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The Distribution of the Nonsensical and the Political Aesthetics of Humour

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The thinking of new worlds, new possible politics, new ways of being, strikes many as serious business, but such a programme is not always carried out in a straightforwardly serious manner. Indeed, the recent history of aesthetic creation and challenge is rife with examples of humour as a critical strategy. Jennifer Higgie suggests that “humour has been central to the cultural politics of movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, Performance and Feminism, and of course much recent art practice that defies categorization” (12). Or as Matthew Collins more drolly puts it, “there are many jokes in Modern art” (184). Here I seek to take up these comic interventions within the terms of Jacques Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” in order to think through how humour might be conceived as a politically meaningful aesthetic act. Through the intertwining of Rancière’s politics of art and humour theory, I aim to critically consider how humour might operate as a gap in the sensible itself, and to thereby explore the political potential of a contemporary aesthetics of humour. By way of the “distribution of the nonsensical” – a comic analogue to Rancière’s own construction – I argue that while it may seem appealing to characterise humour as a liberating break with current regimes of common sense, this account is, in itself, insufficient. Rather, what Rancière’s conceptual framework allows us to grasp is the ways in which the nonsensical is predicated upon the sensible in a mutually constitutive manner, such that humour can contribute to the building of sensible consensus, as well as its disruption.

The notion of “the distribution of the sensible” is central to Jacques Rancière’s critical project wherein he advocates for aesthetics as a site of central political importance and possibility. My particular interpretation of the distribution of the sensible emerges out of Rancière’s discussion of that term in *The Aesthetics of Politics* and *Aesthetics and its Discontents* where it is defined as both “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (*Politics* 13) and the way in which “the practices and forms of the visibility of art . . . distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular” (*Discontents* 25). Following these accounts, I conceive of the distribution of the sensible as a delimitation of the possibilities of what and who can and cannot be heard, seen and understood. Within this framework, aesthetics is understood as the fiction that allows the real to be thought, a proposition which opens up the possibility that aesthetic interventions might recalibrate and fracture existing political sensibilities and epistemologies. Aesthetics not only determines what is perceived as art and how it is thereby understood, but in Rancière’s account, gives rise to the very possibility of politics in that it traces the boundaries of the community and its membership that are central to his understanding of the political (*Politics* 13-4).

This assessment of the political role of aesthetics, broadly construed, should not, however, be taken as a declaration that all art necessarily creates dissensus as a matter of course. If that were

the case then any encounter with art – which we can define in ‘Rancièrian’ terms as those cultural objects which disjoin themselves from the practical regimes of that which is not art (Rancière, *Future* 72-5) – would lead to the assertion of new ways of seeing and knowing the world: as a consequence, gallery patrons and film-goers would have to constantly adapt to an ever-shifting, profoundly Protean and probably deeply unnerving way of being in the world. This prediction does not seem to be borne out by actual events. Literature, film, music and fine arts seem just as capable of reinforcing our prior assumptions regarding the world as they do of disrupting them. Thus, while Rancière has written in one context of how any experience of the free play central to aesthetics, might constitute a dissensual revolution of sensory existence (*Discontents* 98-9), he has also written elsewhere of how different works, such as the fiction of Émile Zola and Virginia Woolf, may challenge existing regimes of consensus to a greater (as with Woolf) or lesser (as with Zola) extent (*Politics* 63-5). It is in terms of this second understanding of the political possibilities of aesthetics – wherein cultural works do different political work dependent upon the relation of their aesthetic features to the existing distribution of the sensible – that the current discussion takes place. The notion of the distribution of the sensible thus offers a means to think of art as neither an oppressive bourgeois fancy, nor an always already political, critical and effective strategy, but as a terrain of potential politics which must be approached and assessed in and of itself in terms of its *capacity* for sensible dissensus. It is with this interpretation in mind, that I seek to take up Rancière’s theoretical framework as a means to assess the political role of humour as a particular aesthetic aspect of cultural texts.

When considered in the context of humour, the notion of the distribution of the *sensible* takes on an additional resonance that is absent in the original French phrase, “*le partage du sensible*,” where *sensible* might be more directly translated as either sensitive or appreciable. In the English translation, “sensible” acquires the additional meanings of reasonable, serious, sober and rational. Taking advantage of this quirk in translation, I want to suggest a model for understanding humour in terms of an inversion of the distribution of the sensible: as a distribution of that which is not sensible (in terms of reasonable, serious and sober), or more precisely *nonsensical*. Departing somewhat from the use of “sense” as taken up by Rancière, nonsense refers to that which has no intelligible meaning: that which is absurd or incongruous. However, though this reading of sense is not completely in-keeping with the strict meaning of “sensible” in the original context, neither is it completely divergent. The distribution of the nonsensical is not autonomous with respect to the distribution of the sensible, but rather can be considered its necessary compliment insofar as a structure of what can be heard, seen and understood implies the existence of a complementary structure of what can be heard and seen, but not understood, at least not within the parameters of “normal” realms of meaning.

The nonsensical is therefore not the same as the non-sensible, which is better understood as the potentially infinite regime of what is not included, and therefore cannot be perceived or known within a particular distribution of the sensible. Rather, the distribution of the nonsensical is the shared sense of the implicit and unquestioned seriousness of the existing arrangement of powers, persons and practices, with particular emphasis upon those relations which are perceived to make sense, and those which are not. Thus, in opposition to the distribution of the sensible, the distribution of the nonsensical is concerned not with the apparent perceptibility and knowability of the world as such, but with the manner in which the relations between different aspects of the sensible is thought to be obvious and correct: the extent to which the world is perceived to either make sense or to be incongruous, that is, to be the proper subject of those forms humour that arise out of incongruity. The distribution of the nonsensical is not concerned with what is seen, understood and known, but what is seen, understood and known *to make sense*: the shared impression of what is prudent, sober and wise and what is not.^[1] This is not simply the noting that certain things are out of place, but rather the shared capacity to perceive and determine what is the proper arrangement of place and things, and what is thought to constitute a breach of that reasonable, serious and sober arrangement. Thus, as the distribution of the sensible refers to the

particular arrangement of sense – of knowledge, of epistemological, aesthetic and political assumptions and visibilities – held in common, the distribution of the nonsensical refers to complementary arrangements of nonsense in common: a shared notion of those objects, events and attitudes which strike viewers as incompatible, ill-fitting, ridiculous, absurd or out-of-place.

As with the distribution of the sensible, the distribution of the nonsensical is a shared cultural phenomenon, held in common by a social group, though nowhere near universal in its reach. The shared nature of this relation to the nonsensical is a precondition of an aesthetic of humour, which would otherwise be an entirely individual experience. While there is clearly some divergence in individual perceptions of what is funny – a term I use here to describe a subjective affective reaction response to a particular instance of humour – by and large members of a society (or of a minority or subcultural group therein) typically agree as to whether a text is attempting to situate itself as humorous or not.^[2] Not everyone agrees on what is funny, but generally members of a cultural group can agree on whether a particular text can be meaningfully interpreted as an attempt to be funny. In addition, the distribution of the nonsensical also accounts for the cultural locatedness of humour: the way in which one has difficulty understanding the humour of a culture different from one's own. As Umberto Eco suggests, "without a degree in classics we don't know exactly why the Socrates of Aristophanes should make us laugh" (270). In terms of the distribution of the nonsensical, the mutual incomprehensibility of humour between different societies can thus be understood in terms of lack of access to the prerequisite distribution of the nonsensical necessary for correct interpretation. An awareness of what makes sense and what does not within the limits of a given culture is a crucial aspect of determining humour: not only can an absence of this knowledge prevent one from 'getting' humour, but it can also lead one to perceive humour where another audience might not. Writing with regards to the use of humour in Native art, Allan Ryan suggests that:

In many cases much of [Native humour's] emotional impact or "ironic magic" derives from the juxtaposition of *seemingly* unrelated concepts and contexts. Yet what is perceived as unrelated may merely reflect the viewer's, and sometimes the curator's, ignorance of historical and contemporary Native culture Well aware of this, Native artists take full advantage of it. (253)

This practice reflects an exploitation of culturally determined differences in divergent distributions of the nonsensical by Native artists for political and humorous reasons. Though not framed in terms of the distribution of the nonsensical, Ryan's observation that differing cultural conceptions of sense can give rise to humour reflects the ways in which humour arises out of culturally specific orderings of meaning and non-meaning. Thus, though not the only such site for the management of nonsense, humour can be thought of as one of the major aesthetic nexuses where the distribution of the nonsensical is expressed, negotiated and fought over.

There is a long tradition of conceptualising humour as an aesthetic condition wherein the relations between elements appear to be without proper harmony, consistency or meaning. Most often discussed in terms of "incongruity theory," the suggestion that incompatibility or inconsistency is central to the production of humour is frequently traced back to the work of Immanuel Kant and his declaration that "laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (209). Building upon this notion, at the core of most contemporary expressions of incongruity theory is the assertion that humour arises when a particular interpretation or understanding of a statement or situation is suddenly disproved and another substituted in its place. Extensively codified in the recent work of humour scholars such as John Morreall, who characterises incongruity as "some thing or event [that] violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (11), incongruity theory is nowadays one of the leading explanatory models among thinkers on humour, particularly those who seek to understand humour within political terms (Billig 57; Morreall 12). Simon Critchley's highly influential *On Humour* and Andrew Stott's *Comedy* are two major examples of this tendency,

whereby incongruous humour is characterised as subversive as a consequence of the manner in which it reveals the incongruities in the everyday structures of power and renders the familiar unfamiliar, thereby producing opportunities for critique (Critchley 10-11; Stott 7-11).

However, even at its moment of ascendancy, incongruity theory is not without its critics. The most common objection is the question of why one incongruous situation might be perceived as funny, while another is seen as tragic (Billig 70). Thus, incongruity alone is not sufficient for humour and there arises a need to differentiate between those unexpected discrepancies which produce laughter, and those which produce sorrow, anger or confusion (Morreall 12-5). To take this critique one step further, one could also ask why certain substitutions and juxtapositions are regarded as incongruous, while others are not regarded as such. To inhabit a modern media society is to be perpetually bombarded with an incongruous montage of media texts, rapidly switching between narratives and representations of violence, consumption, tragedy, enlightenment, romance, scandal, mundanity and, indeed, humour. Moreover, to cite the cliché of the Martian anthropologist, if seen from an utterly alien perspective, social mores and practices beyond the media would also embody an utterly arbitrary and therefore potentially comic jumble of traditions, ideologies and behaviours. What does it mean that we do not perceive this rapid shifting of affective and informational modes as incongruous humour of the strangest sort? Why are we not constantly laughing at the bizarre nature of this world we live in? Such questions speak to the theoretical utility of the notion of the distribution of the nonsensical: a notion that addresses the way in which a society shares in common an interpretive framework as regards what engagements are perceived to make, or not make, sense, and whether that lack of sense is read as humorous. The distribution of the nonsensical charts the gap between the absurdity that makes up our lives that we recognise as such, and that which we do not, as well as whether we interpret such absurdity as grounds for humour or for trauma and tears.

Understood in terms of the distribution of the nonsensical, the reason we do not find humour in the constant series of incongruities that we experience is because the shared distribution of the nonsensical does not interpret these discrepancies as nonsensical: rather, they are seen to “make sense,” and are certainly not seen to be potentially humorous. A particular distribution of the nonsensical arises contingently and historically, and shapes the manner in which we perceive (or do not perceive) the disorderly or incongruous aspects of our everyday existence. Thus, we do not (usually) laugh at the keeping of pets, border conflicts or the international financial market. In terms of Rancière’s distribution of the sensible, it can be stated that we see and “understand” these practices, albeit often in an abstract and automatic manner. Thus they are knowable and understandable, which is to say, sensible. However, the additional move I wish to make is that these practices and institutions are also sensible in that they are not understood to be incongruous, ridiculous, ludicrous or indeed humorous. The sensibility of their internal logic is not considered to contravene the accepted standards of nonsense and sense, and therefore they do not need to account for themselves as sensible, which is to say beyond the reach of humour. We do not only see and understand them, but we see and understand them as obvious, unfunny aspects of everyday life. Thus, not only are these practices and the affiliated institutions sensible in terms of the distribution of sense, they are also sensible in terms of the particular dominant distribution of the nonsensical we inhabit: they are not (often) thought to be in any way funny. Framing humour by way of the distribution of the nonsensical allows for a consideration of the how the perception of humorous incongruity speaks to wider notions of social epistemologies and ideologies and therein begins to get at the heart of how humour might be considered to do politically aesthetic or aesthetically political work.

What does it mean, though, to frame the politics of aesthetics in terms of humour and nonsense? For Rancière, the holding of sense in common is the basis of a consensual society, which must then be subject to dissensus in order for politics – the attempt to ensure equality – to occur. Following from this in a narrow sense, nonsense could be read as the manifestation of that

aesthetic dissensus that challenges existing commonalities of sense: both nonsense and dissensus refer to an absence of sense. In this reading, that which is nonsensical could thus be understood as a manifestation of aesthetic dissensus that challenges existing commonalities of sense. Taken up in this context, humour can be read as a directly political intervention and, indeed, has often been read in this manner, particularly within the context of art. As mentioned in the introduction, the critical thrust of the several avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, such as Dada, Surrealism and Situationism, has increasingly been conceptually reconfigured as exercises in humour as politics (Klein 9; Higgie 12). Thus understood, the aesthetics of humour hold out a constant promise of disruption as regards the existing political and aesthetic orders. Along these lines, in *Art and Laughter*, Shelia Klein makes the broad claim that “all humour is subversive, that is, aims to disrupt our assumptions, emotions, patterns of thinking, ways of knowing and the world as we know it” (132). Klein applies this model of humour as subversion to a range of contemporary artists, from Bruce Nauman through Jeff Koons to Sarah Lucas, some of whom wear the mantle of artist as clown somewhat awkwardly. A similar though less sweeping sentiment informs Higgie’s statement that artists have made use of humour “to activate repressed impulses, embody alienation or displacement, disrupt convention and to explore power relations in terms of gender, sexuality, class, taste or racial and cultural identities” (12) and Judith Olch Richards’ comments that:

in recent years, during this period of widespread political upheaval, artists internationally have injected a healthy dose of humor, both light-hearted and dark, into their work, utilising the leveling power of comedy – irony, slapstick and every other form – to break down barriers of taste, to question authority, and to encourage laughter in the museum environment. (6)

Nowhere in these accounts is it suggested that humour might have anything less than positive and productive political consequences: nor is there any room for a distinction between humour as a critical strategy and humour as a means by which to make such a critique more palatable. Rather, it is taken as an apparent matter of fact, that if an artwork is humorous, then it carries the potential to subvert or challenge dominant paradigms as a matter of course. Indeed, many such attempts to broach the subject of humour with regard to art eventually arise at the conclusion that humour functions in art as a profoundly political and subversive force. Thus, using Rancière’s terms, humour is here regarded as an example of dissensus that prises open gaps in the sensible itself, and allows us to think new ways of being.

This straightforward conception of humour as a directly and subversively political act can be brought into question, however, through the notion of the distribution of the nonsensical. By imagining the nonsensical as a structured system of assumptions and omissions, rather than as a completely liberating force, the distribution of the nonsensical creates the possibility of a more nuanced analysis of humour as a political force, in art and elsewhere. Such an approach can be more attentive to ways in which humour not only subverts and liberates, but can also act to contain disruption and to thereby recuperate challenges to both the nonsensical and sensible orders. In a manner similar to that in which an artwork may disrupt or confirm the existing distribution of the sensible, an instance of humour may be thought to either disrupt or confirm an existing distribution of the nonsensical. In terms of such a framework, humorous nonsense is not always disruptive with regards to existing orders of (non)sense, but rather can also act to enact and thereby reinforce the distribution of the nonsensical that conforms to the existing political community. Thus, rather than treating humour as an invariably critical force, a distinction can be made between whether a given instance of incongruous humour acts to reinforce the existing distribution of the nonsensical, or whether it constitutes a potential disruption and reconfiguration of that distribution. Hence, the alteration of the distribution of the nonsensical can then be considered a political act insofar as it works to unsettle the legitimacy and obviousness of the structures of everyday life: by locating absurdity in the mundane, such humour unsettles the

stability of the distribution of the sensible, so far as the sensible involves an organisation of sense and nonsense. Thus, in this manner, certain forms of humour can be read as instances of aesthetic dissensus.

The politics of the nonsensical therefore attends to a different set of concerns, subjects and causes than the politics of the sensible articulated by Rancière: for whereas the latter is concerned with the epistemological enfranchisement of those excluded from “symbolic enrolment” in the existing distribution of the sensible (*Dissent* 23), the former addresses what is known, but not afforded any meaning or logical purpose. The politics of the nonsensical does not, therefore, enfranchise those who are rendered silent in the existing order of the sensible, at least not in any direct manner. Instead, the disruption of the nonsensical order is political insofar as it upsets intertwined hierarchies of knowledge, seriousness and value that justify the existing community consensus: such recalibrations not only unsettle unthought routines and institutions, but can also potentially create the conditions under which new voices can be heard. Humour can thus constitute a form of politics when it disrupts existing relations of nonsense in ways that also challenge the ordering logic of the distribution of the sensible, and thereby create the possibility whereby the inaudible and invisible may be rendered sensible. The distinction between these two modes – humour as disruption or confirmation of the existing distribution – should not be taken as clear and evident: it is a messy space, rife for disagreement and tied to wider notions of power, authority and politics, as my subsequent examples will illustrate. Nor is the distinction between these two roles universal and constant – the position of any given work always arises within the cultural context of a particular distribution of the nonsensical and thus the political potential of humour shifts depending on the time and space: an instance of humour that is disruptive in one context may therefore reaffirm consensus in another, and vice versa.

A work can be said to enact and reconfirm the existing distribution of the nonsensical when it represents as incongruous, and therefore humorous, that which already was thought to not make sense. In the current moment, to conceive of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* or *Bicycle Wheel*, or indeed much work done under the auspices of Dada, as humour is to work within this first paradigm. To recognise such artworks as humorous is to reassert that they are incongruities and is therefore to locate the artwork as that which does not make sense within the existing distribution of the nonsensical: in the case of *Fountain*, this amounts to an acknowledgement or agreement that it is absurd to exhibit a mass-produced urinal within a gallery space. If Duchamp’s provocation is thought of as humorous, then it follows that a urinal is incongruous within the gallery space: it does not belong there. This is not, however, a radical or novel position: it would have been a conservative response at the time of the initial exhibition, and is a reactionary position within the current moment. This is because, by recognising this particular instance as absurd – the nonsense of the urinal in the gallery – as an example of humour, one adheres to the existing distribution of the nonsensical and thereby runs the risk of missing the wider absurdity of the gallery space and the institution of art to which the work gestures. To read *Fountain* as humour is thus to reinforce the existing distribution of the nonsensical. This holds true in spite of such distinctions, such as whether one laughs with the urinal, as a critical intruder that humiliates the gallery, or at it, as a foolish conceit; in either case the cause of the incongruity is the lack of fit between the object and its location. To laugh at the gallery, or the idea thereof, as the butt of this joke is perhaps to challenge its authority in some passing way, but this does not constitute an intervention in the existing distribution of the nonsensical. At best, the distribution is temporarily compromised through an interpretation of *Fountain* as humour, though in such a way that the wider legitimacy of the distribution, and the exclusions it implies, are reasserted and reinscribed. To demonstrate that a juxtaposition commonly regarded as incongruous is, in fact, incongruous, is not a radical or dissensual gesture.

This is not to say that a work such as *Fountain* does not make a powerful political or aesthetic statement, but rather that to interpret it in terms of humour is potentially to undercut the force of

that statement. A similar tendency can be seen at work in Hans Richter's account of Dada artist, Hugo Ball's phonetic poetry recitation at the Cabaret Voltaire, where the "crowd of pretty girls and serious representatives of the middle class . . . burst into laughter" while Richter and Ball attempt to maintain the seriousness of the work (qtd. in Lemoine 14-6). The point here is not to privilege any form of "correct" interpretation premised on the intention of an author, but to note that the attempt to prevent the interpretation of the poetry as humour speaks to an awareness that when Dada is interpreted in this manner it loses much, if not all, of its critical potential. A similar logic informed the laughter and mockery with which the public and critics responded to the exhibition of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* in the 1913 Armory Show. Parodic exhibitions were held and mocking verses composed regarding the Show and Duchamp's contribution in particular (Brown 109-15). Hostile critics regarded such laughter as a shield against the depravity and immorality that informed artworks such as Duchamp's (Brown 139), and to some extent they were correct. What these critics were noting, though not usually articulating, was the manner in which humour here operates as a method to recover and neuter the political challenge of these works: it is not the means by which the work makes its political statement; rather, it is the means by which that statement is recognised as absurd and thereby rendered null and safe through its recuperation back into the existing distribution of the nonsensical. To conceive of such works as in the context of the distribution of the nonsensical is to counteract the challenge that they pose in terms of the wider distribution of the sensible. I would like to make clear that I am not seeking to argue that the work is not humorous in some final and proper manner: Duchamp's oeuvre certainly may be interpreted in this manner, and probably is more likely to be so interpreted at a historical distance when the shock of the initial gesture has long since faded. However, in the theoretical context I am here suggesting, to react to such works as incongruous is to rob them of their critical potential. The importance of history here also speaks to the central role of context. That *Fountain* might appear humorous within the context of the contemporary distribution of the nonsensical speaks as much to the shifts in that distribution brought about by Duchamp and others, as it does to any inherent humour of the work. Yesterday's radical gesture may become tomorrow's sight gag, and thereby works to reinforce, not disrupt, the existing distributions of the nonsensical and the sensible. The variation in the distribution of the nonsensical over time goes some way to explaining why certain Fluxus film projects can now appear as no more than smarter, more daring variations on *Candid Camera*.

To explore further the distinction between the political and apolitical function of humour in relation to the distribution of the nonsensical, I would like now to turn briefly to a consideration of a form less frequently discussed in terms of art: stand-up comedy, in particular the work of Jerry Seinfeld and Andy Kaufmann. [3] Seinfeld's observational style of stand-up, which also informed the humour of his eponymous television show, relies upon the signalling of the absurdity and incongruity that characterise everyday situations (Zoglin 219): a mode of humour that draws attention to the omissions and assumptions that characterise a particular distribution of the nonsensical. To the extent that the discrepancies and inconsistencies that Seinfeld flags are typically regarded as unremarkable prior to his discussion, his humour acts to intervene within the distribution of the nonsensical, making visible incongruities that would otherwise go unremarked upon and thereby unsettling existing distinctions between what is regarded as the nonsensical and the "sensible." [4] In such instances of humour, what was taken to be obvious and normal is revealed to be, in fact, nonsensical and, insofar as he mobilises this form of observation humour, Seinfeld's work acts to alter the existing distribution of the nonsensical and thereby suggest a new way of thinking about the distribution of sense and nonsense in the world. Conceived in these terms, the humour of Seinfeld's stand-up is more radical than any humour assigned to Duchamp's Readymades, because Seinfeld's observational comedy reveals the absurdity in what was previously thought to make sense, whereas the Readymade simply illustrates a situation whose incongruity is immediately obvious within the existing parameters of the nonsensical. Therefore, in relation to the distribution of the nonsensical, Seinfeld's humour constitutes the promise of dissensus while Duchamp's Readymades constitute the reaffirmation

of consensus.

However, it would be ludicrous, perhaps even incongruous, to assert that the stand-up of Jerry Seinfeld offers a more radical critique of the epistemic norms and power structures of everyday life than Marcel Duchamp's Readymades. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is something of a disjunction between the theoretical dissensual potential of Seinfeld's work and the actual (lack of) critical dissensus it produces. This gap between theoretical predictions and their realisation can be thought to be, in part, a result of the conservative institutional mass media and televisual context in which Seinfeld circulates; and in part a consequence of the absence of any address within Seinfeld's work of the wider resonance and relevance of the social absurdities that he notes. I want to suggest, though, that the main reason Seinfeld stops short of any radical challenge to the distribution of the nonsensical is the power and respect afforded to the "rules," in both the television comedy and stand-up of Seinfeld, even as their underlying absurdity is revealed (Mirzoeff 39-43). While Seinfeld draws attention to the absurdity of the rules of the everyday, he does not seek to challenge their authority on those grounds. Instead, even as he laments and lampoons their lack of sense, Seinfeld's work does not suggest, in any serious or critical manner, that those rules be overthrown or otherwise done away with. Thus, while one might find humour in the incongruity of the social rules, but this does not mean that one stops following them. At the same time, I do not want suggest that the comedy of Seinfeld leaves no room for dissensus: by drawing attention to the absurdity of what was previously thought to be obvious and normal, and moreover framing the recognition of such absurdity as entertaining and desirable, such humour does open up the possibility of critical thought and challenge to the existing distribution of the nonsensical. However, the presentation of these incongruities would also seem to suggest that even if the rules of the everyday are absurd, their breach would be equally absurd, and, indeed, humorous. Seinfeld's humour thus draws attention to, and even unsettles the distribution of the nonsensical, but does not do so in a way that seeks to fundamentally alter the terrain of the normal or the absurd. In this instance, incongruous humour acts to suture over potentially political sites of dissensus, and thereby recuperate challenges to the sensible order by framing them as amusing eccentricities, rather than as breakdowns in the order of social sense and meaning. Hence, while Seinfeld's observational humour disrupts the distribution of the nonsensical, it does so in a manner that detaches the nonsensical from the sensible in terms of what can be seen and heard, and as such leaves the existing distribution of the sensible unaltered. The distribution of the nonsensical is made visible, but only so that it may be observed and catalogued, rather than questioned or challenged.

In contrast to Seinfeld, however, infamous 1970s comedian Andy Kaufman can be said to have embraced humour's potential for disruption and dissensus: the differences between the two men's work thus speak to the political possibilities of humour. The subject of the 1999 biopic *Man on the Moon*, Kaufman has been compared with Duchamp and the Fluxus group, in light of this "boundary-busting performances" that incorporated stunts such as reading the entire *Great Gatsby* or doing his laundry onstage, or intentionally "bombing" through the use of inappropriate or poorly-formed comic material (Bodow 66, Zoglin 15). Whereas Seinfeld's humour is based around the explicit flagging of incongruities through unambiguous comic exaggerations, entreaties to the audience or the dramatic performance of exasperation, for example, Kaufman directly confronted his audience with incongruity without explicitly declaring it as such, and frequently without ever giving any indication that he viewed such behaviour as incongruous at all. Thus, rather than critically explicating the nonsense of the sensible, Kaufman performed both the everyday and the outrageous (such as his chauvinistic "Inter-Gender Wrestling") in such a way that his audience was confronted with the absurdity, and often the cruelty, of his actions. His audience was thereby forced to suffer through the mundane made excruciating incongruous, and to do so in a manner that never made clear whether this performance should be interpreted as humour or deadly seriousness. Moreover, not only would Kaufman act in an outlandish manner while maintaining a serious disposition, he would also present everyday, mundane behaviour as

if it were humorous. In this manner, Kaufman effectively abandoned his audience without any indication as to the interpretation, let alone conclusion, which they might draw from his performance as to where and how humour might be perceived. His work thus brought the existing distribution of the nonsensical – the cultural consensus on what does and does not make sense – into disrepute, but did so without offering another distribution in its place.

In light of the confusion engendered by Kaufman's work it is possible to interpret the abstruse nature of his performance in a very pessimistic manner: some have even suggested that the purpose of his somewhat aggressive and ostensibly apolitical ambiguity was to "make the audience feel like idiots" (Zoglin 172). Yet, a lack of audience guidance need not necessarily be conceived as a put-on or a ruse. Turning back to the work of Rancière, in particular his account of the "emancipated spectator," it becomes possible to instead offer a more generous interpretation through a consideration of the manner in which Kaufman's performances required the audience to confront their relationship to the distribution of the nonsensical. At the heart of Rancière's notion of the emancipated spectator is a rejection of art as a means to transform and redeem the passive audience (*Emancipated* 4-7). In place of this old mode of art, Rancière calls for a new idiom whereby the "straight, uniform transmission" of knowledge or meaning is abandoned (*Emancipated* 14) in favour of a form that not only permits but "requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story" (*Emancipated* 22). In the case of Kaufman, the particular "story" in question is the existing and assumed distribution of the nonsensical, which he destabilises through his atypical occupation of the role and scene of the stand-up comedian. Expected to tell jokes, Kaufman instead bores, offends and confuses his audience in such a manner that prevents the audience from attributing his failure to simply technical incompetence. Thus, while like many other comedians, Kaufman upset the existing distribution of the nonsensical, he did not offer a new distribution in its place, and in this way, forced the spectator to construct and justify a new distribution of the nonsensical.

Unlike with Seinfeld, then, where the audience always retained a clear understanding of the overarching system of humour and critique at play, it was never clear with Kaufman's "comedy" where nonsense ended and sense began. Rather than pointing out how what we take to be sensible can be interpreted as absurd, and thereby effecting minor shifts and changes within the existing distribution, Kaufman's humour instead explodes any stable distribution of the nonsensical. Hence, while Seinfeld's humour observes how the categories of sense and nonsense are not always as distinct as imagined, Kaufman's humour dismisses with the separate categories all together. Kaufman's work should also be understood as distinct from a comic reading of the Readymade, because whereas in that instance the breach in the sensible, and hence the source of the absurdity of the situation is evident, in the case of Kaufman, it is much more difficult to discern where and how this performance breaks with existing distributions of the nonsensical and sensible. In her study of Kaufman, Florian Keller characterises this performance in terms of Slavoj Žižek's notion of "over-orthodoxy," where she suggests that Kaufman does not transgress cultural limits per se, but instead follows them to a seemingly earnest, literal extreme, thus rendering the everyday perverse, upsetting and unstable (44-6). Taking up this interpretation in the context of the distribution of the nonsensical, one can thus argue that Kaufman's work doesn't simply recalibrate small sections of the nonsensical as with Seinfeld's observations, but instead reveals some kernel of lunacy at the heart of the entire system of distribution, and thereby creates the possibility of a profound nonsensical dissensus: one that calls into question the possibility of a stable, consistent attribution of sense and nonsense, sensibility and nonsensibility. What appears to be an assault or an abandonment of the audience can thus be reconceived as their emancipation with relation to the existing distribution of the nonsensical. This can be understood in relation to the observational humour of Seinfeld, which although it offers a disruption of the existing nonsensical distribution, immediately acts to either offer another distribution in its place or, more frequently, disengages the critique of the nonsensical from the sensible by reasserting the

authority and power of the rules even though they are argued to lack an internal logic. Seinfeld's humour can hence be understood to correspond to Rancière's figure of the "schoolmaster," who provides knowledge to the ignorant (*Emanipated* 8-9). In contrast, Kaufman's humour provides no presupposed lesson to his audience, but instead "orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified" (*Emanipated* 11): in short to assemble their own sense of nonsense anew.

In light of this formulation, I would therefore argue that humour can indeed operate as an aesthetic means of generating dissensus, though it is far from a simple equation of humour equalling political dissent. Rather, by understanding the way in which an instance of humour intervenes within a particular distribution of the nonsensical, we can critically assess how humour in art, and elsewhere, might disrupt existing assumptions about sense and meaning in a given community. Humour must therefore be grasped as a site of constant tension between, on the one hand, its utopic promise to prise open gaps within the sensible and, on the other, its ability to reconfirm the existing consensus of sense and nonsense under the guise of free play. Thus, Duchamp's *Fountain* as humour reconfirms dominant structures of nonsense, Seinfeld's humour disrupts existing structures and offers new ones in their place, and Kaufman's humour requires the audience to construct their own. Within contemporary art there are certainly other works that promise to unsettle political regimes of sense through humour, but which I have unfortunately not had space to address here: for example, Vladimar Dubbossarsky and Alexander Vinogradav's critique of the sanctity of art and the museum in *Danger Museum!*; Vitaly Komar and Alexandir Melamid's critique of notions of taste and social science in *Most and Least Wanted Paintings* and recent exhibitions such as the travelling exhibitions *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art* and *Rude Britannia* at the Tate Britain. Beyond offering a model for the analysis of particular works of art, the notion of the distribution of the nonsensical also points towards potential limitations in existing humour theory. For example, while I've suggested above that to interpret Dada as humour is to miss its critical thrust, this could also be understood as another challenge to incongruity theory. To approach Dada, or indeed any art, from the perspective of alternate, less prevalent theories of humour, would be to potentially take up its humour in a different, perhaps more political manner. The distribution of the nonsensical thus points towards new directions for assessing our ideas about humour, as well as ways of assessing the political implications of its textual and artistic manifestations.

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Endnotes

1. The distribution of the nonsensical bears some resemblance to the notion advanced by Critchley that a joke implies a certain set of "shared life practices" or "*sensus communis*" (90-1). However, whereas Critchley interprets the joke as a direct comment upon "common sense," the distribution of the nonsensical instead emphasises humour's role as an aesthetic category, in the sense advanced by Rancière.

2. There are certainly exceptions to this rule, however, particularly with relation to artworks and their use of humour.
3. Though not always regarded as a form of art per se, stand-up does meet Rancière's aforementioned definition of art as that which distinguishes itself from the practical through its free-play of aesthetics, in this instance, the aesthetic of humour.
4. It is relevant to note that *Seinfeld*, as with most other sitcoms, also generates humour through the consideration of incongruities that do not trouble the distribution of nonsensical. Most frequently this occurs through behaviour that compromises the unspoken rules of social interaction, and is therefore incongruous in a given situation.

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