

SPRING 1994 Vol. XVII No. 3 \$4.50

FUSE

MAGAZINE

Global & local perspectives on how
you fit into the corporate
multimedia network.

Cyborgs in Denial

Technology and Identity **in the Net**
by David McIntosh

&

All in the Family

An Examination of **Community Access Cable**
in Canada by Dot Tuer



FUSE

contents

MAGAZINE

VOL. XVII NO. 3

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DESIGN

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FUSE is published five times a year (includes one
double issue) by Arton's Cultural Affairs Society
and Publishing inc., a non-profit artist's organiza-
tion. Our offices are located at 183 Bathurst
Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 2R7, tel:
(416) 367-0159, fax: (416) 360-0781. All news-
stand inquiries should be sent to this address.
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FUSE acknowledges financial assistance from the
Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the
Government of Ontario through the Ministry of
Culture and Communications and the many hours
of volunteer and partially paid labour which are
provided by everyone listed on our masthead.

Subscription rates: \$20 per year; Institutions \$32
per year (in Canada only). Outside Canada \$24
per year; Institutions \$47. Decisions regarding
who qualifies as an individual subscriber remain
the right of the publisher.

Printed in Canada on recycled, acid free paper,
with vegetable-based inks by The Rewco Printing
Group.

ISSN 0838-603X

FUSE is indexed in the Alternative Press Index
and is a member of the Canadian Magazine
Publisher's Association

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Cover Image Christopher Eamon & Kika Thorne
Photo (cover and above): David Rasmus

They Write Their Dreams on the Rock Forever

Rock Writings in the Stein River Valley of British Columbia
Annie Zetco York, Richard Daly, and Chris Arnett.
Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1993

Bowl of Bone/Tale of the Syuwe

Directed by Jan-Marie Martell and Annie Zetco York, 1992.
Turtle Productions in association with the National Film Board of Canada.
Distributed by Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West.

Breaking the code: drawing/site/territory

Whether or not one can develop authentic and viable Native/non-Native collaborations has emerged as a central question in Canadian art. *They Write Their Dreams on the Rock Forever* and *Bowl of Bone/Tale of the Syuwe* are both evidence of a new level of engagement with emerging issues. The book and the film represent problematic milestones in the formation of new stances or practices countering appropriation and providing fuller freedom for Native cultural expression.

The book and the film look at the interconnected threads of traditional healing, art, spirituality and sacred sites of the 'Nlaka'pamux of the Fraser Canyon region of interior British Columbia. Their focus is on the experience of one of the foremost traditional healers, Annie Zetco (Zex'tko) York (1904–1991), and the Stein Valley, probably the largest and richest area of rock drawings in Canada. This valley was considered by traditional elders as a "university" for local life, art and religious observance. It has also been the focus of as yet unresolved contests between land claims, conservation, logging and road building for over twenty years, and could eventually be a candidate for a World Heritage Site designa-

tion. The film *Bowl of Bone/Tale of the Syuwe* is based on a fifteen-year collaboration and an unfinished dialogue between Zex'tko and Jan-Marie Martell.

Both projects illustrate emerging contradictions in Native/non-Native collaborations that require renewed dialogues on positioning and appropriation. The major force in both of these collaborations, particularly from the standpoint of Zex'tko, was interest in the sharing of traditional knowledge and, thus, in the protection of respective 'Nlaka'pamux sites.

An additional motive for making *Bowl of Bone/Tale of the Syuwe* involves an exploration of traditional 'Nlaka'pamux healing and the friendships between York, her cousin Arthur Urquhart and filmmaker Martell. There is a complex and often overwhelming alternation between of a kind of personalized documentary of actual interactions between Annie and Arthur and accounts of traditional shamanism. Because Annie and Arthur both had parents with mixed 'Nlaka'pamux and European backgrounds, they were non-status Natives and were therefore exempt from being required to go to residential schools. Because they also chose to remain unmarried, they were chosen by



Annie Zetco York in *Bowl of Bone*, Jan-Marie Martell (dir.), 114 min., film, 1993. Reproduced by permission of the director.



Still from *Bowl of Bone*, Jan-Marie Martell (dir.), 114 min. film, 1993.
Reproduced by permission of the director.

traditional elders to be trained as keepers of traditional 'Nlaka'pamux culture. Martell states early on that,

I want to belong here and learn from Arthur and Annie but I feel disqualified so I'm here pretending to make a film.... Like a useless shadow, I've been dogging Annie in hopes of learning from her but she can't teach me. I'm not part of her family. I don't belong here.

Toward the end of the 114 minute film, Martell looks at photographs of Annie and Arthur's 'Nlaka'pamux and Métis relatives, noting "these people feel like my family. It hurts to look at them in this way because they are being seen as something that is dead." Between and around these points the narrative progresses from an introduction of Annie and Arthur and the Fraser Canyon to a narration of Martell's background, a description of traditional 'Nlaka'pamux medicinal plants, and then to dual crises: the death of Zex'tko's mentor and guardian, Aunt Josephine, and the logging of the traditional burial site of their ancestors. It then becomes clear that Annie had only become fully a traditional healer, a *syuwe*, after her protector was gone. But soon after, Annie dies of breast cancer, forcing the central (postcolonial) mythic rupture in the film. In so far as Martell is not 'Nlaka'pamux, and was busy making the film, she did not apprentice as a *syuwe*. This fact orders the appropriation dis-

course. Martell does not pretend to be able to take on the weighty responsibilities of her friend; a collaborative film is no substitute; and this highlights a deeper loss.

The filmmaker's strategy to overcome the pressures for appropriation is to put her "cultural baggage" up front. In defence of this approach, relationships between the collaborators are complex and must be carefully understood before the lessons that Zex'tko wishes to impart can be unveiled. The "active (Native) informant" has a better chance of taking control of her own position when the documentarian clarifies which parts of the film are more about his/her own experience. More problematic than Martell's personal baggage, is the inadequate recognition of the importance of particular sites even while Martell notes, "the landscape is a registry of dreams...every place has a story and a name." But the underlying internal constraint of the film is that the names are only partially remembered. This compounds both the personal and cultural losses.

With all of its self-conscious heaviness, it is fair to say that this document represents a significant development in the Canadian documentary tradition away from the relationship of (white) filmmaker/ethnographer and (Native) subject/source of cultural information/"cultural worker" toward something more directly controlled by the "informant" and more obviously the result of provisional decisions between the indi-

viduals involved. The film constructs a brooding labyrinth of memory, loss, disappointment and dreams that spans a number of eras and cultures, but which is more often about the filmmaker.

While the film footage of Zex'tko involves considerable information and powerful imagery, in *They Write Their Dreams on the Rock Forever*, Zex'tko's interpretations of the Stein pictographs and petroglyphs only begin to assert her own world-view and aesthetics, as well as provide linkages to issues of art, site and representation. Unfortunately, the effect of the recorders' active intervention and direction in these interviews is to de-emphasize questions of source and location, central to site-based art, in favour of reducing the drawings to "a form of non-alphabetic literacy" which "transcend those of works of art" (Daly, p. 223). But this view of "art" is perhaps less consistent with both contemporary and traditional Native art practice than with some nineteenth century Eurocentric frameworks.

The reduction to line, form, juxtaposition, space and sequence, to "pictorial literacy" precludes consideration of the lower Stein Valley as a cohesive and living configuration of sites of cultural expression, and can be argued to be an insidious form of colonialism, particularly as the area takes on an expanding role in renewed Native ceremony and reflection. In this case, the (Native) "informant" is still being used to support the (non-neutral) aesthetic interpretation of the (white) "recorder" in exchange for the somewhat Faustian bargain of limited support for land claims.

Daly has the last word in this well-produced book, asking, "How are we to break the code, and read *definitively* the writings on rocks...?" [reviewer's emphasis]. Break the code for whom and for whose purposes? The answers to these questions, which diverge for Native and non-Native individuals, groups and communities, have tremendous implications for strategies to better understand, appreciate and protect Native representations and sites—especially since most are still vulnerable to road building and vandalism, as is the integrity of the entire valley.

These are also questions for much of contemporary art, where relationships of site and performance are increasingly central. But rather than pursue such a revised "reading" of the drawings, it is more crucial to support ongoing Native-centred reinterpretations that are not filtered by outside experts and that reflect the reality of the multiplicity of (Native) perspectives, purposes and strategies. It is these emerging processes of contemporary 'Nlaka'pamux reappropriation and place-making that the book, unfortunately, negates.

The most problematic aspect of both the film and the book is the lack of non-Native focus on the site-based nature of 'Nlaka'pamux culture and knowledge. Zex'tko was constantly framing her experience from within the landscape, and the recording tends to remove this from the respective narratives—information that makes "land claims," with their many implications, more compelling. An achievement of these projects is how these two diametrically opposite experiences of culture and territory are so poignantly illustrated. It is a testament to the personal dignity of Annie and Arthur that the contemporary politics remain secondary to the disclosure of rich lore that may take generations to be fully appreciated and understood.

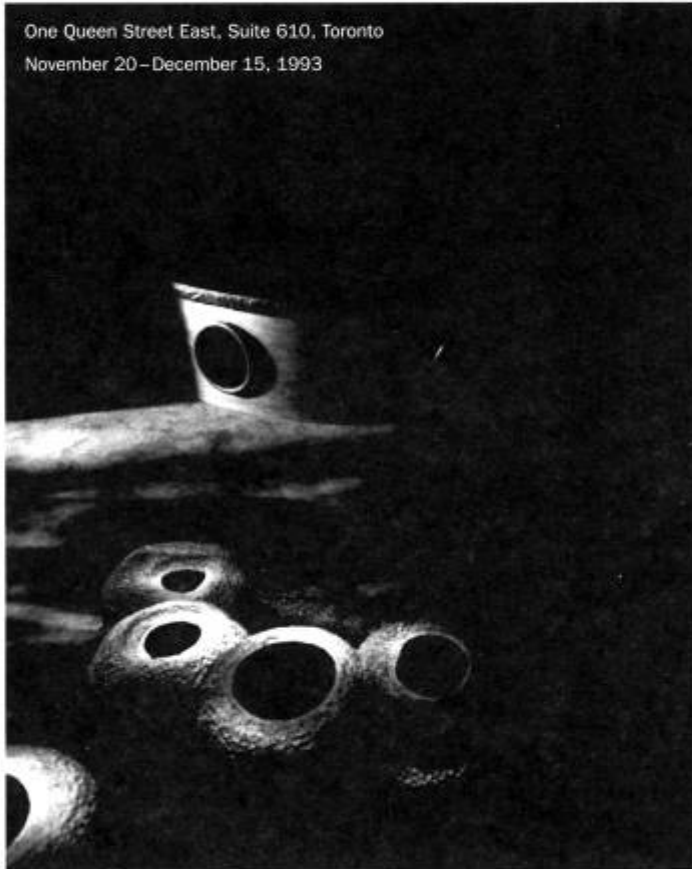
The "codes" have not been broken in these two treatments, nor may they ever be outside of the shamanic and familial contexts of the 'Nlaka'pamux. But non-Native obfuscation, the vestiges of a colonially cultivated blindness to site and cultural memory, emerges as the primary obstacle to deeper understanding. In the wake of this, more specific and critical strategies are inevitable, particularly for 'Nlaka'pamux-defined linkages between land claims, conservation, cultural observance, and yes, the making of art.

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Spontaneous Combustion

One Queen Street East, Suite 610, Toronto

November 20–December 15, 1993



Like Ancient Pots.... Panya Clark, mixed media installation, 1994. Photo: Ian Smith-Rubenzahl

In 1989, disillusioned with the lack of prospects to show their work locally, the members of the provocatively named Spontaneous Combustion collective rented the stunning former industrial showroom of the Massey Ferguson complex and wowed the Toronto public. Remarkable for its independence from the gallery system, the exhibition of predominantly technology-based work was one of the first to represent a generation of artists who had been virtually excluded from solo and curated exhibitions, critical attention and even individual grants. A decade earlier, arts councils had provided funding to similar artists' collectives to programme art in their own centres.

In November 1993, with the recession now hitting the financial district, the collective rented a suite of rooms in the Confederation Life building at Richmond and Yonge Streets. With its plush offices, shining washrooms, hushed board rooms and twenty-foot-high ceilings, it made for an unusual location in which to view art, especially work examining a cross section of issues such as family, technology, representation, tourism, homophobia and the media.

In a corner office, Gwen MacGregor's installation *Body of Knowledge*, a consideration of women's relationship to technology, incorporates rotting fruit and text engraved on brass strips. Across a wall of windows, dozens of