REVERSE ENGINEERS

CURATED BY JULIA DZWONKOSKI AND KYE POTTER

FEBRUARY 19 - MARCH 19, 2005

CARNEGIE ART CENTER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

State of the Arts

NYSCA

INTRODUCTION

This exhibition looks at contemporary art through the concept of reverse engineering... and vice versa.

To dismantle the whole in order to understand its parts; to use existing objects and technologies in a manner unforeseen or unintended by their manufacturers; to invent new forms by breaking down the codes that underlie old forms, to provoke systems into revealing what they're made of. These are some of the tactics associated with reverse engineering as practiced in a variety of fields and contexts: from industrial design and software development to anthropology and medicine. As a practice that emphasizes "know-how" over material advantage, it is no coincidence that reverse engineering has emerged as a strategy in wars that are increasingly asymmetrical and in a world where power and resources are increasingly concentrated and unequally distributed. The artists featured in this exhibition variously embrace reverse engineering as a means of critically understanding, intervening in and reinventing this world.

Julia Dzwonkoski and Kye Potter

TONY CONRAD

Tony Conrad is a video artist, experimental filmmaker, musician/composer, teacher and writer. He was involved in the early development of minimalist music and was a founding member of the Theater of Eternal Music with John Cale, Angus MacLise, La Monte Young, and Marian Zazeela. His stroboscopic film, *The Flicker* (1966) and experiments in film processing and projection are among the key works in the history of avant garde cinema.

Conrad's subsequent works in video explore structures of authority, power and desire as they play out within the audio-visual domain. In his 1985 tape, *In Line*, Conrad addresses the viewer with a series of commands, conflating actual control with its on-screen performance. Other works explore hypnotism, language acquisition and the "haptic" space that exists between a work of art and its spectator. In recent years, Conrad has produced a series of performance-based videos that have been characterized as "fragmentary burlesques." They include *Tony's Oscular Pets* (2002), in which Conrad demonstrates how to care for the pets that live inside his mouth, *Hart* (2001), a modern-day rendering of the story of Gradiva, and *Hello Happiness* (2000), in which Conrad finds himself, via chroma key, on the set of an S/M film shoot.

Tony Conrad lives in Buffalo, NY where he teaches at the State University and releases music recordings through an imprint of the label "Table of the Elements."

Still From *Tony's Oscular Pets*, 2002

ERNEST GUSELLA

Ernest Gusella's videotapes combine experimental engineering, avant garde music, psychedelia and Dadaist theater. As Gusella once put it, "my art is 1/4 fornicalia funk, 1/4 New York punk, 1/4 European bunk, and 1/4 Canadian skunk."

With a background in classical music, Gusella immigrated from Canada to the United States where he studied with composers John Cage, Steve Reich and Constantine Xenakis, and became involved with the emerging video art scene through friendships with Nam June Paik and Kitchen founders Steina and Woody Vasulka. Many of Gusella's tapes make use of sound and image processing tools designed by himself, other artists and sympathetic engineers. These include the VideoLab, a voltage controllable, multi-channel switcher, keyer, and colorizer designed by Bill Hearn that was used in Gusella's 1978 work, *Exquisite Corpse*. Here, a composite image of the artist is created through live switching between shots of different parts of his body. Other works explore the relationship between video and audio signals, often using one to generate or transform the other. In *Audio-Video Rituals*, jerky boxing movements trigger a range of electronic sounds while in *Violin D'Ingres*, drawing a self portrait with the bow of a violin produces an indexical sound track. In Gusella's words, "all of my work is about things which turn me on – either visually, mentally or through sound, and are rites of passage to that ultimate future in which all the best aspects coalesce."

Ernest Gusella lives in Cumberland, MD with his wife and collaborator, Tomiyo Sasaki.

Still From *Iris*, 1979

CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI

Described as an "infiltrator" and "deceptive appropriator," Berlin-based artist Christian Jankowski's videos and installations break down perceived boundaries between reality and fiction, art and life, the scripted and the spontaneous. As an artist, he has inserted himself into a variety of social and occupational contexts, often involving professionals in fields other than art as collaborators.

For the project, *My Life as a Dove* (1996), Jankowski invited a professional magician to transform him into a dove for the duration of an art exhibition. A similar scenario unfolded in *Flock* (2002), where 12 gallery visitors were turned into sheep and remained in this state while they viewed the other artworks on display. *Create Problems* (1999) records a series of couples who were invited to act out scenes from their personal lives against the backdrop of an adult movie set. *Telemistica* (1999) documents a phone conversation between Jankowski and a television psychic in which the artist asks whether the artwork he is currently working on will be a success. The live discussion, broadcast on Italian TV and recorded by Jankowski, serves as the completed work.

For *The Holy Artwork* (2001), Jankowski arranged to appear as a guest artist on a Texas-based evangelical TV program. Approaching the pulpit with his video camera, Jankowski suddenly collapses, leading the pastor to deliver an improvisational sermon on art (defined as "that which has never been seen before"). Through the entire sermon and several choir songs, Jankowski remains frozen at the pastor's feet in a pose that recalls the scene (in Spanish Baroque painter Juan Bautista Maino's *Saint Domini* and in other works from this period) where an artist, working in his studio, is struck down in a state of rapture and unable to complete a painting without divine intervention. The pastor in Jankowski's tape provides just such a rescue, while capitalizing on the artist's spontaneous collapse as a sign of the "bridge between religion, art and television."

NATALIE JEREMIJENKO

"Ask yourself if there is anything currently in your view that you know anything about how it was made: the computer you are using, the pen on the desk, the desk, the chair, the shoes, etc. We are largely blind and blinded to people, places and processes involved in making things, and yet, there could be little else of more political import. These obscured processes are the base of the global consumption of market-based democracies, and the trade, political and institutional relationships that support them. It is these that make the material conditions of life that most effects the air we breathe, the water we drink, our personal and environmental health, and the very activities we conceive of doing."

Natalie Jeremijenko is an artist, engineer and inventor who puts emerging technologies to work for social change. Working collaboratively with other artists, students, scientists and research groups, including the Bureau of Inverse Technology, she has created public artworks and staged media spectacles designed to "place evidence in the public sphere that would otherwise only be available to particular experts."

Recent projects of Jeremijenko's have involved: suspending six live trees upside down to study their "contrived growth responses over time" (*Tree Logic*, 1999); planting pairs of genetically identical trees throughout the city of San Francisco to "render the social and environmental differences to which they are exposed" (*One-Trees*, 2003); modifying consumer-grade robotic toys to sniff out toxic waste (*Feral Robotic Dogs*, 2003); and working with activists at the 2004 Republican National Convention to develop counter surveillance and other devices for assisting and protecting demonstrators.

Jeremijenko's commitment to decentralized and socially responsible forms of information design is evident in the ongoing project *HowStuffisMade* (http://xdesign.ucsd.edu/howstuffismade) an on-line encyclopedia of labor conditions and manufacturing processes involved in the production of contemporary products. *HowStuffisMade* serves both as a consumer guide to everyday commodities (blue jeans, plastic bags, fortune cookies, and disposable razors to name just a few) and as a prototype curriculum for training future engineers and designers.

The project began as a course taught by Jeremijenko in which students at Yale University researched and published encyclopedia entries on consumer products of their choice. Students were required to initiate contact with a manufacturing corporation, secure entry to its production facilities and visually document the process and conditions of production. The research results are presented in form of 'photo essays' on the *HowStuffisMade* website, which is designed (along the same lines as the popular wikipedia website) as an open-content, editable system that allows visitors to modify, correct and/or contribute new content.

As Jeremijenko writes, in addition to educating consumers about how stuff is made, "this system has the potential to change design practices, and industry practices… Because future generations of designers, and future managers will be introduced to manufacturing and labor issues much earlier, and much more vividly in their career (most engineers and almost all management students graduate without a single visit to a manufacturing facility), they may be better equipped to explore and develop designs to address these issues."

Worker at Fortune Cookie Factory, 2004
Photo Essay by Abigail Lubow
From the website *HowStuffisMade*
Photo courtesy of Abigail Lubow

BARBARA LATTANZI

Barbara Lattanzi is a digital artist who creates interactive software for live video improvisation. Drawing connections between old and new forms of time-based media, her work includes software modeled on karaoke, early vampire movies and 60s avant garde cinema.
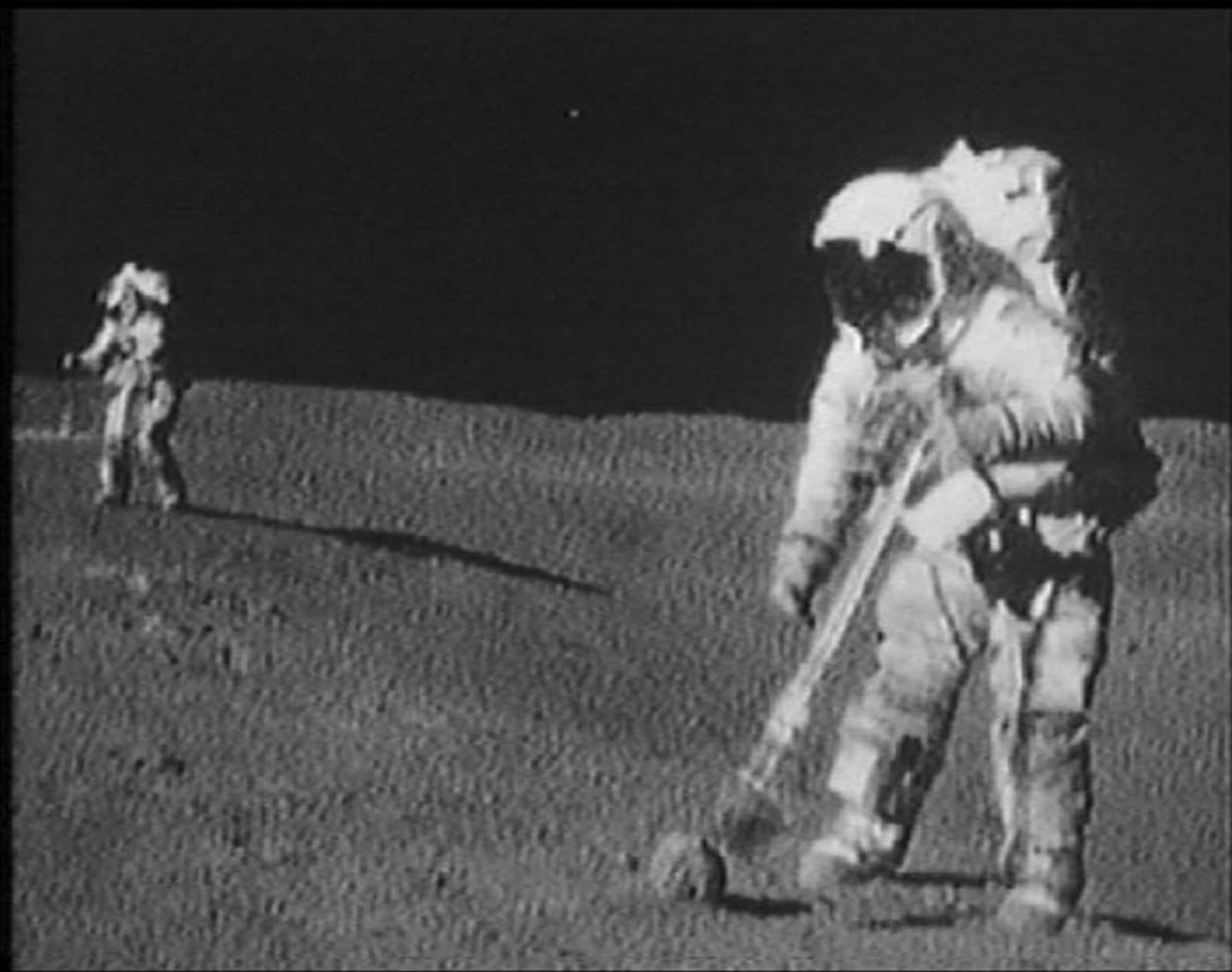
For *The Interrupting Annotator* (2004) and *C-SPAN Karaoke* (2005), Lattanzi wrote software that allows users to manipulate, add text comments and sing along with internet streams from C-SPAN and other news services. *Muscle and Blood Piano* (2000), is a video editing environment programmed specifically for use with F.W. Murnau's 1922 film *Nosferatu*. In performances using a laptop and projector, "the film characters are reanimated through improvised montage of shattered, low-resolution image fragments."

Positioning 60s structuralist film as a precursor to today's VJ culture, Lattanzi has created software that translates the temporal structure of selected films (by Ernie Gehr and Hollis Frampton among others) into programming scripts that can be applied to any movie clip on a user's hard drive. Frampton's 1971 film *Critical Mass* (in which a lovers argument is continuously looped back on itself), was chosen by Lattanzi because of the way the film's structure "marks the passage of time of the viewer in counterpoint with the time-frame of the film's subjects - somewhere between now and not-now, 24 frames per second."

In addition to exploring parallels between past and present articulations of the moving image, Lattanzi's work aims to bring these (rarely screened) films back into circulation. As she writes, "simulating these films in regard to their structure enables the viewer to experience the films by remaking them."

Lattanzi uses her software in live performances and installations with footage culled from a variety of sources, including, in this exhibition, recordings of the 1971 Apollo moon landing. Produced in the same year as *Critical Mass*, these films were chosen because of their "renewed relevance in relation to current U.S. ambitions in outer space" and in "connection to alternative readings of NASA documentation. An example of such an alternative reading is the persistent luddite skepticism that Apollo missions ever happened at all."

Barbara Lattanzi lives in Massachusetts and teaches at Smith College. Her software is available on her website: www.wildernesspuppets.net

HF Critical Mass software

JOHN OLSON

Since age 15, John Olson has been making art, playing in bands, inventing electronic instruments, booking shows and putting out records and tapes. He started the label *American Tapes* in the summer of 1992, releasing limited-edition recordings of his own and others' music from around the world. Now approaching its 400th release, *American Tapes* continues to feature improvised music made with handmade and prepared instruments, low-fi tape recordings of shows and rehearsals, and densely layered electronic experimentation.
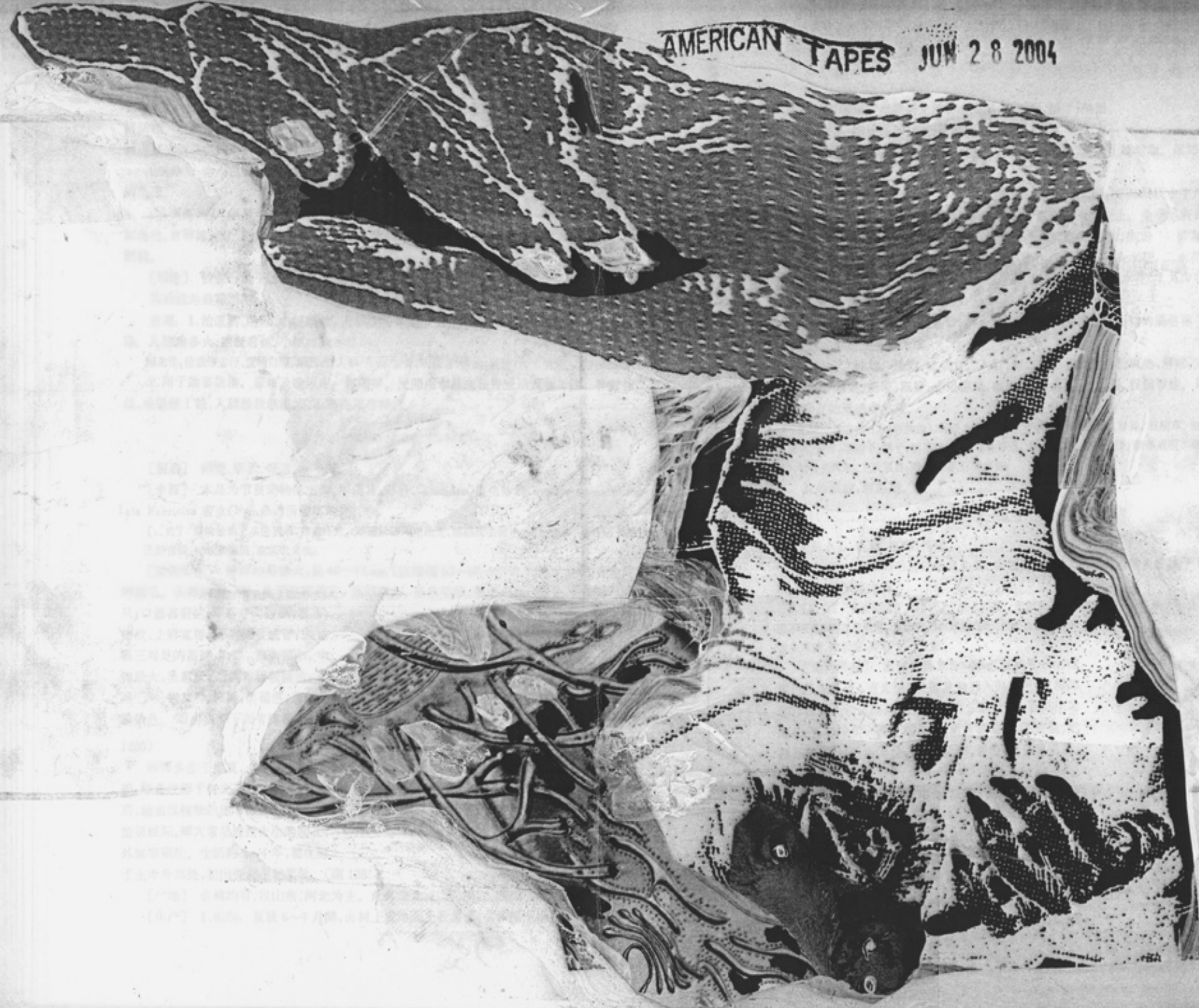
Olson's vinyl, cassette and CDR editions, often released in small quantities of ten or less, reflect an aesthetic that is decidedly handmade and raw. Incorporating an array of materials and processes (spray paint, collage, found objects, photocopies, and screen printing), his releases often take on the status of sculptural objects. The American Tapes release, *D.L Savings T.X's Midwife* (Am-26, 1996), is made from four different vinyl records, quartered and reassembled into a one sided picture disc. The cassette of *E Ka (s) Boa, May You Be Joined By* (Am-43, 1997) combines silicone, train tracks, metal tags, screws, brass lines, silver paint, and lacquer. Olson writes, "you have to learn how to use your own style. Chinese artists would spend their whole lives on one style, so they would know every idiosyncratic aspect to it. If you just stay focused, and try to learn as much about subtlety and nuance, you can put a lot of depth and character into what you do."

Olson plays magnetic tapes, electronics and horns in *Wolf Eyes* and performs with his wife Tovah in *Dead Machines*. Though equally visionary as a visual artist, Olson reflects, "more and more I think that sound is a stronger personal art form than visuals. Because with visuals, you can just turn your head and it's not there. But sound is on you like a blanket."

A large part of Olson's musical interests involve the act of recording. "Recording stops time. Anyone that has recorded can listen back and know how they were feeling at the time. It's better than a diary." Part of Olson's installation at the Carnegie allows visitors to record and take home their own *American Tapes* release on a configuration of Olson's machines made for the exhibition.

American Tapes poster, 2004

PAPER RAD

Structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss argued that myths are best interpreted and understood through other myths. The artist collective Paper Rad adopts a similar approach to pop culture, synthesizing material from television, video games and advertising, and letting these fragments contextualize and cross-reference each other. Day-glow colors, bit-mapped graphics, puffy cartoons and psychedelic patterns combine to create an optical and information overload, exemplified in the group's website: www.paperrad.org. As member Jacob Ciocci writes, "In the '70s and '80s cartoons and consumer electronics were bigger and trashier than ever and freaked kids out... Now these kids are getting older and are freaking everybody else out by using this same throw-away trash." Paper Rad members Benjamin Jones, Jessica Ciocci, and Jacob Ciocci, have been producing visual art, music, videos, photography, comics, clothes and writing since 2000.

Paper Rad, 2004

WILLIAM POPE.L

William Pope.L, aka The Friendliest Black Artist in America©, has been using art to question culturally ingrained categories (of race, food, sex, poverty and work) since the mid 1970s. Combining conceptual rigor, visceral impact and humor, his works expose layers of social absurdity and confound expectations about what "black art" should be.

Over the years, Pope.L's work has involved crawling through the streets of major cities, eating and regurgitating the Wall Street Journal, mapping the United States in hot dogs, and exploring the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. via writing, rumor and bioengineering. Most recently, Pope.L has been touring the country with *The Black Factory*, a mobile exhibition/work space that collects and processes objects of "blackness."

Many of Pope.L's pieces take place on the street and use his own body as a figure of menace, abjection and physical vulnerability. In *ATM Piece*, he chained himself (with sausage links) to the entrance of a bank in Manhattan wearing only a skirt made of $1 bills, which he handed out to passersby. In *Member (aka Schlong Journey)* Pope.L walked along 125th street in Harlem with a 14-foot white cardboard penis in an effort to "own whiteness, male whiteness through the phallus," and to do so "in a black environment, where I became a spectacle and the site of questions."

As part of his larger *eRacism* project, Pope.L has performed more than forty "Crawl" pieces where, giving up his 'verticality,' he has crawled for miles on his hands and knees along public sidewalks until the point of exhaustion. In 2001, Pope.L began *The Great White Way*, a five-year, 22 mile crawl. Wearing a store-bought superman costume and with a skateboard strapped to his back, he will travel from the Statue of Liberty to his mother's home in the Bronx.

About his work, Pope.L writes, "you can hold contraries, bound together, without blurring them together… The fact is I am black and I am influenced by historically European-based art. I am interested in formal issues and I am interested in social issues. Think of it as a bunch of flowers—daisies, lilies, daffodils. I want you to hold them all in a bundle, but see them each distinctly."

Still from *The Great White Way*, 2001-ongoing, endurance performance, NYC.
Photo Credit: James Pruznick.

DYLAN REIFF & JOE KORSMO

In 2002, Dylan Reiff and Joe Korsmo began tracking the internet activities of Kolin, aka Velocity Gnome, an 18-year old computer gamer. They monitored and recorded Kolin's AOL instant messages and gathered information about his friends and family from other sources on the net. Blending this data with scenarios from videogames and sci-fi films, they developed a mythology in which Kolin is "singled out as the savior of the human race." The story is told in *Gem Missile: A Tribute to Velocity Gnome*, a 40-page book that incorporates photographs of Kolin and excerpts from his personal correspondence. In August 2003, Reiff and Korsmo showed up on Kolin's parent's doorstep in Chicago. Reiff introduced himself as "Zane Figium," Kolin's "mentor from the future," presented him with the book, and left without further explanation.

The plot thickened several days later with Kolin posted a detailed description of the encounter to an on-line gaming forum, along with digital photos of every page in the book. Members of the forum quickly added their own theories and responses, which ranged from close readings of the text and speculations about the gender of its authors, to admissions of jealousy and accusations that Kolin had invented the story in order to get a high rating for his thread (which in a few weeks had received over 40,000 hits).

A year passed after this initial contact. In August 2004, Reiff and Korsmo mailed Kolin a package containing a photograph of their meeting a year earlier, along with a note, a certificate, and a plane ticket to Minneapolis. Kolin was met at the airport by a man in a beat up Lincoln Town Car who identified himself as "The Gatekeeper." For two days, Kolin was lead around the city on a scavenger hunt in search of robots, buried treasure and information needed to save the future. Reiff and Korsmo involved numerous actors and another on-line gamer who, equally baffled, was driven with Kolin to a forest and abandoned there. At some point, Kolin noticed that his new friend had mysteriously disappeared. "I stood there alone in the woods, in Minnesota, with a shovel and a large black locked box, more confused then I have ever been in my life." Kolin survived the trip and posted a detailed account of his adventure, concluding, "it was great experience, and I would not hesitate to save the future again, if the chance ever arose."

Dylan Reiff is an actor and playwright who studies theater at Antioch College. Joe Korsmo studies business and marketing at the University of Pennsylvania. Both are avid gamers and have been playing them together for 15 years. Their installation is titled after Kolin's mother's announcement: *There's Someone at the Door, He Says He's From the Future*.

AÏDA RUILOVA

A classically trained pianist who plays with the band *Alva*, Aïda Ruilova approaches the video medium with an emphasis on sound, rhythm and timing… and a love of 70s horror films. Her short-format videos unfold around psychologically charged situations, pushing the aesthetics of horror and techniques of filmic suspense to unsettling and often absurd extremes.

Among Ruilova's influences are Russian avant garde and cult cinema, death metal, and French horror director Jean Rollin, who appears beside the artist in her 2001 work *Tuning*. Here, a hypnotic soundtrack drives the image as the seated couple slowly comes into focus. Other works experiment with the extension and compression of time to evoke fractured narratives. *UH OH* (2004) sustains a moment of paralyzed dread as the camera tilts almost 90 degrees in contrast to its inert subject, a woman murmuring "uh, oh" again and again. In *No, no* (2004) a rapid-fire sequence of shots (a body agonizing on the floor, a face peering in the window, a pair of flailing arms) creates a escalating sense of disorientation and mayhem. Frantic montage and slow motion sequences play off one another in *The Stun* (2000), where an unseen person wearing fur attempts to pry open a man's mouth against a backdrop of digitized, metallic sound. Ruilova's works are often spatially choreographed across multiple monitors which abruptly turn on and off, providing an intense if fleeting glimpse into a postindustrial (and preternatural) world. Though centered around "feelings of tension, unresolve, and depravity," Ruilova insists her works are optimistic: "I'm into horror film, but I'm also into comedy that's extreme,"

Aïda Ruilova lives and works in New York.

HAIM STEINBACH

"Everyday objects produced by our society may be turned into objects of desire more than one time. I am trying to show that an object may be consumed more than one time and desired in more than one way."

Lava lamps, driftwood, boxes of cereal and laundry detergent, pre-Christian pottery, digital clocks, Yoda masks, snowmen made of yarn, a Mies Van der Rohe day bed. These are some of the objects assembled and displayed, often on custom-built shelves, in the work of Haim Steinbach. We've seen these things before: advertised in store windows, laid out on flea market tables, lining the aisles of supermarkets, exhibited in museums, decorating friends' apartments and arranged on shelves in our own homes.

Steinbach's work since the late 1970s has explored our society's evolving relationship to material culture. His use of familiar objects and forms of presentation show us what, in an era of globalization and commodity abundance, we wind up doing all the time: identifying ourselves, communicating with each other and structuring our relationships through objects. Extending the questions of authorship and originality raised by the Duchampian readymade, Steinbach's work elaborates (through its own example) how context and timing determine the way that objects, including works of art, are desired, valued and exchanged.

While some have called what he does "commodity art," Steinbach prefers to think of his work in terms of collecting. "My work is a reflection on collections because any specific thing we possess is part of a collection or a collectivity." Since the early 1990s, Steinbach has been collecting vernacular statements (slogans, catchphrases and other idiomatic expressions) from newspapers and magazines. Some of these expressions become titles for his three-dimensional works. Others are reproduced as large-scale wall paintings where the typography and layout of the original text are preserved and presented against a solid background. Through their altered context and cinematic proportions, works like *yo.* (1991), *aha!* (1997), and *you don't see it, do you?* (1994), catch us in the act of receiving a private message (the one we read to ourselves in a magazine) while encountering a public announcement (the one we read collectively).

Haim Steinbach lives in Brooklyn, New York and teaches in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego.

you don't see it, do you?, installation view, 1994

BRIAN SPRINGER

Brian Springer is a media artist whose work explores ways in which new communications technologies redefine notions of public space and private enterprise. He has exploited social and technological loopholes, extracting images, sounds and data from within traditionally closed systems of power. His well-known documentary, *Spin* (1995), uses unpackaged and uncensored satellite news feeds to offer a behind-the-scenes look at the American political process. In his recent work, Springer has strategized methods for recovering hidden information from digital text files.

I Trust You is a candid portrait of a high-risk work environment reflected through workplace media materials appropriated by an oil company employee. The project is an investigation of risk capital, oil exploration, and the role of audience as investor.

Still from *I Trust You*, n.d.

CARNEGIE ART CENTER
240 GOUNDRY STREET
NORTH TONAWANDA, NY 14120
716.694.4400 / www.carnegieartcenter.org

www.weirdshadow.com