

Mathieu Lefevre: Irony as Method

Mathieu Lefevre's work often relies on humour and mockery. As such, one can place Lefevre in a tradition Pierre-Michel Menger has called the "mocking and ironic avant-garde,"ⁱ an avant-garde tradition descended from Dada and Marcel Duchamp—Schwitters, Cage, Warhol, Damien Hirst. Thumbing their noses at a classical tradition that conceived art as a privileged means of elevating oneself above the banal, these artists delighted in reducing art to the level of triviality, in exposing it to the worst degradations.

To do justice to artists all too often ignored, one should recall that this ironic, mocking tradition predates Duchamp and the Dadaists. The end of the 19th century in fact saw the emergence of the first avant-garde artists to present themselves as unequivocal iconoclasts. Literary and artistic clubs—the Incoherents, Hydropathes, Hirsutes, Zutists, and sundry other irreverent groups—were dedicated first and foremost to "shocking the bourgeoisie."ⁱⁱ

Art of the First Degree

Like that of his predecessors, Lefevre's work plays liberally on language, particularly the language of art, to create its amusing effects.

"I like humour that arises from taking things literally," says the artist. Pretending to understand things in the literal sense, while ignoring the subtleties of language, its metaphors and imagery, is one of the most widespread forms of the comic. The humour arises from the presumed stupidity of an imaginary listener who doesn't get the figurative meaning. This tomfoolery, like a kind of baseline humour, underscores the popular and generally accessible nature of Lefevre's works.

It would be wrong, however, to say that Lefevre's humour is limited to word-play and easy jokes. His witticisms can also have weightier significance and require a more intellectual reading. His *Keep it Real*, for instance, where Lefevre inscribes the slogan on a Kandinsky, requires a particular aesthetic education to "get," as the humour arises from the oxymoron of applying the popular admonition to the Russian artist's work, which was diametrically opposed to realism and figuration. The opposition, of course, is absurd, since the "real" here refers to completely different realities.

Irony as Method

As with his predecessors, the comical nature of Lefevre's works isn't an end in itself, but functions as instrument of enquiry. These works imply an ongoing investigation into the social notion of art and testify to eminently heuristic and sociological preoccupations. Irony, tomfoolery, and satire, Lefevre tells us, are privileged means for testing the fragility of systemic constructs, particularly that of art.

Lyotard liked to recall that satire—a characteristic, he believed, of the postmodern condition and an abiding source for the work of the avant-garde artists mentioned above—

is first and foremost a saturation of all genres and cultural values that have functioned as givens. Such a critique disrupts and questions established systems of meaning.

Michel Onfray points out, however, that satire, sarcasm, and irony, even when amusing, have no value if they do not enable one to question the paradigms, that is, question the prevailing and exemplary models in society. Irony must be a method and an instrument of enquiry—the word, after all, comes from the Greek *eirôneia*, a Socratic interrogation feigning ignorance.

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- i Pierre-Michel Menger, *Profession artiste, extension du domaine de la création* (Paris: Textuel, 2005).
 - ii Luc Ferry, *Le Sens du beau : Aux origines de la culture contemporaine* (Paris: bLGF/Livre de Poche , 2001).