

## *Michael Smith - Untitled*

When I started performing in 1975 I soon became associated with a wave of second-generation conceptual artists nurtured on art from the 70's. Like many of my contemporaries I came from a formalist background; unlike many of them I did not renounce painting, I just dried up. My paintings had become so reductive I had no idea what to paint anymore. I never quite lost my faith in the modernist trajectory, so when faced with the dismantling of everything I had come to believe in, I felt like an innocent bystander witnessing a purge. When I stopped painting I needed something to fill the void, so I started going to various events of every variety: performances, dance concerts and screenings. I became fascinated and confused with this new area called "Performance Art." I'd attend an event thinking I might be mildly entertained but oftentimes I'd be lulled into a stupor by some stultifying activity. The patience I had developed as a minimalist painter prepared me for these ordeals but never thoroughly convinced me that to endure was a virtue. I was clear about wanting to deliver a response to all the excessively serious and self indulgent work but without knowing exactly what I wanted to say. Comedy seemed like a viable and challenging strategy.

Many of the formats and models employed by the evil entertainment complex and detested by the avant-garde community started to look pretty good to me. It seemed important to do some field work. I started frequenting *The Pickle Barrel*, a comedy spot in Chicago with an open microphone, and watched aspiring comics work the room and deliver jokes. I was intrigued by their efforts and soon was compelled to try my hand at this funny business. I had heard that a good way to develop material and comedic timing was to make audio recordings. Having no particular subject I wanted to tackle, I started talking into a microphone about anything that came into my head, mostly offering commentary and speculation about ambient sounds within my recording range: a carhorn, traffic, coffee cooking, a phone ring, electrical interference, etc... I found the results humorous, but for listeners unfamiliar with process art, they were pointless, laborious and distressing. After a few years of considering the universal appeal of abstraction, there was something empowering and mildly transgressive about contemplating the minutiae of the everyday as an object of laughter. I honed my timing, tightened my material and eventually put together my first performance called "Comedy Routine." Unfortunately, designating the perimeter of the stage with masking tape and deconstruction of the old-pie-in-the-fact trick do not move the dial on the LPM meter (laughs per minute.) So I took my show to the appropriate context, where audiences were familiar with Cage and timing would be measured against an hour hand. It was a familiar and generous environment which I thought might be open to the idea of entertainment and willing to respond with laughter.

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