MONK-EY BUSINESS

by Gerald Hannon

"Answer some silly questions"

I say. To, of all people, Philip Monk. If you know him at all, you know him as the famously un-silly curator of the Power Plant, but the art-world denizens I'd been interviewing had described him variously as "the virgin," as "Chairman Mao—he likes to have women around him," as "Mr. Slope" (a particularly oily clergyman from Trollope's novel *Barchester Towers*), as a "brainiac," and in one memorable phrase, as "having the appearance of an over-masturbated seminarian."

Not a promising field for silliness. But he waits patiently for the questions. "If you could have your portrait done by any artist in history," I ask, "who would it be? And if your life were made into a film, what actor or actress would you choose to portray you?"

We are sitting in the back patio of Tango Palace, a coffeehouse on Queen Street East, not far from where he lives. He turns his head slightly to the right, which I have learned to understand as thinking mode. He presents a severe profile, square-jawed and resolute. Slim and in shape (he bikes a lot), he looks considerably younger than his 51 years—though a small crease of flesh at his neck hints at the dowager to come. The long-ish red hair is a mess. It always is. But somehow it is always a mess in precisely the same way, as if even messiness must defer to an overarching fastidiousness.

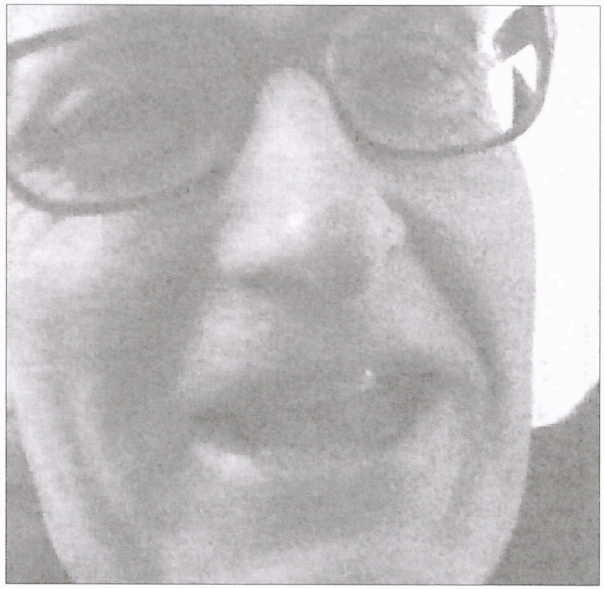
He turns back to me. He has an answer. "Velázquez," he says, then stops. Thinks again. Finally: "No. Francis Bacon, with a Velázquez in the background. Although," he adds, "the portrait genre is one I don't have faith in."

"And the actor?" I prompt.

"Not Ed Harris," he says, referring to the star of the recent Jackson Pollock bio-pic. A pause. Then, with obvious delight, "Derek Jacobi. He played Francis Bacon in the film *Love is the Devil*, and the action was mainly represented as taking place in his head."

Ah, I think. I have had my first Monk-y moment. I offer him nonsense. He pulls it together into a theme. Pure head-theatre.

Here are the basics. Philip Monk, described today by several in the art world as the best curator in the country, is born in Winnipeg on June 14, 1950, the son of a Lutheran clergyman with liberal sympathies and a commitment to native land claims and third-world aid projects. He has an older sister. He attends Grant Park



Philp Monk at Flashdance Strip Show and Trade Magazine Launch, 2001
Video: Peter Kingstone
Camera: RM Vaughan

Portraits by Jorge Zontal, 1982
Published in FILE, vol.5 no.3

High School, then begins studying architecture at the University of Manitoba. "I eventually realized I didn't want to spend years designing air-conditioning ducts," he says, so he switches majors, and graduates in 1972 with a BA in English. He takes a year off and travels in Europe, returns to graduate school in Toronto, earning his master's degree in art history in 1978. He becomes a writer, principally of art criticism. Eventually accepts a position in 1985 as curator of contemporary Canadian art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Leaves in 1994 to become curator at the Power Plant. Is in a relationship with artist Shelagh Alexander for many years, a relationship formalized as a marriage in 1994. They have no children. They separate recently—he moves out; she gets to keep the cats. He is currently dating Louise Bak, a writer, broadcaster, wheat-grass aficionado and sometime dungeon mistress. He is a vegetarian. He practises yoga.

"He wasn't unpopular. He played defence on the hockey team."

Philip Monk visiting Toronto, c.1954

A classic nerd trajectory? I would have put money on it. I could see him in high school, I thought, a pale young man, weak, bookish, hopeless at sports, unpopular with boys and girls alike. And I would have been wrong—at least according to Andy Patton, a Toronto artist and teacher who was a year behind Monk in that Winnipeg high school, and remembers him as "not a nerd at all. He wasn't unpopular. He played defence on the hockey team. He could have passed as normal if he'd wanted to, but he had no interest at all in being liked, in being a teenager. He didn't accept the ideology, and that made him much more of a troublemaker than those who simply misbehaved. To someone a year younger, that was very appealing."

And what did they do together, these unlikely friends? Mostly, they looked at art. "I'm sure I was the only teenager in Winnipeg," Monk says dryly, "who had a subscription to Artforum." Patton remembers regular visits to the art gallery; remembers Monk as a reader of Beckett and Nietzsche; remembers that, when he was briefly hospitalized, Philip Monk brought him a copy of *The Birth of Tragedy* to help cheer him up. Remembers him too as a bit of a joker, though of a particularly wry/dry sort. (I got a glimpse of his almost *sotto voce* humour, at a reading hosted by Louise Bak. She passed Philip some flowers she'd been presented, asking him to find some water. "Why put them in water?" he mused. "They'd be perfect for my underwear drawer.")

And why that precocious interest in art? He can't explain, really. He remembers seeing some art at Expo '67 in Montreal. Art seemed in some vague fashion a way "to reject family and find a new community, the thin edge of the wedge to culture and a way of humanizing myself." During that year-long European trip, he says, he stood in front of every painting, every statue the continent had to offer. Sometimes for hours. "I looked hard at Cezanne," he remembers, "and one day at the Prado I spent eight hours in front of five Velázquez paintings. The training of the eye comes from looking and looking. No one does that anymore—I feel so lucky not to be part of the MTV generation. Looking is very important for writing. Without looking, writing won't be that interesting."

You hear a lot about writing when you speak with Philip Monk. He has done a lot of it. His current publications list comprises a book, a pamphlet, some 26 catalogues, 36 articles, five book essays, 12 catalogue essays, 55 reviews and three published responses. "Lots of curators don't write," he tells me, "because it's difficult to find the time. People don't realize that exhibitions don't just appear. There's lots of background work. But I'm more ambitious than most curators."

Loony ambitions, particularly back in the late seventies and early eighties when he was starting out. It's always been tough to make a living as a writer, but Philip Monk wanted to make a living as a writer of art criticism—and not the Saturday papers kind of criticism that covers, in movie-review fashion, the gallery scene. No, it was to be writing in the high serious, bafflingly arcane mode being promulgated (popularized would hardly be the word) by European, mostly French, writers. So he wrote articles for

"In a spectacular move he lambasted all the people he'd previously supported"

Canadian art periodicals; for Parachute, for Only Paper Today, for Impulse, for File, for Vanguard. They had titles like *The Death of Structure, Violence and Representation, Naming and Comparing, Notes on the Sumptuary Destruction of Leaders.* They contained sentences—if such they can be called—like this: "Discourse exceeds the previously structured domain as a simple displacement or drift: excess as going out; the audience also exceeds a structure reinforcing identity and exchange through interpretive and performative force."

This was not the kind of writing to make him rich. Or even put food on the table. So he did what most in the arts community have to do—took part time jobs. He worked in David Mirvish's bookstore. Even, in desperation one summer, at Dufflet's bakery, "doing prep things like rolling dough for butter tarts, or separating egg whites. That job was one of the low points of my life" (and his friend Andy Patton remembers that he could never really appreciate the distinction between baking soda and baking powder, a confusion with unfortunate consequences for some of the product). He even, in the early eighties, became the art critic for Maclean's but saw it purely as a "monetary gig. I wasn't able to write simply enough for them. They'd say, 'Philip, you have 14 ideas in this paragraph.' They thought that writing was a failure if it provoked an interest in re-reading a paragraph many times."

But that was the kind of writing he wanted to do. And that kind of writing was new, he says. So much so that many of the writers who entranced him hadn't yet been translated into English. No problem. Philip Monk taught himself French, and read them in the original. He was the first in English Canada, he says, to pursue art criticism from the vantage point of poststructuralist critique, and adds, a little sniffily, that "when others became interested later in the eighties, I moved on."

By that time, he was a public figure, at least within the tiny world that is the arts community. And those were years of splendid newness, when Toronto seemed to be shaking off its fusty, staid, upper-Canadian torpor, when the parallel gallery system was just starting and getting everyone excited, when everyone was mouthy and opinionated and if not quite ready to die for at least ready to argue endlessly for and about art. And Philip Monk, as video artist Lisa Steele put it, "looked like flash. He led the most interesting, controversial lectures at the Rivoli—when he's good, he finds the dendrons, the things in the nerves that connect, the synapses.

"Somehow I remember that he always wore this black suit jacket. This unstructured black suit jacket." Artist Liz Magor has similar memories. "Philip was so cool. And Shelagh [Alexander—she and Monk met and got together in the early eighties] was so cool too. They were very exotic for Toronto. They were very beautiful. Shelagh had the whitest skin in the world and black, black hair. And Philip had this square jaw and weird lock of hair, and I think everyone thought that he was armed with this knowledge that the rest of us only had glimmers of. He had power even before he was associated with an institution. He had the power to make a thing meaningful. There were so few people to look at our work and interpret it, and to have Philip Monk mention you was such an affirmation."

Not always. I have come to think of Philip Monk as the Robespierre of the French critical revolution, Canadian division (which certainly has had its very own Reign of Terror, if only in prose style). Robespierre was known as "the incorruptible." It is written of him that he was "shy, but never modest." His commitment to republicanism and the revolution was such that, be you friend or foe, opposition to his invariably high-minded ideals might lead directly to the guillotine. And I suspect some of Philip Monk's famous lectures at the Rivoli must have felt a bit like public executions to those who found themselves suddenly and mysteriously out of favour.

It is hard today to understand their impact. His critical writing from that period seems to me to cover the range from huh? to duh—or, less aphoristically, from "what the fuck does *that* mean" to "is that *all* the fuck he means?" But the times took him very seriously indeed. And perhaps his most famously explosive lecture—"Axes of Difference"—took place on Valentine's Day, 1984 when, as critic John Bentley Mays put it, "in a spectacular move he lambasted all the people he'd previously supported. The impact was devastating. Andy Patton was devastated." Even today, Andy Patton —who is happy to recall his fondness for Monk during high school and at university—simply doesn't want to talk publicly about that time.

with Louise Bak
March 23, 2001
Photo: Geoff Scott

And what was all the fuss about? To do Monk a disservice and put it simply, it seemed to come down to this: Girl artist good. Boy artist bad. ("We could characterize some of the recent work by men as romantic idealism, private subjectivism, sentimental humanism or nihilistic expressionism"). And he did that rare, courageous thing in the arts community (where everyone, at least

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publicly, likes everyone else's work): He named names. Andy Patton was singled out for criticism. So was John Scott. Women such as Shelagh Alexander, Shirley Wiitasalo, Janice Gurney, and Joanne Tod were praised.

It's easy to see why "devastating" might be the appropriate adjective. The community was small. Egos fragile. Monk, as Liz Magor noted, had power. And he used it. Those artists suddenly on the outs might easily have imagined they heard the tumbrels clattering down Queen Street.

Artist Andy Fabo felt that Monk's essay "had a destructive effect on the Toronto art community because it distorted discussion around gender and sexual orientation. It proposed a reductive binary model that totally disregarded lesbian, gay and transgendered representations. The male artists (David Clarkson, Andy Patton, Marc de Guerre, John Scott) mentioned in the essay were criticized, almost demonized, for making art for which I thought they should be praised, art attempting to break out of the stereotypical hetero mold. And there was no acknowledgement of the increasing queer contribution."

Monk acknowledges the impact. "It was seen as an attack on the community, an abuse of community solidarity. John Scott blames me for ruining his career. I lost friends over it. I was sort of exiled from the community. I even thought I might have to leave Toronto. I had a tendency," he says, "to burn my bridges in front of me."

"But then I got a job at the AGO. And everybody had to be nice to me."

This last, of course, spoken with what writer and critic Gary Michael Dault calls "his glacial little smile."

The man provokes such rich reactions. You get the deeply fabulous art maven Ydessa Hendeles, cutting a swath through a Power Plant party like some dark planet enveloped in its own atmosphere of expensive aromatics, accompanied, as any planet should be, by some minor moon in dancing attendance, and who, with ring-clustered fingers reaching for the stab of jet-black jewelry at her throat, is eager to declare, in the tones of someone not entirely averse to being overheard, "I love Philip." Later, she would tell me that she sees his situation, and that of other Canadian curators, as "tragic." He should have become one of the world's great, great curators in terms of the esteem he gets. But he has never wanted to do a certain kind of schmoozing that was optional at one time and required now. He's made a decision from the heart and I love and admire his sincerity."

That "decision from the heart" clearly involves not seeing his career here as a mere stepping stone to more lucrative, prestigious jobs elsewhere: "I have been committed to the idea of an art community in Toronto. My work is toward recording that history and assisting in its further development; perhaps it is a foolish enterprise of little recognition...."

You get vivacious, urbane Joanne Tod, noting that Philip Monk gives a "very disappointing studio visit. I feel drained afterwards. There I am feeding him information about the work and I get nothing back. When he leaves, it feels as if he's taken something from me." You get fiendishly clever, loquacious Gary Michael Dault complaining that "what I hate about curators is they're on the same side of the chalk line as funeral directors. They're so risk-free they bore the ass off me. There's no such thing as a curator with poetic, bardic qualities." You get Canadian Art editor Richard Rhodes saying that "Philip Monk remains a writer—a classical model for curatorial work. And a model worth keeping. We don't need hero curators. We need hero artists."

And the young? What do they feel? Paul P., 24, an artist associated with West Wing Art Space, notes that "he does come out to stuff. That is cool. But he seems to get excited by the blatantly transgressive—in my art practice and for lots of people I know, we've moved beyond that; we're concerned more with lovely objects. And I don't think he is very much. But he registers with us more than Marc Mayer or anybody from the AGO. He keeps his ear to the ground."

Elaine Bowen, a young artist working as development coordinator at the AGO who took a job as receptionist at the Power Plant when she was fresh out of school, calls Monk "an amazing, amazing man. Any show I or any of my colleagues ever had, he'd be the first to arrive. That was amazing to me. There are artists across the country who would die to have Philip Monk turn up at their shows. And he'd come to mine. He made me feel confident about my knowledge and potential."

He does survey the scene, quite consciously. "I get out more than other curators of my generation and standing," he says. "It is part of my

The Power Plant

with Georganne Dean, 1998
Photo: Jeff Mayhew

with Douglas Gordon, 2000. Photo: Jeff Mayhew

with Mike Hoolboom, 2001. Photo: Geoff Scott

with Istvan Kantor and Louise Bak, 2001. Photo: Geoff Scott

job. I range more in what I see than most other curators. And I write the gamut—others specialize more than I do."

As always, you are never far from a discussion of writing when you talk with Philip Monk. But then, writing *is* everything. "I see curating as a narrative act, like writing a book or making a movie. I am not an artist, but there is a creative aspect to curating. And it's not about putting similar things into a room—it's more about what makes dissimilar things join together. You get an intuition about how they fit and you show that, moving people from work to work, developing a story. That's not something that comes immediately. That's learned through a lot of experience."

Which, undoubtedly, he has. Almost a decade at the AGO—which he left, he says, when it became clear that "it was moving from a curator-based to a director-based institution. Curating was being reduced to administration. I took a 45 percent pay cut when I went to the Power Plant, but it was a sacrifice I was willing to make to be my own man intellectually." He's been at the Power Plant some seven years now. He started with a bang.

His first show there, from June to September of 1995, was called Beauty #2: New And Emerging Artists In Toronto. To Ian Carr-Harris, it represented the beginnings of what he calls "phase II" in Monk's development—the move to California. Not literally, of course, but "California as a sign, as code for postmodernity in the North American sense, which has learned from Europe but which has at its disposal a very fluid, rootless society. Which gives it a very different colour from Europe." Phase I, he feels, was coded by French critical theory, and was characterized by the "recuperation" of significant Canadian culture and its creators. The switch was important for Monk, he feels. "If he'd stayed in phase I, he would have been a historical curiosity."

Monk says he doesn't quite agree with Carr-Harris's analysis, but conceded that the move to the Power Plant initiated a "more intuitive" approach to curating. "I had trained myself in European intellectual culture and here I began looking at the way American pop culture shaped all of us who'd grown up in the sixties and seventies."

I wanted to watch him judge artists who had grown up more recently than that. He says he's a quick study—that he can make a judgment about an exhibition in seconds. And if the gallery has a glass door, "I can make a judgment even before I walk through." He suggested we take a walk down Queen Street West, his only condition being that I not identify the galleries or artists we see and talk about. Fine. So, one wretchedly hot and humid afternoon, we take to the street. And he's right. He's fast. And this is some of what he has to say:

"This is attractive but it hasn't taken the next step beyond high design skills. It would look elegant in a fancy restaurant. It's attractive, but that's all. I can like pretty things, but once your curiosity as to how it's done is satisfied, your interest dissipates ...

"... this kind of work has been done to death. ... I don't have any opinion on this—there are not enough clues to attract you. Art can be complex, but it also has to grab your attention ... this is work without soul—it doesn't express any real need. It's too much the application of an idea. ... you could have walked into a gallery in the fifties and seen this ... craft is not enough. You have to go beyond technique to some vision."

And so on. Most of it not very flattering, and much of it quite damning. But then Philip Monk has very mixed feelings about the current art scene.

"These paintings and drawings are not going to help Toronto develop a strong art community"

"I like the energy on this street," he tells me. "It feels revitalized. New galleries are springing up. But I'm distressed by the conservatism—there's a lack of ambition to produce the sort of work that is standard in contemporary art these days. These paintings and drawings are not going to help Toronto develop a strong art community. And the problem is systemic—it goes back to the art schools. OCAD is a joke. What are the profs teaching? The work at their last open house was so substandard. The place needs a major overhaul. It's just a technical school. There is no effort to ground students in contemporary art history and theory. They don't even re-invent the wheel there. They just re-invent the wobble."

And much, much more.

It was once said of composer Richard Wagner that his music is better than it sounds. I had the sense, after repeated meetings with Philip Monk, that the man is better than he reads. Perhaps this is somewhat cruel, given the importance he attaches to his writings—but I have as low an opinion of the huh?-to-duh qualities of most contemporary art writing as he has of most of the young, new work on the Queen West scene. What finally persuades is not his oeuvre—works which lack clarity, elegance and wit—but his intelligence, sustained commitment, hard work and, yes, his enthusiasms. Even though they have to filter their way through that famously daunting persona (Louise Bak says she tells him he should wear a button that says, "Approach me. I'm nice").

When they do, the effect, by all accounts, can be galvanizing. Artist Ian Carr-Harris, who sees something "virginal" about Monk ("not the cowering virgin though—the striding virgin") also says "he has been enormously entertaining for the rest of us. He's a character, and he plays that character. He is very conscious of performing his lectures." Lisa Steele, who teaches at OCAD, recalls bringing a small class of some half-dozen students to the Power Plant for a Monk talk on artist Douglas Gordon. "It was the most generous presentation by a curator I've ever seen," she says. "You could see the kids leaning forward in their chairs. When you're a curator at his level in an institution you don't have to give like that. Especially at 9 a.m. on a Friday, in front of six students."

One last quote: "He won admiration for his abilities, but his austerity and dedication isolated him from easy companionship." That was not said of Philip Monk. It's from a potted biography of Maximilien Robespierre, but it does not ring false here. It struck me that he is one of those men whom it is easier to love than to like. I suspect his high-mindedness and social unease might provoke in some women a combination of tenderness and irritation—not at all a bad recipe for love.

Robespierre's high-mindedness finally led him, of course, to the guillotine. And Philip Monk? Losing his head to art has meant, paradoxically, that that is the part of him given freest reign in his critical and curatorial practice. Pure head-theatre, then, and not to everyone's tastes (I sometimes think that the most appropriate critical response to art is to stand in front of it and sing). But the head-theatre of Philip Monk is still providing one of the better shows in town.