

WILD WILD WEST

Twenty years ago, Queen Street exploded in a richness of art, photography, video, performance and punk. A look back, in words and pictures, at the sparks that lit the fuse

For the Toronto art community, the late seventies and early eighties were brilliant, dangerous, golden years; an acid-tripping, grape-eating, futon-thumping orgy of art and life. Or was that just one night when I was twenty-eight? Who can trust the memory of youth—that hallucinatory brew of hormones and muscle tone, brown rice and Screech. Today's young artists will think the nineties brilliant, dangerous, golden, and they won't be wrong.

Every young artist believes her dreams are the world's destiny. My generation rode in on a wave of cultural nationalism and dreamed of seizing not only a moment but An Historic Moment, between the mimicry of British and French culture and all things American. We beavered away, trying to change the course of a river. By 1975, despite a perpetual blizzard of indifference, we had established a few precarious shelters for indigenous art. Both the giants and the tenderfoots of Canadian art, too lonely to divide up by sex or race or even discipline, huddled for warmth and applause in spaces adapted for painting, poetry, punk, video, publishing, performance, and also for drinking, flirting, bitching and slugging. To hell with New York.

Though brave, witty and glamorous, the art scene was nearly invisible. Ignored by most media, artists photographed, videotaped, zined and mediated themselves into a rarefied fame. The scene evolved into a full-length drama: creating new mythologies and heresies, glorifying and trashing each other's work, becoming a community.

That community began to move toward the exotic wonders of Spadina Avenue and the gentle grace of Queen Street, where an art-friendly ecosystem was already in place—diners, sidewalk stalls, music bars, tall trees, high-ceilinged warehouses, low rents, jobbers, dealers, secondhand stuff, upscale garbage, all-night stores, all-night anything. Street life.

There, the old immigrant neighbourhoods were blooming with recent arrivals, from St. John's to Dawson and around the world. Overnight, the area was blessed with a hundred cultures, with their ancient arts and linguistic jazz, their pig-in-your-face-crab-up-your-nose markets, their gardens of vegetables, fruits, flowers, their dreams of a free city.

From all over town, artists, impresarios, designers and chefs joined the irresistible parade. Theatre Passe Muraille relocated, drawing hundreds of young theatre animals to the area, including my own art-family, VideoCabaret, an ardently experimental ensemble featuring banned playwright Michael Hollingsworth and the pan-media Hummer Sisters. Wielding cameras, mikes, broken dolls and live rats, VideoCab performed in every theatre, bar and booze can in the burgeoning

neighbourhood. In 1982, we put down roots in Queen Street's Cameron House and launched the HUMMER FOR MAYOR/Art vs. Art campaign against Art Eggleton. More than 300 artists and businesses pooled their urbane imaginations in a month of polycultural performance art, storefront art, dub, video, fashion and food art—art swelling out of the ground like maple saplings. Art vs. Art was not the first nor the last community jam, just the one 12,000 people voted for.

One still finds that civic vision in the art, fund-raisers, barbers and other transactions of our social and political economy. Some local heroes are gone, to heaven or New York, but younger generations are renewing and extending the style and ethos of the community west of Bathurst and on to Parkdale.

Of course, Queen has been pronounced dead many times: when Le Château moved into the Goodwill, when Handsome Ned OD'd with his boots on, when the recession came to stay. Actually, the neighbourhood is as lively as a cockroach, though parts are showing their age—the age of megathink. Chain stores devour customers by the gross, starving their one-of-a-kind neighbours; monster signs drone generic messages where murals once delighted; planners sacrifice Spadina's street dance to the god of traffic; even arts councils' scant but vital contributions are accompanied by lectures on marketing.

But Queen and Spadina's interlocking communities resist both gentrification and total collapse. Built by people who work twelve hours a day and speak three languages, fed by the cosmopolitan anarchy of Spadina and the housing projects, magnetic home of the homeless, of angry street kids and natives mad with grief, the neighbourhood is ferociously funky, classy but no-class, like the heart of all great cities.

VideoCab still rehearses and schemes at the Cameron, and I live there yet, growing my small garden in the city. From the roof, where purple clematis, blue morning glories and coral bougainvillea frame the skyline, the neighbourhood looks like an old village tucked into the mountains of bank towers, a lively, fabulously civilized culture clinging to its turf like Newfies.

At the forty-five-year-old Stem restaurant, the original owners still make perfect eggs; at Winston and Joyce's twenty-year-old grocery, every customer is still greeted by name. And all around the neighbourhood, young artists face the music, canvas, page, lens, audience and wonder how they'll pay for lunch, in their golden years.

—Deanne Taylor



The photographs that follow are part of Picturing the Toronto Art Community: The Queen Street Years, opening September 25 at the Power Plant. Captions by curator Philip Monk.



Hummers 1982 campaign for mayor (opposite): Jennifer Dean, Deanne Taylor and Janet Burke

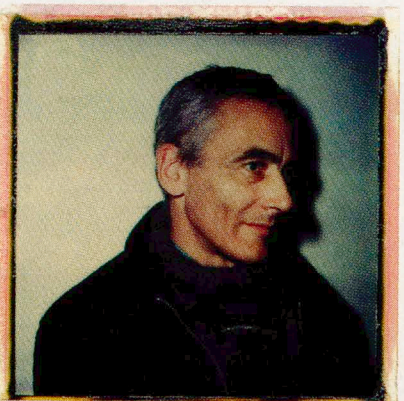
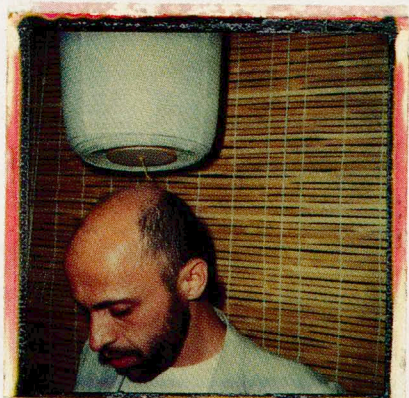
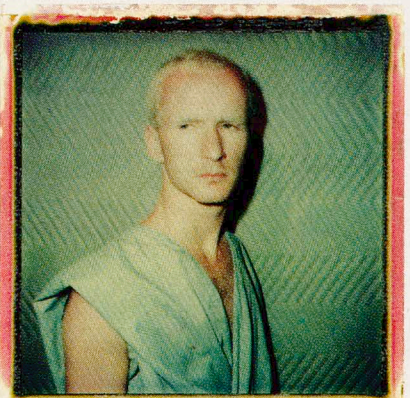
The fashion burnettes (above): parodying glam in 1977 at Toronto's first punk club, Crash 'n' Burn, located in the basement of the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication on Duncan Street

FILE

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GENERAL IDEA'S 1984
and the 1968-1984 FILE RETROSPECTIVE



Picturing themselves (opposite): such artist-produced magazines as General Idea's *FILE* were vehicles for self-promotion. The cover, *Baby Makes Three*, shows (from left) GI members Jorge Zontal, AA Bronson and Felix Partz

The in crowd (above): in George Whiteside's photographs, art, fashion and food intersect. From top, left to right: singer Sherry Kean, artists Rebecca Baird and David Buchan, video artist Susan Britton, art director Eleanor Galbraith, artist Paul Wong, designer Leighton Barrett, painter Steven Lack, GI's Jorge Zontal, chef Greg Couillard, artist Arnaud Maggs and designer Karen Simpson



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THE HOUSE OF MASTERS

The Globe and Mail

The infrastructure: photographs by Peter MacCallum document the hangouts. By 1979, the Spadina Hotel's Cabana Room had become the hub for performance, video and art bands. In 1981, the epicentre moved to the Cameron at 408 Queen West. The owners—Herb Tookey and Paul and Anne-Marie Sanella—supported young talent by commissioning original exhibitions; the tavern's back room, below, is lined with paintings by Rae Johnson





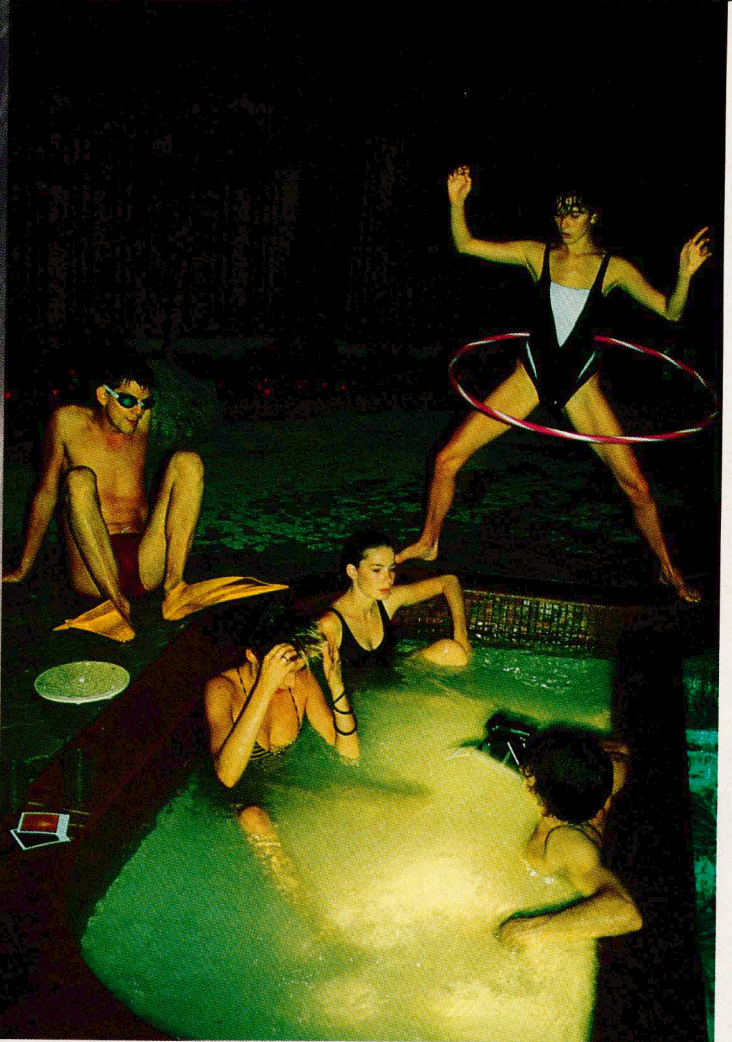


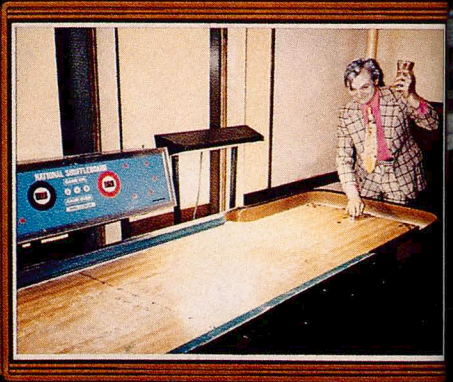
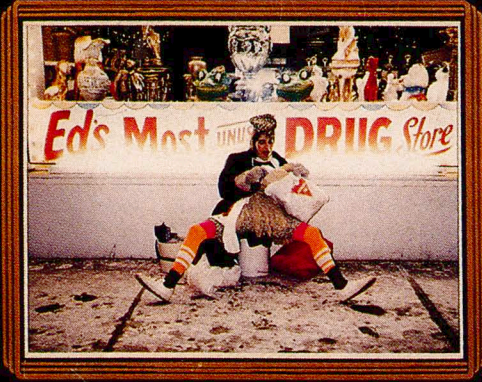
Dressing up (opposite): George Whiteside, in bathing suit, took these portraits at an artists' drag party in 1979

Dressing down (above): video artist and Cabana Room cofounder Susan Britton, photographed by Kim Tomczak in 1979

Playing the role, day and night: members of the art demimonde (top left and bottom right) gravitated to heights and depths of camp and cheek; photographs by George Whiteside. Lower left: a photo session for David Buchan's fake album cover (entitled *Out of This World*), shot by Whiteside in 1981. Middle: lip-sync comedienne the Clichettes (Louise Garfield, Janice Hladki and Johanna Householder) captured by General Idea's Jorge Zontal for the 1979 *FILE* "Transgressions" issue. Top right: Buchan poses for Zontal in that same issue's "Buzz" gossip column









Low class (opposite): the 1979 work *Roots*, by David Buchan, features his alter ego, lip-sync pop star Lamonte del Monte's fictitious family tree composed of kitsch portraits of fellow artists (taken by George Whiteside)

High class (above): Queen's first trendy restaurateur, Peter Pan co-owner Sandy Stagg, photographed in 1973 by Rodney Werden