

# RETROFUTURISM



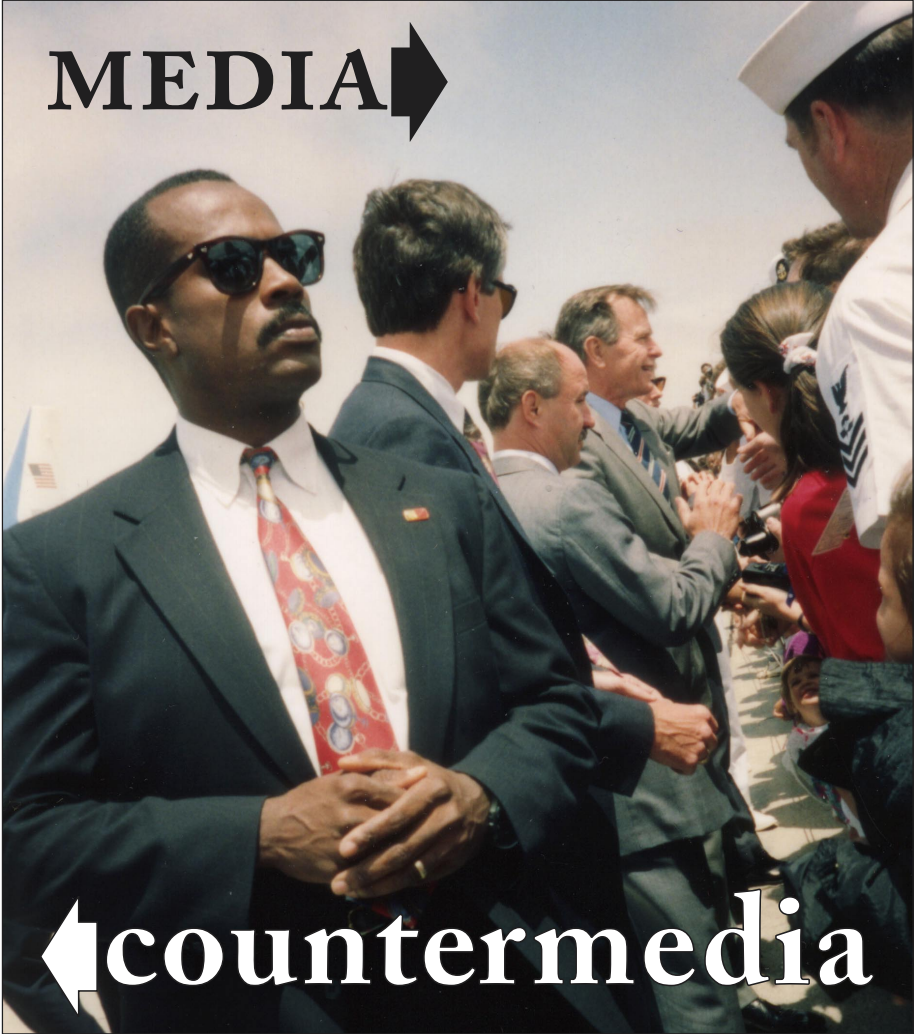
NO. 17



APRIL 1993



**MEDIA**



**←countermidia**

IN THIS ISSUE: Articles, Essays, Reviews and Graphics  
⊗ by *Stephen-Paul Martin, Al Ackerman, Colin Ives, Lloyd Dunn, ⊗  
Ed Lawrence, The Disdainists, Nonlocal Variable, John Stickney, etc.*

<http://psrf.detritus.net/>

# C O N T E N T S

George Bush campaigning at Alameda Naval Air Station, Calif., June, 1992.

*Photography for front and back covers by Lloyd Dunn*

⊗      ⊗      ⊗

“Elvis President Stamps”

Graphic by Colin Ives, 1222 E. Burlington St., Iowa City IA 52240 ..... 1865

⊗      ⊗      ⊗

*Excess Culture from a Culture of Excess* by Scott Gray ..... 1866

*The Role of Disdainists Within the International Art Dump Project*

by David Richter ..... 1868

## WRITE TO THE DISDAINISTS

☞ John Marriott, P.O. Box 489 Station P, Toronto, Ont., M5S 2T1, Canada

⊗      ⊗      ⊗

“Atlas Shrugged” Drawing by Al Ackerman ..... 1870

*Address to the Southwest Decentralized Mail Art Congress* by Al Ackerman ..... 1871

☞ Wig House, 523 East 38th St., Baltimore MD 21218

⊗      ⊗      ⊗

“1993 Inaugural Family Memorial” Graphic by Nonlocal Variable

7770 Orogrande Place, Cupertino CA 95014 ..... 1874

MEDIA/COUNTERMEDIA: *Gleem & Ultrabrite* by Stephen-Paul Martin

210 Congress St., Apt. 5E, Brooklyn NY 11201 ..... 1876

Bill Clinton campaigning at the Quaker Oats Factory, Cedar Rapids, Ia., 1992.

Caption by Ralph Johnson, 215 Fairchild St. #1, Iowa City IA 52245 ..... 1877

“We Are Your Occupied Territories” Graphic by John Stickney

4545 W. 214th St., Fairview Park OH 44126 ..... 1881

*On Inordnance: Bob Black's FRIENDLY FIRE*

Review by Ed Lawrence, P.O. Box 33, Stillwater PA 17878 ..... 1882

# C O N T A C T S

*Retrofuturism* 17 (Photostatic no. 47) is edited by Lloyd Dunn and sponsored by the Drawing Legion, a non-profit performance and intermedia company based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Issues of *Retrofuturism* appear sporadically, in intermittent series with other Drawing Legion Publications, such as *YAWN: Critique of Culture*, *The CVS Bulletin*, *PhotoStatic Magazine*, and others. Subscriptions for one year of Drawing Legion Publications, amounting to around 200 pages of output, cost \$10, delivered bulk rate in the US. The rate is \$12 for delivery to Mexico or Canada; \$18 elsewhere by surface rate. In all cases, local currency equivalent is acceptable if you send cash. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope, and we will send you a complete listing of all items, including back issues, that are currently available.

Submissions of writing and graphic work are welcome and encouraged. No submitted work will be returned unless it arrives here accompanied by a self-addressed sufficiently stamped return envelope. Everyone who contributes in any way to any Drawing Legion Publication, whether they send a letter to the editor that is excerpted, or a work to be reviewed, or work that is published, will receive a copy of whatever issue in which their contribution appears. Send all editorial mail to: [psrf@detritus.net](mailto:psrf@detritus.net).

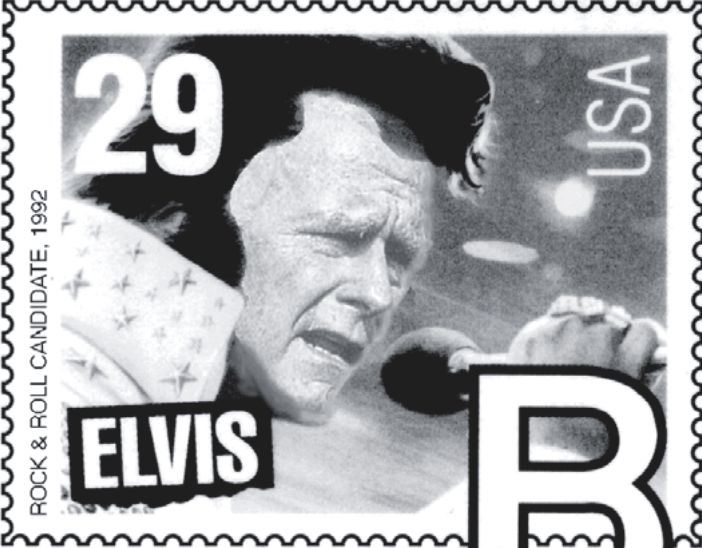
OFFICIAL BALLOT



29 USA  
ROCK & ROLL CANDIDATE, 1992  
ELVIS

MY CHOICE IS ☐

A



29 USA  
ROCK & ROLL CANDIDATE, 1992  
ELVIS

MY CHOICE IS ☐

B

# EXCESS CULTURE FROM

*Taking on Art, Industry, the Supreme Court and Media Muteness, Art Dump is post-industrial political lampoon—with heart, and with teeth*

**I**N AN ABANDONED STRIP-MINE, the location of which cannot be disclosed, I greeted the steely morning skies, sipping steaming coffee and catching the persistent odor of diesel fuel mixed with clay. As the sun rose above the crater's gnarled ridge, my host John Marriott turned toward me, an intense glint in his gaze, "How's that for high culture?"

Below us the arcs of light revealed the still raw strip mine, populated by a desperate growth of scattered weeds, a few vehicles, trailers, and pockets of art, some of it done by artists of international acclaim. That morning I observed the

world's first strip mine *cum* museum.

"Of course it comes across as absurd. We propose to bring high culture full circle, out of its denial, back to its industrial origins and the destruction that is its legacy." Marriott makes the point that if we reflect on our culture's class-based denial, we will see it rendered as an ideal in high art. His conviction comes across, "We see an intense refusal in our culture to own up to the costs connected to our exploitation of the natural resources that fueled industrialization and fostered so-called high culture." Dubbing ours a "culture of excess," Art-Dump proposes no small feat: to confront the pillager-within our cultural psyche.

It is late Autumn 1991, shortly after the Supreme Court of Canada has

granted an injunction against the Art Dump cooperative, siding with the mining company whose defaulted crater has become the site of the International Art Dump project. This comes just as the long-shot is paying off, as volunteers and donations mount, keeping the steering committees busy late into the evening. It seems that the mining interests complained of negative press generated by the project; court action ensued. Oxcart Marpho, who conceived of Art Dump half in jest, looks at the court's gag order as a challenge. "It goes to show you that if we look to trash we find the fingerprints of the powerful," he states.

The issue at hand is nothing less than a re-examining of years of cultural plunder, by way of Art Dump's

# A CULTURE OF EXCESS

by Scott Gray

*A scene reminiscent of Courbet's idealized depictions of laborers: Art Dump volunteers toil in the abandoned strip-mine, recycling the donated and discarded works of art world heavyweights.*



aesthetic activism; the volunteer legal team's response to the injunction has been a foray into local legal records in search of legal arguments to support their case. According to an unnamed source, the paper trail behind the mine-tailings reveals that persons high up played fast and loose in leasing the land and abiding by their legal obligations. Faced with legal harassment over what Marriott describes as "petty politics over by-law infractions," Art Dump has articulated a reply in the form of a counter-suit, citing criminal negligence and crimes against humanity. "It only stands to reason that, when law enters art that art responds as law. It may well be suicide, but we are fortified by the unhesitating support of our patrons,

"The iron piece by Stella works excellently as a plow; the Schnabel painting makes a delightful bird feeder; the Kostabis—well,..."

—Art Dump coordinator John Marriott

our legal team, and our accountants, all of whom are in this for the long haul." Despite a court-ordered news blackout of the trial, spirits at the Art Dump camp are high, as is the humor, *as is the Art*. [END]



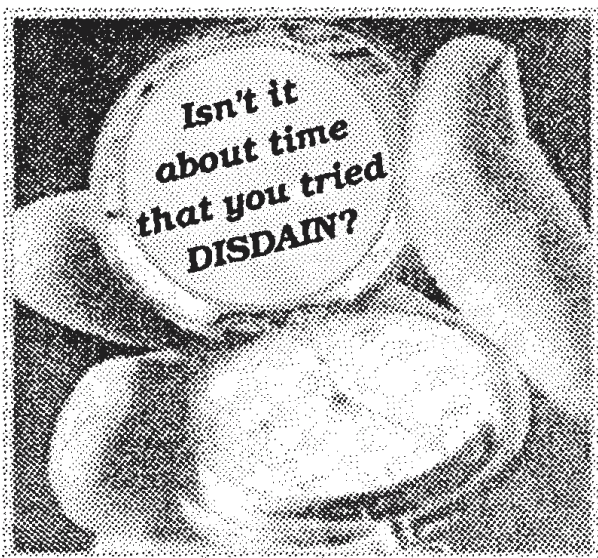
*Praxis Makes Perfect—*

# The Role of Disdainists Within the International Art Dump Project

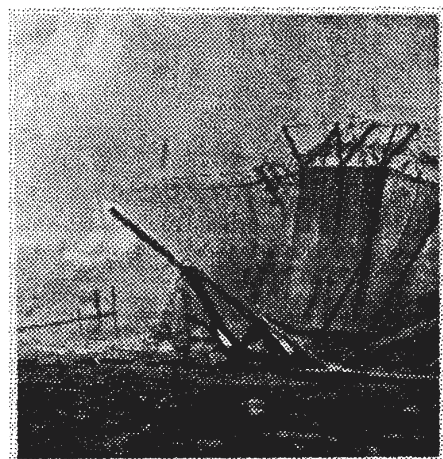
*by David Richter*

FROM THE EARLIEST formulations of what is now the Art Dump project, Disdain has played a part. When the initial group of core members began poring over mounds of paper and writing to various Members of Parliament, municipal boards, etc.—and of course writing grant proposals—there at the table or sorting through records were Samantha and Ben, two of the people who have done so much to bring Janet Kingsley's research and thought to the public's attention.

Theoretical exponents of Disdain have been involved in the important tasks of helping to articulate the theory behind Art Dump's praxis. While the initial terrain of Disdain has been the



Pragmatic Humor:  
Disdainists are careful not  
to portray themselves as  
stone-faced Utopian  
Trotsky-heads



"The most progressive role for Disdain is **not** to explain away the destructive societal tendencies that Art Dump exists to confront... Our task is to offer a conceptual framework for use in shaking up society's æsthetic and political complicity."

*Photos: David Richter*

ideological and academic territory between Situationism and Post-structuralism, minglings of Post-structuralist and semiotic thought have had prominent influence in contemporary political and artistic endeavors, and so it is that Disdainist thought has its obvious applicability to the æsthetic-political goals of Art Dump.

Simply stated, the Disdainist tendency of embracing an ideology or belief system intimately, in order to succumb to it and inevitably to deconstruct it with a fine-edged skepticism—from *within this position of intimacy*—has provided an exemplary model of action of the realization-based goals motivating the Art Dump coalition.

It is precisely this experiential weight of having embraced the social and æsthetic ideals of contemporary western culture—only to see the bankruptcy of these ideals revealed in their application in thought and policy—that has congealed into the Art Dump/Disdainist concept of the industrial-æsthetic meta-

phor of the strip-mine museum as a cultural monument.

Not to be confused with the pervasive fashion of industrial music or sculpture, the critique inherent in Disdain and in Art Dump is directed at the schism between our social espousal of values (*fashion*) which is separate from our actually extending these values *as ideals* to the environment and to all humanity.

Disdainist scholar Janet Kingsley has written that "...we are witness daily to the cynical emptying of ideals such as democracy, human rights, and moral concern, which are used merely as dance steps in the performance of social etiquette..." Disdain exists as a philosophical school whose agenda at Art Dump is to analyze and to provide critical approaches for counteracting the social trends that debase values to empty forms—fashions for the outside—rather than made into guiding precepts that reflect our inner attachments and the values that we share and live by as a community. [END]

PETIT GUIGNOL - Pg 5





*Keynote Address to the***Southwest Decentralized Mail  
Art Congress and Rodeo***by Dr. Al “Blaster” Ackerman*

*Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Mail artists,  
and Distinguished Hangers-On:*

When John Held, Jr., Organizer and Director of this, the Southwest Decentralized Worldwide Mail Art Congress and Rodeo, phoned me a few days ago and asked me to deliver the keynote address this afternoon, I felt somewhat hesitant, chiefly because we had a very faulty long-distance connection and when he asked, “Will you deliver the keynote address?” I at first thought he was saying, “Will you deliver a kilo of grass?” (*Laughs. Drinks water.*)

To make matters even more complicated, Benny Pilcher (one of the violent patients at our clinic) picked that very moment to rush me, and while we grappled on the floor, the phone cord became twisted around my arm and I spilled my drink all down my shirt-front—which is where this big purple wine stain came from, in case you were laundering. (*Laughs. Drinks water.*)

Seven years of hard-fought study and preparation are now behind you and you stand poised, today, on the Threshold of the Past, ready to collect your G.E.D.s, although John Held tells me that not all of you will be going on, due to certain remedial problems in the areas of Reading, Writing, Hygiene and Citizenship. To the young men and women, I would say: I know of no finer career for any willing, able-bodied marginal person in this coun-

try today than the field of Professional Hair-Dressing. The other day I was sitting in the balcony of a downtown movie theater at lunch-time. Four seats away to my left was a young man who appeared to be in the process of repeatedly stabbing a rabbit or something in his lap. Allow me to demonstrate the motions he was going through: It looked something like this—you see? You see how rapidly my fist goes up and down, up and down, until it’s just a blur in my lap? The point is, it was dark as a cow’s stomach in that balcony, and if I hadn’t known better I might easily have imagined that that young man sitting not four seats away from me, was jerking off. Well, it’s a funny old world, and I often think of Graduation Day as the body of the Rabbit of Endeavor on which each of us will leave our mark—or marx, if we happen to be Commies. To each of us is given the

opportunity to strike the Rabbit of En-deavor with the Blade of what the great educator John Dewey called Incurable Recidivism. In the words of the popular inspirational hymn, "When you walk through a storm window, hold your head up high, for you'll never walk alone again, in all likelihood." (*Laughs. Drinks water.*)

If any of you little turnips seated here before me in the audience this afternoon were to come up after this talk and say, "Doctor Al, what is this term 'networking' that we keep hearing so much about? Please share your thinking with us on this important topic—" I would look you in the eye, or eyes, as the case may be, and say, "Young Graduate, I'm as puzzled about it as you are. Heck, frankly, I always thought 'networking' had to do with a certain low-ball scam involving computers that was worked about a few years ago by an opportunistic little slimeball named Jerry Rubin to make questionable sexual and business contacts. However, no matter. Let me tell you a story. You have no doubt heard rumors about certain very curious goings-on in connection with many of the real estate seminars to which the public is so drawn these days. Namely, that at some point during each of these seminars (generally at about the time the speaker is at the black-board on stage showing how to make that first million in real estate by using nothing more than an expired credit card, twelve dollars in cash, and the names of seventeen dead people), a file of strange-looking workmen, wooden-visaged and dressed in overalls and farm hats, will be seen to enter the auditorium and begin piling large seed-pods at the back of the stage. Each pod is roughly man-sized and is covered with feenamints of fine silky hair like a cocoon. You maybe sure that I have checked around

and done some investigating, but the odd thing is that no one who has attended one of these seminars ever seems to come away with the slightest recollection of having seen such a thing. You mention a giant seed-pods to them and they just look blank. Why, you would think they'd been given a dose of Milk-of-Amnesia or something. Is this a plot? Is it some kind of weird, alien switcheroo? Or is it merely the mind-numbing effect of listening to somebody talk nothing but rank real estate for twelve straight hours and not being allowed to go to the bathroom or have a smoke? And is there anything at all significant in the fact that the root word of seminar is 'semen'?

"Well, uncle," I asked my uncle John Carter of Mars when I saw him later that day; "What do you make of it all? You've attended your share of these mysterious seminars. What's up? Any ideas?"

"My uncle, who had risen from a back booth at the New Winston Chicken Delight to greet me, an old-time cordial smile of welcome lighting his handsome face, apparently had not aged a day since I had least seen him at breakfast that morning, but was still the straight, clean-limbed fighting man of seventy or eighty summers. His tiny maroon eyes were undimmed, and his head, to a remarkable degree in both size, color, and flavor, still resembled a crisply baked apple.

"Well, nephew," he replied, his ruddy skin, or peel, gleaming in the steam from a nearby row of coffee urns, 'do you feel as though you were seeing a ghost, or suffering from the effects of one-too-many of Uncle Ben's juleps?"

"Juleps, I reckon," I replied, 'for I certainly feel mighty jewish. But maybe it's just the sight of your friendly, wrinkled head no larger than a baked apple that

affects me. You have been back to Mars? Tell me. And Dijah Thoris? You found her well and waiting for you?

"Yes," replied my uncle, 'I have been to Barsoom again, and visited the forgetful well of Dijah Thoris, and—but it's a long story, too long to tell in the limited time I have before I must return home and stick my head in the microwave oven. Then off to visit Mars again if I can remember to set the microwave timer for three minutes, or perhaps the dumpster out back if I forget and set it for three hours. Which,' he brooded absent-mindedly, 'is always a possibility these days, since my memory cer-

tainly isn't what it once was. Or is it?' He blinked at me. 'Er—what were we talking about, anyway? And—who are you, sir? Your face is vaguely familiar, but, 'pon my word, I'm deuced if I can place you.'

"He was interrupted by the entrance of New Winston's own Dr. Graham, who, evidently mistaking my uncle's head for a baked apple, lost no time in hurrying over and trying to mount it. Dr. Graham was a tense little fellow, whose hobby it was to run around town finding things to mount. His collection of mounted birds was second only to the bicycles he had mounted—to say nothing of fireplugs, dogs, mail-



**The Grand Delusion**

*The Tape-beatles*

60 MINUTES OF NEW AUDIO ART BY  
AMERICA'S FOREMOST CULTURAL EMBEZZLERS

CD \$15.00 postage paid from:  
<http://pwp.detrinitus.net/>



## 1993 inaug- ural family memorial

boxes, really just about anything, including baked apples. Hence, his overweening physical passion for my uncle's tiny, microwave shriveled pate. Under Dr.

Graham's frenzied hunchings and rubbings, my uncle soon lost his head completely. I never did manage to find out his views, if any, on the mystery of the sinister



real estate seminars. Then, to the strains of *The Ouch Song (Love Is a Many-Splintered Thing)*, the happy couple walked out of the New Winston Chicken Delight to start their new life together as man and apple. Of what happened after that—and as to whether Dr. Graham actually married my uncle's head or merely shackled up with it in a common Adam and Eve common-law arrangement at his cabin by the creek—I have only a confused recollection. And that, fans, is the pure unvarnished reason why I happened to be sitting in the back booth of the New Winston Chicken Delight with my uncle's headless torso, last Thursday afternoon, when the police arrived. Small wonder, then, that I've been having the devil's own time convincing the fools down at police headquarters that my story is true. Why, can you believe it, they think that I'm—a homicidal lunatic." (*Laughs. Drinks water, and uncle's severed head falls out from under his coat.*)

So I say to each of you, young upwardly-mobile palookas and palooka-ettes: throw off the shackles of your crippling bran-laxative habit, cover your head with thick and rich Karo-brand pancake and waffle syrup and the flies will turn you into a piece of living, writhing floor-sculpture. And remember, no matter what happens, never, *never* let them see you sweat into a stone bowl and then try to drink it. You cannot have your night sweats and drink them, too. In that direction lies a permanent reservation at Hotel Happy. No wonder your family keeps trying to rent your room out and have you replaced by a sponge (the quiet pet). So in conclusion I say to you, fellow alumnites of the T.P. County Alliance of Alum Users, let us never forget what John Held, Jr., said to me just before we staggered in here together to start this

ridiculous clambake. He said, "The people who run this public library where I work are goons. They're always giving me a hard time. I'm trying to get on over at the meat-packing plant so I can blow off this two-bit job. In the meantime, this nose-candy keeps me going—ahahahaha. Here, have a little more yourself, Al, and let's take a couple of these 'ludes, too. Who knows? Maybe we can get through this miserable 'Mail Art Congress' without feeling too much pain. I doubt it, though—the bozos that generally show up for these things are little better than brain-damaged hyenas. You'll see. The questions they find to ask will make you believe you're vising a home for the feeble-minded." (*Laughs. Drinks water.*)

So there you are, ladies and gentlemen. The straight skinny from the horse's own lips, so to speak. Please believe me when I say that being here with you today has given me the distinct sensation of going under ether for the third time. And if we should ever chance to meet again for a little wine and casual sex under a bridge somewhere, or in a box car, let's just don't and say we did. The rest of your questions, such as whether "the sport of kings (mail art) originated with Van Gogh's ear when he mailed it or much earlier with the light operas of Gilbert & Sullivan & Sullivan (attorneys-at-law), I will have to leave for another time and place, for any more of this and I'm afraid that it's goodbye to that lunch I ate a few hours ago, and I dare not tarry any longer. To put it mildly, let me out of here, you pirates; my throat is parched, my brain is hell-hot and it's the saloon for mine! (*Exits backwards, walking on his knees and tipping his hat unsteadily to the crowd à la Toulouse-Lautrec.Laughs. Drinks water.*)

[END]

*One Commentator Looks at  
Last November's Election —*

# ◀ Media Countermedia ▶ Gleem & Ultra-Brite

*by Stephen-Paul Martin*

**I**MOST OF THIS ESSAY WAS written in February 1992 in response to the pamphlet *Seizing the Media*, a publication of the IMMEDIAT UNDERGROUND that was later reprinted in the March 1992 issue of *Retrofuturism*. While strongly supporting the Immediats' basic assumptions, I had serious questions about the practical dimensions of what they were proposing, and they encouraged me to share these questions in a forthcoming issue of their magazine *Noospapers*.

At the same time, I was feeling an acute sense of frustration about the prospects of the upcoming presidential elections. In February of 1992, it was anything but clear that Bill Clinton and Al Gore would emerge with a coherent and persuasive program of

opposition to the right-wing malaise that was dragging our country further and further into psycho-economic depression. Since that time, of course, much seems to have changed. Clinton and Gore orchestrated such a skilled campaign that many people whose intelligence I respect feel a sense of guarded optimism—or if optimism is too strong a word, then at least a feeling of relief that the Reagan-Bush era appears to be over. In light of this new feeling, the skepticism of the essay to follow may strike some readers as being inappropriate. They may, perhaps with some justification, wonder whether the ideas I outline in this article still have the same relevance that they would have had ten months ago, when *Noospapers* was origi-



*«No, really, I can change things...»*

nally scheduled to appear (the issue has been put on hold). But since I seriously doubt that American politics will change all that much under the Clinton-Gore regime, it seems important to sustain a critical perspective, regardless of how much the rhetoric coming out of the White House seems to have improved. I certainly hope that the Democrats will do as much as possible to reduce the defense budget, clean up the environment, tax the rich and create meaningful employment opportunities. But I remain convinced that our nation's problems are *systemic*, not connected to the influence of one or two deluded politicians but inherent in the logic of our economic system and the networks of consumer imagery that sustain it.

**I**N A RECENT ISSUE of *New York* magazine, Joe Klein urges us to pay close attention to Democratic presidential hopefuls like Senators Tom Harkin of Iowa and Bob Kerry of Nebraska. Extolling the virtues of both men, Klein tells us that they have the power, intelligence and charisma to reinvigorate not only the Democratic Party, but the nation itself. A few weeks later, in *The New York Times*, we find this sentiment echoed by A.M. Rosenthal, who claims that "...the Democrats have put forward not dwarfs, not a faceless five, but a strong selection of men..." who richly deserve our political attention.

At first glance, both writers seem to be conducting themselves quite admirably,

# When was the last time you voted *for* anyone?

urging us to participate with intelligence in one of the most hallowed of all democratic institutions. But in fact both Klein and Rosenthal are basing their arguments on an unspoken assumption: that the election process, as it currently exists in this country, is an ethically meaningful way of selecting a national leader. Instead of stating what should be obvious—that choosing between two white male politicians is like choosing between Gleem and Ultra-Brite toothpaste—Klein and Rosenthal write as if there were nothing wrong with business as usual in this country; nothing that electing the “right” person couldn’t somehow remedy. Without openly defending the oppressive initiatives of the U.S. white male establishment, two writers whose opinions will no doubt influence millions of readers all over the country have covertly endorsed a system that subtly excludes the interests of many of those same readers.

Over the past twenty years, media critics like John Berger, Noam Chomsky, Michael Parenti and Stuart Ewen have emphasized that our nation’s communication system often constructs our reality for us not so much by telling us what to think, but by directing our attention away from conclusions that might otherwise be self-evident. This is precisely what we can expect from media coverage of the upcoming elections. Klein and Rosenthal will be joined by countless others over the next few months, all discussing the election as if it were not already an obsolete process. The airwaves will be filled with invasive, idiotic, manipulative messages, leading to mass spectacles, political conventions, and

the final pseudo-drama of the election itself.

The American public

will be constituted as an obedient mass, passively convinced that what they are watching is central to the democratic system that they have all been taught to revere and defend.

Meanwhile, a more significant, more disturbing question will never be asked: When was the last time you voted *for* anyone? In the twenty years I’ve been old enough to vote, I’ve never felt even the slightest inclination to support a candidate. When I’ve bothered to vote at all, it has only been to vote *against*, to try to keep the more obviously misguided candidate out of office. Although I have no statistical evidence, I suspect that my attitude is shared by many who “voted for” Carter in 1980, Mondale in 1984 and Dukakis in 1988. It’s hard to imagine that large numbers of people were self-deceived enough to *actively support* any of these men.

A more ethically responsible approach to the elections would be to state the obvious—that something is deeply wrong with mainstream U.S. politics—and to propose changes in the voting process. I suggest the following:

**1** To replace the word “election” with the word “erection,” emphasizing the phallocentric nature of the activity. With this change, people at the polls would know that they were participating not in a democratic process but in a masturbatory exercise in market penetration by ruling elites.

**2** To formally eliminate the possibility of voting *for* anyone, setting up the erection booths in such a way that people would vote *against* the candidate they found most offensive. The man with



the fewest votes against would be declared the new president. This would make it clear that we were merely tolerating someone until we found ways of replacing the current system. We would still have a creep in office, but at least people—and indeed the president himself—would be aware that he had no popular support.

**3** To declare the erection invalid unless ninety percent of the eligible population participated in it; or to include a “neither of the above” category on the ballot and encourage people who didn’t really want either candidate to vote against both. If this third option got more votes than the party candidates, the erection would be declared invalid and new candidates selected. Obviously, if candidates like the ones we’ve had over the past twenty years kept running, it might take a while to get a valid erection. To make time for this, we could eliminate the campaign process, all media-spectacle coverage, all the nauseating speeches and photo opportunities and simply have the candidates submit domestic and foreign budget proposals to the public through the mail. People could then vote quickly, Gleem and Ultra-Brite could quickly be declared invalid, and more “legitimate” candidates could eventually be uncovered. Of course, there’s a definite possibility that “legitimate” candidates would never be found. If this happened, with anarchy on the horizon, the military would no doubt indulge in what they’ve been spoiling to do for years—a military coup. Gleem and Ultra-Brite would be replaced by Northrup and Lockheed, and the truth

about our country would at last be apparent to everyone.

Or would it? Isn’t it more likely that the media would make this military coup seem to be a noble act, a necessary bloodbath in the service of democracy, a heroic struggle to protect our great society from the sinister machinations of terrorists, communists, anarchists? Wouldn’t the major TV networks frame the event in such a way that it resembled a prime-time cop show, with General Schwarzkopf parading in front of TV cameras like Kojak, oozing telegenic charisma? Wouldn’t network news programs make use of careful editing techniques to produce another Operation Desert Storm, another pseudo-patriotic spectacle? How safe is our perception of the world when various multi-billion dollar enterprises are busy producing a consensual hallucination, working to make the world safe for white multi-national exploitation.

The focus goes back to those who control the means of production, those who produce our desires, interests and habits of perception. If we are not in control of these, then they will control us—an aphorism which is probably an oversimplification, but may nonetheless be useful in confronting our current situation. The Immediast Underground calls on us to “seize the media,” to take our culture’s

**When I’ve bothered to vote at all, it has only been to vote *against*, to try to keep the more obviously misguided candidate out of office.**

instruments of communication away from the corporations and put them under public control. I completely support this proposal. But I also recognize that it asks us to confront a number of difficult questions:

① How do we “seize” a massive system of corporate networks that may not have its own army protecting it, but could certainly call on the police, the National Guard and the Pentagon if its property were seriously threatened? Clearly, we cannot rely on any direct use of force, storming the broadcasting stations as though they were the Bastille.

② Assuming it’s possible to gradually raise the issue of public control through non-violent means, perhaps through a series of political actions that would ultimately put the media on display as a national source of corruption and disinformation, who would take part in these actions? Who would organize and lead them? How many people in this country are currently angry enough about the media to overcome their own media-induced inertia and place their opposition to corporate-controlled information at the top of their list of priorities? How many people would endanger their lives, homes and careers in such a cause?

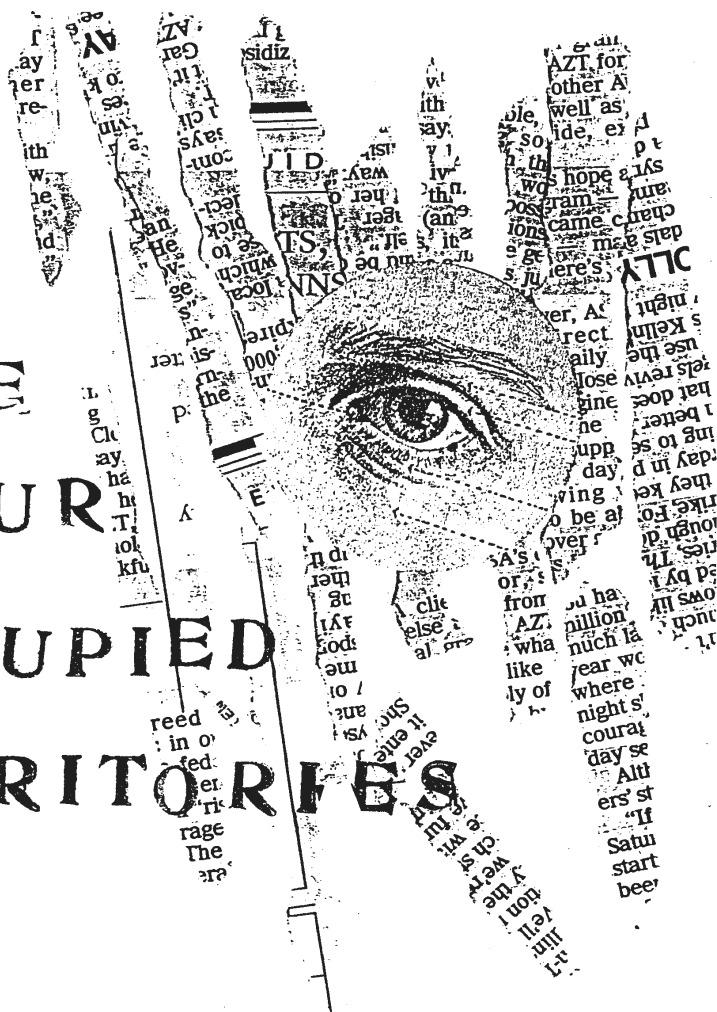
③ Assuming enough people could be convinced that the media ought to be publicly controlled, under whose public control would the media then be placed? What governing body would represent the public, and what would prevent them from becoming corrupt? How would they be chosen? Through public elections? What would prevent these elections from degenerating into the absurd spectacles our presidential elections have become?

The phrase “seizing the media” has bold, romantic connotations, calling up

memories of heroic actions and revolutions. But getting beyond mere rhetoric will require lots of hard work and careful thinking, the ability to deal with massive amounts of frustration and confusion, and the willingness to endure the power struggles that accompany even the most “politically correct” undertakings. At times, the Immediast project sounds utopian, as if it were based at this point more on good intentions, justified anger and a keen perception of media distortion than on a carefully worked out plan of action(s).

Nonetheless, the Immediasts are correct when they point out that it is no longer enough to merely document corruption in the news media or point out the damaging effects of billboards and picture tubes on human perception. The time has come to take action. One of the most interesting parts of the Immediast project involves “routing the spectacle against itself.” This idea is powerful because it can be put into practice in a simple and immediate way by virtually any human being. It involves, first and foremost, a shift in perceptual attitudes. Instead of simply absorbing images from newspapers, billboards, TV and movie screens, people can turn the spectacle against itself by assuming a more active approach, using media images as raw material for creative projects. Where the original information may have been designed to seduce, deaden, confuse or trivialize our response, when this information has been seized and transformed, when it has become an element in a creative design whose purpose is to challenge and stimulate us into thinking and feeling more fully and carefully, then the media’s power has been subverted, the individual empowered. Consider this image, produced by John Stickney and originally published in

# WE ARE YOUR OCCUPIED TERRITORIES



*PhotoStatic Magazine* in the November, 1988, issue, no. 33, p. 1172, reproduced above.

Instead of simply reading the paper, Stickney cut it up, rearranged it, juxtaposed it with a message that bluntly accuses the media of psychological invasion. Instead of remaining a passive "occupied territory," an isolated eye (or I) floating in a stagnant pool of newsprint, Stickney was able to activate his creative resources, turning the deadening ritual of mainstream

journalism into an opportunity for critical intervention. One can imagine Stickney composing the piece, playing with scissors, tape and paste in a state of heightened concentration characterized by the balanced interplay of seriousness and humor, no longer simply ingesting, but producing new information.

This playful attitude, generated by critical awareness, can serve as a cornerstone for alternative networking projects. In-

deed, Stickney's image served precisely this purpose when it first appeared in *PhotoStatic*. This magazine (and its offspring, *Retrofuturism* and *YAWN*) has always seen itself in the context of the networking process, where creative activities are valued not because they satisfy aesthetic standards of excellence (whatever that means) but because they are useful, because they help us maintain our creative and critical sanity in an environment where, as the Immediasts rightly point out, "At every turn we are under attack."

The more one is exposed to images like Stickney's, the more one realizes that the attack is not so subtle. It is the anger that accompanies this realization that will—hopefully sooner than later—trigger the widespread insurgence that the Immediasts are proposing. The fact that we are given a "choice" between Gleem and Ultra-Brite in what is supposed to be the nation's most significant political event should be taken as a serious insult, the kind that leads to serious response.

All of us have been conditioned from the day we were born to see the world as the corporate media system wants us to see it—as a commodity filled with enticements, a place where we will only survive if we can successfully package ourselves as commodities. Absurd as this vision may seem, it is difficult to fully escape it, to resist a message that has been wired into our nervous systems since the time we were old enough to perceive in a coherent fashion. Working against the influence of a mode of perception that seems coterminous with life itself is a process that requires lots of support, a network of like-minded people who are seriously (and playfully) involved in similar projects. Fortunately, such a network is already in place, providing us with alterna-

tives to *The New York Times* and *New York* magazine. The time has come for this network to define itself in even more aggressively political terms than it already has, working not so much to seize the media's cultural property (though it may make sense to keep this in mind as a long-term goal) as to negate its influence, to challenge and move beyond the way the media train us to think, feel and perceive.

III THESE SAME MEDIA TECHNIQUES were of course put to superb use by Clinton and Gore during their recent campaign. Working with a keen awareness of American mass marketing strategies, the Democrats promoted themselves through a carefully designed sequence of images, beating the children of Reagan at their own game. Far from indicating radical changes, the results of the 1992 election clearly support the arguments developed above, indicating once again that our nation's one-party system is really more a matter of Hollywood and Madison Avenue than of Democrats and Republicans. I was pleased when I got home from teaching on the night of November 5 to find that Clinton had won. But I saw no reason to abandon my critical awareness of a political machine that has produced yet another smooth-talking white male president.

No one I know actually voted *for* the new president—all of them were voting *against* Bush and Quayle—and this remains, I think, the most intelligent approach to the U.S. election process. The task of routing the spectacle against itself is just as urgent as it was before, even if Ultra-Brite really does have a way of preventing further decay. [END



## Book Review

## On Inordnance

Bob Black's *Friendly Fire*

by Ed Lawrence

**I** TO BE BLUNT, that is, to the point, Bob Black takes a bacchanal-chemic joy in the protean instability of language. His creative ferment overflows from the fountain of linguistic intemperance. With palpable delight he wrings from words their last drops of intoxicating music; acapriccio. True, this causes him to strike the occasional sour note, but better this than for the fruit of language to rot on the vine. The unexpected turn and return of phrase, the double entente, pun and repartée are not mere diversionary ploys nor simply distractions used as a detour de force to disguise an underlying emptiness of content like some false bottom in an overstuffed portmanteau. The virtue of these laconic devices is their ability to incorporate the poetry of subversion within an economy of surprise by undergoing an out-of-body experience. Giving birth while being born, these words entwine the stretch marks of ambiguity around the forks of a slingshot creating a caduceus that cannot be brought to heel. Given wide berth, by defying description they describe defiance. The uroboros of satire which crowns Black's discourse like a halo also sheds a preposter-

ous nimbus, a kiss of light surrounding the human encounterpoint with a throne. It conflates the lowest complement into the highest compliment. But Black's revels in wordplay indicate, as well, that he is wary of the way words can fossilize meaning by leaching away the very indeterminacy within which the pasquinade naturally secretes itself. Approaching a text is then reduced to an archaeological dig; sifting through the ashes of an abandoned fire pit in hopes of turning up a few charred vertebrae, remnants from the spine of a dictionary. Like Blake, who depicted an open book as twin headstones marking the grave site of the imagination, Black knows that words can be impedimental, can hinder understanding when they become transfixed and obstruct the fluidity of mind that flows intuit. Against this lull into hypnosis, Black opposes hypnosis. And, of course, he is not always successful. At times, being too cavalier, he plays Laocöon to the Trojan horse. He may sometimes even mistake a hobby horse for a unicorn. Yet, unlike the poets who marshal their cadence to the syncopation of a meat grinder, and to his credit, Black never confuses Pegasus with dog food.

**II** ANOTHER ASPECT of Black's œuvre is the documentation, as impertinent as pertinent, of his ensnarlment in various imbroglios. Like black in a chess game, truth usually starts at a disadvantage. Due, in large measure, to its ungainliness, veracity often appears a poor second, ill-fitting and unfashionable, compared to a prevarication which can be tailor-made to conform to the contours of expectation and embroidered by the tawdry seamstress of verisimilitude. Fairy tales aside, when someone has the indecency to question the cut of the cloth they generally get either ignored or slammed. Black has had his share, if not his fill, of both responses. In being ignored he can take a cue from Karl Kraus who perfected the uncanny ability of turning Pyrrhic defeats in-side-out in such a way as to expose their latent transparency. *Der Biberpelz*, Kraus' account of his stolen coat, concludes with the line, "By publishing a new book I might manage to make the Viennese forget me." Here, despite the smoldering desolation, a smile lingers like an unrepentant phantom of redemption; a cheshire catastrophe. On the other hand, Black is confronting a wholly other form of effacement when thugs try to use him as a sidewalk eraser. Undoubtedly his assailants will never forgive him for the bruises he has caused to their knuckles, but we expect from Black a response of a different grain, one not marbled with infinity. Concrete excoriation certainly, but falling short of eternal damnation. When Black confounds athanasia with Athanasiou he begins repaying a debt of ingratitude on an installment plan where the interest quickly overwhelms the principal. The result is that Black wastes his scorn on people who are beyond contempt. By pouring it into a

bottomless pit he is drawn into the vacuum, and the suction inexorably siphons off a disproportionate level of fervor. A fist closing in on his eye may blot out the sun, however, calling it an eclipse doesn't make it a celestial event. Instead, it reinforces a distortion of perspective, giving his attackers an increased stature they little deserve. It is, to borrow Nietzsche's phrase, putting magic hats on straw heads. When warding off slugs, even outfitting them with a petasus will not make them rise above the trail of their own slime.

**III** BLACK PREFACES his latest collection of writings with the letter of psychiatrist Harold Lockett, dated April 13, 1959, recommending that "a bright psychoneurotic child" who displays "extreme hyperactivity, impulsivity and poor response to controls" be "given a trial on medication"; a drug called vesperin from the phenothiazine group. Thus did the eight-year-old Black unwittingly make his debut into the world of 'zines, undergoing his first trial by friendly fire. The fall-out spreads. The first section of the book contains three essays which continue the exploration Black embarked on with his influential piece de resistance *The Abolition of Work*. Building upon the anthropological/sociological/historical insights of Marshall Shalins, Ivan Ilyich, Fredy Perlman, Edmund S. Morgan and the Firesign Theatre (to mention only a handful of his inspirations), Black further elucidates his critique of the social construction of work. He shows why it is no coincidence that the word which describes the forced seizure of territory also denotes one's usual means of earning a living. The terrain of *occupation* is daily life, and in this no-wo/

man's-land the war of attrition is *waged*. Black moves beyond triage to celebrate the authentic potentials of ludic living. In the richly textured lives and wide-ranging sensibilities of the pre-occupied he sees a peripheral vision with a much greater scope than the modernist tunnel vision which is being constricted even more the impoverished dimensions of the tube. This may all come as a kind of shock (therapy) to anyone who thinks that, "*The Flintstones* was a documentary." Through eight other sections of *Friendly Fire* the forages of a "mental traveler" (Blake) are presented. In some instances, like Vesuvius in regard to Pompeii, Black preserves a host of fleeting images by burying them intact beneath the ash and lava of an erupting text. In others he reconstructs from a single shard, and with marvelous ingenuity, an Aladdin's lamp. *Elementary Watsonianism* is the most brilliant example of this type (TYPE 3) of magical reflection. Happening upon a 1954 case in which Reuel S. Amdur was convicted of creating a public nuisance for distributing anarchist literature near Sather Gate on the Berkeley campus, Black medi-

tates with profound empathy upon the possible permuted meanings of Amdur's pronouncement, as attested to by the policeman, "Go ahead and arrest me. I'm a Watsonian Anarchist and will stand on my constitutional rights!" Shifting sand as it turns out. After detailing the incident, Black writes, "The small-minded might quibble that Watsonianism is nothing but an error in transcription" but "It matters not. So majestic and evocative an expression surely has some objective referent with which I, for one, am proud to be associated." Black brings up the rear of this collection with his pre-mortem autopsy of the Gulf War. "There is no need to bring the war home," he writes, recalling the Vietnam-era slogan, because "It never left." Against the "agony of hierarchy, violence and boredom... We will fight the same way we want to live, playfully, creatively, ecstatically, unpredictably." [END

*Bob Black's Friendly Fire is available for \$8 postage paid from Autonomedia, P.O. Box 586, Williamsburg Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11211. Black himself can be reached at P.O. Box 3142, Albany, N.Y. 12203.*

**SUBMIT YOUR WORK:** Drawing Legion Publications are interested in how new media, forward-looking ideas and aggressive voices can work together to foster interactions among people striving for an understanding of what constitutes cultural activity in the machine age. Drawing Legion Publications have included works by people who work at the edges of culture, as well as news, commentary and expository essays about these media; in the form of graphics, letters, reports, or reviews of like-minded works. We are not "against" mass culture as such, but we are "against" what usually passes for "participation" within it; that is to say, consumption. We wish to spur on what appears to be a burgeoning trend against such passive "participation" through the active use of the resources that are available to us. We wish to provide a context for like-minded individuals to share views and present work. Feel free to submit any and all written or graphic work that you think fits these criteria. No submissions will be returned unless they are accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. All contributors receive a copy of any such publication in which their work appears.

**NO PICNIC** will be a small press magazine about working in the service industry and will contain stories related to work; true, fictional, fantasy, dream or anything. There are no categories but we're looking for any 2-dimensional objects, documents, or writing about events or experiences that have shaped your work attitudes and behaviors. "No Picnic" will be a workers' activity funbook, a serious academic journal, or both, depending on received submissions. Some suggestions: Work fantasies, daydreams, or nightmares; Real, fictional, or true crime stories; Jobs you've loved or hated; Documents of time wasted at work, objects or collages you have made "on the clock" or not. Send submissions by June 1, 1993 to:

**NO PICNIC** at the: Glassed-in-Laboratories  
310 E. Burlington St. no. 2  
Iowa City, IA 52240-1609



psrf@detritus.net

<http://psrf.detritus.net/pdf/r17.pdf>

