

Robert Filliou, *Génie sans talent*, Musée d'art moderne Lille Métropole, Villeneuve d'Ascq, 6 December 2003 – 28 March 2004



Robert Filliou wearing the poster for his *Galerie Légitime* (Legitimate Gallery) as a hat at the opening of his 1972 exhibition, *Defrosting The Frozen Exhibition*, Galerie Magers, Bonn. Photograph: Joaquin Romero.

By the time Robert Filliou started writing in 1956, the thirty-year old Frenchman had already been involved in the resistance, obtained an M.A. in political economy from UCLA, worked for the United Nations programme of economic development in South Korea, and also spent time in Egypt, Spain and Denmark. His nomadic lifestyle would subsequently lead him to live in Paris, the French Côte d'Azur, Düsseldorf, and South West France, before retiring to a Tibetan meditation centre in the South of France where he died in 1987. Although his contacts extended from Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers to the international Fluxus movement (through friendships and collaborations with Fluxus artists Daniel Spoerri, Emmett Williams and George Brecht), Filliou remained a marginal figure on the international art scene. This may explain why, despite the recent rise of interest in Fluxus, his work is to this day much better known in the countries where he was active during his lifetime – France and Germany – than elsewhere.

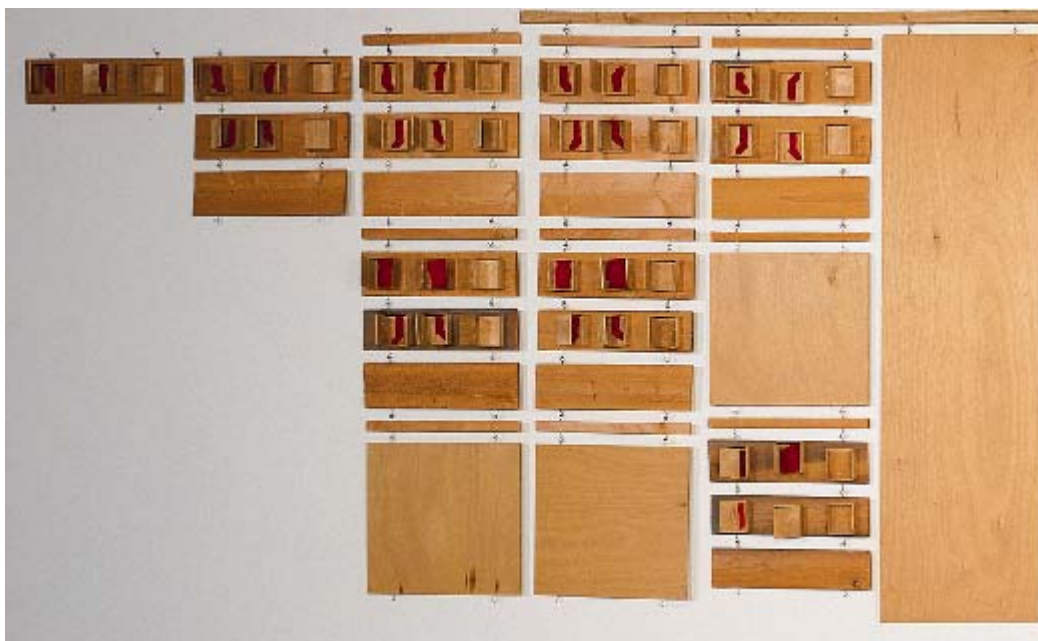
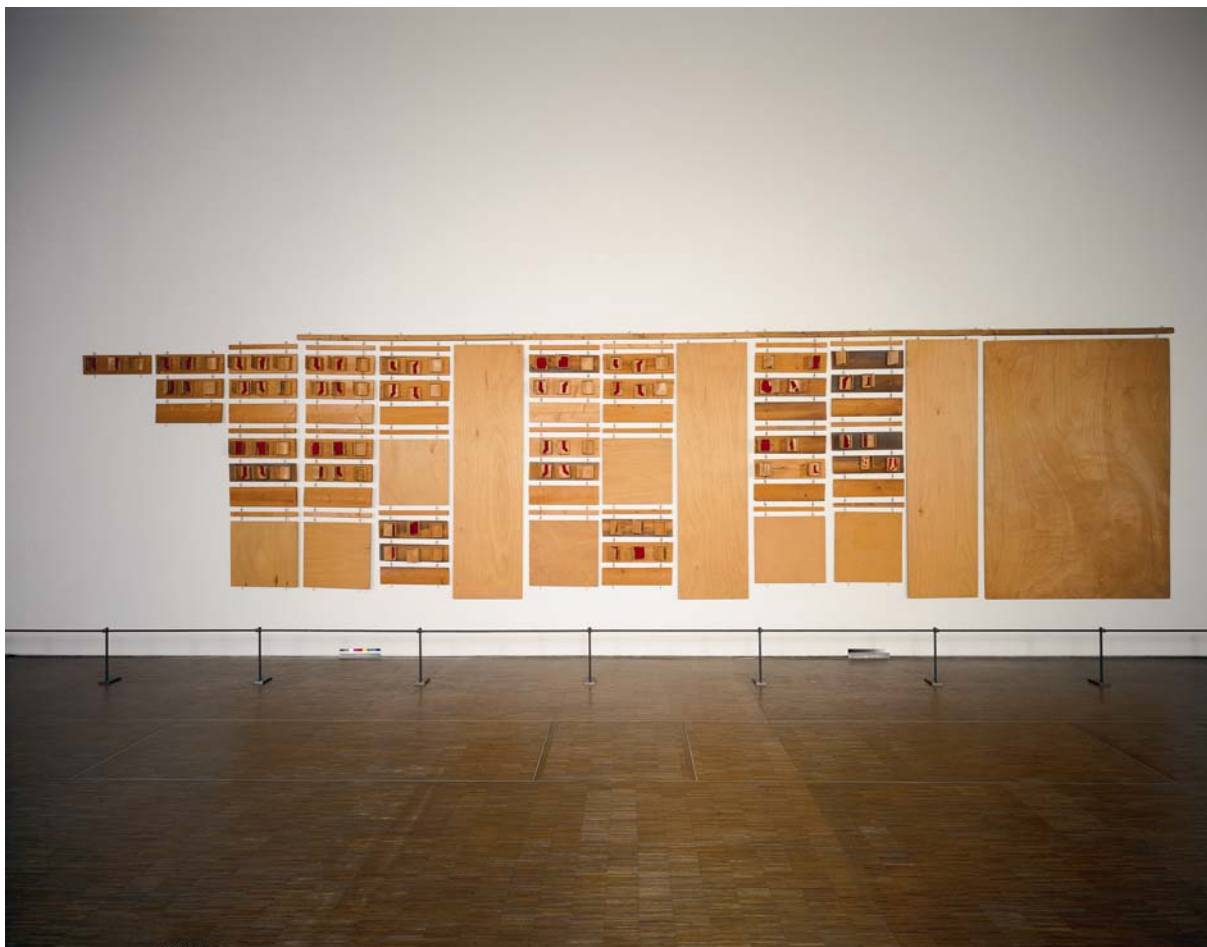


The main reason Filliou remained so resolutely independent and original was that he actively cultivated the persona of a 'good-for-nothing' naive autodidact, to the point of flirting, at times, with downright idiocy – an attitude which, paradoxically, was in fact closely related to his background as an economist, as the two kinds of artistic 'principles' which run through his work suggest. The first of these, influenced by the nineteenth-century economist Charles Fourier, was formulated by Filliou in 1966 as the 'Principes d'Economie Poétique' which opposed what he called the capitalist 'Economie de Prostitution' by privileging unproductive and immeasurable concepts such as joy, desire, pleasure and life. The second driving force of Filliou's work, the 'Principe d'Equivalence,' extended this first general principle by positing a practical equation between what is 'bien fait,' 'mal fait' and 'pas fait' (well made, badly made and not made). Equipped with this pseudo-economic equation, Filliou explored, perhaps more systematically than any artist before him, the fragile boundaries between process and product, success and failure, genius and mediocrity.

And artistic thinking like this, of course, is bound to constitute a challenge for anyone wishing to put together a retrospective of Filliou's work, a challenge to which the curators of *Robert Filliou, Génie sans talent* at the Musée d'Art Moderne Lille Métropole evidently responded by fully embracing Filliou's philosophy and including as many aspects of his disparate œuvre as possible. As a result, the eighteen rooms of this roughly chronological display structured around Filliou's central concepts seemed, with the exception of five major large-scale works, to be mostly filled with small, shabby-looking objects made up of unpainted wood boards, string, bricks or cardboard (often bearing obscure scribbles), along with some amateur videos of the artist's antics and a few deliberately silly one-liners – typically, a handwritten sign attached to a broom (shown with a bucket and floor cloth) reads: 'Back in 10 minutes. Mona Lisa.' As I walked through the exhibition, however, the interest and delight of other visitors clearly demonstrated the success of the curators' choices, and confirmed two things to me: that Filliou's often unprepossessing objects are somehow sufficiently suffused with his quirky humour to sustain the viewer's attention, and that the artist's 'principles' seem to still be very relevant today.



Bien Fait, Mal Fait, Pas Fait



General view and detail of Robert Filliou, *Principe d'Équivalence*, 1968, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne/CCI, Paris. Photograph: Pietro Pellini, Cologne.



The 1968 work *Principe d'Equivalence: bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* illustrates Filliou's 'equivalence principle' by using a simple unit consisting of a red baby sock in a wooden box. The unit is repeated five times according to these three possible outcomes: the 'well-made' model is a replica of its precedent, 'errors' are introduced in the 'badly-made' version, and a space is left blank in order to stand for the 'not-made' possibilities. Using different and less visually attractive units, Filliou created other works following this protocol, while many other works bear the stamp 'bien fait, mal fait, pas fait' with a tick indicating the state in which the artist chose to leave the work. For example, a stamped 'portrait' of Joseph Beuys (1972) remains obviously 'not made' as it simply consists of a canvas painted white bearing the German artist's name. Stamped as a 'badly made' work, *Spontaneity is Fed by Non Competence* (1969–1970) develops the work's title-concept in a hand-written text disrupted by crossed-out words, corrections and the chaotic superimposition of scrabble letters which needlessly duplicate their hidden counterparts. *Paper Brain for 103 Days* (1972) is a more conceptual piece exemplifying the potentialities of the 'not-made' – in a cardboard box, the viewer can find instructions, stickers, and a demonstration photograph which relate to the idea of sticking a small black dot on one's forehead as a kind of disposable brain to be thrown away at the end of every day. Inspired by the short-lived trend of disposable underwear, this work also invites participants to rid themselves of superfluous ideas in order to 'unlearn' traditional commonplaces, a central notion in Zen thought. Another aspect of Zen which attracted Filliou was the 'idea of sitting quietly and doing nothing' – a belief in the possibilities of the 'not-made' if ever there was.

Bricolage

One of the more obvious formal elements running through Filliou's work in the show is the simple device of interlocking, metal cup hooks which usually serve to join together assembled wooden panels hanging on the wall. In his early *Suspense Poems*, verses were mailed to subscribers one at a time in the form of small irregular wooden rectangles which could be hooked together and suspended to the wall to obtain the complete work. *Permanent Creation Tool Box no.2* (1969) also exploited the potentially endless openness of the hook device: in



this piece we are invited to rummage through a blue metal tool box filled with pieces of wood which can be hooked to each other as we wish. The shape of these hooks would also inspire the name of the workshop run by Filliou and George Brecht between 1965 and 1968 in Villefranche-sur-Mer, near Nice: it was called *La Cédille qui sourit* (*The Smiling Cedilla*).

The 'do-it-yourself' aesthetic of the hook is carried out in other, rather austere, materials such as easily transportable brown cardboard boxes, or pieces of string simply nailed around objects to act as improvised frames. The *Briquolages* (1982) are literal puns on the words *brique* – the bricks of which the works are made – and *bricolage*, a French word which can be translated as 'do-it-yourself' and which was used as a theoretical principle by Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹ No doubt familiar with Lévi-Strauss's discussion of mythical thought as a form of *bricolage*, Filliou stated that the *Briquolages* aimed to 'give wings' to a 'grandiosely down-to-earth material,' thus simultaneously mocking and celebrating the artist-shaman's supposedly 'magical' touch.² The contrast between *bricolage* and technology is evoked in *L'Héritage de Lascaux* (1983), where bricks are connected to electric wires and a kind of antenna, and the series of *Video Games* (1980-1982), imagined archaic forms of electronic entertainment made of cardboard boxes, flat bricks, and rows of wooden cubes bearing tiny pencil drawings.

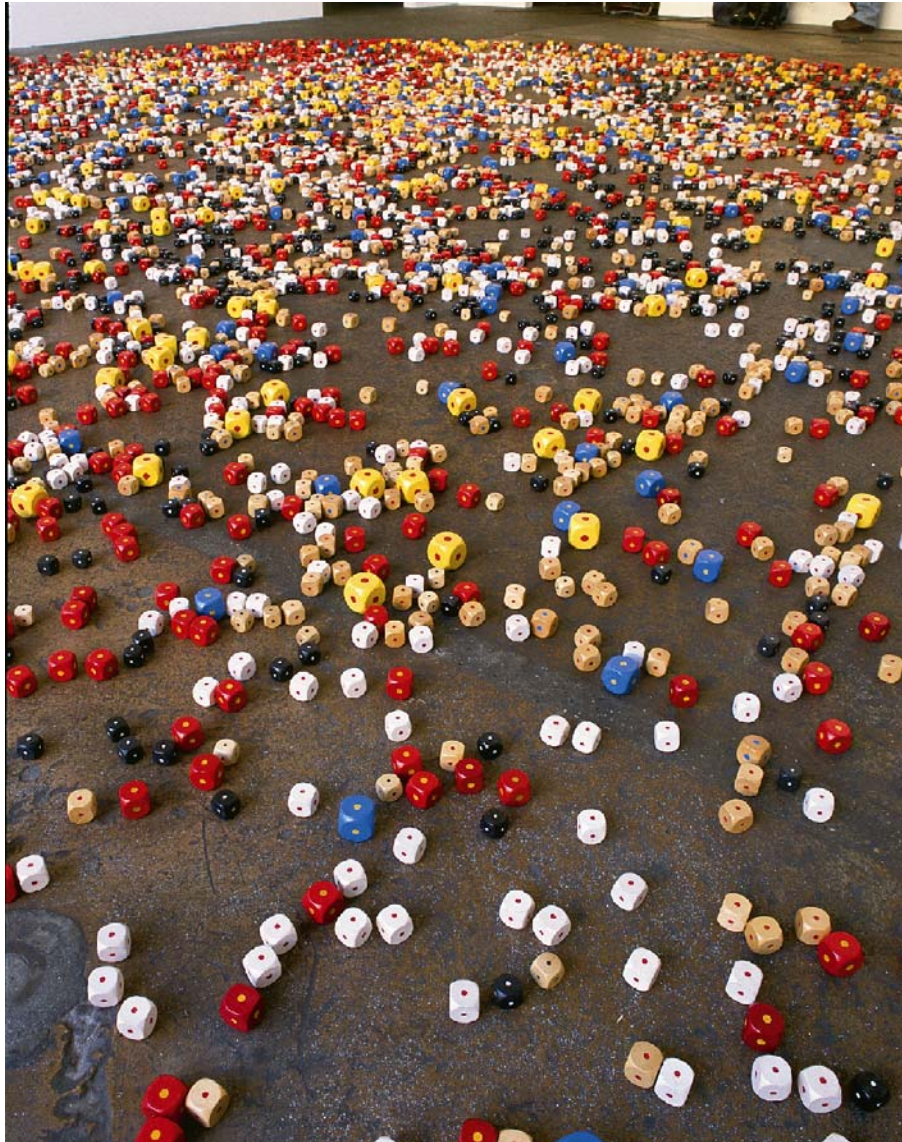
'Genius without Talent'

Filliou's throwaway, unskilled *bricolages* embody his celebration of 'genius' as opposed to 'talent.' As he explained in 1970: 'I simply think that being a man or a woman is being a genius, but that most people forget this,' because, he went on, 'they are too busy exploiting their talents.' Through his 'untalented' works, Filliou wished to 'give people the secret of permanent creation' – a message which lies at the heart of many of his projects.³ At the 1962 Festival of Misfits in London, Filliou allowed viewers to create their own poems by spinning bicycle wheels with three axes pointing to different words. Other works were conceived as collaborations with fellow artists such as Daniel Spoerri, Emmett Williams and George Brecht, while the *Joint Works* were completed variously by a child, rain, sun, or even 'drunkenness.' 'Permanent creation' was the key notion both of the *Cédille qui sourit*, where Brecht and Filliou created games, mail poems, and films, and of the *Poïpoïdrome* conceived in 1963 and executed in different contexts in collaboration with the architect Joaquin Pfeufer. Inspired by a Mali Dogon ritual in which all questions within a specific dialogue are answered with the word 'poïpoï,' the *Poïpoïdrome* created by Filliou and Pfeufer consists in a wooden structure acting



as a site of exchange where adults and children can play, think, read and meet. *Le Territoire de la République Géniale* (*Territory of the Republic of Genius*) was another concept which Filliou used to appeal to viewers' creativity. From the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum piece, *A Joint work of Robert Filliou and the Anonymous Visitors of the Genial Republic* (1971) to the act of driving around with his family in a minibus, each situation sought to create an imaginary territory where research, work and play were closely associated.

Serious Play

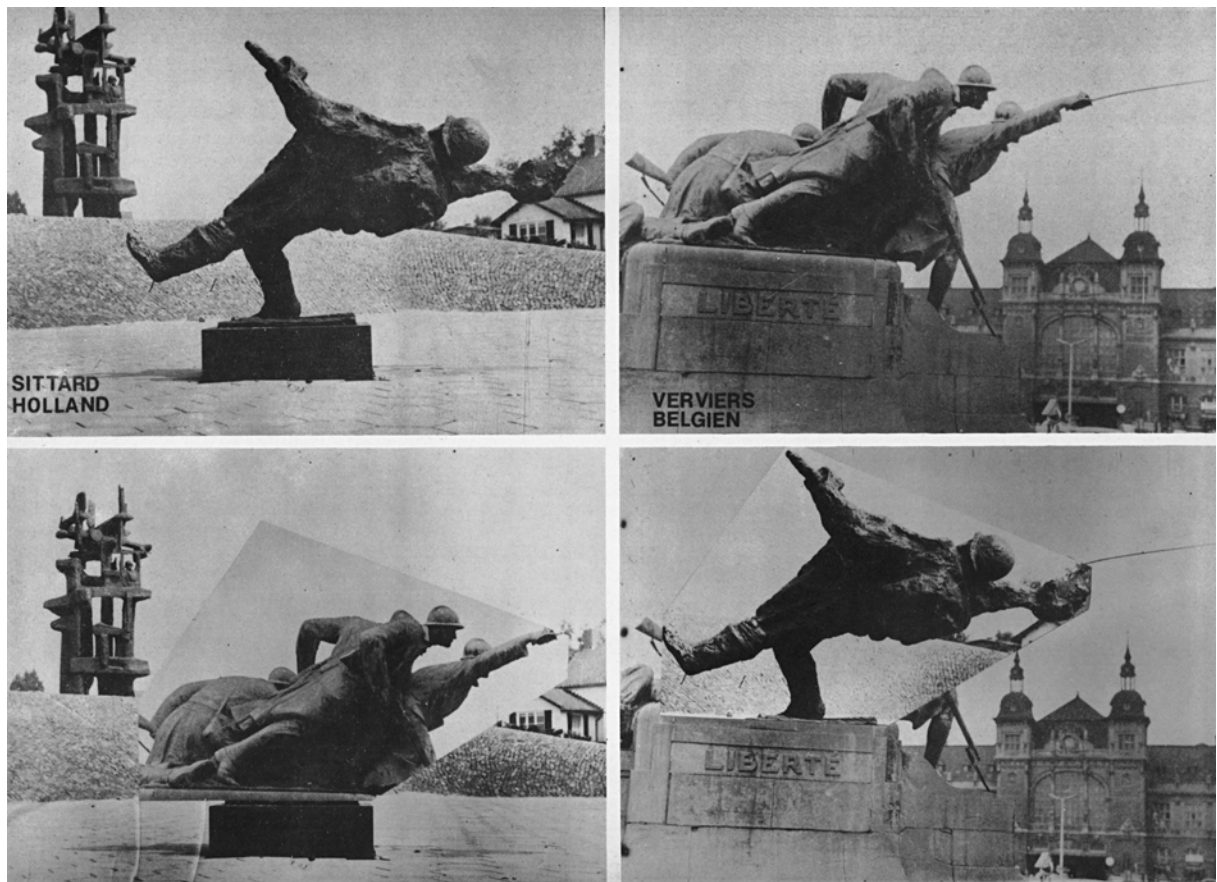


Robert Filliou, *Eins. Un. One.*, 1984, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva. Photograph: Ilmari Kalkkinen, Geneva.



Always looking to children for wisdom, Filliou liked to cite his seven-year-old daughter who, upon being told that her uncle could not play with her because he was working, retorted: 'Well, when I play, I *am* working.'⁴ Play is indeed what Filliou worked on most, actively blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, humour and seriousness. Early poetic works embody comic ideas, as in the charmingly simple *Bouteille de lait rêvant d'être une bouteille de vin* (*Milk Bottle Dreaming of Being a Wine Bottle*) (1961), an empty milk bottle to which is vertically attached an upturned bottle of wine by a piece of wire. Elements from existing games figure prominently in Filliou's later, more spectacular, installations. In one of Filliou's last works, *Eins. Un. One.*(1984), thousands of different-coloured, different-sized dice lie scattered on the floor in an erratic pattern, multiplying, potentially infinitely, the throw of the die which has long fascinated gamblers, physicists, mathematicians, philosophers, and poets, alike. In this piece Filliou succeeded in tricking chance, the laws of probability and fate all in one throw by choosing dice with the same number on each of their sides: the number one. As we gaze at this chaotic landscape and ponder our freedom or inability to load the dice of our lives, or possibly on our place as single individuals within the cosmos, it becomes evident that Filliou conceived play not only as a form of entertainment and a means of questioning 'serious' art but also as a pedagogical and a potentially political tool. Nowhere does this come through more convincingly than in Filliou's proposal that war memorials be exchanged between Germany, Belgium and Holland: announced by a press conference and visualised in the form of collages, this project to promote peace through an apparently childish gimmick seems to offer effective possibilities of symbolic reconciliation.





Robert Filliou, *C O M M E M O R, échange fictif de monuments aux morts entre Sittard (Hollande) et Verviers (Belgique)* [*COMMEMOR, Fictional Exchange of War Memorials between Sittard (Holland) and Verviers (Belgium)*], 1970.

An Expanding Territory

Above all, Filliou was no doubt attracted to play's unique capacity to bridge divides between generations, social classes, and nations. In his desire to reach as wide an audience as possible, Filliou explored alternative means to distribute art and disseminate ideas. Unable to sell his work, Filliou created in 1962 his *Galerie Légitime*, a cap filled with small-scale works which could thus be easily shown and transported. Years later, when he was invited to exhibit at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1978, he chose to construct a version of the *Poïpoïdrome* in the form of an *Hommage aux Dogons et aux Rimbauds* which involved him and Pfeufer travelling to Mali during the show. Inspired by the ethnographic writings of Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, Filliou and Pfeufer were particularly drawn to so-called primitive oral forms of communication, relations between play and ritual, and alternative social constructions of the role of artists.



Alongside experiments such as the *Poïpoïdrome*, the *Territoire de la République Géniale* or the *Eternal Network*, Filliou carried out his social projects through publications and multiples which remain amongst his most significant contributions to contemporary art. Written in 1968 and published two years later, his pedagogical book, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, brought together statements by well-known artists such as Joseph Beuys and John Cage with the ideas of his own children, privileging free and open discussion as a site for sowing revolutionary seeds – a kind of pre-figuration of the prevailing atmosphere of the events of May 1968 in Paris. The hundreds of multiples produced by Filliou usually combined word and image in a variety of media. The delightfully titled *Ample Food for Stupid Thought* (1965) is a meditation game consisting of boxed cards with enigmatic statements and questions such as ‘why did you do this?’, while the card game *Leeds* involves two blindfolded players who must be guided in their moves by the watching audience, thus creating an improvised network based on collaboration and trust. Filliou’s multiples embody his philosophy of art as a playful, philosophical activity which can be performed by everyone; readily and cheaply available, they are conceptual tools rather than finished products. These and other works in this exhibition successfully exemplify Filliou’s ambitious and fruitful project, summarised by the artist in a statement ranking amongst the most challenging definitions of art to this day: ‘Art is what makes life more interesting than art.’⁵

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Robert Filliou *Permanent Playfulness*, 1973, Courtesy Galerie Nelson, Paris. Photograph: Florian Kleinfenn, Paris.

¹ Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*, Paris, 1962.

² 'rendre ses ailes à un matériau aussi grandiosement terre à terre que la brique.' Marianne Filliou archives, cited *Robert Filliou: Génie sans talent*, exhibition guide, 2004, 17.

³ Interview in *Robert Filliou, Commemor*, Aix-la-Chapelle, Neue Galerie, 1970, quoted on the back cover of *Robert Filliou: Génie sans talent*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Musée d'art moderne Lille Métropole, 2004.

⁴ 'et bien moi quand je joue, je travaille.' Marcelline Filliou, in Robert Filliou (ed.), *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, Cologne and New York, 1970, quoted in the exhibition guide, 20.

⁵ Cited in *Robert Filliou: Génie sans talent*, exhibition guide, 4.

