

Interpreting Ursonate

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“Schwitters survives, through a gramophone recording, as one of the most extraordinary performers of the century. When he read his Primeval Sonata – a long poem made up entirely of wordless sounds – it was as if there had come into existence a completely new mode of human expression, by turns hilarious and terrifying, elemental and precisely engineered. Others dreamed of reconciling art and language, music and speech, the living room and the cathedral, the stage and the unspoiled forest. Schwitters had the sweep of mind not only to dream of these things, but to carry them out.”

– John Russell, “An Alternative Art”

Theatrical performance demands a willingness and capacity to abandon personal identity: to place oneself at the service of the script. But every performer, in practice, produces a unique performance. Authors sometimes revolt against these arbitrary outcomes. Most authors do not attempt to rein in the performers and directors who decide to produce their scripts: it's impractical, at best, and counterproductive as well, leading generally to simple non-presentation of the work. Some, though, like Samuel Beckett, are fanatically precise and performances are strictly regulated and prescriptive.

What if a performer violates the stated intent of such a highly prescriptive author? What if this performer ignores the rights of the family that controls the author's estate? What if he performs a piece illegally, and in a manner wholly at odds with the published instructions of the author? Should he be sanctioned?

Or, if his performances are innovative, demanding, even controversial, and also popular, should his performances be applauded, and perhaps honored?

Once a text is published, how is the “incorrectly” performed interpretation of this text to be regarded?

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My father is a nonsense-poetry lover, and when I was a little kid he would recite Edward Lear's “The Pobble Who Has No Toes” with gusto. Or he would suddenly pronounce, at the dinner table, “Ishkabibble,” causing my two sisters and me to dissolve in giggles.

My father used to recite:

priimiitittiii tisch
tesch
priimiitittiii tesch
tusch
priimiitittiii tische
tescho
priimiitittiii tescho
tuschi

He told us that he'd read this poem when he was in college, in an anthology assembled by Kay Boyle of poetry from the literary journal *Transition*. The poem was written by Kurt Schwitters, and at the bottom (this was my father's punch-line) was the note: “Translated from the German by Eugene Jolas.” Imagine, the Priimiitittiii poem, a translation! (Of course this was Jolas' joke – the text was naturally Schwitters' original text, unaltered.)

One day in 1979, during my time running the Yale Dramat Children's Theatre, I was walking on campus when I noticed a placard announcing a performance by Peter Froelich of the English Theatre at the University of Ottawa. His Kurt Schwitters one-man show was starting right at that moment. Luckily, I didn't have anything to do then, and the show was free. I walked in.

Wow. For the first hour Froelich moved through about ten short odd dialogues and peculiar sound-explosions.

Mommy?

Yes.

Mommy?

Yes.

Mommy?

Yes?

Mommy?

Yes?

There's a man.

Where?

There's a man.

Where?

And so on: nonsense, but with a very serious insistent character. Schwitters was an oddball even for a Dada. He wasn't actually admitted to the Club Dada. As I found out later, he showed up in Berlin in 1918 to demand admittance to the Club, and George Grosz opened his door to find Schwitters standing there. Schwitters said, "I am Kurt Schwitters and I've come to join the Club Dada." Grosz said "This is not the Club Dada," and slammed the door. Schwitters knocked on the door again. Grosz opened. Schwitters said, "I am not Schwitters," turned around and left.

Schwitters then formed his own art movement, which he called Merz. He was the only member.

Well, after the first hour, Froelich had a brief intermission. Then there was a second act: a full-length performance of Schwitters' poem Ursonate.

I had been waiting for the Priimittitiii Tisch poem, and since Froelich hadn't performed it during the selection of short works I was a little disappointed. But Ursonate was just so beautiful I couldn't believe it. I especially loved the Rumpf Tilff Tooo section. Near the conclusion, suddenly, there was a whole bunch of Priimittitiii stuff – not quite the same as the poem my father used to recite, but more fully elaborated, and completely integrated into Ursonate.

I learned afterward that Schwitters had developed Ursonate over a period of 10 years, between 1922 and 1932, and then spent the rest of his life performing it throughout Europe. The Peter Froelich show exactly followed a program Schwitters had presented in London in 1945. Schwitters had published extremely exacting specifications for how the Ursonate was to be performed. The rights to all performance were strictly controlled by his son, who generally refused permission to anyone requesting to perform the piece, on the basis of these strict performance specifications. That is: the piece had really been written for sole, solo performance by its author. A performance like the Peter Froelich one, which essentially channeled Kurt Schwitters, was acceptable, but only this approach would be permitted by the family.

A year after the Froelich performance, when I was living in Chicago, I received a letter from my high school newspaper editor friend, Laura Kelsey. She was spending the year in Munich. I wrote back, asking her if she could check in the library there for any copies of Kurt Schwitters' poetry. I didn't know if Ursonate was in print, but I did know it wasn't available in the United States; nothing by him was.

She sent me a complete xeroxed text of Ursonate" she'd found Schwitters' collected works in three volumes in a public library.

It wasn't until four years later, in 1984, that I actually did anything with Ursonate. Working as a children's theatre actor and improviser--and as a jazz musician with several bands and under a number of teachers--had helped me learn how to inject my own ideas into any text, even ones like Ursonate with no coherent linguistic meaning. That is, I was interested in using Ursonate for my own purposes: as a framework for expressing my own ideas; as a template for the integration of jazz improvisation and theatre improvisation.

My friend and musical partner Rob Metrick was running a Time Arts performance series at Chicago Filmmakers. I asked him if he could put me on his schedule to do a performance of Ursonate, and he finagled this.

Ursonate was written as a solo performance piece. But I developed an arrangement for five performers: three voices and two musicians. Art Institute of Chicago instructor Lynn Book, Chicago Chamber Orchestra cellist (and classically trained vocalist) Philip Hart Helzer, and I handled vocals.

Professional jazz musicians Johnsee Holt and Jeff Beer played guitar, percussion and trumpet. We arranged for Rob to rent three Dada Films: Anemic Cinema by Marcel Duchamp, Ghosts Before Breakfast by Hans Richter, and Emak Bakia by Man Ray. We planned to extend the Ursonate evening by interspersing free-jazz improvisations accompanying these films.

Brenda Webb, the founder of Chicago Filmmakers, decided to call the program “Evening of the Bearded Heart,” after a famous program at the original Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916.

I annotated the Ursonate text with instructions both general and specific for each performer. I tried to offer improvisational opportunities for all of us, and plenty of chances for us to surprise one another and have fun. Although the poem as written is intentionally meaningless, some sections seemed to me to imply sex or violence, persuasion or argument, concord or discord when handled by multiple voices either simultaneous or alternating. With the text divided among several singers, characters emerged naturally and drama was implied. The piece became less a presentation and more a piece de theatre.

The show was a huge success. We had a standing room only crowd, and we repeated the program a month later with similar overflowing attendance. The most exciting thing was that after the first show, a distinguished gentleman emerged from the audience and introduced himself as Dr. Hans-Jurgen Kienast – a friend of Richard Huelsenbeck, who was one of the founders of the Dada movement.

Dr. Kienast asked me a provocative question: Why had Dada become popular, now, in America? I wrote him this letter a week later (looking back of I understand there was a lot I didn’t know about Dada’s history in America; still I present this letter unedited to show my thinking in 1984, at age 25):

Dear Dr. Kienast,

Thank you again for coming to see our performance of the Ursonate. It was very exciting for me to meet a man who was intimately involved with the principals of a period which interests me deeply. And that he should be as kind and delightful as yourself.

I have been thinking about why Dada should be regaining popularity, so far from its origins. First, Dada was never strictly a European movement. Man Ray was American. Duchamp lived for many years in New York, as did Picabia. Both were close friends of Stieglitz. Many European artists before and between the wars were fascinated with America. Kafka wrote a book about it, without ever having visited. Mayakovsky was very disappointed with the American way of life, when he visited, probably because he expected to see Utopia, but was transfixed by the triumphs of mechanization, as he writes in his wonderful poem, “Brooklyn Bridge.” Constructivism and Futurism were inspired by this same vision of new worlds replacing old, represented by the rise of American mechanization. Especially in a period of economic instability, amid the feeling that the efflorescence of nineteenth century culture had produced the nationalism that led to the First World War, America was the promised land, where the people and economy were strong, and free of the dead hand of the past. At the end of Kafka’s novel, his protagonist goes out to join the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, a dream-image of the merging of life and art in a communal utopian setting. Of course these images were terribly false. But after all, America was distant enough at least in physical fact to escape the ravages of the war.

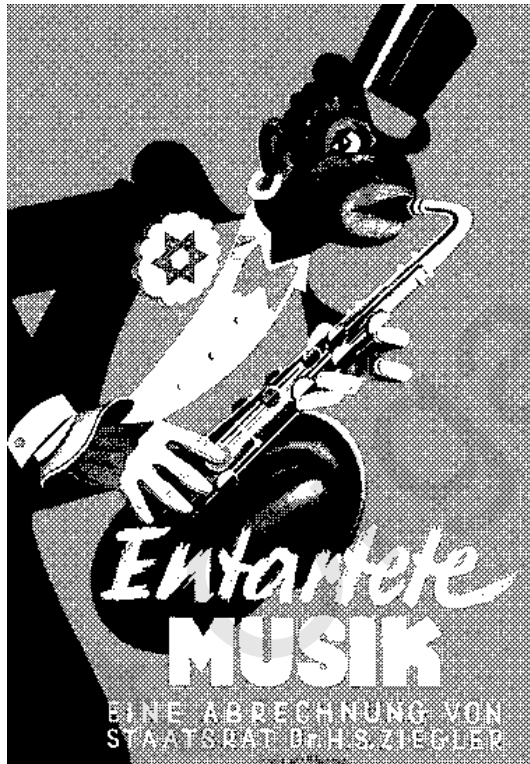
Among the expressions of ‘native culture’ that Europe admired in America were vaudeville and jazz. Composer George Antheil believed strongly in the significance of jazz to modern European art. His statements on the subject, oddly, largely misunderstand jazz, equating jazz rhythms with the pulse of machinery, expecting a solitary genius to recreate a music which thrives on collective contribution, and crediting the ambitious spirit of immigration with producing jazz, when in fact it is a music of freed slaves, whose subject is the triumph of the human spirit. However, some of his observations about jazz’s impact on modern art were in fact borne out: jazz was an inspiration to European artists. And here we come to Dada.

The Dadas were jazz fans. There were many negerbands in Europe that toured and played in cafes and cabarets, and of course there were the phonograph and radio. The Dada poets consciously engaged in word-jazz, improvising just as jazz singers did, using nonsense syllables freely. Of course they set themselves subjects that interested them, such as politics, and often chose to be completely abstract. In fact, the Ursonate can be seen as one long scat piece, though it is not the best example of this most free type of Dada poem. In fact, it is the most structured of a whole oeuvre that is generally very free and improvised-sounding.

My own training is as a jazz musician, and it is in part this affinity of the Dadas to jazz that attracts me to their work. Like jazz, Dada performance has the vitality of improvisation, and it makes full use of sounds culled from the environment, and of the detritus of human sound, like moans, sighs, shrieks, and gasps. Jazz is often framed, though not confined, by conventional, folk-song-derived forms, as is that most formal of Dada poems, the Ursonate, which takes a conventional form, the sonata, for its outer mold.

The Dadas also admired American vaudeville. As a professional children's theatre actor, I especially enjoy the broad Dada performance style. Dada has its place in a long tradition of clowning and street-theatre. Social satire is a mainstay of all cultures. Dada is perhaps above all a style of joking, and though the Dadas looked to American vaudeville, they were probably more closely replicating some older style of German popular theatre. Certainly there are passages in *Grimmelshausen* that seem to be practically Dada in their absurdity.

Whatever the actual origins of Dada, it took current American popular forms as some of its stated sources of inspiration. That an art form claiming descent from American popular culture should regain popularity in America, sixty-five years later, is not strange. Why didn't it happen earlier?



Dada was actually, in its particulars, very different from the sources it claimed. It was a form born of a special social configuration, one that has not been paralleled in America since the teens. The Dadas were members of the intelligentsia: doctors, lawyers, professors, and students. In Germany in the teens and twenties, the intelligentsia was increasingly at odds with the bourgeoisie, and with the lower classes. Segmentation of society intensified in the thirties, leading to one sector of the middle class dominating all of society. The intelligentsia was severely persecuted.

America is undergoing a similar segmentation. As the recent elections demonstrate, reasoned thought does not control this country; charisma does. The supporters and the opposition to the status quo are sharply divided. Members of the intelligentsia, by merely taking a reasoned stance, declare allegiance to a faction. This is because America now, like Germany in the teens, is a faltering imperialistic society, though probably in a much less severe phase.

When a society controls access to its markets, and the prices of its essential resources, its economy can only boom. This Germany did in the time before World War One, and America did more freely in the period before the Vietnam War intervention, and before the rise of OPEC. But once deprived of its former control, the nation must either assert itself and regain its lost grip, or accede to a drastic change of course.

Dada reflected the pleasure of a portion of the intelligentsia at the apparent failure of an overconfident, selfish society and world order. The Dadas believed that the old, pre-war goals of ever-broadening national and cultural hegemony had been misdirected. Theirs was a minority movement, hoping for the rise of a new order, one that would abolish outworn cultural, political, and aesthetic standards, and demand world cooperation, humility, and respect for other peoples. It failed. Dada tried to use an imagined America as a model for a new vision of society.

Meanwhile, other economically disenfranchised sectors of German society accused America and its allies of decimating their economy. These other sectors had harsh economic reality to back up their arguments: the allies had divided up Germany's colonial empire, and were extracting devastating war reparations payments. The Dadas had merely a dream. Naturally, the

new nationalism and self-interest triumphed, and America became the target for popular vituperation, with modern art submerged in the popular onslaught. I have enclosed a “Degenerate Art” poster from the Nazi era clearly demonstrating that German society did indeed perceive modern art, international Jewry, and jazz, representing American culture, to be intimately linked, and equally repulsive.

In short, Dada has always been tied to a utopian vision of American life. Now is an especially likely time for Dada to be revived in America because social opinion is sharply divided between those with a somewhat utopian vision of a more humanistic, better world, and those with limited hopes centering on self-interest. Even in the sixties, the radical culture and the middle-class had more in common: Lyndon Johnson looks very liberal by today’s standards, though he was the target of vehement denunciation from the left in his day. As long as this society proceeds with its sharp division into two groups, one pursuing limited national and personal self-interests, the other aspiring towards mutual international sharing of resources and ideas, the art of the left will be directed to the task of expanding and revising the narrow cultural and aesthetic standards of society as a whole.

-- Chicago, November 11, 1984

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I dropped out of Child’s Play Touring Theatre and launched The Children’s Bookstore a few months later, in 1985, so I really didn’t have time to be a performance artist. But for our 1984 program-pamphlet, I’d managed to sell a single advertisement, and this led ultimately to a new venue for Ursonate. A fellow named Harry Hoch had opened a bookstore called Eyes: Books for the Arts around the corner from Chris’ and my apartment, and Harry bought that \$40 ad in the 1984 Ursonate program. Harry closed Eyes shortly after The Children’s Bookstore opened, and I didn’t see him again until 1988, when he told me that he had just opened a café/performance space called Cabaret Voltaire.

Around this time I learned that Harry had in a previous incarnation created, along with some friends, the first version of what later became the musical Grease, back in 1969. He’d had a lot of ups and downs – needless to say he never saw any money from Grease.

Harry asked me if I’d like to perform Ursonate at Cabaret Voltaire, and we worked up a ten-show schedule: every Sunday at 7pm, during the summer of 1988.

I couldn’t assemble the original five-person cast. I’d be performing the first four Sundays by myself.

Of course since Ursonate was written as a solo performance piece I could have used this opportunity to experiment with an interpretation that was faithful to Schwitters’ intent. I could have performed in a tuxedo. I could have performed deadpan. But I simply wasn’t interested. I felt my approach in 1984 had been substantially more interesting than the authorized version I’d seen Peter Froelich enact. Since I knew I was capable of a straightforward Schwitters-like show, I did not wish to present one. I wanted to challenge myself.

I decided that if I was going to go solo I’d need a large, complex, crazy costume. I went to Amazon Hose And Rubber, an industrial supply warehouse, and bought a bunch of one-foot-wide, ten-foot-long black industrial hoses. I cut and assembled these into a bizarre outfit. I was skinny enough to actually fit completely inside one of the hoses – the other pieces I assembled into a huge curving helmet and a gigantic snakelike arm-sheath. Chicago Reader printed a photo of me in the costume, and the one-man performances started drawing strong crowds. They got even larger as the summer went on. My performances were athletic, loud, abstract, musical, unpredictable, threatening, and humorous.

Lynn Book was still teaching performance art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago: she joined the show for the next six performances. Our duo shows became increasingly sophisticated. Although each show was improvised, we came to know one another so well that our voices and movements melded.

Jeff Beer was doing a doctorate in computer music at Illinois Institute of Technology, and he brought in his elaborately altered trumpet technology to make our last three shows a trio. We were all accomplished performers; Jeff’s presence slowed the presentation, stretched the timeline, increased its dramatic abstraction. The audiences loved us. And oh my god we had fun.



Lynn was a full-time working performance artist, writing her own pieces and presenting in venues around town. Once a year, she would call me up with an Ursonate opportunity. One summer a group of Art Institute students got hold of an abandoned warehouse space in the West Loop, for one night only. They named it Emit Gallery. They lit the space with a dozen gigantic candles suspended from the wood beams overhead. Each candle had five or six huge wicks. The space was dark and jammed with a hundred or so people. Lynn had invited a bunch of kids from her neighborhood to come along; they sat in front.

Our performances were popular in part because I'd added a whole audience-participation element drawn from my children's theatre work. We'd get the crowds chanting along with us, and during the cadenza section, when I'd be ranting and shouting like a politician haranguing a crowd, Lynn would be out in the audience

shouting back at me, and distributing pieces of garden hose and black-eyed peas, so that people could spit peas at me out of those makeshift pea-shooters.

Well, at Emit Gallery, the kids in the front basically went insane during this part of the show. They started marching up and down, shouting Ursonate fragments, throwing things around. It was fabulous.

Dada is supposed to provoke. These days, since everyone knows this, no-one who shows up at a Dada performance can possibly be provoked. But this audience didn't like the kids interrupting the show. They got really annoyed, and they started to walk out. Lynn and I were ecstatic: we'd actually managed to annoy our audience! Or rather, our friends the kids had done it.

The next year we performed at Chicago Academy of the Arts and our industrial hose costumes and threatening tactics caused a group of high school girls to get so frightened that they darted out of the room and hid in the girls bathroom. I later learned that upstairs, in Old Saint Pat's Church, the priest had been trying to conduct a service during our raucous show. Great stuff!

Lynn arranged for us to perform at Club Lower Links two different times in the early nineties, at the height of that venue's performance art days. Dr. Kienast appeared for the second one, and after the performance I jammed on garden hose with the house jazzband.

In 1992, we decided to try an all-children's version of Ursonate, and stage it right in The



Children's Bookstore. We

figured we'd have babies and toddlers, so we couldn't be as weird as we'd been before. One-

hundred-and-fifty people showed up. The babies were absolutely frozen for the full 45 minutes. I swear there were dozens of babies, eyes wide open, mouth agape. The other kids and parents also had a wonderful time.

My friend Mara Tapp, who ran

a daily morning interview show on the public radio station WBEZ, had invited Lynn and me on to promote the 1992 children's performance beforehand. In 1994 Mara called to ask if we would work a birthday party for her. I thought at first she wanted us to perform at one of her daughters' parties, but no, it was for her MacArthur-genius-grant-winning husband Michael Silverstein's 90-year-old Uncle, Ted Silverstein. Ted, like Michael, was a professor of linguistics at University of Chicago. Mara said our audience at Ted's 90th birthday party would be forty linguistics professors and their wives.

Lynn and I this time performed in rather formal dress. It was odd working without our hose costumes, but we wanted to highlight the text more closely given the special qualifications of the audience. Ted was a delightful honoree, and the linguistics professors had a great time chanting along as energetically as the Art Institute types or the toddlers. One professor came up afterwards and recited a long chunk of an Ernst Toch nonsense poem composed entirely of geographical place-names: "Geographical Fugue."



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A few months later, in January of 1995 Willard Dickerson, Education Director of the American Booksellers Association, and formerly founder and president of the Logos Bookstore Association, called me up and told me to sit down. "Andy, how would you like to be dean of the booksellers school this fall, in Latvia?"

My business, The Children's Bookstore, was headed into a terrifically demanding year: since October of 1994 we'd been running a small full-time outlet at Chicago Children's Museum's North Pier location, and we were immersed in planning the museum's much larger gift shop at Navy Pier, to be opened in September of 1995. We also had 75 bookfairs on the docket. The count of new superstores in the Chicago area had risen to 18, several of them close to us.

But how could I say no? I'd taught at several of the ABA Schools, and I loved them. The Eastern European school program had been going for several years: these schools were a function of the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute. OSI had identified bookstores as some of the critical, threatened institutions to try to help make the transition successfully from the planned centralized economic system of the communist era to the free-for-all capitalist marketplace now emerging, since bookstores perform a vital informational and educational function in every free society. I had been on the ABA Education Committee when this overseas schools program got started, and I'd made it clear to Willard that I'd love to be involved in one.

Over the years I'd developed a superstition about Ursonate: I only performed it when I was invited to. However, I made an exception during the September 1995 Latvia Booksellers School. After the first day of the four-day seminar, the forty Latvian booksellers were visibly uneasy with the program. We had been told that one of the difficulties was that there was so much negative history among them, dating from the Soviet period when they'd all been locked together into the Soviet bookselling bureaucracy. That is, some of the booksellers had done cruel things to others. And now they were all trying to learn to run their shops like independent competitive capitalist enterprises. It wasn't easy for them to relax and act collegial.

At dinner, I announced there would be a special lecture that evening, and everyone should assemble back at the lecture hall at 8pm. No one was happy about this but they did all come. My colleagues, Valerie Lewis of Hicklebee's Bookstore, Stan Bolotin of Harvard Bookstore, and Tracy Danz of Zondervan Publishing, all presented impromptu storytelling performances or songs before my main "lecture," so the Latvian booksellers were aware that something was going to be unusual about the lecture.

I stepped to the podium, cleared my throat, and launched into Ursonate. For the first time, I was performing solo, in formal dress, in a manner not far removed from that of Peter Froelich, or by extension

of Schwitters himself.

After a few seconds, when Berutha the translator wasn't interpreting, the Latvians began to get irritated with her. She interrupted me excitedly. "Is it German poetry? From the early 20th century? Is it Christian Morgenstern?" I was delighted: Morgenstern was a predecessor of Schwitters by a decade or so. I told her what I was doing, and she gave the booksellers a rapid explanation. I hadn't known she had a degree in poetry! I continued with Ursonate, and I realized that something was happening that I'd never experienced before. Every other time I'd performed it, my audience had been composed of people who spoke my language, English. So, the nonsense was "non-English" to all of us. (With the exception of the performance for the babies...)

But here, the nonsense was equally non-English and non-Latvian. And, although our entire day had been spent communicating via translator, here was a text that required no translation. Our understandings of Ursonate were equal. The text dropped down into the space between our languages.

The group joined in with all the chanting and participatory sections, transforming into a jolly ensemble. When we'd finished (Valerie, Stan and Tracy had taken on the kind of audience-coaching roles that Lynn would provide during our duo shows), the Latvians told us to sit down, because now they were going to perform for us. They launched into an hour of rousingly rapid songs, with complicated rhythms and choruses. Lots of laughter. I'd read that Latvian folksongs are a full-scale literary tradition, and a famous folk-song collector of the early 20th century had compiled an edition that ran into many volumes. They're bawdy.

Suddenly we were all on our feet, and they were teaching us hilarious circle dances. One called "Adam Had Seven Daughters" required someone to go into the center of the circle, and snatch a second person to join him. The two people would wrap themselves around each other into some sort of impossible position. Then each person in the dance circle had to turn to his or her neighbor and the two of them would have to wrap themselves together in a pretzel shape that exactly mimicked that modeled by the players in the center. This could also involve the removal of clothing...but that night we didn't get farther than trading jackets and shoes.

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Two years later, a friend told me she'd visited the major Chicago Artists, 1945-1995 retrospective, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and seen an exhibit featuring Lynn's and my performances of Ursonate! Lynn, who'd moved to New York in the meantime, had been contacted by the MCA and provided them with a piece of green hose we'd used, and photographs of one of our shows at Club Lower Links. Our Ursonate work was also described in the catalog the MCA published to accompany the exhibit.

Our unauthorized, personal interpretations had made a niche for themselves in art history.