Sara Greenberger Rafferty: Gloves Off

SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ

UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Sara Greenberger Rafferty
Gloves Off

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz

University Art Museum
University at Albany
State University of New York
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Phyllis Diller, 2009
C-print mounted to Plexiglas
20 x 24 x ½ inches
Phyllis, 2009
C-print mounted to Plexiglas
24 x 20 x ¼ inches
Phyllis II
2009
C-print mounted to Plexiglas
24 x 20 x 1/4 inches
Harold's Clock, 2006
C-print
16 x 16 inches

Lucy Not Funny, 2006
C-print
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Shecky, 2006
C-print
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Sparring Partner, 2006
C-print
20 x 16 inches

It Starts with a Poke, 2006
C-print
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Double Gun Prop, 2011
Direct substrate print on Plexiglas
9 ½ x 45 x ½ inches
Bills Prop, 2010
Direct substrate print on Plexiglass
12 ¼ x 13 ¼ x ½ inches
Installation view,
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art,
2017

Window Piece, 2011
Direct substrate print on
Plexiglas and hardware
74 x 35 x ½ inches
The other night he hooked his electric toothbrush up to the hi-fi, played the 1812 overture and blew out all his teeth.

Bill Dailey January 18, 1968

The best scene in the picture is when I dodge the taxi and hit the snow plow. They just don't make movies like they used to.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

And for the 18th consecutive time, I failed my drivers test. On a technicality. License, by the way, is pending.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

The man I hit was carried into the court room on a stretcher. I said, 'Judge, this man is dead.'

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

And I just got over a bad experience in the court. The Judge pointed at me and said, 'He's an untruthful witness.'

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

I decided to know why we have God. I decided to get out of the way. The man explained.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

All through the trial and not a word of: 'I'm sorry.' Then the jury brought in a verdict.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

Before sentence was pronounced, my lawyer pleaded with the jury to look over my record.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

The Judge was impressed at the sentence. He didn't think it was severe enough.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

I hope that I'll make a good job of fighting it.

Bill Dailey December 21, 1964

The answer is: 'I don't think so.'

Charles W. Parker October 24, 1964

I'm saving quite a bit on the food bill. Fang has a bad tongue and got his tongue cut.
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 83 ½ x 40 ½ x 2 ½ inches
On Aggression, On Aggression, 2016
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Two objects, each irregular, overall 24 x 41 1/4 x 1/4 inches

Grid, 2016
Acrylic polymer, inkjet prints, and paper on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 70 1/4 x 24 x 1/4 inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 83 1/4 x 40 x 1/2 inches

Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 91 x 40 x 1/2 inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 60 x 57 ½ x ½ inches
Untitled, 2013
Acrylic polymer and inkjet print on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 35 ¾ × 24 x ½ inches

Untitled, 2013
Acrylic polymer and inkjet print on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 55 × 40 x ½ inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 72 x 40 ½ x ½ inches
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Six components, irregular, approximately
40 x 227 ¾ x ½ inches
Y2K Moschino Dress, 2016
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular: 76 ½ x 40 x ½ inches
Dress, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inks on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware
Irregular, 50 x 18 x ½ inches
Untitled (for soapbox), 2014
Direct substrate-printed acetate, and hardware
24 x 24 inches
Untitled (for stage), 2014
Direct substrate printed acetate, and hardware
52 x 63 ⅜ inches

Untitled (for stage), detail, 2014
Study for Gloves Off Reader, installation at University Art Museum, 2017
On behalf of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz and the University Art Museum at the University at Albany, I am pleased to present Sara Greenberger Rafferty: Gloves Off, an exhibition of hand-crafted, three-dimensional photographs and other works that address a wide range of contemporary topics from comedy, violence, gender, fashion, and politics to the nature of institutions and technology, both analog and digital.

This is the second collaboration between the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art and the University Art Museum, both part of the State University of New York system. We are grateful for the support and encouragement of our respective institutions, which make it possible for us to produce high-quality exhibitions and publications that address the art and culture of our time. We are also grateful to the staff members of both museums who worked diligently to make this project a success.

At SUNY New Paltz, we thank President Donald Christian and Provost Lorin Basden Arnold. At the Dorsky Museum, we are grateful to Coordinator of Exhibitions and Programs Ursula Morgan, Program Manager Janis Benincasa, Manager of Education and Visitor Experience Zachary Bowman, Graduate Assistant Mary-Beth Fiorentino, Collections Manager/Registrar Wayne Lempka, Visitor Services Coordinator Amy Pickering, and Preparator Bob Wagner. We are also grateful to Michael Prudhomme for his assistance with the installation, and Daniel Belasco, the Dorsky’s former curator of exhibitions and programs, for bringing Ms. Rafferty’s work to the attention of the museum.

At the University at Albany, thanks to Interim President James R. Stellar, Interim Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Darrell P. Wheeler, and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs William B. Hedberg. At the University Art Museum, thanks to former UAM Director Janet Riker for championing this exhibition, and to Registrar Darcie Abbatiello, Administrative Assistant Alana Akacki, Exhibition Designer Zheng Hu, Exhibition and Outreach Coordinator Naomi Lewis, Administrative Assistant Joanne Lue, Associate Director/Curator Corinna Ripps Schaming, and Preparator Jeffrey Wright-Sedam.

Allison Cooper and Rachel Uffner, both of Rachel Uffner Gallery, have been extraordinarily helpful throughout the process of organizing this exhibition and catalogue. We are also grateful to Lisa and Stuart Ginsberg, Jamie and Peter Hort, Miyoung Lee and Neil Simpkins, Gregory R. Miller and Michael Wiener, Susan and Randolph Randolph, and Jeffrey and Audrey Spiegel for their generous loan of artworks to this exhibition. Both institutions owe a debt of gratitude to the foundations, corporations, and individuals that support our programs and help us realize our goals. For this exhibition, the Dorsky Museum is grateful to the Friends of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, the SUNY New Paltz Foundation, and the Dorsky Museum Contemporary Art Program Fund. And from the University Art Museum, thanks to The University at Albany Foundation. We are also grateful to the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant, and to the Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Curator Andrew Ingall has done a superb job organizing an exhibition that sets the challenging work of Sara Greenberger Rafferty into its art historical, political, and cultural contexts. Jonathan Thomas’s interview shines a light on the artist’s working process and the evolution of her work, from her 2005 graduation from Columbia University’s MFA program to the present day. Zheng Hu’s catalogue design captures the essential nature and significance of the objects as well as the curatorial construct that informs the exhibition. Corinna Ripps Schaming is also to be acknowledged for her masterful organization of the version of the exhibition presented in Albany.

Last but not least, we wish to thank Sara Greenberger Rafferty for creating the work that has resulted in this exhibition and for her generous investment of time and energy—including the premiere of a new video at the Dorsky and a site-specific work installed at the University Art Museum—which made it possible to realize this ambitious and timely presentation.

Sara J. Pasti
The Neil C. Trager Director
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art

Introduction
In September 2016, I met with Sara Greenberger Rafferty at her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn when her lease was ending. Works of art were hastily taped to walls and tacked with pins. Stacks of clear plastic boxes, tightly packed with acrylic paint tubes, were open. Small Styrofoam trays were laid on a shelf, each holding multi-hued screws in neat rows like ammunition. While many artworks drew my attention, the walls—similar to the teal color of the Styrofoam trays—provided the greatest inspiration. In the process of vacating her studio, Rafferty had removed furniture to reveal walls with posters and newsprint, distressed and yellowed with age. One full-color page from a collector’s magazine stood out: the 1974 “Rumble in the Jungle” between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. Both men, shirtless and wearing trunks, raise their gloved fists in battle stance. (Figs. 1–4)

Rafferty has also been persistently engaged in combat, albeit with less fanfare than a world heavyweight championship. Her art acknowledges, shocks, and disrupts systems of oppression, most notably the persistent grid that not only dominates art history but also exerts control over every aspect of our lives. Her work reveals the brutality and violence deeply woven into fashion, comedy, domestic life, and other areas of American popular culture.

The grid is ubiquitous in the physical world of our homes, workplaces, and cities. It appears as floor tile, cabinetry, apartment buildings, urban plans, and electrical networks. As a fundamental element of cartography, it divides land into latitudes, longitudes, tracts, and territories. It is the warp and weft of textiles. The grid also shows up virtually on our screens: as the windows and menus of graphical user interfaces, the rows and columns of pixels, and the cells and tables of an Excel spreadsheet. (Figs. 5–9, 11–12, 17–19)

For centuries, the grid has proven to be a useful organizing tool for collections of material culture and data. However, media theorist Bernhard Siegert has identified the grid’s sinister and “totalitarian” nature. While the grid provides order and simplicity, it simultaneously...
regulates, restricts, and punishes. The grid separates people across international borders, controls bodies in detention centers and prisons, and tracks the movement and behavior of individuals online, making their private activity public information.1

For artists, the grid is similarly double-edged in its productivity and limitation. From antiquity to today, it has been a popular method to transfer or scale an image to another surface. During the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti originated the veil (velum), a woven thread lattice stretched on a frame, to realize an accurate rendering of figures in space. In the twentieth century, artist historian Rosalind Krauss noted that minimalistists such as Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin (Fig. 15) embraced the spiritual purity and mythic power of the grid. Krauss argued that the grid is emblematic of modern art because of its “capacity to serve as a paradigm or model for the antidevelopmental, the antinarrative, the antihistorical.”2 As a twenty-first-century artist, Sara Greenberger Rafferty recognizes that while the grid may suppress stories, particularly those that concern trauma, the structure is in itself a manifestation of trauma. As an act of resistance, Rafferty advances the grid into new artistic territory by distorting its form and contaminating it with troubling narratives.

For the past decade, Rafferty has consistently used the language, gestures, and props associated with stand-up comedy, a medium with the ability to transmit painful stories through pleasure. Jokes On You (2016) is a large-scale work consisting of six Plexiglas panels that feature high-fashion clothing grabbed from the Internet and ephemera copied from collections in the National Museum of American History. Rafferty fragments the garments by blowing them up and printing them on standard, rectangular 8 ½ x 11-inch sheets of acetate, a medium associated with the analog technologies of archival storage, celluloid film, and overhead projectors. In a further step of mediation and interruption, she stains the images with paint colors (resembling bodily fluids) that dry and crack.

One of the Plexiglas panels incorporates twelve index cards scanned from the Phyllis Diller “Gag File,” the centerpiece of the National Museum’s collection related to the pioneering entertainer known for her flamboyant costumes, self-deprecating humor, and self-constructed ugliness3 (Fig. 16) While participating in a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship in May 2016, Rafferty studied and documented Diller’s clothing, props, scripts, photographs, and ephemera. The “Gag File” consists of approximately 50,000 jokes, typewritten and organized by subject. One card, dated June 28, 1965 and categorized as “Argument,” reads: “I asked my neighbor if her bad tempered husband was upset when she bought a new dress. She said, ‘In a way, but then, I can always cover up the bullet hole with a scarf or a pin.’”4

Diller’s joke ridicules the consumer habits of women, their stereotypical desire for the latest fashions, and the reactive consternation of their husbands. By removing the gag from its original grid—a steel file cabinet housing forty-eight drawers—and recontextualizing it with other materials, Rafferty exposes the violence associated with systems, relationships, and organizational tools that assert control over women’s bodies.

Another index card, dated August 4, 1964, references Fang, a dull-witted husband invented by Diller and employed frequently in her act. Although Diller drew from her experience as a suburban San Francisco Bay Area homemaker, the fictitious Fang had little in common with her true spouse. According to Diller, "Just as I was the antithesis of the happy and attractive Fifties housewife, so Fang flipped the image of the capable husband who was king of his castle, and I soon realized he was a beloved character. No one knew that I was living with an agoraphobic sex tyrant who couldn’t socialize and rarely held down a job. And not until the year of my retirement would I be aware that my stage act was actually a form of therapy.”5 If she had not received a “talking cure” by way of stand-up comedy, Diller may have resorted to violence, inflicted either on her husband or herself.

Other images in Jokes On You underscore abuse. Rafferty pairs a vintage 1980s Moschino “wife-beater” vest with a recent Donna Karan DKNY jacket that admonishes critics, “Don’t Knock New York.”6 Another index card illustrates a black feather boa constricting a neck. Another image, derived from a still from “The Muppet Show,” features Diller tilting her head up. Her mouth is wide open, her red lips smeared, but her facial expression is ambiguous: is she laughing or screaming in terror? Returning to the subject of her actual husband, Diller writes pleadingly in her autobiography, “I’m telling you, if our marriage amounted to a lot of date rape, then Sherwood Diller was the worst sex offender who ever lived.”7

Rafferty is most blunt in a series of “punched props” from 2006. Using paint on gessoed paper, Rafferty reproduced imagery associated with early and mid-twentieth-century comedy and entertainment. Forgoing her fist, Rafferty meticulously punctured the painted paper and photographed the remains as glossy black and white prints. One deceptively simple prop, a circle with a Roman numeral clock face, represents the iconic timepiece from Safety Last!, the 1923 silent film celebrated for its physical comedy, thrilling stunts, and in-camera visual tricks. Comedian Harold Lloyd dangles from a skyscraper high above traffic, clutches the hands of the building’s clock, and narrowly avoids a fall to the ground. Rafferty leaves Lloyd in the lurch: her rendition of the clock is missing its hands. The artist, too, is a master of sight gags, but employs her shtick in the darkest of shades.

Between 2010 and 2011, Rafferty produced another set of props, this time printing directly on Plexiglas. Like the Tears portraits, Rafferty manipulated the imagery in a process resulting in bleeds, drips, and stains that resemble watercolor. Groucho glasses, cream pies, banana peels, and rubber chickens have specific associations with vaudeville. However, categories for other props in the series are ambiguous. For example, long knives and handcuffs could be used as accessories either in a magic show or a murder scene. Cut into biomorphic shapes and installed on gallery walls, the props resemble cells in metastasis, spreading aggressively into cultural systems and public spaces.

More recently, Rafferty has mediated on themes of policing, espionage, and surveillance. She compares a row of large Plexiglas works featuring fashion imagery to the rogue’s gallery, a late-nineteenth-century criminal surveillance system that coincided with technological advances in modern photography. Beginning in New York City in 1858, and later spreading to other police departments in the U.S. and around the world, police departments displayed rows of mug shots on walls, panels, and publications. (Fig. 13) Rafferty manipulates images of

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3. Phyllis Diller is also a subject in Tears, a set of portraits from 2009 that conveys abuse, injury, and damage. Rafferty scanned found images, transferred them to paper, distorted them using a “waterlogging” technique, and then rephotographed the object. In one portrait, purple bruises appear on Diller’s nose and chin. A black feather boa constricts her neck. Another image, derived from a still from “The Muppet Show,” features Diller tilting her head up. Her mouth is wide open, her red lips smeared, but her facial expression is ambiguous: is she laughing or screaming in terror? Returning to the subject of her actual husband, Diller writes pleadingly in her autobiography, “I’m telling you, if our marriage amounted to a lot of date rape, then Sherwood Diller was the worst sex offender who ever lived.”7

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clothing—advertised on retail websites and indexed on computer screens in rows—by blowing them up to life-size. Installed on walls, the thick, glossy acrylic screens reflect the faces and bodies of gallery and museum visitors. Anyone is a suspect.

Costumes, disguises, and props are not only essential accessories for entertainers like Phyllis Diller but are also useful to spies and other criminal offenders.1 (Fig. 10) A faceless “rogue” featured in Grid (2016) wears a pink Moschino dress printed on a grid of standard-size acetate pages. Like a puppeteer, Rafferty compels the model to disassemble her garment and body in rectangular pieces. She is on the brink of collapse. One leg has broken off. The other limb is hidden by a computer screenshot of folder icons. (p. 31)

The Smithsonian, a quasi-federal agency, is not dissimilar from an online shopping site that tracks information about its consumers. In order to gain access to state-owned assets, Rafferty agreed to a background investigation, fingerprinting, and credentialing through the Smithsonian’s Office of Protection Services. Her artist’s research fellowship heightened an awareness of the capacity of the U.S. government—especially in cooperation with technology companies—to collect bulk data from citizens, thereby violating their right to privacy. Those who battle over definitions of American democracy and “greatness” have no choice but to take the gloves off. We live in a social matrix of uncensored and unfiltered aggression.

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, reports of harassment and violence against immigrants, women, LGBTQ individuals, Jews, and Americans of color have increased. Donald J. Trump announced that his administration might register Muslims in a database. He followed up with an executive order temporarily barring entry to refugees and citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries. Technology enables Instagrammers to bully and bots to tweet hate. At the same time, the Internet is a powerful resource for creative disruption and the dismantling of oppressive grids. Resistance takes the form of collective rebellion and protest, but most often it occurs in everyday actions by individuals—including artists—who utilize their tools and skills to speak truth to power. The joke is on all of us if we fail.

Andrew Ingall is an independent curator, scholar, and principal at Pandemonium Productions.

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2 Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” October, Vol. 9, Summer 1979, 64.
3 In the late 1960s, Playboy asked Phyllis Diller to pose nude. According to the comedian, the magazine’s editors intended the shoot as a gag. Diller wore shapeless dresses on stage and the public conceived of her body as flat-chested and scrawny. The resulting unpublished photograph, in which Diller is draped only in a bedspread, shows her full-figured and attractive. The editors decided to shelve it.
5 Ibid., 98.
6 Ibid., 109.
7 As part of her public persona, Diller explained that she wore gloves because “all clowns wear gloves—even Mickey Mouse.” “Fresh Air,” National Public Radio, 1986.
Jokes On Us
Corinna Ripps Schaming

Like the title of the exhibit, Sara Greenberger Rafferty comes on with gloves off, immersing herself in the discontinuities, tensions, and fractures that permeate our culture. She is a self-professed information hoarder always conjugating and sorting things out so that she—and we—can “work it out.” Like the comics she references in some of her work, Rafferty the artist needs “material,” and like a comic she wants to know how the work “reads” to an audience. So her approach is both an invitation and a provocation to enjoin the metaphorical battle: look over her shoulder at the screen, meet her in the studio, get inside her head, and share with her all the attendant anxieties that come with life during wartime—because for Rafferty, it is indeed always wartime. In Gloves Off, she has perpetually reworked and rethought how both minor transgressions and larger aggressions are the prods that make us vulnerable. But her wartime is not personal or psychological; instead it is a much bigger battle that requires us to process our own anxieties through the myriad forms of cultural and societal information that bombard us. In Rafferty’s world (and in our world), it is not a question, for example, of gender domination, rather of vulnerability, of standing alone like the stand-up comic onstage or the artist in the studio. The demons are out there lurking in a culture of unchallenged rhetoric, fictionalized headlines, and tired euphemisms that permeate our often-unconscious intake of all the “material” that constitutes life in the first half of the twenty-first century. The sorting—like the joke—is on us. Are we being coerced, or are we complicit?

Gloves Off Reader (2017), Rafferty’s installation at the University Art Museum, is a reinforcement of her preoccupations—a call-and-response to over-absorption and image sprawl, an examination of the density of information that inundates and confuses our moment. A barrage of source material generated by Google and by old-fashioned hands-in-the-archive research fuels her practice: it heightens her anxieties, but it also pushes her forward. So does other printed matter: screen grabs, snapshots, books, PDF printouts, printer paper strips, and reams of blank paper are attached to the walls, subtexted by Rafferty’s painted hardware that both fastens and punctures those walls. The parts become physical manifestations of her interior processing. Her preoccupations are writ large, revealed and shared.

And we are invited to join her as she stokes us with things that we vaguely recognize: designer clothes, raunchy jokes, trade paperbacks ranging from a book about the evolution of bathrooms to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s Masculine Domination. The texts come directly from Rafferty’s studio, and include “books that I’ve read or that I like the covers of, books that I have in the studio, mostly that relate to my work. And images of the books. Printouts of texts and printouts of images of the texts.”

Rafferty’s Jokes On You (2016)—its missing apostrophe deliberately conveying a double meaning—presides smack in the middle of Gloves Off Reader as a centerpiece, a warning, a taunt. Six Plexiglas panels feature high-fashion clothes and typescript jokes on index cards. The clothes are torn, spattered, and pierced (hand-violated by Rafferty), the jokes are from comedian Phyllis Diller’s “Gag File” (sourced by Rafferty from collections at the National Museum of American History). These cryptic polymer fragments are closely linked to the textual action that surrounds them. Embedded in both are signs of the symbolic violence and sad absurdities that shape our jokes, our (mis)information sources, our style, our cultural barometers—and our existence.

Recently quoted on the importance of Robert Rauschenberg, Rafferty referred to him as “an artist who reads, cares about politics, challenges social norms and systems of power, obsesses over representations in culture, and synthesizes emotions and ideas through urgent investment in objects, images, and performances.” She could easily be speaking of herself.

Corinna Ripps Schaming is associate director and curator at the University Art Museum, University at Albany.

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1 E-mail from Sara Greenberger Rafferty, December 18, 2016.
Jonathan Thomas: I’m curious about the research you were doing at the Smithsonian this year. I wonder what you were studying and how that came about?

Sara Greenberger Rafferty: I first conceived of the idea around 2007–2008, during the end of the Bush years, when I heard that they had the Phyllis Diller joke files at the National Museum of American History. I managed to gain access during the end of the Obama years, in May 2016, during the presidential primaries. I was in Washington D.C. and every day I would walk past a giant blue sign that read "TRUMP FALL 2016." It was hung outside the old Post Office, which Trump was turning into a hotel, so at the time it was a construction site. The National Museum of American History, where I was working, is across the street from the new National Museum of African American History and Culture, which was also under construction last summer. They call the National Museum of American History America’s attic.

JT: Why do they call it an attic?

SGR: Because it’s whatever junk people donated, the garbage of U.S. history, which has a way of telling its own story. Before she died, Phyllis Diller bequeathed her joke files and some of her costumes to the museum. The joke collection is roughly 50,000 3x5-inch index cards in a big metal filing cabinet with alphabetized subjects. Many of the jokes are cross-referenced and double-filed under a couple of subjects, so it’s not necessarily 50,000 individual jokes. It’s a physical database. When she was putting a set together, she would pull cards and put them in an order.

JT: What was it like working in that institutional setting?

SGR: I had a basement office in the museum. It was a really depressing, subterranean, windowless room, probably the size of this two-top dining table. But then I would go up to the fourth floor, which felt very much like a hospital with corridors upon corridors, a very confusing labyrinth of rooms, some that needed keys to get into, some that needed swipe access. There was a central office where you went to borrow the keys to open these spaces. You had to wear an ID around your neck at all times, and to get the ID you needed to get a full security background check, get fingerprinted, and all that stuff. So there I was, sitting in this windowless room, reading absurd jokes of the twentieth century all day long by myself.

JT: Were they just Phyllis Diller jokes that you were reading?

SGR: Yes, many of them were her jokes, and many of them were written for her by joke writers, and in some cases the card even said who wrote the joke and how much she paid for it.

JT: Who was Phyllis Diller?

SGR: Phyllis Diller was an American comedian, one of the first very successful female stand-up comedians. She performed on stage with jokes—not bits, not acts. She was representative of the mid-century conception of the white middle-class housewife, which is kind of crucial. This is what allowed her into that space.

JT: Into the male-dominated space of stand-up comedy?

SGR: Yes, and also into the televisial space. But at the same time, although she always said she wasn’t political, she did a few things that were pointed in taking on the persona of a happy/unhappy housewife, which was the dominant female narrative in popular culture at that time.

JT: And other comedians, like Lucille Ball, played that role as well.

SGR: Definitely, And while Lucille Ball would make herself look absurd, Phyllis Diller made herself look insane, hysterical, frightening—

JT: She looked electrocuted.
2000 to 2007, which coincided with my ages 21 to 28. So it was one-quarter of my life, and my entire adult life by the time I quit, which was pretty significant. One of the things I thought about on a daily basis while I was working on these images was mortality, which is less a matter of scale than an effect of joining artists late in their career, when they’re thinking about their legacy.

**SGR:** What do you mean by thinking about mortality?

**JT:** I felt that, from day one, the tasks that we were doing were geared towards a post-living future, for the catalogue raisonné, and its legacy. The way that interfaces with scale has to do with that. So basically everything was made out of garbage, a sort of monumentality, in a way that someone with a limited amount of money could create a grand image for seeing that in the later works. It was a small gesture, but it was a vote of faith.

**SGR:** One of the things that the Smithsonian Fellowship is that it’s about the way artists provide a script, or a form, or imagery, for work that could spin it into critique. One of the things that I think about is the Smithsonians’ relationship to art, in the way that they use research to make work that might not be expected or necessarily useful. However, while the Smithsonian is a place that has a relationship to the idea of collecting and organizing, it is conceived as a serial zine? Yeah, exactly, and I intend to put out many more issues in that series.

**JT:** I was reading were part of an earlier form of the bulk collection of data by our government. I had been thinking about the NSA revelations of the past couple of years, and of reading Glenn Greenwald’s book. No Place to Hide. Getting back to scale, this domestic or office-worker scale, which is not the scale of intelligence. So it’s farcical to collect 50,000 jokes. No one's ever going to read them, but they’re there if you want to read them, and it’s the same with the government’s bulk data. One of the things that I think about is the NSA revelations of the past couple of years, and of reading Glenn Greenwald’s book. No Place to Hide. It did. I mean, ironically, during the crash, I had a full-time job. The previous ethos of “Do whatever you must, beg, borrow and steal, make the biggest, baddest, most major project’ gave way, I mean, that was never really what I did, but I definitely would have gone into more debt on behalf of a project because I wanted to see a visual realism, and blah-blah-blah. During that summer of 2008, when I was working on the Kitchen show, I said to myself, look, I have this much money and I'm making the show for this much money. That spun into the way I approach almost everything, which is how much do I have? How much can I spend on it? What's realistic? So I did that whole series of waterlogged photos. **JT:** What does waterlogging mean?

**SGR:** I was interested to learn that you were thinking about mortality right around this time.

**JT:** Yeah, exactly, and I intend to put out many more issues in that series.

**SGR:** Yeah, I read it at the time.

**JT:** I made two-a-volume zine this year called "WOMEN AREN’T FUNNY." It's an unworkable and counterproductive scale, or architectural scale, or the non-human scale. I was interested in the idea of collecting and organizing, but still make with a kind of monumentality. I started making these images in 2008 is because I had no equipment to do what I wanted to do, and also importantly, 2007–2008 is the moment of the financial crash. I wonder if the work had an impact on your formal strategies as an artist in any way?

**SGR:** It did. It did, I mean, ironically, during the crash, I had a full-time job. My job at the studio was to do any kind of screen printing I could, which is when the crash was technically starting, but we didn't really know about it until later in 2008. That was when people were starting to realize what was happening. I started teaching full-time in the fall of 2007. That job was definitely at risk, but I didn't lose it. I remember feeling really anxious about money. I was in my studio, working on the "Cave Age," as in—keep women in the cave! Decades later, in 2007, Christopher Hitchens wrote an article for Vanity Fair called "Why Women Aren’t Funny" Over half-a-century had passed between 1955 and 2007, but it’s as if we’re still in the caves, even today. Are you familiar with this text?

**SGR:** The text takes the ink from a book of a low-resolution, digi-looking, pixelated photograph, with the image sitting on top of the paper, and binds the ink into the paper’s...
fingers so that, when I see it, there is a compression of the distance between surface and support. And because it’s a re-photography project, it’s ultimately high-resolution.

JT: It’s as if the surface of the paper is a stage for the illusion of photographic emulsion becoming unmoved from its support. What we see in this work is a collapsing of image and support, image and object, or at least that’s the way it reads, even if, in the end, given the process of production, this is not really the case.

SGR: Yes, it was very important to me that they were photographic, not pigment prints. So this merging of image and support actually exists at the surface level of emulsion.

JT: Your work seems to be ambivalent about photography as a medium. Whatever photography was, we’re now in a world in which two billion photos are uploaded every day to platforms owned by companies, as there’s the flood, the overwhelming. And there’s also the general dilemma that the artist has to negotiate in a contemporary photographic image in an exhibition. The question is how to physicalize what you see in your work is that there’s either an attack on the image—the punched images, the waterlogging—or there’s an amplification of the objecthood of the thing as a thing.

SGR: The reason that I primarily engage in ’60s era re-photography is because I’m extremely skeptical about the way that photography has been used as an oppressive and subjective tool; it’s an exceptionally irrational and subjective tool; it’s an exceptionally irrational and irrational tool. More photographs were taken in the past year than in the first 150 years of photographic history combined. It’s a shifting landscape, or a moving target, and so I am responding to the way that images are used in culture. I have extreme difficulty representing people, representing either a mass of people through individuals or representing individuals through photographs, even though it’s essentially my main interest, and a lot of the work that has affected me most deeply is presented in that mode.

JT: Such as?

SGR: Nan Goldin, Roy DeCarava, Lewis Hine, or Charcot’s commissioned photographs of women hysteric.

JT: So you’re trying to work within photography but without the props, you’re instrumentalized as a tool in the service of power?

SGR: It’s something I think about. I’d say it’s a parameter and a set of ethics that I use in the making of work.

JT: And what about the role of violence? Some of your pictures have been punched, waterlogging causes photos of bodies to bleed into chromatic abstraction, and with the prop sculptures, you have Grunco glasses, a banana peel, a cream pie, and a chicken—but also knifes, guns, and handcuffs.

SGR: Yes, it’s a spectrum. There’s benign violence that turns into real violence, which then turns back again. We see this idea happening in the world, where everyday violence turns into a mass killing or a war. It’s a question of scale, the scale of a person versus a global scale. I’m also raising the issue of the subjective experience of being a female-bodied person in this culture.

JT: Your work is also concerned with bodily damage. We’ve talked about the waterlogging, in which bodies bleed into formlessness, but there’s also the bandage-wrapped lounge chair and the various hand-aided devices that relate to bodily harm as an aide. I wonder what draws you to hand-aid as subject matter?

SGR: I think again it’s the absurdity—it’s supposed to be skin, but it’s not. Like the heteronomy of many of my tides, linguistics are deployed. We know what a hand-aid is supposed to do for a “boo-boo,” but it’s also something that metaphorically can’t contain the wound that it’s trying to protect or heal. When we say something’s a “hand-aid,” we mean it’s just a surface treatment of a systemic problem.

JT: So on the one hand there’s a cycle between benign and actual violence, which we see in the props, and then there’s the way in which the work internalizes this violence or finds itself subjected to it by being physically wounded or attacked or bandaged, thereby signaling some form of bodily damage. And what about the collars and ties and pants and dresses that later appear in your work? What brought you from comedy and violence to investigating clothing and fashion?

SGR: For me it was a logical step. I started with the comedians, mostly female comedians, in the Tiers series. And then I started thinking about pictogram symbols or what you were describing as image-objects. I wondered, while I can think of so many things that are gendered female, what sort of things are distinctly gendered male? This is what led to these new Flexiglas works. My challenge again was how to represent the figure without taking away the props as a piece of a person. That’s when I began making pants and ties, and then I did shirts that were more “unisex.”

JT: When did this shift occur?

SGR: In 2011, when I started teaching at Hampshire College. It was the first place I ever worked that had “all gender” restrooms. But they didn’t have enough money to remodel every restroom, so the door said “all gender restroom without urinals” and “all gender restroom with urinals.” I thought, that’s gendered. So I was contending with the limits of being progressive in the context of real-world issues like budgets and timelines. Making all-gender restrooms does not dismantle the patriarchy, nor the perception of gender difference or our societal relation to gender. Of course it’s a step in the right direction, but I just started laughing at how absurd it was. So I made a couple of urinal pictures and then I thought, OK, this is going to be annoying because it’s going to read as a Duchamp thing, and it does. But like hanging the noose at dick height, I like the idea of having an artwork on the wall that’s invited to be pissed on. No one thinks the urinal is neutral. It’s a male thing. So then I started thinking about the clothes that were made, and that eventually led to the dresses, because dresses are the pictogram for female.

JT: Are you also addressing the field of high fashion?

SGR: Yes, I spent a lot of time in my last show at Rachel Uffner, Dresses and Boxes [2016], dealing specifically with one designer, Françoise Moschino, a classic postmodern designer who is part of a lineage that goes from Elsa Schiaparelli through Rudi Gernreich to Commes des Garçons.

JT: I’m not familiar with Rudi Gernreich.

SGR: He was an LA-based designer who was making gender-neutral clothes in the 1960s and 70s. He famously made a toplees bikini, which of course wears differently on men and women, such as those distinctions still very much exist. But he also offers a utopian vision of a post-gender world. I have totally mixed feelings about Moschino, but I liked his relationship to humor and putting pictograms on his own work, whether it was the shadow of hands or actual words. I went down a research rabbit hole on the legacy of fashions that were simultaneously trying to be critical and subversive but were also high fashion. How can you embed critique in products?

JT: In terms of materials, you often use acetate, Flexiglas, paint, and inkjet prints. Do you see the work existing as sculpture, or photography, or is medium not important?

SGR: Medium’s not important to me, but I see them as handmade photographs.

JT: Is the relation between transparency and opacity important for you? Maybe this connects to your interest in cutting, or concealing, which takes us back to the logic of fashion—

SGR: And magic, and comedy.

JT: How comedy?

SGR: Because it’s this effortless presentation of your persona, but it’s really exceptionally crafted and pointed. It’s real, but it’s not real. It’s a representation of self, but it’s not. It’s a projection. Sort of like an interview.

December 10, 2016

Jonathan Thomas is editor in chief of The Third Rail.

"[S]ignificant moreovers that all facts and percentages have an enormous importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."—Earl Marx, 1866

Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

‘Anarchism’ is the watchword of the Commonwealth, and I am its apostle.”

—Karl Marx, 1846

(1818–1883)
Exhibition Checklist

All works are courtesy the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery unless otherwise indicated.

Gloves Off Reader, 2017
Mixed materials
Dimensions variable
Identify, 2017
Video
18 minutes with sound
Testing I–X, 2009–2017
Microphone stands and mixed materials
Dimensions variable
Dress, 2016
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 50 x 18 x ½ inches
Collection of Jeffrey and Audrey Spiegel
Grid, 2016
Acrylic polymer, inkjet prints, and paper on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 70 ½ x 24 x ½ inches

Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware six components, irregular, approximately 40 x 22 ½ x ½ inches
On Aggression, On Aggression, 2016
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware two objects, each irregular, overall 24 x 41 ½ x ½ inches
Y2K Moschino Dress, 2016
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 76 ½ x 40 x ½ inches

Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 91 x 40 x ½ inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 83 ¼ x 40 x ½ inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 60 x 57 ¼ x ½ inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 83 ¼ x 60 ½ x 2 ¼ inches
Untitled, 2014
Acrylic polymer and inkjet prints on acetate on Plexiglas, and hardware irregular, 72 x 40 ½ x ½ inches
Collection of Myoung Lee and Neil Simpkins
Untitled (for soapbox), 2014
Direct substrate-printed acetate, and hardware
24 x 24 inches
Untitled (for stage), 2014
Direct substrate-printed acetate, and hardware
52 x 83 inches
Collection of Peter and Jamie Hort
Window Piece, 2011
Direct substrate print on Plexiglas and hardware
74 x 35 x ½ inches
Props, 2010–2012
Direct substrate prints on Plexiglas and hardware
Dimensions variable
Phyllis, 2009
C-print mounted to Plexiglas
24 x 20 x ½ inches
Collection of Susan and Randolph Randolph
Phyllis II, 2009
C-print mounted to Plexiglas
24 x 20 x ½ inches
Collection of Gregory R. Miller and Michael Weiner
Phyllis Diller, 2009
C-print mounted to Plexiglas
20 x 24 x ½ inches
Hambid’s Clock, 2006
C-print
16 x 16 inches
It Starts with a Poke, 2006
C-print
16 x 20 inches
Lucy Not Funny, 2006
C-print
24 x 16 inches
Sparring Partner, 2006
C-print
20 x 16 inches
Born in 1978, Evanston, IL
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

Education
2005 M.F.A., Sculpture and New Genres, Columbia University
School of the Arts, New York, NY
2000 B.F.A., Photography with Honors and Art History
Concentration, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI

Solo Exhibitions
2016 Dead Jokes, Document, Chicago, IL
New Works: Dresses and Books, Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York, NY
2014 Riga Repair, kim? Contemporary Art Center, Riga, Latvia
Suburban Studio, The Suburban, Oak Park, IL
2011 In Residence, Eli Marsh Gallery, Amherst, MA
2009 Tears, Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York, NY
Bananas, The Kitchen, New York, NY, curated by Matthew Lyons
2008 De/Feat and Drawings, Sandroni Rey Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Sara Greenberger Rafferty, MoMA PS1, New York, NY

Group Exhibitions and Performances
2016 You Talkin’ to Me?, Galerie Barbara Seiler, Zurich, Switzerland
Her Whenerer, Halsey McKay Gallery, East Hampton, NY
Certain Signs, James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
Lasting Concept, PICA, Portland, OR, curated by Rob Halverson
Untitled Body Parts, Simone Subal Gallery, New York, NY
2015 Prufull Thamp, Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA
Beyond the Surface: Image as Object, Philadelphia Photo Arts Center, Philadelphia, PA, curated by Dan Leers
Laugh In, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA, curated by Jill Dawsey

2014 SHAPESHIFTING: Contemporary Masculinities, College of
Woonsocket Art Museum, Woonsocket, RI
Trophy Plus Time, Hammer Biennial, Public Fiction, Los Angeles, CA
The Last Bravos, New York, NY, curated by the Bruce High Quality Foundation
2013 Paper Cuts, New York Art Book Fair/MoMA PS1, New York, NY
Work, Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York, NY
2012 Perfectly Damaged, Deck Ellis Gallery, New York, NY
The Anxiety of Photography, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, curated by Matthew Thompson
Shame the Devil, The Kitchen, New York, NY, curated by Petraubka Bazin
2010 Hausn: Art and Magic, The Jewish Museum, New York, NY
Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA, Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, CA, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, WI
Love & Theft, White Flag Projects, St. Louis, MO
2009 Put On, Circus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Off the Wall, Van de Weghe Fine Art, New York, NY
2008 Toapto, Mofotech Center, Brooklyn, NY, New York, NY, organized by Public Art Fund
Untitled (Voracious): Photographing the Constructed Object, Gagosian Gallery, New York, NY
The Human Face is a Monument, Guild & Greyshkul, New York, NY, curated by Sara VanDerBeek
3 Rooms—Sara Greenberger Rafferty, Shana Luther, David Kennedy-Cutler, D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, NY
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Sara Greenberger Rafferty
Gloves Off

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