
Gaskell: © Anna Gaskell; Sternfeld: Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York; Rejlander: Darwin Papers, Cambridge University Library; Bozhkov: Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.
What is it about photography and its history that makes so many photographers suppress their sense of humor?

I taught my first photography class in the batty aftermath of 9/11. After muddling through a few sad-sack sessions, I decided the only way to deal with the utter upheaval was with humor. I showed slides of photographs that approached the world with levity and joy, starting with Helen Levitt and ending with Joel Sternfeld, and asked the students to go out and scan the world for some such thing. They were particularly roused by Sternfeld’s *American Prospects* (1987), in all its grandiose lighthearted glory, giggling at the cycloramic puns of color, the sense that a photograph could be a great story your wiseacre uncle would tell, from a world radically more sane than the one outside. I got a call just as the class broke up. Cell phones were at the time still a novelty to me; I fumbled for mine like a man who’s lost a live grenade in the lining of his coat, only to hear Joel Sternfeld on the other end. He asked if I could teach his class in a few weeks and before I could even agree, I told him I’d just showed his work to my students, and that the images had received — I overstated, quoting *A Thousand Clowns*, one of my favorite movie comedies — “outright prolonged laughter.” There was a conspicuous silence on the other end. Not the silence of a dropped mobile network, even this novice knew, but the one Emily Dickinson described as “Wrecked, Solitary, Here.” Joel rang off. I never taught his class.

Photogeliophobia: Fear of Funny Photography — A Diagnosis
Tim Davis

Xanthias: Master, should I tell the usual jokes which always make the audience laugh?…

Dionysus: Don’t you dare, unless you want to make me sick.

— Aristophanes, *The Frogs*

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(Enter a blind old man with a violin)

Mozart: Play us a little Mozart, would you?

* (The old man plays an aria from Don Giovanni. Mozart laughs loudly.)

Salieri: And you can laugh at that?

Mozart: Oh come, Salieri, Don’t you think it’s funny?

Salieri: No, I don’t. When Raphael’s Madonnas are defiled by worthless daubers, I do not find it funny. When a contemptible buffoon dishonors Alighieri with his parodies, I do not find it funny.

— Pushkin, *Mozart and Salieri*
There are no published case studies of geliophobia, the fear of laughter, but the history of visual art mostly is one. Despite how unbearable life would be without it, artists get anxious letting laughter leak into their work. I blame the advent of modernism—the period when novelty and restraint unseated art’s social, communicative function—but the scarcity of laughter runs at least back to the Romans, the last people not to care if their art wasn’t taken seriously. It was with modernism that cold, analytical, obscure art started to sneer at the warm, narrative, and direct. Photographers, whose works are in palpable, seductive contact with daily human stories, have felt the need to avoid appearing too liet.

At the Yale Art Gallery there are three large banks of study slides: “Painting,” “Sculpture,” and “Minor Arts.” Professional photographers, condemned by Charles Baudelaire as a society of “poor madmen,” who rush, “like Narcissus, to contemplate [the] trivial image on the metallic plate,” feel the need to stay serious and avoid having too much Minor fun.

Even the funniest of photographers, such as Oscar Gustave Rejlander, the jaunty Swedish artiste who used a cat’s dilating eyes as a light meter, felt the need to garnish his pie-in-the-face jokingness with a sprig of scientific inquiry. His 1872 double self-portrait with his own famous image Ginx’s Baby was made to prove that laughter and tears can be indistinguishable in a still photograph. He sent a stereo card of the two images to Charles Darwin, who had hired him to make plates for The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals. Rejlander was a great clown, who loved to appear in his own constructed images in gaudy costumes, and whose cut-and-paste techniques would enable generations of amateurs who felt no anxiety at all about expressing silliness. But Rejlander, too, was concerned about not being taken seriously. His funniest pictures are about laughter, hiding the humor behind theoretical comedic masks. In fact, on February 12, 1863, he delivered a speech at the South London Photographic Society titled “An Apology for Art Photography,” in which his obvious irony masks real humility in face of the debate about how seriously photography would be taken. “A funny thing it is that some people actually prefer the chalkings of a boy on the walls and shutter to the finest photographic pictures! Just think how superior are the mackerel and ship at sea we find drawn on the pavement in coloured chalks! I am ambitious, too—I wish I was in Dixie! I do! I do!”

I met Anna Gaskell at the opening of her 1995 MFA thesis show, and was so struck by her beauty and poise that I pirouetted away from our brief introduction and sidled up to the work on the wall. Here were images of this elegant Des Moinesian’s face contorted like a Harold Edgerton apple, with fluids flowing from orifices, and the human body appearing anything but impermeable. With a fast strobe, Gaskell had photographed herself sneezing, yawning, and orgasming. These pictures were pure slapstick—the most uninflected form of humor—where the simple sanctity of the body must be defiled. The reason the Three Stooges were never as funny as Buster Keaton, say, or Harold Lloyd, was that there was nothing sacred being abused. I decided Gaskell was destined to become the Lucille Ball of contemporary photography, a bombshell about to explode into utter mayhem.

When I did begin to see her work on gallery walls, at her exhibition Wonder, in 1997, I kept looking around the room for Lucille Ball. These pictures, staged narratives using girl models, still contained a delirious obscurity, and a sense that something was askew in the world, but mystery had replaced buffoonery.

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—Mark Twain
The pictures felt less risky to me, and I guessed that Gaskell had discreetly dropped the humor from her work when it entered the public conversation. Gaskell did eventually exhibit the sneezing pictures in a 2006 group show called *Voice and Void* at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and published an interview about them: “I was thinking about how as a kid I had interpreted a Bible story where the prophet Elisha brings a boy back to life and the boy sneezes seven times. I had overlooked the miracle and thought that sneezing had saved his life!” And I had overlooked the spiritual pantomime these pictures were performing. The slapstick rictus in the photographer’s expressions was the revelatory shock of resurrection.

*If you tell a joke in the forest, but nobody laughs, was it a joke?*  
— *Steven Wright*

William Wegman’s *Crooked Finger, Crooked Stick* video from 1972–73 is a work of art that you can’t help laughing at, despite every effort. It hurts to try, and brings back childhood memories of being unable to hold back laughter. The psychoanalyst Adam Philips describes the feeling: “Through tickling, the child will be initiated in a distinctive way into the helplessness and disarray of a certain primitive kind of pleasure.” In the late 1960s, a ticklish levity overtook a set of thoughtful Californian artists that still serves as an inoculation against congenital photogeliophobia. If this essayist were forced to explain California to a bloom of alien geographers, I’d show them *Crooked Finger, Crooked Stick*. “Wow, what a neat stick. Boy is it crooked. Oh, that’s nothin’,
Daniel Bozhkov,  
Eau d’Ernest, 2005,  
eau de toilette, edition  
of one thousand original  
100-ml bottles plus  
200 pirated copies;  
a collaboration with  
Ulrich Lang, New York,  
and Pinkar Cosmetics,  
Istanbul  
Courtesy the artist and  
Andrew Kreps Gallery,  
New York  

you oughta see my finger.” In slurry black and white a credulous  
voice—the voice of a totally nice, totally dumb guy—compares  
the crookedness of a finger to the crookedness of a stick. This  
is a work of art made in a world with no anxiety, no pain or fear.  
It is so unwary that thousands of years of philosophy melt away  
in its presence. It is not even absurd, since absurdus, in Latin,  
means “out of tune,” and Crooked Finger hovers in a universe  
without dissonance. No Old Testament, no Thomas Hobbes,  
no Antonioni. It radiates instead with the straightforward  
hopefulness of the science lab. Where Rejlander hid under  
the mantle of seriousness in his experiment, Wegman trundles  
into the science lab with white lab coat flapping. The pressure  
is off. If it doesn’t work, heck, we’ll just try it again. No progress.  
No decisive moment.

Forget that the video was actually made in Wisconsin,  
and that Wegman hails from New England; he is a California  
artist, and this is California art: sunny, unsentimental, and  
utterly hilarious. These also turn out to be the perfect growing  
conditions for humorous photography. It was in this climate  
that Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan started rifling through  
corporate and government archives for their 1977 book Evidence,  
discovering 8-by-10 glossies of unparalleled, unintentional  
silliness. The pictures they collected—of science experiments  
and corporate folderol—evidence one of photography’s purest  
conundrums. We can know what these photographs are of, while  
having no idea what they are about. In this conundrum we can  
detect the tiniest tremor of California artists’ photogeliophobia.  
They hide their humor in plain sight, letting it bleach bone  
black and white in the obvious, deadpan midday sun.

I was working this engineering job and . . .  It wasn’t a gulag but it wasn’t a fun  
job . . .  So one day I was in this conference call, kind of bored, didn’t really have  
to be there and I just started writing these Dr. Seuss poems after seven or eight  
years of doing just Hemingway. And that night I just brought it home and threw  
it on the table . . .  and after the kids were in bed I heard my wife laughing in  
the other room. Like Christmas morning I peeked around the corner and she’s  
laughing at my stuff, actually having pleasure in it . . .  I had just written a seven-  
hundred-page novel . . .  in a Joycean voice . . .  so to see someone taking pleasure  
in it was just unreal . . .  After that I said OK, so, you are heretofore permitted  
to be funny.

— George Saunders, The Sound of Young America podcast

George Saunders is the most humane of writers. The permission  
he found to be funny never left him insensitive to the raging  
spectrum of human pain. In fact, it sensitized him to pain the  
way iodine vapor prepared daguerreotype plates. The history  
of photography’s overall overseriousness starts to feel like a  
first date that can’t laugh at the ketchup he’s spilled in his lap.  
How to reach the fearful and distribute the Saunders vaccine  
to photographers? Well, the metrics tell us to look for those who  
don’t admit to being photographers. I’m not talking A.W.U.P.s  
here—Artists Who Use Photography. Those folks, running from  
the casual veracity of the lensed image, are the most anxious to be  
taken seriously. The nakedest and least ashamed photographers  
who feel Saundersian permission to be openly funny are usually  
sculptors. Take Daniel Bozhkov. The photographs he makes,  
say, of the Hemingway-scented perfume he created in 2005  
called Eau d’Ernest, or his crop-circle portrait of Larry King taken  
from the air, called Learning to Fly over a Very Large Larry (2002),  
are all bit parts in enormous, elaborate performative systems.  
For Eau d’Ernest, he didn’t just make a photograph. He attended  
a gathering of Hemingway lookalikes in Key West and collected  
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hotel. He sold Eau d’Ernest in fancy Turkish perfumeries, but also made knock-offs that were sold on the street. Bozhkov’s photographs, unembarrassedly funny, are mere illustrations in cockeyed, delirious, imaginative essays about how meaning leeches into the world. The photographs themselves are far from phobic, but they’re shy about standing out in public, like the joke opening a lecture at a Medieval Philology conference.

So, even the bold are fearful. I, too, am afraid. But enough about me, let me tell you a little about myself. A photographer walks into an amusement park, where his wife and little sister persuade him to go on the roller coaster. This photographer gets nauseous on escalators. As the sun sets beneath the rain, he stares at the horizon, desperate to hold onto any sort of equilibrium. He makes it through the experience feeling like Byron’s Don Juan on the ship leaving Spain (“Here he grew inarticulate with retching”). On the way out, the high school kids working the ride try to sell passengers a picture that’s been snapped of them on a precipitous descent. They’ve seen thousands of these images pop up on the screen over the long summer, and are as inured to them as to corndogs. But when the image of the photographer pops up on the screen, looking soulless and devoid while surrounding riders scream with glee, the kids break up and fall on the floor laughing. The photographer’s wife shells out the nine bucks for the image in its marbled cardboard frame. It sits in the studio for years, waiting to be legitimized into a proper work of art, but ends up merely preserving for all eternity the terrible suffering of one more photogeliophobe.

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