The magazine of the Columbia Spectator
8 December 2011 / vol. 11 issue 11

the eye

BEST OF 2011

On New York, procrastination, and beyond

the eye

Editor in Chief
Amanda Cormier

Managing Editor
Ashton Cooper

Art Director
Cindy Pan

Deputy Editor, Features
Tala Akhavan

Deputy Editor, Lead Story
Jennifer Fearon

Deputy Editor, Online Content
Frances Corry

Senior Design Editor
Cathi Choi

Visuals Editor
Anthony Clay

Eyesites Editor
Margaret Boykin

View From Here Editor
Julia Miller

Interview Editor
Liana Gergely

Features Associates
Jon Edelman
Meredith Foster
Molly Speacht
Emma Stein

Multimedia Associate
Paul Hsiao

Business Deputy
Steven Cook

Visuals Staff
Thuto Durkac Somo
Maddy Kloss
Stephanie Mannheim

Production Staff
Megan Baker
Allie Carieri
Naomi Cohen
Somala Diby
Zack Etheart
Parida Tantiwasadakran

Head Copy Editor
Emily Handsman

Spectator Editor in Chief
Samuel Roth

Spectator Managing Editor
Michele Cleary

Spectator Publisher
Aditya Mukerjee

Find Us Online:
eye.columbiaspectator.com

follow us on Twitter:
@TheEyeMag

Contact Us:
eye@columbiaspectator.com
Editorial: (212) 854-9547
Advertising: (212) 854-9558

© 2011 The Eye,
Spectator Publishing Company, Inc.

BEST OF 2011

On New York, procrastination, and beyond, pg. 07

by Eye Editors
cover illustration by Cindy Pan

CONTENTS

03 EYESITES

TV
04 **Nickelodeon Nostalgia** *Hannah Page*

EYE TO EYE
05 **Maid in Manhattan** *Liana Gergely*

ART
06 **A Piece of Work** *Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle*

BOOKS
11 **Novels in November** *Rikki Novetsky*

CULTURE
12 **High-Brow Hits the Street** *Michael Blair*

COMEDY
13 **A Crude Debate** *Karen Joseph Adcock*

THEATER
14 **The Mormon Misconception** *Charlotte Murtishaw*

VIEW FROM HERE
15 **Home For the Holidays** *Sarah Gilford*

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I can't help but think that I may have made a mistake.

I've spent much of my space here, in this little gray box, asking: for you to read the contents of this magazine, for feedback, for you to pay attention to things that I—in my infinite wisdom, which really isn't wisdom at all, mostly just guesswork—think are important.

I don't think I've spent enough time *giving*, so I'm going to try to make up for that now, since it's my last chance to do so. Next week, The Eye's new editor will be chosen (and announced on Spec's website), and a new volume will begin in January.

I want to give thanks to every writer, artist, or editor that has contributed to The Eye this year. It's been so humbling to work with you, and completely inspiring.

Thank you to every source that deigned to talk to us—reporters can be pesky, but you made the magazine what it is.

2011 was an exciting and challenging time to be a journalist, a New Yorker, and a college student. From the Arab Spring, to *Watch the Throne*, to the tsunami in Japan, to the Occupy movement, to the release of Nicki Minaj's *Pink Friday*—we had a lot to think about, in culture, politics, and otherwise.

I feel pretty lucky to have held this post at the time I did. It was incredibly special. I don't want to wax poetic, but as a transfer student, The Eye was what tethered me to the University and made me care about it, frankly.

When I got here, coming from Middle-of-nowhere-bury, I wanted the city and nothing else. At Columbia, the issues of the "outside world" are magnified by our place in the city. I've always kind of thought—and this gets me in trouble with my family and other normal, rational people—that New York is the center of the world. Anyone who chooses to be a student here generally has both an interest in campus life, but an even greater interest in New York culture. During my time here, I've tried to reflect those interests in The Eye. So while some of what we wrote about may seem odd for a campus newspaper—after all, discourse on swag isn't anywhere close to a recap of a student council meeting—most of the people on this campus are, in fact, a bit odd. In the best way possible.

One last thing: thank you to anyone who read an Eye article this year (that means you!). Be well, Columbia.

I'll see you around.

Amanda Cormier
eye@columbiaspectator.com

PERFECT PRESENTS

A COLLEGE-AGED GIFT GUIDE

BY MARGARET BOYKIN AND ASHTON COOPER

YOU

They're not quite your family, but they're not always quite your friends. As we grow older and have to attend gift-swaps, Secret-Santas, and Hannukah parties, we find ourselves in the annoying position of having to purchase an item for someone that, unlike your mom, won't find anything you knit entirely endearing. As the holidays roll in, it's nice to be surrounded by a family that you built and not crazy Uncle Mike and his newest girlfriend, but these new-found relatives can prove difficult to shop for. Never fear—as per usual, Eyesites is here.

1 STUDY-TIME ROOMMATE

The Art Museum, a recently released 18 lb. tome that charts the entire history of art in a whopping 1,000 pages. It will keep her occupied for years...or winter break, at least.

2 PARTY-TIME ROOMMATE

Newly released *Maximum Amy Winehouse* CD as a post-game playlist for when she's reflecting on her night...and remembering that sometimes "rehab" isn't just a lyric.

3 YOUR LAB PARTNER

Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson. It's a nice way to say yes, you know they did all the work, and you fully recognize that they're going to be the Mac guy and you're going to be MySpace.

4 YOUR BEST FRIEND

Tickets to Matisyahu's "Festival of Light" at Music Hall of Williamsburg. Nothing says Hanukkah like hipsters and reggae-singing Hasids, plus it's a great opportunity to hang out without...

5 YOUR BEST FRIEND'S SHITTY BOYFRIEND

A gift certificate to T.G.I. Friday's. For one. You know he loves those ribs.

6 THE T.A. YOU HAVE A CRUSH ON

Your number. Obviously. Semester's over—hit that up!

7 YOUR PROFESSOR

This is always weird. Nothing is best, but, if you must, go for a baked good. Neutral and tasty.

8 THE PERSON YOU ONLY SEE AT NIGHT

Nothing. Save your gifts for the bedroom.

9 YOUR PARTNER

A cookbook, any cookbook. Because you know, that'd be nice. If they could do some cooking. (Building you a burrito at Chipotle doesn't count.)

Nickelodeon Nostalgia

why bring back the '90s now?

BY HANNAH PAGE
ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE MANNHEIM

Like many of us at Columbia, I recall fondly the after-school afternoons I spent snacking on Fruit Roll-Ups and watching Nickelodeon. I remember the joy of a holiday season marked by the airing of "A Rugrats Chanukah" and, later in my youth, sunny Saturdays on the couch filled with the sports-centered exploits of my idol, Reggie from *Rocket Power*. As part of a generation that spent a huge part of its downtime watching television, it's no wonder '90s Nickelodeon shows still have a place in many of our hearts.

Unfortunately, most of our favorite childhood Nick shows have, until recently, been off the air for some time. But, in 2006, one '90s fan decided to change that. Benjamin Buckley, who, according to his Facebook page, works at MTV Networks, founded the group "I WANT MY 90'S NICKELODEON BACK." Since then, over a million Facebook users have joined in the demand for the return of the "golden era" of Nickelodeon cartoons. The prayers of nostalgic TV lovers in their late teens and early 20s were answered this past summer when, at midnight on July 25, Nickelodeon's sister network TeenNick began airing nightly two-hour blocks of cartoon and live-action Nickelodeon shows from the '90s.

The 12 a.m. to 2 a.m. block, cleverly called "The '90s Are All That," re-airs a constantly refreshed line-up of such '90s favorites as *All That, Rugrats,* and *Kenan & Kel.* These shows not only had an impact on viewers' lives, but also the careers of their stars. Amanda Bynes got her start as a leading lady on *The Amanda Show* (a spin-off of *All That),* Kenan Thompson of *Kenan & Kel* is now a cast member on *Saturday Night Live,* and *Clarissa Explains It All* star Melissa Joan Hart went on to play Sabrina in *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch,* now starring in the sitcom *Melissa & Joey* on ABC Family.

For some, this revival marks a return to an era of clever and meaningful kids. According to Corey Nachman of Business Insider's "The Wire," modern shows aimed at children and young adults "are doing their absolute best to find the next Hannah Montana." According to him, Montana doesn't "teach anything in the first place, except that we should always change who we are to impress other people." Nachman maintains that Nickelodeon's '90s programming actually had meaning, allowing the kids of Generations X and Y to partake in "surreal humor" that quietly "stomped on the toes of the baby boomers that didn't get it.'"

So why did Nickelodeon finally agree to bring back the '90s now? "The audience demanded it," Keith Dawkins, senior vice president and general manager of TeenNick and Nicktoons, says. "We noticed the enthusiasm online in the 20-something range, especially with the Facebook group. We noticed it with the young interns and the young executives who were coming in here and saying, 'We want the '90s back.'" Dawkins accredits this particular generation's attachment to their childhood Nick shows at least partially due to the fact that cartoons and live action shows aimed at the younger set were available to them 24/7. The Nickelodeon channel was—and still is—almost entirely dedicated to serving those child and young adult age groups. "My cartoons were only on Saturday mornings for a few hours," Dawkins recalls. "20-somethings had their own channel where every single show was for them. News buffs had CNN in the '90s, sports buffs had ESPN. Kids had Nick." The Nickelodeon network, which only began airing original shows in 1991, declares itself as having "launched a new television era of original programming for kids, as well as creating a pipeline of groundbreaking animation that continues through today."

Dawkins acknowledges that the demand for the return of many '90s Nickelodeon shows has been present for some time."Now we have young executives here [at the network] who wanted it to happen, and we've got the interns, and we've got Twitter," he says. We didn't have that ten years ago. The stars have all aligned around it." And in this Internet age, viewers of "The '90s Are All That" can use a part of the Nickelodeon website specially dedicated to the programming block to "reminisce and share their favorite TV memories, watch full episodes, enter sweepstakes to win '90s-based Nick products, access exclusive clips, photos, polls, and more."

The '90s could not have returned to Nick at a more propitious time. In Riley Kennysmith's Pulse2.com article "Nickelodeon Re-Airs 90s Line-up, Takes Over Twitter," he cites the popularity of the #90sareallthat hashtag on Twitter as an example of "what re-airing these shows could mean for the network. The people watching these shows are now in their 20s and 30s, which means that they're now consumers and voters." The hashtag trended at number three worldwide July 26, the day after the midnight premiere of "The '90s Are All That" block.

But Dawkins seems the most concerned with satisfying the fans who were the impetus for bringing back their beloved Nick shows. "All of this came from the fans," he says. "We want "The '90s Are All That" to be a really powerful night." And so far, it has been, spurring numerous nostalgic comments on the "I WANT MY 90'S NICKELODEON BACK" Facebook page and a host of reblogged Nick nostalgia on 90sareallthat.tumblr.com. The '90s are back on Nickelodeon and, in true 21st-century style, much more present on the Web as well, allowing us Nicktoons children countless opportunities to reminisce and—let's be honest—procrastinate on our finals. Sure, our responsibilities have evolved beyond sitting on the couch and eating artificially flavored sheets of rubbery "fruit" goodness, but, as the network finally realized, we will never outgrow the defining shows of our childhoods.

NICKELODEON'S '90S PROGRAMMING ACTUALLY HAD MEANING, ALLOWING THE KIDS OF GENERATIONS X AND Y TO PARTAKE IN "SURREAL HUMOR" THAT QUIETLY "STOMPED ON THE TOES OF THE BABY BOOMERS THAT DIDN'T GET IT.'"

Nicollette Barsamian contributed reporting.

Maid in Manhattan

gossiping with actress zuzanna szadkowski

BY LIANA GERGELY
PHOTO COURTESY OF SZADKOWSKI

From Hewitt to the elite apartments of the Upper East Side, Barnard alumna Zuzanna Szadkowski has become one of the CW Network's most beloved primetime actresses. In her role as Polish maid Dorota on the hit television series Gossip Girl, *she spends her days galavanting around Manhattan with Blair Waldorf and her assorted headbands. Although sometimes undervalued, her character now stars in a* Gossip Girl *spinoff made exclusively for Verizon phones. In addition to her TV work, Szadkowski performed this summer in the second run of the off-Broadway production* Love, Loss, and What I Wore *alongside* 90210 *star AnnaLynne McCord. Szadkowski talked to The Eye about acting at Barnard, meeting Cyndi Lauper, and her pseudo-Polish accent.*

How did Barnard prepare you for *Gossip Girl*? How was life in Morningside Heights different from filming on the Upper East Side?

I grew up in Indiana, so the incredibly cosmopolitan East Coast women that I met at Barnard really blew my mind! I certainly went to class with several Serena types. Mostly, Barnard prepared me well for my career as an actor. I had a stellar experience in the Barnard/Columbia theater department, and the discipline and drive that I honed as a student has helped me survive in this industry.

Last season, many of the characters attended Columbia, making it a prime filming location for the show. What was it like filming near your alma mater?

Working on set anywhere near my alma matter is amazing. Being near campus reminds me of myself as an 18-year-old aspiring artist. I always take a second to be grateful that I am actually working as an actor and living my dream.

What has been your best and most memorable memory on set? Your worst?

I shot a scene once, early on, with guest star Cyndi Lauper. She was incredibly sweet to me, and the scene turned out to be very funny. It was a very special day for me. My favorite whole episode was Dorota's wedding. Walking down the aisle on Wallace Shawn's arm in a gorgeous custom gown was surreal. I have to say that every day on set is fabulous. Every actor should be so lucky as to work with Leighton Meester. She is brilliant and funny. I have no bad memories from set. Sometimes when we shoot outdoors on location in the winter it gets pretty cold, but they take good care of us with hand and feet warmers and hot coffee.

"I AM ALWAYS AMUSED WHEN A GUY IN A SUIT WITH A BRIEFCASE STOPS ME IN THE STREET AND IS A FAN OF THE SHOW."

You've done theater work and recently starred in *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*. Does acting on a teen show like *Gossip Girl* feel less serious than stage acting?

I am a huge fan of *Gossip Girl*. I think the writing is brilliant and the show is beautifully directed, designed, shot, and edited. I love playing Dorota because she is funny, energetic, and very sharp. Playing her is an exciting challenge and a serious acting endeavor.

How is being off-Broadway different than being on the CW? Which do you prefer?

Working in *Love, Loss and What I Wore* was a totally different high than working in front of the camera. The play is very interactive, and the back and forth with the live audience is at the core of the experience. Throughout my run in the play, I have shared the stage with, and learned from, many theater greats.

You are so identifiable on the show by your Polish accent—is it real? Did the writers create the character's Polish nationality for you?

I personally do not speak with an accent. I was, however, born in Poland and am fluent in Polish. Dorota was originally intended to be of Polish descent, so for me it was a lucky fit.

What can we expect from Gossip Girl this season?

I can't give you any spoilers, but, as you know from watching, this season is huge! We just filmed our 100th episode, which is a huge accomplishment for the show. It is very cool to be a part of such a successful show that has so many dedicated, passionate fans.

What is the most interesting fan encounter you've had?

I am always amused when a guy in a suit with a briefcase stops me in the street and is a fan of the show. We have all types!

A Piece of Work

can reality tv and art mix?

BY EMILIA SHAFFER-DEL VALLE
ILLUSTRATION BY NICCI YIN

What is art? More importantly, what constitutes good art? Philosophers spend their lives pondering this esoteric and arguably unanswerable question, while critics devote their careers to establishing objective criteria for "good" art. Epitomizing the trite phrase "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," art is essentially marked by its subjectivity. Thus, it is hard to imagine how three judges, one host, and a team of producers could manage to ranks artists' abilities in an attempt to discover the "best." Now, for the second season, Bravo has picked up the competitive art reality TV show *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*, and taken on the impossible task of finding "the next great artist"—with TV cameras in tow.

Work of Art is a derivative of Bravo mega-hits *Project Runway* and *Top Chef*. The show's producers, judges, and mentors seek to find what they consider to be the best new talent of the contemporary art world. Each week, contestants are faced with a time-constrained challenge that tests their creativity, innovation, and technique. The tasks range from creating portraits of other contestants to street art installations and reinterpretations of old news stories. The artists are given free reign to create with a variety of media—a single episode produced both an abstract arrangement of wood panels behind a person covered in gauze, tape and paint; as well as three scowling sculptures meant to resemble explosives. Along with the prestige of being named "The Next Great Artist," the winner also collects $100,000 and a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. While it seems that *Work of Art* could be an unparalleled opportunity to gain entrance to the notoriously trying art world, the show is often met with scathing criticism.

According to Gregory Amenoff, head of the School of Visual Arts, the artistic process is a complex and idiosyncratic exercise. "The artist is in their studio functioning as best they can to create something, thinking about making things that are vibrant, that are full of imagination, that they hope will interject themselves into the larger culture," he says.

However, the show's overriding aim is not to expose its viewers to this process—it instead takes the form of voyeuristic reality television. Bravo seems more concerned with the drama of reality television and the quirks of each carefully chosen contestant. In season one, a young artist's mild obsessive-compulsive disorder became a focal point of his personality. In the same season, one woman's affinity for nude portraits was portrayed from a slight, though apparent, satirical angle—her outlandish outfits and dazed mannerisms were exaggerated, and the contestants' dubious reactions astutely portrayed. "I feel like they are making art into a spectacle rather than a form or something that people love," says California College of the Arts student Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo. Amenoff also says the show's "real issue is the catering to the caricature of how art is made."

The time constraints and highly edited critiques in *Work of Art* further diminish the show's credibility as a truly demonstrative representation of the art-making process. An artist does not typically produce a meaningful work at the beck and call of an enthusiastic host in a race to complete the day's challenge. The excessive time constraints, though necessary to the competition show's format, can stifle an artist's creativity. Former contestant Jaclyn Santos, whose primary medium is representational painting, recalls "relying on other less-time-consuming mediums."

"WHILE THE TIME CONSTRAINTS MOTIVATED US TO THINK QUICKLY, THEY PERMITTED US FROM WORKING AT OUR BEST."

"While the time constraints motivated us to think quickly, they permitted us from working at our best," she says. At the end of each challenge, the artists face a panel of judges, who give lengthy and perceptive critiques, but are then cut down to pithy, often snarky comments for the aired show.

Analyzing and critiquing art is meant to be a dialogue between artist and critic, with certain historical standards guiding the conversation. While the contestants may experience this more than the audience does, the judges still must cater to the viewers, and often appear to favor art that fits the popular mold. "It seemed like they were really emphasizing commercial art, rather than unique types of making art," Branfman-Verissimo notes. "Maybe they are going for what the art world is going for right now."

Therein lies a significant problem with the show, and highlights a key distinction between *Work of Art* and art school. The contestants, though allowed to use a media of their choosing and allowed to conceptualize the themes however they want, are steered by the show's needs. "In the context of an art school," Amenoff says, "conversations are long, complex—there isn't a right and a wrong." This intimate form of teaching and critique is not mirrored in the show. Santos adds that "the omnipresent cameras change everything. Their presence immediately makes you hyper-self-aware."

AN ARTIST DOES NOT TYPICALLY PRODUCE A MEANINGFUL WORK AT THE BECK AND CALL OF AN ENTHUSIASTIC HOST.

While all of these critiques are valid and worth discussing, it must be acknowledged that the show's primary goal is to entertain, and it does not attempt to be an in-depth look into artmaking. *Work of Art* aims to create an entertaining platform that provides artists with an opportunity, not expose the public to a true artistic environment. *Work of Art* is yet another addition to the genre of ironically un-realistic reality television. The show, Amenoff says, "doesn't hurt anybody as long as people don't think this is the way artists create."

BEST OF 2011

On New York, procrastination, and beyond

by Eye Editors

illustrations by Cindy Pan

Best Party
by Jon Edelman

It was time for the cast party, and I was not enthused. Things like that have a way of taking me back to middle school—I stand in the corner while the cool kids drink beer and dry-hump. Standard awkward white-boy shit. As I took my seat by the radiator, the song ended, and there was nothing queued up to follow. Thinking I'd make the middle school picture complete, I put on "What Would You Do?" by City High.

To my surprise, the dancers started singing along, reciting the story of a young girl forced into stripping to support her family: "What would you do if your son was at home/Cryin' all alone on the bedroom floor…" With no one stopping me, I played "Hot in Herre," then "Let Me Blow Ya Mind" by Eve and a pre-Harajuku Gwen Stefani. "Where have you been all my life?" some girl called. People were dancing and I was the reason. As I slid into "Family Affair" by Mary J. Blige, I was beginning to have, dare I say, fun up on it in this dancery.

Then came the hateration. An agitated girl, tall, blonde, and drunk, was powering toward me through the dancers. She looked like Jane Lynch, but moved like Dwight Howard in the paint. In seconds she had boxed me out and was tapping at the laptop.

"Excuse me, but…" I said.

"THIS ISN'T WORKING!" she yelled at my face.

"I think people were actually enjoying the…"

"I DO THIS FOR A LIVING!" she screamed.

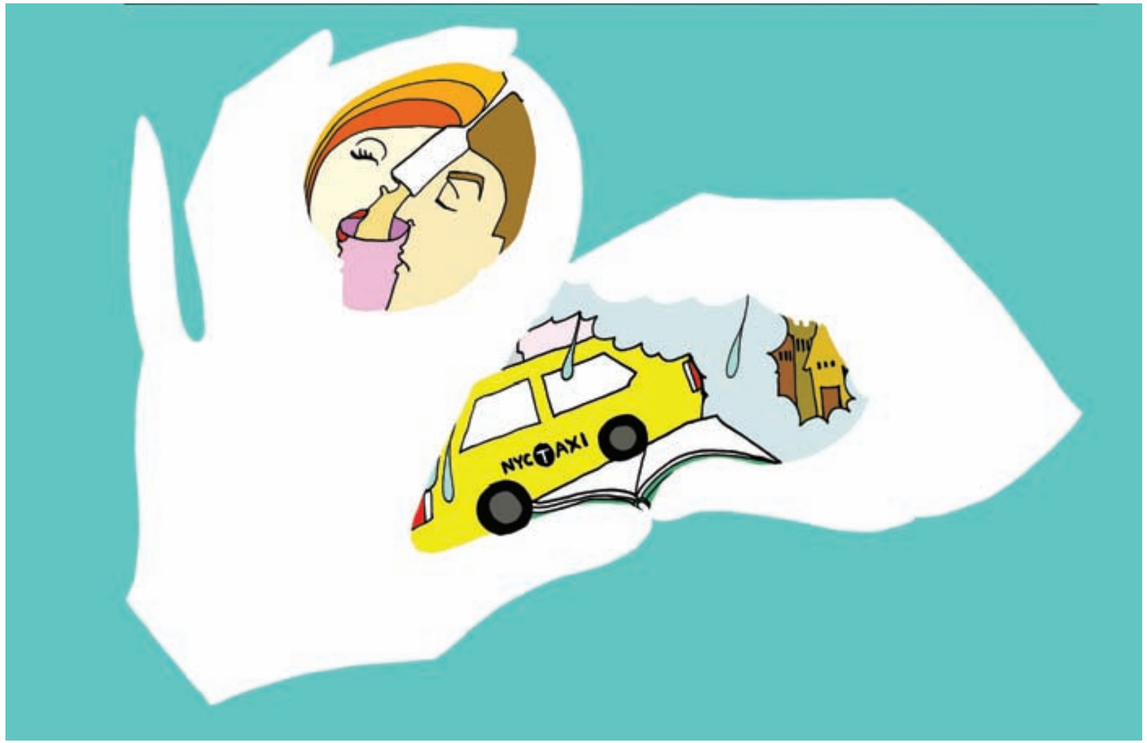
Suddenly, the song had shifted, and there was nothing I could do. My newfound nemesis was huddled over the laptop, staring into the eyes of Kanye West as if they contained a message only professional DJs could decipher.

As the party became an ocean of indistinguishable techno, I slunk away, pondering my lost glory. If only my seventh-grade self had been able to see me! How carelessly I had let it slip, how callously it had been taken! I permitted myself a moment of sweaty pity. For her, it was just a good time, but for me, it was what I called life.

Best Gallery Prank
by Ashton Cooper

I've seen a lot of art this year. If you're rolling your eyes at me, you probably should be. My Thursday nights have been devoted to putting on countless all-black ensembles to drift along the annals of the west 20s with other art devotees also wearing all-black ensembles. I've seen the buzzworthy exhibitions of Kara Walker and Nan Goldin. I've stood mere feet from the most ridiculous celebrities: Chris Brown, Larry Gagosian, Marina Abramovic. I've consumed a lot of bad white wine. The gallery opening is, no matter the address, always a spectacle. We expect that. We demand it. It's why we go.

In August, art world satirist William Powhida used the dead last weeks of August to pull a prank on the art world from the inside. In his exhibition, loudly titled "POWHIDA," he hired a cleft-chinned, lavender-button-down-wearing actor to play an over-the-top, unbearable, Jeff Koons-inspired version of himself at blue-chip gallery Marlborough Chelsea. The intruder spent the hours between 6 and 8 p.m. sloppily drinking



I HAD FAILED TO FORESEE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR A DRUNKEN NIGHT OF REVELRY IN A STAUNCHLY MEDIEVAL BEACH TOWN.

champagne and lounging between two scantily clad accessories on a leather couch inside a six-by-six, bouncer-protected, roped-off VIP section in the middle of the gallery. The only object on the walls was a single portrait—not actually painted by Powhida—of the "artist" releasing a dove into the heavens while a buxom woman clings to his leg.

The crowd milled around, bearing witness to the antics and sipping Pernod Absinthe (Pernod also sponsored the Mondrian Hotel after-party). Appropriately, the opening drew the Bushwick crowd and the critics (I met Jerry Saltz that night), and amusingly, not everyone knew it was a joke. When Powhida made his exit in the backseat of a vintage convertible parked inside the gallery with a crop-top-clad woman straddling him, the parody should have been clear. The art, the alcohol, and the after-party formed an ugly mirror held up to devout Chelsea pilgrims, and it was hard to look away.

I've certainly seen more serious, important, and probably better art this year, but this exhibition (if you can even call it that) stuck with me. No, we don't really go to see the art. We go to see a name and hope for decent alcohol and a Jerry/Roberta sighting. This show was a welcome provocation to the Thursday night routine. Powhida's "POWHIDA" was the funniest show of the year—a proper pinch in the art world's ass.

Best Fall Break
by Margaret Boykin

It wasn't the cab driver's sleeveless tee and blatant come-ons that told me we were in Vegas, nor was it the lights, nor the four-foot tall drinks, nor constant haze of smoke. It wasn't the slot machines, nor the teeny tiny dresses in varying shades of hot pink.

No, the moment I knew we were truly in Vegas was when we were leaving a club after our first night. A girl stumbled ahead of us out of the throbbing darkness into the light of the hotel, holding her drink and taking off her shoes. Well, that's not gonna work, I thought—and immediately the bouncer appeared beside her and gestured for her drink. A waste of a gin and tonic, I thought, and started to walk on but then I saw something amazing, something I'd never seen before—the bouncer poured her GnT into a plastic to-go cup, as if she was pulling out of a McDonald's, gave her a straw, and sent her on her way. I looked at my friends, who stood similarly slack-jawed in awe. There was no doubt about it: we were in Vegas, where, clearly, the party never ends.

What followed after that first night is a blinding three-night haze of house music, circus acts (observed in the first theater I've ever been to that allows you to down popcorn and alcohol in velvet seats), greasy food, hangovers, and blackjack. Over my three days, I learned many things, but it boils down to this:

1. My ability to add and subtract small numbers, already slight, is compromised by alcohol and the pressure of smoking men, so blackjack probably isn't my jam.

2. "Craps" is the name of that game where you throw dice and pray for a 7 or 11, like the drugstore, although no one thinks that's funny so don't make that joke if you go.

3. Men in night clubs in Vegas are merciless, huge fans of button-downs, and know nothing about personal space. Do not look them in the eye. Do not stand too near them, and, for the love of God, do not take shots near them unless you want to hear the phrase "AW YEAH THESE GIRLS LIKE TO PARTY."

4. New York, in all of its grime and gambling-free establishments, is a magical place, where no one talks to strangers, smoking is restricted, sleeves are required and no one—no one—will let you take your drink outside. Because…

5. Sometimes, it's a really good thing that the party has to end.

Best Adventure Abroad
by Emma Stein

We were slightly drunk. I'll be the first to admit that. And I will admit it because it was legal—I was finally in Scotland. I had arrived just a few days before to see one my best friends who attends the University of Saint Andrews. It was spring break at Columbia and, rather than going the more typical route—booze cruise in Mexico—I was taking one in Scotland, goddammit.

The advantages were numerous—least of which was seeing my friend. But, even as someone who loves everything medieval, I had failed to foresee the possibilities for a drunken night of revelry in a staunchly medieval beach town. Instead of trying to take pictures sitting on Alma or parading down 111th like it was my life's calling, I got to literally storm the castle.

The town of Saint Andrews has the ruins of a castle, a good 900 years-old, sitting atop a beach. There are fences to guard it, but they're low, and at night no one seems to be on watch. So my friend and I managed to climb them, in our heeled boots. It was chilly and misty and sort of raining, but it was beautiful as we walked down, slightly tipsy, to the castle.

To be honest, I don't quite recall the details. The structure of the castle ruins, what was said, or how I reached my perch all seem fuzzy, but I do recall climbing up the stone and sitting by a window as I watched the sea. My friend and I held hands as the water of the waves crested and foamed. I looked over at her, realizing that despite our time away, and how poorly I had kept in touch, that really nothing had changed. We will always be friends.

Sometimes, it isn't until you're in a country that is not your own, sitting in the ruins of something much older than you are, watching something that will recede forever beyond you that you realize how much the person you're with means to you.

Best Insane Cab Ride
by Anna Marcum

I hailed a cab because I was running late. It was pouring rain, but I wore heels anyway—it's important to look fabulous, especially on the first day at a new job.

I told the cabbie to head towards West 24th Street. "East 124th Street? Okay!" he replied and then took off down Broadway.

I felt my panic rising. "NO! No, no, no WEST 24th Street! I have to be there in 15 minutes!"

He laughed. "Oh I know, I was just kidding."

My trust in the cabbie officially broken, I yearned for my car at home. As we veered onto the West Side Highway, he turned around, smiled, and said, "I hope you can swim," as the cab zoomed through a puddle, creating a massive wall of water. Fear overcame me as I irrationally thought that the cabbie might drive us into the Hudson.

"Where are you from?" he asked me, and, upon my answer of Mississippi, he said, "YOU! You brought this weather with you! The hurricane followed you from Mississippi! You should go home!"

Thanks so much for the not-so-warm welcome.

"Why you come to New York?" he inquired.

Good god, was I being interrogated? "Um-mm…I want to study art history, and if you're going to study art history, New York is the best place to do it."

"ARE YOU CRAZY?" he practically screamed.

I know art history isn't everyone's favorite subject, but my interest in it doesn't necessarily qualify me as insane, right? "I would say that I'm decently sane."

"Well then YOU DON'T BELONG IN NEW YORK. The only people who belong in New York are insane. Why would you want to live HERE? Normal people shouldn't be here."

The cab slammed to a halt in front of the gallery. I practically fell out of the cab into yet another gigantic puddle. Standing there in the rain, I knew that I was well on my way to insanity.

Best Subway Ride
by Jennifer Fearon

All we were waiting for was the Z train. Armed with unlimited MetroCards and the luxury of nights and weekends free of papers and problem sets, my best friend and I were well on our way to riding every New York City subway line.

We had set the route to explore the far reaches of this metropolis and were nearly there when I actually looked at a subway map on an otherwise dull ride through Fort Greene. Somehow, after nearly two years of living in the city and commuting through Midtown, I hadn't realized that the 42nd Street Shuttle isn't alone—there are two other shuttle trains, in other boroughs—suddenly, we were two subway lines short.

Intent to finish our project, we set our sights on the Brooklyn and Queens lines. Yet, after a consultation with my coworker, our venture was looking rather brash. Chris—a tall Serbian with a thick accent and expertise in international security—warned that, where the subway lines forks on the Rockaway peninsula, one leads to a beautiful beach and the other to a dreary lot of drug dealers and destitution.

"THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO BELONG IN NEW YORK ARE INSANE. WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO LIVE HERE?"

An hour on the A train and the entire *RENT* soundtrack later, we found ourselves the only pair on a Broad Channel platform. Needless to say, we had chosen the wrong branch. Though there weren't any run-ins with ne'er-do-wells, we encountered burnt out buildings that did not sit well with this native suburbanite. We hopped on the inbound shuttle and were laughing about our unnecessary insecurities by the time we arrived back in Brooklyn.

There is something magical about having an unlimited MetroCard and the time to use it. While I don't think I'll be taking the shuttle in Queens again anytime soon, riding through Rockaway Park with my best friend will rank up there alongside a lovely trip by the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, many forays to the best zeppole in Little Italy, and a circle through four boroughs in one

day (Staten Island just didn't make the cut).

Best Interview Question
by Paul Hsiao

"Let's say you are Bank A and you're interested in dealing in interest-based derivatives with Bank B. What sort of things would you look for before proceeding with this transaction?"

I had no idea. As much as students pride themselves on their ability to bullshit, this was one question, hard and fast, to which I simply did not know the answer, and couldn't talk my way out of.

Immediately, my superego began scolding myself for not knowing. I should know. Why was I interviewing for this position if I did not have the slightest clue what a "derivative" was? (It turns out that a derivative is something that derives value from something else. Damn, that's simple.)

Then fear took over—the fear of being jobless or worse, looking unsuccessful among my friends and family. I think it's a fear most seniors have—starting a life that substitutes teachers, friends, and homework for mortgages, insurance, and paychecks. Graduation is a chance to be my best self, and this question at that point in time demonstrated how unprepared I felt I was.

As I was opening my mouth to ask him to repeat the question, a realization came. Maybe it was my brain compensating for the fear and anger but a simple truth hit: it will all work out. If I can't answer this question, then maybe I'm not the most fit for the job. It's the things that come natural that work out best, right? Steve Jobs said so.

This was the best interview question I've ever gotten, because it completely knocked me on my ass and made me evaluate my hopes, ambitions, and capability in the two seconds before I said "I dunno, it sounds good."

I didn't get the job. "It will all work out."

Note: In an interest-based derivative trade, the first thing to look at is what interest rate the trade is based on, usually to the "federal funds rate" in the US and the LIBOR index in Europe. Right now, European markets are volatile because of the sovereign debt crisis, so it's very risky to do a trade pegged to LIBOR. Due diligence about the financial health of Bank B is a given, but swaps can be made to hedge against a default-risk.

Best Class
by Meredith Foster

I was sixteen when I first read, *My Name is Red* by Orhan Pamuk. Having been only vaguely interested in literature before, I did not pick it up for any specific reason. Instead I grabbed it because it was the first book that I saw on my mother's bookshelf before a long car ride to Connecticut. I fell in love with the novel and its ability to immerse the reader into the world of the expert Turkish miniaturists.

After I finished, I proceeded to read more of his novels and, after completing a variety of his works, I started to read other novels from Burroughs to Dickens. My love of reading today, as an English major, is a consequence of his book *My Name is Red*. So, when I found out in the spring that I had gotten into a seminar co-taught by him, I was very excited. Not only were we reading Pamuk's own novels, including *My Name is Red*, but also many of the novels I had read in high school as a result of my passion for reading.

After many weeks in this course, I view it as just another class—albeit a very interesting one. Like in other English classes, I daydream, sometimes look at the clock, and often can't find anything interesting or intelligent to add to the discussion.

AT 6:37 P.M., AFTER $22 WORTH OF CAFFEINE, THREE SEPARATE EXISTENTIAL CRISES, AND A MOTIVATIONAL GCHAT WITH MY MOTHER, I HAVE WHAT I MAY PASSABLY CALL A PAPER.

However, once in a while, when we are reading a really great passage from Tolstoy, Stendahl, or Pamuk himself, I recall who taught me to love reading and find him sitting right next to me.

Best All-Nighter
by Anneliese Cooper

As a college student, consummate procrastinator, and incorrigible coffee fiend, I exhibit all possible risk factors for a user and abuser of the All-Nighter. Though my year has thus seen plenty of these harrowing 20-plus hour library entombments, one in particular sticks out:

At 10:30-something on a Sunday night in icy February, I enter Butler to begin a five-page essay on the Categorical Imperative of Herr Immanuel Kant, due Monday afternoon.

To avoid temptations on my laptop, I log onto a computer in the Butler lab—and still manage to spend three hours composing a passionate blog piece about Avril Lavigne rapping ("Nobody's Fool"—check it). At 2-ish, in an attempt to crack down, I outline a tentative first draft: "Immanuel Kant was a sexist, racist introvert who never left his hometown of Königsberg. By the Categorical Imperative, he has no right to issue Categorical Imperatives." I promptly return to the Internet.

Around 4, I can feel the clock ticks creeping up my spine, so I take the plunge and actually open my book. By 6 a.m. I realize that the quotes I've dutifully typed up now exceed the paper's maximum word count. A single stray tear. I chug my third Red Bull.

By 11 a.m., words become abstract shapes; the world is slowly turning into soup. My vision starts to waver at the edges, everything vibrating and formless and—wait. Something is actually moving in the corner. After a few incredulous glances, I'm forced to accept that I'm not hallucinating: there is a cockroach in the Butler computer lab. So, through soul-churning revulsion, I stand, calmly walk to where it scuttles, and kill it dead. A second draft is born: "SOME THINGS ARE TERRIBLE. ONE OF THEM IS IMMANUEL KANT. IT IS CATEGORICALLY IMPERATIVE THAT HE GO FUCK HIMSELF."

For the next seven hours, I type feverishly—tossing around authoritative "furthermores" despite patent uncertainty—dull, wobbly fingers stabbing haphazardly at the keys, only breaking to calculate what it would take to withdraw my tuition and pack it into a series of gym bags to distribute to various developing countries.

Finally, at 6:37 p.m., after $22 worth of caffeine, three separate existential crises, and a motivational gChat with my mother, I have what I may passably call a paper. As is my custom, only now do I add title, name, date—and, as is par for my unfortunate course, only now do I realize that—"2/14/11"—it's Valentine's Day.

I glance sidelong at my book—scope out the austere, bewigged portrait gracing its cover—and, with a loud, despairing laugh, blow mein Herr a kiss.

From there, I stumble through anachronistic twilight to a friend's dorm (the walk to 110th just too damn daunting) and collapse on his rug, as he feeds me chocolate chip pancakes, festively food-colored pink. Dozing off, I muse dazedly that everything is either a good time or a good story—because really, what other lucky lady can say she was up all night with a German philosophy icon?

Novels in November

inside the nanowrimo community

BY RIKKI NOVETSKY
ILLUSTRATION BY THUTO DURKAC SOMO

"Um, is there an event here tonight?" I mumbled to the woman behind the counter at Starbucks, not sure if I had come across the correct coffee shop among the countless options in Cobble Hill. She looked puzzled. Self-conscious about the way I decided to spend my Thursday night while my friends opted for a concert, I slunk away to the basement of the store and found what I was looking for: a group of mismatched people sitting together, typing fiercely on sticker-barraged laptops. This was it: my introduction into the intense, strange world of NaNoWriMo.

While some traditionalists prefer to call the month after October "November," an ambitious movement of aspiring writers and novelists refer to the month by the moniker NaNoWriMo, short for National Novel Writing Month. Founded in 1999 by Chris Baty, the annual creative writing project, run through a nonprofit called The Office of Letters and Light, began with just 21 participants and has since grown to more than 200,000 in 60 countries.

NaNoWriMo challenges these 200,000 to one simple task: write a 50,000-word novel in one month. The novel must be started from scratch, and written only by one person. The definition of "novel," however, is not too exacting. "If you consider the book you're writing a novel, we consider it a novel too!" the website encourages.

Candace Cunard, an intern at OLL, is a seven-time NaNoWriMo participant, and is currently a first year Ph.D. student at Columbia. She participated in the challenge throughout her years in college, which she says helped keep her grounded. "It is something that is purely fun, [that] no one will ever grade. It was doing what I want, and not what the professor wanted."

I lost cell phone service as soon as I entered the Starbucks. Unsure of what would happen as I approached, a heavily bearded man wearing a TeeFury "Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog" T-shirt, gave me a smile. "Is this the Write-In?" I asked nervously. After some encouraging nods, I sat down at the table with the bearded man, along with an Orthodox Jew, a 20-something woman with a blue-and-blonde mohawk, and a middle-aged woman sporting a NaNoWriMo sweatshirt.

After observing my fellow participants for a few minutes, I quickly realized that a Write-In is not really for writing at all. In fact, it seemed that mismatched participants were talking with one another more than working to fulfill the daily 1,667-word recommendation.

Sitting at the table next to me was Erin O'Brien, a municipal liaison for NaNoWriMo in New York City, who has paricipated in NaNoWriMo for the past 10 years. She explained that Write-Ins, for many participants, were the reason they undertook and continued with NaNoWriMo in the first place. "For the month of November, it creates a support network for those who want to interact and meet other writers." O'Brien initially participated in the writing project because she had moved to the city four months before and was feeling lonely. She met people at Write-Ins and says "10 years later, I'm still friends with them."

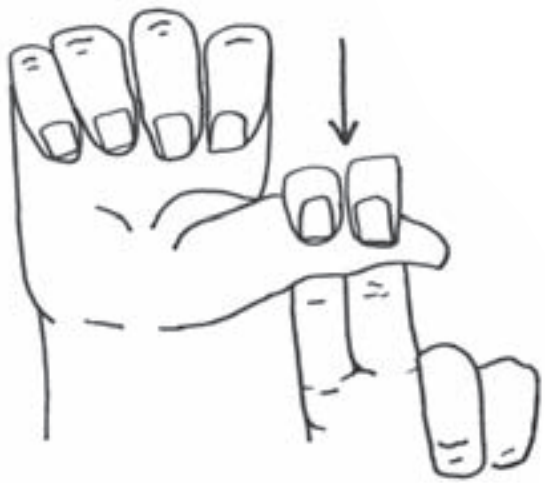
"IT IS SOMETHING THAT IS PURELY FUN, [THAT] NO ONE WILL EVER GRADE. IT WAS DOING WHAT I WANT, AND NOT WHAT THE PROFESSOR WANTED."

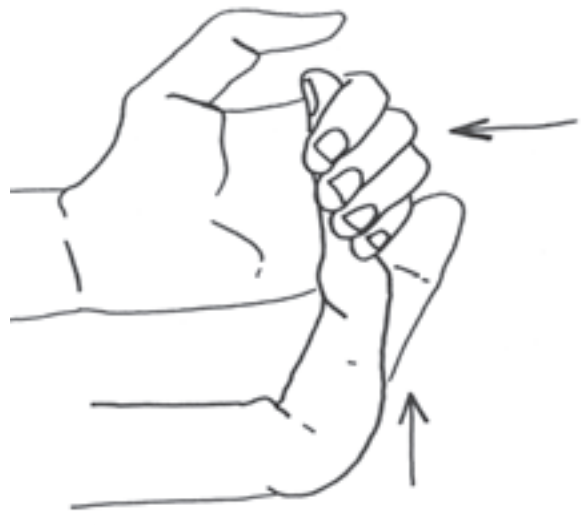
The NaNoWriMo model of writing—with no initial editing or proofreading—has actually brought success to several participants. The most famous example is Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, the New York Times No. 1 bestseller turned movie. However, despite the success of some NaNoWriMo writers, some in the literary community are still somewhat skeptical. Timea Szell, the director of creative writing at Barnard, says that she "wouldn't want to see all novels produced in this fashion, but I would be interested to see what comes out of it. If a worthwhile novel emerges for some writers, good for them."

When I sat around with that the motley crew in Starbucks, I wondered if any of these people would actually become published authors. After a considerable amount of time, I worked up the courage to ask my bearded friend about his story. "This year I'm writing a young adult sci-fi novel," he answered. As a reader of most genres *except* young adult sci-fi novels—I was intrigued. He went on to explain his four characters: a 14-year-old boy escaping a religious cult, a cyclops who is working in a freak show, a 12-year-old girl who is a clone of a pirate and is raised in a laboratory, and a lizard-type humanoid. All are escaping different types of pressures in their respective societies, and eventually join the lizard humanoid on his spacecraft. I was too taken aback by the bizarre plot to do anything but politely smile. I quickly promised to buy a copy of his book if it was ever published.

The fact that so few of the novels written for NaNoWriMo have become published raises the question: is a month-long challenge an effective method for writing quality literature? Though Baty has faced criticism for the annual crop of thousands of mediocre novels, many say NaNoWriMo produces good work. "Everyone who tackles this challenge comes away from it changed in some way, as a writer or a reader," Baty told the New York Times in 2006. Cunard, who has written at least seven novels and has never been published, confirms this sentiment. She says before this November, she sent encouraging letters to all of her friends that have participated in NaNoWriMo in the past. Ater flipping through the envelopes, she realized she was sending them to locations all around the world. "It really creates a sense of community," she says.

It is for this reason, emphasizes Cunard, that it is okay that most novels never leave the writers' computers. "What surprises people is that most participants just do it for kicks. It's more about getting to the end of it."





High-Brow Hits the Street

parsing through hip hop art criticism on youtube

BY MICHAEL BLAIR
ILLUSTRATION BY LIZ LEE

What's Tupac got to do with van Gogh? Certainly, both have famously and publicly damaged body parts, but maybe there are also some wild "Starry Night"swirls to be found on the tracks of *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, those sampled beats the same as copied brushstrokes—repeated time after time, mixed like colors on a canvas, until something new is created.

Thoughts like these are not at all bizarre for comedian Hennessey Youngman, who delivers his popular YouTube lecture series "Art Thoughtz"clad in snapback hats, jerseys, and chains. And with video titles like "Post-Structuralism (THE CLEAN VERSION)," that actually teach about post-structuralism, he seems to merge the two worlds of rap and fine art pretty well.

YOU START TO WONDER HOW MUCH YOUNGMAN HAS STUDIED NOT JUST ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM, BUT PERFORMANCE ART, TOO.

Youngman's dialect and persona are intense. Videos begin with rambling rap-style intros like, "Whatup everybody, this is the Pharaoh Hennessy, back with your best interests in mind. Who needs critical theory when a little bit of some practical-type advice will help y'all out more, right Internet? Let's go!" His character—a musing art critic who also knows *The College Dropout* by heart—can sometimes make you wonder just how sincere he is about art, particularly when he makes observations like "Art's not about making a sculpture out of scratch. I mean, where do you even find scratch in 2011? I thought we ran out of scratch in the '60s after Vietnam."

Hennessey Youngman of "Art Thoughtz"

Like anything else on YouTube, Youngman's aim is to entertain—and he often does so simply with his acting, the way he draws out syllables and flips his cap back and forth while delivering talks on relational aesthetics. After about the third video, when the hat-bills become wider and the tank-tops baggier, you start to wonder how much Youngman has studied not just abstract expressionism, but performance art, too.

And this is the source of most of his comedy: Youngman plays the hip-hop persona as someone we should expect to be an ignoramus who has no business thinking about the higher questions of artistic philosophy. Someone shouldn't use the word "swag" and "post-modernity" in the same sentence, right? But Youngman does, and uses his know-nothing character for the sake of his comedy, but also for the sake of his viewers at large. How many viewers were listening to Nas's *Illmatic* and found Youngman's videos on the related videos bar? Three clicks on Wikipedia can take you from Kanye to Botticelli. So the two are related, right?

It's powerful to see how Youngman connects the highbrow and lowbrow in ways that many would avoid. Perhaps his most potent video is "How to Be A Successful Black Artist,"which starts off with a track from the Wu-Tang Clan. But is also a clear derivation of the Guerrilla Girls 1989 piece "The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist." Youngman rattles off a series of suggested steps every black artist should take to achieve success in the art world: adopt an angry and hostile exterior, keep white folks guessing by evolving styles ("the Jazz principle"), use terms like "post-black," invoke the history of slavery as much as possible, and so on.

This is potent satire, and it's funny too. More than anything, Youngman is making comedy out of reversing expectations, out of living in contradictions. Who's to say that respected art critics can't listen to hip-hop as well?

While Youngman may create an exaggerated persona for his comedy's sake, it's clear that he's not faking his love of art—of all kinds—and that he's up to more than just getting some good laughs, or becoming an Internet celebrity. He's aiming to instruct, or at the very least pass on some of his own strange thoughts, and connect them with the world. He is making his own art—entertaining with wit and satire while talking earnestly about the things that interest him most. It turns out that these are numerous and varied: "How to Be A Successful Black Artist" references Tupac, Norman Rockwell, Spike Lee, Napoleon, Jerry Seinfeld, and the Los Angeles race riots of 1992. The more videos you watch, the more it becomes clear how insightful Youngman really is, and, more than anything,

"WHO NEEDS CRITICAL THEORY WHEN A LITTLE BIT OF SOME PRACTICAL TYPE ADVICE WILL HELP YA'LL OUT MORE, RIGHT INTERNET?"

how much he really cares.

It's easy to think that Youngman may just be another hipster ironist looking for a few cheap laughs, but there's something novel in connecting the stodgy world of art criticism to the world in which we live. Youngman's connecting with that world, too. One of his most recent videos is not delivered from a web-cam, instead in front of a live audience at the Art Institute of Chicago. While there may be a more unbiased way of looking at de Kooning canvases, I doubt there's anything published that teems with the same enthusiasm and creativity as Youngman's YouTube videos. And when I go to MoMa next week to look at those paint-smeared canvases, I'll be thinking of Youngman more than Clement Greenberg, and also maybe how Kanye had a little Botticelli in him after all.

A Crude Debate

female comedians who play dirty

BY KAREN JOSEPH ADCOCK
ILLUSTRATION BY MADDY KLOSS

When Lenny Bruce first took the stage in 1947, many could not have imagined the comedy revolution that he was about to start. Bruce became infamous for his crude and satiric rants on topics like race, abortion, drugs, and Judaism. His crass style influenced many comedians to come— Lewis Black, Eddie Izzard, Jerry Seinfeld, Louis C. K., and Dave Chappelle regard him as an influence, and the taboo nature of their work follows in the Bruce style.

In the past five or so years, a new generation of women has made its mark on comedy. They're showing that they're not afraid to approach the lewd and taboo, either. Addressing controversial topics like racism, sexism, and religion are the norm for Jewish-American comedian Sarah Silverman. She spurts out zingers like, "When God gives you AIDS—and God does give you AIDS, by the way—make lemonAIDS." She makes the kind of jokes that elicit uproarious laughter, but also nervous groans. One of the bits used by Whitney Cumming —now star of NBC's *Whitney*—involves her talking about her feelings on pornography. "Men watching porn is like women watching the Food Network. We're both looking at stuff we're never going to do."

Female comedians are also making their dirty marks on the big screen. Take the movie *Bridesmaids*. Though at heart it's a chick flick about a woman whose life seems to be falling to pieces, Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph and the gang don't skimp on the R-rated lines and material that has become de rigueur for the Judd Apatow set. The movie opens with an awkwardly hilarious sex scene between Wiig and her douchey sex buddy, played by Jon Hamm. After a trip to a sketchy restaurant with cuisine that can only be described as mystery meat, the whole crew endures a messy bout of consequences that leaves audiences gripping their sides with laughter. Female comedians aren't shying away from the sloppier bits of comedy, which begs the question—has the comedic playing field finally leveled, or is the desire for slapstick, gross-out, controversial humor so strong that it no longer matters who enacts it?

Mindy Kaling—star, producer, and writer for the Emmy Award-winning television show *The Office*—seems to think it's a bit of both, though she avoids participating in the trend herself. Her new book, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)*, is an engaging memoir of her rise to fame, scattered with essays about everything from chest hair to karaoke. Within it, she also touches on crudeness in female comedians. Her chapter devoted to things Jewish guys need to stop doing (obsessing over Natalie Portman, among other things) is Mindy at her most risque—she admits that she's not the kind of female comic who can perform inappropriate jokes. She says that the problem with living in a post-Sarah Silverman world is that "lots of young women holding the scepter of inappropriateness [don't] know how to wield it." Nevertheless, she admits that comedians can get away with saying almost anything, so long as they are funny enough.

THIS NEW WAVE OF FEMALE COMEDIANS DEMONSTRATES THAT GIRLS CAN LAY OUT DIRTY JOKES AS WELL AS GUYS CAN, BUT NOT ALL OF THEM DEPEND SO HEAVILY ON THIS TACTIC.

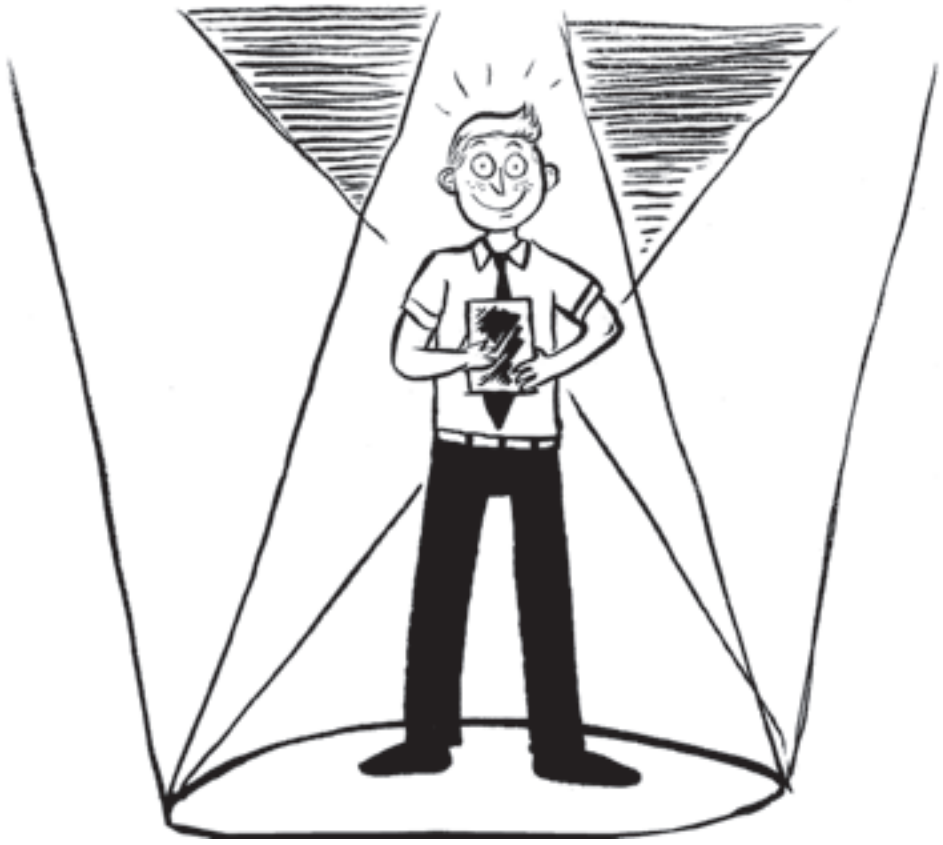
In an interview with The A. V. Club, Kaling was asked about her thoughts on inappropriate humor, and if she has a personal limit she refuses to cross. Kaling went on to explain that she does not understand how some writers, both male and female, write as if they have no one to hold accountable, as if both their parents "were killed in a car accident when they were two."

Kaling also admits that only very few people can actually be that crass and still be funny. She believes that Sarah Silverman can cross lines because she is shrewd, smart, and an excellent joke-writer whose jokes are based on more than shock value. Whereas some comedians rely on catharsis to get laughs, these are the fakest of laughs, in her opinion. Kaling proves that not all women have to be crude to keep up with the boys— she writes jokes you wouldn't be ashamed to share with your grandmother.

The Mormon Misconception

the church of latter day saints' unusual place in pop culture

BY CHARLOTTE MURTISHAW
ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE MANNHEIM



Indigenous American religious movements and successful entertainment ventures may have more in common than one might think. HBO's well received *Big Love* has been nominated for Golden Globes and Emmys since its debut in 2006. *Sister Wives*, a TLC-produced reality show about the polygamist Brown family, drew roughly 2.5 million viewers in 2010. Then, of course, came the improbable success of the *South Park* writers-helmed *Book of Mormon* on Broadway, named after the religious text Mark Twain deemed "chloroform in print."

Oddly, Mormonism has become a pop culture phenomenon. Despite the cheery and squeaky clean persona the church's members often try to convey, the sect's church doctrine and pebbled past have made it a fixture of fascination to the country at large over the past several years, and beleaguered the church with a public image disparate from its proclaimed identity. Still, the mythology about Mormonism persists. Most recently, in an entirely new arena: opera.

Dark Sisters is a modern American opera sponsored by the Gotham Chamber Opera and Music-Theater Group that ran from Nov. 9-19 at John Jay College. "Very immediately, the idea of focusing on a polygamous family came to me," composer Nico Muhly, CC '02, says. "It was something I had been thinking about for several years."

Dark Sisters is, indeed, a dark tale: it follows the stories of five "sister wives" right after a raid on a polygamist ranch in Arizona. The story drew inspiration heavily from the Warren Jeffs compound that was the focus of a government operation and subsequent media firestorm in 2004, and the stories of the polygamist women who testified about their lives there. Thrown into a chaotic upheaval, the women in *Dark Sisters* mourn the loss of their children, who were taken by government officials, and look to their husband, the Prophet, for guidance.

Throughout the opera, the detrimental effects of plural marriage are clear. Most of the wives maintain an unhealthy obsession with the approval of their husband, demonstrated by a strangely disturbing competition for his attention. Others are troubled by the past: the main character Eliza reveals that she was made an unwilling bride at the age of sixteen, and fears that her daughter Lucinda will meet a similar fate. Another wife, Ruth, is driven to insanity by the memory of her sons, who died prematurely, and eventually commits suicide. Lucinda, only fifteen, is betrothed to a man who's nearly 60. Ultimately, the only character to escape the marriage's prison is Eliza, who speaks out to newscasters about her situation and leaves the ranch, shocking the remaining wives and even Lucinda, who cannot understand why she rejects the Prophet's doctrine.

The conclusion is unsettling, to say the least, and the message about plural marriage is clearly negative, though Muhly hastens to point out the difference between the characters portrayed and the Mormon church. "It's important to maintain that they're not Mormons," Muhly says. "It's a splinter section of Mormonism from the 1870s, the 'fundamental' Church of Latter-Day Saints. "Polygamy is not a practice condoned by the official Mormon church, and its members lead monogamous lives and support the original doctrine preached by the church's founder, Joseph Smith, Jr." Yet most of the current shows and productions centering on Mormonism focus on polygamy. *Book of Mormon* is the only recent production which doesn't center itself around the practice.

"WHEN A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK 'MORMONISM' THE FIRST WORD THAT COMES TO THEIR MIND IS POLYGAMY, EVEN THOUGH AT THIS POINT IT'S AN UNFAIR ASSOCIATION."

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has been trying to shed the stigma of plural marriage for over a century. The Church officially revoked polygamy in 1890. According to a 1998 New York Times article, there were estimated to be about 40,000 people in Utah living in polygamist families, in comparison to a staggering 14 million members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints in total who identify as strictly monogamous today. Yet, the idea of polygamous Mormonism remains ingrained in the collective conscious.

"Because it's such a big thing and it happened in America, I think a lot of Americans still retain that association between Mormonism and plural marriage," Randall Balmer, professor at Barnard and a historian of American religion, says. "So when a lot of people think 'Mormonism' the first word that comes to their mind is polygamy, even though at this point it's an unfair association."

Despite the cultural stigma, Mormonism is currently the fastest-growing religion in America's history. The Church has long maintained an aggressive missionary presence, and turned to widespread public relations to combat misconceptions about its identity. There is even a website, mormon.org, where visitors can "livechat" with Mormons. Recently the Mormon church has taken to more visible methods of proselytization. "The Church launched a big campaign," Kate Christensen, president of the Columbia Latter-Day Saints' Student Association, says. "On billboards, cabs, signs. The ads read 'I am a Mormon'—to show that Mormons are just regular people."

Despite the Church's efforts, their more salacious aspects are still being discussed at length through various media, including *Dark Sisters*. Perhaps in the 21st century, "Mormon" connotes two coexisting, separate, and mildly paradoxical identities: an antiquated cult subject to spectator interest and television specials, and a legitimate religion that's finding its niche and flourishing without being undercut by the former.

Home For the Holidays

the trials and tribulations of port authority

BY SARAH GILFORD
ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE MANNHEIM

Port Authority is a pit of human despair. There is absolutely no arguing with this. You know those Jacob Riis photographs? The ones from the turn of the century of 10-year-olds playing next to dead horses? It's like that.

At 4:55 in the morning, however, it also has the added excitement of feeling like it's about 30 seconds away from becoming a crime scene. There's something about those pre-dawn hours that make your fellow travelers look like extras on an M. Night Shyamalan set: everyone shuffles their feet as they walk, like some kind of bizarre zombie send-off; it's cold, so everyone pulls their hoods far over their faces like they're trying to conceal Freddy Kruger masks; and, of course, the ghoulish glare of the flickering fluorescent bulbs makes everyone look like they're tweaking.

When I arrive at the Port Authority at 4:55 a.m., I'm wearing a hand-knitted scarf with a hand-knitted hat, looking like I walked straight out of a Gap Christmas ad. If this is a horror movie after all, I'm that chick named Daisy, who is super innocent and virginal and gets killed in the first 20 minutes. I am acutely aware of this, and try to find my gate as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, this proves harder than it should. I find an older gentleman who looks like he might be able to help. He wears a navy cardigan with frayed patches that say "New York Transportation" sewn loosely on the front lapel, and a name tag that says Gerald. There is some ghostly, faded quality about him, as if he's been preserved by a combination of mothballs and shoe polish. When I say hello, he walks over, knock-kneed and wobbly, his joints bouncing six inches ahead of the rest of his body.

"Do you work here?" I ask.

"I'm a driver," he says. "So I'm here some. But I don't know everything." As he says this last part, he breaks my gaze. No matter how much he wants to save me, young, lost, impressionable lass that I am, he can offer no help. He's just an old man powerless against the abyss that is the Port Authority.

"Can you tell me where the—"

"Excuse me!" Two street toughs step in between me and Gerald. Street toughs. I find myself using terms like this when I spend too much time here. Something about this place makes me adopt the worldview of an 80-year-old from Boca Raton. I'm about 10 minutes away from yelling, "You're all putzes, the lot of you!"

The street toughs continue. "Do you know where we can buy a ticket?" A perfectly reasonable question, but Gerald has already recognized an opportunity to redeem himself. He looks like a kitten about to pounce.

"Excuse me," he charges, "but I was speaking to this young lady here."

Tough #1 starts laughing. Tough #2 scoffs, a little more jarring. "Alright man, I see how it is." They walk away. Wait! My liberal guilt is shouting. If you guys just talked to each other, maybe you could come to learn something about each other, like Hilary Swank and that motley group of inner city kids she teaches to dance or write plays or something!

It turns out Gerald doesn't know the answer to my question after all. I look him in the eye and thank him kindly, and he goes back to looking broken, a lone Kennedy-era relic in a frontier of Tall T's and low rider jeans.

I find someone who actually works here, a youngish guy in a fluorescent yellow vest toting a mop and bucket. His idle stance and loud sighs make him look like a frame from a blue-collar *Dilbert* spinoff. I can almost see a cartoon thought bubble popping out of the side of his head: "Darn, Mondays are the worst!" or "No coffee? I quit!"

When he sees me, however, he gets a certain spark in his eye. I know this spark. I am not in the mood for this spark.

"Well hello there." He approaches, leaving his mop unattended.

"Hi," I say. Efficient but polite. Economical. The veritable "Don't get fresh with me, young man!" of greetings.

"Now, whatever can I help you with, miss?"

"I'm just trying to find the Peter Pan gates."

He leans in and raises an eyebrow. "Peter Pan—like the movie?"

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THOSE PRE-DAWN HOURS THAT MAKE YOUR FELLOW TRAVELERS LOOK LIKE EXTRAS ON AN M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN SET.

"No, like the gates. For the buses. That leave from the bus depot."

He seems irritated that I shot down his joke. He just grunts and points to a far-off chart before walking back to his mop and fixing his eyes back on the exact same point.

Eventually, I find my gate, and arrive just as my bus pulls up to the door. I'm home free! I made it! I'm alive! But then I remember that this is the part in the movie when I come to realize the bad guy isn't dead after all, because he is in the process of stabbing me with a machete.

But, miraculously, I manage to make my way onto the bus with my body parts unstabbed. As I climb the stairs, I see Peter Pan's slogan written alongside the front window: "Walk the plank." Maybe I'm not home free just yet.

Thanks for reading.
See you next year.