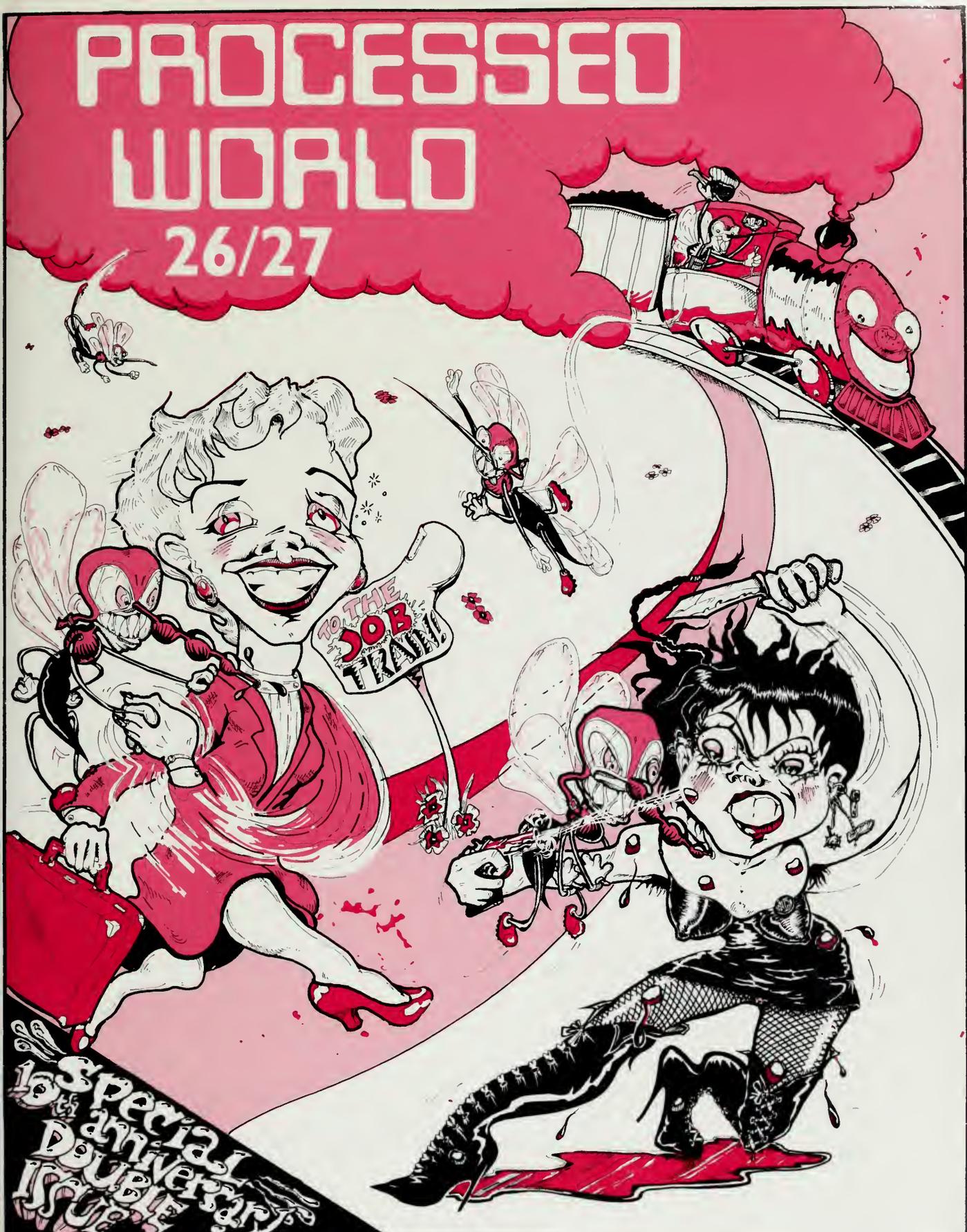


# PROCESSED WORLD

26/27



10<sup>th</sup> Special Anniversary Double Issue



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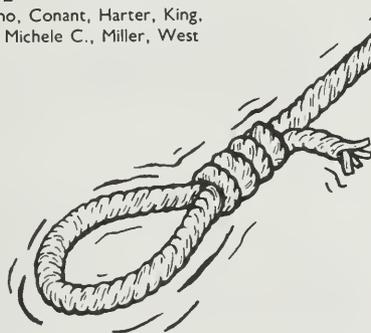
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Processed World is collectively produced & edited: only the printer and the post office get paid.

# War Heads

This special double issue marks *Processed World's* 10th anniversary, a milestone nobody envisioned at the beginning, or even halfway along! This issue, which we've been working on for more than six months, happens to be our first during the Persian Gulf War, which, contrary to reports, is only just beginning. This is reflected in the gallery of oppositional creativity throughout the magazine, and in the continuation of this opening editorial by our friends Med-o, Primitivo Morales, Bean, and Zoe Noe.

The main theme of this issue—"The Good Job"—serves as a rejoinder to the most common criticism of *Processed World's* bad work attitude: "If you don't like your job, why don't you find one you *do* like?" As it turns out, by virtue of our class, race, education, predispositions, talent and owing to the peculiar U.S. history of Work during the past decade, *Processed Worlders* have often managed to escape the blatant misery of working in dead-end jobs directly for Corporate America. We have found jobs with "progressive" organizations, started our own businesses, found academic jobs, well-paid freelance work. Otherwise, we continue to work for low wages but part-time in self-managed or "alternative" businesses, sometimes cooperatively or collectively owned. And for some of us, the Good Job is a well-paid, low-hassle niche in a technical writing, programming, or such like department in a larger institution.

So, are these jobs better? Are they changed by our involvement in them? Or are we changed by our jobs? Or both? Does our willing participation diminish the alienating qualities inevitably present in any job, "progressive," "alternative," or otherwise? What is the relationship between the specific purpose and content of a job and its categorization as good or bad? What if it still consists of stuffing envelopes or processing mailing lists? And what role is played by the relationships established with co-workers? What are the criteria of good jobs? Meaning? Pleasure? Money? Creative challenge? Social benefit? Freedom from super-

vision? These are the questions this issue of *Processed World* sets out to address in more than a half dozen pieces from a variety of people discussing a multiplicity of jobs.

In finding good, or at least *better*, accommodation to the status quo, what have we gained or lost? In some cases we gain a greater sense of meaning, the sense that our work is contributing to a better life. In other cases, our work may not be intrinsically meaningful, but autonomy on the job allows us to pursue what we *do* consider meaningful, or leaves us more energy *after* work to do what we want. Most common, perhaps, is a confused and contradictory search for meaning and autonomy, responsibility and respect, and of course financial security. Because this society is remarkably retarded in examining worklife, our rationalizations and explanations tend to jump around from reason to reason, and each of us is finally forced into unpleasant compromises.

For some, a sixty-hour week in a community organization with a low salary and "comp time" is justified by the feeling that at least one is helping people. Genuine help and service is often paid by the relief and gratitude of the served; the social contact can, at times, take on the qualities of a "perk." Another person's forty-hour week is accepted on the grounds of a good medical insurance plan, a lenient boss and a light workload—plenty of time for personal phone calls, writing projects, and so forth. The qualities of a job that we call "good" are highly varied. In identifying them we can

begin to flesh out something of what we're fighting for.

On the other hand, good jobs also satisfy needs of the ruling order. Often they "buy off" the most creative, motivated, and potentially subversive individuals. When we find ourselves in a "good" niche, our organizing, agitation, and politically dissident energies tend to migrate away from our own immediate circumstances, reinforcing a broader political disengagement from workplace politics in general. If we consider our own "deal" to be a relatively good one, we are not so compelled to embrace a radical, directly democratic movement that recognizes the workplace as the locus of social power.

One big question, then, that arises from this issue's theme (and also from the historic impasse of all workers' movements), is what kind of new methods, formal or not, can we develop to make practical our generalized opposition to this society, while retaining and expanding the good qualities of our current worklives? How can we reject Work as a social institution, and reclaim our right to a useful, meaningful, enjoyable, autonomous, and democratic engagement with the activities we decide we really want.

What exactly do we want from Work? *Processed World* has advocated a Bad Attitude toward Work, even the abolition of Work as such. But what does this mean in the real world of contrived scarcity, massive poverty and deprivation, ecological holocaust, and pandemic apathy and cynicism about the prospects for a better life? Don't *our jobs*, even our "good" jobs, contribute directly and indirectly to propping up this insane way of life? But what about all the things we do as part of our society's aggregate workload that *are* useful, *do* provide pleasure—for us as workers and for those we care about? How can we develop a language that appreciates the various impulses that go into Work?

Anyway, our personal feelings and needs are by no means the only concern about Work. Our most public secret, in fact, may be the practical *unconsciousness* most of us bring to our participation in this complex, highly socialized aspect of human existence. Completely absent from most current discussions of freedom and democracy is any concern for the missing social

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# WALL STREET CONTRE-ATTAQUE

THE COLD WAR IS OVER  
TIME TO HEAT THINGS UP

Graphic MORDICUS



"We never expected they would take all of Kuwait."

—former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, quoted in post-invasion report in NY Times.

## Barbarism, Unlimited

A Transnational Partnership of War Criminals

process that would allow democratic participation and control over what we as a society decide is worth doing. And once this is decided, what would be a sensible, healthy way to realize a specific social desire? In other words, who wants what, and who is willing to do what, to achieve it? And can it be

done in an ecologically sound way?

The Economy, Growth, the Nation, and Money/Debt are all popular myths (fictions) about the proper categories for analyzing life. They are also globally enforced institutions that compel routine mass murder, from industrial accidents, by way of toxic spills, to mass starvation. The Work we seek to abolish is the 10-50% of every job and the 100% of millions of jobs whose sole function is the creation or manipulation of financial/property data (especially banking, real estate, insurance, and speculative markets), or anything to do with the war-making capabilities of modern nation states. It also includes the massive reproduction of shoddy, planned-obsolесcent goods, the vast production of toxic or simply wasteful waste, the endless record-keeping that begins at birth and follows us into the grave, and so on. With the elimination of 70% of all the Work done in our society, we could all work far less, have what we need and want, and live a great deal better!

The basic human impulse to alter the physical conditions of life is a healthy one. The desire for material comfort is a natural and healthy need too, albeit a socially constructed and culturally defined one. Starting from this, it should be possible for people to match themselves with the things they like to do, that also produce the things we want, and to do it in the most ecologically sensible way. These, rather than worrying about the health of an abstraction called "The Economy," should be the basic concerns of modern life.

We seek the abolition of Work as a separate sphere, the end of a society in which "real life" begins after work. A perverse society indeed, whose people voluntarily (even eagerly) enslave themselves to an agenda over which they have no control, in exchange for money to purchase commodities—and, increasingly, experiences.

Our society is lapsing into barbarism on every side, yet few feel passionate enough to imagine, much less act toward, social revolution. Isn't it about time that the bleak fears of late capitalism are determinedly pushed aside for good? Are we capable of popularizing a new language for our daily activities, a new engagement with the existential challenges of our lives, a definitive break with the logic of buying and selling? Isn't it about time we became serious about a pleasurable

life?

In this issue we provide the reflections of a seasoned veteran of union and left organization jobs around the East in *Not Our Own*; a disgruntled ex-food co-op worker in Austin, Texas, in *Beatnik Managers, Tye-Dye Bureaucrats*; a jaded programmer at the progressive Community Memory Project of Berkeley, *Ambivalent Memories of Virtual Community*; a hemmed-in investigative journalist at a large product-oriented computer publication, *A Trade Reporter's Report*; the return of Kelly Girl, now a freelance writer; an itinerant white-collar hobo down on his luck in *Texas, Penury of Plenty*; a refugee of both a trotskyst sect and a progressive greeting card company, *Progressive Pretensions*; a veteran of focus-group marketing scams, *Adventures in the Muck-it Research Game*; and a thoughtful insider's critique of an S.F. neighborhood recycling center, *There Goes The Neighborhood!* This theme really struck a nerve.

We also present interviews with two graffiti artists on opposite sides of the world—Tomasz Sikorski in Warsaw Poland, and Ze Carratu in Sao Paulo Brazil, along with samples of local work in the medium. Bringing the two themes together is klipschutz's article on comic book writer Harvey Pekar of *American Splendor* fame.

Angela Bocage found time to do this issue's front cover and have a baby (with Green Fuschia...Wow! Super-Mom storms *Processed World!*) A bunch of good poetry, letters and graphics are also included, as always, along with the resuscitation of our DOWNTIME! section, highlighting a different look at the recently passed VDT legislation in San Francisco. We are initiating with this issue a review section, which will feature both long and short reviews of books, magazines, movies, theater, and whatever else strikes our collective fancy.

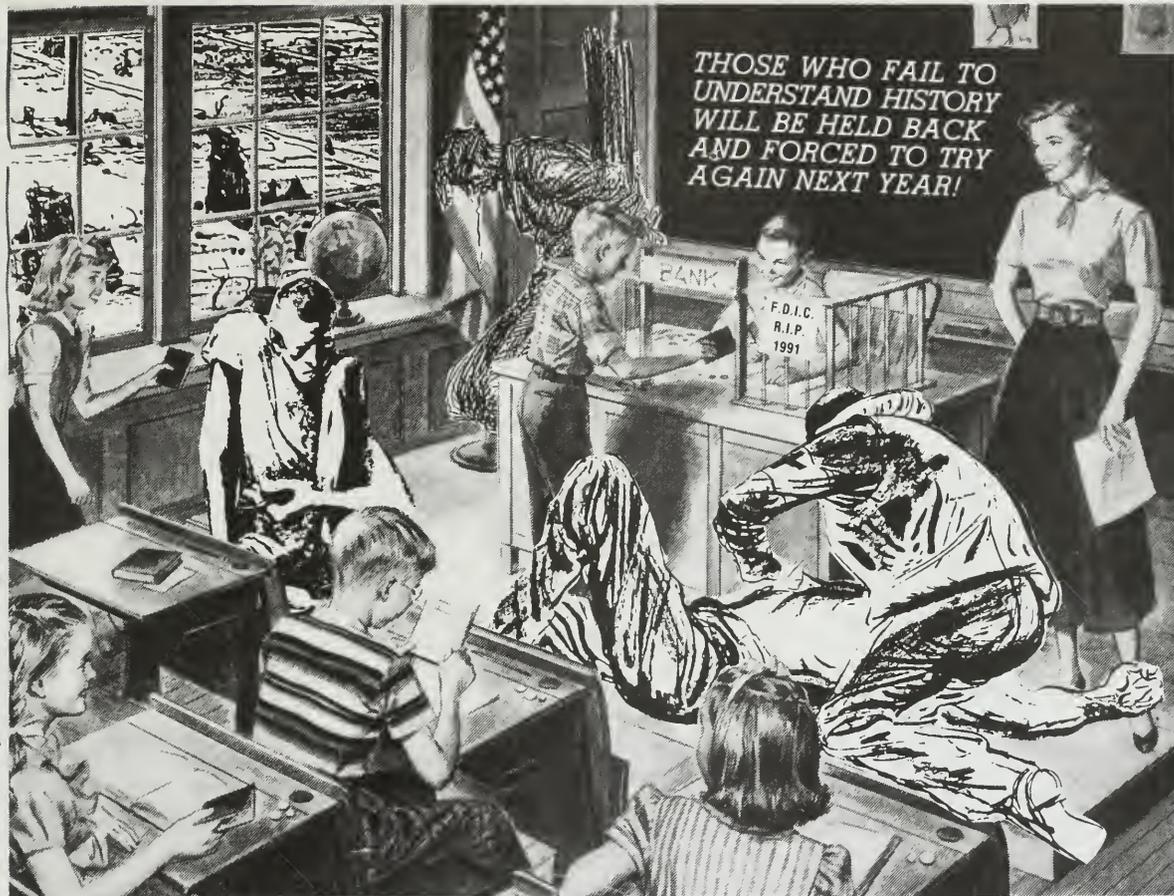
As always we depend on you, our readers, for everything. Without your comments and letters we get depressed and sometimes bored. Without your creative submissions, we don't have enough material. Without your money we can't afford our printing and mailing bills. So you know what to do!

## Processed World

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Graphic: C.C.



Graphic: C.C. Thanks to JS

## BE ALL YOU CAN BE!

I like the slogan "Bring the Troops Home Alive!" For me it carries broad philosophical dimensions. I want them to return **ALIVE**—not merely in the sense of not needing to be carried back, but **ALIVE** in every sense of the word; as thinking, feeling beings ready to challenge the present regime of brutality and senseless slaughter; read to fight for a new world that we would all want to be **ALIVE** in!

It's important to acknowledge the degrees to which most, if not all, of us are complicit in society's war machine, even if we're not the ones in uniform. It's obvious that the "volunteer army" is rarely *voluntary* in terms of actually making free choices. Often mentioned is the reality of the so-called "poverty draft," in which joining the military seems to be the only escape from severe scarcity, unemployment and starvation. Another type of de facto "draft" could be labeled a "boredom draft." In a Generican society which offers so little in the way of real adventure, the armed forces might seem

fulfilling by comparison—even if you are living someone else's adventure. In a society that accumulates pent-up anger and bitterness while offering no constructive ways to release it, one might be enticed to sign up for a "rage draft." It's not listed on the recruiting posters, but the military is one of the only officially sanctioned avenues that promises an outlet for one's accumulated aggression. One might also want to consider the "alienation draft." In an atomized society that manufactures loneliness, the military can appear to offer a much-craved sense of identity, community, and security.

While it's important to understand each person's particular set of circumstances, that still doesn't justify being part of a killing machine. The most important question remains: *What are you going to do about it?* I believe that when significant opposition to war and its machinery do emerge, some of the most important leadership will arise from those who are now in the war or say they support it. Those in uniform are in a unique position to see first-

hand the horrors of war, and are in a unique position to be able to challenge it!

—Zoe Noe

## WAR RANT

Eh...Amigos...let me tell you about these *pinche yanquis* and their war machine.

A friend of mine (one Salvador Ferret) said that Americans are dromomaniacs—a \$25 word that means "sleepwalkers." They endlessly do things and then are horrified at the consequences; they live in a world of continual surprise, a world of their own making.

They value convenience over all else; inconvenience is the true social crime here. And they will do *anything* to get more money, to "get ahead," as they call it. Join the military to go to college...but if they aren't smart enough to see the consequences of the military career, are they smart enough to benefit from college? Or run the high-tech equipment needed for modern war?

A resident of Santo Domingo, after the U.S. invaded to get rid of an elected president, asked a black U.S. Marine why he didn't go back home and fight to liberate his people. The reply—"You going to pay me more?"—sums up, in a nutshell, the American consciousness.

And the *Yanquis* seem to be unaware of their military—one of the most formidable machines in history...paid for by all of them for all of their lives (well, since WWII)...and they pretend that it does NOTHING, especially when it is in the barracks at home. They ignore (willfully? out of stupidity?) the military's enormous influence, domestically and internationally. The bastards have been bombing around the world, mining harbors, doing shit for decades, but these brain-dead humanists only wake up when it looks as if *Americans* might get killed. Nothing else matters.

South Africa's invasion of Angola? Indonesia's invasion of East Timor? The terrible bloodshed of Guatemala, the executions in El Salvador by injection of sulfuric acid?...But they remain silent (well...there are some who aren't total *vendidos*).

And their leaders are so honest, so smart, so wise...you can see the joy in people's faces every day...nightmare poverty and discrimination, boredom and sanitized bullshit *everywhere*.

The fuckers will kill anybody, destroy anything, in pursuit of their comfort and convenience. And they will *never* take responsibility for their own actions...*never*.

The technological prowess and bloodless (for the Americans) victories, along with the need to divert attention from ever-mounting domestic problems, will guarantee more wars in the future. Let their enemies kill as many of them as possible...Let them realize that war is no game, that their privileges are bought at terrible cost, their lives up-holstered and comfortable and unreal. Maybe they will learn, but probably not, for they have all taken of that good old "milk of amnesia." They are all good Germans.

*i Jodidos!* "Peace!" they cry, but there is no peace; nor should there be until there is justice for *all* of us. Their "peace" is war on all the rest of us...at least when they're all romping in the Middle East they are not as capable of inflicting murder in the rest of the world. Me? I'm learning to

goose-step—a useful skill in the "new" world order. —Primitivo Morales

## WAR BRAIN SPLURTS

*"What will become of men who have lost the habit of thinking with faith about the meaning and scope of their actions? The best of them, the ones whom Nature anoints with a sacred desire for the future, will lose, in a painful and unheeded annihilation, all incentive to bear the brunt of life's sordid aspects; and the masses, the common people, the materially-minded, the average man, will unrighteously beget a race of empty-headed children, will raise to the level of essentials the faculties intended to be nothing more than instruments, and will perplex the incurable torments of the soul, which delight only in the beautiful and grand, with the bustle of an ever incomplete prosperity."*

—Jose Marti

Speak to someone at least once a day about the war. Think about it at least once a day. Even if it's officially over when you read this. Skip TV. Other media-heads. Just think about it.

Freedom is not free will. Free will implies personal debate when making decisions. Question what you read—even this!

For close to four years, I waitressed and tended bar in Norfolk, Virginia while I was a student at Old Dominion University. Norfolk has one of the largest naval bases in the country. The city is made up of local people from everywhere else. Most of my clientele, besides local fishermen and crabbers, were college students, railroad workers from Ohio waiting to be transferred home, and those we labeled "Squids," the mostly male sailors. Sometimes they would be out to sea and there would be a slight decrease in business. But when they docked they docked loudly. At one point in a year, the head waitress found out the ship's schedule beforehand and phoned to warn the staff.

When I was bartending, I managed to get over the "gender thing" because, if anything at all, we became parental figures for them, or better yet, therapists. We learned to do a lot of listening, mostly about trying to maintain various relationships through the mail. I became friends with some of them, although the military has always been a hot spot in my own ideological schema, as the quintessence of a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, I have

attempted, with tattered patience, to change them somehow, through conversation. Now, after all those conversations, I believe they honestly thought they had no other alternative to military service. Just as I am in debt with government loans, and will probably have to bartend again someday; like them, I feel I had no other alternative.

I tried to challenge my military friends' belief systems using their own arguments: "Thou shalt not worship false idols"—a country, a president, a flag; "Thou shalt not kill"—WAR. I don't know if it ever worked. I do know they listened. We were around the same ages, born somewhere between 1962 and 1967. Popular culture, music, film, TV, was easy enough to talk about. But politics and intellectual discourse, like most intelligent dialogue, was tense and blocked by our various attitudes toward language. Their's was rational, moral, and technical. Mine was abstract, emotional, based in the creative arts. Our main similarity, though, was our desire for knowledge. Knowledge that would secure a comfortable position within a capitalist society is what brought us all to Norfolk.

The armed forces is another university dividing individual interests into parts of the military nucleus. This happens in most formal institutions. The success of a capitalistic society is to insure each stroke of the engine yields proper supply while simultaneously demanding it. This is learned behavior.

We who are fortunate enough to have learned the skills and knowledge required for particular jobs, we who choose to sacrifice some part of our existence somehow grin and "bare" it. We may slave somewhere to pay back loans or possibly commit murder, even if our moral code condemns such a thing. We, the educated, pervertedly become the "fortunate" ones. Or maybe one day we wake up and really it's a big ol' game of Monopoly, and we're the little silver dog or thimble or iron, going around in circles until we fall off the board. Or maybe not! The American ideology offers a path to false security, the "Good Job." That's what people in the military are victims of, and so are most college students, and workers of various collar colors.

As Americans, we're prone to create a Demonology of the Other, those who don't have this great American chance. Bush is doing it with Hussein



WAR

YES HONK ONCE NO HONK TWICE

A fatal system error has occurred in the Gulf. Continue?

OK Cancel

CENSORED NEWS? WAKE UP AMERICA!

GULF WAR OUTLOOK:

CORPORATE PROFITS HIGH...

...WHILE TENS OF THOUSANDS DIE

OPERATION DESERT SNOW-JOB

war bugs me

Vegetarian UNITED AGAINST CARNAGE

THIS IS OIL THIS IS YOUR PRESIDENT'S BRAIN THIS IS YOUR GOV'T ON OIL

FIGHTING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR VIRGINITY

BODY BAGS = TANKS OF GAS FILL THEM UP WITH THE UNDERLAYS

The New World Order

BUSH BUSH BUSH

BUSH BUSH

LESBIAN NO

Photos: Rick Gerhart, D.S. Black, Kic Miller, Paula P.

Collage: C.C.

as is Hussein, in George's game, with Bush. For me, the Other is a concept constructed from greed. Greed is excessive desire willing to sacrifice someone else's loss.

Personally, I think we should send all the professional athletes in America to fight it out for Bush since athletics

were formed in ancient Rome to train the men as warriors. But that's a bit sexist of me, isn't it? Well, send the cheerleaders too!!

Racism, poverty, hunger, disease, and now War, are all realities. War sacrifices all life for ideals. Someone else's ideals.

Remind yourself to think about war because thinking for ourselves is true freedom, and true education. That's what military personnel have ceased to do. Many are probably in the process of changing their minds and they have my support. But I'm concerned here with those who haven't or never will. Remember to question everything you want until no one is affected but yourself. Including this!

—Bean

### I'M JUST DOIN' MY GOOD (sic) JOB

It is a psychic tranquilizer. It's a drug we are given as children. As adults most of us stay heavily addicted. A few, very few, are "in recovery."

Actually it is more than a drug: it's a way of life, an identity. It is often the ultimate justification for a most common, self-destructive daily ritual. As a covert, widespread tool of social control it's as strong as nationalism and institutional religion. It is the belief, the faith, in "the good job."

Nowhere is this more striking than for those who get paid to inflict and receive violence. This is the soldier's job. What convoluted inner deceptions would allow you to justify such self-destructive behavior? There are many familiar explanations that seem valid: escape from a bleak future of poverty, camaraderie as part of a larger mission, thrills from the prospect of glory and adventure, human bonds formed in a group struggle to survive. But there is another explanation never put forth. A big part of accepting war-work is the misleading quest for the "good job." Nowhere else is there such a compelling need to ignore the downside and dwell on the comparative advantages. Talk about an unsafe workplace! You can be sure the half-million U.S. war-workers in the Persian Gulf are not protected by OSHA. In fact, a recent court decision subjects them to experimental drugs *without* consent! Is there any other vocation millions of men (and now women) would be consciously willing to risk their lives for?

This must be the ultimate "good

job"—something you believe in enough to die for. There is no mucking around about job performance here: productivity literally means survival. There is no question about the self-interest in a job well done. It's understandable... and *totally* unacceptable.

During the many large street protests in San Francisco against the US war to control the Middle East there has been a compassionate but awfully wrong-headed line from anti-war protesters to "Bring Our Troops Home." What a cruel absurdity—they're definitely not my nor any of my friends' troops; we don't want them in the Middle East, Europe, Korea, or here. All this lamebrained leftist cringing about the economic and racist draft, while factually true, doesn't give anyone license to work the killing fields. The same rationale could excuse the Nazis *just doing their job* in Hitler's original call for a "new world order." There is no justification for taking a job that potentially involves killing people. This misguided compassion for "our" troops also denies the dignified, human choice made by all those who suffer from the same (or worse) multiple oppressions and don't line up in the military chow line.

Those are the people I support, those are the people with whom I want to be in solidarity. If you are willing to accept being paid to kill people and you don't take any responsibility to think about it or challenge your initial naivete—we are in fundamental opposition.

Though not as graphically, the rest of us face the same predicament. My experience is that almost every working person in the US has an inner psychological "justifier" that cleverly makes *their* job "the good job." For a tiny minority this is a conscious, rational understanding based on objective conditions. For a much larger minority, it is a conscious but false projection blatantly contradicted by their actual work conditions: the hard-working redneck proudly boasting he dug a ditch the fastest and best and the driven middle manager strutting how smoothly she finished a complicated project, both exemplars of stereotypical "good attitudes" which produce the delusion of the "good job."

But it is a third kind of inner justifier that afflicts the vast majority of us. We live under a powerful cultural ethic that the work we do for



Graphic Joven

# THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW

money should be the basis of our personal identity. At the same time, we're forced to earn money or be victimized by poverty. So, we have to form some kind of "armed truce" with our psyche to make our job OK, or better, or best of all, *good*. Perhaps the most common and binding truce is the belief that "at least in my job I'm better off than the poor sot over there!" The feeling of comparative advantage can be based on more money, shorter hours, perks, relative autonomy, close bonds with co-workers, or innumerable other subjective feelings. Everyone I've met affirms comparative advantages in one way or another.

And why not? After all, if we are forced to work to escape poverty—we may not like it—but we can at least get the best shake possible. This is survival, basic self-interest. But it shouldn't be considered the only route.

The internal construction of the good (actually, comparatively better) job is the result of the normal trajectory in most people's work history. Often as teenagers we begin working in low-paying, low-status jobs and "work our way up." We would be chumps not to advance into better jobs—however we may personally define them. But this process usually gets confused with an insidious careerist ideology, particularly after we hit thirty. The prevailing notion is someone working a "bad" job is at fault and therefore inadequate. In this twisted way we blame ourselves for a perverse social system, since self-blame negates the facts of class, race, and gender oppression, as well as that elusive luck factor.

Coping with the social expectation that "good people end up in good jobs" is hardest for those whose jobs *don't* improve. Some capitulate and accept their depressing plight. More often, denial and self-deception internally enhance what is externally awful. But equally deceived are the millions of people like me who experience some objective improvement but tend to magnify this far beyond its broader content. It's just too painful to face the fact that although my work life has improved, there is nothing really good about it, and I have no hope this will change in my lifetime. It is much more satisfying to dwell on the feeling that I've got it good work-wise as a highly-paid, self-employed electrician and scam-artist, who enjoys



lots of free time and independent scheduling. There is a truth here but one that pales before a much larger truth.

Nothing I have done for money makes me feel good. Sometimes, when what I've done is clearly beneficial to another, I temporarily feel good *in spite* of the cash yoke tied to the experience. Indeed, all the meaningful things I want to do are degraded when linked to the desperate and deceiving system of money. The activities that give me meaning necessarily involve my friends and other working people. How could I feel good about charging them to participate in something I find intrinsically valuable? Conversely, how could I not feel alienated about making money doing something meaningful with people with whom I share no affinity, or worse, actually gain money

by exploiting others? Although I wish it was otherwise, it is a deadly No Exit.

This dilemma, and the fact that the most socially useful activities (childcare, healthcare, education, etc.) are usually the lowest paid, closes off any illusions I have about the "good job." Even if I get a relatively better shake, how can I participate happily in an overall system that pays investment bankers hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for doing absolutely nothing socially useful, while a childcare worker makes minimum wage? Averting my eyes to this doesn't allow me to withdraw from the forced stupidity of buying and selling my and others' time. Ultimately it's a bad deal—we simply get to pick our poison.

Here is where many get confused about *Processed World's* politics of

continued bottom page 10

# ARGUMINCE & FAX

## GUIDEBOOK GROUPIES

Dear **PW**:

I just got #25. The theme—vacation—inspired me to write. Maybe other readers will be interested to hear about my vacation. A while ago I decided to quit my programming job and go for a long trip in an exotic place. I'm back now. The trip was a year long, and I traveled around Southeast Asia, India and China.

Is such a vacation the "answer"? Can it justify years of "toil" and a cruddy job to save up the money? Is coming back to the West such a big letdown that it's worse than never leaving in the first place? What about my "career?"

Beats me. But I'll tell you that anyone could do it. The year cost about \$5000 (that includes airfare, hotels and everything else). Many North Americans could save that much by doing without a car for a while. If you're in the fast-paced hi-tech world of computers, you don't have to worry about being obsolete after a year's absence. . . . nothing really changes. I got a new job in 2 weeks. "Did you find your travels mind expanding?" asked one boss-to-be in a job interview. Who disagrees in a job interview?

Don't think that as soon as you get off a plane in an Asian city that you'll be "away from it all." You'll probably end up staying in a hostel or guest house filled with Europeans and Americans. Maybe you'll order that exotic Asian dish—the club sandwich from the menu that's printed in English. The next day . . . let's go visit that temple which that Australian woman mentioned last night at dinner. Gee, there's a lot of white-skinned people at this temple—I wonder why. Just like when you're at home, you have to look for "alternative" things to do if you want to find them. If you are a couch potato at home, you'll be a guidebook groupie when you're

abroad.

Bon voyage,

—DM, Toronto, Canada

## REVIVAL OF HISTORY

Dear **PW**:

Suddenly we are at the end of history. So a neo-Hegelian Washington functionary, Francis Fukuyama, proclaimed not long ago, crowing that the worldwide collapse of Communism nullifies the historical dialectic—and thus, presto, kills off history itself.

It's a neat equation. I wonder, however, what a resident of, say, Bucharest or Luanda or Hanoi might have to say, for there are still a few historically minded Communists left in such places as Havana and the Heavenly City. Whether we are indeed at the end of this third-rate science-fiction novel called history remains to be seen; greed, ambition, and good, old-fashioned hatred offer at least the promise of a spectacular denouement. History appears to have an ample store of tricks up its sleeve, enough that for millennia to come we'll be obliged to climb the dialectical ladder toward what passes for a German logician's heaven.

History clearly endures. But, as the Rolling Stones warned, we're just as clearly out of time.

These days everyone seems to be in a hurry. We rush between relationships, shedding mates like skins; we dash from one job to the next; we hurtle from one city to another, from coast to coast, rootless, alienated. The average American is likely to meet more people in a year than his or her grandfather did in a lifetime. Small wonder, given the demands of all these new pals, that our hours should fall into a black hole and be lost to us.

A quarter of all full-time workers now spend more than fifty hours a week on the job. The rest clock a mere forty-seven hours a

week at the workplace. For business executives and managers, seventy to eighty hours of desk jockeying is common. In 1967, a Senate subcommittee declared that twenty years hence the average worker would spend no more than twenty-two hours a week on the job; poor optimists, even politicians now must sell their souls from dawn to midnight, weekend included.

A TV advertisement now in heavy rotation depicts a child's Sunday birthday party in some sepia-toned but recognizable past. The telephone rings, and the kid's father is summoned into town to attend to some business that cannot wait until morning. The kid, having learned where his father's priorities lie, is crushed.

Fast forward to 1990, when another telephone summons another adult—perhaps our slighted kid, wrinkled and bowed by post-industrial capitalism—away from another Sunday birthday party. But now Dad has a fax machine, a modem, and a bank of computer gear in the den, and he can get right to work; he pushes a button or two, hits a carriage return, and—poof!—in nanoseconds a few million dollars are zapped from Peoria to Pretoria, picking up interest along the way. Dad's still missing Buddy's birthday, but from a distance of yards instead of miles. (For his part, Buddy will likely dispense with birthday celebrations altogether when his kids come along.) This condition, our advertiser proclaims, is progress.

With time-saving technologies, our days should expand. They have indeed expanded, but only to accommodate still more labor, useful or not. Work now interrupts us at any hour of the day or night; an employer's demands need have no respect for the clock. Surely this is not the first time Dad has been called away from the table to plug in another projection into a spreadsheet. Nor will it be the last.

Real progress would move in just the opposite direction. We'd all unplug our telephones on the weekend, or, better, agitate for strict laws to prevent bosses from invading our privacy in the first place—anything to safeguard our scant allotment of hours as they flash past, quick-marched by relativity's drill sergeant.

In the 1920s, Emily Post, the doyenne of manners, pronounced that a decent woman would mourn her husband's death for at least three years, garbed in widow's black. A half-century later, her late colleague Amy Vanderbilt reckoned that a week would do. We're a busy people, we Americans; too busy to wonder, too busy for trifles like death, too busy for birthdays, too busy to take stock of our miserable selves on this suffering planet. Suffering, in part, because busy people consume more resources than the lazy-bones among us. If the Japanese wish Banzai—"May you live ten thousand years!"—ever came true, a legion of post-industrial busy beavers would scrape the planet clean before we cleared adolescence.

"Thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool," said William Shakespeare, writing in a world where the very notion of measurable

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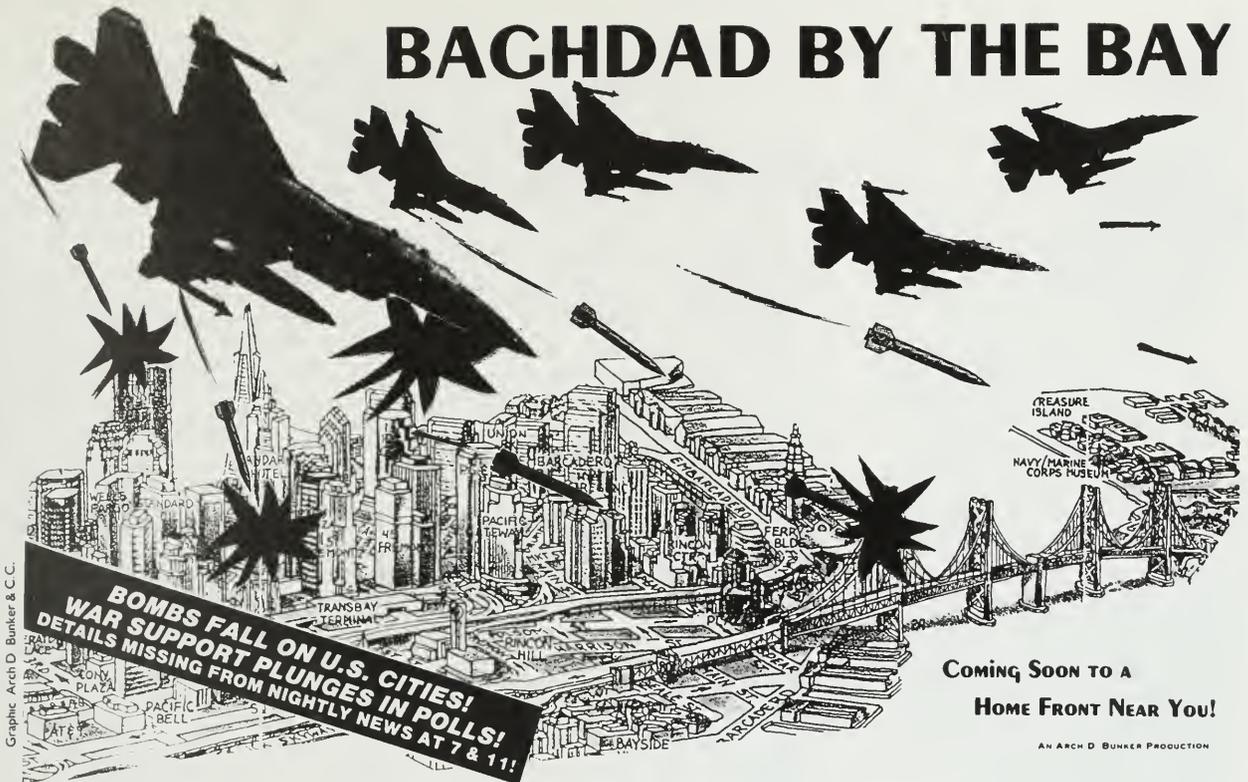
work, since we make a complete break with the pro-jobs bias of leftist analysis. Workers that never question the social contract oppressing them are not "our" comrades. We may identify with and have compassion for them. We certainly encourage them to become more critical and organized. But we don't see class oppression as a blanket excuse for a continual pattern of ignorance and passivity. At best (worst!), every worker is a victim stuck in her/his role, or, better, a ghastly hybrid of victim and collaborator. To be sure, we are an oppressed class occupying a unique position because "the system" can't function without our labor. We possess further leverage: if we democratically organized and controlled our productive capacities,

society would be freed for unprecedented beneficial, creative and pleasurable purposes.

Despite all this there is no glory in work or being a worker—and this is where both leftists and rightists can't fathom *Processed World*. My patriotic superhero is the anti-worker who, even though s/he may strive for the best work compromise, refuses to internalize the ethics of the good job. My four-star Bad Attitudinist realizes that even creating a niche where you get paid to do what you intrinsically love doing doesn't make it *feel good* to be a cog in the planetary work/war machine. I salute, shower medals upon, even promise a parade for all those struggling against just doin' the good job. Here's hoping to hear from you.

—Med-o

# BAGHDAD BY THE BAY



Graphic Arch D. Bunker & C.C.

COMING SOON TO A  
HOME FRONT NEAR YOU!

AN ARCH D. BUNKER PRODUCTION

time was new, where the clock was a recent by-product of the alchemists' quest for perpetual motion. They found it, too: one has only to consider the Long Island Expressway at eight in the morning or the Santa Monica Freeway at dusk to know that medieval magicians still exercise a dark power over this age of smart machines and brainless citizens.

Elsewhere Shakespeare wrote, "I were better to be eaten away with rust than to be scoured to nothing with perpetual motion." I second that. The end of time—of time available to us, of time under our control, of free time—wears us all away, planes off those little burrs of individuality, smoothes us into perfectly functioning ball bearings in the great raceup of the State.

Any destiny but such erosion, please. Resist it. Take the day off, and tell your employer that you demand more hours for yourself. If the whistle blows at eight, do what pleases you until nine, then go home early. Call in sick on the anniversary of the Haymarket riots. Give the planet a break by staying in bed. Spurn alchemy, revive history, commit acts of temporal revolution.

Take your time.  
—Gregory McNamee, Tucson, AZ

## THE TURNING WHEEL

Dear **PW**:  
I work as a radio newscaster for one of the three big networks—one of the last great union gigs on Earth. The pay is generous, though likely soon to be reduced; but for me and at least some of my colleagues, it's a spiritually corrosive job. We work in a straitjacket. Many of **PW**'s "tales of toil" therefore seem disturbingly familiar. My wife and I are saving money as carefully as we can in order to finance an early escape from our

respective corporate hamster wheels. This is not easy even for relatively lucky workers like us. I think I'd go bonkers if I had to keep at it until "retirement" age (I'm 46). I stand in awe of those who cannot escape the master wheel, yet somehow manage to stay human. But no one should have to pass the test. My wife's grandfather correctly told her that if work were so terrific, the rich would have kept it for themselves.

—A Reader, New York

## COMEDY ISN'T PRETTY

Dear **PW**:  
I basically agree with your premise that corporate employment is degrading, mentally insulting, meaninglessly hierarchical, etc. It seems that your response to the working world was just as meaningless and personally degrading; you have to be part of the business world, so your only response is to give a half-assed effort and sabotage the workplace. Is this your view? Or is this just using comedy to get people to think about their working lives? If it's comedy, do y'all have a rational alternative to the corporate world?

—GC, Albany, CA

## BOLO'BOLO, HUBBA'HUBBA

[Last spring (1990), three **PW**ers (Chris Carlsson, Med-O, and D.S. Black) were sponsored by the Anti-Economy League of S.F. to travel to Eastern Europe as corporate insultants. Armed with anti-business cards, indefatigable hedonism, and the humble desire to destroy the entire western financial system, we made friends with many radicals in Poland, Prague and East Berlin. Below are excerpts of 2 letters from a sharp couple we

stayed with in Wroclaw, Poland.]

Dear people,  
We have been reading **Processed World** on our vacations, and now I guess I understand more of your mission. There are two things that seem to me to be the obstacle in the communication between you and the people of Eastern Europe. First, sometimes the language you use automatically brings about unpleasant associations since it does not avoid the expressions we have been offered by the communist propaganda for the last 40 years. . . : [e.g., the term "collective" while connoting voluntary, decentralized group collaboration and democratic decision making here, was a horrific doublespeak application by the state to force unwilling people into groups that had no power or internal democracy—Ed.]

Second, quite a lot of the problems you deal with are very local, very American or at least caused by the level of civilization which is at present beyond our reach. We are many years backwards (though we did have "Mr. Ed"), and computers are a new thing here. I realize I live among the "social margin" people, but I do not know anybody (not a single person!) who would go everyday to work in an office, would have to dress nicely and smile, and be a good clerk—indeed, life here is quite different than in S.F.

The problem with most people I know is what to do with the potential they have, all the energy they don't know what to do with because there are still so few areas of possible social activity, and even if there is somebody who attempts to create a new one, he or she has to be a real strong personality to overcome people's frustration and passivity.

I learned a lot from you [during Med-o & Chris' visit in June, '90], and most important

was for me the discovery that dreams are not necessarily doomed to failure only because of their "dreamy" nature. . . We are products of this reality. We complain a lot. You do a lot. There are serious differences—we have learned to be active first.

We have had also some troubles recently, also concerning our plans of spreading the good **Bolo'bolo** news. [**Bolo'bolo** is a Swiss author's practical utopian analysis to transform the "existing planetary work machine" into non-monetary, decentralized, globally connected collective **bolo**'s—Ed.]

So we are not able to do as we hoped—to translate and publish **Bolo'bolo** in parts—it is a very good time for it now, everything being in a state of complete chaos. Unfortunately, now we are back to step one: finances and organizing the technical background.

Some weeks ago Julita and Piotr visited P.M., the author of **Bolo'bolo** in Zurich. The conversation was short but meaningful:

Piotr: So what have you been doing all this time? You haven't yet introduced the **Bolo'bolo** system in Switzerland. . .

P.M. (apologetically): Oh, Switzerland nowadays is not a good time and place for **Bolo'bolo**. . .

Julita and Piotr (enthusiastic laughter): But Poland nowadays is absolutely a gorgeous place for **Bolo'bolo**!

My best wishes of a Great **Bolo'bolo** all around the world.

Hah!

—Hanka, Wroclaw, Poland

## FOR LIFE

Dear **PW**:

Believe it or not, a tiny minority of students here at Oxford University are totally refusing to make use of the "privileges" we are handed on silver plates, but there is no **serious**, organized alternative to the boring, dodgy, retro, liberal, pseudo-political or crypto-artistic groupings which are self-perpetuating and **DOOMED TO DIE**.

Attempts to collectivize, mobilize, even have good parties, fail again and again. They call us "hippies," "anarchists," "boat-rockers," or that most impotence-inducing label of all: "guilt-ridden middle class children." But we know what we believe, and what we've lived through (11 years of Thatcher).

I'm trying the best that I can to use the time here, which I am **very** privileged to be experiencing, to read the original texts, the ones which have questioned the bases of The Centralized Power, since "English literature" began: whether that's 20th century literary theory, studies of other people's studies of "culture," deconstruction, medieval mystical texts, the nineteenth century novel, industrial revolution, or whatever. It's a hard thing to justify, because it is totally unjustifiable. "Student life" would be obsolete in utopia.

It's getting late. My generation is utterly despairing and desperate, and doesn't realize it yet.

Yours for life,

—Lilah, Oxford, U.K.

## THIS PHONE'S FOR HIRE

Dear **PW**:

The day before the war to liberate Kuwait

## TWISTED IMAGE

by Ace Backwards ©1991



was launched by the U.S.-led coalition forces, I smashed my Geo Metro car, and was forced to take a night job to pay for the damages. My background is in political fundraising, and so it seemed natural for me to do this again.

This job, ironically enough, was in direct response to the war. It was fundraising over the telephone for Citizen to Citizen, a client of Gargantua Campaigns. Gargantua exists to raise money for itself and others. It is a professional fundraising machine, employing over fifty telemarketers who work in several staggered four-hour shifts. For the last several months, Citizen to Citizen had been working to call attention to the U.S.-funded war against El Salvador. Evidently the political concern of the constituent donor base was drifting towards the Persian Gulf, so Citizen to Citizen decided to launch a thirty-day push to prevent the war.

Citizen to Citizen, C2C for short, uses mainstream political organizing to pressure Congresspersons whose votes are deemed to be politically essential. C2C will work in coalition but it also fights the good fight alone, and has a D.C. based lobbying arm. One of the most important selling points of C2C is their ability to train organizers who—money permitting—organize demonstrations, pickets, letters, personal visits to opinion leaders, and TV and radio spots. C2C has a PAC and has cultivated foundation money, and a few well-heeled individuals.

Imagine a phone call five minutes before the war begins: "Mister Bardamu, my name is John Reed, and I'm calling for Citizen to Citizen. We're organizing in 7 states to pressure Congress to restrain the President from launching a war. You're against going to war with Iraq, right?"

This phonebank is high tech. We have computer screens which have been shielded, and a computer which is our telephone. On the screen a small donor profile appears: I know that my telephone call has been answered. The information I have is a name, address, and telephone number. Only rarely do I have a monetary profile. I speak into a mike attached to the headphones. I sit in a

cubicle and stare at my screen. Sometimes it takes as long as two minutes between calls. The computer does the dialing and I do the talking.

"Mr. Bardamu, I'm very happy to hear that you are against the war. I'm sure you know how important it is that C2C continue to lobby Congress for a cease fire in the Gulf with respectable demonstrations. Will you help us with a gift of \$100?"

My objective is placing this sum on a credit card so my company has the donation as soon as possible, and so I get my 10 percent bonus in cash at the end of the night. Checks take time and sometimes other things come up, and that means the money doesn't always come.

Once the bombs began to drop, the pitch to the donor base changed from 30 days to prevent war, to a more pro-active stand against the war. Imagine the telemarketers ringing phones across the United States as CNN broadcast the first rushes of war.

It is an upside down political world. We can save the Amazon by eating ice cream; stop a war anywhere in the world on our Working Assets Visa card (which gives you the opportunity to have a percentage of your credit card fees go to a PC group chosen by Working Assets), and change faces in Congress by buying into a political commodity which will do it for us. Citizen to Citizen is in the business of good causes. Groups like Citizen to Citizen are businesses interested in being players in the big game. Like most businesses, they require techniques of persuasion to build a customer base. My job is persuading you to buy the product. Salvation on the installment plan.

As long as citizens remain pliant and passive and don't inquire too deeply into the necessity for the modern political action package, donors will continue to create a new class of activists who have more in common with corporate thinking than ideological struggle. For instance, if you contribute money to pay a lobbyist in Washington to chat up politicians and monitor the issues for you, then you are also buying into the thinking that incremental change is a feasible solution. It is not.

Each of us must act as individuals and radically alter our way of existence; radically alter our relationship to commodity culture and the toxics that come with it. No government can make you free and no lobbyist can effectively represent your authentic interests if these run counter to the organizational line.

Readers, we are being disempowered by groups that swallow our money and give back to us a product called politics. Unless we hold our elected representatives accountable, without the help of the priest cum lobbyist, we will continue to be sold down the river by our friends. Capitalism is the problem, consumerism the symptom.

In a consumer world, everything that is political is reduced to a TV spot, a direct mail piece, a phone call, or ice cream. We must use our own imaginations in a revolutionary way—we must organize to abolish the middle-class pretensions of our hired political help. We must live out the alternative to consumerism individually by building a community rooted in political struggle.

In short, we must embrace the anti-economy. **STEAL THIS MAGAZINE!!!**

—John Reed, San Francisco, CA

# Not Our Own: Demystifying Goals and Methods of "Progressive" Work



*"Transform the world by labor? But the world is being transformed by labor, which is why it is being transformed so badly."*

—Raoul Vaneigem

*"Anything built on sacrifice and self-renunciation only demands more sacrifice and renunciation."*

—BOLO'BOLO

I'm 30 years old and I have an MA degree in political science, which is not enough to get any kind of good job, but enough to exclude you from any unskilled or semi-skilled jobs because employers know you'll never last. I've worked a lot of jobs—cab driver, landscaper, even ad clerk at *The New York Times*, but I quickly left them out of boredom, frustration, or low pay.

What I learned from all of them is that the only thing that makes them bearable for five minutes is the social interaction. What made them all eventually unbearable was the utter uselessness and meaninglessness of the work

itself. I usually found myself growing despondent, listless, and suicidal after just a few days. So for the past several years I've made a living trying to do something useful, fun and that I do well—political organizing. For the average leftist, who chants whatever the *Workers World* thugs tell him to and dutifully ponders this week's media issue, it can be a great solution. If you fit this description, stop reading and look in the help wanted section of *Community Jobs*, *In These Times* or *The Nation*. But if your faculty for critical thinking and communal and libertarian vision lingers despite your best efforts to drown it in careerism, it can be a bumpy ride. That's especially true if you refuse to believe any single organization is worth dedicating your whole life to.

I've worked for a spectrum of U.S. leftist groups.

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**Public interest groups spread information, but foster ignorance—about how the electoral system works, about what constitutes political activity. Suddenly, the "politically correct" thing to do is to write your congressperson!**

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I was campaign coordinator for a Citizens' Party State Senate race, I raised funds for the New National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee and the New Jersey ACLU (no pay, commission only, zero money), I canvassed for New Jersey Citizen Action, sorted mail at the *Guardian*, and stacked groceries at Texas' biggest food co-op. By early '88, I had just about given up on this method of making a living when a strange experience led to slightly improved working conditions and a bit more "status."

A friend told me that the National Lawyers Guild was hiring. (Incidentally, I got most of these political jobs by knowing people who knew people at the group in question. I'm not sure whether this is a leftist version of "it's who you know" or a sign of "community" winning out over

abstract “merit” in the hiring game.) I called the Guild, and the person on the other end of the line insisted I come in immediately for an interview despite my protests that I was in blue jeans and sneakers and unprepared. I didn’t even know what the job was.

I was hired immediately to recruit students at law schools and form new chapters of the Guild across the country. I had done Civil Liberties work—which involved very little actual knowledge, ability, or organizing experience—and had dropped out of law school after one year. Also, as a student I had been a member of the Guild. They figured, probably correctly, that I’d be able to relate to left-wing law students. For reasons I will describe below, I left after a year.

Most left-wing groups pay very poorly: My National Civil Liberties pay started at \$5 an hour, and was \$7 when I left; the *Guardian* pay was unmentionably low. But the Guild paid \$20,000 a year, which seemed like a lot to me, and for the first time in my life offered health benefits and overtime pay.

Also, with the Guild on my resume, I could apply for union jobs, which usually pay in the mid-’20s with benefits and often a car. But when I eventually looked into working for a union, the only one interested in hiring me was the white collar division of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), PACE, which offered me a job at their one-person Vermont state office. They paid slightly less than the Guild, but did provide me with a car and expenses.

My most recent sojourn into employment was a temporary organizing position with the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR), which I took after being transferred back to New York with PACE at my own request. CIR is a NY-based union of medical residents, people who regularly work 80-130 hours per week right out of medical school. The job paid \$15,000 for six months, more than I had ever made before. This enabled me to get a larger unemployment check when I left.

For the past six years, I’ve been part of the *Midnight Notes* publishing collective. This journal gives me something that no job ever has—the chance to be part of a genuine collective based on a common project and a common understanding of the world. It’s a place where I can express my own “maximum” views instead those of the lowest common denominator



Graphic: C. C.

coalition politics that predominate at most leftist organizations.

I started with this long, detailed list of jobs and wages because such factors shape the world views and political analyses of even the most abstract radical thinkers. Also, it makes it clear that the analysis that follows is based on extensive experience.

### Institutional Ambivalence

I don’t think any single organization can represent a whole movement or class. The *experience* of collective and individual self-transformation, which is the basis of all genuine radical social struggles and what attracts people to them in the first place, can never be totally encompassed by the work of the organizations that partially represent that movement.

At best, institutions mobilize people at a crucial moment in history, or champion the needs of some of the exploited. At worst, institutions project the interests of those social sectors from which they recruit onto a whole class or movement. This process accounts for the bureaucratization of unions, parties and other groups, and explains how they become detached from and hostile to criticisms, suggestions, and initiatives from below.

At the lowest level of “degeneration,” these institutions can consciously play a crucial role in siphoning off political energies by providing an alternative job market for people who hate capitalist institutions and refuse to work for corporate profits. We get to work on

political issues, but not the issues that we would work on, or in the way we would work if it weren’t a job. The possibilities for creating communal places to live, produce, consume, and create close off to you when you’re stuffing envelopes to save a rainforest, or lobbying some legislators. Meanwhile, even if you would prefer the former course, members of your potential alternative network are also working either at straight jobs or for the left.

Only reasonably well-funded organizations can provide a living wage, but the well-funded-employer market is determined by funders. By default these become the left. That they have offices and people in charge means that they are available to cooperate with the media, the Democratic Party, and other institutions as a responsible, respectable, formal opposition. If an alternative view is presented on TV, it belongs to the chairperson of a recognizable national organization, or a left lawyer.

Although these individuals advocate an alternative, they keep working people and less formal activists like squatters, ACT UP, and local groups from presenting their views and being recognized. So while we keep body, soul, and sanity together by working at non-profits, we are helping to prevent the formation of a real movement.

What’s more, because these organizations need funding to operate this way, preserving their financial base becomes Priority No. 1. Increasingly structured around their budget, they consider their

members as nothing more than a funding source. Yet this thwarts the ostensible purpose of political organizations in the first place—strengthening and enhancing a struggle or movement.

It's no surprise, then, that people usually avoid formal organizations when the need for action arises—witness the proliferation of antiwar groups amid the chaos of the divided formal groups. Yet when no autonomous mass upheavals exist, these labor, civil liberties, and other groups do mitigate political repression and occasionally help push through a useful reform. More importantly, they sometimes provide a space for activists to meet, gain political experience, do some of their “own” political work, and survive without being ground up in the wheels of capital.



### BODY BAGS BY HEFTY

The official bag of Operation Desert Shield  
A Mobil Chemical Company product.

### Pursuing Your Own Agenda

The question is: How can people whose vision of life is communal and egalitarian and who work at leftist organizations 1) advance exploited people's own initiatives; and 2) develop some fun, collective project that builds community?

The short answer is that you cannot do your own political work while working for the left anywhere I've been if you have my priorities. The long answer is that you can do some of it if you: 1) go around the organization while using its contacts/networks and resources; 2) make it your top priority to facilitate self-organization, not just recruit for your employer; 3) develop horizontal networks among those involved in the group's campaigns; and 4) don't care very much about getting fired.

Historically, this is a very strange way to make a living. The only other leftists who did so were the generation of communists who became union organizers and officials in the '30s and '40s. This precedent is not a comforting one, because both the role these men played and the way unions turned out are a mixed bag at best.

The institutions that today's radicals work for fall into three categories. The first are organizations run as unpaid collectives or communes 20 years ago. The second are those which arose after the '60s movement faded. The third are those already seen as corrupt when the New Left was new, but which have acquired a new attractiveness because other, better alternatives are lacking.

In the first category, I put the *Guardian* and the National Lawyers Guild—which the New Left literally rejuvenated through collective volunteer work. A number of New Left groups, forged in the heat of battle with 60s communist enthusiasm, continue to function, but as formal organizations with paid staff and a clear division of labor between managers and workers. During my stay at the *Guardian* and the Guild, I found people more “consciously” or consistently radical than at Citizen Action. It is always nice to work underneath a poster of Che Guevara or Malcolm X. But the unsavory religious flavor generated when ideological orthodoxy is enforced on top of regular work discipline left a bad taste in my mouth.

The *Guardian* claimed to be a collective, and a “Leninist” one at that. But a subtle hierarchy existed. I was not the only one told that before I could obtain full membership with policy voting rights I would have to “clarify my views on the Soviet Union.”

### Organizing the Organizers

The job at the National Lawyers Guild was one of the best I ever had. There was a union, something I longed for at Citizens Action, although when my position needed new funding, its function left something to be desired. A staff union testified to the Guild's sincerity about living up to its ideals. But it also raised the question of why we should need union representation at our “own” organization.

There is no question that employees at many “progressive” organizations need unions to get treated with some respect and gain the benefits that even some small, mainstream companies afford their employees. Also, a union provides

a way to share thoughts with fellow employees, who are invariably activists too.

In theory, the officials in charge are also activists, even fellow members of the working class. But the creation of organizations designed to gain employer concessions acknowledges that antagonistic relations and class differences exist within the workplace. Whether or not we focus on the power of only *some* to hire and fire, or the difference between formulating policy and carrying it out, recognizing that class divisions separate most workers in leftist groups from their “professional” executive directors can revive true alternative politics in this country.

On a national scale, the rank and file caucuses that appeared in many unions in the '70s, such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union, reflect this division. However, as with Miners for Democracy's capture of the United Mine Workers Union, once such groups gain power the relationship between leadership and members remains fundamentally unchanged.

The most dramatic example of this is the rise of Solidarnosc. The strikes that created it in 1980 (and not the other way around) clearly demonstrated that the Communist Party was *not* the workers' party. The union's formation meant that class conflict existed between the workers and the state. But once in power, Solidarnosc started representing class interests other than those of the workers, and rank and file control gave way to a new bureaucratic professionalism.

### The Issue of Class

Through the Guild I saw a lot of the United States, met hundreds of radical young people, and probably encouraged somebody to consider alternatives to corporate law. But I was organizing lawyers. Nothing's wrong with this, but I was sometimes aware that I was lower in the social pecking order than my “clients,” leftists or not.

What's more, the projects I worked on had to enable lawyers or law students to play a role. The issues themselves—racism, sexism, Palestine—were often good. But radical forms of organization should not only be internally democratic and non-hierarchical, which the Guild was not, but should also allow the exploited to interact in ways that break down the social hierarchy.

Organizations based upon professional affiliations pose problems—they're not bad, but limited. In theory, legal workers

and jailhouse lawyers can be members. But the jailhouse lawyers are treated as charity cases, and the legal workers, including the Guild staff, are clearly a low priority. In addition, legal workers have very little decision-making power. This is mostly because of a lack of resources, but also because funding priorities require a focus on paying members.

The inclusion of non-professionals and students was forced on the old left movement by the struggles of students, prisoners and women in the early '70s. Thus, changing the social relations within the legal union are part of the movement outside the organization, which determines relations within.

The increasing moderation of old "New Leftists" and the continued presence of old "old leftists," who always counsel working within established structures like liberal city governments and avoiding controversial subjects like Palestine, made my stay at the Guild uneasy. Old CP'ers had never reconciled themselves to the inclusion of law students, as it would make the Guild seem less serious-minded compared to the American Bar Association—to which it is supposed to be an alternative.

As a result, my position came under fire. A new president of the Guild, as always chosen *before* the national convention, planned to forego recruiting new members in favor of making the Guild a clearinghouse for high-profile, media-oriented cases handled by a national staff of lawyers. This hasn't happened yet, but the political atmosphere got uncomfortable and increasingly careerist. Some Guild members were defending the police in brutality and civil rights cases for city administrations like Chicago Mayor Harold Washington's, which were perceived as grassroots-oriented. Others were defending the victims.

I took the liberty of expressing my views on these and other subjects. Soon the national office was getting enough complaints about me that I decided to politely bow out. This blew my chances for a good reference despite having set up their whole law student recruitment structure from scratch and adding many new chapters.

Working for these formerly volunteer groups makes you more likely to meet some genuine radicals with whom you may work in the future. You'll also learn a lot of useful information. But it's an uphill climb for someone whose goal is to

overcome class divisions and create an ideologically unconstrained movement. Luckily, such groups are still quite marginal because they are explicitly anti-capitalist in theory if not always in practice. Mostly they lack a sense of humor, but they do allow some diversity of views.



### Citizen InAction, Public DisInterest

More insidiously typical, and more cynical and prevalent, are "category two" jobs at Citizen Action and similar "community organizations" and "public interest" groups. If the New Left groups were born of '60s rebellion, and became tamer and more conventional with the movement's collapse, the defeat of these revolutionary aspirations in the mid-'70s laid the groundwork for Massachusetts Fair Share (now defunct), the California Public Interest Research Group (CalPIRG), the United Neighborhood Organization, and their ilk.

These groups appeal strongly to white suburban liberals and leftists who have little or no experience of real social movements or direct action. They push specific pieces of legislation, which are usually OK as far as they go, but they organize in the most conventional manner possible. They parody the camaraderie of real collectives by going out to canvass in teams, ringing doorbells and making you work endless hours for low pay out of "idealism." You go drinking at the end of the night with your team because you work so much that you never see anyone else.

Public interest groups spread information but foster ignorance—about how the electoral system works, about what constitutes political activity. Suddenly, the "politically correct" thing to do is to write your congressperson!

But if their strategy is absurd, even reactionary, their tactics *could* be revolutionary. They are among the only groups that go to people's homes to talk to them about politics (only in the last few years have some labor unions tried this tactic). The problem is that the canvasser gets an empty petition signed, a letter written to a Senator, and maybe a new subscription to the group's magazine—period. People are never broken out of the isolation in which the organizer finds them.

I saw this problem most clearly when we canvassed Belleville, New Jersey, mere weeks after the racially mixed, blue-collar town had discovered the largest-ever dump of dioxin, the chemical base of Agent Orange. Citizen Action was pushing a Right To Know Bill on Toxics (which eventually passed the legislature only after farm workers were explicitly excluded from protection under the bill).

The bill was of course too late to help Belleville, but was not irrelevant to their problem. Unlike wealthier towns, everyone gave me some money towards my "quota" in the piecework wage system and wrote a letter. But they all asked, "Which group is it this time?" Every ecological group in the world had been at their front door in the past month, but the residents were still in the same boat. Worse yet, despite their anger and militancy, they remained as isolated and felt as helpless as before.

The New Left at its best saw breaking through people's isolation as the *purpose* of radical politics. They recognized that in groups, people's consciousness, abilities and commitments are radically different than when they act as individual citizens or consumers.

But in contrast, citizen-based organizing depends on that isolation. No one had called a group meeting where Belleville residents could talk among themselves, relying on their own knowledge and resources as well as the expertise of helpful activists. No one organized direct action to punish the companies responsible.

Public interest and citizen groups (including many mainstream environmental organizations) also depend on a steady supply of cheap, willing labor in

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versely, we were ordered out of some offices because the garment organizers were interested in the shops. I stayed as long as I could find new ways to meet workers.

I knew PACE would not be the im-

petus to mass office worker insurgency, but I thought that anything that fostered struggle, militancy, and collective interaction would seed future movements. However, soon there were no avenues toward this goal left, and virtually the

the form of idealistic college students and recent graduates desperate for non-corporate work. A successful revival of demands for "wages for students" in the form of lower tuition, higher scholarships, and more grants instead of loans might eliminate these organizations overnight!

The old left joined mass organizations to win members to their own party. Today radicals can play a positive role in such groups only by subverting the "public interest" strategy by fostering rank and file personal contacts to discuss needs met only outside the organizations' limits. Some tenant organizers I know bring tenants together to form fuel co-ops, discuss problems, and pressure the very groups for which the organizers work for more resources and decision-making power. It is rarely possible to carry out this kind of agitation, but the human contacts are very rich at some of these jobs—people would often have me in for coffee, dinner, long conversations.

### **The Union Staffer**

Unions of course fall into "category three"—groups already discredited as sources of social transformation. They are also the most stable and best paying—plus, union organizing leads to much more intensive contact with working people.

But the level of cynicism one finds among union people is astounding. The white-collar division of the ILGWU for which I worked was ostensibly created because, with garment workers declining in numbers, the union hoped (along with many other unions) to latch onto the growth in office workers. But no one has successfully organized large numbers of U.S. office workers. This suggests a need for innovation, experimentation, and concern for issues like abortion, sexual harassment, and child care.

No innovation was allowed at PACE. The hierarchy knew that an organizer has tremendous potential to facilitate contact among workers—in short, to subvert the union in favor of rank and file power. So they put real pressure on us all.

Years ago the ILGWU crushed a unionization attempt by the organizing staff. We were prevented from working with feminist groups, and I was banned from meeting with radical church activists. The height of cynicism was reached when companies were told that if they allowed their garment workers to join the ILGWU without a fight, we could leave their office workers alone. Con-



Photo: D.S. Black

whole staff quit.

This job reminds me about one of the biggest problems with all existing organizations: radicals gain experience at such places and bring analyses and knowledge to them, but the organizations impede political movements by preventing us from using all that we know. Their whole basis for existence is the fragmentation of political needs, issues, and identities. In this they are reactionary.

Was I supposed to talk about nuclear power or the death penalty when people wanted to discuss these problems? Or was I supposed to tell them that I was sorry, but our organization didn't talk about those issues? Once, at a union staff meeting, I was told that our goal was to get a majority of pro-union people, even if that meant a white majority over a black minority. Fighting racism was a fine thing, said my boss, but not what we did. When I argued that overcoming racial divisions within the working class would make our job easier in the long run, discussion ended. We organized one workplace at a time, period.

This fragmentation of experiences, goals, knowledge, ideals, and energies means that we spend 40 or more hours per week in ways that prevent us from fully using our talents. All of the various kinds of "intelligence" we've accumulated suffer from disuse because they promote more threatening, multidimensional struggles. Controlling radicals and shutting off uncontrollable avenues of resistance have been capitalism's major projects ever since the 1960s.

In fairness, working for the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR) was a much better experience. I worked on a successful strike campaign at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital in the South Bronx. The majority of doctors were "Third World" Puerto Rican, Indian, Pakistani, Arab. We had picket signs in Hindi, Spanish, and Arabic, and protest songs in five languages. The residents there were likely to work for wages their whole lives and were ruled by threats from superiors. Nurses and other community people led them on picket lines, breaking down the hierarchy of doctor/nurse/patient. We even won the strike!

However, I discovered that when doc-

tors struggle with other workers, the union undoubtedly represents the professionals' specific interests. These are not always antagonistic to those of other exploited people—CIR supports a national health plan, for instance. But they are different.

In a contract dispute in a state-owned New Jersey hospital where most residents were white middle class males, the issues seemed more narrow and parochial. Contempt for lower echelons of workers lay just beneath the surface in many, though not most doctors. What's more, though CIR is superior to most unions in its recognition of members' needs and demands, even "far left" CIR organizers were sometimes suspicious of rank and file initiatives.

When previous structures carry over or reflect parallel corporate or state hierarchies, the "professional" role the activist plays separates him from the very people he came from or "represents." Obviously, some "professionals" are more "sensitive" to this problem than others. But for the most part it is *not* subjective.

At CIR, three organizers—myself, and two other "anti-authoritarians"—would sometimes suspect a member who put out a leaflet on his own, organized for other than previously agreed-upon demands, or who called his own meeting.

We weren't necessarily "wrong" in thinking such efforts divisive, incompetent, or even the result of bad intentions. But it's impossible to tell whether you're *in* and *of* the organization when you aren't the one working 80 hours a week or living on a dioxin dump. It isn't that members are *always* right, but that their outlook, interests, and experiences are very different from the organizers'. What's more, they have a different class perspective from the leadership, who become focused on remaining in interesting jobs where they can control institutional policy.

### "Portals to Radicalism" or Just "Good Jobs?"

I'm tired of "progressive" jobs, but I've learned that their use value is what's most important—along with the wage. If you can use your job to get experience or create some space for your own political priorities and it pays a living wage, it can be bearable for a while—even positive. But if you feel like you're being ripped off, you'll resent every limitation and restriction that much more.

Now I'm hoping to get a Ph.D. and

teach for a living. I don't see a qualitative difference between this and many of my previous jobs: part of the work is interesting and fulfilling to me, part of it is not because it's organized as a job. Pay is low, but the exploitation less severe than in corporations. The human relations can be fun—getting through to students, enjoying room for activism, meeting other faculty with common concerns—but the hierarchy and careerism are stultifying.

I've never kidded myself that I was making revolutionary changes when I worked for unions, except when I tried to go beyond the job's limitations. I have the same attitude towards academia, except there the job security and eventual wages are a bit higher.

The careerist New Leftists who flocked to teaching positions in the '70s, but who are politically quiescent today (except for their mostly unread books), made the mistake of assuming that teaching *per se* could be radical activity—as though capital can't turn *anyone* into a commodity.

The "long march through the institutions" usually leads only to empty institutional victories. But any time people can find collective space to struggle against power, or can work mainly to reproduce themselves and friends instead of profits, a foundation for expanding the struggle exists.

We have to first demystify the alternative labor market. Marxist professorships, civil rights attorneys, union jobs for left-wingers, canvassing positions—all exist today because our extra-institutional struggles created new needs and wants and transformed "the market." The question is how we can move on from these accomplishments and use our proven capacity to *transform* the labor market to *abolish* the labor market!

—Steven Colatrella



# Progressive Pretensions



I spent most of my young adulthood avoiding formal “work.” The thought of the soul-killing routine that makes up the bulk of most careers horrified me. Unfortunately, I had no clear notion of what I wanted to do, only a strong aversion to boring and routine tasks. As much as possible, I arranged my life so that I could lay around and read with no obligation to do anything else.

College provided an obvious and easy refuge for the lifestyle I desired. By reading the textbooks the week before exams I picked up enough to pass most courses without wasting too much time on academics. The luxuriant student financial aid of the mid '70s easily paid the token tuition at the city university with plenty left over to subsidize my leisure.

When I finally left home (at age 20), the student dole ceased to be enough to get by on, and I was compelled to

seek part time work. I couldn't hack more than two months as an evening phone surveyor for “Snears”; I only lasted six weeks as a file clerk at the library. Finally, I found a nice, over-paid, federally subsidized “work-study” job reading journal articles for an absent-minded professor of epidemiology.

My academic status justified my existence to my parents. I satisfied my own existential needs by other means. Coming out as gay, and the associated sexual exploration, occupied my twenty-first and twenty-second years pretty fully.

The Movement, as personified by my lover Joe the Professional Revolutionary, anchored my world for the next two years. It had the additional benefits of aggravating my mother and enshrining my aversion to “alienated” work as political

correctness, rather than mere laziness and/or whining. I coasted, happily, a little longer.

## THE PARTY

After several years of aimless academic browsing I dropped out of school (a 24-year-old junior) in the summer of '81, and so lost the shelter of financial aid and cushy work-study jobs. After a last six months of leisurely hanging out on my unemployment checks, I was faced with the task of getting a “real” job. And it might as well be one that would justify my existence at the same time, for I was being purged from The Party.

Joe's group, the now-defunct Revolutionary Socialist League, was kind of a humanist Spartacist League, dedicated to a Proletarian Revolution. Come the Revolution, we would run things. Until

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it as a Career.***

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then, the rank and file worked (ideally) in heavy industry, which provided contact with Real Workers and large dues for the Central Office (about 50% of the wages and everything over \$20,000). This work, despite appearances to the contrary, was not "alienated" because it was an part of being a Professional Revolutionary.

The middle management (branch honchos) were allowed cushy, middle class jobs like teacher or social worker. The top hochos were paid a bohemian pittance by the Party, which they furvively supplemented with many from their parents. Instead of holding down outside jobs they put out the paper from New York City, and spent a lot of time Thinking and writing "documents" about how to build a Leninist revolutionary "party."

Just before we met, Joe had won a hard-fought battle for leadership of the Chicago branch, in one of the very rare successful challenges of the Central Office authority. He defeated the official slate by seducing the local rank-and-file with his appeals to hedonism, and by recognizing of the need for occasional breaks from hawking our unreadable cult rag. He justified his suspiciously enjoyable and unproletarian "interventions" in academia and the gay community by producing real live recruits (a rarity)—like me.

To be a candidate member in good standing, I should have quit school and applied for a job in the steel mills or something. But the rules were not strictly enforced as I was the Organizer's boyfriend. For similar reasons Sally, the Big Cheese's ex-girlfriend, could ignore a technically binding order (from the Organizer before Joe) to get an abortion in order to avoid "wasted" time.

The C.O. never resigned itself to Joe's liberal regime. Refusing to read the writing on the wall, they considered his election an anomaly made possible by temporary rank and file disgruntlement. A year's worth of persistent covert infighting toppled him, and I was caught up in the long postponed house-cleaning. The

technical charges against me were "petty bourgeois" (read: gay) tendencies and anarchism. In view of this latter charge, it amuses me to see that the remnants of the RSL have retro-fitted as "anarchists" in a no doubt futile attempt to find a viable milieu.

In retrospect, I have to acknowledge that I was guilty on both counts, and should never have joined that chicken-shit outfit. My attempts to rally opposition to the C.O. were brushed aside, but I at least tried. Joe, my mentor and lover, didn't even defend himself, instead falling into a months-long depression when "criticized" personally by Ron Tabor,

the Big Cheese. I was kicked out after a brutal trial before a kangaroo court, while Joe was allowed to resign from office and go "on leave" from Party duties.

Our relationship had been on the rocks for most of its three years. Still, I was hurt and surprised that he dumped me as soon I was purged. Joe later patched up his difficulties with the CO for another few years. The RSL was more important to him than I was, something I hadn't wanted to discover.

I was out of school, out of work (out of benefits, even), out of the movement,



Graphic: Louis Michaelson

"The rank-and-file stood on frigid street corners waving The Paper at disinterested proletarians."



and didn't even have a boyfriend anymore. For the first time in my life, a Career began to look good to me.

## THE COMPANY

My Career would, ideally, be meaningful, instead of a mere auctioning of my precious time for a paycheck. It had to be Socially Responsible, if not actively Politically Correct. It couldn't be too mainstream, because I just couldn't pass as a standard drone. In fact I couldn't even get a position as a bank teller (a standard job for young three-piece-suit queens).

At first I scraped by on a variety of casual jobs, ones that didn't require much interaction with mainstream work culture. A combination of part-time non-legal pursuits offered short hours but required unsavory company. House-cleaning for "Brooms Hilda" provided good browsing opportunities but little existential gratification. Working as a clerk at a used book store came close to being ideal; then the creepy proto-fascist owner tried to get in my pants. I quit.

A guy I was dating at the time suggested I apply at Recycled Paper Products. His best friend's lover was "an executive" there, and with her recommendation and my native talents, I got a job.

RPP had just reached the peak of its growth. Started in a garage in the early '70s by founders Mike and Steve, RPP printed off-beat greeting cards on 100% recycled paper, a novelty back then. They offered a cute but not cutesy alternative to the smarmy quatrains favored at that time by the two greeting card giants—Hallmark and American. Their recycled paper shtick got them a lot of good initial media coverage, and their cards sold well.

They began to edge into the mainstream when one of their properties really caught on. Sandra Boynton's cute kitten cards sold in the millions. RPP doubled and doubled again, year after year. By 1982, when I started work there, it was the fourth largest greeting card company in the U.S.. It employed hundreds of salespersons in the field, and a hundred more people at its warehouse in Chicago's south suburbs. The central office in Chicago's Newtown, where I worked, had grown from Mike and Steve and their secretary to a staff of almost two hundred.

Newtown is Chicago's youth/hip/gay neighborhood, a developing zone between thoroughly gentrified Lakeview to

the south and sleazy Uptown to the north. RPP, with its hip, laid-back reputation, fit right in. The office staff included lots of feminist women and gay men from the area. Flex time in the summer allowed the staff to stroll over to Wrigley Field, 2 blocks to the west, for afternoon baseball games.

RPP looked like the perfect refuge. They proclaimed their determination to promote ecology, and played up their belief that the company should be a big, happy family. At first, I approached it as a relatively non-toxic work environment. Soon, encouraged by success, I began to contemplate it as a Career.

I started as a packing slip clerk, graduated in six weeks to commissions clerk, and within six months was assistant manager of my department at double my original pay. This was the largest salary I'd ever earned (\$12,000 a year, even then no big deal), and unlike my friends I didn't have to dress up in establishment drag to go to work. Despite my official cynicism I wondered if the American Dream might not be true. I wondered if I were selling out, or if it were OK to be a capitalist as long as you worked for a progressive outfit, and examined RPP from my new vantage point in the lowest branches of Management.

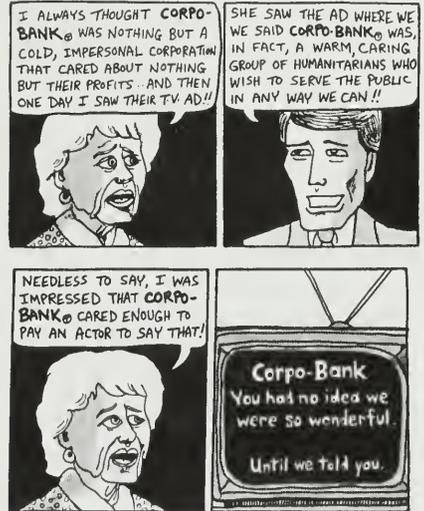
## THE PRODUCT

Some years before I arrived, RPP had had some sort of falling out with Boynton, their biggest star, the woman who did the cute cats. However, their association was too profitable for either party to break off. Bound by iron clad contracts monitored by squads of lawyers from either side, she produced X hundreds of designs per year. There was no direct communication between her and RPP. In addition Mike and Steve had recently gobbled up the Dales, a husband-and-wife team that had tried to be an independent card company and failed. They specialized in cards that had smarmy openers on the front and dirty punchlines inside, using words like "fuck" and "shit"; they were very popular.

But dark times were looming for RPP. Lots of people used recycled paper now. Hallmark began to produce a line of "lite" cards that were a frank rip-off of Boynton's designs—and the gullible public, unable to distinguish these from genuine RPP cards, were buying them. Several previously "underground" card companies were just going mainstream, and their slick stuff was far dirtier—and

## TWISTED IMAGE

by Ace Backwords ©1991



therefore more popular—than anything we produced.

RPP was no longer unique, and its fast growth period was over. For the first time, in 1982, RPP failed to double in size; it hardly grew at all. In 1983 it would suffer its first year of net loss. Mike and Steve, shocked at this sudden downturn after 10 years of uninterrupted success, looked for ways to cut costs. The facade of Family, so long supported by seemingly endless growth, faltered.

## THE FIELD

My department, Payments and Records, was responsible for calculating the pay of everyone who worked in "the Field": anyone outside Chicago. Officially these were all "contractors," so that no one got benefits of any sort. In addition to salespersons, who got commissions, there were "service" people, mostly retired women who stocked cards at their local stores at piece-work rates. My job, in addition to supervising the six-person staff, included resolving the complaints of any sales and service personnel who claimed they were not being paid even the sub-minimum wage they were entitled to.

As part of the austerity effort my boss instructed me to deny all such claims wherever feasible regardless of ostensible merit. This was actually fun to do, particularly as most of the salespeople were pushy and obnoxious. Some of the field personnel, put out at being ripped off by a snotty clerk (me) appealed to their regional managers.

If their regional manager was one of the original five salesmen who signed on with Mike and Steve at the very beginning, they always won their appeal. Otherwise not. The field operation was strictly a feudal-style hierarchy, and no one even bothered with progressive jargon to cover it, as we did at the central office.

### THE WAREHOUSE

When RPP began, its cards were packed and mailed by blind and disabled people contracted via federal and city agencies. This was PR'd as charitable employment, but in fact after federal subsidies and tax breaks, RPP ended up paying them about \$1.50 an hour (and no benefits); some would call this exploitation of the disabled.

When the company grew too big for this, it founded a warehouse in a distant south suburb, a white working class area. The office staff, Newtown liberals and gays, only saw the warehouse staff at the annual Christmas party and we never felt comfortable around these loud red-neck types. We heard vague rumors about tyrannical foremen, low wages, and double-shifts with no overtime.

Shortly after I got there, the warehouse staff tried to unionize. Mike and Steve, progressiveness notwithstanding, hired a famous union-busting law firm and threatened to move the warehouse to Tennessee, a "right-to-work" state. The union lost the vote, the "ringleaders" were fired while a small raise was given to everyone else, and peace returned to the warehouse operation.



Graphic: Louis Michelson

"Barbara was a loud, fat, upfront bull-dyke whose very existence aggravated Eileen's Lipstick Lesbian/Career Woman sensibilities."

I learned most of this by reading confidential memos on my boss's desk while she was doing power lunch. Few people at the central office knew anything about the affair.

### THE OFFICE

In fact, as far as I could tell all my boss Eileen did was Power Lunch. I monitored and assigned work in the office, resolved disputes, prepared reports and gave them to her to sign. She did lunch and attended meetings, held frequent morale boosting sessions where she urged us to work harder in New Age jargon, and lobbied for a larger staff while trying to stay on Mike and Steve's good side.

For some reason I could never figure out, virtually all of the department

heads, like Eileen, were lesbians. Perhaps Mike and Steve felt less threatened by them than they would have by men in the same spots; maybe it was simply that their willingness to tolerate these women's sexual orientation allowed them to pay a good 30% less than comparable positions earned at most other offices.

Soon after I became assistant office manager, Mike and Steve hired an "efficiency consultant" famed for ruthlessly reducing oversize staffs. His advice was to almost totally eliminate an entire level of management—the lesbian department heads, as it turned out. This was actually a pretty shrewd call, for as I'd guessed this crowd did little real work except to stroke the bosses' egos and spy on the workers and each other.

To my bitter disappointment, for I hoped to replace Eileen as many (much lower paid) assistant managers were doing for their ex-department heads, she was one of the very few to weather the storm. Mike and Steve got a real kick out of her sassy, hip style and new age vocabulary.

### ANIMAL FARM

At this point I was totally disillusioned about RPP being progressive in any real way, and also realized that now that "fast growth" had ended, so did my prospects for rising into junior management.

I began to notice parallels between RPP and the RSL, despite their ideological differences. In both organizations the rank and file did shit work, the simple, boring, meaningless tasks that comprise most jobs. The progressive claims of our bosses were supposed to transform this drudgery into something exalted, instead of the "alienated" work we could be doing elsewhere for more money.

The middle management got better, more interesting, and easier work, as well as power over the peons and a chance to hob nob with the honchos. In return for this supposed burden of responsibility, we got vastly higher wages. While my co-workers at RPP added columns of figures, filed forms, and stuffed envelopes, I wrote evaluations of them and performed fairly interesting and challenging (if, ultimately, just as meaningless) tasks. Just so, in the RSL, Joe attended steering committee meetings of this or that progressive cause while the rank & file stood on frigid street-corners waving The Paper at disinterested proletarians.

The Top Honchos in both outfits did nothing but sit around and Think,



Photo: James Carman

assign blame, get their asses kissed, and feud with each other. Mike and Steve of RPP ruminated over their stagnant sales figures; Ron Tabor, the Big Cheese of the RSL, agonized over the dwindling subscriptions to *The Paper*. Mike and Steve spent months on the Annual Report; Ron endlessly wrote *The Book* (on Trotskyism during World War II—a topic as pressing and interesting then as it is now). Both organizations, when a scape-goat was needed, purged their gay caucuses.

In short, the progressive pretensions of both outfits were a scam, with obvious financial and personal payoffs for the honchos. Clearly a good deal for them; equally clearly a raw deal for the peons. But what about the middle managers?

## ESCAPE

The real job of the middle manager is Fink. Kissing ass is rarely enough (unless you're doing it physically, that is, putting out sexually), you also have to keep the peons in line. This, ultimately, was where Joe had let the C.O. down. This was Eileen's real job, which she passed along to me. I'd reluctantly accepted it when I was *On My Way Up*. Now, stripped of my illusions, I balked. I lost my interest in screwing the field personnel out of their commissions, or in whipping on the office. Firing a worker was contrary to RPP procedure—if you fire someone you have to pay a share of their unemployment benefits. Instead, you hazed the worker until they quit. You would take away whatever mildly interesting task they had cornered and give it to someone else, replacing it with inventory duty (the most boring task available). At the same time you watched them like a hawk, noting and writing up every late arrival or long lunch. An impressive paper trail could be used to deny a raise at their annual review—assuming they lasted that long.

Most likely, you have experienced or at least observed this universal and highly successful management technique. The victims are usually perpetrators of Bad Attitude. My first designated purgee was Barbara, a loud, fat, upfront bull-dyke whose very existence aggravated Eileen's Lipstick Lesbian/Career woman sensibilities. She was also the unofficial leader of the department rank and file, organizing the after-work bar socializing and generally slowing the pace of work down to human speed despite Eileen's pep talks.

To my great relief, she quit as soon as it became obvious that Eileen had it in



Graphic: I. B. Nelson

for her, and I was spared the unwelcome task of persecuting her in detail and at length. My reprieve was temporary, for inevitably a new worker with Bad Attitude rose to the top of Eileen's shit list.

I was fed up. I'd been doing Real Work for almost two years, and began to dream of escape. I dreaded going to work every morning, hated every moment I was there, and began to get stoned at lunch every day. Finally, I decided to go back to school, at least part time.

Despite my checkered transcript, I found that I could get a degree with only a year's more work—IF I could take some key classes offered only in the mornings. This meant working less than full time and abdicating as assistant manager, a double relief. Eileen accepted my resignation with tight-lipped anger, clearly scenting Bad Attitude.

To my surprise, school was now a breeze. I aced my courses, and began to suspect that there were ways to become a Professional without kissing Eileen's ass. I applied for graduate school (four more years of prolonged adolescence!) and was accepted on the strength of my phenomenal test scores—the result of several years compulsive reading.

Meanwhile, Eileen had replaced me with a new assistant office manager, a cute (if not terribly bright) young lesbian. Eileen had the galloping hots for Pam's first assignment as Assistant Manager was to haze ME into quitting.

My old co-workers, who had written me off when I became Eileen's protege, welcomed me back to the ranks. They told me how Pam snooped at my desk when I went to work, looking for something incriminating. I began fishing for a student loan, so that I could attend

my last quarter of college as a full-time student. When my safety net was in place, I left a note buried in my "in" file which read: "Hi Pam—snooping again?"

Pam found it as soon as I went to lunch (my co-workers later gleefully reported), and ran into Eileen's office, where they talked in angry whispers for an hour. When I got back, a simmering Eileen called me into her office to reprimand me, but I cut her off and gave her two weeks notice and walked out—one of my finest moments and fondest memories.

Needless to say, I did no real work my last 2 weeks on the job. Despite Eileen's ban, my co-workers threw me a farewell party. For a year after my departure Eileen and Pam attributed every misplaced file to sabotage on my part—not entirely without justification. But it was pretty clearly Pam's profound incompetence, and Eileen's infatuated defense of her, which eventually got them both fired.

Since then I have been remarkably successful at avoiding Real Work, "progressive" or otherwise. Graduate school turned out to be an excellent playground and I highly recommend it to the professional readers of the world.

I have encountered numerous "Progressive" operations since I left the RSL and RPP. All insisted that their Cause would transform routine labor into non-alienated work, and also that eventually there would be a concrete payoff of money and/or power, come Dividends day or the Revolution, as the case may be.

Some were sincere. Most were sleazy scamsters. None delivered the goods.

—Kwazee Wabbit

# Aaaah! *HIP* Capitalists!

1.

That forlorn, plaintive look. The aura of poverty. Soiled blue jacket and dun slacks. Walking through the front door.

*Hurry!*

She darted out from behind her counter to intercept.

"Hi! Can I help you?"

fully expecting a series of unintelligible mumbles, but . . .

"I'll sweep your sidewalk for a sandwich and a bowl of soup"

. . . was an incontestable declaration.

She knew when to settle.

"Fine, I'll get you a broom."

2.

"Nope, no pesticides whatsoever!"

In their designer veggie patches, only Himalayan bottled water from above 9,000 feet would do.

Marta and Jorge only worked part-time for them and they paid them \$8.50 an hour with 2 sick days a month.

What could be fairer?

Marta had four children and also worked part-time at the electronics factory in the mornings.

Rushing from one job to the next, the residues of industrial solvents rushed with her.

Drops of toxic sweat are hidden flavor enhancers.

3.

In the morning fog he runs through eucalyptus-laden hills. His Personal Atmosphere Program fills his house with designer coffee aroma.

After his Daily Pause, his mind is clear, anxiety is reduced to a creatively useful minimum.

Phone in ear on bridge. Numbers begin to fill the void, clarity gradually muddies.

Sun-brightened brick walls feel like a workplace, sort of.

"Stan, I'll be out for a couple of hours at lunch today."

"OK, no problem" but why does she think I'm paying her \$15 an hour?

Not to go shopping, that's for damn sure!

Returning calls.

Most are out, an occasional nibble.

"But it takes so long to pay for itself!"

Think of the bigger picture and then give me the sale!

The market is up, but not hi-tech.

Should he sell his last options?

Damn, who was that? Didja see her?!!

Open convertible, she's in tight leather, cruising back roads.

Phone.

"Pick up Elmer?"

Vet closes early on Wednesday—golf day.

Damn dog, let 'im stay over another night!

"Staaan, puh-leeze!"

4.

Hey, steal from us  
and you're ripping  
off the community!

*Fuck you!*

We're a collective, not profiteers.

*\$4.75 for a tube o' toothpaste!*

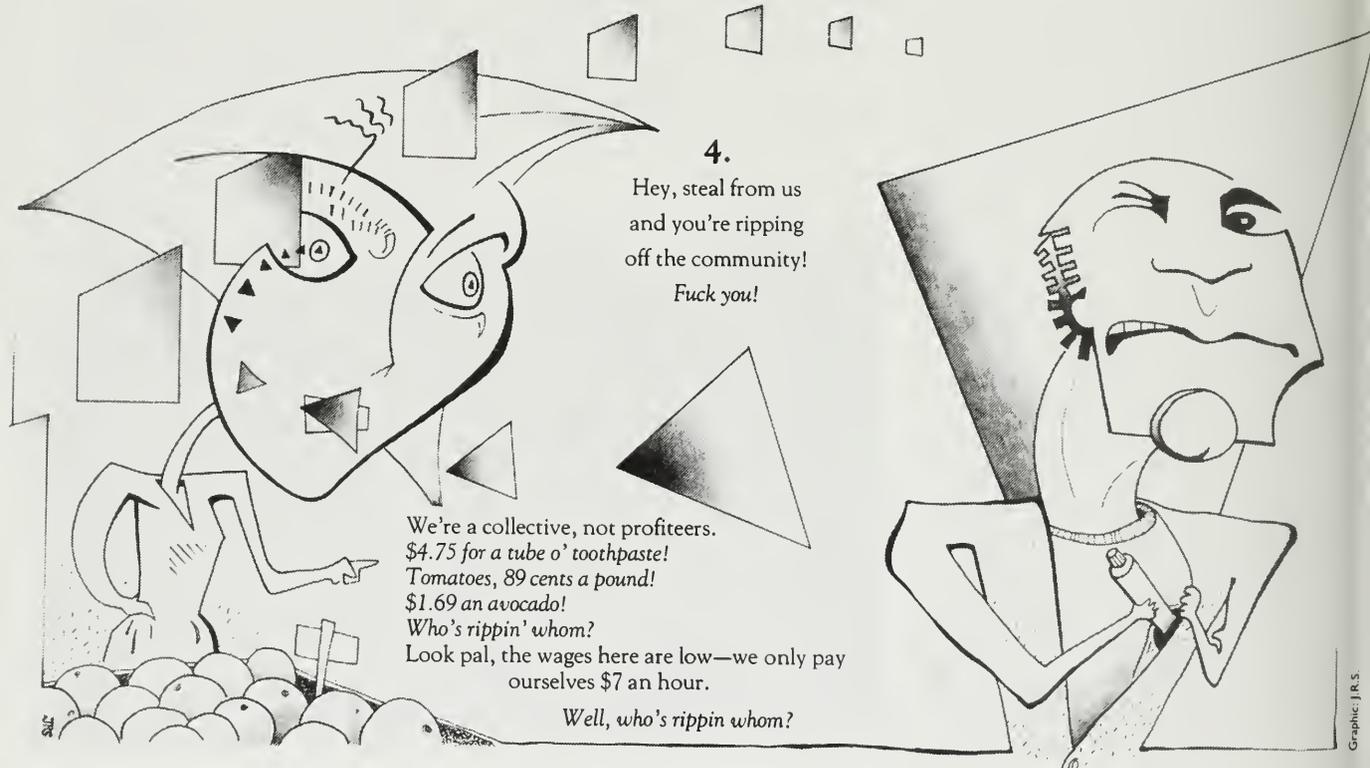
*Tomatoes, 89 cents a pound!*

*\$1.69 an avocado!*

*Who's rippin' whom?*

Look pal, the wages here are low—we only pay ourselves \$7 an hour.

*Well, who's rippin whom?*



5.  
Clattering printer cranking out *personal pitches*™.

Dear Mr/Ms [Last Name],  
You are invited to explore socially responsible investing.  
High returns assured (albeit uninsured).  
Financial Services — Money Massage — Interpreting Circum-  
ambulatory Precious Metals Markets.  
Animating inanimate resources.  
Profiting from dead labor.  
Capital growth through strategic mirror positioning.  
You've *earned* it.  
1-800-IAM-SOLD

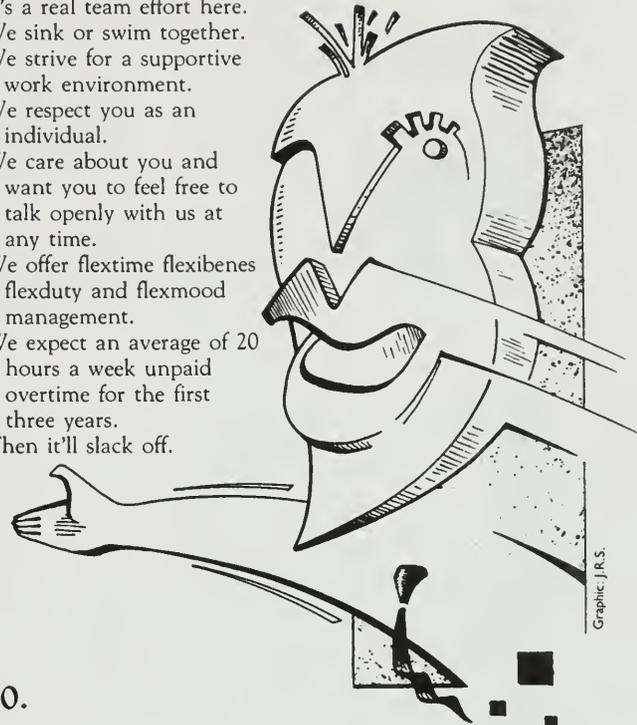
7.  
We started a boom, a new renaissance.  
We've created 47 jobs just in our small business in the past  
year.  
Since we started up, 14 other businesses have opened up in the  
area.  
Honesty, confidence, tenacity, community awareness, that's  
our edge.  
Meeting the needs of consumers best and first.  
Caring through aggressive market research.  
Acting through hiring the homeless.  
Serving through blanket distribution to every home.  
Earning Trust by telling the Truth.  
Profiting by sharing our overhead with government programs,  
and knowing who to know.

8.  
It pisses me off when you treat me like a manager.  
Raised eyebrows.  
Look, we operate by the same rules, we get the same deal don't  
we?  
A look aside.  
You're not working for me you know!  
... I don't like it any more than you do, but let's face it, this is  
our bread and butter.  
Yeah, I guess so.  
I hate this shit.

9.  
Hi, I'm from Better Citizens for an Environment. Have you  
ever heard of acid rain?  
No? Did you hear about the cancer rate just a few miles from  
here?  
Yeah, it's really awful isn't it?  
Our organization is pursuing a lawsuit against this company  
for its chronic violations of pollution law.  
Mmmm.  
We're here today to ask for your support and a donation to  
help us continue.  
Mmmmmm.  
The local playground is—  
OK, here's a five-spot.  
Thanks, keep up the fight!  
... At week's end, payday!  
**Averages:**  
Canvassers: \$169.42 and brow—uh... er... greenie points.  
Staff lawyers and scientists: \$824.17  
Environment: [-\$1,435,887,906,277]

6.  
**Welcome aboard!**

It's a real team effort here.  
We sink or swim together.  
We strive for a supportive  
work environment.  
We respect you as an  
individual.  
We care about you and  
want you to feel free to  
talk openly with us at  
any time.  
We offer flexitime flexibenes  
flexduty and flexmood  
management.  
We expect an average of 20  
hours a week unpaid  
overtime for the first  
three years.  
Then it'll slack off.



10.  
We need to recruit new board members.  
We need to develop more projects.  
We need to keep better records.  
We need to stop working at our jobs so we can do some work  
on what we want to do.  
We need a grant.  
We need a sugar donor.  
We need to be a less needy organization!  
I need some aspirin.  
Pass that joint, would'ja?  
Next meeting?

11.  
Thanks a lot! Really!  
Oh... Don't thank me. Thank you!  
See ya next time.  
OK, bye.  
Phone.  
Can I come over?  
Sure.  
Later.  
Hey, check this out!  
Aaalll RIGHT! Finally, some decent bud!  
This is going incredibly fast.  
I'm sure.  
How much?  
\$4500.  
Shit! What an outrage!  
Remember the \$10 lid?  
The '90s: \$20 grams of sinsemilla.  
Name the three companies, on contract to the same federal  
agency, that secretly control the market.  
Rumor monger.

—Chris Carlsson



# Ambivalent Memories of Virtual Community

I've got a GREAT job. I can walk to work through a pretty neighborhood to work with intelligent people on a project which is both personally creative and socially useful. The job has many different facets and the twenty-four week is flexible—leaving free time for my own pursuits. All this and more, for a thousand dollars a month. I'm a computer programmer with a small nonprofit called Community Memory (CM) which has created a public access electronic bulletin board in Berkeley, California.

For more than ten years (with some time off for good behavior) I've worked as a programmer. My formal education—undergraduate psychology—proved useless in the job market. After a couple of years washing dishes and being a courier, I got a few low-paying jobs programming microcomputers for small companies. I was able to use this experience to get a real job at Structured Systems

Group in Oakland where I spent the next two-and-a-half years ('80-'83) writing instructions for microcomputers (in BASIC for early microcomputers) to help business people count their money accurately and rapidly. The pay was good by my standards, the job relatively unstressful (and *safe*), the co-workers mostly amiable. As a programmer I had a lot of control over not only the pace of the job, but over its direction. I learned a lot, developed some bad habits and read a lot of good books while looking busy.

A year-long vacation was followed by work as a contract programmer for various individuals and small companies, and then a year-and-a-half at a consulting company in San Mateo. I wrote and supported BASIC programs for minicomputers (MAI Basic Four) for clients that were country

clubs or in the food industry (processors, distributors, brokers). My co-workers were a genial lot, and the work was challenging as I grasped the essentials of a new type of computer and a new business. On the down side, I had a long commute from Berkeley by public transit, customer support was a drag, and the poor business climate led to greater demands on staff.

I was laid off in autumn of 1987: a bitter experience, for even with a certain distance from the work I was still *involved*. There is an aspect of creativity—albeit within narrow constraints—to most programming. That aspect is much greater when one is given responsibility for design and support, rather than just coding one little piece without knowing its role in the larger scheme of things.

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***The net result: we reinforce the image of institutions, rather than individuals, as providers of information; some clerk in the city government has yet another task; and the city government—which already has ample ways to disseminate information—continues to set the agenda.***

---

I heard about a “position” at Community Memory from a friend who worked there. I had used their terminals in a grocery store, which were part of a free, publicly-accessible database. It contained a swarm of messages—some on political issues, some advertisements, some raving about the Grateful Dead. I was intrigued and arranged an interview.

I got the job; the meager \$700 a month was a step down, but I was living in a rent-controlled apartment and could squeak by. The work conditions also were worse: instead of my quiet office with a view of the coastal mountains I had a desk in a large room, with no secretary to answer the telephone. On the other hand, I was learning a new language (C) and a new operating system (UNIX) which held great promise for the future: no longer would I be stuck in the double ghetto of being a BASIC (usually said with a sneer) applications programmer. No longer was I counting money or consigning some clerk to the unemployment line, or a secretary to a finger-numbing and brain-deadening job! I could show curious friends what I did for a living, and my “shop-talk” might have a chance of being interesting to a non-technician.

CM has its origins in the public service telephone switchboards of the late '60s and early '70s. There was a continuous turnover in both people and groups which led to a perpetual reinventing of the wheel, as each new person or group duplicated the efforts of others. “Aha! Why not a common storage for ALL of these diverse groups?” asked some. After soliciting various switchboards in San Francisco, a group of computer people who had left the University of California at Berkeley at the time of the Cambodia invasion launched “Resource One.” By the time the technological problems were solved, however, the project was all dressed up with no place to go: the personnel turnover meant that nobody at the switchboards had ever heard of the project.

Terminals were then set up in public places to see how people would use a public bulletin board. Tom Athanasiou<sup>1</sup> described it: “A small three-terminal Community Memory System [was] kept up for about fourteen months. Uses reflected the locations of the terminals. One was in a music store and collected information about gigs, bands and the like. Another, at a hippie hardware store,

specialized in Alternative Technology and barter. The third, located in a public library in the Mission District, a poor area of San Francisco, was little more than a high-tech graffiti board.” The system proved to be much more diverse in its uses than any of the organizers had expected.

Funding never materialized, and it was several years until the system was started again. Several people decided to develop an improved public-access bulletin board system which would use the latest available minicomputers. In 1977, after unexpected delays, and with aid from hardware designer Lee Felsenstein’s success in the newborn personal computer industry, The Community Memory Project was incorporated. A key idea was replicability: other areas or non-geographical groups, including organizers, could start their own CM “nodes.”

Creating software is a long and costly affair, and funding such a venture has driven more than one company out of business. The group decided to develop software in such a way as to allow commercial spinoffs. Predictably this lead to other problems associated with business. Says Athanasiou: “The story of Community Memory is really two stories, reflecting our history as a political/technical collective that took a long, unplanned, and largely unpleasant trip through the computer industry.” There were disputes that reflected the hierarchy of the programmers over other workers, and which pitted the money suppliers against the programmers. There were also fierce debates over sales policy: a South African company wanted to buy “X.Dot,” a communication protocol for linking computers together, and the U.S. Naval Surface Weapons Laboratory wanted to buy a database product (“Sequitur”). Additional tensions developed around the “professionalization” of the operation<sup>2</sup>.

Eventually the software company folded, but there were enough royalties from sales of old products to allow Community Memory to survive, and in September of 1984 a new system with four locations in Berkeley was started. It was driven by a central minicomputer with “dumb terminals” (i.e., the central machine controlled every keystroke and every character on the screen). The terminals were located in several member-owned grocery stores, a Latino cultural center and a “hip capitalist” department store.

They were free, easy to use, and

proved to be popular. Many uses that had been expected *did* materialize, and several that hadn’t been foreseen sprang up, including a sort of “electronic therapy” in which people would describe a problem in their lives and others would respond with advice and support. The system was terminated in the summer of 1988 when the financial collapse of the grocery stores closed half the sites, and the hip capitalists became offended at some message and claimed “liability” problems, as well as the need for more sales space.

By that time CM was hard at work on yet another version, considerably more sophisticated than the previous one. In the summer of 1989 public terminals running the new system were set up. Currently there are ten public terminals located in libraries, 24-hour laundromats, student housing, a senior center and various non-profits. Because the local terminals are microcomputers, which handle the user’s input, screen display, various timing operations, and store copies of messages, the overall operation of the main computer is much more efficient and more people can be served. As in the earlier versions, people may use any “name” they please, and reading messages is free.

Unlike previous versions, however, messages are grouped together in “forums,” which allow more messages to be handled with less wasted time. (Of course, this adds another “layer” the user must negotiate to get to read messages.) Another change is in the content: CM provides a lot of material in the form of listings of community agencies, phone numbers and calendars.



cas. post. 17120  
rivista anarchica # 178  
20170 Milano (Italy)  
Edizione A

Unlike earlier versions it costs money—a quarter—to leave a message. The quarter isn't intended as a funding source for CM (even the busiest site barely pays for the phone line, let alone the cost of a terminal), but rather to reduce the "Fuck You" messages, as well as gibberish and random typing. It undoubtedly also discourages some users, and certainly is a *disincentive* to multiple use (we are now implementing a system that allows us to credit prolific authors with free messages). The software is still being refined; although the process is orderly, the need for improvements is potentially never-ending.

### The Seeds Of Discontent

In many ways, I've got a really SHITTY job. The equipment is inadequate and poorly positioned and my "office" is little more than a cubicle made of bookshelves that does nothing to keep out street and office noise. I'm interrupted by the phone when I'm trying to concentrate, assuming that somebody isn't using my desk when I arrive, and the work can be monotonous. The pay is low for a person with ten years' experience, and the insurance plan is inadequate. Until very recently we were paid monthly, and even then not necessarily on time. My good name [sarcastic smile] is sometimes associated with people and projects that I do not support. And I have come to some unpleasant conclusions about socially innovative applications of technology.

My discontent springs from many sources—long-nagging problems that have become major irritants, a hypersensitivity to political issues and my changing view of the world (and my role in it), and the changing nature of the organization itself.

"Those that do good should not expect to do well" might well be emblazoned over the doors of "nonprofits" and service companies. The continuous parade of broken-down machines and inadequate furniture only emphasizes the message that goes with the small paycheck (a message implicit in "professionalized service systems" in general): (1) You are deficient; (2) you have a problem; (3) you have many problems.

The overt justification for poor conditions and pay is that money is scarce, which it is, compared with the sloshing waste of funds at Visa or Bank of America. But this explanation wears thin after a while; the priority always seems to be something other than the workers. The situation is exacerbated by differential pay scales. When I first started at CM in the spring of 1988, everybody was paid ten dollars an hour (the same wage as in 1981!); a bit more for those who had worked there for long enough to get the (small) annual raises. This changed in 1989 when the first grant money was applied for. The proposal called for two positions to be funded at something closer to \$15 an hour; lo! it came to pass. The justification was that you have to pay more to get good people... an idea I take heated exception to. It was six months before the new pay scale was extended to the programming staff. Interest was also expressed in hiring students at a local business school at \$5 an hour, the rate the school paid its student workers. Ironically, higher pay was accompanied on my part by greater disaffection. My identity became more clearly articulated as that of a mercenary doing a paid task: this is a job, not a calling.

Along with a differentiation in wages

came a greater division of labor. There has been an increase in maintenance labor, both of the hardware and of the information on the system, and this has not been shared equally. The judgment of the relative worth of various tasks can be summed up by: "It's really important, but I have more important things to do, so someone else should do it," a sentiment less common when I started work there.

In earlier days the primacy of the technical staff caused conflict, and more recently has led to comments such as: "For too long CM has been guided by technical needs. Now we must get out of the test-tube and into the community." This argument has been propelled by the availability of funds from large donors oriented toward specific uses and projects, rather than support for software development.

Another source of my discontent has been the creeping institutionalization of the project. Part of this is reflected in the information providers. While there is healthy participation by individuals, a great deal of effort has been spent providing existing institutions, which already have access to various media outlets, with a presence on the system. Try as I may I cannot see how this serves to "empower" (to use one of those fuzzy buzz-words so beloved by progressives) individuals. Many of these institutions are part of a network of "professional helpers" that make a feathered nest out of the alleged problems and deficiencies of large numbers of people. While most of these are innocuous, there are some that are not. Although innocently entered into, CM's appearance on a "Mayor's Advisory Panel on Drug Abuse" drew my ire. Such panels are rarely anything but populist window-dressing for the establishment's jihad against drugs; I was appalled that CM's name would be used without other collective members knowing about it.

At least some of the material on the system, and some of the ties to other organizations, seem aimed at accumulating a laundry list of politically correct items to please potential donors. This includes forums such as "Current Agenda," which has the agenda for upcoming City Council meetings; a whole series of messages targeting the hapless homeless, such as soup kitchens ("prayer service required"); city services; and, always, drug and alcohol programs.

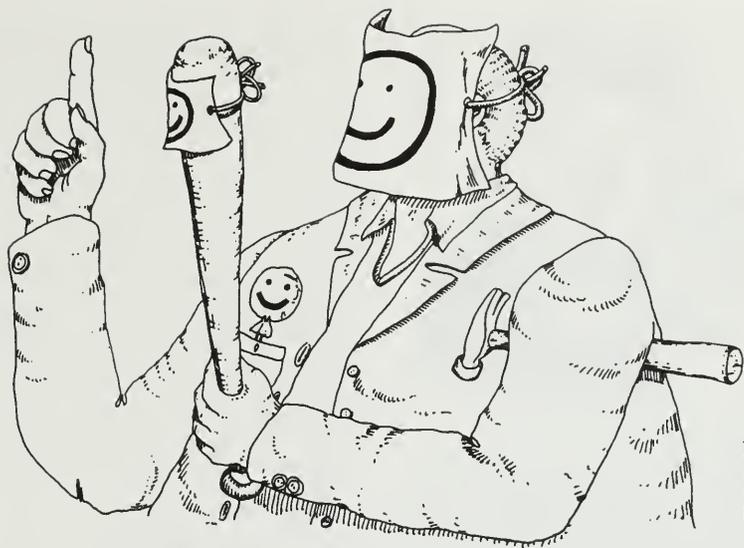
And, inevitably, there have been criticisms of internal make-up. The group



has been overwhelmingly white; hence we can't claim to represent the "Black Community" or the "Asian Community." True, but then I, at least, never claimed to be *representing* people, just trying to provide a technical means for them to speak for themselves.

The quest for money has generated a creeping respectability. Following the predilections of donors, CM has created more rigid job descriptions, and has made efforts to appear "a part of the community." But Berkeley is a diverse city, and the "community" of users is ambiguous. As a result, there have been attempts to enlist putative representatives of "communities" in both the direction and implementation of CM. Of course, this almost always boils down to "community" *institutions*, usually with professional staff—and, of course, their own agendas and requirements. They also tend to be underfunded and overworked, so taking part in CM often is more work for their staffs; alternatively, we have to do the work. In the case of the City Council agenda, a program (written by an unpaid volunteer) converts the material from one electronic form to another; then a person—usually a programmer—adds index words and minor edits, and loads the few dozen messages. The net result: perhaps one person a month reads some of the messages; we reinforce the image of institutions, rather than individuals, as providers of information; some clerk in the city government has yet another task; and the city government—which already has ample ways to disseminate information—continues to set the agenda.

This desire to appear "proper" has also led to the creation of "advisory panels" that contain people of dubious political character but with loads of respectability. One such person—a head of the city library system—demonstrated her commitment to free speech when she announced that she had "referred to the District Attorney" a "problem" that had arisen. Somebody had published a "Social Decoder" pamphlet in which, for instance, CISPES stands not for "Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador," but rather for "Committee for Improved State Power In El Salvador." This pamphlet, which claimed to be published by the Berkeley Public Library, in fact gave a name and a PO Box, and was not likely to be confused with a real library publication. Love me, love me, I'm a liberal librarian.



Graphic: I.B. Nelson

CM has changed its internal structure from a (theoretically) membership controlled organization to (as of January 1991) a group controlled by a board of directors and a paid staff. In theory, volunteers still have a place, but the inability of the group to attract new (unpaid) people reflects both the ambiguity of the project and its somewhat manipulative view of volunteers.

Although the earlier days were characterized, at times, by obstructionism and personal antagonism, CM at least gave people a sense of participation, sometimes even the reality of it. While not everything was subject to group approval, and not every decision was sensible, the process was generally agreeable. Sometimes minor points would take on major importance precisely because of personalities and/or political differences, but the process at least allowed some form of discussion and even appeal. On the flip side, having every decision subject to possible renegotiation was vastly frustrating for people whose job it was to carry out those decisions.

Given these problems I've been forced to look ever more closely at the ideological foundations of the project. There are two intertwined aspects: the primacy of information, and the importance of community.

Langdon Winner in his "Mythinformation" says: "The political arguments of computer romantics draw upon four key assumptions: 1) people are bereft of information; 2) information is knowledge; 3) knowledge is power; and 4) increased access to information enhanc-

es democracy and equalizes social power."

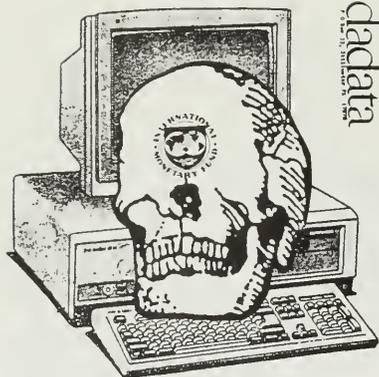
Certainly Berkeley can't be considered information-poor; indeed, many people seem to feel overwhelmed by what passes for information. I would venture that most peoples' lives contain, within their own experiences, the information most crucial to reshaping those lives.

The bland treatment of "information"—for CM this roughly equates to "messages read" and "messages written"—has little significance. The utility to the reader is ignored for a time-honored reason: it's hard to quantify. We screen out a great deal of garbage by requiring a quarter, but we still have a fair number of messages that are gibberish, wild rants, obscene retorts and the like.

The equating of knowledge and power is laughable: for instance, one may know where an enemy is and what he intends, and yet be powerless to stop him. Alternatively, you can know that you are being exploited and be no closer to ending that exploitation. It's doubtful that the abundant advertisements placed on CM, or the play-lists of past Grateful Dead concerts, or the musings on magic, have anything to do with power. Confusing some abstract form of knowledge with actual power is a convenient trick, particularly for those with an interest in maintaining existing forms of "democracy." Indeed, it is rare for the proponents of such "radical" change to actually examine the structures of power; often the claims of the apologists are taken at face value. And as Winner points out, having a personal computer no more sets

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the innerface of capital's interface

you up to compete with the National Security Agency than having a hang-glider equips you to compete with the U.S. Air Force. The proponents of the computer have argued that the spread of (relatively) low-cost machines has allowed popular movements to “catch up” with the government. This is a somewhat ingenuous argument: while some people may have a nifty machine—indeed, a machine of extraordinary capabilities by the standards of 1965—the government/business sector not only has such machines and their big brothers (which are also exponentially more powerful than *their* ancestors) but also the ability to connect them together.

Access to some types of information *might* enhance democracy, but continuing to reinforce a “one-speaking-to-many” system, does not, just as access to jokes or lists of phone numbers doesn’t equalize social power.

The second ideology is that of “community.” Admittedly, CM has never argued that electronic communication should replace face-to-face contact—only that it could be used to meet a wider spectrum of people. But beneath the appeal of “community” (another progressive buzz-word) lie unasked questions. Is community a reactionary desire? Is it simply a matter of shared interests? Is there some meaningful aspect beyond the simplistic sense? Or does the word conceal an agenda as well as an ideology?

As Bedford Fenwick<sup>4</sup> says: “In terms of control, the State is finding the ideology of the community a far more effective means of maintaining good order than the threat of confinement. [...] The traditional community represents the most effective Panopticon of all—control through mutual surveillance. Capitalism destroyed this. [...] The present age is

attempting a resuscitation. Just as the traditional community policed itself because it gave consent to the ruling ideology, because people considered their own interests were connected to the interests of their masters in a significant and truthful way, so present day power is seeking an imaginary identification with the interests of everybody. Only today that identification is hard to achieve and power must ransack the ideologies and rhetorics of previously popular movements to gain a footing.” In a passage relevant to projects like CM, he says “Our society seems to torment itself with the loss of community. Radical projects define themselves as a discovery of community, like the gay community, or the national community. [...] The State’s] assertion of benevolence serves to demoralize society both by denying the unbearable reality of present society, and by undermining society’s belief in itself, independent from expertise, as a responsible and reasonable substance. The State not only wants our obedience, but like other contemporary corporations, it demands our love. The ideology of community is one way it seeks to achieve this.”

Given that many Americans no longer feel an identity with neighborhood or job, it is not surprising to see such attempts to create a more nebulous (and less demanding) “community” by electronic means.

CM’s work, of course, does not occur in a vacuum: there has been an enormous change in both the public view and the actual implementation of computer technology.

When the antecedents of CM were conceived, the nature—and the popular perception—of computers was very different. Even the cheapest of machines cost tens of thousands of dollars and required a host of experts to operate. Heavily concentrated in the government and large corporations, they calculated the money needs of the economic monsters, aided the physicists in their quest for knowledge (and weaponry), and helped the state track both benefits and punishments. There was little doubt in the popular mind that the computers were on the side of Big Brother and his faceless minions. Indeed, much of the discourse on privacy and personal liberty was couched in terms of these machines and their potentials.

The need to train technicians means exposing a growing number of students to computers, however, and not all of

the trainees are devotees of totalitarian dreams. For the libertarian aficionados, the early days were characterized by a heady excitement about the *potentials* of the machine—a potential often ignored or delayed by the accountant-minded administrators. Indeed, these administrators and SYSOPs (SYStem OPerators) were the nemesis of these libertarians, later to be known as hackers. The attempt to develop “democratic” computers had two major thrusts: one towards a more popular use of the large machines, the other towards smaller and cheaper machines. In the first category were attempts to create or increase access to the machines (e.g. Resource One, CM’s ancestor), often by time-sharing or else by wider public access to the information derived from the machines. The Homebrew Computer Club in the San Francisco Bay Area, which nurtured many of the early pioneers of the micro-computer (and Community Memory), falls in the second category.

The diminution of the Big Brother image is only partly due to the actual use of such machines—it has far more to do with the utility of a benign appearance for the technology. Part of this change has been wrought by the promises—and occasionally the practice—of alternative projects.

David Noble has said that “the fight for alternatives...diverts attention from the realities of power and technological development, holds out facile and false promises, and reinforces the cultural fetish for technological transcendence.” By contrast, Athanasios argues for a movement that does not simply oppose technology. He cites the woman’s movement as an example of a social movement seeking the implementation and improvement of technology (contraception and abortion). Such alternative attempts as CM help focus the imagination and the technological fascination that many people feel. But given the difficulties of actually implementing any large project, I am skeptical about this use of people and time. CM has tried both the corporate approach (as Pacific Software) and the non-profit/donor route: neither is very successful, both absorb serious amounts of time and energy, and both have built-in traps; indeed, such efforts clearly delineate the enormous obstacles to humanist projects, even if such projects succeed in their own terms, computerization continues to deepen the division of labor: a few (relatively) well paid and highly

skilled jobs (the programmers and “social” experts) versus a much larger number of people with few skills who are poorly, if at all.

At this point, CM has probably guaranteed its institutional survival, but its vision seems clouded, at best. Perhaps it is to the project's credit, however, that it has more imagination than capability: certainly the opposite is more dangerous. I've learned that using a system like CM in the service of greater democracy is very difficult; it requires both passion and perspective. Success might be more likely in an area with fewer possibilities for popular participation, or in an area less saturated with communications channels. Nor would a group contemplating such a thing today have to design the system from scratch—much of the needed software is commonly available, and the hardware costs are far lower. But the steady flow of requests for us to provide information also tells me that the system encourages a dangerous passivity in its current form.

The ultimate meaning of projects like CM may well be that they are a soft sell for a hard technology that provides a career ladder for ambitious social profes-

sionals. The technology, despite CM's hopes for it, promotes passivity: very few people think of themselves as sources of information. CM can't overcome illiteracy and self-doubt; nor can it create community where there is none. Modern management techniques and the emphasis both on “community” and “the information economy” find a precise reflection in oppositional politics when they become obsessed with communication and technique. Consciously we can provide a human face for a devastating technology. Possibilities of computer use within a truly free society are barely shadows flitting across our screens as we mechanically maintain the edifice of legitimacy for this barbaric social order.

—G. S. Williamson

- 1) Tom Athanasiou, “High-Tech Alternativism: The Case for the Community Memory Project,” *Radical Science* #17
- 2) Lucius Cabins, “Making of a Bad Attitude,” *PW* #17, pages 8-10 on Pacific Software.
- 3) Langdon Winner, “Mythinformation,” *Whole Earth Review*, January 1985, pg 22
- 4) Bedford Fenwick, “The Institutionalization of the Community,” *Here & Now* #10, 1990, pg 7. *Here & Now* c/o Transmission Gallery, 28 King St., Glasgow, G1 5QP Scotland or PO Box 1109, Leeds, LS5 3AA, England

## COMMUNITY

A light rain, the drops streak the windows.

When the trolley waits they point one way. When the trolley moves they point another, cross-hatched like people going to work.

I want to run through the aisles. I want to touch everyone on the shoulder.

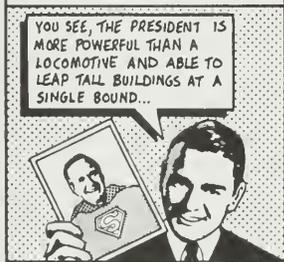
*Look! I will say the rain is making wonderful designs! Each window is different beautiful & meaningless!*

But I stay in my seat & do nothing. I am one of them.

—William Talcott

## THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW

**HOW THE NEWS WORKS... STEP ONE: SPOKESMAN READS OFF PREPARED STATEMENT DETAILING INFORMATION GOVERNMENT WISHES PUBLIC TO BELIEVE...**



**STEP TWO: REPORTERS RECORD INFORMATION VERBATIM AND ASK A FEW SUPERFICIAL QUESTIONS WHICH ELICIT EVASIVE ANSWERS...**



**STEP THREE: NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION REWRITE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE TO GIVE ILLUSION OF ACTUAL REPORTAGE AND THEN DISSEMINATE INFORMATION...**



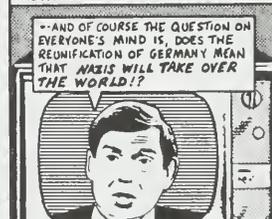
**STEP FOUR: PUBLIC ACCEPTS GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE AS VERIFIED FACTS UNCOVERED BY A DILIGENT PRESS...**



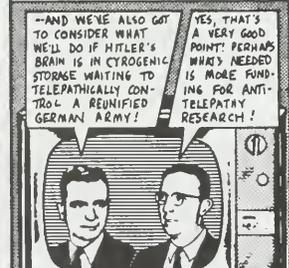
## THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW

**IT'S TIME FOR ANOTHER INSTALLMENT OF "HOW THE NEWS WORKS": THIS WEEK--EDITORIAL COMMENTARIES!**

**STEP ONE: COMMENTATORS FOCUS ATTENTION ON THE MOST SUPERFICIAL ASPECT OF A COMPLEX NEWS STORY...**



**STEP TWO: SELF-STYLED EXPERTS SPEND HOURS ON TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAMS DISCUSSING EVERY POSSIBLE RAMIFICATION OF SAID SUPERFICIAL ASPECT...**



**STEP THREE: CITIZENS ACCEPT THE INANITIES UTTERED AS PROBLEMS WITH WHICH THEY NEED BE CONCERNED, AND SIMULTANEOUSLY CONGRATULATE THEMSELVES FOR THEIR KEEN INSIGHT INTO CURRENT EVENTS...**



**STEP FOUR: WORLD EVENTS ARE COMPLETELY UNAFFECTED BY THE OPINIONS OF COMMENTATORS AND EXPERTS. ANOTHER NEWS STORY CAPTURES EVERYONE'S ATTENTION AND THE ENTIRE PROCESS IS REPEATED...**





# There Goes The Neighborhood!

I work at a neighborhood recycling center in the Haight-Ashbury. At the moment I feel pretty grateful toward my job. It lets me do certain things I wouldn't be able to do at other jobs: I can hang massive anti-war banners around the recycling yard; or, the other night, I borrowed the flatbed truck to use as a traveling sound stage during a demonstration roving through the city. No one complained when I decided to honor the General Strike the day after the air invasion of Iraq began.

Thanks to another part-time job, I work only two days a week at the recycling center. On Thursdays we go into the Financial District to get paper out of offices. I quit a Financial District job a few years ago to take this recycling job, and now, ironically, recycling has me working downtown again. I'm usually not stuck in any one office for more than about 5 minutes, and contact with the office workers is usually pleasant—they seem to regard me

with at least a notch or two more dignity than when I was a bike messenger.

On Saturdays I go around the neighborhood with a partner, getting the recyclables out of cafes and the basements of peoples' homes. The work is physically demanding, and I don't always enjoy having to work Saturdays, but it is often an enjoyable way of having contact with the neighborhood.

I worked in recycling before, managing a tiny buy-back center in a Safeway parking lot, patronized largely by annoying suburbanites who were only doing it for the money. The experience fortunately didn't dampen my enthusiasm for recycling, but did leave a bad taste in my mouth. I had always been fond of the Haight-Ashbury center, and when a friend working there said they

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***Instead of being a marginal dumping ground for the community, I envision the recycling center as being central to the "economy" of the neighborhood, being a trading hub as well as an important resource in ecology information.***

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needed people, I decided to try recycling work again. The director of the center had recently quit due to burnout, and my friend told me that the center was now being run as a collective, which appealed to me.

It soon became clear how little of a collective it really was. The non-profit center was under the jurisdiction of a local neighborhood council board, which tended to be pretty out of touch with the daily realities of the recycling center. However, they certainly didn't mind deciding which groups would get small grants from the money that we made.

Apparently, at the same time that the board authorized the collective, they also hired a certain individual with the understanding that he was to be manager. They never drew any clear lines of

authority between the two, naively trusting that it would work itself out somehow. Of course it didn't.

The collective was split into two factions: those who tried to make the collective succeed, and those who didn't want it to be a collective at all. The pro-management faction was only two people. One was a guy whose father had started the center back in the mid-70's and had grown up with the place. He'd naturally expected to be tapped as director when the last one quit, and was disappointed when it didn't happen. He didn't really recognize the collective, but he continued to participate in the charade of collective meetings. People often accused him (fairly or unfairly) of sabotaging the collective process. The other was the manager designee, an "old boy" recycler who, rumor had it had been fired from just about every recycling center in the city. Somehow he sweet-talked the board into hiring him, and regularly told them what they wanted to hear. He was "our representative to the board," but in reality he was more like the board's representative to us. Collective decisions had a mysterious way of not being carried out.

Pay equity was an issue. The starting wage was \$5.00/hour, and most of us were still making that, even after working there over a year. A couple of the drivers got \$5.50, and a few people got \$6.00, including the two guys mentioned above. We repeatedly sought pay raises to make it equal, the vote usually always going something like 8 to 2 (guess which 2?), and wondered why the board was always so slow to act on what we'd decided. It turned out that our "representative" never even told the board about the votes at all!

Things got worse and more surreal: grueling 5 hour collective meetings, angrily abandoned by many. A "personnel committee," formed to handle disciplinary procedures, turned into a kangaroo court, accusing individuals of "anti-collective behavior." A scandal involving the Christmas bonus: some people got less than \$50, some got as much as \$600, with nobody confessing who made the decisions or what criterion was used. We later learned that the decision was made by our supposed representative (in consultation with an unnamable third party), and further investigation revealed that our "representative" had gotten \$1600!

The board got tired of the "collective" experiment, and began convening a

"Management Restructuring Committee" ostensibly to study the present formation. I had become somewhat active in trying to bring some peace between the different factions, which led to my being elected, along with my friend Debbie, as collective representatives on the Management Restructuring Committee. Our "representative" was asked to leave the center, in a dignified way so that it looked like he quit. (Subsequently he became manager of a failing nearby recycling center.)

Our center would have a three-person interim management team for the next 3 months, at the end of which the board would decide on a management structure for the center. The interim team was comprised of me, Debbie, and a management consultant. Debbie and I were demanding strict pay equity—everybody working at the center should make \$6.00/hour. The consultant said that the rock-bottom lowest she would work for was \$12.00. She proposed we should all three get \$12.00, which sounded good to us, except that out of principle we didn't want to be making more than other people at the center. We finally compromised and decided to receive the \$12.00/hour for our management hours, \$6.00 of which we kept, and the other \$6.00 of which we divided among all the workers who were still making \$5.00/hour. It was a bookkeeper's nightmare, but it was the closest our collective ever got to pay equity.

I couldn't wait for the three-month period to end. We did actually manage to draft a rather agile and sophisticated proposal for collective management of the center, which addressed many of the shortcomings we had experienced previ-

ously, but it wasn't taken seriously, and we knew it wouldn't be. There was some talk among us of going on strike if the board voted against us, but it felt half-hearted, and I was extremely burned out from the whole interim management ordeal anyway, and very uninterested in gearing up for what was certain to be another losing battle. And for what? Were we really that much of a collective anyway???

### P.C. Recycling (Post-Collective)

I appreciate not having to deal with the board anymore. Most, if not all of them consider themselves pretty progressive (One of them once described the board as "radical"). They're actually representative of the general political character of the Haight-Ashbury these days: professional people with a conscience, especially compared to most of their co-workers. But they are blind when it comes to understanding things from the point of view of the people who work for them.

I often complained about the condescending way we were treated. They would listen to the management consultant and think of her as the manager, while mostly feeling uncomfortable around me and Debbie. They treated us like kids, something especially apparent when we would ask for raises. They looked down on us because we made so much less than they did. They didn't believe we deserved to make any more, so they didn't give us any more—another bitter Catch-22.

The board ended the experiment with "collectivity" and opted instead for a "manager with an egalitarian style." The whole interim period was designed to



Graphic: Glenn Caley Bachmann

Photo: D.S. Black



give an appearance of objectivity to what they had been planning all along. They already had their handpicked candidate.

Now he has a good job; lives a half block away, and gets paid \$12/hour to go home and babysit his 3-year-old daughter. Well, that's not all he does; he also gets paid to deal with the board, and with the city and the Parks Dept. (they own the land), and I guess he must be getting some stuff done; we haven't been shut down yet. When he feels like it, he can even decide once in a while to join us and do some work. I don't feel bad about him having such a good job: I wish we all could have jobs as good.

He's cooler than a lot of other managers would be, is open minded, and even appreciates *Processed World* material from time to time. He's easygoing and tolerant of frivolity, which certainly makes any job more sane. I think he's basically a nice fellow, happy to have a good job. But he doesn't seem to be

much of a manager, and seems to have abdicated much of that responsibility anyway. We don't even see him very much, and wonder what he does with his time—it takes an awfully long time to get things we need. If we want safety equipment, we're much better off getting it ourselves rather than waiting for him.

### Recycling Boom

Reflecting the ecology boom of the last few years, the center has quickly grown from a funky little drop-off center into a fairly bustling business, with tonnage figures and all that. Management became more of an issue simply because there was that much more to be managed. More income led to more problems owing to more disagreements over what to do with the money. It caused an identity problem for the center (and for us) to have it grow so quickly. The Parks Dept. stopped donating the site and started charging us rent. We were no longer just a drop-off center: a lot more people came in to get redemption value on their bottles and cans, especially people living on the street. The recessionary mood crept in and added an increased air of desperation to the mood of the center.

Since the management restructuring period there has been more emphasis on "efficiency" at the center: controlling the number of person-hours spent at the yard; and less joyriding in the truck (no more rides to the beach, or stopping in Golden Gate Park to feed the "duckiewuckies"). We had to prepare for competition from the city's curbside recycling program, which was being implemented already in other corners of the city.

Curbside recycling can be a good thing, but we were starting to worry about our survival, and were scandalized when the local garbage company, Sunset Scavenger, was awarded the contract with no competitive bidding. Our repeated petitions to City Hall to have our neighborhood exempted from the city-wide curbside program because we were already doing it were ignored. Assurances that we would be reimbursed by the city for any money lost because of the curbside program also turned out to be bogus.

The curbside program hit our neighborhood about a half a year ago now, and the effect has been dramatic. We creatively try to cut our losses (our unofficial advertising slogan: "Just Say 'Fuck It' To The Blue Buckets!"), but volume has still dropped as much as 50%.

We've succeeded in winning some customers back. (We have some *very* loyal customers. One woman actually UPS's her junk paper to us all the way from Santa Fe!) Many people like what we do but have been confused. Some thought the blue buckets were our service, and that they were supporting us all this time, and are surprised to find out they're not. No one is happy to find out that Sunset charges \$1/month for their service (whether you use it or not!), something that is not advertised as being part of the deal.

Still, it's hard to compete with a service that offers convenience like that. When people can just put their recyclables on the curb, why should they spend their gas money and "free" time and gas to deliver it to us—isn't that wasteful? So we're coping.

The effort spent expanding our own pickup program pays off—the program continues to grow (We need a 2nd truck!), and our downtown office paper program is also expanding rapidly. But the formerly bustling yard now seems often like a ghost town—it's even sparse on weekends. Our staff hours have been cut way back, with no cutbacks in management hours, naturally. (In fact, management had the nerve to suggest we put in some volunteer time!) The yard uses more free help, like pre-trial diversion people. Decision-making is more concentrated among the two de-facto managers, staff meetings are almost a thing of the past, and the proposal for a staff group health plan, which we were seriously discussing before the curbside program hit, has now been all but forgotten...

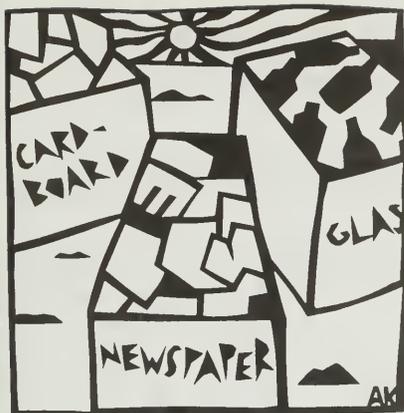
If I'm so critical and dissatisfied, one might be tempted to ask, why do I continue to work there? I ask that myself. In what way is it the good job? I rationalize it this way: As much as I



Photo: Glenn Caley Bachmann



Photo: Glenn Caley Bachmann



dislike a job sometimes, I hate the thought of *job hunting* even more. My job pays more now than it used to and offers plenty of other flexibilities (and fringe benefits). Although staff cutbacks associated with curbside damaged the social fabric of the center, it is still a fairly closeknit group. Whatever might be said for collective management, I actually find lately that my worklife is considerably more tolerable and I feel freer if I don't waste time thinking about work politics at all. I have no illusions about "saving the world," but I enjoy the comparative luxury of knowing that recycling doesn't seem to make things worse. I don't have to ponder what sort of atrocities my energies may ultimately lend themselves to.

### Recycle Your Troubles Away?

Many well-meaning people feel good about "saving the planet" when they put something into a recycling receptacle instead of into a trash can. However, whatever happens to that material after it leaves their sight may or may not do any good at all. Placing all the emphasis on what to do with the stuff at the end of the consumption cycle (instead of addressing production) makes it impossible to do more than cosmetic cleanup. If it helps people justify obscene consumption habits, you could even say it does some harm. No matter how many progressive or well-meaning little operations are involved in recycling collection, they still have to sell it to somebody else. The recycling market is completely controlled by large companies whose only concern is making a profit, not trying to conserve resources or protect the environment. Many of the same companies getting in on recycling are the nation's biggest polluters (3M, BFI, WML.) Investigations so far are inconclusive, but many speculate that collected recyclables

are ending up in landfills anyway. It may sound outrageous, but it is not far-fetched as long as it is still more profitable to bury stuff than it is to recycle it. Tax breaks to corporations that use untapped, unrenewable resources like oil, aluminum ore, etc. ("depletion allowances") are further roadblocks to an ecologically sane solution.

Plastic recycling programs are a scam, marketing hype to make people feel better about using plastic. It doesn't actually get recycled, but is at best made into something else that will get thrown away—and often doesn't even make it that far, but gets routed to the landfill. Ditto for the much-trumpeted styrofoam recycling—very little of it actually goes to the "recycling" plant. One person who'd visited the high-tech styrofoam "recycling" plant in Fremont was appalled to find that the workers wore no protective breathing equipment in a factory filled with a thick, toxic cloud.

Recycling under the present system has to adapt to the logic of the marketplace. Small, community-based recycling operations cannot compete with bigger companies. Big recycling companies can stockpile materials and wait for a favorable moment in the marketplace. Small centers don't have that kind of flexibility, and have to curtail collection of materials that aren't profitable. When the market is glutted, sellers can't find buyers and the price plunges, threatening the very existence of many small centers. Last year the market for newspaper got so glutted and the price dropped so low that many centers on the East Coast actually had to pay to have their newspapers hauled away! It's still cheaper to buy and produce non-recycled paper, and most mills are still reluctant to invest in the de-inking equipment necessary to produce recycled paper. Things are a little better on the West Coast, but most of the paper collected for recycling gets sold to markets in Asia; very little of it gets recycled here in the United States.

Curbside recycling is convenient, but attacks the problem from the wrong end by focusing on end results rather than how and why things are produced in the first place. It also takes resources out of the community. Neighborhood centers like the one in Haight-Ashbury attempt to keep resources in the community, but that's mostly limited to "recycling" small amounts of money. One of Haight-Ashbury Recycling's most useful and popular features, the "free table," is in danger now because Park & Rec considers it an eyesore, attracting the wrong kind of people to the center, i.e., the indigent and homeless (though in reality all kinds of people are attracted to the free table).

*There needs to be more neighborhood recycling centers, not less.* Instead of being a marginal dumping ground for the community, I envision the recycling center as being central to the "economy" of the neighborhood: taking up several buildings as well as a lot, and being a trading hub as well as an important resource in ecology information. It could also have facilities for all kinds of hitherto unprofitable kinds of recycling, such as composting. Basic recycling of familiar materials like paper and beverage containers could have a much more visible presence throughout the community, like the streetcorner recycling kiosks that are commonplace in many European cities. Production needs to be wholly re-examined. Mandate that, as much as possible, paper be composed of recycled fiber, and use hemp fiber for the rest. Promote a culture of "repair and re-use" instead of "throw away and buy another." Make bottles more durable and returnable. Examine the role of plastic. It's an amazing, versatile and revolutionary substance, but is way overproduced. For which functions is it appropriate, and for which other functions is it simply wasteful?

To really look at recycling means looking at just about every aspect of the society we live in—and *the society we could be living in!*



Photo: G. C. B.

—Glenn Caley Bachmann



# Beatnik Managers, Tye-Dye Bureaucrats, and Corporate All-Purpose Tofu Paste

**W**hen I decided I wanted to work at Wheatsville Food Co-op I got very puzzled reactions from two friends who already worked there. Diane, my partner at the time and a member of the Board of Directors thought it was great, since to her it wasn't a job, but "fun." My other friend just looked at me in his customary disbelieving manner and asked, "Why do you want to do that?" I would soon understand what he meant.

When I got the job I gave up an easy cashier position at a Chinese/Vietnamese restaurant. I was exchanging a job where I read half the time, daily consumed food worth as much as my wage and talked to people from all over the world for what I thought would be an even more "workless" job. What I found was a refuge of hippie capitalism mystified by Politically Correct commodities, "avant-guard" management and five kinds of tofu, a

facade perpetuated with the assistance of the most "respectable" elements of the Austin left.

## HARSH REALITIES

The Coop was formed innocently enough during the late 1970s by a group of people who wanted to get access to good, cheap food. It offered no-frills food organized by volunteers with all the profits directed back into maintaining cheap prices and a basic selection.

By the mid '80s this concept faced the harsh realities of rising rent, paying wages, limited demand, and a local economy ravaged by the collapse of the oil boom. The Co-op relocated to a larger spot and expanded its inventory beyond staples, hoping to expand its pool of shoppers. Despite this, it went deep into the red, and increasingly turned to worker

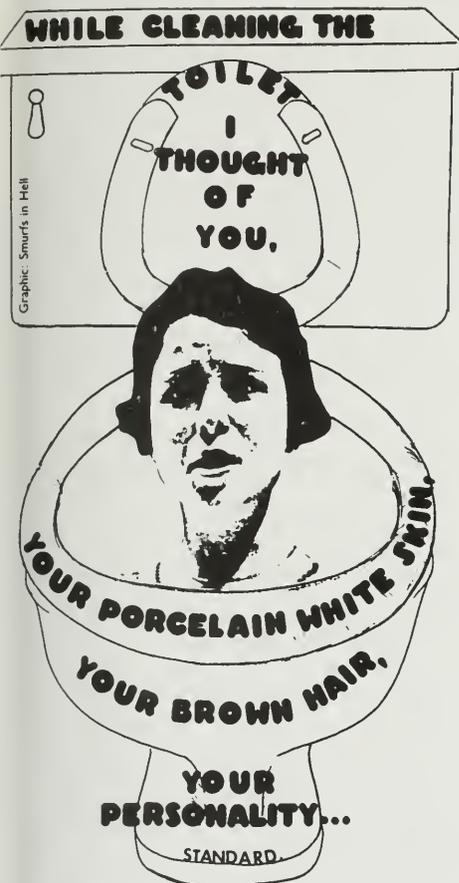
austerity as a means to boost profits.

Austerity "saved" the Co-op. When I arrived, wages had been frozen for over a year, paid sick leave eliminated for part-time workers (defined at an impossible 30 hours per week), discounts for staff reduced five percent for full-timers and entirely for part-timers, and member dividend refunds eliminated. This was in addition to the implementation of numerous efficiency enhancement programs such as constant busy-work activity, notifying management when going to the bathroom, electronic monitoring of cashier speed and efficiency, periodic performance reviews and other programs that earned a heap of praise from the HEB supermarket conglomerate and the Austin Chamber of Commerce on the Co-op's

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***Stocking became a favorite chore among cashiers since it could be stretched out for hours while avoiding one's register. It was also easy to subvert the efficiency and speed tracking by hitting the total key after every item to stop the clock.***

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an extended trip around the store. In fact, stocking became a favorite chore among cashiers since it could be stretched out for hours while avoiding one's register. It was also easy to subvert the efficiency and speed tracking by hitting the total key after every item to stop the clock.

We also made "friendly mistakes," like giving the item to the customer at a lower price, or neglecting to charge the 7% added fee for non-members, or giving staff discounts to almost anybody. And let's not forget the long, friendly conversations that would erupt between a customer and cashier during transactions. The best thing about working there was that many of us used its aura of being a laid-back, hippie co-op to avoid having to work hard or at all. Considering that many of us led full lives as musicians, students, or just people, and work never became a priority among most, this relaxed atmosphere was quite attractive. We could get away with a lot, since we were required to make Wheatsville a relaxed, friendly place to shop. Whereas on one hand we were selling our smile, on the other we were saving up our energy for other activities besides work.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END

I suspect that the largest impetus for installing automatic scanners was not so much speeding us up as it was to cut back on "friendly mistakes" and staff reappropriation. Since the staff knew so many of the customers, it is likely that massive self-reduction in prices was occurring that was impossible to stop. All you had to do was have a friend come through the line with tons of groceries (for example, mountains of \$5 bottles of "organic, we don't test on animals" shampoo) and give up to 80% discounts. There was no sacker, and the manager was always occupied with stocking or checking—so we were free to do as we pleased. Some friends of staff built up awesome wine collections with these connections. This was some compensation for being cheated on salaries and benefits. Why should we sell thousands of dollars of the best food on the market in return for twenty or thirty bucks a day—a rate which would prohibit us from enjoying any of it? This was only partially so, since some were adept at having another cashier undercharge for food that was eaten, only a fraction of which was admitted to.

I learned about the plan to install the scanners from Diane, my partner who was on the board of directors. Austerity had already revitalized profits: the \$100,000 debt had almost been retired and gross annual sales would soon top \$1 million. They figured they could replace the five existing registers for \$80,000 and eliminate long lines and the need for inventory, in addition to strangling worker reappropriation. They neither asked for cashiers' input nor even notified us of their plan, despite being a "democratic, member-run co-op." In fact, I was rebuffed by the cashier team head for using this label. "Wheatsville is a business." I was told. "It doesn't matter what the staff thinks."

This event was the beginning of the end for me at Wheatsville. I put out



tenth birthday.

This class war was not one-sided. While the workers didn't have any officially recognized organizations, we had lots of everyday forms of resistance.

Cashiers had an unspoken program of extended bathroom breaks, with one or more of us off at a time during both lulls and high points in business, visiting friends who were shopping or working, snacking in the deli, changing the music selection, making phone calls, and sometimes even actually going to the bathroom. Sometimes we just sat down on the register and read the paper, listened to the music, talked or relaxed. Cheated on official breaks, we quietly created our own. That this grew to crisis proportions for management could be seen in the frequent exhortations by buttkissers and bureaucrats in the cashier logbook to "always notify the shift manager that you want to leave your register and to not leave until allowed to do so." We turned the busywork of stocking the soda cooler or the bags into

flyers to the staff warning them of this plan, concluding that this was an attempt to make us work harder and faster and destroy what remained of the Co-op's laid-back atmosphere. I also suggested that the money instead be used to make up for real losses in wages over the last few years. Since the Co-op would have to borrow in order to afford this new technology, it would only continue the process by which the staff paid off debt through further austerity and price increases.

But I couldn't arouse any active staff interest. I called a very unsuccessful meeting at my house at which only two people showed—both of them management bureaucrats. It became clear that no one really cared since it was only another dead-end job. I went to the board meeting alone—by now my relationship with Diane was quickly eroding—and confronted the manager about the scanners, asking why they'd only accepted one bid (I wonder who was

grafting off that one?) and why it was needed at all since we rarely used the fifth register (which sat idle as a soda shelf). They ignored me.

### HIPSTERS OF THE VANGUARD UNDERGROUND

Without staff response, I turned to the consumers. Over the next few weeks I quietly dropped a small flyer in the groceries of every customer that I checked out, informing them of what was happening. I also sent a letter detailing the events to four local alternative newspapers, two of which carried Co-op advertising. Giving out the flyers stirred some members to action. Within a few days, numerous pissed-off members called the store, angry that their favorite laid back shopping oasis would be defiled by automation. Then two of the papers published the letter and a third, a popular weekly with a circulation of 40,000, was about to when it called the manager to alert him to his impending publicity catastrophe. He then called me to negotiate the withdrawal of the remaining letters in return for a membership vote on the scanners and one-year moratorium on buying them (which now included competitive bidding) if he won. I agreed and required that he inform the entire staff.

But few of the members gave a damn about the Co-op's inner workings; "membership," like the rest of the Politically Correct facade, was a sham. Voting for directors and boycotts (another "proof" of the Co-op's Political Correctness) often took six months to get a few hundred

votes, and it was a rare fool who actually agreed to unwaged "volunteer" labor. Most of the customers think it's a great place to shop but wouldn't dream of working there. It turned out that most members were oblivious to and/or thoroughly uninterested in hearing about employee troubles. While I found a few members who saw through this fraud most constantly remind us that "it is a great place to work." After all, our low salaries supplemented their cheap consumption. In fact, Wheatsville was a club for well-paid workers and yuppie capitalists, mostly white who lived on the west side of this segregated city. It was a place to be seen and consume while remaining politically correct. On any given day the store would be inundated with radical National Lawyers Guild and ACLU lawyers, intellectuals, and all the other hipsters of the vanguard underground hotfooting it through aisles of tofu, canola oil and organic fufu. They would cheerfully dance to the tune of some underpaid local musicians offering live Musak to calm their daily frustrations.

### A MODEL OF SOCIALIST STATE CAPITALISM

Imagine my surprise a few months later when I realized that a vote was already weeks in progress and that none of the staff, who are required to be members, had been sent ballots. By that time I had left for a winter break and couldn't raise hell. When I returned I found that I'd been summarily purged—removed from the schedule and refused both permanent and substitute shifts.

After my forced departure, reorganiza-

tion continued uninterrupted. As with any good business, the profits are funneled right back into expanding operations and keeping people at work. They've added a new deli counter, a fresh flower cooler, a huge awning, more tables in front, a wooden display case for bulk oil and nut butters, and such healthy necessities as blank tapes to the inventory. No doubt rats continue to die in the storeroom and inside the walls, the toilets still back up, and the staff still doesn't have a breakroom and instead eat among beer and soda boxes. Staff breaks remain at five minutes per hour (below the federal minimum), and it is required that one work 30 hours or be demoted to substitute status. A worker was fired for talking to customers while stocking, and bounties are being offered for the arrest of shoplifters.

The Co-op shrouds itself in the cliches of left political causes: "peace," "vegetarianism," "environmentalism." The manager—once described to me as an "anarchist"—dresses like a beat and wears his black motorcycle gloves and beret as he stocks [see photo]. All kinds of causes get to post their flyers and Co-op ads even show up in underground publications. Yet inside it is business as usual, with Profits, Work, Political Repression, and Austerity waiting to be ferreted out, analyzed and attacked.

In the year that I worked there I saw the Co-op as a model of existing "socialism" that is actually socialized state capitalism, fully managed by the state under the aegis of some left party, as in the USSR, China, Cuba, etc. Although Co-op ownership is legally socialized among the 10,000 or so members, the actual control is in the hands of a management that operates like any other good capitalist business, seeking to generate profits they can reinvest in the store to keep its employees at work producing ever-greater profits. I drew an analogy between the Co-op and socialist state capitalism, under which ownership is supposedly socialized by the state, but the reality is the same—subordination of all of life to work for the accumulation of profit.

Maybe I expected too much from a political community dominated by an illegitimate and authoritarian left dedicated to putting us to work under their revolutionary leadership. Currently, I split up every time I hear about food "co-ops.

—Robert Ovetz,  
with help from Ross A. Dreyer



Photo: James Carman

# If I Die Before I Wake

The resolute thud of a car door.  
The unquestioned authority of a stoplight.  
The simple, curved grace of a nuclear reactor along the interstate.  
The reassuring chatter of a morning talk-show radio co-host.  
The urgent flutter of air through a window opened one half inch.  
The elegant glass panels of the familiar building, reflecting the enormous parking lot.  
The pride of belonging when showing a laminated identification card.  
The light, syncopated heelclicks in the enormous parking lot.  
The fluorescent sheen of buffed hallway floors.  
The family portrait pinned to the fabric cubicle wall surface.  
The familiar buzz of the computer booting up.  
The satisfaction of the illuminated monitor's amber screen.  
The eager apprehension as an LCD wristwatch displays 9:50.  
The quiet jubilation of breacktime; powdered coffee, raisin danish packaged in cellophane.  
The mild dread at 10:10, in anticipation of returning to the cubicle.  
The recalcitrant self-congratulation in making a personal phone call.  
The relief as LCD watchface reads 11:55.  
The sunbleached sidewalk, and background swishing of cars on the interstate.  
The distant chatter of lawn sprinklers.  
The patient gurgle of the concrete-lined, atmosphere enhancing fountain.  
The slick, hard surface of the fiberglass bench.  
The gentle crackle of a plastic sandwich bag.  
The vague panic at how to fill the remaining forty minutes of lunchbreak.  
The sudden waking up from having been staring into the monitor without intent.  
The exasperating patience of the LCD display consulted every twelve minutes, every ten.  
The weary relief of 2:56.  
The irritating thin walls of a paper coffee cup, burning fingers.  
The breathy hum of the microwave in the breakroom, the violent boiling of contents in a green, resealable plastic bowl.  
The exasperating chewing sounds of an ingenuous co-worker.  
The clouded suspicion of an existence discarded well prior to expiration date.  
The faint craving for the calves beneath the white hose passing the cubicle.



Photos: James Carman

The idle figuring of wages on an adding machine:  
 $26,000 \div 12$  months.  $2166 \div 4$  weeks.  $542 \div 5$  days.  
 $108.40 \div 8$  hours.  $13.55 \div 60$  minutes.  $.22 \div 60$  seconds.  $.004$  cents per second.

The anxious 4:00 craving for a cup of coffee.  
The renewed hope of 4:45.  
The stylish liberation of a loosened necktie.  
The light, syncopated heelclicks in the enormous parking lot.  
The thoughtful chatter of the radio talk show host.  
The harsh buzz of the apartment's security door.  
The sighing of shoes on the nylon carpet in the hallway.  
The comforting chime of ice in a cocktail.  
The reassuring chatter of the nightly news.  
The crisp bedsheets and the mercy of sleep.

—Jim Lough

## REDEMPTION

Everybody died.  
I missed the funeral. I didn't know  
it was in my backyard.  
I slept late that day imagining  
The cock-eyed undertow of continental  
drift, washed my hair with beer,  
And cleansed the house with white sage.  
Nothing helped.

I realized long ago there had been  
A certain silent war going on for years,  
So I felt guilty.

Everybody in the world died.  
I still made Cream of Wheat for breakfast.  
Everybody in the world died  
so I showered without soap. Everybody  
In the world died except for me  
And West, the neighborhood street man.

Everybody in the world died and West  
didn't understand. He raided my door,  
Pushed into my hallway, stole the bottles  
Of perfume I've received for years never  
opening. Everybody in the world died  
And West sat on my stoop drinking Love's  
Baby Soft and Chanel -5. When the perfume  
emptied I passed him Lysol, dish detergent,  
Flea powder, Witch Hazel. He was indestructible.

Everybody in the world  
Died except for me and West. We figured out  
how to extract alcohol from bread crumbs  
By soaking them mushed in banana peels and water.  
Everybody in the world died, and West and I  
ran out of ideas. Everybody in the world  
Died and West sobered, gradually, like a child  
On the verge of understanding the hand's tiny  
pores extract blossoms.

—Marina Lazzara



Photo: Laura Plotkin & Glenn Bachmann

## ODE TO THE CHELSEA HOTEL

it was a typical legal  
secretary's hectic afternoon  
it cost one client  
a thousand bucks  
to file those papers  
before the court closed  
and they were truly screwed up  
we did them so fast  
I knew he'd call the next day and scream

the fact that I'd sweated blood  
to type them on time, at the last minute  
like these guys always do things  
didn't matter a bit  
because once they've done their work  
they assume it's all taken care of

it's just like a blow job  
they're flushed & triumphant  
all these messengers and clerks going crazy  
it makes them feel important  
who cares where the semen goes  
they came that's what they paid for

my hands were shaking but I didn't  
say much I went for a walk  
I was trying to quit smoking  
& having other problems too  
none of them mattered  
I just walked real slow  
to the hot dog stand where the old  
chinese couple sold cigarettes  
one at a time, they cost 15 cents  
they were worth every penny

I walked back to the office  
feeling dizzy and weird  
when an old guy said buddy  
can you spare a dime?  
I got out a quarter I was  
shaking so bad I dropped it  
and had to pick it up  
I told the guy good luck  
he said listen jack  
you need the luck  
I'll take the quarter

I hung out by what's left  
of the Chelsea hotel  
the owners tried to tear it down last year  
the old guys who lived there  
took the owners to court  
and won for a while  
but the stay was lifting  
the wheels of justice ground on  
the owners were starting  
to renovate the place

as the workmen came and went  
the old guys sat in the lobby  
watching TV looking tired  
and sour daring anyone  
to kick them out

the ringleader of the bunch  
a white haired, warty guy  
was sitting in the lobby  
looking right through me  
his hands were steady as a rock  
on his cane and I looked  
at my hands and I looked  
at his hands and thought  
I gotta quit  
this business  
soon

—David West

neon squiggles through signpost  
across trash cans, posters & sidewalk  
whatever they pass gets their mark  
indian calls echo through stairwells  
running faster than trains  
they flash by like lightning

—Gina Bergamino

**BANANA WHISTLE**

*"Lester Bowie was playing his ass off"*

What what?  
When a leaf is overturned is overturned  
an overture understands its intensive destruction.  
Dictum: if an insurrectionist attitude belies denials  
everyday vocabulary falters fades

flowers,  
in the rough  
take a testimony, a nightingale  
testimony  
the weariness, the fever and the fret

When a dog wets a garden flower  
its ambition enacts.  
Cool it, dog.

Surrounding, the glow of ground  
slows down, wound,  
a terrific posse glides intractably  
mute, impossible.

It is a social thing

a fever, delivered with good graces.

Penny arcades suck a person dry

action becomes ambit —  
shun succumbing daily

—Jeff Conant

**SMASHING THE BANK**

My knees are  
stained with grass.  
My father says  
I can ignore my neighbor.  
I will fill three buckets  
with acorns. If I'm good  
my grandmother will take  
out her teeth. Woody  
Woodpecker lives on the patio.  
How many ways can I spend  
seven dollars.

—Gina Bergamino

**THE AMAZED PEDESTRIAN**

They ride around  
and cover ground  
they spring full fledged at dawn  
predictable as a reflex.  
They do not cease at noon  
After sunset they're still riding  
at least until eleven  
the next day —  
they ride around again.

*The earth give up her metals  
the ground give up his sauce  
so they can ride around and round  
and be the boss of us.*

—Janice King

everyone's fighting in this city  
people reduced to shouted curses  
stacked over broken bottles  
women and fags are bashed  
on any corner  
and the pervading stink  
is of ignorance  
this is no city of love  
what causes this narrowing hardness  
in the city i craved  
all kinds of hardness  
brick, concrete, asphalt, glass  
blades, fists and metal claws  
the environment becomes enemy  
even while the environment  
provides defense

—Michele C.

**FROM NOW ON**

We'll leave it to chance  
not even calling home  
to the Home Office  
in Rhode Island or North Carolina  
they'll only rubber stamp it anyway  
two-by-two their engineers of gravity  
slumping down that long hollow corridor  
of stone containers and paper proof  
of time's whirling blue machines  
millions of dollars will lay on the table  
ions of weeping with no appreciation  
just the ivory palace fermenting  
in a heaving sea  
of Spanish moss  
and bald green flies euphoric.

—Errol Miller

**POEM**

Because I didn't have a job,  
I walked over a little hill  
in spring, the leaves weren't out yet.

The trees were tall and silent strangers,  
the brown leaves rustled on the ground,  
the sun in the blue, cloudless sky.

Over the hill there was a road  
that led to nowhere I could see.  
I just stood and listened to the silence there.

Because I didn't have a job, I stood  
between a road that led to nowhere I could see  
and a hill of brown leaves and tall, silent trees.

—Gene Harter



Photo: V.T. Voss



# Adventures In The Muck-It Research Game

I am any man. I make purchasing decisions that have far-reaching effects. Whether it's raking muck or throwing it, I'm ready to pitch in or haul ass with the best of them. And, most important, I like to talk shop—for a price.

*Roundup the usual suspects.* When Casablanca Field Research calls, I stand up to be counted. A black Mariah is dispatched to my rickety address in the Mission District. The interviewer doesn't ask how I am, or what I'm doing; we put such pleasantries behind us years ago. Instead, with a blurting maniacal laugh, he launches into my new profile:

"You are one of the friends of Monsieur Rick, yes? You must be the Vice in charge of security and facilities maintenance for a major West Coast pro-apartheid bank headquartered in the Financial District. You pull in 60K a year, several of which go up your nose; you wear pinstripes and

suspenders, live in Gnoe Valley, drive Basic Marin Wheels...two-faced and heartless, you'll do fine."

Ordinarily I would resent this rude identikit, my eyes would narrow, lips compress at his fiber optic effrontery. But coming from my friend Fudge, who is a telephone pimp for a large market research firm, I listen intently to this malignant portrait of a stranger—I try the suit on for size. While it's a life I despise, I can hack it for a whiff of the quick money that seems to stalk these BMW-driving executive types. Do they really get paid for every breath they take?

*A case of do or die.* See, I can't afford to hang up. After another flea-bitten day moping around my squalid Mission apartment in Duboce Fucking



Triangle, waiting in vain for an evasive and ineffectual temp agency to call, I'll snap at just about anything. Especially an invitation to scam, to make some quick moolah, a bit of cutter, the pretty polly that will help me pay my three-digit phone bill, grotesquely inflated since I moved to California.

"Sure, Fudge," I say, after a pause to savor the New Me. "I'll bite. Sign me up to play this slime-mold. Just say when and where."

Fudge can barely conceal his glee—he's got another friend of Rick's on board for a "focus group." For two hours, I will sit through the fuck-us group discussion with a dozen other "decision-maker" corporate managers, shooting the breeze about the latest Star Wars-spinoff widget, or shar-

ing our gag reactions to the latest sloganeering tablets miraculously dragged down from Mount Sinai to flog a new lifestyle.

Here's looking at you, kid. I will sit unflinching under video and audio surveillance, one of them, make all the right moves, the noises that signify assent and sound convincing. For me, it's a question of survival—and the perverse pleasure of subtly feeding them my own line, a little counter-drivel. The unsuspecting host—Thieving Electronics, Perturbation Research, or whichever client retains Casablanca Field Research for this opinion pap smear—is subject to the woof and warp of my skewed views, and any other friends of Rick's who get packed into this group. The beauty of it is, the client will most likely never figure out they've been had.

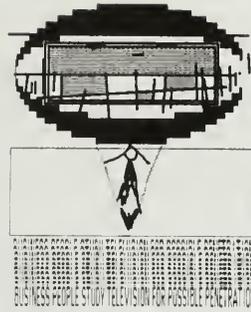
To be sure, there are signs of our deceit—the images we construct flake a bit around the edges, like dandruff on the collar. Not all of us have quite the right threads; sometimes getting outfitted requires a bit of hustling. Even so, I see the wrinkled noses of the genuine “respondoids” sitting near us, appalled by the stench of the street that sticks to us like freshly-poured tar.

I can usually bluff my way through any oral presentation, but a written questionnaire, often handed out with the croissants, tempts the devil in me. I spike my answers with weird indirection, and surreal suggestions—Q: *Have you any additional ideas on how this product could be improved?* A: *A submersible model of this laptop would be desirable, for both the bathtub and, say, a press conference on the Titanic.*

Fudge once explained to me about these focus groups. It wasn't “focus” in the New Age sense, as human potential types might think—it was even more manipulative than one of their inner development scams—

“Our client has either been requested to discover something about the world, or our client had purported something about the world to his client. The focus group is conducted in order either to verify the delusions of the client, or the delusions of the moderator, as the case may be.

“Seeing as we at Casablanca Field Research are one of the best,” here Fudge giggled, “one of the best *delusion verification* companies in the world, you can see how your role of multiple personalities—the ever-flexible ‘friend of Rick's’—becomes crucial to satisfying the



Graphic: GET, Doo Daa Florida

reality needs of the situation.”

My first meeting with Fudge is limned in a strobe-mist of dry ice, on one of my first visits to San Francisco. It was his birthday, and he was tripping. As I later learned, there was little difference between Fudge straight, and Fudge on psychedelics.

I am one of his more “normal” (or conventional-appearing) friends, not being a stripper, a leather lesbian, or a professional space program booster. The phone-call “screeners” that Fudge and his colleagues in market research use to recruit focus group participants serve as yet another vehicle for us to joyride while Fudge discharges his duties for Casablanca. It gives him private pleasure to infiltrate these market research groups with friends, or any convincing fuck-off who can cynically act a part, take the money, and run.

“For your time, Mister Tinnitus, you will be reimbursed with an honorarium of a startling one hundred dollars—did I say *dollars*? I meant *one hundred Vichy French Reichmarks*—or whatever we pay you scurvaceous people with.

“Refreshments, a light supper of soggy croissant sandwiches and soft drinks, will be served if you arrive early for your six o'clock group.

“Please be punctual. If you happen to recognize anyone in the group, any other friends of Rick's, you may exchange secret handshakes in the elevator afterwards, but for my sake in this job, if we are to continue our mutually lucrative arrangement, please do not divulge your prior acquaintance, or personal connection with me. It is not in our interest for my employer, Casablanca Field Research, or its clients, to recognize that you or any others are on my list of 'usual suspects.' Thank you, sir, and be sure to have yourself one hell of a nice day.”

Oh, Victor, please don't go to the underground meeting tonight. The address at which we are to meet is the thirty-something floor of the Flubb Building

on Market Street.

I have a copy of *MIS-InfoWorld* under the arm of my London Frog trench coat. The only thing that sets me off from those strangely suited creatures of the Embarcadero, or the management/slash/procurement types from Star Wars suck-up firms in SilValley, is my Big Country bolo tie, and the scuffed-up black Reeboks I wear in place of more laid-back Birkenstocks, or the new power footwear with Italian toes.

I arrive late, knowing that on those few occasions when everybody they need to fill a group shows up, they have to turn the last ones away with pay, rewarding tardiness for a change.

No such luck as the five o'clock shadows lengthen towards six. It is raining; I sense relief in the receptionist, as my arrival brings them up to a desired quorum. *These are the days my friends, yes these are the days my friends* intones a Philip Glass opera in my head, as we file into the conference room with mirror walls.

My paper plate is loaded with the promised soggy croissant sandwiches, stuffed with sauteed scorpion. A couple of bottles of Calistoga water clink in the pocket of my thriftshop pinstripes. I have reached a new plateau with this group: a hundred gaudy greenbacks for my precious time! I am ready to start celebrating even before it begins, but all I have in front of me is a plastic glass with Diet Coke and not enough ice.

We start with the usual round robin of introductions. For the purposes of today, my title is Public Debt and Securities ossifer at Krugerrand Savings and Loan. Other people in the group admit to being in Mergers & Execrations, Consumption Modulation, and Honest Verification. Buncha sharks—unless there's another friend of Rick's in this group, with a solid cover.

For the convenience of the client, we are being monitored through one-way glass, recorded for both voice and picture. We're a suave ad hoc committee, nodding nonchalance, but then surveillance is in our job description.

The facilitator, a fourth Stooge for the yet unnamed, and possibly unnamable client, faces us from between the tines of the u-shaped table, simulating relaxation. He genially introduces us to the format for tonight's discussion, assuming we're all virgins. He will channel our comments, and exhorts us to be completely candid in our reactions. “There's no such thing as a wrong answer here,”

he assures us.

I've heard this spiel so many times, I sometimes worry that the non-Fudge staff at Casablanca will recognize me as a little more of a "regular" than the strict canons of market research would ordinarily allow. But Fudge is a meticulous scam-artist—he protects the friends of Rick's from embarrassment and apprehension. He is, after all, a professional.

Tonight we are to be introduced to something new that is in the development stage. This (blankety blank) company would like Stooze to find out what we think about the product's viability—will it be attractive to business?

It is not clear just what the product is, for he then leads us into a very general and inconclusive discussion of the modern corporation, the way its physical organization can be modeled as an organism. All right, the elevators and corridors are—

"Alimentary, dear Watson," Stooze looks up from his script, then frowns as if we've missed our cue on the laugh-track.

The phones and computers are nervous bundles, relaying masses of information, commands to the corpuscular personnel. Everyone winces when I suggest, as security officers, we are the white phagocytes of the system—that *phuh* word sounds strange, even if it is accurate. Management is presumably berthed in the seat of intelligence, the company boardroom.

"What about the plumbing? The water fountains, the sinks, the toilets?"

What about them?

"Wouldn't they be for intake and excretion?" asks Consumption Modulation.

"It's the circulatory system," chips in Mergers and Excretions. "With filters for the poisons."

"We all know that water is the very basis of life," Stooze says knowingly. "And waste often reveals what cannot be said."

"Garbage in, garbage out," I opine.

"Precisely. Now what would you say if a means existed for a safe and discrete analysis of that garbage? And better still, for correlating this information with the specific individuals who introduce this garbage into the system? Asking the employee for a waste specimen does not usually engender the most agreeable exchange, and by showing your hand, gives the employee a chance to mess with the process."

"Are you talking about *controlled* sub-

stances?"

"We're talking about this," Stooze points to the flip chart. "Quality." In our opening discussion, we'd thrown some words around which he had written in big letters with a felt tip pen. "And what about this: Control. Quality. . . Control. A company is only as good as its human resources."

I've been in some pretty far-out focus groups before, like the one involving cosmetic surgery for animals—in which everything from vaginoplasty, liposuction, nose-piercing, fur dyes, tattoos, and contact lenses was discussed in all seriousness for house pets. If people were prepared to shell out monster bucks to buy their pooches and pussies a burial plot, then why not go the full yard for penis-implanted tarantulas? Me, I'm a low-tech kinda guy who's content just to kick the cat now and then.

Every day I see the postmodern neoprimatives in business suits swinging from pillar to post on the glassine vines of the Financial District. What they do with (hopefully) consenting animals in private is something I'm prepared to ignore, even if it does disgust me. *Only in San Francisco. . .* we accept this kind of everyday surrealism.

But it's gotten so nothing in the SoMa demimonde can match the Jekyll and Hyde machinations of Corporate America for nightmare logic. This bilgewater about the purity and essence of the employee's precious bodily fluids makes me ill. I rise.

"Speaking of plumbing, is it permitted to go visit the great god Porcelain?" I ask Stooze.

Without waiting for an answer, I step out into the hall, and dash down towards the men's room. I am tempted to grab an elevator back into the maw of the city once again. Only I would not pass GO, would not collect a hundred dollars.

I gotta pee, but after hearing the turn the focus group was taking, do not dare empty my bladder anywhere in this building. Casablanca's client this time has to be among the slimiest of coprophages—although they haven't named the party, I can pretty much guess that it's Sin-Tech. Let's hope they aren't trying out the product *here*.

It's after seven; this part of the hallway is darkened—no Casablanca staff are in sight. The client is in the observation room, possibly humping away with one of the market research execs, while on the other side of the one-way glass, the

focus group weighs the virtues and cost-effectiveness of excretion analysis.

I slip out my garden hose, and quietly, unobtrusively I hope, spray one of the potted plants by an accountant's desk. Poor thing, wilting in this fluorescent fun-house. *I'll bet they're asleep all over America.* At least I'll make its secret life a bit more interesting—it can dream of ammonia seas and gas-giant planets.

After molesting the plants for a few more minutes, my nose buried among the leaves, I slouch back into the light. Before reentering the conference room, I square my shoulders, securing what I hope is my determined, earlier facade, before the horror set in.

The focus group has changed in character while I've been gone. Most are now pencilling answers on a questionnaire. Honesty Verification turns his pages face down, making short work of it with a ready round of rubber stamp platitudes.

I feel like a student late for class as I take my seat near the door. More time has passed in this room than I can account for with my quick micturation. The minutes so easily become distended in Casablanca. Stooze looks at me with officious disapproval. I glare him down with my filed-teeth look, honed from riding the El. *Don't fuck with me, Mister.*

The questions have to do with the "flexible response" option for management to deal with the ever-weakening code of conduct, and employee attitude. Q: *If a security management system facilitates total access to the encoded use characteristics of your workforce, how much more effectively would you be able to husband your human resources?* A: *Sodomy is a good start, but for real exploitation, let's fit them each with a wire, and a bit between the teeth.* Q: *How much would you be prepared to pay for such a system, on a per-employee basis?* A: *Rather than dirty our hands with cash, filthy lucre, I would seek barter in kind. How many pints of blood, how many sperm samples, placentas, corneas, or organs from our body bank would you accept in exchange for the swift installation of your product?*

I scribble my flexible responses using my own pen, which has a special acid-based ink that will, over the course of the next few days, eat through the stack of uncoded, unkeyed, unevaluated questionnaires. Would that I could do the same to the image on the video tape, introduce a wavering moire cloud, as if we were all clad in scramble suits, effacing our features into expressionistic blurs, our bland words melting into gobs

of meaningless verbiage on the carpet squares.

Stooge mechanically thanks us for our participation. "You've all been very helpful, and you can be sure what you've said tonight will be reflected in the packaging of this new service. Until it is actually released, I'd like to remind you of the nondisclosure agreement you've signed—this product is still in a development stage, and may not be available for some time to come." Stooge consults his watch. "And thank you for taking the time from your evening to come to Casablanca. It's a few minutes before eight, but we're going to let you go early. Outside is another focus group scheduled for eight—please don't say anything about what we've discussed here as you exit."

The air out in the waiting room crackles, as we file past the paymistress doling out our centuries. A fresh batch of respondoids sit slumped where we were not two hours ago. They're fading already—it's way past the time they usually shuck their suits. For the next two hours, they too will get to rap about this or that divine invention, whether it's from Sin-Tech, Fourth Reich Research, Thieving Electronics, whatever.

"Your name, sir?" She fans the stack of envelopes.

I scratch my head. Who am I this time? *The fundamental things apply.*

For a moment I'm distracted by a familiar face, an odor I know coming in the door. A woman with demure attire but severe earrings walks past me into the waiting room. She has a cocky stride, a sly wink as she takes her place and immediately starts to fill her plate.

I point to an envelope. "There I am. That's me." I sign by the x.

*Your winnings, sir.*

—Art Tinnitus

**Afterword:** I recently spoke with Fudge, who left Casablanca a few years ago, and has since moved out of state.

Fudge recalled this about his career in muck-it research:

"All too frequently, the depressing fact of life when you do general population interviewing, is that people have so very little happening between their ears, that you can see why we get the governments that we get, and many of the products that we get, and many of the TV shows that we get. It's these shit-for-brains types that make it possible."

The type of research Fudge most reviled is political surveying. "We were

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very careful to aim these calls at voting blocs which were thought to be switchable, or changeable—their voting history had been volatile—it could be switched from one persuasion to another by which way the wind was blowing. It was propagandizing in the worst case. You would get questions like: *if you knew that worthy opponent candidate X routinely ate human brains, would you still vote for this person?*

Fudge had his own fanciful example of political surveying, prepared for a potential client—"Lebensraum Research."

*We're calling French people tonight. We have here a short one-minute survey of French soldiers on the Maginot line, whose paychecks are one tenth what they should be. Does that describe you?*

*It does describe you. You believe your paycheck is one tenth what it should be? We'll get your name, rank and bunker location later.*

*Please tell me if you agree or disagree with any of the following statements:*

*I enjoy trench foot, gangrene, lice, maggots, and the satanic nightmare of certain mangled doom. Would you agree or disagree?*

*Germany, the land of beer, Beethoven, Bach, and boobs, is composed of unrealized*

*geniuses just like yourself. Would you agree or disagree?*

*France is the most civilized country in Europe, and therefore the universe. You would agree with that, I'm sure.*

*In a rational universe, civilized countries would not need armies whose soldiers are paid shit, merde, or scheiss while fat cowardly stupid, i.e. unFrench officers wallow in looted, gilded sloth? Would you agree with that? I assume that you do.*

*Those who can goosetstep, do. Those who can't, drink chablis. Would you agree or disagree?*

*France, the most civilized etc., is surrounded by the scum of the Earth. I'm sure you would agree.*

*Scum of the Earth—Untermenschen, is the German term—plot constantly to loot and rape France of its sacred, virginal honor.*

*France, the most etc., needs protection from the rest of the world as described. The Third Reich has the largest army in Europe, and therefore the universe.*

*And finally, in France, a really precocious feisty Chardonnay is best appreciated by those who are still living. I'm sure you would agree.*

*Do you agree or disagree that life is good, and that your death would be wrong?*



# A Trade Reporter's Report

**Z**apped by your VDT? No one really knows if the radiation it puts out—along with hair dryers, electric blankets and power lines—is dangerous. But studies show that it might be.

The Environmental Protection Agency came to exactly that point in a report that was to be out in late November. That would be news in itself, a good story to cover for my high-tech newspaper. But even more interesting is that the White House was sitting on the report because it would scare people—a better story to cover for my high-tech newspaper.

More exciting for me as a journalist was the fact that I was the only one on to the story—an unusual chance for a scoop in an industry that usually cares more about new mainframes than how computers affect lives. This is what keeps me on the job.

Except, *the story got held*. By the time my piece came

out, other journalists broke it on network news. I could console myself that I had information no one else had. For instance, the reason studies were so inconclusive is that the non-ionizing radiation (electromagnetic fields) from our appliances don't behave like toxic chemicals: there is no dose/response relationship, and the outcome of experiments depends on where they are carried out in relation to the earth's own electromagnetic field. Except that when the story did finally appear, it was not on the front page—and with a trade paper, if it ain't on the front page it might as well be in Siberia.

Now, if that story had been about a new mainframe from IBM, it would have played lead story, with graphs and charts and a sidebar for every state in the union.

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***Apparently flaks don't think that executives of their companies are to be trusted to say the "right" words. They're scared to death that someone will actually reveal NEWS.***

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I try not to write those mainframe stories, but that's how to get on the front page and get a bonus. Money and a byline. A few free lunches. It's not awful in the scheme of things.

At the first paycheck, I knew nothing about computers, except how to run Wordstar. Three years later, I know way too much about them in terms of abstract or virtual knowledge. In real terms, I now know how to use both Wordstar and Xywrite.

Trade reporters can move among different trade publications, but those dozens of publications are controlled mainly by two owners (Ziff-Davis and International Data Group). They only seem to differ in the narrowness of their focus (like on a particular vendor, such as *MacWorld*, for Apple Computers) and in the degree of fawning copy

devoted to companies that advertise in their pages.

I have never been asked to write stories favorable to the companies that advertise in my paper, but people working at other publications say that pressure comes with the well-paid job. In at least one case, IBM reads and approves the editorial copy before it goes to press. Instead, the pressure is to do stories on the endless stream of new products emanating from the zillions of computer companies out there. You use acronyms like commas. Acronyms like RISC, MIPS, and EDI take on as much meaning as IBM. But my mother and most friends cannot decipher my work. For them, the word "Eunuchs" is used to signify short fat castrated men guarding harems. Now it's Unix, an operating system.

For three years I've been stuffing my head with all this relatively useless information when I could use my research and writing skills to inform on more pressing matters. I still have no interest in how the industry works, or care for its products (only the reliability of word processing software).

Not only do I now speak a different language, covering the computer industry takes a whole different technique than being a general interest or even a general business reporter.

For one, it breeds flaks like flies. After being a reporter, even a business reporter, for ten years, I found the clouds of computer flaks (or public relations people, as they prefer to be called) astonishing. Apparently flaks don't think that executives of their companies are to be trusted to say the "right" words. They're scared to death that someone will actually reveal NEWS. Most stupidly, they're afraid that an "unannounced product" will be revealed. In the computer biz, products (like the latest Macintosh) are not talked about before there is an official "roll-out," when all the information hits at once. My job, of course, is to find out just what the products are before the official time comes. Then I attend the roll-out, which often resembles a rock concert complete with dry ice, blaring music and background videos. Only instead of Jon Bon Jovi appearing through the haze, you see some plastic encased box with a screen in front and an announcer with a receding hairline.

All roll-outs have some weirdness to them. The worst, so far, was in 1988 when Steve Jobs rolled out the first

Next computer. He rented Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco. Invitations were so hard to come by that some people were scalping them at the door (they were free). Jobs appeared in the spotlight like Macbeth. The music swelled, and there was a collective oral orgasm from the crowd when he removed the black sheath surrounding the model computer on the stage. The press was then herded into a separate conference room where company flaks guarded press kits like gold bullion. It was a press conference and they wouldn't give out the damn press kits. Of course we diverted them and stole them anyway—big thrill—along with the vegetarian sandwiches and Calistoga.

You can't get a press kit without them, you can't get a drink without

'em. And you can't talk to anyone without flaks. If it's a phone interview, they quietly listen and take notes on a conference line. If it's a live interview, they sit next to you and take their own notes or tape recorder. They've even followed me into the bathroom to make sure I don't stray into off-limits territory on my way in and out.

Not surprisingly, they lie. "I hear the company's not doing too well and that there may be layoffs soon." "No, we're doing fine." Next day 300 people are out of a job. I have to add that some are helpful—usually the ex-reporters who've gone over to the other side where they can make twice the money. But after a few years, the corporateness tends to creep in and take them over too.

The advertisement features a central black banner with the text "PAPA'S GOT A BRAND NEW BAG" in large, white, serif font. Above and below this banner are two identical illustrations of a long, segmented, worm-like creature with a human-like head and tail, possibly representing a "brand new bag" or a "roll-out". The creature is shown in a slightly curved, crawling position. The background of the advertisement is white with some faint, illegible text and graphics.

You do get free lunches out of them, if that's the way you want to spend a lunch hour. At my office, we count good weeks in terms of how many lunches we can scam. They also send us things. Often they're just stupid promotional devices like corporate calendars, or a microchip embedded in plastic. But lately they've been getting better. At Xmas we got chemistry sets with different colored liquids and instructions to make the combinations fizz or turn into a gluey substance. With real gifts, like leather-bound filofaxes, we try to scrape off the corporate logo and regive them to friends. For this *faux* generosity (I plaster my cubicle with Xmas cards from companies and humans I've never heard of) the trade reporter is expected at least to take the flak's phone calls, which are never ending.

Phone calls from flaks trying to get some ink for products or marketing scams, which move me about as much as Perry Como, I greet with an honest, "I don't care, sorry." This moves some of them near tears, pleading to speak to my boss about this terrible injustice I've just meted out to them. And it is true—no ink in the newspaper means they remain in obscurity that much longer. So, send me good gifts!

The gifts keep coming despite the recession, and despite the fact that the recession hit the computer industry early on. It had grown way too big, way too fast, and a little economic pin pricked its balloon.

But when it hit, there were some ominous editorial signs. All of a sudden, editors were demanding more stories on "products." Forget the interesting stuff about how technology affects lives in say, the Middle East, or how pollution from the manufacturing process has

# NEW WORLD



# ODOR

Graphic: Arch D. Bunker & Trixie T-Square

made Silicon Valley groundwater toxic. *PRODUCT STORIES*, the bane of the trade reporter's existence, were all of a sudden in high demand.

My publication and others retracted the tentacles they had slithered out into the real world and tried to rely on the old method of trade journalism. Not much different than writing for the Macy's insert in the Sunday paper. To weather the recession, their first tactic was to go back to pretending that

computers were still just a small part of the world and refusing to recognize that high tech and life in the 1990s had become inextricable.

We had seen it coming—at least those of us on the bottom looking out. Computers were developing so fast—doubling in speed every year—that consumers did not care to keep up with them. Rocket scientists can use these machines, but that is not a big market.

While the industry was expanding in the late 1980s, when consumers *could* keep up, computer companies grew into their wingtips. The status symbol became a new suburban building with fountains—the more fountains, the better one's success. Executives were leasing Ferraris, and the expansion seemed unlimited.

And so it was, in technology terms, but that wouldn't translate into buying and selling, even without a recession. Human beings were not about to keep up with the changing technology—there's a basic resistance to things new. Humans don't want to learn a new word-processing application, much less a new method of logic underneath it (the operating system) if they don't have to. It doesn't matter whether the hardware is cheaper for the employers in the long run; few workers are going to buy it.

So I watch the high-tech world go by. While many magazines such as mine will go under in the recession—or have already gone—mine will still be around. I'll probably spend the rest of my days on the phone with managers of corporate information systems trying to divine the next greatest mainframe, while my VDT slowly cooks my brain.

—Frank Wilde

## TWISTED IMAGE by Ace Backwards ©1988



# Post-Modern Pensées

MODERN PRIMITIVES STOOP TO FIND THEMSELVES.

THE RITES OF PIERCING AND SCARIFICATION  
REPLACE THE RITES OF SILENCE, THE  
RITES OF SPRING.

TECHNOLOGY HAS TOOLED LIVES INTO PRECISION  
MACHINES LACKING MYTH AND FEELING.

TELEVISION EDUCATES CHILDREN ON THE FINE  
POINTS OF ADDICTION, CONSUMER, SEXUAL  
AND OTHERWISE.

TELEVISION PREPARES WHITE CHILDREN FOR  
WHITE SLAVERY IN THE MARKETPLACE.

TELEVISION PREPARES BLACK CHILDREN FOR THE  
CRACK HOUSES.

THE CRACK HOUSES ARE THE NERVE ENDINGS ON  
THE FINGERTIPS ON THE HAND ON THE ARM OF  
THE STATE.

COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY IS USED TO LIMIT  
POWER TO AN EDUCATED ELITE.

COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY IS USED TO DISSEMINATE  
PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT INDIVIDUALS TO  
THE ELITE WHO HAVE THE POWER AND KNOWLEDGE  
TO ACCESS THAT INFORMATION.

THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY IS NONEXISTENT.

THE MASS MEDIA SIMULTANEOUSLY CREATES AND  
RECORDS HISTORY.

THE SPEED AND EASE OF DISSEMINATION OF  
INFORMATION HAS RESULTED IN A DESENSITIZED  
POPULATION.

NEWS OF TRAGEDY REMAINS IN THE CONSCIOUS-  
NESS ONLY A FEW DAYS BEFORE IT IS REPLACED  
BY NEWS THAT PROVIDES FRESH PSYCHOLOGICAL  
STIMULATION.

THE PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE CULTURE  
MORE WIDELY AVAILABLE TO THE POPULATION  
HAS HAD THE OPPOSITE EFFECT.

RAP MUSIC IS THE NEW FOLK MUSIC.

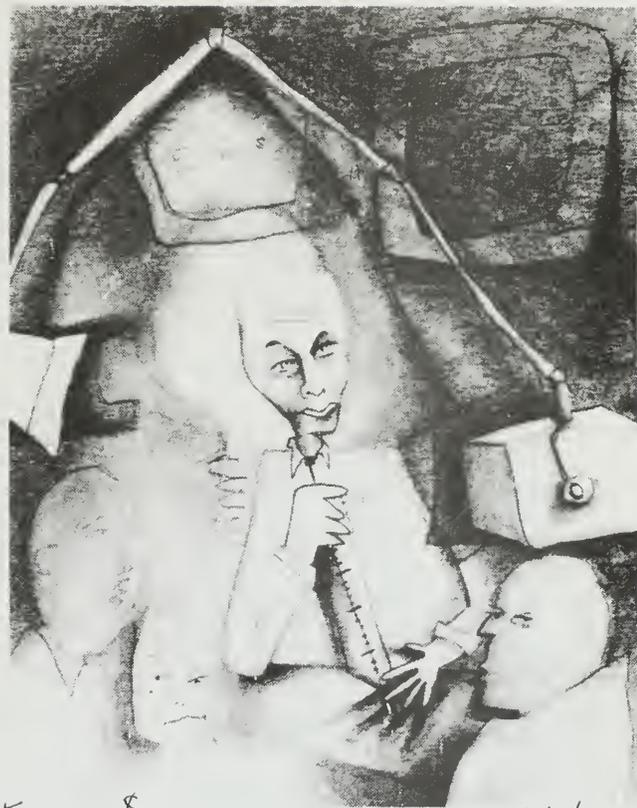
RAP MUSIC FRIGHTENS MIDDLE AMERICA BECAUSE  
IT USES EXTREME LANGUAGE WHICH IS NOT  
TOLERATED.

RAP MUSIC FRIGHTENS MIDDLE AMERICA BECAUSE  
IT IS ONE EXAMPLE OF AN OPPRESSED GROUP  
USING TECHNOLOGY TO THEIR BENEFIT.

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS HAVE BECOME AS COMMON  
AS SHOE SALESMEN.

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS ARE NOT THE RITUAL HEALERS  
INTENDED BY FREUD.

ANALYSIS SMACKS OF RITUAL, IS AN INITIATION.



$E = mc^2$

M. Helj '89

MODERN PSYCHOTHERAPY IS "SAFE PASSAGE," IN  
MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT TELEVISION IS THE  
"COOL FIRE."

THE MECHANIZATION OF WAR HAS CREATED AN  
INDUSTRY THAT ECONOMICALLY DEPENDS UPON  
WAR FOR ITS SURVIVAL.

WORLD GOVERNMENTS HAVE A SYMBIOTIC  
RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS INDUSTRY.

WORLD PEACE WITHIN THIS STRUCTURE IS  
IMPOSSIBLE.

NEW AGE MYTHOLOGY IS AN ATTEMPT TO  
SYNTHESIZE VARIOUS MYSTICISMS AND ANCIENT  
PHILOSOPHIES IN A WAY THAT SUBVERTS THE  
POWER OF EACH.

ADVERTISING IS THE MOST WIDELY AND  
ENTHUSIASTICALLY PRACTICED ART FORM.

KITSCH IS THE PRODUCT OF AN IMAGE-OBSESSED  
CULTURE.

EROTIC FEMALE IMAGERY IS REPRODUCED  
REPETITIVELY IN A WAY THAT TRIVIALIZES  
FEMALE SEXUALITY.

GOVERNMENT RESPONDS PRIMARILY TO THE  
NEEDS OF CORPORATE INDUSTRY.

NEGATIVITY AND CYNICISM ARE FASHIONABLE  
REACTIONS TO LIBERAL APATHY.

NIHILISM IS A REACTION TO ALIENATION.

ANARCHY IS A REACTION TO DESPAIR.

—Paula Orlando



# Kelly Girl's Good Job

**W**hen I was a sophomore in college I found a good summer internship in Washington, D.C., working under the Jimmy Carter administration (the last administration, I believe, to take special notice of women). It paid, it sounded important, and I hoped (OK, I was 19) that it might make me and the rest of the world better feminists.

The job consisted of doing research for a report to the President on the status of women. We wrote abstracts from testimony by hundreds of women about welfare, child care, sexual abuse, harassment, and other types of discrimination. Those women and the ones conducting the hearings, believed their efforts might make a difference. But I realized one day that the report wouldn't even be finished until approximately one week before Carter would be out of office for good. All that work was for show.

The all-woman office was entirely bureaucratic and hierarchical: the worst example of women in power imitating men. I started keeping a journal to ease my frustrations, writing reflections about how the best way to be a bureaucrat was to be stupid, how unfeminist this "feminist" office was, and how committee chair Lynda Johnson Robb (of pink and patent-leather TV wedding fame) seemed as if she'd be much more comfortable back home barking at the servants. I also wrote personal things about whom I'd slept with and how my eating disorder was going.

Then one day I was called into the Executive Director's office, where my journal was sitting on the middle of a big, clean desk. I was told my journal was government property now. It was done on government time, on a government type-

writer, so it belonged to the government. They threatened to fire me (I later found out they couldn't, because their action was in fact what I felt it was, an invasion of privacy).

The upshot was that I could keep the job, but as punishment I wouldn't be able to work on the special White House event, or anything else.

\* \* \* \* \*

My second internship was much more hip. I worked at *Rolling Stone* on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. I wanted to work there because eventually I wanted to write raucous, political, point-of-view journalism, like they had in *RS's* good old days.

But the new days at *Rolling Stone* were different. It was a tense hushed atmosphere, where only established old buddies ever wrote anything. As an intern my job was to photocopy for the profes-

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***I don't have to wake up to an alarm clock, angry as the day begins, confined in stockings and pumps and busses and cubicles. I don't have to pretend to be nice to anyone, or play office politics and sicken myself at how good I can be at those games...***

---

sionally hip. For this, I was paid nothing, but offered occasional free tickets to bad concerts and opportunities to go out with record reviewers twice my age. I kept suggesting ideas and offering to do research, and I kept being told I looked great in that color and would you get me some coffee, and, once, don't you realize you should never sleep with anyone you work with?

My friends envied my great job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eventually I moved to San Francisco to become a writer. I wrote a lot of stories in exchange for very little money. I would spend maybe a month doing original research and, if lucky, get paid \$50 or \$150 for an article. Usually I tried to write in the style and voice of the publication (not my own) and include just what they wanted me to include. I was young and inexperienced. They got off cheap.

To support myself, I worked as a temp. My idea of a good temp job was one where there wasn't much to do all day (particularly no charts to word process) and nobody bothered me. It was an especially good temp job if there was free juice, easy access to the xerox machine, lots of good stuff to take home, and a WATS line.

Those good temp jobs were few, and didn't last.

\* \* \* \* \*

These days I work for myself. I've freelanced for several years, and gradually I've been able to do at least as much work I want to do as work I *have to do* to pay the rent. I mostly write about things I'm interested in, and I get paid pretty well for doing it (relatively speaking, of course).

But it isn't perfect. For instance, I know that over the years I've internalized many of the requirements for being a successful freelance writer, and that my "voice" in magazine articles is not always so much my *own* as it is the one I instinctively know will work. I may not have as much freedom as I think I have. And I don't really know how my voice would be different in a different kind of system, where I didn't have to write anything to pay the rent, to please the editors.

But I try to be a good boss. For one thing, I don't make myself work very hard. Friends of mine (mostly from New York) who are very time-achievement-money oriented tease me, some-

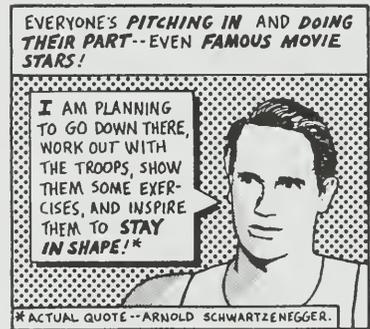
what jealousy, somewhat seriously, about being lazy. They can't understand why, when they come to visit on a Monday, I take the day off to go to the beach to be with them. They don't know how I can be out in the middle of the afternoon when they call. They think this freelancing is kind of cute but not really that important, and certainly not very powerful.

One of the legacies of my involvement with the *Processed World* collective is that I've also internalized the *Why Work?* ethic. I only work as much as I have to, or want to. It makes perfect sense to me to take a bicycle ride at 3:00 p.m., when most people are experiencing that mid-afternoon slump that not even caffeine will fix. It also makes sense to spend a day, like today, working on something for fun, which won't pay anything but satisfaction.

But this good job, as I mentioned, is not without its problems. For one thing, I don't have a community of people to work with, to conspire, collaborate, and create with. Working alone I get to feeling dull. I've tried to create community by spending time with other freelancers, having lunch, chatting about projects, and playing hooky for whole weeks at the film festival. I also log in to a virtual community every day, talking with people on the WELL, the Bay Area's Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link. There the conversations are more or less as interesting as those you'd find at a water cooler, but it's at least interaction.

There's also a problem of feeling as if I have to recreate myself every day. I can't simply push the time clock and do what's expected of me. In some ways, that's more difficult. I have to pace myself, hustle up work, and wonder what I'll do next month or next year. I panic that I'll run out of ideas and assignments, that all my outlets will dry up, that I'll never figure out the bigger project I can't quite grasp right now.

But I don't have to wake up to an alarm clock, angry as the day begins, confined in stockings and pumps and busses and cubicles. I don't have to pretend to be nice to anyone, or play office politics and sicken myself at how good I can be at those games. No one's my boss except the Big Boss, the economy that keeps me writing articles that end up wedged between glossy ads for dreams, articles that are accepted because they will appeal to people who



buy dreams. But in that tiny filler space I do what I can.

And in the long stretches of my working days, my good job has a lot more possibilities.

—Kelly Girl



# DOWNTIME!



## SF VDT Legislation: A Great Idea Corrupted

San Francisco's by now infamous Video Display Terminal (VDT) legislation started out amazingly well. But by the time it was signed by the mayor, most of the protections had been removed or watered down so that workers may only be safeguarded from the most egregious examples of poorly designed workstations.

- Originally the ordinance would have:
- Affected workers who spend more than half their work day at terminals.
- Applied to all businesses with 15 or more employees who work at VDTs.
- Mandated adjustable chairs and desks, and set a minimum standard for the thickness of chair upholstery.
- Required anti-glare screens for employees who request such items.
- Necessitated 15-minute work breaks every two hours.
- Specified non-glare lighting and light intensity.
- Mandated non-VDT work during pregnancy when requested.
- Provided for employer-sponsored vision exams and mitigation.
- Minimized noise from impact printers.
- Required a minimum space of five feet between a worker and the back of a terminal to minimize exposure to magnetic fields.
- Asked the Director of Public Health to report to the county on studies of health effects from electromagnetic radiation.

At the end of the process, only the first five and the last requirement were left intact. The most important one that remained—adjustable chairs and desks to prevent repetitive strain injuries—was substantially weakened by the business community.

VDT legislation began rolling in San Francisco after labor was struck by four ominous precedents, according to Barbara Kellogg, Oakland-based organizer for the Service Employees International Union Local 790.

In 1988, a similar ordinance was struck down in Suffolk County, NY, which is now on appeal. The same year, Kaiser Permanente came out with a study indicating that women who

spend more than 20 hours a week at a terminal, and also have higher-stress jobs are more likely to experience reproductive health problems, including miscarriages.

In 1989, CalOSHA refused to set ergonomic, vision, and stress standards for California workers, despite recommendations to do so from their own ad hoc committee.

Finally, in mid-1990, then-Governor Deukmejian vetoed a symbolic VDT bill that had been watered down to only say that computer equipment makers should meet their own recommended ergonomic standards.



Graphic: Doug Minkler

First off, San Francisco city lawyers looked at the proposed legislation and nixed the parts requiring vision exams and alternative work for pregnant women—since those two areas are, or may be governed by the state and federal government. Then, in a misplaced spirit of cooperation with the “business community,” the supervisors spent several months meeting with the very same business people who have forced workers to remain at terminals long after signs of stress injuries had appeared.

In one case, at Pacific Bell, an operator with splints running from her knuckles to her elbows, was forced to remain at the keyboard or lose her job. About a month before the ordinance was made public, Pac Bell announced new plans for ergonomic redesign of its offices. However, Pac Bell managers had no idea about such a program and a

spokeswoman said that it was announced before details were worked out. The *San Francisco Examiner*, in another case of inhumanity, sent its suffering workers home.

Since the supervisors allowed these meetings, the business community used the opportunity to weaken nearly every point in the ordinance, compromising safety further by weakening requirements for pregnant workers to be allowed non-VDT work if requested and indirect lighting to ease eye strain.

Next to go was the requirement that a worker be placed no closer than five feet from the back or sides of a VDT. This was put in because electromagnetic radiation, which the EPA says may be linked to cancer, envelopes a terminal on all sides. It was whittled down to three feet and then tossed completely.

Even after the bill was signed into law in late December, corporate interests continued to tinker with it. Through amendments, they were able to limit the amount they would have to invest in retrofitting workstations to a maximum of \$250 and to have four years to complete the work. They were also able to extend non-retrofits, or new furniture purchases for workstations up to four years after the legislation goes into effect.

By negotiating with business leaders the city helped shift the discussion from the health of workers to the health of the business climate, one always coming at the expense of the other. Of course, business once again threatened to leave San Francisco due to “interference” by city government.

There were projections of enormous costs to both the city and business—between \$73 million and \$120 million. But no one spoke about the cost of future decades of workers' compensation claims.

To retrofit a cubicle with an adjustable chair and desk and a detachable keyboard costs between \$1,200 and \$2,000, testified one doctor. If someone gets a repetitive stress injury, workers' compensation for lost work time, reduced output, increased premiums, administration, etc., easily tops all that.

But corporations see workers' comp as a cost of doing business. Workers' comp

is no-fault insurance, a system which prevents employees from filing for punitive damages. Companies which knowingly put workers in a hazardous situation only have to pay for actual hospitalization or doctor bills. Lawyers say it's a disincentive for protection (not to mention bad for *their* business!).

Despite the massive concessions, many on the corporate side came away from the process with a sour taste. Some vowed to sue the city. Some vowed resistance. The woman at Pac Bell with the splints up to her elbows couldn't come to the final Board of Supervisors meeting to watch the vote. She couldn't take any more time off from work at her VDT for fear of losing her job.

—Frank Wilde

## SOLIDARITY WITH BRITISH "POLL TAX" RESISTERS!

### THE POLL TAX

The British government is trying to enforce the "Poll Tax"—a flat rate tax on every adult. The Poll Tax is unjust and many cannot afford to pay (especially women, young people and Britain's black and ethnic minority communities). It will also devastate local democracy and welfare services.

The last time a British government tried to impose such a tax—in 1381!—there was an armed uprising and government ministers were set upon and killed. No other country in the world has successfully imposed such a tax. Papua New Guinea scrapped theirs 12 years ago because it was unworkable. A plan to implement a Poll Tax in New South Wales, Australia was abandoned last year following the mass opposition in the UK.

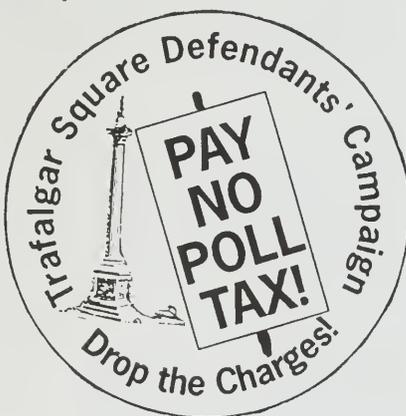
### THE OPPOSITION

Over 12 million adults in Britain have so far refused to pay the tax, despite government threats of court action, seizure of property, wages etc., and ultimately prison. There are over 2,000 local anti-Poll Tax groups and regional federations working to encourage and support non-payers, in order to make the tax unworkable. It is a diverse and dynamic self-organized movement of class and community solidarity.

### TRAFALGAR SQUARE

March 31st was the eve of the implementation of the tax in England and

Wales (it had been introduced in Scotland the year before). Following a wave of angry local protests all over the country, a national demonstration was called, ending in a rally in Trafalgar Square. Nearly 250,000 people attended, making it one of the largest demonstrations in 20th century British history. The police—increasingly notorious for their role in smashing strikes and other working class actions attempted to break up the rally by cavalry-charging a sit down protest outside the Prime Minister's Downing Street residence. Instead they provoked a six-hour long battle, in which protesters defended themselves against police and did millions of dollars damage to capitalist property in London's lush West End. Predictably, the British press and state used the police violence as an occasion to attack the anti-Poll Tax movement, and to label anyone arrested as "Thugs, Rioters or Hooligans." The police launched an immediate campaign of harassment against the movement, arresting activists and raiding their homes. Altogether, over 520 people have been arrested, and are receiving heavy fines and long prison sentences after political show trials.



### THE TRAFALGAR SQUARE DEFENDANTS CAMPAIGN

Building on the long tradition of community self defense by British black people, a campaign was formed to support those arrested, coordinate legal defense (over 200 different lawyers are acting for the various defendants), and raise money for defendants' legal and welfare costs (our target is \$75,000). We want to tell the truth about what happened in Trafalgar Square that day and since, against the hysteria and lies of the media and the authorities. Above all, we need to ensure the anti-

Poll Tax movement is not intimidated by these attacks, and fights for the right to oppose this hated tax and demonstrate freely.

The campaign has already organized pickets of courts where show trials are in progress, and prisons where protesters are being held. We have successfully tracked down witnesses to illegal arrests and violence by police officers, and have arranged lawyers for defendants who were unrepresented. We have raised thousands of dollars for publicity and defendants' costs, and have received support from hundreds of anti-Poll Tax groups and federations all over the country.

We are calling for the dropping of all charges against protesters from March 31st and October 20th.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Organize a protest and send us a report and photograph.
- Become a contact for distributing information about our activities in your country.
- Publicize our situation.
- Send messages of solidarity to those in prison.
- Let us know of similar struggles in which you are involved.

FOR A WORLD WITHOUT EXPLOITATION, OPPRESSION OR BORDERS!!!

The Trafalgar Square  
Defendants Campaign

(they can be reached through Processed World)

## "COMPANY MEN" REBELLING IN JAPAN

A new singing group, the Shines, is spreading the notion that it's OK to have a life outside of work. They are striking a chord among young Japanese within the rigid corporate structures, providing a voice to express vague frustrations.

*"From early in the morning  
My battle starts  
I run up the station stairs  
Turn around, turn around  
A cog in a wheel  
Work hard, work hard,  
Japanese salaryman"*

The Shines draw on traditions of Japanese sentimental ballads and company picnic cheers. "We sing a capella because we don't have instruments, and anyway, the message is more important than the music," says Taro

Sugimura, 26. "The message is, 'Let's find another interest outside the company. Let's enjoy our life!'"

Rika Muranaka, 27, who quit her job at *Esquire Japan* to become a freelance event promoter, said, "It's no longer enough to be just a company person. People are beginning to see that a well-rounded, talented person has more than just a company life."

More young people in prestigious companies are questioning the system that got them there, particularly the "examination hell that rewards their ability to memorize and cultivates the kind of diligence that companies demand." They are questioning values seen as integral to the Japanese.

Recently there has been a proliferation of young people's groups called "networks," which cut across usual company or university classmate lines; consisting instead of "side-by-side relationships," without seniority systems or vertical structures (unlike traditional groups in Japan).

The new horizontal networks are also unusual because they include women. With few exceptions, women are hired as "OLs" ("office ladies"), pouring tea, making copies and doing other trivial chores. These days, OLs are shown in TV commercials laughing together at their bosses. The majority of Shines' fans are OLs. *S.F. Examiner*

Illustration: Jef Mooney



## INTERTWINING WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

*(You have nothing to lose...but your briefs!)*

**WANTED! WANTED! WANTED!** Hedonists...Saboteurs...Erotopreneurs...Pleasurecrats...Working "Stiffs" for personal stories of **Sex on the Job**, to be included in *Fucking Off on the Job: Tales celebrating the erotic spirit sapping the strength of the planetary work machine*. A book and serialized radio show of first-person accounts by workers telling how they mixed business and pleasure in ways never told before.

Cultivating the erotic sphere on the job takes many shapes, many hues, many complications. For some it is planned and quite straightforward; for others it may be a mutually consenting spontaneous "accident"—perhaps rewarding, perhaps not. Unfortunately,

unwanted sexual advances are an all-too-common experience. This project is NOT about that. Rather, it is about consensual erotic adventures in a situation where you have been at work.

To contribute to this project, your sexual forays do not necessarily have to have occurred at your job. It could be at a partner's. It could be at the workplace but "after hours." It's even possible to exclude both the workplace and hours—one friend's story involved him "stealing" the company truck after work, picking up his lover (at work!) and then sneaking the truck back by 6 a.m.—Whew! Just as there is no set definition of where sex starts or stops, being sexual on the job is equally *slippery*. So use your imagination. What is essential is that you enjoyed a charged erotic experience somehow linked to the world of work. Masturbation stories are perhaps the most common, group sex the least, but all tales, whatever their configuration, are welcome. You can send a typed, first-person narrative, a tape recording, or I can interview/record you by telephone (or in person!) Call or write us!! We want your story!! *Michael Medo*

Center for Full Emplacement  
1668 Page Street, SF CA 94117 USA  
(415) 864-1013

## The Disney Revolution?

Disney employees were presumably responsible for crafting this fake memo mocking the style of Jeffrey

Katzenberg, chairman of Disney Studios. Disney has a reputation as the most penny-pinching of Hollywood's major studios. The satire was produced and then faxed to friends at other companies.

### MEMO

*This country faces some of the worst economic and political conditions imaginable. Our streets are filled with the homeless, the uneducated; our troops face the constant threat of chemical weapons, Scud missiles and repeated shell fire; and attendance at our parks is down, way down.*

*That's the bad news. Now the good news. We intend to save money by paying our employees even less.*

*Our great and noble leader, Michael Eisner himself, took home a paltry \$11 million in stock and salary this year, down from last year's haul of over \$50 million. That's an 88 percent sacrifice!*

*All I'm asking is that each of you make the same sacrifice that Michael Eisner has made. By reducing employees' salaries by 88% we will establish a platform to launch the next round of good times.*

*Greed is the only word that can explain how we can force employees to work 60-hour weeks at the studio, paying them the lowest salaries of any major studio, while taking home incredible salaries ourselves.*

## Another "True" Fake



Renegade sign maker Christopher True has caused a stir in the Boston area by posting very official looking signs bearing unorthodox messages.

—Boston Globe

# Lessons in Democracy

Listen, you poor unemployed managers of State Utopia  
there in grey Prague, Sofia and drizzling Warsaw,  
ex-comrades  
with your sad jowls, wondering if you can keep the  
Mercedes—  
here's what we learned in Central America.  
To stay on top indefinitely it's not enough  
to split the language into Above and Below  
so that dissenters' words dissolve like salt under their  
tongues  
and make their mouths wither.

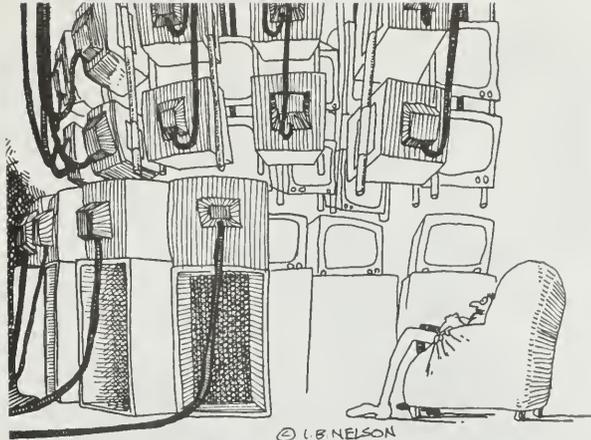
Not enough  
to tap their phones, inject them with migraine  
or vertigo in locked wards, not enough even  
to pound their faces pulpy and toothless  
in Security cellars, abandon them  
shaky with malnutrition in some remote village.  
You never understood that fear  
has to reach all the way down  
through the body. The heart must pucker shut  
like a sea anemone poked with a stick, the fingers  
must cling to the hand, the eyes to the face, the lips  
to the teeth, imagining the surgical tray with its silvery verbs  
laid out in rows, the grammar of the Recording Angel.  
The fear must travel like pale threadworms in milk  
from mother's nipple to child's mouth.

Because somewhere  
your bodies still believed in the body, in keeping  
the promises you made it: promises  
with the warm savor of bread an hour from the oven,  
the bright primaries of a child's toy.  
Your zodiac still held a vague sunrise silhouette,  
woman or man in Vitruvian reach  
toward the four corners of Heaven.

That's why  
in the end it cracked from one side to the other.  
Peace, Justice, Progress, the Power of the Workers—  
these words that were your only justification  
soaked through your skins like red dye and poisoned  
you all.

That's why finally even your professionals  
weren't able to keep it up,  
whether cool surgeon's gaze or sniggering erection  
when they put out cigarettes in a prisoner's wrinkled openings,  
when she bounced and wailed under the electrodes.  
You couldn't even trust your soldiers to open fire. In the end  
you were just petty bullies, knocking intellectuals' glasses  
off,  
making them take jobs cleaning toilets.

That's why now  
you hunch away crabwise from your teak desks  
like bad-tempered bookkeepers caught with their hands  
in the till,  
whining, blustering, promising to change. You feared the  
market  
even as you loved what it brought you.



We  
don't have these difficulties. We need only say: Subversion.  
We need only show Them a swatted helicopter, say,  
some weapons

we captured inexpensively from a dealer in Lima  
and the money comes down, pure as Their Columbia River.  
This cold clean flow drives the turbines  
They have given us, the friendly computers with webs  
of suspect names woven across the screen, the arc lights  
around the strategic village compound, the projectors  
in the theaters that show Their movies about wild dogs  
eating women, huge warriors armored in  
muscle pissing petroleum fire into the jungle.  
With this voltage

we wire up a captured rebel, scrawny marionette  
hanging from his own ganglia, to lip-synch some atrocity  
script.

Right away new assault rifles appear in our hands,  
blessing us  
with fragrant oil.

You see, we still get the joke  
when prisoners' mouths make those absurd rubbery shapes,  
when they apologize for crimes they've never committed  
and beg  
to kiss our fingers. We understand, as you never did,  
that ignorance  
is a velvety dark bloom that must be watered and pruned.  
We understand that an army is a business, like planting  
coffee  
or bringing the Bible to the brown mongrels in the barrios.  
We understand above all that the axis the planet spirals  
around like a bluebottle fly, buzzing and licking,  
is a great column of blood spouting between eternities.

Too bad  
your father Stalin couldn't pass himself on to his pasty sons.  
You see, our Father is the Father of television. He shows us  
pearl-colored sedans cornering silkily under a swollen moon,  
gringas with tight hips and slow cataracts of hair,  
and we reach into the screen's cool water  
and take them.

That is His promise. That's what it means  
to be even the smallest organ of this immense body—  
to be rooted, humbly, in the continent of democracy.

—Adam Cornford



graphic: Tomasz Stepien

# From The Grey Ranks

## Elves and Mermaids: Polish Graffiti in War and Peace



Warsaw, 1944: Graffiti made by Resistance movement in occupied Warsaw. Photo by Zaturski & Szeliga

*If on a summer's night a traveler . . .*

I met Tomasz Sikorski by showing up on the doorstep of his Warsaw apartment late one June afternoon. I was given his name by an artist designer friend in Wrocław, who told me Tomasz was putting together a gallery show on graffiti.

The train to Warsaw passed through Lodz, Poland's second largest city. I had heard Lodz was a heavy factory town, and was surprised to see what I thought was the sun setting through haze, until I realized that fire was actually a flame jet at the top of a stack, not solar.

I happened upon Tomasz's address by chance, as I was wandering around Warsaw's "Old Town" (like much of Warsaw, this area was levelled during the war, and exists today as a modern replica of the old).

His building was enclosed by a scaffolding—the exact nature of the renovation, the work was not clear . . . it must have been a long-term project, whatever it was. Near the entrance I saw a man's face stencilled on the wall, somewhat concealed by the scaffolding. This had to be the place.

After explaining myself to the building's intercom, which greeted me in English, Tomasz said "Yes, you'd better come up." He was indeed the man stencilled outside.

Tomasz invited me to the opening of an exhibition at Centrum Sztuka the next evening on "The Lost Paradise." It was a retrospective of two diametrically opposed but complementary styles in Polish art. A number of works were drawn from the social realist period, 1949-55, when the state's cultural agenda held sway, with humanizing portraits of ghouls like Stalin and the Polish commissar "Bloody Felix" Dzierzynski, boy-meets-bulldozer scenes of pastoral patriotism, and apparatchiks addressing Party congresses. Also featured was oppositional art of the 1980s, following the banning of Solidarity and the imposition of martial law.

The next day, Tomasz was going to be showing slides of Polish graffiti in another wing of this gallery, which like so much in Poland was also undergoing renovation. Although a long-time fan and international collector of graffiti, I was unable to attend this show—for I had to fly to London the next day for the Attitude Adjustment Seminar that Chris Carlsson, Mark Leger, Melinda Gebbie, Linda Wiens and I were to inflict on the public to herald the publication of *Bad Attitude*, the *Processed World* anthology.

All Tomasz and I had time for was talking about graffiti late into the night. When it began to get dark, around 10:30, we repaired to the train station cafeteria for some cold soup. My flight was early the next morning, so I hastened back to my hostel by the 11 p.m. curfew, wishing there was time to read more of this Polish milieu through its markings, and the people who made them.

—D.S. Black

**PW:** Your father used graffiti in the Resistance?

**Tomasz Sikorski:** Yes, during the Second World War, here in Warsaw, beginning from 1941. My father belonged to Szare Szeregi (Grey Ranks), an underground resistance organization, derived from the Polish Scouts, incorporated later in 1944 into the so-called National Army. During the years 1940-44, one of the forms of active resistance was counter-propaganda: underground radio, press, and the

most spectacular, writing and painting on the walls. One of the duties of my teenage father (he was 15 when he joined the Szare Szeregi), was to write slogans on the walls to manifest the resistance against Nazis, to build up a confidence in Polish people that Germans will fail, sooner or later.

German signs were being changed back into Polish; signs of FIGHTING POLAND (the two letters P and W form an anchor, the symbol of hope), signs of resistance organizations and slogans in Polish and German were written on the walls.

Germans used their propaganda; for instance, there appeared huge inscriptions which read: DEUTSCHLAND SIEGT AN ALLEN FRONTEN (Germans Win on Every Frontline). By altering just one letter, this was quickly transformed into DEUTSCHLAND LIEGT AN ALLEN FRONTEN (Germans Lie on Every Frontline). Or the name of Hitler would be turned into "Hycler," which sounds similar to the Polish word for "dogcatcher."

Writing on walls is a very quick and direct way of communication. It catches you by surprise whether you want it or not. Everybody is a potential receiver. Therefore it was used as one of the weapons of psychological war.

You see, after long years of occupation, some weaker souls may lose their faith and hope, and may try to adapt themselves to the new, for others unacceptable situation. It was so very important therefore to maintain that faith. During the years of occupation one strong sign of resistance worked like a spark in deep darkness.

With the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising on the 1st of August, 1944, writing on the walls subsided. Nazis were pushed out from the central districts of Warsaw, and graffiti was replaced by posters and printed news-sheets displayed on the walls. Now, not brush and paint were used, but guns and bullets.

Then the Stalinist times came, a new wave of terror, cold war. As far as I know, there was no other form of street propaganda then, other than official monumentalism. My father does not recall any examples of graffiti, neither then nor in the following years, although it is quite probable that it appeared around protests and demonstrations in 1956, 1968, and 1970.

The first form of graffiti that I have witnessed was the striking series of human silhouettes that suddenly appeared somewhere about 1973 in Warsaw. In one particular area, there were grouped outlines of human bodies, in natural size, painted with a wide brush with either white or black paint in places where, according to rumor, civilians were killed by the Nazis. It is supposed that someone had witnessed those acts and then, thirty years later, reconstructed them in the exact places—for instance, while leaning against a wall with their hands up, or caught while jumping over a fence, probably in an attempt to escape...

**PW:** Reminds me of Chicago in 1981 or '82. Suddenly on the sidewalks of Hyde Park appeared the words, at various strategic points, "A Woman Was Raped Here." You'd be walking along, and without warning find yourself faced with a shocking flashback. Also, there are the shadows that appear on the sidewalks in August to commemorate Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**TS:** And strikingly similar to the figures of the so-called *desaparecidos* in Argentina and perhaps in other parts of Latin America. It was the first graffiti that I saw, and the first one that I took pictures of.

With the rise of the Solidarity movement in 1980, it brought a whole new wave of iconography. In 1980, this was used mainly for political statements and slogans, signs and symbols of the forces of opposition. Later, when Solidarity grew into an all-nation movement, it adopted the symbols that traditionally denoted the nation's ideals and its



Graphic: Tomasz Stepien, Wrocław

## EUTHANASIA MURDER OR MERCY



Warsaw, 1974. Photo: Tomasz Sikorski



Lodz (pronounced **Woodge**), Poland's 2nd largest city.



"The time we live in must be filled up with struggle and hard, arduous work."  
 —General W. Jaruzelski  
 Photo: Tomasz Sikorski, 1990

struggle for freedom. Two colors were dominating: white and red, the national colors of Poland.

Under the terror of martial law in Poland (1981-1983), political graffiti and underground press were extremely important. A very interesting phenomenon was the reappearance of the anchor-like symbol of the Underground, Fighting Poland. Their message was clear: Poland is occupied again, and again we will fight the enemy.

Very few things were legal then, and the absurdity of martial law was beautifully pinpointed and ridiculed by the Pomaranczowa Alternatywa (Orange Alternative) movement led by Wladyslaw "Major" Frydlich. In 1982, he and his friends started to paint colorful elves on the walls of Wroclaw. In 1983, elves appeared in Warsaw. They were smiling, innocent, some of them holding flowers in their tiny hands, but they were all illegal! Imagine, illegal elves! The authorities didn't know what to do with them. They couldn't leave them because they were illegal, but neither could they wipe them off without making a laughingstock of themselves.

Major's favorite places for painting elves were the fragments of walls where previously there had been illegal inscriptions. Special crews painted over this graffiti; their job was to blur messages before they could reach the public. The crews used paint of a particularly ugly grey color. Those stains of grey were perfect, prime spots to put new signs on.

Everything painted and drawn on the walls was being systematically destroyed during martial law, and in the following years, until the fall of communism in 1989.

I took real pleasure in photographing those little elves, and that's how my slide collection of graffiti began. Then in 1984 my life brought me to New York City, and I was truly overwhelmed by the polyphony and the power of graffiti there. I took pictures of everything that I could. Left some stencil prints on the walls and sidewalks of SoHo and the East Village. I came back to Warsaw in the Fall of 1985, and immediately started to spread my stencilled works on the walls over here.

I brought home quite a big collection of slides of New York graffiti. My intention was to spread around and spur graffiti in Poland in order to fight the rigidity, the uniformity and the hypocrisy of the socio-political system here. I travelled to various cities with a show of about 300 slides which were synchronized with an audio tape. On the tape there were sounds recorded in the places where I took pictures, bits of various music and other sounds of Manhattan. Sometime in 1986, to my uttermost delight, some friends of mine started doing their own graffiti. From the very beginning, stencil was the most popular technique. Because of problems with finding spray paint (the cunning authorities made it unavailable for long years), the paint was applied with a sponge wad.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that those who were first to do graffiti in Poland were either art students or graduates. Nowadays there is a whole avalanche of graffiti makers: teenagers, kids, organized groups, recognizable individuals.

Most graffiti in postwar Poland, if not all of it, was political; its source was disagreement. Besides strikes, demonstrations, and underground press, wall writings were the true evidence of this disagreement. The communist propaganda, on the other hand, used its boring messages everywhere. There were, for instance, huge monumental, pseudo-patriotic slogans painted on factory walls addressed to the workers, large-scale poster-like billboards in a terrible style, attempting to make them work more and more for the country's better future and international peace. These were made with steel and concrete to last forever. The opposition scribbled on the walls with haste. The two aesthetics differed greatly, one legal and untrue, the

other illegal and true.

All of political graffiti was generally against something, against the occupant, against the system, against the government. Only in the late eighties there appeared graffiti which brought messages that were not against something, but rather for something, let's say for normal, real and joyful life, without hypocrisy and pretence. I think that most of art can be seen as an endeavor towards the wholeness of human life.

It is necessary to make a distinction here between graffiti as a political weapon, and graffiti as a form of art. It is an extensive topic, but briefly speaking one could say that art—or any other form of individual expression that comes from a totalitarian system—weakens that system. All forms of art are valid in this respect, but graffiti art is perhaps the most perfect because it can be done by anyone, and because it can reach anyone, without any mediators or interpreters. And besides—artworks placed on street walls come as a surprise, and are perceived unexpectedly. Their power is different than that of artworks exhibited in art galleries. Graffiti lives in the context of the real environment, it originates from it, is a part of it, and transforms it. It does not need any special, abstracted space.

The thing that I find most interesting in graffiti art is the desire to transform the environment, the striving to turn a place you live in to a place you feel like belonging to. It is like putting a charm on something in order to make it alive and more humane.

That is what I experienced in New York: I saw that most of those dead buildings with burned-out windows and other abandoned, strange looking places were painted, marked and drawn all over. There were many graffiti signs that were very tiny, you had to look around very carefully, come very close, sometimes squat down or lean over a fence. Some of those little arrangements were done with evident love or passion, and looked like sanctuaries. Very powerful, although modest and silent!

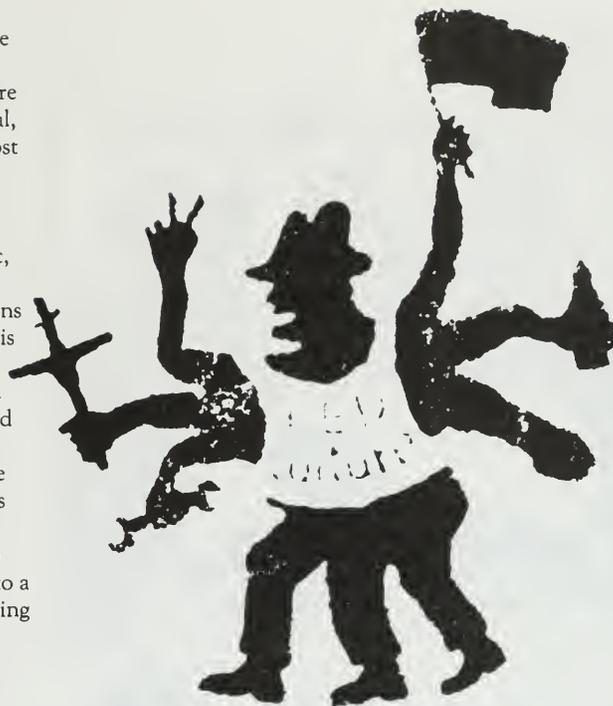
I think that the same impulse drove the unknown souls in the desolate areas of Manhattan and in the grim cities of Poland under martial law.

Under martial law, most artists—I'm thinking about visual artists—were boycotting official places to show their work. Classical forms of art couldn't do much. But when one door is closed, another one is open. For instance, for me one of the ways to show my work, to continue my activity, was to do something in places which weren't belonging to anybody in particular, to any organization or institution. Street walls, telephone booths were perfect places to use.

**PW:** What has changed about graffiti since Solidarity came to power?

**TS:** Sometimes it is hard to believe how much and how quickly the things have changed over here, from one extreme to another. After years of total control, suppression, censorship bans, and such—we jumped into the vast waters of freedom. And look, now we have a show of graffiti which is going to open tomorrow evening right here, at the Center of Contemporary Art (Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej). It will be the first show of its kind in the country. This show, which I am curating, will take place on the second floor of this seventeenth century castle. You see, some few years ago I did my first graffiti prints here in the dark of the night, frozen with fear of being arrested. Today, the same works are being shown just a few steps away from their original location, this time openly, one of the most official places, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. Everything changes, and all is possible. . . .

Graffiti in Poland is on the rise now, it is growing very quickly and now you can see it even in the small, remote towns.



RED CULTURE  
Warsaw, 1990



IMPRISON POLITICALS



Graphic: Tomasz Stepien, Wrocław

ACETONE  
ETHER  
SAUSAGE  
CULTURE

It is also losing its combative spirit. It becomes lighter, more entertaining, more decorative, more elaborate, more related to young subcultures, to music. . . . Since graffiti is not so bound to politics now, many really young kids joined in with their own iconography. You can notice now certain schools or groups. There is an air of growing competitiveness and showing off. And obviously, it is much more diversified now, since more and more people do it.

The common enemy has died. That's a strange moment: for some, especially for the beginners, it is very activating. For some others, on the other hand, though, it is quite demobilizing. You see, if you no longer have this enemy, this all-too-obvious target or point of reference—you have to think what to do now.

[But] I think there will always be something which you would feel like opposing. Youngsters, for instance, have different problems than those who are 30 or 40 years old. I am not doing graffiti anymore because I'm concerned with other things now, primarily with painting, but for younger or beginning artists, graffiti is a good way to manifest themselves and to join the culture.

Youngsters want to be seen. They go the fast way, they do not want to wait for some remote tomorrow. I know committed graffiti-makers who are 15 years old or younger, and of course it doesn't mean that they will do only graffiti in their lives. I don't know anybody who does just that. Imagine someone who is sixty, and still goes around with a spray can.

Grffiti may just be a certain stage in someone's development, or a certain episode. Therefore, attempts to fight graffiti are unwise and unrealistic.

And, obviously, graffiti-making may be a passage to the art world. You could have noticed it in America. After the big boom in 1983-84, people like Keith Haring, who started with graffiti, quickly became famous. There were many followers, whole organized gangs from New Jerseys and Bronxes, who would dream of making quick careers, not necessarily financial, so they would come over to Manhattan, paint huge walls, remembering to leave a legible signature. I have met young graffiti artists in Poland who are now trying to enroll in academies of fine arts. They feel like being artists, they are artists, beginning artists who started off and expressed themselves primarily through graffiti.

**PW:** What do you see as the future of graffiti art in Poland?

**TS:** I don't know. I think this is perhaps the most interesting part of it. It is a kind of art form that is very strongly connected to the present problems of the times, to the political, cultural, and social situations.

Grffiti will always be there until everybody will be satisfied. But it is quite inconceivable that everybody will be happy, and I suppose that in our times, in places like Warsaw, New York, and other big cities, there will always be problems for at least certain groups of people, and that they will always feel the urge to articulate their position.

But beyond socio-politically engaged graffiti, there is something that is especially interesting to me, which is graffiti that transcends the prosaic aspects of life and is more spiritually oriented.

For instance, there was a guy called Larmee. In 1984/85 I saw many of his paintings on the walls of Manhattan. He would make his paintings at home on paper, and then he would glue the ready works on the walls in various places in Lower Manhattan. His works were not politically oriented, not at all. They instead expressed loneliness, the solitude of a person in a big city, something that was particularly striking in crowded places, like on Broadway in rush hour. Just imagine seeing suddenly a beautiful, detached, and somehow sorrowful face in a dehumanized place: something very tender, very human, something that suddenly shifts your attention onto a higher level.

Another example: a stencil print, small delicate, almost unnoticeable, faded face of a young, pensive boy with an inscription below, "THERE IS A NEW KID IN TOWN." Very simple and very touching. I still remember that face, it looked so much more humane than the faces of the rushing phantoms around.

My own graffiti works, my first stencils and chalk drawings, were also not politically oriented, and it was curious to observe that these special crews of graffiti exterminators would sometimes leave my works intact. Some of them survived the long years, and are still there. They were for everybody, you see, for the right and the left, for communists and non-communists, for atheists and for the believers, they were just for men and women, regardless of their external guises.

At that time, in 1985, I didn't use any distinct political messages except for one thing: I made a stencil with the emblem of the city of Warsaw, which is a mermaid. The emblem is strange and alien to me, because the mermaid holds a shield and sword. So I made a new image: the mermaid joyfully throwing the shield and the sword away, freeing herself finally from that burden. The message was clear: change is coming, end of playing war, no more creating enemies, no need for armament. And also: down with the army, with the military.

**PW:** What are the risks involved in making graffiti in Poland?

**TS:** I used to do it at night, because one couldn't foresee the consequences; anything could have happened. My father would be shot dead if caught doing it in 1942. If I were caught doing it in 1985, I would be arrested.

Now I hear from a graffiti kid that there is no written law that bans graffiti. It is not illegal, it must be legal. I never heard about a trial, or sentence, or a fine for making graffiti here.

It is not dangerous anymore. Maybe it's one of the reason that I quit doing it. It is not exciting anymore. Resistance is a natural and very strong energy in the human psyche.

**PW:** To summarize?

**TS:** Some words about the future, perhaps.

I think there are two directions. The first is the obvious voice of those who feel like expressing their unfavorable situation or political opinions. I suppose that in Poland more and more individuals will fall into very difficult positions. This first kind of graffiti could be called political, combative, or contentious.

The other kind is artistically oriented. Among meaningless scribbles, there are true artworks painted on the street walls instead of on canvas and shown in interiors accessible to few. This is very important. I think that this is, in today's free Poland, the real test. The external enemy is gone; now is the time to drive away the internal enemy—ignorance, mental stiffness, prejudice, superfluosity, laziness, and so on.

I remember what Keith Haring said in one of the interviews about his graffiti. He said that even when he started to show in galleries, he still wanted to use the more immediate way of communication, without any mediators. It is really wonderful, because you do it *for other people*, engage yourself into something that transcends your own particular case, and you do it selflessly.

You paint something on a wall, and it hits the people right away. There's no time in between the execution of the work and the act of showing it. You do it, and it's already there, in action!



Graphic: Tomasz Sikorski, Warsaw 1985

# DANGER MONEY!



Graphic: Tomasz Stepien, Wrocław

# Art & Chaos in Brazil



I spent five weeks in and around Sao Paulo, Brazil during the southern hemispheric summer 1988-89. Fortunately I was with my long-time companion Caitlin Manning, whose talent at learning new languages, together with our good luck in finding fascinating interview subjects, made it possible to produce a one-hour video documentary called *Brazilian Dreams: Visiting Points of Resistance*. One of the most intriguing encounters we had was with Ze Carratu, a very active graffiti artist in Sao Paulo's explosive street art scene. What follows are excerpts from the interview Caitlin conducted in a concrete shell of an abandoned building on the University of Sao Paulo campus, which was originally to be a cultural center. The basement is submerged in four feet of water, and the building has become an eerie gallery of graffiti art. The editing and translation are mine.

—Chris Carlsson



**ZE CARRATU:** The Rio de Janeiro—Sao Paulo axis represents the two most effervescent cities in Brazil, where people really have a vision of modernity and information about First World cultural developments. I make a living from plastic art. Some works I've made are commercialized. I paint murals. I am recognized, I've done lots of paintings. I live pretty hard, but I come from a family of immigrants, Italians, and they have a certain power. They developed a business in Brazil and managed things. I, for example, am a person with the opportunity to travel, to leave the country. I can go and return. Thus, I'm the only one who does culture in a family of three hundred!

I am from a family of Italian anarchists. I'm sort of an anarchist, I don't know, I just think there's going to be a tremendous chaos, total chaos, and afterward we are going to have to build a new society, sort of like what happens in a country after a big war. . .

**PW:** And the role of the artist in this?

**ZC:** The artist has to help establish chaos. I think that s/he has to be critical and work on the chaos, appropriate the chaos—and that's what I do. I work on the garbage, the rubble of the city, this is a way of elevating chaos.

I eat the culture that was given to me. I was born with the ability to have culture, to learn things and understand society. So I swallow these things that I learn. This is "anthropophagy," I eat my literature. We had anthropophagists here in Brazil, the Indians that ate people. The Portugese were good to eat! Today I eat the culture in a certain way. It's chaos, we mix everything together. I can't forget that I do art in Brazil. The images that I make have everything to do with this culture and this society. They are almost all fragments.

Since I work in the city, here inside, I am using the city as a support, a context. I think it's pretty natural, probably the same in any part of the world, that people try to understand each other in the street. From the moment I am in the street, I am mixing with society. When I am in my workshop, I am far from society, things are totally abstract. But on the streets I must make myself clear sociologically, anthropologically because I am in the middle of everyday life.



Graffiti has very interesting characteristics. People have an artistic way when they are working with graffiti. Joao, Kenny Schaffley, Keith Haring and these people have artistic training, so their graffiti is a true work of art. Here in Brazil we have much to learn from our own Third World situation. We are at a distance, not just because of the ocean, but because of the type of news that we've had available during this time.

I began working in the street in 1978. I didn't begin with graffiti, but with performance works, theater, and environmental installations. In 1982, a guy from New York started doing graffiti here. May 1968 in Paris was a powerful message, and as I was already working in the streets, I saw that the street was a very important space. The poverty of the people, the necessity of bringing information to them, motivated us to begin doing graffiti. Our graffiti began inside the city, on walls, on the sides of buildings.

Sao Paulo is a city with a big speculation problem. Real estate speculation in this city devalues one space and raises the value of another, which they understand how to manipulate very well. For instance the government put the river into an underground sewer, built a big avenue on it, with huge walls on either side, and people in the surrounding neighborhoods moved away. It became a slum. Then the speculators came in and bought up the place at a very low price, and it soon increased in value. So we began to work on top of these speculators. They speculate a place, tear it down. Chaos is established and there we go to work, always.

This space [an abandoned cultural center building on the University of Sao Paulo campus] is typical, because it was constructed in 1976 more or less. In a place so short of technical resources and cultural information that people need, a space like this with thousands of square meters was never used for anything. So we decided to occupy it. Now we are trying to rescue it as a cultural space and bring its existence to people's attention. We are going to hold an event with people from cinema and other art forms and hold a great cultural marathon to rescue this place. It's an alert that there's something to do, to come and see that it's possible for something to happen here. Because nobody even knows that it exists, neither the local community nor the students on campus. No one ever comes here, it's never used, in fact, never finished! So we've painted here, we're still painting, working all the time.

When we first came here 11 years ago we found names and dates inscribed on the walls, like "Severino, 1976." Severino was probably an immigrant from Brazil's northeast, where it is a common name, and he was probably working here as manual labor. Many people were working here for a time, but for nothing, and this is quite common here in Brazil.

Now some people are living here, poor people, also some punks, and we've hung out with them. Here is a mirror of water, which underlines the sadness one feels when you realize that a space of this size is here for nothing, it's such an absurdity, a waste, so much money, the speculation! They built a building under water! Of course it could be fixed, but this was a work of pure speculation, squandering money with no thought whatsoever. They said this would be a cultural center, but such a thing interests no one in Brazil because people here don't care about culture. In the time of this construction, the mid-1970s, the political situation was very complicated. There was an ideological hunt going on, really a persecution of thought. So those people who were really articulating something, they had no power to do anything at that time.



(Marijuana leaf X'ed out on Can)  
NOW IN CANS!



There are many works, many places that we develop in the city. The only places that really bear our work well are these immense places that have never been used for anything. Our presence immediately improves them.

I think there is going to be a great chaos and that will be really good for making art.

PW: But for life?

ZC: I think not for life, but for the artist it is very inspiring. It's already a chaotic city in a certain way. On one side you have beauty, on the other barbarism, extreme poverty. You can go to the southern area of Sao Paulo and it is beautiful, marvelous, like a Beverly Hills. If you go to the eastern zone or the north you will see incredible poverty, serious suffering.

Brazil is a country of speculation, of grand industries built on speculation. We have 20 brands of powdered soap, 30, 40 brands of detergent, 200 of canned sausage, everything. Only people can see it but they cannot buy it. You go to the eastern zone where they have four supermarkets in a very poor neighborhood, with immense displays of merchandise, with the same advertising as here. You have a culture shock, a social shock because the people can see but cannot have. So what do they do? They steal. It is perfectly natural that this occurs, considering the shocking divergence between what is seen and what can be had.

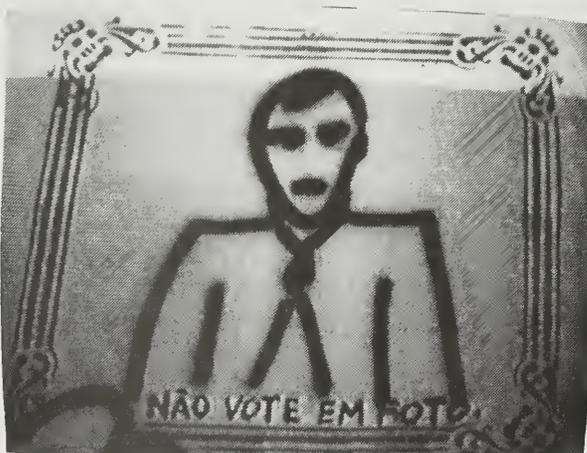
We see that in our city all the art galleries and cultural spaces are here for a very specific part of the public. People that patronize such spaces are very select, and very *selected*. The galleries are constructed in a certain way, there is always a guard at the door, there's no access for handicapped, and so on. The Brazilian people are deprived of information and culture. Not everyone has a chance to study and learn things. Those that do, uphold a system very alienated at the level of cultural information.

Some years ago I had an exhibit in a museum, but many of our invited guests couldn't even find the place. This reality has everything to do with the media. We know that the media is a strong force, whether a newspaper or a TV station. The power to act in the street, to occupy the walls, abandoned buildings and locations with weird architecture, is also a force. We extend the street, really.

It's a very weird situation and I think that with today's media, people are learning to see images, to read images, so when we work in the street, our work provides a different perspective. We don't sell anything, and don't even offer a product.

PW: It's an anti-commercial?

ZC: Yes, it's totally anti-commercial.



DON'T VOTE FOR A PHOTO



# Harvey Pekar

“...children’s games, comic books, bubble gum,  
the weirdness of television and advertising”

—from *WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW TO BE A POET* by Gary Snyder

Most of us left comic books behind somewhere around puberty, the oxymoronic phrase “adult comics” notwithstanding. And yet, perfectly intelligent people were reading Mr. Natural and the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers throughout my post-adolescence. During the ’80s, I began seeing stores selling nothing but comics nestled among the third-hand boutiques, recycled CD outlets and cookie emporiums.

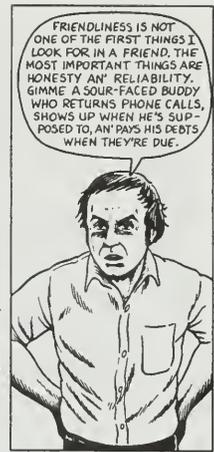
Enter Harvey Pekar. You may have read him; more likely you’ve never heard of him, or know of him only through his guest shots turned verbal sparring matches with David Letterman.

Harvey Pekar *writes* comic books—that is, he provides the story-line and words. He collaborates with a number of illustrators who work from his stick figure storyboards, usually through the mail. One of Pekar’s good friends and illustrators is alternative comics legend R. Crumb.

Since 1975, Pekar, who is 51 years old, has put out a 60 page comic book every summer, self-funded and published under the series title *American Splendor—From Off The Streets of Cleveland*. (As of 1985 he was still losing money; if he’s making any by now, it’s not much.) There is not one super-hero or dragon in these books. Instead, there is Harvey Pekar, his wives, friends, co-workers, and a cast of characters—mostly Clevelanders—including old Jewish ladies in line, a pitch lady at a supermarket, Ozzie Nelson, bus drivers and old cars in winter.

Anyone who has read most or all of the 15 issues will know a lot about Harvey; where his parents came from and what his father did for a

living (both parents were immigrants from Poland, his father ran a small grocery store, routinely working 95 hour weeks); why he doesn’t mind his job; how and why he puts out his books; his ruminations; politics (non-dogmatic leftist); literary tastes, dreams, obsessive compulsions and enthusiasms—a short list includes world history, popular culture, jazz, record and book collecting, trash picking, Katherine Mansfield’s short stories, Russian fiction. You will also meet each of his three wives, and his co-workers, notably Toby, who through his appearances in Harvey’s books has been written up in newspapers, and been on MTV and at grand openings of White Castle hamburger stands.



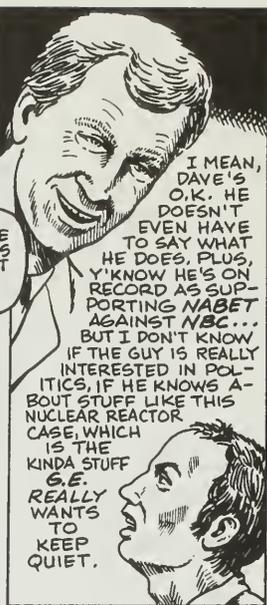
FRIENDLINESS IS NOT ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS I LOOK FOR IN A FRIEND. THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ARE HONESTY AN' RELIABILITY. GIMME A SOUR-FACED BUDDY WHO RETURNS PHONE CALLS, SHOWS UP WHEN HE'S SUPPOSED TO, AN' PAYS HIS DEBTS WHEN THEY'RE DUE.

Art: Greg Budgett & Gary Dunn

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**You get the world  
according to Harvey...  
Maybe a world you want  
to visit, maybe a world  
you want to live in,  
maybe one you want to  
avoid—nonetheless a  
world, to be  
reckoned with.**

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In other words, you get the world according to Harvey. Which is one working definition of a genuine artist—he or she creates a world. Maybe a world you want to visit, maybe a world you want to live in, maybe one you want to avoid—nonetheless a world, to be reckoned with.

Harvey's approach is unabashedly *realissimo*, down to the artwork—the characters look like real people, not caricatures or versions of soap opera stars. (Some illustrators study photographs of Cleveland neighborhoods, from the '20s to the present, to capture the milieu.) His deadpan this-is-my-life-take-it-or-leave-it monologues and characterizations range from one to over 20 pages. Refracted through the unlikely vehicle of comic books, they are, in the words of R. Crumb, “so staggeringly mundane [they] verge on the exotic.”

In Harvey's own words, “everyday experience has a huge effect on people—the accumulation of everyday experience... I didn't want to write about generic experiences... I wanted to write about particular experiences...” (*The Situation As Of 9-20-85* (AS #11).) If a gag can catch the flavor of Pekar's “school,” I humbly offer up “Schlemiel Realism” (though Harvey himself is a struggling mensch).

An issue of *American Splendor* may contain anecdotes, rants, gags and character studies from the previous year, or flashbacks from Harvey's childhood and early adulthood.

Harvey is himself usually involved, sometimes as an observer, in the stories, which are mainly set at work or at home. In the sense that he is writing his own autobiography *in progress*, the approach has sympathies with Henry Miller, Erica Jong, Philip Roth and Frederick Exley, though Pekar is as unlike these writers as they are unlike each other. As with the above-named writers, recurrent motifs are in evidence—in this case, cheapness, donuts, obsessive-compulsive behavior and workplace vignettes.

One significant difference is that Pekar doesn't seem interested in the post-modern game of masks—on the contrary, he strives for realistic depictions of himself and others.

Also, there are plentiful sketches and snapshots of situations observed (such as *Local Sculptor*, *Old Goat*), and occasional stories about Cleveland history, usually involving Jewish immigrants. In these “oral histories” Harvey is shown writing on a pad while an elderly man tells him the story; then we are thrust into the narrative itself.

To make a point, I hope, about creativity and work, and the very tricky relationship between them, I will now identify myself and my milieu.

I am a poet (*mea culpa*). Living in San Francisco, I know writers, musicians, artists galore as well as many politically motivated people, and all permutations of the two. For most of us, economic survival looms large, constantly threatening the continuance of creative pur-

suits. A lot of us spend a lot of time complaining that *if* we worked less hours or none, *if* we had the money to finance our ideas and projects, *if, if, if...*

Harvey Pekar spends a lot of time complaining too, if his comics are any indication. But he seems never to have expected a break, and has proceeded on the basis of the old open mike M.C. jab, “Don't quit your day job.” In a time when “having it all” is pursued by some artists as avidly as by entrepreneurs, the quote “I gave up life for the sake of representing life” (Anthony Burgess) is sobering. I choose to write poetry: it is my responsibility; what you do or want to, from ice sculpture to narrative origami, to more or less respected activities, is yours. These decisions come with consequences.

In Harvey Pekar's case, this has meant giving up outside activities which he doesn't much miss in order to write. He never expected to make anything approaching a living from it. Still, like all artists, he wants “praise and recognition,” which means an audience, and a perceptive one at that. He also says, apropos the nobility of wage slavery, “I should point out that I don't consider it ennobling to be a flunky.” (Interview in *The Comix Journal*, No. 97.)

*American Splendor* contains more than one story mentioning the series of dead-end menial jobs Pekar worked after completing high school. “I even tried the Navy but I got kicked out because, believe it or not, I couldn't pass inspections.” (*A Matter of Life And...*, AS #11). In 1965, he landed a civil service job as a file clerk in a VA hospital. After eight years of hit and miss work without a saleable skill, he settled into the job and a few years later set his sights on sticking it out for the retirement pension, at age 55.

Pekar's argument, stated in many ways in *American Splendor*, that Life isn't fair, is tough to disagree with. But his concentration is on life, with a lower case l. Put another way, independent of ongoing effort and desire, whether to lose weight or to restructure society, there is the zero point, day-to-day existence. For 25 years, Pekar has worked 40 hours a week; he can appreciate the hours to the extent that compared to his father's they can be livable, given the right attitude and manner of living. (And the right working situation—his seems to be low on stress with the built-in job security of working for the government.) He has to be at work by

8:00, goes to bed early, does not frequent bars nor socialize overmuch.

In addition to his comics, he has written criticism for *Downbeat* (from 1962 to 1971) and other jazz magazines, and many articles on subjects ranging from Bob & Ray to African history to a planned economy to Middle Eastern politics. He also does book reviews—recently he reviewed Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*. In other words, he leads the life of a committed focused individual with time constraints—the open slots being nights and weekends. An autodidact, he continually pursues self-devised courses of study in areas including literature, history, politics and anthropology.

It should be noted that Pekar's life is one of voluntary simplicity, without extravagant material wants. In *American Splendor*, he does not preach, but simply presents his outlook. He enjoys Cleveland in spite of unpleasant effects of urban blight; he has lived in rough neighborhoods, and been the victim of violent crime. His job suits him largely because it provides security and because he has been willing to make necessary accommodations. For instance, he has gone years without a car, shows no interest in owning a home and his main "vices" appear to be compulsive book and record collecting.

The risks for artists working with serious intent in "pop" forms are so depressing, why go into them? Among the advantages are the chance to pick up an audience from unprecedented quarters, to create an audience. Pekar is wildly popular with a small, diverse and dedicated audience. In antagonizing David Letterman he knowingly rejected an opportunity for national exposure that may have increased his audience many-fold. (More on Letterman later.)

Pekar has received media attention; more than 25 articles on him have appeared in publications ranging from the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* to *The Village Voice* to skin magazines. In 1986 and '87, Doubleday put out two large-format paperback anthologies of his work. His comics have also appeared in *The Village Voice* and he has been the subject of scholarly articles and a bibliography (through 1985) indexing and cross-indexing the stories and characters appearing in them. If a book-length dissertation or popular audience work on him has not been published, more than one is probably being written. So he is not without honor in his home-



Art. Gerry Shamray

land. What he suffers from is the subtle and intelligent character of his work, as comic books—the frequent complaint being, “Where’s the punchline?” He has called them “avant garde comic books”—as a joke I think—but realistic comic books do qualify as avant-garde.

I’ve haunted various comic book stores in researching this article. I also consulted my 11 year old nephew—he reads *The Punisher*, *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Dick Tracy*. (“I don’t read *Superman*—he’s too old.”) When I told him about Pekar’s books, he shook his head and told me he couldn’t see reading that kind of material. He explained why he reads superhero comics: “It gives me the daily resources of energy I need to survive.”

One thing a surface encounter with the comics scene teaches quickly is that this is a huge genre, with all kinds of subgenres. “Underground” comics is just one of them. It began as an outgrowth of the ’60s. Like the Left and the rest of our culture, these comics were dominated by straight white men and the male perspective, both in social commentary and humor. Now, there are women’s comics, gay comics, ethnic comics, and that’s a very general and incomplete list.

The major figure in the ’60s underground comics was R. Crumb, famous both for his *Mr. Natural* strips and his autobiographical commentaries and sexual (mis)adventures. In the early sixties, Crumb lived in Cleveland, and had a friend named Harvey Pekar. Both were fanatic record collectors.

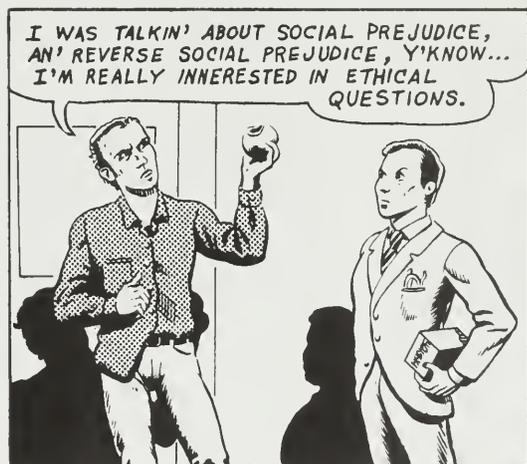
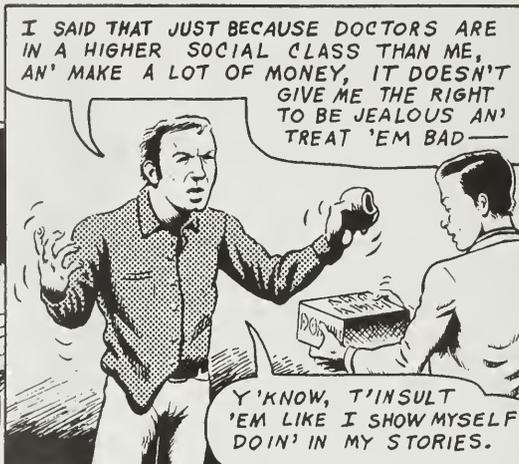
Pekar comes from working class Eastern European Jewish stock, and is a Cleveland native. He is a child of the ’50s, a young adult of the ’60s, and a self-described depressive fighting an uphill battle with pessimism. He sees things through class-conscious eyes to a degree rarely in evidence in American literature.

A comics fan from about the ages of 6 to 11, through Crumb and others Pekar became interested in the possibilities of dealing with politics, social commentary and “real life” through the form. After Pekar visited Crumb in Haight Ashbury, Crumb agreed to illustrate some of his stories. Pekar decided to publish them himself and *American Splendor* was born.

Pekar is a cross-over in that fans can be found among readers of “serious” fiction and poetry as well as among comics aficionados. In one sense, comics can be seen as the perfect way to reach the post-literate, those without the attention

# TODAY AT WORK, I...

STORY BY HARVEY PEKAR ART BY JOE ZABEL CO ©1985 BY HARVEY PEKAR



span to read—but Pekar turns that on its head. His stories are full of his world, and prominent in that world are books and his thoughts about them and their authors.

According to Eric Gilbert of *Last Gasp Comics*, when Harvey started in 1975, there were “maybe two distributors for comics”—this was when underground comics were truly underground, sold mainly through head shops, amidst the headbands, waterpipes, posters and black lights. Today, there are somewhere between six and ten distributors, as well as a national network of comic book stores. Harvey’s work is currently distributed through some of these, though he still has thousands of copies of *American Splendor* in his basement and in storage.

Gilbert on Pekar: “He started the whole thing...he was the only one doing a very literary comic book. [Of course there was Crumb] but Crumb was more into sexual fantasies...What people expect from comic books are people in tights beating up each other...What Harvey’s doing is not commercially viable, it’s an elite commodity for a select readership.”

I have previously alluded to Pekar’s brush with network television notoriety. As the proprietor of an S.F. comic book store put it, “If he’d kept his mouth shut, Harvey’d still be on TV.”

In late 1986, after publishing 11 comic books and becoming something of a cult figure, he was asked onto the *David Letterman Show*. Over the next three years, he returned to the show four times. (The first, fourth and fifth appearances are chronicled in *American Splendor* #s 12, 13 and 14.)

Pekar, who put in some time as a streetcorner comedian many years ago, by all accounts displayed “presence” on the show. But apparently the veneer of pleasant, if pungent, repartee wore thin; what the viewer saw was a pissed-off quick-witted comic book writer with strong political convictions and deep roots in the working class clashing with a misfit post-preppie exemplar of the who-cares anything-for-a-laugh success-is-an-end-in-itself ’80s. Whatever the chemistry was, it worked well enough for Harvey to be asked back.

In his fourth appearance, Harvey tried to bring up the role of General Electric, owner of NBC, in various matters involving lack of corporate responsibility, including the safety record of its nuclear reactors. He subsequently wrote about the episode in AS #13.

The “David Letterman Exploitation

Issue” (#14) recounts the final shoot-out between Pekar and Letterman. On the cover, Letterman, cigar in hand, addresses Harvey during a commercial break: “You f—d up a great thing.” Harvey is pictured standing before him, wearing a t-shirt, hands in pockets and smirking.

The “Grand Finale” appearance had gotten off to a rocky start; it blew up when Letterman leafed through AS #13 during a commercial break, seeing himself presented as basically a shill for G.E., either lacking convictions or without the courage to use his position to express them.

I saw the end of this segment. I remember Harvey putting his feet up on Dave’s desk, grabbing Dave’s pencil out of his hand, and telling him something like, “Look Dave, I’m sorry I can’t be as witty as you. You’ve got lots of writers, Dave, and I’ve just got me.” The episode ends with Dave flexing his network muscles, telling Harvey that he has given him “many, many chances...to promote your little Mickey Mouse magazine, your little weekly reader...You’re a dork Harvey.” In *American Splendor* both are portrayed as telling each other “You’re fulla shit.” These character analyses were bleeped out.

Pekar has turned down seemingly attractive offers to do his own TV show. He presents himself as not having seriously considered such offers for reasons ranging from creative control to the vehicles presented to him. On why he turned down a talk show offer: “First of all you get co-opted, you can’t do anything serious, it’s a drag to go on night after night doing simple-minded bullshit.” (AS #13, in response to a question from David Letterman.) He has also been approached by a number of Hollywood movie types—mega-mega talk with no follow-through. The two Doubleday anthologies are the most concrete results of interest in “mainstreaming” Harvey’s appeal.

Assuming you are among those who have not heard of Pekar, the reason is no mystery. In any market, from local to international, media “saturation bombing”—a combination of advertising and press—is what gets a name on lips and in heads. To have had over 25 articles written about you, to have appeared on a national talk show with hip demographics ain’t bad, but obviously isn’t enough. Pekar’s predicament is, as he has stated, that most people who might like what he does have not been exposed to his work. He can’t afford to advertise,

and word-of-mouth is as hard a dollar for an artist as for a business.

*Interview* magazine has not yet, and may not, assimilate all the currently significant artists, entertainers and cultural workers of our age. It is a worthy goal that artists be recognized early on in their careers, as have such immortal talents as Bret Easton Ellis and Tama Janowitz. We have seen very talented people achieve well-deserved success thanks to the fame machine; for instance, certain musicians live like kings and queens.

Harvey Pekar still lives in Cleveland Heights, and works a day job, at 51. It is doubtful that fame and fortune will descend on him in a flash as it did on Charles Bukowski at roughly the same age. Nonetheless, he is a true American original, variously an entertainer, a poignant clown, a philosopher of the everyday. His stories can be re-read with increased interest.

No less than Henry Miller, he has suffered for and lived his art. Like Henry David Thoreau, he has travelled far and wide, mainly through reading and thinking. If you read Harvey Pekar, and like what you read, pass it on, tell a friend.

—klipschutz

Thanks to Eric Gilbert of *Last Gasp*, Krystine Krytte and Barbara Deuel. I am also indebted to the following pieces: “Approaching Harvey Pekar” by Donald Phelps, “The Life and Work of Harvey Pekar” by Donald M. Fiene, and a lengthy interview with Pekar conducted by Gary Groth, all appearing in *The Comics Journal*, No. 97, April, 1985.

*American Splendor* #s 6 through 15 can be ordered from Harvey Pekar, P.O. Box 18471, Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118 (price range: \$2.25-\$3.50 plus postage); recent issues are available at some comic book stores. The Doubleday anthologies are carried by bookstores and comic book stores, though they may be out of print.



# Reviews



photo courtesy Climate Theatre

## HAIKU TUNNEL Josh Kornbluth performance

One person on stage—a storyteller, raconteur, soloist performer—the lone entertainer has made quite a comeback of late. The popularity of performance artists runs the gamut of Stephen Wade's *Banjo Dancing*, Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*, Karen Finley's *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, and now Josh Kornbluth.

Josh premiered *Haiku Tunnel* in the Fall of 1990 at San Francisco's *Solo Mio Festival*, and has since taken it to the Marsh, Climate Theatre, and other Bay Area venues.

San Francisco is a big lawyer town. The "king of torts" Melvin Belli is based here, in a French bordello-style building in North Beach—one is reminded of Dickens' line "the law is an ass." But looking beyond this immediate concentration of earthquake fodder, just about everyone knows someone who is connected with the practice (if not outright violation) of law.

Subtitled "the adventures of a male secretary," *Haiku Tunnel* documents the interior monologue of a legal secretary, employed by "Schuyler & Mitchell, an enormous downtown law firm with an unfortunate acronym." From the start, this job does not look

good to Josh, recently moved to California from New York. On his first day at S&M, he is assigned a "room," or more accurately, a desk in the hallway with the euphemistic plaque "Room 1525a."

His first task is inventorying his "room" for office supplies he might find, um, *useful*. Unfortunately, the previous occupant practiced a "scorched desk policy," removing everything of value from it. The only sign of the previous occupant is a letter addressed to her from the boss, who inauspiciously composed it at 11 p.m., New Year's Eve: "As the New Year rapidly approaches, I thought I would outline for you your duties as my new secretary" followed by 11½ single spaced pages of explicit instructions. Its anal author, Bob Shelby, is the Tax Group lawyer of S&M Josh has been assigned to.

After one week as an exemplary temp employee, Josh agrees to go "perm" when S&M offers to foot his psychotherapy bill. For an ex-New Yorker, this fringe is not to be passed up.

Josh's productivity as perm predictably plummets. Each day he comes to work a little later, confessing at embarrassing length to the head secretary's voice mail about his "vague personal problems" that have again delayed him. Then, he works on his novel on the company mainframe, masturbates his transcription machine, and otherwise does what he can to keep the job and its idiot demands firmly at bay.

Amid many agreeable onstage contortions, Josh tells how he endlessly procrastinates mailing some 85 letters for his boss marked *personal and confidential*.

"Now take these letters. Eighty-five communications I'm supposed to mail out to eighty-five people I've never even met? Fuck it."

While the dread of discovery hangs over his head, the letters' true worthlessness (and, by extension, the job in general) is amply demonstrated by their never being missed by either Bob Shelby or the 85 intended recipients.

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Haiku Tunnel* of the title is a project Josh worked on (in flashback)

at an engineering firm. It was the closest thing to "a good job" Josh seems to have had (apart, one hopes, from the role of performer). Showing flexibility that is practically anti-corporate in its decency, his supervisor blesses his wearing a walkman at work; she even tells him to work a couple hours each day on his novel, if it's so important. When he is so disposed, his assignment is to type specs for the *Haiku Tunnel* project. Because it remains work, even despite all the slack they cut him, Josh is depressed...for he remains a man entombed in *Haiku Tunnel*.

*Haiku Tunnel*, the show, should not be missed. If nothing else, the existence of Josh and his ilk should inspire others to take their private acts of protest and sabotage beyond the rehearsal stage, to perform where- and whenever.

—D.S. Black

## FELLOW PRISONER OF THE NINETIES

Living in Canada has, alas, kept the work of one of my favorite writers, Crad Kilodney, a well-kept secret. Crad has the dubious benefit of meeting a number of his readers on the street. For on most days, he can be found selling his books on Yonge or Bloor Streets, in downtown Toronto.

This exposure has, predictably, given Crad a fairly low opinion of most passersby, who prefer to ignore a man with titles like *Lightning Struck My Dick* and *Excrement*. Perhaps they are put off by the signs he wears around his neck, DULL STORIES FOR AVERAGE CANADIANS or SLIMY DEGENERATE LITERATURE. Maybe they don't want to be shook from holo-inspired reveries of credit card balances when confronted by Crad's reflective, living deadpan.

Aside from being a lonely, literate foot-soldier in the Canadian street theatre, Crad Kilodney has an acerbic wit to rival Bierce, and a no bullshit-billiousness that beats Bukowski. In his new book, *Girl on the Subway*, he skewers such modern monstrosities as the enclosed environment super-shopping malls (which, over the last few decades, have honeycombed consumer

playgrounds everywhere from Toronto to Pretoria).

In "No Chekhov at Yorkdale," the quest for a collection of stories by the great nineteenth Russian writer, leads to such comments as "You mean the fellow on *Star Trek*?" After several pages of description of all the worthless, overpriced junk that can be had at Yorkdale by any "Fellow Prisoner of the Nineties," "It's back to the subway via the enclosed walkway without Anton Chekhov. The rain is still coming down. The city is becoming more and more enclosed. If one is sufficiently clever and well off, it is already possible to get about from home to work to shopping without ever actually being out of doors. In the future, only the lowest class of city dwellers will need overcoats, umbrellas, and boots. The future belongs to brave boys and girls who, in the words of the prophet, 'aren't afraid to live in tubes and push buttons.'"

For a few months I kept Crad's 1988 collection *Malignant Humors* (from Black Moss Press of Windsor, Ontario) by my bed, and I would chuckle myself to sleep over stories like "Filling Orders in Albania" and "The Hard-Working Garbage Men of Cleveland." Elsewhere in this section, we reprint one of the "Office Worker's Dreams" from this collection.

Other titles of interest by Crad include: *Blood-Sucking Monkeys from North Tonawanda*, *The First Charnel House Anthology of Bad Poetry*, and *Junior Brain Tumors in Action*.

Crad has also produced two entertaining cassette tapes, which include strange things people say to him on the street, answering machine messages, stories from his early (out of print) collections, including his program for "The Peoples' Revolutionary Committee Against Indiscipline."

Write to him at his press for more info: Charnel House, PO Box 281, Station S, Toronto, Ont. Canada M5M 4L7.

—D.S. Black

## OFFICE WORKER'S DREAMS

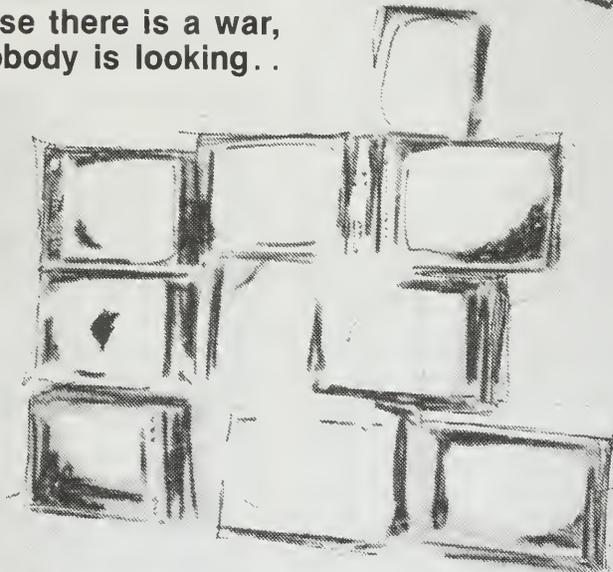
### *Modern Facilities*

When I ask in the office where the men's room is, the middle-aged secretary tells me it's upstairs "under the sign, almost directly overhead." I go upstairs and find the second floor to be an empty framework of wooden beams, like a house under construction. In the corner

DEMONSTREEN  
BLOKKEER  
DESERTEEN

Stel het  
is oorlog

Suppose there is a war,  
and nobody is looking.



en er kijkt niemand

## DEMONSTRATE BLOCKADE DESERT

I see a sign: "MEN." There is nothing under it. No toilet. No door. Nothing. I am greatly disturbed but must relieve myself immediately. I look around. Am I to do it here? Is this what is done in this company? I've never seen such a thing before. I look at the floor and see that it is wet. There is a smell of urine. Apparently, this is where men relieve themselves! Astonishing! What is also astonishing is that there are cracks between the floor boards. I can see the office where I was a minute ago. The women are at their desks right below me. The secretary who directed me is smoking a cigarette and coding orders. I can wait no longer! I unzip myself and after a moment of self-consciousness, I begin to release a strong, healthy stream of piss. It spatters warmly on the floor. Then I hear a voice scream, "Jesus Christ! There's piss coming down through the ceiling!" An uproar spreads through the

office, but I can't stop. The piss goes on and on and on! I hear footsteps from across the floor. It is the president of the company, leading a prospective client by the arm. I hear him say, "I want to assure you we have the most modern facilities."

—Crad Kilodney

**CITY OF QUARTZ:** *Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* by Mike Davis (Verso: London/New York 1990) 440 pp. \$25 hardbound.

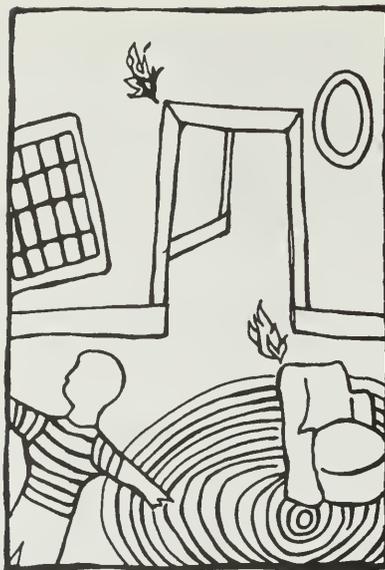
I have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1967, so I've developed the snobbish disdain for all things southern Californian characteristic of we en-

lightened northerners. Sure I've visited LA—went to Disneyland as a kid; later I hung out in Encino and Studio City, Westwood and Santa Monica for a few days each in the mid-'70s. I marvelled at the pleasantness and beauty of the area, but I also had my native disdain reinforced by the empty car-and-shopping culture which I simplistically assumed filled the lives of my friends and their families. I remember, too, feeling an odd vibration which I attributed to being near the center of the global entertainment industry—somehow, in spite of the apparent emptiness all around me, this city was producing the images, icons, and aspirations which were increasingly holding the rest of the world in thrall.

Subject of much angry investigative journalism, even then, the LA Police Department was already ingrained in my mind as the quintessential Gestapo/storm troopers of the U.S., and probably the center of a vast conspiracy instigated by Nixon and his Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to turn local police into a nationally-coordinated network of crack counter-insurgency troops.

Now a book has been published which illuminates the shadows and lays bare the power structures, politics and history of that most bizarre of modern megalopolises, Los Angeles. Mike Davis, who edits Verso's Haymarket Series, displays his own deft analysis and occasional acerbic wit in *City of Quartz*, the latest contribution to the series.

I particularly like the way this book is organized, with chapters devoted to specific narratives of power, its accu-



E. TUMBALE '98

mulation, dissipation, and final metamorphosis into new configurations. A charming prologue introduces us to the crumbling ruins of Llano del Rio, a socialist utopia which lived and died in the Mojave Desert 90 miles north of downtown LA in the years 1914-1918. Davis gives us a concise history of radicalism and political opposition in LA, along with the stories of the powers-that-be.

He relies on various earlier critics of Los Angeles to flesh out the dynamics of past eras, as when he recounts the "debunking" analysis of Louis Adamic (*Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, 1931) and Carey McWilliams who went on to edit *The Nation*. Davis stitches together a first chapter "Sunshine or Noir?", out of a variety of intellectuals, writers, artists, academics and developers for whom LA was both home and raw material, and shows how their various reflections in turn fed back into the larger collective mythology.

Davis's look at the *Noir* genre situates it on a similar experiential plane to *Processed World's* own:

"Collectively the *declassé* middle strata of these novels (*Double Indemnity*, *The Day of the Locust*, *They Shoot Horses Don't They?*) are without ideological coherence or capacity to act...individually their petit-bourgeois anti-heroes become a conduit for the resentments of writers in the velvet trap of the studio system. Tod Hackett, in *Day of the Locust*, is portrayed in a situation like Nathaniel

West's own: brought to the Coast by a talent scout for the studios and forced to live 'the dilemma of reconciling his creative work with his commercial labors.'"

A fascinating chapter is devoted largely to the genesis, history, growth and current politics of Homeowners' Associations, the organized might of the property-owning and historically very racist middle classes. He recounts the role played by restrictive deeds and how developers often set up the Associations and enrolled every home buyer automatically. The Associations' role in enforcing a form of apartheid with a "White Wall" throughout much of the LA area was undermined by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1948 decision on housing discrimination.

Benefiting from the extraordinary real estate inflation of the '70s, Homeowners' Associations were the backbone of the Proposition 13 taxpayer revolt in California, rolling back assessments that tried to keep pace with inflation, leading to a decade of contracting services and crumbling infrastructure, even in the "paradise" of California. Davis is far more detailed and nuanced than anything I can show you in a short review. It's like looking at a clear x-ray and seeing a lot you've never seen before.

In the 1980's, Homeowners' Associations have often become proponents of slow-growth policies. They are fighting to roll back apartment housing, restrict development to 1-acre lots, and provide more recreational land, but Davis shows how this is consistent with their historic mission to preserve and increase property values at all costs.

"The tap-root of slow growth [in Southern California], however, is an exceptionalistic local history of middle-class interest formation around home ownership... [Slow growth in California] is merely the latest incarnation of a middle-class political subjectivity that fitfully constitutes and reconstitutes itself every few years around the defense of household equity and residential privilege."

Elsewhere he discusses the rise of the "barricaded community," the freely chosen kind where the frightened rich and middle class congregate, as well as the "Narcotics Enforcement Areas" which have been repeatedly imposed on Black and Hispanic neighborhoods by the LAPD (barricades seal off a



Graphic: Bart Plantenga

multi-block area and only residents with ID are allowed to pass in or out).

He situates the LAPD in a social context of rising paranoia, bunker and enclave architecture, racial tension, gang warfare, and so on, sketches out its special history of ultra-right militarism, and makes it clear that the department is but one prong in a many-pronged strategy to manage the Third World-ization of a major city. On the 1950s LAPD: "Dragnet's Sgt. Friday precisely captured the [then Chief] Parkerized LAPD's quality of prudish alienation from a citizenry composed of fools, degenerates and psychopaths." But in the high-tech '90s: "As part of its 'Astra' program, the LAPD maintains an average 19-hours-a-day vigil over 'high crime areas,' tactically coordinated to patrol cars and exceeding even the British Army's aerial surveillance of Belfast [Northern Ireland], only 8 hours a day."

An equally important prong, rarely acknowledged or discussed, but admirably done here, is the elimination of public space. In a chapter called "Fortress L.A." Davis gives a critical architectural tour of LA's new buildings: a mall topped by a small branch library, which is in turn topped by a substation of the LAPD, with full video surveillance of the mall below, especially the three critical chokepoints of entry and exit. There is another library built to resemble the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, while soaring office complexes complete with roof gardens and walkways preclude contact with the street below and enforce the separation that is already imposed by the physical layout of the plant.

"Ultimately, the aims of contemporary architecture and the police converge most strikingly around the problem of crowd control. As we have seen, the designers of malls and pseudo-public space attack the crowd by homogenizing it. They set up architectural and semiotic barriers to filter out 'undesirables.' They enclose the mass that remains, directing its circulation with behaviorist ferocity. It is lured by visual stimuli of all kinds, dulled by muzak, sometimes even scented by invisible aromatizers. This Skinnerian orchestration, if well conducted, produces a veritable commercial symphony of swarming, consuming monads moving from one cashpoint to another."

This is a great book. It's also a very beautifully done book, with regard to paper, layout, and printing. Verso has been producing some physically wonderful books—viz the beautiful hardback edition of Cockburn and Hecht's *Fate of the Forest*. Now if only they were priced more affordably (*City of Quartz* is a painful \$25) many more people would probably read it.

—Chris Carlsson



"How did our oil get over there in the first place, anyway?!!"

—protest sign at Port Chicago munitions depot gate, autumn 1990

With a buildup rivaling that of the Super Bowl (and perhaps pre-empting interest in it, as the '89 Earthquake did to the World Series), the Persian Gulf War became one of the most anticipated events in memory. During the buildup some voices tried to offer a different, but not widely available analysis. Two are:

**When Crusaders And Assassins Unite, Let the People Beware** was written by the Midnight Notes collective and published in November 1990. They situate themselves within the growing anti-war movement, but disagree with the theoretical and strategic premises framing it as "another Vietnam." They offer a detailed history both longer-term and recent, and see the current crisis in terms of an attack on the international oil producing proletariat (broadly defined to include the working classes of all oil producing countries, both native and "imported").

They call for not only withdrawal from the Middle East, but complete military demobilization. It's a provocative read, even though it was rendered wrong by the bombing of Baghdad. It nevertheless provides a clearer class analysis of the underlying world oil economy than any other view. They advocate fighting for lower fuel prices in the U.S. as basic strategy for the anti-war movement.

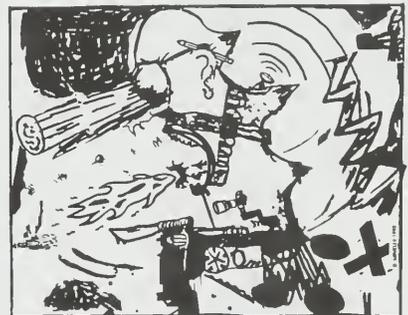
A later pamphlet, after the onset of war, entitled *The Spy and the Assassin*, recasts the analysis in light of later developments.

Midnight Notes, Box 204, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130 USA

*All Quiet On the Eastern Front*, signed by nine people and published last October, departs from the hypothetical, somewhat ironic chance that "it all goes perfectly—the sanctions eventually bite, the admonitory air strikes take out, say, ten percent of their intended targets, and there turns out to be no secret weapon, or none the Iraqi field commanders agree to use..." and so on until the U.S. has installed its own "democratic" general. Then what? An analysis follows that I found dry and somewhat disjointed during my first two readings back in October, but reading it the January evening of Congress's "Declaration of War," it was much more focused. Much more literary in style than *Midnight Notes*, its authors eschew tactical advice in favor of the declaration: "It will be opposition to capitalism as a world system or it will be nothing."

Available from: P.O. Box 9699, Berkeley, CA 94709 USA

—Chris Carlsson

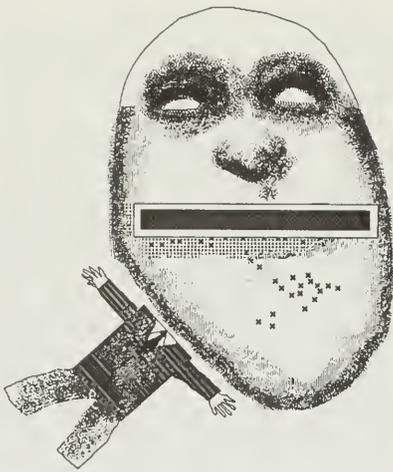


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U S A

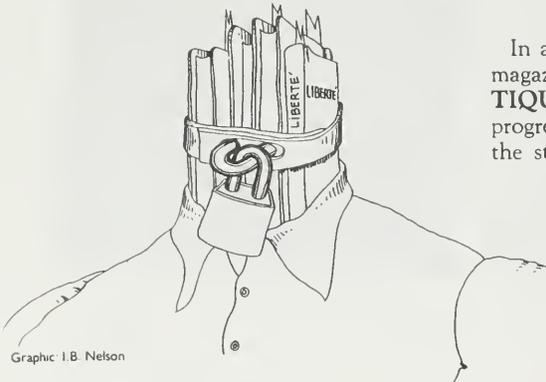
Keeping Democracy in the Right Hands.

Graphic: Doo Daa Florida



In the old "good news-bad news" tradition, I bring you the bad news: **The Mill Hunk Herald** is, alas, dead (1979-1989). But the good news is that they have an anthology—**Overtime**—which gives a more permanent form to their work. For those who haven't heard of them, *The MHH* was the doppelganger of *Processed World*: it dealt with issues of work, both with analysis and with workers' stories, from (for the most part) the industrial world of production. With poems, graphics, fiction and articles they covered issues ranging from history to the changing face of industrial America. The anthology has two pieces on the history and financing of the *MHH*, and an excellent selection of the 'zine. Those who enjoyed it when it was alive will get a kick out of seeing the material together in one large volume (8½x11, more than 200 pages); those who haven't seen it will be in for a real treat. Hey—just a thought—pair it with the *PW* anthology *Bad Attitude*, and you'd almost have a classroom-worthy snapshot of North American work. *Overtime* is overdue: You gotta read this book! It's available for \$12.95; it's published by West End Press and Piece of the Hunk Publishers, Inc. (1990). The ISBN is 0-9311212-55-4.

—Primitivo Morales



Graphic: I.B. Nelson

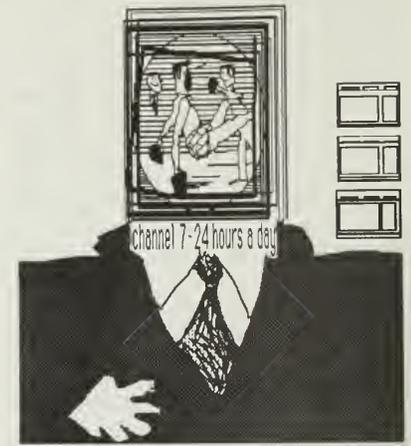
There's a tabloid out of France, name of **MORDICUS**, that you may want to take a look at (given, of course, that you can read some French). The premiere issue included a "10 Step" program for stopping work (which advice for elementary hygiene was transmitted to them after circulating in the e-mail boxes of La Defense—a white collar hive in Paris), the difficulty of being insulting, material on the war in the Middle East, and various other diabolic pieces.

Just before "the war" started, *Mordicus* papered the city of Paris with a poster offering some 17 outrageous suggestions on the subject of "What to do when war breaks out." These range from burning McDonalds to seducing soldiers' wives and husbands, scalping journalists, sending insulting letters to the front, and *breaking your TV*. "War's infamy is perpetuated by our passivity" they say (in French). Stay active or regret it deeply some day soon.

The latest from *Mordicus*: "Open season on wild ducks." Thirteen people, including several editors from the *Mordicus* collective, were arrested on January 23rd and the films necessary to the publication of *Mordicus* #2 were confiscated by the French police. As they put it: "At the time of the sacred unity, they want to silence the rare voices raised against the consensus. If we are already under a state of emergency, let it be proclaimed." The same tactics of preventive arrests and confiscations were used in the 1968 era (repression went on for several more years). It led to the demise of *Charlie Hebdo*, my personal fave of that period, as well as the boring Maoist rag *La Cause du Peuple*, the sale of which could land you in jail for a firm 18 months. The French police state is as alive and well under Mitterrand as it was under d'Estaing or Pompidou. Don't let labels ("socialism?!") fool you.

—Frog

In a very different vein is the French magazine **TERMINAL: INFORMATIQUE, CULTURE, SOCIETE**, a progressive French mag dedicated to the study of the information age. *PW*



Graphic: Doo Daa Florida

shares some of the ideas contained in it (see translated piece in *PW* #10, "Clodo Speaks"). The language in this magazine makes it more challenging than *Mordicus*, and the material is very different. *Terminal* includes a wide variety of material on computers and the world of telecommunications, as well as social issues. A recent issue included an article "Limits of Production & Union Realignment," which had material closely paralleling ideas in *PW* #25 about the waste of human effort while "at work," and the ecological implications of how we structure our lives.

In one passage they comment: "The unions are no longer on top of a situation where divisions, segmentations and contradictory interests are dictated by the State and Capital: Workers of the North against Workers of the South, full timers vs. "precarious" temps against the unemployed... This leads to a unionist rationalization of work, not in view of its usefulness but by virtue of how many jobs they procure. In this manner, productivism reigns supreme, the view that the salaried modality is essential to the redistribution of collective wealth is reinforced... An ecology-minded reorientation of the economy, at the service of its peoples and social creativity can only be led from the standpoint of the abolition of unemployment. We have to do away with the forced productivism implied by salaried work."

People who are interested may contact them at **C.I.I.I./Terminal, 18 rue de Chatillon, 14th Arrondissement, Paris, France.**

—Frog

# Texas:

## Penury of Plenty



**M**y friend and I arrived in Austin, Texas, in an old car jammed with what we could salvage from a dead woman's Santa Fe, New Mexico estate. My friend—we'll call her Babs, because she is from the Midwest and evinces the kind of all-American wholesomeness the name implies, which is exactly the kind of wholesomeness that lands such jobs as live-in companion to the elderly—had hung in with the old woman until the latter's nicotine-stained, sherry-spattered end, and seen her to her grave in the plaster of the living room wall alongside her husband, whose ashes had been similarly spackled many years ago. A colorful family, that, but the furnishings bequeathed to Babs were disappointingly mundane: the flattest of flatware, a hideous artdeco standing lamp, a dozen dull white plates from which the old one had been caught senilely feasting one evening on a meal of candles *al jerez*, and which still bore the tawny

scorchmarks from her beloved and overlong cigarettes.

But scavengers can't be choosers (though on second thought, they are in fact the best of choosers; what eye is more discriminating, more curatorial, than that of a professional *pepenador* in the dumps of Mexico City or of an untouchable in the middens of Bombay?); so we loaded up all this domestic impedimenta into the old car and set out for the Lone Star State.

Many friends questioned the wisdom of our move to Texas. The state was in an economic nosedive, they reminded us, and we hadn't so much as a friend there to hang on to and scream with as we all plummeted.

Texas' economic drop had begun in the mid-1980s, and no one could say when its course

might at least become horizontal, much less regain its former heady altitude. The Texas economy was a craft that had run out of fuel; or rather, that fuel, which was nothing more than crude petroleum, had become, in mid-flight, no longer sufficient to keep it aloft. It seemed the Saudis and the other swarthies of OPEC had, in their cunning Oriental fashion, divested that dark liquid of its power to keep going the impressive machinery of our soon-to-be-adopted state.

Our friends recommended that we at least consult the latest forecasts from the economists, our culture's seers and the official interpreters of the Market and its complex mythologies. Although we knew the economy, the Market system, derived from social relations was not externally imposed on society, we could not be sure the good

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*Despite her obvious loathing of me, she engaged me in the kind of hypocritically unctuous conversation conservative Texas women are trained in from an early age... Texas, she replied daintily, was going through an economic "disappointment."*

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folk of Texas, who are notorious for believing in an ideology that teaches just the opposite, would ever help us out if we found ourselves unemployed or otherwise in a financial pickle. Mightn't they, rather, allow us to succumb to Market circumstances deemed by them natural, eternal, and, strangest of all, the essence of our "freedom?"

And though we knew economists to be little more than modern-day shamans (shamans so intoxicated on their mathematics and their "models" that they declare themselves "scientists"), we also knew that the world was highly mystified. Mightn't they, after all, speak some truth about this world? We agreed to listen to what they knew.

They left aside, for the moment, their monitoring of the cosmic struggle between the Bears and the Bulls and the other larger epic wars being waged across the Universe of Commodities ("where things live human lives and humans live thingish lives"), and bore down, as per our request, on the more specific question of the employment situation in Texas. They showed us their charts and figures, which in their conjunction looked to us something like a board game, full of ups and downs and crises and miracles, rather like Chutes and Ladders. Now, they said, we know that an unfortunate roll of the Market dice (dice loaded, we all suspect, by those OPEC ministers cited above) landed Texas in the Tar Pit where the Skeezix of Recession dwells. Now to get out of the Pit, relatively low rolls on the Unemp-

loyment dice had to obtain, a good deal lower than the near-double-digit figure that was still coming up. Of course, it didn't want to keep getting low rolls on the Unemployment dice either, at least not on a national scale, or interest rates would rise and the whole game could overheat, sending all players to Inflation Inferno.

This game was a bit too byzantine for us to grasp. It seemed remote from our possibilities as individual actors in everyday life. Maybe we were being too ruggedly individualistic, but it seemed to us that, no matter how airtight the ideology might attempt to be, there was still an opportunity for individual human agency to knock breathing holes in that armor. In other words, we would find a way. In any case, we found that the "science" of economics described a universe an order of magnitude larger than our own lives. If it described a relativistic universe, ours was still a Newtonian one; what did it matter to us if the universe was in truth curved, if all we really had to deal with, in our world, were straight lines?

And for us, for now, the first such line was a highway leading straight across New Mexico and West Texas to Austin...

Less than a week prior to our departure from Santa Fe I got an opportunity to gather intelligence on the Texas economy directly from the kind of creature the ideology most works materially to serve: a rich person. But this person was not just any rich person, this

was a Texan rich person, and this was my chance to determine to what extent an ideology might turn on its own masters. Had the collapse of the Market in Texas brought down the swells with it?

My meeting with this person came by virtue of a scheduling faux pas—or was it somebody's idea of a joke?—on a bibulous bon vivant's guest list: I was invited to attend a gathering of Texan fatfish at her quaint adobe settled venerably into the mud of Canyon Road. (Contrary to popular belief, the most valuable real estate in this most contrivedly fashionable of towns is not that which affords a dramatic view from the mountains, but a humble, low location, preferably a warren-like arrangement along a narrow, unpaved road in the "historic" section of town. Property values are exorbitant here, and these have become enclaves for the wealthy, mostly Texans, who act out their fantasy of Pueblo Indian, calling on one another in their faux-kivas to swap posole recipes and share intelligence on the relative wampum values of Hopi jewelry and Navajo rugs.)

At this swank gathering I was introduced to said rich person, a young, wasp-waisted woman from Dallas, who gave my sartorially despicable figure a scornful once-over. She herself was resplendently outfitted in Neiman Marcus threads, which despite their Navajo motifs were so hallucinatorily rich that they more resembled the weavings of a peyote-peaking Huichol. Despite her obvious loathing of me, she engaged me in the kind of hypocritically unctuous conversation conservative Texan women are trained in from an early age, and that was when I took the opportunity to inquire into her thoughts about the economy of the Lone Star State.

Texas, she replied daintily, was going through an economic "disappointment."

By the time I left the party, I had filed this iridescent damsel's delicate term away in that obscure part of the lobe reserved for Texan forms of expression, both the manly crude and the womanly euphemistic. But driving through Texas a few days later, it resurfaced. I realized immediately that her description was quite accurate: for the rich, the collapse and stagnation of the Texas economy was but a disappointment, a vision vanished rather than a nightmare lived. Their dreams of unheard-of wealth had evaporated, and they had awakened to the harsh and dreary reality of their concrete assets alone: the Mercedeses,



the furs, the ostentatious homes and sumptuous ranches with their exotic game animals ("homesteads," which by state law can be touched by virtually no creditor). And to the same old oil wells, which, because the black gold they pumped was now worth only half of what it was at the peak of the boom in the early 80's, only brought in enough income to replace and maintain all those things. (Mexican President Lopez Portillo, who with his corrupt sidekicks had shared the same dream in the early 1980's, had advised Mexicans to "prepare themselves for prosperity." The Texan version of this might have been, because Texas was already so rich, to prepare for sheer *obscurity*.)

The hope then had been that the price of oil would keep going up, possibly to \$100 a barrel. But it only got up to \$32 by the end of 1983 when the bust set in. From there it plummeted to about \$14. (At the time of this writing the price, thanks to the sabre-rattling over Kuwait, is back up to around \$35 for most Texas crude). Texans, banking greedily on visions of ever-upward-spiralling oil prices, had already grossly overinvested in things such as real estate. Driving into Austin, we saw that practically every other office building was empty and for lease, and we soon learned that the city indeed had the most overbuilt office space in the country. Greed had led to overproduction had led to unemployment: this was the "rationality" of the Market system.

Austin seemed pretty prosperous nonetheless, at least on the swank side of town. The "disappointment" seemed only slight there. Debutant balls took place as always on those west-side hills, though on a scale slightly less grand than before; some exclusive clothing outlets were said to have closed, but plenty remained; gourmet dog biscuits, at \$5.00 a pound, were still an item in demand at your finer victualers.

The poor, well, they'll always be with us, says the eternalizing ideology, and in Austin this means mostly on the east side of town. Over twenty percent of the residents of Travis County, of which Austin is county seat, live under the official poverty line of \$11,400 a year for a family of four.

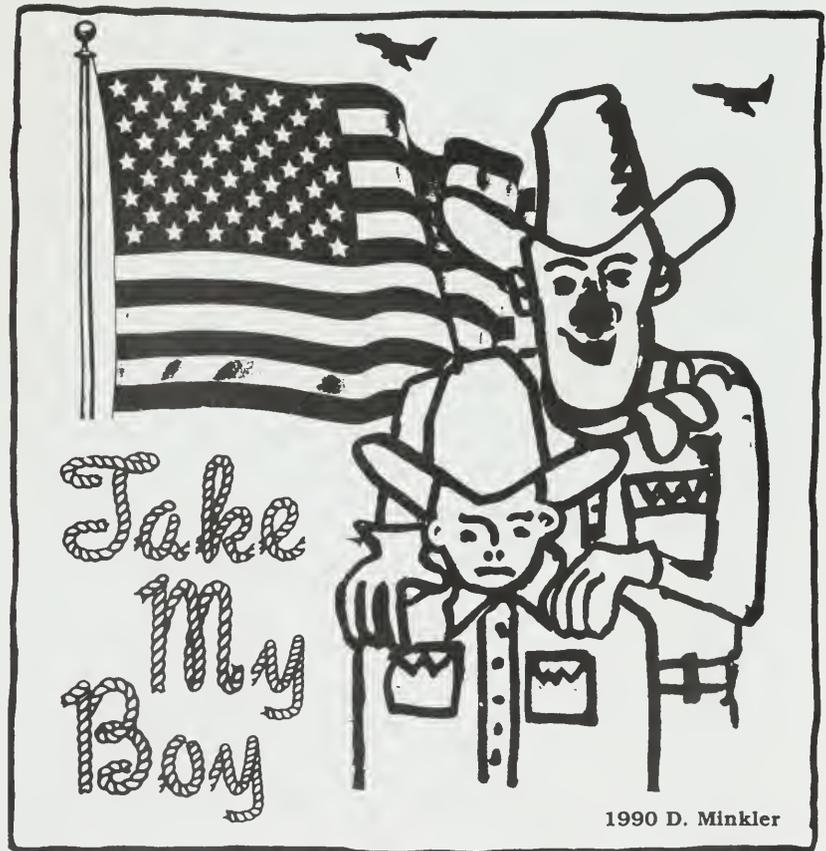
We found the poor in the laundromat, one of our first stops after our road trip. They were sprawled uncomfortably on the hard yellow plastic seats. Why do the homeless like laundromats so? Because it's warm and roofed and they're not

immediately evicted from it, I suppose. It's surely not for the homey atmosphere. Dully watching the clothes roll round in the drier, I reflected on how Western instrumental rationality has robbed clothes-washing of its traditional communal quality. This rationality, believing it could reduce the "drudgery" of everyday life to a nullity through technology, has instead succeeded in eliminating the human from the everyday, thus turning everyday activities into true drudgery. I was reminded of a missionary couple I once knew who brought their African maid back with them to the U.S. This African could not get over the fact that no one in America washed their clothes in rivers: every time they drove over a bridge she would remark on the absence of gossipy scrubbers below. What was she talking about? thought the missionaries. She knew what a washing machine is, she used one every week! The missionaries failed utterly to see the subtext of her remark, which I imagine referred to the acute absence of communality in America, the intense loneliness of everyday tasks here.

I wondered, too, if those missionaries,

having lived in West Africa, understood how the word "zombie" was used among the Bakweri of West Cameroon. "Zombie," according to Michael Taussig's book *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*, was the word applied to fellow Bakweri and others who drove trucks and did certain other kinds of work in the British and German banana plantations. The "zombies" worked far beyond what was required to satisfy their needs. They couldn't seem to stop, they were the living dead. Their "lives" had become abstracted into the commodity of labor-time, and consequently they weighed like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

Across the street from the laundromat, in the morning drizzle, a ragged man hunted for food in a dumpster. He found a soggy crust of pizza, which he gobbled and washed down with a swallow of Thunderbird. A block further down sat the drab brown brick Austin Plasma Center. Perhaps after his meal he'd go there to sell his blood. According to an ad on the laundromat bulletin board, you can make two donations to the Center a week, at \$10 a pop. On





particularly like. After a few weeks of seeing it there, it really begins to irritate me, and I think, well goddamn, the day I'm compelled to be "aggressive" for money I guess I'll do it right, with the snubby nose of my .38 poking the ribs of some gulping fatfish.

There are curious ads, such as the one that reads, "Have you ever lied to get a job? If so, your story may be worth \$100." But how would the folks doing this study know my story was not a lie, just to get my hands on the \$100? Or would that in itself constitute the lie they were looking for? The Liar's Paradox is lurking here somewhere and I don't like the smell of it.

Pharmaco, I notice, advertises a lot for research subjects: "up to \$375 for anyone with resistant genital warts to participate in a study testing a new antiviral drug." (What do they mean, "up to?" Are some people's genital warts more valuable than others?) In any case, I'm not about to go out and contract resistant genital warts just to get my hands on a lousy \$375.

A sperm bank is looking for donors. This would be a more exhilarating donation than plasma, to be sure. But again, the question: how much a pop? It doesn't say. And how many donations can you make? At half a billion or so sperms per, I imagine it's probably just a one-night stand, so to speak.

So much for the classifieds. I try the Texas Employment Commission, but quickly discover that instead of helping you find a job, it seems primarily designed to discourage you from seeking

one. The functionary at the end of an interminable line informs me proudly that the TEC in Austin has so many applicants—over 20,000—that the online files are no longer available for perusal by job-seekers. Strange reasoning: the greater the numbers of unemployed, the less access they get to the job listings. We'll look FOR you, he says, pen poised above the application, eager to strike out each category for which I don't claim enormous experience. A bureaucrat's favorite word is "no." I never hear from the TEC.

I check out every shit-on-a-shingle restaurant in the neighborhood, the kind of places that serve dyed margaritas ("pink killer 'ritas") and have names like Silverado; surely one doesn't need great restaurant experience to serve THEIR kind of slop. Wrong again.

I try canvassing for a progressive organization, but find it too weird trying to sell "peace and justice" as a commodity. Is nothing sacred? Must even this be subservient to the money economy? My field captain thinks I'm naive and have an attitude to boot; he's glad to see me go.

I learn to interpret the penultimate words from a job interviewer, the ones that precede the handshake and the we'll-let-you-knows, things like "sorry you had to come out in the rain," which means, "gee, sorry you had to waste your time and ours AND get wet."

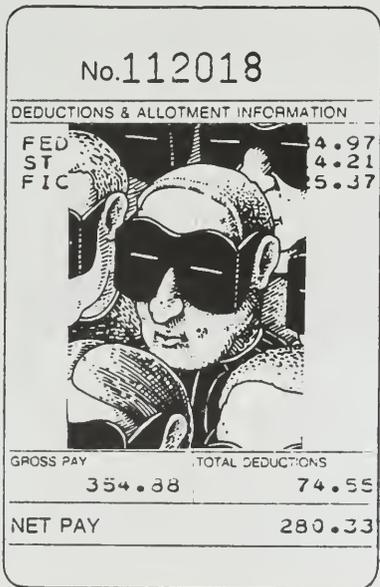
I check out the temp agencies, places with vaguely salacious names like Manpower (the overtly wanton-sounding Kelly Girl has been changed to the more sober Kelly Services, I notice). I get nowhere there, but am led to discover a few things about the temps. I learn that large-scale hiring of temps is a recent phenomenon; that the electronics and defense industries do a lot of it, and that the federal government employs some 300,000 temps. Temps receive virtually no benefits, and are the first to be laid off when a slump or recession hits, while core employees, if they're lucky, get to stay. When the next nationwide recession arrives, up to 3 million temps can expect to lose their jobs. As it is, the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics counts anyone working one hour or more a week as "fully employed"; this accounts for the exaggeratedly low official unemployment rate. But at least the BLS factors into its monthly report those "discouraged workers" who have given up looking for work altogether.

I feel myself gradually becoming one of those "discouraged workers." I begin to investigate what it would be like to live in the streets. One of the first things that strikes me about such a life is its relative rigor, in terms of planning, scheduling, and so forth. Required to abandon the Salvation Army premises by 6 a.m., you must seek warmth elsewhere—the Capitol building, for instance—until the Caritas or other soupline opens. If you're sick, you've got to keep in mind that the Caritas clinic is only open Tuesday and Thursday evenings. You've got to keep your eye on the spots under the bridges for possible vacancies, and be quick to stake your claim when one arises. You've got to be mindful of police routes and schedules, and keep track of your plasma donations. If after all this stress you need to get drunk, remember the Showdown's "Happy Minutes," with 25-cent drafts, are from 3:00-3:15 p.m. A lot of the homeless guys I talk to have all the bus schedules memorized.

When depressed, go to a demonstration. It quickens the blood and gets your mind on something larger than yourself. The one I went to, described in the next day's *American Statesman* (Austin's only daily, better known in our circles as the *American Real Estatesman*) as "spirited," was over El Salvador. We defied pig orders and took the streets. One zealous porker could put up with it no more and collared one of our guys, a lanky Quaker with a Thoreau beard. The crowd turned ugly. The Quaker, a wry smile on his 19th-century face, pleaded for calm while pointing out to the cop the advisability of letting him go. The cop decided he was right, and sprung the handcuffs.

I told Babs about the incident and how I admired the Quaker's cool and humorous resistance. She said, sure, those folks believe so little in authority that they can never take it seriously. By the way, she said, the Quakers are fixing up their Hill Country retreat next weekend, and needed volunteers, if I cared to go.

So we went. But there I learn that even the Friends are not immune to the ideology of desireless production. While washing Quaker windows and railing about the absurd hoops you have to jump through to get a lousy \$4-an-hour job in the University of Texas library system (though I proudly report that I passed, at 45 wpm, the typing test, using my version of caffeinated hunt-and-peck), a middle-aged Quaker listening to



Graphic: Smurfs in Hell

me announces that she works in library personnel and would probably be the one to interview me if my application were to get that far. To my astonishment, this woman turns out to be a champion of taylorized work efficiency and seems to know every angle on the scientific organization and bureaucratic management of white-collar labor. She actually uses, in a personal context, terms like "private sector" ("my husband works in the private sector") and refers to students meeting their "educational consumer needs." What SHE doesn't need on the other hand, is "defiance": "Can you imagine if every time I told someone to do something they asked why?" In the end, what she is looking for, as an interviewer, is "grown up" people. I take this to mean people so burdened with responsibilities and/or fears that they would never ask their boss "why?" I get the distinct feeling I have already blown the interview.

And then, the miracle. A few weeks later, just as Babs and I hit rock bottom—she was by then a volunteer for the United Farm Workers, who pay only for her barest subsistence—I was able to land some free-lance translating jobs. English to Spanish, Spanish to English,

I'll translate anything. More work comes my way, and soon we are receiving almost a lower-middle class income. Combined with the fact that we live frugally, it's O.K.

But after a year or so of this, a malaise begins to set into our household. We begin to feel trapped in routine. The adventure seems over. We begin to suspect it's not enough just to live frugally; we begin to suspect that this "simple" lifestyle of growing our own and of consuming little, though ostensibly subversive, might actually be complicitous with the movement of capital from an industrial to an informational mode. After all, wasn't it the big corporations who sponsored the last Earth Day celebration in Austin? There's something fishy here... By "living simply" instead of DEMANDING the social surplus—those trillions mentioned above—weren't we acquiescing to this obvious corporate redirection of capital? But where was such a movement to demand that surplus? Not in Austin, certainly. Most progressives there were like we had been, believing that frugality was subversion. Still believing, in other words, in the myth of scarcity.

Suddenly we want out... "Archeo-

logists have led us to conceive of this nomadism not as a primary state, but as an adventure suddenly embarked upon by sedentary groups impelled by the attraction of movement, by what lies outside... an extrinsic nomadic unit as opposed to an intrinsic despotic unit." (Gilles Deleuze). We give the car and a lot of the other shit to CISPES, and Babs makes the first go, choosing to move to downtown Detroit, the cutting edge of urban American decay. I opt for Managua, where a similar raw confrontation between the haves and the have-nots continues to openly fester. It seems that in order to restore our sense of reality we are impelled to go to places where the myth of scarcity has taken a real toll.

Meanwhile, back in Texas, the 700,000 individuals to whom oil royalty checks roll in every month, as regularly and eternally as the tides of Galveston, have seen a pleasant doubling of their income, owing to the "Gulf crisis." One can only suppose that the old Texas arrogance—arrogance based on nothing other than the good fortune of having stumbled upon the land under which lay dissolved bodies of dinosaurs—will soon be making a florid comeback.

—Salvador Ferret



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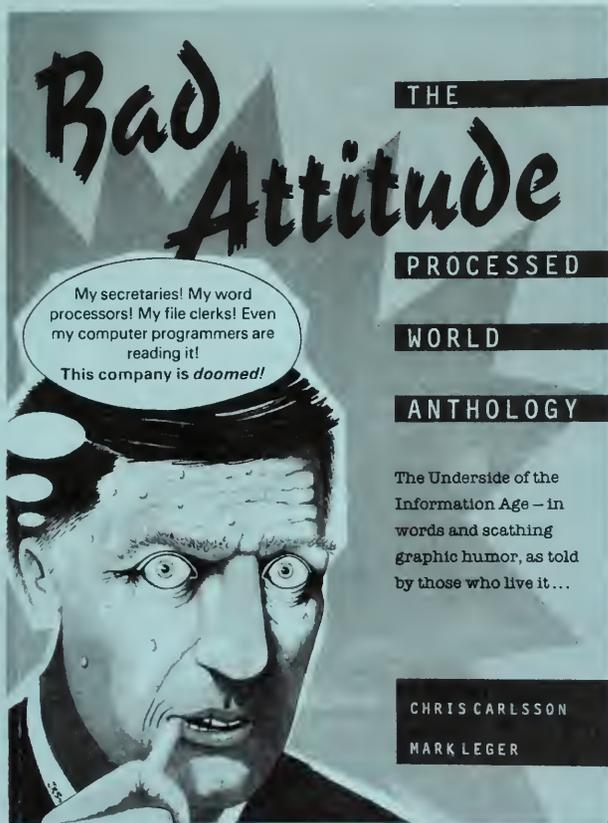
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