

BILLY CHILDISH

A Short Study
NEAL BROWN

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the aquarium
London - Spring 2008

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Billy Childish: A Short Study
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First edition of two hundred cased copies containing a presentation plate, signed by Billy Childish, and the author. one hundred of which are assigned to named persons. Five hundred copies in printed wraps.

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For the convenience of the reader the paintings discussed in this book are, other than those seen in the plates, as reproduced in *Childish, Paintings of a Backwater Visionary* (Aquarium, 2005). Musical recordings are mostly those that can be heard on *Billy Childish, 25 Years of Being Childish* (Damaged Goods, 2002). Lyrics are those published in *Gun in My Father's Hand, Selected Lyrics 1977–2006* (Aquarium, 2006). Poems are from *The Man with the Gallows Eyes, Selected Poetry 1980–2005* (Aquarium, 2005), and from *The Tiger Prowls Striped and Unseen. Poems 1996–2005*, (Aquarium L13, 2008).

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INTRODUCTION

Peter Doig

Billy and I met at St Martin's School of Art in 1980 – where we 'studied' together. I have had respect and admiration for him from the beginning. He had already had a stint there in the late seventies and was back for seconds by the time I arrived . . . Billy was not really around very much. Early on I remember him in the life drawing room. We drew 'Dog Jaw Woman' – Billy's nickname for what was easily the most attractive and animated model we had there. Billy subsequently made a Xeroxed book of poems and drawings as an ode to her. For a second-year exhibition Billy turned up with a heavily rendered green, black and white portrait of his friend Sexton Ming, painted so thick and wet that (when hung above a radiator) it curled up like a stiff sail.

There was never any doubt in my mind that Billy is an artist. A lot of people are embarrassed by work like Billy's – but that's what's great about it as well. He is very honest. I don't ever remember Billy painting in the studios of Charing Cross Road, but do remember him busking in the underpass at Centre Point and in Coffee Bar Dave's, where he challenged a hairy Hell's Angel (a real one) to prove that he could balance a full pint of beer on his erection. Billy was in Hamburg a lot of the time, or so it seemed. While we were down Le Beat Route, he was playing the Star Club . . . and on one great occasion his group The Milkshakes played at a house party next to the British Museum where all us students had paintings hanging in the back garden. Occasionally Billy appeared in photos, in his self-published

books of poems and drawings, dressed like Rodchenko or Kurt Schwitters, along with drawings that looked like rough Paul Klees.

These are a few of the remembrances I have of my early days with Billy Childish, and in retrospect things have not changed much – I mean this in the most positive of ways. Consistency. Billy's is a life project that is unwavering, and I suggest not getting in the way.

I don't believe in ideal, I eat the apple with the peel

(From a poem by Kurt Schwitters, that Billy had tattooed on his left buttock.)

Port of Spain, February 2008

1. BILLY CHILDISH

I didn't found the Stuckists. Charles Thomson runs the Stuckists and I left in 2001 because I didn't like the art, the direction of the group, and I was very uncomfortable with Charles' media campaigning. Other than that they were fine.

Billy Childish

You can't separate the fact that Billy is simultaneously a painter, a writer and a musician . . . Whilst a lot of people focus on one or two aspects of what Billy does (usually the music and the writing), very few people seem willing to embrace his painting. . . . I think that a lot of people perceive his paintings as being too crude, too primitive, too naive. But these qualities are the very same qualities that underpin both the writing and the music.

Matthew Higgs, *Childish, Paintings of a Backwater Visionary* (2005)¹

The goal is to try and recapture your original creative energy, keep your 'channel' open – not try and impress people with technique.

Billy Childish

PISS. FUCK OFF . . . TRACEY EMIN MENTIONED YOU ON A TENT. HAPPY CAMPING. YOU ARE USELESS.

Anonymous, *Visitor's book*, Kent County Council Arts and Libraries

The term ‘limitlessness’ seems a good one with which to begin a description of Billy Childish’s creative practice. By this is meant not just the unlikely, almost hypergraphic quantity of Childish’s written, visual and musical work, but also the limitlessness of its spiritual exaltation and abyss, its comic mischief and its deep-felt emotion. Experientially truthful confessionalism is the basis of Childish’s practice, whose subjects originate in a constellation of relationships – himself, and people and places known to him – and their affinities with specific locations, out of which Childish creates intense remembrance moods.

Childish’s descriptions of personal existence are often complicated by a tendency to paradox, contradiction, or riddle. There are paradoxes between, for example, the highly constrained economy of means he employs and the depth of emotional effect achieved with them, or between his universalism and its highly local origin in the small town where he lives. There are contradictory see-sawings between the benevolent and the malignant, and there are playful riddles of his creative identity – the large number of pseudonymous identities under which he creates his work.

Born Steven Hamper in 1959, in Chatham, north Kent – where he lives and works to this day – Childish is now known principally under the name Billy Childish, but sometimes under the name William Hamper, or various pseudonymous aliases.² It is curious that, for an artist for whom biographical truth is so central, Childish’s work is created using so many different authorial persona. Whichever name he uses, however, he is the creator of over two thousand paintings, many hundreds of woodcuts, over one hundred LPs, and as many singles, and over forty collections of poems. He

is the author of four novels: *My Fault* (Codex Books, 1996), *Notebooks of a Naked Youth* (Codex Books, 1997), *Sex Crimes of the Futcher* (The Aquarium, 2004) and *The Idiocy of Idears* (The Aquarium/L-13 Press, 2007).³

It may not be surprising, then, that even the most sympathetic admirer may experience difficulty in forming an overview of Childish's work, from its bewildering range of media, historical periods and styles, and authorship strategies (these authorial strategies, it should also be noted, also including the multivarious band names he has used). Understanding is further complicated because Childish is a passionate polemicist, and it is an understatement to say that his highly engaged moral relationship with society, and its art, can create certain hazards and distractions of meaning.

For these reasons it may be useful, as an aid to understanding Childish and his work, to use a metaphor. We can imagine Childish's relationship with his work as that of a fruit farmer, in a working relationship with nature – a farmer with extensive, untidy, but high-yielding organic orchards. In this way emphasis can be given to Childish's creativity as part of a growth process,⁴ whose fruits give pleasure no matter how irregular, imperfect and gnarled they are – their imperfections preferable to the unblemished, plasticated forms of tasteless supermarket fruit, or the grubbed-up orchards and sterile monoculture of prairie agribusiness.

This metaphor would also allow us – by imagining Childish's real-life and authorial persona as co-occupiers of a farm – to consider Childish's experience of the world and how it has affected him. In this way we might avoid becoming trapped in the specific details and interpretative difficulties that are inherent in his experience – a background experience

characterised by dysfunction, alcoholism, conflict, abuse and unhappiness.

If Billy Childish were a fruit farmer, his farm, its orchards and its many outbuildings would, doubtlessly, be situated in the fields of Kent,⁵ where he comes from.⁶ We would find the gate to the farm open, and its owner waiting for us in his farmhouse at the end of a winding, potholed lane – a lane bordered by wild flowers growing amongst rusted and abandoned farm machinery. A genial figure, Childish has a fearless, upright posture, a fine moustache and merry twinkling eyes. He is warmly welcoming and offers us mugs of green tea. As we take pleasure in his hospitality we are disturbed to notice, behind him, through the soiled window of a dark room, a child, whose expression is one of pain and sadness. This child, and the other characters we become aware of during our visit, who occupy the farmhouse and outbuildings, or who wander the orchards, fields and hedgerows, are all Childish himself. They are all described in his work, under his own name or his pseudonyms and aliases, and include the names Steven Hamper, William Hamper, William Loveday, Chatham Jack, Gustav 'Gus' Claudius, Charles Hangman,⁷ Kurt Schwitters,⁸ Jack Ketch, Rollin Slim, Virgil, Albirt Umber and Karl Lampenshwartz.⁹

These persons and their character traits relate, directly or indirectly, to past and present aspects of Childish – many of them universal to all human beings, but some very much outside normal experience. These experiences may be – and many times are – very negative. So, while some of the farm's inhabitants have a sober, spiritual calm – aspects of the present-day Childish, who has now stopped drinking alcoholically, and who maintains a spiritual practice – others

manifest the pain and suffering they have received or have committed upon others in the past, in mutual perpetuations of pain, insult and moral crime.

One of the inhabitants is a feral, bad-skinned youth, venturing forth with homemade weapons. Another, in contrast, is an idealistic, romantic youth dreaming good visions of creative joy. There is a malodorous drunkard – an uncontrolled alcoholic – trapped within the malign behaviours, self-pity and self-hatred that go with that condition, and there is a sober and industrious person, caring for and showing love to other people. There are local vendettas (hillbilly feuds, if you will) involving other farmers, in which – perhaps after years of loving friendship and co-operative mutual support – they turn to abusing and insulting each other. There are acts of generosity, affection and kindness, and there are high and low crimes, from arson to petty theft. Misanthropies and misogenies abound, as does generously spirited, high comic merriment. Lively music can be heard being played.

Scurrying around, and incessantly seeking care, food and attention, is a small menagerie of animals; an underdog, a scapegoat, a black sheep and a runt of the litter. Most horribly, amongst the incest, sodomy, herpes, boils, gonorrhoea and acne, is (as we have already seen through the window of an outbuilding), the face of the nine-year-old Steven Hamper – the young Childish – who, teased and bullied at home and at school, is now about to be sexually abused by an adult, a ‘friend of the family’.

From these many aspects of Childish’s past and present biography, and its miscellany of beautiful or appalling truths, arise the many thoughts and feelings which can be found in

his work: a frenzied longing for love, hatred, a fascination with death, anger, disputatiousness, disappointment, spiritual quest, heroism, resentment, bitterness, generosity, revengefulness, obsessiveness, compulsiveness, hypersexuality, creativity, suffering, immoderation, wonderment, gentleness, self-harm, stigma, depression, loneliness, exultancy, defiance, humour, happiness, accusation and euphoria. At the centre of these – the moral centre of Childish’s art – is the idea of emphatic, climactic revelation of a doing self.

Whatever Childish is, and whatever he feels – whatever the actual truths of his autobiographical person, and whatever he has survived, or whatever he is presently dealing with or has triumphed over – his experiential self is unified in its direct relationship with his own imaginative self and doing self. Standing in a pristine relationship to his creative nature, Childish, our toiling farmer, tends the fruits of his various orchards.

The varieties of his fruits are rare and uncommon, too often visited and enjoyed by grubs and insects for the standards of supermarket commerce. But Childish independently sells his fruit at the side of the road, and a great many people travel long distances to purchase it. Others, of course, speed right past, bemused or frightened or unaware. Sometimes, from inside the safety of their cars, they hoot their horns and mock him for his eccentricity.

But the fruits themselves are his proof. Piled high, they comprise intensely flavoured apples, pears and plums. Or rather, we should say, paintings, music, and literature – a vast endeavour of fruitfulness.

2. THE ART OF BILLY CHILDISH



The picture comes clean out of instinct, intuition and sheer physical action. A picture lives with the life you put into it.

D. H. Lawrence, 'Making Pictures' *The Studio* (1929)

I don't show off, or hide behind style, but my style is there: it's just so big that people can't see, a bit like my ambition. I'd say this is an aim in life as well, to let go the bullshit and stand closer to truth. Of course art critics are bamboozled by fun, spontaneity and the surface effect of a painting – and life – that's why they can't get it and are highly confused. My job is to level life; the critic's job is to be wrong. I can draw and I still draw, but I don't show off about it and anyone who actually bothers to see, rather than merely look, will pick that up in my paintings.

Billy Childish

Childish's paintings and many woodcuts are mostly autobiographical, many of them are self-portraits, and all of them are figurative. They have been described unfavourably by many commentators as being resolutely independent of, or indifferent to, the concerns and interests of contemporary art practice, and as being overly raw, naive or primitive – or worse, as aberrant and inept.¹⁰

Although Childish had an impoverished education as a child (stigmatised and disadvantaged because of his undiagnosed dyslexia), he was admitted to art colleges in Medway and London without basic academic qualifications, solely on the basis of the high quality of his portfolio. Even though he was required to leave these art colleges early by the college authorities, as a consequence of his acts of rebellion, he had been accorded high approval by virtue of his admission. And from this, at least in part, he had an exposure to degree-level art education.¹¹

As the consequence of a mythologising process – or as a result of the needs of journalistic storytelling – many different commentators have concluded that Childish is an untaught outsider. As his family has an arts and design background and his older brother is a highly trained painter, Childish would have been exposed to many ideas about art while he was growing up. A controlled, highly competent design sensibility¹² is apparent in his earlier work, which means that the more relaxed, uninhibited painterly language of his more recent painting is clearly one of informed choice.

This more recent painting has an expressionist tendency, and is indebted to Munch – particularly the later Munch – and artists like Hans Richter, the Russian avant-garde painter Mikhail Larionov, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and

the Die Brücke group. (Amongst more recent artists, the work of Georg Baselitz may be mentioned.) Childish has often painted in conscious homage to Van Gogh, and the intense, visionary quality of these and other works also place Childish in a relationship with Samuel Palmer and, in some respects, with William Blake.

There is also relevance in Childish's art college association with the artist Peter Doig, with whom he shares a pictorial language of the visionary or magical – the work of both artists sometimes creeping towards the psychedelic. See, for example, *Boats* (2008) or *Forts in Fog* (2008). Arguably, Childish's landscapes are as deeply felt as his portraits, with their depictions of mysterious pools of light, especially in the seascapes. These pools of light are, perhaps, analogous to the light Childish shows in the eyes of his portrait subjects; although earlier paintings show the eyes as abbreviated or enervated, the later ones are often soulful or mystic.

Painterly nuance is not necessarily the point of Childish's work. A conspicuous emotional register is – particularly moods that it might be possible to summarise as those of poetic exhilaration. This expressive excitement is not necessarily pleasant, but always emotionally vital, and resonates conspicuously through the artist's painting, writing, poetry and music.

There are few fictions in the paintings, or other works; it is Childish's autobiographical truth that he did walk lonely in the sicknesses of alcoholism and soul depression – walking the streets of places like Chatham, London, Hamburg and Seattle – often drunk, in a coat with the collar up against the cold and wearing the battered hat that can be seen in so many of his self-portraits. He did have a compulsive and

sometimes demoniacal sexuality, he did brood and suffer, and he did commit self-harm and harm to other people as a consequence of his sorrowful problems.

He did also (always a shorter list, for everyone), enjoy positive feelings and perform many positive actions, such as giving and receiving love, expressing tenderness, and taking happy pleasure in the richness of things – things such as the enjoyment of beauty, romance and affectionate sexual pleasure, humour, and kindness. There are, also, and very importantly, many examples of Childish explaining, or showing as best he can visually, his love of God.

In *The Drinker* (1998) a self depiction of a confused and woeful, stupidly drunken Childish can be seen.¹³ In *Holding Huddie* (2000) *Holding Huddie II* (2001) and in other paintings, a raw, unidealised, but compassionate love is convincingly shown – Childish showing sensitivity in his depictions of the human face, especially the eyes. In *Where No Shadow Shall Fall* (2001) some terrible, unspecified emotion around death seems to be present. There is a consciously 'faulty' quality to these and other paintings, which resides within their thick, apparently careless impasto. It could be argued that, conscious though the apparent carelessness is, this quality is related to the more undeliberated dyslexia that characterises Childish's written work.

Themes of closeness and separation recur throughout the paintings, as defined by Childish's life experiences, and it is significant that many paths, roads, bridges, railway lines and waterways traverse Childish's psychic landscape. These create ambiguous, sometimes anxiously dreamlike continuities and discontinuities of journeying thoughts and feelings. Estrangement or intimacy with others is a principal

theme which, in its most significant sense, is about closeness, or not, with God. Other divisions such as illness and health, drunkenness and sobriety, vice and virtue, or control and disorder also present themselves in his work, which is an entire cosmos of heavens and hells; a personal existence whose events are spiritually coequal.

In *The Strange Hero of Hunger* (2005)¹⁴ the artist depicts himself as brooding; as malign faced and estranged. Beside him a tree proclaims an idea of happiness through the pinkness of its blossom; in the background, cranes and a ship can be seen, which situate him in Chatham. The title of the painting is also shared with an eponymous song and poem, *I am the strange Hero of Hunger*:

*i am
the hero of all my favourite novels
i live in them
and they
live in me
[. . .] i am the strange hero of hunger
starving to spite myself
[. . .] i am every novelist
and
every character ever dreamed
i am everyone of my favourite artists
and
i feel myself not one jot less
but equal to all of them [. . .]

naturally i have no heroes
i am my heroes
i am my brothers
and sisters*

*i feel myself joined by the soul
with all but
my heart sings with every brave endeavor
with the strange wings of impossible butterfly
with every rock that breathes life into the world
[. . .] i am a desperate man who demands to be listened to
who demands to connect
i am a desperate man who denounces the dullness of
money
and status
i am a desperate man who will not bow down to accolade or
success
i am a desperate man who loves the simplicity of
painting
and hates galleries and white walls and the dealers in
art
who loves unreasonableness
and hot headedness
who loves contradiction
hates publishing houses
and
also i am vincent van gogh
hiroshige
and every living breathing artist
who dares to draw god
on this planet*

Whatever the degrees of spiritual, romantic or social separation that Childish depicts, the authorial Childish, as artist creator, is always in close proximity to the viewer, reader or listener. In this way, Childish is with us as he is with God; there is no authorial distance and the life and work is therefore a convergence – he, and we, are always near to our creator.



I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly,
malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous
wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness,
none of these wanting.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1856)

The man of intelligence – he who will never agree with anybody
– should study to acquire a love of the conversation of imbeciles,
and a love of ill-written books. From these he will obtain bitter
delights that will very largely compensate for his fatigue.

Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare* (1856)

Many of the comments and observations that have been made about Childish's paintings apply to his poetry – poetic mood, by definition, being present in poetry – and which, arguably, places poetry at the centre of his practice.¹⁵ As prolific a writer as he is a painter, Childish has created a huge body of work – again, with different stylistic periods. It is characterised (apart from rare instances where editors have sought to improve it) by his dyslexic spelling, which grants the work a rough, primary quality. This apparently illiterate style is only an appearance, as Childish commands a concise and highly effective technique – a technique that combines the conversationally intimate with the declamatory.

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

*the work is done
something is fixed in words or
wood*

*this is my method
im not talking about jigsaw
puzzels or lituary traditions
im talking about sneeking up on
your own soul*

This 'sneeking up on your own soul' is a clear statement of Childish's witnessing of his own spiritual consciousness. There is much that could be said about the self-reflexive, authorial voice of Childish's exteriorised, detached, commentating self and its coexistence with his private,

interiorised self (for example, aspects of his use of the personal pronoun), as well as the place and significance of this within the practice of confessional art. It might be possible that the pantheistic confluences Childish brings together in his work could be related to this ‘method’¹⁶ in which, it may be argued, meditative detachment and ideas of a soul come together in mixture. This spiritual conflation is an important part of Childish’s work, in which he locates the sacred very much in his own terms, but which also places it within a continuity of antecedents.

Horror and suffering is part of this conflation.¹⁷ Childish’s reports of extreme dysfunction, defilement, cruelty and abject struggle make uncomfortable reading, although it is these experiences that provide authority and qualification for his more redemptively loving self. It seems that Childish places character defects at the centre of the totality of existence, and an honest acknowledgement of them as a condition of gaining spiritual completeness. His descriptions emphasise a mindful acceptance of bitterness and resentment (resentment being, literally, a ‘return to feeling’), and that this mindfulness is amongst the most difficult (and resisted) of spiritual tasks.

It is as if the omissions that Walt Whitman mentions in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* have been made good by Childish, who fearlessly lays them out in the specific details of his own history. In his autobiographical novel *My Fault* Childish writes of the insults, abuses and crimes he has committed against others. These already alarming descriptions are taken considerably further in *Sex Crimes of the Fatcher* where he takes his confessions – his sexual, social and behavioural outrages, presented using the devices of fiction – to an

uncomfortable extremity.

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

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



John Le Kay: Did you always want to be a musician, even before you went to art school, or was it the other way around?

Billy Childish: What is the other way around? Did you always want to be an artist before you went to music school? (Laughs)

Billy Childish and John Le Kay,
www.heyokamagazine.com (1996)

The process by which value is determined in painting and literature is much less clear than – and in the case of fine art, often much less meritocratic than – that of popular music. The nuanced codes and sub-codes of the art and poetry worlds, and the consequences of Childish’s oppositional (or brazenly contrary) stance in relation to many of them, make assessment complicated. In rock and roll, value is more visceral and easily recognisable – and usually more immediately enjoyable – and acknowledgement of musical value, whether hostile or sympathetic, is made less reservedly. For these reasons, perhaps, Childish’s music has received the greatest attention, although all areas of his work have been influential.

The way Childish writes, composes and performs music corresponds, in many respects, to the way he works in painting and literature. It is a passionate, raw expression, made using an economy of technical means. A virtue is made of using old valve amps and a minimum of modern technological assistance (Childish has often described himself as having a

philosophy of ‘freedom through limitation’) and the precise, economic narrative structure of his poems is analogous to the structural perfection of the three-minute, three-chord pop song. As in painting, Childish honours those whose example he follows, offering them various kinds of homage. These have included Link Wray, The Kinks, The Downliners Sect, 70s punk rock – The Sex Pistols and The Clash – 60s garage-punk, Bo Diddley and the Delta blues.¹⁸

There is also, as in the writing and painting, a vast output¹⁹ characterised by an emphasis on exhilaration; popular music is the language of uninhibited excitement, dance, and euphoric merging of identity. Punk is the only form of recent popular music with a defined ideology, of sorts, and is probably the best summary term for Childish’s music,²⁰ as well as providing a useful descriptive prefix for other musical styles he plays in – punk-blues²¹ punk-cabaret, punk-country and punk-folk, especially the ballad. More general terms include rock and roll, beat music, garage and indie. Many of these styles are, in their primary forms, closely identified with assertions of independence or discontent on behalf of minority or disadvantaged social groupings – what could be called ‘people’s music’ – but are also playful, non-didactic and emphatically pleasurable.

In this context, ‘selling out’ is a disloyalty, and one that Childish has not committed, which in turn means that commercial musical success remains outside his experience. Because of the more populist – and more affirmatively idealistic – audience demographic of popular music, this has helped Childish achieve a worldwide, cult distinction as a musician.²² (Childish’s important influence in music is comparable with his influence in art.²³) He has written for,

sung and played in bands whose names include TV21, The Pop Rivets, The Milkshakes, Thee Mighty Caesars, The Del Monas, Thee Headcoats, Wild Billy Childish & The Friends of the Buff Medways Fanciers Association (better known as The Buff Medways), The Vermin Poets, The Musicians of the British Empire, Billy Childish and the Black Hands, Billy Childish and the Singing Loins, Thee Headcoatees, The Natural Born Lovers, The Chatham Singers, and The Headcoat Set. He has also recorded poetry under his own name, and with the Medway poets.

His musical aesthetic – as can be gathered from the preponderance of band names which reference England and things English – includes that of a retrospective, tragicomic nationalism, with great emphasis on English militarism. English punk – The Sex Pistols – established itself during the Queen’s Jubilee year in 1977, and the history of British popular music is one that includes strongly stated interpretations of national identity. Militarism, or subversive references to it, is a related theme, whose defining example is that of The Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper* album. Although Childish’s musical work, in many of its finest senses, is American, and has its origins in black American music, it is also situated within something very English; something retrospective, nostalgic or tragicomic – often with reference to the sea-side – and which can be placed amongst material by The Who, The Small Faces, The Beatles and The Kinks.

But Childish’s song ‘Bitter Cup’ departs from the fast energy of rock and roll and, in its marching metre, summons a Victorian mood, as if a Rudyard Kipling poem had been given a musical accompaniment:

*and I remember the breath of my father
his kisses were bearded and damp
the romance of the bottle dragging him down
to awaken dishevelled in the tank*

*and there’s no sea deeper than the piss of the bottle
and none speaks the truth like the drunk
whiskey runs through me like a sorrowful river
I’m down on my knees and I’m sunk*

Kipling represents an extreme form of English creativity – extremely English in manner, extremely nationalistic, as well as extremely talented – and it is problematic to compare Childish to him. But Childish is already a problematic artist, with a creative interest in national identity. If emphasis was placed on Kipling’s genius, his vast productivity over a variety of styles, his interest in the childhood imagination, and his being a resident of Kent, (where he also lived, as well as in Sussex) – and if his problematic colonialism was disregarded – then the comparison would have value.²⁴ At the very least, the unlikely jump from 60s garage music to Kipling is indicative of the improbable, boundary jumping breadth of Childish’s work.²⁵

Charles Dickens, like Kipling another genius from Kent, was also vastly productive over a variety of styles, and had a strong interest in childhood. He, Kipling and Childish all had childhoods that included severe trauma or abuse. His many descriptions of failed fatherhood and disadvantaged childhood, alcoholism, poverty and social injustice make him an important antecedent in which to situate Childish. Dickens’ genius for exaggeration – for highly exaggerated

melodrama and comedy, and the placement within these of grotesque characters – is, in some senses, one that is shared by Childish in his music. Childish includes covers of material by, or makes references to, many misfit eccentric geniuses²⁶ or grotesques, who include Link Wray, Bo Diddley and – an especially Dickensian grotesque – the early Johnny Rotten.

Although Childish's musical landscape is an extensive one, which shares themes with his poetry and literature, his songs and poetic verse are less commingled in their lyrical and poetic expression than they could be. Childish practises an unlikely (for such a boundary breaker) separation of the two. What does unite them, apart from their intensity, is their humour. Childish's music tends to parodic, humorous self-deprecation, rather than the socio-critical 'danse macabre' of the writings. His most characteristic comic voice is, probably, the sardonic, gallows kind of humour he excels at, which entitles him a place at the far, dangerous end of a transgressive spectrum in the company of Peter Cook, Tony Hancock, Max Wall's *Waiting for Godot*, Céline, Johnny Rotten, Gogol, Kafka, the pornographic Bataille and (by virtue of his uncontainable self-incrimination), Oscar Wilde.

3. RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL AND ARTISTIC PROTEST

V. Vale: You're on risky territory. No one's dared use the word 'God' for decades, especially in 'counterculture' circles.

Billy Childish: Yes, but that's the problem. If you read Dostoyevsky, he's not afraid of God, he's not afraid to mention it. Van Gogh certainly wasn't [. . .]

V. Vale: But you're using a word associated with thousands of years of patriarchy, hierarchy, hegemony and oppression –

Billy Childish: I know.

Billy Childish and V. Vale, *Real Conversations, No. 1* (2001)

Rochester's poetry is the poetry of wit combined with the love of pleasure, of thought with licentiousness. His extravagant heedless levity has a sort of passionate enthusiasm in it; his contempt for every thing that others respect almost amounts to sublimity. [. . .] His epigrams were the bitterest, the least laboured, and the truest, that ever were written.

William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818)

The religious imagination survives for most people as not just the primary but virtually the only credible instance of an imagination working in a total way.

Susan Sontag, *The Pornographic Imagination* (1967)

As Childish is in limitless engagement with the whole universe, through his art, it would be unlikely that he could fail to engage with the art world itself. An impassioned polemicist, he has actively participated in many controversial debates that have accompanied contemporary art over the last ten years or so, issuing manifestos, documents and statements, alone or with other people. These are principally critical advocacies for artistic betterment, or complaints of disillusion or disappointment, and have constituted a significant expenditure of his energy.

The tone of these advocacies and complaints varies enormously and they are, at their best, witty deviancies from art-world norms, being intelligent and droll exhortations to artists to practice integrity and authenticity, and sometimes extending to calls to ecstasy and artistic comradeship. Depending on the view of whoever is on the receiving end of them, these critiques may be described as imaginatively sincere, strategic mischief-making, or as irascible and prescriptively intolerant.²⁷ Childish certainly has what seems to be a complete fearlessness in causing social displeasure through protest, and which puts him in the company of others who have been regarded as indecently frank, such as William Blake, D.H. Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers. His art manifestos are, though, at their best, significant contributions to socialised creative debate, and share an inspirational, charismatic authority with the statements and manifesto writings of Gilbert and George.

More important than this, but also an integral part of his combative attitude to socialised aspects of art-making, is Childish's engagement with ultimate things. This is, to a degree, mystical, but is a task-based mysticism, achieved

through making. For him (and, in his opinion, for society), a significant means of engaging with spiritual wholeness and a proper relationship with God is through having integrity of outlook in making art. By this is meant an art that is independent of the demands of fashion, novelty and commerce – an improved art, which elevates the amateur principle over the professional.

The actual merits or demerits of Childish's own work can become lost in the confusion this debate engenders. And the consequence of this confusion, when combined with Childish's often imprudent honesty and his disinterest in career focus, is disadvantage for him in terms of critical acceptance. This has meant that, although he enjoys cult status, he experiences rejecting hostility or indifference from mainstream critical culture.

In the most important senses of the term, however, Childish enjoys inordinate success, whether or not he receives this critical attention. Through the resisting separateness of his practice, he is in best spiritual alignment with the community he serves. Childish receives as he gives; thereby receiving the gratitude due him from his generous sharing of the facts of his experience from those who wish to read, see or hear it.

In the poem *i give myself to them all* he writes:

*come bring your voice
and we will walk arm in arm
thru this whore of a town
towards the stinking river
and the dawn
and
our dreams shall prove no less poetic
our love no less true
and
our kisses be as sweet
as dog rose

for here all are welcome*

AFTERWORD

This book began as an essay to which, in my enthusiasm for the subject, I added some more, and then more again – and which makes me worry that, instead of writing an informative essay, I have now written an inadequately short book. But the reader will be best judge of that. It's certainly to be hoped that a longer and more complete book, whether by me or someone else, follows quite soon after this one. The subject of Billy Childish certainly requires and deserves it.

Neal Brown, Spring 2008

NOTES

1. Higgs writes further in *Childish, Paintings of a Backwater Visionary* about Childish's separated relationship with the art world, describing his work as having been ' . . . shown alongside the work of American artists like Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon and Jim Shaw: artists who explored the darker sides of the human psyche; juvenile or adolescent aesthetics; and the margins of popular culture. Significantly they were all involved with music too. All of these artists' work was aligned with or integrated sub-cultures. Billy was also on the cover of *Artscribe* magazine in the late 1980s – at the time when Matthew Collings was editor. The *Artscribe* article was written by an influential German artist and critic called Jutta Koether but despite this exposure Billy remained something of an underground cult figure in the art world.' The show referred to took place at the Esther Schipper Gallery Cologne, in 1991.
2. Childish changed his name from Steven Hamper to William Hamper by deed poll in 1985.
3. Childish is a veteran performer of his own music and poetry, is an accomplished guitar instrumentalist, and is an occasional filmmaker and photographer. He has edited innumerable fanzines and has published works by other writers and poets; he was, for example, responsible for the first translation and publication into English of *Canon Fodder* by L. F. Céline (Hangman Books, 1988) which he translated with Kyra De Coninck, and was first publisher of early literary work by Tracey Emin.
4. Poetic wonderment at nature's growth process is, of course, a common theme amongst poets. Whitman reflected on the nature of this wonder (pondering a child's question, 'What is the grass?'), in *Leaves of Grass* as did Dylan Thomas in his *The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower*.
5. The county of Kent is known for its orchards. However, although Kent is known as 'The Garden of England' and has many areas that are deeply picturesque and lovely, it has also, particularly in the area around the Medway estuary, many working ports and extremely run-down seaside towns. The county has a large, disadvantaged working class population (a population who are, in some ways, an extension of the working classes of East London), as well as an extensive Romany (or 'Gypsy') population. In these ways the county is distinguished from others in the south of England that are in close proximity to London, because many of the inhabitants are poor and less compliantly gentrified than those elsewhere.) where he comes from.
6. At his core, Childish says, he is ' . . . a man of Kent. I've got a very strong affiliation with the place. I was brought up near woods, I like being near water and trees.'

7. Hangman was also the name of Childish's publishing house. Childish's identification with the gallows seems more with the archetypal folk hero, the gallows victim, rather than with the hangman. The victim has been celebrated many times in ballad, poem and song; for example, in John Clare's great poem *The Parish*, with which Childish's work has something in common, or in John Gay's *The Beggars Opera*, which states that '*The rogue that's carted to the gallows tree/Is far more honest in his trade than thee.*'

8. Childish had a bank account under the name 'Kurt Schwitters' for many years.

9. Childish has stated that when he was growing up his father regularly referred to him, in the third person, as the 'Smell.'

10. It is, however, true that Childish has been made welcome by certain important sections of the contemporary art world, for whom his indifference to the concerns and interests of the art world makes him more, not less interesting. He featured on the cover of *Artscribe* (1990) and was shown in galleries like Cubitt Gallery (two one-person shows curated by Matthew Higgs and Peter Doig in 1994 and 1995, and a group show curated by Higgs in 1997), as well as in group shows curated or co-curated by Higgs at City Racing (1995), the Approach (1998) and *The British Art Show* (2000). Higgs also published a book of Childish's poetry, entitled *This Purile Thing* (1996) illustrated by Doig, Paul Noble, Bob and Roberta Smith and others.

11. Childish met and became friends with the painter Peter Doig while at St Martin's Art College.

12. This design sensibility shows the influence of African art, circuitously arrived at through, possibly, the influence of the tight design styles of Childish's older brother, Nichollas Hamper, as well as, perhaps, Wyndham Lewis, Jacob Epstein, Mark Gertler, the early David Bomberg (Childish's stylistic change from a tight design discipline to a more painterly style is comparable to that made by Bomberg) and William Roberts. Much of this influence originated through Picasso, of course. It can also be noted that when Childish was sixteen he trained as an apprentice stonemason, at the Naval dockyard at Chatham.

13. A stylistic change slowly but inexorably occurred after Childish stopped drinking alcoholically in 1993. In earlier, pre-abstinence paintings such as *Trembling of Life II* (1992) and *Man Being devoured by the Snakes of his Own Desire* (1992) or *The Humility of Love* (1993) Childish tended to impose a unifying discipline on his work by the use of heavy, dark boundary lines and flattened illusionistic space. In subsequent, post-alcohol works, boundary definitions are more relaxed or collapsed, with a more painterly, less graphic vision.

14. The title refers to the novel *Hunger* (1890) by Knut Hamsen.

15. Childish was a founder member of a group of poets working in Kent in the 1980s called the Medway poets, who included Miriam Carney, Rob Earl, Bill Lewis, Sexton Ming and Charles Thomson (and briefly, Alan Denman). Others associated with the group were Philip Absolon, Sanchia Lewis and Tracey Emin. It is art-historically correct to say that Childish and Emin have contributed enormously to the UK arts, and that this contribution – which also includes, although to a much lesser extent, the enterprises of the others who worked alongside them – shares sufficient purpose as to constitute a 'movement'. A summary of this 'movement' might be that its practitioners shared an aim of energising sincerity, in spite of their very different ways of seeking to achieve it.

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

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

18. A longer list of both direct and indirect influences might include The Who, Them, The Animals, The Yardbirds, The Pretty Things, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, The Ramones, Alternative TV, the Buzzcocks, The Damned, Subway Sect, Woodie Guthrie, Billie Holiday and Bob Dylan, as well as bluesmen like Leadbelly, Robert Johnson and early John Lee Hooker.

19. This vast output has been made by Childish without the benefit of being signed to a major label, which makes him an epic hero of the punk ethos. Particular mention should be made of Childish's band The Milkshakes who released four albums in one day. Of his output, over one hundred or so LPs, and as many singles have been produced on independent labels worldwide. He has performed all over the world. His 'artlabel', Hangman Records, has issued about fifty LP records by bands other than his.

20. It is possible to claim that punk is also a defining influence on Childish in respect of his self-placement within notions of the anti-hero. The Clash's Joe Strummer is a clear example of a 'virtuous' anti-hero, and The Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten a clear example of an 'unvirtuous' one, Childish incorporating elements of both in his work.

21. The traditional strutting claims of male egoism in blues and rock and roll should also be mentioned in respect of Childish. He has playfully appropriated this style in various self-deprecating versions of masculist sexual triumphalism; for example (and to great effect), on his Bo Diddley inspired song '*Billy B. Childish*'.

22. Matthew Higgs writes in *Childish, Paintings of a Backwater Visionary* that, '*Billy is a maverick and it is his stubborn nature, his stubborn individuality, and his stubborn, almost bloody-minded independence that is at the very heart of what he is about.*'

*His maverick status is also why he is so hugely influential. More than any other musician/artist Billy never sold out – despite the offers.*⁷

23. A list of musicians who have cited Childish as inspirational would be a long one.

24. Childish's notions of artistic comradeship and his relationship with masculinity and masculine types also have some similarity with Kipling.

25. Such incongruity is reminiscent of Dada, which – especially as practised by Schwitters – was an important influence on Childish. Dada was, of course, partly defined by its rejective relationship with First World War militarism.

26. Childish's musical projects with the poet Sexton Ming may also be mentioned in this respect – their *Which Dead Donkey Daddy?* (1987) album was much admired by poet Ivor Cutler.

27. Some of these projects have been to the regret of Childish's even most committed admirers, who have not considered them the best use of his gifts. Childish allowed his manifesto-making to become co-opted in a more formal sense when he became a member of the Stuckist art group, to whom he contributed texts, and for which he received much negative criticism. He formally left the Stuckists in 2001.

SELECTED BOOKS, CATALOGUES AND PUBLICATIONS

Morgan Falconer, James Moores and Neal Brown *I Fill All of Your Dreams*, exh cat. Aquarium Gallery L-13 (2008)

John Stammers, Introduction *The tiger prowls striped and unseen 1996-2005*, Billy Childish, Aquarium Gallery L-13 (2008)

Matthew Higgs and Steven Lowe, *Childish; Paintings of a Backwater Visionary*, Aquarium Gallery L-13 (2005)

David Wise, Bill Lewis, Wolf Howard, Rachel Jordan (eds). *The Arts in Medway*, Urban Fox Press (2004)

V. Vale, *Real Conversations*, No.1, RE/Search Publications (2001)

Matthew Higgs, *17% Hendrix Was Not The Only Musician*, Slab-O-Concrete Publications, (1998)

David Hart, Introduction *Poems of Laughter and Violence, Billy Childish*, Hangman Books, (1992)

Jutta Koethe, *Artscribe*, November-December (1990)

For a complete list of books by Billy Childish, discography and exhibition history, please see www.theaquariumonline.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neal Brown is an artist and writer who has written for most UK and many international art magazines. He curated the exhibition *To The Glory of God; New Religious Art* at the 2002 Liverpool Biennial, and is author of the book *Tracey Emin* published by Tate Publishing. For further information please see www.nealbrown.net

PLATES

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