CONTRARY ACTIONS: CHEKHOBOKOV IN AOTEAROA AND NEW ZEALAND

"Precisely what Dadaism is it would be difficult to say – especially through a telegraph wire."

Star *(Christchurch), Issue 16333, 24 January 1921, at 6.*

The mediocrity of the New Zealand inter-war scene was exceeded only by its dullness. As Frances Pound wrote, up to the mid-century "[n]o Cubist or abstract expressionist paintings were available in New Zealand and, most assuredly, no Dada."[1]

Pound, the indefatigable, erudite and verbose expositor of the 20th Century scene, failed to notice the undetonated bomb in the midst of a complacent colonial arts culture. For a masculinist, parochial, and philistine nation, the aberration of Chekhobokov, by their very extremity, evaded contemporary comprehension (a teenage Charles Brasch wrote of his encounter with a "someone or something, baffling") and has hidden from art historical view until now.

With Orlov's discovery of the Chekhobokov archive, the Nationalist period myth of an isolated New Zealand cannot hold. It was not until 1969 that Alan Brunton would declare that "THE DELIBERATE CONCEIT OF REMOTENESS WILL BE NO LONGER!"[2] Yet the Chekhobokov archive reveals that distance was always a conceit. Dada's presence in 1920s New Zealand was not limited to a handful of snide brevities dispatched to the nation's newspapers by syndicated European correspondents, but an actually existing practice within our own shores, one fundamentally at odds with the "structure of feeling" of inter-war New Zealand.

Against an arts establishment which viewed European modernist movements after Impressionism as mere "fashion," (alluring, superficial, suspect), Chekhobokov represents the frayed end of the ludic thread that would run through New Zealand's art in the latter half of the century: the post-Situationist theatrics of Red

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[1] Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity, 1930-1970*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009) at 40.

[2] Alan Brunton, untitled*, The Word is Freed 1*, July 1969, unpaginated.

Mole and the Serpentine Complications Group; the straight-faced absurdities of Billy Apple and Julian Dashper.

Chekhobokov's is a Dadaism of evasion; all that is solid melts into air. In the inter-war period, the mechanical reproduction of sound and images formed the detritus of a new consumer economy that destabilised objects and identities. While their local contemporaries were content to reify in paint an obsolete system of value and aesthetics, Chekhobokov grasped that such gestures could not be justified in the age of mechanical warfare and consumer capitalism. Faced with this rupture, they found in the manipulation of their own image an art that dispensed with the world that was, and could draw into existence the world to come. Decades before Barthes announced the "death of the author," Chekhobokov committed *seppuku* on their own authorship, plunging the *tantō* of artifice into the soft belly of identity. In Chekhobokov, there are no objects; there are only images.

But these are images of images. We are dealing here with representations of Chekhobokov's work by Orlov – artifice heaped on artifice, down to the abyssal plain where we are unlikely to encounter any soul. The archive can only be approached in its mediated form. We are denied access to the thing-in-itself, the same thing-in-itself already obliterated by Chekhobokov.

Chekhobokov's indeterminacy is their art. That they had exactly no impact on the contemporary New Zealand scene cannot diminish their impact. Speaking forward from New Zealand and into Aotearoa, Chekhobokov's repeated erasures and redrawings intervene in an unstable and uncertain present. The system we have inherited cannot be sustained; we must draw ourselves new faces and create a new future.

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