When François Dufrêne, barely sixteen years old, joined the letterist movement shortly after its foundation in 1946, Martin Kersels had not yet been born. Dufrêne had only known Paris, the throes of war, and the lives and consciences that it tore apart. France was finding it hard to come to terms with the dark times of occupation, and it can be felt in the art that followed it: morose and existential. A grave art and a “white” muted poetry. Kersels was born in 1960, in the midst of the California Dream. It is a well-known story: emancipation was everywhere in 1960s California.

On paper, there appears to be no connection between these two artists, who emerged in extremely different contexts. And yet, at the end of the war, Dufrêne and his lettrist friends were the first to explode the European academic torpor. In 1952, he produced the film Tambours du jugement premier (First Judgement Drums) Without a film reel and without a projection, the action took place in the Theatre. This film was certainly the first French post-war happening. In 1952, he was also one of the cofounders of the review Jeunesse, an ebullient preface to May 1968. The letterists were also among the first to deal openly with homosexuality, prostitution, drugs through their psychotropic frenzies, or exploited minorities through their support of Algerian rebels. They too made great strides in emancipation. But their story is much less well-known, “secret”, as Grail Marcus wrote of them.

Dufrêne was a poet, resolutely a poet. Anyone who knew him remembers a poet. Anyone who knew him remembers a formidable onstage presence, with his famous Scream-rhythms, oral performances with dislocated semantics. He became a plastic artist after meeting and then being mentored by, Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé, which allowed him to further explore his letterist experiments by becoming a “poster artist”. But Dufrêne exhibited his posters stuck on backwards, calling them DOS, DESSOUS or ENVERS (back, underside, behind).