Robert Filliou studied economics at the University of California Los Angeles before working as an oil economist. At some point, he lost interest - or hope - in what seems to be the standard approaches to knowledge and knowledge production of an increasingly technocratic society. His manifesto offered an alternative.

Looking back over the developments of the past half century, it is no longer as clear to me as it once seemed that the situation is as hopeless as he believed it to be. I may, of course, be wrong. The history of the past fifty years gives evidence for either position.

Filliou's manifesto effectively declares social science, natural science, and the humanities obsolete. Instead, he approaches knowledge and knowledge production from what seems to be an optimistic perspective anchored in art.

Filliou himself addressed this problem in his manifesto, «A Proposition, a Problem, a Danger, and a Hunch». He wrote:

A refusal to be colonized culturally by a self-styled race of specialists in painting, sculpture, poetry, music, etc... this is what 'la Révolte des Médiocres' is about. With wonderful results in modern art, so far. Tomorrow could everybody revolt? How? Investigate ...

A problem, the one and only, but massive: monotonous, always the same. A refusal to be colonized culturally by a self-styled race of specialists in painting, sculpture, poetry, music, etc... this is what 'la Révolte des Médiocres' is about. With wonderful results in modern art, so far. Tomorrow could everybody revolt? How? Investigate ...

A problem, the one and only, but massive: money, which creating does not necessarily create.

The difficulty, of course, is that the specialists also took control of Filliou's work, colonizing it and adapting it to the art markets, both the economy of buying and selling art, and the attention economy for thinking about it. Filliou's proposition for a solution unfortunately made little difference,

So that the memory of art (as freedom) is not lost, its age-old intuitions can be put in simple, easily learned esoteric mathematical formulae, of the type a/b = c/d (for instance, if a is taken as hand, b as foot, d as table, hand over head can equal foot on table for purposes of recognition and passive resistance. Study the problem.

Call the study: Theory and Practice of A/B.

To be sure, no one else seems to have solved the problem. The idea of letting artists rather than technocrats make the effort was not a bad idea. Nevertheless, this involves a second difficulty. Robert Filliou used the terms as art and artist in a different way than the normative art world does while using the art world to mediate his ideas. The art world seized on Filliou's work, mediating them in a narrow channel rather than a larger world of public discourse in open conversation.

A short note is no place to address the broad range of issues embedded in Filliou's manifesto. What can be said is that these problems are difficult, and solving them is difficult as well. The difficulties are not Filliou's fault. Rather, they are embedded in a series of challenges we are only coming to understand.

Filliou's idea of a poetical economics emerged during an era of contest, inquiry, and debate that affected all research fields and most fields of professional practice. Filliou understood this. He sought a way to link thought to productive action - or perhaps he sought to link thought to productive inaction, as it was for John Cage. Attempting this through art suggested a new kind of research as well. Moreover, it suggested «an art that clucks and fills our guts» in the words of Dick Higgins’s (1966) Something Else Manifesto.

Robert Filliou was trained as an economist. It is interesting, therefore, to reflect on the work of economists who considered the problem in different ways. One stream of this work began in the 1940s when Australian economist Colin Clark laid the foundation for work that Daniel Bell would explore in his discussion of post-industrial society. Others also addressed these patterns, notably the economist Harold Innis (Marshall McLuhan’s predecessor and mentor) and the economist Fritz Machlup. Like Filliou, they did better in analyzing problems than proposing solutions. However, their work had a different fate. It helped give birth to a slowly evolving public conversation that is open to all because it generates political dialogue in the larger arena of analysis, critique, and proposition.

The grand irony of Filliou's work is that he was transformed from a public thinker into an artist, with all the limitations this implies. As a thinker, Filliou opposed the notion of art as a new form of specialization, subject to the control of dealers, critics, collectors, and the highly specialized institutions that serve them. As a thinker, Filliou worked in the productive border zone between art and public life. Unfortunately, Robert Filliou was transformed into an artist, and the art world linked his ideas to mercantile interests. This was not Filliou’s fault. Much like specialists and technocrats in any field, the specialists who manage art world institutions also have a difficult time understanding and working with the productive poetic economies that emerge in the border zone.