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Do You Feel Like We Do? by Andy Roche



Peter Frampton, "Do You Feel Like We Do", Burt Sugarman's Midnight Special circa. 1975. Viewable at <http://vimeo.com/36672034>

When Peter Frampton asked, “Do you feel like we do?” he answered for us. He simply said the question again, but in a different voice, this second time running the signal through a talk box. The device blends the human voice and the guitar tone and synthesizes a robotic, or more accurately, a cyborgian timbre. The thrill of this song is his performance of offering something beside an answer that is more satisfying than the actual thing. He’s a strange golden man, roosting in skimpy magician’s robes, smiling ecstatically, immaculately skilled. The honest answer is, of course, Peter, we don’t know, we don’t feel like you do. But Frampton quiets us, slows the rhythm down, and asks the question again as an answer. It’s stranger now, coming out in a new voice that belongs equally to him, the guitar, and bizarrely, the audience.

In everyday life, evasiveness, when noticed, inspires distrust. The refusal to come out with it, to be straight with us, can also be understood as a denial of the obligation to share information. Besides those who might line up for a Frampton guitar clinic, no reasonable person has an expectation to learn anything from him. But Frampton insists on asking this most empathetic of questions which isn’t quite the same as asking, “Do *we* feel like *you* do?” but it is an open emotional question. That he is interested in our empathy is itself empathetic of a hungry fan’s desire to be closer. This closed-system of empathy feedback becomes a speculative world for Frampton and the listener to inhabit together. While it is a fragile cohabitation, the fact that it remains among the lengthiest songs in rotation on classic rock radio suggests it as a model that at least takes longer to fall apart.

I am interested in expression that does not necessarily reveal an interior world to admire from outside, but instead offers accommodation in some new emotional space big enough for many. Somehow, the agonistic refusal (to answer questions, to transparently inform, to understand any narrative as teleological) clears the way for empathy. As if the only way we can live together is if we do not fully understand where we are.

But a place constructed this way needn’t be just somewhere for us to feel good together and mellow out to some classic rock. Think of the replicants, the artificial almost-humans in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (or in Ridley Scott’s film version *Blade Runner*), and the fear they all shared of being left to die as slaves on the Off-World Colonies. Every one of them shared the same morbid fantasy of exile (that is, if they *could* dream.)

To do that I feel I must address the problematic offered by the model's model, Helen of Troy, to which long historical view I'll briefly turn below. The frivolous may have no origin, but beauty is largely known for problems of which it is said to be the origin, never as an idea but always as an image of itself. Kant makes a distinction with which I want to take some liberties: "Properly speaking, an *idea* signifies a concept of reason, and an *ideal* the representation of an individual existence as adequate to an idea. Hence this archetype of taste—which rests, indeed, upon reason's indeterminate idea of a maximum, but is not, however, capable of being represented by means of concepts, but only in an individual presentation—may more appropriately be called the idea of the beautiful."⁵ I shall suggest that the beautiful is, in Helen and fashion photography, an image that always exceeds the adequacy of its ideation by suggesting an

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And the "less than a idea" of someplace else always exists also as an image, a beautiful image. Here I'll somewhat brutally de-contextualize a selection from Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* to economically make this point:

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In early 2010, I proposed a project for a *Threewalls*' "Solo" exhibition. The idea was a series of what I called dub lectures. I would have scheduled a program of talks, presentations, panels, whatever, and then would have an elaborate sound effects rig to effectively obliterate whatever content was delivered into walls of echo-y, synth-y noise. The proposal went on and on, but this was the start and the heart of it. At the time I was a relatively new instructor and rapidly losing faith in the value of communicating ideas. My feeling was that maybe ideas could mean less and sound better.

Threewalls didn't take the proposal on, but did ask me to do a version of it at the *NEXT* Fair. By then the form of it had shifted into a project of making dub versions of archival tapes of artist talks at the gallery. A little while later, I learned that Franz West had delivered a dub lecture somewhere in California. I would love to take a look at West's application to learn what a winning proposal looks like.

I have relied on the notion of the anecdote in my video and film work. These less than stories are just casual, social talk. Someone, somewhere, sometime, and something happened. The construction of information in another's mind by use of the anecdote is at best an oblique strategy. This is the way we speak when we want to persuade, seduce, impress, entertain, and so on. This is the way we speak when we want more than anything else to drag someone with us into an empty room, shut the door, and say something quick before someone else bursts in and ruins it. I love its speed and that by virtue of its crisp persuasion the anecdote is prone to lies and exaggerations. The anecdote is here now and it wants something.

My film *Born to Live Life* is a collection of anecdotal recollections and anecdotal landscapes as told to me by the comics artist Victor Cayro. In the film places are superimposed on top of each other, Machu Picchu and Peru on top of Iowa. Memories are superimposed on top of fantasy. My idea of Victor is superimposed on top of Victor's own and so on. My intention there was to go into a reverie of intimacy and obfuscation.



Born to Live Life, by Andy Roche, 2005. Viewable at: <http://vimeo.com/36675086>

My performance video *Announcing the Mysteries* reaches through the anecdotal and grabs onto ideas about the abstracted voice and its appeal as I spoke about it with Frampton. The video is loosely structured after a memory of a television program from the Catholic channel, possibly produced in Ireland, featuring a beautiful young girl saying the rosary by herself on a misty hillside. As she performs the prayer cycle other people emerge out of the mist and join her. I imagine it was offered as a reassuring fantasy to the aged and the shut-in who felt alone in the world and who prayed in their homes along with the program. In my video a lone man delivers what I thought of

as a dub rosary, full of echoes and grunts. He also does it alone on a misty hill, but no one joins him. No one ever will.



Andy Roche, *Announcing the Mysteries*, 2008. Viewable at <http://vimeo.com/36847313>

So far, I've spoken about "less than answer," "less than a story," "less than an idea." Rather than "less than," now I want to consider the possibility of "more than." If in one notion of the sublime we define it as something out-of-scale to human experience, too big or too small to fathom, in this conversation I'm interested in something besides what may be an obvious extension of my ideas, the so-called durational.

Before it is set aside, a simple argument can be made to consider this concept as fitting into the category of the anecdotal. When in *The Mirror* Tarkovsky lets the camera shot run extra-long to wait for the moment when a gust rustles a field of grain or when an untouched bottle topples, spins on its side, and falls to the floor, the viewer's emotions will go into revelry in relief that the story world would keep amazing us, perhaps forever, if the editor didn't cut it down, if the cinematographer had a longer roll and blew it all every take, if simply the fantasy was allowed to persist just for a bit longer. Let moments be moments, let anecdotes be anecdotes, please stop trying to tell me a story. Stop pushing me. Tarkovsky used this method as a materialist resistance that for many opens onto a cosmic consciousness of banality. His book *Sculpting in Time* has become a *Dianetics*. A young person lost in art school may read it and within days find himself under the sway of fringe lunatics such as Bill Viola.

Or the conceptual art in Lucy Lippard's 6 Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, it is another similar case. When art objects dissolve into art pieces, these slight conceptual gestures occur somewhere else, some other time and are brought back to us in documentation and ephemera to become fantastic party talk anecdotes, easy to understand at the surface, self-evidential fragments. One time I was at this place and I did this thing.

When I was 18 and visiting New York from Iowa I met Willoughby Sharp at a party. He had installed himself as the bartender at some dotcom-bubble company's holiday party. At least, he was wearing a Santa hat. I only had the faintest idea what Avalanche Magazine was, but he filled me in over the course of the night. He kept tracking me down to talk to me. Andy, smoke this. You go to the University of Iowa? I know Hans. I can help you get an

A. I discovered Claes Oldenburg, now I'm doing the same thing in Lithuania. At some point he tried to pass me onto a group of what seemed old lady painting professors from Bard. It was fun, but I was happy to get away at the end of the night. My sister gave him the phone number for her apartment where I was staying. Every morning for the next two weeks, Willoughby would call early. Hello, Andy! And he would leave a detailed schedule of all the galleries and things he was doing. It was always a great list, especially as I knew nothing about what was going on in New York. Everyday I'd make my picks from his list and be certain to be there at least an hour after when he planned to be there.

I mention this only to suggest that the conceptual artists not only worked anecdotally but also lived as such.

This recent digression into the Big Sublime of stretched out anecdotes can be rolled into another idea of how these "less than"-s can become "more than." We can pile them on one after the other, but while doing so retain their anecdotal separateness.

If my ideal is to make a world available to another person, for us to share, or at least co-occupy, what could be more than such a world? A typical answer may be to fill that world with more detail and incidence, and better still have that world cumulatively add up to some meaning.

But what about parallel universes? Could it be that somewhere else in another dimension, collapsed atop our own, but holographic and invisible from our vantage, there is an experimental lecture being held where an Andy Roche delivers a talk on the privileging of sketchy, anecdotal, "less than" ideas, images, stories and so on. But in this dimension, as in all known dimensions, by fluke or by inspiration of The Originators, only one sentient race rules everything. In this other dimension, six-legged dog men who are adorable have dominion and deliver lectures.

This was exactly what fantasy and sci-fi writer Michael Moorcock proposed in his paperback The Sundered Worlds.

In his novels, in the beginning is always a hastily thrown together speculative universe. Humanity at the mercy of a cosmos about to flush itself into a black hole the size of an atom, a heroic prince with a black stone embedded in his forehead whose adventures are prescribed by a runestaff, or a decadent court of demi-gods who busy themselves with lust and schemes "at the end of time." The books are written fast and episodically. Inevitably when whatever logics running the fantasy are exhausted and in danger of being exposed as thin and frivolous, one character turns to another and informs them that they in fact live in a multiverse. Quickly, an ancient interdimensional machine is discovered, a telepathic breakthrough occurs, a drug is ingested, whatever, and the characters are off to another barely described story world.

I don't love Michael Moorcock because his stories are well-written, although occasionally they are. I love him because he is so persuasive, so leading, so irresponsible. He knows what it feels like, sings it like Frampton both straight and with effects. Incidentally, Moorcock was also the longtime lyricist for space-rock legends Hawkwind and wrote songs like "Psychedelic Warlords (Disappear in Smoke)" and "Space is Deep." The affect is always both cosmic scaled horror and a smirking bad joke. Although this wasn't Moorcock's doing, when Hawkwind fired their bassist Lemmy Killmeister, they simply left without telling him while he was in the bathroom of some gas station in the South West. Abandoned, Lemmy became the desert rock psycho that would soon found Motorhead. This is the way the world changes with Moorcock, one outrageous detail explodes into the next.

Here's an example of how he describes the breaking through from one dimension to the next in The Sundered Worlds:

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The ship throbbed spacewards.
And then they hit horror!

Chaos

It had no business to exist. It defied every instinctively accepted law that Renark knew.

Turmoil

It was fantastically beautiful. But, as far as he was con-

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cerned, it had to be ignored, mastered or destroyed, because it was wrong, evil—unlawful.

Agony

The ship coursed through the myriad, multi-dimensional currents that swirled and whirled and howled about it, that rent the sanity of the two brave men who battered at it, cursed it and, in controlling themselves, managed somehow to stave off the worst effects.

Terror

They had no business to exist here. They knew it, but they refused to compromise. They made the disorder of the tiny universe bend to their courage, to their strength and their wills, creating a pocket of order in the screaming wrongness of unchained creation.

Temptation

They had nothing but their pitiful knowledge that they were human beings—intelligent, reasoning beings capable of transcending the limits which the universe had striven to set upon them. They *refused*; they fought, they used their minds as they had never used them, found reserves of reason where none had previously been.

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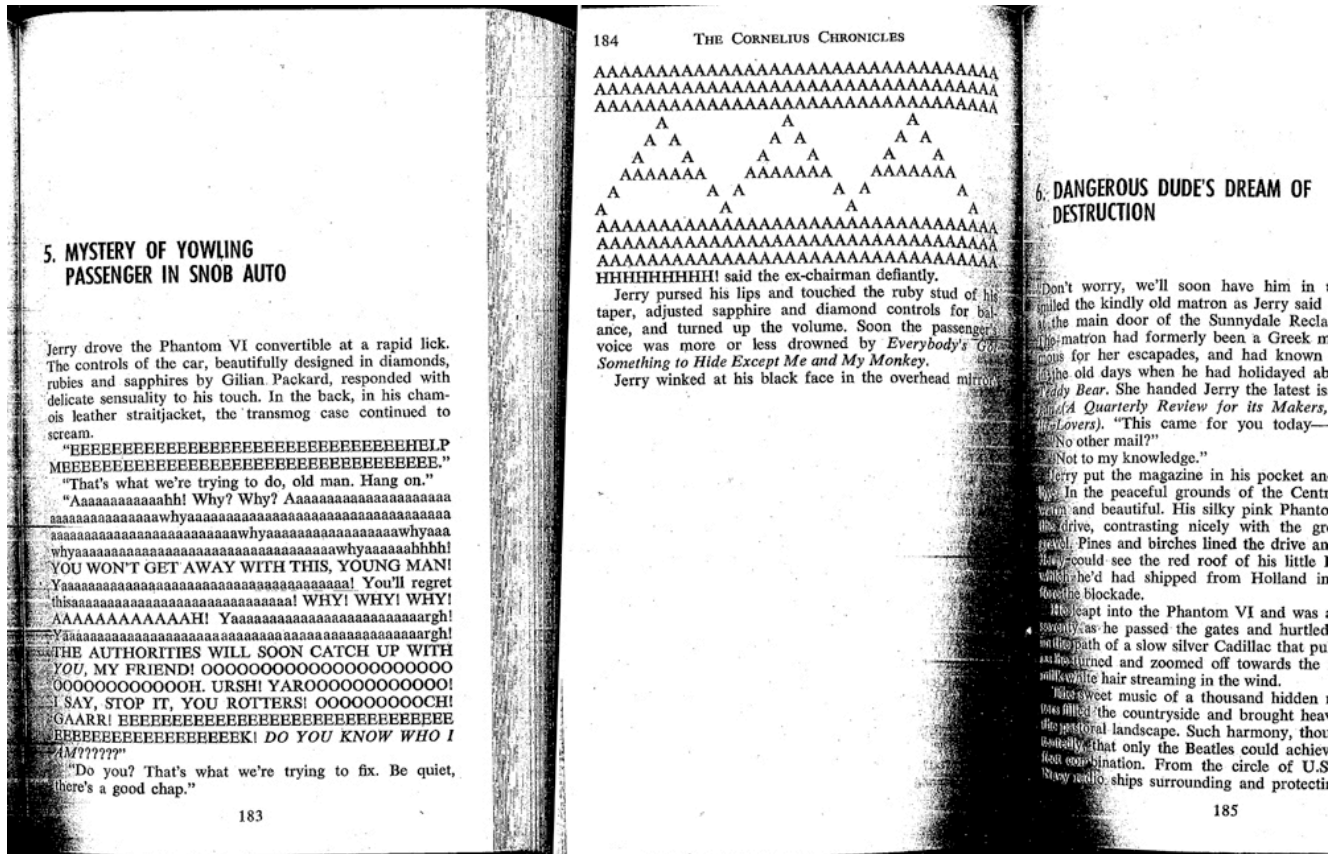
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"I thought I v
"Good. We can
city."

Renark nodded
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Or more elegantly, from a mind shattering episode in his novel The Final Programme:



To pull any section from a Moorcock novel necessarily excludes all the rest, and most significantly, the experience of instantly abandoning one universe for another cannot be communicated without spending time in the former and the latter.

The experimental novelists and poets of the OuLiPo play similar games in a more composed, formal way. Consider Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, a novel structured around short stories that are simply descriptions of far off imagined cities as told by the traveler Marco Polo to Kubla Khan. Each chapter is another city recalled by Polo. Each is premised on impossible particularities of surreal detail. But between each chapter, Calvino politely declines to scream and howl in the empty interstitial spaces as Moorcock would. Not even an acknowledgement along the lines of "Khan bowed his head, the great emperor's mind blown to bits by awe." The novel lurks on from dream to dream like a man talking in his sleep.

Because Moorcock is interested in a multiverse where new, speculative arrangements of reality materialize out of the mist, his fantasy also allows for whole universes to disappear like a puff of smoke. In this way where every place is unstable and temporal and subject to caprice Moorcock clearly is trafficking in effects and persuasion. Whatever knowledge he offers the reader is relatively useless libertarian affirmations of individuality, but we can easily imagine forgiving a stage magician for finishing his act with some pithy line like, “Now you believe in magic, and I believe in you!”

While they cannot claim Moorcock’s alibi for irresponsibility (that is, the refusal to transmit information in a clear, building way) the more serious writers of the OuLiPo (Perc, Calvino, Roubaud, etc.) instead use games to speak in similarly fragmentary ways. Calvino, as already mentioned might use the obstruction of having characters exclusively speak about imaginary places, live out pop-science in the most existential ways as in Cosmicomics, have the narrative ruled by the Tarot as in The Castle of Crossed Destinies, and so on. Or for Perc, the story may be organized around the nexus of a detailed accounting of every room in a Parisian apartment building and of an epic puzzle game in Life: A User’s Manual, a mystery story may have it’s solution irrationally located outside the story but in the missing letter “e” in the prose as in A Void, or a quiet romantic tragedy told entirely in the indexing of a young couple’s possessions in Things: A Story of the Sixties.

An obvious question for the OuLiPo is “If this art work is a game, how is the game finished?” And the OuLiPo here answer just like apocalyptic Michael Moorcock would, simply, “The game ends when the world ends.” Instead of leaps to other dimensions in the nick-of-time, they end the story world typically with an entropic collapse. As if they are fessing up to the truth about their provisional fantasy worlds. The party is over, we can’t believe how late it’s gotten, and friends slip out without saying goodbye. Or even more emphatically, the partiers go home for the night, every beer has been drank, the place is trashed, and now they’ll spread out to commit acts of vandalism around the neighborhood. No late night talks for them. No soul-baring with the last of the cigarettes.

One example I like of this type is from the conclusion of Raymond Queneau’s Witch Grass. The large body of the novel is a relatively conventional story about strange goings-on at a cheap Paris-suburban home of a salaryman in crisis. But at the end, just when it looks like people may learn some valuable lessons a cataclysmic war breaks out that within months (and a few short pages) degrades France to an absurdist vision of its barbaric past. These short selections should give an indication of the tone of these OuLiPo apocalypses.

"In the old days, we used to go in for metaphysics," replied Etienne.

"We still do, from time to time," added Saturnin, "but less and less."

"How come?"

"Because of the rain."

"Well," yelled the queen, rising up into the night, which was illuminated by a bit of round tallow which someone's demented thumbs had pummeled into the likeness of a human face, "well, the rain, that's me . . ."

"Snot true," said Saturnin.

"Hey, you-ou, so you take me for a liar, now, do you?"

"Oh no-o, oh no no no!"

"Well, I am, I'm the rain! The rain that dissolves the constellations and upsets kingdoms, the rain that inundates empires and macerates republics, the rains that makes your shoes stick in the mud and runs down your neck, the rain

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that trickles down dirty windowpanes and rolls down to the gutter, the rain that shits everybody up and makes no sense. And I am also, pay attention now, the sun that defecates onto the heads of harvesters, that skins naked women, that scorches trees, that pulverizes roads. And I am also the icy patches on the roads, that cause accidents, and the ice on the ponds, that cracks under the feet of the obese, and the snow that sends a chill down your spine, and the hail that splits your skull, and the fog that macerates your lungs. Yo soy also the summer months, the spring months that breed venereal diseases, bring faces out in pimples and cause stomachs to swell. Zhur swce the spring, that sells a sprig of lily of the valley for a franc, and the summer that kills people off because they live too intensely: I'm the autumn, that causes all the fruit to rot, and the winter that sells its boxwood on Parmesan Day. Ich bin the storm that howls with the wolves, the tempestuous tempest, the blizzard that blitzes the lizards, the hurricane that hurries you into your coffin, the gale with its hail, the cyclone on its bicycle, the thunder with its icicles, and the lightning that lights life. Eyeamme . . ."

"Then you mean to say, time, it's just nothing? No more history?" asked the queen.

"What does that matter?" she was answered.

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She shrugged her shoulders.

So they left the clearing outside Carentan and, passing through the temporal miscarriages of eternity, came one June evening to the gates of the town. They separated without a word, because they didn't know each other any more, never having known each other. A concierge took to his lodge, a midwife set up shop. A man flattened himself against the gate of a suburban half-house in which, patiently awaiting the vespertine shoup, a child was squinting at an obscene photo. The gate squeaked. The man became flat.

A mask traversed the air, causing people of multiple and complex lives to disappear, and took human form at a café terrace. The silhouette of a man appeared in profile; so, simultaneously, did thousands. There really were thousands.

The sequence at the end of Queneau's *Witch Grass* is a delirious falling-apart of a mostly conventionally episodic story world into a hellscape farce. This same strategy of smashing the game to finish it is also seen in the conclusion of the Marx Brother's *Duck Soup*. The brothers are generals in a total war that destroys everything, even time. From shot to shot they appear in different campy fatigues, unstuck from any particular war. The devastation here is rendered as horror so ridiculous we are easily persuaded to laugh. This is one version of multiversic apocalypse that is certainly "less than apocalypse."



Marx Brother's, "Duck Soup", 1933. Viewable at: <http://vimeo.com/36853286>