

Toward a Unified
Theory of
Physics

by Vance Kotrla

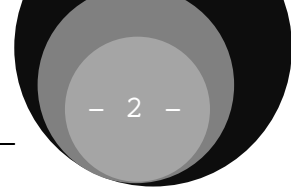
Why the guy who'd been sitting there before him had left that morning's *New York Times*, or even had it in the first place, he didn't think to question - Tate England knew that fate had wanted him to have that paper. Their names - Dan. Vince. - leapt up off the page at him, and he understood that he'd been destined to find that article, and find it in the bus station, no less, that he might find and stop them.

Murder?

Probably not. But he did, at the very least, want his money back.

He'd have to raise the bus fare, but Tate didn't mind. So he'd have to clean some windshields, maybe tie his leg up under his ass and hobble around on crutches with a sign that said 'Hungrey, Broke, God Bless.' So what? That wasn't exactly the movie theater rendezvous from *Midnight Cowboy*, after all.

He approached a ticket window and the gum-smacking high school dropout behind it, and asked for the departure times and ticket prices for busses capable of getting him to New York City. The teller looked at Tate the way she would have looked at a five-foot, eight-inch bacterium, and her thankfulness for the shatterproof glass between the two of them was palpable. As she punched a few keys on her ticketing terminal and then droned off a list of routes that would get him where he wanted to go, the girl made every conceivable effort to let Tate know that he



was causing her a great deal of inconvenience by asking her to do her job.

'How much is the fare?' he asked.

'These is all \$135,' she said, blowing a bright blue bubble.

'And how long is the trip?'

She glared at him, popped her bubble, and glanced back at her monitor.

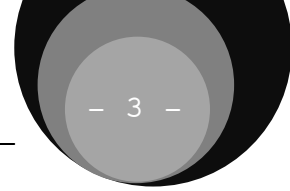
'One day, fifteen hours, and forty minutes; one day, fifteen hours, and twenty minutes; one day, fourteen hours, and fifty minutes...'

'Yeah, I get the picture,' he said. 'Thanks.'

She snorted, and it pushed Tate over the edge. Enough was enough and he couldn't resist.

'I may be dirty,' Tate said, 'but if I take a shower I'll be clean, and you'll still be working at the bus station at three in the morning. I'm fifteen hours from a college degree, and you're still about three grades away from being able to find a predicate nominative with two hands and a flashlight, so...yeah.'

The teller picked up her phone as Tate spun on his heels and started walking away. He neglected to mention that the degree he was only fifteen hours away from was a film school degree, which promised him a bright future filled with



opportunities like making Xeroxes, grading state standardized tests, and delivering pizzas.

But none of that pertained to the matter at hand. He guessed at the amount of time it would take to raise one hundred fifty dollars and added a day and a half for travel. It would be tight, but if his was the side of right, he would make it in time. If fate had brought him a New York paper, it could also get him to Big Apple itself by Friday. Before he could give the matter much more thought, though, a hand like a bear trap clamped down on his shoulder.

Tate peeked back and found a burly security officer glaring down at him.

'Let's go,' the officer said. He yanked Tate off his feet, and, as the officer dragged him from the bus terminal, Tate looked back up at the ticket window, where the girl he'd insulted was waving bye-bye.

He had to promise the guy a percentage, but Tate was able to borrow another vagrant's puppy. The guy wasn't really a vagrant, though. His street name was Larry, and when Tate asked to borrow his dog, the guy confided that he actually lived in a loft about three blocks away. He said the puppy had put him there.

'He's worth his weight in platinum, this one is,' he said. 'He's cuddly, is the thing. I'm thinking about expanding operations, getting another dog, too. My wife's been after me to get one of those SUVs to drive the kids around in, and I think two dogs would put me over the top. I think with two dogs I could do it.'

'And if you had a whole litter of puppies,' Tate said, 'you could probably move out to the suburbs.'

'I don't like the suburbs,' Larry said, apparently as unfamiliar with sarcasm as he was with the concept of moral rectitude. 'Market's saturated. You got kids selling candy for their baseball teams and high school girls giving car washes in bikinis to raise money for student council. Hobos belong in the city.'

'Mmm,' Tate said, taking the dog's leash. 'What's his name?'

'Morgan Stanley,' Larry told him.

Morgan Stanley barked at hearing his own name, and as Tate led him away, the mutt's floppy ears bounced up and down, making it look as though the dog were attempting flight. Those ears, bright brown eyes, and wet little puppy nose had Tate in bus fare by mid-afternoon.

As he stood at a busy intersection with Morgan Stanley's leash wrapped around a 'No Left Turn' sign, Tate couldn't help

but think that things were coming full circle. Dan and Vince had been panhandlers, too, after a fashion, and that's how he'd met them. His affiliation with the pair had begun on the side of a road - Vince holding a sign that read 'Rent a Surrealist,' Dan with something incomprehensible about sea monkeys written on his - and had ended with Tate dead broke, unable to finish school and writing a rent check that he knew would bounce. Now, if he could get his way, he might be able to put the two of them in their place, and get back on his feet in the process.

Visions of book deals, exposés, interviews all bobbed into his mind, but he suppressed them.

'Not yet,' Tate told his rented best friend. 'One thing at a time.' Morgan Stanley barked and wagged his tail.

At five-thirty, Tate headed back toward the bus station and found Larry huddled in a doorway, trying to make his beard look more frazzled. Tate handed him the leash and fifteen percent of the day's haul.

'You're worse than a talent agent,' Tate said.

'But better than a loan shark,' Larry reminded him. He let Morgan Stanley lick his face and then he tucked the ratty blanket he'd been sitting on into his grimy backpack. 'If you come back to town, try to find me. Farming out some work like this, I could get used to it.' Larry grabbed his props and led



his dog away, disappearing around the corner of the bus terminal.

Even after fifteen off the top, Tate had made enough for a one-way ticket and a few solid meals along the way. He went inside the bus station and kept an eye out for the teller he'd had the run in with that morning. He bought his ticket, took a seat in the terminal, slipped a quarter into the pay television built into his armrest, and waited for his bus to arrive.

The next morning in Tuskegee, Alabama, a family of four heading to the Washington, D.C. area for vacation got on the bus. The wife, a blonde in her early thirties who had a Southern accent that sounded more charming than anything, took the seat next to Tate.

'I'm Missy,' she said. Tate only sighed. 'Where are you headed?' she asked him, trying to be polite.

'New York,' he told her.

'New York,' she said. 'Yeah. I'll bet it's nice there.'

'The hoboing's better,' Tate said. 'Tourists. Higher cost of living. Stuff like that.'

'R-Really?' she stammered. 'Well that'll be good.'

'Yeah, I'm looking forward to it.'

'And how did you come to be...a hobo? If you don't mind me asking.'



She was trying to be nice, and Tate hadn't spoken to anyone since he'd gotten on the bus more than twelve hours earlier, so he decided to let her off the hook.

'I'm not really a hobo,' Tate said. 'I'm a college student.'

'Do you go to school in New York?' she asked.

'I don't go to school anywhere right now,' he said, 'and I have to get revenge on two guys before I can go back.'

Missy laughed. Tate didn't smile.

'You're having fun with me again' she said. 'Like when you said you were a hobo.'

Tate just stared at her.

'Oh my,' she said, catching on. 'That doesn't sound very pleasant.'

'No,' Tate assured her, 'it's going to be wonderful.'

'What I mean is, revenge isn't exactly a Christian virtue, is it?'

Now Tate did smile - a smug, sardonic little grin that seemed to chill the very air inside the bus.

'Listen,' he began...

Maybe honesty really was the best policy.

By the time Tate finished his story, every word of it true (or, at worst, only slightly embellished), he had almost become



a general. Missy's husband Joel walked up just as Tate began talking. After another couple of minutes, first one of the couple's children, then the other joined the little group. Tate's story moved them all so deeply that Joel wanted to put the family's vacation plans on hold until he'd helped Tate find Dan and Vince. He pledged his wife and children into service, but Missy talked him down. The kids consulted each other briefly before telling their parents that not only did they no longer require separate beds at the hotel, they didn't even want a separate room anymore.

Joel handed Tate four hundred dollars cash, half of the money the family had budgeted for lodging on the trip. Tate tried to refuse, Joel would hear none of it. It was the four hundred, or the family joined the hunt. Missy seconded him. It was their duty, she said.

Tate took the money and zipped it up in his backpack.

He fell asleep during a long layover in Atlanta, and dreamed. It was like the dream where you walk into class and realize that you're naked...only worse. For Tate, it was as though he realized he was naked before he got to class, but he had to walk in there all the same.

He is still a full-time college student, in this dream, and he's only a week from finishing the first semester of his senior year. Outside a sixty-foot tall cast of Rodin's *Gates of Hell*,

Tate stands clutching a videocassette in his hand. The great doors swing open and when the smoke clears, he sees his Documentary Studies professor -- clad in scarlet robes and wearing a white wig -- beckon to him from atop a giant court bench. Tate inches inside the chamber and sees, high above his head, a jury box packed with his classmates, his peers. They're all there: the guy who wears a beret and once accused Stan Brakhage of pandering to the masses; the bald girl who never speaks without quoting Maya Deren; that guy who thought *The Birth of a Nation* was the single greatest film ever made until he watched the original *Slumber Party Massacre*. The list goes on. The gates slam shut behind Tate, and the videocassette disappears from his hand. Suddenly, projected on each of the chamber's four walls, he sees the first frame of his documentary: a title card bearing Andre Breton's definition of Surrealism.

It begins innocently enough. The opening strains of a harpsichord suite, some artistic shots of highways and street signs rolling by in slow motion, an innocuous voice over. Then, there they are - Dan and Vince. They're trying to flag down cars on the highway. No one stops. They look at the camera and spout gibberish about Jackson Pollock and Bugs Bunny, they go door to door trying to find someone who will pay to watch Dan read *Ulysses*, Vince dresses up as a mime, talks to children at

the park, and refuses to juggle. None of it makes sense, and then the movie really breaks. It's madness. Quick shots of beetles and ceiling fans, a short man in a bathrobe and a mask, waving a machete; the sounds of women screaming and dialogue from old Sci-Fi movies. In the chamber and on the video, Tate is screaming. And then darkness, but Tate knows the worst is yet to come. He begs for someone to stop the tape, but the picture comes back up and there he is, on camera, standing next to a homeless transvestite that ran for mayor and has been the subject of every mediocre student documentary produced at the school in the last five years. Before Video-Tate can even hand him/her the microphone, the tape runs out and the lights come up in the chamber.

'Tate England,' his professor booms over the muffled laughter issuing from the jury box, 'we find you guilty of making an incoherent, trite, and derivative documentary.'

'I tried to do something original,' Tate whimpers. 'But they broke into the editing suite...'

'Silence!'

'They stole all of my money...'

'Be silent and know thy fate!' his professor begins, leaning in and raising his gavel. 'By the power vested in me by Academia and the Consent of the Establishment, I hereby sentence you to...'

Let it be Bollywood, Tate thinks. Maybe even Toronto. I can still make movies in Toronto.

'A lifetime of hard labor for a pizza delivery chain!' his professor bellows, and slams down the gavel.

Tate woke up in Atlanta with a jerk, nearly falling off his seat in the bus terminal.

They were Surrealists...and they had given him nightmares.

'Stupid irony,' Tate said as he gathered up his meager belongings and checked to make sure he still had the money Joel had given him.

The thing was, it hadn't been a dream. Ok, the whole courtroom thing and the Gates of Hell and all that had been a dream, but the video hadn't been, nor its results. That's why Tate was a hobo climbing back onto a bus and why, eighteen hours later, he would climb off at the end of the line: New York City.

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Several months earlier and with the last fifty dollars in his checking account, Tate had entered his documentary into a film festival that boasted \$25,000 in cash prizes. It was tantamount to paying fifty dollars for a lottery ticket, but it had been the only thing Tate saw in arm's reach that resembled a life preserver. Since he hadn't been able to pay the rent at

his apartment, he never got the letter congratulating him on the festival's acceptance of his film.

The fest up in Long Island programmed his documentary and its screening proved a resounding success, but not by virtue of Tate's filmmaking prowess. Dan and Vince and their lofty-sounding-but-ultimately-hollow diatribes entranced the audience, among them a once-prominent art broker in his early sixties with the unfortunate name of George Esthertenby. By the time the crowd had finished clapping and the lights had come up, George's mind had transformed the two subjects of Tate's little movie into great big dollar signs.

The duo hadn't proved difficult to track down, but George wound up having to initiate contact by mail since their phone service had been disconnected. Taking a hint about their financial prospects, Esthertenby reserved gallery space even before he arranged the first meeting. No one who couldn't pay his phone bill, George reasoned, would turn down the kind of money he'd be offering. Nevertheless, Dan played it close to the chest when he called New York from a payphone outside of a Mexican restaurant, and he managed to extort plane fare and five hundred dollars earnest money before agreeing to hear George's proposal face-to-face.

At that first meeting, doubts began to surface. Like Tate had done, George was casting about for something to keep him

buoyant, and the more he talked with the pair of self-proclaimed 'practicing Surrealists,' the more Dan and Vince started looking like a pair of deflated floaties. They balked at the idea of producing tangible works of art.

'Our life is our art,' Dan told him. 'And we give it away for free. I walk into a fast food place, that's art. I take art out of the galleries and give it to the people.'

'But the whole reason you're here is to talk about a gallery exhibit.'

'Well yeah,' Dan said. 'If I happen to be in an art gallery, that's art, too.'

'But if you don't make anything,' George said, 'there won't be anything to sell. And if there isn't anything to sell, I won't even be able to make back the money I've already spent on you guys. It doesn't even have to be good. It could be some trash you find on the subway or some old shoes you don't want anymore, but it has to be something I can put a price tag on.'

'We'd probably let you put our faces on some koozies,' Vince suggested. 'Maybe some key chains.'

'But they'd have to not work in some way,' Dan said, picking up the thread. 'The koozies would have to make your drinks hot or the key chains would have to be welded shut so you couldn't put keys on them or something. Because they have to be surreal.'

After checking Dan and Vince into a hotel in the Village, George took the subway into Queens. Once he got there, he transferred to a bus that took him the rest of the way to his efficiency. Their hotel would wind up costing George thousands of dollars by the time their show opened. But their show would open, he decided. He'd slipped into fatalism on the subway, and despair on the bus, but as he walked up the stairs to his apartment, he made up his mind. Despite his profound misgivings, he'd made a financial and personal investment in these two jokers, and he'd see it through. There was also his complete lack of other prospects to consider. If Custer can have his last stand, he thought, so can George Esthertenby.

He'd sold almost everything of value he had once owned, and didn't have much in the way of liquid cash, either, so when George snapped on the naked bulb hanging over his breakfast table - the only hard, flat surface left in the room - he wrote his credit line at the top of a sheet of paper and, as he itemized his projected expenses, started subtracting. There would be newspaper ads. Not cheap, but a necessity. He still had at least a few unredeemed favors that could bolster his [free!] word-of-mouth campaign, but the print ads would remain a must. If there was to be no art, at least he wouldn't have to spend much on prepping the gallery. He would still need

promotional materials, though. Programs, booklets, posters, and, God help him but maybe, koozies and key chains. As he whittled his credit line down to around the \$2500-mark, he allocated every cent that was left to one final expenditure: a bankruptcy lawyer.

For their part - as George set his marketing plans into motion and fate or destiny or dumb luck led Tate to the bus station - Dan and Vince just laughed and laughed and laughed.

George called a lot of his old friends, and in so doing, established one of the world's foremost examples of swallowing one's pride. Many of the people he called had assumed he'd died, a few that he'd retired, and some had to have their memories jogged by old anecdotes before finally saying, 'Oh, right, right...George Esthertenby.' But each time he got his target on the phone, he nailed his pitch. George, in his day, had been able to talk the devil into buying a parka, and he'd managed to hang onto a few of his old tricks. With each call, he left his past acquaintances curious at the least, and barely able to contain their excitement at best, and he had each of them promising to put the word out in their own particular spheres of influence.

He called newspapers and magazines, got sizes and rates for quarter- and half-page ads, found a Kinko's, and started designing them. George cast his net wide. He sent notices to events-around-town message boards and publications. He canvassed all five boroughs with tape, staples, and 11" x 17" posters. He put postcards and fliers in head shops, T-shirt shops, designer dress shops, you name it. George Esthertenby was a man on fire, and he tried not to think about whether or not he'd be extinguished when he opened the doors on his next exhibit. All he had to deliver, after all, was the renaissance of Surrealism.

Piece of cake.

*

Tate England had arrived, and he was staying at the Hotel Pennsylvania. It had been one of the first places he'd seen when he walked out of the bus terminal, sure, but that wasn't the only reason he'd elected to stay there. Back in the good old days, when he'd still had an apartment, he'd also had a copy of *The Best of Glenn Miller*. When he walked into the hotel for the first time, he was humming.

He had to endure the stares of the bell cap and the lady behind the information desk as he mounted the steps into the vast lobby, and then the stares of 250,000 tourists, but he didn't care. He took his place in the bloated line for the

check-in desk and waited. When his turn came to approach the desk, every customer service rep behind the counter stopped what they were doing to look at him. He unzipped his backpack, drew out his \$400 cash, and said, 'I'd like a room, please.'

His magnetic key in hand, Tate rode the elevator to the fifteenth floor. The doors of each room in the hallway reminded him of ancient bank vaults, and when he flopped down on the king-sized bed in his room, he realized he could hear through the wall every word of the phone conversation his neighbor was having.

It didn't faze him. Nothing could. Today was Friday, and soon it would be Friday night, and soon he would get his revenge.

Tate decided he would try to figure out the subway system. He didn't attract much attention on his return trip through the hotel lobby since he'd used his downtime in the room to shower and shave. He asked the lady at the information desk for a subway map and directions to the nearest barber. He had a little bit of time before the show opened, and he wanted to look exactly as he had when Dan and Vince had last seen him, and that meant a haircut. As he worked his way through the midtown pedestrian traffic and headed for the barbershop, he finalized his plan.

He wanted to get there early enough to be the first one through the doors. He wanted his nemesis, and his other nemesis, too, both of them, to see him, and remember, and he wanted them to sweat. Tate would bide his time and wait for the room to fill up, or fill up as much as it looked like it was going to, and then he would pounce. He wanted every second Dan and Vince spent in that gallery to be filled with tension, fraught with the knowledge that, at any moment, the curtain might be pulled aside, exposing them for what they really were. Tate tried to suppress the evil smile that kept creeping into his features as he sat in the barber's chair and rehearsed his speech.

George was pacing.

He hadn't seen his two charlatans yet and the doors were supposed to open in less than an hour. Dan and Vince weren't the only things he hadn't seen, though. Once they'd weaned themselves from room service and sightseeing tours, the Surrealists had taken an active interest in the content of their exhibit. They had thousands of ideas, it seemed, but George wound up vetoing all of them. And with good reason.

They started growing listless, though, and soon acted like they wanted to drop the whole project. George was in it up to his eyeballs, so calling it quits was no longer in the realm of

possibility. He'd gotten himself in the wholly unenviable position of needing these two guys, so he backed down. And when they insisted on creative control, he nodded. When they insisted on secrecy, he grimaced, and then nodded. When they asked for money, he handed them a check that would draw from his credit card account, and then he went home and drank. Even getting the title of the exhibit from them so he could put it on the publicity materials had taken a bribe of two tickets to a Yankees game, but they coughed it up.

So all the publicity materials and the banner over the door to the gallery, the banner beneath which George was wearing a groove in the sidewalk, all bore the same inscrutable headline, 'Toward a Unified Theory of Physics.' He was sweating - and not from the heat, either - when a beach towel hit him in the face. He peeked around it and saw Dan and Vince standing in front of him, each holding a bulging Macy's bag.

'Open the door,' Dan said, 'but stay here. We have to change.'

George unlocked the front door without a word, and as they walked inside, Vince slipped a baseball cap on George's head. It said 'Daddy's Girl' in pink embroidery.

'Give us five minutes,' Vince said, 'and then you can come in.'

The subway system, or Tate's unfamiliarity with it, proved the Achilles' heel in his plan. He found himself at what seemed to him the hub of all subway lines in New York City, and the glut of numbers and colors and rail cars that met him as soon as he descended from street level made his heart sink. The 42nd Street/Times Square station isn't a good place for anybody's virgin subway embarkation, especially if they're up against a hard deadline. Tate went uptown when he was supposed to go downtown, he took the purple line when he was supposed to take the red line, then, when he finally got headed in the right direction again, he missed his stop and wound up in Brooklyn.

When he got out of his cab in front of the gallery, the show had been underway for an hour and a half, and he'd forgotten his speech. Not that it mattered. When he saw what awaited him inside those doors, words failed him anyway.

At first, all he could see was water, and it wasn't for lack of lighting. A silent mob of people, three or four hundred strong and arranged as though behind a police barricade, jostled each other for position and altogether obscured Tate's line of sight. His jaw dropped. He could see no reason why so many people should be at this thing, but then his soul began to sing. Three hundred, maybe four hundred people, seemingly from all walks of life, some dressed in choice finery, some looking much like Tate himself had looked only three hours earlier. He would

be vindicated, and before a larger crowd than he had ever dreamed.

Without so much as an 'excuse me' or a 'coming through,' Tate shouldered his way through the crowd and made it to the front, where he finally saw them.

There had been a reason why everyone appeared to be behind a police barricade. They were. Dan and Vince had penned themselves inside a ring of sawhorse-style barricades, and the crowd was pressing in against those wooden restraints. Around the edges of the room, the Surrealists had set up hundreds of small aquariums, each filled with a array of tropical fish. A sign in front of the tanks read 'Each Fish: \$1000'

Tate's eyes settled then on the Surrealists themselves. They'd filled their little habitat with fine, white sand, and they both sat in beach chairs, beneath giant umbrellas, wearing Bermuda shorts, flower-print shirts, and sunglasses. Vince wore a straw Huckleberry Finn hat and sipped something from a coconut. Dan ate some type of tropical fruit sorbet from a hollowed-out mango.

Tate froze. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't this. He almost expected to see them standing on top of orange crates and shouting nonsense words while old shoes and garbage hung from the walls, but something this elaborate had never seemed like even the remotest of possibilities.

Elaborate or not, he told himself, it sure as hell isn't art.

'Look at these idiots!' Tate shouted, slipping under the barricade and turning to face the crowd. 'This isn't art and they aren't artists. I know these morons. They're no more Surrealists than I'm a chimpanzee. Look around! This is a pet store, for God's sake.'

In the back of the room, George Esthertenby started toward the crowd. He couldn't see Tate, but could hear his voice. George had been sitting with his fingers crossed and teetering on the brink of mental and physical collapse all night, and as the crowd had swelled, he realized that if they could somehow be won over, he might not have to start calling lawyers after all. And now some unseen visitor was threatening to destroy all possibility of salvaging the evening. Plus, the mystery yeller was right, these guys were no more artists than your average house painter, and maybe even less so, but if the mob packed inside the gallery found out about it, George would be ruined. He had to do something, so he entered the crowd.

Tate pointed at a man in a tuxedo pressed against the barricade in front of him.

'You, rich guy,' Tate said. 'Do you like this?'

'I don't know,' they guy answered. 'It certainly is different.'

'It's not different, it's lousy. It's garbage. Wake up, people!'

George reached one of barricades perpendicular to the one Tate faced. From his vantage point, it looked like people were listening to the kid. George tried to yell, to say anything, but only a brittle gasp escaped his suddenly desiccated throat.

'Art used to mean something,' Tate continued in a lower voice. 'This doesn't mean anything. You don't have to patronize this and love it just because somebody put it in a museum.'

He turned to face Dan, since Dan always had been the leader. 'Tell them,' Tate said. 'Tell them what you are, that you're hacks and thieves and you don't know the first thing about art or creation or beauty. Be honest and tell them that I'm not just some crazy Philistine.'

George sucked in a breath and held it. He wanted to, since it might be his last.

Dan, calmly, set his mango in the sand next to his chair and slid his sunglasses to the end of his nose. He looked at Tate, then he looked at the crowd, scanned the expectant faces who in all likelihood had no idea what was going on but could sense that the next words out of his mouth would be important. Tate bit his lip and Dan turned his attention back to this

bitter, frustrated man who had come so very far to make a point, and he wet his lips to speak.

'Philistine,' he said, and slid his glasses back up his nose. Vince sipped from his straw, making a slurping sound.

The crowd all turned to face Tate, and a chant began at the back of the house and began to swell.

'Phil-is-tine! Phil-is-tine! Phil-is-tine!'

The onlookers crossed the barricades like someone had pulled a giant finger from a dike, and they hoisted Tate into the air.

'No! Wait!'

'Phil-is-tine! Phil-is-tine! Phil-is-tine!' All the while passing Tate, upraised hands to upraised hands, toward the doors of the gallery.

'Please listen to me!'

'Phil-is-tine! Phil-is-tine! Phil-is-tine!'

'They're charlatans!'

The crowd set Tate down and gave him a shove back out the front doors. He fell and rolled down the sidewalk, while inside people reached for their checkbooks, suddenly desperate to buy tropical fish, and George Esthertenby began to cry tears of unmitigated joy.

Can no one stop the ferocious braying of Marcel Duchamp's laughter?