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**Book Review**

*Creative Life: Music, Politics, People, and Machines*

Bob Ostertag  
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**Reviewed by Rob Wallace**

The title of Bob Ostertag’s third book is more accurately rendered as *Creative Life Music Politics People and Machines*—a continuous stream of concepts connected precariously only through Ostertag himself. The key term is “creative,” along with the equally important “people.” For while Ostertag’s book is on the one hand a collection of essays touching on various aspects of his own biography and artwork, it is also a series of engaging and at times very moving portraits of his contemporaries. Profiling such figures as Anthony Braxton, David Wojnarowicz, Jim Magee, “Maria,” Aleksandra Kostic, and Justin Bond, *Creative Life* is a story of many creative “lives” that in some way have intersected with the creative life of the protagonist, Ostertag. Some of these lives may be familiar to readers, some not so familiar, and that latter fact is one of the book’s greatest strengths: as an advocate of artists in particular and interesting people in general, Ostertag’s narrative makes the individuals he meets seem intriguing and potentially life-changing, regardless of their level of “fame” in their respective worlds. The information about Texas-based artist Jim Magee, for example, is reason enough to read the book (and if you are unfamiliar with Magee, as I was, take my word for it and read Ostertag’s profile). Placing himself sometimes at the center, sometimes at the periphery of this fascinating collection of individuals, Bob Ostertag himself becomes equally fascinating and engaging.

Most readers interested in *Creative Life* will probably be familiar primarily with Ostertag’s musical activities, although even in that realm he is arguably not as well-known as other musicians—such as John Zorn and Fred Frith—from the “downtown” New York avant-garde music scene of the late 1970s. Part of the reason for this is explained by the “politics” of the book’s title. As Ostertag states early on, in a section discussing art in the wake of September 11, 2001, “the downtown scene of which I was a part was never able to encompass politics and art at the same time, which is why I left it long ago” (5). This dynamic of conflict—both the national and international conflicts of the last few decades and the presumed conflict between art and politics—becomes another thread connecting each of the disparate narratives in the book. “I don’t see myself as swerving back and forth between art and politics,” says Ostertag, “but engaging in a creative endeavor of struggle against the constraints of the web of social and physical relations in which we live” (15). This “creative endeavor of struggle” sometimes manifests in activity that Ostertag—and most people—might call “art” and sometimes in “political” activity, as when Ostertag spent roughly a decade away from music-making and composing to become a journalist and activist during the 1980s. But Ostertag’s central argument is that these are merely points on a broad spectrum of human pursuits, and that if we try to separate them too much we lose sight of their interconnectedness. The struggle, then, is as much about trying to find a way to live in the midst of chaos—John Keats called it “negative capability”—as it is about resolving that chaos.

While Ostertag’s thesis is a potentially nostalgic or Romantic solution to how a person can use creativity as part of a life dedicated to political and social transformation, he also avoids most of the clichés that continue to dominate many artists’ claims about their own efficacy beyond the realm of “mere” art. Ostertag’s journey is indeed less a “swerving” between art and politics and more of a periodic shutting back and forth between art and politics, in order to attempt to help his fellow humans (and potentially collect information that could be used artistically). Thus his art is almost always “political” in a way that foregrounds the contemporary events and conflicts that a more Romantic artistic practice would attempt to transcend. Ostertag, in fact, uses “transcendence” to describe the role of art, but he strives to refine that notion for a cynical age. Some readers may not ultimately accept Ostertag’s refined Romanticism and may find this purported dialectic between art and politics to be insufficiently theorized. But I believe that the broad scope of the topics he discusses throughout the book and the way in which his personal struggle between art and politics always remains unresolved make these ideas worth taking seriously.

If all this sounds, well, too serious, consider the other key component in Ostertag’s creative life: humor. The cover of the book shows the author gripping a partially-destroyed computer monitor in front of a graffiti-wrapped wall. We’re not sure whether he is about to throw the monitor down, or whether he is merely holding it up for display as if to say “I just broke this.” Either way, the half-gleeful, half-diabolic expression on the author’s face introduces us to a person who is certainly a funny guy for all the gravity of his political and artistic creativity. Ostertag has serious fun, but he
definitely has fun. For example, it may come as a surprise to readers that, until recently, Ostertag was a writer for the now notorious satire team The Yes Men. Other notable projects discussed in this book, which give a sense of this comedic edge, include Ostertag’s collaboration with drag queen Justin Bond and turntablist Otomo Yoshihide called Pantychrist, and his work with the remarkable Québécois animator Pierre Hébert, Between Science and Garbage. One of the memorable photographs included in the book is a picture of the stage after a Science and Garbage performance, showing a heap of shattered glass, plastic cups, and other junk. Ostertag notes of his collaboration with Hébert that

the uneasy relationship between human bodies and machines is merely one instance of a much bigger uneasiness between machines and our own planet [. . .] Exponentially accumulating piles of garbage are a necessary and integral part of constantly increasing power of computers. They are two sides of the same coin. Art that investigates the bright side and not the dark side ultimately can only become yet more props for an increasingly oppressive technological culture we wish to challenge. (148)

The junk pile on stage and the computer monitor on the book’s cover thus remind us that Ostertag, known as a innovative improviser and composer who uses electronic and computer machines as his primary tools, is also extremely skeptical of the utopian projections that so often accompany information technology and its applications for society. Not content, however, to be merely a court jester making jokes and breaking stuff, Ostertag pokes fun while also posing interesting and challenging responses to contemporary life. This constant oscillation between grave, even pessimistic seriousness and comedic improvisational play, makes Ostertag’s life and work—and hence, Creative Life—worth considering.

While I have not discussed at length the diversity of topics covered by Ostertag, I can confirm that this book will interest a variety of readers precisely because it tries to connect so many disparate topics. Reading Ostertag’s own struggle to keep it all going is part of the book’s charm. In many ways, Ostertag reminds me of polymath and self-proclaimed “Post-mamboist” Ned Sublette, another composer/performer/author/etc. who came of age in the 1970s downtown NYC scene and who has had an eclectic career straddling music and other, supposedly unrelated, disciplines, including the history of the Spanish-speaking parts of the Western Hemisphere (Cuba for Sublette, Central America for Ostertag). Both Sublette and Ostertag refreshingly emphasize that you don’t have to do one thing; in fact, in order to deal with contemporary life, to make a living (metaphorically and literally), you almost certainly have to be more than “just” an artist. A struggle for sure, but also a challenge that contributes to a potentially richer artistic vision.

In conclusion, I should add a disclaimer that my encounter with this book was largely influenced by an almost three-week-long daily dialogue with Bob Ostertag, with whom I was a colleague at the second bi-annual Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice Summer Institute, held at the University of Guelph in August-September 2010. One of the first things I noticed about Ostertag was his warm smile and hearty laugh—and therein lies the secret to the cover photograph from Creative Life: Ostertag is laughing in this picture, smiling at the ridiculousness of the garbage he holds, the planned-obsolescence of our techno-capitalist era. He gives us no answers to contemporary problems, but he reminds us that it’s easier to cope if we stop trying to separate politics and art, seriousness and humor, and instead start investigating how life is a complex mix of sometimes contradictory impulses. Creative Life is a mix of contradictory impulses navigated by one man, providing plenty of ideas to question, disagree with, laugh at, ponder, and struggle with—creatively.

Notes

1 All of the music discussed in the book, and, in fact, almost all of Ostertag’s recorded work can be listened to for free at his website, www.bobostertag.com.