

## Studied Stupidity

### Respect to *Da Ali G Show*

Jacob Sullum

"Yo," SAYS THE host, a wannabe rapper named Ali G who wears a tracksuit accessorized with wraparound sunglasses, a Tommy Hilfiger skullcap, and massive amounts of gold jewelry. "Science. What is it all about? Technology. What is *that* all about? Is it good or is it wack?" Thus begins a panel discussion featuring two futurologists, an environmentalist, and a creationist.

Ali G, who speaks a puzzling patois of British slang, hip-hopisms, and Caribbean creole, gets things rolling by describing a friend with a Web site who "ain't got no technology." Later it emerges that Ali G thinks a computer would be stumped if asked to multiply really big numbers and that he considers the human fondness for bananas evidence of evolution. When one of the futurologists says in passing, "We're *Homo sapiens*," Ali G objects: "Hey, I ain't. I don't do that stuff." Even when the discussion veers into accusations concerning the floater someone left in the toilet backstage, with the creationist adamantly disclaiming responsibility, no one has the temerity to suggest that Ali G cannot be for real.

**T**his sort of studied stupidity is the essence of *Da Ali G Show*, the new HBO series created by the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Cohen, who also portrays Borat, a TV host from Kazakhstan, and Bruno, an Austrian fashion reporter, specializes in pushing people's credulousness, politeness, and patience to the limit. Sometimes the results make you squirm, as when the awkward, wildly

inappropriate Borat talks about sex and flamence at a Sons of the American Revolution dinner, punishing his affable hosts for their hospitality. More often, Cohen uses his talents to discomfort people who deserve it, deflating the pretentious and humbling the arrogant.

As Bruno, Cohen gets a fashion designer to contradict himself over and over again without batting an eye, going along with diametrically opposed interpretations of his work. When a spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Administration says marijuana can cost up to \$1,000 an ounce, Ali G tells him he got ripped off and offers to set him up with a less expensive supplier. "What is legal?" Ali G asks former Attorney General Richard Thornburgh. After a brief disquisition on the topic, Ali G has a follow-up: "What is illegal?" Thornburgh does his best with that but is unprepared for the third query: "What is barely legal?" The surreal exchange ends with Ali G recommending a movie that might elucidate the matter.

The genius of Cohen's approach is that he accomplishes more as a moron than he could as a smartass, lampooning the vacuity of talking-head TV and startling his guests into dropping their sound bites. Comedy Central's *Daily Show* (the only newscast I regularly watch) often attempts something similar, with correspondents asking deliberately inane or off-the-wall questions, but the interviewees are rarely famous and their typical response is a blank stare. Cohen strings his guests along much further than *The Daily Show* usually does, and he has managed to arrange interviews with an impressive list of public figures, including former Attorney General Ed Meese (who performs a

rap), former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft (who says we'd never nuke Canada because "we don't want what they have"), former CIA Director James Woolsey (who tries to clear up Ali G's confusion between John F. Kennedy and J.R. Ewing), and Kofi Annan's predecessor at the U.N., whom Ali G overenthusiastically introduces as "Bontros Bontros Bontros Bontros-Ghalt" and asks, "Which is da funniest language?"

In another memorable exchange, Ali G presses former astronaut Buzz Aldrin—who last year punched an overly aggressive conspiracy theorist who asked him to swear on a Bible that the lunar landings were not faked—for a response to the well-known rumors about the Apollo program, just as you're wondering whether Aldrin will take another swing. Ali G asks the question on everyone's mind: Does the moon exist?

Ali G's guests can't really win. If they calmly endure his dumb questions and stubborn incomprehension they may end up looking silly, and if they show their irritation they risk coming across as jerks. Still, the ways different people respond to the challenge can be revealing.

Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop is condescending throughout his interview, making no effort to conceal his contempt for this buffoon who thinks the penis is a bone and who wonders what it would be like to have a mobile phone surgically implanted in his chest. "You're stupid," Koop says. "You just don't know what you're talking about." For those of us who've always thought America's Family Doctor was a pompous ass, this exchange is a special treat.





By contrast, *Inside the Actors Studio* host James Lapron handles himself surprisingly well. He does not go along with everything Ali G says (he firmly objects to the term *bo*, for example), but he's a good sport. After rejecting a rap that Ali G has composed for him, he writes and performs one of his own. It turns out he's a better rapper than his host—which isn't saying much.

Alpha Nader, too, does better than you might expect. When Ali G argues that "you'd have to be absolutely mental" to live in the rainfor-

est, what with "all these monkeys ploppin' on your 'ead," Nader replies, "First of all, the monkeys aren't eager to search out these natives and plop on them." In response to Ali G's suggestion that people's "natural gases" could be harnessed as a source of energy, Nader says, "Well, you already have tens of millions of cattle, but they haven't figured out how to put a box on their asshole." Despite this adroit performance, according to *Newsweek*, "Nader's people were so furious after Ali G got him to rap during an interview that one aide reportedly said it might be grounds for a

lawsuit"—presumably for intentional infliction of rhythmic distress.

Since *Da Ali G Show* hinges on attracting guests who have never heard of Ali G, it may not last long. Cohen got to be so well-known in Britain that he had to bring his act to the U.S. The upside is that there's little chance the show will be spoiled by good ratings, coasting along after its peak. The more successful Cohen is, the sooner he'll have to stop. ■

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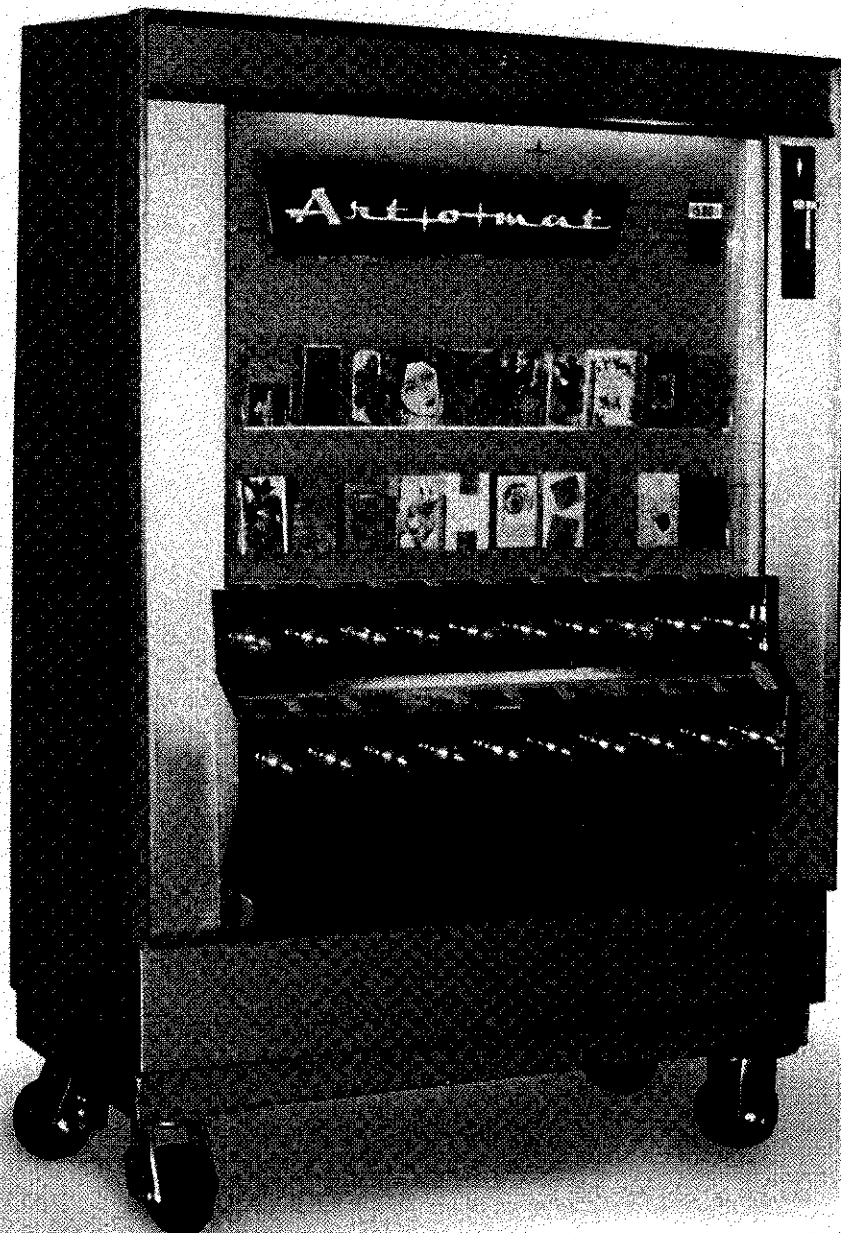
## The Pull of Culture

*Charles Paul Freund*

YES, THAT'S A cigarette machine, or at least it was. The goods it currently vends aren't packs of butts; they're works of art. Each is about the size of a Lucky Strike package, and you buy it by inserting your coins and yanking on the machine.

This is an Art\*o\*mat\*. The first one was born, appropriately, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the 1997 creation of artist Clark Whittington. There are now more than 40 scattered across the country (this one's in Massachusetts) dispensing photos, paintings, sculpture, assemblages, and other "artpacks" in various retail settings. Art\*o\*mat's sponsoring organization, Artists in Cellophane, says the effort "combines the worlds of art and commerce." The group "wants to make art approachable" and asks, "What better way to do this, than with a heavy cold steel machine?"

Good question. The machines manage to combine tobacco nostalgia with retro design (many Art\*o\*mat's come from landfills), and there's nothing like an obsolete machine to reveal how design humanizes technology within a period's values. The effect only increases with outlawed machines, because the old "humanizing" values are forbidden. Art\*o\*mat's make their art approachable by literally commodifying it. Caution: This could become habit forming. ■



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