

Art|Basel

Isn't it ironic? No, it's Cringe: Dena Yago's defense of rising trends



Over the past decade working as a trend forecaster, I have amassed a collection of archival trend reports. While I don't consider myself a historian of this nebulous profession, I have taken an armchair interest in the tropes that run through it. Trend reports are formulaic: first, the subject's key traits are defined. Then they identify emerging behaviors and attribute those to generationally defining moments (the 2008 recession or COVID-19) or technological advancements (the birth of the Internet or the rise of TikTok). Following this macro view, they subsequently identify cultural phenomena that exemplify these shifts, for instance, popular film franchises (millennials and Harry Potter), emergence of new genres (Gen Z and Hyperpop), or specific artists (Lil Nas X).

Trends are an exercise in pattern recognition. In reports, I've recognized a recurring diagnosis of humor being a primary coping mechanism for dealing with a volatile, ambiguous, and uncertain reality, though the way it is expressed changes between generations. When asked to consider the state of humor and irony today, I retrieved an archival trend report from my shelf – 'GENERATION 2000'. Created in 1993 by the marketing department of the defunct magazine Details, it chronicles the plight of Gen X. The first of its 'six salient characteristics' is 'Absurdity Rules'. The opening sentence: 'Perhaps more than any other characteristic, a sense of humor distinguishes members of GENERATION 2000 from the baby boomers. They share a sense of the absurd and express it through irony.' Gen X's humor is supported by a strong sense of moral values, asking us to remember that 'irony assumes an understanding of how things should be.'

Irony is contingent on a shared cultural narrative, which we've seen dissolve in recent years. Any shared understanding of how things should be is up for debate. In the early 1990s, once the Cold War was ending, American self-definition was undermined. America's Gen X alleviated its despondency through sarcasm and irony with a deeply cynical bent (see the 1994 film Reality Bites). Irony allows for a detached coolness, enabling distance from the hypocritical, jading reality they are critiquing.

In the mid-and late 1990s and early 2000s, slapstick humor, raunch, and physical comedy nearly dethroned irony, as can be seen with cultural phenomena like the TV show Jackass and Rotten.com. An artwork equivalent might be Damien Hirst's *Two Fucking and Two Watching* (1995), a sculpture featuring rotting cow and bull carcasses that New York City public health officials banned because of fears of 'vomiting among the visitors.' Irony returned after 9/11 with the early Vice-era hipster where, under trucker hats, a thinly veiled white class grievance was fomenting. Irony is useful in maintaining plausible deniability and a distancing from destructive ideology, but when ironic speech becomes mainstream, acceptable discourse, the distance collapses, and irony hardens into ideology. Irony is most potently used as a form of critique by people lacking power to bring attention to the hypocrisies and contradictions of those in it. When those in power utilize it, it's a form of punching down, not up.



Asked to examine whether irony is still a legitimate cultural response in art during the culture wars that continue to rage – the prompt for this essay – I contemplated writing ‘no’ to the maximum word count. This would not be an ironic response, though it would be somewhat cynical. Irony will never die, but it exists alongside other on-trend modes of humor. The emergence of one trend does not preclude the extinction of another. In addition to the coexistence of temporal trends, each trend has an equal and opposite countertrend.

A false dichotomy often used in cultural analysis on irony is that its oppositional counterpart is sincerity. One does not rule out the other, because a person can be very, very sincere in the messages they are thinly cloaking as ironic. One of many counterpoints to irony, however, is the recent emergence of Cringe, and the content that has come to represent it across the cultural sphere. Cringe is the awkwardness that occurs when someone sincerely expresses themselves and is largely unaware of how their expression is received. Cringe is not inherently a form of comedy, but humor emerges at the disjuncture between an artwork, video, or performance's intention and reception. It can be seen on social media, where people sing their own songs terribly or over-eagerly show off cosplay outfits and unflattering selfies. I took an informal poll asking artist peers which contemporary artists might be Cringe – responses included Marina Abramović, Kaws, and Yoko Ono. A through-line would be a level of sincerity that creates deep discomfort in the viewer, or a disconnect between an artist's self-perceived coolness and how they are received by a critical audience. I'll be the first to admit that this essay is Cringe.

Dena Yago, Art Basel, September 2021

Embracing Cringe is a coping strategy, allowing for complexity and contradiction in a society that rejects both. As an adjective and a noun Cringe describes art and other content that demonstrates a lack of self-awareness (read: a lack of strategic distancing or plausible deniability provided by irony).

One genre that is by and large Cringe is Fanfiction – works created by fans who use material from a broader canon to widen the narrative universe of a fictional series. Over the past two decades, it's become a way for stories like Harry Potter or The Walking Dead to include otherwise marginalized narratives – a Fanfiction creator can queer a cast of characters, changing their identities to represent their own. Fanfiction can educate a public on minor histories, or emergent facets of contemporary society.



Fanfiction does not create new cultural forms, but imbues old ones with new meanings, allowing characters to grapple with their written fates, and freeing them to become mouthpieces for other modes of speech. Fanfiction gets the pill down easier. It is a creative tool for subverting cultural forms, while making dense observations on contemporary life accessible to broad audiences. It is a form I employ in my art practice through known cultural characters and narrative canons: whether it be 101 Dalmatians (1996), The Sorcerer's Apprentice, Mr. Peanut, Frank the Rabbit from Donnie Darko (2001), or Bambi's Thumper (1942), to name a few. I cross these characters with folk meme typologies, as well as recognizable cultural objects, such as the ubiquitous Amazon delivery bins.

I utilize known forms to bring up a more difficult cultural thematic surrounding the changing landscape of labor, or the role of the artist as knowledge worker. Fanfiction is a way to communicate, to make tough topics accessible, and to bust known narratives wide open to accommodate otherwise fringe narratives, characters, and conversations. If Fanfiction is Cringe, I am Cringe. To be Cringe is to be human.

Parallel to her visual work, artist Dena Yago is a founding member of the trend forecasting collective K-HOLE, best known for naming Normcore, the 2014 trend of the year. Addressing emerging cultural behaviors is at the core of Yago's visual and critical practice. Yago is represented by Bodega (New York City). In September, she is presenting a solo project with the gallery in the Statements sector of Art Basel in Basel.

All images of Yago and her studio by Peyton Fulford for Art Basel, 2021.