Louis Kaplan, *Photography and Humour*, Reaktion Books, 2017
Chapter 1: Lenses of Laughter

The emergence of social-media sites such as Facebook has brought with it the posting of millions of photographs, but also the risk that these images may be considered offensive, in violation of Facebook's 'Community Standards for Photos' and thereby subject to censorship. While most of the banned images are obscene or pornographic in nature, there are instances in which the instigators turn out to be humorous. This was the case when the presumed 'authorless' photograph known as *Bagel Belly* was taken off the site because it violated a Facebook policy forbidding 'attacks on an individual or a group of people'.[1] While one assumes that the offended party was fat people, thereby lumping the criticism of *Bagel Belly* in with the grotesque realism that pervades Martin Parr's photographs, it is also possible that this image sparked a defensive response from the Jewish community, who wanted to protect the bagel from what it deemed to be a smear campaign. This particular act of censorship by Facebook appeared outrageous to a few online journalists, given the fact that the same website had meanwhile done nothing to take down sensationalist photos or videos featuring inhuman executions and torture.

I personally found the incident shocking, given my own intimate relationship with this image. In 2000 I curated an exhibition dealing with questions of Jewish identity in contemporary art (*Distinguishing Jewish: Contemporary Artists* at the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center in Newton, Massachusetts) that included the controversial *Bagel Belly.* In its original context, the image does not stand by itself because it is actually a four-part photomontage created by the Boston-based artist Jeffu Warmouth (b. 1970), who specializes in culinary sight gags and who clearly enjoys playing with his food. *Bagel Belly* (1999) was part of his larger project *Strictly Kosher Style: Recipes Spiced with Jewish Humor,* which was displayed as large inkjet prints and had a companion cookbook filled with absurd concoctions. In contrast to *Bagel Belly,* most works in Warmouth's series played on the tradition of Jewish jokes that make fun of the stringent dietary laws (keeping kosher) in

the Jewish religion. In the other three parts of *Bagel Belly,* Warmouth spreads cream cheese on his abdomen, only to add some lox as a finishing touch in the last image. It is a grotesque image of the body, worthy of those celebrated by Bakhtin. The original context also makes the piece decidedly more Jewish in culinary terms (with the addition of the smoked salmon) and in comedic terms, in relation to the tradition of Jewish self-mockery, as we encounter the artist making fun of his own protruding pouch. However, there is little doubt that some would find the cannibalistic overtones of Warmouth's sequence somewhat distasteful.

For Warmouth, 'Jewish humor has always been concerned with subverting logic, language, identity, and generally turning things on their head,' and he brings that sensibility to his photomontage practice. He continues: 'Most of the profoundly funny material that really makes me laugh and think at the same time comes out of this tradition.' But the funniest and most incongruous thing to learn about this artist is that he is not actually Jewish. Turning things on their head, Warmouth confounds our expectations of his identity. This extra layer of irony leaves him in an appropriately uncomfortable situation of comic ambivalence. On the one hand, his photographic humour opens him up to the charge that he is making fun of Jewish people, therefore putting him at risk of being considered anti-Semitic. On the other hand, this postmodern artist illustrates the conversancy with and affirmation of Jewish humour that informs his entire creative practice, but that does not rely on Jewish belonging or the fixing of his own identity. In the next chapter, we will examine how photography has been linked to the affirmation of identity in general, as well as how the world of photographic humour has managed to stand this discourse of identity and identification on its head.

References

1. Angelina Bouc, 'Facebook: Beheading Videos No Longer Banned but These 5 Pictures Are', *Guardian Liberty Voice,* 22 October 2013, www.guardianlv.com. According to Bouc, 'This humorous soul thought it funny to create an impression of a bagel from his belly.'

2. Matthew Nash, 'A Conversation with Jeffu Warmouth', *Big Red and Shiny,* 15 May 2005, www.bigredandshiny.org.