

“It’s not a joke!” Bio-art and the aesthetics of humour

Isabel De Sena Cortabitarte

Berlin

isadesena@gmail.com

Abstract

An analysis of the rhetoric and aesthetics of humour in Adam Zaretsky’s oeuvre will attest to bio-art’s capacity to open up a new critical space within the life sciences debate – one of the most pertinent and conflicted fields of polemic today. In this paper I assert that in bio-art, the use of humour as a rhetorical tool holds the potential to bring ambiguous, non-normative perspectives into ethical questions that arise from developments in the life sciences (that field concerned with the study of living organisms and the advancement of life-altering interventions, such as bio-engineering and genetic manipulation). Departing from Henri Bergson and Arthur Schopenhauer’s Incongruity Theories, as well as John Morreall’s Play Theory, I analyze the performative force of humour in the artistic practice of self-proclaimed mad scientist and misbehaving ethicist Adam Zaretsky. Through this case study I argue that the disengaged mode of engagement evoked by aesthetic humour – the kind of humour that is not instrumentalized for practical concerns, but rather of intrinsic value, inciting imagination, insight, and reflection in the person experiencing it – is crucial in allowing art to move beyond the more normative, rationalized moralism of academic discourse and embody multiple, or even paradoxical perspectives simultaneously.

Keywords: aesthetic humour, Adam Zaretsky, bio-art.

1. No laughing matter

“It’s not a joke!”, was artist Peter Fend’s indignant outcry toward his colleague Adam Zaretsky during the ‘Superplants’ symposium, as he expressed the great offense he had taken at the humorous and irreverent tone that Zaretsky had adopted during his lecture.¹ Clearly, in Fend’s view, the serious and far-reaching issues addressed in this symposium, as in all of Zaretsky’s work, including genetic engineering, ecological sustainability and the inflation of the bio industry, made it categorically impermissible for humour to be part of the equation. No doubt, he is of course right in remarking on the potentially vicious quality of humour, but does that imply that laughter should be banned from any field that earnestly aims to debate pressing ethical

issues? In this paper I will argue that humour is an invaluable rhetorical tool *precisely* in such a field as the life sciences debate (addressing a variety of ongoing polemics arising from advances in the life sciences) which, dominated as it tends to be by rational, normative, and moralistic discourse, would be shrewd to welcome the more ambiguous perspective that is specific to the artistic domain. Leading herein will be the question of how humour as a rhetorical device may contribute to this ambiguity and with what consequences for the field it addresses.

The problem is in fact part of a broader one, and demands to be briefly set in context. As developments in the life sciences advance at an increasing rate, scholarship in the humanities is often granted only limited access, as the permits required to access laboratories and any information deriving from them are notoriously difficult to attain. Consequently, the field of bioethics (field that is concerned with controversial ethics arising from advances in biology and medicine) has become predominantly inhabited by scholars from the field of science, while those from the humanities are generally unable to engage until after-the-fact, that is, only after new methods, applications, and inventions have been fully developed, their legislative framework largely determined and their policies already enforced. Likewise, bio-artists (those engaging with technologies derived from and/or ethical issues raised within the life sciences) are often merely allowed a subordinate role and sometimes even become instrumentalized in educating or appeasing the public. But as developments in the life sciences directly concern and immensely impact all of society, indeed all living things, not to mention the very definition of life itself, this status quo demands to be contested with the necessity of involving the humanities and the arts more closely and from the outset in the process. The aim of such an involvement would be to effectuate a shift in position from their current postliminary, reflective one, to one that would be integrated within the process itself and would become effectively consequential in co-determining how such developments take shape and become implemented in practice. The question addressed in this paper, then, is but one thread within the greater endeavour of articulating why the arts should be granted a more prominent place in this field. Specifically, its focus on humour entails but one aspect that is grossly absent within the current academic discourse on the life sciences and one that can form part of an artistic strategy.

This enquiry is built on a series of notions, views, and perspectives that are crucial for the theoretical framework put forward. Firstly, Robert Zwijnenberg's assertion of the urgency and relevance of the artistic perspective in embedding the ethical implications of the life sciences debate within the everyday, public, and cultural sphere is consequential in appreciating the value of humour's receiver-based function (Zwijnenberg 2012: 1–14). Moreover, his scrutiny of the circumstances under which art is able do so is pertinent here, distinguishing as he does the two recurring traps for art in its collaborations with science; 1) the 'Dazzled by Science Trap', whereby artists are technically unable to keep up with scientific developments and make do with an uncritical adoption of new technologies to the visual realm, and 2) the 'Complicity Trap', by which art becomes instrumental in appeasing the public to unquestioningly embrace new developments (Zwijnenberg 2012: 8–9). Secondly, Krzysztof Ziarek's notion of *forcework*, referring to art's "specific capacity for reworking the categorical determinations of reality into a transformative event", will be the starting point in adopting this critical stance toward art (Ziarek 2004: 66). Such a transformative event calls itself into question, exposing and complicating flows of power, engrained as these are in conceptual agreements and social structures. Thirdly, Joanna Zylińska's advancement of "bioethics in action" and W.J.T. Mitchell's similar encouragement of "tactical irresponsibility" will prove invaluable in appreciating humour's capacity to expose, question and subvert deeply engrained conventions, while moving beyond

such deterministic rhetoric as that of moralism and didacticism (Zylinska 2009: 162; Mitchell 2003: 498). Lastly, Zwijnenberg's proposition that the agonistic-antagonistic mode is most successful in making art a truly transformative force will prove relevant, but not uncontested (Zwijnenberg 2012: 13).² Despite humour's potentially very effective sting, this enquiry will also render questionable whether this is the only mode by which humorous art can gain in forcework.

Within the broader field of humour in relation to art, Henri Bergson and Arthur Schopenhauer's Incongruity Theories, as well as John Morreall's Play Theory will prove worthy of attention, and specifically the former two, as their theories are deeply bound with their theories of aesthetics. Comprising of the primary case study of this paper, Zaretsky's *Workhorse Zoo* (2002) will be considered in assessing how artists might employ humorous strategies and to what avail.³ In this regard, the ethics of humour and the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic humour will be explored in order to assess their significance in empowering art to open a new critical space in the life sciences debate.

2. The ethics and aesthetics of humour in Adam Zaretsky's *Workhorse Zoo*

Adam Zaretsky (b. 1968) is a bio-artist and research affiliate at Arnold Demain's Laboratory for Industrial Microbiology and Fermentation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Biology Department. He studied with bio-artist Eduardo Kac at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received his Master's Degree in Fine Arts in 1999. (Adam Zaretsky [biography].) Throughout his practice, Zaretsky can be said to be preoccupied with two main issues. Firstly, in acknowledging the direct relationship between bio-engineering (which involves a process of design, on both functional and visual terms) and aesthetics, Zaretsky is weary of mainstream tendencies: "We haven't always shown the best of taste. Not that artists have always shown better taste, but they have shown obscure taste. If we start engineering for enhanced humans, then somebody has to engineer for 'punk' humans, for plaid humans. What I'm realizing... is that we are coming close to genetically altering human beings according to popular fads." (Zaretsky quoted in Wolfson 2002). Secondly, he is concerned with the visceral involvement of the public. His installations often integrate an element of participation or ethical implication, as was the case in his *Errorarium* (2013), for which the public at Lowlands, a popular three-day music festival in The Netherlands, were offered the opportunity to inject zebra fish embryos with algae – an intervention by which they would theoretically become fully self-sustaining, in their ability to produce their own food from sunlight. The question of whether people would be sceptical and bail, or rather brave the challenge and thereby predispose themselves in altering the genetic make-up of the fish, of course became all the more interesting as well as problematic in light of the disinhibition resulting from most visitors' inebriated or otherwise intoxicated psychic state.

Another apt example of this latter concern is *Workhorse Zoo* (2002), the primary case study under consideration here; a seven-day performance piece in which the most common industrial so-called 'workhorses' of molecular biology co-existed in an eight-foot square clean room installed in the gallery space of Salina Art Center, in Salina, Kansas.⁴ These included roundworms, mustard plants, yeast, zebra fish, mice, vinegar flies, E-coli bacteria, African clawed frogs and *Homo sapiens* (Zaretsky and his collaborator, Julia Reodica) (Wolfson 2002: 1). The "clean room" was anything but clean as the normally aseptically enclosed organisms were encouraged to interact with other lab animals for the first time in generations. Zaretsky comments on the resulting confusion: "We don't know whether they are research animals or pets, wild or food" (quoted in Wolfson 2002). Each day took on a different theme and Zaretsky

and Reodica costumed themselves and behaved accordingly, in the most stereotypical fashion. On ‘Wild Animal Day’ Zaretsky pulled on a tiger-suit and hunted for mice, while on ‘Caveman Day’ the animals (including Zaretsky) were all deprived of their usual food stash, thereby becoming obliged to fend for themselves, which meant regaining their long-forgotten hunting instincts (which they were surprisingly quite successful at). Zaretsky himself was most efficient and dined on self-caught and killed zebra fish and frogs fried over a Bunsen burner. The whole week was aired live on the internet, in a reality-TV-show manner, contesting, as Zylinska comments, the radically anthropocentric idea of ‘life’ that is usually prevalent in reality-TV (Zylinska 2009: 161). Finally, a series of “bioethics quizzes” were distributed to those visiting the gallery, challenging them to re-think and substantiate how and especially why they adopt the norms that they do, consistently ending questions with “Why is this your belief?” One such question read: “What is your opinion on the accidental witnessing of mouse cannibalism?... In a lab situation this might be left unreported... do you blame the artist for this act or do you give the mice some agency in their own behaviours? Are mice capable of being inhumane or inmousish? Is interspecies guilt a two-way-street?” (Zylinska 2009: 162).

With this preliminary sketch of the strategies employed by Zaretsky, *Workhorse Zoo* can now be positioned within the broader context of humour in art. Firstly, from the four types of humour that Sheri Klein distinguishes in *Art and Laughter* (2007), *Workhorse Zoo* most notably makes use of satire and paradox. Klein describes satire as a form of mimicry and exaggeration that by mocking art and/or life makes us pay attention to constructed norms and conventions, often inciting a re-examination of standards or a change of attitudes (Klein 2007: 16–17). By adopting the stereotypes often associated with the world of science, i.e. the “Bioterrorist Day” and “Corporate Biotech Day”, Zaretsky pokes fun at the superficiality of the general public in their level of acquaintance with the field of science and exposes the romanticised view that exists of a profession that is actually terribly repetitive and tedious. In his use of satire, Zaretsky can be said to fulfil the role that Schopenhauer ascribes to the jester and the clown, who “mask[s] wit as folly”, wherein wit is the arbitrary discrepancy in the identification of two or more objects identified with one concept, usually expressed in words, and folly is the unintentional application of one concept to different objects, usually resulting in foolish action (Schopenhauer 1958 [1818]: 59–60). By adopting the foolish actions described above as if they were his own, Zaretsky exposes underlying assumptions, though importantly *not* by adopting any moral high-ground, or aiming to achieve any particular purpose. In this sense, the humour in *Workhorse Zoo* is only partially satirical: it is effective in unveiling the failure of widely accepted standards, but does not purport to offer any pre-masticated alternatives or assume to know any better.

Paradox is a similar strategy and one that, according to Klein, makes contradictions apparent in order to reveal truth (Klein 2007: 18). Within the context of art, however, this definition proves too finalistic and instrumental, and Zaretsky largely refrains from ‘revealing truth’. However, with regard to the bioethics-quiz question mentioned above, he does effectively expose the contradiction in our concept of humaneness as inconsistent when extended to other species. By the invention of the word ‘mousishness’, the discrepancy in our thought is ridiculed and rendered comical, though Zaretsky emphatically abstains from revealing a new truth to substitute the old one. Here, Schopenhauer’s understanding of laughter as the result of “the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation” fits like a glove (Schopenhauer 1958 [1818]: 59). According to the philosopher, the subsequent pleasure experienced reveals that it is “delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most troublesome governess, our faculty of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy in its

attempt to discern a perfectly reasonable universe” (quoted in Martin 1983: 84). Again, it is crucial to realize that by no means does this imply a resolution of the incongruity; Zaretsky does not assume a didactic role in teaching us how to think, if not in the generally self-reflexive manner. Rather, we are incited to critically question our own assumptions, regardless of whether or not we find satisfactory answers to replace them. In fact, the way in which Zaretsky poses the questions encourages a certain degree of acceptance of contradiction inherent in the world; there is nothing in the artwork that incites us to bring the paradox to a successful conclusion.

Similarly, by adopting the reality-TV format to a “multispecies Big Brother”, it becomes so blatantly apparent how anthropocentric our view of life is, that we laugh (to not cry, one might add) at the very inadequacy of our own concepts and assumptions. Zaretsky comments on the element of performance: “I feel as if the display of these animals in a spectator arena is an aid towards intelligent discussion about animal research, pro or con, without the moral superiority of pat answers” (quoted in EMutagen: *Workhorse Zoo*). This is in conflict with Klein’s discussion of the use of disguise as a humorous tool, wherein she asserts that artists become enabled to “freely pursue personal, political and artistic issues” from a safe distance (Klein 2007: 65). This notion is suspicious in its adherence to the Freudian idea of humour as a release from inhibition, as well as to the notion of humour as a sugar coating for difficult content. Rather than a safe distance, what Zylinska calls “bioethics in action” is more befitting of Zaretsky’s engagement; he gets his hands dirty, encourages the public to do likewise and seeks no refuge whatsoever in moral sanctity, exploring ethics through misbehaviour, or “tactical irresponsibility”, as aptly termed by Mitchell (Zylinska 2009: 162; Mitchell 2003: 498). But Klein nuances herself in noting the dual and ironic function of disguise as one that conceals (identity) and reveals (what lies beneath the surface) (Klein 2007: 65, 78).⁵ This, of course, also taps into the notion of play as proposed by Morreall, for whom a make-believe situation, modelled on serious and real situations, leads to a mode of engagement in which there is cognitive and practical disengagement; a mode in which one has the “comic license” to violate rules and break with conventions (Morreall 2009: 36). Again, Morreall raises a valid point, though he goes too far in advocating the positive effects of humour in a somewhat simplistic and even naive way, proposing that laughter is (merely) a social signal indicating that one is ‘only joking’. When Zaretsky kills and eats the lab animals, there may very well be a certain degree of detachment due to the element of play involved, but by no means is he, nor the laughing public ‘only joking’.

John C. Meyer’s essay ‘Humour as a double-edged sword’, in which he examines the functions of humour as a rhetorical device, offers a more nuanced and analytical perspective in understanding that the effects of humour in Zaretsky’s *Workhorse Zoo* are multifarious, rather than one-directional, let alone solely constructive. In it, the image of the double-edged sword represents the simultaneously divisive and unifying effects of humour, otherwise explained as its lubricant effect on the one hand and its abrasive one on the other (Meyer 2000: 315–323). It is in this sense that humour is able to effectuate multiple reactions simultaneously and that, as is the case in *Workhorse Zoo*, one can become confronted with one’s own assumptions in a way that acknowledges the inherent contradictions and paradoxes that lie behind the often artificial logical ordering of the world around us. The humour in *Workhorse Zoo* can be said to be double-edged in the simultaneity of its lubricant effect on the one hand – its embedding of usually remote and unfamiliar elements from the field of science into culturally ingrained and relatable contexts (the workhorses of molecular biology featuring in a ‘Big Brother’ format, for instance) – and its abrasive effect on the other – the subsequent disconcerting effect as visitors become aware, however consciously, of the underlying assumptions that are revealed by the comedy of it (the

radically anthropocentric view of life that characterizes our entertainment industry, for instance). But even this falls short of capturing the complexity of the humorous impulse in Zaretsky's work and does not fully account for the rather confounded state in which it leaves the viewer. It is here that the philosophy of humour becomes pertinent.

Within it, the so-called Incongruity Theories prove most fruitful within the context of art, in that the humorous is not located in the resolution of incongruities, but in their very apprehension, often unexpectedly. A brief contextual overview is in place: Bergson and Schopenhauer are the chief proponents of this perspective and similarly argue that when accepted patterns of convention are violated unexpectedly – when an incongruity is perceived between what is thought or assumed and what *is* – we find this ludicrous (Schopenhauer) or comical (Bergson) (Meyer 2000: 313–314). Underlying this stance is both philosophers' distrust of rationality and the intellect in understanding reality. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Schopenhauer positions the will as pre-reflective and having ontological primacy over the intellect. For him, "laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between... a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptible" (Schopenhauer, 1883 [1818]: 265), something in which the limitations of conceptual thought become exposed. Similarly, Bergson's notion of the *élan vital* (will to live) positions intuition as the most auspicious epistemological faculty, placing it over the (in his view overrated) value of logic and the scientific method (see Henri Bergson - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). It is in this sense that he understands the humorous to be "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 5.2). Furthermore, both theories are rooted in the real; even the most absurd humour needs to have sufficient association with reality in order for the incongruity to come forth as such. In this sense the humorous is never autonomous and will affect how we conceptualize ourselves as being-in-the-world. In *Workhorse Zoo*, three of the above points are manifest: 1) the humour can be located in the moment of apprehending incongruities and not in their resolution; 2) this realization is brought about by the viewer's intuitive or visceral involvement, thereby positioning its value above that of ratio or reason (which, in turn, become exposed as limiting); 3) this has consequences for the way we position ourselves in reality, both because the incongruity itself is one that occurs in the gap between reality and conceptual thought and because we subsequently become aware and able to effectuate shifts within this gap.

Moreover, it should be noted that in the specific context of bio-art – art that takes life itself as its primary medium – Bergson's insights also take on a perversely literal meaning, arguing as he does that the comical is "rigidity applied to the mobility of life (Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 1.5). According to Bergson, life is an intrinsically mobile, unexpected, creative energy that escapes reason; the *élan vital* described above. Zaretsky could not have more affinity with Bergson, despite his more vulgar style. An advocate of what he calls the "sustainable orgy" (as proposed during his lecture at the Yes, *Naturally* symposium), Zaretsky is all for a maximized thriving of life, denouncing rationality and its overrated status. The following quote is representative of his usual tone: "The brain is a sensual, wet organ, not a bodiless judge. It is a giant clitoris, not a super computer... Let subcognition win... Give up on poise... Unbottle your miasma... Seep." (Zaretsky 2004: 3). Provocatively erotic as such a quote is, it does render an understanding of life that is intimately intertwined with his, and Bergson's, concept of intuition. It is not only the intuition of our own faculties that should be allowed to thrive, but life itself becomes a model, an inspiration and a motif of unexpected mobility that most phenomenally captures the vitality that intuition can offer.

In his essay on laughter, Bergson elaborates on his concept of the *élan vital*, positing that when we are fully and consciously engaged, we do justice to this energy and give free reign to our essentially creative nature, whereas when we are absentminded and live unconsciously, we let our guard down and become lazy, consequently applying automatisms and other mechanical elements in order to move along distractedly and without all too much effort. It is when we realize that we have applied such rigidity to the will to live of the living that we are brought to laughter. The general reprimand to Bergson's writings on humour is his alleged instrumentalization of it; he claims that the comical hereby gains a social function, as the community is "suspicious of all inelasticity of character" and "insists on a constant striving after reciprocal adaptation" (Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 1.2). It is in this sense that Bergson argues that "the comic oscillates between art and life"; it is aesthetic, disinterested and detached from reality (play), yet it also pursues the utilitarian aim of general improvement (Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 1.2). However, he ends his essay with a more nuanced reflection regarding this instrumental function of humour, wherein he digresses more fully into the notion of play. In it, he acknowledges that laughter is not always corrective, as it does not always result from reflection and thereby is not always *just* (Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 3.5). The type of engagement can then be associated with the type of play involved when we dream, when common sense relaxes and regresses. As he describes this: "to detach oneself from things and yet continue to perceive images, to break away with logic and yet continue to string together ideas, is to indulge in play or, if you prefer, *dolce far niente*" (Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 3.5). Again, this challenges many humour theories' obstinate tendency to conceive of humour as something that leads to a particular gain, that is, instrumentalizing it. *Workhorse Zoo* and the humour in it do not necessarily lead to anything that we may characterize as constructive. Rather, it sets the viewer in a mode of playful engagement in which the categorical nature of the clear-cut concepts we operate through is exposed, and which *can* but by no means necessarily leads to any "positive" change in the viewer, which would be abatement into reductive concepts, tenacious as they are.

John Morreall's Play Theory opens a crucial discussion regarding this relationship between humour and norms and conventions viable within the real, socially constructed world. As he expounds in his widespread publication *Comic Relief* (2009), humour involves an activity of cognitive and practical disengagement – play – which occurs only "in absence of urgent physiological needs" (Morreall 2009: 33–34). He thereby counters the customary idea that humour is an emotion, on the grounds that it concerns neither beliefs and desires nor ensuing adaptive actions; two of the four components of emotions (Morreall 2009: 28–33). However, Morreall confuses the two meanings of the word *belief*; the trust that something is true (adherence to norms and standards) and the trust that something is real (credibility). By using both interchangeably, he erroneously claims that humour is equally indifferent to beliefs in the sense of norms, as to belief in the sense of whether the situation is real or fictitious. Whereas the latter is correct and significant – though disengaged, the comic is often modelled in serious activity in a make-believe, non-bona-fide manner – it is false to claim that humour is independent of norms and conventions. As both Bergson and Schopenhauer rightfully assert, the incongruities that cause laughter are always rooted in our construction of concepts, norms and conventions and it is precisely due to this association that an incongruity can be perceived (Schopenhauer 1958 [1818]: 58–91; Bergson 1911 [1900]: sec. 3.1). So, whereas Morreall's theory is valuable in its understanding of play, it goes too far in asserting that "humour is just for fun" and laughter signals that one is "only joking" (Morreall 2009: 36–39). Having based his analysis largely on ethologists' studies of play in animal behaviour, his theory proves limited

when confronted with the more complex and nuanced role of humour in human behaviour. John Marmysz' definition of humour as "an attitude that makes jokes and comedy possible through understanding reality, but refusing to be constrained by it", aptly wraps up this discussion, and *Workhorse Zoo* is a case in point (quoted in Klein 2009: 9). Whereas the humour in it exists by virtue of its grounding in norms and conventions from reality, it also thwarts being bound by them and effectively derails any attempt to theorize it in deterministic terms. It thereby becomes conducive in loosening or even invigorating the firm ground on which we like to stand, but offers no solid alternative. As with aesthetic experience, there is rather a cognitive and visceral play of the faculties, for its own sake, rather than for any practical result, goal or gain.

Before turning to the aesthetics of humour in Zaretsky's work, two points demand brief attention. Firstly, the very compatibility between art and humour is far from unquestioned. Many an author and artist alike have positioned themselves against the unison of the two, positing as R.G. Collingwood did that art created with humorous intent would not be "art proper" and in fact is even "emblematic of a society gone awry" (Klein 2007: 5). Or as Richard Prince says: laughter "cancels out any normal relationship with an artwork", due to the fact that "there is nothing subjective in that laughter" (Yablonsky 2004: 4). What is more, some feel that artists recourse to humour only as a sugar coating for their work – to make art digestible, echoing Zwijnenberg's cautioning of the potential complicity that art can have in appeasing public opinion (Yablonsky 2004: 4). Regrettably, this is indeed the case for numerous artists, but to consequently discard the use of humour altogether is also a hasty and unconsidered stance. Indeed, many welcome the use of humour as an emphatically positive and constructive agent in artistic encounters.⁶ The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art held an exhibition in 2009 entitled *Seriously Funny*, exploring how humour functions in art dealing with serious social concerns. In the exhibition catalogue, assistant curator Cassandra Coblenz states that "Adding humour to the equation dismantles the sense of insistent authority and reminds us that we are all complicit in these inequities. Humour can offer an astute as well as cathartic and even magical way to deal with big issues" (quoted in Campbell 2012). Lee Campbell, organiser of *With Humorous Intent* (2009), a symposium exploring the use of humour in art, feels that not only is it an invaluable tool in stimulating debate, but that it can in fact become a disruptive and subversive force in such discussions, reminiscent of Ziarek's call for art as forcework (Campbell 2012). This discussion makes evident how difficult it is to attempt to grasp what humour brings about, without articulating gain. Indeed, the most eloquent articulations, those that are neither reductive nor undervaluing – Coblenz and Campbell – strongly verge on, but never leak into humour's practical instrumentalization, that is, comedy.

Second, the issue of just versus unjust humour has consequences for the degree of detachedness involved, following Bergson's reasoning, a notion that is crucial in grasping the aesthetics of it. In his 1998 essay on the topic, Berys Gaut addresses this question by listing and weighing the arguments forwarded by the main poles in this debate, the moralist versus the anti-moralist stance. The former holds that "humour is fully answerable to ethical considerations" and is therefore never disengaged, while the latter posits that humour is fully anarchic and unburdened by normal ethical restraints (Gaut 1998: 51). It will suffice here to move straight to his conclusion, to which he arrives after very systematic and deliberate considerations. He therein comes to defend the so-called ethicist stance (one form within the moralist stance), claiming that bad ethics can indeed reduce humour, but that such humour can still be funny given that its ingenuity is fetching (Gaut 1998: 55). Interestingly, he also remarks that this can be broadened beyond humour to ethicism about art, in which ethically bad attitudes can, though not

necessarily always do, diminish aesthetic valuation. Gaut proposes that the justness of an attack, as it can contribute to emancipation and/or subversion, is a sign of “courage and extraordinary ability to rise above adversity”, increasing both aesthetic and comic value and he finally concludes “the notion of the funny is a normative one” (Gaut 1998: 66–67). Turning again to Zaretsky, however, his hunting and feeding on the lab animals, his comments in the quizzes and the reality-TV format, it becomes quite clear that he does not adopt a normative stance, though the strategies he employs are comical. It would therefore seem that, when humour is employed in art, some of the theoretical underpinnings normally applied to jokes, fail. Time and again this notion of the instrumental, normative function of humour resurfaces in scholarly literature on humour, but the case studies discussed are all extra-artistic and fall short of accounting for the specifically artistic use of humour. Finally, and in order to get a grip on how this may be characterized, the aesthetics of humour demand consideration.

Mike Martin defines the aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities – largely following Schopenhauer’s theory – by contrasting it to mere amusement (Martin 1983: 80).⁷ He lists six similarities between the aesthetic experience and the exercise of the sense of humour. Both can occur in response to artworks as well as non-art objects, can be either perceptual or conceptual, involve a play of the imagination, are intrinsically enjoyable, are faculties valued in human beings, though not necessarily for moral reasons, and lastly both are matters of taste, in both the subjective and objective sense (Martin 1983: 80–81). Though some of these are debatable, it does become clear that humour shares a considerable amount of ground with the aesthetic experience. However, one might assume that this is not always the case; humour is as diverse as art, and neither of the two is self-evidently aesthetic. In ‘What makes humour aesthetic’, Mordechai Gordon assesses this question more critically by looking at the effects of humour instead of the motivations of the humourist.⁸ He concludes that in order to be aesthetic, humour needs to meet three criteria of the aesthetic experience: “it must arouse the viewers’ imagination, reveal some insights about human existence, and challenge us to think more critically and creatively” (Gordon 2012: 69). This characterization immediately presents itself as one that far more satisfactorily does justice to what is brought about by the humour in *Workhorse Zoo*, articulating how the latter may activate fertile ground, but not in order to instrumentalize it. Having said this, it also raises a problematic question; if the humour in *Workhorse Zoo* is aesthetic, is this due to its artistic or humoristic element and are the two even distinguishable? If humour is used in art, is it humour that makes it aesthetic, or does the artistic perspective render the humour aesthetic? Or, are the two symbiotic, having actually become one and the same?

This manifests itself as a very case-sensitive issue. One could imagine many and varied answers to this question, which also at least clarifies that they *can* be viewed separately, though sometimes the separation will be largely obscured and even irrelevant. In the case of Zaretsky, the art and the humour can be said to have merged to a great extent; the humour is (part of) the art, and the art is humoristic. One cannot think of one without appreciating the other. In this sense, the humour in *Workhorse Zoo* is aesthetic, not because it is artful (by which it would not necessarily follow that it is aesthetic), but because it is an essential element of the artistic strategy, which exposes the constructedness of our thought-conventions, challenges the public to rethink them, without giving any ready-made answers, and thereby involves the viewer in an ambiguous and non-normative mode of engagement. It is because of the aesthetic nature of the humour employed, that it merges with the total artistic strategy. Finally, this is also what makes it forcework – Ziarek’s term as treated above – as it reworks the alleged certainties of reality from *within*, it critically and humorously partakes in its mechanisms and renders the engagement

a transformative event. It is by virtue of the ambiguous nature of this type of humorous engagement in art that it can move beyond the otherwise over-rationalized and normative discourse that the humanities and the life sciences predominantly offer, making it an invaluable player in these debates.

3. No joke humour

In such dead-serious fields as the life sciences, where the implications on our daily lives are far-reaching and will affect everybody, it is more important than ever to involve the arts so that they can offer a new type of discourse with which the broader public can engage. Crucial to the added value that art can offer are ambiguity, paradox, and multiplicity of perspectives, which allow our encounters with it to move beyond the moral high-ground of academicism and into a richer, more nuanced type of involvement. In doing so, humour can be, though by no means self-evidently, an effective rhetorical tool. Throughout the above analysis, the humour in Zaretsky's *Workhorse Zoo* has demanded a specific kind of theory that is not readily apparent in the typical reflections on this phenomenon, geared as they are toward humorous jokes, situations, and persons in life. Indeed, perhaps a subsidiary conclusion to this enquiry is that humour studies may very well arrive at more nuanced insights by diversifying its scope of sometimes overly mundane examples, to include more artistic engagements with humour. Within the current focus, though Incongruity Theories have proved most valuable in grasping what is at stake in the viewer's appreciation of the humour in *Workhorse Zoo*, they also keep humour and art somewhat separated, which evidently becomes problematic when the two are united, making it difficult to distinguish where the art ends and the humour begins. Indeed, this distinction need not necessarily be made; when humour is successfully employed by artists, it enmeshes itself with the artwork, assuming and simultaneously furnishing its disposition.

Nevertheless, it should be concluded that if humour is to contribute to the ambiguity mentioned above, it needs to be aesthetic. It is by this mode that the humour in Zaretsky's work becomes part of the art, exposing contradictions, encouraging critical reflection and above all, not falling back on pre-masticating how one should alternatively think or position oneself. As is at least the case in *Workhorse Zoo*, humour proves to be an effective tool in circumventing moralism and thereby becomes invaluable in allowing paradoxes to co-exist, raising questions rather than offering answers. In this sense, the agonistic-antagonistic mode by which art-science collaborations can truly open up a new space, as proposed by Zwijnenberg, should be supplemented by the humoristic mode. Adam Zaretsky's *Workhorse Zoo* has made evident that serious play is conspicuously effective in exposing the underlying norms and conventions that otherwise seem utterly natural, and that it can, by way of a laugh, bring one to a type of reflection that is absent in alternative fields. In this sense, one might answer Peter Fend's upset outcry of "It's not a joke!" with: no, indeed it isn't. And that is *precisely* why we should welcome humour in, at its most devious.

Notes

¹ This symposium took place in the context of the *Yes, Naturally* exhibition, held at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague from 15 March 2013 to 18 August 2013. The remark quoted here was voiced during the coffee break, between the lectures and the forthcoming discussion.

² Zwijnenberg quotes the notion of the agonistic-antagonistic mode from Andrew Barry, who proposes it in the context of successful interdisciplinary research.

³ This installation was performed by Adam Zaretsky and Julia Reodica as a part of the *Unmediated Vision* exhibition at the Salina Art Center in Salina, Kansas from 26 January 2002 to 24 March 2002.

⁴ No images have been included in this paper as the photographs taken during the performance are unrepresentative of the strategies employed. Should a visual impression nevertheless be requested, see EMutagen: Workhorse Zoo.

⁵ In this sense Zaretsky can be aligned with certain feminist artists such as the Guerrilla Girls, who appropriate stereotypical images in order to expose culturally engrained inequities and biases.

⁶ Recent decades have seen an upsurge in the general interest (in art as well as in theory) towards the use of humour in art; some even declare it a specifically postmodern phenomenon.

⁷ In agreement with the preceding critique of Morreall, Martin is equally critical of his “defence of the view that amusement always constitutes aesthetic experience” (Martin 1983: 80).

⁸ By doing so, he counters Morreall’s distinction of aesthetic and non-aesthetic humour on the basis of intention, not reception. Having already mentioned the receiver-based nature of humour, Gordon’s method is clearly more appropriate and will therefore be referenced in this discussion, instead of Morreall’s.

References

- Adam Zaretsky (biography). Available online: www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=264 [Accessed on 18 September 2014].
- Bergson, H. (1911 [1900]). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York: Macmillan. Accessed via: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4352. (Original title: *Le Rire. Essai sur la Signification du Comique*. Translated by Brereton, C.).
- Campbell, L. (2012). ‘No laughing matter’: Humour and contemporary art practice’, *Artvehicle* 62. Available online: www.artvehicle.com/feature/27 [Accessed on 8 April 2013].
- EMutagen: Workhorse Zoo. Available online: <http://emutagen.com/wrkzoo.html> [Accessed on 5 June 2013].
- Gaut, B. (1998). ‘Just joking: The ethics and aesthetics of humor’, *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1), pp. 51–68.
- Gordon, M. (2012). ‘What Makes Humor Aesthetic?’, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2 (2), pp. 62–70.
- Henri Bergson - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Available online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Bergson [Accessed 6 June 2013].
- Klein, S. (2007). *Art and Laughter*. London, New York: Macmillan.
- Martin, M.W. (1983). ‘Humour and aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (1), pp. 74–85.
- Meyer, J.C. (2000) ‘Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication’, *Communication Theory* 10 (3), pp. 310–331.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (2003). ‘The work of art in the age of biocybernetic reproduction’, *MODERNISM/modernity* 10 (3), pp. 481–500.

- Morreall, J. (2009). 'Fight or flight – or laughter: The psychology of humor', *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 27–39.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1883 [1818]). 'Chapter VIII. On the theory of the ludicrous', *The World as Will and Idea: Vol.2*. Edinburgh: Ballantyne Press, pp.265–278. (Original title: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Translated by Haldane, R.B.; Kemp, J.).
- Schopenhauer, A. (1958 [1818]). '§13', *The World as Will and Representation: Vol.1*. New York: Dover Publications, pp.58–61. (Original title: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Translated by Payne, E.F.J.).
- Wolfson, W. (2002). 'Bio-artist Adam Zaretsky sleeps with the fishes. Using nature to create art', *Red Herring*. Available online: emutagen.com/downloads/adamzaretsky.pdf [Accessed on 5 May 2013].
- Yablonsky, L. (2004). 'What's so funny about contemporary art?', *ARTnews*, 01 September 2004. Available online: www.artnews.com/2004/09/01/whats-so-funny-about-contemporary-art/, [Accessed on 12 April 2013].
- Zaretsky, A. (2004). 'Viva Vivo! Living art is dead', *Leonardo* 37 (1), pp. 90–92.
- Ziarek, K. (2004). 'Ars tecnica: From futurism to Internet and transgenic art', *The Force of Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 60–102.
- Zwijnenberg, R. (2012). 'A two-headed zebrafish – Some personal observations on the relevance and urgency of collaborations between art, science and technology', *Möbius* 1 (1), pp.1–14.
- Zylinska, J. (2009). 'Green bunnies and speaking ears: The ethics of bioart', *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, pp.149–176.