



# ROLAND

*The ICA's Magazine*  
Issue 6  
June—August 2010

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## [ON NEGATION]

....anti-anti art, non-non-art, non-expressionist, non-imagist, non-surrealist, non-primitivist, non-fauvist, non-futurist, non-figurative, non-objective, non-subjective, non-action, non-romantic, non-visionary, non-imaginative, non-mythical, non-organic, non-vitalist, non-violent, non-vulgar, non-naturalist, non-supernaturalist, anti-accident, anti-brute-junk-pop-folk-art, non-local, non-regionalist, non-nationalist, non-representational, non-poetic, non-dramatic, non-entertainment, non-naïve, non-barbaric, non-nomadic, non-rural, non-eccentric, non-racist, non-commercial, non-linear, non-diagrammatic, non-tachist, non-informal, non-irregular, non-sculptural, non-architectural, non-mural, non-decorative, non-colorist, non-ready-made, non-spontaneous, non-irrational, non-sensational, non-impulsive, non-physical, non-technical, non-asymmetrical, non-gesticulating, non-gesturing, anti-happening, non-mannerist, non-plastic non-relational, non-venal, non-calligraphic

..... pure, purist, puritan, puritanical, protestant, passivist, rationalist, perfectionist, platonic, negativist, abstract, fine, free, right, absolute, absolutist, academic, academicist, dogmatic, domatistic, aesthetic, aestheticist, moral, moralist, moralistic, priestly, islamicist, iconoclastic, iconoclasticist, classicist, classicistic, priestly, hermetic, separatist, exclusivist, idealist, idealistic, mandarinist, byzantinist, traditionalist, conventionalist, historicist, determinist, programmatic, transcendent, formalist, extremist, formalistic, detached, disinterested, meaningless, formless, colorless, lineless, spaceless, lightless, timeless, deathless, lifeless, breathless, cold, empty, sterile, dull, monotonous, repetitious, rigid, intellectual, inhuman, dehumanized, unintelligible, sophisticated, uninteresting

no paint-caricaturings, no-scumble-bumpkinism, no personality-picturesqueness, no texturing-gesturings, no Dadaism, no popism, no duchampism, no romanticist-tricks-of-the-trade, no pop, no poop, no pope, no corn, no brushwork-bravura, no janisms, no jobberies, no qualities, no professional racketeering, marketeering, no amateur-fun-thinging-recreational-area no delirium-trimmings, no kicking-the-effigy no action-arena-canvas and careerism no nature-mending, reality-reducing, life-inspiring, society-reflecting, universe insightful, zeit-geisting no good-timing and fun-thinging

jackpot boxing, juke-box hit-parade camaraderie

Ad Reinhardt, '[ON NEGATION]', *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose, University of California Press, 1991

## COLOPHON

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Institute of Contemporary Arts  
The Mall  
London SW1Y 5AH  
United Kingdom  
+44 20 7930 3647  
www.ica.org.uk

Executive Director: Ekow Eshun  
Acting Director of Programme: David Thorp  
Head of Live Programme: Jamie Eastman  
Head of Learning: Emma-Jayne Taylor  
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Cover: Oscar Tuazon, *Another Nameless Venture Gone Wrong*, 2009.

Installation view, Støperet / Haugar Vestfold Art Museum, Tønsberg  
Photographer: Vegard Kleven

p. 5: Oscar Tuazon, *Untitled*, 2010.  
Installation view, Kunsthalle Bern.  
Photographer: Dominique Uldry

The ICA welcomes you to the pages of the sixth issue of ROLAND, which moves to a new format in order to feature highlights from across the institute's programme. The publication is divided into sections that address our activities occurring between June and August including: a solo exhibition by Paris based artist Oscar Tuazon, an event focusing on post-punk band Gang of Four, a symposium on the politics of community, the release in our cinema of Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers*, and the London International Festival of Theatre.

Each section contains an introduction, alongside additional material from a wide range of authors, artists and commentators, providing a broad context within which to view the featured project. The publication also includes a look back at our recent learning project *MashUp*, and a final section devoted to an artist's project intended to be experienced through the published format; in this issue we feature a short story from writer Mark von Schlegell.

4 June – 15 August

# OSCAR TUAZON

## *My Mistake*

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Located in the ICA's ground floor gallery, but extending beyond the physical confines of this space, this exhibition is the first solo presentation in a British public gallery of work by Oscar Tuazon, a US-born, Paris-based artist, writer and curator. Tuazon's artwork is largely sculptural in nature, taking on a formal language situated between architecture, Minimalist art and an aesthetic peculiar to the utilitarian constructions of outsider communities. Comprised of a combination of natural and industrial materials, Tuazon's structures create tension both between their physical parts and with the spaces they inhabit.

Adopting the problems and materials of structural engineering and hands-on construction, Tuazon's intervention in the ICA building is comprised of a number of repeating modular units, made from large wooden beams and steel fittings. The structure pushes at the boundaries of the gallery space, forcing it to adapt and to reengineer itself in order to accommodate the work. Built on site and without plans, the resulting mesh of struts and columns has an improvised, precarious quality that suggests the artwork's struggle for autonomy. This is an object potentially freed from the constraining rules of architecture and art, an object that can survive on its own, without a roof overhead or a structure to house it, or even someone to see it.

The ICA installation is an extension of Tuazon's long-standing interest in how the built environment is redefined and redesigned by the act of inhabitation. Drawing on the methodology of Henry David Thoreau, put forward in his philosophical treatise, *Walden* (1854), Tuazon's previous works

have confronted nature and architecture to suggest that a particular lifestyle can manufacture the space around it. The development of a structure that surrounds the viewer, as opposed to existing on a human scale, constitutes a new trajectory for Tuazon that he first fully explored in an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland earlier in 2010. At the ICA, this strand of his work continues to grow, with the structure evolving in and negotiating with the space in which it is situated.

Oscar Tuazon was born in 1975 in Seattle, Washington, USA. He moved to Paris in 2007 and co-founded the artist-run collective and gallery, castillo/corrales. His numerous solo shows include Kunsthalle Bern (2010), Parc Saint Léger – Centre d'art contemporain (2010), Centre international d'art et du paysage de l'île de Vassivière (2009), Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2009) and David Roberts Foundation, London (2009).

The exhibition, curated by the ICA's Charlotte Bonham-Carter, will coincide with the release of a comprehensive catalogue on Tuazon's work, published by Kunsthalle Bern, Do.Pe. Press, Paraguay Press, Centre international d'art et du paysage de l'île de Vassivière and Parc Saint Léger – Centre d'art contemporain.

The exhibition is also accompanied by a series of events and a limited edition print; for more information on these, please visit: [www.ica.org.uk/oscartuazon](http://www.ica.org.uk/oscartuazon)



## THE SPIRIT OF ADHOCISM

—  
CHARLES JENCKS  
&  
NATHAN SILVER

*Ad hoc* means 'for this' specific need or purpose.

A need is common to all living things; only men have higher purposes. But these needs and purposes are normally frustrated by the great time and energy expended in their realisation.

A purpose immediately fulfilled is the ideal of adhocism; it cuts through the usual delays caused by specialisation, bureaucracy and hierarchical organisation.

Today we are immersed in forces and ideas that hinder the fulfilment of human purposes; large corporations standardise and limit our choice; philosophies of behaviourism condition people to deny their potential freedom; 'modern architecture' becomes the convention for 'good taste' and an excuse to deny the plurality of actual needs.

But a new mode of direct action is emerging, the rebirth of a democratic mode and style, where everyone can create his personal environment out of impersonal subsystems, whether they are new or old, modern or antique. By realising his immediate needs, by combining *ad hoc* parts, the individual creates, sustains and transcends himself. Shaping the local environment towards desired ends is a key to mental health; the present environment, blank and unresponsive, is a key to idiocy and brainwashing.

### Urgency and purpose

The phrase *ad hoc*, meaning 'for this' specific purpose, reveals the desire for immediate and purposeful action that permeates everyday life. One is constantly involved in small-scale activities that have an immediate end in view: to get out of bed in the morning, to replenish the digestive stock, to work on something significant, etc. Life is filled with such goal-directed actions, varying from the trivial to the profound, many of which are discontinuous or unrelated to each other. Two typical uses of the phrase *ad hoc* bring out this variable but purposeful nature of human activity:

— Left-over, fermenting soup added *ad-hoc* to spaghetti improves its vapid taste.

and

## OSCAR TUAZON'S ABSTRACT VIOLENCE

—  
PHILIPPE PIROTTE

*There is never a story behind the sculptures, the structures, something you need to know in order to understand them or see them. I might have something in mind while I am building, but I don't share that; that is not part of the work. To me it is distracting to be told what I am looking at. I don't think stories have a place in sculpture. Ideas don't have a place in sculpture. I don't have any ideas – I just go to work. Ideas get in the way. – Oscar Tuazon<sup>1</sup>*

Oscar Tuazon's project at the ICA is rooted in three recent exhibitions of his work in France and Switzerland. At the Kunsthalle Bern, he built a modular structure of wooden beams, which encompassed the whole gallery. Based on certain principles of geometry, he repeated his initial sculpture five times, cutting through the walls of the building in an increasingly complex interaction with the space, which obstructed the very logic of the sculpture's progression. In Bern, visitors were reminded of previous exhibitions of Sol Lewitt's work, which took place in the Kunsthalle Bern in 1989 and 1992, as well as his participation in the consequential group exhibition in 1969 (which later toured to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London), *When Attitude Becomes Form*. The ICA installation also starts with a module, which the artist subjects to various declensions and repetitions, pursuing a certain logic *ad absurdum*. This insistence on following the logic of the work, on suppressing the aesthetic dimension and working blind, is what draws Tuazon to LeWitt's approach.

When first determining the basic form of the piece, Tuazon stages a confrontation with the context of its production. An

— The *Ad Hoc* Committee to End the War in Vietnam was formed for the specific goal of ending that war and will disappear when its goal does.

These two statements distinguish adhocism from random, undirected or haphazard action with which it is sometimes confused. But if adhocism is indeed purposeful, how does it differ from other kinds of directed behaviour? Basically, adhocism consists of a general

and loose approach to a problem rather than a tight and systematic one. Thus, seventeenth-century boat-builders went into the forest to cut ready-made 'subsystems' from the trees, combining them *ad hoc* to construct ships. In these combinations, because the subsystems were not tailor-made for their new role, there was a lot of extraneous material left over, which later had to be cut away. The characteristic *ad hoc* amalgamation contains much that is inessential, much

important part of his strategy is that he must work on site. This does not mean the same as making site-specific art, since Tuazon seems to deny the site, annihilating the existing space and entering into a kind of combat with it. Before a show, he will move into the exhibition space for days, sometimes weeks, living there and occupying the site. How the work functions and what it comes to look like is determined, to a large extent, by this process. To put it in the artist's own words: "my basic working template is always moving into a space, fill[ing] it up, push[ing] it till something goes wrong. I think about it more like sex. That's the way I thought about the piece in Bern: it is two structures fucking each other."<sup>2</sup> Equally important for Tuazon is to develop a relationship with the people who already inhabit the space – the curator, the technicians and the gallery staff – although he does not wish them to know in advance what the project will look like in the end.

Even if there is no audience while he is installing the work, Tuazon makes a 'performative' jump into an unknown mental space in order to conceive, develop, execute and install the piece. These different actions are condensed into a very short period of time so that they all take place simultaneously, precluding the possibility of the 'execution of a concept'. As a result, the piece develops a sensibility that is very far removed from a Minimalist or Conceptual aesthetic. There is a kind of performative energy contained in the work, and the whole process of making it, including mistakes, is left visible in the finished piece. In fact, Tuazon sees the ICA piece as a body; the final referent of the work isn't an idea, but a person, a voice, a physical body.

Far from designing something to be fabricated or outsourced, Tuazon likes to think with his hands. The production process takes precedence over the conceptual process: "My work comes entirely from an engagement with the specific conditions of its production, and naturally, there are all kinds of social, economic, and physical forces that intersect in a particular project and leave their marks on it. But I really don't trust the declarative potential of an artwork, or in any case, I don't think I personally have anything to say about

means compared to those of a craftsman... The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand' ... the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within them.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between bricolage and engineering or science is one of degree and intention rather than kind or quality. Both the bricoleur and the scientist are motivated by a search after truth and deal equally rigorously with facts. They are equally objective. Both have to make use of pre-existing subsystems, but while the scientist tries to expand his initial set of resources, the bricoleur sticks with his existing resources as long as he possibly can. The distinction is between appropriateness and urgency. The scientist is intent on using the tools and hypothesis appropriate to his job, whereas the bricoleur or adhocist is intent on undertaking his job immediately, with whatever resources are available. Both are goal-oriented in a general way.

Excerpt from Charles Jencks & Nathan Silver, 'The Spirit of Adhocism', *Adhocism, The Case for Improvisation*, Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1972, pp. 15–17, 19–20.

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966, pp. 16–19.

that is fortuitous and redundant. But if it is not as refined and precise as other kinds of purposeful action, then at least it is more open, suggestive and rich in possibilities. The extraneous material suggests new uses, whereas the perfected and refined construction is usually confined to its specified ends.

Perhaps the oldest and simplest method of creation consists of combining readily available subsystems *ad hoc*, since it is always easier to work with

what is familiar and at hand than what is removed in space and time. At any rate, this is the characteristic mode of creation in tribal cultures: the creation of masks, clothing, weapons and shelter from the materials available, such as bone, shell, wood, hair, etc. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has discussed this activity under its common French label, bricolage:

... the 'bricoleur' is still someone who works with hands and uses devious

## VONU THE SEARCH FOR PERSONAL FREEDOM

—  
RAYO

Associations, Attitudes, Objectives:

At the moment there are very few vonuans – perhaps several hundred in North America. And these are in many different places and with different life-styles. Most are not in contact with each other. At times Dr G and I crave association with more people, not only for economic benefits such as pooling outside purchases and trips, but for interaction with different minds. But we have discovered that association with sheep-people or bullshitters only makes us ‘lonelier’. Such association is like a drink of salt water to a thirsty man. We much prefer just to be with trees, flowers, birds, brooks – and the few people with whom we share values and goals.

But I don’t think this will be a problem for long. More and more people are rejecting the attitudes and roles of the servile society. While only a small minority of the whole population, they number tens of thousands. Some attempt to ‘turn back the clock’ by moving to farms or small towns. But rural dwellers are conspicuously unfree, so those who really want freedom will search in other directions.

A vonuan, to me, is not just someone living in a particular manner. Life-styles may change. A life-style that was vonu 100 years ago may not be vonu today; some life-styles vonu today were not possible 100 years ago and may not be vonu fifty years from now. A vonuan is someone who places a high value on relative invulnerability to coercion – someone for whom freedom is worth a fair amount (though not infinite) of effort, inconvenience, discomfort. To a vonuan, vonu is not just a means to other ends, nor is it an ultimate end – like most qualities of life, and life itself, it is both. A vonuan will choose whatever way of living offers personal sovereignty and will change life-style again and again if necessary.

Although life-style may vary, a vonuan can be identified only by what he does – especially by perseverance over a long period – not by what he says. Words are cheap. This is not to reject ideology. Someone who does not see through the myths of the State will not for long remain vonu, if by good fortune he should become vonu. But anti-state ideology isn’t enough.

If freedom were free (more precisely, if vonu were gratis), almost everyone

ethics or politics.”<sup>3</sup> He does not make sketches, models or computer renderings of what the exhibition will be, and he has never had a studio practice. He likes the pressure of working on site, against a timeline, against a budget: “That’s what I learned from working in architecture, and in construction – the work is always contingent on the conditions of production. It is a process of adaptation. You try to find the limits of the budget, the limits of the site, what the people you’re working with are capable of, and the form of the work is determined by how you manage those factors. I don’t start with a concept, I start with the conditions and let the conditions determine the form as much as possible.”<sup>4</sup>

Through this method of working, Tuazon illustrates how a building is defined by what happens inside it, not by its design. He is interested in how a particular way of living can alter the space around it. This desire to move into the space and alter its dynamics recalls Allan Kaprow’s happening *Push and Pull: a Furniture Comedy for Hans Hoffmann*, which aimed to completely change the mood and character of an existing space.<sup>5</sup> However, Tuazon doesn’t consider his work as architecture or even as an architectural metaphor. He believes that it is impossible to work architecturally in an exhibition space, because “all the problems that architecture needs to solve have already been solved: there’s already a roof overhead; a heating system; plumbing; walls and a floor. The functional imperative of architecture is what’s interesting about it, and when those problems are solved what are you left with? You can make models, prototypes, you can test things out, but you can’t recreate the urgency of having to solve a real problem.”<sup>6</sup> Tuazon’s true concern is what happens if an artwork challenges the building.

In his exhibition at the ICA, Tuazon treats the building as a whole, making a work that occupies the gallery’s various spaces simultaneously. At the same time, he attacks the idea of a space for art, and the notion that any building can ever accommodate an artwork. While the Kunsthalle Bern, designed in 1911, still bears the traces of a bourgeois home, the ICA is a very different space, reflecting the radical change in presumptions of what an

would be free (vonu). But freedom isn’t free; it is quite expensive and will likely remain costly in the foreseeable future. Most people presently alive do not value vonu very much. One reason, perhaps, is that during thousands of years of pre-technological agriculture, servility had a survival value. During this period conventional farming was the most efficient way of producing food. And it is difficult to conceive of a life-style more subject to coercion than that of the traditional

farmer; not only is he visible and usually separated from his fellows, but ‘his’ home and land are especially vulnerable to attack. Servility was not generally pro-survival prior to agriculture. When North America was ‘settled’, few of the natives, who were mostly hunters/foragers, were successfully enslaved. To obtain obedient subjects the bludg had to bring slaves and indentured servants from the more agrarian societies of West Africa and Europe.

I don’t know if servility is due

exhibition space is or should be since the early 1900s. However, in both cases, the problems that Tuazon confronts are the same. Exhibition spaces are largely defined by empty space. Tuazon addresses this defining characteristic from a physical standpoint, working in a way that creates significant structural problems for the building itself. If the walls get in the way, for example, he cuts through them. Making an artwork that requires some re-engineering of the building is a method of shifting the dynamic between artwork and institution.

The artwork's confrontation with the space is a struggle for autonomy. Tuazon's earlier work was often engaged with a tradition of DIY or survivalist architecture, taking inspiration from hippy communes such as Drop City. He found these schemes interesting as architecture, and saw them as a kind of struggle with the idea of autonomy, a (perhaps unknowing) attempt to be analogous to (and more interesting than) what was happening in the art world in the 1970s. He says, "to me those kind of projects were like an unconscious critique of Smithson or De Maria – instead of talking about it, they were living it out. You could call it 'institutional critique from the outside.' And I guess I've absorbed some of that work, not so much in formal terms but as a kind of strategy."<sup>7</sup>

In 2009 Tuazon made a piece, called *A Thing*, a work that he considers to be a turning point in his practice. The work is small in relation to his structural pieces, about the size of a person. It deals with a functional problem and uses the language of design in a completely abstract way. A wooden structure with two lamps attached to it, in some ways it is a 'useful' object. However, as a lamp, it doesn't function well: somewhat unwieldy, it casts a very harsh, bright light. But, at the same time, the presence of the lamps prevents it from being perceived as an artwork. Thus it is just 'a thing'. Tuazon always tries to push his work towards abstraction in this way, because for him, the idea of abstraction is only ever possible in relation to function.

While Tuazon's project for the ICA looks completely different from, and is on a far larger scale than, *The Thing*, the logic behind

mostly to genetic inheritance, to cultural background or to slave-school training. Most likely it is an interaction of all three. But I don't believe that any amount of 'education' (propagandising) will change the attitudes/values/intelligence of most adults. Nor do I believe that the majority can be manipulated into a 'free society' by some elite of would-be philosopher kings. Such an effort will, at most, only change the rulers. So long as most people can be easily manipulated, they will be

manipulated for the aggrandisement of the manipulators.

Traditional agriculture is on the way out. (At the moment, quite a number of people are playing return-to-ye-olde-homestead games, but few are producing enough food even to feed themselves.) Barring a catastrophe of sufficient magnitude to destroy technology world-wide, I predict that within a few decades there will be inexpensive, light-weight, mostly automated bio-chemical devices capable of

converting most organic compounds into most other organic compounds. Load the hopper with dead leaves or sawdust, insert the proper programme, wait a few days, and out come food wafers that are at least as nutritious and tasty as most of the stuff sold in supermarkets today. Insert different programmes and out come various plastics for construction and clothing. Of course, this is just one approach. Maybe I will modify my digestive tract to convert cellulose to sugar. Maybe I will develop hardier varieties of traditional food plants able to grow wild with little assistance, as well as more palatable varieties of wild plants. For the immediate future, maybe mini-grow-holes are the way. In any case, I don't think that farming is the wave of the future.

With the decline of agriculture, servility loses survival value. Improving communication has the same effect – people will no longer need to crowd into cities or be visible anywhere to work and play together. Consider the potentialities of pseudo-random-noise radio transmission – coded transmission detectable only with matching receivers. Even that institution run amok, the contemporary State, has this effect: it is its most gullible and easily intimidated subjects who are most likely to be killed in its wars. So I think in the long run, people who place a high value on personal/small group sovereignty will become a larger proportion of the human population.

Vonu, while difficult, is easier now than it has been since the Neolithic period. Perhaps as high as one or two percent of the population, through accidents of heredity and environment, have values and abilities sufficient to achieve it. To become vonu we must disentangle ourselves from those who won't or can't achieve it – reject all 'reform-society-as-a-whole' schemes, put aside utopian dreams of world-wide free societies, and get with ourselves and each other – build our vonuums and vonuist mini-cultures.

Possibly I underestimate the potential of existing humans. Possibly most people do value vonu and can achieve it. If so, we are more apt to help them become free by becoming free ourselves and showing the way, than by joining political crusades. Political reform/revolution/re-education has been attempted thousands of times in hundreds of situations over hundreds of centuries, but at most changes only faces and slogans. Any sort of political movement becomes a contest in coercion and manipulation. Past crusades failed not because of 'impure motives', 'betrayal', or 'defects in philosophy' (why is it invariably defects, not the good elements, that come to predominate?) but because of their very nature. Function determines form, means

determine ends. The very programmes of the State most detested by present 'reformers' are the reforms-gone-to-seed of past crusaders.

Dr G and I did not choose our way of life primarily because we expect a nuclear war or other apocalypse within a few years. While we have considered possibilities of various catastrophes in our planning, if nuclear weapons had never been invented we would probably be living in much the same way – perhaps somewhat closer to large cities. Institutionalised coercion – States – is a long-existing social phenomenon; war is only its most dramatic form of destruction. We are striving to reduce vulnerability to all forms of coercion and maximise all satisfactions.

Dr G and I would like to contact more people with similar ideas, attitudes and actions. If you are not in the region, we invite letters. If you are in the region, let's arrange joint drops at least, maybe meet occasionally. I think the Loose Open Association (as Lan has named it) is the best community model, at least at first. Any closer involvements should come only as people get to know each other over an extended time.

We are now able to provide someone with a food stash, shelter and equipment adequate (most of the time) from May through October. This would be already set up in an attractive, secluded spot – several miles (at least) from any habitation (including other Vonuans) known to us. We can bring supplies and mail occasionally (once a month?) to someone who wants to remain completely out of that society for a while. By next autumn we may be able to provide year-round shelter. Our prices are low, or we will barter for the services/products we want. Of course, don't come to Siskiyou because a few vonuans are already here; hoped-for relations might not work out. Come only if, like us, you evaluate the region as optimum for you.

Excerpt from Rayo, 'Chapter II: Report on Progress and Problems', *VONU The Search for Personal Freedom, VONU LIFE #9*, ed. Jon Fisher, Lompanics Unlimited, pp. 103–106.

Drawn from an archive of photos taken by Oscar Tuazon for their resonance with certain elements of his practice and research, these images depict the house of Leslie Feuerbach, outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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both works is the same. Where the project in London succeeds for the artist, is in the fact that the structure has a dynamic relationship to the building itself. As with the lamp, there is an aggressive insistence on autonomy – the sculpture is simply too big for the building. At the same time, the form of the structure is almost completely determined by the building itself: the load-bearing capacity of the floors, the height of the doors, the depth of the walls, etc.

Tuazon was born in a geodesic dome, which eventually came to be used as a horse barn; coincidentally, this was also the fate of the famous Drop City domes, most of which were later torn down. When he went back to visit the dome about ten years ago, he found that time had not been kind to it. Physical reality and the process of aging had denied any kind of utopian ideal that might once have been invested in that form. Tuazon tries to work with the entropic characteristics of natural materials as much as he can in order to show the disruptive impact that installations or sculptures can have on the space around them. But he is not only interested in the possibility of structural failure. Ultimately, he wants to make something that's alive, present, palpable and real – a living thing and simultaneously a dying thing. Even if he refuses all narrative suggestions or contexts, his work references a kind of sci-fi dystopia in which he posits an acceptance of a failing system, like an ailing spaceship, leaking, cracking and threatening to destroy itself.

1. This text is largely based on 'Oscar Tuazon in Conversation with Chiara Parisi, Sandra Patron and Philippe Pirotte', in *Oscar Tuazon*, Paraguay Press and Do.Pe. Press in conjunction with Kunsthalle Bern, Le Centre international d'art et du paysage de l'île de Vassivière and Parc Saint Léger – Centre d'Art Contemporain, 2010 (forthcoming)
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Allan Kaprow's 'score' for *Push And Pull* contains the following passage, which is revealing in this regard: "Think of subletting someone's apartment. How can you get rid of the fellow when he is in every piece of

furniture, every arrangement? Do you like living with him? Imagine it unfurnished. What would you do – buy some things (if so, what style?), scrounge some off the streets, ask your relatives or friends (which will remind you of them?) ... Perhaps live without furniture instead?"

6. Tuazon in Conversation with Parisi, Patron and Pirotte, op. cit.
7. Ibid.

Philippe Pirotte is an art historian and Director of the Kunsthalle Bern. Next to his curatorial activity he is senior advisor at the Rijksakademie for Visual Arts in Amsterdam, and he publishes widely on contemporary art and artists.



## NEW ARCHITECTURE FROM MATTA-CLARK

PETER FEND

Instead of starting with the premise that one must make a Building, we start with the premise that the body and mind must sustainably be situated on this gas-enveloped planet.

Les Levine makes a comparison with Frank Gehry: if Gehry designs a chair, he thinks of using a certain Material to create a chair; if Matta-Clark approaches the question of “chair,” he starts with the question, How do I feel chair-ness within me? More boldly, do I, in my body, truly desire to sit in a chair? If so, how? The body, not the accommodation for it, comes first. Levine says that Gordon “left enough signposts” for “what is the activity to be done.” What are these “signposts?”

If you are a body, and if you are trying to build in relation to the body, you want to create levels where the body can move and repose that are off the ground. You want to get up above. You want to do this within an ionised, oxygenated and visually rich environment. In a way that is as exhilarating as outdoors, without the inhibitions of a Building for the Building’s Sake, or a Chair for the Chair’s Sake, or a Wall for the Wall’s Sake. If there is any antecedent, it is trees. Shooting up from the ground, a-gyre, they splay out energy in canopies above. We are not building ‘Architecture’, as Philip Johnson required. We are following the energy patterns exuded by groves of trees and bushes, as original humans did. Matta-Clark ‘saw’ these with his 1972 drawings of plants. He would try, at his death six years later, to be ‘making’ these with buoyant, up-rising structures.

The body, as the first house, first housing of the soul, respire. It stands up by several processes at once:

1. gas inflation
2. liquid filling and inflation
3. counter-balancing of separately suspended weights
4. bridging between separate contacts with the ground
5. elastic stretching and contracting of the skins

These facts can be extended to the structures built around. To academics, this is the breaking of walls. To those in the banished camp of artists attacking architectural questions, it’s called injecting the self into space. Chris Burden, and afterwards performers like Skip Arnold, have enacted this.

### VOCABULARY FROM MATTA-CLARK

1. Light-Gas Suspension (by helium, by hot ‘air’, by sun)
2. Inflation (of an elastic skin)
3. Counterbalanced Weights (in line with Serra and di Suvero)
4. Narrow (Pilotis) Foundation (for straddling, high above)
5. Membranes instead of Walls (a load need not be borne up)

‘Signposts’ from Matta-Clark’s work can indicate the structural practices, the body-in-space movement and extension practices, which can yield Built Things. Not buildings exactly, but things to accommodate

the body’s needs. The cityscape becomes pliable.

Whatever might be done with the last three items above results from conditions permitting lightweight, site-straddling, jungle-gym assembling structures, all by pneumatic mediation between In-Doors and Out-Doors. The kick-off task would be construction of items one and two. The balloon building, as Matta-Clark labelled it, would exploit the fact that a community breathes, a community exhales, and this output is ... hot air.

Excerpt from Peter Fend, ‘New Architecture from Matta-Clark’, *Reorganizing Structure by Drawing Through It / Zeichnung Bei Gordon Matta-Clark*, Generali Foundation, 1997, pp. 49–52.



24 June

# THE TROUBLE WITH SOCIETY

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As part of the ICA's ongoing series of debates that re-address big themes through the prism of contemporary discourse, we host *The Trouble with Society*, a discussion between philosopher, theologian and political thinker Phillip Blond, Stewart Wallis, the executive director of the New Economics Foundation, and author and journalist Mark Vernon.

In its short existence so far, the twenty-first century has wrought some novel social pressures: the impact of globalisation on patterns of migration and employment; the dilemmas of faith and politics thrown up by 9/11; the threat to civil liberties prompted by the intensity of CCTV surveillance across our public spaces; the potential disappearance of our private identities into the information banks of social-media sites and the corporations that run them. For all of these questions, we look to our politicians to frame an answer and suggest the ways that we, as a society, should respond. Yet in the wake of the expenses scandal, disenchantment with the established system has never been higher, or trust in our elected representatives lower. It's perhaps not surprising then that the recent focus in political ideas has shifted from the relative impotence of organised politics to the potential of ordinary people to change society.

Certainly this is a subject that's been exercising think tanks and policy groups from across the political spectrum. Many of these groups are currently running research projects investigating the value of

civic engagement as the means to create a shared sense of identity and endeavour in our neighbourhoods and communities. This work is taking place on the political left with groups like Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research; on the right with Iain Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice; and in the centre with the politically independent Royal Society of the Arts and its Citizen Power initiative, aimed at "cultivating civic behaviour and collective action". This research has begun to cross over into mainstream party politics lending fuel to David Cameron's otherwise nebulous concept of the "big society", and spurring Gordon Brown to the most impassioned speech of his election campaign, when he addressed a 2,500-strong gathering of community organisers in the last days before the polls opened.

This revisiting of the philosophy of people-power is a nascent one. It could yet prove no more than the latest political fad. And yet, what's compelling here is the sudden flowering of utopic optimism within many of these projects; the hope that by bringing ordinary people together around common goals amazing things can happen. This perceived wave of community spirit raises innumerable questions around how we position ourselves in relation to society and the effects of market forces upon our lives. Is the notion of a loss of community a fallacy? And in an era of austerity, is a political investment in community ideals merely a smokescreen for cuts to public services?

# RED TORY

PHILLIP BLOND

The loss of our culture is evinced in other ways. Perhaps it is best understood as the disappearance of British civil society. By civil society I connote everything that ordinary citizens do that is not reducible to the imposed activities of the central state or the compulsion and determination of the marketplace. So defined, it appears that we are now a flat society. By this I mean that there are only two powers in our country: the state and the marketplace. All other sources of independent autonomous power have been crushed. We no longer have, in any effective independent way, local government, churches, trade unions, cooperative societies, publicly funded educational institutions, civic organisations or locally organised groups that operate on the basis of more than single issues. Whatever these various institutions represent now, what they embodied in the past were means for ordinary people to exercise power. These associations helped to give form and direction to human beings; they allowed parents to craft their families and citizens to shape their communities. Nowadays, however, all such sources of independent power have been eroded; instead, these civil spaces have either vanished to become subject-domains of the centralised state or the monopolised market.

The state and the market have advanced from both left and right on virtually all the self-governing and independent domains that previously constituted civil society in Britain. By finding civil society unbearably local, uneconomic or uneven, the market state was able to control and determine its character and so abolish genuine participation in society.<sup>1</sup> This uncritical alliance between the state and the market is highly peculiar. In a uniquely Anglo-American fashion, it was decided shortly after Mrs Thatcher's election in 1979

1. As a concept 'liberal capitalism' doesn't really capture the extraordinary nature of this alliance between political and financial power. Nor does the expression *laissez-faire* capture the current phenomenon, since in the case of both terms there is nothing liberal or free about what is going on. Better I think to try to capture the element of drive and compulsion that is at work in this process.

To that end I shall call Britain and America market states, as this seems to encapsulate better the current coercive nature of the relationship between society, the state and the market. See Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War Peace and the Course of History*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. I do not, however, endorse all of Bobbitt's analyses

# AN INOPERATIVE COMMUNITY

JEAN-LUC NANCY

The first task in understanding what is at stake here consists in focusing on the horizon behind us. This means questioning the breakdown in community that supposedly engendered the modern era. The consciousness of this ordeal belongs to Rousseau, who figured a society that experienced or acknowledged the loss or degradation of a communitarian (and communicative) intimacy – a society producing, of necessity, the solitary figure, but one whose desire and intention was to produce the citizen of a free sovereign community. Whereas political theoreticians preceding him had thought mainly in terms of the institution of a State, or the regulation of a society, Rousseau, although he borrowed a great deal from them, was perhaps the first thinker of community, or more exactly, the first to experience the question of society as an uneasiness directed toward the community, and as the consciousness of a (perhaps irreparable) rupture in this community. This consciousness would subsequently be inherited by the Romantics, and by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: the last figure of spirit, before the assumption of all the figures and of history into absolute knowledge, is that which cleaves community (which for Hegel figures the split in religion). Until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community – one to be regained or reconstituted.

The last, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods – always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy. Distinct from society (which is a simple association and division of forces and needs) and opposed to empire (which dissolves community by submitting its peoples to its arms and to its glory), community is not only intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence. It is constituted not only by a fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy

equilibrium of forces and authorities: it is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community. In the motto of the Republic, fraternity designates community: the model of the family and of love.

But it is here that we should become suspicious of the retrospective consciousness of the lost community and its identity (whether this consciousness conceives of itself as effectively retrospective or whether, disregarding the realities of the past, it constructs images of this past for the sake of an ideal or a prospective vision). We should be suspicious of this consciousness first of all because it seems to have accompanied the Western world from its very beginnings: at every moment in its history, the Occident has given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality. Our history begins with the departure of Ulysses and with the onset of rivalry, dissension, and conspiracy in his palace. Around Penelope, who reweaves the fabric of intimacy without ever managing to complete it, pretenders set up the warring and political scene of society – pure exteriority.

But the true consciousness of the loss of community is Christian: the community desired or pined for by Rousseau, Schlegel, Hegel, then Bak-ouine, Marx, Wagner or Mallarmé, is understood as communion, and communion takes place, in its principle as in its ends, at the heart of the mystical body of Christ. At the same time as it is the most ancient myth of the Western world, community might well be the altogether modern thought of humanity's partaking of divine life: the thought of a human being penetrating into pure immanence.

Excerpt from Jean Luc Nancy, *An Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp. 9–10.

that the interests of the state and the market were synonymous. All her supporters agreed that to further the interests of the latter we had to restrict the activities of the former, but in order to extend the interests of the market, Thatcher had to increase the power of the state – a logic that was only compounded and increased by New Labour. Both market and state thus accrued power in the name of democracy, and effectively and progressively excluded ordinary citizens from economic and democratic participation. The market has become captured by producer interests along with the state, and, even though both political parties have offered an ideology that pretends that the reverse is true, there can be little doubt that the legacy of both, and of the last thirty years, has been economic and political exclusion for the many, and massive and monopolised enrichment for the few.

Why the governing elites in both Britain and America created this state of affairs and viewed the resulting market state as desirable requires explanation. That is to be found both in history and ideology, which I will come to a little later. Now, though, and perhaps for the first time in almost two generations, the financial meltdown of 2007/8 has given us an opportunity to see the game as it really is. We see that the crisis is due in no small part to the ideological and political complicity between Thatcher and Regan over capital controls (or the need for abandoning them) and a naive market fundamentalism that allowed the banks to game the state and rig the market. Nor have many demurred (until now) from the continuing fervent advocacy of the market state by Clinton and Blair and Bush and Brown. Only now can we glimpse an alternative – one that can perhaps give us a truly free market and a properly participatory state, in which citizens feel valued.

Excerpt from Phillip Blond, *Red Tory*, Faber and Faber, 2010, pp. 3–5.

Phillip Blond is a political thinker, writer and journalist. He founded and now directs the think-tank ResPublica, and writes for the *Guardian*, *The Times*, *Financial Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Independent* and the *Sunday Times*.

## ETHICS WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM FRIENDS

MARK VERNON

“The nation’s morals are like its teeth: the more decayed they are, the more it hurts to touch them.” So noted George Bernard Shaw in an observation that still rings true: if the word ‘moral’ feels painful, the word ‘virtue’ makes most people wince. That’s striking because virtues are merely the skills that enable us to flourish, if we have them. Courage and kindness, good judgement and justice: they promise life lived well. So whence the rot?

The root problem, I suspect, is that our current moral discourse lacks a compelling vision of what it is to be human. Ethics has ceased to be a source of inspiration, and instead feels like a burden – a limitation. This is because it’s become what has been said of economics: a dismal science.

On the one hand is the ethics of calculation, the weighing up of one person’s interests against another. It’s ethics as a cost-benefit analysis, a process that hands it over to accountants. This utilitarianism is an honourable tradition: the original utilitarians argued that something is right because it increases human happiness. The problem is that they had a thin sense of what human happiness entails – certain material needs and a decent dose of quality pleasures. That struggles to articulate any richer vision of what humans might be; it fails to make any profound call on our nature. Today, pleasures abound, at least in the West, and it’s an approach running out of steam. We sense there must be more. Utilitarianism can’t say what.

Then, on the other hand, is the ethics of regulation. This is ethics as a series of responsibilities to which we’re tied as a result of a contract we’re locked into because we live with others. It risks handing ethics over to the lawyers, and has a view of life that is bureaucratic. It makes personal ethics feel like corporate compliance, a burden – perhaps a necessary one – but never a source of vitality because, again, it does not have the capacity to inspire. It doesn’t ask what we can be, only addressing what we ought to do, and often ought not to do.

So where might a new ethics be found? Well, a start can be made by attending more closely to what we have. For they’re not just dry systems.

They’re marked by deep ambivalences, which are, in fact, clues.

Take human rights. Rights have won many people many freedoms, and the rhetoric of rights is very powerful. But implicit in rights are less appealing values too, particularly when they become all-pervasive. When everyone is claiming this or that by right, one person is pitted against another in a conflict of rights. Similarly, that creates a culture of grievance in which people see the moral task as being, in essence, the securing of more rights against others who would otherwise take them away. But here’s a paradox: an individual’s rights only make a difference to him or her if given by others. Robinson Crusoe had no rights on his desert island because, as Simone Weil put it, “A right which goes unrecognised by anybody is not worth very much.” A first thought.

A second, related clue comes from the values inherent in democracy. An obvious, invaluable strength of a democratic culture is that it allows everyone to pursue their interests relatively freely. And yet, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, the democratic individual can easily fall into the delusion that they are sufficiently rich and educated to supply their own needs. “Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anyone”, he writes in *Democracy in America*. “They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.”

He’d spotted an old problem. Pericles, the great champion of democracy in ancient Athens, praised individual initiative, but also warned against the citizen who lives only for himself. He said that such individuals have no right to be part of the city-state upon which their flourishing depends. And he had a noun for such folk too, *idiotes* – from which we get a well-known English word.

In other words, the tensions inherent in the language of rights and democracy highlight something of great importance. To be human is to be, at once, independent and dependent. We can only become independent because of our dependency, and vice versa.

Think about friendship. Aristotle had a great definition of friendship: a friend is “another self”, he said. The definition is so good because it functions at multiple levels. First, a friend is literally “another self”, another person. Unlike erotic love, in which there is a powerful desire to meld with the other, to become wholly dependent upon another, the love called friendship wants the friend to be him or herself.

That’s one reason why friends like to talk, and don’t on the whole kiss; and why they don’t mind being apart for a while, something lovers hate.

Second, a friend is another self in the sense that you see yourself in your friend, and they in you. That mirroring reveals similarities. It also reveals differences, which can be painful. But any profound connection between you and a good friend is forged out of both – you both complement and complement each other. That’s something of the reciprocity of dependence and independence again.

Then there’s the third meaning of another self, when a friend becomes integral to your own sense of self. Friends are then like two eyes that together do one thing: both see the world in the same way. Or they bask in each the other’s reflected glory, and feel each other’s agony. We have a word for such friends: soulmates – one soul in two bodies.

In short, friendship tells us that we are not billiard balls that collide and rebound. Neither are we like drops in the ocean, which lose their identity as they dissolve. Rather, we are a fine suspension of one another, in each other. We are dependent and independent. The good life, witnessed to by friendship, arises from both principles.

If that’s right, then our ethics is broken for two reasons. First, one principle has come to dominate over another. Thus, the ethics of the free market instructs us to live wholly self-interested lives – though it’s worth noting that to respond to that excess with an opposite, self-abnegating injunction is equally misguided. Rather, we naturally befriend ourselves, argued Aristotle, because we are closest to ourselves; but we should do so in order to get over ourselves, to forget ourselves. Therein lies my freedom: liberation from self-obsession to be with and for others.

Second, at the social level, there is a similar move outwards. A broken ethics instructs us to live with each other as if we were foreigners; democracy as a company of strangers. That is no mean achievement in a plural world. However, it’s a view of politics that struggles to believe in social justice because that would involve recognising that my own good is implicitly caught up with the lives of others. If I only desire to live with others insofar as it’s good for me, the ethics of calculation and rule is the result.

To put it another way, note how our understanding of justice, today, is dominated by legalistic themes, mostly of rights or just deserts. Whereas for

Aristotle, while similar elements are important, justice is more fundamentally derivative of something else: civic friendship, or reciprocal goodwill between citizens.

Of course, Aristotle himself failed to live up to this ideal in his exclusion of slaves and women from the citizenry. But the principle is clear: friendship is not an added value, it is the basic social value. It’s what makes politics possible. Conducting politics as if it were about the management of a collective of strangers is, according to this reading, unsustainable.

A better politics is only possible when the community manifests sympathy. Citizens can then be bound by bonds of concern, not just obligation. They won’t become friends in the personal sense, and the courts will still have work to do. But goodwill will tend to prevail. Such a society will also know social habits like respect, and it’ll enjoy collective celebrations, such as when ‘we’ win the cup.

This integrative view finds support in other areas of research. A striking one is neuroscience. Iain McGilchrist, in *The Master and his Emissary*, explores how the two hemispheres of the brain see the world differently, one as if we are independent, self-attending creatures; the other as if we are dependent, other-seeking creatures. His point is not that one is better than the other, but that both are required, one for the other – though, he warns, the independent, self-attending hemisphere has triumphed over the other in the modern world.

Ethics is a form of practical intelligence. Like friendship, we nurture virtues best by our engagement with others and the world. Such skills must be learnt afresh in every generation – another reason why a fixed, codified system never inspires: it contains little conception that life is to be lived. But that also means there’s hope, because ethics can be remade. That will come about by recognising the nature of our dependency and independence. We’ll sense it’s right because it’ll speak to our humanity, thereby enlarging it. Who would want to live without friends? Who could? It’ll be good because it offers us the resources to flourish.

Mark Vernon, ‘Ethics with a little help from friends,’ *Citizen Ethics in a Time of Crisis*, Guardian, 2010, pp. 11–12.

Mark Vernon is an author and journalist. His articles and reviews on religious, philosophical and ethical themes have appeared in many newspapers and magazines.

18 – 30 June

# HARMONY KORINE

## *Trash Humpers*

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June sees the theatrical release in the ICA cinema of *Trash Humpers*, the new film by writer and director Harmony Korine. Over the past fifteen years, Korine has achieved notoriety and critical acclaim for his stirring screenplay for Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) and subsequent ventures as writer and director of *Gummo* (1997), *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) and *Mister Lonely* (2007).

Despite his reputation for youthful provocation, Korine's work has never simply been about going to extremes. His interest in people at the margins of society, and a desire to complicate the relationship between narrative and realism, have led him to produce work both for the cinema and the gallery, as well as numerous fanzines and books, displaying a boundless curiosity explored through a variety of aesthetics, genres and characters. Comedy, violence, song, dance, poetry, contemporary and folk art, bizarre physical acts and a clear love of film are all bound up in a stylistic experimentalism rarely seen in contemporary cinema.

Each of these facets – seemingly contradictory yet in Korine's world somehow complementary – can be found in *Trash Humpers*, which takes the form of degraded found video footage, capturing the bizarre behaviour of a gang of suburban degenerates (in reality, the filmmaker and friends in disguise). In the back alleys, vacant lots and rundown houses of suburban America, people are doing unspeakable things to whatever they find lying around. The crudeness and banality of a contemporary cultural life in which the most pointless and ridiculous acts imaginable become a source of entertainment reaches a new nadir.

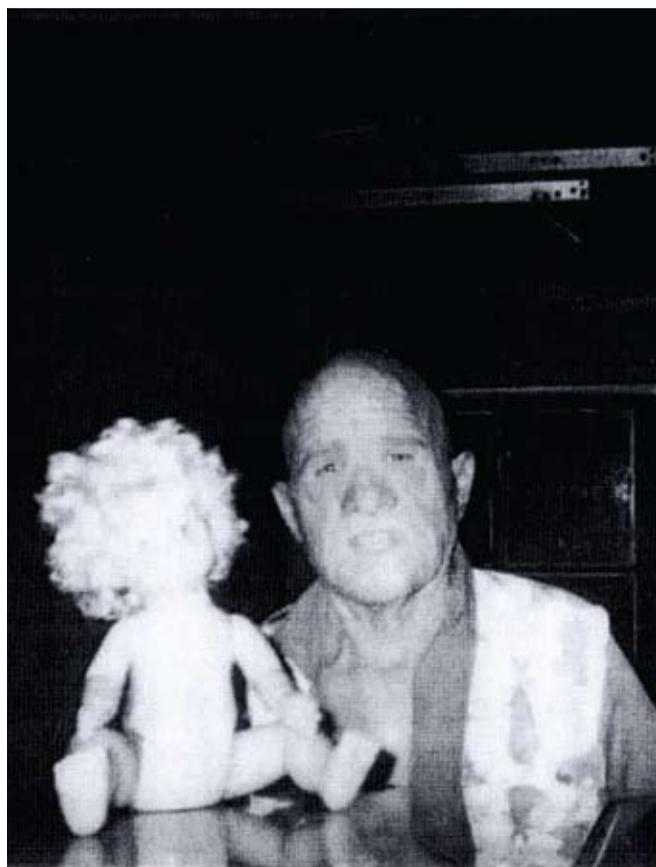


# MAKE IT, MAKE IT, DON'T FAKE IT

—  
EDWARD LAWRENSON

There's an MP3 audio file stored somewhere on the computer that I'm writing this on, that records Harmony Korine, sitting alone in a room for about five minutes. I'd agreed to interview him for the release of his film *Mr Lonely* in 2007, but I'd fallen behind schedule and had to run to get there on time. I started the interview out of breath and after only a few minutes I was dripping with sweat. I excused myself to take a bathroom break to freshen up, but inadvertently left the tape running: hence, the Trappist recording of Korine. The playback wasn't exactly revelatory: first the director laughs a little to himself (presumably at my appearance, melting like a candle in the heat), then, for the remaining few minutes, there's just the noise of outside traffic, the muffled conversations of the publicists in the adjoining room, low-level background noise.

And yet I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't have been more honest of me to have sent my editor this prolonged silence rather than the responses I got from Korine when I returned. He



can be an entertaining interviewee, but for him, encounters with the press often seem as much an opportunity for tall stories and improbable anecdotes as for considered reflection on the film he's there to promote. Here's a recent example (taken at random) of Korine from this January, having just arrived at the Rotterdam Film Festival, talking to the journalist Ben Walters about his earlier memories of the Dutch city:

I met this girl when I was walking back to the hotel. She was like six months pregnant and drinking beer and standing under a tree, and she had pulled her skirt above her knees and she was sticking a fork in her anus. I asked what she was doing and she said her ass was very itchy.

This thumbnail sketch is of a piece with the scatological surrealism of *Trash Humpers*. You might see a certain sideways humour in the remark, or you might just think it plain puerile, and these responses are likely to be reliable indicators of your experience of *Trash Humpers*. In any event, Korine is less concerned with

credibility than with finding opportunities in interviews for mini-performance pieces and biographical flights of fancy. The approach makes for good copy, but it also deflects any attempt to get him to talk seriously about his own practice. Ironically, the grandstanding allows the work to speak for itself. But when the piece in question is as slippery and resistant to categorisation as *Trash Humpers*, the big question is: what exactly is being said in this film?

Like Korine's remarks in press interviews, *Trash Humpers* is on one level a provocation. A seemingly rambling collection of skits involving three figures, each sporting rubbery old-crone masks, getting involved in varying degrees of trouble in desolate patches of downtown Memphis, the film is patience-stretching and gleefully obscurantist. The movie takes its title from the habit these three old folk have of screwing items of refuse, an image of involuntary, almost animalistic pleasure-sating that is at first disturbing, then – on repetition – funny, and, finally, unaccountably poignant. It is a spectacle of punkish bravura, and this attitude reverberates through the film's grotesque, sometimes violent vignettes: a young boy in a school uniform smashes a baby doll (to the sound of giggling like that of the midget at the end of Werner Herzog's *Even Dwarves Started Small*); the body of a busker is revealed on the kitchen floor of an empty house, his head leaking strawberry-red blood; a naked corpse is briefly glimpsed in a refuse dump.

Mixing outlandish, unsettling imagery with a sense of trailer-park Americana, the film eschews the satisfactions and consolations of conventional narrative cinema. Chasing popular success is not, one suspects, something that greatly preoccupies Korine, but there was at least a tentative step towards a more 'mainstream' style of filmmaking with his last film *Mr Lonely*. Its dreamy strangeness was tethered to a coherent plot, name actors and pop-culture references; after the muted critical response to that film, I wonder if *Trash Humpers* isn't an attempt by Korine to reclaim the abrasive experimental impulses and formal

challenges of earlier work like *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) and his short films.

Is that what we can take from the film's concern with the discarded rubbish of everyday life? The trash humpers' obsession with rubbish appears to have infected the rest of the production. All the props seem half-inched from junkyards. A charity-shop chic governs the costume design. And, most striking of all, the movie has been shot on degraded VHS tape, its many on-screen moments of fuzzy abstraction and snowy dropout testifying to this obsolescent technology. It's not too much of a stretch to see this 'junk aesthetic' as a response to, or even renunciation of, the polished production values of *Mr Lonely*, and, more widely, a kind of polemic against the slick allure of so much of our visual culture.

In his new film, Korine invests the crap we'd ordinarily throw away or dismiss as ugly or uninteresting with a seductive appeal – literally so, in the case of his three lead characters, for whom the sight of something as ordinary as a plastic recycling bin can be the greatest of turn-ons. But there's an aesthetic design here too: everyday objects, the detritus of the run-down urban milieu, are transformed by the woozy, ghostly VHS photography into strange and beautiful things. In one of the many striking night-time sequences, for instance, an abstract splodge of colour dances in the flickering torch light before revealing itself as a fire hydrant.

This kind of perceptual game identifies *Trash Humpers* less as an example of independent American cinema (even at its wildest margins) as within the tradition of video art – a term, interestingly enough, that is losing relevancy with the increasingly common convergence of celluloid and HD digital technologies (a trend that the analogue *Trash Humpers* defiantly bucks). And beyond its allegiance to a certain strand of video art, one could be tempted to view Korine's insistence on fixing aesthetic value to banal bits and pieces of refuse as part of much grander lineage of gallery art. In the film's credit sequence, Korine directs the camera to a toilet cistern, freestanding, in a

patch of wasteland. A tribute to Duchamps, perhaps? Or, in the spirit of the improvised summer shoot that Korine has described when discussing the making of *Trash Humpers*, did he just stumble across this bathroom appliance, incongruously situated in what looks like a run-down city park, and think: ‘Cool, let’s film it?’

I’m inclined to think the latter, and it’s this spirit of freewheeling, on-the-hoof inventiveness that makes *Trash Humpers* such bracing viewing. Yes, the durational, abstract, non-narrative aspects of the film connect it to a strand of avant-garde practice, which Korine has always knowingly incorporated into his work. But, a little like Korine in interviews, *Trash Humpers* defies us to take it too seriously.

Above all, there’s something almost childlike in its attention-seeking and mischief-making. Early on in the film we see the eponymous elderly trio smashing up the interior of a derelict house. The scene recalls a sequence in Korine’s 1997 film *Gummo*, when a young man demolishes a table in a cramped kitchen. But if that scene evokes a sense of inchoate fury that resonates with the film’s depiction of the frustrations of small-town life, the spectacle of destruction in *Trash Humpers* is sheer, heady anarchy: it presents the uncomplicated pleasures of a kid smashing up a model that he – or, better still, someone else – has carefully constructed. The line that separates a scene like this from the skater-dude mayhem of, say, *Jackass*, is presumably there, but I can’t see it.

The film delights in other examples of unruly behaviour, like the scene when the trash humpers toss fluorescent light tubes high up into the night air and let them land on the concrete with a satisfying tinkle. Vandalism has rarely been so creative. For all the simulated sex of its lead characters, a certain innocence lurks under *Trash Humpers*’ bad-boy pose, an innocence shared by the trio of lead characters. In a sequence that makes the most of the grubby ‘Readers’ Wives’ camcorder aesthetic, two of the trash humpers hire three prostitutes for the night, but the behaviour of these elderly men is strangely pre- (or post-) sexual:

one giggles uncontrollably while the other seems more intrigued by touching the call-girls’ leather fetish gear than by the women themselves. Elsewhere, Korine seems to be paying tribute to the gross-out delirium of John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* by goading two of his cast to digest some inedible material. But rather than the dog shit that Waters’ convinced Divine to swallow, it’s washing-up liquid that he serves up to his actors, a considerably less filthy and less taboo appetizer.

Earlier I called *Trash Humpers* a provocation, but it’s a provocation in the sense of a trick-or-treat, like the razor in the apple mentioned at the beginning of the film. The results are rambling, flawed, sometimes boring; but there’s a giddy, try-anything creativity to the project that feels fresh and intoxicating. “Make it, make it, don’t fake it”, is one of the few repeated refrains of the trash humpers, and it might serve as a credo for the film itself: *Trash Humpers* exudes a childlike, unsophisticated pleasure in making things, principally in making trouble. It’s been a while since Korine has done so with such brio, and we might view *Trash Humpers* as his attempt to reclaim the enfant terrible label bestowed on him at the start of his career. For some, this might be a little unseemly and regressive: now in his late thirties, Korine should grow up, surely? But it’s an irony that Korine is perhaps aware of, and possibly why he made his infantile trash humpers so aged. Besides, who says that art should be grown-up and dignified? Whatever you think of it, *Trash Humpers* comes across as the kind of film that Korine needed to make to renew and reinvigorate his practice. “I feel like a young boy”, one of the trash humpers says, his face hidden behind an aged mask; “I feel like a new man.”

Edward Lawrenson is deputy-editor of *Sight & Sound* magazine, and has also written about film for the *Big Issue*, and *Time Out*.

**1. BEFORE ENTERING THE CONVENT**

1. I WATCHED A FILM CALLED " CONFESSIONS OF A BLUE MOVIE STAR."
2. I BROKE MY GIRLFRIENDS COLLAR BONE DURING OUR ONE AND ONLY PHYSICAL ALTERCATION.
3. I HAD A CHECK UP.
4. I WROTE MY BROTHER A LENGTHY LETTER TELLING HIM WHY I REFUSE TO VISIT.
5. I ASKED PHIL COLLINS FOR HIS AUTOGRAPH.
6. I ASKED THE BARBER TO GIVE ME A BUZZ CUT.
7. I QUIT SMOKING.
8. I RETURNED A NECK TIE.
9. I QUIT CATHOLICISM.
10. I SAW A MOVIE CALLED "ZELLY AND ME."
11. I READ THE LIFE STORY OF CHICO MARX.

**2. AFTER I GOT OUT OF PRISON**

1. I SAW HUNDREDS OF MOVIES.
2. I VISITED MY OLD FRIEND IN CANADA.
3. I HAD SEXUAL INTERCOURSE WITH A WOMEN.
4. I TRIED MY HAND AT BEING A SHORT ORDER COOK.
5. CONTINUED DOING PETTY CRIMES.
6. STABBED A BLACK MAN WHOM I USED TO BE FRIENDLY WITH.
7. WITHDREW FROM SOCIETY.
8. THOUGHT ABOUT RAPE CONSTANTLY.
9. WENT TO THE BIG APPLE CIRCUS.

9 June

# GANG OF FOUR

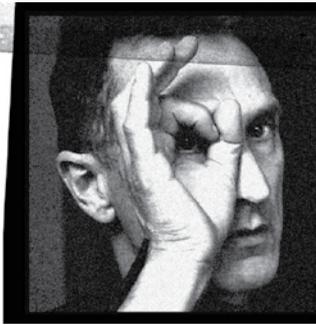
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On Wednesday 9 June, ICA members have the opportunity to experience an evening dedicated to the English post-punk band Gang of Four. The event celebrates the launch of the band's new album *Content*, its first full-length release of new material for over fifteen years.

For more than three decades, the band has championed a more complex role for popular music – one that is both conceptually articulate and capable of euphoric hedonism. Having worked intermittently yet for concentrated periods since its formation in 1977, Gang of Four has influenced numerous musical genres and individual artists, and has left a very special legacy. Along with other bands formed around this time and grouped under the description 'post-punk', the Gang continues to inspire interest in a type of music-making in the UK that fused populism with experimentalism and a polemical attitude.

Since the band's inception, Gang mainstays Jon King and Andy Gill have remained committed to a provocative brand of neo-Marxist informed lyricism, fusing this with an array of musical influences to create what journalist Paul Morley has described as "a kind of demented funk, incredibly white but also, because of political commitment and defiant sloganeering, very dark, and ultimately ... close to the depraved edge of the blues and Hendrix". This politically engaged creativity shows no sign of letting up: one newly written song titled 'Sleeper' addresses "modern paranoia, and the new politics of those that 'belong' and those that are 'outsiders'". Gang of Four's angular sounds cut through the illusion of emotion within pop music, instead giving a glimpse of the impersonal structures that organise our lives.

Centering around a live performance from the band, the ICA event also features a display of artifacts from the group's archives: photographic album artwork, film projections and a recording of Gang of Four's first ever gig, recently re-discovered by singer Jon King.



## GANG OF FOUR

—  
GREIL MARCUS



Early this fall I went to hear the Gang of Four, an almost unknown English punk group that had been booked into San Francisco's Temple Beautiful (since re-named – I think I can bring myself to write this – New Wave A Go Go) as an opening act. It took me something under five minutes to decide that these left-wing former university students from Leeds were the most interesting band I'd seen since the sex pistols – and the most exciting.

That conviction had little to do with any explicit message. The Gang of Four may announce "We are all socialists" in interviews, or work with England's Rock Against Sexism, but I caught only a snatch of lyrics here and there in the hubbub. It was the pure drama of their music and the way they held the stage that made the difference.

They are something to see – grim, determined, a bit intimidating, as if they truly mean to carry on the work of the people after whom they've named themselves. Singer Jon King is all desperation: arms waving, he rushes across the stage in zigzags, and if he seems like a joke at first, his intensity can soon have you worried. Bassist Dave Allen might appear colourless, a nice guy along for the ride; when he heads for the lip of the stage to hammer down a change, he turns threatening. Drummer Hugo Burnham – short and stocky, his hair cut down to a skinhead burr – could be just a few weeks out of



reform school, and it's a shock when he steps out from behind his kit to sing 'It's Her Factory', a song about housewives – because he doesn't look as if he could handle a complete sentence.

But it was guitarist Andy Gill who made me afraid to take my eyes off the stage. Dressed blandly in jeans and a shirt buttoned to the neck, with piercing eyes and a stoic face, he is a performer of unlikely but absolute charisma: his smallest movements are charged with absurd force. He holds himself as if he's seen it all and expects worse. He communicates above all a profound sense of readiness. He's a figure out of countless British sci-fi flicks: caught between powers that are at once impossible to understand and unmistakably evil, he's the everyman who claws his way to the final credits.

On the back of the Gang of Four's first single was a newspaper shot of a matador and a bull; printed alongside was a letter from the group detailing the caption they wanted used. It read: "The matador is saying, 'You know, we're both in the entertainment business, we have to give the audience what they want. I don't like to do this, but I earn double the amount I'd get if I were in a 9-to-5 job.' The bull is saying, 'I think that at some point we have to take responsibility for our actions.'" *Entertainment!*, Gang of Four's debut album, extends the dialogue and plays with the form; the lyrics change sides from matador to bull with every tune, and the tone throughout is one of ominous, carefully worked out disorder.

The songs are gnomic, situational renderings of the paradoxes of leisure as oppression, identity as product, sex as politics; the theme here is not Armageddon (as, with the same material, it seemed to be on stage), but false consciousness within consumer culture. The performers don't rail against the repression implicit in advertising and mass sexual fantasies; rather, without a hint of condescension, they act out received ideas at just that point where they begin to come apart.

Narrative is abandoned, in the music no less than in the lyrics – the tunes are constructed out of jarring off-beats, crooked frames from Gill's guitar – and the process is full of gaps. "Fornication makes you happy", King sings in 'Natural's Not in It'. He seems to accept that as the way things are. To follow the story the band is telling, though, you have to wonder why sex has turned into "fornication", perhaps make a connection to lines from 'Contract' – "These social drams/ Put into practice in the bedroom/ Is this so private/ Our struggle in the bedroom?" – and then wonder why a couple sophisticated enough to describe sex as "struggle" have turned sex into "a contract in our mutual interest".

On almost every cut there's the sense that the ability to speak clearly, to define choices, is slipping away. This is nowhere so evident as on 'Return the Gift' and 'Anthrax'. The former is the only track on the album with conventional rock 'n' roll momentum: as King recites a cutup of commercial give-away slogans, Burnham and Allen find a startling, jerking beat, and Gill traces it with tiny squeaks – squeaks that, as the music builds, seem like the pathetic cries of a consumer who will spend the rest of his life waiting by his mailbox for his package to arrive. 'Anthrax', on the other hand, is anything but impressionistic. It's the band's starkest piece, and rooted in an aesthetic whorly of the group's name: contradiction.



Emerging from a wash of feedback and echo from Gill, Burnham and Allen punch out a fantastic, syncopated rhythm. King comes on, chanting, emotionally frozen – damning himself for having been so weak as to fall in love.

*And I feel like a beetle on its back  
And there's no way for me to get up  
Love'll get you like a case of anthrax  
And that's one thing I don't want to catch*

Aside from some mumbling and buried in the mix, that's all you hear the first time around – and imagery aside, it's fairly standard stuff for punk. That mumbling, however, turns out to be Gill, delivering a simultaneous critique of King's lyrics. The effect is disorienting and hilarious: Gill speaks in the deadpan voice of a student called up to read his essay in front of the class.

Love crops up quite a lot as something to sing about; most groups make most of their songs about falling in love or how happy they are to be in love. You occasionally wonder why these groups do sing about it all the time. It's because these groups think there's something very special about it – either that or else it's because everybody else sings about it and always has. You know: to burst into song you have to be inspired and nothing inspires quite like love. [At this point Gill actually pauses to clear his throat.] These groups and singers think they can appeal to everyone because apparently everyone has or can love, or so they would have you believe, anyway – but these groups go along with the belief that love is deep in everyone's personality. I don't think we're saying there's anything wrong with love; we just don't think that what goes on between two people should be shrouded in mystery.

Gill, Burnham, King and Allen are inheritors of Johnny Rotten – their music has the feeling of beginning just where he left off – but perhaps mainly as artists who inhabit the space of freedom he cleared when he proved that anything was possible. He smashed the limits; most are in place, but I don't think there's any limit to how good Gang of Four can become.

– New West,  
3 December 1979

Greil Marcus, 'Gang of Four', In the Fascist Bathroom: Punk in pop music, 1977–1992, First Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 50–53.

# DO AS I SAY

## GANG OF FOUR

Whet the blade on the stone,  
Light the fire from the flint

*I confess to all of my crimes  
Tell me more and I'll repeat your lines*

You're not natural, you're not as God made you,  
Do as I say, Do as I do

*Before I'm burned up in the flames,  
I will give you all the Devil's names*

Do as I say, Do as I do  
Do as I say, Do as I do  
Do as I say, Do as I do  
Do as I say, Do as I do

Rod on your back i'll use 'til it's broken,  
You say you're innocent so you must be guilty

*You serve me ill Sir, there's nothing to find,  
Need some face time, need some quality time*

I will cleave the soul from the flesh,  
I am unmoved as you confess

*Look in this glass, we are the same,  
If we reversed then you'd be in the flames*

Do as I say, Do as I do  
Do as I say, Do as I do  
Do as I say, Do as I do  
Say as I say and you are not you

*Please*

Say as I say

*Please  
Please*

Say as I say

*Please*

Do as I say

*Who's at the stake?  
Die for a break,  
Lose all I stake,  
Kill all the day,  
She wore some lipstick,  
She should've covered it,  
Dress in dayglo robes,  
In Guantanamo*

*Now I know you, I'll follow you,  
Now I know you, I'll follow you,  
Now I know you, I'll follow you,  
Now I know you, I'll follow you.*

Lyrics from Gang of Four, 'Do As I Say', *Content*, Pledge Music, 2010.

# HEART OF DARKNESS

—  
JOSEPH CONRAD

“I let him run on, this papier-mâché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe. He, don’t you see, had been planning to be assistant-manager by-and-by under the present man, and I could see that the coming of that Kurtz had upset them both not a little. He talked precipitately, and I did not try to stop him. I had my shoulders against the wreck of my steamer, hauled up on the slope like a carcass of some big river animal. The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes; there were shiny patches on the black creek. The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver – over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn’t talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? I could see a little ivory coming out from there, and I had heard Mr Kurtz was in there. I had heard enough about it too – God knows! Yet somehow it didn’t bring any image with it – no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there. I believed it in the same way one of you might believe there are inhabitants in the planet Mars. I knew once a Scotch sailmaker who was certain, dead sure, there were people in Mars. If you asked him for some idea how they looked and behaved, he would get shy and mutter something about ‘walking on all-fours’. If you as much as smiled, he would – though a man of sixty – offer to fight you. I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie. You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies – which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world – what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. Well, I went near enough to it by letting the young fool there believe anything he liked to imagine as to my influence in Europe. I became in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see – you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams...”

He was silent for a while.

“... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone ...”



*You know I know that I exploit you but  
I don't do it on purpose*

Excerpt from Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Project Gutenberg, 2006, first published in 1899 in Blackwoods Magazine.

24 June – 18 July

# LIFT

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Throughout the ICA's rich history, it has been a cradle for new performance, and a platform for artists exploring interdisciplinary work as a means to address the compelling issues of our time. In June 2010 the ICA welcomes back LIFT – the London International Festival of Theatre – as a crucial partner in its endeavour to highlight new groups and individuals working with performative presentation and intervention. Founded in 1981, LIFT has played a significant role over the years in bringing important international artists to London and initiating the production and performance of new work. 2010 marks the full-scale return of the festival as a London-wide event after a hiatus of nine years.

For four weeks from 23 June, LIFT events are taking place in some of the capital's most prestigious cultural venues, as well as on the estates and neighbourhoods of East and North London. LIFT also addresses the role of theatre and performance in the digital world, embracing the potential of new technology for both artists and audiences. Bringing together artists from around the world, the festival provides a cultural gathering point and platform from which to consider concerns both local and global, and from across the artistic spectrum.

As part of LIFT, the ICA hosts a four-week programme featuring four international productions. These new works bring together diverse groups of performers, artists and writers, including the acclaimed Anglo-German artist collective Gob Squad; Rimini Protokoll, leaders of the theatrical movement known as 'Reality Trend'; Russian playwright Ivan Vyrypaev; world champion B-Boy crew Top 9; and a group of eighteen teenagers from Cork who have produced the visceral new work *Fuck My Life* in collaboration with leading Belgian director Pol Heyvaert.

Alongside these productions, the ICA also becomes the home of the LIFT Club. The beating heart of LIFT, this programme of informal talks, workshops, archive material and late-night cabaret enables artists and audiences to come together, share ideas, play, drink and participate in the festival. Hosting dialogues and discussions about the paradigm-shifting issues of today such as climate change, the impact of digital culture, and the rapidly changing nature of public engagement and participation, the Club is a lively vehicle for both entertainment and discourse.

## LAUNCH OF THE LIFT LIVING ARCHIVE

TIM ETCHELLS

Out there somewhere the show starts  
And though sometimes it happens differently most likely it's a matter of dimming the lights in one place and raising them up in another.  
a shift of emphasis – one part of the room you are in losing focus so the other then burns bright and persons enter the stage, speak, move and time passes but

it burns bright also in the afterwards for example aftermath of a firework scratched on a sky seen from London and persons cross the stage of re-memory or else the audio echoes long after a sound for example the clang and clatter of metal on metal, heard down by the river, Thames in a Bow Gamelan boat (*The Navigators*, LIFT '90) from which steam ghosts are rising always upwards or voices singing in a broken down waiting room of former East Germany (*Murx den Europäer!*, produced by the Volksbühne, directed by Christoph Marthaller, LIFT '95) there they sing old songs written already deep with contradictions of the present past – old ballads,



hymns and Yiddish songs next to Hitler tunes, and the national anthem of GDR they sing *From the ruins risen newly, to the future turned, we stand.* And you can't tell quite where they do stand

Their city and their time being just as complex as yours Everything echoes, archivally or otherwise Or (another example) some tightrope walker spins, elegant and deathly, high up above in the now of then still burned on the retina (*Circus Oz*, LIFT '87)

Ten minutes for LIFT Living Archive  
Ten minutes to LIFT Off  
And then on with the show  
Me again how it works the archive  
And LIFT off then up and down  
Stood here  
Looking backwards / forwards  
Looking up and down there

Feet criss cross and the city is Cross crissing its streets with feets  
And criss crossing raised stages with low speeches and murmuring  
The meaning only later, sometimes only years later falling into place  
And down there the city folds around these events continues its flow in time its chase of money, footsteps, and the rest, trafficking in traffic, and pedestrians pedestrianising its pavements  
towerblocking its towerblocks undergrouding it undergrounds the various undergrounds and mainstreams of its heart, its river Thames.  
strong what people remember

delicate and strong what people remember  
delicate and strong and strange what people remember  
strong what they forget

the look of eyes and touch of hands  
sweat of bodies on a stage or in an auditorium with many persons watching waiting a city needs a festival, and the echoes that follow and the ripples that spread

who you sat with and spoke with before or whispered during and afterwards  
what the whole thing brought to mind  
what it changed in you and others  
what it left behind

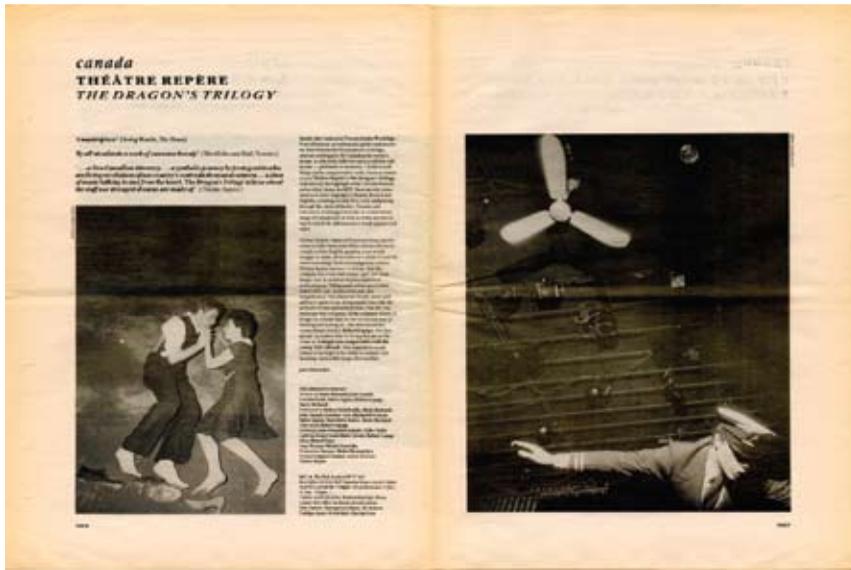
a fax conversation with Ramallah arranging performances – do you remember faxes?  
A contact sheet bearing photographs of Red Pilot, Neue Slowenische Kunst – do you remember contact sheets?  
a list of props that are needed by guys coming from South Africa.  
Letters back and forth also typewritten letters  
an unbelievable nostalgia you know the ones I think where the letters of certain

words have been typed over to correct mistakes  
and where accents for those Hungarian names have been added in, using pencil  
back when writing was not pixels  
when it had materiality

An archive makes the traces visible  
Tangible  
Even as it knows they are gone  
Not just by any means the art works but somehow of all those hours of officeworks and finances and even interns or diverse drivers stood at the airport with signs declaring the names of people they are waiting for  
in conversations  
so many talking breakfasts  
so many aftershows  
so many talks  
Remember Roy Faudree in a LIFT talk/conversation saying  
The actor is a person that says *look*  
*Look*  
*Look at me* (Like me, now) *you can look at me from the top of my head to the bottom of my shoes.*

and an archive at the same time makes clear  
that *Three Sisters* (Katona József Theatre, Hungary, LIFT '89) needed  
2 hand bells





- 1 statue
- 9 rugs
- 2 mirrors
- 1 globe
- 2 whirlygigs
- 1 medical bag
- 1 clock
- 1 artificial cake
- 3 suitcases
- 1 basket of artificial flowers
- and
- a dinner set for 13 persons

or  
that  
*The Dragons Trilogy* (Robert  
LePage/Théâtre Repère LIFT '87)



beneath the title Production Expenses needed things both general and super specific From Fit Up, Get Out and Lighting to named items Sand, Curb Stones and Telegraph Pole. There is a poetry in these practicalities.

Whilst elsewhere there, in another typewritten document at the bottom somewhere at the bottom of the long long list of tech and lighting needs (*for the way of how* George Coates, LIFT '85)

it's a shame to miss the detail of the request – itemised as 'A Miscellaneous NEED' – for 100 Cubic Feet of Helium per week. I mean this is probably and by no means the strangest request in the archive, though hard to compare objectively since as yet there is no trail or index to the content by the quality or appearance of *strangeness*. Given time I'm sure there will be, though there may be too much of it (strangeness) there to keep track of, strangeness buried but emerging from the documents, a trace you cannot stop from rising.

Up  
Above the streets  
To look down on the way we walked and talked then  
The routes we walked to get here to this place  
"Your London is not my London."  
That's what the woman said, as you walked a crowded pavement in East London in *You – The City*, by Fiona Templeton (LIFT '90)

Audience passed from performer to performer, on a ninety-minute journey barraged with text, caught up in a structure that only slowly lets you into its game, encountering performers who seem to be taxi drivers, shoppers and down and outs, performers who seem like spies, like lovers and like psychopaths.

And all of them talking directly to you.

What you find in this work most of all, as in many other performances, are flashes of connection, where a weird synchronicity jumps between text, context and your own state of mind.

"You swear you haven't had an affair ..." says the black guy on the steps of the church while you look out at the traffic and the dust swirling on Commercial Street. "She should leave him and live with you. You smile [he says] you smile so you know what your face is doing."

Pure electric.

Elsewhere in the same performance a white woman sits on the bench next to you. Some movie-moment, only you're in it. You're lovers. Or were. She has to go. Or you have to. Or maybe you both do. Or one of you left already and only now comes back. It's hard to tell, it all happened so down there and back then. Anyhow. Somehow in the moments you spend together – sat together on the bench – the distance that is often called theatre collapses and you can't see the edges of the frame. You want to tell her not to worry, it's OK, it's OK, but you don't even know what 'it' is and when

her eyes seem to need contact you give it to them, not quite as 'a performer no longer in the theatre' but rather as a person, simply present.

She says: "My London isn't your London. My words can be translated into yours, but they're not yours. You fear and yet long to cross that line."

Reading letters again. back and forth for the human scale of "hope you are well's and "nice to see you's and "please let us know if you plan to be in London's again" and at the same time, running side by side to all that the *inhuman scale* of visas, carnets, logistics health and safety fire officer checks on everything are there any naked flames?

no  
are there any flames in some way naked?  
no  
are there any flames at all?  
well yes  
but maybe not the kind you're thinking of  
the naked flames of an idea can start a fire in a city like this one that's the true truth reality-ness of it all  
that things spread out from an event  
that starts at 8  
and by nine, nineteen or twenty years later the ripples still spread.  
Story whispers  
Set loose in the city

and that city – London –  
yes  
goes on  
down there  
glows on down there walking its walkways  
flying over its flyovers  
community centring its communities that have no centre really but you know what I mean  
goes on gardening its gardens  
and kitchening its kitchens

a kitchen show here  
a garden show here  
an air show here  
an earth fire and water show there  
down the river  
yes down by the river  
and a sky show here

a high tech or blue sky thinking  
 show there  
 a dark sky with thunder clouds  
 show there  
 in Graeme Miller's *The Desire Paths* (LIFT '93)  
 and the city down there  
 continues to grumble and  
 crumble  
 weaving its citizens in its streets  
 year on year embroiling them  
 deep  
 in conversations, about weather  
 or politics  
 acid rain and psychology  
 tangling its anglers for truth  
 in wrangles and attempted  
 disentanglements  
 to get to the bottom of things  
 and meanwhile continues  
 refugeeing its refugees  
 and on its bad days refusing  
 them  
 populating its populations  
 surprising its surprises  
 walking its walks  
 and changing its demands  
 (Yes. London – changing its most  
 reasonable and unreasonable  
 demands. Not a static object,  
 more a conversation partner)

needing sequins  
 needing a translator  
 needing a way to make this  
 happen  
 or make that un-happen  
 like cities do  
 needing reflection  
 needing refraction – yes  
 needing relevance – yes  
 and needing art as a mirror  
 or needing art not as mirror  
 but as a hammer  
 like cities do, like times like  
 these do sometimes  
 or needing art not as a hammer  
 but  
 as a telescope aimed far at the  
 future  
 or as a periscope  
 or maybe better a kaleidoscope.

There in the archive you can see  
 the pragmatism of the theatre  
 too. Not just its will to magic.  
*Names on the cast list marked  
 with an asterisk, are not  
 coming and will be replaced.*  
 And in some documents rather  
 endless discussion of hotels and  
 their quality or lack thereof  
 And in other letters – to British  
 councils, cultural attachés,  
 consulates and ministers –  
 a rather constant return to the  
 topic of money and if, by some

chance, by any chance, and in  
 light of circumstances that were  
 not entirely predicted, someone  
 might just possibly, have some  
 more of it.

there are many pictures here too  
 some of them made out of  
 photographs, some of them



made using words  
 Comedianta, Spain (LIFT '85)  
 present *Devils/Dimonis*  
 street performance Battersea  
 Park ... fire and strange faces  
 and somewhere in the archive  
 a letter, describing how the  
 company live and work together  
 in a big house somewhere near  
 the sea  
 there are so many pictures here  
 some made using words

even the titles are something to  
 conjure with  
 (a random selection)



*Oh, How Nobly We Lived More  
 Than Just One Life*  
*Phaedra*  
*Sarajevo*  
*The Unofficial Heavyweight &  
 Entertainment Championship  
 of the World*  
*It is Not For Us To Fly To The  
 Islands of Happiness*

*Lord Dynamite*  
*Brace Up!*  
*Bringing the Streets of Beijing  
 to London*  
*Ubu and The Truth*  
*Commission*  
*Skeletons of Fish*  
*the way of how*

you drift back to something  
 perhaps to George Coates' and  
 the Miscellaneous NEED for  
 100 Cubic Feet per week of the  
 second lightest and second  
 most abundant element in the  
 observable Universe, most of it

formed during the Big Bang,  
 although new supplies are  
 created constantly by the nuclear  
 fusion of hydrogen in stars.  
 Helium – He, atomic number  
 2. The colourless, odourless,  
 tasteless, non-toxic, inert  
 monatomic gas that heads the  
 noble gas group in the periodic  
 table, best known either for its  
 comical effect on the human  
 voice or it's always borderline  
 absurdist quality of being lighter  
 than air.  
 The balloon, filled with Helium,  
 floats.  
 It rises up.  
 Spins above London. Above  
 LIFT as it continues its journey,  
 forwards, making contact,  
 starting new conversation here  
 or there, and stopping here or  
 there on a street corner to chat,  
 setting up somewhere in a park  
 or a theatre, or in high rise or in  
 an underground station.  
 Balloon of helium looks down  
 again.  
 Then continues  
 Upwards over buildings, treetops  
 roads houses  
 And out

This text was originally delivered  
 by Tim Etchells as a lecture to mark  
 the launch of the LIFT archive in  
 June 2009.

Tim Etchells is an artist whose  
 work is highly diverse, moving from  
 a base in performance into visual  
 art and fiction. He has exhibited  
 and performed at numerous  
 international venues and recently  
 curated a weekend of performance  
 and discussion at the ICA.

All images taken from the LIFT  
 Living Archive.  
[www.liftfestival.com/living-archive](http://www.liftfestival.com/living-archive)

Looking back

# A CONVERSATION ABOUT MASHUP

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WITH HAROLD OFFEH,  
LEILA MCALISTER & GLASS HILL

Pursuing Independent Paths (PIP) is a Westminster charity promoting independence and choice for adults with learning disabilities. The ICA's learning team has worked with PIP since August 2007 to develop a series of collaborative projects that bring both students and staff into the ICA, creating opportunities to work with artists and practitioners, and to develop a relationship with the ICA, its programme and its staff.

Our projects have taken PIP's informal learning strands as starting points for work with three key artists: Jessica Voorsanger explored independent travel, Sonia Boyce encouraged confidence building, and most recently Harold Offeh investigated a series of strands: Friendship, Art & Design, and Healthy Eating.

Harold met the students and staff at PIP's Westbourne Grove centre in September 2009, and over the course of six months worked with a group of students towards a final public event held at the ICA in March 2010. Our title for this project, *MashUp*, came out of Harold's conversation with the students: an interest in culture clashes, the idea of taking one element and mixing it with another. This presented a way in which we might bring our themes together, encouraging exchange and dialogue between the three groups.

Harold brought on board a number of artists and practitioners who would work with the students to develop workshops and events to explore our themes. Food practitioner Leila McAlister looked at ideas of healthy eating; furniture designers Markus Bergstrom and Joe Nunn (who work under the collective name Glass Hill) explored tableware design, while choreographer Robert Hylton and designers Nous Vous investigated friendship.

Each of the strands was brought together in *MashUp*, a night-club event held at the ICA with performances, a social eating event and a temporary shop selling t-shirts, a fanzine and tableware designed by the students.

After this event we invited Harold, Leila and Joe back to the ICA to discuss the crossover between the Healthy Eating and Art & Design strands, and to consider how the project may have affected their own practices. A transcript of their conversation appears on the following pages.

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**HAROLD OFFEH** — I'm an artist working with video and performance; I was invited by the ICA to join the ongoing project that they have been developing with PIP students, to help shape it and to develop a series of workshops. The brief was to respond to four strands that the project was developing – Friendship, Healthy Eating, Art & Design and Drama – and to bring on board other practitioners who could bring particular skills to bear on these areas.

PIP (Pursuing Independent Pathways) facilitates projects with adults with learning difficulties. They had a previous track record of working with the ICA and this meant there was an established relationship already in place; it was interesting to see the dialogue that had built up between an arts organisation and a community organisation. Essentially through this existing partnership the ground work had already been laid for me, which was great and unlike previous projects that I'd done where there was a lot of effort required to familiarise the organisation with my work and the processes involved in working with artists.

The idea was that the four strands of the existing dialogue should be brought together in an event at the ICA, with six months to develop a relationship with the students and to work towards this goal. Having a very clear visible outcome was a useful catalyst and again differed from other projects I'd worked on.

It was equally appealing to be able to discuss and consider other practitioners to get involved to lead the different strands. This ended up being quite an organic process where people were 'discovered' and involved as the project unfolded.

As a whole, for me, the model was an interesting one to work within.

Perhaps it would be good for both of you to introduce yourselves and to describe the strands you were involved in?



**LEILA MCALISTER** — I own a food shop and café in Shoreditch in East London, so I'm a food 'practitioner' rather than an artist. The PIP students firstly came to visit my shop as a sort of interview between me and them; it was quite clear from this first meeting that there was something to be done. Some products in my shop that I took for granted were mysterious to the PIP students: unpackaged muddy vegetables, artisan bread and cheeses that

weren't in plastic wrapping were fascinating to them, and I was fascinated by their fascination.

It was apparent very early on that the PIP students had a confidence about being in the ICA building, they had a sense of ownership about the place. They were very supportive of each other and understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses which was a great advantage for us having come relatively late to the project and starting them off with a new topic.

They all had their own notions about what healthy eating was and that's where we started. They had done some previous work around healthy eating which I think had left them more confused in many cases. They thought for example that healthy eating was not eating anything that you liked. Or that healthy eating is tofu, or not eating butter or cream; certainly they had the idea that you should eat low fat food and things without sugar, but the reality was that many of them had a poor diet and a lot of them ate a lot of cakes, doughnuts, packet soups and so on.



So our idea was to go back to basics and find some products that they all liked and didn't understand much about; we chose bread, cheese and vegetables. Over the course of ten weeks we alternated sessions at the ICA with visits to producers or specialist retailers. The classes we did in the ICA Reading Room were really in preparation for visits to producers. For example, we had a class about bread that looked at the science of the process: the raw ingredients, different types of flour, talking about yeast and sourdough. Making the yeast and sourdough alive and bubble caused great excitement! The following week we visited a bakery and met a baker; I think that it was very empowering for them to visit with the knowledge of how bread was made, and very exciting for them to see the process in action. The value in that is that it really changed the way that they bought bread.

We also held a session about seeds, germination and the growth of plants, and planted up some crude sacks with herbs and vegetables on the roof of the ICA. We followed this with a visit to Spitalfields City Farm, where the group harvested vegetables and cooked them there and then; this is something I don't think any of them had done before and they were very pleased with the results of their cooking.

**HAROLD** — Are the sacks still up on the ICA roof?

**LEILA** — I think they are! The parsley was doing very well and the leeks might be the right size to harvest now!

• **JOE NUNN** — Markus Bergstrom and I are furniture designers primarily, but we also design interiors and products. We work together under the name Glass Hill and we



• were approached by Harold to run the Arts & Design strand of the project.

• For us as Glass Hill and as individuals, doing this project was slightly intimidating as we had never done anything of this nature before. The first couple of sessions we had with the PIP students we ended up lecturing to them, with slide shows and fairly tenuous conceptual leaps that we weren't even sure of! This was based on our assumption of what might interest them, and also our uncertainty as to how we would fit in with the project and contribute to the MashUp event. But things moved on very quickly once PIP had visited our workshops. We came to look forward to them arriving on Mondays and despite them complaining about it being cold and dusty I think they really enjoyed it too!

• For the first session in the workshop we got together a collection of previous things we'd made; one of them which we were sure was going to be a huge success was a boat. We showed it to the students and told them that we could make something like this with them. But they looked at it as an object, an existing thing; the link between us, the fact that we had made it and the potential for them as a group to make something similar was missing; there wasn't that engagement with it that we had hoped for. There were some other objects, some test pieces that interested them more. Little scale models of things, prototypes using different materials; these objects that they could hold and explore their different textures and materials were much more interesting to them. That's when we started letting them lead the sessions a bit more. Also, Leila's

- involvement with the healthy eating group
- gave us a focus about what we might be able to produce with them.

**HO** — Would it be useful to talk about the crossover between the design element and the healthy eating strand of the project? What kinds of discussions did you have?

**LM:** Being part of MashUp, this event that everyone was working towards, was a fantastic goal because it was very ambitious: a club night at the ICA. Everyone knew what that meant and that it was something really significant and sensational, but we had quite clearly defined goals for each project so that it was still manageable. Our objective in terms of healthy eating had been very reductive, looking at very simple products, and we were determined to keep it that way – even if it was going to be a feast of bread, butter and cheese it could still be dramatic. But for me the really dramatic thing was the confidence the PIP students had about what they were serving; even if it was just whole carrots, the fact that they ate a whole carrot with the leaves still on it was great; they knew where it had come from.

The fact that it was an unusual meal also meant there was much more freedom in the way that it was going to be served so Markus and Joe could explore how we serve food at its most basic level. The intention had always been to be quite flexible and quite creative. We talked together and had some good ideas about communal eating to explore ideas of sharing and friendship further, but in hindsight they were too complicated to explore or execute within the timeframe.



- **JN** — We had to maintain a certain flexibility and the way our workshop sessions were leading from one to the next, driven by the interests of the students allowed for that to take place. We approached our sessions by process and material. With us being furniture designers it was an opportunity to make something different and we decided to make table wear for the feast. A typical session would have been slip casting a cup. We would make an attempt to have the process ready for them and we would run them through the different materials and

- processes. But because they had done a lot of
- arts and crafts, they very often knew much
- more about the process than we did. We
- would arrive with a prototype and as soon as
- they saw it they would tell us “oh that’s not
- going to work, you need to do it like this”! It
- was great to have this discussion with them
- about the ways of doing things correctly and
- to have the opportunity to then follow up at
- the next session.

- The two things that the students were really
- good at and much better than Markus and I,
- were time keeping and being realistic. For
- example, they asked how many people were
- going to be at the meal. When we replied
- that there would be around fifty people,
- they responded that we couldn’t possibly
- make fifty of this or that object in the time
- frame – and they were right! We ended up
- making things which were simple enough
- for them to be useful in various ways; we
- made a cup, which was not a glass nor a bea-
- ker but was somewhere in between, and the
- same with the chopping board. With the vol-
- ume of people and the kind of meal it was
- going to be, with huge breads and large pieces
- of cheese, it meant this really worked well.



**HO** — I think it benefited from the simplification and streamlining of it; there was a real synergy between the food and the objects that displayed and utilised it, it was fantastic.

I’m conscious it would be good for me to talk about the friendship group that formed a further strand to the project and contributed significantly to the final event; this involved an additional group of practitioners.

The remit of the friendship group was to organise the event and initially structure what would be happening on the night – but the journey to that point was also really nice. The first few sessions were about getting to know each other, talking about social situations, events and clubs that they’d been to and enjoyed. Quite quickly we managed to map out some common ground; the PIP students wanted there to be some sort of performativity, and for there to be several elements to the night, not just a club night with DJ’s. We also did some quite informal things; Michael Jackson was definitely a recurring theme, so we watched videos and shared dance moves which segued quite nicely into them wanting to do some

kind of dance performance on the night. That’s why I approached Robert Hylton to work with them as a professional dancer.

Generally those preparatory sessions were where we tried to bring together all the different things that we had to do for the club night; the visual identity of the club, which involved the designers Nous Vous for the logo and the signage, and then the idea of the pop-up shop, and also working with DJs and thinking about what music they might want.

**LM** — They really understood the proposition of the event as a whole didn’t they? They knew what they working towards.

**HO** — My sense of it was that it was about making sure they had ownership of the event, but also about learning from them, as Joe pointed out. Letting them have a sense of the authority of their opinions.

**LM** — I did my sessions with Rosie Sykes who’s a cook and we would often discuss what we had learned after the sessions. The group’s honesty and immediacy to situations, their sense of the ‘here and now’ and their use of vocabulary was just brilliant, so open.

**HO** — Do you think the project has impacted on your practise?

- **JN** — As a practise we tend towards the
- slightly conservative, which was not some-
- thing that we naturally did with the students.
- Experimenting with different materials is
- something we haven’t done since college
- and something we really enjoyed. It also
- helped us understand what the potential of
- a small workspace is for us; having to make
- fifty objects in one week meant everyone
- had to get down to it and definitely things
- get done.

**LM** — Our shop is very much a local shop with regular customers, and we’ve worked with different local groups, but the great thing about the PIP students was how honest they were. People have their habits about what they choose to eat and buy; it’s a very personal thing, but the PIP guys were very open about how and why they make the choices they do about the food that they eat.

**HO** — For me it’s just reinforced the importance of dialogue, and having enough time for that to occur, which seems to have been really fruitful. It’s provided me with a model of an ideal to aim towards in anything I might do like this in the future.

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MARK VON SCHLEGGEL

#3

# THE ARTIST ABSTRACT

I

The area between the Museum's offices and the west side of the main lobby served as an antechamber between the visible institution and its private offices. The elevator took up the little room's North wall. In front of the East wall, a secretary sat at a desk, monitoring who came in and out of the elevator. The elevator was currently at rest on the fifth floor, and she was talking on the telephone.

A visitor approached, hesitantly.

The secretary swallowed her mirth, her expression at once businesslike, dead. She frowned and lowered the receiver. Though she was a service employee at a desk in a public space, her business was usually with other Museum employees. She regarded the visitor with a dead and businesslike expression.

The pale young man before her desk wore a second-hand overcoat, fastened by two of its three surviving buttons. A yellow scarf was wrapped about his neck and stuffed awkwardly into his front. This though the city was in the midst of an autumn heat wave. He was evidently nervous.

"I'm to use the Library," he said. "I have an appointment."

The secretary sighed, placed her call on hold. She took up a clipboard.

"Library?"

"That's correct. I've made an appointment.

Oct 14 ..."

"Yeah I know the year. Name?"

"Standish Rehl." He spelled the last part out.

The name, of course, would mean nothing to her, and she had difficulty locating it on her clipboard. Because she was, by extension, the Museum. And this young man was the Artist. The Unknown Artist. The Artist, so reasoned the Library, Abstract.

The secretary located the name and turned the board his way. It was spelled there, *Real*.

Standish reached for the pen in his overcoat, so as to sign beside his name, but she yanked the board away and crossed his name out with a bold swift stroke herself. On the north side of her desk a large but low-walled wooden box showed two open compartments. One contained a heap of laminated pink badges. The other was empty. Careful not to endanger her nails, the secretary selected a badge from the latter and handed it out.

He took it and fixed it to the lapel of his coat.

"You're early," she said. "You'll have to wait till eleven. Then you can take the elevator to the sixth floor. Turn left when you exit and walk straight. The Library is at the end of the hall."

She returned to the telephone.

High behind her, the clock on the wall said it was four minutes to eleven.

Standish Rehl turned and strolled to the west side of the antechamber. Here, directly across from the secretary's desk, there was a small black-cushioned bench. Above it hung an unusually long and horizontal black and white photograph. A compound of rectangles and words, it showed a stretch of storefronts along Broadway. No humans were visible. In pencil at the bottom right-hand corner the artist had signed the picture.

He turned and sat down. No one else was waiting for the elevator. It was still on the fifth floor. Standish looked again at the clock. One minute had passed.

## II

The Library had come to Standish Rehl on its own volition. The young man did not seek libraries out very often. He didn't read much, because when he did it was difficult for him to stop. Any claim an author made opened up so many possible interpretations that he saw no end to the argument. Language, slippery and vague, demanded precision of thought. He was, he knew, something of a clumsy thinker, who cared more about the foundations of ideas than their uses.

It was in an Irish bar with an Italian name that Standish had overheard a woman speak of the Library. It was late, near closing, and she and Standish were waiting for the same person, but she didn't know it and was talking to someone else. "They give you folders filled with primary documents", she said. "They just hand them to you. Some are really valuable. There's no proper checking or security. It's an art library, so the librarians aren't even professional."

"The best libraries are the ones you can steal from – would steal from, but don't", said the male she was with.

"You just phone the Museum the day before you want to come", the woman continued. "Give your name and say when you plan to come. They have little exhibitions of ephemera there too. Right now there's a Reinhardt ..."

She stopped speaking, for the man had turned to pay for a drink and was no longer listening.

But Standish Rehl had been listening.

He heard. The Artist Abstract, or so thought the Library, heard.

## III

Since for the Library he was the Artist Abstract and it being the library it was and the times being what they were, Standish Rehl was white and male. He was also a painter. Reactionary? Pop and Conceptualism had not yet been granted centrality and appeared to Standish as jokes played on the establishment by well-dressed hippies clowning about on an escapade to which his generation hadn't been invited. Nevertheless the influence of these movements was felt. Art schools were at this time (1992) growing in influence, but still relatively marginal. Europe was oblique. As an American, Standish understood that one only came to New York City to become an artist. That only there was it a way of life.

Rents in various parts of Manhattan were still quite affordable. His one-bedroom apartment on East 3rd Street came with the first month free. In New York, he found jobs aplenty, some of them quite remarkably odd and educational. An extra fifty dollars a month paid in cash to his landlord gave him a large basement room to use as a studio.

The studio wasn't much. Two grimy foot-level windows leaked an always-grey light into a cob-webbed cube otherwise only illuminated by a bare bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling. With some ingenuity, Standish conglomerated a small workspace beneath it, shifting about long-lost tenants' boxes and furnishings.

He liked working in the basement. It was, in fact, just the sort of space he needed. The limitations of light in the room placed him at a helpful handicap. He needed the difficulty to be able to paint at all. For what, he often wondered, was motivating him, at his most base, to paint? What would constitute success in the endeavour?

Standish avoided the issue through a simple confidence game. He guaranteed that each painting would be a failure. Often the failures were quite explicit. His negligible representational skill, for instance, was easy to prove. A particularly successful stovepipe? It had been intended as a bust of Lincoln. A morning tugboat? A banana. In the all-wrong light of the basement, abstraction came like representation. And then one had to reach over the painting to wash brushes, to open cans, and do away with turpentine. Spills and drops easily spoiled dozens of potential pristinities, yet instantly appeared forced.

Standish Rehl became, in fact, in his basement room, an artist of failure. He contented himself with the thought that he had joined a rich tradition. Who could know his significance? No one. Who could know his true motives? Not the other failed, of course, who were already excluded from all categorisation. He was willing to float failing along in time, propelled by the unconscious mass of the failed.

He had an Observer, of course.

Usually, after Standish carried a small board up to his fourth-floor rooms and subjected it to a blast of early morning sunlight, the Observer would scoff. But once or twice, here and there, the Observer would be briefly enamored with a particular work. The little grimy painting would seem to have bloomed into a surprising, happy, accidental perfection. Standish

would keep it like a pet, look after it for a few days. But soon enough, the Observer would lose interest, chuckling over a recent debacle. It would demand another painting and Standish would bring the old one back downstairs. He found quicklime worked the best. Simultaneously a primer and a gesso, it blanked the previous history with totalising power.

He concentrated on the Observer. He would attempt to force the Observer into one of these rare transcendent experiences. How to get him there? What shade of blue appears as pure black in the basement? What allegorical symbol can emerge from chaos? By manipulating these effects, he was able to de-fang the Observer, whose irony would be for now always delayed.

He passed his first year in the great city amid such byzantine fantasies. He had a few acquaintances, some from where he came, some whom he'd met on jobs. He was even almost friends with a professional artist. Con-artist? His name was Thom Jack, and he seemed always on the make.

In public, for instance, Thom Jack would look away nervously while in conversation. But he seemed to see Standish as something of a co-conspirator, for reasons of his own. And when he looked away, he would look back at him from the corner of a twinkling eye and listen to what Standish had to say. Standish appreciated this confidence, however undeserved.

Thom Jack was always on the lookout for various insider tips. He had told our friend, the last time they talked, of a space in Williamsburg Brooklyn available for long-term lease for next to no money. An entire nineteenth-century factory. It was to be shared by four artists and the three were looking for the fourth. "Do you know anybody who might be interested?"

The twinkle again. Standish considered what it would be like to live there.

"I don't know anybody", he said.

But Thom Jack was no longer listening.

There were evenings when Standish Rehl would daydream of that old factory, with its long-lit windows and its view of an enormous wall painting of a fish advertisement on the building across from it. He would imagine his bohemian antics there. The vast canvases he would leave about, some two stories high, spot-lit by the ranks of cross-barred windows. The woman he would meet there.

But no, Thom Jack would not call again. He would see this as some sort of resistance. Which it was, of course, in its way, or so the Library hoped.

The Artist Abstract would not hesitate to say no to power. The glittering fires of his revolutions would burn out unseen by all but the Observer, who tended to see through them anyway for what they really were. They often overturned his intentions. One day when Standish was working a temporary job in an office in Manhattan, his 'boss' asked him to go get a cup of coffee for her. He 'quit'. No one ever mentioned it at the agency. Sylvie, his 'contact', paid him for the full week.

We report that Standish Rehl became increasingly solitary and self-involved. Nevertheless the Library didn't have to work very hard to catch his attention. He was a New Yorker, after all. He was a painter, working quite steadily, in fact, these days.

He went to the Museum, to the current Retrospective.

## IV

The current Retrospective had met with modest excitement in the press. Several critics demanded a re-examination of the painter as the first of what they now understood as a new generation of Minimal and Conceptual artists. Others pointed to what they saw as an unmistakable romanticism lurking in the recesses of these most ostensibly rigorous abstract works. There were raves. One or two writers described the final room, with its ranks of black monochromes, as constituting one of only a handful of truly moving moments in their professional lives. Standish didn't particularly notice how frequently the terms "the end of art", "the last paintings" and the "last painter" popped up – these being terms, apparently, of the artist's own invention and thus not taken seriously by critics.

But it wasn't in the "last room" with its racks of black monochromes, as it happened, that the exhibition most moved Standish Rehl. He did linger there the longest. It was in the true last room, that is to say, the first room, through which you had to pass again to exit. This room contained large-print reproductions of baroque and ugly cartoons. It wasn't only the images that accosted him violently. Not at all. It was their texts too, often quite sophisticated.

Moved? You might say so. Standish Rehl quit painting for good.

## V

No problem whatsoever, thought the Library. He can still be an artist. In the generalising light of the coming Apocalypse, his paintings will be but shadows anyhow. It was the past that the Library sought to preserve.

Standish Rehl did very well not working. Without the weight of his failed paintings upon him, he turned again to the city and the world. He purchased things and arranged them, fixing up his apartment, avoiding the basement altogether. He took long walks. Through Chinatown, along Canal Street, down to the old ships on the waterfront and up the sparkling band of East River park. He enjoyed the walks, enjoyed the city's grit and real ways. When he walked he knew where he was.

One afternoon late in July he passed, as he often did, a table of books. He usually avoided St Mark's Place, but, lost in anxious thought concerning a letter he had received from the Sheriff's Office calling him "delinquent", he had turned North on 2nd Avenue and turned West on St Mark's.

So passing by one of the outdoor cafés that crowded the block to afford tourists a better view of delinquents, Standish found his eyes straying to a person seated in a small group at a sidewalk table in a more exclusive venue diagonally across 2nd Avenue.

The Observer? It stopped him in his tracks. It was the very same sculptor, this Thom Jack, who'd told him about the vacant studio. Thom Jack was, in fact, looking his way, just at that moment avoiding his interlocutor's eye. Standish immediately turned to St Marks and pretended to be examining books at the nearest table.

The business of hawking second-hand books was flourishing on the streets of New York at this time. The Library had agents all around. Many of the tables stretching along the little street concentrated refugees of the paperback revolution, apex of enlightenment's parabola, now under sustained counter-revolutionary assault by the corporate towers of the East 50s, and offered them at low prices. Darwin competed with von Däniken, and von Däniken with Colette. The sellers were often quite desperate and uninformed. A first-edition Dashiell Hammett might still go for twenty-five cents, while an 11th printing mid-career Steven King would take in 10 dollars as a hardback.

Since the book-sellers' tables today were concentrated at the corner on which Standish Rehl now stood, his eyes bounced off Thom Jack's gaze over a thick field of little doors of potential escape, settling down to come to rest on one.

A black hardbound book lay face up on the table next over to his left. It still retained its paper cover. A photograph on it showed a familiar black and white man seated upon a chair.

Standish didn't look away. Handing the sad hippy seven fifty, receiving a first-edition 1975 *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, edited by Barbara Rose, in a little brown paper bag, he imagined the wandering eye of Thom Jack still upon him.

## VI

Black and black and before the black a blue. In as much as the blue could exist in hindsight without the black. It could not. Nor could the earlier colour studies, hodge-podge representations, or any of the other pieces of the Artist Abstract. The black was all. Only in the black was the Artist "free of all passion, ill-will and delusion".

Or so said the book. Nowhere in the book did Standish find himself surprised. Now directly confronting the static paradox of his new existence in thought, Standish showed himself naturally resilient. He himself was the Artist Abstract. An Artist, perhaps the first, who actually did no art. He took pleasure in the impossibility of his function.

The Observer suggested he change his name to Strandish. After reading the book, there had come an ultimate quality to his new lack of action, as if he'd approached some sort of Gödelian ideal. Standish walked no longer fearing the slippery slopes of expression and self-reflection. He really became, as it were, not an artist at all.

Of course, not acting was not without its own slippery, though quite opaque, surface. Standish lost control. He stopped working jobs, and lost weight at what the Observer felt was an "alarming rate". Meanwhile, every day called for a certain amount of celebration, for like a dandy this Artist Abstract now existed in a world always announcing the opening of his greatest exhibition. As the Library had foreseen, he turned to heroin.

He enjoyed using drugs. He would stand for long periods in front of his full-length mirror and reflect on the shadows yawning hollow around his eyes, celebrating nothing as deeply as it was possible to celebrate it.

The rest was easy. The heroin led to drink and to theft. It led him to a bar where two other addicts were, as we've seen, discussing the situation of the Library at the Museum of Modern Art. The Library was at that very moment showing a little exhibition of ephemera.

## VII

A diminutive worker sat in the elevator on a little stool. The Artist Abstract thanked him as he exited on the 6th floor. He turned left as instructed, and walked down the windowless carpeted hallway. He didn't look into the open offices he passed, but proceeded directly to the closed double-doors at the hallway's end.

Museum Library, they said, opening together inwards.

He was surprised by the brown and yellow room. Standish Rehl had never been to a proper research library. He saw few visible books, understanding at once that the Library was simply a small office with a reading room attached. The Collection itself would be invisible.

The L-shaped exterior room, which he had just entered, contained a small exhibition in cabinets, a card catalogue and a librarian's desk. There was a door to the reading room, and windows looking in. Through them Standish observed several long dark tables, at which patrons (inexplicably there were two already here) worked in quiet, evident sophistication. Farther windows looked out on the dead space of six-storey Manhattan.

Standish approached the desk in the exterior L-shaped room. The librarian regarded him plainly, taking note of his pink badge. "Have you used the Library before?"

"Yes", he said.

Standish turned to look at the little exhibition. As the woman in the bar had noted, it concerned Reinhardt. Two glass cases were fixed onto the walls, and one glass-cased table displayed the private collection of a college friend. He looked at old letters, photographs, various early socio-realistic and Cubist graphic designs, and cartoon pages from *The Jester*, the Columbia University newspaper in which Reinhardt first published his drawings.

He turned back to the librarian.

## VIII

The old oft-fingered manila folder lay open on the long beige table. Faintly pencilled on its worn tab were the words, *Reinhardt, Adolf*.

Standish Rehl sat before it, unmoving, eyes closed.

The Library observed with some tension. While browsing, the young man's expression had at first been straight. When it had come to the card, the particular object with whose provenance the Library was in this case directly concerned, his thin lips had turned downwards.

He read it carefully. The card announced an exhibition of Reinhardt's work five years after his death, at a high-powered gallery on 57th Street. It was a blown-up reproduction of an actual postcard that Reinhardt had sent the dealer in 1967. At this time the dealer had apparently no desire to show Reinhardt's works at all, and the postcard's offer of an exhibition of the black paintings was rhetorical. It was evident to Standish, feeling he had recently acquired a rather sophisticated sense of Reinhardt's history, that the card, though not hostile outright, was nevertheless thick with the author's characteristic strident irony.

The card gave him a peculiar feeling. Was it the dealer's evident bid to glamorise himself by publicising the fact that the artist had revealed his own weakness to him in this way years ago? Or the fact that the artist had made the original request, no matter how ironically? Questions of the sort that did not ordinarily disturb the Artist Abstract had clearly been raised.

When our friend opened his eyes again, he found that his fingers had turned the card over so that its back was now visible. This side showed a magnification of the original card's reverse side. In the centre, the Dealer's name was hand-scripted above the gallery's street number and zip code. In the top right hand corner a Lincoln-head stamp looked across a BROOKLYN 1967 postmark to survey the sender's name. There in the top left, Reinhardt had written

**NOT ME, AD**

Standish slipped the card casually inside his overcoat and closed the folder.

## IX

The Library was ecstatic. But the Observer might have noted that if our friend looked like a young man who had successfully accomplished a precarious mission, he certainly betrayed little joy on the accomplishing of it.

He placed the Reinhardt folder on a library truck and exited the reading room. The librarian was no longer at the desk. Standish exited through the double doors, unobserved.

But outside he didn't proceed to the elevator.

He stopped in the Men's Room. He entered the single toilet stall. The Library watched in something like disbelief as Standish removed the card from his overcoat and without looking at it, placed it temporarily atop the toilet-paper dispenser. He locked the door, opened his overcoat again and got down to business.

Finished, he turned to reach for the bathroom tissue so as to wipe away a droplet of blood. It happened that the open DIXIE/MARATHON dispenser, fixed to the wall by steel screws, was empty. It was exactly the sort of thing the Library had feared when he'd entered the stall.

The left half of the dispenser was covered by a little steel door. On it were written the words, *When this side is empty/Slide door to the left until locked*. The Observer pointed out to Standish that the words were oddly phrased, since "this side" was in this case the other side and the door was already in front of it. Nevertheless, the door slid quite easily to the right, revealing in the dispenser's left compartment the fresh roll of toilet paper that had until that moment been concealed behind it.

Standish Rehl wiped away the blood, flushed it and exited. In all the commotion, he'd forgotten about the announcement card. Blown by the wind of his movements, it dropped quietly to the tiled floor.

## X

Three weeks later Standish Rehl walked, aimlessly enough, onto the pier at Christopher Street.

The interview, the Observer saw, had gone well. Standish had come across, he knew, as an altogether serious and hardworking young man. Mr Denture had said an artistic background would prove an asset. The salary started at twenty-five thousand.

The generous zeroes attached to this number gave our young friend a good feeling. He was thinking in fact how he might move out of his hovel and perhaps find something in a neighbourhood like this. If he got the job, he would no longer need the studio.

He would need a suit. Several suits, in fact, observed the Observer. It was at this point in the conversation that Standish Rehl wound up at the end of the pier, out upon the Hudson River as it widened into the Sound.

It was a cool weekday afternoon, promising autumn and the winter behind it. Except for a guard sleeping at the wheel of a blue Ford, Standish was alone at pier's end. He stopped at the chainlink fence and turned from the river to look back at the city. Smoke bubbled at the feet of its towers of stone, steel, cement and brick, bubbled. Steam issued from manholes, windows. Noise hurried and honked from automobiles and trucks. And over all this, a fat consistent sound, a single, breathing animal.

Standish turned back to the river. He faced New Jersey. A weird yellow sky was rising around the orange setting sun, much of it in a spectrum invisible to his eye. A gentle breeze of undifferentiating waves cascaded against his pale, abstracted face.

On the other side of the fence a discarded coffee-cup atop the old railroad tie that edged the pier began to move. The gentle wind strangely rocked the cup back and forth, as with two fingers stretching long and bony from behind the old horizon, from as far West as Malibu.

More abstracted than ever, Standish decided he would buy a suit today, directly. One the Observer could not deny. In Soho, in one of those new shops that looked like galleries. He would put it on the credit card he had never used.

The cup faced him directly, presenting the blue golden-edged Grecian design – the three smoking chalices and the words, *We Are Happy To Serve You*, cradled over the abyss.

As Standish Rehl was at last swallowed by the city, the cup blew away. The sun soon set, leaving only a wide generalising yellow filling up the sky.

Author Mark von Schlegell's short stories and critical essays appear regularly in the international art world, in zines and artist books as well as museum catalogues and periodicals such as *Parkett* and *Artforum*. His science fiction novels *Venusia* (2005) and *Mercury Station* (2009) are published by M.I.T./Semiotext(e).

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