

# Introduction - Why so Serious?

Laughter is a physical manifestation or, as Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, it is “the body shaken with no way thought” (2008: 109). In a performance of conceptual poetry you hear as much laughter as in a stand-up comedy performance. However, in the academic world, conceptual writing has been treated mainly as a cerebral and intellectual exercise. Enthusiasts and critics alike often take conceptualist works too seriously.

With the exception of Flarf poetry, research about conceptual writing and related practices have focused on formal aspects and the way in which they interrogate notions related to writing and reading, authorship and text, medium and message, among others. However, studies dedicated to thinking about humor or other discursive and material strategies related to it are scarce.

It is nonetheless undeniable that humor plays a central role in conceptual writing. Interestingly, when humor is at all taken into account, it is mainly to condemn the black humor of some works considered controversial. Critics say, in these cases, that the limits of what is acceptable humor have been exceeded. This is, however, something that often happens in comedy, condemned by society when it touches on taboo topics or raises questions about political correctness. In the case of conceptual literature, it sounds even stranger to delimit the reach of projects and performances that, from the outset and as mentioned above, had not even been considered humorous in the first place.

On the other hand, the playful component of conceptual poetry is often highlighted in the literature on the subject. Is humor, however, just another facet of play? For example, how can we think of playfulness but not humor in a work that consists of appropriating and reorganizing another text in alphabetical order? How not to think of humor with regard to a work that is based on the act of transcribing *ipsis verbis* a given source (textual, sound, web) or reproducing it in the form of a book? And what about texts that mine Google searches or repurpose screenshots or user comments on social networks? How not to think of humor when the artist takes up the job of selling letters, words or blank books (whether they are composed entirely of blank pages or completely in black)? These are works that toy with our expectations regarding what literature should be and the kinds of materials that can generate productive thought. It is often unclear, however, if conceptual authors engage in these practices out of high-minded seriousness or simply because they wish to troll us. Perhaps they are in it just for the lols.

We find something funny when it is incongruous, out of place. Incongruity can be repulsive too, as Noel Carroll (a scholar who has also written extensively about humor) points out in his book about horror. Humorous disjunctiveness, however, is non-threatening. Laughter invades our bodies and our minds and it may even undermine our sense of self, but it is never a life-or-death affair. Humor, unlike horror, is pleasurable through and through. Humor may be dark, embarrassing, didactic, philosophical, uplifting and even poetic. But it is always fun.

That, however, does not mean that it should be taken lightly. After all, as John Bruns argues in *Loopholes*, comedy is not just the name we give to a genre, the opposite of tragedy. Comedy is a specific way of thinking and understanding. It does not play second fiddle to tragedy or philosophy with respect to “things that really matter”. Laughter matters a great deal too, just as much, in fact. Humor reveals facets of the world that other modes of perception do not. Thus, we can ask: Does humor, in conceptual writing, have a political dimension? How serious is it?

With this book, we do not wish to take humor too seriously, nor to devalue it. We want to open a space for thinking about humor and its relationship with conceptual writing, in order to understand the implications that humor has on the production, circulation and reception of these works. What are the mechanisms of humor and how are they manifested in conceptual writing? How broad are these mechanisms for rethinking a theory/practice of humor in conceptual writing?

The collection adopts a wide-ranging notion of “conceptual writing”, including diachronic perspectives on post-conceptualism, experimental literature, and visual poetry. It also expands the scope in order to include works and authors usually not associated with conceptualism or even humor for that matter. The chapters focus on works written in different languages and from different parts of the world.

In her essay, Elina Siltanen argues that although conceptual writing, because it often recycles or repurposes existing materials to create new texts, has normally been seen as a quintessentially postmodern art form, some conceptual poems use humor in a manner that can be classified as metamodern, since it goes beyond postmodern irony and embraces a kind of ambivalence that oscillates between sarcasm and enthusiasm. Siltanen illustrates this argument by carefully exploring poems from Alexandra Nemerov, Lawrence Giffin, and Marcella Durand. While engaging with “metamodern sensibilities”, these works make evident how humor connects to political alternative ways of looking at capitalism through laughter and affect.

Also establishing a connection to metamodernism, Lee Campbell examines how comedy is used across a variety of works (ranging from poetry film to performance art) to explore queer identity from a self-reflexive perspective. Campbell’s chapter offers a situated description of his own creative works, curatorial practice and community-led events, arguing that humor and wordplay enable us to see language as a cathartic and transgressive act. This reflection is profusely illustrated with examples of stills

from poetry film works, posters and other visual documentation of screenings and exhibitions, and photos of performances and workshops.

In his essay, Leonardo Villa-Forte surveys conceptual poetry written in the Americas during the last two decades and analyzes the humorous ways in which poets have been responding to the oversaturation of information in today's digital culture. Villa-Forte's mapping is deliberately not exhaustive but is quite impressive nevertheless. Among the various works and geographies mentioned throughout the chapter, there is a particular emphasis on Brazilian and Chilean writers, including analysis of texts by Veronica Stigger, Angélica Freitas, Jorge Miranda and Rogério Bettoni (Brazil), Carlos Soto-Román, Alejandro Zambra and Felipe Cussen (Chile).

Closing the volume, Marzia D'Amico looks at Italian conceptual artist and visual poet Giulia Niccolai. The poet uses irony to undermine the authority of dominant discourses. Niccolai's work, according to D'Amico, essays a feminist politics that is averse to power. Humor plays a key role in her aesthetic and political project, which she fittingly terms "non-poetry". For D'Amico, a poem that does not take itself too seriously, and embraces a lighthearted approach instead, can unlock new possibilities for liberated linguistic and social horizons.

These diverse contributions lead us to conclude that humor is a useful tool through which to think many of the conundrums of the present. Although it provokes in us an immediate reaction (laughter), humor's effects linger and may stir up new ideas.

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