

## *Disintegrationism*

### *I. A Brief History of the Disintegrationist Movement*

THE basic ideas of Disintegrationism were around for 80 years before anyone ever thought of calling himself a disintegrationist. In 1884, Max Schniel, a German engraver living in Cologne, was already producing artworks that can be considered disintegrationist. All of the essential features of disintegrationism are to be found in them, in particular the abandonment of serial order as a structural postulate and its replacement by a hermetic scheme of implied accentuation which, though clearly evoking realistic associations, is not bound to the physical object.

Schniel (1860-1915) cannot however lay claim to being the founder of the disintegrationist school. He was not successful in the promotion of his philosophy, and was just beginning to gain recognition as an artist when he died on the Western Front. A few of his etchings and lithographs to be seen hanging on the walls of museums in Hamburg and Dusseldorf; the remainder are in private collections.<sup>1</sup>

Tendencies towards disintegrationism can also be found in the works of many artists who are better known, many of whom, were they alive today, would probably have little sympathy

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<sup>1</sup>The absurd character of the art market is revealed once again by the fact that a Schniel engraving was auctioned off last winter at Sotheby's for \$100,000. This remarkable change in fortune comes too late to do him any good, but who knows what caprice will gain the ascendancy in another year or so, relegating a fine artist like Schniel back to the dustbins of oblivion?

for disintegrationist ideas. Forms and structures bearing the decided markings of a disintegrationist sensibility can be identified in the canvases of Cezanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Molleaux, Matisse, Hunta, Kandinsky, Munch, Tchetchevitch, Szabo and Arp.

The highly original, if not outright unorthodox, colorism of much disintegrationist painting harkens back to the Renaissance, Giorgone, Titian, Zurbarban and Francesco de Cossa, to Byzantium, the Etruscans, and even the clay pottery of the Oaxaca culture of pre-Columbian MesoAmerica.

In poetry we must take note of Mallarmé who, above all others, must be deemed the father of disintegrationist verse.

The first self-consciously conceived disintegrationist works were created by the multi-faceted artist who invented the term 'disintegrationism', who even today serves to epitomize the movement : Frank Zackler ( 1925-1985) . It was Zackler who , on April 4th, 1970, outlined his *Disintegrationist Programme* to a circle of his students and associates at the Art Students League in New York City, while seated together around the bar of the Empire Hotel at 67th and Broadway. At this stage his best known collaborators were Reese Iakonnen, the sculptor, and the dancer Natalya Simon.

The first version of the *Disintegrationist Manifesto* was published in October, 1975, appearing in a short-lived arts publication called *ARTS IN REBELLION*. Although more than a dozen names were appended to the foot of the document, no-one

doubts that it was written by the unruly, disordered yet brilliant disintegrationist poet, Ewald Lieb.

Once again, it was Frank Zackler who, in September of 1973, organized the first exhibition entirely devoted to disintegrationist art. The story of how it came about is peculiarly American . Zackler had tried for many years without success to put together such an exhibition in New York City. At that time one could not hope to find a gallery manager who was willing to take a chance on a young, little known and controversial movement in the visual arts. Pop Art was still drawing its following, and as the Vietnamese war drew to its close, many of the galleries, ( knowing that in a few years there would no longer be any market for it), were bringing out and promoting their stocks of 'committed' art. Disintegrationism does not lend itself to messages, whether political or religious, being primarily concerned with abstract issues of form.<sup>2</sup>

Tim Arlen, a friend of Zackler's from their school days at the Art Institute of Chicago, a commercial illustrator and animation cartoonist living in Hollywood, was just then opening an exhibition of his framed animation stills in the Phoenix Gallery in Beverly Hills. Arlen, without any aspirations himself for a career

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<sup>2</sup>The question is perhaps academic. One could argue that "Guernica" might be considered a Cubist painting, although the formal aspects of Cubism have been so far relegated to the background to allow for the powerful expression of the political message as to become scarcely relevant. Still, Picasso could not have painted Guernica as we know it had he not had the experience of his Cubist stage.

What politically committed work we do find in the Disintegrationist school is primarily in the domain of poetry. We will come to that in a moment.

in the Fine Arts , was sympathetic to disintegrationist ideas, and it was on his own initiative that he withdrew his own exhibition a month ahead of time so that the disintegrationists could have their show.

The first disintegrationist exhibition featured the works of 15 artists in a broad range of media : oils, gouache, watercolor, collage, stained glass, bronze, plastic, leather and stone. By an unfortunate error in judgement they entitled their exhibition "Les Quinze". This alienated that part of the Los Angeles art market hostile to foreign art. In fact, more than 80% of the artists were native born.<sup>3</sup>

The show was neither well publicized nor well attended. However two events occurred crucial to the development of the Movement: Frank Zackler's monumentalist painting "Rosinante", a virtuoso decomposition of an equestrian figure according to disintegrationist principles, was purchased for the Toronto Museum; and Leslie Hutchins, art critic for the Los Angeles Times, devoted an entire column of the Times to the exhibition at the Phoenix and the ideas of the disintegrationist school. Within less than a week, major newspapers across the country were promoting disintegrationism as the arts phenomenon of the last quarter of the 20th century. "Les Quinze" returned to New York with dozens of offers from major galleries on the Upper East Side. At long last the Movement was launched.

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<sup>3</sup>The only two foreign artists were Max Schwabach, Swiss, and Zaid Haftali, Lebanese. The others were Frank zackler, Reese Iakonnen, Miriam Goad, Abe Selkin, Dick Schwartz, Bertha Wentz-Heubler, Ramon Morales, Don Neighbors, Bonnie MacNeil, John Dekker, Joan Ames, Bob Kelly and Lyle Jackson.

## II. Disintegrationism: Ideology and Praxis

*“Disintegrationism”, to quote Zackler, “starts from the mysterious capacity which exists in art alone of suggesting deeper levels of meaning by the avoidance of explicit statements about them.”*

In the Disintegrationist Manifesto, Ewald Lieb makes essentially the same point, amplifying it substantively, though with greater ambiguity:

*“ The disintegration of the mechanical line[....] opens up new horizons of meaning latent in the object, horizons kept in bondage by the banal constraints of formal delineazation. We owe a great deal to the new mathematics of Topology, which has led the way for the arts, giving us a firm foundation beneath our instinctual gropings. We now have at our disposal the tools for the conceptualization of the ideology required for the expression of the fundamental crisis of the Twentieth Century[....]If I were obliged to summarize the key notion of Disintegrationism in a few sentences I might say: ‘ That which is, is not. That which appears, must. All boundaries are mistakes.’”*

This rejection of the boundary appears to be the lone thread uniting the disintegrationists of 18 countries. The Argentinian painter Jorge Melendez calls himself a disintegrationist. We can, I think rightly, dismiss this claim as nothing more than a confusion of labels. Essentially, Melendez is a neo-surrealist with post-modernist tendencies, and nothing else.

The flamboyant style of Frank Zackler makes him one of the greatest colorists of our time. He is far more original in this domain than even Matta, the Surrealist. This predilection for bold, pungent chromatism is shared by all of his students, although it is not an absolute requirement for a disintegrationist. Zaid Haftali, who intended to establish a school in Beirut but who, because of the Lebanese civil war, finds himself in more or less permanent exile in Rome, is happiest working in mezzotints. His color, per se, is uninspired, uninteresting, even a bit dull. Haftali, who holds a BA in mathematics from the American University in Beirut, uses the term "Topological Synthetism" to describe the extraordinary, even perhaps incredible research he has performed in the expansion of the scope of the resources of the formalisms of description.

Arguably the leading disintegrationist painter in France, Jean-François Guillaume, pursues traditional emotivist values, sometimes falling just shy of arrant sentimentality. His technical command is however nothing short of virtuostic. Miriam Goad moved back out to California to accept a teaching post at the Idyllwild College for the Plastic Arts in Pasadena. She has quickly become the focus of a flourishing disintegrationist movement in the southwestern United States. Her enigmatical crypto-symbolist tessellations do not seem to fit nicely into any pre-designed category. The disintegrationist paradigm however is clearly present in the opacity of her iconography and the vigorous application of an apparatus of formlessness.

Frank Zackler died in 1985, at the age of 60, from an overdose of cocaine. There is a school of thought that maintains that he committed suicide because the Minimalists were getting all the attention in the prestigious arts magazines. This malicious tale has been deliberately spread by his personal enemies, of which there were more than one : despite his own struggles to gain recognition, Zackler, once arrived, was stingy in giving credit to others.

But it was in this same year that the poets, seeking their own solutions to the modernist dilemma, saw the homology of their formal experimentation to the disintegrationist *Kunstbegriffe* .

On September 14 , 1985, 5 poets in Madison, Wisconsin calling themselves disintegrationists published a volume of verse . The overall level of this book is so puerile that it need not concern us here. The first poet of substance to call himself a disintegrationist, the one who it could be said remains in some sense perhaps the best, is Ewald Lieb. His revolutionary poem, *FIST* , first appeared in *Arts in Rebellion* in January, 1986. It has since been reproduced many times and even been anthologized<sup>4</sup>:

### *FIST*

*PLINTH. nail. Of is of the SOOOOO.....*

*com,b us ..t\*\*ible*

*WASH FORGOT?*

*WHAT ( nude?)*

*GNOSis? Not WHY!!*

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<sup>4</sup>Bards Of The Apocalypse; An Anthology of Contemporary American Verse  
Miller and Halverson, University of Nebraska Press, 1981

(( McNuggets ))

*“ Vent et Silence Déjà , Pensée de la Mort”*

*\*Dentist\*DentistDE\*\*nTi;st....DentistDentistdentisttttttttttt*

*ttt*

*NECTAR! GAROTTE! spigot(“*

*(( Frenzy ))*

*swaddled?*

*WashDentistNectarNectarDentistWashDentistNectarNectar*

*: !!)!!WAIT??”(((*

*Tauromachie Garotte*

*Afghanistan!*

*Afghanistan!*

*Afghanistan!*

*Afghanistan!.....*

The disintegrationist poet James Morgan lives in Philadelphia. One finds in his work the same distinctive traits of dissolution of grammar, the avoidance of rhythmic regularity or semantic consistency, and the juxtaposition of striking imagery. Morgan, unlike most other disintegrationists, is unapologetically political. His politics , strangely enough, tends to be right wing conservative, even at times extremist. Some of his best disintegrationist poems have been unashamedly patriotic. His long ode, “Jubilation” at the occasion of the Bicentennial of 1976, begins:



**Aching FLAGGG!!**

**Commie stink.....OOOmph!ailLust!!**

**\*\*' .....?;**

**Toothplichkt FR\*\* eEEEE\$\$\$\$DDDDDD..oooooooooM!!!**

As of 1986 <sup>5</sup>, Disintegrationism is in full bloom. Articles on disintegrationist artists, theories, cliques, coteries and exhibitions and schisms are appearing at the rate of one a week in the international arts periodicals. One is also witnessing the exciting phenomenon of mergers with other, better established schools, so that we can find works classified variously as “Disintegrationist Pop”, “Disintegrationist Op”, “Disintegrationist Minimal”, “Disintegrationist Post-Modernist Objectivist”, etc., etc. Some of these labels are patently ridiculous, if not overtly fatuous. The latter combination appeared in ARTSVOICE 86, a slick British publication of the Manchester Arts Council.

Disintegrationist is one of the important contemporary movements in the arts, and it is here to stay. Its durability comes from its capacity to fill the urgent need for vehicles for the expression of the cultural pessimism which has become the central pre-occupation of the 80's owing to the spiritual crises and disappearance of values that has descended upon our civilization in these times.




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<sup>5</sup>The date of the original publication of these articles ( Editors Note)

## *The Disintegrationist Manifesto*

( An excerpt from the original Manifesto of Ewald Lieb, in *Arts in Rebellion*, October 26, 1975 )

“...We are witnessing in our own day a collapse of values more devastating than anything that has ever yet descended on the human race. While events cry up to us that we must give appropriate expression to the psychic desperation of our state of siege, the muzzled artists of the Establishment and the academic artists cling to their outworn visions of the past. They repeat, like the mumblings of toothless old men, the same threadbare formulae of Surrealism, or Popism, or Orphism, or whatever other archaism they have found between the musty pages of their art history texts. They wash themselves in their isms, they shave in their isms, they piss and shit their isms. Even in their sleep, they dream of their old isms!

Yet they fail disastrously to grasp the essential reality of our time, that truth roaring like a wounded lion in the daily bustle of life, that ultimate, ultimately repugnant essence, that *diastema* which cannot be depicted by any kind of statement or form, which can only be signified by FORMLESSNESS!

Responding to their need to protect their sterile visions of a vanished age, they deny us access to the galleries or to the schools. They refuse to let us publish our poems and manifestos in their journals. They hound us from employment and the seats of culture,

forcing us to wander on the fringes of civilization, in the boondocks and wildernesses, cut off from all outlets of exposure or publicity. Yet they cannot, for long, hide from the world its own face, and that face is **THE DISINTEGRATIONIST VISION.**

*The essential goal of OUR ART is : the objectification of the subjective ( the exteriorization of the IDEA) rather than the subjectification of the objective. We are assisted in this task by a literal adherence to SCIENCE, to theories constructed through induction and expressed according to the rigorous mathematical principles of aesthetic theory!* These theories have their solid foundation on a purely idealistic principle that causes us to reject the outer appearance of material reality and to only admit the existence of a world of representations.

Disintegrationism had its historic origins in the Programme outlined by Frank Zackler in the bar of the Empire Hotel on April 4th, 1970. From that moment forth we have raised the banners of defiance against all the schools that shackle the imagination, against the nefarious system of indentured servitude, let us rather call it slavery, that puts the artist at the mercy of the mercantilism of dealers and gallery owners, against all those fat-cat, phony, hibernating, enfeebled "artists(?)" pandering their cheap veneers to the plutocratic artsy taste-makers, but who shrink from confrontation with **THE ULTIMATE CRISIS.**

Pay heed, ye whoring philistines! Disintegrationism will abolish all these things ! Disintegrationism will dissolve all falsehoods, not only of the present, but **ALL FALSEHOODS THAT HAVE EVER BEEN UTTERED IN WORD, PAINT OR SYMBOL**

**SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME!** It will begin by eliminating the surface in the name of the line; then the line in the name of the point; then by eliminating the point in the name of color; next it will eliminate color by the shadow. *The shadow will be exterminated by the Ineffable Beyond.* Ultimately there is nothing that we will not do away with. We will disintegrate all things.

[....] Disintegration is not an "Arts Movement" to be compared with so many others; for it is the only authentic expression of our times. This being the case, all other so-called movements will prove to be unnecessary: disintegrationism alone expresses THE TRUTH.

*In due time, even the name "Disintegrationism" will disappear, for the truth needs no name.*

**THE MYSTIQUE OF THE OBJECT IS NO MORE.**

**THE MYSTIQUE OF THE SUBJECT IS BUT A TEMPORARY EXPEDIENT.**

**SCIENCE IS OUR GUIDE.**

**WE MUST NOT, CANNOT, AND SHALL NOT, FAIL!**