

Thomas Boutoux

METRONOME PRESS
MAISON DE PASSE OR HALFWAY HOUSE

*To Robin R.
Paris, September 2005*

Dear Robin,

Yes, it has been a long time since I wrote. But then, for a while, I had no idea where you were. We have both been so busy. So now you've re-surfaced, let's pause for a minute, and catch up.

You remember the last time we spoke – when we had dinner at La Réserve a little over a year ago – I told you that I had just been invited by Clémentine Deliss, a curator, to take part in a publication she produces called 'Metronome'. Back then I had no clear idea about what I would do, or what my role in this project would be except that, intuitively, I sensed it would be different from what I had been working on so far. A whole year has passed now, and as we are just about to go to print, it's time to tell you what this is all about. When Clémentine arrived in Paris a little over 18 months ago, she brought with her two very intriguing pamphlets published in the early 50s. She had already decided she would base her new Metronome on these objects, but it was still very imprecise as to how this would happen, even for her. She just knew there was something to be done. So she laid the two books out in front of me, just for me to look at. They were a strange mixture of pictures of anonymous girls tripping over their lingerie, and short stories. I tell you, it was quite different from your usual pin-ups, lively, something was going on that went beyond the image.

I had never heard of Maurice Girodias, the man behind these two books, nor of his publishing activities, even though he had been carrying on for several decades here in Paris and then later in New York. So yes, she introduced me (the French guy) to someone who had been at the heart of many things here in Paris, but whose name had never cropped up in my sphere of research until now. I soon realised that I was not the only one who was oblivious to this man and his work: Girodias had been lurching from one crisis to the next and ended his days as a forgotten man. That was in 1991.

To tell you about Girodias' life in detail would take me too much time and too many pages, and I still have a lot to do, but I really urge you to find out more, and to read the two volumes of his autobiography, *Une journée sur la terre*, and also *L'Affaire Girodias*, in which he relates some of his extravagant adventures in the U. S. in the 1970s. As far as I know you, I'm sure you'll enjoy this stuff, and if you can't find them in Auckland (which is likely) tell me, and I will mail them to you.

The only thing you probably need to know right now is that Girodias, soon after the war and after some years spent in art book

publishing, started up a new business in Paris, called Olympia Press. He used the Press to publish the works of American and British writers who were prevented by censorship laws from being published in their own countries, alongside lots of pornography, commissioning struggling anglophone writers who lived in Paris to produce dirty books, or DBs. Among the plethora of books he published at the time, Girodias released the original English editions of some key novels of the twentieth century, including Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. The enterprise flourished and later, when censorship was levelled in the U.S. and *Lolita* was reprinted over there, he made a lot of money and diversified into restaurants and a nightclub in Paris called La Grande Séverine. Girodias' achievement is broader than that, however — in his bid to show the world the futility of moral censorship, and the indispensable role of passion in literature, he helped change the ways we read and think about sex. No, seriously.

You're probably wondering about the significance of all this beyond the historical one, and why this should be relevant in 2005. I mean, what is censorship today? That's precisely what we started asking people over here. What kind of text would require the use of a pseudonym? What kind of images would need to remain hidden from public view? Anonymity, as we both know, could become a very necessary component, the drop of acid that could corrode certain assumptions about the role of the artist in the public realm. Can you imagine the catalogue of an exhibition where only the eyes of the artists and not their names appear? Well, Girodias did that: one of the earlier Olympia catalogues was decorated with just the eyes of the authors. Don't you think it's a great idea? Who would do this today? Could you agree to withhold your identity?

After lots of meetings here in Paris, and a crazy few days in London, the whole thing shifted into gear. Among the things we discussed in London with some potential contributors was fiction. You remember that discussion we had about the state of writing in the contemporary art world, and the fact that magazines, catalogues, readers, all that stuff is draining our imaginations and *raison d'être*? I've been thinking a lot about it since. When was the last time you were shafted by a good piece of writing? Even literature has become market-driven. As for filmmaking, John Akomfrah told us that nobody writes scenarios anymore and that all you need today to produce a film is six lines of blurb and five pages of budget details. From that moment on, we began searching for artists who sense that there is a renewed need for stories, narratives, and forms of fiction that stimulate and nurture the imagination.

Later I met this cool Chinese girl at a meeting of an arts foundation in Paris. We were the two extra guests who'd been invited there for some obscure reason. As we waited for the committee discussions to end, we had some drinks at the bar of the Park Hyatt and I began to tell her about our work with Metronome. And suddenly, it became even clearer to me that fiction might be the key to an interesting intercultural understanding and a possible means of working together over long distance. Fiction is everywhere and it would be challenging

to negotiate the concept elsewhere, even in China. But of course not just China. Locations in Africa would fit in well with the spirit and framework of this enterprise. But maybe I'm going too far too fast... and what I really need to do is describe the object.

So what's it all going to look like? So far, Clémentine has produced one Metronome in one location at a time, but together we're bringing out seven, plus a whole new series of books. Just like Girodias earlier, we will publish 'Teasers' to seduce people into buying our new collection of paperbacks. In the originals of 1953, the girls undress on the photographs and Girodias — as editor — reveals the shoulder of a new novel or the ankle of script. I tell you, you're going to be surprised at how the six new 'Teasers' of 2005 translate this playful operation.

In Paris, of course — and you know how Paris is today with its no-risk policy — an enterprise like this generates confusion. People find it hard to locate it in the given categories of art projects. Is it a magazine? When is it going to translate into an exhibition? Why don't you collaborate with an existing French publisher who's good at distribution? Why do you want to do everything by yourselves? But interestingly, the project works well in mobilising different kinds of people, from artists, sociologists, lawyers, architects, to filmmakers, not only because they feel fiction might be the right genre to invest in once again, but also because they feel caged within their own disciplines and professions. We have organised many get-togethers both festive and formal during which we tried to define more precisely the parameters of this project and the impact it can have on further collaborations within the common space that Metronome provides. There's a sense in which we're building something together...

What I like with the idea of Metronome Press as a publishing house, is precisely the word *house*. It gives a formal structure to our idea, solidifies something without narrowing it down to one activity and proves that people can share a long-term perspective and dynamic. You could see it as a shell for initiatives coming from this family of people who aspire to an economy of production outside the normal institution.

From the international perspective, Clémentine and I think, that on the long term, it could give Paris a kind of *maison de passe*, a place unlike a museum or gallery where you put up a show or look at one, but that functions like an intermediary or better, a *halfway house*, where you would meet other patients in the sense of people who don't want to see things happen instantly, and who are not drugged by visibility. You could come with an intuition or just by yourself, and see what develops out of this environment. The first production of Metronome Press with its four volumes is proof that this is already a reality.

I look forward to reading your spirited comments on this and of course, to see you soon here in Paris, without having to wait until we bump into each other at the next biennial.

All the best,
Thomas