

Curated by **Amei Wallach**  
February 22 - April 8, 2006

- |                  |                       |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| William Anthony  | Ilya & Emilia Kabakov |
| Ida Applebroog   | Melamid & William     |
| Hideaki Ariizumi | McClelland            |
| Atlas Group /    | Peter Land            |
| Walid Raad       | Laura Nova            |
| Tamy Ben-Tor     | David Rees            |
| Paul Chan        | Skart                 |
| Michael Combs    | Nancy Spero           |
| Thornton Dial    | Art Spiegelman        |
| Matt Forderer    | Marie Watt            |
| Regina Gilligan  | Olav Westphalen       |
| David Hammons    | Paul Zaloom           |

**GALLERY TALK:** Wed March 1, 6:30 pm  
Art Spiegelman, Alex Melamid, & Amei Wallach

**PERFORMANCE:** Paul Zaloom's *The Mother of All Enemies*  
March 30 - April 9. See website for tickets, schedule, location.

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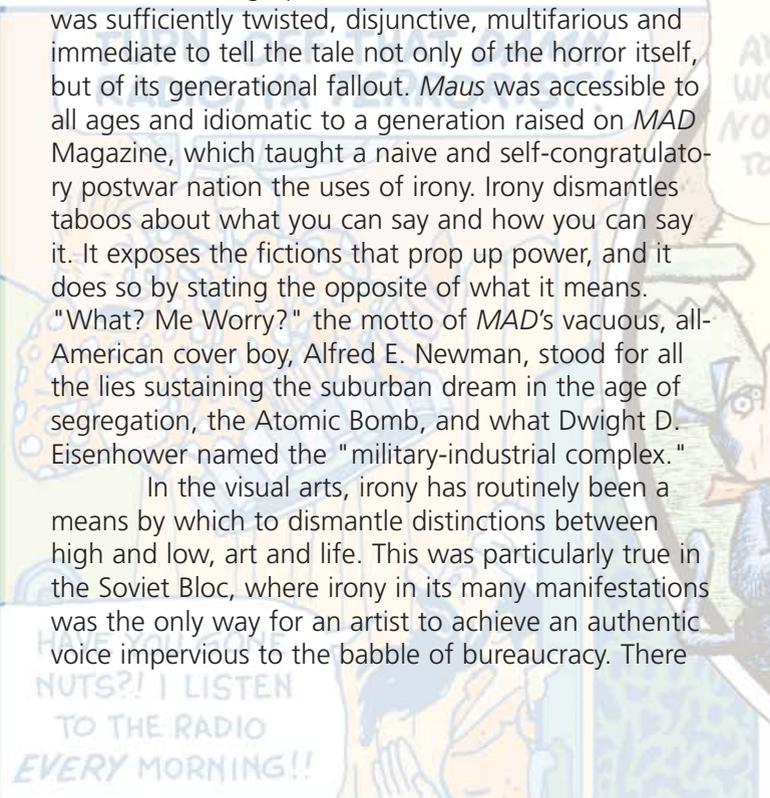
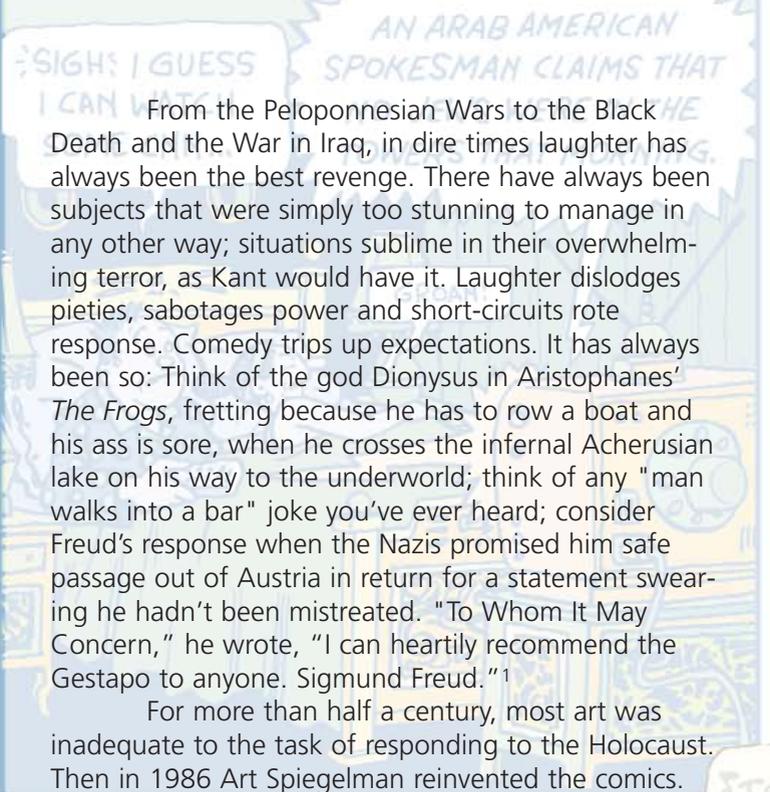
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cover image: Art Spiegleman, *In The Shadow of No Towers*, 2003, graphic novel (detail)

# Neo-Sincerity: The Difference Between the

# Comic and the Cosmic is a Single Letter



From the Peloponnesian Wars to the Black Death and the War in Iraq, in dire times laughter has always been the best revenge. There have always been subjects that were simply too stunning to manage in any other way; situations sublime in their overwhelming terror, as Kant would have it. Laughter dislodges pieties, sabotages power and short-circuits rote response. Comedy trips up expectations. It has always been so: Think of the god Dionysus in Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, fretting because he has to row a boat and his ass is sore, when he crosses the infernal Acherusian lake on his way to the underworld; think of any "man walks into a bar" joke you've ever heard; consider Freud's response when the Nazis promised him safe passage out of Austria in return for a statement swearing he hadn't been mistreated. "To Whom It May Concern," he wrote, "I can heartily recommend the Gestapo to anyone. Sigmund Freud."<sup>1</sup>

For more than half a century, most art was inadequate to the task of responding to the Holocaust. Then in 1986 Art Spiegelman reinvented the comics. His two volume graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* was sufficiently twisted, disjunctive, multifarious and immediate to tell the tale not only of the horror itself, but of its generational fallout. *Maus* was accessible to all ages and idiomatic to a generation raised on *MAD* Magazine, which taught a naive and self-congratulatory postwar nation the uses of irony. Irony dismantles taboos about what you can say and how you can say it. It exposes the fictions that prop up power, and it does so by stating the opposite of what it means. "What? Me Worry?" the motto of *MAD*'s vacuous, all-American cover boy, Alfred E. Newman, stood for all the lies sustaining the suburban dream in the age of segregation, the Atomic Bomb, and what Dwight D. Eisenhower named the "military-industrial complex."

In the visual arts, irony has routinely been a means by which to dismantle distinctions between high and low, art and life. This was particularly true in the Soviet Bloc, where irony in its many manifestations was the only way for an artist to achieve an authentic voice impervious to the babble of bureaucracy. There

were some Soviet-born artists, such as Ilya Kabakov, who did not permit their ironic strategies to altogether mask their yearning for deeper, more humanistic significance. There were American artists, like Ida Applebroog, who braided irony with intimacy. But, in general, irony as it has been practiced in art and popular culture in the last half-century has been a distancing device. Unless you want to be taken for a born-again or a talk show host, forget about wearing your heart, let alone your principles, anywhere visible.

In the fallout from the twin attacks on the World Trade Center towers, irony has become so ubiquitous in this country that it is the language of choice from the boardroom to *The Daily Show*. It has become America's version of a chador. To be ironic is to wear the contemporary reality of doubt meant to warn off any possibility of emotion or conviction.

So about five years ago, Spiegelman began integrating into his lectures around the country a sly proposal for a neo-sincerity movement. "Neo-sincerity," as he defines it, is "sincerity built on a thorough grounding in irony, but that allows one to actually make a statement about what one believes in."<sup>2</sup> This may not be altogether serious (Spiegelman confesses that he can't tell the difference between serious and funny), and this exhibition doesn't make any claims to an actual movement in art. But at this moment of emergency in the world, there certainly appears to be a hunger for the comic relief of personal conviction. Freud defined a "tendentious" (as opposed to "innocent") humor that could overcome prohibitions against life (sex) and death (aggression). In an age in which sentiment is an embarrassment and sex and aggression are at once lionized and feared, comedy has the ability to deal smartly with all three by cutting through conventions to expose the core of actual feeling and belief. It tames the terror of confrontation with what is most primitive, pleasurable and real.

You don't need the journalists' creed of three facts and a deadline make a trend to notice how

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Thornton Dial, *The Real Deal (Heavyweights)*, 2000, acrylic on plywood, 46 x 45 x 2" (detail); Paul Zaloom, *The Mother of All Enemies*, 2005, performance, 75 min; Peter Land, *The Ride*, DVD, sound, 3 min. loop.



Nancy Spero, *The Bug, Helicopter, Victim*, 1966, gouache and ink on paper, 19 x 23.25 in; William Anthony, *Feminist Andrea Dworkin Thinks Rape Victims Should Be Able to Execute Their Attackers Personally*, 2006, pencil and pastel, 22 x 30 in; Melamid & William McClelland, [www.neosincerity.com](http://www.neosincerity.com), 2001, website (detail).



Hideaki Ariizumi, *Woop Fashion*, 2005, digital photograph, 36 x 24 in (detail); Regina Gilligan, *Vote for Lori P*, 2005, wax and Hopi corn, 8.5 x 4 x 3.25 in; Marie Watt, *Flag*, 2003, reclaimed wool, satin binding, thread (hand sewn), 132 x 136 in; Laura Nova, *Playing Dead*, 2005, digital c-print, 13 x 19 in (detail).



Olav Westphalen, *Custom Rim Job*, 2004, DVD, 6:30 min; Matt Forderer, *Wdeck*, 2000/04, 55 digital portraits, 2.5 x 3.5 in each (detail); Michael Combs, *Force of Nature*, 2006, mixed media, 54 x 58 x 41.5 in; Skart, *Your Shit - Your Responsibility*, 2000, street action, Brussels / Belgrade.



David Rees, *Get Your War On*, 2001, screenprint on paper (detail); Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *Eternal Emigrant*, 2002, 13.5 x 10.5 x 20 in; Tamy Ben-Tor, *Girls Beware*, 2005, DVD, color, sound, 9 min; David Hammons, *In the Hood*, 1993, athletic sweatshirt with wire, 23 x 9.5 in.

thoroughly strategies of buffoonery and sincerity have invaded literature. Young writers like Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Zadie Smith and Jeffrey Eugenides have taken on subjects such as a parent's early death, the Turkish invasions, the Holocaust and terrorism with comedy which, however schooled in irony, hasn't the least intention of obfuscating feeling.

For a visual artist like Walid Raad, humor is both tool and payoff. It permits him to appropriate the post-modern suspicion of verifiable reality in order to create a loony kind of order from the chaos that the Lebanese Civil Wars made of his country and adolescence. He created a fictional foundation, The Atlas Group, to archive documents and tapes pertaining to the history of those wars, thus facilitating deadpan slips between fiction and anally retentive factoid.<sup>3</sup> The multiple *The Missing Lebanese Wars. Water Slid* comes from a group of works that chronicle the contradictory notes of a group of war historians. They would meet at the racetrack to bet on the discrepancies between when horses finished and when photographers snapped the finish - often bribing the photographers so that history would prove their individual positions.

This is a multi-generational show. There is, in fact, nothing neo or new about artists who approach cosmic subjects through comedy. The differences are in attitude and critical mass. Nancy Spero, whose defecating helicopters were a mother's response to the Vietnam War, turns 80 this year. Thornton Dial, who grew up black and illiterate in Alabama, is 76. He's a painter who can find the joke in the way different colored skin

turns ordinary people into Frankensteins in their own country. Paul Zaloom, at 54, has taken liberties with the Middle Eastern "Karagoz" shadow puppet play in *The Mother of All Enemies*, a comic epic that tangles the web of interlocking hatreds and stereotypes currently at play in the world. His hero, a queer-secular humanist-Quaker-agnostic Syrian, makes frenzied attempts to outwit everyone who would take issue with any part of his identity, including Homeland Security, Al Qaeda, and the Statue of Liberty.

The second part of the title of this exhibition, "The Difference Between the Comic and the Cosmic is a Single Letter," comes from something that the Russian-born novelist Vladimir Nabokov wrote about the Russian dramatist Nikolai Gogol. In the context of the "comic" and the "cosmic," he said, Gogol's writing, "gives one the sensation of something ludicrous and at the same time stellar, lurking constantly around the corner."<sup>4</sup> This would be an apt description of the work of artist David Hammons, who transposes the ephemera of city streets, particularly the streets of Harlem, into incongruous art events. In 1993 he sold snowballs (the punch line: they melted). He has made art out of chicken wings (poor people's food, both real and stereotypical), turned basketball nets into monuments and made drawings on the walls of a London gallery by bouncing dirty basketballs against them. Here he elevates into planar sculpture the kind of hooded sweatshirt that would make many a gallery-goer lock the car if it were encountered in an unfamiliar neighborhood. His art about being black in America is wily and poetic, and the joke is on the viewer who gets it.

Spiegelman pretty much put paid to notions of where comics fit into our culture. So I've included here David Rees, 33, who, in Dada tradition, bent found art and the internet to his purpose. The improbable juxtaposition of his outraged responses to the War on Terror's bombing sprees and the inane corporate clip art workers who mouth them, punched air into the prevalent patriotic fervor after September 11 and touched a nerve on the internet.

Art occurs in places more astonishing than the term "outsider art" makes room for. One recent Christmas, a friend gave me a pack of *Wdeck* playing cards, each card depicting a different version of President George W. Bush in drag. The cards punned on the US Military's "Most Wanted" playing cards from Iraq. *Wdeck* was sold over the internet as a novelty, but its composition was complex, collaged and surreal. They turned out to be created by an artist, Matt Forderer, who didn't consider them his real work, though that too is complex, collaged and surreal.

"I am sincere. I am sincere. I am sincere," the all-American Kilroy and the gypsy whore who could become a virgin on demand swear to one another in Tennessee Williams' 1953 play, *Camino Real*. A thing like that will give sincerity a bad name. But humor, as the comedian John Cleese once said, "frees people up to have new thoughts."<sup>5</sup> There are more than 22 artists in this show: William Anthony, Ida Applebroog, Hideaki Ariizumi, Tamy Ben-Tor, Paul Chan, Michael Combs, Thornton Dial, Matt Forderer, Regina Gilligan, David Hammons, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Peter Land, William McClelland and Alex Melamid, Laura Nova, Walid Raad, David Rees, the Serbian group Skart, Nancy Spero, Art Spiegelman, Marie Watt, Olav Westphalen, and Paul Zaloom. It's a fraction of what there could be, but their range, guile and passion go far toward making the point: artists are at their most subversive when they amuse and appall.

Amei Wallach, 2006.

1. The Freud and Aristophanes examples come from John Morreale, "Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions." Paper presented at 1997 Annual Scholar's Conference, posted at [http://www.holocaust-trc.org/holocaust\\_humor.htm](http://www.holocaust-trc.org/holocaust_humor.htm).
2. Quoted in Calvin Reid, "Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly: Literature of Comics," *Publishers Weekly*, Oct. 16, 2000.
3. The Atlas Group is no longer fictional.
4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* ([1944] New York, 1961), 142.
5. Quoted as an exchange between John Cleese and psychoanalyst Jennifer Johns in synopsis of Humour and Psychoanalysis conference, London: Freud Museum, Nov. 5, 1994, posted at <http://www.freud.org.uk/Humour.htm>