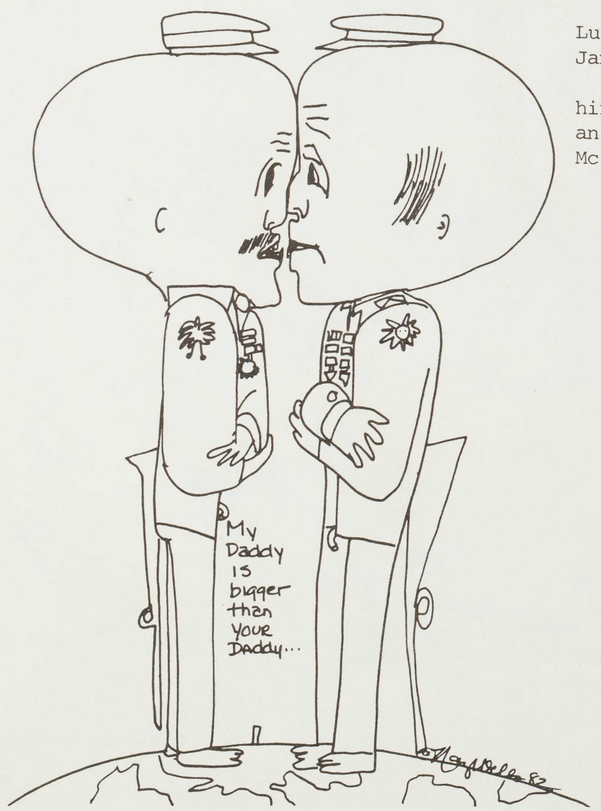
RADICAL HUMOR CALENDAR

Saturday Night April 24, 9 pm on...
Dancin' and drinkin' fun-raiser at CASH performance/film space, 10 East 18th Street, 3rd Fl. Adm. $5

Sunday Night, April 25, 10:30 pm
The Radical Humor Festival helps Paul Krassner celebrate his 50th Birthday at The Village Gate.

Saturday Night May 1, 8:30 pm
The Glines presents an hilarious evening with Robin Tyler, America's most outrageous comic. 2 West 64th Street, off Central Pk West. $7 in advance, $9 at door. Res. 869-3981



INTRODUCTION

This issue is #1 in the new series of Cultural Correspondence. An abbreviated edition for distribution at The Radical Humor Festival and wherever The Radical Humor Art Show travels next year.

The next regular (80 pp) issue will document and assess the festival. Please send letters, articles, art work, reviews, poetry, stories, etc. CC does not define radical or humor in any one particular way, and we're sure the festival will multiply the possibilities.

CC is working against the traditional isolation of artists, writers, performers, and intellectuals. In late 1982 we will publish a special issue on current political art in the Americas. That issue is being planned by a few dozen cultural activist groups from around the country. We invite your participation in that project also.

To subscribe to Cultural Correspondence, send your name and address and ten dollars (check, cash, or money order) and we'll send you three issues worth $3.50 each, plus oCCasional newsletters. (The new CC comes out three times a year.) Or just send your name and address for the newsletters. The address is 505 West End Avenue, NY NY 10024.

The editor is Jim Murray. Associate Editors are Lucy Lippard, Irving Wexler, and Paul Buhle. C.L.R. James is a Contributing Editor.

Paul Buhle did an extraordinary job, even for him, editing the artwork in this issue. Editorial and design associates were Nancy Barton and Ed McIlvane.

BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE:

#8, Feminist Humor, by Naomi Weisstein; The Decline of Jewish Stage Humor; and American comic strips, by P. Buhle. 70 pp, $2.00

#9, Sex Roles and Humor: interviews with women comix artists, feminist humor essays, Art Young and Oscar Ameringer Humor Archive. Lots of cartoons! 86 pp, $2.00

#12: Founding of the Humor International, with Manifesto and documents from Italy, Spain, Poland, France, Mexico, USA, Also comix and essay by R. Crumb. And Surrealist Symposium. 120 pp, $2.50

Available from 505 West End Avenue, NY NY 10024

Laughing Is Believing—but Why?

by Bill Livant

Why do we tend to feel that what we laugh about is true? I was first persuaded that this question required an answer when I read in draft Bertell Ollman's *True Confessions of a Marxist Businessman*:

> . . . this is something I still don't understand well—people seem to attribute an exaggerated truth value to whatever makes them laugh. . . . Political speakers of all persuasions have made use of this bias in favor of the humorous version, but no one to my mind has adequately explained it.

By the way, many of Ollman's "confessions" are quite funny, which disposes me to feel that they are true. I am therefore an object of my own question.

And I'm not the only one. Two months ago, the PTA of P.S. 59 (Manhattan) met to figure out what to do about the ethnic jokes circulating in school. The panel moderator said: "The danger is that humor is perceived as truth. We laugh and say, boy, is that true! What sinks in with ethnic jokes is an oppressive description of another group" (*New York Times*, 26 February 1982).

The conviction that the joke carries—boy, is that true! — is very hard to shake; in fact, one teacher at P.S. 59 was herself shaken: "I froze inside; I simply did not know how to respond. It took me two weeks of discussion with other staff members, friends, and parents to figure out how to handle the child."

What did she do? What *could* she do? Mark Twain once wrote that, "against the assault of laughter nothing can stand." Where does its power come from? Why is laughing believing?

One might ask, isn't the answer simple? We like to laugh; it makes us feel happy, it makes us feel strong. And we like to believe what makes us feel happy, what makes us laugh, is true. This answer is too simple, for it leaves open the question of why we laugh, what makes us laugh. And so it separates the question of why we laugh from why we find truth in the source of our laughter. Charlie Chaplin had a better idea. He took on these two questions together when he explained how he made people laugh: "I make them *conscious of life*. You think this is it, don't you. I say, well, it isn't, but *this* is, see? And then they laugh."

Here Chaplin is taking his audience through a process. To find out the nature of this process is to find out both why we laugh and why we give truth value to what makes us laugh. People, he says, come to "see" something. But they see it in a particular way. It hasn't just come to them, they have had to find it. And in order to find it, they have had to see through something else. They have seen through the way something *seems*, to the way they feel it really *is*. Max Eastman has called this "sudden reality." In short, we believe that what we laugh about is true because we feel we have had to see through something false in order to find it.

Sometime this finding is a discovery of something new. Sometimes it is a recovery of something "I knew all along." But when it causes us to laugh, we have recovered it in a new way, by a new path. It is like the impression of belief in a scientific fact found by two different methods. The more different the methods, the more we believe in the reality of the fact. Our belief in our humor is similar to our belief in our insights. Both may in fact go wrong. But both seem real. And both depend on the point that Chaplin made—the difference between appearance and reality.

I am not talking just about "intellectual humor" or indeed any special kind of humor. Eastman observed about this "sudden reality" that, "For some reason, this kind of joke has acquired no special name, yet everybody knows it to exist." It doesn't have a special name because it isn't a special kind of humor. It is a process we go through whenever we laugh. It is present in the simplest laughter. Even in tickling. Tickling is one of the most elementary causes of laughter and one of the most mysterious. But it has been suggested that tickling is a kind of mock attack, an attack that seems so but really isn't. Tickle a baby. If you do it too strongly or too long, or if a stranger tries it, the baby is more likely to cry than laugh. But when the right person does it in the right way, the baby giggles from head to toe. At some level the baby knows the attack is mock. He or she feels the tension between appearance and reality: that's what the laughter *is*.

So, according to Studs Terkel, did Miss America of 1973 laugh in this same way. She is a feminist: "I won the Miss U.S.A. pageant. I started to laugh. They tell me I'm the only beauty queen in history that didn't cry when she won. . . . In the press releases, they call it the great American Dream. There she is, Miss, America, your ideal. Well, not my ideal, kid."

She too saw through something to something else.

Humor is fallible. So is seeing, hearing, touching, all the senses. (And we do call our capacity to laugh, a "sense of humor.") All the senses can be mistaken, but we do not abandon them just because of this. We say, seeing is believing. We know we can see wrong, but also that we can come to see better. Very well—it appears also that laughing is believing. We can laugh wrong, but we can come to laugh better. Humor continually renews our sense of the difference between how things seem and how they really are. In this power, despite its misuse, lies its potential and its promise for the people.