

THE BUTT OF THE JOKE

Humor and the Human Body



A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** 101

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



Our bodies are strange! They're funny shaped, they move funnily, and they allow us to do funny things. But why exactly is the body funny to us, and what are the circumstances under which the body becomes a vessel for hilarity?

The human body has fascinated artists for about as long as there has been art, so it's no surprise that artists commonly explore this issue. Some artists keep it lighthearted and don't ask much of the viewer except to smile and laugh. Other artists demand a more self-aware analysis: still funny, but in conversation with other internal and external factors. Many artists didn't intend for their art to be funny at all, but as art moves from context to context and criteria for humor change, the art becomes funny retroactively.

This exhibition is (roughly) divided into three sections: funny faces, funny miscellaneous body parts, and . . . butts, the largest category, representing what is arguably the funniest part of the human body. Within those three rough groupings, there is a great deal of diversity in what the artists respond to and how they employ and represent the human body in their work.

The largest work in the show is Mika Rottenberg's *S12 (Ass Print No. 3)*. Rottenberg creates humor through her unorthodox use of her own body as artist's implement, painting her own rear before repeatedly sitting down on the paper. Rottenberg's use of bright blues, pinks, and greens might fool some viewers into initially thinking that this is an abstract work without a

connection to the human body. After all, it isn't often that you see a blue butt. However, after a moment of observation, one realizes just how this work was created—and what it represents. There is a strange intimacy in facing a piece of paper that carries the imprint of the artist's bare bottom. *Mika Rottenberg's butt was here*, it screams. The method is familiar to us, a slightly more direct version of how many of us attempted to photocopy our own butts as children (or adults, we don't judge).

Speaking of photocopying butts, another notable work is Sonia Landy Sheridan's *Sonia in Her Breasts*. Instead of her buttocks, Sheridan has photocopied her breasts, but the element of humor remains. Using a double-exposure process, Sheridan made it appear as if her face were emerging from between her breasts, almost as if she were wearing them like a hat, or earmuffs. When studying Sheridan's prolific body of work, the seriousness of her exploration of technological media becomes obvious. Here, though, seriousness and stoicism are not one and the same. One need only glance at the work to tell that the artist had a lot of fun in depicting her body in new, exciting, and bizarre ways, and her joy shines through.

When we consider works like those by Rottenberg and Sheridan, what exactly is it that makes them so funny? Is it the distortion that occurs when we press a soft, round part of the body onto a flat surface? Is it the shock value involved in making generally private parts of the body very, very public? Ask yourself why it's more humorous to make an impression of a butt or breasts than it is to make an impression of something like a hand or foot.

Two earlier artists, Honoré Daumier and Robert Doisneau, consider the question of nudity and humor as it relates to the gaze and voyeurism. Doisneau's *La Dame indignée* uses the element of voyeurism to expose the humor of everyday life—ultimately as a means of demonstrating the resilience of the human spirit after the horrors of World War II.¹ He set up a camera on a street corner to capture the diverse reactions of various people looking at a particularly daring painting of a woman with her bottom on display. In this photograph,

the woman viewing the painting is obviously shocked by it, either due to surprised amusement or anger. Regardless of what her feelings are, however, the silly face she makes in reaction becomes a new source of interest. Daumier works in a similar manner, but with the aim of a playful critique on how society views art and the nude body. In his lithograph depicting a scene at the French Salon, he reverses the typical power dynamics within a gallery setting by depicting salon-goers as the subject of the work, with the work on view taking a secondary position. When looking at these pieces, imagine viewing a viewer, viewing art. I wonder, is anyone viewing you? What faces have you been making as you look at the works on display here?

Art can have many purposes. Sometimes it aims to make you think, sometimes to make you laugh, sometimes both at once. There is a great deal of value in laughter, especially in times of difficulty. *The Butt of the Joke: Humor and the Human Body* invites you to look around and smile, and to let your day grow just a little bit brighter.

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NOTE

1. Victoria Gao, "Robert Doisneau's *La Dame indignée*: Modernity in the Fourth Republic," *Ezra's Archives: Journal of the Cornell Historical Society* 1, no. 1 (2011): 21–32, <http://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/47926>.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kirkpatrick, Diane, and Sonia Landy Sheridan. *The Art of Sonia Landy Sheridan*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, 2009.

Rottenberg, Mika, and Ann Demeester. *Mika Rottenberg*. New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. and De Appel Arts Centre in association with M-Museum Leuven, 2011.

CHECKLIST

Louis-Léopold Boilly, French, 1761–1845. *La Félicité parfaite (Perfect Bliss)*, 1823, hand-colored lithograph on cardboard. Purchased through the Julia L. Whittier Fund; PR.953.26.2

Horace R. Burdick, American, 1844–1942. *Nectarines*, 1880, oil on panel. Gift of Robert A. and Dorothy H. Goldberg; P.986.66.1

Paul Cadmus, American, 1904–1999. *Horse-Play*, 1935, etching on chine collé. Gift of Ilse Martha Bischoff; PR.950.32.2

Honoré Victorin Daumier, French, 1808–1879. *Dis donc, not' homme, faut-y avoir une drôle d'idée pour faire faire sa portraiture comme ça! . . . (I say, my man, one must have strange ideas to have one's portrait done like this!)*, published 1852, lithograph on paper. Purchased through the Adelbert Ames Fine Arts Awards Fund; PR.2001.4

Robert Doisneau, French, 1912–1994. *La Dame indignée (The Indignant Lady)*, 1948, gelatin silver print. Gift of Frederick J. Myerson; PH.979.130.1

Larry Fink, American, born 1941. *Greetings from Jean Sabatine, December 1983*, 1983, gelatin silver print. Gift of Barbara and Robert Levine, Class of 1954, Tuck 1955; PH.2000.1.14

Nicolas de Larmessin II, French, about 1632–1694. *Habit de pêcheur (Fisherman's Suit)*, 1690, etching and engraving on paper. Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; 2019.24.1

Leon Levinstein, American, 1910–1988. *The Screen, Child in Window, Lower East Side*, negative 1951; print about 1980, gelatin silver print. Gift of Harley and Stephen C. Osman, Class of 1956, Tuck 1957; 2009.96.6

Alison Marks, Tlingit/American, born 1989. *Burt Reynolds*, 2017, acrylic paint on yellow cedar. Purchased through the Stephen and Constance Spahn '63 Acquisition Fund; 2018.19

Mika Rottenberg, Argentinian, born 1976. *S12 (Ass Print No. 3)*, 2006, graphite, gold leaf, acrylic on paper. Anonymous gift; 2018.37.318

Sonia Landy Sheridan, American, born 1925. *Sonia in Her Breasts*, 1970s, copy art; 3M VQC on paper. Gift of the artist; MIS.2004.84.386

Laurie Simmons, American, born 1949. *Hot Dog*, from the portfolio *Food Clothing Shelter*, 1996, color photogravure on Somerset textured paper. Purchased through gifts in memory of Churchill and Dorothy Lathrop; PR.997.32.3

Arnaldo Tamburini, Italian, 1843–1901. *The Monk*, late 19th century, oil on wood panel. Gift of Elizabeth Converse; P.923.4

Daisy de Villeneuve, English, born 1975. *He Said She Said*, 2001, pen and typewriting on lined, three-holed notebook paper. Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2010.89.1

Andy Warhol, American, 1928–1987. *Nude Model (Male)*, 1977, Polacolor Type 108 (3 works). Gift of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; 2008.3.100–102

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Cover image: Mika Rottenberg, *S12 (Ass Print No. 3)*, 2006
Inside left: Sonia Landy Sheridan, *Sonia in Her Breasts*, 1970s
Inside right: Honoré Victorin Daumier, *Dis donc, not' homme, faut-y avoir une drôle d'idée pour faire faire sa portraiture comme ça! . . .*, 1852

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