

# FAILURE BIOGRAPHIES

10c

JOHNNY DAMM



# **FAILURE BIOGRAPHIES**

the operating system  
print//document

## **FAILURE BIOGRAPHIES**

ISBN: 978-1-946031-92-1

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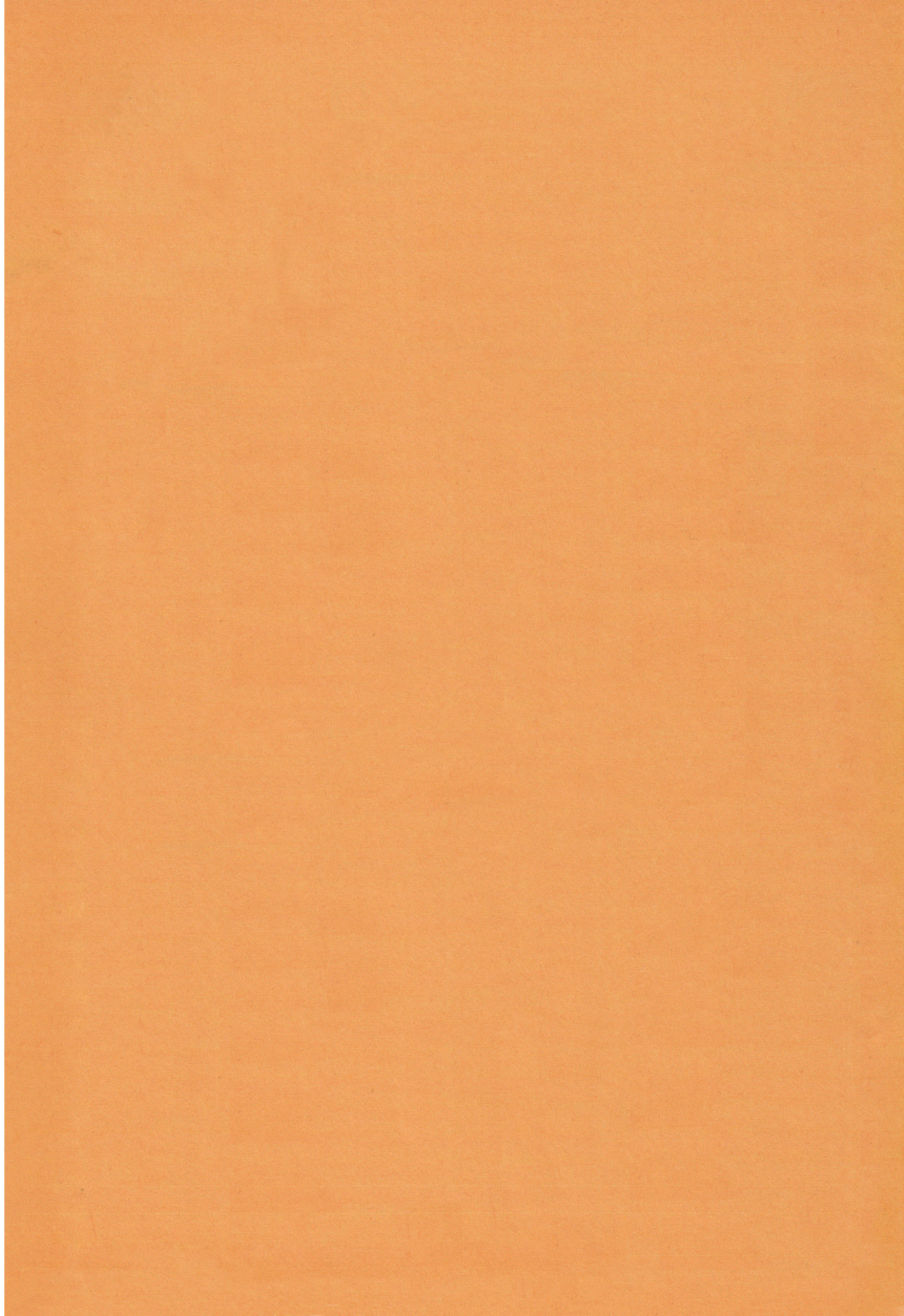
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# **FAILURE BIOGRAPHIES** loc

Johnny Damm

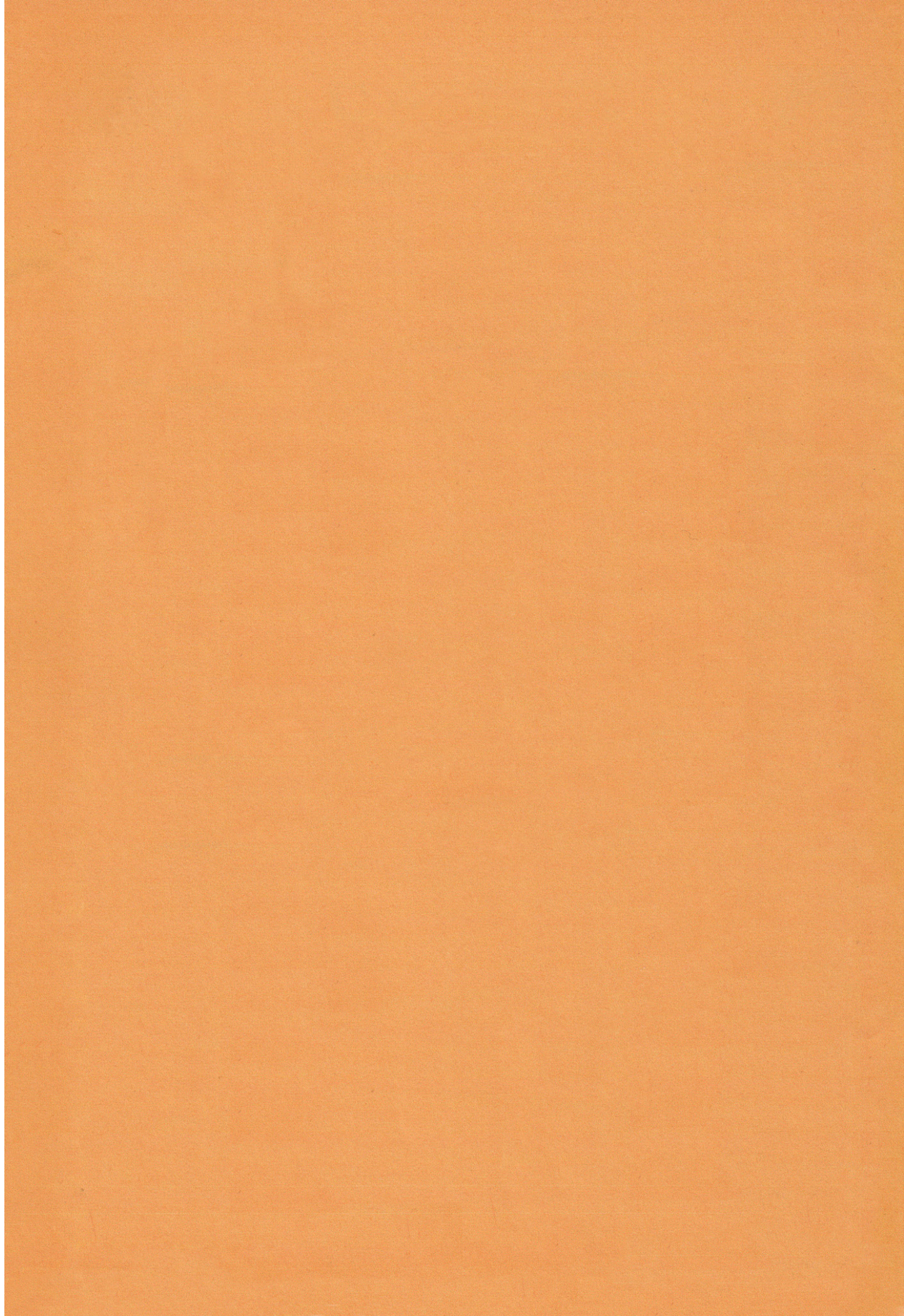


These histories... identify potent avenues of failure, failures that we might build upon in order to counter the logics of success that have emerged from the triumphs of global capitalism.

-Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

Nothing beats a try but a fail.

-James Brown



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# I. Art Histories



Her Here

(Adventures into the Unknown # 35)

# HER HERE



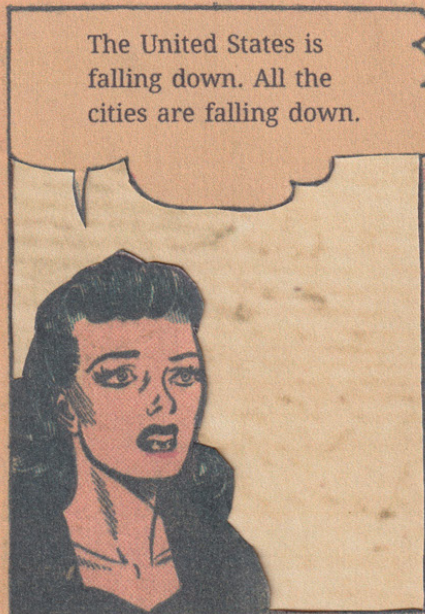
Marta Minujín writes a letter.



I write to you because  
I have an idea to  
be made with  
hamburgers.



ADVENTURES INTO THE UNKNOWN, published monthly and copyright, 1952, by Best Syndicated Features, Inc., 1250 Camden Ave., S.W., Canton 6, Ohio. Editorial offices, 45 West 45th St., New York 19, N.Y. Richard E. Hughes, Editor; Frederick H. Iger, Business Manager. Subscription (12 issues), \$1.20; single copies, \$0.10; foreign postage extra. All characters are fictitious and use of any real names is coincidental. For advertising information, address American Comics Group, 45 West 45th Street, New York 19, N.Y. Re-entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Canton, Ohio. No. 35, September, 1952. Printed in U.S.A.



The United States is falling down. All the cities are falling down.

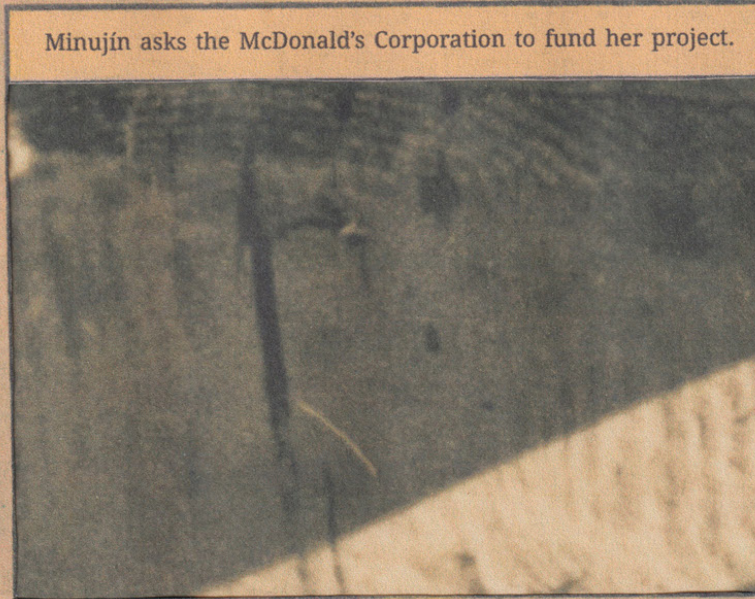


The artist makes a proposal:

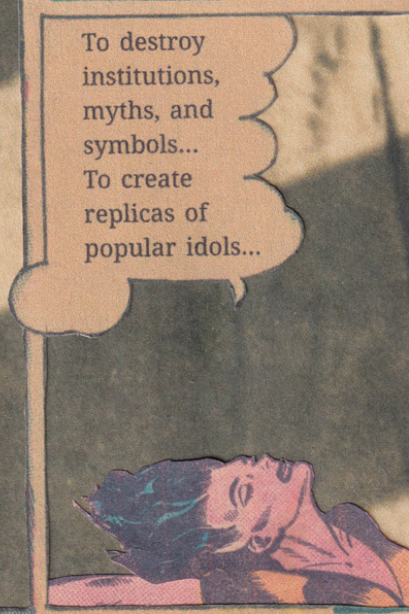
What is vertical...



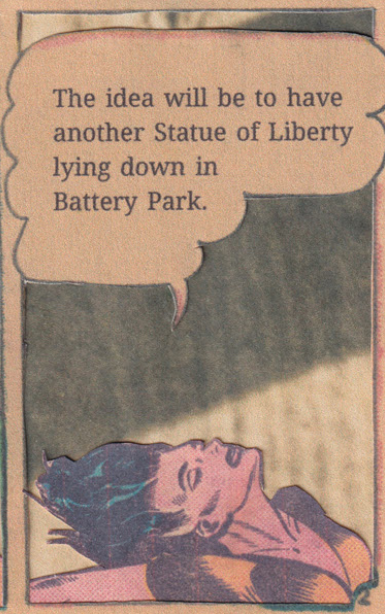
becomes horizontal.



Minujin asks the McDonald's Corporation to fund her project.



To destroy institutions, myths, and symbols... To create replicas of popular idols...



The idea will be to have another Statue of Liberty lying down in Battery Park.

The year is 1972.

And the people would walk in it.



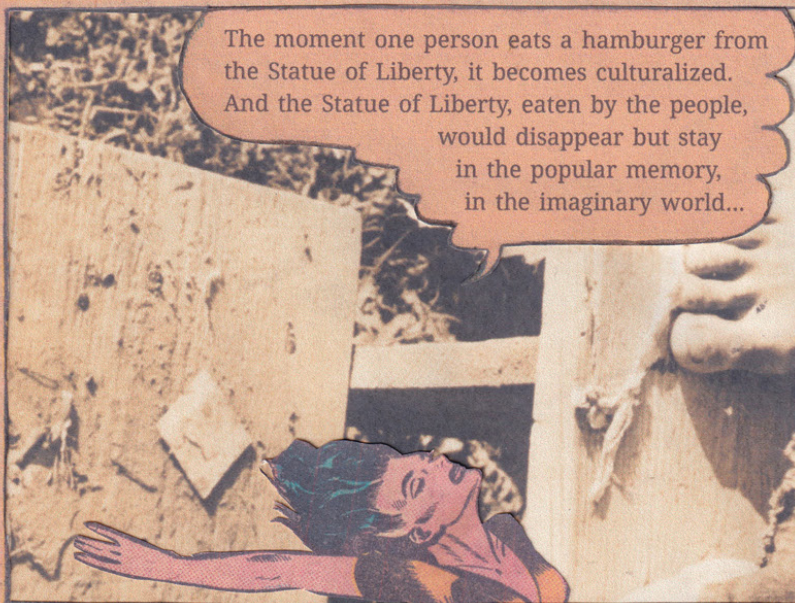
McDonald's would come and cover, with precooked hamburgers, the whole Statue of Liberty.



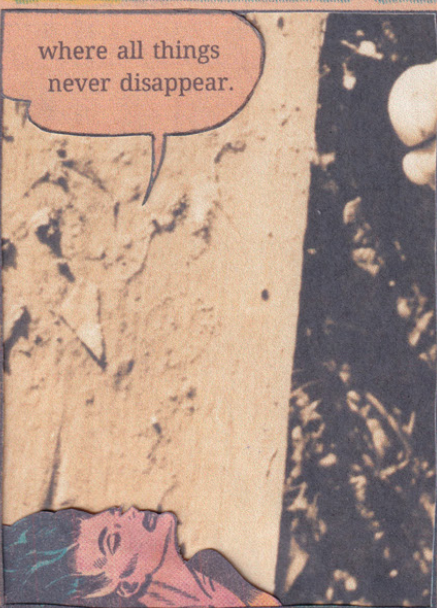
Then the firemen would come and grill it. And then from a helicopter, ketchup would be thrown. And... bread.

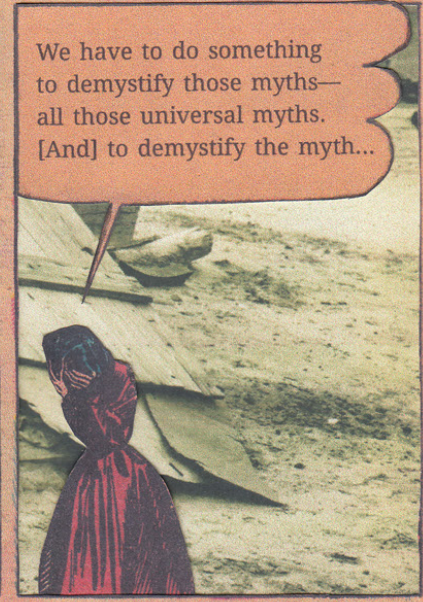
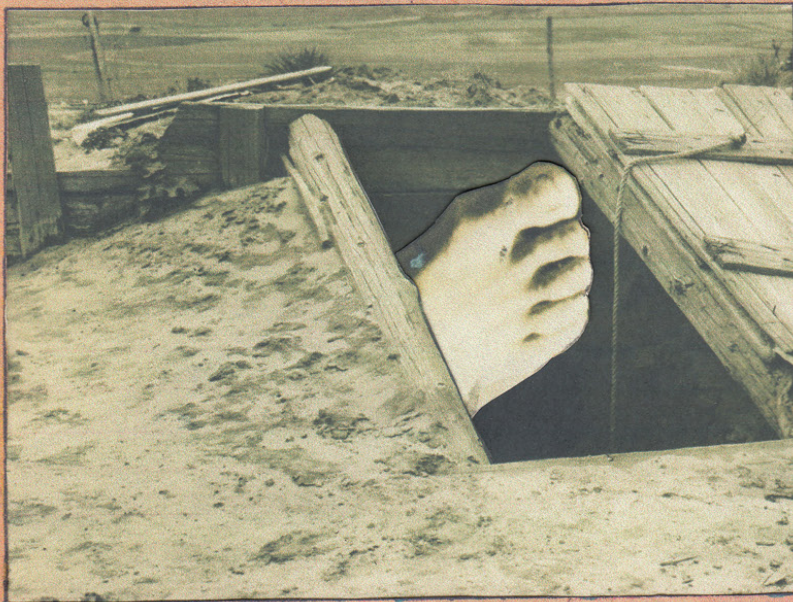
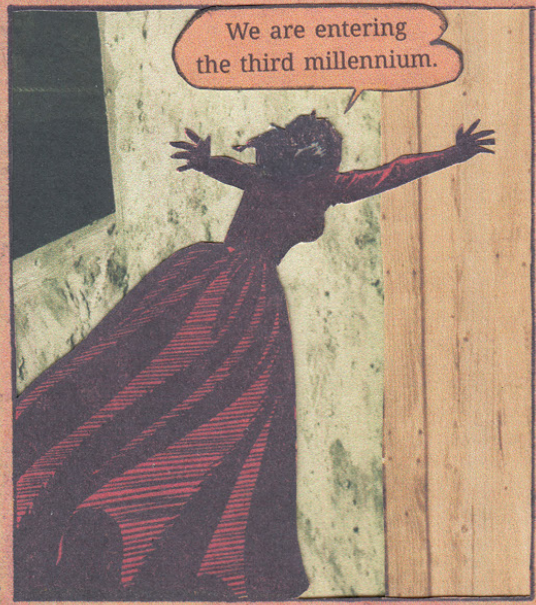


The moment one person eats a hamburger from the Statue of Liberty, it becomes culturalized. And the Statue of Liberty, eaten by the people, would disappear but stay in the popular memory, in the imaginary world...



where all things never disappear.









THE  
END

All dialogue from interviews with Marta Minujín,  
a written version of her proposal published in  
*Journal: Southern California Art Magazine*, or  
Minujín's letter to the McDonald's Corporation.

# Death Scent

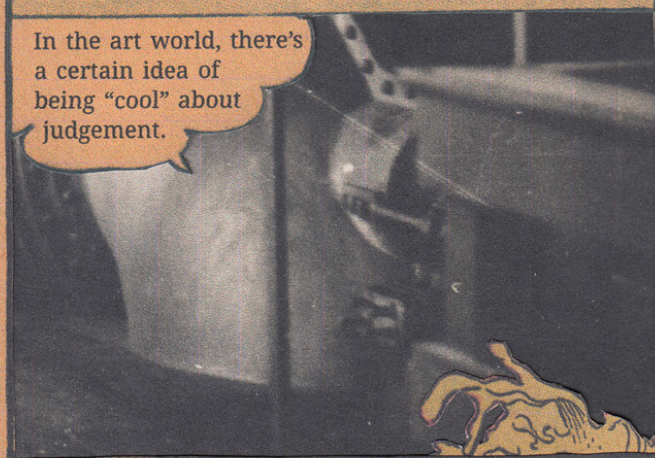
(Tomb of Terror # 15)

# DEATH SCENT

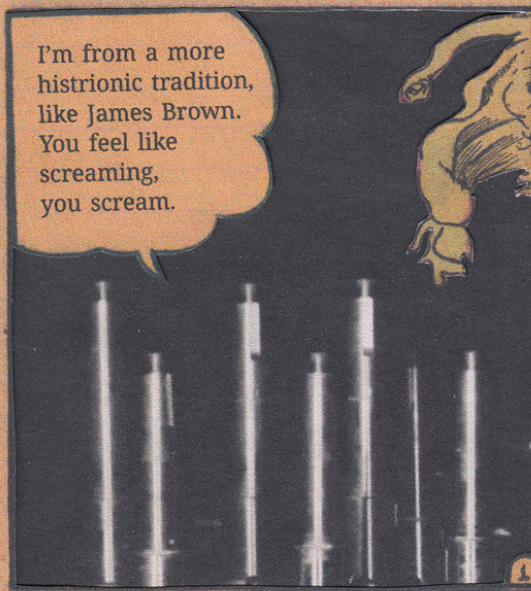


Let us begin with the gift: a single envelope.  
Inside, a small collection of hair, dirt, and skin.  
The man presents it to his friend, the artist Pope.L.

In the art world, there's  
a certain idea of  
being "cool" about  
judgement.



I'm from a more  
histrionic tradition,  
like James Brown.  
You feel like  
screaming,  
you scream.

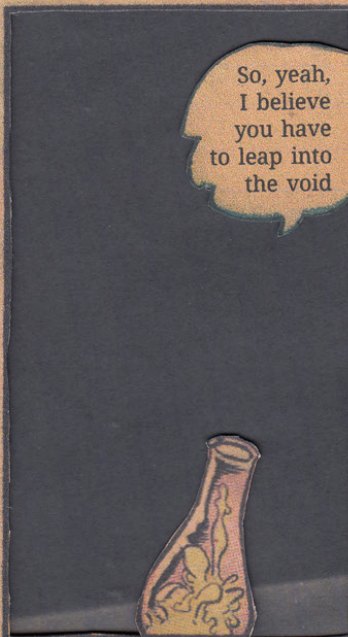


"I found this and thought of you," the man tells Pope.L. He was doing research in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s papers when he came across the envelope. "I'm not sure, but I think it's his."



You want people to feel hot and bothered.

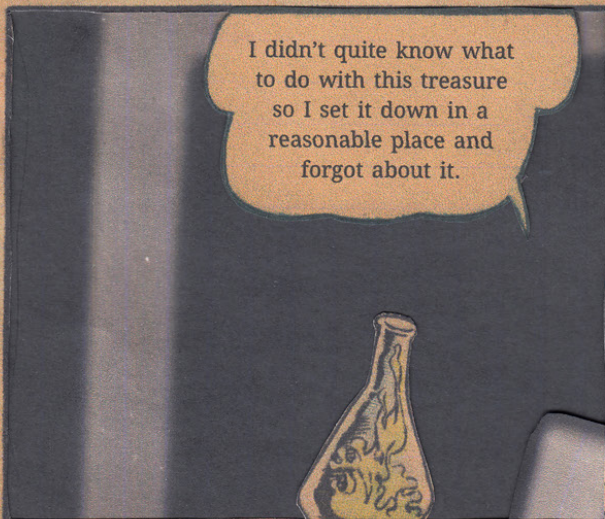
So, yeah, I believe you have to leap into the void



and say, "I have faith we can make it a little better." The challenge is to construct something that leads to conversation or participation.

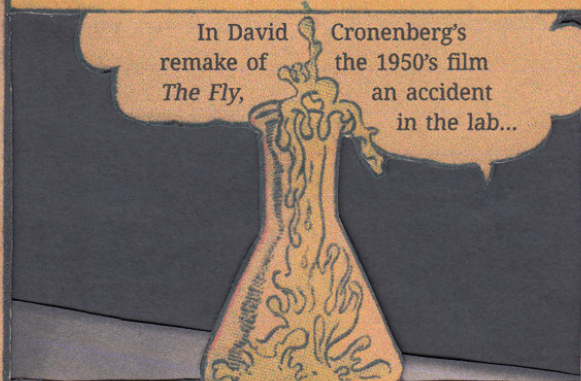


I didn't quite know what to do with this treasure so I set it down in a reasonable place and forgot about it.



Years later, Pope.L is sitting next to another man on a bus. They strike up a conversation, and Pope.L learns the man runs a genetics website.

In David Cronenberg's remake of the 1950's film *The Fly*, an accident in the lab...



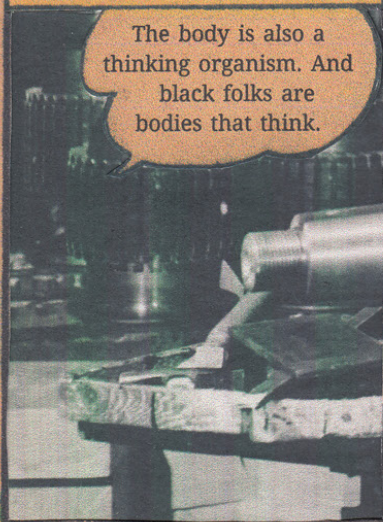
He tells the man that he'd like to inject King's DNA into pieces of fruit. The man responds that he doesn't think that would work, but he'd help anyway.



...merges a scientist with a common housefly.

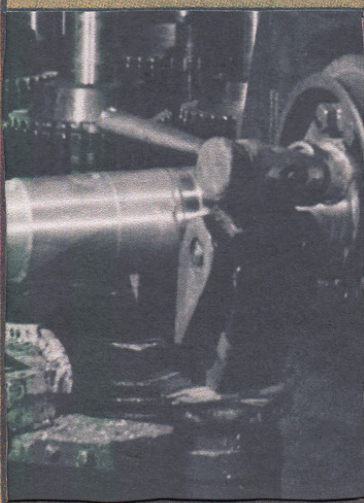


So the artist and the genetics entrepreneur work together.



The body is also a thinking organism. And black folks are bodies that think.

It takes a few months to create their first working prototype, but once done,



they begin to inject pieces of fruit and leave them in supermarkets.

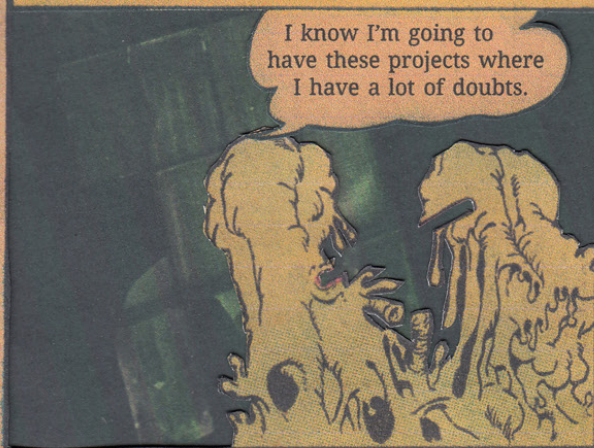


They have, however, no way to track the results and, if they continue this way, will soon run out of genetic material.



Maybe that's our problem: we're too intellectual!

Their next prototype takes the form of an aerosol, but it remains too crude for Pope.L's satisfaction.



I know I'm going to have these projects where I have a lot of doubts.

The entrepreneur gradually loses interest.



I know I'm going to have people telling me I did it wrong.

With few options, Pope.L creates a website, [distributingmartin.com](http://distributingmartin.com). He works sporadically on it for some years.



I tried to make the site attractive, but it ended up looking like my grandmother's apartment.

[The scientist-fly] explains that there can never be an insect politics because insects are inherently brutal.



Pope.L is contacted by a third man, a young academic, who is interested in a collaboration.



But he, because of his unique hybrid condition, will be the first insect politician...

The academic believes he can make an effective aerosol, and to top it off,



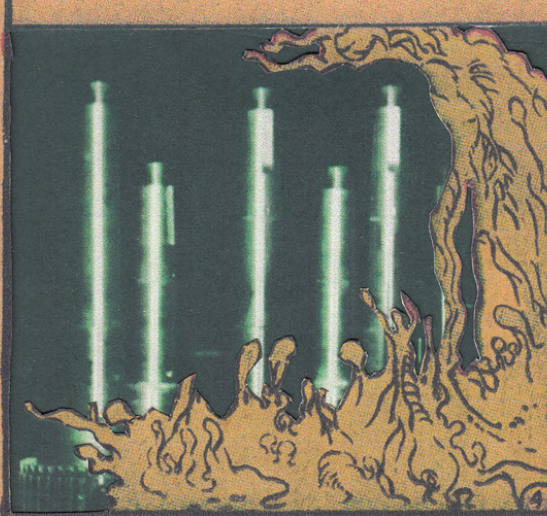
He begins to weep.

he has a mentor who once marched with Dr. King. This mentor, a reverend, expresses interest.

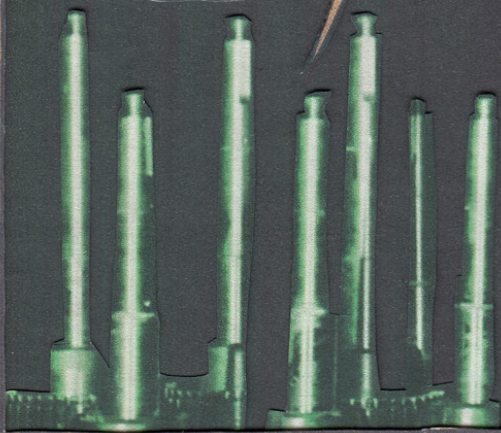


THE BUGLE  
WEIRD THEORY TOLD  
BY INSANE MAN!  
SLASHING THROUGH THE  
MIND OF THE TOWN

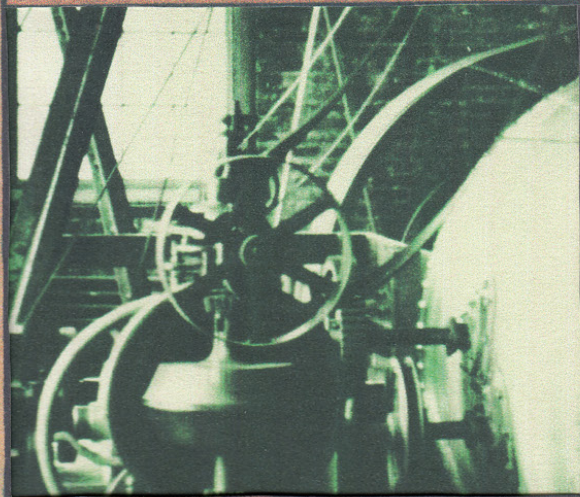
Their idea is for a formal ceremony, where a prayer would be read and then the aerosol released.



I'd been reading about the use of the AIDS virus to motor or drive the dispersal of genetic material in the body.



Pope.L proposes they mix King's genetic material with the AIDS virus.



The academic asks him if he'd seriously release this into a room full of people.

Sure, if it will make them as good as MLK, sure.



And just like that, the project is over.

We need endings, but they don't exist, so we manufacture them.



THE END

All dialogue from interviews with Pope.L or  
the text of *Du Bois Machine*, an artwork by  
Pope.L chronicling his failed project.

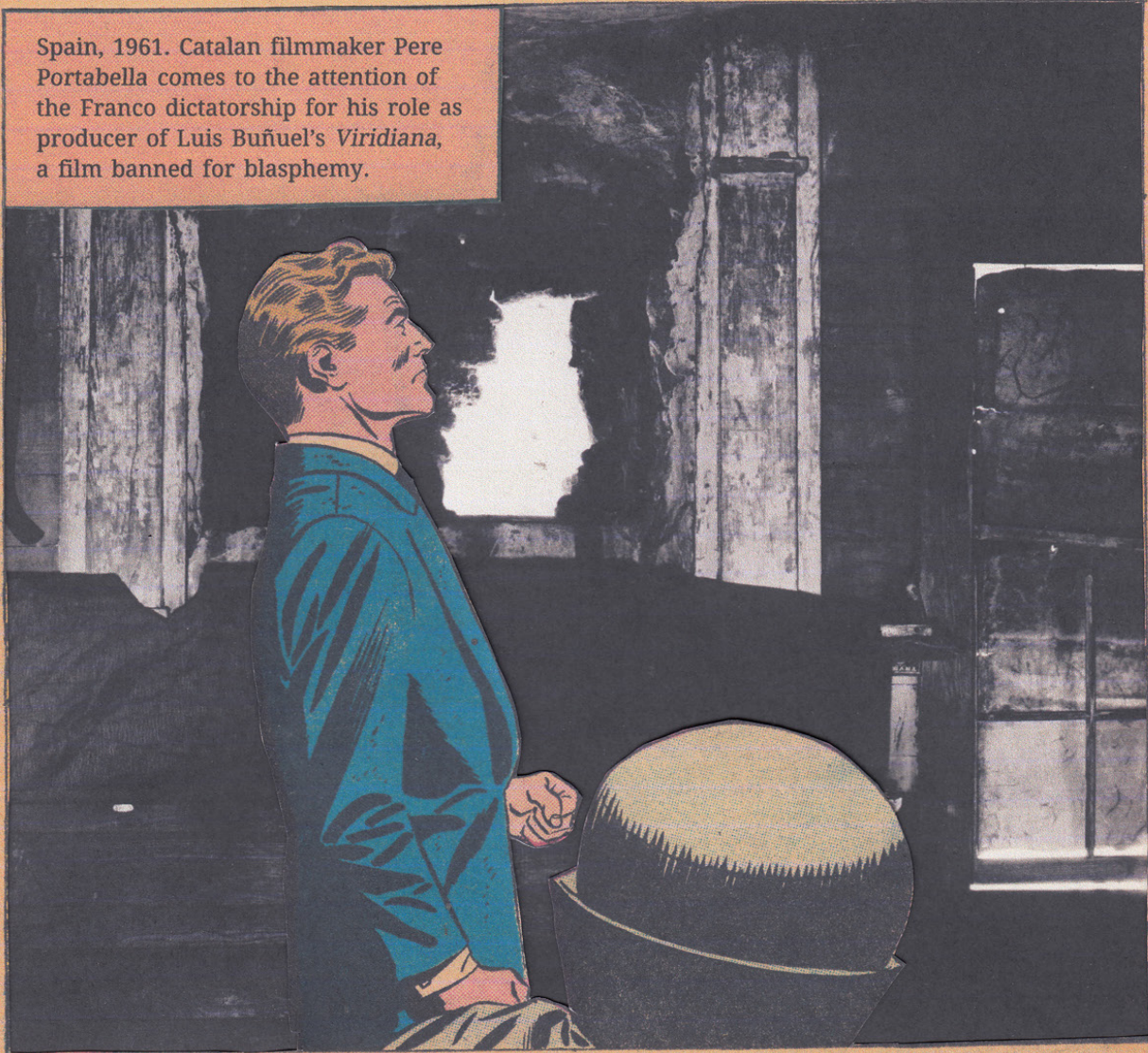


# Vampir

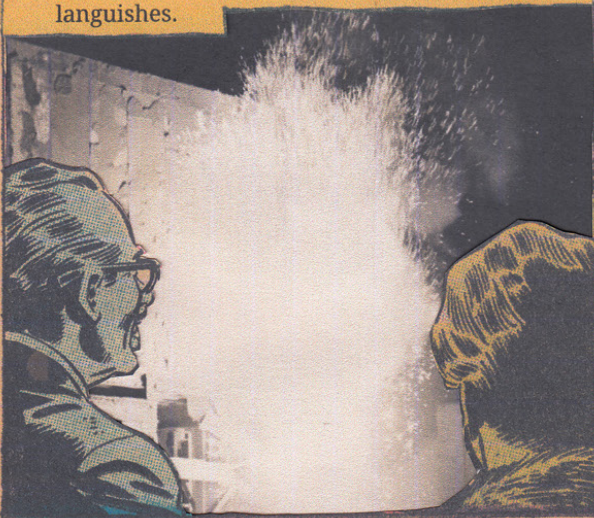
(Space Mystery # 38)

## SPACE MYSTERY

Spain, 1961. Catalan filmmaker Pere Portabella comes to the attention of the Franco dictatorship for his role as producer of Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana*, a film banned for blasphemy.



Barred from leaving the country, his career languishes.



The list of banned books, confiscated magazines, and shut down publishing companies is endless. Plays and movies have been censored and forbidden.



## SPACE MYSTERY

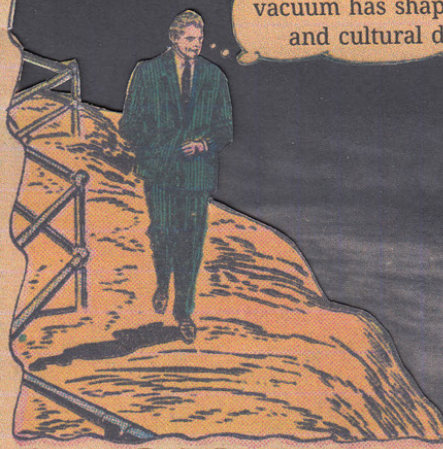
Portabella searches for a new way

We must refuse any concessions proposed by the government [which] would be, at best, another extension of its power and repressive policies.



to make films outside the government-controlled industry.

A dramatic vacuum has shaped our social and cultural development.

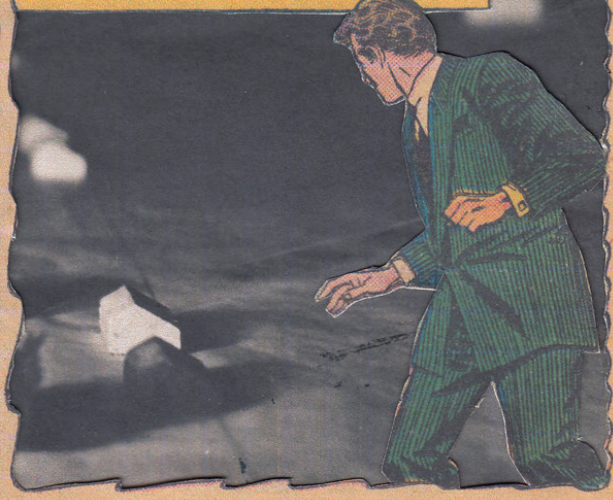


One day, he learns that a horror film will be shooting in Barcelona,

We must unmask the avant-garde movement that ignores the masses.



and he quickly contacts the director



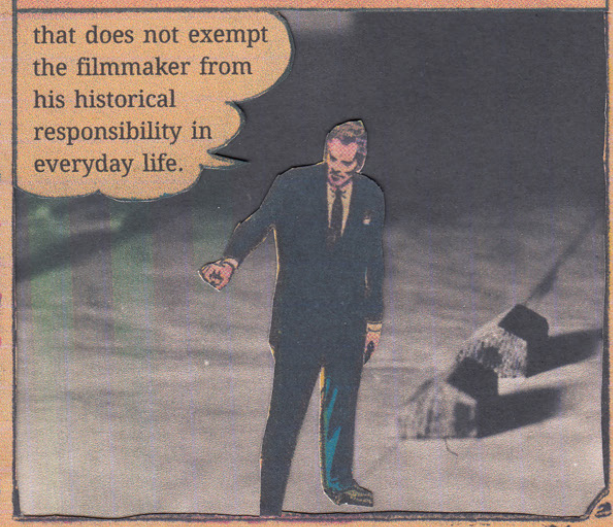
to ask if he can bring his own crew to the shoot:

We must [return] to the roots of the revolutionary "avant-garde"

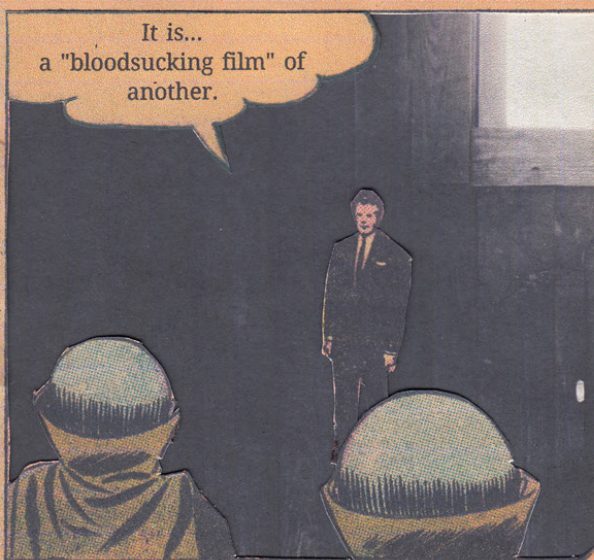
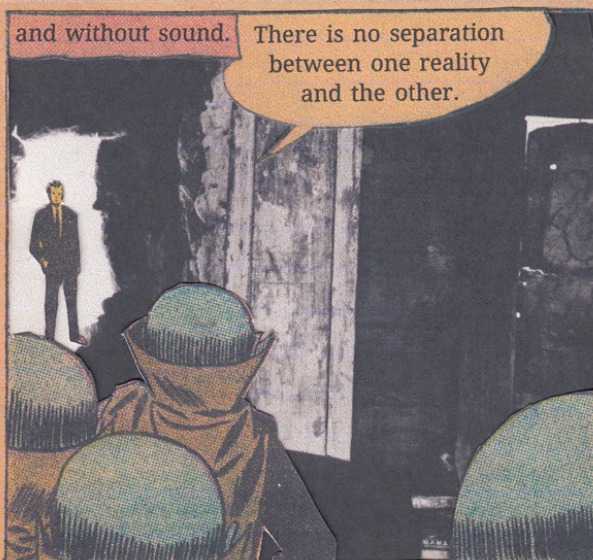
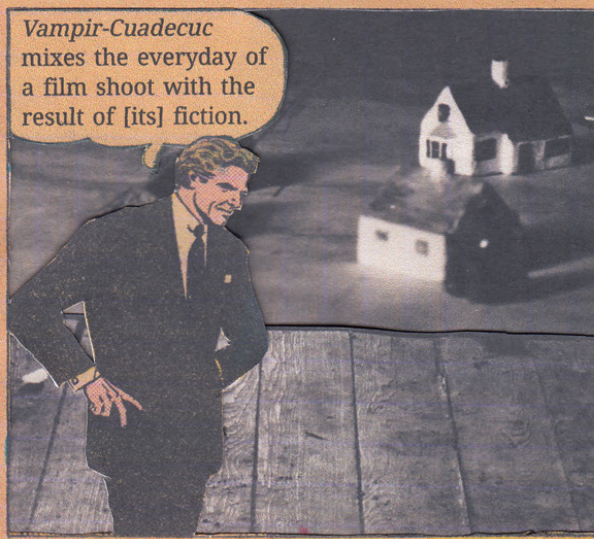
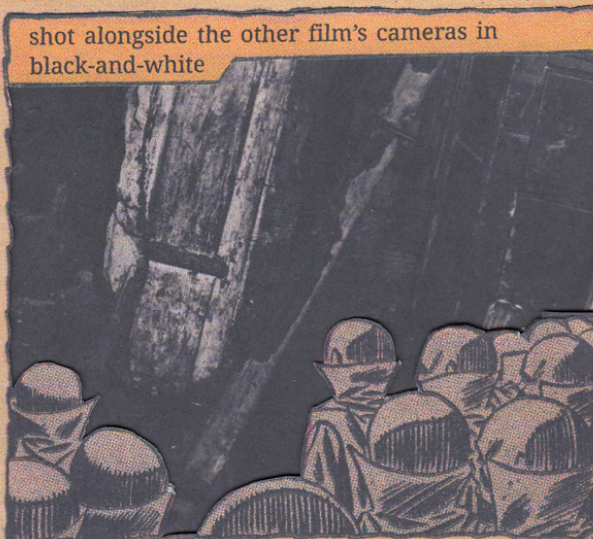
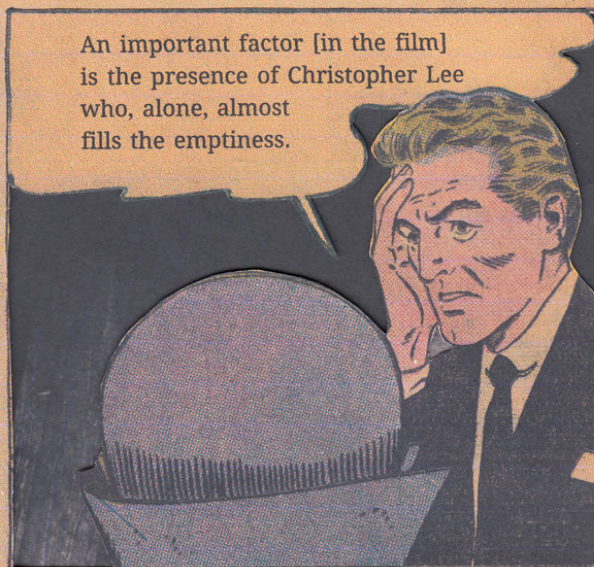


he will film the filming of *Count Dracula*.

that does not exempt the filmmaker from his historical responsibility in everyday life.



## SPACE MYSTERY



## SPACE MYSTERY

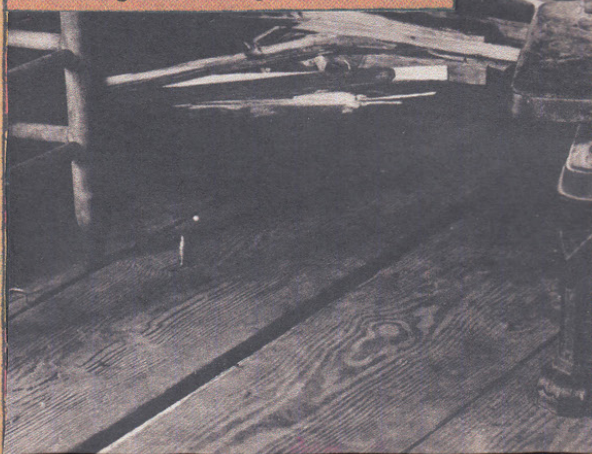
Repression is even worse  
for the workers.



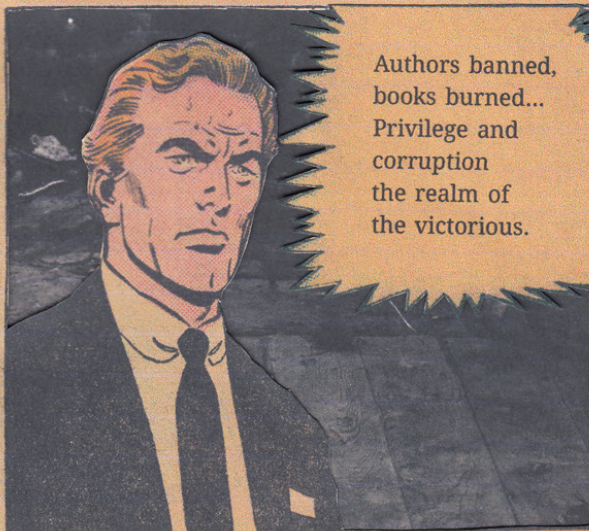
A soon-to-be victim swivels his head in fear; Portabella  
reveals the watching cameras and the men behind them.



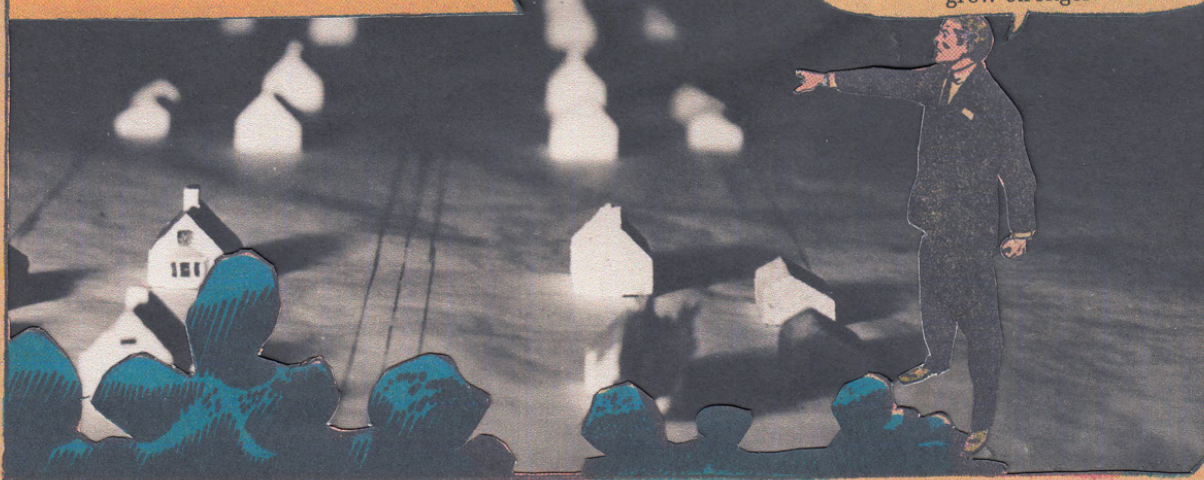
A disembodied hand hangs spiderwebs across  
the crags of Christopher Lee's face.



Authors banned,  
books burned...  
Privilege and  
corruption  
the realm of  
the victorious.



The camera lingers on the wire that carries a stuffed bat  
into the room.



Repression lingers  
as democratic movements  
grow stronger.

## SPACE MYSTERY

In 1972, *Vampir-Cuadecuc* screens at MoMA in New York.

As a result of repression of the media,



Portabella remains forbidden from travelling,

the film you are about to see has no legal existence in my country.



This... must not be seen as an isolated case,

but as a something that reflects the reality of Spain today.

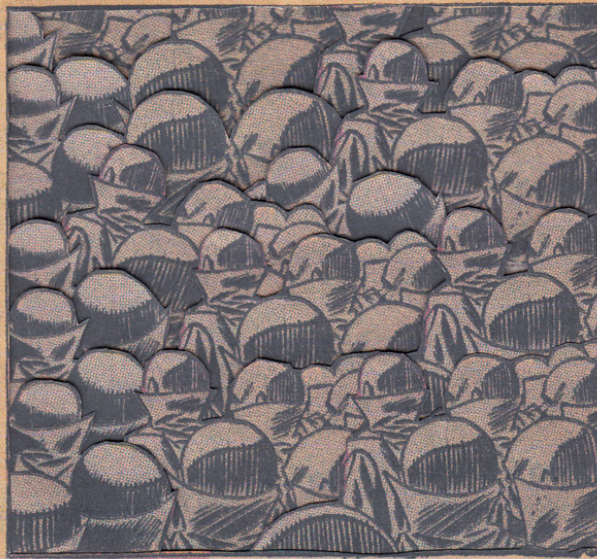
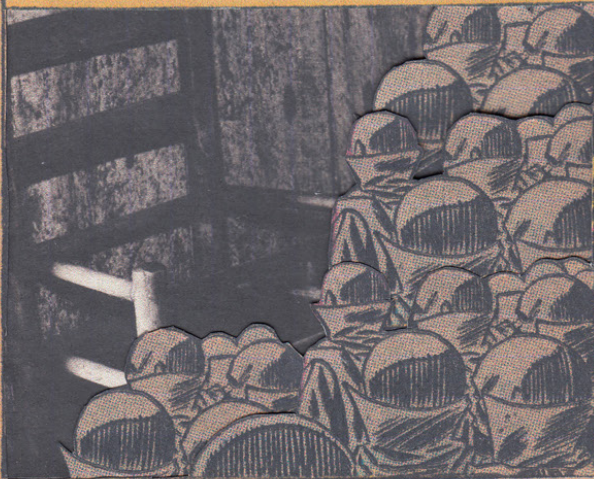


so his introduction to the film is smuggled to New York by a friend.

Thus here is *Vampir*, not in spite of everything, but as a result of everything.



Christopher Lee swats playfully at the camera. His grin drops, then he climbs into the coffin.



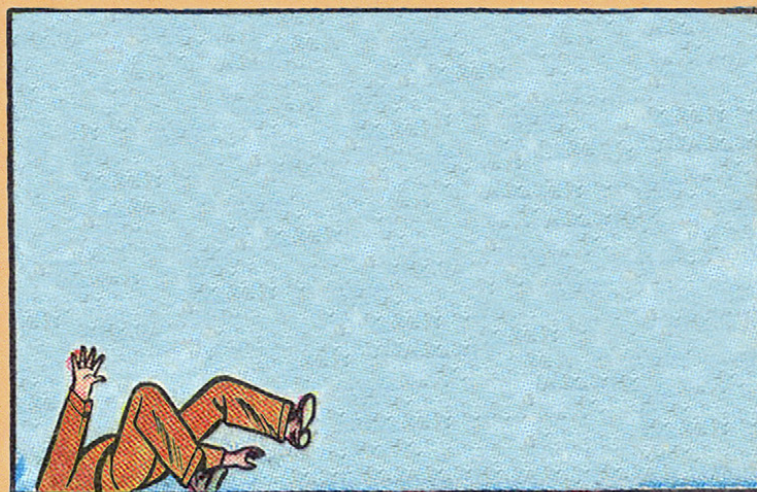
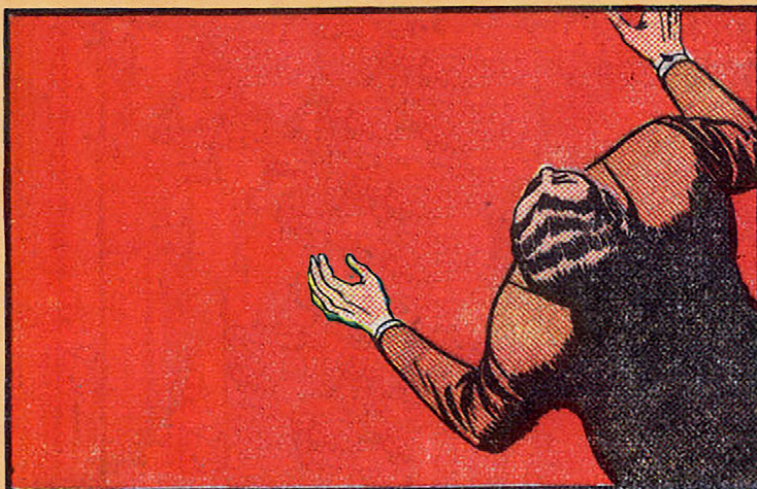
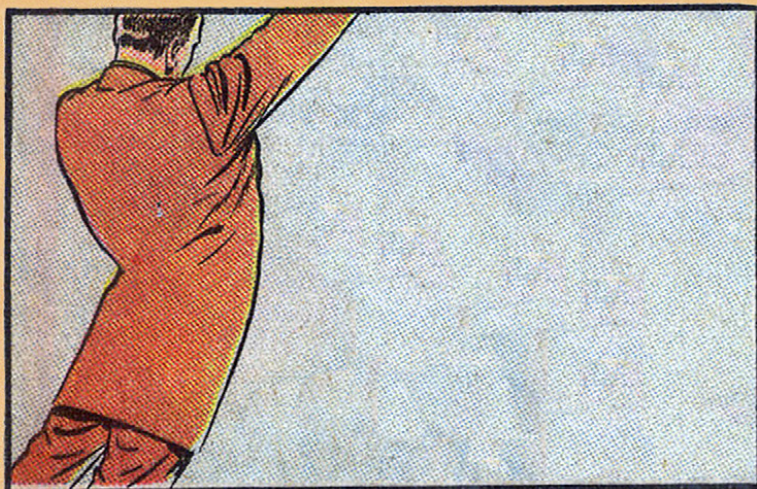
## SPACE MYSTERY

All dialogue from Pere Portabella's introduction to the screening of *Vampir-Cuadecuc* at MoMA in 1972 or an interview with Pere Portabella conducted in 1973 by J.M. García Ferrer and Martí Rom, both translated by David Barba.



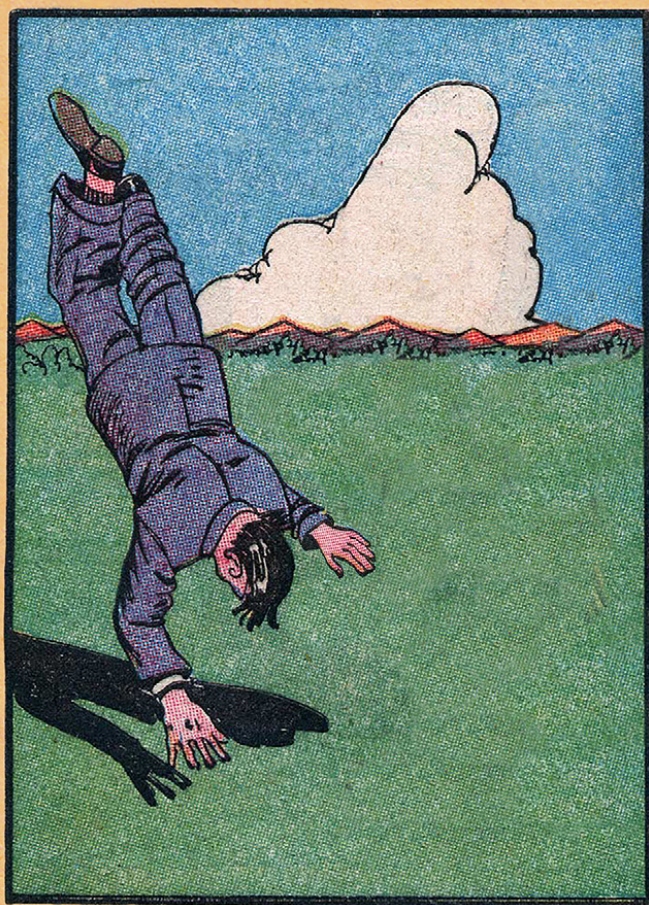
# Bodies in Space

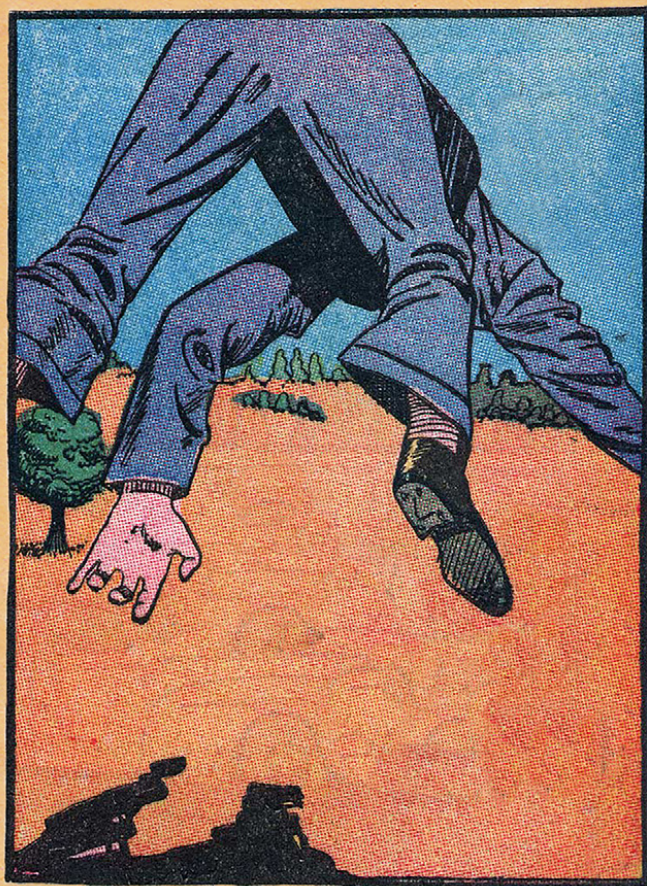
# FIGHT COMICS



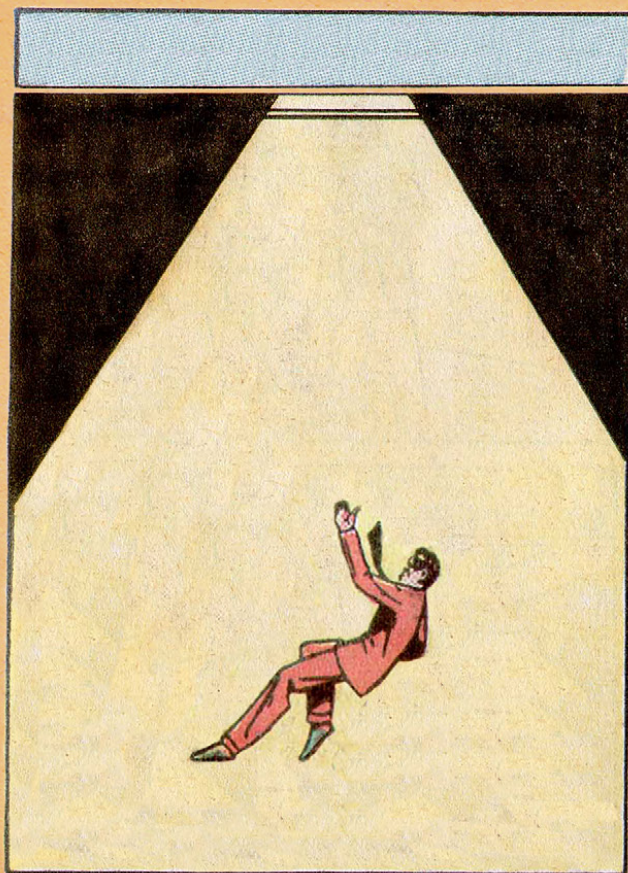


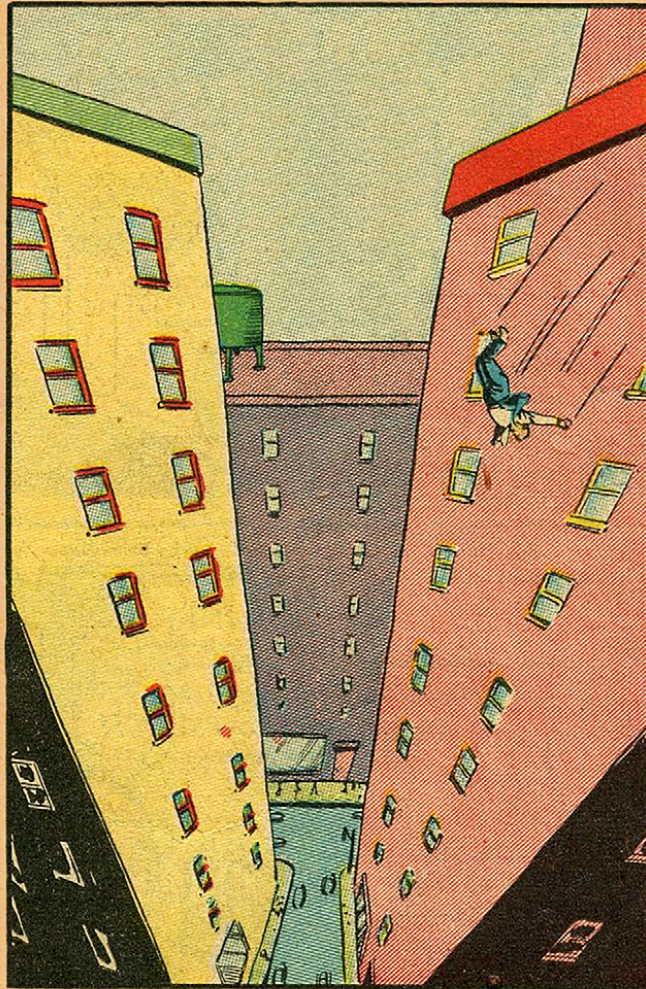
SCIENCE COMICS





FIGHT COMICS





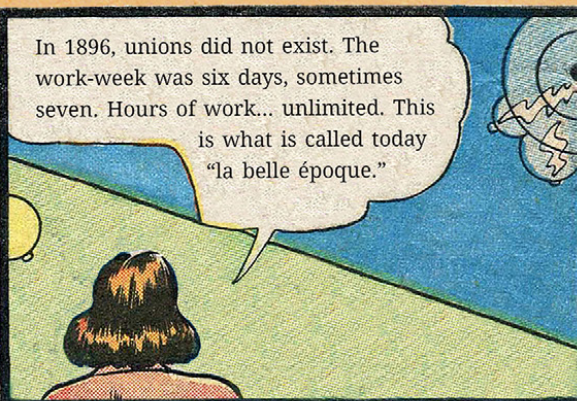
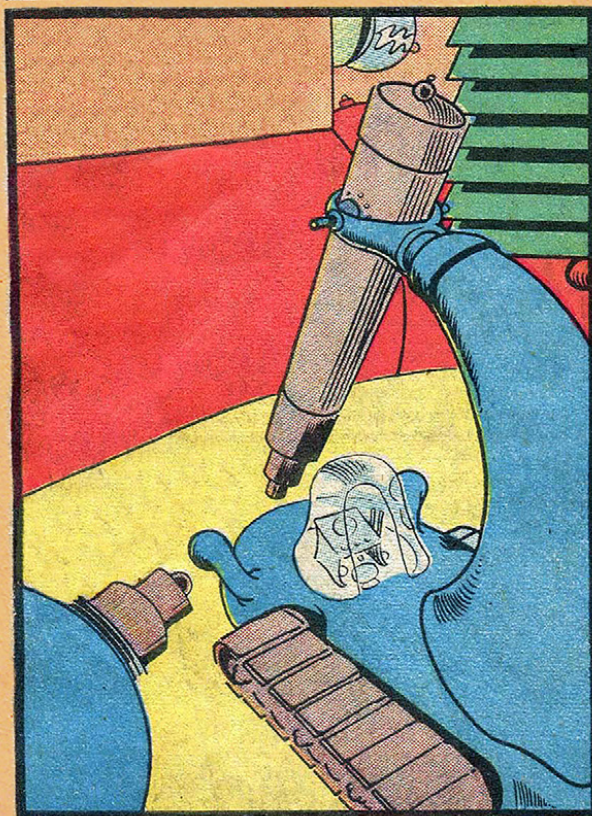
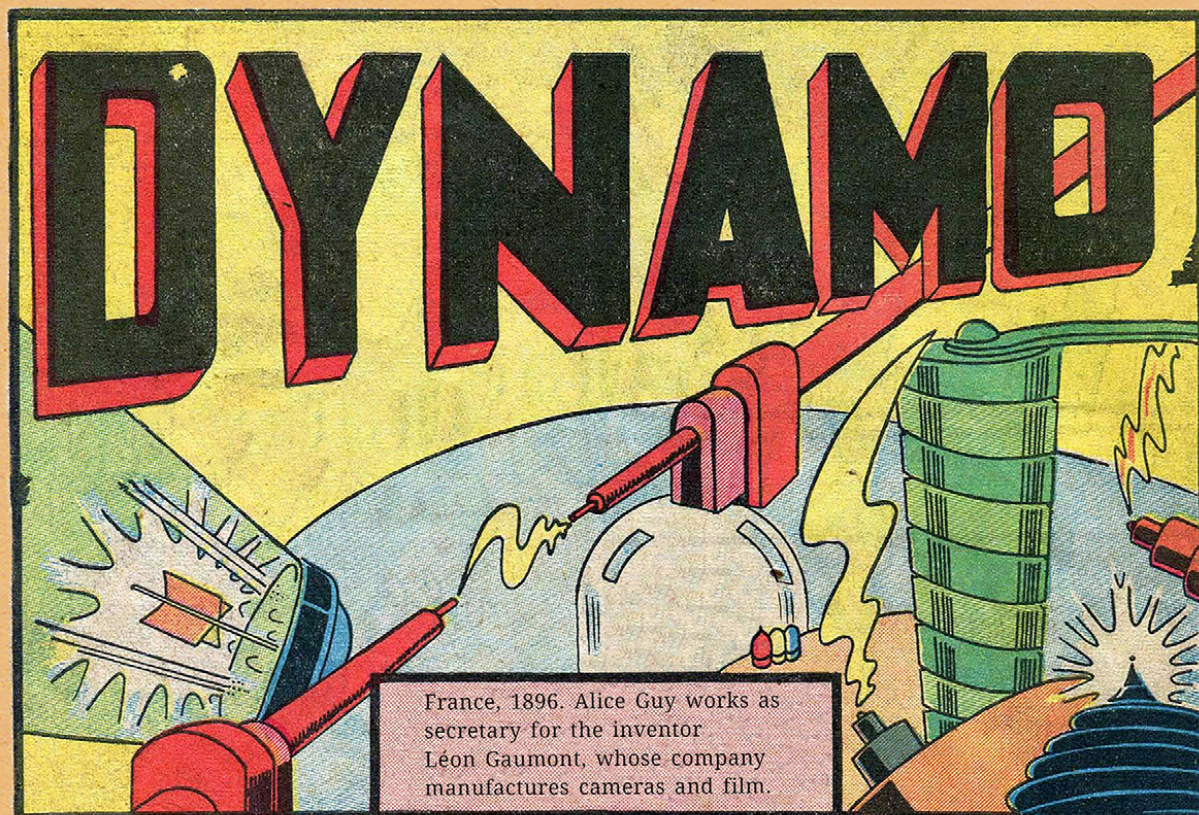


## II. Film Studies

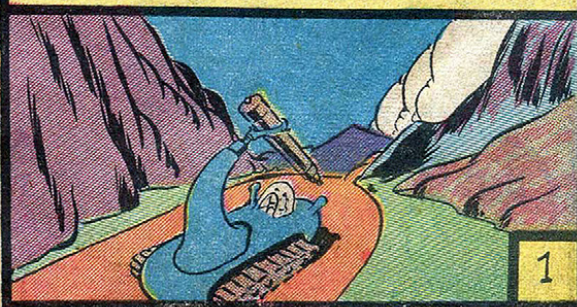


# Dynamo

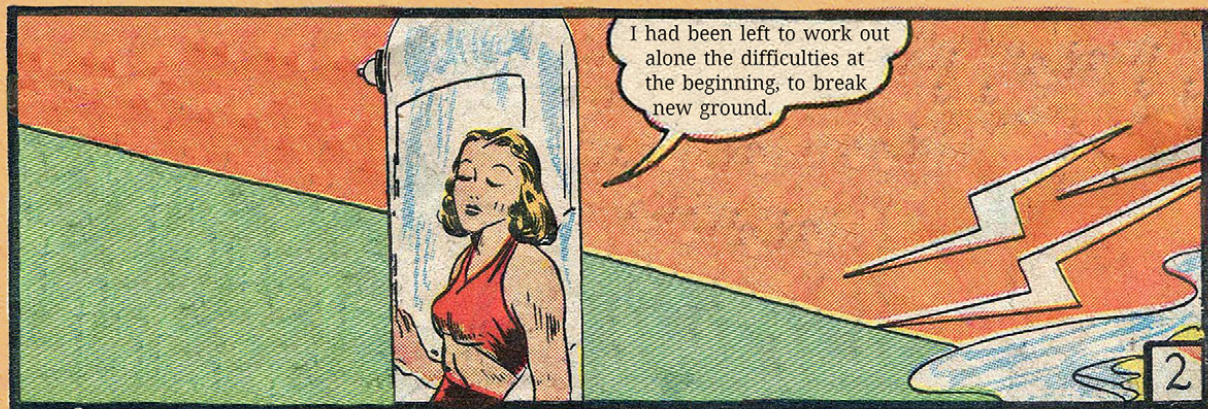
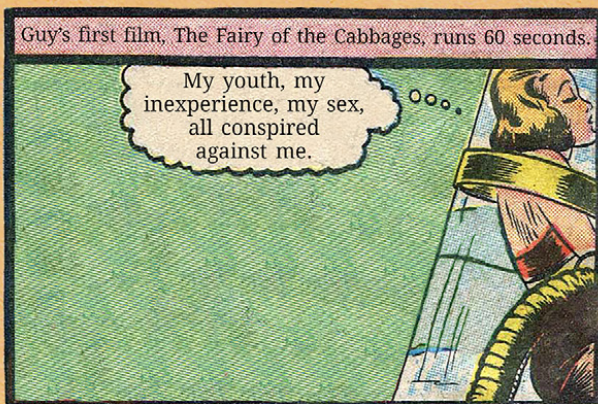
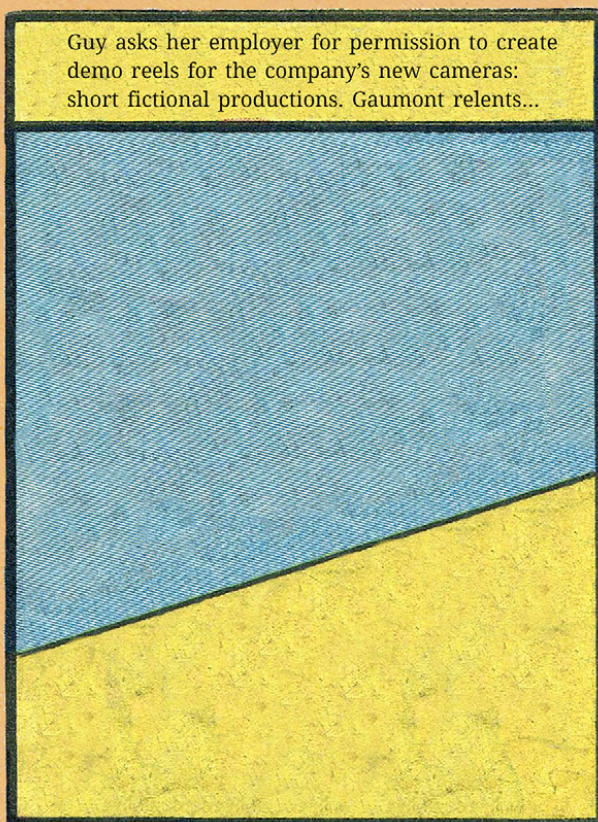
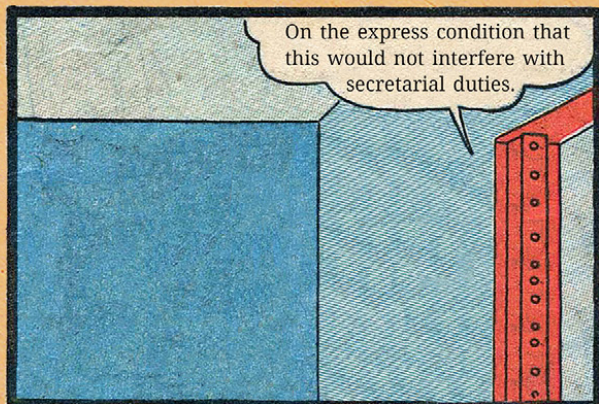
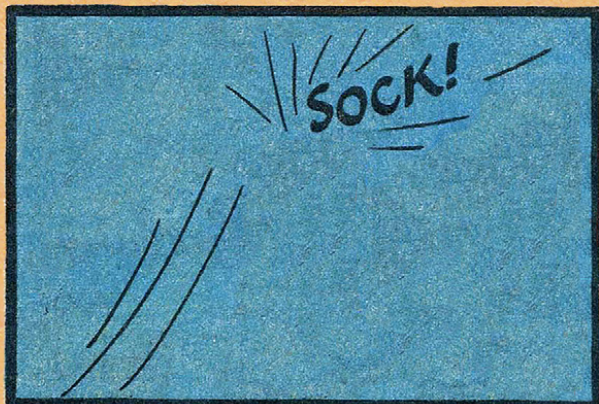
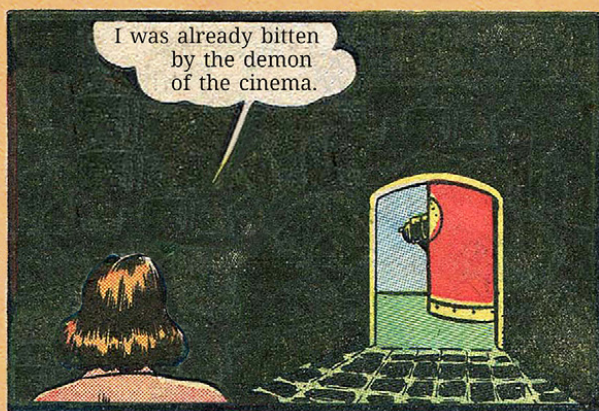
(Science Comics # 7)



With her employer, she attends a demonstration of a new technology, the motion picture.

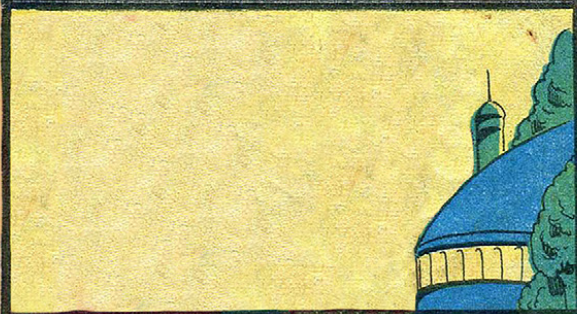


# SCIENCE COMICS

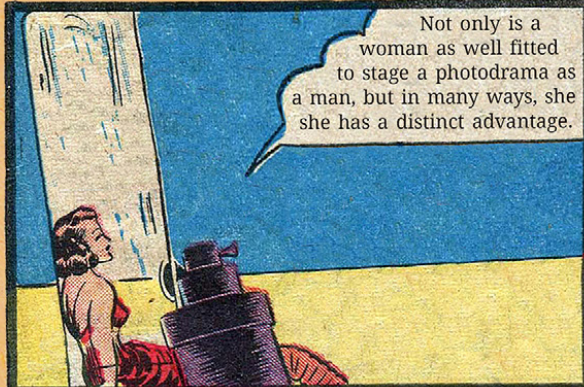


# SCIENCE COMICS

By 1906, Guy has founded her own studio, made nearly 600 films, and largely defined the modern role...

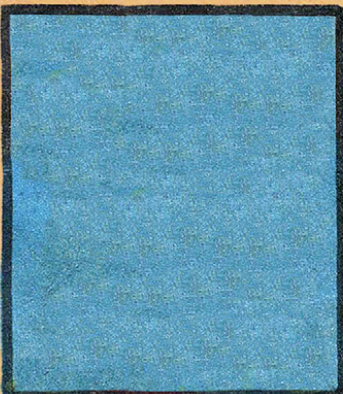


Not only is a woman as well fitted to stage a photodrama as a man, but in many ways, she has a distinct advantage.

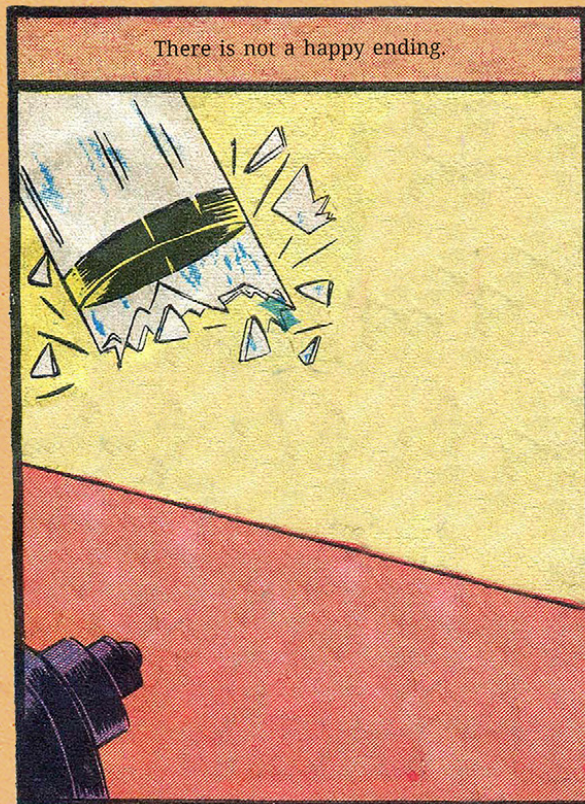


...of motion picture director.

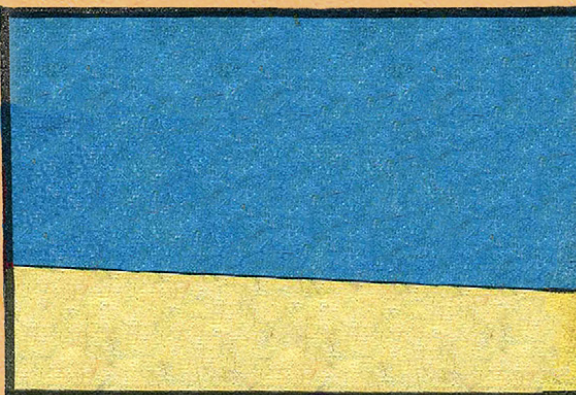
Anything went, if only there were a happy ending.



There is not a happy ending.

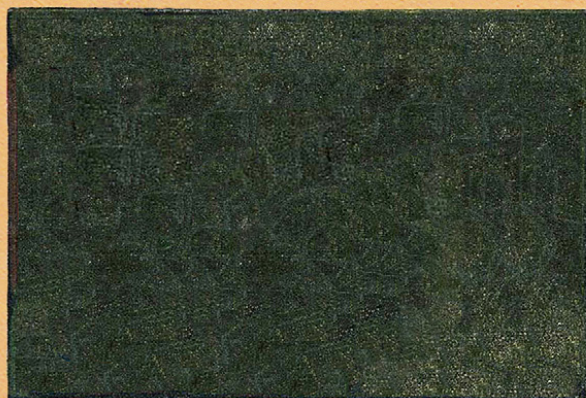
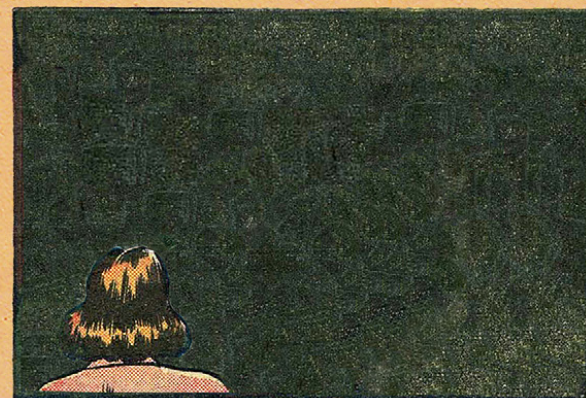
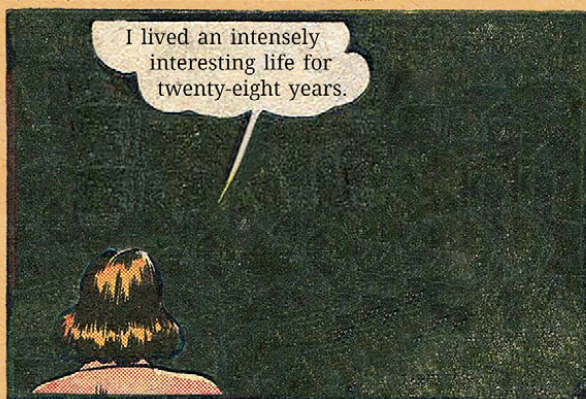
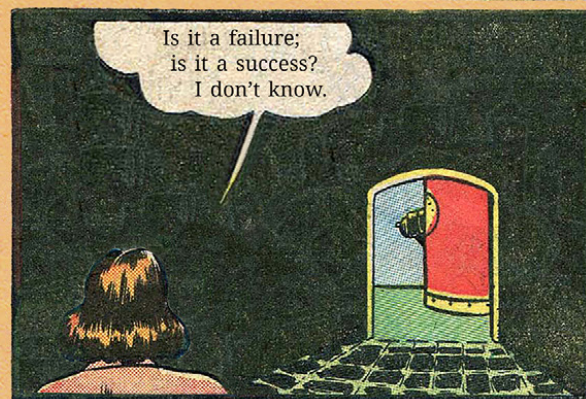
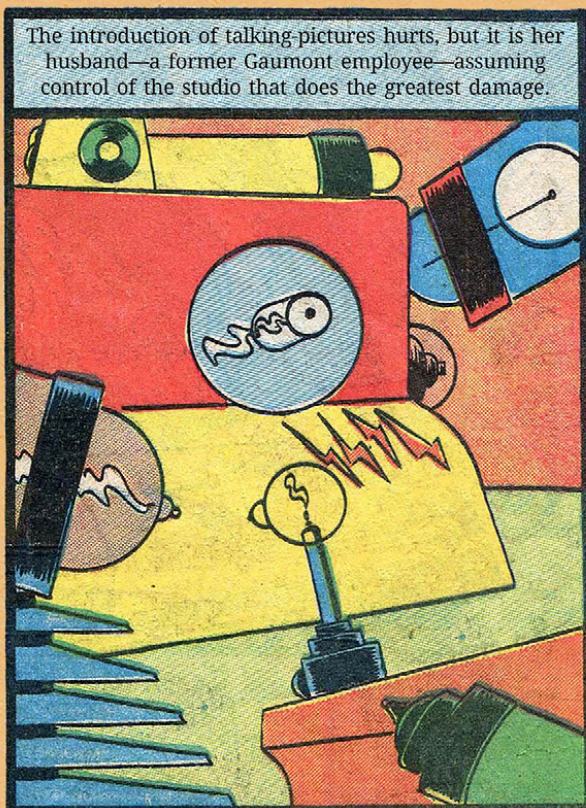
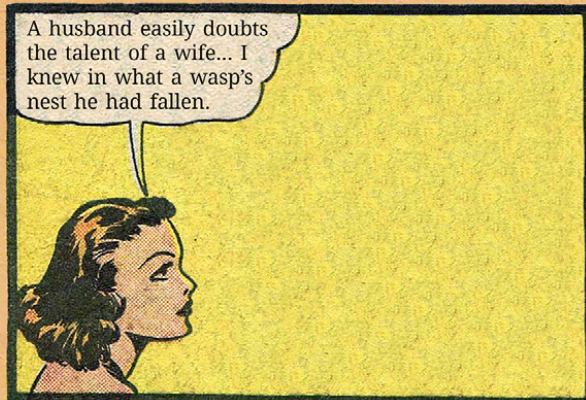
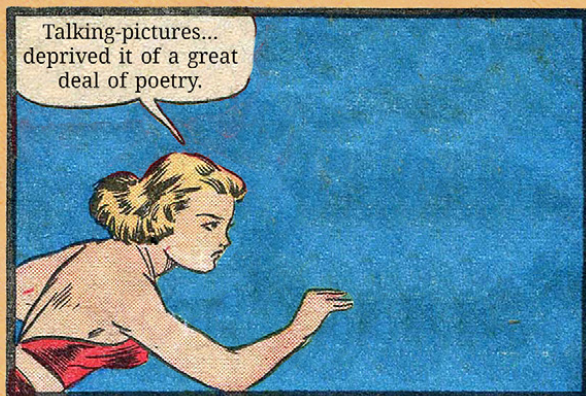


Art and reality were both lost there, surely.



3

# SCIENCE COMICS



## SCIENCE COMICS

All dialogue from Alice Guy Blaché's autobiography, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, translated by Roberta and Simone Blaché, or the article "Woman's Place in Photoplay Production" by Alice Guy Blaché.

# Space Watch

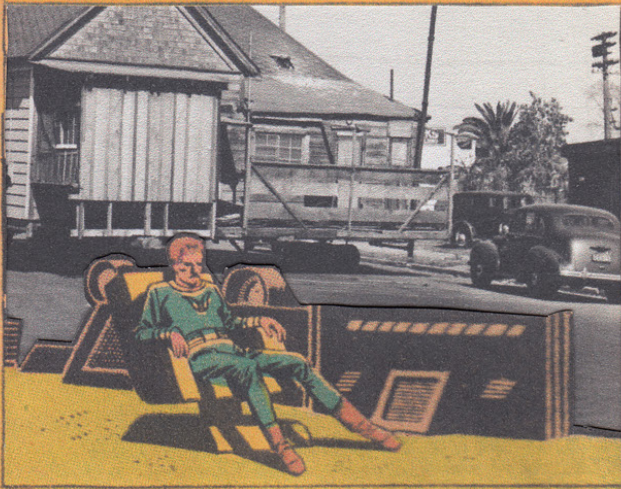
(Space Mystery # 41)

# SPACE MYSTERY

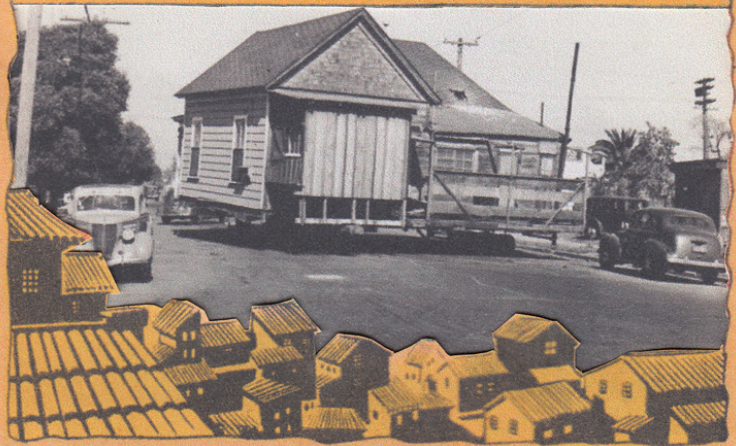


## SPACE MYSTERY

They say Stalin watches every film himself.



Before the state approves a film for release,



it premieres for the only audience that matters: one man alone in a private theater.



## SPACE MYSTERY

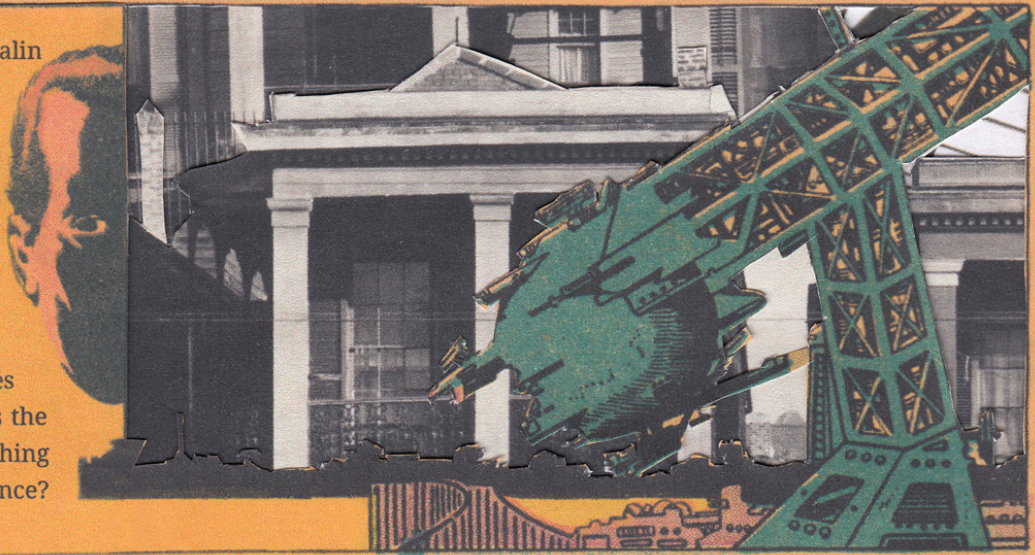
In these productions, Stalin himself often appears. Or, at least, an actor playing Stalin

In the climax of *The Vow* (1946), Stalin fixes a farmer's tractor, then takes it for a spin around Red Square.

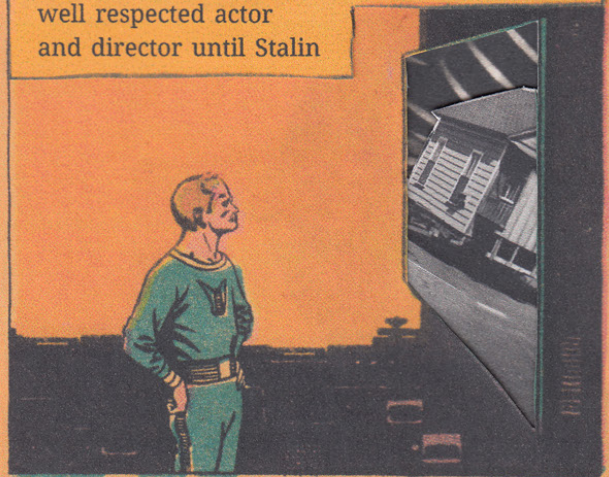
## SPACE MYSTERY

What does Stalin see while watching these scenes?

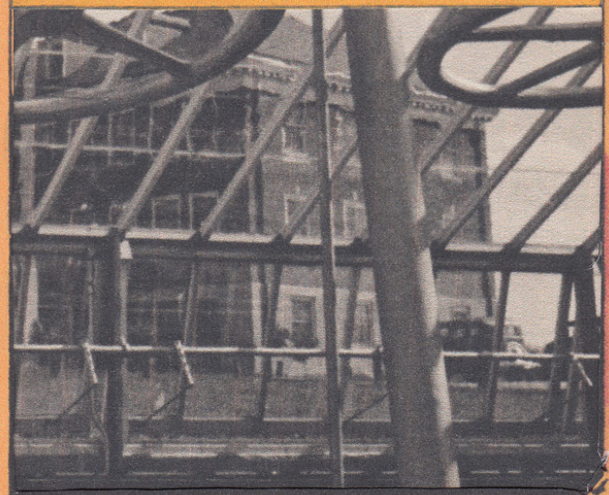
What does the actor playing him see when he closes his eyes and imagines the dictator watching his performance?



Stalin's favorite Stalin, Aleksei Dikiy, is a well respected actor and director until Stalin



attends one of his plays and denounces it.

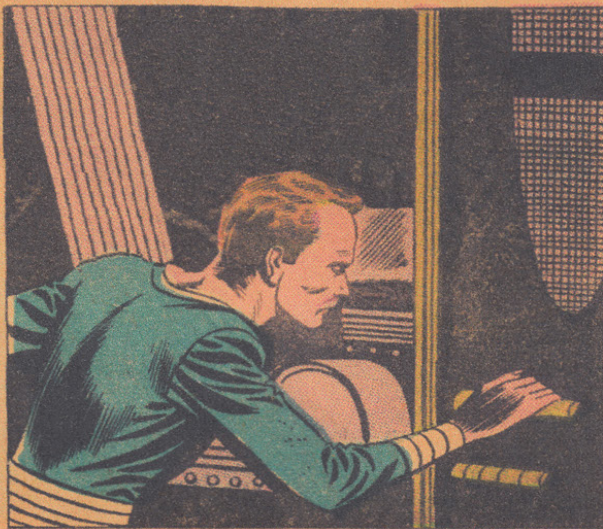
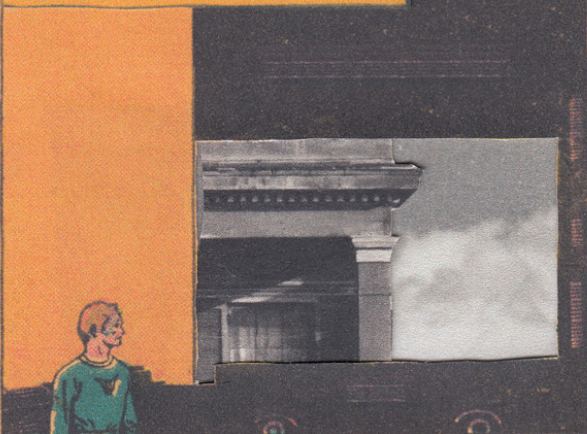


## SPACE MYSTERY

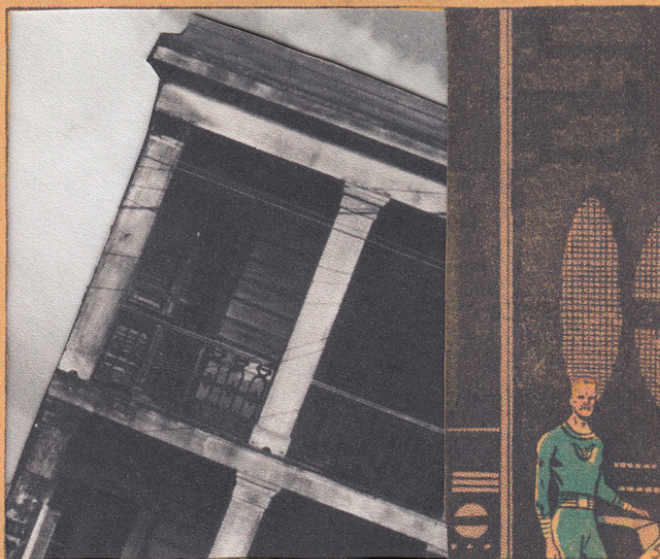
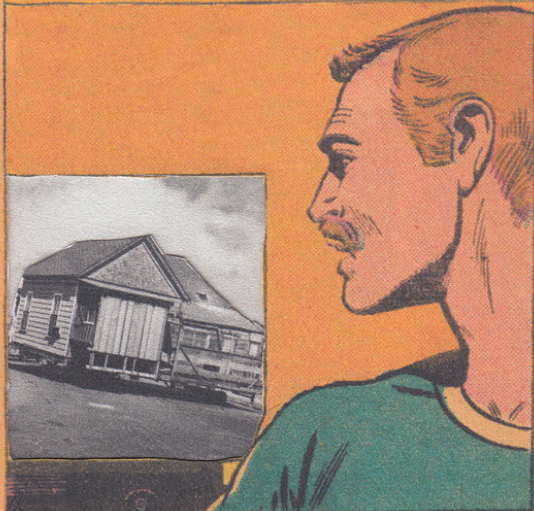
Dikiy is exiled from Moscow, then  
thrown into the Gulag.



When released four years later, he settles in  
Siberia. He accepts a film role



and Dikiy again catches Stalin's eye.



## SPACE MYSTERY

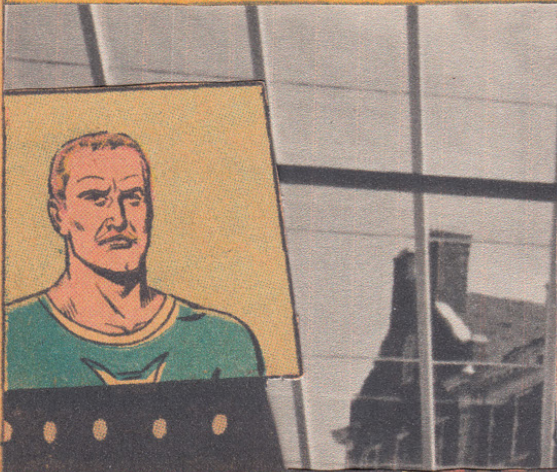
Dikiy's Stalin (3 films) differs from Mikheil Gelovani's (13 films).



Gelovani resembles Stalin—remarkably so—and captures the dictator's Georgian accent,



while Dikiy attempts something more stylized: Stalin as Shakespearean villain.



## SPACE MYSTERY

Stalin admires Dikiy's performance so much that when he hires

a new body double,

he sends the double to study two years under Dikiy.

Various news footage of Stalin—the dictator attending events, hailing his people with a signature stiff wave—has been discovered

to be of this man instead.

11.1936.

# SPACE MYSTERY





The Motion-Picture Director  
(Adventures into the Unknown # 50)

In the 1910s and early 1920s... in any given production the screenplay was likely to have been penned by a woman... A female director may have guided the female star, who quite often worked for her own production company... After shooting ended, a woman may have edited the film, a female censor may have re-edited it, a female exchange owner may have distributed it, and a female manager might have exhibited it in her theater.

-Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*

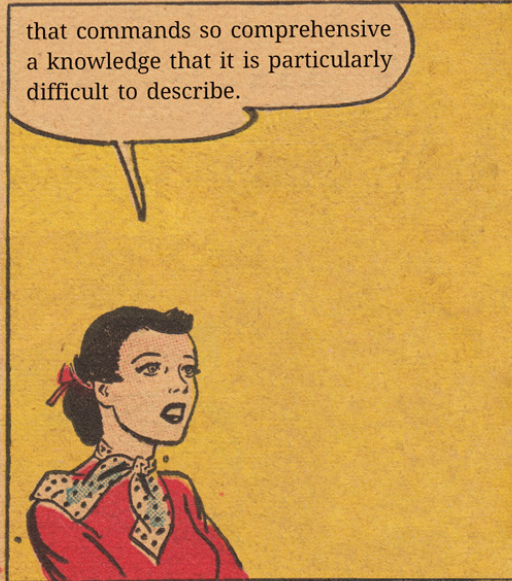
In 1920, Houghton Mifflin released a new textbook: *Careers for Women*.

Alongside articles on the professions of "Dog-Raiser," "Life-Insurance Salesman," "Landscape Architect," and "Detective" appeared "The Motion-Picture Director."

The vocation of motion-picture director is one

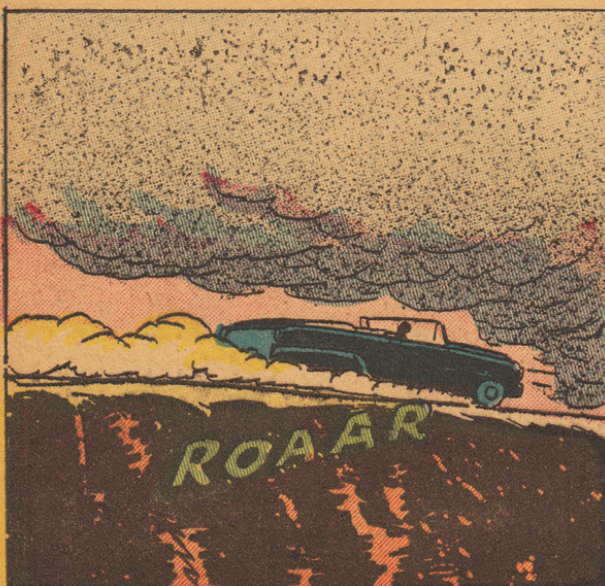


that commands so comprehensive a knowledge that it is particularly difficult to describe.



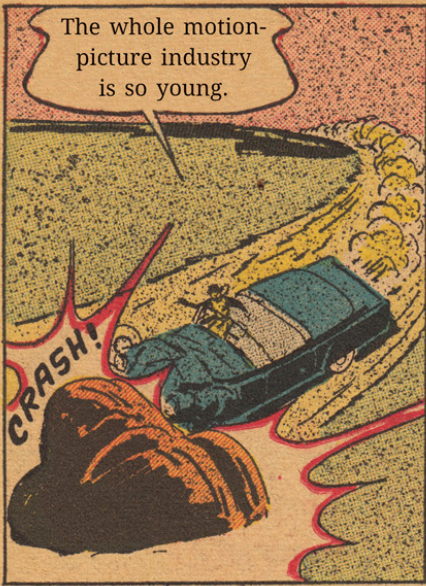


As for the natural  
equipment of women for  
the role of director,



the superiority of their emotional  
and imaginative faculties gives  
them a great advantage.







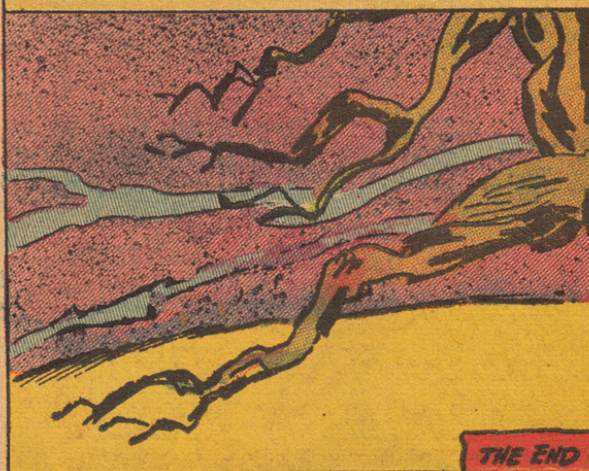
Wait until the profession  
has emerged from its  
embryonic state.



When that time comes  
I believe women will find  
no finer calling.



When, in 1935, Houghton Mifflin released a new  
edition of *Careers for Women*, the article on  
"The Motion-Picture Director" had disappeared.

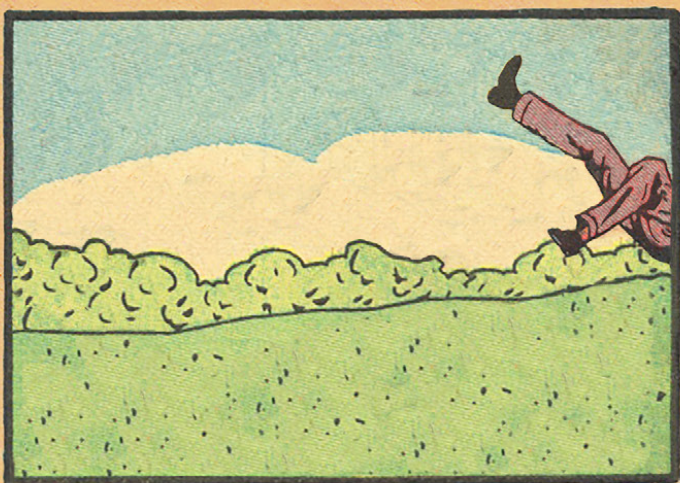
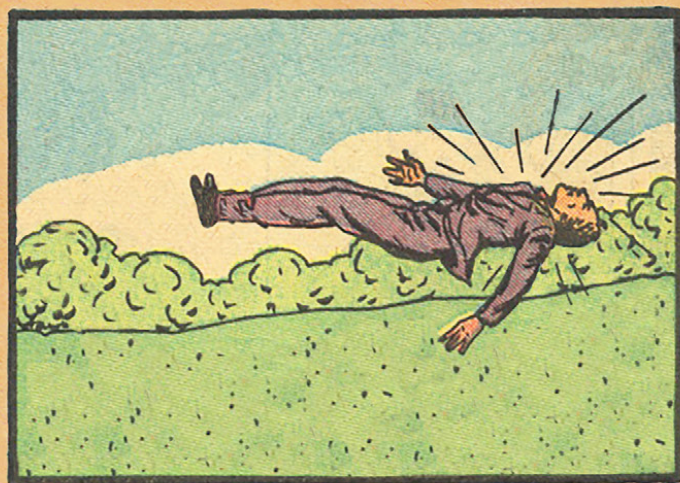
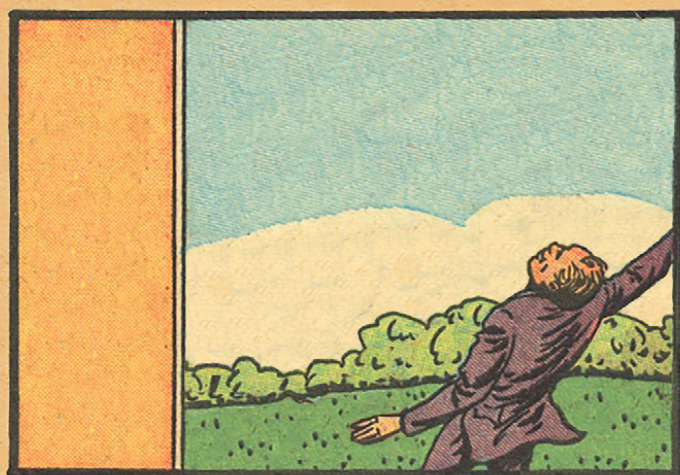


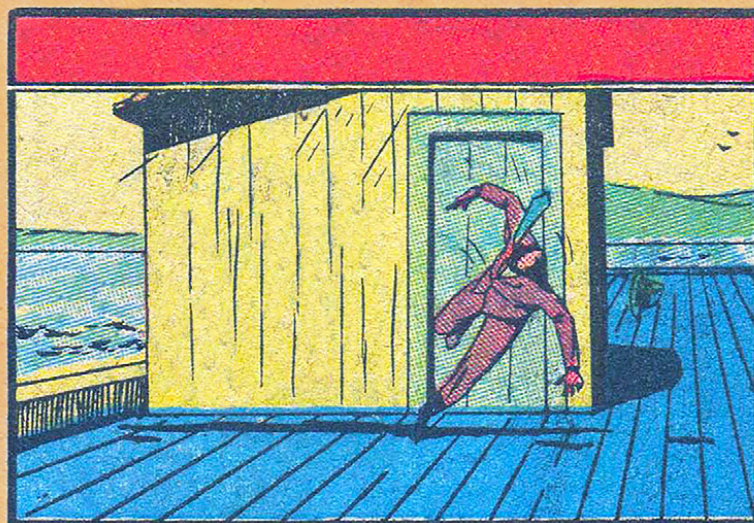
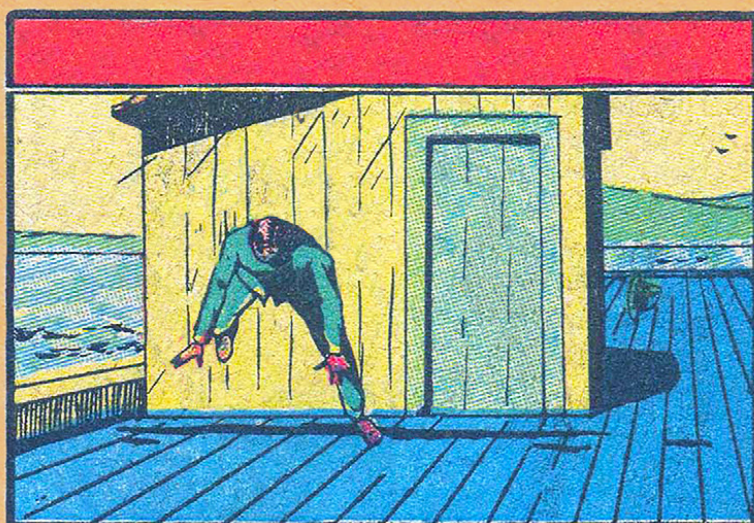
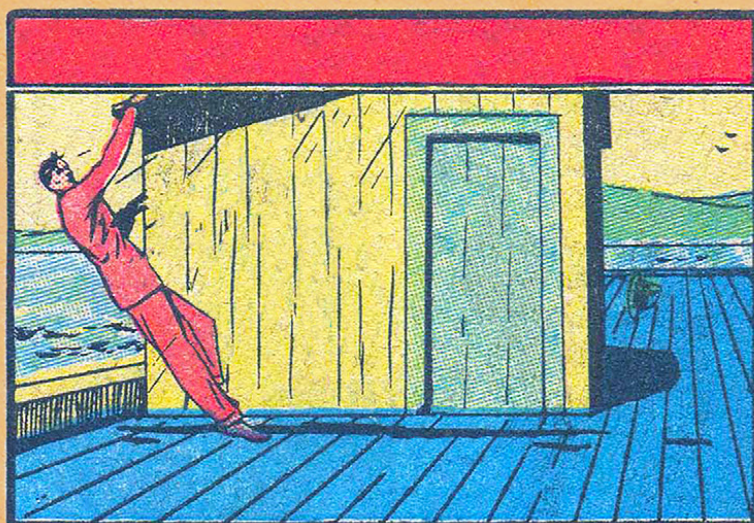
All dialogue from “The Motion-Picture Director” by  
director Ida May Park, *Careers for Women* (1920).



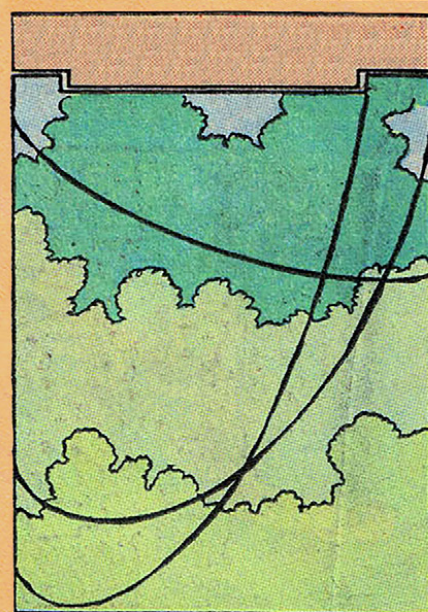
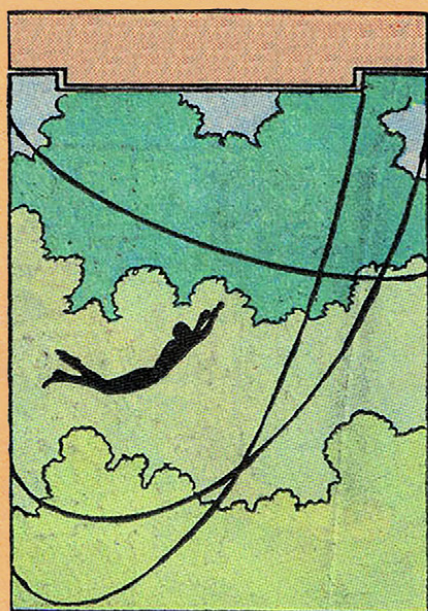
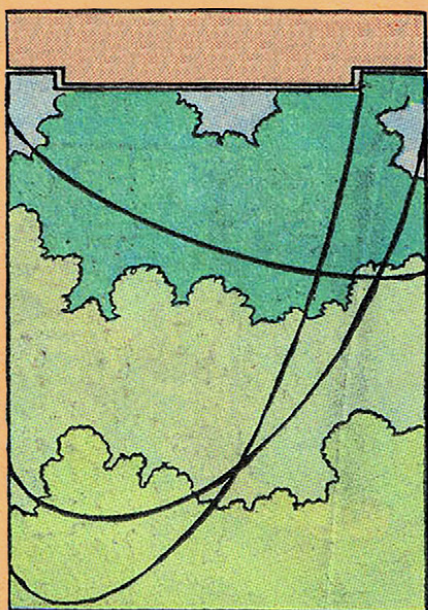
# Bodies in Space

SCIENCE COMICS

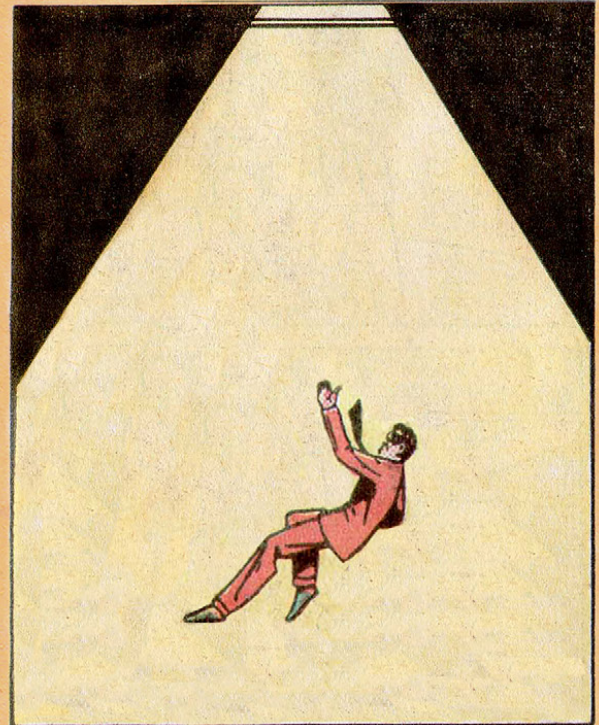
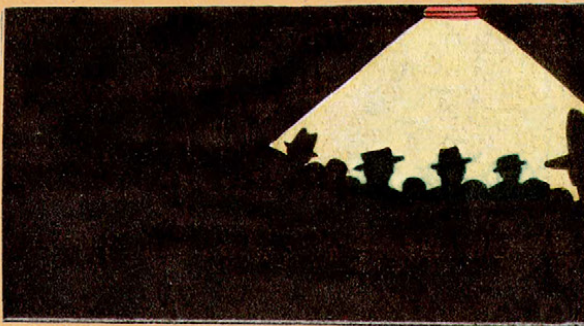
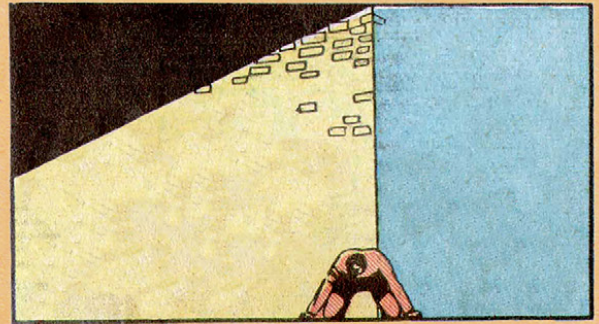
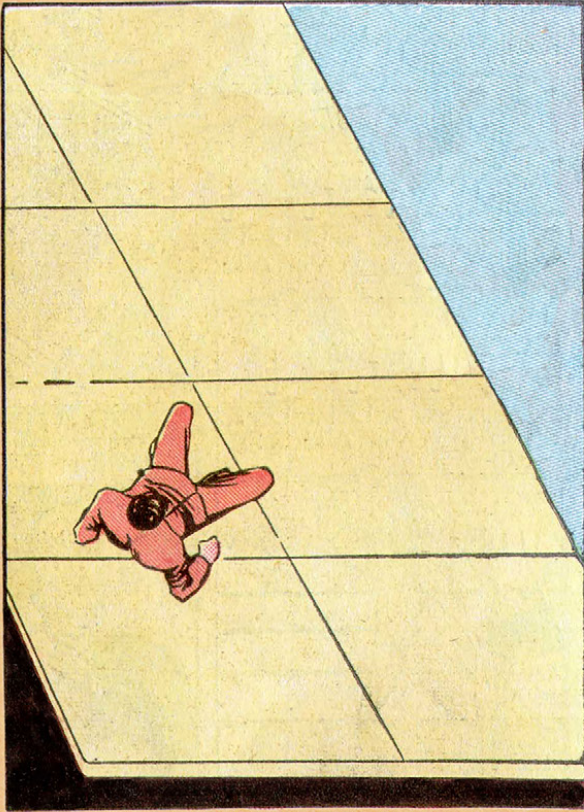




FIGHT COMICS



FIGHT COMICS





### III. Tomb of Terror # 14



TALES OF HORROR IN OTHER WORLDS!

**TOMB  
OF TERROR**

No. 14  
MAR.  
10c

PDC

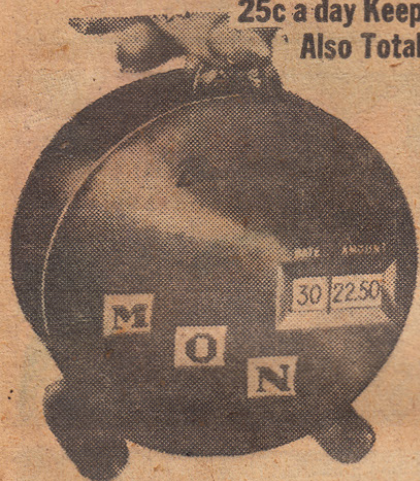
# TOMB OF TERROR



1 /// 79 ///

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Print Name .....  
Address .....  
City..... Zone..... State.....  
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And this package of unbeatable shock will come to you in a cyclical pattern of doom, with four distinctive terror books getting to you during a two-month period. Thus, a mag belonging to this group will appear on your newsstands every two weeks -- each one a king of shock.

Just look at this shock king's domain...

BLACK CAT MYSTERY will offer you a package of real-life horror, where man meets man in a mad clash of reality...

WITCHES TALES is designed to tickle your funny bone and chill your spine, the strangest and most different terror mag ever created.

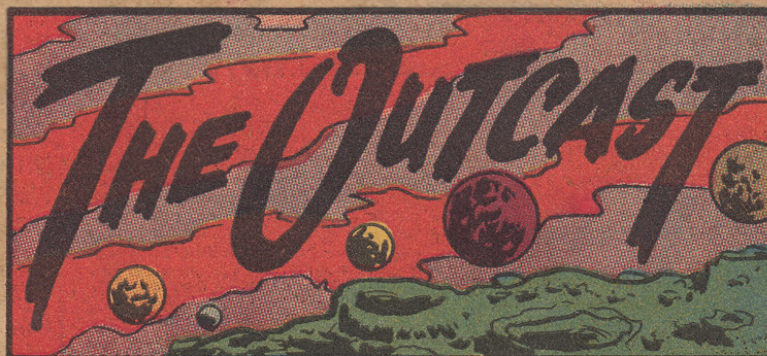
TOMB OF TERROR will consist of stories told out of this world, an unmistakable unit of horror ripped from the many unexplored voids...

CHAMBER OF CHILLS will carry you to the incredible sphere of the supernatural whose teller is as weird as his stories!

Look for them!

# TOMB OF TERROR

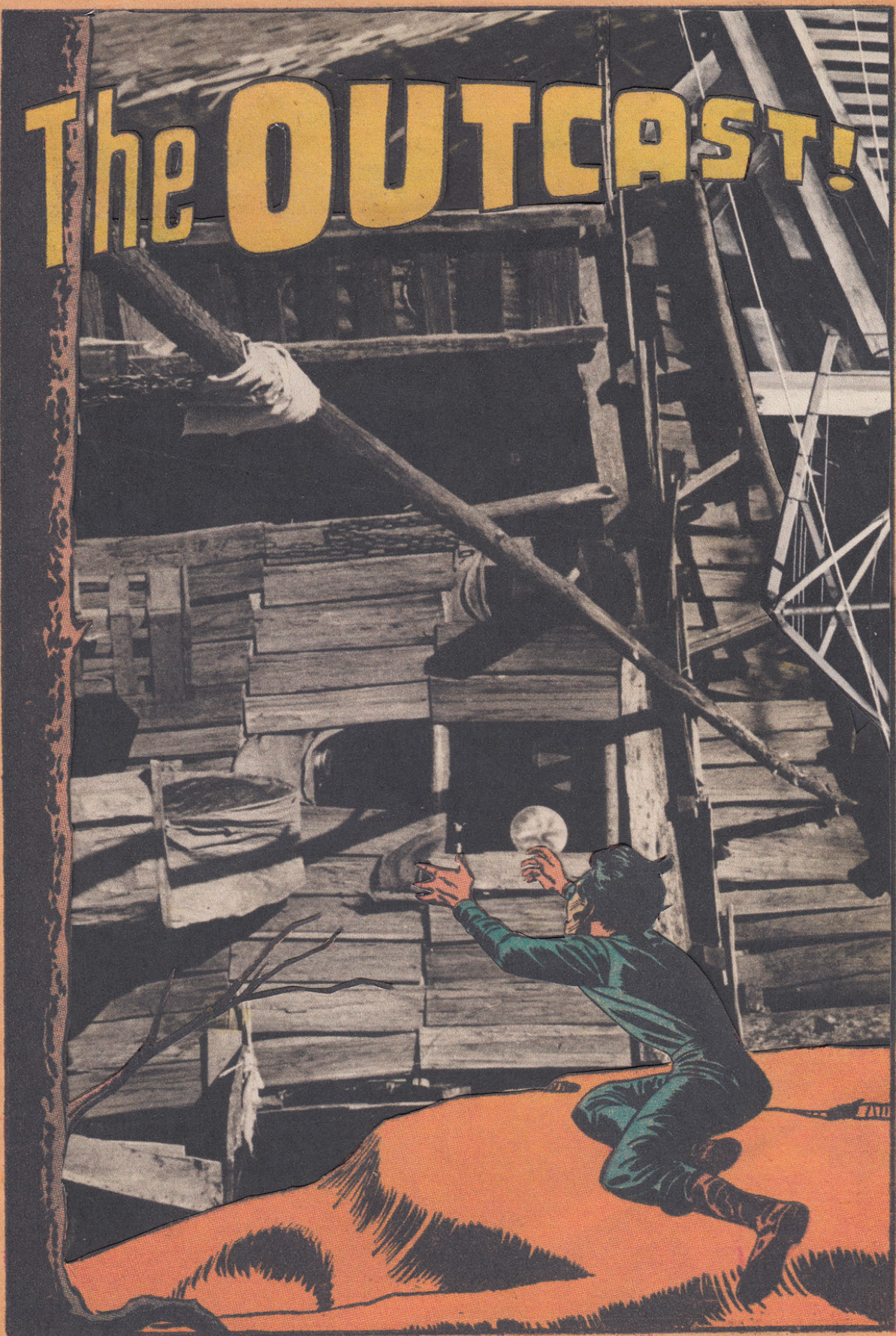
Contents  
NO. 14



TOMB OF TERROR, MARCH, 1954, VOL. 1, NO. 14, IS PUBLISHED EVERY OTHER MONTH by HARVEY PUBLICATIONS, INC., at 420 DeSoto Avenue, St. Louis 7, Mo. Editorial, Advertising and Executive offices, 1860 Broadway, New York 23, N. Y. President, Alfred Harvey; Vice-President and Editor, Lou Harvey; Vice-President and Business Manager, Robert B. Harvey. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at St. Louis, Mo., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 10c. Subscription rates: 10 issues for \$1.00 in the U. S. and possessions; elsewhere, \$1.50. All names in this periodical are entirely fictitious and no identification with actual persons is intended. Contents copyrighted, 1954, by Harvey Features Syndicate, New York City. Printed in the U. S. A.

One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture; since there was nothing indecent about it, there was no reason to reject it.

-Marcel Duchamp, from a letter to his sister, April 11th, 1917



Who sends Marcel Duchamp the urinal? Who is "R. Mutt"? Scholars have settled on one likely candidate:



Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,

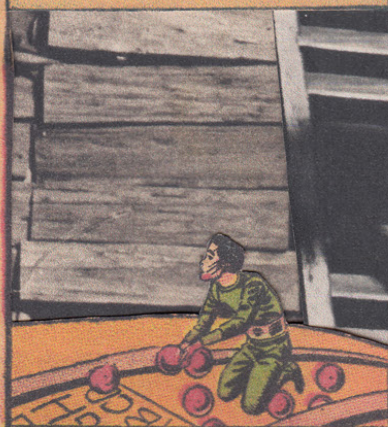
"the first American dada" and pillar of the New York avant-garde. Her poetry appears beside James Joyce's debut publication of *Ulysses*



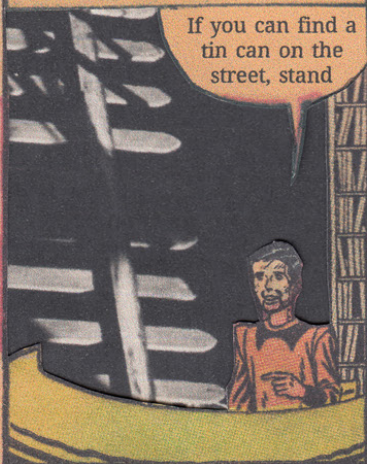
in *The Little Review*, her "readymades"—the discarded objects she finds in the street



and declares art—predate Duchamp's by several years. She dresses in found materials as well: tin cans over breasts,



car tail light sewn to the back of her dress, wooden birdcage with



live canary around her neck. Head shaved and "laquered... a high vermillion."



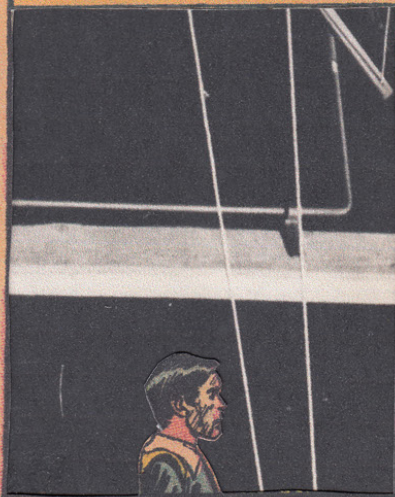
Duchamp submits the urinal for exhibit under the name "Richard Mutt." (It is rejected.)



Not until decades later, with the Baroness dead, does he claim *Fountain* as his own,



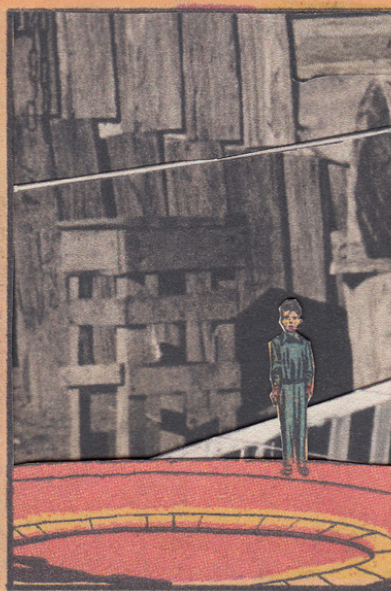
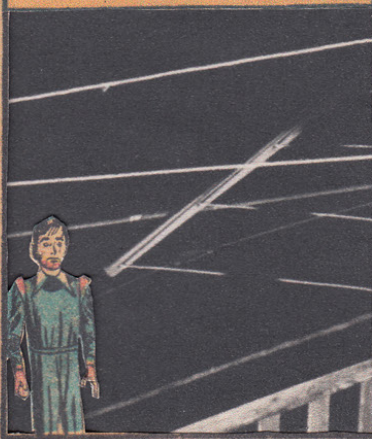
signing 17 reproductions of the lost original.



Outside the entrance to the Duchamp collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

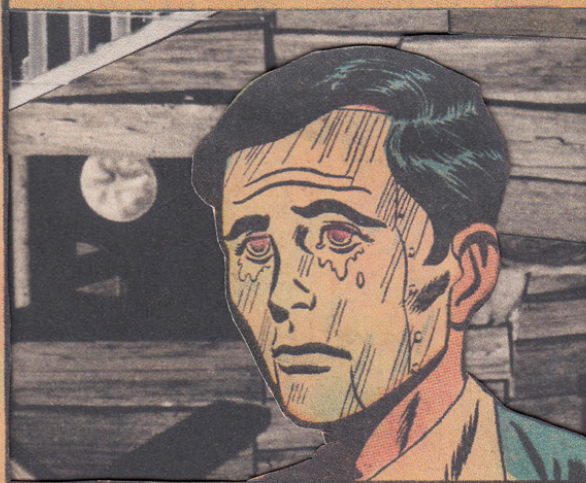


stands *God*, a sheered plumbing trap mounted on a wood miter box.



Scholars have known for decades that the Baroness made this readymade, which dates from the same year as *Fountain*, but since 1950,

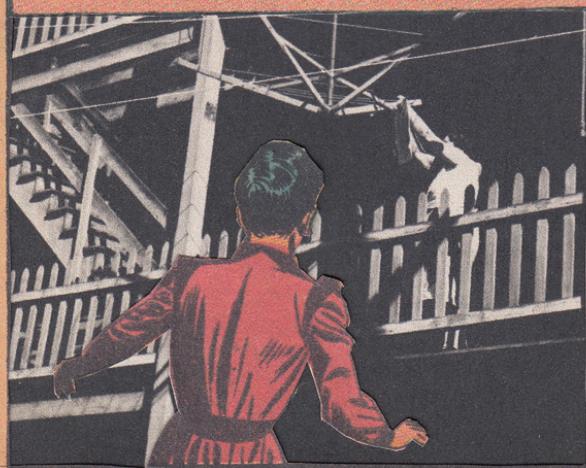
the museum has attributed the work to a photographer named Martin Schamberg.



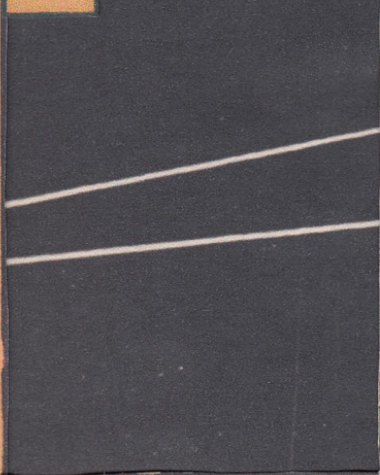
Nearly 100 years after *God's* creation, with a newly published biography and poetry collection



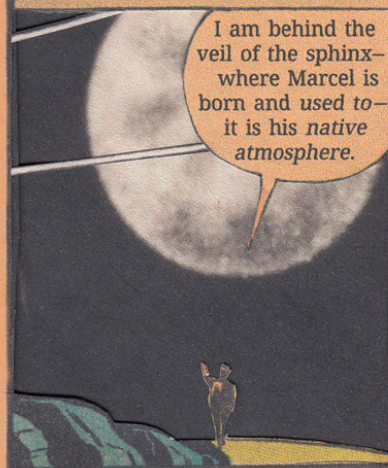
driving fresh attention to the Baroness, the museum finally adds her name to the work's title card—listed after Schamberg's.



The Baroness lives—very poorly—as a model, often nude, and it is in this



role that histories of the avant-garde try to keep her: subject rather than creator.

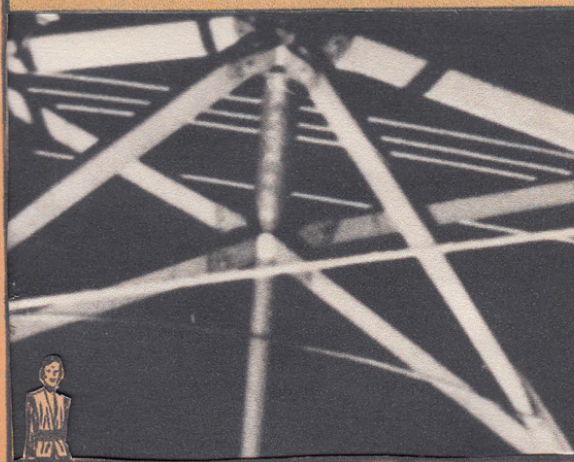


I am behind the veil of the sphinx—where Marcel is born and used to—it is his native atmosphere.

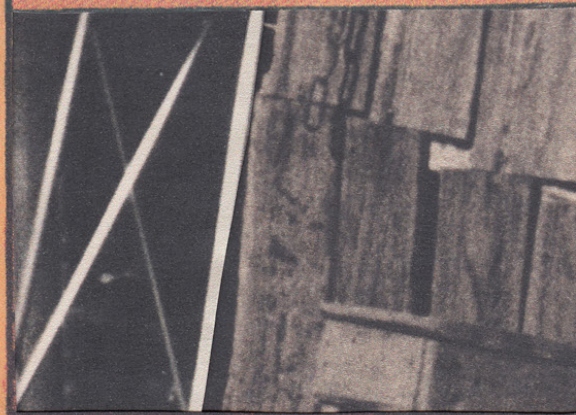
She embodies Dada, a living collage, an anti-art artifact, and as such, provides



inspiration for the great men who revolutionize art in the 20th century.



The sole issue of *New York Dada*, a magazine edited by Duchamp and Man Ray, includes two photos of the Baroness followed by a poem, which critics have long attributed to



Marsden Hartley.





All dialogue from Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's letters to Djuna Barnes or as spoken to Sarah McPherson.

Characterization of the Baroness as "the first New York dada" by Janet Heap and description of the Baroness's head by Margaret Anderson. Heap and Anderson were editors of *The Little Review*.

*Read these*

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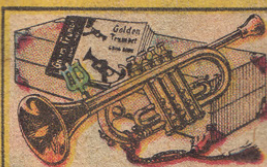
Daisy's Red Ryder Air Rifle  
Dick Tracy Camera  
Cinderella Wrist Watch  
Roy Rogers Binoculars  
Ukulele with Arthur Godfrey's famous player  
Boys' Radium Dial Wrist Watch • Woodburning Set  
Movie Projector • Phonograph



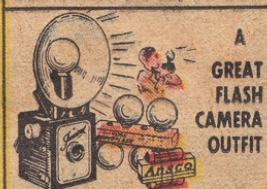
Crystal Radio Kit  
Printing Press • Roller Skates  
Identification Bracelet  
Ready-to-fly Jet Airplane  
Gene Autry Guitar  
Electric Jeep  
Official Size Football



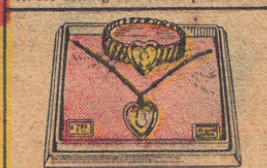
and many more



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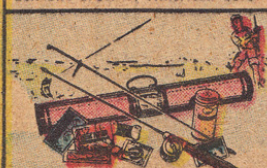
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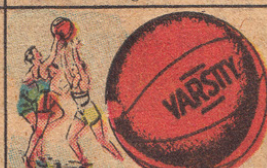
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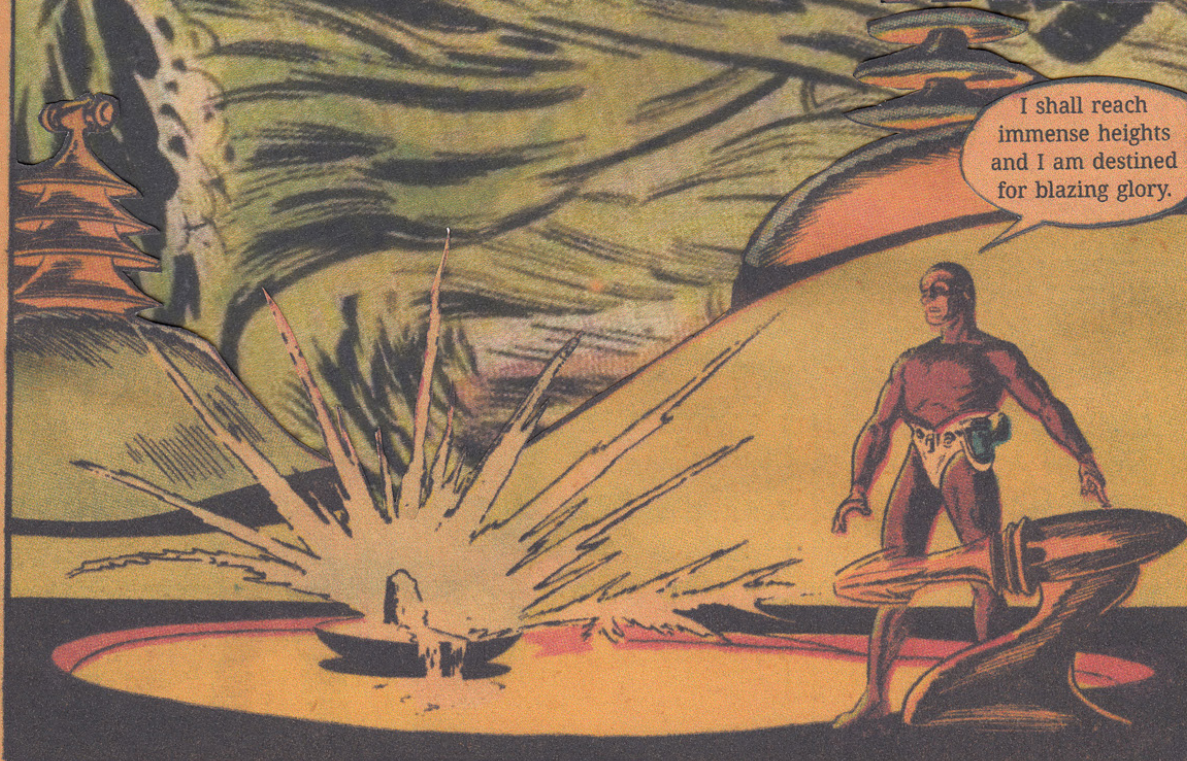
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Raymond Roussel had no interest in the avant-garde.

# THE HARDER THEY FALL

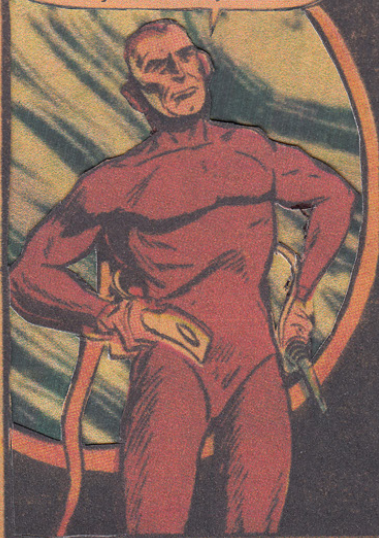


He spent much of his family fortune publishing his works and bankrolling lavish productions of his plays—

I shall enjoy greater glory than Victor Hugo or Napoleon... There lies within me a glory of immense force.



This glory will be evident in every one of my works.

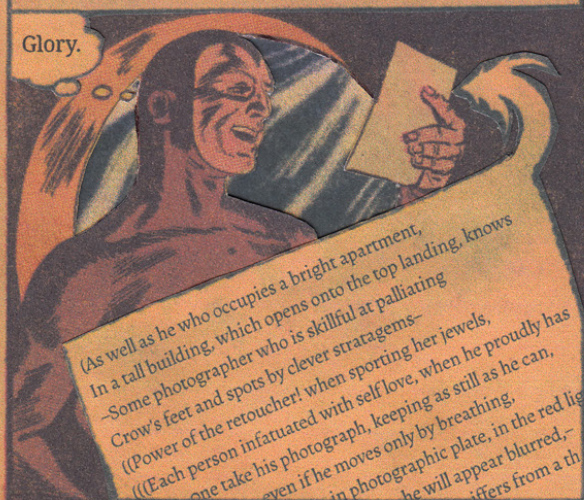


No author has been, or can ever be greater than I, although no one is aware of this yet today.



All with the confidence that *this time* the public would recognize his genius.

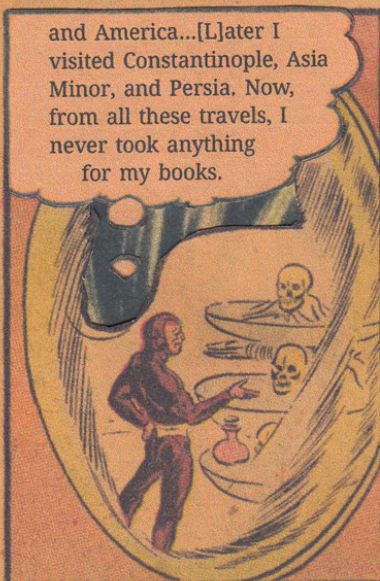
Glory.



I traveled around the world by way of India, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific, China, Japan,



and America...[L]ater I visited Constantinople, Asia Minor, and Persia. Now, from all these travels, I never took anything for my books.



[I]t clearly shows just how much imagination counts for everything in my work.



People say I'm a Dadaist, but

I don't even know what Dadaism is!



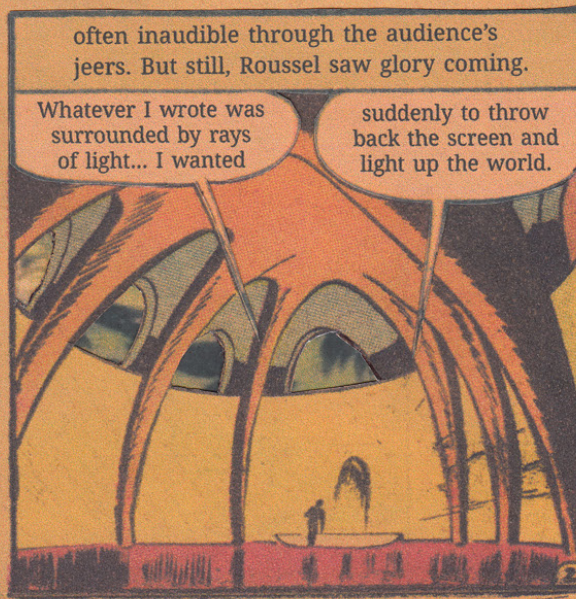
His books sold almost no copies. His plays were met with hostility and scandal, the actors



often inaudible through the audience's jeers. But still, Roussel saw glory coming.

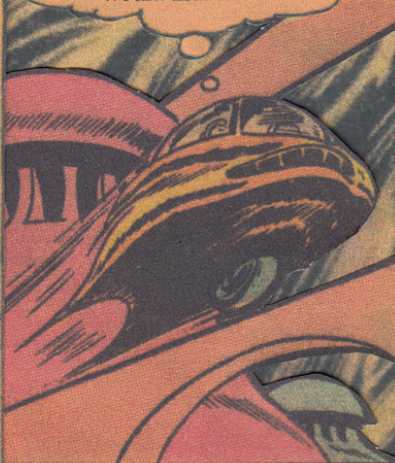
Whatever I wrote was surrounded by rays of light... I wanted

suddenly to throw back the screen and light up the world.



But for Roussel, glory was not: being revered by the Surrealists (his plays' only defenders), inspiring Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*, or serving as patron saint to Oulipo and the writers of the Nouveau Roman.

Without a doubt, when the volume appeared, this blinding furnace would be revealed and would illuminate

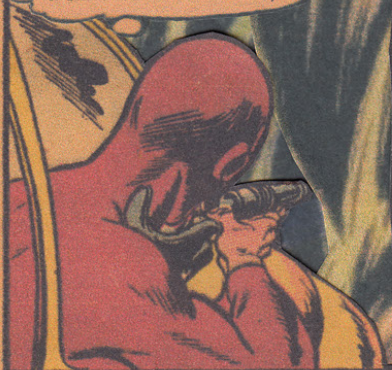


the entire universe.



Raymond Roussel wanted to be another Jules Verne, not a member of the avant-garde.

It's lack of success shattered me... The shock brought me out in a kind of skin disease,



How, then, could we tell him that one day he'd be read, but as the most radical of the radicals,

which took the form



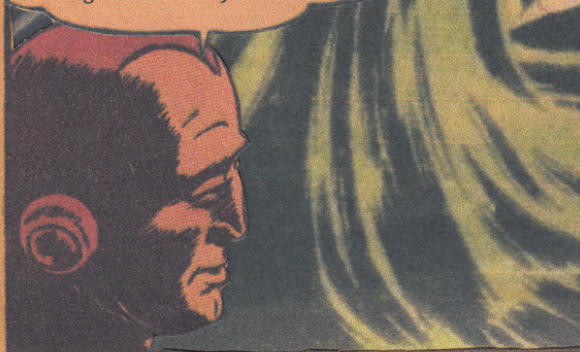
so far out in the vanguard that we've yet to catch up? Only at the end of his life

of a rash covering my entire body... [and] my developing a dreadful nervous illness.



did Roussel glimpse failure, and even then, he found no solace in the avant-garde movements with whom, after death, he would remain intertwined.

And so I seek solace, for want of something better, in the hope that I may perhaps gain a little posthumous recognition for my books.



Ask yourself, how satisfied would Roussel be with the recognition we offer today?

THE END

All dialogue quoted from Raymond Roussel,  
as spoken to his psychologist, Pierre Janet,  
spoken to Michel Leiris, or appearing in his  
essay "How I Wrote Certain of My Books."

# *The* **HIDDEN DOORS**

in 1938, Elizabeth Bishop spots a painting in a barbershop window, a landscape featuring a road, small cabin, and a tiny figure of a man on a donkey. Bishop pays three dollars for it.

Gregorio was not a great painter at all, and although he certainly belongs to the class of painters we call "primitive," sometimes he was not even a good "primitive."



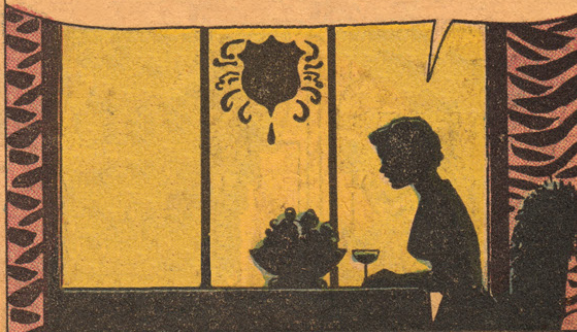
Painted by artist Gregorio Valdes—who at the time of Bishop's discovery already has a successful New York gallery show—the work fits Bishop's criteria for the desirable *primitive*.

Gregorio himself did not see any difference between what we think of as his good pictures and his poor pictures, and his painting a good one or a bad one seems to have been entirely a matter of luck.



Of this quality, Bishop considers herself a connoisseur.

There are some people who we envy not because they are rich or handsome or successful... but because everything they are and do seems to be all of a piece, so that even if they wanted to they could not do otherwise.



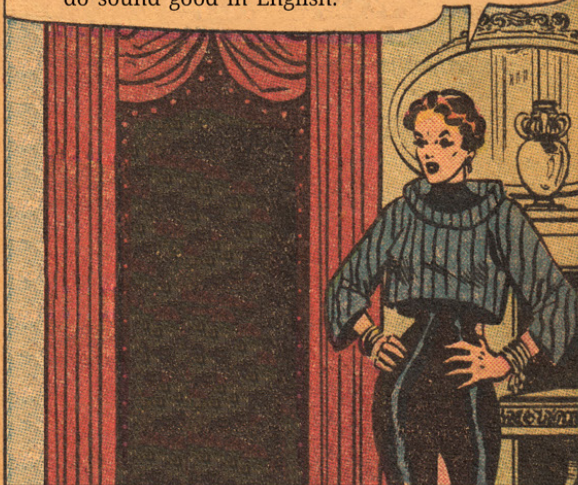
She believes she spots it again in the work of famed Brazilian modernist Clarice Lispector.

She's the most non-literary writer I've ever known and "never cracks a book" as we used to say. She's never read anything, that I can discover—

I think she's a "self-taught" writer, like a primitive painter.



Her novels are NOT good; the 'essays' she does for *Senhor* are very bad—but in the stories she has awfully good things and they do sound good in English.



I have translated five of Clarice's stories—all the very short ones & one longer one. *The New Yorker* is interested—I think she needs money, so that would be good... I was quite pleased with them. Oh dear. Well—we'll see.



[I]t seems that some people receive certain "gifts" merely by remaining unwittingly in an undemocratic state of grace.

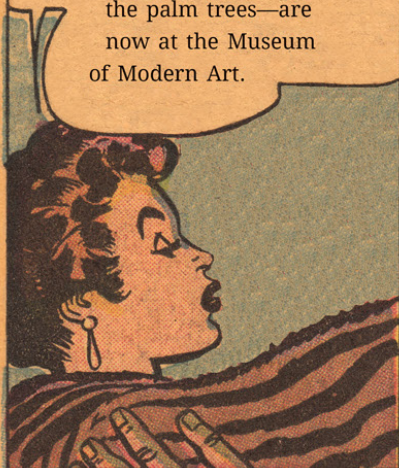


More than this, Bishop wants to shape these primitives according to her superior vision: translating Lispector, commissioning the perfect painting from Valdes. She struggles towards an *ideal* primitive.

[M]ore flowers... a monkey...  
a parrot...  
a... palm  
tree.



Two of our Valdes pictures—  
the big one of the house and  
the little one of the road &  
the palm trees—are  
now at the Museum  
of Modern Art.



The next step, Bishop judges, is to  
take an even more active hand—

I am entertaining Grant Wood, who wants to see  
the Valdes picture... Under a magic spell of all  
this, I have started to paint myself.



Not through her poetry, where she is known for her high-brow precision, but through a new parallel vocation.

In 1971, with Valdes long dead and Lispector an established literary star, Bishop tells an interviewer...

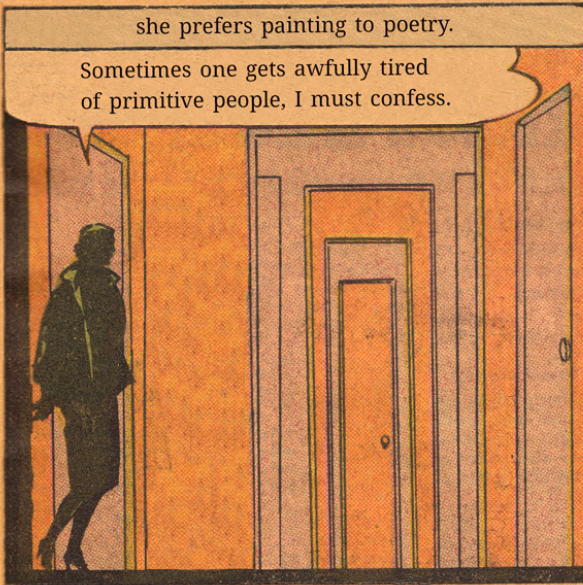
I'm not sure whether you have—or if you don't, if you'd care for—one of my genuine primitive paintings.

From time to time I paint...  
[T]hey are Not Art—  
NOT AT ALL.



she prefers painting to poetry.

Sometimes one gets awfully tired of primitive people, I must confess.



*The End*

All dialogue from Elizabeth Bishop's letters or from  
her memorial essay "Gregorio Valdes, 1879-1939,"  
which originally appeared in *Partisan Review*.

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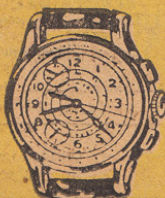


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from THE BIRD FRIENDS of AMERICA—  
Unbreakable Vinyl phonograph record  
of 18 authentic reproductions of...  
Bird Calls and Songs, Bird Picture Book,  
Bird Food, and Double Throat Bird Call.

Whether you live in country or  
city, you can get new pleasure  
and thrills from this amazing com-  
plete outfit. Besides you will be  
performing a needed service for  
our feathered friends and Amer-  
ican wildlife.

**BIRD FEEDER**

**Bird  
House**

**BIRD BATH**

**BIRD CALL  
RECORD**

**BIRD BOOK**

Now for the first time ever, you can get this amazing complete outfit. Bird house, bird bath, feeding station, all made of fine rust-proof sheet aluminum embossed and decorated so that the birds will love to use them, plus: • Free bird food • Easy to use bird caller • Bird picture book and • Unbreakable vinylite hi-fidelity record of 18 bird calls and songs — all for the amazing low price of \$1.69.

In a few minutes you can set up your outfit on your own window-sill, porch, or tree. Birds will flock to your feeding station, take baths in your bird bath and sing and chirp to your record or your own bird calls. Soon, too, some birds will make their home in your bird house, lay their eggs and start to raise a family. All your friends will envy your wonderful new pets, and your ability to imitate their calls. Parents and teacher will be amazed at how children know and learn to do so many new things.

### YOU GET ALL THIS:

- Sheet aluminum bird house, in natural colors
- Simulated leaf bird bath
- Bird feeding station
- Bird food
- Bird call imitator
- Book of 30 bird pictures
- American flag
- Unbreakable vinyl phonograph record with 18 authentic bird calls

### 10 DAY FREE TRIAL

Just because we know you will love this wonderful bird-care station, we make this offer. Just fill in the coupon below. We will rush your whole outfit by return mail together with the free bird caller, record, bird food, and bird picture book. Set it up and use it for 10 days. If you are not delighted, just return the aluminum house, feeder and bird bath for a refund of the complete purchase price. And keep all the rest as a gift from us. But rush now and be the first in your neighborhood to have this wonderful outfit.

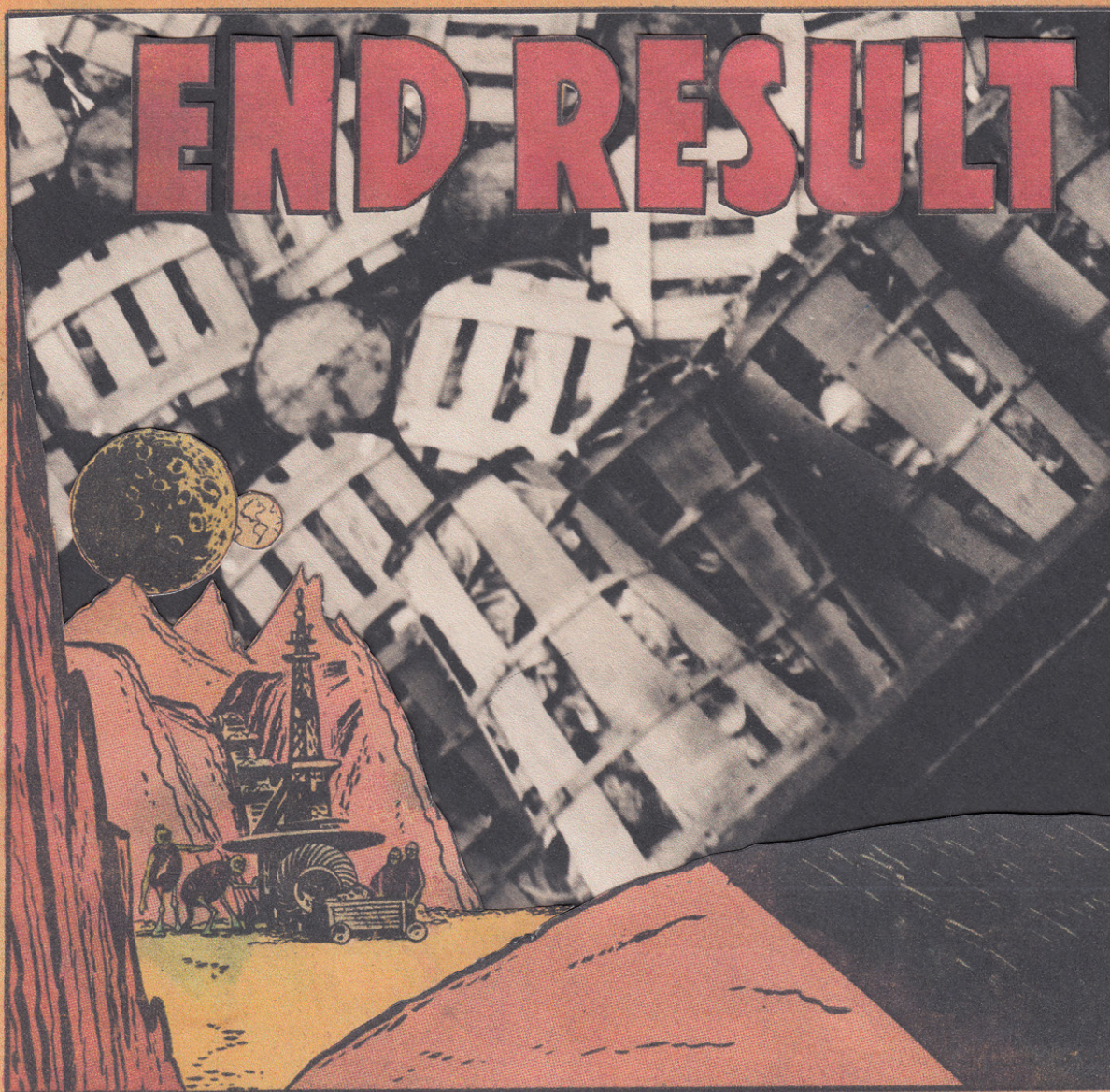
BIRD FRIENDS OF AMERICA, 15TH FLOOR  
1860 BROADWAY, NEW YORK 23, N.Y. M

☐ Rush me my complete Bird House, Care Station, Bird Book, Bird Food, Record and Caller, for only \$1.69. If I am not 100% delighted, I may return the outfit after 10 days free trial, for prompt refund of the full purchase price.

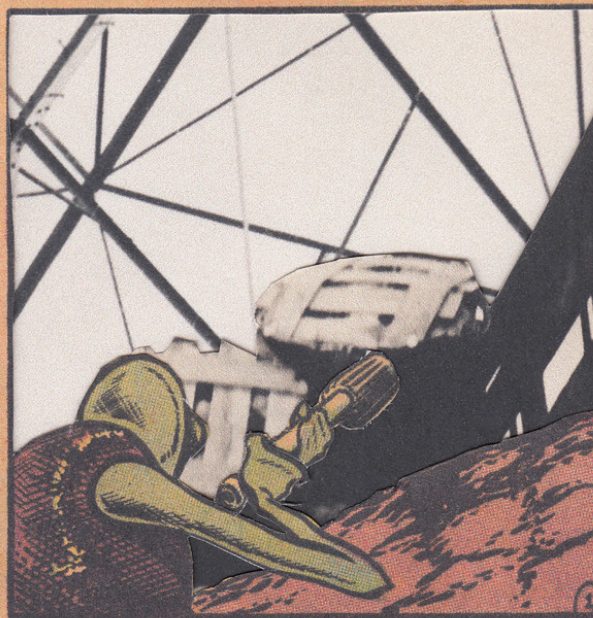
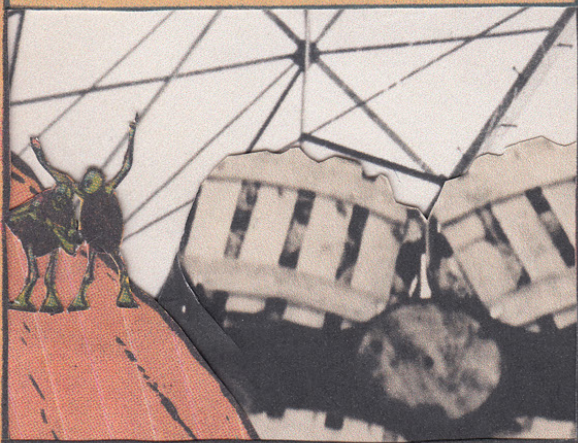
☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman \$1.69 upon delivery plus a few cents postage.

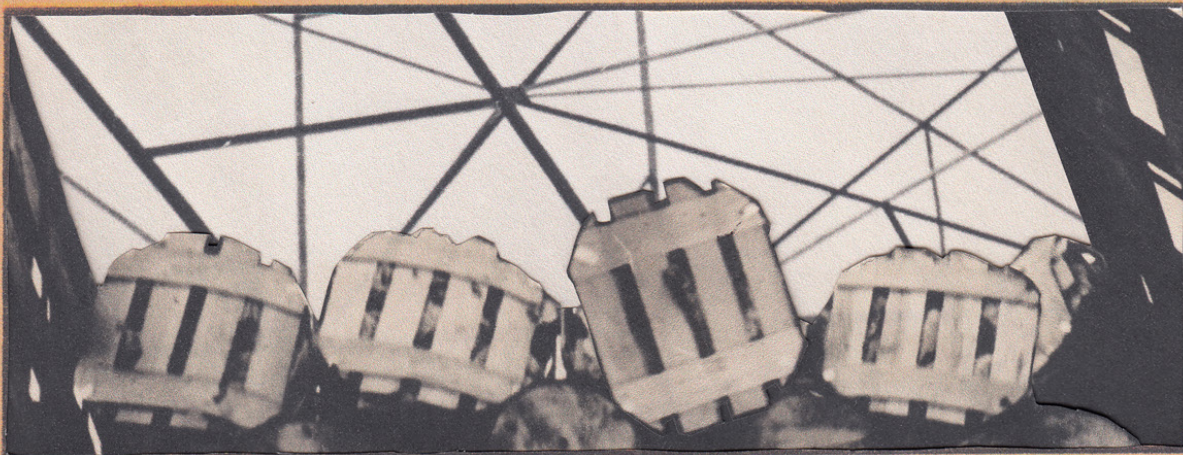
NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_



Buenos Aires, 1968, the First National Conference on Avant-Garde Art. Under the eye of Argentina's military dictatorship, a small group of artists debate how best to stage a revolution.



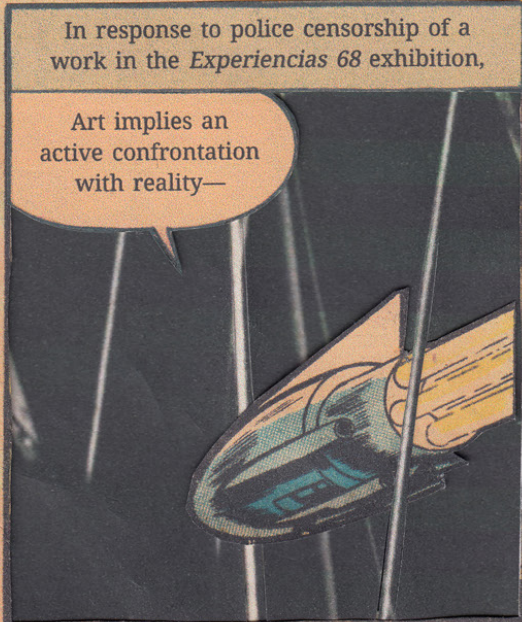


Art is not a peaceful activity nor the decoration of the bourgeois life.



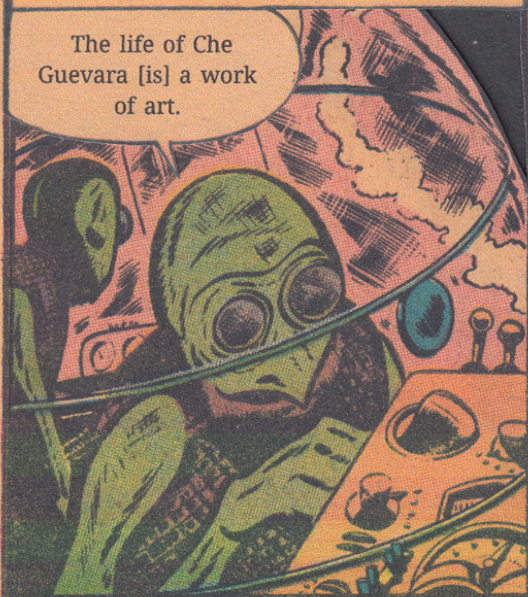
In response to police censorship of a work in the *Experiencias 68* exhibition,

Art implies an active confrontation with reality—



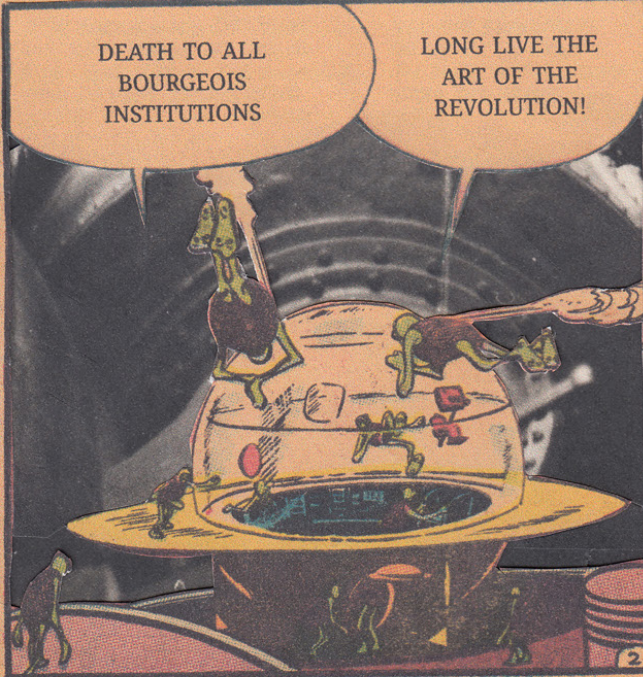
the artists take their pieces from the museum and destroy them in the street.

The life of Che Guevara [is] a work of art.



DEATH TO ALL  
BOURGEOIS  
INSTITUTIONS

LONG LIVE THE  
ART OF THE  
REVOLUTION!

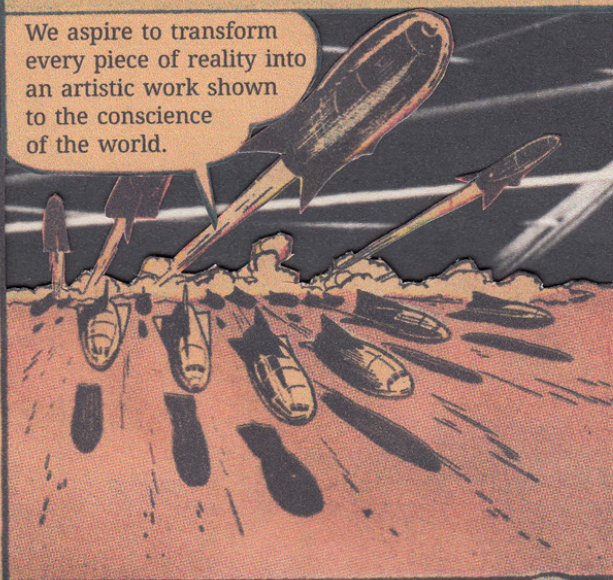


Finished with museums and galleries,  
the artists plan a new collective work

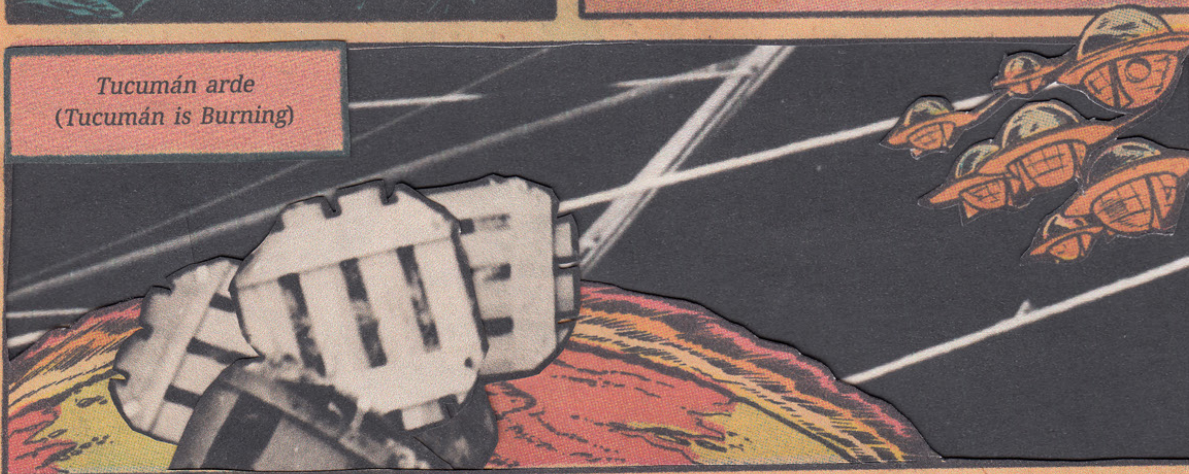


to counter the government's official  
information on national living conditions:

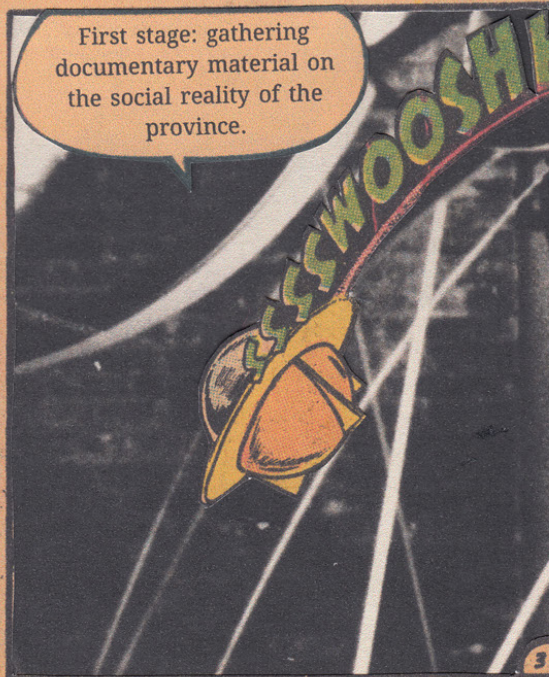
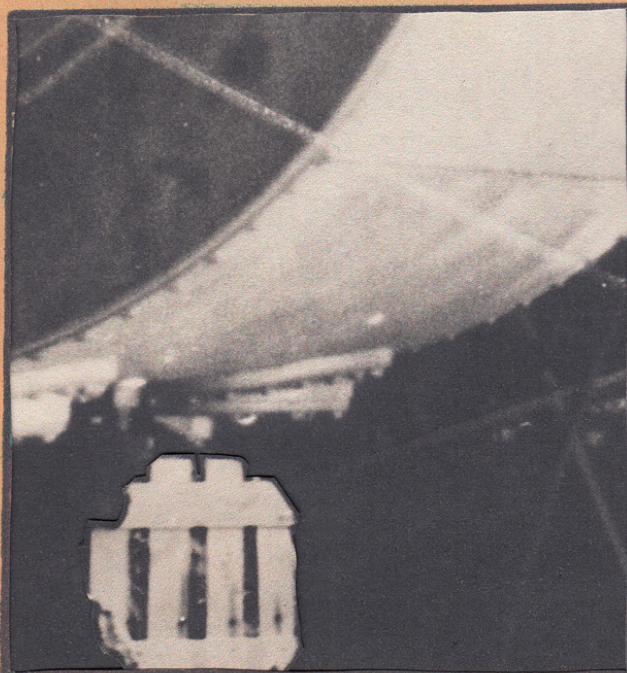
We aspire to transform  
every piece of reality into  
an artistic work shown  
to the conscience  
of the world.



*Tucumán arde*  
(Tucumán is Burning)



First stage: gathering  
documentary material on  
the social reality of the  
province.



Second stage:  
confrontation and  
verification of  
the Tucumán  
reality.

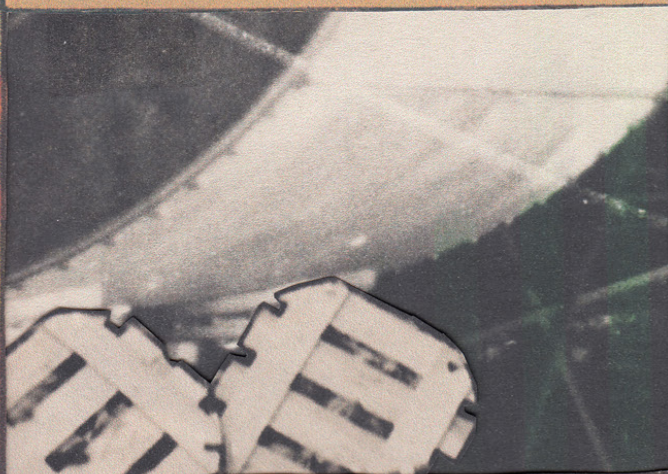


Third stage:  
the  
denunciation-  
exhibit.

Tucumán is an impoverished sugar-producing region  
touted by the government as "the Garden of the Republic."



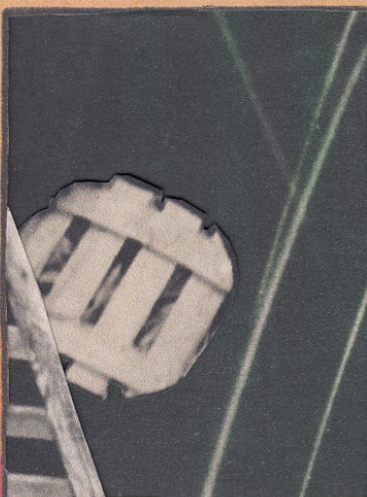
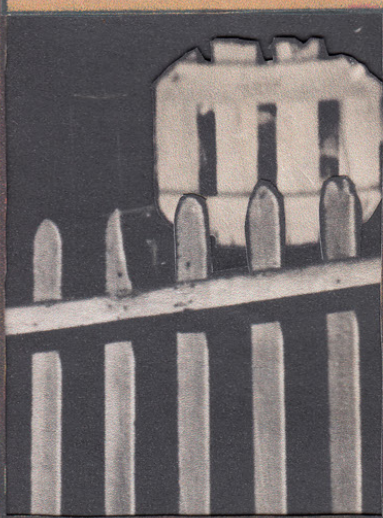
Working with economists, journalists, and sociologists,  
the artists fill four floors of a labor union's  
headquarters with "the social reality of the province."



We will no longer  
place our talent at  
the service of our  
enemies.



Charts on the connections  
between government officials  
and the owners of the sugar  
monopolies; lights dimming



every ten minutes to  
represent how often a child  
dies in the province;  
newspaper clippings on  
workers killed by police;



projected films and slides; speakers blaring interviews with residents; the region's coffee (without sugar) given to every visitor; a bombardment of information and experience.



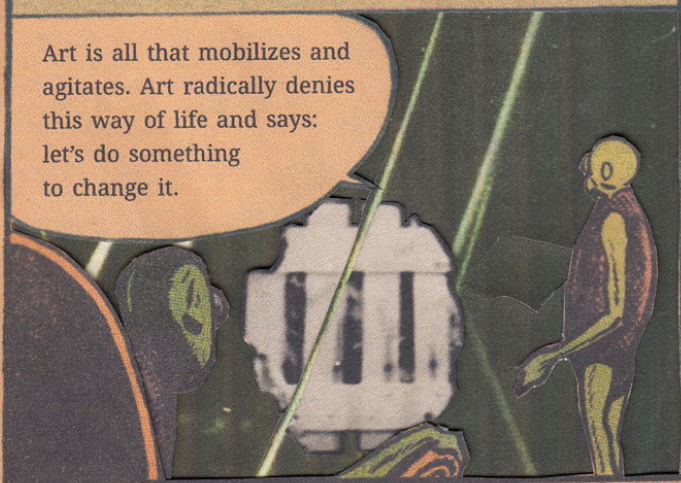
[We] show the true enemy [and] inspire the people with hatred and energy for the struggle.

Visit Tucumán, the Garden of Misery.

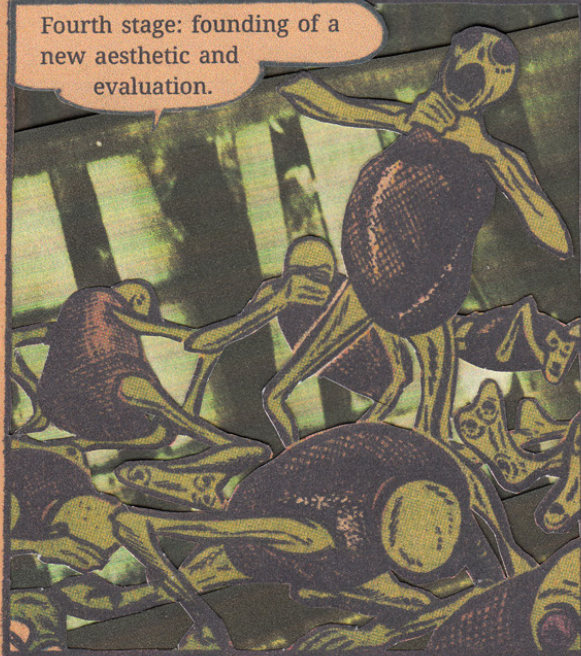


The first *Tucumán arde* exhibit lasts two weeks. Restaged in Buenos Aires, police order it closed on the second day.

Art is all that mobilizes and agitates. Art radically denies this way of life and says: let's do something to change it.



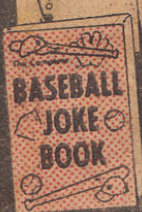
Fourth stage: founding of a new aesthetic and evaluation.



After the closing, most of the artists quit producing work—some exiled, some “disappeared,” and some joining guerilla groups to be killed in action. For a time, political art all but disappears in Argentina, with the following years known as “Silence of *Tucumán arde*.”

THE END

All dialogue from Tucumán arde artists, as appearing in the following texts: an address to the “Friends of Art” Society by the participants in *Experiencias 68* (June 1968), “Tucumán arde” by the Avant-Garde Artists Group, “Declaration of the Argentine Artists Committee” (November 1968), and a poster appearing in the exhibit. All texts but the poster translated by Harry Polkinhorn.



Canada & Foreign—\$2.50 with order

☐ Check if you enclose 98c, Stravon pays postage. Same refund.



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## Buy Now at our Low Low PRICES!

**Hi! I'm GINGER!**  
the Doll whose HAIR  
YOU CAN WAVE!

I have RUBBER WONDERSKIN!

**FREE HAIR WAVE KIT**

**NEW!**

A wonderful new doll in washable rubber Wonderskin whose hair is so lifelike it can be waved in any style and rewaved just like your own. A perfect playmate for the "Junior Mother" of the house. Complete with real Hair-wave kit which consists of . . . plastic curlers . . . rubber waving bands . . . waving end papers . . . plastic comb . . . and bottle of hair wave lotion. Ginger is 11 inches tall. Her soft cuddly body which can be bathed will give the "Junior Miss" an almost real baby sister to play with.

**only \$3.98**

**complete**

**TERRIFIC VALUE!**

**RUSH YOUR ORDER TODAY!**

**NEW MYSTERY FISH-BOWL**

**AMAZING**

**What keeps the water in the loop?**

**2.98**

**IT'S NEW — IT'S DIFFERENT**  
**BEAUTIFULLY MOLDED PLASTIC GYM**  
**FISH SWIM THROUGH MAGIC LOOP**  
**DECORATES END TABLES, BOOKCASES, ETC.**

**RUSH YOUR ORDER TODAY!**

What keeps the water in the loop? Amaze and mystify your friends with this sensational new "mystery" fish-bowl molded from clear durable plastic with a scientific tube loop. Fill it with approximately 1/2 gallon of water as per our secret instructions, then insert two or three of your pet goldfish. You'll watch them for hours and hours as they frisk and frolic through the loop. The perfect compliment to any room. Decorates end-tables, bookcases, etc. Makes a wonderful gift. **SEND NO MONEY.** (C.O.D. you pay postage. Remit with order, we pay postage.)

**NEW! SENSATIONAL! AMAZING! 22 PCS.**

**NURS-A-DOLLY**

**COMPLETE NURSING SET**

- She drinks; She wets!
- Washable Rubber Wonderskin!
- 22 pc. complete—dolly, nursing kit!

To thrill the heart of every little mother — this sensational 22 piece NURS-A-DOLLY! Cuddly rubber doll drinks, and wets her diaper . . . comes with complete feeding equipment — 21 sturdy pieces including sterilizer rack, nipple jar and kettle, formula measuring cup, funnel and spoon, and six bottles and nipples ready to use! Made of soft, life-like WONDERSKIN, you can bathe her, move her arms and legs. **SEND NO MONEY!** (C. O. D. you pay postage. Remit with order, we pay postage.)

**Imagine Only \$3.98 Complete**

**RUSH YOUR ORDER TODAY!**

**HAPPY the Cowboy**

**HE'S OVER 19" TALL!**  
**MOVES HIS MOUTH,**  
**ARMS AND LEGS!**  
**REAL COWBOY OUTFIT!**

Hey kids — here's your chance to become a master ventriloquist — in a jiffy! Imagine — you can make **HAPPY the COWBOY** actually talk! (in your own voice, of course.) Pull the string in the back of his head — watch his lips move — hear your own words coming right out of **HAPPY'S** mouth! See how real he looks — rigged up in a cowboy hat, washable plaid shirt and western pants. . . Show off your skill at parties — at school! **SEND NO MONEY.** (C.O.D. you pay postage. Remit with order, we pay postage.)

**Imagine Only \$2.98 Complete**

**HYA PARDNA**

**SEND NO MONEY!** C.O.D. you pay postage. Remit with order...We pay postage.

**SEND COUPON!**

**NOVELTY MART, Dept. AG-3**  
59 East 8th Street, New York 3, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Please send me the following

Enclosed find: ☐ Check on M. O. ☐ C. O. D. plus postage

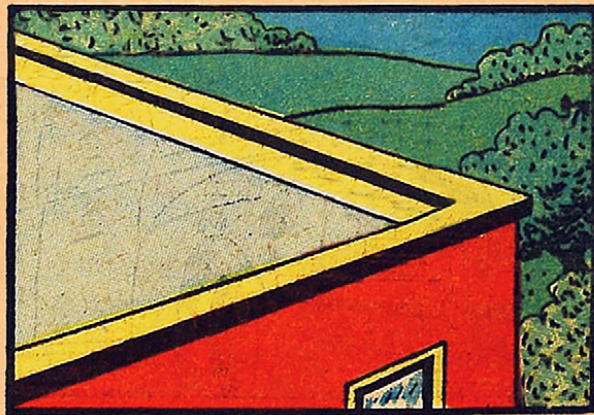
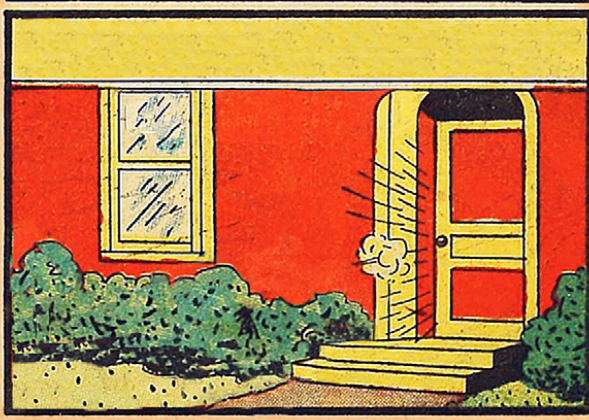
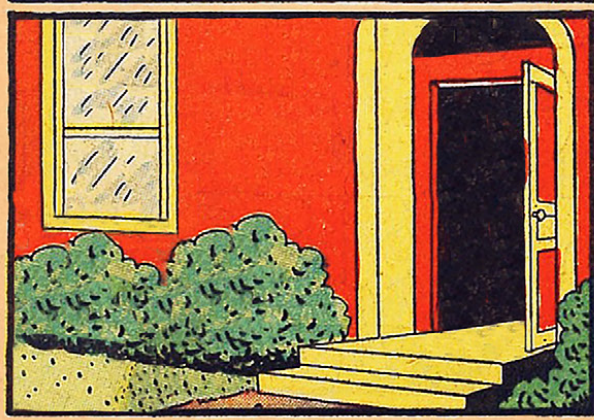
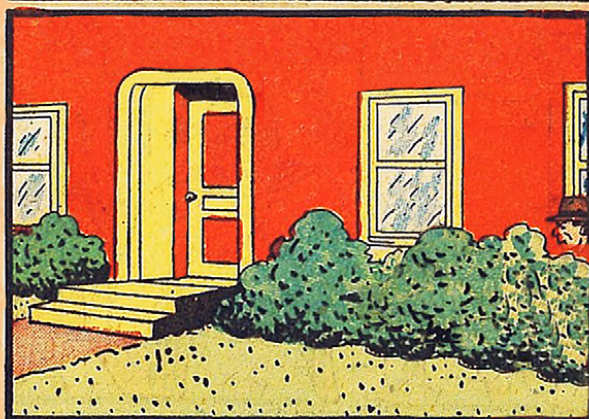
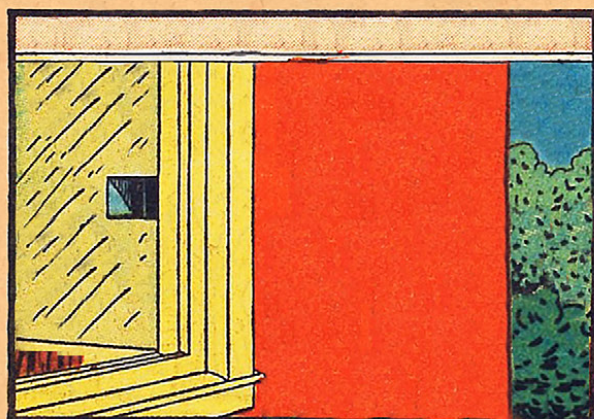
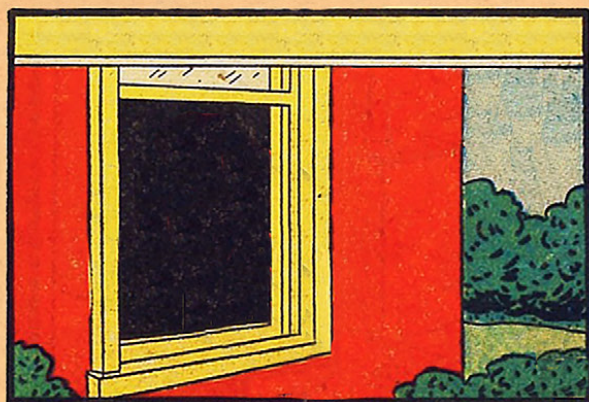
<input type="checkbox"/> FISH-BOWL	\$2.98	<input type="checkbox"/> Ginger	\$3.98
<input type="checkbox"/> Happy the Cowboy	\$2.98	<input type="checkbox"/> Nurs-A-Dolly	\$3.98

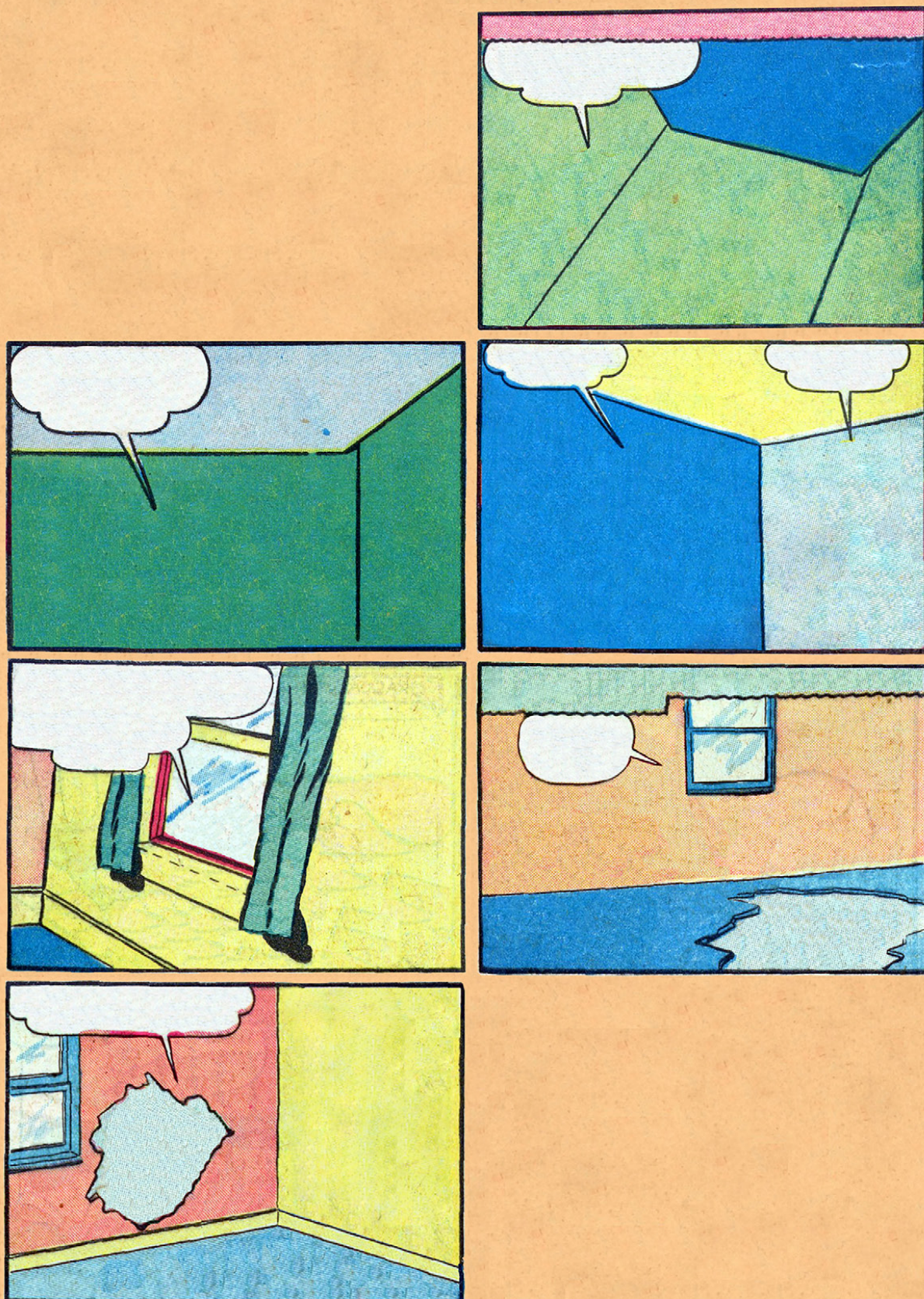
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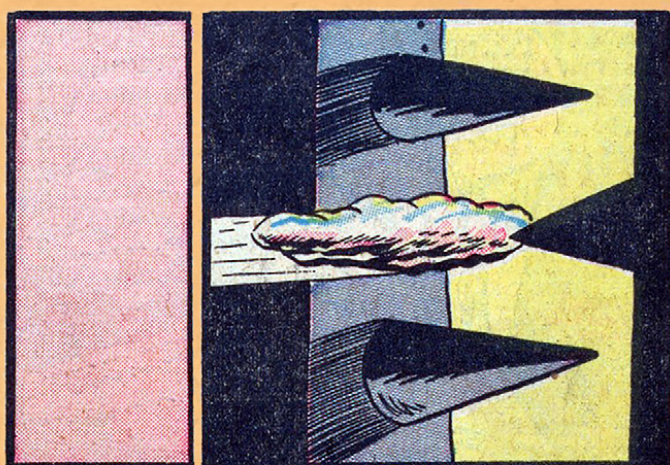
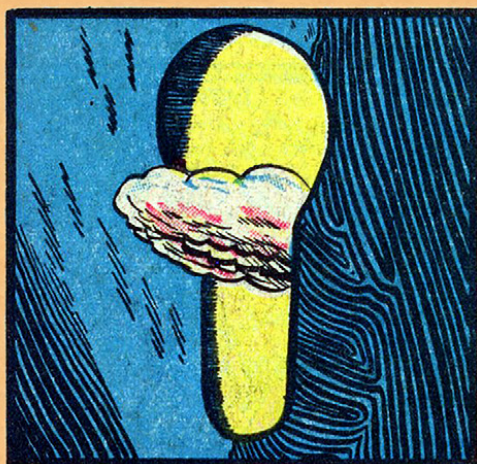
Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_

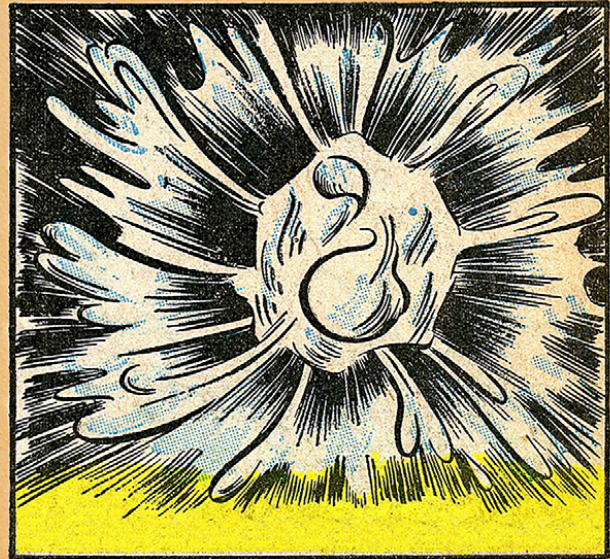
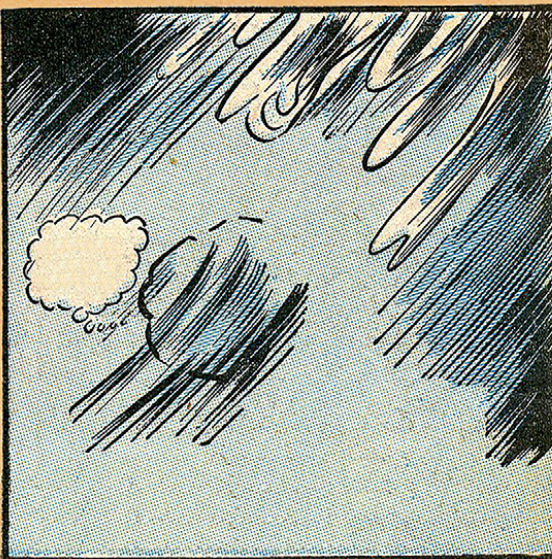
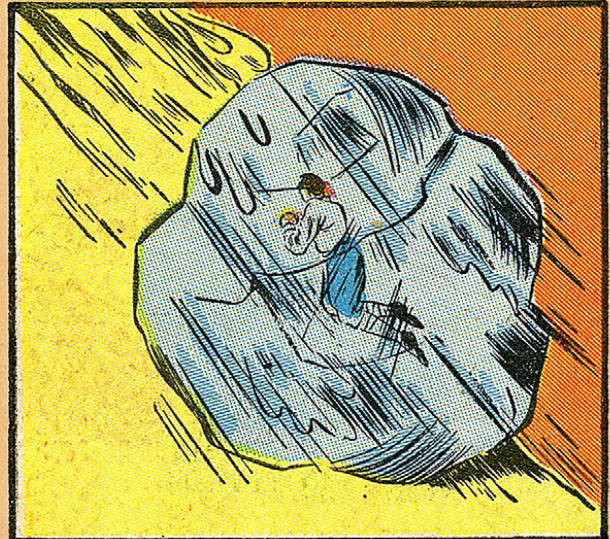
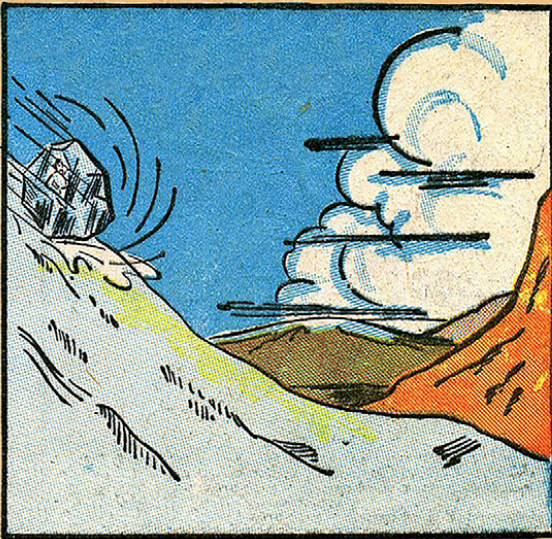
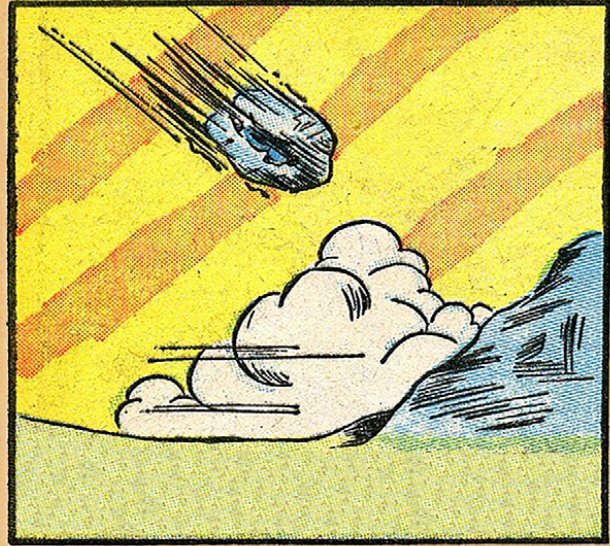
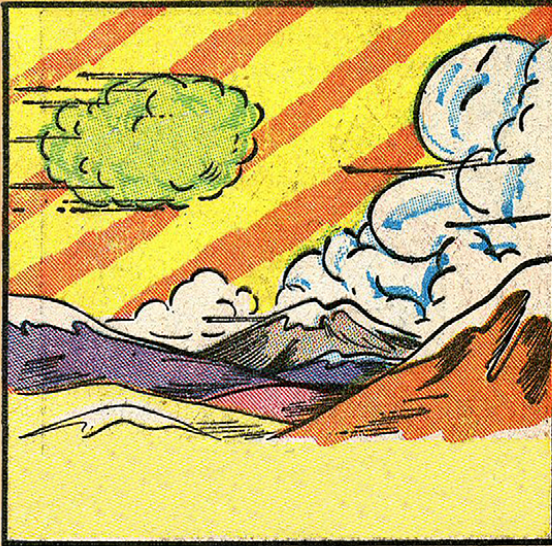
**NOVELTY MART 59 East 8th Street, AG-3 New York**

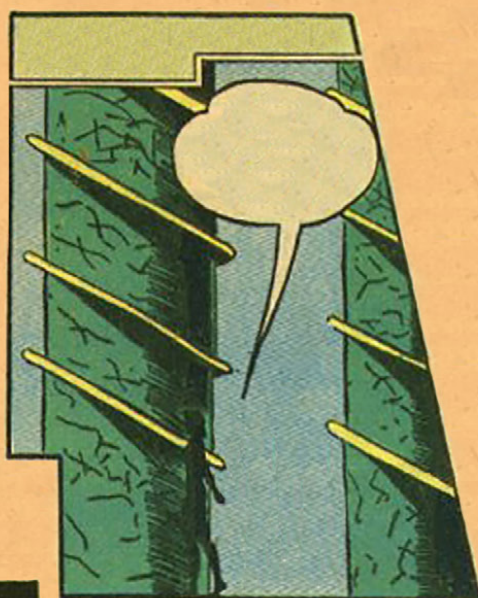
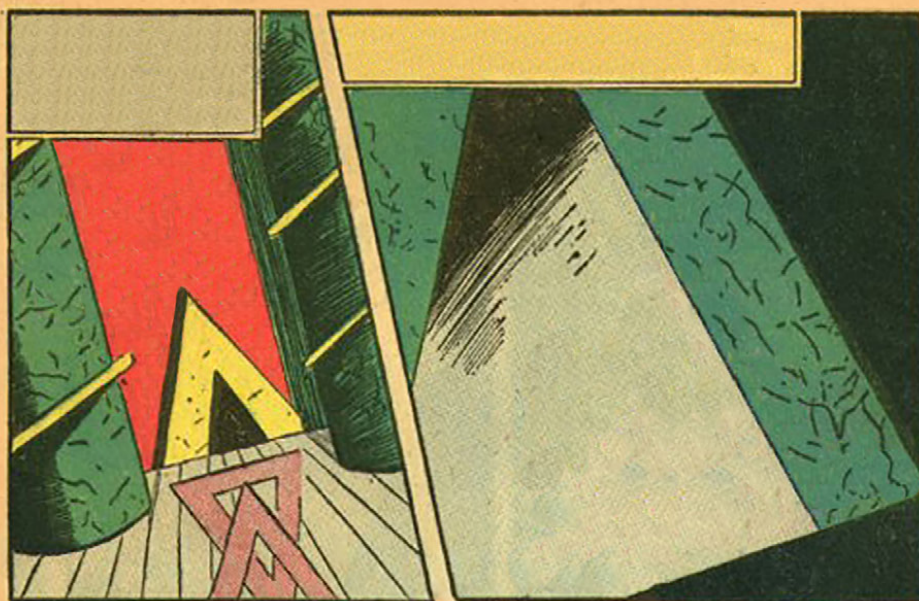
# Bodies in Space











## IV. The Performing Arts



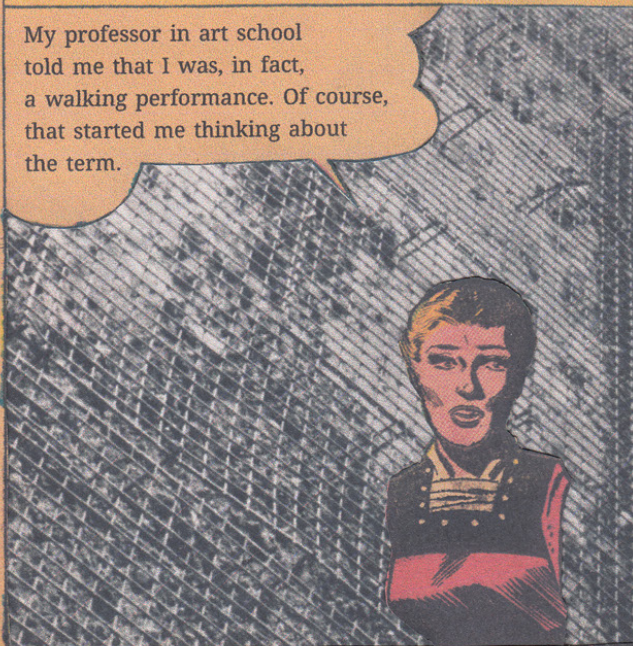
Venus

(Adventures into the Unknown # 50)



NYC, 1982, the *Venus de Milo* performance.  
An armless woman stands frozen on a tall pedestal.

My professor in art school told me that I was, in fact, a walking performance. Of course, that started me thinking about the term.

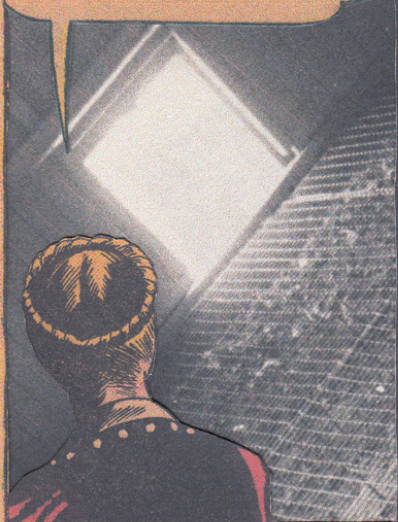


**SUDDENLY...**

What actually is a performance?



In some way, I am an exhibitionist, and I like it.



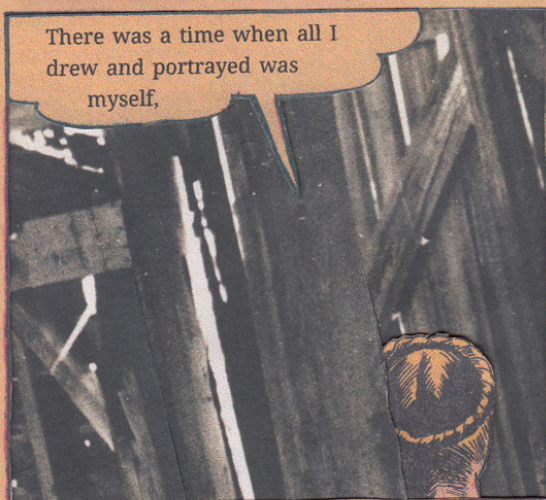
But I was not always an exhibitionist.



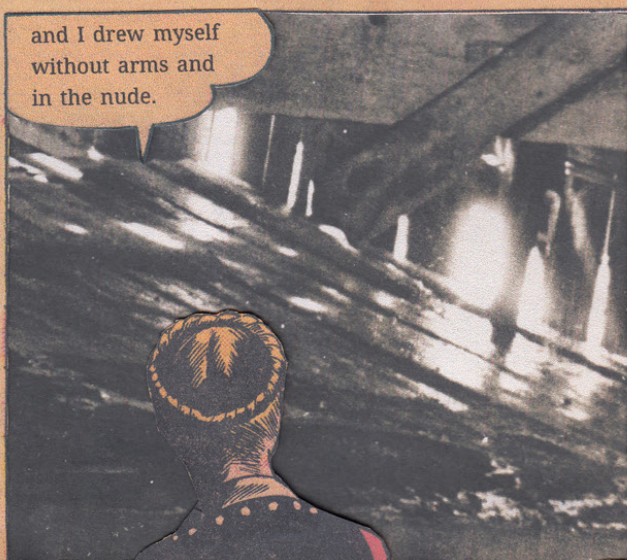
It came as a result of my handicap. People stare at me whether I dress conservatively or very flamboyantly.



There was a time when all I drew and portrayed was myself,

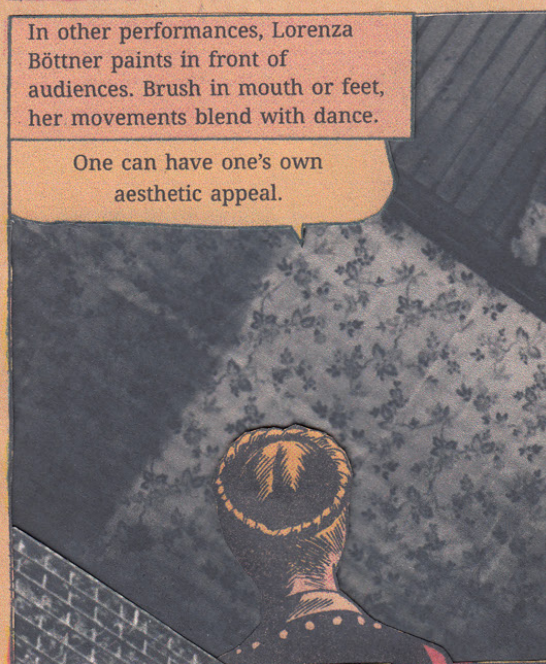


and I drew myself without arms and in the nude.



In other performances, Lorenza Böttner paints in front of audiences. Brush in mouth or feet, her movements blend with dance.

One can have one's own aesthetic appeal.



I became an artist by accident.

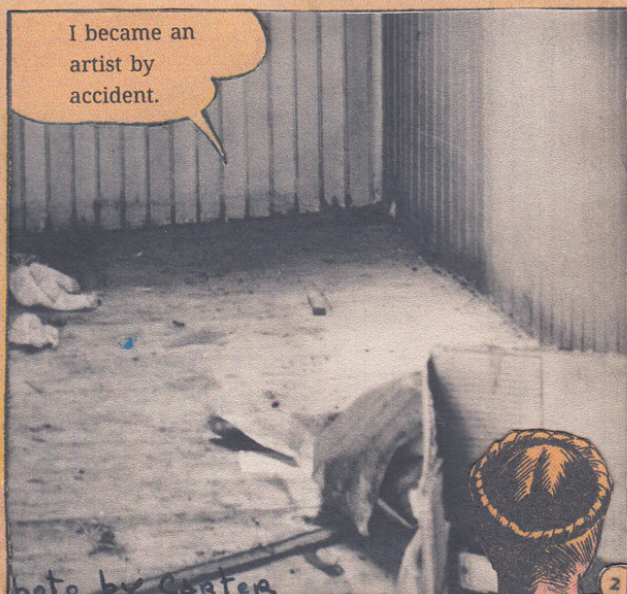
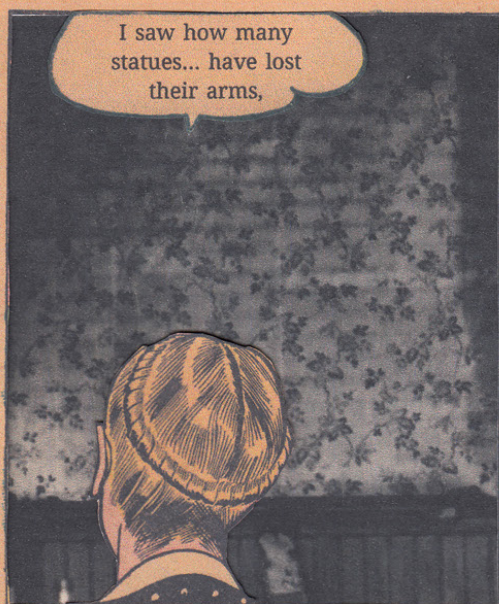


photo by Carter



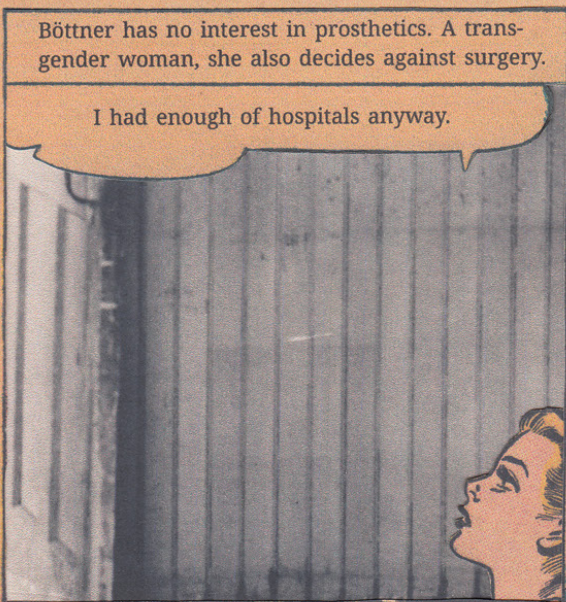
I saw how many statues... have lost their arms,



but they have lost nothing of their beauty.

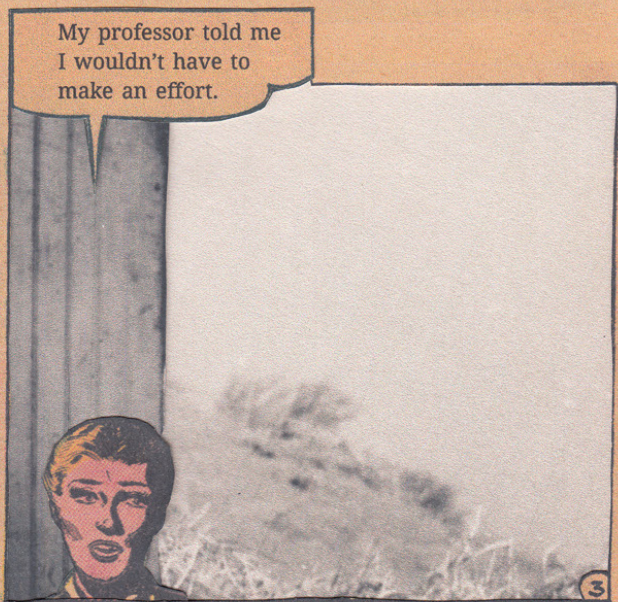


I am very observant. I enjoy observing.

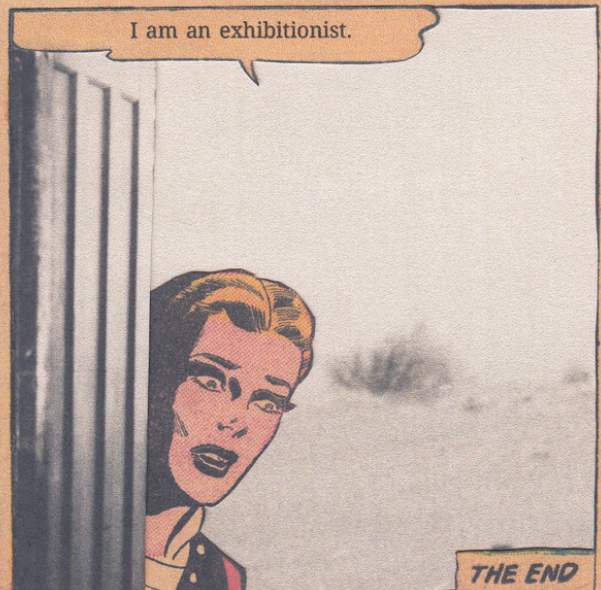
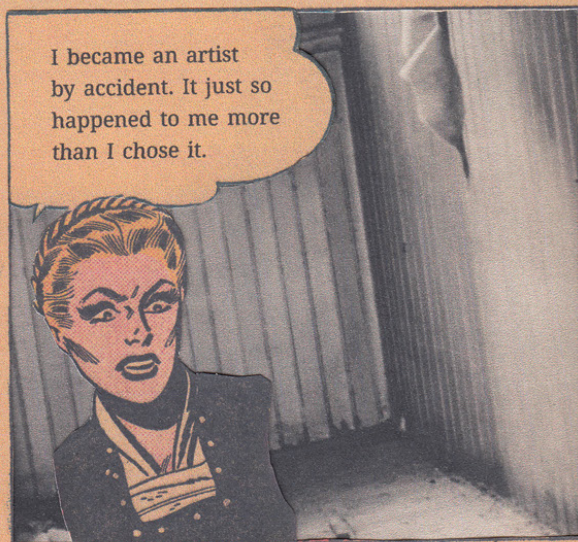


Böttner has no interest in prosthetics. A transgender woman, she also decides against surgery.

I had enough of hospitals anyway.



My professor told me I wouldn't have to make an effort.

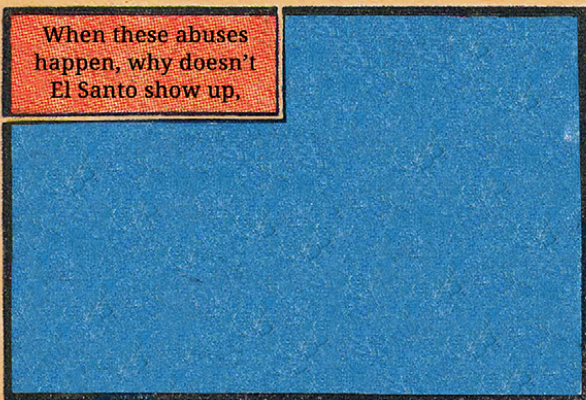


All dialogue from interviews with Lorenza Böttner  
conducted for the documentary short *Lorenza*,  
directed by Michael Stahlberg.

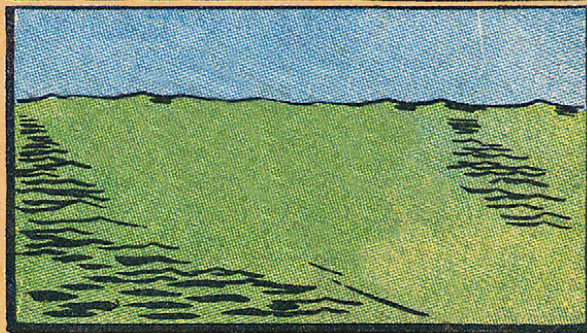
Superbarro Says  
(Science Comics # 3)

## SCIENCE COMICS

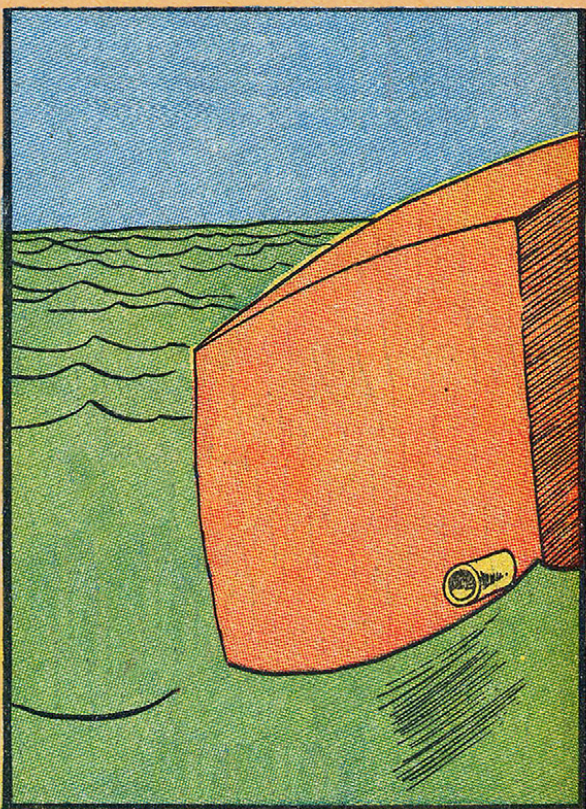
When these abuses  
happen, why doesn't  
El Santo show up.



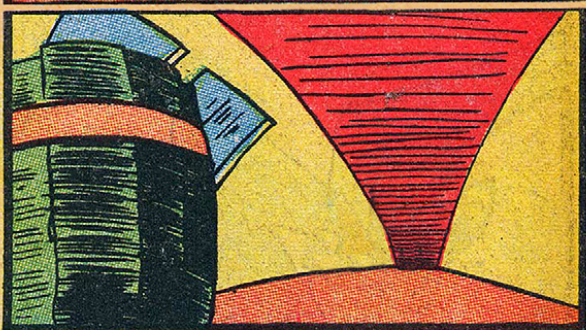
or some champion of justice show up.



I wish Superman... would come.



someone who could stop abuses like these.



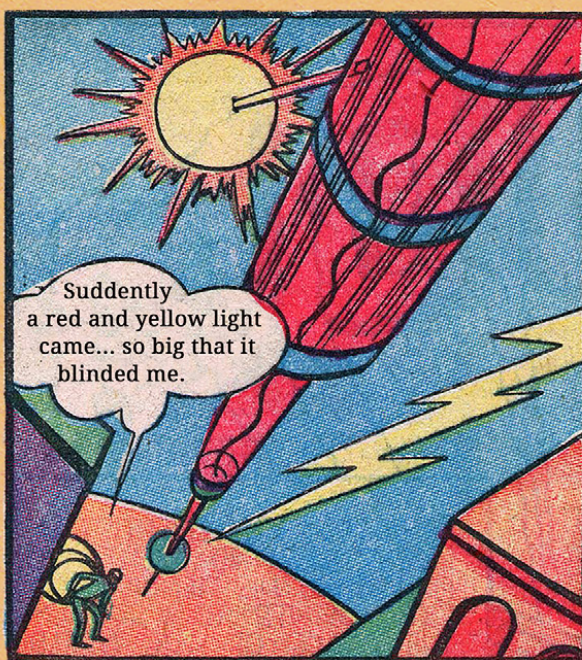
## SCIENCE COMICS

June, 1987.

A man wearing a red luchador mask, tights, and a t-shirt bearing the crudely stitched letters “SB” walks into a Mexico City courthouse.

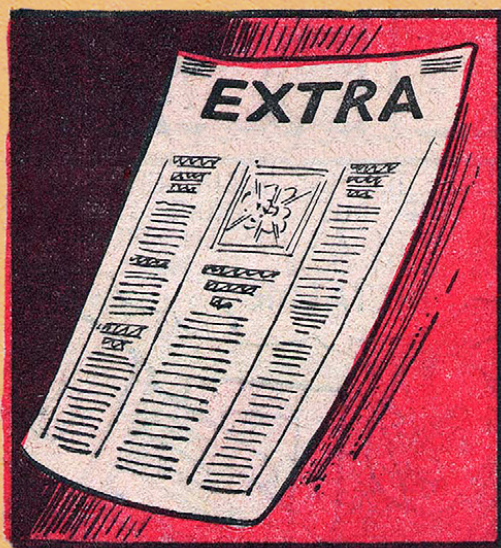
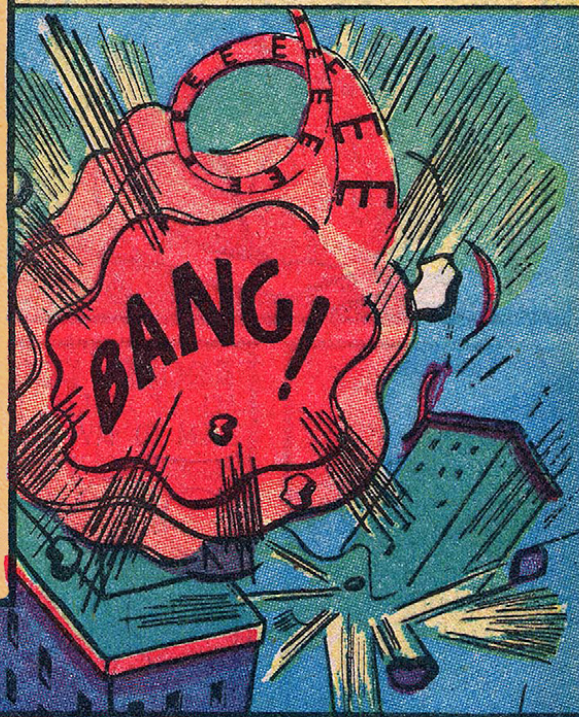
He presents the court with papers to prevent the eviction of an elderly woman from her downtown apartment.

## SCIENCE COMICS



I looked at the mirror, and there I was, as you  
see me now... A stereophonic voice told me,

"You are Superbarrio, defender  
of poor tenants, scourge of landlords!"



And I said, that's fine. Let's start.

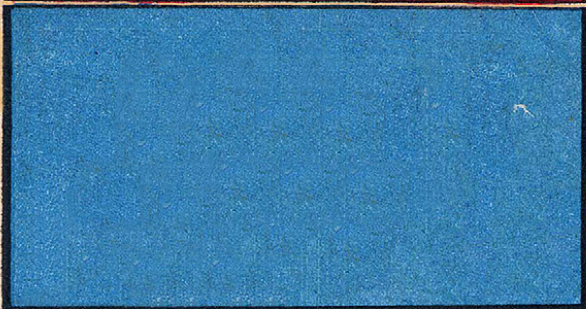
## SCIENCE COMICS

In 1985, the Mexico City earthquake had killed more than  
10,000 people, left at least 100,000 homeless,

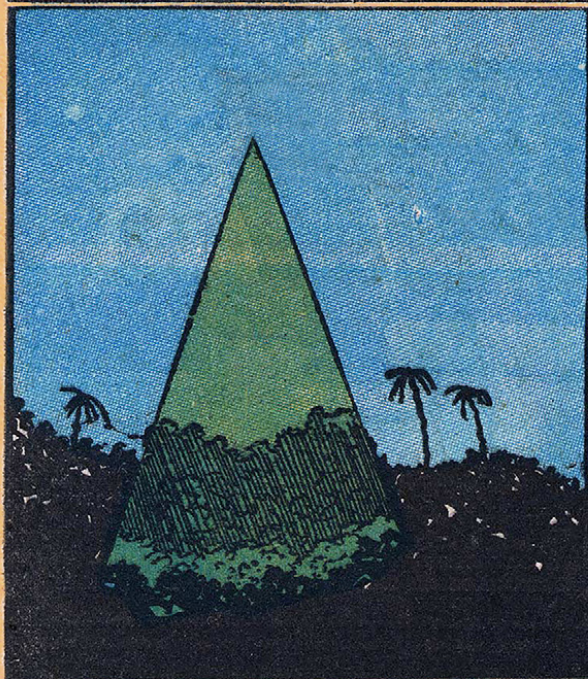
and made visible an endlessly repeating pattern:

## SCIENCE COMICS

The policy of the government...



from the center of the city to the periphery,  
and giving the properties at the center



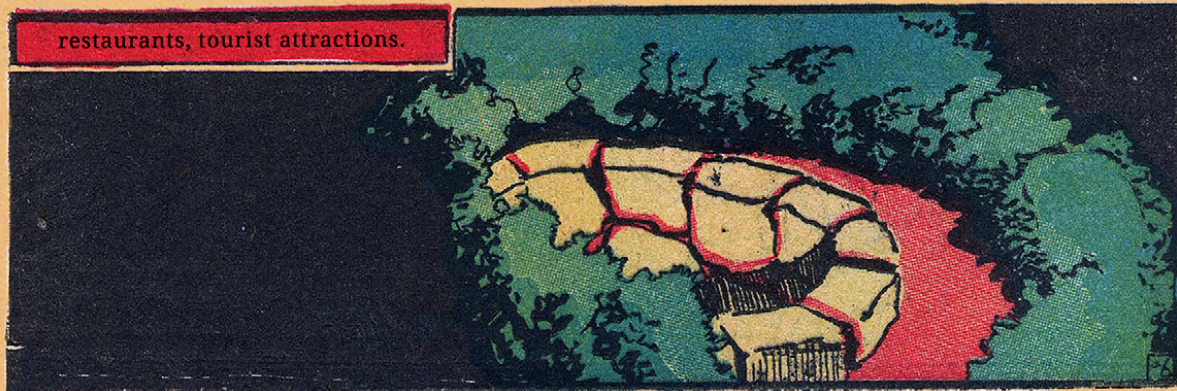
has been one of forcing people



to... large enterprises, warehouses,



restaurants, tourist attractions.

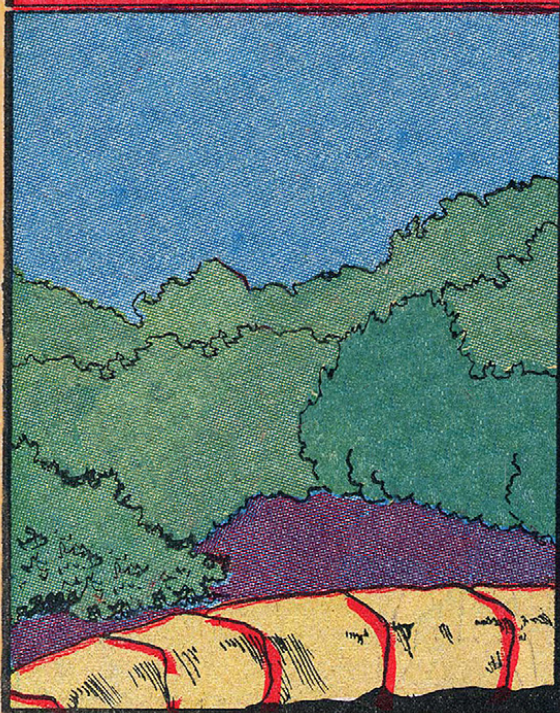


## SCIENCE COMICS

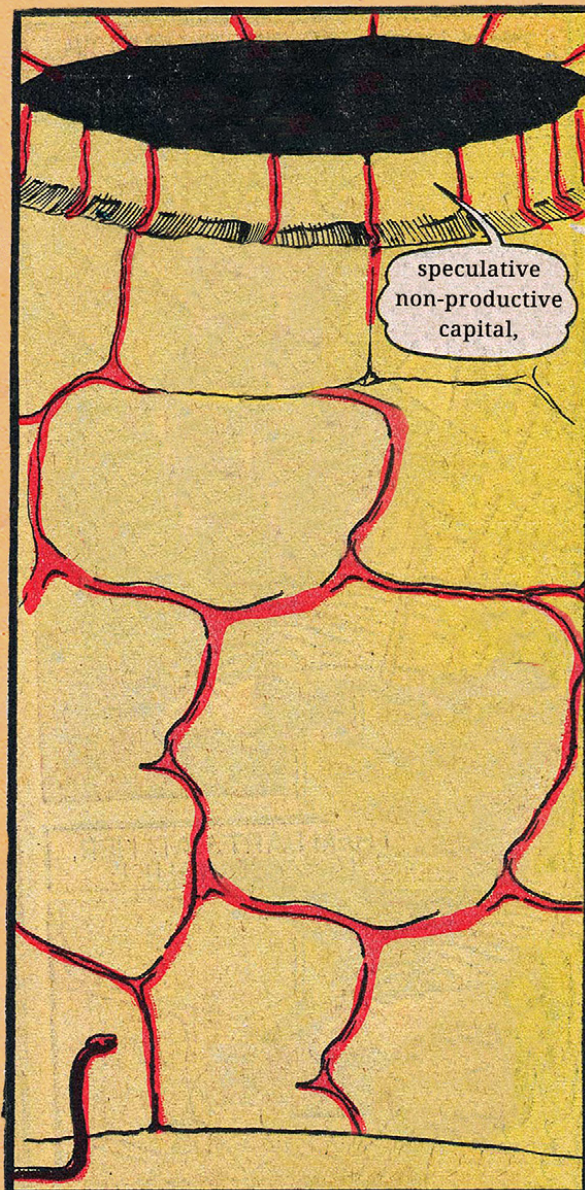
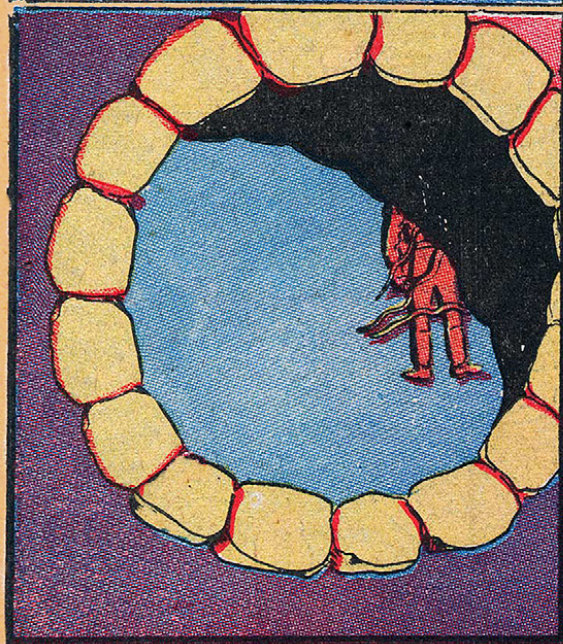
From 1987 to 1992, Superbarrio presents the court with enough legal objections to stop 1,500 evictions of low income tenants from downtown neighborhoods.

## SCIENCE COMICS

We are now living with the realities of



nuclear disasters, and a corruption of  
such magnitude that it exceeds national  
boundaries and international law.



speculative  
non-productive  
capital,

I come to offer some simple things.

## SCIENCE COMICS

Over time, Superbarrio's body changes. His height fluctuates by several inches. His belly juts outward and then retreats.

Beneath the costume, the body morphs from one man's to another's, but still, Superbarrio remains Superbarrio.

## SCIENCE COMICS

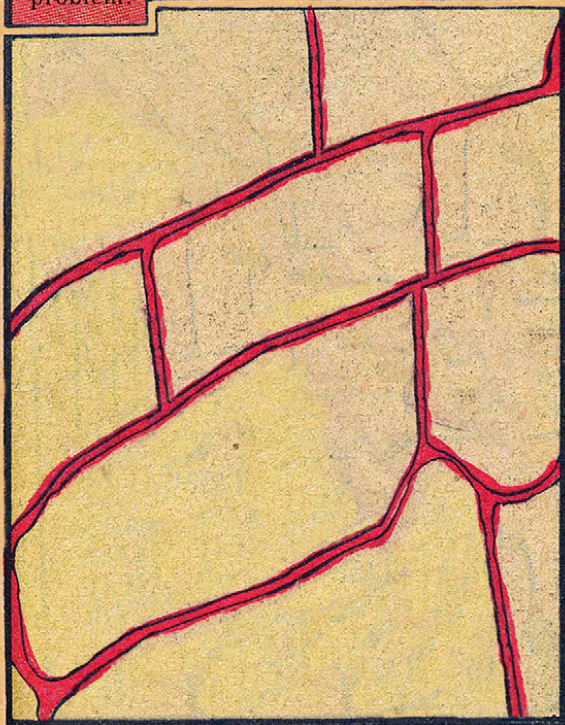
Even though I had never been a direct victim... I know that feeling of impotence, of fury.



Nights without sleep, going to work but thinking of other things.



How to stop it, how to put an end to this problem?



How to make justice, how to put these people in their place?



How to release this uneasiness?



## SCIENCE COMICS

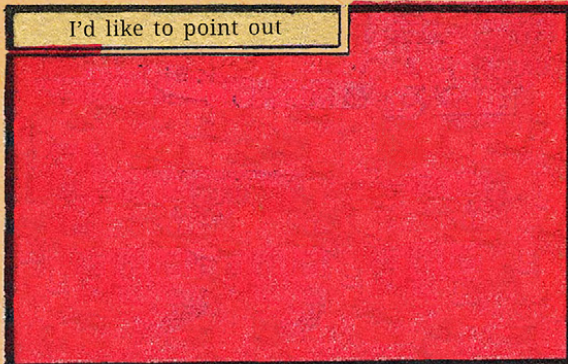
Throughout the nineties, Superbarrio leads marches, crosses the border to stage immigrants rights rallies in California, and eventually runs for president of the United States.

His platform is simple:

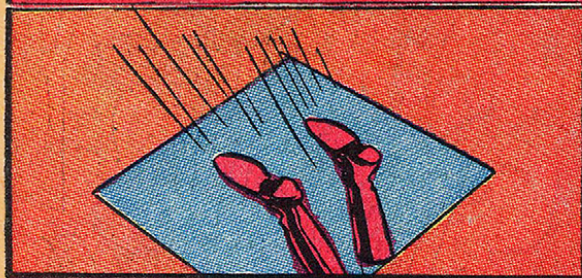
Due to the right of self-governance, all citizens of Latin American countries should be allowed to vote in U.S. elections.

## SCIENCE COMICS

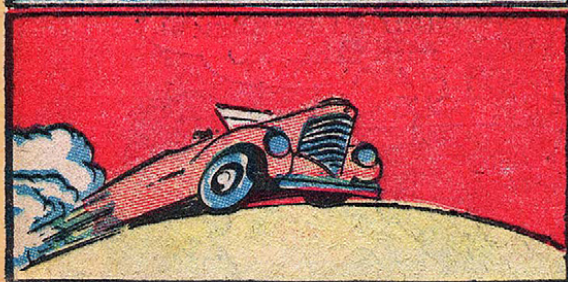
I'd like to point out



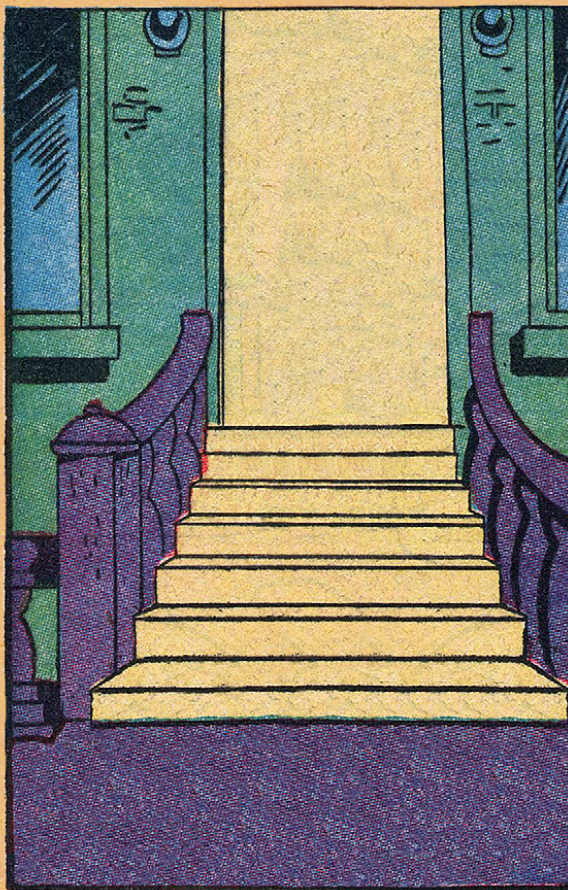
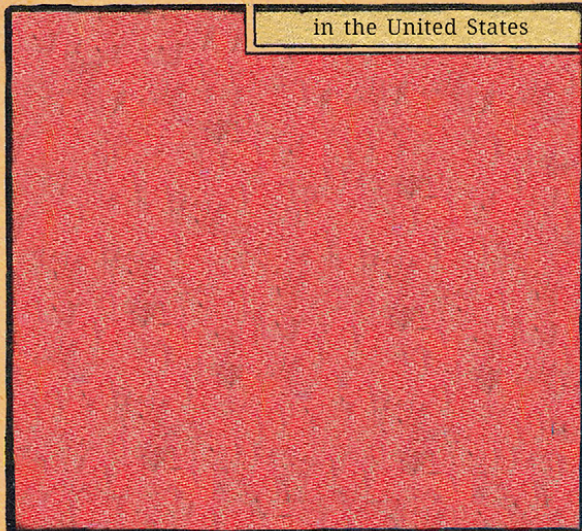
that in Mexico and the rest of Latin America,  
we learn that America is one continent.



Imagine my surprise when



in the United States



people tell us  
it's two.



## SCIENCE COMICS

All comics text from interviews with Superbarrio Gómez or a 1996 presidential campaign speech delivered at Dartmouth College.



# Riddle of the Runaway Earth

(Space Mystery # 38)

# SPACE MYSTERY

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART.  
Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to  
be grasped by all people, not only critics, dilettantes and  
professionals.

FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries  
into united front and action.

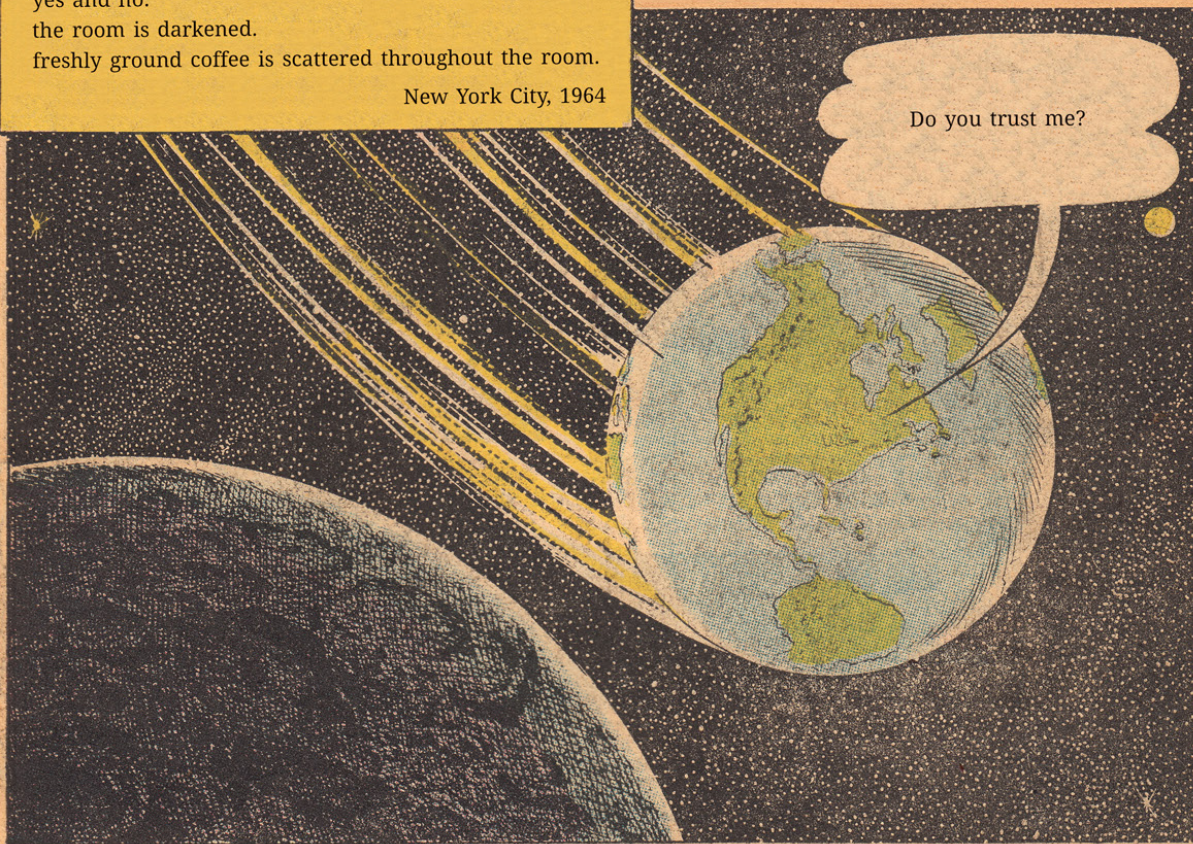
-FLUXUS MANIFESTO, George Maciunas

# SPACE MYSTERY

## FIRST SYMPHONY

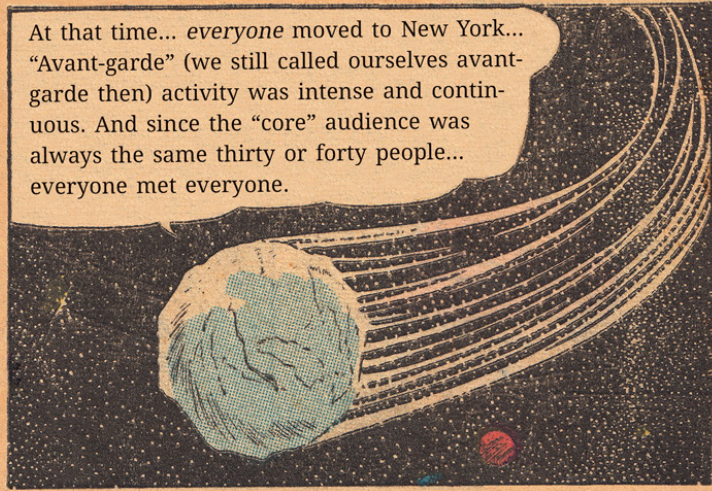
One at a time, members of the audience are questioned,  
"DO YOU TRUST ME?" and are divided left and right,  
yes and no.  
the room is darkened.  
freshly ground coffee is scattered throughout the room.

New York City, 1964

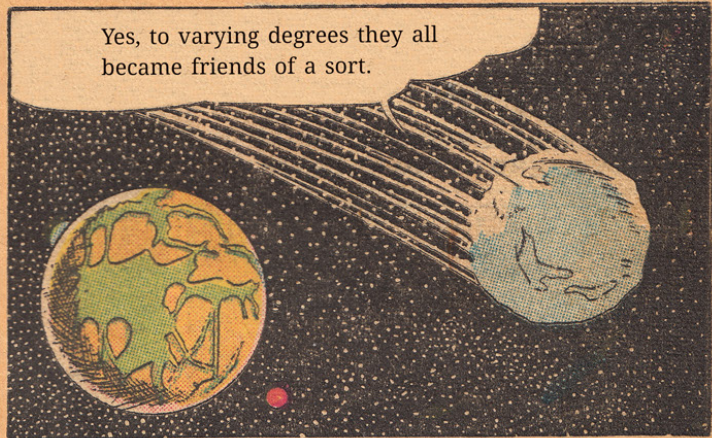


## SPACE MYSTERY

At that time... *everyone* moved to New York... "Avant-garde" (we still called ourselves avant-garde then) activity was intense and continuous. And since the "core" audience was always the same thirty or forty people... everyone met everyone.

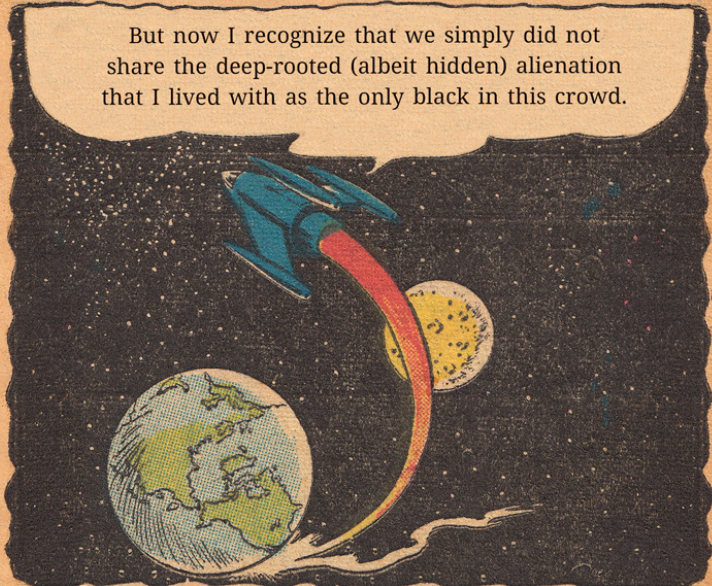


Yes, to varying degrees they all became friends of a sort.



In 1962, Benjamin Patterson cofounds the arts movement that comes to be known as "Fluxus."

But now I recognize that we simply did not share the deep-rooted (albeit hidden) alienation that I lived with as the only black in this crowd.



# SPACE MYSTERY

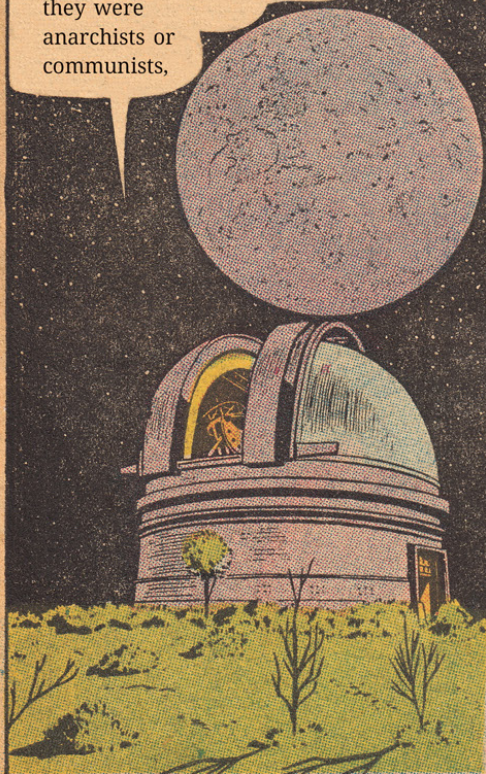
I think Fluxus may have been a great mistake.



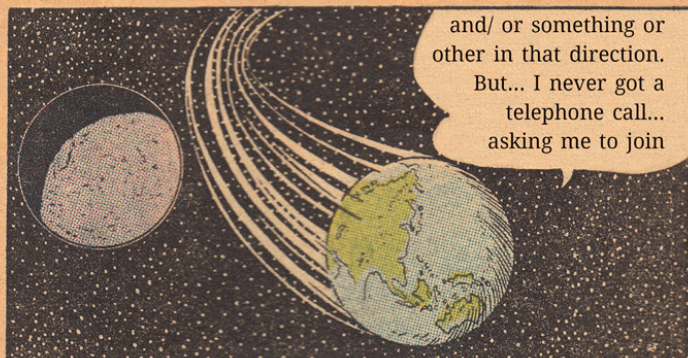
## SPACE MYSTERY

When Benjamin Patterson asks  
"DO YOU TRUST ME?" his  
audience is the white avant-garde.

[M]any of the Fluxus artists...  
were willing to "confess" to  
harmless friends that  
they were  
anarchists or  
communists,



and/ or something or  
other in that direction.  
But... I never got a  
telephone call...  
asking me to join



next Saturday's "March  
on Washington"—  
for any purpose.

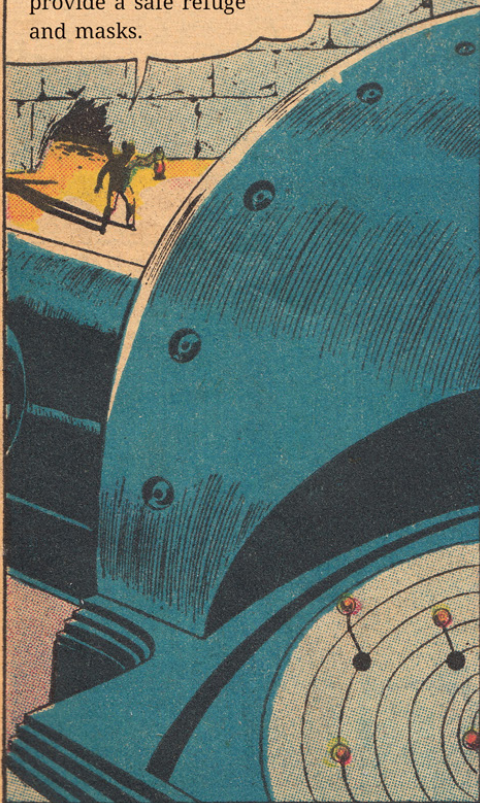
Fluxus  
was never  
really  
political.



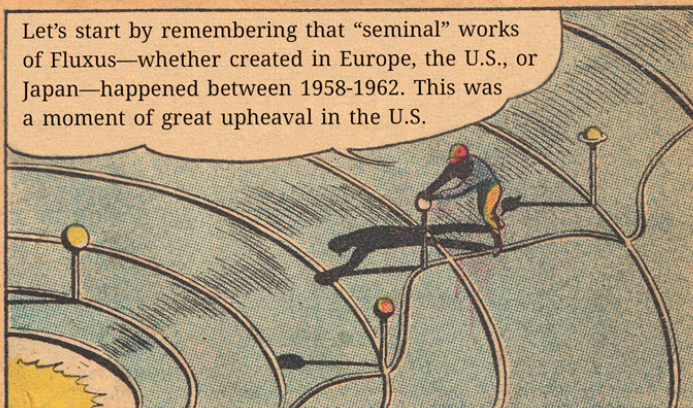
# SPACE MYSTERY

In 1965, at thirty-years-old,  
Benjamin Patterson retires from art.

All it really did with its reputation  
for radical aesthetics was to  
provide a safe refuge  
and masks.

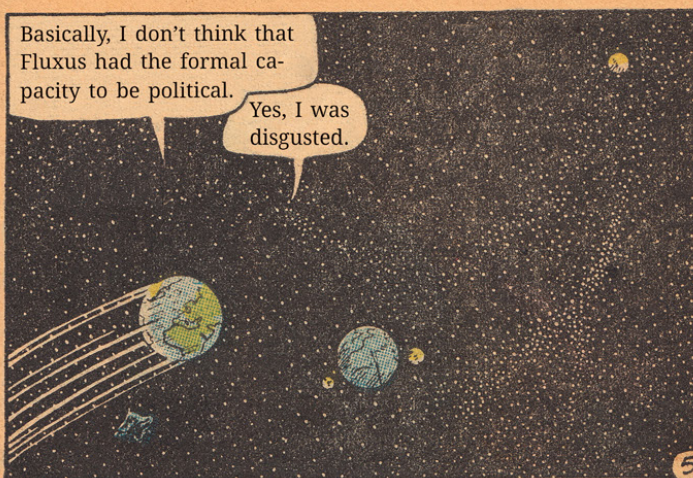


Let's start by remembering that "seminal" works  
of Fluxus—whether created in Europe, the U.S., or  
Japan—happened between 1958-1962. This was  
a moment of great upheaval in the U.S.



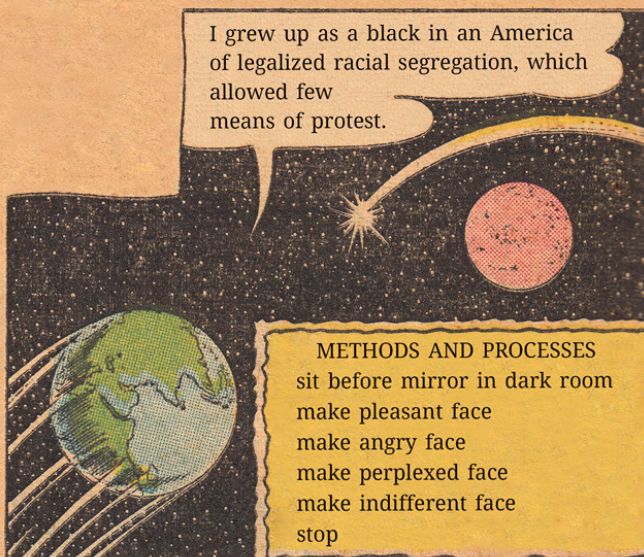
Basically, I don't think that  
Fluxus had the formal ca-  
pacity to be political.

Yes, I was  
disgusted.

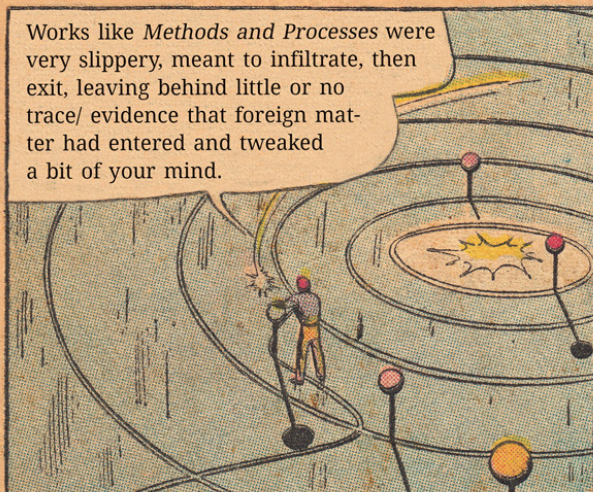


# SPACE MYSTERY

I grew up as a black in an America of legalized racial segregation, which allowed few means of protest.

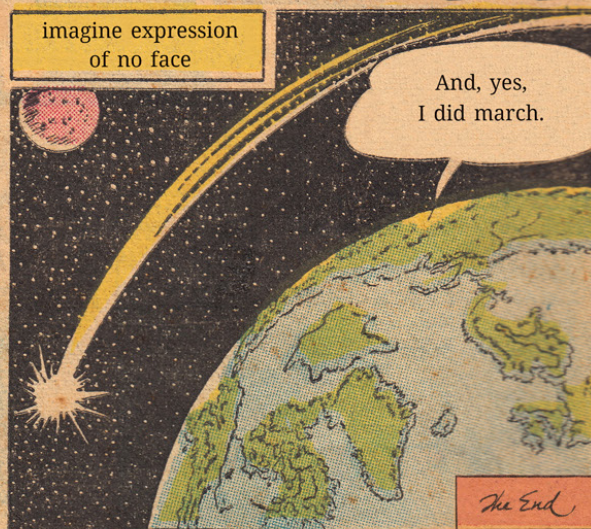


Works like *Methods and Processes* were very slippery, meant to infiltrate, then exit, leaving behind little or no trace/ evidence that foreign matter had entered and tweaked a bit of your mind.



imagine expression of no face

And, yes, I did march.



## SPACE MYSTERY

All dialogue from "I'm Glad You Asked Me That Question," an interview Benjamin Patterson conducted with himself between 1990-1991 for the German arts magazine *Kunstforum*.

Also quoted are the complete event score for *First Symphony* and a section of *Methods and Processes*, Patterson's collection of action poems.



Fly By Night  
(Black Magic # 16)

## BLACK MAGIC

# FLY BY NIGHT!



Los Angeles, 1974. Noah Purifoy stops making art to become a social worker.

The reality is that since the riots nothing has been restored, nothing has been improved,

socially or economically

# BLACK MAGIC

Art of itself is of little or no value if... it does not effect a change.

A change in the behavior of human beings.

23 M-2

The students at the Towers participated in the riot.

Most everyone did.

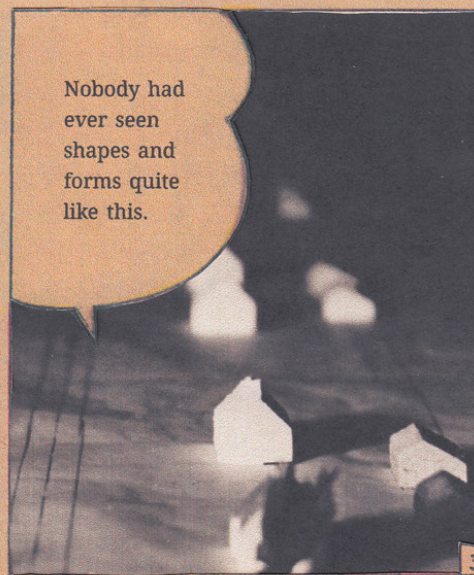
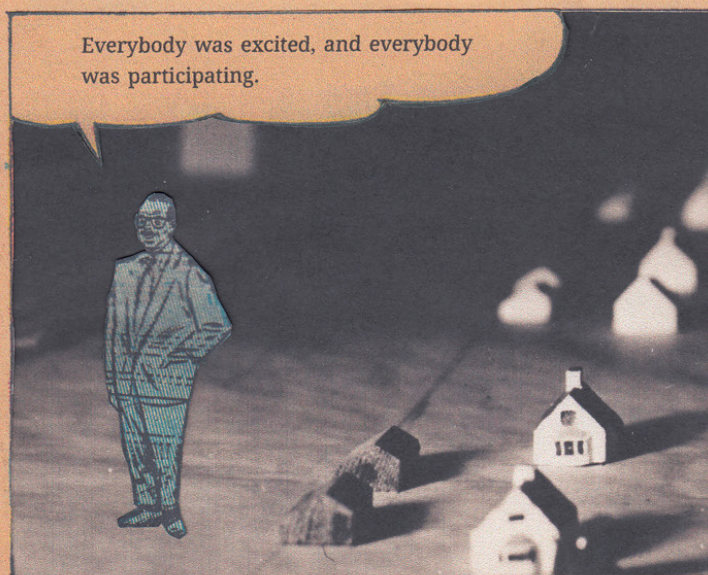
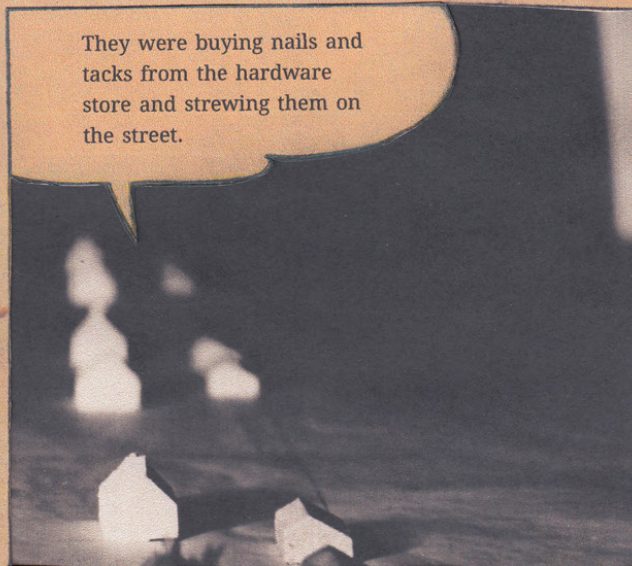
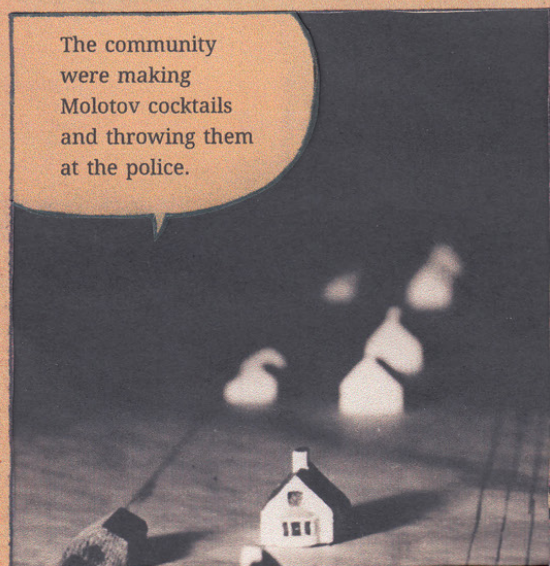
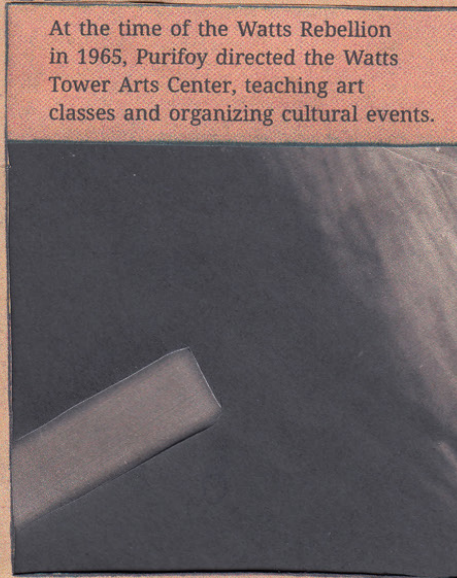
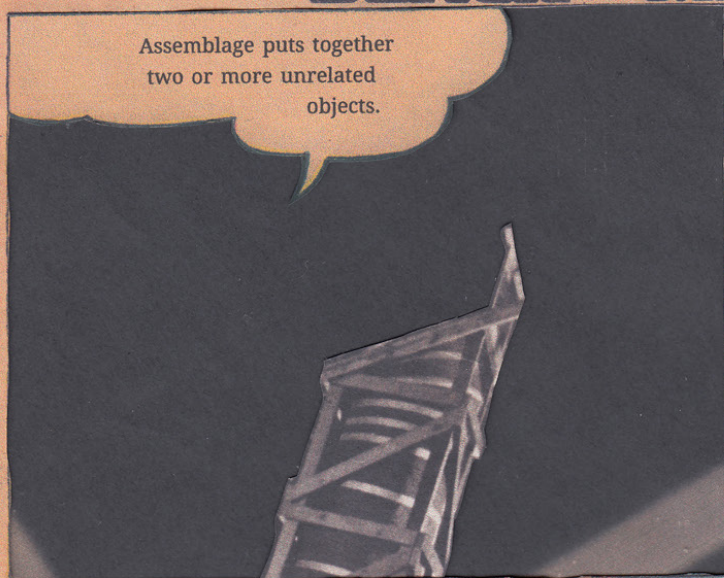
by Mydans.

They would loot and stash their loot in and around the art center. We permitted that.

I had a strong affinity for blacks, and I wanted to experience us at the level where we lived at.



# BLACK MAGIC



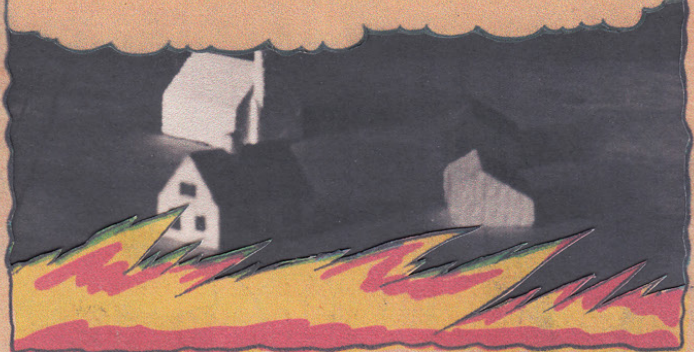
# BLACK MAGIC

[M]elted neon signs, medicine bottles embedded in the molten remains of plastic raincoats, pieces of smashed automobiles.



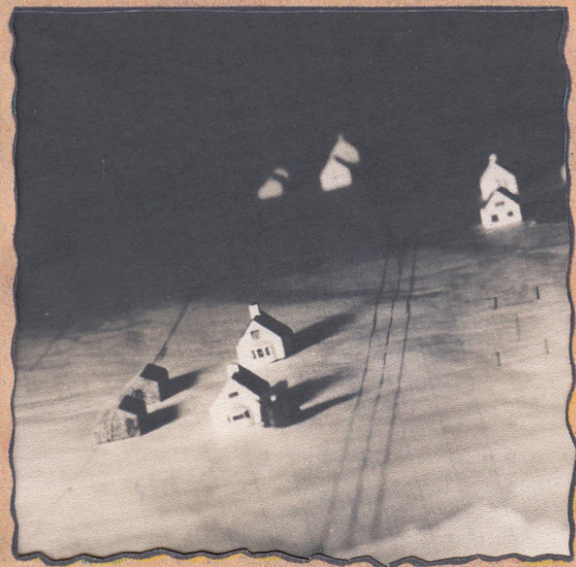
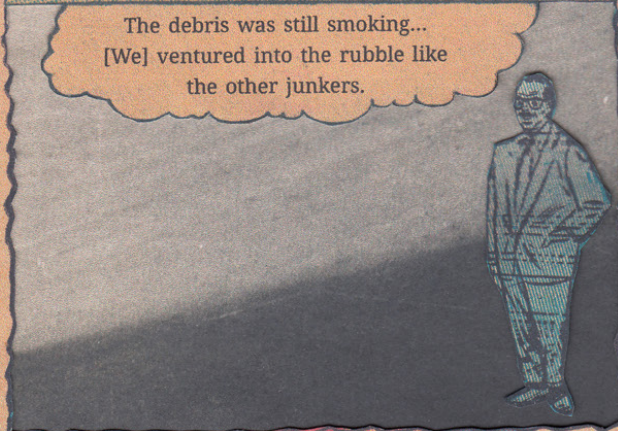
With Judson Powell, a musician who also taught at the center, he headed into the streets to collect.

We uncovered them, and we thought they were little jewels.

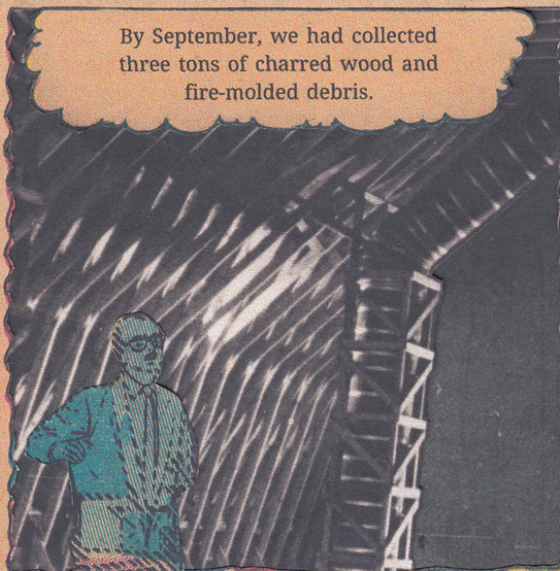


The pair returned there again and again.

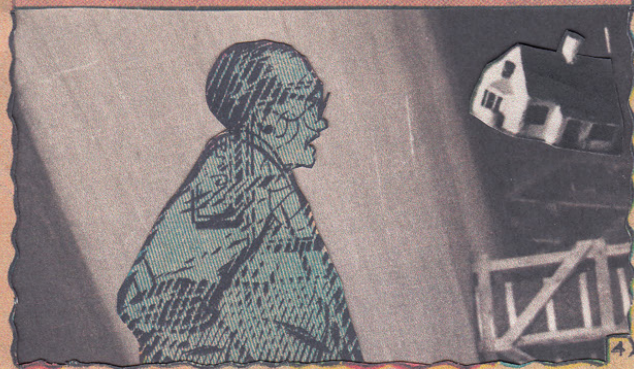
The debris was still smoking...  
[We] ventured into the rubble like the other junkers.



By September, we had collected three tons of charred wood and fire-molded debris.



Purifoy and Powell invited other artists to work with them and create an exhibit from these materials.



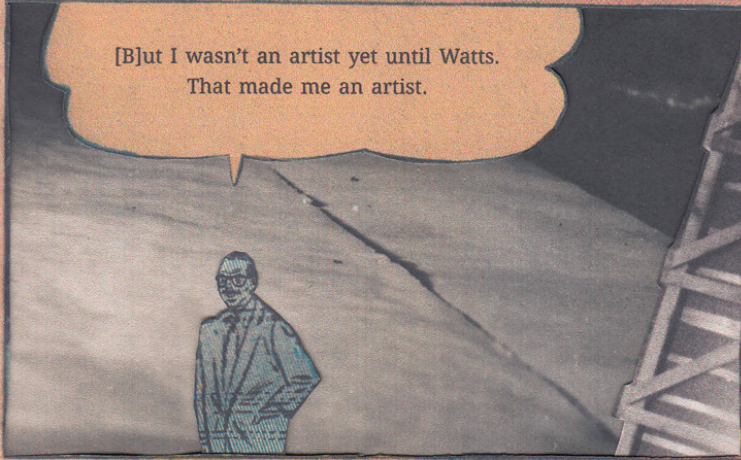
# BLACK MAGIC

I'd graduated from art school,  
and I had ten years of  
of experience vaguely  
with artists.



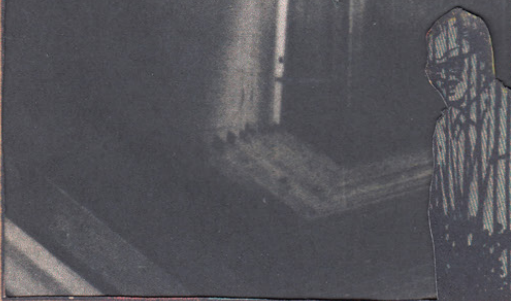
The resulting exhibit opened in spring of 1966.  
66 *Signs of Neon* traveled for three years, showing  
throughout California and in Washington, D.C.

[B]ut I wasn't an artist yet until Watts.  
That made me an artist.



Noah Purifoy thought he'd discovered  
a future.

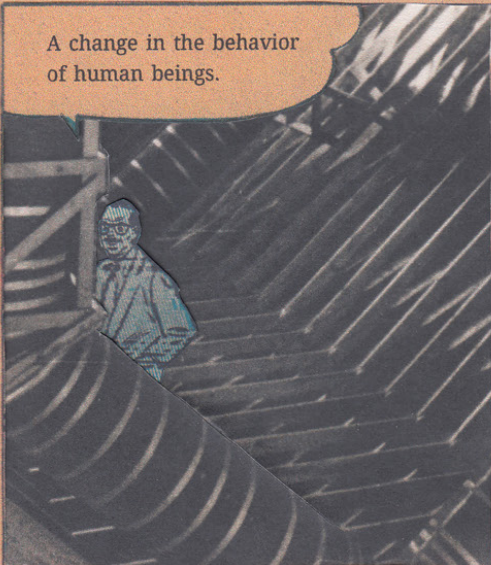
Two or more seemingly  
unrelated objects assembled  
constitutes the possibility of  
communication.



Art can become a new thing  
when... used as a symbol through  
which someone becomes better.



A change in the behavior  
of human beings.



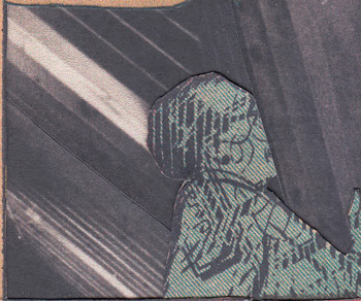
These fragmentations only  
mean that I am fragmented.



# BLACK MAGIC

By 1974, this future has not come,

[N]othing has been restored, nothing has improved, socially or economically.



and Purifoy begins work at the Central City Community Health Facility of Los Angeles.

I have less now than I ever did. I am not angry about anything. I promised everyone that I would resolve my anger, and I did.

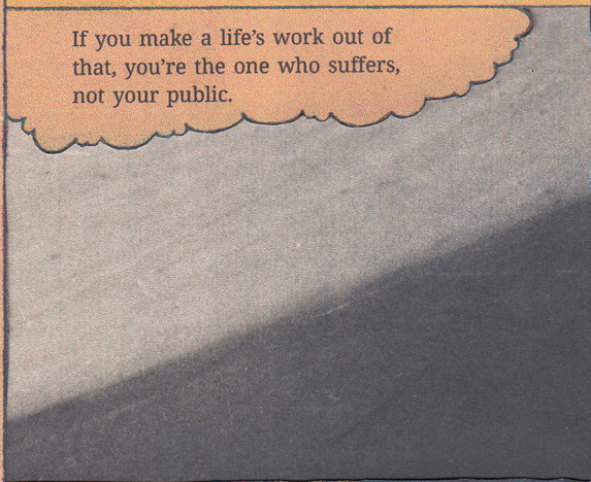


Therefore, I have no reason to do protest art.

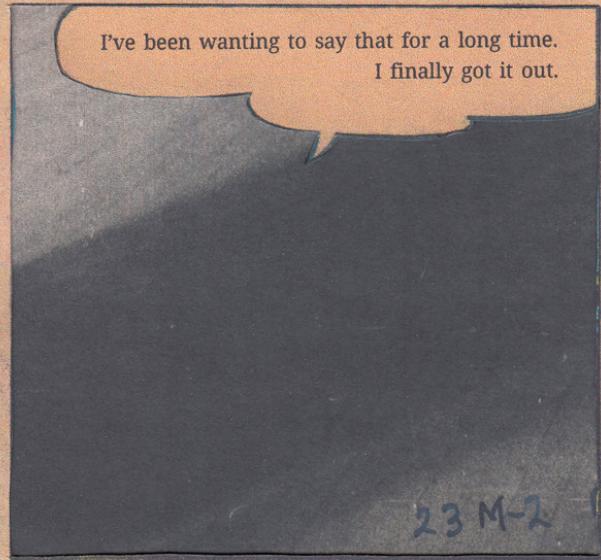


He eventually returns to art-making in the nineties but now refutes any suggestion of social content.

If you make a life's work out of that, you're the one who suffers, not your public.



I've been wanting to say that for a long time. I finally got it out.



In the Southern California desert, he assembles a sprawling sculpture garden until his death.

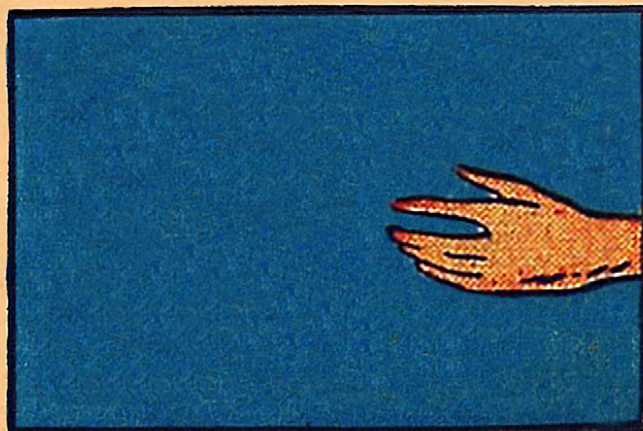
There's nothing left but art.

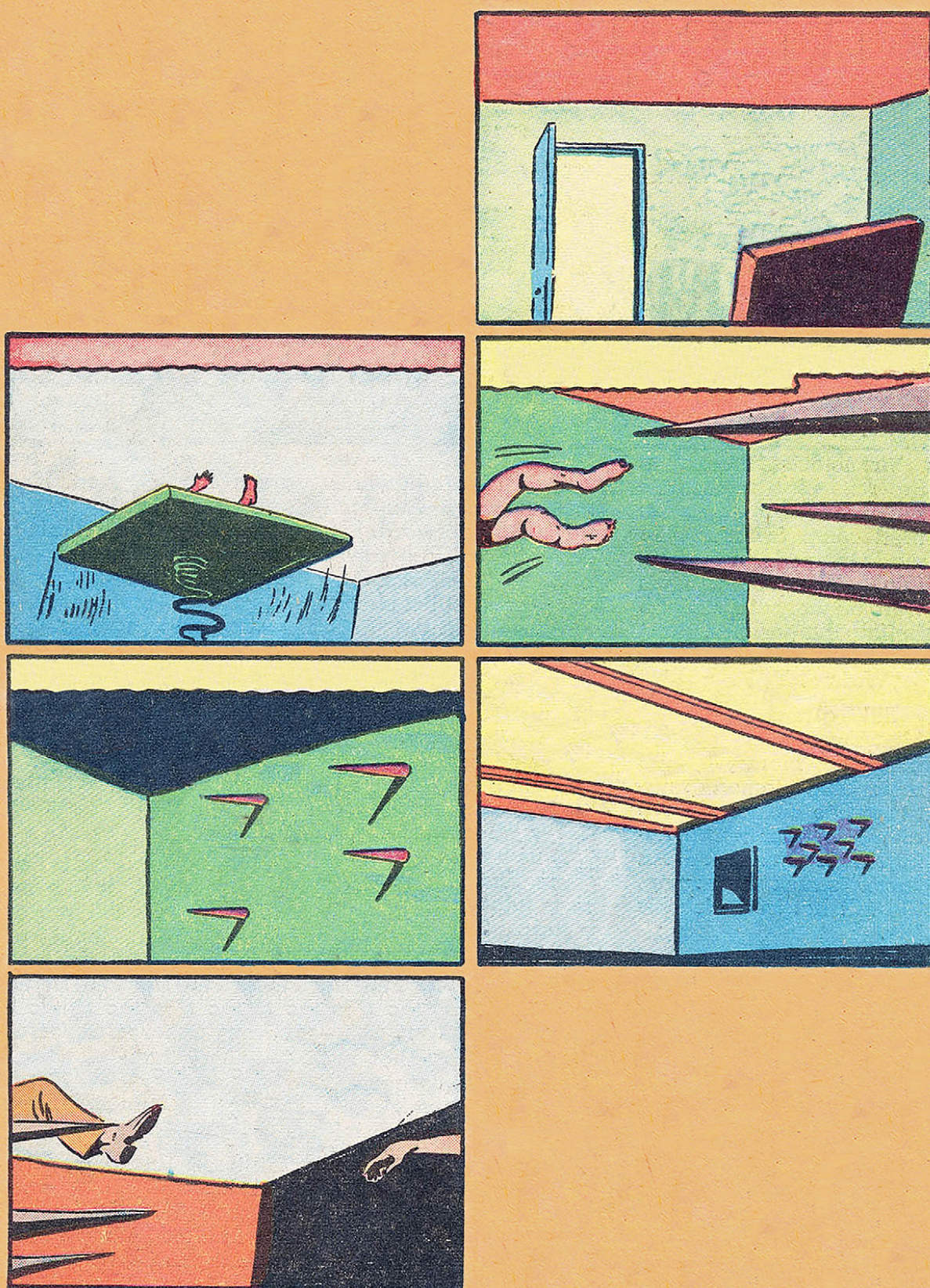


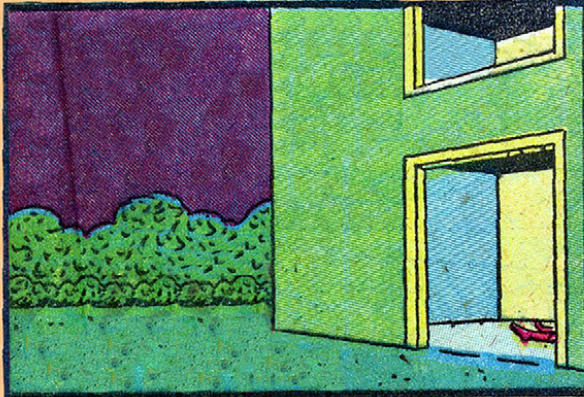
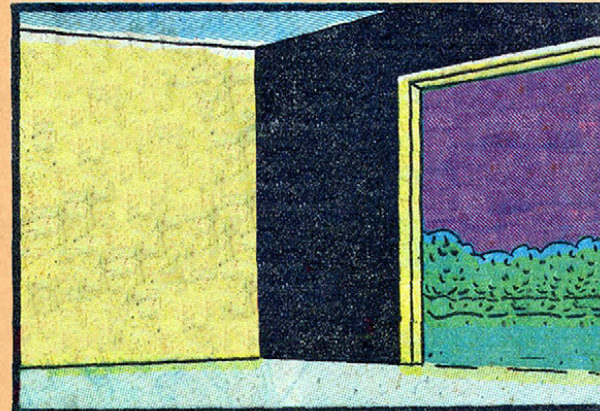
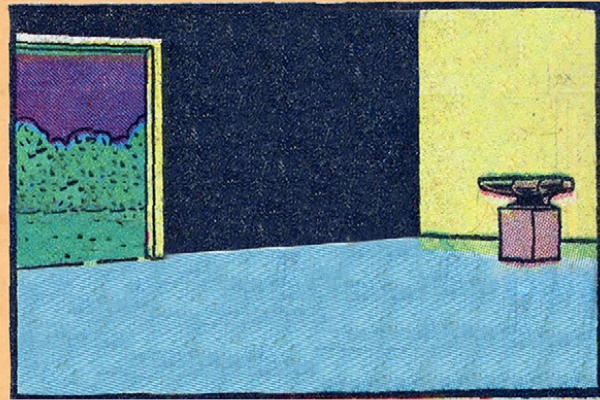
# ***BLACK MAGIC***

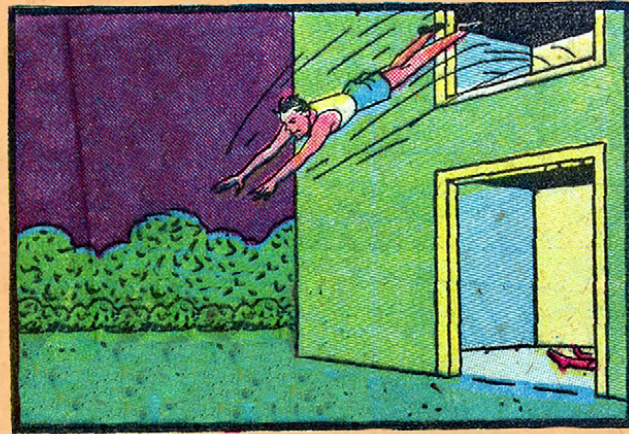
All dialogue from interviews with Noah Purifoy, a letter, his self-published newsletter, or the Purifoy poem "A Book Flown."

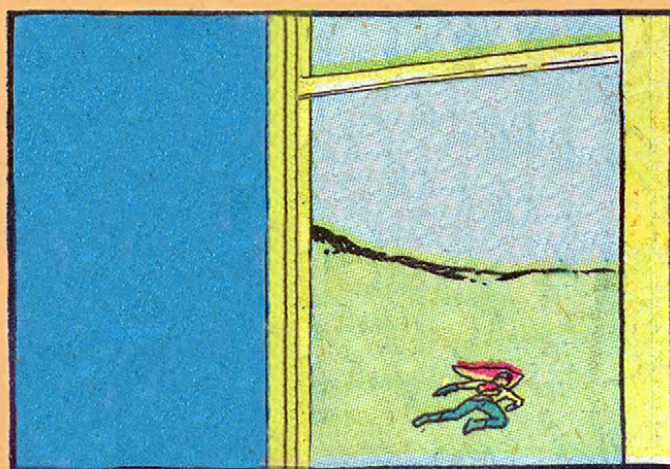
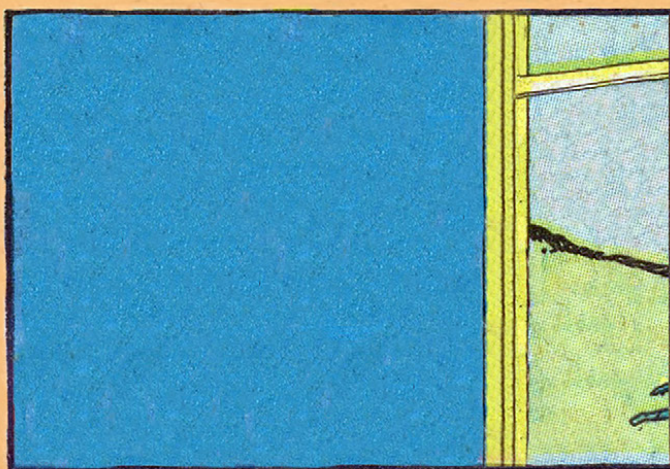
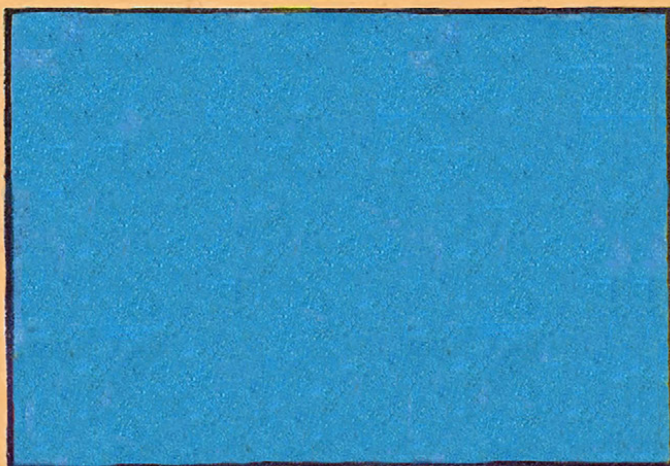
# Bodies in Space











*The End*



## Success Biographies: An Afternote

Visit the children's section of bookstores and libraries, and you'll find shelf after shelf of celebratory biographies. Lushly illustrated picture books and graphic novels offer stories of figures such as Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Maya Lin, Charles Schultz, and DJ Kool Herc. The popular *Good Night Stories of Rebel Girls* series profiles women pirates, pharaohs, artists, and scientists. Book titles include phrases such as "Courageous World Changers," "Women and Girls Who Shook Up the World," and "True Tales of Courageous Cats."

These biographies all follow the same template. They remain relentlessly upbeat as they glide smoothly over potential complications (Coco Chanel becoming a Nazi agent, the first astronaut cat promptly dissected after returning to earth) to offer an unvarying message of triumph.

YOU can succeed too, they challenge children.

The celebration of individual achievement against the odds, discounting collective action and leaving systems of oppression conveniently unexamined... Even when well intentioned, these books indoctrinate children with a distinctly neoliberal vision of "success."

On one level, *Failure Biographies* is my response to these books. I sought to highlight careers and artistic practices derailed by systemic oppression, but I also wanted to demonstrate how failure can function *as* practice. The "unregulated territories of failure," Jack Halberstam stresses in *The Queer Art of Failure*, can offer "other modes of political engagement than those conjured by the liberal imagination."

Think about Marta Minujín, and the fact that exhibits of her work often include her unsuccessful correspondence with McDonald's displayed on gallery walls.

Think about Lorenza Böttner and how she takes her professor's failure of imagination—his offensive suggestion that every move she makes in public will be viewed as spectacle—and transforms it into stunning, audience-challenging performance.

Think about Noah Purifoy's attempts to shape the physical remains of an uprising into sculpture in order to spread that uprising to the rest of the world.

Think about the *Tucumán arde* group's stated goal to "transform every piece of reality into an artistic work shown to the conscience of the world." "Success" exists in a wholly different universe from *Tucumán arde*, which uses failure to begin

mapping an alternate, better reality.

(Superbarrio Gómez might live in that alternate reality; it is, at least, where he sleeps when not fighting injustice in our own disastrous reality.)

For a brief moment, I planned *Failure Biographies* as a children's book, to be slotted on shelves next to the endless volumes of "Courageous World Changers."

But then, of course, I failed.

## True and Irrevocable Failure: A Conversation with Johnny Damm

*Greetings comrade! Thank you for talking to us about your process today!  
Can you introduce yourself, in a way that you would choose?*

Greetings! I'm Johnny. I make comics using a scanner, an x-acto knife, and the library.

*Why are you a "artist"/ "writer"/ "poet"?*

Making art is one of many ways to stay engaged in larger communities—no better or worse than many other occupations. My particular practice gives me a rational to continue researching and, I think, to continue grappling with difficult ideas. I value that.

*Do you feel comfortable calling yourself a artist/writer/poet? What other titles or affiliations do you prefer/feel are more accurate?*

I consider myself a minor member of a number of artistic communities. In different contexts, I receive different labels (artist, writer, cartoonist, poet). I'm fine with all of them.

*What's an "artist" (or "writer" or "poet") anyway? What do you see as your cultural and social role (in the literary / artistic / creative community and beyond)?*

There's no single definition that fits perfectly for any occupation, I think.

As for myself... When interviewed by the Operating System for my earlier book, *The Science of Things Familiar*, I described my work as an effort to explore "the house we all live in." I think that still holds up. In my work, I try to show people areas of the house they might not have noticed on their own.

*Talk about the process or instinct to move these comics as independent entities into a body of work. How and why did this happen? Have you had this intention for a while? What encouraged and/or confounded this book in coming together? Was it a struggle?*

Rarely do my comics start as independent entities. I wish they did more often, actually. Instead, I always start with at least the vague idea of a project. In this case, my project was "failure." I wanted to make short pieces on artists that relate in some way to failure.

Fairly quickly, I isolated three types of failure I sought to explore: systemic failure (i.e. capitalism destroying the careers of women filmmakers), productive failure (i.e. Marta Minujín and Pope L.'s failed projects becoming the materials of their artworks), and political failure (i.e. the *Tucumán arde* group and Noah Purifoy's failed attempts to create tangible political change with their art). Not every piece fits neatly into one of these categories, but I think these three types of failure echo through the book.

*What formal structures or other constrictive practices do you use in the creation of your work?*

I make comics out of other comics—in this case, a handful of horror and science fiction comics from the late forties and early fifties. My other primary source material came from Depression-era WPA photography. I constructed the comics using a blend of digital tools and physical collage.

Most typically, my process starts something like this: I scan a comic page into the computer and then print it out. The original comics were cheaply printed to begin with and then badly (at least my copies) damaged by age and neglect. The printer I use is itself a low-end, discontinued model, stocked with off-brand ink ordered in bulk off eBay. As you can imagine, this results in a poor-quality reproduction of the original comic page. I'm interested in the flaws added in the printing process (both by the original printing and then by my own) and often force my printer to keep printing even after it has begun to run out of ink.

My next step is to take an x-acto knife to the page. I slice out each panel and then begin the process of refilling them.

For *Failure Biographies*, my other constraint was that every speech bubble had to use the artists' own words. I treated the text as another element of collage.

*Have certain teachers or instructive environments, or readings/writings/work of other creative people informed the way you work/write?*

I'm interested in repressed histories, narratives of history that run counter to the dominant construction. So, foundational works include Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous People's History of The United States*, and others. I recently read Kelly Lytle Hernández's *City of Inmates*, and it's perfect: everything I want from a history text. Indigenous activist Gord Hill makes explicitly educational comics; his *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* and *The Antifa Comic Book* use comics as counter-history brilliantly.

Related to form, the collage-comics of Jess provide great inspiration. Siglio Press published *Jess: O! Tricky Cad and Other Jessoterica* at a time in which I was looking for permission to try new things in my work. Jess gave me that permission. And you can't talk collage-comics without mentioning Jack Kirby, who incorporated collage in *The Fantastic Four* beginning in 1964. Perhaps my all-time favorite cartoonist, Julie Doucet, has also done some strong collage work.

Outside of economics, it's a great time for indie comics, and I keep a particular eye on artists using pastiche. R. Sikoryak's pastiche "illustrations" of un- or underread texts—Apple's user agreement, the U.S. Constitution—are technical and conceptual marvels. There's a ridiculous wealth of talented comics artists working (mainly in the margins of the industry) right now.

Finally, I should mention the critical texts I draw from the most in *Failure Biographies*: Luis Camnitzer's *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation*, Kellie Jones's *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, and Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta's amazing catalog for *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*. In particular, my characterization of Tucumán arde and the framing of Superbarrio as a performance artist come directly from Camnitzer. I also used Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Jose Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* to help develop the conceptual framework for the project.

*Speaking of monikers, what does your title represent? How was it generated? Talk about the way you titled the book, and how your process of naming (individual pieces, sections, etc) influences you and/or colors your work specifically.*

I like to think of this book as part pulp comic and part educational textbook. The section titles reference this. As much as possible, I title my individual pieces after the original comics stories.

*What would be the best possible outcome for this book? What might it do in the world, and how will its presence as an object facilitate your creative role in your community and beyond? What are your hopes for this book, and for your practice?*

I'd like the book to circulate widely. Adopt it for your classroom or library!

*What does it mean to make books in this time, and what are your thoughts around shifting into digital books/objects and digital access in general?*

Outside of economics, again, this is a great time for books. Digital access to books has put pressure on publishers and writers to reconsider how books operate as physical objects, and the book form is better for it, I think.

I'm a big proponent of the Operating System's Open Access Library. *Failure Biographies* is only fully realized in its physical state: it is a physical object. But I also want people to have unfettered access to the text. So, for me, the Operating System strikes the right balance in its approach.

*I'd be curious to hear some of your thoughts on the challenges we face in speaking and publishing across lines of race, age, ability, class, privilege, social/cultural background, gender, sexuality (and other identifiers) within the community as well as creating and maintaining safe spaces, vs. the dangers of remaining and producing in isolated "silos" and/or disciplinary and/or institutional bounds?*

Writing is a communal activity. I think it is important to approach my work as adding to a larger conversation rather than positioning myself as an authority. I use the voices of others, because I want readers to hear these voices. But I also have a responsibility to not use the voices disingenuously—to not misrepresent the speakers, to not simply put the voices in my own mouth and make them say what I think they should say.

I actively work to not *appropriate* the voices which appear in my comics and to not appropriate the original comics used in my collages: these are not mine, and I am not taking them as my own.

*Let's talk a little bit about the role of poetics and creative community in social and political activism, so present in our daily lives as we face the often sobering, sometimes dangerous realities of the Capitalocene. The publication of these volumes now falls during an ongoing global pandemic, intersecting with the largest collective uprising in US history, with Black Lives Matter, dismantling white supremacy, and abolition at the fore. How does your process, practice, or work reflect these conditions?*

To answer this question, I want to talk about the past, specifically the years between 1965 to 1974. A good chunk of *Failure Biographies* occurs during these years: all the events related to Benjamin Patterson, Noah Purifoy, *Tucumán arde*, Pere Portabella, and Marta Minujín.

It would be impossible to list all the momentous national and world events that also occurred in these nine years, but I invite you to consider the atmosphere of this period and its dramatic seesaws between crisis and possibility, between oppression and revolution. With no adequate frame of reference, I imagine living through 1968 (the year of *Tucumán arde*), for example, as feeling a bit like living through 2020.

And in each of those nine years, an event called the Avant-Garde Festival was held in New York City. Much of what art historians now regard as avant-garde royalty participated: John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, Yoko Ono, Sun Ra, Joseph Beuys, Carolee

Schneeman, Nam June Paik, Christo, John Lennon...

As organized by performance artist Charlotte Moorman, the Avant-Garde Festival consistently imposed only a single rule on its artists: "NO POLITICS."

What's the role of the creative community, whether during those eventful nine years or now?

Well, I think the Avant-Garde Festival displays the destructive possibilities of art isolating itself from the larger political environment, how so-called "radical" artists can uphold and reinforce systems of oppression by insisting on separating art from "politics."

The title of this book is a bit of a feint: I consider none of these artists or the works discussed here as having failed and question the value of "failure" as label. But I can't help but see true and irrevocable failure in this tidbit from U.S. art history: "NO POLITICS."

Thanks for the questions.



Sections of this book have previously appeared in *The Adroit Journal*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Aquifer: The Florida Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Drunken Boat*, *Entropy*, *Ink Brick*, *Nashville Review*, *Phoebe*, *Redivider*, *Sweet*, and *Western Humanities Review*.

**Johnny Damm** is the author of *The Science of Things Familiar* (The Operating System). His comics, prose, and visual poetry have appeared in *Guernica*, *Poetry*, *The Offing*, *DIAGRAM*, and elsewhere. He lives in Santa Cruz, CA and teaches at San José State University.



## WHY PRINT / DOCUMENT?

The Operating System uses the language “print document” to differentiate from the book-object as part of our mission to distinguish the act of documentation-in-book-FORM from the act of publishing as a backwards-facing replication of the book’s agentive \*role\* as it may have appeared the last several centuries of its history. Ultimately, I approach the book as TECHNOLOGY: one of a variety of printed documents (in this case, bound) that humans have invented and in turn used to archive and disseminate ideas, beliefs, stories, and other evidence of production.

Ownership and use of printing presses and access to (or restriction of) printed materials has long been a site of struggle, related in many ways to revolutionary activity and the fight for civil rights and free speech all over the world. While (in many countries) the contemporary quotidian landscape has indeed drastically shifted in its access to platforms for sharing information and in the widespread ability to “publish” digitally, even with extremely limited resources, the importance of publication on physical media has not diminished. In fact, this may be the most critical time in recent history for activist groups, artists, and others to insist upon learning, establishing, and encouraging personal and community documentation practices. Hear me out.

With The OS’s print endeavors I wanted to open up a conversation about this: the ultimately radical, transgressive act of creating PRINT / DOCUMENTATION in the digital age. It’s a question of the archive, and of history: who gets to tell the story, and what evidence of our life, our behaviors, our experiences are we leaving behind? We can know little to nothing about the future into which we’re leaving an unprecedentedly digital document trail — but we can be assured that publications, government agencies, museums, schools, and other institutional powers that be will continue to leave BOTH a digital and print version of their production for the official record. Will we?

As a (rogue) anthropologist and long time academic, I can easily pull up many accounts about how lives, behaviors, experiences — how THE STORY of a time or place — was pieced together using the deep study of correspondence, notebooks, and other physical documents which are no longer the norm in many lives and practices. As we move our creative behaviors towards digital note taking, and even audio and video, what can we predict about future technology that is in any way assuring that our stories will be accurately told – or told at all? How will we leave these things for the record? In these documents we say:

WE WERE HERE, WE EXISTED, WE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY

- Elæ Moss, Founder/Creative Director

RECENT & FORTHCOMING  
OS PRINT::DOCUMENTS and PROJECTS, 2019-21

2020-21

Institution is a Verb: A Panoply Performance Lab Compilation - Esther Neff, Ayana Evans, Tsedaye Makonnen and Elizabeth Lamb, editors.

Vidhu Aggarwal - Daughter Isotope

Johnny Damm - Failure Biographies

Power ON - Ginger Ko

Spite - Danielle Pafunda

Acid Western - Robert Balun

KIN(D)\* TEXTS AND PROJECTS

Intergalactic Travels: Poems from a Fugitive Alien - Alan Pelaez Lopez

HOAX - Joey De Jesus [Kin(d)\*]

RoseSunWater - Angel Dominguez [Kin(d)\* /Glossarium]

Bodies of Work - Elæ Moss & Georgia Elrod

GLOSSARIUM: UNSILENCED TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Steven Alvarez - Manhatitlán [Glossarium]

Híkuri (Peyote) - José Vincente Anaya (tr. Joshua Pollock)

Ernst Toller's "Vormorgen" & Emmy Hennings - Radical Archival Translations - Mathilda

Cullen [Glossarium x Kin(d)\*; German-English]

Black and Blue Partition ('Mistry) - Monchoachi (tr. Patricia Hartland)

[Glossarium; French & Antillean Creole/English]

IN CORPORE SANO

Hypermobilities - Ellen Samuels

Goodbye Wolf-Nik DeDominic

2019

Ark Hive-Marthe Reed  
I Made for You a New Machine and All it Does is Hope - Richard Lucyshyn  
Illusory Borders-Heidi Reszies  
A Year of Misreading the Wildcats - Orchid Tierney  
Of Color: Poets' Ways of Making | An Anthology of Essays on Transformative Poetics -  
Amanda Galvan Huynh & Luisa A. Igloria, Editors

KIN(D)\* TEXTS AND PROJECTS

A Bony Framework for the Tangible Universe-D. Allen [In Corpore Sano]  
Opera on TV-James Brunton  
Hall of Waters-Berry Grass  
Transitional Object-Adrian Silbernagel

GLOSSARIUM: UNSILENCED TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Śnienie / Dreaming - Marta Zelwan/Krystyna Sakowicz,  
(Poland, trans. Victoria Miluch)  
High Tide Of The Eyes - Bijan Elahi (Farsi-English/dual-language)  
trans. Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian  
In the Drying Shed of Souls: Poetry from Cuba's Generation Zero  
Katherine Hedeem and Víctor Rodríguez Núñez, translators/editors  
Street Gloss - Brent Armendinger with translations of Alejandro Méndez, Mercedes  
Roffé, Fabián Casas, Diana Bellessi  
& Néstor Perlongher (Argentina)  
Operation on a Malignant Body - Sergio Loo  
(Mexico, trans. Will Stockton)[In Corpore Sano]  
Are There Copper Pipes in Heaven - Katrin Ottarsdóttir  
(Faroe Islands, trans. Matthew Landrum)

## DOC U MENT

/däkyəmənt/

First meant “instruction” or “evidence,” whether written or not.

*noun* - a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record  
*verb* - record (something) in written, photographic, or other form  
*synonyms* - paper - deed - record - writing - act - instrument

[Middle English, *precept*, from Old French, from Latin *documentum*, example, proof, from *docere*, to teach; see *dek-* in Indo-European roots.]

### Who is responsible for the manufacture of value?

Based on what supercilious ontology have we landed in a space where we vie against other creative people in vain pursuit of the fleeting credibilities of the scarcity economy, rather than freely collaborating and sharing openly with each other in ecstatic celebration of MAKING?

While we understand and acknowledge the economic pressures and fear-mongering that threatens to dominate and crush the creative impulse,  
we also believe that

***now more than ever we have the tools to redistribute agency via cooperative means,***  
fueled by the fires of the Open Source Movement.

**Looking out across the invisible vistas of that rhizomatic parallel country  
we can begin to see our community beyond constraints, in the place where intention meets  
resilient, proactive, collaborative organization.**

Here is a document born of that belief, sown purely of imagination and will.  
When we document we assert. We print to make real, to reify our being there.  
When we do so with mindful intention to address our process, to open our work  
to others, to create beauty in words in space, to respect and acknowledge the strength  
of the page we now hold physical, a thing in our hand, we remind ourselves that,  
like Dorothy: *we had the power all along, my dears.*

## the PRINT! DOCUMENT SERIES

*is a project of*

the trouble with bartleby

*in collaboration with*

the operating system





Funny, irreverent and urgent, *Failure Biographies*' method is best described as creative mayhem. Immerse yourself in this tribute to failure and embrace all it has to offer. Magnificent!

-Jack Halberstam, Author of *The Queer Art of Failure*

One artist's quixotic quest to clone Martin Luther King, Jr. A pioneering silent film director pushed from the industry by her controlling husband. A writer who tries to write popular fiction but ends up in the avant-garde.

Damm's distinctive style of collage transforms 1950s horror comics into true stories of artistic failure.

Featuring radical Argentinian art collective Tucumán Arde, conceptual artists Pope L. and Marta Minujín, filmmakers Alice Guy Blaché and Pere Portabella, Mexican superhero Superbarrio Gómez, and more, *Failure Biographies* celebrates the struggles of great 20th and 21st century innovators who attempted — and failed — to change the world.

Praise for Johnny Damm:

[S]ophisticated and delightfully bizarre... Damm's ideal reader is an open-minded culture junkie and fan of poetry, high art, and comics, someone with a penchant for everything from Dada to Derrida.

-Publishers Weekly



the operating system  
brooklyn and worldwide  
c. 2021