

# *Shame on you!*

*Thierry Ehrmann, creator of the Abode of Chaos*

"*Shame on you!*" summarizes in three words the life and death struggle we are waging against reactionaries and art negationists who want to destroy the *Abode of Chaos*, a symbol of resistance against conservatism...

"*Shame on you!*" ... is a cry from the heart, repeated with tremendous anger and also the title of our compiled book of 1,800 commentaries from our petition to save the *Abode of Chaos* from destruction. We started the petition in 2006 to save the 2,900 art works at the *Abode of Chaos*.

The "Abode of Chaos" (dixit le New York Times) was born on 9 December 1999 by my conceptual act. I conceived it as *œuvre au noir* (most difficult phase of the alchemist's process, the separation and dissolution of substance...) inspired by the alchemical chaos of the 21st Century, tragic and yet sumptuous, whose embers were ignited on 9/11. In just nine years the Abode has become a unique and internationally recognised artistic factory, having been the subject of more than 1,080 press and TV articles in 72 countries. It is an open-air museum (open to the public free of charge) that welcomes more than 120,000 visitors a year. It is also a residence for a number of artists.

Our petition has already collected 72,000 signatures accompanied by commentaries and it is growing at the rate of several hundred new signatures every day. Nor, is it likely to stop growing ... because we are not the only victims of the erosion of the liberty of expression in France.

The commentaries of these petitions were written by artists, historians, elected representatives, self employed professionals, workers, civil servants, retired persons, students, families, managers, magistrates, art experts, clergymen, citizens of the world... 1,827 authors from 450 different walks of life.

This book is free because it defends the most fundamental right of the French Republic: the liberty of expression. The book is also a fascinating testimony for the sociologists, art historians, law professors and journalists who have contributed and solid proof that despite the pressures exerted, and outside any form of organised political structure, there still exists a real capacity for indignation amongst the citizens of this planet. Every time I sat down to select testimonies I had tears in my eyes and stomach cramps after half an hour because ultimately they are talking about love, beauty ... and a lot of anger. The people have real power outside the *Palais Bourbon* (French Parliament).

Few people know that our fierce battle to save the *Abode of Chaos* (and freedom of expression) has led to an avalanche of legal disputes, tax inspections, administrative dead-ends, summons (almost every week), police raids, physical threats and other dirty tricks... but apart from what we have suffered, these underhand acts and discriminations have only strengthened our conviction and our belief in the ideological in legitimacy of our struggle.

For the Municipal Council of *Saint Romain* - that has authorised its Mayor, Françoise Revel, to re-iterate its demand for the destruction of the *Abode of Chaos* (to be represented on 17 November 2008 at the Grenoble Appeal Court) - for the reactionaries and for the art negationists who have supported them, this book is the most scathing indictment that any Public prosecutor could pronounce.

But beyond this indictment, the book also demonstrates the power of words... here is one sentences from among thousands that stand out:

"*Only cathedrals have this effect on me.... F.F.*"

## Straight into the wall...

*Philippe Liotard, sociologist*

"In fact art is a means of dealing with chaos by making a vision that illuminates a moment, a Sensation. Even houses... : the drunken houses in Chaim Soutine's work seem to emerge from chaos"

*Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, What is philosophy?*

When Thierry Ehrmann asked me to write a preface for *Shame on you !*, I immediately accepted. I was glad of the opportunity to work with such a rich source: commentaries spontaneously delivered by signatories of the petition defending the *Abode of Chaos*. But before I started reading nearly 2,000 contributions selected for this work (out of 72,000 gathered), my mind turned to Ron Athey, the American artist who performed at the *Abode of Chaos* during the Borderline Biennial in October 2007. In the middle of the 1990s Ron Athey was also at the centre of an unusually aggressive controversy in the United States. Under the influence of conservative members of congress and senators the controversy led to the introduction of a moral clause into the process of attributing public funds for contemporary art. Although he had never received a penny from any institutions, Athey was used to scare the right-thinking taxpayer and allow conservative politicians and journalists to rationalise a campaign of moralising art.

Nevertheless, in October 2007 at the *Abode of Chaos*, Ron Athey literally flabbergasted the public by the strength of his artistic performance. The law voted in the US to *moralise* contemporary art is still in force. It allows *a priori* decisions to be made about what the public wants to see and what can be produced. Ron Athey's work was used as an instrument by American reactionaries and conservatives to generate a climate of political control over art. The law sets limits... but Ron Athey lives on. He continues his artistic evolution without any subsidies. He was more than welcome at the *Abode of Chaos*. His performance had a profound impact on the audience ... even those who disagree with his fundamental ideas.

As I say, when Thierry Ehrmann suggested I write this introduction, I immediately thought of Ron Athey because there is an analogy between the way this artist uses his body and the way Thierry Ehrmann uses his property. Corporeal property and real estate are both used in non-utilitarian ways, for expressive purposes and with aesthetic objectives. But the aesthetic in question disturbs, upsets, impacts... It worries. Both work in a context of complete freedom, without any dependence on public funds. Both break down barriers. Both have been the target of lawsuits and legal proceedings launched by conservative authorities.

In reaction to these attacks, and particularly to the fierce negative energy to which the *Abode of Chaos* has been subjected, it has been a fascinating insight to see how people from such a broad range of different origins and social levels, with such different beliefs and artistic cultures as those represented in this book could react to the *Abode of Chaos* and the threats it faces. *Shame on you!* is a collective cry by thousands of people who do not know each other and who work and live in completely different universes and yet who share the same anger and indignation... the same incomprehension.

These testimonies are interesting because they are reactions produced at the moment of signing the petition. Nobody asked the signatories to make any particular comment when they added their names to the petition. The commentaries are spontaneous contributions because their authors felt the need to go beyond just signing a petition. They felt the need to say something more. The utility of these commentaries (for understanding the social effects of the legal battle between Thierry Ehrmann and the town council of Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or) resides in the support they express and in the arguments they develop to justify this support. The *Abode of Chaos* is indeed highly supported and its creator's arguments carry considerable weight. This is clear - in the first place - from the sheer quantity of signatures. The comments then tell us what the support is based on. They allow us to identify the values to which thousands of strangers are attached.

I therefore focused on what all these very different people wrote, trying to capture the deeper trends that were expressed. What battle is being fought with the *Abode of Chaos*? What do these different people tell us about the world they condemn and the world of their dreams? To answer these questions, I wish to develop three approaches before concluding with a brief discussion of law and art.

The first approach consists of identifying what exactly the *Abode of Chaos* represents for those who support it. The second deals with its impact on the signatories. The third asks what societal struggle does the *Abode of Chaos* reveal

### What is the *Abode of Chaos*:

As the reactions to it prove, the *Abode of Chaos* is without doubt a "phenomenon". In the land of golden rock (Mont d'Or) and bourgeois houses, the edifice certainly stands out from its surroundings... impossible to pass by without noticing it. The commentaries all say so, and a large number of them speak of the impact of their first contact with the place. This impact comes not just from what it emanates but also from the stark contrast with its surroundings. Although one might perhaps expect to see such a place in New-York, London, Rotterdam or Saint-Etienne (the black city), it is totally unexpected in a quiet little village of the Mont d'Or region. Surprising, strange, curious, bizarre, original, rare, unexpected, unusual, striking... just some of the adjectives used to describe the first encounter in the *Shame on you* commentaries by those who have been lucky enough to visit the place. Numerous testimonies have also been posted by people who have only seen

the *Abode of Chaos* on television or Internet, or who have seen the building from outside but have not been inside (or, should I say... not yet been inside... as it is clear they are curious and eager to become more acquainted with the place).

The *Abode of Chaos* is unanimously considered as a work of art, veritable, unique, real, authentic, jubilatory, uncompromising, brilliant, exceptional, extraordinary... in short... "*one hell of a*" work of art, as well described as a "reflection of society". This is the general thrust of the remarks that describe the work. The evocation of violence and cupidity, the depiction of death and madness, the visual references to the destruction of the planet, of populations and of bodies, the expression of murderous ideologies, of political and religious sectarianisms, the obsession with surveillance and the reminders of totalitarianism... these are the themes and motives behind the works. But the depiction of evil is not bad. A Bosch painting does not mean that Hieronymus Bosch was a demon; the walls and installations of the *Abode of Chaos* do not mean that the place is Hell. The commentaries show that their contributors are quite capable of distinguishing between the reality represented and the nature of the representation.

While everyone agrees that the *Abode of Chaos* is a work of art, visitors describe the place as a "free museum". Indeed this point is often advanced: its presence in the street... at the centre of life. But it is a museum that does not incarnate the past. It is not understood as a conservatory of prestigious and dusty works of art. It is rather perceived as *the* museum of key current and global events, of international interest and significance, a living, open museum, in perpetual motion. The *Abode of Chaos* is an on-site museum where art may be touched, felt, caressed... not like subsidised museums where you pay to enter... (depositories of institutionalised culture). It is a "*work in progress*" museum made accessible to all in the very process of its own development, because it "transforms, changes and moves all the time". It may be described as a "patrimony of living art" or as a museum of the future, even if it does not become a "museum of the future" in the institutional sense of the term.

For all contributors, the *Abode of Chaos* is a symbol, a utopia incarnated by red and black walls, just like the world that is presented to us on the TV news... a symbol that the attacks of 11 September 2001 make comprehensible to everyone. For the signatories of the petition, the *Abode of Chaos* does not tell us something about the world... *it tells us the world...*

### What the *Abode of Chaos* produces ...:

And the way it tells it generates mixed emotions. The world depicted by the *Abode of Chaos* – via numerous works of art that juxtapose, crash into and reply to each other – leaves no-one indifferent. Of course, the commentaries that accompany the petition are quite different from the commentaries by people who are overwhelmed by anger, aversion or hatred. Naturally what is expressed in the petition is above all positive, describing the *Abode of Chaos* as awesome, sublime, seductive, punishing, realist, original, shocking, disturbing, provocative, anti-conformist, etc.

But above all the commentaries prove that emotions cannot always be reduced to a "like or don't like" polarity. They are often much more complex, sometimes contradictory, combining aversion with attraction. For example, one may not like something or someone, but one may recognise that one is attracted. One might love and yet simultaneously regret the absence of pedagogy. One can be moved, but not necessarily appreciate the emotion felt. One can "feel ill-at-ease". In any case, the *Demeure* pushes (emotionally) all of us to consider our relationships with art, but also with order, violence and destruction.

### The encounter

There is in fact another obvious factor expressed by the petition commentaries: *discovering the Abode of Chaos, is feeling something strong*. "*Impossible to tell you exactly what I felt*", says one contributor..., *light-headed* says another. Another says: "*that house turned me inside out, shocked me, questioned my entire belief system!*". When speaking of its emotional and intellectual impact we need comparisons... other places that produce a similar intensity of effect: "*only cathedrals have this effect on me*".

The encounter with the *Demeure* produces a shock that provokes a process of philosophical reflexion. The emotions are so strong that they initiate a process of self-questioning. Many petitioners have mentioned this; structured around the evolution of ideas and both before and after the encounter. One person says he went "*at first reluctantly*" thinking "*what a monstrosity!*"... but then ... "*I didn't want to leave the place..., I wanted to continue seeing, discovering, understanding*". Another admits: "*I can imagine that it 'shocks' those who don't know what it is; the very first impression is somewhat sombre, even morbid. But if one looks a little further one realises that it simply brings together representations of everything we see and hear on TV channels and in the media*". In response to the question "why?", everyone finds an answer in the confrontation with "*art which is undoubtedly disturbing, but which speaks to something buried deep within us*".

## Lending support without necessarily liking it

As I mentioned above, the fact that something provokes a strong emotional reaction is not necessarily synonymous with approval. Not liking a particular artistic project does not necessarily stop one from defending it in the name of an open political vision of culture. Many of the commentaries are based on a reflection that essentially says: "*I don't agree with what you do... but you should not be prevented from doing it*". The aesthetic of the project could be criticised for its 'blackness', for the sombre vision of the world that it paints. It is possible to *not* be "*sure of liking everything that the Abode of Chaos produces*" and still say: "*one thing is certain: it is an original approach that is both uncompromising and artistic*". Or, alternatively, one might say... "*the aesthetic of chaos is not one I particularly appreciate*" however "*I prefer it any time and any place to the aesthetic of suburban residential neighbourhoods or shopping centres*". Comments of support like this are important because they remind us that identifying with the themes and spirit of the place is not a *conditio sine qua non* for supporting it. They reveal that the question of support has to be debated at a different level – a level that each signatory understands as a question of important social and political principles. In other words, this is not merely a struggle between an owner and a town council... it is a battle that we all have to face.

## What struggle does the *Abode of Chaos* represent.

*Shame on you!* is the title chosen for this book of commentaries. It is true that the word 'shame' is often used to describe the actions of the public authorities and, more specifically, of the town council of Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or. In the 72,000 commentaries collected on-line, the term *shame* appears over 5,000 times! But in view of the vocabulary and expressions that appear in the commentaries, this book could also have been entitled "*Liberty for Art*" or "*Crime against art and culture*" or even "*Crime against Humanity*" or "*Liberty, I write your name!*".

There is however another title that could have been selected, and with equal pertinence. It comes from an exhortation formulated by thousands of voices: "*Let's continue the struggle*". The chapters could then have carried headings like "*Hold your positions*" or "*no pasarán*" or "*lutte permanente*" (permanent struggle)... Struggle, fight, resistance... a bellicose vocabulary indeed. But how could it be otherwise? Because beyond a legal battle between a local town council and one of its citizens, the battle of the *Abode of Chaos* is a combat between two worlds. A conflict that has the capacity to spread...

## A conflict between two worlds, a conflict for values

The geographical proximity of certain signatories is an indication of the extent to which the decisions of the town council of *Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or* are criticised. But we have seen how the battle has quickly spread from the *Monts d'Or* region to the *Val de Saône*, to *Lyon*, to France, to society in general and to the world... This broadening of the struggle to save the *Abode of Chaos* has made it a symbol of the struggle against cultural conformism, narrowness of mind and political ineptitude. In this battle, the town council of *Saint-Romain* represents obscurantism, even a certain kind of fascism. It prefigures an ordered society, drab and uniform, conformist and dull, directed by blinkered reactionary politicians, using unscrupulous methods that are both dictatorial and medieval, manipulating censorship and muzzling the media and all forms of unorthodox creativity. In the commentaries, the Mayor of the town is likened to Ubu but also to genocide killers from history for his obstinacy in eliminating everything that upsets... to purge *Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or* of its differences.

However, despite the political content of the statements stigmatising the struggle as a "*rear guard action*" by the town council's team, the struggle actually reaches beyond a typical Left-Right dialectic, with support coming from surprisingly diverse areas of the political spectrum. Because, in essence, this is a struggle between two worlds: between a world of freedom of expression and a world of censorship; between a pluralist world and a closed monotone world, between a living and forward-looking world and a world turned in on itself and on a history with highly questionable values. It is also a struggle for 'mixity', co-existence and mutual respect; a struggle for a world "*qu'il [...] s'agit [...] d'articuler autrement*" (that needs to be structured differently...).

## Struggle between two arts

The struggle for values expresses itself by a tension between contradictory representations of art: on the one hand standardised art; on the other, open art; "*centrally directed culture*" vs. "*art that disturbs*"; controlled art vs. free art; critical art vs. an art under orders; an art that 'generates' vs. a degenerating art. The commentaries also say something about 'beauty' and about the right of a work of art *not* to be beautiful. They affirm the right to cause visual disturbance, associating the *Abode of Chaos* with the Eiffel Tower, with the Ferdinand Cheval's self-built palace, with Gaudi's buildings, with the Centre Beaubourg (baptised Pompidou), and with the Pyramid of the Louvre Gallery. They remind us of artists like Dali, Picabia, Warhol, Duchamp,

and the Dada movement.

Lastly, "*It is not the result... but rather the struggle that counts*", because it reveals the issues at stake in the confrontations of these two visions of the world. It is remarkable that the representation of our world at the *Abode of Chaos* - with a never-ending series of murderous logics at its disposal - actually generates such a huge support. Despite of this tidal wave of support the local elected representatives remains stubbornly attached to their positions. Their obstinacy shows to what extent they have lost control of what is happening under their very eyes, forced into bracing themselves with legal positions that lack the support of the whole village, incapable of exploiting – for their common good – the advantages the *Abode of Chaos* brings. Faced with popular support from way beyond the walls of Saint-Romain, the decision to continue the legal harassment of the *Demeure* demonstrates how far removed the elected representatives are from the society in which they live.

### The law facing the wall...

One might well wonder how the law will avoid heading straight into the wall by rendering a decision on what the *Abode of Chaos* has become. Because, at the end of the day, the whole issue revolves around... walls. Walls diverted from their primary function, walls that have lost their value as measured by the real estate market and its speculators, walls which house multiple activities, an enterprise, a family, artists... walls daubed with expressive paintings. Walls that have transformed a smart house into a work of art.

It is indeed the walls of the *Abode of Chaos* that have generated so much hate and anger and it is the French building regulations that is being used to threaten its demolition.

The destruction of the *Abode of Chaos* would be perceived as an attack against art; the Law would be seen as having built a wall against the liberty of creation... a wall of shame.

Inversely, the maintenance of the *Abode of Chaos* would be perceived as an opening to the world. If that were the case, the Law would have erected a barrier against conformism and it would roll back the walls of what is possible, of cohabitation, of mutual acceptance.

### That is what the commentaries say

But whatever decision the courts make, they still say something else: "*that the Abode of Chaos cannot be wiped out*".

It may be materially destroyed, like the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan that were blown away by the Taliban, but it can no longer be destroyed as a work of art. By their destruction, the Taliban eliminated the Buddhas from the landscape of the peasants living in the valley. But not from memory. In effect, the Taliban have demonstrated to the entire world how moral terrorism begins by wiping out all traces of difference.

If the judges order the destruction of the house, they will not really be destroying the *Demeure* as it has already been scanned, dematerialised, reproduced and will continue its journey ... outside the walls. The Work has already escaped the Mayors and judges, just as it is escaping from its author, by pursuing a project that is almost its own independent agenda and which will be interpreted and re-interpreted indefinitely. The commentaries gathered confirm this notion: "*Art is indestructible*"

## The monster and Liberty

*Céline Moine, Art Historian*

The *Abode of Chaos* is not a closed circuit; it is open to the world, to the past, the present and the future. One could describe it as a massive *positive* black hole because its field of exploration is of an extraordinary breadth and through the apparent chaos, its ultimate aim is clarity.

### Insatiable

Thierry Ehrmann is a protean character with a tremendous appetite for life. Not surprising therefore that he should have created a 'voracious' work of art. For those who enter it, the *Abode of Chaos* - initiated conceptually by Thierry in 1999 - is a devouring and insatiable monster. Its gargantuan feast is permanent, fed by haunting images from current affairs, by a plethora of signs, figures, traces, alchemical symbols, hybrid and burnt works, tagged and disembowelled, with references to the past, present and future, homages to art, to science, to science fiction, ironical quotes, satirical messages, inspired ... a wild disorder in a space that it is continually outgrowing.

A 'food' that is *difficult to swallow*, to use a common expression, enters here in a slow digestive process,

particularly the images that are based on current affairs. The artists who work onsite paint – at a pace commensurate with the act of painting – photographs selected by Thierry Ehrmann on Internet. These images of the violence of the world, normally forgotten the instant they are consumed, take on a more tangible and durable dimension on the walls of the *Abode of Chaos*. For Thierry Ehrmann, these over-sized scenes, stripped of their captions, acquire an extra force in terms of brutality and truth.

There is violence, absurdity, power, justice and injustice, police and anarchy, law and anti-law, politics, insanity, technology... a perpetual interrogation which undermines our reference points and produces a sensation of vertigo ... Accused of living on scandal, the *Abode of Chaos* rather takes its energy from public debate, from reactions to that which *should* scandalise us. Indeed, the legal battle with the local authorities of *Saint-Romain au Mont d'or* is entirely consistent with the logic of Thierry Ehrmann's opus, reworking the question posed by Marcel Duchamp nearly a century ago: how do we define what is and what isn't art?

In response, the wave of petitions signed in support of the *Abode of Chaos* against the censorship and obscurantism (the terms crop up frequently) is a veritable 'performance' (in the standard and artistic sense of the term). By feeding the debate, the petitioners have merged themselves with the opus, just like its detractors ... you were warned, the *Abode of Chaos* is hungry!

In defending the *Abode of Chaos* against the threat of destruction, the signatories of the petition remind us of the scandals and legal proceedings that have surrounded *avant-garde* works of art in the past. They frequently invoke the violent controversies sparked off by the *Ideal Palace of the Facteur Cheval* (a wonderful "folie" built by a postman in a small village in middle France (1879 – 1912), by the *Colonnes de Buren* in the great courtyard of the Palais Royal in Paris, or by the "*Useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower*" as it was described in 1887, before it was even finished. The petitions are full of architectural references – and mention is often made of the Pompidou Centre (Museum of Modern Art in Paris) the architects of which, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, had to face no less than seven court cases during its construction. However, writers, musicians, artists, scientists and popular figures are also mentioned. We are invited to think of Jerome Boch, Giger, Mozart, Galilee, André Gide, Antonio Gaudi, Gustave Courbet, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, Jean Dubuffet, Leonardo da Vinci, Edward Munch and Henri Rousseau... all of whom had their share of controversy. They all created shocks in the history of art and thought. Each, at a certain moment, was singled out by a hostile segment of the population.

According to generally accepted Latin etymology, he who is singled out (pointed to) is a "monster" (*monstro*, *monstrare* : *montrer* = *to show*). Outside the accepted standards, he is treated with mistrust and hostility, and pointed to as an oddity. In the XVI century, books that were judged heretical, obscene or dealing with witchcraft were "pointed to" and condemned. Today, works of art are still being banned, sometimes for reasons that many of us find surprising. We are in the second half of 2008 ... and a work by the artist Martin Kippenberger showing a crucified frog with a mug of beer and an egg in its hands caused a scandal at the Bolzano museum in northern Italy. The humour of this work did not deride the President of the Haut-Adige region nor the Bishop of Bolzano who judged this *Self-portrait of the artist in a state of profound crisis* blasphemous and tried to have the work withdrawn from the exhibition.

The History of Art literally crawls with examples of this kind. The hostility is even greater if the artist is irreverent or if he/she works with impure subjects or materials. Duchamp nevertheless revolutionised the status of art and of the observer... armed with a urinal. Manzoni upset the references of the collector by offering his faeces as a relics, preserved "*au nature!*" in "Boxes of Shit" weighing 30 grams each, sold at the same price as the price of gold. The iconoclastic gestures of Duchamp or Manzoni, of Pinoncelli or Ben, live on in the spirit of the *Demeure of Chaos*. Their reflections on art and life, the role of the artist, the cultural institution and the art market are all re-activated in the *Demeure of Chaos*. And not just via the works of art and quotes written on the walls! Apart from the cultural and intellectual references, the *Abode of Chaos* crystallizes all these issues from the numerous questions it asks and from the implications of its triple identity: remember that it is simultaneously a private home, the head offices of Groupe Serveur and of Artprice and a place of artistic creation.

The *Abode of Chaos* is therefore a three-headed monster that has devoured the personal, professional and creative identity of the place. The marriage of the place '*as a work of art*' and of the company Artprice may at first sight appear incongruous: there are no works of art for sale in the *Abode of Chaos*□<sub>2</sub> which aspires to be "*a free open-air museum*". The *Demeure* side-steps art marketing and yet paradoxically it is the head office of the global leader in art market information. Are these not the two diametrically opposite faces of one and the same artistic coin: free and unshackled expression on the one hand ... market logic, with its price and

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Reworked portraits of Pierre Dumont (the former Mayor of Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or) and of Françoise Revel (current Mayor) are now on the walls of the Demeure.

2

Thierry Ehrmann has created a TAZ or temporary autonomous zone (1999). Existing beyond controls, liberated from constraints, it completely circumvents the marketing and commercialisation of art.

popularity indices on the other?

The offices of Artprice and Groupe Serveur are *deconstructed* just like the private quarters of the *Abode of Chaos*. The walls, both interior and exterior, the floors, the recesses, the windows, the mirrors, the tables, the chairs, etc... are all invested by the spirit of the place. The 'Opus' swallows up everything... makes no distinction between art and life... vibrates to the rhythm of performances, such as those in which Thierry Ehrmann cuts into his skin just as he disembowels his house. His ferocious appetite is a hunger for experiences, for renovation and for an intensification of perception.

### The Dada spirit

The experience of 'living art' was also very much the spirit of Dada, references to which haunt the walls of the *Abode of Chaos*. But these are not just sterile quotes or homages; the Dada spirit is literally pulsating throughout the entire place. Everything begins with the exterior wall, the perimeter that marks the frontier between the golden universe of the Saromagnots and the blackened and disembowelled universe of the *Abode of Chaos*. The multiple identity of the *Abode of Chaos* is immediately announced on the walls. First a work by Ben indicating "*L'antré de la Salamandre*" (the salamander's den); then just below, a large 999 tagged on the wall; then a panel announcing the order of destruction of "la Abode of Chaos". Under this triple identity, we can also read the official address of the place: "*Impasse de la Croix*" (Dead-end of the Cross)... Then, when you turn the corner, still following the exterior perimeter that leads towards the main entrance, the spirit of Dada is plainly visible with inscriptions in capital letters: "ART DEGENERATES" and "DADA IS GREAT AND KURT SCHWITTERS IS OUR PROPHET". Continue and you see references to Dada resonating like calls to a gathering: "everything is dada, dada is chaos", "*dada globe*", "*dada messe*". After the words, the images of faces painted on the walls come into view. The Abode of Chaos is an immense gallery of portraits including some of the leading lights of Dada and of the so-called "degenerate art": Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara.

In 1918 at the end of the First World War, Tzara, revolted by human foolishness, drafted the Dada Manifesto which has certain particularly close resonances with Thierry Ehrmann's work. For example, Tzara wrote: "how can we put order to the chaos that this infinitely shapeless variation, Man, represents?... No pity. After the carnage, there remains the hope of a purified humanity". In his "clean slate" logic and as an expression of his need for independence and for poetry, the author of the Dada manifesto calls for a "furious wind" that will tear "the sheets from the clouds and prayers" and prepare for the "the grand spectacle of disaster, of fire and decomposition".

Dada and the *Abode of Chaos* grew out of the same anger, out of the desire to wipe the slate clean, to "drown the bourgeois apparatus in a state of permanent war"... to instigate chaos in order to break conventional reference points. Nearly a century after the official birth of the Dada movement in 1916 at the Voltaire cabaret in Zurich, the *Abode of Chaos* has obviously evolved in a different historical context; but it is still vehemently opposed to war and horrors and to "*prêt à penser*" (readymade thoughts). After all, the Dada spirit was born out of the revolt against the First World War and the *Abode of Chaos* was re-baptised after the shock of 11 September 2001.

Dada and the *Abode of Chaos* are both about the reign of chaos and incomprehension, of provocation and of creative energy. To the question "*Why ?*" the response is always the same: revolutionise ways of seeing and ways of thinking; withdraw the spectator from past experience, create against the absurdity of the world, rediscover the dominions of emotions and euphoria. To the question "*How ?*" the answers are also similar: dissolve the limits of art, abolish *genres*, breakdown artistic frontiers, create a new order within the apparent incoherence.

An example of the freedom that was so dear to Dada is revealed in the original architecture of Kurt Schwitters' Hannover *Merzbau*. It was a "Work in progress" (like the *Abode of Chaos*) constantly fed by all sorts of trivial materials, thrown away objects, insignificant leftovers, garbage recovered in the street that deconstructed the architectural space to create a 'total work'. Launched with a maniacal passion in the *Merzbilder*, Schwitters merged into his project and became Merz ... as one might become Dada. It was no longer Schwitters who inhabited the work but rather the work that inhabited Schwitters<sup>3</sup>. In 1937, he was honoured by being exhibited as a counter-example of official 3rd Reich art, along with other degenerate artists. Modern art was considered as illegitimate production, an art of mad people, in essence impure.

For the Dada artists (and for Thierry Ehrmann as well) the label "*mad*" was received with glee since they revelled in the idea of personifying the insane. The artist wants to an *instrument of the incredible*, he threatens the order of things even if it means provoking a reaction of defence in the spectator which may result in insults, laughter or even hysteria... If the *Abode of Chaos* is described as the "*the abode of a*

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3 the *Merzbau de Hanovre* was destroyed in the war during an allied air-raid.

4 Expression taken from the artistic and literary collection edited by Hugo Ball, end-May 1916.

*madman*", its creator, Thierry Ehrmann, accepts the epithet wholeheartedly and even says it himself.

In a report on a Dada evening in Zurich on 19 April 1919, a journalist from the *Tribune de Genève* wrote "it is our opinion that this band of nutcases and perverts with their monkey-business do not deserve any mention whatsoever. If we publish the above report, it is to indicate just how ridiculous the aberrations of the *ultras modernes* can be. It is artistic bolchevism."

The *ultra-moderne* Thierry Ehrmann takes the liberty of being on the brink of insanity; he organised a *Borderline biennial* in 2007, praises convulsive beauty and the mad love wanted so badly by André Breton. As I write these words - at the heart of the Abode of Chaos - I find myself at the centre of a strange triangle: a vanity of the artist Goin, a painting of a skull 10 times the size of my head, faces me. On the wall to my right emerges a portrait of André Breton<sup>5</sup>, whose interest in mental 'illness' is well known; on the wall to my left, the face of Louise Bourgeois, who was fascinated by nervous disorders. Happily for me, according to Louise, *art is a garanty of sanity*<sup>6</sup>...

## Bible of Chaos

*Philippe Brunet-Lecomte, Director of the publication Lyon Mag*

"In an environment that keeps getting darker, we need crackpots because they let the light in!"

Flicking through this book I found this little phrase signed "ES", quite by chance. And I understood. Written by an anonymous visitor to the *Abode of Chaos*. A very strong contribution. Strong like this Work that gets its energy precisely from the feedback that so many anonymous people have contributed to this colossal artistic happening by Thierry Ehrmann.

Phrases like this... there are tens of thousands others... millions of words. But I remember this one particularly because it goes way beyond artistic criticism. By capturing all the interest of the artistic approach undertaken by Thierry Ehrmann and his artists.

We shall not attempt an exegesis of this little sentence here... because its simplicity has the merit of underscoring the obvious. Aside from the controversy and beyond the creative gesture, the *Abode of Chaos* is a brick thrown at the head of a society that today is looking for its heart as it enters a major and profound crisis. Because it is a crisis that undermines practically everything we take for granted. A crisis in which only the "crackpots" open up new perspectives, that is to say... the minds that refuse to back down; the minds open to the unknown and ready to welcome new truths.

This is the meaning of the *chaos* acted out at Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d'Or. Not simply a performance designed to upset conformist observers... but a true invitation to think beyond our rationalist instincts. Because the crisis is here, and we must escape from this straight-jacket to find another way of thinking. To build the future in another way... to live another way.

If we have not got this message when we leave the *Demeure*, then we have understood nothing. It means we have somehow missed the key message that Thierry Ehrmann carries with brilliant intuition. This annoys the fools who have launched a stupid war against him because deep down they feel targeted, but incapable of reacting.

And this book contributes an additional touch to this edifice which for the past nine years has been deconstructing itself. Because Thierry Ehrmann, who was one of the pioneers of Internet at a time when the Net only interested a small community of "nerds" , is once again at the spearhead of the combat.

Of this combat against ourselves that we need to undertake to get past our doubts and our fears.

That's why this "*Shame on you!*" is a veritable "Bible" of Chaos. Because it gives a voice to all those who have participated in this formidable artistic experience at *Saint-Romain-au-Mont d'Or*: the cortege of anonymous petitioners. A petition initially launched by the monthly magazine *Lyon Mag* and which Thierry Ehrmann has taken over to inject his incredible energy. Very soon they will be 100,000. A veritable 'army' that is today on the march. And nothing will stop it as it advances on the stupidity of all those who believe they are fighting chaos by refusing to look in front of them.

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5 This portrait, like that of Louise Bourgeois, is painted by Thomas Foucher.

6 Art is a garanty for sanity **bu Cell** : Precious liquids, 1992

But the force of this book also comes from the fact that it is born from the loins of this futuristic universe that is Internet ... to then return to the origins of mass communication... paper. An interactivity that, essentially, derives all its sense at the heart of chaos. Deconstruction is not about denying the past. On the contrary it's about *transfiguring* it by learning from it. That is the real light that shines from this *Demeure* and from this book. And its all of you anonymous visitors who today carry this light to diffuse it in "this environment that keeps getting darker". A real message of hope.

## Continue!

*Jean Tourette, Author*

"Without doubt, the *Abode of Chaos* disturbs". But its destruction will not change anything. Because the Work (the *Demeure*) is constantly moving ahead, and transcends the blackness of its towers. Much more than a visual icon that disturbs the aesthetic sensibilities of its detractors, the *Demeure* is a concept. A living concept. A process that is not limited to a visible perimeter... that attracts and repulses. This Book of Petitions is an integral part of the *Demeure*, conceived as an uncensored work. It is a manifesto. The words on these pages are not just a series of pleas against the decisions of town planners. They seek to defend one of the essential qualities of art... if not the most important: its capacity to question the epoch in which it creates.

When the definition of art belongs to a handful of commissioners and their henchmen, the result is of no real significance. When art is modes and well organised in its expressive area, showing what it can of false provocation to mask propriety, the work is inert. Within the limits of imposed taste, whether good or bad, entrenched, decorative, it no longer questions. It reflects nothing. The creation motivation is buried.

But the unpredictable suggests one or two small clashes. Fear of the bizarre... in a place where steps are less confident. When the reference grid is not available and the system is still uncertain. The conscience is inconvenienced. It wants reference points. But it is this navigation into the unknown that sheds a new light on our normal experiences. A curiosity that still conditions the power to astonish ourselves. The possibility of the dream. The imagination sufficient to give body to the outline, to materialise the suggestion and concretise the idea. To create.

Beyond current codes... outside its pre-meditated fields, art can upset... can disturb. But when it stops surprising us, it loses its vital force. The following pages defend art as something that has the power to mobilise. Artistic creation is not limited to the production of artefacts. Its power resides in the ability to transmit an autonomous strength to the final work, an energy liberated from circumstances so that it may produce an effect. But works of art cannot defend themselves alone.

Whether via its anachronistic transcending of the real, or, on the contrary, via its excess of contemporary reality, the *Abode of Chaos* opens eyes. Exaltation or catharsis, expression of anti-conformist revolt, liberation of the "*avant-garde*", mirror of a tragic and yet sumptuous world... the touching sincerity of these testimonies reflects a powerful lobby of people who are ready to step outside the consensus and seek new horizons: those of an art that is free, alive, and open to the present.

This open work exists, lives and derives its substance - continually replenished - from this unanimous imperative: "Continue!"