

INTERVIEW:

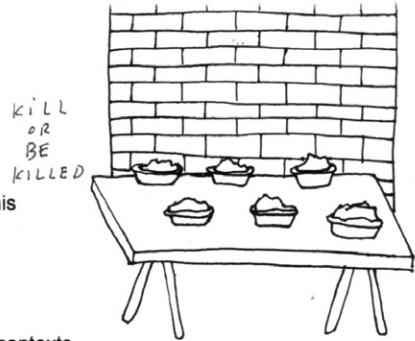
SARA GREENBERGER and
CAROL BOVE

Sara: Dear Carol,

As you know, I am currently working on an artwork about stand-up comedy.

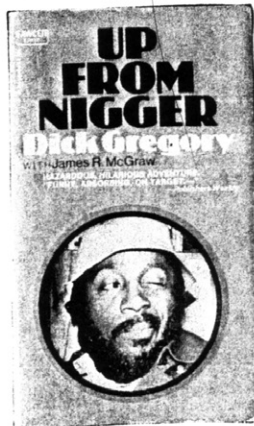
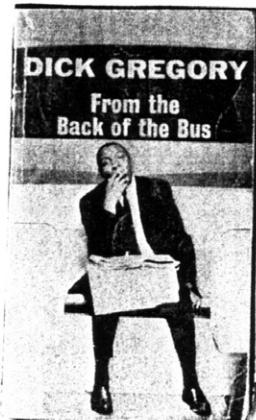
When people come to my studio I am often asked if I actively go out to comedy clubs around the city for "research." While I am interested in recent stand-up practices (the late Bill Hicks, Dave Chapelle), I also find stand-up an incredibly limited comedic form. By this I mean that only a very few practitioners transcend the artificiality of the form.

At the moment, I prefer some of the sketch and situation stuff on television to an open mic or a performance at Caroline's on Broadway. My main contemporary comedic interests right now are sketch and situation stuff (such as Ali G., Chapelle's Show, Arrested Development, The Daily Show, etc.). The other side of this live stand-up comedy conundrum is that what I really love is to listen to the recordings of comedy club acts on LPs where you can sort of hear the audience, the jokes are political and dated, and totally not as "racey" now as they were in their original contexts.



My interest in stand-up began with an interest in Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory and the conflation of art and politics in the 60s. I was reading a book by Doris Witt called Black Hunger. [I don't remember how I got my hands on it – I think because Witt wrote a chapter on Aunt Jemima and the World's Columbian Exhibition, and I had been ravaging everything about the fair I could find. It was in her book that I read that a 1927 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* featured an advertisement for pancake mix stating: "Aunt Jemima... the tang men hanker for." Witt demonstrated that this sexy slogan was transformed into "the taste we hanker for" in more contemporary versions.]

Anyway, Witt also wrote about the 60s and 70s and the pro- and anti- "soul food" tendencies. This is where I became more aware of Dick Gregory.... as you may know he was a stand up comic but he also ran for President in 1968. In addition, he wrote many books, one of which is his autobiography, titled Nigger. At any rate, my favorite Dick Gregory book is actually Dick Gregory's Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat: Cookin' With Mother Nature. This was of the anti-chittlin's persuasion.



Like Lenny Bruce, whose own autobiography How to Talk Dirty and Influence People was published as a serial in *Playboy*, Dick "Greg" Gregory was also published in *Playboy*. All these great comedians were published in *Playboy* in the sixties... you know "the articles." I know you work with *Playboy* women from the sixties, and basically this whole pre-ramble was a roundabout way of asking my first question, which is this: What is it about the *Playboy* of the Sixties?



And, using Dick Gregory as prototype, what is it about the sixties (and into the 70s) that influences the type of, shall we say, "career paths" of Gregory: stand-up comic, military man, runner, cookbook author / dietician, politician, author, etc....?



Carol: Well, yeah, I started by working with *Playboy* women, but in the beginning I was also looking at the "feel" of the magazine and doing some work about that too. But now I've gone on to work with other aspects of the magazine. Recently I made a sound recording on vinyl of someone reading one of the articles. Which makes me want to initiate a little digression, back to the beginning of your set-up: I love spoken-word on vinyl too. It's not just that the jokes are out of date... I don't know. There is something immediate about a voice speaking in your own physical environment. I think there's something strange and threatening about aural space in a record. Not when

there's music filling it up, but when there are simply human voices speaking – or laughing. Doing regular, non-musical things. I've always found talk radio very threatening like that – where are they? I strain to imagine their environment, but I get nothing. But then, I know the speakers leave the studio and get in their cars and are reintegrated into my world in the US in the year 2005. The speakers in the record are gone, evidence: the political jokes make sense to their audience but not to us. A record is more like its own world too because it's a complete unto itself. The object is crude and attractive, and the mechanism for freeing the voices is crude – not technological magic, more like ancestral magic.

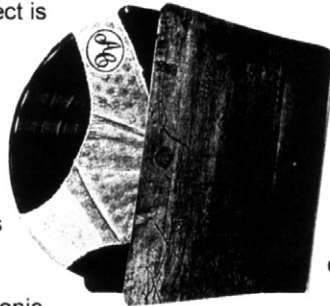


"Frankly, I'd rather be in the United States where they're having a sexual revolution!"



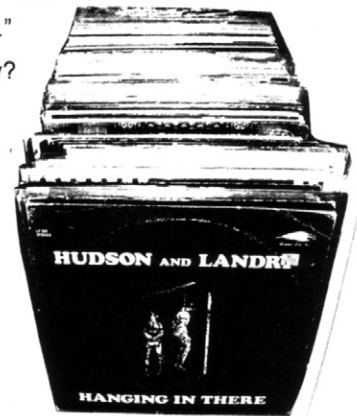
Sara: That's it exactly: the comedy records provide me with a sense of space and atmosphere that is totally different from visiting a comedy club on a Tuesday night. By listening to the records, the club is instantaneously erected in my studio at the drop of a needle. I also don't think that it is only because the jokes are out of date. One thing I always think about when I think about vinyl is the idea that it is one of the most durable data-encoding media we have. Supposedly vinyl will be able to be played by the cockroaches when they're the only life left on earth.

It is the media of the past and the future at the same time, because at this point when all things are digital, the record implies the time capsule. This effect is it's the voice of our ancestors telling us enough to make in acetate and wax. different vernacular than the musical, That you must actively listen, you never knowing which of the 20,000 songs As you say, it really is magical. It's the at Carnegie Hall rather than the Philharmonic both. A different kind of imagination is used. I'm not a "purist," I have an iPod and I love it too, but that's just city practicality.



heightened when it's spoken word... some information that was important The spoken-word record is a totally but they have some things in common. can't put it on shuffle and space out, in your pocket you were just listening to. opposite of symphonic. It's Lenny Bruce there, but the record is the platform for

Carol: I definitely see the appeal of iPods, but I really don't like them. I feel like they extend private property into a very personal realm, which makes me uncomfortable. They're like, "my soundtrack." Sure, you have a special claim to your experience, but does it have to be proprietary? Maybe it would be desirable to work towards heightening the permeability of our individual experiences rather than strengthening the boundaries. I think they're a hideous capitalist plot, actually.



Part of what's interesting about records right now is that they're so cheap and often free. I have the experience of finding records on the street and taking them home to check them out. Or buying them because they look interesting and they're only a dollar. Then you have all these slightly interesting but mostly unlistenable records on to reckon with. On the one hand you have a curiosity about new things and on the other the impulse to curate your collection, organize it, make it esthetically pleasing and also, have it represent you to the people who visit your home. And there's an unwritten rule that you can't throw records away. It's just not done. They have to be sold or given to charity or put on the street. They exist in a special economy because on some level they belong to everyone. Anyway, record collections in the age of iPods tend to be chaotic and dealing with chaos is an important challenge for people. It's like a spiritual practice.

Sara: I think the kind of vinyl-collection practice that you describe above is definitely an ideal one, but is it really the experience you have here in New York City? I find I go on vinyl binges outside of the city and that here, even stoop sales pretend like all vinyl is good or, rather, *collectible* vinyl. People think they should get a premium of \$10 just for alphabetizing the records they sell. My experience of current New York vinyl-specific record market is just that, it's the WFMU record fair rather than a garage sale.

I don't think affection for vinyl and using an iPod are mutually exclusive, but I respect your take on the matter. Not only are record collections chaotic in the age of "all your songs inside a business card," but they are also heavy, physical, dirty, space-consuming and utterly analog (of course, I agree with you, as a collector this is a lovely 'predicament' in which to find yourself – the more the better). I actually bought a little do-hickey that allows the digitization of vinyl (which is useful and cost-effective for my sound pieces) and the package described: "digitize your old record collection." This was an incredibly telling advertisement, the operative word being "old." I guess their marketing department didn't get the memo that vinyl is back.

Back to spoken word, I just finished reading Bob Dylan Chronicles, Volume I. In it, Dylan recalls when he first signed with Columbia Records and the executive John Hammond gave him an as copy of Robert Johnson recordings. One thing that has been sticking with me, light of this conversation we're having, and the idea that these records serve as or tours of another time, is Dylan's description of this Robert Johnson record He details, "[I] put the acetate back in the white cardboard sleeve. It wasn't The only identification was written by hand on the disc itself and what it said name Robert Johnson and a listing of the songs." For me that relates to a of choosing all of the Love records out of my dad's collection (because, as girl, I was attracted to the band name), putting it on the record player my shared, and proceeding to listen to music which sounded to my young ears a tin can and bad vocals, un-listenable. It wasn't until my late teens and was properly introduced to psychedelic and garage music. Now I'm a but Love will always hold a special place in my heart for the memory of that early experience.

ACTUALLY, I LISTENED TO SEAN PENN READ IT - THAT'S WHY IT RELATES TO SPOKEN WORD. -S



yet unreleased especially in time capsules he was given. a printed cover. was simply the memory I have an adolescent brother and I like clanging on twenties that I Nugget-lover,

Carol: That's funny. It reminds me of how my husband describes his young impression of the Rolling Stones: a dirty, dusty, messy tumbleweed. That was the image they evoked. They were unlistenable and... I guess the aesthetic was incomprehensible. Now they're probably one of his favorite bands.

But you're right, there aren't too many cheap records in New York. They're either free or absurdly expensive, like so many things here. But Sara, listen, maybe we should get back to your original question. I feel guilty, like I've been avoiding it because it's rather enormous. Do you mind hacking it down a bit? Or maybe we shouldn't look back? What do you think?

Sara: You're right, you're right. At the moment I'm sitting in the kitchen of my parents new apartment in Chicago. Before I came here I was thinking about *Playboy* and the Playboy headquarters that were here in Chicago. As is so indicative of the time we're living in now, the old Playboy HQ is now known as the "Palmolive Building" condominium development. I checked out their website which states: "the Palmolive Building was home to many more of Chicago's most prestigious firms. Household Financial, The Gillette Safety Razor Co., and the Celotex Co. were tenants, along with Esquire, Good Housekeeping, and Cosmopolitan magazines." There is absolutely no mention of *Playboy*, which was arguably the most famous of historical (and long lasting) tenants. So, I guess the hacked down version of my original question is: what are your feelings about *Playboy* (especially the historical magazine of the sixties)?

Q. What do you think of the mass-circulation periodicals: Time Magazine? Playboy? McCall's? Others?

A: Others is a reactionary publication.

Carol: Even that is such a complex and difficult question. You could generate a huge stack of books about *Playboy* from the early sixties through the mid-seventies just by using it as a prism through which to regard the social and political changes in the US during that time. I guess that's why they're such a source of endless interest to me. I always want to look at history and sociology through material culture. I remember the first day of my first art history class, looking at ancient objects and the instructor's lecturing about the culture that they implied – it totally blew my mind. I remember thinking – how could you teach history in any other way?

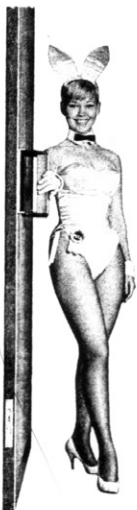
STILL NO E.R.A. →
-EDS.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

E. R. A. Central is an organization for Illinois supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment to constitutionally protect women from legal and economic sex discrimination. Without the help of the Playboy Foundation, E. R. A. Central would probably not be operating at its present level. We are deeply indebted to the Foundation.

Sonia McCallum
E. R. A. Central
Chicago, Illinois

What the reader has to remember about *Playboy* at that time is that the magazine was completely different from how it is now. I mean, I don't know what it's like now exactly – only that it's repellent. But during that period it was very progressive and intelligent. This might be hard to swallow but compared to other mainstream magazines of its day, like *Life* or *Newsweek* or *McCall's* or whatever, *Playboy* is more feminist (or less offensively anti-feminist, however you want to think about it).

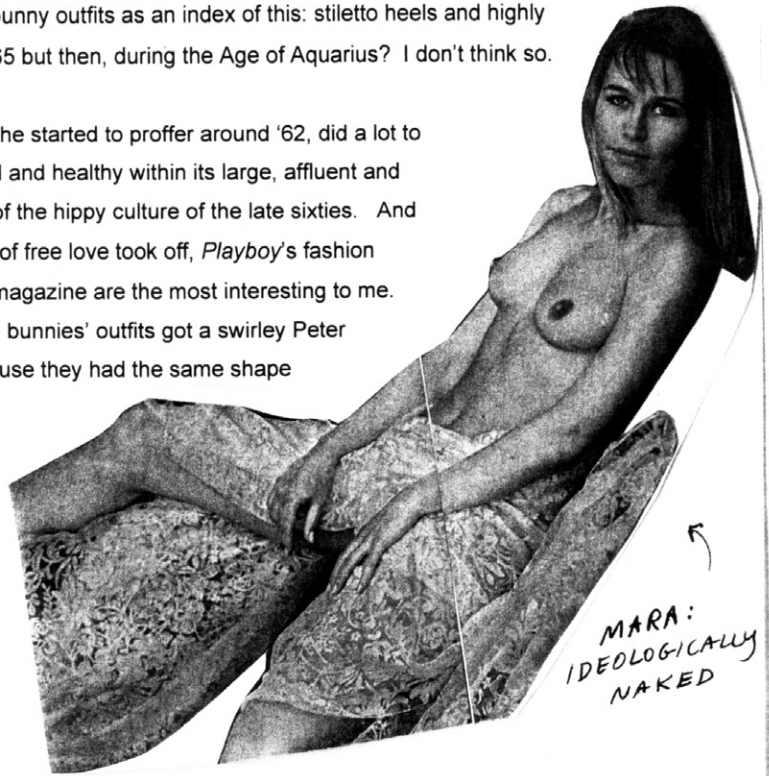


1969

NOT COOL/LAME ————— COOL

Up until '65, that was *Playboy's* time. Imagine the bunny outfits as an index of this: stiletto heels and highly structured lingerie. That is fashionable from '52 – '65 but then, during the Age of Aquarius? I don't think so.

But *Playboy* and Hugh Hefner's "philosophy" which he started to proffer around '62, did a lot to popularize the idea that nudity and sex were normal and healthy within its large, affluent and educated audience. It played a part in the making of the hippy culture of the late sixties. And of course the sexual revolution. But once the idea of free love took off, *Playboy's* fashion moment has passed. These next few years in the magazine are the most interesting to me. *Playboy* struggled to make its image more hip. The bunnies' outfits got a swirly Peter Max pattern. They must have looked so lame because they had the same shape and the same stiff hair and pointy shoes. But the editors cast out in all different directions to try to find their way in this moment of uncertainty – trying to be relevant and progressive but not too far out. My favorite part of the struggle was that some of the women they photographed, with straight, limp hair and no makeup, seem to be naked in this really idealistic way.



Around the same time there are some important Supreme Court rulings about profanity. I'd like to know more about this but it's something I've never managed to research. But that's what allowed other magazines to come along and get way more hardcore. This development also destabilized *Playboy*. I think they must have tried to keep up with *Penthouse* and *Hustler* while trying not to alienate its original readers. It's tone got a lot more sleazy in the mid-seventies and that's where I sort-of lose interest.

