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Young Folk Steven Shearer's Heavy Metal Youth and Culture

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Young Folk:

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Whether so-called folk art is considered within its European genealogy of Modernist primitivism or *art brut*, or within its more North American lineage of outsider art or rural, Indigenous, or craft-based traditions, its connoisseurship has always been fraught with contradiction. In his study of popular discourse surrounding folk art, John Michael Vlach gets to the heart of the matter, pointing out that the typically employed descriptors—"primitive, naïve, amateur, grass-roots, outsider, country, popular, backyard, spontaneous, unsophisticated, innocent, provincial, anonymous, visionary, homemade, vernacular, isolate, ethnic, non-academic"²—often would be thought pejorative in other contexts, but instead here, paradoxically, are considered complimentary.

This strategic reversal of aesthetic values is not specific to perspectives on folk art however. The appreciation and appropriation of expressions coming from the margins (cultural, geographical, economic, and so on) has long afforded European and North American artists a way to revitalise their art practices.³ In *The Return of the Real*, the art historian Hal Foster argues that this embracing of the *marginal* can be seen as much a political gesture as an artistic one. This approach offers artists not only a sought-after aura of authenticity or avant-gardism to their work, but also, potentially, a way to affiliate themselves with those deemed societies' outsiders. Such an act is seen as subversive.⁴ And as these previously marginalised voices and vernaculars are absorbed, accepted, and inevitably normalised within the art world, artists continue to search for as yet untapped sources of so-called outsider expression. In this way, as Lucy Lippard contends, the connoisseurship of folk art "has long played the role of the 'other' for a hierarchical dominant culture,"⁵ and therefore must be understood in relation to it.

Claims can be made that the connoisseurship of folk art shares parallels with contemporary art's enthrallment with youth⁶—who the cultural historian Charles Acland tellingly defines as, "Other to the order of the adult world."⁷ Youth, like folk art, is often uncritically associated with uncorrupted subjectivity, emotional honesty, unbridled freedom and pre-socialised revolt by artists, critics and the public. For example, in Francesco Bonami's curatorial statement for the exhibition, *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* (2003), youth is indiscriminately characterised as "self-destructive," "violent," and "tragic," but also "visionary" in its "folly and ideals."⁸ There are marked similarities between Bonami's idealising discourse and that of *art brut*'s spiritual grandfather Jean Dubuffet, who, decades earlier, made sweeping primitivising statements that paid tribute to "the values of savagery...instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness."⁹

With a corpus that concentrates almost uniquely on male youth and its representation usually in relation to the heavy metal music scene, the Vancouver-based artist Steven Shearer offers up a fascinating example of the current interest in youth in contemporary art.¹⁰ Artists who focus on youth can be roughly divided into two categories: those who make artworks with an anthropological bent in which aspects of youth and youth cultures are documented and/or archived (Collier Schorr, Larry Clark, Rineke Dijkstra), and secondly, those generating work in what could be called a general mindset of youth, aiming to capture if not *embody* an overarching youth-based perspective, psychology, or styles (Anthony Giocolea, Karen Kilimnik, Althea Thauberger). Shearer's art practice epitomises both approaches, at times melding the two.

Folk Is Tradition From the Bottom Up¹¹

Emerging in the late 1960s from such hard rock bands as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, heavy metal (and its many latter derivatives: death metal, power metal, speed metal, etc.) is infamous for its loud volume and extended guitar solos, as well as its (oft mocked) followers' style of dancing known as head banging.

The culture of metal is known for embracing an often morbid and misogynist ethos, what Andy Brown has described as "a collective investment in a 'fantastic' masculinity."¹² Because of its focus on dark nihilistic themes, revolving around such topics as drug abuse or violence, heavy metal has been vilified by such groups as the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), "as an evil influence on young people, causing them to take drugs, and even to commit murder and suicide."¹³ However, Roger Horrocks paints a slightly more positive picture, describing it as a musical genre whose "iconography of power, heroic fantasy and intense romanticism can be seen as compensatory in the lives of the [largely white, working-class] audience."¹⁴

In his art practice,¹⁵ Steven Shearer delves into the white male culture surrounding heavy metal through the use of imagery amassed from old teen magazines, self-published groupie websites, band promotional shots, music paraphernalia, eBay, and album covers. He shows a particular penchant for photographs evidently shot by non-professionals with little interest in the photographic medium itself other than as a convenient personal documentation device. Taken with little or no reflexive formal criteria in mind, they are often poorly lit, out of focus, or awkwardly framed. Shearer also expresses being inspired by the visual aesthetic of teen and fan magazines from the 1970s, so unlike today's slick commercial approach in which the subjects and images themselves have been worked on by professional stylists, photographers, and graphic designers.¹⁶ Explaining his appreciation for this particular sort of found imagery, Shearer enthusiastically praises the pictures for being "visually impoverished" with "no editorial self-consciousness" and displaying a "kind of scrapbook quality."¹⁷

In his photo-laminated series, Shearer collages found photographs onto coloured canvases mimicking the rough cut-and-paste montage of these youth-focused magazines from decades past. *Manpile* (1998), for example, features a messy clump of photographs featuring boys partying (one giving us the middle finger his hair almost entirely covering his face) on an orange background. *Mustang* (2005) showcases the eponymous car unevenly cut from its original setting and placed on a backdrop painted sky blue. The Mustang appears to have at least one punctured tire, and Shearer has cut the car out so that it appears to be missing not only a wheel but also its front fender. At the same time, the vehicle is partially covered with a tarpaulin, suggesting the care of its owner, his (thwarted) youthful ambition to drive fast cars and attract girls, as well as the paucity of his economic status. The intentionally crude quality of these works could be understood as Shearer's attempt to embody the energy and attitude of the typical metal fan. Moreover, through his use of collage, he pays homage to the typical teenage activity of decorating bedroom walls with photos of friends and family in tandem with pictures torn directly from magazines, a cheap, creative outlet for young people still living with their parents. Using brightly coloured backgrounds in a palette that recalls children's books or the décor of kindergarten, Shearer highlights this collage practice as a kind of youth-based vernacular aesthetics.

Shearer has also made ballpoint pen drawings using band promotional photos as his source material, an example of which is *Band* (2004), featuring a group of four heavy metal musicians (recognisable as such from their hair and clothing) shot from behind, heads downwards, legs apart. From their stance, the viewer might imagine that they are collectively urinating—an instant signifier of masculine territorialisation, youthful revolt and phallogocentric expressivity. Shearer skilfully captures the obsessive cross-hatching of the talented-but-bored kid at the back of the class who, with sticky ink-smudged fingertips, uses drawing as a way of escaping from his immediate reality, expressing his fandom or simply impressing friends. Moreover, the particular shade of blue and quality of mark-

DARKENED BLEEDING JOURNEY
BARATHRUM OF AHRIMAN
TRANSYLVANIAN HUNGER
OCCULT BLOOD EXCREMENT
DEFILED HUMANITY IN ECLIPSE
ANCIENT THORACOPAGUS
SUCKING ULCEROUS PHLEGM
RISING UNBORN CORPSES
SPAWN OF AZAGTHOTH
CRAWLING IN YOUR BLOOD
PREMATURE EMBALMENT
CANDLES OF DOOMED IMPIETY
NECROLUST APOCALYPSE
VOMITED BROTH OF ABIGOR

VOICELESS ALTARS OF FLESH
DIRTY INFAMOUS PAGAN FOG
PROFANE CALLINGS OF HATE
CELESTIAL DESECRATIONS
OCEANS OF GRIMNESS
RHYPOPHAGIC SELFDEFILEMENT
HEMORROGICAL EXPULSION
BLACK METAL DEICIDE
FECULENT GORETOMB
TOTAL HUMAN HOLOCAUST
CRYPTIC SLAUGHTER
MERCILESS CRUCIFIGATION
AVULSING NUCLEAR ANITCHRIST
BRUTAL FUCKING DEATH

CHTHONOPHAGIC HUNGER
PURE ARTHRITIC TORMENT
WITCHFUCKING HECATOMB
RAPE THE BANNER OF LIGHT
PUTRID NECROGENIC BIRTH
MUCULENT NECROFEAST
FLAME OF BLACK OBSCURITY
BLEEDING SICKNESS
BLACK FUCKING WITCHERY
SPECTRAL WITCHBUTCHER
RIPPED FROM THE CROSS
EMBALMED IN UNHOLY MISERY
VOMITING FERAL HATRED
TOTAL SKULLFUCKING DEATH

PAINTED IN U
EMBALMED I
CONVULSIONS
SPIRITUAL A
DISEASED LIFE
SACRIFICIA
ENGORGED CR
HIDEOUS CON
BRING FORTH
STORMING
ROTTING IN FE
CRADLE OF U
CHALICE
VOMITORIUM

ORGASMIC TEARS OF UNHOLY
PERISHING BLACK LIGHT
SUFFOCATED BUTCHERY
SODOMIZED AT THE CROSS
PUTRID NECROGENIC BIRTH
VOMITED BROTH OF ABIGOR
ROTTING IN YOUR TRIUMPH
GRAND AMPUTATION
BEFOULMENT OF SACREMENT
ABHORRENT DISCHARGE
BAPTISED IN FERAL GOATROT
BEYOND GRIM CREATION
PETRIFIED BREATH OF HOPE
FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROT

MIRRORS OF SUFFOCATION
A B O S R A N I E B O G U M
BEYOND THY CAGE OF FLESH
GROTESQUE SONIC DEVOURMENT
FLAME OF DARK CREATION
CAUTERIZING THE WOUNDS OF
ATOMIC INFESTED CARNAGE
UNHOLY PENETRATION
SECRETING SEEPING LEAKING
CELESTIAL DECONSTRUCTION
WITHIN DISGRACEFUL RUINS
FROSTBORN NECROMORTUM
DIGESTED FLESH OF CHRIST
EXHAUSTED CENTURY

AWAKEN TO CARNAGE
FEAST OF ANCIENT BIRTH
NEW ORDER OF HUMAN FLESH
RETURNING TO SLAUGHTER
POSER VOMITURITION
ETERNAL FUNERAL MISTS
RELENTLESS ABHORRENCE
OPPRESSION IN OBSCURITY
MARCHING TO WINTER BATTLE
IN P A G A N D I M N E S S
DESECRATING THE SPIRIT OF LIFE
UNHOLY INVASION OF THRASH
FALSE METAL ASPHYXIATION
SILENT HOLOCAUST

GRIM FUCKING
GOLDEN AGE OF
BLASPHEMY THR
HEMORROGICAL
INFECTED CAR
PARASITES IN GA
UNHOLY NECRO
SPECTRAL HORR
NAZARENE DE
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IMMERSED I
GRIND YOUR FU

PRISONS OF FOUL FLESH
SUCK MY UNHOLY VOMIT
CONSUMED IN EVIL OBSCURITY
GUTTED WITCHFUCKING HELL
CADAVEROUS MASTICATION
PURE UNHOLY BLOODLUST
INFERNAL DISCHARGE
ETERNAL WOMB OF HATRED
IN ANGUISH AND FURIOUS PAIN
VOLUNTARY AMPUTATION
TOTAL FUCKING DARKNESS
BOUND IN UNHOLY FILTH
WATCHING MYSELF BLEED
I SHALL BE RELEASED

LYCANTHROPIAN CARNAGE
EXHALING PUTRID GOATROT
RAPE THE BANNER OF LIGHT
ROT MUNCHING ARCHITECTS
OF LUGUBRIOUS BEFOULMENT
NECROSADISTIC AVULSIONS
ABANDONING THE FLESH
SPAWN OF AZAGTHOTH
SODOMYTHICAL FROST GOATS
GATHER AGAINST HUMANITY
NUCLEAR ABBOMINATIONS
BLACK WITCHING METAL
TRANSYLVANIAN HUNGER
GRIM FUCKING FOLKTALES

DEAD BRAIN
EUPHORIC DISCO
SENTINELS OF BLASP
ACOUSTIC TO
MISCREATION OF
ABLAZE IN VIRAL
ABSORBED IN M
DESTINED FOR DEF
MOST DEEP AND
MUTILATED REGUR
SPECTRAL HORNS OF
DRINKING FROM
GRINDING OPUS OF H
INTERNAL REDESE

UNHOLY BLOOD
IN BLACK BILE
OF PUTRID LUST
ASPHYXIATION
EXTINGUISHED
L GLUTTONY
ANIAL ROTTING
SUMMED FLESH
FETID DECAY
OF CORPSES
CULENT BLOOM
UNHOLY FILTH
OF INFAMY
CONVULSIONS

SUMMONING INFERNAL LEGIONS
DISFIGURED NECRODementia
SUBMERGED IN GLUTTONY
AUTOPHAGIC DEVOURMENT
BRUTALLY EXCRUCIATED
SHITSTORM OF HUMANITY
BAPTISED IN FERAL GOATROT
UNHOLY CRANIAL INCUBATION
SADISTIC BLACK METAL GLORY
GUTTED WITCHFUCKING HELL
INVERTED PUTRID MASS
ABHORRENT REGRESSIONS
INGESTING PUNGENT LIQUID
ROTTING WITH YOUR CHRIST

CHAINS OF CHRISTIAN FLESH
ENRAPTURED IN PUTRIENCE
BLASPHEMYCAL DISCORDANCE
EXHUME TO CONSUME
BLACK PUREST DESECRATION
MALIGNANT INCEPTION
ODIOUS ABORTIVE DISCHARGE
SODOMYTHICAL CHRISTHUNT
BLACK MASS PERVERSION
INFERNAL DISGRACE
ANCIENT CELESTIAL TYRANTS
FALSE METAL ASPHYXIATION
GRIM FUCKING SATANIC METAL
MARCHING AND BLEEDING

OH ABHORRED DEFILER
DRAPED IN PUTRID GLORY
SUCK MY UNHOLY VOMIT
AURULENT GOG AND MAGOG
BLACK AMEBIC DYSENTERY
ABOMINATIONS OF DESOLATION
AUTOPHAGIC SUICIDE
GODLESS SECRETIONS OF
PLACENTOPHAGIC FEASTING
CHRISTHAMMER TORMENTUM
EVIscERATED ANGEL CORPSE
SCATOPHAGOUS GOATFATHER
CEREMONIAL UNEARTHING
ORGY OF INFERNAL SUFFERING

ING FOLKTALES
OF DESECRATION
ROUGH BLEEDING
ICAL VOMIT
DAVER FLOWS
ARDEN OF CHRIST
MASTERBATION
NS OF TORMENT
COMPOSITION
APSODY OF
DD EXCRETION
RUCIFEAST
N ENTRAILS
CKING MESSIAH

BEHEADED AND SANCTIFIED
RIPPED FROM THE CROSS
DIABOLICAL HALLUCINATION
SUCKING ULCEROUS PHLEGM
CHRISTIAN SOUL INCEST
SPIRITUAL CRAMP
ETERNAL GRIM SUICIDE
EUPHORIC TORMENT
DEATH MUTILATION DISEASE
COLD BLACK EJACULATION
FONT OF PUTRESCENCE
SPECTRUM OF AGGRESSION
CHALICE OF INFAMY
ANCESTRAL NECROSODOMY

REHEARSAL OF FLESH
INTERNAL BLOODY ORGASM
INFECTION PURIFICATION
AURULENT GOG AND MAGOG
DISFIGURED AFTER BUTCHERY
ROTTEN DARK PASSAGE
MALIGNANT IMPREGNATOR
CRADLE OF UNHOLY FILTH
PESTILENT EMANATION
IMMOLATE THE CHAPEL
VISCERAL EXTRACTION OF
AUTOPHAGIC SUICIDE
PURE FUCKING DEATHCRUSH
SPASMODIC CONSECRATION

SUICIDE INSEMINATION
OCCULT CEREMONIAL TOWERS
HALO OF BURNING WINGS
PURITANICAL BAPHOMET HORDE
OSCULUM OBSCENUM
PERVERSE CHAOTIC REIGN
IMPALING THE MARY BITCH
EMBRYONIC NECROPSY
ORGANIC PUZZLES OF
SECRETED NECROBLASPHEMY
TRAILS OF ANGUISH
DEEP APATHETICAL GRIMNESS
SADISTICAL NECROPHAGOUS
POSSESSED WITH ERECTION

CELLS
RDANCE
HEMOUS
RMENT
FILTH
FLAMES
MISERY
LEMENT
FOUL
GITATOR
TORMENT
SKULLS
LABORYM
CRATION

PUSS BLOOD PENTAGRAM
PERVERSE CHAOTIC REIGN
ACHIEVE THE MUTILATION
ALCOHOLIC SMASHING WAR
FLAME OF DARK CREATION
EXHUME TO CONSUME
MISANTHROPIC PANTHEONS
RAVISHING GRIMNESS
BLACK METAL SUPREMACY
SUPERNATURAL ADDICTION
DROWNING IN PUTRID FLESH
VOMITORIUM CONVULSIONS
BLINDED BY MY OWN BLOOD
PURE FUCKING ARMAGEDDON

BLASPHEMY MADE FLESH
MALIGNANT INCEPTION
INVERTED NECROLATRY ROT
BLEEDING AND PRAYING
BLACK METAL SUICIDE
UMBILICAL DIVORCE
NIGRESCENT DISSOLUTION
MUCULENT VOMITORIES OF
ABHORRENT PUTRILAGE
REPUGNANT NECROSCULPTURE
NAILED IN UNHOLY MISERY
EPOCH OF DISFIGURED UNLIGHT
ETERNAL PRAYER OF HATRED
INVERTED PUTRID MASS

RITUALS OF DESECRATION
MALIGNANT INCEPTION
PURE NECROMANTIC LUST
THURINGIAN PAGAN MADNESS
MISANTHROPIC CEREMONIES
PURIFYING THE CAVITY
BURN THE FLESH FROM THIS
VOMIT FLOOD OF PLAGUED BIRTH
ONWARD TO GOLGATHA
SKULLFUCKING ARMAGEDDON
DROWNED IN DIRT
SOLSTICE OF OPPRESSION
CONNECTED BODY PENTAGRAM
SPIRITUAL AMPUTATION

BOUND IN UNHOLY FILTH
USURPERS OF BEASTIAL DEATH
GOATSPAWN BLIZZARD BEASTS
SODOMYTHICAL FROST GOATS
IN ANGUISH AND FURIOUS PAIN
FED BY CHRISTIAN BLOOD
ETERNAL PRAYER OF HATRED
MALIGNANT INCEPTION
CANNIBALISTIC GLUTTONY
RITUALS OF DESECRATION
SCULPTURES OF FLESH
SPIRITUAL AMPUTATION
BLACK METAL WAR
TOTAL FUCKING DARKNESS

Steven Shearer, *Poems V, XII, X*, 2005.
Each: 7 drawings, charcoal on rag paper;
framed. Each 125 x 92 x 5 cm.
Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich;
Ringier Collection, Switzerland. © the artist.

making reveal their source as the ubiquitous Bic pen. Shearer describes his use of this cheaply available pen as allowing him to access a psychological state of generalized adolescent ennui and isolation: "With a ballpoint-pen drawing I can get these kind of inky, dark, dead spaces that I associate with a kind of desolation, because I imagine myself or other teenage kids trying to do chiaroscuro effects with a ballpoint pen, always doomed to fail."¹⁸

Composed of collaged grids of literally hundreds of digital images downloaded from the Internet (fan pages, band sites, etc.), Shearer's large-scale digital prints are very different in aesthetic and approach. Seeking to represent the heavy metal scene, they, unlike the aforementioned works, do not aim to operate within the adolescent psyche but rather mimic the objectifying, supposedly impartial collecting and curatorial procedures of the museum. At the same time, although this series was initiated in the era before Facebook, Shearer anticipates and mirrors the widespread practice of uploading images to various on-line and social networking sites—an ongoing documentation of the most insignificant of daily details that many North American youth in the twenty-first century embrace as an essential and normal part of self-representation.

Guys (2005) is an emblematic example of this series in which numerous individual images (each framed with a border of white) are laid out in one sleek rectangle. *Guys* is comprised primarily of black-and-white or colour studio head- and bandshots of metal fans, stylistically recognisable by their long hair (permed, straight, teased), mask-like make-up, tattoos, (painted) leather jackets, muscle shirts, tight jeans, spandex tights, (fake) bloodstained bodies and bare torsos. Other images were clearly intended at first for personal perusal by their makers and have a more homely quality to them. Some of the more plainly quotidian imagery features heavy metal fans and/or musicians within the domestic sphere (rather than in concert arenas or bars): boys gnawing on meat at a backyard barbecue, a man blow-drying his hair in the bathroom, someone captured sunbathing and so on. Apparently, Shearer inserted a single photograph of himself as a youth, linking his young self indelibly to this scene and culture. The overriding coherence of the content that emerges throughout this massive amount of multi-sourced digital imagery reveals the highly specific performativity that makes up heavy metal masculine identity. Moreover, Shearer's decision to include only images of males gives a homoerotic thrust to his portrait of this culture, undermining the heavily heteronormative outlook for which it is typically known to subscribe. In his text-based series, entitled *Poems* (2001-), Shearer straddles the lines between the two approaches. For this series, he collected and curated lists of text from song titles and lyrics from heavy metal albums. These texts are stencilled in white letters onto black backgrounds in sonnet (14-line) formats, sometimes framed on gallery walls or on the sides of buildings. Featuring a mix of appropriated text and some written by Shearer, one opens with a dramatic dystopian bang declaring "PRISONS OF FOUL FLESH/SUCK MY UNHOLY VOMIT;" another concludes on this depressive, depressing note: "BLINDED BY MY OWN BLOOD/PURE FUCKING ARMAGEDDON." They are exaggeratedly extreme in their unfocused, uncontextualized pessimism and hysterical rage. Moreover, the melodramatically perverse content (presented in all caps no less) underscores the posturing that takes place in the construction of the heavy-metal-loving adolescent male persona. Finally by compiling these texts and then conceiving of his own wicked verse, Shearer not only maps out the canon of heavy metal themes, but captures the allegedly satanic spirit that heavy metal youth are typically known to revel in.

Making Lowbrow Highbrow

Shearer's artworks deconstruct the heavy metal scene in terms of its style, performativity, music and activities. At the same time, they give a kind *gravitas* to his subject matter, a culture typically criticised for its nihilistic ethos, heteronormative attitudes and negative influence on youth, not to mention its being parodied for comic effect in such films as *Spinal Tap* (1984), *Wayne's World* (1992) and *Fubar* (2002). How is this value constructed however? For his photolaminated works, Shearer collages images on to clean monochromatic surfaces that suggest hard edge painting or colour field abstraction. His drawings have been linked, by both critics and the artist, with the stylistic mark-making and portraiture of a range of artists from the European art canon.¹⁹ Jpegs scavenged off the Internet are organised in neat Modernist grid formats according to various

categories: young men and guitars, guys sleeping and so on. Even the titles of heavy metal songs are reconfigured into formats that reference the poetic genre of the sonnet, while the trademark ornate fonts loved by heavy metal bands are replaced by Shearer's customised pared-down sans serif typeface. Thus, even as he pays homage to the culture of heavy metal, this is unflinching done by reframing found images and their subject matter within Western art historical traditions and tropes.

By this token, Shearer's artworks function through what Arjun Appadurai terms, an "aesthetics of decontextualization,"²⁰ in which his source materials are displaced from their original websites and fan pages (images produced by people in the heavy metal scene for fans and participants in the heavy metal scene) and put into gallery settings for a new public (not necessarily conversant with this scene). According to Appadurai, this decontextualization usually results in an "enhancement of value," citing such examples as "the display of 'primitive' utilitarian objects, the framing of 'found' objects, the making of collections of any sort."²¹ And, as these commodities become more available on a wider scale, a new importance is given to what Appadurai describes as "*traffic in criteria*,"²² a process by which the knowledge about a commodity is commoditised and circulated.²³

Likewise, given the hyper accessibility of heavy metal visual imagery to be found on the Internet, it becomes important for Shearer to stress his knowledge of this culture and its importance, as well as to curate, display and interpret it for us. He becomes thus the guide for a public that might find this musical scene exotically unfamiliar. Unsurprisingly then, it is stressed in many articles on his work and interviews with the artist that Shearer was a heavy metal fan and amateur musician as a youth.²⁴ His firsthand knowledge of this culture, his commitment to collecting heavy metal artefacts²⁵ and his resulting expertise in the visual ephemera and material regalia are all highlighted. These biographical details establish his credentials as a heavy metal *insider*, offering a kind of rationalization for his own identification with heavy metal culture and male youth in his art practice (notably heavy metal's many female fans are ignored in Shearer's portrait of the culture). Moreover, it allows for a seductive autobiographical reading of his oeuvre as an ongoing, extended act of self-portraiture.²⁶

Not only does this information justify and validate Shearer's usage of "visually impoverished" materials, but it allows an unschooled audience a desired *authentic* point of entry into the spectacle of long-haired male musicians with their strange costumes, rites and rituals. His representations of the heavy metal scene—one usually linked with politically incorrect values (machismo, misogyny), antisocial or alienated tendencies (rebellion, destruction) and a decadent lifestyle (excessive partying, drug use)—offer viewers a kind of voyeuristic, guilt-free pleasure. Furthermore, his work can be linked on a wider scale with romanticized notions of youth and its passions, and its supposed capacity to live in the present without concern for the future.

Steven Shearer and many of his peers display an unabashed interest in pop culture and a postmodernist penchant for its sampling and recontextualization as playful strategies, refusing the elitist divide between so-called high and low culture.²⁷ Cosmopolitanism, globalization and, of course, the Internet have concretely consolidated this approach to art making. Shearer's appropriation of imagery produced in and around the heavy metal scene as his source materials can be interpreted as essentially an inclusive act, based on the idea that the creative production of untrained or instinctive practitioners have equal if not more value than that of their institutionally schooled counterparts. However, can we assume that simply because Shearer's use of heavy metal source materials has received contemporary art's stamp of approval that artistic egalitarianism has been achieved? Indeed much of the seductive appeal of his work is rooted in viewers' enjoyment in getting to explore a highly specific culture, accessing a scene usually best known by its members. We can feel equally *in the know* thanks to the privileged knowledge of the artist, based on his previous involvement in the scene as a young white male.²⁸ Furthermore, Shearer consistently reverses the supposedly lowly status of his imagery and subject matter through the referencing of various aspects of Western art history, be it abstract painting or the museological traditions of collecting and archiving. In effect, these strategic processes make this culture more easily palatable if not more *worthy* of contemporary art's interest. Even as Shearer celebrates and monumentalises



Steven Shearer, *Group*, 2004. Ballpoint pen on paper; 28 x 28 cm. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Private Collection, Switzerland. © the artist.

the distinctive style, attitude, tastes and subjectivity of metal culture, his project ultimately suggests that his subject matter's value—that is to say, for which it is appreciated by its many fans and musicians²⁹—is insufficient. Rather, as is the case with folk expressivity, its worth is amplified by being found and reframed, curated and collected within an official art context.

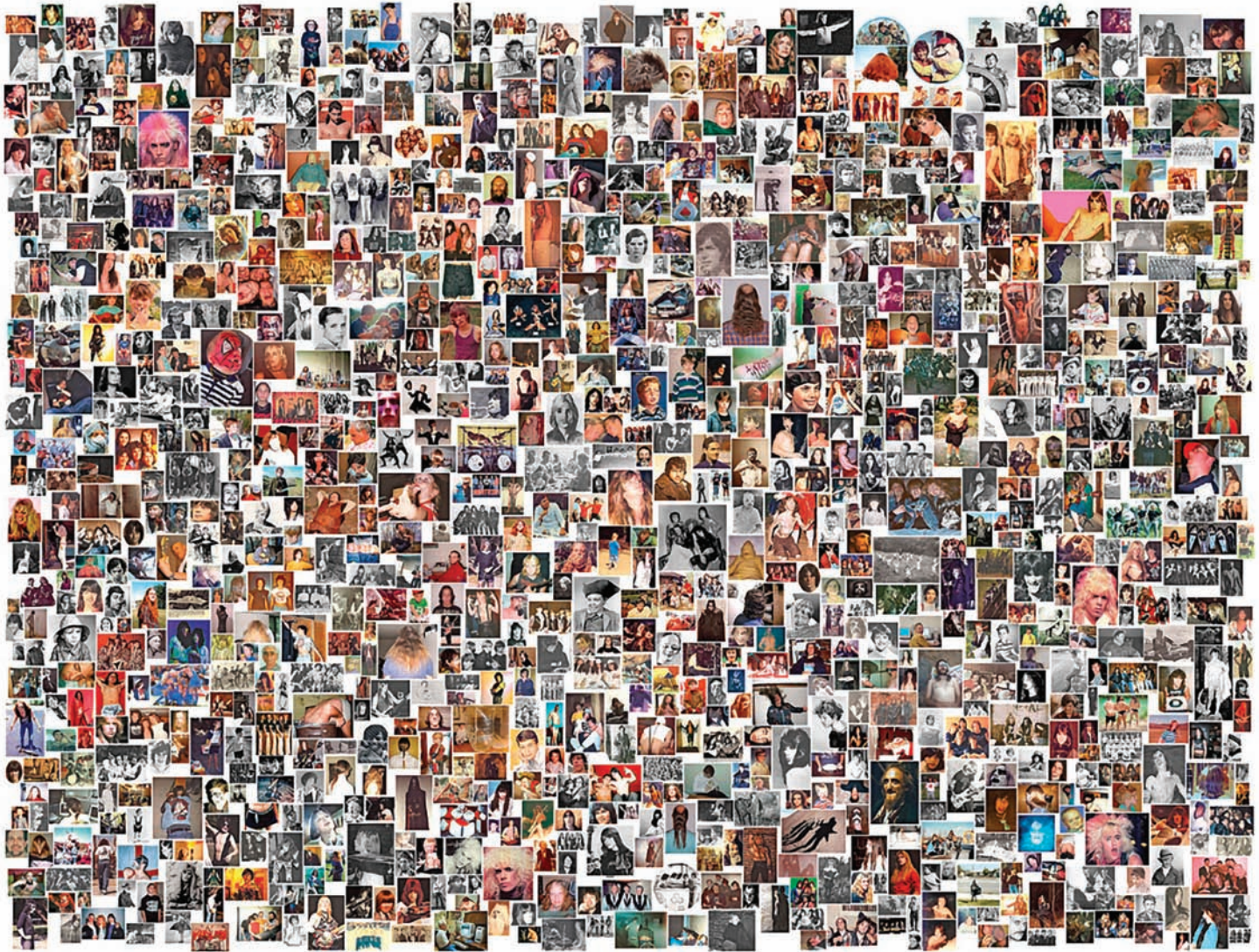
Zoë Chan

Zoë Chan has a Master's degree in Art History from Concordia University (2008). Her thesis research examined representations of male youth in the photographs and films of Larry Clark. She has contributed to *Canadian Art*, *Esse*, and *RicePaper*, as well as the exhibition catalogues *Ed Pien: Haven of Delight* (2010) and *Shié Kasai: Survival Japanese Cooking* (2010).

Notes

- 1 Some of the research for this essay was originally done during my Master's degree in Art History at Concordia University, Montreal wherein I looked at representations of male youth in contemporary art. My thanks to Dr. Johanne Sloan and Dr. Bronwen Wilson.
- 2 John Michael Vlach, "Properly Speaking": The Need for Plain Talk about Folk Art," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner eds. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986), 14.
- 3 From Pablo Picasso's pastiche of African masks to Édouard Manet's focus on the Parisian *demi-monde* including shop girls and prostitutes, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Modernist painters offer up paradigmatic examples of this phenomenon.
- 4 Hal Forster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 4th printing, 1996, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2001).
- 5 Lucy R. Lippard, "Crossing into Uncommon Grounds," in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, Michael D. Hall & Eugene W. Metcalf eds. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 10.
- 6 The fascination with this topic can be seen in such exhibitions as *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* (2003); *Will Boys Be Boys? Questioning Adolescent Masculinity in Contem-*

- porary Art* (2004); and *The Youth of Today* (2006).
- 7 Charles R. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of "Youth in Crisis"* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 19.
- 8 Francesco Bonami, "The Fourth Sex," in *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes*, Francesco Bonami and Raf Simons eds. (Milan: Edizione Charta, 2003), 11.
- 9 Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions. 1951," in *Primitivism and twentieth-century art: a documentary history*, Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds. (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2003), 292.
- 10 Shearer's practice can be linked with other artists looking at music-based youth cultures such as Pia Schachter's photo-portraits of death metal musicians and fans, Nikki S. Lee's participatory performances and documentations of hip-hop and punk scenes, Larry Clark's photographs of Latino punk-loving skaters and Kehinde Wiley's paintings of African-American rap and hip-hop celebrities to name just a few.
- 11 Kenneth L. Ames, *Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition* (Winterthur, Delaware: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1977), 14.
- 12 Andy R. Brown, "Heavy Metal and Subcultural Theory: A Paradigmatic Case of Neglect?" in *The Post-subcultures Reader*, David Muggleton & Rupert Weinsierl, eds. (Oxford and NY: Berg, 2003), 210.
- 13 Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 143.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Shearer was chosen to represent Canada in the 2011 Venice Biennale. His oeuvre includes drawings, collages, prints, paintings, and sculptures; however, for the purposes of this article and due to a lack of space, I will look at examples of the first three.
- 16 See "12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," *Double Album: Steven Shearer with Daniel Guzman* (New York, NY: New Museum, 2008), 83.
- 17 Shearer quoted in Meeka Walsh, "Steven Shearer: The Poetics of Impoverishment," *BorderCrossings* n. 96, v. 24, #4 (2005): 64.
- 18 *Ibid.* 85



Steven Shearer, *Guys*, 2005. Digital C-Print, framed. Ed. of 3 + 1 AP; 186 x 241,3 cm. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. © the artist.

- 19 In a recent interview, Shearer describes some of his influences as being Velázquez, Brueghel, Rubens, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Munch. ("12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," 81)
- 20 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 28.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 23 Shearer himself argues that his artistic process in a sense increases his source materials' cultural significance, perhaps even completes them. Discussing his jpeg series, he states, "There's something in those images that I thought had escaped, had never really come to form. [...] That's why I thought I could appropriate them." Deborah Campbell, "Steven Shearer: Bastard Offspring of the Photoconceptualists," *Canadian Art* v. 22, n. 3 (Fall 2005): 96.
- 24 See for example Roy Arden, "Swinging Lumpen," *Canadian Art* v. 18, n.3 (Fall 2001), 46. Further facts in relation to his biography are often highlighted: the fact that he grew up in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, which was an economically depressed city outside of Vancouver, as well as infamous as being the site where the serial killer Robert Pickton was convicted for having brutally butchered prostitutes on his pig farm. See for instance "12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," 79 and Helena Reckitt, "Boy's Life," Steven Shearer (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery & Toronto: The Power Plant, 2007), no page number.
- 25 This commitment is not just artistic but *physical* as Shearer suggests, mentioning the tendonitis he got from personally typing out hundreds of heavy metal song titles in a work called *List* (2004). Quoted in "12/3/07: Richard Flood Interviews Steven Shearer," 86.
- 26 The art historian Catherine Sousloff reminds us of the important role that the biography plays in terms of giving value to artworks as commodities in the art market, describing this phenomenon as "the commodification (and/or fetishization) of the artist in the form of the object." Catherine M. Sousloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 144.
- 27 Shearer is usually linked with a generation of Vancouver-based artists such as Geoffrey Farmer, Brian Jungen, and Kelly Wood whose respective practices, emerging in the 1990s, revolve around the appropriation of elements of popular visual and material culture.
- 28 As previously mentioned, Shearer's perspective centres primarily on the representation of males while ignoring the many young women that participate in the heavy metal scene. Moreover, his emphasis on white youth does not necessarily represent the current globalized state of heavy metal culture (see footnote 29).
- 29 Heavy metal appears to be thriving. Though Shearer chooses to focus on North American and European heavy metal scenes, documentaries such as *Global Metal* (2008) and *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (2007) show heavy metal fans and music scenes flourishing beyond its traditional geographical borders.