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Poetics on Five Dollars a Day

A thesis submitted in partial ^{Sept. 17} satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Poetics on Five Dollars a Day

by

Daniel Olin Boord

Master of Fine Arts

University of California, San Diego, 1980

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POETICS ON FIVE DOLLARS A DAY

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The opening portion of this essay briefly evaluates my relation to contemporary art and art history. What follows this is a fuming tirade directed at the past fifteen years of art self-legitimation. The introduction concludes with a particularly scathing apology for my not being able to truly deviate from precedents set by predecessors and contemporaries.

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POETICS ON FIVE DOLLARS A DAY

This highly theoretical essay represents a fair attempt at establishing a pre-poetics, a poetics which comes before poetics proper. That is, to say that all those activities which do not find their way into the critical literature, which are regarded in fact as antecedent to the poetic act, can form a valuable object of study whose legitimacy is on equal footing with poetics since Aristotle.

Not unlike the history of poetics itself, this essay shifts its premises, its voice and convictions to offer a confused diatribe which mistakes bad taste for common decency. I therefore take issue with the

position that the best way to examine a work is not by emulating it.

The opening portion of this essay briefly evaluates my relation to contemporary art and art history. What follows this is a fuming tirade directed at the past fifteen years of art self-legitimation. The introduction concludes with a pathetically unconvincing apology for my not being able to truly deviate from precedents set by predecessors and contemporaries.

The text might be best described as not only an attack on what Alexis Lykiard terms in his preface to Lautréamonts' *Poésies* the "odour of humourless reverence," but an assault on the smell of humorless relevance fed by self-proclaimed champions of the state of the art.

This essay comes at a time when the wolf is at the door and the baby has been thrown out, not only with the bath water, but with the tub as well.

Shouldn't we break for lunch and call for a five year moratorium on all writing? (Oh, give me back that old black magic!)

Rather than writing manifestos or constructing pet theories, maybe we should be writing formal apologies: "We are truly sorry for saying all that false stuff, we take it back—philosophy and doctrine have never really been anything more than just a hobby, we are in fact very sorry about bastardizing other people's art as well."

Perhaps such apologies would never quite wash. Even so, this is my attempt at an apology for the sort of prescriptive poetics which follows—I am really and truly deeply sorry.

How should one begin a project of any poetic nature? To begin with a clean shave and a few good cigars is generally a good idea.

After several cups of strong coffee one might be struck by a whole

Within the contemporary scene my work might be best described as unlikely. Most probably it will be remembered, if at all, for its eccentricities and benign irresponsibility in a period marked by fashionable relevance, tired didacticism and idle mannerism.

The antecedents of the sensibility of this work are varied. They range from certain humorous early photographic tabloids to what seems to be several silly and inane silent films seen in the Avant-Garde Cine of the late 20's, to Ernie Kovacs, back to Ubu Roi, The Kitchen Sink, and The Sonnets by Ted Barrigan.

But how useful can this kind of approximate location in history be? What use does any kind of placement in the critical literature have? Isn't this literature loaded with enough sophism and intellectual dishonesty to fill every page of every Sears Roebuck catalogue published in the last ten years?! Shouldn't we break for lunch and call for a five year moratorium on all writing? (Oh, give me back that old black magic!)

Rather than writing manifestos or constructing pet theories, maybe we should be writing formal apologies: "We are truly sorry for saying all that lame stuff, we take it back—philosophy and science have never really been anything more than just a hobby, we are in fact very sorry about bastardizing other disciplines as well."

Perhaps such apologies would never quite wash. Even so, this is my attempt at an apology for the sort of prescriptive poetics which follows—I am really and truly deeply sorry.

How should one begin a project of any poetic nature? To begin with a clean shave and a few good cigars is generally a good idea.

After several cups of strong coffee one might be struck by a whole

slew of thoughts. Disregard them. Where then should your ideas come from and which ones should you trust?

Those moments just before you wake are sometimes full of great ideas; Descartes conceived his geometry from his bed and the logician Rudolf Carnap came up with his Logical Syntax of Language bedridden in a feverish delirium. However, this frame of mind does not necessarily denote superior access to truth.

There are rules of thumb which should be kept in mind at all times.

Maintain as your first principle the principle that WHEN IT RAINS IT POURS, everything happens at once, or that trouble always arrives with friends who eat you out of house and home. This should not be confused with THE BACK DOOR THESIS, which supposes that good ideas arrive at the back door, unlike the bad ones which slip in posing as guests—making off with unknown quantities of chips and dip.

3.

How then should one begin this project? Begin with a cold shower and stay away from the great themes: the immortality of the soul, our inhumanity to one another, the vast cold indifferent universe at large and so forth. Also try to avoid emulating any of the three major schools of thought prevalent today.

All contemporary art does in fact fall into at least one of the following three movements. The first major intellectual enclave to have surfaced on the scene has been, IT IS SO CUTE IT MAKES YOU WANT TO PUKE. This is followed by - IT IS SO BORING IT KEEPS YOU SNORING, and IT IS SO WELL DRAWN IT MAKES YOU YAWN.

The effects of cheap whiskey can likewise be disastrous, leading

to the most ludicrous of circumstances.

4.

How should you in fact begin? You should always start with your spirits up; an evening of carefully selected television can achieve just that.

Begin each evening with Walter Cronkite, he has been around for a while and deserves some respect. Bypass the local news and go straight for the game shows—Tic Tac Dough, Face The Music, etc. Your viewing would of course be incomplete if you did not round it out with re-runs of Rod Serling's Night Gallery.

5.

It is important that your ideas spring from the right setting. Therefore, take great pains to secure a suitable chair, writing table, and other creature comforts which might ease your task.

A tall glass of water is always good to have on hand. However, if you live as I do, where the water is barely fit for bathing, Canada Dry Club Soda is an excellent substitute.

Of equal importance to your setting is your frame of mind. Cultivating a hobby can often not only prove immensely satisfying, but can serve as a useful distraction from the stress your project might impose.

Treasure hunting is a very good example of the many benefits obtained from a constructive hobby. For not only can you enjoy the Zen like activity of sweeping your detector around parking meters and over desert terrain, but this hobby can likewise provide a modest supplement to your income.

6.

You are being driven out of your mind and trapped by shadows

(SHADOWS?) *built with coarse skill by egoism and self-esteem.*

Among the many influential components in your environment, special attention should be paid to *Gold leafed puppets!* *It is time to react to what offends us!* (WHERE'S THIS STUFF COMING FROM?)

Among the many influential components in your environment, special attention should be paid to music! There is nothing like the right music to enhance any setting, and conversely there can be nothing more disturbing and unpleasant as *The specters waited upon the will ... torments* (DAMN!)—nothing more disturbing than the strains of inappropriate music.

Although a radio may provide many carefree hours of listening pleasure, it has many serious drawbacks which may ultimately prove it a totally inadequate source of music. For one thing the radio is plagued with commercial interruptions telling you how much friendly bankers are doing to improve our lot ... *the cruel route through which one forces last ditch logic, the odour of wet chickens* (ODOUR OF WET CHICKENS?)

Aside from numerous radio jungles there is the question of ... *drunk hours of taciturn dejection, the sober gobs of spittle* (BRING ON THE GOBS!) *upon sacred axioms. The philosophy of poetry can do without poetry itself.* The question of programming to consider. A good F.M. disc-jockey can purge transitions between songs of unnecessary awkwardness by having a feel for what tunes, played back to back, fit well together. More often than not good judgement is sorely lacking, and just as you are getting into a really fine Eagle's set of "Tequila Sunrise", "One of These Nights" and "Peaceful Easy Feeling"—the disc-jockes juxtaposes "Disco Inferno" followed by "Boogie Nights" and "Shake Your Bootie". *When dawn breaks, young girls gather roses. Taste,*

Quality, Judgement. At last it is time to react to that which offends us! We foam at the mouth. The world does not hold enough water to boil away a single intellectual bloodstain.

As for classical radio stations—I have yet to find a classical station which does not make it a policy to play daily the works of Benjamin Britten or at least the Vaughn Williams harmonica concerto. As if this were not enough, many stations carry syndicated educational programs with titles such as "Son of a Gun, The Sons of Bach and the Development of Symphonic Form," and "Look Ma! No Hands! Pianistic Virtuosity in the time of Lizst."

All in all audio cassette decks provide music which is hard to beat. Recording on cassettes gives you a clean cut opportunity to exert mastery over the forces of programming by placing you in the driver's seat. Great care should therefore be taken in the preparation of these tapes, and in particular one should take into strict account the time of day these tapes are to be played. *Thanks to those Great-Soft-Heads of our epoch. SEcond rate minds.* With few deviations the following scheme can be applied with excellent results.

The mornings I have found *one eyed, bastard, albino, thighs like camellias, the bearded lady* should be filled with music from the eighteenth century, while the afternoon should be occupied by neoclassicism, impressionism and Bela Bartók. The evenings are to be reserved for the late string quartets of Beethoven, the music of Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, Mahler's philosophical narrations, the austerity of Boulez, and the Brahms op. 115 quintent.

Not only does the time of day figure into programming, but *our heroes have killed themselves, or are killing themselves. The hero,*

then, is not time, but the seasons play an important role as well. Take the winter for example. Prokofiev's Eighth Piano Sonata should only be played in the winter, along with the Schumann Fantasiestucke op. 111. Spring and Autumn are good times for Mozart and Bach, while a warm summer's evening should be spent with a tall frosted glass of beer—listening to Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys.

control, and there are those over 7. In our control seems marginal.

Of all the critical factors determining the outcome of your work, none are quite as significant as unwarranted distractions. Rimbaud has gone to Abyssinia ... Wittgenstein, after a period as a village school teacher, has chosen menial work as a hospital orderly. These distractions can assume a variety of forms, and have a variety of remedies. Personal poetry has had its day.

Take the case of Gustav Mahler. To secure the necessary peace for composing in his summer cottage, Mahler's sister Justi and her companion Natalie would bribe children with candy, tend chickens and geese, chase after the dogs and cats of the resort town, and "hurl" themselves upon street musicians with sizeable tips. Let us take up the indestructible thread of impersonal poetry; poetry is geometry in the highest sense.

People will in fact go to extraordinary lengths in the face of opposition. The Beatles for instance bought up several buildings once to squelch complaints from tenants that their playing was too loud. And one Sunday morning in Manchester, 1910, after Ludwig Wittgenstein learned that there was no train to Blackpool, he threatened to rent one to take him there. I will leave no memoirs!

These are, of course, extravagant solutions which most of us would be without the means to employ. Besides, we should be so lucky as only

have to deal with things like children, ducks, and towns where trains don't stop. Invariably, we're stuck with things like huge guys tuning up their stock cars at three in the morning.

Without trying to appear fatalistic we can divide the universe of distractions into two camps. *I have seen the best minds of my generation.* There are those distractions over which we have some measure of control, and there are those over which our control seems marginal. Things like low flying jet fighters running practice strafing missions over your apartment fall into the latter category, while things like romance and the temperature of tomato soup fall into the former division. And as far as romance is concerned, one should always maintain the credo "It is better to have loved and not to have picked up the tab."

How then should one begin a project? To always begin with a cool head and a warm roast beef sandwich is very important, this is known to many enthusiasts as the principle of Roast Beef Madness. The two part corollary accompanying this principle states, in effect, that you should never let your eyes get bigger than your stomach, and that there is always room for jello.

Dear reader, please forgive this interruption. At this point a small bookish man, whose age I would place at forty and whose costume puts him in some distant century, has decided to intercede on my behalf.

Gentle reader, the part in men most affected by love is the liver, and therefore called heroical because, commonly, gallants, noblemen, and the most generous spirits are possessed by it.

Some are of the opinion that this love cannot be cured; Nullis amor

est medicabilis herbs; it accompanies them to the last; the passion
 consumes both shepherd and sheep. He that runs headlong into a rock is
 not so bad a case as he who falls into the gulf of love. Bid me not
 love, bid the deaf hear, the blind see, the dumb speak, lame run,
 counsel can do no good, a sick man cannot relish no physic can ease me.
 Yet this malady may be helped and by many a good remedy.

The first rule to be observed is exercise and diet. Love grows
 cool without bread and wine. An idle life and liberal feeding do
 nothing but agitate the pains of lost love. Hard work, a slender and
 sparing diet are the best means to prevent feelings of remorse. Remember
 the saying "love retires before business; be busy and you will be safe."
 Stay busy and, above all, fast. Not with sweet wine, mutton and pottage
 as many tender-bellies do, but from all manner of meat. Those opposites of meats which ought to be used are cucumbers,
 melons, water-lilies, rue, woodbine, lettuce and fried okra with salted
 slices of tomatoes. Wine, too, must be altogether avoided and it was a fair edict, a
 commendable deed, so that it was not gone for some sinister respect, as
 those old Egyptians abstained from wine because some fabulous poets had
 given out, wine sprang first from the blood of the giants, or out of
 superstitions, as our modern Turks, but for temperance it being a poison
 of the soul and a stimulant of vice.

If all else fails, the last refuge is a halter.

9.

What should you read upon entering a project? Every Sunday morning
 I read the Calendar section of the Los Angeles Times, and on weekdays I
 read the nutrition information on the sides of cereal boxes. Some of my

best ideas, however, have come while reading billboards, bumper stickers, and the personals.

What should you do? How should you begin? Who do you trust? Is this love or another lost weekend? Remember, coming down the home stretch, you might be running neck and neck, but at the wire it's always six of one, half a dozen of the other.

10.

This final section would have concluded with Antoine Roquentin, the hero of Nausea, meeting Kafka's immigrant Karl Rossmann over a fateful glass of beer. Both men would then team up with Tocqueville, and begin their tour of America with the Oklahoma Theater. At first all three would be puzzled by their separation from their own texts, and troubled by their new location within this concluding section. Their fears would then turn into fist fights over who among them was more fictitious than the others. Finally, after reading an essay entitled "How to Begin a Poetic Venture on Five Dollars a Day" they would fall asleep in front of a television. There in a Dallas townhouse—the hiss of television snow and three figures on the floor in a flickering light: Antoine Roquentin, Karl Rossmann, and Alexis de Tocqueville.