

I've dreamed of starting a stand-up comedy routine with the line "I'm a feminist art critic, so it goes without saying that I'm funny and relatable." The audience would laugh, of course. One of the most hackneyed jokes is that feminists aren't funny—nor is modern and contemporary art. Then I saw Hannah Gadsby's Netflix comedy special, *Nanette*, which proved both statements wrong. Centering her own experience, Gadsby shows how relatable and moving a queer feminist takedown of rape culture can be, particularly as it relates to art.

INCORRECTLY FEMALE

BY WENDY VOGEL



I have been devouring the accounts of various funny women coming to terms with the bodies they are in. Queer, fat, pregnant—as Gadsby says succinctly of her own masculine-of-center gender presentation, “incorrectly female”—they describe how estranged they have been from their own desires. They speak frankly about the process of returning to those bodies and owning their own narratives. Their stories are stories of redemption, but a redemption that acknowledges the ways that a psychic hole exists in the expression of female sexuality. In so doing, they critique the very foundations of comedy.

Nanette, performed by Gadsby, is a wholesale reckoning of sexist and homophobic culture. She begins her set with some expository background information about growing up lesbian in Tasmania, the Australian island that outlawed homosexuality until 1997. Bespectacled, in

Opposite - Farah Al Qasimi, *S Folding Blanket*, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

a suit, punctuating her jokes with small flicks of the wrist, and bugging out her eyes, Gadsby contrasts her quiet soul with the “Mardi Gras” culture of LGBTQ pride celebrations. As she gently pokes fun at her earlier sets about coming out, she declares that she may need to quit comedy. Why, exactly? Because Bill Cosby, recently convicted of serial rape, was her favorite comedian. The crowd responds with wry laughter. She presses forward, building to a declaration.

“I built a career out of self-deprecating humor,” she says. “I put myself down in order to speak... And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or to anyone who identifies with me. And if that means that my comedy career is over, then so be it.”

The threat to quit comedy is a rhetorical device that allows the comedian to swerve from anger to anguish. Gadsby deconstructs the joke form, explaining how tension operates in her work. “A story has a beginning, middle, and end, but a joke is a question and a surprise answer,” she says.

By explaining how jokes simplify the nuances of lived experiences, Gadsby illustrates how comedy can be cruel and dismissive. The comedian ramps up to her boldest conclusions with art history. She relates the story of a confrontation with a man who tells her that she shouldn't take medication for her mental illness because “artists need to feel.” “What if Vincent Van Gogh took medication?” he asks. “Then we wouldn't have the sunflowers.” Gadsby applies her art

history knowledge, tearing the man “a college debt-sized new arsehole,” about the facts of Van Gogh’s attempts to self-medicate and seek professional psychiatric help.

The show hinges on Gadsby’s critique of Picasso as the ultimate example of a misogynist artist. Cubism is a style that permits all perspectives, Gadsby cracks, except any perspective of a woman. She questions how art history can ascribe so much cultural value to the man who has an affair with the teenage Marie-Thérèse Walter, with his brash invocation that to “destroy the woman” (after he is sexually finished with her) is to “destroy the past she represents.” Gadsby concludes a very funny treatise about the lack of available positions for women in art history (alluding to the famous virgin-or-whore dichotomy and also to the literal pliant, floppy bodies of women in nineteenth-century paintings) with a return to Picasso. He pursues the seventeen-year-old Walter as a married fortysomething. In his defense, Picasso said that he was in his prime, and Walter was in hers.

Gadsby drops down the mood as she admits that the way she treated an earlier joke in the set about a man threatening to assault her before realizing she was a woman was a fragment, an incomplete story. The true story, she explains, is that he did assault her later; she simply never reported it. She was also a victim of rape. But now, as an adult who has been “destroyed,” she rises, in her prime. “Would you dare test out your strength on me?” she roars.

In May I saw Cameron Esposito perform a set about sexual assault in a New York comedy club. A recorded version of the routine, *Rape Jokes*, is now available online. Like Gadsby, Esposito is a white, androgynous lesbian. She also embeds a rhetorical thread early in her set, but with more direct subject matter. Warming up her liberal crowd with jokes about President Trump, she flatly states, “I’m a sexual assault survivor.” Her voice rising with upspoke, she adds: “And I don’t love how he brags about assaulting people?”

This line serves as her introduction to the #MeToo movement. Esposito contrasts women “standing in their truth” with a “shriveling Nosferatu,” who stands in for a broad stretch of patriarchy, from casual sexists to adamant men’s rights activists. She stretches out her arm dramatically and imitates such a man: “What am I supposed to do *at work* if I can’t talk about her sweater?” But whereas Gadsby chafes at her earlier material and “feedback” from her LGBT audience about not having enough “lesbian content,” Esposito doubles down on discussing sex and her sexual identity.

Between jokes about navigating the world as a visibly queer person, Esposito makes repeated references to #MeToo. She slams male comedians for making insensitive rape jokes, the hyperbolic example being a man simply shouting “Rape!” and holding for

uncomfortable laughter. Esposito worries that even though the topic of sexual assault is becoming more normalized in everyday speech, the culture will react by punishing “eight powerful men” and considering the case closed.

Esposito’s own admission of having been sexually assaulted comes at the tail end of a long story about growing up Catholic, with no sex education and a fundamental lack of understanding about sexual agency. When she started a relationship with a woman while attending a very religious college—so religious that being outed as queer could lead to student or faculty expulsion—she realized that what she had been told was her entire worth as a woman, her “fuckability” quotient, was down the drain. Enter an obsessive acquaintance whose attentions Esposito permitted, just like those of her high school boyfriends. Her friend’s creepy overtures turned to sexual assault one night after too many beers. “I know I didn’t say yes, and I also know that I couldn’t have. I was fucked up,” she says, voice on

the verge of breaking. Then she confesses that she used to tell that story as a party joke until a male friend told her it wasn’t funny. “That’s how disconnected I think so many people are from our own agency,” Esposito says.

Esposito also rewrites the flow of the punch line. Her emotional register shifts from heavy to light as she cracks jokes about the pleasures of the TV show *Law and Order: SVU*. Her set ends with a tense account of how her assailant found her years later in a dark parking lot and ran at her. A coworker stepped in and defused the situation, no questions asked. Esposito flips the script on the terms of intervention and legacy—a concept she codes as male—by asserting the power of this heroic man’s action. His memory would live on not through “spreading his seed” or being a sexual aggressor but by heroically standing up to violence.

Writer Lindy West’s 2016 memoir, *Shrill*, also devotes much space to the subject of how comedians treat sexual misconduct. The book details her life as a fat activist and a feminist commentator. She recounts the paltry models in popular culture for herself as a fat child, including Miss Piggy (whose voluptuousness is tainted by her “rapey-ness” toward



Opposite, top - Farah Al Qasimi, *S Eating Watermelon*, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line, Dubai
Opposite, bottom - Farah Al Qasimi, *M Napping on Carpet*, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line, Dubai



Jennifer Camper, *Heterosexuals in the Military*, 1993, *Bad Girls* at New Museum, New York, 1994. Courtesy: Jennifer Camper and New Museum, New York

her object of desire, Kermit) and Ursula, the sea witch from *The Little Mermaid*, whom she reframes not as a greedy villain but as a political revolutionary. West's journey through puberty is fraught, and as she grows up, she realizes that mainstream culture polices both her own desire and the desire that men have for her.

Comedy was always one of West's beats as a writer. But she went viral after publishing a piece called "How to Tell a Rape Joke" in 2012, on the women's news and culture website *Jezebel*. The article was written in response to an incident in which comedian Daniel Tosh responded to a female heckler, who had objected to Tosh's rape joke, "Wouldn't it be funny if she were raped by like five guys right now?" In the article, West argued that set-ups that make the perpetrator (or men in general) the butt of the joke, as opposed to the

victims of rape, can change culture. West's examples of successful rape jokes included a one-liner by Louis C.K., who has since been accused of sexually harassing multiple women.

In 2017 West published "Why Men Aren't Funny" in the *New York Times*.¹ She wrote the piece shortly after Louis C.K.'s abuse made the news. In one section, she writes a statement that could well apply to sectors of the visual art world: "One of comedy's defining pathologies, alongside literal pathologies like narcissism and self-loathing, is its swaggering certainty that it is part of the political vanguard, while upholding one of the most rigidly patriarchal hierarchies of any art form." But she adds that the ubiquity and popularity of comedy might well give it the power to reshape society: "If we address the power imbalance in comedy, in this art that shapes how people think, what jokes they repeat to their families, who they believe deserves to hold a microphone and talk out loud, other imbalances might follow."

One of the most riotous female comedians of the moment has indeed defied stereotypes about whose experiences can take center stage. The Asian American comedian Ali Wong's 2018 Netflix stand-up comedy special *Hard Knock Wife*, filmed two years after her first special, *Baby Cobra*, pushes mommy-blog humor to its limit. Clearly pregnant with her second child and sporting a clingy cheetah-print dress, she delivers a raunchy rant on aspects of new motherhood. She upsets expectations about femininity, particularly Asian femininity. Wong breaks the ice of politesse immediately, with her first punch line landing on the frustration of being the primary caretaker of her young daughter. Her reaction when fellow comedians ask why she's performing so soon after having a baby? "I need to miss her so that I don't throw her in the garbage." Quick jokes follow on sniffing baby asses, the "chronic physical torture" of breastfeeding, and seeing a friend's mangled genitalia after giving birth ("like two dicks hanging side by side"). And while she jokes that a young male nanny

would tempt her—"I would eat the shit outta his asshole!"—it is perhaps even more radical to admit her own lack of interest in certain sex acts after having a child. "Emotionally and spiritually," she laments, "my pussy is gone."

How might the momentum in comedy translate to contemporary art? This summer the Brooklyn nonprofit Smack Mellon presented the exhibition *Laugh Back*, curated by Lindsey O'Connor. In the curator's words, the group show aimed to "examine the diverse cultural production of self-identifying women who engage the defiant possibilities of humor, satire, and the absurd as subversive tools for cultural change."²



Farah Al Qasimi, *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Room* (stills), 2016. Courtesy: the artist



Like the famous *Bad Girls* exhibition curated by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum in 1994, almost twenty-five years ago, *Laugh Back* is constructed as an intersectional feminist response to a politically volatile climate. In the 1990s the US art world was the target of government censorship. In that era's larger political landscape, reproductive rights, civil rights for LGBTQ individuals, and resources for AIDS patients were under attack.

"Bad girls like the critical and constructive potential of laughter," Tucker wrote in 1994. But she also advocated for a certain avant-garde tendency in the form of comedy—stories with twists and turns that allow for nuance. Today we might think of this kind of narrative as one that complicates the black-and-white politics of #MeToo, as comedians like Esposito do.

Opposite - *INNER COURSE, The Agony of it All*, 2018, *Laugh Back* installation view at Smack Mellon, New York, 2018

"[Bad girls'] laughter... resists the construction of an 'intelligible, consistent, 'unbroken' story' and opts for the inconsistencies, contradictions and 'catch me if you can' elusiveness of multiple narratives," the curator wrote.³

As *Bad Girls* did, the exhibition *Laugh Back* employs different types of humor, from ironic signage in an installation by Kameelah Janan Rasheed (for example, "Gluten-Free Graveyard" and "Anachronistic Anger") to a riot grrrl-inspired music video by Farah Al Qasimi in her teenage bedroom about how her appearance is out of step with feminine norms. Some of the most powerful work in the show drags sexist culture, in all senses. Dynasty Handbag, whose performances have been described as a meditation on "queer failure," performed live and contributed the video *Fascist Dictatorship Makeup Tutorial*, which she posted on YouTube one week after the 2016 presidential election. The duo Inner Course (Tora López and Rya Kleinpeter) created *The Agony of It All* (2018), a library with pseudoscientific self-help books for women. Topics in Inner Course's library range from toxic motherhood to witchcraft to specious "breast analysis." But not all titles are from the pre-Internet era. Alongside *The Predatory Female* (1986) by Rev. Lawrence Shannon is a 2017 title called *AWAP: All Women Are Psychotic*.

Kleinpeter and López offered dramatic readings and consultation in 1950s-style pajama outfits and wigs similar to comedienne Lucille Ball's iconic do. They acknowledged that their archive of cross-disciplinary material seeks to amplify the insecurities of anyone deemed an "other." As funny as the books' sexist premises can seem, like that of the dystopic 1971 sci-fi novel *The Feminists*, the breadth of Inner Course's archive is staggering. Unlike much of contemporary art, the installation does not stop with irony. It invites viewers to locate

themselves in this archive, to reflect on the ways in which they have been cultured into understanding themselves as incorrectly female—or incorrect and female. In this moment, the registers of comedy and art can join in their mission to reflect the complexity of lives, with radical narrative paths, pathos, and, of course, humor.

1. Lindy West, "Why Men Aren't Funny," November 14, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/opinion/louis-ck-not-funny-harassment.html>.
2. Lindsey O'Connor, press release for "Laugh Back," http://smackmellon.org/files/6015/3012/8913/PR-LaughBack-Smack_Mellon_2018.pdf.
3. Marcia Tucker, "The Attack of the Giant Mutant Ninja Barbies," (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 42.



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