



**FASTWÜRMMS**  
**DONKY@NINJA@WITCH**











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# FASTWÜRMS

## DONKY@NINJA@WITCH

### A Living Retrospective

Curated by Philip Monk

with texts by  
Emelie Chhangur, Andrew Harwood,  
Jon Davies, and Sally McKay

ART GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY

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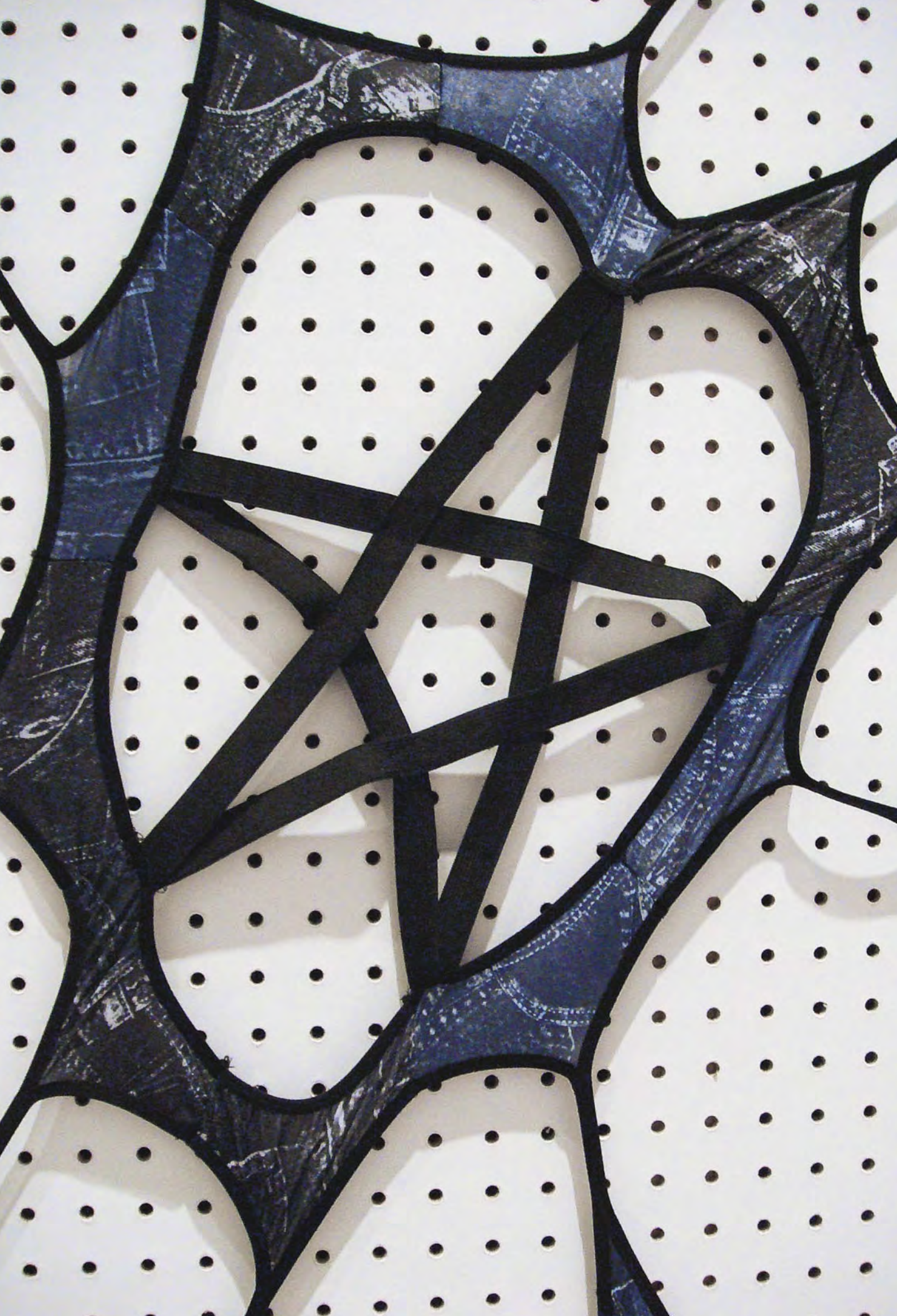


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MARQUIS DE SADE  
VON SACHER-MASOCH  
CAPTAIN X 

# THANK YOU, COME AGAIN Philip Monk

Over an under-the-counter whisky in *Blood Clock*, FASTWÜRMS' unconventional "shop"—or should I say "shoppe"—in a hotel-room booth at the 2005 Toronto Alternative Art Fair International (TAAFI), I asked Kim and Dai about the possibility of a retrospective exhibition of all their Queen Street storefront installations. They must have thought I was joking and it took them a year to realize I wasn't. So began the saga of DONKY@NINJA@WITCH, one of the grandest extravagances in Canadian art history.

Actually, I now remember I first proposed an exhibition of their storefronts juxtaposed to a simultaneous exhibition of their widespread influence on a generation or two of Toronto artists—mainly of the queer, crafting sort (by now its own full-fledged, glorious art community): artists such as Will Munro, Allyson Mitchell, and Andrew Harwood, to mention only a few. But I quickly realized that the scope of a retrospective alone exhausted the AGYU's exhibition space. Nonetheless, I still think of FASTWÜRMS' solo DONKY@NINJA@WITCH as an oblique Toronto history exhibition of the kind I periodically concoct (FASTWÜRMS having been in my *Rococo Tattoo*).

Perhaps it was the lunar lure that made me finally propose this extravagant exhibition concept to FASTWÜRMS while in their makeshift installation. Maybe I should have been warned, rather than bewitched, by the unsettling anomalous combination of scythes and axes with dildoes and horseshoes hung on the pegboard walls, each silhouette outlined as if in a workshop. An exhibition controlled by witches makes everything "over under sideways down." It was a retail investment worth making, though: this strip-mall of FASTWÜRMS' storefronts, where there were no "for lease" signs in evidence, rather plenty of the creative economic coupling one might find in small towns or the country where an entrepreneur can open a hair salon and a pet food store under the same roof!

During the two-and-a-half months of installation—when the artists sometimes lived in the gallery—and the two-and-a-half months of exhibition, the AGYU was transformed into *Witch Nation* under FASTWÜRMS' guidance. There was a kinship in the DIY ethos by which these artists made their work and constructed their AGYU installation that this hard-working gallery could understand; there was something deeply satisfying in their glorification of the lowly shop format with which a public gallery that ran itself like a mom and pop convenience store could empathize.

Welcome to Witch World—a mini-mall of *House of Bangs* (1999), *Blood & Swash* (2002), *Pirate Head* (2004), *Gusset Nation* (2004), and *Blood Clock* (2005), as well as a backlot Nissen hut, *Pink Donky* (2007), which houses the video *Witch vs. Ninja*—and...please, come again!



TO MAKE  
1. Cut out  
2. Sew  
3. Press  
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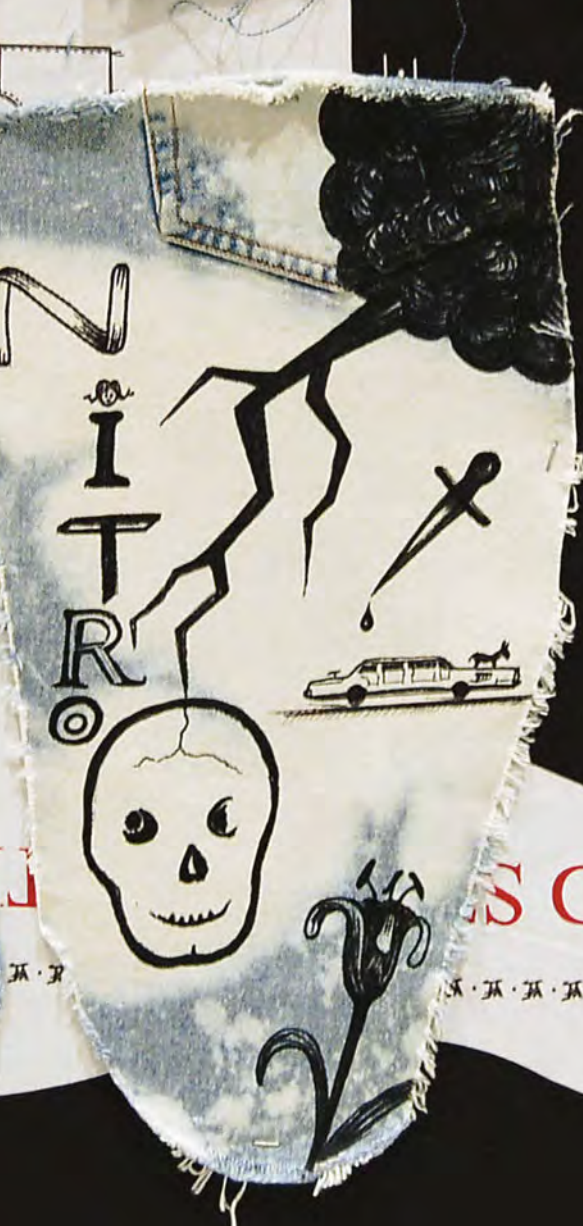


VEST AND

.....







COLD S



# Dear Kim & Dai,

Saying why or what it is that you like about anyone is so hard. Even therapists have a hard time saying, “I love you!”

This basically is a love letter to you two—I owe a great debt of gratitude to you both for your amazing (informal) mentorship of me as an artist and person. I thank you for teaching me about “witch” work ethic(s), which is about hard work but always studded with the pleasure of making, installing, and performing.

Our relationship started out kinda rocky when I gave one of your artworks a shitty review in *Fuse Magazine* in the nineties. Later, when I saw your work at the Power Plant, I retracted what I had said in print to Dai on the opening night of the show. I fell in love with you and your work. Spell complete! Despite my bitchy review, you always showed me kindness and included me in whatever social or artistic thing was going on with you. I think some of the very best exhibitions that happened at Zsa Zsa were your shows; the gallery space itself also seemed to be in love with you two. Just having your work in my gallery brought me a great deal of pleasure, even though I think I protested about the smoke cannon going through the wall of my living room to the gallery for *Blood & Swash*. I was the only one who had one in Toronto, tho, and all the other gallerists were jealous!! As a result of our friendship, I have also learned not to judge too quickly.

I am so pleased that DONKY@NINJA@WITCH travelled across the country and that I got to be part of that exhibition. I really felt like a rock star in Vancouver with you. Being part of your entourage/coven was just fabulous and I hope that at least a few folks got a decent or, at the very least, interesting haircut through *House of Bangs*.

I have learned so much about sampling from you—viewing some of your video works inspired in me a sense of permission to sample. And sample I did—*Convoy/Truckstop Daddy*, *Bikers*, *Andrew Harwood as Ann Margaret*, and *Depression Era Hypnosis* to name a few video works influenced by your work!

*Wiz-Dum*, a video produced for Zsa Zsa’s mammoth *Michael Jackson Project*, co-curated with Lex Vaughan, remains one of my favourite works. You basically took an unwatchable film, *The Wiz*, and boiled it down to a roughly 8 minute work of great beauty and irony, extracting and elevating all of the magical/entertaining moments for our viewing



pleasure. I think what I loved too was art critic Sarah Milroy's basic non-reading/incomprehension of that work for her review of the *Michael Jackson Project* in *The Globe and Mail*. She tried!

One of the most precious gifts you passed on to me is the subtle insistence—never spoken and without pressure—of a renewed appreciation, love, and even worship of nature and the natural world. I hug trees now, except for the poor elm trees in Winnipeg. They wear tinfoil bands coated with what feels like Vaseline to keep the bugs off. (I do like how they look like gigantic cock rings, tho!) I now take the time, even in city life, to appreciate what is natural. I am sorry I still eat meat, but a lot less since knowing you!

When I visited you last May on my way to do a site visit at Tom Thomson Art Gallery, we were hanging around your living room one evening and something truly magical happened. Outside of your window there is that bird feeder to entertain your lovely horde of kitties, fenced off to keep the cat-on-bird carnage down. (Perfect tension between two animal communities tho!) Two blue birds, the likes of which any of us had never seen, came to the feeder to eat. I hope that those beautiful blue birds brought and continue to bring you lots of happiness and good luck!

It is hard to summarize an ongoing relationship with people that are friends, like family (better than) and mentors. I feel like this is just scratching the surface. I have never felt bitchy towards you two (very unusual for me!) or that I had anything to prove in your company. I am grateful for your help in expanding my understanding/rainbow of what art and life are about and can encompass. Thank you two, too, for allowing me to visit your place in the country and spending time with your sweet cats and for inviting me to bathe in your gorgeous red cauldron/Jacuzzi. Oh and you guys are really smart and sexy too!

I love youse!

**Andrew xoxoxoxox**

p.s. Thanks for the brownies too!

# House of Bangs



# Blood & Swash



Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto (2002); MANIF D'ART, Québec City (2003)



# Pirate Head







Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto (2004)

# Gusset Nation





# Blood Clock



Toronto Alternative Art Fair International (TAAFI), Toronto (2005)

FASTWÜRMS PRÉSENTE

26 SEPT - 9 DEC 2007 • Art Gallery of York University • Toronto • [www.yorku.ca/agy](http://www.yorku.ca/agy)



Katie                      Andrew                      Jill  
**BETHUNE-LEAMEN    HARWOOD            HENDERSON**

PHILIP MONK • EMELE CHANGUR • LISA PEREIRA • MARY ANNE BARKHOUSE  
KELLY JAZVAK • PATRICK HOWLETT • JENN NORTON • NICOLE VOGELZANG  
CECILIA BERKOVIC • SUSAN EASTWOOD • BILL ALLEN

R.M. VAUGHAN • JON SASAKI • SHAY GIBSON • DARRYL BANK • KATERYNA TOPOL • MICHAEL BARKER • TAI LEE • PAUL PETRO

# DONKEY NINJA WITCH

# AGYU FLAVA Emelie Chhangur

*Sung to the tune of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" by Bob Dylan*

Monk's in the basement  
Mixing up the medicine  
I'm on the pavement  
Thinking about the government  
Curator in the trench coat  
Badge out, laid off  
Says he's getting too soft  
Wants Toronto's pay off  
Look out kid  
It's somethin' you did  
God knows when  
But you're doin' it again  
We'd better get down wicca way  
Lookin' for a new friend  
Kim and Dai in the coon-skin cap  
In the big pen  
Wants eleven-dollar bills  
But Shay's only got ten

Kateryna's in the lobby  
stitchin' up the cat nip,  
Darryl's in the basement  
Waxing down the axes' grip  
Fingers worn  
Trousers torn  
While Jonny's in the corridor  
Still puttin' up the peg board  
Look out kid  
They keep it all hid  
Smoke you out the cannon hole  
Just try to let it all go  
Andrew's full of scandals  
Please try and get a handle  
You are the only son  
Keep on the run  
The pump don't work  
'Cause FASTWÜRMS lit the candles

Katie's on the ladder bent  
This is how the day went  
FASTWÜRMS in the turtle tent  
This is how the nights were spent  
Tryin' to get the right size  
Now they're in the 905  
Look out kid  
Don't matter what you did  
Walk on your cat-toes  
Don't cheat Jamie knows  
Better stay away from those  
Who only want to strike a pose  
Keep your dildos  
Watch the plain clothes  
You're gonna need the witches yo  
To see the Harvest Moon show

Get sick, get well  
Hang around the nipple well  
Ring bell, hard to tell  
If anything is gonna to sell  
Try hard, get barred  
Get the bats, write 'tats  
Get nailed, jump bail  
Join the fairies, if you fail  
Look out kid  
You're gonna get hit  
By users, cheaters  
Six-time losers  
Hang around the beaters  
AGYU keeps their cool  
Looking for a new fool  
Don't follow leaders  
Watch your back there's stealers...



**LEARNING  
TO BE  
DONKY**

**Emelie Chhangur**

The AGYU steals, but only with good will and the best of intentions. And it only steals from the best. Mimicking artists' strategies, the AGYU is already in on the anti-establishment game. So working with FASTWÜRMS should have been no surprise. But of course the delight is that it always was! Our collaboration with FASTWÜRMS to produce DONKY@NINJA@WITCH was a highly unusual venture: a hybrid interspecies exchange, so to speak, that contaminated both the institution and the anti-establishment.

At the AGYU we learn from artists. Learning from artists means that with each new project and artist we work with we create a new context that transcends the institution at the same time. We use all the institution's resources to *perform* a new role for the institution, transforming ourselves and, by implication, the very nature and function of the institution itself—and doing so in public. The question therefore was: How would FASTWÜRMS change us?

FASTWÜRMS' *lesson number one*: change the old order by presenting alternative others—other means of creation, reference, and production—that offer up a different understanding of what is considered to be the status quo in contemporary art, and then implicate the institution in the formulation of this status quo. So, at the AGYU we had to reinvent ourselves in order to encompass the plurality and diversity of FASTWÜRMS' polyvalent practice. Following FASTWÜRMS, as observers/participants we created new structures, methods of production, and modes of display to suit their complex works and even more complex working practice. In turn, we found ways for the institution to counter the status quo. This is AGYU Flava. We make the institution *work* for artists. And we learned new ways by working with these witches cum artists.

Our intention was to create a retrospective of FASTWÜRMS' storefront exhibitions from 1999 on (and, as it turned out, with the addition of the new works *Pink Donky* and the HD video production *Witch vs. Ninja*). Re-staging kept the format of their exhibition practice: mom-and-pop storefronts. DONKY@NINJA@WITCH was thus an exhibition of exhibitions that nonetheless, while presented in an institution, maintained a local flava. Local meant not only reference to certain types of stores and methods of display but to FASTWÜRMS' influence on a whole generation of (Toronto) artists. The exhibition was intended not just as a retrospective of their collaboration but as an implicit history of one direction of Toronto art.



The AGYU worked with the artists as co-curators of the exhibition and accommodated the institution to their needs. Consequently, FASTWÜRMS conceived and realized an exhibition otherwise impossible given normal installation schedules and which was, moreover, more conducive to their way of working. The extended installation period of two-and-a-half months, when FASTWÜRMS was in residency at the AGYU, opened up a space for the artists to articulate their own history as a “living retrospective.”

A living retrospective calls for new exhibition languages and new ways of institutional working. As an exhibition concept, the living retrospective takes the idea of the retrospective—a fixed and static looking at, presenting, and interpreting artists’ oeuvre for generations to come—and turns it into a living, breathing entity: like FASTWÜRMS’ work. We participated in FASTWÜRMS’ postproduction narrative ecology so that others can experience, rather than learn second hand, the real work behind the exhibition’s display. In order to do this, we had to change the way an exhibition is conceived, orchestrated, and produced, radicalizing how artists fit into the schedules, use the space, and work with the demands and needs of the institution by reversing institutional hierarchies and making the institution now fit into the artists’ schedules, the artists’ use of the space, and artists’ demands and needs. Changing the way we work to change the outcome of the work we do. And putting the local—that is, generating a Canadian point of view in celebration of our artists—at the forefront of what it is to be an institution here.

Like the *House of Bangs*, *Blood & Swash*, etc., the gallery turned into the very thing it sought to put on display. The process, production of work, and nature of collaboration between artists and institution articulated a new, hybrid identity for the AGYU (taking our cue from FASTWÜRMS, of course) and marked a productive shift in the institution’s approach to originating new ways of working with artists and exploring new means of commissioning and presenting contemporary art. The residency was a strategy that allowed us to work with FASTWÜRMS without compromising their working methodologies, keeping true to the ethos of their work and their DIY sensibility. The WÜRMS are out there. Luckily, so are we.

As a consequence of the artists’ intervention into the institution’s structure, the AGYU was turned into a small-scale factory...I mean...studio (this, I guess, is also the @DONKY side of things) in order to produce the pegboard modules and other accoutrements that provided both the structure and display system for the exhibition elements. We worked with a team of residents, most of whom were already previous FASTWÜRMS hired hands: Jon Sasaki, who built the peg board modular units that covered the AGYU gallery walls; Katie Bethune-Leamen, who assisted in all aspects of the work’s preparation and installation; Shay Gibson, who picked up where Jon left off but fit seamlessly into Witch Nation; and, of course, Cecilia Berkovic, who translated the AGYU and Witch Nation into one concept by designing (under the directive of FASTWÜRMS, not the Gallery) all of the marketing material, including the specially commissioned free take away posters and our gallery newsletter. Substantiating the DIY production sensibilities of FASTWÜRMS, our interns and work-study students also were transformed magically into Donky, too: Darryl Bank in the basement, polishing and grinding each axe and sickle, and Kateryna Topol, who spent countless hours at the gallery’s front desk sewing mounds of cat-nip into little pieces of fabric to make the “pant pollen” pussy treats featured in *Gusset Nation*. For the opening reception, we brought back all of the original performers to re-enact and re-perform their original roles: Andrew Harwood and Lisa Pereira cutting hair in *House of Bangs*; Jill Henderson and the FASTWÜRMS themselves providing visitors with tattoos in *Blood & Swash*. Following

the pragmatics of the periphery, the final component of the project was the commissioned *Moustache Ride* by Katie Bethune-Leamen for the AGYU's *Performance Bus* that brought eager hoards of mustachioed riders to the opening on the Harvest Full Moon, September 26, 2007—the night I got the best mullet I've ever had.

As a living retrospective of their work and the staging of their collective ethos put on display in real-time, DONKY@NINJA@WITCH was a true commitment to FASTWÜRMS practice that actively (rather than museologically) re-engaged their past works in the present and allowed us to follow along and re-enact and relish in the work of FASTWÜRMS' DIY mom-and-pop sensibility with local flava...but now on an institutional scale. Long live the local! Long live Flava! Long live FASTWÜRMS!

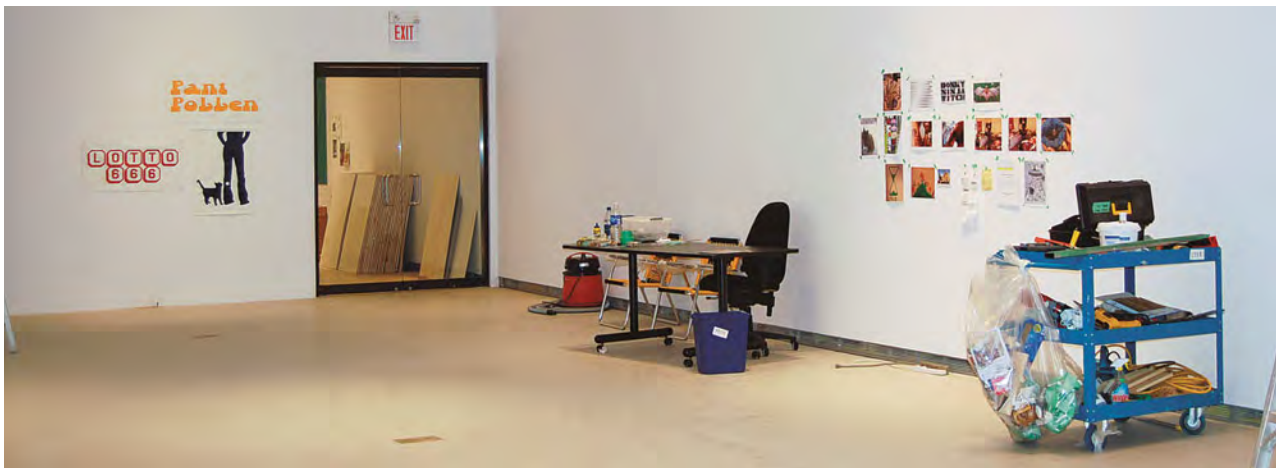




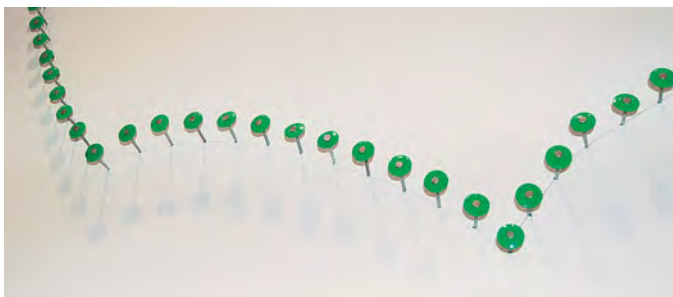
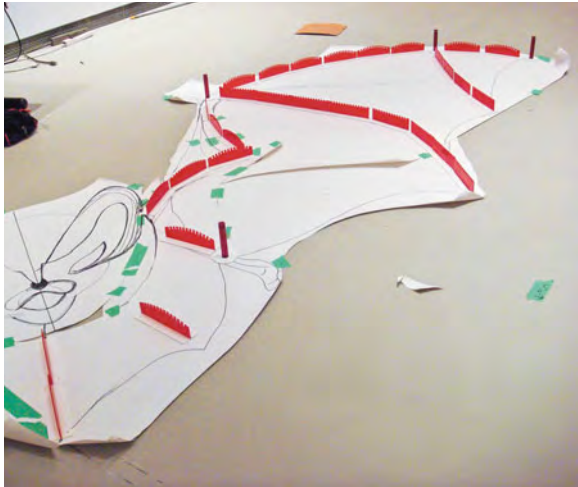
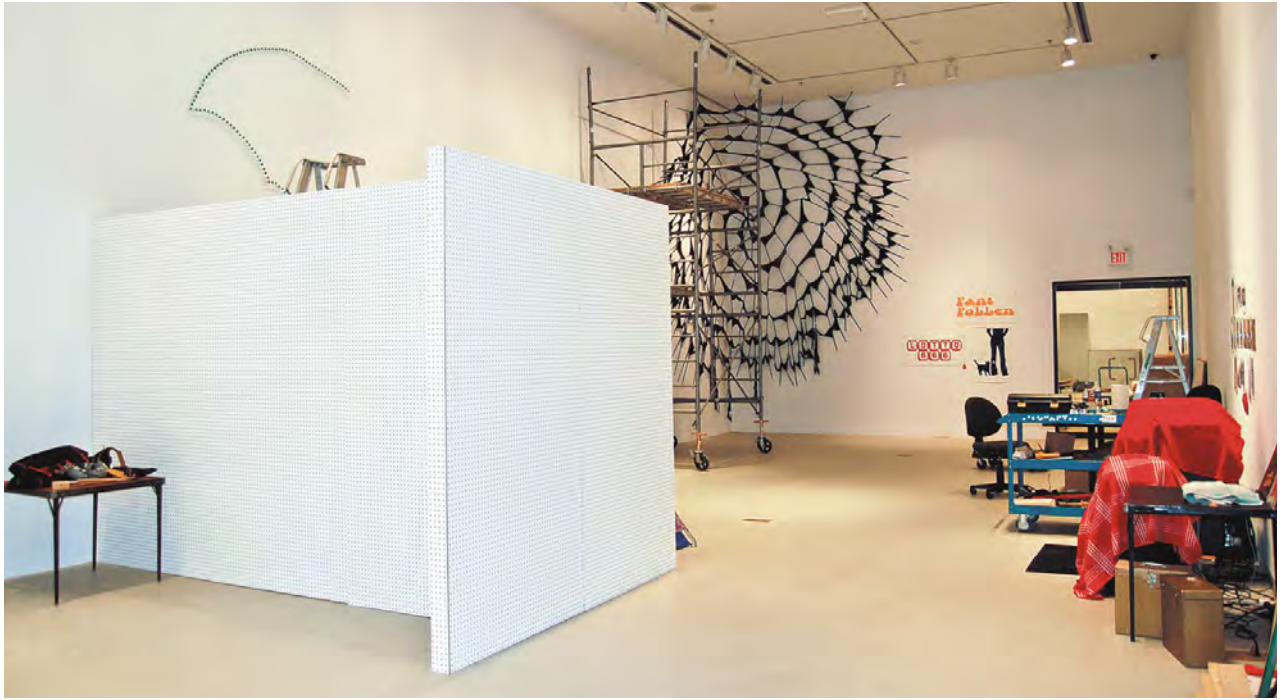




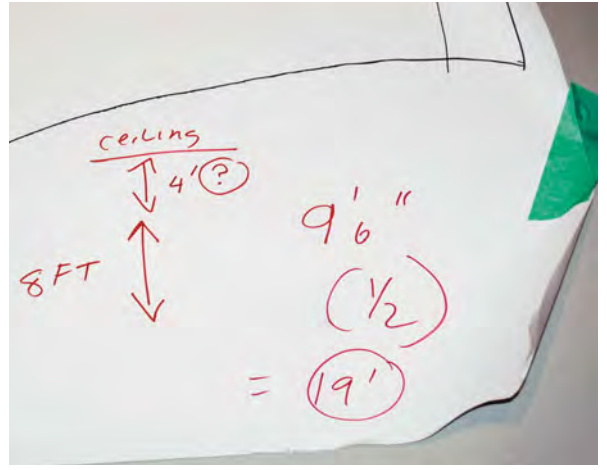




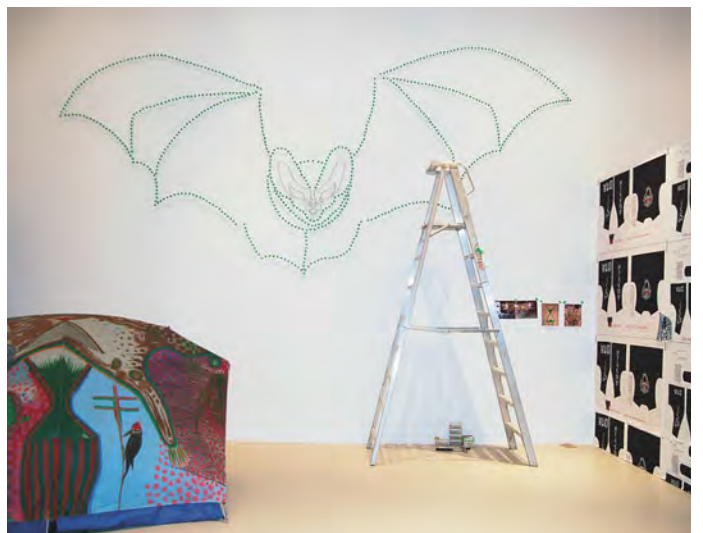




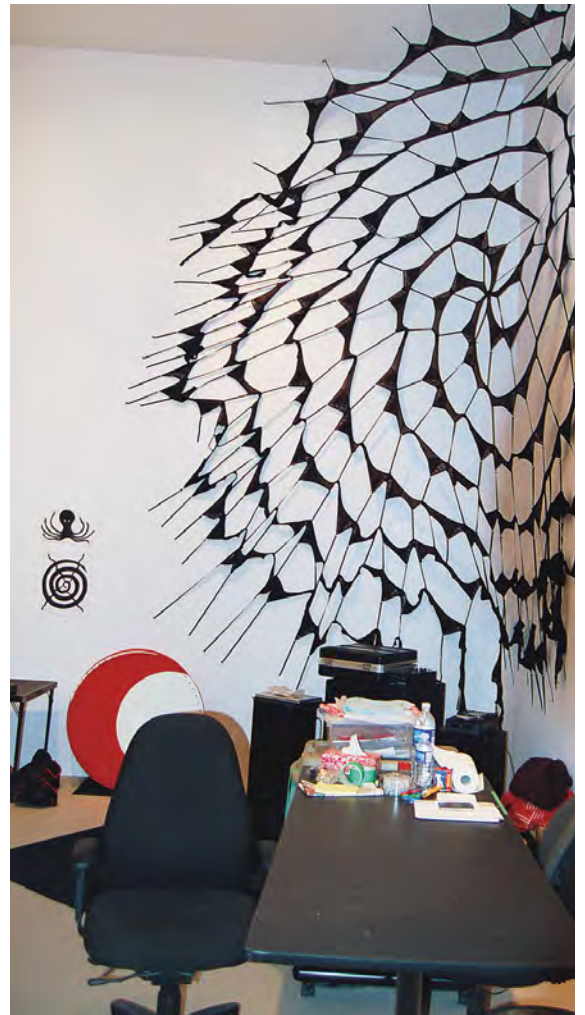
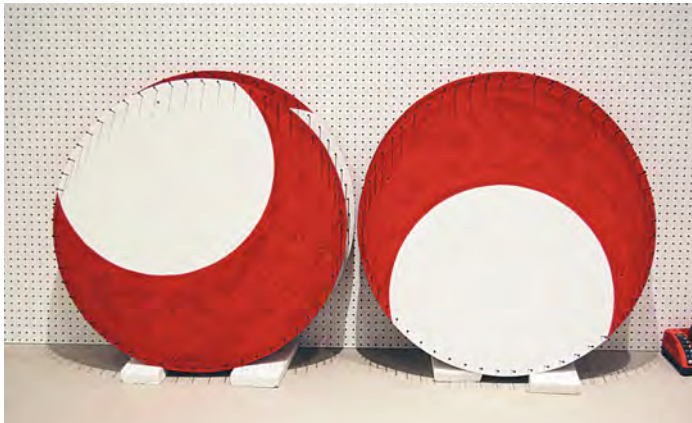




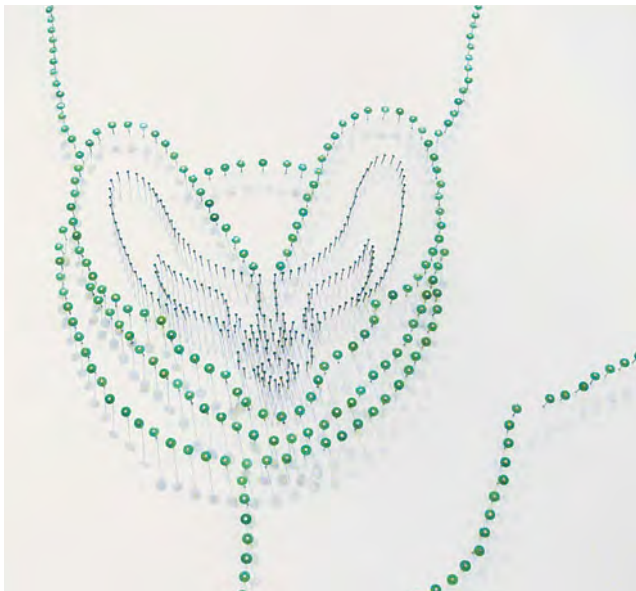








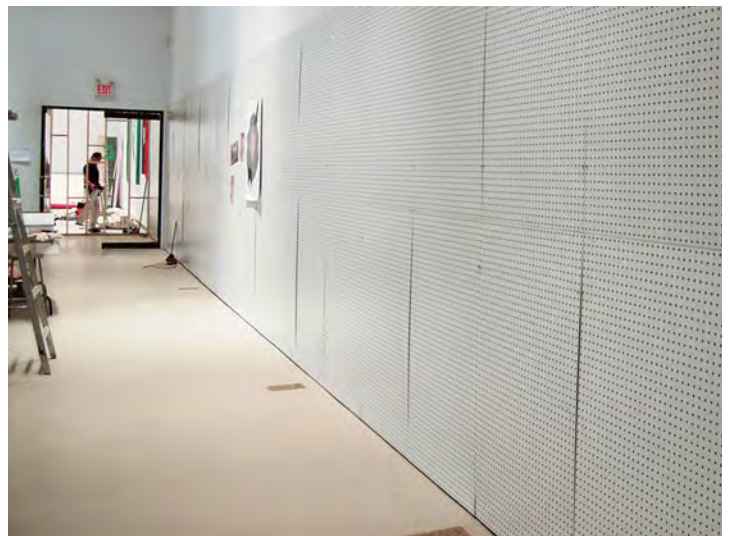
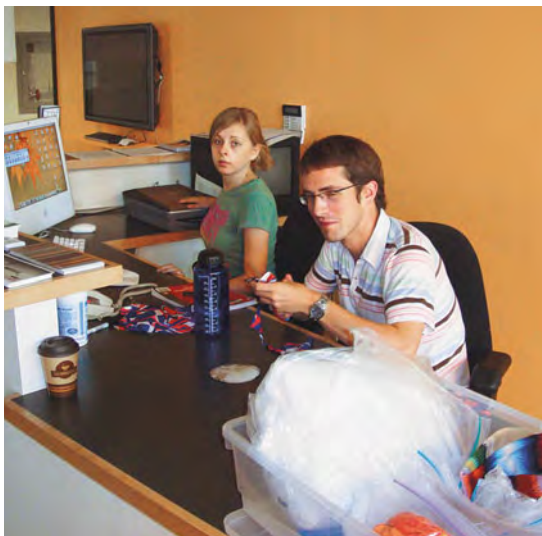








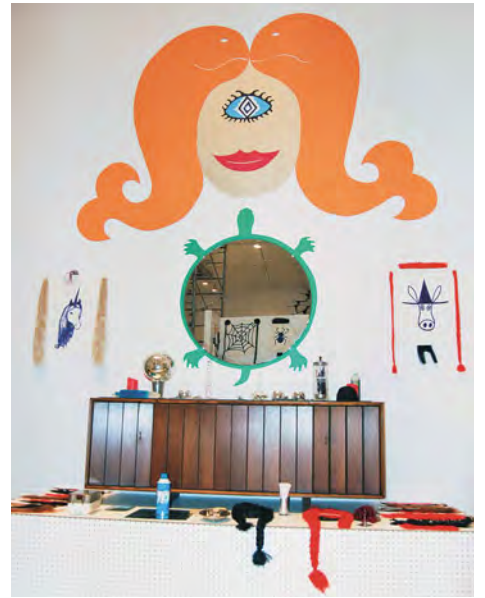












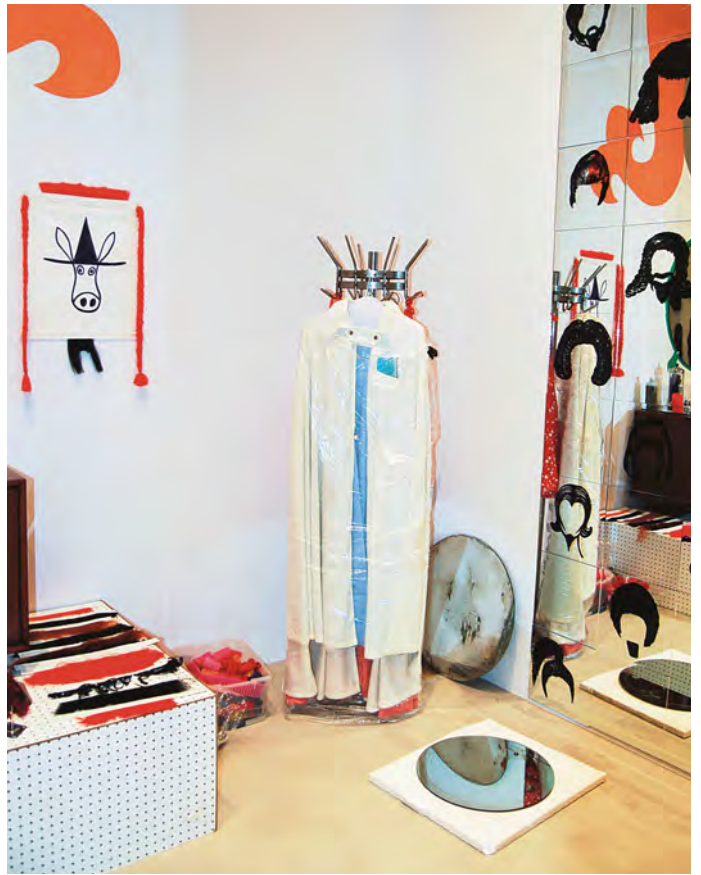




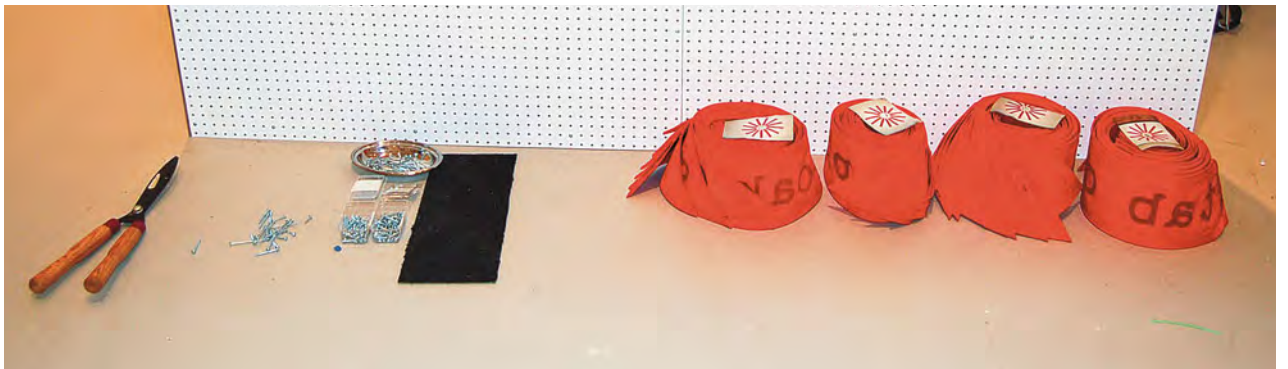








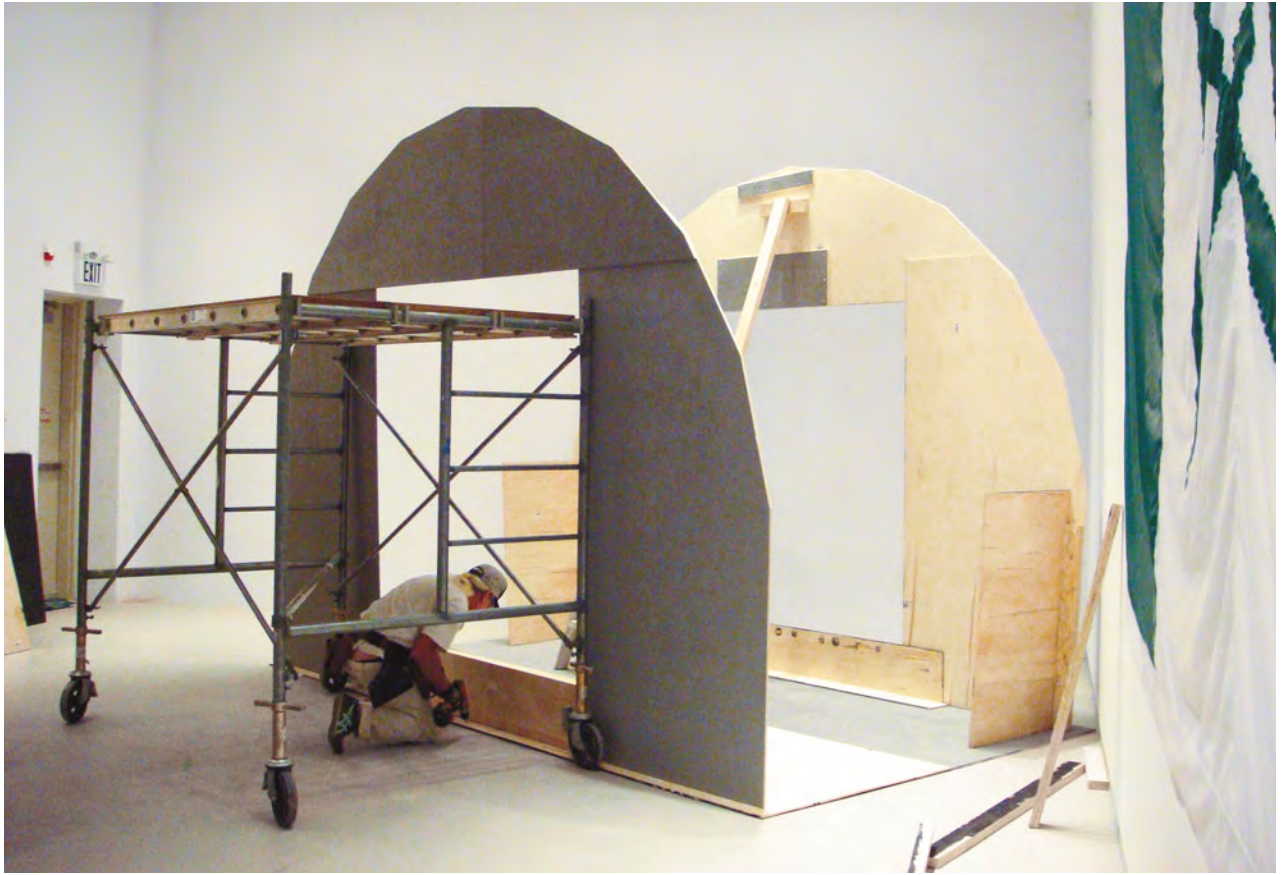












**PROPS  
TO THE  
FAIRY  
PEOPLE**

**Jon Davies**



Active since the early eighties, Creemore, Ontario-based FASTWÜRMS has evolved a cosmology that unites every creature, scrap of cultural detritus, and social scene into one harmonious and hedonistic union. The arena for their aesthetic alchemy is subcultural style—working class, youth, stoner, witch, goth, queer, cat-fancier, pirate, country, anarchist; all filtered through pop mediation, camp adoration/irony, and an amateur’s loving hand—and their methods are collaboration, craft, collecting, movies, and manifestos. The shared authorship of partners Kim Kozzi and Dai Skuse as well as a number of others over the decades, FASTWÜRMS has carved out an all-encompassing art/life system that stands as a more home-spun and tactile rejoinder to meta-media barons General Idea—that other great Toronto art group. The WÜRMS’ breed of casual socializing-cum-performance has been a vital part of their practice from the beginning, making them not only pioneer practitioners of the now-widespread genre of ‘relational aesthetics,’ but also key catalysts in the dynamic Toronto art ecology as well. (As different as their styles may be, it’s hard to imagine artists like “service-oriented” collective Instant Coffee or fellow craft “maximalist” Allyson Mitchell without the WÜRMS—and indeed both have worked and played with the WÜRMS.) Arguably, they could have served as a model for Dave Hickey’s view of art as a “mode of social discourse, a participatory republic, an accumulation of small, fragile social occasions that provide the binding agent of fugitive communities” in a scene that has changed dramatically during their more than three decades of production. Delighting in culture-surfing and social scenic crossover, the duo mash up all manner of subcultural signifiers into a creolized, impure utopia.

The WÜRMS’ ethical system—which brings together the most radical and compelling elements of witch and queer cultures, or, essentially, “do what you will, harm unto none”—is an animistic rejoinder to the restrictions of civilization with our humans-only burdens of guilt, shame, and self-doubt. As media theorist Sean Cubitt states in his 2005 essay *Drawing Animals*, “Human desire is founded on loss and lack, while animal instinct is presumably ordered by presence and fullness, since it is never mediated by those prohibitions that shape humanity.” More into id than super-ego, the WÜRMS’ copious videotaping, photographing, mark-making, crafting, and scavenging of objects—not to mention the excess of their display strategies—adds up to a radical, ethical art practice based on desire and pleasure. They have called into being a sprawling menagerie of plants and animals—cats, frogs, owls, bats, vultures, spiders, snakes, and more—united in one voracious polymorphously perverse supernatural clusterfuck.

In Jim Trainor's animated film *The Moschops*, one of the two narrators is a female "moschop," a mammal-like reptile that lumbered the earth over 250 million years ago. As is characteristic of Trainor's unsettling anthropomorphism, she bears the weight of a soulful, articulate self-consciousness that usually only humans carry. At one point she dryly intones, "We didn't love each other exactly, but we all slept together in one big stupid pile." Through accumulating nearly a decade's worth of architectures, objects, drawings/paintings, and videos—the artifacts of their communal production process—into one such "big stupid pile" at the dynamic duo's autumn 2007 survey exhibition DONKY@NINJA@WITCH at the Art Gallery of York University, the artists' similarly perverse worldview was bountifully on display.

FASTWÜRMS filled the long and narrow exhibition space with an overwhelming accumulation of, well, stuff. Considering how shiny and new the space still appeared two years into the AGYU's occupation, the pair faced an enormous challenge in dressing it up in their über-accessible shabby chic, but their reams of charm and sheer excess prevailed. Through copious use of that old do-it-yourselfer's standby, pegboard, they managed to transform the somewhat sterile and pristine galleries into a row of pseudo-flea market stalls that called to mind—and subtly mocked—booths crammed with art objects for sale in the international circuit of art fairs. Their crafty aesthetic and hoarding-based practice respect no distinction between found and handmade or trash and treasure in the relentless amassing of objects—talismans, not tchotchkes—and their attendant pleasures. The pair's imagery is viral: an object, symbol, figure, or animal—horseshoe, pentacle, ghost, or mouse—may first appear, say, on a denim patch but soon find its way onto a poster or a flag, painted on the wall or sculpted out of string, such as the monumental, grotesque bat crafted specially for the AGYU. By multiplying their elements, each FASTWÜRMS stall at the AGYU remixed and expanded projects from the past eight years that originally took place in various spaces on Queen Street West in Toronto, many of these installations-cum-rituals overseen by the strip's grande doyenne, the gallerist and artist Andrew Harwood, who has since decamped for Winnipeg. (Both these descriptors of the WÜRMS' projects fall short somehow: "Installation" sounds too formal, as they are more like the residual *mise-en-scènes* of crafting, socializing, play, and performance; "ritual," meanwhile, comes off far too rigorous and reverent for the joyful libertinage of their projects.) It should be noted that the artists camped out in the AGYU in a tent during the protracted two-month-plus residency/installation of their collection over the summer. Living space and exhibition space thereby became muddled much like it does throughout their artistic process, with craft work at home happening in front of the TV when not editing videos, writing polemics, growing herbs, teaching art, or caretaking their homestead and feline buddies such as Cheese, Ludacris, Dragon-Wagon, Russell Crowbar, Taalon, Spoticus, Bunny, and Petunia (who frequently appear in the artists' work, including a set of majestic colour photos of the wild beasts).

Activating the spaces they create through a combination of socializing and performance is a key component of FASTWÜRMS' approach. Two projects at the AGYU in particular testify to the important role played by Harwood and his Zsa Zsa Gallery (1998-2005) in the WÜRMS' practice. *House of Bangs* (1999) is a hair salon of your wildest dreams, with walls covered in an assortment of wigs and implements both for hair styling—driers, curlers, blades—and seamier purposes (such as a big blue glass corncob virtually begging to be inserted into a hungry orifice). Hair clippings from the exhibition's opening night remained piled on the floor, the remnants of the TLC doled out to an appreciative public by hairdressers Harwood and artist Lisa Pereira as a full moon shone above them.



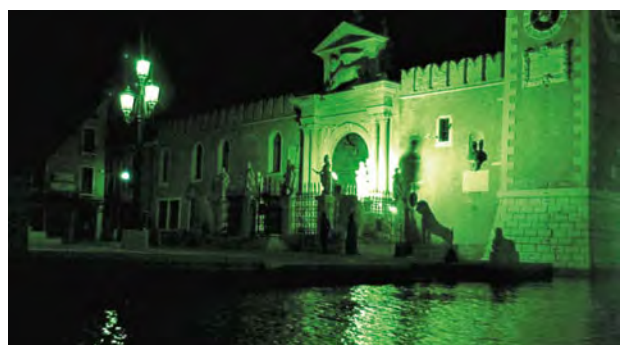
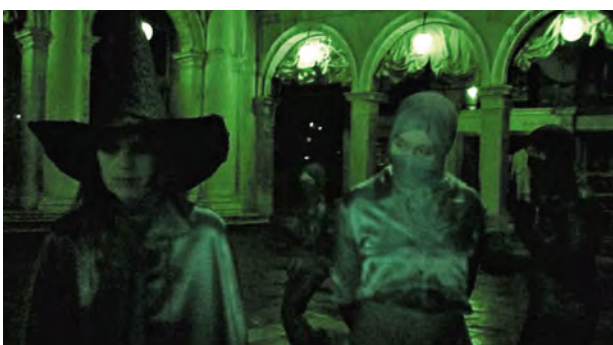
*Blood & Swash* (2002), meanwhile, is a shrine to denim and drawing, to the art brut of bored high school students doodling on their blue jeans with Bics. A tattoo parlour for dilettantes and dabblers who don't want to commit to anything permanent—unlike the braver convicts, sailors, bikers, metalheads, and punks whom the space invokes who wouldn't shy away from being marked for eternity—*Blood & Swash* was like a cultic clubhouse for worshipping the transformative potential of the pen and marker with artist Jill Henderson, the WÜRMS and other friends playing badasses and inscribing the temporary tats on all takers at the show's opening night reception. As one would expect from the installations' original contexts, there was very little in the AGYU that could be misconstrued as a pristine art object, the WÜRMS' pile represents a labour of love and profuse commingling.

The drawings that cover the pegboard dividers of *Blood & Swash* find their way onto a wall of witty pirate-themed illustrations on scarves in another room, which feature an assortment of imagery ranging from cartoonish octopi and fearsome sharks to numerous variations on the tried and true skull-and-crossbones motif. These hankie drawings are punctuated by geeky flourishes including the unexpectedly faint-hearted caption “Dental Plan”—scrawled on a machete—and a group of otherwise vicious Vikings under the headline “ABBA.” This is the installation *Pirate Head* (2004), which honours the pirate as revolutionary criminal and tracks the frequently overt homoeroticism of his escapades, as conveyed through pirated (ahem) clips of Errol Flynn in *Captain Blood* and “Fashion Television.” Branding, bondage, and whipping are prevalent motifs, and a heaving, hairy man-chest is never far away. To top it all off, a phallic canon, emitting an occasional wisp of smelly gun smoke, pokes through a pegboard wall.

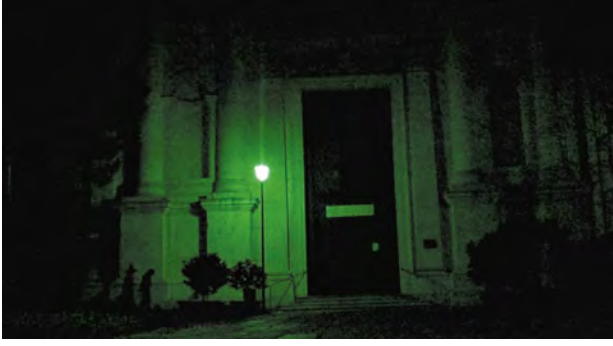
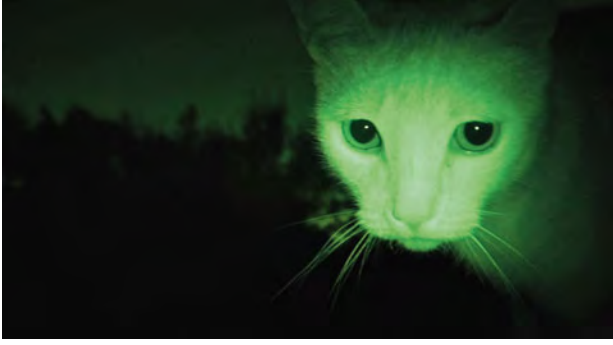
Projects such as these can be seen as allegories of the role of the artist in post-everything culture, where there is an eschewal of aesthetic authority and mastery in favour of the devising of stimulants for social exchange. Thus artists become tradesmen and craftspeople, embracing non-elitist and collaborative creative forms (craft, specifically textiles, has a particularly prominent place in Toronto's art community). They also bring to their work a very casual and mundane approach to materials that resists any lingering post-Nauman mystique around the artist's studio and the mythic, hard-won labours that emerge from it fully formed into the light of day. The artist is seen instead as a role to be self-consciously performed. The WÜRMS playfully enact the artist as bohemian, as arbiter of cool, as party animal, as shape-shifting magician, as mediator between dangerous and exotic subcultures and a culture-hungry educated elite. They fulfill our desires for transgression with the bravado of an adolescent poseur's game of dress-up, wielding the universal language of style and the emblems of a cult we all want to belong to.

The most iconic identity that the artists take on is that of the witch, and the fashion in which they live and inhabit the world as witches reflects their sensibility more broadly: all identity is performance and, to cite the long established adage, the personal is political. They are, in fact, “real” witches who practice magick rituals, worship and live in communion with the natural world, indulge primal urges rather than repressing them, and resist authority and the exercise of power over other people/creatures. Yet they are also acutely aware of the pervasive visual and performative conventions associated with witchcraft from dominant culture, which are historically rooted in misinformation. They are more than willing to take on and play with these persuasive clichés and caricatures—such as their oft-worn matching denim cloaks and pointed hats—as they say, “our strategy is to confirm and confound expectations. We are, after all, shape shifters!” Thus,

START







END

authentic belief can rub shoulders with a self-conscious inhabiting of this oft-demonized identity. Their religion isn't dogmatic but rather an anarchist-spiritual worldview: the perspective of the outsider capable of casting a wry gaze at both the misguided mainstream and herself simultaneously. Witchcraft is the origin of much of FASTWÜRMS' iconography, but they are willing to let it float freely as another set of subcultural signifiers to traffic in.

The projects the artists' undertook at Zsa Zsa, Paul Petro Contemporary Art, and other Queen Street West spaces were provisional, limited by what could fit into their car, and took place in the summers when FASTWÜRMS had time off from their professorship in the Studio Art program at the University of Guelph. Outside the commercial art calendar cycle, they avoided the pressure of having to make sales and compete for attention. Attesting to Zsa Zsa's openness and its status as an interactive, semi-public space—its bite-size floor plan blending with the street life outside—the hair salon and the tattoo parlour were service-oriented projects where enthusiasm trumped expertise and everyone who walked in—artists, mental health patients, and other neighbourhood residents—could depart transformed, not only by their new 'do and Sharpie tattoo, but by the class-mixing, queer-inflected sociability encountered within. This kind of boundary-crossing social experiment is inseparable from the longstanding gentrification of this particular stretch of Queen Street West, which has seen flophouses and working-class dives gradually replaced with swank hotels and bars and the construction of towering blocks of condominiums that, when completed, will rub shoulders with a newly renovated Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, redeveloped with the intention of integrating its marginalized but highly visible clients with the increasingly tony neighbourhood around them.

In a 1997 article, reprinted in 2004 in *C Magazine*, "Show's Over Folks, Move Along: The Institutionalization of Art and the Secret Life of the Underground," curator Philip Monk discussed how what were once considered transgressive subcultural expressions are now completely integrated into the mainstream entertainment industry and thus rendered banal, leaving art desperately searching for new margins: the "show really and truly is over." He suggests that "[t]he 'underground' today is a representation" and that the *idea* of an underground became the subject of the generation that came of age after the sixties and began to make work in the eighties (as FASTWÜRMS did, at the beginning of the decade): "Can an *image* alone sustain some reference to the underground without being its actual documentation? Are reprising *roles* enough to keep a dialogue with the idea of the underground at least intermittent?" These are the images and performances that compel young people to become artists and join art scenes. With the AGYU exhibition, FASTWÜRMS was a perfect case study for Monk's concerns. They employ forms of sociality and marginality that Monk associates with the suburbs and their denizens' distance from and desire for the underground and its pleasures, for which art is a "compensation." Like Larry Clark but with greater self-awareness, FASTWÜRMS remakes and re-embodies the underground—and the experimental identity-hopping of youth culture—from a geographical and temporal distance by performing its roles and rituals. They do this not from the vantage of an American suburb but from the relatively provincial position of Toronto—and now from profoundly rural Creemore. Riffs on self-fashioning are endlessly replayed in their work, promiscuously cobbling together subcultural signifiers from bits and pieces of whatever's around. This form of stylistic self-creation as collage has deep roots in the WÜRMS' Ottawa punk youths, punk being a subculture that Dick Hebdige and others have interpreted as a kind of chaotic bricolage drawing on the elements of subcultures gone by. Monk's curatorial text for this exhibition meanwhile explicitly aligned the duo's witch identities with the queerness of the Queen Street West scene, further suggesting the fluidity of identity categories.



Some call this self-fashioning practice “queer world-making,” and one could draw provocative parallels to the demonic invocations of avant-garde deity and Crowleyan occultist Kenneth Anger, who similarly patched together a huge range of styles and scenes—from sparkly Hollywood glamourpusses to depraved Bacchanalian bikers—in his indelible films. In conversation, the WÜRMS point out that the definition of the word “occult” is something hidden, and their work uncovers the buried codes that make styles legible. In their videos, which have become prominent pieces of their installations, pop culture found-footage is juxtaposed with performance, thus casting every visual artifact as a kind of artifice or drag that anyone can accomplish simply by roping in one’s friends to a makeshift film set and improvising some costumes and props.

The animal is another identity central to FASTWÜRMS’ oeuvre. The way we look at and represent animals cuts to the heart of our unspoken collective anxieties about the limits of the human. When I mentioned how little academic attention the phenomenon of animal cuteness receives and the oftentimes physical, gut reaction experienced in the face of cuteness, Skuse dubbed the feeling a “heart orgasm.” He also slyly pointed out that this visceral response is precisely what many find lacking in contemporary art, whose cool affective detachment some blame for art’s inability to attract a lay audience. It is no surprise that animal imagery is so omnipresent in visual culture considering how its pleasures are so instinctive and affective, or, as some see it, generic, easy, even Pavlovian. For FASTWÜRMS, however, cute animals are never the paradigm of pitiable innocence, fuzzy vulnerability, and disempowered objectification that cultural critic Daniel Harris suggests they are in his entertaining study, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic*. In a very real way, FASTWÜRMS treats them as equals—the heart orgasm can perhaps be interpreted as the most intense expression of empathy. Opening up their cosmology beyond the human widens FASTWÜRMS’ sphere of community to all creatures. Jumping off from Commoner’s first law of ecology—everything is connected to everything else—Cubitt proposes that drawing animals, as FASTWÜRMS consistently does, is a form not only of humans reaching out to embrace other species but the reverse as well; their likenesses compel us. Power runs on a two-way street, and through simultaneous anthropomorphic projection and zoomorphic introjection, drawing animals becomes the “conduit” for “trans-species identification.” The WÜRMS declare in their artist statement “Witch Nation: Directive from the Ministry of Information” that, “[i]n the Witch world, the ‘other’ is understood to include all peoples, animals, plants, the vast web of life, the universe.” Or, to invoke the “full sense” of the word kindness as related by J.M. Coetzee’s eponymous protagonist in his 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*, “an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature” and each of us “an embodied soul.”

A “web of life” in microcosm, *Gusset Nation* (2004) is an ode to pussy power and pussy play—both feline and vaginal. Giant spider webs built from geometrically organized panties span the room—crotchitecture?—intertwined with colourful yarn to form a pet pussy’s wet dream. On a video monitor near a catnip crafting station, *Pussy Necropolis*, one of the duo’s most downright entertaining tapes, plays on a loop. It is a rousing collage of post-mauling Siegfried and Roy headlines and clips (including some WÜRMS-shot scenes of a majestic tiger held prisoner in this other cat-loving duo’s “Secret Garden”), B-movie ancient Egyptian cat myths, cartoons, and footage of their wickedly cute quartet of identical, yawning kittens in their own roiling, “big stupid pile” of striped ginger fur set to the strains of AC/DC’s “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap.” (Animals are frequent stars in other FASTWÜRMS videos as well; one is unlikely to forget the vultures in their mesmerizing *Red of Tooth and Kaw* (2001), for example, which was not included in the AGYU show.) Untrained animals rarely do what they are told when the camera is on, permitting us to witness creatures simply

being themselves, free of the burden of serving as our metaphors: at the end of *Pussy Necropolis* (2004) a cat proudly tosses a delicious rodent at the cameraperson's feet, while an enthusiastically leg-humping dog steals an already slapdash scene of rowdy pirate play in the video for the installation *Pirate Head* (2004). Meanwhile, trans-species communication is satirized in their short video *Telepathacats* (2003). Here FASTWÜRMS' convoluted, incantatory language of hand gestures attempting to manipulate a couple of cats in the snow is juxtaposed with a scientist engaged in very similar "magic" to control the operation of a dauntingly high-tech piece of machinery. The supernatural and science collide here, and neither offers a satisfying prescription for dominating the Other, whether animal or mechanical. (Remember that, *pace* Descartes, animals were long held to be closer to machines than to humans, incapable of feeling pain or even thinking).

Also animal-themed, the projects *Blood Clock* (2005) and the newly created *Pink Donky* (2007) are more austere than the other, earlier installations that were on view, particularly when one knows that the cow serenely gamboling through a sunset-reflecting pond in the video for *Blood Clock* was a bovine neighbour of the wÜRMS destined for the abattoir. One can even detect an apocalyptic vibe, generated, perhaps, from the rise of despair in our twenty-first century entrenchment in the War on Terror (this might also explain the appearance of the hourglass in their recent work, a foreboding warning that time is running out). Despite the artists' often tongue-in-cheek dark-hued iconography, the claustrophobic *Blood Clock* is the only room that feels like a mausoleum, its white pegboards covered with both real and black silhouette painted tools, as well as a menagerie of crow paintings. One wall is decked out with sharp hatchets, scythes, and knives—which reminded *Globe and Mail* art critic Sarah Milroy of the weapons of a peasant uprising—while the other mixes a wide array of dildos and buttplugs with lucky horseshoes—the weapons of a pagan sex orgy, perhaps. This collusion of tools of industry and tools of play—as in *House of Bangs*—takes on the appearance of a hieroglyphic language system, though any concrete meaning remains enigmatic if not beside the point.

*Pink Donky's* elements congeal into a strange brew of potion-casting wordplay, détourned nationalism, and an explicit animal liberation politic: a striking series of bright orange banners bearing such fantastical ingredients as "piss of otter" and "gall of willow" hang near a cauldron of salt and a quartz stone; giant red and green flags replace the iconic Canadian maple leaf with a giant pentacle; and a smattering of photos document The Donkey Sanctuary of Canada, an Elysian refuge for the noble, Christ-like beast of burden. Screening inside a small barn-like shed, their new video *Witch vs. Ninja* stages a rumble between the wÜRMS (in full witch regalia) and a posse of ninjas on the streets of Venice. Tensions boil up one moment and simmer to a détente the next, but no one seems to be taking their roles too seriously, with the ninjas roasting marshmallows and all sleeping in the same bed (one even requires an inhaler for their asthma). The piece also references class struggle through the artists' labeling these "workers of the night" as "donkys," their slang "for all the behind the scenes workers and beasts of burden that do all the unglamorous but essential dirty work." Fittingly, the handsome poster for the exhibition designed by frequent collaborator Cecilia Berkovic bears a litany of names of all those involved in bringing this most ambitious project to fruition, thus acknowledging the social, fraternal, and physical labours behind FASTWÜRMS, and giving due thanks to under-appreciated donkys both human and equine.



of “peer to peer, artist to artist exchange” that originates from a shared politic and aims to be less hierarchical than traditional pedagogical mentoring: “The social dynamics and the event architecture of our projects are aesthetic elements, and we choose our collaborators based on our project parameters [which] require a subtle translation of self interest into a (temporary) transcendent social creativity.” They have characterized FASTWÜRMS as a “hybrid avatar artist,” a social construction that contains within it the sum of the reciprocal relationships that contribute to a given initiative, and this “avatar” has most often included artists Katie Bethune-Leamen (whose obsession with mushrooms that culminated in the construction of a gigantic *Mushroom Studio* (2008-9) in the Toronto Sculpture Garden suggests the wÜRMS’ influence), Jill Henderson and Zin Taylor, writer RM Vaughan, and numerous other individuals and groups in Toronto and elsewhere.

It was through foregrounding the communal that DONKY@NINJA@WITCH ultimately underscored the radical uniqueness of FASTWÜRMS’ practice, a singularity that is perhaps paradoxical considering its relentless game of cultural call and response, and its staging of the artist as go-between for seemingly disparate subcultures (and species). Their lusty, righteous cosmology has included and influenced many other artists, animating much of what is most vital about art production in the city of Toronto. In fact, their soaring *Woodpecker Column* (1997), with its two bird-priests situated near the Skydome, stands guard over—and, at night, illuminates—Hogtown’s pagans, queers, and other artists not far from that other, better-known tower (the straight one): a bent signpost for a whole metropolis’ carnal and creaturely urges.



# WITCH NATION

DIRECTIVE FROM THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION



WITCHCRAFT IS AN OLD RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY,  
AN ANCIENT CULTURAL NATION THAT SHARES WITH THE MODERN HIP-HOP NATION  
A CREATIVE “CAN’T STOP, WON’T STOP” COMPULSION  
TO EXCEED BOUNDARIES AND LIMITATIONS,  
TO MOVE BEYOND THE NARROW CONSTRAINTS OF NATION, RACE, ETC.,  
TOWARDS THE DIVERSE, PLURAL, AND HYBRID,  
THE COMMONWEALTH OF A BOUNTIFUL AND BEAUTIFUL, POLYMORPHOUS AND  
POLYCULTURAL AVALON.

THE WITCH NATION ANTHEM IS A SONG ABOUT INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM  
AND THE PRICE OF UNIVERSAL LIBERTY:

**“DO WHAT YOU WILL, HARM UNTO NONE.”**

IN WITCH CULTURE

PERSONAL FREEDOM IS A PARTICIPATION AND POSITIVITY ECONOMY:

**ENHANCE THE LIBERTY OF “OTHERS”**

**AND YOU PROSPER,**

**CONSTRAIN FREE WILL AND YOU SUFFER.**

IN THE WITCH WORLD, THE “OTHER” IS UNDERSTOOD TO INCLUDE  
ALL PEOPLES, ANIMALS, PLANTS, THE VAST WEB OF LIFE, THE UNIVERSE.

**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR YOUR**

**“DONKY” TODAY?**









"TOOL & DRESS  
BY CAPTAIN X"  
—TELL THE FACTS—  
MOTORS & ALL BENEFITS  
RETT 2011 69"



spider



















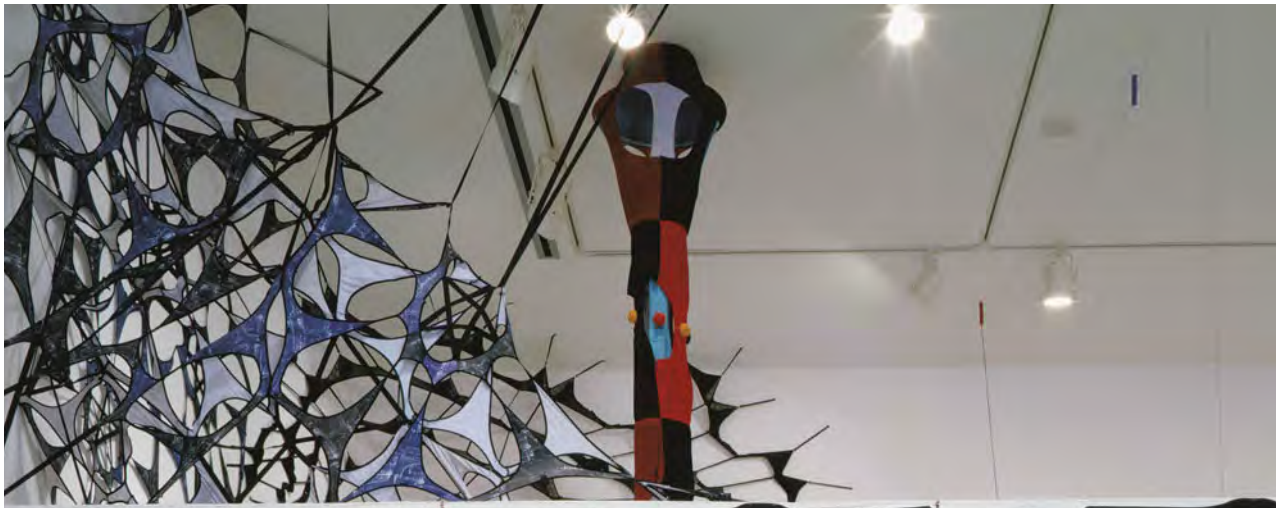






























House of Banns





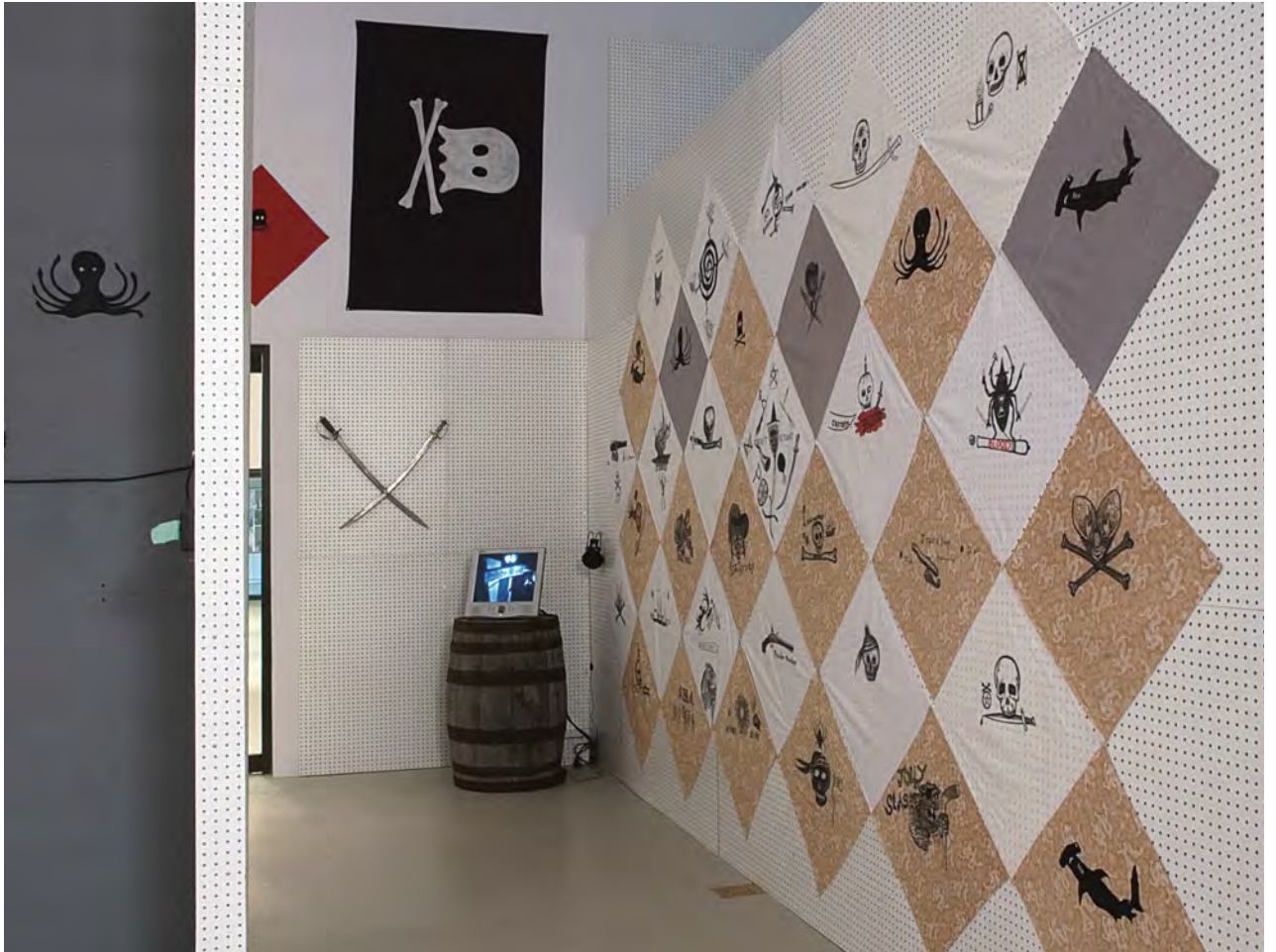


















mull of mole

bark of toad

wing of knat

fix of frog

jot of junko

kip of coyote

arch of cat

mote of mouse

atom of ant

felt of elk

jag of jay

lash of bat

skin of birch

sally of lark

horn of owl

piss of otter

lick of flame

dive of loon

coat of skunk

spit of snake

pox of poppy

spike of crow

kiss of otter

flit of moth

knee of ash

maw of jaguar

mew of beaver

cut of swift

bluff of bear

eye of raven

gall of willow

lap of lynx

pant of puma

coll of snake

fleet of fox

stab of heron

spy of shrike

sex of seal





spilt of snake

pox of poppy

spike of crow

mull of mole

bark of toad

wing of knat



NO  
HUNTING







# NATURE IN THE NETWORK

**Sally McKay**



*In the Witch world Others are understood to include all peoples, animals, plants, the vast web of life, the universe. — FASTWÜRMS<sup>1</sup>*

*Nobody of even average intelligence could possibly actually believe any of this to be literally true. — blog comment regarding Wiccan beliefs<sup>2</sup>*

In a recent TED Lecture (available online), neurobiologist Ted Sapolsky suggested that the one human quality that most distinguishes us from other animals is our ability to believe two contradictory things at once.

Sapolsky, apparently, hasn't spent much time with cats.

Cats are masters of contradiction, experts at suspension of disbelief.<sup>3</sup> A good game of string chasing is equal parts chasing and hunting, and a good mouse hunt is equal parts hunting and playing. FASTWÜRMS spends a lot of time with cats and their artworks posit a feline-esque fluidity between reality and representation.

FASTWÜRMS' short video *Telepathacats* (2003) opens with footage of a science lab. Two men in white coats manoeuvre a large unidentifiable, techno-scientific piece of equipment. One of the scientists gestures slowly with a white-gloved hand as the other man carefully moves the machine into place. The scene then cuts to a blindingly white snowy landscape in which the witches—wearing pointy black hats, black capes, and gloves—make slow, hypnotic hand gestures as their cats cavort around them. Set to a techno-dance groove, the edits cut back and forth between the witches and the scientists, as each use their hands to shape and direct the movements on screen. The cats seem to be enjoying themselves a great deal, and the patterns of their movement are often in synch with the witches' directives. As the cats and witches play together, nobody of average intelligence could possibly actually believe that any telepathic communication is going on...or could they?

Why assume, for instance, that the witches are doing the directing? Perhaps the cats are setting the agenda and FASTWÜRMS simply responding, adjusting their movements to reflect the imminent behaviours telegraphed by the cats they know so well. Or perhaps it's a bit of both, a give and take in which all parties are teasing each other with intertwining moments of tension and release. During the climactic scene, Dai Skuse crouches in the foreground making an upwards gesture with his hand, his pointy witch hat perfectly composed in the frame, while one of the handsome orange cats, also perfectly composed

(in both senses of the phrase), leaps dramatically up the side of a snow bank. It looks for all the world as if Dai and the cat are in cahoots, both playing to the camera, and we the audience are the ones being teased.

The scientists in the video are goofy in their solemnity, yet they also exude confidence. They have a system, and it works. The witches' demeanour is similar. Nobody except FASTWÜRMS could wear those funny hats and pull it off. They seem both convinced and convincing because, while they are certainly playing, they aren't *just* playing. FASTWÜRMS really are witches, and they really do communicate with cats.

The word telepathy has a supernatural connotation, implying, according to the Collins English Dictionary, that communication is happening by means that "cannot be understood by known scientific laws." Mind reading, on the other hand, is a perfectly ordinary term in the neuro- and cognitive sciences. People often make assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of others based on facial expressions and body language. While those assumptions may not always be correct, they are accurate enough to form the basis of much of our communication. Interspecies mind reading, then, need not come as much of a surprise, especially between animals who are as intimate and familiar as FASTWÜRMS and the cats with whom they live.

For FASTWÜRMS, expressions of witchcraft are often analogous to the practices of science. In a recent conversation with the author they explained, "A good word for 'magic' is 'gnosis.' The aspiration of witches is to become wise. Magic and knowledge are really interchangeable."<sup>4</sup> The forms of knowledge associated with both witchcraft and science are derived from nature and a belief in the complex interactions of matter. In the context of art, matter and the complex interactions of culture are conjoined. In FASTWÜRMS' massive and multi-layered exhibition DONKY@NINJA@WITCH, viewers were given the option to engage with situated, embodied systems of knowledge on their own terms. The artists' installations are politicized, contingent, constructed, and far too complex to allow for any singular kind of cartographic reading. It is up to the viewer to bring their own experiences to bear. In this respect, FASTWÜRMS is eminently postmodern. And yet, despite their lexical use of iconic imagery, FASTWÜRMS' practice has never fallen prey to the logocentrism of high-postmodern practice. The art experiences they offer are embodied and manifest, real to the same extent as rocks and trees and cats, aesthetic epiphanies, political allegiances, and cultural cliques.

In the late 1980s, the artworld was fully in the grip of high-postmodernism. Christian Eckart was making a cynical splash with paintings that consisted solely of their own gilded frames. Gerhard Richter was painstakingly scaling-up abstract gestural brushstrokes with tiny fine brushes. In Canada, Andy Patton was making paintings of canvas on canvas, Joanne Tod was reflecting images of feminine wealth and status back to the elite bourgeoisie, and Ian Carr-Harris was making installations with his elegant and austere juxtapositions of objects and material. In the midst of all this art-for-art's-sake self-referentiality, FASTWÜRMS—no less ironic and no less savvy to artworld tropes and memes—was creating messy, sexy, gawky installations that brought viewers into direct experiential contact with the natural world.

While Richter and Patton demythologized the expressive potential of the artist's hand by turning their own hands to a process free of gesture, FASTWÜRMS displayed



on the signifying qualities of man-made materials, FASTWÜRMS fashioned uncanny mounds of collected bark and mud. While Eckart played with the hollow satisfaction of fetish, FASTWÜRMS created totems that invoked the resonant power of ritual. While Tod passed comment on the construction of femininity, FASTWÜRMS created their own iconic goddess, Powerful Birch Girl, whose image still appears in their installations to this day. And yet, even at that time when an arch stance of detachment was apparently *de rigueur*, FASTWÜRMS was a hit, showing in high profile institutions like the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Ydessa Gallery. Their work was always rife with campy po-mo humour, full of visual and linguistic puns indicating their thorough understanding of lexical connotation. They knew how signifiers worked and they were adept at their deployment; they just refused the notion that signifiers belonged to a separate sphere from life experience. In FASTWÜRMS' artworks, meaning has always emerged from the fundamental inseparability of culture and nature.

Like the collective General Idea, FASTWÜRMS keeps careful control over their own image: producing texts and manifestos rife with media-friendly sound bites, disseminating postcards, posters, stickers, and other ephemera that swarm in and around their installations like a colony of bats. Another similarity is that, just as FASTWÜRMS really are witches, General Idea really were the famous and glamorous art stars they claimed to be. An important difference between the two collectives, however, is that art stars hold positions of status in the art world and witches do not. In a 2006 interview with Robert Enright, FASTWÜRMS explains:

**Dai Skuse** We were always getting positioned as if we somehow had a direct relationship to [General Idea], but we were coming out of New Wave and punk. In Toronto we were in the East End, in the warehouse district, where it was basically punks and outsiders. We saw General Idea as uptown intellectuals, compared to us.

**Kim Kozzi** We were definitely working class and we had no aspirations to be famous *per se*. We would never have made a statement like they made about fame. At the time it seemed really facile to us. But I'm a total fan of much of what they've done, so I'd like to be included, but I don't think there is much of a relationship.<sup>5</sup>

For FASTWÜRMS, identifying as witches—a group with a long history of persecution—means identifying deeply with outsiders and social underdogs as well as with rocks, trees, and animals.

Nowadays, FASTWÜRMS uses a lot less mud and birch bark, but nature is still an active component in their work. The cats, of course, are actors, in all senses of the word. The inclusion of self-actualized beasts indicated a conjoining of nature and culture that is also evident in the relational processes of the viewer's engagement. While FASTWÜRMS skilfully deploys technologies of mediation, nature itself is never cast into doubt. This is, in many respects, a scientific premise, but from a very particular understanding of science.

In her 1988 essay "Situated Knowledges," feminist science critic Donna Haraway argues for a feminist concept of "nature" that refuses to sign over the realm of intellectual reason to men. Haraway was reacting to work done by social constructionists, a

movement she herself participated in, that had resulted in such a deep suspicion of all truth claims coming out of science that to express a belief in “reality” was to be pegged as some kind of cult-like escapist. The important, and necessary, feminist effort to refuse biological essentialism had the unfortunate side effect of denigrating empirical reality; all that really mattered were the mediations of social conditioning and language. This culture/nature split emerged as an emancipatory tool, but it eventually began to close off as many doors as it had opened. For Haraway, it was important to account for the “radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims” while at the same time maintaining “a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world.”<sup>6</sup> Situated knowledge, then, formulates embodied experience without the need to universalise, a way to work effectively with science without having to ascribe to overblown, patriarchal claims of scientific objectivity. It is specific to local conditions, always partial and subject to change, but it is knowledge nonetheless. Furthermore, according to Haraway, objects of knowledge themselves should be understood as active agents in the co-construction of meaning. Both observer and observed are understood to have subjective points of view.

Bruno Latour, a French theorist of science studies, shares many of Haraway’s concerns. In his 1993 book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour argues that the nature/culture dichotomy is an outdated modern device. According to Latour, modern social scientists scoff at ordinary people for their naive belief that power comes from the “objective properties intrinsic to the nature of things”<sup>7</sup> because social science tells us that objects are empty surfaces upon which we inscribe the normative values of society. Conversely, social scientists also criticize ordinary people for naive beliefs in volition and free will because, according to social science, the nature of things actually underlies and governs our behaviour. The nature/culture split, Latour explains, allows for a convenient flipping between these two contradictory binary poles. In either case, belief is squashed, agency diminished, and humans are construed as puppets. These negative constructs, Latour argues, are based on a false dichotomy between nature and culture. The actual state of affairs, for him, is and always has been one of generative hybridity.

Neither Haraway nor Latour in any way rejects the importance of understanding social construction but rather argues that such constructions are in and of themselves “real.” In his 2005 book *Reassembling the Social*, Latour explains:

...in all domains, to say that something is constructed has always been associated with an appreciation of its robustness, quality, style, durability, worth, etc. So much so that no one would bother to say that a skyscraper, a nuclear plant, a sculpture, or an automobile is “constructed.”<sup>8</sup>

For Latour, knowledge is constructed through networks and networks have many actors, human and non-human. Each actor in the network has agency, contributing to the co-construction of meaning. The fact that meaning is constructed, however, does not make it any the less meaningful for any of the parties involved.

These are dynamics that FASTWÜRMS has always understood. Haraway’s “situated knowledge” is a complex theoretical formulation. In a FASTWÜRMS installation, however, audiences intuitively feel their way into their own situated points of view. While Latour struggles to discuss hybridity in way that does not imply a pre-existing dichotomy,





FASTWÜRMS has all along been creating aesthetic moments in which the interrelationship of nature and culture is embodied and experiential.

DONKY@NINJA@WITCH was an ambitious project. The artists had to literally inhabit the gallery—setting up a tent on the floor and living there for several weeks during the installation/residency—in order to activate the large space at AGYU to their satisfaction. The show included retrospective re-enactments of installations from the past ten years. Moving from the front to the back of the first gallery, visitors first encountered *House of Bangs* (1999), a queer DIY hair salon—initially staged as a collaboration at Andrew Harwood’s storefront gallery, Zsa Zsa—where performers offered haircuts on opening night; then *Blood & Swash* (2002), a felt pen tattoo parlour—initially created for Zsa Zsa in collaboration with artist Jill Henderson—where visitors could join the artists at tables to get tattoos and/or create their own icons on denim patches; then *Gusset Nation* (2004), a utopian cat playground with balls of yarn, catnip toys, giant cobwebs made from bras and panties, and the video *Pussy Necropolis* featuring Siegfried and Roy’s sexy Royal White Tigers and, of course, FASTWÜRMS’ charismatic familiars. The second gallery was darker. Passing through the glass doors that separate the two spaces, visitors first encountered *Pirate Head* (2004), a smoke-puffing cannon stocked with an uncanny pile of human skulls for projectiles. The next exhibit was *Blood Clock* (2005), a video installation decorated with axes, scythes, dildos, mirrors, busts of the Egyptian cat goddess Bast, and a projection with sublime and pensive footage of a white cow drinking from a golden pond at sunset. The final installation was a new work, *Pink Donky* (2007), in which Witch Nation icons such as a giant mock-Canadian flag with a pentagram in place of the maple leaf, cauldrons, and animal banners surrounded a small Nissen hut commemorating a donkey sanctuary. Inside the hut was a monitor displaying the video *Witch vs. Ninja* shot in spooky green night vision in which the witches and a group of ninjas flit in and out of shadows on the streets of Venice. Each installation was itself a major undertaking, and all together there was a mind-boggling amount of artwork on display.







An iconographer could have had a field day at DONKY@NINJA@WITCH. Almost every inch of wall space was covered floor to ceiling with potent objects, images, and icons—all of them cross-talking through complex visual and connotative networks that wove throughout the six installations in a tumultuous, porous flow of nested feedback loops. I would never attempt to make any kind of complete or definitive map of the complex, multi-layered threads of interconnection that made up this exhibition: I am convinced that the meaningful forms of the labyrinth were different for each and every visitor. Nevertheless, I will describe some of the themes that resonated most strongly for me—webs, knowledge, and tools—in the understanding that my written interpretations represent an optional adjunct to any experiential engagement with the work.

The web is a much-theorised concept in technological arts and digital media. While FASTWÜRMS is not working with the medium of networked computers and electronic machines, their technological mode shares a great deal with network theory. Audiences who are perceptually conditioned in their interactions with techno-scientific media might have found themselves at home in the installation. Several large depictions of actual webs created a visual link between modes of seeing and situated modes of knowing in a networked environment.

A giant bat hovered above the *Blood & Swash* installation. It was made of string-art, woven with colourful yarns threaded between green-capped nails that had been pounded directly into the wall. The design was extremely intricate. From a distance the creature was rendered in flat planes of colour that, upon closer inspection, abstracted into finely detailed webs of intersecting patterns. Other giant webs, sprawled in organic graphic patterns, were visible in the adjacent enclave housing *Gusset Nation*. Upon moving closer it became instantly clear that one was made from bras and the other from panties—the triangular gussets of the garments making up the repeating shapes of the larger web. The bat, loaded with associations from the mythical world of vampires to the scientific world of radar and echolocation, was legible as an image on the macro level of perception, revealing an abstract intricate formal structure in its details. The gusset webs, conversely, were iconic on the micro-level, their exuberant byzantine structure composed of real world commodities that resonated playfully with sexual innuendo, gratification, and desire.

This oscillation, from formal design to associative content and back again, was like a microcosmic model for the entire exhibition. If Sapolsky is right that humans are good at holding onto two different realities at once, FASTWÜRMS both made that concept manifest and extended the nexus of perception and meaning to engage non-human entities. The giant cobwebs of *Gusset Nation* resonated with the miasmatic compilations of objects and images that spread across every wall of the exhibition. In connotative harmony, spiders dotted the show hither and thither: dangling off a crescent moon, crawling across a denim patch, or holding court under a fringe of hair. While the webs themselves operated on meta-levels of form and cognition, the spiders served as totemic reminders of the natural forces that can create them.

“Darwin is the prophet,”<sup>9</sup> FASTWÜRMS announce. In Darwinian evolutionary theory, outcomes cannot be predicted from the variables of input. The web can’t be charted in advance, nor can its complexities be reverse engineered. Since Darwin’s time, however, neuroscientists have made use of *hierarchical* evolutionary analogies to describe the structure of the brain, correlating “lower” areas where nonconscious processes take place with “older” evolutionary forms (hence the phrase “reptile brain.”) The “newer” areas of the brain are “higher” and more cognitively developed. The neuroscientific,

“bottom-up” model of consciousness suggests that the system is primarily driven by biology. FASTWÜRMS have a much more progressive approach to evolution. They do not understand evolution as a teleological system of progress, but as a massively interconnected and unchartable system of complexity. In a FASTWÜRMS exhibition, the systems of signification are not linear. Not only are webs represented as part of the imagery, but visitors create their own webs of meaning, and the experience is dependent on volition and willing engagement.

The work of FASTWÜRMS is more akin to web-like models of consciousness emerging from contemporary neuroscience that are better equipped to address the art experience. For example, neuroscientist Warren Brown and philosopher Nancey Murphy have formulated a non-reductive materialist theory of consciousness that takes agency and free will into account.<sup>10</sup> In reductive materialism, the domain of traditional neuroscience, the parts are seen to determine the behaviours of the whole. In non-reductive materialism, mind is still understood as a material manifestation of the brain but the behaviours of the parts are seen to be determined by the structures of the system in which they function. As Brown and Murphy explain, neural feedback systems are in a constant state of flux, shifting and adjusting based on our ongoing interactions with the world. Consciousness, then, while material is also co-extensive with the surrounding environment.<sup>11</sup>

A direct experience of FASTWÜRMS’ exhibition supports Murphy and Brown’s progressive model of consciousness in that their work makes manifest the interconnectivity between sense perception and cultural environments. FASTWÜRMS’ web has many entry points: some people will connect with stonewashed denim, others with pirates, others still with hairdressing. Some will find their eyes drawn to spots of saturated colour, others to black and white silhouettes. Some visitors will make an historical investigation, tracing the recurrent images and icons from FASTWÜRMS’ own exhibition past, others will be encountering the work for the first time. Some will connect with images of owls, others might notice snakes, others cats, frogs, crows, daggers, moons, etc. Some will want to look at pictures, some will want to watch video, some will want to participate in a performative collaboration. Some will want to take up political identifications with working class culture, some will want to take up gender, some will be interested in animal rights, some will want to lose themselves in the paranormal, other in kitsch, others in science fiction. Some will want to be playful, some will want to be frightened, some will want to be political, some will be engaged in a process of healing.

FASTWÜRMS’ webs are only meaningful as processes of interaction. And, like Haraway’s understanding of situated knowledge, no single viewer can know the web in its totality. In fact, totality is not even an option as the relational character of these webs means that they can’t be mapped or plotted in any universalising chain of significance. Nevertheless, these mediated nets of signification are embedded in experience. The natural world is totemized as animal agency, but the experience of nature itself extends to the cultural environment of hair salons, Halloween costumes, biker bars, and pirate ships. Humans and human cultures exist in nature too.

As Bruno Latour insists, the fact that a “fact” is constructed does not mean it is not real. FASTWÜRMS does not simply transmit knowledge from sender to receiver. Knowledge is co-constructed between many collaborators in the style of open source media. It is not just the web-like “shape” of the conceptual model that fosters agency on the part of the viewer; it is also the relational, embodied aspect of the aesthetic exchanges





that occur. The framework of witchcraft allows for a kind of self-conscious animism that goes beyond traditional artworld notions of presence or aura. Animals are depicted as having agency and input into the forms of FASTWÜRMS' works, and the works, many of them depictions of animals, register on the level of icons, things that have an active agential force or presence in and of themselves. Viewers are thus invited into a conversation, an engagement in which they may choose how deeply to suspend their disbelief in order to play a role in investing the objects with associative meaning. The objects and images reciprocate with an affirmation of meaning as a material process.

The installations in the second gallery would have been the most challenging for visitors suspicious of witchcraft. Here, the lights were dimmer, the symbols darker in both colour and content. Death was palpably invoked. On opening night I witnessed several young students flee the back room for the more brightly lit sense of communal fun in the installations in the front gallery. I admit that I felt some trepidation myself. As a long-time consumer of schmaltzy nature programming on TV, however, I am familiar with the concept that "nature has its darker side." And, true to form, FASTWÜRMS' delivery of darkness is couched in wicked dark humour.

The pirate skulls were hah-hah funny. A fake cannon aimed out of the darkness toward the glass doors that separated the two galleries. A decal that looked like shattered glass had been applied to the doors, making it seem as if a skull had just been shot through, forming a slapstick vaudevillian hole in the barrier between the light and dark. FASTWÜRMS' kitschy humour contains a promise: no matter how deeply you choose to engage with their cosmology, you will always be able to find a way back out. As with most good horror

Farther back in the dark space, a grid of banners was installed near two hanging cauldrons. Each banner bore a phrase such as “coil of snake,” “stab of heron,” “dive of loon,” and “fix of frog.” The scenario was reminiscent of the three witches in *Macbeth* who incant around their cauldron, “Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog...” Like FASTWÜRMS, the *Macbeth* witches carry a suspended vaudevillian affect, something somehow exactly halfway between awe and slapstick humour. FASTWÜRMS’ incantations, however, differ from Shakespeare’s in a significant way. The animal attributes they invoke are not bodily objects such as eyes, toes, and tongues that can be severed and boiled, but actions—behaviours that can be emulated but not possessed. The black cauldrons dangle as if in reference to a fictional potion, but the actual concoction happens in the gallery, in the present, as viewers internalize a potent mixture of animal powers that just might linger and empower beyond the experience of the exhibition. Not only do the powers invoked by FASTWÜRMS become somehow operative, but the knowledge of how to cast the spell is also imparted. Another banner, “logos of human,” could hypothetically be added to the grid. The human powers of narrative and naming are dangerously mighty and are not to be abused, but anyone can make a similar potion for themselves if they so choose.

In their manifesto, FASTWÜRMS explains, “In Witch culture personal freedom is a participation and postivity economy, enhance the liberty of Others and you prosper, constrain free will and you suffer.” In contrast to Shakespeare’s witches, FASTWÜRMS would never cast a narrative spell that involved the dismemberment of animals. At the very back of the second gallery, their *Donky* installation bears a poster with a quote from Alice Walker:

The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men.

By making their philosophies of mutual respect and free will explicit, FASTWÜRMS creates a frame of reference in which the knowledge and agency of the viewer (also, technically, an animal) is as important to the exhibition as the knowledge and agency of the artist (another animal). And this dynamic so thoroughly by-passes the usual artworld hierarchies that the institutional powers of the gallery system and the values of art history are diminished, foregrounding instead the processes of engagement that take place in real time between the exhibition and its audiences. By enacting their creeds through embodied knowledge, FASTWÜRMS makes art that creates magic without deceit. While the exhibition literally contains both smoke and mirrors, there is no chicanery and no coercion. As in science, the knowledge that is produced and the means of its production are both available for communal public use and scrutiny.

Webs and open source knowledge are both key themes in contemporary networked technoscientific environments. It is interesting, then, that the installation DONKY@NINJA@WITCH was full of simple hand tools—including hairdryers, curling irons, axes, scythes, and dildos. In the installation *Blood Clock*, one wall was hung with axes and scythes. Scythes lead a double life as both harbingers of death and harvesting tools, while the axes are gorgeous old objects, their wooden handles worn with use and their idiosyncratic blades rounded and rusted with nostalgic country quaintness: farmers clearing land and building cabins and chopping wood for winter. Hung together in the gloom, however, the sheer numbers of these tools began to exude whiffs of murderous obsession. The oppo-



site wall was gridded with dildos and horseshoes. Dildos invoke queer oscillations of fact and fantasy, dominance and submission, body and image, experience and representation. Horseshoes are talismans of both luck and subservient animal labour. In a glossary created for the exhibition, FASTWÜRMS defines the term “Blood Clock” as “FASTWÜRMS slang for, circulation equals vitality within poignant temporal limits.”<sup>12</sup> The whole room, which also displayed busts of Bast, mirrors representing phases of the moon, and a pensive, sumptuous video of a large white cow basking in the blood red evening glow of sunset, resonated with work, death, fertility, transgressive power, blood, sweat, violence, dominance, and sex. The fourth wall danced with icons of crows, watchful tricksters who have been known on occasion to use tools themselves.

As FASTWÜRMS deploys their tools, the objects shift from one mode to another and back again. An axe presents itself ripe with function but an axe in conversation with a scythe is something more than a tool of labour; it is also a cultural icon. And the cultural meaning of a scythe, so often invoked as a symbol of death, opens into heterogeneity when placed in dialogue with a dildo. FASTWÜRMS’ tools combine into a potent lexicon of symbols, but not one that can be read like an alphabet. Instead, it must be felt, interpreted as much through physiological connections to networks of objects as to cultural reference. Huge networks of significance bump up against one another—agriculture, sex trade, labour politics, animal subjection—clashing, overlapping, and producing hybrid meanings.

All the elements of FASTWÜRMS’ exhibition operate like tools with double lives and multiple meanings. The denim witch hats and capes that hang on the wall in *Blood & Slash* are both costumes and clothing, designed for service as much as for ceremony. The wigs in *House of Bangs* are likewise both performative and functional. The “pant pollens” in *Gusset Nation* function as both cat toys and nodes in a web of interspecies interaction. And all of these items are also art objects, occupying meaningful positions at the nexus of several overlapping frames of reference. In this way, the technologies that produce meaning are somewhat unravelled; not to render them any less effective, but to make them more transparent and revealing, to give viewers options about what worlds to inhabit and what paths to take between them.

FASTWÜRMS does not situate themselves outside of technology, nor do they stand apart from the politics of domination that technology invokes. As mentioned above, they have always identified themselves as workers and the exhibition itself was evidence of hours upon hours of backbreaking labour. The tools that perform as art objects are the tools of their trade as artists. Likewise, witchcraft is not presented as a supernatural mode that can provide instant gratification of desire, but as a mode of interacting with others who have experienced subjection. Haraway’s situated knowledge calls for a commitment to reality that recognizes the “modest meaning in suffering.” It is a curious phrase, one that seems intended not to valorise suffering but to acknowledge that those who suffer are active collaborators in the co-production of knowledge.

In a similar construction, FASTWÜRMS explores the point of view of the donkey, the epitome of a beast of burden, traditionally subjected to the will and dominance of others. Their installation *Pink Donky* was, in part, an homage to the Donkey Sanctuary of Canada, where the animals are given space to wander and the freedom to conduct their lives according to their own volition. In conversation with the author, FASTWÜRMS explained their use of Alice Walker’s quotation, and their frustration with people who do not recognize animals’ rights to self-determination. “There is an impossibility of seeing





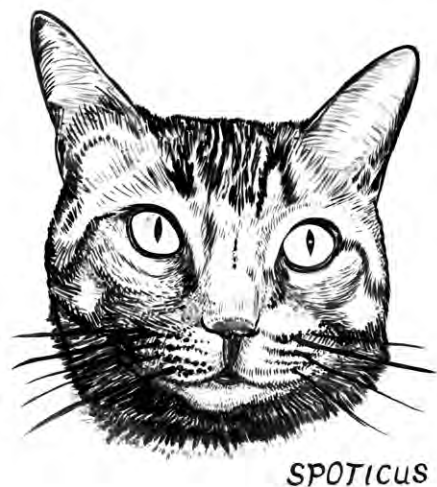
beyond a construct that benefits you. People will say, ‘sure, your nature stuff is all very well but I am going to continue eating chickens because that’s just the way it is.’ They don’t stop to realize that years ago people would’ve said the same thing about keeping slaves.”<sup>13</sup> And, true to form, they use the technology of language to mess with constructs, jarring preconceptions by spelling Donkey without an “e.” In their glossary they present their own definitions for both terms:

Donkey: to consider interspecies exchange as an aesthetic object  
in and of itself.

Donky: to perversely celebrate the transcendent value of the lowest  
form of unrewarded labour.<sup>14</sup>

As with the animal banners, nouns and verbs are reversed. In *FASTWÜRMS*’ construction, neither Donkey nor Donky can be understood as a mere tool. The conventional construction of the donkey as an object is transformed into a construction of donkey as a process, a generative and agential mode of being.

These are the kinds of spells that *FASTWÜRMS* casts. Tools are used to create webs of knowledge in such a way that each of the elements—the tool, the web, and the knowledge itself—is both manifest as a material entity and operative as a cultural process. The artworks may be magical in that they have the power of transcendence from one mode of being to another, but they are not supernatural because all of the processes that take place are apparent and embodied in the contexts and constructs of the real world. As a science, *FASTWÜRMS*’ practice is one in which the construction of knowledge is understood as a process, subjective and mutable, but one that nevertheless generates concrete results. In this respect, *FASTWÜRMS* is like Bruno Latour. He situates himself as amodern, not post-modern, dismissing postmodern strategies of debunking because they only lead us into a dead end where all claims for empirical reality are taken to be illusory. Instead, he suggests, it is time to recognise that nature and culture have never been discrete—that we have never really been modern.<sup>15</sup> Witchcraft, which long predates concepts of modernity, is a similarly amodern system in which nature and culture have never been understood as separate spheres. For *FASTWÜRMS*’ audiences, belief is optional, but plausible. And every agent—the artists, the animal collaborators, the audience members, even, perhaps, the images and objects themselves—is an active participant in the networks of meaning, free to engage and disengage at whatever point they choose. We audience members are like the telepathacats who may or may not exercise their choice to play with *FASTWÜRMS* in the snow.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 FASTWÜRMS, “Witch Nation, Directive from the Ministry of Information,” in *AGYU Fall 2007 Newsletter*. (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2007).
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<http://egina.blogspot.com/2005/02/are-witches-gnostic.html>
- 3 Jody Berland writes on cats and their capacity to pretend in “Cat and Mouse: Iconographics of Nature and Desire,” *Cultural Studies* 2:3-4 (May-July 2008), 440.
- 4 In conversation with author, 4 January 2010, Toronto.
- 5 Robert Enright, “Crafting Every Witch Way: An Interview With FASTWÜRMS,” *Border Crossings* 25:1 (March 2006), 43.
- 6 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (Fall 1988), 579.
- 7 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 51.
- 8 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89.
- 9 FASTWÜRMS, “Creation Machines,” in DONKY@NINJA@WITCH exhibition catalogue (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2008), 44.
- 10 Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 11 Warren S. Brown, interview with Ginger Campbell, Brain Science Podcast #62, posted 9 October 2009.  
<http://docartemis.com/brainsciencepodcast/2009/10/62-warrenbrown/>
- 12 FASTWÜRMS, “Creation Machines,” 44.
- 13 In conversation with author, 4 January 2010, Toronto.
- 14 FASTWÜRMS, “Creation Machines,” 45.
- 15 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 51-55.







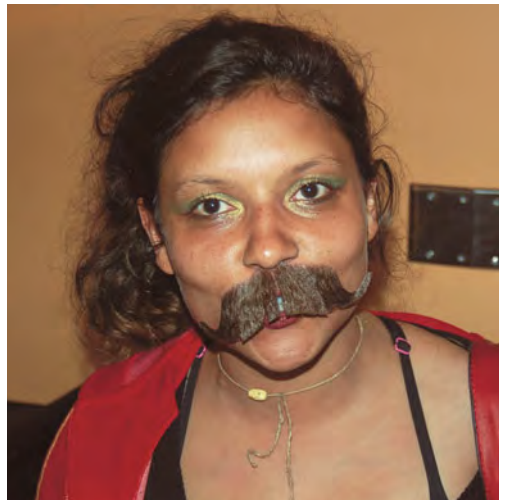












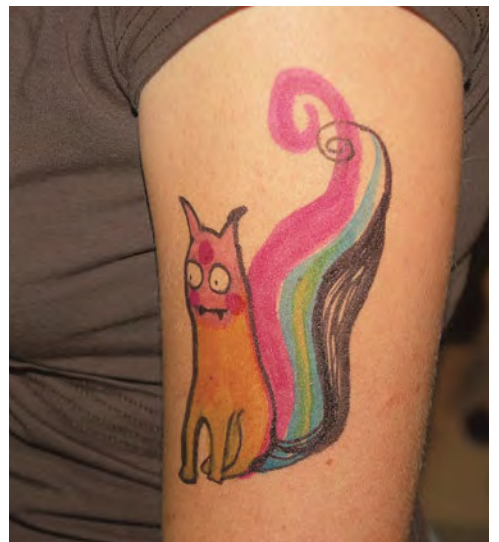
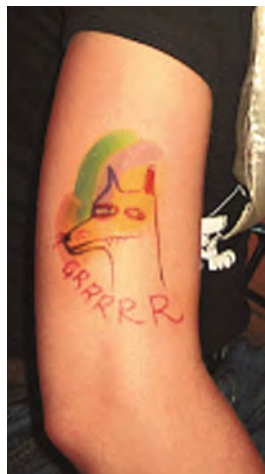


















FASTWÜRM'S MOUNTAIN TOP  
 GEO PLASMA POWER SURGE  
 STUDIO 69 + BIO GENETICS  
 LAB with ALL OUT BAT CAVE  
 AND WINE CELLAR - OLD REDS RULE -  
 AND PRETTY PRETTY BLESSED BE  
 CREATURES. ROOF TOP ATOLL

WITH SEA PLANE AND REEF,  
 SOUND: ROLAND TB 303  
 WITH 10<sup>3</sup> BODE RING THUNDER  
 MODULATOR + SEXOTIC WITCH  
 DRAGON FLY EYES,  
 SPRING PEEPERS,  
 VIRGINIA CREEPERS  
 AND CRICKETS;  
 THRU PHASE π  
 SHIFTER AND  
 MOON FOG ECHO  
 OWL FREQUENCY SHIFTER,  
 TONE COLOUR ATOM SMASHER  
 SAPHO DELAY, AND SUPER  
 NOVA GALAXY STAR "ORGASMATRON"  
 SPEAKERS - WITH MIND MELD

BLOOD CHEMISTRY AND PLAYGROUND  
 OF THE DEAD - RIVER GODS -  
 STRINGS STRECHED-FENG TECHNO'S  
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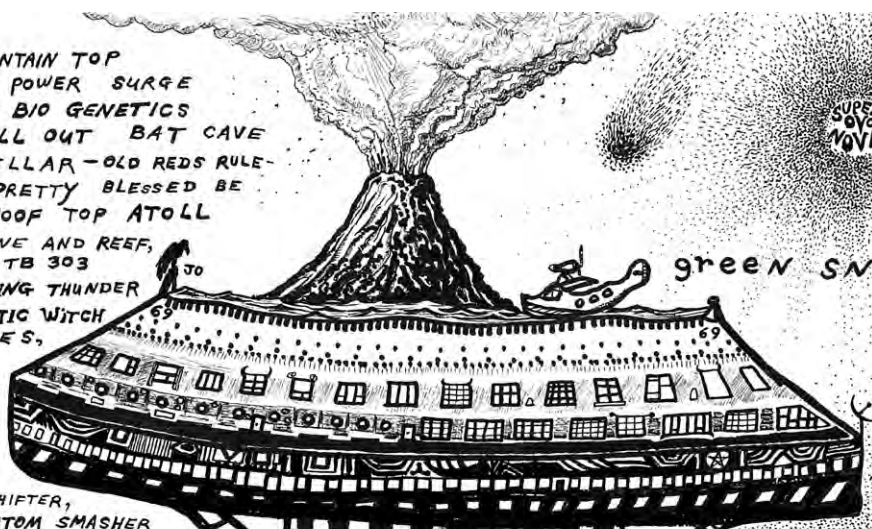
MANY MORE -  
 PLASTIC FANTASTIC 88  
 LOVERS AND  
 SISTERS OF THE  
 NIGHT KITTENS 44  
 DJ: LAPTOP  
 THREADS: BY  
 RIVER OTTER +

**TOMMY GUN**

SPANK



2001



green SNAKE

SUPER  
NOVA

SAPHO

DAWN'A

WASSON

ISIS

VALVEOLINE

MAME

ROLAND

"303" MC

SLOW POKE

"PERCIVAL"  
FER-DE-LANCE

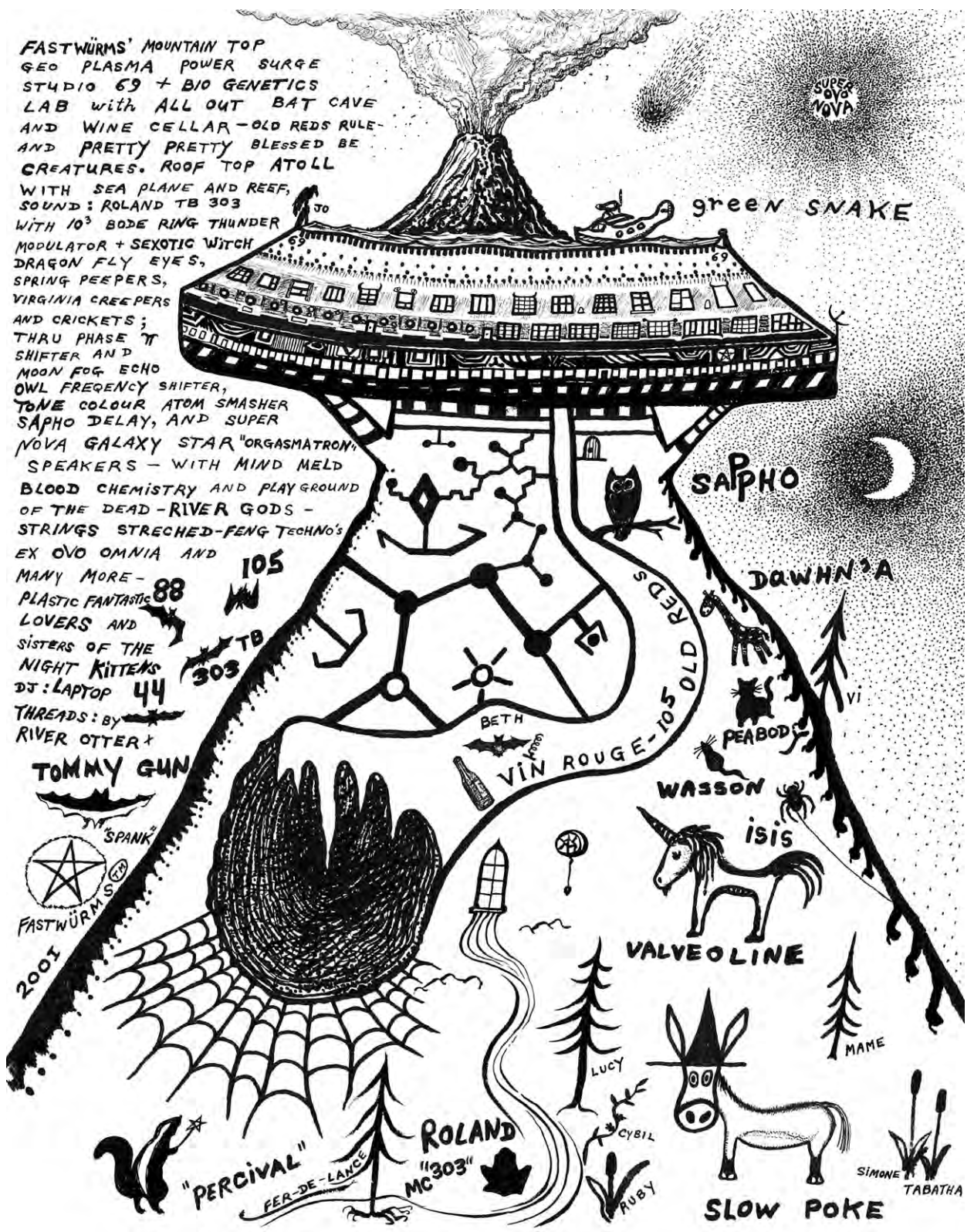
LUCY

CYBIL

RUBY

SIMONE

TABATHA





# WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *FASTWÜRMS: DONKY@NINJA@WITCH* at the Art Gallery of York University, 26 September – 9 December 2007.  
Curated by Philip Monk.

*House of Bangs* (1999). First exhibited at Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto.

*Blood & Swash* (2002). First exhibited at Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto.

*Pirate Head* (2004). First exhibited at Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto.

*Gusset Nation* (2004). First exhibited at Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto.

*Blood Clock* (2005). First exhibited at the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International (TAAFI), Gladstone Hotel, Toronto.

*Pink Donky* (2007). First exhibited at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto.

All works courtesy the artists.

# ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Formed in 1979, FASTWÜRMS is the cultural project, trademark, and joint authorship of Kim Kozzi and Dai Skuse.

FASTWÜRMS is a rare ‘avatar artist,’ crafted by joint authorship and a complex web of multiple selective artist collaborations.

FASTWÜRMS cultural production is about multidisciplinary, multimedia artworks that integrate time-based, performance, and visual art in the context of immersive installations, social exchange and event architecture principles.

FASTWÜRMS artwork is characterized by a determined DIY sensibility, Witch positivity identity politics, and a keen allegiance towards working class, queer alliance, and artist collaborations. FASTWÜRMS cultural practice is predicated on the free exchange and circulation of aesthetic knowledge as a public and performative narrative.

FASTWÜRMS has exhibited and created public commissions and installations, performance, video and film projects across Canada and in the United States, Europe, Brazil, Korea, and Japan.







TM

FOR THOSE ABOUT  
TO ROCK.....





# FASTWÜRMS would like to thank

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## THUMBS UP!

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