

“I don’t know how I was born,
I’m neither happy nor sad,
neither stranger nor intimate,
nor can act otherwise,
entranced thus, by night,
on a high hill.”

Reader

Sensitivity Training

Art and Humour in Nervous Times



Sensitivity Training

EN



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This reader accompanies an exhibition titled *Sensitivity Training*. Most of the essays in this book have evolved from conversations that occurred around the making of the exhibition. Some are direct responses to the show's curatorial statement, which is reprinted here on page 54. This reader can be used as a companion to the exhibition, but it is at the same time a stand-alone publication. The included texts and artworks may have been prompted by, but are not dependent on, the exhibition. 10

Sensitivity Training is part of the 25th Gabrovo Biennial of Humour and Art. The biennial comprises three distinct parts: a juried cartoon exhibition; a juried art exhibition; and *Sensitivity Training*, a curated contemporary art exhibition which focuses on humour as an intellectual and ethical attitude. *Sensitivity Training* gives space to variants of comedy that are ambiguous and less obvious than typical satire or political caricature but—so the exhibition claims—are no less consequential.

This reader contains four types of contributions:

1. Essays that try to make some kind of discursive argument about art and humour
2. Texts that address related topics in oblique ways, i.e., poetic, narrative, comical, or nonsensical
3. Artworks, in the form of images and/or texts, that were specifically conceived of, or substantially reworked, for this publication
4. Documentation of artworks that exist outside of this publication

Some of the artworks included in this reader are also present in the exhibition. Most of the reader's contributing writers and artists—but not all of them—are involved in the exhibition.

Orientation

A Note from the Director

Just over a year ago, when we at the Museum of Humour and Satire invited Olav Westphalen to curate an exhibition for the 25th Gabrovo Biennial, he proposed “Sensitivity Training” as the title for an exhibition about ambiguous, unresolved humour.

In recent years, the museum has made the conscious and important choice to express an explicit position in support of freedom of expression and against censorship and self-censorship (an almost incurable symptom of post-totalitarian cultures), and to provide a platform for artists to exhibit critical work. This might not seem like a big thing, but when nobody else in the public cultural landscape is doing it, someone must.

So, after years of training ourselves to take a stand, we could not but agree that some subtlety and sensitivity would do us good. And, of course, each and every perspective on humour is welcome and valuable to a museum whose mission is to collect them. Besides, the times we live in do call for sensitivity, even if only to enable a simple conversation with a stranger. This may require us to set aside our biases; to suspend our immediate reactions and establish grounds for curiosity in this age in which we tend to think in absolutes.

Just as we entered the final stages of preparation for *Sensitivity Training*, Russian troops entered Ukraine and started a war. Here we are again, post-pandemic and in the midst of a climate crisis, trying to make sense of yet another unpredictable, complex situation; being called upon to make decisive choices, to take a stand and act quickly. Who would have thought that pacifism could be a questionable standpoint? That all too quickly, we would be able to calculate and accept the cost of human life on the front lines, whilst planning for the inconveniences of independence from the oil and coal of authoritarian regimes?

Sensitivity we need, indeed; the training needs to be somewhat accelerated.



Felix Gmelin
Harun El Usman, 1999

“I don’t believe in censorship, but I don’t think it’s a bad thing to say, ‘Hey, be better.”

Hannah Gadsby¹

This book, which accompanies the exhibition *Sensitivity Training* curated by artist Olav Westphalen, continues a long collaboration which began almost a decade ago. Focusing on the Swedish context, in which I lived and worked at the time, the first leg of this cooperation started with us trying to understand the role of humour in handling awkward cross-cultural moments. Working around the notion of dysfunctional comedy with a group of artists, writers, and comedians, we mapped how cultural clichés and attitudes towards intellectualism, conceptualism, the absurd, and the ironic play out in art and culture. A series of humour- and comedy-related projects, including residencies, symposia, and performance nights, resulted in the publication of *Dysfunctional Comedy: A Reader*. This publication discusses comedic practices and strategies (anti-humour, negative humour, crypto comedy, etc.) in their capacity to challenge norms and attitudes, as well as to address sensitive issues, taboo subjects, and the various registers in which these might be considered objectionable, harmful, or inconvenient.

A few years later, in 2019, we worked together again at the Nida Art Colony (Nida, Lithuania) in the framework of the 9th Inter-format Symposium, *On the Fluidity of Humour and Absurdity*.² During the four-day gathering, alongside artists, cultural practitioners, and researchers, we explored further the role and critical potential of comedy and humour and the purpose of the absurd within contemporary art and related theories. This short but intense period provided space to test collaborative strategies and examine humour’s potential in pondering social, ecological, and (cultural-)political complexities while interrogating the comedy practice itself, its structures of production, dissemination, and rhetorics.³

¹ Hannah Gadsby, “Hannah Gadsby on Comedy Trolls, Anti-Vaxxers and Burying Her Dog,” interview by David Marchese, *The New York Times*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/25/magazine/hannah-gadsby-interview.html>

² Co-curated by Vytautas Michelkevičius, former artistic director of Nida Art Colony.

³ <https://www.nidacolony.lt/en/projects/symposium/inter-format-symposium-2019>

Comedy Disrupted

17 *Sensitivity Training* is not a manual; it does not suggest a technique or method as one might expect based on its title, but rather it makes readers aware of nuanced observations. It does not posit a new theory, but invites the reader to revisit existing ones, while connecting to a wider set of ongoing conversations about humour in the arts and its potent function “as an attitude—as a way of relating to a paradoxical world.”⁴ Both the exhibition and this book see humour as a complicating device; a tool that doesn’t serve a simple purpose, but rather questions the very structure of its own operations.

Recent social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have catalysed a change in the rules and operations of mainstream comedy. The comedian Hannah Gadsby—addressing toxic patriarchal structures, the laxity of comedic routines, and the long-unrevised contract between audience and comedian—strongly criticises the very format of gag comedy, of the punchline-joke, and even of self-deprecating humour, which she sees as upholding power structures that keep LGBTQ practitioners at the receiving end of heterosexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and violence. Her transformative comedy performance *Nanette* (2017–18) has resulted in the reconsideration by many practitioners of the basic forms of humorous expression, from the apologetic and self-destructive to the openly critical.

Comedy and power, humour and violence are closely related, and laughter can quickly turn from liberation to ridicule or even attack. Preventing this requires thoughtful consideration of one’s own position and the privilege one speaks from. But as the rules of public speech change, complications arise around ambiguous or controversial content and the over-protocolization or policing of language.

Both in his curatorial address and his essay “So Nervous,”

Olav Westphalen argues for a more complex approach to humour and its contextuality, seeking circumstances that might support a more careful navigation around this new landscape complicated by self-censorship, the misuse of political correctness, and often-simplified debates around so-called cancel culture. Thus, *Sensitivity Training* proposes a wider view on how provocation, pain, power positions, and offensiveness can be negotiated within comedy and humour

4 Olav Westphalen, *Sensitivity Training: Curatorial Statement*, 54.

in order to challenge preconceived ideas and reframe complex situations.

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The various contributions to this volume include thought fragments, quotes, absurdist poetry, inspirations revisited, challenging observations, and manifesto-style investigations, as well as some more discursive addresses and a specific selection of artworks. To paraphrase Alex Kwartler,⁵ openness to ambiguity and playing with the failure to meet expectations are central to the project’s, and thus the publication’s, logic. Kwartler’s inclusion of a translation of an early troubadour song on “nothing” ties in well with fragments of Cecilia Edefalk’s spectral conversation with proto-feminist painter Hilma af Klint, whose signature style emerged around 1906 and combined abstraction, geometry, figuration, and scientific and spiritual practices.

While Annette Geiger gives a brief overview of the history of cartooning and caricature—from cave paintings to Walt Disney’s *Skeleton Dance*—and their intimate ties to mortality, Roe Rosen in *The Standard Edition* gives a twist to evolutionary history and the philosophical foundations of humour. He hijacks the signature covers of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* to feed us “promises, potentials and ploys” and inscribes into the classic a “parodically distilled form of an autobiography.”⁶

Knowledge and opinion-sharing practices change quickly on digital platforms, and they continuously reshape and recontextualise the context and functions of humour, its accessibility, and its directness. David Geers offers valuable insights into the short history of collective digital consciousness and a future praxis shaped by social media platforms and the crypto market.

Comedy as artwork is central to Kasia Fudakowski’s practice. Her early influences include conceptual artist Lee Lozano and actor, singer, professional wrestler, and performance artist Andy Kaufman—the expert on anti-humour. Fudakowski (along with a few other artists included in this project) also collaborates with Westphalen, within the Association for the Palliative Turn (APT), a “loose collection of individuals who describe themselves as ‘palliatively-curious’

5 From an email to the author.

6 Quotes from the artist. From an email to the author.

19 in exploring approaches to cultural life with death.”⁷ The project *Sensitivity Training* itself, and both Westphalen’s and Fudakowski’s essays in this publication, draw inspiration from the genre-defying writer and poet Maggie Nelson’s *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*,⁸ a book of essays that critically studies the aesthetics and artistic representations of violence and provides a nuanced exploration of cruelty. Nelson’s embracing of strong emotions and recounting of personal experience in a conversational style pulls readers into an ambivalent dialogue and leaves them with more questions than answers.

With a selection of artworks from the exhibition interspersed throughout this reader, *Sensitivity Training* offers a busy intersection of some unusual encounters, disruptive and challenging observations, and quiet unsettlement, presented through the playful design of Shortnotice Studio (Sascia Reibel and Mathias Lempart).

7 Read more about APT at <https://www.palliativeturn.org>

8 Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (London: W.W. Norton, 2012).