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 have been manipulated by the powers that be, and humor is the only way to resist. 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; think of Sigmund Freud’s response when the Nazis promised he 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.”

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 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 the exhibition of humor 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. ... take 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 in which one can actually make a statement about what one believes in.” 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 “neutral”) look that could overcome prohibitions against life (sex and death). In an age in which sentiment can be an embarrassment and sex and aggression are at once lionized and feared, comedy has the ability to sidestep with all three by looking 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
But humor, as the comedian John Cleese once said, “frees people up to have new thoughts.”

The Atlas Group is no longer fictional.


One Recent Christmas, a Friend Gave Me a Pack of WDeck ing 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.

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.


