

Lex Brown at Bel Ami

December 16, 2023 - February 10, 2024

by Isabella Miller, May 2024



Lex Brown, *Communication* (video stills) (2021). Video, 29 minutes and 8 seconds. Images courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

In Henri Bergson's 1900 book *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, the philosopher describes the humor of the body's failures—its slips, falls, tumbles—as a phenomenon of the industrial era. As human labor was delegated to efficient machines, the body's follies became ever more comic.¹ Linguistic and narrative clumsiness match that of the body in Lex Brown's absurdist video *Communication* (2021), recently on view at Bel Ami, as the artist imagines a world much like our own, where the physical plane is rendered increasingly immaterial. In the video, dystopic communications company Omnesia offers insurance policies against cancellation, trademarks new terms for “talking about not talking,” and induces collective paramnesia about urban displacements. Such concern with language and narrative manifests at the formal level, too, as Brown—the sole actor in her video—modulates her speech to reflect the fast pace of our hypermediated world and opts for self-consciously deskilled art direction and editing. If slapstick imagines our embodied experience as broken or failing, Brown updates the genre to capture the brokenness of how we think, speak, and feel. She clowns, and thus resists, the machinations of big data, corporate PR, and real estate profiteering, all key features of our age.

Brown trained as a clown in various workshops from 2014 to 2019 and drew on those experiences to imbue a buffoonish comedy in all her performances for *Communication*. The video begins with a black screen and some old-fashioned humor, as we hear audience members gracelessly struggling to traverse a planetarium, crashing into each other in a dark room. Then a professor appears onscreen to introduce a presentation about urban dwellers, addressing the viewer. The rest of the video comprises the professor's story, following Aspen Van Der Baas and Jordie, who work for Omnesia. Split screens and shot/reverse shots are employed heavily throughout the video, as Brown creates a cinematic space that feels almost entirely untethered from the physical plane. With the help of Silvie—an AI reminiscent of

¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan, 1900; Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2014).

a juiced-up Siri who is only heard, never seen—Aspen and Jordie conspire to build a housing development in a town called New Greater Framingham for viewing purposes only, not for living in. Their strategy relies on messaging: By manufacturing plot holes in the thoughts of the town's current inhabitants via powerful algorithmic forces, they will be able to displace them without upset, therefore making space for their speculative development.



Lex Brown, *Communication* (video stills) (2021). Video, 29 minutes and 8 seconds. Images courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

In early twentieth-century slapstick, pianos slide down staircases and bandits jump out of moving trains. But Brown suggests that in a world increasingly structured by digital, artificial, and disembodied experience, the contours of this comedic mode have shifted to encompass how we shape and relate information. Rather than originating in anxiety about the means of production, Brown's slapstick registers anxiety about the means of communication. A plot hole, in *Communication*, induces fissures in people's ability to make sense of the world and understand local changes as contingent on larger economic and political forces. Plot holes are not mistakes or "gotcha" moments of authorial failure but rather deliberate strategies to manipulate citizens—"blanket loving, prime time streaming, emotionally...hmm... animals," as the professor introducing the story put it—into complacency and compliance.

Much of the video's humor issues from Brown's flickering paroxysms of word soup, a linguistic transference of slapstick and clowning's physical comedy. Early in the video, Aspen paces around a theatrical set, talking over the phone: "Didn't you hear? Something about an 'aggravation', or 'acquisition,' or 'attrition'? I don't know. Something with an 'a,' it was just scrolling so fast. It's this word, it's just all I can hear." She jolts from word to word like a stuttering car engine, stopping, starting, and repeating phrases nonsensically. Her speech reflects the speed and conceptual disjuncture that characterize the feed, now the primary mechanism through which we digest the world around us. At the same time, these frenetic argots undercut the goal of complete manipulation expressed by the developers-cum-communications specialists seeking to displace residents of New Greater Framingham. The expressive body of clowning and the disobedient body of slapstick made light of physical precarity in a newly mechanized world, while here, we laugh at the ridiculous failures of a narrative mode that also threatens to overwhelm us. Our laughter becomes a form of critical distance.

Likewise, Brown's stylistic grammar, characterized by sloppiness, elevates the viewer to heightened criticality. *Communication* engages in a comic form of self-reference, with its slipshod costuming and

sets, awkward frames, and deliberately clumsy editing style. When Aspen and Jordie video chat with B. Marbles, a Hollywood director called upon to construct the requisite plot holes, his face glitches as the camera surrealistically cuts to bizarre close-ups. Rather than presenting viewers with the sleek ease of telecommunication methods already available to us, Brown humorously doubles down on aesthetic estrangement via glitch.

While Bergson's slapstick emerged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Brown works in the extended afterlife of the information age. As AI encroaches on our everyday experience, and as dizzying gluts of disinformation become increasingly challenging to disentangle, our capacity to formulate, communicate, and critically engage with ideas hangs in the balance. Justice is reached in *Communication's* narrative, as a character named Marie foils Omnesia's plan and rescues her fellow citizens of New Greater Framingham by appealing to Jordie's empathy and righteousness over profit-driven self-interest. The real thwarting of what Omnesia represents, however, lies in Brown's comedic mode. Like the comic innovators of the twentieth century, who were attempting to make sense of a changing world and their place within it, Brown sheds light on the machinations of our era and sensitizes viewers to the failures of algorithms, feeds, and corporate doublespeak. By making light of dialogic and narrative ruptures, she uses humor not only as a tool for letting off steam but also for resisting the threat of mass misinformation.