

## **A Filliou for the Game: From Political Economy to Poetical Economy and Fluxus**

Marc James Léger

Volume 37, Number 1, 2012

Humour in the Visual Arts and Visual Culture: Practices, Theories, and Histories

L'humour dans les arts et la culture visuels : pratiques, théories et histoires

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066734ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066734ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

### ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Léger, M. J. (2012). A Filliou for the Game: From Political Economy to Poetical Economy and Fluxus. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 37(1), 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066734ar>

### Article abstract

L'humour qui caractérise l'oeuvre de Robert Filliou est conçu ici en tant qu'approche individuelle de l'artiste dans sa réflexion sur les méthodes iconoclastes et sur l'état d'esprit du groupe Fluxus. Notamment, l'oeuvre vidéo *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* (1979) est présentée dans le contexte de concepts que Filliou avait développés dans ses projets antérieurs, dont la Galerie Légitime, le centre de Création Permanente, La cédille qui sourit, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, et Les principes d'économie poétique. Dans ses références à la réalité quotidienne et aux conditions de travail des artistes, *Breakfasting Together* fait preuve d'un sens de l'humour ironique qui relève autant de l'aliénation que de la créativité. C'est donc dans le champ de l'art que se déploie une vision poétique de la vie et de la résistance au côté sinistre de l'économie capitaliste.

---

# A Filliou for the Game: From Political Economy to Poetical Economy and Fluxus

MARC JAMES LÉGER, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

---

## Résumé

L'humour qui caractérise l'oeuvre de Robert Filliou est conçu ici en tant qu'approche individuelle de l'artiste dans sa réflexion sur les méthodes iconoclastes et sur l'état d'esprit du groupe Fluxus. Notamment, l'oeuvre vidéo *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* (1979) est présentée dans le contexte de concepts que Filliou avait développés dans ses projets antérieurs, dont la Galerie Légitime, le centre de Création Permanente, La cédille qui sourit, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, et Les principes d'économie poétique. Dans ses références à la réalité quotidienne et aux conditions de travail des artistes, *Breakfasting Together* fait preuve d'un sens de l'humour ironique qui relève autant de l'aliénation que de la créativité. C'est donc dans le champ de l'art que se déploie une vision poétique de la vie et de la résistance au côté sinistre de l'économie capitaliste.

---

Often art is so serious, and so is life. We need a sense of humor to be able to sustain ourselves.

Fluxus artist Yoshi Wada

The French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou first visited Vancouver in 1973, shortly after the founding of the Western Front Society.<sup>1</sup> While in Canada he also travelled to Halifax, Montreal, and Toronto, meeting artists and contributing to an emerging artist-run culture. He returned to Vancouver in 1979 in order to work as an artist-in-residence at the Western Front. There, he produced a series of video projects that, like the mail art that was practised globally from the 1960s onwards, contributed to a critique of the preciousness and uniqueness of the work of art. One of these videos is titled *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* (1979), a work produced with the assistance of Kate Craig and Western Front Video Production. It depicts Filliou himself seated at a table and reading from the morning newspaper's classified ads section. Filliou addresses the camera as though he is having an intimate conversation with an unidentified interlocutor and muses on the relations between job postings and the world of art production, making fun of the precarious existence of most artists. In more specific terms, the video enacts in the form of a conversation a shift from political to poetical economy. In what follows I examine this video in detail and argue that it is primarily through the use of humour that Filliou transposes social and political problems—political economy—to a poetical economy in which these problems are imaginatively resolved.

According to Sharla Sava, the videos Filliou made in Vancouver represent a diverse series of proposals that summarize his artistic interests.<sup>2</sup> Some of these interests had been outlined in Filliou's *Principles of Poetical Economy*, a set of revolutionary concepts that he elaborated in 1966, as well as the ideas that he established between 1967 and 1970 in his compendium *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, they provided users with a "potentially revolutionary" set of values—propositions for artistic creation that could unite artists in an effort to liberate the social realm.<sup>4</sup>

Filliou's ideas and artistic strategies were aligned with those of most Fluxus artists insofar as their aim was to help resolve the socioeconomic problems introduced by late capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Fluxus historian Owen Smith states that the Fluxus artists' commitment to radically overcoming the separation of art and life was very often operated "in the manifestation of gags, humour and games."<sup>6</sup> He argues that Fluxus artists used humour as both a transformative and a confrontational mechanism; it corresponded to an indeterminacy within game-playing that allowed for a critical stance towards both the pretensions of serious culture and the economy of consumer capitalism. In this regard Filliou's oeuvre is best explained against the background of Fluxus activities and as part of a body of work created by a loosely associated network of artists, poets, and musicians. According to Sava, Filliou developed his theories of poetical economy as a means of liberation from the kinds of alienation associated with political tyranny and economic exploitation.<sup>7</sup> Poetical economy, the creative space in which social problems are imaginatively suspended and potentially resolved, could be used to contest human misfortune and the misery of everyday life in the modern world.

*Breakfasting Together* is, I would argue, one of the most compelling examples of Filliou's work. In keeping with the Fluxus attitude, yet based on Filliou's own concepts, *Breakfasting Together* makes use of ironic humour to confront and bypass the pressures of the late capitalist economy. In the terms of Henri Lefebvre, Filliou can be seen as an ironist who makes use of humour to go beyond the merely individual aspects of social problems.<sup>8</sup> My contention is that Filliou's work is a form of protest against individual alienation and a figuring of creative solidarity. While I will present other works by Filliou, my focus will be specifically on *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish*, which displays many of the characteristics of his overall production. It is an interactive and dialogue-based project, informal in style, and seemingly open to reply. In 1979 Roy Kiyooka recorded *Breakfasting with Roy Kiyooka*, a video that responds directly to it. I would like to take up the invitation made in Filliou's video and provide a Lefebvrian reading of his observations on political



Figure 1. Robert Filliou, *Galerie Légitime. The Frozen Exhibition*, 1972. Cardboard bowler hat, photos, and text, 31.6 x 20 cm. Courtesy of Galerie Nelson-Freeman, Paris (Photo: Florian Keinefenn).

and poetical economy. In order to do so, I will situate the work in the economic context in which it was produced, a moment in the history of neoliberal capitalism that has led to the present conditions of risk and austerity that mark the working lives of the vast majority of artists and intellectuals within post-Fordist social regimes. I conclude the essay with Lefebvre's view that irony can act as a means of protesting alienation. Lefebvre's definitions of the ironist allow me to consider the ways in which Filliou's humour sought to offer a critique of capitalism while not reducing the possibilities of the poetic to the demands of the political. With this form of humour, we could say, Filliou's *Breakfasting Together* explores alternatives to the stultifying socio-economic conditions that confronted artists.

Enjoy Precarity!

One of Filliou's close colleagues in the 1950s was the New Realist artist Daniel Spoerri. A one-time member of Fluxus, Spoerri is known especially for his "snare pictures," tabletop surfaces onto which he fastened cutlery, tableware, and chance objects that had been left by friends after evenings of food and conversation. Not very interested in either art or politics, Spoerri's sociological investigation of table manners epitomizes European postwar concern with everyday life and its rapid transformation in consumer society.<sup>9</sup> With a kind of Zen acceptance of the chance ordering of relatively uninteresting objects on a flat surface, Spoerri's snare pictures are sociological snapshots

of everyday reality. His attempts to outfox the “topography of chance” through art found its way into Filliou’s many concepts from the 1960s onwards. One of Filliou’s first “snare concepts” is the *Galerie Légitime*, where a hat is used as a mobile art gallery (fig. 1). Filliou recounts,

I think one of the most interesting occurrences that happened with the *Galerie Légitime* was a show I made in 1962 of works by Benjamin Patterson, the American composer. He had made small works in matchboxes: the matchboxes were under the hat and we announced all the places that we would be on that particular day. George Maciunas printed the programme on rough wrapping paper. It included a map of Paris. We started at three o’clock in the morning and we ended up at midnight in the Coupole in the 14th arrondissement. We were very precise. We announced that at a certain time we would be at such and such café and we were there as predicted.... After we had dinner at the Coupole (a small café) we had said that we would have dinner with anyone that was willing to treat us to dinner; we went to someplace where there was what was called Fluxus Preview.... One of the last projects with the Galerie was in London at the time of the Misfits Fair, 1962—of course in London it was a bowler hat. All of the participants—Ben Vautier, Emmett Williams, Robin Page, Addi Koepke, Daniel Spoerri, Metzger and myself—gave a small work that went into the hat, and I announced the beginning of the frozen exhibition. That is, I put the Galerie Légitime into a freezer.<sup>10</sup>

The Galerie Légitime provides a real-life aesthetic context around which like-minded artists could gather. It introduces some of the concerns that would later be carried into a video such as *Breakfasting Together*. For Filliou art exists more vividly in places where you live or work than in rarefied spaces like museums. Martin Patrick has observed that “Filliou’s interest in the ‘genius of the café’ or the everyday gesture as a work of art is directly informed by the beat-hippie countercultural period emerging in the late 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>11</sup> Having dropped out of a career as an economist and as a civil servant for the United Nations in the late 1950s, Filliou became a poet. He took the next step when he dropped out of the formalized commercial art system and developed in the 1960s the Eternal Network, a space where every artistic contribution is legitimate.<sup>12</sup> As with Spoerri’s gatherings of friends, the Eternal Network represents the ongoing interactions of artists and non-artists alike in an everlasting and creative celebration of life.

One of Filliou’s earliest attempts to bring together art, everyday life, and work was the Poipoidrome, a project for a permanent creative centre that he developed with the architect Joachim Pfeufer in 1963. While this project remained unrealized, his theory was tested in 1965 in a collaboration with

George Brecht and their respective partners, Marianne Staffaldt and Donna Jo Jones, with the establishment of a storefront for the permanent creation of art.<sup>13</sup> Based in the French provincial town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, the *Cédille qui Sourit*—known as both the Cedilla and the Store of Useless Knowledge—was first conceived by Filliou while sitting in a café and thinking of a creative way to pay the rent. The Cedilla would be a bookshop in which everything would come under the sign of humour: comics, cartoons, children’s books, jokes, games, tricks, and avant-garde publications that showed a sense of humour.<sup>14</sup> It was a centre for research into ideas, with the goal of making Villefranche into a city of the arts. It also sought to convince the public and fellow artists to become involved in a gift-giving sacrificial economy that could help move society beyond capitalist exchange. The objects for sale, Filliou thought, could include “odd objects” like eggs and bananas, cutting across the boundaries between schools, theories, and coteries. The library, he explained somewhat obliquely in 1966, could be for the humourless as well as the Chinese.

One would not be wrong to see in the Cedilla many of the concerns of George Maciunas, the Lithuanian-born organizer of Fluxus events and activities. Maciunas had by this time moved away from Fluxus concerts and towards Fluxkits, Fluxboxes, and Fluxyearbooks, projects that involved games, puzzles, gags, and various kinds of printed matter. The same ethos of collectivism, de commodification, and deaestheticization that animated Fluxus multiples was certainly in play at the Cedilla, which hosted artists from Paris, New York, Rome, Prague, and Tokyo.

For the few years it existed the Cedilla represented a living instance of the Eternal Network. From this centre Filliou devised a new form of mail art: in “suspense poems” and “suspense sculptures” the constituent parts would take several days, weeks, or months to be delivered. Scenarios were invented such as the *One-Minute Scenario*: “People eating their soup. The camera backs up. They are in a cage.” Open-endedness played a role in some of the works, such as *The Game of Objects*, in which one player writes “Take \_\_\_\_\_” and names one or more objects. A second player, without knowing what the first has written, describes an action to be done with the object(s). Filliou gives as an example: “Take the thing nearest you that you don’t care for—and wire it to Daniel Spoerri.”<sup>15</sup> When the Cedilla became insolvent in 1968 Brecht and Filliou produced a humorous poster that announced without regret,

There is always someone who makes a fortune and someone who goes BANKRUPT (us especially). But *La Cédille qui Sourit* turns the page and because Creation is Permanent, we announce the coming to be of The Eternal Network, manifestations, wanderings, meditations, microcosms, macrocosms, mixtures, meanings....<sup>16</sup>

The countercultural ethos of dropping out of mainstream institutions and away from harmful ideological commitments finds itself clearly expressed in two works from this period that we could easily associate with concrete poetry: “Le Filliou Idéal” and “Yes.” These works display a kind of uselessness combined with communality that I associate with Spoerri’s snare pictures. For example, “Le Filliou Idéal” is an action poem that was first presented at the Café au Go-Go in New York City in 1965. It reads, “not deciding / not choosing / not wanting / not owning / aware of self / wide awake / sitting quietly / doing nothing.”<sup>17</sup> The paradoxical quality of doing nothing speaks both to the spiritualism of Zen Buddhism and the materialism of a bohemian existence. As an event score the poem does not appear to give the performer much to do. However when conceived in terms of the Eternal Network, the possibilities are endless.

With the action poem “Yes,” Filliou demonstrates how the vagueness of “Le Filliou Idéal” can be actualized. Part One, Section One, “The Adult Male Poet,” begins,

Just as a steam engine does not function without water and coal, and the motor of an automobile stops when short of gasoline, the poet, in order to furnish poetry, must be fed regularly. It is food that gives the poet strength and heat. The first thing a poet does with food is to chew it. This consists in breaking the food into small pieces, mixing it up with his saliva, thus making it easier to swallow and to digest, and chewing it well.<sup>18</sup>

Section Two is entitled “The Blood of a Poet” and reads,

When you sever a poet’s jugular vein, blood does not stop running out from the wound until the poet is dead.... The late Professor Pascal once said of his heart [of a poet] that it is hollow and full of garbage. However, exactly what he meant by this is not clear.

Section Four, “The Excretion of the Poet,” continues, “Excretion is of such vital importance to the good functioning of the poet that the departed savant, Leonardo da Vinci, insisted that ‘the poet is a wonderful mechanism transforming good wine into urine.’” Part One concludes,

Let us suppose, then, that the poet sees a woman passing by. He looks at her, that is to say, the lens of his eye focuses upon her. Her image is formed upon his retina, small and upside down. The optic nerve of the poet transmits to his brain the information allowing him to realize what is meant by the exact position, the shape, the color of the woman situated in front of the poet’s eye. This at least is his ideal. And he expresses his ideal in a poem, because he is a poet.

The second part of “Yes” presents the score of “Le Filliou Idéal” (“not deciding, not choosing, not wanting, not owning, aware

of self, wide awake, sitting quietly, doing nothing”) and dates it with the words “Paris, 1964.”

“Yes” was performed at the Café au Go-Go on 8 February 1965. While Filliou sat motionless on the stage, Alison Knowles read the poem aloud and Philip Corner provided silent musical accompaniment. In perfect Fluxus form, the performance of this poem appears arbitrary. There is no direct correspondence between the poem and the manner of its presentation. The audience requires no particular comprehension skills to understand the work, and the performers require no particular skills in order to interpret and perform it. The purpose of such a performance is therefore to create in the participants a sense of acceptance and openness to chance—an awareness, as Filliou might put it, of “the mind becoming the infinite world of developing ideas.”<sup>19</sup> As with *Breakfasting Together* the open-endedness of “Le Filliou Idéal” and of “Yes” is premised on the active involvement of the audience, which allows for no unique or fixed version of the work. As it lays hold of ever-smaller elements (like those elements that can be placed in a hat), the work becomes transfinite, or relational. Another way of thinking about this is that the work acts as an occasion for an infinite number of people to meet and interact with one another.

*Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* recaps many of the features of Filliou’s work that I have described so far. Based on a reading of classified ads in the morning newspaper, it makes use of a “topography of chance” similar to what we saw in the case of the *Galerie Légitime*. As with many of the gags produced at the Cedilla, it has an open structure that invites participation on the part of the audience. *Breakfasting Together* depicts Filliou seated at a table with a ceramic teapot, cigarettes and a lighter, and the morning newspaper. A light blue tablecloth and a pink wall behind him make for a very plain but colourful setting. He pours himself some tea, has a drink, picks up the newspaper, and then addresses the camera: “Hey! Hey you! Hello. I see you are reading the same paper as I do. Look here! Look. Open to the classified ad section. Page C8. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. The ninth, last column, bottom of the page. Look what they say.”<sup>20</sup> (Figs. 2 to 9) From this opening, he continues by reading eight classified ads to his imaginary interlocutor. Each one is followed by a reflection on the art world, marking a shift, in other words, from political economy to the art world’s poetical economy. He reads from the newspaper and then comments to the listener:

“Ask yourself, how is my future determined? Is my job challenging or boring? Am I motivated to do better? Does my job pay only to scale? Is it what I should be doing? If you are in doubt, or unsatisfied with your present position, look up the classified ads section of this paper.” And look at what I find there. That might be interest[ing] to artist[s].



Figures 2 and 3. Stills from Robert Filliou, *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish*, 1979. Video (Courtesy of The Western Front Society).

They say here: “No experience necessary. On the job training. An international company is now hiring twenty enthusiastic individuals, male or female, to be trained in the marketing field.” Well, I think enthusiasm is important for artists, no? (*laughs*) Maybe you could advise some people to apply for the job. (*takes a serious tone and goes back to reading*) I see another one. Yes I agree with you, I mean. (*laughs*) Yeah, we’re very enthusiastic. Okay.

Here they want “A dependable personable person. Hours nine am to five pm.” That one’s an “experienced secretary wanted by Whitecaps,” whatever that is, but, now are artists

dependable? (*smiles*) (*holds up his hands and plops them down on the newspaper again*)

This one is direct sales. “We require a mature salesperson to sell a lifestyle product.” Well I think art has to do in one way (*laughs*) with sales also. Very unpleasant to face for many persons but, it’s got to do with earning your living, and uh, not always an easy thing to do. (*serious tone*) (*pause*) Well sure. Actually, I don’t see why artists shouldn’t be paid for their work. I think that a great deal of the job of artists has to do with un-learning, with anti-brainwashing. Now we all know that we send our children to school, and school teachers do their best



Figure 4 and 5. Stills from Robert Filliou, *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish*, 1979. Video (Courtesy of The Western Front Society).



Figures 6 and 7. Stills from Robert Filliou, *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish*, 1979. Video (Courtesy of The Western Front Society).

I'm sure, but many parents, many adults looking back upon their childhood or their youth—they feel that along with a formal education came a lot of, uh, of brainwashing (*laughs*) or, learning that they have to unlearn. (*reflects*)

Now may I interrupt a second? What I had in mind is that, although we are not fully satisfied with the job that schoolteachers do, none of us would dream to say that they shouldn't be paid for the job that they do, anyway. For the time they spend doing this job, to the best of their ability, I think. So, I think that, uh, artist as they contribute to the unlearning process, there is no doubt about it. They

should be paid reasonably for their work too. (*serious*) Yeah, like a skilled worker for instance. (*laughs*) Oh well...yeah let me light a cigarette. Oh I see you smoke too. (*lights a cigarette*)....

Here they ask for "telephone solicitors." Oh well that should be a good thing for artists. I mean modern art is quite wide in the field of activities (*laughs*) and there's a lot of artists who spend a lot of time on telephone and they consider all their work as...all their telephone conversation as artwork. (*laughs*) You know in the old day, like you had, uh, the letters of Van Gogh to his brother. I think is very fantastic book. Or



Figure 8 and 9. Stills from Robert Filliou, *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish*, 1979. Video (Courtesy of The Western Front Society).

letters among artists, that they exchange. All these things get published eventually if the letters didn't get burned. But now I think that the equivalent for artists would be to publish their telephone conversations. (*laughs*)....

This might be a good one. "Food services supervisor." Let's see they are looking for this—a food service supervisor. (*laughs*) It has become quite an art form. I know quite a few artists whose artwork consists in cooking. (*laughs*) And that traces us back to a, the pretty amazing invention of cooking, and a great practice. Do you think it's uh, maybe it is the fundamental art. (*laughs*) Yes. Well now I'm not a good cook myself, no. But then, I huh...I wash the dishes! It's kind of my hobby. At one point I worked in a French restaurant in Hollywood. I was busboy. Now you know in the kitchen there is a great hierarchy and the busboy is just—when you start from the bottom he's the second one after the dishwasher. So, uh, taking up the dishes from the table, and taking them to the sink, that's kind of a hobby for me. Washing them is actually a necessity. I do it.

The video concludes with an ad for a schoolteacher, a job that Filliou compares to art-making as a means of sharing information and experiences. He then puts the newspaper down and tells his imagined company that he must go to work. "Bye bye now," he says smiling.

Humour operates in this work in many ways, mediating the shift from everyday life to the particular concerns of artists. The work itself takes the form of a joke that allows the content of the morning newspaper to be made into the content of an artwork. The joke form, however, allows for a second level, a negation of the negation that betrays the work's status as art. Here the idea of a shift from political to poetical economy is itself up for negotiation and depends on our reception. A listener could, for example, respond with the conservative rebuttal that unemployed or badly paid artists should simply "get a job," meaning that they should give up on their years of training and specialization as well as any idealist or ideological commitments they may have.<sup>21</sup> Insofar as it acknowledges, identifies with, and then moves away from this kind of conservative pragmatism, the joke operates all the more effectively to promote an Eternal Network of participants who refuse the terms of a consumer economy. The asymmetry between the form of the joke and the significance of the commentary allows the content to emerge in a new form, throwing off its original shell and perhaps also imaginatively overcoming the alienating features of unemployment and wage labour as instruments of capitalist control.

While Filliou's use of the newspaper is certainly comical, it also acknowledges the real-life anxieties associated with unemployment. His conversation with the viewer makes ironic use

of the job descriptions, creating intimacy by making light of and simultaneously bypassing the pressures of the labour market. These pressures would have been particularly acute in the late 1970s, a period that marked the end of the "golden era" of the postwar economic boom. According to Chris Harman, postwar economists had believed that by increasing government spending, one could increase the demand for goods and deflect socialist radicalism.<sup>22</sup> Higher growth rates in Eastern Bloc countries had allowed both East and West to pursue military production as a means to ward off economic slumps. In this way the Cold War appeared until the 1970s to offer a plausible long-term strategy for economic stability. Deficits later became the norm, and recession led to unemployment and inflation. By the late 1970s unemployment began to be accepted as a protective measure against inflation, and governments dedicated themselves to breaking labour unions and privatizing industry. Workers, a nascent neoliberalism announced, should accept lower wages as a natural consequence of the need to keep prices stable. Seen in this context *Breakfasting Together* is in no way aesthetically detached, but rather complexly related to the emergence of neoliberal monetarism.

The circumstances surrounding *Breakfasting Together* allow us to consider how Filliou's ironic suggestion to fellow artists that they embrace their precarity opened up new possibilities for cultural resistance to social and economic injunctions. According to Gene Ray, the command of today's creative industries to "enjoy your precarity" is a correlative to the possibility of subjective and collective emancipation.<sup>23</sup> Cultural autonomy in this regard can act as a force of resistance against processes of capitalist integration. In the context of an artist-run culture emerging in Canada at the time of *Breakfasting Together*, this meant bypassing the bureaucracy of centralized institutions. *Breakfasting Together* refuses to give cover to the machinery of political economy; it allows for a minimal but crucial distance from this machinery and for subjectivization through ironic humour. This in no way locates resistance at the level of individual subjectivity. Instead, through a form of humour that is premised on a shared social universe, it insists on *togetherness* as a means to link isolated people and to make common cause toward solving social problems. The use of humour in this video holds the key to both Filliou's art and that of Fluxus. As Sharla Sava argues, Filliou's video works from 1977 and 1979 consciously evade serious theorization and refuse to engage in finite solutions.<sup>24</sup> In this we find not only the *modus operandi* of Fluxus praxis, but many of its contradictions as well.

Through the exploration and diffusion of the tensions that exist between art and life, works like *Breakfasting Together* provided alternative models to those of Maciunas, who from the early 1960s had set out to destroy the system of high art and serious culture.<sup>25</sup> From the beginning of Maciunas's career as



an organizational impresario, Fluxus was conceived of as anti-bourgeois and anti-art, replacing high-minded museum and concert art with the low commerce of ephemeral goods, vaudeville, and cheap gags. This corresponded with the sentiments of most of the artists first associated with Fluxus—practitioners of poetry, happenings, music, and almost anything that could not easily fit in the category of visual art. Owen Smith argues that the heyday of Fluxus, between 1962 and 1978, coincides with the involvement of Maciunas and his efforts as Fluxus designer, art historian, musicologist, provocateur, businessman, and producer. Maciunas sought to break down the distinction between art and life through the use of humour and concrete art, understood as a form of political action.<sup>26</sup> According to Smith, Maciunas considered Fluxus an art for the masses, understood in a Marxist-Leninist sense. He even worked to have Fluxus events recognized by the Soviet Union and to have Fluxus considered a truer form of socialist realism. But Fluxus humour, considered by Maciunas to be an effective cultural weapon, was criticized by artists such as Tomas Schmit, who worried that Fluxus was becoming too plebian and too bourgeois.<sup>27</sup> In fact, many of the European members of Fluxus considered that the emphasis on humour in the early 1960s had become a depoliticizing tendency and “evidence that Fluxus was losing its confrontational edge.”<sup>28</sup> Maciunas’s efforts to politicize Fluxus also encountered strong opposition from American artists.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the differences among participants in Fluxus events, humour informed the development of Fluxus towards games and open forms.<sup>30</sup>

Filliou’s work, like that of his contemporaries, sought to problematize the economy of post-industrial capitalism. According to Clive Robertson, humour was Filliou’s answer to the 1960s idea of cultural revolution, primarily because it was “the least expensive and the most radical tool available to artists.”<sup>31</sup> In what way was Filliou’s humour a radical tool? How could humour participate in a process of social and cultural revolution? The humour one finds in *Breakfasting Together* corresponds very specifically to a host of concepts developed by Filliou in the 1960s and 1970s. His humour developed in such a way as to provide a temporary solution to the different modalities of politics and art. While it might trick his audience into thinking that art and life have been reconciled, Filliou’s irony actually sustains the contradiction in an act of double negation. Filliou’s humour is a tactical operation. It protests against alienation and moves from individual concerns toward the collective consciousness of a conflict that it seeks to aggravate.

### The Unemployed Buddha

*Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* is the outcome of ideas that Filliou had put together between 1967 and 1970 in his book *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*.<sup>32</sup> As Sava recognizes,

the book lays the groundwork for Filliou’s 1970s videos.<sup>33</sup> In fact it is structurally similar to *Breakfasting Together* in that it leaves one third of the writing space open for readers to use as they wish. As Filliou puts it, this allows the reader to “enter the writing game as a performer rather than as a mere outsider.”<sup>34</sup> The book begins with a discussion of Filliou’s youth. It recounts his joining the communist-led underground *Francs-tireurs et partisans français* during the war and, later, the French Communist party. After Tito was excommunicated in 1948, Filliou gave up communism and withdrew from political activity. Nevertheless, he states in this book that he favours democratic socialism, the public ownership of the means of production, and absolute freedom. He considers Marx an important social theorist but feels that Marxism has become too dogmatic. He prefers the anarchist, or “non-scientific,” socialist tradition of Fourier and others, yet still holds that revolution is a necessity. Maoism welcomes anarchy, he says, but only temporarily.<sup>35</sup> These facts and statements make for important background information to Filliou’s subsequent elaboration of the theory of poetical economy as a form of creative investigation and participation. His view is that life should become essentially poetical. In order to achieve this, people need to be taught the creative use of leisure. Under any given political system this would give people a better chance to grow and be less concerned that everything should work smoothly. The “system,” as he puts it in the language of the time, alienates people in various ways: through overspecialization, self-analysis, loss of creativity, and the lack of the gift for living. This leads to adults’ loss of childhood innocence and imagination, qualities that must be regained so that art and life can become poetical.<sup>36</sup> Those who sell out to the system of specialization enter an economics of prostitution, Filliou argues, which is the opposite of the revolutionary poetical economy.

There is a very real sense in which the levels of the political and the poetical, although both very well understood by Filliou, cannot be reconciled. In this Filliou is perhaps more sophisticated than Maciunas. The weakness in Maciunas’s view stems from the fact that he thought there could be a communist art, whereas there can only be a communist society and an art that corresponds to it. In other words, there is nothing in communism that determines from the outset what forms art should take. The problem, as Filliou sees it, certainly lies in the relationship of art to the political; his solution is to bring people closer to the art experience by circumventing the division of labour between teaching and learning, and by promoting creativity. In this way people gain greater control of their environment.<sup>37</sup>

Filliou’s work can be understood in psychoanalytic terms as a prolonged and strategic effort to avoid the anxieties and pressures associated with the social rules that structure reality. Social rules and the rules of art operate as illusions that mask the basic

facts of social antagonism and the contingency of what Jacques Lacan referred to as the Real—traumatic irruptions into the field of one's perception of reality. Because the loss of such illusions can lead to illness, the subject learns ways to cope with the pressures of reality. Humour is just such a coping mechanism, one through which the subject negotiates his or her relationship to social demands. According to Slavoj Žižek, a prominent interpreter of Lacan, ironic humour acts as a means of keeping a minimal distance from the double deception of the symbolic order, a mechanism through which humans are capable of deceiving not only other humans, but also themselves.<sup>38</sup> Žižek argues that humanity alone can deceive by means of the truth.<sup>39</sup> The implication is that while social appearances may seem deceitful or arbitrary, we cannot but play the game, as Pierre Bourdieu once referred to the system of art production.<sup>40</sup> The violence that structures the rules of the social game can therefore become the target of a humour that acts not only as a cultural weapon, but also as a psychic resource. Humour, I would argue, provides a temporary solution to the irresolvable difference between art and life. Humour sustains the contradictions between art and life without reducing one to the other. One of Filliou's well-known aphorisms states that art is what makes life more interesting than art. More than simply a statement on the overcoming of the opposition of art and life, this aphorism is also, tellingly, humorous and ironic; it takes into account the limits of all efforts to play one against the other and holds open the movement from the political to the poetical. The reflections in *Breakfasting Together* on the dire socio-economic situations in which most artists find themselves are received as being funny. An artist viewer, in particular a struggling artist, would recognize himself or herself in this account as an alien entity, precisely, someone who because of social circumstances is deprived of substance. Because humour allows the sometimes terrifying facts of existence to be recognized, to be viewed from an oblique angle, not only can one perceive oneself objectively, but one learns to see how subjectivity is trapped in an alienating situation. Serious humour, directed against serious culture and the capitalist universe of which it is part, thereby acts in terms of an ethics of separation from social demands.

Filliou returns to Marx in *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* when he explains that the problem with art is money. Because artists are willing to give up comforts in order to maintain their independence and to protect their leisure, they often become destitute. "The freer an artist," he writes, "the more destitute he is."<sup>41</sup> Filliou gives his book as an example. It is a book he had been working on for several years but with no certainty that it would be published. "I can't pay the rent," he writes, "but I go on, and feel cheerful enough."<sup>42</sup> He adds,

I have a hunch that a new theory of value, upon which to build a much-needed new economic model, might come out of these investigations. But years of research are involved. I'm willing to invest my time, and my creativeness. Frankly, however, I cannot do the job properly without subsidies of some sort. So far my prospects are nil.<sup>43</sup>

He mentions at the same time that he had registered with the state as an indigent pauper. The bigger picture of course is the art system to which he belongs:

The art market, on the other hand, is shit. These big dealers, publishers, producers, agents, critics. Merde. (Small publishers, etc...do it for love. They're artists, too, really.) Just to think of what I'll have to go through to get this book published makes me feel like giving up writing it. But I won't give free reign to the pimps. They make whores of everybody. They "recuperate" everything. Every genuine protest they turn into a source of profit... It's the system that makes prostitutes of us all that must go to the garbage can.<sup>44</sup>

Leisure, Filliou surmises, will soon allow everyone to live as freely as the poor, providing a new theory of value that is based neither on labour time (Adam Smith and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon) nor on socially necessary labour time (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). It is not surprising that many of these ideas are still with us today as we discuss both the increasing instability of working conditions and the systems of casualization and flexibilization that break down the divisions between leisure and work.<sup>45</sup> Using a bit of poetic license, the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once said that within the system as it currently exists we must not only prostitute ourselves, but we must learn to play the other side, to also be the johns.<sup>46</sup> Such recognition of the complexity of social relations opens up the (eternal) inter-subjective network that defines our true position in the game. The paradox indeed is that the rules of the game, although lived and played as real, do not concretely exist. Laughter provides us with a certain distance from such a realization.

Whereas Fluxus artists debated whether or not humour was an effective political tool, Filliou sought to avoid this problem by locating efficacy within humour itself as a feature of teaching and learning and as an aspect of poetical economy. In this regard, I argue that Filliou's humour could be said to correspond to Henri Lefebvre's theory of irony. In the "First Prelude" of his 1962 *Introduction to Modernity*, Lefebvre states that one of the first rules of irony is the rule of distance.<sup>47</sup> Distance offers the ironist some protection against being exploited. It allows him to distinguish his subjectivity from the game into which he is thrown. Irony reaches towards the rules of the game but without reducing the latter to a fixed totality. It strikes a happy medium. Irony begins with a form of subjective withdrawal that I referred

to earlier as ironic inversion. The ironist, Lefebvre says, is not directly committed to struggle, but perceives the limits of the interests involved and evaluates the situation. He writes,

Back out again in the public domain, [the ironist] questions whether those involved really know why they are gambling with their lives, their happiness or lack of it, not to mention the happiness or unhappiness of other people. Do they actually know they are gambling? Do they know what the stakes really are?<sup>48</sup>

For Lefebvre it is clear that irony is a form of struggle. Whereas humour without irony softens a situation, making the ennui of social life tolerable, humour with irony emphasizes and aggravates conflict rather than resolving it. As an act of defiance, it links the protest of a lucid subjectivity to the social situation.

In a complex argument, Lefebvre associates irony with the historical imagination: irony is born from a desire for historical action and change. He refers to Socrates as someone who determined that decent people should be ridiculed so that they could see that knowledge consists of contradictory points of view. Irony is therefore a response to the high seriousness of dogmatism. Its features are curiosity, amazement, and questioning—the possibility of knowledge rather than its certainty. Its modality is a dialogue in which the ironist takes dissimulation so far, Lefebvre says, that he disappears behind his own mask.<sup>49</sup> Because Socrates attacks no one he becomes a universal scapegoat, alternately a saint and a martyr. He embarrasses those in power because he asks them to experience uncertainty. The ironist does not take jokes too seriously but has an eye on the conflict at hand. According to Lefebvre, the strength of the ironic attitude is mental; it represents a consciousness of conflict, a temporary taking stock of larger social struggles.<sup>50</sup>

As an ironist, Filliou was very sensitive to the way that even Fluxus could become an orthodoxy. He steered a path that was at once part of Fluxus and at the same time fully his own. We could say that unlike Maciunas, Filliou saw art less as an instrument of social change than as a clumsy way to exhibit the contradictions of the world. *Breakfasting Together* strikes a contemporary note even though its conditions of emergence in the late 1970s may seem to us somewhat mild in comparison with the present impasse of neoliberal globalization. Filliou's irony is contemporary inasmuch as it recognizes the violence of capitalism that keeps the game of culture operating as it does. For Lefebvre irony deflates the drama of a situation and de-dramatizes subjectivity as a way to avoid both relativism and absolutes, including the eternal idea of revolution. It is like gambling, he says, knowing that failure is a possible outcome.<sup>51</sup> Filliou's irony was not ultimately detached but gave him a place in the world. It spoke about serious matters in an unaffected manner, exposing the secrecy in which the game is shrouded.

## Acknowledgements

I first saw Filliou's *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris in the summer of 2010. Thanks to Clive Robertson and Martin Patrick for their critical comments and musings on this paper.

## Notes

- 1 The Western Front is described on its website as one of Canada's first artist-run centres. It was founded in 1973 as "a space for the exploration and creation of new forms" for "artists interested in exploration and interdisciplinary practices." Its experiments in video art and sound art in particular played a "role in the development of electronic and networked art forms in a national and international context." See <http://front.bc.ca/about> (consulted 12 April 2012).
- 2 Sharla Sava, "The Filliou Tapes—from Political to Poetical Economy," in Robert Filliou et al., *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy*, exh. cat. Vancouver, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery (Vancouver, 1995), 18.
- 3 See Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (Köln, 1970).
- 4 Filliou cited in Sava, "The Filliou Tapes," 23.
- 5 Sava, "The Filliou Tapes," 16, 22.
- 6 Owen Smith, "Art, Life and the Fluxus Attitude," in Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood, eds., *Flux Attitudes* (Buffalo, 1991), 58.
- 7 Sava, "The Filliou Tapes," 28.
- 8 Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity* [1962], trans. John Moore (London, 1995), 9.
- 9 The classic text in this regard is Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947). See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Volume 1, trans. John Moore (London, 1991).
- 10 Filliou, cited in Filliou et al., *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy*, 75–76.
- 11 Martin Patrick, "Unfinished Filliou: On the Fluxus Ethos and the Origins of Relational Aesthetics," *Art Journal*, 119, 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2010), 48.
- 12 See Filliou, *L'art est ce qui rend la vie plus intéressante que l'art*, (Québec, 2003), 63.
- 13 This store was preceded by Ben Vautier's Living Sculpture apartment gallery of 1963 and Willem de Ridder's European Mail-Order Warehouse and Fluxshop, opened in Amsterdam in 1964.
- 14 See "Letter from Robert," in George Brecht and Robert Filliou, *Games at the Cedilla or The Cedilla Takes Off* (New York, 1967), unpaginated.
- 15 Brecht and Filliou, *Games at the Cedilla*, unpaginated.
- 16 The poster is documented in Brecht and Filliou, *Games at the Cedilla*, unpaginated.
- 17 Robert Filliou, "Le Filliou Idéal," in *A Filliou Sampler* (New York, 1967), 10.

- 18 “Yes,” in Filliou, *A Filliou Sampler*, 5–10.
- 19 See Robert Filliou and Edwige Regenwetter, *The Seat of Ideas: A Logical Analysis by Edwige Regenwetter* (Calgary, 1981), unpaginated.
- 20 Robert Filliou, *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish* (1979) from *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts, Part II*. Video. Produced by Kate Craig and Western Front Video Production. All of the following excerpts are transcribed from the video. Thanks to Sarah Todd at Western Front for making this video available to me for research.
- 21 In this regard, I disagree with those who associate this kind of Fluxus work with today’s relational and activist community art; see for example Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, 2011). Filliou’s work comes closer to the avant-garde goals and strategies of the Situationists and their aim to bring all facets of life, friendship, love, play, sex, and work into revolutionary consciousness. On this see Greil Marcus, “The Long Walk of the Situationist International,” in Tom McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, 2002), 1–17.
- 22 See Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Resistance and the Relevance of Marx* (London, 2009).
- 23 Gene Ray, “Culture Industry and the Administration of Terror,” in Gerald Raunig et al., eds., *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the “Creative Industries”* (London, 2011), 178.
- 24 Sava, “The Filliou Tapes,” 18.
- 25 Thomas Kellein, “I Make Jokes! Fluxus through the Eyes of ‘Chairman’ George Maciunas,” in Fluxus (London, 1995), 12.
- 26 Maciunas, “New Dada in Music, Theatre, Poetry and Art” (June 1962), cited in Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego, 1998), 61.
- 27 Smith, *Fluxus*, 139–40.
- 28 Smith, *Fluxus*, 141.
- 29 Smith, *Fluxus*, 163–64.
- 30 Smith, *Fluxus*, 155.
- 31 Clive Robertson, “Meeting a Mentor in the Making of Porta Filliou,” in Filliou et al., *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy*, 58.
- 32 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*. The complete listing for the author of the book is “Robert Filliou (and the READER, if he wishes), with the participation of John Cage, George Brecht, Dorothy Iannone, Allan Kaprow, Marcelle, Dieter Rot, Benjamin Patterson, Vara, Bjössi, Karl Rot, Joseph Beuys.”
- 33 Sava, “The Filliou Tapes,” 22.
- 34 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 7.
- 35 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 14. On this subject, see Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* [1880] (Beijing, 1975).
- 36 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 19–23.
- 37 Filliou’s work fits nicely with Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s theory of the proletarian public spheres of experience. They write, “People’s immediate experience does not unfold as a mere appropriation and accumulation of knowledge; when it is successful, experience does not represent a process of appropriation alone, for a person is appropriated by objects in the same way in which he appropriates them. The immediate experience has a complex structure; it is shaped by the predominance of the object world, which, throughout the entire life cycle, confronts it as a concrete reality, the labor process, relations of production, and social totality—in other words, as the world. This same objective context of living determines immediate experience in the form of the libidinal economy, lifelong fantasy production, the psychic structure of the individual personality, and the molding by family, upbringing, and one’s own learning processes—this is the subjective side of experience. The experience derived from dealing with the learning rhythms of this type of experience is the site where motivation, political actions, and mental activity converge. Only to the extent that workers can have experiences of their own behavior and consciousness are they in a position to develop their own forms of experience.”
- See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* [1972], trans. Peter Labanyi et al. (Minneapolis, 1993), 27.
- 38 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), 73.
- 39 Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 73.
- 40 See Randal Johnson, “Editor’s Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture,” in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993), 1–25.
- 41 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 49.
- 42 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 49–50.
- 43 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 51.
- 44 Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 65.
- 45 See, for instance, the special issue entitled “Precariat” of the online journal *Transversal* (2004); *The Precarious Reader*, published online by *Mute* 2, 0 (2005); Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, eds., *My Creativity Reader: A Critique of Creative Industries* (Amsterdam, 2007); Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labour in Precarious Times* (New York, 2009); Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London, 2011); Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London, 2011).
- 46 Jean-Luc Godard discusses his film *Sauve Qui Peut (la Vie)* (1980) with Dick Cavett on the *Dick Cavett Show*, 1980, made available on YouTube by LettertoJaneMagazine, 22 July 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93HCeGy6vzk> (viewed on 24 April 2012).
- 47 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 46.
- 48 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 7.
- 49 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 9.
- 50 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 7–9.
- 51 Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 39.