

# Absurdity in Prime Time

Dora García

Pushed in a baby carriage by one of the beautiful stewardesses with big hairdo and white boots, the star of the programme, his eyes partly closed and a cigarette dangling from his lips, begins to sing: *Every time it rains, it rains... bourbon from heaven.*

'The other night, I was arrested for driving under the influence,' continues Martin. 'The policeman asked me if I could walk a straight line and I said, "No, not unless you put a net underneath."' "

Suddenly, the star stops and stares straight at the camera, his gaze perfectly aligned with that of the audience staring at the screen, as if he were drunk, perhaps in a semi-intentional parody designed to reflect the audience's astonishment, as if he had just realised, to his own embarrassment, that he was on television. Trying to regain his composure, he asks, 'How long have I been on the air?'

—Dan Graham<sup>1</sup>

Dan Graham is probably one of the most complex and difficult to classify artists who arose in the United States during the irreverent 1970s. He has always admitted his fascination with pop culture, rock and, particularly, television. In an article in the *New York Times* on 25 June 2009, journalist Randy Kennedy begins with the following question: 'Here's a good art-world quiz question: what do Sol LeWitt, Sonic Youth, Dean Martin and Mel Brooks... have in common?' The answer is Dan Graham.

1. Dan Graham, 'Dean Martin: entertainment as theater' in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, vol. 2. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967.

A few lines later, in the same article, he clarifies: ‘Though many critics through the years have complained that Mr. Graham’s work can be hard to love and too dryly pedagogical, he said he sees himself as a Jewish comedian working firmly in the tradition of Jewish comedy greats like Mel Brooks and Andy Kaufman.’

Dan Graham emphasised the Brechtian component of the *Dean Martin Show*, that is, the way the character created by Dean Martin – a funny, friendly drunk who courts women with ease – fits into Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* (estrangement), revealing the hidden mechanisms of television.

When asked to do his successful television programme (*The Dean Martin Show*, 1965–74), Dean Martin set several conditions: no memorising lines, no rehearsals and only being on the set when the programme was actually being taped. He made his entrance sliding down a firemen’s pole and was clearly reading his lines off the large cue cards flashed at him from behind the camera. In fact, he would occasionally lean his head to one side or squint to read them better. If he got confused when reading his lines, he would simply tell the audience, ‘I’m sorry, I must have misread the cue card on that line.’

The finale of Dean Martin’s TV career is equally revealing: during a crowded show in which he appeared with Frank Sinatra, Martin turned to him in the middle of a carefully delivered dialogue and muttered, ‘Frank, what the hell are we doing up here?’

However, if there has ever been a master at disconcerting the public and making them feel bad, at turning a mishap into a true work of art, it was the conceptual artist Andy Kaufman (as Dan Graham has said).

No one knows what kind of person Andy Kaufman was or what he really thought. Many doubt that he is really dead, as they consider his early disappearance (at the age of 35, from lung cancer) just another one of his rude dismissals of the audience.

Few books have been written about Andy. One of the least trivial is by Julia Hecht, *Was This Man a Genius? Talks with Andy Kaufman*, in which the methodical journalist tries to have a one-hour conversation with Andy Kaufman to write an article for *Harper's Magazine*. Instead, she ended up spending a full year pursuing a lunatic. Hecht does manage to have dinner with Andy's parents, but she never gets more than ten minutes of incoherent dialogue with him, as well as a few marriage proposals. In fact, the book is really a portrayal of the journalist's own torment.

YouTube offers a wide selection of Andy Kaufman moments. In one of these videos, a fairly old one judging from the low quality of the sound and the black-and-white image, Kaufman comes on stage in a tailcoat. He puts on a record, takes it off, and then addresses the audience in a British accent (one of the many accents he could do without ever letting on how he really spoke).

Kaufman always acted as if his appearance on stage were a semi-clandestine affair, a gig that, despite his awful reputation among audiences and TV producers, he had almost miraculously managed to get as long as he behaved and didn't make too much trouble. After explaining to the audience the exceptional circumstances under which the programme producers had agreed to give him twenty minutes, he proposes the following: reading them one of the great American novels, *The Great Gatsby*. Soon after he starts reading with an exaggerated British accent, the audience begins to boo. After several backs-and-forths, and the

inevitable appearance of a member of the production crew begging him to get off stage (such appearances happened in almost all of his performances, though it was impossible to know whether they were staged or not), he proposes putting the record back on. The audience agrees enthusiastically. Kaufman puts on the record... And we hear his voice again, reading from *The Great Gatsby* just where he had left off.

‘I’m not trying to be funny, I just want to play with their heads,’ is one of Kaufman’s most well-known phrases; it inevitably reminds us of Lenny Bruce’s most famous quip:<sup>2</sup> ‘I’m sorry if I wasn’t very funny tonight... I’m not a comedian. I’m Lenny Bruce.’ Dadaist humour, anti-humour.

Andy Kaufman, very much the Conceptual artist (let me repeat: Dan Graham said it), undoes the conventions of television and the audience’s expectations time and again. At the end of his programme *Andy’s funhouse* when the programme credits were running and he was still on the air, he began insulting the audience: ‘Goodbye, goodbye everybody, I love you, goodbye, boy, what a bunch of sheep, the people out there in the public are just a bunch of sheep, they’ll listen to anything I say, boy, the power of the media, I’ll tell ya... I could say anything and they’d do it. What a bunch of idiots! They just sit in front of their television sets like idiots. Sheep! They follow along and they gotta find a leader, huh? Boy! And they bought that crap I said about being vegetarian. Ha ha ha! I don’t believe it that they bought that I am a vegetarian and that I won’t be aggressive anymore. Boy!

2. At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, a new generation of American comedians began exploring political issues, race relations and sexual humour. Live comedy had gone from quick jokes and one-liners to monologues, many of which involved black humour or biting satire. Lenny Bruce became particularly well known for going beyond the limits of what was considered acceptable as mass entertainment.

Talk about stupidity and ignorance. OK. OK. Hey, come on, are we off the air yet? I gotta get out of here, I got a hot date. I gotta go home, OK? Come on, let's get out of here already, OK! Let's end the show finally, OK? I don't want to stay here all day! OK? Come on, let's go! OK, are we off the air? Are we off the air yet? 'OK, OK... shut up! Where's my hamburger? Thank you, thank you, OK, get out of here! Who wants to wrestle?'

Absurdity in prime time: without a doubt, Andy Kaufman was a successful comedian, though the public never really knew what to think and never felt totally comfortable with him. In fact, in a vote that he himself proposed, he was voted off the programme *Saturday Night Live*... and he left.

Soon thereafter, he made several appearances on the *David Letterman Show*.<sup>3</sup> In one of them, he played the ruined, tearful, dirty and disoriented comedian who ends up begging the audience for some spare change before being discretely asked to leave the set by a member of the production team.

Another time on the same programme, he appears recovered and happy – though still unemployed – to announce to David Letterman and the audience that he has just adopted three children. Kaufman's new sons turn out to be threatening looking African American adults. 'Come on, dad!' they yell when Kaufman agrees to do his Elvis Presley impersonation.

Andy Kaufman not only played with television conventions and the public's expectations, but also with the idea of success and what it meant to be a TV star.

On his own programme, in the segment entitled *The going*

3. David Michael Letterman (1947) is a US television comedian, a late-night TV host and producer. His first TV hit came in 1982 with the NBC programme *Late Night with David Letterman*, a programme that has aired on CBS since 1993.

*too-far corner*, the host invites a wrestler to show his abilities to the audience: he moves two raw eggs from a cup to his mouth and back again. In the next shot, we see an elderly couple sitting in front of the television in a middleclass living room. Shaking their heads, the two say: ‘That’s disgusting. He’s gone too far.’ Then we see Andy before the judge, who bans him from ever appearing on television again. The screen goes black (which the programme producers didn’t like, since they feared that the audience would change the channel, thinking that the programme had come to an end) and then, in a delicious example of ‘concrete television’, we see Andy tiptoeing across the screen. It’s useless, though: thanks to the shouts of his next guest, ‘the James Brown of the eighties’, they find him out. Andy Kaufman is arrested by the police and put on a desert island. He then asks the audience to draw a ship on their television screen and this ship takes him off the island. We are back in the middleclass living room, and the man asks his wife, ‘What’s he doing now?’ She responds, ‘You know, he’s playing with the medium.’



*Dame la manita Pepe Lui* by Tip & Coll, CBS, 1974

Coll: What is television?

Tip: According to the French, television was invented by Monsieur Televisuá.

Coll: Otherwise known as Mrs Braulia Montpellier.

Tip: But what is television? What is it for? Who is to blame for it?

Coll: We are. As the men of tomorrow, we're to blame.

Tip: By the way, it's Monday, remember.

Coll: We've reached the conclusion that television is the mirror of the soul.

'Next week, we'll talk about the government,' was the innocent threat with which Tip and Coll ended their programmes. They knew what they were talking about: their dialogues were often censored, more because of the *nonsense*<sup>4</sup> that they brought to an insipid, feeble national television than because of any explicit or concealed political critique. Tip and Coll, 'the most illustrious minds in the country', often ended the comic scenes off-camera, with a weighty, 'Boy, that was stupid.'

Interestingly, *nonsense* is much more subversive than open opposition to power. Tip and Coll were masters of the most literary sort of *nonsense*. Their formal pronunciation and exaggerated pedagogical tone (remember their 'Ladies, gentlemen' or 'Please allow me to speak', as well as their penchant for taking cover behind pulpits and confessionals, dressed as gravedig-

4. Nonsense attempts to create word plays that undermine standard syntax and semantics, generating strange, humorous and absurd puns. One of the most striking texts along these lines appears in Chapter 68 of Julio Cortázar's novel *Hopscotch*. Here is an excerpt: 'As soon as he began to amalate the noeme, the clemise began to smother her and they fell into hydromuries, into savage ambonies, into exasperating sustales. Each time that he tried to relamate the hairincops, he became entangled in a whining grimate and had to face up to envulsioning the novalisk, feeling how little by little the arnees would spejune, were becoming peltronated, redoblated, until they were stretched out like the ergomanine trimalciate which drops a few filures of cariaconce'. Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966, p. 373.

gers) are offset by absurdity in large doses. Their techniques are easy to recognise: the non-sequitur (where cause and effect are wholly unrelated), puns, neologisms, turning things on their head, imprecise usages, simultaneousness, incongruent images and texts, arbitrariness, endless repetition, negativity, tautologies, redundancies and maniacal clarifications. The fabric of textual *nonsense* is always rational and the illogical explodes on this rational fabric, attacking it from within. In other words, *nonsense* is not a direct attack on the institution: it is an infiltrator, something like a suicide bomber. Its target is the core of the institution: meaning.

What upsets power more than anything else? Not explicit, noisy dissidence – which is often encouraged by power itself in order to neutralise other more dangerous kinds of dissidence – but a fundamental, vital dissidence, where everything used to justify power (order, meaning, economy, security, religion...) is ‘formally’ attacked while uncontrollable laughter explodes. Dissidence shatters: it is everywhere, spread amidst the laughter, in a guerrilla war that, as everyone knows at this point, is impossible to win.

Tip (*as the audience laughs*):

Quiet, man!

Coll: Instructions to fill a glass of water. Let's begin.

Empecemos, principiemos.

Tip: Begin, empezons, principions.

Coll: To fill a glass of water...

Tip: Pour llener un vaso de l'eau...

Coll: It is important for the glass to be empty...

Tip: Que le vase est vasuá.

Coll: Because if it is full...

Tip: Parce que si c'est plein...

Coll: ... it's impossible to fill.

Tip: Ce n'est pas possssssssiiiiiiiiiiiible!!!

The gag continues as the two explain to the audience that it is essential for a glass to be empty in order to fill it. The glass must also be held vertically with the open end facing up (*arrrrrrrrrrrive!*); the pitcher of water must have water in it and both objects must be aligned, because otherwise it would be impossible (Coll starts making circular movements in which the glass and pitcher never line up, and Tip translates: ‘regardez la gilipolluá’ [‘What a load of bollocks!]) In addition, the pitcher must be higher than the glass. Thus, with the empty glass whose open end is facing up, and a full pitcher higher than the glass but aligned vertically, we tip and... fill the glass! (‘et voilààààààààààà!’ yells Tip).

‘To climb a staircase one begins by lifting that part of the body located below and to the right, usually encased in leather or deerskin, and which, with a few exceptions, fits exactly on the stair. Said part set down on the first step (to abbreviate we shall call it “the foot”), one draws up the equivalent part on the left side (also called “the foot” but not to be confused with “the foot” cited above), and lifting this other part to the level of “the foot”, makes it continue along until it is set in place on the second step, at which point the foot will rest, and “the foot” will rest on the first. (The first steps are always the most difficult, until you acquire the necessary coordination. The coincidence of names between the foot and “the foot” makes the explanation more difficult. Be especially careful not to raise, at the same time, the foot and “the foot”.)’

— Julio Cortázar<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> ‘Instructions on how to climb a staircase’, *Cronopios and Famas*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1969.



*An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*, Mercury Records, 1960.  
Photography: Richard Avedon

I will wrap up this brief review of absurdity in prime time with an homage to another biting pair of comics whose humour – in the true Jewish tradition – enjoyed unprecedented success on US television during the fifties and sixties. I am talking about Mike Nichols and Elaine May. One of their most surrealistic and cruel gags is the following: an office worker (Mike Nichols) returns to his home in the suburbs after a long day's work. As he changes, he asks his wife to make him a dry martini. She responds from the kitchen, asking whether he wants it on the rocks or straight up. In a few minutes, they both walk into the living room – the man wearing a bathrobe, the woman holding a dry martini – only to discover that he has entered the wrong house and is standing before his neighbour's wife. He wasn't her husband and she wasn't his wife!

A critic for the *New York Morning Telegraph*, Whitney Bolton, summarised the effect that this gag had on her: 'Nichols and May murder everything sacred, respected and loved in our society, and they make you laugh at this murder.'

Lenny Bruce said: ‘The only honest art form is laughter, comedy. You can’t fake it... try to fake three laughs in an hour – ha ha ha ha ha – they’ll take you away, man. You can’t. Because comedy is based on irreverence, and there is a revolution in every joke. Comedy never lies; it always tells the truth. It always tells us the way things really are, not the way we want them to be.’

#### BIOGRAPHY

Dora García is an this artist from Valladolid (Spain) who has produced studies and works on the relationship between performance and stand-up comedy. She worked on the script for the project *Are you ready for TV?* at MACBA.

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