

An abstract painting with thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of brown, tan, and black. The composition is dense and textured, with a central area that appears to be a face or a figure, though it is heavily obscured by the surrounding chaotic strokes. The overall effect is one of intense energy and emotional depth.

# ROLAND

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ICA'S VISUAL ART PROGRAMME  
ISSUE 5 / FEBRUARY—APRIL 2010

FEATURING A GUIDE TO  
*Billy Childish*  
*Unknowable but Certain*

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Plus texts and other contributions by: Max Beckmann, Richard Birkett,  
Neal Brown, Charles Bukowski, Martin Clark, Louis-Ferdinand  
Céline, Bo Diddley, Knut Hamsun, Matthew Higgs, Jutta Koether,  
Robert Walser





The ICA is proud to present the fifth issue of ROLAND, which has been produced to accompany our new exhibition *Billy Childish—Unknowable but Certain*. The first half of the magazine contains a guide to the exhibition and other events at the ICA, while the second half features a variety of texts and images by the subject of the exhibition, Billy Childish, as well as contributions from a wide range of authors, artists and commentators, providing a broad context within which to understand Childish's work. The magazine also includes a special insert that forms part of COSEY COMPLEX, a one-day event at the ICA on 27 March.



## **Billy Childish** **Unknowable but Certain**

17 FEBRUARY—18 APRIL 2010

The ICA is proud to present a major solo exhibition by artist, musician and writer Billy Childish. The artist was born in 1959 in Chatham in Kent, where he still lives, and his prodigious range of activities can best be understood as a total work of art—one which centres on his own extraordinary persona. Childish is a cult figure, and one who has gained an international following, but this exhibition is the first occasion on which a public institution has attempted to encompass his long and wide-ranging career.

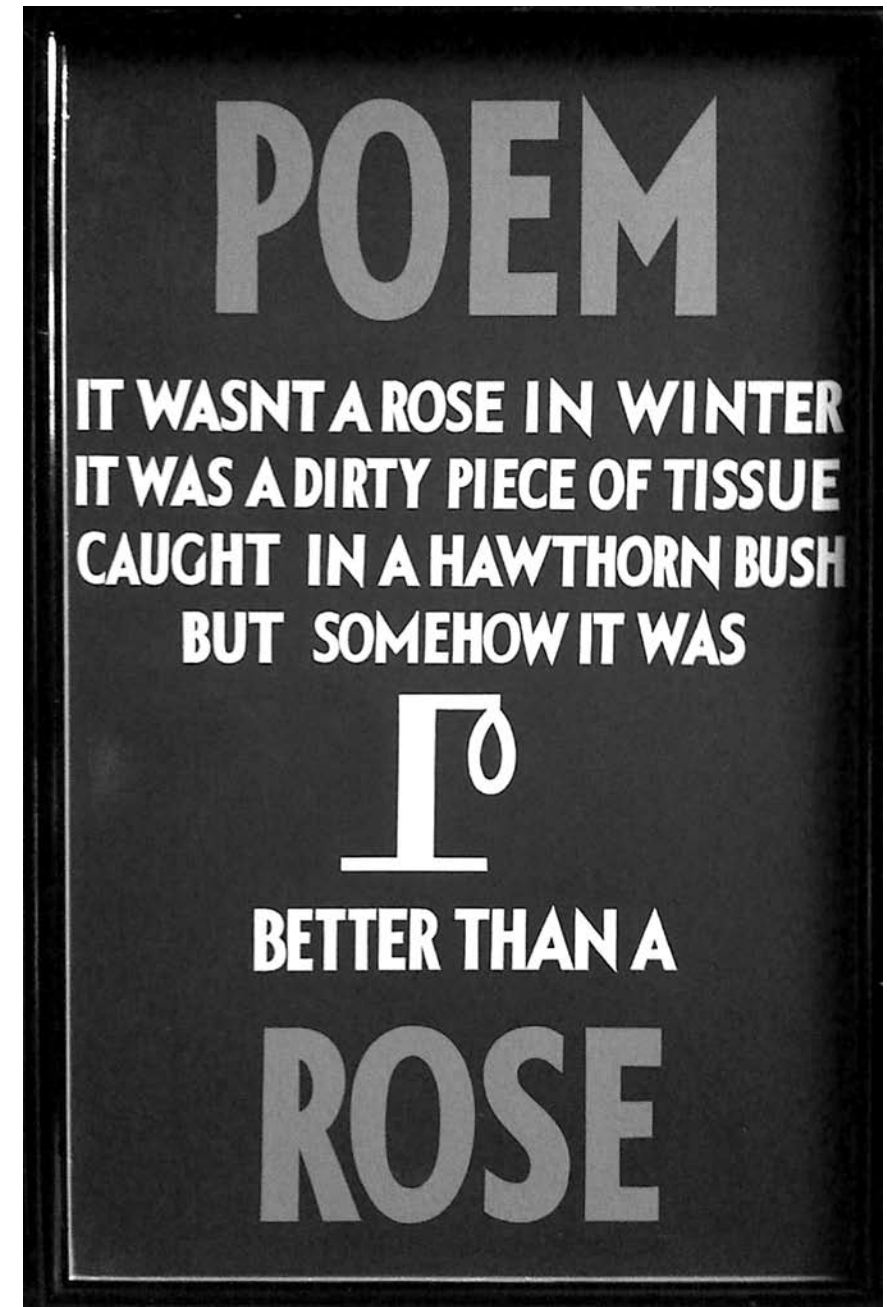
The ICA's Lower Gallery features a group of Childish's recent paintings, which have an unusual command and power. It includes self-portraits of the artist, often shown hill-walking; images of boats on the Medway Estuary, where he lives; still lifes with flowers, featuring pots made by the artist's mother; and paintings depicting the Swiss modernist writer Robert Walser, including works based on police photographs showing the author dead in the snow. Childish's paintings are highly expressionistic, conveying a sense of the visionary significance that he discovers in objects, places and people. They also demonstrate the deliberate rejection of the

contemporary world that is a feature of all his work.

The ICA's Upper Galleries present Childish's output as a musician and writer, covering a career which began in 1977, and providing a context within which the recent paintings can be understood. One room concentrates on his music, which has involved a huge range of collaborators and bands, and which maintains a stubbornly independent ethos originating in the punk era. The other room features books and pamphlets containing Childish's writings, often designed and published by him and illustrated by his own woodcuts. The display includes polemical and campaigning literature, but also his more personal poetry and prose, much of which is profoundly autobiographical in nature.

The exhibition has been curated by Richard Birkett of the ICA and Matthew Higgs of White Columns, New York, and is staged concurrently with an exhibition of the artist's paintings at the latter venue (5 March—17 April 2010).

Mark Sladen  
Director of Exhibitions, ICA



*Rose, paint on board, 2009*

## LOWER GALLERY



*Man Walking up a Snowy Slope, 2009*  
Oil on canvas, 182 x 121 cm

Painting has been a consistent part of Childish's practice since the late 1970s, and for many years he concentrated his painting into a few weeks of the year, during which time he would work intensely to produce a large number of canvases, most of them made in just a few hours each. In the mid 1980s Childish shifted this pattern, since when he has spent most weekends painting at his mother's house in Whitstable, Kent, where an upstairs bedroom serves as his studio. The paintings in the ICA's Lower Gallery are all made since 2007, in oils (with charcoal under-drawing), and display subjects and compositions that have recurred in the work of this period—while Childish does not consciously work in series, he often returns to certain themes and motifs.

Across thirty years of painting Childish's work has been largely autobiographical and expressive, often employing the self-portrait as a means to register experience and emotion. While his approach to the act of painting is intuitive and physical, his compositions consciously echo the work of artists with whom he has an affinity, including the early modernist painters Edvard Munch, Mikhail Larionov and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, along with the writers Fyodor Dostoevsky, Knut Hamsun and Robert Walser. This network of influences is echoed in Childish's depiction of the artist as anti-hero, a creative archetype that embodies the intensity of worldly experience and the problematic attempt to translate it into art.

Walser, a Swiss modernist writer who died in 1956, is the subject of a group of recent works by Childish, and a number of these paintings are exhibited here.<sup>1</sup> Walser's most radical works coincided with his committal to a mental home, and he died from a heart attack while walking in the snow near the sanatorium. Childish's paintings of Walser include images of the writer's death, based on original police photographs of the scene, and imbued with elegiac and dream-like qualities through the use of thick impasto to build up the snow-bound scene. Walser was known for his habit of taking long nocturnal walks, and walking in the landscape is important to Childish as well. The painter has often returned to the image of the flâneur, and in his pictures of Walser this figure takes on a special poignancy, and the notion of walking a

wider resonance—as a metaphor for the artist's attempts to order his experience of the world.

The pictures of Walser overlap with a group of self-portraits by Childish, which show the artist in the midst of towering landscapes, including the Atlas Mountains. In some of these pictures the artist is depicted in a yellow suit, making reference to a character in *Mysteries*, Hamsun's novel of 1892. The character of Nagel is a radical, almost Christ-like figure who arrives in a small Norwegian town wearing a yellow suit, and who proceeds to create turmoil in the contented community through his eccentric and provocative behaviour. The existential notion of a man 'out-of-time' is present in the writings of both Hamsun and Walser, and is also evident in much of Childish's work, which expresses a desire for a spiritual response to the world, a response often cast in opposition to the status quo.

While the intensity of Childish's paintings reflects the immediacy of emotional experience, their subject matter speaks of a deeply ingrained personal history and iconography. Another group of works made in recent years depict old moored steamboats and other ships on the Medway Estuary. These images are evocative symbols of the region where Childish has lived for much of his life, and reflect his own personal experience of working in the Chatham dockyard as a teenager. They also evoke the persistence of such industrial icons in folk memory, and conjure up a decelerated response to contemporary living that is very characteristic of the artist.

If a sense of temporality and mortality is central to many of the paintings within this exhibition, then a group of still lifes provides an equivalent meditation on the vibrancy of existence. Evoking the composition, gesture and intense hues of Van Gogh's flower paintings, these works are also marked by Childish's choice of vases. Each brown vessel appears to be a kind of totem, bearing primitive human or animal features that are sometimes menacing, at other times comedic. These vases have a very specific meaning for Childish, as they are made by his mother, June Lewis, a practice she began after a trip to Bali. One of these vases can be seen at the ICA, placed at reception to welcome visitors to the exhibition, and displaying flowers selected by the artist.

1. Walser's early work was widely published and lauded, but as his approach to writing grew more radical he became a marginalised figure, and he was largely forgotten by the time of his death. Committed to a mental asylum in 1929, after confessing to

hearing voices, Walser continued to develop his densely layered and abstracted style, writing by hand in minuscule and almost indecipherable lettering.



## CONCOURSE

The Concourse contains a group of simple text-based placards, and introduces a very particular—and notorious—side to Childish's practice, that of his polemical work. Commissioned from a sign-writer who is a friend of the artist, the signs consist of brief phrases that veer from the lyrical to the confrontational and declamatory. They often address the contemporary art world, and relate to a series of

manifestos that Childish has written or contributed to since the early 90s, employing his savage wit and regaling the reader with heartfelt appeals for creative integrity. The text on the placards is accompanied by the symbol of the gallows, a central feature within Childish's iconography, and employed as a reference to folkloric heroes and anti-heroes, and as a symbol for public authority and judgement.

## UPPER GALLERIES

The ICA's Upper Galleries are devoted to presentations of Childish's work as a writer, musician, and filmmaker, covering a period of over thirty years. Operating in parallel to his visual art, his output in disciplines rooted in text, music and performance has been equally prolific, standing as testament to a totalising approach to creative endeavour.

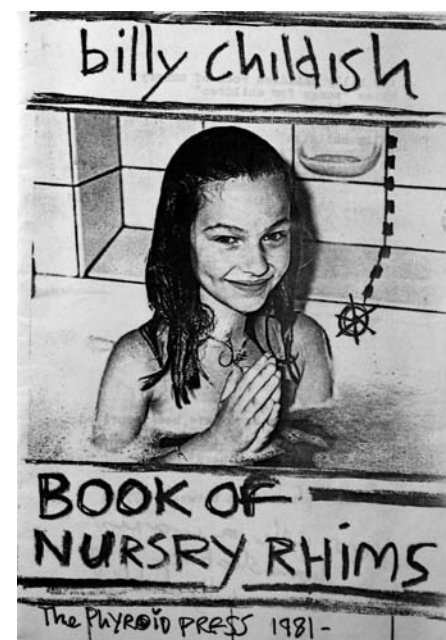
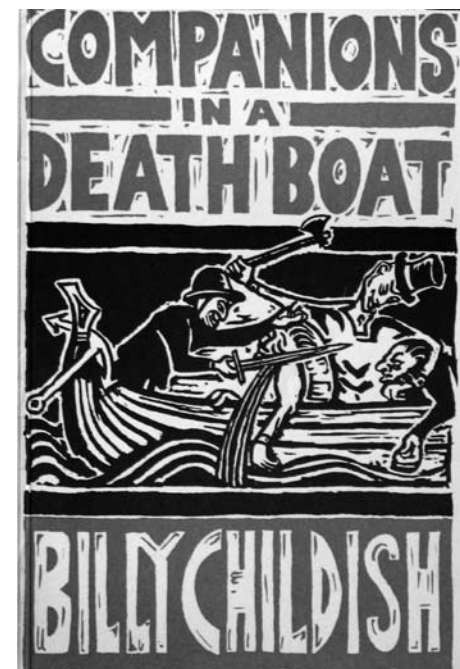
The left hand room in the Upper Gallery focuses on the written word, featuring poetry and prose produced by Childish from 1977 to the present. Childish's writing, and specifically his poetry, has a special place in his practice—as the clearest manifestation of the autobiographical dynamic at the heart of his work. His early poems depict a life of poverty in Chatham, moving from an alcohol-infused sexual urgency to his railings against authority and conventional forms of work. The starkness of this verse is countered by a deeply affecting poetic humour, built on Childish's observations of the people around him. A series of poems by Childish written from the 80s onwards are on view on the walls of the gallery, and as his poetry develops there is a noticeable shift towards more abstract reflection, including the interrogation of his position as an artist, and a broader spiritual enquiry.

The gallery also features a wealth of books, pamphlets and fanzines, the majority of them self-published. Stemming from a distinctly punk ethos, born of both necessity and antagonism, Childish has maintained an independent approach to releasing his own and others' writing. He has helped initiate and run a number of DIY imprints, beginning with Phyroid Press, founded in the late 70s by

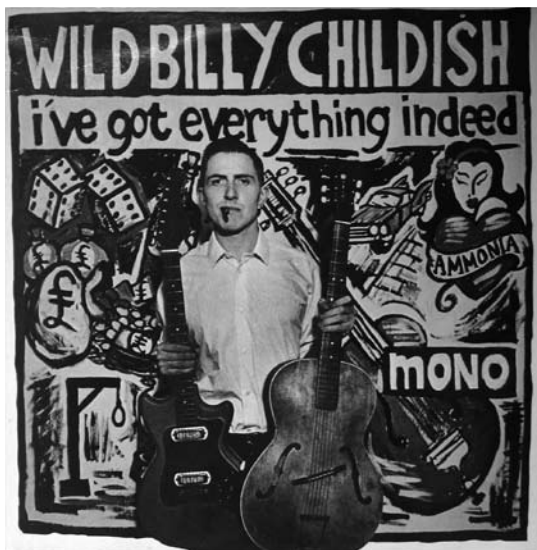
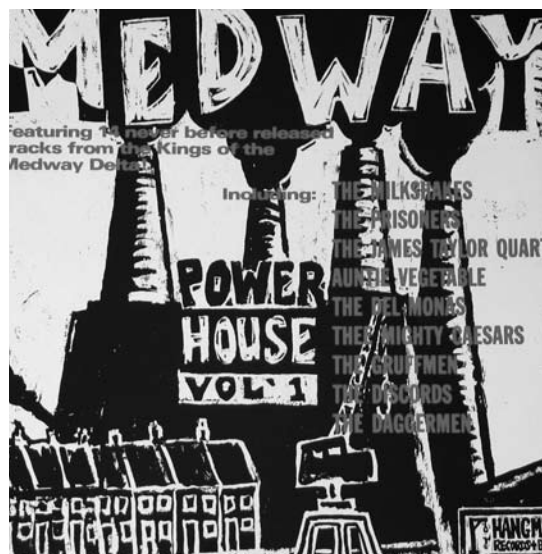
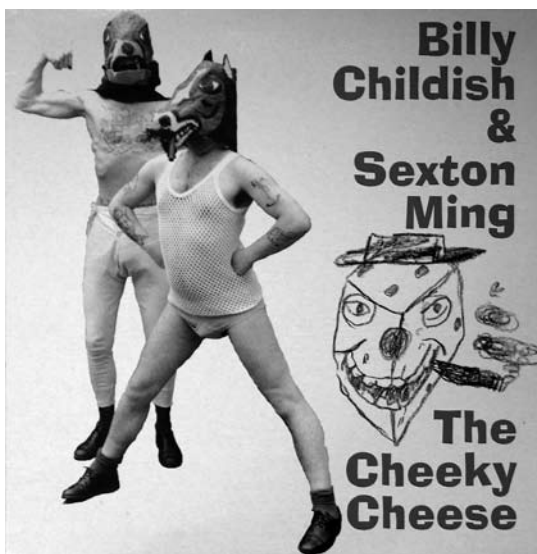
Childish with his friend and fellow poet Sexton Ming. After this, in the 80s and early 90s, Hangman Books became the mainstay of Childish's publishing activities, releasing his own writings alongside that of The Medway Poets (a performance poetry group including Childish, Ming, Bill Lewis, Miriam Carney, and Charles Thomson) and Tracey Emin. Childish has also made numerous connections with other independent presses around the world, leading to his work being translated and published internationally.

The selection of printed material exhibited here includes rare, one-off publications, as well as editions customised by Childish. Ranging from early Xeroxed fanzines containing poetry and song lyrics, to collections of woodcut prints and novels with hand-painted covers, this material demonstrates the synthesis that Childish achieves between visual and textual language. Using a more graphic style than his paintings, yet exhibiting the same brevity of mark and directness of image, his prints and drawings play an important role in constructing the iconography of his poetry and prose.

The second room of the Upper Galleries introduces Childish's musical output. As in his work in other disciplines, Childish is remarkably prolific as a musician and songwriter, and since the formation of his first group in 1977—The Pop Rivets—he has worked with an extraordinary number of bands, under names such as Thee Headcoats, Billy Childish and the Musicians of the British Empire, and (most recently) The Vermin Poets. Childish's commitment to the headlong and apparently unedited production



Clockwise from top left:  
covers of the books *Hunger at the Moon*, 1993;  
*Companions in a Death Boat*, 1987;  
*Book of Nursry Rhims*, 1981;  
*Back on Red Lite Rd.*, 1981



Clockwise from top left:  
covers of the records *The Cheeky Cheese*, 1999, by Billy Childish and  
Sexton Ming; *Medway Powerhouse Vol. 1*, 1987; *I've Got Everything  
Indeed*, 1987, by Wild Billy Childish; *The Original First Album*, 1989,  
by The Pop Rivets

of music is characteristically unconventional, and the bands with whom he has worked have also routinely refused to operate through the established music industry, despite enthusiastic critical and public followings.

The music that Childish makes is usually infused with a punk sensibility, favouring a short burst of vocal, guitar and drum-based energy. Yet his songs also reveal a debt to the blues tradition, and to a lineage of garage rock since the mid 60s, including bands such as The Kinks, The Who and The Pretty Things. Production is approached with the most basic of means, and Childish's live performances and recordings utilise old valve amps and minimal technological manipulation of sound. The result is raw and tight, creating a perfect foil for Childish's lyrics, which combine simple rhymes and repetitions with the personal narratives and reflections familiar from his written work. A number of recordings are available for visitors to listen to in the gallery.

As with his writing, many of the albums produced by Childish have been issued through his own imprints—or through small independent labels, whether in Britain or abroad—and this room features the covers of the majority of the LPs he has produced, creating a wall of imagery. This archive also reflects some of the visual iconography that is present across the artist's practice, including his interest in historical figures and the archetypes of behaviour associated with them. The very British notion of the 'boy's own' hero is particularly prevalent, from the military gentleman to Sherlock Holmes, and including the more sinister figure of the hangman.

The collaborative urge that is manifest in Childish's musical work is also demonstrated in his filmmaking, a lesser-known aspect of his activities

but one which is also presented in this room. In 2002 the artist—along with his friends Wolf Howard and Simon Williams, and his partner Julie Hamper—formed The Chatham Super-8 Cinema group, which uses a Super-8mm film camera (purchased second-hand at Rochester Flea Market) to produce short films. These films, a number of which are being shown here, include both narrative and documentary works, and the basic nature of the production equipment is reflected in an equally straightforward approach to structure and content. This filmmaking collective, and some of its films, reflect Childish's interest in creating and celebrating groups which are steeped in the past, an investment in the anachronistic that can be identified throughout his work.

As has been shown, the motif of the yellow suit is one that links a number of Childish's activities—the image of the man in yellow is found in some of the artist's paintings, including his self-portraits, and is one way in which he links himself to his artistic forebears. However, Childish has also created an actual yellow suit, which can also be found on show in the Upper Galleries. This outfit has been worn by the artist as part of a series of performance-protests that he has conducted since 2008, under the banner of the British Art Resistance. In this project Childish takes on the role of the Son of Art, a supposed saviour of the artistic community, leading the way through his creative spirituality. It is a role which is posed with tongue in cheek, but which reflects the passionate engagement with the world that runs through all of Childish's activities.

Richard Birkett  
Curator, ICA



## BIOGRAPHY

1959	Publishes <i>Chatham's Burning</i> , the first of a series of punk fanzines. Co-founds The Pop Rivets (with Bruce Brand, Russ Wilkins and Russ Lax), the first of many bands in which he will be involved, often as lead singer.
Born Steven John Hamper in Chatham, Kent. Second son to June and Reginald Hamper.	Writes first lyrics and verse. First poetry reading, with the Out Crowd Poetry Group (Rob Earl and Bill Lewis).
1967	First given the name Billy Childish, one of many aliases he employs over the years.
Enrols at Lordswood Junior School. An undiagnosed dyslexic, he is put into a remedial class.	1978
Father leaves the family home.	Enrols on the painting course at St Martins School of Art, London. Attends for half a term and quits.
1968	1979
Sexually abused by a male family friend while on holiday in Seasalter, Kent.	Meets Sexton Ming, with whom he founds The Medway Poets (with Bill Lewis, Charles Thompson, Miriam Carney and Alan Denman) and Phyroid Press.
1970	The Pop Rivets record their first LP, <i>Greatest Hits</i> , and tour in Germany and Switzerland.
Enrols at Walderslade Secondary School for Boys.	1980
Mother reads him <i>Lust for Life</i> (1934), Irving Stone's book about Van Gogh. Executes his first oil paintings.	Eugene Doyen directs <i>The Man with Wheels</i> , a film based on poems by Childish about the life of Kurt Schwitters.
1972	Re-joins the painting course at St Martins School of Art. Meets Peter Doig.
Mother diagnosed with Tuberculosis. Father temporarily moves back into the family home.	1981
1974	Learns to play guitar and forms The Milkshakes (with Micky Hampshire, Banana Bertie and Bruce Brand).
Founds the Medway Military Research Group (with Keith Gulvin), which investigates the history of local fortifications.	Founds Hangman Books. Expelled from St Martins School of Art for publishing 'obscene' poems.
1976	
Leaves secondary school. Starts work at HM Dockyard, Chatham, as an apprentice stone mason.	
Hears <i>Anarchy in the UK</i> by The Sex Pistols.	
1977	
Leaves work and enrols on the foundation course at Medway College of Design, Kent. Makes first collages.	

Father is arrested for drug smuggling.

1982

Meets and falls in love with Tracey Emin. Has a painting studio at the family home in Chatham until 1987.

1983

Forms printmaking collective Group Hangman (with Tracey Emin, Sheila Clark and Sanchia Lewis).

Marries Sheila Clark. Meets Kyra De Coninck.

1984

The Milkshakes release four LPs around the world on one day.

1985

Leaves family home to live with Kyra De Coninck in Rochester, Kent. Changes his name by deed poll to William Charly Hamper.

Forms the band Thee Mighty Caesars (with John Agnew and Graham Day).

1986

Has solo exhibition of his prints at De Media, Belgium.

Founds Hangman Records.

1987

Diagnosed as dyslexic.

Hangman Books publishes books such as *The Man Who Created Himself* by Sexton Ming, and *Six Turkish Tales* by Tracey Emin, among others.

1988

Moves his studio to the front bedroom of his mother's new house in Whitstable, Kent. Has first solo exhibition of his

paintings at 5 Dryden Street, London.

Hangman Books publishes Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Cannon Fodder* (1952), co-translated by Childish and Kyra De Coninck.

1989

Forms the band WOAH – Thee Worshipful Order Of Ancient Headcoats (with Bruce Brand).

1990

Solo exhibition at Westwerk in Hamburg.

1991

Tours in the United States with Thee Headcoats, and in Japan with The Milkshakes.

Exhibits at Galerie Spaarkrediet in Belgium, and spends the winter painting in Zurich.

1992

*I am the Billy Childish*, a compilation CD, released by Sub Pop Records, Seattle.

Included in *The Kelly Family* exhibition at the Esther Schipper Gallery, Cologne.

1993

Gives up alcohol. Starts practising meditation and yoga. Begins seven years of psychotherapy.

*Hunger at the Moon*, a collection of his poetry, published by Sympathetic Press, Long Beach.

1994

Solo exhibition at Cubitt Gallery, London (curated by Peter Doig and Mathew Higgs).

1995

Founds The Friends of the Enemies of the Western Buddhist Order.

1996  
*My Fault*, his first novel, published by Codex Books, Hove.

1997  
*Notebooks of a Naked Youth*, his second novel, published by Codex.

Re-forms Group Hangman with Dan Melchior. Writes first Hangman manifestos.

1999  
Co-founds the Stuckist Art Group (with Charles Thomson), and helps write the Stuckist manifestos. Thrown out of the Tate Gallery, London, for distributing manifestos.

Parts from Kyra De Conick. His son Huddie is born.

Forms the group The Friends of the Buff Medway Fanciers Association (with Wolf Howard and Johnny Barker).

2000  
Marries Julie Winn.

Included in the British Art Show 5 (co-selected by Matthew Higgs).

2001  
Leaves the Stuckist Art Group.

2002  
Television profile of Childish, directed by Paul Tickell, shown on Channel 4.

2003  
Starts association with Steven Lowe, director of The Aquarium Gallery / L-13, London, where he has the first of a series of exhibitions.

2004  
Solo exhibition at the Simon Finch Gallery, London.

*sex crimes of the futcher*, his third novel, published by The Aquarium.

Forms *The Chatham Super-8 Cinema* (with Wolf Howard, Simon Williams and Julie Hamper).

2005

*My Fault* and *Note Books of a Naked Youth* re-published by Virgin Books, London.

Forms Billy Childish and the Musicians of the British Empire (with Julie Hamper and Wolf Howard).

2007

*The Idiocy of Idears*, his fourth novel, published by The Aquarium.

Starts the Band of Historical Hill Walkers (with David Wise).

Forms the band The Vermin Poets (with Neil Palmer and Julie Hamper).

2008

*Billy Childish—A Short Study*, by Neal Brown, published by The Aquarium.

Forms the British Art Resistance, a 'non-organisation' with multiple manifestations.

The Band of Historical Hill Walkers visit Auschwitz and the Atlas Mountains.

2009

The British Art Resistance organises National Art Hate Week. Childish makes propaganda posters and records an anthem with James Cauty.

His daughter Scout is born.

2010

Solo exhibitions at the ICA, London, and White Columns, New York.

## ACTIVITIES

AN EVENING OF POETRY  
AND FILM WITH BILLY  
CHILDISH  
THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY  
8.30PM  
Cinema 1 / £5 (£2.50 members) \*

Billy Childish has had a long career as a poet, and has published over forty collections of verse. His poetry is by turns base, spiritual, funny and devastatingly honest, and for this event the artist will read a number of poems from across his career. The evening also features films by Childish, a less well-known aspect of his output. In 2002 the artist and a group of friends co-founded The Chatham Super-8 Cinema, which produces short films with a second-hand camera purchased at Rochester Flea Market, and the evening will include a number of their recent works.

RICHARD BIRKETT  
THURSDAY 11 MARCH 7PM  
Lower Gallery / free

The ICA's Richard Birkett, who has co-curated the Childish exhibition, delivers a talk on the show. This talk will be signed in British Sign Language by Rob Chalk.



BILLY CHILDISH IN  
CONVERSATION WITH  
MATTHEW HIGGS  
THURSDAY 18 MARCH 7PM  
Nash room / £4 (£2 members) \*

Curator and artist Matthew Higgs has been a long-term supporter of Childish's work, and has included

him in exhibitions at venues such as Cubitt and the Hayward Gallery. Higgs is now the director of White Columns in New York, where an exhibition of Childish's paintings is being mounted in parallel with the ICA show. For tonight's event Higgs is in conversation with Childish, discussing the latter's work as a painter and printmaker in the context of his wider, multi-disciplinary practice.

BILLY CHILDISH AND  
THE MUSICIANS OF THE  
BRITISH EMPIRE / THE  
VERMIN POETS / THE KEN  
ARDLEY PLAYBOYS  
THURSDAY 8 APRIL  
DOORS 7.30PM  
Theatre / £8 (£4 members) \*

Childish has been a unique and maverick figure on the music scene since the late 1970s, during which time his brand of garage-and-blues-infused punk rock has gained an international following and influenced many musicians. He has maintained an independent yet highly prolific approach to making-music, collaborating with others as well as performing solo under multiple guises and names. Tonight's gig includes performances by two of his recent vehicles—the MBEs and The Vermin Poets—which feature Childish alongside Julie Hamper, Wolf Howard and Neil Palmer. Support comes from The Ken Ardley Playboys, a noise-junk band that includes the artist Bob and Roberta Smith.

## THE FOX READING ROOM

Situated off the Bar area and adjacent to the ICA's Lower Gallery, the Fox Reading Room is our resource space providing artist-selected publications and related material to accompany our visual arts programme. It also provides learning resources for teachers and educators linking our exhibitions to the national curriculum and beyond.

For the duration of the Childish exhibition the Fox Reading Room will host a series of events relating to the show, as well as a selection of publications. See [ica.org.uk/learning](http://ica.org.uk/learning) for further details.

\* To book please call the ICA Box Office on 020 7930 3647.

## PUBLICATIONS

The following is a selection of exhibition-related publications that are available in the ICA Bookshop.

ICA Members receive 10% off all books, ICA branded gifts and ICA films and DVDs.

[www.ica.org.uk/bookshop](http://www.ica.org.uk/bookshop)

PAINTINGS OF A  
BACKWATER VISIONARY

By Billy Childish  
The Aquarium, 2005  
£24.99

Since 1977, along with his writings and songs, Childish has produced more than 2,500 paintings, some of which are collected and explored in this volume. A comprehensive and extensive study of the work of this "visionary from the backwaters," it includes an introduction by Matthew Higgs, director of White Columns, New York, an in-conversation with Billy Childish and Steven Lowe and reproductions of Childish's paintings from the early 1980s through to 2005.

GUN IN MY  
FATHER'S HAND:  
SELECTED LYRICS  
1977–2006

By Billy Childish  
The Aquarium, 2006  
£8.99

Billy Childish has released over 100 LPs and written more than 1,000 songs. He has often denounced the poetic worth of song writing, but in these gut-wrenching, rude, funny and often sad rock 'n' roll songs, he has proved himself wrong—they stand up on the page just as well as his celebrated poetry.

THOUGHTS OF  
A HANGMAN:  
WOODCUTS BY BILL  
HAMPER AKA BILLY  
CHILDISH

By Billy Childish  
The Aquarium, 2006  
£19.99

Since 1984, Billy Childish has been producing woodcuts under the name of Bill Hamper, which have adorned the covers of his books and records and have been exhibited throughout the world as works of art in their own right. This publication provides an overview of these exceptional prints, made over the course of 22 years.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED  
BY THE ICA

## THINGS TO SAY

Published to mark  
*A Recent History of Writing & Drawing*, an exhibition featuring Jürg Lehnli and Alex Rich, and curated by Emily King, at the ICA in 2008.

ICA & Nieves, 2009  
£8.00



## LIMITED EDITIONS



*Man Walking Up a Snowy Slope*, 2010  
Etching, each uniquely hand-painted in watercolour  
56 x 38 cm on 250 gsm Somerset Buff  
Edition of 100, signed and numbered by the artist  
Accompanied by a letter press poem *the snow* (for Robert Walser)

BILLY CHILDISH

Billy Childish has generously created a special limited edition to accompany his solo exhibition at the ICA. The edition is an etching, the first ever published by Childish, and each print is uniquely hand-painted in watercolour by the artist. The etching sits alongside a number of paintings made by Billy Childish (some of which are on display as part of the ICA exhibition) which reference the Swiss modernist writer, Robert Walser. A prolific, and much lauded writer at the beginning of his career, Walser became increasingly marginalised. Eventually, he was committed to a mental asylum, where he died, while taking a long nocturnal walk. A character with whom Childish strongly identifies, Walser's influence is clearly evident in Childish's recent work. The edition is co-published with White Columns, New York and is also accompanied by a letter press poem by Childish, entitled *the snow* (for Robert Walser).



*I love I love coffee*, 2009  
Etching and aquatint with chine-collé  
70 x 50 cm on handmade paper  
Edition of 64, signed and numbered by the artist  
£180 (£162 to ICA members) including VAT

MATT MULLICAN

The ICA is proud to announce a new print by Matt Mullican, made by the artist to accompany the ICA exhibition *For the blind man...* (3 December 2009—31 January 2010). For over three decades Mullican has created a complex body of work which deals with systems of cognition, knowledge and signification. One feature within Mullican's work is performance and drawings made while under hypnosis, many of which refer to 'That Person', a figure who emerges during the hypnotic trance. Over the years certain things have become established about That Person, one of which is that he likes coffee (he wants to wake up). Mullican's print for the ICA, entitled *I love I love coffee*, refers to That Person's love of the brand of coffee named 'i love coffee'.

## ARTISTS' FILM CLUB



Wendelien Van Oldenborgh  
*Maurits Film*, 2008, production still

WENDELIE VAN OLDENBORGH  
MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY 7PM

Theatre / free / booking required

February's Artists' Film Club features the work of Wendelien Van Oldenborgh, a Dutch artist who develops works from specific social or historical situations, including the colonial past of the Netherlands. Cinematic methodology is a key element in Van Oldenborgh's work, which often features participants co-creating scripts—interactions which open up a space between performance and collective learning. Following the screening the artist will be in conversation with Emily Pethick, director of The Showroom in London.

Wendelien Van Oldenborgh is based in Rotterdam, and has recently exhibited at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and MuHKA, Antwerp, as well as in the 11<sup>th</sup> International Istanbul Biennial. This year she will participate in Art Sheffield, and will have a solo exhibition in Toronto.



Haris Epaminonda  
*Tarahi V*, 2007

HARIS EPAMINONDA  
MONDAY 22 MARCH 7PM

Theatre / free / booking required

Haris Epaminonda presents a selection of her videos from the last few years, together with the ongoing series *Tarahi*, started in 2006. With disparate images, Epaminonda creates short filmic sequences and montages, playing with cuts, repetition and interruption. Her enigmatic works, which have an emotive and dreamlike appearance, often feature found footage from the 60s and 70s—including soap operas and amateur holiday films.

Haris Epaminonda was born in Nicosia, Cyprus and lives and works in Berlin. She was one of two artists to represent Cyprus at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and also took part in the Berlin Biennale in 2008. This year she will have a solo exhibition in two venues in the UK, at the Level 2 Gallery, Tate Modern, London (May 2010) and at the Site Gallery, Sheffield (June 2010).

## COSEY COMPLEX

COSEY COMPLEX is a special one-day event on Saturday 27 March—conceived by writer Maria Fusco and commissioned by the ICA—that has developed from conversations between Fusco and artist and musician Cosey Fanni Tutti. Cosey is known as a member of the art/music groups COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle, and for her solo activities which famously include works based on appropriated pornographic images of herself—works that were exhibited in COUM's *Prostitution* exhibition at the ICA in 1976. 'Cosey' is an assumed name that has allowed the artist to engage in multiple practices and roles across her life, and today's event builds on the shared interests of Fusco and Fanni Tutti around language and power relations, exploring the potential of 'Cosey' as a working method.

The event starts with an afternoon session involving a range of artists, writers and other practitioners, who have all been asked to formulate contributions that enact and are inspired by 'Cosey as Methodology'. While this session involves some of the traditional formats of a conference, such as academic presentations and discussion panels, it also includes experimental responses, investigations and performances. Participants include Martin Bax, Gerard Byrne, Daniela Cascella, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Diedrich Diederichsen, Graham Duff, John Duncan, Anthony Elms, Babak Ghazi, Chris Kraus, Zak Kyes, Clunie Reid and Rob Stone. The day concludes with Cosey Club, a regular club night brought to the ICA under the rubric of 'Cosey as Methodology', and which tonight features bands and DJs such as Factory Floor, Fixmer / McCarthy and Andrew Weatherall. After COSEY COMPLEX at the ICA, the project will be developed further for a future event at Tramway, Glasgow.

The afternoon session is from 1 to 6pm, in the ICA's Theatre; tickets are £8 / £7 concessions / £6 members. Cosey Club is from 10pm to 3am, in the Theatre and Bar; tickets are £10 / £9 concessions / £8 members. A joint ticket for both events costs £14 / £12 concessions / £10 members. To book please call the ICA Box Office on 020 7930 3647. For more information visit [www.ica.org.uk/coseycomplex](http://www.ica.org.uk/coseycomplex)

This issue of ROLAND includes a special insert that forms part of designer Zak Kyes' contribution to COSEY COMPLEX, a piece of print which features texts from Fusco and Chris Kraus. The insert is the initial stage in the production of a 'reader' which is being put together in the ICA's Reading Room in the weeks building up to the event, and which is produced in association with Bedford Press.





The second half of the magazine includes a collage of texts, essays, poems and images. It includes a new essay by Martin Clark and a variety of material by Billy Childish, ranging from reproductions of his woodcuts, book covers and record sleeves to an extract from Childish's novel, *sex crimes of the futcher* (2005), and a number of older and more recent poems by Childish. Alongside material by the artist, the magazine features contributions by Max Beckmann, Neal Brown, Charles Bukowski, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Bo Diddley, Knut Hamsun, Jutta Koether and Robert Walser, as well as a 20 question interview with Childish, compiled by Richard Birkett and Matthew Higgs.

## THE TANNERS

ROBERT WALSER



The next morning Simon stepped out of the house wearing a short, dark blue coat, with a delicate, useless little stick in his hand. A thick heavy fog received him, and it was still blackest night. An hour later, though, the sky began to lighten as he stood on a hilltop gazing back at the metropolis beneath him. It was cold, but the sun rising fiery-red above the snowy bushes and fields promised a glorious day. He remained transfixed by the sight of this red ball that kept soaring higher and higher and said to himself that the sun in winter was three times again as beautiful as a midsummer sun. The snow was soon blazing with this peculiarly bright-red warm hue, and this warming sight and the actual frostiness of the air all around had an invigorating, stimulating effect on the wanderer, who, not allowing himself to be delayed any longer, went striding stalwartly on. The path was the same one Simon had taken that night in autumn; he practically could have found it in his sleep by now. In this way he walked all day long. At midday, the sun poured beautiful warmth down on the region, the snow was on the verge of melting again, and there were bits of green peeping out damply in several spots. The trickling streams reinforced the impression of warmth, but toward evening, as the sky showed itself resplendently dark blue and the sun's red rays were vanishing over the mountain ridge, it at once turned bitter cold again. Simon was once

more ascending the mountain he'd climbed before, that autumn night, though in more frantic haste; the snow crunched beneath his footsteps. Heavily laden with snow, the fir trees' thick branches arched down splendidly to the earth. When he was approximately halfway to the top, Simon suddenly saw a young man lying in the snow in the middle of the path. There was still enough last light in the forest that he could observe the sleeper well. What had possessed this man to lie down here in the bitter cold, in such a secluded part of the forest? The man's broad hat lay across his face, just as one often sees on a hot, shadeless summer day, when a person lying down to rest will shield himself from the sun's rays to be able to fall asleep. There was something unsettling about this covered face in the middle of the winter, a season when it could hardly be considered pleasurable to settle down for a rest in the snow. The man lay there motionless, and already it was beginning to get darker in the forest. Simon studied the man's legs, shoes, clothes. His outfit was pale yellow, it was a summer suit, a quite thin, threadbare one. Simon took the hat from the man's face, it was rigid and looked terrifying, and now all at once he recognised this face, it was Sebastian's face, no two ways about it—these were Sebastian's features, this was his mouth, his beard, his rather broad flat nose, his eyes and eyebrows, his forehead and hair. And he'd frozen to death here, without a doubt, and he must have been lying here on the path for a while. The snow displayed no footprints; it was conceivable he'd been here for a considerable length of time. His face and hands had long since turned rigid, and the clothes were stuck to his frozen torso. Sebastian





must have sunk to the ground here with an immense, no longer endurable weariness. He'd never been particularly robust. He always stooped over, as though he couldn't bear to walk upright, as though it caused him pain to hold his back and head straight. Looking at him, one couldn't help feeling he hadn't been strong enough for life and its cold demands. Simon cut some branches from a fir tree and covered the body with them, but first he drew

a small, thin notebook from the dead man's jacket pocket where it had been sticking out. It appeared to contain poems, though Simon could no longer make out the letters. Night had fallen. Stars were sparkling through the gaps between the fir trees, and the moon, a fine delicate hoop, observed the scene; "I don't have time," Simon said silently to himself, "I've got to hurry to reach the next town, otherwise it wouldn't frighten me at all to spend a bit more time with this poor devil of a dead man, a poet and dreamer. How noble a grave he chose himself. His resting place lies amid splendid green snow-covered firs. I shall not report this to anyone.

Nature gazes down upon her dead man, the stars are quietly singing at his head, and the night birds are squawking—this is the best music for a person who no longer feels or hears. Your poems, dear Sebastian, I shall bring to a publisher, where they will perhaps be read and consigned to print, so that at least your poor, sparkling melodious name will remain to the world. What splendid peace: reposing and growing stiff beneath fir branches in the snow. You couldn't have chosen anything better. People tend to inflict harm on the eccentric—and this is what you were—and then laugh at their pain. Give my

greetings to the dear, silent dead beneath the earth and don't get too badly scorched in the eternal fires of non-existence. You are elsewhere. Surely you're somewhere splendid, you're a rich fellow now, and publishing the poems of a rich elegant fellow is certainly worthwhile. Farewell. If I had flowers, I'd strew them over you. For a poet one never has flowers enough. You had too few. You were expecting some, but you never heard the flutter of their petals above you, nor did they alight upon your shoulders as you dreamed they might. I too am a dreamer, you see, as are many, many people you'd never suspect, but you believed dreaming to be your prerogative, whereas the rest of us dream only when we fancy ourselves utterly miserable, and are happy to be able to stop at will. You despised your fellow creatures, Sebastian! But this, my dear man, is something only a strong individual may allow himself, and you were weak! But now that I have found your hallowed grave, let me not heap scorn upon it. I cannot know what you have suffered. Your death beneath the open stars is beautiful. I shall not soon forget it. I shall tell Hedwig of your grave beneath these noble firs and make her weep with my description. At least people will still be able to read your poems, even if they didn't have much use for you before."—Simon strode away from the dead man, casting one last glance back at the little pile of fir branches beneath which the poet now slept, then turning away from this image with a rapid twist of his supple body, he hastened further up the mountain, moving as fast as he could in the snow. And so he was having to ascend this mountain at night for a second time, but this time life and death were shooting through



his entire body in feverish shudderings. In this icy, star-resplendent night he felt like crying out exultantly. The fire of life bore him tempestuously away from that gentle, pale image of death. He no longer felt any legs, just veins and tendons, and these pliantly obeyed his forward-striding will. High up on the open mountain meadow he had his first full, sublime view of the glorious night and laughed out loud, like a boy who's never seen a dead man before. What was a dead man? What else but a reminder to live. This and nothing more. A delightful memory calling one back, and at the same time a being-driven-on into the uncertain, lovely future. If he was able to face the dead so calmly, Simon felt that his future must still be spread out broad and wide before him. He was overjoyed that he'd been able to see this poor, unhappy person one last time and that he'd found him in so mysterious a guise, so silent, so eloquent, so dark and peaceful and so graciously at an end. Now, praise God, there was nothing remaining about this poet that you could smile or turn up your nose at, just something you could feel.



Images pp.22–26: photographs of Walser used by Childish as source material.

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Excerpt from Robert Walser, *The Tanners*, New Directions Books, New York, 2009, trans. by Susan Bernofsky, pp. 153–7, first published as *Der Geschwister Tanner* by Suhrkamp Verlag, Zurich, 1978.



Billy Childish performance outside Tate Britain, 2008

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## A DOLLAR AND 20 CENTS

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

he liked the end of summer best, no fall, maybe it was fall, anyhow, it got cold down at the beach and he liked to walk along the water right after sundown, no people around and the water looked dirty, the water looked deathly, and the seagulls didn't want to sleep, hated to sleep. the seagulls came down, flew down wanting his eyes, his soul, what was left of his soul.

if you don't have much soul left and you know it, you still got soul.

then he'd sit down and look across the water and when you looked across the water, everything was hard to believe. say like there was a nation like China or the US or someplace like Vietnam. or that he'd once been a child. no, come to think of it, that wasn't so hard to believe; he'd had a hell of a childhood, he couldn't forget that. and the manhood; all the jobs and all the women, and then no woman, and now no job. a bum at 60. finished. nothing. he had a dollar and 20 cents in cash. a week's rent paid. the ocean ... he thought back over the women. some of them had been good to him. others had simply been shrews, scratchers, a little crazy and terribly hard. rooms and beds and houses and Christmases and jobs and singing and hospitals, and dullness, dull days and nights and no meaning, no chance.

now 60 years worth: a dollar and 20 cents.

then he heard them behind him laughing. they had blankets and bottles and cans of beer, coffee and sandwiches. they laughed, they laughed. 2 young boys, 2 young girls. slim, pliable bodies. not a care. then one of them saw him.

## BILLY CHILDISH: A SHORT STUDY

NEAL BROWN

Many of the comments and observations that have been made about Childish's paintings apply to his poetry—poetic mood, by definition, being present in poetry—and which, arguably, places poetry at the centre of his practice.<sup>1</sup> As prolific a writer as he is a painter, Childish has created a huge body of work—again, with different stylistic periods. It is characterised (apart from rare instances where editors have sought to improve it) by his dyslexic spelling, which grants the work a rough, primary quality. This apparently illiterate style is only an appearance, as Childish commands a concise and highly effective technique—a technique that combines the conversationally intimate with the declamatory.

“I like distance from my work,” Childish has said, and “I like the idea that I have not been responsible for it.” In the poem *Woodblocks and this poem* Childish writes:

the werk is done  
something is fixed in words or  
wood

this is my method  
im not talking about jigsaw  
puzzles or lituary traditions  
im talking about sneaking up on  
your own soul

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“Hey, what's THAT?”  
“Jesus, I dunno!”  
he didn't move.  
“is it human?”  
“does it breathe? does it  
screw?”

“screw WHAT?”  
they all laughed.  
he lifted his wine bottle. there  
was something left. it was a good  
time for it.  
“it MOVES! look, it

This “sneaking up on your own soul” is a clear statement of Childish's witnessing of his own spiritual consciousness. There is much that could be said about the self-reflexive, authorial voice of Childish's exteriorised, detached, commenting self and its coexistence with his private, interiorised self (for example, aspects of his use of the personal pronoun), as well as the place and significance of this within the practice of confessional art. It might be possible that the pantheistic conflation Childish brings together in his work could be related to this ‘method’<sup>2</sup> in which, it may be argued, meditative detachment and ideas of a soul come together in mixture. This spiritual conflation is an important part of Childish's work, in which he locates the sacred very much in his own terms, but which also places it within a continuity of antecedents.

Horror and suffering is part of this conflation.<sup>3</sup> Childish's reports of extreme dysfunction, defilement, cruelty and abject struggle make uncomfortable reading, although it is these experiences that provide authority and qualification for his more redemptively loving self. It seems that Childish places character defects at the centre of the totality of existence, and an honest acknowledgment of them as a condition of gaining spiritual completeness. His descriptions emphasise a mindful acceptance of bitterness and resentment (resentment being, literally, a ‘return to feeling’), and that this mindfulness is amongst the most difficult (and resisted) of spiritual tasks.

It is as if the omissions that Walt Whitman mentions in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* have been made good by Childish, who fearlessly lays them out in the specific details of his own history. In his autobiographical novel *My Fault*, Childish writes of the insults, abuses and crimes

MOVES!”  
he stood up, brushed the sand  
from his pants.  
“it has arms, legs! it has a  
face!”  
“a FACE?”

they laughed again. he could  
not understand. kids were not this  
way. kids were not bad. what were  
these?  
he walked up to them.  
“there's no shame in old age.”

one of the young boys was  
finishing off a beer can. he threw it  
to one side.

“there's a shame in wasted  
years, pops. you look like waste to  
me.”

“I'm still a good man, son.”  
“supposin' one of these girls  
put some pussy on you, pops,  
what would you do?”

“Rod, don't TALK that way!”  
a young girl with long red hair  
spoke. she was arranging her hair  
in the wind, she seemed to sway in  
the wind, her toes hooked into the  
sand.

“how about it, pops? what  
would you do? huh? what would  
you do if one of these girls laid it  
on you?”

he started to walk, he walked  
around their blanket up the sand  
toward the boardwalk.

“Rod, why'd you talk to that  
poor old man that way? some-  
times I HATE you!”

“COM'ERE, baby!”  
“NO!”

he turned around and saw Rod  
chasing the girl. the girl screamed,  
then laughed. then Rod caught her  
and they fell in the sand, wrestling  
and laughing. he saw the other  
couple standing upright, kissing.

he made the boardwalk, sat on  
a bench and brushed the sand  
from his feet. then he put on his  
shoes. ten minutes later he was  
back in his room. he took off his  
shoes and stretched out on the  
bed. he didn't turn on the light.

there was a knock on the door.  
“Mr Sneed?”

“yes?”

the door opened. it was the  
landlady, Mrs Connors. Mrs  
Connors was 65. he couldn't see  
her face in the dark. he was glad  
he couldn't see her face in the  
dark.

“Mr Sneed?”  
“yes?”

“I made some soup. I made  
some nice soup. Can I bring you a  
bowl of soup?”

“no, I don't want any.”

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“oh, come on, Mr Sneed, it’s nice soup, real nice soup! let me bring you a bowl!”

“oh, alright.”

he got up and sat in a chair and waited. she had left the door open and the light came in from the hall. a shot of light, a beam of it across his legs and lap. and that’s where she sat the soup. a bowl of soup and a spoon.

“you’re gonna like it, Mr Sneed. I make good soup.”

“thank you,” he said.

he sat there looking at the soup. it was piss-yellow. it was chicken soup. without meat. he sat looking at the little bubbles of grease in the soup. he sat for some time. then he took the spoon out and put it on the dresser. then he took the soup to the window, unhooked the screen and quietly spilled the soup onto the ground. there was a small rise of steam. then it was gone. he put the bowl back on the dresser, closed the door and got back on the bed. it was darker than ever, he liked the dark, the dark made sense.

by listening very carefully he heard the ocean. he listened to the ocean for some time. then he sighed, he sighed one large sigh and died.

Charles Bukowski, ‘A Dollar and 20 Cents’, in *Tales Of Ordinary Madness*, ed. by Gail Chiarrello, City Lights Books, 1991, first published in 1967.

Right: excerpt from Neal Brown, *Billy Childish: A Short Study*, The Aquarium, 2008, pp. 30–32.

he has committed against others. These already alarming descriptions are taken considerably further in *sex crimes of the futcher*, where he takes his confessions—his sexual, social and behavioural outrages, presented using the devices of fiction—to an uncomfortable extremity.

In this way Childish isolates and gives emphasis to intense feelings that are characteristic of fear, damage and resentment, in written descriptions of appalling, defiling, comic genius. Céline is an obvious antecedent here. Other antecedents include Dostoevsky, John Fante, J.D. Salinger, Knut Hamsen and Charles Bukowski, who have all been quoted by Childish as influences, and all of whose work contains alienated, anti-hero protagonists. Other authors might include Herman Melville and Mark Twain. But in the deepest sense, it is Walt Whitman and D.H. Lawrence (particularly the Lawrence of the poetry, rather than the novels) amongst whose work Childish’s should be situated, in the sense of a total clarity of spiritual reaching.

In *and also i have felt god*, Childish writes that “the sun shines with yellow fingers / and my hartbursts still with unknown / fires” and says that these are amongst the reasons he writes. It is true that it is often a terrible journey that Childish is reporting, riven with tragedy, error and mistakes. But from this a properly informed spiritual position is, it seems, the gift. And when this gift arises, Childish is generous in giving it away.



*Flags (In June's Pot)*, 2009  
Oil on canvas, 91 x 71 cm

1. Childish was a founder member of a group of poets working in Kent in the 1980s called The Medway Poets, who included Miriam Carney, Rob Earl, Bill Lewis, Sexton Ming and Charles Thomson (and briefly, Alan Denman). Others associated with the group were Philip Absolon, Sanchia Lewis and Tracey Emin. It is art-historically correct

to say that Childish and Emin have contributed enormously to the UK arts, and that this contribution – which also includes, although to a much lesser extent, the enterprises of the others who worked alongside them—shares sufficient purpose as to constitute a ‘movement’. A summary of this ‘movement’ might be that its practitioners shared an aim of energising

sincerity, in spite of their very different ways of seeking to achieve it.

2. It should be noted that Childish is sympathetic to ‘the radical Christ’ rather than to Christianity, which he melds with Taoist and Buddhist principles.

3. Childish appears to have no coequals in horror amongst contemporary practice, with the exception of Jake and Dinos Chapman.





*Son of Art*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm



*Robert Walser Lying Dead in the Snow (In Yellow Suit)*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 182 x 111 cm





*Steam tug John H. Amos off Rochester, 2008*  
Oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm

## I am the son of art

i am the son of art  
of illiteracy  
stammering  
and bad drawing  
my symbole is not the cross  
but the gallows

i hang above you and within you  
of course there is art  
of course there is god  
of course there is me

i come to liberate you  
to let the shit flow  
like a royal enima  
a clensing of the guts  
and mind

i hang above you and within you  
of course there is art  
of course there is god  
of course there is me

Billy Childish, 2008



## HANG AND RULE; THE LIVES OF WILD BILLY CHILDISH

JUTTA KOETHER

*He is a rocker in loose English gallows-bird trousers, a painter and wood carver, a John Lee Hooker, the owner of a label, publisher, poet, master of various pseudonyms (actually he is named after his grandfather, who receives his due in a volume of poems now out of print) and, in very general terms, a benefactor of mankind.*

These imperishable lines were written by that imperishable Wild Billy Childish aficionado, Clara Drechsler. Their subject was born in Chatham, Kent, in 1959 and has lived there ever since; the place is the only world he knows. The fact that we, the members of SPEX in Cologne, together with a few scattered individuals in various cultural undergrounds here and there, know anything about the strange and multifarious activities of this person, and that indeed he cannot altogether be denied the status of a sort of legendary figure, is almost entirely due to his activities as a musician and as a founder of the label Hangman Records, which has been creating uncertainty in Europe ever since 1979. And yes, it is that he models himself on the famous English hangman: “The most popular of London spectacles was a hanging; then the underworld, drunk on gin and horrors, shouted itself senseless as Jack Ketch, the hangman, cut down the lifeless bodies” (from a book on life in Regency England). For Wild Billy Childish he was “a very able man.”

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Billy Childish and Sexton Ming in the garden of the former's house in Chatham, 1981

## MYSTERIES

KNUT HAMSUN

In the middle of the summer of 1891 the most extraordinary things began happening in a small Norwegian coastal town. A stranger by the name of Nagel appeared, a singular character who shook the town by his eccentric behaviour and then vanished as suddenly as he had come. At one point he had a visitor: a mysterious young lady who came for God knows what reason and dared stay only a few hours. But let me begin at the beginning ...

It all started at six one evening when a steamer landed at the dock and three passengers appeared on deck. One of them was a man wearing a loud yellow suit and an outsized corduroy cap.

It was the evening of the twelfth of June; flags were flying all over town in honour of Miss Kielland's engagement, which had been announced that day. The porter from the Central Hotel went aboard and the man in the yellow suit handed him his baggage. At the same time he surrendered his ticket to one of the ship's officers, but made no move to go ashore, and began pacing up and down the deck. He seemed extremely agitated, and when the ship's bell rang the third time, he hadn't even paid the steward his bill.

While he was taking care of his bill, he suddenly became aware that the ship was pulling out. Startled, he shouted over the railing to the porter below: "It's all right. Take my baggage to the hotel and reserve a room for me."

With that, the ship carried him out into the fjord.

This man was Johan Nilsen Nagel.

The porter took his baggage away on a cart. It consisted of

The emblem on all Billy's discs is his own woodcut of a gallows, and many of the sleeves of Hangman Records carry on them a reproduction of a woodcut self portrait. Ah, those forgotten arts! But Billy didn't breathe new life into them, he handled them badly; but he did handle them—with toughness, endurance, alcohol and a mixture of grief and cynical brutality. Not only Hangman Records, on which one can find the most recondite pearls of British underground (the Len Bright Combo, for example, James Taylor Quartet and the Prisoners, to name but a few), but Hangman Books as well, are the enterprise of a gifted loser—at any rate from a business point of view. But it has never occurred to Billy Childish to give up his 'pace of life', his 'hang and rule', in the little rural patch by the river, or his impoverished life as an uncommercial artist.

"Oh, Hangman Records," says Childish, "it's a bloody joke! All we did was to show people that it's possible to make records without meaning to make a lot of money. Mind you, we're not even managing to do that, but what the hell. We just chuck mountains of stuff at the market and we always hope that something in the heap will turn out sufficiently commercial. Of course, commercial for us means the same as ruinous for others. We are highly talented business losers. We've still got some old Milkshakes recordings and with a bit of luck we'll sell enough to finance the really 'obscure' stuff. Music is a really pretty nice old business, people like rhythm and all that stuff, it cheers em up" (quoted from *SPEX* 11/88 in one of Childish's rare interviews). The Milkshakes (1981–87) were the longest-lived and most 'successful' of the seven bands with which Childish has worked. The understatement of "a really pretty nice old business"

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expresses, in a pleasant, gently insistent way his contempt for all things modern, for the equipment mania, techno-frenzy and the 'hell of the drum-machine' that add up to pop music, can also be applied to other fields of production. Distance is all. Making art is an honourable occupation. Full of substance? His woodcuts could be taken for imitations of some German Expressionist woodcut washed up on the shores of the Medway in a bottle: from the point of view of that old style, that is. Only they are rougher, more honest, more amateurish, and devoid of shame. Wild Billy Childish is an indefatigable, dedicated poet (more than 20 volumes of poetry) and a dyslexic; he makes woodcuts and despises the craft; as a musician he ill-treats his instruments but unspectacularly so; he manages to strip down even the barest blues riff. Whatever he does, he finds the skeleton within the skeleton. And he doesn't stop there. The man is a phenomenon on the margin of everything, even on the margin of art. He offers a bewildered nakedness as the solution to all contradictions: an ultimate exposure, but with pride and swagger. It all adds up to a self-portrayal of the most un-hip, most unspectacular kind, but where there is a certain self-indulgent acceptance of a nihilistic existentialism. Making virtues out of necessities he has accepted a life-long permission to take the genuinely poorest and genuinely worst there is—for these, in his view, make up the essence of his life (see quotation from Céline that he has prefixed to his book *The Girl in the Tree*)—and out of them to create things and to design a phenomenon that can be guaranteed not to be acceptable or marketable. He cultivates amateurism because he is convinced that all specialisation is too much self-deception and fraud. But he won't allow

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only two small trunks, a fur coat (although it was the middle of summer), a satchel, and a violin case. None of them had any identification tags.

Around noon the following day Johan Nagel came driving down the road to the hotel in a carriage drawn by two horses. It would have been easier to make the journey by boat, but still he came by carriage. He had some more baggage with him; on the front seat were a suitcase, a coat and a small bag with the initials JNN set in pearls.

Before getting out of the carriage, he asked the hotelkeeper about his room, and later, on being taken up to the second floor, he began to examine the walls to determine how thick they were and whether any sounds could come through from the adjoining rooms. Suddenly he turned to the chambermaid and asked: "What is your name?"

"Sara."

"Sara." And without pausing: "Can you get me something to eat? Well, so your name's Sara. Tell me," he went on, "was there ever a pharmacy on these premises?"

Surprised, Sara answered: "Yes, but that was many years ago."

"Oh, many years ago? I knew it the minute I came in; it wasn't so much the smell, but somehow I sensed it."

When he came down for dinner, he didn't say a word during the entire meal. His fellow passengers from the day before—the two men at the other end of the table—made signs to each other when he came in, and made no effort to hide their amusement at his previous evening's misfortune, but he took no notice of them. He ate quickly, declined dessert, and left the table abruptly by sliding backwards off the bench, lit a cigar, and disappeared down the street.



He stayed out until long after midnight and didn't return till a few minutes before the clock struck three. Where had he been? Only later did it become known that he had walked to the next town and back—along the same long road he had driven over that morning. He must have had some very urgent business there. When Sara opened the door for him, he was wet with perspiration, but he smiled at her and seemed to be in excellent spirits.

"My God, girl, what a lovely neck you have!" he said. "Did any letters come for me while I was out—for Nagel, Johan Nagel? Three telegrams! Oh, would you do me the favour of taking away that picture on the wall, would you? I don't like to have it staring at me. It would really annoy me to lie in bed and have to look at it! Besides, Napoleon III didn't have such a bushy beard, anyway! Thank you."

When Sara had gone, Nagel remained standing in the middle of the room. He stood absolutely motionless, staring fixedly at a spot on the wall, and except that his head slumped more and more to one side, he didn't move.

He was below average in height; his face was dark-complexioned, with deep brown eyes which had a strange expression, and a soft, rather feminine mouth. On one finger he wore a plain ring of lead or iron. His shoulders were very broad; he was between 28 and 30, but definitely not older, although his hair was beginning to turn grey at the temples.

He awoke from his thoughts with a violent start, so exaggerated that it didn't seem genuine; it was as if the gesture had been made for effect, even though he was alone in the room. Then he took some keys, small change, and what looked like a lifesaver's medal on a crumpled ribbon out of his pocket and put them on a table next to the bed. He stuck his

his amateurism to be classified as an 'oddity'; he is closed to any discourse unless he himself has originated it, and even then he is very wary, and even keeps a sharp eye on himself. This man has nerve. This man has endurance. Where the expenditure of energy is concerned he models himself on the epic heroes of incorruptible hard-core amateurism, men who refused to be told anything by the expectations of the world about them or by theories—such figures as John Lee Hooker, or the French author Céline. The latter's book *Cannon Fodder* has been laboriously translated, published and adorned with Billy's woodcuts—a pioneering effort since it is the first English translation of this book. Quite apart from the fact that Céline is his favourite author, it meant a lot to him because "since Chaucer and Shakespeare people haven't made any great effort to find a literary form for everyday spoken English. As the everyday language, when it is used in literature, is never what it seems and has to be modified—something that has to be learnt—it would be simpler to have a few possibilities of comparison." The pronouncements of this young, old, thin man are alarmingly assured.

Perhaps this certainty has something to do with the life 'at the margin', in the provinces, in a constructive mulishness. To see the whole picture one has to see his activities as the construction on an honourable profession as well as a link to an ominous network of international outsiderdom shading into outlawry; one that offends against all the laws of 'How-Shall-I-Become-A-Successful-Artist' yet without making the artist into a monkey or a 'funny-nutter'. The whole picture comes across like the coarse-grained, imperfect print of the portrait of a

severe eccentric who does his thing and lives his life while sternly opposing all refinement, beautification and media-related matters—in short, all pop-eccentricity. Chatham rules. The man says he will die in Chatham. Hang and rule something! And that applies to Billy Childish's visual arts as it does to the remainder of his activities. With his cultivated toughness he has at last managed to arrange a presentation of his oil paintings at the Hamburg Westwerk, framed by an opening day complete with his music and readings and a closing day with concert.

Those paintings are really outlandish. They were painted with an expressive but paint-encrusted brush, all stuck together as though it dated back to the First World War. Truly doomed, truly charming, truly honest. Here is somebody who has managed to paint badly in a consciously unambitious way, and against whom, nevertheless, it cannot be proved that he might be connected with THIS WORLD: rather the reverse. The man shows you these pictures and slams these questions in your face: kindly tell me what do you WANT to expect to see when you go to look at pictures? Feel it, see it, or a demonstration of skill or a building block in the gigantic theory and practice of painting, which perhaps helps to advance it by one millimetre? Perhaps we can draw the conclusion that Childish uses his pictures to assert that the 'everyday language' of painting is quite simply an expressive, figurative and obsessive line, and that is why he paints as he does.

Or at any rate, you can tell by looking at the pictures that he paints as he does because there is a reason for it, and not because he has thought up a piece for a show. (Thus he is in no way to be put into the same pot as the Neue Wilden of the early 80s; if he had had anything in

wallet under the pillow, and from his waistcoat pocket he pulled out a watch and a small vial labelled 'poison'. He held the watch in his hand for a moment before putting it down, but immediately put the vial back in his pocket. Then he removed his ring and washed, smoothing his hair back with his fingers, never once looking in the mirror.

He was already in bed when he suddenly missed his ring, which he had left lying on the washbasin, and as though unable to be separated from this perfectly ordinary ring, he got up and put it on again. Then he began opening the three telegrams, but before he had finished the first one, he uttered a short, muffled laugh.

He lay there laughing to himself; his teeth were exceptionally fine. Then his face became serious again and a moment later he nonchalantly tossed the telegrams aside. Yet they all apparently dealt with a matter of great importance; they referred to an offer of 62,000 crowns for a country estate, the money to be paid in cash if the deal were concluded at once. They were brief, matter-of-fact business telegrams, definitely not sent as a hoax, although they were unsigned. A few minutes later Nagel fell asleep. The two candles on the table, which he had forgotten to put out, illuminated his clean-shaven face and his chest and quietly flickered on the telegrams, which lay wide-open on the table.

Excerpt from Knut Hamsun, *Mysteries*, 1892.

common with their approach, his pictures today would look quite different). They battle for, show faith in, any destructions of the myth that making art is an honourable occupation. That's the way life is. That's how a man prepares to become a myth, sparing neither himself nor us. It is a very slow and tough process.

"Almost arrogant in their desire to shock the reader out of his contemplancy!" [sic] (*Bogg Magazine*), "Poems like old furniture drifting downstream" (*SPEX*), "nihilistic self-absorption, punkish anti-intellectualism, sexual paranoia and continuations of his life-long pursuit of ecstasy through denial" (*City Limits*): all these comments on his poetry can also be applied to his paintings. Unafraid that the words 'Wild 'n' Childish' will be taken at face value, he makes his debut in an exhibition room. Billy, the Man in the Middle! He's not the one to 'make decisions', he's not the one to become a specialist, an aesthete! The art-resisting visual message was accompanied by a suitable poem printed on the invitation card:

## Only a man

equal rights for  
women!  
i shout  
equal rights for the  
damned  
and  
the ugly  
the toothless  
the godless  
the sightless  
the poor  
and  
the dump

equal rights for  
the  
buyers of fridges  
the  
layers of tarmac  
the unemployed  
the raped  
and the  
duped

i am only  
a man  
born that way  
it is hard  
to be

Billy Childish, circa 1988



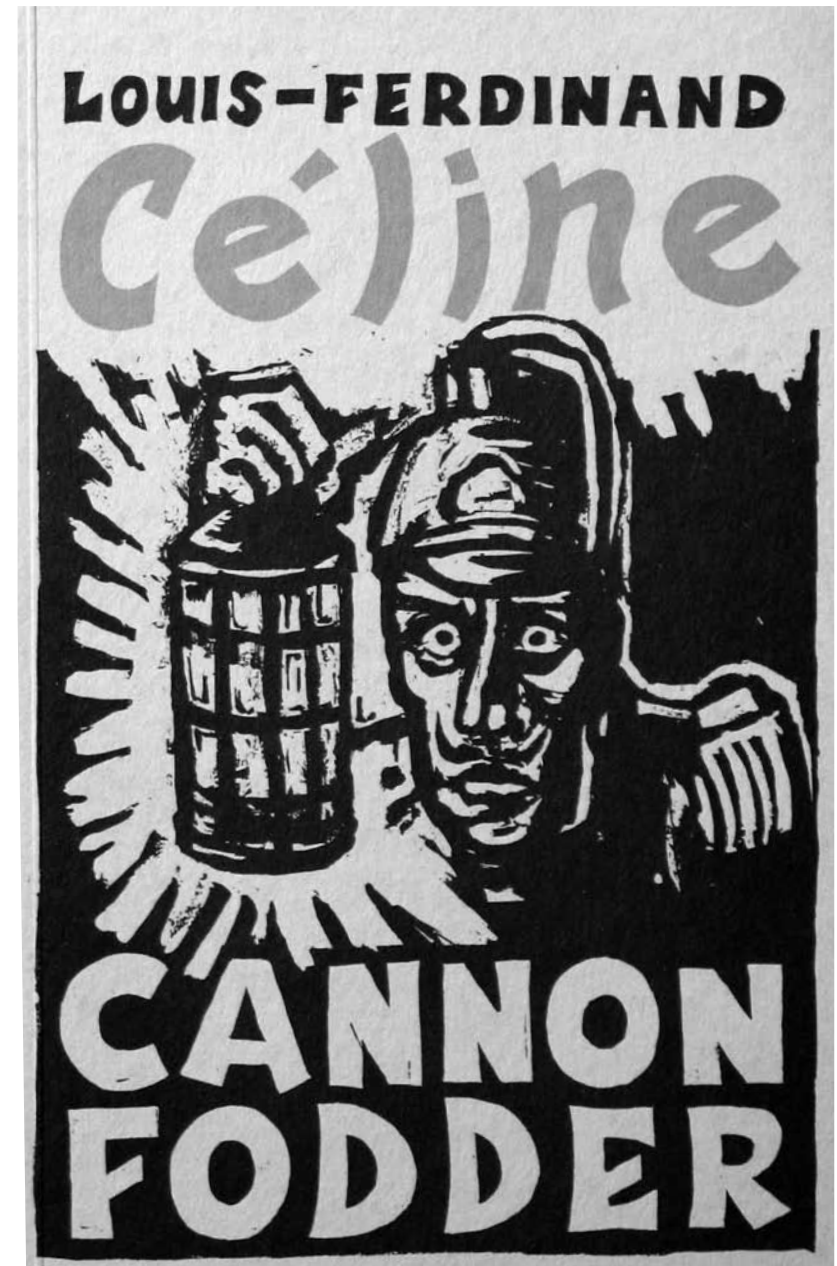
## A brimful of being

on a glorius track  
upon a bridge spaning  
the thames  
i see life is an  
arrangement of stones  
seen from a passing train

a movement of matter  
a lite display of  
monsterious preportions  
a flutter of strange wings  
an infitessimle delicacy  
tiny meaninfull  
and  
prefound

a brimful of being—  
expansive  
irrapressable—  
not to be scorned  
or blindly messured  
but honoured  
and loved rite back

Billy Childish, 2008



Cover of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Cannon Fodder*,  
published by Hangman Books in 1988

## CANNON-FODDER

LOUIS-FERDINAND  
CÉLINE

My military debut was one unmitigated disaster! Even under my raincoat I was sopping wet. The path was a filthy quagmire of sludge and stones; we were still keeping close to the wall. Trudging along in the darkness, beneath torrents of rain. My slippers were no match for the cobbles, sticking out like mile-stones, overlapping, it was terrible ... I tried to stay upright, I stumbled, I fell twice ... All the same, I forced myself to keep up with the others, to keep in step! Left! Right! Left! Right! ...

Le Meheu called the pace, he fired us up, swinging his lantern in great arcs all along the rank ... Gibbering away, continuously making wisecracks.

—Hey, rookie! Tell me, isn't it nice to be the underdog? The drowned dog! The dead dog! I'd love to be in your shoes! Don't you like it here in Pissingham? Hey, my cheerful one? Not knackered yet, are we? Are you impervious my treasure? Or is your arse waterproofed? You haven't shit yourself have you? Don't worry, you'll get it in the neck later! Just you wait! In step! Left! ... Left! You'll see tomorrow, if not the day after! You'll be all washed up! Oh yes! Oh yes! Oh yes!

Everybody was in stitches. He hurried us along, calling time with a series of greasy burps ... urp! ... urp! ... urp! ... That interrupted his rib ticklers ...

—The show isn't over yet my lovely, not by a long chalk ... You'll be laughing on the other side of your face in a minute, my lad ... I wonder how you'll make out on the jumps! ... Left! ... Left! ... You'll wish you'd thought twice ... the shit will fly!

## WHO DO YOU LOVE

BO DIDDLEY

I walked 47 miles of barbed wire  
I used a cobra snake for a neck tie  
I got a brand new house on the roadside  
Made from rattlesnake hide  
I got a brand new chimney made on top  
Made out of a human skull  
Now come on take a little walk Arlene  
and tell me who do you love

Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love

Tomb stone hands and a graveyard mind  
I'm just 22 and i don't mind dying

Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love

I'm gonna lay on the town use a rattlesnake whip  
Take it easy Arlene dont give me no lip

Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love

Night was dark but the sky was blue  
Down the ally an ice wagon flew  
Hit a bump and somebody screamed  
You should have heard just what I seen

Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love

Arlene took me by my hand  
she said ooo wee Bo you know I understand

Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love  
Who do you love

So this is what they've sent us from gay Paris? ... Left! ... Left! Rancotte can't stand your type! And how right he is! Shit! You filthy little stinker! Phew! What honk! ... We're lucky it's pissing down! Come on, keep moving you slackers! I'll give you training my flower! Stirrups on the neck! His arse will be on fire, on fire! On fire! We'll make mince meat of your arse! He'll die of his bum! The poor little volunteer! Put your arse in gear! You little shit bag! I can't wait to see you in the saddle! Squat and stand up! The first one who falls on his arse will be up for court martial! Understood? Left! Right! Left! Right! Till it kills you! Legs up! Higher! You'll be the death of me, you scum! Sit? Sit? There won't be an arse left in the whole fucking platoon! You can count on that my friends!

Bo Diddley was born in McComb, Mississippi in 1928 and moved with his family at a young age to Chicago's south side, where he became a fixture in the city's blues clubs. Recorded in 1956, 'Who do you love' is one of his most well-known songs. The title of the song is a word play on 'Hoodoo', a form

of African-American traditional folk magic reflected in the lyrics. There are no chord changes in the song.

Excerpt from Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Cannon-Fodder*, 1952, trans. by K. De Coninck and Billy Childish, Hangman Books, 1988, pp. 23–25.



## A REBUFF

BILLY CHILDISH

When i first attempted to gain entrance into the Academy i was refused on the grounds that i had no qualifications to my name whatsoever. I sent off my application in the spring, sure that my drawings would convince them of my worthyness. At the end of the summer i recived a brown envelope in the post. It was on the kitchen table when i came down for my tea—the Acadamys name embossed pretentiously across the top. Inside was a 3 lined, typed refusal. I sat down and put my toast back on my plate. Rite across the bottom of the letter, in his own handwriting, was Mister Bennits signiture.

I read that rebuff, my hands shaking. Their refusal was not based on my artistic abilities—thay had not seen my cearfually made paintings and drawings—but becouse i haddn’t any exam results in quite un-related subjects to art. These people, who claim to love painting, wouldn’t even give a fellow a chance, just becouse he can’t read or rite.

Mister Bennits signiture, which was groteskly large, took up the whole bottom 1/2 of the page, leaving only the smallest arear near the top, for them to refuse me.

After this letter it was everyones unaminus oppinion (my father, mother and brother), that i forget any silly notions i once held of ever becoming an artist and instead enter into the dockyard, along with all the other no-hopers from the B stream of W—Secondary skool.

From then on my mother woke me at 6.30 every morning and i had to open my eyes, get dressed in the icy cold air and walk down to the bus stop at the H—Meadow. Over my shoulder i wore my ex-army gas-cape bag, which contained my drawing pencils, a small sketch book, my cheese sandwiches, some digestive biscits and an occasional apple. My mother was doubly pleased that i was now being forst to werk in that same hatefull place as her father had once attended.

I stood by the roadside in the dark and rain with the other mournful figures untill the bus finnaly showed up. Then we all climbed on boared and paid our fares. If there was room i’d sit down at the back, above the engin, for warmth. I look round me at all the broken faces and the toothless gobs and no, deep down in my trembling hart, that no matter how hard i try, i will never be happy amongst the world of the sain and the living.

It was there—in the dockyard—that i learned to skive off, sitting in the tea hut drinking great mugfulls of that strong, sweet brew. My fellow werkers sit round me, stupifid by the heat and fumes of the calour-gas stove. I make drawing after drawing of them and dream of a life beyoned the dockyard gates with Vincent van Gogh and all of the other painters of hart.

It was shortly after this—enclosed in a thick morning fog—that i took up a 3 lb club hammer, purposly smashed my own hand and left werk for good. Next, i signed on at the dole office, did one day at the fruite factory, and that summer won a place at the Academy, but by default. This is how it goes, (viz). I applied to, and was accepted by, a far greater institution than the Academy. I traveled to London, showed them my drawings that i’d made in those ‘tea huts of hell’ and was accepted on the spot. But as the greater instutution was out of my catchment arear, the County Council decreed that i must instead attend the local Academy, regardless.

Shortly after this i recived a second letter from Mister Bennit, which was altogether diffrent in tone to the first. In this letter i was not shunned, but invited to attend an interview at the Academy and to bring along all of my werk with me, which i refused to do. Instead, i went along empty handed and told Mister Bennit that i didn’t want to go to his pretencious Academy at all and would he please refuse me again, so’s i could attend the greater

institution? He lookt at me from out of his fleshy face, placed the tipps of all his fat fingers together and told me that there was no question of me being refused entry, as ‘if i had been offer’d a place at the greater instutution, then i could certainly gain entrance to the Academy, and would have to attend the Academy weather i liked it or not!’ He then sent me home to fetch my pictures. My face must have shown my dissmay, and this seemed to please him emencly.

I didn’t realise that i had upset him by not wanting to go to his shabby art skool, or that i would soon be made to pay the price for my honesty.

So that September i walk’d reluctantly up the front steps and in thru that marverlous doorway. Old Merick, the doorman, stopped me and demanded to see my pass, which i didn’t have. From then on it was war.

Despite my dissapointment at having to attend such a dump, i was happy that at last i was free from the mournful faces of the dockyard and was about to meet my brother and sister painters; people who ceared and lov’d painting as i did.

And so i came in off the streets and into the land of women. The canteen and studios were full of them. Most of them hand picked—for there looks rather than their ability—by Mister Bennit and the other male tutors. Those gray-beards were in direct compertion with us kids. Thay wanted to make sure that no student achive anything—in sex or art—that thay themselves haddn’t. As a student of ‘out-standing artistic ability’ i was not honoured, but seen as a mear affectation, ripe to be smashed. I soon found out that all tho’ the Academy is call’d a skool of art, it is infact a sausage machine.

As i wandered thru those morbid and desolate studios, all of my dreams of brotherhood and sisterhood were shown to be idiotic. Of course there were no great painters of the hart at the Academy, only obedeant students awaiteing their carrers in

graphics, model making and fashion, prosided over by a handfull of frustrated tutors whos carreers had long fizzleed out into nothing, and all of them topped by the arrogant Mister Bennit.

I tried to speek with 2 boys in the canteen, but the rough accent i had picked up in the dockyard stood out harshly in that rearified atmasphear. Despite lacking real intelgence, any argument or obsevation i made would allways be torn down and shredded by their condicending looks, noing air, and surity of their rite to rule. No, i would never be able to speak with them or hold any comaradi.

When i was still a small child at home, i refused to eat food.

1stly, i didn’t like the feeling of things being squished up in my mouth.

2ndly, washing up liquid was on all the plates—i had seen the bubbles dying there and this was poison. Also, the toilet paper put bleach on your arse. Likewise, when i came to be in-tombed in the Academy, i refused to eat or to become contaminated by their poisonus dictates. In short—i refused to take so much as one lesson from its trecherous officers or to paint one single painting within the confines of their sterile studios.

“I paint at home.” I told Mister Bennit, but he refused to belive me. As i have already related, for my bravery and ethics, i was expelled.

Excerpt from Billy Childish, ‘A Rebuff’, *sex crimes of the futcher*, The Aquarium, 2005, pp. 114–19, first published in 2004.

## I am their damaged megaphone

dead artists speak to me  
and thru me  
you'd do very smartly to listen

they speak to me  
with voices filled with mud and clay  
and decay  
people feel violated by the stench of their breath

they are not desert prophets  
or nessissary sat next to god or the devil  
but i am sat smack in the midst of them  
their rotting teeth grinding and wispering  
black thorts in my ear  
and  
i am their damaged megaphone  
barking across the nite  
calling for  
art with out art  
for  
love with out love  
for  
hate without hate  
for lite without lite  
and  
you'd do very smartly  
to shut up and listen

Billy Childish, 2009

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## DAMAGED MEGAPHONE

MARTIN CLARK

On Christmas Day 1956, the Swiss writer Robert Walser took a walk in the snow. He was 78 years old and had been interned some years previously in a sanatorium in Herisau, near his home town in Switzerland. Though his friends doubted he was ‘insane’, he had written nothing, to their knowledge, for many years—“I am here not to write but to be mad,” he claimed.<sup>1</sup> His sole industry now consisted of the long, solitary walks he would take each day, an activity that he had practised throughout his life—he had described himself years earlier as a poor flâneur. The walk that Christmas day, though, was to be his last. He was found some hours later in a field near the asylum, dead of a heart attack. The police photographs show him lying in the snow, arms outstretched, hat some feet away, a row of footprints tracing his steps to the point at which he fell, a bleak dotted line, an ellipsis terminating at the full-stop of his body.

Since 2007 Billy Childish has made a series of paintings based loosely on those police photographs. Walser has long been an influence on Childish, particularly on his writing, and Childish’s autobiographical novel *Notebooks of a Naked Youth* (1997) owes an acknowledged debt to Walser’s 1908 novel *Institute Benjamenta*. There is an episode recounted in Childish’s book that evokes those photographs in an oddly premonitory way—an episode that he had already depicted, some years earlier, in a painting showing a young man lying on his back in

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1. Walser apparently spoke these words in 1932 to a visitor to the asylum.

## LETTERS TO A WOMAN PAINTER

MAX BECKMANN

The important thing is first of all to have a real love for the visible world that lies outside ourselves, as well as to know the deep secret of what goes on within ourselves. For the visible world in combination with our inner selves provides the realm where we may seek infinitely for the individuality of our own souls. In the best art this search has always existed. It has been, strictly speaking, a search for something abstract. And today it remains urgently necessary to express even more strongly one’s own individuality. Every form of significant art from Bellini to Henri Rousseau has ultimately been abstract.

Remember that depth in space in a work of art (in sculpture too, although the sculptor must work in a different medium) is always decisive. The essential meaning of space or volume is identical with individuality, or that which mankind calls God. For, in the beginning there was space, that frightening and unthinkable invention of the Force of the Universe. Time is the invention of mankind; space or volume, the palace of the gods.

But we must not digress into metaphysics or philosophy. Only do not forget that the appearance of things in space is the gift of God, and if this is disregarded in composing new forms, then there is the danger of your work being damned by weakness or foolishness, or at best it will result in mere ostentation or virtuosity. One must have the deepest respect for what the eye sees and for its representation on the area of the



picture in height, width and depth. We must observe what may be called the Law of Surface, and this law must never be broken by using the false technique of illusion. Perhaps then we can find ourselves, see ourselves in the work of art. Because ultimately, all seeking and aspiration ends in finding yourself, your real self, of which your present self is only a weak reflection. There is no doubt that this is the ultimate, the most difficult exertion that we poor men can perform. So, with all this work before you, your beauty culture and your devotion to the external pleasures of life must suffer. But take consolation in this: you still will have ample opportunity to experience agreeable and beautiful things, but these experiences will be more intense and alive if you yourself remain apart from the senseless tumult and bitter laughter of stereotyped mankind.

Some time ago we talked about intoxication with life. Certainly art is also an intoxication. Yet it is a disciplined intoxication. We also love the great oceans of lobsters and oysters, virgin forests of champagne and the poisonous splendour of the lascivious orchid.

It is necessary for you, you who now draw near to the motley and tempting realm of art, it is very necessary that you also comprehend how close to danger you are. If you devote yourself to the ascetic life, if you renounce all worldly pleasures, all human things, you may, I suppose, attain a certain concentration; but for the same reason you may also dry up. Now, on the other hand, if you plunge headlong into the arms of passion, you may just as easily burn yourself up! Art, love and passion are very closely related because everything revolves more or less around knowledge and the

the snow, eyes fixed on the stars, a portrait of a memory of his younger self: “I was lying in a snowdrift drunk, and crying my eyes out. We (The Pop Rivets) were playing at an indoor rifle range in a village in the Swiss Alps. It was my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday (1<sup>st</sup> Dec 1979) and I was crying to God or a space ship to come and whisk me away—a proper night of the soul.”<sup>2</sup>

The new paintings revisit and re-imagine this enigmatic image again and again: a man lying prostrate in the snow—dead, drunk, desperate, or all of the above. Realised at different scales, in different palettes and with varying intensity of mark and stroke, they provide a leitmotif to which Childish repeatedly returns. This is not unusual in his paintings, as over the last thirty years certain key motifs have recurred. The self-portrait has remained highly prominent, even as he has shifted his style.<sup>3</sup> Other recurring subjects, often with a similarly autobiographical nature, have included: nudes and portraits of women; shambolic and aggressive drunks; the town of Chatham, which has often as the background to the image of a flâneur; and memento mori, including still lifes.

However, the series under consideration, based on those pictures of Walser’s death, seems to pull together and crystallise many of Childish’s preoccupations and obsessions. Walser becomes a figure with whom Childish identifies profoundly, both in terms of his work and his life: the quintessential ‘outsider’, difficult, uncompromising, eccentric, undervalued and misunderstood except by a handful of greats (including Franz Kafka, Herman Hesse and Walter Benjamin), plagued by his battle with drink but devoted to his determined, steady and private practice, as well as his walking, of course.

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2. From an email conversation between Childish and Steve Lowe, October 2009.

3. Over this period Childish’s stylistic approach has developed from angular and graphic compositions rendered in dark tones of oil on board, to a more visceral and vibrant use of oil on canvas that emerged in the mid 1990s.

Childish has written, in his poems and prose, and spoken at length about the way in which he sees his work, and the work of all good artists, as part of a continuum, a conversation, a torch that is passed. This is not necessarily unusual, but few artists are quite as open and intense about it in their work as Childish. He identifies strongly with certain artists, poets and writers with whom he strikes up very active relationships. But he meets them on their own terms, in the democracy of their humanity and in his words “not one jot less but equell to all of them.”<sup>4</sup> This attitude might be—indeed has been—perceived as arrogance, but that is to entirely misunderstand. It is grown-up, productive and healthy. Childish is a kindred spirit, a fellow traveller; he isn’t afraid or in awe of these artists because he isn’t afraid of what they do. It seems an odd thing to say, but he isn’t frightened of art—of making pictures and poems and songs; for him, it is an activity that is both precious and useless, of the highest importance and the utmost inconsequence, as essential and as arbitrary as breathing.

Childish’s intensity and honesty can make the work difficult, even embarrassing at times, but he is unashamed and unafraid of failure. He is not scared of making ‘bad’ paintings. Indeed, he must make bad paintings, is *bound* to.<sup>5</sup> He is always, as he has said, struggling to get out of the way, to let go and allow for both the failures and the small successes. For Childish, painting is a process, an activity that is important in and of itself—it is better to paint than not to paint, to make something than not to make something. His pictures have a looseness and immediacy, apparently laid down as rough-and-ready first takes, ‘demo recordings’ full of false starts, bum notes

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4. Billy Childish, ‘I am the strange hero of hunger’, *Chatham Town Welcomes Desperate Men*, Hangman Books, 2001.

5. In *Hangman Communication 0001* (1997), Childish writes: “It is essential for every artist to paint a succession of unacceptably bad paintings.”

enjoyment of beauty in one form or another. And intoxication is beautiful, is it not, my friend?

Have you not sometimes been with me in the deep hollow of the champagne glass where red lobsters crawl around and black waiters serve red rumbas that make the blood course through your veins as if to a wild dance? Where white dresses and black silk stockings nestle themselves close to the forms of young gods amidst orchid blossoms and the clatter of tambourines? Have you never thought that in the hellish heat of intoxication amongst princes, harlots and gangsters there is the glamour of life? Or have not the wide seas on hot nights let you dream that we were glowing sparks on flying fish far above the sea and the stars? Splendid was your mask of black fire in which your long hair was burning—and you believed, at last, at last, that you held the young god in your arms who would deliver you from poverty and ardent desire!

Then came the other thing—the cold fire, the glory.

Never again, you said, never again shall my will be a slave to another. Now I want to be alone, alone with myself and my will to power and to glory.

You have built yourself a house of ice crystals and you have wanted to forge three corners or four corners into a circle. But you cannot get rid of that little ‘point’ that gnaws in your brain, that little ‘point’ that means ‘the other one’. Under the cold ice the passion still gnaws, that longing to be loved by another, even if it should be on a different plane from the hell of animal desire. The cold ice burns exactly like the hot fire. And uneasy you walk alone through your palace of ice. Because you still do not want to give up the

world of delusion, that little 'point' still burns within you—the other one! And for that reason you are an artist, my poor child! And on you go, walking in dreams like myself. But through all this we must also persevere, my friend. You dream of my own self in you, you mirror of my soul...

Excerpt from Max Beckmann, 'Letters to a Woman Painter' (1948), *College Art Journal* 9, number 1, Autumn 1949, pp. 39–43; reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, University of California Press, 1996.

and a raw and messy energy. But full, too, of honesty and intimacy and 'life'—what he is always most attracted to in the work of others.

In his work Childish is seeking not originality but the *originary*. He is struggling for an authenticity made all the more radical through the limitation and boundaries of its apparently obsolete, outdated or discredited language. And if Childish's paintings seem anachronistic then perhaps it is because we want and expect our artists to be more 'sophisticated' or 'savvy', less 'innocent'.<sup>6</sup> But innocence is powerful and hard won, and something that Childish has always nurtured and respected; in this way he approaches and brings together both the childlike and what he considers to be divine. For him everything is precious: "Good taste is fascism. Either all are special or none."<sup>7</sup>

Childish makes his paintings and poems and records out of an insatiable, inescapable and absolute necessity, almost in spite of himself. And he is always making the same painting, always writing the same poem; these works make Billy Childish just as Billy Childish makes them. We find this same strange truth in Walser, too: "My prose pieces are, to my mind, nothing more nor less than parts of a long, plotless, realistic story. For me, the sketches I produce now and then are shortish or longish chapters of a novel. The novel I am writing is always the same one, and it might be described as a much-chopped-up or dismembered book of myself."<sup>8</sup>

So in these new paintings Childish and Walser communicate and commune. The figures become interchangeable, Childish as Walser and Walser as Childish; Childish as a 19-year-old lying drunk and broken in an

Alpine snow drift, or at the end of his life, frail and gaunt and finished now, like the Swiss writer. Childish complicates this further in the painting in which the protagonist—if a frozen corpse can be described as a protagonist—is dressed in a yellow suit. This might be read as an allusion to Knut Hamsun's enigmatic, Christ-like character John Nagel, who appears in his 1892 novel *Mysteries* to make mischief amongst the unsuspecting townsfolk dressed in a peculiar yellow suit, a character with whom Childish has also identified and engaged. But is the character in the painting Childish or Walser or Nagel, or a representation of that 'holy trinity'? In fact, Childish has written of the painting in quite overtly spiritual terms as an attempt to picture Walser "ascending to the spirit world."<sup>9</sup>

These are paintings, then, of a threshold, and paintings that act as thresholds: the threshold between life and death, the real and the imaginary, and other existential states; and the threshold between people—artists, writers, literary characters—the permeability of bodies and spirits; that sacred, empathetic moment when we connect, translate, become many and one. This is a moment revisited by Childish again and again in these works, as they replay a cycle of transformation and transubstantiation, picturing a man outside of time, literally frozen in the incomparable moment of death; a man set against the void, adrift not just in the snow but in space and time and history.

6. In his foreword to the book *Childish: Paintings of a Backwater Visionary* (2005), Matthew Higgs talks about the development of modernism in Britain as a succession of eccentric and singularly anachronistic artists—Stanley Spencer, Eric Gill, Gilbert & George. To this, one might add Paul Nash, Michael Ayrton, Cecil Collins—

so-called 'Neo-Romantics' who were ignored, ridiculed or undermined by the establishment of the time—a Francophile modernist orthodoxy that left no room for anything outside its progressive, formalist doctrine.

7. Billy Childish, *Hangman Communication* 0001, 1997.

8. Robert Walser, 'A Sort of Speech',

*Selected Stories*, NYRB Classics, New York, 2002.

9. Billy Childish, *Robert Walser Dead in the Snow and Other Depictions of Divine Mundanity: Facts, Clues, Anomali and other Intellectual Debris*, [www.1-13.org](http://www.1-13.org)



## That strange bravery

the painting

thats what its  
all about  
doing that  
god-thing  
on  
the canvas

trying to glue  
the world  
together  
with  
septic egos  
and  
grand vanities

to believe  
totally  
in  
the importance  
of your work  
but  
no  
that alls  
to be rubbed  
out  
in 2 life times  
or less

thats the  
balancing set  
shouldering self  
importance  
with the humbling  
ferocity  
of the stars

there lies that  
strange  
bravery

Billy Childish, 1989

Mathew Collins apology to billy childish

Dear billy,

i am a fantastic idiot!

i rote you off and said you couldnt paint  
and it was rong of me. The reason, billy,  
is that i was (am) jellious. i was bullied  
at skool then forced into ~~xxx~~ repressing  
myself by wanky tutors at art college.

Rather than face them and deal with

them as a man, as ~~xxxx~~ you have so  
bravely done, i took the girls way out  
and lashed out at the very person - you -  
who i should have upheld and lorded  
for their spirit and integrity.

i now publicly admit that you are a

better painter than me (or anyone).  
~~xxxxxxx~~

Thank You.

As a new friend

Matt

Billy Childish, 'Apology from Matthew Collings,' from the series  
*The Art World Apologises*, 2008

## 20 QUESTIONS FOR BILLY CHILDISH

RICHARD BIRKETT & MATTHEW HIGGS

**Richard Birkett:** The notion of being willfully ‘childish’, of ‘loving unreasonableness and hotheadedness’, is apparent both in the openness of your art and the direct way in which you’ve responded to the establishment throughout your life. Do you have a particular polemical goal, or is it more important to you to be leading by example and asserting the value of speaking freely without malice?

**Billy Childish:** I’ve only ever wanted to be seen and recognised by a father figure, without having to compromise my heart and soul to achieve that. I’ve naturally responded according to my particular nature. There’s never been a game plan. I’m unusual in that I haven’t sought to please, nor displease. Though I have often been guilty of dumb insolence.

**RB:** What does it mean to you to work and collaborate with other people, for example when you’re making music or films?

**BC:** Making music with others is a fantastic experience, if you work with friends who limit themselves for the good of the song. This is also true of painting with others, which I’ve done. The important thing is working with people who respect each other’s abilities, and are willing to restrict themselves for the good of art and expression.

**RB:** While you’ve chosen to live and work in Chatham for the majority of your life – using it as a base for your publishing activities, as well as for the formation of several bands and a filmmaking group—you’ve also established connections and become known within creative communities around the world. Is this relationship between the local and the global important to you?

**BC:** The local is genuine engagement, where we find ourselves as we are, not how we wish we were. Truth is what it is, regardless of what we’d prefer it to be. This genuine engagement with ourselves means that we can relate realistically to the big outside world. My work, and endeavour in the world, could be summarised as objectively subjective.

**RB:** In some of the paintings in the ICA exhibition, your subject is the River Medway and the ships that have operated on the river. What particular significance do the river and the boats have for you?

**BC:** The boat, the John H Amos, is non-operational—it was the last steam paddle tug built in the UK, and is under restoration. The significance is that the John H Amos was an anachronism when built, already out of date in 1930. As a member of Greenpeace since the mid-80s, I’m a passionate advocate of the use of the waterways of our island home.

**RB:** Would you be happy for your children to be artists?

**BC:** Painters definitely; musicians reluctantly.

**RB:** You’ve used the silhouette of the gallows as a symbol within your paintings, woodcuts and placards for many years. What does this icon of crime and mortality mean to you?

**BC:** It’s variously a symbol, spelling problems of pain, suffering, gallows humour and humanity. People have told me it’s dark. I remind them that as a means of death and torture, the crucifix is far meaner.

**RB:** The vibrancy of colour in your paintings strikes me as creating both a sense of rapturous celebration and a sense of discomfort, as if the world you’re depicting is almost too intense. What role does colour play for you in your paintings?

**BC:** When I was fifteen, I was a committed Fauvist, looking at Matisse. This intense use of colour left my work for fifteen years, but later returned. Yes, the world has often been too hard and intense for me; I’m always learning how to be here. Painting helps me—it calms my soul. I think we often get the colours of the hell realm. I hope to be getting nearer the God colours as I grow.

**RB:** Your work is often talked about in relation to supposedly archaic attitudes towards art and life. More importantly though, it seems that you value a historical lineage of artists who worked with a sense of immediacy, rather than production filtered through layers of semantic argument and counter-argument. Do you feel that culture has become too bogged down in systems of thought?

**BC:** Well, the art world and critical world and social world are intensely conservative. The controlling side of the brain, the side that deals in concepts, is the left brain. The right brain—which is creativity and imagination—is, and always has been, bullied by the dominant, doctrinaire left brain. Western society is entombed by left-brain thinking. If you see it in these scientific terms, you realise that Conceptual art is in fact an oxymoron. I’d say that as a society we’re in fear of death, therefore in fear of life and in

fear of art. That’s why we commodify life and art, and that’s why the fearful and baying mob applauds. If we could still legally burn witches at the stake, we’d do it.

**RB:** You gave up alcohol in 1993. Do you feel there was a shift in your approach to painting, writing and music-making at this time?

**BC:** Every night for fifteen years, I fell to bed drunk, and said: “I can’t do this anymore.” And finally I stopped. It was the end of living my life—or killing myself—for the entertainment of others. I was unwell from the constant drinking and the emotional turmoil it underlined. I’d seen an old acquaintance, Shane McGowan, attracting audiences to see him turn up his toes live on stage, and I wasn’t going to live out other people’s romantic fantasies by wrecking my life for them. So this was a big return to my pre-drinking days, and my art returned to what I’d been looking at when I was fifteen; the Fauvists—this time via Schmidt-Rottluff—came into my art. I share the same birthday as Schmidt-Rottluff, and enjoy number/date synchronicity. Otto Dix’s is the day after, 2 December.

My younger interests came to the surface and my art and life were renewed. I came to believe that art is a small part of life, and that life is more important, and art that doesn’t improve life isn’t worth having. I admit that drinking stopped me committing suicide, but then drink was going to kill me so I had to drop it. Then I took up meditation, yoga and psychotherapy to work with the buried issues of child abuse. As a drunk, I painted graphically and carefully, and sober I painted crudely and loosely. In fact, as if drunk.

**RB:** What do you enjoy most about hill walking?

**BC:** Noticing God’s vivid and surprising colours. And stopping hill walking.



**Matthew Higgs:** You adopted the name Billy Childish as a teenager in the late 1970s. Three decades later, what, if anything, does it mean to be a 50-year-old man called Billy Childish?

**Billy Childish:** I called myself Gus Claudius in 1977. I was a punk in Chatham, Robert Graves's *I Claudius* had just been serialised on television. I was a big fan of that and wanted a more interesting pen name for writing a fanzine. A friend of mine said, "You're not Gus Claudius, you're Billy Childish." I actually always painted under my family name, but by the early 90s I was in a lot of shows in Germany and they kept calling me Billy Childish, so I just went along with it. I suppose you can't fight a nickname—I've started spelling it Chyldish and claiming it as an Old English name.

**MH:** You studied art briefly at St Martins College of Art in London. What positive experiences, if any, still resonate from your time at art school?

**BC:** I was first accepted onto St Martins Foundation Course in 1977. My local authority wouldn't pay the fees, so I didn't get back there till 1978. I walked out after half a term because I didn't like their doctrine of Abstract Expressionism, plus I needed to play round Germany and Switzerland with the group—self-promoted gigs out of a transit van. I painted on the dole till Thatcher came into power in 79, then they had a crackdown, so I reapplied and went again to St Martins in 1980. That's when I met Peter Doig. I was there for a year and a half, till I was expelled for refusing to paint within the art school—I only painted at home—and they were upset about my poetry. I learned that art school is overrated and stifles creativity and promotes orthodoxy, be it drawing like Michelangelo or making Marcel Duchamp anti-art. I think art school is the last line in our education system for stifling fun and enjoyment in creativity. The positive was meeting like-minded people. Pete liked the same painters, music and writing. Down in Kent, I met musicians who let me sing in their group. And in the mid 80s Tracey Emin went to Maidstone to study printing and I used to go in and use their presses for block printing, and we had some of my poetry books printed there in the holidays

on the QT. So I'd say they are great, despite being down on the true artist.

**MH:** How, if at all, do you see your work in relation to British art more generally? I'm thinking about the many maverick figures who've populated British art, such as Alfred Wallis, Eric Gill, Stanley Spencer, etc.

**BC:** I'd say I'm an Englishman who refuses to be English. I'm a European painter—all my first acceptance was in Germany, even Paris, and the USA. If there are a few Englishmen I'm in the line of, I tip my hat to them. I'm sure DH Lawrence was depressed by the English and their lack of culture. So I'm an international artist from Chatham within the brotherhood of English painters and writers who groaned in despair at the nationalist English. Apart from instigating the manifestos for the Stuckist movement, my only other contribution was to demand that it was an international movement against the jingoism of 'Brit' art.

**MH:** Are writing, making art and playing music fundamentally different?

**BC:** Yes, music is entertainment that can be meaningful. Painting is meaningful, but can be entertainment. Both, I give my heart to, and try not to dictate to, allowing the elemental forces of God to manifest through my damaged channel.

**MH:** You're often referred to as being 'independent' (frequently stubbornly so). What does the term 'independence' mean to you in relation to your approach and identity as an artist, musician and writer?

**BC:** I don't care for the term. I see myself as intelligent. That intelligence means that I'm not seeking to be sanctioned by others, but to be recognised for truth and integrity, if I can muster up enough of those praiseworthy attributes. This is important to me because I'm manifesting the energy of past masters who require to be honoured in their spiritual quest.

**MH:** John Peel famously described The Fall's music as "always different, always the same"—which was clearly intended as a compliment. Your own music,

like Mark E. Smith's, has followed an equally singular path. Do you feel any affinity with Peel's assessment?

**BC:** I love contradictory statements as they have a much greater chance of encompassing or touching an aspect of the truth of things. I spoke to John on the telephone from a call-box in Chatham a dozen times when I was an eighteen-year-old. John was a great man, who took the time to speak to me and helped so many through his un-snobbish support of youth looking for acceptance from an 'uncle figure'.

**MH:** Your work has always been autobiographical, often explicitly so. How has this relationship—with yourself—evolved or changed over the years?

**BC:** It's been a hard and painful road. My work is all about how to be here on the earth plane and embrace humanity. Sometimes I've succeeded and I'm still learning, looking to forgive myself and others, and to make a meaningful contribution to mankind's Godly quest.

**MH:** The ICA show has the title *Unknowable but Certain*; how should we interpret this?

**BC:** The artist who's really engaged in art and emotional growth will always remain a moving target.

**MH:** A number of recent paintings feature images of the Swiss writer Robert Walser. Can you say something about how you first encountered Walser's work, and its subsequent impact on your own work?

**BC:** I read *Institute Benjamenta* in about 1995. I found it through my usual habit of walking up the fiction aisle of a book shop and randomly picking a book from the shelf and reading the first paragraph. I immediately recognised a friend in Walser, a karmic relationship. People like Walser make my life worth living. When I was a child it was picture-making and comedy—Peter Cook and Monty Python; in my teens it was picture-making and punk music; in my twenties and thirties, it was painting and literature. Now, it's more painting and Buddha and Christ.

**MH:** What question would you like to ask yourself?

**BC:** Why do I estrange myself from the world?

## COLOPHON

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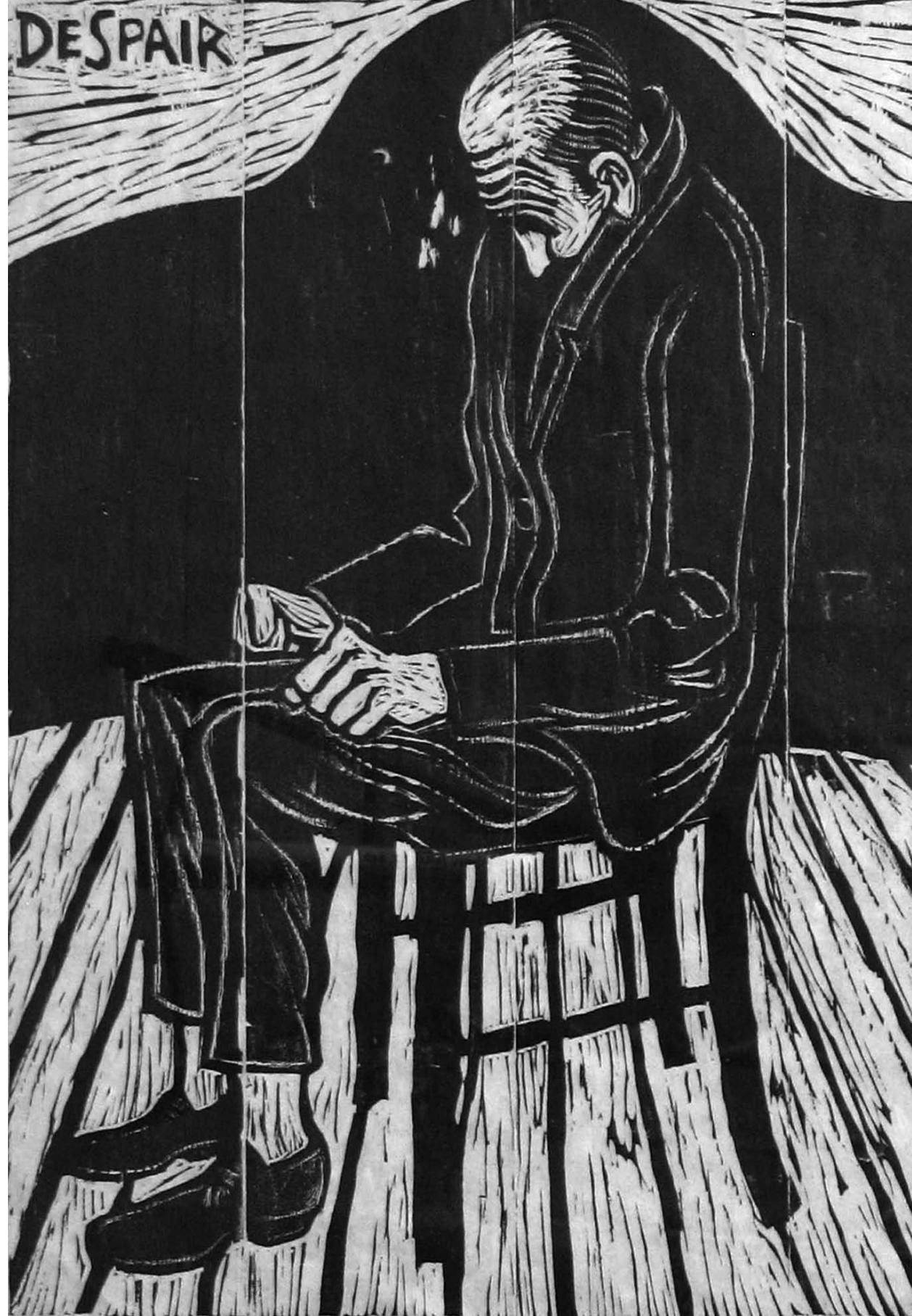
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**Robert Walser**