



This Is Not a Joke: Review of “Performing Praxis” Roundtable

“Humorous > Disruptions Colloquium: Laughter and Technologies of Disruption in Feminist Film and Media.” Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. October 16-17, 2015.

Reviewed by Aditi Ohri and Xander Selene

Shelley Niro, Liz Clarke, and Ara Osterweil came together for “Performing Praxis,” one of two roundtables included in the colloquium “Humorous > Disruptions,” sponsored by *Synoptique* in October 2015. Their presentations were politically engaging, provocative, and funny. However, the panel engendered an intense discussion that was far from lighthearted. For Niro, humour gave levity to legacies of genocide and colonialism in Canada; for Clarke, it functioned as a negotiating tool in the corporate world of Hollywood; and, for Osterweil, it mingled with rage and served as a counterpoint to the hopelessness incited by the structural patriarchy of the Western art world. Humour, as each speaker idiosyncratically demonstrated, has the ability to act as the silly putty that binds feminist theory to practice. Like silly putty, it may bind theory to practice effectively... or it might turn into a ball and bounce away. A tension permeated the presentations and pointed to the negative correlation between a speaker’s privilege and her willingness to use humour reflexively. Each speaker indirectly conveyed that feminist praxis varies according to social position. Survival strategies adopted by Niro, a Kanien’kehà:ka (Mohawk) feminist and independent artist, differ from those employed by Clarke, a white feminist scholar recently hired by the University of New Brunswick as an assistant professor, and those employed by Osterweil, a white tenured professor at McGill University. Over the course of this panel, it became clear that white feminists in positions of institutional authority, particularly tenured faculty positions, have privileged access to rhetorical devices and comedic postures that those peripheral to academia dare not engage.

The first panelist, Shelley Niro, is an Indigenous artist from the Six Nations reservation in Ontario. In her presentation, she showed the intersections of trauma, recovery, and humour in artworks relating to her personal life, her family, and her community. In her photographic work, she drew on political events such as the 1990 Oka Crisis, which infiltrated her daily reality. Her images playfully confronted stereotypes about Indigenous peoples and reflected on collective experiences of poverty in *Waitress* (1986), land dispossession in *This Land is Mime Land* (1995), and domestic violence in *The Rebel* (1991). Throughout her art practice, she reflects on the struggle to retrieve Mohawk history, tradition, and language from the cultural landfills created by centuries of colonialism.¹ Niro concluded with a screening of her video *The Shirt* (2003). In the

¹ Ryan Rice. “Oh So Iroquois!” in *Oh So Iroquois!*, ed. Emily Falvey (Ottawa, ON: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2007), 57-65.

wake of dark and difficult knowledge, the artist found beauty in the landscape of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) territory—what we call Southern Ontario and upstate New York—laughing at North American histories of conquest and the contemporary tokenization of Indigenous peoples confined to reservations, despite living on their ancestral territories. “My ancestors were annihilated, exterminated, murdered and massacred,” Niro’s video declares, “... they were lied to, cheated, tricked and deceived... attempts were made to assimilate, colonize, enslave and displace them... and all’s I get is this shirt.”² As observed by an audience member, Niro sublimates the anger at the inherited norms of the colonial political landscape to grapple with the contemporary challenges of decolonization for Indigenous peoples and settlers. Niro stated that sometimes her art “comes from a place of anger,” but it does not remain there. She elaborated, “as I start to work through the work I find that anger dissipates and then it becomes a place of entertainment or joy or just kind of a place where you can laugh.” Niro’s humour is accessible, resilient, and transformative.

Dr. Liz Clarke, at the time of this panel an Assistant Professor at Concordia University’s Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, shared comparative research on female screenwriters from the early twentieth century and contemporary women scripting, producing, and directing television. Clarke found that writers and actresses such as Mindy Kaling, Tina Fey, and Lena Dunham relay narratives of sexism eerily similar to their silent film-era counterparts. Clarke screened clips from Tina Fey’s primetime hit series *30 Rock* (2006-2013), using the show as a mode of analysis for women navigating Hollywood, both a creative and corporate world. Clarke identified inconsistencies between the selective inclusion of women in Hollywood’s corporate spaces and the long-term goals of the feminist movement, such as bridging the wage gap, but did not engage critically with popular liberal feminism. If women “lean in”³ and imitate powerful white men in order to succeed in Hollywood’s corporate spaces, these negotiations continue to feminize certain forms of bureaucratic labour and exclude people who fall outside the norms of respectability defined by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.⁴ Clarke related a comment made by her former professor, Robin Wood: he was disappointed that feminists had not yet dismantled corporate America. Yet dismantling the corporate machine was never a goal of liberal feminism, which endorses corporate culture as potentially liberating.⁵ Neither Clarke nor Wood should puzzle over this. As long as liberal feminism remains the most visible form of feminism, women in positions of power, such as Liz Lemon from *30 Rock*, will continue to be the butt of every joke. Clarke’s discouraging conclusion that this tension is potentially irresolvable conjured, for one audience member, a fatalistic emotional framework that offers only laughter or tears as appropriate responses to sexism in the mainstream media.⁶

² *The Shirt* can be viewed online at IsumaTV: <http://www.isuma.tv/imaginative/shirt>.

³ Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In* (New York: Knopf, 2013).

⁴ bell hooks, “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In,” *The Feminist Wire* (October 28, 2013), accessed July 26, 2016, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/>.

⁵ Nina Powers, “FeminismTM: Two Sides of the Same Con,” in *One Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2008), 29-38.

⁶ René Girard, “Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis,” in *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 121-135.

The third and final paper, by Dr. Ara Osterweil, Associate Professor of Film and Cultural Studies in the English Department at McGill University, provided attendees with a delirious and tragicomic performance. Flailing between rage, reluctance, impatience, and despair, Osterweil offered examples of feminist artists, artworks, and gestures that say “fuck you” to the art world status quo as a survival strategy. Her wildly incoherent academic posture, which went from adulation of the pacifist Yoko Ono to a celebratory description of Valerie Solanas’s armed attempt on the life of Andy Warhol, advanced no determinate theory or thesis. Osterweil confessed she threw her presentation together in thirty hours while on sabbatical, when she would rather have been drinking bourbon and painting in the Southwest. She prefaced her talk with the caveat that any “actual theorizing has been tabled until September 2016” and that “if you want more than my preliminary thoughts on this matter you can go fuck yourself.” Rather than considering the complexity of negotiations necessary to reach solidarity among artists across class, race, and gender, she roared “fuck you” sixty-six times in twenty minutes. Osterweil employed Peter Bürger’s term “historical avant-garde” for the American avant-garde movements of the late Modernist period, yet she did not integrate his critique of the aesthetics of shock—namely, that shock’s lack of specificity fails to produce praxis toward a concrete goal.⁷ Despite the superficial performativity of her gesture, Osterweil failed to be reflexive. Even though she recognized the relative impunity granted to her as tenured faculty, she did not admit her privilege as an academic. In response to a question about her accountability to taxpayers who subsidize her salary, she denied this fact, defensively stating, “I don’t live in an ivory tower.” Let us hope that she was joking.

Humour can work to confuse, to transform, and to revitalize academic spaces with wit and candour. Humour can be uplifting and healing across cultures; it can increase creative capital for a select few behind closed corporate doors and it can be used as an empty rhetorical device to shock audiences. At a feminist conference, one would hope that critical minds come together to generate courageous responses to feminist problems. The claims brought to the fore by Dr. Ara Osterweil point to a necessity for brave spaces, where speakers in positions of privilege are held accountable for their words, arriving with a willingness to admit the specific limitations of their perspectives.⁸ Osterweil and Clarke both bring forward feminist strategies that are not accessible to all feminists. Are working-class feminists of colour granted opportunities to negotiate with managers and bosses to climb the corporate ladder? Are they as successful as American visual artist Carolee Schneeman when they openly defy their antagonists and employers? Are Native voices granted space for their anger in the public sphere without significant backlash? Indigenous feminists such as Shelley Niro do not have the luxury of public despair and aggression in a society that discredits their communities through insidious stereotypes while denying ongoing land dispossession and histories of genocide, the root causes of Indigenous peoples’ marginalization. In the face of a cultural climate hostile to First Nations, Niro’s work proudly and joyfully affirms Indigenous identities.⁹ Niro’s artistic praxis self-reflexively uses

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 80-81.

⁸ Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces,” in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M. Landreman (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 141.

⁹ Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 66.

satire to infuse difficult knowledge with levity and hopefulness for communities in recovery from generations of trauma. To be critical praxis, humour must do more than disrupt—it must also choose the right target. In this, Niro’s humour clearly hits the mark.

Aditi Ohri is an MA candidate in Art History at Concordia University. Xander Selene holds a PhD in Philosophy from the Université de Montréal.

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