Margaret Cho is subversive. Other people may rant about changing the world, but Cho is intent on doing it through laughter, truth, and mirrors. Her finger is on that light switch in your brain, ever poised to flick it on when you get the joke, sending currents of empowerment through your system so you never look at yourself or the world in the same way again.

Sure, Cho is brash, unabashedly sexual, foul-mouthed and brazenly political. She gets your attention. And, by flaunting her curves, her hard-earned triumphs and her crushing failures, Cho offers herself as a stand-in for those too frightened to admit their flaws or confront their secrets. Her seemingly casual and embarrassingly honest observational humor lures you in, seduces you into identification with her very ordinary humanness, then shocks you with her version of "truth or dare." Suddenly you realize you're laughing about racism, sexism, homophobia, and the dictatorship of image. And, couched in the context of humor, Cho gives you permission to find, create, and be yourself, too.

Cho assumes a certain cleverness in her audience. A fan of Olivia Newton-John, her 1999 comedy concert film, I'm The One That I Want, is loosely based on the Grease hit song, with the Cho-twist of embracing and promoting self-esteem. A fan of hip-hop, her 2001 film, Notorious C.H.O. is a reference to the late Biggie Smalls, a.k.a. "Notorious B.I.G.", who was believed killed as part of the 1997 East Coast-West Coast rap wars which earlier resulted in the murder of singer Tupac Shakur. In a short video on her website, Cho talks about attending the recent March to Save Women's Lives rally in Washington D.C. where she tried to pick a fight with some Mennonite protesters. "I tried to step up," she says. "I brought the thug-element." She later apologize when she realized the women were non-violent.

Cho's most recent concert CD and film, Revolution, is a more obscure reference to Latin American revolutionary icon, Che Guevera. The block poster-art cover shot of Cho wearing a black beret with a red star in the center duplicates the portrait of Che made famous after his 1967 murder by Bolivian army soldiers, believed to have been lead and trained by the CIA. Che Guevera, writes Richard M. Ruiz on a website devoted to the martyr, "was a man of conscience, a crusader against injustice, oppression and misery. [He] was a man concerned for the poor, not a demagogue. He was a symbol of rebellion against hypocrisy, injustice, human suffering and a
society without soul."

It is this to which Cho, the idealist, aspires. But Cho the pragmatist realizes that any good worldwide revolution of peace and love, in the John Lennon-Yoko Ono sense, must begin first with the self, and then in coalition with others who are marginalized at home.

"There has to be a revolution," Cho tells the Lesbian News when asked about the title of her latest work. "I think we're in the midst of one and what we need is a reminder of the fact that we are The People. This is fact — not a Civil War, but a Revolutionary War — on many fronts. Of course, we have the war in Iraq but we also have this cultural war going on with the limiting of freedom of speech and limiting of human rights and civil rights on a grand scale — from women's rights on to gay and lesbian rights on to free speech."

This Lesbian News interview occurred before the release of the shocking pictures of Iraqi prisoners being abused by U.S. military prison guards in Abu Ghrabi prison and before the beheading of American Nicholas Berg by Muslim extremists, which Cho wrote about in her daily blog (www.margaretcho.com). But Cho was both matter of fact and smolderingly angry about how the war in Iraq is being conducted "with such malice and indignity" and the dearth of information about what's really happening in that country.

"It's a case of cutting off our nose to spite our face," Cho says of the American prosecution of the war. "It's a very tragic thing. We're not hearing and seeing enough of the depth and breadth of the death there, as well. Most importantly, we're not honoring all of the people who are still over there, who are mostly children — 18, 19 years old — who I correspond with. I correspond with a lot of different people whose freedoms have been compromised. They're people who are just scared; who don't want to be there, who want to come home, who hate what's happening and hate the fact that they have to do it. They experience death every single day. One of their friends dies every day."

Cho is also involved with a project called the West Memphis Three which was created to try to correct an injustice organizers believe occurred to three young men who did not receive adequate criminal representation. "[These] are three young men who were charged with murder over a decade ago," says Cho. "One of them is on death row waiting for execution and the other two are serving consecutive life sentences for a crime they didn't commit. They didn't have the advantage of solid, good forensic technology that we do now. I'm in very close contact with the person awaiting execution, Damien Echols. They came to my attention with the documentaries Paradise Lost, One and Two, and there are two feature films in production now about the case. Many public figures have come forward to speak out against what has happened to them. Basically, the point of it all is these kids were convicted out of a sense of "satanic panic" that gripped that part of west Arkansas. Since they listened to heavy metal music and died their hair black, they were somewhat outcasts in this very small community and therefore were blamed for a heinous crime. [Police] have not done anything to find the true killers, who are still at large, and so have ruined these men's lives as well. This is a major atrocity of justice."

The case is on-going, says Cho, who is surprised that "for whatever reason, it is not completely being taken for the gravity of what it is." Some very knowledgeable people have told her that, "if
you're in the wrong state, you'll die — whether you're innocent or guilty. There are places in this
country where there are major problems with the justice system. We have many cases of racial
profiling, or class profiling or an almost popularity kind of profiling. Ridiculous things are
happening in our nation today. My tours, my shows, all of my writing on my weblog, my work
with the Democratic National Campaign to get gay and lesbian voters out to vote, and my
activism to win the right to same-sex marriage, is all about the latest in the cultural war."

Cho's outspokenness and activism have garnered admirers, fans, critics, and hate mail, especially
after her appearance at a Moveon.org benefit last January. Online gossip Matt Drudge posted two
minutes of her 20 minute set on his website, which was subsequently picked up by the
conservative freerepublic.com. Apparently, readers of that site took the comedy act to be an anti-
Bush speech and assailed her with an avalanche of hate mail. The situation was further inflamed
when New York Daily News columnist Lloyd Grove took a quote out of context from Cho's
weblog, provided links to Drudge and Free Republic and that then was picked up by Fox TV's
Bill O'Reilly.

"GOOK CUNT, You fat ass slant eyed WHORE. YOU SUCK LIBERAL COCK, " Nero wrote
on Jan. 23 under the subject head, "Your cool."

"Never heard of you before seeing the item on the Drudge Report. Where did you learn such foul
language? Went to your website and soon discovered that you are queer, too. Get a life, will
you," wrote Hank, who identifies as a "Concerned Citizen."

"I find it hilarious that you get so offended when someone attacks you. You liberals are so
hypocritical, you use f-word laced rant when talking about George Bush and you cry like the fat
pig you are when someone does the same to you. I wish nothing but the worse for you and will
be praying that you develop cancer or AIDS. God Bless," Peter wrote under the subject head, "I
think your great."

The following month, in February, a young conservative group demanded that a Houston, Texas
comedy club cancel Cho's show or they would picket. The threat seemed to inspire the
comedienne.

"I am now more excited than ever to meet y'all," Cho wrote on her weblog. "Personally, if you
are going to picket a show, fine, but the fact that you are picketing my show, means you are
stepping up to me, which means some very bad things could possibly happen to you... The great
fanbase I have built up over many years can fucking fight. They will throw down in a fucking
split second, and really I don't want to sec any of you protesters get hurt. Queens do not play.
They will fucking kill you. Lesbians know how to throw a punch that will leave a very large
bruise, and aren't opposed to kicking protesting men right in the balls. The underrepresented,
unvoiced, ignored part of our population, the great many that make up the Cho Army are
something you are unaware of, and pretty much the gang not to fuck with. We are the baddest
motherfuckers on the block. I don't want to see you protesters get injured, emotionally or
physically. I don't want to see a drag queen make you cry. Which will happen, if you actually do
show up with picket signs and all your protester accessories." However, Cho wrote, she and her
The bottom line, Cho tells the Lesbian News, is that she will not relinquish her rights as an American citizen, especially the right to freedom of expression and speech.

"It all leads back to one thing, one idea," Cho says," we are all Founding Fathers of this nation. We all need to take on the responsibility to be American. That doesn't mean that we can just exist and watch it on TV and reality shows. That kind of popular culture is what it is and it's as popular as it is because people don't want real reality. They want a kind of reduced reality because real reality is a little bit too hard to face.

"Real reality now is about being an American and really facing the truth about America and that we have lost so many of the things that were laid out for us. We have lost the message that Patrick Henry set forth ["Give me liberty or give me death."] We need these people back. We need to be these people, basically, whoever we are and claim the right to be that — whether we are women, or people of color or gay or what have you. It is a responsibility to all Americans that we have an opinion about what's happening and be well informed about what's happening and do something. That is really the main intent [of her work]. It's non-partisan, though it's clearly probably liberal. But even more than that — it's revolutionary."

Cho is keenly aware that comedians are on the frontlines in the current government crack down on freedom of speech after Janet Jackson's breast was exposed during a live performance at the Superbowl.

"This is something all artists face, not only comedians," Cho says. "And the media, too. These new FCC [Federal Communication Commission] rulings would effect journalism — all broadcasts. It's really an upsetting thing because the new guidelines are so old about what is blasphemous speech. The ideas of guidelines for what is considered rude and offensive speech is just a real departure from what we have now which is a kind of vague place where anything is fair game and fineable and, therefore, censored."

Cho says she is helping with a petition to the FCC "to explain and lay down hard and fast rules as there were before, not to have this gray area, not to limit freedom of speech as they see fit," she says. "This gives them way to much leeway about what the government feels is acceptable and what they don't. To define indecency is a kind of fairly individualized, ethical thing. But there are certain things, like dirty words, or whatever, and if we just stuck to those, which we were doing before, at least everyone would know what the guidelines are."

Love is a fairly individualized thing, too. Having slept with both men and women and gained icon status as one of the country's premiers "fag hags," Cho says she has now been married to artist Al Ridenour for one year. "I'm a part of the gay community. This is my community," Cho says. "But my own sexuality is not really questionable. My politics go hand in hand with what I am and what I fight for are the same thing. I've had relationships with people of both sexes and I find them equally disappointing. There's no particular favorite. There's no front-runner. I just happened to marry somebody that I love. And I want those rights and the joy of wedded bliss for my brothers and sisters. It's the same thing. It's not about sexuality. It's about politics. It's about
equality. I totally think that that is such a beautiful thing. Because we all are — we're all gay, we're all straight, we're all everything. We are the people. We are the world, as they say."

As the Lesbian News goes to press, Cho is scheduled to help officiate with West Hollywood Mayor John Duran in a mock same-sex wedding ceremony at the Abbey Restaurant. She hopes that participants of both sexes will wear her "High Class Cho" same-sex wedding gowns.

Cho acknowledges that she is now less frenetic and more centered. "I think it's just experience, age, politics, knowledge — a sense of acceptance about taking on a role beyond entertainment, but still being entertainment. I think it's just an ease. It feels natural," she says. "I'm sure I am centered. I feel it, although I'm kind of a globetrotter. It's a jarring life. So it's the storm and I am still. Isn't that the Jennifer Lopez ad for her perfume? Amidst the storm, I am still. I adopt that slogan from her fragrance."

When asked what this election means to her, Cho replies: "It's pretty much life or death, as far as I'm concerned," Cho says. "We have to have a new administration. We have to have political reform quickly — a sense of honesty, and respect for the people, which is vital to the survival of our nation. We have to fight all together. It's not about putting these issues on the back burner. The same-sex issue is just as important as the civil rights movement in the 1960s was for people of color. This is our Stonewall — again. We actually have to have another one on an even larger scale. We must Stonewall this administration!"

Cho's two previous concert films are airing on Showtime through June and Revolution, taped last year during her performance at the Wiltern Theater in Los Angeles, will premier on the Sundance Channel on June 19. She is scheduled to introduce the film at a special Outfest preview on June 10 at the Regent Showcase (213-480-7067 or www.outfest.org) and she will be a guest on The Late Show with David Letterman on June 18. The Revolution CD is available in stores and through her website (www.margaretcho.com). The DVD will be available on Aug. 17, just as she prepares to launch her new "State of Emergency" tour. She promises to tour in all the political "battleground" states to help elect Democrats in November. LN

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Margaret Cho on her weblog in response to hate mail she received.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Karen Ocamb