

Two Reports from the Field

1. *Modern Arts*

As a new generation of critics cringes at the state of the Arts during these Modern Times, another delights in the cringing as it gleefully disseminates the manifestations of its dreams. On the sidelines, many watch what they presume to be yet another avatar of the Eternal Return of that basic conflict between youth and age, between the has-beens and would-bes. I humbly submit a more radical explanation for the unique state of Culture in our time. My position allows me the unlikely luxury of both condemning the bulk of "Modern Art" as the egregious accumulation of bad taste that it is, and to laud its practitioners (and, as I will explain, its non-practitioners) as the unrecognized geniuses they really are. Here it is then: I believe the abysmal level of modern artistic achievement is the culmination of a thousand years and a year of meticulous thought, and represents a profound victory over an apparently unrelated centuries-old philosophical dilemma: that of Free Will versus Determinism. I will attempt to relate the train of thought that has taken me to this most unexpected station.

Devotees of philosophy likely know something about Aharon Lowenthal. A brief review for the lay: Lowenthal was undoubtedly the most promising young philosopher of the early twentieth century. He first garnered attention as a graduate student at Columbia University where his critiques prompted two professors to do major rewriting of their then current works. Ivy-League legend has it that Lowenthal was so sharp that professors began dreading the presence of his critical acumen in their classes. They offered him an entirely independent course of study, which he accepted, apparently without hesitation. It seems the twenty-seven year-old scholar was entertaining offers for professorships all around the world two years into his course of study. In short, Lowenthal was a prodigy. Strangely enough, though, just before

publishing his thesis he dropped completely out of sight. The much anticipated work was an utter flop, and after all the hyperbole surrounding the book, Columbia's public relations office had to work overtime to downplay the scandal. For a short time Lowenthal's disappearance stirred up considerable interest, even in the popular press, but inevitably, he devolved into (at best) an Ivy-League anecdote.

To be sure, though, the work was stunning in its own way. It contains remarkable recapitulations of most of the major Determinist-Anti-Determinist squabbles throughout time, nimbly leaping between arguments by such revered thinkers as Campbell, Hume, Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Kierkegaard and Mill, to name a few. The problem was that Lowenthal's own argument never materialized. Halfway through the book, just as he begins to formulate a position, the text suddenly ends. The work concludes abruptly with the following enigmatic (and perhaps, arrogant) lines: "I have devoured, digested, and purged each of these postulations. I could offer a final, irrefutable conjecture, but such would be my passion. I will never write again."¹

As it turned out, he never did write again. Lowenthal remained, for all intents and purposes, invisible. This us until 1945, when a short article on him appeared in *The Debuke Courier*. It seems that a *Courier* reporter, Adam Joseph, who also happened to have been a former undergraduate Philosophy major at Columbia, came across the name "Aharon Lowenthal" while working on a story about two Champion Chick-Sexers. On a whim, Joseph called on the man, and, sure enough, it was the former philosophical phenom. Lowenthal acknowledged himself to the reporter, but would not discuss his mysterious exit from the academy. It seems he spent all those years following his disappearance from Columbia doing nothing but running a small chicken farm. Looking around at the shabby state of Lowenthal's property, Joseph asked if he had come upon hard times. Lowenthal responded, with a wry smile, that he had always been a horrid farmer and that he had found "no success at all in the venture."² The small article did stir up some curiosity in several Humanities departments, and it was reprinted in a number of journals. Unfortunately, though, Lowenthal died of colon cancer before much more could be learned about his solitary life. A

¹ Aharon Lowenthal. *Passion and Free Will*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955, 111.

² Adam Joseph. "What Ever Happened To...?" *The Debuke Courier*, May 11, 1970, Sec. C, 4.

search of his meager, dilapidated farm yielded no hidden philosophical tracts, no literary gems. Again, Lowenthal faded from interest.

He likely would have remained this way for good if not for the fact that I had re-encountered the above article while going through my files only a few days before glancing at a new “unexpurgated” edition of the diaries of Francis Picabia. In the diaries, I encountered the following, previously excluded entry concerning Marcel Duchamp, that pioneer of “Modern Art,” dated November 14, 1915:

Duchamp is greatly provoked, indeed, he is another man all together. He is distraught about a young, promising painter friend of his who recently (without warning) shoved aside his pallet in order to become a handyman, or a plumber, or something of the sort. Marcel told me the young man had been ruined by some disgraced academic from Columbia he met in a cafe somewhere. Oddly, what perturbs him to no end is that, apparently, according to him, this friend would be hard pressed to drive a nail through a board with a hammer and a full set of directions. Marcel told me he was planning on tracking down this University ‘scoundrel’ himself and giving him a piece or two of his mind. Nonsense, entirely. He does go on, though, in the most amusing way.³

Suddenly, as these lines passed under my gaze, a veil was torn from my eyes. At once, I experienced the sense of a thousand disassociated thoughts coming together in a rush, not unlike the scattered shards of a broken vase played on a film in reverse. Multitudinous events, theretofore scattered and inexplicable, joined hands and stepped out of the shadowy alleys in which they lurked into the glaring exposure of the light.

To get on with it: When the above mentioned Marcel Duchamp, as R. Mutt, sent a urinal under the name *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists’ exhibition in Paris in 1917, he supposedly launched, for all time, “Dadaism” and perhaps “Modern Art” as we know it. Let it be known here and now, he was not “breaking down the artificial barriers between Art and ‘Not-Art,’”⁴ nor was he “expressing profound disillusionment with the failure of the Rationalist tradition,”⁵ nor was

³ *The Complete and Unexpurgated Diaries of Francis Picabia*. Ed Laibe J. Rossner. New York: Dutton & Grunlap, Inc., 1994.

⁴ Paul Sitton-Hayes. *Art, Not-Art, & Anti-Art*. Sydney: Koala House, 1991, 10.

⁵ Pierre Menard. *Art and the Death of Death*. Buenos Aires: Circular Publishing, Inc., 1969, 21.

he, despite the connection, the “reincarnation of that infamous Greek cynic, Diogenes.”⁶ He was, in fact, expressing his understanding of the insight achieved by Aharon Lowenthal and his own young painter friend. Duchamp was making a semi-clever gesture to them both. It was Picabia’s unexpurgated words to the effect that Duchamp’s friend was incompetent as a carpenter that clinched it for me.

You see, Lowenthal realized that those who had considered the conundrum of Free Will had utterly missed the boat. He understood, half-way through his book, that if any law of determinism exists, it is deployed through *passion*. For any philosopher, novelist, poet, artist, (or person for that matter) to be led by her passion is utterly to embrace the laws of Determinism. Simply put, to do what one desires is to do as one is compelled. Therefore, Lowenthal concluded, that since it was his great passion to resolve, once and for all, the debate over Free Will, he would have to *not* do precisely that. His contribution to the debate was the offering of a second rate (or, unfinished) book on the subject. A truly daring act of genius, without any doubt.

Duchamp’s urinal on the wall at the Paris exhibition transmitted this insight to a world ready to receive it. By now it is certainly clear to the reader: all artists of passion, in all fields, bolted their garrets and pursued lives of tedious vocations—vocations they were undesirous of and for which they were totally ill-equipped. What better all-out offensive could have been unleashed on the forces of Determinism? Subsequently, the mantle of the Arts was picked up by those bereft of all talent and vision, representing the first wide-scale appropriation of philosophical doctrine by the masses. A new age of people doing exactly what they were least equipped to do—an age of people mastering Fate—was born. All at once, the wide array of Modern artistic catastrophes becomes clear. Is not the work of Klee, Arp, Ernst, Miro, Dali, Breton, Lichtenstein, and Warhol, and a thousand sculptors and designers suddenly comprehensible? I presume that I need not adduce the litany of Modern novelists and poets whose work (so clearly now) confirms these conclusions.

There’s little left to say. The implications for the new *cognoscenti* (we must consider ourselves to be at its fore) are profound. In our daily excursions into the vast monotony of every day life we encounter a dizzying array of incompetents. How many of them are the unfathomable

⁶ Jon Kakula. *The Dada Revolution*. New York: Circle Press, 1966, 17, 21.

geniuses like those of time gone by? Do not curse the plumber who cannot fix your leaks—would you condemn Michaelangelo himself? Do not cast aspersions upon your bumbling waitress—would you insult the Muse herself? Reader, friend, as you gaze around at the horrendous incarnations of Modern Life, raise your spirits! Every time you read another sophomoric novel, amble among truly barbarous architecture, peruse galleries of offensive smudges, take heart. The next time you find yourself seated on your own *toilette* with a stack of yellow journalism on your knees, rejoice! Affect a wry smile like Lowenthal himself did on his failed chicken farm twenty-five years ago, and thank your lucky stars that you live in the most enlightened time the world has ever known.



2. *Sign of the Times*

In my humble (but well regarded) opinion, what is best about this particular world is that no matter how many clever wits extend to absurd ends the faulty logic of our deepest beliefs, we can go right on living with them. We have all seen metaphysical magicians, even paid the price of admission to see them, but we all go home and have to sleep and pee. Nonetheless, in light of recent theoretical trends, this critic finds himself on *terra* truly *infirmia*. Let me attempt to tug once more on the thread woven into the web that inextricably binds me (wherefore art thou, Ariadne?).

When the great Rumpbold Goliadkin repudiated his *oeuvre* as a meaningless jumble of nonsense last year the literary world was turned on its head, but I (among many) wrote off his behavior to senility or simple boredom. But when, half a globe away, Chinua Achebe did the same, we were all stunned into silence. The dominoes began to fall; writers everywhere were suddenly calling press conferences and eloquently declaring their mutual inability to communicate. John Updike submitted his resignation to his publishing firm (and winked at their response—a claim that his note was incomprehensible). Margaret Atwood proclaimed to the Canadian press that, not only could no one truly express a reality through the written word, verbal communication was equally chimerical. Replying to an unusually acute member of the press, she explained that there was no way for her to explain how she could explain all this to them in words, and that in itself substanti-

ated her claims. In London, Graham Swift appeared before a hastily assembled committee of Ph.D.'s and stood staring at them silently until he collapsed. His statement was met with almost universal acclaim as one scribe after another around the world tossed their lap-top computers into the trash.

My next thought: there has been some sort of covert, massive-scale unionization of the world's writers, and they are striking for better readers. This seemed plausible enough given any survey conducted by the *New York Times*. In fact, my hypothesis was strengthened when, after several months, the larger publishing houses and libraries began to show signs of serious agitation. Meetings and seminars were held in secret and some sort of plan was hatched. The reading public was beginning to clamor.

As noted in my recent exposé in *Readership*, equally clandestine meetings were then initiated in every major city world-wide between book company bureaucrats and local writers. This intrepid critic tried valiantly to spy on no less than two dozen of these arrangements, but must, alas, own up to failure. I am no athlete. No one knows what went on during these *tête-à-têtes*, but shortly after the meetings commenced the notice was issued by Button & Grunlap, Inc. that altered the course of literature, allied once again the publishers and writers, and pleased the public clientele. In this notice, B & G expressed their "sincere and earnest desire" not to "contribute or add" to the "useless and futile" accumulation of meaningless symbols (and apologized for the very "meaninglessness and pointlessness" of the notice itself). The corporation explained that they had signed several of the world's better and lesser known writers, all of whom agreed to detail and submit to B & G all of the books they would no longer consider writing. The notice concluded with a non-publishing schedule which included the likes of Gabriella Garcia Marquez, who would no longer be writing a book entitled *Vertimony*, Baxter Washington, who would not compose *Marxists and Their BMW's*, and Tom Clancy, who refused to pen a spy thriller under the name *Right Hand Man*. The always prolific Stephen King was on the schedule not to write two books, *Super-natural Shakedown*, and *Monster-Truck Town*.

Other publishing houses scrambled to follow suit and suddenly, as quickly as the situation arose, it was resolved. Writers were paid, books were not written, orders were filled for libraries and shops, and people are happy. Currently, the public is near frenzy in anticipation of the new book John Grisham refuses to write, *The Innocent Victim* To re-

fute the cliché that may be invading my readers' thoughts, there is a foul here; someone has been damaged in this situation: the critics, in general, and myself, in particular. Now, you are no doubt aware that most of my colleagues have found no problem integrating themselves into the current literary scene, but I, on the other hand, have resisted taking my mental scalpel to this upstart breed of texts; I suppose I am old fashioned. Even so, I have not yet reached the apex of my career; I am, as of this moment (unjustly) untenured. I might grudgingly admit that I am somewhat intrigued by the new work not being done by D. M. Slater, a truly promising talent. Let me be honest then: knowing that publishers will no longer accept such a conglomeration of superfluity as this very page, I will no doubt repudiate my words as mischief to the now less than invisible strong-arm committee of this nameless movement; I have peered into the abyss that is opening around me and I shall surely be swallowed up.

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