

Cardboard Resistance:

Deconstructed Rock and the Politics of Authenticity

[Phillip Vannini](#)

Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature...will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self [\[1\]](#)

Resistance is disorder, rebellion, the chaotic cacophony of dissent. And yet, to resist is to exist, to give sense to a spitefully senseless experience, to be open to one's world, even if only to reject it. Resistance as noise, existence as harmony. The line between the two? Suffocated by the noise of harmony and the harmony of noise. Both, to be found in the artistic production of Constellation Records -- a Montreal-based, deconstructionist, independent rock production label that finds itself at the forefront of an artistic and political movement of noise that strives to reject modern ideas of art, politics, and movement, and finds resistance in the harmony of noise itself.

Constellation's politics is as artistic as its art is political. Founded in Montreal six years ago, Constellation has produced and distributed independent rock music mostly through a network of Mom-and-Pop stores across Canada and the United States, expanding its influence through web and underground zine coverage, word of mouth, and ultimately its website. At first glance Constellation Records' impact on the music industry and the world at large is minimal. No platinum records are produced here, no multi-million dollar contracts are signed, and no large arena concerts are planned. Some of its bands, notably 'godspeed you black emperor' (GYBE), may have reached international audiences but gatherings of hundreds of fans at shows are still despised in the name of a truly punk philosophy calling for the demolition of all hierarchies and boundaries between the music, the musicians, and the listeners. While still unknown to the masses, GYBE, a nine-piece, multi-instrumental symphony-rock orchestra has recorded four albums, '*f#a#-*,' '*slow riot for new zero Canada*,' '*lift yr. skinny fists like antennas to heaven*,' and the latest '*Yanqui U.X.O.*' which lie at the forefront of its own musical sub-genre. GYBE's relative underground fame is also fueled by the legendary mystery surrounding the band, rumored to be living collectively in an abandoned rail yard in Montreal's Mile End district. On their part, GYBE members refuse to be identified by their last names and constantly shy away from interviews, appearances, or publicity. Their live shows take place in the dark, with the stage overflowed by cinematic images projected onto a background screen, with their violin and cello-driven rhythmic crescendos annihilating all interaction outside of melody. If

at all possible, their music is even more mysterious. Loosely describable as apocalyptic gloom, doomed nostalgia, and melodic urban utopia, their voiceless rhythms re-cover tape loops of street recordings, bigots' rants, corporate mini-mart in-store public announcements, and ethnic chants. The few, sparse, unsystematic prose passages involve distant narrators' voices reciting decentered poetry, such as:

The car is on fire and there is no driver at the wheel and the sewers are all muddied with a thousand lonely suicides. And a dark wind blows. The government is corrupt and we are all soul-mate drunks with our radio on and the curtains drawn. We're trapped in the belly of this horrible machine and the machine is bleeding to death... [2]

Why care about this, as critical theorists? Because through its cultural production Constellation is inherently and explicitly critical of commodified and standardized artistic expression. In words excerpted from its own manifesto, Constellation has

attempted to evolve one possible model for the recovery of an independent music ethic, hoping to summon some real sense of indie rock in spite of its reduction to a branded slogan through corporate co-optation, its laissez-faire attitude towards the market and the means of production, and all the facile irony that helps pave the path for these content-negating trends [3].

Constellation rejects the standardization typical of the music industry [4] and post-industrial society at large. By choosing to envelop its recordings in recycled cardboard and involving local craftspeople and artisans in the packaging process, Constellation condemns the plastic fakeness of commodified duplication and mechanical reproduction [5]. Neo-Luddites? No, cardboard resistance -- I argue. This is resistance in the name of difference -- a postmodern interpretive politics of authenticity set against the massified sameness of popular music and pop culture.

Constellation's art is inherently political, and clearly grounded in the social geography of postmodern cultural production and consumption. Constellation's production and distribution reclaim autonomy both from the corporate intellectualism of classical music production, and from the bastardization of the indie genre, first constructed then co-opted by global marketers of cool". Yet, this is no post-rock, but rather the vindication of the original project of independent rock itself, a self-aware practice of protest against the unquestioning consumption of stable, certain, cliché formulas of musical expression corrupted by taste standardization. Constellation's re-discovery of independent rock works as a philosophical and political assertion of the value of creativity, uniqueness, and openness to change. Constellation's independence from the demands of profit and the corrupting pandering to the minimum common denominator is not only validating its difference, but also its human authenticity. This is not a logic of profit-maximization then, but rather of individuation, an individuation fashioned

from the contradictions of late capitalistic culture, and practiced reflexively through strategically interwoven moves.

Constellation's independence lies in its resistance to global music conglomerate co-optation -- a resistance in both spirit and practice. Indie music is not a sound, or a look, or in other words an empty signifier, but a critical cultural stance toward the homogeneity of corporate-driven cultures. Corporatism standardizes, commodifies, de-individualizes, and turns humans into consuming serfs, false human beings who have lost their originality and independence -- *Constellation Records' political manifesto* implies. Escaping the basic traits of capitalism, such as trade, may be impossible, but re-asserting the meaning of what is traded and of trade itself is indeed possible and worth pursuing. There is much Rousseau in this quest for authenticity, but there is just as much Foucault and Habermas:

Independence is to our minds the affirmation of real community, real conversation, and the real exchange of artistic work. The urgent task is to build up and promote real dependency through a network of dissemination and valuation of culture that strives to address the truth of our human situation - a dependency based on freedom, critique, and dialogue. Obviously putting out rock music, however experimental and boundary-pushing, is only obliquely a political and social activity, but we nevertheless hope to contribute in a tiny way to a meaningful model of communication which takes its lead from art [\[6\]](#).

Besides being a denunciation of art for art's sake, this artistic-political independence is also a rejection of postmodern simulacra and the superficialization and standardization inherent in simulation. Instead of empty, alluring imagery Constellation asserts the original signified of indie, the primacy resistance value of expressiveness, singularity, and reflexivity. Independence, however, is not a synonym of autonomy. Constellation Records must necessarily relinquish some control over production and distribution to certain stores and distributors whose main intent is to infiltrate the market with profit motivation in mind. Besides mundane convenience, the delegation of certain aspects of distribution to regional distributors allows Constellation to deflect responsibility, and thus minimize the personal corruption business practices entail. The ideals of autonomy and self-legislation are as utopian now as they were throughout modernity, and must be clearly kept separated from pragmatic resistance practice. If it is of authenticity that we speak in interpreting the significance of Constellation's cultural production, we must understand authenticity as distinct from the traditionally modern ideal of autonomy and self-legislation. Instead, we ought to ground the authenticity of Constellation's practice in difference, and in the intersections between art-politics, the subject, and the Other of artistic and politico-cultural production -- in Constellation's case, the corporate music industry and commerce.

Indeed without this critical stance toward the commodified Other of music and culture, the art-politics of Constellation bands makes little sense. The authenticity of Constellation's cultural production indeed resides in its parodying a generalized and disavowed Other. In Constellation's deconstructed indie rock, authenticity is difference from corporate enemies, their retail "temples of payola" and their "warehousing of culture" [7]. This re-assertion of difference is a form of "postmodern sensibility" as "a reflexive hyper-authenticity [...] a parody of the parody that is called the social" [8] -- a postmodern authenticity as reflexive intersubjectivity [9]. And the music of GYBE is filled with moments of parody. In one instance it is the recorded corporate message of a highway mini-mart denouncing the protest activities taking place outside the store, in another it is the rage of a street reactionary reciting paranoid poetry and voicing his passion for weaponry. And yet, we should not make the mistake of separating GYBE's art from its lived practice, for resistance is practice and not just ideal. Take for example the obscurity surrounding the band. GYBE's antipathy to undue exposure is not merely a quirk somewhat typical of eccentric alternative musicians, but rather a self-reflective and indirect protest of the implicit, and often explicit, collusion between the press and the pop culture industry regime. Interpreting an interview or a photo shoot as but a form of subliminal advertising much too often present in the era of quasi-pornographic MTV-style infotainment, GYBE find their music and cover art a sufficient means for self-expression. By reducing the visibility of the artist at a time when the commercial popularity of music is determined by the carnal appeal of its performer [10], GYBE vindicate the primacy of the message and its content, rather than its medium and form.

Constellation's cardboard resistance is of crucial interest to the critical student of technology. Institutional discourses and their impact on subjectivities, such as the cultural and political forces of technologies, exist in different forms and are experienced in different ways. Constellation's cardboard resistance is indexical of an interpretive practice of the fluid meanings of discourses on technology, a creative practice through which individual and collective identities are constructed, namely identities grounded in resistance and independence from mainstream institutional discourses. This entails that we relinquish all meta-narratives and globally valid theoretical discourses on technology, and focus instead on the local practices and discourses created, undertaken, and experienced by Constellation.

Indeed, in the Lyotardian sense whereas *global* meta-narratives no longer make sense, *local* narratives constituted in the language games of everyday practice, and constructed at specific "nodal points" of interaction allow the subject, whether individual or collective, to exist "in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" [11]. Lyotard writes that no one "is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him [sic]" at the cross-roads of discursive

formations [12] -- Constellation's resistance indeed works as a self-repositioning at the cross-roads of commodified expression, independent rock label co-optation, and classical music re-interpretation. Constellation's subjectivity, in other words, is not entirely determined by the institutional discourses surrounding it, and it works well to understand it as "a particular set of sited language games whose rules discursively construct the semblance of a more or less unified subjectivity centered in experience" [13]. In fact, notwithstanding the might of global entertainment conglomerates, Constellation has been able to excavate a niche for itself, or perhaps even a trench from which to resist the oligopolization of artistic expression. How can we make sense of Constellation's resistance, then? By understanding resistance and the ideologies behind it not as universal conditions, but rather as practices pragmatically reduced to their local validity within interpretive communities.

In this sense, Constellation's rapport with technology is easily understood within its ideology of difference and authenticity, and within the political and philosophical history of the punk and indie music interpretive communities. Through their choosing cardboard packaging over conventional plastic, and the production of an immediate and almost 'live' sound over studio over-production Constellation artists and artisans can actually ground their difference from a commodified mainstream in practice. Anyone familiar with the specificities of music genres can promptly think of how the use of mastering and production techniques can be either lived and interpreted as inauthentic or authentic, depending on its context. In punk rock and much of indie rock, some technologies have been traditionally held to play a corrupting role between the ideally immediate force of the music and its listener. In its early days punk musicians could barely play their instruments and much of the ensuing distortion and imprecision was immediately thought to be directly representative of the genre's authenticity. Later, however, as musicians improved their technical skills and mastered the use of recording technology, distortion and dissonance were added during the recording process in the musical studio to make the music sound more real. However, music produced in the studio is not necessarily branded as fake. Consider the music of GYBE, a highly pure noise that is precisely executed and cleanly recorded free of errors and imprecision. Indeed, even though like all Constellation bands GYBE are known to stand for the raw and genuine immediacy of live performance over studio wizardry, both their studio-recorded tracks and live performances could not reach the same level of subversive purity without the bricolage of distant sounds, live play, and tape loops. How can this be lived as authentic? Because punk and indie rock's claim to authenticity lies not in the 'perfection' of digitally recorded mainstream pop -- what Lack labels hyperreal music -- but rather in the purity of a recording with distortions added -- a form of authentic inauthenticity. A record, such as a tape or CD or vinyl album after all is but a mediation of the live, authentic sound. But not all reproduction technologies are by

necessity corrupting of this original authenticity. A live performance re-mastered in a studio, or a 'live' studio performance that is not 'too' clean can also pass as pragmatic compromises between absolute noise and virginally pure, hyperreal sound. Constellation's use of certain forms of technology is then about reaching and maintaining a human scale, rather than letting technologies construct their human subjectivity:

Mechanical reproduction, whether digital or analogue with regard to the music itself, whether at the local die-cutter or silkscreener with regard to packaging and printing, is accessible technology and allows for the duplication and dissemination of cultural work at the micro-level, even if the macroscopic potentials of the technology machine, with respect to art no less than labour practice or weaponry, are terrifying. It's all about maintaining a human scale. Fin-de-si cle capitalism both facilitates and threatens independent production, and the key for us is to utilise those technologies that capitalism itself has marginalised and dispersed in order to create cultural objects that are inherently critical of the system. To the extent this condemns us to pursuing quality at the expense of quantity, it is a fate to which we willingly submit [\[14\]](#).

The need for another pragmatic compromise comes when records need to be packaged, some technologies are interpreted as corrupting, and others are seen as more authentic. That is why Constellation avoids standardized plastic jewel-cases and chooses instead to design fully recycled cardboard packaging for its CD releases. Cardboard packaging involves local artisans, craftsmen, environmentally-friendly small business suppliers, requires more creative human labor (from cutting and folding to trimming and drawing), and allows "the sensibility of the music [to be] reflected in and reinforced by the tactility of the package that contains it [\[15\]](#). These discourses-in-practice speak of the construction of the subjectivities of Constellation members, of the significance of their cultural resistance, of their interpretive practices, and identity politics.

Constellation's authenticities work as cacophonous voices further confounding the noise and doubts of postmodern culture, but sound like beautiful harmonies to those who choose to sing and listen. Much like GYBE's deconstructed rock strategies of indie representation, these cries are often suffocated in its own noise. Take GYBE's latest full-length recording, *'Yanqui U.X.O.'* for example, a genuine *mise en garde* of the power of deconstructed rock. *'Yanqui U.X.O.'* follows the irrational logic of a political aesthetics of protest, a cry of protest that is speechless and drowned in the noise of belligerent vibrations and notes, as no words are spoken throughout this recording. Yet it is in the periphery of the text that GYBE's voices are to be heard. The disc itself bears the inscription: "rockets fall on Rocket Falls" and "motherfucker = redeemer" -- a clear indictment of the aggressiveness of contemporary US foreign policy. A folder depicting a hammer nailing the word hope and chasing away flying

white chimeras with its motion reinforces this impression, corroborated by the photograph of a bomber jet on the cover. "U.X.O." -- a writing on the inlet specifies -- "is unexploded ordinance is landmines is cluster bombs. All of it mixed by god's pee..." [16]

Entertainment indeed blurs art blurs politics blurs technology in GYBE's music and Constellation records. Through the '*Yanqui U.X.O.*' album cover charts linking Sony, AOL Time Warner, Universal, and BMG to various military industries GYBE shed light not only on the connections between music and industry, but also between technology, entertainment, and military politics, much like a CNN "Showdown Iraq" or "Target: Terrorism" special which profits from the spectacle of military technology and turns politics into fictionalized entertainment from which the very same owners and perpetrators profit. This is in fact the art-politics of deconstructed rock, to bring the darkness of hegemonic power to light, only to submerge it in the noise of independent, i.e. authentic expression. The denouncement itself is a claim to difference "& hope still, a little resistance always maybe stubborn tiny lights vs. clustering darkness forever ok?" [17].

Notes

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche. "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983: 129.

[2] godspeed you black emperor. "The Dead Flag Blues (Intro)," *f#a#-*.

[3] <http://www.cstrecords.com/html/cowards.html>

[4] Theodor Adorno. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Edited by J. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991.

[5] Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Belknap, 1996.

[6] <http://www.cstrecords.com/html/manifesto.html>

[7] <http://www.cstrecords.com/html/manifesto.html>

[8] Tony Lack. *Consumer Society and Authenticity: The (Il)logic of Punk Practices*. Undercurrent, 3.

[9] Alessandro Ferrara. *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1998.

[10] Phillip Vannini. *Adorno's Legacy: Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, and the Global Political Economy of Britney Spears Inc.* Illuminations.

[11] Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. p. 15.

[12] Ibid.

[13] James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium Jaber. *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 70.

[14] <http://www.cstrecords.com/html/manifesto.html>

[15] <http://www.cstrecords.com/html/pckg.html>

[16] godspeed you black emperor. *Yanqui U.X.O.* Constellation Records, 2002.

[17] Ibid.

Phillip Vannini is a doctoral student in Sociology at Washington State University. His published works on music and popular culture theory have dealt with issues of commodification of memory, seduction, and standardization of taste.