

| [SEARCH BLOG](#) | | [FLAG BLOG](#) | [Next Blog](#)>
[Create Blog](#) | [Sign In](#)

TEXTIMAGEPOEM

MONDAY, OCTOBER 09, 2006

Olchar E. Lindsann

Cheating Art History:
Strategies in the Fight Against Modernism
by Olchar E. Lindsann

We are crunched against a wall, of this there is no denial; but the war against Modernism, though it is now a guerrilla war, is not yet lost. Like all regimes, it can be toppled. Dada planted a disease in the heart of Modernism 89 years ago; Modernism believes that it has metabolized this disease, neutralized it through the false alias of "Post-"Modernism, and that by injecting a new "post-" into its name every decade, it can remain immunized against the cells of anarchy which lay dormant, yet are spread through every fiber of its system. But those cells DO still exist, and there is no clearing them away. We must reactivate these cells, give them new energy to work their creative malice, and when the system topples, all the "post-s" in the world will not cushion its fall. The invention of "Post-Modernism," the Emperor's new clothes, the new name for an old and disfigured face, has taken the bite out of the innovations of Anti-Art; but it has also taken the bite out of Modernism itself. Bloating on its own complacency and the sprawling system of easy misrepresentation in which it has couched itself, Modernism no longer remembers what it is to fight; but we few who remain alive to the creative spirit have been fighting for generations in the dark of night, passing the torch from chosen few to desperate fewer. If we can wake up the artistic chattel and help them to turn once again into artists, we can force Modernism to fight again; and then will come the fatal blow, and art can be taken out of the markets and shoved down humanity's throat once more.

ABOUT ME



JIM LEFTWICH
ROANOKE, VIRGINIA,
UNITED STATES

[VIEW MY COMPLETE
PROFILE](#)

LINKS

[ubuweb](#)
[john held jr](#)
[light & dust](#)
[european free improv](#)
[restructures](#)
[writing systems](#)
[osu rare books & manuscripts](#)
[situationist international](#)
[dada](#)
[sztuka-fabryka](#)
[eclipse books](#)
[ron silliman](#)
[electronic poetry center](#)
[alchemy](#)
[electronic book review](#)
[eliterature vol. 1](#)
[jim andrews](#)
[vispoets](#)
[tom taylor](#)
[scott macleod](#)

In other essays, published in *The Appropriated Press* and *Antiglobe*, I have treated the system of Modernism, so pervasive that many think it dead. But behind all the empty babble of relativism (a cowardly alternative to da, da, da) and social critique (a myopic farce dangling from the legs of academies and galleries) is the same positivist assumption, of poetry, art, music, and criticism as puerile and self-centered expression or infantile “exploration”; of art bound down with chains of content, art bound and gagged and enslaved by its own creator, whored out as a commodity of thought or of money; of art as a social practice rather than a multivalent, amoral, vital creative force. “Post-”Modernism claims to oppose false ideas of universality yet claims to be the universal state of current self-reflexive art; it claims to have ended our chains to history yet ties itself to an ostensibly different historical moment; a “truly” non-historicized artistic discourse would be that which existed prior to Modernism: the plurality of thousands of discourses which (Post)Modernist discourse arbitrarily labels as “Traditional,” i.e. “before” Modernism (the great Post-fetish) and therefore all essentially indistinguishable. I have shown that the struggle in which we are engaged will not be an easy one; that Modernism has at its disposal all the (un)intellectual forces of a limp and apathetic society, and that this apathy is what makes its weapons so effective. I will not recapitulate these arguments here; the apathy must end now. These essays can be found in the publications listed or obtained without cost by contacting the “author” through whatever publication you are now reading. Let me simply reassert that the present incarnation of Art History (in its broad, multidisciplinary sense) stands as the misinformation wing, the propaganda office of the Modernist machine. It is through the artificial severing of tradition-making from art-making, and through the twisted, criminally selective “history” of the “progression” of the arts handed down by the academic Art Historians, that all awareness of any credible alternative to the small-minded view of the creative project which has been dominant for the better part of the past century, has been eliminated from the minds of the drooling masses of half-assed “artists” in their various disciplines; and without awareness of that opposition, their own basic beliefs devolve to mere animal assumptions.

How are we to combat this system that has either assimilated or

[john m. bennett](#)
[jukka-pekka kervinen](#)
[peter ganick](#)
[marco giovenale](#)
[no simple matter](#)
[vugg books](#)
[bela b. grimm](#)
[mgbon](#)
[thierry tillier](#)
[anna christina](#)
[claudio parentela](#)
[slobodan skerovic](#)
[reed altemus](#)
[david baptiste chirot](#)
[pierpaolo limongelli](#)
[textimagepoetry sets](#)
[parade of animals](#)
[scores improvisations texts](#)
[znet](#)
[noam chomsky](#)
[thirdworldtraveler](#)
[tomdispatch](#)
[otoliths](#)
[epidermis](#)
[blue lion books](#)
[xPress\(ed\)](#)
[cPress](#)
[eight page press](#)
[Edit-Me](#)
[Edit-Me](#)

PREVIOUS POSTS

[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 001](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 002](#)

trampled out every threat since the 1920s? I intend to offer several actions and techniques for this purpose. But first, broadly, let me assert the malice of one major mindset which we must break both in ourselves and in others in order to carry out yet another offensive. We must obliterate intellectual apathy. We must destroy all apathy of course, but the greatest advantage that Modernism sports is that, by and large, its practitioners are too lazy even to know what is at stake. They do not question the party line they have been given by the academy, and so fail to realize that they support it. This apathy takes the form of a slavish docility in the face of critical and historical authority. Modernism preens itself for its resistance to authority; yet it is authority. It is taught in the schools, published in the books, and allows itself to be set against only one term- the "traditional," which is in fact not a school or ideology at all but the result of an arbitrary division devised by Modernist art history to eliminate the idea that more than two parties might exist; to make all movements opposed to it either reactionary, or else implicitly "Modernist" despite their revolt, simply because they happen to employ "new" techniques such as assemblage or fractured syntax. The fact that this arbitrary and artificial dichotomy (which, for instance, causes students to fail to see the continuity of revolt that progresses in a straight line from Keats to Mallarme to Tzara to Debord) has been allowed to stand so long, has been one contribution to Modernism's longevity. Symbolists and Anti-Artists, Classicists and Post-Structuralists must unite in their bid to topple the crown, and then restore the fight to equal grounds between all of the hundreds of parties who know what is at stake. As we shall see, this slavishness to authority surfaces, and can be combated, in other ways as well.

The fight has never been easy, and it will not become so. We will, most likely, not see the fall in our lifetimes; but we can eat away, we can start the cancer gnawing again at Modernism's core, we can, perhaps, pass along a brighter torch to the next generation. As the past 80 years have shown, the first weapons employed in this fight- new techniques, new materials, outright attacks on current taste- are no longer enough. The fact of innovation is no longer threatening, drawn into the mask of "post"Modernism. Different measures are called for- more insidious measures, measures which seep silently into the structures of discourse itself, or into the brains of those who participate, infecting

[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 007](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 008](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 009](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 012](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 013](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 014](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 016](#)
[ficus strangulensis & tom taylor 017](#)

.....

ARCHIVE S

[05/15/2005 - 05/22/2005](#)
[05/22/2005 - 05/29/2005](#)
[05/29/2005 - 06/05/2005](#)
[06/05/2005 - 06/12/2005](#)
[06/12/2005 - 06/19/2005](#)
[06/19/2005 - 06/26/2005](#)
[06/26/2005 - 07/03/2005](#)
[07/03/2005 - 07/10/2005](#)
[07/10/2005 - 07/17/2005](#)
[07/17/2005 - 07/24/2005](#)
[07/24/2005 - 07/31/2005](#)
[07/31/2005 - 08/07/2005](#)
[08/07/2005 - 08/14/2005](#)
[08/14/2005 - 08/21/2005](#)
[08/21/2005 - 08/28/2005](#)
[08/28/2005 - 09/04/2005](#)
[09/04/2005 - 09/11/2005](#)
[09/11/2005 - 09/18/2005](#)
[09/18/2005 - 09/25/2005](#)
[09/25/2005 - 10/02/2005](#)
[10/02/2005 - 10/09/2005](#)
[10/09/2005 - 10/16/2005](#)
[10/16/2005 - 10/23/2005](#)
[10/23/2005 - 10/30/2005](#)

them with vital creation. Many of the techniques I lay out here are of this type; many are tried and true, but have been too nearly stamped out under Modernism's reign of Apathy. Some of these techniques are tactical, specific, and others are strategic; all can do their part. One tactic has already been employed as a guiding device of this very essay: we must claim language as our own. One can see that my own definition of "Modernism" differs greatly from the various (all admittedly vague and slippery) definitions given by various tracts of art history and criticism. Through many writings over the course of the Post-NeoAbsurdist tradition, the word has been resituated within our own discourse, a discourse autonomous from that practiced by mainstream art criticism and history. Thus not only do I signify through language (the very stuff of thought) my refusal to confine myself to terms (both the "terminology" and by implication the very founding terms of discourse) of this inherited system; not only do I assert myself as a creative force whose duty it is to actively engage with language; I also free the word, and by implication all words, from the tyranny of narrow Modernist ideas of "definition" somehow free from context; "Modernist" in Post-NeoAbsurdist discourse has no definition; only associations. One can see the same process in the Dada employment of "spontaneity." Neologisms constitute new weapons; re-situated or "re-defined" words represent aggressive raids on the linguistic stockpiles of the enemy. Dada itself is an (anti-)ideology founded in the floating neologism, the germinate syllables continually ripe for the potentiality that Modernism, in terror of the void that is life, must crush at all costs. Neologisms, and old words newly cast, spread confusion; and in this confusion, the creative spirit has a fighting chance to grow, freed from the habitual apathy in which it is held by the mind too certain of the lies to which it unknowingly subscribes. Do not let the Modernist terror of authority thwart you here! "Only Shakespeare can coin new words; I'm no Shakespeare." Everybody coined new words in Shakespeare's day, whether they were Shakespeares or no; and without these lesser minds' neologisms, Shakespeare might not have had the courage*. Again, Modernist History squeezes our minds into a pinhole; a "stable" and peaceable vocabulary, in the broad range of human experience over millennia, is the exception, not the rule. Our minds are narrow because the languages through which they work are artificially constrained in their

10/30/2005 - 11/06/2005
 11/06/2005 - 11/13/2005
 11/13/2005 - 11/20/2005
 11/20/2005 - 11/27/2005
 12/04/2005 - 12/11/2005
 12/11/2005 - 12/18/2005
 12/18/2005 - 12/25/2005
 12/25/2005 - 01/01/2006
 01/01/2006 - 01/08/2006
 01/08/2006 - 01/15/2006
 01/15/2006 - 01/22/2006
 01/22/2006 - 01/29/2006
 01/29/2006 - 02/05/2006
 02/05/2006 - 02/12/2006
 02/12/2006 - 02/19/2006
 02/19/2006 - 02/26/2006
 02/26/2006 - 03/05/2006
 03/05/2006 - 03/12/2006
 03/12/2006 - 03/19/2006
 03/19/2006 - 03/26/2006
 03/26/2006 - 04/02/2006
 04/02/2006 - 04/09/2006
 04/09/2006 - 04/16/2006
 04/16/2006 - 04/23/2006
 04/23/2006 - 04/30/2006
 04/30/2006 - 05/07/2006
 05/07/2006 - 05/14/2006
 05/14/2006 - 05/21/2006
 05/21/2006 - 05/28/2006
 05/28/2006 - 06/04/2006
 06/04/2006 - 06/11/2006
 06/11/2006 - 06/18/2006
 06/18/2006 - 06/25/2006
 06/25/2006 - 07/02/2006
 07/02/2006 - 07/09/2006

compass.

Confusion and anarchy are friends to us in this fight, because our enemies are torpor and self-satisfaction. It must be our constant mission to destroy this self-satisfaction by pointing out and making untenable, as nearly as possible, the gaps in the canon and discourses that too many take as complete. A tactical goal here is, of course, to wield our own canon, to expose artists or theorists who have been unjustly excluded; but the larger, strategic goal is not to replace another incomplete canon with our own incomplete canon; it is to destroy the very notion of a definitive or even adequate canon. Every canon must be the result of an intentional and polemic stance. To this purpose we can sprinkle our texts and objects with obscure and hermetic references, and NOT explain them, NOT apologize for their lying outside mainstream discourse and canon; only in this way can we show that these traditions are not inherently deviant, nor mere offshoots of the greater system, but are in fact autonomous and equally valid, equally deserving of an assumption of prior engagement; if you can expect everyone to know Van Gogh, I can expect everyone to know Hugo Ball. I may be wrong; so may you. This, of course, is also another stand against apathy: when you don't understand me, go look it up, or ignore it with the knowledge that here is a tradition with which you are unfamiliar.

From employing unashamedly, if not intentionally obscure specific references, it is a short step to taking the same attitude toward theoretical and discursive writing in general. Again, this very essay can serve as an example of this stratagem, but so can theoretical writings from every period from the ancient Greeks until the great stagnation that was the 1950s. What we too often think of as defining critical writing itself are in fact conventions whose domination, though not presence, goes back merely half a century. I might cite: the assumption that theory and criticism should feign objectivity or evenhandedness, that its polemic should be hidden under the scraped skin of a sheep; or going farther, that it should be reasonable or even responsible to any standard outside the championing of its own vision of the creative life; that it should be syntactically coherent; that it should not be narrative; that it should, in fact, be written at all, in the narrow sense of the term; that its aim should be to convince someone of some kind of truth; that the intention is to be right. I might point to the

07/09/2006 - 07/16/2006
 07/16/2006 - 07/23/2006
 07/23/2006 - 07/30/2006
 07/30/2006 - 08/06/2006
 08/06/2006 - 08/13/2006
 08/13/2006 - 08/20/2006
 08/20/2006 - 08/27/2006
 08/27/2006 - 09/03/2006
 09/03/2006 - 09/10/2006
 09/10/2006 - 09/17/2006
 09/17/2006 - 09/24/2006
 09/24/2006 - 10/01/2006
 10/01/2006 - 10/08/2006
 10/08/2006 - 10/15/2006
 10/15/2006 - 10/22/2006
 10/22/2006 - 10/29/2006
 10/29/2006 - 11/05/2006
 11/05/2006 - 11/12/2006
 11/12/2006 - 11/19/2006
 11/19/2006 - 11/26/2006
 11/26/2006 - 12/03/2006
 12/03/2006 - 12/10/2006
 12/10/2006 - 12/17/2006
 12/17/2006 - 12/24/2006
 12/24/2006 - 12/31/2006
 12/31/2006 - 01/07/2007
 01/07/2007 - 01/14/2007
 01/14/2007 - 01/21/2007
 01/21/2007 - 01/28/2007
 01/28/2007 - 02/04/2007
 02/04/2007 - 02/11/2007
 02/11/2007 - 02/18/2007
 02/18/2007 - 02/25/2007
 02/25/2007 - 03/04/2007
 03/04/2007 - 03/11/2007

theory and criticism of William Blake, of Tristan Tzara, of Al Ackerman, of Gertrude Stein, all of whom have developed critical modes in which coherence or univalence play secondary parts at best. Are they polemic? Undoubtedly; but what is the object of polemic? art, poetry, art... The present Party Line** toward criticism easily dispenses with opposition through appeal to its own authority. Other modes of discourse are thus labeled as frivolous or "impure" since the specific mode in favour is seen not as a mode, but as an objective standard. A work of theory or criticism is still a text, and is still, if valid, associated with the (anti-)ideologies upon which it lives. It cannot say one thing and do another. It must respond to its host (for criticism is a kind of lovely parasite) in kind, it must not only argue for, but become and exhibit that for which it stands. Otherwise it does not engage in the creative drive, it merely "examines;" and this is a species of cowardly apathy. We might look at the polemics of Tzara, but might equally look to Coleridge's Organic Form. Yet we must not lose subtlety in this mad rush; there many ways of adapting the discourse to the mission, some more subtle than others; and some, perhaps, insidious and sly; every art, every poetics, every (anti-)philosophy has an infinite number of discourses gestating in its womb.

And if discourse is as pliant as I argue; if it can be fashioned into an infinite variety of weapons; then it stands to (anti-)reason that we should learn to use as many of these weapons as possible, to turn them, if need be, against their makers. There are several reasons that this course should be, at the least, considered by anyone struggling in this cause. One is essentially personal- is it not the job of the artist to develop every technique which might be employed in the creative project, as much as is in heris power? But more to our present topic: being able to clothe oneself in this discourse allows one to wriggle into the midst of a room of vipers, to quietly offer the fruit of life to the brighter examples in the crowds therein. The false aura of discourse works both ways; if you know the linguistic systems which feed the giant of Modernism like arteries and veins, you can subtly infect them with the virus of life, you can, in short, become a plant, a double-agent; and, of course, knowing the language, convert some of the undeniably intelligent and promising people just waiting to see the light of real art. *** And then, the falsely self-justifying function of this system could be turned against it. The pharmakon could be slid

03/11/2007 - 03/18/2007
 03/18/2007 - 03/25/2007
 03/25/2007 - 04/01/2007
 04/01/2007 - 04/08/2007
 04/08/2007 - 04/15/2007
 04/15/2007 - 04/22/2007
 04/22/2007 - 04/29/2007
 04/29/2007 - 05/06/2007
 05/06/2007 - 05/13/2007
 05/13/2007 - 05/20/2007
 05/20/2007 - 05/27/2007
 05/27/2007 - 06/03/2007
 06/03/2007 - 06/10/2007
 06/10/2007 - 06/17/2007
 06/17/2007 - 06/24/2007
 06/24/2007 - 07/01/2007
 07/01/2007 - 07/08/2007
 07/08/2007 - 07/15/2007
 07/15/2007 - 07/22/2007
 07/22/2007 - 07/29/2007
 07/29/2007 - 08/05/2007
 08/05/2007 - 08/12/2007
 08/12/2007 - 08/19/2007
 08/19/2007 - 08/26/2007
 08/26/2007 - 09/02/2007
 09/02/2007 - 09/09/2007
 09/09/2007 - 09/16/2007
 09/16/2007 - 09/23/2007
 09/23/2007 - 09/30/2007
 09/30/2007 - 10/07/2007
 10/07/2007 - 10/14/2007
 10/14/2007 - 10/21/2007
 10/21/2007 - 10/28/2007
 10/28/2007 - 11/04/2007
 11/04/2007 - 11/11/2007

into the veins. What might this recipe for creative freedom be? What might some hypothetical mad linguistic scientist carry in his syringes? The possibilities are endless; we must think of what Modernism abhors; we must inject a vacuum.

The object of Modernist critical dialogue? Truth. Truth as consistency, Truth as a magical chain mooring creative energy and potentiality to "the world,"**** (another name for a blank page, canvas, uncharged silence). This is why we find, as the most unassailable, the most holy and venerated, if unspoken, commandment of (Post-)Modernist Theory and Criticism: Thou Shalt Not Lie. The dominant discourse has signed an uneasy truce with Derrida and Barthes, and will tolerate a certain amount of creative play within discursive texts, giving a little in order to keep the aesthetic proletariat happy. But the Lie is still anathema; toy with it and you will discover that the Inquisition does, in fact, still exist. Who will be the intrepid martyr who plunges it into the discourse's heart as he is torn asunder?

Yet there are other discourses, those we create, where it can be utilized- always responsibly (responsible, as I have noted, only to the creative drive itself), yet employed. After all, what is an art object, in any discipline, but a beautifully woven system of life-giving lies that burst with potentiality? What are we but the particular lies we have each chosen to live by? And- of course- what better way to breed the chaos that creation breathes? If the act of theorizing, of criticizing, is to become a creative act, then lies, in the sense that I have just implied- fictions narrative or rhetorical- become inevitable, for they are the stuff from which art is made. The threat, then, comes not in the lie itself, which is simply a species of something native to EVERY text; the threat is in the breaking down of barriers between criticism as conceived as Truth, as that-which-is-or-may-be, and art, that-which-is-not-yet-is. You do not lie- you collapse the world (the realm of truth) into the world of art (the realm of creation).

And if any reservation about this tactic remains in you, I put to you the following question: if one blindly believes anything put before them on a page, do they deserve to know the "truth"? Have they worked for it, striven for it, the way even a disciplined Modernist, nay, even a disciplined "Post-"Modernist would do? As for myself, I adhere to the lies that open doors, the lies that I find interesting and useful to the cause of art; the others I discard. I don't care what half-wits do. This, of

[11/11/2007 - 11/18/2007](#)

[11/18/2007 - 11/25/2007](#)

[11/25/2007 - 12/02/2007](#)

[12/02/2007 - 12/09/2007](#)

[12/09/2007 - 12/16/2007](#)

[12/16/2007 - 12/23/2007](#)

[12/23/2007 - 12/30/2007](#)



course, ties in with the admonishment not to talk down to your audience, as a blow against apathy; but this is as good a paragraph as any to limn the reverse of that coin, for there are other reasons as well. If your obfuscations, your lies, your hermetic wanderings, your newly-formed language, prevents you from gaining converts: so be it. We must speak to the intelligent, not to the ignorant. We do not need such trash in our ranks, they would merely slow us down. They are cannon fodder, and we need marksmen and hunters. Do not fall into the trap of Populism (which I have treated elsewhere in Antiglobe). In this way we test artists before they discover us. The ranks of Modernism are swelled with mediocre spirits and minds- that is what has made it so despicable. We must not become like them. We no longer meet on the wide-open battlefield of the salons and major reviews. The nature of the fight has changed. Let us attract only those worth calling comrades. And once those potential comrades arrive, inevitably naive and disoriented, we must embrace them, support them, communicate to them the seriousness and the exhilaration of a life lived creatively, in the deepest implications of the word. We must show them that in this world of art, each of us is essential, worthy of the time and effort- because helping one to become initiated is helping the creative project itself.

Those other minds- those spongy minds terrified of the sun- have been softened by a discourse with no edge. Polemic is not partisan: Its only party is art itself. To be outspoken is to proclaim that art is worth caring about, worth fighting about. My only deep enemy is the artist who claims impartiality, and may even strive for it. Write manifestos, distribute them, scream them. Yes, you may discover a week later that you were wrong- it has happened to me; so what must you do? Write another manifesto, contradicting the last one! I prefer one who rushes desperately into folly, to one who stands safely at the side, taking notes. And to rush into the fray means to be ready to attack, to denounce those whose denunciation is required by the cause. Let us suppose, hypothetically of course, that Picasso is not entirely deserving of the abuse that I and others in this Tradition have heaped upon him for generations; if, hypothetically, he is indeed NOT deserving of it, his nonexistent ghost***** will forgive us, for he will understand that it is done in the name of a greater cause than Post-NeoAbsurdism or even Anti-Art itself- in the name of the creative will. Attacks are necessary,

if only to keep everybody on their toes, to eliminate apathy, to show that we ALL, save those COWARDS who REFUSE, care enough about the artistic project to lash out against all who oppose what we see as its best interests. Attacking ideologies, movements, and artists alive or dead (but especially those dead and canonically enshrined) shows those who have been duped by the passivity toward artisticliterarymusicaltheat-ricalcritical history that Modernism teaches, that these histories, these canon, are NOT set in stone, are NOT settled, are NOT to be taken for granted. It shows that this history is NOT the sovereign realm of those sequestered off as specialists by the academic system; that every artist must be actively and passionately engaged with the way that this history is transmitted and interpreted, that canon-making is the duty of all of us who create, not to be left to others. And, must I repeat, it forces each of us to become personally engaged. It forces us to identify ourselves with these statements and with all of our creative work, to take the creative enterprise personally, not professionally. WE ARE NOT BUSINESSMEN. We carry culture on our shoulders. Professionalism is another word for pedantic disinterestedness. We MUST be responsible, but responsible not in the way of a worker filling out each each line on the form, rather in the sense that every act we make is artistic, and that every artistic act is a moral one for which we must account to ourselves.

Which is to say- and I wince to mention that Anti-Art can, too often, serve as an excuse to shirk this all-important statement: WE MUST TAKE OURSELVES SERIOUSLY. Even Absurdity is a serious thing, a weapon, a religion, as the Dadas showed. No more humble self-effacement. I bow down only before the bodies of work I choose. But this is NOT an argument for self-aggrandizement: we should all be ashamed, for who among us can claim the brilliance of Ball, Schwitters, Satie, Moreau, Valery, Klinger, not to mention Lautreamont, Blake, Milton? This is the register in which our aspirations, even if unrealizable, must exist. Have you transformed your personality into an instrument with the sole purpose of creation, as has Baader, Murlock, Satie, Blake, Wilde, Jarry, Freytag-Loringhoven, Berlioz, Cravan, Vache, or in a more subtle matter Moreau, Pontorno, Mahler, Rousseau, or any other artist you might consider great? We must stop judging ourselves against, "that

one guy who graduated the year before I did and went to grad school at Parsons,” stop judging ourselves against our instructors, the icons in our disciplinary journals, and the artists at the tops of our local “scenes” and begin judging ourselves against the greatest minds (by minds, of course, I mean bodies of work) we can imagine. Otherwise our aspirations and thus our imaginations remain small, cramped, limited and twisted even compared to whatever potential we may have. Only in this way can we slip out of the grip of the various controlling systems of the Modernist machine, which prays on lack of confidence as well as small-mindedness by assuring artists that they can be vindicated artistically by being published by a “respectable” press, shown by a “legitimate” gallery, released on a “serious” label, performed in a “respectable” venue. Only the quality of the work presented determines respectability and legitimacy. A glossy magazine publishing mediocre work that happens to be by mediocre poet laureates is less respectable than a xeroxed journal with a readership of 15 containing ambitious, imaginative, and beautifully-wrought (take that as you will) work sharing the aspirations of Huidobro or Tzara. A commercial gallery selling paintings to hang over the sofas of CEOs has no claim of legitimacy compared to a room in someone’s home showing work that even attempts to remember the lessons of Da Vinci or David. Picabia’s 391 was privately printed, distributed among friends. Schwitters’ collage and performances were staged mostly in private homes. Charles Ives never heard some of his pieces played in his lifetime.

DO NOT DEPEND UPON THE GALLERY/PUBLISHING SYSTEM. If your play will not be produced, produce it yourself. If only 12 people show up in your basement to see it, they are the only 12 who deserve it. Hang your paintings in your house: it is where they belong; live with your art as if with a lover. Holding exhibitions, readings, performances in the home is more than a necessity in order to escape the tyranny of the market; it is an aggressive statement that THIS is where art belongs, in the home, in life. Art should not be cordoned off in a separate building, a cage to keep it from menacing the populace. Here, as a defense, we find the (Post)Modernist system exerting its force upon artists’ insecurities; self-publishing/showing is looked upon as an admission of failure, as an essentially “amateur” exercise (again the spectre of the “professional”). Yet the avant-garde, even the

Modernist avant-garde upon whose work the system is predicated, has always been founded in self-publishing. There is hardly any movement of the 20th century (until the appearance of (Post)Modernism) that did not self-publish a large bulk of its output, and avant-garde artists and poets who did not, at least at some point, edit their own journal, are more rare than those who did. The international Dada Fair of 1920 was held in a private home in Berlin. And while it is imperative, whenever possible, to publish and show with other like-minded artists and poets, to play with like-minded musicians- for these communities, these brother and sisterhoods, are absolutely vital to the continuance of the creative project- they are another facet of the artistic life, not a substitution for self-publishing/showing/performing. A body of work- whether by an individual, a group, a movement- is one thing when it crops up singly, conversing with other bodies of work; it is an altogether different thing when condensed and presented together without any editorial concerns outside those directly involved. The work should exist in both these states, in as many states as possible.

And this statement, which I have reiterated many times in many ways, can be taken in other senses as well. What do you make? The only acceptable answer: Whatever I feel deserves to exist. We must not limit our production to that in which we specialize, nor limit our specializations to a single discipline. Specialization is inevitable and is no bad thing; but it is no excuse for stifling every other creative potential. Arp may have specialized in the plastic arts, but his poetry is also invaluable. The same might be said for Chriss. In this way, we not only cross-pollinate disciplines with the ideas and methodologies of others; we not only create more spaces for art to inhabit; we not only locate, within our own liveswork, the obscure space of the creative, the (anti-)structure which communicates with all of our creative languages; we also keep ourselves in a constant state of uncertainty, imbalance, transition; and in this way we ward off the encroachment of our odious enemy, banal comfort. We keep a space alive for art.

We must do this individually; but we must also do it communally, and not only across, but within disciplines. WITHOUT COLLABORATION THERE IS NO REAL ART. But collaboration is not nearly so simple a thing as we have been led to believe. Collaboration is not, as it is discussed and taught in the academies, a "mode of working," it is not

something one “decides” to “do,” it is not an action, and it is not a process or tool to be employed; IT IS A WAY OF LIVING AND THINKING. Collaboration is not limited to the joint production of single works; it means that every artistic action is contextualized, enriched, and enlivened by its relationships to the creative communities within which it is made. We collaborate by showing with artists we admire, by contributing to their journals, by performing with them; we collaborate with them through constant conversation or correspondence, sharing with each other our individual passions for the creative act; we collaborate by living and breathing the same creative air, and using it to form different words. COLLABORATION IS INSEPARABLE FROM LIFE. Otherwise it is not collaboration, it is merely symbiosis. Collaboration occurs when friendship and artistic engagement become inseparable. DO NOT fall for the divisive, egocentric rhetoric that sets up simplistic and artificial divisions between autonomy and collaboration, treating them as mutually exclusive, as if one is on a balance with the other. To deny or prevent collaboration which might yield vital artwork- either on a piece, a body of work, or an entire life- is to commit the most selfish and damnably grotesque act anyone calling themselves an artist, poet, musician, theorist, playwright, can possibly commit: Putting one’s “autonomy” before the work; which is to say, putting one’s “self” before the idea of art, of art itself. The fact that your vaunted “autonomy” is in no way inherently threatened by real collaboration is beside the point; you have shown your colours, and are damned. You are merely a means. All that matters is the work to which you give birth.

And then what? After the departure of the 12 people who attended, the play sinks back into the void; the work you have produced fades into retinal coils. The great herds of sheep around us have paid no attention, and we do not care. The next topic I wish to address is one upon which I will admit some argument; a certain argument at least, and that is as good as you will find in my essays such as this one. It can be argued that we should allow these works, and not only these works (or else Plastic Artists could skip this paragraph; do not! do not!) but the specific events where they were displayed- the exhibitions, performances, the hidden installations- to sink into oblivion, an unread testament to our dismissal of the conventions of academic, commercial, and “respectable” expectations. And it is true that

documentation is a kind of pharmakon; it can usurp the work, it can itself be usurped by consumerist concerns. Yet while I respect this position, I must put forward an alternative tactic; preserve everything. Our fight is one which may last generations, which may never end; we must pass our weapons on to the next generation. As long as the material exists, there is always some chance, however slim, that it will be discovered. Lautreamont was virtually unknown before a stray copy of Maldoror ended up in Dadaist (later Surrealist) hands, roughly 40 years after the author's death; Blake's influence was not felt until a generation after his death. And what bite would Surrealism have had, or even Paris Dada, without the linguistic weapons of Lautreamont? Where would we be without the awesome Anti-Philosophy of Blake? My own conversion, and that of Andrews and Hartke, were brought about by such forgotten relics. Again, we may not be Blakes and Lautreamonts, but what we are, what we can make ourselves, must retain the chance to continue to act after we ourselves no longer can. I offer some additional tactics which might be considered in order to avoid the possible pitfalls of this documentation. Documentation can often usurp a performance, be looked at as the object itself, sucking the marrow of the experience of the action out of the bone of its image. This, I will simply point out, is much easier insofar as the documentation is "professional," insofar as the fact of the document's (I would prefer "artifact's") viewer is able to forget hiser own absence. The implied tactic, eschewing certain elements of "professional" presentation, can admittedly backfire- a video looking like it was made by a group of drunk 17-year-olds will do nobody any good- but if well handled the documentation can thus be kept, to a greater degree, on the level of "record." Documentation on a large scale- the trajectory or activities of an artist or movement over time- can be well argued to work against the disorder that much great art must hold sacred. I would argue that there are at least two ways to prevent the easy digestion and hierarchization of a body of work: to hide the evidence from the viewere researcher, or to bury them under an unassailable mass of evidence. The former has been to a certain extent the strategy of Dada, while the latter has been the strategy of Fluxus. This latter option repels the lazy or casual but allows the dedicated to slowly explore the hoarde of artistic treasure. This sifting is an essential, if not the essential, action of the canonizing

process, a process which is, as I have by now pounded into you, my dearest reader, of absolutely vital and central concern to all creative agents. And the last tactic which I will here introduce combines what I think must be the two most important principles upon which any new assault on the prevailing system MUST be predicated: An INTENSIVE intervention, on the part of every artist, in the canonizing process; and the absolute necessity of COLLECTIVE ACTION. Let me point out: sometimes great artists get through, ARE recognized, ARE critically examined. On a limited scale, at least within dissident traditions, it is not at all uncommon, though these traditions are rarely referred to by the larger artistic world. But it happens; and when it happens, our works must be spring-loaded to inject a far greater dose of creative force than the discourse thought it was taking on. The sifting of the critical- and therefore the canonizing- process often works thus; the open-minded researcher finds piece 1 by artist A, and is intrigued. In heris scholarly, hermeneutic, or zealous attempt to understand the work more deeply, s/he finds that this piece contains references to pieces 2 and 3 by artist A. Our researcher studies these pieces and uncovers references to the work of artists B, C, and D, with whom artist A worked closely. In order to better understand the work of A, our researcher realizes that s/he must track down some examples of these artists' works; much to the researcher's surprise, artist C is equally intriguing as artist A, and suddenly this entire group seems worthy of further study. It is in this way that most of us, in our humble ways, have slowly developed broader pictures of our respective traditions. Thus: we must sprinkle our works with references, whether overt or subtle, to the artists, and also the ideas, who deserve to be recognized. This is in no way restricted to living artists- if the references in this essay goad one person to look up Klinger or Bennett or Panzeri, it will have served a purpose- but it is especially important in regards to our immediate comrades, those who have as yet no foothold in any canon at all. I by no means suggest ruining a work by artificially inserting a name where one should not exist; yet this tactic can operate on many levels: by inserting a name or citing a work directly, but also by dedicating a poem, painting a portrait, setting a poem to music, quoting or paraphrasing a line, by making oblique and hermetic references, by appropriating recurrent images or methodological or syntactic techniques, a well dropped word, a certain colour or

compositional device, by an inarticulate cry such as Barr Barr Barr. In this way, any body of work which is able to enter the discourse, coming into a position where it cannot be ignored, or may yet make some headway, already has the tools needed to open a side door for others, who can rush into the fortress, knives drawn. This may seem like a relatively local and specific technique, but like many others I have put forward it has a long history: the Dadas and Fluxists have used it to great and very obvious effect, but one can also look at the dedications of Mallarme and the symbolists, the song settings of Debussy, the intertextuality of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and so many others, and so many others.

Moreover, this technique can be seen to relate, in a specific way, to many of the more sweepings strategic points I have made: the collaborative impulse, the necessity for critical subterfuge, the willingness to take one's self and one's comrades seriously, the need to engage seriously but craftily with the dominant discourse, the employment of hermetic traditions and discourses. And, in addition, it is yet another manifestation of what has become, in this essay, the dominant metaphor spinning around the chosen method of aestheticicide, the new way to murder ideologies: injection. For while the skin of Modernism has grown thick and impenetrable as iron under its armour of apathetic "Post-s," the reason for these stratagems is that in this newfound complacency Modernism has opened itself to a far more insidious attack. We can no longer spear it with new forms, with new source material, with fractured forms and syntax alone; but the disease planted generations ago is waiting to be renewed. Perhaps a sense of this has existed since the early days of this battle; I will close with words from a 1920 manifesto by George Ribemont-Dessaignes, whom I myself discovered through the same tactic last described, a name repeatedly reemerging from one Dada text to another, until I decided I must learn him:

Dada is a cancer which also causes cancer. It destroys the functioning of specialized cells and makes the others multiply with frightening rapidity. You must be told the nature of your illness. The air blown in by the trade winds at springtime is as cold and hard as iron. Society and its charms are dead. Quaking in your bed you know you have

a cancer of the heart, an enormous cancer of the heart which, spongy through and through, has ceased beating and simply squelches your hideous stagnant blood like an industrially-reared pig in a manure pit...

Let us, or our descendants, deliver this as a final love-letter to the (Post)Modernist corpse as it lies expiring, this time for good, on its deathbed made from the bones of creative potential. Let it look us in the eyes, and with its last thought KNOW that it was WE who have done this.

NOTES

* One might also point out that this specific example- one that I have heard dozens of times- also self-satisfactorily assumes that Shakespeare is unassailable, that his example is inarguable- of course one could not debate that Shakespeare's position at the top of the English canon is sustained by any criteria less than the word of some unnamed aesthetic god himself. Another subtle symptom of unthinking adherence to canonical authority.

** In its early, fighting days, Modernist discourse was polemic as any other, and therefore more worthy of respect; the present veneer of "respectability" (as opposed to the respect due to a worthy enemy or comrade) came with a "post-" attached.

*** I blush to say it, but too often (though certainly not invariably), within the ranks of Anti-Artists and Traditionalists, a refusal to engage in this way is in fact merely a cover for a certain apathy, an excuse for a lack of intellectual rigour. The Modernist model is by no means the only, and certainly not the best, model for intellectual discipline; but nor is this realization an excuse for lazy and fuzzy thinking. We must all constantly evaluate our various modes of discourse, pry ourselves open to ask with clear and unsentimental intellects- am I copping out, or am I striking a vital blow?

**** "Post-Modernism" claims to have discarded the idea of Truth.

This is merely a button on the Emperor's new shirt; do not believe it; it is merely a nipple. "Post-Modernism's" claim to have derived from the Post-Structuralists is similar to the fluid from a boil claiming to be the descendant of its host. The inherent inevitability (read: fatalism) of the "Post-"Modernist outlook is another kind of Truth; but as usual, too cowardly to go by the name.

***** Of course, Picasso is dead, therefore it is impossible to insult him and we should not care. This statement is metaphorical. Nonetheless, his body of work survives, and his name can still, both rightly and wrongly, be invoked, still has power, and can be insulted; it is this which I "actually" address here.

POSTED BY JIM LEFTWICH AT 9:27 AM 0 COMMENTS
