

# FUSE

M A G A Z I N E

J U L Y 1988

No. 50

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what's so funny?

by sheila r. gostick

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artists & the state

books

women's music

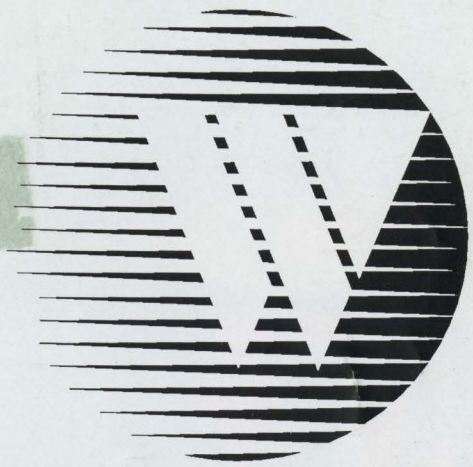
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MAGAZINE  
JULY • 1988  
VOL. XI NO. 6

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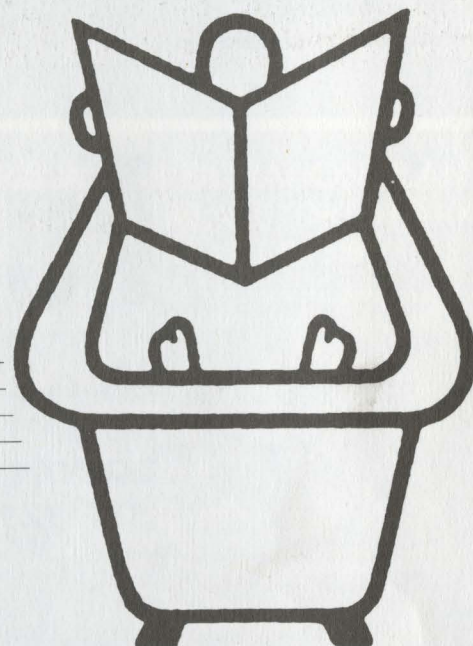
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WATERWORKS



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JULY • 1988  
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Tenko Ueno  
of the Honeymoons  
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Cover image: Guatemalan "Trouble Doll"

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# 50 ISSUES

ALTERNATIVE PUBLISHING • ARTISTS' UNION • SELF-DETERMINATION  
BLACK POLITICS • WOMEN'S MUSIC • CENSORSHIP • LABOUR & ART  
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## Errata

In the last issue of FUSE (April 1988, Vol XI,  
No. 5) the interview entitled *Art After the  
Coup: Interventions by Chilean Women* was  
translated by Michael Hoechnan. We apologize  
for omitting this credit.

The following are corrections to text that was in-  
advertently omitted in the the review *Territories  
of the Forbidden* by Marusia Bociurkiw in the  
same issue:

P. 28, col. 2: But censorship means different  
things to different communities. The historical  
convergence of censorship laws with feminist  
organizing around abortion, daycare, and  
equal pay; and gay and lesbian organizing  
around bath raids, equality rights and AIDS, is  
no coincidence. By the same token, the preoc-  
upation of a particular strand of feminism with  
pornography can be seen as the result of femin-  
ist backlash.

P. 28, col. 3: The danger lies also in what will  
never get written, filmed, photographed, or  
documented. Self-censorship — located in the  
self, but emanating from the state — can make  
the lesbian artist unable even to imagine posi-  
tive sexual representations, let alone to apply  
for state funding, or to exhibit the work if it does  
get made. As video artist Lisa Steele said at the  
same press conference, "No artist in their right  
mind would seek to be classified as difficult, in  
terms of their work. That is the kiss of death, if  
you want to get institutional support in this  
country."

P. 32, col. 3, footnote 4: The House of Com-  
mons is not debating Bill C-54. It has not passed  
second reading (three readings are required  
before it becomes law) and will likely die quietly  
before the next election.

We apologize for these omissions.

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## Sharing the Credit

THIS IS A...belated response to the critique of *Firewords* in your Fall 1987 issue which leans heavily on *The Politics of Subtitling* by Suzanne de Lotbiniere Harwood.

Suzanne takes issue with two quite distinct questions: The fact that reviewers and audiences often ignore or fail to notice and therefore credit the work of the translator; and the fact that her credit on the film was not separated out from the other collaborators and placed at the head of the film.

**RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORSHIP:** In her text, *The Politics of Subtitling*, Harwood asks, "Were the subtitles so good they gave reviewers the impression they understood French?" Yes, they were. The goal in translating on film is to make the audience transcend the barrier of language.

Harwood says: "That's my work you're reading on the screen." Yes, and they were skilled and thoughtful adaptations.... But while words are an integral part of the film — they are not the whole film....

**WHO GETS THE CREDITS?** Harwood says, "My mistake was not insisting from the start that the subtitles by given separate opening credits." The fact is...no one gets opening credits in an NFB English Production documentary. Singling her out for special acknowledgment would simply be unfair to the many other people who also contributed to the film.

—Dorothy Henaut  
Director, *Firewords*  
Montreal, Quebec

## Uncomfortable Categories

I WOULD LIKE to respond to the Lenore Keeshig-Tobias review ("An Emergent Voice," *FUSE*, April 1988) of Jeanette Armstrong's novel *Slash*. In a sense *FUSE* should be applauded for the recognition, at long last, that there is a community of indigenous Amer-Indian authors. Their surging presence on the literary scene, as evidenced by Jeanette Armstrong, may also be a positive product of the militant sixties and seventies in Indian country. But the fact that *FUSE* relies on the lumping-and-splitting tendency of the critical tradition of the literary world to handle this emerging indigenous Indian voice does little justice to the growing wealth of Amer-Indian authors in this country.

What Armstrong accomplishes in *Slash* is to capture the confused mind of Indian youth attempting to make sense of this new era of militancy for Indian people during its tumultuous period. And yes, Keeshig-Tobias' observation that Indian people during the period were some of the "meetingist bunch of Indians" is correct. Ask any young Indian who travelled for a time with the American Indian Movement (AIM). Where Keeshig-Tobias misses the current is in assuming that the works of indigenous writers should be lumped or split into comfortable categories. Her reference that *Slash* fits somewhere between "emergent literature" and "testimonials" (both obscure labels that require more definition) equates this work to nothing less than "gutteral." This does little to enlighten an ignorant public about the world from an Indian point of view — as *Slash* does; nor does it recognize the accomplishments of the growing Amer-Indian community (to which this reviewer professes to belong).

*Slash*, like many other Amer-Indian penned novels (Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* and Anna-Lee Walters' *The Sun Is Not Merciful* to name a couple), is written in the home-grown literary genre that truly represents the world-view of the Amer-Indian. These novels should be widely read and appreciated by the public at large, and should not fall victim to the critical lumping-and-splitting for the sake of academic quibble.

— Henry Michel  
Penticton, British Columbia

## Negative Diametrics

On Dot Tuer and the idea of Her Revolution ("From the Father's House," *FUSE*, Winter 1987):

"What's falling ought to be pushed" serves as ex post facto to codify an arch-bourgeois maxim. Probably all bourgeois revolutions were decided in advance by the historic upsurge of the respective class: an admixture of ostentation was then externalized in art, as classicistic decor.

—Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

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First you self-destruct and then you reconstruct the self-destruction revolution by de-constructing the self-destruction so that in the end you have started a revolution that has no end nor a beginning nor a middle and in so doing you also have a new kind of revolution namely a mythical revolution or mystical revolution or whatever title you want to give to a revolution that has no end nor a beginning if you know what I do not mean.

—Ron Gillespie  
New York/Toronto

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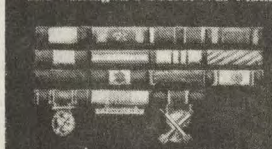
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# MAYWORKS VANCOUVER

Vancouver's first Mayworks Festival kicked off this year with strong union support and 33 multi-media events. The selection included workshops about pay for cultural work and the history of the city's strong labour culture; blue pencil cafes, poetry sweatshops and story-telling forums. There was a concert by D.O.A.; a nightly cabaret with local favourites such as Fraser McPherson and Roots Round-Up; a series of events at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre that included the On-to-Ottawa Trek performance; A Crop of Poison by the Canadian Farmworkers' Vancouver Sath and Winnipeg singer Heather Bishop. Visual Art exhibitions included Are You Sure This Is Work? an exhibition of multimedia works by B.C. artists; video screenings; an historical photographic exhibition by the Women's Labour History Project and the Working Artist exhibition from A Space gallery in Toronto.

Built through collaboration amongst committees representing various artistic disciplines, the Festival united the creativity of progressive cultural producers with supporters in the B.C. labour movement. As one participating artist stated, it was the first time since the Solidarity Coalition of 1983 that the labour and cultural community could effectively demonstrate the power of unity. Based on this year's success, organization is already underway for the 1989 Vancouver Mayworks.

— S.D.

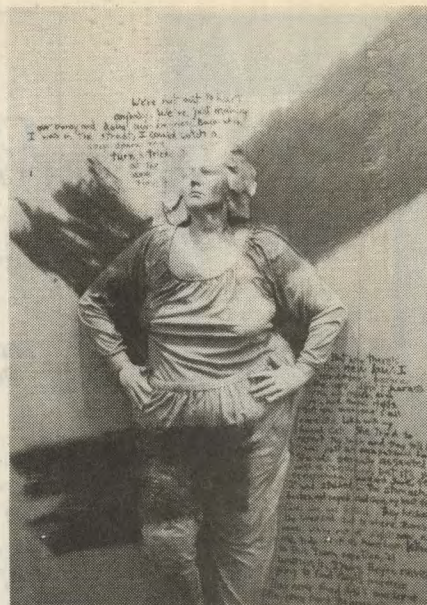


Photo: Chris Cameron

Persimmon Blackbridge presented new work as part of the *Are You Sure This Is Work?* show at the Or Gallery



Photo: Chris Cameron

Katari Taiko and Kokoro Dance: an evening of drumming and a powerful performance about the internment of the Japanese



Photo: Robert Klein

*Working It Out: Songs and Poems of the Workplace*



Photo: Chris Cameron

*A Crop of Poison:* Vancouver Sath Theatre group explains the impact of pesticides on farm workers

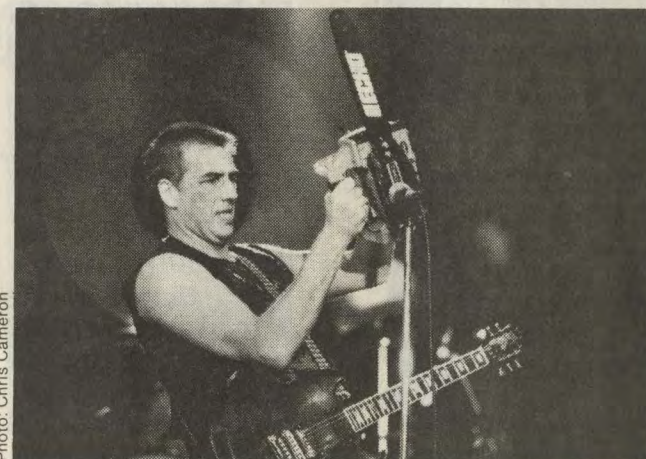


Photo: Chris Cameron

*May Day! May Day!* opening concert featuring D.O.A.'s Joey Shithead on the chainsaw

# MAYWORKS TORONTO

Toronto's third-annual Mayworks Festival opened April 30 at Partisan Gallery with an exhibition entitled Making Free Trade Visible. The six day festival of 25 events included visual arts exhibitions, notably Critical Visions at A Space gallery and Northern Images at The Funnel; video and film premieres included Keep The Home Fires Burning by Sara Diamond, Working for Piece Work Wages by Nancy Nicol and Phyllis Waugh, The Canneries by Bonni Devlin and Worth Every Minute by Catherine Macleod, Lorraine Segato and Laura Sky; photography exhibitions; music and dance performances, starring such luminaries as Siyakh from the Multi-Cultural Womyn in Concert roster; and poetry readings (entitled Speaking Out) at A Space gallery.

The involvement of labour this year in terms of shows included Memories of Fire, photographs by Frank Rooney of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union; a full day of entertainment at the Canadian Auto Workers (Local 303) which included a play, Free Trade Zone by Ground Zero Productions; and at the Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada (Local 50), an historical show of buttons, pins and old photographs covering 20 years of labour history, by Ed Seymour.

The coalition of arts and labour and community groups, entering its third year, is a powerful force producing an eclectic and exciting festival.

— P.W.



Rebecca Belmore, a Thunder Bay multi-media artist and performer in front of her soft sculpture *True Grit*, a self portrait; from the Northern Images show



Tomson Highway in motion on stage at A Space reading excerpts from *The Rez Sisters*



The Siyakh dance troupe performing South African "gum boot" dances at Harbourfront Cafe



All Photos This Page: David Smiley

The Ruth Budd String Quintet performing at Local 303 of the Canadian Auto Workers; in the foyer of the newly constructed Pensioners' Lounge



Adhri Zhina Mandiela, a Toronto multi-talented "dub poet", performer and director, performing at Harbourfront Cafe



## VIDEO NEWS

Kim Tomczak

**THE LONGEST RUNNING** international women's film and video event, which has been a great success, has just completed its eleventh annual festival. *Festival des Filles des Vues*, organized through Video Femmes in Quebec City, has had excellent programming and has been applauded internationally. But no more! Unfortunately, the festival has not received much in the way of government (financial) assistance. Clearly, it is not for lack of enthusiasm, energy or commitment on the part of the organizers or participants. The demise of *Festival des Filles des Vues* is a result of divisive manoeuvres by the cultural bureaucracies; especially Telefilm which has withheld funding and, in fact, seems to have developed a priority of funding only three or four of Canada's big film festivals. This is bad news for independent film and video producers, as well as the smaller and, frankly, more interesting festivals. (b.h. Yael is a Toronto video producer who attended *Festival des Filles des Vues* and prepared this report.)



tion by SOS Productions; and *Just Because of Who We Are*, a documentary tape about the violence that still threatens lesbians, women who love each other by T. Dickerson, A. Norman, L.D. Picher, R. Omata, A.F. Akua and D.Kyi. For more info contact: DEC, 229 College St., Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4.

**A NEW FESTIVAL** of independent film and video is currently being organized in Toronto. The festival, entitled *Images 88* will take place the last week of June/88 at the *Factory Theatre* on Bathurst Street.

(above) *Keeping The Home Fires Burning*, a new videotape by Sara Diamond

(right) *Cop Out*, a new videotape by Gary Kibbins

**IT'S TIME** to send your video art tapes to the *Kijkhuis Video Festival* again. Canadian work is often included in this large and well organized international festival. The deadline for submissions is July 1, 1988. Contact: Tom Van Vliet or Leo Reijnen, *Kijkhuis World Wide Video Festival*, Noorderinde 140, 2414 GP Den Haag, Holland.



Still: Courtesy of VTApe

**DEC** (Development Education Centre) Films is beginning to carry a number of titles for distribution in video. Some recent titles include: *The Struggle for Choice*, a five part history of the abortion rights struggle in Canada by Nancy Nicol; *The Way to My Father's Village*, a personal tape which traces family history from Canada to Trinidad to China by Richard Fung; *Abortion: Why Not?*, a tape about issues facing women in Brazil around access to abor-

Film and video from across Canada will be featured in the four-day-event, with many Toronto premieres. Next year's event will have an international component, and will run an entire week, with a much enlarged program. For more information (a catalogue will be available) please contact: Gillian Morton, *Northern Visions*, 67 A Portland St., Suite 3, Toronto, Ontario M5V 2M9 (416) 971-8405.

**THERE ARE** a couple of conferences which directly affect video in June this year. One is the *Independent Film and Video Alliance's* AGM which takes place in Vancouver June 2, 3 and 4th. Most film and video production and distribution centres belong to the *IFVA* making this a dynamic group. If you want more info on the *IFVA*, contact Martine Savaugau, *IFVA*, 397 Boul. St-Joseph Ouest, Suite 1, Montreal, Quebec H2V 2P1. The second conference is *ANNPAC's* AGM which includes a film and video caucus. This caucus presents an opportunity for information sharing, rental/sales fee setting and programme exchanging. The thrust of the caucus is to ensure that video, as an art form, maintains a profile within the "artist run centres" which has not, of late, been the case. I think the caucus (which started at last year's AGM) has already made some headlines, with a noticeable increase in video activity over the past year in the "arcs". For more info about *ANNPAC* contact: Ric Amis, *Managing Director*, 183 Bathurst St., Toronto, Ontario M5T 2R7.

## NEWS & REPORTS



Arms length B.C. style

## B.C. ARTISTS ORGANIZE THE BREADLINES

BY SARA DIAMOND

**VANCOUVER** — In the 1970s, B.C. cultural producers lobbied the provincial Social Credit government for the establishment of funding programmes for individual artists. Although this campaign was unsuccessful, it pointed out the need both for an economic base for non-commercial production and the lack of understanding of this issue on government's part. Almost ten years later another generation of artists has taken up the flag, forming the *Ad Hoc Coalition* for B.C. Artists in order to establish a grant system which would substantially augment funding to artist-run centres and provide an arms length grant pool for individual creators.

The Social Credit government lumps Tourism, Recreation and Culture under the same ministry. The arts are reduced to an industry closely linked to the service sector and economically independent or only viable as a stimulant of consumer interest in the province. Otherwise, "culture" is treated as a form of recreational activity, to be fund-

ed through local arts councils. In neither of these understandings is there a place for professional artists whose work is not motivated by profit.

According to coalition organizer Annette Hurtig, the need for the grouping became evident during *Artropolis*, Vancouver's annual multi-floor warehouse show. The lack of substantial support for cultural organizations let alone for individual artists was clear as organizers struggled to stretch limited budgets. The province's demands that organizations required a lengthy history, a recognizable board and substantial accounting procedures (including audits) excludes single events no matter how spectacular their potential and new organizations. Those organizations that are currently funded receive tiny operating or project grants.

Currently there are zero level funds for individual artists at both the municipal and provincial levels. This seems particularly perverse given the number of artists in Vancouver alone and

the significant strides in other parts of Canada towards augmenting individual funding for artists and artists' initiatives. When Hurtig approached both municipal and provincial governments she was told that there was no need for individual grants because the community had not been asking for such monies. That the system to ask, let alone receive, does not exist did not seem to disturb the powers that be. Based on this response, Hurtig decided to insure that artists' voices were well heard.

The Coalition's first action was to design a registration form that artists could sign demanding funding. These were distributed and continue to stream in from all over the province. Fortunately the Assembly of B.C. Arts Councils joined the campaign. This was a positive step as the government had recommended in its *Artreach* Report (written without any consultation with the professional arts community) that all funding for the arts be centralized through the arts councils who primarily service amateur artists.

Organizing has centred on four areas. These are: funds be made available to individual artists; the creation of an arms length process of administering such monies; peer assessment of artists' proposals; and across-the-board increases to artists' organizations and initiatives.

The current focus is lobbying, both of the Arts Board, an advisory committee appointed by the province and charged with the task of writing a position paper on funding, and of government. Tourism, Recreation and Culture Minister Bill Reid will be a hard nut to crack. According to a recent interview in *Bookworks* Reid prefers to fund high profile events and well established organizations, not experimental work.

The whole notion of individual grants to artists is an anathema to Social Credit's dog-eat-dog philosophy where grant money is not even available to post-secondary students. Despite the difficulty of the task, the Coalition is receiving strong community support and the fight for artists' funding is on in B.C.!



# WOODS WAREHOUSE LIQUIDATION

Illustration: W. Chris Woods

## Artists & Taxes

IT'S THE SAME OLD SONG WITH A DIFFERENT MEANING  
EACH TIME IT'S SUNG

**HALIFAX** — Artists and taxes are in the news again. It seems that the provincial government cannot get its act straight when it concerns the local art community. A long-standing dispute has erupted between the Nova Scotia government's regional Tax Department and eight artists, who lease studio spaces in Pier 21 on the Halifax waterfront, formerly one of the principal immigration entrance points for Canada. The "Halifax Eight," who are members of the Waterfront Art Association, have disputed their individual tax assessments for the 1986 and 1987 periods for their leased studios, claiming that their creative activity cannot be equated with a business and is therefore not taxable in the same manner as a profit-oriented enterprise.

Unheated and with few amenities, classed as storage spaces in several instances, the studio spaces leased by the artists command a particularly high taxation rate, comparable to some of the office spaces in the downtown business area. Two of the artists

have 2-year assessments amounting to \$2,000 a piece. The "Eight" are individually assessed as owing the government a total of \$6500. The owners of the building, The Port Authority of Canada (that is, the government) allowed the artists to sign leases which mentioned that the spaces would be subject to tax. The amount, however, according to Chris Woods, one of the group's spokespeople, was never stipulated. The first assessment was appealed in 1987 and was left unresolved. This second appeal was heard before the Regional Assessment Court on Wednesday, May 4, 1988. The solicitor for the artists, Mike Pugsly, convinced the judge to adjourn the case to August 9 which will allow him to prepare a case for the appeal. Pugsly, a strong advocate of the arts, has waived his \$1500 fee. The Halifax arts community, including the media, have rallied in defence of the artists, most of whom, in company with the majority of artists in Canada, make little from their art and subsidize their activities by

BY BRUCE BARBER

other means. Without the artists leasing of Pier 21's spaces, these spaces would have remained empty or continued as waterfront storage space as they had been for the last decade.

One great irony of the present conflict is that Chris Woods advertised his recent exhibition of works in his studio as the *Woods Warehouse Liquidation*. The advertisement, according to the artist, had nothing to do with the present dispute — it was merely fortuitous. Fortuitous or not, the advertisement may yet have some part to play in the proceedings. The case may also provide the rallying point for many of the current negotiations between the government's Culture and Recreation Department and the Nova Scotia Coalition for the Arts on the formation of a regional arts council — a 'Cult' that is separated from the 'Rec and Fit' as this government department has been called for the past few years. The Halifax art communities have long wanted a strong provincial department with powers to repre-

sent them when provincial budgets are being meted out. One which, when push came to shove, could become a positive target for cultural lobbying efforts.

Many artists in Nova Scotia believe that they are contributing to the local economy significantly. A recent statistic is that the craft 'business' in Nova Scotia is a larger industry and a greater contribution to the provincial economy than is ship building. The problem is that this is not reflected in individual artists' incomes nor in their status as taxpayers. However, artists' business, as has been pointed out many times in the last few years by various individuals and lobby groups, is unlike other business and should not be equated as such. And yet, how does one respond when the statistics suggest that tourism (arts and crafts) is a bigger dollar earner than forms of primary production? The question is a difficult one. On the one hand, artists argue that they are non-profit, non-business creative enterprises — and statistics prove this so. Artists' earnings as a group are lower than any other except old age pension beneficiaries. And on the other hand, artists' groups argue that they should have (a) a bigger share of the pie, and (b) tax breaks, because as a group they are, as the rhetoric goes, marginalized and underpaid, exploited producers of the under-classes.

For years the problem has been discussed at various levels within the artist communities and most recently by the Ontario-based Artists Union. The bottom line is *labour value* and how this is interpreted both economically and culturally. From one perspective, the artists working in Pier 21 are maintaining the building, from cleaning and caretaking to security. Of course, the Port Authority and the taxation department could argue the obverse — that the artists' presence in these storage spaces cost money, hence the rents and the taxes on the use of the property. How do we distinguish between these two arguments? Some clear thinking and discussions on both sides before contracts are signed might help. Why are the rents for these spaces comparatively low if the Port Authority does not recognize the value of the artists as maintainers? Is this philanthropy? Is it not better to have the building occupied and have a slight profit to balance the deficit in utilities and securities costs than to have it empty and deteriorating. How is the presence of the artists rationalized in the

## Northern War Games

ARTISTS ENCOUNTER THE MILITARY

BY BILL LINDSAY

**THUNDER BAY** — Members of an Artists' reconnaissance task force were repulsed without casualties by elements of the U.S. Marine Corps in Thunder Bay, Ontario, after a limited engagement on Saturday, February 20th, 1988.

The Artists and the Marines (military police company of the 4th Marine Division of Minneapolis, Minnesota) met along the Armstrong Highway, about 40 km. northeast of Thunder Bay. The Marines were the "guests" of the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment and their weekend included skiing, snowshoeing, trail breaking and setting up a winter camp with their hosts.

Intelligence on where and how this weekend was unfolding was sought by Artist operatives

(members of Definitely Superior, a Thunder Bay artist-run gallery). Questions to Ernie Epp, MP (Thunder Bay - Nipigon) revealed nothing; however, enquiries in the Armouries' parking lot by Glenna McLeod, sculptress, revealed not only the exercise site's whereabouts, but an invitation to come to the airport to meet the Navy DC-9 that was depositing the U.S. military personnel. Artist McLeod declined. She led a Saturday convoy of eight Artists, including Jim Strecker, a writer visiting from southern Ontario, and they searched for and found the site on a side road off the Armstrong Highway. Strecker, creative writing faculty member at Sheridan College, was included on this mission for his well-documented expertise in communications.

At the site, Artist operatives could not gain admittance beyond the cosmetic entrance to the twin-nation exercise. They were turned back at the medical evacuation tent which blocked the way, and provided a convenient military line of demarcation between free and restricted ground.

Before retreating in the face of dangerous odds, Artist operatives had made contact with a few of the local militia men who shared some of their chocolate and information considered harmless enough not to be classified as secret. There was much they would not tell us, such as the identity of any flag, object or vehicle beyond the medical tent. Nor would they comment on the proximity of the weekend exercise to the natural gas pipeline. Artists were told reciprocal visits south of the border have been made and that the local men have also gone to the U.S. — to be trained in "prisoner-of-war handling": a distinctly caretaker role in the man-of-action hierarchy of the military.

As the Artists withdrew to their vehicles, their militia contact was seen to come under fire from a tough superior of some apparent authority and the victim of this shouted discipline was the only casualty on the military side. The officer, whose parka made his rank indiscernible, barked orders at the Artists as well — not to stray beyond the roadside, and to keep away from his vehicle — but the Artist operatives were already pulling out.

## NOTES

1. Artists of the "Halifax Eight" are Chris Woods, Kim Truchan, Richard Robertson, Marilyn Kellog, Martina Urbas, Verlay Harrop, Barbara Louder and Marilyn MacAvoy.
2. A report of a government sub-committee composed of MLA's and craft industry representatives revealed that Nova Scotia crafts represented a \$10.4 million a year industry employing some 400,000 people. The *Nova Scotia Production Craft Review Report* suggested that the industry had experienced a 15% growth in the last few years. "Tourism and Culture Minister Brian Young predicted that in 5 years the industry could be worth 20 million and employ 500,000 people in Nova Scotia." *Halifax Mail-Star Report*, May 5, 1988.

Artist  
reconnaissance:  
Lynne Sharman  
with cameras and  
Josie Wallenius  
near medical tent



Photo: Bill Lindsay



# Someone may pull the plug... but it won't be Edythe

CLIVE ROBERTSON SPEAKS WITH THE CANADA COUNCIL'S

NOT SO LONG AGO in cultural leftland, when suspicions of state interference through arts funding were commonplace, when arts councils or their provincial counterparts did, with regularity, meddle in their clients' affairs, the expectation was not *if* funding to artist-controlled organizations would cease, but *when*.

The Visual Arts Office at the Canada Council has, during the last 15 years, remained faithful to their mandate of primarily servicing artists. Though many arts and artist associations would like to take credit for keeping the Council honest and on track by creating mirror-matching management bureaucracies (thinking of: the Canadian Conference for the Arts, CARFAC — Canadian Artist Representation, and even elements within ANNPAC — Association of National Non-Profit Artist-run Centres), the success of this unique institution owes more to artist advisers/juries and, least recognized, a handful of internal staff members.

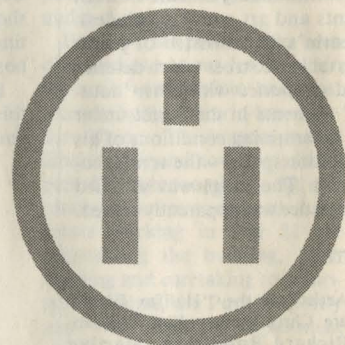
It is a fact, that during its thirty-year history, the Canada Council has been making funding contributions to artist-run facilities for now what amounts to half of its existence. It was therefore something of an event at last year's ANNPAC/RACA annual conference when Edythe Goodridge (Head of the Visual Arts Section of the Canada Council) informed the meeting that a review of artist-run centres was to be made.

Was this the "other shoe dropping" that the artist cargo-cult practitioners had long been waiting for? Was this to be the revenge of the newspaper art critics, curators and other arts managers who have never really appreciated artists doing double-duty (as artists and self-administrators)?

The self-reforms and mandate evolutions within artist-run spaces undoubtedly *is* worthy of a community-based independent review; however, the real issues are: for one generation, access to production monies, and for another generation, security of employment. (Another generation, that fits in between, wants access to both.) A major function of all arts funding agencies in Canada has been as an employer of artists, with artist-run organizations also offering extra contractual and part-time employment.

It is true, particularly within the majority of artist-run exhibition facilities, that the political culture that initiated the artist-run centres barely exists. That the impetus to both stop and examine cultural production — not to reproduce its past — has gone, and with it the rationale for such an examination. There are other provisional observations that may also fit in here. The first, is that current Canadian visual art production (painting, sculpture, some installation works) has the appearance of being a very safe form of commercial (i.e., saleable) art, as if it were being produced out of economic necessity in a country (like Britain or the States) where public subsidies to individual artists and their organizations have long been ideologically dislocated.

Of course, this is not to argue that a social evolution of art is tied to any specific forms, but the questioning of the social use of one's occupational output is not something to be dropped without consequence. For example, does the following still hold true: "It is not the institution that validates your work, but your work that validates the institutions"...?



EDYTHE GOODRIDGE •

"We were proposing...that we do some thoughtful, serious analysis with the community..."



Photo: Clive Robertson

Clive Robertson interviewed Edythe Goodridge for FUSE. Goodridge is a former student of the Ontario College of Art who, after travelling in Europe, worked as a curator at Memorial University where she developed extensive art educational and artist employment programmes. Goodridge researched and set up the Newfoundland provincial arts council, as well as being active in the founding of the Fisherman's Union (now with Canadian Autoworkers). While in Newfoundland, Goodridge participated in "the national scene" with the Canadian Conference for the Arts, the National Gallery and the Canada Council. Goodridge has been the Head of Visual Arts, Canada Council for the last five years.

**FUSE:** When you came here and you brought with you all of your occupational experience of what it means to identify regional and local needs and autonomy, how did you put it together with an institution like the Canada Council which rhetorically operates in favour of elitism and excellence?

**EDYTHE GOODRIDGE:** I had never seen the Council in that light, and it continues to surprise me, travelling around the country, to hear that...I had never ever seen the Council as a central agency, situated in some distant notion of excellence. The Council had been the most critical instrument for us in the '70s. We had a provincial government and municipal governments that were, to be unkind, neanderthal. To be kind, they were still engaged in building roads, hospitals and schools. The last thing they could accommodate was either social change or artistic development or anything else that you want to talk about.

It was the (Canada) Council throughout those 12 or 15 years that, in fact, had been our critical link with the rest of the country and had funded and accommodated much of this development.... In my view, the Council

has not had the opportunity to become as institutionalized as, for example, Memorial University which had been built on a Scandinavian model. It had an enormous mandate to service the community first, not just the student population. It was incredibly engaged. It has now become a third-rate imitation of every fifth-rate university in North America. I watched that university become completely alien in the space of five years. The same cannot be said for the Council.

**FUSE:** Let's talk about the Council's current relationship with artist-run organizations, and the announced re-evaluation process and the accompanying rumours of cuts, etc. I think it would be useful for you to contextualize something about your role in defending artists and artists organizations in the skirmish that happened with public galleries and museums.

**EG:** The debate about the role of the museums had begun in the '70s, and when I came here it was already an internal debate at Council and within



the community of public art galleries or museums. Much of that debate had very little to do with the Council, except we were in the shadow of that debate around the National Museums Corporation policy — that monolith that emerged in the '70s; a massive bureaucracy with a mandate to provide for the federal role in the museums of the country. Throughout the '70s, the Council's funding of the public art galleries became a part of that larger equation; constantly changing, constantly disruptive. There was also one very obvious impact of the emergence of the National Museums Corporation on the Council, and that was that the funding for visual art and museums was constrained by the presence of another, quote, "federal agency" funding the public art galleries.

Statistics show that the growth of funding for the visual arts was very different than it was for other disciplines because of the ever-present "other" agency. The Director of the Council, Lussier, had commissioned a study. When I walked into that debate, it was well under way. It was the smaller regional museums versus the larger ones, the larger ones versus the new — the normal dynamics for such a debate — where nothing much had changed for a decade. The original premise of how the Council had funded art galleries had been lost in the debate. So what we attempted to do was find that original premise — find it, extract it, examine it and re-define it. So we entered into the fray. Did we ever!

**FUSE:** What were the measures that you finally took?

**EG:** The measures we finally took, through the committees and discussions, were to identify the original premise which we found to be highly intelligent. The rhetoric of the time was that we are re-articulating that original premise which was: these grants to the public institutions (i.e., public galleries and art museums) were intended as extensions of grants to artists, OK. That they were intended to subsidize, as we do books of poetry and fiction, etc., the costs of presenting, in this case exhibiting, the work of our artists to a public. Amen.

**FUSE:** So did you then cut core or operational funding?

**EG:** There was never core funding. That again was part of the distortion.

**FUSE:** So what was the response of these institutions to what you did?

**EG:** The public galleries and museums were a large community and there were a small number of them who had, in fact, received special status, where there were annual grants to some and project grants to others. What we did was basically take that status away.

In the debate that followed there was an element that got lost. In retrospect, we should have shortened the time-frame to introduce the two elements. There was from the beginning of the debate a commitment made by Council to the museums that there would be a new form of funding which the Council would identify and situate. However, the funding was not available at the time. The second element is critical. It recognizes that some art museums are engaged in collecting, interpreting and publishing that are critical to the contemporary arts. They are not just exhibiting centres.

**FUSE:** When you took away the status, did it free up any money?

**EG:** No. The original monies that we had dispensed to the public galleries

were then redirected into the Exhibition Assistance Fund and that was open to all the public art galleries and the artist-run centres. Once you re-established the original exhibition function, immediately you had to include the fact that there were artist-run spaces also exhibiting. There were elements where the artist-run centres and the public galleries had to be brought into closer alignment. The programme became a bridge between the two "parallel" systems.

**FUSE:** So this brings us to last summer, when you introduced an agenda for evaluating artist-run organizations.

**EG:** Let me correct you; there was never an agenda for re-evaluating. There was a discussion paper sent out which simply said: "It's been 15 years. It's very clear from our analysis and our perspective that there's a crisis. We have no capacity to accommodate growth and development. There's a very real, very obvious demand on Council to accommodate growth and development within artist-run spaces. Both of these properties are distinct but interrelated. Therefore, there is a need for another level of funding and commitment. It's been 15 years; it's time for us to do a basic review."

Now, it's interesting, because that was immediately interpreted by some as being a re-evaluation of the artist-run centres. That surprised us. ...Perhaps we were naive in assuming that people would not assume the worst. During the five years I have been here, we have said that there is no question that the Visual Arts Section and/or the Council was changing its commitment to the artist-run centres. But it had had a 15-year evolution with the centres, and that the commitment for the next 15 years had to be re-articulated if we were going to get another significant level of funding. Particularly at a time of obvious political and economic restraints. What we were proposing was that we do some thoughtful, serious analysis with the community, and try to re-articulate the critical nature of the centres for the contemporary arts so as to change the status. I think one of the prevailing issues about the centres, not just at the Council but with the provinces and municipalities, is the centres' capacity to strengthen their rather feeble economic base which is what we're basically talking about. To change the Council's role, we have to find pretty substantial arguments. Given the changing and varying fiscal abilities in municipalities and provinces across the country, overall the Council has been the constant factor.

The need for a review was to compile a collective strategy whereby, over the next few years, we could make a substantial difference in the arguments for another level of funding.

**FUSE:** So where are all the rumours coming from that this review is not expensible but, on the contrary, is a selective weeding-out process?

**EG:** First, let me say that we have made substantial increases in the artist-run centres over the past five years but they're pennies, peanuts — they don't amount to a ripple for god's sake. We need a more mature funding context than this ad hockery. Let's look for a moment at the question of status. If you look at the 15 years of artist-run centres, they have in fact all reinforced their notion of being marginal and alternate... Like those who work in the centres, I deal with these questions every day within the Council, with provincial governments, with federal departments, with the media, with other institutions, etc. There is still a perception that such artist organizations are less than critical or vital or mature. I think there needs to be a concerted effort to change these perceptions. The collective analysis

over 15 years has been impressive. The stress within the artist-system disturbs me.

**FUSE:** What concerns me about any external "perceptions" or review is that the artist-run network should not be critically isolated from the rest of the gallery/museum system. Let's not kid ourselves; there is no mature or rational public art institution in the whole country. Most galleries don't even know who the artists are and most of them, as we have just witnessed, favour curatorial over basic artist moral rights. The artist-run spaces came into being to challenge that existing system and that challenge has almost never been faced. Reverting to the traditional re-emphasis in the visual arts in the early '80s was the easiest and laziest move to make. Curators who formerly could function asleep were now free to go fully into suspended animation or, at the very least, to re-mystify their roles. Of course, the artist-run centres also slipped into habits of greater convenience. The "pressure," aside from being underpaid, is another interesting "invisible" factor. Public institutions make much of their services (having collections, public interpretation, etc.) and yet those artists who work in artist-run organizations are there to be accountable both to their peers and the public. This accountability is even symbolized by the physical proximity and open-plan accessibility, rarely found in public galleries or museums.

**EG:** When you look at the debate around the public galleries, you can see those differentiations being acknowledged. As the Council stated, public art institutions serve many masters whether it's municipalities, endowments or the public and only, incidentally, the contemporary artist. The nature of grants to artist-run spaces recognizes that and allows flexibility and what I call empowerment.

**FUSE:** How can the Council expand its funding role?

**EG:** We're faced with two pressures. To increase our existing level of our funding contribution to 50 centres each year, we need \$1 million before it would even be felt. There are new centres wanting to come in and that would give some oxygen into the system that could alleviate some of the competition. Then there is the question of some of the centres wanting to expand or change their mandates quite significantly. We do know we need more money, but that's almost too simplistic.

**FUSE:** This is where the anxiety comes in. If there is no more immediate money, and something has to give, then one glaring option is to cut back.

**EG:** Nobody's ever said that. Over 15 years, some 70 (artist-run) organizations have emerged as an organism. We are committed historically to these forms of collectives. Whether they are production, exhibition or distribution centres, they are all based upon a common principle which is: they are run by artists. Part of the pressure is that the importance of our contribution is being undermined.

All of this sounds like rhetoric, but this is what leads to the review process, arguing the case. The Council has spent 30 years engaged in development and growth and identification of the nature of the art practice and artists in this society both in their own work and in their social work. Three generations later and we're caught in this time warp. We are almost in the '90s and yet most people act as if it's 1978. It isn't just financial. We have no capacity to stand back and, perhaps, shift because



Photo: Clive Robertson

"...we have made substantial increases in the artist-run centres over the past five years but they're pennies, peanuts — they don't amount to a ripple for god's sake. We need a more mature funding context than this ad hockery."

that creates too much anxiety. It's something nobody wants to deal with. The level of anxiety is of deep concern to us. When the larger community wants to engage in a collective analysis, we're going to try and give them the opportunity but we're not going to structure one now. I've stepped back from it; we were geared up for it, as you know — a centre-by-centre collection of basic operational tenets. However, I do not wish, nor intend now, to add to the existing anxiety. ■



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10-YEARS

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- Deadlines: February 1, August 15

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- exhibition assistance towards the cost of an upcoming exhibition.
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- Deadlines: February 1, August 15

**ELECTRONIC MEDIA**

- to facilitate creation of works of art using electronic media; to facilitate research of potential significant benefit to the arts community into the creative possibilities of electronic media.
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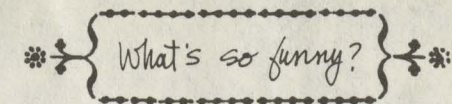
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AN EXCERPT FROM

# The Psychology of Fun

## Volume 1: Phlegmatic Humour



by Sheila R. for ritin' Gostick





## SHEILA GOSTICK

(born Sheila Starquality — Gostick is a showbiz handle), honorary member of the Society of Belgian Insomniacs, recipient of the Royal Order of Deportation, once known for her spontaneous renderings of spicy Igbo limericks, recently lost the use of the lower half of her only face in a luppertime mishap.

With this tragic blow, Sheila was denied her quick-tongued livelihood and faced a dim future as an itinerant air guitar player. But thanks to government interference, we are now employing Sheila under a Comedian Rehabilitation Programme.

After she wiped out ten years of files on the computer and was found to be misappropriating overcoats from the office, the board decided to let Sheila write something...at home. We gave her some books and reference materials but, judging from what she produced, they were ignored. When asked why, Sheila scrawled a quote from her literary mentor on the little blackboard she now wears around her little neck:

*I can read readin'  
But I can't read writin'.*

POPEYE



HA HA HA

# WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

**WHAT'S SO FUNNY?** is a question that can strike fear in the chatterbox of any talky schoolgirl. The answer invariably given by the terrified future alumnus to this sudden challenge from the seething blob of prejudice and obsession known as 'the teacher' is, 'Nothing.' The adult embodiment of this existential enchantment with nothing is the TV audience, at home, or here in the studio.

*"I think people tend to distrust something new on television. You always hear people say, 'We want something new, something different.' But I think the truth of the matter is they really don't."*

**David Letterman**  
**Quote of the Week**  
**National Enquirer**

And he should know.

"Gostick's non-stop patter," according to the Halifax Chronicle-Herald Mail-Star, and CP wire service in a coast-to-coast plague notice entitled *No One Safe From Gostick*, "made quirky sense of an insane world to a hot crush of people in a derelict room." — Hot crushed derelicts were laffing out loud and it was all my fault. Making sense elicited the same response as nothing can. Did I fill the void or just replace it?\*

\* Answer in a 250 word song to the tune of Wolverton Mountain and win a chance for a free gluteal liposuction session with the visual artist of your choice.

These strangers who extract their fun from staged displays of my personal agonies enjoy increasing my suffering with their ebullient confessions. "I laffed so hard I peed!" In what other line of work is one expected to be flattered at inspiring incontinence in a unilingual half-bake?



Just because a man is a dress salesman does not mean he's a drag queen. Just because a woman is a comedian does not mean she's having fun. Now, drag comedians, that's a different story. Men dress up like women and get paid for it. It's a joke. Women dress up like that for free. They expect to be taken seriously. That too, is a joke. But don't laugh while wearing high heels — titting and teetering are a dangerous combination.



Sheila at age 23

The element of surprise keeps them rolling in the aisles



**AUDIENCES CAN LAFF** at comedy without understanding why. I don't understand why they laff either. But I don't have to understand. I just have to make them do it — that's the job description. So, comedy is a divine mystery. I think it's a comfort to know that there are still some things that can't be predicted, produced, or controlled by computers. But, oh no, can't just enjoy it — it's a mystery — it has to be solved. That compulsive need to know drives the desiccated dissectors to pick apart the inexplicable. Then they attempt to measure the parts — in earth years. They seem to have this theory that smartness is relative to age. Good theory. Allow me to introduce the President of the United States of America.

Example of the Earth Year Theory as applied to my untimely self:

"Gostick is a gutsy 18-year old who comes on as if she's 45."

Globe & Mail

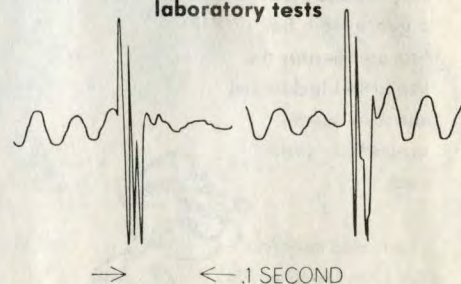
Just how does a 45-year old come on? On crutches? Drunk from 45 year-long parties? Jaded? What does 'jaded' mean anyway? Take a look at my report card. "Sheila is too cynical." And that was grade four! I was 9 and they were already projecting their negativity onto my budding critical sensibility. Thirty-six more years and you're wrecked, soft, dead, or filthy rich, not blabbing your heart out to a mess of beer-sucking hecklers who just came to see the band:

...a talent as alarming as that of any 14-year old violin prodigy fully up to the Wienawski Violin Concerto No. 2 — Gostick is only 23, and so hip. She makes the Johnny Carson regulars look Neanderthal. What kind of future can she have you wonder.

Vancouver Sun

TREMOR IS SUPPRESSED OR ENHANCED depending on the instant at which the prod is administered. When the prod is given out of phase with the ongoing tremor (left), the tremor is suppressed. When the prod is in phase (right), subsequent waves are enhanced

Primitive audience prod is proven effective in modern laboratory tests



(above) I don't understand why they laff either. But I don't have to understand. (below)



Watch movies, plays, concerts from the highest balcony! NO arm weariness from holding opera glasses!

Wretched penury — that's what kind of future, and he knows it! Violinists can play with symphonies. They have futures. Is it my fault I'm the product of a-rhythmic Mormon Catholics? I can't play violin but I know how to fiddle. When I was fourteen I was busy honing the skills of my art: pick-pocketing, lying, and showing up an hour late.

She says that she is 24, but her real age is 14 going on 80. She has been making a living as a standup comic since she was 17.

Coming Up, San Francisco

Apparently a highly evocative number, this 14, but 14 going on 80 sounds like some sort of eugenics project distilled from too many viewings of *Walk on the Wild Side*, a 60s movie where anyone over 30 is placed in a death camp. Straight from one childhood to the next with none of that messy cocktail party groping in between, not a bad idea. But frankly, I'm rather alarmed that somehow through my work, I unwittingly suggested it. Which part of me is 14? Is it my skin condition? Which part is 80? I've got to know.

Of the Gostick stage beast, the same reviewer says:

She turns her laser-like vision onto society and slices the world and us into little quivering bits of protoplasm quaking with laughter...We leave her performance with our vision permanently altered.

**BIOTECHNICAL RESEARCH** laboratories and outposts of dubious chemical engineering are rampant in California. I deny any affiliation with any of them. These quivering bits of vision-impaired, laser-treated quaking protoplasm, allegedly my creations, must be rounded up at once and towed out to sea on a cruise ship. There, in a floating nightclub, I will conduct my research, free from the prying ears of new-age-old Mr. and Ms.-informers.

As a child (Doesn't that sound bucolic? More like bubonic.), my major source of literary amusement was the department store catalogue. The descriptions of palazzo pyjamas and bra dresses, the placket-fronted smart styling of easycare pret-a-porter self-zippered body suits and denim-look slack casuals kept me enthralled for years. Needless to say, I was a peerless, sensitive young person, prone to long walks on short piers.

When the schoolgirl's response to the interrogation, "What are you laughing at?" is, "Nothing," what she is saying is, "I cannot," or, "I do not wish to explain." (Thankyou, Dr. Gostick.) Humour is personal. But humour always takes two. You know, like if a joke is told in the forest, and no one hears it, will it still turn up in somebody else's act?

This principle is easily clarified with an instructive diagram for beginners: see Figure 1.

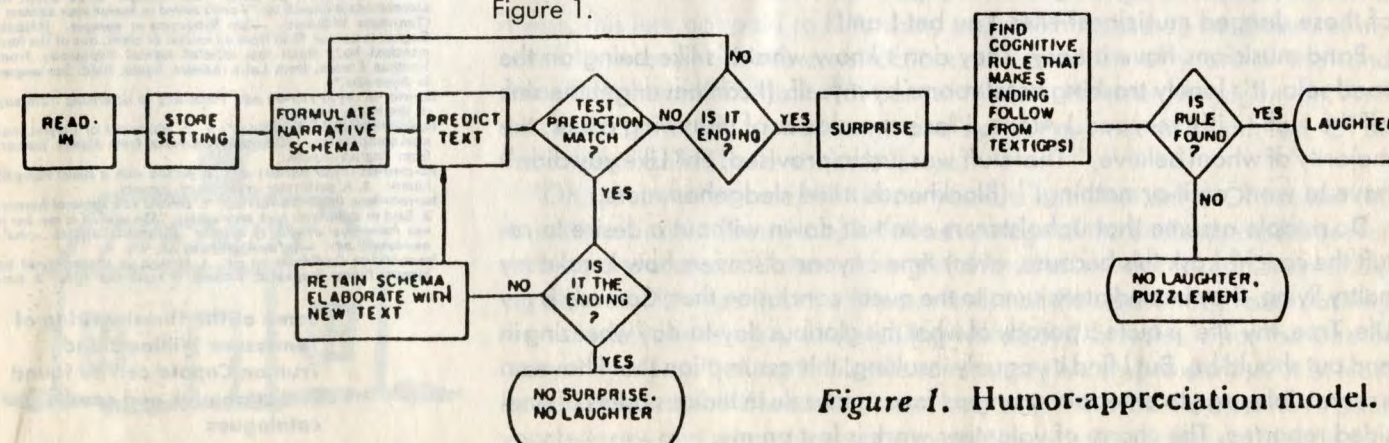


Figure 1. Humor-appreciation model.



One prostitute asks another, "Could you lend me some money 'till I get back on my back again?" This fine joke is an example of successful usage of the model, according to the book from which it was lifted. If I had discovered this sure-fire method of comedy production earlier in my "career," I would have been a famous violinist by now.

**TRADITIONALLY**, actors (puppets) looked down on comedians (clowns); according to actors who conveniently overlooked the fact that comedians don't require others to put words in their mouths, tell them how to say them, or what to wear when they do — comedians (boys) took it out on (or in front of) the only performers to whom they could feel socially superior, strippers.

Many of these boys simply hated women. That's not remarkable. Perhaps their denigration of strip-women of the non-comic variety stems from professional jealousy (far more serious than the amateur kind). Strippers get paid to take their clothes off. Boy comics could only make money if they promised to keep theirs on.

The equation between 'solo female performer' and 'naked woman onstage' still lingers in the grotty attics of some boy comics and many male audience members. (Oh no, I said "members." I didn't mean to remind you of comics in comedy clubs where sex equals dinks and the success of an act is measured on the wiener scale.) Be-turtlenecked gals such as myself, who open their mouths but not their legs, can, with the right breaks, work a whole circuit of hostile environments.

Fortunately, this pathetic hierarchy is disintegrating. Actors, comedians, and strippers, we all have one thing in common — none of us can play a tune. With roadies, groupies, Grammys, and backstage cheesetrays, musicians have it made.

Musicians can have *hits*. A catchy 3-minute song can carry a whole career. Bands can play hits over and over again, and when they're dead, they can sell albums from beyond the grave. Crowds cheer every time they hear a hit song. A joke has a life of one night. The crowd responds the first time they hear it, and, unless they are exceptional or amnesiacs, never again. After the performance of new comedy material, it's time to leave town, or write some more. Unlike musicians, comedians are expected to come up with an album's worth of new stuff for every show. Forty-five new minutes, and they'd better be good. For comics, there's no jamming, no axes, no chords, no choruses, no humming, no backup singers to help you remember the words. — Jealous of those danged musicians? Me? You bet I am!

Band musicians have it easy. They don't know what it's like being on the road solo. It's lonely trashing hotel rooms by myself. (I can never get the sink off the wall — it's very sad.) Alone, I face roomloads of muttering critics, the majority of whom believe, "That stuff was just improvised, eh? Like you didn't have to work on it or nothing." (Blockheads need sledgehammers.)

Do people assume that upholsterers can't sit down without a desire to re-tuft the couch? I ask this because, every time anyone discovers how I make my paltry living, they immediately jump to the queer conclusion that, Comedy is my Life. True, my 'life' is quite a parody of what this glorious day-to-day wheezing in and out should be. But I find it vaguely insulting, this assumption that I have an irrepressible urge to entertain strangers face to muzzle in tedious bouts of one-sided repartee. The charm of volunteer work is lost on me.



Poor Beth! She hasn't discovered that people dislike witticisms at their own expense. She has just been telling about how terribly funny Ted looked the time his car skidded against the curb and smashed a wheel. Now she turns to Fred and chortles, "When I look at that tie, I need dark glasses. Did you buy it in an awning department?"

**Poor Beth! She's wasting her comedy talent on these yokels when she could be opening for Wayne Newton**

## (hyōō'mər)

(Origin obscure.) —hum'rock-y adj.  
**hu-mor** (hyōō'mər) *n.* Also *British hu-mour*. 1. The quality of being laughable or comical; funniness: *He saw the humor of the situation.* 2. Something designed to induce laughter or amusement. 3. The ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is comical or funny: *a sense of humor.* 4. In medieval physiology, one of the four fluids of the body, blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile, the dominance of which was thought to determine the character and general health of a man. Accordingly, one's disposition might be sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, or melancholy (all of which see). 5. A state of mind; mood; spirit: *in a bad humor.* 6. Disposition; character; personality; temper: *a girl of most sullen humor.* 7. *a.* A sudden, unanticipated whim. *b.* Capricious or peculiar behavior or action. 8. *Physiology.* *a.* Any clear or hyaline body fluid, such as blood, lymph, or bile. *b.* Aqueous humor (see). —See Synonyms at mood, wit, —out of humor. In a bad mood; irritable; grouchy. —*tr.v.* **humored**, -moring, -mors. 1. To comply with the wishes or ideas of (another); go along with; indulge. 2. To adapt or accommodate oneself to: *"I don't intend to humor your silliness"* (Tennessee Williams). —See Synonyms at pamper. [Middle English *humour*, fluid from an animal or plant, one of the four principal body fluids that affected mental disposition, from Norman French, from Latin (*humor*, liquid, fluid. See *wegw-* in Appendix.)]  
**hu-mor-al** (hyōō'mər-əl) *adj.* Pertaining to or arising from any of the bodily humors.  
**hu-mor-esque** (hyōō'mər-ēsk) *n.* A whimsical or playful musical composition. [German *Humoreske*, from *Humor*, humor, from English *humor*.]  
**hu-mor-ist** (hyōō'mər-ist) *n.* 1. A person with a sharp sense of humor. 2. A performer or writer of comedy.  
**hu-mor-less** (hyōō'mər-lis) *adj.* 1. Devoid of a sense of humor. 2. Said or done with high seriousness: *"She winked at me, but it was humorless; a wink of warning"* (Truman Capote). —*hu-mor-less-ly* *adv.* —*hu-mor-less-ness* *n.*  
**hu-mor-ous** (hyōō'mər-əs) *adj.* 1. Having or characterized by humor; funny; laughable; comical: *a humorous sight.* 2. Em-

**Some of the finest writing of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote can be found in dictionaries and seed catalogues**

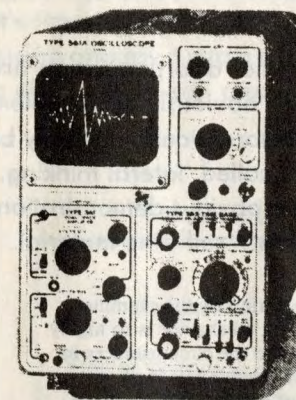
In spite of my night job, by no stretch could I be considered what is commonly known as a 'kidder.' (I'm not trying to complicate this with references to Canadian actresses either.) I've had to quit more than one dentist who was unable to take seriously the abscessed root canal that was rapidly infecting an important half of my head. These dentists (no doubt, they're movie producers too) were convinced that swelling the side of my face and screaming for morphine was just my idea of acting "wacky."

Rooms go quiet when a comedian — okay, when I walk in. Sure, there's nobody in them, but if there were, they'd shut their traps *toute de suite* (Latin for PDQ). Tight-lipped acquaintances credit me with extraordinary powers of memory. They cherish the unfounded fear that any revelation of their dreary daily dreadfuls goes straight into my pockets as grist for this mill I apparently operate on a nearby stream.

**NEVER WASTE LIQUOR ON COMEDIANS.** Very few have to drink to be obnoxious. This obnoxious tendency is even more pronounced offstage than on. Boy comics are paid to be like that. I, naturally, being of the lady-like gender, must affect a more demure comportment. So it's all right to buy drinks for me. Not that I'm a drinker, of course not. But I will choke down several just to be polite.

Still, the notion persists — If Sheila is a comedian, she must be obnoxious, She is going to insult us. They rush to beat me to it. Offstage, I am the most unassuming vole-like character, and these unprovoked affronts leave me regretting my sad lack of seconds for pistols at dawn.

But most insulting of all, is the asshole assumption that funny equals frivolous; that dedicated practitioners of socio-surgical entertainment are, and this is the worst,



asillyscope

# CRAZY

But why listen to her? She's crazy.

Toronto Magazine

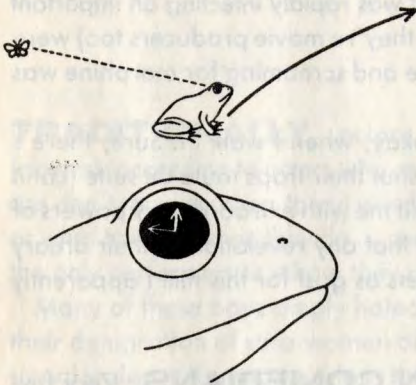
Sure, but he listened. And he couldn't even do that right! He came to a show and tried to rip off material. I guess I didn't talk slow enough for him. He should have told me. I could have done the whole thing into a Dictaphone. As it was, this jerk got paid to fill a shiny page with fucked up renditions of my carefully wrought comic constructions, the products of years of trial and error with the Laff-O-Matic® System of Modern Humour Management. As if that wasn't enough, he had to go and slander my mental health too. Of all the colossal gall! That's normals for ya.

"Oh, you, you're crazy!" I know you are but what am I? Of course, the comedian is not at liberty to take full advantage of the endless possibilities for shirking and scandal that are the rightful lot of all mental cases. Chain smoking pilfered filter-tips (just the filters, mind, not the cigarettes), razorslashing the suits of businessmen, and stealing whiteboys' bicycles is not the kind of crazy they mean. Calling Sheila the comic crazy is a way to dismiss, or at least devalue her work. "If we laff, it must be crazy." Maybe they just have poor vocabularies and what they really mean to say is iconoclastic. Doubt it.





**FUNNY** — not funny-ha ha but funny-hmmm — I opened the 1949 edition of *Introduction to Psychopathology* and, there, on page 235 was a stunningly apt description of a typical stand-up comedian: Schizophrenia, hebephrenic type. But just before we get to that, I would like to quote from a case on page 234, also remarkably similar to my own.

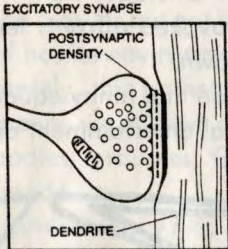


...He has an ambition to be a famous violinist and talks confidently of his ability, but he has never bought a violin. The patient showed some insight for his condition, saying "my nerves are all shot."  
(There but for the masculine pronoun go I.)

*Schizophrenia, hebephrenic type:* This form of schizophrenia contains most of the symptoms that are popularly associated with "craziness," or "insanity." The word *hebephrenic* is of Greek derivation and means literally "youthful mind." Like the simple form, the hebephrenic develops slowly and insidiously from early youth, usually reaching a state of social disorganization in late adolescence or early adulthood.

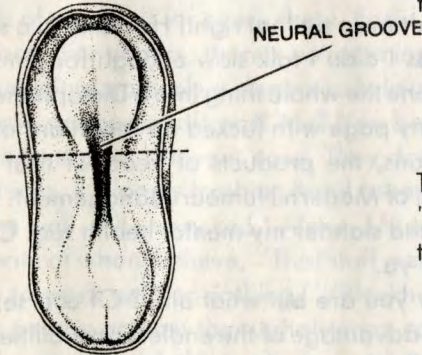
The chief identifying symptoms are silliness, fragmentation of affective and intellectual processes, and the formation of extremely bizarre delusional and hallucinatory content. The hebephrenic manifests many seemingly meaningless facial grimaces, ritualistic movements of the extremities, and odd mannerisms of voice and action.

A youthful mind and a well-developed state of social disorganization are both pre-requisites for a comedy career. 'Silliness' is obviously a convenient cover. 'Fragmentation,' if exhibited by one of the doctors, would, naturally be seen in a more complimentary light, and probably called 'lateral thinking.' Grimaces, ritualistic movements, and odd voices are obvious demonstrations of a valuable ability to, as we say in comedy jargon, "sell" the material.



The "silliness" of the hebephrenic is, of course, an evaluation by the examiner and arises from the circumstances that much of the patient's behavior is so highly individualized as to make little sense to anyone not privy to the circumstances in which it occurs. Silliness is expressed by the giggling and laughing with no apparent adequate social stimulus, by the odd manner of speech, and by varied patterns of ritualistic motor activity. The giggling is usually an expression of the patient's preoccupation with delusional or hallucinatory material, or it may be due to the individual way in which he sees the external world.

They acknowledge that it was the examiner who came up with the "silliness" tag just because he didn't get many of the jokes. So, of course, the patient/comedian laughed at them himself. Who wants to play to a bunch of slow-witted psychiatrists? Their efforts to classify the myriad of things they don't understand consume cases of rubber stamps. "Officially Crazy" in red ink and all their fears are taken care of.



One patient's delusional content pictured people as animals, and the patient's reactions to his warped perceptions often occasioned mirth on his part. He could describe the sort of animals various people appeared to be, and sometimes his descriptions were sufficiently apt to stimulate amusement in his "normal" examiners.

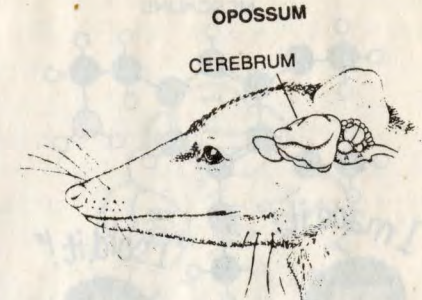
Though the patient's perceptions were considered by the examiners to be "warped," he was a sufficiently good comic impressionist to amuse even those "normal" dullards.

The language of the hebephrenic presents extremely bizarre features and deserves even more research attention than has been given to it. Basically at least two trends may be discerned: (1) a substitution of sound-association for meaning association, and (2) an elaborate and private symbolic association between words. The first tendency leads the hebephrenic to utterances that have been graphically described as "word-hash" or "word-salad," in the course of which many new words (neologisms) are coined.

(1) is the description of a pun, and (2) defines the comedian's cultivation of a distinctive shtick.

In later analysis of the case, they criticize the guy for choosing words for the sake of sound alone. Perhaps they are more comfortable with "normal" random dissonance. The doctors seem to be hurt by what they term, "the typically schizophrenic indifference to the people around him." These licensed experimenters want to be liked by their laboratory rats. They had a hard time with "schizophrenics," "who did not feel that communicating with others was an important function of speech." First of all, these fools expect those committed to mental institutions to enjoy conversing with their incarcerators, and secondly, the patients are expected to pander to these simpletons by simplifying their patterns of speech. No wonder, our comedian often answered questions with, "Jondary, jondag, jikkle jikkle jikkle, mat-mitty, mat-mitty, mat-mitty, jongwhing jat-jitty, johnwhing, etc., etc." That's scat! Forget the hospital. A trip to the Catskills, 3 squares, and 3 sets a night was all this hip-ophrenic cat needed. A jive jazz comic like he could have killed, super-killed, broken a leg... These psychosomatic straights just don't twig to comedy symptoms on the padded room circuit.

It's time to untie those sleeves, unhook those electrodes, blow that ward, stand up and say it into a microphone. Work it out in front of a real audience! Dig it? Crazy, m'am, crazy!



Preferred audience members

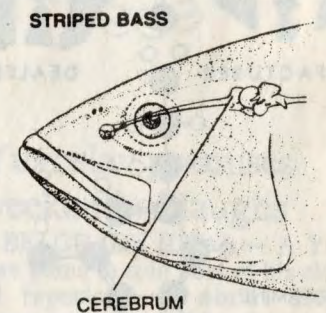


TABLE 4  
EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS OF SOLDIERS IN COMBAT\*

Symptom	Percentage of Soldiers
Violent pounding of the heart.....	86
Sinking feeling in the stomach.....	75
Feeling sick in the stomach.....	59
Trembling and shaking.....	56
Cold sweat .....	55
Tense feeling in the stomach.....	53
Feeling of weakness and faintness.....	51
Vomiting .....	24
Involuntary defecation .....	10
Involuntary urination .....	10

(Substitute COMICS for SOLDIERS and you've got the picture — same gig)

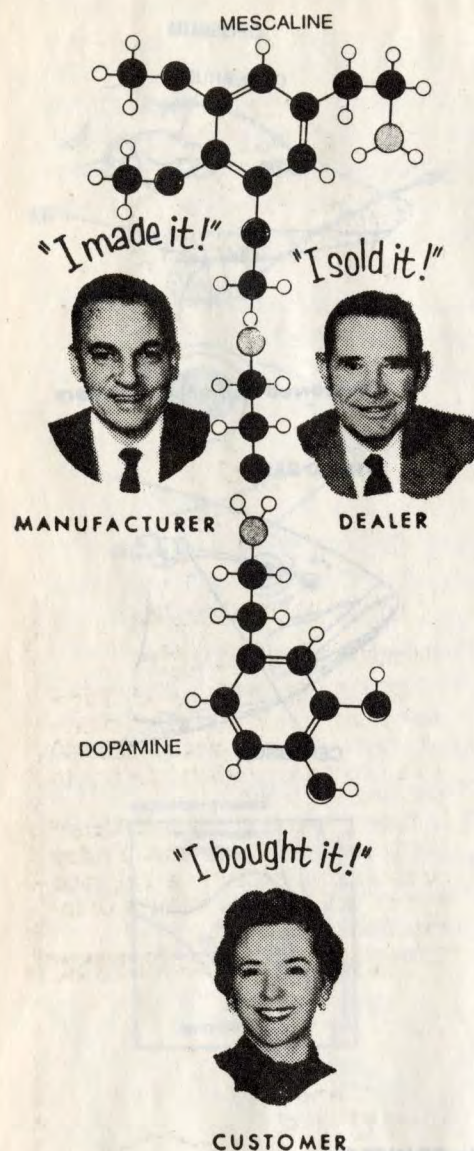
\*Source: E. G. Boring (Editor), *Psychology for the Armed Forces*, 1945), p. 384. Reprinted by permission of the National Research Council and the Infantry Journal Press, Washington, D. C.

"I LIKE SMUTTY OLD JOKES," Kenneth Williams once said. He appeared as the flamboyantly faggotty character in over twenty of the British "Carry On" movies before his recent demise. "Honest vulgarity is the central tradition of English humor\*\* and uninhibitedness the essence of comedy."

Though it may not be cricket to differ with a dead man, I would say that naughty jokes would cease to exist if we were all uninhibited. (Parallel, perhaps, to cocaine jokes being bombs in South America.) The more repressed the society, the more prevalent are the bum and breast jokes. Because references to bodies and bodily functions are generally considered taboo, the comedian who makes them is generally considered to be daring. Laughing at a dirty joke is meant to show off the laugher's unprudish lack of inhibitions, but, more likely, signifies the opposite.

\*\*I'm sure he said "humour". When did Canadian papers start using American spellings of English words? Saving typeface by getting rid of "u"?





CUSTOMER

Telling a bad joke in an unventilated area not only stinks up the place, but also can be very dangerous



**WOMEN HAVE EXISTED** in comedy, primarily as the butt (or tit) of sexist jokes, while the experiences that make up women's lives are still judged to be "tasteless (!)" or taboo material. Aside from the few women comedienne who are highly paid to publicly belittle themselves, attack other women, and advertise exclusively feminine gratuitous surgical pro-

The English Music Hall humour, of which Mr. Williams was a proponent, is relatively mild and delivered in an atmosphere of jolly, bawdy fun. The sexist content pales when compared to the rancorous dark misogyny that pervades much of what passes for entertainment in North America today.

Most comedians are old-fashioned (to put it politely), cream-of-'normal'-guys — Bobs and Howards with the Mrs. Bobs and Mrs. Howards home producing male offspring for their husbands to brag about on panel. Such staunch supporters of the status quo are as likely to be purveyors of radical humour as they are to go on TV without neckties.

Reactionaries are more preoccupied with sex than ever. They can watch TV where there's always a show with the women cops wearing G-strings as part of their job. They can see bad single women get punished in the movies. They can go to comedy clubs and laugh at descriptions of rape, forced cocksucking, and just how to keep a chick in line. (And that includes your mother.) Queer-bashing and racial slurs add to the fun. Amazingly, even the word 'drugs' still gets a laugh.

Commercial comedy, like commercial anything, is going with the rising red-neck tide, instead of against it. Comedy that does not challenge the powers that be is worthless.

"I'm so dumb"

(whines the girl stand-up comic, and the audience audibly approves.)

"You're too smart"

(complains the club owner to the new girl comic.)

"No, they're too dumb."

"If you wanna work, ya gotta do something they can relate to. DUMMY UP!"

cedures, (How many more new cheekbones can Phyllis Diller get?) women have been successfully prevented from dishing it out. The boys are scared — You know, "She's a ball breaker! She just wants my balls." How they flatter themselves! That's also supposed to be a big compliment, when they tell a woman, "You've really got balls." No thanks. What is that supposed to mean anyway? Is that supposed to mean you're tough? "You've really got these little sensitive things you constantly have to guard and protect." Yes, I want to be tough — cover me in testicles... "BACK! I've really got balls! Watch your knee!"... "You've really got ovaries."

Having no steak in the butchershop of hack comedy, women can afford to take on the taboos. Humour must be biting. It doesn't matter whose hand, when you're not being fed. Watch out, if they do stick a plate in front of you. There are strings attached. Hungry minds are never satisfied. (All slogans available hand-embroidered on tea towels. Allow nine years for delivery.)

A fella can put in his 2¢ worth and not worry. More coins will come his way. Women have only about 1.1¢ worth and we have to pinch that penny 'til the Queen cries Sir Uncle. I must foolishly admit I did receive a government grant to overthrow the government. Not alone. I applied myself with G., a stripper at children's birthday parties. We asked for money to get on *Love Boat* to subvert the masses. We thought that these officers on the Canada Council most likely know the Captain. We were going to "expose, exploit and export the underside of the incorrect." Then came free trade. Our vineyard is now threatened. They're undercutting our sour grapes.

*Particularly misleading, all the humour authorities agree, is the connection between humour and laughter.*

Give me a misguided crowd anyday. Those humour authorities — every party needs poopsters — that's why we invited them. That quote comes from a book I found in the dog's room. It's called *Sense of Humour*, and I was surprised to find it among the more predictable titles: *1001 Uses for a Dead Cat*, *The Canine as a Young Dog*, and *Snarl*, a radical dog separatist tract featuring an article by a remorseless pit bull on Death Row, "Four Legs Good, Two Legs Gone."

In matters of humour, the dog goes for the basic dirty joke: Offstage, an orgasmic roll in the waste product of her fellows. Next, a stinky grand entrance. Then, she turns to the audience, wearing a grin, that, in English, means, "What are you going to do now? Rub my nose in it?" At this, she laughs uncontrollably for hours, all the while flicking ticks into my bedding. A regular little Charlene Chaplin, she is.

*Sense of Humour* is an attempt to trace and define the quintessence of English humour. In the section, "The Irrelevance of Laughter," the author says that we only laugh in company. In my oddball opinion, laughter is a lot like crying, an unseemly release best indulged in when one is alone. Thankfully, as I make money from door receipts, this opinion is probably unique. "We laugh at misfortunes, if they do not incur danger..." states he. The inverse of this English rule of humour applies in Mexico, where death is the biggest joke of all and every bus driver is a potential comedian.

*The day before yesterday, in ethnological time, we laughed to see a lunatic on the end of a chain or a bear tied to a post and bitten to death by dogs.*

Now you have to have Pay TV.



### Yugoslav promises weekend of laughs

**BELGRADE (DPA)** — A Yugoslav plans to spin part of his claimed repertoire of about 287,000 jokes over the weekend to try to set a world record.

Tanjug news agency said Miroslav Mihailovic's feat from Friday to midnight Sunday in a Belgrade square will make it into the Guinness Book of Records.

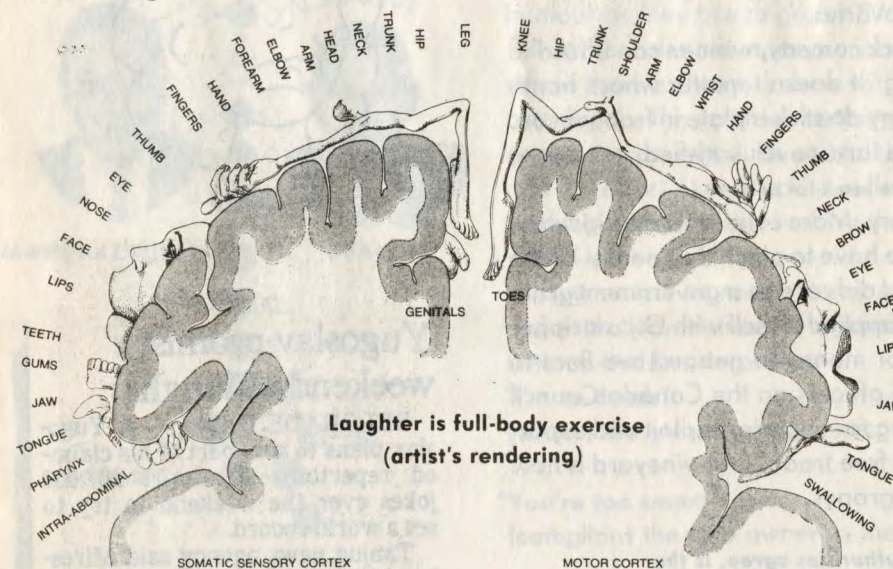


Illustration: Gail Gellner



HA HA HA

**WHAT'S SO FUNNY?** is still the question. Some of the worst comedians I've ever seen were the ones with highly developed theories on the mechanics of humour. Though comedy can be the most thoughtful and thought-provoking of art forms, it is not something you should have to think about. Unlike high arts, comedy does not allow for the luxury of ambiguity or obtuseness. The point must be obvious. Banality has no place to hide. The comedian risks presentation of clear and radical thoughts, that can, upon impact, excite laughter, a visceral response.



Because I have a brain in my head, and I use a small percentage of it, people are often shocked into considering me a thinker — you know — an intellectual. "She's too smart to be successful," says the *Vancouver Sun*. Takes brains that does — what an insult. Academics are always convinced that, if they appreciate the humour, less educated types certainly could not. The comments of a teen-aged busboy who actually took time to listen to a bit while working a convention banquet mean more than all the compliments of the hyper-groomed execucouples dirtying the dishes.



## FUSE BORED

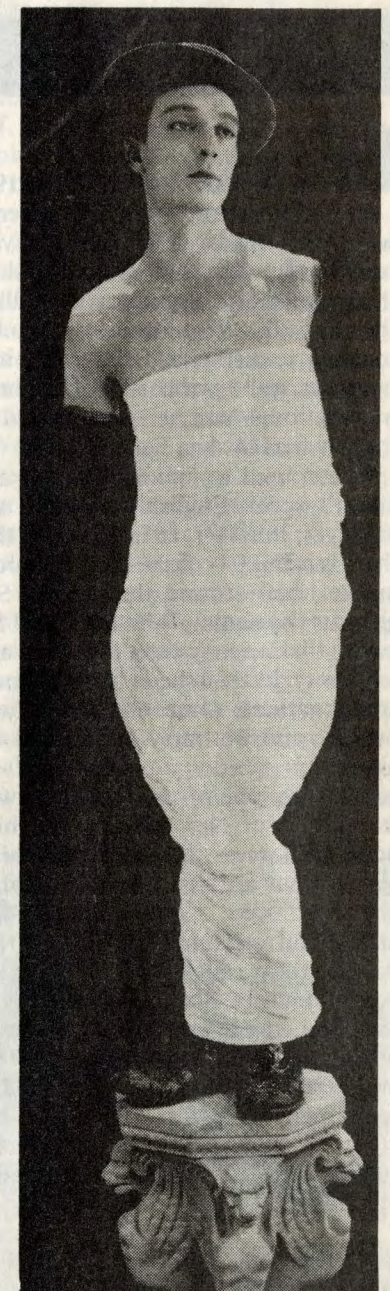
The tint-windowed *FUSE* limo was the scene of the editorial meeting where one of the big *FUSE* cheeses suggested to me that humour is the sugar coating for the bitter pill of real issues. "Right on the button, R.B.," I concurred obsequiously. That's the Mary Poppins medicine administration theory. It is true, that, if you get them really laughing, they'll swallow all kinds of unpleasant topics and incendiary ideas. Kind of like I'm the fire-breather and they're the fire-swallowers. Healing through cauterization...burnt offerings... voodoo... hoodoo...spontaneous cranial combustion! In any case, you can get across all class of matter that you never could in writing. Idiom and emphasis are



We are told that women are uncertain, coy and hard to please, but also they are practical and save the family's money. Women are simple and natural, yet mysterious... Changeable, yet set in their ways. ...If we only knew what to believe we might convert more millions of these difficult creatures to the use of Tampax for monthly sanitary protection.



HA HA HA



essential. Talking fast has the urgency that publishing deadlines can never meet. (And, let's face it — time is getting tight.)

This cheesy type also said how laffter leaves people helpless and they give up their power to the comedian who is, in turn, empowered. Sounds scary when you put it that way. Have I been overlooking a potential slave cult? You know — give up all your worldly goods to follow the way. Call and they will be picked up. Comedy is a weapon. And a defence. Forget Star Wars. Make everybody laff instead. They can use the Comedy Weapon to render senseless the imagined enemy. Need new jokes, though. That president joke is getting too old. As for the "enemy," how will they use humour on someone who's already as senseless as they come?

**THE UNRIVALLED COMIC VISION** of St. Buster Keaton was not clogged with monologues. His sixth sense was humour. So were the other five. People everywhere can taste flight with this angel of the sublime.

People everywhere laff at the sight of animals with clothes on. As an international language, pigs wearing tutus is far more successful than Esperanto.

You don't have to speak Spanish to appreciate the Mexican movie comedian, Cantinflas. He just acts so funny. It would help to be French, however, to appreciate the alleged appeal of Jerry Lewis. It's definitely some kind of *je ne sais quoi*, or as they say in French, *I don't know what*.

The ambition of every North American comedian is to make it on the coast. And it's true, my biggest thrill was working in Newfoundland where everybody's funny without even trying.

In many Indian nations, clowns were revered. In the guise of fools, they flouted the rules of behaviour and poked fun at the sacred.

You can't do that on network TV, where the rule of the talking head shows, no matter how pseudo-hep, is No Political Stuff. Can you think of one thing that isn't political? I can't buy candy in the U.S.A. without tasting the poor quality of the sugar and remembering that America considers cane sugar to be a Cuban commie plot better replaced with 'liquid cancer' substitutes. In Canada, maple syrup has been severely politicized by acid rain. It's okay for TV guys and gals to talk about their in-laws or their weddings, as long as they don't mention the miners in South Africa whose labour provides the gold and diamonds for the sparkling ball and chain man slips onto wife.

Inoffensiveness is the key to success. Standard advice, advice offered to me when I was starting out, is, "Compromise now. Later, you can do what you want." Compromising positions do pay, but they're awfully hard to get out of.

I work live. These words are dead. People say to me, all the time — okay maybe once — "I've heard so much about you, but I've never seen you perform." Good, let's keep it that way. Why wreck a good reputation with shows?

**YES** the bitter wormwood of unrequited fame burns my acid tongue. And another thing — no one understands me. I hope it makes you happy to know that it's just as you'd expect — the lonely comedian, sad as a black velvet Red Skelton oil painting of the big-eyed clown squirting a rhinestone tear. In fact, if it weren't for those rhinestone tears, I don't know how I'd survive. Everyday I cry up a few bracelets and earrings which are eagerly purchased by ballroom dancers and Marilyn Monroe impersonators. Sometimes strangers catch me crying. Even though they're really laughing, I like to throw them off by shrieking, "WHAT'S SO FUNNY?!" You know the answer.

**Watch for Sheila's upcoming cable TV show, *Cooking With Gin*.**



# NO LAUGHING MATTER

NOTES FROM THE MARGIN

**N**EW YORK, DECEMBER 1986

I am walking north along Fifth Avenue with two friends. A woman hurrying past in the opposite direction slips, there is an ominous crack as she falls to the sidewalk. We all move over to her to enquire whether she is all right; it is, however, quite evident from the large indentation where her tibia should be that she has broken her leg.

The injured woman is Hispanic and doesn't speak English very well; she manages, however, to let us know that there is a child — alone — in her room in the hotel around the corner. She gives us the name of the hotel and her key so that we may enter her room and tell the child that she is hurt. A small crowd gathers; someone calls the ambulance and we hurry off to find the hotel.

We enter one of the notorious welfare hotels of New York City which house welfare mothers and their children in what are essentially uninhabitable conditions. I am simultaneously afraid and ashamed of being afraid because the people I see around me are predominantly Black, and I am not used to being afraid around my own people. I locate the source of my fear in the atmosphere of suspicion and resentment I sense around me — the entirely expected result of circumstances that oppress and brutalize individuals.

Several floors up the decrepit elevator lets us out; we walk down the hall to the room — its number now escapes

me — open the door on to a large messy room. An infant — a baby girl no more than eighteen months is standing in her crib crying; she cries even harder when she sees three strangers — albeit caring strangers — approaching her. We are surprised: from the way her mother spoke, we had been expecting an older child and we now become even more anxious fearing that the ambulance may have come and gone. A quick look around reveals a sparsely furnished room, a table with a couple of boxes of corn flakes, two tins of evaporated milk, clothes and toys strewn all around the dull shabby carpet and, of course, the ubiquitous coloured television set.

We quickly bundle up the baby along with its bottle, close the door and return down the hall, where we run the gauntlet of hostile looks and questions: "What are you doing with that baby?" "Are you taking it into care?" My other two companions are white which in all likelihood increases the hostilities: "Where's the mother?" "Who are you people anyway?" I talk fast and explain that the baby's mother is lying on the sidewalk with a broken leg: "We're only taking the child to her."

We come out into the cold again. The ambulance has arrived and the mother is being transferred from the sidewalk to a stretcher. The ambulance attendants, however, will not take the baby; after much talking we manage to convince them that they have to —

there is no one to look after it, and we are from Canada!

No New Yorker we spoke to afterwards believed that we actually did what we did — got involved; entered a welfare hotel! And thinking about it after, it was probably unwise; the entire experience was, however, a chastening and disturbing example of what is rotten in the Big Apple.

**TORONTO, APRIL 1988** I blink my eyes in the harsh sunlight as I exit from the darkened cinema. I have just seen the film, *Colors*, and I feel at least two inches smaller: as a Black person I experience a sense of somehow being diminished — psychologically — by the film. *Colors* attempts and succeeds every so often in being less simplistic than the usual Hollywood action/crime film (this is probably not saying much), but it is also a film which unrelentingly, and no doubt to a point honestly, portrays one segment of the underclass of America — an underclass overwhelmingly Black and violent, disproportionately occupying prison spaces, and apparently beyond rehabilitation.

The film examines this segment of the American nation with an apparent clinical objectivity that is usually reserved for more "scientific" material: the audience could almost believe another species was the object of this examination. Nowhere does *Col-*

*ors* — ought it to? — attempt to link the phenomenon of gang warfare to what is grievously amiss in the kingdom of capitalism and free enterprise; this underclass, like the air we breathe — and even that can no longer be taken for granted — merely is.

As I watched the credits for the film roll up at the end of its allotted time, my thought was that if anyone wanted a gut understanding about why Jesse Jackson would never get the Democratic nomination, let alone come near the White House, they should see *Colors*. After the initial surprise at seeing so many Blacks on the screen, you become aware that these images, and this aspect of Black life are what white America is comfortable with. They may fear the Black rapist, mugger, thief or drug dealer, but they are also comfortable with the image, because it does not require them to shift their accustomed patterns of thought, or their systems of belief.

Welfare hotels; *Colors*; Jesse Jackson: where is the link in these three apparent disparate phenomena? Jackson is campaigning on a platform that would seek to change the very circumstances that have created welfare hotels and that underclass so ably depicted in *Colors*. However, as the film reveals, a powerful collective racism holds this underclass in place, not only by economic deprivation, but also by a public articulation of images which help to keep the home fires of racism smouldering if not burning. Jackson may talk, lecture and preach about the ills in American society until Oliver North tells the truth about the Contra arms deal and the cows come home, this fundamental collective racism is what

continues to shut Jackson out.

And what, if anything, does any of this have to do with humour? Humour has traditionally played a vital role in Black life in the New World. Laughing at 'massa', his habits and his way of life was a psychologically healthy way in which slaves diffused an intolerable situation.

In the Caribbean this humour found its way into the various musical art forms and, in my biased opinion, finds its highest form in the calypso where the humour may range from the broad, coarse and often sexual (read sexist as well) to the satiric, political commentaries of Black Stalin.

The United States produced Sambo, a powerful and persistent image of the Black man as buffoon and fool — repository and symbol of the American nation's racism. It was not that long ago either that the image was still being used to advertise a chain of pancake stores, and I recently witnessed a brief incarnation in the movie, *House on Carroll Street*, where a Black man with no connection to the story suddenly makes his appearance, rolling eyes, broad grin and all. Black women were also the objects of humour but they had been assigned other equally important roles like Mammys or Aunt Jemimahs.

From Sambo to Cosby — the most highly paid entertainer in the U.S.A. if not the world — seems almost a quantum leap; there has, however, been a long struggle represented here by a small sampling of names: Step'n Fetchit, Amos an' Andy, Dick Gregory, Redd Fox, Richard Pryor. Comics like Gregory, Pryor, Murphy and Cosby, aided by changing times have taken

their audiences well beyond the Sambo image of the Black person. Whoopi Goldberg has not only entered an arena traditionally reserved for men, but has imbued her humour with a biting and, at times, painful social consciousness. And it is more than unfortunate that Eddie Murphy plays on the homophobic, racist and sexist sentiments of his audiences. What can I say here but that it doesn't surprise me in the context of American society which produces a Michael Jackson who seeks to obliterate his racial origins by cosmetic surgery — autophobia run rampant. The flip side of the collective racism mentioned above is the creation of just this sort of self-hatred that Michael Jackson and Eddie Murphy exhibit.

If, however, I argue with myself, the Sambo image and its underlying reality can be erased from the media, if not from the psyche of the American people, is it not merely a matter of time therefore before images like those that proliferate in *Colors* are erased and Jackson, or another better packaged, 'more acceptable' Black man is able to enter the White House? *Anything* is possible in America, isn't it?

Wrong. Cosby and Murphy are, however well paid they may be, still entertainers: white Americans, and Canadians for that matter, do not mind being entertained by Blacks — that is but a continuation of a long tradition. We do it — the entertaining — with more dignity now, and Cosby is probably well-liked enough to run for President. But to be governed and led and represented by a Black male or female of the same species as appeared in *Colors* — that is no laughing matter. ■



Image: Newspaper ad for Colors





Photo: Courtesy of Jamelie Hassan

Detail from Jamelie Hassan's *Meeting Nasser*

## Identity & Resistance

### NATIONALISMS: WOMEN & THE STATE

JAMELIE HASSAN, BARBARA LOUNDER,  
LANI MAESTRO & MONA HATOUN  
A Space, Toronto  
April 2-23, 1988

by Margaret Christakos

WITH FREE TRADE at the front door, nationalism and indigenous culture have become timely themes. As an action against the deal, it might have been appropriate for the Toronto gallery A Space to program an invitational "position" exhibit, one which encouraged a lobby of self-addresses by local artists to Canada the "Other" squashed by a centrally placed, ineluctable U.S. Statehood. Art under this umbrella would likely limit a treatment of nationalism to the assumptions of Canadian-U.S. status quo, ones based on two male governments facing off. The resulting exhibit would have fallen squarely within North

American, "first world" borders, and more conservatively, patriarchal discourse.

Instead the exhibit was placed in feminist terms of the relationships at work between women and themes of nationhood, power, privilege and identity. This shift, which appropriately looked to the art of four women cultural producers, polarized the narrow field of Canadian nationalism. As a semantic, *Women & the State* emerged to address the unequally held aims, positions and histories of two conditions in conflict: marginality vs. might. This framework manages to transcend a localized politic, not by forgetting it, but by

enlarging the treatment of a rhetorical nationalism to address underlying issues of power.

Artists Jamelie Hassan, Barbara Lounder, Mona Hatoum and Lani Maestro all base their art on intersections of personal history and the social reality in which each finds herself positioned. Except for Lounder, all have had the experience of displacement from their country of origin. And each creates work as a counterstance to existing power differences based on class, race and gender. Hatoum is a Palestinian performance and installation artist exiled since 1975 in London, England. She describes her art as "a thorn in the side of a complacent Western audience." Ontario-born, Hassan's Egyptian ancestry has become a politicized site for work which reinterprets world events that shaped her identity as a child. Lounder also draws on her childhood experience of growing up on Canadian military bases, and being ordered into a hierarchy of authority which implicitly links the father parent to imperialist control. Maestro, a Filipina artist who grew up under the Marcos dictatorship, refers in her work to explicit militarism and its victims. Studying in Canada, she aligns these references with less bloody but equally violent symptoms of state oppression: a silenced class, a class that is brutalized, devalued, disposable.

The exhibit was prefaced by an evening panel presentation, chaired by Marlene Nourbese Philip, in which all the artists spoke about their ambivalence surrounding definitions of nationalism. From a feminist perspective, even the liberatory connotations of "third world" countries rising to challenge colonial rule were riddled with parentheses. Despite a progressive front for change within many nationalist movements, the experience of women has often been to face a double oppressor: first, an imperialist "first world" power, and second, the gender and class positions brandished as unifying identifiers within traditional cultures. Hatoum's statement on nationalism's problematic ended with the query, "Isn't the struggle of women and the working class always subordinated in the process of national formation?"

Western politics of exclusion, which establish class difference, animate the close identification of women's struggles with class-based marginality. Maestro aligned the slogan of silenced political prisoners with issues of women's voice: "Listen closely to what we are not allowed to say." These associations give the art in this exhibit a context that is acutely gender-specific. However, unlike much feminist art which has a fixed female body imagery, this work treats the political conditions of women vs. the State in social rather than explicitly sexual terms. To me,

this questions the privilege of many Western artists who treat issues of sexual politics and identity separately from issues of class and race.

ONCE ADDRESSED, this privilege can be seen as a gap. As an example, in Lani Maestro's work, representing the physical body suggests reclamation not of sexual identity, but of the more immediate struggle of marginalized peoples to become visible. Maestro takes as her subject the real conditions of torture and disappearance faced by political victims in her native Philippines. At the same time, her work's title *Poem Without A Country* refers to the stripping of identity and displacement from discourse endured by immigrants and refugees in a new land, for example, in Canada. This installation piece was originally shown as part of a group exhibit installed in a Montreal rooming house addressing themes of urban homelessness. Housed in a domestic context the work's material references to decor and comfort would have read with increased irony; here on the broad rear wall of A Space, *Poem* is somewhat neutralized, each of its five components reading more formally as related "sites." Four bedsheets, unfurled to varying degrees, are suspended in a classical arrange-

ment across the wall. The smooth central surface of each drapery bears a highly rendered painting of dismembered parts of a body. From left to right, the images accrete: a screaming mouth, larynx-deep; an arm severed above the elbow, its hand outstretched; an oversized, iconic ear; a tableau of staring eyes, many of them, in rows like a caricatured crowd but onerous, overly compact. The fifth component is a palimpsest block of script painted directly on the wall. From a distance its rectangular shade suggests a window, an exit, or a memorial stone engraved with the names of war dead. At closer range, the text announces a visceral reading for the work. Entitled *The Colonel*, this poem by American poet Carolyn Forché describes the sadistic pleasure of a Latin American official terrorizing his supper guests with ears cut from political victims. In contrast, the centrally placed image of the large, perfect ear asserts itself as an icon of Western painterly illusionism, inscribed by an art privilege which strips away the image's realer associations of bloodletting, class oppression and the State's power to silence dissidents. By combining the matrix of a colonial art education with explicit references to the violation of her country's sovereignty by colonial powers, Maestro's

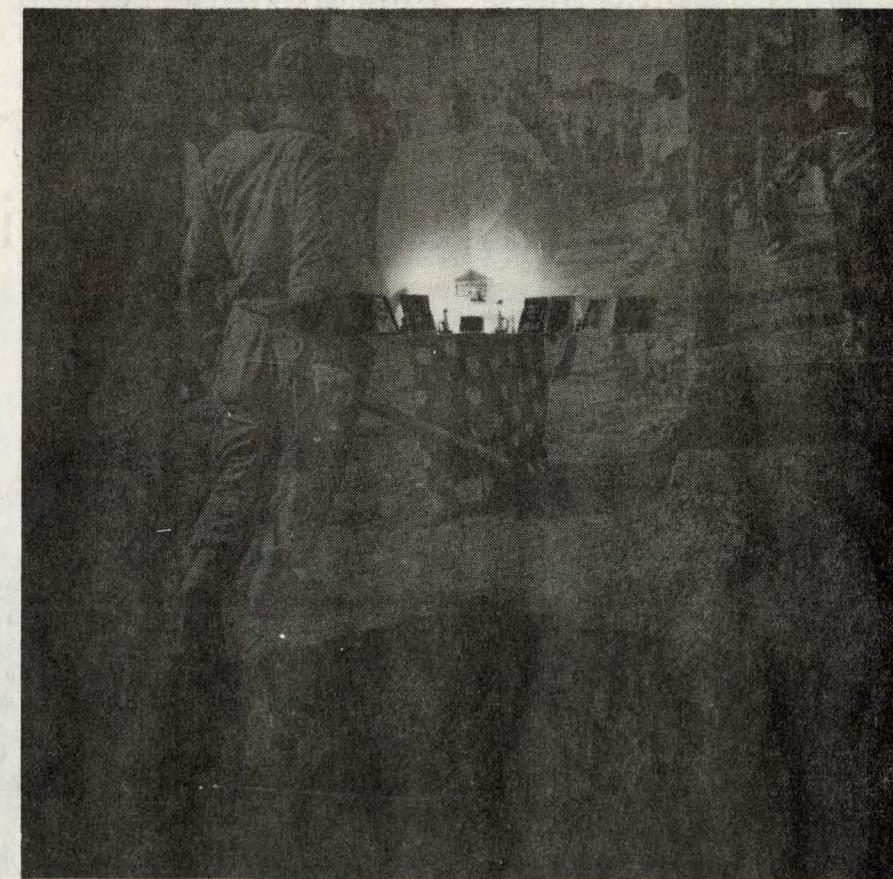


Photo: Peter MacCallum

Installation by Mona Hatoum: "My work is a thorn in the side of a complacent Western audience."



## EXHIBITION

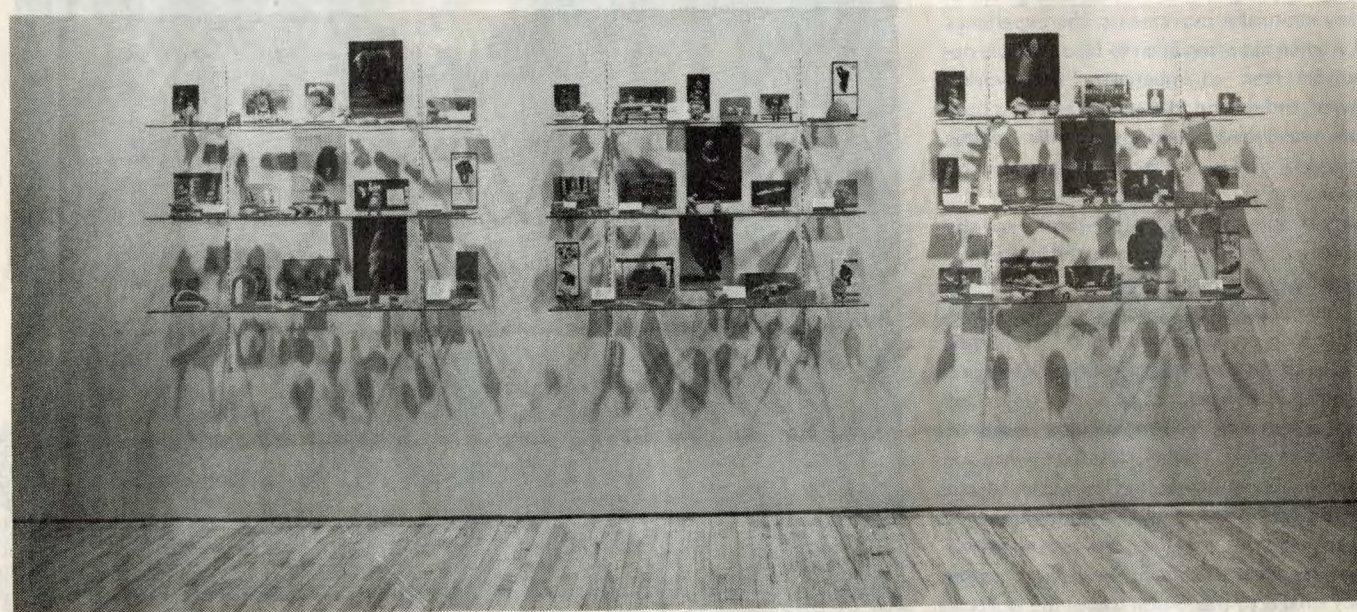
praxis in this piece is instructive. The formal distances separating each image from the next speak about cultural gaps of power between classes, and the invisibility of minority groups. In addition, her use of a borrowed "fictive" text to construct linkages between the images resurrects a voice for those who have been murdered. Silently read, the text operates for the viewer as a kind of political memory or conscience, without breaking the piece's vigil to a notion of silencing itself.

Like Maestro's, Jamelie Hassan's work reclaims a personal history in the terms of Western art discourse. Hassan's media-use is based in video technology and photographic representation. As a second generation Egyptian woman, she has focused her recent art on questions of national identity and female socialization. In her panel statement, she placed these issues "in the context of liberation movements of self-determination" where "issues of women become aligned and intertwined." Hassan's piece, *Meeting Nasser*, focuses on a photograph representing an encounter between the primary figure of Arab nationalism, President Nasser (1952-1970), and a young girl. Hassan appropriated the image from her family archives; in it, the child bears flowers, seeks approval. She enacts her culture's expectations of obedience to male power. Four additional photographic images flank this central one with the Presidential entourage, arranged symmetrically on the gallery wall. An historic image of the young Hassan, her hair tied in one long braid identical to the emissary girl's, overtly invests the artist's relationship to the other anonymous images. Positioned as a frontispiece, a video

monitor runs a tape of yet another young girl, proffering a bouquet and next, attempting to read aloud a required text. This poem, by Najib Mahfouz, describes a condition of adult memory reconstructing political innocence: "...my information about contemporary brutality remained based on the imagination until many years later the locked hearts were opened to me, explaining the mysterious events I failed to understand while they were taking place." The child in the tape fidgets, rambles, unable to make sense of the tract she has been given. Her attention, and in turn the viewer's, becomes fixed on the immediate means of her performance. She rejects her assigned relationship to the girl depicted in the photograph, and in turn to a political accountability as described by the flower-bearing child's veneration of Nasser. The sanctifying of State power is replaced by an ambivalence toward its representation, and in turn its belief structures. By existing outside of the language of the text she is to read, the small girl interrupts assumptions of the socializing process, standing instead at the threshold of that process's circumvention. Again, a feminist notion of change occurring at the seams of patriarchal discourse is active.

Barbara Louder is a Canadian artist whose work over the past several years has centred on her experiences growing up in a military family, and the disrupted State-controlled lifestyle of moving between bases in West Germany and Canada. Her piece in this exhibit deals only obliquely with concerns of militarism and power, stemming instead from the specific context of Churchill, Manitoba, the base where her family was posted during her

early childhood. At that time, Louder writes, she "perceived the armed forces as a benign if somewhat confining presence." Her memory of this period was imprinted more forcibly by the contrast between the large numbers of American and Canadian armed service personnel on the base, and Churchill's incursion on the area's Dene and Inuit populations. This piece, *The Eskimo Museum*, exacts the appropriation of traditional Inuit culture by first, Catholic missionaries, and next, the military machinery of a white State, without making further reference to the State's colonizing presence. In the title of her piece, Louder refers to an actual museum of Inuit culture in Churchill and, in so doing, treats the museum as an artifact of the region's military occupation. For the viewer, though, these important relationships are not explicitly described by the work. *Museum* consists of three sets of glass shelving units installed on a gallery wall. Positioned on the shelves are numerous red clay replications of traditional Inuit soapstone objects. Adjacent to Louder's facsimiles are their "blueprints" — photographs culled mainly from advertisements in art magazines representing the original work in already appropriated contexts. Alongside this juxtaposition, a series of quotes from Inuit artists are positioned like captions in archival/museum displays on miniature easels, bluntly contrasting the advertising imagery of this work to how it has been represented by its makers. The fetishized objects and texts in their clinical, expository arrangement assist in treating Louder's themes of mass production, institutionalized art, and the stripping of meaning from tradi-



Barbara Louder's *Eskimo Museum* documents white appropriation and mass production of Dene and Inuit cultures

Photo: Peter MacCallum

## EXHIBITION



View of exhibition at A Space showing works by Barbara Louder (left), Lani Maestro (rear wall) and Jamelie Hassan (right)

Photo: Peter MacCallum

tional objects by a consuming white society.

Of the four works, Hatoum's installation relates most directly to the themes of *Women & the State*. Conceived for the show and created on site, *In the Present as in the Past, a Thousand Bullets for a Stone* enacts Hatoum's practice of marshalling the political constants of her art performance/installation with overlays specific to the occasion of each work. Before arriving in Toronto, she established an initial imagery based on shrines erected by Palestinian women to consecrate victims of resistance. Once on site, Hatoum built a small room at the back of the gallery, isolating this piece in a solemn shrine-like aside, evoking a place of memory or possibly of strategic planning. The room was darkened, and a projector was positioned outside its entrance. A slide image of a newspaper photograph of a Palestinian woman demonstrator confronting a police officer is played on the room's inner corner. Its cast light directs the viewer's apprehension of the work, pointing into the room, skimming a rubble floor arrangement of small rocks and brightly focusing on the shrine's corner-shelf display of memento photographs. Dotted with its array of stones, representing the "weapons" used by Palestinian protesters, the floor becomes a war zone through which the viewer must manoeuvre. Each of the stones is tagged, numbered and dated, referring to both the military confiscation of "artillery" and the anonymous classifying of corpses in a morgue. At closer range, the shelf display of candlelit, clustered frames reveals additional docu-photos representing current Palestinian conditions. Texts layered on these photos are obfuscated by the projected image, forcing the viewer to step back, to refer to the

work's overview representation of a woman at explicit odds with State officials.

For each of the works exhibited, personal history plays a key role in defining wider themes of importance. However, the works themselves present a discursive face, one which resonates objectively outside personal referencing. Mona Hatoum's performance, presented in conjunction with the show, differs in that its political themes are vitally narrated by the emotional relationships that underlie them, always. *Mind the Gap* begins from the painful effect of Hatoum's own exile from her native Beirut and its result of ungrounding the personal identity that derives from the bonds of family. Visiting her parents in 1981, Hatoum taped an intensely private exchange with her mother in which the two speaking in Arabic discussed pleasure in sexuality, their relationship to father/husband, and their self-definition as Palestinian women. The frankness of the discussion produced a mother-daughter complicity which Hatoum represented through a dissolving slide sequence of her naked mother showering. The tape and images were saved intact for four years until Hatoum felt able to approach their emotionally risk-laden content. In its present form, the performance uses both as a filter through which a montage of political questions are mobilized.

A translucent vinyl screen patterned with flowers backdrops a series of vignette actions by Hatoum. Crouched before the audience she produces from a suitcase a miniaturized world of children's toys whose cultural readings are charged with male-organized stereotypes. Finally a tiny bucket of garish red polish is spilt deliberately into the centre of her paper dress. As a symbol of menstruation/

castration taboos which define femaleness as a series of absences, she scissors out the red mess, enacting upon herself cultural violences done to women. The gap she identifies links children's socialization to legion rites of denial. Then the room is darkened, lit only by the slide projections of her mother washing. The soundtrack is, faintly, a conversation in Arabic between two women; and overlaid, becoming fictive, Hatoum's accented English voice reading the letter she has constructed from her mother's admissions. This mother adores her absent daughter yet worries over the schisms of their lifestyles. She questions her traditional culture and the hegemony of marriage, aligning herself for at least this exchange within her daughter's transgressive discourse. It is at the threshold of this moment that women are clearly positioned in a margin, a gap, a potential.

WRITING THIS ARTICLE, I walk in Parkdale, Victoria Day upon me. My thoughts on *Women & the State* crystallize on the yellowing photograph of smiling Queen Victoria refrigerator-pasted in a local roti shop. The elderly West Indian couple who run this tiny business have survived their emigration and now, the grizzly economy of Toronto's poorer districts. It strikes me the shop's well-cooked smells are hard to take in under a star-crash of fireworks, so cold and narcissistic in the Victor(y)a night sky; that their origin can be no better than the display of flagrant military might and Canada's youngest-son inception into the great imperialist fraternity: "you're one of us now" (gun burst, ejaculate, drumroll). The definitions remain conveniently flexible. Canadians need their holiday. ■



# Straight Shots at Gay Targets

UN ZOO LA NUIT

JEAN-CLAUDE LAUZON  
Distributed by Cinemaplus

by Steven Maynard

I THOUGHT I was in for a real treat. It was said to be erotic. Friends told me that Marcel, the main character and working-class hero, was so cute. But even after a second viewing of *Un zoo la nuit*, the recent film by Quebecois director Jean-Claude Lauzon, I am unconvinced. Placed in its political context, the ways in which *Un zoo la nuit* makes use of gay male sexuality and the working-class still leave me very uneasy.

In the first scene Marcel is brutally raped in prison by another inmate. It is essential to make the distinction here that what is represented is not a kind of consensual S/M, but rape. Afterwards, Marcel is left crying on his cell floor. This rape scene is only the first to connect gay sex with violence. The next encounter takes place in a wash-room between Marcel (recently released from jail) and an undercover cop. In a stall, on his knees, the cop is just about to get into Marcel's pants when Marcel begins to bash the cop around, threatening to shoot him unless he says "Ahhh!" This was described in *Xtra*, one of Toronto's gay publications, as "brutal eroticism." But I would take issue, finding here not aggressive or rough sex made erotic, but gay sex used as a vehicle for the eroticization of violence.

To further complicate things, violence and gay sex are also tangled up with class. Seems Marcel and a buddy had been selling drugs supplied to them by the police. Now out of jail, Marcel is eager to break his connections with the cops but they want their money back and Marcel silenced. Here enters an element of class struggle. The story becomes one of the little working-class guy against the forces of authority and the state. And while our sympathies are drawn to Marcel, the way he sees out of this mess combines an exploitation of gay sex and extreme violence. Marcel's buddy has sex with the cop in order to trap him so that Marcel can put a half dozen bullets through him. The friend makes it perfectly



Still: Courtesy of Cinemaplus

Erotic or just brutal?

clear that sex with this man disgusts him and was done only out of necessity. On one level, getting rid of the cop represents Marcel's triumph over the authority that sought to destroy him. But the way in which this is accomplished entangles class and sex/uality in a particularly messy way. It further tightens the link between gay sex and violence. This violence is represented physically and sexually in the film by the fact that everyone is fucked; never does one man desire to fuck, or be fucked by, another man.

Other connections are made. Gay sex takes place only within a dark, working-class underworld of crime, drugs and prostitutes, serving to reinforce a mainstream heterosexual cliché of gay sexuality as a depraved life-

style. None of the working-class characters is gay. The only identifiably gay character is the cop, his closeted sexuality used to make him appear as a predatory queer, and to make him more objectionable in his role. The use of this particular gay cop also makes a curious identification of gay sexuality with the repressive authority of a corrupt state. When placed back into its class context, this link drives a wedge between the working-class (Marcel) and gay sexuality (the cop), presenting the two as mutually exclusive, as hostile enemies.

Sitting rather uncomfortably alongside all of this is the story of Marcel's reconciliation with his father. The closing scene which shows Marcel lying on a bed with his dead father, both of them nude, and the moments preced-

ing it when Marcel bathes his father are clearly homoerotic and in stark contrast to the film's other portrayal of homosexuality. In class terms, this scene seems to say something about the possibility of a non-violent same-sex relationship within the working class. But even this plot is only partially free of the violence which prevades the rest of the story. The only way in which Marcel and his father can come together, for example, is around hunting and, in the end, with the killing of an elephant. Here the focus is not so much sexuality, but a clear link between masculinity and one form of accepted male violence.

In one way Lauzon's use of gay male sexuality and the working-class merely adds intrigue or raciness to his film and here we have gay sex in the familiar role of spectacle, as a journey for mainstream audiences into what Marusia Bociurkiw calls "territories of the forbidden." But what are the political implications of this? Bociurkiw warns about the dangers of placing representations of lesbians and gay sexuality in a public setting marked by homophobic stereotypes and attitudes. To that I would add the anti-working-class sentiment and stereotypes held by most middle- and upper-class people. So rather than challenge or subvert dominant, heterosexual representations of gay sexuality and masculinity, *Un zoo la nuit* reinforces them. And the film's minor assertion of working-class power unfortunately gets lost in its stereotypes of violence in working-class life and the politically reactionary links drawn between class and sexuality. From this perspective, the fact that *Un zoo* won such wide recognition and praise from the mainstream (at both Cannes and the Genies) is not surprising.

It didn't have to be that way. Lauzon could have used many elements of his film — the black leather, the rough sex, prostitution, and the many shots of Marcel's jean-clad bum — to make a positive, erotic working-class statement. For that, I am still waiting.

\* M. Bociurkiw, "Territories of the Forbidden: Lesbian Culture, Sex and Censorship," *FUSE*, Volume 11, No. 5 (April 1988).

**Steven Maynard is a Kingston gay activist and a graduate student in Canadian gay history at Queen's University.**

# The Heart of a Difficult Place

THE WAY TO MY FATHER'S VILLAGE

RICHARD FUNG  
Distributed by DEC Films

by Cameron Bailey

THE TRAVELLER LIES, being in a position to do so. Arriving with more interest and education than the tourist, the traveller leaves bearing stories without connections, narratives in point form, lies. The stories she tells concern her uniqueness in the foreign land; they are structured by difference, hers and theirs — peculiarities of custom. The traveller constructs his memory of foreign places out of a collection of colourful quirks, which vary only in detail from the clichés he took 'abroad' with him. The traveller's work keeps us different from them.

But the pilgrim? The pilgrim is more complicated. Undertaking both a journey and a return, the pilgrim's stories resonate with the desire to unlock the power of one's past.

Richard Fung's 1987 journey to China was in some sense a pilgrimage, although that word may carry too much piety. Fung went, in part, to see the place his father, Eugene Fong, left decades ago for Trinidad. (Fong, whose name was changed to Fung by an immigration official, died in 1986.) The resulting videotape, *The Way to My Father's Village*, reveals Fung as both a traveller and a pilgrim. His previous work, *Orientalisms* and *Asian Characters*, dealt with representations of and for gay Asians. This latest work is a subjective documentary, by turns personal and distanced, that carries its self-reflexivity lightly.

The first of the tape's five parts, a straightforward, voice-over driven history of Fung's father, is dependent on the authority of the voice and the physical presence of documents (the camera pans across passports and birth certificates as if verifying them). "History and Memory," the second section, uses home movies shot in Trinidad, steel band music, and Fung's own voice-over in a more personal approach to his father. But it's always modulated by the ironic strategies that come to dominate later in the tape. Text on screen, for example, will complement the

voice-over by anticipating something that is about to be said, or might have been said: "he never hit us," or "he whistled between his teeth," or "he never taught us his language."

The third section, an interview with Fung's Jamaican relatives Tony and Dorothy, is prefaced with a quick reminder of the camera's presence, but is played naturalistically after that. Fung locates the interview's place and time, and gives both speakers time to tell their stories. In a sense he's creating another historical document here.

"Travel Logs," the fourth section, begins with the word "China" flashed on the screen in clichéd "Mandarin" lettering. This is where the irony begins. Over footage shot in China, Fung blends his own observations about the country with the often racist statements made by a long line of European imperialists, from Marco Polo to French semiotician Roland Barthes. Of China, Barthes concludes, "There

is nothing picturesque."

(In an evocative move, Fung matches the quotes from most of these figures with the hallmark of tourist footage, the travelling shot. Taken from a moving vehicle, but reversed in the process of framing so it appears that the landscape is moving, this sort of image usually serves to standardize a place, creating a "big picture" that eliminates details in a procession of images parading past a "fixed" observer — sort of a Ptolemaic perceptual shift, with all its accompanying ideological consequences.)

What Fung sees in China (or at least what he reports) are the curiosities. His observations could almost be Chris Marker's — like the French film essayist, his remembrances are personal in a literary sense, observations polished like gems and dropped before you not so much to admire as to contemplate. Despite being only two generations away from his father's village, Fung must reluctantly accept the

position of a foreign visitor, returned to find the country's poetry. "I take out my frustrations (at not fitting in, being taken for Japanese) on the other tourists," he says. "I try to keep them out of my shot. They spoil the purity of the image I'm trying to capture."

The last part of the tape is the shortest, and perhaps the most powerful. As we watch travelling shots of a cemetery in winter, we hear an actor playing Fung's mother as she telephones a relative. She needs the Chinese characters for her husband's tombstone, but she doesn't read Chinese. Calling to mind all the losses and the longings of an immigrant family — the spaces between here and "home," the secrets that each generation keeps from the other — this last section foregrounds the problematic of family in a brief, baldly poignant fashion.

Fung is a responsible artist. He maps out his strategies pretty clearly. But his real talent — in this example, or in the travelogue shots — is the way he can reach the heart of a difficult place in a few short strokes, and leave you there.

**Cameron Bailey writes for Cinema Canada and NOW Magazine, and co-hosts "Frameline" on CKLN-FM.**



Still: Courtesy DEC Films



# Women Centre Stage

## FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE MUSICIENNES INNOVATRICES

Montreal  
April 6-10, 1988

THIS FESTIVAL was the most ambitious women's music event ever undertaken in this country, and possibly in North America. Organized primarily by Wondeur Brass and Les Poules members Diane Labrosse, Danielle Roger and Joane Héту, under the auspices of their recently-formed production company Les Productions Super-Mémé Inc., the Festival brought together an impressive international array of alternative women musicians. While other women's festivals have slipped in the occasional experimental performer or band in a general programme of folk or pop-oriented music (e.g. Pauline Oliveros or Mat'Chum at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival), the Festival was the first of its kind in North America to feature women's alternative music exclusively. As such it was an im-

portant showcase for musicians who, as women, often find ourselves marginalized and ignored in the alternative music scene and who, as musicians, often find ourselves stylistically relegated to the margins of the women's music scene.

According to the introductory notes in the festival programme, the Festival was conceived as a one-shot event, designed to be a catalyst to launch women working in innovative music into the larger arena. "We believe these musicians have acquired enough identity to be appreciated outside of all-women events; that's the reason why the festival will only take place this year," the organizers write. While it's true that all of the performers featured in the Festival can and do take a place in the larger alternative scene,

there are many women who could benefit from participating in such an event for reasons of professional profile and contact with other alternative women musicians. I see a need for such an event, or at the very least a dialogue, to be ongoing.

by Susan Sturman

THE FESTIVAL CREATED a buzz of excitement in Montreal, with events held all over the city and in some of the major music venues. Overall, the production was sophisticated; the sometimes demanding requirements of sound (and light) for experimental music were well met at the concerts I attended. Artistically, the emphasis of the Festival was on a Montréal/New York/Europe axis, with a bit of Toronto intervention in the form of Lillian Allen and Fifth Column. Winnipeg's Diana McIntosh was the lone representative from Western Canada, a regrettable under-representation considering the number of alternative women musicians Vancouver alone has spawned, but perhaps not so surprising given the cultural impasse between Québec and the West.

There were two press conferences/discussions with some of the artists participating in the Festival. There was a general discussion about innovation in music, the commercial music industry versus alternative women



Photo: Mark Boudreau/Plessisgraphie

Marie Trudeau of Wondeur Brass takes five



Photo: Suzanne Girard/Plessisgraphie

### CANAILE is committed to radical experiments in music and feminism

musicians, the pertinence of women's musicians' festivals, and the impact of music on the society of the 1980s. As a musician, I would have welcomed more workshops and in-depth discussions throughout the Festival between women musicians, Festival participants and listeners, but to be fair, the organizers did an amazing job in pulling such a sophisticated, high quality event together with the acutely limited economic resources available to them.

Another more serious criticism is that so few women of colour participated, and when they did, it was generally within the tradition of European or white North American contemporary music. With the possible exception of Lillian Allen, there was no music featured which did not in some way emerge from this tradition. Why was there no participation from Black North American jazz musicians working in a tradition of improvisation stemming from African roots? Why no music by Latina women? It seemed that the organizers' definition of "innovative music" was largely limited to Western European musique actuelle, white American avant-rock and contemporary classical realms. While the organizers mention in the programme "all the Third World and Eastern European musicians that we have been unable to get in touch with

or even uncover, in spite of all our hunting," it seems they have missed women who would have been fairly easy to find if one were looking in the right places. Some further discussion about what constitutes "innovative music" and whether or not the pursuit of and praise for artistic innovation for its own sake is primarily a 20th century urban white Euro-American value, is in order. The canon of "innovation," is as culturally entrenched as any other. Many of the women participating in the Festival were linked stylistically to modern white mainstream traditions. In other words, what's "new"? And what cultural assumptions are behind the value judgement that "new" is inherently better? These are the kinds of questions white alternative women musicians need to ask ourselves; the kinds of racist exclusions we must be aware of if our music is to be a catalyst for change. More events of this kind, with an ongoing commitment to a wider cultural range of alternative women's music, and more dialogue, are essential.

ANOTHER QUESTION raised by the Festival was that of accessibility. There were a lot of performers working in the realm of "European art music." To penetrate it or to understand its references required some

understanding of European classical traditions and how the avant-garde emerged from these. This assumed musical knowledge on the part of the audience, and as it is generally only the middle and upper classes who have access or exposure to European "high culture," the accessibility of the music itself was limited. In contrast, those performers who used rock/pop or "roots" music as a point of departure had a broader base of access, because of the wider diffusion of that music to different classes and cultures.

To illustrate this point, Double X Project, a German trio consisting of Viola Kramer on electronic keyboards and voice, Gitta Schafer on tenor, baritone, alto and soprano saxophones, and Regina Pastuszyk on clarinet, sax, voice and keyboards, opened the Thursday night concert at Les Foufounes Électriques. The music, largely written by Kramer, featured her looping keyboard parts and swooping, screeching Meredith Monk-like vocalising punctuated by the staccato riffing of the two horn players. The pieces ranged from those with an angular contemporary classical feel to those with more Romantic or "new age" overtones. Some were reminiscent of Keith Jarrett's solo piano work with its soft cascading repetitions. The presenta-



tion was very formal, a little stiff, it was very much "serious music." It is obvious both from their musical references and their performance that the musicians in Double X Project come from a European classical background. Although experimental, the music was presented in chamber-music style, the players playing their individual parts and making little visual or verbal contact with the audience or each other. There were some lighter moments — the voice and clarinet interacting in a squawking duet, one piece which seemed like a take-off on a spy-movie theme — but overall the solemnity and remoteness made the group seem inaccessible and pretentious.

In contrast, the duo that followed, The Honeymoons, from Japan, gave a wonderfully dynamic, iconoclastic and humorous performance, one of the highlights of the festival. Tenko Ueno, on vocals, guitar, keyboard and drum machine, was a co-founder of Japanese womensband Polka Dot Fire Brigade. Her musical accomplice on bass, castanets, chair, keyboards and vocals, Kamura Atsuko, is also a member of Polka Dot Fire Brigade and works for the Kinniku-Bijo (Beautiful Women With Muscles) record label (on which The Honeymoons have a record). The duo performed a show on Thursday and Friday; one, a night of "rock songs" and the other, free improvisation. Thursday was the "rock song"



Sussan Deihim

Photo: Marik Boudreau/Plessisgraphie

night, though most of the pieces fit that description very loosely. The "songs" demonstrated an "outside" and witty view of the intersection of Japanese and American pop culture, occasionally colliding with elements of Japanese classical music. At one point Tenko played guitar with a cymbal, creating a sound like a samisen plugged into a fuzzbox.

Another piece featured Kamura playing percussion on a chair. Both women have incredibly powerful voices, which they often used in rhythmic counterpoint, screeching and wailing over the tremendously good-humoured din of cheesy drum-machine, frenetic bass, radio interference and clanging guitar. Their performance style was energetic and aggressive in the best punk tradition; as well, they also used makeup and costume — dressed as man and woman (a honeymoon couple?) — to add a theatrical element to the show. Using the conventions of American popular music, The Honeymoons' repertoire, while wild and strange, had a touchstone in a musical language that is widely accessible. It is no accident that the duo met with the most enthusiastic audience response of the night.

The same kind of contrast was evident in Friday night's Spectrum concert featuring pianist Margaret Leng Tan and the duo of Sussan Deihim and Richard Horowitz. Margaret Leng Tan is a classically trained pianist from Singapore who performs music by contemporary Asian composers working in the Western modern classical idiom. Highly technically accomplished, she played several pieces featuring prepared piano. In another piece she plucked the strings of the piano as if she were playing a Chinese gin (a kind of zither). Although some influences of traditional Asian



Margaret Leng Tang played the piano like a zither

Photo: Marik Boudreau/Plessisgraphie



Photo: Suzanne Girard/Plessisgraphie

Tenko Ueno at the intersection of Japanese and American pop culture

music were there, Leng Tan's performance was essentially a very elegant and very formal Western-style contemporary classical concert.

Deihim/Horowitz provided a more global-beat pop-oriented context. Sussan Deihim, of Iranian descent, has developed a unique hybrid of traditional Middle Eastern and avant-garde Western vocal techniques. Richard Horowitz, a New Yorker, studied traditional North African music and has also worked in the realm of jazz and new music. Sussan Deihim's amazingly powerful and passionate vocal instrument was in constant decibel-level competition with Horowitz's bank of thundering synths, her very human voice almost a challenge to them. There was a pop tinge to the rhythms and melodies, combined with a Middle Eastern and/or African feel — somewhat reminiscent of Byrnes/Eno's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, but stretched farther by Deihim's radical vocal acrobatics. The rhythmic pulse of the music reminded that the base of American popular music itself is essentially non-European.

ANOTHER HIGHLIGHT of the Festival was Canaille, which is not a band but the name of the International Women's Festival of Improvisation, a sporadic meeting of innovative British and European female musicians working in the realm of improvisation. The first Canaille

took place in Frankfurt in 1985. It developed out of the work of the Feminist Improvising Group (1979-81), a pool of players from Great Britain, Holland and Switzerland whose stylistic rock encompassed free jazz, performance art, women's music (Ova) and experimental rock (Henry Cow). The FIG/Canaille group included the English bassoonist/composer Lindsay Cooper, who is known for her participation in Henry Cow and a number of other avant-rock projects, as well as composing music for feminist filmmaker Sally Potter's *The Gold-diggers* and *Rags*. Other FIG/Canaille members were Irene Schweizer, Swiss pianist, drummer and founder of the European Women Improvising Group (EWIG); the English singer Maggie Nicols, who works with now-jazz singer Julie Tippetts; and Annemarie Roelofs, a Dutch trombonist and violinist. The group was not only committed to radical musical experimentation, but also to trying to articulate feminist aesthetics in music and to exploring ways of working together in a free and collaborative musical environment. They were later joined by a number of other women, including the French doublebass player Joëlle Léandre, and Swiss saxophonist Co Streiff. It was this group of women (minus Lindsay Cooper, unfortunately) that participated in the Montréal Canaille.

The ensuing concert at the Spectrum (which was a tragically short one, due to another scheduled show at the venue that night) was a passionate example of how these ideals can work to make exciting and committed music. Watching the interaction of the players in this totally improvisatory and yet democratic musical environment, their mutual respect and sense of solidarity was as obvious as the high level of musicianship. They communicated to the audience and to each other with imagination and a sense of humour. In addition to their musical commitment, it was also clear from Maggie Nicols' plea to the audience to help stop the recent anti-gay bill being launched in Britain that music is part of their daily life and struggle as feminists and political activists, not held apart on some rarefied artistic plane.

IN ALL, the Festival was an important event, as much for the questions it raised for women musicians working in an alternative context as for the many inspired performances it featured. Hopefully festivals of this kind and the dialogue initiated by them will continue and contribute to a continual widening of what constitutes women's music. ■

Susan Sturman is a Toronto musician, graphic artist and writer.



# Fork in the Road

## A STORY FOR NATIVE YOUTH

SLASH

JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG  
Published by Theytus Books  
Vancouver, 1985

by Lee Maracle

SLASH: Cutting a swath. A path. A burning scar. He comes to us gently, through a woman's tongue. This book was not written, it was spoken. Spoken to an audience that the author could see. It was told to a group of Native youth that would need something to hang on to. An historical beginning, a place from which to stand erect. Slash comes from that inevitable fork in the road that every Native youth faces.

Pedagogy for Native people has always focussed on the story that would help to sort out youthful confusion. No Native elder would ever rhetorically offend youthful vigor and intelligence by filling in the descriptive blanks or merely answering life's questions. The story, full of parables and analogous lessons cuts the swath that will help youth choose the path. Slash is a modern such story, written for our youth who sit at the fork of Native and white society.

Slash is rich with the kind of love Native people hold supreme — social love, spirit of community. The sparse romance between himself and Mardi, relegated to second place by the characters' commitments to their perception of "the struggle" is at once agonizing and electrifying. It is also beautifully typical. No Native person would immodestly parade their affection. Few Native people would put their personal desire ahead of their sense of community and loyalty to their convictions. Yet, we love, deeply. And we suffer, like Slash and Mardi, with great and modest dignity. No regrets, no forlorn backward lapses into romantic or nostalgic melancholy — just quiet, soft acceptance of an impossible love.

"I wonder what Mardi is doing..."

No one not washed by the sacred smoke of ceremonial fires will find it easy reading. Slash is immersed in the dogged rhythm of our ancients, full of poetic pause. Those submerged in urban culture will find it trying. I know. The dim memory of my great-grandmother rescued me from tearing out my hair when my urbanized impatience kept whispering — "Why stop talking now, hurry up get on with the story," and I realized — "Oh, my gawd, how very integrated you are, Lee."

I am influenced by the European notion that a good book is one that keeps the reader captivated from cover to cover. Slash has no such frenzied pace. It is not an attack on your stamina, an assault on your time. It is not a European piece of literature. It is Native literature from beginning to end. I read Slash and realized that the silence was as much a part of the story as were the words. I wept when a friend of mine asked me, "Where are the pauses in your own book, so full of oratory, yet so bereft of the silence that punctuates the stories of your ancestors and allows the hearer the time to reflect the truth unfolding?"

Slash touches the private inner place where the spirit resides. Slash was told by a Native woman, at once ancient and young. His life is re-counted with the campfire of our ceremonies in plain view. It is rich in traditional oral history and our "modern" dilemma. It is 250 pages of painful indecision at the fork in our road for which the final direction that Slash took was really simple. The choice Slash made should have been obvious from the beginning, but Native people, particularly youth, know that it is not obvious.

Slash is the story of urban madness seen from the eyes of a



Image: Signs, Brands, Marks

woman travelling across the polluted skies to view the concrete wreckage below, forced onto the pages through a man's mind. It is the story of natural peace and beauty that our ancient laws reflect. The reader is caught in the web of listening to the story and seeing the writer struggle with the telling of it. It is very much like being parachuted in the midst of the process of waving a blanket or beading your dance outfit. The woman who wrote this work wanted us to experience the life of Slash and the culture of the people that birthed him. There really is no other way to tell this story. It is the first truly Native novel, penned by a very Okanagan, Okanagan woman. ■

Lee Maracle is the Native author of *Bobbi Lee, I Am Woman*, and has participated in the production of two poetry tapes: *Poetry Is Not A Luxury*, and *Death of John Wayne*.

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** In FUSE Volume 11 Number 5 (April 1988), an interview with Native author Jeanette Armstrong was accompanied by a review of her 1985 novel, *Slash*. In this review, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias discusses *Slash* in the context of two genres: "Emergent literature" and "the Testimonial", saying "Slash falls somewhere between these two and is easier to take when read aloud." She writes that the book's main character "unfortunately... becomes another of the world's 'youngest elders' full of newly learned teachings and militant rhetoric."

Although it is unusual to run a second response in review form, FUSE is interested in providing space for the various opinions *Slash* has generated. (See letters section in this issue.)

# We Are Amused

## LESBIAN LAUGHTER & TRANSGRESSION

REFORM SCHOOL GIRLS

TOM DeSIMONE

Distributed by New World Video

by Jane Farrow

IT'S LATE Friday night, the bars closed hours ago. In the back room of a darkened duplex, a gang of short-haired, leather-jacketed girls lounge about on the bagged-out chesterfield and stained carpet. They are hooting, laughing and shaking their beer bottles at the TV screen flickering in the corner. At certain points their rowdy mimicking of the actors' words and movements completely drowns out the sound and image tracks. This is not a typically non-interactive audience. But, you ask, what could provoke such riotous laughter and racous deportment? *Reform School Girls* — a totally predictable tale of innocence and corruption which takes place inside a hot and horny lezzie pleasure reserve.

The Pridemore Juvenile Facilities are run by Warden Sutter, a prototypical SS icewoman replete with blonde hair, blue eyes, motorcycle boots and a riding crop. She is assisted by Edna, the depraved and lascivious head matron who salivates at the sight

of fresh, new inmates she can whip into shape. Inside the dorm, Charlie (Wendy O. Williams) presides over a tantalizing array of body-beautiful delinquents clad (barely) in leather g-strings, belts, boots, bikinis and bras. Charlie is in cahoots with Sutter and Edna, and is disliked by one faction of girls (largely Black and Latino) — "there ain't a lot of fish who fuck with Chuck." Enter Jennifer, a "good" kid who drew three years for her part as the driver in a small time B & E her hot-headed boyfriend bungled when he shot a security guard. Jenn and Chuck lock horns instantly and the feature-length prison riot showdown ensues.

*Reform School Girls* contains the standard overwrought porno camera work — lots of low and high angles accentuating power differences in addition to a glued on loyalty to curves and crotches. Long steamy shower scenes are followed by assorted erotic dorm rumbles and/or the requisite S & M inquisition sessions with Sutter, Edna and Char-

lie. There's not a lot more to the film, or if there is, it's not worth writing about. The point here is what's happening in the audience, not the text.

Made in 1986, *Reform School Girls* is soft-core teen trash — politicized lesbians don't exactly figure in the target market. More to the point, none of us would have gone near this thing a couple of years ago — but 1988 is different. Despite the predations of a reactionary, gynophobic culture (of the bacterial variety), a few spaces exist, however big and/or small, where we may "safely" view these images ... and laugh.

Our laughter at *Reform School Girls* is ritualized transgression. The film must be watched with a few veterans who, having seen it more than once, have overcome their initial pangs of ambivalence — after all, these images of the neanderthal diesel dykes are the same heterosexist propaganda that kept us in the closet in the first place. This reluctance, however, gives way to a defiant,

disrespectful laughter which defuses and disempowers the text. Denied its weapons of heterosexual fear and hatred, *Reform School Girls* merely falls in on itself and serves only as further evidence of the myopic, sexual vapidness of the status quo. It reinforces the rightness of our escape from their cloying, stunted morality.

Therefore, "lesbian laughter" as such is not a type of specific sense of humour but an implicitly political process. Its "lesbianism" derives from the realm of experience and not, for instance, a perceived familiarity or sympathy on behalf of a heterosexual viewer. Edna, for example, cannot be as horrifying and/or hilarious for the viewer who has never experienced the personal terror of closeted lesbian desire — "oh my god, if I like Shirley that means I have to start wearing plaid shirts." This laughter does not constitute a direct attack on the structures that create and enforce ours, although it can foster the internal collective strength required to address those impediments on a day to day basis. It bites back. And thus, in controlling the text, desecrating its significance and ultimately using it against those determinants of our oppression, lesbian laughter transgresses both the form and content of the likes of *Reform School Girls*. We are immune. And amused. ■

Jane Farrow is a video producer, member of GIRLCO and studies social anthropology at the University of Toronto.



Still: Courtesy of New World Video

"Your friend is a local scum-sucker around here!"



# Depth of Field

## SUPER 8: MOVING IMAGE AS ART

Pitt International Galleries, Vancouver  
February 5-12, 1988  
A Space, Toronto  
March 16-26, 1988

by Randi Spires

SUPER 8 FILM is no longer the medium of choice of the backyard and barbecue set. Today, home video has that dubious honour. But super 8 film is still relatively inexpensive, extremely portable and, if need be, can be edited cheaply on one's kitchen table. Therefore, it is still the medium of choice of many a cash-strapped artisan. *Super 8: Moving Image As Art* was not so much created as organized by Zoe Lambert of the Pitt International Galleries in Vancouver with help from others such as John Porter and Jonathan Pollard in Toronto, Claude Ouellet in Montreal and Jurgen Bruning in Berlin. What they looked for was work with a progressive political bent, however slight that tilt might be. The result is an eclectic mix that reveals some of the strengths and pitfalls of the medium.

Among the strongest works were a number of relatively straight forward documentaries. *Boarding House* by Dot Tuer of Toronto takes viewers on a tour of a rather dreary urban dwelling while a voice-over informs them of the appalling conditions in which ex-psychiatric patients are forced to live. A twist at the end awakens watchers to the realization that many of these people are neither unintelligent nor hopelessly ill. One has to conclude that anyone forced to contend with such conditions would likely become depressed as a result. How much harder it must be for those already emotionally damaged to regain their spirits in such surroundings.

*Boarding House* depicts an angry individual resistance. In contrast, *Spray It Loud* by Claude Ouellet is a joyous celebration of racous rebellion. The film jumps from one bit of urban graffiti to another showcasing such nuggets as "If Voting Could Change the System, It Would Be Illegal" and "Free The Five Billion." A better term than graffiti for such work is street poetry or poetry of

(above) Bruce LA  
Bruce's film *Boy/Girl*

(right) John Porter's  
film *Hamilton Homes*



Still: Jonathan Pollard



Still: Jonathan Pollard

resistance. Since the sites of such insights are often ephemeral, quickly demolished or painted over by the authorities, films such as this play an important part in both preserving and celebrating such work. The soundtrack, on cassette, is provided by Montreal street musician Windi Earthworm who has the vocal resonance of a politicized, male Carole Pope.

The spirit of the Yuppies lives on according to Peter Sandmark, Patricia Kearns and Claude Ouellet. Their film, *Over Our Dead Bodies*, documents both the celebratory and the serious sides of a number of demonstrations at the Montreal Stock Exchange and several subway platforms. These were organized as part of a series of international actions called "No Business As Usual" announced by the Yuppies in 1985. They were meant to draw attention to the link between business and the arms race.

The Montrealers carried out a number of die-ins at the above locations during rush hour. *Over Our Dead Bodies* shows, among other things, disgruntled commuters stepping over and willfully ignoring their human obstacles. Commentary, on cassette, provides its own ironies. One young man mentions how he enjoyed the disorganization of the event (fine for certain types of political action; not recommended for brain surgery), while a woman participant speaks of the thrill of having

dozens of people step over her.

The final image is both playful and poignant: a supine business-suited male figure wearing a skeleton mask slowly lifts his head up and peers into the camera as if to say Halloween or Holocaust — that is the question.

If nothing else, Vancouverite Natasha Moric's films exude exuberance. One feels she and her friends had a wonderful grand time putting them together. But for the audience much of her work has a disappointing slapdash feel. An exception, and an indication of just how much potential Moric has, is *Old Country*. To the sound of a Ukrainian Diva singing a splendid traditional song (with all the constraints implied by that tradition), a group of old country peasants (hilarious in flea-market approximations of east European costume) suffer under the yoke of a leather-clad overseer, escape to the new country and gradually assimilate. Here, assimilation is shown to be a deceptively pleasant process. By the final tableau the women have discarded the old ways, and discovered a measure of sexual freedom but at the price of being a part of the culture of Gumby and Visa.

Zoe Lambert's film *Masturbation* is a simple demonstration of autonomous female sexuality. Since one of the main organizing principles of all patriarchal societies, including our own, is the suppression and control of female desire, such activity is extremely threatening. This is the

site at which the personal becomes a literal embodiment of the political. This connection has long been recognized, at least subconsciously, by those in power. *Masturbation* juxtaposes the images and sounds of a woman fulfilling herself with some humourously harrowing quotes about female sexuality from a number of medical 'authorities.' The result is both liberating and a forewarning. Most of the quotes are decades old but with an AIDS fuelled anti-sex and anti-feminist backlash, we could well be hearing similar pronouncements from those currently in power, albeit in more sophisticated forms.

*Boy/Girl* by Toronto's Bruce LA Bruce looks at, among other things, the way media socializes people into boy roles and girl roles. Television is especially effective because of its frequent use of close-ups and point of view shots. Through these, the viewer is sutured into the production and encouraged to think and act in the limited ways presented by the medium. LA Bruce reverses this process, suturing Mary Tyler Moore (in a nun's habit, no less) into his movie. The results are quite funny. But beyond these laughs lies a serious notion — that by subconsciously suturing media images into our minds we are thereby internalizing their limitations and values. Humour often masks this process. Like the proverbial spoonful of sugar which helps the medicine go down, these belly laughs sweeten the sometimes bitter, often constricting, process of gender development.

The above are a few examples of the better films presented in this series. Some of the other work seemed more concerned with the formal aspects of filmmaking, such as the relationship between images and sound. One of the Berlin films consisted of a series of images repeated three times — each accompanied by a different sound track. Others had moments of great visual beauty but left these images adrift in a sea of private interconnections which had little meaning for the public. Perhaps as super 8 becomes more expensive filmmakers will be forced to plan out their productions more carefully. In the meantime, some of the best work is very good indeed.

**Randi Spires is a Toronto freelance writer. She is host of "Cinescope," weekly on CIUT 89.5FM.**

# Facing Contradictions

## HEROINE

GAIL SCOTT

Published by the Coach House Press

by Karen Herland

THIS BOOK comes from the personal and political debates of the 70s in Montreal. Before Gail Scott can enter the 80s, she feels she must write her way free of what she's leaving behind.

Scott's heroine is an anglophone in Quebec while the Parti Quebecois produces Bill 101 as a public commitment to French language and culture. She relates better to the franco-phone left but what about her accent?

She needs reassurance from her lover, but he's determined to have a personal freedom that matches his political ideals. She also identifies with an emerging women's movement but they have questions about her commitment.

This heroine agrees with the need for a unified front to liberate the workers, but the homeless, without a union hall in the parks and doorways they occupy, keep shuffling past her window.

Meanwhile, the 80s seem to be moving in quickly, looking sleek in appropriated 50s style, but reality keeps seeping through the veneer. It's enough to paralyze a heroine, make her want to duck and cover.

Scott's heroine sits in her bathtub staring at the cracked tiles in the Waikiki Tourist Rooms, just off the Main, tracing and retracing her steps through the Plateau Mont Royal over the last decade. She wanders in her thoughts from her arrival in the big city, through the course of her involvements with an ultra-left group and a man, to her decision to recreate herself by writing her story.

*Heroine* is the result. Scott writes of one woman's experience of the 70s as honestly as possible. Instead of trying to sort out what is crucial, from what is interesting, from what might have happened, from what was, *Heroine* becomes a single novel with multiple beginnings and endings.

LANGUAGE POLITICS mean that the heroine examines each syllable with the conviction

that no person be effaced. Layers of words cover the cafes and houses she stops in, the graffiti she sees on the way and the images of the city and people that remain in her mind.

The heroine realizes that memories have a way of shifting, sounding different if remembered in conjunction with another event, or something just heard on the radio. Each shift requires a retelling of the same story, because the difference might capture something that was missing the first time.

What emerges is a collage of images and impressions that turn and return, illuminating each other as the heroine's story unravels. Scott manages to spin a tale whose order is only evident when the novel is finished. Each event is coloured by a context that more traditional novels tend to ignore, the faces passing by windows, the heroine's own insecurities; what she did say juxtaposed against what she wanted to say, or should have said.

Scott manages to underline conflicts simply by mentioning them. Life rarely works out the way we want it to, even less often the way it does in books. But books rarely work out the way life does, where distractions and indecision often get in the way of a perfect whole. In *Heroine*, what happens in the margins become as important as the central story.

The heroine isn't trying to prioritize the events in her life. She records times and places,

and considers the people who left her, and the ones she had to leave. She runs over and over her memories, hoping to find a reason or fix a moment. Yet, the longer she waits, expecting the story to somehow fall in place, the more it slips away, as outside, the city and situation continue to change.

MAIS, plus ca change...

Couples made up of not quite new men and almost liberated women are replaced by slick young lesbians in matching leather jackets, who move like they own the world but are not always ready to publicly indicate their attachment to each other.

Friends who were ready to devote their lives to the struggle, decide that it is so self-defeating for women to continue to live for others. So, they spend 15 hours a day in the studio instead, devoting their lives to creative government projects labelled art.

Even now, after the book's second printing and nearly a decade after Bill 101, the signs indicate that the city still has not resolved its contradictions. The graffiti that reads "We Are A Sign That Isn't Read" is answered by "Commencez Par Ecrire En Francais...Ensuite Nous Vous Lireons!!!"

Although the heroine's story is particular to a time and place, by allowing the cracks to show, Scott extends the themes. The tensions between men and women in the left, between the personal and political, between vision and reality and around colour, class and culture are relevant to most readers who examine the contradictions in their lives.

Scott's narrator has chosen to face those contradictions head on and acknowledge them. Her title of heroine is well-earned.

**Karen Herland is a Montreal writer.**

"...a collage of images and impressions that turn and return, illuminating each other as the heroine's story unravels."

Cover Image: Courtesy of Coach House Press



# TOKEN & TABOO

ACADEMIA VS NATIVE ART

by Alfred Young Man

**N**ative art with its antecedent and contemporary practitioners is a relative newcomer to the field of written, theoretical Western art history which has been at its logical development and growth for well over 200 years. The nine arts of Western civilization — architecture, dance, drama, fiction, music, painting, poetry, sculpture and cinema — are each approached by critics, teachers, artists and scholars as individual disciplines which each have as their *raison d'être* the self-evident high ideals and aspiration to greatness of Western civilization. Any culturally different disciplines such as those found in Native studies, and more particularly North American Indian art, which fall "outside" these sacrosanct parameters are immediately questioned and held up to the irreverent mirrors of justification and obfuscation leading one to the conclusion of either assimilation or Otherness. Either choice effectively eliminates serious consideration of one of the most unanswerable questions of our time. What is to be the ultimate conclusion of the last four hundred years of verbal debate and cultural interaction between the Euro-Americans and the Original Peoples of North America? To whom does North American Indian history rightfully belong? To those American

Indians who have made this their homeland for more than 25,000 years or that gaggle of complacent scholars and experts who can't seem to agree on the shape of Reality from one year to the next except to maintain decorum? Undoubtedly several decades from now the elusive answer to this question will startle us with an unexpected conclusion.

A majority of students of the assimilation/Otherness school of thought who enroll in the second-year university level courses in Native art history or Native art-studio are for the most part ill-prepared to undertake the curriculum. Interest alone is not an argument for preparedness. The Alberta government and its systems of education are perhaps unwilling, certainly lethargic, soporific, disinterested, apathetic, uneducated, or simply undereducated, and seemingly unable to appreciate the value of Native art and its relevancy to contemporary society. Those few enlightened individuals, a few students amongst them, who show an understanding and appreciation of the big picture of Native arts homology are simultaneously amazed at the naiveté of Western society and awed by the power and phenomenological capacity of Native art to overcome, survive, and even proliferate in what has been described as virtually the most

negative of all possible environments. As a consequence the Native art professor's job is to decipher for his students abysmal historical politics and, when he falters in demonstrating absolute competence, to suffer limitless blame.

There are still no good texts on the subject. Material must be gathered from a wide variety of sources. Students are quite easily let-off-the-hook in a student/professor dispute and have the advantage, if they happen to be white, and the art professor is an Indian, of having the Caucasian administration take their side in a world where academic freedom vis-à-vis Native art, is taken about as seriously as last year's broken political promises. The discipline is a minefield of naive dissent and Philistinism. Money is the bottom line here, contrary to the universities' philosophical liberal arts policy. Students need not worry about having to learn anything of real consequence because the administration will see to it that "Native art" will be taught as they see fit (whatever that is); and self-realization, the kind that free-thinking, free-spirited artists/teachers are supposed to engender and inspire in students, is just a memory of a recent by-gone era of good will within the university system.

"Western history" is the One, real,

indisputable metaphysical element of our existence which we know as absolute. Linear time, thinking, will and shall prevail, marching us into the oblivion of the future. The idea that "no one can teach art" is not even entertained.

Nowhere in the phantasmagorical retinue of the Western world's art history is there the slightest clue as to the very personalized Native histories of which Indian art is a product. Contemporary problems and arguments are rarely, if ever, discussed. Indian art is non-existent to "mainstream" art politics, anywhere. Students taught and tested for the first time on Native art history, using the linear-time format, have not proven they have learned anything at all of the full three-, or even four-dimensional nature of Native metaphysics. They can only expiate the one. The linear. The Westernized concepts of aseity. One-dimensional man. All feeling, emotion, imagination, dreams, self-knowledge, and wisdom are expurgated in the name of the grandiose theme (*Western civilization*) which has given us a world of good guys vs. bay guys, communism vs. capitalism, cowboys vs. Indians, good vs. evil, black vs. white. The subtlety of distinctions becomes blur-

red and buried in the egomania of power politics and self-aggrandizement.

The polarity of consciousness has created a student of art who does not discriminate easily between right and wrong, believes rules and laws are made to be circumvented or broken, morally upright behaviour is an abberation of the mind and believes cheating (if you don't get caught) is a socially acceptable way to get through university.

Attention to quality work is at an all-time low. Respect for the Native American professor seems to be a type of behaviour not evinced if you are white, according to some students. The high moral ideals and aspiration to greatness of the North American Indian civilization are next to impossible to teach under such circumstances. *Nice guys finish last* is an epitaph indelibly etched on impressionable minds. The subtlety of persuasion needed and utilized by the professor to teach Native art at the second-year level is superseded by an administration who favours a style of edification and knowledge which at its most profound level reflects the comprehension and politics of a ten-year old child. It takes an "adult" to understand art. James

Baldwin, the famous great black novelist, said there are very few "adults" in this world. There may be fewer still in the art world. It would not be stretching credulity by much to say that graduates of most, if not all universities in North America and Europe still harbor a child's awareness and feelings on the subject of Native art and metaphysics, if they have an awareness at all. Insight and brain tissue atrophies shortly after learning in primary school about the "discovery" of America by Columbus.

Native Americans and their Otherness, it is thought, can quite comfortably be interpreted and experienced through the gendarmes of social science and archaeology who in turn re-create the native world according to Boas, Malinowski, Leakey, Darwin, Marx, Freud, or whatever scholastic culture hero is in vogue at the moment.

The assumption that mankind has a common lineage, heritage and destiny is more often than not changed, or at least attenuated, by the very way in which the alleged occurrence has been interpreted. This anomaly is in turn re-phrased and re-structured to give us yet another event which must be re-interpreted with no common meeting ground between cultures.

**W**ho has the cultural and scholarly integrity to understand Gerald McMaster's *Only Buffalos Call Buffalos*? This painting makes an interesting statement just as an extremely cautious interpolation of history. McMaster demonstrates that the objets-d'art-existentialism, which came into Being from out of the void, needs the absolutely necessary intellectually didactic ingredients of wisdom, understanding, patience and respect of his Native Cree culture in order to convert primary Western-nonbelief into metaphysically acceptable objective reality. He treads dangerous grounds leaving the skeptic all too likely to use coincidence as the unwilling handmaiden to explain any bad luck which might accrue due to his disregard for taboo. Nevertheless, coincidence must at some point be suspect. The all-perfect Western world-view must finally admit blindness to ultimate Reality. The strange ways of the mysterious Universe will prevail.



*Only Buffalos Call Buffalos,*  
painting by  
Gerald McMaster



Norval Morriseau has shown the world the Power of Ojibwe philosophy, religion, faith, hope, glory all in the face of taboos by his Elders and disbelief by the public at large. Must anything which is taboo merely be regarded as superstition then?

Perhaps the Native American's knowledge of the afterlife, the aether, should now be publically discussed, perhaps not. To refrain from such discussion implies vacuity. More and more there are those Native artists who are exploring the subject as only they can. There are still those Elders who caution against this temerarious behaviour. In some ways their wishes must be respected if only because the educational systems as they now exist simply cannot handle such an enormous responsibility as an everyday occurrence, nor would it wish to even if it could. There is simply too great a distance between cultures, elements of philosophical discourse and pride on either side. It is highly doubtful the majority of citizens of the mainstream Western art world will ever come to fully understand Native values and beliefs. Aboriginal peoples from other continents and countries such as Australia, Africa, Norway, India and South America are more likely to intuit the principles behind Indian art.

Only *Buffalos Call Buffalos* can all too easily be reduced by scientific theoreticians into meaningless, mindless schizophrenia which has repeatedly been the treatment afforded such imagery in the past (and present) without taking into consideration the real life experience of the artist/creator. After all, how interesting would Paul Gauguin's work be if his life history was unknown? Such pyrrhonism reflects more on the inability of the skeptic to internalize and accept different realities than on the nature of human existence. Indifference confirms irresponsibility. The trench between the cultures only widens with each misunderstanding. (Arts Canada's *Stones, Bones and Skin: Ritual and Shamanic Art* is anthropology wrapped up in an art book cover and is a rare attempt by the Western world to come to grips with a complex subject in this way.)

McMaster is acutely aware of the responsibilities of the artist and Native spiritual leader to society. He indicates a strong desire to bring about a clear

and direct understanding between the world art community and his art. His quest for substance bridges the gap between the Native art of the 1980s and male Native artists of the late 1800s who created, or rather didn't create, much art when decades of government policy of both Canada and the United States (1874-1951) mandated all Native cultures be suppressed and destroyed. It became taboo to create Indian art. Over 70 years of enforced assimilation and acculturation are addressed here as the "victim" of the Western ego. The Native male's rightful role, place, in society is extolled as positive and therefore unquestionable after a century of emasculation by the inventors of America. The Native male preserve is seen as the sacrificial lamb of Western society's sins and McMaster demands restoration through taboo imagery and spiritual power. The Western world's taboo of Native art returns to haunt it. Superstition reigns supreme even in rational 20th century North America.

McMaster's Native male as sacrifice is an unusual statement. The male sacrificed on the altar of Western civilized knowledge. And all for what purpose? This strange behaviour which continues even as discussion progresses still assaults and mystifies the intellectual sensibility of the sagacious, the aware, the knowledgeable, the wise.

In a truly enigmatic way *Only Buffalos Call Buffalos* reflects the ultimate truth of our precarious existence in today's world of power-broker politicians, theoretical science, money-dominated religions, and movie star pop-mythology: a world where people have been cruising the vacuum of outer-space for two decades but still have yet to bring home a photograph of the stars taken from their multi-billion dollar space ships, and have it published in the glossy magazines which are hawked on the newsstands of the world. Perhaps it is up to the artist alone to divine and meet the Universe's mysterious rhythms.

**G**iven the profound nature of human existence, is it any wonder Indian art's place in the post-secondary curriculum structure is both deceptive and problematical? With Western society reducing every element of human existence to the smallest, most isolated

constituent of reality, leaving no room for either error or individualized self-realization, the uniqueness of Native art could be regarded as a threat to the safe, well-guarded, structured environment of contemporary social and philosophical discourse. Students cannot be allowed, nor ultimately taught, to experience the Native perspective. Every gain made is a gain made against incredible odds.

The Native perspective, if it is understood at all, is perceived as much too radical and unmanageable, or of little or no value. Therefore, it is thought of as no good for the young mind which must be programmed with information so that the institution graduates a citizen who is able to "function" in the correct ideology of the dominant world view: one who casts the correct vote for the right man or party, sings the proper national anthem, believes in the one true theology of religion or style of politics, gives to the right ministry of God, stands behind the leader of the country most righteous in its goals and aspirations, salutes the right flag, and defends abstract ideals of no conceivable absolute universal value or consequence except those of allegiance to his immediate egocentric existence. This student, with no original ideas to speak of, is sent out into the world four years later wondering what his years at university taught him.

Those students who were able to somehow meet and fathom the nature of the complex world of Native art feel immeasurably enriched by their experience. Those who had no imagination, steadfastly refused, or were simply powerless to acknowledge its unique existence, in spite of mountains of documentary and physical evidence to the contrary, turn hostile and unfriendly (if they were friendly to begin with) unable to comprehend that they are victims of Western man's ego. They are blind to the fact that they are living on a continent which will inexorably reshape, reform, and return the stuff of North America's historical existence back upon itself, espousing new undreamed of definitions for culture and society as has happened for thousands and thousands of years. ■

**Alfred Young Man is a Cree artist and a professor of Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta.**

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*Only Buffalos* too easily be reduced to theoreticians into less schizophrenic imagery in the without taking in real life experience. After a while Paul Gauguin's history was unknown. Ism reflects more skepticism to internal realities than human existence. Indifference confirms irresponsibility. The trench between the cultures only widens with each misunderstanding. (Arts Canada's *Stones, Bones and Skin: Ritual and Shamanic Art* is anthropology wrapped up in an art book cover and is a rare attempt by the Western world to come to grips with a complex subject in this way.)

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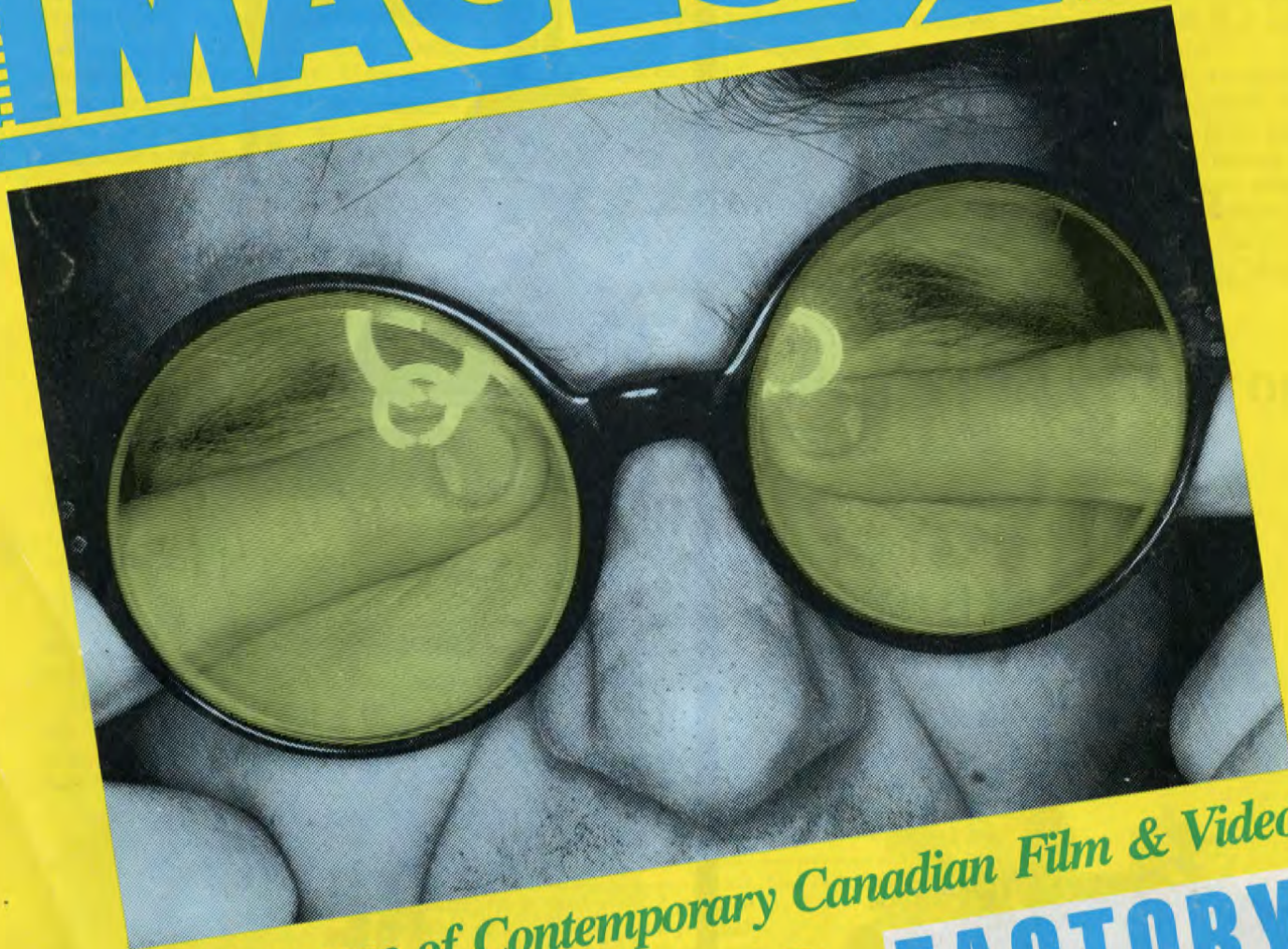
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