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# Young Folk

## Steven Shearer's Heavy Metal Youth and Culture

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# Young Folk:

## Steven Shearer's Heavy Metal Youth and Culture

Whether so-called folk art is considered within its European genealogy of Modernist primitivism or *art brut*, or within its more North American lineage of outsider art or rural, Indigenous, or craft-based traditions, its connoisseurship has always been fraught with contradiction. In his study of popular discourse surrounding folk art, John Michael Vlach gets to the heart of the matter, pointing out that the typically employed descriptors—"primitive, naïve, amateur, grass-roots, outsider, country, popular, backyard, spontaneous, unsophisticated, innocent, provincial, anonymous, visionary, homemade, vernacular, isolate, ethnic, non-academic"<sup>2</sup>—often would be thought pejorative in other contexts, but instead here, paradoxically, are considered complimentary.

This strategic reversal of aesthetic values is not specific to perspectives on folk art however. The appreciation and appropriation of expressions coming from the margins (cultural, geographical, economic, and so on) has long afforded European and North American artists a way to revitalise their art practices.<sup>3</sup> In *The Return of the Real*, the art historian Hal Foster argues that this embracing of the *marginal* can be seen as much a political gesture as an artistic one. This approach offers artists not only a sought-after aura of authenticity or avant-gardism to their work, but also, potentially, a way to affiliate themselves with those deemed societies' outsiders. Such an act is seen as subversive.<sup>4</sup> And as these previously marginalised voices and vernaculars are absorbed, accepted, and inevitably normalised within the art world, artists continue to search for as yet untapped sources of so-called outsider expression. In this way, as Lucy Lippard contends, the connoisseurship of folk art "has long played the role of the 'other' for a hierarchical dominant culture,"<sup>5</sup> and therefore must be understood in relation to it.

Claims can be made that the connoisseurship of folk art shares parallels with contemporary art's enthrallment with youth<sup>6</sup>—who the cultural historian Charles Acland tellingly defines as, "Other to the order of the adult world."<sup>7</sup> Youth, like folk art, is often uncritically associated with uncorrupted subjectivity, emotional honesty, unbridled freedom and pre-socialised revolt by artists, critics and the public. For example, in Francesco Bonami's curatorial statement for the exhibition, *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* (2003), youth is indiscriminately characterised as "self-destructive," "violent," and "tragic," but also "visionary" in its "folly and ideals."<sup>8</sup> There are marked similarities between Bonami's idealising discourse and that of *art brut*'s spiritual grandfather Jean Dubuffet, who, decades earlier, made sweeping primitivising statements that paid tribute to "the values of savagery...instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness."<sup>9</sup>

With a corpus that concentrates almost uniquely on male youth and its representation usually in relation to the heavy metal music scene, the Vancouver-based artist Steven Shearer offers up a fascinating example of the current interest in youth in contemporary art.<sup>10</sup> Artists who focus on youth can be roughly divided into two categories: those who make artworks with an anthropological bent in which aspects of youth and youth cultures are documented and/or archived (Collier Schorr, Larry Clark, Rineke Dijkstra), and secondly, those generating work in what could be called a general mindset of youth, aiming to capture if not *embody* an overarching youth-based perspective, psychology, or styles (Anthony Giocolea, Karen Kilimnik, Althea Thauberger). Shearer's art practice epitomises both approaches, at times melding the two.

### Folk Is Tradition From the Bottom Up<sup>11</sup>

Emerging in the late 1960s from such hard rock bands as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, heavy metal (and its many latter derivatives: death metal, power metal, speed metal, etc.) is infamous for its loud volume and extended guitar solos, as well as its (oft mocked) followers' style of dancing known as head banging.

The culture of metal is known for embracing an often morbid and misogynist ethos, what Andy Brown has described as "a collective investment in a 'fantastic' masculinity."<sup>12</sup> Because of its focus on dark nihilistic themes, revolving around such topics as drug abuse or violence, heavy metal has been vilified by such groups as the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), "as an evil influence on young people, causing them to take drugs, and even to commit murder and suicide."<sup>13</sup> However, Roger Horrocks paints a slightly more positive picture, describing it as a musical genre whose "iconography of power, heroic fantasy and intense romanticism can be seen as compensatory in the lives of the [largely white, working-class] audience."<sup>14</sup>

In his art practice,<sup>15</sup> Steven Shearer delves into the white male culture surrounding heavy metal through the use of imagery amassed from old teen magazines, self-published groupie websites, band promotional shots, music paraphernalia, eBay, and album covers. He shows a particular penchant for photographs evidently shot by non-professionals with little interest in the photographic medium itself other than as a convenient personal documentation device. Taken with little or no reflexive formal criteria in mind, they are often poorly lit, out of focus, or awkwardly framed. Shearer also expresses being inspired by the visual aesthetic of teen and fan magazines from the 1970s, so unlike today's slick commercial approach in which the subjects and images themselves have been worked on by professional stylists, photographers, and graphic designers.<sup>16</sup> Explaining his appreciation for this particular sort of found imagery, Shearer enthusiastically praises the pictures for being "visually impoverished" with "no editorial self-consciousness" and displaying a "kind of scrapbook quality."<sup>17</sup>

In his photo-laminated series, Shearer collages found photographs onto coloured canvases mimicking the rough cut-and-paste montage of these youth-focused magazines from decades past. *Manpile* (1998), for example, features a messy clump of photographs featuring boys partying (one giving us the middle finger his hair almost entirely covering his face) on an orange background. *Mustang* (2005) showcases the eponymous car unevenly cut from its original setting and placed on a backdrop painted sky blue. The Mustang appears to have at least one punctured tire, and Shearer has cut the car out so that it appears to be missing not only a wheel but also its front fender. At the same time, the vehicle is partially covered with a tarpaulin, suggesting the care of its owner, his (thwarted) youthful ambition to drive fast cars and attract girls, as well as the paucity of his economic status. The intentionally crude quality of these works could be understood as Shearer's attempt to embody the energy and attitude of the typical metal fan. Moreover, through his use of collage, he pays homage to the typical teenage activity of decorating bedroom walls with photos of friends and family in tandem with pictures torn directly from magazines, a cheap, creative outlet for young people still living with their parents. Using brightly coloured backgrounds in a palette that recalls children's books or the décor of kindergarten, Shearer highlights this collage practice as a kind of youth-based vernacular aesthetics.

Shearer has also made ballpoint pen drawings using band promotional photos as his source material, an example of which is *Band* (2004), featuring a group of four heavy metal musicians (recognisable as such from their hair and clothing) shot from behind, heads downwards, legs apart. From their stance, the viewer might imagine that they are collectively urinating—an instant signifier of masculine territorialisation, youthful revolt and phallogocentric expressivity. Shearer skilfully captures the obsessive cross-hatching of the talented-but-bored kid at the back of the class who, with sticky ink-smudged fingertips, uses drawing as a way of escaping from his immediate reality, expressing his fandom or simply impressing friends. Moreover, the particular shade of blue and quality of mark-



DARKENED BLEEDING JOURNEY  
BARATHRUM OF AHRIMAN  
TRANSYLVANIAN HUNGER  
OCCULT BLOOD EXCREMENT  
DEFILED HUMANITY IN ECLIPSE  
ANCIENT THORACOPAGUS  
SUCKING ULCEROUS PHLEGM  
RISING UNBORN CORPSES  
SPAWN OF AZAGTHOTH  
CRAWLING IN YOUR BLOOD  
PREMATURE EMBALMENT  
CANDLES OF DOOMED IMPIETY  
NECROLUST APOCALYPSE  
VOMITED BROTH OF ABIGOR

VOICELESS ALTARS OF FLESH  
DIRTY INFAMOUS PAGAN FOG  
PROFANE CALLINGS OF HATE  
CELESTIAL DESECRATIONS  
OCEANS OF GRIMNESS  
RHYPOPHAGIC SELFDEFILEMENT  
HEMORROGICAL EXPULSION  
BLACK METAL DEICIDE  
FECULENT GORETOMB  
TOTAL HUMAN HOLOCAUST  
CRYPTIC SLAUGHTER  
MERCILESS CRUCIFIGATION  
AVULSING NUCLEAR ANITCHRIST  
BRUTAL FUCKING DEATH

CHTHONOPHAGIC HUNGER  
PURE ARTHRITIC TORMENT  
WITCHFUCKING HECATOMB  
RAPE THE BANNER OF LIGHT  
PUTRID NECROGENIC BIRTH  
MUCULENT NECROFEAST  
FLAME OF BLACK OBSCURITY  
BLEEDING SICKNESS  
BLACK FUCKING WITCHERY  
SPECTRAL WITCHBUTCHER  
RIPPED FROM THE CROSS  
EMBALMED IN UNHOLY MISERY  
VOMITING FERAL HATRED  
TOTAL SKULLFUCKING DEATH

PAINTED IN U  
EMBALMED I  
CONVULSIONS  
SPIRITUAL A  
DISEASED LIFE  
SACRIFICIA  
ENGORGED CR  
HIDEOUS CON  
BRING FORTH  
STORMING  
ROTTING IN FE  
CRADLE OF U  
CHALICE  
VOMITORIUM

ORGASMIC TEARS OF UNHOLY  
PERISHING BLACK LIGHT  
SUFFOCATED BUTCHERY  
SODOMIZED AT THE CROSS  
PUTRID NECROGENIC BIRTH  
VOMITED BROTH OF ABIGOR  
ROTTING IN YOUR TRIUMPH  
GRAND AMPUTATION  
BEFOULMENT OF SACREMENT  
ABHORRENT DISCHARGE  
BAPTISED IN FERAL GOATROT  
BEYOND GRIM CREATION  
PETRIFIED BREATH OF HOPE  
FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROT

MIRRORS OF SUFFOCATION  
A B O S R A N I E B O G U M  
BEYOND THY CAGE OF FLESH  
GROTESQUE SONIC DEVOURMENT  
FLAME OF DARK CREATION  
CAUTERIZING THE WOUNDS OF  
ATOMIC INFESTED CARNAGE  
UNHOLY PENETRATION  
SECRETING SEEPING LEAKING  
CELESTIAL DECONSTRUCTION  
WITHIN DISGRACEFUL RUINS  
FROSTBORN NECROMORTUM  
DIGESTED FLESH OF CHRIST  
EXHAUSTED CENTURY

AWAKEN TO CARNAGE  
FEAST OF ANCIENT BIRTH  
NEW ORDER OF HUMAN FLESH  
RETURNING TO SLAUGHTER  
POSER VOMITURITION  
ETERNAL FUNERAL MISTS  
RELENTLESS ABHORRENCE  
OPPRESSION IN OBSCURITY  
MARCHING TO WINTER BATTLE  
IN P A G A N D I M N E S S  
DESECRATING THE SPIRIT OF LIFE  
UNHOLY INVASION OF THRASH  
FALSE METAL ASPHYXIATION  
SILENT HOLOCAUST

GRIM FUCKING  
GOLDEN AGE OF  
BLASPHEMY THR  
HEMORROGICAL  
INFECTED CA  
PARASITES IN GA  
UNHOLY NECRO  
SPECTRAL HORR  
NAZARENE DE  
REEKING RH  
GENITAL BLOO  
FECULENT C  
IMMERSED I  
GRIND YOUR FU

PRISONS OF FOUL FLESH  
SUCK MY UNHOLY VOMIT  
CONSUMED IN EVIL OBSCURITY  
GUTTED WITCHFUCKING HELL  
CADAVEROUS MASTICATION  
PURE UNHOLY BLOODLUST  
INFERNAL DISCHARGE  
ETERNAL WOMB OF HATRED  
IN ANGUISH AND FURIOUS PAIN  
VOLUNTARY AMPUTATION  
TOTAL FUCKING DARKNESS  
BOUND IN UNHOLY FILTH  
WATCHING MYSELF BLEED  
I SHALL BE RELEASED

LYCANTHROPIAN CARNAGE  
EXHALING PUTRID GOATROT  
RAPE THE BANNER OF LIGHT  
ROT MUNCHING ARCHITECTS  
OF LUGUBRIOUS BEFOULMENT  
NECROSADISTIC AVULSIONS  
ABANDONING THE FLESH  
SPAWN OF AZAGTHOTH  
SODOMYTHICAL FROST GOATS  
GATHER AGAINST HUMANITY  
NUCLEAR ABBOMINATIONS  
BLACK WITCHING METAL  
TRANSYLVANIAN HUNGER  
GRIM FUCKING FOLKTALES

DEAD BRAIN  
EUPHORIC DISCO  
SENTINELS OF BLASP  
ACOUSTIC TO  
MISCREATION OF  
ABLAZE IN VIRAL  
ABSORBED IN M  
DESTINED FOR DEF  
MOST DEEP AND  
MUTILATED REGUR  
SPECTRAL HORNS OF  
DRINKING FROM  
GRINDING OPUS OF H  
INTERNAL REDESE



UNHOLY BLOOD  
IN BLACK BILE  
OF PUTRID LUST  
ASPHYXIATION  
EXTINGUISHED  
GLUTTONY  
ANIAL ROTTING  
CONSUMED FLESH  
FETID DECAY  
OF CORPSES  
CULENT BLOOM  
UNHOLY FILTH  
OF INFAMY  
CONVULSIONS

SUMMONING INFERNAL LEGIONS  
DISFIGURED NECRODementia  
SUBMERGED IN GLUTTONY  
AUTOPHAGIC DEVOURMENT  
BRUTALLY EXCRUCIATED  
SHITSTORM OF HUMANITY  
BAPTISED IN FERAL GOATROT  
UNHOLY CRANIAL INCUBATION  
SADISTIC BLACK METAL GLORY  
GUTTED WITCHFUCKING HELL  
INVERTED PUTRID MASS  
ABHORRENT REGRESSIONS  
INGESTING PUNGENT LIQUID  
ROTTING WITH YOUR CHRIST

CHAINS OF CHRISTIAN FLESH  
ENRAPTURED IN PUTRIENCE  
BLASPHEMYCAL DISCORDANCE  
EXHUME TO CONSUME  
BLACK PUREST DESECRATION  
MALIGNANT INCEPTION  
ODIOUS ABORTIVE DISCHARGE  
SODOMYTHICAL CHRISTHUNT  
BLACK MASS PERVERSION  
INFERNAL DISGRACE  
ANCIENT CELESTIAL TYRANTS  
FALSE METAL ASPHYXIATION  
GRIM FUCKING SATANIC METAL  
MARCHING AND BLEEDING

OH ABHORRED DEFILER  
DRAPED IN PUTRID GLORY  
SUCK MY UNHOLY VOMIT  
AURULENT GOG AND MAGOG  
BLACK AMEBIC DYSENTERY  
ABOMINATIONS OF DESOLATION  
AUTOPHAGIC SUICIDE  
GODLESS SECRETIONS OF  
PLACENTOPHAGIC FEASTING  
CHRISTHAMMER TORMENTUM  
EVIscERATED ANGEL CORPSE  
SCATOPHAGOUS GOATFATHER  
CEREMONIAL UNEARTHING  
ORGY OF INFERNAL SUFFERING

ING FOLKTALES  
OF DESECRATION  
ROUGH BLEEDING  
ICAL VOMIT  
DAVER FLOWS  
ARDEN OF CHRIST  
MASTERBATION  
NS OF TORMENT  
COMPOSITION  
APSODY OF  
DD EXCRETION  
RUCIFEAST  
N ENTRAILS  
CKING MESSIAH

BEHEADED AND SANCTIFIED  
RIPPED FROM THE CROSS  
DIABOLICAL HALLUCINATION  
SUCKING ULCEROUS PHLEGM  
CHRISTIAN SOUL INCEST  
SPIRITUAL CRAMP  
ETERNAL GRIM SUICIDE  
EUPHORIC TORMENT  
DEATH MUTILATION DISEASE  
COLD BLACK EJACULATION  
FONT OF PUTRESCENCE  
SPECTRUM OF AGGRESSION  
CHALICE OF INFAMY  
ANCESTRAL NECROSODOMY

REHEARSAL OF FLESH  
INTERNAL BLOODY ORGASM  
INFECTION PURIFICATION  
AURULENT GOG AND MAGOG  
DISFIGURED AFTER BUTCHERY  
ROTTEN DARK PASSAGE  
MALIGNANT IMPREGNATOR  
CRADLE OF UNHOLY FILTH  
PESTILENT EMANATION  
IMMOLATE THE CHAPEL  
VISCERAL EXTRACTION OF  
AUTOPHAGIC SUICIDE  
PURE FUCKING DEATHCRUSH  
SPASMODIC CONSECRATION

SUICIDE INSEMINATION  
OCCULT CEREMONIAL TOWERS  
HALO OF BURNING WINGS  
PURITANICAL BAPHOMET HORDE  
OSCULUM OBSCENUM  
PERVERSE CHAOTIC REIGN  
IMPALING THE MARY BITCH  
EMBRYONIC NECROPSY  
ORGANIC PUZZLES OF  
SECRETED NECROBLASPHEMY  
TRAILS OF ANGUISH  
DEEP APATHETICAL GRIMNESS  
SADISTICAL NECROPHAGOUS  
POSSESSED WITH ERECTION

CELLS  
RDANCE  
HEMOUS  
RMENT  
FILTH  
FLAMES  
MISERY  
LEMENT  
FOUL  
GITATOR  
TORMENT  
SKULLS  
LABORYM  
CRATION

PUSS BLOOD PENTAGRAM  
PERVERSE CHAOTIC REIGN  
ACHIEVE THE MUTILATION  
ALCOHOLIC SMASHING WAR  
FLAME OF DARK CREATION  
EXHUME TO CONSUME  
MISANTHROPIC PANTHEONS  
RAVISHING GRIMNESS  
BLACK METAL SUPREMACY  
SUPERNATURAL ADDICTION  
DROWNING IN PUTRID FLESH  
VOMITORIUM CONVULSIONS  
BLINDED BY MY OWN BLOOD  
PURE FUCKING ARMAGEDDON

BLASPHEMY MADE FLESH  
MALIGNANT INCEPTION  
INVERTED NECROLATRY ROT  
BLEEDING AND PRAYING  
BLACK METAL SUICIDE  
UMBILICAL DIVORCE  
NIGRESCENT DISSOLUTION  
MUCULENT VOMITORIES OF  
ABHORRENT PUTRILAGE  
REPUGNANT NECROSCULPTURE  
NAILED IN UNHOLY MISERY  
EPOCH OF DISFIGURED UNLIGHT  
ETERNAL PRAYER OF HATRED  
INVERTED PUTRID MASS

RITUALS OF DESECRATION  
MALIGNANT INCEPTION  
PURE NECROMANTIC LUST  
THURINGIAN PAGAN MADNESS  
MISANTHROPIC CEREMONIES  
PURIFYING THE CAVITY  
BURN THE FLESH FROM THIS  
VOMIT FLOOD OF PLAGUED BIRTH  
ONWARD TO GOLGATHA  
SKULLFUCKING ARMAGEDDON  
DROWNED IN DIRT  
SOLSTICE OF OPPRESSION  
CONNECTED BODY PENTAGRAM  
SPIRITUAL AMPUTATION

BOUND IN UNHOLY FILTH  
USURPERS OF BEASTIAL DEATH  
GOATSPAWN BLIZZARD BEASTS  
SODOMYTHICAL FROST GOATS  
IN ANGUISH AND FURIOUS PAIN  
FED BY CHRISTIAN BLOOD  
ETERNAL PRAYER OF HATRED  
MALIGNANT INCEPTION  
CANNIBALISTIC GLUTTONY  
RITUALS OF DESECRATION  
SCULPTURES OF FLESH  
SPIRITUAL AMPUTATION  
BLACK METAL WAR  
TOTAL FUCKING DARKNESS

Steven Shearer, *Poems V, XII, X*, 2005.  
Each: 7 drawings, charcoal on rag paper;  
framed. Each 125 x 92 x 5 cm.  
Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich;  
Ringier Collection, Switzerland. © the artist.



making reveal their source as the ubiquitous Bic pen. Shearer describes his use of this cheaply available pen as allowing him to access a psychological state of generalized adolescent ennui and isolation: "With a ballpoint-pen drawing I can get these kind of inky, dark, dead spaces that I associate with a kind of desolation, because I imagine myself or other teenage kids trying to do chiaroscuro effects with a ballpoint pen, always doomed to fail."<sup>18</sup>

Composed of collaged grids of literally hundreds of digital images downloaded from the Internet (fan pages, band sites, etc.), Shearer's large-scale digital prints are very different in aesthetic and approach. Seeking to represent the heavy metal scene, they, unlike the aforementioned works, do not aim to operate within the adolescent psyche but rather mimic the objectifying, supposedly impartial collecting and curatorial procedures of the museum. At the same time, although this series was initiated in the era before Facebook, Shearer anticipates and mirrors the widespread practice of uploading images to various on-line and social networking sites—an ongoing documentation of the most insignificant of daily details that many North American youth in the twenty-first century embrace as an essential and normal part of self-representation.

*Guys* (2005) is an emblematic example of this series in which numerous individual images (each framed with a border of white) are laid out in one sleek rectangle. *Guys* is comprised primarily of black-and-white or colour studio head- and bandshots of metal fans, stylistically recognisable by their long hair (permed, straight, teased), mask-like make-up, tattoos, (painted) leather jackets, muscle shirts, tight jeans, spandex tights, (fake) bloodstained bodies and bare torsos. Other images were clearly intended at first for personal perusal by their makers and have a more homely quality to them. Some of the more plainly quotidian imagery features heavy metal fans and/or musicians within the domestic sphere (rather than in concert arenas or bars): boys gnawing on meat at a backyard barbecue, a man blow-drying his hair in the bathroom, someone captured sunbathing and so on. Apparently, Shearer inserted a single photograph of himself as a youth, linking his young self indelibly to this scene and culture. The overriding coherence of the content that emerges throughout this massive amount of multi-sourced digital imagery reveals the highly specific performativity that makes up heavy metal masculine identity. Moreover, Shearer's decision to include only images of males gives a homoerotic thrust to his portrait of this culture, undermining the heavily heteronormative outlook for which it is typically known to subscribe. In his text-based series, entitled *Poems* (2001- ), Shearer straddles the lines between the two approaches. For this series, he collected and curated lists of text from song titles and lyrics from heavy metal albums. These texts are stencilled in white letters onto black backgrounds in sonnet (14-line) formats, sometimes framed on gallery walls or on the sides of buildings. Featuring a mix of appropriated text and some written by Shearer, one opens with a dramatic dystopian bang declaring "PRISONS OF FOUL FLESH/SUCK MY UNHOLY VOMIT;" another concludes on this depressive, depressing note: "BLINDED BY MY OWN BLOOD/PURE FUCKING ARMAGEDDON." They are exaggeratedly extreme in their unfocused, uncontextualized pessimism and hysterical rage. Moreover, the melodramatically perverse content (presented in all caps no less) underscores the posturing that takes place in the construction of the heavy-metal-loving adolescent male persona. Finally by compiling these texts and then conceiving of his own wicked verse, Shearer not only maps out the canon of heavy metal themes, but captures the allegedly satanic spirit that heavy metal youth are typically known to revel in.

#### Making Lowbrow Highbrow

Shearer's artworks deconstruct the heavy metal scene in terms of its style, performativity, music and activities. At the same time, they give a kind *gravitas* to his subject matter, a culture typically criticised for its nihilistic ethos, heteronormative attitudes and negative influence on youth, not to mention its being parodied for comic effect in such films as *Spinal Tap* (1984), *Wayne's World* (1992) and *Fubar* (2002). How is this value constructed however? For his photolaminated works, Shearer collages images on to clean monochromatic surfaces that suggest hard edge painting or colour field abstraction. His drawings have been linked, by both critics and the artist, with the stylistic mark-making and portraiture of a range of artists from the European art canon.<sup>19</sup> Jpegs scavenged off the Internet are organised in neat Modernist grid formats according to various

categories: young men and guitars, guys sleeping and so on. Even the titles of heavy metal songs are reconfigured into formats that reference the poetic genre of the sonnet, while the trademark ornate fonts loved by heavy metal bands are replaced by Shearer's customised pared-down sans serif typeface. Thus, even as he pays homage to the culture of heavy metal, this is unfailingly done by reframing found images and their subject matter within Western art historical traditions and tropes.

By this token, Shearer's artworks function through what Arjun Appadurai terms, an "aesthetics of decontextualization,"<sup>20</sup> in which his source materials are displaced from their original websites and fan pages (images produced by people in the heavy metal scene for fans and participants in the heavy metal scene) and put into gallery settings for a new public (not necessarily conversant with this scene). According to Appadurai, this decontextualization usually results in an "enhancement of value," citing such examples as "the display of 'primitive' utilitarian objects, the framing of 'found' objects, the making of collections of any sort."<sup>21</sup> And, as these commodities become more available on a wider scale, a new importance is given to what Appadurai describes as "*traffic in criteria*,"<sup>22</sup> a process by which the knowledge about a commodity is commoditised and circulated.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, given the hyper accessibility of heavy metal visual imagery to be found on the Internet, it becomes important for Shearer to stress his knowledge of this culture and its importance, as well as to curate, display and interpret it for us. He becomes thus the guide for a public that might find this musical scene exotically unfamiliar. Unsurprisingly then, it is stressed in many articles on his work and interviews with the artist that Shearer was a heavy metal fan and amateur musician as a youth.<sup>24</sup> His firsthand knowledge of this culture, his commitment to collecting heavy metal artefacts<sup>25</sup> and his resulting expertise in the visual ephemera and material regalia are all highlighted. These biographical details establish his credentials as a heavy metal *insider*, offering a kind of rationalization for his own identification with heavy metal culture and male youth in his art practice (notably heavy metal's many female fans are ignored in Shearer's portrait of the culture). Moreover, it allows for a seductive autobiographical reading of his oeuvre as an ongoing, extended act of self-portraiture.<sup>26</sup>

Not only does this information justify and validate Shearer's usage of "visually impoverished" materials, but it allows an unschooled audience a desired *authentic* point of entry into the spectacle of long-haired male musicians with their strange costumes, rites and rituals. His representations of the heavy metal scene—one usually linked with politically incorrect values (machismo, misogyny), antisocial or alienated tendencies (rebellion, destruction) and a decadent lifestyle (excessive partying, drug use)—offer viewers a kind of voyeuristic, guilt-free pleasure. Furthermore, his work can be linked on a wider scale with romanticized notions of youth and its passions, and its supposed capacity to live in the present without concern for the future.

Steven Shearer and many of his peers display an unabashed interest in pop culture and a postmodernist penchant for its sampling and recontextualization as playful strategies, refusing the elitist divide between so-called high and low culture.<sup>27</sup> Cosmopolitanism, globalization and, of course, the Internet have concretely consolidated this approach to art making. Shearer's appropriation of imagery produced in and around the heavy metal scene as his source materials can be interpreted as essentially an inclusive act, based on the idea that the creative production of untrained or instinctive practitioners have equal if not more value than that of their institutionally schooled counterparts. However, can we assume that simply because Shearer's use of heavy metal source materials has received contemporary art's stamp of approval that artistic egalitarianism has been achieved? Indeed much of the seductive appeal of his work is rooted in viewers' enjoyment in getting to explore a highly specific culture, accessing a scene usually best known by its members. We can feel equally *in the know* thanks to the privileged knowledge of the artist, based on his previous involvement in the scene as a young white male.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Shearer consistently reverses the supposedly lowly status of his imagery and subject matter through the referencing of various aspects of Western art history, be it abstract painting or the museological traditions of collecting and archiving. In effect, these strategic processes make this culture more easily palatable if not more *worthy* of contemporary art's interest. Even as Shearer celebrates and monumentalises



Steven Shearer, *Group*, 2004. Ballpoint pen on paper; 28 x 28 cm. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Private Collection, Switzerland. © the artist.

the distinctive style, attitude, tastes and subjectivity of metal culture, his project ultimately suggests that his subject matter's value—that is to say, for which it is appreciated by its many fans and musicians<sup>29</sup>—is insufficient. Rather, as is the case with folk expressivity, its worth is amplified by being found and reframed, curated and collected within an official art context.

Zoë Chan

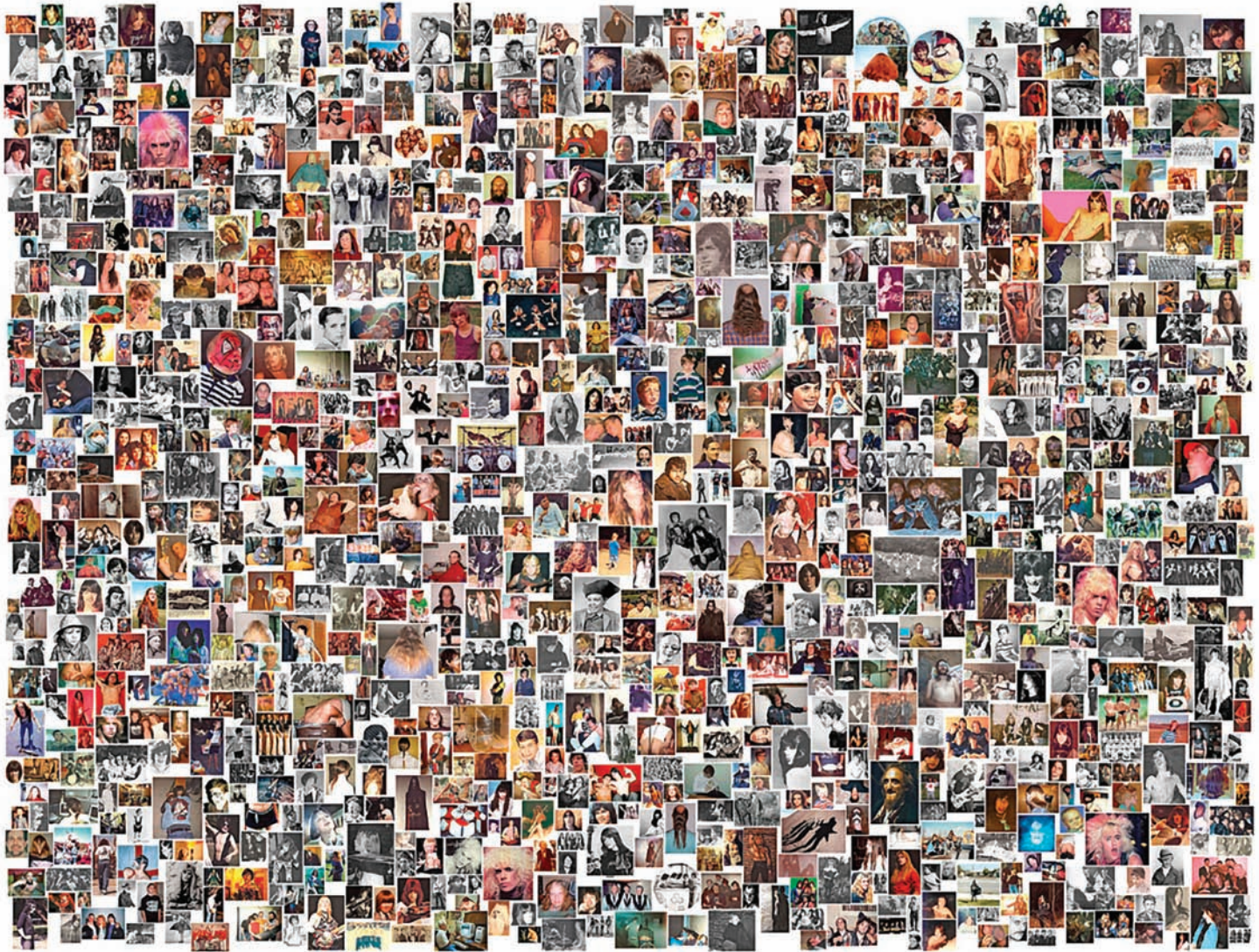
Zoë Chan has a Master's degree in Art History from Concordia University (2008). Her thesis research examined representations of male youth in the photographs and films of Larry Clark. She has contributed to *Canadian Art*, *Esse*, and *RicePaper*, as well as the exhibition catalogues *Ed Pien: Haven of Delight* (2010) and *Shië Kasai: Survival Japanese Cooking* (2010).

#### Notes

- 1 Some of the research for this essay was originally done during my Master's degree in Art History at Concordia University, Montreal wherein I looked at representations of male youth in contemporary art. My thanks to Dr. Johanne Sloan and Dr. Bronwen Wilson.
- 2 John Michael Vlach, "Properly Speaking": The Need for Plain Talk about Folk Art," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner eds. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986), 14.
- 3 From Pablo Picasso's pastiche of African masks to Édouard Manet's focus on the Parisian *demi-monde* including shop girls and prostitutes, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Modernist painters offer up paradigmatic examples of this phenomenon.
- 4 Hal Forster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 4<sup>th</sup> printing, 1996, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2001).
- 5 Lucy R. Lippard, "Crossing into Uncommon Grounds," in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, Michael D. Hall & Eugene W. Metcalf eds. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 10.
- 6 The fascination with this topic can be seen in such exhibitions as *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* (2003); *Will Boys Be Boys? Questioning Adolescent Masculinity in Contem-*

- porary Art* (2004); and *The Youth of Today* (2006).
- 7 Charles R. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of "Youth in Crisis"* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 19.
- 8 Francesco Bonami, "The Fourth Sex," in *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes*, Francesco Bonami and Raf Simons eds. (Milan: Edizione Charta, 2003), 11.
- 9 Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions. 1951," in *Primitivism and twentieth-century art: a documentary history*, Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds. (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2003), 292.
- 10 Shearer's practice can be linked with other artists looking at music-based youth cultures such as Pia Schachter's photo-portraits of death metal musicians and fans, Nikki S. Lee's participatory performances and documentations of hip-hop and punk scenes, Larry Clark's photographs of Latino punk-loving skaters and Kehinde Wiley's paintings of African-American rap and hip-hop celebrities to name just a few.
- 11 Kenneth L. Ames, *Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition* (Winterthur, Delaware: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1977), 14.
- 12 Andy R. Brown, "Heavy Metal and Subcultural Theory: A Paradigmatic Case of Neglect?" in *The Post-subcultures Reader*, David Muggleton & Rupert Weinsierl, eds. (Oxford and NY: Berg, 2003), 210.
- 13 Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 143.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Shearer was chosen to represent Canada in the 2011 Venice Biennale. His oeuvre includes drawings, collages, prints, paintings, and sculptures; however, for the purposes of this article and due to a lack of space, I will look at examples of the first three.
- 16 See "12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," *Double Album: Steven Shearer with Daniel Guzman* (New York, NY: New Museum, 2008), 83.
- 17 Shearer quoted in Meeka Walsh, "Steven Shearer: The Poetics of Impoverishment," *BorderCrossings* n. 96, v. 24, #4 (2005): 64.
- 18 *Ibid.* 85





Steven Shearer, *Guys*, 2005. Digital C-Print, framed. Ed. of 3 + 1 AP; 186 x 241,3 cm. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. © the artist.

- 19 In a recent interview, Shearer describes some of his influences as being Velázquez, Brueghel, Rubens, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Munch. ("12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," 81)
- 20 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 28.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 23 Shearer himself argues that his artistic process in a sense increases his source materials' cultural significance, perhaps even completes them. Discussing his jpeg series, he states, "There's something in those images that I thought had escaped, had never really come to form. [...] That's why I thought I could appropriate them." Deborah Campbell, "Steven Shearer: Bastard Offspring of the Photoconceptualists," *Canadian Art* v. 22, n. 3 (Fall 2005): 96.
- 24 See for example Roy Arden, "Swinging Lumpen," *Canadian Art* v. 18, n.3 (Fall 2001), 46. Further facts in relation to his biography are often highlighted: the fact that he grew up in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, which was an economically depressed city outside of Vancouver, as well as infamous as being the site where the serial killer Robert Pickton was convicted for having brutally butchered prostitutes on his pig farm. See for instance "12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," 79 and Helena Reckitt, "Boy's Life," Steven Shearer (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery & Toronto: The Power Plant, 2007), no page number.
- 25 This commitment is not just artistic but *physical* as Shearer suggests, mentioning the tendonitis he got from personally typing out hundreds of heavy metal song titles in a work called *List* (2004). Quoted in "12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," 86.
- 26 The art historian Catherine Sousloff reminds us of the important role that the biography plays in terms of giving value to artworks as commodities in the art market, describing this phenomenon as "the commodification (and/or fetishization) of the artist in the form of the object." Catherine M. Sousloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 144.
- 27 Shearer is usually linked with a generation of Vancouver-based artists such as Geoffrey Farmer, Brian Jungen, and Kelly Wood whose respective practices, emerging in the 1990s, revolve around the appropriation of elements of popular visual and material culture.
- 28 As previously mentioned, Shearer's perspective centres primarily on the representation of males while ignoring the many young women that participate in the heavy metal scene. Moreover, his emphasis on white youth does not necessarily represent the current globalized state of heavy metal culture (see footnote 29).
- 29 Heavy metal appears to be thriving. Though Shearer chooses to focus on North American and European heavy metal scenes, documentaries such as *Global Metal* (2008) and *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (2007) show heavy metal fans and music scenes flourishing beyond its traditional geographical borders.