

The Universal Beginner

At the end of 70s I was completely, totally, deeply and absolutely involved with networking. I have been co-ordinating the operations of Neoist Conspiracy from my bathroom size office (Neoist Research Center) at Vehicule Art, in Montreal. Through mail-art I have been in touch with all the uncounted illegal millions who joined the Eternal Network. My mission has been to convert everyone into Neoists. I mention this only to illustrate my feverish activity and social situation of the time when I have met Robert Filliou in Montreal.

His arrival seemed to be almost like a divine arrangement. I'm still firmly convinced that he has been sent to Montreal by the spiritual forces of the 14 Secret Masters of the World (a deeply secret fictitious organization infiltrating the entangled webs of alternative communication networks).

In reality, he was just passing through and has been invited by the University of Quebec (UQAM) to lecture about his work and projects. I saw an obscure looking flyer and I went to meet him. Besides the organizer Rose-Marie Arbour and a few people of the faculty of arts and communication I was the only one representing the larger public of local interest. After the lecture I introduced myself to Filliou and invited him to visit us at Vehicule Art.

At the end of 70s and up until its unfortunate "assasination" in 1983 Vehicule Art has been the center of new artistic experimentation. Besides having a gallery space for exhibitions, installations and performances, Vehicule also has been functioning as a video production center for artists. The video production facilities included a half inch reel-to-reel editing suit, a b/w studio camera, a couple of rarely functioning portapacs, and some broken light bulbs. With this less than low budget equipment Vehicule has been the most important, internationally recognized, driving force of video art in Montreal.

At his first visit Robert immediately expressed interest in working at Vehicule on some video projects. From the very beginning it was apparent that he was not a skilled video maker and had no knowledge about the technical sides of video production. And through the years, in spite of his continuous experimentation with the medium, his use of video has always remained very amateurish. And that was one of his greatest qualities.

To be an amateur for Robert Filliou meant to be a true artist. To get away from formal obligations and reject the statue of the professional has one of his life purposes. He wanted to be a universal beginner for ever. He produced his tapes without rehearsing, without caring about the lights, without much effort to have unique camera angles or movements, without giving time to the "actors" to learn their roles. The camera was there to make an idea available for communication at the lowest possible cost. Useless work had to be eliminated, time and energy had to be saved. There were only first takes at Filliou productions. He refused to repeat the same thing twice and even if there were so

called "mistakes" and "errors" he was happy with the result. Working with him meant full time amusement.

And this attitude has been the greatest encouragement for me.

My self-confidence has been increased by Robert's unwritten working methods. His presence was enough to convince me that I was on the right track with my Neoist insurrection. He introduced me to fluxus members, among them Ben Vautier, Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams... In those years of constant struggle with the narrow-minded officialdom of the institutional art world I haven't receive much encouragement from the Montreal art community. Locally I have been isolated and a constant target of punitive criticism. Only with people like Robert Filliou on my side I could survive.

The following short conversation with Robert based on notes I have taken after a meeting with him in a bar, in Montreal, sometime in 1979.

Robert Filliou: Let's have another beer.

Monty Cantsin: OK. When do you have to leave for New York?

RF: After tomorrow.

MC: Are you going to do something there?

RF: I'm not sure what I'm going to do. Perhaps meet some my friends. Go to some restaurants. People are too active in New York. They always have to do something, and they always have to show that they are always doing something. And they think that New York is the place where you have to do something. That's a problem. I think New York is the best place to do nothing. You can just be there and walk in the streets. You get all the information by doing nothing anyway and you do the most by simply being there. But I should take some document of your work and show it to Jean Dupuy. You have to get in touch with Jean. He works there with a group of young people and they would be a very good contact for you. You have to call him next time you are in New York.

MC: Yeah. I might go down next month. I dont know. I have no money at all.

RF: They have a big loft, you can probably stay there.

MC: I usually stay at Squat Theater.

RF: I think Gregor Davidov* was going to do some work with Squat*, but he doesn't have any papers and can't leave Europe. You and Gregor are very similar. You should get together Monty. I'll probably see him when I get back to Europe. He looks amazing with his fire red hair and russian military uniform.

MC: Great. Tell him that I'm still alive. We have never met.

RF: That's interesting because you do the same thing in some way. I'll tell him to get in touch with you.

MC: Are you a member of the Party?

RF: I don't know. They probably think I am and that's why they wanted me on their record. I will tell them to send you a copy. It's a great record. If I see him I'll certainly mention that we met. But I won't be in Paris for very long. I'll stay in Germany for a few months.

MC: Do you know Peter Below*?

RF: Hmm...

MC: He lives in Wurzburg. I never met him, I know him only from mail-art. He wants to organize a neoist apartment festival there. Maybe next year. I haven't been in Europe for years.

RF: You should visit us as well. You should let me know ahead when you come.

MC: Would you sign your name here?

RF: What is this? Is this your passport?

MC: It's a travel document for people without a country. Homeless passport. Look, John Cage signed it a year ago. And here are the signatures of Cavellini and Andy Warhol. I would like to have your signature as well. These are my visas.

RF: Well, I'm not sure if it's good for you if I sign it. It's a legal document

MC: Yes. It's very good. I'm an illegal alien.

We laughed and Robert signed it. That travel document was stolen from me in New York soon afterwards.

*Gregor Davidov: Formerly Gergely Molnar, writer and punk rock singer from Budapest, Gregor Davidov left Hungary in 1979 and lived in Paris at the time of my meeting with Filliou. He later changed his name to SPIEL! and became leader and self-declared

prophet of the OSP (Overnational Socialist Party). He immigrated to Canada in 1980, lived in Toronto and moved to Montreal in 1984.

*Squat Theater: Hungarian origin neo-avantgarde theater group, formerly known as Kassak Theater. They left Hungary in 1976 and by 1980 they became one of the sensational attractions of the New York art theater scene.

*Peter Below: Mail artist and painter in Wurzburg, Germany, Below joined Neoism among the firsts in 1980. The Neoist Network's First European Training Camp took place in his tiny summer house near Wurzburg, in 1982.