Brooks as Media Critic

Your General Humor Buildup: Constructing Albert Brooks

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RECEIVER WISDOM

In the context of the New Comedy of the 1960s and 70s, the received wisdom about Albert Brooks is that his principal aims were aesthetic, not political. As Richard Zoglin explains, "His comedy might have looked like a retreat from the social consciousness" of Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, or Robert Klein. "But Brooks was an artistic radical just the same." His stand-up was "Pirandellian . . . doubling back on itself, satirizing the very notion of being an entertainer—comedy *about* comedy." Zoglin's account of this era goes on to nuance that apparent break from politics, but his general sense remains that the Bruceans "were modernists, breaking down the traditional joke-joke mono-logue and inventing a new, more free-form kind of stand-up" while Brooks "was a postmodernist, resurrecting the old style and encasing it in irony and self-parody."[1] Or, as Brooks explained in a *Tonight Show* appearance on June 6, 1973, "It has been my passion forever, and ever, to pursue the field of comedy itself: to take it apart a bit, to bring it more to you people."[2]

The outlines of Brooks's early career—the pre-cinematic era—are well known. Unlike other stand-ups, he began by performing on television, not by touring or as part of an improv troupe. Only after his performance on the *Steve Allen Show* did he begin playing out, and that came to a halt in 1974 as a result of what Zoglin calls "a famous breakdown onstage in Boston."[3] By then he had already made his first short film—*Albert Brooks' Famous School for Comedi-ans* (1971)—and would shortly make several more for the inaugural season of *Saturday Night Live*.[4]

Nearly every account of Brooks's stand-up career begins by emphasizing its ending. This makes the stand-up seem contingent and unwanted—even

Brooks seems to agree with this account, explaining that he really wanted to be an actor[5]—rather than the complementary offshoot of a unique mode of comedy that came to being on television. "Television," here, includes both the live or live-to-tape recording of performances before an audience for (later) broadcast *and* the threaded replay of pre-recorded shorts or telefilms like *Famous School*. In addition to those parameters of liveness-delay-recording, Brooks's television is marked by the rhythms of commercial breaks and possible interruptions, and so he anticipates both—by becoming the pitchman who would interrupt his own work and, when that isn't possible, by "obsessing" about the possibility of interruption, even going so far as to call NASA "to help him determine" whether the moon landing would pre-empt his debut on *Dean Martin Presents the Golddiggers* in the summer of 1969.[6]

At the core of Brooks's TV variety-show appearances—he did more than fifty in this era—is the send-up of the traditional bit.[7] Paul Slansky rattled off a few of these in a long *Playboy* profile: "the impressionist whose every imitation sounded like Ed Sullivan; the shadow artist with the broken hand who was reduced to portraying 'a bunny hiding behind a rock'; the mime who described everything he was doing in a French accent ('Now I am walking up ze stairs, now I am petting ze dog')."[8] Brooks did the mime bit on the *Steve Allen Show* in 1969. He was a terrible ventriloquist on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1971 and *The Flip Wilson Show* in 1972. He was by turns "an animal trainer . . . whose elephant has gotten sick at the last minute and ha[d] to be replaced by a frog," and a comedy version of a plate-spinner who had to keep half a dozen people laughing.[9] At the first *American Music Awards* in 1974 he was Carl Heller, a children's songwriter doing a lounge-y retrospective of his work. That oeuvre included both "Brush Your Teeth" and "Eat Your Beans, Please." They were the same song.[10]

The high-concept or one-man-sketch approach was so determining that it resulted in a modular style of comedy once Brooks actually went on tour. "At first he was so green that he would simply string a few of his TV bits together with perfunctory segues."[11] Yet rather than see the early career as the professional overcoming of those limits—to no one's great surprise, he did—we might see that half decade as the activation of an extended range of mediated performance and studio practices. That is, if Brooks's comedy came to being on television, it could not exist entirely there. The stand-up gigs would be performances that were defined *negatively*. They were "not television": live, yes, but not to tape, and not for broadcast. This may in fact be the standard stand-up situation, yet Brooks can barely imagine it. In "Memoirs of an Opening Act, Part I," a piece of stand-up recorded live for the album *Comedy Minus One* (1973) and thus already within the orbit of comedy-toward-recording, he imagines a fantasy broadcast of the event, a second scene, an elsewhere.[12] "By the way, you know this room is full, and I might—there's a camera up there,

right now there's a Jewish audience in the Wilshire Ebell Theatre watching this. They do that on High Holidays. When the temple fills up they move into theaters." More biographical frameworks have excavated the specific Los Angeles Jewishness of the scene; I will keep the focus on the media configuration Brooks invokes.[13]

For Brooks's version of the New Comedy, the meta-turn is a medial turn. Instead of simply chronicling his early career—Zoglin has done an excellent job of that and there is no large, untapped archive of material that might supplement his account—I will consider a different set of relations for his work: presentation and context, scale and audience, markets and media.[14] In what follows, I turn to a limited selection of Brooks's work from the early 1970s in order to do two things with each. First, I place it in its media-cultural contexts. This is ordinary enough, but in the case of Brooks's comedy, those contexts have been ignored or all but erased by the modular integrity of the bit and a general critical emphasis on his meta stance.[15] As a consequence the *occasions* for his meta-comedy have been underthought, and once those occasions are restored, the precise stakes of his apparent turn away from immediate political engagement become clearer. Second, and far more speculatively, I link each of these pieces to cognate work taking place in then-contemporary US art, particularly to efforts to come to terms with mass media and media discourse over the long history of conceptual art. While these two approaches are in some ways complementary—they are both contextualizations, one toward the vernacular, one toward the artworld—they are intentionally asymmetrical in the roles they play in my overall reading. Explicating some of the referential ground of his bits restores a wider range of aims to Brooks's interventions; forging analogies to the artworld de-specifies his "postmodernism," his "deconstruction," his "meta" spin on the medium of comedy and the media as institutions. If Brooks's meta-comedy is a version of (institutionally acceptable) institutional critique, it should also be understood as an unheard voice in the debates around the idea that art is fundamentally propositional.[16]

This asymmetry captures at the level of methodology the peculiar historical configuration of the era coincident with and immediately surrounding Brooks's early career. There was so much art, particularly conceptual art, that was funny, deadpan, or po-faced. Alongside it, and evolving out if it, there was so much activist work, but activist work that had its roots or targets within its own socially proximate art institutions. Benjamin Buchloh's legendary essay "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions" captures the passage between those poles, but naturally enough without wondering about the comedic proximity of the work in question.[17] At the same time, the aim of cultural contextualization cannot simply be to match an object—or a creator—to a context and call it a day. By setting up two distinct poles of attraction, I place Brooks's work in a field of aspiration, underwritten

and held in tension by broad cultural forces and small-c conceptual analogues. In that contextual field, the work has *options*, degrees of freedom and surprise that are, nevertheless, positionally visible from long-standing cultural or conceptual vantage points. This may seem like an overbuilt framework, but it has two important and immediate consequences. First, it provides sufficient interpretive ballast that the early Brooks material is not reduced to stuff he made along the way to the major works. Second, it hard-wires the scalar discrepancy between tight references or individual jokes and wider aesthetic stakes. If the framework does its job, it makes the large claims I will make about Brooks's significance not implausible, leaving the process of conviction to the readings themselves.

Those stakes are complicated by the supervening and evolving nature of US television. As the overwhelming focus of cultural diagnosis, television and its coverage of the political—the war in Vietnam, Watergate, the rising of suppressed populations, the articulation of state media support within a stalling market economy, and so much more—would seem to constrain the significance of any *merely* media-critical stance. Instead, I take Brooks's televisual era to be comedy's introjection of the TV and video art that are the subject of art historian David Joselit's *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*. Joselit understands TV as "the commercial doppelgänger of art's experimental advance toward information since the mid 1950s."[18] He contends that such doubling amounts to a complementary operation, ultimately with political consequences: "Art stands against television as figure stands against ground, and television, in its privatization of public speech and its strict control over access to broadcasting, stands against democracy." In Brooks's case, though, he "stands against television" as the figure against the ground upon which he stands (up).

That may seem too precious, but I mean it in particular ways. Within Joselit's recounting of "certain events in the video ecology of mid-century America that disrupted or reconfigured television's closed circuit," Michael Shamberg's career offers especially suggestive and coincident parallels with Brooks's.[19] Shamberg's path through the "video ecology" of the 1970s began with radical theoretical and activist work in *Guerrilla Television* (1971). He then played a key role at the video collective Raindance/*Radical Software* (1970–4) and the satirical *Top Value TV* (*TVTV*, 1972–7) before becoming a top-tier Hollywood producer with *The Big Chill* (1983).[20]

Brooks's career aligns almost too neatly. He debuted on *Steve Allen* in 1969; that year he was a member of the writers room for the TV series *Turn-On* (Friendly and Schlatter, ABC 1969).[21] And if his subsequent stand-up did not obviously "expose society's injustices or stick a thumb in the eye of the censors," *Turn-On* did.[22] The show's *Laugh-In* sensibility was grounded in the conceit that a computer was choosing segments for playback, almost at random, certainly not in the usual televisual order. Sketch fragments would play out in a white cube, Moog synth tones would bleep and bloop, live action

would be punctuated with pop-up animation: A cartoon biplane would pass along the top of the screen trailing signs such as "Israel Uber Alles" and "Free Oscar Wilde." (We do not know who wrote what on the show.) *Turn-On* was so sexually frank that it was essentially canceled in the middle of its premiere on February 5, 1969. Some stations did not return to the broadcast after the first commercial break; others in Western time zones refused to show it; the second episode never aired.

To continue the parallel, Brooks's *TVTV* analogue was, of course, his work for *Saturday Night Live* in 1975. Like Shamberg he would then shift to Hollywood filmmaking. *Real Life* (1979) was his directorial debut, but *Broadcast News* (James L. Brooks, 1987) would be Brooks's most direct *Big Chill* complement; both co-starred William Hurt and both were "sophisticated and nuanced stor[ies] about the vulnerability of idealism."[23] As part of that depiction, *The Big Chill* "prominently features therapeutic uses of video," turning Shamberg's suggestion that the middle classes should "videotape and play back their own alienation" into "a feature of Hollywood entertainment." In contrast, Brooks's *Broadcast News* comes at the end of a decade of therapeutically inflected, media-political writing, directing, and acting: *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976; Brooks plays a political spin doctor), *Real Life* (comedian-documentarian), *Modern Romance* (1981; film editor), and *Lost in America* (1985; advertising executive). In *Guerrilla Television* Shamberg declared that "True cybernetic guerrilla warfare means re-structuring communications channels, not capturing existing ones," and his subsequent efforts attempted to put that claim into action, before settling on the "therapeutic" model of *The Big Chill*. Brooks's early work in contrast would test that claim: could one *capture* existing channels? Or would such "fantasies of revolution and subversion" be rendered "either cynically opportunistic or childishly naïve"?[24] What happens to art's "commercial doppelgänger" when it prominently features its own autocritique? Can you stand against the ground of television even as you enact television's most exemplary figures, most typical studio practices? Is such a tautological instantiation of televisuality critical at all?

To answer those questions, I highlight Brooks's relations to debates about teachability, audience membership, intermedial competition, and marketing—central topics in any history of US television. But rather than simply align Brooks with the video art versions of those debates—an alignment that would necessarily highlight Brooks's complicity with the mainstream media institutions throughout and likely lead to a judgment of the limitations of his critical stance—I highlight the ways in which his work brought central aspects of conceptual art to the fore. This, in turn, has the effect of broadening the ambit of the work. I proceed chronologically through four examples and relate each to a cognate artwork: the "Famous School for Comedians" to Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1965); "Memoirs of an Opening Act, Part I" (1973) to David

Antin's "Talking at Pomona" (1972); a joke diagram from that same year to Ad Reinhardt's own *Joke* (1956); and the album *A Star is Bought* (1975) to Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* (1973). This course will emphasize the diverse range of media channeled in Brooks's early work, from off-screen stand-up, to comedy albums, mock advertisements in print, audio, and audio-visual form; audio and audio-visual technical demonstrations; faux-documentaries and faux-news reports.

I. TEACHING

Albert Brooks' Famous School for Comedians appeared in *Esquire* in February, 1971.[25] An eight-minute film version aired on PBS's *The Great American Dream Machine* in October.[26] The original six-page feature was structured as a special advertising insert, putatively addressed to anyone who has had "a friend turn to you and say, 'You know something, [your name here], that was pretty funny. You should think about being a comedian.'" It combined attractive depictions of life at the school—students milling about the "Jack Klugman Comedy Research Center," sitting in classrooms practicing spit-takes, or choosing a favorite charity to support "in case they make it big"—with the five-minute "Comedy Talent Test" itself—multiple choice punchlines, fill-in-the-blank insults, a game where you are supposed to match individual facial features to the comedians they belong to. As editor Lee Eisenberg explained, Brooks "took complete control of the photography, he was exceptionally meticulous and hard to please with written copy. But we hope we gave him what he wanted."[27]

Brooks modeled the ad on those placed in magazines and sent via direct mail for artistic correspondence schools, and the most basic part of the gag was the assumption that there was a real Famous School for Comedians campus, "located on twenty-two gorgeous acres near Arlington National Park." There you could work on discrete comedy skills—practicing spit takes, choosing a disease-based charity in case you make it big. Part of what made the bit work for Brooks was the underlying pathos, the inevitable appeal of something like an official certification of your talent, identified via an art test, and the correlative instructional scene: if you can draw a pirate, why couldn't you learn to do it better? If you can tell a joke, why not work on making it funnier?

In the case of the school for comedians, though, what might seem implausible or useless—working with a drummer to help your timing—had a more caustic edge. Brooks's hucksterism was not simply a joke, it was a joke with a direct reference: The Famous Writers School (est. 1961). Like its elder sibling, the Famous Artists School (est. 1948), FWS advertised heavily and at its peak was supported by a staff of 800 commissioned salespeople. Just as the FAS sales pitch relied on the prestige of its "Guiding Faculty" including Norman

Rockwell, the FWS touted its ties to publishing legend Bennett Cerf, *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling, Iowa Writers Workshop head Paul Engle, and prolific romance writer and television host Faith Baldwin.

But what made the Famous School for Comedians topical was not simply the prominence of the Famous Writers School, but the latter's collapse. Its downfall was brought on by Jessica Mitford's devastating profile in the July 1970 issue of the *Atlantic*.[28] Her reportage detailed the exploitation of the students who enrolled while her interviews exposed the utter detachment of the "Guiding Faculty" from the actual work of the place. As Cerf explained to her—on the record!—"I know nothing about the business and selling end and I care less. I've nothing to do with how the school is run; I can't put that too strongly to you." As for the real desire of students for writing instruction that Brooks drew on, Cerf was dismissive: "Oh, come on, you must be pulling my leg—no person of any sophistication, whose book we'd publish, would have to take a mail-order course to learn how to write." Later coverage highlighted the enormous burdens placed upon the "Teaching Faculty," who had to grind through the enormous volume of submissions.[29] The school lurched through efforts at reform, promising to cease certain deceptive advertising practices. Still, the mea culpas and the new approach did not succeed. Famous Artists declared bankruptcy in February 1972.[30]

The details of that collapse—the prestige scam at the top and the crushing workload at the bottom—help explain two of Brooks's visual gags. In one photo, the nine "Advisory Faculty" are shown sitting around a sauna in towels. They are recognizable TV comics: Orson Bean, Totie Fields, and the Dean, Eddie Albert. The obvious mismatches between their heads and bodies highlight their lack of connection to the school. Below that picture is a smaller one of "well known comedy writer and part-time professor Mordecai Hunter" in his office being buried under piles of assignments, "grading a student's test paper." The ad leaves its media criticism largely tacit. One would have to be a true contemporary, for example, to know that when Brooks dangles the possibility of being on the Ed Sullivan Show ("*Sunday night* at 8p.m. on CBS") he is demonstrating how far behind the times he is: the network had canceled the show and the slot was now occupied with the CBS Sunday Movie. Befitting his place in *Esquire*, Brooks presumes a sophisticated audience. Without the web of references, the joke is reduced to the more general one of the teachability of comedy and the callowness of the hard sell.

Part of the reason that immediate context has been lost despite the continuing success of the Famous School is that the specific cues were left out of the telefilm. That version was so successful that it was put forward for Emmy consideration, anthologized as part of *Great American Dream Machine*'s "best of" showings and its 1974 series retrospective, and picked up for theatrical distribution.[31] Where the *Esquire* ad quietly conveyed that students would not

receive the ballyhooed personal attention they were promised by contrasting the Advisory Faculty having a schvitz with the overburdened Mordecai Hunter, the *GADM* film showed neither, concentrating on the classroom situations. Instead, it relied on the more structural opposition between its status as a long-form advertisement and its appearance on the non-advertising-supported Public Broadcasting System. The canniness of seeing through the ad's deceptions was displaced to the contextual unexpectedness of its appearance. Brooks's ad for the Famous School was as out of place as *Sesame Street*'s announcements that the episode had been brought to you by the letter W and the number 8.

Dan Graham's *Homes for America* first appeared in *Arts* magazine in the December 1966/January 1967 issue, which helped shape its reception as a sophisticated intervention in questions about the relationship between the artwork and its reproduction.[32] But he initially wanted it to appear, like the *Famous School*, in *Esquire*. As he explained, "My real interest was actually *Esquire* magazine, because *Esquire* magazine, which had the best writers, also had color features of the sterility of the suburbs, with kind of boring, formalistic photographers who would go and show the sterility of the suburbs."[33] At its aesthetic heart was the homology between the gridded layout of the piece and the gridded layout of the suburbs; at its sociological heart was the homology between the apparently automatic operation of the market and the affected affectlessness of the prose, that "aesthetic of administration" that Buchloh highlighted. "The owner is completely tangential to the completion of the project"; "Contingencies such as mass production technology and land use economics make the final decisions, denying the architect his former 'unique' role."[34]

In addition to this bureaucratic tone, the piece devoted much of its space to the limited array of model homes, their possible colors, and the combinatorics of mass production. At a certain point, such pseudo-documentation crosses the line between useful illustration and eye-glazing encyclopedism: "Each block of houses is a self-contained sequence—there is no development—selected from the possible acceptable arrangements." Here Graham lists forty-eight different permutations of four different models in groups of eight in two columns of twenty-four. On the left, each model is adjacent to a duplicate (AABBCCDD to DDCCBBAA) on the right there are no adjacent pairs (ABCDABCD to DCBADCBA). "As the color series usually varies independently of the model series, a block of eight houses using four models and four colors might have forty-eight times forty-eight, or 2,304 possible arrangements."[35] At that moment, the piece exemplifies the combination of "bureaucratic rigor and deadpan devotion" to process and permutation that Buchloh considers typical of conceptual art in the period. In *Arts* magazine, there was no doubt that the bureaucratese was part of the artistic project; in *Esquire* it would have been harder to tell, and the joke might have played better, and longer.

And had it played longer, it might have been more obvious that conceptual practices stand in a complex relationship to their own limits. Buchloh emphasizes conceptual artists' "acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations." They possess, for him, a "critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions."[36] But where those limitations seem most galling and systemic, we find the emergence of humor out of that combination of "bureaucratic rigor and deadpan devotion." I want to insist on that twin development, in no small part because Buchloh's claims about the "obvious" limitation of the social aims of this art are rejected by the artists themselves: "Everybody thinks it's sociological. Buchloh thinks it's sociological critique of minimal art," Graham says. "It's not an analysis . . . It's not a study . . . It's a joke."[37]

Homes for America is legible as both sociological critique and joke, and the former has largely swamped the latter. But if we restore the dual reception of the piece, it becomes clearer that conceptual humor is a collateral product of the constraints on its social reckoning. Inverting each of those terms can illuminate Brooks's position: his social reckoning is the product of the liberated reflexivity of his humor. If he can joke about anything as long as it becomes a joke about comedy as such, then it is unsurprising that the specifics of his target—the Famous Writers School; the notion of comedy "instruction"—are lost to the formal innovation, just as Graham's humor was lost to its sociocritical reception. This is the risk that his accommodation to the antecedent form of the *Esquire* piece entailed; it's the risk that Graham wanted to run.

II. AUDIENCING

Early in *Comedy Minus One*, in "Memoirs of an Opening Act, Part I" Brooks notes that "concert halls have gotten too big anyway." He spends some time discussing how *this* arena isn't too big, and that even 4,000 people in Philharmonic Hall isn't too large. "After that . . . Grand Funk Railroad sold out Shea Stadium. David Cassidy sold out the Astrodome." Here, he diverts to jokes about Cassidy's young audience, the abundance of station wagons at the concert, and Ford's reliability issues before returning to the question of scale:

It's getting worse. There's no building large enough. Three Dog Night just passed a law within their group, starting I think in two months, they will play no more buildings of any kind. They will just play states. Do thirty, thirty-two concerts a year. Stand in the middle of Kentucky and play. [guttural shout] Everyone pays that day! Appearing in Kentucky . . . Three Dog Night! [whiny singing] "Liar, liar."

[obsequeiously] Eight fifty. [moan, then gruffly] I'm just goin' to Dayton! [guttural voice returns] You heard it, you pay it!

Brooks's gestures must have given more context—an extended palm for the $8.50, driving pantomime for the man going to Dayton—and his head and eyes would have made the hot-swapping between characters clearer. But the centerpiece of this joke is a philosophical question about what it means to be an audience. If you don't have a building you don't know you're at a concert, and while obviously that puts you in the world of people who are "overhearing" rather than "hearing," the situation is nevertheless governed not by an antecedent transaction (buying a ticket *to go to* a show) but by an experience: "You heard it, you pay it!" The problem, here, is the discrepancy between scale and audience—and the comedy of that point lies in the mismatch between the bare fact of a scalar relation "appearing in Kentucky" and the obligation to be an audience "You heard it, you pay."

Brooks is not finished.

What could the ultimate of that be? They get on a jet plane in New York and fly to Los Angeles and play in the plane, let the military promote the concert, and have everyone in the country pay a dollar. "'Scuse me you two, see that plane?" [woman's voice] "Yes, we do." [Back to Brooks] "Two dollars." [Pompous man] 'Let me treat ya, honey."

The bit ends. The jet concert bears even less of a relationship to its audience than the Kentucky appearance: the music can't be heard, the performers can't be seen, and yet the price must be paid. To be an audience, here, is a matter of being administered as such, and the shift from a collective experience to an administrated collectivity is ludicrous.

Something nearly parallel preoccupies David Antin in his poem "Talking at Pomona." "Talking at Pomona," first published in the volume *Talking* and in *ArtForum* in 1972, is the first of Antin's "talk poems." These were, as Marjorie Perloff calls them, "experiments with controlled improvisation, recorded directly on tape" and then transcribed (albeit in complex ways). Just as Brooks is working through the social infrastructures of performing (buildings, audiences, scales, publics), so Antin is exploring the nature of different sorts of artmaking, particularly painting and sculpture.

Early on, Antin is discussing the notion that "sculpture articulates space"—a notion he has *already* marked off as old-fashioned. His example is putting a "non-committal cube" in a three-dimensional space, which is, he quickly says, like what happens in the Wallace Stevens poem, "Anecdote of the Jar." "I placed a jar in Tennessee" it begins, and the claim, elaborated in the poem, is that a new set of relations emerges as a result: "It made the slovenly

wilderness/ Surround." The upshot—"It took dominion everywhere"—is a maximalist, modernist idea of relating. Antin reflects: "now putting a jar in tennessee is   after all an odd idea   merely because the scale of the jar and the scale of tennessee is discrepant   you have an idea of a relation between a geographical entity that isn't visible and something that is trivially handleable."[38] In patiently, deadpannily working through the actual situation of this jar, Antin does *not* note that placing a jar in Tennessee is not something that Stevens actually did *nor* that Stevens is writing a poem, which is (perhaps) what Antin is doing on stage and in transcription, *nor*, finally, that it would take a maximal claim like "placing a jar in Tennessee is sculpture" to bridge the gap between sculpture and poetry. All of that is tacit, and maybe not even intended. But it is that tonal combination—po-faced ordinary language reasoning backstopped by winking transcendence—that initially made the talk poems such a controversial practice.

Antin's audience surely laughed somewhere along here, a kind of bursting forth at the literalism of working through the discrepancy. Brooks's did as well. What makes Brooks's version more modally familiar as stand-up is the shift from narration to dramatization, the emergence of characters who have to make this mad "conceptual nexus" actually function: the ticket-taker, the man headed to Dayton, the couple unknowingly out on a date, and the military promoters. And the way we got to those characters was by building out from a delimited scene—a theater, then a hall, then an arena, finally beyond buildings to what Antin calls "a geographical entity that isn't visible." There, no longer in anything like the familiar participations of a concert, Brooks finds the edges of relation: "You heard it;" "See that plane?"

Not that Antin doesn't do that as well, albeit usually in reverse. In his Wittgensteinian mode, at just such points colloquy emerges: "one might say that sculpture's proceeding was to create a conceptual relation between spaces of a sort now you say 'what sort?' and they'd say 'well of an interesting sort'."[39] From "one might say" to the one who says it, or to *you* as the person enrolled in the process of *saying it*. And then we're off to the races again.

That interpellated *you* is the central figure in *Comedy Minus One*. Across the bottom of the album front we read "Introducing the Comedy Team of Albert Brooks and . . . (Over!)" while the back proclaims "You!" and features a mock-up of a backstage dressing mirror with a sheet of mylar-like reflective material glued where the mirror should be. In the eponymous piece, "you" perform with a recording of Brooks by reading along with an included script. As Tim J. Anderson has noted, *Comedy Minus One* takes its place in a long history of "instructional records," most directly the "Music Minus One" series begun by the legendary Irv Kratka, but dating back to the Add-a-Part 78s of the 1940s.[40] But if *Comedy Minus One* takes its title from musical recordings made for musicians and aspiring singers, the dramatic structure owes more to "Co-Star: The

Record Acting Game." "Co-Star" was a series of fifteen LPs launched in 1958 in which well-known actors from Cesar Romero to Pearl Bailey to Tallulah Bankhead would perform one part in a scene and the listener—again working from an included script—would play along.[41] The temporal relationship of script and recording, and the emphasis on "read[ing] your lines at the proper pace so that the flow of the scene is natural and realistic," were much closer to Brooks's album than the play-along groupwork of "Music Minus One." If the Famous School offered a ludicrous group of exercises and techniques, and held out the promise of faculty feedback that would never come, Co-Star and *Comedy Minus One* at least delivered on what they offered: the chance to step out of the infinite audience and perform. There would be no feedback, but none was offered.

Yet the inclusiveness of Brooks's "you" is limited. "Memoirs of an Opening Act" begins by setting the context at Doug Weston's Troubadour in Hollywood where it is being recorded. Not, again, by specifying that they are at the Troubadour or noting the date, but by noting:

> There's mics all around here. There's a recording truck outside. A record is being made. There's nothing you have to worry about, just have a good time. Just don't identify your laughter. A lot of people like to [Booming laugh] "'Ha ha ha ha haaaa," said Bill Harrison of Phoenix.'

"Identified laughter" is the conceptual flipside to the imputed audience: the performance reaches out to anyone within earshot; the audience member has no similar recourse.

That asymmetry is, for Brooks, part of the scalar problem of individual identity subsumed within the national, and as is usual with Brooks, he explores the conceptual inverse at length in another piece, "Rewriting the National Anthem."[42] The set-up asserts that with things in the country "changing" (how is unspecified) the anthem will have to change as well. One might hire someone, but he quickly rejects Henry Mancini's version—"Big mountains, lots and lots of trees" to the tune of "Moon River"—in favor of the fairer process of holding open auditions. And with that as his concept, he is now able to work through an array of stereotyped characters arranged on axes that span from amateur to professional, from enthusiasts to critics. The opener, "Ted Rutherford," is a man unleashed—"Hey, World!" he begins—thrilled to have his chance at last. He is followed by a piano novice, equally thrilled to get both hands properly alternating, "Heart and Soul" style. When "LeRoy Williams" steps to the piano and announces he is from "any ghetto you choose" the audience already knows this is a different level of intensity. He picks out individual notes with his left hand, percussive and ominous before launching into the song "You jail, all your black—" At which point he is immediately and smilingly cut off like

all the others. In immediate contrast to Williams is 75-year-old Hal Carter from Michigan, who retains the current melody but replaces the lyrics with whole-hearted praise for consumer society: "Let's give thanks for our lawns, and our two-car garages. Let's give thanks for TV!" The piece concludes with a Vegas lounge singer whose lengthy, maddening pre-song patter prevents him from ever getting to the point. "Would you get off the stage!" Brooks shouts in his stage-manager voice, whereupon Brooks does.

The exemplars of professional performance here—Mancini and the lounge singer—fail to adequately incorporate the vast "you" of the national audience. Even the *most* professional cannot manage anything more specific than "lots and lots of trees." Where Antin's "you" veers between the depersonalized interlocutor of analytic philosophy and the specified "you"s of his current audience, Brooks's songwriting hopefuls may be specified by region, age, ethnicity, professional status, and so on. That pluralization makes it harder to imagine any adequate result from the process. Yet at the end of the bit, when Brooks takes the direction he gives himself, his identity collapses into the persona of the lounge singer. That collapse both suggests that Brooks is an unspecified third professional, one capturing the diversity of the national audience by attempting to catalogue it directly and solves the problem of the utter impracticality of such a strategy. (He need not work through a million potential songs; he has found a way to end the bit.) "Rewriting the National Anthem," like "Memoirs of an Opening Act" pivots around questions of performance and scale, questions that are enlivened by the threat that individual identity poses to the adequate management of those scenarios. It may be unsatisfying or ludicrous to be "audienced" by an airplane flying overhead; it may be impossible to find a way to allow everyone to audition for the new national anthem. These are the antinomies of "dominion" and participation as Brooks sees it. And like his other interventions, they may be present in a variety of media—live in concert or on record—but they take their imbalance from the basic televisual situation.

III. CYCLING

The sort of intermedial competition behind the different incarnations of the Famous School, "Rewriting the National Anthem," or "Comedy Minus One" could reach a remarkable degree of intensity. In 1968, Mason Williams, head writer for *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, had a hit single with the instrumental "Classical Gas" (#2 on the Hot 100; #1 on Easy Listening). The song was buoyed by its repeated performance on the popular show. In addition to multiple live versions, Williams persuaded animator Dan McLaughlin to turn his pre-existing, experimental, "kinestatic" film *God is Dog Spelled Backwards*

into a music video for the piece.[43] As in *God is Dog*, Williams's song would play under rapidly changing still images—"for the first time, all of 3000 years of Fine Art in 3 minutes."[44] *The Smothers Brothers* repeated the formula that fall when they aired Chuck Braverman's historical speed-run, *American Time Capsule*. Such music montages seemed to carry obvious ideological potential, whether for the left or right. Cuban director Santiago Alvarez's pro-Civil Rights short *Now!* (1964) relied on the technique to generate activist solidarity while Eugene Jones hoped to generate a reactionary irritation in his ads for Nixon's 1968 campaign that bore titles such as "Convention," "Failure," and "Crime."[45] These latter, all-but-avowedly fascist commercials promised "an honest look at the problem of order in the United States" and would eventually give rise to the stunning diagnostic montage in Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974).

Brooks's intervention came earlier than Pakula's and worked by undermining the standard technique. His connection to the popular source of these films, *The Smothers Brothers*, was personal and competitive—his brother Bob Einstein was in the writers room while Brooks was trying to make his way at *Dean Martin* and *Turn-On*. In Brooks's entry into the kinestatic canon, again set to "Classical Gas," the images in the film would survey animal life rather than Fine Art, only "the film had been lost in the mail, so he had to try to re-create it live" by "flipping madly through the pages of a Time-Life book on the animal kingdom; then, after exhausting the pages, he raced backstage to bring out props—a live dog, a beach ball (in lieu of a seal), even a can of sardines."[46] Writing about Brooks's performance at the Troubadour in Hollywood for *Billboard*, Bob Kirsch called the routine "undoubtedly" "the highlight of the act."[47]

Against the slickness of the professionals and ad men, Brooks offered a cheap, DIY substitute. But in that faltering assemblage, he brought together not simply music and photography but publishing (in its high-gloss, industrial middlebrow), animal training (and its failures), and industrial fishing. It was both a summa of the prevailing relations of nature and culture and a bathetic come-down from then-hip, image-overload aesthetics.

At the same time, watching Brooks "flip madly" through the book recast media intensity as personal desperation. That personalization could then appear to decontextualize the media critique, replacing the baring of the device with the baring of the soul, shifting attention from how the media does things *to you* to how you might participate, or try to. The same summer that Kirsch saw Brooks perform the animal "film," Brooks appeared again on *The Tonight Show* to work through the steps to telling a joke—"A good joke. It's not a bad joke." This is where he avows that it has been his "passion forever, and ever, to pursue the field of comedy itself" and he casts the bit as an explicit spin-off of his management of the Famous School, which is "operating, profiting I might add, on the East Coast." At the heart of his explanation, is a mad, spiraling
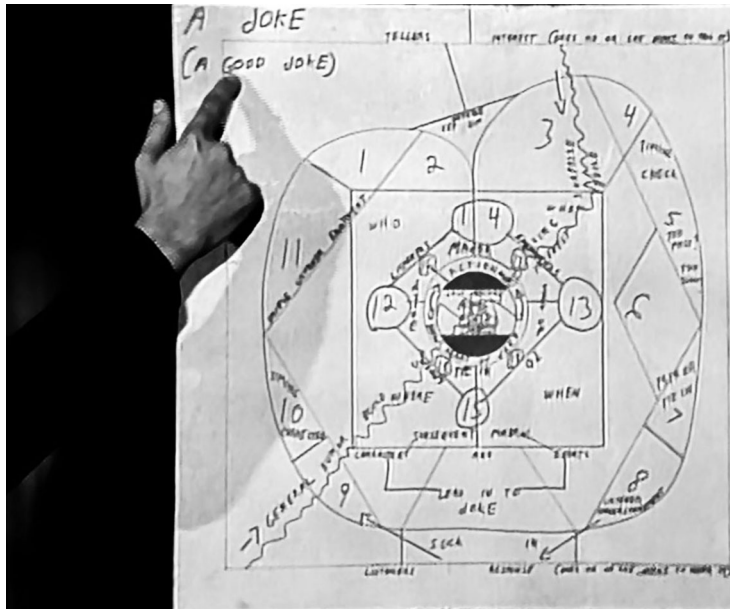
Figure 2.1 Albert Brooks's joke diagram

diagram, a joke-mandala that he sets on an easel at the beginning, and that gets his first big laugh.

The mandala takes us from "steps one to twenty," an orderly progress belied by the actual delivery. What Brooks sets up as a set of interlocking aspects of the joke—timing checks, the dispensation of information, monitoring listener reactions—arrive as a manic cycling through voices and frameworks. Throughout the routine, levels of discourse collide and fracture as he jumps from meta-discourse to prosaic example. There are cues about what phase of the joke we are in, from the "outside setup" through the "suck in" to the "Actual. Heart. Of the Joke. Say it with me: Heart. Of. Joke." There are banalities derived from sales lingo about gauging the "Listener's Eagerness to Laugh" and the "Visible Listener Enjoyment. That's our VLE." There are bits and pieces of the jokes that are ostensibly being setup—non-existent jokes about, for example, "two hookers and turtle" or a woman with an eight-foot nose. He will suddenly gesture at the chart to underline a point only to leave the *Tonight Show*'s director behind. "People might want to look at the monitors in the studio, might want to look at your feet. Doesn't really matter." The dizzying diagram and the dizzying routine work in perfect sync:

Presentational Voice: Now, between step 8 and 9 we have our "suck in."
We call it a "suck in," that's the point in the joke where you wanna have

the guy trapped. I mean, if you don't have him trapped here, you're gonna be in trouble later. But if you do it right, nothing will drag him away. See, if you don't have him there, you never can be sure of him. And god only knows they leave right before the punch. [Places hands on hips; shakes head.] Oh, boy.

Aggro joke-telling voice: So his wife turned to him and said—

Voice change, slightly dismissive, slightly apologetic for cutting in: Oh, I gotta run. [Checks imaginary watch]

Aggro joke-telling voice, abashed: Okay, bye, thanks.

Presentational Voice: [Smiling] You're left with a punch in your pocket. No good. [fist extended]

Offered as a humor how-to, the joke-mandala is impossible to put into practice. No one could possibly track these steps while moving fluidly through the joke being told. The joke of the bit thus lies in the misapplication of analysis and action, in the discursive shuffling itself.

And yet there is a practice to it, a mandala-like invocation of simultaneity and cyclicality, a punchline that is simultaneously the big sell:

And at the same time from the very beginning your general humor buildup, it should be starting at the beginning of the joke and getting more and more, your surprise build [Finger tracking from the corners of the diagram; fist pumping] your rising interest, more and more, it joins now, you're ready to go into the punch, you got all their attention, then you go in, step 20, the actual punch [punching with left fist] you give it to 'em . . . You got 'em on the floor, you got 'em laughing if it's good enough. Start over with number one. Do it again.

That practice differentiates it from its joke diagram analogues, but it also grounds it in the temporal closures of the TV variety-show bit: the joke ends, the bit ends; both begin again, some other time, some other place.

As a diagram, Brooks's joke-mandala falls in the tradition of the diagrams popularized by Max Eastman in *Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936) and the mocking rejoinder to Eastman by Robert Benchley, "Why We Laugh—Or Do We?" published the next year in *The New Yorker*.[48] Indeed when Brooks heads over to the desk after his *Tonight Show* performance, Johnny Carson comments, "Haven't heard such a dissection since Max Eastman." Eastman had created his diagrams out of symbols for frustration and satisfaction arrayed on angular and dashed lines that would trace the joke's path. Benchley responded with something closer to Corporal Trim's walking stick flourish from *Tristram Shandy*. But where their diagrams both hew to the form of particular jokes and so meander, Brooks's traces the stages of the social relationship of joke-telling in general

and so achieves the form of an emblem. As he narrates his way through the twenty steps, Brooks seems to tap into the most cant-ridden portions of Eastman's work, particularly the "Ten Commandments of the Comedic Arts," with its invocations of "interest" and "redeeming disappointments," or its discussion of timing: "Not only must the mind be genuinely on the way (plausibility), and the not-getting-there a genuine surprise (suddenness), but the surprise must come at the instant when the on-the-wayness is most complete, and the surprise most unexpected."[49] This is the sort of discourse that Benchley took on.

Yet Brooks's diagram is both a record of the joke's path and a map that at certain distances from the center arrays the fourfold relations of the joke (Who, What, When, Where) or spatializes the "Listener's/ Eagerness/ To/ Laugh." Relying on a broad assimilation of the mandala to popular culture, largely driven by psychedelic art and a fascination with Jungian analysis, Brooks was able to count on the immediate recognizability of his version, however lumpy and off-balance it might be.[50] At the same time, his mandala is wildly and illegibly over-labeled, linking its presentation to keyword-driven sales talk. That reflexive linguistic surplus aligns Brooks's diagram to Ad Reinhardt's *Joke*, a collage piece usually called *A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala* (1956). Reinhardt's "last" art-world cartoon, *Joke* is encrusted in puns and nonsense, pseudo-profundities and barbs directed at art-world institutions.[51] Presented without the benefit of live narration, *Joke* rewards deeper and deeper attention to both its arrangement and its linguistic inventions.

Brooks's hand-annotated visual aid is amateurish next to Reinhardt's precisely ruled version, a construction that offered "barely a trace of the artist's hand."[52] Just as his rushed kinestatic "film" undid the passivity such an image barrage might inspire, so Brooks's narrated mandala inspires a kind of manic processualism, the polar opposite of the contemplative stance the mandala should offer. Still, both artists' works participate in the stasis of cyclicality: Reinhardt to display a synchronic picture of the art system, particularly in its New York forms; Brooks to dwell on the iterative nature of the joke. In his notebook entry "Mandala," Reinhardt points to the figure's "Rules, regularities, symmetry" and adumbrates its conceptual positions:

Recoverable, repeatable circular time, transhuman
Starting over at beginning   non-historical
Eternal return, repetition   transmundane[53]

In *Joke*, Reinhardt takes that "transmundanity" and ironically applies it to the surface busy-ness of the art world, finding an assured, external point of view on the system. Brooks tries to find such a point but cannot locate any center that might hold. What might seem "transhuman" for Reinhardt is exhaustingly all-too-human for Brooks.

Figure 2.2 Ad Reinhardt's joke mandala

Seen one way and the joke-mandala is the most self-reflexive of Brooks's early comedy bits, the one that seems to have the weakest links to its medial surround. It is the height of "comedy about comedy," and if it has a social vector, it would seem to be, yet again, about the difference between amateurs with their hacky street jokes and professional analysts such as Brooks. But aligned with Reinhardt's *Joke* it becomes clear that it is not only about comedy but about the labor of explication. Where Reinhardt's painting, and his explication of it, amounted to an "extreme form of self-critical, perceptual positivism,"[54] his cartoons and collages were complementarily extreme forms of art-critical, conceptual mock-mysticism. And while it might be possible to make the aesthetic positions of the paintings and the collages cohere, the gap between the austere, cruciform monochromes and the baroque, mandalic or serial polylogues posed a problem that would require a tremendous amount of interpretive work to bridge. In this sense, Brooks's meta-comedy—comedy-critical, conceptual, mock-formalism—lies close to Reinhardt's cartoons, but the interpretive work is foregrounded as the performer's own bodily enlistment in the project. Whether stumbling around onstage dripping olive oil from a sardine can or jabbing at the air to indicate where "the punch" belongs, Brooks centralizes the underlying media critique in his own physical situation. And that situation depends on the givenness of the constrained temporality of "the bit," the reliably ready-to-hand contextualization of his performance.

IV. BUYING

If the aim of Brooks's televisual-era were to investigate and exhaust the possibilities of meta-comedy, then the joke-mandala might be its endpoint. If, as I have been contending, its aim is more properly to situate the New Comedy as both a form of media critique and as a source of conceptual innovation, then there might still be much to accomplish after the release of *Comedy Minus One*. Brooks followed the end of his live stand-up career with the album *A Star is Bought* (1975).[55] While the title alludes to the perennial, tragic story of Hollywood success, *A Star is Bought* is immersed in the media industrial landscape of US radio. Each featured track is directed at a particular pre-existing format: Country, Top 40, Talk, Classical, the "FM Undergound," and Nostalgia. And for each of those formats, the "song" aligns with a particular subgenre: the country song is the patriotic "Phone Call to Americans"; the Top 40 number is a novelty "Party From Outer Space"; the classical song is "Bolero," with new, hypersexual lyrics; the FM song is a blues performed with Albert King; and the nostalgia entry is a rediscovered Old-Time Radio comedy episode of *The Albert Brooks Show* from World War II. In this redoubled precision, *Star* converts "Rewriting the National Anthem" from a collection of social portraits

("state your name and where you're from") to a distribution of market segments. It is both a specification of the contents of those formats and a survey of the medium as a whole.

Star sets each off each of its fictional format entrants with a narrated introduction—a clean break from the songs, unlike the discursive collisions of the joke-mandala bit. Overall, fifteen minutes (roughly one-third of the record's runtime) is devoted to intercalary talk. Each of those sections is named not for the format it introduces but for its place in the record's running order: "In the Beginning," "Near the Beginning," "The End of the First Beginning," "A New Beginning," "Call This Cut Three, Side Two." A stereo experiment from *Comedy Minus One* reappears here in the form of a "Promotional Gimmick." The aim is to pre-record "custom" announcements for every radio station in the country. Brooks explains that while visiting—and here he lists several cities and regions—he enjoys "the good sounds of K___ the good sounds of W." After that, he lists half the alphabet in the left channel, half in the right. (The introduction usefully explains this is part of a copy-protection strategy.) Ostensibly, a radio station such as WOXY would choose the appropriate regional tag, cut the letters O, X, and Y out of Brooks's list, and then assemble its very own station ID. (How that would work with a record is less clear: they would need to use an intermediary tape source first, just as someone acting along with Brooks on *Comedy Minus One* would need a tape in order to review their performances.)

A station is formatted; a format is populated. The subgenres for each format are themselves mobilizations of clichés, none more explicit than the "Party From Outer Space," which sends up novelty "break-in records" that build imaginary interviews from snippets of other popular songs. "Near the Beginning" tells the story of Brooks's search for a Top 40 hit. He is initially steered to the break-in record by Peter Tork and Mickey Dolenz of The Monkees, who emphasize the genre as compensation for Brooks's lack of talent. But after consulting with intellectual property lawyer David Braun, he realizes that the expense and difficulty of pre-clearing the rights to popular songs will make the endeavor unprofitable and time-consuming. At this point, Brooks opts to write *fake* songs to splice into the record, becoming—at least in miniature—a Top 40 hit machine. The disdain Tork and Dolenz show for the novelty records pioneered by Dickie Goodman seems real, but the entire process that leads Brooks to "Party From Outer Space" is itself a pre-scripted, fake interview, one that Brooks's audience takes as part of a successful bit despite its (hidden) proximity to Goodman's hacky recordings.[56]

At that moment, *A Star is Bought* seems like an endpoint to the bit-accumulation strategy. An album of styles, a meta-album of anthology tracks, *Star is Bought* concludes with the narrator doing a series of impressions (Jimmy Cagney, Marlon Brando) that all sound just like him, a meta-turn on Brooks's own earlier failed impressionist bit. That is then followed by an unlisted track,

a commercial for *The Best of Pardon My Boner! Vol. 8*, itself a parody of the Kermit Schafer *Pardon My Blooper!* series that had begun with *Radio Bloopers* in 1947 and was still going strong into the 1970s—Shafer would release a double album set (*Super Bloopers Vol. 1*) in 1974 that would receive international distribution through K-Tel.[57] In Brooks's commercial, the blooper itself comes from the "Pardon My Boner newsroom," in which the newscaster intones, "In Chicagoland today, a woman slipped and fell on the asshole. Asphalt. Oh shit, I said 'asshole.' Oh goddammit, I said 'shit.' Oh Jesus, I said 'goddammit.' Oh, nooo." [Laugh track.] Everything about it is phony: the newsroom, the blooper, the chain linking blooper-to-blooper-to-blooper, and the laugh track. It stands at the end of this fake-anthology record as another fake anthology. Its Chicago setting conjures the notorious "Uncle Don," blooper, a long-standing fake in which the host of a long-running children's radio program on WOR supposedly cursed into a hot mic. The blooper may or may not have existed, but that did not deter Schafer from "reconstructing" it and introducing it on *Vol. 1* as "a legend." In that version Don (not actually Don) sings his sign-off song, makes certain the show is off the air, and then announces, "I guess that'll hold the little bastards tonight." Schafer's synthetic version takes care to spatialize the recording engineer's assurance that they are no longer broadcasting, and drops "Don's" voice to the edge of audibility. In sending up *Pardon My Blooper!*, then, Brooks and Shearer were recognizing a pro in action, but they were depending upon an audience's ability to see some vestige of critique that could differentiate their work from Schafer's.

Recognition of market clichés and differentiations underlies Brooks's critique of radio. In contrast, Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* relies on the unspecific nature of TV: "There is no such thing as mass media in the United States except for television," it declares.[58] First aired on March 3, 1973 *Television Delivers People* delivers its sharp media critique clearly, in simple rolling text set against a flat chroma-key blue background. That baldness helps make the piece effective. Yet no one would confuse it with an ordinary TV program. It stands out precisely because of its visual banality, because it is very nearly a *non-program*, by contrast Brooks's *Famous School* film stood out not because it was an ad but because it was an ad within the context of PBS.

Yet Serra and Schoolman also add a musical soundtrack to the match the non-imagery. This insipid accompaniment is the crucial third element of the piece. Neither explicitly critical like the text nor neutrally administrative like the text's presentation, the "muzak" seems aggressively propagandistic, a too-obvious attempt to pacify the critical faculties aroused by the critique, a hand-tipping, slightly smirking acknowledgment that the system is busy hiding its operations under the light jazzy sounds of a bustling marketplace. As it happens, the soundtrack to *Television Delivers People* (at least the canonical

version I have heard) is provided by the Manfred Minnich String Orchestra. *Television* includes two songs, "That's Why" and, five minutes in, "Beauty Salon," that appeared on a 1970 album recorded for Sonoton, a label that produced licensable music in a wide range of genres.

Yet in choosing licensable music that is muzak-*like* rather than, for example, rerecording actual muzak, Serra and Schoolman adhere to the usual copyright conventions and only perform their subversion of them. (Brooks, in contrast, fakes his thefts and announces his fakes.) Certainly their choice has not struck critics as in any way undercutting their media-critical bona fides. For in addition to being a corporate provider of canned music for commercial enterprises, by 1973 "muzak" had been a term of approbation for a decade or more.[59] Critics believe they hear "muzak," and muzak is what they disdain; but what they are not hearing is the silent operation of the system of intellectual property.

Still, the de-specificity of muzak (or string-heavy Easy Listening, which is here being mistaken for muzak) is crucially related to the work's invocation of mass media. Television in 1973 still operated according to what Richard A. Peterson and Russell B. Davis, Jr., contemporaneously dubbed "vertical" programming: given a competition for overall market share, networks varied their programming "greatly, both through the day and from week-day to week-end." And yet "at any one time in the schedule, however, the programming of each network was much like that of others."[60] The post-war arrival of television had captured much of the radio audience, and in response radio broadcasters moved away from vertically programmed networks to "horizontally programmed" stations that differentiated themselves from local competitors by adopting different formats—those formats that Brooks took as received categories in *Star is Bought*. In this regard, radio was decidedly more advanced than television. TV was a truly "mass medium"—Serra and Schoolman were not wrong—while radio was entirely subsumed by formats. That historical shift would only come to television in the wake of the cable revolution, and even then it would be incomplete: the "major networks" continue to base their programming on dayparts. Within *Television Delivers People*, "massness" is *figured by* the muzak; radio, in contrast, as a formatted medium subject to *horizontal* differentiation seems more insidious, more aligned with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's analysis of genre and prestige differentiations in classical Hollywood: "Something is provided for all so that none may escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The hierarchy of serial qualities purveyed to the public serves only to quantify it more completely."[61]

Yet even muzak was not what it had been by 1973. As Joseph Lanza and Hervé Venel variously explain, muzak's model of mood management through "stimulus progression" was under assault. In place of background music that aimed to subliminally guide workers to greater productivity through the day, new competitors offered "foreground music" to enlist consumers in a company's particular brand

identity. This changed the sort of music that one heard as well. The arrival of "foreground" music services such as Audio Environments, Inc. and Yesco put paid to muzak's approach of remaking popular songs in 1,000-strings-of-death versions. The company struggled against its hipper, more formatted competitors, first by distributing original artist recordings rather than covers, then by launching its own foreground service in 1980 and eventually merging with Yesco in 1987.[62]

One line from *Television Delivers People* is true of network television and remains true of formatted radio: "In commercial broadcasting the viewer pays for the privilege of having himself sold." What Serra and Schoolman did not foresee was the resourcefulness of the market in periods of flux, the ability of the culture industry to generate sufficient differentiation that it might retain an audience ready to sneer at the *muzakification* of media. Brooks joked about the opposite, the possibility that the entire nation would be made an audience unwittingly, but he knew from his tours, his performances at the Troubadour, and his reflections on contemporary radio that such universalization was unlikely. Without doubting that consumers of commercial media bring themselves to market, or that stars long to be bought themselves, Brooks sought the contours of those exchanges—not simply in the demand that one pay for a ticket to a show one did not see, but in similar scenes of instruction, contemplation, close reading, and critical audition.

Over half a decade, Brooks constructed a mode of New Comedy practice with unparalleled breadth that could bring together media-critical practices directed at magazine publishing, live performance, radio, and television, that could unite the subversive educational scenarios of the Famous School and the joke-mandala with the formal subversions of the animal "film" and the pseudo blooper. It had room for questions about the propositionality of the joke (or the work of art) alongside name-naming criticism of key players in the US media ecology. Its social commentary did not lie in a haughty assumption that "real" social problems could be reduced to the discourses of their appearance. Instead, Brooks took the real problems that confronted him, medium by medium, activated by particular events (the collapse of FWS; the rise of kinestatic filmmaking) and found ways of opening up critical habitations that might simultaneously speak to their cultural typicality—contemporary television and radio—and their historical specificity. I have shown that those habitations have specific occasions and conceptual consequences and that the passage between those scales is managed via a relentless reflexivity. That reflexivity has been seen as a limitation of Brooks's TV-bit-based approach. But as the reflexive embodiment of a medium already at a fever pitch of reflection, Albert Brooks stood as a singular figure against the ground of US television. That differentiation was always in danger of collapsing. Brooks managed to sustain it through suddenness, surprise, speed, and a dedication to the display of intermedial collisions at every occasion.

NOTES

1. Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 110–11.
2. Johnny Carson. *Tonight Show*, guest appearance by Albert Brooks, aired June 6, 1973, on NBC. Available at <https://youtu.be/nDO3IJKB-P8> (last accessed December 28, 2020).
3. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 110.
4. Jeff Menne discusses this in his chapter.
5. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 117.
6. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 123.
7. Paul Nanas, Brooks's long-time manager, email to author, August 14, 2018.
8. Paul Slansky, "Albert Brooks is Funnier Than You Think," *Deadspin*, May 9, 2014. Available at <https://thestacks.deadspin.com/albert-brooks-is-funnier-than-you-think-1573238010> (last accessed December 28, 2020).
9. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 113.
10. Albert Brooks, "Albert Brooks as Carl Heller," *American Music Awards*. Aired February 19, 1974, on ABC. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2Z6AfsNSJA> (last accessed December 28, 2020).
11. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 116
12. Albert Brooks, *Comedy Minus One*, Rhino/WEA, 1993, compact disc.
13. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*; Dave Nuttycombe, "Albert Brooks and the Rise of 'New Humor,'" *Vulture.com*, February 9, 2011. Available at <https://www.vulture.com/2011/02/albert-brooks-and-the-rise-of-new-humor.html> (last accessed December 28, 2020).
14. To anticipate: Despite the alliances between Brooks and other conceptual artists I will be calling Brooks's works works and not propositions à la Joseph Kosuth. That is because the aim of these performances and their records is to highlight the effort necessary to produce or procure the position from which the proposition has been made. When Benjamin Buchloh writes of the founders of Conceptual Art that "Their convictions were voiced with the (by now often hilarious) self-righteousness that is continuous within the tradition of hypertrophic claims made in avant-garde declarations of the twentieth century," he points to the possibility of an alternative temporality for the hilarious, namely, via the hypertrophic claims of advertising. That would of course provide the infradiscourse of Brooks's relentless pitching of himself and his projects. Buchloh follows that sentence by quoting Joseph Kosuth's prohibition against the notion of a "conceptual *work* of art" (108). Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
15. For an extensive consideration of stance in relation to West Coast art, see Jacob Stewart-Halevy, "California Conceptualism's About-Face," *October* 163 (Winter 2018): 71–101.
16. Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy"
17. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969."
18. David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), xi.
19. Joselit, *Feedback*, 85ff.
20. The collected works of Top Value Television are available at <www.tvtvnow.com> (last accessed December 28, 2020).
21. Ed Friendly and George Schlatter, *Turn-On*. Aired 1969, on ABC.
22. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 111.
23. Joselit, *Feedback*, 101.
24. Joselit, *Feedback*, xii.

25. Albert Brooks, "Albert Brooks' Famous School for Comedians," *Esquire*, February 1971, 89–94.

26. "Wednesday's Television Programs," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1971, G23. It doubtless aired on other dates and times on other PBS affiliates. *GADM* deserves to be much better known. A DVD anthology was issued in 2015 with an appreciative essay by David Bianculli. *Great American Dream Machine*, television program DVD. USA: PBS/S'More Entertainment, 2015.

27. Lee Eisenberg, "Back Stage with Esquire," *Esquire*, February 1971, 8.

28. Jessica Mitford, "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1970. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1970/07/let-us-now-appraise-famous-writers/305319/> (last accessed December 28, 2020).

29. William W. Kiefer, "Writing Instructors Want Better Status, Conditions," *Hartford Courant*, August 12, 1971, 24.

30. The advertising pledge was announced in June 1971 and revised further in December; "Four Schools Agree to Shun Deceptive Advertising," *New York Times*, June 18, 1971, 32; "Famous Writers School Agrees To Substantial Revision of Ads," *New York Times*, December 14, 1971, 32. The bankruptcy declaration listed liabilities of more than $40 million and assets less than $28 million. *New York Times*, February 9, 1972, 61. It emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1973. "From Paint to Pipe: FAS Draws up Plan for New Business," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 1975, 14.

31. "Rugoff in Short Pickup from Educational Video," *Variety*, December 22, 1971, 5.

32. Dan Graham, "Homes for America," *Arts*, December 1966/January 1967, 21–2. It was reprinted in altered forms many times. For the variants see Alexandra Wolf, "Dan Graham's *Homes for America* re:visited," *all-over*, 2015. Even the "facsimile" of the original version in Dan Graham, *For Publication* (Los Angeles: Otis Art Institute, 1975), 17–20, has been significantly rearranged.

33. Dan Graham and Sabine Breitwieser, "Dan Graham," *Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program*, November 1, 2011. Available at <https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_graham.pdf> (last accessed December 28, 2020). The discussion of the early work captures, in its meandering way, some of Graham's sense of the linkages between his diverse projects. For another take on *Esquire* see Peter Scott, "Grahamarama," *artnet*, July 7, 2009. Available at http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/scott/dan-graham7-7-09.asp (last accessed December 28, 2020). Brooks and Graham cross over in multiple ways, not simply their sense that *Esquire* was the logical place in which to launch a media critique. One of Graham's early and essential writings was about the *Dean Martin Show* (Dan Graham, "Dean Martin/Entertainment as Theater," *Rock My Religion* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993], 56–65), originally appearing in 1969; it spawned Graham's performance piece *Lax/Relax*.

34. Graham, *Arts*, 22; Graham, *For Publication*, 20.

35. Graham, *Arts*, 22; Graham, *For Publication*, 18.

36. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art," 141.

37. Graham and Breitwieser, *Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program*, 9–10.

38. David Antin, *Talking* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), 151.

39. Antin, *Talking* 151.

40. Tim J. Anderson, "Listening to the Promise of a Better You: Considering the Instructional Record," *Leonardo Music Journal* 26 (2016): 28–31. Irv Kratka, "Q + A," *Music Trades*, May 2015, 48–53.

41. Drew Friedman, "Co Star, The Record Acting Game," *drewfriedman* (blog), November 8, 2011. Available at <http://drewfriedman.blogspot.com/2011/11/co-star-record-acting-game.html> (last accessed December 29, 2020).

42. On the record *Comedy Minus One* and on a videotaped October 25, 1973 appearance on *The Flip Wilson Show* "Williams" is third.

43. Mason Williams, "Original Classical Gas Video '3000 Years of Art'." Available at <http://www.classicalgas.com/gasvideo.html> (last accessed June 2, 2020).

44. Mason Williams, "Classical Gas—3000 Years of Art," mp4 video, 3:11. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viyufRQKlto> (last accessed December 29, 2020).

45. "Convention," *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952–2016,* (Astoria, NY: The Museum of the Moving Image, 2020), video 49 sec. Available at <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968/convention#4019> (last accessed December 29, 2020); "Failure," *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952–2016,* (Astoria, NY: The Museum of the Moving Image, 2020), video 4 min. Available at <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968/failure#4009> (last accessed December 29, 2020); "Crime," *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952–2016,* (Astoria, NY: The Museum of the Moving Image, 2020), video 1 min. Available at <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968/crime#4023> (last accessed December 29, 2020).

46. Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 114. Brooks did a version on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* that aired February 18, 1972. Based on that, there is no evidence that the book is from *Time-Life*, which does not seem to have published such a volume, but I have not been able to locate it. In any case, it has similarities to many lavishly illustrated animal books of the era. The book appears to be called simply *ANIMALS*. It features pictorial laminated boards and low-text, image-heavy two-page spreads throughout.

47. Bob Kirsch, "Talent in Action: Albert Brooks; Kenny Rankin," *Billboard*, July 21, 1973, 58.

48. Max Eastman, "To Diagram a Joke," *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1936), 279–89; Robert Benchley, "Why We Laugh—Or Do We?" *The New Yorker*, January 2, 1937, 14.

49. Eastman, "To Diagram a Joke," 317.

50. The sources of the mandala in pop culture span a range of discourses: the religious, the psychedelic, the orientalist. See Rose Harris-Birtill, *David Mitchell's Post-Secular World: Buddhism, Belief, and the Urgency of Compassion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 137–66; Daniel G. Noel, ed. "Jung's anti-modern art of the mandala," *Picturing Cultural Values in Postmodern America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995). Available at <https://philpapers.org/rec/DOTPCV> (last accessed December 29, 2020). See the works by Allen Atwell, Lex de Bruijn, Hugo Mujica, and Usco in Robert E. L. Masters and Jean Houston, *Psychedelic Art* (New York: Grove, 1968).

51. Reinhardt would produce an update to a cartoon from fifteen years earlier: Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look at Modern Art in America," *ARTnews*, Summer 1961, 36–7.

52. Thomas Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt* (Rome: Marlborough, 1975), 23, cited in Prudence Pfeiffer, *Routine Extremism: Ad Reinhardt and Modern Art* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 104.

53. Ad Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Viking, 1975), 188.

54. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art," 111.

55. Albert Brooks, *A Star Is Bought*, Wounded Bird Records, 2017, compact disc.

56. For a discussion of Goodman's relationship to copyright, see Joanna Demers, *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Law Affects Musical Creativity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 76–8.

57. For photos of the sleeve and labels, see <https://www.discogs.com/Kermit-Shafer-Super-Bloopers-Vol1/master/478922> (last accessed December 29, 2020).

58. *Television Delivers People*, video installation created by Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman. Collected in *Surveying the First Decade: Volume 2*. USA: Video Data Bank, 2008.

59. Hervé Venel, *Triple Entendre: Furniture Music, Muzak, Muzak-Plus* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 47.

60. Richard A. Peterson and Russell B. Davis, Jr., "The Contemporary American Radio Audience," *Popular Music and Society* 3, no. 4 (1974): 299–313.

61. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 97; translation modified in light of the earlier Continuum version, 123.

62. Venel, *Triple Entendre*, 71–3; Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy Listening, and Other Moodsong* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 219–20. For further considerations of Muzak, foreground music, and the manipulation of mood, see Paul Allen Anderson, "Neo-Muzak and the Business of Mood," *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Summer 2015): 811–40; Ronald M. Radano, "Interpreting Muzak: Speculations on Musical Experience in Everyday Life," *American Music* 7 (Winter 1989): 448–60; Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space," *Ethnomusicology* 41 (Winter 1997): 22–50.