

apexart

2012-13 Unsolicited Program Project Proposal by
Kari Cwynar

The Last Laugh

Artist Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen tells the story of an unexplained laughter epidemic that began in the town of Kashasha in Tanganyika in central Africa in January 1962, spanning six months, and contaminating and incapacitating hundreds. The epidemic began with in a classroom, possibly the result of a joke, and quickly spiraled out of control – a true social contagion. Its darker underbelly, however, lies in the reality that 1962 marked Tanganyika's independence and citizens were facing increased pressure. It was, in fact, an outbreak of mass hysteria – a Mass Psychogenic Illness.

In his 1953 lecture "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears," Georges Bataille points to laughter as beyond the extreme limit of knowledge, the confusion, intoxication and uncertainty of laughter, and its close relation to trauma:

"There is something intoxicating in tears, as in laughter. One would, I think, have no difficulty in showing that tears can be considered as related to laughter, to the invasion of the unknown, to the elimination of a part of this world which we consider as the world known in all the parts generally seen as a whole."¹

Because it is unknowable and ambiguous, there is power in laughter. The motivation for this exhibition is to pursue research into laughter as a destabilizing force, emancipated from the joke and entering the realm of power relationships, reactions to political landscapes and human emotion. 2012 is the fiftieth anniversary of the 1962 epidemic, which began from the giggling of three schoolgirls but which had much deeper roots. This epidemic, which highlights the cyclical and paradoxical nature of laughter, was at its core an involuntary response to a radically changed reality, not unlike the one we are currently experiencing. Unexpected modes of expression come spilling in out in times of distress or exhaustion.

Nguyen's installation *For An Epidemic Resistance* (2009) anchors the exhibition. The artist takes the 1962 event as a conceptual point of departure. Organized as a grid of hanging speakers, the installation provides a spatial approximation of the classroom in which the epidemic broke out: laughter spreads between speakers as one walks through the installation. Sam Taylor-Wood's eight-minute video *Hysteria* (1997) provides a close reading of emotional confusion. The video frames a woman's face, and we cannot discern whether she is laughing or crying. Shahryar Nashat's *Modern Body Comedy* (2006) is an ambiguous power game. In this seductive and unsettling film, two men enact an enigmatic narrative upon on stage set. There is a frightening, exhilarating discord between communication and intent on the part of the actors, such that one loses a sense of reality as the story escalates. The film culminates in a troubling denouement. Althea Thauberger's *Anatomie Artistique* (2011) speaks to past and present readings of women's bodies. Her photograph transposes a woman in a pose associated with hysteria in nineteenth-century medicine, with a similarly posed yogi. It is a beautiful, sad and clever formal exploration of the interpretation and confusion of form.

1. Georges Bataille, "Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears," reprinted in *October* 36, Spring 1986, 98.

291 church st. nyc, ny 10013
p: 212.431.5270 f: 646.827.2487
info@apexart.org; www.apexart.org