

Image Bank, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin,
June 22 to September 1, 2019, Co-curated by Krist Gruijthuijsen,
Maxine Kopsa, and Scott Watson

Brayden Nicholas Burrard

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Image Bank

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It has been nearly fifty years since Vancouver artists Michael Morris, Vincent Trasov, and Gary Lee-Nova founded Image Bank (1970). Lee-Nova left the group in 1972. Morris and Trasov continued Image Bank's activities and also participated in the development of the Western Front, a Vancouver artist-run centre opened in 1973, as well as other projects such as the *Hollywood Decca Dance* (1974) and the *Mr. Peanut Mayoralty Campaign* (1974). Image Bank's network emphasized fetish and queer aesthetics. Bankers (the eponymous term for Image Bank participants) organized Fluxus performance events, mailed correspondence between urban centres, and used photography and video to record the Vancouver community's evolving response to the rise of conceptual art in Canada. In contradistinction to the more restricted analytic and formalist concerns of emergent conceptualism, Morris and Trasov imagined Image Bank as a peripheral space where marginalized artists could organize and exhibit work collectively.

The *Image Bank* exhibition at Kunst Werke Institute for Contemporary Art is based on the Morris/Trasov Archive held by Vancouver's Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and is the first major retrospective to explore the archive since curator Scott Watson's 1992 exhibition *The Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris Trasov Archive* at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery. It is fitting that Berlin hosts this exhibition, since both artists have lived between British Columbia and Berlin since their residency with the German Academic Exchange Service in 1981.

The first efforts to catalogue Image Bank's archival material began in 1991 at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts, where Morris and Trasov worked with curator Lorne Falk. It was here that the Morris/Trasov Archive was created. In 1992 it was donated to UBC, and Scott Watson's *Hand of the Spirit* exhibition followed immediately. In beginning the necessary work of exploring this vast archive, Watson understood it as a slippery project, almost a work of art in itself, housing numerous unrealized projects that exist simultaneously as artistic research and research as art. The archive comprises over eighty meters of documents, primarily focusing on Morris and Trasov's networking activities between 1969 and 1978, early Image Bank projects involving Lee-Nova, and other material including video art produced by Morris and Trasov during the West Berlin years.

Whereas the *Hand of the Spirit* developed out of Watson's

early interpretation of the archive's open-ended aspect, the Berlin exhibition closes in on the networking narrative of Image Bank and its anti-authorial gestures, which functioned alongside mass distribution via "gender-crossing aliases" in the form of pseudonymous identities such as Mr. Peanut, Art Rat, and Marcel Dot. To Morris and Trasov, pseudonyms became signifiers that queered public space by way of performance art, brought to a wider audience in such publications as *FILE Magazine* and the *Image Bank Directory Lists*. The lists catalogue the locations of participants via the inclusion of addresses and image requisitions in the style of classified ads, published by General Idea in *FILE* alongside photographs and writing during the early issues of the magazine (1971–1974). The aliases became a two-way code that protected the artists from the risks of homophobia as they distributed fetish-themed art, as much as they signaled to participants their affinity with one another. *Image Bank* functions like a quasi-group exhibition with the inclusion of Image Bankers who all took part in the playful use of pseudonyms: Anna Banana, Kate Craig (Lady Brute), General Idea, Ant Farm, Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute), Glenn Lewis (Flakey Rosehips), and other collaborators such as Robert Cumming, Dana Atchley, Geoffrey Hendricks, Dick Higgins, and Willoughby Sharp. The exhibition presents this larger network in a way made relevant by contemporary art's concern with archival material.

Upon entering the first room in the exhibition, the viewer engages with a cacophony of media and images: Trasov's replica peanut column; a large video projection of nude men refracting light onto each other; monitors with video documentation performances; a massive twelve-section vitrine housing collaborative ephemera and photographs from the Morris/Trasov Archive; a wall displaying the *Artist Directory* from *FILE Magazine*; and the original Mr. Peanut costume, hung on a wall-sized image of Mr. Peanut

at Vancouver city hall, made during his run for mayor (because “politicians are nuts so you might as well vote for a nut”). Bankers were fascinated with future-oriented thinking and the Orwellian date of 1984 figures throughout much of the exhibition’s fetish-inspired mail and performance art. The far alcove on the right at the end of the main hall houses early Ray Johnson mailings from New York to Image Bank, demonstrating Morris and Trasov’s position within North America’s mail art network. There is a second, smaller room dedicated to fetish-themed projects which were primarily executed at Babyland, Morris and Trasov’s pastoral art community on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, partially modelled on Die Brücke’s Expressionist retreat at the Moritzburg lakes in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century.

Morris’s *Lite-On Babyland* (1972) is the first video projection viewers see as they enter the exhibition. *Lite-On*, a silent black-and-white film, depicts the bodies of two nude male figures who caress each other through light refracted from mirrors. The film stands as an example of an emerging queer art sphere in which collaborators sought to question heteronormativity and systems of identity against the backdrop of free body culture.

For Morris and Trasov, Pierre Trudeau’s Local Initiatives Program, begun in 1971, facilitated the creation of numerous projects, including funding the painting and manufacture of the colour bars displayed within the present *Image Bank* exhibition. The LIP sought to fund experimental artists’ communities in an effort to define Canadian culture. The legalization of homosexuality in 1972 profoundly affected some Bankers’ networking activities as some of the participants within Image Bank’s Fluxus community openly identified as homosexual. Still, homophobia continued to affect the reception of Image Bank’s artistic activities



Installation view, *Image Bank* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2019.
Photo: Frank Sperling.

throughout the 1970s, often making the network invisible to mainstream art criticism. Somewhat ironically, Morris and Trasov countered this lack of visibility through collaboration with LIP-funded projects like *FILE* magazine and Image Bank mailings. These state-sanctioned counterpublics facilitated communication and travel among Bankers, eventually leading some participants to travel to Vancouver and Babyland for the creation of Fluxus performance projects.

Lite-On is displayed alongside twelve photographs made during the production of the performance while the installation leads viewers into a small, theatrically illuminated room that includes Image Bank’s *Colour Bar Research* (1972–74), a series of one thousand painted colour bar props used for outdoor performance events and exhibited here as two rectangle rainbow forms made up of eight-inch colour bars, resembling paintings situated six inches off the floor, in the middle of the room. Also present are Eric Metcalfe’s *Leopard Reality* (1972), a fetish video installed on the floor that depicts scenes of bondage intercut with pastoral child’s play, and General Idea’s *Hand of the Spirit Wands* (1974), five Plexiglass hands made as props for the *Decca Dance* pageant and Babyland performances during 1973

and 1974. The *Decca Dance* brought Canada’s mail art network to Los Angeles to celebrate Fluxus artist Robert Filliou’s “birthday for art” in the style of Hollywood glamour, recalling the aesthetics and showmanship of the Oscars. The far wall of the room has a three-channel projection of hundreds of performance photographs from Morris’s *Colour Research* made between 1972 and 1974. The room also has a single black and white photograph titled *I am Curious Grey Scale* (1973) that epitomizes the experimental spirit of Babyland as site for expanding definitions of sexual identity: the photograph represents the torso of a nude male floating in a natural spring pool surrounded by floating colour bars. Leopard spots, “hands of the spirit,” colour bars, and leather became figurations of the community’s shared interest in a queer futurity that art historian Felicity Taylor describes as a process of coded everyday communal experience contrasted against heteronormative expectations in urban life.

The exhibition’s catalogue, to be published in September 2019, includes new essays by Zanna Gilbert, Angie Keefer, Scott Watson, Felicity Taylor, and Hadrien Laroche, as well as Kopsa’s interview with Morris and Trasov and Watson’s interview with Lee-Nova. I am grateful to have been given the

opportunity to preview the catalogue for this review. Gilbert explores the importance of the postcard medium for Image Bank's networking activity; Keefer investigates how the "eternal network" developed as an expanding organism in which Morris and Trasov were active participants; Watson elaborates on his 1994 essay "Hand of the Spirit," describing Image Bank's cinematic exploration of mass culture via performance props as tool for social and sexual critique; Taylor develops her previous observations in "Indexing Vancouver: Image Bank's International Image Exchange Directory" by exploring in greater detail the relationship between queer futurity and the language used to situate people from different urban locations within the network's publications; and Laroche describes the history of Babyland in great detail, showcasing the importance of this rural site for artistic exploration and travel in the example of Robert Filliou.

The catalogue also includes previously published material, such as AA Bronson's "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters" from *FILE Magazine* (May 1973). It reproduces unexhibited material relevant to the exhibition, further developing the idea of Image Bank's ever-expanding networking by way of art envelopes, photographs, and correspondence. The catalogue advances the importance of Image Bank's networking in the context of a larger Fluxus community as well as exploring the history of its social milieu in Vancouver. It focuses on the 1970s, and while there is much scholarship to be done on Morris and Trasov's activities between 1978 and 1991, the catalogue refines previous scholarship concerning the network and offers readers a seemingly definitive account of Image Bank's Vancouver history during the period it addresses.

The *Image Bank* exhibition begins the important work of revising the role of the "eternal network" within Canadian art history, even as it resembles a directory list in its inclusion of so many collaborators. In

the Summer of 2020, the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at UBC will exhibit the second leg of this two-part exhibition for a Vancouver and Canadian public. The kw Institute iteration of *Image Bank* traces the history of the network to offset the historical amnesia that has downplayed the significance of Morris and Trasov within Vancouver history. It will be interesting to see how the show plays out in Vancouver, where the archive is housed, as the second exhibition will have the benefit of all eighty meters of material. *Image Bank* at the kw Institute is an example of concise curatorial editing, and though it only scratches the surface of the material housed in the *Morris/Trasov Archive*, the exhibition and catalogue conclusively construct the narrative of Image Bank as a network. ¶

Brayden Nicholas Burrard is a PhD student at Concordia University.
—bnburrard@icloud.com

1. Scott Watson. "Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive". In *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive*. UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver. 1992. 5.

2. Kathrin Bentele, Krist Gruijthuijsen, Friederike Klapp, Scott Watson, and Katja Zeidler. "Image Bank". *Image Bank*. KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. 2019. 1. Exhibition Pamphlet.

3. Byron Black and Vincent Trasov. *My Five Years in a Nutshell*. Video. 31:01 minutes. Vancouver: Western Front Archive. 1975.

4. Felicity Talyer. "Indexing Vancouver: Image Bank's International Image Exchange Directory." *Canadian Literature* 235, Winter, 2017. 52-53.

Linda Steer

Appropriated Photographs in French Surrealist Periodicals, 1924–1939

London/New York: Routledge (Ashgate), 2017

180 pp. 23 b/w illus.

\$165 USD (hardback) ISBN 9781409437307

Charlene Heath

The seed of Linda Steer's *Appropriated Photographs in French Surrealist Periodicals, 1924–1939* can be found in two of

her 2008 published articles: "Photographic Appropriation, Ethnography, and the Surrealist Other" in *The Communist* and "Surreal Encounters: Science, Surrealism and the Re-Circulation of a Crime-Scene Photographs" in *History of Photography*. Certainly, discussions about surrealism and photography are not new: in the first half of the twentieth-century Walter Benjamin and André Bazin come to mind, followed by critics and scholars such as Rosalind Krauss and John Roberts in the second half of the century. While Steer's book grapples with photography's ontology, it does so without entirely leaving behind the social and political reality in which photographs are made and exist. Steer's book is a contribution worth noting: it examines how photographs are appropriated as art and put to work in different discursive contexts. Yet it addresses not how photography influenced surrealism, but what surrealism and its use of photographs in various periodicals might tell us about photography itself. Ultimately, Steer's study demonstrates how two competing theories about photography are both true: that a photograph has a special connection to the real and that a photograph's meaning is instituted through discourse (131).

In the book's introduction, Steer explains how she plans to combine four main sets of ideas that shape her discussion. First and foremost



are French linguist Roland Barthes ideas pertaining to the relationship between text and image as elucidated