Michael Portnoy's *100 Beautiful Jokes*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Ernst van Deursen. Courtesy of the artist

Interview

Complicating Comedy, Engineering Behavior

A Conversation with Michael Portnoy

Interviewed and introduced by Evan Hill

When I introduce people to Michael Portnoy's experimental comedy, they usually look at me quizzically, scratch their heads, and ask, "How is that comedy?" It looks like performance art, moves like dance, sounds like nonsense poetry, or talks like theory, so their befuddlement isn't unwarranted. But I try to tell them their confusion is the point: this is a futurological comedy, one of discovery rather than recognition. "I think innovation and humor share the same kind of mechanism," Portnoy says. "You're basically taking the known, finding its formula, and permuting different variables until it either makes you laugh, or you have something progressive, or some new form of otherness."[1]

If inventions are sometimes laughable, perhaps it's because many engineering problems—problems about improving performance—call for comic methods. Try on ridiculous solutions, play out ludicrous hypotheses, tinker with slapstick resolutions, take sharp left turns, complicate conclusions, get somewhere by following inferential rabbit holes to nowhere—the practice of invention requires an absurdist's toolbox. Bringing into relief the ludic and often irrational behaviors involved in experimental practice, Portnoy's comedy executes a kind of technoscientific slapstick that ironically overcomplicates traditional vanguardist values and our preformed notions of progress and innovation. Calculated absurdity becomes a method for improving on how we

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experiment and, by extension, monkeying with how we might reinvent experimental culture more broadly.

Rooted in theater, his performance-based work over the last three decades has employed a variety of media: dance, stand-up, sculpture, painting, writing, films, installation, games, relational art, and curation. However, the comic impulse flows through his work like an electrical current giving charge to nearly everything he does. As David Robbins, the theorist and historian of "concrete comedy" says, "The 'medium' for comedy isn't paint or film or music or writing; the medium is us—what we do, and the way we do it. Comedy is a behavioral enterprise that freely trespasses contextual borders."[2] Investigating comic performatives beyond joke telling and laugh getting, Portnoy destabilizes the comic frame by situating its theatrical gestures in the art world, "offer[ing] at once an alternative to conventional comedic practice and an alternative reading of recurrent visual art strategies."[3]

Portnoy defines experimental comedy as "the injection of the sublime, the blatantly inscrutable, the abstract, the primal, the choreographic, the theoretical, the improbable, the generative, the postrhythmic, the turbo-stupid, etc. into the frame of stand-up."[4] Experimenting with comedy means complicating its relation to other artistic forms, institutional contexts, and social structures. It means interrogating how the free play of irrationality might reveal patterns of cultural conditioning and open us up to a more creative spectrum of behavior and communication. Freeing comic activity from the constraints of literary genre, dramatic fiction, and the verbal model of jokes we find in stand-up, he finds in the comic frame a set of techniques for reconfiguring the theoretical and affective foundations for comic practice in an expanded field.

This interview was conducted with a few objectives. The first was to understand how Portnoy's comedic approach informs his interventions into contemporary art practices. Another was to bring his work to the attention of theater scholars and critics, especially those with an interest in comedy. For artists working in the comedic tradition, I hope Portnoy's conceptual anarchy and wily performance antics inspire a boundless sense of comic possibility. For all those coming to his work for the first time, I enjoin you to give in to Michael's speculative sense of humor and ask with him, "What other kind of jokes are there?"

EVAN HILL *Would you start by describing your art practice and how comedy fits into it?*

MICHAEL PORTNOY My background is in writing and experimental theater. When I moved to New York after college, I started making my own performances, got involved in the downtown comedy scene in the mid-nineties, and worked as a dancer for several choreographers. It wasn't until around the mid-2000s that I shifted more seriously to presenting work in art institutions. In the last five years, for instance, I've made films, sculpture, dance, theater, performance works, radio plays, and music.

When I moved to New York, I wanted to make some kind of hybrid between an experimental theater company and an absurdist sketch comedy group. I moved into a loft with my best friend from college and some other performers, with the intention of converting it into a performance space. We wrote a bunch of material but ended up going our separate ways, so I started performing by myself in the Lower East Side at small black-box theaters like Surf Reality and Collective Unconscious, which hosted these rowdy, anything-goes performance nights. A genre emerged there, a hybrid between performance art and comedy. Robert Prichard, the founder of Surf Reality, called it "performance comedy." I performed regularly every weekend, and that was where I really developed my chops as an improviser.

100 Beautiful Jokes. Photo: Ernst van Deursen. Courtesy of the artist

In the mid-nineties, other venues popped up for what they were calling "alternative comedy" at the time. Luna Lounge on Ludlow Street had a weekly night where you'd have emergent mainstream comedians like Sarah Silverman, Jeneane Garofalo, Marc Maron, Upright Citizens Brigade, Louis C.K. They were doing looser, more freewheeling sets, trying things they maybe wouldn't feel comfortable doing at a regular comedy club. Some of us performance freaks got let in somehow.

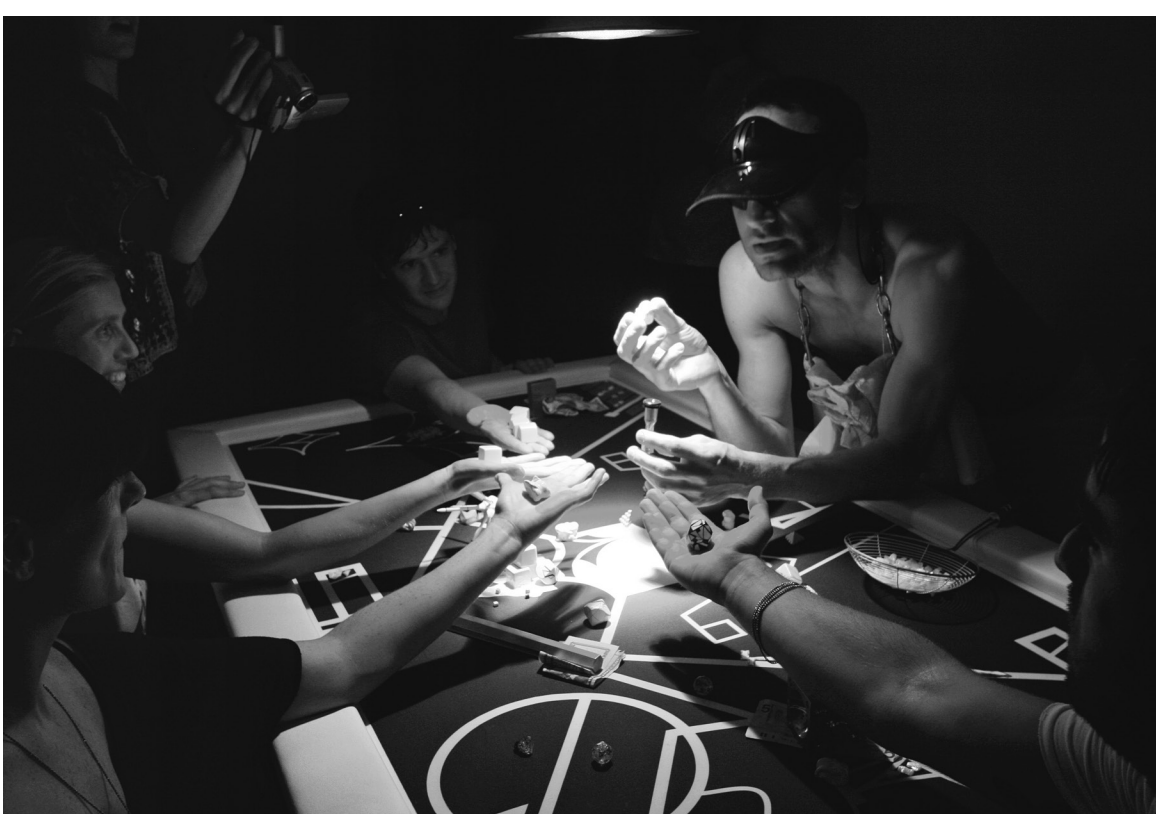
What I was doing was informed by my work with choreographers. Sometimes I'd perform some spastic Butoh-tinged dance, peppered with convoluted joke-adjacent text. I remember one time I did a dramatic reading of a real psychiatric assessment of myself from when I was nine, which began, "Michael is a wistfully appealing little boy," and tossed the contents of my Prozac bottle out to the audience, and then leapt gleefully about from sofa to sofa where the audience was sitting. I was naked of course, as performance artists are in their twenties. Another time at Luna Lounge, I turned all the lights out so that the audience could hold an anonymous metacritique session about the alternative comedy scene.

It's funny to me that now the term *experimental comedy* is in actual usage, because I started saying it tongue in cheek in the late 1990s, since what passed for so-called alternative comedy at the time was not nearly as much of an alternative as I wished it could be. And unlike the fields of experimental theater or experimental music, there was no real com-

munity devoted to serious experimentation with the forms and methods of comedy.

EH *A* Time Out *critic quoted Marc Maron saying of you, "I don't know why, but somehow I think you're necessary."[5] I'm curious about your behind-the-scenes relationship with the other comedians given that you were an oddball, wild-card figure in the alt-com scene. "The next Andy Kaufman" was a phrase that critics had floated about you, presumably because you were stretching people's comic imagination in the way that Kaufman did. How did other comedians perceive your work? How did audiences react?*

MP I definitely felt a kind of antagonism between me and the more mainstream comedians. I had come from a place which was super welcoming, supportive, collaborative, wild, queer, joyful. Then, I walked into an extremely competitive, frat boyish environment where there were Hollywood agents in the room. Everyone was angling to get an HBO special or a sitcom; while there was this guise of the alternative, it was a careerist kind of place. I was there just to fuck with things. I wanted to experiment. I wanted to play. I wanted to bring that sense of experimentation out of other people, too. So, in addition to my own sets, I would occasionally interact with other comedians onstage, sometimes uninvited! I became Maron's absurdist monkey for a few shows. He was one of the few comedians that actually warmed up to me. But from most of the others, I felt their attitude was like, "Who is this dancing freak who's invaded our territory, who doesn't obey typical joke structure, doesn't have his polished ten minutes



Michael Portnoy's *Casino Ilinx*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2008. Photo: Jason Fulford. Courtesy of the artist

Michael Portnoy's *27 Gnosis*, documenta (13), Kassel, 2012. Photo: Henrik Strömberg. Courtesy of the artist

ready, and just does some kind of linguistic and bodily contortions onstage, like Pee Wee on crack?"

But I *did* like being the alien stepping into a world that was not mine. I'd get a lot of energy out of it, and I think audiences responded to that.

EH *Feeling a resistance to your work in the comedy world, did moving into the art world allow you to embrace more abstract, experimental forms?*

MP I've joked that I snuck across the border at night into the art world. But it really wasn't premeditated. Around 2005 I created my first sculptural work, these abstract gambling tables, where I would lead games as a "Director of Behavior." People were using actual money and winning and losing and being yelled at with arcane instructions. Around that time I started getting more invitations by curators of European art institutions. I do like the freedom within the art world, where I can create sculpture one moment, then performance or dance in another. So I did have much more freedom than in the comedy world.

EH *So it seems like your fabrication of objects and space coincided with the development of your Relational Stalinist practices.*

MP Yeah, I guess it was around the time of *Casino Ilinx* at SculptureCenter that I came up with the term *Relational Stalinism* to describe my particular breed of absurdist dictatorial participation. I saw it as an antidote to the looser, democratic forms of knowledge building that were typical of "relational aesthetics," which, in my mind, often simply replicated existing modes of knowledge production and human exchange but transplanted them into an art space. I was interested in using what I call a slippery iron fist to shake people out of their habitual ways of communicating and behaving and creating meaning with each other.

I've relied a lot on complication. It's one of the oldest comedic strategies in the book: how to take a simple thing and complicate

it needlessly, from Mr. Bean eating a sandwich and everything going wrong, to Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks. So with the gambling I thought, "Well, what happens if all of the playing pieces start representing concepts and ideas, and the way they're arranged on the table creates an abstract proposition which then the participants have to use to develop a world together? And then how do I complicate that further?" I found that the more seductive and tactile the environment and the apparatus were, the easier I could lure people into more intuitive and associative states with each other. So I kept complicating the process.

This led to *27 Gnosis* at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in Kassel, which was a kind of open-air spaceship within a huge mound of mud, where twenty-seven people entered this lilac chamber with a spherical stage. It was a linguistic game show based around a set of "gnoses," nose-shaped sculptures representing different forms of experiential knowledge. And the way these (g)noses combined on the game tables created the propositions which players fleshed out over three rounds. All of these games relied on the destabilization of the participants, who have to perform. They're put in the center of attention and given cryptic propositions made of strange words that I define with more unfamiliar terms, and they have to quickly develop ideas and fictions with strangers, while the performers circle them and punish them for using language in the wrong way. They can't get away with easy nonsense, and we constantly enforce the kind of nonsense we want them to use.

EH *What kind of nonsense do you want them to use?*

MP I would say it's a robust, poetic nonsense ripe with theoretical implications, which relies upon the combinatorial fusion of new terms from a limited set of root words, rather than known academic jargon. It should have a great mouthfeel and a diaphragmatic heat! They're given a set of terms which they only have the barest kind of intuitive understanding of, and they should construct meaning in a more primal way. These constructions should come from the gut, and then have radioactive reverberations in the brain afterward.

EH *And you're also dis-coordinating the body in this alien game show space—*

MP Right, it's very destabilizing. The architecture by Christian Wassmann was really ingenious. All the participants lean against a curved wall with a thirty-degree incline that sort of looks like a funnel. The stage floor is a convex sphere, so it's hard to get your footing. They're being physically manipulated at times. This swirling, hallucinatory music was piped in, and we were drenched in a scent I commissioned from perfumer/madman Alessandro Gualtieri, whose purpose was to loosen the tongue and derange the senses. All these things combined to induce a kind of accelerated form of hypnosis, where you're just overloading the players' circuits.

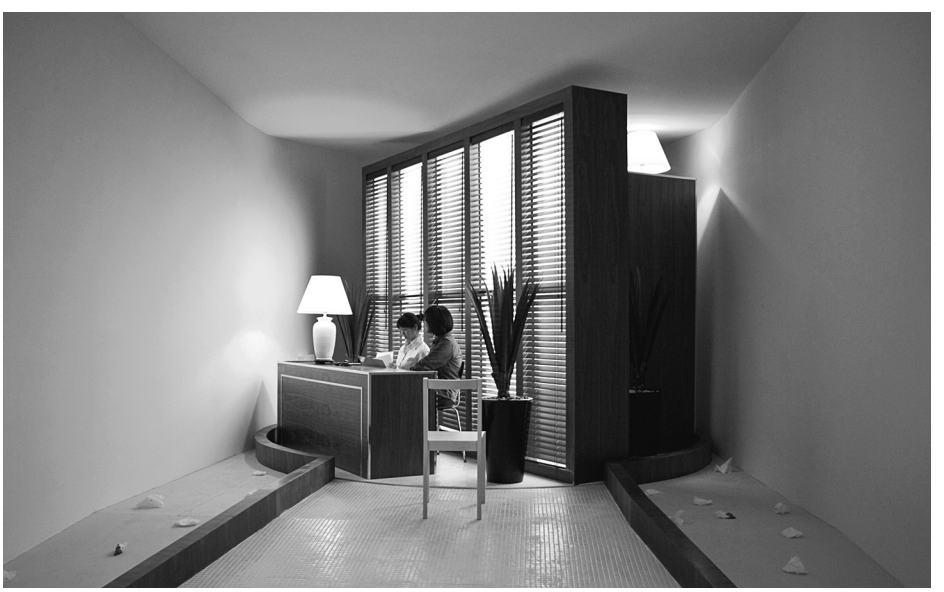
EH *That brings us to vertigo. How did that concept enter into your work?*

MP This notion popped up for me when I was studying different forms of games around the time of my subterranean gambling den, *Casino Ilinx*. I was looking at Roger Caillois's work and his categorization of games. *Ilinx*, the Greek word for vertigo, was his fourth category of games. I love his description of vertigo, which he says "consist[s] of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind."[6]

With *Casino Ilinx*, I became interested in instructions that were confusing and ambiguous. The Directors of Behavior order you around in this over-the-top authoritarian character, and you only have the vaguest sense of what's being asked of you. I developed this approach when I was in Russia for the first time. It was my experience with Moscow cabbies. These were very big men with wide necks in very small cars, and you'd have to sit right next to them. And they'd just scream at you louder and louder in Russian, with the idea that if they spoke Russian forcefully enough to you that, finally, you'd understand! So I think this style came a bit from that.

EH *Despite the heavy-handed dictatorial element, this type of performance must be very delicate, no? Because although you're subjecting your audience to a degree of force, you're ultimately trying to generate an atmosphere of play. Like a ritual clown, your overlord persona initiates audiences into a wholly invented rite, and you have to negotiate a lot of social complexity in the process. Your comic sensibility seems necessary to achieve the desired effect.*

MP The humor is crucial to this equation because someone just shouting nonsense at you will not be a liberating mechanism for most people! In *27 Gnosis*, for instance, the game was led by myself and artist/performer Kira Nova, my ex-wife, who cocreated the dramaturgy and choreography, and we worked hard to find the right balance of humor and rigor.



Michael Portnoy, *Google Office 0.2*, Taipei Biennial, Taipei, Taiwan, 2010. Courtesy of the artist

We want to give the participants a linguistic and conceptual workout, and this requires firmness to keep people on their toes. But, simultaneously, we want you to know that we are just playing characters, we're in this game together, and we'll make you laugh along the way. Because I think the best results come from joy.

EH *Collaboration and the pleasures of experimentation are important values in the "generative satire" of your "Improvement" works.*

MP Yes, what I call improvement is basically thinking like a crackpot inventor meets horticulturalist meets genetic researcher. It's about picking apart existing forms, approaches, and ideas, and then permuting and crossbreeding them until they create some new beast. My idea of improving is not making something better; it's just making it more complicated. But there's a seed of hope because it's about forcing ideas through a fantastical form of progress.

EH *What about the Improvement League?*

MP The Improvement League was a project in 2010 for the Taipei Biennial. I formed a team that involved an editor, architect, futurologist, artist, and myself. We sifted through the early-stage proposals of other artists in the biennial and chose the one most in need of "improvement"! We spent five or so months relentlessly picking apart the ideas and forms in this piece and playing with its DNA until it turned into a whole other breed of thing. From the outside, this can sound kind of cruel: what artist would want their work improved? But it was done in a very generative, fun spirit. Like a little grain of sand in an oyster, these improvements come from a genuine annoyance with certain trends and practices in the contemporary art world. But the goal is not to be bitter and cynical, but to use that annoyance to fuel inventive visions.

So, after all that work, we created a participatory installation that "improved" artist Olivia Plender's *Google Office* installation—an adaptation of the open-plan, recreational atmosphere of the Google headquarters, which she intended as a site for gathering and knowledge sharing. Mangled in our hands, this became a multiroom, living search engine for only one visitor at a time. We asked ourselves, "What happens if, instead of focusing on the most salient bit of information in a query, you focus on the least salient bit?" As a participant, you go up to two performers at a desk playing the search agents who ask you, "What are you searching for?," and you say, for instance, "I'm searching for cheap airline tickets to Peru in the spring with my uncle." The agents might ask the next question about your uncle's shoe size. And as they keep focusing on the least salient information in each subsequent answer, soon the conversation goes down some crazy rabbit hole. Then, the platform on which the desk sits revolves 180 degrees, revealing a comically large desk twice as big as the original, and a door opens

Michael Portnoy's *Relational Stalinism—The Musical*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2016. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of the artist

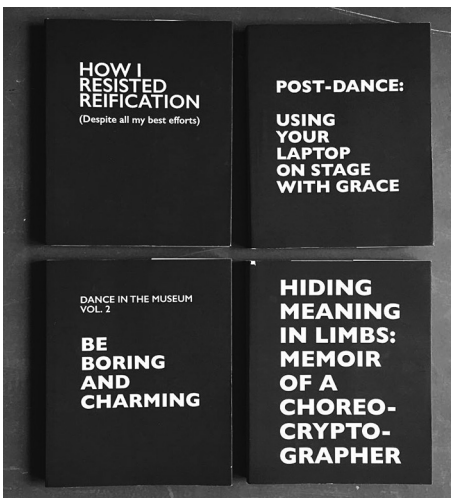
and a performer playing The Query Manager emerges and invites you inside where there's a miniature nightclub for two and the conversation continues, in dance. Anyway, this goes on through another few rooms, ending up in a space where representations of all the works in the biennial are being improved continuously. It's all very fragmented, frustrating, and absurd in opposition to the kind of feel-good "relationalizing" of Plenders's piece.

EH *Traditionally, satire is a mode of ridicule that critiques or deconstructs without fostering further creative discourse. But by cultivating a constructive approach to satire, it's as if you're proposing a satirical ethos that collaborates with its targets. In another interview you said that if everyone started using satire generatively, by adopting radical constraints to reengineer breeds of art, that our forms would evolve way more quickly.*

MP Right! If for one year Hollywood could only produce movies that were set inside airplanes, the whole genre of the airplane film would evolve radically! Think of all the hybrid forms: jet-fueled teen drama, geriatric airplane Western, dystopian airplane bromance, and so on!

EH *What's the object of critique in* Relational Stalinism—The Musical*?*

MP That piece was a response to a prevailing trend in visual arts performance of very minimal, po-faced, quasi-sculptural works. I was trying to use the same materials as the visual arts performer: people, in a room, with minimal scenography, but pushing it to a maximalist extreme. I developed it in Kunstinstituut Melly (known at the time as Witte de With) in Rotterdam. I staged eleven performance pieces organized in a two-hour cycle, spread across one entire floor of the museum, where the audience was led from room to room.



Prop books from Michael Portnoy's *Relational Stalinism—The Musical*. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn. Courtesy of the artist

The pieces engaged many different types of performance from dance, participation, physical theater, opera, and so on, all of which were created with the idea of "improving" upon certain contemporary trends and ideas. One piece was a rhythmic improvement of minimalist dance: *77 Blinks*, a dance piece for five performers' eyelids. On one hand, it's super minimal, just their eyelids are moving. But they're doing this synchronized blinking to a complex and unpredictable score for *taiko* drums. It's actually punishingly hard to learn! At the climax of the piece, they surround one member of the audience and blink at them in unison. The most explicit critique in the collection was *An(al) Lee(k)*, which essentially roasted Tino Sehgal's *Ann Lee*. It features a cyborg performer who'd supposedly escaped as a refugee from Tino's concurrent retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum! She was traumatized by the highly constricting role she was forced to play and so was granted a safe haven within our show to express herself fully.

EH *It seems you're inviting back into contemporary art a more theatrical approach, away from the postconceptual aesthetics of minimalism and*

Michael Portnoy, *Portnoy (born 1936) Improvises*, FIAC, Paris, 2018. Courtesy of the artist

banality toward charisma, spectacle, entertainment, musicality. Is theatricality important to you in a way it isn't for others working in art-world performance?

MP I think it's just a difference of lineages. I come from a theatrical background. That's what I was schooled in, it's what runs through my blood. The lineage of visual arts performance has historically been opposed to forms of spectacle and theatricality because they were seen as anticritical. This prejudice against the theatrical still exists today in the art world, despite the fact that satirical entertainment has always been a critical force for change. I'm an entertainer, so there's no way around that, but I also think entertainment is simply a more effective delivery system for ideas.

EH *Humor theory is also an important part of your work. You're not only reading humor theory—it's rare enough to find a comedian who'll read super dry humor theory from cognitive linguistics—but then you're also integrating it into your work, staging it, publicizing it, like in your work on Carrot Jokes.*

MP Humor theory has been a long-term interest of mine. I find the way researchers dissect a joke to be really hilarious. A long time ago I developed this character, Professor Kiffy, a professor of comedy, and he'd give extremely lengthy introductions and dissections of jokes. The jokes themselves ended up being more like prose poems or experimental fiction than jokes, but the humor really came from his excessive contextualization and deconstruction of the jokes themselves.

EH *You framed your exhibition* Script Opposition in Late-Model Carrot Jokes *with a history of these "genetically modified jokes." You cite a 1981 paper from the scholars Władysław Chłopicki and Marni Jo Petray as the origin, in which they proposed this alien breed of joke that computational models of linguistic analysis supposedly couldn't distinguish from poems, narratives, or pure nonsense. Your periodization of "late" carrot jokes comes from a competition hosted by the International Society of Humor Research in 2009, although I can find no record of either the essay or the contest. So I'm wondering: how much of your framing is real and fictional, or how much of it is itself a joke?*

MP You're wondering . . . it's good to wonder! (*laughs*) For the carrot joke works, I involved researchers from philosophy and linguistics to help me develop theoretical structures for understanding the kinds of jokes I was making at the time, and then to kind of sneakily insert these theories within their own fields. So I made a book and a series of talking carrot photographs for an exhibition at Objectif Exhibitions in Antwerp. You press a button on the frame and it plays a recording of me delivering a carrot joke: overly dense jokes with

way too many background incongruities, too many characters and ambiguous situations, where the script is constantly being opposed, where the rug is constantly being pulled out from the sentence itself.

I'm amused by this impossible quest to understand the elusive nature of comedy, something so immediate and automatic. Working with the humor theorists was a natural development of wanting to get deeper into the field and stage things within that arena. I think I do have a skewed scientific or mathematical approach to art making.

EH *Your quasi-scientific approach has a tradition going back to pataphysics, which maintains an ironic relationship to the discourses of both science and culture. But despite your ironic positioning, you're also quite rigorous about reengineering our patterns of behavior and thought.*

MP I am interested in producing new forms of communication and behavior—I kind of believe in the hope of the avant-gardes—but I'm also an ironist and have to be upfront that I think it's a ridiculous quest. I would be very wary of anyone who has a liberationist utopian project of togetherness and all that. My point of view is kind of perverse and dark, and so that's always going to undercut my feel-good, hippie side.

EH *In* Portnoy (born 1936) Improvises, *your fellow critic of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop, gives a stand-up lecture about your work. She reintroduces you to the public as an octogenarian who's been hiding under de-aging prosthetics as a much younger Michael Portnoy. As an art historian, she elaborates this whole mythology about you living through the rise of Fluxus, happenings, and Judson Dance, subsisting as a marginal*

Michael Portnoy's *100 Beautiful Jokes*. Photo: Ernst van Deursen. Courtesy of the artist

but crucial "underminer" figure in that history. Bishop identifies you as a living link to that past and says—with a detectable sincerity—that when we come into contact with your work, we touch the radical playfulness of those neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s.

MP Yes, and the conceit continues that in my late eighties I've finally decided to take off my prosthetics to show my true face and devote my remaining years to improvisation. So then after Claire's twenty-minute intro, I come onstage with a Hollywood-grade old-age mask and dance, like Judson Church meets the Borscht Belt.

EH *The reference to Fluxus seems particularly apt: their aesthetics of "goofing off," their Vaudevillian populism, their pursuit of creative nonsense, their games and gags as a language of social intervention. Do you feel any kind of affinity with Fluxus?*

MP I've always had a fondness for Fluxus, especially artists like Robert Filliou. There's an elegance and simplicity in many of their directives that I really respect, simple instructions that, in the best circumstances, can generate very amusing, poetic, and unpredictable results. But I guess I always prefer the darker, weirder, or more elaborate instructions in Fluxus, like Dick Higgins's *Danger Music Number 9*: "Volunteer to have your spine removed." I prefer that to the dry, "good-vibes" ones like Alison Knowles's *Make a Salad*.

Play somehow got a very bad name, though. Because it's seen as light, trivial, childish, silly. But there's a huge spectrum of levels of complexity to play, covering everything from the Three Stooges to *Finnegan's Wake*. Being situated within the art world has forced me to complicate my ludic impulse to an insane degree, with layers of obfuscation and theory sauce just to make it palatable for a visual arts audience. Recently in some of my film works I'm trying to return to and honor my funny bone.

EH *It's helpful to understand that dark absurdism alongside your ludic sensibility. In your work with the humor theorists, they distinguish between the speculative absurdism of your carrot jokes and the failure of meaning in existential absurdism. Your relationship to the absurd isn't nihilistic. It's more complicated than that.*

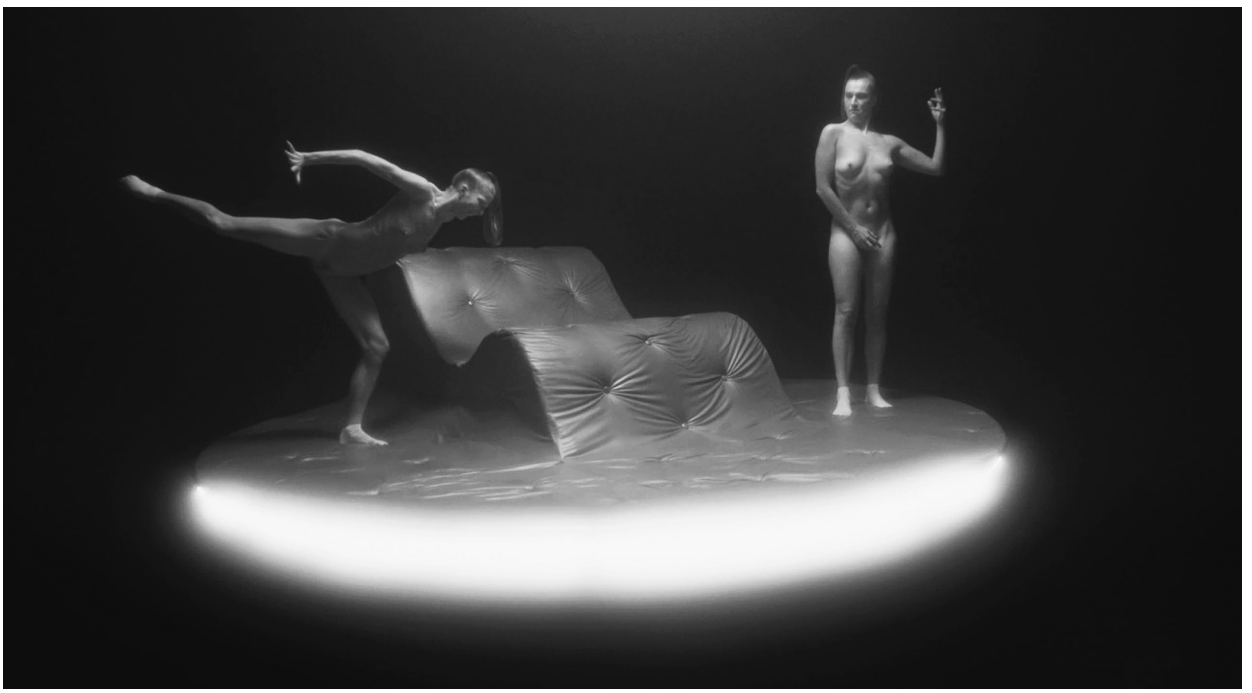
MP *100 Beautiful Jokes* is a good case in point. The project there was how to create a performance from a series of jokes that, rather than just making you laugh, make you shudder or even cry for reasons you don't quite understand. It really was this kind of tonal layering of the joke, resembling a comedy concert on the face of it, with some guy onstage telling what he promises are jokes. But I'm telling jokes that are highly theatrical and abstract over these wistful, melancholic soundtracks that change every three minutes.

EH *And they're all improvised on the spot?*

MP Yes, over five hours.

EH *What was the logic behind investing the frame of stand-up with durational and improvisational structures?*

MP I had this itch to return to improvisation, like when I first moved to New York. From past experience, I knew that in the first few hours of a long improvisation you rely on your usual bag of tricks and after that you get sick of yourself and start forging ahead into new territory. I felt like I needed that. I had someone up in the sound booth whom I'd supplied with this ammunition—lexicons, taxonomies, and word lists I assembled over the years—and it was up to her to constantly pull me out of the frame of the joke I was telling



Michael Portnoy, *Progressive Touch*, digital film, 2020. Courtesy of the artist

with a steady trickle of concepts. It allowed me to follow the improvisational flow while inserting alien ideas into it, so I could take left turns and tangents, and keep switching the frame.

EH *What you introduce as jokes are actually these fleeting micronarratives that abruptly shift in atmosphere and mood, and you embody various high-sentiment personas across these erratic fragments of absurd melodrama, introspective soliloquy, and physical comedy. Given their shifting forms, are these three-dimensional carrot jokes?*

MP Carrot jokes expanded into a more diverse, emotional terrain. I was expanding upon the range of affective responses for something we think should be a joke. The acting style swings from very naturalistic to completely over-the-top Klaus Kinski scenery chewing, to dance slash pantomime. When you engender in the audience a quick transition from something terrifying to something comedic, to something beautiful, to something inscrutable, I like that kind of whirlwind of emotions. That's really the project: how to create that whirlwind of emotions under the expectation of it being a joke. And at the fifth hour, I felt I finally got to some new ground where I loosened, I wasn't as careful, the channels just opened up. The movement and the words were affecting each other more fluidly. And finally, the tears came! I wept profusely while telling a stuffed bunny toy that he'd be given up for adoption because I'm going to be executed for sleeping with his mother.

EH *How do you think about your relationship to the comedy world now?*

MP I consume a lot of comedy. I'm always wanting to keep abreast of the state of experimentation. But because I'm not situated within that world, I'm often in a one-sided conversation with it. My comedy projects are just following my notion of what expansive

Michael Portnoy's GOING, digital film, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

experimental comedy should be, what the possibilities are.

I've gotten into this avant-slapstick mode in my last two film projects—some fusion between physical comedy, dance, and music, which rely upon a lot of strange synchronicity and syncopation. *Progressive Touch* is porn-comedy, porn as dance as slapstick. There are three couples, all contemporary dancers and romantically involved in their real lives, performing explicit sex. But it doesn't intend to arouse the viewer at all. The whole project is about how we can complicate the rhythm and choreography of sex to a ridiculous degree, that is, "Can you fuck to an irregular beat?" I had the idea for fifteen years or so, I think from being a musician who's obsessed with the complex rhythms of progressive rock and working with dance. And it was just always a funny concept to me: what happens if people were to have sex in punishingly difficult rhythmical sequences? You know, blow jobs in 17/4 time. It basically frustrates the whole aim of sex. In foreplay you can have free jazz, but after a certain point in sex, our bodies rely on a steady rhythm to climax, and so what happens if we're constantly frustrating that?

EH *It's a hilarious premise. How'd you get interested in prog-rock?*

MP I first discovered Rush in high school, and that was the gateway drug. I grew up in DC, so I was really into the DC hardcore scene. Bands like Rites of Spring, Fugazi, and Bad Brains. Bad Brains was a bunch of jazz fusion guys

who were in the punk scene, so in contrast to the simpler musical structures of a lot of hardcore and punk, they were combining punk energy and attitude with insane musicianship.

EH *It seems so paradigmatic of what sets you apart from the alternative comedians of the 1990s. That scene had a cool and ironic indie ethos, and then there you are, the outlandish prog guy.*

MP Every comedian talks to you about rhythm, from George Carlin to Seinfeld, who'll just endlessly labor over the construction and rhythm of a joke until he finds the right delivery. It's a funny thought for me, too, to have verbal jokes using intricate time signatures of progressive rock. If comedy is all about timing, let's improve the timing, too, you know?

EH *Oh, I love that. Speaking of improving comedy, where do you want to see comedy go next?*

MP The vibrant LA Clown scene is exciting to me. Not only specific performers, but also for the whole pedagogical structure that surrounds it. It's this very rich scene with roots in French physical theater, like Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier, but it combines strains of performance art, dance, and improvisation, and there're performances all across the city and classes teaching all of these different approaches. Some of these acts are bleeding into the mainstream, and I think it's helping to bring about a new wave of innovation in physical comedy. There's no equivalent scene in New York. I wish there was, but there isn't. Further cross-pollination and new hybrids between European contemporary dance and physical comedy would be great.

What else? I'd like to see others taking up the reins of the maximalist absurdist strain of comedy, practices that ask "What's the densest comedy we can create?" You know how film editing has accelerated over the years, how in these superhero movies some scenes are barely intelligible because the editing is so hyperfast? This would have been unpalatable for us years ago. What's the comedy equivalent of that? How much layering of sign and sound and word can we achieve? What's our aptitude? What are our perceptual limits? Different historical times have had peaks of complexity. If you think about how Monty Python, which is extremely complex and hyperreflexive, was able to achieve huge popular appeal in the 1970s, and then that maximalist project fell aside culturally for a while. It would be interesting for me if we rode another one of those waves of complexity.

Notes

1. Michael Portnoy in conversation with John-Paul Pryor, "Steirischer Herbst Festival | Grand Hotel Abyss," *Flaunt*, October 2, 2019, https://flaunt.com/content/steirischer-herbst-festival-grand-hotel-abyss.
2. David Robbins, "Concrete Comedy: A Primer," *Artforum* 43, no. 3 (2004): 208.
3. Robbins, "Concrete Comedy," 206.
4. Michael Portnoy quoted in Kari Cwynar, "Experimental ~~Comedy~~ Training Camp," *C Magazine*, no. 125 (2015): 27.
5. Cynthia True, "Alterna Be Thy Name: Say Goodbye to Stand-up as We Know It. The New Wave Is Here," *Time Out New York*, June 5–12, 1996, 43–44.
6. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 23.