

## TRANSCENDENCE

by Amish Morrell

This issue goes to press only days after the death of Will Munro, at the age of 35, following a two-year struggle with brain cancer. Munro, whose exhibition *Inside the Solar Temple of the Cosmic Leather Daddy* is reviewed on page 46, was a central figure in the Toronto art community, with a wide-ranging practice that incorporated craft, textiles and performance. Munro was also a DJ and event promoter, and was behind an infamous series of club nights, which included *Vaseline*, a monthly party that had critical importance in queer culture not just within Toronto, but internationally. For this event, Munro regularly brought performers including Vaginal Creme Davis, Nina Hagen and Carol Pope to Toronto, and hosted locals such as Peaches and The Hidden Cameras, before they achieved international fame. At *Vaseline* it was not only okay to be gay, but it was okay to be *other* than gay. One could be just about anything. The effect was that it completely destabilized all preconceptions of gender and sexual identity, in a hyper-libidinous environment where everyone became a performer. By the end of the night, most people were dancing on stage in their underwear.

Under the direction of our former Editor, Rosemary Heather, *C* provided important and extensive coverage of artist countercultures and the activities of younger artists, including Munro, examining their broader international contexts and significance. *C88*, on the theme of Art Rock, published in 2004, included a centrefold by Will Munro. His work also appeared in the magazine in 2003, as part of an artist project by the collective Tops 'n' Bottoms, led by Karen Azoulay and Joel Gibb, who organized sculptural dress-up performances using clothes obtained from bulk used clothing stores. One of the difficulties posed by such practices, in terms of achieving recognition within larger art communities, is that they are often collective, sometimes anonymous, and their most profound points of engagement are rarely with conventional gallery or museum audiences. Sometimes their very purpose is to create a different kind of audience. To focus solely on individual artists, or on their exhibition histories, risks miss-

ing the broader significance of artist countercultures. Many events are transient and ephemeral and their only physical traces are a few event posters or photographs taken by participants. One of the functions of *C Magazine* is to document artist-run culture, as an essential context for understanding contemporary art practice.

On May 26, a public memorial was held to mourn and celebrate Will's life, which was also billed as a dance party on the theme of transcendence. Although most contemporary art is grounded in relatively secular concerns, among artists there has always been a great deal of interest in the supernatural, the magical, the paranormal, the spiritual and the occult, especially for those who disavow organized religion. Indeed, art might be seen as inherently concerned with the supernatural, or with accessing and describing that which cannot be understood through rational means. Many practices—such as those discussed in this issue—involve refining, expanding and altering one's senses and perceptual capabilities, often through ritualized activities. And others explore ways to communicate with the spirit world, or with the past.

In her article, *Get On Up! Michael Jackson Is Alive and, Well—(Preface to a Twenty Volume Love Note)*, cultural critic Lynn Crosbie writes about the death of Michael Jackson, whose transgression of gender norms was arguably at the heart of the controversy that surrounded him towards the end of his life, and also crucial to his success as a pop star. Crosbie's article is evocative of how the sexually ambiguous person can be a profound threat to popular conceptions of self and identity. A "freak" that was at once a "sex machine" while being seen as a possible sexual predator, Jackson's personal story is also one of a much more troubling crisis in American racial and sexual identity. Here, the libidinal energy that his fans so strongly felt is perceived as the conduit to an otherworld of freaks and monsters. But this energy is also that of *funk*, the liberation and transcendence that Jackson offered through his music.

The supernatural can be a transformation of the body and the self, and of one's identity and individuality. But it can also involve gaining access to a realm that is beyond the physical present. In her article, *Psychometry and the Affective Artifact*, Jennifer Fisher

discusses the use of psychometric methods in art historical inquiry as a means to understand something of the affective texture of the past. By collaborating with a psychic medium, she was not only able to confirm factual information about a painting—describing the artist, its subjects, and the process of its creation—but also to gain an understanding of the emotional lives of the sitters. Based on attention, intuition, and touch, this process places one in contact with the past, providing a new way of using art objects to understand their history and context. Similarly, other authors and artists in this issue explore different ways of engaging with the past: In her interview with David Lillington, Paulette Phillips discusses her work at E-1027, the iconic modernist house in the south of France, designed by Eileen Gray in the 1920s, but since fallen into ruin. Their interview illustrates new methods for engaging the traces and legacies of Modernism. Leah Modigliani also interviews the Center for Tactical Magic, discussing how their recent projects engage social power and magic power, as means for cultural critique and transformation. Centred on an artist project by Scott Treleaven, Elijah Burgher discusses the role of magic, the occult, and countercultural ritual in Treleaven's practice. Louis Kaplan also examines Nate Larson's documentation of unexplained phenomena and performances where he follows scripted instructions, as ways of invoking the miraculous through photography.

While it would seem that ideas of magic and the supernatural imply the transcendence of the body, the body is needed for transcendence to occur. It is through touch, feeling, identification and desire that one accesses realms both within and beyond one's physical present. With collective practices—particularly those based on celebration and ritual—an idea or a feeling is shared among many bodies. At Will Munro's memorial, handfuls of glitter were thrown over the people on the dance floor. For days many of us found the sparkling flecks in our hair, in our clothes and in our beds. The traces remind us of our shared abandon on the dance floor, the work we are charged with continuing, and of the party that isn't over yet. ♦