



PERFORMANCE, WHEN I AM THROUGH WITH YOU THERE WON'T BE ANYTHING LEFT (2022)  
PHOTO COURTESY: TEXAS STATE GALLERIES, MADELYNN MESA



# Using Humor as an Access Point: *A Conversation with Performance Artist Bridget Moser*

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BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

Understanding a performance through still images can be challenging, and articulating the experience in words that genuinely convey the sense of the work is still more difficult." with the following: "Understanding a performance through still images can be challenging, and articulating the experience in words that genuinely convey a sense of the work is even more difficult.

I was introduced to Canadian artist Bridget Moser's work while attending an event at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska. I had no idea what to expect but was instantly captivated by her performance set: a baby blue and pastel pink backdrop with seemingly unrelated and peculiarly futuristic objects (think aesthetically of the 2013 Joaquin Phoenix movie "Her.") The ensemble included an anthropomorphized chair, a cylinder wearing a wig, rubber feet and a little pink Croc with limbs. Moments later, Moser brought not just the objects and set to life, but animated everyone in the room. We vibrated with energy and laughter. During the performance, Moser guided us through bizarre sound bites and dialogues paired with sudden and hilarious movements that were strong and confident, with undercurrents of self-deprecation. She used the performance to explore the body, our expectations of it and our weird relationship with our self-image.

After the show, the audience repeatedly noted, "the performance was hilarious," "the artist is so funny." And I immediately thought, "Yes, but the performance did so much more than make me laugh." But what is this "more?" Humor is just one element Moser brings to her art, but it is a vital one. It is just as important as the satire, the critique, and the harsh reality within her performances. Moser wields humor like a sword, using it as a savvy tool that allows her audience to access her complex work. Join me as I engage the artist in a conversation where we delve into her use of humor, the evolution of her performances and her approach to body anxiety.

By Chirstina Nafziger

Middle:

Video still, *My Crops Are Dying But My Body Persists* (2020)

Photo Courtesy of the artist, Video Paul Tjepkema

## What initially drew you to performance art? What inspired this shift in your work, and what were you creating before?

I used to talk about it like, “What a surprise that this is my medium!” And I think my parents were thinking, did you erase the years 1989-2004 from your memory, during which you were a competitive child dancer? And I think I had tried to forget, because right after that I went to art school and was convinced that real artists were painters and therefore I was a painter. And that lasted maybe six months, followed by several years of trying out pretty much every conceivable medium, and eventually making a lot of mediocre but formative videos.

Then in 2012, I did a residency focused on experimental comedy led by Michael Portnoy that I did not realize would be performance-based. He’s an excellent teacher and he basically encouraged me to do whatever it was that was interesting to me. We did a lot of exercises about working intuitively, which helped unlock something, and that was probably the first time my work started properly “working,” if that makes sense. I realized that performance would let me incorporate all kinds of things I like writing, sound, movement, and jokes with inanimate objects.

## Performance is such a different beast than more static forms of art making like painting or drawing. What is your process like creating a performance? Do you storyboard your ideas, or is improv involved?

sort of network of meaning. I would say I keep generating different collections of fragments, including text, sound, objects, and movement. Usually for a longer performance



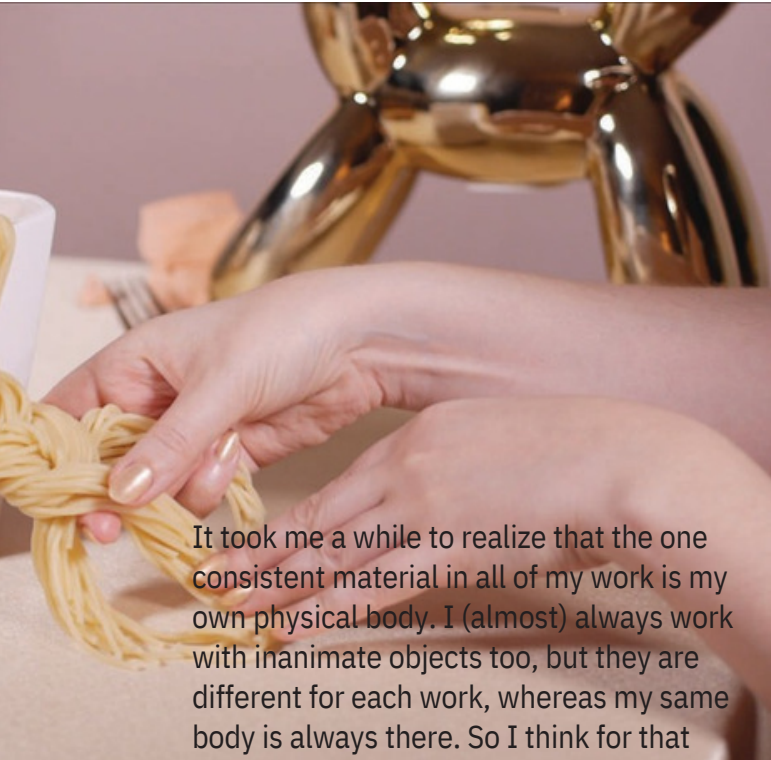
I create some kind of overall structure of “chapters” that makes sense to me, but doesn’t need to be legible to anyone else. I list out all of the fragments on paper, on cue cards, or in a mind mapping app and start to work them into a composition that feels right, removing the pieces that don’t quite fit, and building out more sections that work better.

The final performance is tightly scripted and since there can be (for example) 50 different fragments that change abruptly and unexpectedly, I make an audio file that has every sound cue embedded in it and learn the timing pretty carefully. There’s not a lot of room for messing around and this is really a terrible format for comedy. But I guess that’s why it’s not comedy.

Most of the time I would probably prefer to pass away than improvise in front of an audience.

## How would you describe the role of humor in your work? How do you





It took me a while to realize that the one consistent material in all of my work is my own physical body. I (almost) always work with inanimate objects too, but they are different for each work, whereas my same body is always there. So I think for that

reason it's always been a central topic, and

**use humor to express the themes** there's a lot about the specific materiality of **within your work?** my body to riff on.

I think it's one nice little ingredient in a When it comes to body horror, I like bigger recipe. For me there is great pleasure to imagine myself really "going there" in finding an idea that makes me laugh. with something and then I watch the Making new work can be frustrating and documentation and it seems so gentle in kind of depressing when things aren't coming comparison. I find it very annoying. But I together, so then finding these moments of don't seem to be capable yet of getting more pleasure becomes very essential for me. visually disgusting while also maintaining Making art and performing is something that a reasonable conceptual purpose. Maybe makes me feel alive and vital, in a way, and that's also just the way it's got to be.

humor is a big part of that—but so too are emotions and moving my body. I guess this For the last few years, I have been thinking is about my work and also not about my about what it could be to have a form of work. body horror dealing with interiority, where all of the terror is actually cursed to be

I like it because it's a very effective tool to contained inside the body, because there are invite people to think about material that is so many different ways that can take shape. not so palatable. Offering something to laugh I do consider many of the personas I inhabit at maybe takes the edge off of content that to be philosophically disgusting.

is more about discomfort (I like discomfort, too) and hopefully gives an audience a **I have to ask about your previous** reason to keep following me to these places **job working for a plastic surgeon!**

that are more invested in criticality. And I do **How did this impact your practice?**

think sometimes people have preconceived ideas about performance art, expecting it to be very boring or inaccessible, so maybe that's some low-hanging fruit. But, as we all know, fruit tastes good from any height.

**Our bodies and our relationship to them appear to be a core subject and direction in your work. Can you talk about the ways in which you address body horror/body politics in your performances?**

Learn more  
[www.bridgetmoser.com](http://www.bridgetmoser.com)



VIDEO STILL, MY CROPS ARE DYING BUT MY BODY PERSISTS (2020)  
 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, VIDEO PAUL TJEPKEMA

It's still my job! I've been working there for 10 years, and I work from home or on the road when I need to travel for exhibitions. I started there about a year after I started making work in this way, and I think there was more overlap between these two worlds of my life at the beginning. I started out as a surgeon's ghostwriter and needed to write a lot about what it's like to have anxieties about one's body, and I think a lot of my earlier work was similarly focused on my own personal body anxieties. Thankfully that continued to evolve over time to some more conceptually interesting places.

**Name three things that inspire the humor aspect of your performances.**

Stupidity, pleasure, and the lucky fact of being alive.

**As a performance/video artist, what is one thing you wish you knew starting out?**

This might be more specific to the kind of work that I do that relies on timing and script memorization. But I'd say: worrying about what might go wrong in a live setting is not the same thing as being prepared, so it becomes a waste

of energy. And things will go wrong. I can't control everything. And it's always fine when things do go wrong.

Because of that, I do still get nervous before a performance but I used to get catastrophically anxious. One time many many years ago, with great shame, I had to ask a curator's partner to run out to buy Imodium for me before a 4-hour long performance due to a serious and very real risk that I would nervously shit myself once it started. The performance wasn't great, but that was the result of the material (thankfully Imodium is a highly effective medication).

**If someone was about to watch you perform, what would you say to them to prepare them?**

I feel like in real life I always end up saying, "It's definitely something!" or, "We're gonna have a good time!" But that's not always true for everyone—some people have definitely had a bad time. I will say though, overall, it's often more fun when an audience isn't prepared and doesn't know what to expect because they aren't sure if it's okay to laugh at first and then that eventually breaks down.

PERFORMANCE, WHAT WILL STAY YOU ALIVE (2019)  
CREDIT: VOX, MOMENTA BIENNALE DE L'IMAGE; PHOTOGRAPHER: JEAN-MICHAEL SEMINARO



PERFORMANCE, SCREAM IF YOU WANT TO GO FASTER (2019)  
PHOTO COURTESY OF REMAI MODERN

