

## DEATH DRIVES, DIFFERENCE, NOTHINGNESS

Dieter Roelstraete Ponders the Work of Steven Shearer

*"In essence, the mass culture of today is the folk art of tomorrow. Leaving the idea of nostalgia behind - since folk art is, really, a timeless art supposedly representing traditionally shared values - the mass culture we live in at the moment is already folk art."*

Mike Kelley, On Folk Art [1]

"SORRY STEVE, WHEN WE TALK ABOUT CELEBRATING CULTURAL DIVERSITY WE DON'T MEAN YOURS"

Steven Shearer, Sorry Steve (1999)

### 0. Introduction: Introductory Warning, Autobiography, Anecdote

Readers who may not have a great deal of interest in anecdotal autobiography creeping into a critic's reading of an artist's 'visual' work - and they are doubtlessly right to be suspicious of such presumptuous obfuscations of the Work of Art as are implied in each and every instance of autobiographical self-absorption on the part of the writer instead of the artist - may want to skip these opening pages; their understanding of the work of Steven Shearer will not be hampered in the slightest - if anything, it will probably turn out less tarnished than that of those willing to continue "here and now". After all, these opening lines speak of the nature of my encounter with the work of Steven Shearer, and not just anyone else's - and frankly, whom could I honestly expect to give a shit about the nature of that encounter that is so ostensibly 'mine', other than myself? Indeed, these lines speak of the experience of both 'nostalgic' enchantment and (more importantly perhaps) recognition that I myself felt when first encountering Shearer's art; surely recounting this experience shouldn't be made to posture as art criticism - which is exactly why I am stating, by way of introductory advice, that it is not art criticism but autobiography instead, and why I am stating it with such ardent emphasis, is another fine example of personal involvement perhaps.

That said, however, seeing as the art of Steven Shearer to a certain degree 'is' about the dual experience of nostalgia and enchantment, and about the artful reconstruction of those conditions conducive to re-enacting these experiences, it might not be a bad idea after all, at least for the mildly interested, to allow my indulging in anecdotal autobiography - and read along, starting "here and now".

My obvious appreciation of the work of Vancouver-based artist Steven Shearer has many origins and raisons d'être, foremost among them, of course, the sheer quality and strength of said work, making for some of the best art to come out of the famously spoilt artistic milieu that is Vancouver in the last decade - a city that is home to an exceptionally rich community of artists comprising, among others, Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall.

However, I have no problem admitting that another reason for this appreciation is far more 'subjective' and personal in nature, and is closely linked with my own youthful experiences of growing up in the rather eventless middle to late eighties in an equally eventless backwater in the utterly forgettable border region where Belgium's far west hugs the Northern shores of France - not unlike growing up in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, in pretty much the same period of time, I suppose, as indeed was the case with Steven Shearer.

Much of my time in those days was happily squandered listening to the extremely loud, extremely obnoxious and, most importantly perhaps, extremely obscure music that at the time was coming out of such unlikely locales as Bradford, Birmingham and Ipswich, England, Tampa, Florida, Gothenburg, Sweden, and various minor cities in Finland, Greece and Japan; these experiments in the outer reaches of musical extremity were rooted in fast, technically savvy and devil-worshipping early death metal, in abrasive, nihilistic hardcore punk, and in artsy forays into noise and audio terror terrain. The bastard genre of ear-splitting sonic torment that came out of these unholy couplings came to be known as "grindcore", and was pioneered by various legendary and lesser-known outfits such as - nomen erat omen - Napalm Death, Extreme Noise Terror, Doom, Sore Throat, Repulsion, Terrorizer, Filthy Christians, Rotting Christ, and Impaled Nazarene, scoring improbable 'hits' with albums such as "Scum", "From Enslavement to Obliteration", "A Holocaust in Your Head", "Police Bastard", "Acid Bath" and "World Downfall". The stance was fiercely political and ferociously anti-establishment; with the anti-musical program - best encapsulated by the war-mongering motto "Make Noise Not Music" - came anti-social behavior, articulating itself in impossible eating habits (I still feel for my mom, who, from one day to the next, had to put up with my staunch vegetarian demands) dropout dress-codes and horrendous haircuts (I still resent my mom for making such a big deal out of the spiked-up hairdo). In short, grindcore's overriding 'cultural' appeal lay not only in the music's tremendous energy and its subsequent promise of cathartic release, but also in its passionate embrace of a steely, resounding

"NO" ("No For An Answer", "No Means No", "NoNoYesNo") as a legitimate cultural position, in its (admittedly, rather nihilistic) proclamation of negation and negativity as forceful cultural strategies and all-around viable "ways of life". Clearly, the conscious provocation of this celebratory embrace - cranking the stereo up to volume 11 every time "You Suffer" came up - was fostered by the recognition, however inarticulate, premature and un(in)formed at the time, that, given the obvious untruth of the world as it represented itself to the aspiring young radical, the only way out of this world would have to involve a lot of kicking, screaming and violent denunciation, i.e. of a violence even more terrifying and 'operatic' than the structural violence implicated in the establishment of this false reality itself. Of course, I hadn't read any Adorno at the time, but in listening to bands like Carcass, Extinction of Mankind or Seven Minutes of Nausea (as well as playing in like-minded bands myself) I was obviously, unwittingly, subscribing to his dictum that "in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image."<sup>2</sup> Put in yet another way, this improbable "cradle of filth" is where I first stumbled upon the bedrock that would, in later years, provide the substance of my ongoing engagement with philosophy, critical theory, and, most importantly, Art.

Now this whole story is a solid seventeen years ago, and needless to say I now spend far less time listening to the soundtrack of my youthful rebellion; in the intervening seventeen years, I have grown up to love many more musics and appreciate the respective realms of cultural experience these various musics imply: listening to Glenn Gould's 1955 recordings of Bach's Goldberg Variationen, I affect genteel, urban ways that easily blend in (or so I imagine) with fifties, modernist New York; listening to the grim, ruffneck darkcore drum & bass beatz that wreaked havoc in East London's club scene in the mid-nineties, I smoke pot and conjure the apocalyptic desolation of British inner cities groaning under the yoke of decades of Tory mismanagement; listening to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme", I catch a glimpse of the blinding light that emanates from a higher being's Eternal Truth (even when manifesting itself by way of scorching black consciousness). In short, I have become a more complete human being, and sanely shed the skin of an adolescent posturing that was perhaps too one-dimensionally geared towards épater les bourgeois: I have no time anymore for grindcore's ludicrously simplistic politics, let alone its crude D.I.Y. ethics - I eat meat, cut my hair and regularly don designer suits - and frankly never gave a shit for the hair-brain metal cult of the Evil Dead in the first place. All these reasons notwithstanding, however, I have always kept going back down grindcore's memory lane, for what I now understand to be reasons of primarily aesthetic pleasure, but also for more deeply 'philosophical' reasons: because I like (and in some ways even continue to be inspired by) the operatic, performative aspect of this particular subculture's demands on physique, and because there simply is no mayhem like Mayhem. But also because Napalm Death, to name but one honorary example, simply says "NO" in ways that no other cultural forms can do, certainly not in terms of ferocity, intensity, velocity and volume. For sheer visceral excitement and cathartic release - a perfectly human desire - nothing beats the kick of hearing Morbid Angel's anthemic "Chapel of Ghouls"; as far as death drives and similar destructive impulses go - a perfectly human urge - nothing beats the apocalyptic, over-the-top nay-saying of Extreme Noise Terror's "Only In It For the Music". I find myself reaching back for these worn-out, scratched records because their theatrically contrived nihilism can be a source of great 'critical' solace for me (nihilism is and will always be critique), and because every now and then I find it necessary to avail myself of the insultingly blunt weapons of 'critique' these positions provide - especially when the instruments of critique offered by the art world seem to be faltering and/or irrevocably compromised. Indeed, I now find myself going back down memory lane more often than before simply because the lofty realm of art, which I always believed should be a refuge for the very idea of negation as a warrant for difference, for "doing things differently" - in truth, aren't all subcultures in the end united in their dedication to "making (a) difference"? - is progressively being drained off the powers of negation and negativity that are imbedded in these anti- or subcultural strategies.

Entering the studio of Steven Shearer, then, and being greeted by the grinning, goat blood-stained faces of (predominantly dead) Norwegian devil-worshippers, by the stern invocation to "exhume to consume", by a faintly fauvist homage to Pete Sandoval, the human tornado manning Morbid Angel's Drums of Death, by a crudely rendered Mayhem logo - in short, by the great nay-sayers and indomitable, unyielding savages of contemporary culture - how could I not be enthralled by the shock of recognition? Indeed, how could I not feel instantly at home in this Heart of Darkness, the baleful echoes of which I first heard beating a solid seventeen years ago, in the bludgeoning experience of death metal's or grindcore's very own "negative dialectics" - the path that would lead me, via philosophy, to art, the art of Steven Shearer among others?

## **1. Rampage, Deluge, Abomination: Some Notes on Steven Shearer's Archival Works**

The question of the archive is not a question of the past. (...) It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself. (...) The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to

come.

Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of Steven Shearer's disparate artistic universe - a world that encompasses drawing, painting, sculpture and various types of "beachcombing" and/or collage - we find the so-called "archival works", monumental inkjet or digital prints in which the artist hoards together, in ways that may seem just as erratic as they are rigidly thematic or rigorously systematic, thousands of minute, coarse-grained images picked from obscure sources - many or most of them in fact 'amateur' internet websites, but on a telling number of occasions, these huge, labyrinthine meshworks of optic fodder also include pictures of the artist himself, either as a young boy, teenager or young adult, leaning against a Duke of Hazard-style Firebird, as in Scrap #1, or posing in full-on Kiss regalia, complete with black-and-white facepaint<sup>4</sup> in Boy's Life - and painstakingly assembled together in lavish, bewildering tapestries of meticulous visual reasoning that, in most cases, seem to defy all extant discursive logics. On occasion, the seemingly random nature of these vast machines of associative, 'magical' thought results in some "uncanny juxtapositions", to quote from Bruce Hainley's essay on the subject: "in Owls, Butterflies, Corpsepaint, the spooky eyes of forest birds, butterfly-wing graphic design, and black-metal corpse paint posit an updated A Rebours of culture against nature, or nature as felicitously artificial as culture."<sup>5</sup> The reference here to the culture/nature dialectic is a by no means an arbitrary one, for much like the high-minded products of traditional easel painting's trek into the Great Wide Open, Shearer's archival works may indeed resemble instances of landscape painting - the painting being an especially 'sociological', even 'anthropological' one, and the landscapes in question being those of high culture's social debris or marginalized undercurrents, most famously the elusive, corresponding netherworlds of "trailer park", "white trash" ('lumpen') American folk culture and the teenage celebrity cult of hybridism and androgyny. Arguably Shearer's most emblematic and encyclopaedic work to date, Boy's Life brings both purgatorial zones together in a dizzying panoply of images that includes promo shots of the Osmonds, the Partridge Family, and the movie musical Oliver!, and photos of naked hippies, glam rockers, Black Sabbath tapes, death metal picture discs, drum sets, guitar amps, owl tattoos, mullets, tool sheds, responsible playgrounds, pet opossums, crocheted bedspread - and a self-portrait of course, in full-on Kiss regalia, complete with black-and-white facepaint.

Well-versed in the many different languages of western art history, both orthodox and heterodox, both canonical and apocryphal, the artist himself has referred to the cut-and-paste, scrapbook aesthetic of works such as Owls Butterflies Corpsepaint, the aptly titled Scrap #2 and Geometric Healing no. 5 as a "vulgar variant of the avant-gardist collage", thereby inscribing his tactics of abandon, profusion and rampant growth in a tradition that also shelters the rowdy, recalcitrant oeuvres of, most notably, Kurt Schwitters, John Heartfield (an important if largely unsung figure in Vancouver's politically engaged intellectual art climate) and Hannah Höch; the propensity towards disruption and violent displacement that is inherent in the very idea of collage (as opposed to mere 'smoothing' montage), however, is subtly counterbalanced by Shearer's conscious, detached espousal of the stern geometry of taxonomy and classification. The austere grid-like patterning of these printworks inevitably recalls Rosalind Krauss' portentous statement on the centrality of the grid as one of the foundational myths of modernist and/or avant-garde art practice<sup>6</sup>, while the engagement with the sobering particulars of mongrel photography - the artless bedrock of the amateur cult so 'loved' by the artist - may indeed be read as, in Matthew Higgs' words, "acute and often witty interrogations of photography's modus operandi", allowing the author to firmly posit Shearer's work in the mighty lineage of Vancouver's "post-conceptual photography" idiom, one of late modernism's most persistent myths (Higgs subsequently calls Shearer's work the "bastard child of Photo-conceptualism")<sup>7</sup>; certainly, his interest in the structuralist aesthetics of the matrix as the work's primary organizational principle resounds with echoes seen or heard in the work of fellow Vancouverites Roy Arden, Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace - as an art city, Vancouver is (still) very much dedicated to the master narrative of Hegelian dialectics, the critical wellspring from which all thoughts of 'grids' and 'matrices' flow.

Encyclopaedic, kaleidoscopic and taxonomic, it is primarily this 'scientific' strand within the work of Steven Shearer that anchors the well-known and widely disseminated (though not wholly convincing) claim that seeks to equate Shearer's work with a visual anthropology of 'modern' and contemporary youth culture; in part because of reasons that are, again, quite simply biographical in nature, Shearer has been singled out as such a visual anthropologist or archeologist of heavy metal counterculture in particular, and his ongoing series of Metal Archives are those works that are perhaps the most straightforwardly 'anthropological' in tone, revealing a loving yet slightly disengaged interest in a commonly disdained, low-level ('lumpen') subculture that, in Shearer's reasoning among others, in fact fosters a truly contemporary variant of "folk art" in which crassness equals authenticity, and as such could be construed as an unsuspected hideout of utopian yearnings. Furthermore, as every anthropology or sociology, or every instance of soci(ologic)al 'landscape' painting, should also propound an economic 'theory' of the social phenomena it seeks to address or map out, the Metal and Guitar Archives in particular provide an insight into the humble and mundane

'infrastructural' realities that determine and define the tacky culture of metal guitar worship. As Matthew Higgs perspicaciously notes in his short essay on the work of Steven Shearer, "a significant side effect of these ad hoc images is that the socioeconomic status and lifestyle of the heavy-metal enthusiasts are baldly revealed in the details of the vendors' homes"<sup>8</sup> - needless to say these homes are nothing like the palatial abodes of refined taste that the cultured cognoscenti of this peculiar brand of 'abject' art inhabit. In this regard, the Metal and Guitar Archives may also be considered a sobering 'humanist' take on the same issue that also inform Roy Arden's 'documentary' Landscape of the Economy project.

Finally, the archives of course also 'serve' to reveal the reservoir of obsessions that continue to inform Shearer's multifaceted artistic practice: whereas the totemic fetishism of Guitar showcases the artist's benign interest in proletarian craft and suburbanite blue collar vernacular, Toolsheds, a derisive debasement of the hallowed archival aesthetic of Bernd & Hilla Becher, also doubles as a harsh, damning comment on contemporary art's persistent infatuation with architecture, both as 'theory' and 'practice'. As the artist himself confided to the author in a conversation in Vancouver in July 2005, architecture all too often - in the perennial guise of architects' models, building plans and schemes, as urban 'proposals' and statistics seeping into art exhibitions, biennials and the like, or what I would like to call the "Koolhaas effect" - functions as the "refuge of weak art", and it is precisely the contemporary art world's current obsession with housing as 'sheltering' (another symptom of the all-too-pervasive therapeutic doxa of "Relational Aesthetics" to which I will be returning later on in this essay) that is in some way denounced or at least critically challenged in Shearer's own take on the topical art/architecture interface - a depressing catalogue of quaintness, prosaically listing all types of garden or tool sheds as the ultimate achievement in the architecture of trauma, retreat, resignation and defeat<sup>9</sup>.

Speaking of both quaintness and trauma is where yet another important stratum in the issue-saturated 'archival' art of Steven Shearer comes into play - that of gender, hybridization and the seventies' experiment in teen identity. The series of archival print works conceived around 70s teen heart-throbs such as Shaun Cassidy and Leif Garrett (a triptych titled I Thought I Was a Visionary - but I Learned I Was a Channeler) complement the crude panorama of uncomplicated, 'straight' masculinity, however "at the margins", that is exposed in the Guitar and Metal archives, as well as in Toolsheds. Substituting the symbolic minefield of class - that which the neo-liberal world order has sought to abolish, but has simply succeeded in aggrandizing to a global scale - with the equally precarious 'non-site' of teenage sexuality and subdued androgyny, the archives of Steven Shearer thus constitute an artistic world-view that is almost exclusively peopled by men, documenting "male-dominated activities played out in countless suburban bedrooms, living rooms, gardens, basements, and dens,"<sup>10</sup> and appearing unsettlingly lacking in apparitions, however "at the margins", of the female form. [The one work that, revealingly, includes the greatest number of images of women, girls and female bodies, is none other than *Repose*, a kaleidoscopic inventory of "people asleep" - or, as pop Freudian lore, would have it, overcome with a "death wish" or "death drive" of sorts. This inevitably leads one to question whether women, or images of women, are only "allowed in" when depicted certifiably passive, 'dead' or reduced to a state of powerless non-being. Is the mystique of the female form only allowed to manifest itself vicariously, namely in the experimental play with gender roles and stereotypes that is implied in Shearer's investigation of the cult of the androgynous male teenage body?] Whereas the guitar and metal archives obviously purport to stage (and thus also reinforce) the clear-cut, anxiously patrolled gender lines that apparently come custom-made with American lumpen culture, the Cassidy & Garrett archival works paradoxically seem intent on breaking down those very same barriers, most notably by bringing into play the slippery, positively threatening notion of "male beauty" - the great Unspoken of western art history.

In one of his most recent archival works *X-mas Trees* (2005), finally, Shearer appears to be paying satanic homage to the iconic upside-down photographs of lone-standing trees - an ongoing series of works pioneered, incidentally, in Flanders' fields - by fellow Vancouverite Rodney Graham, an artist known internationally for his interest in arcane art-making technologies (the upside-down trees recall the camera obscura mechanics that give birth to photography, and hence also to 'photoconceptualism') as such). In Graham's work, the heroic, mythopoeic 'portraits' of grandiose oaks, soaring willows and majestic cedars, in part meant to symbolize the romanticized "splendid isolation" of the Modern Artist (equally important, as a line of inquiry, in Graham's so-called "trilogy of costume dramas", in which the artist appears, respectively, as a lonesome, ramblin' troubadour in *I Was a Ramblin' Man*; as a castaway survivor of a shipwreck in *Vexation Island*; and as a schizophrenic bohemian type forever caught in the fateful cycle of urban sophistication and rustic cluelessness in *City Self/Country Self*), obviously correspond to both his earlier and subsequent forays into the dense forests of British Columbia that fringe Greater Vancouver's suburban sprawl, where the threatening, formless mass of innumerable trees that engulf the viewer (in *75 Polaroids*, in *Illuminated Ravine*, in *Edge of a Wood* respectively) clearly operates as the spectral nemesis of suburban anxieties and as the proverbial site of some nameless trauma - a "site of trauma" that, in the life-world of Steven Shearer, would surely be identified as "Port Coquitlam"<sup>11</sup>.

## Interlude: Choosing Death

In *Archive Fever*, a belated "Freudian impression" that came quick on the heels of his critical 'rediscovery' of the spectral legacy of Karl Marx, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida famously linked the mnemonic impulse of the archival enterprise to what Sigmund Freud so felicitously termed the "Todestrieb" or death drive: "If there is no archive without consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, contrary to what may perhaps be expected, "the archive (...) will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary, the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory." In other words, "the archive always works, and a priori, against itself;" in truth, "there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive." In naming his collage-based artworks 'archives', Shearer consigns these vast, sprawling galaxies of 'amateur' imagery to the abysmal realm of Thanatos; the various Guitar and Metal archives indeed resemble gulag archipelagos peopled, not so much by actual human beings, but by the spectral shadows these human beings have left behind: it somehow seems fair, irresistible even, to assume most of the human figures (again, predominantly boys and/or men) depicted in these kaleidoscopic works dead<sup>13</sup> - an intuition that is further enhanced, of course, by the fact that so many images in these 'atlases' document the morbid leanings associated with different teenage cults of transgression: with so many long-haired, black-clad, angst-ridden middle class kids donning the ghoulish corpse paint that has been de rigueur in so many factions of the global metal underground for so long, it is especially tempting to construe Shearer's archival works as the exact necropolises these legions of undead seek to roam.

But death and destruction, as Derrida pointed out, is also implied in the logic of Repetition itself, i.e. in the logic of the archive as such: the very act of archiving presumes the sepulchral mode of burying the archived beneath the rubble of sameness, of the ever-same, of the certifiably identical. [Again, it is of course no simple coincidence that Shearer's most 'scientifically' sound archival work to date, and hence also the most literally archival, *Repose* (2004) - a work in which the act of archiving itself most ostentatiously produces the archival effect of sameness, and in which monomaniacal repetition directly ensures the obliteration, annihilation and 'leveling' of all 'difference' - should consist of literally hundreds of pictures of people 'slumbering', i.e. teetering on the brink of that Deathlike Silence that is Sleep.<sup>14</sup>] In the modern era, no artist has done more to dramatically foreground the implicit correlation between repetition and death, between the serial and the lethal, than Andy Warhol - the Warhol of the Chair series first and foremost, but also of the many car wrecks, H-bombs and other man-made disasters - and it should come as no surprise that Warhol, too, has been mentioned on many occasions when discussing the work of Steven Shearer, even if only for the formal 'convergences' of their screen-print 'painting' techniques; it is also Warhol, finally, whom Gilles Deleuze refers to in his groundbreaking *Difference and Repetition* when considering art's various "techniques of repetition": observing that "art does not imitate, above all because it repeats", Deleuze finds that in "Warhol's remarkable 'serial' series (...) all the repetitions of habit, memory and death are conjugated".<sup>15</sup> Like Derrida twenty-odd years later, Deleuze recognizes that "strangely, [in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*] the death instinct serves as a positive, originary principle for repetition" - and this repetition, according to Deleuze, "is against the law;" this law in turn regulates the realm of generality. "In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, its nominal or general character in favor of a more profound and more artistic reality" [my emphasis, ed.]. In short, repetition, as the 'morbid' principle that governs the 'art' of archiving, effectively produces art as a reality defying both generality and law. In "choosing death", the archival fact of repetition and the repetitious fact of archiving 'produce' art as such.<sup>16</sup> This becomes especially clear, I believe, in the work of Steven Shearer.

## 2. Paint It Black, Draw First Blood: Painting, Drawing and such

The neglect of anthropomorphic representation, and the deformation of it, encouraged entire legions of painters to turn out stupid and facile reproductions. With its return the problem of animal-man looms larger and more terrible than ever, since, this time, the right weapons to confront it are lacking, or rather they are in existence, but they are blunt, and many have forgotten how to use them.

Giorgio de Chirico, *The Return to Craft*<sup>17</sup>

I have called the archival works the "heart of Steven Shearer's disparate artistic practice". As befits art in the era of decentralization, however, this 'central' position is also a visibly ambiguous one, and one that is continually contested from within the work itself; like Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, to which (along with the

'archival' works of Marcel Broodthaers and Hans-Peter Feldman) these pieces have on occasion been likened, it is alluring to think of them, not so much as the actual 'art', but first and foremost as the wellspring of iconographic motifs from which Shearer distills the actual material for both his paintings and drawings, i.e. for the recognizable format of the painting or drawing as a final product or "masterpiece". Quite literally, then, the archival works hold the future of Steven Shearer's Art: they are the purgatorial machine through which those images are processed that may or may not make it to the Pantheon of Painting. Indeed, scanning the bewildering surface of archival inventories such as *Boy's Life*, *Guitar and Metal Archive*, with its motley crew of 80's glam hair metal bands, Norwegian Black Metal terrorists and various mullet-sporting, backyard-wrestling blue-collar types, its many samples of "contemporary folk art" (mostly customized cars, customized guitars, and customized drum kits) and relentless procession of Ozzy Osbourne incarnations, one quickly comes across the crude, unprepossessing images that, lifted from the dire oblivion of the multitudinous, were in some sense allowed to be transformed, by way of the traditional techniques of painting and drawing, into bona fide 'art'. The archive-painting nexus constitutes the liminal space where Pete Sandoval, the positively ferocious drummer with Florida death metal ruffians *Morbid Angel*<sup>18</sup>, 'becomes' the artwork *Pete* (2001); where the rightfully suspect Rick Wakeman, of *Yes* fame, 'becomes' *Hash* (2005); where - the most successful metamorphosis of all perhaps, in that it is fast becoming Shearer's most iconic, 'signature' picture or painting - Larry LaLonde, the guitar player of legendary (and fittingly obscure) proto-death headz *Possessed*, becomes *Larry in Germany* (2004). In the field of drawing, this alchemistic process of purgatorial transformation is applied most notably to an ungodly assembly of fierce-looking death & black metal partisans such as *Mayhem's Euronymous* and *Necrobutcher* as well as *Celtic Frost's Tom G. Warrior* (in *Longhairs*<sup>19</sup>, 2004), and *Obituary* (in *Band and Group*, both 2005), all of whom appear 'somewhere' in Shearer's archival hall of shame but "only really become artworks" when treated to the artist's magisterial crayon, pencil and silverpoint magic; alternately, the seven silverpoint drawings that together make up *Dirtyface* (2003-2004) are ostensibly based on the utterly forgettable seventies teenage playthings who star in Shearer's *Cassidy/Garrett* glossaries.

The obvious 'critical' effect of these procedures partly hinges on the well-known dialectic, inherited from a long history of avant-garde practices that culminated in Pop Art, of wedding high- with low-brow cultural dynamics, the lowly, vulgar motifs of the everyday with the hieratic, lofty techniques of cultural aristocracy: by subjecting the Dickensian biedermeier kitsch of *Hucky*, the gluesniffing street urchin, to the sacred rites of crayon or silverpoint technique, Shearer's drawings ostentatiously enter into the dialogical space of canonical art history. The drawings evoke obvious reminiscences with the work of Brueghel<sup>20</sup>, Cranach, Dürer, and Holbein, the sovereign master-draughtsmen whose works so prodigiously straddle the transition from the bleak, twilight world of medieval Gothic, with its penchant towards the grotesque, the macabre and the lugubrious, to a world enlightened by humanist reason, a new world order in which the portrait was to become the ideological cornerstone of all great art - a chasm that is in some way reflected in the contrast between the vile milieu of underground pop currents which Shearer so candidly documents and the timeless aura of the artworks extracted from these muddy, foul-reeking strands of popular 'trash'. In the paintings, this effect of deliberate estrangement becomes even more palpable as the abyss between crude 'metal' motifs ('puffrock') or the awkward schmaltz of 70s teenage pap on the one hand and the great, hallowed traditions of oil painting further deepens - to equally great critical effect: in the eerie *Larry in Germany* the gloomy nimbus of Edvard Munch's sinister symbolism both dissolves the 'original' image's pop-cultural overtones ("*Larry LaLonde from Possessed*") and simultaneously reinforces, through the application of psychedelic Munchian brushwork, the visual experience of witnessing a man possessed.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, through its formal resemblance to such iconic, terrifying Munch classics as *Ashes and Madonna*, true Norwegian monuments to fin-de-siècle morbidity and Europe's perennial *Todestrieb*, *Larry in Germany* unwittingly brings to mind - the mind of the undersigned, that is - a line from one the 20th century's most chilling poems: "*Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*", or "Death is a master from Germany".<sup>22</sup>

Even though the cult of 'craft' is very much at the center of Steven Shearer's current preoccupation with - and investigation of - painting's many mannerisms and methodologies (and partly responsible for his subsequent move away from the slick 'Warholian' printing techniques that defined much of his painterly output in the nineties, as in *Chevron*, *Denim & Leather* and *Oueff*), inevitably, and predictably perhaps, the relationship the artist entertains with all notions of tradition, mastery and craft - especially where these 'antiquated' notions converge in the high-art pantheon of painting and sculpture - is a highly ambiguous, even scabrous one, fraught with anxious affectations of trauma, abjection and denial; this becomes especially apparent in works such as *Satanic Rampage* or *Maze of Torment*, *Hatework*, *Cradle of Filth*, *Chasm* and the like (all four from the so-called *Craftmonster* series, with titles that again refer back to the diabolical art of Metal songsmithing), silk-screened reproductions of crudely rendered, faux-expressionist "children's art" - all visibly dating from the late fifties and early sixties, an era naïve enough to still believe in the blessings of "staying in touch with the inner child" - that caustically mimic the commonplaces of modernist abstraction or, alternately, invoke that era's analogous architectures of repression, as in the modular play area that may just as well be

considered an ingenuous prison-house in PVC, or the retro-futuristic, biomorphous structure resembling a typical urban plaza sculpture in Playground. Far removed from the apparently effortless virtuosity of execution and dedication to stylistic command that animates Shearer's current pictorial output (and subsequent interest in the syntax of the 'masterpiece' that has been a hallmark of much Vancouver art of the recent past), these lugubrious, often labyrinthine monstrosities - shit-colored spiral jetties, spiraling intestines - embody the proverbial Evil Twin that lurks in the shadow of all utopian modernist schemes intent on unchaining the terrifying creative energies of the infantile urge, sexual or otherwise; as such, the sinister invocations of an unsullied, 'premodern' infantile naivety that haunt these works enter in an 'enlightening' dialogue of sorts with the archival works that seek to mine the related ambivalences of teenage & young adult male sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Not entirely unexpectedly, then, Vancouver-based critic and curator Scott Watson has framed Shearer's works within the context of the so-called "cultivation of infantilism" that hit the big time in a decade ruled by the likes of Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and within the overall terms of the "abject condition of adolescence": "Shearer's pictures are partly a refusal of the world the pictures presage. He is, I think, interested in the seventies' teen celebrity system as the twilight of modernism, an idyll of obliviousness as global consumer capitalism marshalled itself - partly through the teen celebrity cult of the boy - to colonize childhood, prolong adolescence, and discourage any notion that anyone will ever become an adult citizen."<sup>24</sup>

### **3. Skullfucking Armageddon: Re-reading [the Negative Dialectics of] Steven Shearer's Poetry of War**

As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; this book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy.  
Theodor W. Adorno, preface to *Negative Dialectics*<sup>25</sup>

In a recently published diatribe in *Artforum*, the American artist Joe Scanlan took issue with the airheaded fad of "relational aesthetics", that sorry 'radical chic' excuse for a degraded brand of social realism that has been a domineering force in much European art (and, more deplorably still, much Euro art discourse) since the early to mid-nineties - much to his credit, Nicolas Bourriaud, the avid amateur theorist who naively coined the term in a mildly aspiring paper in 1998, never meant to cause the stir, much less found the 'school' that Relational Aesthetics now has become, and grew tired of it himself rather quickly (yet more testimony, if any was ever needed, that relational aesthetics in many ways deserves to be called the least compelling art 'movement' of the last quarter century) - and currently also enthralled America's black-clad, bald-headed and bespectacled art loving hordes.<sup>26</sup> According to Scanlan, this widely celebrated cultural phenomenon, all too easily caricatured as an "art form" that might see artists befriend, cook for, counsel, deejay in front of, foot-massage or otherwise 'liberate' (always selected) members of the art audience, has made for too much boring, decidedly underwhelming art; I would venture that it has in fact made for much bad art, or for art that grows progressively weaker as the phenomenon inevitably becomes more and more enshrined in institutional affirmation - and this in itself justifies Scanlan's dismantling of the myths that underlie this most mediocre of artistic paradigms.

In his scathing assessment of the doxa at hand, Scanlan shrewdly and caustically notes that, as a symbolic exchange system, Relational Aesthetics is in fact strongly reminiscent of everyday traffic; like traffic, it operates as an institution predicated on the implied interiorization of peer pressure, with the idealized model of 'traffic' Scanlan has in mind - much like the relational-aesthetics version of the art world - constituting that exact type of "social space" where, "when Grandma is coming, you stop, because that's what normal, courteous human beings do." [In the relational-aesthetics version of the art world, one could state that relational aesthetics constitutes that exact type of "social space" where, when people come together to look at or experience art, you build a campfire, light the barbecue, unpack the acoustic guitar and name all of the above the very artwork that people have in fact come to 'see' or experience.]

Of course Scanlan's incisive comparison immediately forces the question whether this view of traffic as the selfless realm of common sense, high-toned moral values and shared humanity, the place where "one stops when Grandma is coming," is an interesting or even instructive paradigm to model oneself after in strictly 'artistic' terms, and whether the art world should indeed become more and more "like traffic." Clearly, the answer to this rhetorical question should be a resounding NAY. Quite the opposite in fact, I would hope: perhaps art should be anything but that space of social interaction specifically 'designed' or equipped to celebrate a common sense of ethicality (this is the reason why we 'have' the political sphere anyway); perhaps art should be that place instead where the willed dissolution of common sense - and the onslaught on the power politics of peer pressure - can be fêted without bounds, let alone scruple - a place of ontological contrariety, in short (I am again, approvingly, quoting from Scanlan's piece), "where we can "kill Grandma" and, rather than call an ambulance or the moral authorities, stand around and talk about what it means."

Granted, the work of Steven Shearer may seem an unlikely environment to pass judgment on or even discuss the handful of merits and many flaws and/or inexcusable regressions of "relational aesthetics", but looking more closely at a fifth and final important strand in his artistic practice - the works I first laid eyes upon when visiting the artist's studio for the first time, my infernal gateway to the bewildering, idiosyncratic Shearer universe - namely the ongoing series of 'poems' made up of mottoes, catchphrases and battle-cries of the global metal underground ("Spawn of Azagthoth", "Entangled in Chaos", "Blessed are the Sick", "Altars of Madness", to name but a handful of examples from one such 'poem', clearly honoring the literary legacy of the founding fathers of Florida's once-thriving death metal scene, Morbid Angel<sup>27</sup>), I am in fact reminded of Scanlan's scandalous, polemical appeal to "kill Grandma" indeed - and, instead of calling an ambulance or some other Moral Authority, "stand around" and look on with the ghoulish glee that befits such a ghastly, outrageously Evil Deed. In short, in looking at the stoic stanzas of Shearer's drone-like Poetry of War - stark, matter-of-fact white lettering on a monochromatic, matted blackground<sup>28</sup> - I am reminded of art's tremendous powers of both negation (as an act) and negativity (as a fact) that were so dearly valued by Theodor Adorno in both his Negative Dialectics and Aesthetic Theory, in which the artistic act and/or artwork as such were almost exclusively identified with said powers of negation and negativity ("the more artworks are understood, the less they are enjoyed"; "the darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational"; "only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia"; "for art, utopia is dressed in black"; "radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black" etc. - ad nauseam indeed<sup>29</sup>); powers that, in today's tiresomely righteous art world, have in many ways become fenced off with an impregnable garland of taboos which insistently tell, admonish, urge or force us to "think positive", "say yes", "do good", further the cause of dialogue and mutual understanding, and act all-round Politically Correct - an art world that, however polite, pleasurable, civil and safe, inevitably also has become all the more boring and bloodless in the process. In this sterile art world, enraptured with its (largely self-appointed) 'mission' to redeem, therapize and uplift through affirmative action, the grim summonings of Steven Shearer's found-footage poésie concrète stand out as monolithic memorials to art's idea that "thought as such," following Adorno, "is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it." The poems' "convulsions of satanic zeal" mirror the one valuable truth that arguably underlies all self-consciously contrary, dissident underground 'pop' cultures, of which the black/death metal armada is perhaps the most operatic, and therefore most 'effective' or convincing manifestation: that, through negation and its thoughtful "revolt against being importuned to bow to every immediate thing," art ensures the very fact of difference as non-identity, of thought as Negation, Estrangement, Distancing, Denial and Abomination - the negation of everything today's culture industries, including the field of contemporary art, demands us to affirm and endorse in the Administered World. 30

As Bruce Hainley appositely noted in his review of Steven Shearer's work published in Artforum in September 2003, - and here we are again returning to the archival works discussed earlier on - "[Shearer's] indexing of every picture of Leif Garrett or Shaun Cassidy presents the sign (if not the actuality) of the fan's all-encompassing obsessive collecting, the dandy's highly edited arrangement; Shearer's blatant wish, in fact, may be to circulate the imponderability of Cassidy, Garrett, and Kiss as embodiments of a nonbeing resistant to theorizing, to cherry-bomb and "sabotage" the idea of culture as necessarily redemptive and therapeutic." [My emphasis, ed.] Instead, Hainley goes on to suggest, Shearer wishes for an idea of culture as "an entity that eternally dismembers and consumes."<sup>31</sup> Dismembers and consumes... The rotting carcass of Scanlan's proverbial Grandma, I am inclined to add here, as yet another blood-stained teardrop in Shearer's seething Chalice of Infamy.

Post scripture: this essay was assembled during a four-month period in various inspiring locales such as Vancouver, Linz and Oslo; I am especially indebted to the artist for shedding light on both his art and working methods on numerous occasions, and to George Emanuelle III for providing the soundtrack to the writing process throughout.

## Footnotes

1 Mike Kelley & John C. Welchman (ed.), *Minor Histories - Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.

2 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London & New York: Continuum, 1997 (originally *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970).

3 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. (Originally *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne*, Paris: Editions Galilée, 1995.)

4 Steven Shearer provides no legends or instructions on how to 'read' these massive landscapes of mostly mediocre visual clutter; the 'objective', uninformed viewer is allowed no knowledge of these quirky autobiographical facts, which operate rather as the artist's signature in a deluge of floating signifiers (or,

phrased in yet another way, in the "excess that we commonly call meaning", as Avital Ronell would have it; see Bruce Hainley's article on Steven Shearer in *Artforum*, September 2003). It is precisely the secretly autobiographical nature of the archive as an ongoing, ever-changing self-portrait that has led me to consider 'autobiography' as a legitimate (if slightly self-indulgent) authorial inroad into this reading of Steven Shearer's work.

5 Bruce Hainley, *op. cit.*

6 "If the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality" - i.e. the discourse of always "making it new", of the eternal "break with tradition" - "the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that 'originality' is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence. One figure, drawn from avant-garde practice in the visual arts, provides an example; this figure is the grid." Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986. Krauss invokes the examples of Malevich, Mondrian, Léger, Schwitters, Reinhardt, Johns, André, Lewitt, Hesse and Ryman to make her case; indeed, some of these oeuvres readily come to mind when discussing a peculiar undercurrent in Steven Shearer's body of work, namely the crude, abjection-laden "children's art" modelled after modernist stereotypes from the fifties and sixties - I am thinking of works such as *Hatework* and *Cradle of Filth*, *PVC* and *Chasm*, to which I will be returning later on in this essay.

7 The "bastard offspring of photo-conceptualism" tagline seems to become a rather dominant force in the burgeoning evil science of Shearer analysis, gracing the cover of a recently published issue of *Canadian Art* among others; inscribing the work of Steven Shearer in a tightly guarded tradition that encompasses the work of the major forces of said photo-conceptualism (Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace), however, seems a bit of a stretch - especially given the predominance and primacy of such 'antiquated' techniques as drawing and oil painting in Shearer's most recent output. Sure enough, I myself have considered the axial position of Shearer's practice in a brand new survey of Vancouver art, to be published on the occasion of the *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists* exhibition at MuHKA, Antwerp: "harbouring such widely diverging research interests as an 'anthropology' of suburban amateur culture and debased 'pop' aesthetics (preferably of the ignoble, plebeian kind), strategies of archiving, images of excess, perversion and transgression, and the ambivalences of craft and 'mastery', the proverbial cauldron of Steven Shearer's sprawling body of work reverberates with concerns that also animate the work of fellow Vancouver artists Roy Arden, Brian Jungen, Geoffrey Farmer, Rodney Graham, Kevin Schmidt, Damian Moppett, Jeff Wall and Kelly Wood".

8 The "vendors" quote refers to the prime source of much of these images, the online auction site E-bay. See Matthew Higgs' article on Steven Shearer published in *ArtForum*, October 2002.

9 Tellingly, it is also the lowly, common 'tool' or garden shed, that derisory symbol of working-class male self-empowerment, that has provided the blueprint for one of Shearer's more recent forays into sculpture: in his most comprehensive survey show to date, held at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 2004, *Toolshed* was the only sculptural work on view - an undersized (and self-consciously underwhelming) aluminium structure containing a guitar amp humming with the atrocious, ear-splitting non-sound of overdrive guitar reverb. This work inevitably references a similar, slightly older sculptural piece, *Activity Cell with Warlock Bass Guitar* (1997), another shaming travesty of the grandiose assumptions of modernist architecture that is also related to the *Craftmonster* series and works such as *PVC* and *Playground*, cf. *infra*. [Joining the ranks of archiving/collage, drawing, painting and readymade 'poetry', sculpture constitutes the fifth element in Shearer's heterogeneous practice; its discussion, however, falls outside the immediate scope of this essay, but will be featured in my forthcoming monographic essay on the occasion of the artist's exhibition at The Power Plant, Toronto, 2006.]

10 Matthew Higgs, *op. cit.*

11 Port Coquitlam is the less-than-thrilling suburb of Vancouver where Steven Shearer grew up, ironically immortalized in the painting *Live in Port Coquitlam* (2003), a pastiche of a famous Black Sabbath album cover in which the name of the legendary hard rock band has been replaced by that of the wholly fictitious Puffrock Shiteaters; like the mock brand name "Swinging Lumpen", "Puffrock" operates as an imaginary platform for Shearer's heterogeneous creative energies: "puffrock" may indeed be the exact type of clichéd metal shlock the artist himself produces when wielding the typically trident-shaped Metal Guitar. In more recent times, Port Coquitlam has become infamous as the former domicile of Canada's record-breaking serial killer, a pig farmer by the name of Robert Pickton.

12 Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*

13 Posturing, often quite literally, as so many "living dead", these zombie-like apparitions in fact remind me of the *Muselmänner*, the "living corpses" and "nameless hulks" that, following Giorgio Agamben, 'peopled' the Nazi death camps (!); cfr. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York: Zone Books, 1999.

14 Arguably German "archive artist" Hans-Peter Feldman's most memorable, harrowing piece, 1967-1993 *Die Toten* (The Dead) provides an interesting counterpoint to Shearer's *Slumber*, further highlighting the interest Feldman's work garners in the Vancouver art community.

15 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; originally published as *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France) in 1968, the year in which Steven Shearer was born.

16 Repetition, of course, is another hallmark of modernist art practice closely related to the rhetoric and methodology of the 'grid', and yet another trope of obsessive narration all too familiar from the work of fellow Vancouverite Rodney Graham, whose work has often been discussed in terms of 'pathologies' (as in the well-known diagnosis of the so-called "pathology of the loop"), neuroses and compulsions, most markedly of the "compulsion to repeat". In a recently published catalogue quasi-raisonné of Graham's work, Dorothea Zwirner observes "a constant conflict between claims of innovativeness and the compulsion to repeat, between 'difference and repetition'" - an evident allusion to the eponymous classic of contemporary philosophy by Gilles Deleuze. "With this ambivalent trait, Graham stands in the tradition of occidental melancholia, that "sickness of the artist" which oscillates between depression and mania, resignation and euphoria." See Dorothea Zwirner, *Rodney Graham*, Cologne: Dumont Verlag, 2005.

17 Quoted in: Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

18 See "Drum Check" on: *Morbid Angel*, Heretic, 2003.

19 In a prodigiously ironic twist of fate, it is precisely this 'portrait' of Euronymus a.k.a. Oyvind Aarseth - the founder of Mayhem and Oslo's specialty shop Helvete and a true folk hero of Euro black metal lore - that has recently ended up on the cover of Belgian (!) mock-black metal band Spasm. The Longhairs series in fact consists of five portraits in all, the remaining two of which are based on two anonymous figures handpicked from a website devoted to "gay and bisexual longhairs" - another gesture 'meant' to obfuscate the tightly secured border zones of rock & roll and 'suburban'/blue collar' gender stereotyping, the site of much anxiety in teenage subcultures. [In one account of the spectacular murder case involving Euronymus and his slayer Varg "Count Grishnack" Vikernes, homophobia on the side of the latter was invoked as one of the main catalysts of this particularly gruesome instance of internecine strife at the heart of the Scandinavian black metal scene's so-called "inner circle".]

20 The reference to Breughel is an especially meaningful one, particularly when taking into account the latter's exemplary role as the crown witness and primary 'anthropologist' of 'contemporary' (i.e. 16th century) popular culture: it is probably fair to say that, if Breughel had lived and worked today, surely he wouldn't have had time for the billion dollar business of spectator sports or other, similarly 'industrialized' travesties of contemporary popular culture - instead he would probably have become the chronicler par excellence of the truly plebeian ("lumpen") undercurrents of today's "folk art": 'amateur' erotica fairs in Germany, stock car races in Kentucky, re-enactments of historical battles in England and Belgium, black metal festivals in Norway.

21 Other, less emphatic art-historical ('stylistic') references concern no less titanic figures such as Bonnard, Degas, Ensor, Goya, Kirchner and Manet. The demonstrable ease with which Shearer manoeuvres through the dense thicket of painterly traditions doubtlessly stems in part from his informal schooling in the highly intellectual, historically informed Vancouver art climate, in which Jeff Wall figures as the prime heir to Manet's legacy of a "painting of modern life" - a painting tradition that is literally taken up again by Steven Shearer.

22 From Paul Celan's *Death Fugue*, 1945.

23 In a review of a Steven Shearer exhibition that was published in the *Georgia Straight*, local critic Robin Laurence has defined this ambivalence by way of the anxious opposition between "sweet-faced, androgynous teen idols of the Leif Garrett and Shaun Cassidy variety" on the one hand, and "crotch-grabbing, face-painting, blood-dripping heavy-metal bands" on the other: "the former, this art suggests, represent mainstream society's attempt to promote a clean, compliant, and sexless image of male adolescence, while the latter express all that conventional adults fear of the same demographic: raw aggression, social alienation, and obsessions with sex, death, and violence. His own interest, Shearer says, is in youth as a time when "ideas of identity, social engineering, and culture collide"."

24 Scott Watson in: *6 New Vancouver Modern*, Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 1997.

25 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1973. (Originally *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966.)

26 See, among others, a recently published special issue of the journal *October* 'dedicated' to relational aesthetics, volume 110, Fall 2004 - including, among others, Claire Bishop's much-discussed "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics".

27 Many of the iambic exclamations that together make up the teeming volumes of Shearer's sheer, ungodly poetry have in fact also been culled from an ongoing series of (radically 'different') archival works such as *List* (2004) or *xytraguptorh@yahoo.com* (2003) - the title of the last piece actually refers to the metallic-sounding moniker of an extreme/underground music fan running an online post order service that offers such delightful feats of literary engineering as "Evil Obscurity", "Eternal Dismemberment", "Dethroned Emperor", "Wombful of Scabs", "Purifying the Cavity" and many others. Looking very much like a mid-seventies conceptual/minimal art piece straight out of the Art & Language, Hans Haacke's or Robert Morris' studio, *List*

again conflates "High" with "Low", wedding the high-octane formal particulars of canonical avant-garde art with the base, crude materialism of Death/Black Metal's radically nihilistic dropout culture. Additionally, the "found footage" nature of the poems' 'lyrics' also introduces an element of the readymade into the discussion of Shearer's art.

28 Much like the contrast that defines the abstruse illogic of Shearer's recent paintings, the poems' uncanny 'groove' results from the paradoxical wedding of their static, restrained form and exuberant content; invoking us, with the ceremonial pomp and circumstance typical of the metal creed, to "curse the flesh," "hate eternal", "disembowel the virgin" and generally "destroy sacred words", the poems' incantatory zeal is at once disowned by their deadpan (hence also humorous) stylization, the Arial-like font the exact opposite with the elaborate fantasy/gothic lettering that makes so many death & gore metal band names next to unreadable.

29 See Theodor Adorno, *op. cit.* (note 2). It should come as no surprise that the damning, apocalyptic tone of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory (as well as his earlier *Minima Moralia*) served as an improbable source of inspiration for a string of eighties German punk bands: if Adorno was right in claiming that "writing poetry after Auschwitz" would constitute an act of irredeemable barbarity, then the only 'poetry' (or art) left for mankind to consider should be that of truly barbaric non-meaning or sound - the Poetry of War that had been brewing in the cauldrons of the global hardcore/metal underground.

30 Ultimately, this instance of distancing, an effect most immediately realized by the rigid formalism of many of his artworks, is also what sets the work of Steven Shearer apart from the fashionable affectations of Blackness that permeate much of today's so-called "metal art" - another fad much like Relational Aesthetics, best known through the work of Banks Violette and Anthony Burdin, whose practices rarely move beyond the mere replication of the culture industry's (necessarily affirmative) mainstream view of the extreme metal subcultures from which these practices derive their *raison d'être*. Invited to participate in the Uncertain States of America survey show that recently premiered at Oslo's Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Burdin rather uninspiredly decided to build yet another ramshackle monument to Norway's most controversial black metal warrior, namely Varg ("Count Grishnack") Vikernes of Burzum fame, an avowed "national socialist" currently residing in a maximum security prison, from whence his malignant idiocies continue to captivate the minds of the non-informed and the downright stupid. Similarly, Banks Violette's Whitney-commissioned (!) museum piece *Untitled* (2004) resembling a burnt-down Norwegian stave church complete with Thorns soundtrack, does very little to move beyond the facts of the mainstream culture industry's commodification and appropriation of black metal's originary impulse of unadulterated negation. [Needless to say, the Norwegian art audience has grown immensely tired of this rather one-dimensional referencing of a series of criminal facts dating back from the early to mid-nineties.] A far more interesting point of reference for further investigation of Shearer's 'appropriation' of these extreme subcultures' "negative dialectics" can be found in the work of Cameron Jamie and Norway's own Bjarne Melgaard.

31 Mad props to Bruce Hainley's knowledgeable pick of words, as "dismemberment" is indeed the right term to aim for in the general context of Shearer's work - Dismember being the name of a Swedish death metal band best remembered today for their trial over the "indecent and obscene" content of one of their songs on the *Like An Everflowing Stream* album entitled "Skin Her Alive".