

# Ted Riederer's The Resurrectionists

## Five Instruments in Five Acts

By Colby Chamberlain

### I. Do It Again

Start here—In 1953 Robert Rauschenberg knocks on the door of Willem de Kooning with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a favor to ask: Could he erase one of de Kooning's drawings? They sit down and open the bottle, and nervously Rauschenberg explains his current body of work, a series of white paintings wholly lacking in gesture and image. He would like to involve drawing as well, with the only method available, erasure. Would de Kooning, among the most recognized of living U.S. artists, agree to the destruction of one piece for the creation of another?



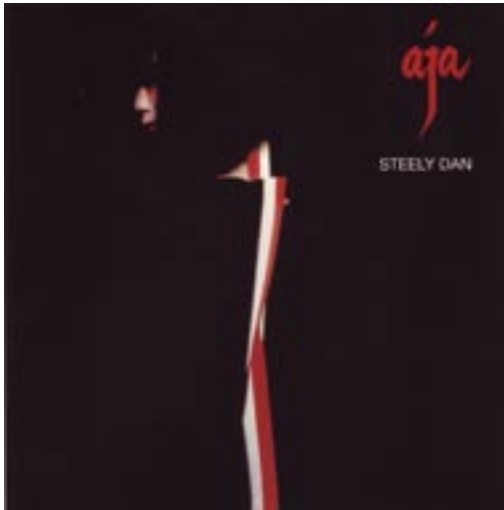
De Kooning is no dummy, and he understands the ballsy nature of Rauschenberg's request. It is an act of insouciance, of slaying the father with eraser-heads. Take away de Kooning's mark and it's tantamount to castration. Nevertheless, de Kooning plays along and begins looking through his portfolios. At first he reaches for a light sketch but thinks better of it. "It has to be something I'll miss," he tells Rauschenberg. He looks through the first portfolio, then a second, a finally in the third finds the perfect piece, grinning deviously.

The drawing is two feet high and thick with graphite, crayon, and charcoal. It takes a Rauschenberg a solid month and countless erasers to remove it all. His friend Jasper Johns decides on the precise wording of the title, which is later embedded into the frame: *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.

Now, with chords—In Spring 2006, Ted Riederer approaches Max Huber, formerly of the punk revival band Swingin' Utters, with a favor to ask: Could he smash one of Riederer's guitars? On a street corner in the East Village, Riederer explains himself. Like Huber, he's a refugee from punk—still has the oversized barn-red van that carried him and his band, Thumper, to gigs in church basements and bars. Nowadays he mostly considers himself a painter but still plays with a Boston-based band, appropriately called The New You. They specialize in self-acknowledged Sunday-morning music, all chiming guitars, careful percussion, and murmured vocals—which, as it turns out, is a hundred-times harder than any three-chord punk anthem.

As a painter, Riederer explains, he reveres craft, patience, and mastery—in short, a set of values that sometimes feels rather unfashionable in art these days. He studies the work of Delacroix and Goya, and sees himself as part of that tradition, even as he pokes fun of it by painting Caravaggio-inspired mosh-pits or water-colors that mimic concert flyers. Imagine his frustration, then, with insider-circuses like the current Whitney Biennial, where a dark glamour pervades and art critics thumb thesauruses in search of new synonyms for detritus: debris, trash, waste. For someone who has spent as long living in No Future as Riederer has, this doesn't seem enough any more.





So why in hell does Riederer want Max Huber to smash yet another guitar? Well, to rebuild it. To gather up the broken shards and frayed strings, to piece them back together with glue and patience. To think past the poetry of wreckage towards an aesthetics of reconstruction, a lyric of revived form. And Riederer wants to pass on the honors of smashing the guitar to Huber so it doesn't become about him, the artist, and instead speaks to an entire community and condition.

Admittedly, this is pretty earnest and heartfelt talk to share with someone you just approached out of nowhere, particularly when that person used to play songs with titles like "Teenage Genocide" and hasn't so much as taken out his earphones during this whole exchange. Maybe Riederer should have promised Huber a six-pack and left it at that. But Huber nods and says that he'll play along, that he understands completely. Then he takes out his earphones and lets Riederer hear what he's been listening to all this time: Steely Dan.

Dear reader, have you even heard of Steely Dan? Unless your parents were fans, probably not. Consisting of the duo Walter Becker and Donald Fagen, along with an ever-changing cast of studio musicians, and named after a steam-powered dildo in William Burroughs's

Naked Lunch, Steely Dan was a fixture of 1970s FM radio. Hits included "Reelin' in the Years," "Kid Charlemagne," "Rikki Don't Lose That Number," and, of course, "Do It Again." "You go back, Jack, do it again / Wheel turnin' round and round." They had a penchant for studied lyrics, complex chord progressions imported from jazz, and polished musicianship; they seldom toured and instead focused on perfecting recording techniques in the studio. Yes, their classic album *Aja* did come out the same year as the Ramones' *Rocket to Russia*, but they might as well have existed in alternate universes—or at least in two different Americas. Suffice it to say that when the step-children of punk start listening to Steely Dan or studying Delacroix, something queer has come over the land.

When Rauschenberg took an eraser to de Kooning, he challenged a governing logic that took stock in the authenticity of gestures and harbored a desperate hope that, even (or especially) after Auschwitz, painting could tap into something primal and pure. In early 2006, when the Whitney Biennial coincided with the retrospective for Rauschenberg's Combines at the Met a scant few blocks away, proof of Rauschenberg's legacy abounded. His rude amalgams of everyday flotsam, his interest in refuse and refusal, his rag-tag assertions—advanced via the denial of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, or the hand-made photo-copying of *Factum I* and *Factum 2*—that authenticity is a lost privilege, are all ingrained lessons for generations schooled in irony and assemblage.

Riederer, then, is exploring murky new territory. How do you make something with the purity of intention that de Kooning's generation once claimed without assuming that state of grace for yourself? What would it mean to take *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and restore its original form, to re-imagine its swoops of ink and charcoal, to bring back whatever it was that de Kooning said he would miss, stroke for stroke?





## II. The Body Electric

“I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together.”  
—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, 1831

After Huber smashes the guitar in the backroom of Niagara, Riederer sweeps up the pieces and brings them back to his basement in Long Island City. He scatters them over a long table and begins sorting, approaching it as one would a jigsaw puzzle—only with a curious additional step. As he identifies each broken piece’s position in the guitar’s overall structure, he marks it with a number, weighs it, and logs the results. Listed in a long column scrawled down his journal, even splinters are accounted for.

The odd practice reenacts the experiments of a Massachusetts doctor named Duncan MacDougall, who in 1907 attracts a great deal of publicity with claims that he has accurately gauged the weight of human souls. Though featured in the *New York Times* and published in *American Medicine*, his methods are suspect and convince few in the scientific community. Nevertheless, MacDougall’s findings take root in the public imagination, long after his own name is forgotten, and to this day legend ascribes to the human soul a weight of twenty-one grams.

How such a quack announcement could capture that degree of attention is difficult to explain without its context, the nineteenth century’s preoccupation with the corpse. Just as the form of the double-helix today dominates the imagery of popular science, the figure of the cadaver characterizes medical practice throughout the 1800s. In England, France, and the United States especially, schools put anatomy at the center of their curricula, and the professionalizing of medicine, the codification of its knowledge and procedures, coalesces around the dissection table.

This new brand of instruction, however, does not come without its costs and complications—namely, a scarcity of bodies. Demand for anatomical training grows, but schools have no means to collect an adequate number cadavers. Classes are delayed for weeks at a time, or simply cancelled. In 1810, Harvard Medical College permanently re-locates to Boston because corpses are unattainable in Cambridge. In the face of such difficulties, a mutual dependence develops between the methods of scientific inquiry and the clandestine practices of grave-robbing. It becomes a rite of passage among medical students to exchange scalpels for shovels and troop out at night to un-earth the newly buried. Schools make informal arrangements with professional body-snatchers, commonly known by the macabre and euphemistic nickname of resurrectionists.



Resurrectionism becomes a subject of public, often violent, controversy. In both England and the United States, resurrectionists caught red-handed rarely survive the wrath of their captors; by the 1840s and 1850s, mobs lay siege to medical schools in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Pittsfield, and elsewhere, overturning the facilities to find evidence of their missing dead. These clashes run along class lines. At the very moment when the bourgeois are investing in their existential security—securing burial plots, commissioning family mausoleums, transforming the work of undertakers into a full-blown profession—resurrectionists in the employ of medical schools raid the graves of blacks, Irish, and other members of the working class. The medical establishment fights for legislation to reduce the penalty for grave-robbing and to regularize the supply of bodies, with some success. Amid furor and protest, Parliament passes the Anatomy Act of 1832, which grants to medical schools the bodies of executed criminals, paupers, and those who die in almshouses. Similar legislation later passes throughout the United States, starting in New York with the so-called Bone Bill of 1854.

In England, discussion of anatomy's dependence on bodysnatching and the ensuing conflict between the sanctity of death and the boundaries of science would have been common throughout the youth of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. The daughter of two noted writers, Mary Wollstonecraft and George Godwin, she marries the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1818, becoming Mary Wollstonecraft *Shelley*, and travels with him to Geneva. There, they spend a rainy summer with the poet Lord Byron, who suggests they pass the time by each writing ghost stories. Shelley is slow to start on her project, but one night amid discussion of recent rumored developments in science and medicine inspiration hits: "I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts," Shelley recalls years later, "kneeling beside the thing he had put together."



That pale student is, of course, Victor Frankenstein, who discovers how to reanimate flesh with a bolt of electricity. "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source." Spurred on by this vision, Frankenstein raids the charnel houses to assemble parts for a new being of gargantuan scale. "The dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation." Published anonymously in 1818, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, with its mix of modern science and gothic macabre, is an instant popular hit.

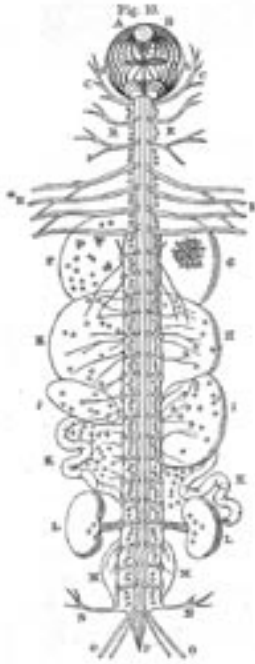
In the United States, anatomy stands at the juncture between science and mysticism, between professional practice and outright hucksterism. Duncan MacDougall is just one of many physicians of dubious distinction who invoke anatomy to hawk elixirs, cure-alls, or reading materials to a curious public. Andrew Jackson Davis, an eighteen-year old shoe-maker, demonstrates a clairvoyant understanding of anatomy when mesmerized; Henry Hall Sherwood publishes volumes on the benefits of electromagnetism, arguing for the positive effects of galvanism on the body's ganglions and heart. Lecturers travel the country elucidating the principles of phrenology, which extends the lessons of anatomy into the evaluation of character.



In 1855, the successful phrenological publishing house Fowler & Wells strays outside its typical subject matter to publish a collection of poems called *Leaves of Grass*, written by one Walt Whitman. In this context of bodysnatching and galvanism, a selection from that volume warrants a re-print here:

*I sing the body electric,  
The armies of those I love engirth me, and I engirth them;  
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,  
And discurrup them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.*

*Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves;  
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?  
And if the body does not do as much as the Soul?  
And if the body were not the Soul, what is the Soul?*



And if the body were not the Soul, what is the Soul? This question is central to the panic over anatomy and its accompanying practices. It's what stirs local communities to riot against medical schools, what gives undertakers a livelihood. Is the body a necessary component of the spirit, or is it of minor consequence to the well-being of the soul? Whitman zealously assumes the former position. Drawing on the language of galvanism, he imagines the soul as an electric current, a charge coursing through the flesh and inextricable from it. In the conclusion of "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman catalogs the body with breathless detail, unfolds an exhaustive survey of its parts and flows. "Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, fingernails . . . Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity." The list sprawls out in all directions. "Oh I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul," declares Whitman, "O I say now these are the soul!"

. . . But where were we? Oh yes, Riederer is still in his basement, he's been down there for nearly three weeks. Does he know about all this shit? About nineteenth-century bodysnatching and Frankenstein, about dissection or the phrenology of Walt Whitman? Actually yes, the boy does his homework, and he's down there piecing together much more than just a guitar. An artist like Riederer thinks in form, ideas are imbued in material. The so-called found object can be a musical instrument or a fragment of history—either might be rearranged and constructed anew. The creative process begins with rifling through the scrap heap; as Mary Shelley puts it, "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself."



Finally, Riederer completes his task. All the pieces are marked, cataloged, set into place. The cracks and fractures reveal themselves only upon close inspection. Good as it may be, however, Riederer is less invested in the restoration of the guitar's superficial appearance than in the revival of its sound. Electric guitars, for the record, make music through magnets. When struck, ferromagnetic strings create specific oscillations that solenoid coils convert into an alternating current. In turn, this current travels through an amplifier and comes screaming into the world as a single note. Riederer takes up the guitar, once strewn over a table in a hundred pieces, and feels out the strings. Trying out a few melodies, he settles on a slow wailing wail, then feeds it through a loop; set onto a guitar stand, the instrument begins to sing.

### III. Empire

Smash is scheduled for a Thursday night in August at Ted's studio. It's been a rainy summer, and this evening is no exception, so the participants trickle in slowly, trooping up the six flights of stairs in ones and twos. A cooler full of beers eases the wait. There are the appointed cameramen, photographers, someone to work the smoke machine, a few stray friends here for the show, and, of course, the band members. For this second rendition of the guitar smash, Riederer has arranged for a full-fledged punk quartet: rhythm, lead, bass, and drums.

Everything is already set up. Two white Gibson guitars and a crimson bass rest up against a drum kit at the center of a concrete slab of a room. Two wreaths held on stands flank the instruments, each with a slogan banner draped across the front; *immaterial substance* at left; at right, *insoluble bliss*. These wreaths are a distinctly funerary touch; the drum

kit, gleaming white and silver, can't help but resemble a coffin. Stage lights and recording equipment lie closer to the door, along with a twelve-foot ladder, intended for aerial views.



In Riederer's studio, you begin to see what's been going on since the Huber piece, a suite of work developed around a fictional band, The Resurrectionists. Paintings, watercolors, and prints draw from the vernacular of concert-flyers and record covers. Paintings with the classic 16"x16" dimensions of an LP jacket chart the band's past albums. *Alive Again* features a blood-spattered Riederer—or rather not Riederer but the band-member who shares his image, whom we'll call, for old times' sake, Billy Shears—emerging from the grave. The cover for *The greatest benefit to the greatest number* is considerably starker, three flag-draped coffins that many will recognize from documentation of transporting bodies back from Iraq, images long suppressed by Pentagon officials. Another wall is all circles: vinyl records with wriggling black grooves, funeral wreaths laden with nothing but barbs—or are those buds?



While we're waiting, a few of us head up to the roof to take in the view. Riederer's studio is at a dead end in Long Island City, just behind the Pulaski Bridge and over the entrance to the Midtown Tunnel, so from there the skyline is one long expanse, stretching out unimpeded in either direction. There's a light drizzle overhead, and a soft fog blurs the usual scatter-pattern of Manhattan skyscrapers—the distinct glittering coordinates of individual offices—into a single pale warmth.

At the center of attention is the Empire State Building, decked out in all-white floodlights honoring the skyscraper's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. First installed in 1964 to celebrate the World's Fair then taking place in Flushing, Queens, the floodlights inspired and, moreover, made possible *Empire*, Andy Warhol's eight-hour static shot of the Empire State Building shining through the night, filmed from the Time Life Building that same year. Lately, it's been difficult to look at the skyline without reflecting on *Empire*, since recently it started screening in a prominent gallery at MoMA, and a handful of its hallowed and grainy film stills have lately shown up in magazines. The effect of such an extended meditation on a single object is to dematerialize the building—to render it no more solid than a pointed halo, no thicker than the surface of film, with its blotches, stains, and scratches. On a night like this, the fog conjures a similar spell; the Empire State is just a ghostly shine in the mist, so tissue-thin and insubstantial that New York's tallest skyscraper, survivor of seventy-five years' surrounding upheaval, might vanish in a moment.



Back downstairs, the band is ready. Gavin, Dana, Johnny T. —veterans of Slaughtershack, Clowns for Progress, Burn, and Go Away Evil, to name a few—have arrived and, along with Riederer, changed into all white. Their outfits gleam softly under the stage lights. They pick up their instruments and take position. The cameramen and photographers confirm their equipment settings, and everyone else crowds by the door.



Someone turns on the smoke machine; for a room this size, the device is pitifully small, and its jerky spurts of fog add only a whiff of absurdity over the whole enterprise.

One-two-three-four, Johnny T. does the count—the no-fuss kick-off you expect from a punk song. Greil Marcus reminds us how punk departed from rock’s tradition of adding an extra ‘One-two’ at the outset. “The punk rejection of the opening ‘One-two’ meant that punk was ready to dispense with any warmup, with history.” Indeed the Resurrectionists will never be more ready to pull this off—which is not to say they have any clue what they’re doing up there. From the moment Riederer first swings the crimson bass above his head, it’s a complete clusterfuck. Smash, the body of Dana’s guitar goes spinning across the concrete, and Riederer’s flies upward with uncanny bounce. Left with nothing but the neck, he throws his back into cracking the frets. Johnny T. kicks over the drum kit and crashes cymbals. Eventually everyone converges on the bass drum, taking shots at the rim until Gavin heaves up the whole thing and slams it down with a deafening boom. The room shakes and plaster falls off the ceiling like ash from the sky. One by one they walk off.

The whole shebang hasn’t lasted any longer than a minute, it all happened so fast. Everything’s a mess of smoke, plaster, and ruin, with nothing left standing but the two wreaths straddling the wreckage. A stunned silence stretches on awkwardly until finally someone starts clapping, and we all whoop and survey the damage. The concrete is a chaotic swirl, with flurries of dust and a confusion of parts. Guitar knobs scattered to the corners and strings curling around kick-stands. How the hell did these things fly so far? Are demolition sites always such displays of ragged beauty?

We stick around a little longer trying to process what just happened and helping Riederer empty out that cooler full of beers. Outside, it’s late enough that floodlights of the Empire State Building have gone out. That gauzy white apparition from an hour before has vanished, leaving only the trace of a faint shadowy outline, barely there.

Back upstairs, Riederer takes a broom to the concrete and starts sweeping up the debris. A riot of a minute has yielded a few weeks’ worth of repair. The first task will be sorting the pieces, singling out the remnants of each guitar. Riederer seems unbothered—in his mind, it was much harder coordinating and cajoling all the people involved in tonight’s smash. The mending demands only time and determination. And that can start tomorrow. Riederer pauses before he turns off the lights. This is what remains: twin funerary wreaths, the lingering smoke, the echoes of battered drums.



#### IV. If I Sang Out of Tune

After the smash, Riederer takes the Resurrectionists project in two directions, editing the video-recording with his friend Ethan Minsker and piecing together the instruments on his own. Once the recordings are finalized and the instruments restored, Bill Fallon and Ben Gurley from Ted's band The New You drive down from Boston to create a musical score. None of them have any idea of how it will turn out—the only thing they're sure of, in fact, is that they only have 36 hours to complete it, start to finish.



There are two versions of the smash video, each proof of the humor in destruction. The first edit, lasting no longer than a minute, plays out as an over-the-top slapstick routine, like the off-kilter house-wreck in Laurel & Hardy's *Big Business*, complete with a comic din of bangs, booms, clangs, and crashes—falling anvils can't be far behind. In a second, slow-motion version, shards of wood spin through the air in cosmic rotation. Referencing the solemnity of a goth rock video, or the pivotal actions in cheap summer action flicks, the video is an exercise in mock-profundity, a joke of the utmost seriousness.

The New You's first stop is Ted's studio, to record a drum track in the same room where the smash took place. They set up Johnny T.'s drum kit, banged-up but none the worse for wear, and Ben hits the toms as hard as he can. The cymbals crash, and it's the same tumultuous noise that filled the room during the smash, only with a bit more rhythm. These correspondences are important. In no time at all The Resurrectionists has become an unwieldy project—comprising painting, sculpture, photography, video, music, and the quite the cast—and these unities of time and place, as well of course the talismanic qualities of the instruments themselves, ensure that all these off-shoots return to its central themes: an act of restoration, a gesture of return.

For this weekend, The New You is not The New You. Rather, they're playing as the Resurrectionists, writing a score for a video featuring a corresponding set of people playing as the Resurrectionists, with Riederer as the only overlapping member. This conceit fixes the project squarely in the venerable tradition of fake bands, ranging from recent outfits such as Gorillaz or Gnarl Barkley back to theatrical extravaganzas the likes of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars. No less an album than *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is built around the premise. The Lonely Hearts lead singer is the one and only Billy Shears, played by Ringo Starr (a.k.a. Richard Starkey)—a bit of a joke considering Ringo has a vocal range of about three notes, which intimates a wink behind the first line of Billy's song "A Little Help From My Friends": "What would you do if I sang out of tune?"



*Sgt. Pepper* is just the most significant example of a fictional band serving as a necessary front and format for out-on-a-limb experimentation and outrageous new noise. Probably it's freeing to pull off the wayward calliope and fairground organ medley of *For the Benefit of Mr. Kite* when it's one step removed from your own name. Then again, an alternate identity probably harbors its own deeply personal allure to anyone in the supernova circumstances of the Beatles, at the time among the most recognizable people on the planet. Often they're reduced to traveling in disguise, either donning fake

beards on the streets or signing in under false names at hotels. Paul McCartney's favorite such alias is Paul Ramone—a piece of trivia that years later captures the attention of a few pimply kids growing up in Forest Hills, Queens. They take the surname as their own and form around it an outfit, an ethic, and a sound.





In a few hours, Riederer's basement, where the instruments were reassembled, turns into an impromptu studio stocked with microphones, amps, a laptop for mixing, and a television for repeated screenings of the smash in slow motion. To be honest, it's a little awkward getting started. Since they're playing outside the usual boundaries of being The New You, Riederer, Fallon, and Gurley are building from the ground up. They look to the video for cues and inspiration: the grim beauty of raining plaster, the synchronicity of Gavin and Johnny T. hurling drums in unison, the occasional poltergeist flash from a camera, the alternating mood of dour intensity and punch-drunk glee.

Another hurdle is of a more technical nature: the instruments keep going out of tune. This tendency so frustrates the group's high standards of musicianship that it takes some time to remember that *of course* these guitars are going out of tune—that going out of tune may in fact be the whole point. The guitars are the ones with the story to tell. In a manner of speaking, the musicians are letting the instruments *play them*.

The score that emerges the next morning is a narrative without lyrics, a tale of wreck and revival. It begins as a dull whirr, the electrical hum of amplifiers left unattended. Layers of white noise pile atop one another, each discordant and heavy; distorted loops throb like a lingering headache. Then this rough debris discovers a deeper sense of order, a governing pulse. The drums jump in, each beat rippling out in long echoes, and the whole thing opens up, claustrophobia giving way to release. Guitars surge upwards, taking position and speaking to another, at first in taut and urgent tones, then in steady counterpoised strumming. And finally, a single soaring voice, high over the drone below, lilting and hopeful. It's a shaky resolution at best, but it will do.

Fallon and Gurley have to drive back to Boston almost as soon as they make the final cut. Riederer helps them pack up and thanks them a hundred times over. In light of all these different aspects of the Resurrectionists project—the score, the



video editing, the smash itself—it's sometimes difficult to remember that just a few months ago Riederer considered himself a painter, typically a pretty private pursuit. And here he is, corralling twenty-odd people for the smash or collaborating with a band, working constantly, as one might put it, with a little help. In no time at all, Riederer has created under the banner of the Resurrectionists a community—one composed loosely of members of the Antagonist Movement (the weekly art night he co-organizes at Niagara), alums from the School of Visual Arts, fellow survivors of punk rock, maybe even a few assorted groupies—and goes to great lengths to recognize everyone's contributions. It's a working method that owes as much to the garage band as the gallery—DIY, gracious, and thoroughly punk rock.

## V. Ergo

Lester has been wanting to say something for a while now. He's been waiting patiently, and finally it's his turn. Without further delay, a brief history of punk, as written from the standpoint of 1977:

*I mean, it's easy to forget that just a little over a year ago there was ONLY ONE THING: the first Ramones album.*

*But who could have predicted that that record would have such an impact—all it took was that and the ferocious edge of the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK," and suddenly it was as if someone had unleashed the floodgates as ten million little groups all over the world came storming in, mashing up the residents with their guitars and yammering discontented non sequiturs about how bored and fed up they were with everything.*

*Punk had repeated the very attitudes it copped (BOREDOME and INDIFFERENCE), and we were all waiting for a group to come along who at least went through the motions of GIVING A DAMN about SOMETHING.*

*Ergo, the Clash.*

Those words were written in 1977, after Lester Bangs toured with the Clash through England and departed dumbstruck at the band's courage of conviction and generosity of spirit (not to mention their solid appreciation of the Muppets). No one came closer, Bangs argued, to "the realization of all the hopes we ever had about rock n roll as utopian dream." Nevermind that a rock utopia is an ever-receding point on the horizon, the Clash were, and perhaps remain, the only band that matters.

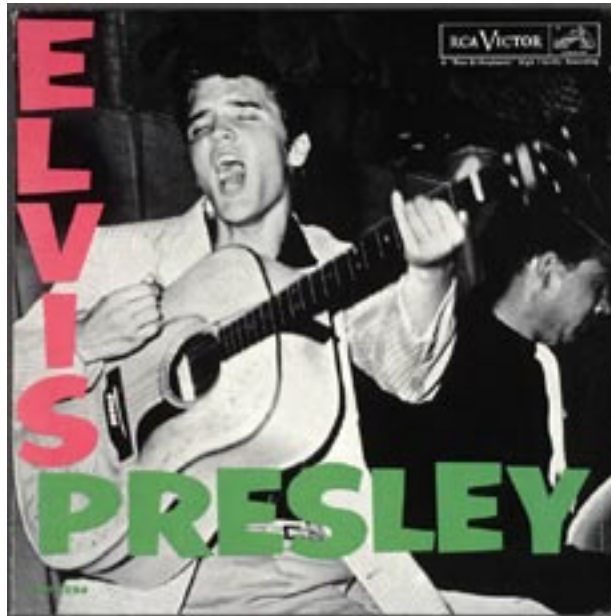
Humbly and brashly, I would like to offer here a new telling of Lester's short history, re-vamped for the present moment. In this version, the artists of New York find themselves in strange times: There's war abroad, division at home, a great gaping wound downtown. The close connections between culture and capital give them unparalleled opportunities to witness the luxuries and excesses all those tax-cuts for the supprich make possible, even as affordable studios, along with many a middle class enclave, vanish with brutal speed.

And in response: at best, a deep resignation, an apparent disinterest in addressing any of this, or actually expressing anything at all. The fashionable aesthetic becomes an evermore canny strategy of refusal and, at a moment when so much has been broken, a general contentment to play hide-and-seek among the debris. And probably this refusal is more rationally defensible—maybe even more *truly* radical—and maybe the moral of every failed utopian gambit that has preceded this moment should indeed be why bother. But sometimes it's hard not to wonder why the adherents to that outlook don't move into advertising, or some other profession where they can get bigger cash returns on their cynicism, and leave the vocation of art to the utopians, the overly generous, or anyone else sharing in the collective urge for someone to come along who at least goes through the motions of *giving a damn* about *something*—in a manner passionate and intelligent enough not come off as a damn hippie.

Ergo, the Resurrectionists? Maybe so. This is, after all, a body of work that aims for an aesthetics of reconstruction, that is built around a set a formal concerns yet moves out into all media, that is equally committed to the coherence of its outcome and the righteousness of its working method. It is terribly earnest in its intentions but also unabashed about its humor. In 2007, you can't seriously smash a guitar without laughing a little. The operative phrase in Lester's parable is *at least going through the motions*.

Dr. MacDougall's century-old experiment to gauge the weight of souls was a failure but an interesting one, enough so that his theories of spirit and substance have become the stuff of legend. Evidently some ideas work better when they're flawed. Likewise, Riederer's galvanized guitars slip out of tune, but they do make a beautiful music.





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