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The Museum of Modern Art

NEW DRAWINGS EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART EXPLORES ROLE OF HUMOR IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART

Sight Gags:

Grotesque, Caricature, and Wit in Modern and Contemporary Drawing
January 21-May 4, 1999

Highlighting the important role of humor in twentieth-century drawing, *Sight Gags: Grotesque, Caricature, and Wit in Modern and Contemporary Drawing* opens January 21, 1999, at The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition complements the upcoming *Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper, 1963-1974* (April 1-June 16, 1999). Polke was among the first and most well-known postwar artists to incorporate humor into his work, often taking his inspiration from comic strips and other popular amusements.

An eclectic mix of techniques, styles, and periods reflecting the richness of the Museum's drawings collection, *Sight Gags* comprises some 80 works on paper by approximately 65 artists, organized into four categories: the grotesque, caricature, visual puns and conceptual jokes, and works inspired by comics and cartoons.

"Humorous drawing is as old as drawing itself, but there is something about its transgressiveness, its irreverence, and its relationship to contemporary issues that makes it particularly modern," says Laura Hoptman, Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings, who organized the exhibition. "It is probably no coincidence that the first great flowering of caricature occurred in the mid-nineteenth century around the time that modernism was born."

Grotesques distort and deform their subjects, often in surrealistic manner. Works included in this group range from the abstractions of Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy to the mutated figures of the more contemporary artists such as Francesco Clemente and David Moreno.

A caricature also ridicules its subject by means of distortion, but is more satiric than surreal, often implying that the subject has a particular quality or personality trait. Jean Crotti's 1915 caricature of Marcel Duchamp exaggerates the angularity of the artist's face. A series of caricatures by various artists of Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Exhibitions and Publications for nearly thirty years, emphasizes the curator's smoothly handsome, almost simian features.

Among the visual jokes and conceptual pieces included in the exhibition is Marcel Duchamp's well-known example of a visual pun *L.H.O.O.Q./Shaved* (1964), a playing card bearing the image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, beneath which Duchamp has written a suggestive acronym. The performances of conceptual artists such as Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Peter Hutchinson, and Bruce Nauman often incorporate video either as a documentation device or as the medium itself. Seemingly ordinary actions are singled out and made absurd by virtue of their transformation into art. In *Corrections* (1972) Acconci uses video to document his attempt to burn a tuft of hair from the back of his neck with a match. Baldessari's

30-minute videotape of a hand monotonously copying a single sentence--"I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art"--parodies the artistic device of serial repetition.

Comic strips have been a source of inspiration to both European and American artists. Pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol assimilated the colors, graphics, and characters of comic strips and cartoons. Richard Prince's untitled works from the mid-1980s and early-1990s isolate single cartoons, suggesting a deeper meaning beyond their initial humor. *Popeye*, a 1982 collage by Elizabeth Murray, isolates and embellishes the popular cartoon character's bulging biceps, creating an abstract composition that is both elegant and playfully contentious.

Contemporary artist Gary Simmons will contribute a special rendering of his wall-size work *Boom* (1996) specifically for this exhibition. Using an entire gallery wall as his canvas, Simmons borrows individual motifs from film animation, abstracting them and rendering them in chalk on an enormous scale. *Boom* depicts the clouds and jagged lines that represent a cartoon explosion. Dust clouds made from clapping blackboard erasers against the gallery wall add to the experience.

No. 4

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