

Derision, Nonsense, and Carnival in the Work of Greg Curnoe

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Article abstract

Dans les années 1960, l'artiste canadien Greg Curnoe était le protagoniste du très dynamique milieu artistique de London en Ontario. Il y créa une série d'ateliers indépendants, y exposa ses oeuvres dans différents lieux et y conçut plusieurs performances audacieuses. Curnoe était une personnalité extravertie qui adhérait de façon inconditionnelle aux principes du mouvement Dada : rejet de normes esthétiques, adhésion à « l'anti-art », utilisation du hasard, de l'aléatoire et de l'absurde. Cependant, ses oeuvres empreintes d'humour, tout comme ses activités à parfum anarchique, ne relevaient pas simplement d'un esprit moqueur. En effet, tout au long de sa carrière, Curnoe eut recours à des stratégies humoristiques inspirées de Dada et à certains aspects du carnavalesque visant à contester le milieu des arts, mais aussi à brouiller les frontières entre l'art et la vie. Par là, il entendait créer une communauté d'esprit dans laquelle il pourrait librement faire évoluer sa pratique. Ce texte se donne pour objectif de mettre en évidence le rôle central qu'ont joué les stratégies inspirées du mouvement Dada et le carnavalesque dans la vie et l'oeuvre de cet artiste.

Derision, Nonsense, and Carnival in the Work of Greg Curnoe

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Résumé

Dans les années 1960, l'artiste canadien Greg Curnoe était le protagoniste du très dynamique milieu artistique de London en Ontario. Il y créa une série d'ateliers indépendants, y exposa ses œuvres dans différents lieux et y conçut plusieurs performances audacieuses. Curnoe était une personnalité extravertie qui adhérait de façon inconditionnelle aux principes du mouvement Dada : rejet de normes esthétiques, adhésion à « l'anti-art », utilisation du hasard, de l'aléatoire et de l'absurde. Cependant, ses œuvres empreintes d'humour, tout comme ses activités à parfum anarchique, ne relevaient pas simplement d'un esprit moqueur. En effet, tout au long de sa carrière, Curnoe eut recours à des stratégies humoristiques inspirées de Dada et à certains aspects du carnivalesque visant à contester le milieu des arts, mais aussi à brouiller les frontières entre l'art et la vie. Par là, il entendait créer une communauté d'esprit dans laquelle il pourrait librement faire évoluer sa pratique. Ce texte se donne pour objectif de mettre en évidence le rôle central qu'ont joué les stratégies inspirées du mouvement Dada et le carnivalesque dans la vie et l'œuvre de cet artiste.

On 11 March 1970 Greg Curnoe and John Boyle presented the *Continental Refusal/Refus Continental* at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University in Kingston. Modelled after Paul-Émile Borduas's *Refus global*, the *Continental Refusal* was a vitriolic rant against the United States, an indictment of Canada's inferiority complex, a doleful eulogy for Canadian culture, and an impassioned call for action. Boyle's reading of the manifesto was followed by Curnoe's performance. Curnoe first recited entries from his journal of a trip to Nova Scotia before launching into a series of ten amendments to the *Continental Refusal*. His amendments ranged from the emphatic ("that we the citizens of the second-largest country in the world should sever all connections with the smaller country immediately to the south of us"), and the political ("the return of the Alaska panhandle" to Canada), to the ridiculous ("all Canadian atlases must show Canada's southern border to be with Mexico").¹ Fully expecting an "evening of conversation" at the gallery, the small local audience was bewildered and outraged.² Curnoe was delighted.

Encouraged by the reception in Kingston, Curnoe added another twenty-seven amendments to the manifesto at a second reading a week later at the University of Windsor. Again the readings caused a stir, particularly as there were a number of Americans in the audience. Curnoe recalled,

It was fantastic because all the Americans went home. The Chairman apologized you know to our American friends after I was finished. It was really funny... I was just laying on a little Canadian chauvinism on the people who lay American chauvinism on and they couldn't take it and went home... I got a standing ovation from the people that stayed. It was really unbelievable.³

The readings of the *Continental Refusal* encapsulated a decade of satirical sedition by Curnoe. In the ten years since his return to his hometown of London, Ontario, from studies at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, Curnoe had been using

humoristic strategies drawn from Dada along with aspects of the carnivalesque to systematically undermine and challenge the art establishment, assert the powerful connection between life and art, and create an environment within which he could promote his career. Whether making pointed political statements, championing low-brow art, celebrating the lives of ordinary folk, or bringing attention to trivial occurrences, Curnoe, like the Dadaists, revelled in the world of the absurd: in his life and in his art he embraced elements of chance, the accident, mistakes, and contingency. The *Continental Refusal* was a perfect example of his interpretation of Dada: it was satirical, political, ridiculous, facetious, disrespectful, insulting, nonsensical, and divisive. It was also great fun. By examining a selection of activities, exhibitions, and artworks, this article will define the central role that derisive humour (forms of humour that take aim at a particular target to act as "a universal corrective for deviancy in the social order"⁴) and nonsensical humour (forms of humour that liberate the participant from ordinary constraints) played in Curnoe's life and work, and in the cultural life of London, Ontario, during the 1960s.

It is helpful to consider Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque—the ritual spectacles (carnival pageants, comic shows), comic verbal compositions (written and oral parodies), and various genres of billingsgate (coarse or abusive language such as curses and oaths) that were manifest during the medieval festival of carnival.⁵ Taking advantage of the relaxed social mores of religious festivals and events like the "feast of fools," carnival participants mimicked serious rituals, inverted hierarchies, and engaged in bawdy and licentious, or carnivalesque, behaviour.⁶ First published in Russian in 1965, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* was translated into English in 1968. While Greg Curnoe would have been unaware of his work during most of the 1960s, there are many aspects of Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque that resonate with Curnoe's work. In *Rabelais and His World*—which is both a historical analysis of the work of the sixteenth-century author Rabelais and a comment on the

repressive early twentieth-century Russian culture of Bakhtin's youth—Bakhtin examines the role laughter and humour play in forging common bonds amongst “the folk.” The central aspect of his study is the idea of the carnival as a temporary event that intersected with everyday life and facilitated a sense of cultural rebirth and renewal. Laughter is central to the carnivalesque; however, unlike Dada's biting humour, carnivalesque laughter is not satirical. As Bakhtin points out, satire places the satirist apart from the object of his mockery, but carnivalesque laughter is “directed at those who laugh,” because the people's laughter “expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.”⁷ While Bakhtin contends that the carnivalesque allows participants to challenge orthodoxies and official ideologies, an alternative argument can be made that those in positions of power permit carnivalesque behaviour because they are aware that it provides a temporary safety valve that releases social pressures and dissipates revolutionary energy. As Terry Eagleton argues, carnival is “a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off.”⁸ However, a carnivalesque space does allow participants to think differently about the world, even if only for a short moment, and it is possible that seeds of change may be planted in the minds of the participants.

As Arthur Asa Berger points out, “the comic involves the world of the social and the political.”⁹ This was certainly the case with Curnoe, who believed that the only valid basis for relevant art was direct experience and a frank expression of one's beliefs. As a socially and politically conscious artist, he found derisive and nonsensical humour, mainly inspired from Dadaism, the perfect vehicle for personal expression, and made full use of it. By adopting strategies that can be likened to many aspects of the carnivalesque, the Dada movement of the early twentieth century used laughter as a weapon against authority, often combining humour with nonsensical performances and works of art. These were designed to provoke and antagonize while also examining and breaking down the barriers between art and life. Unlike carnival, which was celebrated at prescribed moments (such as before Lent) and was expected to break certain codes of behaviour, Dada happened when and where it was least expected, shocking and unsettling the audience. The beginnings of the European Dada movement in 1916 Zurich are well known, forming a series of events and creations that included gatherings, performances, spectacles, artworks, and publications. Throughout the 1960s Curnoe combined Dada techniques with aspects of the carnivalesque in many areas of his own life and artistic practice.

Greg Curnoe was born in 1936 in London, Ontario. Surrounded by an extended family since his childhood, and with a large circle of friends, Curnoe remained steadfastly loyal to his hometown throughout his life. This is not to suggest that

he was in any way parochial or insular. Curnoe was well versed in international art trends, particularly those that allowed him to explore the humorous side of life. While a student in his final years of high school at H.B. Beal Technical School he was introduced to the work of a number of early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements including Dada.¹⁰ The ideological underpinnings of Dada especially appealed to Curnoe: the Dadaists were anti-war and nihilistic and they were cynical about art. In fact they ignored the aesthetics of art, rejected the notion of meaning in art, and rebelled against the art establishment. They espoused the notion of “anti-art” and their works were influenced by ideas of chance, randomness, and absurdity.

When Curnoe returned to London in 1960 after a few years of arts training at the Doon School of Art and the Ontario College of Art, he realized that the deeply conservative nature of the city permeated its cultural milieu, in particular the London Art Gallery. Curnoe set about establishing the social conditions that were favourable for his art, first by renting a studio, a large loft on the third floor of a building at 432 Richmond Street. It immediately became the main gathering place for a lively circle of young people (an “interpretive community”) who shared his sense of the ridiculous and his desire to break with the past.¹¹ It also served as the setting for their fraternal antics and Dada buffoonery.¹²

Curnoe also set about exploring exhibition opportunities, and, in November 1961, was featured in his first solo exhibition at the Richard E. Crouch Branch Library of the London Public Library and Art Gallery (the responsibility for Curnoe's selection resting most probably with assistant curator Paddy O'Brian). *An Exhibition of Things* showcased a number of objects that challenged the gallery's traditional fare and perplexed viewers. The exhibition received mixed reviews: the local arts critic Lenore Crawford wrote, “Some of the spoofs are scarcely worth the effort of moving them into an exhibit, for Curnoe, the producer, has not yet learned all about selection, which a good modern Dadaist should know.”¹³ Among the items exhibited in the show was a ready-made ticket booth. When questioned by one skeptical television reporter about why he had chosen to include this object, Curnoe replied guilelessly that he thought it would be fun.¹⁴

Curnoe often masked his true intentions behind humour—a strategy commonly employed by the fool. Unpredictable, spontaneous, full of surprises, and intuitive, the fool observes and pokes fun at the world around him. Believed to possess extraordinary insights into the world, his task is to reveal those insights. During medieval carnivals, when the ordinary rules were suspended and hierarchies were reversed, the fool was at his finest—shielded from censure by the carnival, the fool could mock and deflate high society with impunity.¹⁵ As Helen

Molesworth writes, Dada offered artists similar opportunities “to articulate both a problem and a potential solution.”¹⁶ This idea is transferable to a number of other contexts. For Curnoe the problem was the conservative nature of Canadian society in general, and the ossified culture in London in particular. His solution was to replace London’s cultural élite with new young artists, with himself at the vanguard, and he exploited the full potential of humour to accomplish this.

In late 1961, Curnoe participated in his first group exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto. The untitled exhibition was organized by Richard Gorman and included an assortment of works by Gorman, Curnoe, Michael Snow, Dennis Burton, Joyce Wieland, Gordon Rayner, and Arthur Coughtry.¹⁷ Among the works was Curnoe’s *Drawer Full of Stuff*, which drew on the Duchampian tradition of assembling and exhibiting found objects.¹⁸ The title of Curnoe’s work was literal: in an old drawer Curnoe assembled objects such as spent fuses, toy cars, part of an old bicycle seat, one of his grandmother’s tablespoons, a length of his mother’s clothesline, a door handle from his parents’ garage shed, and a large quantity of bus transfers from trips he had taken. The work was interactive, and visitors to the gallery were encouraged to rearrange the items in the drawer. Michel Sanouillet, in an exhibition review in *Canadian Art*, praised Curnoe’s work: “Greg Curnoe displays an exciting genius and freshness of approach. From London, Ontario, a most improbably Dadaistic town, he brought a drawer filled with odds and ends such as we all conceal in the non-public corners of our Gracious Living Homes.”¹⁹ Arts critic Robert Fulford, who covered the event for the *Toronto Star*, noted that the audience members could also “as one distinguished visitor did on opening night...make a personal contribution to the exhibition by leaving some object of [their] own amid the assembled junk.”²⁰ Visitors at the opening were encouraged to sing along with the show’s anthem—“Oak and Dada,” performed to the tune of “O Canada.”²¹ Fulford was responsible for christening the exhibition “Neo-Dadaist.” By promoting the artists’ non-conformity Fulford positioned them firmly in the vanguard of Canadian creativity and in stark contrast to Toronto’s staid arts scene. Calling the exhibition “an exercise in the art of anarchy,” Fulford predicted that the show would be a winner on all fronts: “If the wild, anti-everything attitude of the old-time 1920s Dadaists has appealed to you in the past...then you’ll enjoy seeing its 1961 version in a Toronto setting. If, on the other hand, you suspect that current art is essentially insane, then you’ll be smugly confirmed in your belief.”²²

While the Isaacs Gallery’s “Neo-Dada” show created a stir, it was by no means the first exhibition of its kind in North America. In fact, postwar North American interest in Dada had first been piqued in 1951 when Robert Motherwell published his important work *Dada Painters and Poets*, and in the follow-

ing year the expatriate Dadaist Marcel Duchamp was featured in the first of four exhibitions at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. During the 1950s the Janis Gallery showed the work of other Dada artists.²³ By the latter part of the 1950s American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Richard Stankiewicz, Jean Follett, John Chamberlain, and Allan Kaprow were variously experimenting with the techniques of the readymade, collage, assemblage, and performance art to create a new, less politicized, and more aestheticized version of Dada. These American Neo-Dadaists responded not to the horrors of the Second World War or to the complacency of bourgeois society, but to such diverse stimuli as the throwaway culture of the 1950s, the constraints of Abstract Expressionism, the experimental music of John Cage, and the changing social mores of the mid-twentieth century. American Neo-Dada was a short-lived movement—due to the commercialization of the movement and the integration of the artist into bourgeois society, it was essentially over by 1962. For the most part, it had been merely a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and later movements such as Pop Art, Minimalism, and conceptual art, rather than a resurrection of Dada.²⁴ As Barbara Rose wrote in 1963, “what once seemed vanguard invention is now merely over-reproduced cliché. Anti-art, anti-war, anti-materialism, Dada, the art of the politically and socially engaged, apparently has little in common with the cool detached art it is supposed to have spawned.”²⁵

Although Curnoe appropriated Dada techniques familiar to many American artists—collages, the readymade, assemblages, performances, and multimedia events—and while he shared their distaste for Abstract Expressionism, his work was much more closely aligned with the anti-bourgeois nihilistic sentiments of the original Dadaists than with the mostly apolitical American Neo-Dadaists. In both attitude and content, it was intended to scandalize, satirize, and criticize.²⁶ Part of the reason for Curnoe’s greater involvement with European Dada is that Canadian artists, just like the French Nouveaux Réalistes, were not exposed to the work of the Dadaists in art museums in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, artists had to educate themselves about Dada, which led to a deeper historical understanding of the movement than the Americans had.²⁷ Even when he moved stylistically towards Pop Art, Curnoe did not embrace the American fascination with consumerism and mass culture. He continued to use his personal, narratological, sometimes nostalgic, and often-absurd works to critique the status quo, question authority, and challenge the viewer. The most powerful of the Dada strategies he employed were those that celebrated the powerful connections between everyday experiences and art, and in particular, those that engaged with the participatory aspects of Dada performance and the inclusivity of the carnivalesque.



Figure 1. Greg Curnoe, *Hurdle for Art Lovers*, 9 April 1962. Assemblage of wood, cast iron, plastic belt, oil-based paint, ink, silver knives, stainless-steel knives with wooden and plastic handles, aluminum knitting needles, bamboo stick, silver spoons, steel screwdriver blade, and mastic knife, 99 x 158.5 x 26.5 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. © Estate of Greg Curnoe / SODRAC (2011). (Photo © National Gallery of Canada).

One of Curnoe's early Neo-Dada works, *Hurdle for Art Lovers* (1962; fig. 1), was conceived with this type of strategy in mind. The menacing-looking construction was made out of various knives and other utensils, knitting needles, sharp sticks, and a mastic knife. These sharp and pointy objects were mounted on scraps of wood and supported by Christmas tree stands, and they threatened to castrate those brave enough (or foolhardy enough) to jump over it. Ron Martin remembers seeing fellow artist Brian Dibb repeatedly jumping over the hurdle in Curnoe's Richmond Street studio, an act that Martin likened to playing Russian roulette.²⁸ Although Curnoe's work often bordered on the ridiculous, there was nevertheless an underlying seriousness to much of it. Despite its humorous aspect, *Hurdle for Art Lovers*, with its witty title, was a sharp and satirical com-

mentary on the risks inherent in making and appreciating contemporary art.

In early 1962 Curnoe masterminded Canada's first happening—*The Celebration*—at the London Central Library and Art Museum. Embracing spontaneity and chance like the Dadaists, Curnoe began by arbitrarily selecting February 3 for the date of the happening. He then searched through the archives at the *London Free Press* for an interesting event that had occurred on that date in history. To his delight he discovered that on 3 February 1922, Laurence Lee, the Chinese proprietor of the Royal Café on Richmond Street, was fined two dollars for sprinkling salt on the ice in front of his restaurant.²⁹ This ridiculous incident served as the inspiration for *The Celebration*.³⁰

A contingent of Curnoe's friends came down from Toronto for the event. Michel Sanouillet, the photographer Michel Lambeth, whose portrait of Curnoe wearing a German World War I army helmet was used on a poster for the event (fig. 2), and up-and-coming artists Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland took the train to London. They were greeted at the station with considerable fanfare by a delegation of kazoo-playing, flag-waving revellers who led them to the gallery where *The Celebration* was to take place. The happening was chaotic. Herman Goodden relates, "The party became spectacularly rowdy and messy—wood was nailed to the floor, enormous, instant sculptures were created and destroyed, one witness smelled smoke—and gallery curator Clare Bice was furious about the whole thing."³¹ As the gathering wound down, a number of partiers paraded down London's main street dressed in "dadaistic,"³² German World War I uniforms. The participants held aloft a huge plywood panel painted white with a black border, and local police mistook them for a union protest march. At the end of the evening an inebriated Wieland thanked Curnoe for "inviting us to wreck the gallery."³³

Although *The Celebration* was the first happening in Canada it was not the first in North America; by the early 1960s happenings were occurring with increasing frequency in the United States, particularly in New York's Greenwich Village. However, despite *The Celebration's* clear affinity with American prototypes (for example, happenings organized by Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and Jim Dine), Curnoe believed that its real significance was that it altered the way in which Londoners responded to the traditional gallery space. He wrote, "The thing we did that people still talk about is that we changed the way they perceived the art gallery.... They used to go in there and whisper, but after that people didn't whisper any more."³⁴

Like the intoxicating effect that the Cabaret Voltaire had had in Zurich, the exhilaration of *The Celebration* soon carried over into other areas of London life.³⁵ In 1962 Curnoe founded *Region*, a locally produced, limited-edition magazine that was published nine times during the 1960s and distributed free of charge. The magazine, which became the literary manifestation of London Neo-Dada, consisted of satirical and humorous articles, nonsensical poetry, and other submissions by young London artists and academics. The same year Curnoe co-founded the first artist-run gallery in the city. Region Gallery's aim was to serve as a meeting place for the city's stylistically and ideologically diverse young artists, to promote their work, to reflect local culture, and to act as a forum for home-grown ideas. Such a gallery was necessary because, as Curnoe claimed, the city's public gallery was "completely smothered by out-of-date sophistication."³⁶

In September 1963 Curnoe and his friends attracted even more attention when they co-founded the Nihilist Party of London, Ontario.³⁷ The Nihilists held gatherings and banquets,



Figure 2. Poster for "Happening" at London Public Library and Art Gallery, February 1962. Offset photolithograph on wove paper, 38.3 x 25.8 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo © National Gallery of Canada).

staged mock rituals and protests, organized sporting events, and went on vacation together. Their varied activities fostered a sense of collective solidarity among their members while antagonizing London's "old guard." The Nihilist Party was opposed to anything remotely "establishment," including the way in which the 1963 provincial government was being run. In a city-wide blitz during the campaign they plastered banners urging voters to "Vote Nihilist—Destroy Your Ballot" across posters of the Ontario Premier John Robarts. Curnoe liked the image so much he incorporated it into a pair of Dadaistic artworks the following year (figs. 3 and 4). He recalled the event:

We were in the process of putting a poster over a John Robarts poster when a policeman appeared and ripped it down, saying that it wasn't a fair way to do things. His action, of course, was equally unfair, especially since the other political parties had been doing the same thing, but since he



Figure 3. Greg Curnoe, *DADA!!* Late 1964. Oil pastel on newsprint, 134.6 x 89.3 cm. London, Ontario, Collection of McIntosh Gallery, The University of Western Ontario. Gift of Sheila Curnoe, 2009 (Photo: © Estate of Greg Curnoe / SODRAC (2011)).

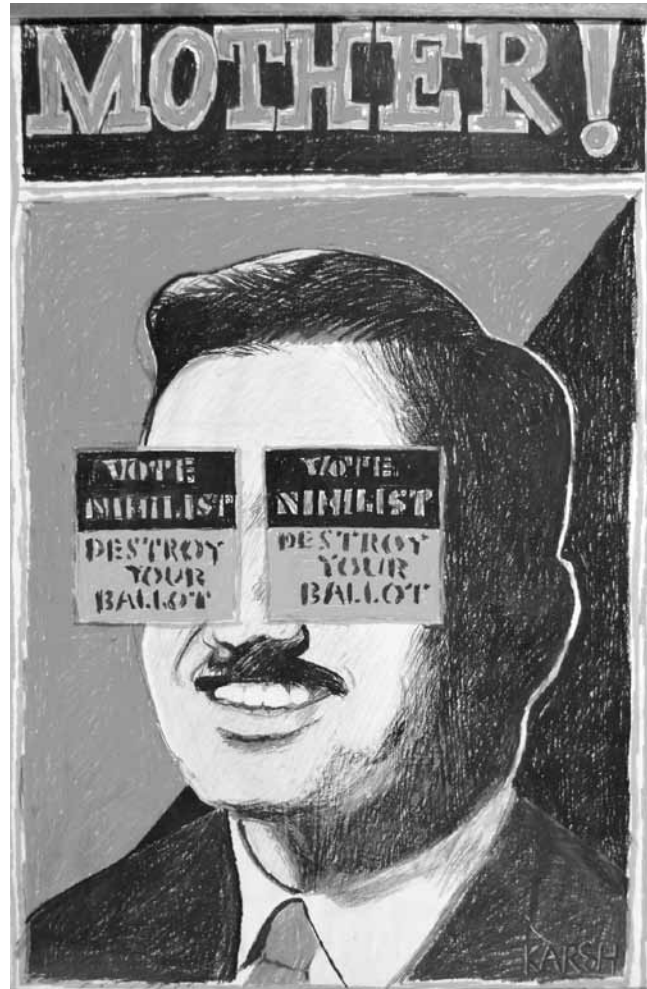


Figure 4. Greg Curnoe, *MOTHER!* Late 1964. Oil pastel on newsprint, 134.6 x 89.3 cm. London, Ontario, Collection of McIntosh Gallery, The University of Western Ontario. Gift of Sheila Curnoe, 2009 (Photo: © Estate of Greg Curnoe / SODRAC (2011)).

had all the arguments we were helpless to do much except argue back. It rankled me for weeks until we got back at the cop in a minor way, letting him know that his authority was questioned.³⁸

While the Nihilist Party had serious conceptual underpinnings, it often appeared as a light-hearted social organization with a loose constituency. Because of the anarchistic style of organization it was difficult to establish exactly who the members or sympathizers were. In 1964 the Nihilist Party made the local news when it organized a banquet and ball at “a secret meeting place.” Charles Gerein of the *London Free Press* called it an “anti-organization” with no leader, central philosophy, or doctrine.

The Nihilist Party, Gerein reported, was planning “to run for model parliament this year—without a platform and not as a member of a party.”³⁹

Performance was one of the fundamental activities of the Dada movement, and, as was the case with the earlier *Celebration*, performance would be key to the summer gatherings of the London Neo-Dadaists that took place from 1965 to 1967 at No Haven, a cottage in Port Stanley, a small vacation town on Lake Erie. On 1 August 1965, the first of many Nihilist Picnics was held in Port Stanley at Invererie Heights Park. The picnics featured mock speeches, sporting events, and general revelry. To mark the occasion of the first picnic Professor Kenneth Hilbourn of the University of Western Ontario gave a speech

entitled “The Still-Present Dangers of the International Communist Conspiracy.”⁴⁰ At another picnic Curnoe memorably called for the bombing of the front yard of the White House with “bags of shit made in Canada by Canadians.”⁴¹ In 1967 Curnoe incorporated this text into the interior of a painted wooden construction—*Kamikaze* (plywood and acrylic, undated, Art Gallery of Ontario).

In October 1965 Greg Curnoe co-founded the Nihilist Spasm Band, together with John Boyle, Bill Exley, Murray Favro, Hugh McIntyre, and Art Pratten. In 1966 John Clement and Archie Leitch joined the band. Aping Dada’s *bruitist* performances, the Nihilist Spasm Band played atonal experimental music on homemade instruments manufactured from such items as plumbing components, cooking pots, and kazoos. John Boyle caught the significance of the band: “Although some would hesitate to call it music, the Nihilist Spasm Band was perhaps the supreme experiment in collective Nihilist culture making.”⁴² Art critic and editor Barry Lord called the band “the squawking mouthpiece of the Nihilist party of Canada (Vote No!), which has its non-headquarters (and, of course, denies its existence) in London.”⁴³ The Nihilist Spasm Band rapidly gained fame around London, and, beginning in 1966, had a regular Monday night gig at the York Hotel, a local public house across from the CN railway station. The York Hotel was a blue-collar establishment with a loyal group of regulars. On Monday nights, however, the hotel was filled with students, professors, and artists, along with “the occasional Canada Council member, social workers—the jaded and hip of London.”⁴⁴ The York Hotel rapidly became the London Neo-Dadaist equivalent of the Cabaret Voltaire—outrageous and provoking, entertaining and confounding the audience at the same time. At one of the Monday night gigs Curnoe was asked what the Band’s goals were. He replied, “Don’t ask me that, Christ! You can’t be serious.”⁴⁵ John Boyle would have been a better one to ask: “We have no themes, we throw everything in...but it’s not protest,” Boyle claimed, “it’s a portable happening.”⁴⁶

By the mid-1960s Curnoe had been challenging London’s status quo for a number of years. Things came to a head in 1966 when Clare Bice censored two works from the exhibition *Artists of Our Region No. 16: John Boyle, John Chambers and Greg Curnoe*.⁴⁷ Bice deemed that John Boyle’s work *Seated Nude* (a construction that included the imprint of the artist’s behind and genitals on a chair) was “unsuitable for a public gallery,”⁴⁸ and, against the wishes of the jury, refused to hang it. He also excluded an unidentified work by Curnoe who immediately wrote a letter to the local paper calling attention to the event and claiming that Bice’s decision compromised the overall calibre of the exhibition.⁴⁹ Bice’s decision to flout the jury’s judgment discredited him amongst the city’s young artists. He became the target of derision while Curnoe—the main

instigator of the incident—increased in stature in the eyes of his peers. “The mantle of power,” Nancy Poole wrote, “had slipped from Clare Bice to Greg Curnoe.” Now, she continued, “the young artists flocked to the new ‘Mr. Art London,’ hoping to gain his favour.”⁵⁰

Having effectively dethroned Clare Bice, Curnoe set his sights on the national arts scene. He would soon find that he had a powerful ally in his quest. In the fall of 1966 Curnoe made one of the most important connections of his career when he approached the National Gallery of Canada about the possibility of the gallery acquiring his work. Jean-René Ostiguy, the curator of Canadian art at the time, delegated the request to his assistant, Pierre Théberge.

Thanks to Théberge, Curnoe got his first opportunity to play the fool on the national stage in May 1967 when he was invited to participate in the opening ceremonies for *Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art* at the National Gallery of Canada. The exhibition was planned as part of the massive celebrations marking Canada’s centennial, and was intended to demonstrate the country’s cultural coming of age. Although the exhibition was well attended it was not a critical success overall. Contending that it reflected Canada’s cultural inferiority complex, J. Russell Harper claimed that the exhibition held “few surprises for those familiar with the Canadian scene.”⁵¹ He believed the combination of overworked gallery curators and a lack of critical scholarship led to an over-reliance on “key canvases” from the National Gallery.⁵² If the show fell flat, the same could not be said of the opening celebrations, which were exuberantly carnivalesque. After the official opening of the exhibition, artists, their guests, and a select group of dignitaries descended to the basement of the gallery where they were entertained during dinner by The Kinetic Improvisation Unit from Toronto and a psychedelic light show. The main attraction of the evening was an enormous cake, specially designed and decorated for the occasion by Curnoe. It consisted of text outlined with brightly coloured, bacon-flavoured icing. The text parodied the current hit record “Wild Thing” by the British rock band *The Troggs*:

300 YRS OF CANA
 DIAN ART I THINK
 I LOVE YOU!
 BUT I WANT TO KN
 OW FOR SURE!
 300 YRS OF CANA
 DIAN ART, HOLD ME
 TIGHT! I NEED YOU.



Figure 5. Greg Curnoe, Jean Sutherland Boggs, Judy LaMarsh, and Pierre Théberge at the 11 May 1967 opening of the Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art exhibit at the National Gallery of Canada. Gelatin silver print. Photographed by John Evans, Ottawa. © Library and Archives Canada. John Henry Evans Studio fonds/Accession 1994-435/Item 2331-29. Reproduced with the permission of Library and Archives Canada. (Photo © National Gallery of Canada.)

In what was called a “Dadaist performance,” a luridly attired Curnoe helped a pastry chef apply the lettering. *Time* magazine wrote, “Hovering over a 21-sq.-ft. orange cake, Painter Greg Curnoe, who was himself gussied up in a canary yellow suit, chartreuse shirt and blue tie, deftly applied the icing.”⁵³ With Curnoe standing gleefully at her side, and Pierre Théberge hovering in the background, Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh cut the cake with a huge ceremonial sword (fig. 5). Throwing herself into the spirit of the event, LaMarsh forsook her usual conservative attire in favour of a “blue print chiffon dress, blue stockings and a coonskin cap.”⁵⁴ The next day images of the cake-cutting ceremony appeared in newspapers across the country.

It was obvious that the opening was much more “hip” and outrageous than anything the National Gallery had seen before. Robert Ayre of the *Montreal Star* noted, “Such high jinks are seldom seen in the National Gallery and could only have taken place in the basement.”⁵⁵ In a letter to the gallery’s director, the artist Jack Bush wrote, “It was quite an Opening! I’ll never be the

same, after that whole day, and I find myself wondering how it will all sit with the stuffed shirts and the swingers.”⁵⁶ Despite the unconventional festivities and Curnoe’s public dig at Canada’s ongoing identity crisis, it was universally acknowledged by those in attendance that the event had been a success. In fact, the outrageous antics and carnivalesque spirit of the gathering went a long way toward mitigating the exhibition’s lukewarm reception.

Buoyed by this success, Pierre Théberge selected the Nihilist Spasm Band as Canada’s musical representative at the 1969 Paris Biennale des Jeunes, an exhibition for artists under the age of thirty-five.⁵⁷ The selection of the band was the joint idea of Joanna Woods Marsden (coordinator of travelling exhibitions) and Théberge, who agreed that the band was “very specially tailored to the Carnival atmosphere of the Paris Biennale...”⁵⁸ After expressing some reservations, Jean Sutherland Boggs, the director of the gallery, went along with the choice.⁵⁹ The gallery’s decision was controversial with the public; complaints appeared in the newspaper over the government’s decision to

spend taxpayers' money to send a "band that does not play music, but only makes noise."⁶⁰ The reviewer for the *St. Catharines Standard* contended that it had been "a case of 'pull' and knowing the right people" that had led to the selection of the group. He wrote, "Some dimwit—or a committee of dimwits—holding public purse strings at the National Gallery in Ottawa, has decided the band will represent Canada in the musical category at the Paris show."⁶¹ A London radio station's phone-in listeners expressed the belief that the band was nothing more than a "put-on" and a "sinful" waste of money.⁶²

The irony of Canada's national gallery and the Department of External Affairs selecting a nihilist group was not lost on the band members and their friends. In the *five cent review*, a limited-edition magazine billed as "the monthly review of the arts in Canada," band members were asked if their selection by the gallery meant that they had been "co-opted" and were now "official culture."⁶³ Hugh McIntyre responded facetiously, "*five cent's* question has forced me to think deeply about the whole situation. Slowly, and reluctantly, I have been forced to the conclusion that the Nihilist Spasm Band has co-opted the Government of Canada. But we didn't mean to. Honest."⁶⁴ John Boyle, who had become disenchanted with the band because it had ceased to be "fun," replied, "If there is an opportunity to embarrass Canada in Paris, I will take advantage of it."⁶⁵ Curnoe took the question more seriously, and saw the band's participation in the biennial in a positive light: "At last Canada is starting to export, under a cultural label, indigenous or rooted things... like The Spasm Band."⁶⁶

In addition to the seven band members and the curator, five wives accompanied the group on their trip. The band was scheduled to play four concerts in Paris, followed by two in London, and Théberge was dispatched to act as the group's chaperone for the trip. The band gleefully played up their selection as "Canada's Official Music Team 1969," and even sported crests on their jackets identifying themselves as such. The team affiliation was superimposed over a Canadian flag, in the centre of which appeared the words "No Captain."

The opening venue for the Spasm Band's Paris engagement was the basin of a drained fountain in front of the Musée national d'art moderne, a large neoclassical structure on the bank of the Seine. There were about two hundred people at the opening, "including artists, critics, curators in Paris for the Biennale,"⁶⁷ who looked at the exhibitions and listened to the Nihilist Spasm Band. Among the guests at the opening were Michel Sanouillet and Teeny Duchamp, wife of the artist Marcel Duchamp. General members of the audience, who were attracted away from Faubourg St-Honoré by the noise, did not know quite what to make of the band.⁶⁸ Curnoe noted the audience's bemusement: "The audience was made up of young French intellectuals, and they just didn't know how to place us, somehow."⁶⁹

After the opening of the Biennale the Spasm Band attended a reception at the Canadian Embassy. Their unkempt appearance and loud behaviour caused some consternation, and, in order to safeguard the eighteenth-century embassy's fine furnishings and crystal chandeliers, the ambassador's wife prohibited dancing at the event.⁷⁰ At one point, one member of the band was asked by the ambassador's wife to remove his river-walking boots from the antique coffee table, and Art Pratten and his wife Barbara spent some time kissing under a chandelier for photographers.⁷¹ A reporter noted, "Champagne flowed freely, and as subtle signs that the reception was over meant nothing to the uncouth Nihilists, they had to be nudged toward the door."⁷²

The band subsequently travelled to England where they played two gigs in London at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Unfortunately, their gigs were poorly attended due to bad planning and a lack of publicity by the host institution. They also received a muted reception from the audience.⁷³ Théberge recalled how the audience dwindled over the course of the evening, leaving "slowly one by one or two by two," until only he was left.⁷⁴ Théberge put the less than enthusiastic reception of the band in London down to "English reserve."⁷⁵ It may just have been that the show did not strike a chord with the audience in London, England (which was, after all, the original "swinging London"). It may also have been that, by the late 1960s, Curnoe and his cronies were becoming absorbed into the mainstream of the art world. As art critic Barbara Rose noted, the "bourgeoisie, that formerly worthy adversary, [became] the shock-proof patron of the new art."⁷⁶

The band's lukewarm reception in England did not deter Curnoe from continuing to court controversy when he and John Boyle presented their *Continental Refusal* in Kingston and Windsor a few months later. His innate desire to play the fool, a character who revealed infinite possibilities to society, meant that he would forever be pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable.

Were London, Ontario, Neo-Dadaists, like the original European Dadaists, expressing their disillusionment with the bourgeois and conservative postwar society that they had inherited? Were they trying to achieve a state of "illuminism"—a more meaningful existence—through the exploration of unreason?⁷⁷ Did they hope, by adopting strategies of a historical avant-garde movement, to add cachet to their own artistic production? Or were Dada and the carnivalesque simply tools that allowed London's artists to express their individuality? As Helen Molesworth points out, one of Dada's main goals was to dissolve the bourgeois categories of art by merging art and life. We must acknowledge the role that Dada and the carnivalesque played in Curnoe's life and art. Dada strategies provided him with "a set of management techniques...for how to live, as an artist, in a critical way, amid the endless permutations, twists

and turns, and baffling contradictions of capitalism.”⁷⁸ The carnivalesque provided similar techniques, belonging, as Bakhtin states, “to the borderline between art and life. . . . It is life itself.” Carnavalesque humour, with its rituals based on laughter, offered “a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations. . . [allowing them to] build a second world and a second life outside officialdom.”⁷⁹ During the 1960s Curnoe used derisive and nonsensical humoristic devices, in particular a combination of elements from Dada and the carnivalesque, in all aspects of his life and art as a form of social criticism intended to express his political beliefs, shake up the status quo, collapse the boundaries between art and life, and create an interpretive community within which he could promote his art.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Amendments 1, 3, and 6. Greg Curnoe, “Amendments to Continental Refusal/Refus Continental,” reprinted in *20 Cents Magazine* 4, 4 (April 1970), unpaginated.
- 2 Irene McKim, a Kingston artist, reported that most of the small local audience responded with disfavour to Boyle’s and Curnoe’s readings. She noted, however, that although they shocked people, “no one will forget the night Curnoe and Boyle came to Kingston.” Irene McKim, “Curnoe and Boyle Speak in Kingston,” *20 Cents Magazine* 4, 4 (April 1970), unpaginated.
- 3 Greg Curnoe quoted in “Greg Curnoe: A File Interview,” *File* 2, 1–2 (April–May 1973), 46.
- 4 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (originally published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1900), trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville, MD, 2008), 12.
- 5 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 5.
- 6 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.
- 7 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 14.
- 8 Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London, UK, 1981), 148.
- 9 Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humour* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London, UK, 1993), 10.
- 10 Ross Woodman, “Greg Curnoe,” essay for the exhibition *Greg Curnoe’s Series* (London, Canada, 1967), 3.
- 11 Stanley Fish, “Is There a Text in This Class?” *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. H. Aram Veaser (Malden, MA, 1999).
- 12 Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret* (London, UK, 1975), 83.

- 13 Lenore Crawford, “Spoofs Reveal Artist: Odd Objects Exhibit Startles Art Lovers,” *The London Free Press*, 4 November 1961.
- 14 Greg Curnoe, *Souwesto* (16 mm, colour, silent, 30 min) 1969.
- 15 Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago, IL, 2001), 38.
- 16 Helen Molesworth, “From Dada to Neo-Dada and Back Again,” *October* 105, Dada (Summer 2003), 180.
- 17 The exhibition ran from 21 December 1961 to 9 January 1962. Donnalù Wigmore, ed., *Isaacs Seen: 50 Years on the Art Front* (Toronto, 2005), 158.
- 18 Curnoe’s work may reference Jasper Johns’s *Drawer*, an assemblage on canvas from 1957. The title of Johns’s work referred to both undergarments and to draughtsmanship, while in appearance it reproduced a non-functioning dresser drawer. Susan Hapgood, *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958–62* (Scottsdale, AZ, 1994), 18.
- 19 Michel Sanouillet, “The Sign of Dada at the Isaacs Gallery, Toronto,” *Canadian Art* 19, 2 (March–April 1962), 111.
- 20 Robert Fulford, “World of Art: Anarchy,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 23 December 1961.
- 21 Fulford, “World of Art: Anarchy.”
- 22 Fulford, “World of Art: Anarchy.”
- 23 Barbara Rose, “Dada, Then and Now,” *Art International* 7, 1 (January 1963), 24.
- 24 Hapgood, “Neo-Dada,” 56.
- 25 Rose, “Dada, Then and Now,” 24.
- 26 Rose, “Dada, Then and Now,” 24.
- 27 Hapgood, “Neo-Dada,” 44.
- 28 Ron Martin, “A Remembrance,” *Carnet* 1, 2 (1993), 28.
- 29 Herman Goodden, “Arts Section,” *London Free Press*, 26 November 1988.
- 30 Curnoe’s choice of this incident was undoubtedly an homage to the French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp, whose nickname was the *Marchand du Sel* or salt seller. In fact, a few years earlier, in 1958, his good friend, the renowned Dada scholar Michel Sanouillet, had edited a volume of writings by Duchamp entitled *Marchand du Sel*. Pierre Théberge, *Greg Curnoe: Retrospective* (Ottawa, 1982), 14.
- 31 Goodden, “Arts Section.”
- 32 Michel Sanouillet, e-mail correspondence with Judith Rodger, 4 February 2000, quoted in Judith Rodger, “Chronology,” in Reid and Teitelbaum, eds., *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff*, 147.
- 33 Katie Cholette, interview with Tony Urquhart, 6 February 2005.
- 34 Curnoe quoted in Sarah Milroy, “Time Machines,” in Reid and Teitelbaum, eds., *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff*, 35.
- 35 Oliver C. Speck, “The Joy of Anti-Art: Subversion through Humour in Dada,” in Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher, and Ulrich Scheck, eds., *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media* (Amsterdam and New York, NY, 2009), 378.
- 36 Greg Curnoe, “Region=Regionalism,” *The Gazette* (University of Western Ontario), 15 March 1963.

- 37 The other founding members were John Boyle, Gary Bryant, Toby Chapman, Brian Dibb, Bill Exley, Marg McCullough, Hugh McIntyre, Art Pratten, and Liz Sandler. There were two other non-identified co-founders. Rodger, "Chronology," 148.
- 38 Greg Curnoe, "The Relation of Art to Politics," Unpublished writing, Greg Curnoe Fonds, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, AGO, 1963 Writing, 8.
- 39 The First Nihilist Banquet was in fact held at the Melody Tea Room at 646 Dundas Street in London. Charles Gerein, "Anti-Organization Group Organizes Banquet," *London Free Press*, 7 December 1964.
- 40 Rodger, "Chronology," 151.
- 41 Greg Curnoe, unpublished writing, Greg Curnoe Fonds, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, AGO, 1965 Writing.
- 42 John Boyle, "Building a Nihilist Universe," *Paradigm* 6 (1999), 7.
- 43 Barry Lord, "Swinging London (Ontario)," *Star Weekly Magazine*, 13 January 1968, 19. In September 1966 Barry Lord became editor of *Canadian Art* magazine, which he transformed into *artscanada*. The first issue of *artscanada* came out in January 1967 with a cover designed by Curnoe. The magazine included a 45 RPM recording of the Nihilist Spasm Band playing "Canada I think I love you, but I want to know for sure..." Katie Cholette, e-mail correspondence with Barry Lord, 21 March 2006.
- 44 Grant Fair, "Nihilist Noise Numbs York Hotel," *The Gazette* (University of Western Ontario), 7 October 1966, 20.
- 45 Fair, "Nihilist Noise Numbs York Hotel," 20.
- 46 John Boyle quoted in Marjorie Harris, "You Should See it When it's Working it's Really Great," *artscanada* 25, 2, issue 118–119 (June 1968), 7.
- 47 The exhibition was held at the London Public Library and Art Museum on 4–29 January 1966.
- 48 Nancy Poole, *The Art of London, 1830–1980* (London, Ont., 1984), 133.
- 49 In his letter Curnoe also claimed that Bice excluded one of his works from the exhibition as well, although he did not mention which one. Greg Curnoe, "Not 'Leftover' Art," *London Free Press*, 12 January 1966.
- 50 Poole, *The Art of London*, 136.
- 51 J. Russell Harper, "Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art," *The Burlington Magazine* 109, 773 (August 1967), 465.
- 52 Harper, "Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art," 465.
- 53 "The Arts: The First & Last," *Time Magazine*, 19 May 1967, 16.
- 54 "The Arts: The First & Last," 16.
- 55 Robert Ayre, "300 Years of Art," *Montreal Star*, 20 May 1967.
- 56 Letter from Jack Bush to Jean Sutherland Boggs, 22 May 1967. NGC Box 478, Vol. 7, NGC Fonds, NGC Archives.
- 57 The seven band members who went to Europe were: John Boyle, Greg Curnoe, Bill Exley, Murray Favro, Archie Leitch, Hugh McIntyre, and Art Pratten.
- 58 Letter from Joanna Woods Marsden to Guy Viau, 16 April 1968, Exhibition Files, EX 1280 File 12–5–40, *Canada: art d'aujourd'hui*, Volume 4, NGC Fonds, NGC Archives.
- 59 Memorandum from Jean Sutherland Boggs to Guy Viau, 11 July 1969, Exhibition files, B–34. Paris Biennale, 6e Biennale de Paris, Untitled folder, NGC Fonds, NGC Archives.
- 60 Andy Neimers, "Canada Represented by Garbage," *St. Catharines Standard*, 26 September 1969.
- 61 Neimers, "Canada Represented by Garbage."
- 62 Transcript of John Dickins's *Open Line* radio call-in show, CFPL, London, Ontario, 8 October 1969, published in *20 Cents Magazine* 3, 9 (November 1969).
- 63 Barry Lord was the editor of the *five cent review* in 1969. Four issues of the *five cent review* were produced by Unicorn Publishers in Montreal between December 1968 and October 1969.
- 64 Hugh McIntyre, *five cent review* (October 1969), 21.
- 65 Boyle claimed that his goal was "the destruction of the R.C.M.P., the National Gallery, the Government of Canada. My heroes are Paul Joseph Chartier, John Diefenbaker and Jehovah's Witnesses." John Boyle, *five cent review* (October 1969), 21.
- 66 Greg Curnoe, "Written by Greg Curnoe on Aug. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18/19," *five cent review* (October 1969), 21.
- 67 Copy for telex from Joanna Woods Marsden to Jean Sutherland Boggs and Guy Viau, 7 October 1969. Paris Biennale, 6e Biennale de Paris, Volume II, Paris Oct.–Nov. 1969. NGC Fonds, NGC Archives.
- 68 Copy for telex from Woods Marsden to Sutherland Boggs and Viau, 7 October 1969.
- 69 Barrie Hale, "Home-made Music is Pure," *Toronto Star*, 25 October 1969.
- 70 "Parmi les invités, des garçons hirsutes, en blouson, cols roulés et chaussures de sport : les musiciens de l'orchestre 'bruitiste' qui représentera le Canada à la Biennale de Paris. Détail : ils ont fabriqué eux-mêmes leurs instruments, dont un cigare siffleur." "L'ambassade du Canada craint la musique 'bruitiste'," *France-Soir*, 3 October 1969.
- 71 Robert C. McKenzie, "Canada's Official Music Team," *20 Cents Magazine* 3, 9 (November 1969), unpaginated.
- 72 McKenzie, "Canada's Official Music Team."
- 73 Memo from Joanna Marsden Woods to Jean Sutherland Boggs, 29 October 1969. Exhibition Files. B–34, NGC Fonds, NGC Archives.
- 74 Pierre Théberge, "Confessions of a Nihilist Spasm Band Addict," *artscanada* 26, 6, issue 138–139 (December 1969), 68.
- 75 Théberge, "Confessions," 68.
- 76 Rose, "Dada, Then and Now," 4.
- 77 Appignanesi, *Cabaret*, 76.
- 78 Molesworth, "From Dada to Neo-Dada," 178.
- 79 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 6, 7.