

# BUSINESS AS USUAL AT THE WESTERN FRONT



Friday afternoon, July 13, 1973.

**W**hat's the Image Bank?

Silence . . . Laughter.

MI: Image Bank started . . . uh, we are all the Image Bank. Everyone is the Image Bank. There's no definition of the Image Bank, it's subliminal.

WS: What does the Image Bank deal with then? Certainly not everything.

MI: No. The Image Bank is a network of people exchanging images.

WS: What kind of images?

MI: The images that people request. We make up lists and directories. They are an important part of our activities; they're the access to the Bank. The Bank is like a decentralized file, its access is quite open-ended on the subliminal. There are numerous banks, Bum Bank, Chicken Bank . . .

WS: But those banks are just one person, aren't they?

MI: Yeah, but they all have their

network, they're all interchangeable. That's part of the difficulty in discussing any of the concerns.

WS: So it's a concern, rather than an activity.

MI: It's more a conspiracy.

LB: A subversive conspiracy.

MI: That too, at times.

LB: What are your most subversive activities?

MI: That would be giving the whole show away. Well, the taking on of names, changes in identification. We're all into each other's names and playing each other's parts, it's all an event, it's a false history. But the images are real and can be used in any context, it's very much a process of recycling.

WS: Why do you want to recycle images?

MI: (Turning to Myra Peanut.) Let's ask our postman. What would you say Image Bank was?

Myra Peanut: A lot of mail.

LB: That's the clearest answer we've had so far.

MI: The NY Corres-Sponge Dance School of Vancouver looks after the mail, and all of us are members. The school holds

informal meetings with guest stars every Thursday at the Crystal Pool.

WS: A lot of people say you're skating on thin ice.

MI: That's true. We're a very precarious organization, what we call Mondo Arte consciousness, a major fantasy collaboration and research project. We've been making a very rich, dense, and diversified film of our involvement in precariousness called *Mondo Artie*. It's been about ten years in preparation.

WS: When will it be out?

MI: By 1984. (Laughs). Most of the work that we do exists as rushes but we're slowly finding a way of tying events together. So the film's going to be basically rushes.

PAUSE.

WS: So everything seems to be open at the Western Front. People come walking in and out, open and interchangeable. How do you maintain a focus, or isn't there any? And if so, how do you keep in touch with what you're doing?

MI: I think it's basically because the



## D r. Brute Lady Brute Mr. Peanut by Willoughby Sharp

Nude calendar group portrait photo of the members of the New York Correspondence Dance School of Vancouver

Western Front is very new. We took up occupancy of the building less than six months ago, although all of us have worked together for quite some time.

LB: How did it all start?

MI: Sometime in 1970 I was sitting in the can re-reading William Burroughs and came across a reference to an Image Bank in Nova Express, and it just implied everything. I had been into the idea of networks for some time . . .

Mr. P: Ray Johnson started writing to us in '67.

MI: . . . and we were meeting lots of artists who were into media imagery. We got to identify a person by the images he was interested in and whenever we came across them we'd cut them out, stick them in an envelope or rubber stamp them, and put them in the mail without any explanations. It was mysterious. And it became an amusing inexpensive kind of communication system. Pretty soon we were deep in image reality and needed to formalize the concern a little, just to see where it would put our heads. Basically what we wanted to do was to start an ongoing

communications process, an activity that could be defined in any way useful to the people plugging into it. So we accessed ourselves to a kind of comedy.

LB: At that time you weren't operating in this sort of commune situation.

MI: No, it was Mr. Peanut and myself working out of our apartment in Vancouver. We'd been travelling a lot and realized that if we were going to put anything together we'd have to be in one spot for a while. At first the audience was basically other artists we knew and worked with. Now the network has spread to people who get off on it, usually we don't know them personally, so there are both practicing and non-practicing artists plugging in.

WS: What's a non-practicing artist?

MI: It's a life style, an ongoing event.

WS: Isn't everyone's life an ongoing event?

MI: Of course.

LB: So it's the take they have on it.

MI: The entire network is probably close to a thousand people. I keep in touch with around 350 that I've corresponded with for some time, and

that's as much as one can physically deal with without getting into hardware.

That's where it falls apart, when you can't deal with it on a personal level. The mail thing ODED, exploded a year ago. The Bank ended for us, and the collaborations began. The work is cut out. All of a sudden we had this incredible sense of the potential of communicating ideas and information, collaborating on trips all over the world.

WS: So what do you do, throw the mail out?

MI: No, over the past few years we've developed formats for processing areas of concern. We started off being totally into the postcard as a means of communication. We requested postcards and received reams and reams of them from artists everywhere, collage postcards and photographs and drawings. Within that genre we learnt a lot, a whole structure. We organized an exhibition of the postcards, which was the first concrete evidence of our activity. We used the exhibition as an excuse to get a budget to produce a catalogue, which consisted of printing

postcards for people who had participated. We asked them to send a design for a postcard and all the designs that could be were printed. We didn't edit, it was a completely impartial process. If somebody got off enough to send us a postcard, that was enough. Then we became very involved with the image request lists, which are the key to the Image Bank. We started circulating them in mailings as often as we could afford to have them printed. Very much Gestalt concerns. People would drop us a note saying, "I'm researching pictures of cars and their owners." Dr. Brute wanted pictures of leopard skin. People would plug into the lists directly, we never acted as a clearing house for images.

WS: Isn't it rather artificial to group people by the imagery they're interested in? And some of those requests you made up.

MI: Of course, it's difficult not to be inventive.

LB: Poetic license . . .

WS: So you're really not so much into the imagery as into a certain sensibility?

MI: Yes, a collage consciousness. We never intended to create a straight image retrieval system. Images are definitely common property. It's important to realize that once an image is put out on the subliminal there can be no copyright on it. Also a lot depends on one's understanding of pictorial formats, for instance straight magazine publication is over. We all know that. We're into other image systems that are more difficult to retrieve and change. Television sets in people's homes pile in far more images than any of us could cut up. So it's important to develop a consciousness that allows more freedom to play with what's being laid out. To change its meaning by enabling it to be seen differently.

WS: What happens to an image after you deal with it?

MI: We don't manipulate the images that much except by cutting them out of this original context. If it's a strong image we don't want to doctor it in any way. It's a matter of recycling it

with our sensibility as the reference point. It's collage at the classification level more than at the cut-up level.

The Bank is a sort of subliminal collage.

WS: What about Image bondage?

MI: That's when the image is so blatantly exploitative that all possibility of alteration is removed for the present. The image is a slave of the vision, the idea is bound. It's difficult to redefine the use of those images. For instance, our first image of the month was very image bondage. It was a picture of Nancy Berg, who was the highest paid model and cover girl in the mid-fifties, and we recognized her in endless advertisements in old magazines. We finally found an article on her in *Cosmopolitan*. She was a slave to the vision of the advertising companies, she was a manipulated image. And in dealing with that image and recycling it, we broke the bondage of its old context.

WS: Why don't you say something, Mr. Peanut, about how you came to take on alternate identities?

Mr. P: Well, because I'd never really had an identity to begin with.

I was doing these doodles of animated peanuts and that led to a film, *Mr. Peanut Tap Dancing*.

I just became interested in the possibilities surrounding Mr. Peanut represented as an anthromorphic character. Planter's Peanut was always my favorite corporate image.

WS: How about you, Dr. Brute?

Dr. B: I wanted to be another person, like Mr. Peanut. I left all the rubbish behind and started fresh.

WS: What was the rubbish?

Dr. B: Just all the stuff I'd been, all my life.

WS: Why did you take on the personage of Dr. Brute?

Dr. B: Dr. Brute started when I was in high school . . . I went to a very lenient school in Victoria that allowed me to carry out my fantasies. I used to entertain myself by doing watercolors and drawing to radio programs.

WS: Which ones?

Dr.B: Oh, the usual sort of forties and fifties children's programs,

*The Green Hornet, The Lone Ranger, Dragnet*. Then I used to spend the summers with my aunt in Seattle and she took me to very far out films, at the time, like *Laura* with Jean Tierney, *Cry of the City*, *Richard Conte* . . . They had a tremendous impact on me.

LB: Wasn't your father a captain in the Artillery?

Dr.B: Yes. He was a very glamorous figure. So was my mother, she talked a lot about movie stars. And my aunt was into the arts. Looking back I realize that my family has been a major influence. It was far more valid as experience than what I was trying to do after I left home. So I had to liberate myself so I could express myself the way I used to as a child. I wish I'd never gone to school. I wish I could have developed in my own way. During my twenties I was sort of brutalized, I worked, I drove trucks, and my personal life was a shambles. Then I met Maxwell Bates in Victoria who became my mentor in a sense and turned me on to a lot of things. I also met Michael Morris at that time, and hung out at the University of Victoria and took a degree. At the end of that period I became Dr. Brute.

MI: We've all decided to do what we enjoy most.

Dr.B: Exactly. I reexamined my past, and decided it was something I could use and get off on more. And that I could realize my fantasies.

MI: An assumed identity lends itself to very free interpretation, so it frees one from a lot by mouth. Remembering to be nothing by mouth is very important at the beginning.

LB: Not so much now, though.

MI: No, because the myth is taken for granted and the activity is being duplicated all over.

WS: Which activity?

MI: Well, banking, networks and associations in general.

Lady B: Brutoping.

MI: The network is not so much making art as just business as usual. For instance, we never had the intention of inventing "mail art", which is the farthest thing from what any of us are dealing with. We're definitely *not*



The Western Front Lodge.



The reading room and library at the Western Front.



The reading room and library at the Western Front.



The Western Front's prototype grand staircase for the Miss General Idea Pavillion of 1984.



Image Bank post cards printed for the Image Bank Post Card show.



Part of the Image Bank Archives.



The head office: business as usual.



Image Bank requests images of 1984 as research for The Great Wall of 1984.



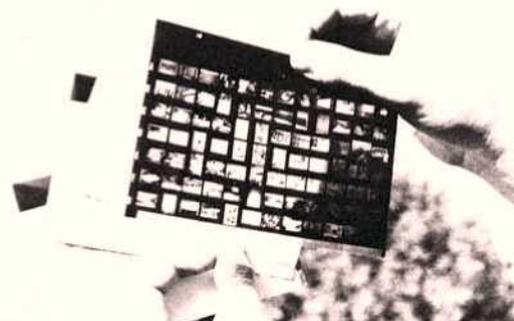
Pages from the shooting script of the major collaborative work *Mondo Artie*



The New York Corres-ponse Dance School of Vancouver's collection of rubber stamps.



Actual shot of the chairman's office at the Western Front.



Microfiche card of images sent for the 1984 event.

# ★ STARS on PARADE ★ ★ ★

MR. PEANUT UNDERWEAR DOCUMENTATION

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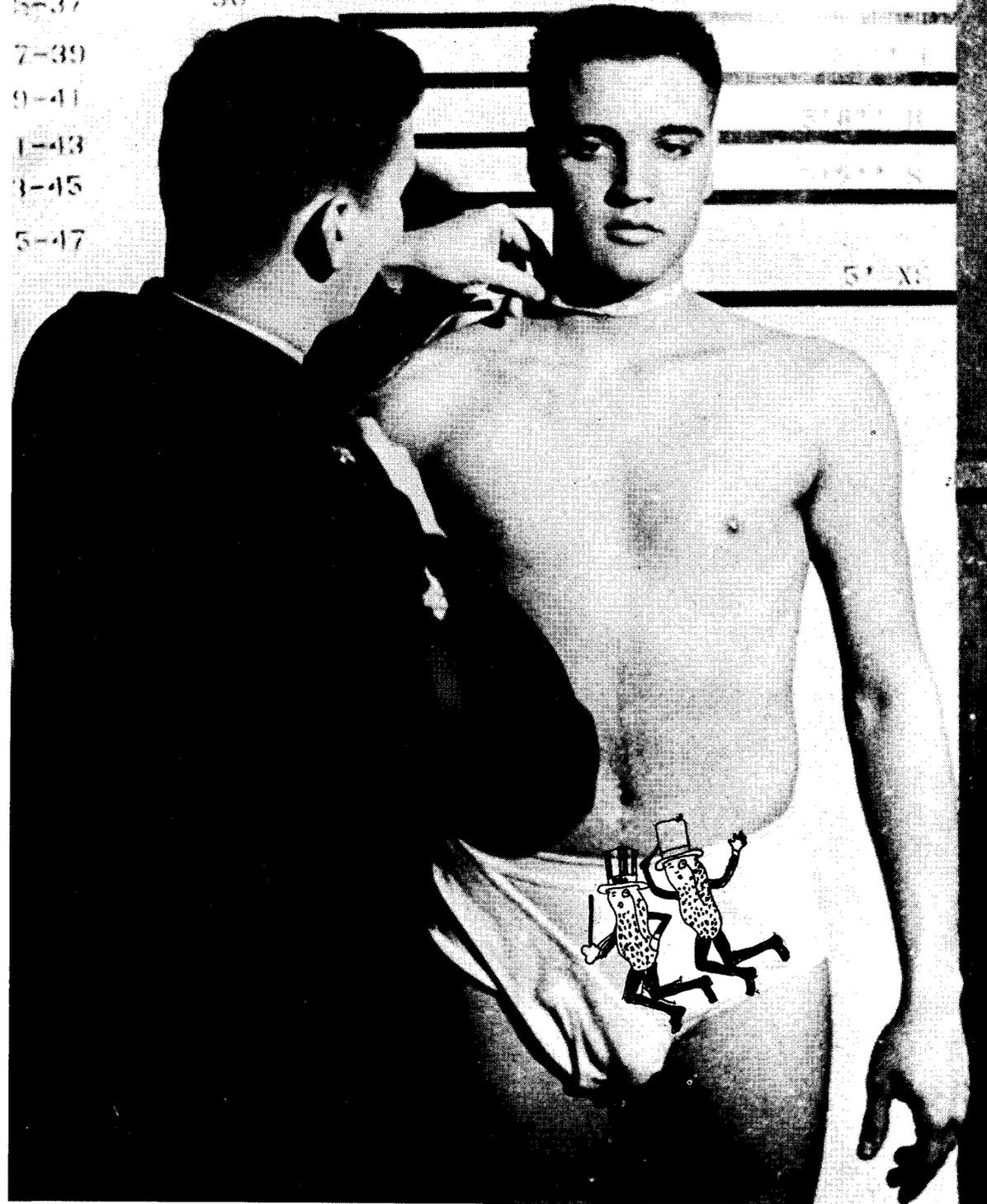
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COLLAGE BY JOHN DOWD

mail artists. Our work and ideas have brought us all together in a way that comes from our activities rather than our reputations. We never had to become self-conscious about getting together. That's become the reality.

LB: But at The Western Front Lodge, it's become more concretized, hasn't it?

MI: Yeah, we had to get our concerns on another level in order to continue the event. What we've gotten into now is much bigger than any of us individually.

WS: Is there a dichotomy between your urban existence and Babyland?

MI: Babyland is the place where we go to unplug. It's a small piece of land near Robert's Creek up the coast from Vancouver that we use as a retreat more than anything else. It's a place where we work by ourselves and do projects, essentially research like making props and tools and signs, components for understanding how we learn to see things. And we use them in a fairly crude way. It's very much caveman technology up at Babyland.

WS: Do you share, with General Idea, a concern for glamour?

Dr.B: Banal Beauty.

MI: Well, glamour to me is gesture. Me being Miss General Idea, is image gesture. We share with General Idea a sense of camouflage as being a glamorous gesture. Banker's drag is our glamour, but it's a very camouflage consciousness.

WS: What do you mean?

MI: Well, camouflage drag is being invisible.

Mr.P: They don't know you're there till you've left.

WS: Mr. Peanut, you had some more observations about image bondage.

Mr.P: I used to feel a certain amount of image bondage. Mine was beaver bondage. My request in the International Image Bank Dictionary . . . . was for split dripping beavers . . . .

I've gotten over the bondage aspect of it now, I realize that it was a fantasy fetish. It's got nothing to do with reality.

WS: What has the image of Mr. Peanut got to do with your fantasies?

Mr.P: Well, I've realized that the image of Mr. Peanut has sexual connotations for me that I've been able

to use in relating ideas to other people.

LB: Now that you have this Peanut identity, how do you feel about your own identity?

Mr.P: You mean my given name, Vincent Tarasoff?

WS: How's he doing?

Mr.P: He's not that well. I only use Vincent Tarasoff very officially, on passports and the like. I don't mind the name. Want some tea?

WS: Marcel has multiple identities . . .

MI: Right. Marcel Idea, Miss General Idea, Marcel Dot, Michael Morris.

LB: So Mr. Peanut is your real identity now.

Mr.P: Yeah, I'm Mr. Peanut in every situation. It's great because it's a name that everybody knows.

WS: But he doesn't say things, he isn't a developed character.

Mr.P: No. Well, that's what I do.

LB: Do you consider that your work?

Mr.P: It allows me a lot of freedom.

Mr. Peanut's an anthromorph trapped in his image: without me he's just an empty shell.

LB: He doesn't have to think.

Mr.P: Right. Being Mr. Peanut is enough.

MI: *1984: Deca Dance*, the February gig in Los Angeles will be the first real coming together of people on the subliminal. It's going to be an extravaganza. I think we'll write it into our Mondo Arte scenario.

LB: Do you have a script?

MI: Yeah. Uh, E.E. Clair is writing the script based on an episode from the television series, *Peyton Place*. On one of my visits to L.A. I met a t.v. producer. We were running around in the studio one Sunday opening up filing cabinets and he said, just take anything you like. I picked half a dozen episodes of *Peyton Place*, it was the first drawer I opened. They are marvelous, they've got all the commercial breaks and camera movements and lines. I gave a script to E.E.

Clair and he's used it as a basis for our shooting script because this year he's preparing a mural for the National Research Library in Ottawa. It's a major correspondence event.

WS: Oh?

MI: The mural is an event. It's like a

calandar, with 365 safety deposit boxes for each day of the year—the great wall of 1984. It's also like a time capsule. Everyone on the network was invited to send in something suitable for a safety deposit box in a library. The work has to be installed by January '74, but will take as much as ten years to finalize, which is funny because that makes the work complete in 1984.

WS: What are you doing in the mural?

MI: I'm dealing with 1984, and Mr. Peanut with 1916 and 1789.

LB: How did the Western Front come together?

LadyB: Well, it's very loosely organized really. The Western Front is made up of all of us working together, and Flakey, Roger Greenstein, and . . . .

LB: And you're the only woman.

LadyB: Yes, I'm the token female . . . . Basically we bought this place because we needed space ourselves. The lodge used to belong to the Knights of Pythias. It has four floors, 180 by 45 feet, with two large halls, a huge dining room, two kitchens, plus a lot of very small adjacent offices. With all this space available, it's obviously a place for artists to meet and get their trips off much better than anywhere else in Vancouver.

WS: Do you want to make it into a kind of art center?

LadyB: Well, no, it's looser than that. It's not totally in operation yet, but there'll be performances, concerts, events, poetry readings, banquets, everything.

WS: How about the economics of it?

LadyB: Very touchy subject. Hopefully our activities will be self-supporting, but there'll also be some revenue from rentals—the fewer the better, as far as I'm concerned. The more subtle this place is the better. It's not a public space.

WS: Is there anything else like this in Canada?

LadyB: No, I think Western Front is quite unique. This place may become a model, I don't know.

WS: You just want it to work.

LadyB: Right. And we're very optimistic about it. I don't see how we can go wrong. ●