



**plays, protests, punks, poets, painters, photographers...
and unusual art galleries**

commentary by francis powell

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Spring has sprung, here, and France is gearing up for a presidential election, the foremost candidates all fighting to gain the support of yet-to-be-convinced voters. 'Tis the season for political protest—that great Parisian tradition of The Airing of Dissatisfactions—and it's evident even in the local art scene.

In the shadow of the imposing Pompidou Center, a makeshift stage was erected; a banner proclaimed, "Americans Against the War"; and it was there that, several days ago, I witnessed a street play fueled by humor and relentless mockery. The production has two principal players—a man in a large hat bearing the U.S. flag (he was meant to be Uncle Sam) and a woman dressed as the Statue of Liberty.

The title of the show was "1st AAW French Fries Awards Ceremony". It was a pastiche in which prize winners were all protagonists of the current Iraq War. The first award presented: "The Weapon of Mass Destruction". Among others was "The Boys and Their Toys" award. The Bush administration was lampooned, as actors appeared in various costumes and masks—one, inevitably, bearing the face of George W. Bush. Songs were sung, including two anti-war anthems—Pete Seeger's "Bring 'em Home" and "War", by Edwin Starr. Condoleezza Rice was a featured luminary of the Bush cabinet, attracting some amused and bemused tourists. The actors appeared to be enjoying themselves while delivering a clear ideological message.

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Punk rock has long been a tool of protest—indeed, often an exponent of anarchy. I remember an acne-suffering schoolmate, back in the late seventies, had an ever-increasing collection of punk 45s while I was, I admit shamefully, into a *different* style of music—the very style that punk rockers were attacking: stadium rock. I recall going to a Genesis concert and one of the opening bands was Devo. My taste in music began to move more in the direction of punk, landing there as I came closer to graduation. I've also had my love affairs with reggae, ska, dance music and all manner of electronica; but it somewhat surprises me that punk has never truly left. Even on the BBC, stories of reuniting punk heroes abound. Punk heroes with faces old and weather-worn... some even grandparents, now...their balding scalps where colored porcupine quill-like hair once shot into the air.

Yes, punk still has its place, and neo-punksters still vent their anger, scream their rage. My friend

and sometimes music collaborator, Josh Hudes, is one such person. He and I recently went to a bar, not so far from where I live, and found telltale signs of a punk gig.

Josh was involved in every aspect of the evening—organizing, sound engineering, Dj-ing, acting as a musician for all three performing groups, serving as MC. He even made up a number of badges. (Badges, as well as safety pins, are trademarks of punk culture.)

Josh—charismatic, energy-filled, and a natural performer (in between songs he likes to joke and exchange pleasantries with the audience)—is inspired by the Anarchy movement, so it's no surprise that the name of one his groups is Louis Lingg and the Bombs. The band is influenced by The Buzzcocks, The Clash, The Epoxies, Butthole Surfers, Anti-Flag, and Rancid. As Lingg played, an amazon punkette with endlessly long legs snapped photographs, pushing herself right up to the faces of the band members.

There were technical problems—piercing, shrieking feedback and such—but the bands played on. The drummer for the first group (Udigrudi) comes from Brazil; she wore pigtailed and an unbudgeable, impish smile. Whatever the imperfections of Udigrudi's music, they were outweighed by the Brazilian's spirit. A man who goes by the '60s throwback name of Ricky Spontane, and who was clad in a loud red shirt, was the musician sandwiched between the bands. Spontane has a classic rock-n-roll face, a wiry body, and a voice reminiscent of Lou Reed's. He was accompanied by standard rock rhythms hiccuped from an antiquated drum machine. A gathering of Scotsmen in kilts, letters on their backs (they were obviously a rugby team), was drinking upstairs. One of the Scots drifted downstairs and passively watched the punk concert.

The thrashy happening was a bit like being dragged back in time. There were no real musical innovations of which to speak, but the crowd had a good time—as did the bands—living out their punk fantasies.

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I arrived late but in time to hear the event's organizer introduce a poet, there for a public sharing of his work. It felt as though people were awaiting the start of a trial as they scattered incongruously about the sizable cave posing as a rathskeller. I sat on a bench, with two other poets who were also part of the evening's lineup, and realized that I know one of them—the one with the edgy, pensive demeanor.

Live Poets Society (a play on the title *Dead Poets Society*) has been taking place for fifteen years, but I was drawn to it, *this year*, by a friend with a colorful past and a talent for entertaining, witty, meaningful poetry. Her name is Nina Zivancevic; the other two poets are Sue Chenette and John Noonan.

LPC's mastermind is John Kliphan, who insists, in his publicity, that

"...the society does not exist; the poets exist, the listeners exist, the live readings exist..."

But there's no actual 'society'. There are no membership cards. There are no dues. And the only meetings are poetry readings such as the one I attended. According to John, LPC's purpose is to continue

"...the tradition of spoken poetry, the oral tradition, the tale in front of the fire. You, the audience, are just as important as the poets... We believe in poetry as dialogue. We believe in the potency of words to express and communicate human experience. Only some kind of magic can bridge our essential solitude. Ask your lover. Or ask a poet. Or come to one of our readings and see for yourself. Be part of it."

The poetry is sometimes light and humorous, sometimes profound, sometimes sexy, political, or surreal. Sometimes it falls flat on its face. But, often enough, it succeeds. The quality is generally very high, and the work presented in a relaxed, unpretentious, communicative atmosphere.

A brief biography of each poet was given by John, sporting his characteristic black beret. Reminding me, a bit, of a cheery aunt, the first participant clearly wanted to endear herself to the audience, which responded with flutters of polite laughter. She was, also, obviously well acquainted with the technical aspects of poetry, hers being rather refined—though, perhaps, too slickly packaged for my taste.

Nina, announced after applause for the opening poet had died down, was wearing a substantial, eye-catching scarf. Whereas her predecessor appeared comfortable and poised, Nina—a tall, willowy figure, with a shock of hair almost masking her face, and who was dressed in the smart fashion of a high-powered business woman—is of a different ilk. Simply put, she possesses a raw magnetism. She explains, her voice somewhat lost in the vastness of the hall, that her poems have a theme running through them—Cure.

Nina was born in Serbia, lived a rich life in New York, and now fights the constraints she finds herself up against in Paris and French life. She's not a person for whom things have run smoothly or comfortably; she's spoken of friends felled by AIDS. Maybe it's life's hard lessons that have infused her with wit and resilience and that rest behind the poignancy of her work. She bravely addresses those matters from which others generally shy away, and she neither aligns herself with conventions nor the conventional.

For her second piece, Nina read in her mother tongue. I admired the courage it required for her to stand so exposed before strangers.

An American, a Serb, and then, as the listeners drifted, constantly moving to and from bar stools...

A Canadian man in ill-fitting professorial garb, complete with tweed jacket. His long, bearded face could have been ripped from the cover of a paperback detective novel, and his poems contained elements aimed to shock. I noted his carefree presentational style, making him come off, at times, like a comedian. His work, perhaps, held more resonance for other Americans who were present, but was slightly lost on the rest of us.

There was another poet—a woman with pronounced blonde hair whose voice extended far into the room. Her political allegiance was betrayed by the sizable Barack Obama badge pinned to her clothes. Near her, in a portable dog basket, was a whippet, its limbs pulled into a circle. It stirred, during an interval, to accept the admiration of all.

When the order of poets changed, an invigorated Nina stepped up. The American served up more of the same from earlier; and the Canadian, whose first session bore some flippancy, now focused on her father's death. I couldn't help noticing, with some consternation, poets in the audience who were scribbling into their notebooks.

Is this what they do at readings? Use the time to cement their own ideas?

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It was a Saturday morning and the toils of another working week were over. I made my way to the Gare du Nord. (It's almost unfathomable that a railway station could exist with a façade as beautiful as that central Parisian railway station.) My destination was a place unknown to me, endowed with the name Garges Sarcelles. It's some twenty-odd minutes from Paris, and the train passes through stark, industrial, and high-rise areas to get there.

Garges Sarcelles doesn't have a welcoming veneer. I asked for directions and walked along a secluded avenue, feeling eerily alone. A friend/musical collaborator of mine, along with his group of friends—an association known as Jongle&Ris—performed as part of a carnival, which commenced at (an ungodly) 8:30 am. To the distinctive orchestral melodies of Ravel's "Bolero", blasted at an almost deafening level, I entered a sports complex. People were thinly scattered about, but there was no sign of a carnival. I followed the music into an athletics stadium and found only two people—a mother and her child. Puzzled by the emptiness, I inquired as to the whereabouts of the carnival. Somebody informed me that everyone was expected to arrive in a matter of five or ten minutes. Finally, I heard the rumble of far off drums and was taken aback by a protracted stream of approaching people. It was as if the entire town had been evacuated and was now returning. The main component of the throng: children in homemade costumes, many simplistic in their design. Nevertheless, it was my friend and his troop of stilt walkers and jugglers who, in my opinion, stole the show. I was also impressed by some musicians from abroad, particularly a few of North African extraction.

Despite the conclusion of Winter, the weather was gray and bitter, the surroundings, grim; nonetheless, the carnival was colorful and uplifting to the extreme. When I finally returned to Paris, I was amazed to see a man dressed as a clown, unabashedly awaiting the bus. Had the carnival spurred some kind of clown world take-over? My suspicions were heightened further when I saw *the same man*, a couple of hours later, selling animal-shaped balloons near the Pompidou.

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I've known the artist Davide Bertocchi for several years and have seen some of his work at the Palais de Tokyo. He was born in Modena but lives and works in Paris. He presently has a show in a most pleasant and unlikely Boulogne setting, La Blanchisserie gallery. The title of the show is "Selector", and it's a link-up between 100 artists (including Jean Bedez, Laurant Chambert, Alois Godinat, Ingrid Luche, Arnaud Maguet, Pierre Malphettes, Samon Takahashi, Phillippe Terrier-Herman, and, of course, Davide) and their favorite pieces of music. The art is of a conceptual nature, with shades of pop art sensibility. Davide's contribution is an LP (vinyl record) constructed in marble. A projection of a canoe with wheels made of vinyl records is another article on display, in a room where a Dj plays a compilation of the 100 selected tunes. (Because the project is ongoing, there seem to be other compilations from different selected artists played, as well.) In the gallery space, a mirror rotates. There's also a picture in which Samon Takahashi has color-coordinated a collection of vinyl records to create "A Rainbow in Curved Air".

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Lately, photographer Danielle Voirin has been active exhibiting her work at locales such as Un Portrait de 59 Rivoli, a well-known squat. Included in her repertoire are some excellently conceived images capturing the spirit of that squat.

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La Blanchisserie wasn't the only improbable gallery I recently visited. Grace Teshima's Chez Grace (even the name sounds more like that of a Parisian café than that of a fully operational exhibition place), has been around since 2005, and the reason that it has the charm of being a room in someone's cozy house is because that's exactly what it is! When I asked Grace, clothed in striking red, what prompted her to open a gallery in her Montmartre home, she replied, in her

giggly, effusive manner, that she loves "living with art" and "change" (the exhibit switches every month). She informed me that she's not a businesswoman and has recently engaged outside help to run Chez Grace.

The event I attended, there, showcased the work of a French artist called Otuwana, a businessman who exports exotic foods. Some people are a little bewildered by this artist's work, due to its diversity.

The art world could do with more devotees like Grace Teshima, providing opportunities for largely undiscovered artists to put their work on view.

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