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ISLAND THOUGHTS

An exhibition of work and thoughts by Rodney Graham and Robert Linsley

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NADA

ISLAND THOUGHTS

The exhibition *Island Thoughts* has been curated as a small tribute to Rodney Graham and Robert Linsley, two artists who passed away much too early but left a lasting imprint on Vancouver's cultural landscape. What brings them together here are a number of overlapping interests they shared with the American artist Robert Smithson. Smithson was to become a lynchpin for many artists working in Vancouver before and after his visits here in 1969-70. As with Graham and Linsley, he valued islands as a place to distance oneself from the mainland. In the fall of 1969, shortly before producing his now famous *Glue Pour*¹, Smithson proposed what was to be his first permanent earthwork, an *Island of Broken Glass* to be situated in the archipelago outside Vancouver involving one hundred tons of green-tinted glass deposited on Miami Islet (a tiny island in the Stuart Channel, B.C.). The work was meant to crystallize his dialectical thoughts. Despite having secured government approval to use the island, financial support from Vancouver art dealer Douglas Christmas, and receiving positive feedback in the popular press, the project was cancelled after pressure put on the provincial government by environmental groups.² You could say that as an exhibition, *Island Thoughts* has been organized as an archipelago of the ideas and gestures that connected these three artists. In this sense, each artist's work represents an island thought. I think of this along the lines of Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant. For Glissant, the islands of an archipelago represent a model of thinking that emphasizes diversity, plurality, and interconnectedness, contrasting with the homogenizing tendencies of "continental" thought and globalization. It's a non-linear, fluid way of being and thinking, wherein things are in constant motion and transformation.³

Trapp Projects was founded in 1997 shortly after I read the opening text by Robert Smithson which accompanied his 1968 *Non-site (Palisades-Edgewater, N.J.)*. I recall finding it peculiar that he would go to the trouble of explaining that the name of the specific rocks in his work came "from the Swedish word trapp meaning 'stairs'". Not only am I Swedish, but at the time I was also interested in traps — particularly as it pertained to *Trébuchet (Trap)*, a readymade by Marcel Duchamp consisting of a coat-hanger nailed to the floor and meant to function as a three-dimensional pun that held the potential to 'trip' one up — physically and mentally. It seemed to have influenced the Romanian artist Daniel Spoerri's psycho-geographic *tableaux pièges (Snare Pictures)* that I was researching at the time. Perhaps a misreading on my part, but could it be that Smithson's Nonsite was also meant to function as an assisted readymade? All these artists were interested in 'trips'. For Smithson, the trip addressed the space "Between the site and the nonsite [where] one may lapse into places of little organization and no direction." As someone interested in curating, but not quite ready to work within the confines of commercial or institutional spaces, this last sentence suggested not a way out, but a way *in-between*.

As an art history student in those days, out of the many ways I found to pay the bills, the most rewarding was working as a studio assistant for Rodney Graham.

A NONSITE (THE PALISADES)

The above map shows the site where trap rocks (from the Swedish word trapp meaning "stairs") for the Nonsite were collected. The Map is 1 7/16 x 2". The dimensions of the map are 18 times (approx.) smaller than the width 26" and length 36" of the Nonsite. The Nonsite is 56" high with 2 closed sides 26" x 56" and two slatted sides 36" x 56" — there are eight 8" slate and eight 8" openings. Site-selection was based on Christopher J. Schuberth's *The Geology of New York City and Environs* - See Trip C, Page 232, "The Ridges". On the site are the traces of the old trolley system that connected Palisades Amusement Park with the Edgewater-125th St. Ferry. The trolley was abolished on August 5, 1938. What was once a straight track has become a path of rocky crags -- the site has lost its system. The cliffs on the map are clear out contour lines that tell us nothing about the dirt between the rocks. The amusement park rests on a rock strata known as "the chilled-zone". Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art. Between the site and the nonsite one may lapse into places of little organisation and no direction.

Robert Smithson (1968)

Rodney's close friend, the New York artist Dan Graham, once asked me what I thought Rodney's work was ultimately about. "Trips" I replied without too much thought, to which Dan nodded and smiled. As I got to understand Rodney's work better by the mid-nineties, it was clear to me the importance to him of artists like Duchamp, Smithson, Marcel Broodthaers, Hanne Darboven, and Bas Jan Ader. All of them, you could say, set out on conceptual voyages that explored the edges of representation with pataphysical intellect, rigor and humour. Graham would mix this with his own sense of melancholic beauty and local textures. But as Jeff Wall would note in his 1988 essay "Through the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham's Work", perhaps no one laid the foundation for Graham's practice more than Raymond Roussel, the author of *Impressions of Africa* (1910) and *Locus Solus* (1913). Art historian Steven Harris has noted how central Roussel was in the creation of *The System of Landor's Cottage* (1987), perhaps Graham's most ambitious artwork.⁴ From this 328 page novel, Graham appears to have modelled his work on a series of bracketed observations in Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa* (1932) to interpolate himself into the structural universe of Edgar Allen Poe. The result would provide Rodney with an engine — a time machine of sorts — to produce artworks to come. As with most of his art, to try to follow the logic and interplay between all these influences on his work tends to make one's mind spin — or perhaps more accurately, spiral in and out of control. It's what makes us return to them, as to a good record.

Back in 1997, if there was one person I could rely on to make sense of these intellectual and aesthetic trips Rodney took us on, it was Robert Linsley, an artist and historian who lived with his partner and architect/designer Yvonne Ip in the same building as Rodney and his partner, artist Shannon Oksanen, on South Granville.⁵ Few people had wider knowledge of art, literature, philosophy, science and critical theory than Robert. He had a penchant for making one look at art from new perspectives and rethink assumptions with controversial statements and dialectical precision. As stubborn as he could be, he was always enthusiastic and open to listen to others, and willing to change his mind when warranted. I would suggest that the three people he most enjoyed speaking with were Rodney Graham, art historian Shep Steiner and art critic turned gallerist and bookstore owner Christopher Brayshaw. By the late nineties I recall the discussions mainly circled around late modernist post-painterly abstraction, something Shep was writing about and both Rodney and Robert would develop in their practices.⁶ Rodney's *The Gifted Amateur Nov 10th, 1962*, 2007 is in many ways the outcome of these conversations as were Robert's Island Paintings that he began in the early 2000s. When he tragically died in a biking accident in 2017, these works were just getting traction with impressive exhibitions in Canada and abroad.⁷ A year prior, Linsley had released the book *Abstract Art in the Age of Global Conceptualism*. As its publisher suggests:

Linsley shows how abstraction is a response to the world we live in, one that deliberately avoids moralizing, explanation, or overt polemic. He champions the work of lesser-known but important artists from India, China, and Latin and Central America, such as Vasudeo S. Gaitonde, Ding Yi and Gunther Gerzso as well as the more familiar names from

history, such as Lucio Fontana, Frank Stella and Gerhard Richter, treating their work with equal seriousness.⁸

Asked to contribute a few words in memory of Robert by *Canadian Art Magazine* shortly after his death, Graham writes that "There are few people I would rather talk about art with more than Robert Linsley. In fact, come to think of it, there is nobody I would rather talk to about art more than Robert."⁹

I remember both Rodney and Robert as generous neighbours and friends who acted as informal mentors for my entering into the artworld of Vancouver and beyond. For me they represented that dialectical space I was looking for between the mainland and smaller islands of art. This exhibition was spurred by two events within the course of a week. One was an email I received from Matt Versteeg, the artist who like myself lived in our neighbourhood in the late nineties and studied at UBC. Out of the blue he sent me *Two Generators: A Fine Arts Adventure*, a comic-style recollection of his first and last meetings with Rodney. The other was the discovery of Linsley's *Archipelago*, a series of alkyd paintings on paper from 2005, discovered by a friend of art historian Mary Jane Cowan who then prompted Brad Chernoff and myself to acquire them for an exhibition. Shep Steiner refers to the exhibition as a "talk show." It was certainly generated from conversations with Brad, Shep, Matt, Mary Jane, Grant Arnold, Christos Dikeakos, and others. Hopefully more will find themselves navigating this archipelago that is Island Thoughts.

Patrik Andersson

1. *Glue Pour* was created for the exhibition 995,000, curated by Lucy Lippard for Vancouver Art Gallery. In December 1969 Smithson positioned a large drum of bottle gum glue, industrially produced by the Canadian company National Adhesives, at the crest of a hill and tipped the container over. The work was assisted by Christos Dikeakos, Ilya Pegonis, Dennis Wheeler and Lucy Lippard.
 2. For a detailed account of this, see Grant Arnold's essay "Robert Smithson in Vancouver: A Fragment of a Greater Fragmentation" in the catalogue *Robert Smithson in Vancouver: A Fragment of a Greater Fragmentation* Vancouver Art Gallery, 2003.
 3. Glissant, Édouard *Poetics of Relation* (Translated by Betsy Wing) Penguin Books: London, 1990.
 4. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/06/pataphysical-graham-consideration-of-pataphysical-dimension-of-artistic-practice-of-rodney-graham>
 5. Judith Steedman and I lived across the alley. My father-in-law used to refer to 15h Avenue between Granville and Fir Street as Bloomsbury as there were so many artists, designers and intellectuals living there including Ken Lum, Denise Oleksijczuk, Neil Wedman, Tina Lynch, Myfanwy McLeod, Gary Lee Nova, Mathew Versteeg, and others.
 6. In a summer of 2011 article in *Artforum* magazine Rodney acknowledged the importance of Steiner's 1997 dissertation on Post-Painterly Abstraction in motivating him to produce *The Gifted Amateur Nov 10th, 1962*, 2007: "My interest in Abstract Expressionism and post-painterly abstraction came late—as did my interest in painting in general — and was motivated by a reading of Shep Steiner's 1997 thesis on that similarly late-blooming member of the Washington Color School, Morris Louis... I still find myself, in my mind's eye, contrasting the fluid, classical movements of Pollock's well-documented Abstract Expressionist ballet against the weird, modernist, angular contortions most likely imposed on his successor: the poor post-painterly abstractionist constrained by the ergonomics of the postwar kitchen nook."
 7. See for example the review for his 2005 exhibition at Felix Ringel Gallery in Düsseldorf: Smolik, Noemi "Robert Linsley" *Artforum* (November, 2005), pp.195-196.
 8. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/B/bo25035593.html>
 9. <https://canadianart.ca/features/robert-linsley/>
- * Special thanks to: Grant Arnold, Mary Jane Cowan, Christos Dikeakos, Allison Kerr, Judith Steedman, Shep Steiner, Nada Vuksic and Ian Wallace.

ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

Island Thoughts is a 'talk show.'¹ It circles around the work of two artists who were in conversation with one another and whose work shows the traces of that conversation. 'Talk about art' is what Rodney Graham remembered most fondly about time spent with his friend Robert Linsley, and this 'talk about art' is what we remember in turn about time spent with Graham. Recall too, that Graham's *Vexation Island* was conceived of as a 'conversation piece,' and in the manner of the 'talking cure' would eventually spur Linsley to make his Island Paintings.² Island Thoughts is about this endless show and tell in both a general and restricted sense. Only the restricted sense concerns us. It is what mattered most to these artists, and it amounts to little or nothing. But let me explain.

Aside from all the noise that surrounds the spectacular form of the Talk Show beloved of television audiences the world over, etymologically speaking, the high form of the Talk Show finds its roots in the history of twentieth century philosophy, specifically phenomenology.³ These days every cat on Main Street knows the names of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, but only the back-alley strays know the Greek root words of this philosophical movement concern the logic of phenomenon, or that artistic practice, even when turning on a shared trope like islands, breaks up continental philosophy into fragments, effectively instantiating the logic of phenomenon as idiosyncratic modes of experiencing the world. Rarer still are the feral few like Graham and Linsley who recognized that experience, in its largest sense, is framed as a Talk Show; that in its deepest sense phenomenology should be understood through the ongoing drama of Talking and Showing. In this regard, the central tension plumbed by phenomenology involves the friction between static form and durational process, or image and text. In this context, *logos* or voice is understood as a question of reading (as opposed to the discrete act of looking) and is implicit to a dialectic that happens in and over time, breaching the surface only by proxy. Thus, the Old English, Latin, and Proto-Indo-European etymology of the 'I' in Island, which has so little to do with the stable subject with which we self-identify, derives from the archaism for flowing water. Émile Benveniste's parallel study on 'The Notion of Rhythm in its Linguistic Expression' is further confirmation of the latter: in the Greek *rhuthmos*, one hears this stream beneath the lapping of waves.⁴

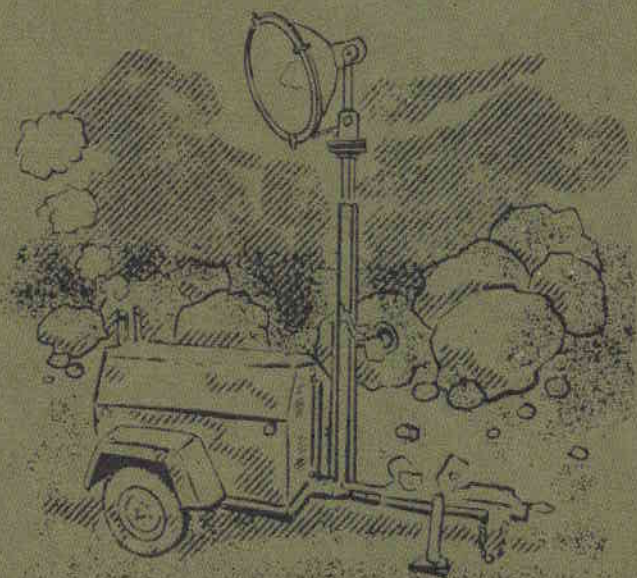
In any case, apart from its dry substitute, *logos* remains submerged in the flow, robbed of the present as such, but felt, nonetheless. Islands in the Stream are always left behind by Island Thoughts. Nothing can survive the hurricanes that blow in these tropical latitudes—why Hemingway described the house of the painter in his eponymous novel 'as much like a ship as a house. Placed there to ride out storms...'⁵

Logos has always been important to contemporary art in Vancouver. Voice, in particular, has a special status now, but for the generation of artists who came of age with Linsley and Graham, *logos* held center stage, and this was pitted against identity in entirely contradictory ways. Islands, like individuals, or isolated entities were understood as monads, which in turn could not be separated from an archipelago, a community, a set, or a fold with many layers and as many scales. The 'seismic places where sovereignty quakes,' as Derrida frames his idea of Geo-psychoanalysis is what mattered most to these Island thinkers. This happens repetitively from moment to moment, and it is also something each found instanced in the earthworks of Robert Smithson. But the similarities end there.⁶

Shep Steiner

1. Here I borrow Patrik Andersson's phrase for the imagined dialogue between works in this diminutive exhibition.
2. In the context of the late 1990s and the rise of relational aesthetics its status as a repetitive film loop was to serve as a backdrop for conversation. In effect, the audience could talk amongst themselves and thus forget about the art encounter, which, of course, is the crucial matrix for relationality.
3. Here I take my cue from Michael Marder's 'colloquial translation' of the phenomenological enterprise in *Dumb Philosophy: A Phenomenology of Devastation*.
4. A more strategic archaeology of photo-conceptualism in Vancouver would also dig up Ian Wallace's notion of a 'literature of images,' which neatly brackets the importance of montage as well as marking a generational obsession with film and film theory.
5. Conversely, it is why the lyric in Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers song of the same name, 'needs no conversation.'
6. Island Thoughts for Linsley speak to the geological humanities and late modernism as one in the same discourse. He frames the earth's history as a kind of painterly tradition, which means we should imagine Linsley as a kind of Atlas figure tipping the surface of his pre-stretched canvas' to and fro. Geo-psychoanalysis for Linsley is about island formation on an unstable plane(t)—i.e., land masses and the thrust faults separating them, the proximity of these cartographic measures to the human body in motion or as felt, projection as a process of flattening a spherical world onto a flat plane, phenomenology as the capacity to suspend one's idiosyncratic mode of experiencing the world through the epoché or intentional reduction, etc. For Graham, geo-psychoanalysis, which is bent by Deleuze on film, turns on we human castaways left on a rock and trapped between vegetal and animal desires. And because this is another kind of plane or *plateau*, Graham is additionally able to dramatize an Oedipal dynamic through tree and bird, a generational dynamic that would allow him to return to painting from the moment of conceptualism as much as the limits of an anthropocentric universe. The absolute marked by 'The Palm at the End of the Mind,' as Linsley notes in his contribution to *Island Thought*, figures a paint brush that colors an azure sky.

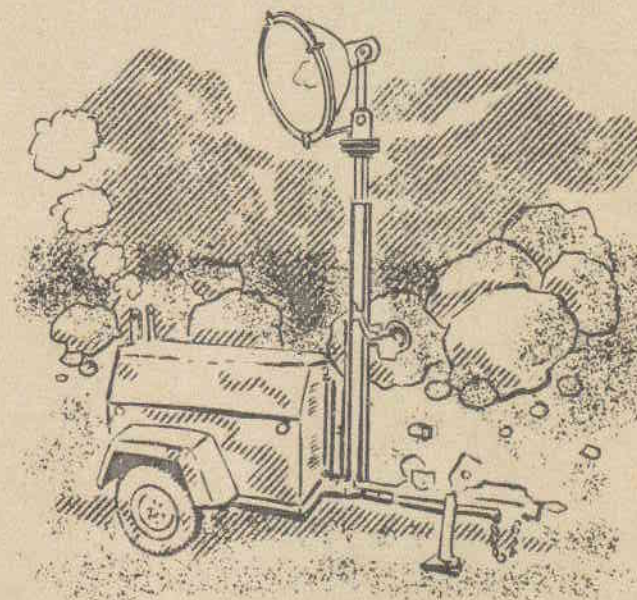
TWO GENERATORS



A FINE ARTS ADVENTURE

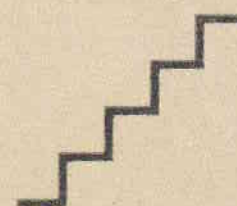
by MATT VERSTEEG

TWO GENERATORS



A FINE ARTS ADVENTURE

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TRAPP PROJECTS

TWO GENERATORS AND MORE!

A FINE ARTS ADVENTURE!

THE LASSERRE BUILDING, UBC,
MID-1980S



I MET RODNEY GRAHAM WHEN I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE. HE CAME BY THE SCHOOL TO GIVE A TALK ABOUT HIS ART WORK.



...AND IT WAS DURING THIS TALK THAT IT SUDDENLY BECAME CLEAR TO ME WHAT MAKES THE SPACE OF CONTEMPORARY ART UNIQUE!



SNAPPING PHOTOS AT VARIOUS POINTS WITH ONLY THE MOMENTARY POPS OF THE FLASH CREATING THE SCENES OUT OF THE DARKNESS.



"75 POLAROID'S" (1976) WAS COOL, TAKING WALKS THROUGH THE LOCAL FORESTS AT NIGHT WITH A POLAROID CAMERA IN HAND...



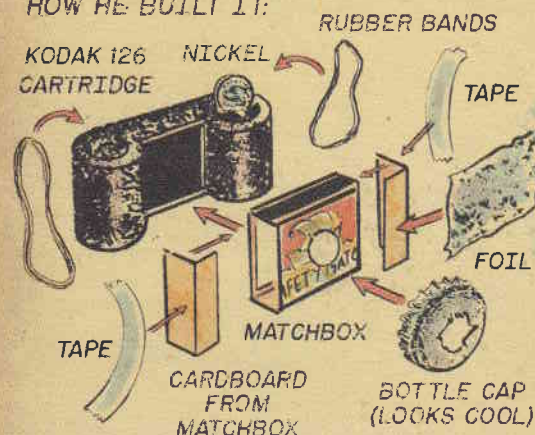
HE THEN SHOWED US "ROME RUINS" (1977). PHOTOS TAKEN WITH A PINHOLE CAMERA - BY NECESSITY!



APPARENTLY, HE HAD HIS CAMERA STOLEN WHILE IN ROME, SO HE BUILT A NEW ONE WITH A 126 FILM



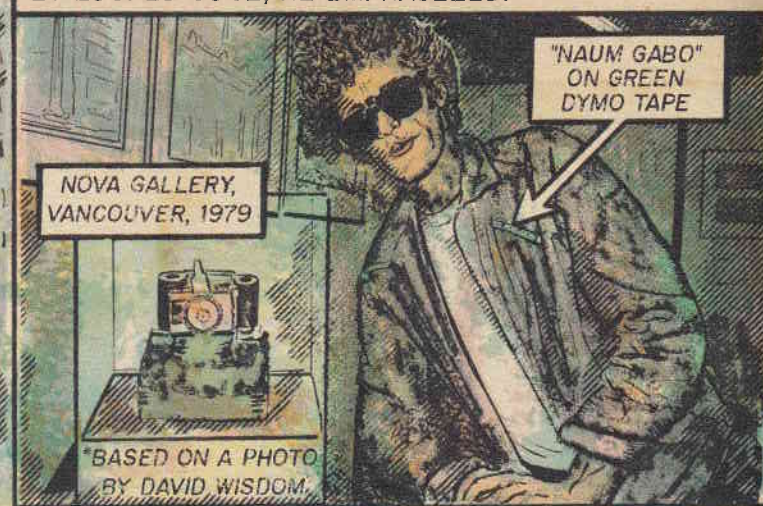
IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, THIS IS HOW HE BUILT IT:



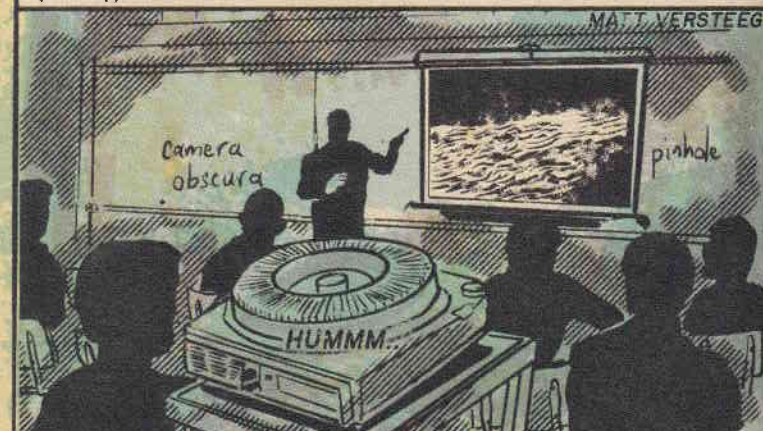
IT WENT SOMETHING LIKE THIS - A MOVIE CAMERA AT THE SIDE OF A CREEK IN THE DARK OF NIGHT.



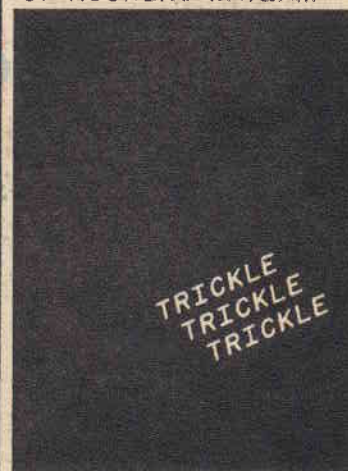
CARTRIDGE, A MATCHBOX, RUBBER BANDS, SOME FOIL, AND THE BEST PART - A BOTTLECAP - "BECAUSE IT LOOKED COOL", HE EMPHASIZED.



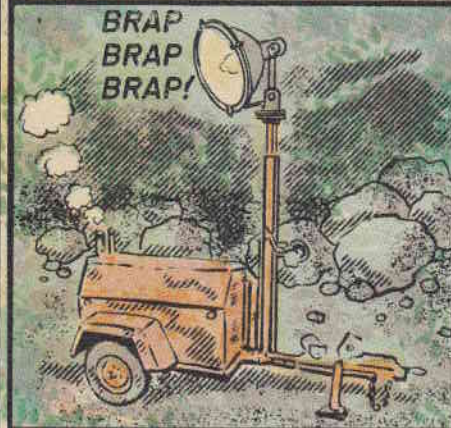
HE THEN SHOWED US SLIDES OF "TWO GENERATORS" (1984), AND EXPLAINED HOW HE DID THE PIECE.



A BLACK SCREEN. YOU JUST HEAR THE SOUND OF RUSHING WATER...



THEN YOU HEAR A GENERATOR'S ENGINE FIRE UP, AND AN OFF-SCREEN FLOODLAMP COMES TO LIFE, ILLUMINATING THE CREEK.



EVENTUALLY A SECOND ENGINE FIRES UP, AND A SECOND FLOODLAMP COMES TO LIFE. WE CAN SEE THE CREEK CLEARLY NOW...



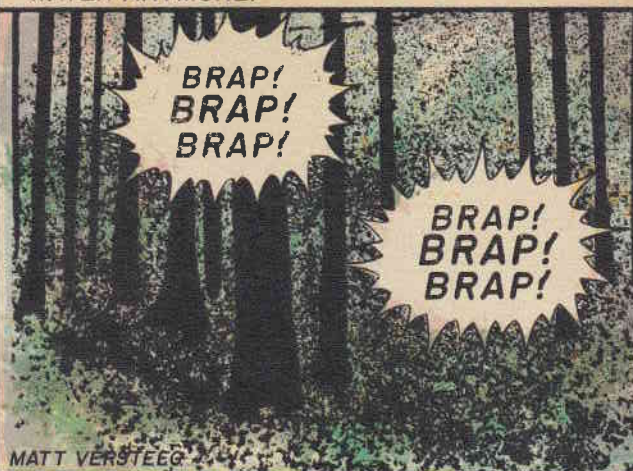
ONE BY ONE THE GENERATORS ARE SWITCHED OFF, THE SCREEN GOES BLACK, AND WE JUST HEAR THE SOUND OF THE CREEK AGAIN.

TRICKLE
TRICKLE
TRICKLE

NOW A FEW OF US IN THE CLASS WHO WERE INTO THE LOCAL MUSIC SCENE KNEW THAT RODNEY HAD BEEN A MEMBER OF UJ3RK5 -



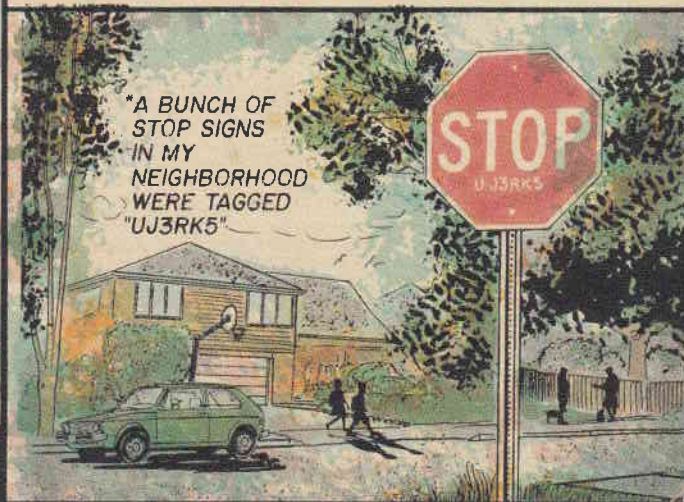
BUT WITH THE RACKET OF THE TWO GENERATORS, WE CAN'T HEAR THE RUSHING WATER ANYMORE.



MATT VERSTEEG

IT WAS CLEARLY A FILM - BUT NOT A FILM THAT WOULD MAKE SENSE IN A THEATER - OR ON TV. THESE DAYS, IT WOULDN'T MAKE MUCH SENSE AS A VIDEO ON ANY DEVICE. YOU HAVE TO SEE IT ON SOMETHING YOU CAN'T PAUSE, SKIP, OR FAST FORWARD. IT WAS A LIKE A MOVIE ABOUT THE PROCESS OF MAKING ITSELF. SUPER CHILL AND POETIC. IT DIDN'T ASK TOO MUCH FROM THE VIEWER EITHER. BEST THING, NOT ONLY DID IT LOOK REALLY COOL - IT ACTUALLY LOOKED FUN TO DO! IT WAS SEEING IT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ART THAT IT ALL MADE SENSE.

PRONOUNCED "YOU JERK" BECAUSE "THE FIVE IS SILENT". I HAD THEIR FOUR-SONG E.P. "EISENHOWER AND THE HIPPIES" WAS A GOOD TRACK. MAN OR ASTRO-MAN? COVERED IT. BUT I DIGRESS...



A FEW YEARS LATER, I WAS WORKING IN A MOVIE PROP FABRICATION SHOP, AND I INTRODUCED RODNEY TO MY BOSS WHO MADE PROSTHETIC APPLIANCES FOR



OVER DRINKS, HE DESCRIBED HIS PLANNED PIECE, "VEXATION ISLAND" (1997), A LOOPED FILM LIKE "TWO GENERATORS", BUT BIGGER. IN CINEMASCOPE - AND IN FULL COLOR!



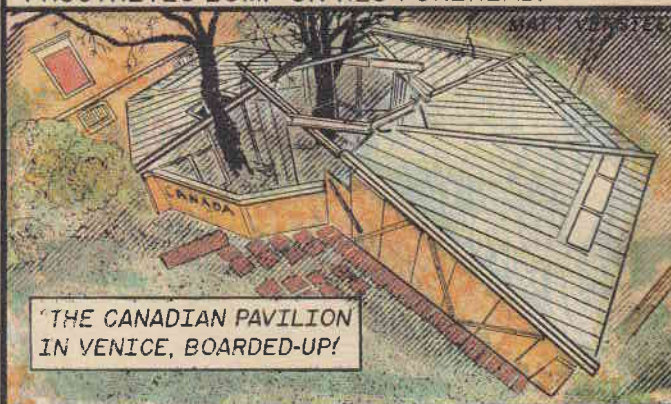
HE WAKES UP ON A DESERT ISLAND UNDER A GIANT COCONUT PALM, AND WE NOTICE THE



MACAW... EVENTUALLY OUR CASTAWAY GETS UP, WALKS OVER TO THE TREE, AND SHAKES IT...



MAKE-UP EFFECTS. YOU SEE, RODNEY HAD BEEN SELECTED TO REPRESENT CANADA IN THE 1997 VENICE BIENNALE, AND NEEDED A PULSATING PROSTHETIC BUMP ON HIS FOREHEAD.



HE HAD JUST BEEN TO WARNER BROTHERS COSTUME STOCK DEPARTMENT TO GET HIS PERIOD OUTFIT, AND THE REST OF PREP WAS UNDERWAY FOR A SHOOT IN THE CARRIBEAN...

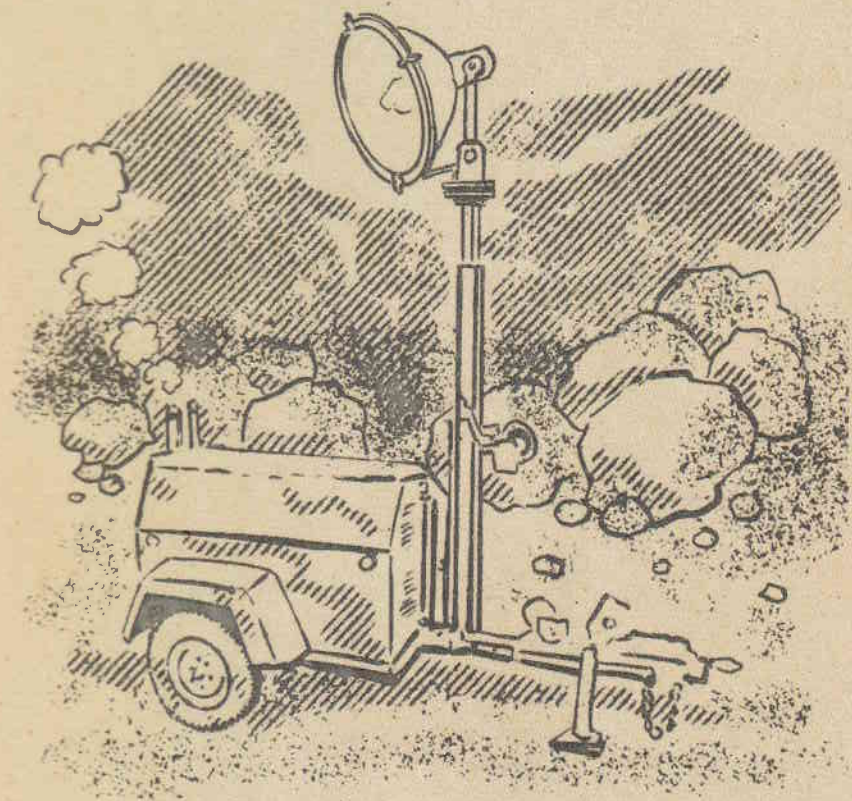


BUMP ON HIS FOREHEAD. WE HEAR THE WIND, THE WAVES, AND THE EXHORTATIONS OF A



THEN A COCONUT FALLS, LANDS ON HIS HEAD, KNOCKS HIM OUT, AND WE START OVER AGAIN...





ISLAND THOUGHTS
EDITION

18/100 *W. H. A.*

FALL 2025

