

Sarah Cowan

# Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One

I don’t care<sup>2</sup> to belong<sup>3</sup> to any club<sup>4</sup> that will have me<sup>5</sup> as a member.<sup>6</sup>  
—<sup>7</sup> Groucho Marx<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If you cut out the postcard in the back of this catalog and mail it to the address indicated you will receive a hollow replica of Annelies Kamen’s thumb. If you put it over your thumb, Kamen will become your personal arbiter. She will congratulate your children at their Little League game, judge your employee’s thorough presentation, validate your lover’s cooking, or tell someone you think the band sucks in the middle of a loud song. The piece, called **I’ll Be the Judge of That!**, allows Kamen to stand by her word and also multiply it, rendering obvious the ways the we use our discretion daily to assert personal ideology and appraise one another. It’s her way of undermining the role of the artist as tastemaker, authority, and egomaniac, and of laughing at it.<sup>1</sup> If you put the thumb upright on your desk, you will be putting Kamen in the uncomfortable position of offering her unflagging support for whatever systems guide your routines and life.

<sup>2</sup> When something is shoddily made, it appears that the maker didn’t care about the task. But sometimes things are made poorly because they are preparatory to a functional object. The catch-all word for this is a “dummy.”<sup>ii</sup> This essay you are reading has replaced “dummy text,” a standard gibberish language used by graphic designers as a stand-in for finalized text. Because I live in New York and Kamen lives in Berlin, my essay is based on a video tour she gave me of a dummy version of this catalog, which demonstrated very well its planned look and function, despite being held together by paper clips. Even though it seems kind of dumb to put a dummy thumb over your fully functional thumb, you understand that it represents the idea of Kamen’s approval.<sup>iii</sup> She’s making the limits of control clear, that even though she might care how her thumb, and

thereby her judgment, is used, she has to hand over (no pun intended) the power of determination to you. You can follow her instructions for how to crumple up **Rules of Bad Drawing** to make it into a sculpture, or you can use it as toilet paper.<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In his posthumously published “Essay on Laughter,” sociologist Norbert Elias attempts to tackle what he called the “problem of laughter,” which is that nobody knows exactly why we do it. He proposes that laughter, a behavior specific to humans, was an evolutionary development for reconciliatory communication: “If you are in danger of being physically assaulted, make the attacker laugh (if you can). For the time being, he will be unfit to go on with his assault. Momentarily, laughter paralyzes or inhibits man’s faculty to use physical force.”<sup>v</sup> Laughter is disarming; it can delineate who’s in and who’s out of a group. Kamen uses humor to let her viewers know that they belong, even in a space as acerbic as an art gallery, and simultaneously defends herself, neutralizing the attacks that lend exclusivity to the art world.

<sup>4</sup> Kamen’s work suits itself more to the dynamics of the comedy club than the club of the art world. She forces the art critic to take on the cartoonish role of the heckler, a style of critique much more emotional and direct than they may be accustomed to.<sup>vi</sup> Thrown tomatoes make the messy risk of audience response overt, something that is often alienated from production in the visual arts. In a comedy club every member of the audience is a critic, and their reaction has an immediate effect on the route the act takes, if the stand-up comic is skilled enough to read the room. This inextricability between artwork and audience is easily understood in Kamen’s installation **A faucet which**

<sup>i</sup> Art and comedy are often thought of as distant fields, but they are both arenas in which “getting it” links intellect and taste. This is the cartoon image of The Art World: a sparse set of people, skinny from ascetic lack of enjoyment, wear all black while contemplating a black square, framed and well-lit on a blindingly white wall. Their lengthy, quiet consideration prohibits the very possibility of someone who doesn’t “get it,” even if they don’t necessarily seem to “like” the art very much.<sup>o</sup> The same goes for a joke: if someone doesn’t “get it,” it’s a signal to the group that the person lacks a sense of humor, a sign not just of intellectual but also emotional inferiority. The question of liking a joke, or a work of art, is an issue that can only be discussed after acknowledging you understand it. You don’t have to understand food or perfume or sex to know what you like or don’t like.

<sup>ii</sup> When someone doesn’t understand something (doesn’t “get it”), they can sometimes be essentialized as “dumb,” or a “dummy.” When a child says, “I’m dumb at math,” they fault themselves instead of the teacher or the system of schooling. In **Rules of Bad Drawing** and **Origami Bad Idea**, Kamen magnifies the ways that the passive language of instruction is informed by judgments, and how, by taking direction, our actions propagate those judgments.

<sup>iii</sup> Dummies are at their essence conceptual art, because they are objects that represent an idea.

<sup>iv</sup> “Toilet humor” is considered childish, but the oldest recorded joke is 3900 years old, born in Sumer, and it’s no more mature: “Something which has never occurred since time immemorial; a young woman did not fart in her husband’s lap.”

<sup>v</sup> Norbert Elias and Anca Parvulescu, “Essay on Laughter,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 281-304.

**stops dripping when nobody is listening to it.** The very presence of a viewer enlivens the work.<sup>vii</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant defined laughter as self-deprecation, calling it “an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing,”<sup>viii</sup> which describes very well the inherent comedy of being an artist, a role appointed with the promise of seriousness that buckles under the slightest human triviality. Such incongruity is epitomized by the photograph of Pablo Picasso, one of The Greatest Artists of All Time, posing like a triumphant general in nothing but his tighty-whities. But in her essay on “unlaughter,” Moira Smith writes about why self-deprecating humor is so highly valued in society: “To laugh at oneself requires a capacity for self-objectification, the ability to perceive the incongruity between our subjective and objective selves [...]. People with this prized ability to laugh at themselves possess an appropriate sense of proportion and moderation and the ability to adjust to the demands of the bureaucratic order, qualities that make them ideal citizens of modern industrialized society.”<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps as an acknowledgment of the systems we are confined within, Kamen uses the language of bureaucracy in her work—diagrams, instructions, lists of rules, machinery—all in service of absurdity, elucidating the circuitous Rube Goldbergian inventions that burden our simplest tasks while claiming to make them easier.

<sup>6</sup> There’s nothing worse than having to explain a joke.

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the few one-liners that can be unequivocally attributed to Groucho Marx, and it’s so hackneyed that I admit it’s pretentious,

almost condescending, to format it so formally, as if I discovered it and felt it a unique endorsement of my essay. Still, as legendary as it is, no one knows **exactly** how Groucho delivered the line, because he would repeat it, as comedians are known to do, with various phrasings, in many contexts, with reference to different clubs.<sup>x</sup> Jokes like these are functional in that that they can be applied, adjusted, and reused, depending on the audience, and can be passed on to be used by many. They are dependent on the audience, just like the dripping faucet.<sup>xi</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Groucho Marx appears in **Still Looking at Idols**, a series of portraits Kamen drew of people she finds funny, which she then turned into masks you can wear. She didn’t have to make a mask of Groucho, because there’s already one sold at most party supply stores; it’s one of the most popular gag gifts ever produced.<sup>xii</sup> Kamen told me that jokes are subversive because they allow you to momentarily get outside the cage of language and to peek at it. Peeking implies that you have to be hidden, and if you wear a mask, whether store-bought or made by Kamen, you’re going undercover. A standard form of comedy is mimicry, like when people do impressions, but the masks aren’t fooling anybody. Putting one of these masks on is more like turning yourself into a dummy, “standing for” someone famous rather than being them, but from behind it you get to peek at something usually difficult to get perspective on: ego. When Annelies poses in nothing but tighty-whities, she is standing in for the famous male artist. Kamen’s mimicry could be seen as a form of self-deprecation, mockery, or homage, but any way you take it, it makes evident Picasso’s power, and the absurdity that affords him.

<sup>xi</sup> The heckler is the physical embodiment of “unlaughter,” a state of refusal that arises when laughter is solicited.<sup>x</sup>

<sup>vii</sup> The “faucet which stops dripping when nobody is listening to it” is an inside joke, because it was written by Marcel Duchamp. The one-liner expresses the ideology of his readymades, which advocated for the club of the art world to have the widest of open-door policies, allowing anything to be art so long as it is placed before an art viewer. It’s worth noting that the line reappears in a 1964 print Duchamp made called **Mirrorical Return**, featuring a sketch of his most humorous ready-made, **Fountain**, which means the dripping faucet is totally toilet humor.

<sup>viii</sup> Immanuel Kant, **Critique of Judgment**, trans. J. C. Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1952).

<sup>ix</sup> Moira Smith, “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance.” *Journal of American Folklore* vol. 122 no. 484 (2009): 148-171.

<sup>x</sup> The original quote was in reference to the Friar’s Club, a New York institution known for its infamous “roasts.” The exact reason Marx never participated, and why he resigned from the club is not clear, but maybe he disapproved of using comedy as a spit, or of the Friar’s Club’s exclusivity as a place where only the most insular of inside jokes were told.

<sup>xi</sup> Thanks, you’ve been a great audience.

<sup>xii</sup> “Groucho Glasses” **Wikipedia**. [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groucho\\_glasses](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groucho_glasses) accessed May 10, 2018.

<sup>o</sup> Because of social media, the thumbs-up has become a global symbol of the action “to like.” It’s the symbol of sincere validation; it’s the sound of one hand clapping.