

# INIUSA: PAUL LAMBERT'S WRY HAIR

by DAVID SEAMAN

Paul Lambert the INIUSA poet does art like a graffiti fiend decorating the bathroom of a truck stop. Not the slick internet-ready truck stops of our Interstate System, but the old stinky truck stops on US highways through the Heartland, where a visit to the men's room allowed an opportunity to read the walls, study the condom dispenser, and decipher the defaced signs: "We aim to please, you aim too please," and the classic obliterative poem scratched out from the hand dryer:

PUSH BUTTON. RUB HANDS UNDER WARM AIR. STOPS AUTOMATICALLY

PUSH BUTT RUB HAND UNDER ARM STOP AUTO AT ALLY

Before pay-at-the-pump you could not pay for the gas without going into the gas station and admiring the pin-ups. Pin-up calendars of course. Pin-ups also smiled from the match book covers; since everyone smoked. And these matchbook cover had ads for masculine products: Ads for products to build muscles and grow a full head of hair.

Enter Paul Lambert. Unfettered by the deadening intellectualization of the college-bred, he builds on a layer of truck-stoperia. His INItial attack on the fabric of Amerika is high Kamp perUSA! of the wall art of an era we now revere in black and white. Ladies with big white underpants and permed hair. Lambert's posters and post cards layer this material with a stream-of-consciousness narrative that leaps into the contemporary, weaving today's technology into his comix wonderment. The underlayment of Lambert's art is a photomontage of this bygone era. Zap from the truck stop to the Macintosh and the Hair Club for Poets. Did I say not the high tech T/A truck stops with internet connection? OK, Paul Lambert uses the internet and his Macintosh computer to embellish the old images that predated the interstate highway system. The institution of trucking tries to outgrow its rowdy image and embrace slick modern times with showers and internet and capuccino at the truck stops. Paul Lambert starts with his Macintosh computer and works his way back to the old funky days. It is a fun trip to the past with an electronic toehold on today.

The Hair Club, with its outrageous bouffants and ridiculous outfits is a wry comment on the former efforts to become masculine, and mirrors today's hair clubs and erectile dysfunctional testimonials. Paul Lambert declares that his hair grew, and so did his ears.



How far back should we go to find the origins of Paul Lambert's INI art? His texts and reminiscences about his grade school years (many of them in email messages over the past twelve months) remind me of Rimbaud's "Poètes de sept ans," taking refuge in the latrine. Here is my translation of a verse from Rimbaud's poem:

At seven years old he wrote novels, based on life  
 In the vast desert, where ravished Liberty reigns,  
 Forests, sunshine, shores and savannahs! – He worked  
 From illustrated tabloids where, flushed, he ogled  
 Laughing Spanish women and Italian ladies.  
 When in came the wild, brown-eyed neighbor girl!  
 Eight years old and wearing Indian dresses,  
 A mean little girl who jumped on him in a corner  
 Shaking her locks, and when he was under her,  
 He bit her bottom, because she never wore underpants;  
 And, bruised by her fists and heels, he savored  
 The flavor of her skin back in his room.

[À sept ans, il faisait des romans, sur la vie  
 Du grand désert, où luit la Liberté ravie,

Forêts, soleils, rives, savanes! – Il s’aidait  
 De journaux illustrés où, rouge, il regardait  
 Des Espagnoles rire et des Italiennes.  
 Quand venait, l’oeil brun, folle, en robes d’indiennes,  
 – Huit ans, – la fille des ouvriers d’à côté,  
 La petite brutale, et qu’elle avait sauté,  
 Dans un coin, sur son dos, en secouant ses tresses,  
 Et qu’il était sous elle, il lui mordait les fesses,  
 Car elle ne portait jamais de pantalons;  
 – Et, par elle meurtri des poings et des talons,  
 Rempportait les saveurs de sa peau dans sa chambre.  
 Poésies, Les Poètes de sept ans.]

Now here are some unwitting parallels from Paul Lambert. He sent the following text modestly translated into Italian by the internet software Babelfish. It has the innocent charm of a Fellini film:

Amavo questa donna così tanto. Lei ed io hanno avuti un grande affare di amore. Abbiamo speso insieme molto tempo nudo nei cespugli del giardino e nelle piccole stanze della nostra casa della famiglia.



[I loved this woman so much. She and I had a great love affair. We spent a lot of time together naked in the bushes in the garden and in the back rooms of our family home.]

Lambert goes on to tell how his family had moved to Hawaii while he was in grade school. This led to another adventure that would later emerge in his art:

“What slays me in retrospect is that I was part of a ‘club’ or ‘group.’ We built ‘forts.’ The main fort or bunker was an interconnected series of trenches and bunkers underneath our house”. Lambert then describes how he decorated the clubhouse with covers torn off of the lurid crime stories his mother read (remember



Rimbaud's poet, inspired by illustrated tabloids):

"I actually tore the covers off of some of these paperbacks and pinned them up down in our main clubhouse bunker underneath the house. It just struck me this last weekend (Easter) that the first inist text collages I made with my first computer were literally based on the same types of lurid babes on covers of old murder mysteries".

Lambert was not the academic whiz that Rimbaud was, and was only too happy to end his school years (of course, Rimbaud never went to college, either). As Lambert explains, "At the start of the sixth grade I said to a classmate, 'Two more years and then we're out.' He told me no way, there is still high school. At the time I didn't know high school existed. This guy then explained to me about high school. Like freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years were yet to come. Oh god will it never end. It was very depressing."

Somehow in the intervening years, Lambert learned ceramics, and made his way to Portland, Oregon. He happened to be living in Portland when a series of happenstances led to Paul's art work being viewed and appreciated by Pietro Ferrua:



"In the early eighties my girlfriend Susan met Pietro Ferrua's wife Diana and through her introduced Pietro to my work. Both Pietro and Diana Ferrua were excited about my work," he continues, "and Pietro showed some of my oil pastel drawings of brightly colored geometric shapes and floating letter forms to

Maurice LeMaitre who included them in a 1985 show at the Grand Palais [in] Paris. In the same show Bertozzi and the other early Inists exhibited work.”

It appears that a rush of involvement followed, with Lambert at one point accompanying Bertozzi to the INI Painted 2000 exhibition at the Kemi Art Museum in Finland. Along the way, as Lambert recalls, Bertozzi “declared me the King of INI North America and wrote a declaration to that effect.”

But Lambert the American was not entirely comfortable with the royal mantle, and tried to relinquish this honor. “Later, when I abdicated,” he recalls, “[Bertozzi] sent me a letter to the effect that he did not name me the King of INI North America lightly and informed me I was the King for life. My reaction to all this king stuff was that of course I am king as is each and every one of us in the good old USA. I believe this is more of a new-world idea. Long live the king!”

There is a reference to this series of events in the tongue-in-cheek on Robert Ferry’s site “We Are Them.” <http://home.earthlink.net/~wearethem/>. He suggests another version of Lambert’s loss of his crown, and hints at dissension between INIUSA’s two coasts. “[Mark Fisher] was introduced to INI by his long time friend INI/BOB. Later, along with Lex, Mark took over INI/USA after beating up the King in a back alley, and INI/BOB quit in disgust. The King and INI/BOB were banished to the netherwold of poetry oblivion never to be spoken of or to ever again.”

I mention these points because I think the interpersonal and group cohesion phenomena are fascinating aspects of the evolution of creative movements, in particular avant-garde art movements. Who can think of the avant-garde without recalling the struggles within the Surrealist movement? We join, if that is the word, well, we subscribe to avant-garde movements because they are iconoclastic, and yet the energy of belonging is synthoplastic, to coin a term. We are encouraged/invited/coerced into sharing the community values. When I first met Paul Lambert and climbed into his pickup truck in Portland, Oregon, he wryly

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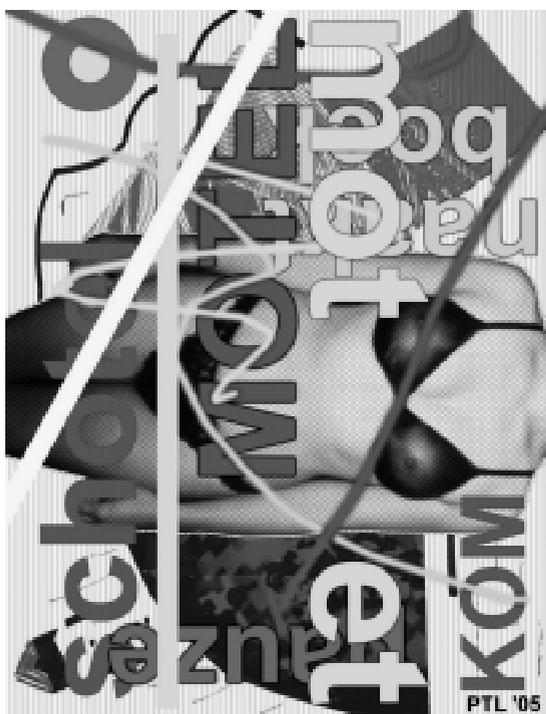


showed me what he called the INI secret handshake. This of course does not exist, though Lambert has made use of showing INI in hand signs. This is similar to the ini insistence on the letters I–N–I when they occur naturally in words, such as in the salutations, “Saluti INInterrotti,” and “infiINite greetings.” Some may call this the euphoric stage of the revolution, where centripetal forces bring the group together.

Unfortunately, revolutions go through further stages. As Crane Brinton suggested in his book, *Anatomy of Revolution*, there often comes a “reign of terror” similar to the struggles between Robespierre and Danton in the French revolution. The most powerful leader claims the euphoric signs of the revolution and converts them into an orthodoxy that is imposed on all members. Such an impetus led André Breton to expel Salvador Dalí and others from Surrealism, and is partial cause of the schism between Isou and Lemaître in Lettrism. Does the great physical distance between New England and the West Coast force a split in INIUSA? Or is there simply a generational change that time inevitably creates? I will leave it to others to explore and explain this phenomenon.

Let us return to looking at Paul Lambert’s work. In 2001 and 2002 he published a series of printed black and white artist books, which he called *TEMPLE #13*. They contain some text and otherwise have full page INI images. The very first one is

biographical synopsis, reading “Portland Texas / I was born in Texas / Way out on the dry / dusty plains / I was born in Texas / Way out on the dry / dusty plains / Now I live in Portland / where all it does / is rains.” Other images in these three volumes combine layers of old pornographic magazines (including both male and female nudes) with machine language, stills of American life that appear to come from *Life* magazine, and random other images (such as a text from my book on *Concrete Poetry in France*, for which he asks permission in a handwritten dedication). The words on the pages indicate a spiritual quest for wisdom, as well as a desire to eat more



carrots and broccoli, expressed in the language of Christian evangelists; the diet evangelists are their American successor. In addition it contains a wry critique of a corrupt society: "English Dept. / the crack of the bullwhip will soon be available / Each Additional Year / Sophisticated Booze-Induced Lethal Gases."

*We Are Them*, the same web zine from which I cited Robert Ferry (INIBOB) above also publishes a long list of works by Lambert. This includes two more variations on the Hair Club, and more of the pin-up inspired collages.

The text that overlays the images has become more



cryptic, and sometimes even makes use of Dutch, a language which sometimes appears comical to English-speakers because it resembles either baby-talk or raunchy slang. Shall I cite examples? "BOEK / KUNT/ MOET / HAREN."

Lambert also has a political side, which emerges in his defense of the Native American chief Geronimo, and in criticism of the American war policy in Iraq. The Geronimo image is accompanied by a text that relates the American war machine to conquest of the Native Americans as well as other combats: "SOME OBSERVERS THINK THE ARMED FORCES OF POWA AMERICA (NORTE) DISORGANIZED AND NAZI GERMANY TO INVASION. THESE OBSERVERS THINK THIS MADE THE SAME



BENCHLAND IN YOUR SIDE, PIERCED WITH A SPEAR AND ARROW.”

His “Whinged Victory” he calls “an attempt at current event satire,” suggesting that the current U. S. administration is like something out of the comic books.

There is much more going on in Paul Lambert’s work, which continues to evolve. Here is a statement of philosophy that he sent to me on

February 14, 2005: Last year my own efforts were more in the vein of pure text. I will send you a recent pc [post card] that has quite a connection to ships and the seamen who sail them among other themes.” The image sent was a bright burst of color with the words “See Love War Sex Weep Sea;” I call it his philosophy of life.

As he said in the same message to me, “ I am as always endeavoring to continue my creative works in many ways and many media.” (February 14, 2005)

Paul’s latest permutation is L.A.W.N., the Lambert American Wryting Network, the signature he uses on all his current emails. Wry / ting suggests his irony, which also comes out in some political commentary, and just plain silly jokes. When he is serious, the commentary is devastating; one wonders where Lambert adopted the cause of the Native

Americans when he created this: But wry is a good attitude for an avant-gardist, especially in this world where we inevitably end up alone with a computer linked electronically with partners all over the world whom we simply cannot reach out and touch. Wry is the wink across the safety of the ether; wry is a smirk from the comfort of the living room; wry is the image that can be endlessly doctored through PhotoShop.



Paul Lambert is wry and only he knows why.