

Volume 19 Number 5 \$5.50 A magazine about issues of art and culture

# FUSE

MAGAZINE

## life & life support systems

Judith Doyle on zines, nets & outlets by artists

Projecting Art and Magic Across Borders by Deborah Root  
Heidi McKenzie on the Corporate Hurricane  
Interview with Sunil Gupta  
plus reviews and more...



September 21 to October 13

Night Stories

**John Giorno**  
**Stephen Horne**  
**Tom Sherman**

curator: W.J. Stanley

October 19 to November 17

**Michael Buckland**

artist's talk: October 20

November 23 to December 15

**Shelley Low**  
**Kelly Mark**

curators: Valerie Lamontagne & Vida Simon

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media room



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**Kevin Madill**

*Swinger*  
September 11 - October 5

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September 11 - October 5

*In the Realm of Freedom*  
curated by **Teresa Heffernan**  
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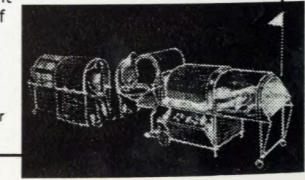
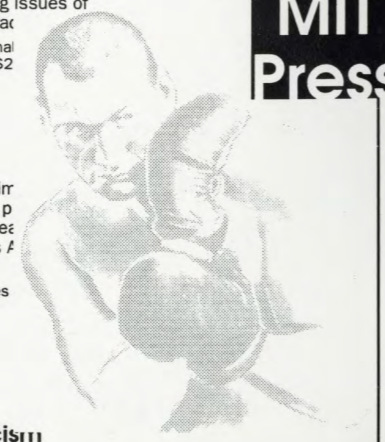
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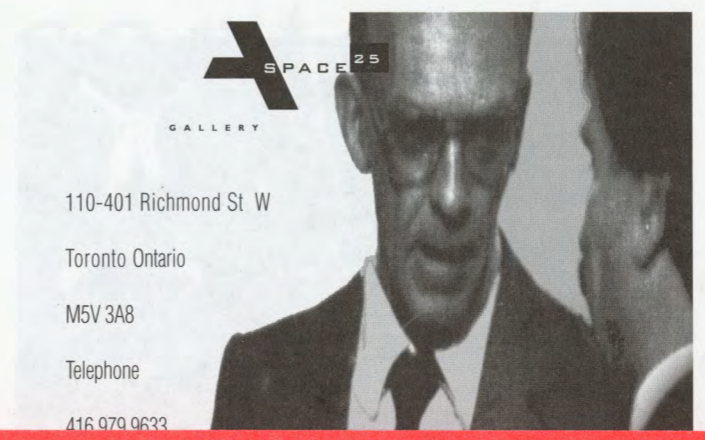
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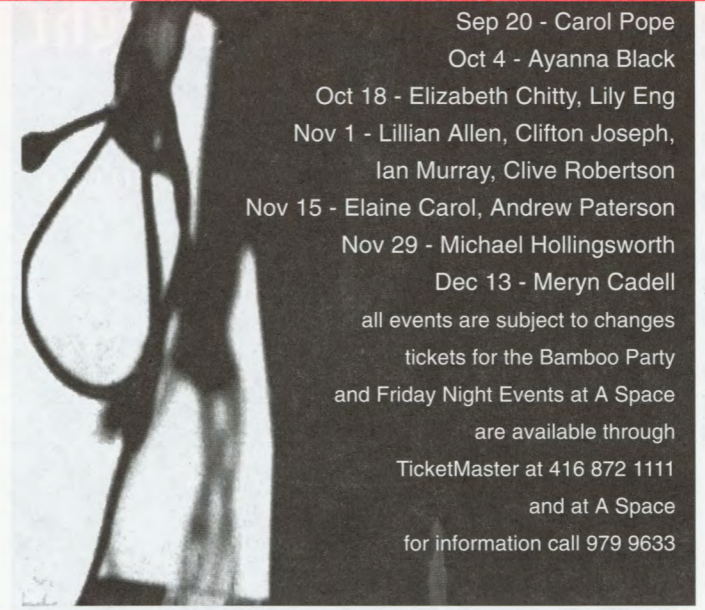
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and Publishing Inc., a non-profit artist's organization,  
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Canada M5V 3A8, E-mail: fuse@intacc.web.net, tel: (416) 340-8026, fax: (416)  
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Subscription rates: \$20 per year; Institutions \$32 per year  
(in Canada only). Outside Canada \$24 U.S. per year; Institutions \$38 U.S.  
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ISSN 0838-603X

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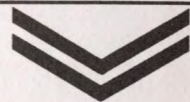
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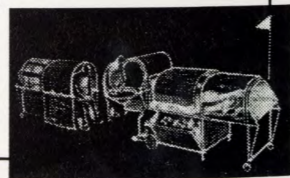
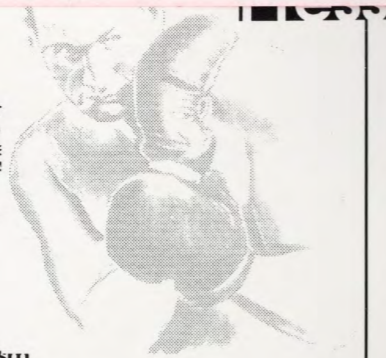
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Rinaldo Walcott for copy editing.  
Thanks to John Maxwell and Shawn Syms for proofreading.

FUSE is published five times a year (includes one special issue) by Artons  
Cultural Affairs Society and Publishing Inc., a non-profit artist's organization.  
Our offices are located at 401 Richmond Street West, Suite 454, Toronto, Ontario,  
Canada M5V 3A8, E-mail: fuse@intacc.web.net, tel: (416) 340-8026, fax: (416)  
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(in Canada only). Outside Canada \$24 U.S. per year; Institutions \$38 U.S.  
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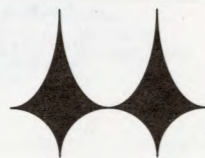
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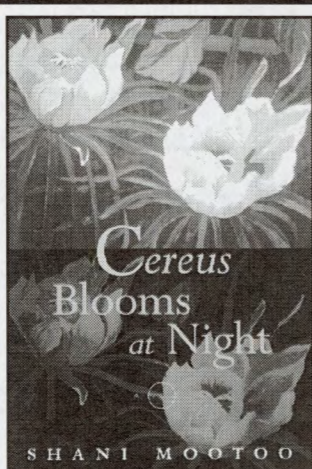
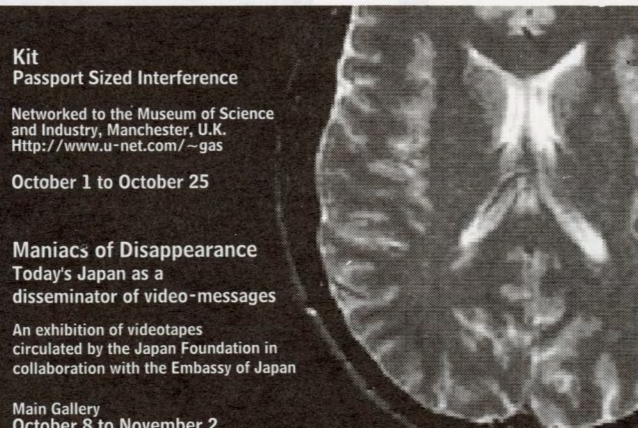
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From "Trespass 3," Sunil Gupta, 1995, digital imaging, inkjet print.

Cover photograph: From a video of Christy Cameron  
performing at Dirty Babettes' "Piss Elegant Wank,"  
Toronto, March 29, 1996. See "life and life support systems,"  
by Judith Doyle (gender.performance, p. 30).

## editorial

Alarm bells have been ringing for some time now about the potentially devastating effects of government cutbacks on arts and cultural activities in Canada. As the harsh reality of these cuts has unfolded over the last year, some of the most dire predictions have come true. Coach House Press, one of the country's leading alternative publishers for the last twenty years, collapsed when the Ontario government slashed its grant. Subsequently, the Ontario Arts Council gutted operating grants to a broad range of visual arts organizations, putting the future of vital venues like Mercer Union, YYZ, Public Access and A Space in serious jeopardy. These provincial cuts are only the first volley of economic tactics in what is shaping up as a much broader, ongoing culture war.

Artists and the organizational framework we have developed over the last twenty years are left in a position of dangerous vulnerability to the vicious—and seductive for some of the short-sighted among us—corporate agenda of monopoly stranglehold, global mega-profit, and elimination of diversity and opposition. Coach House Press has been summarily offed while transnational moralist and print mogul Conrad Black sucks the remains of every other text-based endeavour into his ideological empire. Alternative strategies of resistance and defiance in cultural production and critique are required if we are to win the culture wars.

As FUSE celebrates its twentieth year of publication with wary optimism, we offer an issue that encompasses a range of highly relevant and innovative perspectives on power and resistance. Feature articles by Judith Doyle and Deborah Root approach questions of history and representation from different positions; Doyle has adapted her web-sit history of self-funded art production in Toronto for print to expose a range of defiant, broad-based cultural survival practices, while Root explores representations of power and magic in relation to the state of the individual in recent Mexican films and performance. In conjunction with the equally incisive columns, interviews and art reviews, these feature articles continue FUSE's evolving twenty-year commitment to trenchant issues in art and society.

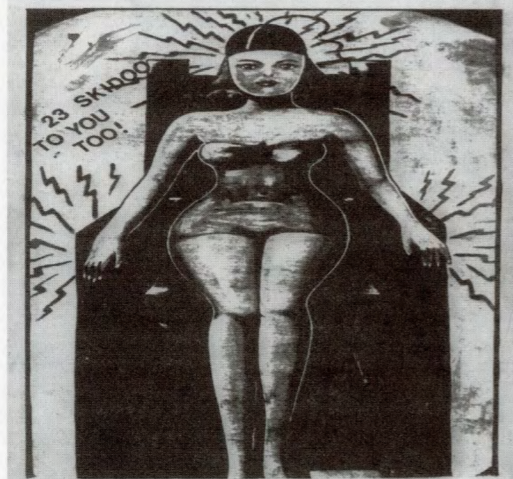
FUSE's future is no more secure than any other artists' organization, even as the surrounding political-economic context makes it more crucial than ever that the diversity of voices and practices expressed in FUSE be disseminated and heard. We invite you to join us in an ongoing act of resistance by subscribing to FUSE, and by writing to us with your thoughts and comments.

## erratum

Robin Curtis' name was misspelled in vol. 19, no. 4. FUSE apologizes for the error.

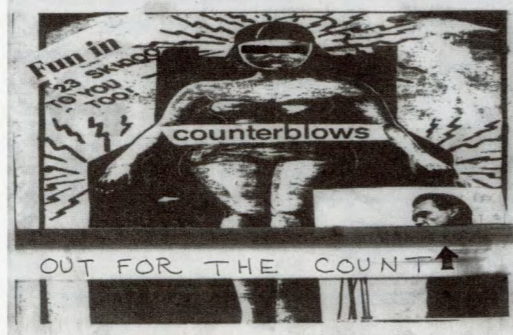


## BREAKTHROUGH



## BREAKTHROUGH

SHAKING AND SPEAKING



Interactive fax project, Toronto, 1978, reconsidered in "life and life support systems" (see p.23 this issue).

# Braving the Storm

THE CANADA COUNCIL, THE NEA AND THE CORPORATE HURRICANE

by Heidi McKenzie

We are living in a society where political agenda is blurred with corporate agenda. On both sides of the border governments are embracing conservative tactics regardless of historical partisan connotation. And politicians and civil servants alike are mirroring Wall Street-Bay Street culture. The cultural sector has not been immune from this corporate environment, as is evidenced by the fate of each country's premier cultural agency: the Canada Council and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). But is this a viable strategy?

Each country's formative history has created a distinct institution, but one that artists nonetheless tend to rely upon in very similar ways. Their basic functions are similar: the delivery of public money in the form of grants to artists and arts organizations. However, in context with our particular cultural, political and economic developments, there are crucial differences in each agency's legislative beginning and mandate.

With its Parliamentary birth in 1957, the Canada Council is eight years older than the NEA. Its mandate instructs Council to "foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of, works in the arts." Furthermore, the guiding principles espouse autonomous arm's-length status, in addition to peer evaluation, as vital to artistic decision making. The criteria for such decisions have always been, and continue to be, based on "excellence or comparative artistic merit," with a focus on "professional" artistic activity.<sup>1</sup>

The NEA was officially formed in 1965, with a mission to "foster excellence, diversity and vitality of the arts in the United States"; and to "help broaden the availability and appreciation of that excellence, diversity and vitality." In addition, the Endowment must exercise

care to "preserve and improve the environment in which the arts have flourished." It must not, under any circumstances, "impose a single esthetic standard" or "attempt to direct artistic content." Yet paradoxically, NEA legislation Section 954 (d) 1. defines the criteria by which applications are judged as "taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public." This is clearly the same conservative ideology of "family values" that is behind a Republican call for the complete dismantling of the NEA by 1998. Passed by Congress in 1995, the bill has since been vetoed by President Clinton.

One glaring difference in these mandates is the apparently elitist, and arguably British Imperialist, subtext regarding the promotion of "high art" and "excellence above all" at the Canada Council. Another is the notion of arm's length: at the Council, the chair, director and board are all political appointments, but funds are granted by peer juries independent of the Crown's intervention; the NEA's mission statement carries a utilitarian "serve the people, reflect the people" connotation, yet grants are subject to Congressional approval. Apart from the obvious issue of censorship, one example of how these principles are played out is the fact that the NEA funds jazz, whereas the Canada Council has never been able to reconcile such grassroots, non-Eurocentric art into its mandate. Indeed, Canada's national cultural institutions invest a great deal of effort into limiting the flow of American popular culture into its mythically pristine cultural oasis.

There is a common notion that American artists and arts organizations are better at private fundraising—the NEA manages a budget of approximately \$100–120 million, whereas the Canada Council's grants budget is nearly \$90 million for a population

### TATSUO MIYAJIMA

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roughly one-tenth in size. It is undeniable that Canadian artists receive relatively more government funding than their American cousins, (US cultural spending per capita runs at around four dollars, Canadian at nearly thirty dollars); it is disputable, however, whether or not the Americans are truly superior on the private patronage front.

The recently published findings of the Genovese, Vanderhoof & Associates' report on private arts funding of not-for-profit performing arts organizations, *An Economic Case for Government Support*,<sup>2</sup> dispel the myth that Canadian arts organizations feed on public monies in contrast to their American counterparts. On the contrary, the report tells us that Canadians are superior at raising private funds, at generating earned income, and their cities offer much richer cultural menus than do American cities of similar size. If we are already doing such a great job of raising private funds for the arts, then the belief that private monies will step in where public funding disappears is unfounded. In fact, public money has traditionally provided a catalyst for private donations, and our corporate and individual patrons will likely follow the governments' lead by withdrawing support. The bottom line is that there may never be enough "no-strings-attached" private money to sustain a healthy not-for-profit arts ecosystem in either Canada or the United States.

The effects of government cutbacks in the face of escalating deficits, and in light of an increasingly corporate conservatism, are all too real. From May 1995 to April 1996, the Canada Council, following the edicts of then-Minister of Canadian Heritage, Michel Dupuy, pared down its administrative work force from 238 positions to 162, terminating over seventy-five positions. This includes the nine positions that disappeared with the dismantling of the Art Bank; downsizing from ten arts sections to seven; the collapse in programme numbers from one hundred to fifty; re-disbursement of the Explorations Programme; and the disappearance of assistance for arts service organizations.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the emergence of a horizontally structured Strategic Initiatives Unit, which comprises Touring, Equity and First Peoples, and the Media Arts Programme, has risen from the ashes. The noble gesture on the part of the Council is that, in order to keep grants at 1994-1995 levels, Council has made a commitment to absorb the nearly 50 percent funding cuts over three years on the administrative and programme delivery planes. This means lopping off nearly \$10 million by 1998.

To complicate matters, for a variety of reasons, more staff have left than were asked to, and new recruits are filling the ranks of officers and administrators in Ottawa. Now we have a tough-playing Board of Directors, hardened by the last year and a half of "mass public" and

"political Public" scrutiny, and a relatively new and/or alienated staff trying to pick up the pieces and force the implementation of *The Canada Council: A Design for the Future*. This "blue book," which forms the blueprint for change, restructuring, downsizing and surviving, was the fall-out from the 1995 community soundings performed across the country by chair Donna Scott and director Roch Carrier. One of the big changes is Council's supposedly heightened commitment to its role in advocacy on behalf of Canada's artists. The obvious question is whether or not this newly emphasized role is timely or redundant—the Canadian Conference of the Arts already functions as the national lobbying and advocacy agency for Canadian artists.

State-side, various options for the NEA's path into the twenty-first century have been bandied about since the late 1980s, culminating in the bipartisan Independent Commission on the NEA in 1990 which recommended, among other things, public advisory committees to compliment artist peer panels. The rationale is to incorporate "community opinion" and "public interests" into grantsmanship, clearing the path for corporate strategies in order to more obediently mirror the Republican agenda. In April 1996, Congress and the President passed another bill "restricting subgranting, seasonal support and grants to individuals except for literature and honorifics and the [Jesse] Helms language regarding grants that may involve 'denigration of religious... beliefs...' etc., and 'sexual and excretory activities.'"

At present, the NEA is digesting a 40 percent cut to its 1996 budget. (There are no forecasts on the cuts over the following two years to compare with Canada Council figures.) It has undergone an "agency reinvention" that crippled grants to individual artists and melded seventeen distinct arts programmes irreversibly into four categorical funding pots: Heritage and Preservation; Creation and Presentation; Education & Access; Planning & Stabilization. All grant applications must be project-based, and no organization may apply to more than one category, and then only once per fiscal year. As with the Canada Council, the NEA's administrative staff took a beating with ninety lay-offs, trimming its size to 148. This extreme simplification in the administration of grants reflects a defensive move—making do with what little resources the agency has left.

Since the early 1980s, arts activists and cultural workers have been turning to economic arguments for the arts when plea bargaining with politicians over funding. Today's corporate political climate, perhaps more than ever before, seems to encourage these economic arguments. The problem, however, is that corporate oriented governments will inevitably take the arts communities' economic arguments and stack them against any number of other industries to compare

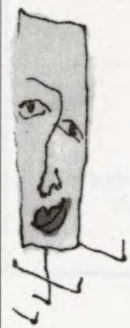
# POINT OF VIEW

MAGAZINE



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life imitates art in a renaissance setting  
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investment dollars versus dividends. The not-for-profit arts sector, (regardless of *The Economic Case for the Arts'* claim that governments earn far more from the arts in economic spin-offs than they spend in supporting the arts directly), cannot hope to compete with mines, agriculture, energy or even commercially driven arts.

A revamped rendition of the federal government's role vis-à-vis arts funding is urgently required as the new millennium looms. Three patterns simultaneously call into question the perpetuity of national public funding of the arts: firstly, conservative corporate jargon positions

public patronage and public subsidy to the arts as nothing less than outdated paradigms; secondly, the cultural sector now ceases to resist this corporate jargon; hence lastly, the building of national

infrastructure in both Canada and the United States becomes tired and old as justification for further funding—Bay Street and Wall Street don't want to hear it anymore. Soon grant applications will "Let's cut a deal," with lines such as "estimated gross return on investment" par for the course.

An effect of the possible elimination of the government support for the arts will be the contraction of all other donors. American statistics show that the NEA has functioned as a venture capitalist by stimulating private sector philanthropy. As a justification for continued funding, the notion of the not-for-profit arts sector's function as an incubator for the private sector/commercial arts is ineffectual at best. If the current trend runs its course, the funding structures will collapse over the next decade, and we will be left with *Cats* and *The Phantom* in every other city centre around the continent, and around the world.

One cannot help but imagine the worst, that Canada will take back its comfortable role of following in the footsteps of its big cousin with fewer cultural offerings on every front and politicians clamoring to limit arts funding to the image-boosting big cultural institutions. It is difficult not to end on a down beat. The swing of the pendulum towards the Right has only just begun. The survival of both the NEA and the Canada Council—along with many social welfare aspects of the state—now seems tenuous as these two cultural infrastructures brave the storm and weather the corporate hurricane.

Heidi McKenzie is a free-lance cultural policy analyst and arts administrator, on the Board of Directors of YYY Artists' Outlet, and on the Steering Committee of ARTSVOTE.

### Notes

1. In 1991, in response to recommendations regarding systemic racism, Council revised its definition of professionalism to include the following components: specialized training in the field (not necessarily in academic institutions); recognition by one's peers (artists who work in the same artistic tradition); a history of public presentation (not necessarily in Council-sanctioned venues); and a commitment to devote more time to one's artistic activity if this could be financially feasible. See *Recommendations of the Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equality in the Arts and the Response of the Canada Council*, Canada Council publication, January, 1992, p. 8.

2. Genovese, Vanderhoof & Associates, Centre for Cultural Management (University of Waterloo) and the Association of Canadian Orchestras, *An Economic Case for Government Support*, December, 1995.

3. The Canada Council, *The Renewal of the Canada Council: A Message from Director Roch Carrier on the Implementation of the Strategic Plan*, January, 1996.

# Pop Goes the GRRRL

## JAPANESE BANDS GO GLOBAL

by Kyo Maclear

Lee's Palace in Toronto was teeming with shiny happy people. Hello Kitty lunch boxes were toted and candy-shaped barrettes worn as accessory by the club crowd. Witty punsters Cibo Matto captivated the packed room for two hours with a surreal looping of '40s swing, bossa nova, mutated jazz and trip hop. Sampling master Yuka Honda played Captain Alchemy with New York-based Miho Hattori on the mike.

Cibo Matto are among a handful of female Japanese musicians who are hyping bilingual tuneage on the North American club scene. Sonically accessible and experimental, Cibo Matto have joined Pizzicato Five and Shonen Knife in spreading transnational wackiness with their atonal parodies of pop culture and commodity consumption.

A stream of adoring reviewers have touted these predominantly grrrl bands as ultra-hip. Cibo Matto were voted Best Unsigned Artists of the Year at the reputable 1994 CMJ Music Marathon, before signing on with Warner Brothers and releasing their debut CD *Viva! La Woman*. Shonen Knife earned jubilant praise from late grunger Kurt Cobain for their LCD (lowest common denominator) recordings. Now signed by Virgin Records, they still muster a large off-track following with their cult-pleasing blend of punk, ska and pop. On the swanker side, Pizzicato Five have jaunted their cocktail mixes and dance jams with huge success on the big screen with P5's "Happy Sad" spun as the theme song to *Unzipped*, Miramax's 1995 biopic on fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. Having reigned on Top-40 music charts in Japan for close to a decade Pizzicato Five have recently club-crashed into North America with their spacey disco sound. If pop music can be heard as a stereographic index of social change, then things appear to be changing. Japanese girl bands



in North America are collecting fans like bar coasters.

Alongside the possibilities for cultural de-streaming heralded by access to digital information and electronic samplers, there is another related phenomena that has helped shape the context for a Japanese pop surge in North America. Shifting social formations resulting from Japan's economic ascendancy in the New World Order have contributed to collapsing certain borders in culture trading. Comparably popular Japanese bands like Happii Endo and the Pink Ladies didn't garner North American audiences in the '70s and early '80s when the gulf between Japan and The West was imagined wide—with only occasional television peeps into this "other" world afforded to

From Pizzicato Five cd booklet for *Made in USA*.



Pizzicato Five: Made in USA CD booklet centrefold.

North Americans by "Shogun" re-runs and, well, "Shogun" re-runs.

Today the gulf between East and West is being challenged by Japanese musicians deracinating themselves from the idea of discrete national cultures. Most of these bands do not use their cultural ethnicity as a primary or explicit signifier in their work. Cibo Matto, who have chosen to market themselves as down-home East Villagers rather than Japanese expats, emphatically resist being seen as playing "Japanese" music. They know that these labels stick. When asked by a *New Music* interviewer how they related to P5, Shonen Knife and other successful Japanese pop bands, Yuka Honda retorted impatiently: "That's like comparing Lou Reed to Hootie, just because they're all American."

Cibo Matto are making it harder to sort cultural origins. Conveying Yuka Honda's ambient sound-play requires a bounty of descriptors. My friend flirts with a case of adjectivitis when she describes them: "Yah, well, it's kinda like bossa nova-thrash-bluesy-jazz." Cibo Matto, with their eclectic mixes, see themselves as joining the Dream Warriors in rapping "multiverse." Cars whizz by in the East Village with stereos blaring the sounds of a new cosmopolitan internationalism and Cibo Matto revel at the intersections.

Whether or not Cibo Matto and other diasporic Japanese bands can imagine something beyond the uncall of corporate globalization, whether or not they can sound new meanings for Japanese diasporic identity remains to be seen—and heard. The challenge

involves finding new ways of hearing those soundings and sounders that dash out of the field of common frequency, challenging the ordinary run of stereotypes.

### COOLING JAPAN

The globalization of culture—streamlined through a worldwide web of cafés and clubs—has allegedly democratized our taste buds. Those of us craving something different are being encouraged to indulge our appetites on a bountiful table of borderless delights.

But the idea of edible difference rests on this basic assumption: people want to eat what's on offer. Call it a pedagogy of cultural gastronomics, our consumer desires are constituted in large part by changing social trends and relations. In the case of Japan, there have been previous pop flirtations that may lend context to shifts on the North American music scene.

For example, in the 1980s, Japan enjoyed flash-in-the-pan attention in the "West." By then, Japan was turning heads, having grown to an economic power that could rival countries in Europe and North America. Those Western countries, which had served as a virtual pantheon for Japanese admiration and emulation since the Meiji Restoration were now taking note of Japanese trends in fashion, design, and architecture. Pop musicians such as Boy George, David Sylvian, and the Vapours were among those tipping their hats eastward. The video for Boy George's "In the Church of the Poison Mind" had caricaturish Japanese

people scurrying around with cameras and a Culture Club band member sporting a headband emblazoned with an image of the rising sun. David Sylvian's "Life in Tokyo" hit the charts and Sylvian became associated in the popular imaginary with "Japan" through his band of that name and later for singing on the soundtrack to Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (1983). While musicians such as David Bowie had lent prior significance to Japan as a place vested with exotic allure and sensuality, it had long been considered a mark of eccentricism or out of the ordinary—in this instance, a mark of "bisexuality"—to be a Japanophile.

What's changed? If Culture Club saluted "Japan" in the '80s, it's club culture that spreads the grove in the '90s. If the "Japanese" were stuck as stereotyped referents for pop play in the '80s, they are now taking their turn at signifyin'.

Seen in the context of "global cooling," the emerging popularity of bands like Cibo Matto and Pizzicato Five, may be pushing North Americans beyond national caricatures and stereotypes of Japan and the "Japanese." On the other hand, we've seen the rampant commodification of rap and hip-hop, the parading of diasporic cultures as stylin' and fresh on the street can also be co-opted into another occasion to aggrandize whiteness, by providing white people with new fetish objects to bolster their claims to hipness.

At its shallowest, the "global" is a specious love-in. A love-in that sees potentially insurgent signifiers sucked dry of subversive meanings: circulated by predominantly white First World scenesters in various incarnations as cute, fresh, and phat. Instead of meaningful gestures of international solidarity, we see so many stylized individuals, bedecked in the latest "global" fashions, on quests for unfettered—meaningless pleasure.

Which raises the question: Wherein lies the power to consume meaning? Some rappers and hip-hoppers recognizing that white middle-class youth make up a large portion of their audience in cash terms have paid heed to how their music gets recoded. Caveat emptors abound, with De La Soul (on "Buhloone Mind State") waxing ironic about the "white folks" who be "crossing over" and "buying this album."

### YUMMY YUMMY I'VE GOT JAPAN IN MY TUMMY

How can we come to understand the appeal of Japanese pop-play in North America? How does this music get circulated and consumed amidst often hostile US-Japanese trade relations? When does parody become a re-hashing of gendered and raced stereotypes? These related questions suggest that social context can play a greater hand than lyrical intent in

determining the meanings and identities ascribed to these musicians and their music.

For example, most articles and reviews encourage us to treat the food theme of Cibo Matto's *Viva! La Woman* as a cutesy gimmick, rather than as a metaphor that might, for example, allow Honda and Hattori to sonically explore the theme of everyday pleasures and pain. No doubt, Cibo Matto pride themselves on stringing together nonsense: "My weight is 300 pounds—My favourite is beef jerky—I'm a vagabond, I'm a vagabond—My mom says, 'You are kinky!'—Who cares? I don't care—A horse's ass is better than yours." But even non-sense can be coded differently. Their lyrics may be taken as a mélange of trendy and vapid twenty-somethingisms, a symptom of free-associating netspeak, or simply place them on the margins of (a racially gendered) common-sense.

In a similar vein, what are we to make of the food glut on these CDs? Other bands have paid tribute to the edible. We have heard the Beach Boy's paying homage to "vegetables" and Bananarama wanting "candy." Yet, Shonen Knife's "choco bars," Pizzicato Five's "tomato-based stew," and Cibo Matto's "white pepper ice cream," take consumption to parodic dimensions. The gastronomic war between the West/East could be considered adjourned with Tokyo salary-men ducking out of their offices for take-out McDonald's. Yet the war continues, hostilities are fanned, with Japan mocked and disparaged for consumer excess. "Almost the same/yet not quite," as Homi Bhabha would have it, Japan (unlike America?) becomes associated in the North American popular imaginary with greed and over-the-top consumption.

Even in the absence of stereotypically "Japanese" signifiers, there are ways of reproducing relations of othering. Shonen Knife provides a case in point. You won't find oriental flava on most of their CDs. What you're more apt to find on first listening is pop *lite*. Shonen Knife—comprised of three women sporting colourfully matched outfits—are best known for their fluffy punk sound. The image conjured here is one of garage walls lined with powder pink terry cloth. Sweet sing song voices are overlaid on top of reverbed riffs; sentimental sound mixes are pumped up and valve-compressed. If their sound appears underproduced, it's intentional, even studied. All three band members have marketed themselves as self-made basement musicians. Their rapid journey from Osaka-bound secretaries' desks to the world stage has been mythologized by their followers in North America. Nirvana paid homage to them and in 1994 a crew of musicians released a tribute album titled *Everyone Has a Shonen Knife That Loves Them*. Stroke for stroke, Shonen Knife has also paid tribute to such North American bands as the Carpenters and the Beach Boys.



In concert, with Hello Kitty as a mentoring stage presence, Shonen Knife have gained a reputation for parading the virtues of play and fun. During their debut at Toronto's Lee's Palace in 1993, band members brought Mattel Barbie dolls on stage. The crowd, predominantly white Torontonians, went wild. Parody aside, there appears to be Freudian fascination in the image of lollipop sucking, toy-brandishing Japanese. Opportunities to infantilize are augmented by the fact that Japanese pop-grrrls are usually very young. In Japan, charm points for marketing pop talent include doll-like faces and small immature bodies. These are the innocents fetishized for their "cuteness" and for dumbing-down into perpetual childhood.

While Shonen Knife may have dumped a little grit in the sugar bowl, scoring grunge affiliations along the way, they haven't completely spurned the superficialities associated with "cute" and "banal" Japanese teenyboppers. Those looking for deep seated subversive messages would do better to play with their secret decoder rings. Shonen Knife's discography, which includes *Let's Knife*, *Pretty Little Baka Guy*, and *The Birds and the B-sides*, all feature songs that remarkably manage to say practically *everything* about *nothing*. Those looking for social bite are left with this to chew on: "Let's send out for some pizza or something...and then we'll get, you know, like world peace, you dig?"

Perhaps it's the sense of naïveté surrounding Shonen Knife, their ingenue status, that has contributed to their appeal. Having *just* picked up guitars and "gone electric"—it's like they're a metaphor for Japan, a country still imagined as having "just joined" the modern age—and lo and behold, they're fairly proficient. But the idea that pop and Japan are new friends is misleading if we consider the relatively long and fettered history of pop music in Japan. (But that's another story.)

Suffice to say Japanese musicians are still generally seen as dupes of trend-setters in North America: they've ingested too many issues of *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*, they've watched too many MTV videos, sung too many karaoke covers. And if we see Japanese musicians and artists as punch-drunk on Americana—even as we choose to overlook the many exceptions—why should we expect them to be self-reflexive or *critically* cool?

### POMO GRRRLS

The postmodern blonde grrrl is a complex, layered sign. Courtney Love, Liz Phair, Madonna, Lady Kier, can reappropriate signs of gendered femininity and wed them to raunch. Be they kinder-whores, bisexual voguers or trippy ravers, these grrrls are rocking subversively.



Cibo Matto cover.



Promotional photo for Frank Chickens CD.

Despite shifts in international economics, the post-modern Asian grrrl may still be a sign of overdetermined significance. A sign of other exotic worlds, a symptom of powerlessness, supine passivity, and hospitality. The idea that Asian women make interesting objects of consumption has a long history.

But what happens when signifiers are re-wired by globalization? What are we to make of Pizzicato Five's Maki Nomiya, the Asian blonde? Nomiya can be seen refashioning cultural borders, cruising down the runway with Western supermodels in a feat of computer transgression in the P5 video for "Happy Sad." She is Barbarella one minute and Audrey Hepburn the next. Not unlike Dee-lite, Pizzicato Five flaunts their *über*-fashionable lead vocalist, playing up their 1960s retro-futurism theme.

P5's recent CD *Made in USA*, a tongue-in-cheek spin on "Made in Japan," toys with preconceptions

that exist of Japan and Japanese people. In the video for "Twiggy Twiggy," Maki Nomiya hams it up as a cross-dressed Twiggy to the borrowed tune of "Hawaii Five-O." This play of Western-coded cultural signifiers laces the "Buy Japanese" text, which later appears on screen, with an ironic "twist," a jab directed, no doubt, at anti-Japanese trade protectionists in the U.S.

Through such occasionally provocative and border-challenging performances, P5 may be seen to test the limits of free-flowing cultural commerce. Or not. "Or not," because however campy and parodic these grrrls be, stereotypical fantasies of Asian women crop up in ways that can quickly encode their music in racially gendered ways. Ambient becomes mystical; irony is sweet play; and everything is simply oh-so-cute. The transnational spinnings of Japanese male musician Towa Tei, former DJ for Dee-lite, are similarly reduced to such stereotypical attributes as "techno-wizardry." In all these cases, packaged versions of transgression easily get stopped at the discursive border of a racially gendered East/West. Small wonder that Cibo Matto's photo in *The Village Voice* (January 23, 1996) is emphatically captioned: "Something more than 'cute'."

### ZIPPITY DOODAH

P5's Maki Nomiya may be seen to "unzip" the West's penchant for fashioning "Japan" in antiquated, even corseted, terms. But one wonders if the world of pop-fashion is the best site for intervention. The fashion world already prides itself on marketing the transnational, and parading global colours on the runway. Needless to say, there are moments (beyond the moments earlier mentioned) when listeners get snagged on P5's free-flowing "magic carpet ride." Nomiya's Eihongo or "Japlish" patters, at times defiantly, through her tracks. Her scatterings of transnational cultural signs—Max Factor, Coco Chanel, raw food, tulips, Meiji shrine, Barbie dolls, hard work—register something about globalization. But P5's subtleties, consumer redundancies, and globalized inevitabilities are nothing when compared to Frank Chickens' frank politics. Frank Chickens is a British-based Japanese pop group whose creative leader Kazuko Hohki has been on the music scene since the mid-1980s. With eerily buoyant and hyper-synthesized songs about the bombing of Hiroshima and Japanese sex-tourism in Asia included in their repertoire, it is not surprising that they've been relegated to alternative and college radio-play. Hohki tackles the limits of globalization, and more specifically, Western antagonisms toward Japan, stereophonically. So for example, with a refrain from Disney's "Zippity Doodah" prancing in the background, Hohki sings:



I was in the Rockefeller Center  
Say we got a new yellow owner  
When I heard a lonesome cry  
Someone in a hat'n bowtie...  
Sorry Rockefeller, Sayonara Rockefeller...  
Tell me who is haunting who?

In another heavily digitized tune, "Robot Love," we hear the synthetic repetition of tinkling taiko chimes and clicking bachi. The song hails us to consider what and *how* we're hearing:

The ancient robot is making her way  
With the sweets and teas on her lacquer tray  
Have you any order she should obey?  
Or do you just want that wooden tongue to say  
I love you forever  
Whatever you do and whoever you are  
blah blah blah

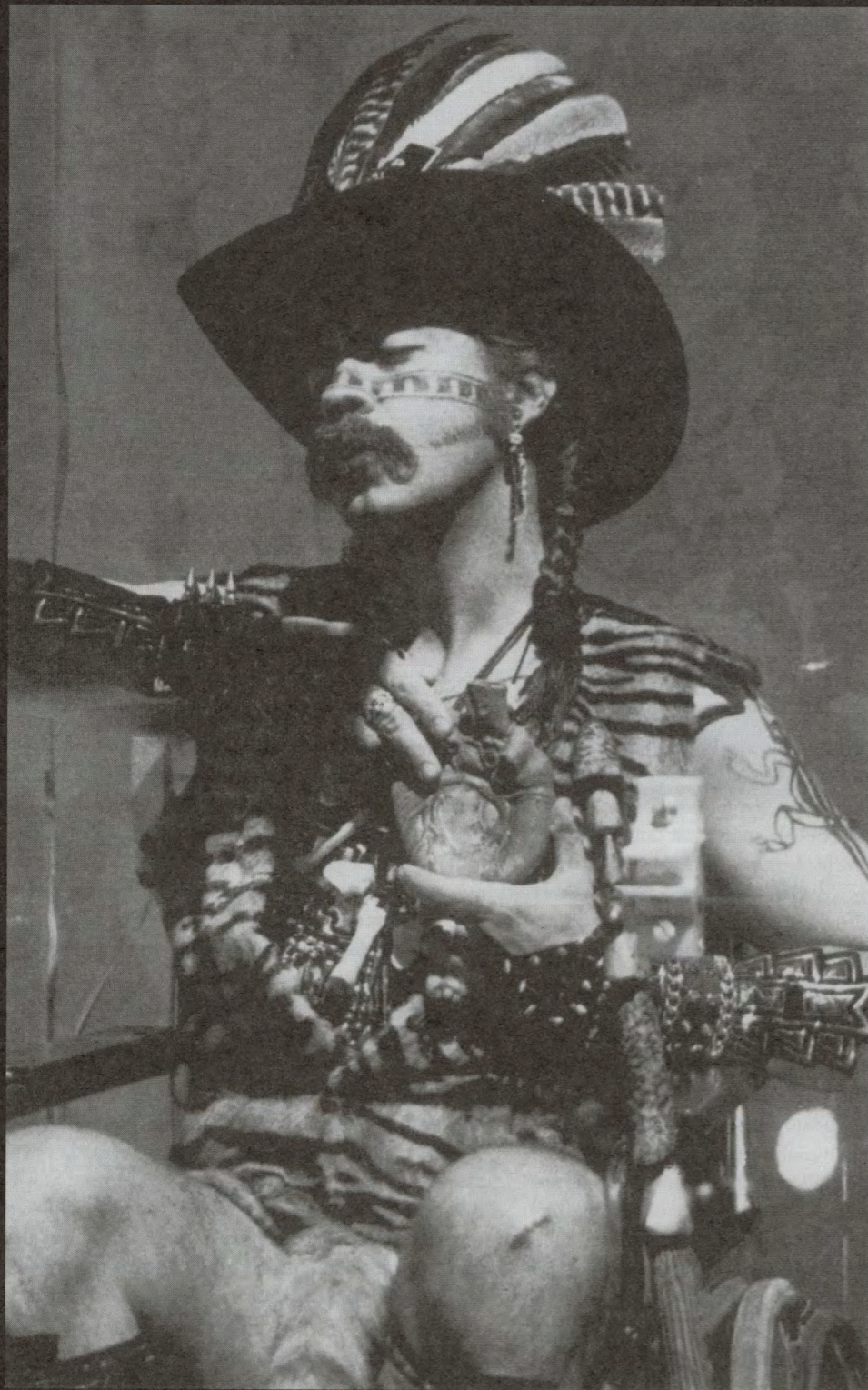
Kazuko Hohki knows that however nation-less, even inter-national, the Asian grrrl becomes, she still signifies the "East." Only now, she is also seen to embody the pleasurable riffs and routes of global capitalism. Still associated with comfort and leisure, she can be seen playing seasoned hostess and acting mascot for international ad campaigns for Four Seasons Hotels one moment, and sashaying down the fashion runway the next.

*Kyo Maclear is a Toronto-based writer and visual artist.*

Unzipped by Pizzicato Five.

# Ritual

Projecting Art and Magic Across Borders



Guillermo Gómez-Peña in the performance/installation work *The Temple of Confessions*, by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, 1996. Photo: Monica Naranjo.

# Practices

by Deborah Root

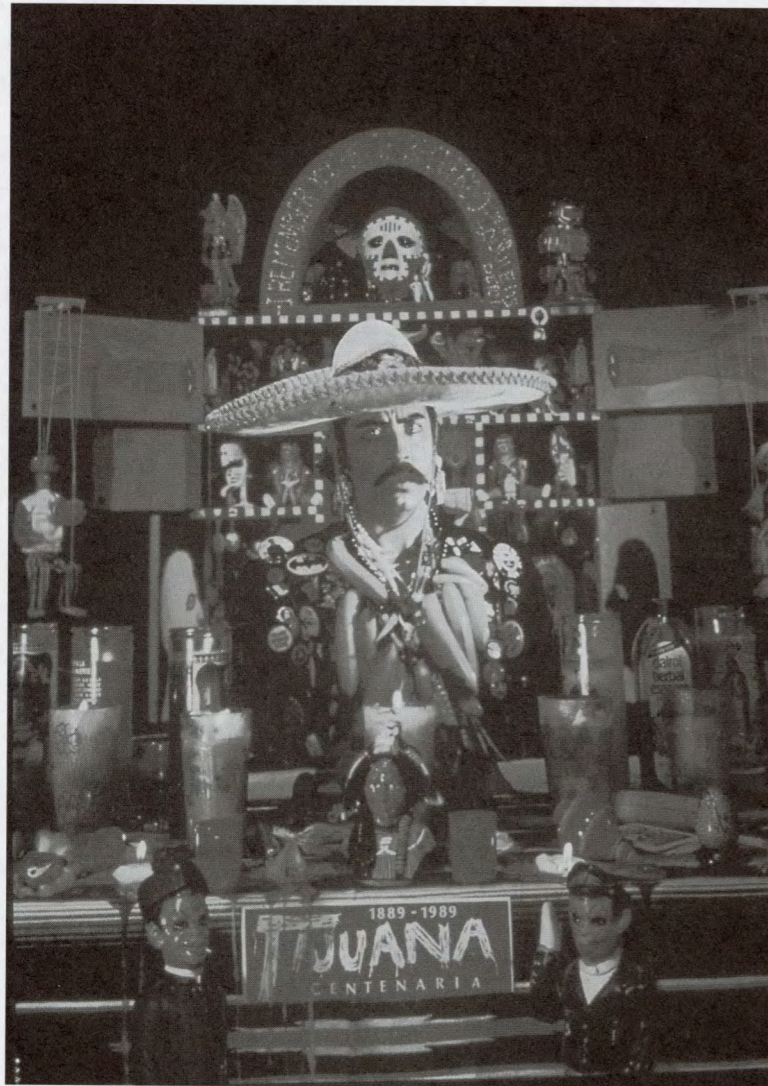
Let's say I love you from afar, so I visit a magician who places our photographs in a bowl with (perhaps) pieces of paper with our names written on them and several spoonfuls of honey. Candles are lit, words are said, and it is done. You and I are together in a bowl, cemented with sticky sweetness. At the level of appearance, we *are* together, even if events in the world have yet to catch up with events in the bowl. In this sense the desired effect has already happened: the appearance of our union has been made to exist in the world and I have witnessed the materiality of the ritual that brought us together.

Or another scenario: let's say there's a bad political situation, and arts grants are being cut right and left. Bureaucrats gather together in a room, and certain names are written on a piece of paper and placed in a file. The names represent the people who will lose their funding. The same day, the government erects billboards with the image of its leader, and arranges rallies where its supporters can be photographed. Is this magic? Both the magician and the bad government are attempting to construct a map of real life, and both are manipulating appearances to create effects in the world. Both are ritualizing their actions, explicitly so in the first example. The difference is that government councils think that their actions only happen in this world, whereas by creating another world in the bowl the magician recognizes that different realities can coexist simultaneously. One system of thought is static, the other flexible.

Why turn to magic instead of dealing with power head on? Is magic, as is claimed in social science textbooks, the last refuge of the dispossessed, a consolation for people who can't make things happen in the real world?

I would argue that magic is about transformation, and if I were to generalize, I would say that magical practices are concerned with the permeability of borders, of collapsing the boundaries between fixed categories of "now" and "later," life and death, male and female, animal and human. Rather than insisting on a firm distinction between the real and the unreal (and where do you draw the line?), magic reminds us that there are different planes of the real, each of which produces its own effects, each of which has materiality. For example, ritual art tends to show how something is able to become something else, or is something other than it appears on the surface. This is based on a particular understanding of reality; the boundaries between phenomena exist for the sake of convenience, in that they make description easier, but they do break down once you look closely at things. What is powerful about magic is its ability to disrupt categories of thought.

Magic can make people uneasy because it utilizes what is for many an unfamiliar conceptual language. Accordingly, magic (or practices explicitly named as such) is not yet integrated into urban life in late-twentieth-century North America. We have art instead. In the performance piece *Border Brujo* (1991), Guillermo Gómez-Peña speaks of the border as the place where *brujos* become performance artists, but what is the border? He is referring to the border between the United States and Mexico, but also to the different histories and symbolic systems these entities



Guillermo Gómez-Peña in the video/performance work *Border Brujo*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Isaac Arntstein, 1991, 52 min. Photo: Max Aguilera-Hellweg.

express. How come "they" got the magic and "we" got the art? It seems like a raw deal. Is it part of an operation of containment, a mechanism of capitalism that makes things that cannot be easily explained more manageable and, in the end, more saleable?

For many, magic is conflated with irrationality. Gómez-Peña's border between magic and art reminds us that the technological north has been designated as the space of reason and the south as disorder, violence, romance and, most importantly, irrationality. These are longstanding tropes of colonialism, but also have to do with how the West has imagined its own margins. Within the Western tradition, most of the books about magic written in the last two hundred years or so insist that magic is ultimately delusional, a refuge for the weak-minded and superstitious; many of the books written in the preceding centuries recognize its existence, but claim that it is the devil's work and must be rigorously suppressed. Although the Church clearly has its own ritual practices, institutionalized religion has been very careful to distinguish these from magic. This is the intellectual training many of us have inherited, and the weight of this

tradition makes it difficult to know how to approach magic. In everyday life, there are strict lines of cause and effect that we are supposed to acknowledge as "real," in which there is a denial that the manipulation of objects in a ritual context can produce concrete effects in the world. (It's true that magic doesn't always "work," but that doesn't mean it doesn't have effects. And science doesn't always "work" either). When scientific explanations of reality took over from the religious discourses of the Church, magic was increasingly displaced. Yet the suppression of magic by science shared many assumptions of earlier religious discourses: both insisted that it is not the community that will decide

what truth is, and both claimed that to reject the truths of experts is to manifest a profound and ultimately anti-social ignorance.

Something has happened at the end of the twentieth century to return us to magic. While various forms of organized religion have experienced a revival (for example, the charismatic evangelism of the New Right), in the cities of the north one can also find occult shops, botánicas, New Age seminars, and different kinds of curers and seers. At HMV and Tower records we can buy CDs of trance music; we can visit expensive shops to purchase magical healing candles from Vermont. To some extent, this is an outgrowth of the mixing of cultural traditions in an age of globalization: old borders are breaking down, and different peoples and cultural traditions are coming into contact with one another. The questioning of colonial histories and inclusion of different perspectives means that the possibility exists for approaching other traditions and realities more openly. But this does not explain why so many schooled in Western rationalism are turning to the supposedly "irrational" symbolic systems of magic. What do people want? It seems too simple to say that they are seeking "meaning," but people do seem to desire a world that makes sense. As Einstein's critiques of cause and effect seep into popular consciousness, and chaos theory appears in blockbuster films like *Jurassic Park*, old certainties have been called into question. I think the last straw has been the seemingly inevitable ecological disasters: increasing numbers of people in the West have ceased to trust the grand promises of science and progress. As the old maps seem less and less relevant to daily life, other approaches to the world become increasingly attractive.

### Modernist Projections

Although most people in the North American art world tend not to explicitly engage in magical practices, today we can see traces of magic everywhere, one step removed: Santería altars are set up in art galleries, performance pieces are described as ritual, and bits of hair and bone turn up in installation work. The idea that the artist is a kind of magician runs through the twentieth century avant-garde from the Surrealists' fascination with dreams and sorcery to the shamanistic performance work of the 1970s. How did the magician become the artist or, to put it another way, how is magic transformed when it enters a market economy?

The rationalist legacy of the West insists on a distinction between art and ceremony. An assemblage of objects used in one context is art, in another ritual. At one level this is true: "art" is created to be looked at, ritual is created for a particular set of social and political purposes. Certainly, the distinction between art and ritual proved convenient when, for example, the ceremonial assemblages of other cultures were seized and brought to Western museums and renamed "art." The ritual qualities of the work tended to be ignored by formalist connoisseurs, or accorded the status of amusing stories. This has been the subject of considerable debate in recent years, particularly around the return of cultural objects to their original communities and the question of whether spiritual material should be in museums at all.

This is where we need to be very clear on the effects of colonialism. Although we can never escape our position in history, we can open our categories of analysis to question, and begin to understand how history structures our perception of art, culture, and magic. Western artists' fascination with magic

had in part to do with how the spiritual practices and cultural objects of colonized people came under the purview of Western art.

The modernist avant-garde did attempt to grapple with issues of spirituality, up to a point. Surrealist artists were very interested in the transformative qualities of spirituality; for instance, whereas the early avant-garde such as the Cubists saw masks and other ceremonial objects as constructing a transitory sense of the real, the Surrealists saw masks as a veil for the Freudian unconscious and as a way to access a more primordial knowledge that moved beyond the "real." For instance, André Breton said Oceanic and Northwest coast art abolished the dualism of perception and representation and manifested a return to original unity. Masks in particular were seen as a gateway to a reality that was privileged above Western rationality, and to a realm of intuition and dreams. Thus masks and other ceremonial objects became a kind of raw material for Western artists, a vehicle for locating an outside to reason.

The problem with their understanding of ritual was that after centuries of repression of Western magical traditions it was difficult for urban artists and writers to grasp the community base of indigenous magic, and the way this is linked to the practical concerns of the community, such as farming or medicine. It was also difficult for them to abandon the notion of the individual, who exists separately from the larger society and is equated with personal freedom and agency. This raises the question of where we are taught to locate margins, and with the idea that there is an outside that can be easily accessed and recognized in advance. Do we look for magic some place else, that is conveniently far, far away, or is it right here all along, if only we can look in the right way?

It is important to recognize the legacy of modernism as we in North America attempt to come to terms with magic today. The art world is only one site where magic is being integrated into understandings of reality, and despite claims that post-modernism has undermined old certainties, modernist conceptions of the relation between art and magic can continue to structure how magic is approached. Modernism has left us with two enormous blind spots: first, that magic is a practice that is abstracted from the community in which it is practised, and has

to do with individual power; second, that the magic of other cultures can be easily recognized by its apparent strangeness or exoticism. Both encourage us to think of magic as something separate from everyday life, that can be safely tamed by transformation into an art object, which is one reason that "magic" continues to be ensconced in art galleries.

### Sorcery and Power: Another Side of the Problem

If we believe that magic is the province of fools and irrational cultures, something that takes place "there" and not "here", then we will be unable to see how capital and the state use sorcery to further its agendas in our everyday lives. Power itself is a kind of magic, in that it involves the manipulation of appearances. Societies that maintain magical practices understand the potential for magic to be usurped by structures of power, and tell cautionary tales of what can happen when any kind of power gets out of hand. There are differences between state magic and community ritual; both bring together specified objects and people and speak certain magical words, but the state tends to dress up the process with spectacle, which can dazzle and disguise unpleasant truths. For a long time the word "glamour" meant enchantment, and to "cast the glamour" was to perform a magical spell.

However, if we are willing to cross borders, it is possible to hear other stories, and other understandings of the relation of magic to community. For example, two Mexican films reflect the rethinking of history at the time of the 500-year anniversary of the European invasion of the Americas, but offer very different readings of magic and transformation. In one sense, these films reflect the battle lines that have been drawn around the question: was European domination a good thing or has it been a disaster? The answer has implications for how magic, especially indigenous forms of knowledge, can be approached. *Return to Aztlán* (Juan Mora Catlett, Mexico, 1990), shows how magic can be implicated in structures of state power and offers a cautionary tale about the ability of power to dazzle and enchant. *Cabeza de Vaca* (Nicolás Echevarría, Mexico, 1990) tells the story of a conquista-

dor who (supposedly) becomes a shaman, but frames his experience within a modernist narrative of the transformation of the individual through his encounter with another culture.

In *Return to Aztlán*, Juan Mora Catlett offers a twentieth-century reading of fifteenth-century Mexico in order to make a point about how the state usurps sorcery to further its ends. While First Nations spiritual traditions in Canada have been systematically suppressed, and erased in many non-Native discourses of national identity, indigenous knowledge is a site of contestation in Mexico. Large segments of the population remain connected to land-based symbolic systems, and most urban Mexicans tend to be familiar with indigenous spiritual and aesthetic systems. Although Mexican elites tend to look to Europe and the United States as sources of art and culture, the political party that has ruled Mexico since the 1920s has consistently privileged the imperial Aztecs as the exemplar of Mexican identity. In *Return to Aztlán* Catlett distinguishes between the community rituals of ordinary people subject to the agenda of the Aztec state (and by extension, the contemporary Mexican state) and the glamorous sorcery of imperial power.

*Return to Aztlán* tells the story of a great drought that occurred in Mexico about fifty years before the Spaniards arrived. The Aztec leadership became concerned that the common people were turning away from the kings and priests of the empire, and sent sorcerers to locate the place of origin and offer tribute to Coatlicue, the mother goddess. The film presents this as a power struggle between the sorcerer-priests and the imperial high command. But despite the internal squabbling, both the state and the sorcerers collude in their use of knowledge and spectacle to maintain control of the common people. In so doing, *Return to Aztlán* distinguishes between the ritual practices of the common people, who seek to transform the drought-ridden landscape into one of abundance, and the cynical practices of both the state and the sorcerer-priests. Because magic is about the manipulation of matter, it has always attracted people obsessed with power, from the jewel-encrusted Moctezuma I to the dark suited bureaucrats of today. This is why the state has always had its magicians, and why if magic is separated from a community practice, it has the potential to function as a tool of oppression.

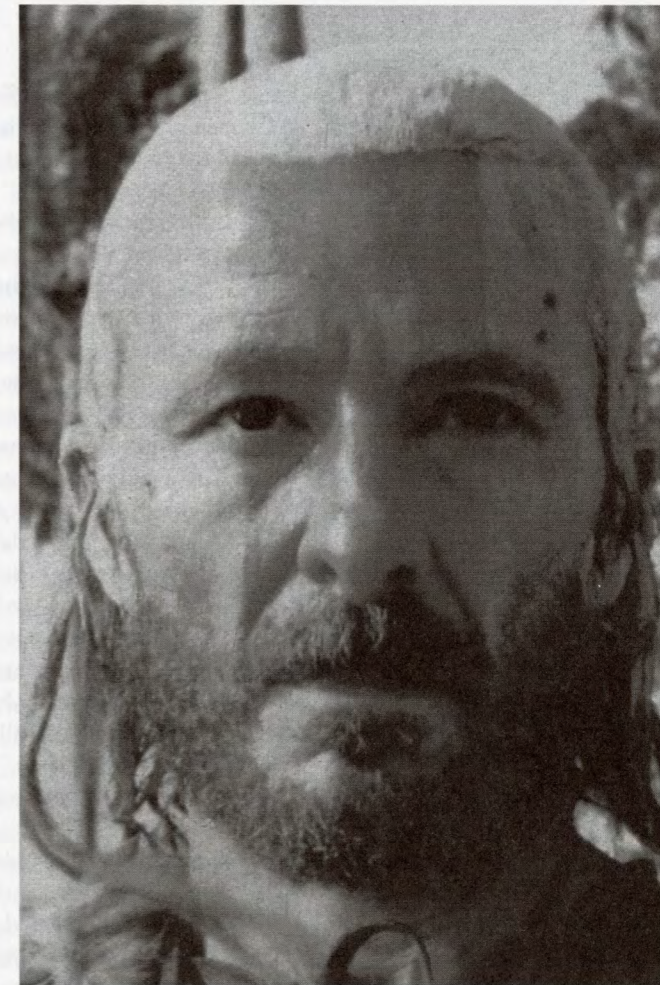
In the film the sorcerers of the Aztec state have the interesting clothes, the music, the elaborate ritual, as they move through the land seizing people and property at will. The common people can become momentarily distracted by the glittering displays that confront them and demand their attention, but this does not mean that they don't understand the way the sorcery of power contributes to their own oppression. The fine clothes and other accoutrements of Moctezuma's emissaries manipulate the appearance of glamour in order to make it look like it is the sorcerers who have the power, whether they actually do or not. Just as corporate images are designed to incite desire, the elaborate imagery of the state causes us to trust authority in advance, and to privilege the enticing displays that authority offers us.

While *Return to Aztlán* addresses the issue of state power, Nicolás Echevarría's film *Cabeza de Vaca* frames magic as a question of individual will and individual power. *Cabeza de Vaca* is a good example of how both modernist tropes and colonial histories are reworked to produce a personal story of transformation, framed within the modernist dream of high adventure in colonized space. The film is based on a "true" story. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca was a Spanish conquistador who was shipwrecked off Florida

in 1527. After nearly dying of starvation, Cabeza de Vaca and three other survivors wandered through the American southwest for eight years before returning to Mexico City in 1536. During their sojourn, the survivors lived among several different nations and experienced different roles, from slave to merchant to healer. Cabeza eventually became governor of Paraguay and finished his days on a royal pension in Spain.

Cabeza de Vaca wrote about his experiences in *Naufragios* (first published in 1542), which took the form of a personal letter to the king of Spain, as required of commanders by Spanish law. Although Cabeza de Vaca was both slave and healer, the film centres on his role as a healer, and suggests that he underwent a transformation in which he discovered himself to be a shaman: his encounter with another culture allowed him to come into his magical power. Cabeza de Vaca's power as a magician comes from some mysterious place that is never clear to the viewer; his will was not involved, and in the film the quivering hands that represent his power seem completely beyond his control. At the same time his access to magic is totally individualized, not part of any community practice or shared symbolic system.

*Cabeza de Vaca* implies that the European can be transformed from a conquistador to a shaman by undergoing hardship in a strange place and, by extension, that the Americas had the potential to change European culture. But why make a conquistador into a sign of transformation and shamanism at all? The film is not the only place where this occurs; most critical work on *Naufragios* approvingly views Cabeza de Vaca as a sign of cultural transformation, a "good European" who called into question the certainties of his own culture. Many



Still from *Cabeza de Vaca*, Nicolás Echevarría, Mexico, 1990, 35mm, 112 min.  
Courtesy the Toronto International Film Festival, Film Reference Library.

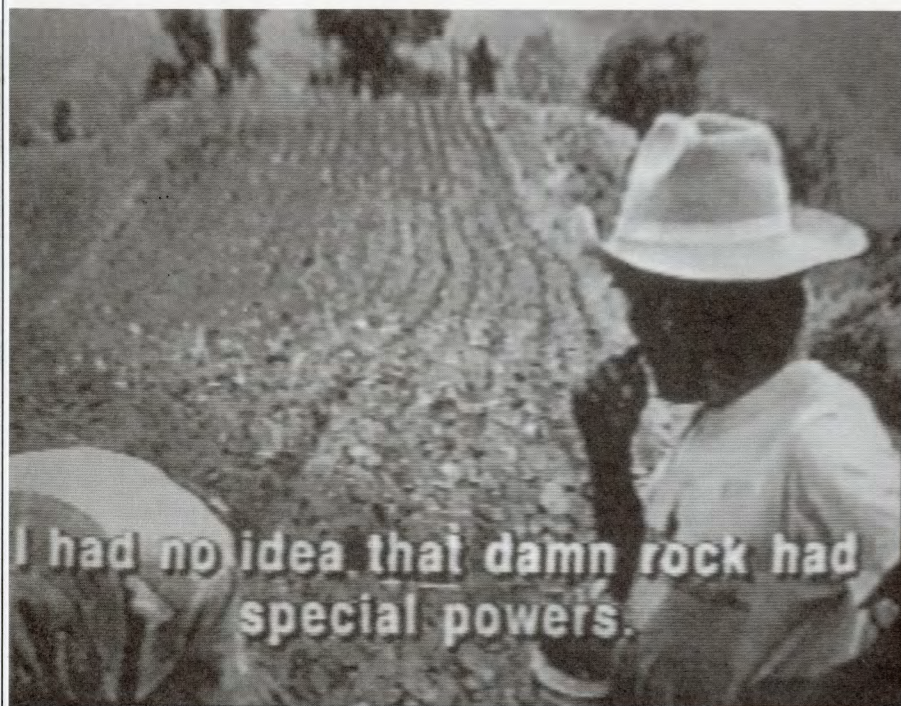
people seem to continue to want it both ways: the European remains in charge, the colonial project is not seriously challenged, but the Western individual can access another reality through an encounter with another culture.

The insistence that Cabeza de Vaca questioned the constraints of his culture becomes even stranger when we read what he actually had to say about his magical abilities. In *Naufragios* he writes:

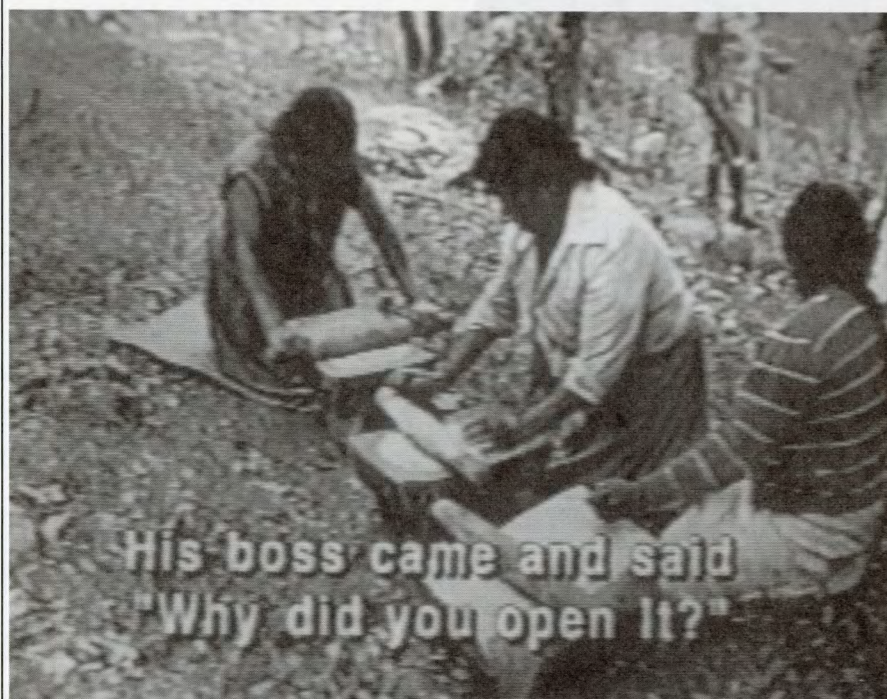
The islanders wanted to make physicians of us without examination or a review of diplomas. Their method of cure is to blow on the sick, the breath and the laying on of hands supposedly casting out the infirmity. They insisted we should do this too and be of some use to them... they withheld food from us until we complied.... Our method, however, was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria*, and pray earnestly to God our Lord for their recovery. When we concluded with the sign of

From *Retorno a Aztlán*, Juan Mora Catlett, 1990, Mexico, 35mm, 90 min.





Stills from *Viko Ndute* [Water Celebration],  
Emigdio Julián Caballero, Mexico, 1995, video, 21 min.  
Stills courtesy of A Space.



the cross, He willed that our patients should directly spread the news that they had been restored to health.<sup>1</sup>

The fact is, Cabeza de Vaca had a real problem. He had to explain what he had been doing in those eight years he was outside the purview of the institutional authority of Christian Spain, and he had to be extremely clear that in no way had he gone over to the other side. Apostasy was a capital offence. The healing practices he describes are wholly articulated within orthodox Christian doctrine, something Cabeza de Vaca would have had to negotiate extremely carefully to allay any suspicion of heterodoxy or idolatry. Except for the sentence in the long quotation above, there is no description of Native healing practices. Moreover, later in the text he sheds light on his motives for healing: "now this cure so inflated our fame all over the region that we could control whatever the inhabitants cherished." This sentence suggests that the colonial "magic" embodied by the *Pater noster* will win the Spaniards the goods and territories they covet.

There is no way of knowing what really happened with the historical Cabeza de Vaca, but what is interesting is the way he has been celebrated as a shaman whose skills are completely individualized. Echoing the narratives of Western modernism, Native cultures in *Cabeza de Vaca* function as raw material, backdrop and vehicle for the conquistador's personal story. In every instance European magic is presented as being more powerful than Native magic, and Cabeza de Vaca appears as a much better healer than Native medicine people. The community disappears, the long training of medicine people disappears, and what is reinforced is the twentieth-century idea that magic is a matter of individual power and individual transformation.

### Where Brujos Become Performance Artists

As I prepare to go out, I spill coffee all over my clean clothes. Running out the door, I just miss the streetcar. By reading these signs, I recognize that today will not be a good day. We all read omens as individuals, whether we name it as such or not. Everyone has personal rituals: a friend of mine places all rejection letters in the cat litter box, another wears the same pair of earrings each time she gives a talk. In explicitly

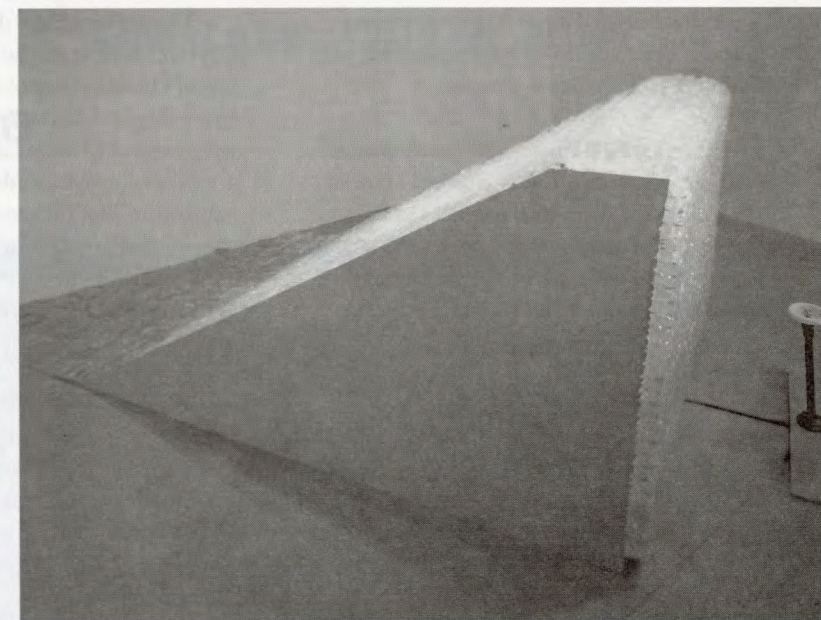
## Life & Life support

magical thought, the "text" of omens and ritual is expanded, and we read not just what affects us personally, but the path of a bird's flight, or the seemingly random arrangement of stones encountered during a walk, events that affect the community as a whole. The vocabulary tends to have to do with the natural world, but the problem is the same: how to read signs and omens, and how to connect these to events occurring in the world.

In cultures that affirm the existence of magical realities, signs and omens are linked to rituals that are in turn linked to the earth and the community. Viewing Emigdio Julián Caballero's videotape from Oaxaca, *Viko Ndute* (1995)<sup>2</sup> at a recent exhibition at A Space gallery, I was struck by the way magical practices are embedded in the community of San Antonio Huitepec. A farmer had a problem with a magical rock in his field, and had to figure out what to do about it, in other words, how to read the signs that the rock offers to him personally and to the community as a whole. He consults a friend, who has had a dream about a solution to the problem, and various members of the farming community act together to perform a ritual that will make the rock happy. An accident caused by lightning was the event that set things into motion, and this event is understood to be connected to dreams, ancestor stories and community rituals, all of which refer to the natural world. Like everyday life itself, magic can present us with annoying demands: the farmer says: "I had no idea that damn rock had special powers." (Watching a tape like this in Toronto can illustrate the prejudices of the north, when the farmers sacrificed a goat to feed the earth, the people sitting next to me flinched and murmured disapprovingly). The point is that magic and ritual exist simultaneously in this world and in another world, and to recognize this entails responsibilities that at times are onerous.

For the farmers of San Antonio Huitepec, magic is part of everyday life. However, with the meeting of cultures it is also possible to be a witness to the intersection of art, magic, and the everyday here. We encounter a different kind of everyday in Rebecca Belmore's installation work on view at the Power Plant, *Temple*,<sup>3</sup> we encounter that basic substance of life: water. Belmore has brought together water in different forms, first in plastic bags stacked against a pyramid-like structure. This shows us that even the most natural elements of life can be subject to the forces of power and spectacle. Water then appears in the form of a public drinking fountain, which reminds us that civil society mediates our access to the natural world. Finally, the spectator climbs a staircase to view Lake Ontario through a periscope. The natural world is out there, and our task is to recognize the extent to which our perception of it is veiled by the culture in which we live. Although *Temple* does not explicitly address spirituality, by combining the different appearances of a natural element in such a way to make us question the everyday reality we inhabit, Belmore has created ritual space and offered us a map through the mediations that many of us take for granted. In effect, Belmore reads the signs and omens of a dying earth and, like the magician, brings different elements together to show us the path to another world.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Border Brujo* (Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Isaac Arntenstein, 1991) constructs a space where magical possibilities can be imagined, and returns us to the politicized, community



*Temple*, Rebecca Belmore, 1996, detail. Photo: Cheryl O'Brian, courtesy The Power Plant.

base of ceremonial practices. If one of the legacies of modernism is a desire for the exotic, Gómez-Peña shows us the error in how many of us look for difference by calling the glamour of the exotic into question.

Gómez-Peña disrupts the rigidity of stereotypical images of the shaman by manipulating the objects that represent Mexican "irrationality." In *Border Brujo* he lights candles in front of a magical altar, but the artist's body itself becomes a kind of altar, loaded down with the ritual objects of the colonial imaginary, including a banana necklace, pearl necklace, skeleton earrings, bandanna, sombrero, sunglasses, bullet bandolier, and a boa made of pink ostrich feathers. This reminds us that the magician's body is marked by colonial history, and that to encounter magical reality requires a willingness to confront the everyday lived experience of this history. By using objects that represent commodified images of Mexican spirituality, he is able both to undermine the power of these stereotypes, and to expose the yearning for magical reality experienced by so many alienated intellectuals in the twentieth century. For Gómez-Peña, the problem is not the fact that many living in the

cities of the technological north long for magic, but the way this need has been commodified in a neo-colonial market economy. Gómez-Peña makes this explicit when he tells his audience: "I need dollars, you need magic: a perfect transaction."

In his book, *Warrior for Gringostroika*, Gómez-Peña speaks of his encounters with shamans and medicine people:

Far from being austere and contemplative, they were courageously engaged in social reality, and their ritual practices took place in specific political contexts, such as the struggles for land or human rights. They were also rowdy, quite theatrical, and didn't regard mass culture as a threat to their "authenticity."<sup>4</sup>

If one of the errors of the modernist understanding of magic is to look for it in the strange and exotic, this passage reminds us that magic isn't about individual transformation and individual power, or the strange and grotesque. It doesn't occur some place else. For magic to be more than an alluring abstraction, it must be part of our lives, including our social and political experiences. By abandoning expectations of strangeness, we can see the magical possibilities in art that transforms appearances in order to offer us access to another reality and tell us something unexpected about our everyday relation to the natural world. Contemporary work such as that of Gómez-Peña and Belmore can reveal to us the links between magic, art, and history, but it is up to us to find the path out of the isolation and despair that is the consequence of an absence of spiritual practice. Belmore's *Temple* was successful precisely because it did not call itself magic, yet as a work of art it did many of the things that magical ritual does. Similarly, Gómez-Peña recognizes that magic is a political practice linked to everyday life, and refuses to claim an equivalence between art and magic.

In Belmore and Gómez-Peña's work, art and magic are constituted in relation to everyday reality. At the same time, it is important to remember that the art gallery does not precisely constitute this "everyday reality," but exists as a privileged space that is part of the market economy and is linked to what can be a cynical and unpleasant scale of values. The point of art would seem

to be to express something that cannot quite be said in language, to generate another way of looking at things, another reality, but it is not quite ritual, most importantly because it is abstracted from a community that shares both culture and a magical symbolic system.

The art language deployed by Belmore and Gómez-Peña makes their work accessible to the North American viewer, but because their understanding of culture is historically and politically grounded, they are able to create a space beyond static, commodified images of difference. A potential problem with explicitly magical art is that it can be a way of containing magic in the art gallery, and in so doing render it passive. For example, I can attend an art exhibition that utilizes images of, say, Haitian voodoo but chances are I lack the vocabulary and cultural context to make voodoo part of my everyday life. This means I will tend to have a passive relation to the magical reality embodied by the work, and there is a risk that such work will end up being a mere representation of another world rather than something that creates that world. In attempting to think through the relation between magic and art, works such as *Temple* and *Border Brujo* make it possible to open up conceptions of what magic is. That for many of us our only encounter with magic is in an urban art gallery does not negate the ability of both art and magic to construct another reality, but the gallery work should provide the viewer with a map of that reality, as does the work of Gómez-Peña and Belmore.

### A Possible Ritual

I imagine another part of town, and a magician who gathers together objects that represent the meanspirited government under which we live, smashes them with a hammer and cuts them into small pieces and removes them from sight. She then takes objects that represent positive action and puts them on a table with flowers and food and images of people working together. We can see these objects, and we can see that it is done. Does this change anything? Does the government suddenly start funding artists? Probably not, but those of us viewing the objects are able to perceive in a very concrete way what a different configuration of power would look like, which has the effect of breaking the stasis of fear and hopelessness. We gaze at the assemblage of objects on the table and remember that it is always rigidity that works against the enemy. Political magic disrupts this rigidity, turns it against itself, and causes a shift, if only in the way we react to the inflexibility we face around us.

**Deborah Root is the author of *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1996). This project was completed with the support of the Ontario Arts Council Arts Writing Program.**

#### Notes

1. Cabeza de Vaca, *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*, trans. Cyclone Covey (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), p. 64.
2. *Viko Ndute* was part of the "New Video from Chiapas and Oaxaca" show at A Space gallery in Toronto (11–29 June, 1996), curated by Ian Reid.
3. *Temple* was part of the "Liaisons" show at The Power Plant Gallery in Toronto (19 April–16 June, 1996), curated by Louise Dompierre.
4. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1993), p. 18.

# life & life support systems

zines, nets & outlets by artists--

the late '70s & some now

by judith doyle

### preface.archive

The old  
warehouse  
burned  
furiously.  
And with it my  
matches.  
—Patti Smith &  
Tom Verlaine,  
*The Night*,  
Aloes Books  
1976, London.

In a dark space made close by the crush of people, reading after performance after art band took stage; in between were film strips—scratched castoffs from the trim bin of pop cinema, spun by Martin Heath, the archivist film DJ *par excellence*, on his rattling 16mm projector. It was a hot night in May 1979, at 466 Bathurst St., one of the potent array of self-funded venues and publications set up in Toronto in the late '70s. They formed brief allegiances and working



Martin Heath in the projection booth at the 317 Spadina Ave. Rear CineCycle, June 1991. The front wall of the booth had not yet been built, allowing a full view of his projectors. Photo: John Porter.

crews, using borrowed office machines and low or no-rent spaces to create telecommunications networks, storefront window exhibits, film and performance venues, programs in bars, photocopied publications and distribution networks for books, films and videos. Now, these working methods proliferate again in an environment of cutbacks and constraints.

This network of short texts—reminiscences,

quotes, opinions—taps into this rich vein of Toronto history and activity, as a start for a longer project. It is also the first stage of a website I am developing. I hope it will be accessed as an archive and rendezvous point, not an artifact that "makes us history" through selective closure. But the reality of using the web is less like surfing than wading—up to your eyeballs—in a sea of junk mail. The good stuff is

buried deep in cybersilt. At best, the hypercommercialized Internet is an adjunct to our local, embodied contexts—word-of-mouth grapevines, rented buildings and small-run printed matter. Perhaps we can use the web, critically, as a cross-referencing tool, one among many circulation systems linking people, ideas, images, forgotten and out-of-print texts, anecdotes and forwarding addresses.

## foreword.grants

It seems improbable that we suffer from a "lack of history." Perhaps, instead, we suffer from a lack of articulated histories, any history which is not constructed from within the narrow confines of an "art" discourse, within the confines of state-funded documentation and promotion. Perhaps it is not the history we lack, but an acknowledgment and interest in art practices and art politics that stray too far from the cultural mandate of the status quo.

—Dot Tuer, "The CEAC was Banned in Canada," *C Magazine*, 1986.

There is a strange calm as artists watch the immolation of government cultural funding in Ontario by the politically ascendant right. Other issues, like past and recent censorship, triggered more vocal and coordinated actions. Why hasn't a broad-based artists' coalition emerged to oppose the cuts yet? In this era of "workfare" purges when subeconomic babysitting gigs are prosecuted as social assistance fraud, does it seem outrageously self-interested to request, accept or mount a spirited defense of arts grants? Is it shock, guilt feelings, or a "lay low and weather the storm" sense of resignation? Or have artists have been making do with next to nothing for so long, nothing doesn't seem so big a stretch.

In the context of cuts, the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) awarded a \$75,000 "Venture Fund" grant to Bravo!FACT this year for a TV series of ad-length minidocumentaries "about" art. Most of the jurors who will dole this money out to producers will be CHUM-CITY staff. The projects will be screened in gaps between international flicks that are available for rent in any video store. Bravo! will placate CRTC regulators about CAN-CON requirements, and simultaneously avoid showing longer, independent film and video by Ontario artists. OAC's role in this project brings to mind 1980, when the Ontario Arts Council gave an indirect "grant" to the Ontario Censor Board, to pay censorship fees for the Funnel Experimental Film Centre. The OAC has, reluctantly or enthusiastically, long been in the business of brokering the arts through an array of government and corporate agendas. Now, as the reigning Conservatives and aristocratic benefactors headed by the Chalmers family pull out of OAC, artists pause before leaping wholesale to the defense of an arts bureaucracy that, by any analysis, isn't always accountable to artists.

Recent histories published by artist-run centres give scant attention to self-funded cultural practice, mostly noting it as a form of cultural collateral that registers as "deferral" on the line-items of grant applications, used to validate the next round of funding requests. The fact that artists are deliberately working outside

the subsidized model is minimized at best, and frequently dismissed. Except for the creatively or administratively impaired, the oddballs and sociopaths, self-funded publications and venues are portrayed as stepping stones for young artists and writers on the road to stable, subsidized careers and programming structures, and as fresh veins of cool new blood for the corporate culture milieu. This myth echoes through granting agencies, that rationalize themselves as social service stations en route to full participation in the culture industries. It has been internalized by even the most non-commercial artists, who reference their subsistence and practice in terms of civil-service unions, social service agencies, and nation-building bureaucracies.

Arguably, state funding plays a minor, though significant, role in the meager finances of most artists. The real funding bases for marginal and oppositional culture are volunteerism, hobbyism and do-it-yourselfism. Much of this art circulates through a network of microdistribution entities that are localized, transitory, embodied, and opposed to vertical integration and economies of scale, the monopoly mechanisms of corporate culture. The artist-run centres have internalized corporate and bureaucratic models, and this process has been actively encouraged in successive restructurings of cultural funding programs, as they adapt to power. Maybe it's time to own our self-funded production and distribution, and to include it in our cultural analysis.



We live in a mechanical age. It is an age of steel and electricity. Motors and carbon lights have come to be as familiar to us as horses and candles used to be, until we have to become a mechanic to-day in order to be of any particular use to society or ourselves. We cannot be happy and be simple any longer. We have been converted into strange forms, run on the electric principle, and controlled by the pushing of a button. If we appear to go wild sometimes and cut wide figures down the middle of the road, it is because we have pressed the wrong button. It is not safe to trust ourselves on the street for fear we shall suddenly dash off without anyone at the switch. Nobody is safe any more.

## marketing.colony

The money [the US networks] earn from their shows in Canada probably wouldn't cover Disney/ABC boss Michael Eisner's annual bonus; one post-Superbowl, 30-second commercial for *Friends* earns the US network nearly as much as an entire season of one sitcom on a Canadian network.

—John Haslett Cuff, "Television," *The Globe and Mail*, July 15, 1996, p. C1.

Canada is a small market for corporate culture monoliths like SONY, Disney and



Time-Warner. Its importance is ideological. The success formulas of cultural conglomerates are being promoted. These are vertical integration—the corporate structure that maximizes profit through control of all aspects of research, production, promotion, distribution and spin-offs—and economies of scale—the strategy of maximizing profits by saturating the market with the largest possible number of units of a cultural product at once. Although Canada isn't a player in this superheavyweight Olympiad, our funding agencies haven't

spearheaded the defense of alternative models. Bureaucrats at film funding agencies wear their best business drag while meddling in the scripts and all aspects of production of local films, supposedly championing the commercial viability of these "properties." But these are quasi-moguls; their imitation-corporate overlordship occurs in a another, miniature universe from mass-market profit margins, because Canadian cultural producers never had access to the mass culture distribution system, which is controlled in Canada as elsewhere by an ever-smaller elite of US-based monopolies and their Canadian print and electronic counterparts, like Hollinger, Thompson and TorStar, that are openly hostile to state-culture funding and protectionism.



Left & below: from a facsimile transmission series from Judy Rifka in NYC to Rumour Publications in Toronto, 1978.

## equipment acquisition

Artist-run centres have also internalized market-driven metaphors to somehow rationalize our continuing existence.

The money comes and the material purchased becomes obsolete (through use) in several years. The programme established or furthered by the equipment previously purchased is now a form of symbolic capital invested by the (centre) and the funding agencies. Requests for upgrading go out, emphasizing the invested aspect, pointing out changes in technology and outlining how technological improvement will enhance the equity resident in the documentation and artifacts produced by the previous and continuing programme. The cycle starts again...requests, funds, obsolescences.

—William Wood, "This is Free Money?," *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver 1993, p. 182.

The reciprocity between cultural funding and the accumulation of collateral assets unfolds in the activities and maintenance of the artist-run equipment access centres, and in those of the cultural agencies. Hardware is the pretext to rationalize the continuation of both. The contestable assumption here is that it is costly but

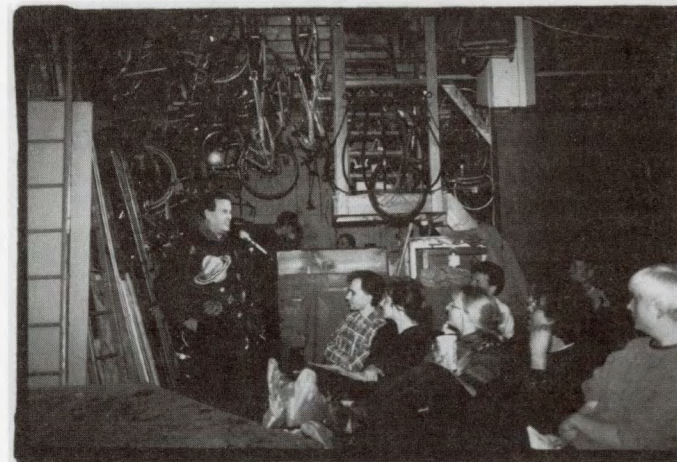
essential for artists to have access to the newest technology, whether it is to achieve "industry standard" quality, to provide low-cost "R & D" services, or to critically inhabit it before its commercial purposing is completely locked. If in

fact this "critical inhabitation" of technology has led to social change, the effects have been thinly documented. Contrast this spiral of upgrades with the dumpster-diving, cast-off collecting, borrowing and bricolage that sustains marginal self-funded publication and exhibition. Almost all "marginal" producers engage in recycling and repurposing obsolete imagery and technology. The bad xerox collage is emblematic of this cycle of garbage-scoring, tinkering, breakdown, cannibalizing and reconfiguring.





L. to R.: Holly, Gwendolyn, Morgana and Annie at Artefact for a screening of their film *Out of the Blue*, February 28, 1988.



Kenneth Anger speaking to the audience at CineCycle, April 10, 1992, during a retrospective presented by Public Access and the AGO.



Members of the Shake Well collective at CineCycle, January 14, 1993. L. to R.: Zoë Hamilton, Jenny Keith, Kim Kutner, Clare Lawlor. Members not present include Joey Myers and Louise Liliefeldt.

Above photos: John Porter.

### symptom hall.space

Symptom Hall is an ex-Lithuanian Hall run since 1993 by a group of art students and graduates as a performance venue. It is one in a long lineup of self-funded art venues financed, not by grants, not by corporate tax write-offs, not by wealthy collectors or aristocratic private foundations, but by booze cans and Joe jobs. Symptom Hall survives by subletting the space, which was originally occupied by Martin Heath's CineCycle, then Kensington Carnival, who drew on the services of an anarchist plumber to upgrade the building to code. At Symptom Hall, a lot has happened in the quest to make \$2,700 a month rent for almost four years. Sadly, in order to pay the rent, Symptom Hall charges nightly rental rates (about \$250) that are too rich for some self-funded promoters or collectives to break even.

Symptom Hall was initiated by the performance collectives Shaved Monkey, Phredded Phred, Pow Pow Unbound and Shake Well. The Shake Well artists share an interest in the representation of women's bodies through new technology. Shake Well began by organizing performance nights at CineCycle. Moderated by the hilarious dyke performer Clare Lawlor, long lineups of performers arrived with voice, music, sound effects, key lighting, slides and moving-image projection requirements in what invariably became a last-minute logistical nightmare for the small band of organizers who doubled as the tech crew. It is hard to imagine these anarchic groupings of unknown artists with their rickety array of complex technical setups exhibiting anywhere but CineCycle. It would have taken six weeks of paid administrative labour at most artist-run centres even to write a grant application for this unwieldy programming.

In trying to come up with a "rock solid" organizational structure, the artists recently invited me and several others to an "elder's session" to share our stories and survival tips. Consulting with "elders" was only one element in Symptom Hall's multi-pronged survival plan. Other strategies included offering a series of workshops in "Dumpster Diving" and insisting that everyone who attends a meeting bring a 2"x4". We discussed problems in attaining organizational stability without government or corporate money, and traded gossipy anecdotes about takeovers, burnouts, breakdowns and infighting in the artworld of yore.

### phoenix.cinecycle

CineCycle is one of several self-funded spaces that Martin Heath has operated and lived in with his bicycle repair business over the last twenty years. Repeatedly closing up shop under pressure from angry neighbours, he always resurfaces, phoenix-like, with another programming configuration. Martin Heath owns a vast collection of aging projectors and spare parts and offers the service of hauling his hefty "portable" 35mm film projector to screenings in other venues. For marginal and oppositional programmers, this is the only reliable access to 35mm projection.

Martin Heath's spaces and programming have been sustained by many cohorts and tireless volunteers over the ages, who bring some semblance of order to his packrat style of

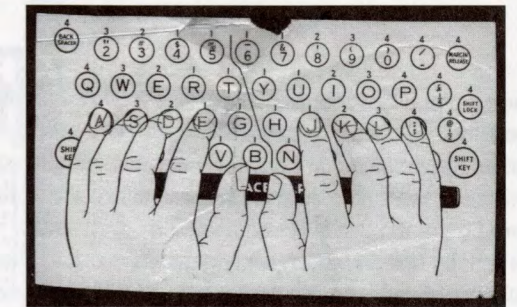
operation. Martin is a "thrift score" expert, a yard-sailing pirate, node in an underground network of nighthawks who cannibalize the growing cinematic scrapyards. His collection of 16mm prints includes Cuban and African third cinema, radical documentary, go-go music shorts, art films, roaring twenties hard-core porn and much more. Teachers and programmers committed to presenting activist film in an historical context have relied on Martin Heath's collection and projection. Artist-run centres and



Andrew Paterson performing at 466 Bathurst, c. 1979.

filmmakers have sublet the CineCycle facility. Marginal programming entities such as the Pleasure Dome and Shake Well inhabit CineCycle, especially at the points in their existence when they have no money.

Many "Cinemateque" exhibition venues, festivals and artist-run centres have been well-funded to mount screenings, make archives and build equipment access facilities without providing marginal producers with the consistent access available at Martin's for decades. Funders and some of the alternative arts aristocracy might write off Martin as an obsessive-compulsive anomaly and argue that it is structurally impossible to fund his spaces, let alone expect that his deviance can or should be replicated in the exhibition infrastructure. As individualistic as Martin Heath is, he is not an isolated blip in the matrix of cultural production here; he does not operate in a vacuum. Atomizing his practice erases a history, for Martin Heath is only one gifted member of a legion of cultural producers in this town who for years have moved from one volunteer formation to another—publishing, programming, working on live art venues, in retail outlets, participating in committees and cultural working groups. This disruptive, nomadic art workforce perennially operates with only the most tenuous links to administrative sinecures in stable, well-funded art power-bases.



### ancient futures.the net

There are rich historical links between junkyard-dog equipment stashes and Paleolithic cyborg theory and experiments with new communications technology. This technological work explores distribution potential and ramifications, rather than superior "grain free" image-making production capabilities. Early art telecommunications experiments in Toronto were a product of the self-funded "marginal milieu" that published zines and set up performances at 466 Bathurst, Martin Heath's space in 1978–81.

I have a hazy vision of the day when we all will have access to a computer network containing the entire body of known facts. In the meantime, we must start to construct our own network from our own shared needs.... The Computerized Arts Network... is now being implemented in two geographically displaced computing nodes, New York and Toronto.... Although CAN facilities are now going on line, this network is in a primitive developmental stage....

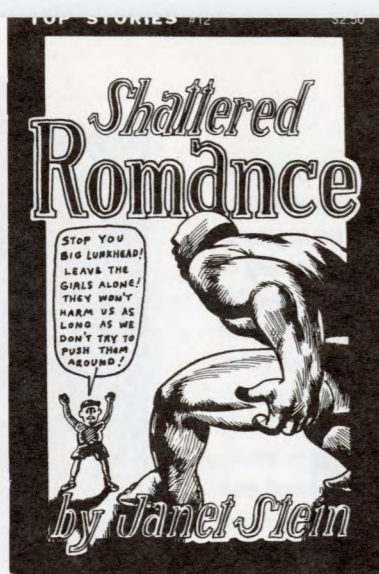
[Many] aspects of CAN must be discussed if we intend to create a workable global communications network. And if we don't do it, others, with their rather than our interests at heart, will."  
—Willoughby Sharp,  
"WORLDPOOL: A Call for Global Community Communications,"  
*Only Paper Today*, December 1978, p 9.

In 1978, less than a block from Symptom Hall in a former Ukrainian jewelry shop in a seedy, Queen Street west-of-Bathurst location, Fred Gaysek, Kim Todd and I opened Rumour, a storefront to produce and distribute

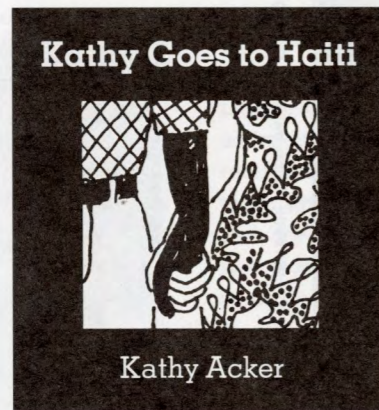


zine-type publications; two of us lived upstairs. The cheap xerox pamphlets and artists' books didn't pay for themselves and weren't meant to. There were no grants. We survived and paid the rent by collaboratively writing novelizations of horror movies and giving workshops on topics like, "How to Not Make Money From Your Art." Victor Coleman, A Space and Coach House Press Founder, published *Only Paper Today* there, after the tabloid was ousted from A Space in 1979. Rumour published xerox books and pamphlets, including the first printing of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* by Kathy Acker, and zine-type books and pamphlets by Philip Monk, Willoughby Sharp, Judy Rifka, Brian Kipping and others, and held rotating exhibitions in the window including John Greyson's first show which prompted a bizarre police interrogation. The local Ukrainians were concerned that his project, which involved the daily unfurling of red clothing items from a garbage bag, signaled the arrival of a Communist sect in the neighbourhood.

Rumour Publications hosted WORLDPOOL, Toronto's first continuous computerized arts network node (primitive Internet site). The group met weekly and was open to all. Artist and Ontario College of Art (OCA) electronic animator Norman White was a founder and many artists, theoreticians and young proto-hackers attended, hearing about WORLDPOOL through the arts and computer mailboxing grapevines. Interactive telenetworking by computer mailbox, slow-scan video and "facsimile transceivers" (the first demo portable fax machines) was often accompanied by a meal in these "dine on line" evenings. WORLDPOOL remained on-line from 1978 until 1981. Artists' distributed digital database networks of the 1970s are ignored in official histories of the Internet, that jump from early defense applications to the proliferation of modem-linked home computers in the mid-eighties. Art on the net did not begin with the defense department, techno-nerds, the McLuhan Institute, the OCA "Photo/Electric Arts" Department, the



#12 from the series TOP STORIES, 1982. Published by Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York.



Cover artwork by Robert Kushner. Rumour Publications, Toronto, 1978.



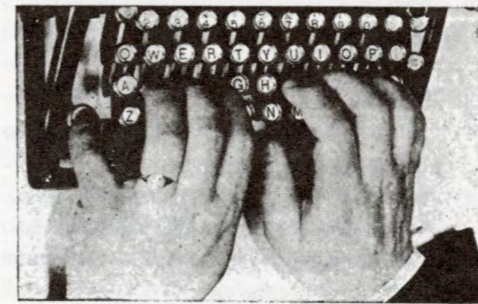
Rumour Publications pamphlet series, Judy Rifka, Toronto, 1978.

Art Research Centre (ARC), and certainly not the "established" subsidized video art centres and their entourages, though all these groupings became involved with WORLDPOOL.

By the beginning of the '80s, Rumour, WORLDPOOL and a number of other spaces and programming entities were sermonizing in print and workshops on grant-free do-it-yourself art survival tricks. Like rave now, these artists twisted business imagery into insignia—clip art of telephones, urgent memo pads, logos, graphs and charts. A performance series was billed with the sub-title, "An Anti-Granto Production." That many younger and punk artists were disenfranchised from the grant system was only part of it. The attitude was that grant procedures and regulations were creatively and politically compromising. Self-funded venues were less subject to "prior approval" mechanisms, allowing for more spontaneous creation and dissemination of art, and a certain dissolving of the barrier between artists and audiences, producers and consumers. The Cabana Room was established in 1979 by Susan Britton and Robin Wall. Britton's 1979 letter of resignation from A Space registers this anxiety about artists' links to government:

Call me paranoid but, it is my opinion that in Canada artists are encouraged to pay their bureaucratic dues. In fact, it's likely that early in his or her career a Canadian artist may suddenly realize that he or she is hanging out with none other than agents of the federal government!... My suggestion is to loosen the obnoxiously close relationship between artists and funding bodies.... I think artists should reinvent the artworld rather than just fitting in where they can.

—Susan Britton, letter of resignation as A Space's "Visual Arts Curator," July 24, 1979.



### performance.women's work

In my files, I found an unpublished story by Kathy Acker wedged in with material for a performance night at Martin Heath's, blacks of the smeary typewriting so dark and sensuous—there is a sense of obscure violation.

#### "The Scorpions": excerpt from Janey's diary

My friends were just like me. They were desperate—the products of broken families, poverty—and they were trying everything to escape their misery. Despite the restrictions of school, we did exactly what we wanted and it was good. We got drunk. We used drugs. We fucked.

We sexually hurt each other as much as we could. The speed, emotional overload, and pain every now and then dulled our brains. Demented our perceptory apparatus. We knew we couldn't change the shit we were living in so we were trying to change ourselves. —Kathy Acker, "The Scorpions," draft manuscript, 1978. (in the margin, Acker has scrawled, "French girl, fat lady, middle-aged shriveled man." These are my parts to read at Martin's)...

Much of the history of performance by women in Toronto is buried in the artists' filing cabinets. Depending on how you look at it, live art by women either thrives or subsists in the self-funded margins. Certainly, many women never get off the "stepping stone" of this invisible economy. A 1980 listing in SLATE magazine for the Cabana Room of the Spadina Hotel includes art bands (The Lounge Lizards from New York, The Government), a video night, and several evenings of performance cabaret. Susan Britton and Robin Wall, the Cabana Room producer/programmers, put a spotlight on live art by women; some worked as hack writers and arts bureaucrats; others, like Margaret Dragu and Electra, worked as strippers. Many of the rants, readings and actions deployed the feminist strategy of representing women's work (housewife, stripper, typist), in various breeds of "femme drag" attenuated to the registers of neurosis, anxiety humour or violence. The Cabana Room stage was puny, tech support minimal, and the crowded smoky booze-soaked ambiance fueled lapses and eruptions in the levels of audience attention and interaction. Perhaps the Cabana Room's fatal flaw was its lack of critical self-awareness around issues of performance, confrontation and controls; a performer (Margaret Dragu) was attacked by a "neoist" audience member

who argued that his degrading "intervention" that included pulling a tampon out, was an art initiative. In retrospect, it is hard to fathom how everybody just stood there—the artists in the room didn't boot the guy out or make plain that this wasn't their idea of art.

The art community's ambivalence about the attack and the performer's ensuing court case signaled the Cabana Room's demise and underlined the lack of a women's/feminist art venue in Toronto, an absence subsequently addressed by the Women's Cultural Building Collective. The name here is misleading because, although the collective was formed in a doomed attempt to inhabit the dreary and dying Pauline McGibbon Cultural Centre, the WCBC lived on as a nomadic programming entity, focusing on feminist performance and humour. An ideological formation took shape with the foundation of the WCBC in the aftermath of the Cabana Room debacle: feminist space=safe working environment=a place free of drunk punks. One could argue that the emphasis on safety was accompanied by a toning-down of content. The stances of punk-laced women's live art at the Cabana Room were less in evidence at the WCBC events—satire displaced provocative anxiety; mocking critiques of sexist popular culture and family life eclipsed noir-ish erotically-charged accounts of addiction, poverty, sexual power and sexual violence. Farce replaced in-your-face displays of anger and defiance.

As a footnote, *Kathy Goes To Haiti*, written by Kathy Acker and originally published in an edition of 1,000 by Rumour Publications in 1979 in Toronto, was

### THE CABANA ROOM



Upstairs at the Spadina Hotel  
Opens July 20th

**RUMOUR**

Kathy Acker

Reading Friday Feb. 23  
9.00 p.m.  
466 Bathurst St.  
\$2

recently republished by Grove Press in a triptych of novels called *Literat Madness*. The Grove edition was held at the border by Canada Customs as allegedly pornographic. Of course, they didn't know the book was already here.

## gender.performance



We created this production company to give voice to a new aesthetic—a girl gang, gender-fuck, engaged/enraged aesthetic. Not that the boy's aren't welcome.... Look around. Where are the forums for sexy, angry multi-talented performers. Enough already of this limiting notion of spoken-word OR music OR readings OR film events. We want it all!  
—*Dirty Babette's mission statement, 1995*

Abrasive, class-critical, sexually loaded performance is erupting again in the '90s in self-funded venues as an assault against the resurgence of evangelical "family values" and the scapegoating of poverty. Dirty Babette Productions is a sporadic series of cabarets produced by dyke writer/performer Christy Cameron. Bars and private houses are inhabited for evenings with long, shifting line-ups of performers. The programming emphasis is on dyke/core reading-rants and media art, transgendered performance, pseudo-sex shows, and audience dress-up (the audiences are huge, unruly and interactive). Shows produced include Cabaret LesboMonde (Toronto & Montreal 1994); Drag, Slag & Skag Bash (1995), In Harm's Way (1995) and Piss Elegant Wank (1996). The latter received "sponsorship" from CKLN in the form of free radio ads (CKLN provides this essential exposure resource to a wide array of self-funded, community-based ventures), and part of the proceeds went to Maggie's (Toronto Prostitutes' Community Service Project).

Dirty Babette's was formed in part because Christy Cameron was "banned"

from Buddies in Bad Times, which has evolved to become the official venue for local queer theatre. Exclusion from subsidized, artist-run centres has always been a powerful incentive for the formation of new programming venues and collectivities in Toronto. "Exclusion" runs the gamut from outright banning, to systemic privileging of older artists (the generation who founded the space persists in showcasing its own peers), through the range of exploitative strategies (younger artists receive second-rate pay and treatment, emerging artists are used to advance the careers of established programmers, improper credit is given, young volunteers get joe jobs and are denied decision-making authority in matters of their own representation, selection occurs through personal favoritism and the casting couch, there is rampant racism and sexism, various art forms are excluded as naive or politically retrograde). Nomadic programming in bars eludes the rent problem. Some police harassment still occurs (a Dirty Babette event at the Cameron House was closed down for "overcrowding"). Programming in a bar may evade the internal and external censorship problems that have usually hounded this breed of work in heavily scrutinized gallery and performance venues including Buddies.

In the early and mid-'80s, "Open Screening" nights at the censor-harassed and now defunct Funnel Experimental Film Centre became an important venue for queerpunk performers and filmmakers. The



queercore zine *Dr. Smith* promoted the screenings and called for submissions including "Pro-it home movies/lavender liberation flicks/films that don't make money/groovy films/wacky queer films." The Toronto zine *J.D.s* founded by dyke artist GB Jones, later including Bruce La Bruce as co-editor, is renowned as a prototypical zine for the queer-punk movement; it also marks a connection with no-budget film.



## do it yourself ethos — zines

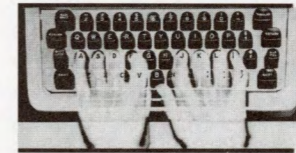
However varied, anarchic and obsessively individualistic zines are, together they form a significant, expanding oppositional culture model; zine producers, weaned on the soup of pop culture, underemployed as an effect of the widening divisions of wealth resulting from economies of scale and consolidation of ownership, are electing to operate outside the mass market instead of seeking a microniche in it. The most activist of these do-it-yourself producers also boycott *consumption* of corporate product—some drug and alcohol-free urban vegan punks do not buy or sell books, films or music by artists who have "crossed the line" of independent production.

Zine culture is an alternative—not a stepping stone—to the mass market. Zine producers opt for dissemination outside the retail infrastructure—mail, handouts between friends, small zine fairs, listings in other zines and "catalogue" publications like *Factsheet Five*. Zines are vertically-integrated, but on a micro-scale. Usually, the core of participants numbers five or less. Often, one person is responsible for every aspect of creation, production and dissemination.

Contrary to vertically integrated mass media, there are no economies of scale to the photocopied print runs. Rejecting or abandoning the goal of remuneration for cultural labour (art work for pay), most zine-makers try to break even on production costs, ironically comparing the time spent to leisure activities like golf, or more politically, to anarchist street activism. Unlike 'artist union' initiatives or proto-business industrial culture, it is part of the zine ethos that people are unpaid for their creative labour; on the "take" end of this ethos of exchange, zine culture flagrantly violates copyright, reproducing, effacing and violating mass culture images, reprinting, recycling, rewriting and responding to material from other zines.

## robot writing

The connection between Rumour (a literary zine publisher), and WORLDPOOL (a node in an arts/communications technology network), was elaborated in a species of theoretical fiction. A precursor to cyber-critique, this writing by artists was steeped in discourse from other fields: structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, physics, artificial intelligence books and bulletins from the Architecture Machine Group at MIT. The texts combined theory, fandom, sex fantasy and do-it-yourself pragmatic instructions. The network was speculative, playing itself out across a shifting surface of performance art venues, alternative art publications, street poster projects, mail exchanges and grainy facsimile and slow-scan video transmissions. For example, "Model for a Prose Algorithm" was an early manifesto on the potential character of interactive art fiction:



Connections are contingent, interchangeable—like the Perverse Telephone Network (A sub-network sending and receiving interactive pornography using new audio, video, and facsimile transceivers and the existing telephone system)....

Inserts, challenges, breakdown—a text without pre-determined sequence must prepare itself for all of these, for how can we determine this text's completion? At this point, the model of the network applies—impossible to locate, its coordinates are very shifty. The text is immediately implemented in any given transmission; more than vulnerable to transgressions, it seems composed by them at every point. Effective and effectable, it is a fictive effect.

—*Judith Doyle, Model for a Prose Algorithm, Only Paper Today, vol. 6, no. 8, 1979.*

This "robot writing"—techno-theoretical fiction and performance scripts by women in the late '70s—subverted techno-

logical metaphors. It stroked the sexual body of the robot, posited sado-masochistic surveillance games, attempted to inhabit signals and break them down like a mutant noise virus. Adele Freedman's 1979 description, like most popular press about this art, is a hopelessly confused mess, contrasting the ludicrous spectacle of performance for the slow-scan camera with a load of techno-mumbo-jumbo:

On International Women's Day, using the telefacsimile transceiver lent them by Xerox, Doyle and friends hooked up by image with artists in Boulder, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Pender Island, New York and Buffalo.

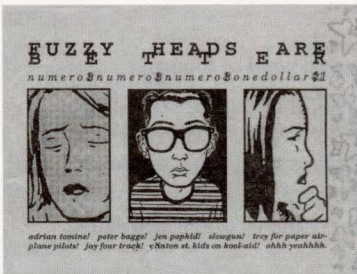
Two hundred Toronto networkers looked on as Doyle performed her interpretation of the life of a secretary—at one point she hurled her typewriter into the air—and sent facsimiles of her 12-frame performance to six different locations by picking up the telephone connected to a robot, which turns sound signals into 8-second video scans.  
—*Adele Freedman, "Overlapping key to house of glass," The Globe and Mail, June 16, 1979.*

## pamphlets.women's work

Files full of stone-age faxes, home-made postcards and pamphlets are the residue from Rumour's close creative link with Anne Turyn, responsible for publication projects and readings at Hallwalls Gallery in Buffalo. *Top Stories*, a pamphlet series she edited, included a wide array of writing and image/text hybrids by women: new fiction, performance scripts, photo-novels and comics, each by an individual author, including Laurie Anderson, Constance de Jong, Jenny Holzer, Kathy Acker, Janet Stein and many others. The *Top Stories* pamphlets received some NEA funding, were priced between \$1.50 and \$2.50 and sold in a few stores. However, as with zines, the vast majority of distribution was through the mails, often for trades with women who were writing/publishing them-

elves. "Top Stories," a precursor to the powerful flood of zine activity by "riot girls" in the late '80s and '90s, marks an axis of shared content and distribution tactics between women artists utilizing language in their performances and publications. Points of intersection include the unapologetic use of first-person accounts and personal experience; cannibalized imagery from lingerie and fashion advertising, home economics texts, typing manuals and so on targeted at women, reworked into defiant new insignia; recycled family photographs and kiddie cartoons, charged with sexual or personal meanings; and texts that expose the systemic sexism encoded in language, technology and the representation of women's bodies.

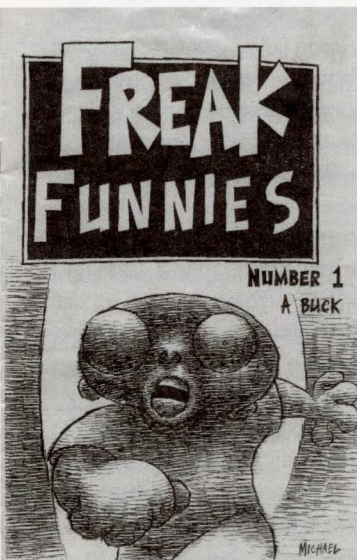
In the past and now, correspondence networking between women goes on, oblivious to nationalisms or



Cover of *Fuzzy Heads Are Better*, no. 3. Published by Patti Kim, 1995.



Cover of *ab imo pectore*, no. 1, by Patti Kim. Published by BHB Press, 1996.



*Freak Funnies*, no. 1, by Michael Pender. Published by Devil Bat Comix, 1994.

state-imposed readings of national culture. Reducing these sensuous, colourful, sticker-laden souvenirs to the form of an "E-Zine" seems impossible, for each collage and tip-in is singular, with the powerful talismanic properties of a gift exchange, yet reveling in a cheapo, thrift-store approach, free of the elite, limited-edition mannerisms of fine art bookworks.

### oca.zines

The Ontario College of Art student publications provided a context for student activism and oppositional art from the mid-'80s on. Collectivities that were spawned there reconfigured outside the school, working in self-funded contexts. In 1988, queer activist and satirist Barry Nichols started *Spurious Emissions*, a xeroxed one-sheet of scathing, sarcastic critique of the OCA administration, illustrated with cut and paste clip art in the spirit of John Heartfield political collage. He was assisted by Deborah Waddington, who in 1990 formed an editorial collective with sex-trade artist-activist Andrew Sorfleet and Symptom Hall founder Jenny Keith, releasing a double issue of *SPU*. The collage-infested mag contained extended critiques—of mass advertising (complete with a map for finding offensive downtown billboards), the exploitation of immigrant contract-workers at OCA, alongside art projects and alternative comix. Sorfleet went on to work at Maggie's Prostitute Centre. Maggie's is a flashpoint for artists, through programming initiatives like *WhoreCulture*, and its zine-type publication *Maggie's Newsletter*. While at Maggie's, Andrew Sorfleet developed his

important analysis of censorship law, and power imbalances between anti-censorship artists and porn workers/consumers. Andrew distributed his research materials in what became a community-access file-folder of clippings and commentary, hand distributed between students, writers and organizers.

In 1992 Paul Lamothe edited *just BITE*, with an anti-homophobia stance, including a comic by Spirit on inadequate wheelchair access at OCA, the truth about cock-sucking by Andrew Sorfleet, fierce caricatures of OCA President Tim Porteous and an article on anarchist sampling and plunderphonic strategies. After this, the OCA administration threatened to cancel the "Publication Seminar," which provided academic support for the student/publishers. Through 1994–95, queer content was nurtured by OCA editors including Raymond Helkio, Christina Zeidler and Laura Cowell, culminating in the "Denying Queerness" issue of *Pushpress*, edited by Marc C. Tremblay. "Denying Queerness" takes issue with the absence of Queer curriculum at OCA. Notable was Marty Bennett's "Internalized Homophobia," a delicious script of a make-believe course called "Cinema of Change: The Art of Gay Porn Film and Video Making: The Recent Years," attended by the Moderator (resembling David McIntosh, instructor of *Cinema and Social Change* in 94/95) and his students: Id, Ego and Super-Ego.

As the Ontario College of Art morphs into the Ontario College of Art and Design,

downsizing, restructuring, and competing for patronage, it seems likely that the radical content prevalent in the student newspapers will disperse into the zines. Recent OCA zines include *ab imo pectore*, *Alternazone* and *Fuzzy Heads Are Better*, edited by Patti Kim, a women-centred, mail-networked zine with music reviews, dryly satiric accounts of everyday life, and interviews with indie cultural producers including musicians, zine publishers, filmmakers and comic artists. *The Remnants* by Dalton Sharp, *Freak Funnies* by Mike Pender and *Cash Grab* by Chris Brimacombe are alternative comix with anti-heroic protagonists negotiating the minefields of popular culture; these xeroxed comix draw on a rich history of classical and alternative comic practice.

*Professionelle*, Marc C. Tremblay's zine of the queer rave and transgendered club scene, inhabits and subverts the fashion-lifestyle mag format, in xerox form. Rave promoters, dancers and DJ's, long engaged in a process of inhabiting the machine while reversing its effects, are active on the Internet, using advanced visual and sonic software. World Wide Web sites like NIMM, organized by rave cultural participants, provide an anthology venue for web sites by artists. *Juice!*, Jame's Gardiner's zine on/for graffiti crews, combines zine and comix approaches. *This is the Salivation Army*, edited by Scott Treleaven, is a pagan-punk-homocore zine with an intelligent, literary edge, with pilferings from other publications, homoerotic collage, and finely-written stories and commentary. These zine's are distributed among friends and

through the mail, paid for by the editor/publishers' part-time jobs.



### retail. books

Bookstores have long been street-level meeting places for artists and writers; in the '70s, Rumour was a zine-store and hangout. Who's Emma, a new volunteer-run book, music and zine store in Kensington Market, was initiated by Alan O'Connor, a Toronto queer-core activist who participated in the early eighties in Nicaragua solidarity actions. At Who's Emma, classic anarchist and activist texts are stocked on shelves alongside *Profane Existence* and *HeartattaCk* (Hard Core), magazines that draw anarchopunk communities to the store. Hard-to-get activist materials, music recordings and zines are available in a coffee bar-type space. Roots are in Chomsky, Goldman, Galeano, with an emphasis on do-it-yourself strategies—for example, *Food Not Guns*, a manual for setting up ad-hoc vegan street theatre food kitchens; *Bomb the Suburbs*—a graffiti crew testimonial/manual from Chicago; and *Beneath the Underground*, abrasive, formative zine critique and history by Bob Black.

The salient feature of the store is its refusal to stock any corporate product. Collective members stress the importance of living the "life" not the "lifestyle." Bands and writers who have "crossed the line" are not sold at Who's Emma.

The store is run by volunteers; orders are taken in person or by fax from a wide array of producers, listeners and readers. The same core of people who operate Who's Emma have set up a music/performance venue—the Laundry Mat—in the basement of a nearby functioning laundromat. Who's Emma operates like a renegade community resource facility—a "safe" space to research, talk and form associations. The fact that the space is volunteer-run and operates outside of grant-based or commercial financial imperatives mirrors the condition of most of the marginal producers whose work circulates there.

### history.books

Since 1990, artist-run centres in Canada have published catalogues and books to commemorate ten, twenty and twenty-five year anniversaries; titles include *YYZ: Decalog* and *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*. *VIDEO re/VIEW* and *Performance Art in Canada* are organized as retrospective inventories. Structurally, these projects stress the longevity and adaptability of the artist-run centres. Aiming for inclusiveness, the long enumerations of exhibitions over the years are an endurance marathon for readers. Perhaps this angle is due for reconsideration.

Coach House Press was Toronto's most experimental literary publisher, closely connected with the writing program at A Space in the '70s. Coach House encouraged micro-publishers like Rumour, and was internationally known for its translations of innovative fiction by women from Quebec. Coach House won't be mounting a nostalgic

end-of-century retrospective, because it is history—dead after a 74 percent cut of \$54,202. from its government of Ontario grants this summer, and the cancellation of a loan guarantee by the Ontario Development Corporation.

[Mike Harris said that] Coach House Press went under not because the province cut its grants to the publisher but because "they can't compete in the marketplace" ... (that) the company blames the province for its demise "probably speaks to their management capabilities." Harris told reporters that what the Ontario Government is concerned with is "the overall industry and how we ensure that new writers, for example, get access to be published and getting their start. In most countries in the world, that happens without government grants," Harris said. "Unfortunately we have a history of government dependency, almost, in Ontario. We're trying to change that. We'd sooner see our share go... more directly to the artist than ... to the profit-making company that depends on government taxpayers' dollars to compete." —James Rusk, "Publisher poorly run, Harris says," *The Globe and Mail*, July 17, 1996.

Coach House's history is an example of the things that did not endure, while Mike Harris's badmouthing is exemplary of the method by which Ontario Conservatives make cultural policy statements. The trend among politicians of attacking specific artist-run centres is creeping up on us now, for example, in Metro Toronto politicians' recent invective against Buddies in Bad Times. It brings to mind the rhetoric by politicians against the Toronto artist-run centre CEAC, after an editorial in its newsletter *Strike* that seemed to advocate kneecapping. In 1986, in *The CEAC was Banned in Canada*, Dot Tuer provided an account of CEAC's history, giving a context for the moment when politicians intervened to pull its funding. This alternative history traces gaps, fissures and breakdown, in the context of wider economic and political issues. As governments retract their support for artist-run culture, it is critical to locate the antecedents for this, and to identify our alternative sites of practice. Martin Heath's film and performance space, the proliferation of zines, nomad curators working in bars and storefronts, angry women hackers, writers and performers—provide an irrepressible source of replenishing energy. Authors of alternative histories will seek this, as artists shift their operations from one bit of holy ground to the next.

website: <http://www.ocad.on.can./dd/jul23-96/doyle>  
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**I wish to thank David McIntosh for his insightful work as editor of this piece. I am also indebted to the artists, publishers and producers whose work I cite, and to Steev Morgan for his assistance with the website.**

**Judith Doyle is a filmmaker and writer. She teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design.**

# Interview with Sunil Gupta

by Sarindar Dhaliwal



In 1983, Sunil Gupta graduated from the Royal College of Art with an M.A. in photography and joined a wave of young artists that put black in front of British and changed the face of contemporary Western art. In a symbiotic relationship with critics like Kobena Mercer and Homi K. Bhabha, visual artists and filmmakers such as Isaac Julien, Pratibha Parmar, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Sunil Gupta forced a confrontation between the truisms of racial and sexual politics and broke down borders between theory and practice, formal experimentation and activism. With their art school training, they drew from a wide vocabulary, and with their postcolonial savvy went right to the heart, challenging the reigning notions of the nation.

Sunil Gupta is Indian by birth, Canadian by citizenship and British by residency. As an artist, his photographs have been exhibited and published worldwide. As a curator, his touring shows include "Disputed Borders," "Fabled Territories" and "Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology" (co-curated with Tessa Boffin). This past summer, Sunil Gupta toured Canada to research "The New Republics: Contemporary Art from Australia, Canada and South Africa." Visual artist Sarindar Dhaliwal spoke with him in Toronto where a show of his own photographs, "Trespass III," was on exhibition at YYZ Artists' Outlet (July 3–27, 1996).

SARINDAR DHALIWAL: You have travelled extensively in Australia, South Africa, and now Canada, researching "The New Republics." The methodology that you are using to meet artists in order to look at their work is still rooted in that old world order and system of connections. Is this inadequate?

SUNIL GUPTA: It could be if we professed anything different with the end product, but we're not doing survey shows, we're not doing "best of" shows. We're more interested in this process of networking, of meeting real people and then seeing which of these people might work together and what they might get out of it from each other. From a previous show, I could see Shiba Chachi, of Delhi, would work well with Millie Wilson from California. That became my role and my job, in a sense, to match artists with one another. The two of them together in one show created a third thing that was more than each of them separately. In Shiba's case it was her first opportunity to show outside of an Asian, feminist or racial context. These women in California, because of regional problems of their own, appeared not to have met any smart, articulate, competent women from India who made art. It was an eye-opener for them so of course they invited Shiba to come to Cal Arts and talk about her practice. This was an important opportunity for Shiba who had been struggling in her own context with labels and language. The thing that ties all of what we're doing together, for better or worse, is language. We pretty much all work in the English language. It's a slightly indefinable slippery quality, and I always hasten to preface everything with the fact that we are not traditional curators. I don't have a degree in art history; I'm not researching in that sense. I'm trying to take my own practice, which is slightly self referential, and with a loose association of imagery create a similar pattern with these projects.

Our primary interest is in making as many studio visits as possible, seeing as many artists as we can because of the ahistorical way we're conducting the research. Our methodology is to try to meet the artists because it's very unlikely we will show anyone we haven't met. It's partly because we want to present twelve or thirteen artists in a group show where there is some sympathy between the works, and not as regional groupings. We feel quite strongly that meeting the person gives you so many clues about the work. Our academic interests don't lie in the area of precisely made, conceptual artworks which

could function without much human interface. It's been a matter of luck also as to who's around when we're there. It's all very ad hoc and we also end up with five times as much material as we could possibly use.

In each country we have a collaborator who has been feeding us information and we will work with that person to make the final selection. Bruce Grenville from Edmonton is our Canadian curatorial partner. We're also looking for writers of different kinds; pieces of art criticism, fiction, short stories of about 5000 words.

DHALIWAL: How is this project being funded?

GUPTA: The funding is a bit complicated. We've been able to come this far on research funds from the British Arts Council and we will return to them at the end of the year for production and presentation monies. The Australians are applying to their arts councils for their production funds. In Canada we will be approaching the Canada Council. We're hoping the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa will be able to help us with shipping costs. South Africa presents a huge problem. It doesn't have an arts council in place so we'll have to go directly to some ministry. There's altogether less money there so we'll be investigating sources of private sponsorship or splitting the budget between the three other arts councils and they won't like that. I've become interested in working with artists from different places and then trying to downgrade the place. I'm not interested in helping to forge some new Canadian or Australian art because I'm not concerned with nationalist impulses. But the way the funding works is nationalistic, everyone wants to look after their own. I would like to exhibit the work and then remove the name of the country of origin. I had a disaster in Johannesburg when I had taken British artists' works there and created a show by adding a fourth local artist, a South African. The Australians wanted to take the show to Australia and the British Arts Council would only fund the British artists and nobody would fund the South African. I failed to find any other money. Although there is an interest in the art works now, this re-arranging, moving art around is problematic.

What is important in this project is that it is multicultural in each locality. In outlook it is not about simply what the black artists are trying to say. It seems like nationalism and nationhood has become a black area of practice. If there are

white artists working in this vein they're doing so very obliquely and sometimes very academically so it's quite hidden.



DHALIWAL: How can institutions integrate an exhibition such as "The New Republics" into their mainstream programming and identify the publics that would respond to the work?

GUPTA: In the past what the smarter institutions in England did was to hire freelancers from the Asian community to create an audience for the shows that were being curated by us. They then added these new audiences to their database. Whether they did any follow-up to see if these audiences would then attend mainstream shows, like Henry Moore for example, remains to be seen. There was quite a lot of consultation around questions such as how to persuade these audiences to revisit the institutions after the initial contact. A common mechanism was food and music. Education and audience is a huge factor in England right now as a justification for certain exhibitions. You can't just have an art show and not have some understanding as to who the audience is.

DHALIWAL: How is it possible to expand the notion of heritage across lines of blood, birth and

class into areas of interest or knowledge about a given place?

GUPTA: One of the ways in which I have attempted to create the educational programming around some of these shows is to invite speakers, mostly non-Asian academics whose area of knowledge is primarily South Asian or non-European. This is partly a reflection on discussions I had in India. I have been sensing a change in India recently. For a long time there was this blanket anti-ness; anti—the West, anti—the Brits. Modern India's database of its own culture is British and imperial in origin. There are, for example, annals recorded by army officers that list the tribal groups in the Northwest and in Rajasthan. Often this information has to be a starting point, or you would have to begin from

scratch. One can't say let's disregard these records because they were compiled by the forces of colonialism. There is a stronger feeling now, in younger people anyway, that the process is one of give and take. There are useful aspects of this information and knowledge and it's more to do with interpretation. One can have interesting panels inviting people from universities and anthropology departments because often the facts and figures are buried in the records. There's been a kind of looseness, or rather the picture has been painted with a very broad brush and colour without reference to more specific detail.

One thing I found interesting in South Africa is that there is this phenomenon of white Africans. Black Americans find this completely difficult to deal with. There's this whole thing around going back to something and that ideal is a black one. But then the Afrikaners have been there for a long time, it's their home. When I spoke to the American curator for Johannesburg, who was an African American, she was very impressed that with our kind of black arts background we can now deal with having white artists

in the shows. She said there was no way that she could do that; she has to have African American artists all of the time. I'm getting the feeling that in the States everything is still very ethnocentric; it's much more apartheid-like than in South Africa. So changing this kind of thinking is definitely the plan with "New Republics" and all the aboriginal artists we've met on these trips are saying if this is another black show I don't want to be in it.

DHALIWAL: Do you find that you are more useful to the art community as a curator and writer than as an artist?

GUPTA: That's a difficult question but basically, yes. It's not just me but also my contemporaries who came out of art school expecting to be practitioners but not finding administrators and curators who were willing to deal with us. So we eventually had to do our own organizing and create our own little institutions and that, in a sense, became useful in a co-opting kind of way to the larger art world.

It has created a complication in my own artistic career in that I've now met and come to know, as a curator, a number of other curators and people from museums and galleries. Wearing that hat has brought an added access that isn't available to all artists, but at the same time it's made it more difficult to approach those people as an artist. I feel as if I'm taking advantage of my position as a curator if I bring up my own practice.

I used to think that my primary creative function was my work because I was trained in a very classical way, in a very English art school way that instills the notion of being a career artist as paramount. But then I got sidetracked into community politics. Essentially I started out defining myself as an artist, then we began to define ourselves collectively more as cultural activists than artists. Then that definition could mean a lot of different activities, not just creating the work but organizing around the work. So, I have occasionally argued for more status for organizing, although these people who control the movement of the artworks are quite faceless and don't have cultural value in quite the same way because they're not artists. The aims changed from being my own individual desire to be an artist of some repute or marketability to some broader cultural aim. I guess because of the time that I arrived in England I was quite a good candidate for this kind of thinking and it's stayed with me and been quite a powerful motivational

force. I experienced complete cultural deprivation arriving here in Canada at the age of fifteen, into an environment where no one knew anything nor did there seem any way that they would know anything about where I'd come from. Compare this to the position I found in England, an institutional obsession with all things European, and anything outside that was a pale reflection, at best, of what the Europeans did in terms of cultural production. So to rectify this situation is to create lots of work and bombard them with everything that is happening out there. Thus, my focus has shifted and has stayed shifted, so although I like to produce art work it's no longer my main ambition.

DHALIWAL: What's the relationship between artists of your generation and younger artists?

GUPTA: I'm slowly becoming aware that my generation seems to have been a unique phenomenon. The people who came before were completely invisible. It's taken historical survey shows (like the "Other Story") to reveal who they were and sometimes recognition has come too late for their careers or artistic opportunities because they were nearing the end of their working lives. My generation is fortunate, and it's all to do with timing, because postmodernity, fixed identities, colour, the body became fashionable. We were overeducated, we went through as many years of studying as was possible and ended up with at least an M.A. from somewhere and thus tended to be articulate. We immediately figured out how the funding worked. So we've been quite successful in organizing ourselves. After us, even though there are more and more people coming out of the system they seem less and less interested in organizing. It's a combination, I suspect, of the general political atmosphere, because in England we've had the Tories in power for a long time. Especially during the eighties when Margaret Thatcher emphasized the individual and the individual's success, so that has to have some impact on the way artists are thinking now. They are focusing on themselves and their careers and are less interested in networking in some communal situation. They're viewing the demise of black arts in England as a natural end. It doesn't seem to serve anyone's purpose any longer. But there are catalogues, and there is reference to ten years' worth of work and shows, which may not be a lot but, there's a hell of a lot more than when we were in school, when there was nothing.

When you're younger, and I'll make a comparison to gay politics, a commonality is this idea of coming out; it's a phase and we all go through it. Culturally specific groups are very useful for precisely these artists who are still

something. The other thing is that England is a very urban society so people tend to live quite close together. Like France, like Paris. There's a huge concentration of people in Paris and there's not much outside those centres. London is a

unique city in terms of multicultural production and has created a situation like that which might exist here in Toronto, where there are people working in different artforms who supply a core large enough for audiences and critics and also people one can speak to as a support network.

DHALIWAL: Is there anything that you would consider has had negative impact on artists and their work within the

context of identity politics?

GUPTA: It can be very limiting and also one of the main factors that affects all of this is the way it's been funded. Mainstream artists are funded through a dealer network of selling works. Identity politics, black arts or making art around racial identity has been funded through the state either through grants directly to the artists or the process of commissioning works for exhibitions. That's had very serious consequences. It's overlooked the market place completely so they've had no other means of survival. They are dependent on the state and its policies, which are liable to change with every new government, and everywhere the support from the public sector is continuously being eroded. So what's happened to my generation is that after ten or fifteen years of working we are worse off. Nobody's buying the work, there are fewer and fewer grants and this has had serious implications. The arts councils are not sure what to do with you. They can't keep funding you endlessly but they do recognize that they have, in a sense, created you and now don't know what to do with you. That's the feeling I'm getting and we've done nothing collectively to replace that system with any other kind of economic support. Maybe it's better here,

in terms of sponsorship from your own communities. It's hopeless in England. The Indian businessmen and their associations won't sponsor this kind of art because they see it themselves as being a very minority interest, a marginalized audience. They will support it if it's in a mainstream context and they get the normal payback in terms of advertising. Or they'll sponsor charities, which get them into luncheons with Princess Anne. We don't offer that so it's been very awkward. We've had no community based funding strategies in place other than local government or town halls.

DHALIWAL: Are there destructive ways that we work against ourselves especially in lobbying situations?

GUPTA: It's a contradictory situation. Individuals can exploit situations for their own career ends. Communication between institutions and protesting groups usually breaks down, so coalitions can be very short lived. Collectives can form around specific events and then disintegrate before any real progress can be made. Institutions say "Well, we didn't know these artists existed before but now that we do know we see that some of these artists are good political organizers and some will make good work and we should be watching their careers with interest." One has to balance all these views and say something intelligent in the midst of this. What the institutions need to do is to follow this up through their infrastructures. It's been more than a decade of organizing now. There used to be a standing joke that the only black faces one would find in institutions belonged to the cleaners or security guards. As one met people higher and higher up the ladder it gets whiter and whiter and this sends a message to the public simply by the colour of the hierarchy of the staff or the board. It breaks down by gender. The support and curatorial staff are often women, the directors are invariably men. I've not come across too many non-white people who have programming power, who are members of the staff in the big institutions. I've come across many people who are volunteers, who have been co-opted as consultants or in an advisory capacity for these projects. Therein lies evidence to me of some failure, that one hasn't broken through, I mean most black artists, especially after the eighties, have M.F.A.'s so why is there nobody? What happens to people who organize festivals such as Desh Pardesh year after year? They are gaining experience in arts

management and are trained as part of those jobs to be able to move into the larger museums.

DHALIWAL: People here will sometimes criticize their own artists and political instigators for weak ideological reasons.

GUPTA: This is a natural response and it's happening all over the place. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, which is similar to the Power Plant but on the scale of the Art Gallery of Ontario, has a large curatorial staff. There is an aboriginal curator there. He feels he's doing a good job but the aboriginal art centres in the community complain that he's become one of them (the establishment); he makes so much money he now travels all over the world. It seems to be human nature but it is misplaced envy. It's the way these structures absorb the change and the energy. One can make a political argument that maybe our original focus was misplaced, which was simply to get the works into the mainstream. I realize now that simply to get the work seen in a mainstream space doesn't have an impact on how the power structures operate. In that case it doesn't matter what the colour of the artist is because the nature of the process is the same. What you want to do is affect how the mainstream operate. So I have shifted my focus away from the curators and directors who are the visible focus. The rules have been put into place by the trustees; they decide the policy. I've become much more interested in policy and who makes the decisions. The Tate Gallery is hugely influential in terms of what is collected simply by what it collects. It reflects NATO; it collects Western European and North American art. It's to do with the cold war, what else could it be? And when you talk to their staff, who are youngish, articulate people, they say for them to change the collecting policy it will take ten years. Because that's how slowly trustees operate. How do we change these power structures and the boards? Do the boards reflect a national view, an inclusive view and the wider changes in society? One has to get the evidence of demographics into play. One of the problems with contemporary curators is they're too busy and very rarely leave their offices to look at work on their own doorsteps.

*Sarindar Dhaliwal is a Toronto-based visual artist, who has previously published short, fictionalized texts. She is presently organizing her second curatorial project entitled "Of Mudlarkers & Measurers" (opening January 10, 1997 at Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario).*



formulating themselves. To go through and gain information and a confidence can lead to maturing as an artist.

DHALIWAL: What are some specific differences in the dissemination and reception of exhibitions in Britain and Canada?

GUPTA: Britain is advantaged by the fact it has a lot more people so there's a bigger market where this cultural stuff is played out. And although its non-white population is a small proportion of the total population of the country, it does live in concentrated communities, very visible concentrated areas. The other thing is that academically England is still a great storehouse of information. They went out there and brought all this information back from the Empire. They catalogued, they labelled plants, people, places. Photographed it, wrote about it and it's all there in the archives, everything. Even a white audience would know, you could expect them to know, quite a lot of general information about other cultures. The consequences of travel and family connections has led to more people gaining specialist information. Broadly speaking, you could make larger assumptions about your audience's knowledge when they come and view

# MUCH MUZAK

## Frieso Boning's "Greatest Hits"

MUSAK BY JEFF GILLMAN

EXHIBITION AND PUBLICATION WITH CD

CURATED BY GILLES HÉBERT

ST. NORBERT ARTS AND CULTURAL CENTRE, WINNIPEG, MAY 30–AUGUST 15, 1996

TRAVELLING TO THE WINDSOR ART GALLERY, OCTOBER 26, 1996–JANUARY 26, 1997

REVIEW BY NORA YOUNG

In radio, where I work, music is hardly ever considered music. Music is PRODUCT. That's what it's called and that's how it's dealt with. Record reps bring you PRODUCT in hopes of getting air-play so they can get PRODUCT off the shelves and out of the stores. As a music programmer, you weed through this endless stream of PRODUCT trying to find what fits your show's image and demographic. For a programmer, finally pulling together a "nice rack" for your show from the mass of undifferentiated PRODUCT is an unbeatable high.

These tawdry tales from the radio world underscore this summer's show at the St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, on the outskirts of Winnipeg. "Greatest Hits" displays new work by Winnipeg multimedia artist Frieso Boning, and an accompanying "audio treatment" by audio artist Jeff Gillman. Using computer technology, Boning has designed and constructed one hundred mock cds featuring fake musicians from a whole range of musical styles and imagined advertising budgets. SNACC curator Gilles Hébert commissioned Gillman to produce site-spe-

cific muzak from about a dozen genres, using digital sampling and mixing software. A catalogue has been produced to mimic the liner notes in a cd case; it features not only a description of the show,



Detail of CD cover from "Greatest Hits," 1996, 12.4 x 14 x 1 cm. Photo: Sheila Spence, courtesy St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre.

but also mock interviews with artists Boning and Gillman. This catalogue—cd case is set to include a genuine cd of Gillman's muzak.

The exhibition is set up as a music store. We enter through a security gate, and wander past displays of the discs.

There's a cash desk, complete with band fridge magnets, bumper stickers, and two people posing as mock clerks lurking behind the counter. Muzak blares to get you in the buying mood. Country, classical, grunge — all genres are represented. There's something for everybody! Unless you open the cd cases, you really can't tell these aren't real bands, real PRODUCT. It's all fictional, right down to the record label names and bar codes. The muzak fits seamlessly into the background, so accurate are the musical and emotional cues to each genre. Before you know it, you become less a gallery visitor, than a music store customer. You stand beside other "shoppers," reaching gingerly past them to pick up a case that looks interesting, and slouch nonchalantly as you inspect it, deciding whether or not it's for you. The experience of shopping in a music store, picking up discs

because they have cool covers, the thrill of purchase, is as common to most of us as a trip to the grocery store. Yet placed in a gallery, it's disconcerting, in part because it involves us in an artistic recreation of an event from our own lives. We are, in a deep sense, participants in the exhibit.

# I ♥ Cerebral Fungus

The show is more about ambiguity and fun (some of the muzak and discs are outright hilarious, like that of Frederick Romance, the dentist-cum-cello d'amoro musician) than it is a polemic about "the work of art in the age of digital reproduction," yet it leads us in playful ways to ask questions about music, commodities, and art. The accurate, niche-marketed packaging and the music that accompanies it, seen in an art space, raise the issue of the commercialization of music. Music is, of course, an art form, yet this fact always has to be balanced against the requirements of music as a commodity. After examining the cds in this exhibition, it is difficult to experience a music store in the same way ever again. Boning and Gillman have recreated in an art context the music-commodity experience of being manipulated by commercial design and by the way the discs are orchestrated to appeal to different consumers. Presenting this mundane shopping experience in a gallery, where commodification isn't supposed to exist, we come face to face with commodity fetishism. We experience that basic "I WANT" of the consumer; but we also see how social relations are played out in cds as commodities. In the marketplace, a particular cd isn't just about music. It is coded with and reflects back all kinds of messages about who we are: our lifestyle, our aesthetics, how and with whom we socialize. In this fetishized world, when we buy a piece of music, the meaning we invest in what the music represents reassures us about many social aspects of our own lives. In this sense, the best marketing strategy would be to slap our own picture on the cover.

We can't dismiss this form of infusing meaning into an object as entirely negative. The purchase of a music PRODUCT has a curiously ambiguous character. Sure it's an ego-based act of economic self-assertion, but as anyone who's ever tried to learn more about someone by sifting through the music they've bought



"Greatest Hits," installation, 1996. Photo: Sheila Spence, courtesy St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre.

knows, it has a constructive, communicative aspect as well. "Greatest Hits" calls up this set of ambiguities through its dead-on accuracy in its depictions of fictional bands. I can flip through the cds and know that I'll like *Crystal Drifter*, that *Enzo* is a sleazy home production, and more than that, I know just what they'll sound like. Through the iteration of packaging of musical niches, we have acquired a complex and subtle vocabulary to describe a subtle system of fashion, design technique, and words that form a description from which the contents of the discs, in real life, rarely stray. All this coding serves the purpose of disseminating music in the form of mass produced cds. The notion that we exist in a world where a musical group produces one-of-a-kind cds, or does live performances free from the influence of mass production, is absurd.

In making art about commodification, Boning and Gillman are using their talents to make specific objects designed to carry a generic quality. Each is a one-of-a-kind cd case (unlike real cd cases, they aren't mass produced, although given the digital technology at work here, they could be) and each one is designed to obey the vocabulary of commercial design. Paradoxically, the individual art pieces are

successful to the extent to which they reproduce commercial products which are utterly standardized. The same can be said for Gillman's muzak, which actually has been mass produced as a cd accompanying the catalogue and which becomes as invisible as muzak in a shopping mall.

Within these tightly controlled parameters, there are moments of originality and beauty: personal images on the cds, startling moments in the muzak. There is also a lot of humour to be found in this show: songs with names like "Seething with Despair," cds with running times of "seven hours twenty six minutes and thirteen seconds." The muzak also possesses the power to make us laugh out loud with the way it mimics and flirts with a range of music genres. Overall, there's a feeling of a prank to the work. It provokes an urge to complete the cycle of moving art into commercial space by rushing out to the nearest HMV to watch the latest release by the fictional band Systemic Failure being picked up, judged, and bought by the consumer. Attention shoppers.

Nora Young is the host of CBC Radio's national pop culture program, "Definitely not the Opera." She lives in Winnipeg, and uses old CDs as drink coasters.

# PEDRO ALDERETE'S ALTARS & AUTOTOPOGRAPHIES

## Call-777 Nganga

OLIVER BOLTON STUDIO, TORONTO, MAY 3-31, 1996

REVIEW BY DAVID MCINTOSH

Nganga provides me with a voice of many voices; each element has a life of its own, a reason for being. It is an inanimate object which lives as revelations. Its magic occurs within actual experience; it is based on a nature-specific dialogue rooted in a given place and time that is interactive and that offers its many elements an equal voice in the creative process.

—Pedro Alderete

Over the past decade, a form of artistic expression particular to Latino cultures emerged in Los Angeles and New York. Elaborating the popular tradition of constructing personal altars in the home dedicated to a range of aboriginal and African deities and Catholic religious figures, many visual artists reformulated this aspect of their Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban heritage to express a range of cultural concerns. Cultural critic Celeste Olalquiaga examined this artistic phenomenon in her 1992 text *Megalopolis*,<sup>1</sup> pointing out that the use of mass produced Catholic statuary and imagery in artists' altars provided a suitable surface from which to comment on issues ranging from the banality of consumer culture to the eclipse of traditional spirituality by cults of beauty and fame. Similar projects have been undertaken in other media by writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and performance art shamans like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who invoke history through ritual to propose an intertwining of spiritual, social and aesthetic purposes.



*Las Siete Potencias*, 1996, installation element: B&W photo. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In his recent show "Call-777 Nganga," Havana-born Toronto artist Pedro Alderete exhibited a series of altar works that reference the recent history of this form of expression as practiced primarily in major U.S. cities, but that highlight the specifics of Alderete's personal vision, spiritual heritage and border-crossing journey. The

seven installation pieces that constitute his exhibition are all grounded in the West African spiritual tradition of orisha, or deities, which has been practised continuously, in varying degrees of overtness, since the first African slaves were brought to Cuba by the Spanish in the 1500s. Within this spiritual tradition the nganga is a personal, home altar through which the orisha are invoked. A metal receptacle containing human and animal parts, branches of different trees, roots and soils, the nganga is a living form and centre of magical forces. On a recent trip to Havana, after an absence of many years, Alderete reconnected with his African-Cuban heritage, an aspect of his identity which had

become submerged in his life in Toronto. A visit to the home of his grandmother, the woman who raised him and who even after her death continues to be revered as one of Havana's most powerful spiritual leaders, prompted him to bring his nganga and all of the history, memory and knowledge that it embodied, back to Toronto.



*Nganga*, 1996, installation detail. Photo: Oliver Bolton.

On the opening night of his Toronto exhibition, Alderete did a performance in which he reassembled his nganga on the gallery floor, explaining the symbolic and ritual meaning of each element while drawing it in egg shell chalk on a large piece of black cloth. Included in the items found and collected by the artist to construct his nganga are: a stone of faith with the believer's signature on the bottom, which serves as the foundation of the altar; twenty-one sticks from twenty-one different trees, a multiple of the number seven, which signifies the gender-shifting warrior orisha Chango; the effigies of identical twins, which symbolize multiple identity and the infinite regression of mirror image; horse shoes, which symbolize escape; and the crowning element, a handmade effigy of Elegua, a capricious

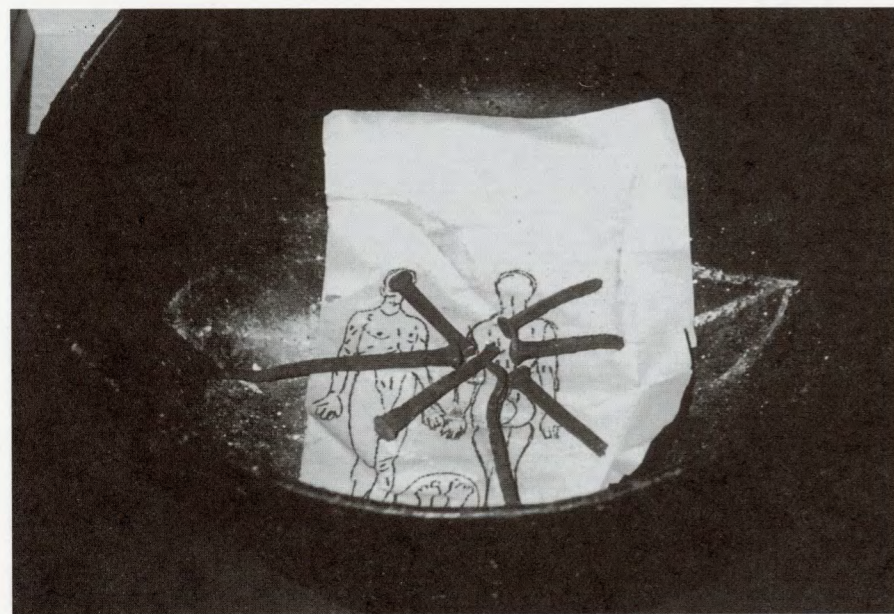
and playful orisha who is quick to anger, must be appeased with toys and candies, and who sits in corners and at crossroads, opening and closing doors. On completion of the performance, both the nganga and the drawn map of it had been transformed from a collection of inanimate objects into a complex and resonant point of interaction between an individual and a communally held worldview. Alderete's generous narration of the construction of his altar respected its spiritual power while allowing the uninitiated to comprehend the basics of the system of beliefs it embodied. This performance also gave viewers the tools to read and interpret the other works in the exhibit.

The other five installations in the exhibition, each comprised of seven discrete

pieces, build on the traditional nganga, abstracting it, condensing it, adapting it and integrating it with a range of industrial materials and artistic processes. In an installation entitled *Historical Devices*, Alderete has mounted seven sumptuous 11" x 14" Cibachromes depicting various altars from his grandmother's house in acrylic boxes which are then piled on top of each other to simulate a brick wall. The images in the Cibachromes demonstrate the great adaptability of the orisha to personally designated forms of representation; for example, in one photo of a corner of the house, the twins are represented by two identical blue ceramic pots, while Elegua assumes the form of a white plate full of food offerings with another white plate covering it. The overall effect of this piece is to suggest the



## PEDRO ALDERETE'S ALTARS



*Las Siete Potencias*, 1996, installation detail. Photo: Oliver Bolton.

contradiction and continuity between a hard-edged modern surface and a richly personal past. In another installation piece titled *Nombrando Altares* (Naming Altars), Alderete has mounted seven miniature oil paintings of gay men of colour from Toronto who have died of AIDS in a single altar, surrounding each painting with mirrored surfaces and placing a glass of water in front of each image to call the orisha to honor and protect the spirits of the dead. *Suspended Issues* is a hanging installation of seven poured clear acrylic blocks in which Alderete has encased a range of objects ranging from the personal to the industrial to the sacred. As these hanging transparent blocks spin, the two sides of reality become apparent. In one block, the artist has suspended a Polaroid nude portrait of himself on one side and an unopened condom on the other; in another block, a mass produced image of Che Guevara turns to reveal a mass produced image of the Virgin of Regla, a symbol of the orisha Yemaya, female deity of salt water, on the other side; in yet another block, one of the artist's dreads has been encased with a representation of the ever-present

Elegua as a hooked stick. *Suspended Issues* extends the notion of continuity and contradiction to considerations of duality and bifurcation.

The most complex installation in the show, which replicates and resonates with the *nganga* on a number of levels, is *Las Siete Potencias* (The Seven Powers). Alderete has created a wall installation of seven handcrafted altars where the sticks from the *nganga* have been transformed into wooden L-shaped shelves. The vertical of each altar holds an 8x10 black and white photograph while the horizontal shelf holds a related three dimensional object as an offering. Each altar assumes a different style. In one, the photograph documents an elaborate home altar in the small colonial Cuban town of Trinidad and it centres around a statue of Saint Barbara, the Catholic face of Chango, the deity who can assume male or female form at will. The offering on this altar is a life-size wax carving of a penis with a slit on the top from which an eye emerges. Another of these altars contains a stylized overhead photo of a lifelike Elegua, hiding under a table, while the offering is

a simple silver painted bicycle seat for this whimsical deity to play with. Each altar in *Las Siete Potencias* represents photographically the many forms a personal *nganga* can take while proposing an abstracted offering to the deity in question. With this installation, Alderete has captured the enigmatic mutability and magical revelations which the *nganga* evokes through its accommodation of personal invention in its representation, inventions that are in turn rewarded by insights into the *nganga's* complex philosophical model of chaos, order and transformation.

The extensive body of interrelated works that Alderete has created for this exhibition also function as a map of self, an autotopography, through which the artist negotiates his processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as an African-Cuban living in Toronto. Engaging in a "tactical act of self-representation at the level of intimate objects," Alderete has captured "a moment of personal and cultural transition, the movement from one place to another, from one role to another."<sup>2</sup> In crossing the borders of language, gender and culture, and in shifting from one set of psychic states and symbolic relations to another, Alderete has constructed his inspiring array of altars as a site where aesthetics, spirituality, ritual, memory and experience merge to form a continuous and integrated autotopography of transition and possibility.

David McIntosh is a Toronto critic and curator who programs Canadian cinema for the Toronto International Film Festival.

#### Notes

1. Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
2. Jennifer A. Gonzalez, in *Prosthetic Technologies: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, eds. Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll (Boulder, San Francisco: Westview Press, 1995), p. 147.

## ENTRANCING DOORS

### Doors

MINQUON PANCHAYAT, FEATURING WORK BY: EDWIN LIM, ALEX TSANG, KEVIN WALKES, ASHOK MATHUR, SANHITA BRAHMACHARIE, ARUNA SRIVASTAVA, RITA WONG, JUDY CHEUNG, ALVIN VIEIRA, HIROMI GOTO, FRED WAH, VANESSA WARDLAW, SHARRON PROULX, SARDU JETHA, KIRA WU, REKA SERFOZO, DAVID LESLIE ESCALONA, KLODYNE RODNEY, GAIL DUIKER, SADIA UQUAILI, SONESAI BOUPHASIRY, HERVERT SANCHEZ, MAYMEE YING.  
LATITUDE 53, EDMONTON, MAY 16-JUNE 14, 1996

REVIEW BY DAVID GARNEAU

Calgary's Minquon Panchayat is a diverse movement of First Nations and of colour artists who create awareness of the issues facing their communities. These artists, however, are not just conduits to their communities. The works they produce—as the exhibition title, "Doors," suggests—engage and negotiate the spaces *between* the diversity of communities. These artists are variously implicated, invested, and identified: between cultures, "races," genders, classes; between the individual and his or her many affiliations; between artists and viewers, visual and literary artists, senior and new artists, craft and art, modernist and postmodernist approaches; between representing and being...

"Minquon" is Maliseet for "rainbow"; "Panchayat" is a word in several South Asian languages referring to a traditional, non-hierarchical village council. The Minquon Panchayat organized from an impulse similar to the one that generated artist-run centres. Both began with a group of diverse artists working outside the mainstream who became an inclusive, consensual, democratic collective in order to more effectively voice their selves to themselves and the wider community trying to resist hegemonic dominance.

The Minquon Panchayat collective presence illustrates the centripetal limits of artist-run centres. While the centres have been liberal (and often radical) institutions, they have also been selective about who makes up their community, who is drawn in and included. As they became

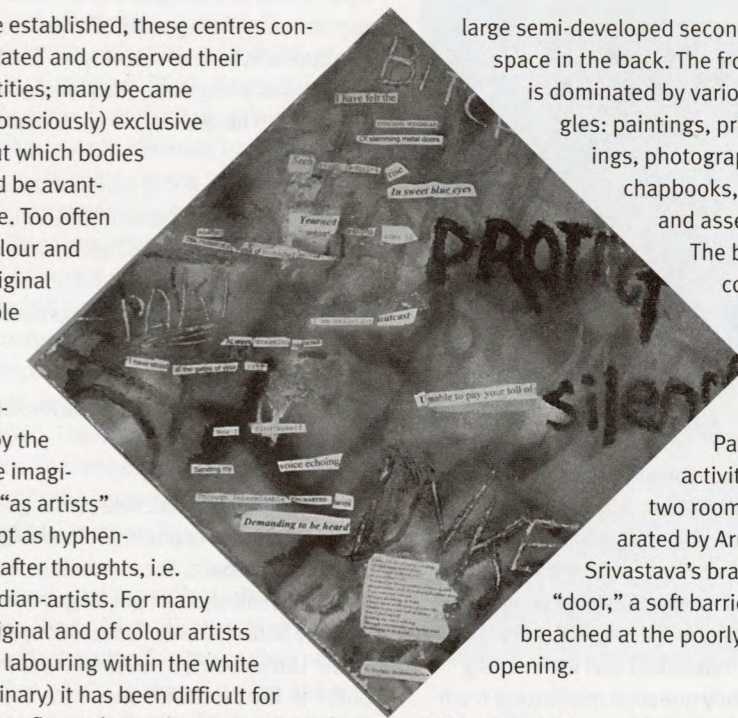
more established, these centres consolidated and conserved their identities; many became (unconsciously) exclusive about which bodies could be avant-garde. Too often of colour and aboriginal people were not pictured by the white imaginary "as artists" except as hyphenated after thoughts, i.e. as Indian-artists. For many aboriginal and of colour artists (also labouring within the white imaginary) it has been difficult for them to figure themselves "as artists" (in the artist-run gallery sense). This has not been a conscious exclusion as much as a failure to create an inviting atmosphere. Not content with this satellite status, many of these (unimagined) artists constellated themselves as the Minquon Panchayat, a group that not only makes opportunities for inclusion across many boundaries but also works to celebrate rather than assimilate difference. This action has encouraged a reassessment of notions of art and the purpose and complexion of artist-run centres.

#### The Exhibition

Latitude 53's newly renovated space features the traditional white cube with a

large semi-developed secondary space in the back. The front room is dominated by various rectangles: paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, chapbooks, collages and assemblages. The back room contains a slide show of past Minquon Panchayat activities. The two rooms are separated by Aruna Srivastava's braided "door," a soft barrier few breached at the poorly attended opening.

While "Doors" features some "straight" paintings, photographs, prints and drawings, much of the work is a collage of materials and a crossing of visuals with literary disciplines. The prevalence of text works is testimony to the fact that founding members, Aruna Srivastava and Ashok Mathur, and many other early participants, have literary backgrounds. Words are also more conducive to the less ambiguous expression of political ideas in the somewhat de-contextualized, "neutral(ized)" space of the gallery. (It is interesting to note that despite the strong presence of text, the artists chose not to title their work!) While a few of these hybrid pieces are earnest but awkward, many more exceed either discipline.



Klodyne Rodney's text and pencil crayon drawing on brown paper is a poetic description and celebration of a black



Fred Wah, mixed media, 30x46 cm.

woman's body, history, and spirit. Ashok Mathur's piece has a wooden slat window shutter (shudder) with a picture of Ralph Klein giving the finger on one side and jailed Philadelphia activist Mumia Abu-Jamal on the other. Beside this is a reporter's notebook filled with writing. Together they question media(ted) truth and journalistic neutrality, and raise issues of authority and resistance.

Fred Wah's wall piece is printed on recycled paper and mounted on wood. It has two small, swinging doors cut into the middle leading to another text. The poem is a meditation on doors and gates; it narrates Wah's growing up in a Chinese restaurant. Read aloud the poetry requires a sustained rhythmical breath that recalls jazz music and beat poetry and the swinging gates and conversation of a busy restaurant.

One of the exhibition's most effective pieces is by novelist Hiromi Goto (*Chorus of Mushrooms*). A small, empty tuna can is

mounted on the side of a pedestal. Inside there is gold foil and a cut-out 1970s photo of three children sitting around a dinner table. On the lid is written "They were never rich but they ate well, their mom said." And then, "We were never rich but I made sure you kids ate well." On top of the pedestal is a small tongue-and-groove wooden box with a glass front. Inside is a miniature room made with cut-out photographs of a family and furniture and a bit of real carpet. The lid of the box has a fragment of an immigration document. The text on the glass reads:

She used to think that maybe all immigrant parents were alcoholics. Her mom said, "I never drank until we came to Canada but your father drank so much I started drinking too. There was nothing else I could do." (c. 1975)

Some works require no explication, only inhabitation.

Kevin Walkes' accomplished paintings combine abstract atmospherics with ambiguous architectural space. These paintings—and excellent semi-abstract paintings of doorways by Sadia Uquaili, Sonesai Bouphasiry, Edwin Lim and others—are not overtly political. Their inclusion shows the depth and range of Minquon Panchayat, First Nations and of colour artists—artists often over-looked by curators and dealers looking for explicitly political, "ethnic," "Indian," or exotic art. But even seemingly apolitical work, because they are in this context, can attract politicized readings. Maymee Yings' five small, brown, cast wax hands housed in white and grey plaster and clay may suggest segregation, isolation, containment, all of which can have both formal and social meanings.

Alvin Vieira's small door decorated with brass baroquetry (shiny leaves, door knocker, mermaid/putty) and chains with a pet lock, hints at not just a door but a secret room, a closet?



Door 13, Alvin Vieira, mixed media, 25x51 cm.

The highly suggestive title, "Doors," indicates the liminal space of this exhibition, its objects and subjects. Doors are between spaces—neither or either or both? They have a face for each and a body between. The exhibition is not titled "portal" or "passage." "Doors" hints at both invitation and protection—keep in or keep out? Doors are not passive, they hinge on interactivity: a reaching out, permission (an answered knock), meeting halfway, a physical entrancing.

"Doors" then is a threshold that the viewer approaches, hesitates at, looks through, enters, (or doesn't) with varying degrees of comfort depending on his or her identification and engagement with the objects and his or her self. The art works share this range between invitation and protection. One could only have hoped that more Edmontonians had taken up the invitation and challenge.

David Garneau is a practising visual artist in Calgary. He writes about the visual arts continuously and pays for it by teaching theory at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

## INTERSEXIONS

### Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women's Writing

EDITED BY COOMI S. VEVAINA AND BARBARA GODARD

PUBLISHED BY CREATIVE BOOKS, NEW DELHI, 1996

REVIEW BY KATARZYNA RUKSZTO AND MARY-JO NADEAU

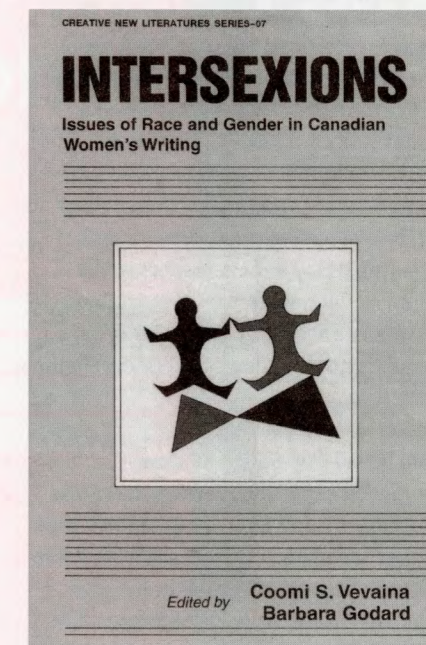
The making of *Intersexions: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women's Writing*, a collection of essays edited by Coomi S. Vevaina and Barbara Godard, is a testimony to the uneven relationship between the fertile ground of cultural literary criticism and the shrinking public resources of the Canadian culture industry. Paradoxically, this book of critical essays on Canadian women writers is published by Creative Books, a New Delhi publisher with an impressive list of publications on Canadian (and other) literature and literary theory, but has no Canadian publisher or distributor. While the project was subsidized by the Indian Association for Canadian Studies, the editors have not been able to find similar support from Canadian arts funding bodies nor publishing houses. The inadequacy, and on one level sheer absurdity, of the regulations organizing funding practices in Canada becomes clear when one considers that the book received funding from External Affairs to promote Canadian culture overseas, but it does not meet the criteria for funding through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme. As a result, the collection is almost unavailable in Canada.

In contrast to the strains of the Canadian publishing industry, the collection represents the complexity and vibrancy of inter- and intra-national discussions and debates about race, gender and culture in the context of Canadian literature. Written from different theoretical perspectives

and various geopolitical locations, the essays in this collection analyze literatures by aboriginal, Black, South Asian, East Asian and white ethnic-minority women writers in attempts to pose questions about writing at the intersections of conflicting conceptualizations of subjectivity, language, nation and literature. To name a few, the collection examines the poetry and fiction of Himani Bannerji, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Joy Kogawa, M. Nourbese Philip, Lilian Allen, Myrna Kostash, Jeannette Armstrong, Maria Campbell. The essays engage seriously with the challenges posed by the "other voices" to the exclusionary canon of "Canadian literature."

The essays, and the critical introduction, address the problematic of writing as "minoritized writers" in the context of Canadian official multiculturalism and a Eurocentric malestream discourse of what constitutes Canadian literature. In the introduction, the editors outline some of the questions posed in the essays; what kinds of politics is produced by the resistance to dominant national cultural discourses? What kinds of categories, naming and speaking practices, are deployed in such writing? Are the categories and terms (of naming and writing) contradictory and performative, rather than stable and essential? What is at stake in writing under the sign of racialized and gendered Other?

While sharing such general concerns, the essays in this collection address different themes. The relation between race and



gender affiliations are theorized differently by the authors, reflecting, besides their own, the differing perspectives of the writers whose work they write about. For example, there is a marked distance from the topic of exclusion in the writing of white ethnic writers like the Greek-Canadian poet Smaro Kamboureli. In an interview with Sukhmani Roy, Kamboureli argues that "Instead of being shut in the retrospects of an ethnic identity, she would like to explore the possibilities of the prospects of forging a 'different' identity" (p. 268). Kamboureli's playfulness with identity as a process of be(com)ing can be read as not attending to the exclusionary and negative practices of racism for non-white writers in Canada.

Several writers in the anthology explore the conflicts between Eurocentric discourses of literary representation and the aboriginal and Caribbean writers' desire to write texts that articulate the orality of aboriginal and Caribbean cultures. Indeed, the collection begins with three commentaries on native women's writing in Canada (Jeannette Armstrong, Lee Maracle, Maria Campbell, Ruby Slipperjack and Beatrice Culleton). Each essay foregrounds the colonialist invention of subordinating native/oral textuality to Euro/written textuality. Vevaina names this particular dichotomy as belonging to the more generalized and delegitimizing historical "bifurcation of reality into hostile opposites" (p. 60). Vevaina's essay directs readers to the complex, unequal terrain of encounters between dominating and resisting language/cultural systems that underpin the collection.

From there, M.F. Salat and Dawn Thompson explicate the ways that Ruby Slipperjack's and Beatrice Culleton's work (respectively) explode the mythical divide between the oral and the literary — an explosion that seriously challenges the epistemological space that has long been dominated by the "White colonial regime" (p. 75). Salat recognizes in the work of Slipperjack, that the message and its meaning in native literatures lies somewhere in/at the intersexion of the stated (verbal/oral) and the unstated (implied/silent), the oral and the written, the text and the reader.

Reading practices are also at stake in Culleton's work. Thompson highlights the epistemological tensions in "In Search of April Raintree" and "April Raintree," and argues that oral literature is more complex in its form than has been previously acknowledged in Canadian literature. This strategy is pedagogic, Thompson argues because "it teaches a different method of 'reading'

— literature and all of the other texts surrounding us" (p. 101).

Godard's essay pushes the issue of "literary value" (p. 107) in yet another direction through a critique of similar practices in the arena of feminist literary production. She raises questions about the marginalization and exclusion of literature by women of colour, black, Caribbean, immigrant and native women, while simultaneously highlighting tensions in these analytical categories. Focusing on black women's writing, Godard reveals that feminist publishing is not exempt from conflict around defining legitimating criteria for women's literature in Canada.

Another significant theme of the book is the relationship between reader and text as central in the production of transcultural reading/writing of minoritized literatures in Canada. Kavita Sharma addresses the issue of a writer's accountability to her communities in the context of her position as a writer. Others focus on the historical role that fiction can play in making historically unrepresented communities of women visible (Krishna Sarbadhikary, Uma Parameswaran, Annette White-Parks, Lien Chao, Cecily Devereux). Several essays attend to the possibilities for rethinking relationships between language and subjectivity (Vevaina, Thompson, Godard, Sunanda Pal, Roshan G. Shahani, Susan Jacob, Christl Verduyn, Roy).

Overarching the collection is the question of literary comparisons/readings from different geopolitical sites. Roughly half of the contributors are scholars writing in Canada, and two contributors write from the United States and Australia. The particularity of readings/interpretations that India-based scholars make of Indo-Canadian literature offer the possibility of exploring the geopolitical location of the

critic as a crucial aspect in knowledge production.

Why is it, for example, that critics/readers located in India note and criticize a perceived nostalgia in immigrant Indian women writers in Canada (Sharma, Shahani), while the same critique is not raised in discussion of black women's writing (Sarbadhikary, Pal)? The historical contingency of the reader/text relationship is played out when critics produce divergent readings of the same writer — as in the case of commentaries on Himani Bannerji's work (Shahani, Jacob, Sharma).

*Intersexions* joins the proliferation of voices that have ruptured and refigured the literary scene in Canada in recent decades. Its current unavailability in Canadian bookstores concretizes the incongruence between Canada's official commitment to difference in the name of multiculturalism, and the current absorption of the Canadian independent publishing industry into the fold of foreign-based transnationals. As we speak, more and more independent publishing houses are being sold or are facing budgetary crises (witness the recent sale of McClelland and Stewart's College publishing division and the partial sale of Canadian Publisher, among others). Despite this dangerous trend, and against it, *Intersexions* serves as both an incisive critique of the present structural and cultural systems of exclusion in Canada, and as an important participant in the process of transformation of Canadian cultural politics.

*Intersexions* can be found in some southern Ontario university libraries. For enquiries about *Intersexions* contact: 350 Stong College, York University, North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3. Fax: 416-736-5412 or Creative Books, C.B. Ring Road, Naraina, New Delhi, 110 028, India. Fax: 91-11-329-8081.

Katarzyna Rukszto and Mary-Jo Nadeau are graduate students at York University.

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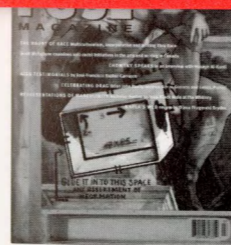
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**18:1 FALL 1994**  
"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold": Prospects for the Racist Right in Canada; plus Agitative Propaganda; Embodying Shame and Fear: The Effects of Misogyny and Homophobia on Gay Men's Bodies.

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Several writers in the anthology explore the conflicts between Eurocentric discourses of literary representation and the aboriginal and Caribbean writers' desire to write texts that articulate the orality of aboriginal and Caribbean cultures. Indeed, the collection begins with three commentaries on native women's writing in Canada (Jeannette Armstrong, Lee Maracle, Maria Campbell, Ruby Slipperjack and Beatrice Culleton). Culleton's essay foregrounds the collection of subordinating nativity to Euro/written textualities. She names this particular dichotomy as belonging to the more general delegitimizing historical "binary reality into hostile opposites." Vevaina's essay directs readers to a complex, unequal terrain of language/cultural systems that define the collection.

From there, M.F. Salat and Dana Thompson explicate the ways Ruby Slipperjack's and Beatrice Culleton (respectively) explode the myth between the oral and the literate. Culleton's explosion seriously challenges the epistemological space that has been dominated by the "White color" (p. 75). Salat recognizes in the Slipperjack, that the message and meaning in native literatures lie where in/at the intersexion of the stated (verbal/oral) and the unstated (implied/silent), the oral and the written, the text and the reader.

Reading practices are also at stake in Culleton's work. Thompson highlights the epistemological tensions in "In Search of April Raintree" and "April Raintree," and argues that oral literature is more complex in its form than has been previously acknowledged in Canadian literature. This strategy is pedagogic, Thompson argues because "it teaches a different method of 'reading'

— literature and all of the other texts surrounding us" (p. 101).

Godard's essay pushes the issue of "literary value" (p. 107) in yet another direction through a critique of similar practices in the arena of feminist literary production. She raises questions about the marginalization and exclusion of literature by women of color.

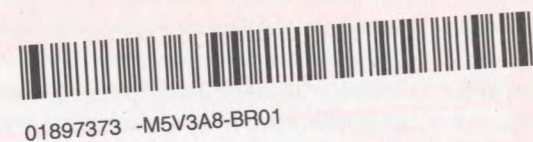
critic as a crucial aspect in knowledge production.

Why is it, for example, that critics/readers located in India note and criticize a perceived nostalgia in immigrant Indian women writers in Canada (Sharma, Shahani), while the same critique is not raised in discussion of...

against it, *Intersexions* serves as both an incisive critique of the present structural and cultural systems of exclusion in Canada, and as an important participant in the process of transformation of Canadian cultural politics.

*Intersexions* can be found in some southern Ontario university libraries. For enquiries about *Intersexions* contact: 350 Stong College, York University, North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3. Fax: 416-736-5412 or Creative Books, C.B. Ring Road, Naraina, New Delhi, 110 028, India. Fax: 91-11-329-8081.

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**19:1 FALL 1995**  
Kill, Kill, La, La, La: Pop, Punk and the Culture Industry; The Obscenity Chill Continues: Elaine Carol on the Eli Langer Trial; plus reviews of Body-centred Video Art in Halifax, Out on Screen, *AlterNative* and General Idea.



**18:1 FALL 1994**  
Featuring Hair of the Dog? Perspectives on Artists of South Asian Descent in Britain by Sonali Fernando. Atif Ghani interviews curator and Writer Ian Iqbal Rashid. Packed with great reviews!



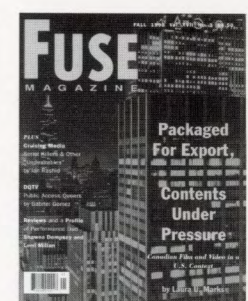
**17:2 WINTER 1994**  
Sinking: \$6-million & Still Counting, M. Nourbese Philip on *Show Boat* and the Media; plus Call Out the Tropes: *Miss Saigon* Undergoes Analysis; Richard Fung interviews David Henry Hwang, author of *M. Butterfly*.



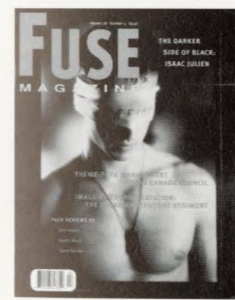
**18:5 SPECIAL 1995**  
A Newer Laocoön: Toward a Defence of Artists' Self-determination Through Public Arts Funding; Michael Balser's Video Art and Activism; Positive (Inter)Action: Responding to AIDS in Montreal; and much more!



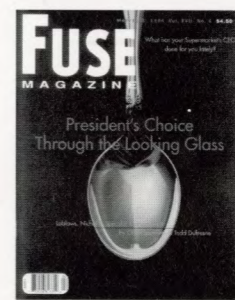
**17:5&6 SPECIAL 1994**  
This is our very special music issue. It features articles on The Changing Space of the Record Shop & an interview with Digable Planets. Columns include Music in the New South Africa and Hole's Courtney Love.



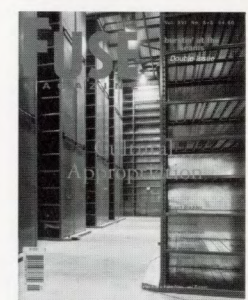
**17:1 FALL 1993**  
Canadian Film and Video in a U.S. Context; plus Cruising Media: Serial Killers & Other "Undesirables"; and DQTV: Public Access Queers. Also a profile of performance duo, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan.



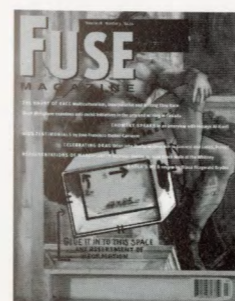
**18:4 SUMMER 1995**  
The Darker Side of Black, an interview with Isaac Julien; Theme Park Management at the Canada Council; What the Canadian Airborne Regiment Means to Artists; with reviews of bell hooks, Nancy Nicol and Steve Reinke.



**17:4 SUMMER 1994**  
President's Choice Through the Looking Glass: Loblaws, Nichol & Specular Consumption; Talking Cock: Lesbians and Aural Sex — Cynthia Wright interviews Shonagh Adelman; plus Multiculturalism and AIDS: Doing the Right Thing!



**16:5&6 SPECIAL 1993**  
This double issue is burstin' at the seams. Re-appropriating Cultural Appropriation; Working Through Cultural Appropriation; Dis-Orient-ation; wordS and sWord: An anagram of Appropriation. Also Voices and Stories, and Dance Me Inside.



**18:3 SPRING 1995**  
The Haunt of Race: Multiculturalism, Incorporation and Writing Thru Race; Chomsky Speaks; AIDS Testimonials by José Francisco Ibañez-Carrasco; plus reviews of *Guy to Goddess: An Intimate Look at Drag Queens & Ladies Please!*



**18:2 WINTER 1995**  
"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold": Prospects for the Racist Right in Canada; plus Agitative Propaganda; Embodying Shame and Fear: The Effects of Misogyny and Homophobia on Gay Men's Bodies.

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The latest issue of *Granta* looks at children. Some of our authors' initial findings:

*Research and development period:* nine months.

*Most common product faults:* noise, mess, puking and mewing, irregular sleeping and eating patterns, amorality and irresponsibility.

*Economic productivity:* almost zero in the developed world.

*Leading economic beneficiary of their desires:* Walt Disney, Inc.

*Chief virtues according to their owners:* joy, innocence, love, perpetuation of the gene pool.

*Chief faults according to non-owners:* lawlessness, refusal to obey instructions, growing global numbers.

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