

Hand of the Spirit:

Documents of the Seventies
from the Morris/Trasov Archive

UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver

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In October 1992, Portfolio No.1
The Search for the Hand of the Spirit
was published by Morris/Trasov Archive and
UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver, in an edition
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with the first exhibition developed from
Morris/Trasov Archive.

Cover:
detail from portfolio edition –
Arts Birthday/Decca-Dance
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Preface

This book is a sample of documents, correspondence and ephemera covering twenty-five years of collaborative research into the nature of art and life and the subsequent networking that these activities involve. 1969–1974 was the period of greatest activity and excitement. Initially contacts with artists were made and maintained via the postal system. Subsequently people met and friendships arose. Activity took many forms. Everything was open to appropriation; banks, schools, churches, companies, countries, even politics and individuals' personae. Activities included the forming of fan clubs, holding meetings, publication of artists' directories, books, zines, postcards and videotapes. All was performed in a spirit of a playful utopia. The groundwork for an independent artist network was established, the interpretation of which would be developed by the agenda and priorities of the individual artists participating in it. Our contribution is the Morris/Trasov Archive and the development of the themes and projects it contains.
Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov, Berlin 1994



Scott Watson

**Hand of the Spirit:
Documents of the Seventies
from the Morris/Trasov Archive**

The Morris/Trasov Archive contains correspondence with other artists in the mail art network of the time, first editions of artist's books, Image Bank files on various subjects developed from Image Bank image request mailings, ephemera and objects associated with performances and artist's visits, photographs, drawings, collages, media clippings and documents associated with ongoing research concerns such as Colour Bar Research, the Cultural Ecology Research, etc. In the fall of 1990 at the Banff Centre for the Arts, as a project initiated by Lorne Falk, the approximately ten thousand items were accession-numbered, boxed and entered on disc by a team led by Art Me-



tropole archivist Amy Maggiacomo and Banff Centre librarian Bob Foley. The archive now occupies some fifty running metres of boxes as well as several crates and is currently housed by the UBC Fine Arts Gallery.

The Morris/Trasov Archive is not an ordinary archive, but something more slippery to define. The Archive itself contains earlier attempts to file and catalogue its holdings. Many of the files are not closed, but contain as yet unrealized potential for projects and exhibitions. The Archive, in a certain sense, is meant to be considered as a work of art, or perhaps more accurately, as a vehicle for artistic research, as a working model for research as art, art as research.

The history of the Archive begins with the formation of Image Bank. Image Bank was founded in 1970 by Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov as a "bank" for mail art projects. The term "Image Bank" was borrowed from

Morris/Trasov
with "Props",
1970
Polaroid:
Mo van Nostrand

Michael Morris,
Miss General Idea,
Vancouver 1971
Photo:
Vincent Trasov



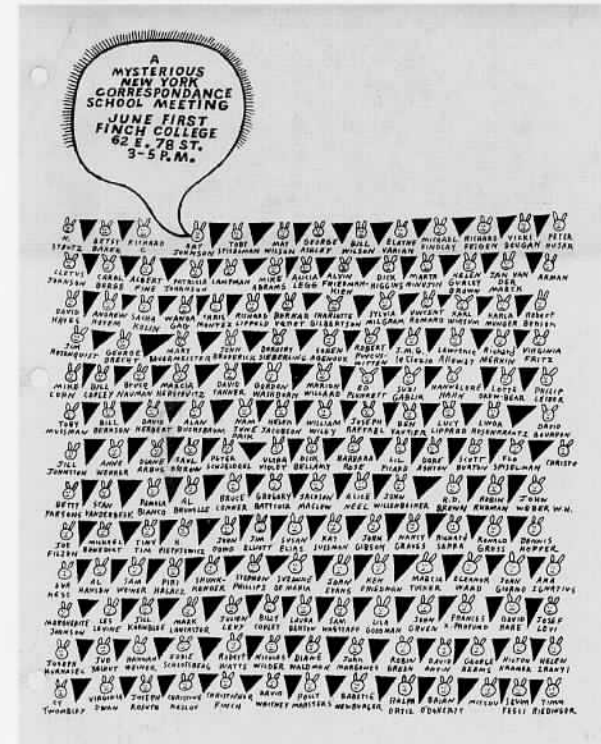
Image of the month mailing, 1970
Image Bank, Vancouver

Claude Lévi-Strauss. A citation from *The Savage Mind* served as a cornerstone, "The decision that everything must be taken account of facilitates the creation of an image bank." The project was communal and collaborative, or idealized as such, in the attempt to create a shared consciousness. As Morris put it, "Image Bank implies the mechanics of a collective creative consciousness."

The bank was oriented toward process rather than product, to creative exchange rather than the production of masterworks, to artists and the lives of artists rather than the terrain of the gallery or the museum. According to Morris, the bank was "not an elaborate filing system or an access or retrieval agency ... [but] a reflection of responses, attitudes and positions that have been part of the constant redefining of the creative process in our time."¹ By the time the bank did its first mailing in the spring of 1970, its co-

founders had assumed personas for their artistic and network activity. Morris was Marcel Dot (a.k.a. Chairman Dot, Marcel Idea); Trasov, Mr. Peanut (after briefly assuming the more aristocratic Marquis d'Arachide); Glenn Lewis became Flakey Rosechips; Robert Fones, Candy Man; Gary Lee-Nova, Art Rat; Eric Metcalfe and Kate Craig, Dr. and Lady Brute. The personas made identity fluid, situational and circumstantial, signalling that this group of artists rejected the idea of the artist as solitary explorer of the psyche.

The first Image Bank mailing was a rapid off-set "recycled" image of a fashion model riding an inflated swan stamped "Image of the Month" accompanied by a list of addresses and a list of requests for images that was mailed to fellow artists. The response was positive and immediate although some who received the mailings were put off by it. One prominent Vancouver collec-



tor fumed that Image Bank was trying to derail high art and had embraced kitsch. Through the mailing, Morris and Trasov had made contact with the main players who would "become collaborators in creating a shared mythology of the times."²

Subsequent mailings provided a frame of reference. The Fetish mailing was a border into which the recipient could insert anything, as it were, into the fetish file. A Cultural Ecology Project asked for "piss pics," the 1984 mailing asked for images of the future. As the first (and only) Image Bank Report (January, 1972) noted: "Feedback resulting from exchanges created a kind of decentralized filing system."³

Image Bank did not appear in isolation. As early as 1968, Morris had been contacted by New York artist, Ray Johnson, who had seen Morris' painting *The Problem of Nothing* reproduced in *Artforum*. Johnson wrote that lots

of people were doing happenings but he was interested in doing nothings. Johnson's involvement with mailings went back to the 1950s, or by his own account, the 1940s. He is often given the paternity for the mail art network, a position that makes him uncomfortable as his own aesthetic emerges from rather different values than those which animated the artists of the 1970s. Another lineage could be drawn through the activities of Fluxus, especially Robert Filliou, who broadcast the concept of "the eternal network." There are precedents for mail art in the activities of the French Nouveau Realists, some of whom, notably Daniel Spoerri, would be associated with Fluxus. There is also a precedent in the activities of the various Dada formations and references to Dada abound in the punning and collaging that was circulated through the network. But as international as Image Bank was in its connections and as knowing of a counter

N.Y.C.S. mailing, 1970
Ray Johnson, New York

memorandum

to Dana Atchley
from Marcel Det Jan. 1, 1971.

when you are away send post cards to

NOTHING
BY MOUTH

Image Bank, 4454 west 2nd.
Vancouver 8 B.C.

RAY JOHNSON
THE PINK HOUSE
44 WEST 7 STREET
LOCUST VALLEY
NEW YORK 11560

December 1, 1970

Michael,
Could you please write to tell or
telephone or ESP to Dana Atchley in
Victoria since I can't find her
address that my phone number out
here on Lung Island is area cod
516- then 676 then 3150. Hello.
And that I would be delighted
to meet her when she is in
town New York City and that
the Pink House is one mess.
I think I'm going nuts. Please say
a prayer for me. Also if I can't be
reached here I may be at a moving, she
should try May Wilson saloon 6914²¹⁶
next to the Chelsea Hotel. I think May is
cracking up too into little pieces.

Michael Morris
Ace Ace
1724 davie st
Vancouver B.C.,
Canada

Postcard page for
Space Atlas,
1971
Michael Morris,
Vancouver

(one might say un-American) version of modernism, it operated in a context unprepared for it. There had been in Canada, which was unique among the industrialized nations in this respect, until the 1960s neither an indigenous avant-gardism nor a cultivation of knowledge about such art in other countries. This gave the project an element of risk, challenge and even euphoria.

The first compilation of correspondence activity had been produced in 1970 by Dana Atchley, operating as *Ace Space* in Victoria, British Columbia. For this project, the *Ace Space Notebook* contributors were asked to send 250 pages which Atchley collated and redistributed to the contributors. Atchley had become involved with Fluxus artist Dieter Rot and Daniel Spoerri at Yale. In Victoria he decided on correspondence as a way of keeping touch with his contemporaries. Around the same time, Michael

Goldberg produced the first *Video Exchange Directory*, "with the aim of promoting videotapes moving by mail all over the place."⁴ Goldberg's interest in video was based on his search for visual methods of communication that could transcend international language barriers. He was especially interested in establishing contacts in Japan. All this activity was interrelated and had not only a common local context but international aims shared by Gary Lee-Nova, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, Kate Craig and Eric Metcalfe, Terry Reid, Ken Friedman and others working in Vancouver at the time.

As a film maker, Lee-Nova was inspired by William Burroughs' and Brion Gysin's "cut-up" technique. His interest was shared by Morris, Trasov and many of the artists. The technique, invented as a literary tool for creating new meaning, involved the chance cutting up of texts. Randomly rearranged, a new text appeared. This

new text would open up surprising coherence. By shattering the order of the source texts these new readings were thought to infiltrate and disrupt the dominant ideology of the day. Their model was viral, to invade and infect dominant structures, rather than reform them. Lee-Nova was also influenced by film artists Stan Brackage and Bruce Conner. As Al Razutis accounted for it, "The year of its creation [Lee-Nova's film *Steel Mushrooms*, 1967] was dominated by television reportage of disasters, violence, the Vietnam War, demonstrations and riots. Lee-Nova recalled that it was in the form of a reply to the media that the impulse for making the film first developed. Bruce Conner, as early as 1957 (*A Movie*), had "framed" society, history and culture within a kind of "action art" that used the wreckage and excesses of society, its "stock footage" as materials for film. *Steel Mushrooms* carried forward a part of that tradition; its formal design was also

influenced by the Burroughs/Gysin "cut-up," the fragmenting of narrative and juxtaposition of elements by chance until an "intuitive" correspondence/meaning was found."⁵

Collage and cut-up became important means for transforming images from the mass media. "Collage or Perish" and "Cut-up or Shut-up" were network commands meant to mobilize the troops on the network of image exchange.

The manipulation of images invariably pointed to their fetish and ritual characteristics, provoking an awareness of the circulation of the subliminal. Found images and parodic sayings were recycled through the network to create a sense of a shared utopian vision and a shared critique of the West's obsession with mastery and progress. Yet the relationship between art and the images of the image industry was also contradictory, dialectical and critical. By embracing the emptiness of mass culture one broke its mes-

N.Y.C.S. letter,
1970
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New York

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to Dana Atchley
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N.Y.C.S. letter,
1970
Ray Johnson,
New York



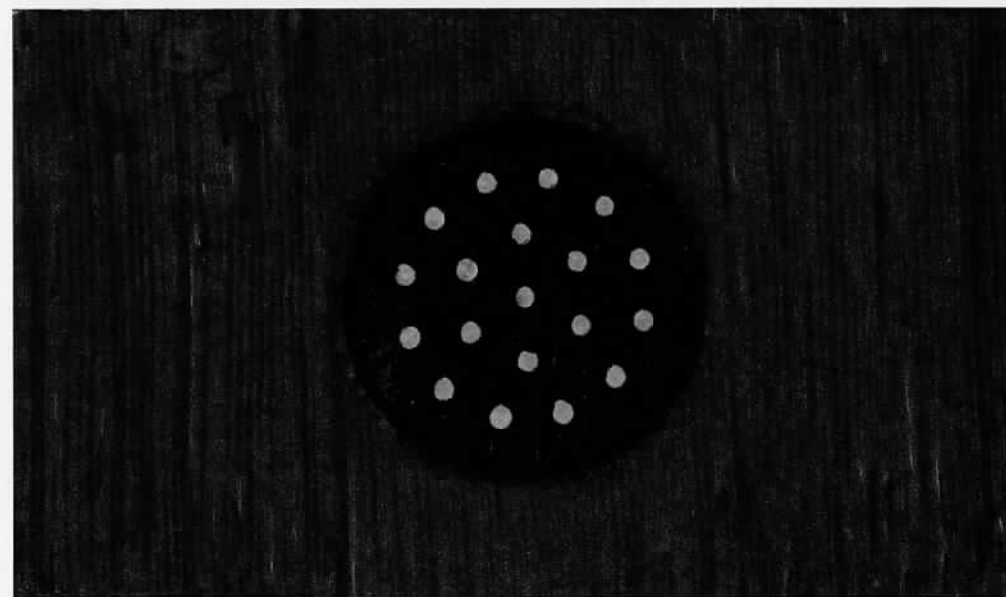
Halifax Landscape
1,
1970
Ann Noël,
Halifax,
Nova Scotia

merising spell and transformed the power of the spell by speaking through its very instruments.

The figures of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol loom especially large behind the artistic manifestations of the network, but for specific, not every, aspect of their activities. The network was fascinated with Warhol's exploitation of celebrities through an emptied-out persona that seemed to receive important cultural forms uncritically. The Warhol attitude was a net or a mirror for a culture obsessed with image. Duchamp's example was in the adopting of personas, the pursuit of the androgyne as a new creative type and formulating a dialectical critique of aesthetics through pun and allusion.

Robert Smithson's imagination of a voided-out contemporaneity was also important to the theoretical beginnings of Image Bank. To the Warholian void, a world-view centred in the fame-game of New York, Smithson added a cos-

mos and nature. The Canadians living in (especially in the case of the artists living in British Columbia) a frontier, resource-exploitation based economy considered the culture/nature binarism as prime borderline case. Smithson's work with mirrors influenced Morris and his visits to Vancouver for his abortive "Glass Island" project coincided with the founding of the bank. Smithson's own mirror work, which involved the "displacement" of a landscape by placing mirrors in it, had in turn, sought its sanction from Lévi-Strauss. "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" opens with a quote from *The Savage Mind*, "The characteristic feature of *The Savage Mind* is its timelessness: its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws from there is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) al-



though without being strictly parallel."⁶ Morris, Lee-Nova and General Idea worked extensively with mirrors. Lee-Nova and Morris built the mirrored environment, *Prisma*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1968.⁷ *The Fire Mirror Video* produced by Goldberg, Image Bank and General Idea in 1971, was one of the pioneer works of Canadian video. Smithson's influence was important to others in Vancouver and Canada, especially to Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and Toronto's General Idea. Early contact between General Idea and Vancouver gave a national context to the network and the first issues of their *File Magazine* (April, 1972) gave extensive coverage of Image Bank and West Coast activity.

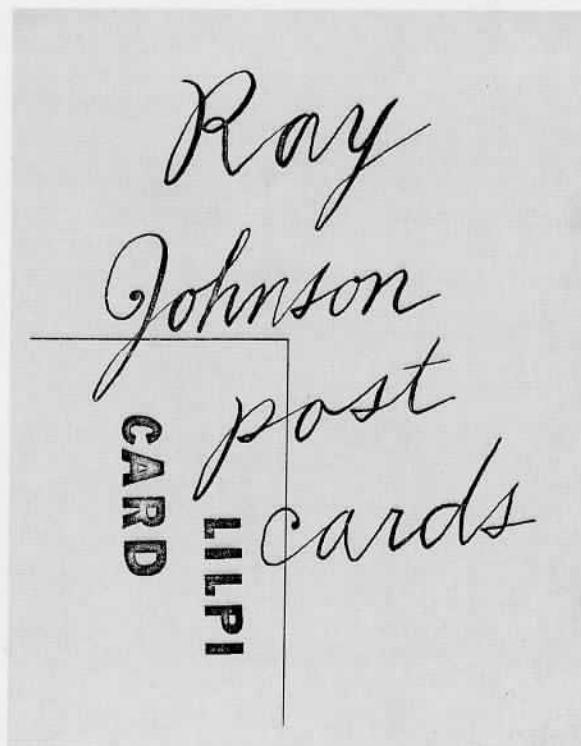
The Image Bank Request Lists appeared in General Idea's *File Magazine* (1972). *File* was a parody of *Life* magazine and meant to be its antidote. *Life's* injunctions to wallow in the American postwar order of consumer bliss, ma-

terialism and the subjugation of the peoples of the world were inverted by *File's* call for transgression, disobedience and the pursuit of good times, glamour and fame.

Image Bank was theorized by General Idea's A. A. Bronson in his article "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters"⁸ in terms of its concerns with history and myth. For Bronson, "History is the story of the great and the wealthy and the powerful few. The poor and the renegade are left with myth, legend and folklore. Myth is the past brought into the present, that we may be masters of our own culture ... In myth it is all very clear that everything must be accounted for. One starts with a vision and names the parts."

Bronson saw the method of Image Bank in dialectical opposition to the method of conceptual art; the conceptual artist started with parts and revealed structure, "Image Bank starts with the structure and names the parts." This

Send this piece
of sky to
Hendricks,
1971
A. M. Fine,
New York



N.Y.C.S. mailing,
1971
Ray Johnson,
New York

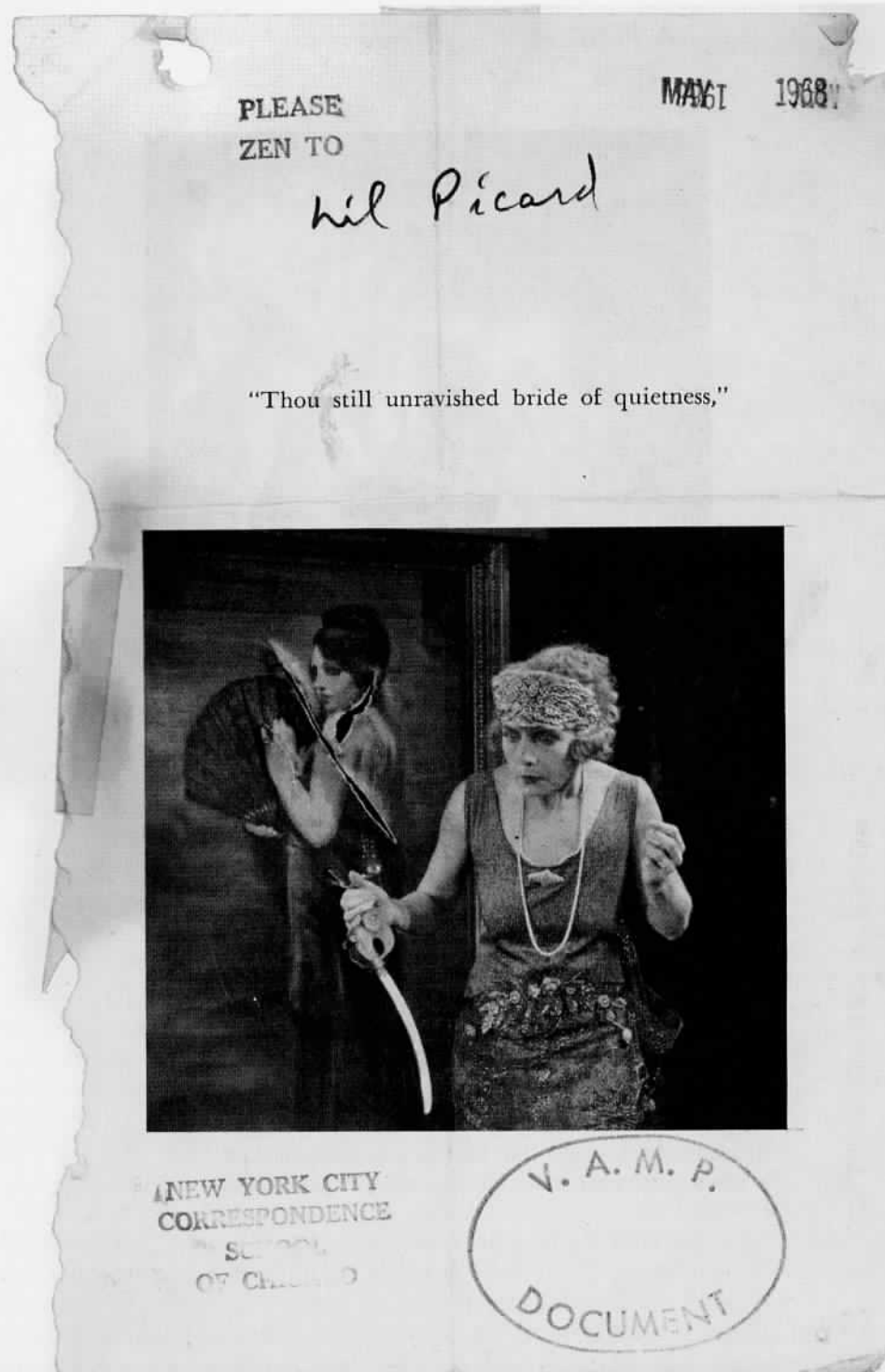
N.Y.C.S. of Chicago
collage,
1968
Ed Plunkett,
New York

strategy related the bank to myth, "It is the function of myth and art to reestablish correspondences and the sense of the possibility of correspondences that may allow description of the universe as a vision named now. We may no longer move beyond the image, nor beyond the image of the images." There was both subversion and utopia in Bronson's account of Image Bank. It was a project to end history and place culture in the atemporality of mythic time, a project to conquer alienation, arrest progress and restore the bond between humankind and the natural world. It was a project to end the dominance of the Cartesian grid of space/time continuities on the imagination, "to erase the time gap between past and future, to erase then that sense of progress of historical process and create a continuum of discrete presences."

The strategies for achieving this revision or restoration of reality were conceived in three

inter-related terms: fetish objects, ritual and archives. "The fetish object is the intersection point of potent images," a point around which rituals gather and concretize. The ritual releases "the resident imagery of fetish objects," tying together the past, present and future. Its references are temporal; "the ritual acts as a means of stepping outside of the historical process and placing oneself in the context of a dense mythical network in order that one may view simultaneity." The archive is "a means of making present, of establishing the past as an existing presence." In this the archive functions like ritual.

In his appraisal of what it was that Image Bank was doing, Bronson suggested that the archive was becoming "specific collections of imagery filling in obvious gaps in the cosmology attempting by these collections to define whole areas of emerging consciousness." Image Bank's 1984 project was a case in point. "The 1984 project op-





Marcel Dot, 1970
Michael Morris,
Vancouver

This is not the
oarsmistress, 1971
Aleatory
Novelties Ltd.
(Barry McCallion),
Claremont, California

erates specifically within the arena of imagery from a progress-oriented society foreseeing the future and inadvertently answers specific contemporary problems in coping with nostalgia and camp." The 1984 project collected future-oriented mass media images that were produced in the past, mainly the immediate post-Second World War period. Bronson theorized that these images represented the collective historical vision of the future as seen in the past and remained as a general mythology in the present (1973).

Bronson's article may be seen to articulate the position of General Idea through a description of Image Bank but it also reveals an aspect of the discussion of the times and reminds us of the discontent and desire to re-vision the world from which both General Idea and Image Bank were born. Both were interested in media, the democratization of artistic life through networks and through what they both termed the subliminal,

that stratum of society, not necessarily of the art world, which was reached through the image request lists. This was the world of fan clubs and zines circulated by hobbyists, cataloguers, fetishists and/or pornographers. This world, atomized from the mass media, contained many cottage industry communication networks, demonstrating that "ordinary" people could and did actively produce their own image worlds and did not just passively consume what the corporate image industry produced. Although neither General Idea nor Image Bank theorized this phenomenon in an academic sense, they thought what they were doing was something like ethnography, that they had uncovered the "primitives" of the Cold War order. Both groups used and re-circulated the zine material in the mailings and collages they would produce as artists. There were, however, significant differences in the tone and character of early General Idea and Image

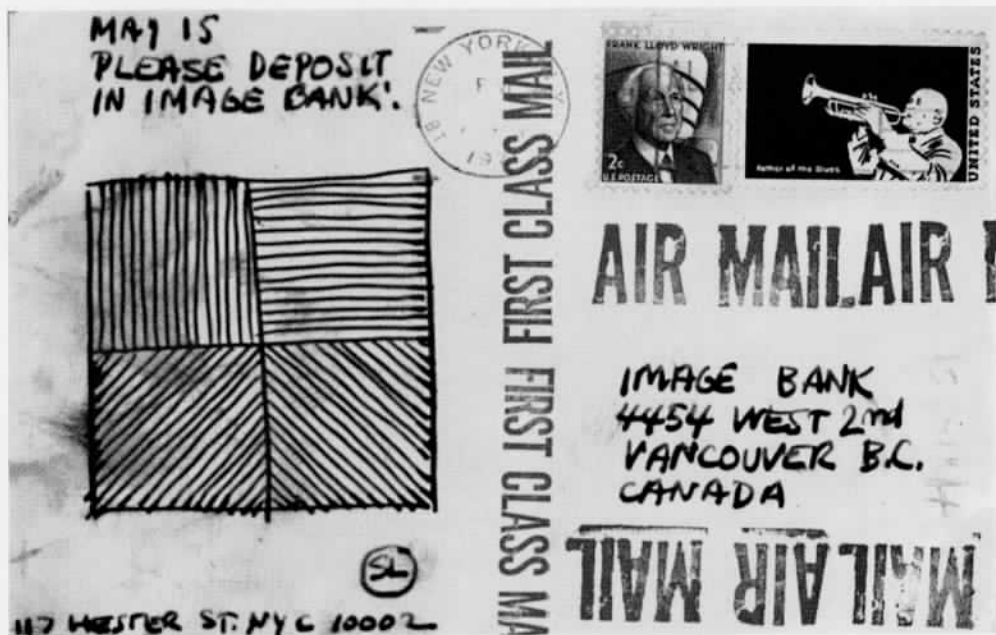
8/22/71

Dear Michael,

Thanks for your letter + for including a notice on the Marcel Duchamp Club West in the next Image Bank mailing. - I assume that you are a member. Once we have a membership we can continue as we were with a title on us(?) The Club has no program + will have none if I have a vote. It should be an arena + little more. I like the idea of an armada of rowboats drifting randomly, the emphasis and focus gathered collectively, rather than the image of a single, romantic rowboat.

Here is my postcard proposal:





Postcard, 1971
Sol Lewitt,
New York

Bank. General Idea's fascination for the fetish and kitsch was used as a weapon, the mode played on the anxieties of an urban scene caught between petit-bourgeois aspirations to glamour and the knowing hipness of coded art world cool. Image Bank, especially after Trasov and Morris purchased some rural property near Roberts Creek in 1972, explored the pastoral, the promise of paradise and its ruin along the binary fault line, nature/culture. At the Roberts Creek property (Babyland) the Image Bank coterie enacted one of its most luminous projects. *Colour Bar Research* was an endless, infinitely variable, floating conceptual painting. Two thousand wooden colour bars were filmed, videoed and photographed in a landscape populated with naked young people.

In 1971, Vincent Trasov found the "original" Hand of the Spirit in a garbage can. Later, transformed into a silhouette or Plexiglas transpar-

ency, the hand was quickly circulated through the network to become one of a number of characteristic fetish icons. The references were multiple, conflicting and provocative. A hand with stylized, pointed extended fingers with index and middle-finger joined and the thumb rotated out makes an ambiguous semaphore. The hand is a clamp or a frame. The gesture is campy and precious, signalling glamour and artificiality while claiming an other-worldly spiritual presence. Its origin as an *objet trouvé*, a discarded vitrine prop, pointed to its origins as a fallen object and a sign of the fallen, a badge of allegiance to the semiotics of the transgressive and subversive power of the consumer fetish to mine the collective unconscious and throw sudden, shifting light on the structures and patterns desire had built beneath the surface of society.

Hand of the Spirit files were collected, cataloguing the appearance of the hand in sources

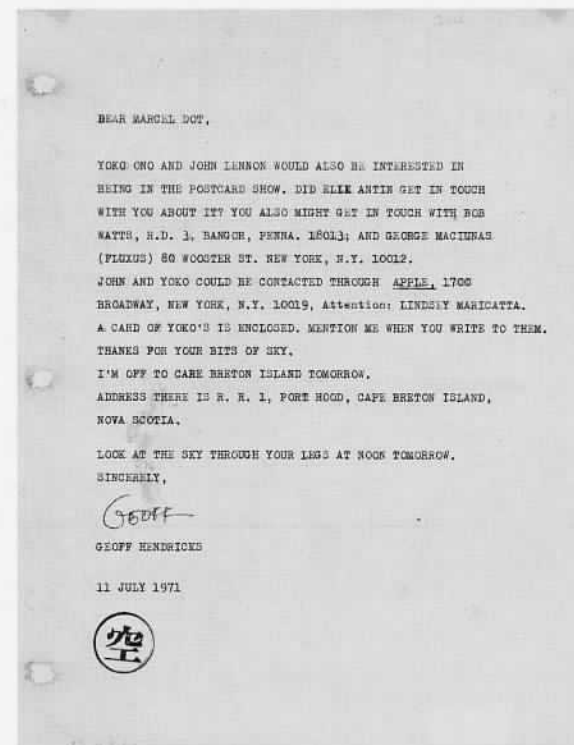
that ranged from fashion ads to statues of the Buddha, drawing correspondences that privileged the ability of the image to have meaning that couldn't be pinned down through the established categories of discourse. So in the end the hand stood for the synthesizing ambitions of Image Bank and General Idea. The prototype now resides in Glenn Lewis' great index and entombment, the *Great Wall of 1984* (1973). Installed in the National Research Library, Ottawa, the wall was correspondence art transformed brilliantly to monument. Some 365 Plexiglas boxes contain objects culled from a request list. For Morris, Lewis' Great Wall was "the most anarchistic yet democratic and intelligent manipulation of official bureaucracy to date. It mirrors the complex implications of current artist/government interactions."⁹

In 1971, General Idea had commandeered an uneasy but desperate-to-be-hip Art Gallery of

Ontario for their first Miss General Idea pageant. Artists in the network were asked to compete by sending in photographs. The winning entry was Trasov's picture of Morris. The picture, something of a small icon in the history of Canadian art, depicted Morris "wearing" a dress. The gown falls from Morris' shoulders, hiding his arms. A silhouette of the Hand of the Spirit supports his upward gazing face. It's a startling image, striking just that right note of the bizarre that was, according to Baudelaire, the mark of modern beauty. In subsequent years the hand appeared in performances, set-ups, photographs—it had become a "prop" with a wandering set of references.

Between the formation of Image Bank and the Decca Dance, a convention for the Eternal Network held in Hollywood in 1974, there are four years. Participants in the Morris/Trasov circle remember a frenetic time, fuelled by drugs, drink

Letter, 1971
Geoff Hendricks,
New York





303 EAST 6th AVE.
VANCOUVER 10, B. C.



CAMPECHE, CAMP.
MEXICO
NEW YORK
CORRES - SPONGE DANCE
SCHOOL OF VANCOUVER

Gran Hotel
'Mar Azul', 1973
Vincent Trasov,
Vancouver

Canada -
Trajectories - 73
Image Bank
envelope design,
Paris 1973

and sexual exploration, the promise of internationalism, a place for art in society and a life devoted to art. The artists celebrated daily events and actions as the border between art and life was subsumed. Many of these are recorded in letters and snapshots in which the sense of occasion doesn't quite transmit into the future, that is, our present and future. Perhaps the devotion to the actual and the moment, an overarching ideal of not only these artists but a whole generation, resulted in the incommunicability of much of what was then to now. We also no longer witness the same phenomena. In many ways we no longer witness the same society. Then there was a heady optimism that the mere unmasking of the great engines of society would dissipate their efficacy. No such illusions brighten our days now. However, a deep paradox was at work in the absolute value given to the fleeting moment. This was the archive itself—systems of fil-

ing, documenting, cataloguing that would transport the projects into the future.

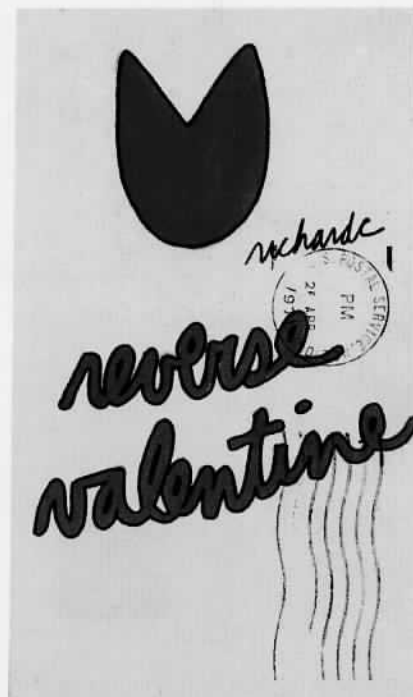
The Decca Dance—titled as a provocation to the network's critics—was conceived to celebrate "Art's Birthday"—a concept circulated throughout the network by Robert Filliou when he declared February 2, 1963 as the one millionth birthday of "Art." The event, held in Hollywood, was attended by about one thousand network artists and their friends. The evening was a mock Academy Awards ceremony with prizes for various categories. Although it attracted the attention of *Esquire* magazine, the Decca Dance—legendary as a moment of consolidation among the network—was ignored by the art journals. This must have been sobering for a movement that felt it could tantalize, fascinate and ultimately manipulate the mass media.

But later that year, the Vancouver artists would attempt to captivate the mass media by nomi-

nating Mr. Peanut for Mayor on an aestheticist platform. The media were captivated and Mr. Peanut's campaign received extensive coverage. For A. A. Bronson the "success" of the Peanut campaign was in the proof it offered that the empty image could be inserted into mass culture. "Mr. Peanut is an arrow pointing in an empty landscape, the cultural landscape of the mass media ... the very emptiness of the image, the very lack of content, that creates its desirability; it has no connection to any specific event, product or opinion. This lack of substance combined with its familiarity leaves it an open receptacle, a mirror on which the media can project anything they want. And they do ..." ¹⁰ In the final analysis we may find that the Mr. Peanut Campaign, confirmed rather than challenged the liberal consensus which handily won that year's civic election. The Mr. Peanut Campaign marks the end of the effort to produce an active, col-

lective, collaborating, avant-garde community.

In Vancouver, the rediscovery, recovery, re-utilization of avant-garde strategies and stances, beginning in the late 1960s, flourishing in the early 1970s, ending in confusion and disillusionment by the end of the decade, was a period of coming of age for the visual arts in the city. Intermedia, the New Era Social Club, the N.E. Thing Co., Image Bank and the Western Front all began during this period, pulling together local and international artists in an effort to radically reform artistic practice in Vancouver. These efforts have often been characterized by noting the emphasis on collaboration, performance, experiments with new media and the hostility to the institution of art with its emphasis on the object and the notion of the individual "artist." The historian will also note, as Nancy Shaw did in her *Vancouver Anthology* essay on the period, the apparently contradictory phenom-



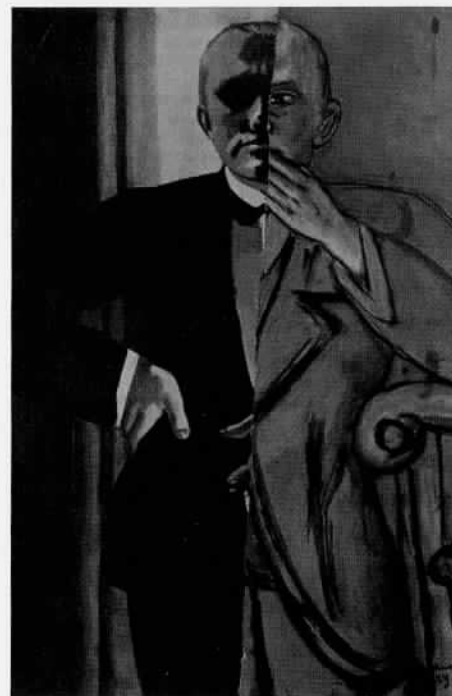
Reverse valentine, 1971
Richard C.,
Winston Salem,
North Carolina

anon—a new dependence on state supported funding. Partly this was due to the new availability of such funding through not just the Canada Council, but the Trudeau government programs of “repressive tolerance”: Opportunities for Youth, (OFY) and Local Initiatives Program, (LIP). The exchange that this engendered can now be seen to also have had a role in a language of obfuscation, assumed identities, corporate models and an alternate, but also pernicious elitism, where networking and network knowledge meant mobility, visibility and support. The river of irony and camp that runs through the avant-garde manifestations of the period was partly an attempt to poison this seemingly easy exchange between bureaucracy and art and to thwart the inevitable structural similarities between the “system” and its artistic antagonists.

But the bureaucratic model remains among the chief problematics of the period. The banks,

companies and corporations that artists formed in order to mainstream and legitimize their activity speak of a presumption that turned out to be false—that the world would not resist transformation by aesthetics given the opportunity. Image Bank and other groups defined themselves on their grant applications, not just to the art bureaucracy, but to the make-work bureaucrats of the Trudeau regime. Apparently their language was, to some small extent, understood. The bureaucratic models: the files, indexes, banks and corporations formed by the avant-garde were an egalitarian alternative offered to a society mired in administrative prerogatives. Critics of the network’s seeming fascination with anything bureaucratic should remember that the network had little use for order and that their banks were anti-instrumental, mirrors of structures subject to contamination.

The river of irony and camp that coursed



Split project, 1972
General Idea,
Toronto

through Image Bank also reflected the way in which sexuality and desire circulated in code among artists of the avant-garde network. It was a hedonist time—as far as such things go in Canada, marked by the appropriation of gay cultural idioms and tropes into high art. Following the Christopher Street riots in New York in 1969, the gay liberation movement, never dead but long dormant since the 1920s, resurfaced and entered the arena of public consciousness. But what was “out” in the network wasn’t necessarily out for its public.

The Trudeau government’s decriminalization of homosexuality in 1968 and the dandified, ambiguous figure of the bachelor prime minister himself allowed a seeming new liberty of personal styles based on sexual preferences. So did the new social phenomena of drugs, sexual freedom and the demands for the emancipation of women, civil rights for minorities,

etc. “Family values” took second place to a new knowing sophistication as legions of mostly straight male artists and cultural bureaucrats received their first same-sex blow-jobs. This doesn’t mean that homophobia had been vanquished. The art world and its sustaining institutional support still settled for old hierarchies. Straight white men ruled the roost. Gays, as they still can, played the patriarchal game until asked to walk the plank. Women figured at the margin of this picture and people of colour not at all. The social scenes around General Idea, Image Bank and the early Western Front are storied with accounts of sexual initiation. The burnish of legend has grown around these years as years of not just freedom, but of a staging of a specifically gay sensibility. The irony and innuendo that characterize much of the artistic production of these groups has a source in gay culture—a

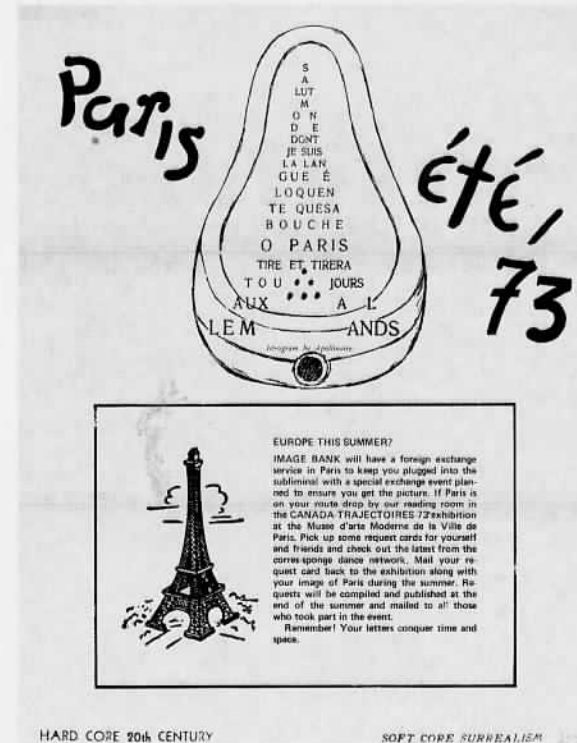


1984
correspondence
event,
1972
Michael Morris,
Vancouver

culture in which persecution and intolerance has nurtured a penchant for codes and camouflages.

One of the borders to be researched in the dossier of borderline cases was the one between tolerance and vilification. For gay people, then as now, this social border is one of the most important facts of social life. Identity, which other people seem to have as natural right, is under constant negotiation depending on context and circumstance. There was a homophobic backlash in the Canadian art world towards Image Bank and General Idea. Like other forms of discrimination that operate as gentleman's agreements it would be difficult to offer the documentation and specifics. Morris refers to his crowning as Miss General Idea as "career suicide." He'd always been out, but now he had flaunted it. After the first issue of *File Magazine* appeared in the spring of 1972, an article appeared in the Van-

couver radical weekly newspaper, *The Grape*. Unsigned, "File: the Great Canadian Art Tragedy," lashed out at "the mindless masquerade" of General Idea and Image Bank. Seeing them as heirs to "the eclectic hysteria of experiments like Intermedia," the anonymous author accused the new Canadian network artists of "decadence," of "having no aesthetic" and of "advertising themselves as a zoo of exotic phenomena." The tenor of the article is vitriolic. The artists were charged with proposing a "parasitic" relationship to the dominant culture and its bureaucracies "instead of realizing solidarity with oppressed groups elsewhere in this society," of becoming victim to a "survival-until-or-for-the-next grant mentality." They were even accused of being inadequate as homosexuals: "Shitting on their own homosexuality they have done an inestimable disservice by re-opening what remains for many a serious and actual struggle within this society. They have



HARD CORE 20th CENTURY

SOFT CORE SURREALISM

paraded their homosexuality as though that in itself gave the magazine some bizarre status within the enigma of the alternate society. Instead the problems of homosexuality as an actual way of life recede into the pageantry of camp parody."¹¹

Robert Amussen and Myra Peanut, both members of the Image Bank circle, responded with spirited denunciations of whoever it was who wrote the article (who must have been in the art world). Amussen called the article "reactionary, badly written, ill-conceived, venal, counter-revolutionary, obscene."¹²

The article had been a strong condemnation from a leftist perspective and is evidence of a deep split in the community of avant-garde artists working in Vancouver at the time who saw themselves as alternative or outside the system. The positioning of those who argued for an aesthetic of resistance was fractious and complicated. Image Bank and General Idea were too rude and

too queer for the establishment and too lacking in puritan rigour for a considerable number of the left artistic intelligentsia. For the former they posed a threat to the regime of normality in which the moneyed class who sit on gallery boards had invested so much; for the latter they offered an insufficient account of their suffering. In retrospect, armed with present day critical analyses of how difference and otherness are constructed, one can see that the attacks from the left and from the establishment were saturated with that revulsion we call homophobia. By the time the first *File* appeared, in April, 1972, the Vancouver artists had already been buffeted by the artistic left. In March, Image Bank and others had travelled to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design for their part of the Halifax-Vancouver exchange. NSCAD at the time had become an epicentre of conceptualism and critical thinking based on the dialectic of Marx. There the Van-

Canada –
Trajectories – 73
Image Bank
correspondence
event,
Paris 1973



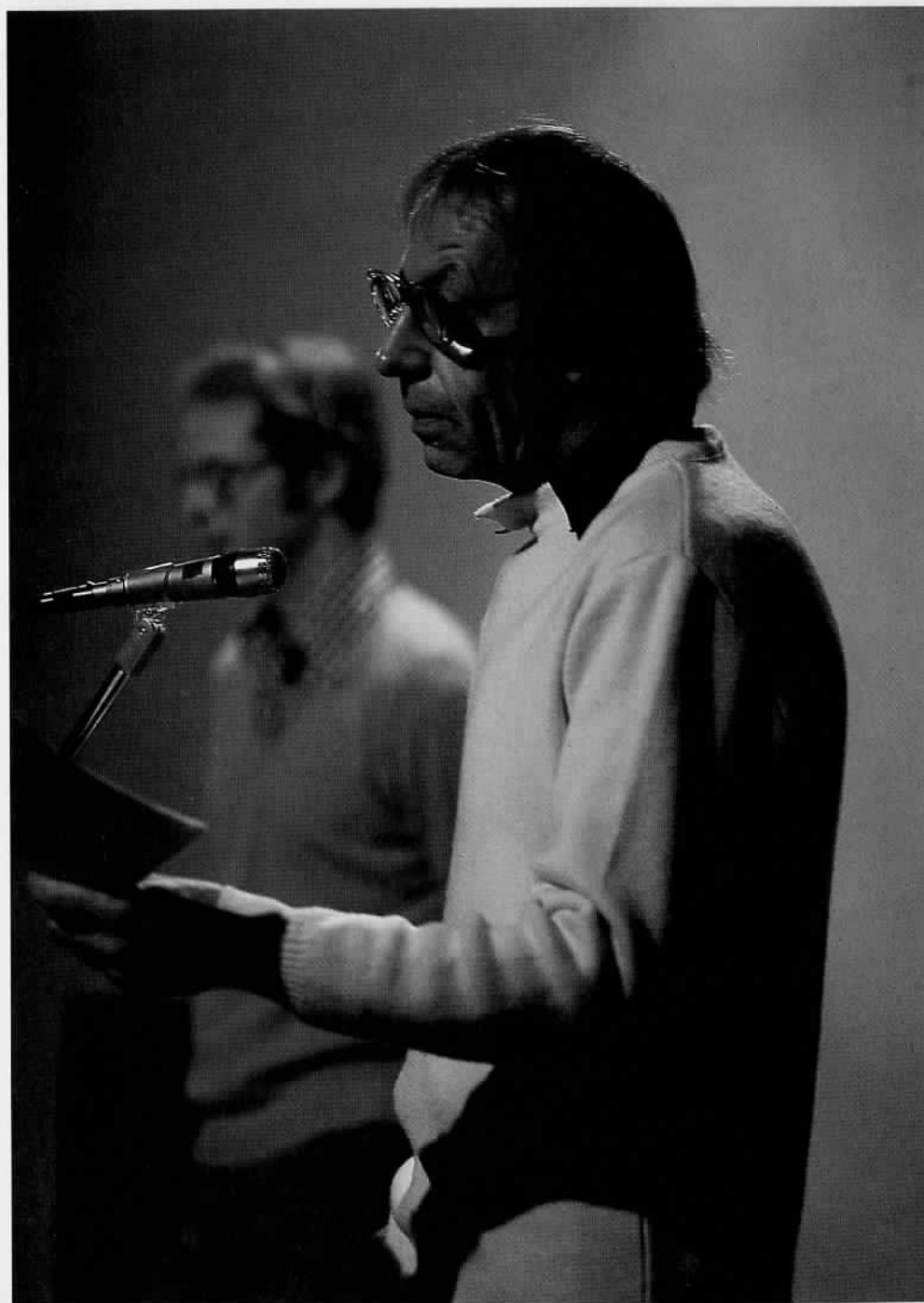
Michael Morris,
Miss General Idea,
Vancouver 1971
Photos:
Vincent Trasov

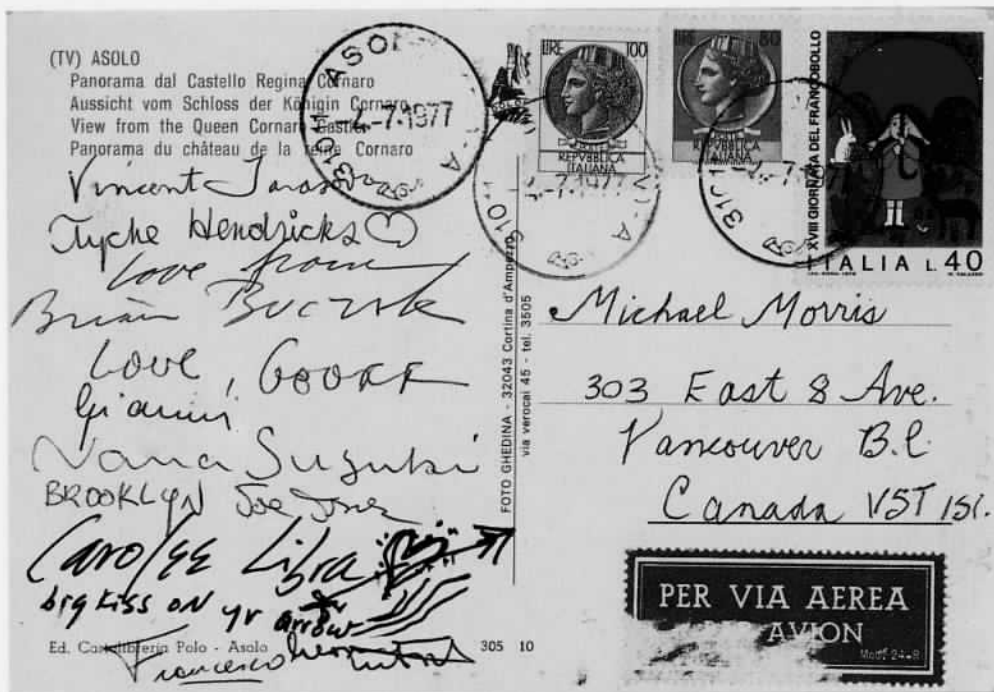
Robert Filliou,
Western Front,
Vancouver 1978
Photo:
Byron Black

couver artists had been challenged and attacked. Without critical theory they had nothing to stand on but their aestheticism and in some cases their Buddhism. The message from those who would later come to master the art world was clear, the world was for serious, adult straight men only.

The sexual references and jokes exchanged throughout the network took place in this social field of contained and measured tolerance; a field mined with explosive nodes of homophobia. Aimed at consumer culture, where the image industry larded sexual innuendo over its ideological *mise-en-scène* of family values, the new network mailings and archives set out to revise, revive and renegotiate post-war individualism and identity. The stance and persona of the artist in the years following the war had honoured the straight man, his go-it-alone, against the grain struggle with his creativity, the ever blank canvas, the booze and the broads. He had been hero

and a master. He poeticized alienation, making it the very badge of his freedom. He swaggered and he painted. Warholism helped put an end to all this. So did the recovery of Marcel Duchamp's influence and example. Identity became social, something one wore, something one collages. Suddenly the inner depths weren't so deep after all and appearance and surface, with all their variety and differentiation, seemed to be a typography for new kinds of being and behaving in a society that needed new types and new consumers. Exiled from the moneyed class, yet uncomfortable with the labouring class, artists worked through petit-bourgeois aspirations and subjectivity. The craving for romance, empowerment, the insecurity and instability of manners and mores, the thrall with things that shine, dress-up parties, nostalgia and banqueting, all delivered paradigms to new artistic practices that had critical potential, expressed utopian yearnings and





Autographs
from Asolo,
Italy 1977

Vincent Trasov
and Cavellini,
Brescia, Italy 1977
Photo: Ken Damy

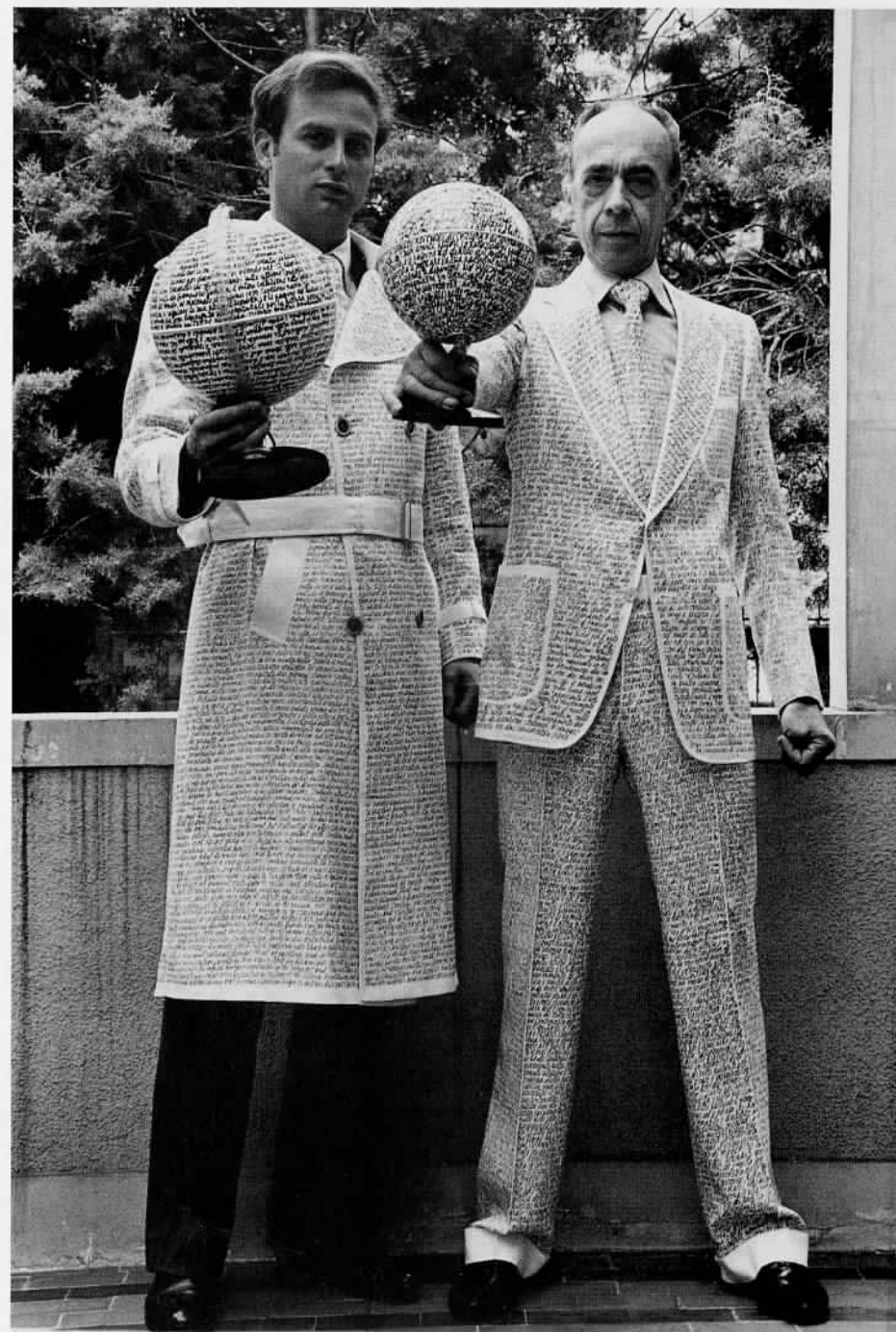
promised to deliver life to art once and for all. However, in the 1970s art still provided itself with the rationale of self-sufficiency. Despite the disregard into which traditional practices had fallen and regardless of the emphasis placed on lifestyle, the notion of Art as an autonomous and privileged precinct was still legitimate coin. This contradiction was perhaps inevitable as the new manifestations turned to the institutions of art for support and often received it. For a time.

By the mid-seventies the moneyed class regained control of the Vancouver Art Gallery, turfing out performance and special events, looking again toward high art and the "visual arts." The regrouping of the institutions around high-art ideals ended their flirtation with the network and its project to revolutionize the world through the aestheticization of life. That had been too messy. One too many stoned or drunk scenes in the mansionette, one too many blow-jobs on the

fur coat on the bed. For the young it was a delicious initiation into adulthood from those who didn't believe a word of it. For the moneyed class it had been an indulgent nuisance and they went back to purchasing canvas and steel. For the archive it was the evidence upon which the future might be rescued from its past. For the past it might have been the vehicle of survival.

Image Bank never officially closed its doors. The end came in 1977 after the publication of the "Image Bank Postcard Show." This was a box of postcards that could be conceived of as an exhibition destined for the mail. Just as *Life* magazine sued *File Magazine* to desist appropriation of its logo, a New York company called Image Bank threatened suit against Image Bank, stalling distribution of the postcards through bookstores and gallery shops.¹³

The Morris/Trasov Archive contains powerful latencies. There are hundreds of unrealized,



PARTIE DU TOUT A BEN

CERTIFIÉ ŒUVRE D'ART, LE

Poster
Ben Vautier, Nice

but realizable projects in its files, thousands of images that could be potentially recycled as high or low art. The exhibition at U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery and the publication of the portfolio, 1992, are the first commotions of the archive as it enters the 1990s and approaches the end of the second millennium.

¹ "Art and Correspondence from the Western Front." The text also appears in "Pablum for the Pablum-Eaters," *File Magazine* (May 1973). The citation appears in numerous mailouts and is, in fact, a misquote. *The Savage Mind* was published in English translation in 1966 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson); p. 16 reads: "The decision that everything must be taken account of facilitates the creation of a 'memory bank'."

² Michael Morris, chronology notes, 1992, unpublished.

³ Legal Tender, "Image Bank Annual Report," 1992. The report was written for an L.I.P. grant.

⁴ Vancouver Art Gallery, *Vancouver: Art and Artists*

1931-1983, 1983, p. 263.

⁵ "Art and Artists," p. 165.

⁶ Smithson's article was published in *Artforum*, Sept., 1968.

⁷ *Prisma* bore more than a passing resemblance to Lucas Sumaras' *Mirrored Room*, 1966.

⁸ *File Magazine*, May 1973.

⁹ Michael Morris, "The Artist as Curator of the Imagination," *artscanda*, Apr./May, 1978, p. 73.

¹⁰ *artscanada*, Spring, 1977.

¹¹ *The Grape*, May 24-30, 1972. It is certain that the "anonymous" author was Dennis Wheeler.

¹² *The Grape*, May 31-June 5, 1972.

¹³ There were two Image Bank Post Card Shows. The first was published by Coach House Press in 1971. The second in New York in 1977. The first edition was published on the occasion of an exhibition on collected postcards, The Image Bank Post Card Show. This was organized by the UBC Fine Arts Gallery and toured under the aegis of the National Gallery of Canada. The postcard editions argued for the form as a legitimate genre, with editions taking the role of exhibitions.



Keith Wallace

On the Set at Babyland

Image Bank was conceived in 1970 by three artists—Gary Lee-Nova, Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov—as a means of devising an art context for perceiving the world. Although Image Bank continued until 1978, the most intense years spanned 1970 to 1974, a time that paralleled the height of the correspondence art network, an elaborate exchange of images and ideas in which Morris and Trasov played an influential role.¹ Image Bank's activities centred on debunking the systems in control of formulating and disseminating visual information, especially as it pertained to popular and corporate culture.

According to Image Bank, culture is an accumulation of myths, and Image Bank's conceptual mechanics demand a shift in our perception of the images and terminology that we are greeted

with daily, allowing the imagination to enter a re-mythified world. Image Bank harnessed the fetishization of the visual icon within popular and corporate culture by aestheticizing and mirroring it back in often ironic and humorous ways. Yet they were serious in understanding that even the most banal image had incredible subliminal power and that strategies of appropriation and redesignation could provide a frame of reference through which to expose the relativity of the world.

The roots of appropriation and redesignation in Western art reach back more than seventy-five years when Marcel Duchamp took common objects—a urinal, a snow shovel, a bottlerack—and redesignated them art objects simply by considering them in the context of art. In the 1960s, Duchampian tactics found new potency as a critical reaction to high-art canons and as a desire to engage with the real world. During this dec-

Marcelle Filliou
and Michael Morris
at La Différence,
Nice 1978
Photo: Silke Paull,
Hervé Würz
Archive

SHOOTING FINAL
February 2, 1974

MONDO ARTIE

EPISODE No. 1681

ART'S BIRTHDAY
THE HOLLYWOOD DECCADANCE

AIR DATE
APRIL 21, 1974

WESTERN FRONT FILM AND VIDEO

Mondo Artie
Episode
No. 1681, 1974
Glenn Lewis,
Vancouver

Felix Partz,
Sandy Stagg,
Decca Dance,
Hollywood 1974
Photo: Jorge Saia

ade, art was in the midst of reaching its formalist apogee in the transcendent and material forms exemplified by Colour Field painting and Minimalist sculpture. Pop Art, Nouveau Realisme, Fluxus, the Situationists and Conceptual Art represented various approaches to placing popular culture and real life at the centre of artistic practice. While Image Bank does not fall neatly within any of these "isms" they were well aware of them and used appropriation as a tool to liberate images from their ideological bondage. This attitude was a precursor to appropriation in the 1980s which presented existing images as a means to question authorship, authenticity and truth.² Appropriation and redesignation were not exclusive to the world of images. Buzzwords, puns and slogans populated Image Bank's (and others within the correspondence art network) naming, writing and conversing. They circulated images rubber-stamped with declarations such

as O.D., HARD CORE 20TH CENTURY, APPROVED, EXTRA FANCY and SOFT CORE SURREALISM as a way of instigating a new reading of familiar information through an alternate system of classification. Image Bank believed that once mass media images, or images from any source, have circulated through the public realm, they no longer have conceptual ownership and are open to the workings of the imagination. And when detached from their original frame of reference—the caption, the article, the publication—images are even more susceptible to various levels of interpretation.

Changing the frame of reference, the means through which we perceive, changes the truth factor. In the 1972 Image Bank Annual Report it is written that, "There can be no copyright on that which defines the imagination: recycling of media information in new contexts helps break down the control programmed into the origi-





Untitled, 1977
Allen Jones,
London
(Image Bank
Post Card Show)

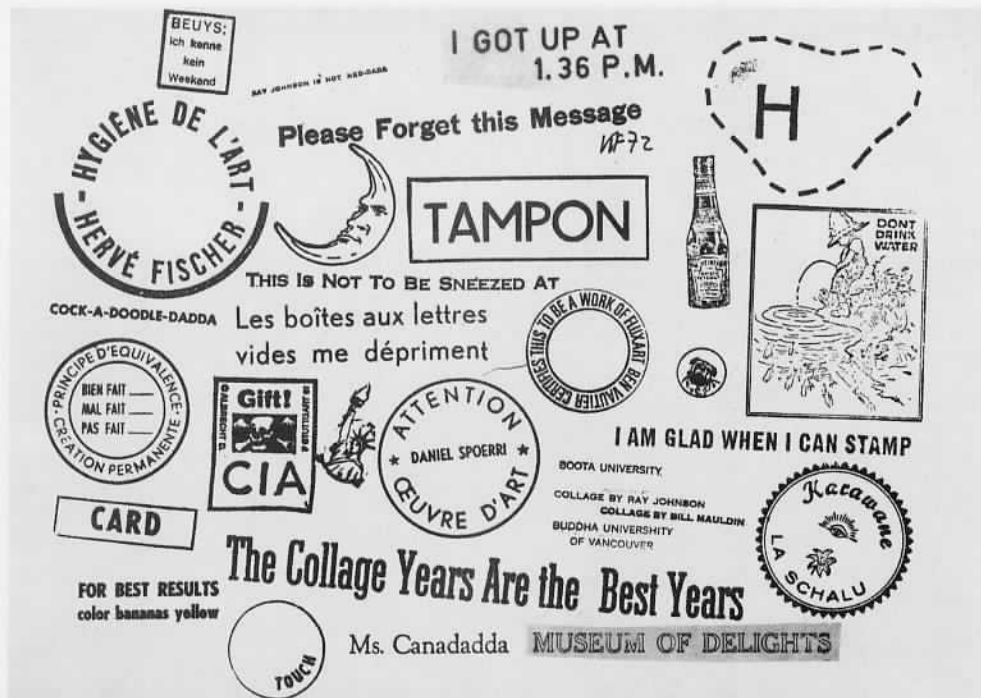
Star, 1977
Robert
Mapplethorpe,
New York
(Image Bank
Post Card Show)

nal information, enabling it to become legal tender." This statement suggested that it is through imagination and interpretation, through contrasting perspectives and freedom of the mind, that ideological norms can be questioned. According to Image Bank ethos, it was the role of the artist to take responsibility and determine the cultural ecology.

To help achieve this, Image Bank struck alliances with a number of individuals and artist collectives, both locally and internationally, within the correspondence art network. They played a pivotal role in facilitating connections among artists, first through monthly mailings that led to the *Image Bank International Exchange Directory* published by Talonbooks in 1972, then through the *Image Bank Image Request List* published in almost every *File Magazine* from 1972 until 1975. The *Image Request List* both spawned and responded to the rapidly expanding network; it cre-

ated what became referred to in the pages of *File* as "image virus," with the postal system being the veins that transmitted the images. Names, addresses and the desired images were compiled for each Request List. Some requests were earnestly serious, some fed fetish files, while others were purely conceptual with the request itself constituting the work of art. The Request List functioned as a large decentralized image bank, a filing system, where artists had access to all the images in the bank through the index of addresses and requests. The barriers of geographical isolation fell to the victory of the postage stamp. And though the network was international in scope, an intimacy was possible in that one could find friends with similar interests or sensibilities. Through the Request List, scores of connections were made among artists who may or may not have been in direct contact with Morris and Trasov, but rather, became participants





Tampons d'artistes,
1974
Hervé Fischer,
Edition Ecart,
Genève

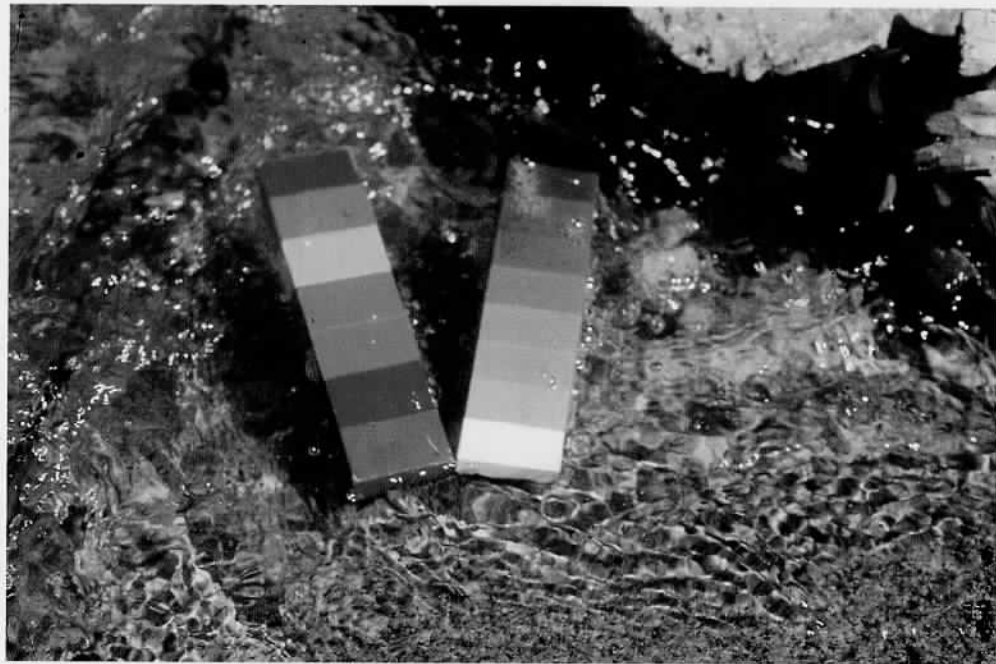
Mailing, 1976
Klaus Groh,
Berlin, German
Democratic
Republic

within what Fluxus artist Robert Filliou referred to as the Eternal Network, an endless self-generating communication system that claimed no geographical centre and that existed outside of institutions.

It was through a publication such as *File*, generated by General Idea and published in Toronto, that Image Bank and the correspondence network could make itself tangible.³ *File* functioned as a voice through which artists could construct their roles and publicize their "images." A. A. Bronson, one of the General Idea collective, has, in retrospect, described *File* as "a response to the networking then actively pumping images, manuscripts, ephemera through our mail slots and collecting in our archives. Now we needed a way to recycle this material back through the system it reflected, to allow a self-image, or the possibility of self-image."⁴ Fame and glamour were themes that surfaced in the first issues of

File, a star system was put in place that listed the top ten artists, gossip columns reported the latest network news, letters to the editor were instituted and feature spreads focused on select artists.

As part of the emergent correspondence network, the artists of Image Bank assumed pseudonyms—Marcel Idea and Mr. Peanut were the two that Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov sustained the longest; Lee-Nova acquired the anagrammatic name of Art Rat. The pseudonyms not only began a mythology of personalities and role playing, but also accommodated an exploration of the world through an alter ego, a frame of reference to the side of the specific individual. It meant serving as an art object within the spirit of another persona. This strategy had its roots in Dada, and is again most commonly associated with Duchamp who used a pseudonym and alter ego when he dressed in female at-



On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972-74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

tire and photographed himself as the mythological personality *Rose Sélavy*. In the network, alter egos were identified by pseudonyms, costumes, fetishes, image requests, rubber stamps or terminology.

Within the mythology that Image Bank created for itself, the role of Babyland, a sixteen-acre piece of property located on the Sunshine Coast, a two-hour car and ferry ride north of Vancouver, has received little attention outside of its appearance as a backdrop for a number of Image Bank projects. But Babyland played an important role in the early 1970s. While *File* offered a two-dimensional forum for photo spreads and network promotion, Babyland was a fully dimensional set that allowed Image Bank to explore its role playing in the flesh.

From 1967 to 1972, Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov had been headquartered in a large rented house on the west side of Van-

couver. Although the Image Bank name wasn't widely used until 1970, it was in this house that the archives were already taking form through the many connections developed within the correspondence network. But the house was sold and an eviction notice called for a change of set. Through Glenn Lewis (a.k.a. Flakey Rose Hip), a fellow network collaborator and founder of the New York Correspondence School of Vancouver, the opportunity arose to buy shares in Babyland. The property featured a year-round creek, enormous sword ferns, lush treed areas, clearings and masses of blackberries which were picked by the bucketful and made into pies, jam and wine. The property was owned by Mick Henry and John Grieg who intended to set up pottery studios and a kiln.⁵ The name Babyland was coined in 1969 during an oyster and mushroom feast that was attended by, among others,



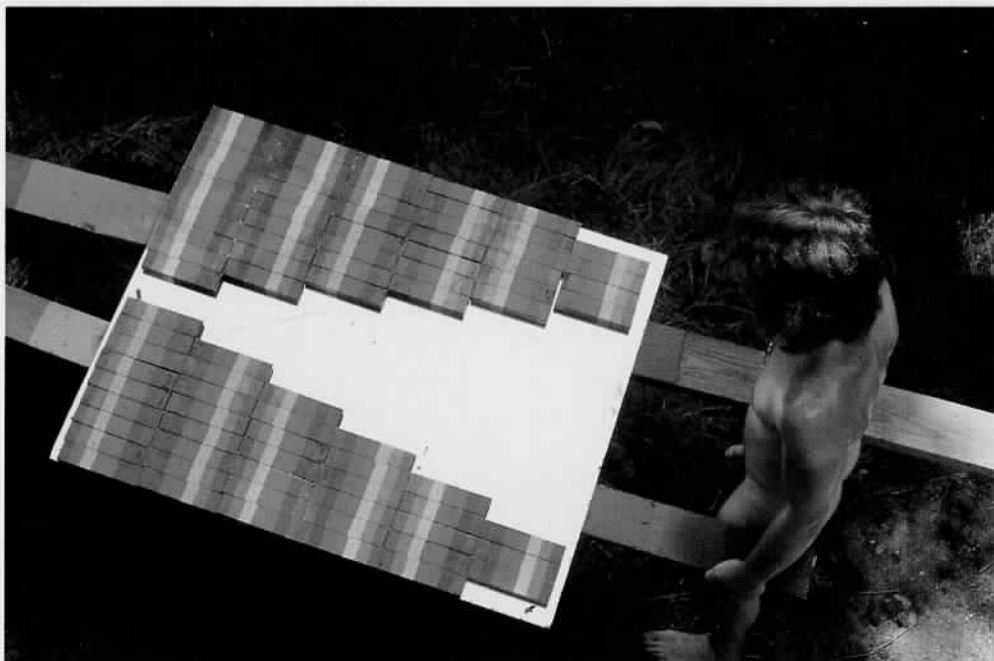
On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972-74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

seven expectant mothers. The name stuck. However, Grieg decided to sell his share and Henry needed new partners.

The prospect of buying property outside of the city was an unplanned and somewhat daunting consideration for Image Bank. They were urban in their lifestyle and Babyland offered no central heating, electricity or indoor plumbing. Bathing took place outside, with gravity fed creek water heated by a fire under the tub. The tub was centrally located with a view on the extensive food garden and, at night, the stars. Mick Henry's home was designed by an architect friend, Mo van Nostrand, but the other buildings were typical of the provisional "handbuilt" houses that marked the counterculture's move from the city to the country in the late 1960s. Image Bank inherited a modest multilevelled shed-style cabin. Another shareholder recruited shortly thereafter, artist Carole Itter, would take over an even smaller

structure nicknamed "the shack". Lewis, acquainted with the forested West Coast landscape, already owned property further up the Sunshine Coast and persuaded Morris to take up the offer. Morris sold his set of Warhol *Marilyn* prints (except one he saved for his mother) and Image Bank descended upon Babyland.

Even though Image Bank disliked the bland urban environment as it was developing in Vancouver, they did not see themselves as part of the neo-pioneer movement of Hippies who left the city in quest of a more pure lifestyle. Their relocation to the Sunshine Coast was indeed an escape from the city, but it was also an opportunity to establish a set. The Hollywood concept of building sets to create new realities was lurking behind Image Bank's perception of its new circumstance. The idea of a set was central to the conscious construction of mythologies that Image Bank had been building. When people were in



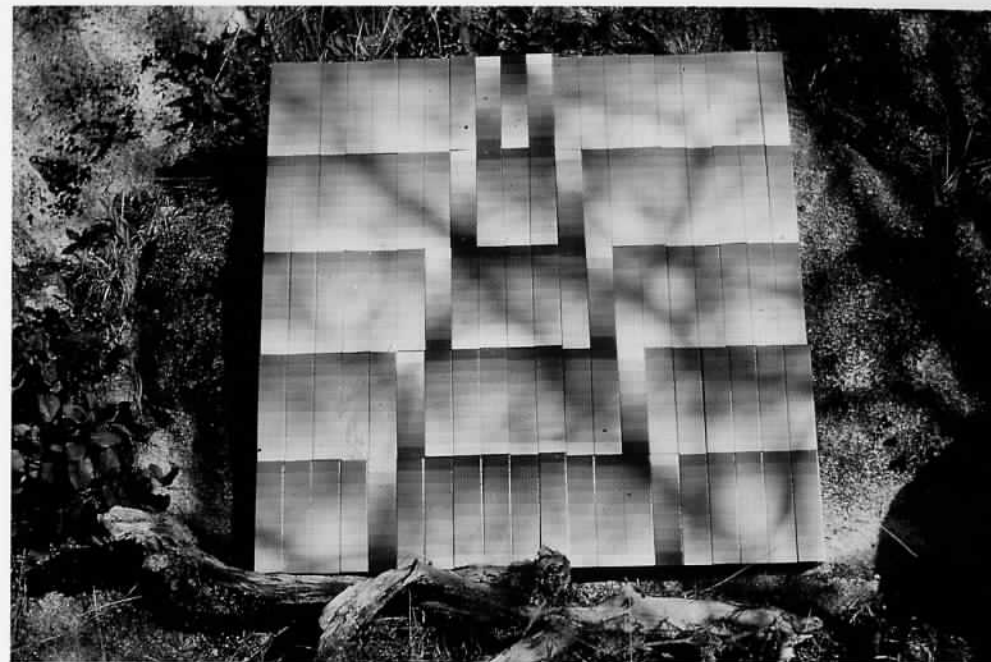
On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972–74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

their alter egos, they were considered to be “on the set”. Babyland was a place to act out fantasies, to set up the props and pursue a culture/nature debate.

As a set, Babyland was an imagined Arcadia. Its aesthetic/intellectual precedents could be found in Monte Verità, an early 20th century artist colony in the Swiss Alps; in Black Mountain College, which fostered an environment of workshops and discussion from the 1930s to the 1950s in rural North Carolina; and in Charleston, the pastoral estate for London’s Bloomsbury coterie during the 1920s and 1930s where arts and crafts shared the stage with sexual libertarianism. Babyland’s popular culture/nature precedents were the nudist camp and summer camp, with their choreographed activities, campfire discussions and glorification of physical culture. Artists, writers and craftspersons gathered and shared ideas and iconography at Babyland.

A summer of painting colour bars was one project for resident and visiting artists. Mick Henry incorporated thunderbolt designs (a common Image Bank icon) on an edition of plates fired in his new wood-burning kiln; weaver Joan Marshall used the same design on one of her handwoven blankets. Mr. Peanut produced peanut tiles. And as in the early 20th century paintings of *Die Brücke* artists Erich Heckel, Otto Mueller and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, clothes were shed on the set of paradise in a search for innocence and in protest against prudish middle class values. Nature was, in a sense, being re-discovered, and the name Babyland reinforced this spirit.

At Babyland, Image Bank kept in touch with the correspondence network through the mail that flowed to their address of General Delivery, Roberts Creek, B.C., Canada. Numerous participants in the network came to visit and Babyland became a destination where artists ar-



On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972–74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

rived to experience West Coast nature as formulated by Image Bank. Props, role playing, eating, drinking, smoking marijuana and dropping acid, sex, reading the mail, telling stories and painting and photographing colour bars set the tenor of the visits. Among those who arrived in the first year were the Toronto contingent of Victor Coleman and Stan Bevington from Coach House Press, Marien Lewis of A Space, and General Idea; Lowell Darling (Dudley Finds) of the Fat City School of Finds Arts and Robert Cumming from Los Angeles; Tom Dean from Montreal; Ant Farm from Texas and California; Robert Filliou from France; Robert Fones from London, Ontario; Kate Craig and Eric Metcalfe (Dr. and Lady Brute) and Glenn Lewis from Vancouver; Willoughby Sharp from New York’s *Avalanche* Magazine; and John Jack Baylin (Count Fanzini) from Garden Bay, B.C.

John Jack Baylin lived an hour’s drive north

of Roberts Creek and became a regular visitor to Babyland. He shared much of Image Bank’s attitude towards the non-urban environment and had accumulated an archive of images of the plastic covered structures beginning to populate the West Coast with the counterculture’s move to the country and called it his Plastic Country Museum. He also developed Bum Bank and held his own network meetings of the John Dowd Fanny Club; his meticulously recorded minutes were interpretations of the gatherings and visits and illustrate just how complicated the terminology and role playing with alter egos had become.⁶ One person, knowingly or not, was delegated to play the role of John Dowd, a network personality living in Brooklyn, New York who was fetishized by Bum Bank and who eventually made a visit to Vancouver (The Grand Tore). Baylin’s texts were filled with double-entendres and needed decoding. It was through



On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972-74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

Bum Bank that the whole gay component within the network became most visible.⁷

The props—the Hand of the Spirit, the colour bars, General Idea's full scale figure photo cut-outs, mirrors and costumes—were important accompaniments to the role playing. The Hand of the Spirit was derived from a window display accessory which had the forefinger and thumb forming an "O" with the rest of the fingers expressively splayed out, much like the hand gesture for O.K. Several versions of the Hand of the Spirit were made; one set was cut out in clear plexiglass and attached to a long handle that transformed it into a kind of wand that infused the spirit of the network upon all that it touched. It was one prop of several shared by both Image Bank and General Idea; ownership was not a major concern at the time. From their initial meeting in 1971, an instant rapport developed between these two collectives. Each had similar

concerns and sensibilities in how they viewed the world and how images and information circulate in culture. Both had amassed collections of images and delegated them to various areas of research. Both were interested in alter egos and role playing, in mirrors and reflections, in the spectrum, and, especially, in the idea of a frame of reference.

The colour bar was another central prop that functioned as a frame of reference. The two sets of colour bars were the most ambitious and long term projects that grew out of what Image Bank referred to as Colour Research. Colour Research was a field of inquiry that initially generated collaborative projects between Gary Lee-Nova and Michael Morris. During the mid-1960s, both noticed a similar exploration of colour relationships in each other's painting. Both were nationally recognized for paintings that were seemingly aligned with the formalist formats of colour re-



On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972-74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

lationships and geometry that characterized hard-edge painting. Yet both Morris and Lee-Nova questioned the sanctity of formalist painting. While Lee-Nova undermined abstraction by introducing hard-edge landscape shapes within the geometric space of shaped canvases, Morris snubbed the rhetoric of the flat surface and the purity of the taped edge with exaggerated illusionistic planes complemented with hand-painted bands of luscious colour. In 1967 Lee-Nova, Morris and Dallas Selman each made paintings with the word "Menthol" in the title and explored the idea of menthol through a study of greens. But it would be the colours of the spectrum (and the grey scale) that occupied the attention of Lee-Nova and Morris.

By 1970, Lee-Nova, Morris and Trasov were working as Image Bank and a collaborative project from that year solidified the idea of Colour Research. The National Film Board made

available to artists film and Super 8 camera equipment through training workshops. Lee-Nova already had considerable experience with film, and Image Bank painted wooden planks and variously scaled plywood circles with the colours of the spectrum. They were placed in gardens, parks and on the beach, then documented with film and slides. The planks and circles, or colour bars and dots as they came to be known, functioned as gauges for experiments in depth of field. When projected, a slide of a seven foot colour bar placed in a field would be followed by a slide of a seven inch colour bar placed amongst plants. The viewer would have to alter their sense of scale, and thus reality. The dots which were referred to as the "Dot Depth of Field Project," functioned similarly, and were photographed as graduating circles that gently interrupted how one looked at the landscape. Like the colour bars used to gauge "real" colour in colour transparencies,



On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972–74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

the spectrum in Image Bank's project was literally placed in the real world as a frame of reference, as "nature seen through the eye of culture, culture through the eye of nature".⁸ In the months prior to the move to Babyland, Image Bank, under the sponsorship of Intermedia, a multidisciplinary artist's collective in Vancouver, received a Federal Government Local Initiatives Projects grant to produce an edition of colour bars.⁹ Work began on sanding and applying the ground to the 7" x 1 3/4" x 3/4" blocks of yellow cedar at the New Era Social Club, headquarters for the New York Corres-Sponge Dance School of Vancouver. But it was Babyland that changed the focus of how the colour bars would be used. The nature/culture relationship first explored in Image Bank's "Dot Depth of Field" project of 1970 was intensified by the possibilities that the landscape in and around Babyland presented. By the end of the summer of 1972, some-

where around one thousand colour bars were handpainted with enamels in an outdoor studio.

The bars were painted in variations of colours mixed by Morris. One set had close to five hundred bars, each painted with the seven colours of the spectrum. By gradually adding white to the enamel pigments, the intensity of the colours would gradate in a systematic manner as they worked through the set. Another set had each bar painted with one colour of the spectrum with the gradation of colour occurring in nine stages on each bar. Yet another smaller set was painted in the grey scale.¹⁰ The colour bars painted at Babyland were arranged in a multitude of configurations—ziggurats, chevrons, and zigzag thunderbolts—that resulted in striking colour relationships. The colour gradations created a blurring effect where one colour would blend into another. These configurations were placed in fields, under trees where the light and shadow



On the set at Babyland, summer of 1972–74
Photos: Morris/Trasov Archive

changed, scattered in streams or left to drift in a lake, then documented with film and colour slides. The colour bars seemed to accommodate endless permutations, and although this project was presented in a photographic form, Morris also saw the dots and bars in the landscape as proposing a new form of landscape painting by "expanding the notion of painting by not painting".¹¹

One of the more emblematic colour bar events took place at Lake Yogo (a pseudonym for Mixal Lake in Pender Harbour, B.C.), in the territory of Bum Bank. This event was a collaboration between Image Bank, Bum Bank and the New York Corres-Sponge Dance School of Vancouver, with a cast of independents such as A.C. McWhortle, Taki Bluesinger, Robert Fones in the role of John Dowd, and a bevy of local non-practicing artists (a term of General Idea's). A shallow lake as warm as bath water in the August sun was an

ideal location for the Arcadian quest of nature, Colour Research and role playing. The late summer afternoon was spent eating and drinking. The colour bars were dispersed in the lake and synchronized swimming was directed by the Corres-Sponge Dance School. All was photographed, videotaped and compiled as documentation for the Colour Research project.

Image Bank had no intention of living in the country on a permanent basis, and in late 1972, another opportunity to buy property arose in the form of an old labyrinthine Knights of Pythias Hall that came up for sale in Vancouver. Eight artists, musicians, writers and an architect—Martin Bartlett, Káte Craig, Henry Greenhow, Glenn Lewis, Eric Metcalfe, Mo Van Nostrand, and Morris and Trasov—pooled their resources, bought the building and renamed it the Western Front Lodge. It contained ample living and working spaces as well as two large halls, one of



William Burroughs,
Vancouver 1974
Photo:
Michael Morris

which has continued to be a staple in Vancouver's performance, literary and music scene. The Western Front went on to become one of the most active and stable artist-run centres in Canada.

Image Bank moved back to Vancouver and Babyland became the summer set. The "Summer of '72, '73 and '74" were highlights in the role of Babyland. These years saw more visits, social gatherings and photo shoots. Mr. Peanut and Granada Gazelle posed for a photo narrative that turned into a love story between a human and a peanut. General Idea arrived with a set of the wand-like Hands of the Spirit that played their magic with colour bars and bodies in the landscape. And more Colour Research was carried out.

By 1978, Image Bank as it was defined had played itself out. Many artists within the correspondence network had hit the saturation point.

Robert Cumming had announced his farewell to the network pointing out that he could "no longer answer a bad piece of mail ... I used to answer everything I got, but now I find myself ignoring 3/4 of it out of principle and lack of energy. There's too much of it."¹² For others the role playing became too ingrained or confining. The Request List petered away by 1975.¹³ With the Western Front, priorities changed as attention turned to programming, administration and maintenance. The need to break the isolation of the West Coast had been achieved with contacts made through the correspondence network. Mr. Peanut retired his papier-maché shell and returned to being Vincent Trasov. Both Trasov and Morris continued to collaborate with performance and video, but each pursued their own practices as well. Morris returned to painting and Trasov developed a body of "fire paintings" and "word paintings". In 1981, the two artists moved



to Berlin as guests of the Berlin visiting artists' program, D.A.A.D., and have remained there ever since.

Image Bank threw nothing out and their files have become a vast archive that stands as an important and abundant chronicle of their activities, and those of the network, concrete poetry and Fluxus. With the dozens of binders filled with correspondence, the collection of rubber stamps, the boxes of colour bars, the books, magazines and catalogues, the postcards, prints, ephemera and, of course, the thousands of images, the archive is now intended to function as a resource pool for a spectrum of future exhibitions.

Babyland still remains. Its role is now that of a quiet residence and retreat, although it has served as a set for post-Image Bank projects such as the photographs produced by Morris for a 1980 exhibition at the Musée d'art contempo-

rain in Montreal. And the colour bars still remain, although they are somewhat battleworn from the many manipulations they endured. They resurfaced in Banff, Alberta in 1990 to be once again configured and photographed.¹⁴ There have been suggestions of a possible interactive computer program whereby an individual could create their own Colour Research on database. The colour bars have become the endless painting.

Image Bank's effort to devise an alternative way of looking at the world was utopian. Babyland offered a version of a utopian environment. However, as they never attempted to propose solutions to the complexity of twentieth century society, they never expected to attain a utopian state. As a project of social engagement, Image Bank was not about social change. What they did was create a re-reading of culture through specified frames of reference—the alter egos, the

Ant Farm
Media Burn,
San Francisco
1975
Photo: Diane Hall



Announcing VILE, 1976
 Anna Banana / Bill Gaglione, San Francisco

Hand of the Spirit and the colour bar. Utopianism existed in their programme of manipulating the systems that govern our lives—especially the corporate and state systems that attempt to regulate cultural perception, political ideology and sexual morality—and interpreting them to satisfy their own desires. The intent of Image Bank was to encourage and nurture freedom of the imagination and to provide a context that permitted an exploration of one's fantasies in relation to the existing social order.

¹ By 1972, Gary Lee-Nova had removed himself from his affiliations with Image Bank. As Morris and Trasov became more of a fixture within the correspondence art network, Lee-Nova's participation lessened and his interests became directed more to sculptural objects that dealt with systems of grids and structures that affect perception. In September 1972, he signaled his stepping out of the network by mailing an announcement for a Dead Letter

Funeral. The subsequent responses, some of which were reproduced in *IS*. 12/13 (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973), comprise his final network archive.

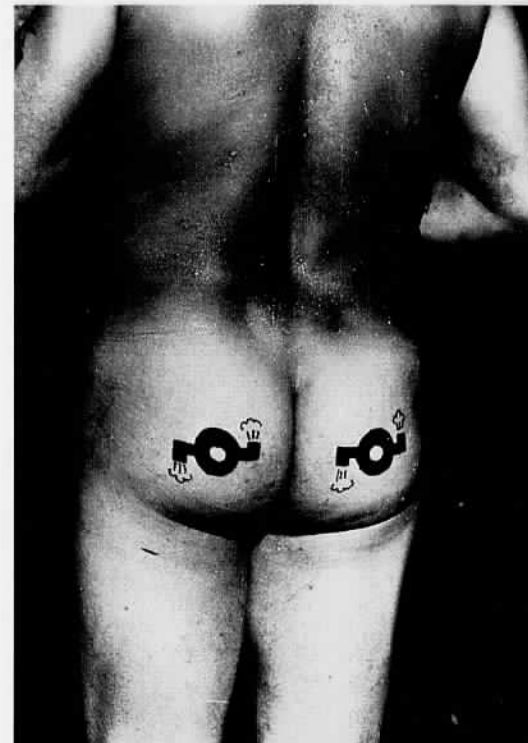
² In the 1990s, appropriation has taken on new connotations with cultural appropriation—the taking of images, stories and ideas from cultures that are not one's own—becoming a contested field that has instigated a re-thinking by the artistic community.

³ Fanzines or photocopy books were a common way of compiling and distributing work that circulated through the network. *File* was a more ambitious combination of the two.

⁴ A. A. Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-run Spaces as Museums by Artists," *The Power Plant*, From "Sea to Shining Sea," (Toronto, 1987) p. 168.

⁵ Mick Henry and Glenn Lewis had met each other in St. Ives, England while studying ceramics at the Bernard Leach studios.

⁶ The minutes from a number of these meetings are recorded in *IS*. 12/13, (Toronto: Coach House



Press, 1973).

⁷ John Jack Baylin published two substantial fanzines in 1973 and 1974. Gay content predominated and by 1990s standards would be considered risqué.

⁸ A. A. Bronson, "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," *File* (May 1973) p. 30.

⁹ This grant included a number of projects by different groups of artists who applied for funding under the umbrella of Intermedia.

¹⁰ Another set of approximately one thousand colour bars was painted during the following year in Vancouver.

¹¹ Interview with Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov, August 10, 1992.

¹² Robert Cumming, "The Letters of Robert Cumming", *File* (September 1973) p. 63.

¹³ The Spring 1976 edition of *File* announced that the Request List was finished and directed interested artists to *ART DIARY*, edited by Giancarlo Politi in Milan. Correspondence art is still very much alive, but the network has changed. The idea of mythologies and pseudonyms has shifted to more thematic formats. In Vancouver, Anna Banana and Ed Varney

(both early participants) continue to develop correspondence projects.

¹⁴ Morris and Trasov were part of a residency programme at the Banff Centre for the Arts in the autumn of 1990. Here, the Image Bank archives were brought together for the first time in a decade and went through the first stages of organization through an accessioning process.

Bum Bank Archive, Garden Bay B.C., 1970
 Photo: Taki Bluesinger

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