Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism

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Introduction

Exploring the Maximalist Body

> There's no single ideal listener out there who likes my orchestral music, my guitar albums and songs like "Dyna-Moe-Humm." It's all one big note. Ladies and gentlemen . . .
>
> —Frank Zappa

Like Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro," Zappa's music has often been accused of being far too noisy and of containing too many notes. Because of their density and complexity, his sound sculptures have alternately enthused and alienated several generations of critics and listeners. With more than sixty albums (including no less than twenty-one double albums and two triple albums) released over a period of twenty-eight years, and fifteen "official bootlegs", Zappa is one of the most prolific artists of the 20th century, a composer whose sheer output could stand accused of maximalist excess. His attempts to embrace different genres and creative practices (rock, jazz, blues, orchestral music, film, opera, . . .) have been interpreted as a bulimic desire to explore the totality of past and present modes and styles in order to create strongly contrasting musical collages and establish his reputation as an outsider in both the rock and the art music communities. As James Grier writes:

> Zappa clearly relished the conflicting images he projected as rock musician and knowledgeable observer or practitioner of art music. This posture allowed him to remain an outsider in both fields (rock musician who employed the language of art music; practitioner of art music who

> played rock) while capitalizing on the cultural hegemony of art music to create an ironic distance between himself and other rock musicians, and assert the superiority of his cultural sophistication and musicianship.
>
> (unpag.)

As we will see, however, Zappa's maximalist poetics, as well as his more general disdain for genre boundaries, goes well beyond the fashionable levelling out of high vs low dichotomies that has become associated with postmodern art. Zappa has repeatedly alluded to the fact that all the diverse aspects of his musical output were to be perceived as part of a single "Project/Object," a formulation meant to describe "the overall concept of [his] work in various mediums":

> Each project (in whatever realm), or interview connected with it, is part of a larger object, for which there is no "technical name."
>
> (*Real* 139)

The art of connecting apparently antithetical styles and items usually seen or experienced in radically different contexts has long been a feature associated with the international avant-garde, and Zappa's aural collages have been compared with the equally democratic and undogmatic aesthetics of Kurt Schwitters's *merzbau*.[1] But Zappa's extension of collage aesthetics to the non-musical and even the non-artistic materials and phenomena that gravitate around his published works and performances (Zappa repeatedly insists on the importance of interviews, audience participation and cover art) reflects above all his commitment to compositional methods that consider musical works as having an existence that exceeds the sum of their parts. Zappa's holistic poetics is also indicative of his desire to experience the whole world as a material extension of a single, prime-moving vibration which he calls the "BIG NOTE" ("Everything in the universe is, is, is made of one element, which is a note, a single note. Atoms are really vibrations, you know. Which are extensions of the BIG NOTE, everything's one note").[2] The suggestion that the universe began with one primal sound can be related to the theories of the astronomers and Nobel-Prize winners Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson who, in 1965, accidentally discovered the existence of Cosmic Background Radiation, a residual vibration from the Big Bang which comes to us from all directions with the same intensity and a tone a little flatter than B, as defined by standard tuning. Once translated into aesthetic terms, Penzias's and Wilson's primordial hiss from the beginning of time can be seen as the cosmological justification of

various forms of (intentional and nonintentional) "conceptual continuities" that incorporate Zappa's works into a constantly evolving "event-structure", poised between careful calculation and chance operations:

> The *project/object* contains *plans* and *non-plans*, also precisely calculated *event-structures* designed to accommodate the mechanics of fate and all the bonus statistical improbabilities attendant hereto . . . [It] incorporates any available visual medium, consciousness of all participants (including audience), all perceptual deficiencies, God (as energy), THE BIG NOTE (as universal basic building material), and other things.
>
> (quoted in WALLEY 122)

Zappa's conception of his work as an organic-event-structure-in-expansion is indicative of his decision to let the material itself suggest ways of connecting apparently unrelated musical objects and live idiosyncracies which are liable to be fitted together and synchronized into further studio constructions. Whole tracks from *Sheik Yerbouti*, *Joe's Garage* and *Shut Up 'N Play Yer Guitar* were developed around live guitar solos extracted from other pieces. This process of gradual musical and conceptual recycling, which Zappa termed "xenochrony" (or "strange synchronization"), evokes the aesthetics of James Joyce, another maximalist artist, whose "epiphanies" were recycled into his longer and more ambitious works of fiction, of which more will be said later. As for Zappa's "Big Note" itself, it amounts to what David Walley calls "a painting of time in time, the purposeful working with coincidence," a structure over which the composer sometimes has only limited control, as Zappa explains:

> I can say that I control the structure of it perhaps acting as an agent for some other contractor . . . I'm a sub-contractor, from time to time I'm a master of ceremonies in the larger sense, if I bring to the attention of a certain audience an event or situation which is not of my own manufacture.
>
> (Walley 147)

Of "Rubber Shirt," a piece entirely composed of a bass track and a drum sequence performed independently from one another, Zappa writes:

> The drummer was instructed to play along with this one particular thing in a certain time signature, eleven-four, and that drum set part was extracted . . . The bass part which was designed to play along with another song at another speed, another rate in another time signature,

> four-four, that was removed from the master tape. . . . Then the two were sandwiched together. . . . The musical result is of two musicians who were never in the same room at the same time, playing at two different rates in two different modes for two different purposes, when blended together, yielding a third result which is musical and synchronizes in a strange way. That's xenochrony, and I've done that on a number of tracks.
>
> (Marshall, unpag.)

In the years that followed the release of "Rubber Shirt," the possibilities afforded by multitrack recording and remastering enabled Zappa to manipulate time and disrupt the linear sequentiality of his own career by mixing materials from many different periods into composites that do justice to the multidimensional dynamics of the "Project/Object". From the mid-1980s onwards, the Synclavier provided Zappa with even more ways of exploring the wonders of electronically-transmitted signals turned into musical notes. The complicated, kaleidoscopic geometries of *Jazz from Hell* (1986)—an album consisting almost exclusively of tracks electronically composed and recorded on the Synclavier—were eventually performed live by the Ensemble Modern in 1991. Ironically enough, the gestural interpretation of the German musicians, who turned out to be Zappa's last band, restored the Benjaminian "aura" of the original compositions whose digitally produced sounds had until then been completely divorced from the primal gesture of the composer or musician. Zappa's well-documented delight in conducting and composing for the Ensemble would seem to confirm the fact that his interest in electronic music had been first and foremost prompted by practical rather than aesthetic reasons. (The problem of having to deal with the ego problems of real musicians and the costs of having his scores performed by classical orchestras such as the London Symphony Orchestra in the late 1970s had proved too discouraging for him to proceed with his orchestral projects).[3]

Air Sculptures and Other Musical Objects

As suggested by the "Big Note" theory discussed above, Zappa regarded music as a material construction, a kind of synaesthetic "air sculpture" (or "molecule-sculpture-over-time" [Walley 188]) that is "'looked at' by the ears of the listeners—or a microphone" and creates "perturbations [that] modify (or sculpt) the raw material (the 'static air' in the room—the way it was 'at rest' before the musicians started fucking around with it)" (*Real* 161). In his interview with Bob Marshall, Zappa makes another

interesting remark connecting his musical theories to the realm of modern physics. Here, Zappa's awareness of the physicality of sound (see also our discussion of Zappa and Satie's "musique d'ameublement" in Chapter One)—an awareness gained from Edgar Varèse and other composers interested in timbre and noise rather than traditional notions of harmony and rhythm—leads him to posit the existence of musical *matter*, namely the transformation of sound waves into solid objects:

> If you buy the idea that the vibrational rates translate into matter, and then if you understand the concept of vibrational rates above perception and below perception combining to create a reality, that opens up the door to some pretty science fiction possibilities. If you can create an audible reality by a sine wave above the range of what your ear can hear and another one from below, and you put them together and suddenly it creates something that your ear can detect, is it not possible that solid matter of an unknown origin could manifest periodically because of the frequencies of some unknown nature above and below which, for short duration, manifest solid objects? It could explain a lot of strange things that people see.
>
> (Marshall; unpag.)

In the mid-1980s, Zappa discovered that the Synclavier's G page (which contains the machine's inaudible inner codes and numbers) could be used to generate "G numbers" that never surface at the level of the "user-friendly" part of the machine. "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress," from the *Jazz from Hell* album, was based on the rhythms indicated by the "dust particles" resulting from guitar notes recorded by the Synclavier and which Zappa subsequently converted into pitched sounds:

> So we found a way to convert bunches of G numbers into note blanks. And G numbers occupy points in time. They indicate that something happened on the guitar string at a certain point in time. It takes a little piece of eternity and slices it up, and if your finger moved, there's a G number that says what your finger did besides just playing the note. So we converted this dust into something that I could then edit for pitch, and the dust indicated a rhythm. So what I did was take the rhythm of the dust and impose pitch data on the dust and thereby move the inaudible G number into the world of audibility with a pitch name on it. That's how "The Girl in the Magnesium Dress" was built.
>
> (Menn 60)

As we will see, Zappa's commitment to the materiality of sound and

the physicality of performance is inextricably linked with an aesthetic geared towards the creation, appropriation and (mis-)consumption of everyday objects, a tendency most apparent in the radical fetishism of such songs as "Montana", "Evelyn, A Modified Dog" and "Sofa." The most everyday object of them all is the human body, and in what follows we will explore how maximalist art projects and exploits a pluralisation of the body's material means. In Chapter Two we will argue that so-called degenerate art reflects and enacts a re-materialisation of the body which detonates conservative mythologies of perfection, leaving the body radically potentialised, subject to a new maximalisation of forms. This hybrid condition has affinities with theories of abjection, and in Chapter Three we pursue these connections in the context of the gothic, which has traditionally exploited the in-betweenness of the body as a source of trauma; where the relation of the subject to the object is fraught with the anxiety of becoming other. In Chapter Four the liminal maximalist body is associated with an eroticisation of the edge between self and world, and a notion of style emerges as an expression of the body beyond objects.

Like the human body, criticism is pervious to its objects, and just as maximalist art develops out of and contributes to a sense of the body as a point at which subject and object interpenetrate and reconfigure each other, so any bid to write about maximalism can only accept a similar suspension of its traditional limits and certitudes. The degenerate critical method we develop in the course of our readings culminates in Chapter Five in a discussion of the problem of maximalist pleasure. The cross-contamination of subject and object reveals itself at this point as an unavoidable condition of our writing as well as one of its guiding thematics. The maximalist body-in-progress, like any attempt to define it, is located at a point of double contingency, where it is impossible to decide whether pleasure is a concomitant of meaning or vice versa; and where it is all but impossible to decide what criticism is for.

Maximalism vs Minimalism?

> There are the minimalist pleasures of Emily Dickinson—"Zero at the Bone"—and the maximalist ones of Walt Whitman.
>
> —John Barth

Was the maximalist potential of the Big Note for Zappa a way of defying generic categories in order to avoid being pigeonholed as either a

classical or a rock musician? Of defeating the expectations of both rock and classical listeners by breaking down the barriers separating low and high art forms? Of creating a multidimensional art project that is no longer subject to such distinctions? Of filling the empty space of the Mojave desert of his youth with "imaginary guitar notes that would irritate an executive kind of a guy"?[4] Of composing an œuvre which seems *as big as* his century? Of doing justice to a world in which "time is a constant, a spherical constant" and "EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING *ALL THE TIME*" (*Them* 62)? Or of cheating closure and death through a creative application of Stephen Hawking's "no-boundary proposal", the notion that the universe has neither singular beginning nor ultimate end (Zappa dedicated *The Real Frank Zappa Book* to the author of *A Brief History of Time*)?

Certainly one of the difficulties in dealing with Zappa's (or anybody elses's) maximalist art arises from the lack of serious attention to the development of maximalist aesthetics itself. That the history of maximalism in the arts is the *parent pauvre* of contemporary criticism is already indicated by the fact that the term is systematically absent from all lexicons of literary terms and, indeed, most discussions of contemporary music except when it refers to Milton Babbitt's "maximal" extension of Schoenberg's ideas of serial composition or, more rarely and even more loosely, to the "New Complexity" school of Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy. One of the rare exceptions to the rule comes from the American novelist John Barth, who in an article first published in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1986, offers the following definition of literary maximalism:

> The medieval Roman Catholic Church recognized two opposite roads to grace: the via negativa of the monk's cell and the hermit's cave, and the *via affirmativa* of immersion in human affairs, of being in the world whether or not one is of it. Critics have aptly borrowed those terms to characterize the difference between Mr. Beckett, for example, and his erstwhile master James Joyce, himself a maximalist except in his early works. Other than bone—deep disposition, which is no doubt the great determinant, what inclines a writer—sometimes almost a cultural generation of writers—to the Negational Path?
>
> (1)

For Barth, the distance that separates Joyce from Beckett (or Whitman from Dickinson, or Faulkner from Hemingway), cannot be

reduced to an aesthetic option (the desire to embrace richness and completeness, on the one hand, or aim for precision and brevity, on the other), but is immediately translated into social terms. Barth opposes maximalist fiction to the so-called "New American Short Story" of the early 1980s, a tendency represented by Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason and others who are "both praised and damned under such labels as 'K-Mart realism,' 'hick chic,' 'Diet-Pepsi minimalism' and 'post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism'". The collusion of style and politics in minimalist fiction echoes a number of similar accusations made against postmodern art in general, whose success story has been linked with the expansion of capitalist hegemony. For Fredric Jameson, for example, this tendency reaches a climax in Andy Warhol's work which, far from parodying commercial culture in a "modernist" (e.g. Joycean) fashion, incorporates it into its very substance, thereby abolishing the critical distance that separates artists from their socio-economic environment.[5] The total interpenetration of aesthetic and commodity production is indeed the logical result of the gradual process of "immersion in human affairs" brought about by Barth's *via affirmativa*. Another critic of postmodernism, Takayoshi Ishiwari, believes that the "style which is broadly called maximalism" is characterized not only by a tendency to embrace the time's modes and conventions but also by a typically pomo attitude to the notion of the "authentic":

> Under this label come such writers as, among others, Thomas Pynchon and Barth himself, whose bulky books are in marked contrast with Barthelme's relatively thin novels and collections of short stories. These maximalists are called by such an epithet because they, situated in the age of epistemological uncertainty and therefore knowing that they can never know what is authentic and inauthentic, attempt to include in their fiction everything belonging to that age, to take these authentic and inauthentic things as they are with all their uncertainty and inauthenticity included; their work intends to contain the maximum of the age, in other words, to be the age itself, and because of this their novels are often encyclopedic. As Tom LeClair argues in *The Art of Excess*, the authors of these "masterworks" even "gather, represent, and reform the time's excesses into fictions that exceed the time's literary conventions and thereby master the time, the methods of fiction, and the reader."
>
> (1)

Zappa's ambition "to be the age itself" clearly manifests itself in his penchant for works that seek to incorporate—albeit in a frequently iron-

ical fashion—nearly all existing musical genres and modes, from blues-rock and doo-wop to *musique concrète*, free jazz and symphonic orchestral works. And Tom LeClair's definition of maximalism as an art that exceeds its own historical context and represents more than the sum of all past and present compositional styles would seem perfectly suited to the development of Zappa's aesthetics. But we will see that the impact of maximalism on contemporary art cannot be reduced to the decision of what to include or exclude in a literary text or musical score or even to the rather dubious notion that such a decision should be dictated by a Baudrillardian sense of "epistemological uncertainty." Zappa's disdain for accepted distinctions between the "authentic" and the "inauthentic," high and low art, as well as other aesthetic and generic hierarchies, is in fact only one aspect of his commitment to the *via affirmativa* of contemporary music, one which allies him with other musical eccentrics such as Charles Ives—who was among the first to integrate elements of "low" music (gospel hymns, jazz, fanfare) into classical/orchestral music—and Zappa's self-confessed master Edgar Varèse, with whom he shares not only an interest in bruitism, tape music and percussion-based orchestral pieces but also a penchant for gigantic compositional structures that exceed traditional performance formats (Varèse used 400 speakers to perform his "Poème électronique" at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair).

Does the Body Belong in Music?

According to David Jaffe, one of the very few composers to address the development of a "maximalist" *musical* style, the maximalist approach in contemporary music "embraces heterogeneity and allows for complex systems of juxtapositions and collisions, in which all outside influences are viewed as potential raw material." The example of Charles Ives once again comes to mind and Zappa's tribute to Ives in the fifth box set of the *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore* series confirms his early interest in his predecessor's use of "multiple colliding themes" (*Real* 167) and fragments of (sometimes distorted) melodies, a technique emulated in Zappa's "Call Any Vegetable" which, like many of Ives' compositions, seeks to convey "the musical illusion of several marching bands marching through each other":

> In our low-rent version, the band splits into three parts, playing "The Star-

> Spangled Banner," "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful" all at the same time, yielding an amateur version of an Ives collision.
>
> (*Real* 167)

Ben Watson rightly underlines the historical significance of Ives's "simultaneous musics" as probably one of the first instances of pre-digital "xenochrony" and points out that "while a boy [Ives] would sing one hymn while his father played the accompaniment to a different one" (358). For readers familiar with the aural collages of Zappa's *Freak Out* and *Absolutely Free*, Zappa's delight in merging fundamentally incompatible materials and rhythms cannot be considered as a simple manifestation of the modernist cult of irony or its hypothetical extension into postmodern eclecticism, quotation and pastiche. Rather, the satirical spirit of Zappa's xenochronic experiments originates in what Amiri Baraka describes as Coltrane's decision to "murder the popular song" and "do away with weak Western forms" (quoted in Harris 174). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the doo-wop sendups collected in *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets* (1968), which Zappa claimed to have conceived "along the same lines as Stravinsky's neoclassical period" ("If he could take the forms and clichés of the classical era and pervert them, why not do the same thing with the rules and regulations that applied to doowop in the fifties?" [*Real* 88]).[6]

As indicated by both Baraka's comments on Coltrane and Barth's description of the K-Mart aesthetics of the New American Short Story, the maximalist vs. minimalist axis inevitably invites a political reading. In another chapter of his *Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, Ben Watson discusses the work of the feminist critic Susan McClary, for whom Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique is the expression of an "asexual" musical language that puts an end to the binarisms (major/minor, masculine/feminine) around which sexism articulates itself. McClary claims that minimalist music, being based on repetition-with-variation and therefore deprived of the sexual climaxes of, say, Beethoven's Ninth or Bizet's *Carmen*, simultaneously undermines the supremacy of the male models of phallic telos and verticality that characterizes a sexist culture. Compared with the soothing sounds of Brian Eno's *Music for Airports*, Zappa's "The Torture Never Stops" would no doubt be condemned by McClary as too sensual and orgasmic to qualify as anything other than an expression of the male libidinal self. Whatever one makes of McClary's suggestion that female sexuality is fundamentally anti-climactic, it would be pointless to try and defend Zappa from accusations of sexism or even deny that his music and lyrics derive

much of their energy from the representation (or shameless endorsement) of popular archetypes of masculine domination, rawness and obscenity. But Zappa's own remarks about minimalism indicate his desire to shift the debate from the domain of sexual politics to more largely political and economic matters. Reflecting on the popularity of minimalist music with established critics and foundations, Zappa suggests that minimalism arose out of the necessity of being cost-effective (in the same way as, for instance, the success story of the "theater of the absurd" format is at least in part due to the fact that it lends itself to low-budget productions requiring only two or three actors and very few additional staging costs):

> . . . it used to be that they would fund only *boob-beep* stuff (serial and/or electronic composition). Now they're funding only *minimalism* (simplistic, repetitive composition, easy to rehearse and, therefore, *cost-effective*). So what gets taught in school? *Minimalism*. Why? Because it can be FUNDED. Net cultural result? Monochromonotony.
>
> (*Real* 189)

Ironically enough, the only work by Zappa which could conceivably be described as possessing certain minimalist features is his last masterpiece, *Civilization Phaze III*, a Synclavier-based opera derived from "a vague plot regarding pigs and ponies, threatening the lives of characters who inhabit a large piano" and incorporating various fragments of spoken material, some of which dates back to the recording sessions of *Lumpy Gravy* in 1967. Here, Zappa's attention to the physicality of sound once again manifests itself in the music performed by the "ponies" who make music "with a very dense light" ("How the Pigs' Music Works"). Zappa's use of space and silences in such pieces as "N-Lite" or "Beat the Reaper" represents a break from his earlier works and even led Ben Watson to suggest some connection with New Age music in his last interview with the composer:

> OTL: I noticed certain "new age" sounds in the music that preceded "Beat the Reaper" on disc two of *Civilization Phaze III*—surely you're joking?
> FZ: What's a "new age" sound?
> OTL: Sounds I associate with new-age music—shakuhachi or some kind of flute . . .
> FZ: Mmm. [Affirmative grunt]
> OTL: . . . and the throat-singing—quite atmospheric sounds. I was quite surprised to hear you use them. Normally . . .
> FZ: Normally in new-age material there is no hint of dissonance, so no

> matter what you're orchestrating it with, the fact that you're not dealing with lush triads would set it apart anyway. The only thing it has in common with new age music is that the chords are held a very long time, but you couldn't go out and get a new age record contract with that tune, because there's too much going on in it.
>
> (548)

Characteristically, Zappa uses a pro-maximalist argument ("there is too much going on in it") to defend himself from allegations of derivativeness and distance himself from a musical tradition which capitalizes on the soothing effects of repetition and endless atmospheric chords. The New Age sounds of *Civilization Phaze III* are only the tip of the iceberg of Zappa's preoccupation with the relationship between matter and sound, as well as a number of other questions related to those which have occupied the mind of Stephen Hawking and other contemporary physicists. Among these, the notion of infiniteness and finitude in both extent and content figures prominently. Where does a sound-wave or a movement begin and where does it end? Was it determined by chance or by a set of rules and equations designed by the composer? What is the relationship between time and space and how does a sound exist in space as well as time?

In this sense, *Civilization Phaze III* (1994) is perhaps the ultimate example of Zappa's maximalist-objectist aesthetics as well as a climax in the development of his materialist-objectist musicosm(icomic)ology. It can also be seen as the last of Zappa's xenochronic experiments in that it alternates Synclavier pieces with spoken word fragments recorded over a period of more than 25 years. Whereas the short bits of conversation sandwiched between the instrumental pieces returns us to the collage techniques of *Uncle Meat* and *Lumpy Gravy* (Zappa had originally meant the album to be titled "*Lumpy Gravy* Part II"), the compositions themselves create a space in which the sound environment becomes a living structure that expands along the lines of an (anti-)method best described by the composer himself as "AAAFNRAA"—an acronym for "Anything, Anytime, Anyplace For No Reason At All". The "plot continuity" of the work, Zappa argues, is derived from a serial rotation of randomly chosen words, phrases and concepts, including (but not limited to) *motors*, *pigs*, *ponies*, *dark water*, *nationalism*, *smoke*, *music*, *beer*, and various forms of *personal isolation*" (sleeve notes 3), a description which evokes the aesthetics of *Uncle Meat* (1969), where "the words to the songs on this album were scientifically prepared from a random series of syllables, dreams, neuroses & private jokes that nobody except the

members of the band ever laugh at, and other irrelevant material. They are all very serious and loaded with secret underground candy-rock psychedelic profundities."

The liner notes estimate that 30% of the music of *Civilization Phaze III* was played by the Ensemble Modern who, Zappa claimed, was meant to beat what Stockhausen called "the lazy dogma of impossibility" by performing the most complex, "unplayable" music he ever produced (Menn 44). Whereas "Dio Fa" incorporates sounds created by Tuvan Throat Singers, and "N-Lite" contains piano parts which were played by Zappa himself, the bruitist "Waffenspiel" features the sounds produced by construction workers as Zappa's kitchen was being remodeled, the sound of barking dogs, automobile noises as well as sounds of semi-automatic weapon fire reportedly sampled from CNN newsreels. With its emphasis on the dialectics of the gestural and the mechanical, *Civilization Phaze III* confirms Zappa's attraction to Hawking's no-boundary proposal. Listeners, who are deprived of the irrevocable illusion of "real time"—which gives us the sense that we can grasp the singular reality of sounds and objects, that they can be traced to their sources—find themselves in the position of the post-quantum physicist confronted with the impossibility of determining both the velocity and the position of any given particle. They are forced to resist the illusion that turns the musical object into an objective fact liable to be enjoyed and consumed passively and uncritically. The enjoyement of Zappa's *Civilization Phaze III* is subject to a similar principle of radical uncertainty, one which is further emphasized in the second CD, where it is often hard to distinguish between the sounds that are computer-generated and those which are performed by the Ensemble Modern. Such a radical blurring of the boundaries between different states of the physicality of sound creates a space for the creative transformation of musical matter into a physical experience which resists analytical thought, accentuating its flight into abstraction and the void. The general body of the piece will only materialize for those who allow themselves to explore the most improbable reaches of sonic physicality.

This is not to suggest that Zappa's *Civilization Phaze III* is the only example of such a radical use of musical materiality. A maximalist alternative to Eno's "Music for Airports", Anthony Braxton's *Composition No-173* (1996), a "one act play" for "4 actors, 14 instrumentalists, constructed environment and video projections", is a structuralist speculative opera based on a series of dialogues taking place in an airport, "a kind of orange-like luminous state area-space" containing four giant

video screens that give off "'image motion' projections and moving shadows", a circular table and four white chairs around which four people are seated, examining various maps including a large one that "almost covers the whole table but doesn't". Like Zappa's, Braxton's sounds "have a sense of humour":

> One can make you jiggle over to the left side of the room-space like a spinning top or something, or one can send out a smoke-trail of sonic imprint flashes that dart up and down the ceiling of the event-space. It's a kind of action-experience thing.
>
> (liner notes; unpag.)

Like Zappa's "Black Page" or Satie's fruit-shaped *divertissements*, Braxton's composition not only incorporates visual signs into his musical performance but also builds upon the visual potential of the material signs to create "different imaginary sound occurrences" (one also thinks of the "imaginary guitar notes" and air sculptures of *Joe's Garage*) liable to effect psychological changes in the actors and their audience. Braxton attempts to create an "animate-experience" born out of a synaesthetic awareness of the interaction of space, sound and image. His characters spend most of their time trying to "map" their environement and make sense of the strange sounds that swoop around them, bouncing on and off the stage and occasionally trying to come into their bodies causing them to check their "body-areas" for signs of physical alteration. They also try to create or represent new sounds by tracing their "physical" trajectories with their hands. The patterns of recognition vary according to the reactions of the four characters–one of them thus points at a sound which has just "landed" at his feet and speaks of a "'sponge-like' sonic garden" while another one immediately proceeds to formulate a "kind of sound that sinks in under the fireplace (light)". A third actor, using a typically Zappaian vocabulary, is more interested in the material texture of sound and seeks to identify a "kind of sound that sneaks up behind the lumpy area in the 'shade area'". A little earlier in the play, the "air sculpture" postulated the existence of a "creamy sound texture that blended into a ray of pulsing light—flashes (like at the Vegas floor show spectacles)". Braxton's synaesthetic *art total* reminds one of *Lumpy Gravy*, of course, but also of the "hot and putrid" sound and the pigs making music "with a very dense light" on *Civilization Phaze III*, which was originally envisioned as a theatrical production which was to be adapted and produced by Matt Groening and choreographer Jamey Hampton (of the ISO dance troupe). Zappa's

description of the work, in the liner notes to the album, as "an opera-pantomime, with choreographed physical activity (manifested as dance or other forms of inexplicable sociophysical communication)" (3) confirms both his growing interest in making the body an integral part of his compositions and his attraction to the idea of a maximalist *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would trascend traditional genre boundaries and constitute an alliance of music, poetry, the visual arts and dance.

The closing chapter of *The Real Frank Zappa Book* establishes Zappa's status as the Mark Twain of American music, a man whose variety of occupation—as a composer, producer, businessman, social satirist, politician, writer, publisher, and inventor—is perhaps best illustrated by what he calls his "own personal collection of crumbled dreams" (*Real* 333), a series of extra-musical projects he sought to develop in the early 1980s and which range from a late-night adult program called "Night School" (340) to a cable network broadcasting 3–D movies (334) and a proposal to replace traditional record merchandising with a system allowing music consumers to access digital files by phone or via cable TV.

It is hard to imagine what kind of turn Zappa's career would have taken had it not been brought to an end by his untimely death. But one is tempted to believe that he would have given up on touring altogether and devoted himself to his orchestral and Synclavier-generated compositions. The notion of a maximalist *spectacle total* was becoming dear to his heart in the last years of his life, as attested to not only by the projected performances of *Civilization Phaze III* in various European theaters, but also by the "Proposal for a World Cup Football Opera" entitled *Dio Fa*, which Zappa claims to have presented to the Socialist Mayor of Milan in 1988 in advance of the World Cup Football Finals in the Summer of 1990 (*Real* 343).

Baby Take Your Teeth Out

the swollen lips from where
she munched them down
to the strawberry roots
when the bottles ran out
stupid voice tries to sing

stupid feeling for everything
irritation: pond—leg—pond—leg—pond—leg
—Andrew Norris. Recorded by
The Wrong Object as "Cunnimingus"

Like marron-glaced fish bones
Oh lady hit the road!
—King Crimson, "Ladies of the Road"

Baby take your teeth out
Try it one time
Baby take your teeth out
Try it one time
Leave 'em on the kitchen table
—Frank Zappa, "Baby take Your Teeth Out"

The synaesthetic dynamics of *Civilization Phaze III* are only one example of how Zappa's relationship with the perceiving/thinking/functioning body reflects the true essence of his maximalism. More generally, the examples discussed in the following chapters indicate that the body imposes itself as the essential receiver and be-all-and-end-all transformer of maximalist art. This, incidentally, is by no means a contemporary, or even a modern, phenomenon. The best-known maximalist artist of the Renaissance, François Rabelais, had already understood that only an aesthetics of corpo-reality is liable to multiply the vectors of perception while allowing the body to become its own food for conceptual thought and artistic experimentation. For Rabelais, maximalism allies itself with the grotesque through the essential component of bodily excesses. As Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, the carnivalesque insistence on bodily functions and the liberation of instinct, far from being degrading, is meant to express the vital energies of mankind. Indeed, Rabelais's "grotesque realism" has a regenerative effect as the reduction of all aspects of human life to primary bodily functions "digs a bodily grave for a new birth," conceiving of new possibilities arising from the body's nether regions.

The profusion of grotesque and abstract(ed) bodies and body parts in the works of Frank Zappa and his old friend and occasional collaborator Don Van Vliet (aka Captain Beefheart)—from the latter's *Trout Mask Replica* to the exaggerated, phallic noses that appear on the cover of *Ruben and the Jets*[7]—represents "the epitome of incompleteness" (Bakhtin

26), an unfinished unit transgressing its own limits through eating, excretion and sexuality. The stress, therefore, is on the excesses and potentialities of its orifices, "on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose." This "unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born)," Bakhtin adds, "is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects" (26–27). Zappa's and Beefheart's lyrics are full of similar images of bodies coming out of themselves to meet the world of animal and objectist reality. The point where body and things enter each other (literally or figuratively) is where the unfinished chain of growth, proliferation and metamorphosis comes to represent the whole potential of the integrated body, the body emptying itself to become like nothing and preparing itself to go out and m-eat the world again, devouring the universe and being devoured by it.

Rabelais' poetics of degradation, with its focus on food, drink, digestion and sexual life, clearly anticipates Zappa's own "carnivalesque" compositions. These also enact the peculiar logic of the inside-out explored in Chapter Four, shifting accepted models from top to bottom, front to rear and delighting in imagining a new musical space in which inside and outside are one. According to such a totalizing/maximalist notion of art production (and consumption), scatological jokes become one of the prime movers of artistic creation itself. When Gargantua almost gets expelled from his mother's loins during a fit of diarrhoea, Rabelais establishes a symbolic link between the digestive cycle and the act of giving birth to a new human being, or a work of art—artistic fertility and peristaltics go hand in hand, so to speak. The following chapters will show that Zappa, like Rabelais (and Swift), does not shy away from describing fantasies of infantile regression (see our readings of "Lost in a Whirlpool" and "Let's Make the Water Turn Black" in Chapter Three) and puts them to the service of a popular art that delights in imagining how the most banal situations can degenerate into absurdist extremes. In "For Calvin (And His Next Two Hitch-Hikers)" (*The Grand Wazoo*), a song about back-seat fucking and eating, punning on the various meanings of the word "leakage", this absurdist logic typically takes us in the direction of abstract connections between sex and food:

> Where did they go?
> When did they come from?

What has become of them now?
How much was the leakage
From the drain in the night
And who are those dudes in the
Back seat of Calvin's car?
Where did they go?
When they got off the car?
Did they go get a sandwich
And eat in the dark?

The examples discussed below suggest that Zappa's irreverent humor revels in all things related to the body, from eating, farting and belching to defecation, laughing, dancing and masturbation. Scatology imposes itself as an important strategy, one of the most common manifestations of the conjunction of diet and discourse (one thinks, for example, of the Chaucerian farting devil of "Titties and Beer" or the poo-poo jokes of the "Illinois Enema Bandit") at the same time as it invigorates Zappa's satirical spirit. ("Satire is traditionally associated with filth, and the satirist is described as throwing turds and urine on those whom he ridicules. [Ehrenpreis 691]")

More generally, Zappa's treatment of the body confirms Bakhtin's dictum that "all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" (19). This principle extends of course to the representation of sexuality in both literature and music. The alliance of the grotesque and the obscene in Zappa's explicit lyrics (in 200 *Motels* and other socio-documentary materials of life-on-the-road, the word "ob-scene" can often be taken in its literal sense, of that which happens "behind the scenes") has often been seen as the expression of Zappa's radical politics. Still, it would be a mistake to reduce it to, say, Wilhelm Reich's famous assertion that fascism is an expression of man's "orgastic yearning, restricted by mystic distortion and inhibition of natural sexuality" (24). There are similarities between Reich's sex economy and Zappa's warnings against the dangers of an authoritarian and sexually repressed society (see our discussion of Zappa's and Anthony Braxton's "Enema Bandits" in Chapter One). But more often than not Zappa's explicit lyrics do not take us in the direction of social-psychological emancipation. Rather, they seek to develop abstract forms of sexual behavior that enact the gradual decontextualization and abstraction of body parts from their traditional functional uses.[8] In such songs as "Charlie's Enormous Mouth," "Cocaine Decisions" or "Your Mouth,"[9] the mouth and the teeth (to which a whole section of Chapter Two is devoted) as organs of

both speaking, eating and sexual intercourse, are often subjected to such a process of a physical decontextualization:

> Your mouth is your religion.
> You put your faith in a hole like that?
> You put your trust and your belief
> Above your jaw, and no relief
> Have I found.[10]

As the rest of this book will make clear, such a radical use of the grotesque indicates a tendency to move away from social and political satire per se. This tendency for the grotesque to drown or obscure the point of satire is well-attested:

> The grotesque artist exaggerates at first only for satirical purposes. But it is in the nature of this kind of powerful, extreme satire that its exaggerates burst through all limits. The grotesque satirist becomes intoxicated with its own creation. Gradually he loses sight of the satire. The exagerrations which he had at first unleashed in full awareness of their purpose become more and more wild, until they get out of hand, obliterating like a turbulent stream everything around them.
>
> (Thomson 42–43)

The opening section of this book will show that Zappa's and Don Van Vliet's use of the grotesque, the abject and the repellent (the fundamentals of post-Dada anti-totalitarian art) nonetheless lends itself to a political reading, one which is not geared towards practical changes (if one excepts, of course, Zappa's crusade against the PMRC campaign to label obscene lyrics) but seeks instead to create mediations between imaginary objects "liberated from the curse of being useful"[11] and abstract forms of behavior that put degenerate art to the service of an aesthetics that follows Kundera's recognition that beauty and harmony are first and foremost a political lie.

At this point, one is led to consider the ways in which Zappa used his own body as a stage on which to perform further practical eccentricities. The liner notes to the first album of the Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out*, set the tone for the first few years of his career, a period characterized by his satire of teenage America and in which the group tended to present themselves as disgusting and revolting "freaks". At the time, the phrasal verb "to *Freak Out*" was itself described as "a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricing standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his

immediate environment":

> These Mothers are crazy. You can tell by their clothes. One guy wears beads and they all smell bad. We were gonna get them for a dance after the basketball game but my best pal warned me you can never tell how many will show up . . . sometimes the guy in the fur coat doesn't show up and sometimes he does show up only he brings a big bunch of crazy people with him and they dance all over the place. None of the kids at my school like these Mothers . . . specially since my teacher told us what the words to their songs meant.
>
> Frank Zappa is the leader and musical director of THE MOTHERS of invention. His performances in person with the group are rare. His personality is so repellent that it's best he stay away . . . for the sake of impressionable young minds who might not be prepared to cope with him. When he does show up he performs on the guitar. Sometimes he sings. Sometimes he talks to the audience. Sometimes there is trouble.
>
> (liner notes; unpag.)

From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, Zappa systematically opted for an aesthetics of abjection, forcing his audience to contemplate (or imagine) the most degenerate parts of the human body ("Stink Foot", "What's the Ugliest Part of Your Body"). Zappa's use of the abject, in this respect, clearly allies him with the spirit of Dada. His 1967 revue entitled "Pigs and Repugnant", to cite but one example, deliberately used the shock tactics of the avant-garde. In the years that followed, Zappa acquired a reputation for obscenity and the rumor spread that he went as far as defecating on stage and eating the turd. Zappa later denied these rumours, but he nonetheless posed for the now famous "Phi Beta Krappa" poster.

In his later works, Zappa's relationship with his own body became more and more ambiguous. The mid-1970s, in particular, saw the construction of a more explicitly sexual persona. In those days, Zappa frequently appeared on stage with straggly hair, wearing tight trousers and an open shirt revealing the hairy chest of a glamorous demon-lover, a public image reinforced by his growing reputation as a guitar hero. An extreme example of this change can be found in the bold, phallic exhibitionism of *Zoot Allures*, whose cover, conceptualized by Cal Schenkel, features Zappa with his long untidy mane of thick dark hair and his skintight narrow hipped white jeans revealing a bulging crotch, perhaps intended as an ironic response to the rather feeble penis joke perpetrated a few years earlier by Andy Warhol on the cover of the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*.

This sexualized period, during which Zappa even appeared on the cover of *Vogue*, came to an end in the early eighties. At this time he began to adopt a more sober style which culminated in the classical, posh-looking cover portrait of *Jazz from Hell* and his numerous appearances on TV, not as a musician but as a defender of the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution and an opponent of the PMRC campaign. The last major modification in Zappa's appearance was brought on by his last illness which eventually conferred to him, on the front cover of *The Yellow Shark* (1993), the timeless, mortified solemnity of David's dying Seneca.[12]

That Blues Thing: Enter Captain Beefheart

When Frank Zappa and Don Van Vliet sat around after school eating pineapple buns (from the remains of Mr Vliet senior's bread round) and listening to rhythm and blues records, they were indulging in an early form of maximalist synaesthesia, performing the basic tenets of an aesthetic philosophy and way of life which was, at various points throughout the next thirty years, to unite and divide their parallel careers as American maverick artists: buns and blues, the listening body eating, this was an auspicious beginning.

Van Vliet was one of Zappa's earliest and most significant collaborators who eagerly assisted in the forging of links between discourses of bodily experience and music-making; along with Motorhead Sherwood and Ray Collins, he was a key figure in the conversion of teenage gross-out humour into an expanding aesthetic of the body's parts and processes. Zappa's account of the origin of the name "Captain Beefheart" captures the atmosphere of those formative years and illustrates how so much of what we analyse below can be traced back to the lewd anecdote or obscene gesture:

> Captain Beefheart was a character I invented for the film ["Captain Beefheart Versus the Grunt People"]. His name derives from one of Don Vliet's relatives who looked like Harry Truman. He used to piss with the door open when Don's girlfriend walked by and make comments about how his whizzer looked just like a beef heart.[13]

The vortex of Zappa's maximalism is a toilet, and here we see him seizing on a creative *détournement* of the human body: the penis becomes a heart, a conflation of two organs of love—the literal and the symbolic

are fused together in an anthropomorphic leap of imagination curiously prophetic of Van Vliet's later pictorial style with its Wellsian miscegenations. Artistic experiment is already inseparable from research into what the body can do physically, how it behaves socially, and how it can be manipulated aesthetically.

Van Vliet finally abandoned music for painting in 1982, and Captain Beefheart was no more. His recording career was characterised by an intermittent striving for an innovative rock-blues-jazz-avant-gardist *mélange* which would sing back to us in crazy voices from beyond the beat. In his assault on the "moma heartbeat" and the sedimentation of form and response it imposes, Van Vliet seemed to be working towards a maximalist enhancement of possibilities; and his efforts in this direction have proved very useful to us in our attempts to show how musical maximalism incorporates its opposite, and how the meeting of extremes more generally is one of the vital blowholes of maximalist art.

As a musician, Van Vliet lacked both the formal know-how of technique, and an interest in advanced musical technologies, and this may explain his unwillingness to extend the experiments he was making at the level of the group to the broader plane of conceptual and materialist manipulation, his failure to objectify his moments of transcendent insight into a Project/Object with a life of its own. Regularly, also, the Captain tried to conform to the norms of popular music, writing songs which seem to labour under a load of assumed sincerity while lending themselves to a perversely melancholic listening experience. Much of the *Unconditionally Guaranteed* album falls into this category (especially "Magic Bee" and "This is the Day"), together with the notorious "Too Much Time" from *Clear Spot* and the *Bluejeans and Moonbeams* album, where the Magic Band was replaced with the critically lambasted "Tragic Band". This hesitation between modes of creativity, together with his eventual selection of a neo-primitive abstract-expressionist aesthetic for his painting contrasts interestingly with Zappa's self-consuming commitment to the Big Note and its cosmic ramifications. And it is significant that Zappa's own attempts to write songs that could be played on the radio always contain elements of social and/or formal satire ("Bobby Brown", "Dancing Fool", "Valley Girl").

After his musical researches, where questions of sound and form were complicated by the struggles of individual and group, Van Vliet settled into a painting *style* which has achieved a traditional coherence (and a degree of international recognition to go with it) through the accumulation of signature effects from work to work. This kind of artis-

tic practice is diametrically opposed to the genre-leaping of Zappa, and its origins in the fraught abutments of collage.

In spite of these differences, many of Van Vliet's texts are thematically consistent with Zappa's concerns, and both hark back in various ways to the anti-art activities of Dada (perhaps the key maximalist movement of the modernist period):[14] Van Vliet drew on the paradox of ordered disorder exploited by Hugo Ball in his sound poetry, together with the "primitivism" of Tzara, rendered urgently audible in the free jazz of Ornette Coleman; while Zappa fell in love with the materiality of sound, and the theatrical extravagances of burlesque, key components in his self-recharging brand of social satire. While Van Vliet played with the paradox, evolving his own surrealist slant on those odd overdetermined objects so dear to Zappa, the latter branched out and out into parody, satire and beyond. Often, in Van Vliet's work, these objects are freakishly human, the Ant Man Bee, the Man With the Woman Head, Apes-Ma, The Human Totem Pole, and express his ludic approach to the lineaments of human being, a delight in monstrous combination and subtraction which has affinities with the gothic tradition and the uncanny stresses of the "is it or isn't it?" exploited in the art and literature of terror. Here again, Van Vliet seems to cross Zappa's maximalist trajectory, and we explore the double intersection of their work with the gothic tradition and some of its more recent avatars in Chapter Four.

Van Vliets's neo-primitivism proclaims itself through his interviews in the denial of all influence; a rhetorical move which is often coupled with an enthusiasm for the existential and ethical purity of animals. While Zappa could satirize the notion of natural being (and its racist overtones) in "You Are What You Is", Van Vliet seems to work within the tradition of the individual genius, whose every act is a work of art, the quality of which is directly related to the sincerity of the gesture. In this system, authenticity remains the final index of artistic value: If Picasso wanted to paint like a child, Van Vliet wants to paint like an animal. From the relativisng perspective of post-modernism, Van Vliet's stance might seem quaint or merely stubborn in its attachment to the mystique of essence, the "It" which the Beat generation venerated, that indefinable something which connects one to life and separates one from the mass of people who don't have or haven't found "It".[15] Whether or not Van Vliet had "it", he was at the very least capable of remarkable idiosyncrasy; and Zappa, who was equally disdainful of the cultish "it" and the dogma of cultural relativity which came to oppose

it, regularly sought to tap this source.

Even if finally not a maximalist himself, Van Vliet participates in and engenders a series of maximalist moments through his lyrics and musical ideas, his physical presence and bodily projections, his ego statements, and his shifts between the verbal, visual and sonic media. By examining some of these moments below, we hope to shed more light on Zappa's developing art and the key ideas of maximalism, and our essay will culminate with a comparative discussion of the two artists and their relationship to that vexed and faintly illicit subject—aesthetic pleasure.

Electric Carnival

Chapter Three discusses Zappa's and Beefheart's relationship with the blues in a way that continues to emphasize their poetics of the carnivalesque body. In his study of the blues and the vernacular stratum of American culture, Houston A. Baker, building upon Barthes' "zero degree writing" and Kristeva's discussion of Bakhtin in *Desire in Language*, writes of the social and political protest enacted by the "ambivalent word". In the fiction of Richard Wright and other African-American novelists, the ambivalent word (which is defined by Kristeva not just as an ambiguous utterance but as a word that is given a new meaning "while retaining the meaning it already had" and is therefore "the result of a joining of two sign systems" [216]) is reflected in a wealth of "obscenities, parodic utterances, inversive or ironical phrases [that] function as reductive junctures." Wright's use of carnivalesque, Baker concludes, reduces conventional language to "dialogical (two discourses 'yoked,' sometimes 'violently,' together) symbolic occasions." The result is "language of starting misalliances, sacreligious punnings, scandalous repudiations" (150).

As we have seen, Zappa's own work is often associated with ferocious attacks on both mainstream compositional strategies and conventional pop lyrics. As in the case of blues, the parodic and inversive power of his best lyrics provides us with a symbolic mode of processing the real that promotes semantic shifts and displacements which are rarely encountered on the rock scene. What makes Zappa's work interesting in this respect is perhaps not the postmodern *pasticcio* which is observable in, for instance, his Ivesian use of "multiple colliding themes" (*Real* 167) in "The Duke of Prunes"—where Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* floats into a

theme from the *Rite of Spring*—or in his striking cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze," in which the staccato lyricism of the original song is dismantled by the dry and cybernetic "Fake Devo texture" (166) of Zappa's impish arrangement. A similar, and arguably more powerful strategy, can be observed at the level of his use of language, as suggested by our reading of the song "Montana," discussed below in Chapter One, which confirms that the significance of fetishism, in Zappa's œuvre, lies in its capacity to de-code and redefine the parameters of language and the instrumental meanings of objects.

Houston Baker conceives of the blues as a "matrix," "a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (3). For Baker, the blues is the equivalent to Hegelian "force," "a relational matrix where *difference* is the law" and which, like electricity, is a "simple force . . . indifferent to its law—to be positive and negative." Once the instrumental energy of the blues is envisioned as such a force, Baker adds, it becomes a mediational site where "familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding" (6). One of the most common avatars of blues mediation is its capacity to "contain both lack and commercial possibility":

> The performance that sings of abysmal poverty and deprivation may be recompensed by sumptuous food and stimulating beverage at a country picnic, amorous favors from an attentive listener, enhanced Afro-American communality, or Yankee dollars from representatives of record companies traveling the South in search of blues as commodifiable entertainment. The performance, therefore, mediates one of the most prevalent of all antinomies in cultural investigation—creativity and commerce.
>
> (9)

The promise of material success and sexual gratification (humourously reduced by Zappa to "the blow job" effect in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*) has characterized the history of blues and rock music from their origins to the present. In the context of his relationship with the music industry, Zappa, who gradually worked his way from deep poverty to financial success, has always relied on the mediation of blues-rock performance and commodified entertainment to finance his most ambitious projects, resolving the familiar dualities of the music industry by mocking the absurd conventions of conventional rock while simultaneously thriving on the immediate impact of his parodic style on huge popular audiences.

On a superficial level, quoting a passage from "Petrushka" in the middle of a cheap, three-chord ballad ("Status Back Baby") or using a Varèsian siren as an introduction to the pounding jazz-rock riff on "Filthy Habits" certainly helps to efface the frontier between high art and so-called mass or commercial culture. But what redeems Zappa's eclecticism from, say, Fredric Jameson's postmodernism—with its insistence on the dissolution of subjective styles and the degeneration of parody into the "neutral" realm of pastiche—is his commitment to an aesthetics that refuses to limit itself to the anti-hierarchical dynamics of collage, hybridity and juxtaposition. By privileging the satiric impulse (the Latin word "satira" originally meant a "medley" or a kind of "mixed stew") and injecting the combining energies of rock, jazz and classical music into the very fabric of his compositions, Zappa refuses to indulge in the unironic "depthlessness" that, according to Jameson, characterizes much postmodernist art. Likewise, to reduce Zappa's genre-jumping and his continuous commitment to low art forms to a mere stylistic trick intended to help him court the popular-culture industry would be as naive as to suggest that musical dissonance and inacessibility are automatically concomitant with social and political emancipation. It would also be to ignore the importance of a work that finds its most powerful expression in the radical interplay of social, cultural and political influences that are held together by Zappa's use of various forms of "conceptual continuities," particularly as regards his use of the body as a key site of the uncontrollable and excessive in art production and consumption. Finally, Baker's understanding of the blues as a web of intersecting cultural impulses indifferent to familiar antinomies can help us make sense of the dynamics at work in a song like "Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch", where Zappa's soaring guitar solo interrupts a simplistic reggae riff and plunges listeners into a maelstrom of raw, convulsive energy which is informed as much by Hendrix as by Coltrane or Varèse's "blocks of sound". Once again, the significance of Zappa's soloing practice is indeed to be found not in the so-called postmodern pastiche that, as we know, supposedly bridges the gap between high and low, past and present styles, but, rather, in its complete disregard for such dichotomies.

Hegel's notion of electricity as a pure activity and process, a unifying force of social desire that abolishes the separation of form and content, Notion and Being, positivity and negativity, is also relevant to a close reading of Captain Beefheart's "Electricity", in which the Magic Band's electric instruments are both the ground and the medium of the

"truth" shouted "peacefully" by the thunderbolts described in the song. One of the lessons to be drawn from Hegel's definition is that the necessity of any existing fact or impulse is based on a force which is responsible for its immediate existence and manifest effects. In Beefheart's hymn to electricity, such a force is taken as a manifestation of social desire. Beefheart sings about love, friendship and mutual understanding, but the language of Van Vliet's "free-seeking electricity" is completely devoid of any sentimental content:

> Singin through you to me; thunderbolts caught easily
> Shouts the truth peacefully Eeeeeee-lec-tri-ci-teeeeeeee
> High voltage man kisses night to bring the light to those who need to hide their shadow deed
> Go into bright find the light and know that friends don't mind just how you grow
> midnight cowboy stains in black reads dark roads without a map
> To free-seeking electricity (repeat)
> Lighthouse beacon straight ahead straight ahead across black seas to bring
> Seeking eeee-lec-tri-ci-teeeee
> High voltage man kisses night to bring the light to those who need to hide their shadow-deed hide their shadow-deed (repeat)
> Seek electricity . . .

Van Vliet's refusal to treat emotion in terms of standard objects and relations is linked with a holistic vision of the real which posits the existence of a dynamic system of interrelationships that clearly exceeds the conventions of self-expressivity that govern the popular song. A song like "Electricity" helps explain why W. C. Bamberger has described Van Vliet as an Emersonian or "ecological" artist seeing his environment as "one network, or web, interdependent, with man no more important than any other element," a philosophy which becomes even more fully developed in Van Vliet's paintings of landscapes and animals (see the section on Van Vliet's environmentalism in Chapter Four).

As we will see, the ecological impulse that underlies Van Vliet's lyrics is inextricably linked with his gothic imagination. Like Big Joan, who pull[s] up her blouse and compare[s] her navel to the moon," the narrator of "Frownland" asserts his feeling of oneness with the natural world. His spirit is "made up of the ocean / and the sky 'n the sun 'n the moon", and cannot be contained by the world of "gloom", shadows and lies represented by "Frownland" (*Trout Mask Replica*). He aspires to a place

"where uh man can stand by another man / Without an ego flying: With no man lyin' / 'n no one dying by an earthly hand". Many of Van Vliet's poetic personae seem to strive for such an unalienated setting which allows for disinterested cooperation, human solidarity and self-determination. In "When Big Joan Sets Up" (*Trout Mask Replica*), for example, the overweight couple's decision to retreat from the world because of their eccentric appearance recalls countless other stories of human freaks who, like Victor Frankenstein's monster (and, before that, Milton's Adam), are "promoted from darkness" to an existence of fear and pain; wretched creatures thrown into being, rejected by the community and condemned to a life of darkness and loneliness. In Beefheart's more optimistic reworking of the traditional gothic plot, Big Joan finds herself a mate and the tacit understanding that unites the two lovers brings the song to a happy conclusion. Later in the album, the seriousness of intent of Van Vliet's political gothic gives way to more visionary pieces such as "Dachau Blues" (discussed in Chapter Three) or "Bill's Corpse", whose quaint Poesque diction is nicely deflated by Beefheart's more habitual blues idiom:

> Quietly the rain played down on the last of the ashes
> Quietly the light played down on her lashes
> She smiled 'n twisted she smiled 'n twisted
> Hideously looking back at what once was beautiful
> Playing naturally magically
> O' her ragged hair was shinin' red white 'n blue
> All 'n the children screamin'
> Why surely madam you must be dreamin'
> You couldn't have done this if you knew what you were doin'

In a frozen tableau which evokes the aestheticized, cold-blooded violence of Browning's "Porphyria's Lover", the lady who has apparently just murdered her lover remains unimpressed by the children's screaming while the rain is "playing naturally magically" with her perception of the scene. Like the narrator describing the oriole singing "like an orange / His breast full of worms" in "Orange Claw Hammer" (*Trout Mask Replica*), she is confronted with the revelation that, to quote Hélène Cixous, "there is a bit too much death in life, a bit too much life in death" (Gelder 44)—in this respect, her tragic recognition of the dialectics of the hideous and the beautiful is perhaps the cause of her enigmatic, twisted smile. Her ragged hair "shinin' red and white 'n blue" recalls Beefheart's painting technique and his penchant for unaldulter-

ated, primal colors. The song ends with an urgent plea that the fallen lady should "have us all" and "have us fall". We can only guess at the meaning of this final secular prayer but the implication seems to be that the Frownland people, who can only get together "not in love but shameful grief", will never build a true community of souls but that a relationship based on fear, grief, and mistrust may be better than no relationship at all.

Along similar lines, "The Thousandth and Tenth Day of the Human Pole" (*Ice Cream for Crow*) sounds like a warning against the lack of communal consciousness that prevents human beings from cooperating in the face of a hostile environment. A Tower of Babel made of flesh and bone, the human totem stands as a metaphor for a society defeated by its own aspirations to freedom and transcendence and relying too much on abstract and devalued ideals of autonomy and progress; the appearance of the "small child / with statue of liberty doll" at the end of the song will not keep the human pyramid from crumbling down. The reference to the "integrated pole" also makes Beefheart's song stand as an open-ended parable on US racial politics:

> The thousandth and tenth day of the human totem pole.
> The morning was distemper grey,
> Of the thousandth and tenth day of the human totem pole.
> The man at the bottom was smiling.
> He had just finished his breakfast smiling.
> It hadn't rained or manured for over two hours.
> The man at the top was starving.
> The pole was a horrible looking thing
> With all of those eyes and ears
> And waving hands for balance.
> There was no way to get a copter in close
> So everybody was starving together.
> The man at the top had long ago given up
> But didn't have nerve enough to climb down.
> At night the pole would talk to itself and the chatter wasn't too good.
> Obviously the pole didn't like itself, it wanted to walk!
> It was the summer and it was hot
> And balance wouldn't permit skinning to undergarments.
> It was an integrated pole, it was taking on an reddish brown cast.
> Exercise on the pole was isometric,
> Kind of a flex and then balance
> Then the highest would roll together,
> The ears wiggle, hands balance.
> There was a gurgling and googling heard

A tenth of the way up the pole.
Approaching was a small child
With Statue of Liberty doll.

Van Vliet's imaginary scenarios of spiritual emancipation often take the form of paroxysmal visions which are less a symptom of the psychic disintegration of the self than a consequence of the desire to lose one's attachment to oneself and reach for a higher plane of consciousness. For Beefheart, sex, violence and death are not merely agents of libidinal release but experiences which purport to transcend the boundaries of selfhood. Since such an escape from the self and the advent of a communal consciousness seem doomed to failure by the lack of honesty and stability of ordinary human relationships, it is only through the liminal experiences of (weird) sex ("White Jam" [*Spotlight Kid*], "Neon Meate Dream of a Octafish" [*Trout Mask Replica*]), death and rebirth ("Fallin' Ditch", "The Dust Blows Forward 'n the Dust Blows back" [*Trout Mask Replica*]) that they begin to realize their fantasies of wholeness. Among such fantasies of psychic integration, the dream of being one with nature figures prominently, as does that of approximating the mythic plenitude of the real or imaginary "homeland" of infancy. Repressed infantile complexes abound in Van Vliet's lyrics throughout the 1970s as, for instance, in "Doctor Dark" (*Lick my Decals Off*), where, in an interesting reversal of the bogeyman story, the naughty child is anxiously waiting to be carried off by a mysterious dark stranger:

Mama, mama, here come Doctor Dark
Horse clippin, clappin' 'n his ol' hooves makin' sparks
Gotta git me who I want to

The Freudian psychodrama of "When I see mommy, I feel like a mummy" (*Shiny Beast*) enacts the coincidence of incestuous, scopophiliac and necrophiliac urges. In a Poesque narrative of emotional dispossession, the desire for union and oneness symbolized by the mother gives way to a desire to preserve the physical integrity of the body. But the mother's body remains undescribed or invisible, it escapes into vapor and mirage. In a typically gothic fashion, the fear of death and decay leads to murder: the impossible object of desire has to be obliterated or wrapped away in order to be controlled and fully (re)possessed. The final stage of such radical, narcissistic fetishism is here represented as a symptom of the fear and loathing created by the specular realm of fantasies that infect the mind of the "Mirror Man":

oh woe—when I see mommy
I feel like a mummy
gonna wrap her up
every time I see her
I want to grab her
pull her up to me
till I look through her
but she moves so fast
that I can't even see her
her interest fades
like breath on a mirror
every time I see her
I try to grab her
and the wind from my hand
blows away like a feather
every time I grab her
oh—when I see mommy
I feel like a mummy
gonna wrap her up
next time I see her
I'm gonna seize her
then I'm gonna freeze her
it's the only way
that I might get to see her
gonna wrap her up—oh, mommy

In "When I see Mummy . . . ", as elsewhere, Van Vliet's gothic romanticism has its origins in wonder and mystery, the essence of his poetry lying in the sense of something hidden, of something about to be revealed by the power of the poet's painterly imagination and its dedication to the dialectics of fear and attraction, pleasure and disgust. His lyrics are peopled with otherworldly hybrids of meat, blood and hair, fraught with unknown (perhaps best unexplained?) significances of what the "dark" powers of the subconscious mind force us to do or think. In many ways, Van Vliet's use of the conventional paraphernalia of Romantic poetry (dark nights, moonlight, dreams, desolate and dreary landscapes, madness, incest, . . .) is simultaneously regressive and progressive as it seeks to bring back a mythic past at the same time as it strives to correct the energies of a culture dominated by greed and hypocrisy and stimulate psychological changes that would lead to the emergence of a new sensibility based on a renewed attention to the mystery of natural forces. Suspended between nothingness and infinity, the unnamable and the formless, Beefheart's poetic personae enter a sleepy region where their own troubled dreams take us to the source of

the sublime:

My life ran through my veins
Whistlin' hollow well
I froze in solid motion well well
I heard the ocean swarmin' body well well
I heard the beetle clickin' well
I sensed the thickest silence scream
Then I begin t' dream

Your Mouth

Ugly is bad
And bad is wrong
And wrong is sinful
And sin leads to eternal damnation

–Frank Zappa, "I'm So Cute" (*Sheik Yerbouti*)

The first chapter of this essay concentrates on Zappa's use of foodstuffs as one of the foundational materials of his art. The convergence of food and performance is of course not new, and the Italian Futurists, to cite but one example, prefigured the creations of performance artists such as Alicia Rios and Janine Antoni[16] by subscribing to Marinetti's famous dictum, "the distinction of the senses is arbitrary," which signalled the advent of a new maximalist (syn-)aesthetic promoting the dissociation of food from eating and encouraging the transformation of the gastronomic into the theatrical. The Futurists' "Manifesto on Tactilism" (1921) introduced many synaesthetic experiments meant to maximalize the combination of sense experiences. These experiments included such idiosyncratic happenings as "Tactile Dinner Parties" and "Polyrhythmic salads" which were to be manipulated and consumed while listening to music and smelling natural essences. The Futurists' "extremist banquet" featured many such culinary events separating food from its use-value and turning it into an aesthetic fetish whose main purpose was to teach Marinetti's contemporaries how "to distinguish between things which serve to please the stomach and those destined to delight the eyes" (Marinetti 95).

Zappa's own oeuvre—which takes us from the Futurists' "Steel Chicken" (whose body was "mechanized by aluminium-coloured bonbons" [Marinetti 89]) to the rubber penis-measuring chicken of "Tengo Na Minchia Tanta" (*Uncle Meat*) — tends to externalize actions which are usually kept inside the body, or relegated to the margins of

art history. His use of offensive and obscene materials, in particular, opens up a space where further dissociations (between food and eating, sex and sexuality, life and art, etc.) produce disorders and interferences that bypass or short-circuit traditional modes of art production and consumption.

By reconciling the mouth that sings with the mouth that eats, the experiments carried out in Zappa's Utility Muffin Research Kitchen also combat the compartimentalization of physical and mental pleasure which has characterized Western civilization. The power of laughter and satire in his music and lyrics creates a profusion of festive, farcical expressions that frees the body from its instrumental destiny. Like Rabelais's work—which mixed popular and learned idioms, classical and modern languages, lewd jokes and erudite Humanist talk—Zappa's music brings together not only different musical genres and subgenres, from the most refined to the most trivial, but also antipodal modes of apprehension of the real. His imaginary mediations between the subjective and the objective, the abstract and the concrete, are important because they create a pivotal space where opposites meet and where the interpenetration of low and high art, film, orchestral music, blues-rock and noise is part of a larger conceptual nexus where ideas, feelings and gestures are exchanged and where Zappa's carnivalesque aesthetics contributes to the creation of alternative art forms that encourage an integrated approach to life and art in general (his role as a "documenter" of life on the road is crucial in this respect).

Maximalism as a Critical Method

James Joyce's application of the peristaltic process to literary technique in *Ulysses* introduces us to another interpretive model with which to appraise the cultural value of maximalist aesthetics. By likening the movement of food down the esophagus and, by extension, the entire digestive process, to the workings of narrative fiction in the Lestrygonians chapter, Joyce sets the tone for all later attempts to pursue analogies between diet and discourse in order to illuminate the tensions between physical and mental pleasures. In conversation with Frank Budgen, the author declared of this chapter:

> "Among other things . . . my book is the epic of the human body. The only man I know who has attempted the same thing is Phineas Fletcher. But then his *Purple Island* is purely descriptive, a kind of coloured anatomical

> chart of the human body. In my book the body lives in and moves through space and is the home of a full human personality. The words I write are adapted to express first one of its functions then another. In LESTRYGONIANS the stomach dominates and the rhythm of the episode is that of the peristaltic movement."
>
> "But the minds, the thoughts of the characters," I began.
>
> "If they had no body they would have no mind," said Joyce. "It's all one."
>
> (Budgen 21)

Joyce sees the body as the surpreme maximalist receiver and generator of meaning, rhythm and being. While Bloom's insistence on the simultaneously enjoyable and disturbing pleasures of food and sex anticipates some of the issues explored in our first chapter, Joyce's peristaltic prose argues for a kind of interpretive reading that causes his writing to inflate with unexpected meanings that exceed the sum of its individual parts.[17] Since the very early years of Zappa's career as a musician, songwriter, composer and producer, his works have resisted the purgative/gastrokinetic properties of critical exegesis. And it seems that even the most creative fits of connectivitis and canine aesthetics of Ben Watson's Poodle Play, far from reducing Zappa's opus to an œuvre à *clef* liable to be elucidated in the light of buried narratives, have added to the non-absorptive nature of his works by multiplying the vectors of aesthetic/instrumental and social meaning produced by them while encouraging readers to extend them by drawing upon their own imagination and cultural background. Such a method, which calls on the reader's/listener's imaginative individual responses to the works, affords us many opportunities for the maximalist repossession of both high and low art forms, *including* minimalist music. For as Brian Ferneyhough notes, "one of the few possible justifications for minimalist music" is that "the maximalisation comes through the individual, rather than through the object" (Potter 15).

Readers looking for an exhaustive study of the music of Zappa and Van Vliet will be disappointed. For those who are already familiar with Zappa and Captain Beefheart, we hope that this book will appear as a welcome addition to the already existing literature on two of the best-known American mavericks of the last century; not another critical biography, but an interpretive essay investigating what we feel is the cultural and historical importance of both artists in the context of a wide-ranging network of references that run from Michelangelo and Arcimboldo to William Burroughs and Vaclav Havel. Readers who are only vaguely familiar with their music will be introduced to a projected

pantheon of maximalist artists and "moments" which will in turn give rise to poetic–associational readings designed to encourage the exploration of the processes of art production, consumption and rejection in their expanding totality and to considerations of the body as the fluctuating constant against which all composition (addition and subtraction of parts) is attempted. In many ways, this book is also intended as a maximalist alternative to the cultural studies take on the study of popular music, which generally neglects aesthetics in favor of the merely semiotic and sociological and is reluctant to investigate the relationships and coincidences of mass, underground and "elitist" culture, while paying lip service to the postmodern fashion for works that purport to undermine the high vs. low art dichotomy. In what follows, we will propose an (anti-)method, a conspiracy theory of the mind that seeks to do justice to Jaffe's definition of musical maximalism while simultaneously proposing a promotional application of "paranoid" criticism risking its very credibility (and sanity) to abandon itself to the energizing virtues of connectivitis and coordinology.

CHAPTER ONE

Breaking You Down

Moving to Montana soon
Gonna be a dental floss tycoon.
—Frank Zappa, "Montana" (1973)

Now some folks loves ham hocks
And some folks loves pork chops
And some folks loves vegetable soup
And Roland the Roadie loves Gertrude the Groupie,
But Gertrude the Groupie loves groups.
—Dr Hook, "Roland the Roadie" (1976)

Zappa's song, "Montana" (*Overnite Sensation*), tells the story of an aspiring entrepreneur with a strong belief in the future potential of the dental floss market. He is about to move to Montana to raise "a crop of Dental Floss" ("raisin' it up / Waxen it down / In a little white box / I can sell uptown"). He is riding a "small tiny hoss"—also described as a "pigmy pony"—named "MIGHTY LITTLE" and is riding "him all along the border line / With a / Pair of heavy-duty / Zircon-encrusted tweezers in [his] hand." The zircon gem that adorns the dental floss cowboy's heavy-duty tweezers is clearly an outward sign of social superiority and material success that is meant to impress the other wranglers ("every wrangler would say I was mighty grand"). Surely, one of the lessons to be drawn from Zappa's "Montana" is that, to quote Gertrude Stein's "Glazed Glitter," "certainly glittering is handsome and convincing" (161). Here, Zappa's parodic treatment of the Western myth is remarkably similar to that of Ed Dorn's mock-epic, mock-allegorical poem, *Gunslinger*. Begun in the late 1960s but first published in full in 1989, *Gunslinger* relates the adventures and encounters of a man who embarks on a quest in search

of "an inscrutable Texan," a businessman whose ruthless capitalism is inspired by the figure of Howard Hughes. The cowboy fetshism of "Montana" recalls Dorn's opening description of the "Cautious Gunslinger / of impeccable smoothness / and slender leather encased hands" (3).[1] A brilliant blend of narrative, lyric, mythic and phenomenological material spiced up by countless comic-book types, Dorn's cycle contains many parodies of folk ballads and even what appears to be a direct reference to Zappa's "Montana". At the end of the poem, Dorn's hero is taking leave of one of his companions, The Poet, a "drifting singer," and asks him "what's in the cards" for him. The Poet answers: "Moving to Montana soon / going to be a nose spray tycoon" (199). Like Zappa's "Montana," whose narrator begins the song by declaring "By myself I wouldn't / have no boss, But I'd be raisin' my lonely / Dental Floss", Dorn's *Slinger* is about the perils and attractions of private entrepreneurship, a world Zappa was to play an increasingly active part in as a producer and owner of several record companies. The Poet's final decision to give up his itinerant art and enter the world of privately-owned business rings the knell of Slinger's quest at the same time as it confirms the ultimate victory of Howard Hughes over Shelley.

In songs such as "Montana" or, as we will see, "Evelyn, A Modified Dog", Zappa develops a kind of fetishism that functions as a foundation for both the apprehension and reinterpretation of instrumental objects and commodities. Here, as elsewhere, Zappa's interest in objects goes beyond the dynamics of projection and introjection—in a mode that hesitates between description and definition, fetishism becomes an act of interpretation of the real. In his best lyrics, it promotes radical semantic shifts and displacements rarely encountered on the rock scene.

Zappa's approach to food displays a similar desire to create a new ground on which our eating habits can be questioned and redefined. Culinary references abound in Zappa's lyrics—they range from the comic and the anecdotal (the doo-wop nostalgia of "White Port 'n Lemon Juice" and "Electric Aunt Jemima" or "Jelly Roll Gum Drop") to the sociological ("Cruising for Burgers"). Like Dalí, Zappa seems to have a special interest in vegetables and beans.[2] In "Mr. Green Genes", from the album *Uncle Meat*, the ingestion of beans and celery develops into a comic vision of the compulsive eater and consumer of commodities that degenerates into cannibalism, thereby unveiling the most disturbing and sinister implications of consumer capitalism (the song urges the

listener to eat his own shoes, "the box he bought'em in," "the truck that brought'em in" and finally to "eat the truck and driver / And his gloves").

In "Call Any Vegetable", the suggestion that our lives can be improved by eating vegetables that "keep you regular" once again recalls the flatulent humor of Ed Dorn in *Gunslinger*: ("Youre in Beenville, is that a place / or THE FLATULENCE TENSE" [135]).[3] If "Montana" can be said to be indirectly about the American fixation on dental care, "Call Any Vegetable" touches upon what Paul Spinrad describes as the American obsession with "regularity of stool", an obsession which led John Harvey Kellogg to call constipation the "most common and most destructive disease of civilized people" (*Colon Hygiene* [1917]; quoted in Spinrad 25). More seriously, perhaps, one of the favorite targets of Zappa's scatological lyrics is the anal-retentive behavior of middle-class America, the "Po-Jama People" whose repressed desires Zappa frequently tries to awaken through the electrifying power of his blues-based repertoire and his most flamboyant guitar solos. As Henry Threadgill's and Zappa's respective salutes to the "Illinois Enema Bandit" in the mid-1970s indicate, the purgative power of jazz and blues is a possible remedy against the conformism and hypocrisy of a society which was "full of shit" and "going backwards after the increase in freedom and honesty in the 1960s" (Threadgill quoted in Watson 322). For Zappa—a musician and songwriter convinced of the power of the "ambivalent word"—the language of the blues, described above by Houston Baker as the "language of startling misalliances, sacreligious punnings, scandalous repudiations" (150) must have appeared as the perfect idiom through which to expose "a world of secret hungers" in which "every desire is hidden away / In a drawer, in a desk / By a naugahyde chair" ("Brown Shoes Don't Make It" [*Absolutely Free*]).

You Are What You Is

> A dream of eggplant or zucchini may produce fresh desires. Some fruits are vegetables.
>
> —Harryette Mullen, *S*PeRM**K*T*

The title song of Zappa's 1981 album, *You Are What You Is*, transposes his food-related concerns onto the domain of race and identity politics. It describes the behavior of two "foolish young men" who are confused about the racial stereotypes they should adopt in order to feel better

about themselves. They both believe that they can become the other by changing their eating habits. One of them is a black guy who "devotes his life / to become a caucasian". He stops eating pork and greens—thereby reducing the risk of flatulence and opting for the low-fat diet promoted by mainstream white culture—and "trade[s] his dashiki / for some Jordache jeans". The other character, by contrast, is

> A foolish young man
> From a middle class fam'ly
> Started singin' the blues
> 'Cause he thought it was manly

The white musician's adoption of black mannerisms and fascination with the romanticized street credibility of the negro hipster has influenced the whole history of rock 'n roll and jazz. In "You Are What You Is", the young man's attempts to eat chitlins and talk the black talk in order to escape from the narrow, constipating confines of his white middleclass education are doomed to failure, and he only succeeds in making himself ridiculous by sounding like the Kingfish from the Amos 'n Andy show (who, as we know, provided the inspiration for the idiolect developed by Zappa in the Broadway operetta, *Thing Fish*). He thinks "he's got / de whole than down" but is completely devoid of any historical consciousness and does not understand the significance of chitlins as a cultural stereotype rooted in the history of slavery (slaves had to eat parts of animals that others did not want, such as pig intestines, fat back, and pigs' feet). Finally, the aspiring "White Negro's" conclusion that "chitlins taste like candy" takes us back to the deliberate confusion between the sweet and the salty discussed later in connection with Beefheart's "Neon Meate Dream of a Octafish".[4] Zappa's "Call Any Vegetable" also insists on the necessity of distinguishing between sugar and salt, the taste of sweet fruit and that of sour vegetables. Towards the end of the song, Zappa declares:

> A prune is not a vegetable
> Cabbage is a vegetable

To readers of American poetry unfamiliar with Zappa, these lines might well have been taken from the "Food" section of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. In fact, Stein's prose poem, "A Substance in a Cushion," begins with the recognition that "sugar is not a vegetable". On a

superficial level, Zappa's baroque maximalism appears to have little in common with the serial (cereal?) abstractionism of Stein's *Tender Buttons*. Still, Zappa, who was probably not familiar with Stein, would no doubt have enjoyed the sensuous and visceral humor that characterizes her "cubist" still-life. In the following excerpt from "Breakfast", the rhythms of Stein's prose convey the pleasures of ingestion at the same time as they attempt to pump all the jaded "wornout literary words" (168) out of the reader's stomach and rinse the poet's mouth of the unpleasant taste of stale poetic images and post-Romantic decorum:

> A breeze in a jar and even then silence, a special anticipation in a rack, a gurgle a whole gurgle and more cheese than almost anything, is this an astonishment, does this incline more than the original division between a tray and a talking arrangement and even then a calling into another room gently with some chicken in any way.
>
> ("Breakfast"; 183)

Uncannily enough, Stein's "Breakfast" contains a number of key ingredients encountered in Zappa's most bizarre lyrics: the Beckettian "unnamable" jar of "Living in a Jar", the gurgling "voice of cheese" of *Uncle Meat*, the inevitable measuring chicken of "Tengo na Minchia Tanta" and, above all, the "curious breeze" of "Evelyn, A Modified Dog" (*One Size Fits All*). "Evelyn" takes us to the subjects of flatulence, dyspepsia and bad/dog breath in Zappa:

> Evelyn, a modified dog
> Viewed the quivering fringe of a special doily
> Draped across the piano, with some surprise
>
> In the darkened room
> Where the chairs dismayed
> And the horrible curtains
> Muffled the rain
> She could hardly believe her eyes
>
> A curious breeze
> A garlic breath
> Which sounded like a snore
> Somewhere near the Steinway (or even from within)
> Had caused the doily fringe to waft & tremble in the gloom
>
> Evelyn, a dog, having undergone
> Further modification
> Pondered the significance of short-person behavior