

onestar press

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The Home of the Future An Interview with Richard Wicka

Buffalo, New York, August 1, 2007

Richard Wicka has been producing public access television shows at his Buffalo, New York home, The Home of the Future, for over 20 years. Hundreds of people have visited the HOTF to work on TV shows, film shoots and radio programs. We talked with Wicka about the history of the HOTF and the social and artistic vision behind it.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *Can you tell us the story of the pond in your backyard?*

RICHARD WICKA: I went to nurseries and said: "How do you put a pond in your backyard?" They all told me the same thing: "You've gotta dig a hole at least three feet deep." Why? "Because water freezes in the winter but never to a depth of three feet. You've gotta let the fish get down there. They've gotta have water to swim in. They can't stay in a block of ice all winter like the Frankenstein monster." And I said: "That is deep. I don't like that idea." I have this theory and I try to apply it to all aspects of my life: Learn by experimenting. You should solicit the advice of experts but you should also use the experimental method to find out what works for you.

So I go to Kmart and I buy a kid's toy chest, which is about 18 inches deep. It's good plastic. I dig a hole big enough for the toy chest and I put it in the ground. There were people telling me: "In the winter that chest will become brittle and crack and all the water will leak out." I get a pump to keep the water clean and I know that moving water will not freeze. The question is: will the pump work year round?

Next came the question of fish. So I go to the pet store and I ask: "What's a good, hearty, wholesome fish?" And he's showing me these fish, you know, like 15-20 bucks a piece. I say: "What about those fish right behind the counter in that water that's very murky?" He says: "You don't want those. Those are feeder fish. We feed those to the fish that prey on other fish." I say: "Those fish are all gonna die?" He says: "That's right." I say: "How much are they?" He says: "10 cents a piece." I say: "Gimme six of them."

I put them in the backyard and I tell you what, those fish have lived in that pond for the past seven years, winter and summer. When winter comes and the snow falls, I don't feed them. They go four to five months, no food, no nothing. I go out there in the spring to feed them and they're

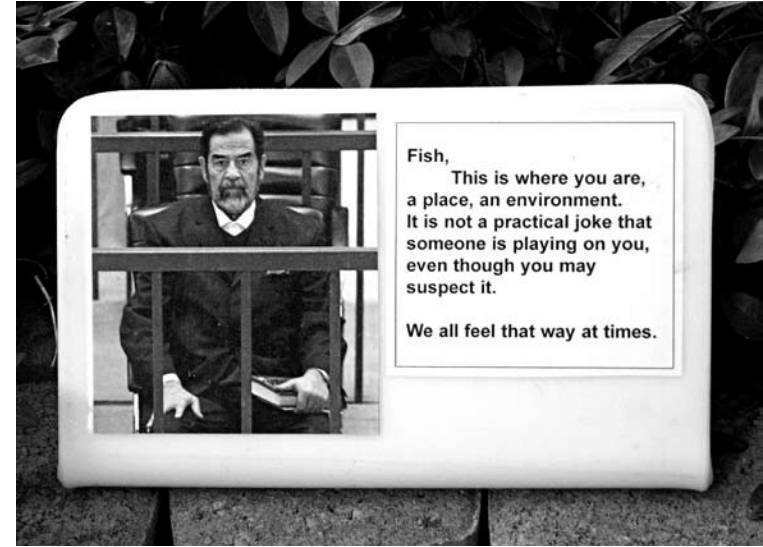


Pond at The Home of the Future

not interested at all. I don't know how they survive. But now in July and August, I go to feed them and they see me coming. They're at the top: "Come on, come on, let's get the food." It's really nice that I was able to, you could say, beat the system.

And is that Saddam Hussein above the fish?

rw: Yes. Saddam is sitting in prison and he's saying to the fish: "This is where you are, the place and the environment and it is not a practical joke." Here's a guy who cooperated with the Americans, did everything they wanted him to do. Then he decided that he was going to switch the oil currency of Iraq from dollars to euros, which means it would go through the European treasury and the US treasury would lose their cut of all the money coming in and out of Iraq. I thought he would be perfect with the fish. Here he is being held prisoner and he's thinking: "I can't believe this is happening." I'm surprised he didn't implicate the



Pond at The Home of the Future (detail)

United States more at his trial. We never heard his testimony, but when he had the world stage he could have buried a lot of people.

Tell us about The Home of the Future. What is The Home of the Future?

rw: It's a concept... and a place. It started out as a place. After both my parents died, my brother said to me: "You really should own this house." They left us the house and the money in their bank account. He said: "I'll take the money, you take the house." So I got the house and I started transforming it and people started coming over right away. I was sitting with some friends in this room where we're sitting now and I said: "I have to make some changes to this house. For one thing, I'd like to paint this room black. And they said: "You're going to have a room that's black in your house." I said: "Well this is not a typical house. This is a home of the future." That's how it got started.

I had no idea that so many people would gravitate to this place. There are days where I don't feel like I own it. It's a very curious thing the way people who come here often feel a sense of ownership. People will come to me and say: "I've got an idea of something I'd like to change." Or people will bring other people here and show them around. It's like they're showing their own place. I never give anybody a tour because I get so much enjoyment out of seeing other people give the tour. One guy Sal, he brought someone from work and he brings them into this room and says: "Here's where we edited three movies. We do three TV shows a week," even though he's not involved in any of them.

Then there's Jim who has his MySpace fetish. I set up a computer and put up a sign, *The Community Computer*, because people were always asking to check their email. Jim started coming here to sit and play on his MySpace account. He'll come here at 7:30 at night and leave at 5:30 in the morning. I feel like I've got a night watchman. I'm in bed, I'm sleeping and I can hear little clicks going on in the other room and I'm thinking: no one's ever gonna break into this place because he's on the computer all the time.

It seems that technology and what you can do with it personally has been a major part of what's happened here. You've always used technology to bring people together.

RW: That is true. I do use technology to bring people together. I never phrased it that way, but it definitely fits. I mean the radio station, boy does that ever bring people together. That came about because there was an actual radio station in town, AM frequency WHLD. They decided they would be radical, a radio station with progressive, political content. They put up a call for work: Anyone who wants to can have their own radio show and do it for free, once a week. And all these people went to WHLD. They loved having their own radio shows. It was a pretty cool thing. But they mismanaged the funds at the station and soon they were actually saying to the people who had their own shows: "We could be getting \$400 a week for that slot and if you wouldn't mind paying us the \$400, we'll let you keep your show. Otherwise we're going to sell it." Well that wasn't going to happen so people started jumping ship and before you know it, the whole station collapsed. People were coming to me saying: "Can you buy the radio station?" I said: "No I can't." But then I thought, what is the problem here? Well the problem is financial. So whatever radio station takes its place, it has to be on such financial footing that it's bullet proof, where you don't have investors saying: "You're not making enough money." So the idea of this internet radio station crossed my mind. I contacted some of the people involved at WHLD and we started it.

Is it still focused on progressive, political content?

RW: I would say so. There's a great show called *What Fresh Hell is This?* and it's totally radical. Then there's this guy named Lou Corrigan and I swear this guy—he will not admit to it—but boy does he seem like a true communist. He's got an analysis of capitalism and how it can't work and how it's been corrupted and how it affects people. He does a great show from here. He's in his seventies. There's a show about sex and power, about how pornography is part of the culture of the American



Ron Ehmke and Richard Wicka, *Snap Judgments*

landscape. And then there are people who come here with just regular, almost public-access ideas for shows like Jim's show.

The MySpace call-out show?

RW: Which is pretty much what it should be called. Jim meets people on MySpace and then asks: "Can I interview you for my radio show over the phone?" So he interviewed a filmmaker and tonight he's going to interview a singer/songwriter from another part of the country. There's a comedian who does his comedy skits on his show. There's a guy who's been a musician for 30 years. He's brought all of his oeuvre, all his music, all his CDs, cassettes and vinyl. He does a show looking back on all aspects of his career with examples: "Here are all the songs where I used a theremin... This is the beginning and end of this particular band I was in," etc.

And this is all available on the internet?

RW: Yes, at www.thinktwiceradio.com

Can you talk about some of the television shows you've made here, like Snap Judgments and then The Greg Sterlace Show?

RW: The first was *Snap Judgments*, which I did with Ron Ehmke. We did 101 episodes. It started out as an imaginary TV show. The thing about working with Ron is, I can let my imagination go crazy and he can accept it as real. He doesn't get weirded out by it. So if I said to Ron: "How

would you feel if tonight we went and saw this particular movie?,” he’d say: “I hate that movie.” And I’d look over and I would say to nobody: “As you can see, he has a personal vendetta against such and such an actor.” And Ron would look at the same imaginary person and he would give his take. So we developed this thing where we would always be talking to the invisible third person.

When a time slot opened up for a public-access show, I said: “Ron, why don’t we do this thing where the third person is the camera?” He said: “That’s a great idea.” So we did it. We would have breakfast at a restaurant on a Sunday morning and I would ask Ron if he wanted to go to a movie that night and he would say: “No... well, what’s playing?” And I would go down through the list in the paper and he would give his opinions and we would look over at the imaginary third person. We were judging movies we had not seen, based on what we thought they were going to be about. Instead of making the show about: “Should we go see it or shouldn’t we?,” we pretended like we were advising people: “We haven’t seen this movie but you shouldn’t go see it because... boom boom boom.” And then it really evolved. We had guests. We shot a lot of shows in restaurants since that’s where it started. We’d also take actual movies, take out the soundtrack and put our voices in place of the characters’ voices and have a dialogue that way. That was great.

After *Snap Judgments* I developed *The Home of the Future TV Show*, which we shot here. That was your typical public-access show. Different people would come in each week. Then I started saying to people: “You’re good at this. Why don’t you host the show this week?” And they would. It got to the point where there were about a dozen people who would take turns hosting the show. That was fun, that period. But then the five-minute idea hit me one day. It had to do with the internet. If you shot something five minutes or less, people would sit still while it downloaded. But if it was longer than five minutes, forget it. And I got this idea, yeah, let’s do the show in a series of five-minute segments and I’ll interview people.

How did The Greg Sterlace Show come about?

rw: About 10 years ago Greg came to me and said: “It’s always been my dream to have my own public-access show. Could I film it at your house?” And I said: “Yes!” Greg is a lot like Neal Cassady from the Jack Kerouac combination. He is very charismatic. He is very authentic. If I just said charismatic you would think people like to be around him, when actually some people hate being around him.

Like when I introduced him to my friend Herb—he’s a professor—and Herb mentioned something about how he was studying screenwriting. I said: “Greg here has just finished writing a screenplay for a movie

that we plan on producing.” And Herb interrupted and said: “Well, I know all about producing movies and I mean I definitely...” And then Greg interrupted Herb and said: “Herb, if you weren’t such a sanctimonious son of a bitch you would listen to him while he was talking and wait until he finished before you said what you were going to say.”

I like that about Greg. I think he rubs people the wrong way, but if you can pass the test of being around him, you know there’s nothing false about you. If you come to him with a false front he will expose you mercilessly. Anyway, I developed this bond with Greg and that’s why we’ve been doing shows once a week for 11 years. Then two years ago it all collapsed for Greg. Did you know this? He lost his enthusiasm for everything. He announced one day: “I’m not going to make any more movies or TV shows, I’m just going to stay at home and watch TV.”

How did he come back?

rw: He came back very slowly. His friendship with Paula saved him I think. Because they confided in each other about their depression and how they felt, the troubles they had in dealing with the world. Interestingly enough, Greg’s stepmother, who hates him because he’s brash, she got cancer and his father said: “I’m having trouble trying to take care of her during her convalescence. Would you move down to Florida and help me?” And Greg said sure and moved down there because he doesn’t like the winter. He was taking care of this person with cancer and he just started getting better and coming out of it. Plus he was on the phone with Paula almost every day and when Greg moved back, he and Paula became lovers. They moved in together. And Greg has got his same fire back. He’s 100% recovered.

Who are some of the other people that have spent time here?

rw: Well, the name that will leap to the forefront in any biography of *The Home of the Future* is Dave Medium. This place was ablaze during the Dave Medium area, 1976-89. Dave is the most creative person that I’ve ever met. It was like gasoline and fire putting us two together. He would say: “Here pick up the guitar and start playing a song.” The minute you started playing he would think up lyrics and a melody and sing along.

Dave generated so much enthusiasm... but he had problems with his mental health. He frequently thought he could hear people talking about him. We’d go to a supermarket and he’d ask me: “Did that person in the other aisle say... did you hear her say to her son that I’m an asshole?” His mental health deteriorated. He had a psychotic episode where he thought that God was calling him to save humanity by going to Canada where some plans would be revealed and he would address the nation. He went,

and of course he felt he did not need a passport to get into Canada. He could just walk across the bridge. He had this forcefield around him and no one could touch him. He was walking on the tops of cars that were waiting to get into Canada. He got arrested and put back in the mental hospital. I would visit him every day. The first day he'd be weary. But the second day he was back to normal and saying to me: "OK, when you come down tonight, bring your guitar. We'll do a show for all the other inmates on the ward." I'd bring my guitar and we'd do a show and entertain everybody like the USO.

Dave's mental health continued to deteriorate and there'd be shorter intervals between episodes until finally he just stopped coming over and he'd be hospitalized for extended periods of time. One bad thing they do in a mental hospital is they either turn a blind eye or they encourage you to smoke. He must have been smoking five packs a day when he was in there. They figure if it calms you down, keep doing it. His health deteriorated. Now he looks like a homeless person who's had the life drained out of him from sleeping on the streets.

One day I was at a restaurant and Dave walked in the door. I thought to myself: this is going to be great. I'll think of a cool opening line. I extended my hand to shake his and I said: "Sir, I am looking for the prince of the universe, can you tell me where I can find him?" He smiled and he shook my hand. Then came the next line—I hope you never have to get a line like this—he said: "Who are you?"

Well you know there's a saying: "Something lasts only as long as the last person to remember it." It's sad. Want me to tell you about another sad event in my life?

Yes.

rw: When this place started, my friend Paul started coming over and he had this love of technology that was just as insatiable as mine. I was Paul's role model. He'd say things like: "Gee, you've got a lot of hats around here. Could I wear one?" And so he'd always be wearing my old hat. If I had a lamp with a lampshade he would get one just like it. It used to sort of annoy me, like he's taking over my identity, but we were close friends. Then he got cancer of the skin. He would go out and play basketball a lot and he was really fair skinned and if you're really fair skinned, I don't think you should spend a lot of time out in the sun.

One day, I got the phone call from Paul which essentially was: "I can't get out of bed anymore because the cancer has gone into my body and this will be our final phone call. People are constantly visiting me and I hate it because I'm being treated through this false perspective of: this is the present but we're thinking of the future when you'll be dead. It'd be better if you didn't visit me but there's nothing happening here tonight so

let's have this last phone call." Can you imagine having that? Those are two of the saddest things that have happened to me.

I'd like to ask you a general philosophy of life question.

rw: I love those questions.

At one point you were studying to be a priest. You left the seminary to study philosophy. Can you talk about how your studies have shaped the way you live your life and, for example, the way you handle conflict? When I first met you, you were president of the board of Hallwalls, a contemporary art center here in Buffalo, and I remember that you had an unusual way of handling conflict.

rw: I'll touch on a couple things you've said. Have you ever heard of the Via Negativa? It's a fascinating thing. But first I'll give you a timeline. I went into the Seminary. It's a three-phase program. They do this on purpose. If they didn't have phases they would have trouble getting people to go in. If you get out after phase one, you haven't wasted your time. You'll have the equivalent of a high school diploma. If you get out after phase two, you'll have an associate's degree. If you get out after phase three, you'll have a master's degree in Theology. At the end of every phase they have a discussion with you to see where your head is at before you move on to the next phase.

When they had their discussion with me at the end of phase one, they said: "Tell us, how do you see yourself as a priest? What kind of a priest will you be?" I said: "Well, I don't really see myself as being one." And they said: "But your application said you want to come back for phase two." I said: "I like the environment here. It's really cool. There are things here that you don't really find anywhere else." For example, there were certain days of the month where nobody spoke. You had to do all your studies in silence. And every subject you had, you could question on a religious basis and the teachers would listen to you. They wouldn't say: "That's a different subject," because these were priests teaching.

I told them all this and the head of the seminary said: "You really don't belong here. You belong at the university in the philosophy department." He gave me good advice. In a way I felt rejected but it was such good advice I have to look back now and thank him. Because I did go on to study philosophy and it was ten times better than the seminary. I went all the way through and got my bachelor's degree. Then Paralegal Services started and I couldn't really continue my education and run the business. But once Paralegal Services got on a sound footing, I went back and started taking courses again. That is the timeline of my education.

Now I want to tell you a little bit about power and a little bit about conflict. As you know from your days at Hallwalls, there's a fundamental

flaw at the very heart of the organization. We're a radical group and we survive because we get money from the state. You really can't overcome that contradiction. You really can't. The director, in his mind, has to reconcile the fact that not only is the state giving the organization money but a lot of wealthy people give money as well. So there's a side of the director which is: "It's nice to meet you. I hope I can turn you into a donor who can help us survive." There's another side, which is: "We view ourselves as a radical force in changing ideas and making society progress. Hopefully it won't offend you as a donor because we really need your money." That is such a contradiction and you see that on the board. A lot of people are there because they can donate a lot of money and the director is always walking on eggshells because if there's any conflict within the board it could affect our funding and our donor base. It was hard for me to deal with that, but then again, I like conflict because I think it's a necessary way that ideas grow, as long as when you and I are having a conflict it's not you and me, it's our ideas having a conflict. We've had conflicts here at The Home of the Future. When a conflict starts there is probably some contradiction that has to be brought out into the open and examined.

How have your philosophical studies influenced the way you organize things at The Home of the Future?

rw: Wittgenstein famously stated that the limits of our language are the limits of our reality. If there's something you don't have a word for, you're never going to experience it. I always found that fascinating. I don't know how exactly it has helped me to organize this place... because I don't feel in control of this place that much. I'm sure I influence it a lot.

You were going to tell us about the Via Negativa?

rw: Yes, the Via Negativa. In the history of the Catholic Church, the inquisition didn't really get started until the heretics were questioning the power of the church. When the heretics would question Catholic theology, it was OK. When the heretics would say, like Martin Luther said: "What the church is doing—like selling indulgences where you give ten thousand and you get ten years off in purgatory—this is wrong and this is a sign the church has lost its way"... that's different. When you start to question the power and the financial resources of the Church, that's when they come after you. Up until Martin Luther, the church would welcome alternative theological points of view and that's when the Via Negativa came about. It goes like this: Everything in the universe changes. We can't think of a single thing that does not change. Even a diamond on some level is changing as time goes on.

Well, if everything in existence changes, it's wrong to say that God exists because that means God changes and that's really not possible because if you're perfect, what do you change to and from? God can't evolve. So they said: "We cannot say any longer that God exists. It's inaccurate to say it and its inaccurate to think it." But then they thought about it and they said: "What concept of God could we possibly have that wouldn't change? Isn't a concept itself sort of limiting? How can you have a concept of something that you think is unlimited?"

So they said: "We shouldn't have a concept of God. We shouldn't talk about God. We shouldn't act in any way that acknowledges the existence of God." That's called the Via Negativa. The road to God is to deny God. If you bring this concept into our contemporary times, it means that the true hard-core atheists are following the Via Negativa.

Can you tell us what a typical day in your life is like?

rw: Absolutely. I get up at 4:00 a.m. From 4:00 to 7:00, I'll work on websites and answer all my email. I'm able to get a lot done because I'm a morning person. Then I eat breakfast, take a shower and go downtown to the office. I walk in there at 9:00. If you think it's organized here, you should see Paralegal Services. It's like a clock. I am amazed at the way that place has evolved. I have a communist side of me where I don't like the capitalist system, you know, and I want the working class to take control of the country. So naturally, this way of thinking has infiltrated its way into Paralegal Services. There are seven workers there and they've become very good at their jobs. Say I'm talking about movies or history. If I'm talking too much they tell me: "We've got work to do, can you leave us alone?" They discipline me when I get out of line.

I'm there from 9:00-11:00 every day. That's when all of our work comes in. I look for anything that could cause a problem. Usually if we've had a problem the day before, people will call the next morning. So I help them put out fires if there are any. Then I come back here. I usually have errands to run, go food shopping, go to the public-access station to drop off the tapes. Right around noon I've spent so much energy since 4:00 a.m. that I need to take a nap. I take my nap. Then I'm revived. Then I have my main meal of the day because I think it's good to eat as far away from your bedtime as possible because you assimilate it better. That's why I wanted you to come after three because I wanted to have my main meal before you came over. Then I just work here doing whatever needs to be done. A lot of our customers communicate with us via fax, which gets turned into email, so I'm constantly checking my email to see what needs to be done. There's also the old fashioned method of the phone. I have to do that with people. Then I always have something happening at 7:00 p.m., something from the artistic side of my life, every single day.



The Home of the Future

You grew up here in this house, in this neighborhood.

RW: Since I'm living in the house I grew up in, I can definitely see how the times have changed. When I was growing up, the Bunczyks lived next door and the head of the household, Eddie Bunczyk, was a Bob Villa type. He could do anything, put dormers on the house, fix cars. He built a windmill from scratch. That was a beautiful house next door. He knew what he was doing. Then he got a brain tumor and he died. His wife kept on with the house until she died. Then the daughter took over. This was the 80s. You could see how things were changing in society. She got divorced from her husband. She had a live-in boyfriend. He used to come home drunk. They would have arguments. The windmill fell down. They just took it and threw it in the trash and left the slab of cement there. They had a little outdoor swing with a gazebo. That rusted and rotted from the rain. They threw it into the trash.

One day she moved out and a woman moved in who was divorced, a single mother, a real friendly type. I'd be working in the garden and she'd come over and start talking to me: "By the way, how old are you?" I'd tell her. "What month were you born?... Wow that's my age too... and I was born in October too." I thought: "By any chance are you looking for a husband?" But she took a mortgage out on the place and then a second mortgage and she lost it by not making the payments.

The house stood idle for a year and now an absentee landlord owns it. When I was growing up, these houses were all occupied by families and they were all busy bodies. They were all interested in what the other families were doing, where they worked and everything. I always wondered: why is that, why do they care? But they did and that is all gone now. The family across the street is all deceased. It's an empty house. Next door to me, a single guy lives. Just like me. Next to him, where there was a family living, there's a single guy living. Then there's an empty house and on the other side, there's a single woman living. The era of the family is gone. It's gone and it's all here in a microcosm right on my street.

Do people from the neighborhood come here?

RW: No.

Do they know what's going on here?

RW: I don't know.

How many shows are on the air and how do you schedule it all?

RW: We do two public-access shows every week, *The Greg Sterlace Show* and *HOTF TV*. The radio station is usually two or three shows a week and then the movie we're working on—we meet twice a week for either a shoot or an editing session. My entire schedule is on the internet for everybody to see. People will ask: "Hey can I get together with you?" And I'll say: "Here's the website. See if there's an open day and I'll put you down." You're on there right now as being scheduled for tonight.

Do you feel like telling the story of how you started your paralegal business?

RW: I can't imagine anything I wouldn't want to talk about. When I was in college and going to school at night, I needed a job during the day to pay for my schooling. I got a job at this place that did legal assistant work. After four years I was managing the place. In my naiveté I said to the attorney who owned the business: "Have you ever thought of selling

this business?" He says: "No I haven't. Why?" And I say: "Because I really think I could run it better than you. I could really make this successful, much more so than you have done." Once I'd said that, he had no rational option but to fire me.

So I started my own business. I was his competitor and at first it was a real David and Goliath thing but then I persevered and as the years went on I got bigger and bigger. I believe the year was 1990 and one of his representatives contacted me and said: "You know there's all these mergers going on, Time/Warner and all these things. What would happen if our two companies merged?" I thought: no way am I going to have anything to do with that guy, but I'm not going to pass up this opportunity to sit down at a table with him. So I went and had these meetings with him and his two partners and they were fascinating meetings. I'm thinking: I gotta steer these guys away from merger and toward me buying them. I want it to be a take-over. They were thinking: we'll get this guy into our camp, combine everything, and then sit back while he runs the show. I'd be a fool to ever get involved with that. I kept explaining to these guys that there's this thing called autonomy and I'd lose it the instant I partnered with them. They couldn't understand that so the talks fell apart.

I waited two years. Then I contacted his second-in-command and I said: "Two years have passed. A lot has happened. What do you think about the offer I made to buy your business?" He said: "Let me check and I'll get back to you." He got back to me and suggested we sit down and talk. I went out and got the friendliest, most convivial attorney you could ever imagine. This guy could make a joke about anything. He could put you at ease. He was jolly. I asked him to represent me in this deal because the last thing I wanted to do was to scare them off. That was a smart move on my part because it worked. I bought them out and I had the whole ball of wax and it's been growing ever since.

Can you talk about where your video and photo ideas come from?

rw: I would say paying attention. I just pay attention to the things that come my way. I'll give you an example, there's this friend of mine in Florida and she likes to talk on the phone... and I don't. I don't know why. This realization happened to me about two years ago. It just hit me one day that talking on the phone drains my energy. I feel like I'm Superman and I've been exposed to a lot of kryptonite when I talk on the phone. So I gave it up. All of my phone calls get sent to a place in Seattle that turns them into emails, which are sent to me. It's free, it's great and I love it. I never looked back.

My friend left me a voicemail today talking about how she didn't like the arrangement. She really misses her phone conversations with me and

she wishes I could make an exception. So I said: "How about I meet you half way. I'll start a radio show called Private Conversations and when you call me, we'll record it and we'll put it on *Think Twice Radio*." She wrote back and said: "How come it would be draining for you to have a phone conversation but it's not going to be draining if it gets put on the radio?" Then of course I had to explain to her what Sartre said, that the act of being observed changes the nature of experience. When Milton Berle dresses up in women's clothing and goes on national TV, that's one kind of experience. If he were to do it in the privacy of his own home, that would be another type of experience.

I know your work often evolves through your interactions with other people, but I'm wondering if there are certain kinds of ideas or creative methods that you've used again and again?

rw: I see the world that we live in, in America, as being heavily influenced by advertising. For example, in 1982 there was 29 billion dollars spent on advertising. Last year, there was 186 billion spent on advertising. At the pace it's at right now, by the time you're 50 years old, you've spent three solid years of your life watching billboard, magazine and television advertisements.

Interestingly enough, when they have polls asking people if they're influenced by advertising, 89% of the people say: "I don't pay attention to advertising." Yeah, right, not true. That's the insidious part of it. You don't think it influences you but it does. Women are going to doctors now and they're asking for Viagra for themselves and the doctors say: "Well what do you want it for?" And the women say: "Well I saw the ads on TV and they say it produces a loving, caring relationship with your spouse."

The ads don't tell you what the drug is and what it's used for, they emphasize the dream that the drug is selling. So in essence, advertising has two layers. One is the layer of what is being sold and the bigger layer is the dream that is attached to it. People are influenced by all these dreams that we're surrounded with but, getting back to your question, there's also the actual lives that they lead aside from the dream. The idea that I'm constantly going back to is: what is the actual life that you're leading aside from the dream? How can we express that? So a lot of my art is an attempt to either expose the dream or have people relate experiences outside the dream. That's what the *Five Minute Video Series* is about and a lot of projects I've worked on have that as an underlying idea. I am of the opinion that the real lives we lead are more important than the dream. Call me crazy.

In many of your videos and photographs you stare into the camera with a deadpan expression. How did this character come about?



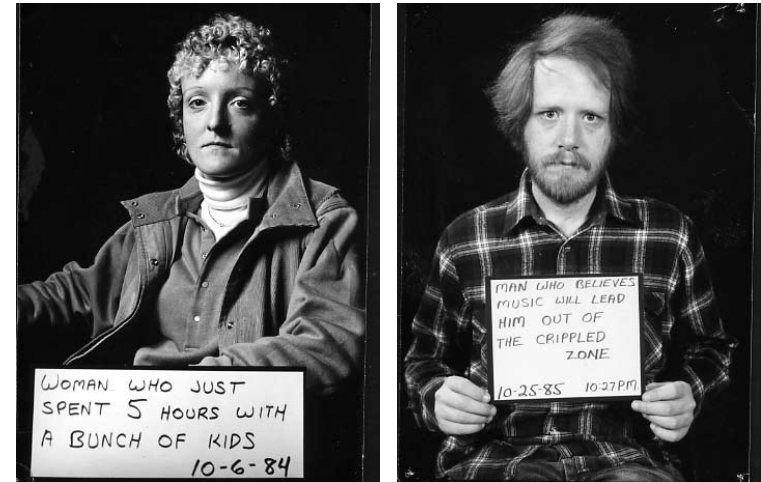
Kitchen with doorway leading to studio. The sign above the door reads, "MAGIC THEATER. ENTRANCE NOT FOR EVERYBODY."

rw: Oliver Hardy, from Laurel and Hardy, had this phenomenal way in movies of being in an absurd situation and looking right at the camera. It had a huge influence on me. Huge. Jack Benny would do it too but Oliver Hardy was the master of it. It's like: "I'm in this situation and there's something strange about it. I know it and you know it, but I'm still in this situation." How does that saying go: "The most imposing thing hanging over our heads at all times is what to say next and how to say it." There is some truth to that, this burden that we deal with. That's what that character is conveying. It's an important philosophical question.

One of the nice things about art is the fact of being observed and knowing you're being observed. If you're having a conversation with someone who thinks that America is this very fair place that's trying to spread freedom throughout the world and our leaders are trying their best to do something right... and it's just you and them, you're in their world of illusion. But if I'm talking with the same person on video and I pause and I look at the camera, it's like I'm saying to the audience: "Come on, feel my dilemma. I'm trapped in this world of illusion."

For many years you've been photographing friends and acquaintances, sometimes on their own and sometimes together with you. Some of these pictures are displayed on the walls of your kitchen. Others are stored in your car and people who ride in your car can look through them.

rw: If I were to just take pictures of people with me behind the camera, it would create a situation with them as the subject and myself as



Photographs by Richard Wicka

the engineer or the mediator, whereas if I stand next to them and put the camera on a self-timer, it's a different situation. We're both subjects. I had another photo series where people would write on a sign and hold it up. I was focusing their attention on what they'd written. In a sense I was saying: "Oh, you just made this wonderful sign: WOMAN WHO JUST SPENT 5 HOURS WITH A BUNCH OF KIDS, now will you hold the sign up so I can photograph it?" In reality, I'm as interested in photographing them as I am the sign. They're thinking: "It's the sign that's more interesting than me." Then you get the photograph and you look at it and you can't help but see the sign, see the person and see the relationship between the two.

Here's another thing. When people are in a photograph with me and I go into my neutrality mode, I notice that it creates a reaction in them. They could try to imitate me and they could try to go into neutrality mode themselves and there are some dynamite photos I have of people who've done that. Or they could take the opposite approach and try to animate themselves and there are good photographs like that too.

What's going to happen in the future at The Home of the Future?

rw: The future can be looked at as something you are headed toward. Or it can be looked at as something you are doing now that affects where you're headed. I like the second definition. For me the future has always been something I do now that determines where I'm going.





Bacon, Eggs, and Sweet Mary Jane

An Interview with Animal Charm

Los Angeles, California, May 25, 2008

Rich Bott and Jim Fetterley have been making videos and performing together as Animal Charm since the mid 90s, when they began cutting up and reassembling the most marginal and underwhelming videotapes they could find: industrial training and home exercise tapes, late night infomercials, how-to's and low-budget films that never made it. We asked Bott and Fetterley about their backgrounds, working process and artistic goals.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *How did you grow up?*

RICH BOTT: I was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1972, the year of the rat, but I grew up in Naples, Florida, near the Everglades. In the 80s, Naples was mostly for old people. Kids would run away from the police, sneak booze on the beach and skateboard. Where I used to play as a kid there were sand dunes and pine forests. Now it's all plastic surgery places and strip malls. It's been completely wiped out.

Your parents were musicians.

RB: They played bluegrass but that wasn't their main job. My mother was a nurse and my father was a lawyer, but he quit when he had a heart attack. I was in the courtroom when it happened. I was ten years old. I went to go see him at work and he had a fucking heart attack. They took him away in an ambulance. He couldn't take the stress. He did a lot of divorce stuff and crazy husbands would want to kill him. I remember him putting a gun in his briefcase to go to Miami to try a case.

My dad was in a band called Beargrass Bluegrass. They played in a lot of festivals with big name acts. I got to meet Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, The Seldom Seen. We'd be back stage with all those guys. My parents always encouraged me to play music and draw. I was totally small playing a huge stand up bass. When I was a kid I thought it was lame. I wanted to play punk rock, electric guitar. I was embarrassed. Now I'm stoked. My dad and I made some recordings together last summer with synthesizers and dobros. I'd like to cut an album with him. He's senior and I'm junior, we have the same name, The Rich Botts.

How did you get from Florida to Chicago?

RB: One of the guys in my dad's band was an art teacher and he suggested that I drop out and get my GED, then wait until I was old enough to go to art school. So I dropped out, got a job as a bellhop at the Ritz Carlton and made cash money. When I was 17, I went to Chicago to do this thing at the School of the Art Institute where you can take a class and see if you want to go there. That's where I met Jim.

What about you Jim, how did you grow up?

JIM FETTERLEY: I was born in Love's Park, Illinois. I'm an only child, with just my mom. It wasn't until much later that I realized everybody else had fathers and family. I was in my own little bubble. My mother cleaned houses during the day and bartended at night. I'd stay up until she got home from work at 1:00 a.m. She'd bring people over from the bar and there'd be Monty Python and the smell of bacon, eggs and sweet mary jane. I was a bit of a goody two shoes because my mom was a partier. When I was eight I threw a big fit at her birthday party. I called her an alcoholic and told her I was running away. I hid in the woods, totally trashed the whole day and gave her a complex about being an alcoholic.

My aunt came to live with us when I was nine. Her girlfriend died and she moved back from California. She couldn't confess to the family that she'd been living with a woman for 30 years. At the same time, my mom had stopped dating because something tragic happened. After my dad had been out of the picture for nine years, my mom started dating this other guy, Bob Dewitt, and he was great. All of a sudden she had some stability and it wasn't always night partners and nighttime parties. Then one night, I remember it was past one o'clock in the morning and no one was back yet and I was thinking: what the fuck's going on? I went downstairs and the cops were there and I figured out by listening through the door that Bob Dewitt went home one night—he was married and my mom was his mistress—found his wife in bed with another man and shot and killed him.

My mom never dated after that. She became a committed life partner to her sister and dedicated everything to raising me. I wasn't spoiled but definitely lived in a bubble, never imagining that my life was any different than anybody else's. By the time I was in high school, my friends were having their parents divorce. I was telling them: "It's so much better, you need the distance." And by that time I was also totally into becoming a teen drunk. It seemed natural.

How did you spend your time as a kid?

JF: My mom never went to movies—she's agoraphobic—but we always watched television: *Twilight Zone*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Tales from the Darkside*, but I never saw movies, I never saw *E.T!* By the time I went to art school and began to watch all kinds of films... Wow!

My friend Gee Whiz had me over one night and showed me an 8mm film of him and his brother running around in Green Bay Packers outfits. He showed me the little Brownie camera and I got interested in making movies. I was constantly buying old 8mm film and shooting film at parties. I'd get it back and it'd be black because there was never enough light.

Do you remember any of the films you made?

JF: My favorite film was a loop of my bulimic friend, Jeff Nelson. He could puke on command. We made a little film of him eating my mom's chicken at the house. Then he goes upstairs and pukes. I went to the summer program at the School of the Art Institute and I brought my films to share with other students. I set up two loops of Jeff puking on two projectors and in the middle was a third projection of him eating chicken in the kitchen. The student teacher told me I should get into film and video. I thought: Alright! They like my puke movie. I'm gonna do this!

So the two of you met each other at the summer school?

RB: We were both staying in the same dorm. Jim was my neighbor and after the summer session he started school right away. I went back home and made a portfolio by going to the library and looking at other art: "Andy Warhol.... Oh, I'll make an Andy Warhol type-thing... Richard Serra, I'll make a Richard Serra." I gave myself a crash course in contemporary art and ripped a bunch of it off, made a portfolio, got accepted and went to the Art Institute a year after Jim had started. I spent the last year of college in Amsterdam through an exchange program. Then I came back to Chicago and lived there with Jim for another six years.

JF: We lived together the entire time we were in school in a loft with a lot of other people called Balilau. When Rich's parents dropped him off, his mom was crying because there were heaps of garbage... it was horrible, all homeless style. There were older people living there who'd already graduated. They told us to drop out of school and just do stuff. Of course we stayed in school.

Did you start making videos together while you were in school?

RB: No, it wasn't until after we graduated, but we studied film in school. We were both well versed in experimental film history and I took a lot of sound classes. They had an Emu synthesizer with patch cording and a digital sampler, which was unaffordable at the time. If we hadn't gone to school we wouldn't have had the same access or way of looking at things but I think we were influenced more by shitty films and television than by art films or art videos. We both read *The Electronic Disturbance* by Critical Art Ensemble when it first came out. We were into recombinant music, borrowing from things and reassembling them. We'd make music with our friends. It was all very loose, a loose group of people.

JF: We were collecting records and finding stuff. Right before Rich left for Amsterdam, we went to this outdoor thrift store where we realized: Jesus, a quarter a record! While Rich was in Amsterdam, all of us who lived together would send him mix tapes. Our friend Paul had a 4-track that we used to make recordings, mostly music, but also teleplays.

When Rich got back, we talked about doing a video version of these home recording nights, basically make something and play it at a party or have a party around the fact that we made a tape. It wasn't about going to bars or shows. It was very insular.

We were also working 40 hours a week and stressed. Rich was working at an internet service provider and I was working for Kartemquin Films as an online editor and equipment manager. My bosses turned me on to a lot of films and history, all the practical stuff, what the politics meant and how they'd taken their films to church basements and community centers, "25 people at a time." But the stuff they were doing 25 years later was so far from that, too didactic and heavy handed, but I really related to the stuff from the past. When we had parties we'd go to the library and get Norman McLaren's abstract animations, then mix in a hippie demonstration and a Miss America contest.

Meanwhile, I was setting up the first Avid system at Kartemquin and learning how to edit digitally. We were working on *Hoop Dreams* and it took eight hours to edit 30 seconds. The way they worked made it seem like I could never make a movie—no way, thousands of hours, writing all this time code, it seemed undoable. But then one night I brought some footage in and did a little edit, brought it home and said: Guys look at this! All of a sudden it looks like TV. Holy shit... titles!

RB: We started sneaking into Kartemquin at night. We'd bring a bunch of VHS tapes, digitize them and fuck them up. We'd have to be done that night, get it off the hard drive, and lay our master off to VHS. If we put it on beta we couldn't take it home and watch it.

JF: The first video we made... we went to the library and got a CD

about how to take care of your cat and a video about biology, petri dishes and stuff like that. We threw it together and we were psyched about it. That was our first video, *Sunshine Kitty*. We took it home and showed friends. It got to be the thing to do: "Hey what are you doing tonight? I got a space booked midnight to seven, come on by." We'd all go and collect things. At first it included our friend Paul and another friend Andrew, but when Rich and I were together it really worked. Too many people made it so everybody got drunk and nothing got done.

RB: All those early videos, the first five or six, were made the same way. It was like: "Let's apply what we're into in music right now into video." We did it for fun, to freak ourselves out and entertain ourselves and our friends. Then Jim sent one of our tapes, *Slow Gin Soul Stallion* out to the San Francisco Film Festival and it won a prize. That's when we discovered a world of places, outside of our living room, where what we were doing could have a reason to exist.

JF: Before we found out we were in the festival, I had a chance to go to San Francisco for a documentary project on people living in communes. I wanted to somehow meet Craig Baldwin so I went to Artists' Television Access. We'd seen *Sonic Outlaws*. We kind of had a big conflict with that film—it was very direct, hit you over the head—but at the same time we were trying to find things like that, things involving sampling and copyright. So I was determined to find Craig Baldwin and show him our videos. Craig was skeptical at first: "I don't know, you give me two videos and want me to show them?" He was a real weirdo but I liked him and we kept in touch. He wasn't going to program our videos but then we got into the film festival. So I called him and said: "We're in the festival and it's the same week as the Tape Beatles are performing at your place, can we have a screening as well?" He said alright. We didn't think the festival would be that good, but we knew the thing at Craig's was going to be amazing. As it turned out, the festival was great. We met a lot of people and at the awards ceremony, they were like: "Well you know, art's like pornography, you know it when you see it. And when we saw these two videos, they kind of came out of left field and we didn't know what they were but we know it's art."

Around that same time we saw Igor Vamos's *Barbie Liberation Organization* tape, which was another thing that made me realize: "Wow, it's so easy to do stuff and actually put it in the world. People want to see stuff like this." So I'd send Igor a box of videos with stuff like *The History of the French Fry* and all the McDonald's outtakes and he'd send stuff back. There was this loose network of tape trading that led to our friend Matt up in Portland asking if we wanted to go on tour with him in 1997. We thought: we can't play these same videos every night. That's

when we got a video mixer, a Videonix. We found out about it from friends who made rave videos. Once we were on the road with all these little shorts, it got to be boring and we wanted to mix up the order. We'd sit with Matt the night before and go through it and try different things. By chance we noticed: Hey wow, I'm watching *Lightfoot Fever* but I'm hearing *Slow Gin Soul Stallion*. We had four VCR tapes rolling and audio from one was going over the video from another. So by the end of the tour we were thinking about how to do that more deliberately, how to make new videos to be played live.

Can we back up and talk about the kinds of source material you use?

RB: In the beginning we didn't want to use found footage that was recognizable, like: "Oh look, it's Michael Jackson." We wanted to create something new that we hadn't seen. There's also the economy of finding the stuff. We were in the thrift stores just like you guys looking for some kind of weird, other shit that's not about selling products or entertainment or branding. We were looking for things that were outside of all that.

JF: And at first we had a rule: we're going to cut out all words, all verbal and written language. Having text on the screen was too literal. We wanted it to be so defamiliarized and disorienting that it went into a generic anti-aesthetic. We also decided never to shoot any video, never record any sound, never use any music we like, never use images or references to things we like. But that changes because your tastes change. Reading *The Electronic Disturbance* was huge. It became clear that what we were doing was not just for our own self-entertainment—and even *as* self-entertainment—it was a way to not become part of a market or a marketer of something to be consumed. It's about having power over your own creativity. You don't even have to share it with anyone else. If you can make entertainment for just you and your friends, that's all you need. That means you don't have to go buy things or become part of these warring tribes of subcultural groups who learn these past histories in order to present their resumés and knowledge—their record lists and libraries pitted against one another. We wanted something totally outside that type of battle.

You guys don't cut up tapes that are already good on their own. If you find a video and you think it's amazing, you'll just show it.

RB: Yeah. Say in a live show, we'd play those *Blazin' Hazin'* tapes but we wouldn't fuck with them. We'd just play a whole song and present it as is. And when people would ask us: "What is that?," we'd tell them. We'd never act like: "This is *Art*. We don't reveal our source material."

Basically, we're always looking for banal moments that can be put together to create a new moment. It's more interesting when you start with shitty things because there's all this room around them to become something else. It's also being disgusted with society and wanting to shit all over its face and do the opposite of what everyone thinks is cool. Then slowly that becomes cool too but then you're always trying to dig for that next moment, to keep yourself separate and autonomous.

JF: Yeah, we wanted to find stuff that had no relationship to us, that we were not nostalgic about, that we had no understanding of. Then we'd try to defamiliarize it even further so that it ended up having a truly empty meaning, like dry carcasses that we could reanimate. That was easy at first but it became more difficult as that type of material became more familiar to us. By the time we got to *Hot Mirror*—an amalgam of the world's worst corporate music combined with really banal video, like a slow zoom-in on a couch—we didn't want it to fall under anything. We only had a definition of what it was not. We had lists. It's not this. It's not like that group.

But then our tolerance went up. We'd see things and think: that falls under that genre plus that genre. It's a hybrid we recognize. Maybe nobody else sees it that way but we do, and we need to put a different unfamiliar thing in there. We wanted to break into something new by going deep down into the center of absolute normal, everywhere, banal, nothingness. Don't get me wrong, Rich and I don't philosophize about it so much as we try to have physical reactions.

So you're at a thrift store and there's a wall full of videos. What goes through your mind as you're looking for tapes?

RB: We've always collected videos and records both. I think it's just a skill you acquire through practice. You can vibe out and feel what's going to be good. Even if it doesn't have a holder and it's just a video with some writing on it, you can tell. And since they're so cheap you can gamble. No exercise videos, unless it was something really different. I've seen them all, *Aerobic Grannies*, *The Abdominizer*... We've never really used major movies unless it was a special case. We did cut up *Meatballs* but that's because of our relationship to *Meatballs*. It's mostly instructional videos, products, explanations, demonstrations, self-help, that kind of stuff. Everything's changed with YouTube. Jim found some guy that has every Chuck E. Cheese instructional video on YouTube. If we'd found those tapes 10 years ago on VHS we'd have been blown away.

We were recently looking at things on YouTube, things that had been viewed the least. We were trying to think of the things that people put up that no one wants to look at. We came up with things like the weather or

station identification sign-offs: “This is KCRW wrapping up this broadcasting day.” And we found some. Man, there’d be only ten views. We had both our laptops side by side playing two different videos. Basically, we were looking for things that are never going to take off. There’s gotta be an interesting way to work with videos on YouTube, but you need a base concept or else you’re lost in the quagmire of everything out there.

People always ask us why we use 80s and 90s stuff. Well we didn’t consciously choose that, that’s what’s on VHS tapes. No one’s making VHS tapes anymore so they’re always going to be dated.

JF: Yeah, people say we only use corporate/industrial videos and how-to’s, but that isn’t true at all. We have that as a core but we’ll use anything. For *Lightfoot Fever* we used a tape of Jim Bailey, a crossdress performer from Vegas. It’s a compilation tape where he’s performing as various personas, like Liza Minnelli. In one of them, he plays the part of a man from the Lucille Ball show and he’s singing *Fever* with a beatnik backtrack. We combined that with a video of rabbits chasing rabbits where all of a sudden you hear a voice saying: “Hi, my name is Lightfoot. Can you find me? I’m hiding in the forest.” We were thinking: the best thing on this crossdress tape is the one where he’s straight and the best thing about these animals is that they’re talking. It’s the exception. We can let the animals talk. We can use words now because they’re from an animal, not a human. We’ve always begun with a series of limitations and as soon as there was a limit we had to break it. This led us to define this defamiliar, non-surreal, non-strange type of strange. We were constantly trying to be uncool and wanting to make something that couldn’t be co-opted. And it will never be co-opted because it’s all copyright stolen. You can’t resell this. Try! We can’t. You can’t either.

RB: Everything can always be co-opted but if you’re alive it feels good to resist it. When Paper Rad first got started there weren’t people wearing day-glo clothing and getting all 80s. Now bumpers on MTV look that way and everything’s gone that route. I remember when thrift stores were filled with that shit, filled with bright pink ski jackets. We’d rather not pay tribute to things that are already co-opted or add more crap to the world. Why should we shoot our own videos? There’s plenty of shit out there already. Why not just fuck with it, remangle it to be something better? We can do that.

Didn’t Nike want to buy one of your videos?

RB: They wanted to use the *Mark Roth* video to sell shoes. They were like: “What’s that footage?” We told them they couldn’t use it because it wasn’t our footage. And they said: “Well where’s it from, we’ll contact



Animal Charm, still from *Lightfoot Fever*

them.” We said we didn’t know. Someone had given us a tape of a postal union meeting. We lied and told them we could reshoot it. They were going to give us \$5,000. We needed the money. So we shot *Street Shapes*, got it to them and they were pissed. They called us and said: “This is not what you put in the proposal.” Then Jim totally manipulated the guy. The shoes were supposed to be for parcoures and street soaping so Jim said: “We know people doing parcoures. We showed it to all our friends who are into soaping and they love it.” The guy finally says: “Thanks guys, I guess I was on the wrong page.” So we got our money and our tape wasn’t even on the DVD—actually it was, but on a hidden track—so I felt like we’d won all around. And those shoes fucking failed, man. They were called Prestos, ever heard of those? No!

When people laugh when they watch your videos, what are they laughing at? Where does your sense of humor come from?

RB: We’re close friends and we have the same sense of humor, kind of dark, kind of fucked up, kind of reveling in people’s misery and uncomfortableness. I think we’re both really uncomfortable and miserable and we hide it with humor and drugs. I remember we were so different from the other people in art school. We couldn’t relate to kids who were like: “Yeah I was making abstract paintings when I was in high school. Let’s go see Anselm Kiefer.” Jim grew up working at the Rockford Speedway and stealing things and running away from home and without a father. I was adopted by weird bluegrass parents, running around with my friends



Animal Charm, still from *Street Shapes*

bashing car windows. We came together. Our similar backgrounds made the same things funny to us. Our sense of humor could go to the dark place but we'd still laugh and really revel and accept and embrace the sickness, turn it into something awesome and fun. We made our own TV to freak ourselves out. We didn't have entertainment that did that, especially at that point. There was no Adult Swim. There was *Ren and Stimpy*—that's the only thing I can think of that was even close.

JF: I hated art school. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. After having a little success in the art world and moving out here I thought: Ah, my horizons are open. I know about this stuff. Then I realized how naive I am. I'm not a professional, intellectual artist. I'm an amateur and I'm comfortable in my amateurism. I have a love for this. I like being surprised. I like to discover things. I don't like being force-fed. I like going on a journey where one thing leads to the next and you get to know things and people. Well, things don't work that way here in LA as much as we'd hoped. To this day I feel a total outsider ignorance. I don't want to read all the books and go to all the art shows. If I go to another screening and see the history of avant garde cinema and how it relates to what I want to do... I want to run and hide because those aren't the people I want to be in my audience. I want my friends. I want to be able to make bad jokes, get drunk and be humiliated. I don't want to have to put on a face to go out in public. So living with Rich, we both had that going on. Initially we wanted what we do to be anonymous.

Where does the name Animal Charm come from?

RB: At first we were called Janetanglosaxophonejackson Jr., but it was too long and hard to remember. That was the name on our first video. It took up the whole spine. No one could remember it so we decided to shorten it. And then it was actually a Rod McKuen drawing, a line drawing of a peacock from one of his books. We started using it on our VHS covers and we said: "That's an Animal Charm!" So it just kind of came to us. Then we remembered it's a Dungeons and Dragons spell where you get an animal to do your bidding. It was a perfect name.

Can you walk us through the making of one or a few of your tapes?

RB: They've all had different strategies or experiments behind them. We usually come with a bag of things. The only plan is to start digitizing, make a bin of materials to work from and just start looking at things. We'd make videos where we'd digitize what we had, lay it out on a timeline and then randomly start shifting things around. We'd make a bunch of cuts really fast and then watch this mangled thing and find the parts that were good. We'd take out all the bad parts, cinch the rest together, and slowly it would get constructed and we'd make it flow with music. But the first step was mangling the shit out of something and having that dictate the next move. The rhythms and connections are just there, you know: "This looks like MTV but it sounds like Cajun music."

One of my favorite videos is *Hot Mirror* with all the Feng Shui stuff and country music. That video bums people out because it's 15 minutes long. We were just getting off on that, pushing ourselves to the unbearable limit. Other tapes, like *Stuffing*, people love it, but when *Hot Mirror* comes on, it separates the players from the non-players. It's a test to find the serious people.

For the *Mark Roth* tape, Jim had just gotten a mixer and we set it up in the living room. We were playing a postal video, which was pretty boring. Then we put on the soundtrack to *Airport '77*. We were smoking pot, watching it and we were like: "Oh my god, this is fucked." We made a note of the times and the tracks and took it to the Avid and put it together.

For *Meatballs*, we decided to take out all the actors, all the celebrities and make that the video. Other tapes started with music. *Slow Gin Soul Stallion* started with a song and then we worked as if we were making a music video. In general we come up with a loose structure so that things can be born inside of it. We have each other to bounce things off and we can be critical with each other, like: "No, we can't do that, that's stupid."

What would be stupid?

RB: Well, we don't use porn. That's something we consciously don't

use. We don't use things that are too obviously shocking, that don't give room for other things to occur, nothing too heavy or obvious. That's just a matter of exposure and taste. If you've never really seen anything, you might think: This footage from World War II is cool with a drum beat or hey, let's re-edit a Ronald Reagan speech.

Can you talk about some of your recent live shows?

JF: The last show we did at the Mountain Bar in LA we didn't talk about it at all beforehand. We decided to do a live show-and-tell of the stuff we'd each been thinking about and looking at. What we'll often do is create tracks of video and sound that can be go-to's, like a backbeat in case anything goes wrong. We'll organize a track with a strong visual rhythm and another track that's visual noise. Another track will be tightly edited stuff that we can cut to when we want to reorganize and retool. Finally there's an open channel of material I've prepared that Rich hasn't seen and vice versa.

We had also talked about themes. We've always said that Animal Charm is a spell to make animals do your bidding, so in a way we're the wizard behind the curtain that hypnotizes the audience to do what we want. We have the power of authority but we don't want it. We want to reveal the curtain and make mistakes. At that particular show it was hard to do because our processes were unknown to each other. For me, improvisation means you've done all your preparation so that you can go anywhere you want. It means not just going places by accident. Normally our improvisations are very structured: here are the marks and in between these marks is the freedom to go between my freestyle and Rich's freestyle. The whole idea is that two people can be a better artist than one—because you're time-sharing and putting ideas together.

Anyway, the Mountain Bar show was a record release party for Ancestors, a stoner metal band. Rich showed me a video of all these homeboys smoking weed and I wanted to see what African American youth getting stoned would look like at a stoner metal concert. Also, that tape was something Rich gave me, so I knew he'd recognize it. So it's a one-two call and response... he sees that and brings the hip hop track up about smokin' out... and it's blasting while the band is playing upstairs.

We always try to make use of the context including who's going to be at the show. Our friend Jim Brown had given us a tape his mother gave him of contemporary Native American dancing. She knows he's into sweat lodges and that was her way of sharing with him. He's like: "Mom, you don't get it," but to her that's what Native American culture is all about. I knew Jim was going to be at the show and I wanted to play that for him. Rich hadn't seen that video for a long time so I was also hoping to rekindle some old spirit from our past. I also had the video



Animal Charm at the Mountain Bar, Los Angeles, 2008

of the baby's birth and the balloons and I wanted to combine that with the montage of all the multicultural kids singing. I wanted a male version opposite the woman giving birth so I tried to live pull in the footage of the cult leader pulling disease out of a stomach—which is a kind of male birth—with the children underneath... all these balances, that's what I'm thinking about. Meanwhile, Rich is putting out an artillery of audio that I'm responding to. Hopefully the end result for people who come and see it is similar to the experience we go in search of when we're editing and watching things come together.

It was a great show.

JF: Then a month later, we had a chance to re-present that show in San Francisco. We had to take it in another direction. We couldn't do the same thing again.

Why is that?

JF: Every time it's a specific conversation about what that moment is. It's not like a set list that we go out and play. It's more like we have all these fragments, like an alphabet that we use to say whatever it is we want to say at a given time. Maybe you saw motifs that recurred, like the chipmunk... we've used that clip before but each time it's different, based on where we choose to put it. I want the chipmunk to find its own place in there, somewhere where it will shock me new and different.





Painting and Prison

An Interview with Wynn Satterlee

Cadillac, Michigan, August 3, 2007

Wynn Satterlee began painting while serving a 20-year prison sentence. Working day and night, he made hundreds of paintings each year, developing his own style and set of themes. After eight years and numerous appeals, a federal judge ruled that Satterlee had been denied his Sixth Amendment rights at his original trial when his attorney failed to inform him of a favorable plea offer. Since his release in 2006, Satterlee has continued to paint while running a motel and a car dealership in Cadillac, Michigan.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *How did you grow up?*

WYNN SATTERLEE: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a hundred miles from here. We've lived up here all our lives.

What did you do when you were a kid, how did you spend your time?

ws: I started working on a paper route at age nine. I've been in business my whole life. Everyone else was going to school at seven in the morning and I was coming back from my paper route. I grew up on the lake so we got to do a lot of fishing, lots of running around, kid's stuff. I kept busy. It's funny. My parents didn't have much when I was a kid. I didn't want to set the world on fire but I did want a bicycle and I couldn't get one any other way than working for it. I'd get up before dawn and load up with the Detroit Free Press. Friends wouldn't come over and spend the night at my house because it meant they had to get up as early as I did. I picked up momentum over the years. I always said I could run IBM if you gave me the keys. I'll try anything.

Did you make art when you were younger?

ws: I've loved to doodle my entire life. About a year ago, while I was painting, I realized doodling is what it's all about. I never know what a painting is going to be when I start it. I'll have an idea and real quickly blow it out... just to remember, like taking notes. Doodling gets the energy out. As long as I keep painting, keep busy, something guides me in the right direction. I still do things that I did when I was in prison. If I have a little red paint left, I'm not going to throw it away. I'm going to find a place for it. So I get up and walk around and look at all the

paintings until I find somewhere the red paint can go. I work on 10 to 20 paintings at a time, put some black in there, mess it up, get some white. This works, this doesn't... it's all about doodling.

You said once that your paintings are finished when you name and sign them.

ws: Yeah, it's like I say to the painting: "There you are. I knew you where in there somewhere." And then I sign it. Some of them never get there. If I haven't signed them I know there is something bothering me about them. When a painting is done I have no desire to touch it again.

How do you come up with the titles for your paintings?

ws: My titles give a direction for thinking about my paintings. That's it. I'm not trying to explain them. In my paintings of the thinkers, instead of wondering what they are doing, what's wrong with them, why they are bent over, the title tells you that they are thinking, simple as that. With a title like *Something's Gone*, you understand: there's a hole, something fell down the hole. The title sends you in a direction but there's also what you see. Everyone sees what they see.

How did you start painting?

ws: I think I always wanted to paint. Just a year before I got put away, I went into an art store and was thinking about buying some paint. I didn't, but I wonder what would've happened if I had. Would I have even cared? Would I have gone home and tried it for 20 minutes and then thrown it in the closet and never tried it again? Is it a good thing I didn't do it? I have no idea, but I do know I wasn't in the same frame of mind. I had nothing to do when I was in prison. I didn't have to raise a family, work and go get the milk, watch the kids. I don't think I would have invested the time it takes to see how worthwhile it is to paint.

In prison I painted 12 hours a day, seven days a week for seven years straight. And I find myself doing the same thing today. I work two jobs, sell cars, buy cars and run a motel and I still paint every day. It still comes out now, all the time, even though I've gotta force my own time and my own mental state... but I find the minute I pick up that brush my world is just like it was in there. It's there and I'm caught in it.

I started painting because I was sick. I had to get my mind off dying. A guy in there showed me how to paint. I got five other guys started. You guys found out about me through an art show and now there's five more people who put work in that same show. That's pretty cool. That guy who showed me had no idea what would happen. I remember one of the first paintings I made. He looked at the little



Wynn Satterlee, *53 Thinkers*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

people and he wanted to know where in the hell did I get the idea to paint little people. He's an accomplished painter. He spent a lot of time in the library looking at pictures, getting ideas. I'm the opposite. I don't want to see or be influenced by other pictures. I paint out of my mind. I hate it when someone tells me what to paint. If you want a rabbit, I'll paint a rabbit but you've never seen a rabbit like mine. So that's what got me painting. If I grew up knowing that I was going to be an artist, had my kindergarten teacher said: "Look this kid is good," and developed that in me, it would be a different story. I was 41 years old before I picked up a brush.

How did other inmates respond to your paintings?

ws: I had respect because a lot of people wanted my work to send home. I made small canvases—little Boston bull dogs with balloons—and I'd add personal messages: "Daddy Loves You Samantha." I made a little money that way. Guys want to do something for their kids and they can only do so much from prison. They want it to be something special, something handmade. So people liked what I was doing. There was a buzz that things were going well for me.

It's different in there. If you're doing well people would rather be on your side than against you. It's not like out here. It wasn't about player hating, except for the guards. The guards didn't want anyone to prosper. They're working their asses off and they can't make a living. It made

them mad. I think you came and visited me one day when I was in the hole, 120 days of solitary confinement at level-4 for a dirty floor. You could kill somebody and get less. Level-4 is where all the murderers were. And I was in there for a dirty floor because they hated me.

For a short time guards were buying your paintings.

ws: One guy's got 18 paintings. They're hanging in his house. Can you imagine a world ruled by me like that? One's a lot, but 18 paintings? He turned out to be an asshole. At first, people were giving him shit about buying the paintings. They eventually came around when things were going well for me and I was getting attention and showing my paintings outside. Then that guard became the smartest guy around. But by then I was so pissed at the guards that I wouldn't sell them snot.

Some tried to steal them from me. I had a counselor ask to see a painting. He wanted to take it back to his office. I had to fight to get it back. He said: "Just let me have it." I said: "Tell you what, you bring me in a bag of four whoppers so I can sit down with my buddies out in the yard and we can act like we're human for a minute." He said: "I can't do that. I could get fired." I said: "Well then give me my painting back." And then I went into the hole for 30 days after that. That's the shit they would pull.

There are recurring elements in your paintings... the hunched over figure...

ws: That comes from a painting of a prisoner, from way back... 1600s, 1700s. It showed him in a cell with chains on his arms. He was tied in a corner. It hit me when I saw it. I felt the isolation. Certain things trigger you after going through an experience like that. To this day I have a rough time, all day long sometimes. Something reminds me, something clicks. It's become an easy emotion to show. That so much emotion could exist in three strokes of a brush is amazing. The arms aren't proportioned but it doesn't matter. You can see that something is freaking the guy out.

Expressing emotion seems like a very risky thing to do in prison.

ws: I think the feeling you get from a lot of the people in my paintings is the feeling people in prison have all the time only magnified. You walk around and see people taking the same deep breaths you're taking. We're all in the same situation and it's humiliating. We were humiliated as a group, not as individuals. It's not like high school where the teacher makes someone go to the corner and everyone else is glad it's not them. We're all suffering from the same thing. The other inmates accepted my paintings. They could relate and they wished they had a way



Wynn Satterlee, *Ceremony of the Hat*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

to express those feelings themselves. It wasn't seen as a weakness. Once in a while I'd hear someone say: "My kid could do that." Those guys were not commenting on the art. They're commenting on the fact that I was doing something with my time and they weren't. But that didn't happen very often. I mostly had respect. Sometimes there were misunderstandings about why I didn't come out to the yard, people asking: "Do you have a problem?," and not understanding that I didn't come out because I was painting. But nobody ever picked on it as a weakness.

I put people in bottles and on shelves because that's what it was like to be in there. It's interesting, I look back now and realize that I wasn't able to accomplish what I thought I was accomplishing. I went out of my way not to be in prison when I made my paintings. I only painted one or two prison scenes, but the mindset in every painting is a prison mindset. I didn't see that then but I recognize it now. The only reason you'd be sitting like the people in my paintings, hunched over, is when you're thinking: "Man, I have ten more years, I'm having a rotten day and I'm in prison." You don't do that in the real world. You don't have those kinds of days very often where you bury your head in your knees. If you do you get a counselor or you get on Prozac. If I don't tell you I was in prison when I made these, you might not know it but the minute I tell you, you can see it.

You've made a lot of paintings of large groups of people who are painted almost identically. What are those about?

ws: That's the doodling. You're talking on the phone and before you know it you've got a page full of circles and squares and blobs and what not, all tied together. You've got this really cool piece of... what? It's all over the place. I do the same thing with a paint brush... just keep adding and connecting. The little people were a way for me to keep myself painting. I'd do 53 people, 53 sets of arms, 53 sets of legs, 53 heads. I'd end up with 53 people, all the same. It became a way of keeping busy, the busier the better. It was also that I only had so many canvases to work with. If I'd had unlimited canvases, I wouldn't have packed so much into each painting.

The painting you pointed out in my office is very complicated. Do you realize what that is? It's one large painting of 50 smaller paintings on the floor and each one has a face and a personality. So that's 50 personalities and paintings inside one painting. They all had to be very small. So here I'm making this guy with a mustache but not that kind of mustache because this other guy has that mustache and not that kind of hair because I've already done that hair over here. Everyone had to be painted differently, yet the same because they're all family. It was about me keeping busy, which translated into those cities with all the buildings and guys sitting on them. It's all about getting into a groove. I have no problem sitting for ten hours working on something.

Other than reading and painting, how do people in prison do their time? Are people just bored out of their minds?

ws: Yeah, that's the problem. There's nothing to do.

So why don't more people paint?

ws: They make it complicated even when you want to. Even with everybody I had—you guys, my parents, everybody on my side trying to help me—it was still hard even for me. The hobby craft guy who was in charge of making sure we had what we wanted, his job was to slow us down. He'd purposefully not put in orders. He'd miss deadlines and even send our orders back. Three weeks after you expected to get some supplies, you get a slip that says you signed the wrong paper. Everything is against you. The better I got the more I had people throwing their foot in and trying to trip me up. I had to work around that. If I saw someone painting in the hall, I'd buy some paint off them and have them pour it in a cup. I didn't care if it was grey enamel for painting the steps. I'd get my grey enamel and hide it. Purple and brown don't go together but I made it work. Actually, I had no idea if it worked or not and I didn't give a shit. I'd spread the paint around, not wanting to waste it. A lot of the textured areas in my paintings, the strange skies, come from this. I call

it cleaning my brush. It starts out darker on the left or right and goes lighter and lighter and creates a pattern. It started out as me trying to get every mile out of my materials.

Do you have any artistic influences?

ws: I didn't really study art. Van Gogh kind of influenced me. The heavy feel, the wheat fields, the heavy paint. He had the same problem that I have. He did not like detail. His self-portrait has a lime green nose. He opened my eyes up to thinking you can be as weird as you want and get away with it. I work my paintings so hard, I don't care if they have texture all over the place. Probably one of the characteristics of my art is that up close it's a mess, but from a distance it looks great.

You often quote your own work. Some of your paintings include tiny reproductions of your other paintings. They're never simple copies. You're always elaborating and changing things up.

ws: In some How to Paint book from the library, it recommends that you take something and finish it. Then, instead of trying to fix it, do it again. There can be six different versions. There are many *Thinkers* paintings, different colors, different numbers.

Realistic art is much more common in prison than expressionist art or abstract art. Why do you think this is?

ws: The guy who taught me was really good at shadows. You could give him four snapshots of people and he could take all four and put them together on one canvas and make it look like the whole family is sitting there together. That same guy—you take those snapshots away from him and he can't do it. I knew another guy who could reproduce those Kinkadee paintings. I guess you can learn that way of painting. I was interested in doing something else. For example, I don't need my faces to be perfect or realistic but I don't want them to be cartoonish either. I never want the cheeks or the wrinkles in the right places. I've often thought of learning that stuff, but then it wouldn't be me. I'm out there. I don't mean gruesome or gross or perverted. I try to avoid those avenues. Some people still can't stand looking at my paintings.

There are paintings of yours I don't think I could look at every day. Some are disturbing. Or they're sad or just difficult. The sad ones can be uplifting. I remember the painting you made called Mail where a group of people are all reading their mail. It's a very emotional painting.

ws: I like to show people that painting. It's definitely about prison. Mail is what you wait for. The biggest thrill of any day is mail. When you get it, you're proud of it. There are people sitting down reading their letters over and over again. They're in their own little world. You don't bother anyone when they're reading their mail. It's a thing. It's an event and some people don't get that event very often. No one gets mail every day. I don't care how popular you are. You get it once in a great while.

Do you want to talk about the day you were released?

ws: I'm still not quite.... I thought about it on the ride here, when you came and saw me at my mother's house, I'd only been out four months and I wasn't in a solid frame of mind. I'm still not. I put on a good show but it's still really hard. I don't face anyone. Instead of trying to explain to people what I've been through, I put up a wall. I got destroyed in prison. Eight years is a long time. It's even more of an insult for them to say: "Well, gee, we're sorry." That's not easy to handle.

I remember the morning when my door opened. I had no idea what was about to happen. I'd lost appeal after appeal but I kept fighting. I'd go to the law library every night and work on my case. Twenty years was like a death sentence. But after the appeals, the lawyers and the money, it gets to the point where you settle in and get used to it. Mentally the lights are on and nobody's home. You go through the motions. You get comfortable. I didn't like it but I knew I had ten to twelve years to go. It was my frame of mind and I was OK with it. I could handle it. I didn't expect much after my appeals were rejected. No one gets out. Believe me. You can't count on miracles. So they cracked the door open that morning and said "Half an hour Satterlee. You gotta be up to go to court."

What happened was the judge—one federal judge out of this whole system—picked my case up and said: "Somebody should have caught this a long time ago." He was disgusted and took the case on with a vengeance. I got real lucky there. Instead of just making a ruling, he called me into court. My mother and sister got a call the night before from my lawyer saying they had to be in federal court in Detroit the next morning at 10:00 a.m. I got there and all of a sudden the judge is talking about how a grave injustice has been committed. He said: "I've got a lot of power but it's not enough power to fix this. There's no way I can turn the clock back and give a man his life back." It all hit me then. I thought I was there to get rejected again and I'd be back in prison by lunchtime. I couldn't believe it was happening. An hour later I'm at Red Lobster. Simple things like a steak knife in front of me, a fork and a spoon. I was in shock. How do you adjust from being a good prisoner, living with murderers and sucking it up to sitting in a restaurant and having people ask you what you want? The fog still hasn't lifted. Normal



Wynn Satterlee, *Reflection of Man's Revolution*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

people will never have that experience. The first two weeks after I got home I wanted to live in the bathroom. People would come over and I'd have to leave. I still have a hard time. People get too close to me and bump into me. They don't realize. You can't have your space violated. A lot of things will never be the same. It's still soaking in little by little. I eat something out here and I realize that people inside would die to be able to eat this.

A lot of people who began making art when they were in prison stop making art once they get out, but you've continued to paint.

ws: I paint at night and I paint in the morning before work. Saturdays I settle in and gear up for my world. I go there but it isn't to escape prison. It's to escape my sister, the world, the garbage guy, the neighbor that wants me to move my fence, all the people at the car lot. At my job, I make things look easy. I'm supposed to solve everybody's problems. I'm the guy they call. Instead of fretting it, I pick up a brush and walk into my world. It was hard in prison. It wasn't easy to stay in my room ten hours a day when everyone else was trying to beef up and be on top. Basically, I would paint as much as I could force myself to paint. I wasn't as healthy then so it wasn't easy. I have more energy now. I just turned 50 and I don't feel it and I don't look it. I'm in the best shape of my life and I'm supposed to be dead. This is all bonus time.





The Ukrainian Time Machine

An Interview with Naomi Uman

Newhall, California, April 16, 2008

Experimental filmmaker Naomi Uman gets to know the subjects of her films by participating in their daily lives. She spent a year living with a family of dairy farmers in rural Mexico to make *Leche* (1999) and another year living with immigrant workers in California to make *Mala Leche* (2003). Most recently, Uman moved to a small village in the Ukraine where she shot *The Ukrainian Time Machine* (2008), a series of experimental films documenting the land, culture and history of her East European ancestors.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *How did you grow up?*

NAOMI UMAN: I wish that were a more interesting story. I grew up in suburban New York. Upper middle class Jewish family, four kids. My parents are pretty normal. They were married, shouldn't have been, stayed married until we all graduated high school and then divorced. I was the geeky kid without any friends in high school.

What were you into?

NU: In high school, even in junior high, I was interested in doing things with my hands. My mom took me to a store called The Niddy Noddy where they sold yarn and all kinds of stuff for textile working. They had classes and so I learned how to spin wool, dye wool, shear sheep, knit, crochet, all that stuff. I also took art classes after school. I was really crafty but I couldn't draw. I still can't draw. At the time, for me, that meant I couldn't be an artist.

When I finished high school I went to cooking school because I thought: this is something I can do with my hands. It's not being an artist but I'll be able to make something. So I did that for a long time. I owned a catering business. I worked as a private chef. I lived in Manhattan in the early 80s when everybody had a lot of disposable income so I made a lot of money. I worked for famous people, but ultimately I was a servant.

Eventually I sold the business and went to Spain to teach English. I began to realize how little I knew about the world and about life. I was already 29 when I decided to go to college. I'd studied Latin in high school and had learned to speak Spanish in Spain, so I was interested in Romance languages and how they develop. I was also studying Italian and I wanted to understand the roots of language. There was no such

program so I majored in Medieval Studies. I was reading Medieval texts in the original Italian and Spanish. It wasn't exactly what I wanted but it was close enough.

Did you anticipate becoming a scholar?

NU: Well, it's funny. I went to Columbia, so it was supposed to be all academic but somehow they let me do other stuff. I remember I made a book for one class and a video for another class. I was also taking graduate classes and my language skills were not at a graduate level so they cut me some slack. I was a really good student but I hadn't been in school that long. Then, in my final year, I had to take classes outside of my major, so I took a history of experimental film class with John Hanhardt, who's now director of the film/video program at the Guggenheim. I knew the first day that it was what I wanted to do.

The teaching assistant for the class was James Mangold. He'd gone to CalArts and went on to make *Cop Land* and *Walk the Line*. He was teaching this class that went along with the history class where you could make an experimental film. It was an optional thing. He gave me a 16mm camera. He got it out of the cage and just handed it to me. I didn't know what an f-stop was. I didn't know what an iris was. I didn't know how to load the camera. I ruined a couple rolls of film just trying to load it. Then I got it and I made a film and I hand colored it frame by frame. I showed it to James Mangold and he told me I had to go to CalArts. Then I showed it to John Hanhardt who said: "You need to go to CalArts or to the Chicago Art Institute." So I applied to both.

What was the film?

NU: It's called *Love of Three Oranges* (1993). It's really kind of silly. It's about a woman who washes these oranges and in washing them, she falls in love with them and they turn orange. Then she does this dance with the oranges and winds up destroying and consuming them. It's a black and white film and the oranges are hand colored orange. I was inspired by Edison's film, *Annabelle Butterfly Dance* (1894). Edison shot the film and then women sat and hand colored each print. Anyway that was the film that I got into CalArts with. I never show it. It has the Prokofiev opera of the same name as a soundtrack.

So you went to CalArts.

NU: After I finished Columbia, I moved to Mexico. I lived there for a year in a small port town called Puerto Progreso in Yucatan. I met and married a man there. I applied to CalArts from Mexico, found out I got

in and my husband and I came back together. He couldn't get a visa so we had to get a coyote to cross him over the border.

At first we lived in my van so I could afford to make work on film and take my student loan money and sort of horde it. Also, I've never lived in a dorm because I've always had dogs. CalArts was the first time I felt like an artist or knew what that meant. I always wanted to be an artist. In New York, I had an artist friend and I would go to openings with her but I never felt hip enough. When I got into CalArts and found this community of people that were similar to me, it blew my mind. I was older, 32. I was incredibly happy. It was a little weird though. My husband couldn't drive, didn't speak English, had never used a bank or a telephone. He was an artisan-hippie jewelry maker. So here I am in this world of radical people and creative thinkers—which he also was—but he also had this small town mentality. He thought the fact that people were naked at the pool meant that they were fucking. There was no in-between there. The fact that girls were friendly to him meant that they wanted to sleep with him.

That was really why our marriage fell apart. And we were living in a van in the parking lot. It was hard. He was very unusual, anti-materialist. Everything he owned could fit in a bag. He was happy in the van. He didn't talk a lot so he didn't mind that nobody spoke Spanish and he didn't mind not working. And I was happy to have the company but then he started getting jealous. Here's an example. I was a projectionist and I worked with the film services librarian who was basically my boss. He was this very flamboyant gay man—very, very gay. Now the door to the projectionist booth locks automatically when it closes. I had a key and my boss had a key, obviously. My husband would occasionally see me go in and the door would close. Then he would see my boss go in and the door would close. I would tell him: "He's gay, you know." And he'd say: "People can change." Well, he didn't change—for some reason, every musical known to man is in the CalArts library.

Anyway, that's how my marriage fell apart. You know, I would do it again. If I had to go back and relive my life I would do the exact same thing because I've learned so much. He and I traveled all through Mexico and Guatemala, making and selling jewelry. I saw so much that I would never have been able to see without him. And you know, I really loved him and he really loved me.

How did you go about making Leche?

NU: I had proposed as my thesis to make a film with my mother-in-law about gossip and the kitchen. But after my marriage fell apart, my husband forbid me to see my mother-in-law again. He forbid me to come to the Yucatan. I had already taken a leave of absence. I'd bought the

film. I had everything ready to go so I decided to go to Mexico anyhow. On the way down, I stopped to see a friend in Guadalajara. He was a CalArts student. He brought me to visit his grandparents' ranch in Aguascalientes. I've always had a thing for farms. It's the handicraft thing again. I like to work with my hands... the land, animals. It made a lot of sense.

I had all the stuff to make a movie with me. I had to make a thesis project, so it was already in my mind. The first morning when we woke up, they were milking the cows. I heard the milk hitting the bucket and I thought: I have a movie. This is my movie. I immediately knew so I asked them if I could come back. I came back and I just lived with them. I didn't even take the camera out of the case. They knew I wanted to make a movie but I just wanted to live with them, get to know them.

I probably lived with them six weeks before anything happened with the film. Then one day they were branding the cows. They asked me to shoot that because they wanted it for their own records. It's a big family event. I shot that and by then I kind of knew what was important in their lives, what would be important to show. I shot that film for over a year. I was with them probably nine months out of that year. I edit first in my mind and then I start shooting. Film is expensive and the camera is very heavy. You have to decide what's important and you shoot that. That's still how I work. Like the stuff I'm working on now. I lived in this village in the Ukraine for 18 months and only shot two hours of material.

Do you use most of the footage that you shoot?

NU: I probably use more than three quarters of what I shoot. I'm surprised at the economy. In one of the current films a whole roll was ruined because I forgot to put the filter holder in. Then a bunch of the film was x-rayed. Luckily it works with the film. Also, for a couple shots the motor was running slow so the footage is sped up. All the mistakes work together. But it's still a really expensive process, even if I'm able to use most of the footage.

You seem equally comfortable making documentary films and what could be called experimental animations.

NU: Well, I was in the Live Action program, not the Experimental Animation program. I've never considered myself an animator, even though my early films could be classified as direct animation and stop motion animation. All of my work is about handicraft. *Leche* is hand processed and also about all the things this family does with their hands. Even today, I don't know what kind of filmmaker I am but it all seems related to craft. With *removed* (1998) I worked directly on the film,



Naomi Uman, still from *Leche*, 1999, 16mm, 30:00

frame by frame. I painted with nail polish. That protected everything and then I bathed it in bleach. What wasn't covered in nail polish was taken away. So *removed* and *Hand Eye Coordination* (2002) are something like animation, but somehow to me they don't feel like animation. And *Private Movie* (2000) is also shot frame by frame but it's actually real situations shot frame by frame. To me it's all the same thing. It's about process and repetition and long-term investment of time... and patience.

It also seems to be about the interaction with the people who you're working with.

NU: Yeah, making a sweater, to me, is not a whole lot different than making a film. When I am making a sweater I'm usually thinking about the person it's for. In my mind I'm spending time with that person. It might not be apparent in the resulting work but it's all the same to me. When I made *removed*, I carried the film around with me in a bag, like knitting. I had a little portable light table so I could do it anywhere. I would go over to someone's house and socialize while working on my film. My films are a vehicle for me to have an interesting life and to look into other peoples' worlds.

With Leche and Mala Leche you began to externalize more, to tell stories.

NU: Yes, but for example, I'd be working on *removed* at my friend's house and I'd be doing the same thing, telling stories. They're not in the film but

I'd be telling them. At the end of *Private Movie* it says: "These stories are all true." But I don't tell any stories, actually, in the film. I mean, they're in there but I haven't told them in a narrative way.

I never know what I'm doing until I'm done. It can be hard to pull off financing for my films because it's difficult to write about a project when I have no idea how it will turn out. Right now I'm in a bit of trouble with the NEA. They were expecting one film but then I had to tell them I'm making four instead. They want to know what happened. Well, the project happened.

Leche and Mala Leche were made in a similar way with very different results. Mala Leche is a much more critical film.

NU: When I finished making *Mala Leche* some people were really upset with me for making a critical film, for making a film that shows a man and says: "This man is a murderer" or "This man is an alcoholic" or "This is not a healthy situation for young women to grow up in." People were repulsed and angry that I would make a film like that. I didn't set out to make a film like that. I had gotten a grant and already spent a lot of it. By the time I was up there and living with the family, I realized I was in a situation that no one in their right mind would want to put themselves in. I had to make a movie and I had to make an honest movie. That's where *Mala Leche* came from.

I lost a really good friend over the film, a friend who grew up in a situation similar to the family in that film. His parents were from Mexico. He grew up in a working class situation and he felt that my criticism was unfair, unfounded and uneven, and that I had all the power, which I did. He ended his friendship with me over that film which is really painful to me, in part because he never gave me the benefit of watching the film with me and telling me what it was that bothered him. A few years ago I emailed him to let him know that I missed him and that I thought he owed me an explanation. He sort of agreed, but freaked out and wouldn't talk. What he did say was that his grandparents were all that, but they were so much more. If I had the opportunity I would say to him: "You make that movie. Make it about your grandparents. Please, I'll promote it."

That being said, I did take it to heart that I didn't know what it was like to be an immigrant. I had seen it close up but I didn't have the experience myself. So I decided to go back and make the journey in reverse that my great grandparents had made. That's why I went to the Ukraine. And there is a city there called Uman, which is where our name comes from. I went there, didn't know the language, didn't know anybody. I did have the advantage of money and being an American.



Naomi Uman, still from *Mala Leche*, 2003, 16mm, 47:00

There are four films in the Ukrainian series.

NU: One of the films is about a brick-making factory. In this part of the Ukraine there is something in the earth called gleena, which is a kind of clay. It's everywhere and the bricks from this factory are made out of gleena and water baked together, that's it. Five thousand years ago, people that were part of the Trypillian culture lived in this area. They made everything out of clay. Archaeologists have found houses that had been fired. They don't know if the people burned them down as they were leaving or if it was part of the process of making the house. But they're sure the clay was burned because clay that hasn't been baked doesn't have any memory. I've seen pieces of clay with handprints from when they made the wall. There are several archeological sites in the village. There's also a museum dedicated to this culture. It's my Fulbright institution—you have to be paired with an institution—so the museum, which in fact is not even open, is my institution.

The director of the museum, Vladislav Chabaniuk, has an interesting story. He grew up in the village and wanted to be a filmmaker. When he was younger he went to the film school in Kiev and they laughed at him. Basically they said: "You're from a village. You can't study filmmaking." Villagers are totally looked down upon. He studied history and archeology instead and is now known around the country. He's been on television a million times. He's kind of like the unofficial mayor of the village, and he now makes films. Everyone in the village participates in Vlad's films, which are historical fiction films. His last film was called

Oira and it takes place in 1916 when they had a revolution. People in the village made costumes and offered their horses and their houses and food and they learned a dance—all for the film. It's really amazing. When he was making the film, a woman from Kiev got wind of it and she decided to make a "making of." She was there videotaping the making of *Oira* and her film called *Kinomania*, is even longer than *Oira*. The two films play together and they've done really well.

So Vlad became a celebrity again and I met this filmmaker from Kiev who'd bought a house in the village and never lived in it—she's never even spent the night there. It had been empty for five years and she heard about my project and told me that I was welcome to live there. It's a small clay house, no plumbing. I had to build an outhouse. That's how I wound up in this particular village, which is near Uman. I narrate my film about the bricks using an interview I did with Vlad. He talks about the Trypillian people and how they used clay. You see the brick factory, old soviet technology, which is also like ancient history.

You chose to live in the village instead of Uman.

NU: Yeah, Uman's a post-Soviet city. I wouldn't want to live there. The cities in the Ukraine, in general, are not my cup of tea at all. They are very materialistic, status conscious. I don't find the people that friendly. The villages are like paradise, like family. I taught English at the school for a few weeks when the English teacher was sick. That was great. I know every single person in the village. There are a thousand people there. Lisa Marr and Paolo Davanzo, from the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles, came the first summer I was there. They showed experimental films in the football field. They liked the village so much that we decided to do a tour. There were some musicians in the village who wanted to perform and we wanted to show Vlad's film. We rented a van and bought a generator and did this 5000 km tour of the Ukraine. It was phenomenal. I showed the first film from the Ukrainian series, *Kalendar* (2007). They had their program of language-neutral films and they made music. We would just roll up into a village and ask permission to hang a screen somewhere and show movies. They would sing and then usually someone from that village would sing. It was magical and it opened so many doors for me because I had been living there in this village, sort of like an island, and now I know these people in the cultural world from all over the Ukraine. Suddenly there is a real community of artists and it feels so vital. It's not like here where that has always existed. It feels like a place on the verge of change so it's really exciting.

You decided to buy a house there?



Naomi Uman, still from *Clay*, 2008, 16mm, 15:00

My fellowship was extended and I'm going back in the fall. I'm going to teach one day every two weeks in Kiev and continue living in the village. The idea of buying the house was that we'd always have a place and that this place is part of the village and keeps it interesting. We want the house to be an artist residency. No money. All we ask of people who want to go there is that they do something of benefit to the village and something of benefit to the house. Whatever that means. The house needs a lot of work. But it's really affordable, \$200 to replace a roof. It's very inexpensive in general. The house cost \$4,000 and it's on a big piece of land. We couldn't actually buy it in our names so it's in the name of a friend of mine that lives across the street. It's already benefiting my neighbor Maria. She wanted to use the garden to plant pumpkins for her animals. All kinds of good things have resulted.

Do most people grow their own food?

NU: Well, the villagers could not live without growing their own food. This one guy now has email and he sent me a picture of his cherry tree in blossom. He sent a picture of him and his wife with their potatoes. They're intellectuals. They don't love the land, they're like: "fuck the land," you know, but they have to grow stuff. In the picture they look like they're being punished.

You have to also keep in mind that this is a place that's lived through intense hardship. During the communist period, Stalin took every grain



Naomi Uman, still from *Unnamed Film*, 2008, 16mm, 55:00

of wheat, every piece of food. They came and took peoples' furniture. They took everything. There are still people alive who remember that time, 1932-33. Vlad wanted to collect stories of the people that still remember and I had been teaching video to kids, so we started interviewing people. All of them talk about people eating people. I mean, nobody says: "I ate a person," but they all talk about somebody else doing it. And people were killing children to eat them. There is a mass grave, 3,000 Jews, not far from the village. One of my friends in the village, who is in her mid-sixties, was born in Austria because her parents were prisoners during the Second World War. There are traces of that history everywhere.

One of the films features a group of village women singing traditional songs.

NU: The village grannies are sitting outside of the local store eating ice cream and they tell me this story of the first time ice cream was brought to the village. Nobody had a refrigerator. This was only ten years ago. People in the village, to this day, earn about \$150 a month, that's what a schoolteacher makes. So a refrigerator is very expensive. After I shot them they burst into song. And it turns out there is a group of grandmothers, I call them grannies, the word is Babuschki. They love that word and use it to describe themselves—it's not like calling someone an old bag or something. So they sang this song for me and I'd made a mistake with the tape recorder, pushed pause instead of play, so I missed

the song. I was super bummed out but I asked them if they could do it again. They said: "Don't worry, we'll come to your house and sing. When is a good day?"

Paolo and Lisa had arrived only the day before so it turned into a huge party. Cooking for days, homemade vodka, homemade bread and vareneki, boiled dumplings. They just kept coming and they came in costumes, traditional, embroidered outfits. I didn't know what to expect. It was a huge deal partly because they had stopped singing. They used to sing together but the tradition had stopped. At the party, Lisa and Paolo sang to them and then they sang together. It was amazing. Now they sing together at my house.

Some time later, a group of Georgian musicians came and they sang for each other. A young friend of mine who sings traditional Ukrainian music in the city of Lviv was visiting me and he always dresses in a Cossack outfit and smokes a pipe. He has a funny Cossack hairdo. There are no freaks in the Ukraine. No freaks anywhere. At least you never see them. This guy is a superfreak. The grannies came in and he met this one woman who is 72 years old. The instant they met they were like: "Let's have a wedding! Let's get married!" And so they pretended to be the bride and groom. They sat at the head of the table. I had this wreath of plastic flowers to put on her head because the bride traditionally wears a wreath of flowers. The whole night we pretended they were getting married. They called me the mother. I was the mother of the bride. And now this singing group of grannies just told me they were on national television. Music is a seed that blooms over and over again. I feel lucky to be a part of it.

Tell us about the film called Kalendar.

NU: I'd been studying Russian and when I awoke to the reality that no one in the village spoke Russian, I began taking Ukrainian lessons with the Ukrainian teachers in the school. They were teaching me but it was very difficult for them because they didn't speak any English and my Russian was rudimentary. When they taught me the months of the year, they would point at stuff. It was July when I was studying and they were drying Leipen, which are Linden flowers. When they told me the name they pointed to the flower. Then they went through all the months, teaching me what the names meant and I instantly had an idea for a movie. I was so excited. I asked if I could come back and film them making tea. That's why they were drying flowers, for tea. I came back the following week and they had picked Linden flowers from a Linden tree and placed them on a nearby tree so that I could film them picking the flowers and not have to move the camera. They cheated the shot for me. So that was where the idea came from.

And there are two more films that make up the series?

NU: There are two black and white films and two color films. The brick factory film is in black and white and so is a film about the pilgrimage of the Hasidic Jews to Uman, which is shot on film from the Czech Republic. It's very grainy, high contrast, different from film shot on Kodak stock. Every year there's a pilgrimage to Uman of Hasidic Jews who come to worship at the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman who died in 1810. He said: "I will be your last Rabbi. I will be your last leader." This group of Jews decided to continue following him. They're the only group of Hasidic Jews with a dead leader. He said if you come to my grave on Roshashana, Jewish New Year, and make a donation to charity, even one penny, and say this specific prayer, I will pull you out of purgatory and into heaven by your side curls. Hasidic men come and pray at his gravesite, which is on a downtown street in Uman. The city has grown around the gravesite which is in the middle of an apartment complex. Last year 25,000 Jewish pilgrims came to Uman, just men. The women come and set up the apartments, make everything kosher and then they leave. Women and men aren't allowed to worship together.

And so you have a group of repressed men without their wives in a culture that they don't respect because they only respect other Hasidic Jews, so they behave really terribly. They solicit sex from women and they throw their garbage around. They're very rude... and they're regenerating anti-Semitism. Actually, it's not anti-Semitism, it's anti-Hasidism but the people living in Uman don't realize that not all Jews are Hasids. And so this ancient conflict in Ukraine is resurfacing... and continuing.

How did you go about making a film about this conflict?

NU: Well I haven't edited it. I have the elements that I think are going to go together. It was really hard to shoot the Hasidic pilgrims because I wasn't allowed to be there. I would stand around with my sound equipment or just hang around with my camera and shoot them when I could. On holidays, you're not allowed to film. That's their rule and that's when a lot of activities take place. So I just kind of stalked them. I'd spend entire days in Uman with the camera. It was really intense.

I've always had a problem with elements of Judaism, not the religion but the culture of Judaism. I just read an article in the Jerusalem Post called "How about some courtesy?" It's about the history of bad manners in modern day Israel. My film is going to include footage of the pilgrims interacting with people and places in Uman. I have footage from the bazaar. And then I had an affair with one of the pilgrims, which was really insane, but it opened a door that never, ever would have been opened. He came to the village and everybody knew this guy was at my



Naomi Uman, still from *Kalendar*, 2007, 16mm, 10:00

house. He was horrible. It was horrible but it was interesting. He was a professional canter, a singer, and I recorded him singing. I used some footage of him in the longer, color film. I'm going to put this criticism in there. It's probably going to be text. The film will be short, 15-20 minutes. I'm going to say something about this return to anti-Semitism.

That leaves us with the other color film. You mentioned it will be much longer than the others.

NU: Yeah, probably around 45 minutes. That film, which I need to find a name for, I'm realizing it's like a Ukrainian *Leche*. But instead of living with one family, I'm living with the entire village. I used all the footage in chronological order from when I arrived to when I left. It's a portrait of the village and me and I'm super excited about it.





180 Needles into Sonny Rollins An Interview with Charlie Nothing

Soquel, California, June 26, 2007

Musician, writer and inventor Charles Martin Simon a.k.a. Charlie Nothing is known for his contributions to free jazz and psychedelic music and for the oversized string instruments he welded out of used cars. He called these dingulators and his music, dingulations. Nothing passed away in October 2007. We were lucky to know him. May he rest in peace.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *How did you grow up?*

CHARLIE NOTHING: I was born in Newark, New Jersey, the first city to go bankrupt due to racial strife. I grew up in Clifton. As soon as I broke free from there I spent some time in Mexico and when I got back, I went to Manhattan, which is where I really grew up.

What was going on in Mexico?

CN: Dope... I'd had a very negative attitude toward dope. I thought of myself as a writer and my wife was a painter and we were really clear on that. In order to write and paint it was necessary to drink and stay drunk. But no drugs. If you were a drunk, you were cool. If you did drugs you were an idiot. That was our attitude and mindset when we went to Mexico. But things changed. We got turned on in Mexico and became drug fiends. We were looking for a house and met this landlord. He said there was another American who owed him rent and asked if we could do him a favor and go see this guy and tell him that he was behind in his rent. We said sure. So we met the guy and as we told him what we were there for, he handed us joints. He did it in such a way that there was no way to refuse it, so we just did it. We both ended up on the floor having revelations. Our attitude changed immediately.

We were there for a year. We were going to stay and buy the house where we were staying. That was the plan but we had to come back for our visas. Just as we were ready to leave—we were all packed up and ready to go—I got busted for smuggling. This was 1963. I'd been sending pot back to the States. We had a gardener and he'd been writing down all the names and addresses on the packages, keeping a log of what I was doing, which he then turned in to the cops. He wanted a payoff of \$35.

You moved back to New York and continued working on music.

CN: I was involved with everything. The writing kind of translated into music. I was singing this spontaneous, stream of consciousness, free association shit. I had bands. Then all of the sudden Dylan came out. People said I was imitating him so I stopped doing it. I couldn't compete, so I stopped. Then a really bad thing happened. My wife died and that whole thing got blown up and I came out to Los Angeles.

Blown up?

CN: Yeah, blown up. She died of starvation. She had anorexia for ten years before anybody identified the disease. She was a perfect example of it. She refused to eat. I couldn't get her to eat. She got sick. I couldn't get her to see a doctor. She was very powerful. You didn't tell her to do anything. She took herself out and I got blamed for it. They were going to indict me for murder. The idea was that I had chained her up and refused to let her eat. Even though I was trying to get her to eat all the time. So that kind of blew up my whole world. As far as I was concerned my whole world was gone. She and I were in with the New York artists of the time but after that none of them would even talk to me. I tried to maintain my connections with those people and it didn't work out, didn't work at all. So I spent a lot of years going in and out of dope. When I'd go into dope I would do anything and everything, constantly, morning till night. Then I would clean up. Then I would do nothing. I did that back and forth. I've been cleaned up since '89 and I don't think I would do any dope under any circumstances because I want to stay high all the time and I can't do it with dope but I can do it without dope.

You decided to leave New York...

CN: New York became worse than a bummer. It became impossible. But I was there and I was still working with bands and stuff but a whole part of my life was all black. I met a woman from LA, married her and moved there. That lasted about a year. Then I was hitchhiking north and I came here to Santa Cruz. I didn't even know what Santa Cruz was. I just happened to stop here and got turned on to acid the minute I arrived. And dope was \$20 an ounce because the fishing boats would bring it right in. I figured I should be here so I stayed here. So far, I haven't had any reason to leave. I went to LA a couple times to do art things. I was with a gallery there selling paintings for \$3,000 a piece, as fast as I could make them. I had a show and it sold out before the opening.

Were you hanging out with other artists in Los Angeles?

CN: I knew Nancy Kienholz. She was the manager of the Nicholas Wilder Gallery on La Cienega. I knew her pretty well. I knew Roy Lichtenstein, George Segal, Bob Watts. I associated with, but didn't feel close to Allan Kaprow. I thought he was a jerk. I acted in his happenings. There's a book on his happenings and there's a picture of me in there. I was on top of a ladder photographing a nude who was up on a platform.

Anyway, the owner of my gallery had a husband. He was a big shot lawyer, one of the lawyers that won the Thalidomide case. He didn't like the idea that everyone in the gallery was smoking dope because he was an alcoholic, so one day he caught a bunch of us in the back of the gallery smoking dope and he came in like Hemmingway, started beating everybody up. I confronted him and tried to stop him and he punched me out. I woke up on the floor getting stomped by this guy. In fact, I still have a broken toe—35 years later there's still pain. I got up and was going to fight him but thought: what chance do I have against this guy even if I beat him up? So I left. That was it, I left there, left town and came back to Santa Cruz. That was the end of that career. I still painted. I had a studio out in the woods kinda tacked together with cloth and plastic.

What kind of paintings were you making?

CN: I don't even know what kind. Basically the same as I'm doing now though my painting philosophy has taken a very interesting turn, which is: I paint as little as possible. I probably did the last brush stroke on the current series of paintings two years ago. I won't make another mark until I have to. If I don't have to I'll never touch them again.

What makes you feel you "have to" paint?

CN: I've got a friend, Casey Sonnabend, who paints all day, every day, constantly. He's in his seventies and he's been doing it his whole life. He has warehouses full of canvases. It's completely out of control. He can only paint. He makes music and writes too but he has to paint. He is compelled to do it.

I'm compelled to paint too. It began after my wife died. I inherited all her art supplies. She had a ton of stuff. I figured the only thing I could do was use some of the stuff so I took over that department as well. That's what happened. I went through periods of being productive and not so productive and I got it to a place now where I only paint when I have to. And if I can hold out forever I will.

Does it feel good to hold out?

CN: Yeah.

Does it feel good to paint?

CN: Yeah, works both ways. It's different with writing. I have to write. I've got millions of words I'm dealing with all the time and because of the computer nothing is ever finished. Every time I print a book I make changes. It's not a first printing and then a second printing, it's a continuous thing that's constantly changing. The only way I could possibly be finished is if somebody bought the copyright.

Could we back up to 1967 when Takoma released your first record?

CN: I first started playing the saxophone as a hedge against lung cancer. I was smoking so much I thought I had to do something and I thought the saxophone would be the perfect exercise for my lungs. Actually, it did me a lot of good. I started playing saxophone and flute. I had no interest in learning anything. When I was a kid I was forced to take all kinds of music lessons, which made me completely against traditional training. I wanted to feel the instrument, play it and go with it.

When John Coltrane was creating his definitive rendition of "My Favorite Things"—it happened over the period of about a month during a gig at the Village Gate. I managed to go almost every night. I became friendly with Elvin Jones and I used to drive him to get stoned during the breaks. I was there absorbing the change of "My Favorite Things" from what it was to what Coltrane did to it, which is probably one of the most important things to happen in music, definitely in jazz music. I was studying it to the fullest extent of my ability. At least as much as an ignorant teenager could.

At one point I studied with a Japanese acupuncturist who did work on Sonny Rollins. Once I put 180 needles into Sonny Rollins, under the supervision of the master, of course. We gave him the treatment and I did some jamming with him around that time. If I had idols, it would be those guys. Rollins and Coltrane, more than Ornette Coleman. Although, I guess my music style would be more like Ornette Coleman.

Did you consider what you were doing jazz?

CN: My record, *The Psychedelic Saxophone* was labeled Jazz or New Jazz but it wasn't jazz to me. Ed Denson owned Takoma records and somewhere along the line I met him and he said he wanted to produce a record. We rented most of the instruments and we borrowed Tiny Tim's Banjo Ukulele. There are only two people on the record. Me and this guy, [Brother] Fred. He was a buddy.

After that record I did a 45. I knew the owner of a grocery store down by the beach. It was kind of a popular store. I had this concept that if I



The Psychedelic Saxophone of Charlie Nothing, 1967 (Takoma)

put the record on the counter next to the gum and all the other impulse things and charged a dollar, people would buy it. They sold an average of one or two a day. People were buying them for no reason, without knowing anything about it. Selling them was the issue for that particular record but after that it ceased to be the issue. I don't really know what the issue is but I am compelled to do this from time to time.

To put out your own music and books.

CN: Yeah, it was the same as acid. I had a migraine condition that was very extreme, five attacks a day, every single day for years. So I was either in absolute pain or exhausted and in terror of the next one coming. It was impossible to function. I didn't function. Somebody said that the shrinks were giving out acid and this was the thing to do to figure out what was wrong with you. I went and signed up and I took a couple trips with this shrink. It cost \$400 a trip. Then I found out I could get it for \$5.

It was pretty much the same with the records. I could go with this company, which didn't cost me anything but was a real drag, or I could put out my own little things just for the hell of it. So I did that. I'm

still doing the same thing with my books. I just got an order from the Netherlands for two copies of my book about Cambodia.

How did you come to write a book on Cambodia?

CN: I got a phone call one day from this guy who barely spoke English. He said he was a Cambodian refugee. Somebody told him that I was a writer. He had a story and was looking for a writer. I said we could talk about it and we had a meeting and I decided to do it. This high school for gifted students uses the book so they buy about 20 copies a year. I don't have a bestseller and nobody knows about my books but when I sell them I get all the money. I'm successful artistically because no one has ever told me that I couldn't do this or I have to do that.

You developed a method of binding your books here at home?

CN: I use a beekeeping implement to tattoo the glue into the spine. I put the glue on there and tattoo it about 5 million times, wipe off the excess and then clamp it together. I put the cover on in a separate operation. The cover operation is not good. I need something that will clamp the book and press the spine in, mechanically, but in the mean time, its handmade and a little bit rough. The book I gave you isn't my biggest one. I've got one that's 560 pages, an autobiography.

How did you get involved with bees?

CN: In my youth I was a nature boy, I wanted to be a farmer. In college, my major was agriculture. After two years, I realized that school wasn't what I was interested in so I dropped out and joined an organic farm in Bonny Dune and became part of that. There were a lot of partners and they all had different concepts of what was going on. The communal farm wasn't really a communal farm. I think of it more as a psychedelic concentration camp on the edge of blowing up. It never quite blew up but it never was what I wanted it to be. I was doing my own thing amidst this group of people that really weren't connected except for the fact that they inhabited the same area. Everyone pretty much did their own thing.

Psychedelic concentration camp makes me think of the Manson Family.

CN: The Manson Family was different. They had cohesion. We didn't have anything like that. Nobody could get anybody to do anything. Anything vaguely like what Manson did would have been impossible. Even playing the kind of music that Manson played could never have happened in our situation because it was too organized and too straight. Manson is

a product of the culture. He's not a rebel, he's not a revolutionary. He's just a product, a puppet and then he has these puppets that are attached to him. You could say he's an institutional person and we were the opposite. There was no "we," no group, only individuals.

What part did art play in that scene?

CN: Art played a big part. We were all making art. We had that in common but we were all making different art. We didn't like each other's art.

Where do your ideas come from?

CN: My mind looks to me like a field and stuff grows in the field like weeds. My job is to pull the weeds and keep the field clear. Sometimes stuff comes back and refuses to go away. If something refuses to go away long enough, to where I decide I can't get rid of it, then I'll start cultivating it. That's what happens. I work in a lot of different media. Certain ideas just don't go away. I won't work on something for a long time and then all of the sudden there will be the next step for that thing. It's probably because I'm insane.

It's rare for people to trust themselves to decide what's important.

CN: I don't think anybody in this culture can think. Thinking has been taken away. Everybody's programmed. They think they are thinking but they're not. They're running through tapes that have been programmed. The lie is so extreme that nobody can face it without blowing up. It's worse than blowing up. It would be so catastrophic to face the facts that it just goes further and further into this artificial construct, which by the way has logic, science and integrity. One step leads to the next, it all fits together and you can't break it open. It's like a titanium egg. This culture is designed for sickness and death. Our social security system was based on the German social security system. When it began in Germany people were dying at 50. Social security was designed to kick in at 55. It was designed so people wouldn't collect it, at least not most people. When we began the system in this country people were dying at 60, so they had it kick in at 65. But people started living longer and the social security system is falling apart for that reason. If people face the truth about what the potential for life is, the system, as we know it, would collapse. I'll be 66 in two days. No one in my family ever lived to be 60. Both my father and mother died in their fifties. My brother in his thirties. My grandparents too. So I'm already past the family concept.

It's funny, most of the stuff that I do doesn't go anywhere. Most of the paintings, the writing, the art that I've done has just disappeared,

rotted or gotten trashed.

That doesn't bother you?

CN: No, I don't have a specific audience in mind. People think you should know who your audience is and I completely reject that. I'm not going to satisfy an audience. I mean, I wouldn't do anything if that's what it was about. That would be enough motivation for me to quit.

But on the other side, it must be nice when people respond to what you make.

CN: Yeah, I went to Europe and people knew me. That was amazing. I can't understand it. And that's fine. To have some kind of phenomenal experience like that and not be able to comprehend it is perfectly fine. Probably better. If I understood, it might not be as good.

In addition to making music, paintings and books, you're an inventor.

CN: I recently invented something for the beehive. I'm also working on a magnetically powered generator for electricity and a condenser to condense water out of the air using solar power. These aren't really inventions because people have done variations of them before.

Are migraines the reason you don't eat after noon and use a special contraption to ionize your water?

CN: I was in Tompkins Square Park and I had an attack. It was so bad that I couldn't get home. I didn't know what to do. I had friends that lived close by so I decided to go there. I went there and told them I was sick and wanted to take a cold shower, which sometimes helped. When I got out of the shower a woman gave me a spoon of macrobiotic food and a book. I took a spoon of this stuff. It was sesame seeds and sea salt roasted and ground together. They call it gomasio. The pain immediately went away so I was very impressed.

In the end I had the same experience with acupuncture and macrobiotics. It only took me so far and then I reverted right back. Now I'm into health. I'm not into medicine of any kind, conventional or alternative. I'm not into therapy of any kind. I'm into health. I do everything for health, to make myself healthy. I'm in better shape now than I've ever been. I run for an hour barefoot in the mornings. My work with the bees is very demanding physically and mentally and requires balance and strength. I do removal which means I work on top of roofs and on ladders. I'm hanging on with one hand and doing something with another hand and being attacked, all at the same time.

It seems like, from a young age, you've had an open mind. Were your parents open-minded?

CN: No, they were extremely closed-minded. My father was a dentist. My mother was a wife. When I was about five I was playing around in the cupboard. I didn't know what honey was but I knocked it over and broke it and it spread out on the floor. I figured I did a bad thing and I started tasting it and I got carried away eating it. I was eating it off the floor when my mother caught me. She flipped out and said: "Wait until I tell your father." Then my father came and beat me up for that, a really vicious beating with a belt. My first beating was over honey. So I grew up to be a beekeeper, naturally.

When did you start going by Charlie Nothing?

CN: In the 60s I did a comic book with very simplistic drawings and literary stories and the hero was Charlie Nothing. At that time I had long hair and a beard and Charlie Nothing had sort of a happy face logo. I was hanging out with cartoonists at the time. We all had a character. Mine was Charlie Nothing and he was basically the opposite of me. That's how I was writing and drawing him.

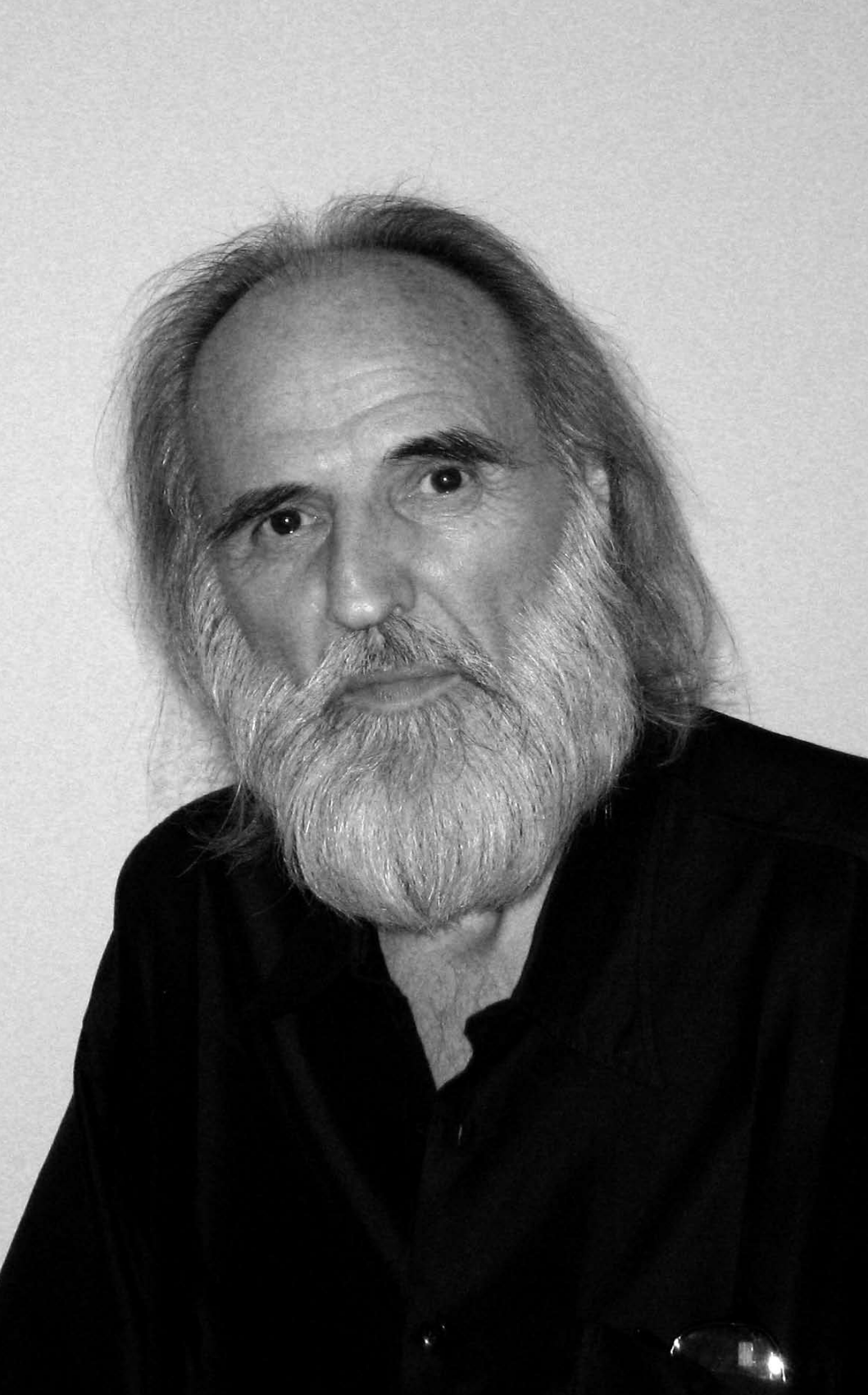
What were his characteristics?

CN: I was bad and he was good. That was fundamentally it. After my wife died, I took on that name. I became the opposite of myself.

Did you want to become good?

CN: That no longer mattered. My parents were always teaching me to be good and I was learning that good was wrong, good was not it. Whatever good was, it was not *it*. So, naturally I had to pursue the bad to find out what that was. Eventually I found out bad wasn't it either. So I'm left with nothing.





I'm Not a Believer

An Interview with Ernest Gusella

Cumberland, Maryland, July 21, 2007

Ernest Gusella's videotapes combine experimental engineering, avant garde music, psychedelia and Dadaist theater. As he once put it: "My art is ¼ fornicalia funk, ¼ New York punk, ¼ European bunk and ¼ Canadian skunk." We asked Gusella about growing up in Canada, being part of the 70s video art scene, his recent travels and what interests him as an artist and musician. The interview took place in Cumberland, Maryland, where Gusella and his partner Tomiyo Sasaki run a fair trade store called Social Studies.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *How did you grow up?*

ERNEST GUSELLA: I was born in Calgary in 1941, during the war years, so my parents had a lot of Depression stuff going on in their heads. My father was born in Germany, the youngest of three children. My grandfather came to Pennsylvania as a coal miner, went back and got my grandmother and took her to Canada where there was still homesteading going on. My uncle was a farmer in Alberta. We used to spend the summers in Alberta on the farm, riding horses, chasing cows, being chased by turkeys. Actually, one time Tomiyo got hustled by four turkeys in China. I was away videotaping in town and I came back. She had on a raincoat that was blue. She was squatting and all these male turkeys were performing around her. I said: "Tomiyo, what the fuck's going on?"

So my grandfather's three sons married three English-Irish crackers with religion. The women carried the religion. My mother was a Methodist Nazarene and on that side of the family there were lots of Pentecostals. I've been in churches where they were speaking in tongues.

Anyway, my parents stressed education. I skipped a grade, my sister skipped a grade, my brother skipped two grades. I was enrolled in the London Conservatory of Music when I was thirteen, when everyone was necking with their girlfriends. Then Elvis hit and I quit. I was in this zone of rebelling against my parents. My brother's a big oilman, chief land buyer for Texaco when he was 21. When we were small my father took us to church on a Sunday night. He turned to my brother and I and said we should go up to the altar. That laid Protestant guilt on me. If you are under that kind of pressure—it's religion and it's education—it's oppressive. My brother didn't think it was oppressive. He thought it was the best.

So Elvis hit. What other cultural influences were in the air?

EG: I remember “Heartbreak Hotel.” Girls were giving themselves tattoos with needles. I worked in a bowling alley setting pins. I worked at a ritzy golf course in the summer time—that’s where my brother got a taste for that kind of life. I’ve caddied for Gary Player, for Johnny Longden, jockeys, Bing Crosby, for the mafia in Banff. I had a bear lick my knee one day when I was carrying two sets of golf clubs. I always did art, like MAD Magazine, Mickey Mouse, cartoons. When the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland* came out I won a drawing prize from a local radio station. Shit like that.

Actually, drawing is very interesting. I couldn’t draw as a kid until I got to second grade and I saw a drawing of an Indian kid on a horse shooting an arrow. I put a piece of tracing paper over it, traced the lines and thought: oh, that’s how it’s done. I could draw instantly after that.

When I was about 15, there was a revolution in Hungary. This was in 1956. I met these Hungarian guys who turned me on to Bertrand Russell, lots of weird, Christian, existential shit. Van Gogh was in the back of my mind, heroic shit, teenage shit. I listened to lots of rock ‘n’ roll, Wolfman Jack, Hank Snow. I went to the Calgary Stampede. They brought The Who and everybody like that. I remember one time when I was in high school, a bunch of Hell’s Angels came up to the Calgary Stampede and they got the shit kicked out of them by cowboys. I mean, they thought they were tough guys and that was a laugh. Oil workers are tough. I remember talking to a teacher when I was in art school. He’d taught out in some boon dock towns. At the dances they would smash the school. One night I was coming back to the high school from setting pins at the alley and some guys went by and I said: “Fuck you.” They got out of the car and had jagged bottles under my neck. It’s Canada!

I applied to the University of Idaho and they accepted me as a second year student. I was on a rigorous academic program. I ran on the track team. I was holding down three jobs. I read books, held a GPA of 3.9, went to bed at 2:00 got up at 7:00, went to work washing dishes, went to classes. After school I went to work at a bird packing plant, then I’d go back and sweep up the library. Anyway, I go to Idaho and then I start coughing up blood from no sleep, too much running, etc. I got pissed off and had a religious experience in reverse, telling God, school, parents, everyone to take a hike. My dad took me to a TB sanatorium. I was negative. My parents brought a preacher and I told him to fuck off. I didn’t want to hear this stuff.

Let’s go back to high school. When did you start playing music?

EG: I started playing the violin when I was seven. I had to take theory

and composition and people came from the London Conservatory to test me. I kicked it after I reached a certain level, which drove my mother crazy. I got my letter in track. If you can run a lap in 60 seconds and you hand off a baton to somebody else and then they give it back to you after their lap, you can break the 4-minute mile easily. What Roger Bannister did when he broke the 4-minute mile was completely psychological, you know, nothing exists until it is named. Atoms didn’t exist until science said there were atoms. There is a psychological leap that people have to make in their minds in order to conceive what’s possible. Where was I going with this?

How did you make the transition from music to painting?

EG: There was the Alberta College of Art and that was crazy... hippie chicks with leotards. I’d read Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind*... Kerouac. I was itching to be an artist so I started as a painting major. I actually ran the art gallery there. I met this woman who liked artists. She said: “Look, give me a sculpture.” And I did this Egyptian head of Nefertiti or something and she gave me free records. That got me into Lightnin’ Hopkins, blues guys. Jazz was hot, Mingus, Thelonious Monk, hip cool beatnik stuff. This guy out of Chicago, Ken Nordine, he was really cool, did a lot of coffee commercials. He did a record where some of the beatniks read poetry to his background music. I did three years as a painting major.

What were your paintings like?

EG: I started with realistic stuff. Then I combined scribbles with magic marker landscapes. They merged together. They were on masonite. It looked like Kandinsky. Vincent Price was a collector and he came around. I did this crazy thing of a clown and he was going to buy it but it didn’t happen.

I met Tomiyo at ACA. I believe, like Breton, that thought is made in the mouth. Tomiyo comes from an older, Japanese culture that is more analytical. It’s all about strategy. You don’t just make a move. I’m more of an abstract expressionist. You throw paint at the wall, react to the paint, and let it drip down. I don’t care what you’re painting, even if it’s realistic. I believe in making adjustments. I’m fearful of making commitments. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker where two artists are making a giant sculpture. One guy hits it and it cracks in half and the other guy says: “You and your finishing touches,” or something like that. I don’t want to do anything final. That’s what’s great about video. You can make adjustments. I was always frustrated as a painter that my whole gestalt as a personality was limited.

You eventually moved to New York and then San Francisco...

EG: Some of the teachers at ACA studied in New York with Barnett Newman and in Provincetown with Hans Hoffman so they were bringing ideas back. There was a lot going on but I was getting sick of art school. I split Canada, went to New York and worked throwing boxes in Canal Street. I hooked up with a teacher from the Art Students League, Will Barnett. He was a kind of Picassoid, flat, back to figurative stuff. I went to his classes in the morning and he told me to just go for it.

I was an illegal alien at the time. When everyone was jumping the draft, I was going the other way. I was a frostback. I found an apartment on 92nd Street for \$45.00 a month. I was painting. Tomiyo was applying to the San Francisco Art Institute. She said: "Why don't you transfer all your credits to California?" So I did, in the spring of 1965. When I got there I met some hippie types who were sleeping in Coit Tower in North Beach. They said: "The whole scene is going to be happening at Haight-Ashbury." I said: "It is?"

I got a job doing paste-ups and mechanicals in the Mission District, grocery store fillers and stuff. Haight-Ashbury at that time was an integrated neighborhood. Ginsberg was there. He had a house with all this old Victorian stuff. There was the Sexual Freedom League and the Blue Unicorn was a club that they hung out in. There was a jazz club called the Both/And, so jazz guys were coming through there. It was next to Golden Gate Park. Tomiyo and I got an apartment on Downey Street, right above Haight, and all of a sudden hippies started appearing. I had long hair and they would come up to me in the street and say: "Hey man, spare a quarter?" They had a lot of dogs on ropes and they had dog shit. I got tired of that.

Tomiyo and I moved to North Beach. I came home one day and she had painted the whole apartment: orange floors, purple furniture. I was like: "We don't own this apartment!" Along with Tomiyo, I went to the San Francisco Art Institute. I was doing Stella-esque paintings. I would work the square canvases, painting them in, painting them out. It was a hard-edge type of painting. Wackier and wackier. A lot of the people were painting in this muddy Bay Area expressionist manner. Those paintings marred up my paintings in the rack.

So you finished art school in 1968. When did you get into video?

EG: In San Francisco I met Scott Bartlett who was shooting a video—actually it was shot on film first—called *Off/On*. One strip was blue, one red. Stan Vanderbeek was getting into it, was aware of it. Arlo Acton taught at Berkeley. He made *Music With Balls*. They were de-beaming the video cameras and spinning around with streaks of color across the

screen. KQED started showing video by artists. They had Janis Joplin and rock groups with video people tweaking shit. So video was in the back of my mind.

I went back to New York and made fiberglass paintings for about a year, started urinating blood, had a show in SoHo at the OK Harris Gallery in 1971. I stopped painting after seeing my work mixed in with a bunch of other artists' work in the gallery. It all looked like commercial trash to me. I picked up Gene Youngblood's book, *Expanded Cinema*, where I read about Paik, Vanderbeek, the Whitneys and Pat O'Neill. I was looking for Bethlehem or something. I bought an audio synthesizer out of the Village Voice from an engineer that was doing research on how to generate sine waves. I didn't know about Brian Eno at the time. He used this kind of stuff with Roxy Music as "treatments," he called them.

I had this old artistic fantasy that you could use sound to create images. In 1981, I made *Connecticut Papoose*. I got the name from some Surrealist text, where I linked together a bunch of stream of consciousness segments. One was about King Louis XVI, the Sun King, who had an organ constructed out of live pigs. His assistants went through the countryside picking pigs that had various squeals and the pigs were arranged in front of the keyboard according to the pitch of their squeals. King Louis was pulled through the streets of Paris playing this keyboard. Hitting the keys would cause spikes to go into the pigs' asses and they would squeal. The idea of music as a spectacle is an oldie. The Futurists—Boccioni and Russolo—got going with noise machines. It's always been an artistic fantasy—color wheels, color organs—and so I thought I could somehow combine sounds and visuals. My creative drives were being frustrated and confined. Painting was frozen. The Greeks believed that music is the highest art because it can't be captured.

You were part of the video art scene in New York. Tell us about it.

EG: I was walking through Washington Square Park with Tomiyo and I heard some strange sounds coming out of a church where WBAI, the Pacifica station was having a fundraiser. We went in and Woody and Steina Vasulka were showing videos on a bunch of Setchell Carlson monitors. They had a Putney synth made by Electronic Studios of England, which had patch pins instead of telephone cords used with the Moog synth. The patch pins completed connections between the various modules in the circuit. The Vasulkas were using the Putney and other devices to cause drifting and for abstract video keying. They had some money and engineers and they'd been talking to Howard Wise, who ran a gallery and later started Electronic Arts Intermix, about distributing artists' videotapes. They got money from Wise and the New York State Arts Council to set up The Kitchen. It was in the back of a bar, literally the

kitchen, in the Broadway Central Hotel, where artists hung out. We'd been in there a couple of times. The Kitchen had an incredible loft in the back, 30 foot ceilings and Ho Chi Minh had worked there as a busboy.

Woody said: "Listen, we're doing a gig next week at Merce Cunningham's studio." So we went and they were showing tapes. Five people were there. We met Merce Cunningham, Nam June [Paik] and Shigeo Kubota there. The Vasulkas were always very encouraging. They liked to have disciples. And Nam June too, he liked to have other people do the work for him. He would riff off of other people. He was a philosopher. I never really considered him a visual artist. I did a performance with him at the Guggenheim where I was colorizing stuff while he was slamming a video camera into the keys. Some friends of ours thought it was the most insane thing they had ever seen. We bought a second generation AV series Portapak and a 4-channel colorizer. I started with black and white video, put mirrors in front of an oscilloscope, and used the Putney synthesizer to create the sound. I used prismatic lenses from Spiroton. I'd make a kind of permutation and combination of that sine wave, multiplying the image. It was all abstract because I came out of abstract painting.

Some people at that time were hostile toward video. Jonas Mekas said it was old wine in new bottles. Of course today he embraces it as a cheap and vital medium.

Were you drawn to video because it was distinct from film?

EG: I saw it as a new medium that would be cut loose from the history of film. I was also drawn to video because it incorporated ideas. A lot of my painter friends didn't read. A lot of people don't read! One of my favorite books is *Finnegans Wake*. It's a reservoir full of junk to riff off. They say 50 people in the world have read it. I got the annotated *Finnegans Wake* where, you know, a professor shows how two words jammed together have references to eight different cultures and puns and word play. I have riffed off of that to get ideas. I didn't care where it went, didn't want to know. It was all about discovering something. I wanted to see something new but you know there is nothing new. What's new is biology combined with computers, optics combined with bacteria. It's like the prophet said, there's nothing new under the sun, and there isn't. It's only how different people respond to the wheel that keeps spinning around.

There is probably an arrogance factor in my artistic sensibility, in wanting to be cutting edge, but that's all that interests me. I'm bored shitfaced with what people do. My painting friends are boring. They just do the same thing for 30 years. One-color paintings... I mean hello! I'm a maximalist. My biggest problem is entertaining myself. Tomiyo says I should stop and listen to other people and she's right. You can learn a lot



Ernest Gusella, still from *Wolf Zooming*, 1974, video

from other people if you shut up. But I'm one of the lucky ones who hear voices all the time. I'm like one of these people that have epilepsy and the synapses are firing off. We saw this documentary on PBS where a doctor solved this kid's ADD problem... but the kid doesn't want it solved. He wants to go back to the synapses firing at a thousand miles an hour. It's more interesting.

Tell us about some of the other videos you made.

EG: Once in the mid 70s, I got a grant rejected and I went to the studio. I was pissed off. I had a Spiroton lens screwed onto the front of the camera lens. I spun the ring zoom on the camera and I said: what is that? It made this "woof, woof" sound. I weighed the camera down with paint cans hanging from the tripod and went to work on my face and teeth, zooming in and out ferociously, using a piece of tape to whip the zoom lens back and forth. That video, *Wolf-Zooming* (1974) was done in one take. I was so pissed off, but that tape got me a grant immediately. I mean a lot of times the throw-away stuff is the greatest. Stream of consciousness is where it's at.

Around 1976, I got a video engineer in Berkeley, Bill Hearn, to build me a 4-channel video synthesizer and colorizer, which really opened things up and allowed me to patch the audio synthesizer into the grid. I took patch cords and would randomly get all kinds of weird effects, which I would then build pieces around. After *Connecticut Pappoose* (1981), I



Ernest Gusella, still from *Iris*, 1979, video

stopped using myself as a subject and I started making tapes with a theme. I made a feature length tape about Mexico, *What Under the Sun?* (1984) and another about Stalin, *The Red Star* (1988). The last tape I made was a riff on Ezra Pound and Japanese culture called *Operation Wandering Soul* (1992). I use a lot of rock 'n' roll and electronics in my work because I can't live without music.

I'm also interested in abusing language. The role of the modern artist is to abuse everything bourgeois culture believes in. Puns, for instance, are usually regarded as a low form of humor. Freud thought they exhibited a high level of intelligence because they involve the compression of cultural opposites.

Did I tell you the definition of a cultural person? They took a big survey of diplomats, artists, writers, professors. The question was: "What is a cultured person?" Their definition, which may not be a hillbilly's definition or McDonalds' definition, was a person that can hold two opposing ideas in their head at the same time and can argue the virtues of both sides. That means I can argue the virtues of Al Qaeda and why they hit the World Trade Center, like Susan Sontag did. But as the Doors, who got it from Bertold Brecht, said: "Oh, don't ask why...I tell you we must die". In Godard's sci-fi movie, *Alphaville*, Lemmy Caution stares at the old Russian scientist and says: "Then why didn't you kill him?" The Russian says: "Why... what does that word mean? I forgot." He's been brainwashed. He doesn't know what *why* means because it's a forbidden word. You're never supposed to ask that question because it leads you into other territories. Why did Al Qaeda do it, if it was even them? Why do

they hate us so much? Brecht understood this absolutely.

You've made videos and records that make fun of the art world.

EG: It was taboo then and still is. Bob Dylan wrote: "To live outside the law, you must be honest." Well, to live inside of the law, you have to adhere to the rules. People found ways to live outside the law while appearing like they were inside. Of course now, it's the opposite. Back then there was no market for video art. That actually appealed to us. You could sell a copy to the Modern or a museum in Europe and that would help you to get a grant. Tomiyo got gigs in Europe and we'd go back and forth, setting them up. When we got back, we'd lost money. Maybe it would help your reputation, but no money. We never pursued it for money. Some of the early video artists were aspiring Hollywood directors. I hated that shit. I like euro avant garde art and literature, the wilder the better. Who wants Hollywood garbage except the pigs who eat the garbage?

Who is your audience?

EG: Kids. I tell you, kids love my work. I make it for my friends. I don't care about collectors and curators. I make it for myself. I do it because I like it, because it's fun. It's like a cat playing games with itself or it's like looking in a mirror to figure out what's there. I remember I got a machine from Bill Hearn that could do voltage controlled chroma keying. One Sunday, I filled the toilet up with blue paint and chroma-keyed my image into the blue paint and flushed the toilet. The voice over said: "All the worlds problems could be solved by plumbing. In the end, the ocean will have us all."

I did a piece in which I had Hearn's oscillators going and I had spots keyed in all over my face. I asked Tomiyo to respond to me when I had the camera on. I told her: "When I woke up this morning all I saw were dots in front of my eyes." She asked: "Did you see a doctor?" I said: "No, I just saw dots."

The tape *Iris* (1979) with Tomiyo's image flipping back and forth, was played at MoMA. John Martin, this producer at ABC, saw it and invited me up to the ABC Studios for the nightly news with David Brinkley. I was there, all set to be on but I was blown off by the news story of the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. So the next night I'm sitting there—cameraman, lights, ABC Studio—and I'm asked to explain what my video means. "Yeah, I'd be happy to. If you can explain to me what your news is about, I'll give you the secrets of my video." They asked what I meant. I said: "What do you think I mean? Students are always superior to the teacher. You tell me!"



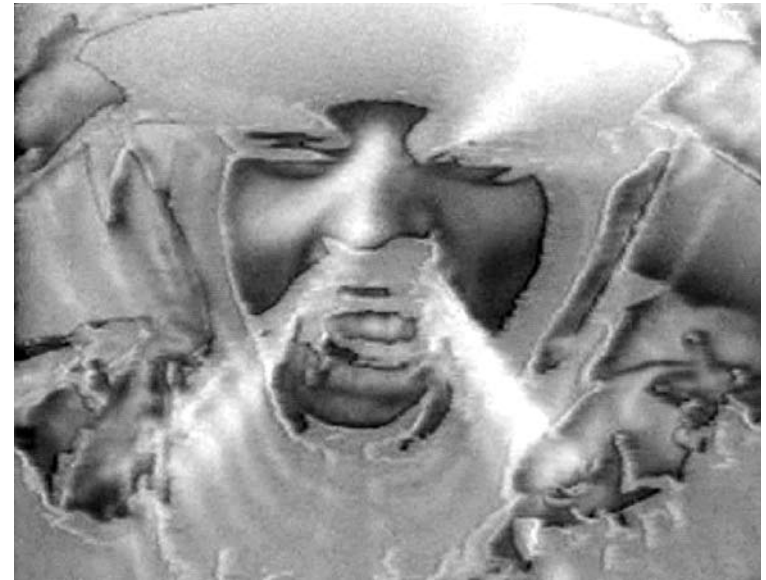
Ernest Gusella, still from *Washday Miracle*, 1973, video

Were you interested in the magic tricks that are possible with video?

EG: Yeah, in *Washday Miracle* (1973) I had a box of Tide soap, a 2x4 and all these heavy art books. Tide is Edit spelled backwards. I was into the sort of mind warp that goes on. In other tapes, I used rock 'n' roll pedals, had tape loops going and there'd be chanting. For instance the video *Midori No Kutsu Shita* (1974) means 'green socks' in Japanese. I found on the tape loop that it got weirder and weirder with feedback so I kept repeating it, screaming it. In *Nihon Kara Kita* (1974) I actually had a basket on my head and with the Shintron feedback it made me look Asian. I responded to that immediately and started chanting, you know: "Sony, Panasonic, Honda, Kawasaki..." In 1974 those brands were just becoming visible in the American landscape. Now, of course, they *are* American culture. It was like vengeance for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They were going to take us over. That tape is very popular with my Japanese friends.

Let's talk about after 1980. What has your life been like?

EG: I started doing more music and have put out ten CDs to date. We've also done a lot of traveling, gathering images for my work and working on Tomiyo's installations. The more we've gotten out into the world, the better we've felt. It's more interesting than making a career talking to curators. I mean John Hanhardt was like a bank clerk. Barbara



Ernest Gusella, still from *Nihon Kara Kita*, 1974, video

London was like a schoolmarm. I know some cool European curators but it gets tedious. What's the alternative, make stuff to sell? I know Tony Oursler. He was around Buffalo, went to CalArts. On one hand there's a demented thing that is going on in his work that I like and on another hand, it's demented. He's a video star. He's done some interesting stuff but now it's marketing. At first it's weird and free but once its been packaged by galleries and you become an art star, it's not interesting. That's why Rimbaud went off to become a slaver in Africa. He was finished by 20. Everyone thought Bob Dylan was cool but he's just like everyone else. We get old and can't find our way to the bathroom. He's pathetic too.

I believe in burning my bridges behind me like Cortez. I don't care what happens after I die. A lot of artists care about posterity. I don't. I'm not a believer. I hope there's a heaven or whatever but I can't imagine what it's like, probably tedious. Did you see the site on the internet where they show the size of the Earth in relation to the other planets, then the sun, then the Milky Way? We are endless monkeys making endless abstract expressionist paintings, endlessly.

You and Tomiyo have traveled extensively in Europe and Asia. What do you look for in your travels?

EG: Tomiyo is my soulmate. We've been together 44 years, 24 hours a day. We're each other's best friends. She said she wants to go to the



Ernest Gusella, still from *Violin D'Ingres*, video

Falkland Islands. I said: "Where's that?" Once, Tomiyo and I were sitting in St. Wenzelsplatz in Prague, never bombed during World War II, beautiful Art Nouveau hotels. We go into this hotel tea salon. Tomiyo likes good chocolate and there's this sideboard in the hotel lobby and they're selling chocolate in gold coins. Tomiyo buys three of them, one for each of us and one for our friend. She pays for it and being a cholic, opens it right up and it's a fucking condom! That's what happens when you travel.

In New Delhi we saw a motor rickshaw with a bumper sticker that said: "Thank you God. Thank you God. Please keep your distance." That's the way I feel about God too. You see conundrums like this every day. In India, a lot of people believe if you turn on your headlights you'll run down your battery. They don't believe in alternators, so they turn their lights on *after* they hit the cow. Holy shit. These drivers go all the way on the Grand Trunk Road from Calcutta through Delhi right to Bombay. The roads are about a car and a half wide. Some drivers drink because they think it keeps them awake.

One night we were in Rajasthan and we hired a taxi driver to take us out to a rock quarry. He'd been drinking all weekend. He was as drunk as a lord with yellow and red eyes. We kept a grip on his shoulder from the back seat like New York cops do to wake people sleeping in the subway. When he stopped at a gas station, I couldn't believe what I saw. A cow went running. There are cows everywhere in India—they're holy—and there are cows with disproportioned legs from inbreeding. They

get scraped by taxis and buses going by. They're passive as hell, nice big bashful eyes. They have no enemies in the world. No one eats them. But this one at the gas station was a one of a kind. Its right front leg was twice the length of the other three *normal* legs, so its elbow was on the ground. It looked at me and said: "Hello, have a nice day."

Do you travel with plans to make videos?

EG: Yes. In Katmandu we were video taping. We were at a temple by the river, a beautiful area with little shrines and clear mountain air. We came across a funeral. The Nepalis hire professional mourners. The women are kept back in sheds behind the burning pyres. The men shave their heads leaving a top knot. They're Hindus. They purify themselves, strip down to their underwear and let their clothes drift down the river. About 200 yards down are all the untouchables picking up the clothes. It's a beautiful river.

There was a dead body of a man about 38 years old laid out. The family saw us with video equipment and I asked the cab driver: "Can we videotape?" The family actually said: "Come, come." I took the steadycam over to the body as they were putting him on the funeral pyre. They had him on a really nice elevated platform with logs piled about three feet high beneath him. A lot of poor people can't afford this opulence. Poor people use buffalo chips and the body just gets kinda charbroiled. It takes over night to burn the body.

It was really amazing. The priest led the oldest son and the other two sons and they walked around the platform three times with the sacred fire. A similar thing is done for marriage. They put tapers in the man's mouth—cloth dipped in clarified butter—and tied his toes together. Then the oldest son put the fire in the father's mouth. Then they said to me: "Get up on the funeral pyre." I got my steadycam up there and with the ghee burning, the camera was getting hot. It was starting to melt. I was staring at this scene... holy shit.





The Disappointment An Interview with Brian Springer

Yellow Springs, Ohio, August 7, 2007

Media artist Brian Springer is known for his 1995 documentary *Spin*, which used unauthorized satellite feeds to chronicle the 1992 US presidential election and the behind-the-scenes maneuverings of politicians and newscasters. His latest tape, *The Disappointment: Or, The Force of Credulity* (2007), explores the legacy of 19th century anarchism, treasure hunting and spiritualist folklore through the story of his family's search for buried treasure in the caves of western Missouri.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *You've just finished a new video about treasure hunting and your father's search for lost Spanish gold. You, your mother and brother all became involved in the search, which spanned a 30-year period.*

BRIAN SPRINGER: My mother and father were in their seventies and they were still going down to dig in the cave. At a certain point, my father was going down by himself because my mother couldn't go with him. There was a fair amount of concern that he would fall off the ladder and die. He was experiencing dizziness. In the tape, when he's going up and down the ladder, he's in extreme congestive heart failure, a condition that was not diagnosed at the time, but there were signs something was wrong. If he were a worker, he'd have been on full disability. I was trying to help give him evidence of finding something. I was documenting an ephemeral, private family practice that was on the verge of disappearing. The idea was that if I could make a document, an artifact, it would help my father feel comfortable in having found something, even if what was found was this search, the story of this search.

And he might stop...

BS: Yeah, he might stop or... I guess... we're getting into some weird Freudian area but I think it would have killed my mother if my father had been injured in the cave. I think it would have been devastating for my mother because she let him go down there alone to dig, and she would have felt responsible. This was part of my motivation for making the tape. I started shooting material and briefly put a website up on the rock carving that had prompted my father's search. It was tricky because this was all a very private story. It couldn't be made public within my father's



Brian Springer, still from *The Disappointment: Or, The Force of Credulity*, 2007, video, 70:00

own drama. He thought someone would come and take his treasure. He believed it was still there and that he was only a few feet away. His constant narrative since 1969 was that he was eight feet away. He was very concerned that if the stories got out, people would come and take all the credit for his hard work. The other thing was that he wouldn't go on camera. In the few shots I have of him, I'm holding the camera at my side or he's just kind of forgotten it's there or he imagines the recorded material might be useful when National Geographic comes to do a follow up study on this miracle in Missouri.

Your father shot Super-8 films himself for research purposes, to help him figure out where he'd been.

BS: It wasn't so much for research purposes. It was more for documentation. Some of it was personal documentation. My father's best friend was a psychic who wasn't very ambulatory. My father would show the films to the psychic and the psychic would let my father know where he was in relation to the treasure and how he might proceed. When I was a kid, the constant ritual was that we'd leave on a Friday night for the cave—which was kind of fun because we would eat out and stay in a hotel room—and then work all day Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday night, before driving home, the last thing we did before leaving the cave was to get a plastic sandwich bag and put a sample of dirt into the bag from the last place we'd been digging. On the way home, we'd stop by the psychic's



Brian Springer, still from *The Disappointment*

house. While my brother and I were watching the Smothers Brothers in his living room, the psychic would hold the clay and at some point go into a trance and provide a vision of what he saw associated with this piece of earth. The films were used in a similar way, for reconnaissance purposes and then, well, we had a camera and wanted to shoot some film.

To document your family's life.

BS: He documented water skiing too.

The film begins with your family and the cave but quickly branches out into other areas. There's Kate Austin, the anarchist who once lived on the land where the cave is located. There's the missing local artifact that looks like a cross between a lizard and a rhinoceros—rediscovered by you in the basement of a public library in Texas—and the ensuing debate over its origin and authenticity. There's your father's experience as a scout in the Korean War and your mother's practice of communing with the spirit world, and with your father, through automatic writing. It's as if you have taken these adjacent and sometimes quite loosely associated elements—material that might be cut from a conventional documentary—and made them the focus of your film. How did you go about identifying and then piecing together such a range of material?

BS: I think there's a tension or two factors competing in the piece. One is to move horizontally—literally like a tunnel—and the other is to create

a memorial. I see the piece of rock art, the cave, the zoomorph and the spiritual possession of my mother as objects that propel the search forward. I felt that these were all characters that were needed, and then the element of the anarchist comes in because she's part of the history of the land and she also brings economics and power structures to the foreground.

My initial interest in Kate Austin was based on an experience I had as a child. Kate's youngest child was still alive and he owned the land where the cave was located. It was his birth that weakened Kate to the point that she died. He made dandelion wine and we were all drinking. He said: "I want to show you this picture my mother had in the kitchen." His wife frowned, and he went into the storage space of his trailer and brought this huge picture down. It was a photograph of the four people executed at the Haymarket in Chicago, anarchists hung without hoods. My recollection is that most depictions have them with the hoods on. This had them with the hoods off, four guys with their eyes bugging out. Kate's son remembers this picture hanging in his house when he was a child. It was so taboo. He put it away fairly quickly and never discussed it again. For me, it was one of those mysteries that lodged deeply.

In terms of structure, I was thinking of the Bunuel film, *L'Age d'Or*, which is structurally based on the anatomy of a scorpion. The last part of the film is the sting and it goes through each of the segments. I decided to apply a similar abstraction and use the treasure map as an organizing device for the narrative. There are other elements beyond this kind of structural trick. For instance, the tape deals in personal history, family history and also world history insofar as you start digging in Missouri and wind up on the other side of the world. The other thing that interested me are footnotes. All those histories cited in the tape are footnotes. The 1767 ballad opera, *The Disappointment*, is itself a footnote to the history of the early magical world views of the colonists. The Korean War is like a footnote since it's been pushed to the margins of American history with the nickname the "Forgotten War." The extensive use of napalm in Korea is a footnote. Personal family histories are mostly footnotes at the margins of larger histories. The tape also deals with loss and what a given culture considers valuable.

It takes a certain faith or resolve to stick with a path of investigation, to trust that it will lead somewhere and yield something. Your father was determined in his search and a similar persistence and trust characterize this and other tapes you've made.

BS: It has to do, I think, with the spiritualist and folk traditions that I grew up with. There was a tradition in early spiritualism of talking to the unquiet dead. People would go into states of spiritual connection. They

would talk to spirits who couldn't face the fact that they were deceased. This branch of spiritualism got pushed out as the field became professionalized and increasingly dependent on the psychic providing confirmation of an afterlife. For example, if I said: "Oh, I see a woman who peels apples and she's wearing a pink apron," you would say: "Oh, my grandmother always wore a pink apron and we always peeled apples together whenever she visited." That would provide a circle of confirmation that would then legitimize the field of spiritualism, this new practice. The problem with these people that were speaking with the unquiet dead is that the latter were displaced.

They didn't have a living person who could confirm their existence.

BS: Right, so that kind of investigation got subverted, pushed out. It's just not profitable. There's no economy for it. But I would say this is what my father did, this was his practice. He and my mother were communicating with the spirit of a Spanish explorer who led a group of people into and was responsible for a massacre. This could be read as a repressed retelling of my father's own experience with committing atrocity as a soldier or being in the presence of atrocity. Beyond that, there were thought to be spirits residing in the area around the cave. My mother first communicated with them and then my father took over the practice.

The practice of automatic writing?

BS: Yes, he took the voice. It left my mother and then went to my father. On a typical weekend, if we weren't at the cave, we would get into the truck and my father would use his dowsing rods. His rods would cross and point us in a direction and we would drive seven miles in that direction. We'd pull off to the side of the road and he would point and we would go one way, and he would point and we'd go a different way. And then maybe after an hour of driving he would find the spot where the points crossed and at this geographical place he would say a prayer for the spirit there that needed help. That was his folk-spiritualist practice. It's a practice that I grew up with and I think that, in a similar way, *The Disappointment* is about looking into noise and embracing noise. I guess you could say that what I'm doing with this video is crossing my rods and pointing this way to the anarchist, that way to the zoomorph, this way to the cave, that way to the piece of rock art, and just letting them be. As a creative process it's related somehow to this older spiritual practice.

Not that this folk-spiritualist tradition is specific to the Midwest, but it does seem that the setting of your video is significant. You've talked about the American Midwest as the flyover states, a part of the country that tends to be

overlooked. This may explain why your father was able to go about his unusual business without judgment or interference, without anybody saying: "What are you doing, you're nuts!" How do you think growing up in this part of the country has influenced the way you work?

bs: It's interesting to be working in a less populated area. In terms of spiritualism, I don't know. I mean the burned-over district of western New York where you're from is where Kate came from. It's where the American spiritualist tradition comes from in part. Being from a rural area, you constantly have to confront boredom in a very direct way. If you're a kid, your closest neighbor is eight miles away. You've got the dogs and the soy beans and you want to get the hell out of there and you can't. Because of the Puritan work ethic you come home from work and relax by working for four hours in the garden. It's either gardening or you're going to make something up, something that might wind up being fantastic. It's interesting, when Reagan became president, ABC aired a made-for-TV movie called *The Day After*, which depicted a nuclear strike against the United States. After doing market studies, they chose Kansas as the target because people were least likely to identify with Kansas and would therefore feel less threatened when it was annihilated in the film. It's an unreal place.

There's also The Wizard of Oz...

bs: Yeah, that kind of association. How the Midwest plays in the psyche of various geographical areas—east coast, west coast—is interesting. So far the one professional person who has responded to the video likes it because he sees it as being some authentic version of what's going on in the Midwest.

There are parallels between The Disappointment and Spin, a video you made about the 1992 presidential election using satellite feeds. In a sense, both tapes are about searching for buried treasure. To make Spin, you had to find the hidden satellite channels and then tune in periodically to see if anyone was sitting in front of the camera waiting to be interviewed on Meet the Press or Larry King Live.

bs: *Spin* was an experimental process where I literally looked into noise and in these varied satellite channels I would sometimes find a chair and hit record. And maybe somebody would sit in the chair and maybe they'd say something interesting. These aren't common channels that people go to. They're a few channels that are buried among thousands and there is no schedule for them. So there's that sense of looking into noise that resonates with treasure hunting and trying to find something. I mean, I



Brian Springer, still from *Spin*, 1995, video, 57:26

might record some footage of Jerry Brown using nasal spray, sell the footage to Gore Vidal for \$4,000... then I have two months pay. It really is like treasure and you can't believe it, that with your dish and your stupid VCRs, you're actually going to pay the bills for a few months.

It's also interesting to think about diaries in both pieces. *Spin* is essentially a diary film. It begins in February of the election year and it ends with the election being over. I guess *The Disappointment* is a bit more jumbled. It uses a different architecture of time and space. Its spatial element is the treasure map. So it's different in that sense, but there are similarities. Both videos are diaries of searching.

Which part of the process do you enjoy more, the search or the synthesis—pulling it all together?

bs: I think pulling it together. I mean both parts are fun. I can get obsessed with searching because there's a certain gambling aspect to it, like pulling the handle of a slot machine one more time. But then I have to deal with the mess. If I cast a wide net, I have to inventory that net. This causes me to become focused fairly quickly.

What was your shooting ratio for Spin compared with The Disappointment?

bs: *The Disappointment* would be fairly high, probably 40:1. For *Spin* it would be 600:1.

Did you work from any kind of script when making Spin or did the process of investigation determine how the video is structured?

bs: It was a balance of being in and out of control. It required a certain leap of faith because I was articulating the script once it was over. It's a more performative and a less than critical model of working. On the other hand, I did try to shape it and bring other lenses into focus. I try to trust the process. I wouldn't know how to write a script and go out and shoot it.

There's a searching aspect that I enjoy about media. Someone once told me the Latin root of video means "to see clearly," and that's what I'm trying to do. The thing about a satellite feed is that it's a transmission medium. It's traveling through and bouncing off a satellite that's 24,000 miles away. It's a flow of information, and working without a script is trying to work from within a kind of flow.

And yet there are a number of specific arguments put forth in Spin. You must have had at least some idea of what you wanted to say with the material as well as criteria for collecting material in the first place.

bs: What I was looking for in *Spin* were moments where there was contempt for public discussion or contempt for a live moment by the person who was appearing live on TV. I was interested in cases where people revealed that they were trying to make the live moment as scripted and as prerecorded as possible. I could have made *Spin* based on everything they said on TV *on air* and it would be just as outrageous. I was more interested in calling attention to moments when television looked different—when television was live, where there was distain for public debate, where there were images on the screen that I usually didn't see on TV.

This was in 1992 and it was the closing down of a technology. The large home satellite dishes were shutting down. Before that there had been lots of feeds, lots of people sitting in chairs, waiting to go live. Some of the politicians understood and knew how to take advantage of this technology, while others did not. If Bill Clinton had an 8-track player when he was in the back of his El Camino—his love wagon as he called it—he's likely to have been more aware of what a satellite transmission is. He might understand that this is a stage, and that it's a deep stage. So Bill Clinton doesn't come off looking so bad, but George Bush—who doesn't understand, who didn't have an 8-track player, and who didn't have a relationship to technology—he's much more vulnerable.

Watching Spin again, I kept thinking: Wow, here's a single person trying to view and make sense of an enormous, undocumented world and what an impossible task that is. For every segment of material you recorded, there were

probably hundreds that you missed. This doesn't take away from the project but seems rather to be part of what your video shows us. It illuminates a part of the communications spectrum that we can't see but which is nonetheless operational at all times. I feel like there is something similar in your new video.

bs: They're both dealing with global systems, with huge panoramas.

Both videos leave me with an eerie feeling that there's more in the room than what I'm seeing. Are there ways that you approached editing or timing to push that feeling... to structure that feeling into it, or do you think it just happened based on the nature of the material?

bs: I think that you get the sense of something bigger in part because these are not grounded practices. That's why both projects are difficult. A grounded practice in terms of, let's say, information surveying would be the Chaos Computer Club in Germany. There was a time when you could intercept pager messages quite easily, and let's say there's a small village of maybe 12,000 people and you can intercept all three pager towers there. This becomes interesting as a form of investigation because you have a closed data set. The Chaos Computer Club would record all local pager communications to disc and they'd read the paper everyday. Then one day they notice: "Ah, there was a steam pipe leak at the nuclear power plant and it occurred at 9:48 a.m." They go back into their complete data set, through all the recorded pager messages, to see what happened at 9:48 a.m., and they see a little bit of text and they say: "Here's the guy calling out to the service technician. Here's the service technician calling the set-up person." Next they create an algorithm that will send them an alert the next time pages from these same numbers come close together, and six months later they get that alert message. They get the paper the next morning but there's no story. Now they know something happened at the plant. They can go as journalists and ask: "What happened last night at the plant? We know there was a problem." It's a type of investigative journalism that depends upon a closed data set. *Spin* and *The Disappointment* are not closed sets, so you do get this sense of something outside your field of vision. You gain that but you lose the tightness of closure.

In making The Disappointment you used some unorthodox methods of research, for instance, releasing helium balloons at a festival in Nevada, Missouri.

bs: Yeah, it was a pretty weird performance. I was seeking information about a rock carving related to my father's search for treasure. When I talked to the town historian, he was less than forthcoming with information about this symbol. There were some pretty odd groups in that

area that had appropriated pre-contact rock art—from say the 1300s or 1100s—and post-contact rock art from the 1750s. More recently, a Christian militant group purchased some land and worked this rock art into the narrative of their supremacy. Eric Rudolph, the Olympic Park bomber, was hanging out at a compound in the area, for instance.

Anyway, I decided to have the symbol printed on hundreds of helium balloons that I released at a public festival in downtown Nevada. The idea was to appropriate the symbol and see if there was any reaction. The reaction it provoked was profound silence. The editor of the newspaper was surprised that no one came forward to say anything because history is very important to that town. Nevada is on the Kansas-Missouri border between the pro and anti-slavery movements of the north and south. It had been burnt to the ground during one of the most draconian events in the Civil War. So they have an interesting history there and it's always really contentious. Who knows why no one responded to the balloons. Maybe making a bunch of balloons isn't the best strategy for provoking conversation. I figured if it really hit a nerve, I'd find a chicken head on my hotel room door. That's what I was looking for. My hope was to provoke something and to provide some visual elements. I guess from a tactical, scripted point of view, I knew I wanted to talk about the Civil War.

I also started to get caught in these circles of magic: Eric Rudolph lived in Nevada at a site where there was rock art and perhaps this rock art relates to some sort of society that no longer exists or maybe has some existence, some sort of regional group. And it's interesting to me personally because Eric Rudolph nearly killed my brother because my brother was working in Olympic Park when the bomb went off in 1996. He was just 30 feet away from a cloud of flying nails.

It seems like treasure hunting is a dying pastime.

BS: Treasure hunting is a protestant work ethic form of gambling. You work all day and then you get home and you work all evening in your garden. It's about being responsible. It's the mentality in the part of Kansas where I grew up. So instead of putting a quarter in a slot machine and pulling the handle, you had to go underground to play the lottery. Because there's a work ethic associated with it, treasure hunting is an acceptable form of gambling. It's a little strange though, returning to the earth to find something that has been preprocessed, a metal that's been manufactured. The relationship between industrialization and nature being acted out became another source of interest for me.

I think there are different types of treasure hunting. I used to put in water and sewer lines. The size of the hole that you're working in makes all the difference. Once you're in a hole that's over your shoulders, your



Brian Springer, still from *The Disappointment*

life is in danger. The banks cave in and you're dead. Every year someone would get crushed. There's something about going deep within, physically down into the earth and also mentally, within your head. You go more than six feet under and the imagination is opened in a different way. Then there are the people with metal detectors who go six inches to find lost jewelry. There are different kinds of treasure hunting based on depth or based on where you find your history—the clues to why you think something is there. Is it because people used to hang out on this beach and there might be some rings that fell off or is it because some magical event—one that historians refuse to report on—occurred here, some unbelievable thing? And there are stories that circulate. If you went to the grocery store in Nevada or El Dorado Springs or Stockton, Missouri in 1972, you'd find treasure hunting magazines.

Why 1972?

BS: Developments in consumer-grade radar and metal detection technology made treasure hunting an affordable leisure practice. To market any product, you need a good story. Treasure hunting stories are great because they almost always begin with someone's eye witness account: "We snuck into a cave and we took the eight bars of gold and put them under the skull of John James and we covered up our tracks and left." Then the writer of the magazine story will say: "That happened in 1880 and no one's been able to find John James' treasure." And he's not quoting



Brian Springer, still from *The Disappointment* (The Zoomorph)

someone's diary. It's all made up. It's great. It's a funny form of literature.

Your video points to the historical conflict between treasure hunters and the state. The 1767 opera The Disappointment: Or, The Force of Credulity—which you chose for a title—was created as anti-treasure hunting propaganda.

BS: Yeah, the treasure hunters were becoming a little too obsessive. The play was put on to shame people about talking to spirits and digging for gold. That was its ideological purpose. At the time, two out of every ten people living in North America went to church. Eight out of ten did not go to church. The only way to reach the masses was through entertainment, kind of like it is now I guess. So this unseemly, embarrassing and maybe unproductive habit of digging for treasure, be it pirate treasure or treasure one thinks is there because they can commune with the earth, or because of the people they have buried underground—literally through their act of colonial occupation—well, they need to stop this bad habit. It is the upper class telling the others: dig no deeper than plough depth, in other words, get back to farming.

Although it's about your family, The Disappointment is less personal or confessional than a lot of autobiographical documentaries. As the filmmaker, you maintain a certain distance throughout. For example, instead of you with a microphone standing in front of the house where you grew up, the narrator of the story is an inanimate object with a computer-generated female voice.

BS: I started working with that voice because I was trying to create timing for dialogue. I was also interested in the uncanny—is it alive or is it dead? And then all the Richard Attenborough documentaries have that British female voice, and, well, I really think a Brit made the zoomorph. I realize it's a subjective viewpoint but you had all these folks from Scotland and the UK moving to Tennessee and South Carolina. That would have been in the 1820s. Then they migrated into Missouri. Some people believe that the zoomorph is an authentic pre-contact artifact. I think it was probably made by a Brit—or someone with that ancestry—so it would be appropriate for it to have that voice. That was one reason to choose a British voice. It's also that the voice of Audrey UK—one of several AT&T Natural Voices—fooled me more often than any other as being real. I guess if Tony UK had sounded more real, I would have chosen that voice. Then, of course, I just liked the distance of it. And it became an element of play because the zoomorph is the narrator.

Which we discover after becoming involved in the story.

BS: It was a way of confronting the viewer with the piece's constructedness. It's probably what makes the video incredibly unmarketable in terms of reaching a mainstream mass audience, and I guess I like messing that up too. This tape is about practices in the Midwest that take place in isolation. It's about a family that goes underground. Maybe the oddness of the narrator also relates to this notion of expansiveness or of something else out there.

Maybe your video will circulate in a similar way. Lots of great things get passed around from person to person rather than being shown in a mass, public setting... and they're appreciated differently because of it.

BS: I think about art projects as being things that can't find any other place—you go to art as a place of last refuge. You don't know where else to go. Maybe you go there because you might get sued or maybe you wind up there because there's no other place in the world to put this thing that you made.





The Answer You Like is the Wrong Answer An Interview with Henry Flynt

New York, New York, July 25, 2007

Musician, philosopher and anti-art activist Henry Flynt is known for his unique synthesis of Indian classical music and the music of the American South. He has written and lectured on a diverse range of topics: mathematics, musicology, psychedelics, meta-technology, revolutionary politics, acognitive culture, concept art and dignity, to name a few. In addition to releasing archival recordings of his music, Flynt and his niece Libby have recently toured as the rock 'n' roll duo, The Flynts. In this interview, Flynt discusses the circle of artists and thinkers with whom he associated in the late 1970s and 80s. The interview took place at the apartment of Virginia Tate in Tribeca, New York.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *Here we are in Tribeca...*

HENRY FLYNT: Yes and as a matter of fact we might go back to around 1980-1981. I have a niece, Libby Flynt, in North Carolina and I invited her to visit. At that point C.C. Hennix was teaching or had just taught in the Mathematics department at the University of New York at New Paltz. Libby and Hennix got a house in Woodstock, New York. That's where they met Virginia Tate, whose apartment we're in now. I had a rather grandiose idea that it was going to become a cultural collective and that it was going to be visited by important people and become a salon.

My idea of Woodstock was probably a myth but that was my fantasy. The house was visited by some important people like Pandit Pran Nath and the Soviet logician Yessenin-Volpin. So the circle is Libby, Hennix, Virginia, La Monte Young and myself. I wanted to show you a couple of locations near here associated with La Monte Young because these are his stomping grounds. He had a building that was a former stock exchange. I wanted to show you that. As I think of this circle, La Monte is a bona fide public figure and Pandit Pran Nath is certainly a world figure. Hennix was a disciple of Pran Nath. I was a student of Pran Nath. I don't think that Libby came to that point. I think she was timid about stepping forward and saying she wanted to study. There was a point in time where something was going on here. There was a circle of people. Since we're talking about me that makes me the hub of the circle. If it were Hennix it would be different personnel. If it were La Monte it would be different personnel. I'm talking about the people that I knew. We had something going on that was very different from the going thing, from the sort of run of New York or the run of the cultural community at the time.

What did you talk about as a group? Were you interested in any of the same topics that you've been writing about recently?

HF: As I mentioned to you, I've been writing on so-called emotion and spirituality in art. Spirituality has a vernacular metaphor, the light. I've also been writing about dignity. Dignity has a vernacular definition, the sacredness that resides in every person. I'm critically rebuilding the notions these words label.

And were these topics discussed when you got together in the 1980s... dignity, the light, and so forth?

HF: No, not explicitly, but I think that is what we were doing and I think it was highly unusual. As you either have or have not gathered—I am an insane extremist. I admit to that.

Give us an example of an idea that you hold to be true that is insane...

HF: Insane extremism? Let me slide into it without taking a flying leap. Certainly I've spent a lot of time on what would be called the cognitive phase of culture, the dimension of culture or thought comprised by knowing, truth seeking, and the acquisition of true statements. There's a piece on my website called *Uncompromising Positioning* that talks about what you have to do when you want to explain something and it's going to be trivially self-defeating—I mean trivially self-defeating if you go into it in the ordinary colloquial way—and what you have to do, the formal bobbing and weaving that's needed to end up with something which, instead of trivially defeating itself, defeats or short circuits the entire block of culture that it has been inserted into or focused inside of.

Can you try to give examples because I'm lost...

HF: In other words, all beliefs are self-deceiving. To say that colloquially, as an assertion, is trivially self-defeating. That's the first thing that a real philosophy student learns. So obviously if we're going to do it right, we're not going to come about it that way. What's needed is a replacement that must be taken seriously as a shattering insight. I'm going all the way up to the very apex of my program, which is a wipeout of cognition. I then come down from that to a field that I crystallized in 1979 called meta-technology, which was the idea that if my insight is a sound insight, it should then be possible to alter the laws of nature at will. In other words, you should be able to look down on science from above and see that scientific results are just one delusion...

When you refer to the laws of nature are you referring to things like gravity?

HF: Yes exactly, the law of gravity, elementary arithmetic. These are the two standard examples.

$2+2 = 4?$

HF: Yes and how should I say it... these are conventions which have enough delusion mixed in with them that you could go around them or you could break them from above.

What are the tools that you would use to break them if they don't come from science, or do they come from science?

HF: It's actually eclectic. Many of my meta-technology studies come from science but it's eclectic also. It's not on the same plane or it's not positioned in the same room, so to speak. One of the major meta-technological manuscripts is *The Apprehension of Plurality*—you can find it on my website. In that piece I'm ripping into elementary arithmetic, ripping it to pieces. I'm rising off of the plane of arithmetic as it's commonly understood, but legitimately so. Meta-technology is essentially technical and specific.

How did you come to question...

HF: To be so extreme in the first place? Yes, why in the world would someone come to the point of wanting to kill all cognition? When I was in college, which happened to be at Harvard—that was the first time I tried to go to college—I already thought of myself as a philosopher and I ran directly toward the big questions: truth, cognition, reality. I just ran right for that. My only credentials as a philosophy student were that I took Israel Scheffler's philosophy of science course, which ostensibly had everything to do with what I was doing and wanted to do but in fact wasn't that at all. The quality of instruction at Harvard was basically terrible, by the way. I don't know if that matters or if anybody cares. What you got from going to Harvard was meeting other students who came there for the same reason that you had, because they thought it was a good school. Tony Conrad and I were classmates, taking the same courses. We were pacing each other.

During this period I embraced the logical positivist critique of metaphysics, [Rudolf] Carnap's early empiricist or solipsist formulation. I then concluded that science cannot satisfy empiricist strictures, that it was not credible to assert anything outside of experience. I realized that the assertion that language exists was at the center of the problem. This is

the background of my early “cognitive” texts. By the time I was 20 years old, I’d written my first monograph, short, 14 mimeographed pages. That was the first time I said, to put it informally: cognition is a charade.

I continued along the same lines in the 1961 monograph, *Philosophy Proper*.¹ Beginning in 1962, I produced a series of one-page texts which foreground the question of the existence of language at all. The only one of these texts I could get published at the time was *Primary Study*, which George Maciunas accepted for Fluxus V TRE.² Resuming with the question, when you say that language exists, that two-word assertion... well, what about that? I decided that, for epistemological reasons, this two-word assertion short-circuits. And that’s the end of cognition.

I was setting things up in such a way that the mere possibility of thinking a certain thought could be a discovery or a revelation that did not depend on the truth of the thought. In other words, a thought does not have to be a truth in order to be interesting and in order for the fact that you can think it at all to be important. Concept art, the phrase that I coined in 1961, was an example of this.

Concept art, as you describe it, differs significantly from “conceptual art” as we understand it today.

HF: Yes, now I’m retelling the story... you may already know it...

But others may not.

HF: Of course they don’t. We wrote an entry for me for wikipedia and they actually rejected it because they said it doesn’t have any footnotes and things like that.³ That left us in an infuriating position because I had told them the truth. The wikipedia editors were slamming the door on the truth. What am I doing being indignant about truth? I weave back and forth between invoking the truth and announcing that I have blown up the truth. This is what the piece *Uncompromising Positioning* addresses. When I assert truthfulness, I mean: “it hews to exacting standards in some established discipline which has not yet exhausted its potential.” In my extreme program, those disciplines disintegrate. In any case, I can’t provide wikipedia with the footnotes because there is no scholarship on me. So you’re right that people will be hearing this for the first time, even though it’s tedious to me.

Concept art came because of the quasi-cognitive claims that were being made for serial music. At the time, Cage and his school were involved in a kind of manipulation... you could call it extreme formalism. As a matter of fact I can be precise and call it absurdist formalism. But the absurdist formalism of Cage, you might almost say the head-game aspect of it and the head-game aspect of La Monte Young’s

word pieces... I looked at that and I said: Let us isolate the head-game aspect. Instead of being pseudo-cognitive as the serial composers are, let us get rid of that—get rid of what Milton Babbitt would eventually do with the twelve-tone set... that abomination, which I guess is some trivial kind of academic mathematics. I said to hell with that, but let us indeed have an art form that is about head games, that is about logic defeating itself. I was responding directly to these precedents but at the same time I moved it way over and away from where these precedents were.

Many, many years later I was talking to La Monte and Marian [Zazeela] and they were saying the word pieces were basically like social criticism or, you know, pulling the public’s leg, where you have a concert and the performers sit on the stage and watch the audience. They were talking about that as a social practical joke or something like that. I was saying: “Oh no, you’ve just ruined everything for me because I thought that this was a ferocious logical thing that you were involved with rather than a social prank.” That’s what I saw when I looked at these things.

You were writing and also composing at this time?

HF: When I first met John Berndt, he said: “I don’t see what it is in your extremist insights that requires you to become some kind of quasi-scientific scholar, to write what seem to be scholarly documents appealing to this or that known case in perceptual psychology or foundations of mathematics.” I was putting together things that came from widely different places, from dreams...

And from psychedelics... you’ve touched on so many...

HF: Yes, well I must say that if we’re talking about altered states that would be for Hennix to handle.

But I do want to ask you how, in phasing out cognition, overcoming elementary arithmetic and exposing science as a hoax... how these steps relate to what we were talking about earlier: the elevated experiences of splendor, radiance, and the light. Is it that once you get rid of certain set ways and day-to-day habits of thought, a door opens to these other states? That might be an oversimplification but how do you see these other experiences...?

HF: These other experiences or ‘spiritual modalities,’ as I conceive them, are accessible to all people already. I’m just mentioning them. You’re not hearing about them from me for the first time.

But where do those experiences fit into your views on science?

HF: This has to do with my long relationship with Hennix. Somehow, Hennix became an acolyte of Pran Nath when she was much younger than me. Hennix's idea was that what we are presented by everyday life is totally profane. She asserted that logic is not a fantasy, that it is true. Logic is your access to reality. There *is* a reality and logic is true and real and all of that good stuff. Hennix simply assumed that higher mathematics and higher thought are one and the same.

Higher thought meaning spiritual thought?

HF: Superior thought, elevated thought. We don't need to use the word spiritual. In the European tradition, there's a figure that really concentrates this and that's Leibniz. Leibnizian spirituality combines with his interest in mathematics. He is considered to be one of the prophets of mathematical logic. He was a co-inventor of calculus. All of that, it all came together in him. Hennix might not like Leibniz as an individual but I see the mathematical mystique in her way of thinking as being characteristically European and Leibnizian. Hennix put that mentality together with what La Monte was doing, his work with the drone and tuning mystique and the arithmetical theory of musical intervals.

So the two of you were interested in understanding how music, mathematics and an elevated dimension come together?

HF: When an educated Westerner comes to Hindustani music the first thing they see is the arithmetic of the scale. That may be the first thing they think about and they publish treatises on that, on the arithmetic of scales. They see the sustained tone and so on. Hennix's idea was *sustained states of awareness*, which she wrote about in 1976.⁴ I finally realized that Christer was talking about being high, in the vernacular sense. In Hennix's vocabulary, *awareness* was correlative to *luminous*.

But the high could be achieved not only by using drugs but...

HF: ...through logic, for Hennix. These things have long histories and all sorts of documentation. Hennix has an entire oeuvre that the world has never seen. She was trying to pull together logic, psychedelic drugs and the experience afforded by Indian music. Hennix's idea was that you can't get to an elevated state by accident. You have to have a formula to get there, or as she would say, an algorithm. She was trying to tie all of this together with formal linguistics. Her master's degree was in formal linguistics. She believed in logic, truth, reality and so on. Perhaps after meeting me, Hennix began trying to stretch those more than

before. Her other mentor, Yessenin-Volpin, made a big deal of the freedom of stipulation or the freedom of how you pay attention to something, how you select by paying attention... but that was as far as the freedom extended. It did not extend into terrain in which contradictions become meaningful expressions. That didn't happen because it couldn't happen.

But this is possible within your system?

HF: Yes. Wittgenstein had all sorts of explanations for why a contradiction must be vacuous. For example, he said to imagine a plane surface that is entirely colored with one color and is entirely colored with some other color at the same time. He said this is obvious nonsense and that's why a contradiction can never mean anything. It has no function in a logical system except to ruin the system. I'm involved in a massive war against that kind of thinking. I'm out to get the ones we call "identitarians," the people who believe that $A = A$. To me, the people who believe that $A = A$ are the bad guys.⁵

Hennix is an identitarian—I think it's fair to say that. This was a dialogue. Obviously I gained a great deal from Hennix but we were on different sides. I wrote an essay in which I try to reply to Hennix.⁶ I argue that the subject—the self who does meta-technology—has an uncanny manipulative power over reality.

Can you, yourself, manipulate reality in uncanny ways?

HF: Not in a way that would matter to a scientist or engineer yet. In the history of mathematics you have the invention of zero. You could do a whole comedy routine about this nothing invention, which is nothing, which is actually about nothing and which says that it is nothing. Yet, it was of fundamental importance to all mathematics that came after it.

Not only was it of fundamental importance, it resulted in all kinds of problems for mathematicians. In other words, what do paranoids, e.g. the mathematicians, do? Paranoids start out with a delusional system and when there is evidence from the real world that contradicts their system, they have to keep molding the system to make it square with the new evidence that keeps proving that they're wrong. To me that is the essence of mathematics and of all science. It's layer upon layer of fixes. Needless to say, the history of the sciences is not taught this way at all. I wanted to tell you that one of the problems that zero creates is that if you raise zero to the zero power—do you know what one to the power of one is?

One.

HF: What is zero to the power of zero?

Zero?

HF: No, it's one. The answer you like is the wrong answer.

Why?

HF: If I tried to explain it to you we would be here all night. That's why I picked the example. The thing is that this happens way up in the conceptual system and it then has these reverberations that go all the way down and finally effect what kind of technology you can do. That is probably a reasonable way of thinking about what I do and what I want to do. I'm coming up with these little things way up at the top of the conceptual system.

By "technology" you don't mean the lever or the sewing machine, you mean a conceptual apparatus.

HF: It's a good question. Why did I say "technology" rather than "science"? I picked the term in 1979 because I wanted to say that meta-technology is not a collection of propositions. It is not a discovery of reality in the sense that you are painting reality with this secured proposition and that secured proposition until you finally have a picture of reality. You're right that I did not mean the lever and so forth but I meant that technology was instrumental, that it could be an instrumental activity without truth claims. The idea was that the meta-technologist, as a subject and as a self, is presumably going to have access to an uncanny situation.

At the same time, I began to notice that there were phases of experience that just did not come from any of these things that I was doing. My one psychedelic trip—I could not have gotten there by using what I think of as my specialty. I recorded "Celestial Power" during my trip and the way that I played... I tried to duplicate that way of playing without the drug and I couldn't.

That was the one time that you took acid?

HF: It wasn't acid, it was synthetic mescaline, but there's no question that it was psychedelic. I was having visual apparitions and full-fledged hallucinations. I still remember playing and seeing a glow around the scroll of the violin and what I specialize in doing does not bring you to that point. This is something else. I guess that I've gotten involved, in a rough and ready way, in trying to explore both at the same time. How they connect up... maybe I'm not that far along.

To come back to this group of people and why we were so different—

I've given you a brief idea of some of the intellectual issues that were in play here. When you think of an artist normally, you think of somebody who trades on being a lowbrow. Pollock or whoever you want to talk about. Lowbrow is part of the job description. Hennix said to me in this apartment: "You know Henry, there isn't any art that accomplishes anything intellectual and there was only one artist, Leonardo, who had a foot in both camps." Hennix and I considered ourselves exceptions to this rule. The two of us gave a presentation on concept art at MELA Foundation. We promoted the idea of having art that not only addresses what they call science but actually means to blow it out of the water. We were ambitious in that sense.

You've been lecturing recently on the subject of dignity.

HF: The idea of dignity is invoked by people who want to support some moral conclusion or other. People want moral conclusions, they insist on them. You have these science weenies walking around. You have Marvin Minsky's famous line that a human being is a meat machine. In the greater part of their lives, however, these same scientists are totally unwilling to play by their own rules.

Because they also want to have morals and values?

HF: Because they want other people to treat them with the greatest generosity, deference, respect, reverence and so forth and so on.

Not as meat machines.

HF: Not as electric fans. There are enormous holes in the prevailing culture, which is vastly, systematically insincere in that sense. The whole thing is a hoax. I've never been able to get people excited about that. They have no problem walking from one side of the academic hallway to the other, being a physicist on Thursday and going into the theology department on Friday. Here's another vast incongruity. Sophisticated people affect a secular view of history part of the time—but when it suits them they return to the obtaining monotheism with its divine view of history. It's just stunningly insincere and dishonest. Apparently I'm the only person who even cares to make that observation.

You've talked about how this scientific mindset has infiltrated art and music as well.

HF: I want to try to tie this together a bit. We had this circle of people and for me, when you challenge western civilization intellectually, you

are also challenging what could be called its emotional side. The view of music that crystallized in Europe, for instance—curiously enough, painting and music became scientific. With painting, it's perspective and perspective theory. With music, it's the underlying sound theory, scale theory and the theory of harmony. You get the development of chromaticism and the move to serial music and you end up with Stockhausen and with Meyer-Eppler's view of music as a branch of engineering.

It was very important to me as an object lesson to understand that the serious composers were saying: "This is it. This is the best. If you want musical popcorn you go somewhere else. If you want the real thing, it had better be scientifically organized." If you read the early issues of *Die Reihe* magazine, it's all there, that attitude. From that point of view, when you look at somebody like Robert Johnson and the country blues, well, it's pathetic primitivism. That's the only verdict that they can have on it.

I came to a point when I was 19 or 20 years old when I turned around so completely that I decided that it was the Robert Johnsons who were the real musicians in the West. Stockhausen, to the contrary, was what he sometimes presented himself as—an engineer with, in my point of view, no musical talent, who doesn't even know what music is. He can put together assemblages of notes using technology like helicopters, which he's really big on, and some other things that as far as I'm concerned have nothing to do with being a musician. Apparently Europe loves it. We have an entire civilization on that trip. I reject it wholesale.

Tell us about your experiences studying with Pandit Pran Nath.

HF: I first heard Pran Nath on tape in La Monte's loft. The next year La Monte was able to bring Pran Nath to New York. That was January or February of 1970. The lessons and the concerts began and continued for over fifteen years into the mid 80s. During that time Pran Nath had a heart attack, which weakened him, and at the end of his life he had Parkinson's disease, which actually affected his ability to sing. The heart attack made him weaker but did not otherwise affect his singing.

Pran Nath became for me the person who was, in the most studied and considered way, a musician for the emotional and spiritual dimensions. I still have all my admiration for Robert Johnson but he was making music in extremely unfavorable circumstances, coming to it sort of catch-as-catch-can. Pran Nath had the advantage, more or less, of being honored by an elite in his own country, where this music was a cultivated tradition for hundreds of years. That is an oversimplification because... it's very complicated. Pran Nath had to leave home in order to become a musician and his parents wanted no part of it. He was a Hindu from Pakistan who went to study Hindustani music with Muslims in India. He was not a member of the family. The music is the property of the family,

the Khan family. In that sense he was always an outsider. As I say, his parents threw him out. I forget at what age he left home. It was a ridiculously early age. He was completely cut off from his family. He had no disciples from India and he told La Monte more than once: "The Indians are hopeless, don't give them my music, they don't deserve it." He was that alienated from the very tradition on whose shoulders he stood. But taking all of that into account, he became, to me, the musician of musicians. Pran Nath's presumed job was to reach you spiritually and to me he's the only musician who both did that and knew exactly how he was doing it.

Did he talk to you about that as a goal of his?

HF: Well there were interviews done with him but they may not have been very helpful for the same reason that interviewing a jazz musician tends not to be very helpful. Nevertheless, there was a tremendous amount of proprietary technique that he was completely cognizant of—I see this as a vindication of Hennix in a way. In order to do what Pran Nath did, you have to actually be aware that that level exists and you have to want to do it. One of the things that I noticed was that the younger singer in the Khan family, when I would go to hear him sing in New York... he simply was not on Pran Nath's level. He could be an entertaining performer, a very proficient and polished performer, but he was not on that level. He may not have been aware of it. It may have demanded sacrifices that he saw no reason to make. There were all kinds of sacrifices.

That Pran Nath made in order to sing the way he did?

HF: Yes, in order to do what he did. MELA had very exacting standards for his concerts. There were no concessions. The audience sat on the floor. They explained to the audience that, in the Indian custom, you cannot sit in such a way that your feet point at the teacher. That's disrespectful. No applause. All of this was very important to them.

Why no applause?

HF: Because it's considered vulgar. He's poured out a music that for some of us is life changing. You reward entertainment with applause.

Wasn't it also that he wasn't making this music only or primarily for the audience? It was for God.

HF: Pran Nath would say that he was singing for God. He would say that you have to perform various devotions in order to sing in the way that he

does. It's an old culture. It's an extremely sophisticated culture. You get a marked contrast when you're looking at black music in the American south. It's much more rough and ready. I think that it is also an achievement of the highest level. I personally have tried to take a great deal from that as opposed to Hindustani music where being polished is so important. I mean Pran Nath is... there's a bootleg record where you can hear him coughing. He sang like a storyteller. He was informal enough to cough during his performance, but his singing always was perfectly in tune. There was no such thing as ever hitting a wrong note, although knowledgeable listeners would remark that he would throw in a note outside the raga.

So how do you see the music that you make fitting in, being influenced by both...

HF: I staked out my own territory and sometimes it was the one, the other... both at the same time.

But it's somewhere in between, being influenced by Robert Johnson and Pandit Pran Nath both, but also vastly different from either.

HF: You also have to bring in white southern music. You have to bring in Coltrane and Ornette Coleman and Bo Diddley, whose originality awes me now more than ever. What I do is all over the place. James Brown. I mean without James Brown there would be no "I Was a Creep". That's the way that I think of it. "Graduation" itself was... I mean it's country music but there's an eye on Pran Nath. Not even his technique, not at all, but perhaps the slow, low-slung way that it's performed. In the piece, "Portrait," the violin goes through Romanian music. It's around the world in so many minutes.

Do you have a sense of where your talent lies in music?

HF: It's in the unique synthesis. It's not a copy of anything. My musical training was in classical violin. I had extremely brief rock guitar training with Lou Reed and the vocal lessons with Pran Nath. The rest I'm kind of making it up as I go. I'm self-taught. The actual Indian training is formal but what I did with it on the violin is sort of my own problem. By the time I was past a certain age in my 20s, I was committed to standard instruments and to holding the violin in the standard way. I didn't want to compose music that could only be played on weird instruments, where there was only one in the world or anything like that.

Do you think of your music as a proof or manifestation of your philosophy?



Henry Flynt lecturing at the University of California San Diego (January 2007)

HF: I never separated my intellectual critique of the civilization from the idea of opening the door to so-called emotion and spirituality in music. I think that Europe has slammed that door shut. It's a complicated story because modern music was preceded by Romantic music. Music criticism in Europe had taken its best shot at talking about music as an expressive activity. You have classical painting... there is a European version of it but I would claim that, going back to the Greeks, Europe has gotten off onto this mechanomorphic, arithmomorphic kick: The object, the external object, the thing.

Over and above experience?

HF: Just what I said. The thing. The exterior thing. That's Europe's fundamental ontological category. There is a modern anti-humanism which accuses European philosophy of glorifying the subject, but that's bad historical judgment. Philosophy is viciously psyche-phobic. Carnap, for instance, abandoned "experience" for physicalism. Europe's romantic irrationalism is a compensation, which does not remove the intellectual stumbling block. Cognitive scientists today are tying themselves in knots trying to figure out how they can put things together in some concrete way and then talk about consciousness. Of course it's preposterous. They're just spinning their wheels.

There are a number of other things that I find odd in Europe. For instance, the way medieval music played out in Europe is quite odd in being sort of a discrete phenomenon. The hocket, for example, where each performer has his one note and it jumps around from one guy to

the other—this note to that note—it is so discrete. There's a complete lack of the fluidity and bounce that are so important in other musical traditions. I am not surprised that by the time you get to the 20th century, it all becomes a disaster. You get serious modern music, which to me is just a big disaster. You get modern art, which... well I guess we have to decide whether we're talking about high art or popular culture since they shift from one to the other as you well know. High art to me, I mean Duchamp and so forth, it becomes the scandal, the hoax, the practical joke.

Are there people today who are becoming interested in the topics your circle was discussing in the 80s?

HF: It's completely different. The ideas of splendor and radiance were just intuitive and axiomatic for the people I'm talking about. They didn't sit down and make a decision: let's do splendor and radiance this week. That's where they always were, whereas nowadays I see a total deafness. I think that the going thing in the art world is smirky, campy, pulling the collector's leg—very big, very important in the art world.

You've talked before about how, at a certain point in history, what gains currency within the western art world is self-hatred.

HF: Art evinces the milieu's self-hatred. Art becomes ironic, with no real emotion—practical jokes, etc. It's all defilement, in fact. I look at it and my reaction is: how can anybody hate themselves this much? Apparently seeing some Indian culture must have had a bigger effect on me than it does on other people.

A South Indian dance performance, that's an example. There are four schools of South Indian dance and what you want to see is Bharata Natyam, which is the oldest and maybe the most classical. The first time that I saw it was in Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. I was walking by one evening in the summer around 1976 and two girls had a blaster with a pre-recorded tape and they were performing. They were Americans who were studying Bharata Natyam. They had an Indian teacher here in New York and they were getting ready to go to India to study. So the first time I saw it was with American performers. Then I went out to a Hindu temple in Queens and saw it a couple of times and got to see visiting Indian performers. It makes Western civilization look like garbage. They're doing exactly what I would expect sane, self-respecting people to be doing. It is dazzlingly beautiful. At the same time they are involved with structure. The girls explained that there is a whole philosophy behind it, there's mathematics. If that is the case, they managed to take thinking and completely combine it—like Pran Nath did—

with what we would call the funky.

To me, once I've seen that, western civilization is just an abomination. I have to hold myself back from calling for a war on it. A war of destruction would be a mistake because there are, so to speak, various secured positions in western culture that cannot be overcome by mere obscurantism. You have to meet it on its own level and defeat it on an intellectual plane.

If you read what I say about Pran Nath⁷, you'll see that I try to talk about him without looking back at western civilization but I can't quite do it. This was all happening, as I say in the essay, when you have The Sex Pistols... and The Ramones singing: "Beat the brat with a baseball bat." It was bizarre to see Pran Nath walking down the street and to know that we were blocks away from the Mudd Club or CBGBs.

The person that struck me the most in that connection was Marian Zazeela. I guess you could call her work a cool minimalist art. Be that as it may, when they had the stock exchange a few blocks from here, she had this installation on the trading floor. It was Marian's lighted aluminum mobiles suspended from the ceiling and also La Monte's chords, which come from generators, playing on large loudspeakers. I was a great fan of it. What struck me so much about her was that she cruised along doing what she does while being surrounded by the culture of defilement, if you will. La Monte only pays attention to what he is personally involved in. Marian may have been more aware of the surrounding world, but there was still this enormous gulf between what she was doing and what was happening in the pop world and the art world in general. She just breezed along without seeming to care, whereas it seems necessary for me to engage with other people and to tell them what I think is important or worthwhile and to try to influence them.



1. Published in Henry Flynt, *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*. Milan: Multipla Edizioni, 1975.
2. Published in cc Valise e TRanglE = Fluxus Newspaper No. 3 (March 1964).
3. This biography is available on Henry Flynt's website: www.henryflynt.org.
4. Hennix, Christer. "Notes on Toposes & Adjoints." Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1976.
5. See "Uncompromising Positioning" on Flynt's website.
6. See "Elevated Experience" on Flynt's website.
7. See "On Pandit Pran Nath (1918-1996)" on Flynt's website.



Livin' and Feelin' It

An Interview with Twig Harper and Carly Ptak

Baltimore, Maryland, July 22, 2007

For the last seven years Twig Harper and Carly Ptak have lived together a former optometry supply building in southwest Baltimore. They put on shows (on the top floor of their place, which they've named Tarantula Hill), tour (as Nautical Almanac) and run a label (HereSee Records). In this interview, Harper and Ptak discuss their evolving thoughts on music, work and love. They were married in June, 2008.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *Where did you grow up and how did you grow up?*

CARLY PTAK: I'll start. I grew up in Davison, Michigan, which is a white suburb outside of Flint. Our house was on the edge of a trailer park and it had a garden. It was the 70s. I can't believe they had a garden. Neither of my parents would have had a garden if it wasn't the 70s. That was just what you did. It was a pretty normal, happy and pain-free childhood until my sister died when I was 11. She was 15. As far as formative experiences go, I would say that was it. She liked heavy metal, so by the time I was seven or eight I was really into Ozzie and Black Sabbath and Mötley Crüe. I saw Metallica on their first tour with Ozzie and I was like: "What is this? This is completely different." My sister's death definitely caused me to come to terms with certain things. My parents were grieving so hard and I was pretty existential, unbeknownst to myself. My sister put herself in the situation—it was a car accident—and she lived her life fully up until that point. It was different for me. I was very alone. I was at an age where, you know, you change friends a lot. I was already not fitting in. I didn't have many friends at that time. I think that really veered me toward music. Flint had a really good scene. There were shows every weekend. It was a really good place to grow up, but I never considered playing music until after I finished college.

TWIG HARPER: Yes you did.

CP: Oh, I did. I considered it, but then I discarded it because I didn't want to practice. When I was 12 or 13, I thought: if I don't start playing the guitar now, I'll never be great. Me and my friends took lessons and I learned how to play "Wipeout." That was it. I didn't practice.

What about you Twig?

TH: I was born in rural Pennsylvania. My parents were part of the back-to-the-land movement. They decided to live on this family farm. I grew up gardening and being around chickens and pigs and goats so I was tuned in and able to communicate with animals. My mother was a no-sugar, no-television kind of mother. She wanted my brother and I to grow up to be idealistic. But slowly, as life goes on, reality happens. It's hard to support a family and pay a mortgage and eat. My dad worked the whole time in a plastics factory. Then my dad got transferred and we ended up moving to south Florida. Where we were living, it was nice, nicer than it is now. Now it's like Anywhere, USA, it's been so developed.

I've always felt like an outsider. I don't know if that's in my blood or what. Going to school and being around people and having access to culture and mass media, I felt even more isolated because I couldn't relate to it. I wasn't indoctrinated into the language and it was always confusing to see other people being so tunnel-visioned and base-level about how they reacted to things. Everyone that I was around... it kinda seemed like the sun was boiling their brains. Florida put me in a position where if something was going to hold my interest, I was going to have to create that something myself. There was no music, no art. Bands would never come down to Florida. If they did it would be Miami or Palm Beach and we didn't have cars. We had to do stuff so we ended up... what the hell would we do? I've always been really into heat so I used to wear lots of clothes all the time. I'd wear four pairs of pants, two pairs of socks and a few sweaters. And I'd walk for miles.

In order to sweat?

TH: Yeah, sweating and getting into states that way. But then I'd also do things with my friends like make really fucked up masks out of pant legs and go to the side of the highway and just stand there. "Hey, this is what we're going to do today, this is something to do." I also started doing a lot of acid when I was 14 or 15, right before I moved to Michigan. When we would do it, it was always ritualistic. We'd all gather objects together and put them in bags. "OK, let's get together tonight and do acid. Bring your object bag... and what did you bring and why did you bring this?" When you're that young, I think you're really intelligent. Young people are the smartest on the planet. As we get older we just get dumber.

When I was 15, I moved to Ann Arbor. Florida wasn't working out. I wasn't going to school. My parents had gotten divorced. My mother never liked Florida. Maybe she read someplace that Ann Arbor, Michigan was a great place to move your kids. It was fall when we got there and everyone was wearing winter clothes and boots and that's

what I always wore in Florida. I thought: I've found my people. It was a big shock to be around people my age who were into things and doing things. It felt like the most cultured place in the world. I thought it was the moon. Eventually that illusion dissolved and I realized it was all just as immaterial as everything else and I just wanted to go even farther from it. That's when I met Carly.

Before that, what was your relationship to music and art?

TH: My grandmother was a painter. Her brother was a really good pianist. My parents went to art school and got kicked out for selling marijuana. My mother was always painting and my dad was into photography and music. I think my dad got all his records stolen so we never grew up around music, even though they were into music. I heard the radio but I never turned it on. It didn't interest me. Skateboarding got me into listening to the Butthole Surfers and Chrome and Throbbing Gristle and late 80s industrial punk.

So you met each other?

CP: I remember when we met. It was Hash Bash. It's this legalization party that happens in Ann Arbor on April Fool's Day. I was riding my bike, checking out the scene. There was a preacher up on a stump. Twig was there and he asked the preacher: "What if there's Siamese twins and one of them is evil and one of them is good... what happens when they die?"

TH: If there are two brains but only one heart and you want to get at the soul, where does it reside?

CP: I followed him for a little while. But we didn't meet. I was hanging out with Leif Ritchey, playing in his band. I lived in a co-op and Leif brought over the whole crew of Ann Arbor kids. I remember Twig coming over and telling a story about how he'd taken acid before going to the dentist that day. I was extremely impressed by that. The story was that the dentist asked him if he'd ever heard of the Butthole Surfers.

TH: Then I knew the world was just an illusion.

What was going on in Ann Arbor at the time?

CP: I was in school. I went to shows. There was a party house where everybody hung out or lived.

TH: Yeah, a mayhem party house, like: find a beef carcass in the dumpster, wheel it back, paint it polka-dotted and stick it on the front porch. Someone says: "Let's put televisions on the front porch." Next thing you know, kids are driving up with televisions. Where did the televisions come from? No one knows. It just happens. Right across the street was the Institute for Social Research. Someone's grandmother worked there and we'd hear that they'd be looking out the window at us and saying: "Look what they're doing today!"

It was all very self-contained. It was people in high school and drop outs—I dropped out of high school in 10th grade—and people in college and older musicians and a lot of people from Detroit had moved there. So there was a convergence in Ann Arbor, all these children of the flower children coming of age. Everyone was like: what do we do? There were no more strong, underground social movements... they'd been co-opted a million times already. People were angry and didn't know what to do so they just started doing anything and trying to go as far as they could go. One time this kid drove up to the house and said: "Do something to my car!" People started painting on it and maybe it caught fire.

CP: Then there were people like Rich Ahern who was 60 years old and had lived in Ann Arbor for years. He was a wild stoner dude who saw what was happening and said: "Yeah!"

TH: He knew all the underground heads and it was great to have that influence. There were old SDS weirdos walking around too... hippie dreams and hippie nightmares all rolled into one.

CP: At that time there wasn't much in the way of analysis. None of us were saying or thinking: this is about this or that means that. It was all about what your friends were doing.

Twig, can you talk about the loose, whoever-shows-up structure of Scheme, the band you were in around that time?

TH: I started making music intuitively by myself. I wanted to play guitar and my mother's boyfriend played bass in a bar rock band and I asked him if he could get me a guitar. He handed me an acoustic guitar and I was like: this is not it. I started taping over the record head of a cassette player—I don't know how I figured that out—and started making sound-on-sound tape collages. When I moved to Michigan, I met people who were doing similar things. I started messing around with Sol Meltzer and Thom Klepach and we thought maybe we should do a band. We called it Scheme and we decided anyone's in it. Anyone's in the band. It doesn't matter. I remember Tom saying at one point that the band should just

spawn everywhere so that all across the world, everyone's in this band and it's a worldwide band. There are no rules, there's no separation between anything. It's about ultimate freedom.

CP: It wasn't just a band at shows, it was a band at Taco Bell.

TH: We'd play anywhere at any time. We'd load the van up with garbage and go to frat houses and be like: "Hey, we're here, we're the band," and they're confused and we'd say: "Oh, I guess we're at the wrong place, but let's just play here." And so we start bringing in all this garbage and breaking things, breaking their windows and throwing the couch out the window and getting out of there before they beat us up and then going to the next one.

How did Nautical Almanac begin?

TH: I didn't like where Scheme was going. I thought it was getting too musical or too formalized and I didn't want to play with the people who'd attached themselves to those ideas. So me, Nate Young, Thom Klepach—us and a couple other people—we decided to start the Nautical Almanac. We would have chants, like cheerleading or marching band cheers, just trying to get people riled up.

When Carly got out of school, she stuck around for a little while but she'd grown up in Michigan and wanted to move. If you live in the Midwest and you want to move to the big city, you move to Chicago.

CP: I was sick of walking out my door and knowing everybody and knowing who was going to be where... and the cops were more of a presence in peoples' lives. I wanted to move. Twig didn't want to move.

There was a KKK rally and Twig and some other people went just because it was a big group of people and a freak zone. There's a KKK sign up on the courthouse and the political people are doing their thing and the cops are there and suddenly there's tear gas. Twig picked up a tear gas can and threw it back at the cops before they had their masks on. Some of them had to go to the hospital. Seven people got arrested. I wasn't there. I got called to come pick them up ... they were hiding out. It was serious.

TH: People had smashed out all the windows at City Hall. There were federal and local police and they overreacted. They just started gassing people right away.

CP: So Twig had to leave town. They were going around to all the houses and picking up anyone tall, anyone who looked like Twig.

So you moved to Chicago, both of you.

CP: We looked for a space right away but it didn't happen. For a year we lived in an apartment with a roommate. We fought a lot that year. It was two years into our relationship.

TH: It was a cramped apartment.

CP: But then Twig got me a crystal radio set or maybe I got it for myself. That was the first time I made something with electronics. Twig wasn't playing with anyone else at the time and I'd always been into music, but not making music. So he started feeding me instruments because I had zero talent.

TH: That's the kind of musician I like to play with.

CP: It was like: "Oh, I'm not playing music, I'm just turning knobs" or "I just built this solar-powered light that's triggered by a foot pedal. I'm just putting my foot down." Slowly that morphed into Nautical Almanac.

TH: The first tours would be us and Wolf Eyes and Rubber-O-Cement so we'd have six people, three bands in one van. We toured Europe like that. We thought: this is it, let's see the world and have it paid for.

I'm interested in how you think about your music and what you want your music to do. You make abruptly psychedelic, some might say annoying electronic music

TH: At the base of it, we want to increase awareness by presenting a form that people aren't accustomed to, that wakes them up from the waking dream we exist in. I've always felt, with music and with art, that it's best to create something, not necessarily grating... but something that can't be ignored. In the 20th century there were a lot of avant garde musicians who asked, you know, what is music and what is sound and can you separate the listener from the sound... and the answer usually is no. That is the groundwork, but we're dealing with something that is more folk related. Our music has punk/folk roots. It's a communal and social, people thing. It's non-hierarchical and non-educational.

Now it's in fashion. So what do you do when something you're doing gets co-opted? Art pulls the veil off and the mass of people, the mediocracy wants to pull it back down, put a new form on it, put a new coat on it. The mission of artists is to keep peeling that off. People get confused by the form, not the spirit.



Nautical Almanac

CP: What we do or what we've done has been to use the energy in the room and turn that into awareness of now. Our mode of performing is speaking through machines, speaking to the spirits. Letting the machines speak for the spirits and letting ourselves and our movements be open to the spirit world. There's no consciousness at that time. I can't go back to a time when I was on stage because that time was just itself. That's what we do. Electronic music is just a form, but when you're shocked it's easier to see things in a new light.

TH: And we have a history of cannibalizing electronics. I started off using cassette tapes, programmed electronics and garbage simply because I didn't have anything else. It was an instinctual way to go about making music.

Machines have intelligence and people have intelligence and both are interacting. If you have a light that's flickering on and off and you sit there and you sync up to the light, you have a much better chance to influence it, because it's on the edge, it's not a full frequency. Beyond that, when you perform there are observers affecting things. We'll use instrumentation that has sequencing elements, that has its own way it wants to go. It has a drive that you and the audience struggle with. It becomes a total experience. To open that up to the person in the back of the room who's thinking that this is the worst shit they've ever seen, and to cause that instability. That's exciting.

We have a loose structure that gives us greater freedom to operate. I think that's a difference between us and our contemporaries. We can't make it doing what we do. People need something more solid.

CP: When *Wolf Eyes* was getting more and more popular there was a time of thinking: OK what's our role? Is our role to become popular, whatever that entails? We flirted with that idea and no, it's not. If we're lucky, 5% of the people are actually *there* when we perform. Most people go to a show not to be there but because it's the thing to do.

TH: And McDonalds is there to pull the people in. If you can't see beyond that and you're seduced by that... I don't need it. I got things to do. We don't want people whose motivations are so highly different from ours to suck our energy. Our friends that have gone that way, it's hard for them. People are vampires and they latch on to successful people and suck them dry. You give this and I'm latching on to you. We say we don't have it because everyone has it.

And then there's the experience we all had this weekend, we call it rainbow rock. These just-into-college young kids wearing rainbow clothes, these ADDDD dimensional kids. It's wild. There's a part of me that finds it so alien. It's weird to see this wave of youth that's really attached to the nostalgia of mainstream media. It makes me wonder: how far in am I? And also knowing the pitfalls. You can mimic the mainstream and try to twist it into something subversive but you can only go so far. At some level it's already co-opted before it exists. So it's interesting to see youth attracted to something that's already been dissolved and digested.

CP: Definitely, after moving to Chicago, I was really into pushing the circuit, you know, anyone can do this. I was really pushing it. Come on, do it, do it. And it worked. I'm happy for that but I don't want to hear this stuff.

TH: This music really is annoying. It seems like that's our role. We get into it, push it, and when people do it, we step on to something else. That's the role of an artist. Infamy is way better than fame.

Along with touring and playing shows, you opened a store in Chicago called The Mystery Spot.

TH: We got a store front, lived in the back and filled it with junk.

CP: It was in an area that we knew was close enough to stuff. I knew it would attract people and the rent was cheap.



The Mystery Spot, Chicago

TH: It was in a fringe area.

It's not a fringe area anymore.

TH: First come the freaky people, that's us, then come the yuppies.

CP: That's getting to why we left. When we opened, people would say: "Oh, your store is on that street... I won't walk west of Division." Four years later there was valet parking on all three sides of us and restaurants where we couldn't afford to eat. We didn't want to feel like suckers for being gentrifiers. We knew we had caused some of it by opening the store.

TH: It was either clean up our act and become one of them or get out of dodge. We just saved money and our plan was to move to "X" cheap, desolate city.

CP: We thought it would be Detroit or New Orleans or Baltimore. We came to Baltimore and it was amazing. We loved the city before we'd met any people or knew what was going on here. The major thing was that we could afford to buy a building without having a mortgage. I grew up near Flint, a mostly black city. It's similar here so I'm comfortable. The industries have died but people continue to live.

TH: Post-industrial cities that have not made a successful transition are very forward. It's the curve where the most potential is. It's the third

world in a first world country and that's interesting. People are more open-minded about new things because they understand that the system doesn't work and it crushes people down.

CP: Plus living in Chicago, we got priced out of our place. Living here, some people want to think of us as separate from our surroundings, as though we're different. We're not different. We don't make money. We're as poor as everyone else here.

TH: The difference is that it's conscious poverty. We're choosing, even though we have schooling, race and other kinds of access, to live in poverty. In Baltimore, if you're a character, you fit in. If you're not, you stick out, people notice you. It's a port town. It's not the north and it's not the south. It's right in the middle where those cultures combine and create something different.

Has Baltimore lived up to your expectations?

CP: I think we've progressively been able to live more idealistically. That means ridding ourselves of expectations. Our only expectation was: buy a place, don't spend money, and be able to live while working as little as possible. I think that was the gist of it.

TH: Work as little as possible to make money. Work as much as possible on what we love.

CP: Erase the boundary between work and life.

TH: That's the ideal. That seamlessness. We knew we could do it. We just needed the right environment. We came here and this was the second building we looked at. The downstairs was a doctor's office and the back part was sealed up. We weren't really sure what was inside. We had to break through a wall. Technically we're not allowed to use the upper two floors.

Tarantula Hill, on the top floor, became a spot where bands can play.

CP: Our first show was six months after we moved in.

How does your experience of Baltimore compare with Chicago?

TH: It's way slower here. People always talk about Baltimore being two years behind. The history of Baltimore is a history of resistance to change.

CP: To me there's definitely a spiritual difference. In Chicago, I had to shed my institutional learning. I did it.

TH: Carly is a reformed educated person.

CP: My spiritual side was not fostered in Chicago, maybe because we were focused on material things. I felt smothered there and I didn't even know that I felt that way until we moved here. It's about being able to live in love and not in anything else. We do what we want because of love. Everything here, the people we know and the community we've built are based on love. What that has brought me spiritually, that's the difference. Unfortunately, you have to get over the idea of money and the idea of work and the idea of fame.

TH: Everyone involved in the art or music scene knows this. You find yourself thinking: I want people to want... That's a major thing, to want other people to want something.

When did you start your label HereSee and where did the name come from?

CP: Twig had a hand in Hanson Records for a long time. Most people thought it was only Aaron [Dilloway]'s label, but Twig put money and effort into it. Aaron did do more and he was the faceman. After we moved to Baltimore there were some Hanson co-releases, the Metalux record, which we had a part in. Around the time of the Nautical Almanac/Wolf Eyes split LP, there was a disagreement over the way the business part of that relationship was going. So we were like: Fuck it. Let's have our own label.

The name was somewhat based on Nonesuch. I always loved that name and we wanted to create something that was similar. HereSee, you know it has "heresy" and then "hear and see" and it's also like handing someone something: "Here, See?"

How does the label work?

CP: The way that we've always done releases is that if Twig does one, he does it from start to finish and if I do one, it's from start to finish. To me, aesthetically, I can tell the difference. I've enjoyed working that way. I can't speak for Twig but my style of releases has been tied in with going on tour.

We've been very fortunate that whoever books our shows always puts the weirdest shit around on the bill with us. It isn't necessarily noise, it's whatever's the weirdest thing that goes on in that town, and we're gonna see it. That's a great position to be in. So touring around I would meet

people who didn't have any type of exposure at all and maybe only made a band for that show. I'd offer to put something out. I've offered that to a lot of people and maybe 25% of the time they come through with an actual object. Either they don't take me seriously or they take themselves too seriously or they just don't care.

Is the label a good outlet for your art?

CP: When I first started putting out releases, I definitely cared about packaging a lot. I really enjoyed doing it. Same as with music, but I've come full circle with that too. The market got too flooded with too many things, too much, too overwhelming. When something's handmade and you're thinking to yourself: oh, throw this in the pile of handmade stuff. I can't listen to it all. I can't deal with it anymore. Things have lost their specialness. For packaging, now I want something plain as day. If it sounds good, it's gonna sound good.

What's next?

CP: At this point we've decided that CDs are over and that music released on a material object is over. LPs are worth it but so expensive and we currently don't have the money. We were doing a lot of CD-Rs, but with MySpace and with all the downloading that's been happenings in the last few years, nobody wants CDs. I don't want CDs. There's such an influx of music from everywhere. Why add to the growing mound? So we've stopped releasing a lot of stuff. We plan on doing DVDs and LPs when we can, and just putting more stuff on the internet.

The thing we haven't discussed is the fire. Your building was almost entirely destroyed.

TH: That's been the biggest change in our lives. On our last tour I started having bizarre experiences where I would walk out of my body and I would observe my body interacting with people. I knew what a person was going to say and what I was going to say and how the whole night was going to go. I felt like: OK, everything is predetermined and I'm just going to leave my body because what's the point? I realized I'd gone as far as I could go. Our philosophy of touring was, you know, book a tour all by ourselves, no money guarantees, play no bars, all on the level with friends. These were ideals that we'd set up and fulfilled but we were not satisfied. I had been touring pretty much non-stop for a couple years and after awhile I'd get back from touring and I'd feel like a total wreck.

CP: Well the other thing is, separate from the creative community and

touring stuff, I had always had this belief in non-monogamy. I didn't believe in not allowing myself to experience something for any reason whatsoever.

TH: We had an open relationship. For me, the kind of interactions I have with people... I don't need to have a non-monogamous, open relationship because I don't need to connect to people like that. I have a hard time connecting with people anyway. I don't even comprehend it. But if you love and respect someone you can't hold them back, but I was struggling with it. So one stress in my life at that point was Carly's intimacy with other people.

CP: We were having issues, I think, because we had gotten what we wanted but it was so much what *we* wanted. We have this band together, this house together, we make money together. Everything, all this stuff together and I began to realize that I was too connected to this other person, so I did things to differentiate myself. I knew it. I was talking about it. I was feeling it. But I couldn't get out of it. I would do things by myself but it didn't work. I wasn't getting separation. So I fell in love and I got separation that way. I got a separate experience. I was completely honest. I didn't lie. Twig always knew what was going on.

TH: Love. How could love be wrong?

CP: Right, how could love be wrong? It was fun to fall in love but it caused a lot of pain.

TH: It's a great feeling.

CP: It feels really good and as you get older, it's an experience that's farther away. So that was an experiment that I learned from. It still affects me every day. I'm happy that something I believed in just totally fucked me up so hard. It fucked me up and made me realize that beliefs are always going to do that if you hold them to any one thing.

I no longer have beliefs that insist on the way things should be. I used to believe: I'm not going to have any constraint or restriction. I've never had restrictions in a relationship before. Now I realize that not having restrictions is a restriction in itself. So why not choose the restriction.

Does that mean the two of you have chosen to be monogamous at this point?

CP: Yes, the last time we talked about it. But let's back up... so the person I fell in love with, Max, moves here and is playing in our band.

TH: So everything is intense in our lives. We're livin' and we're feelin' it. All of a sudden it all starts dissolving and guess what, our life is crazy. I started obsessing and creating fake things on the internet and trying to alter reality that way. I'm into conspiracy theories and I wanted to create a conspiracy. So one of the things I did was create Mothers Against Noise, this fake organization. I'd started developing hostility toward a part of my life that was connected to the noise scene. It was a parody of the worst, ugliest, stupidest, American ignorance. It had parody write-ups about bands and band profiles. And people would help, knowingly or unknowingly. So I was working on that.

CP: And he told me he wasn't in love with me anymore.

TH: All this stuff was going on and we were supposed to play at No Fun Fest in New York, so for the culmination of this Mothers Against Noise thing, I decided to stage a protest and hire actors. That didn't entirely work out. We didn't protest but we had an audio message that was going to be played. Carly had recorded this thing where her voice was disguised and she was talking about Mothers Against Noise. The writing was funny and it was also really evil and fucked up, like: "We're going to destroy you" or "You people think you're having a good time but you're really destroying everything." These were things I believed but didn't want to admit.

CP: Yeah, the thing I recorded, I believed it all. I lie only very occasionally.

What were your feelings about the noise scene that came out in the recording?

TH: Carly said something that was good and that was intense.

CP: "Do you know what it's like to raise a child? You can't not have rules anymore." Basically, it was a rejection of postmodern thought. Not necessarily wanting structure but not wanting no structure.

TH: So we're at the No Fun Fest, we go up there, we're hanging out before the festival, it's ten minutes before doors, someone hands me a phone and it's Caleb on the phone saying: "Your building's on fire." From that point on, everything became way more intense than it had been before, but it really solidified the concept of, you know, the veil of life... that our minds create these blanket forms and the true reality of what is happening is so much more complex and so much more dire and intense and infinite and beautiful and amazing. On the one hand, it was the end of everything. And then, after coming home and dealing with it, I realized that it was the beginning of everything and a beautiful thing.

So the building caught fire right as you were beginning to question the noise scene. A lot of people from that same scene helped you out afterwards.

TH: That's it. We realized we're not going to be the band that changes people's minds about how music is created. We're just people and we influence our friends. Music is one thing, but it's not the only thing.

CP: For No Fun Fest, I was doing food. I was already over music at that time. I was like, music is not doing it anymore. I'd been feeling that for a long time. So I was making food. I was making society for the festival.

TH: I was conflicted. I didn't want to do music or be in a relationship with Carly because I didn't want to have these commitments. And then before the fire, a couple days before, I decided: I have a new goal that will be very hard to accomplish, and it might take me the next twelve years. I'm just going to be myself and I'm going to influence the world by being myself and not having any attachments... and then the fire totally did that to me.

CP: That's what it gave me too.

TH: It's not only your actions in the world but your thoughts that have weight so you have to be conscious of your actions and the way you think.

CP: When Twig told me he wasn't in love with me anymore, it coincided with a fast I'd planned. During those ten days of fasting, I was able to come to a realization: OK, Twig's not in love with me anymore. I'm still in love with him. I definitely had a sense of guilt about everything with Max. I caused Twig a great deal of anguish. So my new plan was: I'm going to be the best person I can be and that's what I can do. He was obviously falling apart and I knew that it wasn't up to me to save him. I had to give him the space that I took when I was with Max. And I had to try not to affect, save or direct him. I just had to love him and give him space. So when the fire happened, which was about three or four months after that... we each made it happen in our own way.

TH: We used to joke about it. We'd drive home and say to each other: "Oh, the house hasn't burned down yet." We just always knew that our house was going to burn down.

CP: But for me, I always thought that our relationship would be over when the house burned down.

TH: Our cats all died. Our house was gone. We had no connection. We'd

separated everything emotionally and now we were physically separate.

CP: Before the fire I'd planned to take a trip, so I left a week after the fire. Even though I'd been thinking about it, those two months when I was gone, beyond thinking it, I experienced it: I don't need him. I don't need this house. I don't need anything in the material world that's going to prove who I am or what I am. These things aren't necessary to make me live fully. None of that stuff matters. I finally got to experience that.

So you realized that you didn't need to be in a relationship with Twig but that it was something that you wanted and you chose it again?

CP: Since then, I've chosen it again but at that point I was ready to go.

TH: There was definitely a point when Carly was gone and we were gutting the downstairs and I wanted to toss a burning rag into this huge pile of wood and say goodbye to everything.

CP: It was major limbo, but I was still in love with Twig. Suddenly, with the fire, I was confronted with a cosmic directive telling me that I was not supposed to be with Twig. But there was pressure from the outside world, a lot of pressure.

To stay together and rebuild your place?

TH: Because everyone was invested. It was part of the community. People believed in what we were doing.

CP: I came back and Twig had been gutting the house. He'd done a fair amount of work but it didn't necessarily mean we had to rebuild.

TH: We didn't have electricity or windows.

CP: We didn't have air to breathe.

TH: It was worse than squatting.

CP: I'd had my time away and now he needed his time away.

TH: I hitchhiked around and tried to get my head together. It was a confusing time for me. I went to the mountains and fasted. I figured out: you aren't in control but don't be an idiot and there are things you can do so you don't get killed. Your life is mapped out but it's more like a grid system where you choose which reality you're going to walk down, even

though the end point is already decided. That helped me.

CP: While he was gone I was here alone. The people who live around here weren't supportive of me. In our close community, they didn't know what was going on.

TH: Well, it's a hard thing to approach.

CP: I felt alienated for a number of reasons and wanted to leave. When Twig came back, everything was saying: stay. There was probably money coming in from the city to rebuild. But I was still interested in thinking about what I would do if I left. I got myself excited about what I might do. Then there was our relationship. Twig had stood by me and I felt that it was my responsibility, and my choice, to stand by Twig as he was going through this stuff and to not lose faith in our relationship. Now we're at the point where we're like: what are we going to do? We signed an agreement, a contract.

TH: We set guidelines and decided to make a commitment for one year.

So you're going to continue to live here but your relationship has changed and it seems your interests have shifted toward spiritual practices and away from music and the material world in general. What takes up your days now and where do you think you'll put your energies in the future?

CP: Well it's weird, we've planned a tour.

TH: We're doing a tour, but for me, this whole time, I've been working on the house. It's a huge amount of work and it's been great not to do music, not to do art and not to have these commitments that I'm used to. It's crazy because it's getting close to the end of the building. I've got the studio almost set up and I should be able to start recording and mixing things that I began work on before the fire. And we're about to do a tour and that's pretty major for us to go back out. Here we are, it's been two years since we've toured and we're going to walk this path again.





Throw the House in the River An Interview with Theo Kamecke

East Durham, New York, July 26, 2007

Theo Kamecke worked through the 1960s and 70s as a director and editor of award-winning documentary films. Invited to direct a film for NASA about the first Apollo moon landing, Kamecke's *Moonwalk One* (1970) captured the magnitude of the launch and a feel for everyday life on the planet in 1969. In the course of making films Kamecke encountered physical objects and materials that fascinated him, including the electronic circuit boards used in his current sculptures. Kamecke discusses his films, art and the relationship between the two in this interview, conducted at his home in East Durham, New York.

JULIA DZWONKOSKI & KYE POTTER: *Tell us about your background, how you grew up, your education...*

THEO KAMECKE: Aside from a couple of years of Tufts University—dropping out because I felt like a total prisoner—I just wanted to hit the road, so I started hitchhiking around the country. After going through 12 years of regular school and then being faced with this additional sentence, I just thought: this is not real life. Not that I'm not interested in a bunch of stuff, you know, I read Camus and things like that but I just wasn't going to be pinned down. I was interested in getting into film. I realized pretty quickly that I didn't want to be an actor. I much preferred being behind the camera, being a director.

You made it to Los Angeles...

TK: Yeah, but I quickly figured out the way the system worked. Never mind what you want to do, if it's not in the system, well then forget it. I mean some guys go out and make a chainsaw movie and in that way they get in. I didn't want to make a chainsaw movie. The kind of ideas that I had about films wouldn't fly even today. They were beyond simple story telling, where film is really exploited as a visual medium.

What about going the route of experimental or art film?

TK: Today everyone has a video camera, but film production in those days wasn't cheap. Anything's an option if you have the money. There were some beatnik filmmakers that—I'm being pejorative but you know, that's what it comes down to—got high and overexposed the film. What

does it amount to? Not much. Between that and something substantial, there was nothing and there still is nothing, because everything is geared toward where the money is. Look at the problem Kubrick had with *2001*. It was a perfectly sensible movie, well produced and people still couldn't understand it. Anyway I decided when I was back in Boston that I wanted to get into film. I found a little flea bitten film company on the wrong side of the railroad tracks in south Boston, a tough Irish neighborhood in those days, a different world. I was there for about six months, learning the elements of film editing. I was 21 or 22 at the time.

Was it a documentary film company?

TK: They made really schlock industrial films and crappy local TV commercials. It gives me the creeps to think about it, but at least I learned the mechanics. I remember editing a 16mm film that some Jesuit priest had shot about a little Jamaican boy that he'd probably been molesting. You could put two and two together.

How did you meet and start working with Francis Thompson?

TK: I met a film editor who was working temporarily in Boston and he lent me the keys to his New York apartment so I could look for film work there. I found a job as an editing room apprentice for a place that made TV commercials, and that led within a few months to a job with Francis Thompson. I told them I had lots of experience with 35mm film, neglecting to mention that it didn't amount to much more than winding commercials onto spools and taking them to the post office. But Thompson and his crew were leaving for a shoot in Africa and needed someone to take care of the footage they'd be shipping back to the States. It was to be a 3-screen film for the New York World's Fair. By the time they got back I had figured out how to edit a multi-screen film, and because they were so busy shooting, I just kept editing till the end. I even edited in my sleep. That film, *To Be Alive!*, was the absolute hit of the Fair. It was only 18 minutes long but people stood in the broiling sun for hours waiting to see it and then gave it a standing ovation every time. It won an Academy Award in 1965. Francis Thompson made that film with Alexander Hammid. They created, in my view, a truly revolutionary film—simple in concept and style, visually satisfying and uplifting.

What other kinds of films did you make before Moonwalk One?

TK: I hadn't been an independent director for that long a time before making *Moonwalk*. After *To Be Alive!*, I worked on the Montreal World's Fair film, which was also a multi-screen film. These were big

productions. I worked as a film editor for Francis Thompson until 1967. But I wanted to be a filmmaker, not just an editor. So I went off on my own to direct some fairly creative sponsored films and a couple oddball projects—projections for the Paris production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and an arcane thing for IBM, which was really just an impressionistic film. *The Incredible Bread Machine*, which I made a few years after *Moonwalk*, was certainly unconventional.

Tell us how Moonwalk came about.

TK: In the late 1960s NASA had some very talented people running the space program. Julian Sheer was head of public relations. He was no bureaucrat. He was smart, had a solid background in television broadcasting and knew the temperament of the audience. In 1968, he contacted Francis Thompson, who had the reputation of being the best documentary filmmaker in the country at that time, and he said: "We'd like to do a substantial documentary about the first landing on the moon. Can you get involved?" Of course Thompson said yes. MGM was pulled in as the major source of money. Thompson and Hammid began work on it, but several months later some heads rolled at MGM, and they just up and cancelled. This was a five million dollar project and they just up and cancelled. Everybody ran around in a panic trying to find somebody else to put up the money. It was getting closer and closer to launch time and they weren't having any luck. Julian Sheer came to Thompson and said: "Look, I can put together \$350,000. That's all the money we can put into this. But we've got to do something." By that time Thompson was busy with something else so he called me up and asked if I would be interested. I said yes.

I had two and a half weeks to organize shooting the launch. I put together five crews and went down to Cape Canaveral to plan everything out. Because of the huge jam of people coming to watch the Apollo 11 liftoff, there was no possibility of communication or travel between crews. It was essential that each crew knew exactly where to be and exactly what images they were going for. They had to be in place in the middle of the night for the morning launch. Before the shoot, Julian Sheer said to me: "Everybody will be sick of the space program by the time this film comes out, so forget about making a hit at the box office. Just make me a time capsule." And I thought: what a gift!

And so I set out to make a film that people could look at 50 or 100 or 1,000 years from now and understand the psychology of the people on earth in 1969. Human beings were leaving the earth for the first time. You can look at it as just a job or just a film, but it was about something momentous that perhaps will be better understood 500 years from now—if we are still human, and still around. I started out thinking: this

is a one and only thing. This is the first time man has left earth to walk on another planet. I regarded it as an epic in the old, rich meaning of the word epic. It was great fun to do this as a time capsule.

Were there other films or filmmakers that influenced the way you made Moonwalk? You mentioned Kubrick's 2001...

TK: When I was in high school, my friends and I used to go to foreign films. I was a big fan of Bergman, Kurosawa, De Sica, and so forth. I like Kubrick very much. I happened to be in London working on a film when I saw *2001*. I went with three or four British guys and they were all completely bewildered by it. They didn't understand it. It bothered them. I just loved the film, understood it instantly. When I did *Moonwalk*—it was only a year or so later—it was a doff of the hat to Kubrick. I saw the enterprise of landing on the moon as comparable to what happened in *2001*. It's a different story but the same feeling. On that same trip, I went to some drunken party out in the boondocks in Wiltshire. We got to the party by following some other cars through these hedgerows. There was nothing but fog outside. It would have been impossible to find the place. By the end of the night everybody was plastered and falling asleep on the floor, that kind of thing. I woke up out of my drunken stupor around three o'clock in the morning and said: "Hey, how far is it to Stonehenge?" A bunch of us got in the car and we drove to Stonehenge to see the dawn, which of course never happens in England—at least you hardly ever see the sunrise. But it was very impressive nonetheless. I decided when doing *Moonwalk* to intercut the film's opening sequence—where the crawler is taking the rocket to the launch pad—with footage I would shoot at Stonehenge. Both are undertakings of a similar magnitude and mystery. There is not a stone to be found in Wiltshire. They got these stones and dragged them from somewhere far away to put them on top of this little hill where there are no stones—and these stones are not light! For Stone Age people, it's the equivalent of putting a man on the moon. It is something deeply imbedded in human nature to do the impossible.

How did you envision the structure and pacing of the film?

TK: I wanted to do the opposite of television. I wanted to hold certain shots on the screen until everyone said: "What's this? That shot is still there?" I did this because the mentality of 1969 is not going to be the mentality of people 100 years from now. Maybe in the future, people won't have the short attention spans that television and computers make us have today. When you hold a shot for a long time it makes the back of your mind wander, which is what I wanted.

It's also that this enormous project, that was years in the making, culminates in a launch that happens fairly quickly.

TK: I knew that I was going to have to tell people what it was like. When I was watching the launch I thought to myself: What is this? What's going on here? And I had two contradictory thoughts. I was in the launch control center, the only civilian there—I still have the pass that says "Apollo Firing Room Badge #1"—and I was looking out those giant windows, and thinking: Geez, there are 500 people in this room and 500,000 people that worked on this project and all that bulk and metal, all of this infrastructure, just to get the three tiny little people—sitting at the top of a rocket that you can barely see—off this planet. The other thought that kept coming to me was: what a truly marvelous thing that these little animals on the planet can conceive this whole thing and leave their natural environment. In fact, I worked with the composer, Charlie Morrow—I twisted his arm because he was really bad at pop music—to write a song for the prelaunch sequence, a kind of a rock song called "Goodbye Mother Earth."

How did you organize filming the launch from different angles? You had five crews. What was the plan?

TK: I've learned to size things up, take them apart and evaluate the different parts to see what will make the right whole. I guess every filmmaker has to do that. I knew that I wanted the faces of the people, the rising rocket reflected in their sunglasses. I knew I wanted a general shot of the place where all these VIPs were gathered and I also wanted photographers in the scene to put the whole thing in context. I wanted the crowds both from the helicopter and general documentary shots—a person washing a frying pan by the side of the river, the little things that give it a comfortable homespun feel. I knew that I wanted to have someone stationed where the astronauts were coming out of the building with their suits on and getting into the van to go to the launch pad. Boy, did he have to fight to get that position. There were 50 guys behind him that wanted that position. I think he put a sign on his back: "NASA Don't Touch Me or I'll Kill You," something like that.

Some of the shots required extensive preparation...

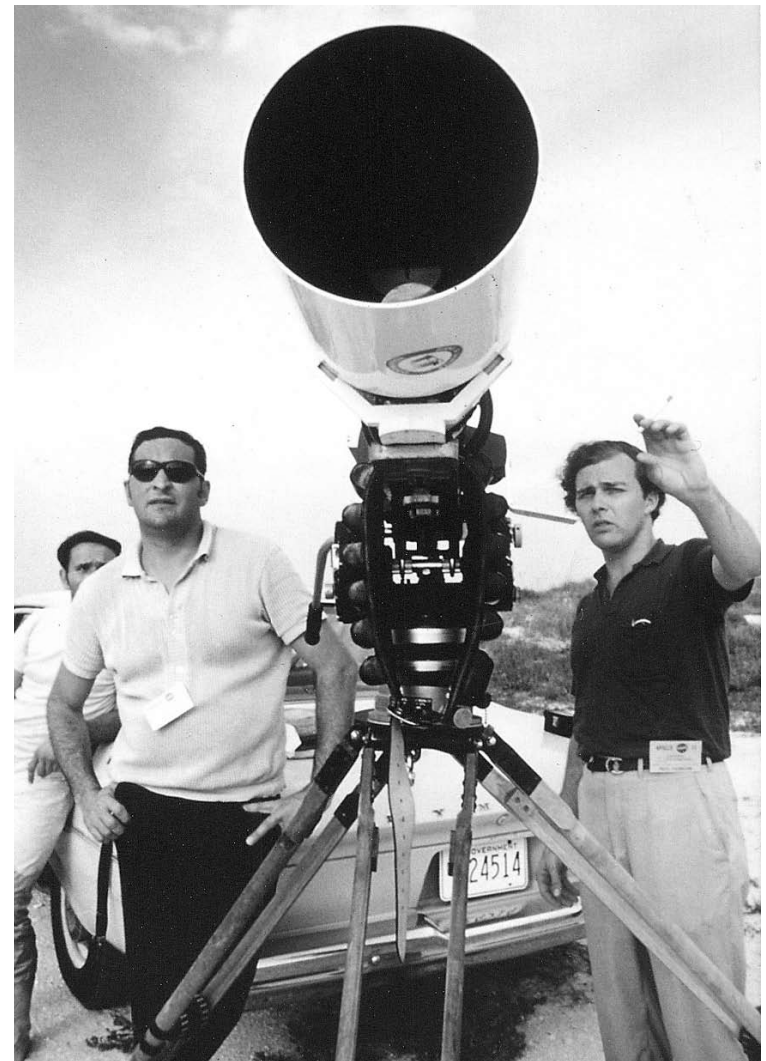
TK: Yeah, I thought it would be great to have the sun rising behind the rocket, behind Apollo, on the morning of the launch. You know, Apollo the rocket, Apollo the sun. The closest you can get to the rocket is three miles away. No one gets closer. So I knew how far away I needed to be. I had to find out where the sun was going to rise. A lot of people—city

dwellers—think the sun rises in the east. Yes, well it rises in the east twice a year. The rest of the time it rises someplace else and if you're going to be three miles away you have to be absolutely sure the sun will rise exactly behind the rocket. Otherwise you'll have the rocket here and over there is the sun, out of the shot. So I got aerial photographs of Cape Canaveral, I had marine charts that were extremely accurate, and I talked to the Naval Observatory to find out at exactly what point on the compass the sun rises at that latitude on that date. I got all this down and put an X on the map where I needed to be. I had my fingers crossed because that part of Cape Canaveral is just scrub woods, you know, little bushes and trees growing as tall as this room, tall enough to prevent a good, clear shot. As luck would have it, there was a spare crawler—the football field size thing that transports the rocket—parked right there, at exactly the right place. I thought the gods were smiling on me. So with permission, we got up there and had a look and it checked out on the maps. The day before the launch we went there to check out the sunrise. It was a crystal dawn and I could tell that when the sun had moved the fraction of a degree by the following day, it would be absolutely perfect, nearly filling the screen side to side, silhouetting the rocket.

On the morning of the launch, we set up in the pitch darkness. We'd ordered a 1000mm lens, which was a meter long and the glass on the front was about 12 inches in diameter. It weighed a ton and had to have its own tripod. We got it set up, lashed it down with ropes so it wouldn't shake. While we were waiting for the sunrise, we saw the astronauts, this little cavalcade of blinking lights and sirens on their way to the rocket. I wanted so badly to cut the wires, turn around and shoot that. Here are these earthlings riding to the place where they will leave the earth to walk on the moon. It was just beautiful but we couldn't do it. There would have been no time to get the camera tied down before sunrise. So we waited for the sun, waited for what could have become one of the most replayed shots in the history of film. It would've been marvelous but it was not to be. The sun didn't peek above the cloud cover on the horizon until it was way above the rocket, and Apollo 11 silhouetted against dingy gray doesn't do it. Anyway, it makes an interesting story about something—maybe hubris.

What was it like at launch control?

TK: The firing room, which I filmed prior to liftoff, was a huge room with 500 technicians sitting at rows and rows of consoles and the chief scientists up on the platform facing the giant windows looking out toward the launch pad. The funny thing is that I became aware of something—I'd heard of this but didn't believe it—it was the smell of fear. Animals, tigers... they can smell fear, and this room of 500 people was so scared



Kamecke (right) and crew at Cape Canaveral

shitless that something would go wrong, you could actually smell the fear.

While the astronauts were on their way to the moon, I traveled to Houston where Mission Control had taken over after the liftoff and where I could follow the landing and moonwalk. It was a much smaller place than Launch Control, an almost intimate room with video screens, maps and other astronauts dropping in to follow the progress.

When the astronauts returned to earth they were quarantined and during this time we shot other things, background stuff, the manufacture of the command module, the place where they made the suits, the ladies

that stitched the gloves. After they got out of quarantine, we filmed the homecoming parades. We were in Wapakoneta, Ohio, which was Neil Armstrong's hometown, to shoot the parade there. I remember going to Armstrong's home and his grandmother was sitting on the porch. We had a conversation and she told me something that I never revealed publicly because I felt it would have been insensitive. She made Neil promise that the first thing he would do when he stepped on the moon was to say a prayer, a silent prayer. If you watch the actual footage, listen to the recordings, you see and hear a long pause that everyone chops out. The first thing that the man on the moon did was to say a prayer. The things that were said—"One small step..."—that stuff was not written for them to say. They made it up themselves. These were test pilots. You can't get them to do something they don't want to do.

When we went to Armstrong's parade I had this Japanese cameraman, a great cameraman but he barely understood English. Anyway, I told him I wanted to get up real close and personal with the camera in this parade, make it funky. He didn't understand so I took away all the lenses except the wide angle.

Did you use the 16mm film that was shot on board?

TK: I used some of the 16mm they shot while in space, but not the moon-walk footage. I didn't care for it—there was something stilted about it. I liked the ghostly quality of the black and white video, where you could sort of see through the image, see through the astronauts as they moved around—the same images everyone on earth was watching at the time.

Can you describe the political climate at the time of the launch?

TK: You have to understand what was happening at the time. We were marred down in Vietnam. It was the height of the arrogance of the baby boomers. They had come swelling up through the population, through the school system. Everything was oriented toward young people, everything you saw on TV, at the movies, everything in popular culture. Listen, I have no complaint about the Beatles. I love the Beatles. What you have to understand is that all this was to the exclusion of everything else because the buying population was now 20 years old.

There is something about youth that is very charming. They think they have the power to change the world. Then you have the adults who think the world's just going to go on in this lame way that it always has. Neither is 100% correct. Then you have someone like Abbie Hoffman who, after all the stuff he put the country through, goes into business and becomes a stockbroker. When you get a whole gang of young people who think they can change the world, they can influence

the media. They decided the moon program was bad because it had to do with the cold war: "It's bad, I won't pay any attention to it and besides we should all be smoking dope and feeding poor people." There was the phrase: "Don't trust anyone over 30." They meant it. People looked down on me because I was doing something with the space program. Some people bragged that they never saw the men walk on the moon because they refused to watch that kind of garbage. That was the climate at the time. I was doing my share. I protested the war in Vietnam because I thought it was becoming something it wasn't supposed to be. I thought it was going in a crazy direction. If you are going to fight a war, win a war, but don't just keep dropping bombs in the same places.

You mentioned wanting to create a film that would capture the psychology of the period. What did that mean in terms of choosing what to shoot and how to sequence the material?

TK: There was a lot of stuff pre-launch. People eating hamburgers, dancing at discos. It sort of told you: these people don't quite understand what's happening, but they *do* understand what's happening. Even the lowest common denominator. I didn't need to show that there were a lot of PhDs involved. Everyone understood what was happening in their bones. Some people chose to make fun of it but by and large everyone on earth understood. They thought of the astronauts as earthlings, not just Americans. Everyone was glued to their TV sets.

You included footage of people from all over the world.

TK: I was looking for things that looked absolutely casual, like a child in China standing at a basin washing his face. I wanted to give a feel for everyday life on the planet, a taste for all the kinds of people that were on the planet and a guess at how they might have been feeling. There was a sequence with the working title *Earth Poem*. I intended it to be placed as the astronauts are getting farther and farther away from earth. In some crazy version they switched it around and they put it on the return to earth, which makes absolutely no sense to me. Anyway, the sequence was made up of very slow pans over photographs taken by astronauts on various missions above the earth. They were shot on a Hasselblad so they're really sharp. These were intercut with little fragments from life on earth that I gathered from many sources. You'd be looking at a river delta and a second later you'd be looking at a bumblebee on a blade of grass or a manta ray swooping in the ocean. The whole thing was accompanied with a score that was only heartbeat and breathing. It was astonishingly poetic. The sequence was about 4 minutes long. Everyone said it was too long. I said: "Wait 50 years, it won't be too long."

Watching the scenes in the launch center, there's a casualness to it all that's hard to conceive of today. Everyone is smoking, for instance...

TK: Oh yeah, do you mind if I have a cigarette? Fashions change. It would have been just as curious to the people back then that everyone today takes Prozac.

Could you talk a little bit about the astronauts?

TK: When they started the moon program, computers were kind of babies, infants, if you think about them in terms of what we have today. They just weren't capable of doing the kind of things even a handheld computer can do today. You couldn't rely on a computer to fly this thing, whatever it was going to be. Whether it was the launch, the lunar module, or the command module, you couldn't rely on a computer to control it. They may have helped in checking figures, but they needed people who could fly things, they needed test pilots.

These guys were smart people. The general public had and still has an idea that the military is dumb and bad. Soldiers, sailors and airmen are idiots. You know: "Nobody's as smart as we people in New York." Believe me, I had to wade through this shit. A lot of people wouldn't talk to me when they found out I was doing something for the space program. It's similar to when people were coming home from Viet Nam and being spit on. The astronauts were really sharp people, incredibly gutsy. They were not afraid of anything. I didn't interview the astronauts because I felt it would detract from the mystery and timeless quality I wanted the film to have. And they never wanted to be interviewed by anybody. To this day Neil Armstrong has never consented to an interview. They could have become rich, but they weren't opportunists.

Your film, especially the footage of Michael Collins orbiting the moon by himself in the command module, captured the horror of being so far away and alone.

TK: You can't horrify these guys. They had to decide who would do what and Michael Collins got picked to operate the command module. Any one of them could have done any part of the mission.

Was there a feeling that the moonwalk achieved a purpose beyond proving that it could be done?

TK: People think you can bring a rock back and be able to tell something just by looking at it and analyzing it. No, it goes into a database that requires years of study. Those rocks are still being examined today, and the most current ideas about the origin of the solar system are coming

from data that was collected on the first moonwalk. There are two things going on. One is that you want to prove something about humans and the other is to understand something about the universe. They are not mutually exclusive. Apparently a lot of people still think that we never really did it.

Right, there's no wind on the moon, but in the photos the American flag is waving in the breeze...

TK: There is no air to stop it from moving. It was hanging from a stick and it just kept bouncing because there was no air to stop it. I saw one of these programs and I was laughing at every one of the illustrations they gave.

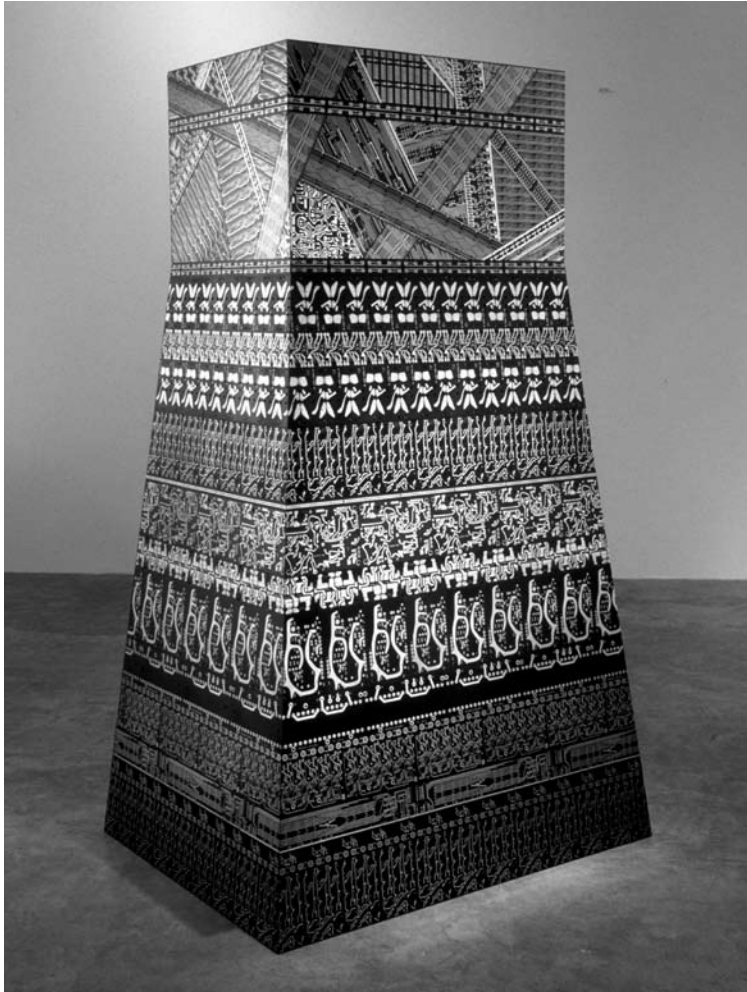
Why hasn't anyone gone back?

TK: Because of the tremendous expense. By the second or third voyage, they were seeing diminishing returns. The kind of scientific instruments you might need would have to be set up on the moon itself, which is incredibly expensive, and if you're only going there to bring rocks back, you've already got some rocks. The continuation of the program was really a sort of tour de force to keep the Russians at bay. We are probably going to be doing the same thing to keep the Chinese at bay because otherwise the moon is going to be China.

What became of the film? Where was it shown?

TK: A couple of years after the moon landing, the public had lost interest. Julian Sheer, who'd been in charge of the project, left before the film was even finished and his second in charge, also a good guy, died of a heart attack. The third person down the chain was a bureaucrat who didn't understand and didn't give a damn. That was a big loss.

When they had a screening for distributors to see who would pick it up, this guy had the wrong-headed idea of treating them to lunch first, and of course distributors drink their lunch... so they were all asleep. I don't remember what time of year it was but I remember it was terribly hot in the screening room. It was all down hill from there. But somehow it got picked up by the Whitney Museum's *New American Directors* program. I was one of the five directors in their first year of the program. What they would do is run all five films all day long for a couple of weeks. From there it got picked up by a distributor who wanted to distribute it theatrically, and he did put it in some theatres around the country but by that time the public really didn't care. It was no longer sexy. So then he decided to take the easy money by selling the television



Theo Kamecke, *Pharaoh's Secret*, mixed media, 46 x 27 x 21 inches

rights internationally. It was on TV in Japan but not on TV in America.

In the end I was disappointed with a lot of things that happened in post-production. There were money problems that I had no hand in. At the end we were forced to cut corners like crazy. The narrator was recorded in a bathroom somewhere in midtown because the funds for a studio had disappeared.

There was absolutely no money at the end of the film production. The titles came back and they were too big on the screen but we couldn't redo them. I had hoped that after the film was finished some money could be found to fix things. The original version had been one hour 50 minutes, then NASA had it chopped it to 96 minutes, hoping to humor the

distributors who probably said it put them to sleep. That was the version shown at the Whitney.

The original film was done at Technicolor and it was one of the last projects done there before they shut down the old imbibition process, where they actually printed on the film. It was run through a printer that used ink instead of light. It was the best color. They closed down the plant and promptly lost *Moonwalk*. They lost the masters. After a while I lost interest in it because I was busy doing other things. It seemed like an impossible problem.

How did you move from making films to making sculpture?

TK: One day I just got fed up with making documentaries, because it was such a formula that it could be done blindfolded. Most of the time when you felt like being creative you had to go to some goddamn meeting, a budget meeting or something. So I started fumbling around, trying to figure out something else to do with my time. When I was making films I was always fascinated by the things that I would see, like when I was in the place where they made the space suits, I came back with little pieces of it. I found certain materials so interesting. I had collected a bunch of circuit boards that I thought were visually fascinating and they happened to be in the basement. One day I had the compulsion to be creative. I thought the circuit boards were awfully resistant to doing anything with, so maybe it was a good idea, because you don't get anywhere without some resistance. If things are too easy you are doing something wrong. I discovered quickly that I liked the result so I traveled to factories that were making these boards and talked them out of their rejects and overruns.

In my circuit sculptures, I am taking this stuff that is made for one purpose and completely perverting that purpose, turning it into something that is distinctly human. There is no reference to technology in these things, no blinking lights, nothing. It just sits there and looks back at you. It even looks kind of familiar and comfortable, like an old medieval chest or something from the past. It has that same comfort. That's my way of investigating what the human quality of us really is. The truth is, collectors and curators don't give a shit about any of this business. They want to know what they can put in the box.

The boxes came later?

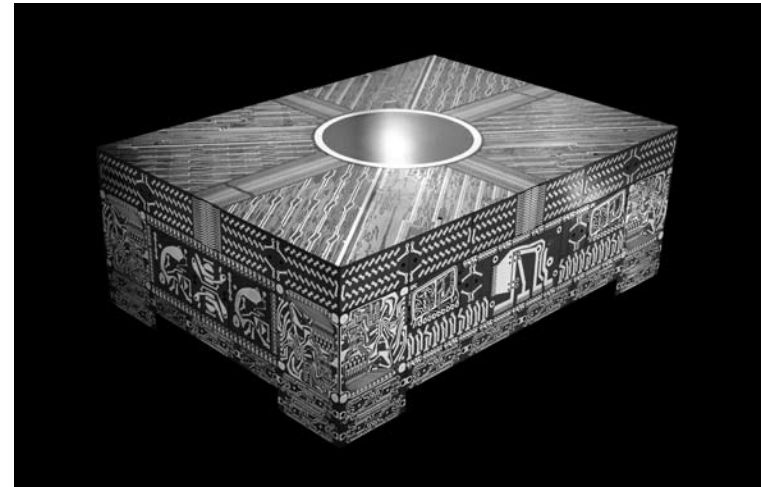
TK: I started out by doing non-functional sculptures with this material and had some shows. A gallery owner in SoHo saw a box I'd made as a present for someone and said: "Hey if you could make things like this, I'll give you a one-man show." I know what a bad attitude people have

against functional art. A scribble can make it but once you can use it, it's crap. Nonetheless, I grew to like the idea that a box has six sides and has a certain reasonable size and proportions. It's a discipline. It's like being told to paint a triptych to go above the altar. It can't be too big to fit in the building and can't be too small to see from the fifth row. It's a discipline and disciplines are very creative because they keep you from messing around. Boundaries make you focus. When I started putting these things together, I would sometimes be drawn to a certain circuit board, and think: that would make a nice side to a box. I'd like to use that for the top and I'll look for other things that go with it. I was putting together pieces that aesthetically seemed to go together. I'd step back and look at it and say: that looks like ancient Egyptian, that's Aegean, that's Flemish Gothic. You realize this is how people all over the world and throughout history have developed the distinct look of their culture. They were looking over each other's shoulders and putting things together that seemed to go together. As they were getting to think more and more alike, the appearance became more and more unified until it looked like Tang Dynasty or like Art Nouveau. I felt that after a few years I had proven my point. AT&T bought one of my earlier sculptures. It was in their lobby in New York and I heard that people were worshipping at it.

Your sculptures look ancient... and futuristic.

TK: I've maybe been dealing with the same question Kubrick raised in *2001*: "Where are we going as human beings? What do we do about it when we get there? Or on the way there?" Peoples' eyes glaze over when you talk about this kind of thing, but this is what I was thinking about when I started doing the work with the circuitry because these things are like artifacts an archeologist gathers from some ancient time. Technology, the way we think of it, and you can include the steam engine, has really only begun fairly recently so we are witnessing something in its infancy. What is it? People look at a circuit board and they say that's man made. Is it? What made the man make it that way? The function. It's only designed for a purpose. Just because it looks nice doesn't mean anyone intended it to look nice. You pick up a seashell on the beach. You say: well isn't that beautiful. The seashell didn't have any intention of giving a beach bum a thrill. These circuit boards look the way they do because it's the best way to be.

Looking at the birth of technology, we're looking at something that for the moment is visible. A hundred years from now, nobody will know what technology is. It will be so completely invisible that no one will understand it or know what it is. It will be in the hands of machines. Even now, machines are the only things that are capable of designing other machines. If machines can design machines, if machines



Theo Kamecke, *Anubis*, mixed media, 7 x 20 x 15 inches

can propagate themselves, what is that called? It's called life. Sooner or later we'll have to realize that this has been the birth of another life form in the universe. Call it technology, but a thousand years, ten thousand years from now, it's going to be a life form all its own, entirely distinct from humans. Which leaves the question: "What is it to be human?"

If you go around replacing all your body parts and manipulating genes to get rid of the bad traits, you'll probably get rid of the poets in the process. What exactly are human beings going to be in the future? Nothing like we are now. If aliens are coming here in their flying saucers, what do you think they are coming for? They are coming to visit something that is completely different from themselves. They don't have Bach, they don't have Jackson Pollock, they don't even get it, but they are curious about these creatures who possess qualities they lack themselves because millions or billions of years ago, they bred these qualities out of themselves. They became machines and that's exactly what we are doing now. We are breeding out the human part of us. You talk about criminal tendencies, the propensity to become an alcoholic, well insurance companies are going to start saying: "Hmm... if we get rid of that we can make more money." Pretty soon we will rid ourselves of all the things we consider foibles, forgetting that it's the foibles that make us human. Who invented the first boat? It was the person that was crazy enough to throw the house in the river.



The Sky Opened Up with Answers

Interviews by Julia Dzwonkoski & Kye Potter

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