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A Whispered Economy of Art

Sophie Cras

“A *Principles of Poetical Economy* must be written. Write it,” enjoined Robert Filliou in 1966.¹ These *Principles* were “the keys to my work” he insisted, a few years later.² I spent years hunting through archives and collections in the hope of getting my hands on that volume. Written by an economist who suddenly became an artist in the mid-1950s, surely it would be rich in secret remedies to the ills of our world. However, as my research went deeper, the hope of finding anything remotely like a finished volume grew slimmer. But then what else was one to expect of a “café genius” who celebrated the “not done” as an “ideal stage” and proclaimed the necessity of remaining “calmly seated, doing nothing”? “It’s been years since I began making notes for a book on ‘Poetical Economy,’” wrote Filliou in 1970.³ Seven years later, he went further: “‘The Principles of Poetic Economy’⁴ is probably my longest research project. I have been working on it for some fifteen years.”⁵ In line with the ideas he put forward during talks given in the 1970s, he recalled:

And I realised that this was the first chapter of The Principles of Poetic Economy. I wrote: To the butterfly that is flying in my studio I dedicate this first chapter Pierre. It is 11.51. I failed to note which day it was. The second chapter is called Jacob in honour of the lizard that lives in my house.⁶

By naming his first two chapters after an apostle and a patriarch, respectively, Filliou was humorously positioning his *Principles* as a kind of future Gospel. At the same time, by dedicating them to idle, lazy animals, the butterfly and the lizard, he hinted that these chapters had been baptized without ever really having been born.

I had to face facts: with Filliou, there was no voluminous treatise or little red book to stand as a revolutionary doxa. The poetical economy is not tub-thumping material; it is whispered. It is a lo-vol backbeat to practice: the works and life of the artist. Rather than the normative postures and brinkmanship of revolutionary purity, Filliou offers the simplicity of evocative images (a fishing rod to catch the moon), childlike slogans repeated with extreme seriousness (“Faim = fin de la faim”⁷), and the endless narration of his experiences: for example, the video *Porta Filliou* (1977) is a montage that takes the form of a dictionary in which the successive letters of the alphabet serve as prompts for memories and new ideas, all of them “chapters” in a *Principles of Poetical Economy* that is forever in progress.

Among these chapters, the “Galerie Légitime” [Legitimate Gallery]. The philosopher and economist Charles Fourier, an inspirer of socialism and the dedicatee of the *Principles of Poetical Economy*, declared his

¹ Robert Filliou, “A proposition, a problem, a danger and a hunch,” in *Manifestos* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), p. 14.

² Robert Filliou, “Filliou,” *Opus International*, No. 22, January 1971, p. 20.

³ Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (1970) (Cologne, New York: Kaspart Konig, 1970), p. 49.

⁴ Robert Filliou moved freely between “Poetical Economy” and “Poetic Economy” in his English texts.

⁵ Robert Filliou, “The Propositions and Principles of ROBERT FILLIOU,” *Centerfold*, vol. 2, Nos. 2–3, January 1978, n.p.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ This translates as “Hunger = the end of hunger” but to the ear, “faim” [hunger] and “fin” [end, finality] are all but indistinguishable, meaning that the statement can be read with differing permutations of “hunger” and “end.”—TRANS.

enmity towards shopkeepers as manipulators of value harmful to morality. Filliou, for his part, chose to rehabilitate the figure of the merchant: the person at the center of exchanges within the community, the person who does not produce but presides over the mutation of values. It was for this reason that he founded a gallery and, later, an artist's store, La Cédille qui Sourit [The Smiling Cedilla], which became both laboratories for experimentation and sources of inspiration for the *Principles*. La Galerie Légitime came into being in 1962. Filliou originally planned to install it in a greengrocer's barrow so that he could trundle it around streets, museums, and galleries all over the world. However, his implementation of this project fell afoul of the administrative rigidities governing ambulant trading: "As they refused me authorisation to walk around with a barrow," he explained, "I would get round the difficulty by installing the gallery in my hat."⁸ Filliou therefore used a cap he had purchased in Tokyo ten years earlier, and filled it with small artworks that he could then carry on his head and present to those around him.

As in any other gallery, the objects exhibited by the Galerie Légitime were for sale: they could be acquired by those who were interested, everything at five francs or in exchange for a beer at the nearest bar. Several hats were used as a gallery in this way. That first Japanese cap was lost in Frankfurt and replaced by a blue Basque beret. In London, for his exhibition at the Misfits' Fair in October 1962, it was replaced by a bowler hat—the one that appears covering the dome of the Invalides in the 1968 work titled *Galerie Légitime*.

The range of meanings of "Galerie Légitime," which are more complementary than contradictory, reflect Filliou's complex relation to the art economy. On an initial level, the name of course conveys a manifest critique of a closed and elitist system: "I consider it *legitimate* for art to descend from its heights to the street." His gallery was thus "legitimate" in contrast to the "illegitimate" traditional galleries, which ignored the ordinary public and assigned a disproportionate commercial value to artworks. However, Filliou immediately added another, more benevolent meaning to this critical one: "And also, given the artist's catastrophic lot in a society that forces him into either poverty or prostitution, *anything* an artist might do well (or badly) to earn money was *legitimate*."⁹ Thus, the art market was legitimate insofar as it could help artists survive. In addition to these two meanings, there is a third, if we understand "legitime" not as an adjective but as a transitive verb: only the gallery legitimizes a body of work. Filliou the economist was well aware of this.

The Galerie Légitime did not last long. It was ceremoniously frozen for ten years in 1962, then finally binned when the artist moved in 1965.¹⁰ La Cédille qui Sourit, the artist's shop that succeeded it in Villefranche-sur-Mer, did not last much longer. But these experiences, in which the artist became a shopkeeper, did directly enrich the *Principles of Poetical Economy*: redefining work as play, pleasure and reward, rather than as toil requiring compensation; imagining a "principle of equivalence" accompanied by a True Exchange Rate, which preserved the irreducible nature of differences, suspending all comparisons and all value judgements; calculating the "speed of art" in order to describe the long trajectory of the fusion of art and life, based on the model of the progress of a chemical reaction in a laboratory. Arising from practice, these principles returned to practice, bringing about new works in the process. The red woolen sock thus became the illustration of the *Principe d'équivalence* [Principle of Equivalence] (1969), between "well done," "badly done" and "not done": a generative principle expected to deploy the same degree of invention in success, failure, or abstention alike.

⁸ Irmeline Lebeer, "Musées Personnes – Filliou," *Chroniques de l'art vivant*, No. 35, December 1972, p. 19.

⁹ Undated text from the late 1960s, held in the Sohm Archives, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, quoted in *Robert Filliou*, exh. cat. (Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 10 July – 15 September 1991, Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1991), p. 38.

¹⁰ Robert Filliou, "Defreezing the Frozen Exhibition": the original poster appears in A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (eds.), *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), p. 93.

It took me some time to understand that when Filliou enjoined “A *Principles of Poetical Economy* must be written. Write it,” he was addressing not only himself but also us, his readers. Wary of any kind of dogmatic theory, he limited himself to using deliberately modest means to prefigure different joyous and desirable forms of life – what Mark Fisher called “postcapitalist desire.”¹¹ That is what makes him so contemporary. His *Principles* cannot languish in the pages of a book, they must be passed on: lived. *Je meurs trop* [I’m dying too much] (1977) is one of the pieces that the artist designated as a “chapter” of his *Principles*. Formally, it does indeed look like a book, with a label bearing the title and the author’s name and its commercial band.¹² But this thick tome is, quite literally, a brick. To anyone hoping its pages would provide solutions to the problems of the day, Filliou offers a reminder that the truth of a brick lies in the action of the person who throws it.

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¹¹ Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire* (London: Repeater Books, 2021).

¹² The band ironically subverts its commercial function, since Antonin Artaud’s phrase “Une sensibilité unique au monde” [A sensibility unique in the world] is corrected by hand to “sansibilité”, evoking the absence of qualities as much as their presence.