

**Lettrist International**

**Faces  
of the  
Avant-garde**

1953

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## Faces of the Avant-garde

*Megapneumatic improvisations (30")*

*Silence (3")*

Voice 1:

In 1947, in an issue of *Fontaine*<sup>1</sup> devoted to trends in poetry, Max-Pol Fouchet wrote:

*The Magnetic Fields* and *The Necessities of Life and The Consequences of Dreams*<sup>2</sup> were published in 1921. *Seven Dada Manifestos*<sup>3</sup> had appeared a year earlier. In 1924, André Breton's *The Manifesto of Surrealism*, Paul Éluard's *Dying of Not Dying*, Benjamin Péret's *Immortal Sickness*, and Pierre Reverdy's *The Wrecks of the Sky* were all published. The first three years of peace saw the emergence of works testifying to a drive towards the extremes of previous exploration, and towards poetry's decisive engagement in risk and rebellion as a way forward. In other words, the books that established Dada and Surrealism had been published three years after Versailles.

Today, three years after the Liberation, are we witnessing similar events and advents in the field of poetry? This question is important, and shouldn't be avoided. But still we must take a step back, to ensure that we don't rush into an assessment of the real interest of such contributions. Likewise we shouldn't commit the mistake of believing that wars are inevitably followed by renewal, demanding unprecedented frameworks, plotting new points of departure just as they redraw the borders on maps. Wars are phases, not eras. The proof of that is that the most important books of poetry published in the last three years (at random: *Dwelling Alone*, *The Poem Crushed*, *Exil*, *Word*, *Ode to Charles Fourier*<sup>4</sup>, etc) are not by previously unknown names. The major poets of 1947 are those of 1939 and before - for some: Péguy, Apollinaire, Valéry (always living), or Fargue, Claudel, Gide - for others: Breton, Éluard, Supervielle, Saint-John Perse, Reverdy, Artaud... The recent popularity of someone like Henri Michaux or René Char can't let us fool ourselves: they were writing before the war, just like Gracq and Queneau. It's just that they have gained a bigger audience - as Prévert did with his *Dinner of Heads* in 1931. Almost all of these poets are forty years of age or older - and this is only rarely the age at which people emerge in poetry, with the notable exceptions of Frénaud and Césaire.

In light of that, is our poetry, in 1947, in a time of ebb-tide? Couldn't a needed succession appear? Couldn't the young poets succeed in freeing themselves from the onerous influence of their elders? Has the establishment of our lyricism since Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Mallarmé frustrated their ability to demand a change-of-the-guard and to hope for fallow land? Nothing guarantees it. I know there are some who report with

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<sup>1</sup> This issue of *Fontaine* (No. 62, October 1947) also included an article written by Isidore Isou (*Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme?*)

<sup>2</sup> André Breton & Philippe Soupault - *The Magnetic Fields*; Paul Éluard - *The Necessities of Life and The Consequences of Dreams*

<sup>3</sup> By Tristan Tzara

<sup>4</sup> René Char - *Dwelling Alone*, *The Poem Crushed*; Saint-John Perse - *Exile*; Jacques Prévert - *Words*; André Breton - *Ode to Charles Fourier*

conviction that today's poetry is exhausted. In truth, they are jumping to conclusions. We must allow it to be born, before digging its grave.

It will be seen that, for these young poets, poetry is only an end to the extent that it can control the fate of man, or more accurately, through happenstance, gives man mastery over his fate. Their highest quest isn't to engage poetry in the service of man, but to engage man in poetry. Thus, we shouldn't be amazed that they constantly refer to André Breton and Surrealism, even though they take care to (sometimes violently) mark their distance. They don't turn what must be an end into a means, and they don't turn their backs on commitment. It remains to be seen if they've lost their way (should their systems prove to be derisory), or if there are better routes and more gifted poets to direct man towards the abolition of his excessive contrariness - and towards freedom.

All of these poets are under twenty-five years old, and only one of them was published prior to 1944. On the whole, it is undoubtedly Letterism which has the spotlight. Shouldn't it be better known? Doesn't it pride itself on a body of theory? We must stop ourselves from, once again, prejudging the outcome. The future will sort things out, separating the wheat from the chaff; the present demands that we study the agitation of the springs, prior to the waters proclaiming their design.

*Megapneumatic improvisations (30")*

*Silence (3")*

Voice 1: 1857

Voice 3: One night I had some ghastly Jewish whore,  
We were a couple of corpses side by side <sup>5</sup>

Voice 1: 1865

Voice 2: The flesh is sad, alas! and I've read all the books. <sup>6</sup>

Voice 1: 1867

Voice 3: Yet I love Kate,  
And her pretty eyes,  
She is delicate <sup>7</sup>

Voice 1: 1869

Voice 2: As beautiful as the fortuitous encounter upon a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine  
and an umbrella. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Baudelaire, *Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse juive* - this translation by Walter Martin from *Complete Poems* (Carcanet, 1997)

<sup>6</sup> Mallarmé, *Brise marine* - this translation by William Rees from *Penguin Book of French Poetry* (Penguin, 1990)

<sup>7</sup> Verlaine, *A Poor Young Shepherd* (original title is in English)

<sup>8</sup> Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror* - this translation by Guy Wernham (New Directions, 1946)

Voice 1: 1871

Voice 3: A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels <sup>9</sup>

Voice 1: 1896

Voice 2: Shitr. <sup>10</sup>

Voice 1: 1917

Voice 3: There is a poem to be done on the bird with only one wing  
We will send it by telephone. <sup>11</sup>

Voice 1: 1918

Voice 2: a e o i ii i e a ou ii ii ventre  
Montre le centre je veux le prendre <sup>12</sup>

Voice 1: 1923

Voice 3: One evening near the statue of Etienne Marcel  
Gave me a knowing look  
He said pass André Breton <sup>13</sup>

Voice 1: 1945

Voice 3:  
A small, short-sighted Jew hunted from Bessarabia<sup>14</sup> by the warlike *carcsac*<sup>15</sup> arrives in  
Paris dragging an infernal machine.<sup>16</sup>

*AI BIDJIBIDJIBAI, Letterist poem*

*Silence (3")*

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<sup>9</sup> Rimbaud, *Voyelles* - this translation by William Rees from *Penguin Book of French Poetry* (Penguin, 1990)

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* - the opening word, "merdre", alters the French word "merde" by adding an "re" ending (the most common verb ending). This is just one of the many possible renderings in English.

<sup>11</sup> Apollinaire, *Les Fenêtres* - this translation by Roger Shattuck from *Selected Writings* (New Directions, 1971)

<sup>12</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Pélamide* (this has been left in French, as a main feature is the untranslatable internal rhyme)

<sup>13</sup> André Breton, *Tournesol* - this translation by William Rees from *Penguin Book of French Poetry* (Penguin, 1990)

<sup>14</sup> Bessarabia was part of Greater Romania between 1918 and 1940.

<sup>15</sup> While this obviously appears to refer to Germany, no translation/reference for this term has been found.

<sup>16</sup> The reference is to Isidore Isou, the "infernal machine" being Letterism itself.

Voice 1:

Sir, In response to your approaches, we inform you that the reading committee of Éditions Gallimard has decided not to publish your essay: *Introduction to a New Poetry and to a New Music*.

Voice 2:

Sir, In response to your approaches, we inform you that the reading committee of Éditions Julliard has decided not to publish...  
(hissing)

Voice 1:

Sir, In response to your approaches, we inform you that the reading committee of Éditions Flammarion...  
(hissing)

Voice 3:

Seghers-Stock-Calmann-Lévy-Éditions de Minuit...  
(hissing)

Voice 2:

Every generation brings with it a mass of new values that are stifled by old rouges of your kind. I warn you that my friends and I are going to smash your face in if you don't publish my work - which is bound to bring about great upheavals. Without any regards. Isidore Isou.

Voice 1:

And every day the writing on the walls was piling up: "Will your body be found on the corner of Rue Sébastien-Bottin?"<sup>17</sup>

Voice 2:

1947. Publication of *Introduction to a New Poetry and to a New Music* by Éditions Gallimard.

Voice 3:

In the evolution of poetry two distinct phases are observed: one of amplification began with the appearance of poetry in the world and ended with Victor Hugo; the other began with Baudelaire and is still continuing. This latter is defined as: the chiseling phase.

Voice 2:

As it had all the necessary components at its disposal, the amplic phase was successful in creating vast works dealing with wide-ranging and varied themes. This is the dominant feature of that era - having possessed so much material, it was able to create outside its own domain.

Voice 3:

It was concerned with topics extrinsic to itself (ideas, stories etc).

The basis of poetry, the *a priori* to which the poet was bound, was speech, and his only way to fight against it was specifically to create through verse. Connoisseurs of poetry were forever concerned with knowing what the creator was expressing in their work: was it an epic, a love poem, or a ballad? For the poet of this era, poetry was simply a convenient

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<sup>17</sup> The offices of Éditions Gallimard were located at 5 Rue Sébastien Bottin.

form to express what they wanted to say. Above all else there must be an idea, a theme. This form of versification is exclusively social - it is recited on formal occasions, performed in public halls, and read out at salons or during special events and public meetings - as it has obvious and generally-understood elements.

Poetry isn't restricted to its own domain, and discovers its subject everywhere, often it even infiltrates into disciplines unfamiliar to it.

Voice 2:

The Song of Maglia

You're beautiful and I am ugly  
Radiant splendour shines on you;  
While I harbour spiders and dust.  
You're beautiful and I am ugly;  
You be the window, and I the screen.  
We'll settle everything in our tiny room.  
I'll protect your trembling glass;  
We'll be happy, we'll be together;  
We'll settle everything in our tiny room;  
You'll make the day, I'll make the night. <sup>18</sup>

Voice 3:

Chiseling poetry set off on a new route. After Baudelaire the entire poetic vision was transformed. Themes were eliminated. Poets try to create poetry in its essence. They try to create a poem by balancing the very lines, by arranging the beauty of language. The poet, for the sake of his work, sets out without any support from tradition. Poetic work becomes a purification, a destruction. There is an attempt to dispel everything associated with elements foreign to poetry.

There is a search for metaphors, images, precious and rare words, for the shock that certain distortions release from words.

The laws, as well as the depths of poetry itself, are released.

It is the work of specialists, as the overall meaning is no longer understood and it no longer communicates with readers in other fields. This is why poetry has become a craft only understood by specialists and connoisseurs, removing itself from a public unable to engage with an austere specialisation.

Voice 2:

Ashtrays for smokers of algae and filters interregnum  
The inventoried ishmi invent roundabout crime  
Percolation  
The Dadaists at the helm of the gulf-stream blowpipe  
Bear lawful and Latin moustaches  
Nursing fistulae of lazulite  
Lazulite lazulite  
Which climbs the Capricorn appeal of Tetrarch zeal vaccine  
And made the provisions of fissured fossils

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Hugo, *Chanson de Maglia*

Of erections filtered by the thorax of Jesus  
Attacks forecast on Shackelton's under-brain. <sup>19</sup>

Voice 3:

We have made progress in the complete and practical destruction of the word in favour of the letter.

In destroying the word we have discovered a new material, as poetic as the old, that no longer has meaning or logic, and that, in addition, contains the music that was poetry's age-old desire.

Today's critics claim that it is impossible to make progress in refining detail. We contest these limits, that are thrown up as a challenge to the potential of poetry.

Beyond the word, we are able to chisel the letter. We push through the precious and the trivial to reach this minuscule and despised value, which we will discover as the measurement of an endeavour that must be carried through to complete fulfilment.

We want to create beauties entirely with letters. We want to create works of art which enchant, overwhelm and move by the beauty of their Letterist unity.

We have to take all letters as common property, laying the wonders created in letters before the dazzled audience; to create an architecture of Letterist rhythms; to amass oscillating letters in a precise framework; to magnificently elaborate the standard empty words; to make a true feast from the crumbs of letters; to take the confused and resurrect it in a more concentrated order; to take what is incomprehensible and vague and make it understandable and tangible; to make silence real; to write Nothing.

The poet's role is to progress towards subversive sources; the poet's obligation is to get beyond the black depths and take on the unknown; the poet's work is to, once again, open a doorway in front of the average man that leads to treasures. There will be a poetic message in new signs. We call the organisation of letters: LETTERISM.

Voice 2:

PRINCIPLES <sup>20</sup>

Voice 3:

Letterism is the art of letters returned to themselves and considered as the constituent elements of new poems.

Voice 1:

We have made it clear that poetry has nothing to do with literature.

Voice 3:

The future of art can only be post-Letterist and not pre-Letterist. We can only destroy the letter by assimilating it, improving it, and exhausting it by surpassing it. We will not forget the letter by ignoring it, but by remembering it's existence too often, until we're "sick of it".

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<sup>19</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Cinéma calendrier du cœur abstrait* (1920)

<sup>20</sup> This section is derived from Serge Berna & Claude-Pierre Matricon, *Vingt questions sur le lettrisme* in *UR* no.1 (Dec, 1950)

## TKDL TAKADELENEN

Voice 1:  
Is Letterism poetry or music?

Voice 2:  
Letterism is neither one nor the other. IT IS. A hybrid blend of two dying arts, it ensures their continuity in the framework of a new art.

Voice 1:  
Is Letterism a language?

Voice 3:  
Letterism doesn't wish to destroy words for the sake of other words, nor to create concepts to clarify the nuances of words. It's a case of speaking for speaking's sake. We have no dictionary, we have no concepts or words to offer to you, just the beauty of letters, the ambiances that form around vowels and consonants.

A word doesn't function to delineate something, to name something, but to have an effect on people.<sup>21</sup>

The Letterist unities that we create are no more conceptual than a Bach harmony. We aren't tackling a question of language. In announcing the final divorce of poetry from literature, we have put an end to a confusion that had made dialectical, sophisticated, philosophical and commercialised language the constituent element of an anti-dialectical, anti-sophisticated, anti-philosophical and anti-commercial art.

Voice 1:  
Letterism is anti-working class!

Voice 3:  
That statement is as stupid as those who make it. Since it doesn't call on any knowledge, Letterism addresses itself to everyone, not just a few. When we've occasionally had to rehearse our performances on the banks of the Seine, road-workers have stopped their work to come and hear us, just like people going to listen to Sunday concerts in the Luxembourg gardens.

## DID-GIVAM <sup>22</sup>

Voice 1:  
What is Letterism's attitude to contemporary literature?

Voice 2:  
Contempt!

*Silence (3")*

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<sup>21</sup> Detournement of Brice Parain, author of *Research On the Nature and Functions of Language* (1942)

<sup>22</sup> This refers to Serge Berna's poem *Du léger décalage qu'il y a entre le Tam du cœur et son écho aux tempes* published in *UR* no.1 (Dec, 1950)

## Megapneumatic Improvisations

### Silence (3")

#### Voice 1:

Dada had already become aware of the bankruptcy of language's conceptual organisation. "Thinking is done in the mouth": the word had been freed from its intellectual burden. However if this represented an overthrow of the intellect, there wasn't a transcendence of poetic material. The Dadaist's use of elements extrinsic to poetry (chance, automatism and the addition of other mediums - typographic, plastic etc) is proof of the exhaustion of all possible combinations of words; the final outcome of what we call the chiselling period.

#### Voice 2:

Surrealism was merely a resumption, a poetic response that followed on from Dada. This is why Aragon would later say:

#### Voice 3:

This anarchy had to be transformed by the adoption of a system we call Surrealism, which was, alongside other systems, the refusal to push the critique of language beyond a certain point. This is what distinguished it from Dada. This is how it returns worth to all kinds of poetic expression that Dada had cast off as rubbish.

With Surrealism the delusion of "words in liberty" dies. The sentence is *reborn*. It *becomes* the unit of delirium. Alongside its traditions and resources: duration is *redeemed*, clauses are balanced. Under the movement of words the classic complements, the epithets, fell in droves. It must be emphasised that it was creation (what was created in those days and within that system) that was most often responsible for *returning* new life to old-style poetics...

That will probably be what will be remembered in the future: the *restoration*, to the field of poetry, of all those things that the taste for negation had rejected over time. Surrealism *restored* writing's right to cite all the words that had been gradually excluded by successive schools, and changing tastes...

It put an end to Dada's trial of language. It didn't pronounce the verdict. <sup>23</sup>

#### Voice 1:

We point out that the evolutionary dynamic of the first Surrealists was buried under a mystico-picturesque jumble and that it lost sight of the real question of poetry, the precondition for any advance.

Apart from displaying a kind of prankster's humour, the unearthing of people like Maurice Scève, Guillaume Budé, and Xavier Forneret has served to demonstrate the helplessness of those who desired to be total revolutionaries. The poetic art of Surrealism hasn't exemplified a point along the golden thread of poetic evolution, instead it has been based on the original creations of its successive leaders: the hypnotic delirium of Desnos, the verbal delirium of Aragon, the paranoiac delirium of Dali.

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<sup>23</sup> Aragon, *Chronique de la pluie et du beau temps* from *Europe* no. 16 (April 1947)

Voice 3:

Throughout Breton's writing his "faith in automatism as a benchmark" persists, not only in automatism as a technique in artistic and literary expression, but also as the highest authority in a general overhaul of our ways of understanding.

However, no matter which manual of modern psychology we consult, we find that automatism is incapable of leading to any new creation since it is merely the disordering of things (and apart from this disorder, Surrealism has led to no other creation). Automatism is the disordering of traditional elements, not the plumbing of unknown depths. Inasmuch as it is a mechanical outburst, automatism is a repetition that leads to habitual behaviours. As such it contradicts Bergsonian creation, which, quite rightly, is in the breaking of well-ordered actions. Automatism is an "inert" natural force, only important to man inasmuch as it can be regulated, and not as a non-critical passivity in which we agree to immerse ourselves. For those on the outside it leads to the comic "snowball", to the absurd, and even to "black humour"; but for those who abide by it, it only brings about confusionism and foolishness - the opposite of discovery. The movement was generated by the concept because they share a common organisation. Automatism has effect, not by virtue of its similarity to Surrealism (as Breton would have it believed), but because of its habitual proximity to the movement. A general overhaul of our ways of understanding can only be obtained by being rescued from all forms of automatism.

If Breton, when compared to Tzara, signalled a period of reaction, then the succession of lesser poets from Michaux to Ponge via Prévert, René Char and Saint-John Perse was in turn reactionary when compared to Breton.

This is why during the postponement of poetry in the years after 1940-45, even those who expressed reservation as to the "viability" of Letterism (like Étiemble, Gaëtan Picon, Maurice Nadeau) were obliged to recognise that it held the only hope of a poetic renewal.

*Letterist Poem*

*Silence (3")*

Voice 2:

An original literary movement is born when a person or group discovers a field of activity, and realises that they won't be able to solve all the issues that the new terrain has suddenly revealed by themselves; that it will require years and years of relentless work, whole lives devoted and sacrificed to these ideas, to reach the fulfilment of their potential, to bring the research to its conclusion.

However it will only become vital and historically significant if the ground is true and rich, if it allows for the development of orientations that search out new horizons, if the movement proves to be unrivalled in focussing every advance in a particular time (like arrows hitting the target), towards the latest path for all cravings and every avarice. <sup>24</sup>

Voice 1:

A number of young people responded to Isidore Isou's manifesto, attracted less by the creative possibilities of Letterism than by its scandalous appearance. This can be called the

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<sup>24</sup> Isou's manifesto (cosigned by Berna, Brau, Wolman, Lemaître, François Dufrêne, Marc'O, A-J Legros, and CP-Matricon) from *UR* no.1 (Dec, 1950)

first wave of Letterism, consisting of: Paul Armandy, Gérard Baudoin, Georges Catinot, Max Deutsch, Charles Dobzynski, Pierre Finois, Claude Hirsch, Henri Joffe, Bernard Lecomte, Robert Loyer, Guy Marester, Richard Marienstras, Louis Mortier, Pierre Pellissier, Gabriel Pomerand, Georges Poulot, Bernard Rivollet, Jacques Sabbath, and Henri Zalestin.<sup>25</sup>

*Harp-shaped Tavane, Letterist Poem*<sup>26</sup>

Voice 3:

But this first Letterist group was gradually unravelled by the critics' sarcasm (that endless grunting of swine) combined with a lack of zeal for a new mode of expression, and ignorance of the elementary concepts of phonetics, acoustics and musical composition. So the group only expressed itself in the scandals that peppered Paris' intellectual life between 1945-47: disruptions at the premiere of Tristan Tzara's play *La Fuite* at the Theatre du Vieux-Colombier, breaking up Gabriel Marcel's<sup>27</sup> meetings, and brawls with Jean-Paul Sartre's followers in the back alleys of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

*Letterist Poems*

*Silence (3")*

Voice 2:

At the beginning of 1950, after a rather long period of inactivity, the movement saw the arrival of two noteworthy poets. They had experienced the exhaustion and bankruptcy of the word through their personal experimentation, and were to open Letterism's productive era through their works and critiques.

Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman assembled young intellectuals around the *Front de la Jeunesse*<sup>28</sup> who were eager to escape the restricted framework of poetry and to take hold of the Economo-Political domain.

The cycle of classical economics was based on the relations between agents who had ownership of goods (defined as *homo oeconomicus* by Strigl).

Disruptions in this cycle were only able to be explained by dubious formulations like Keynes' aggregate demand and Marx's historicity. The discovery of a non-productive group that is untied from the cycle - the *externity* - allowed the consideration of a new explanation. This spirit was brought to life when Serge Berna<sup>29</sup> climbed into the pulpit at Notre-Dame, interrupting the Easter mass, to express an entire generation's desire to cast off dead ideas.

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<sup>25</sup> These names are featured on the front cover of the first Letterist journal: *La Dictature Lettriste* (June 1946)

<sup>26</sup> By Charles Dobre, published in *La Dictature Lettriste* (June 1946)

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Marcel was a playwright, philosopher & Christian existentialist.

<sup>28</sup> *Front de la Jeunesse* was launched in 1950 with an editorial committee of Wolman, Brau, Lemaître, Lips, and Gabriel Pomerand

<sup>29</sup> While Berna was the principle author of the text, it was actually Michel Mourre who delivered the address from the pulpit of Notre Dame.

Regarding Serge Berna the judges were no longer sure on which basis to guillotine him: as a degenerate? a dangerous anarchist? a provocateur paid by the Party? or perhaps by the Church itself (with its legendary depths of Machiavellism).

In his essay *The Aesthetics of Scandal*, Serge Berna recounts another scandal that he carried out during a ceremony organised by the Auteuil orphanage, in which he wished to protest against their tyranny over the youth:

Voice 3:

So we will go to Auteuil to pull off this scandal for which I became a soldier of fortune. As laughter tickled the inside of my throat, I insisted on cleaning my nails in a funeral rite, as one ought to be farsighted and expect the worst...

Then we started to make off with the endless pairs of black orphans and I began to love this miserable selection (I can love anyone, to order) that had been firmly secured by the prayers of the faithful: an ave-maria, a kick up the arse...<sup>30</sup> And finally hatred. Without wasting time, we immediately helped to deliver these young ones from that *hateful* place in a very bloody caesarean, in order to quickly extract them...

I walked slowly into the Gold. I floated in the velvet of those hymns. Skins and high-pitched voices sank into the edges of grass lawns, maintained like Arlette by her benefactor. The successive thick layers of bodies, the perfumes swinging in the black bilboquets: cops and priests...

In fact, we bored ourselves stiff waiting for that fabled right moment: the place was crammed with cops and we weren't very easy to spot, wrapped up in checked shirts and espadrilles in a corner replete with riff-raff. We were fed up with looking up there, towards the back, over the dark line of orphans, towards the altar which was like a wedding of yellows, of reds, of purples with some folk loitering around a white iron shaft erected on a triangular head...<sup>31</sup>

*Silence (3")*

Voice 1:

Nevertheless the group did not reduce its expression in Letterism's own domain.

In October 1950 a season of performances was organised in the cellar of the Tabou, however the police quickly recognised some names of those responsible for recent scandals on the large yellow posters announcing the events. After some pressure the Tabou was shut down for "insalubrity". The Letterists launched a search for available halls: a performance at Royal Odéon on the 15th October, at Rose Rouge on the 18th, and Maison des Lettres on 21st, 22nd, 23rd.

*Letterist Poem*

*Silence (3")*

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<sup>30</sup> The next section of text is untranslatable - it makes verbal puns on the previous phrase: "un cave-paria, un moup ne vied auv mul; un oupav-curia, un lepe-ra-pem-vel-care".

<sup>31</sup> Serge Berna, *un nommé Serge Berna, né à...* from *UR* no.1 (Dec, 1950)

Voice 2:

At the showing of the first Letterist film, *Traite de Bave et d'Éternité*, at the 1951 Cannes Festival, an enthusiastic young man caught in the uproar unleashed by a hostile audience, was seen raising himself to answer a celebrity's sarcastic comments with an energetic fist. In this manner Guy-Ernest Debord indicated his support of the Letterist movement. Afterwards he had to join in the new orientation of the group by casting off the bases of the beauty of the situation in his work: *Sketch of Three-Dimensional Psychology*.<sup>32</sup>

*Letterist Poem*

*Silence (3")*

Voice 2:

This showing of *Traite de Bave et d'Éternité* marks the incursion of Letterism into the field of cinematography.

Gil J Wolman signals the definitive separation of images from sound in his film *L'Anticoncept* - banned by the censor and illegally shown at the 1952 Cannes Festival. Wolman concentrates his research in the domain of speech and arrives at results that the most hesitant critics have been obliged to recognise as most astonishing. Wolman uncovers a new movement that he calls *cinématochrone*.

In *Hurléments en Faveur de Sade* Guy-Ernest Debord raises himself against an ethical order with the greatest possible violence.

Serge Berna wants audience members who see his film *Du Léger Rire Qu'il y a Autour de la Mort*<sup>33</sup> to be so penetrated by the intensity of the sound that they suffer a fatal heart attack.

As for Jean-Louis Brau, his aim is to blast through every kind of barrier to speech, to reach a raw art of elementary sensation.

Jean-Louis Brau takes great steps towards the development of a total art in developing the basis of *stressology*: the study of the psychological and physical effects of shocks and stimuli. The aesthetic demonstrations that he has produced of a stressological approach already take their place among the key artistic works since the war: in poetry, spellbinding chorales, and in cinema the major avant-garde film *La Barque de la Vie Courante*.

*Letterist Chorus*

*Silence (3")*

Voice 3:

Between the movement's performances (which mobilised all the Letterists around a particular action) there were long periods of organisational effort. Groups were either formed randomly, around the sympathies of the time, or by a convergence of specific goals. These groups patronised the established "literary" cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and

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<sup>32</sup> A related title (*Essai de psychologie tridimensionnelle*) is mentioned in *ION* (Apr, 1952), but it was never published

<sup>33</sup> This film was never actually made.

cafés that were becoming known as such. Maurice Lemaitre and Pomerand would go to Café Bonaparte every day to take Isidore Isou's orders; the Mabillon was the lair of Serge Berna and his "hooligans"; Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman were already debuting a new spirit at the Reinitas; and the Moineau on Rue du Four was the incubator of the current generation.

### *Letterist Chorus*

#### *Silence (3")*

Voice 2:

Isou (who has lost interest in Letterism today) and his followers are stagnating in their poetry, continuing to break the structure of the word and inverting sounds in original arrangements - arbitrary combinations which soon begin to reproduce a conceptual execution.

This was the only possible outcome with the unchanging standard of the primitive letter.

It was necessary to try to attack the letter.

This is what Wolman endeavours to do in creating the Megapneumie.

The Megapneumie is the art of letters reduced to themselves and refined. Gil J Wolman demolishes the consonant, to free the consonant from the vowel. Vowels are restored to their abstract hierarchical powers. For each letter emitted, a mass of resonances remain inaudible. To compensate for the bankruptcy of the sense of hearing, Wolman incorporates visual simultaneity (introducing lines and colour). Faced with the impossibility of the total integration of the sense of vision, Wolman adds depth. He initiates Total Art - the creation of which he is working towards in collaboration with Jean-Louis Brau. <sup>34</sup>

### *Megapneumies*

#### *Silence (3")*

Voice 1:

We witness a definitive break at the ideological level between those who want to be nothing more than literary hacks and those who want to go further.

Literature excites us only to the extent that anything could excite us today.

When Charles Chaplin arrived in Paris in October 1952 (along with his escort of paunchy sub-prefects and the representatives of Arts and Letters) Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman wanted to scream out their disgust at this officially-sanctioned non-conformism.

A tract was thrown in the face of the old tramp at Charlot's press conference at the Hotel Ritz:

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<sup>34</sup> Derived from *Introduction à Wolman* published in *UR* no.1 (Dec, 1950)

Voice 2:

A sub-Mack Sennett film-maker, a sub-Max Linder actor, a Stavisky<sup>35</sup> for the tears of forsaken, unwed mothers and the little orphans of Auteuil; Chaplin, you are the swindler of emotions, the extortionist of suffering.

The camera needed its Delly. You've given it your works, and your good-works.

As you identified yourself with the weak and oppressed, to criticise you was to attack the weak and the oppressed — but some already sensed the cop's truncheon behind your bamboo cane.

You are "he-who-turns-the-other-cheek-and-the-other-arse-cheek" — but when we, the young and beautiful, are told of suffering our response is Revolution.

We don't believe in the "ridiculous persecutions" of which you would be seen to be the victim, you flat-footed Max de Veuzit. In the French language "Immigration Service" is pronounced "Advertising Agency". The kind of press conference you held at Cherbourg would be capable of launching any dud. You have nothing to worry about regarding *Limelight's* success.

May your latest film truly be the last.

The footlights have melted the makeup of the so-called great mime, and now we can see only a dreary and self-serving old man.<sup>36</sup>

Voice 1:

Isidore Isou absolved himself of responsibility for the incident in a letter published in the newspaper *Combat* on 1st November 1952, thus making himself appear totally outmoded.

The break was completed, and the signatories of the tract gathered themselves together in the Lettrist International.

The group was joined by the young people who held firm to the practical nature Isou had instilled into Letterism. Amongst them Sarah Abouaf, PJ Berlé, Leibé, Mohamed Hadj Dahou, Linda, Jean-Michel Mension, and Éliane Pápaï signed the *Manifesto* of the Lettrist International.

Voice 2:

Lettrist provocation always helps to pass the time. Revolutionary thought isn't somewhere else. In the absence of anything better we keep up our little racket in the narrow afterlife of literature. Naturally in order to express ourselves we write manifestos. Indifference is a beautiful thing. But our desires are ephemeral and deceptive. Youth is regulated, as it is said. The weeks spread out in straight lines. Our encounters are at random and our precarious connections get lost behind the delicate defence of words. The earth turns as if nothing every happened. To be honest, the human condition displeases us. We have dismissed Isou, who believed in the usefulness of leaving traces. Everything that maintains something helps the police in their work. For we know that every concept and behaviour that already exists is inadequate. Consequently today's society is divided into lettrists and

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<sup>35</sup> Alexandre Stavisky was an embezzler who caused a major scandal in 1934.

<sup>36</sup> Extracted from the tract *Finis les pieds plats* (29 October 1952)

informers, of whom Andre Breton is the most notorious. There are no nihilists, there are only the powerless. Almost everything is forbidden to us. Juvenile delinquency and drug use, like all of our actions in general, are pursued to get past the emptiness. A lot of our comrades are in prison for theft. We stand against the punishment imposed on those who've become aware that it's not absolutely necessary to work. We refuse to debate. The foundation of human relations must be passion, if not terror. <sup>37</sup>

*Silence (3")*

Voice 1,2,3:

But the schools disappear to give way to complex men.

*Silence (3")*

*Letterist Chorus*

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<sup>37</sup> Published in *Internationale Lettriste* no.2 (February 1953)