

CONTRA MUNDUM I-VII



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"After all this, still a lonely bastard"

The Sycophancy of the Contemporary Artist and the Impossibility of Reaching Out to Mark E. Smith

Frances Stark

I originally thought I had said "no" to doing this, because I don't really know very much about The Fall, and I don't really have a discographic memory, with a full catalogue of songs and facts at the ready. So, I didn't really feel qualified. But then I thought, well, in the spirit of "contra mundum"—which somehow I always translate as "fuck the world," rather than "against the world"—Mark E. Smith being against the world would equal that he is against me, and that it would be this kind of Möbius strip of love and hate, etc. But, still, I thought I said, "No I can't do it, but if I did it would be like this." And so here I am, and I don't really know what to say.



I'm deeply ashamed that my passport says songwriter/musician, there's some vague affectation about that.

—Mark E. Smith

This is the obligatory photograph of a very handsome, young Mark E. Smith, and this is him earlier this year. Maybe I should try to explain why I think I was even invited to do this. We don't have to say what we are on our passport in the U.S., but when you do go to other countries and they ask you, "What do you do? Why are you here?" and you say, "I'm an artist," it always seems really stupid and kind of unbelievable.

Paul Morley: I love the way he reduces the basic idea of The Fall to being, you know, raw sound with weird singing over the top. You know, he's not a singer, but he's one of the greatest rock singers there's ever been...



MES: My singing is getting very good, actually. I don't want to boast. I'm getting really good at singing, after twenty-fucking-five years. No, I really am.

So why am I here? This is an image from a book of collected works that I did with my partner, Stuart Bailey.



I was working on it concurrently with putting together a kind of retrospective, and it really hurts to say that word, because you realize that you shouldn't be allowed to have a retrospective, or something. You realize it's such a pretentious idea. In any case,

that's what I was doing: I was putting together a show, and I was making a book, and it came time when the curator said to me, "Let's make the poster for the show." I still didn't even know what I was going to call it at that point, but the whole time we had been working on the show I was a little surprised at how little we discussed what works were going to go into it. In fact, most of our email correspondence had been about Mark E. Smith. So we had this thing where we were talking about The Fall all of the time—and the album Fall Heads Roll had just come out, and it was really great—and it seemed to me that on some level we had this vicarious conversation about my show through Mark E. Smith.

The curator was so obsessed (this was in Eindhoven in Holland), that he said, "I am going to try and get The Fall to play the night of your opening." And I'm just thinking: "Well, good luck with that!" But apparently he really did some footwork, and there was a club in Eindhoven that The Fall had been playing since like 1980 or something. Then, at a certain point, when that became part of the discussion, I told a friend of mine, Mark Leckey, that the curator was trying to get The Fall to play, and Mark said, "Oh, well, why don't you just write Mark E. Smith a letter and charm him." And I was just like, "Are you fucking crazy?" What am I going to say? "I'm an artist and I like you and I'd really like you to play my opening."? I mean, I was just not going for it. But it underscored for me this incredible disconnect between the world that I function in and the world that I consume, and hence this sycophancy of the contemporary artist, where I just felt like to ask for some kind of seeming cohabitation was just too absurd.

In any case, this was all going on, and I still had to come up with a title for my show, so I thought, "Well, why don't we just make a poster saying that The Fall are going to play, and I'm sure they won't, and we'll just sneak my name into it." So, this is what we ended up plastering all around town. So the idea here, really, is that there is a select audience in the art world; it has a built-in notion of who its audience is. That is a big thing that has affected my work at least since 1999, this ultra self-consciousness about what the preconditions are, or the sort of scaffolding, that is built up around this so-called "art career." I guess I was just really interested in highlighting that distinction between something

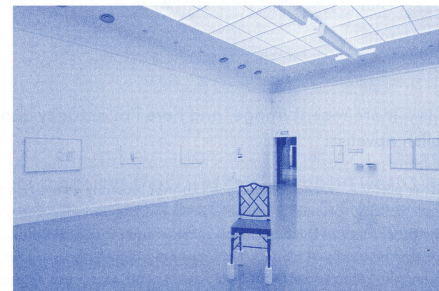


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that is quite popular and has a lot of cultural agency and something that is quite selective, with a very skewed sense of its own cultural agency.



So this is what it looked like on the outside of the city.



And here you are looking at one of the five rooms in my show, and of course, it's totally not punk rock. It doesn't look very raw.

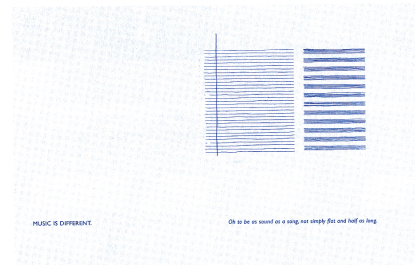
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This is from a show from about ten years ago. It's a poem I wrote about the envy of different forms:

Impossible the grassy maxim's dream
to grow as green as others seem
Oh, to be as sound as a song
not simply flat and half as long
So dark dark green the envy at which this hints
"In other places lights pitched happy tents."

So this is another grab from the book, also showing this theme that music is different, and also the contrast between writing and music and a kind of envying of other forms, an envying of durational forms from a two-dimensional artist.

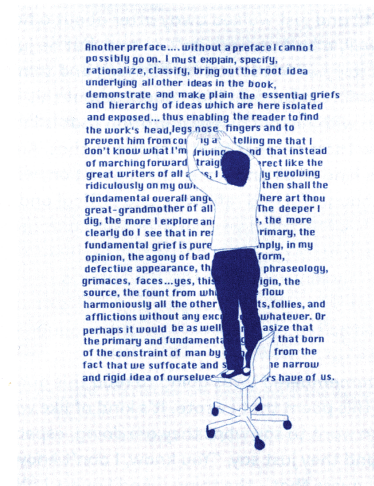


And here is a more recent image, and here I'm actually quoting from a Polish novelist:

Another preface...without a preface I cannot possibly go on. I must explain, specify, rationalize, classify, bring out the root idea underlying all of the other ideas in the book, demonstrate and make plain the essential griefs and hierarchy of ideas, which are here isolated and exposed... thus enabling the reader to find the work's head, legs, nose, fingers and to prevent him from coming and telling me that I don't know what I'm driving at, and that instead of marching forward, straight and erect like the great writers of all ages I am merely revolving ridiculously on my own heels. What then shall the fundamental overall anguish be? Where art thou great-grandmother of all griefs? The deeper I dig, the more I explore and

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analyze, the more clearly do I see that in reality the primary, the fundamental grief is pure and simply, in my opinion, the agony of bad outward form, defective appearance, the agony of phraseology, grimaces, faces... yes, this is the origin, the source, the fount from which there flow harmoniously all the other torments, follies, and afflictions without any exceptions whatever. Or perhaps it would be as well to emphasize that the primary and fundamental agony is that born of the constraint of man by man... i.e. from the fact that we suffocate and stifle in the narrow and rigid idea of ourselves that others have of us.



So, one of the things that I was thinking about when I was coming into this attempt to address Mark E. Smith was Michael Bracewell. I don't know how many of you are familiar with him, but he is kind of a cultural studies writer and he is also a novelist, and I don't mean "cultural studies" in a pejorative sense. I had heard this story of him doing a discussion with Mark E. Smith at the ICA in London in the 1990s, and I think the topic was something like "self-taught artists" or something. I had never actually read anything about it, but my partner, Stuart, who is friends

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with Michael, told me about this, and somehow I've completely blown the whole thing out of proportion. And the reason I have done so is because I read Michael's writing and I know the kind of thinker he is and I know the way he writes. I don't know if many of you know, but he wrote a book about Roxy Music recently. So, in my mind I had it that he was really trying to legitimize and contextualize Mark E. Smith for an art audience, which was pretty much true, but I had never read any accounts of it or anything.

Well, the thing is that Mark E. Smith was just kind of like "Fuck this shit" and just walked away after about a half an hour. And I guess, well, a half an hour isn't so bad, but he just wasn't having any of it. I just felt so sad for Michael, and thinking about this sort of conflict in my own life, I guess, about this complete preoccupation with historical legitimization that is in the art world and how I sort of react to or respond to that. And that there was this kind of oil and water thing going on, where no matter how thoughtful and reflective and critical and analytical someone like Michael could be about something as great as what Mark E. Smith does, to reflect that back at somebody, it just doesn't make any sense. At least this is what I had totally imagined about this conflict. It's just like, "This is bogus, I don't need this, I don't need to be speaking in this language. I do what I do, and that's it."

I just remembered I was going to read this quote from Picasso from this poem that I wrote. It's kind of like when art students don't want to say what they are doing, especially undergrads, and they just say, "You know, I don't know, it's just like that's it. I guess that's the thing." And I guess I always approach that as a prompt to say something like, "Get your shit together. That's not the thing. You need to contribute to the conversation." In any case, there's a great quote from Picasso that is, "But of what use is it to say what we do when everybody can see it if he wants to?" The gist of which is this thing familiar from the 1990s, a kind of verbiage versus intuition, and he was on the side of "Fuck it, that's what it is," and I was on the October magazine side, I'm embarrassed to say.

So anyway, here is Michael standing next to some wall text, a very lucky Google image, and it's not such a great

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picture—I think he's a quite dashing, compelling man, and I quite like him a lot.



So the thing with Michael is that they were supposed to be "in discussion," and the first question he asked him was, "What about the time you played in men's clubs, do you remember that?" and Mark E. Smith responds, "I'm not a bloody amnesiac."

Here is another clip:



Q: So, do you think The Fall are the best band in the world?

MES: Yeah I do, yeah.

Q: Do you think The Fall have had a very big influence on the music industry?

MES: Yeah.

Q: Which do you think is worse, the punk or the hippie?

MES: The punk or the hippie? Well, the punk. I don't know why you are asking me all of these questions.

Q: Oh dear, it's not going too well. Let's try the confrontational route. Why are you so miserable?

MES: I'm not.

Again, when I was thinking about doing this I was thinking a lot about Michael Bracewell and this whole thing about being "in discussion" and this whole desire to draw some pithy commentary out of the artist.

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Q: I'd like to know about the cover of your album. I'd like to know about the meaning of the photograph with you wearing the Triumph t-shirt?

Dylan: What would you like to know about it?



Q: Well, I'd like to know if that's an equivalent photograph it means something, it's got a philosophy in it, and I'd like to know visually what it represents to you, because you are a part of that.

Dylan: Um, I haven't really looked at it that much.

Q: I've thought about it a great deal.

Dylan: Um, it was just taken one day when I was sitting on the steps, you know. I don't really remember too much about it.

Q: But what about the motorcycle as an image in your song writing? You seem to like that.

Dylan: Oh, we all like motorcycles to some degree.

Q: I do.



Q: Do you prefer songs with a subtle or obvious message?

Dylan: With a what?

Q: With a subtle or obvious message.

Dylan: Message? Like, what song with a message?

Q: Oh, like "Eve of Destruction" and things like that.

Dylan: Do I prefer that to what?

Q: I don't know, but your songs are supposed to have a subtle message.

Dylan: A subtle message?

Q: Well they're supposed to.

Dylan: Well, where did you hear that?

[audience laughs]

Q: In a movie magazine.

[laughter]

Q: Do you think of yourself as a singer primarily, or a poet?

Dylan: Well I think of myself more as a song and dance man, you know.

Okay, well Dylan was sort of establishing a precedent there.

Okay, one more. It's not a very clean clip. It was done hastily.



Q: Could you just suck your glasses for one second?

Dylan: Suck them?

Q: Just put 'em in your mouth, for one second. Put the corner of your glasses in your mouth—that's it! Just suck your glasses.

Dylan: [shakes head] You want to suck them?

Q: Do I want to suck them? [brings glasses towards mouth] Just like that.

Dylan: Does anybody want to suck my glasses?

Part of the reason why I originally wanted to say "no" to doing this was because the last time I had a talk about my work I was in Canada and there was a TV documentary being made about this place that I was visiting, and they interviewed me and they brought me out and stuck me in front of some backdrop and started asking me questions and they didn't really know what my work was about or anything and then they decided that they were going to film my lecture, which they did. They were in there with a camera and everything. I gave an hour and half talk about my work, and it wasn't so bad and then somehow towards the end I just started to feel like, "Why am I doing this? It's really disappointing to me to go through and talk..." I mean, for years I've given talks about my work, but whatever happened this time, I don't know, at the end I just fell apart. It felt so empty and pointless. Maybe it was just because the TV people were there waiting. So anyway, once the talk was over and I had answered questions I walked out of the lecture forum and instead of meeting the crew I just hid. I then proceeded to have what felt like a nervous breakdown. They just stayed waiting for me so they could get their

extra footage. Somehow after a full on waterfall I just walked out and the TV people were like, “Okay, now we want you to walk from this garden gate and just walk over and sit on the bench and pretend to write in your notebook.” I sucked my glasses so hard—and that was before I had seen this clip. I didn’t feel very good about myself there.

I’m going to read something now. I was going to prepare a more thoughtful synopsis, but Stuart took my book with him, and it has all of the little underlinings in it, so instead I am going to read something. This is from Jacques Rancière’s The Ignorant Schoolmaster:

The revelation that came to Joseph Jacotot [This is the person who Rancière is writing his book about] amounts to this: The logic of the explicative system had to be overturned. Explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. On the contrary, that very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world. It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around; it is he who constitutes the incapable as such. [Got that? The teacher needs the student.] To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of the world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid. The explicator’s special trick consists of this double inaugural gesture. On the one hand, he decrees the absolute beginning: it is only now that the act of learning will begin. On the other hand, having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to this task of lifting it. Until he came along, the child has been groping blindly figuring out riddles. Now he will learn. He heard words and repeated them. But now it is time to read, and he will not understand words if he does not understand syllables, and he won’t understand syllables if he doesn’t understand letters that neither the book nor his parents can make him understand—only the master’s word. The pedagogical myth, we said, divides the world into two. More precisely, it divides intelligence into two. It says that there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one. The former registers perception by chance, retains them, interprets and repeats them empirically within the closed circle of habit and need. This is the intelligence of the young child and the common man. The superior intelligence knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole. It is this intelligence that allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what he has learned. Such is the principle of explication. From this point on, for Jacotot, such will be the principle of forced stultification.

To understand this we must rid ourselves of received images. The stultifier [to students in audience: That’s me, ‘Professor Stark, Roski School of Fine Arts’] is not an aged obtuse master who crams his students’ skulls

full of poorly digested knowledge, or a malignant character mouthing half-truths in order to shore up his power in the social order. On the contrary, he is all the more efficacious because he is knowledgeable, enlightened, and of good faith. The more he knows, the more evident to him is the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant ones. The more he is enlightened, the more evident he finds the difference between groping blindly and searching methodically, the more he will insist on substituting the spirit for the letter, the clarity of the explications for the authority of the book. Above all, he will say, the student must understand and for that we must explain even better. Such is the concern of the enlightened pedagogue: does the little one understand? He doesn’t understand. I will find new ways to explain it to him, ways more rigorous in principle, more attractive in form—and I will verify that he has understood.

A noble concern. Unfortunately, it is just this little word, this slogan of the enlightened—understand—that causes all of the trouble. It is this word that brings a halt to the movement of reason, that destroys its confidence in itself, that distracts it by breaking the world of intelligence into two, by installing division between the groping animal and the learned little man, between common sense and science. From the moment this slogan of duality is pronounced, all of the perfecting of the ways of making understood, that great preoccupation of men of methods and progressives, is progress towards stultification. The child who recites under the threat of the rod, obeys the rod, and that’s all: he will apply his intelligence to something else. But the child who is explained to will devote his intelligence to the work of grieving, that is to say, to understanding that he doesn’t understand unless he is explained to. He is no longer submitting to the rod, but rather to a hierarchical world of intelligence. For the rest, like the other child, he doesn’t have to worry: if the solution to the problem is too difficult to pursue, he will have enough intelligence to open his eyes wide. The master is vigilant and patient. He will see that the child isn’t following him; he will put him back on track by explaining things again. And thus the child acquires a new intelligence, that of the master’s explications. Later he can be an explicator in turn. He possesses the equipment. But he will perfect it, he will be a man of progress.

—Jacques Rancière. The Ignorant Schoolmaster. (Stanford University Press), 1991. 6-8

Okay, so now the anti-talk begins... Are we ready? Go! 1-2-3-4!

Printhead

Hey badges tinkle
T-shirts mingle
Hey you horror-face!
I’m a printhead
I go to pieces
I’m a printhead
I go to pieces yeah

End of catchline
 End of hook-line
 We had a two page
 It's what we needed
 I'm an ill head
 My face increases
 How my head increases
 Real problems, biz
 So how is it, yeah
 That I've reached here
 I thought this game
 Uh would do me good
 How could printed vinyl
 bring you out to here?
 We laughed with them
 When it was take-the-piss time
 I'm no egghead
 But I'm an ex-worker man
 W.C.—hero friend—and not water closet!
 There's a barrier between writer and singer
 Uh-huh he's a good man
 Although a lazy one
 The singer is a neurotic drinker
 The band little more than a big crashing beat
 Instruments collide and we all get drunk
 The last two lines
 Were a quote, yeah
 When we read them
 We went to pieces
 We went to pieces, yeah
 We went to pieces, yeah
 Regularly
 One day a week
 I'm a printhead, yeah
 Twenty pence a week
 Dirty fingers
 Printhead x3
 With print you substitute an ear for an extra useless eye

Your Heart Out
 Just take for instance
 a time of great depression
 fade out of reason
 bad time's in season
 Don't shut your heart out
 Don't cry your eyes out
 Don't shut your heart out
 No no no heart out
 Don't cry for me
 Mexico
 or Savage Pencil
 Well I'm nearly healthy
 And they try to take my eyes out
 Friends try to work my soul out
 And I don't sing, I just shout
 Heavy clout, heart out
 Now here's a joke
 to cheer you up
 Old times no surgeons
 Just magicians and dungeons
 There they take your heart out
 with a sharp knife
 It wasn't fake
 They had no anesthetic
 That joke's pathetic
 Just look at me
 Too much speed
 But very plain
 You're lucky, friend
 You've got one to take out
 You know what I'm talking about
 I don't sing I just shout
 All on one note
 Sing, sing, sing, sing x2
 Look at me, I just ping
 Heart is out
 Out
 It's out