

The Art of Losing Oneself without Getting Lost: Brecht and Filliou at the Palais Idéal

Steven Harris

Abstract

The Fluxus-affiliated artists George Brecht (1926–) and Robert Filliou (1926–1987) lived and worked together for a time in the mid-1960s. Their artistic and intellectual concerns often coincide with surrealist concerns, yet surrealism was never available to them as an aesthetic option in the 1950s and 1960s. This essay explores some of the reasons why this was so, despite an awareness of surrealism implicit in their own artistic strategies. The type of organization represented by the surrealist group is rejected by Brecht and Filliou, in favour of a much looser notion of community encapsulated by their concept of the eternal network/*la fête permanente*.

Unlike André Breton or Guy Debord, neither George Brecht nor Robert Filliou ever made a pilgrimage to Ferdinand Cheval's Palais idéal in the Drôme, either during their residence on the Côte d'Azur from 1965 to 1968, or at any other time. Arguably, the Palais idéal represented the same thing to both Breton and Debord – the popular imagination at work, a non-instrumental thought made visible – and Debord would make his own pilgrimage to this site in 1955, since the Lettrist International existed in an antagonistic though mimetic relationship with surrealism.¹ The way to the realization of poetry led through the interior pathways of the Palais idéal for both Breton and Debord.

For his part, Filliou established what he called the 'mimetic territory' of the Genial Republic in 1971, a sometimes virtual territory where genius was cultivated at the expense of talent, and which was realized on occasion at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, in Filliou's Volkswagen bus, or at his farmhouse in south-central France.² Brecht and Filliou shared a great many ideas and values with the surrealists, yet Filliou, despite his friendship with the surrealist painter Victor Brauner, never referred to surrealism, and Brecht only did so to make his differences with it clear.³ Such shared values include art considered as a means rather than as an end in itself; an anti-formal artistic practice that often utilizes 'poor' materials; a rejection of careerism, professionalism and specialization; a rejection of labour as a positive value, in favour of play; an interest in the creative organization of leisure; an extra-literary notion of poetry as a mode of thought, and thus as a spiritual activity that informs artistic practice; a language-oriented artistic practice resulting in the production of objects, which Filliou, like Breton, calls 'poèmes-objets;' intuitive research as an experimental method



leading to the production of knowledge; and a shared interest in Chinese thought (both Taoist and Zen Buddhist), and in the thought of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier.⁴

Such a catalogue makes clear the many affinities between the surrealists and artists like Brecht and Filliou, although there are a number of important differences between them as well, not least Brecht and Filliou's lack of interest in the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, and their rejection of the organized group as a means to advance their interests. It is the purpose of this paper to explore why surrealism was unavailable to such artists in the 1950s and 1960s, despite their overlapping concerns. It will be my argument that Brecht and Filliou's reluctance to mention surrealism is not an instance of bad faith, or a refusal to acknowledge their intellectual sources, but is, rather, a consequence of surrealism's impossibility in the postwar period, which leads to its virtual invisibility as a source of strategies and ideas.⁵ In part, this invisibility leads to a repetition of certain of its concepts and practices by Brecht and Filliou, in the absence of an understanding of their origins in surrealist art and thought. Even so, a general awareness of surrealism as an outmoded practice is evident in the parodies of surrealist games jointly published by the two artists in *Games at the Cedilla* in 1967, their compendium of scenarios and games invented in Villefranche-sur-mer at their shop called *La Cédille qui sourit*, or more often in the café across the street (Fig. 1).⁶ George Brecht claims the games at the Cedilla were made in a different spirit than surrealist forms of play; they remain poetic, but poetry here does not presuppose unconscious thought.⁷



Game of the Conditional

The first player writes a phrase beginning with "If" Without seeing what the first has written, the second player writes a phrase beginning "then" The two parts are afterward combined.

For example (played by George and Robert)

If clocks were horse-turds, then I would buy a ticket to New York.

If lemons were sweet, the world would end, wouldn't it?

If Robert were me, and I were Jesus Christ, women would be very distressed.

If ocean water were wine, and wine were ocean water, why go to the moon?

If mathematics were the woman I love, then that would be enough.

Fig. 1: George Brecht and Robert Filliou, 'Game of the Conditional,' in *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off*, Something Else Press, New York, 1967, n. p.

While certain of these shared interests, such as that in Zen or Taoism, or in the writings of Charles Fourier, are only taken up by the surrealists from 1945, others – like the creative organization of leisure, or the practice of poetry as a mode of experimental research – were abandoned in the postwar period, with the crisis of conception experienced by the surrealist group, once it could no longer imagine how to achieve the synthesis of action and dream that had motivated its activities in the 1930s.⁸ The untying of the coupled terms of interior and exterior, revolution and poetry, or knowledge and action was implicit once the surrealists renounced their ties to the agent of social revolution, the international communist movement.⁹ If they continued to invoke the resolution of these terms poetically and alchemically, the turn to utopian socialism evident in surrealist thought from Breton's 1944 book *Arcane 17* on is the most explicit sign that the question of a social agent for this revolutionary change had become an open one, and that the very concept of revolution needed to be re-imagined on terms other than and prior to Marxist theory and Communist praxis.



With this untying, the creative organization of leisure in a revolutionary society, which was a demand put by Tristan Tzara in 1931, was no longer on the surrealist table after World War II.¹⁰ Likewise, the notion of poetry as an experimental means of attaining knowledge of the unconscious mind – that is, as a form of research, through which the surrealists theorized a place for their activities beyond art as such, during the period when they were keen to establish an alliance with the Communists – this no longer made sense at a time when they were seeking not to abolish or supersede art, in a ‘poetry made by all,’ but rather to discover a different role for art in unchanged social circumstances, for instance in the kinds of ritual practices in evidence at the postwar exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*.¹¹

In my view, one of the criteria for the relevance of surrealism in the postwar period is the group’s recognition that the avant-garde strategies that it helped invent in the 1920s were no longer viable in the political circumstances of the Cold War, though the clarity of this insight did not lead to a further clarification of what its future role as a group might be. Other groups, from the revolutionary surrealists in 1947–8 to the situationists, tried to refunction this avant-garde model, and this I think is the significance of Debord’s own visit to the Palais idéal in 1955: the Lettrist International wished to continue the avant-garde project it believed the surrealists had abandoned. In each case, this model depended on a relation to the revolutionary agent of the proletariat, whether or not hope was invested in its self-declared representative the Communist Party. The surrealists themselves retreated from this kind of commitment, without indulging in resignation or political indifference; their history of involvement in political issues and causes in the 1950s and 1960s precludes any analysis of this sort.¹²

Yet after 1947, surrealism was largely eclipsed as a movement of any relevance or concern to postwar artists and writers, at the very moment of its historicization, with the histories and accounts of Maurice Nadeau, Anna Balakian, Georges Lemaître, Michel Carrouges, Yvonne Duplessis and others, and at the moment of canonization of a handful of surrealist artists like Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Max Ernst and René Magritte.¹³ As the critic and sometime surrealist Robert Lebel noted in 1953, surrealism was made visible as an artistic and literary phenomenon, that is in conventional terms, at the same time as the surrealist group ceased to exist in the public eye, in spite of its continued existence as a collective entity



that organized exhibitions, published, and was involved in political struggle.¹⁴ Part of the explanation for this eclipse in the postwar period lies in intellectual fashion, which had moved on to other trends, and part of it lies in a turn by many artists and writers from the collective to the individual (a tendency which was particularly evident among those artists who chose the path of gestural abstraction). It is also true that in renouncing an avant-garde strategy, a strategy which claimed to be in advance of the others in both theory and practice, the surrealists relinquished a field that was taken over by others, who exercised less doubt and more conviction. In this reading, then, the criterion for the relevance of surrealism in the postwar period, the group's recognition that an avant-garde strategy was played out in new political circumstances, is also, in part, what consigned it to oblivion.

Thus, Brecht and Filliou receive surrealism chiefly in artistic terms, as an historical movement without direct relevance to their own aims. Their influences, in fact, are different. Brecht became an artist largely through the impact of John Cage, whose class on composition he attended in New York in 1958–59, while working as a research chemist for Johnson & Johnson.¹⁵ As a consequence, his work depends on the Duchampian readymade as reconceived by Cage, and he understands surrealism chiefly through the medium of the 1936 Museum of Modern Art catalogue *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. Brecht refers to this source in a 1957 essay on chance procedures (the MoMA catalogue was one of the few sources on surrealism available in English at that time, but interprets it largely as an artistic movement).¹⁶ Brecht's mentor John Cage had a more direct knowledge of surrealism through his friendships with Duchamp, Max Ernst and several of the abstract expressionist painters, but had turned away from the expression of inner necessity in 1950, in favour of a Zen-influenced notion of an outer-directed attention to nature.¹⁷ Cage, however, is a fundamental source for Brecht and Filliou's own choice of artistic strategies, including those that bring them close to surrealist values, and we will return to some of those ideas in a moment.

There is no evidence that Filliou made even the cursory study of surrealism that Brecht undertook in the 1950s; he was exposed to Zen and Taoist thought while in Japan and Korea in the early 1950s, at the time he was working as an economist on a reconstruction plan for South Korea following the Korean War, but this was before he decided to opt out of a professional career and become an artist. Living in Paris from 1959, he met Daniel Spoerri by



chance that year, and Spoerri introduced him to the future nouveaux réalistes, as well as to a number of artists who would come to constitute Fluxus in and after 1962.¹⁸ Thus Filliou's artistic formation, like Brecht's, was primarily Duchampian and Cagean rather than surrealist, given both the nouveaux réalistes' revaluation of Duchamp's readymade, and Fluxus' debt to the performative element in Cage's procedures.

Consequently, both Brecht and Filliou constructed objects with found or readymade materials, which were often performative in orientation and which are reifications of thought or language. Examples are Brecht's *Three Chair Events*, shown at the *Environments, Situations, Spaces* exhibition organized by the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1961, or his *Clothes Tree* of 1960, both of which return the found or chosen object to its initial use.¹⁹ They each invert Duchamp's strategy of recontextualization by means of Cage's acceptance of and attention to the everyday, and call into question the difference between art and everyday objects from another angle than Duchamp had. *Two Durations* of 1975 is a realization in the form of an Italian flag of an event score from 1961, whose instructions are 'red' and 'green;' the score is thus realized as an object rather than a performance, though it would be language that brought it into being in either case.²⁰ (*Three Chair Events* also exists in the form of a score.)

Filliou's *General Semantics* of 1962 is a series of linked plaques correlating words and objects, in a manner not unlike Magritte's language paintings of the 1920s and 1930s; a series of words are linked to each letter, but the associations of the words or letters to the objects and images collaged onto the plaques are only sometimes evident, and may also suggest less obvious and more poetic affinities.²¹ *General Semantics* is, at the same time, more 'realist' (or more 'nouveau réaliste') than Magritte's language paintings or Breton's poem-objects, in its adaptation of nouveau réaliste procedures to language, which sometimes results in a one-to-one correspondence between word and object, as in the collaging of a die for the word 'dé,' or a yoghurt cup for the word 'yoghurt.' In each case, however, Brecht and Filliou make it clear that their objects, irregardless of whether they are the product of event scores or are themselves a semantic field, are the result of a process of thought made visible, which can in turn lead to other thoughts and possibilities.²²

If, in the argument I am making here, one of the criteria of relevance of the postwar surrealist programme was its recognition of the impossibility of an avant-garde strategy it had



helped invent, for Brecht and Filliou too, the organized group was a thing of the past, on several grounds. One of these was a perceived decline of '-isms,' which had once confidently communicated verities through the writing of manifestos, and advanced them strategically through collective action. Filliou noted in 1973 that, just as it was impossible any longer for one person to comprehend the whole of mathematics, it was impossible today to grasp the whole field of contemporary art, and with incomplete knowledge, who could say who was ahead, and who behind?²³ The notion of an avant-garde was thus obsolete. (Note that Filliou equates art with knowledge here, and still retains a notion of art as research, which informs both his and Brecht's artistic practice.) In his own activity, Filliou replaces the notion of communication with that of dialogue, in for example the central work of his career, the book *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (1970), where pedagogy becomes dialogic and performative, rather than a one-way message from those who know to those who don't.²⁴ Research, in this inverted perspective, becomes an activity of those who don't know rather than those who do, a general way of conducting one's life in a spirit of inquiry rather than a field for specialists. This preference for dialogue over communication, for a conspiracy of equals over a hierarchical organization of knowledge, comes directly from Cage, but it also resembles the arguments for poetry as an activity of research, rather than a means of expression, that were made by the surrealists in the 1930s. Such arguments had, however, disappeared by the 1940s, and were thus unavailable to either Brecht or Filliou.

Poetry is as central a category for Cage, Brecht and Filliou as it is for the surrealists, and if this is so, it is because poetry is understood by all parties to be a non-instrumental mode of thought, one capable of offering a viable alternative to a self-interested instrumental reason used to dominate nature and other human beings. In Brecht and Filliou's idea of research, a poetic mode of thought will be an intuitive means of achieving a knowledge of what one did not know before, though in each case, as in Cage's own experimental procedure, attention is paid more to the world outside than to the dictating machine of the unconscious. Yet only a non-interfering approach to nature or culture is capable of producing new knowledge, and this principle of non-interference is the basis of the attraction to Zen thought by the surrealists after 1950, for it resembles the principle of attention to the dictates of the unconscious that is the foundation of the method of automatic writing.



Both the former economist Filliou and the former research chemist Brecht hold onto research as a value, but it is now turned to poetic ends. Or perhaps this can be put in another way: once the production of useful knowledge is rejected, the notion of ends or goals is itself refused, in favour of poetic or artistic research as a way of life that is continuous and purposeless, with no end in sight. (The purposelessness of this activity is what situates it within notions of modern artistic activity.²⁵) The rejection of goals is a refutation of the avant-garde project, which is organized to achieve the goal of social transformation. If Cage's and Filliou's views and activities can nevertheless be described as utopian (though this is much less true of Brecht, who is uninterested in the social implications of his researches), it is because a new relation to the world, and thus a new way of organizing society, will be achieved through the shift in consciousness that is part and parcel of their experimental method, rather than through any more determinate reorganization of society achieved or sought by a vanguard of those in the know.

This shift away from an avant-garde orientation now believed to be obsolete is partly due to the values held by Cage and Filliou, but it also registers a shift in postwar society described by Branden Joseph, in which the proletariat that had once represented the agent of social change for anarchist and Communist alike, had been integrated into the social structure with the advent of consumer society and the universal extension of credit.²⁶ The moment of this integration coincides exactly with the postwar era, the period in which the surrealists lost confidence not just in the Communist Party as the representative of the international working class, but in Marx's own faith in the inevitability of proletarian revolution and a future classless society. It is at this point that they turn to Fourier and his notions of 'absolute doubt' and 'absolute divergence,' which were themselves products of a time in the early nineteenth century when the future could only be imagined in fantastic terms, rather than brought into being.²⁷ The 1965 surrealist exhibition *L'Écart absolu* (or 'Absolute Divergence') is constituted in part as a critique of consumer society, that same false promise of individual happiness through consumption that disintegrated the promise of proletarian revolution on which the avant-garde strategies of the 1920s and 1930s had been based. Absolute doubt and absolute divergence are maintained as principles at a time when the supersession of existing social relations has become extremely difficult to imagine, or can *only* be imagined. Indeed, the



emphasis on a magic or hermetic art by surrealist artists and writers in the postwar period is a way of countering the market in unchanged social relations (by keeping the public out), as well as situating art on another terrain than that of the marketplace, as ritual. While these notions are not altogether new in surrealist thought, they take on new meaning at a time when one no longer envisages a 'poetry made by all' (which, as a watchword, disappears from surrealist declarations after the 1930s), but seeks a meaningful role for art in a market economy.

The surrealists' turn to Fourier also involved a critique of labour as a positive value, which had been an object of critique from the very beginnings of the movement, and which frequently got it into trouble with Communist militants. This aspect of Fourier's thought is central to Filliou's own approach to art, and this is evident in his research question, 'How to go from Work as Toil to Work as Play,' as well as in his 1970 construction *I Hate Work Which is Not Play* (Fig. 2), which incidentally acknowledges and refutes the nature of the art object as commodity, through its resemblance to the crates found at fruit and vegetable stalls, and through its use of poor materials.²⁸





Fig. 2: Robert Filliou, *I Hate Work Which is Not Play*, 1970, felt pen on wood, 70 x 60 x 5.5 cm. Collection Eric Décelle.

Filliou founds his own Principles of Poetic Economy, which he dedicates to Fourier, on Fourier's critique of the division of labour, and proposes a new theory of value based on the principles of innocence and imagination, which are opposed to self-interest or the cultivation of individual talent. In two related works from 1969, the *Permanent Creation Toolbox* and the *Permanent Creation Toolshed*, innocence and imagination become the tools with which to construct a non-utilitarian worldview through which a society dedicated to work is replaced by a society of play, in which work becomes play.²⁹ To this end, Filliou writes in *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*: 'The point is that art and life should become essentially poetical. More specifically, I would define 'poetic sense' as the appreciation of leisure; and 'poetry' as the creative organization of leisure; and 'poems' as enlargements of the area of freedom.'³⁰ Poetry is defined here as a non-utilitarian way of life, rather than the production of a literary category, and Filliou is using this understanding of poetry, which he



shares with Cage and the surrealists, to rethink a society based upon the division of labour in terms of leisure, or the refusal of work.

La Cédille qui sourit, the shop that Brecht and Filliou established in Villefranche-sur-mer between 1965 and 1968, is a model of work as play, of the creative organization of leisure, at the same time as it is a parody of the market relations of art. The shop sold Fluxus multiples as well as those produced by Daniel Spoerri's Editions MAT, and whatever else artists cared to make on consignment, but it was only open on request. The artists spent the greater part of their time inventing games and scenarios in the café across the street (including games, as we've seen, that bear a remarkable resemblance to surrealist games), which were published by Something Else Press in 1967 as *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off*. Games invented in the café, which is an already-existing site of leisure, become the model for leisure as a way of life, without any other end or goal.



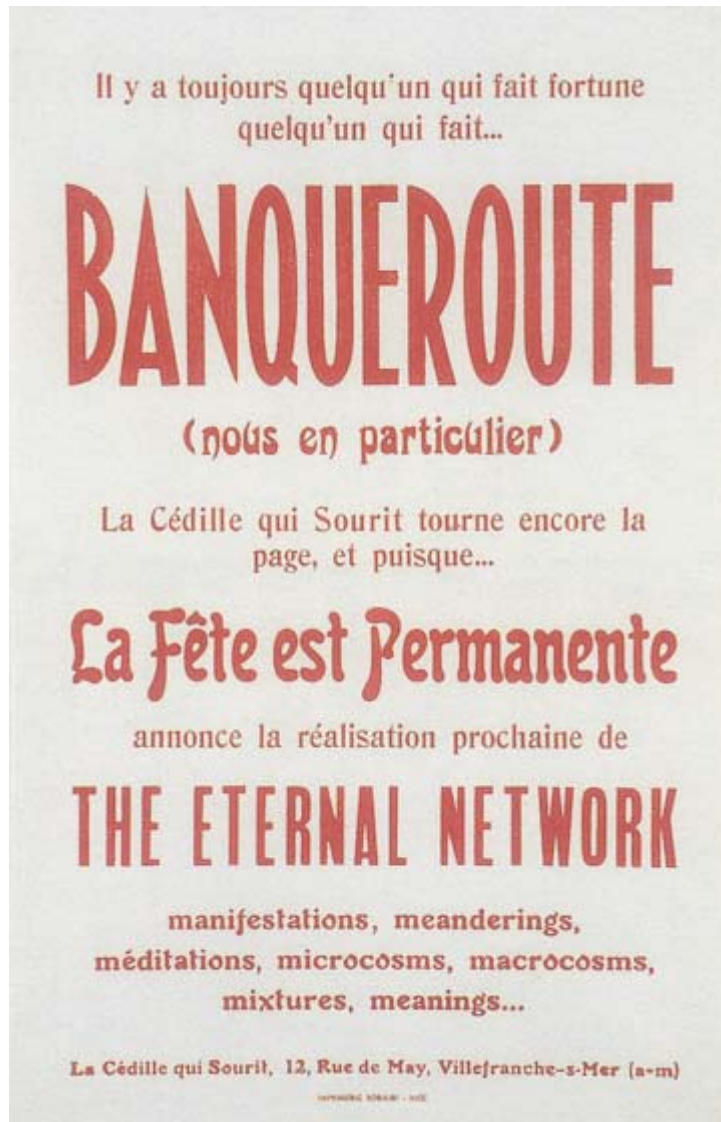


Fig. 3: George Brecht and Robert Filliou, poster, March 1968, dimensions unknown.

After three years of continuous non-activity, *La Cédille* was liquidated when the artists could no longer afford to pay the rent. They registered this event with the production of a poster, which declared both their bankruptcy, and the establishment of what they called The Eternal Network (Fig. 3). This was translated into French as 'La Fête permanente,' a non-equivalent term. While the French term is closely related to the shift from work to play, the English one announces the substitution of the Eternal Network for the concept of the historical avant-garde, which is believed to be obsolete. A much looser network of like-minded artists, based on the model of Fluxus (with which both Brecht and Filliou were associated), is given as a more valid alternative to the tightly-organized avant-garde, which is no longer



sustainable given the dispersal of knowledge and power, and the disarming of the traditional revolutionary agent due to its integration. The cooperation of an international community of artists engaged in non-utilitarian activities is already a social fact, and can provide the basis for a new way of life conceived and practiced as permanent creation, rather than as exploitation. Artistic activity need not be centred in one place, but in a society in which contact between dispersed communities was no longer a problem, and where art was conceived more as research than as the production of objects for a market, it could occur anywhere, and assume the form of a network. If art were reconceived as poetry, which was a form of non-utilitarian research, it could become a way of life, without the necessity for violent revolution. And because Filliou no longer thought in the same political terms that had motivated the historical avant-gardes, he began to research biology as a form of permanent creation, and conceived of the social shift from work to play as a five billion year plan, rather than something practically realizable in his own time.³¹ In this sense, his thinking remained utopian; the Eternal Network was a concept taken up and in this way realized by correspondence artists, and by a number of Canadian collectives from General Idea in Toronto to the Western Front in Vancouver, but it was understood to be an alternative that would only become available to society at large with a general shift in consciousness from self-interest to imagination, attention and curiosity.³²

Art was then, for Brecht and Filliou, a form of research without end, pursued by those who had refused specialization. It is worth noting, in this regard, that Filliou had been the co-author of the UN plan for the reconstruction of South Korea following the Korean War, and that Brecht was the inventor of the tampon for Johnson & Johnson. Each of them turned away from this kind of useful, purposeful work, in 1954 and 1965 respectively, in favour of an intuitive approach to research as a purposeless way of life, without specific goals. Paradoxically – and I use this term ‘paradox’ deliberately, in relation to the function of paradox in Zen Buddhism, and to Brecht’s exploration of the subject in a 1975 book, *Vicious Circles and Infinity* – there is a coordination of means and ends in Cage’s, Brecht’s or Filliou’s approach to art that is also found in surrealism, but that is absent in that part of twentieth-century art that focuses on art as an end in itself.³³ The means is a poetic mode of engagement with the world through language, the end the bringing into being of a world



without self-interested ends, whether this be through an investigation of unconscious thought, or an attention to the world as it is. It is, in Filliou's words, 'the art of losing oneself without getting lost.'³⁴

This essay was first given as a paper at *Surrealism Laid Bare, Even*, the third international symposium on surrealism held at West Dean College in Chichester in May 2003. I thank the organizers for inviting me to speak, and for prompting these reflections.

¹ A photograph of Breton at the Palais idéal was included in his *Les Vases communicants* in 1932; see Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II, Paris, 1992, 204. Snapshots of Debord's visit to the Palais idéal, which was made in the company of fellow lettrists Michèle Bernstein and Jacques Fillon, can be found in the situationist archive at the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum in Silkeborg, Denmark.

² On the Genial Republic, see *The Eternal Network Presents Robert Filliou* [sic], Sprengel-Museum, Hannover / Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris / Kunsthalle, Bern, 1984, 142. Filliou discussed the Genial Republic in an interview with Jean-Pierre van Tieghem, first published in *Clés* (Brussels), 17, January 1972 and reprinted in *Robert Filliou* [sic], Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1991, 72-8. (Note: Filliou began spelling his name with three 'l's in 1981.)

³ Filliou dedicated his play *L'Anniversaire d'une mouette*, written in 1958, to Brauner's memory when it was published in *Aa Revue* (Liège), 25–26, in 1971. (Brauner had died in 1966.) I would like to thank Sharla Sava for bringing Filliou's friendship with Brauner to my attention, and more generally for introducing me to Filliou's work and thought. Incidentally, Filliou does once refer to Ferdinand Cheval, the constructor of the Palais idéal, as a popular artist, but never to my knowledge to surrealism itself. See 'Robert Filliou in Conversation with Allan Kaprow', *Vanguard* (Vancouver), 6: 9, December 1977–January 1978, 20.

⁴ Filliou uses the term 'poèmes-objets' in a letter to Richard Tialans (18 February 1966), which is reproduced in Tialans' *Aa Revue*, 169-70, 2 December 1987, unpaginated.

⁵ These are the 'Années maudites' described by Jean Schuster in his essay of the same name for *André Breton: La Beauté convulsive*, Musée national d'art moderne / Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1991, 398-400, and by José Pierre in his introduction to *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives, 1940-1969*, vol. 2, Paris, 1982 (see especially the section entitled 'La Traversée du désert', xx-xxii).

⁶ George Brecht and Robert Filliou, *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off*, New York, 1967.

⁷ When asked by Henry Martin in a 1967 interview whether his own procedures were related to surrealist ones, to the extent that they were unpremeditated, Brecht replied:

Yes, I suppose you could say that, but I prefer to think that it's a natural process that takes place. Many of what I accept as natural processes are simply a part of all the things that happen to me and of no special importance – dreams, accidental occurrences, etc. – were, I think, seen differently in surrealism. And I think that surrealist work *looks* very different from mine. When you see the book that The Something Else Press is bringing out on the *Cédille Qui Sourit*, you'll see some experiments that Robert Filliou and I have done using the technique of the *cadavre exquis*, but you'll also see that the spirit is very different from the surrealists' experiments along the same line,



and I think that the spirit is important. As far as the *making* of my objects is concerned, it's not, for example, like an experiment in having a blank mind scribbling or writing on a piece of paper more or less in a state of trance. I'm attentive to what's happening all the time; I'm aware of the objects that I'm using and of the words that come to mind. I put them together ... carefully ... whatever that means. I think of what I do as the taking place of a natural process, and the objects that I work with come to me in a natural way. Once they've been assembled, it gives me the possibility of discovering relationships, meanings, associations.

'An Interview with George Brecht by Henry Martin' (1967), in Henry Martin, *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, Milan, 1978, 75. The procedures are similar, which explains in part the explicit reference to surrealist games in *Games at the Cedilla*. However, the intentions differ, and here intentions are important. Not only do surrealist games presuppose the unconscious as the source of the imagination, and of unpremeditated combinations of imagery such as those found in automatic writing or surrealist objects, but the images produced exercise a critical function in that they are a rupture with the given, which estranges the source materials from their initial function. While both surrealist games and those invented or reinvented by Brecht and Filliou are models for a generalized and non-professional creative activity, which anyone can practice, Brecht and Filliou see theirs as the unfolding of a natural process, rather than a critical and disjunctive one. It is not a question of a rupture with the given, understood as culture, but of an acceptance of the given, understood as nature – just as it is with Brecht's mentor John Cage. For surrealist players, it is imperative that one's questions and responses be unpremeditated, for this is the condition of their poetic value. Brecht and Filliou do not depend upon the psychoanalytic model of mental activity, and the questions and responses given in their own versions of surrealist games are arguably weaker than the ones found in the originals, because more conscious – although there are, of course, no objective criteria for this kind of evaluation.

⁸ For a discussion of the prewar period, see my *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*, Cambridge, 2004. Breton began reading Fourier seriously in 1945, and a reference to Fourier begins the preface Breton wrote in February 1945 for an exhibition of the work of Arshile Gorky at the Julien Levy's gallery in New York. It is collected in Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, Paris, 1965, 199-201. There are numerous other references to Fourier in the 1940s and 1950s, and Breton published his long poem *Ode à Charles Fourier* in 1947; Fourier's ideas also provided the conceptual basis for the 1965 surrealist exhibition *L'Écart absolu*. Zen Buddhism is mentioned in passing in José M. Valverde's interview with Breton, first published in the *Correo Literario* (Madrid) in 1950 and reprinted in Breton's 1952 book of *Entretiens (1913-1952)*, Paris, 1969, 287-92. D.T. Suzuki's *Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*, which Breton had just read in translation, is discussed in an open letter to Picabia which served (along with six letters by other writers) as the catalogue text for an exhibition of work by Francis Picabia at the Galerie Colette Allendy in Paris in December 1952. For this text, see Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, 224-5. Other references to Zen in Breton's art criticism in the 1950s include 'L'Épée dans les nuages', his preface for an exhibition of Jean Degottex's paintings at L'Étoile scellée in Paris in February 1955 (reprinted in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, 341-3), and his 1957 preface to an exhibition of paintings by Yahne Le Toumelin (in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, 251-3). An essay by the third-century Taoist scholar, Wang Bi, is included in the *Almanach surréaliste du demi-siècle*, published as a special issue of *La Nef* in 1950. This is only the second text in the almanac, immediately following Breton and Péret's 'Calendrier Tour du monde des inventions tolérables'.

⁹ This break was consummated with the publication in August 1935 of the surrealist tract 'Du temps que les surréalistes avaient raison', which was extremely critical of the Stalinist régime in the Soviet Union. It was reprinted later that year in *Position politique du surréalisme*.

¹⁰ Tristan Tzara, 'Essai sur la situation de la poésie', *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, no. 4, December 1931, 23.



¹¹ In his 'Projet initial', the invitation to participants sent out by André Breton and included in the exhibition catalogue, the author described the exhibition as a series of stages in an initiation process, as one passed through various rooms and up a staircase. The journey culminated in a room with twelve altars dedicated to various imaginary beings, and these beings were related, in turn, to the zodiac. The exhibition as a whole, and the altars in particular, were offered as ways to reconceptualize the role of art in contemporary society, and as concrete examples of ways in which to elaborate a new mythology. Breton, 'Projet initial', *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, Paris, 1947, 135-8. A brief description and several pages of photos of the exhibition can be found in Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement* (1997), trans. Alison Anderson, Chicago, 2002, 466-72. A more extensive discussion of the exhibition can be found in Clio Mitchell, 'Secrets de l'art magique surréaliste': *Magic and the Myth of the Artist-Magician in Surrealist Aesthetic Theory and Practice*, Ph.D. thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1994.

¹² For a history of surrealism's political involvements before and after World War II, see Carole Reynaud Paligot, *Parcours politique des surréalistes 1919-1969*, Paris, 1995. For the surrealists' public pronouncements in the postwar period, see José Pierre, ed., *Tracts surréalistes*, vol. 2.

¹³ Max Ernst, Jean Arp and Joan Miró won the grand prizes for painting, sculpture and graphic arts, respectively, at the 1954 Venice Biennale, thus signifying the acceptance and recuperation of a few surrealist masters into modern art. Max Ernst, who was still loosely associated with the surrealist group, was expelled in 1955 for accepting the prize, though the other two artists were too far outside of the orbit of surrealism by this time to warrant the same treatment. (On Ernst's expulsion, see the tract 'À son gré' in Pierre, *Tracts surréalistes*, vol. 2, 135-6 and 365-7.) René Magritte began to achieve commercial success after 1950 through his New York dealer Alexandre Iolas, which caused a break with his erstwhile comrades in the Belgian group.

¹⁴ Robert Lebel, 'Le surréalisme en 1953', *Premier bilan de l'art actuel 1937-1953, Le Soleil Noir-Positions*, 3-4, 1953, 95.

¹⁵ The most comprehensive treatment of Brecht remains Martin's *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, (see note 7).

¹⁶ George Brecht, 'Chance Imagery' (1957), first published by Something Else Press in 1966, and reprinted in Martin, *An Introduction*, 140-8. The references to the MoMA catalogue are found in notes 4 and 7, p. 148.

¹⁷ This shift is signaled by Cage's text 'Lecture on Nothing', delivered in 1950 but not published until 1959, and reprinted in his book *Silence*, Middletown, CT, 1961, 109-26. For discussions of Cage's earlier views and practice, see the essays in David W. Patterson, ed., *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950*, New York, 2002.

¹⁸ Spoerri describes his first encounter with Filliou in the 1995 introduction to his *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, written in collaboration with Filliou and first published in 1962. Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, London, 1995, 20.

¹⁹ For reproductions of these works, see the well-known photograph of the opening of *Environments, Situations, Spaces* by Robert McElroy, reproduced in Joan Marter, ed., *Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963*, The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ / Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1999, 79 (and a photograph of another one of the 'chair events' on the preceding page); and Martin, *An Introduction*, 150.

²⁰ For a reproduction of this work, see Martin, *An Introduction*, 40. Brecht's event scores were first produced in a boxed edition by George Maciunas in 1963 as *Water Yam*, and in several versions since.



²¹ For a reproduction of this work, see the 1991 Pompidou catalogue *Robert Filliou*, 146. Each of the 26 panels of Filliou's assemblage presents five objects in association with five words that begin with one of the letters of the alphabet. Not only is the correspondence of word and object made arbitrary here, as it is in Magritte's paintings, but with a few exceptions it is unclear which of the five objects on each panel relates to which word. The field of possible relations between words and objects is thus enlarged. This semantic ambiguity stimulates an associative activity of a poetic nature precisely because a one-to-one relation of word to object is impossible to achieve, and this, I take it, is the significance of Filliou's title: the relation between signifier and signified is released from precise determinations even within a field that remains that of language (as this is signified by the alphabet that is the framing device for the work). Magritte's illustrative approach, which treats the arbitrary relation of word and image as an 'object lesson' such as one would find in a child's schoolbook, and Filliou's assemblage, itself constructed to resemble an elementary school lesson, are both explicitly anti-formal strategies derived from Belgian surrealism and nouveau réalisme, respectively, and each is opposed to the professional formalisms of their day. For a good discussion of this work, and of Filliou in general, see Sharla Sava, 'The Filliou Tapes – from Political to Poetical Economy (caught in the word storm of May)', *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1995, 16-49 (the discussion of *General Semantics* is found on p. 42).

²² Since writing these pages, it has come to my attention that two of Magritte's *Clef des songes* paintings, including the 1927 version in the Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst in Munich and the 1935 version owned by Jasper Johns, also employ a one-to-one correspondence of word and image in the lower right quadrant of the painting—the same location, incidentally, where Filliou places his. Reproductions of the two paintings are found in David Sylvester, ed., *René Magritte: Catalogue raisonné*, vol. I, Houston / Antwerp, 1992, 239 (cat. 172), and in vol. II, 1993, 199 (cat. 370), respectively.

²³ Robert Filliou, 'Research on the Eternal Network' (1973), in *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy*, 8.

²⁴ Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, Köln, 1970.

²⁵ On the purposelessness of modern art, see the discussion of the autonomy of art in Kant and Schiller's aesthetics in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, 1984, 41-6. In 'The Future of Music' (1974), Cage would write: 'The usefulness of the useless is good news for artists. For art serves no material purpose.' Cage, 'The Future of Music', in *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*, Middletown, CT, 1979, 187.

²⁶ Branden W. Joseph, 'John Cage and the Architecture of Silence', *October*, 81, Summer 1997, 103.

²⁷ Fourier defines 'absolute doubt' and 'absolute divergence' in his *Theory of the Four Movements* (1808), ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson, trans. Ian Patterson, Cambridge, 1996, 7-9. (Note that 'l'écart absolu' is rendered as 'absolute separation' in this translation.)

²⁸ This research question is found in 'The Propositions and Principles of Robert Filliou' (1977), reprinted in *Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy*, 86. This is the transcript of a video, *Porta Filliou*, made with Clive Robertson and Marcella Bienvenue at Arton's in Calgary, Canada.

²⁹ For reproductions of these works, see *The Eternal Network Presents*, 164 and 47, respectively.

³⁰ Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, 23.

³¹ The turn to nature is exemplified by his projects 'Research on Pre-Biology' of 1973 and 'Research on the Origin' of 1974, presented at the Galerie Multhipla in Milan and the



Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, respectively, and discussed in 'The Propositions and Principles of Robert Filliou', 82-5; on the five billion year plan, see 'Robert Filliou talks about the integration of "dharma" into his work as an artist' (a 1982 interview with Louwrien Wijers), in *The Eternal Network Presents*, 194.

³² Filliou was in Canada in July 1973, October–November 1977, September–November 1979, and November–December 1980, working at the artist-run centres Art Metropole (Toronto), the Western Front (Vancouver), Arton's (Calgary), and Véhicule (Montreal). The impact of Filliou's visits to Canada is indicated by the titles of *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch, Calgary, 1995, and *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace, Vancouver, 1993. ('Whispered Art History' is a title of a poem Filliou recorded in 1963, which was reprinted in *Teaching and Learning*, 59-64.)

³³ Patrick Hughes and George Brecht, *Vicious Circles and Infinity: A Panoply of Paradoxes*, Garden City, NY, 1975.

³⁴ Filliou, *Teaching and Learning*, 24.

Steven Harris is assistant professor in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. He received his Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in 1997, and was a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Essex from 1999 to 2001. He has published in *Art History* and the *Oxford Art Journal*, and his book *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche* appeared earlier this year from Cambridge University Press

