



INHERITANCE



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SYLVIA BOWYER

MELISSA GOLDSTEIN

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DANNY TISDALE

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LOS ANGELES CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

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An alternative to commercial galleries and museums, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, LACE, is committed to contemporary artists, ideas and forms. Though in some senses the organizational practices at LACE parallel the conventions of the museum, we stand far enough away from this system to allow for a critical perspective on how these conventions contextualize an individual's artistic production. **Inheritance** examines and comments upon the museum's tendency to recontextualize or simply omit vast areas of our cultural production. We are pleased to provide a forum for this ongoing discussion.

On behalf of the board and staff of LACE, I would like to extend our thanks to the curators, Roberto Bedoya and Jody Zellen, for their leadership and direction of the exhibition; and to the writers Joshua Decter and Kobena Mercer for their insights.

Jinger Heffner, Exhibitions Coordinator and the staff of LACE have worked diligently to realize this exhibition and catalogue.

Finally, we would like to thank the artists: Sylvia Bowyer, Melissa Goldstein, Renée Green, Danny Tisdale, Brian Tucker and Fred Wilson without whom this exhibition would not have been possible.

Gwen Darien

Executive Director

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MUSEUM PIECES

The museum is bad because it does not tell the whole story. It misleads, it dissimulates, it deludes. It is a lie.

— Le Corbusier

Who we are depends upon who we were. Looking to the past, into history, we learn about ourselves. Yet there are different pasts and different stories to be told. The genealogies are many. Museums interpret the values passed along from generation to generation. They manipulate culture, shaping it into an accessible presentation. In the process, the museum homogenizes multiplicity. It acts as a frame, as a viewpoint and a point of view through which to regard objects. Museums caption, classify and create a structure for remembering. They turn art into artifacts and artifacts into acquisitions. They collapse time. What happens when we want to see more? Remember something else?

Museums are places of contemplation where objects are exhibited. They are institutions devoted to "the procurement, care, study and display of objects of lasting interest or value." These objects, or museum pieces, are things of the past, things that have been preserved and made suitable for display. What is on display is culture. A museum inherits its collections. A bequest. A legacy. Something handed down from an ancestor, predecessor, or from the past. A thing of value, to be preserved and presented, ends up in its collection. Museums arrange history spatially. They exist as theatres of memory. But whose memory? Whose history? Whose culture do museums choose to perpetuate?

Inheritance is an exhibition that looks at the past, at the present and towards the future. It explores issues of inheritance — cultural, political and personal — as they relate to representational practices. The artists in the exhibition — Sylvia Bowyer, Melissa Goldstein, Renée Green, Danny Tisdale, Brian Tucker and Fred Wilson — employ conventions of museum display to critique and challenge that which is missing or left out of official history. They propose alternative ways of reading culture by examining the museum as an institution, noting the difference between art and artifact, and probing the notion of acquisition. Their work pushes the discussion of representational practices beyond its conventional parameters to include a socio-political study of cultural stereotyping and remembrance.

Danny Tisdale examines the museum as a repository of cultural images. Through his work he preserves what might have been forgotten or deemed insignificant by re-presenting objects that pay homage to African American heritage, specifically artifacts from the 1960s and 1970s. Tisdale functions as an archaeolo-

gist, recovering objects from the "Black Pride" movement. Through the display of these everyday objects, he explores how identity is both cultural and personal. "My residue," Tisdale says, "is the residue of us all."

Fred Wilson also looks at that which traditional museums exclude. He proposes other ways of seeing the past — not Tisdale's recent past, but the past as it is presented in a 19th-century colonial museum. By re-examining Western ethnography from the perspective of the other, Wilson exposes historical misconceptions and prejudices. His installation juxtaposes both real and manipulated objects with ironic texts in display cases and settings that mimic a natural history museum presentation.

Misrepresentation — specifically the way women of African descent have been viewed throughout history — is of importance to **Renée Green**. Her work explores the cultural politics of race, sexuality, representation and the imaginary through the juxtaposition of literary texts, found objects and personal memories. Although Green's work references colonialism and the era of expansion and exploration, it is designed as a fiction. Her dream version of the natural history museum embraces the history of the other.

Melissa Goldstein explores how ownership changes the meaning of an art object. By juxtaposing photographic fragments of Freud's collection of ancient sculptures with sterling silver spoons engraved with Freudian terms, Goldstein looks at the relationship between souvenirs of the past, myth and the qualities of human nature. Goldstein presents these objects — the photographs, as well as the spoons — as fetishes, as conveyers of a specific history that has been passed on, and reinterpreted over time. The collector, as well as the collection, plays an important role in determining history. As Goldstein suggests, it is through the taste of the individual rather than through the inherent value of the object that meaning is conveyed.

Brian Tucker's installation looks at the Beatles as a cultural phenomenon. By creating and displaying collections devoted to the study of John, Paul, George and Ringo, he explores the notion of the fan and the function of the collections of pop idols. Tucker is interested in how history and myth are constructed, as well as how different attitudes toward collecting mirror the different attitudes toward self discovery. According to Tucker, who we are is related to our obsessions.

Although Tisdale, Wilson, Tucker, Green and Goldstein all look to the past, it is not only through the past that we come to know ourselves. **Sylvia Bowyer** looks forward. Her installation is an exhibit set sometime in the future based on the premise that in the future people will freeze and store the essence of all wild flora and fauna. These essences take on the shapes of Russian Suprematist paintings alluding to the Constructivist ideal. The work enters into a dialogue between past and future visions of utopia. It presents a diagram of what the future would look like if "our desire for simplification and preservation were realized."

What we inherit from the past we apply to the future. The present becomes the catalyst, the point through which everything passes. A museum houses these memories. It becomes the frame through which we come to know ourselves and our histories. But museums are limited; they only present some points of view. There are other histories to be told and other legacies upon which to draw. The artists in **Inheritance** present unconventional approaches to traditional museum display. They make references to both recorded and personal history in order to expand upon the limited frame of the museum.

Roberto Bedoya
Jody Zellen
curators

INHERITING DIFFERENCE

Joshua Decter

To see ethnography as a form of culture collecting (not, of course, the only way to see it) highlights the ways that diverse experiences and facts are selected, gathered, detached from their original temporal occasions, and given value in a new arrangement.

Every appropriation of culture, whether by insiders or outsiders, implies a specific temporal position and form of historical narration.

—James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture"

In her director's forward for the anthology, Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, Marcia Tucker offered a relatively straightforward yet indisputably trenchant observation: "None of us chooses our race, our gender, our age, or our country of origin, nor can we do anything to change them. But while these factors are outside our control, how we position ourselves in relation to them is very much a matter of choice."¹

Indeed, it is very much a question of how we position ourselves — in relation to the multiple influencing factors which we inherit, either willfully through a conscious absorption of traditional forms, practices, and belief systems (whether derived from religious, ideological, political, philosophical or other cultural sources), or through determinations which presuppose our "conscious" acts (i.e., the rather obvious examples of racial inheritance, the context in which one is born, etc.). I am a white male, and no amount of surgery or

prosthetic implantation can effectively erase this fundamental condition, even though such methods of bodily alteration announce a desire to renounce biological, genetic (i.e., gender and sexual) inheritance.

The sex-change operation suggests one of the most radical attempts to re-invent the body according to a psychological resistance to biological inheritance: yet even the "choice" exerted by the individual in relation to the cultural position of their sexuality is predicated, on some level, upon the adoption of a set of codes of signs of "the feminine" or "womanhood" (as distinct from the code/signs of "the masculine," or "manhood"). In other words, the fantasy of sexual (self)transformation is itself the product of a certain mode of cultural inheritance. We can refer to an example from popular culture to locate a figure who would seem to be symptomatic of the inter-related desire to renounce both racial inheritance and sexual condition: Michael Jackson. On the terms of this discussion, we may be able to understand the spectacularly pathetic endeavor of Jackson to quite literally "make himself over into" a kind of white Diana Ross — an ultimate symbolic figure for a cultural masquerade wherein "difference" is nullified in favor of artificial synthesis, a corporeal rearrangement which suggests a desire to produce a (self)representation of so-called "cross-over" culture. Yet the image which Jackson proliferates through the mass media and entertainment industry is itself an index of a post-racial, post-sexual order of existence wherein cultural identities and distinctions collapse into a prosthetic hybrid — the "new" a-sexual (i.e., androgynous), a-racial (i.e., the product of racial conversion) type of individual constructed by certain members (black and white, male and female) of the entertainment industry.

Born into a white, Jewish, middle-class New York family, I "inherited" aspects of the cultural background of my parents — for instance, their participation within a milieu of intellectual/political culture, their apparently contradictory (or so it seemed to me during my childhood) relationship to "Jewishness" (a positive embrace of certain aspects of Jewish cultural tradition, yet an extreme ambivalence towards religion, and questions of faith). In other words, I inherited the (complex) cultural, social, and psychological conditions of secular Jewish urban life. I was educated at high-quality private high schools and colleges, whose students populations were predominantly, though not exclusively, white. This comes as no surprise, yet it seemed to disturb me by the time I reached college — particularly in relation to my father's history (he had worked for Martin Luther King for a brief period during the 1960s). Apart from the seductive and morally compelling quality of the rhetoric of liberal, democratic, and libertarian principles, where were the concrete accomplishments to be found? They were there to be sure, subtle yet potent, but it was still difficult to perceive such changes against the milky-white background of these racially homogeneous (with few exceptions) student populations, even in the early 1980s. (Perhaps I would have encountered considerably more racial and ethnic diversity within the State college systems). I studied art history and philosophy, and there seemed to be a "natural" (i.e., partially inherited) tendency towards the so-called emancipatory theories/practices of Marxist cultural criticism and theory. I became infatuated with the Frankfurt School in particular, seduced by the range of writings concerning both the negative and positive attributes of industrial culture (e.g., Adorno, Benjamin, etc.). I began to encounter an idealistic or utopianist impulse within my formative approach to contemporary culture — an impulse partially inherited, but then actively re-appropriated.

INHERITANCE: THE ACT OF INHERITING PROPERTY; THE RECEPTION OF GENETIC QUALITIES BY TRANSMISSION OF PARENT TO OFFSPRING; THE ACQUISITION OF A POSSESSION, CONDITION, OR TRAIT FROM PAST GENERATIONS; SOMETHING THAT IS OR MAY BE INHERITED; TRADITION; A VALUABLE POSSESSION THAT IS A COMMON HERITAGE FROM NATURE.

Considering this set of definitions of the word "inheritance," I am struck by the multiple meanings which might obtain for this linguistic term. The word may be used to identify or name a range of social/cultural processes and acts, some of which I have already articulated through the previous meta-narrative, quasi-autobiographical structure. One may inherit a sum of money from a recently deceased relative, and one may also (or always) inherit the ideological assumptions of a "liberal arts" system of pedagogy. Both describe different types of inheritance within the socio-cultural matrix. For the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, individuals are born into ideology on symbolic and material levels — bathed in it from birth, and through structures of education. These are modes of inheritance.

Upon reflection, my embrace of certain aspects of Marxist philosophy and cultural criticism in college and then in the Whitney Independent Study Program now would seem to suggest a moment wherein I attempted to re-appropriate inherited models (from family, from school) for the sake of a notion (and perhaps even practice) of "critical consciousness." I began to endorse the viability of utilizing certain Marxist concepts and theoretical frameworks of cultural analysis for emancipatory ends: that is, to use method and theory to engender "social transformations," beyond a private sort of critical consciousness. My re-appropriation of a tradition of Marxist criticism within the formative language of my emergent practice as an art critic in the later 1980s was simply the logical extension of my inheritance of Continental philosophy/thought. Ironically, it never occurred to me to apply this notion of "critical consciousness" in a self-conscious manner, so as to indicate the fundamentally Euro-centric assumptions of my thought and language (indeed, it is probable that the notion of Euro-centrism was still "foreign" to me in the mid-1980s). Furthermore, it never occurred to me, at that time, to question whether the writings of a German-Jewish author (i.e., Walter Benjamin) active in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s could have the remotest connection to the cultural conditions and problems of America or Europe in the 1980s. I "naturally" concluded that the authority granted to Benjamin and others was justified, and I reinforced this authority of the canon without question. After all, his writings were part of my "rightful" inheritance, ready for my re-appropriation. Ironically, it was an essay by Edward Said, entitled *Traveling Theory*, which guided me towards a critical self-consciousness about such ideological assumptions. In the essay, Said proposes an historical, sociological, and ideological analysis of what might be described as the "migration" of theoretical models from one cultural context to the other, from one period to the other. Specifically, Said focused his attention upon the "traveling" of Georg Luckac's 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*, as this was inherited and re-appropriated by later Marxist critics such as Lucien Goldmann and Raymond Williams within distinctly different contexts (and ultimately, for distinctly different "uses"). Said prompted me to begin reflecting critically upon the fundamental a-historical nature of my appropriated inheritances when he argued that we should:

"... distinguish theory from critical consciousness by saying that the latter is a sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating or situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the place and time out of which it emerges as a part of that time, working in and for it, responding to it; then, consequently, that first place can be measured against subsequent places where the theory turns up for use."²

Articulating a defense of a neo-humanist critical engagement with the "world," which calls for a materialist conception of theory in relation to its supposed "practical" applications, Said wrote:

"The critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. And,

above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict. Indeed I would go as far as saying that it is the critic's job to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human need and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive arena necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory."

Reading this as I began to produce art criticism (perhaps the most insular, self-referential, apolitical, and culturally dis-engaged mode of cultural criticism as a discipline) for the relatively small audience which comprises the so-called art world, I was immediately impressed by Said's effort to articulate a re-engagement of theory and criticism (specifically, academic criticism) with the broader social, cultural and political conditions of a specific context. At that point, I eagerly inherited and then re-appropriated Said's approach: it was persuasive. And even if I might have disagreed with some of his "real" political positions (for instance, regarding the history of the Palestinian issue, from his position as a Palestinian), I nevertheless admired his ability to produce an active and concrete dialogue between the work of the academic critic and the work of the political activist. The interface of these roles made manifest Said's own demand for the overcoming of academic and political specialization — an endeavor towards larger, cross-cultural, social reform. But could art criticism function in the way in which Said envisioned a new type of literary/cultural criticism might operate "... in that potential space inside civil society, acting on behalf of those alternative acts and alternative intentions whose advancement is a fundamental human obligation"?

Over the past few years, the institutional limitations of my practice as art critic have become increasingly evident. What did it really mean to "speak on behalf of alternative acts and alternative intentions"? Did this mean that if I wrote a review of an exhibition of contemporary African-American artists at The Studio Museum in Harlem that I was "acting on behalf" of some group which constituted an "alternative," "the marginalized"? In a sense, I had also inherited (and then appropriated) already available notions of what constituted "alternative" art production — i.e., those practices which seemed to have been produced by "marginalized" artists, artists who worked outside of the so-called "center," at the so-called "periphery" of "mainstream" (i.e., sanctioned) high culture. Until recently, I had accepted the legitimacy and viability of these seemingly authoritative terms which claimed to identify (within a rather crudely structured binary system of dualisms) that which was "included" at the center, versus that which was "excluded." But whose "center," and whose "periphery"? I had never really questioned which "center," which "dominant" was being referred to — since there is obviously more than one center and one margin within an ethnically and racially diverse society (this reality itself nullifies the legitimacy of the binary divisions between "mainstream" and "alternative," "center" and "margin")! Such categories are utilized by those within a self-perceived "dominant" cultural configuration (which means, in translation, where there is capital for the production and exhibition of art) to reinforce their interests and desires. But returning to Said, was there something inherently Euro-centric about adopting and endorsing the notion of "human obligation" towards the "alternative"? Didn't this suggest a kind of neo-Enlightenment humanism which once again reinforced the artificial division between "center" and "margin"? Well, I don't believe that Said, as a Palestinian, could be suggesting that the critic's role is to speak for that so-called "alternative," but rather to facilitate an empowering of disenfranchised, marginalized cultural producers to speak in their own "voices," to create their own self-representa-

tions. I do not wish to speak for the other, since I am also "other;" likewise, I hope that the other does not speak for me, since he/she is also "other." Rather, we should conceive of the possibility of a coalition of "otherness" (i.e., to use a somewhat outmoded vernacular, "togetherness").

When I began to encounter writings by African-American cultural critics such as Cornel West, Michelle Wallace and bell hooks, it became immediately clear that these authors were contesting the very language of multi-culturalism which had begun to seep into the linguistic/semantic horizon of the lexicon of art criticism. In particular, West's *The New Cultural Politics of Difference* seemed to present the most sophisticated and pragmatic approach to the notion of "cultural difference" on both intellectual (i.e., in terms of the language of the academy) and political (i.e., the language of activism) grounds. West's method and language suggested a selective hybridization of diverse cultural, historical, political, ideological, racial, ethnic and philosophical traditions which allowed him to locate a "genealogy" of Western conceptions (and practices) of democracy — a genealogy which indicates both the positive and negative characteristics of developments in notions of racial, ethnic, cultural identities (specifically, articulated in terms of the historical relationship between blacks and whites). To my mind, West argues for a type of reconciliation between distinct groups (whether these are characterized by gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, race, economics, etc.) that is organized around the re-consideration of democratic, liberational goals — not unlike the mode of humanitarian obligation suggested by Said. I have willingly inherited, then actively appropriated, West's call for coalition building between diverse communities and languages within the U.S. context:

"Adequate rejoinders to intellectual and existential challenges equip the practitioners of the new cultural politics of difference to meet the political ones. This challenge principally consists of forging solid and reliable alliances between people of color and white progressives guided by amoral and political vision of greater democracy and individual freedom in communities, states, and transnational enterprises, e.g., corporations, information and communication conglomerates."

The "progressive" unfolding of my own pragmatic approach to progressive cultural politics has been engendered by a series of reflexive, self-consciously critical re-evaluations of how I have positioned myself in relation to inherited notions, models and practices, and then through a re-appropriation of specific languages within my critical writing that indicate this continuous dynamic of influence and selection. This dynamic is predicated on a degree of critical flexibility towards other disciplinary languages (whether theoretical or political) as a means to challenge received ideological models and practices of "cultural democracy," and facilitate a re-conceptualization of "cultural democracy" as a sphere of "political culture" wherein democratic freedoms (whether social or economic) need to be won back. For West, the "new" critic must engage in both intellectual and political struggles for such re-definition:

"The time has come for critics and artists of the new cultural politics of difference to casts their nets widely, flex their muscles broadly and thereby to refuse to limit their visions, analyses and praxis to their particular terrains. The aim is to dare to recast, redefine and revise the very notions of 'modernity,' 'mainstream,' 'margins,' 'difference,' 'otherness.'"

My relationship to West's ideas are not merely symptomatic of my condition as a "sympathetic" white liberal critic. Rather, the inheritance of my father's ideological and political liberalism, for instance, has influenced my inclinations towards notions of social and economic democracy; yet, in ideological terms, these convictions have also been strongly influenced by certain principles gained from an exposure to certain types

of Marxist philosophy and criticism. It is evident that aspects of the Marxist tradition have also been inherited — and then re-appropriated — by West, particularly in regard to his conception of inter-disciplinary, inter-cultural coalitions resisting hegemony (on local, national, and global levels). Indeed, it might even be tenable to suggest that Habermas may have entered into West's implied notion of greater communication between races, genders, etc. Yet, for West, the work and activities of the "progressive" cultural critic have all too often been co-opted by mainstream forces — producing the paradoxical role of the "co-opted progressive" critic. This is the apparent result of a lack of broader ideological support and political reinforcement from a coalition of institutional and non-institutional bodies. I am drawn to how West has unified his perhaps contradictory impulses toward utopianism and practical politics, suggesting a strategy for the development of personal and public "coalitions" between divergent or antagonistic positions. Extrapolated from these observations, it might also be tenable to suggest that the "spirit" of Martin Luther King is inscribed within the grain of West's discourse. This, alone, is a powerful and persuasive inheritance to re-appropriate for myself, for others.

NOTES

¹ Marcia Tucker, *Director's Forward, Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson et al., New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 7.

² Edward Said, *Traveling Theory, The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 241-242.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁴ Edward Said, *Secular Criticism, The World, the Text, and the Critic*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁵ Cornel West, *The New Cultural Politics of Difference, Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

THE FRAGILE INHERITORS

Kobena Mercer

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

— Marx, 1869

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.

— Freud, 1917

There has been a death in the family of man: modernism. The morbid symptoms of its slow decline have been with us for some time now, but as a body of myths central to the shaping of Western culture, it has taken a long time dying, and in so doing has forced us into an interregnum in which, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci).

The death of modernism thus leaves an inheritance and makes us heirs of its own demise. The dead take a long time dying because by way of a legal contract, such as a will, they continue to exert a certain power and influence over those who survive them: hence, in the form of the bequest, the dead transmit their deeds to their descendants — the postmodernists. Whether one comes into a family fortune, or inherits only ancestral debts, as survivors we remain bound to mythologies from the past which constitute our common heritage of modernity. The death of universal "Man," and with it the traditional liberal humanist belief in the family of

man, is one such mythology which, dying in squalor, weighs like a nightmare on the bad brains of the living. In the United States today, there is a name for this nightmare as it is lived in the collective imaginary of society — "multiculturalism."

When there is a death in the family, especially when someone has been dis—inherited, survivors often quarrel with one another in dispute over competing claims over the legacy of the deceased. The dead thus exert their power by reanimating jealousies, animosities, sibling rivalries and resentments among surviving family heirs; all of which shows how much the family-of-man, like any family, was based not so much on love, but on violence, error and malice.

The museum has become one of the key institutions in which the death of modernism has bequeathed its terrible inheritance — it is the key site upon which the last will and testament of liberal humanist "Man" has been so bitterly contested by his illegitimate offspring, the minors or so-called minorities of today's society, the bastard stepchildren of the West (in James Baldwin's phrase).

The museum acts as a repository of cultural capital in which accumulated objects and artifacts are exhibited, ordered, classified and made meaningful as evidence of the sovereign and centered identity of "Western Man" as the subject of knowledge whose certainties are staged, displayed and returned in representation as the sum total ratio of what it means to be human. As myth-systems of cultural, political and symbolic power and prestige, the great museums of Europe and America are today in ruins. The sight of the museum in ruins has been important to the recognition of our postmodern condition in that our ability to believe in the mythic narratives of human history embodied in the museum has been radically undermined by our counter-knowledge of the exclusionary practices through which Western Man acquired his identity as the fixed and stable center of the knowable world only by denying the differences and discourse of others.¹ While many have mourned "his" death, some of us have delighted in the decline and fall and decentering of the universal subject as the process has revealed that "he" who historically monopolized the microphone in public culture, by claiming to speak for humanity as a whole while denying that right to representation to anyone who was not white, not male, and not Western, turned out to be merely a minority himself, an "other" amongst others.

The "crisis of authority" within the apparatus of cultural legitimation thus reveals multiculturalism as the flip-side of postmodernism, its "other scene." It is 1992 and, 500 years since Columbus' voyage of destruction/discovery, the museum becomes the setting for diverse struggles over the very meaning of "Americanness" as a national identity. In Europe, desperately seeking a unified self-image in 1992, old imperial nation-states confront the postcolonial inheritance in their body-politic, now the common home of countless people of the African, Caribbean, Asian and Muslim diasporas.

Because he regarded crisis as a permanent condition of modernity, Gramsci said: "If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only dominant, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously," adding: "NB. this paragraph should be completed by some observations on the so-called 'problem of the younger generation' — a problem caused by the 'crisis of authority' of the old generations in power."²

The six artists featured in this exhibition may be regarded as exemplars of a "younger generation" practicing a critical postmodernism which chooses the museum as the site for critical intervention in the

myth-making functions of the cultural imaginary. The artists each use and creatively abuse the conventions of museology as part of an art practice that exhibits a critical archival methodology, deployed in six very different ways around distinct topics, sites and archaeological digs. It would be a bit reductionist, however, to simply label these practices "postmodern" merely on account of their shared, overlapping, concern with the artifact as an outcome of power/knowledge articulations, with the story-telling function of ideologies, or with the imaginary staging of representational access to an "authentic" past. All six are ipso facto pomo in their problematization of our perception of the past, but what intrigues me about their "detachment from traditional ideologies" is that they all seem passionately genealogical in their commitment to a methodology, a way of working through an ethical response to the museum's "crisis of authority," that is best described by Foucault's conception of genealogy as an instrument of counter-practice.³

What we have on display are six different ways of doing genealogy as part of a contemporary art practice that wants to get to the bottom of things with respect to the museum's crisis of credulity and dig a little deeper into the "depthless" predicament of the postmodern. Whether this concerns the mise-en-scene of textual authority (Brian Tucker), or a dread dystopian sci-fi fantasy of global endo-colonization (Sylvia Bowyer), the methods and devices of genealogical inquiry are sharply felt not so much through the mere "appropriation" of the museum's codes and conventions, but through the meticulous and ruthless *perversion* of the idea of a visible "truth" on which they depend.

This strategy informs Melissa Goldstein's re-reading of Freud and the Freudian concept of fetishism, parodying and playing to the 19th-century image-reservoir of the scientist of unconscious mental laws as an obsessed collector. Or from an adjacent angle, when Danny Tisdale's found objects, with all their faded aura from the Black Power era of the 1960s — dashikis, black leather jackets, Afro combs, Ron O'Neal and Nu Nile pomade — are re-placed and re-presented in a fine art museum context as funky-up Duchampian ready-mades, the genealogical impulse in such art practices suggests a strategy of critical perversion which seeks to bend the clichés of museum display to counter-hegemonic purposes. As Foucault put it, *knowledge is not meant for understanding: it is meant for cutting*. The aim is to subvert the codes of museological authority precisely by perverting our aesthetic contract with the artifact as a signifier of power, knowledge and "truth". Quite literally, such methods are perverse insofar as they aim to *lead us away from* the search for a final and absolute "meaning" to historical events, and encourage us instead to take pleasure in a rigorously sceptical disposition towards the "truth" embodied by the museum as an imagined representation of our relationship to the events of the past that made us who we are today.⁴

The museum-in-ruins has become a site of struggle over representations of cultural history because new social actors have sought to reclaim what has been "hidden from history," to rewrite the distorted versions of the past inherited from the dominant, Eurocentric, paradigm. Yet in counter-movements, such as feminist "herstory" or Afrocentrism to cite two examples, there is often a tendency that unwittingly replicates the master-codes of dominant historicism by reducing the desire for knowledge of the past to the discovery of "heroic ancestors" and their "origins," which often comes about because such movements also assume that there is something called "truth." Genealogy, on the other hand, *opposes itself to the search for origins* and departs from history as the telling of fabulous just-so stories of innocent origins and happy endings, for oppressor and oppressed alike.

The artists gathered here resemble genealogists rather than historians in that whereas, *historians*

take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy — the unavoidable obstacles of their passion in order to fabricate an "objective" history which must hide its singular malice under the cloak of universals, the genealogists on the other hand acknowledge their perspectival location and thus resemble Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" as they imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory — a transformation of history into a totally different form of time. It is in this sense that the methods employed here refuse the certainty of absolutes in favor of an epistemological position of ambivalence and uncertainty through which the "look" solicited by their installations, corresponds to the acuity of a glance that distinguishes, separates and disperses, that is capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements — the kind of dissociating view that is capable of decomposing itself, shattering the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past.

Genealogy cuts away from the interpretive authority of the museum for, if interpretation were the slow exposure of the hidden meaning in an origin, then only metaphysicians could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations.

As counter-practice, genealogy concerns what Foucault called, "the search for descent" — a phrase which marvelously describes what Fred Wilson and Renée Green are doing in their gray, meticulous and patiently documentary researches into the toxic mythologies of "race," whose sedimented traces in the fantasia of the popular imaginary are being reworked in the resurgence of racism in the United States today. Green and Wilson follow the complex course of descent in order to take up Cornel West's call for a "genealogical materialist" analysis of "race" as an ideological phantasm of US history which haunts its sense of national identity and its sense of "who we are."⁵

In relation to this topos of "race," I want to stress the importance of such genealogy in its critical difference from that abuse of popular memory which results, for example, in the Black History Month Hall of Fame version of the past in which the search for "positive images," itself motivated by an urgent need to repair the damage done by the dominant paradigm, nonetheless has the effect of embalming and "museumifying" the past and thus paradoxically replicates its perceived marginality. By using genealogy, on the other hand, artists like Renée Green do not arrive at the therapeutic comfort of cathartic "feel-good" counter-myths, but encounter the upsetting discovery that critical knowledge of the past is a dangerous legacy and that, we should not be deceived into thinking that this heritage is an acquisition, a possession that grows and solidifies: rather, it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath.

This is a crucial move in contemporary struggles over the symbolic economy of the museum because it disrupts the simplistic duality of arguing only about "exclusion" and "inclusion" (the rhetoric of bureaucratic multiculturalism). It goes beyond the binary mode of narration in which history's victims and victimizers can only trade places, and opens instead onto a "third space" in which it becomes possible to rethink the social function of the museum and contemplate its radical transformation. This is because genealogy, unlike history, disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified, and the introduction of such disturbance into the field of vision underlines that, what is found at the historical

beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin: it is the dissension of things. It is disparity. In their different ways, the six artists here remind us that, the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation.

Hold up. I'm a confirmed fan of Foucault, who remains one of my favorite dead, white, male thinkers, but like his other black readers I feel compelled to confront his Nietzschean emphasis on the total "dissipation" of identity with the question: whose identity? It is one thing for Europeans like him to abandon any claim to "identity," but some of us have struggled long and hard to grab hold of one and we'd like to hang onto it for the moment, thank you very much. What is missing from Foucault is Stuart Hall's counter-emphasis on the necessarily provisional and arbitrary character of any "identity" formed in and through the process of historical struggles.⁶ But, on the other hand, when Foucault argues that, *nothing in man — not even his body — is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for the understanding of other men*, I agree entirely because in taking aim at the Platonic prejudice against the body as an eternal and immutable substratum of an essential identity, Foucault emphasizes the painful and oppressive materiality of those *phantasms* — inscribed in old world ideologies of race, gender, nationality, sexuality and ethnicity — which cut into the body and divide it from itself and hence undermine any claim to something as finished or as complete as an "identity."

It is because, "Bodies (and not subjects) 'think' not through concepts, nor categories, nor even language, but through phantasms," that, *genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body [as] an inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.* En route to LACE where this exhibition is located, near East Los Angeles, your encounter with homeless and dispossessed bodies, black, brown and white, will confirm how much history "dissolves" the body according to "events," like world recession, and "ideas," like masculinity, class or ethnicity.

Insofar as they ruin our illusion of the museum as repository of "truth," the artists in *Inheritance* allow us to think how our multiple identities as gendered, ethnic, racialized, sexual subjects are not "essences" but themselves "artifacts" of lived experience and violent histories *saturated in blood*. Against the essentialist logic of identity-politics (which paradoxically reifies, dehistoricizes and thus remains tied to the phantasms through which our identities are bound into the murderous hierarchies of the family of man), these artists remind us why we continue to need a sense of "effective history," because: *the world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to their essential traits, their final meaning or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events. If it appears as a "marvelous motley, profound and totally meaningful" then this is because it began and continues its secret existence through a "host of errors and phantasms."*

In this respect, considering the diverse social identities brought together in this group of artists, what the curators of *Inheritance* have achieved is an instance of "critical multiculturalism," which we need more of in contemporary arts programming. What I mean to suggest by this somewhat clumsy phrase is that the curatorial process clearly acknowledges the fact that the phantasms of "race, gender, class" constitute part of our legacy as the lost children of modernity; but in contrast to a certain "bureaucratic multiculturalism," which holds that such phantasms necessarily determine, finalize and fully define what artists can and can't do,

or what curators can and can't show, a "critical multiculturalism," on the other hand, recognizes the emancipatory potential of the "discrepant cosmopolitanism" (the phrase is James Clifford's⁵) through which we locate ourselves in mestizaje cities like London, Lagos or Los Angeles, where we sometimes discover "differences" we can cherish and learn from amidst the otherwise hazardous experience of postmodernity.

The various art practices brought together here lead us away from the museum as such and invite us instead into the rich, strange and quirky texture of that version of the postmodern in which, *the will to knowledge does not achieve a universal truth: man is not given an exact and serene mastery of nature. On the contrary, it ceaselessly multiplies the risks, creates dangers in every area; it breaks down illusory defences; it dissolves the unity of the subject; it releases those elements of itself that are devoted to its subversion and destruction. In so doing, the "younger generation" respond to the "crisis of authority" by gently reminding us that, the study of history makes one "happy, unlike the metaphysicians, to possess in oneself not an immortal soul but many mortal ones."* (*The Wanderer*)

NOTES

¹ The view of postmodernism as, "a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions," is developed by Douglas Crimp, *On The Museum's Ruins*, and Craig Owens, *Feminists and Postmodernism*, both in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press: Seattle, 1983.

Although Owens and Crimp offer a "corrective" to the Eurocentric pathos evoked by Baudrillard, Jameson, Lyotard et al., there is an irony for people of color pointed out by Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg, namely: "those who never made it now arrive to find the Museum in ruins... They arrive to find their Identity already gone, their Culture in fragments, their Nationhood dispersed, and their Monuments reduced to canonical rubble. Welcome to the New Art History. There is room for everyone and a place for none." *The Pachuco's Played Hide: Mobility, Identity and Buenas Garras*, in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge: New York, 1991, p.556.

² Antonio Gramsci, *State and Civil Society* [1930], in Hoare and Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1971, p. 276.

³ Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (1971), in Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Cornell University Press: NY, 1977, pp. 139 - 164; all quotations are in italics.

⁴ The notion of "perversion" as a counter-hegemonic aesthetic strategy is developed by Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, Oxford University Press: New York, 1991, see esp. Part 5, *Perversion's Last Histories*, pp. 103 - 168.

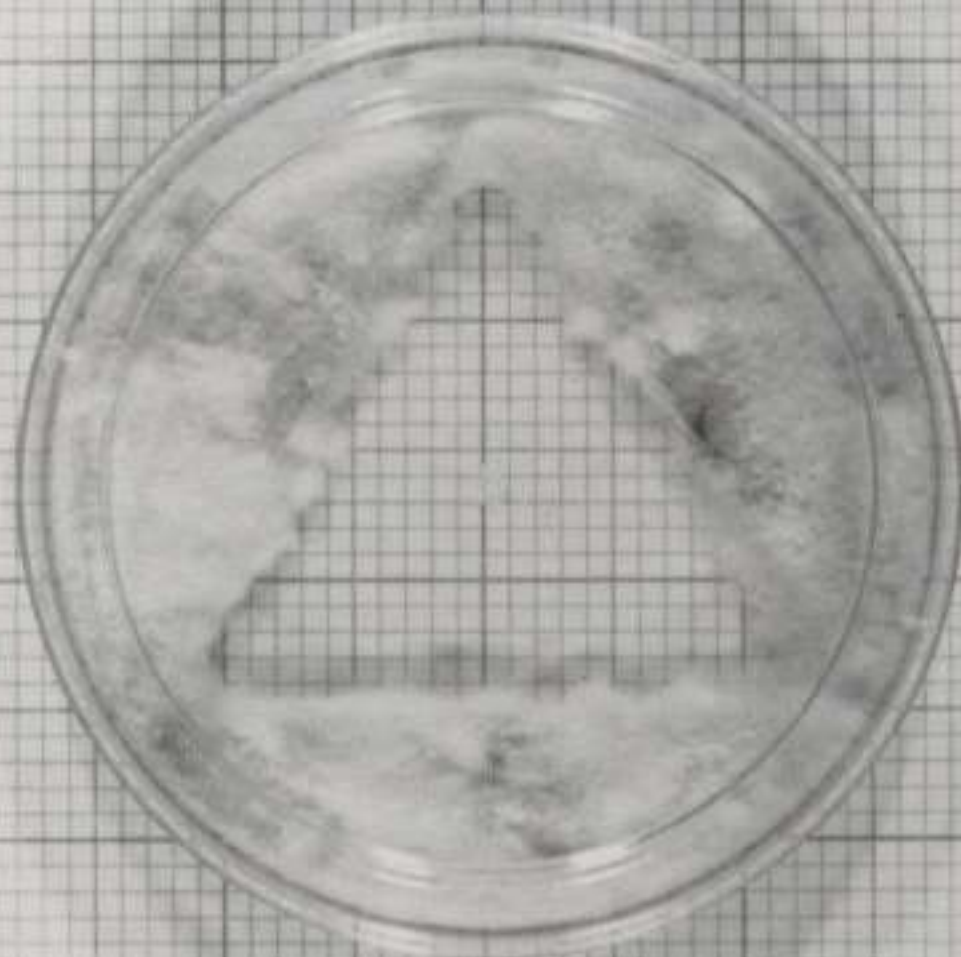
⁵ Cornel West, *Race and Social Theory: Towards a Genealogical Materialist Analysis*, in Davis, Marable, Pfiel, Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left 2*, Verso: London, 1987, pp. 73 - 90.

⁶ Stuart Hall's emphasis on the necessarily "arbitrary" point of closure entailed by any assumption of "identity" is developed in, *Minimal Selves, The Real Me*, ICA Documents #6, Institute of Contemporary Arts: London, 1987, and *New Ethnicities, Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA Documents #7, 1988.

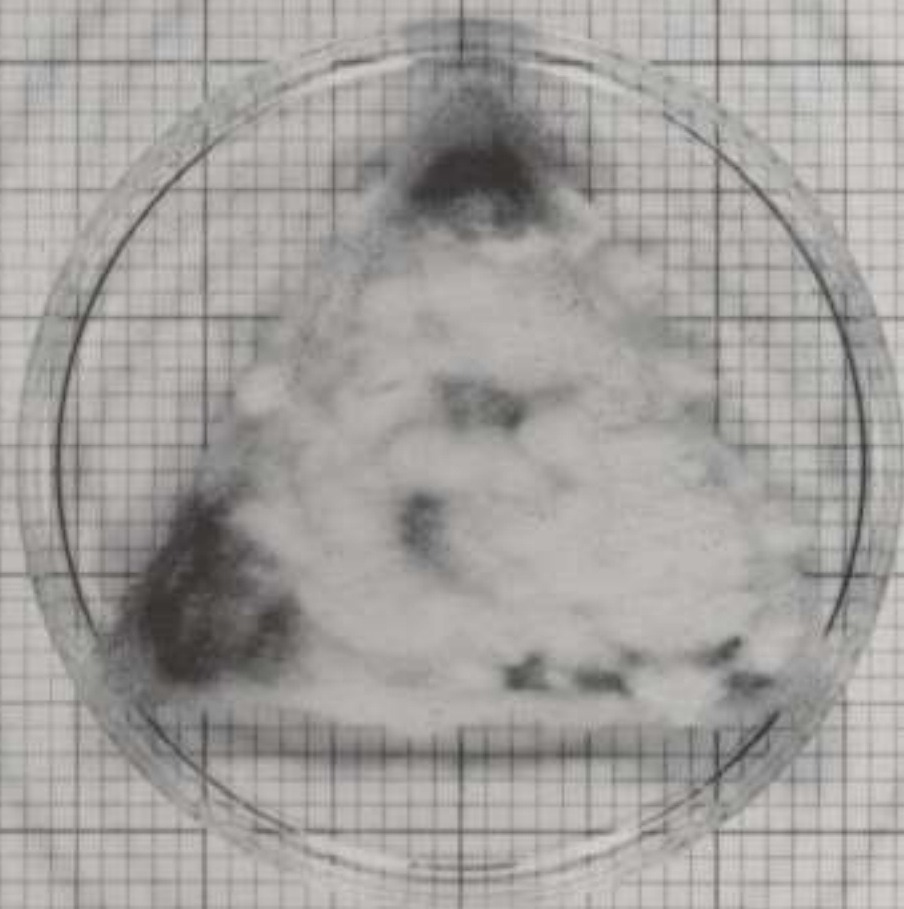
⁷ Scott Lash, *Genealogy and the Body*, in *Sociology of Postmodernism*, Routledge: London, 1990, p. 64.

⁸ James Clifford, *Traveling Cultures*, in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, op. cit., p. 108; on the political economy of the museum, see his, *On Collecting Art and Culture*, in *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press: MA, 1988, pp. 215 - 251.

SYLVIA BOWYER



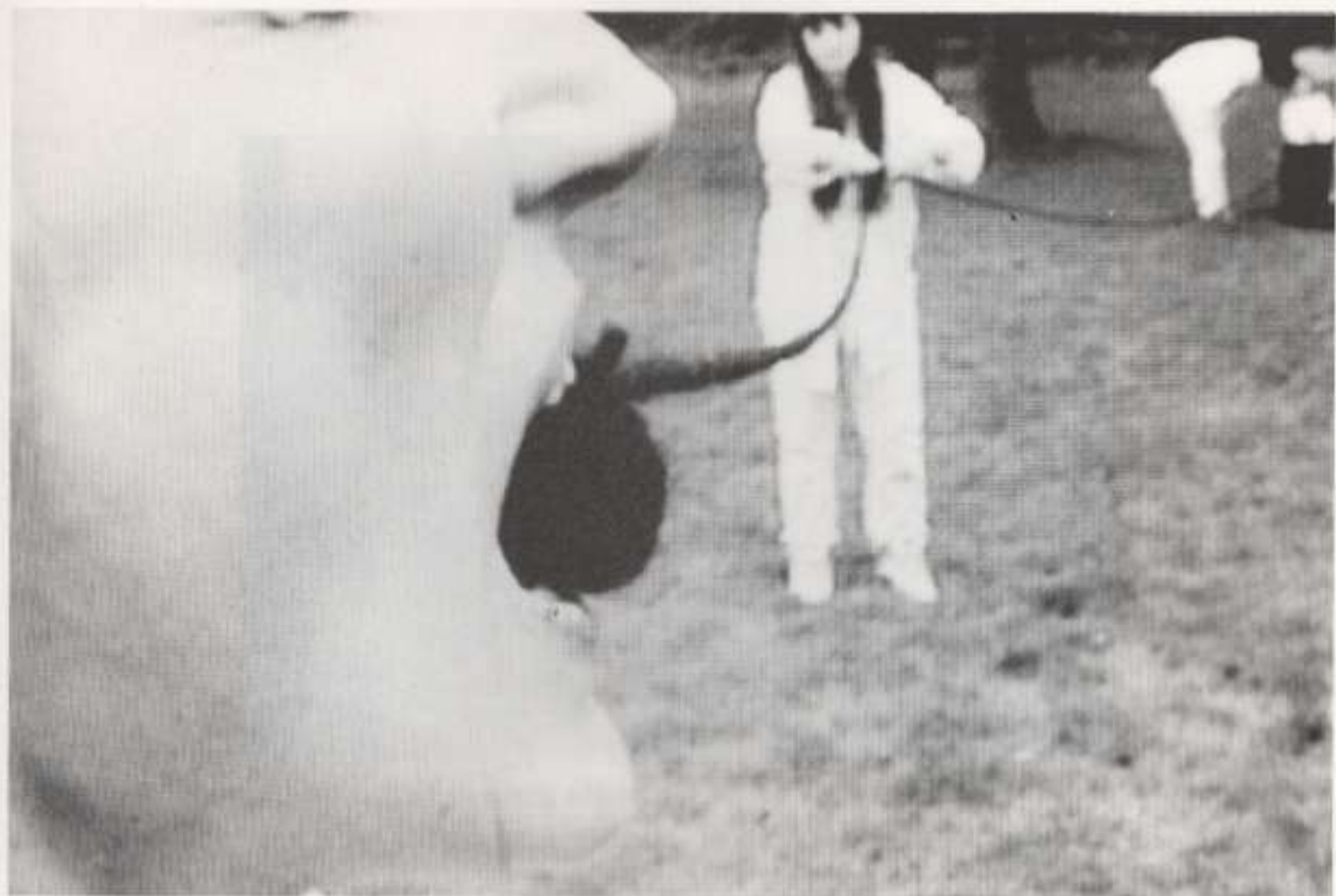
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LINK

MELISSA GOLDSTEIN







DANNY TIDDALE

But for me it was enough if, in my own bed, my sleep was so heavy as completely to relax my consciousness; for then I lost all sense of place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke at midnight, not knowing where I was, I could not be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness; I was more destitute of human qualities than the cave-dweller; but then the memory, not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be, would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself: in a flash I would traverse and surmount centuries of civilization, and out of a half-visualized succession of oil-lamps, followed by shirts with turned-down collars, would put together by degrees the component parts of my ego.

— Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

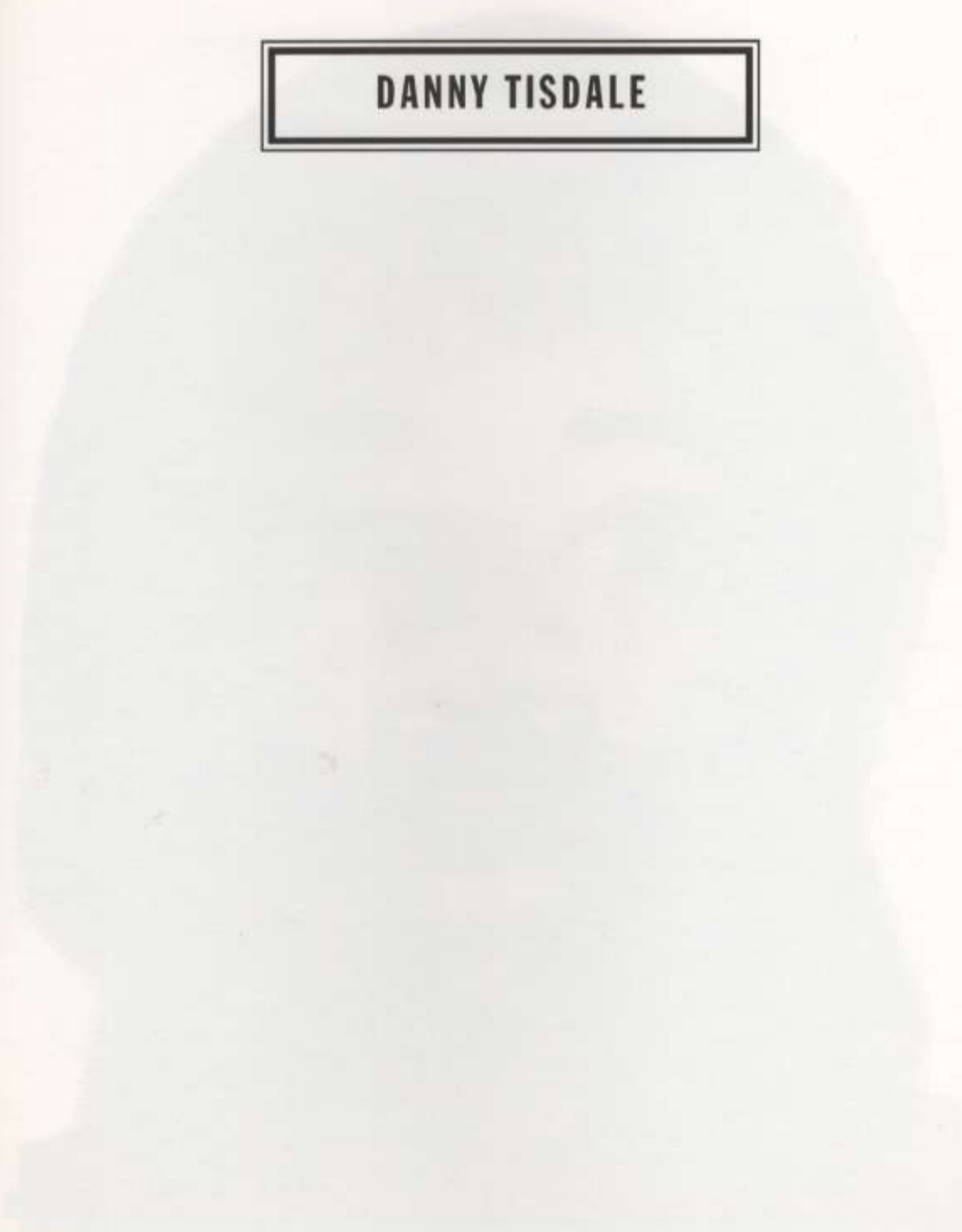


and of various other places where I had been, and
might not very possibly be, would come like a
step to them from heaven for there was no out of
the story to be told, from which I could have
been rescued by myself in a flash I would be-
come and momentary conduct of attention and
out of a half-stunned suspension of all things
followed by a state with turned-down collar, would
tell together by degrees the component parts of
my life.

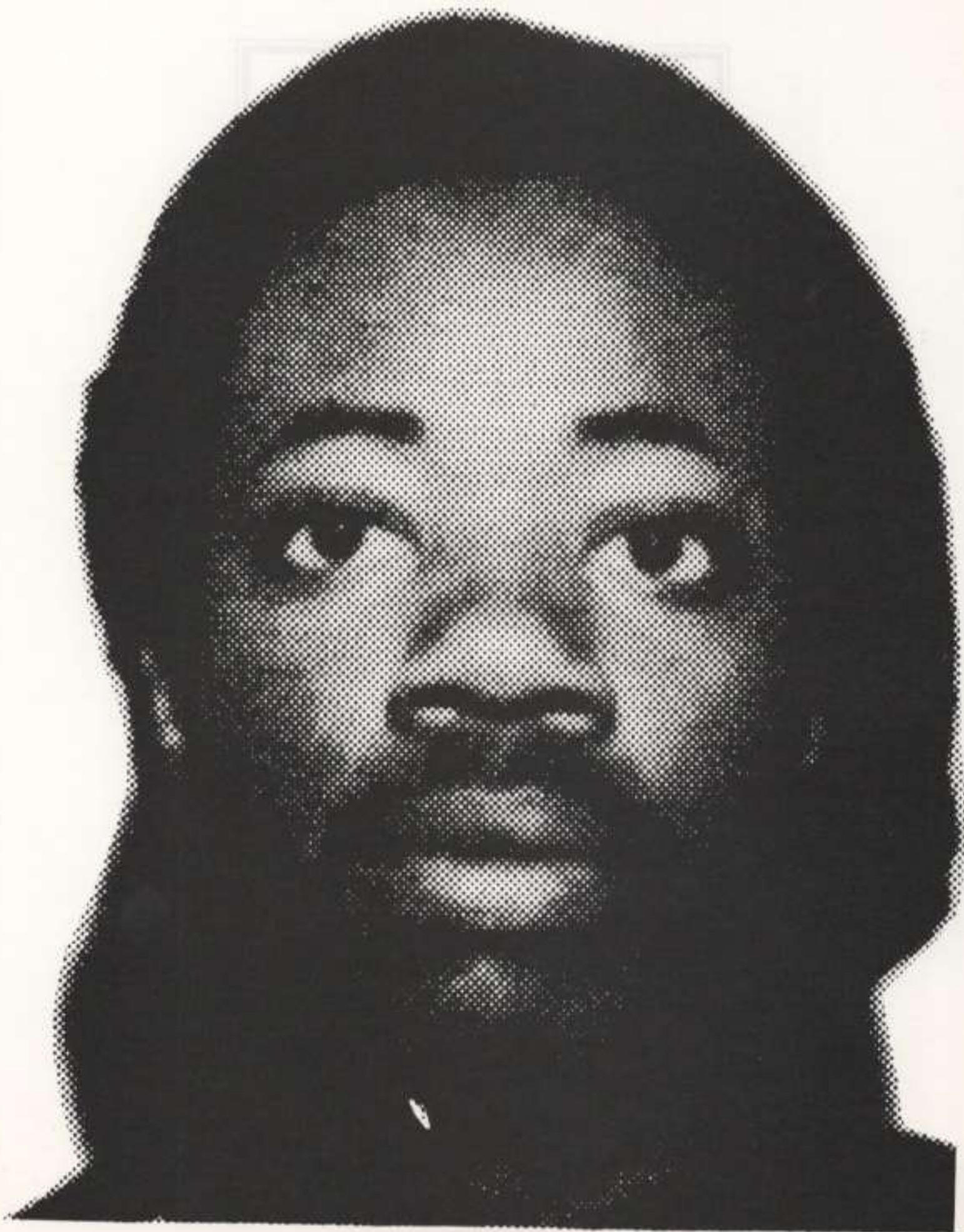
—John Galsworthy

"AMERICA'S MOST WANTED"

DANNY TISDALE



"AMERICA'S MOST WANTED"



inheritance: to receive as a right or title descended by law from an ancestor at his or her



death. **b:** to receive as a devise or legacy. **c:** the acquisition of a possession, condition or



trait from past generations. **I:** to take or hold a possession or rights by inheritance.





RENEE GREEN

PHOTOGRAPH

RENEE GREEN
PHOTOGRAPH

RENEE GREEN

RENEE GREEN

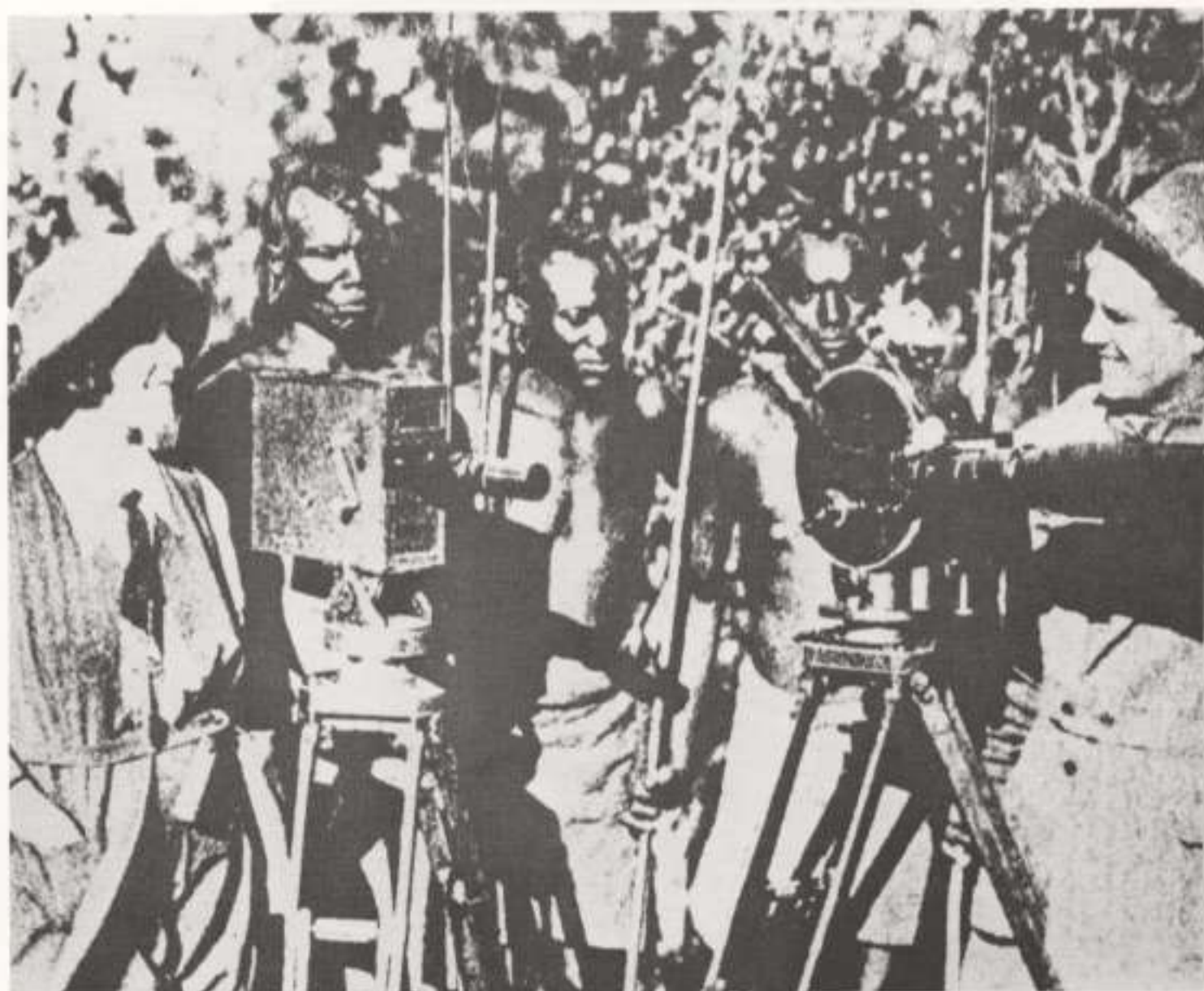
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RENEE GREEN

RENEE GREEN

CASE 507





PROFILE

Symptom: Fear of separation from photographic apparatus.

DIAGNOSIS: Scopophilia

Indications: "Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused." In addition, "The force which may be overridden by it... is shame." (Ref. Freud)





BRIAN TUCKER

The Smart One
The Cute One
The Quiet One
The Clown

The Smart One
The Cute One
The Quiet One
The Clown

BRIAN TUCKER



Figurines of this type trigger nostalgia and are prized by collectors. Their value is increased by 80% if the original packaging is intact.

Many effigies were produced, most in 1964, including bobbing head dolls (a mint set of those is worth about \$500), inflatable dolls, cloth dolls, rubber dolls with embedded hair, unauthorized cake decorations labeled "Swingers" or "Go-Go Swingers," bottlestoppers, moulded bubble bath containers (Paul and Ringo only — the most popular members of the group), plastic model kits, and Halloween costumes.



There is much more to know about PAUL. From the earliest days, he was thrifty. In 1960, he was deported from Germany for suspected arson. He admitted to Queen magazine that he had taken LSD and that it "opened my eyes." He has always been very impressed by famous celebrities. He believes that women are turned on sexually when he strikes them. By turns, he can be considerate or petulant. He is frustrated by the fact that Michael Jackson controls the publishing rights to many of his songs. He sings and plays his guitar almost constantly; he seems to have a compulsion to perform.



Actual Size

©1964 Topps Chewing Gum,
abbreviated "T.C.G."
for Trading Card Guild.

In fact, "The Nurk Twins" is a stage name John and Paul used when playing as a duo in 1958. They had played together in "The Quarry Men" since July of 1957. By 1958 George had joined, and the name had changed to "Johnny and the Moondogs." "The Rainbows" was a name improvised when they arrived for a performance in different colored shirts. George played part-time with the Les Stuart Quartet. They became "The Silver Beatles" in May of 1960, named in response to Buddy Holly's "Crickets;" the spelling was a pun on "beat." By August of 1960 the name was shortened to "Beatles." "Long John and the Silver Men" is spurious.



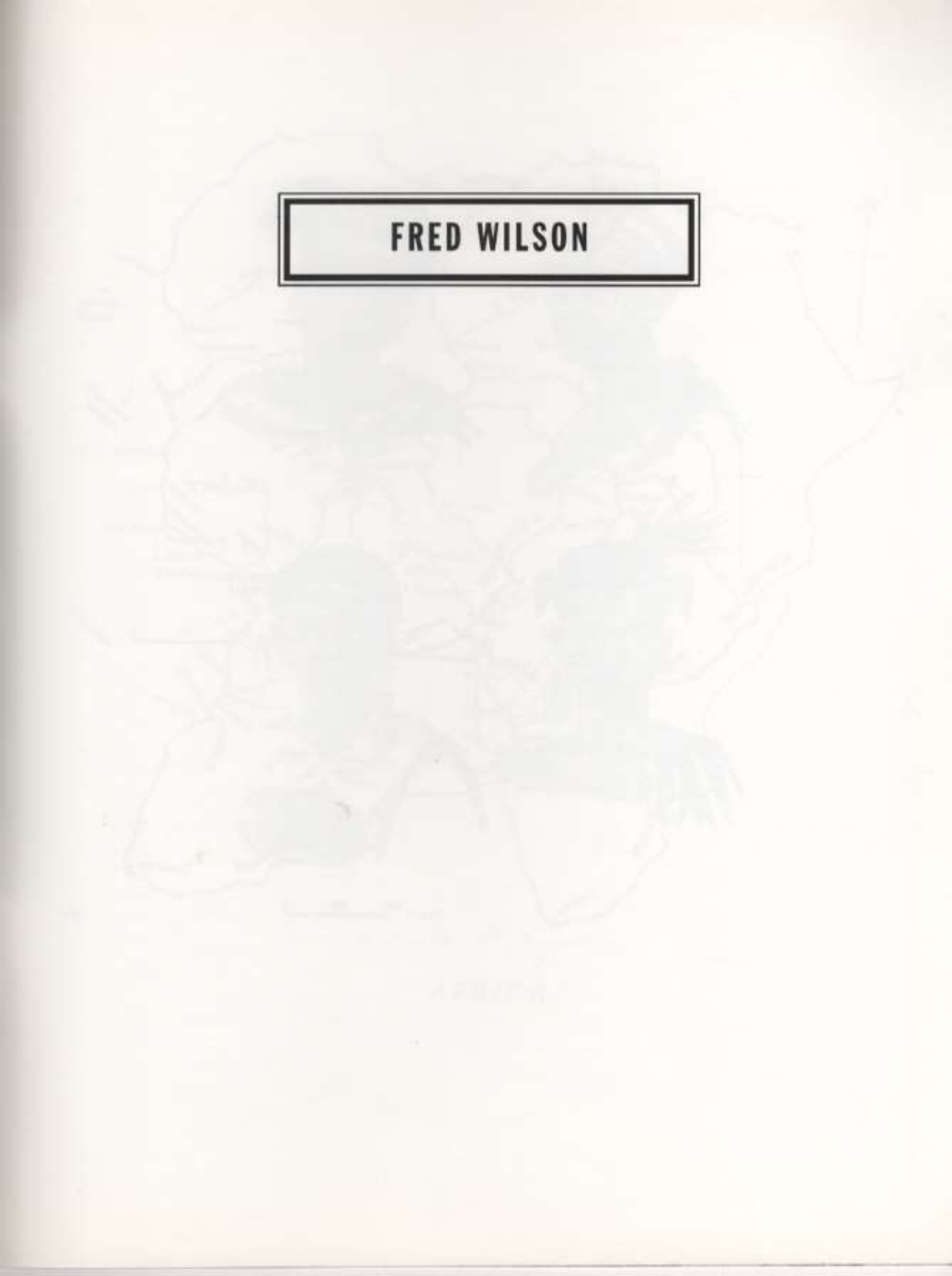
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Beatles memorabilia from the collection of Jerry McCulley.

Biographical and historical sources include *Shout!* by Philip Norman (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1981); *Yesterday* by Chet Flippo (Doubleday, New York, 1988); and *The Beatles Memorabilia Price Guide* by Jeff Ausberger, et al. (Branyan Press, Elburn, Illinois, 1988).

Photography by Sherrie Zuckerman.



FRED WILSON



W. & A. G. & Co. Ltd.

AFRICA

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

SYLVIA BOWYER

b. 1956, Loma Linda, CA
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

"A Controlled Nature," 1992
mixed media installation
72" x 30" x 34"

MELISSA GOLDSTEIN

b. 1961, Bryn Mawr, PA
Lives and works in Seattle, WA

"Homage to a Collector," 1990
mixed media installation
144" x 60" x 96"

RENÉE GREEN

b. 1959, Cleveland, OH
Lives and works in New York, NY

"Blue Skies," 1990
postcard, metal sign,
music roll, stamped wood
75" x 30" x 96"
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery

"Case II: Lost," 1990
mixed media
48" x 83" x 12"
Courtesy David Doubilet

"Case IV: Found," 1990
mixed media
48" x 83" x 12"
Courtesy David Doubilet

DANNY TISDALE

b. 1958, Compton, CA
Lives and works in Harlem, NY

"Afro Hair, The Black Museum," 1990
mixed media
11" x 11" x 11"

"Afro Combs, The Black Museum,"
1990
mixed media
30" x 18 1/2"

"Bandana and Photo,
The Black Museum," 1990
mixed media
18 1/2" x 25 1/2"

"Dashiki, The Black Museum," 1990
mixed media
36" x 42"
Courtesy Virgile Benson

"Dr. Palmer's Skin Whitener and
Bleach, The Black Museum," 1990
mixed media
3" x 3" x 3"

"Black Men, Black Face," 1991
photo
32" x 24"

"Rodney King Beating," 1991
photo
32" x 24"

"America's Most Wanted #9," 1991
photo
32" x 24"

BRIAN TUCKER

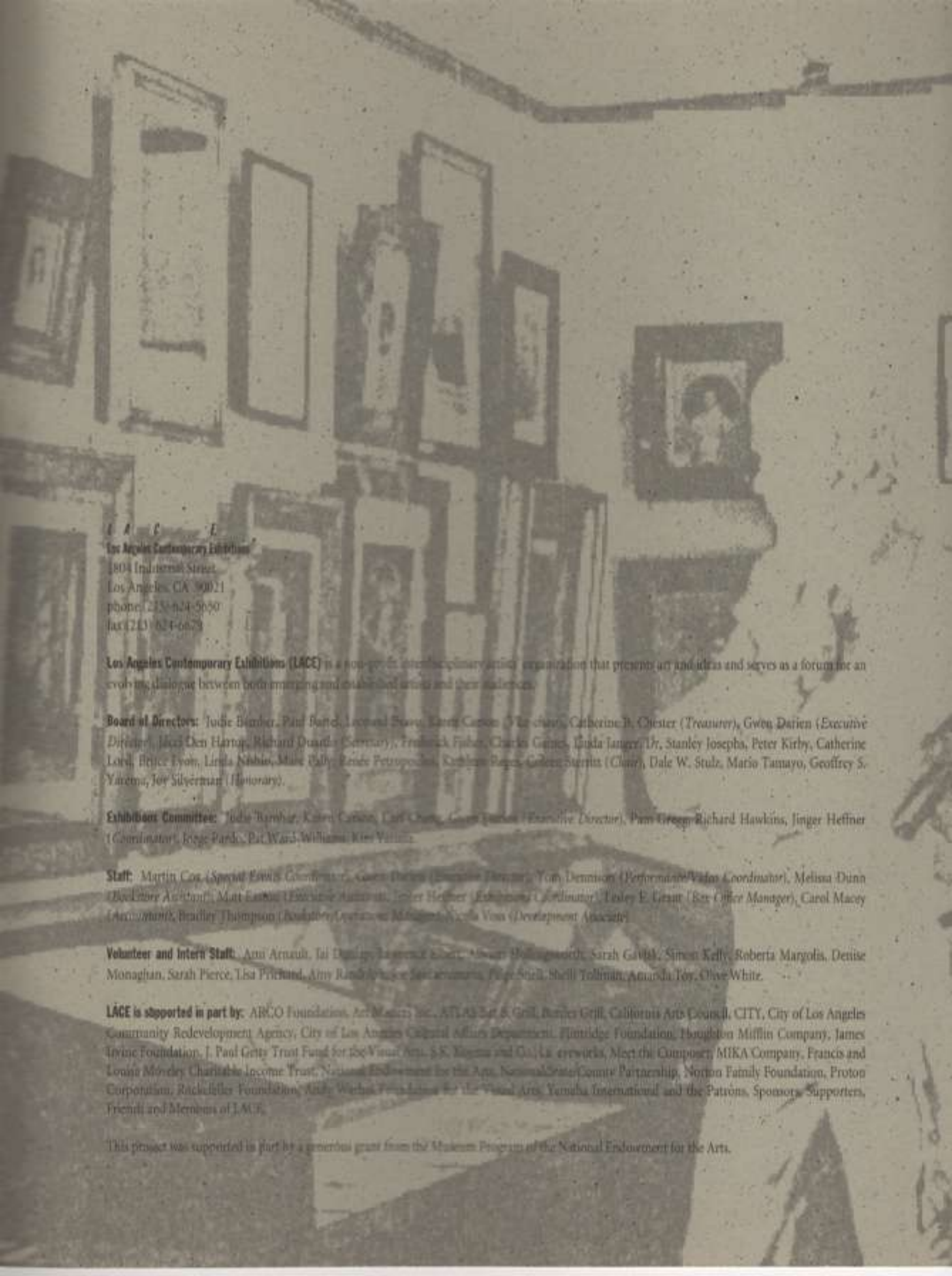
b. 1955, Santa Monica, CA
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

"Meet The Beatles," 1992
mixed media installation
variable dimensions
Courtesy Roy Boyd Gallery

FRED WILSON

b. 1954, Bronx, New York
Lives and works in New York, NY

"Colonial Collection," 1990
mixed media
variable dimensions
Courtesy Metro Pictures



L A C E
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