

■ ■ ■ The Triumph of Neoism

There at Chameleon Bar with the other beer drinkers, the neoists had assembled from across the universe—Baltimore, Berlin, Rivington Street. Maybe they numbered only fifteen or twenty. But they were hard core—those who wanted to destroy the existing order, those willing to announce “give me freedom or kill me,” those who might wear flaming bread loaves on their heads.

It was the first day of their Millionth Apartment Festival, otherwise known as the APT Festival, otherwise known as the Anathema Party Takeover. Onstage, two artists had amplified a baby with a little mike. Baby cries sounded over the bar din: neoist music. Waiting to address the narrow barroom was Monty Cantsin (real name: Istvan Kantor), founder of neoism, member of the Rivington School, and “self-appointed leader of the people of the Lower East Side.”

Any definition of neoism simultaneously reveals and conceals, because that is the goal—to get where “all mechanisms of logic are broken, control is impossible, the great confusion rules.” Neoism dates from the late seventies—an ism that swallowed every modernist ism, then puked out the pieces. Jarry’s pataphysics, Marinetti’s manifestoes, Duchamp’s readymades, Klein’s leap, Warhol’s fifteen minutes, Beuys’s alchemy, Maciunas’s games—they’re all floating in the neo soup now. Neoism is the last little gurgle of what we once called avant-garde. Or maybe it’s nothing.

I asked Monty/Istvan about his court appearance the week before. Last August he splashed six vials of his own blood across a wall at the Museum of Modern Art. In court, he said, they’d only given him a new date to appear. He’d intended the blood painting as a gift to the museum. He’d read a manifesto in front of it, protesting gentrification on the Lower East Side. He figured the citadel of modernism would

understand such a gesture. "I thought they would leave the blood on the wall. But I was too idealistic." He'd spent two days in jail, one of them his birthday. A good birthday, he said. A good separation from the world.

Monty wore his characteristic uniform: breeches, skinny tie, leather jacket, red soldier's hat, badge with two-headed arrow (symbolizing the neoist slogan, "It's always six o'clock"). With this military look, he told me, he was able to irritate bohemian artists. Onstage, brandishing a flaming steam iron, accompanied on kohl drum by Gordon W. Zealot who had donned the ritual flaming bread loaf, Monty declaimed, "Art is nothing, art is dead, art is living, art is bread!" He cried out his warning that the authorities would soon eliminate urban society, a hiding place for terrorists, perverts, and drugs. No one seemed stirred.

"Monty Cantsin"—an "open pop star"—was a name, an identity, an idea invented in the late seventies by David Zack, a mail artist. Anyone could be Monty Cantsin. The name would then become famous, to the benefit of *every* Monty Cantsin. But the person most identified with the name is Istvan Kantor—construction worker, nurse, Canadian citizen, and native of Budapest. For this, Kantor/Cantsin has taken some neoflack in the neozine *Smile* ("Free to Shoplifters"). In a philosophy where nothing matters, it's funny what does matter.

He turned the stage over to TENTATIVELY a. CONVENIENCE (Michael Tolson), who would introduce the videos. TENTATIVELY wore a suit made from dozens of zippers. A tattoo of a brain covered most of his shaved skull. He'd amplified the baby to get people's attention.

I felt a great nostalgia as the tapes began. In my fantasy of the avant-garde I never knew, people all over downtown Manhattan watched things like *Philosopher's Union Member* (by Emma Elizabeth Downing) in their unfinished lofts. I rather liked this footage of a woman's mouth painted in black and white zebra stripes, the mouth ranting about the blood of the lamb, the search for meaning through vulnerability, and other philosophical hooah.

Most of the tapes were TENTATIVELY'S. For example, some quasisporn he'd run at a peep show two weeks before anyone noticed. (Vegetables having sex and goofy people in monster masks, spliced with real blow jobs.) Then, a video of him boarding a London bus on all fours, wearing a dog mask, trying to ride free as a seeing eye dog. Most of the rest was tediously self-indulgent. During TENTATIVELY'S taped document

of every book and record he's ever owned, several drunken members of the Rivington School took the mike and began to chant the usual: "Fuck you! Die yuppies!" I went home.

So ended Flaming Wednesday. Next was Painful Thursday—Thanksgiving.

Up at the Stockwell Gallery on East 13th Street, twelve hours had been set aside for wasting time and for the writing of a collective book. I found Monty Cantsin writing alone on a giant newsprint pad on the floor. He'd hung finished pages haphazardly over the walls with red tape. On one of them, Monty had declared his intention to keep writing "even if nobody else comes." Here was true dedication to a philosophy of the false.

On Friday of the Millionth Apartment Festival, the neoists planned to make a monumental blood painting at Stockwell Gallery.

By the time I got there, though, mere anarchy had been loosed. And I had missed the police intervention.

It was about 10:30 at night, and Pamela Stockwell was dragging from her gallery the last of several big hunks of scrap metal, the purported instruments for that evening's concert of "booed music." She was quite agitated, the blue and green strands of her hair sticking out from the red. She said it had been too noisy, and she was glad that I'd missed the fight. The neighbors had freaked.

No, the noise was no problem, Monty told me. Some of the guys had been drinking beer on the street. That's all.

Everyone would tell me a different story. First disappointed that I'd missed the action, I soon realized that missing it was appropriate to the spirit of neoism. Now I would never know "the truth."

Stockwell complained that the Rivington School had wrecked the evening. (They'd been the scrap metal players, while the neoists had planned the blood painting.) I wondered if there was some split between the groups, but I'd noticed that Monty's attitude had always been that whatever happened happened. He belonged to both camps, and both shared the slogan, "Art is shit."

Inside the gallery, people stood talking, but a hostile wiggly energy bounced off the walls, where most of Monty's "collective book" pages had been covered with Rivington School graffiti. *Suckbutt. Die yuppies.* The usual.

"Smells like they're boiling a rat in here," said a friend who'd come with me, only half-joking. Someone was cooking on a hot plate, and I peered into the kettle. Eggplant.

Monty had had five doctors coming to draw blood for the collective painting, but they'd arrived when the police had, and they'd fled. There'd be no painting.

Whatever had happened at the gallery spilled into the next day, End of the World Saturday. Down at the Rivington School Sculpture Garden, about a dozen people gathered around a bonfire. Monty explained that what the Rivington School did with their sculpture, he did conceptually. I looked around at the tire treads, graffitied bathtub, rusted car parts, unidentifiable wreckage lifted right from the dumpster—all welded into something new and, on the whole, quite ugly. What is the Rivington School? According to festival propaganda: "a bunch of idiots . . . dirty and broke . . . terrorists, revolutionaries, alcoholics, stupid assholes, painters, construction workers, neoists."

Rivington School was the name of an atmosphere, according to its self-proclaimed "dean," Ray Kelly. Kelly dresses like a cowhand. He said, "We started the fight at the gallery as a performance. 'Make shit happen.' That's our motto." In the Rivist headquarters/welding shop next to the garden, graffiti covers the walls, the fridge, the tools, the canoe. The scrawls, like the space, are half frat house ("Beaver Club"), half holdout against suburban blandness ("I'm Too Intense to Die").

Back in the garden, Pamela Stockwell complained that the Rivington School had written all over her windows and personal possessions. That they were disrespectful. Disruption was their lifestyle. She'd been trying to support these outsiders and felt betrayed. Yet, when I left for Mars Bar with Monty Cantsin, she stayed behind while Ray Kelly threw some steaks on a grill over the bonfire. Later she would tell me that she *did* love them. Stockwell Gallery is a holdout too. She'd featured a group show of "attack art" after the riot, for example.

"You don't seem to agree with her that the evening was ruined," I suggested to Monty.

True. He didn't agree. "The people had been very excited to play their scrap metal music because this is music no one wants to hear." Besides, he said, the apartment festivals (which *were* held in apartments years ago) should be chaotic.

*To view this image,
please refer to the print version of this book*

Neoists brandish flaming steam irons in Tompkins Square Park to end the Millionth Apartment Festival. (© C. M. Hardt.)

Back at Monty's apartment, neoist headquarters, Gordon W. Zealot was having dinner with Jack Smith, the forefather of Queer Theater, the auteur of *Flaming Creatures*. Smith turned his bony Sam Beckett head to us with a baffled scowl, but said nothing. He was wearing Gordon W.'s pearl necklace. Gordon W., I learned later, had been a Krishna monk in India for two years and currently lives in Toronto, where he works as a caterer. Other neoists drifted in, including TENTATIVELY a. CONVENIENCE, Stiletto, an avowed antineoist, and festival co-organizer Matty Jankowsky. In his studio lined with blood paintings, "Stop Misery!" posters, and other neo junk, Monty threw every steam iron he could find into a dairy case, preparing for the day's big event—the Flaming Steam Iron March into Tompkins Square.

I noticed that TENTATIVELY's brain tattoo was, in fact, meant to be 3-D, red lines right next to green lines. "You should be able to see it vibrate right in the middle," he directed as I looked through some 3-D glasses. And his zipper suit had been made by "midget undersea hermaphrodites," he said—giving me, the media, a colorful quote.

Furthermore, he hated *The Village Voice* and hoped I'd write something bad about him.

We all walked to Tompkins Square with the ten irons Monty had found. He'd forgotten the rest at the Rivington School, but, as it turned out, ten were enough, because after waiting half an hour for more participants to arrive, no one did. Monty started the backing tape on his beatbox and began to sing: "Every six minutes, we need new sensations. Every six minutes we need rock 'n roll." The other neoists stood chatting to one side, and a passerby asked me what was happening. "They're neoists," I said.

The man looked frightened. "Nihilists?"

Monty began to rant: "I believe in the power of the imagination to change the world, to release all the prisoners and abolish all oppressing systems for whom the most frightening idea is freedom!" And so on. But this seems to me to be the central message of neoism.

Monty distributed the steam irons, handing one to a dazed-looking park transient since there weren't quite enough neoists. He poured rubber cement over the bottom of each and ignited them. "Just walk peacefully," he said. They did, with Gordon W. on drum and Jack Smith on finger cymbals—sort of. The flames never lasted more than a minute. The motley parade kept stopping to relight, while a mutter ran through the passers-by: "Nihilists. They're nihilists."

A squad car was driving down the park sidewalk. A cop stuck his head out the window and asked me if I was leading this group. "No," I said. "It's just an art event."

"Is it gonna get violent?" asked the cop.

"They didn't plan for it to be violent."

"Okay. Okay. Just asking. Just asking."

Monty stopped at the Faith/Hope/Charity cupola and did some more songs. "Nothing stays forever/the skyscrapers will fall into ruins . . . the day will come/walls will tumble, blood/will overflow the streets." The squad car had turned, pointing its headlights at us. And the Rivington School had arrived. "What is the aim of art?" sang Monty. "Where are we going?" They did one last ritual steam iron flame.

"Fuck you!" Ray Kelly shouted, to end the festivities.

In confusion, they drifted apart, unable to reach a consensus on

where to party. "These freewheeling people. You can't make plans with 'em," sighed Pamela Stockwell.

There with the dozen faithful, the curious, the hecklers, all lit by a squad car, I felt I had seen the triumph of neoism. For in a culture where it's increasingly difficult to find the margin, they had found it.

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AT THE END

OF THE

TWENTIETH CENTURY

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C. CARR

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