

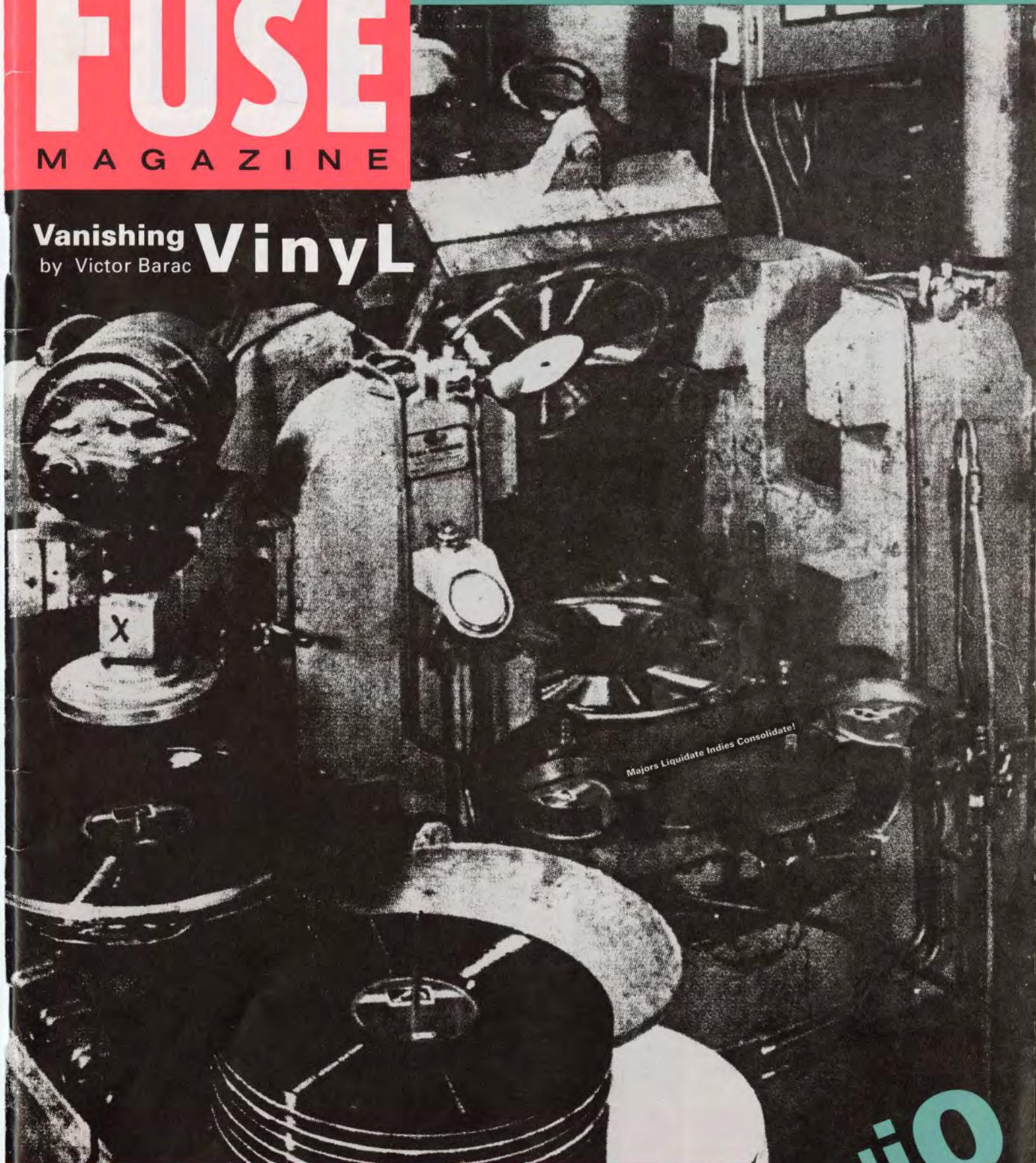
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## Vanishing Vinyl

by Victor Barac



INSIDE: Radioactivating in Nicaragua by Dot Tuer  
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Review of John Greyson's Film *Urinal*  
Northern Light : A Video Visit to Helsinki

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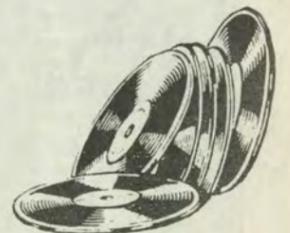


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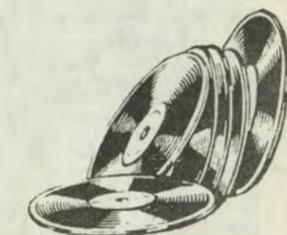
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## letters

I would like offer my support to the open letter to David Peterson by the "artists concerned about the Ontario Arts Council" and to Lisa Celloto's article concerning the lack of OAC funding to the Native Indian/Inuit Photographer's Association (both in FUSE Nov/Dec 88). While I am only marginally aware of these particular cases, I think these rumblings of criticism can be applied to other facets of the current OAC phenomenon.

Hey! Share the wealth eh? I get the feeling that even if the OAC funding budget was increased (which is essential) those same people would be getting the increased prizes. As I have been told, OAC policy doesn't provide on-going funding. In my opinion some of those people on the winners list (and let's be honest, that list remains more or less the same) deserve on-going support, but then so do many others. That's just the way it goes. However, who the hell has heard of that hardworking artist in Wawa when those "in the know" get that "evaluation" phone call? It's only logical — and deplorable — that all the recent visual arts grant winners were from Toronto. Shame!

Am I bitter? You bet and I would guess many more out there are too; the wood-carver from Sioux Lookout, the numerous "unfashionable" painters and printmakers from Toronto, Simcoe, North York and all those people who are contemplating an artistic "career" but can't even get support to start.

On second thought I probably shouldn't have written this letter because I've just submitted my application for OAC funding (again) and probably have blown my chances of winning. What the hell. Let's hear it folks. Isn't it about time we stuck our necks out and complained? What have you got to lose?

**Janis Bowley**  
Assistant Director  
T.E.R.R.A.

Re: "SUBTERRANEAN HOMESICK BLUES: HARD TIMES FOR THE FUNNEL"  
(FUSE Nov/Dec 1988).

Although I supported the motion to expand voting rights which was forwarded at The Funnel's 1986 AGM, I cannot accept credit as its "author". It was authored and forwarded by Dot Tuer, who can be proud for having seen in the majority of Funnel members, the potential for a different kind of "heroic effort" than that required to move uptown.

**John Porter, Toronto**

### Recycle FUSE!

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FUSE welcomes letters to the Editors. All letters are subject to editing.

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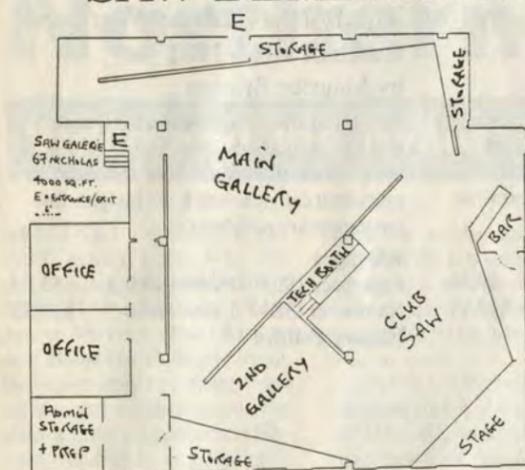
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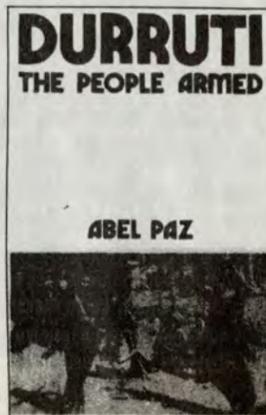
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## news & reports



Video still from *Gyros*, Marikki Hakola.

# Northern Light:

## Video and the Avant -Garde in Finland

BY NINA CZEGLEDY

**HELSINKI** — In August, 1988, while preparing the screening of *AURORA BOREALIS, Canadian Video Art*, at VANHA (The Old Student House) in Helsinki, I took the opportunity to contact video artists and inquire about the state of experimental arts in Finland. VANHA, a constantly buzzing centre of activity, is a unique pivot, standing in the middle of Helsinki. Streetplayers perform by the corner and posters herald upcoming events. A steady stream of people meet in VANHA's offices, where phones are ringing, exhibitions are prepared, and computers flicker; musicians

practice in the auditorium, a fashion show is organized in the main hall, and there is an everlasting queue on the steps because VANHA has the busiest bar in town.

VANHA is the property of the Student Union of the University of Helsinki, which owns an entire block of buildings in the centre of the city. Income from rental revenues enables the Student Cultural Centre to exercise considerable freedom in the programming of cultural events. Consequently, in conservative Helsinki, it is at VANHA that video art and video installations are shown a few times yearly. There is no other major show-

place in the city and although the Atheneum Museum bought videotapes by several well-known U.S. artists, these tapes are in storage and have never been screened in Finland. All this is likely to change now with the recent emergence of Muu ("the Other"), the first organization of experimental artists in Finland.

Muu was established in 1987. The founding members considered the time ripe for more organized activity in the country and hoped enough artists would join to establish a forum for shared concerns. Much to their surprise, Muu mushroomed and its membership

now numbers more than 170. A major objective of Muu is to obtain financial support from cultural agencies. Funding for non-commercial art, as everywhere, is limited in Finland and individual artists have had difficulties obtaining grants.

Most of the experimental artists in Finland make their living by teaching or from working at odd jobs. Although Finland is an affluent country with one of the highest living standards in Europe, only mainstream artists do well due to the conservative taste prevailing in visual arts. Non-commercial artists have to support themselves with several jobs. Negotiations are currently

in progress to gain more extensive and organized funding policies. A further objective of Muu, which includes approximately 10 video artists, is to establish a forum to meet, discuss, exhibit and exchange ideas.

The success of Muu in Finland must be measured against what have, until recently, been the traditional meeting places for musicians, writers, filmmakers and painters. In the absence of an official centre, they met at Kosmos, a centrally located turn-of-the-century style restaurant and at the Golden Steer, another well known restaurant a few blocks away.

Muu obtained temporary premises for three months in an old factory building slated for demolition close to the waterfront. The building is only a shell, it has two large halls where several exhibitions are planned, each for a three week period to maximize the number of exhibitors. During the *Helsinki Festival* this August, its industrial brick walls formed the background for the Anton Artaud anarchist performance group who played to packed houses. Muu members come from varied disciplines such as music, theatre arts, science and journalism. In Finland many of the avant-garde artists seem to be working in mixed media. For example, several artists I met work in more than one field: all the members of Transistor (a music ensemble) are artists or scientists. Cris af Enehjelm, the lead singer of the group and a well known actress, has just had a sold out solo exhibition of her paintings at a Helsinki gallery and she also coordinated a Russian Constructivist exhibition this summer.

An important international connection for Muu was established this year with Estonian artists. In 1988, for the first time, young Estonian artists were able to organize exhibitions independent of approval from Moscow. They approached Muu for contact and exchange. As a result, this summer members of Muu presented video-works, installations and performances in Estonia, and

Estonians, some of whom have never traveled outside the ever, a working knowledge of Finnish or Swedish is an essential prerequisite. In addition, video access and basic hands-on courses are available through other organizations, some of which are commercial. The Japan Studios are a part of the world famous Arabia porcelain and glassware factory's teaching institution, where activities include video. There are four or five video centres across Finland which allow varying degrees of access. Most of which are connected to educational facilities. However, the best known media centre in Helsinki, is the unique KSL or The People's Educational Association.

KSL is an independent cultural and educational organization that receives some gov-

ernment subsidy. It was established in 1964, but its roots USSR, will come and show in Finland next year. This is a very tangible result of glasnost in the USSR and may herald future positive developments.

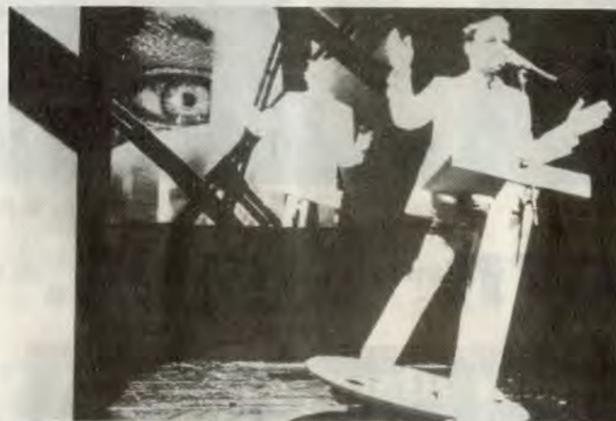
An air of anticipation surrounds Muu as it gains the enthusiastic support of avant-garde artists. It is clearly expected that Muu will become the focus of the avant-garde in Finland.

The teaching of video appears to be limited to a few institutions of higher education: the Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki. These institutions have a policy of welcoming foreign students. Furthermore, foreign students are eligible to compete for Finnish State Scholarships, offered by the Ministry of Education. How-

go back to the study activity of the leftist worker's movement at the beginning of this century. To quote its information brochure: "The goals of KSL are the awakening of self-esteem, mental growth, independent thinking and the ability to understand and change life and society . . . KSL cooperates with adult educational and cultural organizations in Scandinavia, Western Europe and several socialist countries. KSL deals yearly with 4,000 study circles of 30,000 students. KSL provides training and instruction for people with different artistic interests. It arranges cultural events such as exhibitions and performances and provides cultural materials."

Currently only KSL provides access for independent video production in Helsinki. I visited the studio at KSL, where I was received by Perttu Rastas, who is in charge of the studio. The students have access to both VHS and U-Matic facilities and a sound studio, which is also linked to a broadcasting radio station. The video equipment is very basic, with some special effects facilities. While independent artists may have access to the studio facilities in practice, teaching courses dominate the timetable leaving very little time for independent production. Amidst this daily buzz, Perttu Rastas, with the characteristic friendly grace I became accustomed to in Helsinki, found the time to show me around and arranged a screening of tapes by Finnish video artists. The tapes contained original ideas, were experimental in subject treatment and often humorous.

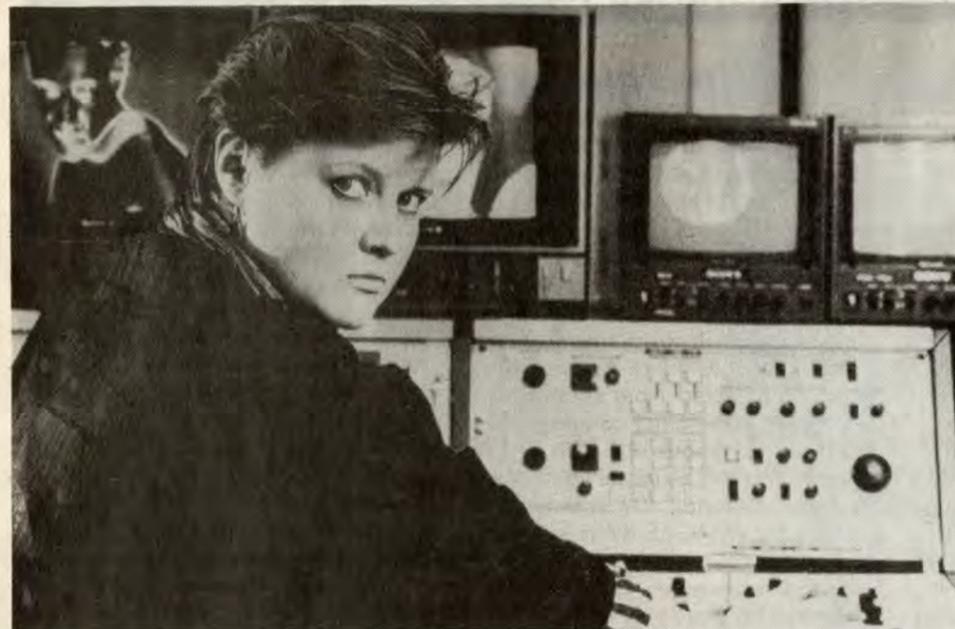
There are about 120 artists in Finland working actively in video. During my visit I encountered several video people such as Minna Tarkka, Tarja Enasti, Marita Luilia, Kimo Koskala and Nina Skogster. However, the name most frequently mentioned, even before my arrival in Helsinki, was that of Marikki Hakola. She is a leading activist in the Muu organization and the best known young video artist in Finland. Her work reflects a concen-



Video still from *Piipaa* by Marikki Hakola.



Video still from *PRE* by Marikki Hakola.



Finnish video artist Marikki Hakola.

trated effort to produce technically high quality tapes. Her message, based on strong philosophical ideas, is very pronounced. A graduate of the Helsinki Academy of Fine Arts (1984), Hakola studied painting. She is also interested in music and in 1982 became involved in performance art. At the Academy she was a member of "Turppi," a performance and experimental art group established in 1982. As well, "Turppi" members were involved with site specific land art which they created in distant areas of the Finnish countryside. The group split up in 1984. Hakola found the Academy very conservative: "it was difficult to do any experimental work." After her graduation, she traveled extensively in Europe and visited the U.S. According to Hakola, the art scene is slowly changing in Finland, and in the last four years experimental art, such as installations, video and mixed-media productions, is more accepted.

In 1983, Hakola started to work in video at the Academy, where she had access to U-Matic equipment. After her graduation she worked in commercial video for a while. The job gave her opportunities to explore the

medium and to acquire excellent technical discipline. Currently she teaches video at the Academy of Fine Arts.

One of her first major works *Time is right for . . .* (1984) is a scratch video and was shown at several festivals in Europe (Locarno, Taliv and Oulu) as a video loop installation. It is an intensely-paced collage based on TV commercials. At the start of the tape, paper strips (in extreme close up) stream out of an unidentified machine. This image then is intercut with two to four frames from commercials. The commercials increase in length creating a mechanical and very unsettling effect. I was very impressed with the professional quality of this tape made by a then 24 year old artist.

Hakola showed her first major mixed installation titled *Pre* at VANHA, in 1984, with six tapes and ten monitors. The title is a protest confronting all the "Post-" labels we encounter incessantly. Writing in the video catalogue *Vuoden Nuori Taitelija* (1988), video artist Minna Tarkka describes Hakola's work as "electronic expressionism." "Painted" with chroma-key techniques (*Piipaa*, *Tihead*), *Silicon Head*. (1987) uses taped material from audio-visual stage

work, performed at VANHA. Through collages and multi-layered icons, Hakola depicts man's anxiety at a time of concentrated power, stimulation and manipulation. Describing Hakola's tape *Crickets*, Tarkka writes: "Grasshoppers cling to the person's brain cortex like electrodes, through which incorrect knowledge can be injected straight into the subconscious."

Hakola completed *Crickets* recently. The tape is based on mythological references. Tight close-ups of faces fill the frames, in a typical television frontal-view style to accentuate the message. Hakola is now working on *Gyros*. This tape deals with the emergence of a charismatic leader's image, superimposed over stark industrial footage. At the beginning of the tape, one encounters the benevolent, smiling face of this "leader." Gradually, through gestures and lighting effects, the features of a demagogue appear. Hakola is also working on the revision of *Piipaa*, which she hopes to sell to TV. She is confident that Swedish television will buy it even if Finnish television won't. "Finnish TV doesn't show experimental or video art. In Sweden the pro-

gramming tends to be much more experimental," says Hakola. She received grants to work on *Piipaa*, but they covered only part of her expenses, so she has to use her own funds to complete the tape. Hakola is also supported by industrial sponsors like SONY. This sponsorship offers her an opportunity to work at night (off hours) in commercial studios, at reduced rates.

Hakola's tapes create a very strong impression on the viewer. To quote Tarkka: "The critical viewpoint taken by video artist Marikki Hakola is a rare phenomenon in Finnish art of the 1980s, which in the struggle against postmodernist pressures has seldom taken a stand on any cultural or social issue. Marikki Hakola has primarily been interested in the power of mass communications and in the effect which electronic information has on a person's mind and subconscious. The artist herself distinguishes three different dimensions in her work scientific, esthetical, and ethical. This tripartite division feels natural when we look at her production, for here we can see that the subject matter, the forms of the works themselves, and their technological means of expression are the subject of equal research and criticism."

Hakola is a person with strong philosophical attitudes, she is very critical of how information in society is used toward commercial and political ends and she fears a new fascism is on the rise in the world.

Through the cooperative atmosphere of the Student Centre, and in particular the very genial Kaisa Vasamies and Sanna Rekola, I was able to meet and talk to several video artists who came to VANHA or to the screening of *Aurora Borealis*. They expressed keen interest in the organization of artist-run centres in our country, especially as no such organizations, apart from Muu, exist in Finland. Finland certainly has some very promising video talent and I sincerely hope that we will have a chance to see their work exhibited in Canada in the near future. ■

by Kim Tomczak

THE BANFF CENTRE announced the appointment of Vern Hume to the position of Assistant Director, Media Arts (Video). Mr. Hume is a well known video producer and was most recently employed at EM/Media, an artist run video access centre in Calgary. Of interest to video producers is the centre's Video Art Workshop, a 13 week programme scheduled for the fall of 1989 that will provide a unique opportunity for training and production for artists working in the video art field. Eight to ten producer/directors will receive a full orientation/training session and will work together on several large commissioned video works developed by senior faculty artists. The producer/director will then produce and direct an original work under the guidance of faculty and staff. For more information contact: The Registrar, The Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, P.O. Box 1020, Banff Alberta T0L 0C0.

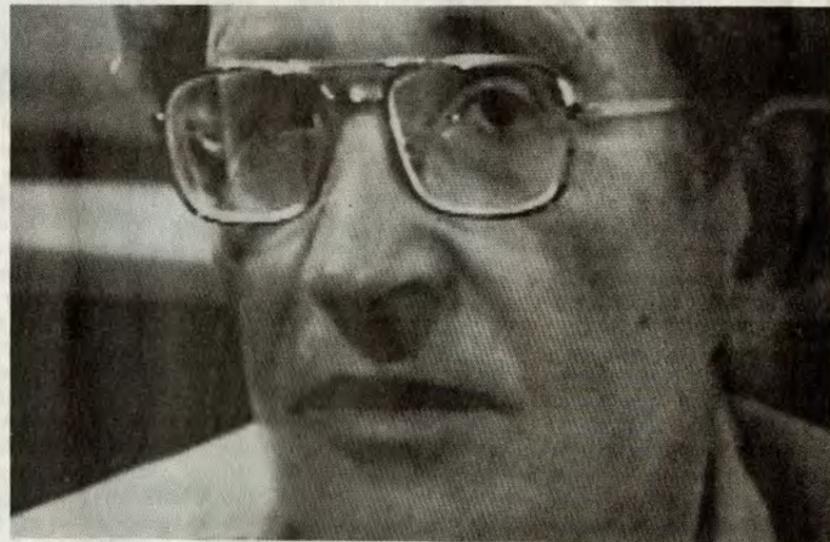
HALF INCH OPEN REEL duplication services are being offered by the Arts Television Centre. In the late 60s and early 70s thousands of videotapes were produced using 1/2" open reel format. Restoring these aging and deteriorating tapes and transferring them to the more common 3/4" U Matic or VHS formats requires expertise and these folks claim to have it. They even specify a "cleaning" option on their rate sheet. Many veteran producers will welcome this long overdue service. Contact: Lawrence Adams, The Arts Television Centre, 142 George Street, Toronto (416) 869-1589.

CONTACT GRANT POIER at EM/Media for details concerning the 1989 National Working Meeting of Video Groups. EM/Media, 1014 Macleod Trail S.E., Calgary Alberta. (403) 263-2833.

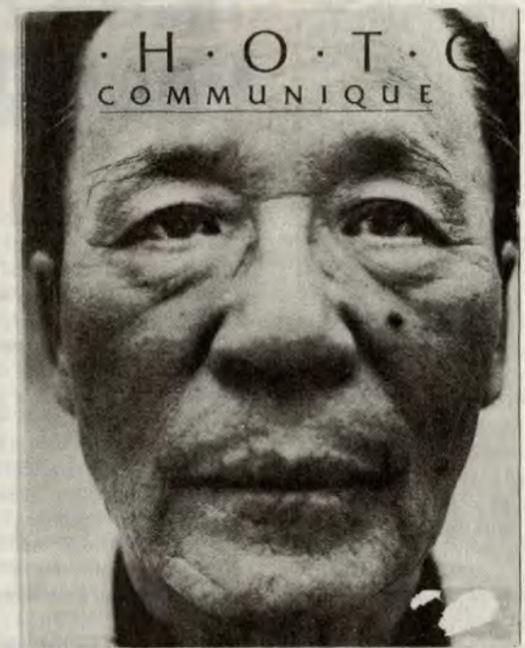
IMAGES, Toronto's most important film and video festival, is gearing up for its 1989 version. Last year's event was a total success with high attendance and lots of press. IMAGES 89 will have several components in its week long schedule with three curators from across Canada creating programmes. An open programme selected from submissions will make up the other component of this festival. About one fifth of the programme will be made up of international material, the rest will be Canadian. IMAGES 89 is a model festival for several reasons: all work selected receives an exhibition fee, no entry charges apply for work submitted and film and video are shown together utilizing the highest quality projectors available. The deadline for entering Canadian video and film is Feb. 1, 1989. Formats: Super 8 prints only (originals will not be viewed), 16mm, 3/4" video and VHS. Preview tapes are preferred in VHS formats. Tapes and films must have been completed after Nov. 1, 1987. Films and video tapes not in English

should be subtitled or be accompanied by an English transcript. Contact: IMAGES 89, 67A Portland Street, suite 3, Toronto, M5V 2M9 (416) 971-8405.

THE YORKTON Short Film and Video Festival is coming up soon. Entry deadline is April 20. Supply video entries under 60 minutes on 3/4" and let them know you don't appreciate the entry fees. Video artists, particularly the more interesting ones, don't pay to have their work shown to the public. This festival is supported by Telefilm and other government agencies but they still want artists to pay these entry fees. Personally I think a video and film festival in the middle of Saskatchewan is a wonderful idea but they'll have to change their policies before very many video producers begin to participate. Let them know how you feel: Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival, 49 Smith Street East, Yorkton Saskatchewan, S3N 0H4 (306) 782-7077.



Noam Chomsky featured in *Betrayed but not Beaten*, the first video to address the invasion of East Timor.



## Final Communique: Photography Magazine Folds

BY NINA LEVITT

TORONTO — Of all the recent changes to have taken place in the arts community, none seemed more surprising than the demise of *Photo Communique*, Canada's only critical photography publication. After nearly a decade of publishing, its founder and editor Gail Fisher-Taylor quietly packed in the magazine in July 1988.

Starting as a modest newsletter in 1979, Fisher-Taylor formed the publication immediately following "Canadian Perspectives," a national photography conference held in Toronto. During the conference it became clear that there was a lack of information and critical discussion on photography, and Canadian photography in particular. At that time there were still a handful of photographic art dealers and artist-run photographic centres strung out across the country. *Image Na-*

*tion and Impressions* were still going strong, publishing Canadian and American photographic works (although they had both folded by 1984). The American publications *Afterimage* and *Aperture* were the best sources of information and critical writing on photography, although both were sadly lacking in Canadian content. *Photo Communique* was thus borne of the immediate needs of our photographic community which required a national forum for information and critical discussion.

Published quarterly, *Photo Communique* featured articles on historical and contemporary photographic practices, artists' portfolios, book and exhibition reviews and community notes that couldn't be found in any other publication. In the first few years, the feature articles were largely written by pho-

tographers and critics such as Marta Braun, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, A.D. Coleman — writers who literally had no other Canadian outlet. In later years, the magazine expanded to include writers from outside the photography community such as Monika Gagnon, Elke Town, Michael Ondaatje to name a few. *Photo Communique* eventually expanded to accommodate Special Issues such as "Photography & Nuclear Politics," "Toronto Documentary Photography Project," "Photography & Fiction," "Identity," "Science & Technology," "Media," and the infamous "Artists Issue" which published Michael Snow's controversial appropriation of porn, "Repeat Offenders."

With Fisher-Taylor firmly at the helm, and with what seemed to be a revolving door for staff through which Beth Wilcox,

Anna Gronau, Joyce Mason, Jane Perdue, Renne Baert, and Rosemary Donegan entered among others, *Photo Communique* grew to become a vital publication of international stature, affording an unprecedented profile to Canadian writers and photographers.

Publishing, especially full-colour photography, is an expensive venture and financial problems were a constant threat. Despite receiving core funding from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council, *Photo Communique* operated on a deficit. Financial resources were augmented by occasional employment grants, while ad revenues and subscriptions helped to offset costs further. Around 1982, Fisher-Taylor formed the Holocene Foundation, a non-profit charitable body, primarily to assist with fundraising for the magazine and to act in an advisory capacity.

Yet amid financial insecurity, Fisher-Taylor continued to plan and expand the magazine's enterprises, by sponsoring conferences, beginning research on photographic book publishing projects (except for the recent spurt of books by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Canadian photo-

graphic publishing barely exists) and planning a series of extensive workshops by photographers. In 1986 additional staff were hired and directed towards these activities.

After the Holocene Foundation organized the "Talking Pictures" conference in the fall of 1987, it became clear that the Board couldn't solve the magazine's financial problems and Fisher-Taylor could no longer bail the magazine out. She was already coping with her son's neurological disabilities (which she attributes to the ingestion of fumes during pregnancy that were emitted from a silkscreen company located across the hall from the magazine's office) and had planned to slowly pull out of the magazine. At this time her staff was working collectively, but Fisher-Taylor felt they were not experienced enough to keep the magazine afloat without her. In addition, the magazine's financial problems persisted and deepened. At one point Fisher-Taylor even placed herself in financial jeopardy by taking out a loan on her house. By July '88 the Holocene Foundation board, and Fisher-Taylor succumbed to these pressures by folding the magazine. By that point, there wasn't even enough money to mail out press releases to subscribers. The news of its seemingly sudden collapse was left to quietly trickle through the community.

There is some hope that the magazine will stay around — *Photo Communique* is up for sale. But in the meantime, the magazine's departure leaves the photographic community dependent on two fledgling regional publications, *Blackflash* (published by The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon) and *VIEWS* (published by Toronto Photographers Workshop). In a medium that is still stereotyped by mass appeal and camera clubs, *Photo Communique* gave a sane voice to a thriving art community. ■

## The Year of Listening DANGEROUSLY

BY MILTON BLAKE

**TORONTO** — At precisely 2.34 P.M. Sunday, October 23rd, Dave Ahmed shouted into the microphone on his *Dave's Dance Music* programme: "We've done it. We've reached our goal of \$108,881 but don't stop pledging we have a great deal more money to raise." This was the final day of CKLN's annual 10-day fundraising drive. With midnight set as the deadline, new challenges came into focus, and when it was over, close to \$12,000 more was raised taking the grand total to \$120,000.

Before and throughout the fundraising drive every CKLN volunteer was confident that the target would be reached. An enthusiastic confidence graced the airwaves and CKLN listeners responded with pledges and supportive comments which fueled a renewed commitment within the community and among our volunteer staff of 150.

The \$120,000 raised during Fundfest '88 represents approximately 40 per cent of CKLN's annual budget. This money will go towards salaries, transmitter rental fees and various operating and administrative expenses. Unfortunately, this money will not go towards the purchase of new broadcasting equipment or the maintenance, repair and improvements our studios and offices so urgently require. The cumulative effect of the daily use and abuse our equipment is subject to makes it, in some ways, absolutely remarkable that CKLN gets the job done. These needs will be reflected in our next fundraising challenge which, despite its enormity, we are confident we will meet. Why? Because CKLN is a community radio station that truly supports the people.

CKLN has succeeded in broadening the definition of

community. The music, the perspectives, the news, the sponsorships, the open-door policy and the representative corps of community volunteers are all factors that capture and highlight the spirit of multiculturalism while underlining a respect for cultural and racial diversity which in turn engenders in people a deep sense of belonging.

Within the world of community radio, CKLN has asserted itself as a dynamic leader, an accomplishment due in part to the energetic leadership of Station Manager Punam Khosla. On an international level CKLN has been a leader in making the airwaves available to all manner of progressive causes.

For example, CKLN supported the adoption of a set of principles put forward by the National Campus-Community Radio Conferences in July '87, part of which stated "And be it further resolved that member stations of the NCRA [National Campus-Community Radio Association] will endeavour to promote the cultural and politi-

cal aspirations and struggles of oppressed peoples through their programming." To this end, the real struggles of the people of Central and South America can be heard on CKLN via the voices of Nicaragua's Radio Pancasan and El Salvadore's Radio Farabundo Marti. Strong bonds of practical cooperation have also been established in Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and of course, here in Canada.

Fundfest '88 proved, once again, that the support for black music, in all of its forms, is tremendous. CKLN's six black music programmes raised 41 per cent of the \$120,000. Considering that these six programmes enjoy only 14 hours of combined weekly air-time, it is even more remarkable, and lends further evidence that black music in its pure form is totally viable, contrary to the claims of mainstream programmers, industry insiders and awards show juries, and particularly those who represent the Junos. It is also an indictment of the music industry which makes mega-

profits internationally from the exploitation of these pure music forms. CKLN's commitment to "people's programming" has been renewed by Fundfest '88. The people support CKLN's focus and direction with their dollars precisely because of the progressive principles that it follows. ■



Design by Swinghammer  
Promo poster for CKLN's '88 "fundfest."

## Federal Arts Funding ? Artists Back the Canada Council

BY GLENN COOLY

**TORONTO** — Artists and arts administrators turned out in force at a meeting at the Ontario College of Art (OCA) December 7 to add momentum to a national campaign in support of a request by the Canada Council for a major increase in its funding.

Last summer, the council asked the Department of Communications, which oversees its budget, for a special hike of \$47 million over the next three years. Its current budget is about \$93 million a year. In an unprecedented move, the council called on artists and arts organizations to go public on its behalf with a plea for increased government funding.

In August, the Canadian Artists Committee (CAC) was formed to lobby government and draw public attention at large to the issue. CAC includes authors Margaret Atwood and Timothy Findley, filmmakers Atom Egoyan and Patricia Rozema, and 20 other prominent Canadian artists.

CAC has met with former Communications Minister Flora MacDonald (before she was defeated in her bid for reelection November 21), and individually with several newly-elected MPs.

As part of a National Awareness Campaign, CAC has distributed more than 500,000 postcards at art performances and public meetings. The card drawing donated by Nova Scotia artist Tom Forrestall, a CAC member, includes a message of support for increased government arts spending. They can be sent to Prime Minister Mulroney postage-free.

Also, during December CAC members attended public meetings in 11 cities, including Toronto.

The Toronto meeting was coordinated jointly by the Independent Artists Union (IAU) and the Independent Film and Video Alliance (IFVA). More than 100 people turned out to sign a telegram to Mulroney supporting the council, and hear several speakers discuss why it needs more money. CAC members Fiona Reid and David Cronenberg took the microphone, along with IAU spokesperson Elizabeth Schroder, writer Marlene Philip, ballet doyenne Betty Oliphant, former council director and current OCA president Timothy Porteous, and three other noted Toronto artists.

Toronto artist Karl Beveridge spoke about how council funding contributes to Canada's cultural vitality. He said that this country has gained a national sense of self-confidence and independence through the work of many artists that federal arts grants have helped nurture. If the council becomes less able to continue its support, cultural strength is imperiled. "There's a lot of talk about artistic vision, but if you don't eat, your vision gets blurred."

Beveridge added that a major federal commitment to cultural production is especially important against a backdrop of free trade. A weakened sense of cultural identity means "we become the 51st state," so "if the Tories are serious about Canadian independence, they'll increase arts funding."

Toronto artist and arts educa-

portions of the market, such as gays, minorities and women."

IFVA president Lisa Steele, a Toronto videomaker and art educator, expressed concern that Canada Council budgetary limits are squeezing emerging artists off the scene for lack of funding. She said that since 1976, the number of qualified individual grant applicants has increased dramatically, while the number of individual grants awarded has actually decreased. Currently, 75 to 80 per cent of "deserving" grant applicants are turned away.

Steele said she hopes that the additional money the council seeks will go primarily to emerging artists. She said a large portion of arts funding is disbursed either pre-earmarked for special projects or to large arts organizations, leaving little left over for young artists and the small arts groups that support them.

The council will learn the outcome of its request when the Mulroney government brings down its new budget early next spring. Several people declined to predict which way the decision will go, but CAC president Zarin Mehta, director of the Montreal symphony, said he was not optimistic. ■





# Radioactivating COMMUNITY RADIO CONFERENCE Nicaragua

by Dot Tuer

## I Want to Explain a Few Things . . .

To my children and all the children still with us,  
I want to explain a few things  
Just to tell you, for example,  
that fires, grenades, machine guns  
are necessary, real, needed,  
because how can we win this battle  
relying upon geraniums and roses?  
Of what use is song that remains but song?  
Of what use unless it bursts forth in rifles,  
blossoms into plows, then books?  
That is why, children, I want to explain a few things,  
lest you fear the final bullet

Alenka Bermudez Mallol<sup>1</sup>

## Prologue

It is the morning after the federal election. I am awake (barely), and I am trying, (without much energy) to finish an article on an international community radio conference I attended this summer in Nicaragua Libre. I feel as if I awoke this morning with a bad hangover that is going to last four years. I feel as if the dream-drenched humidity and the idealism of international solidarity experienced in Managua are a million miles away. I imagine, as part of a Canadian arts community, a sense of disenfranchisement and pre-eminent gloom. The Free Trade deal is here to stay. The red carpet is unrolled and Mulroney, all smiles, is waiting at the front door.

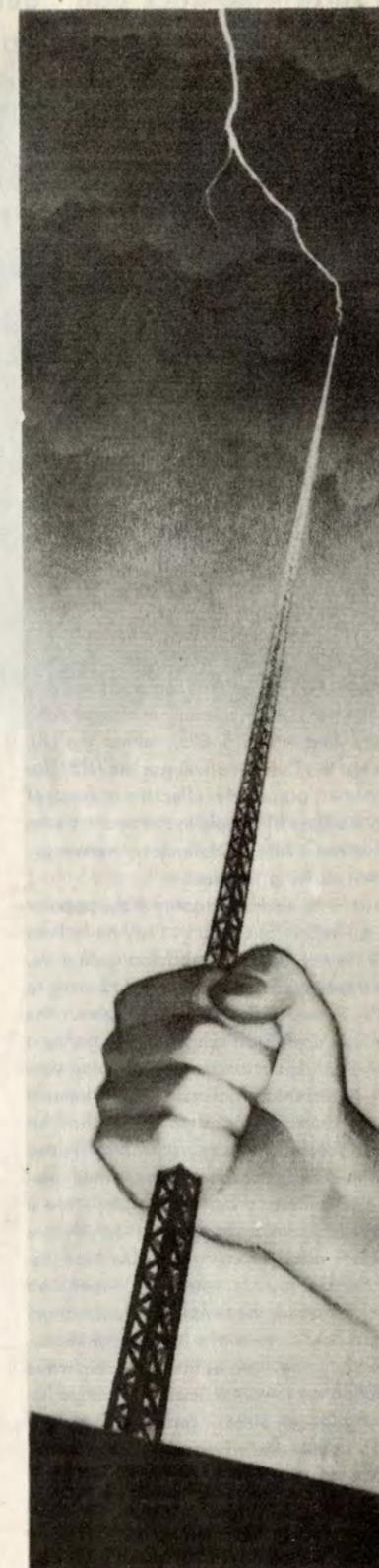


Illustration by Tony Hamilton.

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Artists, on the other hand, are probably going to be shown the back door, quietly and effectively silenced through a strangulation of funding, an onslaught of American entertainment, and their own inability to identify the enemy and shed the conditioning of a liberal individualism for a necessary collectivization of resources.

**B**ut was there ever any doubt about the outcome of this dogfight? Could artists and writers and marginalized groups who have never been given an active voice in this country expect to be visible in a turn around of public opinion when big business showed an unprecedented interest in an election result? When the forces to be, the forces who boast Power and Money and an unequivocal Desire to put profits before people pour millions of dollars into mass media advertising? When intervention from our "friendly" neighbour to the South is not simply about a Reagan endorsement but about a stock market fluctuation and a tumbling dollar the day that the polls show a lead for Liberal John Turner? And when, finally, neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives nor the NDP (for that matter) accurately reflect the interests of a vast number of people in this country who are neither white, middle-class, heterosexual, nor aspiring Yuppies?

Despite the odds, a majority of the popular vote rallied in this country to say no to Free Trade, to say no to an unbridled capitalism, no to a massive privatization, no to having to watch a man with lockjaw talk about the American dream on television for the next four years. Unfortunately, a popular vote and a representational system of parliament did not quite jibe, and Mulroney has his historic second majority in the bag. Faced with this chilling prospect, there is the temptation to fall into a defensive slump, into a deep sleep with a sign posted outside the bedroom door which reads "Do Not Disturb. Wake me up when the revolution comes." There is the temptation to dream of the good old days or of a fantasy collaboration with the new era as the inevitable wave of the future; to romanticize a nostalgic fiction of a Queen Street "community" where there was only ever a bohemia or to rationalize alienation as the adaptation of Canadians to a postmodernist condition in which history has ended and politics have disappeared.

Dionne Brand, in her new book, *Sans Souci*, dedicates her short stories to Faith with the line "to be awake is more lovely

than dreams."<sup>2</sup> She reminds us in her dedication and in her stories, as did many of the radio broadcasters gathered in Nicaragua for the AMARC III (Association Mondiale des Radio de Type Communautaire) conference, of a world where people do not sleep, but struggle in their daily lives and in their art to change "the inevitable wave of the future." As we rub our eyes in disbelief in the wake of the federal election, wondering whether to go to sleep or wake up, to dream of resistance or to actively resist, the examples of popular struggle and the commitment of the community broadcasters at the AMARC III conference become all the more important. The women radio workers of Central America expressed the importance of learning from the international women's movement. At this historical moment, however, I would argue that we have much to learn from them, and much to learn from all cultural activists, including Canadians, who woke up long before the Free Trade Deal became a reality.

### The Conference

On August 22, 1988, I arrived at the airport in Managua, Nicaragua Libre, drove in a taxi past the National Palace and the ruins of the Cathedral, past corrugated iron huts and stretches of jungle undergrowth, through the centre of a city which has no centre on my way to attend AMARC III, an international conference on community radio. In the next few days, participants from all over the world would meet to discuss and exchange the ideas and ideals of community radio. Unlike many conferences, in which location becomes a backdrop to the debates which emerge among delegates, Nicaragua offered a context in which the passion of politics and the articulation of ideology were integral to the proceedings. From Tomas Borge's opening speech to Daniel Ortega's guest appearance to the day trips planned to radio stations throughout the countryside, the government was on board and on side, a partisan rather than indifferent host. And the strategic geography of Nicaragua meant that for the first time in AMARC's short history (the first two conferences were held

in Canada) participants from the "Third World," in particular from Latin America, outnumbered European and North American delegates.

Nicaragua is a small and extremely poor country, bankrupted and destabilized by the United States' dirty war, economic blockade, and the continuing internal interference of the CIA. First hand evidence of the hardships the Nicaraguan people must endure, however was not experienced by the majority of the participants. Delegates were lodged in Samozá's old mansions and at an expensive hotel on the outskirts of Managua; transported around the city by a fleet of buses despite the chronic shortage of public transportation and gas rationing in Managua; and wined and dined while the plunging value of the Cordoba meant most Nicaraguans could no longer afford even the basic food items. The lavish hospitality notwithstanding, delegates did confront an on-going dialogue in which materialism was framed by the dreams of literacy and food and basic housing rather than the desires of yuppie generations for coffee table books on architecture and the new sushi bar and a renovated semi-detached in Cabbagetown; where the propaganda of culture was not veiled as entertainment but articulated as revolutionary struggle; and where art was about participation rather than acquisition.

Towards the end of the conference, a woman delegate from Canada was talking to me, and exasperatedly confided that she was sick to death of hearing about the revolutionary process. This comment completely took me aback, both in her imagined sympathy for such a statement, and for its lack of sensitivity to the political situation of the country in which she found herself. Her statement, however, did point to the context which framed the week of dialogue and workshops and caucuses. For Nicaragua provided both the setting and the platform in which community radio was no longer conceived as an outlet of marginal culture, at best tolerated by the state in North America, but was privileged as the medium of popular resistance and participatory democracy. What this definition of popular resistance was, and how it could be acted upon, however, was shaped by the conditions and restrictions facing community radios in different countries and political regimes.

In the crudest sense, the participants divided themselves between those who believed music could change the world (à la Amnesty International) and those who were fighting for social change and the right to a people's expression on political and military

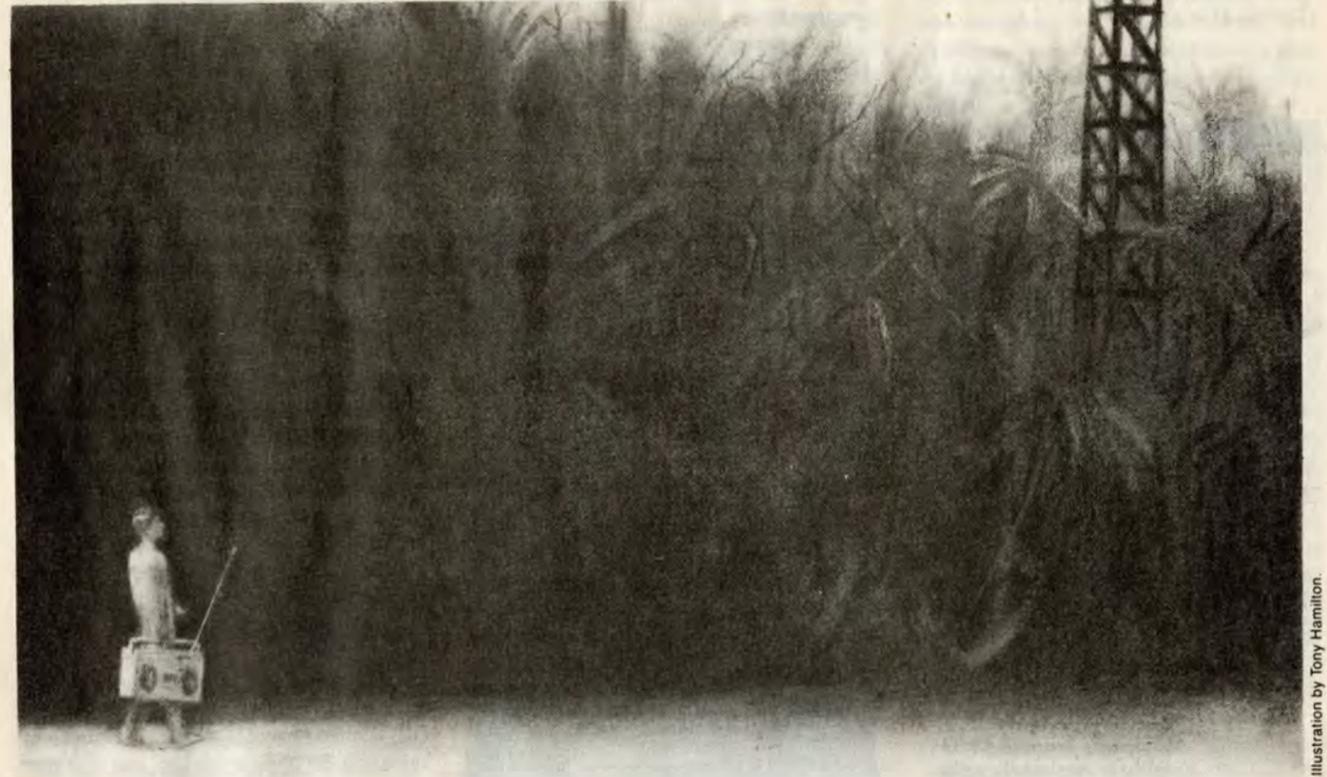


Illustration by Tony Hamilton.

as well as cultural fronts. From Radio Freedom of the ANC to Radio Farabundo Martí and Radio Veceremos of the FLMN; from the indigenous programmes produced by Ecuadorians and Bolivians to the voice of the Dene Nation in the Yukon; common goals of community radio were articulated as:

1. Break with vertical integration and bring to the community issues and information that are important to daily life.
2. Give all peoples and marginalized groups a medium in which they can actively self-determine an expression of their culture.
3. Agitate for social and political change.

Within the larger framework of the conference, these goals were not always respected. Both the Third World and Women's caucuses experienced institutional obstruction, highlighted in the heavy-handed politics of the North Americans who fought for administrative control during the formation of the NGO (non-governmental organization). AMARC applied to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) for B status as an NGO. This will make AMARC eligible for U.N. funding and provide access to U.N. information. The final outcome of the conference, however, in which the constituency of the NGO steering committee elected at the plenary reflected a majority of voices from the Third Worlds,

reinforced the goal of community radio as a political and cultural tool of self-determination.

The clarity of purpose and vision which frames radio broadcasting by peoples in struggles of revolution and autonomy became even more evident in an afternoon meeting of women radio broadcasters and producers. A decision was taken at this meeting to divide into two groups; women working in radio in the First World and women working in radio in the Third World. It was agreed we would talk among ourselves and present group positions to be discussed as a whole. In the group of First World women, many diverse issues were raised. The difficulty of working with men, encountering sexist attitudes, a "boy's school" mentality, the lack of technical training and access, the often failed efforts to include the participation of racial minorities, and volunteer burn-out were some of the problems articulated. Feminism was most often cited as the political force behind participation and struggle was framed as a need for more women's programming and equal air time.

When we returned to the round table, the Third World women's group presented their discussions first, giving an historical overview of women's roles in society, in wars of liberation, and in radio. Although women

from a variety of countries attended, this group primarily represented Central American perspectives, with two women from Nicaragua and a representative of Radio Farabundo Martí (from El Salvador) speaking. Mariana Blanco, who produces the first "feminist" programme in Nicaragua at Radio Insurrección in Matagalpa, provided a general overview of radio in Nicaragua, emphasizing its importance to a country with poor road systems and isolated collectives, and its accessibility to a people's culture which has a highly developed oral tradition. In the war of liberation, radio functioned as a medium for agitation and information. After the liberation, radio became an essential component in giving voice to different sectors of Nicaraguan society from campesinos to industrial workers. From Mariana's perspective, the women's movement in Nicaragua is still young, and with the mobilization for the war against the United States, it is difficult to obtain priority for women's programming. She felt that women in Nicaragua were still fighting for better access and for equal participation from all sectors of society. In this context she added that women must also find time to fight for the survival of their families, and simultaneously maintain a job, political responsibilities, and contributions to the war effort as well as find



Photo by Michael Dyer

Musicians from El Chile outside a regional radio station set up by Radio Insurreccion.



Photo by Michael Dyer

Radio Insurreccion, Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

the time to volunteer for community radio programming.

Luy Gonzales, who is the director of Radio Pancasan in Jinotega, a war zone near the Honduran border, spoke to the contradictions which Mariana had articulated in a more personal testimony. She described her work in radio as double-edged: to break the terror of women's silence and to break the terror of the war which has engulfed her region. As a sole support mother with five children, and as a woman in a position of power, she had to find the strength to work a twenty-four-hour day. As the director of a radio station in a war zone, she had to provide examples of leadership, be prepared to hitchhike to the front to report on a contra atrocity and to encourage women in the region to speak of their feelings and their fears. She explained that she saw women's issues in terms of helping the campesino women in her region; discussing problems of health, isolation, and the difficulties of working in the home and in the fields while the men were participating in self-defence patrols.

Yolanda, who spoke on behalf of the women at Radio Farabundo Marti, was very young and extremely articulate. In the eight years of struggle by the FLMN, Yolanda said that it was now possible to talk of a women's movement in the FLMN. The breakthroughs, however, were not easy, and they had to constantly struggle to ensure the incorporation of women in all aspects of the FLMN's revolutionary process. She pointed to the efforts of women in the FLMN to learn from and absorb the experiences of the Nicaraguan and Cuban women, to break with all traditional roles, and to frame the struggle for women's participation in the new society within the context of national liberation. In radio, she described the efforts of a collective, now with an equal number of women and men, to transmit three or four hours of programming a day. Their work is dangerous and exhausting, requiring the crossing of enemy lines to obtain information, and constant movement around the country to elude military pursuit. The radio, in terms of its focus, is an important source of agitation but is also essential as a social and cultural tool, broadcasting programmes directed towards women in marginalized barrios, including discussions of health care and women's issues.

The testimonies heard that afternoon, far from leaving most of the "First World" group sick to death of hearing about the revolutionary process, gave most women who attended the meeting their first encounter with the dedication, commitment and

courage with which women in Central America are fighting for a women's movement within the larger context of national liberation. The unity and determination which shapes their struggle on many simultaneous fronts is formed by very different conditions than those which frame the strategies of community action and popular expression which exist for women working in the North American and European sister stations of the FLMN and FSLN. That does not mean, however, that we as First World activists can afford to either lionize their struggle as extraordinary or to imagine that our "democracies" will always provide the alternative space for the ideas and visions that Central American women had to achieve through military means.

In Britain, for example, the institutionalization of racism and classism supported by the Thatcher government's policies has created a situation in which community radio is banned and all popular radio broadcasting by groups fighting the status-quo is de facto illegal and subversive. There is no unified voice of the people, but underground stations, organized and listened to by different communities face confiscation, fines and jail sentences for their efforts to confront the white, state supported blackout of their voices. Working class, Asian, and black communities use portable antennae and rely on constant movement within the cities in order to elude police. Their programming, which is a source of agitation and information, is also a medium in which minority cultures can frame their music and literature in a context where art is the art of resistance; made by and heard by the people who are fighting the right-wing policies of the Thatcher regime.

Lest we in Canada, where community radio is both legal and flourishing, become complacent and smug in the belief that the Mulroney government is any more benevolent than Thatcher's, a few recent political developments should be seen as advance warning signals. In Vancouver, Co-op Radio, an established and left-leaning radio station, is facing the very serious threat of a shut down. At the CRTC hearings in 1988 several interventions by independent lobby groups were brought against Co-op Radio for broadcasting a programme called *The Voice of Palestine*. Under CRTC guidelines, any licensed radio is required to create balanced news reporting of issues which are of public concern. Co-op Radio presented a defence of their programming which stated that they were following the regulations of the CRTC by offering the public information not available through the mass-media. The CRTC did

not agree. Instead, the CRTC sent a memo of guidelines to all community radio stations that defines balanced news as presenting all sides of a political issue which is of public interest within a reasonable space of air time (reasonable to be defined by them). The final irony of this directive is not only the concept "balanced" coverage by the mass media, but the control given to the mass media to define what is an issue of public concern. For it is only when the mass media goes hot on an issue that the imperative for balanced reporting goes into effect. Thus federal prison reform, native rights or AIDS medical care can be discussed at will until the mass media decides that they are issues. *Central American News* (produced by CKLN) can present the ANN broadcasts from Nicaragua without air time for the contra's position only until the mass media declares it a prime time story.

Stripping away the bureaucratic double-speak and liberal evocations of balance and fairness, community radio is in effect being told to watch its step. Too much left-wing propaganda without enough air time for the right-wing to rant away, and there goes your license. Out of step with the mass media who now has a direct lever of control over the relationship of reporting to politics at a community level, and there goes your license. Co-op Radio is not off the air, yet. They were given a three year provisional renewal of their license on the condition that they submit monthly reports to the CRTC proving they are following the regulations on properly balanced news. CKLN is now being monitored by two right-wing factions, factions waiting for an obvious slip in "objectivity," for evidence of a left-wing bias or inflammatory comments like "fuck Free Trade" in order to pressure the CRTC to revoke CKLN's license. In 1990, almost every campus community radio station is up for license renewal before the CRTC. The commissioner of the CRTC called it a "happy coincidence."

In the era of Free Trade, "happy coincidences" begin to have ominous overtones. The battle over Free Trade split the country into class, ideological, and regional divisions which were always present, but rarely acknowledged. I doubt the benefits of Free Trade which gives Canadians the right to buy cheaper VCR's, cheaper stereos, and cheaper fashion clothes can heal these divisions overnight. Rather, political positions are no longer going to be tolerated as dissent in a country which politely agrees to disagree. Under Free Trade, I suspect governments will attempt to silence difference, if not by outright banning, then through the

Illustration by Tony Hamilton

great Canadian tradition of underfunding which guarantees failure and an increasing bureaucratic demand for paperwork and reports that discourage and burnout already overworked volunteers and underpaid staff.

The testimonies and idealisms of the AMARC III conference may seem a million



miles away, but the analysis of government repression and goals of self-determination have an immediate resonance for Canadians struggling to fight not only against Free Trade, but against a political system where the potential for co-optation and factionalization with its divide and conquer mentality seriously affect our efforts to create an alternative culture. This is clearly not the historical moment to go to sleep, nor even doze off for a second. As cultural activists in an hostile political climate, we must draw our strength from the examples of unity and clarity presented by so many of the delegates at AMARC III, declare our soli-

arity and our allegiance to popular struggles throughout the globe, fight like hell, and as we would say in a capitalist country, give the Conservative government a run for their money.

### Postscript

It is my last day in Nicaragua. The conference ended a week ago. The passions and discussions and frenetic activities of the conference melt into the rhythms of Managua's daily struggle against a war of aggression. The streets are full of people waiting, waiting for the war to end, waiting for the economy to collapse, waiting for the rains to come. The contradictions between development and underdevelopment, between dreams and reality, amplify in the steamy torrents of a tropical storm and in the deafening chatter of the birds at dusk who hawk like vendors from the trees. I walk through deserted stretches of jungle overgrowth, walk past a children's park where a diesel engine from the 1940's is propelling the horses of a merry-go-round. I reach the cathedral destroyed by the 1972 earthquake I passed in a taxi my first day in Nicaragua. I have the impression, walking through its ruined facade, that I am playing a cat and mouse game with the ghosts of Samozá, the ghosts of the revolution, in this place empty of people, of martyrs, of gods. Opposite the cathedral is a small park, where children are gathered to watch the slow movements of an ancient turtle trapped in a dirty pond. This turtle, enclosed, depressed, poor, and declawed, is still able to bite. In Managua, I never heard a plane. I never saw a helicopter. I only heard the silence war creates, and saw a people, surrounded and besieged, continue to fight, like the ancient turtle, for a dream of freedom. ■

### Footnotes

1. *You Can't Drown The Fire: Latin American Women Writing in Exile*, edited by Alicia Partnoy. San Francisco, Cleis Press, 1988; page 225. (*I Want To Explain a Few Things* was written by Alenka Bermudez Mallol who was born in Santiago, Chile. She became a citizen of Guatemala and one of her children was killed in combat in Guatemala. She now lives in exile in Nicaragua where she represents the Alaide Foppa Guatemalan Cultural Workers Association).
2. *Sans Souci and other stories*; by Dionne Brand; Stratford, Canada; Williams-Wallace Publishers Inc., 1988.

Dot Tuer is a writer living in Toronto.



# Eyes Shut Ears Open

SONIC PROJECTIONS AT THE AUSTRIAN RADIO ART FESTIVAL

by Bruce Barber

Last year, Israelis and Jews around the world, along with East and West Germans commemorate the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass). At the same time the anniversary of Anschluss, the political union of Germany and Austria in 1938 is being marked. 1989 will mark the 50th anniversary of Hitler's march into Poland which signaled the beginning of the Second World War. Throughout Austria a series of events, a few of them such as the Styrian Autumn Festival in Graz, encourage visual artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, dancers and theatre people to reflect on the historical circumstances of fascism and to concentrate their efforts on the representation of issues that encourage debate among the generations to whom war has become an undifferentiated image of the past, or worse, as Kurt Waldheim's "problem."

The Steirischer Herbst (Styrian Autumn) organizers established the theme of "innocence and guilt" (in art) as the principal theme of the festival, one of the longest running (20 years) avant-garde festivals in Europe. Organizer Peter Vujic says in the catalogue introduction:

Guilty are those who demand forgiveness and expiation from art for what they once committed themselves. Guilty is all art which complies with such desires. Guilty also is all art which furious about the past, becomes blind towards today's disasters. And desecrators of art are those, in the West as well as in the East, in the North as well as in the South, who use such

blindness. Great and innocent is all art that depicts and says what will or cannot be tomorrow. And guilty are those who despise such art. Because mostly it only betrays the horrors which its determined opponents are about to provoke. Besides, death comes as a master . . . not only from Germany.

For three months from October until the end of November the festival exhibits a wide range of films, theatre and dance productions, readings as well as symposia for nearly all of the disciplines represented. One of the symposia organized by Heidi Grundmann of the Austrian Broadcasting Commission (Oesterreicher Rundfunk) — (see interview below) — is the first of its kind for the festival, focusing attention on what has, until now, been a neglected aspect of mainstream neo-avant-garde activity. Audio art, specifically radio art (Kunst Radio) has rarely been the subject of lengthy debate in any of the major venues for international art. This year three (to this writer's knowledge) such symposia have been mounted, in Graz, San Francisco and Managua.

The Graz Symposium, *Bilder Im Kopf (With the Eyes Shut)* brought together theoreticians, historians and critics, radio programmers and audio artists from at least 10 countries for a three day period to discuss the state of audio art, the condition and future of audio programming, distribution and broadcast. More specifically, discussion focused on the theme of the festival itself, the guilt and innocence of art (and artists) under fascism. The sub-title of the symposium "On the Theory and Praxis (practice) of Radio

Art" was reflected in a somewhat uneasy balance between the presentation and exhibition of audio art, and the reading of papers. Discussions were simultaneously translated into English and German.

A major audio installation by Bill Fontana was presented as part of the Symposium and festival exhibition *Reference Points*. His work *Sonic Projections* provided a structural foundation for the symposium and was heavily profiled in the catalogue. A discussion of Fontana's work on the final day of the symposium which could have formed an extremely lively debate was inhibited because the work was not yet installed. Fontana's acontextual "aestheticising of politics" was cited as a major problem by several of the participants including Douglas Kahn (U.S.) and Peter Weibel (Austria) who lead a vital exchange after hearing excerpts from Fontana's "Projections."

Two other installations; a collaborative work by Tom Johnson (U.S.) and Bruno Beusch (Switzerland) *Itin Burd* (Interarium Burdigalense), and a work by Ed Tomney (U.S.) *Whispering Elms*, completed the roster of site specific works. The installations by Beusch/Johnson and Tomney had difficulty in competing with the extravagant neo-Baroque architecture of the Palais Attems. The echo effect of the stairwell site chosen by Tomney disrupted the stereo montage he had constructed.

Two performance works by Hungarians Laslo Revesz / Gabor Bora and Janos Sugar were performed for subsequent broadcast at the ORF studios on the second evening of the symposium. Sugar's performance was a simple yet elegant montage of text and piano music, repetitive in a late 60s minimalist fashion; self-reflexive ruminations on the modes and manners of performance itself. Revesz and Bora's *Prague Student* examined the existential conundrum of the doppelganger. The space and timing was inappropriate for this rather confused performance which merely confirmed several stereotypes of what constitutes appropriate artistic (creative) behaviour. The performance might have been more successful had it been presented as a film or philosophical paper.

Other performances were presented by the mobile radio programmer/intervener Karel Dudesk/Mike Hentz (Austria and West Germany) and Oil Blo and Armin Medosch (Czechoslovakia and Austria). Acting like a telegenetic version of a cross between Clint Eastwood and Danny the Red, Hentz and Dudesk attempted and marginally succeeded in grabbing centre stage for their Minus Delta T Mobile Media Bus. Why is it

that some artists have to reproduce the least desirable aspects of 60s leftism i.e. its anarchic tendencies — in the "kind o'" permatex environment of the late 80s? Maybe this is the new tele (literary) symbolism of the late 20th century, a lame parody of its progenitor a century ago, all flare and no substance. Hentz and Dudesk's laid back Western style, their deck chair antics provided some light relief to the proceedings, but little substance. Their use of the media as neutral recording equipment (i.e. you can video, tourist like, an academic discussion from a deck chair) is the practical demonstration of simulation theory.

The papers ranged over a number of substantive issues including the political dynamics of radio and avant-garde music (Kahn U.S.); alternative broadcasting in the states (Thorington), fascist radio and the regression in listening (Kittler); state broadcasting, political alternatives and the radio play (Horspiel) Klaus Schoning and Vittorio; satellite technology (Richard Kreishe); re-prosound, literature and utopia (Peter Weibel) and radio and cultural hegemony (Barber); audio by artists distribution (William Furlong); and poetry/artists radio (Zurbrugg).

Of these papers Kittler's became a sort of key note address establishing a critical ambience for what followed. Georg Katzer's 1983 work *Aide Memoire*, a complex montage of reactionary and fascist emblems and speeches with progressive critical cadences, provided practical explication of some critical energies focused upon in Kittler's paper.

In contrast with equivalent North American events there was a noticeable absence of feminist critique. While a few feminist issues were discussed informally this did not compensate for the lack in the main body of the symposium. The catalogue and poster also suggest this was a problem for the festival as a whole. One of the posters for the Opera/Dance section of the festival (Belgian director Jan Fabre's *Das Gals im Kopf wird vom glass: The Minds of Helena Troubleyn*) gave the impression that the *Something Divine* (catalogue) which Fabre is attempting to construct is less metaphysical than carnal. Proof positive, once again, that nothing succeeds like "succex."

*With the Eyes Shut* was an excellent beginning to further informed debates about the role of audio art today. Issues confronted deserve further exploration. Hopefully, the plans to publish the transcripts of the symposium participants will become a reality so that those working in the field can benefit from the discussions which took place.



Recalling Anschluss, the political union of Austria and Nazi Germany in 1938.

Bruce Barber interviews festival organizer Heidi Grundmann of the Austrian Broadcasting Commission.

**FUSE:** How long have you been planning the symposium?

**GRUNDMANN:** The idea came up exactly one year ago with a former symposium at the Steirischer Herbst (Autumn Festival) and I was already preparing a radio programme (Radiokunst) which began in December. I had been talking with the director of the Festival and just said in passing that this would be an interesting subject for a symposium. He reflected upon it then later, I do not exactly remember when, he phoned me in Vienna and said that he would look at the idea closely.

**FUSE:** What do you hope to accomplish with the symposium. I find the title *With the Eyes Shut: The Theory and Praxis (Practice) of Radio Art* very provocative.

**GRUNDMANN:** Yes, it principally means that the symposium will deal with theory and have some practical examples of the kind of art which is transmitted via radio. It is also attempting to provide some kind of support and substance to the programme at the ORF (Oesterreicher Rundfunk/Austrian Radio Commission). We also wish this symposium to focus attention on this form of art and to give some kind of support to people who work in the field of radio.

**FUSE:** You work for the Austrian Broadcasting Commission and you obviously have support from them to have this kind of work transmitted on the air waves. Is there possibility for further support of this kind so that this may in the future become a continuing event?

**GRUNDMANN:** I hope in a way. It depends a lot on how the symposium goes and how the Bill Fontana (audio project) is received. If that is successful, I would hope that there would be more support for the bigger projects; those which go beyond the scope of the radio programme itself. If it does not go over so well, it will be difficult to continue these types of projects. But the Radio programme which I produce? I do not think it is at all in question. It is already in place. It is not expensive and it is also a kind of alibi programme in the sense that the ORF can say that they experiment, that they are progressive. Austrian Radio as you know is run by the state. It is public radio and has to cover events in the visual arts, in the fields of literature, music, etc. and it has to also have some kind of coverage of experimental or innovative programming.

**FUSE:** The sense I have of the Festival as a whole, is that there is great interest in having avant-garde projects presented and, for the past 20 years, this appears to have become established as a pattern.



Kunst Radio programme cover.



A conspicuous lack of feminist content and critique highlighted by the poster for the opera/dance section of the festival.

**GRUNDMANN:** Yes the Festival constructed its image as an avant-garde event and in the beginning it was not always easy but it was certainly possible to have things that were, shall we say surfacing — in the air — and to do this with relatively little money in a small city. But this is not really possible in the same way any more.

**FUSE:** How did you make your choice of participants for the Symposium? There are many from different countries, East and West. Would you have liked to have a greater representation of artists and speakers from Eastern Europe and elsewhere?

**GRUNDMANN:** Yes we have a few from East Germany and Hungary and I thought that it would be interesting to have greater representation of people from different media and political situations. Our own radio is different from yours in Canada or that which exists in the U.S. and Australia. With representatives from each country we obtain a sense of these differences. Also I wanted to have people from different backgrounds. It is somewhat biased towards visual art because I think that that has not been dealt with sufficiently in other year's festivals. Visual artists are also producing radio art and it is important to represent this in some way at this time.

**FUSE:** One of the themes of the festival is the 50th anniversary of the Anschluss and a few of the papers, Friedrich Kittler's for example, and some of the work itself, Georg Katzer's tape piece *Aide Memoire* for example references itself to the history of Nazi Germany and the annexation of Austria by the Nazi regime in 1938. To the extent that the, can I call it the "guilt factor," has become a specific theme of the exhibition — I find this to be very courageous at this time, to place it in this kind of context. Was this debated by the organizers of the festival, how this was to be represented?

**GRUNDMANN:** We felt it important to show that art is not far removed from it all, that a medium like radio had a role to play. It was the organizers' decision, but nobody in Austria in this year can overlook that date. So here there are many things happening this year throughout the country. We have also had work dealing with the theme in the radiokunst section of the festival; that confronts the past in a very specific way.

*Reference Points* is the main visual arts exhibit of the festival this year and they decided to have works sited in public places. They have done site works before but this time all the efforts are being directed toward this end. *Reference points* means that there are several points in the city which were researched and which were shown to have taken a major role in the taking over of Austria by the Nazis in 1938 and these points have been shown to artists from various countries and they have been asked to produce works to the theme. Bill Fontana (U.S.) chose several of these points and decided to link them with sound.

**FUSE:** Is there a sense that the Austrian people are attempting to forget this history. I am thinking in particular of the concern world wide over Kurt Waldheim's war record. And is this why the organizers have concentrated on this issue of "guilt and innocence"?

**GRUNDMANN:** Yes this has something to do with it; an attempt to find a way to confront the past. Of course there has been a lot of pushing away, forgetting, and of course we have to find some way of dealing with it. A festival like this helps to assist artists in dealing with this history, by providing them with the opportunity to work together on this issue.

**FUSE:** What has been the public response to the exhibition? I noticed for instance that on the outside of the Palais Attems (Festival and Symposium headquarters and one of the former Nazi buildings in Graz) that there was a montage of festival posters which allowed the image ground to be read as a white swastika. It is visible from many points in the city. What has been the response of the local media and the public at large to this.

**GRUNDMANN:** It is difficult for me to say because I have not followed so much what has been going on in Graz. One of the organizers Richard Kreische certainly has a better idea of the responses from the public. They are talking about a pre-programme scandal because of the statue of Mary in the St. Marks plaza — a golden statue is being covered and made into an obelisk form by Hans Haacke. I do not know what role the statue played in the history of fascism in Austria but the public seems to be very concerned by this work (of Haacke's). Also Bill Fontana has tried out some of his sounds for his work; broadcast them throughout the town from the Schlossberg [a mountain in the city centre of Graz] and the public have not been disturbed by this. But then again his sounds are beautiful and not too disturbing.

**Projekt Mahnmal: A telephone dialogue between Graz and Santa Barbara for Kunst Radio.**

There was not much negative public response from that (Fontana's work). On the contrary from a taxi driver I heard a very satisfactory response. He remembered that he had heard the sounds and was extremely interested in them. So, I do not know how the whole exhibition has been received by the public at large. Of course some of the work would be very difficult to swallow because art of this kind is not very easily understood by the public.

**FUSE:** Bill Fontana's project is the locus for much audio and visual activity and his *Sonic Projections* deal with the introduction of audio material from outside of Graz and re-contextualises it here. There is an emphasis on Bill Fontana's work. Is this something that began as a structural point for the symposium as a whole.

**GRUNDMANN:** No. It was really by chance that it happened. Bill Fontana approached us because he was planning a piece for Berlin in which he wanted Vienna to participate. He had not the money together for Berlin so he came to us and we said that it would be better if he produced something especially for us here rather than for us to participate in the Berlin project. So he met with the curator for the festival and immediately came up with this very clear project and then it was merely a matter of getting the resources together to do it. Ideally it would have been better for it to have already been up now but there were problems with timing. The date of the symposium had to be different.

**FUSE:** I have been very impressed by the level of inquiry and the kind of information being presented here. If I have one criticism, it would be that there has been very little time for open discussion between the symposium participants. Do you hope this will occur over the next day or so.

**GRUNDMANN:** Yes, there are too many lectures and not enough time for discussion between them. Also, a paper like yours, for instance: there is so much material that people have to have time to digest it and many of them do not understand English so well. And it's also a problem to have a discussion of Kittler's paper, as well, even in German. One person said that it is too early for discussion, we have to digest it. That is why I asked the participants to stay for a full three days to allow more discussion between the participants, in the restaurants and exhibition venues and with two exceptions this has happened. This is so more personal talks can take place and not so much emphasis is placed on the formal part of the symposium. ■

**Bruce Barber teaches intermedia at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax.**

What's ripped us apart even more than the drugs,  
 Are the thieves and the goddamned liars . . .  
 When the thugs form bands, look who gets record deals,  
 From New York metal labels looking to scam,  
 Who sign the most racist, queer-bashing bands they can find,  
 To make a buck revving kids up for war.

"Chicken Shit Conformist"  
 By Jello Biafra, The Dead Kennedys, 1988

# a hairstyle is not a lifestyle

## Community Building and Cultural Resistance

by Jane Farrow

I used to work at the Silver Dollar though my tenure as a waitress there was short, spanning only the fall and winter of 1987. This was the period when Elliot Lefko was the resident promoter, a man whose aesthetic dis/loyalties might be described as anything too weird, loud, risky and radical for anyone else to touch. It was an interesting time in terms of the bar's history as it involved a radical change in the clientele which comprised a large native contingent as well as outpatients, addicts, drifters and sex trade workers to the night-creatures of Toronto's alternate/hard-core/punk community. The clash of cultures within the lounges was minimized however by a substantial decline in regular business over the preceding year, indeed the upstairs "peeler" bar had been closed for months before Elliot's shows went in. The regulars who lingered were quite willing to tolerate the newcomers — what ultimately sent them packing was the management's new policy of doubling booze prices promptly at 8:30. The on-stage replacements for the occasional Country and Western cover bands certainly looked pretty different, but beyond that, it is hard to talk about them as a unified whole. Simplistic assessments of the aesthetic and stylistic commonalities of hard-core, thrash metal and punk may

be possible but these genres are heterogeneous, particularly in their political affiliations, some being progressive and truly alternate while others cling to a retro-wretch conservatism in the hopes of signing a record deal.

These musics and their respective communities are discussed here under the general rubric of punk for lack of a more concise yet recognizable amalgam of hardcore/thrash/garage/alternate/independent/sludgeabilly. This article is a response to those misinformed "observers" who make the absurd generalization that punk is no longer a terrain of resistance but merely the latest fashion option for bored suburbanites and weekend warriors. While there are hundreds of popularized derivatives which have capitalized on aspects of the punk aesthetic (i.e. U2, INXS, Guns and Roses, The Cult, Stray Cats, Billy Idol, etc.), it is completely wrong to claim that these acts are punk. My stint as a waitress at the Silver Dollar only served to strengthen my conviction that the alternate scene is, for the most part, a progressive, pan-ethnic, polysexual community wherein the exchange of ideas, understandings and emotions constructs a community that is actively political, transgressive and resistant. Totalizing generalizations to the contrary are not only wrong, they are words

from the colonized and colonizing.

In order to discuss what went on inside the Silver Dollar it is first necessary to situate it within the political economy of the Hotel Waverly. This will in turn make it easier to understand why the Silver Dollar's heyday as Toronto's hard-core headquarters was so brief.

The Hotel Waverly, in conjunction with its upstairs and downstairs Silver Dollar lounges, have historically constituted a powerful wart on Toronto's toilet-white exterior. Sandwiched between the Scott Mission for Homeless Men, The Clarke Institute of Psychiatry and the Addiction Research Foundation, this landmark has a rap sheet as long as owner Phil Wynn's statement of assets which, incidentally, puts his net worth at over \$100 million. The Waverly's reputation as a brothel rivaled that of the Warwick, the notorious "sin-bin" at Jarvis and Carlton that was finally ploughed under almost a decade ago by the sanitizing pressures of Toronto development money. The sex trade thrived in the Waverly's "one-stop-shopping" surround: "girls, girls, girls" action in the upstairs bar, cheap draft and noise downstairs, and the array of available rooms and hallways in the hotel. One night the front desk clerk showed me a hole in the wall through which you could see into the next room — "That bed's

seen more miles than a New York taxi, I used to get five bucks a peek from the guys drinking downstairs." In a social climate marked by its "Acquired Dread of Sex," this free flow of creative juices flew in the face of dominant morality yet it was this that also fueled the backlash of the repressive state apparatus which, in cahoots with a tight-ass Toronto voting constituency, constructed a timely need for an American-style, zero-tolerance crackdown on vice and vagrancy.

Of course the rooms themselves were by anyone's standards uninhabitable leading one to the inescapable conclusion that Phil Wynn had nothing less than contempt for the human beings who paid him \$45 a night to sleep there. Indeed, conditions at Wynn's 17 aging apartment buildings around Toronto have prompted tenants to take him to court literally hundreds of times over the past 27 years. Despite their determination, Wynn has managed to elude punishment thanks to a legal system that dispenses wrist slaps and "suspended sentences" to multiple-offending magnates like Wynn. In one recent example of this pattern, Wynn was convicted of 41 violations of the building standards bylaws and was fined \$25 on each offence for a total of \$1,025 despite the maximum fine for each conviction being \$2000.

Wynn's teflon-like ability to elude justice inside and outside the courtroom faltered momentarily in 1987 when raids on the sex trade at the Waverly became more frequent and wider in scope. The vice squad eventually got "compliance" out of Wynn by threatening to close down his hotel operations completely. This prompted Phil and his son Paul to devise plans to turn around the Waverly by revamping the hotel and its clientele. This renovation therefore was in no respect related to the cries of despair and agony that had caused the paint to peel in this hell-hole — it was merely the latest in a lifetime of profit-maximizing decisions but this one had "public support" (read media compliance from a morally outraged, well-connected elite).



Photo by Fredericka Towle

Wynn hired a new manager, Josh Segal, to run the Waverly and Silver Dollar. By this time Lefko had been booking both rooms for a few months with the odd show by other local "indie" promoters like Mark "Cattleprod" Smith, Jill Heath and William New. Josh moved quickly to "streamline" expenses beginning with a 20% reduction in waitresses' hourly pay (from five to four dollars), a rate which was actually less than minimum wage. He was constantly haranguing us about not pushing alcohol hard enough. He eventually fired Diana for "insubordination" when she told him that she "knew how to waitress." He then tried to eliminate "the liars and thieves" by planting a few bucks more in the evening's float and seeing if they reported the discrepancy. Perhaps most annoying was Josh's facile posing as some sort of politico when he censored Tupelo Chain Sex's poster which featured dueling portraits of Hitler and Reagan. Despite the efforts of many to "explain the meaning" of the parallel, he went around tearing out Hitler's face claiming that the poster was "anti-semitic." One wondered how this man's political conscience jibed with his willingness to work for the man who can be found saving lawyers fees in the small-claims courts two or three times weekly by personally collecting overdue rents and evicting tenants.

In short, the Wynns and their henchman Josh were difficult to do business with. These were the givens, however, if one wanted to do business at the Silver Dollar at all, a decision that Lefko made for lack of any suitable alternative. Yet despite such limitations, the calibre of the entertainment and events there was outstanding. Within a nine month period Lefko et al brought in some of the best domestic and international alternate material Toronto has ever seen. Attendance rates varied but most nights it hopped.

On the eve of the opening of the '88 Winter Olympics The Dik Van Dykes, the Dundrels, Heimlich Manoeuvre and The Shadowy Men from a Shadowy Planet (see "Art Band Makes Big," this issue *Fuse*) announced that their show would honour "all the boys and girls at home who swallow patriotic steroids." Decked out in a shabby nylon track suit and runners, the Dundrel's Olympic King dedicated a song to his "non-existent penis" while the Shadowy Men lit

the Official Cheese Fondue and hoola-hooped with their unauthorized Olympic logo. The "it" of "My mother and father do it" sung by the "Diks" turned out to be curling.

Things got out of hand sometimes: there were the mega-thrashers, the Day-Glo Abortions from Vancouver who inspired the mostly male audience to heights of ecstasy with their "mating dance," involving raucous stomping, screaming and general crawling over each other. And then there were the Rhythm Pigs, pseudo speed metallers from the States who do a satanic version of the "Peanuts" theme song. Or the Mud Honeys featuring Nora, the go-go dancer from RPM, whose "so young, so bad, so what" stances sent up rock and roll posing brilliantly. And from Montreal, the tyrants of teen trash themselves, The Gruesomes, whose extended metaphor on scary and nerdy always packed the house.

**H**enry Rollings, formerly of Black Flag, exhorted the packed house around him to "get off your ass and do something before the neo-nazis blow us all up" and Jayne County (formerly Wayne) from New York sang "If you don't want to fuck me, fuck off" thus making her feelings on the connection between personal politics and the social construction of desire perfectly clear. Other favourites include the Chesterfield Kings, swampabilly swingers Ray Condo and his Hard Rock Goners, Suicide, Big Dipper, BunchofFucking-Goofs, Fifth Column (a nice bunch of weirded-out anarcho-tacky garage girls), Plasterscene Replicas, Maggot Fodder, No Means No, Jerry Jerry and the Songs of Rhythm Orchestra (the drunkest and rockiest country gossellers this side of the bible belt) and Lydia Lunch and Pianosaur. Oh yeah, and Montreal's sludgeabilly doyens Deja Voodoo whose five albums have never exceeded a \$150 production budget.

But it wasn't just the entertainment that made the Silver Dollar special. It came from the audience when they weren't afraid of interacting with the band by transgressing the oppressive rock hierarchy of star/fan. Sometimes people would push aside the singer from the mike so they could sing the words — they might have paid six dollars to get in



but that didn't mean they wanted to have their "culture" passively dictated to them. One time, rapper Schooly D's opening act, the Rascals, were told to get off the stage when they started their rap about "getting a disease from some slut's cunt."

People resisted sitting at tables, despite Josh's efforts to enforce LCBO regulations about being seated while drinking. Instead people walked around talking to each other, shouting to be heard over the deafening music, wading through the smoke and sweat, beer and broken glass and the hyper-active toilets that no one cared enough about to report let alone fix — the graffiti: "Don't Wash, signed the Manager" and "Cleanliness is a Conspiracy" on the walls. Physical comfort was irrelevant, and if you wanted to be waited on, well you might end up waiting forever. Besides, if you were in a real rush you would have brought your own beer.

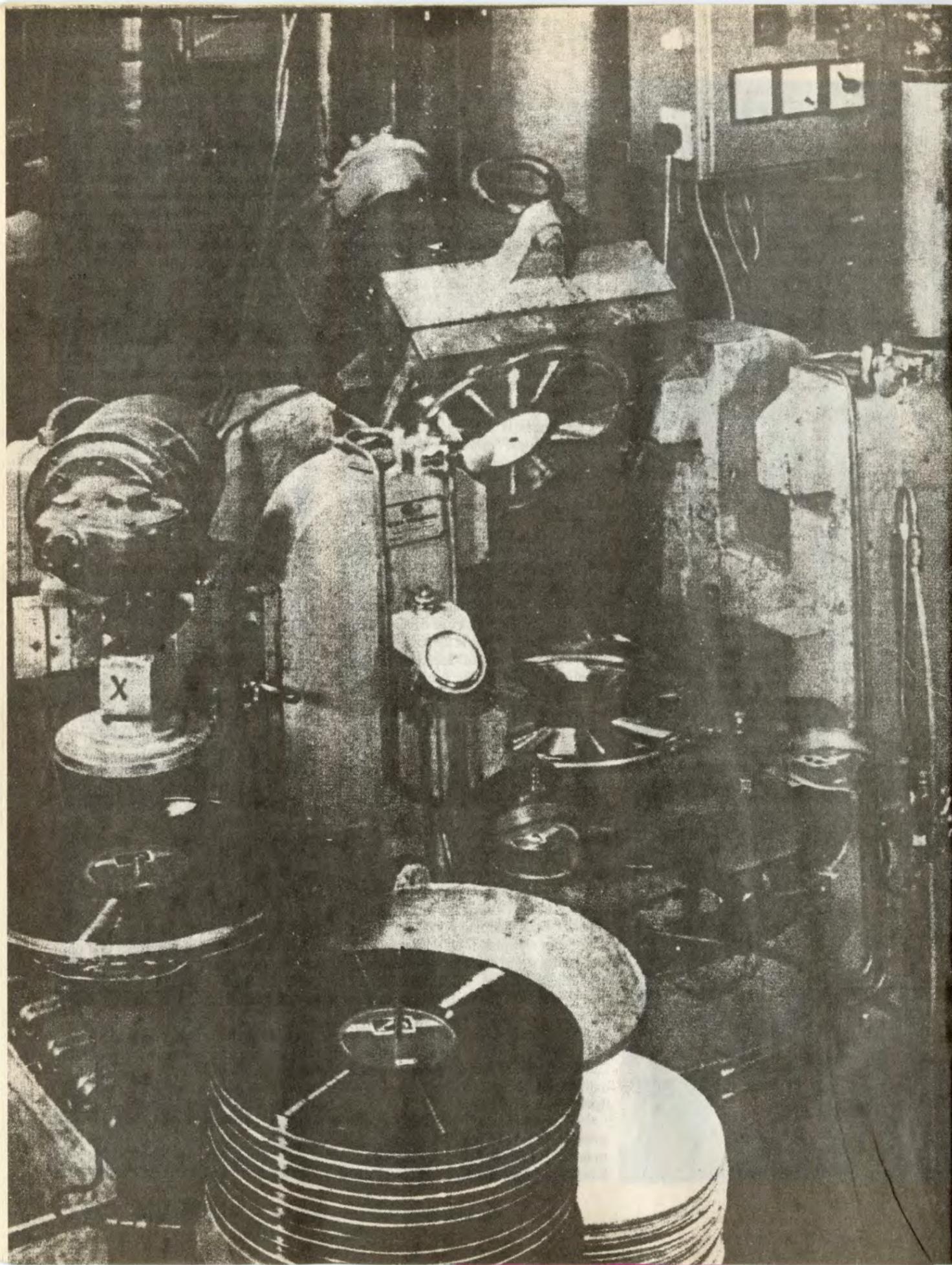
When the audience was not like this it was beyond boring, it was politically retrograde. Like the sanctimonious "straight edge" boys who would come in and not drink, not dance, not smoke, not cruise. They didn't just decline your waitress patter to round up some drinks, they made a point of declaring that it wasn't that they weren't thirsty, it was that they didn't drink — as in ever — get it? The straight edge wants to keep "straight" so as to maintain their "edge" or, as in the case of some of the skinheads, so they would be "totally in control for any fight that may break out (read start) after the gig." The straight edge's conspicuously moralized abstention is merely the internalization of dominant ideas about "just saying no," those calculated ideals which strive to keep people inside their individualized, solitary and alienated bodies. This "self control" and "keeping cool" prevented them from escaping their oppressive individualization via some screaming, dancing, fucking or "losing one's head" that often accompanied a night at the Silver Dollar. And it is in the experiencing of this communication, commonalty and collectivity that we build our community. After all, its not going to be an individual that keeps the "neo-nazis from blowing us all up."

My statement as to the political progressiveness of punk cannot unfortunately be applied to all such bands. Some are politically retrograde to say

the least, like the white supremacist band Agnostic Front or the virulent homophobia and misogyny of Verbal Assault or Problem Children. Despite their small numbers these bands have tended to predominate the media's coverage of the alternate scene (i.e. *Rolling Stone's* alarmist cover story last November entitled "Skinhead Nation" which makes the absurd claim that skinheads pose some kind of organized threat to "America's young minds and future"). The fact is a skinhead panic is functional to their surplus-extracting commodity producing economy and ideology — popularity with the shock/schlock media can always be parlayed into recording contracts with those "New York metal labels" looking "to make a buck revving kids up for war" to quote Jello Biafra.

**T**he Silver Dollar's alternate phase ended in May '87 with the "surprise" dismissal of Elliot Lefko from his post as resident promoter. This event was presaged by his paying of guarantees to a few bands "didn't pay off." As Phil Wynn explained: "It was not a profitable venture. Whether you're booking bands or selling apples, the goal is the same — you do it to make money." Predictably, what few live shows there are at the Silver Dollar now are mainstream in style and content (R&B cover bands, light rock and pop).

These events however should not surprise us as it certainly doesn't surprise the coke-addicted record company magnates who use the words "indie" or "alternate" interchangeably with "financially unviable." The fact is live alternate music is not a big money-earner, and so long as you can't "make money on it," landlords are going to be breathing down our necks. And perhaps it is this economic determinant that one should remember when claiming that punk has become some kind of stuffed and mounted aesthetic adorning the walls of the nouveau chic. It is the hairstyles that are being commoditized, not that social movement's critique of hierarchy, capitalism, sexism and racism. And until such time as the Gay Bikers on Acid play Rosedale weddings, we'll go on building our culture and community of resistance. ■



# Vanishing Vinyl

Majors Liquidate Indies Consolidate!

by Victor Barac

The big are getting bigger, and the small are becoming more numerous. These two trends characterize the world of music in the 1980s. Concentrating their power on a global scale, the multinational record industry giants have become "bigger business" than ever before. At the same time, there has been an unprecedented proliferation of small-scale independent record production, seemingly free of the dictates of "big business." To account for these apparently contradictory trends, most commentators look to the past for explanations. It is assumed that whatever is happening in the 80s, must have already been present in embryonic form in the 70s.

## The most popular account is based on a romantic reading of the significance of punk music:

Punk is supposed to have issued the decisive aesthetic and ideological challenge which forced the corporate rock music establishment to change. This view has been elaborated and debated in various ways and has even become, to a certain extent, popular lore. With plummeting profits in 1978-79, the international record industry was indeed forced to change. But it was not due to punk. A more plausible account would have to consider the various social, demographic and technological determinants which created the conditions for change in the first place.

Throughout the 60s and 70s, record industry profits were primarily derived from the youth market. But by 1978, this market had been substantially eroded by two related factors: first, the demographic structure in the West had become "top-heavy," with a greater proportion of the population now over 25 years of age, and a smaller proportion of the record-buying youths; second, widespread youth unemployment further reduced the already diminishing purchasing power of youth. These social and demographic factors were beyond the control of the industry. Still, others were not. For instance, the introduction of inexpensive cassette recording machines had given rise to the unforeseen practice of "home taping": a practice which has resulted in billions of dollars of lost revenues (according to industry estimates). In addition to this, the widespread popularity of home video and video games has further cut into industry profits to the tune of billions of dollars.

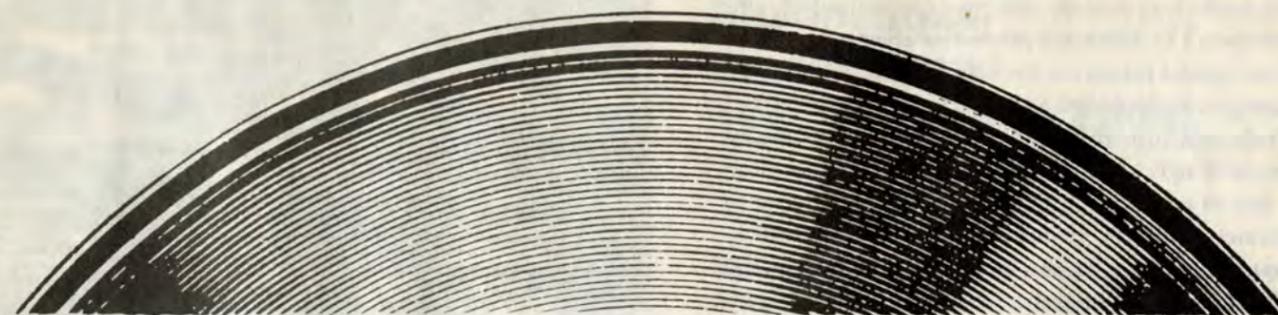
Punk music, however, was not totally without significance. Following the example set by reggae and dub, punk music gave rise to a mode of musical production characterized by a "do-it-yourself" ideology. Taking advantage of new high-quality but inexpensive recording technologies, punk music was instrumental in showing how popular music could be performed and recorded in the interstices of a dominant musical establishment. This way of making music has come to be known as "independent."

### Independents . . . Independence?

The cultural currency given to the concept of independent music can be for the most part attributed to the alternative music press of the late 70s and early 80s. The general view expounded is in terms of a set of oppositions designed to distinguish between independent and multinational recording companies: big versus small; multinational versus national; commercial versus non-commercial. It is generally believed that music put out by independent record companies is somehow aesthetically and ideologically superior; and that the record industry can best be understood as a struggle in the market place between "music by the people" (the indies) and "music for the people" (the multinationals). A closer examination will reveal a confusion and oversimplification in the oppositional terms which underlie the concept of independence.

### Big Versus Small

It is obvious that indies operate on a smaller scale than the multinationals. In Canada, the top seven foreign owned multinational account for about 90 per cent of the record market, the 25 top domestic indies for about 9.9 per cent. But distinctions based solely on size do not reveal the crucial relation of dependence between the indies and multinationals. Virtually all of the big domestic indies depend on the multinationals for manufacturing and distribution (and to a lesser extent, promotion). As such, the difference between indies and multinationals is more significantly a qualitative, rather than a quantitative one. Furthermore, a simple big/small dichotomy fails to take into account the variety of indies. Some indies specialize in following the most popular trends capitalized on by the multinationals; others put out records made ex-



clusively from imported masters; still others are primarily involved in producing local music for the purpose of leasing out the masters to other record companies which then take on the task of securing manufacturing, distribution and promotion deals. About half of Canada's 200-plus indie record companies operate at a loss, whereas the top 25 or so make profits in the hundreds of thousands and sometimes in excess of a million dollars.

### Multinational Versus National

In distinguishing indies and multinationals on the basis of their geographical range of operations it is widely believed that the indies exert a positive force on the domestic music scene. The multinationals, on the other hand, are "big business," the bad guys with a well known history of corruption, scandal, and exploitation. In general, the indies stand for cultural nationalism, the multinationals for foreign domination. Although there is a certain degree of truth to this scenario, this simple distinction serves to hide some significant contradictions.

As was mentioned above, some Canadian indies specialize in leasing imported masters from the back catalogues of foreign companies for the purposes of making compilation albums (K-Tel Records of Winnipeg was a leader in this field). Their main goal is to get as much mileage as possible out of records which the multinationals have either deleted or stopped promoting. Such indies can hardly be said to be contributing to the creation of "Canadian" music.

There are indies who specialize in finding and producing Canadian artists for a market which remains quite small domestically but is significant internationally. For example, Nettwerk Records (Vancouver) succeeded recently in accessing European

markets for their Canadian artists (such as Skinny Puppy). Only about 20 per cent of their business is in Canada, the remainder abroad.

If Canadian indies are seen as the answer to fostering the growth and development of a vibrant domestic musical culture, then it should be made clear that this involves more than just promoting the music made by citizens of Canada. It also very much depends on access to records which are at the leading edge of contemporary musical production worldwide. The global demand for Afro-American based music has demonstrated that peoples of the world are becoming less insular and more open to international cultural currents. But the duties imposed on imported records (13.5 per cent) limit their availability to all but a very small number of full line retail shops located in the major urban centres. And the relatively small demand for such product makes it unprofitable for the bigger companies to manufacture domestically. Nonetheless, several indies (such as Fringe and Amok) have been active in importing masters for the domestic manufacture of records by artists whose music would ordinarily be available only as imported finished product.

### Commercial Versus Non-Commercial

All record companies are in the business of selling commodities; they are all commercial enterprises. But there are big differences in their commercial attitudes and strategies and in their social effects. Because most multi-nationals are subsidiaries of larger corporate conglomerates, the decisions as to what to record and promote must be coordinated to the workings of a larger corporate strategy. The success of multinationals depends on the rapid turnover of global hits

and a marketing strategy designed to manipulate consumer tastes by intensive promotional activity. Without the capital resources needed for mass advertising campaigns, indies tend to cater to more specialized markets and subcultures; their marketing strategies are accordingly oriented not towards taste manipulation but to consumer information and responding to consumer demands. If multinationals can be said to operate according to the principle of maximizing profits, then indies operate on a principle of minimizing losses. Earl Rosen, former president of CIRPA, (Canadian Independent Record Producers Association) has referred to owners of indies as the "last of the buccaneer capitalists." This is in reference to the fact that in the record business it is the indies who take the big risks in seeking out and recording new and unknown music and artists, while the multinationals play only the "safe bets." Another important difference in the commercial character of multinationals and indies is the destination of profits: in general, indies reinvest the bulk of profits into new products, whereas the profits of the multinationals largely go to shareholders.

## Indies & Multinationals: A Dependency Relation

In order to understand why certain commentators are predicting the demise of independent music in Canada it is important to grasp the precise relationship of domestic independent and foreign-owned multinational record companies. The 1984 Statistics Canada report on the recording industry gives the following conclusions:

... we may reasonably conclude that the recording industry in Canada is an oligopoly; that is, a very small number of major companies hold almost all of the market. The predominance of foreign controlled firms is not unique to this particular cultural industry, however.

Situating this dominant position of the multinationals in Canada within the international context, the report continues with a quote from Quebec economist Pierre Roy:

It is an inescapable fact that the phenomenal growth of the culture industry has gone hand in hand with its concentration in huge firms, heavily integrated both vertically and horizontally. As a consequence, the world market is dominated by a small number of companies motivated by purely economic considerations, which flood other countries with their home culture because the latter have neither the financial resources nor the technical know-how to compete with them effectively. Even highly industrialized countries such as France have had their markets invaded by foreign, notably American products.

Cheaper than machines : Women working at EMI Record plant. PHOTO: EMI.



## Multinational Branchplants: The Competitive Edge

The domination of the recording industry by foreign owned multinationals is possible because of the considerable advantages afforded by the branchplant system of production. This advantage is secured in various ways, but the bottom line is that there is an unequal level of risk in the manufacture of domestic masters as opposed to the manufacture of imported masters. About 90 per cent of all domestic sales of records manufactured in Canada are from imported masters. And over 90 per cent of the records manufactured by multinational branchplants in Canada are from masters leased from parent companies abroad. The great advantage of manufacturing records from imported masters is that production costs have already been paid for; so all that the branchplant needs to do is manufacture and distribute a product which in many cases will benefit from spillover promotion on American radio and TV. In addition to this, an imported master is taxed at the same rate as a blank master tape, which, at a cost of about \$25-\$30, yields a four or five dollar duty. The production of domestic masters costs, on the average, five to 10 thousand dollars per song, and often relies on the contributed (unpaid) services of artistic and technical personnel. It is not surprising, then, that multinational branchplants concentrate their efforts on the manufacture of records from cost-efficient imported masters, and, devote only a small proportion of their budgets to the comparatively expensive production of Canadian artists.

Another aspect of indie/multinational dependence is the former's reliance upon the latter for manufacturing capacities. Although several small independently owned record pressing plants exist, only three major multinational manufacturing facilities have the capacity to handle the needs of indies and multi-nationals alike — for the whole country. The inescapable conclusion which can be drawn is that within Canada, foreign owned multinationals control the means of production for the record industry.

Distribution infrastructures and payment systems are, however, likely the most crucial sphere in which the indies depend on the multinationals. Because the multinationals already have a huge distribution network in place for their own products, they profit by

distributing indie products across Canada with minimal additional cost and effort. Distribution is a costly process which requires vast personnel countrywide; indies just do not have the financial resources to do this themselves. Because of this, the multinationals can sell their products to retailers at lower prices, who, in turn, can sell at a higher profit margin or at discount prices. So, from the retailers' point of view, multinational product is then preferable to that of the indies. For the indies then, the only way they can be assured of getting their records in the stores and get promptly paid for them is to sign distribution deals with multinationals.

The distribution system is organized in other ways which favour the multinationals. About 80 per cent of retail sales of records are through rack jobbers — sub-distributors who stock the record racks of department stores and other large retail outlets. Because they concentrate on high volume sales, rack jobbers restrict their product selections to current chart hits. As such, they are particularly conservative buyers and very reluctant to take on indie products.

In the past decade the over-all character of record retail outlets has changed in a way that is advantageous to the multinationals, but less so to the indies. The old "mom and pop" record stores — independently owned family businesses which carried the full array of available products — have been displaced by the proliferation of retail chain stores (i.e. Sam the Record Man, A&A's) which stock only major label products. Combined, these developments and dependencies have had two major effects: 1) in order to get their products to retail outlets indies have become ever more dependent on signing distribution deals with the multinationals; 2) consumer choices are being restricted and homogenized by the structure of the retail sales in the record industry. Multinational products dominate the market at all points of purchase. The full range of independent (domestic and imported) products are now available only at a small number of specialist retail outlets; and these are to be found only in the largest urban centres.

## Free Trade: The Demise Of Canadian Independents?

With profits, jobs, careers and cultural sovereignty at stake, industry people, musicians, enthusiasts and culture critics alike are conjoining their usually cacophonous voices into one unified chorus condemning the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as the death knell of Canadian music. The objection to the deal is based on

both economic and cultural grounds: Canada will lose what little economic control it already has in the music industry; the ongoing process of creating a distinctly Canadian musical culture will be undermined. The government, on the other hand, replies that the free trade deal will be a boon to "the economy," and what's good for the economy must therefore be good for culture (as Conservative MP John Bosley stated on the recently televised free trade forum taped by CITY-TV's *New Music*).

## The Indie Response

The potentially damaging effects of the FTA on Canadian music have been outlined by CIRPA in a July 25, 1988 report submitted to The Parliamentary Committee Hearings On The Free Trade Agreement With The United States. Three main issues are addressed: 1) the unsatisfactory dispute mechanism which seriously puts in doubt the government's promise that culture would be exempt; 2) the relaxing of Canadian content regulations for private broadcasters; 3) the removal of tariffs on imported records. Let's look at these a little more closely.

The government has repeatedly assured Canadians that cultural industries would be exempt from the FTA. In an April 7, 1988 speech, Minister of Communications Flora MacDonald is quoted (in the CIRPA report) as saying: "this Prime Minister, this Minister of Communications and this Government promised one thing: that Canada's right to determine our own culture would be respected in every degree."

But the real concern of CIRPA is not the stated intentions of the government, but rather the ability of any future government to implement policies and programmes designed to assist the development of the recording sector. CIRPA's report clearly implies that future assistance will be needed — not because the industry is floundering, but because of its tremendous growth potential. And unlike other cultural industries, the Canadian recording industry has achieved an admirable degree of success in the absence of any government financial assistance. To quote from the CIRPA report:

The recording and music sector has long been regarded as the poor relation of the cultural industries . . . federal sales tax is levied on records but not on books — books and magazines benefit from massive postal subsidies — the TV production and film industry receives major cash infusions from Telefilm — the recently announced film policy gives millions to Canadian distributors to acquire product — more than \$50 million yearly is distributed in the form of grants and contributions to cultural organizations.

After many years of lobbying, the recording and music sector has access to only one programme, the Sound Recording Development Programme (implemented two years

ago) which dispenses a total of \$5 million annually (for 5 years) in various programmes for both the English and French language markets. No provision whatsoever has been made for core funding of trade organizations such as CIRPA and ADISQ, our counterpart in Quebec.

Let us be quite clear, we have no quarrel with the programmes we have outlined that are in effect for other cultural sectors. The point we wish to make is that given the vast potential and proven cost efficiency of the music sector, there have been major misjudgments over the years in relation to the music and recording sectors and their potential cultural and economic value to Canada.

But what happens after the Sound Recording Development Programme reaches its five year term? Will it be considered a protectionist measure by the Americans? Can it be re-implemented without dispute? And if there is a dispute, how is it to be settled? As regards the dispute mechanism, CIRPA (among many others) is convinced that the so-called "notwithstanding" clause (2005 Section B) of the FTA is so poorly formulated that it would " . . . severely restrict or even totally stop any new public policy measures that Canada may wish to enact in the future to further the development and international success of the music and recording sector." So just when the Canadian recording industry is beginning to receive the respect accorded to other cultural industries, the proverbial rug is pulled from underneath its feet, thwarting the much anticipated and desired growth spurt.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of how the FTA will affect Canadian music and recording is the very real prospect of the elimination of Canadian content regulations on private broadcasters (the CBC, it is promised, will not be affected). The enactment of Canadian content quotas, in 1970, was crucial to the growth and development of the Canadian independent music industry. "Cancon" regulations were formulated on the basis of the 1968 Broadcasting Act, which stipulated that broadcasters' programming be "substantially Canadian." But curious new developments have arisen. After signing the FTA, the government has come out with Bill C-136 — a new broadcasting act. And the new wording regarding Canadian content has been changed from "substantially Canadian" to "maximum use of Canadian and other sources" (see *THE RECORD*, Sept. 5, 1988). The Standing Committee on Communications and Culture had recommended to the government that precise specific terminology be used in reference to Canadian content, in order to avoid conflicting interpretations. But the recommendations were ignored, further muddling an already complicated situation. Because new radio formats have made the AM/FM categories obsolete, CIRPA had hoped that major changes in FM regula-



PHOTO: EMI.

tions were forthcoming. But, to quote once again from the CIRPA report:

We have no hesitation in stating our view that elimination of the "substantially Canadian" wording for all private broadcasters in the proposed Act leaves the door wide open for the eventual elimination of all Canadian content regulations on both private radio and television. It seems a strange coincidence that this wording should appear in a new Broadcasting Act announced after the free trade agreement has been negotiated.

The third major issue is the removal of tariffs on imported recordings. Accounting for about 15 per cent of all records sold in Canada, imports are now taxed at 13.5 per cent. In compliance with the GATT (General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade) agreement, the import tariff on recordings will be phased out over the next 10 year period, but the CIRPA report states that "... the potential for disruption has been increased by the high visibility given to these reductions under the free trade agreement." The biggest fear is that with the removal of import tariffs, there would be a rapid shut down of multinational manufacturing facilities and a restructuring of their distribution networks. Not only would there be widespread job loss in the multinational sector, the indies would be deprived of the distribution services currently provided by the multinationals. As it stands now, record distribution in Canada is organized along an east/west axis. Although there are several small successful independent Canadian distributors, nearly all of the major indies are distributed by one of the multinationals, who, according to the report, "... provide by far the most effective mechanism by virtue of their size and market power." Big changes have already taken place — CBS and Quality records sold their record manufacturing plants (in Toronto and Vancouver, respectively), and Polygram has sold its tape plant in Montreal. The so-called rationalization of multinational operations in response to the FTA is well under way and there is good reason to believe that this will entail the consolidation and rationalization of distribution patterns (confidential report to The Department of Communications (DOC) by Toronto economists Arthur Donner and Norman Mogil — see *THE RECORD* Sept. 19, 1988).

The CIRPA report warns:

Should there be consolidation of these companies and a change be made to north/south rather than east/west distribution patterns, this could be extremely detrimental to the survival of most independents. Without access to markets countrywide, the sector will suffer severe financial damage which will almost certainly result in its total elimination within a relatively short period of time.

Indies have yet another crucial relationship with the multinationals; this one concerns the raw mater-

ials from which records are made. World wide sales of recorded music are now comprised mostly of cassettes and compact discs (CDs). 1983 marked the first time cassettes outsold albums in Canada. The proportion of vinyl sales has decreased further each year since then. According to Bill Ott, vice president of A&M Records (Canada), the extinction of vinyl is "inevitable," although it will still be profitable for at least another five years (see *THE RECORD*, July 25, 1988). Indeed, a range of observers have predicted that the majors will eventually get out of vinyl production altogether. If this seems incredible, remember what happened to the 8-track tape — phased out in the late 70s after attaining a level of 25 per cent of all sales of recorded music in the U.S. in 1975.

One of the main factors in this trend is the higher manufacturing costs of vinyl records compared to cassette tape duplication. Some of the multinationals (WEA, CBS) have recently raised the LP sale price one dollar, to \$11.98. (It is not clear as to whether this reflects immediate increase in manufacturing costs or just traditional lust for profits). Confirming evidence of the trend away from vinyl is seen in the widespread practice, among the majors, of deleting back catalogues on vinyl and re-introducing them on CDs. Availability of back catalogue products is already higher on cassette than on vinyl. For example, Capitol has only three John Lennon albums in press on vinyl, but eight on cassette. With the sale of the CBS and Quality record pressing plants and the Polygram tape duplication plant to CINRAM, it is clear that the multinationals are pulling out of the costly manufacturing end of the record industry. As of now, CINRAM is the sole supplier of vinyl (raw material) in Canada.

To add to this rapidly changing state of affairs, the record industry trade papers have been reporting on a current shortage of vinyl in Canada (see *RPM* Oct. 1, 1988 and Oct. 8, 1988). This is of great concern to the independent record companies, whose orders are lowest on the priority scale, and who need to get their products promoted in time for the Christmas market. But vinyl should not be written off too hastily. While it appears that it is on its way out, vinyl is still the configuration of choice for singles, and singles are still the most important radio play format. For certain types of music — disco, hardcore, rap — vinyl singles are still the most widely used. CD and cassette sales are rapidly on the rise, but the shift to these configuration-accounted for mostly by rock titles (and classical, which led the way for CDs, but account for a small percentage of total sales).



His Master's Voice: Women working in record storage room at Victor. PHOTO: RTH Library.

## The Future

It should be evident by now that what is referred to as independent music is a phenomenon which cannot be understood in isolation from the complex determinations of a global music industry. Free trade, new technologies, the vinyl shortage, home taping — all will impact on the way in which Canada will make, listen to, and define music. Music will continue to be a terrain for cultural politics and profit making. But the terms and arrangements of such activities are shifting in ways which can only be dimly perceived if we restrict our perspective to within our national borders. If the latter is the case we will be forced to answer difficult questions: is music to be seen as primarily of economic or cultural importance? Do we support, through legislation and subsidies, second rate imitations of American and British hit music just because it is made by Canadian citizens and companies? Such may be the case already, but would we be prepared to give up this hard won support which the free trade agreement would take away. Is it worth paying high duties on imported records we so badly want in order to have low prices on best-sellers? Do we want the multinationals out of Canada and at the same time be willing to give up a working distribution system and thousands of jobs? Do we want records made by Canadian companies distributed to Canada from Indianapolis and Seattle?

Whatever is in store for music in Canada depends on the changing nature of the music industry on a global scale. In a book titled *The Music Industry: The End of Vinyl?* (1985), John Qualen has outlined the major changes in the organization of profit making of the multinational record companies. First, an increasing share of profits are derived from the exploitation of copyrights. Record companies are increasingly active in buying up catalogues of publishing companies and publishing companies whole. It is standard practice now that one of the conditions of signing new artists to record deals is that their music be published by companies owned by the record company to which the artist is being signed. It is important to remember here that royalties from radio and TV broadcasting (performing rights) accrue to the publishing company, not the record company. Therefore, the strategy is to get the revenues from performing rights as well as from mechanical rights (royalties from the reproduction of records). Second, as the multinationals stockpile ever more product, an increasing profit share comes from licensing back catalogue material to independent TV and specialist music packagers. There is a

constant demand for old jazz and blues records but it is too small to be worthwhile for the majors to manufacture them again. Independents who want to re-issue old records must pay for the right to do so. Third, the attitude to the use of records and videos by radio and TV has changed. No longer seen as just advertising for their products, record companies now see themselves as providing entertainment services to broadcasters, services which should be paid for just as any other. Music television depends on a constant supply of videos, and have to pay for the rights to broadcast them. MTV, for example signed lucrative deals with several majors for the exclusive right to be first to broadcast their products. Music videos are no longer provided free of charge to the broadcasters.

What all this means is that the music industry has been reorganized to such a degree that the actual selling of finished records has come to occupy an increasingly subordinate position in the overall profit making strategies of the multinationals. The ancillary markets have become much more important than selling records, thus calling into question their established identities as "record companies." In addition to records, tapes and CDs, greater portions of their profits are derived from tie-in merchandise and multimedia tie-ups: film, advertising, books, posters, T-shirts, buttons, cable, etc. The irony to all this is that whereas the actual sale of records was at one time the major business activity of the multinationals, now, major acts are pre-sold to advertisers and TV, who provide the major source of income to the multinationals in the form of licensing fees for the use of their products. The direct sale of records to the consumer, in a strange turnaround, now seems to be a by-product of a much more complicated process.

If the multinationals appear to be pulling out of the costly and less profitable enterprises of manufacturing and distributing records, what about the independents? Qualen concludes that:

The one trend that is most positive is the likelihood of the continued growth and expansion of the independent sector into the manufacture and distribution of black vinyl as the majors continue their process of withdrawal, as well as into production by capitalizing on the possibilities for producing music with the aid of the new technologies and keeping in touch with sounds of the streets. (p. 33)

If we are to have a Canadian music which really is a "sound of the streets," we cannot expect the multinationals to deliver the goods. Even though it may not exist in the present, a truly "independent" music is a future possibility whose realization depends on informed analysis and engagement in the political struggles of the present. ■



## Marva Jackson talks with the "Shadowy Men"

It was a dark, cold St. Patrick's Day eve in 1985. The Music Gallery's cavernous hall was only half-full. Candles smouldered on chipped cafeteria-style tables littered with tinfoil ashtrays. The surroundings certainly gave no hint of the creative energies about to be unleashed on the small quiet gathering. Suddenly a moving art object exploded onto the scene hurtling at breakneck speed. Pointy and silvery, it looked suspiciously like a rocket ship. The audience ducked but was soon hooked when the travellers traded their ship for the instruments waiting for them on stage.

Three years later the Shadowy Men On A Shadowy Planet are still joyous, creative and dedicated to the rock 'n' roll sound which often draws a comparison to the Ventures and Duane Eddy and the Searchers. Crunchy guitar riffs (Brian Connelly), heavy bass lines (Reid Diamond) and big steady drum beats (Don Pyle) spiced with hefty doses of stand-up comedy have helped the "Shadowy Men" carve out a special niche in Toronto's music scene.

The "Shadowy Men" originally met in 1979 while playing in a group called Crash Kills Five. They only lasted a couple of years performing at the usual Toronto clubs like the now defunct metal haven, Larry's Hideaway. In October 1984, the "Shadowy Men" regrouped almost by accident. More

accurately, or at least the way they tell it, they renewed their friendship and the band started as a happy coincidence. At that time the group included a singer who soon became a silent partner with different musical interests.

**Reid:** As soon as you get a singer the instruments have to lay back behind the singer. There's a certain sound that forms and it just sort of sits there.

The Shadowy Men delightedly inform everyone that they've been instrumental since 1985. That summer they issued the first in a series of seven inch EP's called *Love Without Words* on their label JETPAC Records. The latest is a live recording of the "Shadowy Men's" 4th anniversary (Reid insists it's their 3rd) celebration at the Rivoli. This limited edition called *Reid Does Neil and other throwaways we had to get out of the house before Christmas* includes Reid's hysterical, historical singing debut. His impersonation of Neil Diamond had the audience screaming for more as he crooned and sometimes bent hits like "Shilo" and "Travellin' Medicine Show." Neil and Reid do have in common the same last name and a penchant for brown leather jackets and 70s style platform shoes. Unfortunately, the records are slow in arriving because World Records, the company many bands depend on to press their independent product, has been delayed by their affiliation with CBS Records. CBS has stopped pressing vinyl in Canada so World Records has had to find a new plant.

More fortunate is the news that the "Shadowy Men" have signed a contract with an English label, Glass Records. The deal includes releases of *SAVVY SHOW STOPPERS*, a compilation of all previous "Shadowy Men" singles and an album of new material to be released in March 1989.

**Reid:** Even at our humble stage there are contracts we could have signed and had we not read them and asked lawyers about them we could have been screwed by now.

**Brian:** And none of us want anything to do with being misrepresented and there's nothing wrong with that. Everybody wants to put out a record but they want somebody to do it for them. It's important to do it yourself.

**Reid:** Get your hands on your own representation. Too many approach the music business as if applying for a job. But it's not just an occupation. It's more than fulfilling supply and demand.

**Brian:** You have to trade off so much (dress, how you act, et cetera) when you're going through the calculations if you sign with a major label.

**Reid:** Often you don't realize you're separating the business from the music.

Fueled by spontaneous combustion the "Shadowy Men" have firm control of their "rock cottage industry." They enthusiastically share the stage with friends like Heimlich Manoeuvre and the Dik Van Dykes or with rock 'n' roll veterans like the Ramones ("We sent them a record just because we think they're a good band"). Each record and each performance is a well-crafted work of art chiefly financed by their day jobs.

**Reid:** Some people think that all we are is a self-promoting machine. We're not doing it to get attention.

**Don:** People think we're more planned than we are. It's just pop culture trash. We make 16 big nice looking posters, put up 13 and keep three for ourselves. Subtlety isn't one of our best qualities we only do the little ones [posters] if we're nervous about the show."

**Brian:** We just like doing it. It's fun to think of it as a game, kind of like a side show. Promotion should be part of the show. If it's a little different, all the better.

All the better for them as well is the increased national exposure their consistent activity on the independent music scene has brought them. This winter fans can look forward to a "Shadowy Men" special taped by the CBC (accidentally co-produced by Reid) for *Brave New Waves*. Even more exciting are the touring opportunities afforded by the connection with Glass Records. This hasn't weakened the "Shadowy" commitment to Toronto's music community. Instead, they're more outspoken than ever about the independent music business. Experience touring with the Ramones, Husker Du and the Jesus and Mary Chain has shown them the limited access to clubs other indie bands have to deal with in many American and Canadian cities. The option to play regularly for an appreciative, paying audience is essential to a band's creative development. Most indie bands work hard and spend their own money on promotion but often it seems that club owners benefit more from the increased profile than the bands because the club usually gets most of the profit. The "Shadowy Men" revel in the abundance of venues that Toronto has to offer because it allows them "freedom to refuse to play Lee's Palace."

**Reid:** Our big priority is on right now. Sometimes we put as much work into a show as we do into a record, just because we put real value on the live show. I would like to compare us to the Fleshtones who are a good live band.

**Don:** Or Motorhead.

It's not surprising the "Shadowy Men" know that Motorhead leader Lemme was once a roadie and member of legendary British experimental rock band Hawkwind, known for elaborate, and in the early days (they still play and are politically active), inexpensive but riotously funny promotions they would stage for their shows.

"Shadowy Men" remain adamant that they have nothing to do with the music industry. As independent "businessmens" (sic) they're too busy to compete for industry attention. Before signing with Glass Records they hadn't even bothered taking demos to record companies.

**Don:** I sent a record to John Peel who played it quite a bit at Radio One in England. Then he wrote back asking for more. We got a good response as a result.

**Reid:** Where the independent scene gets abused is (not that there are any rules) when bands just take advantage of the indie scene as a stepping stone into the majors. It's not a farm league, it's an alternative. ■

# artists and the whips of art criticism

by Clive Robertson

I returned from Winnipeg last summer with a sheaf of notes on *Me(a)sure*: a three-day conference on "Artists and Art Criticism." *Me(a)sure* consisted of three panels, the first titled: "Feminist Impact on Contemporary Critical Practice" (Margot Butler, Lani Maestro, Wilma Needham and Martine Sauvageau); the second: "Media and Art Criticism" (Sara Diamond, Gary Kibbins, Christine Ross and Tom Sherman); and the last: "Artists and Criticism" (Graham Asmundson, Celine Baril, Barbara Louder and Jean-Marie Martin).

The panels (made up of almost all artists/artist curators) were preceded and followed by two antithetical guest lectures: the first delivered by American scholar, art historian and prolific essayist, Donald Kuspit — the latter by Toronto filmmaker and feminist and cultural critic, Dot Tuer.

Kuspit, a frequent contributor to Canadian cultural criticism (as a writer and speaker) gave a lecture entitled: "In favour of a psycho-analytically oriented criticism" — which had little or nothing to do with the conference because his sphere of operation has no relationship to the history of Canada's developed artist institutions and because his theoretical biases and aristocratic snobishness makes him impervious to the achievements of a feminist art criticism.

Dot Tuer, on the other hand, made a spirited attempt to encourage a dialogue on artists' social engagement, which could have better served the proceedings, had it been placed at the beginning rather than at the end of the conference.

There were some structural problems; for instance, the absence of workshops prohibited opportunities for debating the ideas being presented. A pity, because all the components were there; this conference took place during an Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres (ANNPAC) Annual General Meeting which has the standard fixtures of simultaneous translation and a large diverse artist presence.

From my perspective, there were other telling omissions; it seems lopsided to hold such a rare event on artists and art criticism without including a panel to examine the domestic art magazines. It certainly would have been timely to have had a vigorous session with editors of *Vanguard*, *Parachute*, *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art* and perhaps therapeutic, even entertaining, to have received input from *Le Devoir* and the *Globe & Mail*.

But perhaps the omission that affected most of the practicing artists in the room, was the absence of discussion about the re-occupation of art criticism by contemporary art historians and non-art scholars (literary studies, psychiatry, philosophy) which has usurped a long if broken history of artists acting as their own critics and historians.

So while panelist Margot Butler hit the mark by saying: "feminism is a laxative, disimpacting the bowels of the patriarchy," even a cursory glance at art magazines here, in the U.S. or in Britain would suggest that many critics, from whatever occupational position, have not been taking their medicine in sufficient dosages. Much of this revolves

around the agendas of those like Donald Kuspit who has been described by historian Clara Weyergraf as: "the very type of bourgeois art lover whose cultural needs cannot be satisfied by TV soap operas and Hollywood movies because of an acquired taste for the high-brow . . . when Kuspit occasionally laments the entire state of contemporary art, it is to complain that art is unnecessarily impeding the workings of his own imagination."<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of more fundamental problems connected to art criticism and its publication which many artists only subconsciously acknowledge. The most obvious is that art magazines are often not vehicles for reviewing art, but are instead forums for a discursive rhetoric which may or may not be about art practice. Art critics usually do not like artists suggesting (as they did in Winnipeg) that they should at least be doing some grunt work e.g. writing more focused reviews — as if such a legitimate demand might somehow restrict their practice. In fact, like artists themselves, art critics have the choice to simultaneously engage in different disciplinary and stylistic forms. If we look at current issues of semi-serious art magazines we can see an abundance of prosaic high brow essays crowding out the room for plain, but essential, "fast food."

Of all the observations that are most telling about the whys and wherefores of "contemporary art criticism" one of the most significant is the question of the "relevance gap": the relationship between the actual art work and the

work posited by art critics is both highly inflated and arbitrary.

The reasons for the "arbitrariness" of evaluation common to both visual artists and their critics, cannot be found within the dense theories surrounding "post-modernism," but within an older rhetoric.

It could be argued, for example, that current painting, in any style, has a use value wherever it chooses to deliver contemporary social content from communities who have been literally invisible. Such an argument could at least stall the overwhelming amount of published criticism which has denied painting a critical future. The least such a theory foregrounds, as Douglas Crimp and others have pointed out, is to "declare art, like all other forms of endeavour to be contingent upon the real, historical world."<sup>2</sup> As Crimp wrote in 1981:

The rhetoric that accompanies this resurrection of painting is almost exclusively reactionary: it reacts specifically against all those art practices of the 60s and 70s which abandoned painting and coherently placed in question the ideological supports of painting and the ideology which painting, in turn supports . . . moreover this art sought to discredit the myth of man and the ideology of humanism which it supports. For indeed these are all notions that sustain the dominant bourgeois culture.

The point of this is not simply to attack painting — although the signal came from painters themselves such as Ad Reinhardt's claim that "he was just making the last paintings that anyone can make." A tautological correspondence emerges with the simultaneous desire to

deliver "innovation and experimentation" and the perpetuation of a bourgeois status quo.

So part of the failure, shared by all of us as artists and, especially as art critics engaged in an art practice of the 80s, is a failure and unwillingness to confront the misconceptions of liberal humanism. And on seemingly endless gallery walls this unwillingness is displayed.

Crimp in his above mentioned essay, "The End of Painting," points to another common assumption which is that any art object of one period can be the same as a similar art object of another period — "that they all belong to the same a category of knowledge." He asks: "how did this historicism of art get put into place?"

Crimp quotes Goethe, who, when referring to Italy wrote, "there was a time when, with few exceptions works of art remained generally in the same location for which they were made. However, now a great change has occurred, that in general as well as specifically, will have important consequences for art." According to Crimp: "what Goethe foresaw as early as 1798 was an 'art entity' we now call modernism." Crimp concludes by saying that:

Art as we think about it only came into being in the 19th century with the birth of the museum and the disciplines of art history, for these share the same time span as modernism (and, not insignificantly, photography). For us, then, art's natural end is in the museum, or, at the very least, in the imaginary museum, that idealist space that is for art with a capital "A." The idea of art as autonomous, as separate from everything else, as destined to take its place in art history, is a

development of modernism.<sup>3</sup> And it is an idea of art that contemporary painting upholds, destined as it too is to end in the museum.

Which brings me, circuitously, to one of Donald Kuspit's more revealing essays that appeared in the September/October (1987) issue of the British art magazine, *Artscribe*. Kuspit contributed a critique of "80s sensibility" entitled, "The Opera is Over" which is a ringing example of the historicisms described above. The essay is "useful" in that it precisely articulates a malaise in visual art which has been hastened as much by the art critics as by the call of the "the market forces." Of course, Kuspit does not reveal that he himself is part of the problem, if for no other reason than he wishes to re-heat what feminists refer to as the "leftovers of the male project."

Kuspit begins by taking a swipe at performance art for "casting its spell" on traditional media. He suggests that "theatricalism in the visual arts during the 80s involves something much more serious than the cross-pollination of the arts." This "revelation" was put forward 20 years earlier by another American critic, Michael Fried who claimed that "theatricality (is) at war . . . with modernist sensibility" and he suggested three propositions:

- 1) The success, even the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre. . . .
- 2) Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre . . .
- 3) The concepts of quality and value — and to the extent that these are central to art itself — are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.<sup>3</sup>





Kuspit writes:

(Theatricalism) is part of the artists' attempt to increase the power and influence of visual art in the face of an implicit recognition of its diminished significance, tied to its social depreciation, despite all the attention and acclaim that it receives. Visual art is not obviously useful as science and technology; it has much less impact and communicative consequence, not to say intellectual weight. Gradually it has become an alternative if difficult entertainment; many artists have adjusted to this public perception by trying to find a new inner necessity and strength of purpose within the dubious social necessity accorded their art.

The result, Kuspit observes, is an art that "becomes grand and outspoken, dramatic and heroic. It disturbs and overwhelms and importunes the spectator, which I suppose is a way of reaching people." And where we might ask, trying to hide the discomforts of such paternalisms, does the public get such "perceptions?" From actually confronting the art, or having such a confrontation described for them by a critic?

Let's dig out something recent from the bottom of the barrel: Friday, September 18th, art journalist Christopher Hume writes about an Ian Carr-Harris exhibit curated by Philip Monk at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the "What's on" section of the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest circulation anglophone newspaper:

As a matched pair of high-art pseudo-intellectuals, they're ideally suited . . . Monk who was a fixture in all those dreary art rags before going to the AGO . . . Carr-Harris' roots lie in conceptualism, surely one of the most spectacular intellectual dead ends of the current age. In a different time, people like this would have devoted mind-

numbing debates on the implication of Christ's poverty or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin . . . Carr-Harris, who heads the experimental arts department at the Ontario College of Art . . . is not an artist in any sense that the word is traditionally understood.

Aside from being a good example of an overplayed dismissive review, this clown Hume is being a little more "theatrical," as defined by Kuspit, than the artist and curator under review.

**M**eanwhile back in Kuspit's laboratory, the good doctor (Kuspit has two doctorates), pen doodling the appropriate sexual imagery, is closing in for the kill:

The new unhealthiness of art, brought on by the anxious feeling of general insignificance and lack of social impact — definite, controllable communicative outreach — becomes narcissistically inflated in order to compensate. Feeding ever more hungrily on art history, it becomes increasingly absurd, making outsized claims for itself pathologically overestimating itself. Everywhere evident in post-modernist art this complexity is the essence of its operativeness, its overopeness.

Obviously Kuspit did not heed the quiet words of intermedia artist Dick Higgins who wrote in "Thirteen Serious Considerations" (1977): "The meaning of an artwork is its implications. Lacking those it lacks essence, and cannot achieve its social, emotional or intellectual impact. The good critic points to the implications and does not play doctor with the artist."

What calls into question Kuspit's frequent intrusions into the art press of this country is his obvious disinterest in looking at the substantial socialized art institutions set up by artists that daily engage in a face-to-face interpretation

with both socially specific communities of interest and, in many cases, the general public. What Kuspit is describing is more peculiar to the "art scene" and the "art world" where he and his ilk both report on and exercise their own projected imaginatons.

Having told artists that they are sick and socially insignificant, Kuspit then proposes his "new" artcure:

A new inner necessity — a new healthiness — may be emerging art that is uninterested in instant communicative impact in any attempt to gain overt significance. The time for opera is passing; the time for chamber music may be approaching . . . where the one appeals to the masses, the other appeals to the individual, offering only one thing — a sense of particular self — a single person . . . where the one is eager to communicate directly and explicitly and overwhelmingly, the other works through understated — even compacted — communication.

Dr. K's prescription is, at face value, "a retreat from the obviously false, public self, to the hidden, true, deeply private self" but beneath it is the burial of resistance and self-determination and, lest we forget, an acquiescence to the art critic.

Seriously. What are we as artists supposed to do — go into a deep sleep until Uncle Donald kisses us on the lips to wake us for the next (art) revolution? And what's all this "visual chamber music?" What good's that for those of us who barely have a pot to piss in?

No, let's get back to the unfinished chore of artists learning about their own histories, writing art criticism and compiling histories of their peer's efforts. With a few exceptions, the art critics of the late 80s are too busy hallucinating. ■

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Clara Weyergraf: "The Holy Alliance: Populism and Feminism," *October* No. 16, Spring 1981. While I'm grateful to Weyergraf for her pithy description of Kuspit, this article which focuses upon Kuspit and Lucy Lippard is problematic and somewhat worse for wear.

<sup>2</sup>Douglas Crimp: "The End of Painting," *October* No.16, 1981. I have lifted a lot from this article and there is much more in it that is recommended reading, particularly about Frank Stella and Daniel Buren.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock, 1968. Taken from Chantal Pontbriand's introduction to "Performance by Artists," *Art Metropole*, Toronto, 1979.

# S W E E N V I E W S



Illustration by Joe Morse

BOOKS

## Immoral Fiction

by Marlene Nourbese Philip

A CASUAL BRUTALITY

NEIL BISSOONDATH

Macmillan

Toronto, 1988

The significance of Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality* lies not in the work itself, but in the overwhelmingly positive and uncritical reception it has garnered here in Canada and what that reception reveals about Canadian society. There is a very close relationship between the attitudes that engender this sort of reception for an extremely flawed work, and the historical and political forces that have produced a Neil Bissoondath. It is a relationship that has much to do with empire, colonialism and racism and it is these realities that Bissoondath goes to great lengths to evacuate from

his novel. His work, *A Casual Brutality*, is in fact a brilliant example of social amnesia at work in a writer.

In a recent *Toronto Star* article titled "The Solitude McLennan Didn't Anticipate" (October 29, 1988), among the many things for which Bissoondath criticizes immigrants is their desire to gather together in groups or associations; like his character, Dr. Raj Ram Singh, he believes that the best and most effective way of "making it" in this society is to put as much distance between himself and those others — immigrants. Opinions and sentiments such as those expressed by

I had not come to Toronto to find Casaquemada, or to play the role of ethnic, deracinated and costumed . . . this display of the rakish this attempt at Third World exoticism, seemed to me a trap. . . The life implied by Kensington Market gave me nightmares for weeks to come. . .

Bissoondath in his public pronouncements and through his character, Raj, are those of the truly colonized mind, trained and schooled to despise all that has produced him except what the colonizer considers valuable. As in the case of his more famous uncle, V.S. Naipaul, writers like these, provided they have some ability, are guaranteed an immediate entree into the literary scene of whatever metropolis they happen to reside in. They can express the racist sentiments of the colonizer without appearing to implicate the latter. Individuals such as Bissoondath feature significantly in the articulation of a more sophisticated brand of racism.

Despite the rapidity with which he wishes to shed his immigrant skin, and his obvious need to belong to Canadian society, *A Casual Brutality* is, ironically, the classic immigrant novel: Raj Ramsingh, a young Indian man hates his country of birth, Casaquemada — a thinly disguised Trinidad — and comes to Canada in search of a better life. Why he hates his country we are never told, but hates it he does and quite rightly so. I say quite rightly so because nothing, according to Bissoondath, is loveable in Casaquemada, nothing is valuable; there is nothing that ought to be preserved or treasured. The people are shallow and greedy, the landscape threatens or is dirty, and there is only money and the lust for power; naturally, therefore, fleeing the country is the only sensible thing anyone would do, fleeing it for one of the Northern metropolises, in this case, Toronto, where one can find all that is missing in the country of one's birth.

Where there was filth and dirt, there is now cleanliness, except for that eyesore, Kensington market:

I had not come to Toronto to find Casaquemada, or to play the role of ethnic, deracinated and costumed . . . this display of the rakish this attempt at Third World exoticism, seemed to me a trap. . . The life

implied by Kensington Market gave me nightmares for weeks to come. . .

Where people had been greedy and lusting for power in Casaquemada, they were now kind: "it was remarkable how people went out of their way to help." There are, however, other immigrants who, heaven forbid, at times try to make eye contact with him: "Only occasionally did distress arise: when the observer became observed, when Indians or blacks sought me out with their eyes, with nods of invitation." The one white racist Raj meets is so clearly off balance we are able to dismiss him easily — too easily; and with that dismissal the reader can turn away from that most impolite of topics in Canadian society, racism, and, more particularly, institutional racism. Did Raj Ramsingh come to Canada as a student or an immigrant? As the former he would have had regular contact with the Immigration Department. Bissoondath has chosen to avoid those issues which reveal the potential confrontation that always exists between immigrant and host society. After he qualifies as a doctor, Raj, along with his wife and young son return to Casaquemada, where money is in plentiful supply on account of a massive increase in oil revenues. We find out that like everyone else from Casaquemada, Raj was only interested in making money — this was, in fact, the reason for his return. The inevitable violence breaks out, the reasons for which and the details of which are left vague. His wife and son are murdered and he, having wisely taken out Canadian citizenship as insurance before leaving for Casaquemada, returns to Canada — fade out to music and the picture of a plane taking the grieving Raj Ramsingh back to his new homeland, Canada, saviour to any immigrant who will find happiness provided they shed disturbing habits like trying to make eye contact and setting up associations of fellow immigrants.

Individuals come to this country for a variety of reasons, some no doubt, like Bissoondath, for the reasons he advances in his novel. But surely there is an obligation on a writer to do more with these facts. The profound flaw at the heart of this novel is that it is so structured it lacks any sort of tension. For the reasons stated above we know that the protagonist will leave Casaquemada, where for is irrelevant, provided it is not another Caribbean country. The only question is why he returned to Casaquemada in the first place. Without the tension set up by competing loyalties, for instance, the work becomes a flat, one-dimensional study in how to feed the hand that feeds you — Canada in this case. And I must confess that reading this book for review was one of the most tedious exercises I have ever taken part in. Bissoondath ignores the exploration of powerful themes such as exile and alienation to pander to the insatiable appetite of North America for Third World violence.

There are many technical flaws in this book. The use of the first person voice fails utterly, and without the resource of a distinctive speech pattern what we have is a rather bland formal type of standard English. Self indulgence and autobiography masquerading as fiction (or is it fiction masquerading as autobiography) permeate the work and I was, on many occasions, reminded of Gertrude Stein's comments on adjectives — that they "are not really and truly interesting. In a way anybody can know always has known that . . . because of course the first thing that anybody takes out of anybody's writing are the adjectives." "Anybody" clearly needed to go work on *A Casual Brutality*. It is not enough, for instance, to have a "narrow, gravelled lane," but it must also be "hard-edged and filled with stone-studded ruts." Examples like this proliferate.

Like Naipaul, Bissoondath's attitude to women is, at best ambivalent, at worst misogynist. Raj Ramsingh's wife is "pasty" and "slack faced," her breasts "pendulous."

There is the usual healthy dose of racism complete with references to Chinamen. And in case we hadn't known, the many nations of Central and South America are all interchangeable — the kind of places that make "you think of drugs and oil and easy violence."

There is a fundamental immorality at work with writers like Naipaul and Bissoondath. It is the immorality that manifests itself in a writer shitting on his country of birth and yet using the image of that country or place as Other in the psyches of Western and Northern countries to fuel their writing and to enrich themselves. It is clearly ludicrous to say that a writer should write only positive things about his/her country, but when a writer presents such an unrelentingly dishonest picture of his/her country, which serves to perpetuate racist stereotyping, and says in as many ways as possible that nothing

of value ever came from that country, then s/he is in fact saying that s/he is not of that country. It is, to my mind, a form of matricide, I go further — it is a form of pimping of the worst order, for first you destroy your place of origin and then you market your version of the destruction to those very forces that play a part in that destruction.

Why the accolades for this work and this writer here in Canada? In a publicity memo from Macmillan, Bissoondath's publishers, there is a quotation from the *Times Literary Supplement* on the writer's first book, *Digging Up Mountains*, a collection of short stories. "An accomplished first collection," the quotation reads. What Macmillan has conveniently omitted is that the *TLS* also wrote that if Neil Bissoondath could learn to control his racism he might someday become a good writer. This was the same work that garnered unqualified praise from critics in Canada. If we understand how this society works we should not be surprised at the reception of both this writer's works. Stanley R. Barrett in his work, *Is God a Racist?* writes: "racism in this country is as deeply rooted as that in the United States . . . it remains puzzling how Canadians have been able to maintain a reputation for tolerance and harmony. What has characterized Canada has been 'an ostrich like denial that a significant problem of racial hostility exists at all.'"

A work like *A Casual Brutality* and writers who mouth the sort of sentiments Bissoondath does, help fuel powerful myths in this country, myths that help to perpetuate the belief system that coming to Canada is the solution for one's problems, and the corollary of that, that colonialism and neo-colonialism are over and were not really problems in any event. To my mind this explains why a writer of such dubious talent is able to command advances in the range of \$200,000 for a first novel. That and his uncle's name. We need, however, to remind ourselves that contrary to the messages we receive, value and success are not one and the same thing. In his work, *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner writes:

The lost artist is not hard to spot. Either he puts his money on texture — stunning effects, fraudulent and adventitious novelty, rant — or he puts all his money on some easily achieved or faked structure, some melodramatic opposition of bad and good which can by nature handle only trite ideas. (my emphasis).

*A Casual Brutality* falls squarely within this description. ■

Marlene Nourbese Philip is a Toronto-based writer and poet.

## FILM



Sergei Eisenstein (Paul Bettis) explains the finer points of washroom sex.

# Private Parts in Public Places

URINAL

JOHN GREYSON

Distributed by John Greyson Productions  
1988

by Andrew J. Paterson

*Urinal* is a cinematic adaptation of John Greyson's sizeable body of video work, particularly *Jungle Boy*, *Moscow Does Not Believe In Queers* and *You Taste American*. Both public washroom sex and arrests for public washroom sex have played prominent roles in these tapes. So has the device of creating fictional summit conferences and encounters between historical figures. And so has the flagrant disrespect for the boundaries between fictional and documentary forms of time-based representation.

Added to these familiar Greyson motifs is a defiance of the conventions distinguishing film and video. Within the wider cinematic frame, Greyson employs the classical surveillance video-within-film but also makes extensive use of the post-production possibilities of video-intrinsic technology to create a hermetic almost impenetrable mon-

tage. The expressionistic use of video within *Urinal* implicitly parallels Greyson's critique of the state's regulation of desire. The various reactions of the "living dead" celebrity committee members to the simplified print and celluloid biographies of themselves draws a metaphoric relationship between the mythologizing effect of classical narrative and the control of desire.

A mysterious taped communique has assigned a committee of deceased 20th century artists, all of whom were either known to be or suspected of being gay, to investigate "the cause, history, and ramifications" of harassment and arrests of men who are sexually active in the tearooms of Southern Ontario. The committee consists of Sergei Eisenstein, Langston Hughes, Frida Kahlo, Yukio Mishima, hostesses Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, and the elusive Dorian Gray.

All members except for Dorian present evening dissertations. Meanwhile Dorian passes himself off as a cop and becomes more and more withdrawn while his portrait, painted by Frida, gradually decomposes. The progression towards the conclusion of the committee's term and the inevitable revelation that The Picture of Dorian Gray has degenerated into an image of a Mountie is more or less *Urinal's* trajectory.

As each artist presents a thoroughly researched paper, the committee proceeds like a comedy of manners until the multilingual, bi-sexual Frida Kahlo identifies washroom sex as an issue in which the personal is indeed political. When she states that washroom sex is "an example of the battle for sexual emancipation," differences between committee members are transcended and the menace of washroom surveillance becomes relevant to all concerned.

The committee is frequently interrupted by "talking head" interviews which expand on the public/private dichotomy of sexual practice. The interviewees, along with the committee members, address the paradox of increasing state control over private lives in a nation which is becoming increasingly privatized both economically and rhetorically.

Greyson outlines the development of the public washroom as a place to do what is to be done as privately as possible both in social and working situations. Ironically, the sex-segregated washrooms which initially benefited working women by creating a male-free environment naturally allowed possibilities for same-sex activities in the men-only facilities. On the one hand washroom sex provides a situation of relative egalitarianism compared to baths and bars, on the other hand, participants who are both aggressive and furtive about their activities are reluctant to reveal their identities. This need for anonymity, parodied by "talking head" interviews with obviously disguised performers, stands in contrast to an interview with a man who describes how his actual coming out was forced by his washroom arrest and its consequences. This man recounts his experience of watching surveillance footage of himself during his trial and proudly acknowledging his identity. (Did this man need to be publicly identified as gay in order to come out?)

This particular question could not be explored within the structure of *Urinal*. Greyson's montage barely hints at this man's struggle; similarly it makes brief reference to the current state of washroom and other "impersonal" sex in the age of AIDS and the relevance of "this gay liberation movement" to other liberation movements (black, marxist, feminist, etc.) Thematically and formally *Urinal* concentrates on locating the points at which private behaviour becomes



Sculptors Florence Wyle (Keltie Creed) and Frances Loring (Pauline Carey) discuss their strange group of guests.



David Gonzales as Yukio Mishima as St. Sebastian.

scrutinized. The artists committee members whose lives were subject to speculation are mirrored by the testimony of washroom sex participants, particularly the man caught indulging his private parts in public. The polite etiquette of the tea party at Florence and Frances's is complimented by discourses on the etiquette of tearroom encounters.

The film is itself a battleground between a relatively private language (video art and experimental film) and a public language (the expectations of mainstream filmgoers and programmers). Although *Urinal* does not depart thematically from Greyson's

video oeuvre, the cinematic scale allows for a greater degree of montage within *mise-en-scene* than is possible within the smaller video frame. Greyson is genuinely committed to expressing the personal within the structure of contemporary political cinema; unfortunately the film's unrelenting assault on the boundaries between film, video, fiction and documentary might prove uncomfortable for too many preconditioned programmers and viewers. ■

Andrew J. Paterson is a Toronto-based fiction writer, video producer and performance artist.

# Confusing the Script

by Lisa Pottie

## REWRITING THE SCRIPT: FEMINISM AND ART IN ONTARIO

JOAN BORSA

Distributed by V-Tape 1988

The Women's Art Resource Centre video, *Rewriting the Script: Feminism and Art in Ontario*, documents a large number of paintings, photographs, installations, and videos by women artists in Ontario. The video fails, however, to live up to its explicit intention to respond to the need for "exposition and analysis of feminist art production in Ontario," precisely because of its scope. It attempts to encompass a multitude of issues related to feminist art production and, in doing so, becomes problematic in content and structure.

The video is multi-layered, cataloguing women artists' work grouped by medium. Staged scenes from the everyday life of a woman artist are interspersed throughout — presumably to reinforce one of the fundamental premises of the video that the personal is political. Both voiceovers and a music track run throughout most of the simulated "real life" and art footage. The voiceovers perform the essential task of raising issues related to feminist art, which the work itself cannot. Organized into loose categories

of medium, static shots of work roll by too quickly to discern the image or identify its maker.

These structural problems are overshadowed by more serious difficulties presented by the content of the voiceovers and personal scenes, and by their relationship to the art work. The issues raised by the voiceovers are important ones. The lack of feminist perspective in art schools and texts, the stereotypical representations of women by mainstream culture, the lack of exposure of women artists in the mainstream artworld and the stereotypical responses of critics to work by women artists are all brought up at various points. So too are the positive aspects of feminist artists organizing, sharing ideas and discovering their common difficulties. But the voiceovers consistently present all of these issues within a singular, personal context and, seemingly, in no particular order.

Without contextualization, the diversity of opinion becomes a superficial myriad of sometimes contradictory perspectives. This

problem emerges particularly in the polarization of theory and practice. While one speaker quotes liberally from French feminist theorists such as Cixous and Kristeva, another simplistically criticizes academic theory, divorcing it from practical concerns. While the personal is political theme might help to resolve this division, none of the posited viewpoints meet in debate but remain isolated in their respective anonymous camps.

There are fundamental issues that the voiceovers do not address. How are these works feminist? Do the artists define their work or themselves as feminist? Or is there an external definition being applied? If so, we are never told what it is. How does the spectrum of feminist definitions reflect the broad range of work shown? The problem of definition is magnified by the pace of the static shots of art work and because the voiceovers and the personal scenes are unconnected to the work. The only instance of a direct connection between the voiceovers and the work is made at the beginning of the



Shawna Dempsey as talking vulva in *Rewriting the Script*.



Simulated "real-life" footage with voiceovers.

Still by Katie Thomas

video. While the voice recounts her first response to Marcella Bienvenue's video *I Believe in Myself*, an excerpt of this tape is shown. This initial correspondence is misleading, since we can be led to expect further connections between image and voice. For example, while shots of Cyndra McDowell's photographs, *Some Notes On Ending* are shown, a woman reminisces about the first time she saw the Hummer Sisters' video, *Hormone Warzone* and how she admired the way it presented the issue of birth control. *Some Notes on Ending* had nothing to do with birth control, and consequently the accidental correspondence can be very misleading.

The problem is endemic to the video, since the voiceover and personal scenes have actually little or no direct relation to the work being presented. Essentially, an important opportunity is lost. Contextualization of the work through the voiceover could have enhanced the audience's reception of the work. For instance, no mention is made of how the "Air" in Lynne Fernie's *Lesbians Fly Air Canada: Private Desires, Public Sins*, came to be dropped from the pixelboard on Yonge Street, even though only the censored version is presented in the video; the whole issue of censorship is never mentioned.

If the video takes up the premise that the personal is political, context becomes extremely important. Often we are not even sure what the women artists are doing in the personal scenes. If these sequences are meant to contextualize the reality of a woman artist's life, they fail; the artist is silent in all the scenes and instead she becomes a cardboard cutout in a mundane drama. Had the video made more of an attempt to provide a frame of reference for understanding the specific circumstances of a piece of work or an individual's life, the video could still have provided us with such a wide range of work, but within a context which allowed connections between the various aspects of the video, and one which could be used self-reflexively by the video to point out the problems of definition in feminist art, instead of becoming the chaotic diversity that *Rewriting the Script* is. ■

Lisa Pottie is a Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto.

## A Little Faith May Be A Good Thing

by Peter Laurie

### A MAN OF LITTLE FAITH

RICK SALUTIN

Published by McClelland and Stewart  
Toronto, 1988

The 1980s have been strange years indeed. Conservative regimes have very nearly colonized the political landscape of the First World; as this article is written we face the absurd prospect of President George Bush: never mind that half the population didn't bother to vote. And punk has gone from being a genuine shout in the street to just another style among styles, stuffed and mounted for general consumption. Strange.

Much, much closer to home, on the terrain of that thing we call Canadian culture, Rick Salutin has published *A Man of Little Faith*, his first novel. And a strange book it is, coming from a writer (journalist, playwright) who in many ways is a sort of Bruce Cockburn of the journalistic left, an earnest commentator on these troubled times, but one with a sense of humour. Strange and unexpected because this surprisingly idiosyncratic work seems, at least on its mottled surface, to have few points of contact with the usual Salutinesque concerns.

Indeed, those who have followed 16-or-so years of Salutin in *This Magazine*, a publication he helped found, may be tempted to find in *A Man of Little Faith* the early evidence of middle-age burnout, or fuel for the sneaking suspicion that Rick's occasional dalliances with the likes of *Toronto Life* and *Broadcast Week* have caused him to go, well . . . soft on capitalism.

Not so. *A Man of Little Faith* may be a far cry from Salutin's journalistic work, but it's no sell-out. Instead, a closer look at this novel reveals the work of a mature and committed writer testing the waters of what is, for him, a new genre. The result is part social history, part autobiography, part existential ramble — and at least partly successful at wrapping all these goods up in one engaging and uneven story.

The story is that of Oskar, a German Jew who lives through the horrors of the 1938 Nuremberg laws, which stripped Jews of their citizenship, and Kristallnacht (the



Photo of Rick Salutin by Elizabeth Feryn

Night of Broken Glass), which destroyed their businesses and synagogues. Escaping the Holocaust, he comes to Canada by default, an Other among others, a survivor.

Oskar is an anti-hero par excellence. Physically he is singularly unattractive: "his nose spread all over," the most obvious legacy of Oskar's beating and internment by the Nazis. But, notes the story's narrator, "someone else might have had it fixed." An emotional cripple, Oskar is racked by envy and a pervasive sense of failure. His relations with women are that of an overgrown adolescent, a series of fixations that begin and end with Oskar's furtive masturbation, his misogyny, his inability to connect.

It's that last facet of Oskar's interior landscape — the tension between his yearning for connectedness or community and his compulsive rejection of the same ideals — which redeems Oskar from being merely a crabby, unlikable old asshole. And not just for the reader. In his milieu as well, the Jewish community of post-war Toronto that Salutin describes so deftly, Oskar is both reviled and respected for his skepticism, his distaste for givens.

If, in a small way, Oskar's life is some-

thing of a lurching, sideways move towards sainthood, he is a most unlikely candidate. As a religious educator, Oskar is unable to believe in belief; a teacher of youth, his own proclivities run to the perverse. But amid the smugness and bourgeois values of his surroundings, Oskar is a necessary if unwanted presence, "this refugee from their id."

Salutin, like Oskar, has long been a contradictory presence in the same community. In "The Conversion of the Jews," a 1982 article for *Saturday Night* magazine, Salutin blended personal recollection with social history to describe the evolution of Canadian Jews from a left-leaning working-class minority to an increasingly bourgeois and materialistic community. The article cemented Salutin's reputation as an unrepentant shit-disturber and made him, a writer who is passionate about Jewish history and theology, somewhat of a pariah in his own community. In a cruel bit of irony, *Saturday Night* — that bastion of WASP high culture — provided a clear focus for the backlash that followed by accompanying what was arguably a brilliant piece of exposition with illustrations that were clearly anti-Semitic.

Salutin's concerns haven't changed or mellowed much in the intervening years; to the contrary it's remarkable to what extent *A Man of Little Faith* constitutes a fictional spinning-out of the possibilities inherent in "The Conversion of the Jews." But this time around, the story is told with a lot more warmth, and the kind of wryness that comes only with experience.

What has changed in Salutin's writing, and it's not entirely evident from his columns in *This Magazine*, is his feel for dialogue and the texture of language. While Salutin's non-fiction work remains hard-boiled and at times downright clumsy, *A Man of Little Faith* is adroit, mischievous and elliptical. Only occasionally does the text become leaden with over-description as Salutin attempts to weave historical events into his narrative.

Similarly, where Salutin fails, it is in trying to work too much material into the life of Oskar: his encounters with Golda Meir (who unsticks his car door from a curb in front of the Knesset) or a thinly-disguised James Keegstra (Oskar lectures the teacher's class on anti-Semitism) leave one feeling that Salutin's grasp of satire is still a little shaky. And Oskar himself, despite all the ink spilled making him live, remains flatly-drawn, a cartoon figure.

But these are quibbling concerns. For what Salutin offers us in the tortured figure of Oskar is a message of some urgency in these times: "what the world needs is a little faith. Not much, but something." ■

Peter Laurie is a Toronto-based freelance writer and a graduate student at York University.

## Embodied Theory

### COUNTER TALK: THE BODY

A.R.C. 658 QUEEN ST. WEST

TORONTO

September 20 - November 29

by Barbara Godard

Staging the body might be an alternate title for a series taking place on Tuesday nights this fall at A.R.C. (Artculture Resource Centre) in Toronto. Sponsored by Public Access, the gallery without walls, the series brings together artists working in different media — poets, painters, photographers — with academics from varying disciplines (French literature, psychology, sociology) to explore the interdisciplinary aspects of discourses on the body. The body is s(c)ene in different ways, ranging from the large photographic image of a woman giving birth projected on the wall, overshadowing the first lecture by Jane Gallop, through Renaissance tableaux of the Madonna and Child (exhibiting his manhood) and photos of the nude body of performance artist Vito Acconci in artist Mira Schor's slide show on the representation of the male body, to the poet's body in performance during a reading by Toronto "language" poet, Lola Lemire Tostevin. The series is, however, billed as *Counter Talk: The Body*.

Writing the body is a phrase that has become a catchword for contemporary French theory focused on the "pleasure of the text." As feminist and post-structuralist

discourses have infiltrated artistic and intellectual signifying practices, the body has been put in question. These discourses emerged in the first talks in the series. Visiting from Rice University where she heads the Women's Studies programme, author of *Rereading Lacan*, Jane Gallop reads "The Bodily Enigma," opening chapter of her most recent book *Thinking Through the Body*, a study that seeks to challenge the mind-body split, the division between public and private which keeps our lives separate from our knowledge. To replace the dominant model of the separation of culture and politics from the realm of love and the body, Gallop proposes mothering with its entangling of these orders, intertwining of categories, sign crimes code, like those committed on the cover of her book were the bodies of woman giving birth and woman assisting her labour cannot be distinguished.

Tostevin addressed the question of the body through the misrepresentation of the female. Reading from her new book *sophie*, alternating poems with analysis, she outlined her project of an embodied philosophy where "Sophie" would have her place alongside "Phil" and no longer be an apos-



trophe, "the smallest possible sign" for woman as name, as metaphor of the speaking subject, canceled like all metaphors. "Woman" spoken, addressed: "the pregnant pause as conceptual space." From this collection that paradoxically rewrites the dominant philosophical discourse, Tostevin chose to read poems in which music was evoked, the voice inflecting a bodily presence into the silence of the woman question as phrased in writing.

Despite this introduction to embodied language, to the problematics of the absent woman constituting herself as a subject in language, there remained — for the audience at any rate — an opposition between staging the body and the discourse on the body, between the physical body and its cultural representations, as became apparent on the fourth week, October 11th, during "Rituals of Writing," a talk by Montreal poet and feminist theorist, Nicole Brossard. Questions from the audience focused on the physical body. How did Brossard write, with a typewriter or a pen? Did she think there could possibly be such a paradoxical creature as an intellectual woman? Why, with her interest in the performative aspects of language, asked a poet in the audience, had Brossard not done any performance art? What these questions expose are the conventions of speaking/staging the body as these are gender inflected, a reminder that we are still caught in the mind/body split in which women intellectuals have been positioned. Despite the increased mental freedom women have found themselves physically restricted by the conventions of what women might do with their bodies in public. Speaking the body has been a freedom denied them. Feminist artists have been working to make a space for women as subjects in representation seeking to remove women from the position as other, body to man's mind — as Schor pointed out — Brossard was positioned as body. The questions addressed to her re/remarked a language/gesture polarity and reactivated the binary oppositions of Western discourses wherein woman is always and only body, overlooking Brossard's own work on "the emotion of thought/the thought of emotion," as she has developed the female subject in embodied language in her book *Amantes (Lovers)* (1986), a study in the erotics of reading and writing, a text was both invoked and explicated in "Rituals of Writing."

As Brossard reminded the audience, a word she frequently uses is "body" in conjunction with the words "writing" and "text" — *le cortex exuberant* — playing on the words *corps* (body) and *texte* (text). The body, though, is a metaphor for energy, desire and consciousness. Through the senses, the body functions as a network of associations whereby the imagination constructs our mental environment. Exploring these

associations speeded up or in slow motion, produces unexpected dimensions of thought. While the body is the channel for energy, such exploration or unrecorded territories must be processed through language which produces social meaning. Language, however, is patriarchal and positions woman as non-existent, as non-subject. The lucid, desiring woman is not welcomed in language nor in "writing which produces a signifying presence in the body of the language." "Writing is a wager of presence in the semantic, imaginary and symbolic space," as Brossard phrased it. Consequently, she affirmed, women are obliged to perform "rituals of presence" in order to create a space for themselves in language, in writing. So, through their work on re/presentation, they advance from self-censure to transgression to formulate a body of resistance.

By rituals, Brossard understands a series of gestures or postures, preprogrammed but automatic, which are performed in order to achieve a result. She identified two different categories of rituals, one with a mask which is applicable to writing in which one may hide behind the characters (as in novels, essays, plays) and a maskless one, associated with poetry. In both may be located the four rituals of trembling, shocks, sliding and breath which are experienced by the subject in the process of positioning herself in language. The "ritual with trembling" is the body trembling from the urgency of coming to voice, casting out fear that has blocked one from one's inner landscapes and images. The "ritual with shock" is made necessary by the recognition of the monolithism of patriarchal meaning. The woman writer's anger translates into a clash of words, a conflict of values, so that words are shattered. It is, as Brossard commented, a dangerous ritual in its deconstruction of meaning. Certainly, it is riskier than the "ritual with sliding" which involves work on representation in order to displace the imaginative and cognitive "aura" of words, by disturbing their connotations, both semantic and metaphorical, whether these be positive or negative. In the convergence of desire, sensation, emotion, consciousness and memory, an energy charge produces an effect, rather than meaning, through concentrating on the materiality of language — its sonority, polysemy, graphism. This, she suggested, is the effect of a writing woman in love with another woman: she alters profoundly the connotations of words like sleep, skin, memory, vertigo, desire. "Rituals with breath," more closely related to poetry, has the effect of modulating energy to the rhythm most appropriate for thinking. This produces a "field of vision" through which to convey the new meanings invested by the emergence of woman as subject within a liberated linguistic space. But if the desiring body has an impact on language, transgressing

patriarchal codes, words too have an effect on bodies. They may blow the mind, trigger pain or pleasure. Language is performative. The reader too is embodied in language. As Brossard concluded, quoting herself in *L'Amor (These Our Mothers)* (1983), "to write I am a woman is full of consequences." Not a disembodied, Cartesian ego, the gendered subject inflects the meaning of words differently.

In this talk, Brossard described the strategies of writing which she has deployed in more than twenty books in as many years of writing as she has worked on representation and narrative, seeking to destabilize the fictions of a dominant patriarchal discourse and produce alternate fictions, utopian ones, through which feminists and lesbians could imagine themselves otherwise in the symbolic order, in language. The work on the material signifier through word play and a focus on the grapheme foregrounds the textuality of Brossard's writing, underlines the fact that the body in question is the body in/of language. The presencing effect of her voice when she talks, foregrounds the corps that was the impact of her talk when many in the audience responded to an unmediated body, to the body, that is, and not to its re/presentations. This response is framed and produced, however, by North American readings of French feminism as biological essentialism, as though in "writing the body" one could miraculously escape the mediation of linguistic representation. ■

Barbara Godard is a teacher/critic and translator of Nicole Brossard's *Lovers* and *These Our Mothers*.

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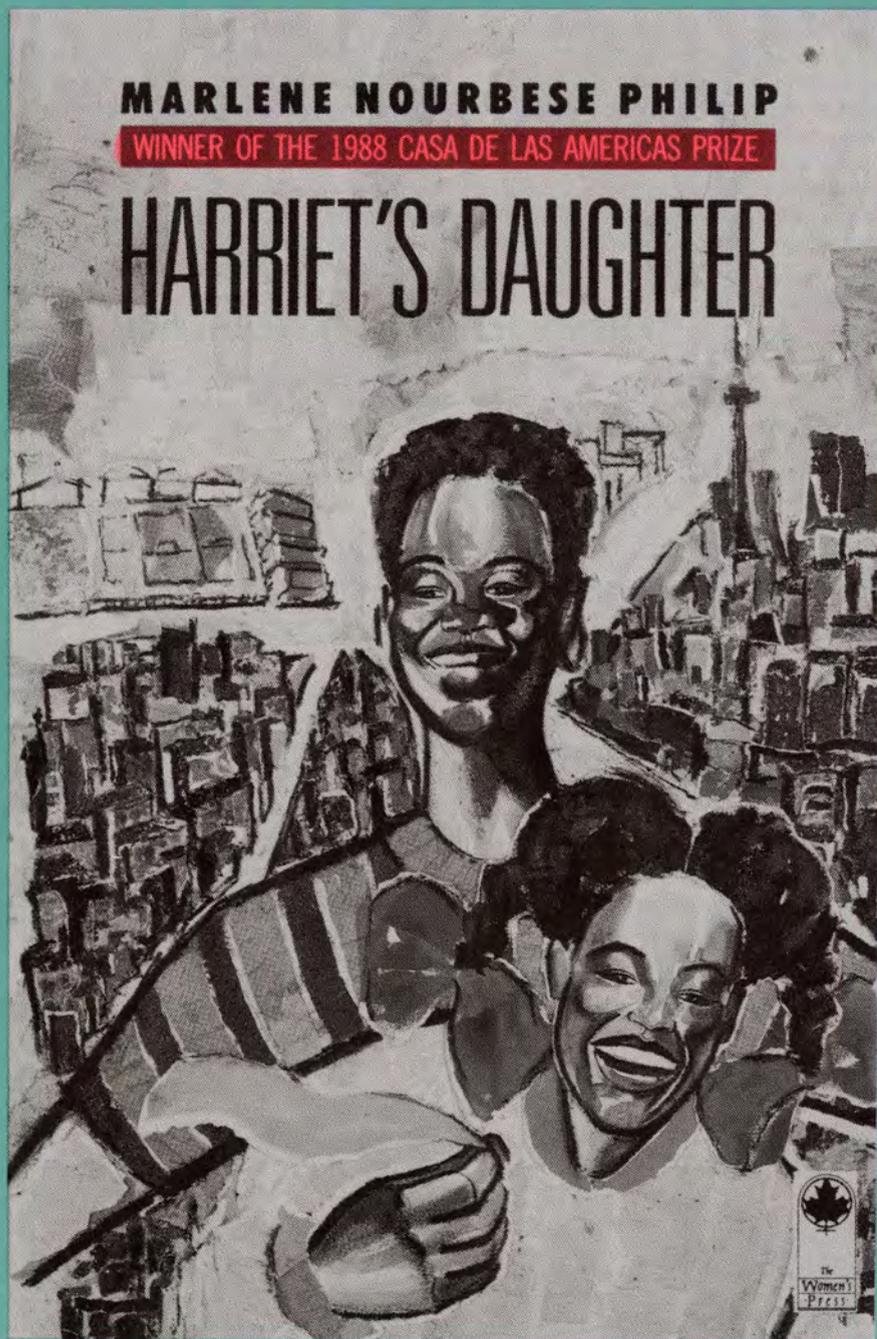
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