

from WHY I JOINED THE AVANT GARDE

by STAN APPS

'On Democratic Art' is in the form of a lineated poem and meditates on standards, what they are and how they should be negotiated in a democratic society. 'On How a Poem Should Be' discusses how poems should be written and read; it meditates on, among other things, the relation of intention to irony. 'On the End of History' begins as a list, evolves into a multiple-choice question, and ends as an apocalyptic scenario; this piece is a humorous consideration of teleological and dialectical thinking.

ON DEMOCRATIC ART

All literature, all art, imagines itself to be great,
and most of it is, considered by those standards
appropriate to it, the standards of its creators:
noble, parochial people committed to their way.

So, as we look at different art by different people
we are traveling, entering zones of different standards.
We know that we are staying tuned in to the standards
as long as all the art we see is perfect or near perfect.

However inane or boring the art might be,
if it is perfectly suited to the standards it expresses
(which is to say, if we can intuit the art's standards
by looking at the art) then we can stay centered

in the greatness that is the obvious consequence
of seeing the art world as a rolling landscape of differences
where every standard has its mountain and/or valley.
Of course, all the different groups of artists

whose greatness we accept, are jealous nonetheless of each other. The artists do not want to share centrality. We who see perfection everywhere do not see as artists see. Artists are intolerant, and look at

other artists as competitors. Artists feel contempt. They do not agree with how art-funding is done (the only way it can be done in a democracy) by head-count. They think more heads should not equal more \$.

Parochialism plus egotism equals ignorance: that is how artists have to be, to perfect their craft. They can only achieve greatness by holding to one standard as if so many other standards were not applicable.

Some say we must bring back elitism, accepting some groups' claims and rejecting the claims of other groups. They say our democratic aesthetic is failing us, and that as a result we do not have a common culture

so that there is nothing to unite us anymore but tragedy, and even the tragedy is split between warring camps of artists: some depict the tragedy as weeping mushroom angels, others make it look like some sort of self-lacerating ant.

But elitism is very vicious; it will not tolerate the specificities of human self-expression. Elitism implies that some people are fucked-up, some people are dumb, some people are bad nasty coughed-up troughs of slime.

That is not the way to go! I don't want to give anyone the license to attack and to be cruel to other people

who are engaged in legitimate acts of self-expression!

No!! What is beautiful is to look at something

that might be banal or boring, and to discover

why the artist made the decisions s/he did.

And when we have discovered what the artist is going for

we begin to understand why, and we begin to understand

what is important to another person, and then we find

we are touched by that aesthetic and by the values

that it tries to share. And we share those values, we try

those values on. We wear so many shining sets of values.

ON HOW A POEM SHOULD BE

for Juliana Spahr

A poem should make general statements, in order to be profound. A poem should include unusual specificities in order to avoid being cliché. Generalities and specificities should be seen as enemies reluctantly supporting each other in a common cause: the poem.

In order to be challenging, a poem should include unappealing images or suggestions. Because different people disagree on what is unappealing, a poem should include a diverse variety of images and suggestions. The language of the poem should be in conflict with the poem's intentions, in order to bring society into the poem. Society is a place where people disagree with each other and with the principles that govern their interrelation; the words in the poem should disagree with each other and with the principles that govern the poem.

Specific images and suggestions that are unappealing and incongruous should revolt almost successfully against the intentions of the poem. The intentions of the poem should be stealthy, and should reconstitute themselves regularly, through secret subterranean ironies, in order to keep the poem functioning as a coherent entity even though its intentions have been discredited. A new intention can always be formulated, up to the very last image or suggestion, and this final intention can become the entire intention. Everything in a poem is there to be subordinated by future intention, just as a society is there to serve the interests of whatever elite is able to seize power.

A poem should intend, first of all, to come into existence, and secondly, to serve the interests of those images and suggestions that come into being with the poem. Those images and suggestions should be given an opportunity to relate independently with the readers of the poem. The images and suggestions in the poem should be given their fair chance to find common cause with the readers of the poem, so that images and suggestions and readers can work together against the intentions of the poem, perverting the intention and replacing the elitism of the poem's controlling irony with the democratic solidarity between the readers and their favorite images and suggestions.

The irony that unifies a poem should be pushed aside in favor of the belief that unifies a reader and an image. A reader should put on the most beautiful or exquisite image in a poem (or another image imported into the poem) and should do battle against the most unappealing, ugly, wrong images in the poem. By vanquishing disagreeable images, the reader should show the poem who is boss and should clarify that the reader's intentions are at all times of greater importance than the supposed intentions of the poem. By this means, the poem's intentions shall be further deferred, into a deeper secret pool of irony or ever more futuristic crowning interpretation. Experts shall seek the intention that the reader has dethroned.

Readers do not need to know the effect they have on poems. If they did know, about the irony that retreats from the reader's advances, readers might be discouraged. An enemy that can survive as a pool of unreconciled potentials determined to undermine—that sort of enemy is hard to read. Experts should become the poem, embodying the reader's enemy.

ON THE END OF HISTORY

History is about conflict; in fact, history is about several conflicts at once:

Rich vs. Poor

Man vs. Nature

God vs. Satan

Sex vs. Prudishness

Religion vs. Secularism

Humans vs. Animals

City vs. Rural

Domesticated vs. Wild

Men of Peace vs. Men of War

Father vs. Child

Father vs. Mother

Mother vs. Child

Fossil Fuels vs. the Environment

Love vs. Indifference

Love vs. Hate

Center-Left vs. Center-Right

Corporations vs. Government

Managers vs. Manual Laborers

Improvisation vs. Design

Laziness vs. Industry

The Life-Extending Elements of Progress vs. the Life-Eroding Elements of

Progress

Forest vs. Bulldozer

Wild Animals vs. Cars on Roads

Greed vs. Conscience

Faith vs. Empiricism

Ethnic Difference vs. Nationalist Assimilation

Ethnic Nationalism vs. Ideological Nationalism

Nationalism vs. Globalism

Family vs. Network

Local vs. Global

Local Network vs. Distributed Network

Selfishness vs. Bleeding Hearts

Ownership vs. Sharing

Fear of Possibilities vs. Fascination with Possibilities

Death vs. Reproduction

Human vs. Technologically Augmented Human

Heaven vs. Earth

Hell on Earth vs. Metaphysical Hell

Christ in Self vs. Christ in Others

Vegan vs. Meat Lover

Ancien Régime vs. Revolutionary Movement

Secret Police vs. Right to Know

Military vs. Elected Government

Secret Police vs. Public Face

Reason Manifested as Self-Interest vs. Reason Manifested as Collective Mandate

Criminalization vs. Tolerance

Love vs. Pornography

Theocracy vs. Technocracy

Carelessness vs. Oversight

Perfection vs. Mistakes

Organism vs. Code

Reproduction vs. Managed Fertility

Real Women vs. Pictures of Women
Hollywood vs. Experimental Poetry
Icons vs. Empty Light
Servant of God vs. Servant of the Market
Servant of the Market vs. Servant of the People
People of God vs. The People
A People vs. The People
Pleasure vs. Responsibility
Hope vs. Terror
Corruption vs. Idealism
Binary Thinking vs. Actual Situations
Self-Government vs. Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Corporate Colonialism
Self-Government vs. World Government
Murderous Idealism vs. Murderous Pragmatism
Empty Hands vs. Automatic Weapons
Handing out Flowers vs. Throwing Flowerpots from Balconies
Thoughts vs. Computer-Guided Rocket-Bombs
God vs. Computer-Guided Rocket-Bombs
Free Expression vs. a Knock on the Door
Child Soldier vs. Unarmed Child
Corpses vs. Plans for the Future
Starvation vs. Luxury
The Dead vs. the Unborn
The Living vs. Holy Books
The Living vs. Heaven, Hell, and other Metaphysics
Infinite Library vs. Infinite Shopping Mall
Free vs. Pay
Violence vs. Productive Work

Etcetera, etcetera. The end of history will come when all these conflicts occur at once, and are resolved once and for all with incredible ferocity and bloodshed: Apocalypse, Ragnarok, Vindication, Simplification, Unification, a

Vast Weeding-Out replacing history with a well-regulated lawn of a single ideological texture. Then we will be happy blades of the right type of grass (or not exist). Then there will be one more battle: Productivity vs. Boredom, and Boredom will win. The question of the purpose served by humans will be resolved: Humans are here to serve the interests of . . . ?

It is actually a multiple-choice question; choose wisely. After the end of history, people won't get a choice of how they answer this; living in the time of bloodshed gives you the luxury of options, so enjoy it, if you can.

CHOOSE ONLY ONE:

- a. Humans are here to serve the interests of other humans, and should subordinate themselves to that interest if necessary.
- b. Humans are here to serve the interests of a divine being or divine beings, and should subordinate themselves to that interest in this life in order to secure a higher life or higher manifestation beyond this world.
- c. Humans are here to serve the interests of Earth, considered as a collective of animals and plants, and should subordinate themselves to that interest (principally by regulating human population).
- d. Humans are here to serve their own self-interest, and should subordinate others to that interest if they are powerful or persuasive enough.
- e. Humans are here to serve the interest of an ethnic, national, regional, or ideological group to which they belong, and should make sacrifices, if necessary, to ensure the continued sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic well-being, strategic advantage and/or internal purity of that group.
- f. Humans are here to serve the interests of their own family and genetic-

specificity, and should focus their efforts on acquiring and consolidating resources to benefit their family or gene-group.

Pick your number and get ready to fight. Here's how I see the Line-Up:

God, the Family, and Self-Interest unify into one major faction. Humanity and Earth unify into another slightly weaker force (an underdog). The underdog status of Hum-Earth leads various ideological shadows of God's Self-Family to align themselves with Hum-Earth: Satan and Science, for example, join the Hum-Earth team, as does Reason Manifested as Collective Mandate. Meanwhile, both sides are opposed, in various localities, by various groups of people who answered "e". The E-people also fight other E-people of other E-groups whenever another E-group is too close to them. God's Self-Family and Hum-Earth both vie to convince various E-groups to support them; ultimately most E-groups join God's Self-Family, due to their intense animosity towards the idea of Humanity as a collective group. Some E-groups do support Hum-Earth though, because E-groups they oppose have joined God's Self-Family. Hum-Earth's support is something like 35% to 40% of the population. The conflict speeds up. Urban centers are devastated; economies fall apart as shipping networks are disrupted. Militants steal food and resources from civilians, and civilians starve. Binary Thinking crushes Actual Situations like ants, turning reality into a series of hallucinatory scenes of total viciousness, like Goya paintings. The struggle becomes so violent that the ideological concepts driving the two sides collapse and disappear. And then, in this murk where the local and the actual have dissolved in favor of a distributed disruption of society, ideology, and morality— out of that an unsuspected new ideology sewed together out of the removed organs of past ideologies emerges and sweeps across the disrupted landscape, unifying everyone like an Illuminator carrying a torch that dispels all shadows and lets all humans see themselves in the correct relation to the one idea aglow inside the torch.

The End.

Except for celebrations, incredible celebrations that rush around the Earth like Happy Dragons carried by ecstatic crowds. Champagne and sexual liberation might or might not be allowed as part of the celebrations, depending which idea won. Probably they will be allowed. You have to make some small concessions to human beings.