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As told to Lindsay Howard, 1831 words.

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# Sean J Patrick Carney on starting a podcast

## Which of your past projects has the most influence on how you approach *Humor and the Abject*?

The main influence was probably *Social Malpractice*, my publishing label. It started as a vanity project for my writing, and then I put out other people's books - mostly artist books I thought were funny. It was a way for me to connect with different people online, and then have a certain kind of intimacy by sending them physical objects. I moved to New York shortly after, and had the opportunity to write for *VICE*, *Art in America*, and other publications.

## Were those opportunities a result of the writing you self-published on *Social Malpractice*?

Yeah, actually the first piece I did for *VICE* was a shorter version of something I published on *Social Malpractice*. I write for publications on a regular basis, but there are times when I have something to say that doesn't fit into their schedule or the format isn't right. I used the classes I taught at Bruce High Quality Foundation University to explore different ideas, which is how I ended up teaching a class called *Humor and the Abject*. I liked being able to invite guests and ask them questions, so when the class ended I turned my research into a blog. And then a podcast.

## What appeals to you about the podcast format?

Each of these formats - the class, blog, and podcast - have their own value during a particular time. I wouldn't be able to re-create the energy of the first class because it was so collaborative with the students, artists, and comedians who came through, like Jen Catron and Paul Outlaw, Liza Dye, Wayne Koestenbaum, Jayson Musson, and Alan Resnick. It functioned well and there was a lot of energy around it but then after 14 weeks, the class ended. There's something kind of exciting about that ephemerality, but I also didn't want the conversation to end there.

I wrote a piece called "Site-Specific Comedy" for *Art in America* which continued some of the ideas, and looked at an alternate history of comedy that focused on action rather than language, something David Robbins wrote about in his book *Concrete Comedy* - performing long cons or extended jokes. I focused on young comedian/artists like Taj Bourgeois, Casey Jane Ellison, and Jayson Musson, who are funny because of their proximity to, and context within, the art world. After that essay, another community of like-minded people reached out to me and there were more conversations around it. The podcast has become an ongoing, even further extension of the class - and now anyone, anywhere can participate.

Part of the reason why I wanted to do the podcast is because I didn't see this conversation happening anywhere else. Artists often give talks or lectures, but they're very rehearsed. On the other hand, I didn't see a place for comedians to reflect on their practice and politics substantively. I'm exploring the similarities and relationships between these two worlds, and learning a lot while doing it. The podcast is still finding its footing but I'm glad that it's resonating with people. No one seems weirded out by the people I choose to interview or which shows I review.

One thing that makes my approach unique is that I give the same attention to a comic's open mic night that I would to an exhibition opening at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. I treat both equally, and I hope the comedians appreciate it. They seem receptive. I'm sure they're probably a little bit skeptical, as anyone should be of the art world. But for now, it's a fairly limited group of people who are sharing and responding to these ideas so it feels safe.

## How do you choose the people you're going to interview?

When I started, I had a running Google doc with the names of people I'd love to interview -

## Was it a dream list, or were these people you already knew?

It was realistic at first because I wanted to focus on people whose work I knew really well. Now, my main focus is trying to be representative of what New York's art and comedy communities actually look like, in terms of practices and lived experiences as well as backgrounds. It ends up happening naturally, anyway,

because the groups I'm interested in are, in fact, diverse.

I try not to schedule too far out, so I can stay nimble, and also because it's hard to get an artist or a comedian to commit when I'm like, "Hey, can we do an interview six months from now?" They're like, "Oof, I don't know. Maybe?" They may end up having to cancel, and anyway, it's better to keep things fresh so the podcast's roster of guests is responding to what's on both my and my audience's minds in the moment. Sometimes I'll see a person retweeted on Twitter and remember how much I love their work, and try to get them on the show right away.

**How do you prepare for an interview? Do you have any pre-show rituals?**

I'm a really big fan of Nardwuar the Human Serviette, a Canadian media personality who interviews musicians and blows their minds with the minute details he knows about their lives. I heard him interview Tyler, the Creator and ask something like, "When you were in eighth grade, do you remember a friend made you a burned CD that included this [insert name of obscure artist]?" and then he produced like an autographed LP for him. I aspire to that level of devotion and seriousness, so that every conversation has the chance to go beyond typical talking points.

With that said, I spend a lot of time researching each person before I talk with them. Since most of the people I'm talking with do time-based work, that usually means watching hours of video. I also read every interview that I can find with them to avoid asking the same questions. I'm terrified of mispronouncing a name or project title, so I'll check with other people who know them. I'll write pages and pages and pages of talking points. We'll only get to a fraction of them because the conversations end up happening organically, but I prefer to go in overly prepared. It makes me feel more at ease, so I can help the person I'm interviewing feel more at ease.

**Have you ever done an interview that just didn't click for whatever reason? How did you recover from that, either in the moment or afterward?**

There have been a couple of times when the conversations got awkward, or when it took me longer than usual to gain the person's trust. I try to remain humble, and remind myself that this happens all the time. I've listened to podcasts when the conversation feels stilted and instead of being turned off by it, I usually find it entertaining. One thing I had to get used to, and be flexible about, are the different ways in which people communicate. For example, unlike a lot of artists, most comedians didn't go to college or graduate school for comedy - where they might've had groups of people deconstructing every aspect of their practice. Instead, they're very intuitive. My interviews with comics tend to be more fun and conversational for that reason. It's harder with artists because they're more academically self-aware and are used to giving interviews and lectures with particular talking points. I tend to interrupt artists when I hear them slipping into art-speak. I throw a wrench into it by asking them an aside, or otherwise scooting them around it.

**What other strategies do you use to help someone feel comfortable, or push the conversation in a particular direction?**

I record fake advertisements for each episode so if I can't find a left turn when I need one in a conversation, I'll say, "Let's take a quick break. We're going to hear from our sponsors." It helps break up the moment, and allows us to build an off-the-record rapport before getting back into it.

**When you're not working on the podcast, how do you nourish your creative side?**

I'm often in the role of an administrator, writer, director, or interviewer, so when I'm not working I try to do things that will allow me to step back and be an audience member. I'll go to a friend's show, drink a couple of beers, and remind myself: "You don't have to document this moment. You don't have to do anything. It's okay. Just enjoy yourself."

**Your practice has an entrepreneurial spirit to it: you created your own publishing platform to get your writing out into the world, and are approaching an ambitious research project with a blog and podcast. Were you always this independent, or was there a point when you decided to operate outside of established systems?**

I grew up in a remote-ish area of Northern Michigan where I had limited access to culture, so my friends and I had to make our own entertainment. We heard about bands playing in Flint and Detroit, and invited them to perform in our small town under the pretense of an existing hardcore scene. Over time, we built a community of performers and had dozens of bands circling around each other. We all sucked, but it didn't matter - there was no other way to do it.

When I moved to Portland, Oregon, I started making zines because I didn't know the process for submitting an article to a magazine. The same thing happened with comedy: I performed sets in art galleries, not comedy venues, because I had access to them. I started recording podcasts in 2008 and 2009, but at that point I didn't have anyone to interview so I played all of the characters. I wrote the music, interviewed myself with different voices, and shared them on my Tumblr. I did it for myself and maybe a few other people, but ultimately I used them to teach myself -

**God bless Tumblr in 2009.**

Yes! I taught myself how to do audio engineering from that. I learned how to organize and stitch together

a whole podcast. Now I can do all of that easily, but at the time I was making a ton of shitty podcasts. Luckily, not that many people heard them.

Sean J Patrick Carney recommends:

Read Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of 20th Century Comedy by David Robbins

Follow comedian Ana Fabrega on Instagram and turn on the sound

Watch Chopped on the Food Network

Listen to Jayson Musson AKA DJ Hennessy Youngman's CVS Bangers mixes

Get your hot takes on the Mars Volta, wood-fired pizza, supporting the arts, and salacious art world scandals by following me on Twitter: @SocMalpractice

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Fact



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