

Today we should be thinking
about the artist Robert Filliou
(b. 1928, Sauve, France –
d. 1987, d. Les Eyzies, France).

On September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers went bankrupt and Damien Hirst sold \$198 million worth of his own art. For our culture at large, it was a day that finally marked the end of euphoric abundance and cynical strategizing, and when calculated maneuvering went from being an act of savvy cleverness to being one of ignorant selfishness.

Two years later, as a growing sense of a post-9/15 sensibility emerges, the context of art-making has become one that allows artists to let go of some of their strategic self-consciousness and embrace their intuitive sense of play.

Like many of his peers in the Fluxus community, French artist and poet Robert Filliou placed his faith in the clumsy playfulness of games, misunderstandings, jokes, and time spent with friends.

His well-known maxim, *art is what makes life more interesting than art*, is a useful summary of what he stood for.

He first trained as an economist and studied the nineteenth-century utopian-socialist philosopher Charles Fourier. In the early 1960s, borrowing from Fourier, he sought to introduce curiosity, intuition, joy, learning, and conviviality into an art community he saw as weighed down by self-conscious critical distance, careerism, money, expertise, and “talent,” which Filliou considered to be merely the ability to use an acquired skill to execute a task.

In what he called a state of Permanent Creation, all art is life is play, and all are part of everything in the world, all the time. In that spirit, his Equivalency Principle, developed in 1968, posited “well-done,” “badly done,” and “not done” artworks as fundamentally equal.

This attempt to pull art out from under the weight of calculation and strategy opens up a new place, where “error” can be something other than a mark of inadequacy.

His Principles of Poetic Economy reached for a radical re-organization of society that would put artists at the center of politics, economics, and education.

In 1965, Filliou and George Brecht founded a short-lived space called La Cédille Qui Sourit (the Smiling Cedilla) in the small town of Villefranche-sur-mer, on the French Mediterranean coast. With a generous mission statement—“everything which does or does not have a cedilla in its name”—the Cédille was an artist-run storefront, a center for artistic research, a curiosity shop, a headquarters for Permanent Creation.

Its governing code of conduct was
simple: *whatever you do, do something else.*

Filliou and Brecht urged artists, friends, collaborators, visitors, and contributors not to invent, but to disinvent; not to learn, but to unlearn; not to understand, but to misunderstand.

Post-9/15, the values that Filliou represents have taken on a renewed resonance—not only humor and play but also poetry, passion, friendship, gift giving, cost sharing, conviviality, smallness, inefficiency, improvisation, and the importance face-to-face experience.

Artists are drawn to exploring associative acts of intuition; critics are writing about love and the soul; and curators are increasingly active in creating small, cheap, and quick-footed spaces and in doing, as one slogan states, “short exhibitions in a small room, sometimes.”

Being broke doesn't have to mean being broken, and play, in difficult times, is perhaps more urgent than ever.

The first season at The Artist's Institute,
with Robert Filliou, runs from September
19th, 2010 to January 17th, 2011.