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Jim Shaw, *Dream Object (Vise Head)*, 2006, bronze, wood, steel, 119.4 × 137.2 × 90.2cm. Courtesy the artist and Patrick Painter Editions, Vancouver

The Artless Dodger: Jim Shaw and His Endless Compendium

– Claire Barliant

A pack of younger artists have been responding tentatively to modernist icons recently, throwing themselves at their feet while chopping off their legs. In contrast, Jim Shaw's bold and unfiltered take on the history of art – along with that of religion and the American West – is always frankly irreverent in its use of these subjects. For some, his voice may be a little too frank. Unlike much of today's art, which is cool and detached, primly following a Conceptual and Minimalist track, Shaw's work is garish, messy, confessional and indulgent. Perhaps its most striking difference, though, is in its relation to time. Though he is wildly prolific, Shaw takes years to complete his projects, which encompass such a range of media and formal styles that they are almost impossible to comprehend fully. Arguments against a hyperactive contemporary art market may be overblown, but there is a case to be made for the diminishing effects of the pressure to produce, and produce quickly. Shaw is hardly immune to this heat, but his idiosyncratic, omnivorous approach results in work that more or less operates in a manner antithetical to a market that likes to eat its prey whole.

Shaw is ruthless in the editing, revising and reconfiguring of his own work, and the often tortuous revision process itself seems to hold a key to understanding his practice. When he showed a selection of *Dream Objects*, paintings and home décor modelled in the shape of body parts at Metro Pictures gallery in New York last year, Shaw reshuffled its contents five weeks after the opening, and doubled the number of works within.[1] The press release explained Shaw's reasoning:

> *For the initial installation, Shaw was keenly aware of his impulse to edit works for any number of reasons — perhaps against his better judgment. Works may have been deemed unresolved, undesirable or non-commercial in Shaw's wish to curate a 'traditional' gallery exhibition. Overriding these inhibitions, the second half of the show will illustrate the cumulative effect of the artists' abundant ideas and his desire to see the installation as part of an ongoing artistic practice and not a single exhibition.*[2]

Almost all of Shaw's production could be read through a counter-establishment lens, as long as one acknowledges that for Shaw the lens needs to be wide enough to include not only the current Bush administration and American religious fundamentalism, but also a cultish, elitist and insular art world and its uptight institutions. His work stems from processes of self-discovery that almost always reveal a desire to go against the grain, flipping off the artistic conventions and easy critical characterisations that usually result in watered-down mediocrity. The *Dream Drawings* and *Objects*, which he has been making for the past seventeen years, are just one example of the way in which he continually plumbs the depths of his own subconscious for fresh material, and splays out his id for our bemused analysis. Resisting self-censorship and the inhibitions that come with trying to please the masses, or at least seeming to, he is nevertheless tireless in his efforts to get at the core of *something*.

1 Jim Shaw, 'Dr Goldfoot and His Bikini Bombs', Metro Pictures, New York, 2007—08.
2 Press release for the exhibition. Available at http://www.metropicturesgallery.com/index.php?mode=past&object_id=267&view=pressrelease (last accessed on 29 July 2008).

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Shaw's cycling through strategies, styles and possibilities, and his refusal to settle, suggest a rejection of a universalising mandate. At times his endless citations and devotion to being thorough, as well as his dedication to articulating multiple voices and points of view, make him seem like one of the most writerly artists out there. And of all the authors he could resemble, Shaw is probably closer in spirit to William Faulkner than, say, E.M. Forster, at least in terms of his sheer obsessiveness. Faulkner once famously said, 'Kill your darlings', referring to passages that, for one reason or another, an author can't relinquish but really should – those parts of a story or a well-crafted turn of phrase that the author loves beyond reason, but which ultimately are detrimental to the overall success of the text. It is fitting that Jim Shaw, who cites Max Ernst as a major influence because of the many styles he tried on and discarded over the course of his lifetime, made an installation that borrowed Faulkner's words as its title.[3]

Shaw's use of the phrase 'Kill your darlings' has another side to it, too: the homicidal undertones resonate with his ongoing cannibalising not only of the work of other artists

– such as the Abstract Expressionists, Judy Chicago or countless comic-book artists – but also of his own prodigious output. Cannibalisation is homage by other means, but it goes hand-in-hand with the seemingly more benign concept of misinterpretation. To paraphrase Harold Bloom, misinterpretation is the first step toward finding artistic freedom. Bloom argued that by misunderstanding the legacy of a writer or artist you are

Jim Shaw, *Dream Object (I dreamt up an image of a yellow walled city with a yellow kid sticking his finger in the outer wall)*, 2004, acrylic on muslin, 6.7 × 11.6m. Courtesy the artist and Patrick Painter Inc, Santa Monica

3 'Kill your darlings', Patrick Painter Inc, Santa Monica, 2003. Shaw made a series of paintings of Oist movie posters incorporating colour-field painting and other styles that have fallen out of favour. In an interview with Mike Kelley, Shaw said: 'The Pop artists maintained the large scale of late modernism, and whoever had jumped around stylistically in the past wasn't very well respected; Max Ernst did a lot of jumping around stylistically. I responded to that.' 'Here Comes Everybody: A Conversation Between Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley', *Everything Must Go: Jim Shaw 1974—1999* (exh. cat.), Luxembourg, Geneva and Santa Monica: Casino Luxembourg-Forum d'art contemporain, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain and Smart Art Press, 1999, p.22.

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furiously trying to imitate, you begin to carve out a space for your own style to evolve.[4] Deliberate misinterpretation, then, in Shaw's hands, is not an innocent exercise – it is a revolutionary tool. When he collected and exhibited the work of more than a hundred unknown artists for his first 'Thrift Store Paintings' exhibition in 1990, it was more than a way of rejecting the high/low distinction – it was also a way to give primacy to visions that were warped or twisted, with the unnamed artists seeming to have digested reproductions of famous artworks and discovered their own, alternative style and formal language in the process.

It is often said that Shaw's wide range of references has the effect of flattening hierarchies. His encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture is related perhaps to his having once worked in Hollywood, directing commercials and creating special effects, but the freedom with which he wields this arsenal of knowledge makes his references fully autonomous. His citations are never more than a starting point; they become his own largely because he concentrates on unlikely imbrications, including modernism,

Jim Shaw, *Paintings Found in Oist Thrift Stores (Early History / 1800s)*, 2008, acrylic on board and canvas, one of three paintings, variable dimensions. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

popular culture, politics, religion, mythology and myriad other subjects. In the end, despite using a vast range of references that seems part of an effort to avoid being pinned down, this technique of layering itself becomes something of a signature style. At the same time, Shaw cultivates a massive (and phagocytic) network that encourages shape-shifting, change and transformation, harnessed through the use of narratives such as his self-generated religion (Oism) and *My Mirage* (1986–91), a series of about 170 works – drawings, paintings, sculptures, videos – that recount the life of Billy, a typical American who grows up in a suburban household, rejects the bourgeois values imposed on him during adolescence, experiments with hallucinogens in the 1960s and 70s, discovers Jesus as an adult and is then 'born again'.

4 See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

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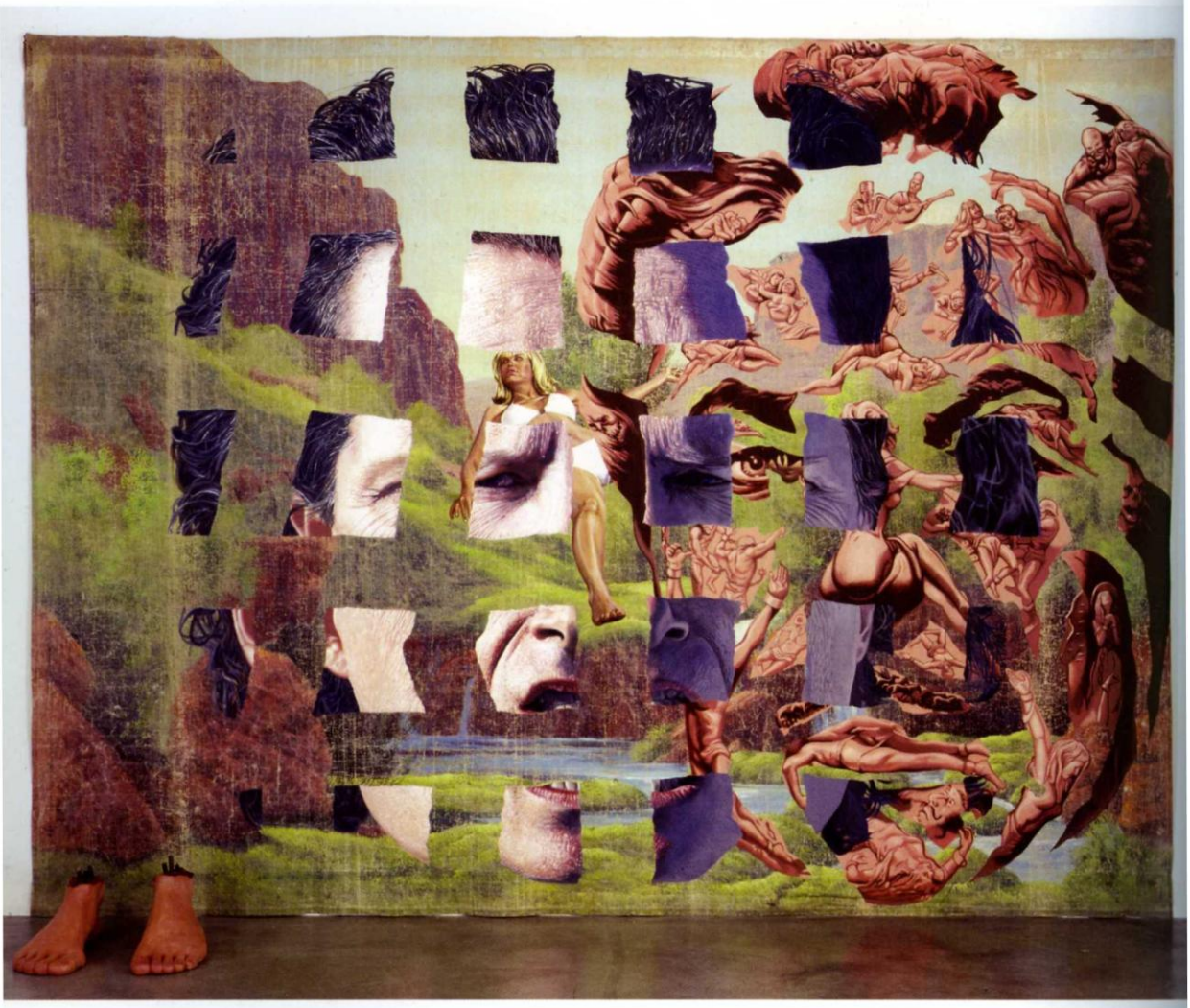
Shaw's embrace of multiplicity and his employment of fictitious figures such as Billy have less in common with, say, Rodney Graham's *alter egos* than with the heteronyms and identities created and channelled by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa that enabled him to write in different styles. Like Pessoa, Shaw is less invested in trying on false identities (which often result in facile parodies) than in cutting through the constructs of a social self. 'I want to be free and insincere,' Pessoa wrote.[5] Allying freedom with insincerity may initially seem counterintuitive until one considers the opposite: that sincerity, or 'just being yourself', is itself a falsehood – the world simply imposes too many limits and constraints. But liberating oneself to be insincere and to explore the possibilities of deceit, narrative and fiction opens up unlimited avenues of potential.

Insincerity, like the idea of a mirage, offers a way to project and perform one's own desires. By piling on the references, Shaw allows others the freedom to misinterpret in turn. His discussion of *Utopian Landscape #4 (Plain of Jars)* (1988) reveals the way



the connectors of his mind click into place. In the drawing, which is part of his *Utopian Landscape* series, a seemingly infinite number of jars, each containing a decaying human head in formaldehyde, are laid out in a V formation on a dry field, pockmarked here and there by tiny rocks. One jar in the foreground contains a droopy head, its features squished to fit the confines of the vessel. In a 1999 interview with Mike Kelley, Shaw explains that the piece was based on the Plain of Jars in Laos, a combat site during

Jim Shaw, *Dr Goldfoot and His Bikini Bombs*, 2007, acrylic on muslin, 365.8 × 485.1cm (painting), 141.6 × 25.4 × 62.2cm (left foot), 141.6 × 49.5 × 62.2cm (right). Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

5 Fernando Pessoa, untitled poem, *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems* (trans. R. Zenith), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2006, p.308.

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the Vietnam war.[6] Hearing about the field during his youth, Shaw envisioned many jars spread out on a plain – and in fact that is pretty close to the truth, as massive ancient rock jars that were possibly once used for burial purposes are scattered throughout the area. Shaw elaborates on the drawing's concept, giving us a glimpse of how his mind works:

> JS: *I transmuted that delusion into that* Alfred Hitchcock Presents *version about the Ray Bradbury story about the head in the jar at the carnival which the hillbillies sit around...*
> MK: *...and free-associate about...*
> JS: *...and try to understand the meaning of. It compares to the central concept of* My Mirage, *trying to understand the meaning of life through misinterpretation.*[7]

Faithfully retold by Hitchcock, Bradbury's story 'The Jar' is worth summarising here since it illuminates aspects of Shaw's own work. A man walking through the carnival buys the aforementioned irresistible vessel, bringing it home and enchanting his friends and neighbours with its prismatic allure. The story builds to a grisly conclusion when the man's wife, jealous of the attention her husband showers on the jar, furiously unscrews the top and destroys the mystery of its contents. When it comes time for the husband to choose between the jar and his shrewish wife, well, guess who (or what) wins. The jar's contents are refreshed and the wife mysteriously disappears. Bizarrely, a later remake of this same story on the updated *Alfred Hitchcock Hour* in 1986 featured as its main character a conceptual artist (played by Griffin Dunne, the lead actor in Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*, 1985), whose moribund career explodes when he puts the jar in an exhibition. He too has a jealous wife, whose need to expose the jar's contents leads her to a similar end.

Choosing insincerity over authenticity, and encouraging free association and misinterpretation over any kind of objective analysis – not unlike the lead character in 'The Jar', who can't resist showing off his prize – Shaw aims for, and often gets, our full attention. Throughout his work, there is a palpable undercurrent of aggression and insecurity, an urgent desire to please by creating entire worlds that encourage total immersion. Yet unlike recent works by Los Angeles-based contemporaries such as Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy which evoke fantasy-driven rides at Disneyland (albeit terrifying and complex ones), Shaw's work is more demanding, requiring one to sort through its striated levels and accept that it involves a temporal commitment, often taking years for a single series to run its course.

Unlike *My Mirage*, which channelled the inner life of an individual, Oism, Shaw's most ambitious and enduring project to date, was initiated in the late 1990s and encompasses many more voices. The history of Oism seems loosely based on Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Science movement, although Mormonism is also a model, and one can discern hundreds of other references folded into its ever-growing annals. According to Shaw's mythology, it was founded in upstate New York by a woman called Annie O'Wooten in the early nineteenth century, and celebrates a feminist civilisation that existed 5,000 years ago. O'Wooten's following slowly grows and, after being hassled for her unorthodox views, she moves her flock to Omaha. Fast forward several decades to the birth of Mandy Omaha, who decides to create a fictitious feast based on Oist history and principles set on a round table made of miniature pioneer wagons, each place setting evoking a particular figure or moment pivotal to Oism's growth. She calls her work *The Donner Party* (2003). Mandy Omaha is clearly modelled on Judy Chicago, and *The Donner Party* is, obviously, not just a story of desperate, cannibalistic pioneers, but also a spoof on Chicago's 1979 *The Dinner Party* and her alleged exploitation of the hundreds of assistants that helped her to create it.

During an email interview between Shaw and curators Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun, he is asked: 'Would it be wrong to say that one "enters" your work the way one would a cult?'[8] Shaw doesn't outright deny this is a possibility, maybe because it is difficult to make up a religion as a critique – especially a made-up religion that is replete

6 'Here Comes Everybody: A Conversation Between Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley', *op. cit.*
7 *Ibid.*, p.32.
8 Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun, 'Interview with Jim Shaw', in L. Bovier, F. Stroun and Yves Aupetitallot (eds.), *Jim Shaw: O* (exh. cat.), Zürich and Grenoble: JRP / Ringier and Le Magasin, 2004, p.45.

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with its own history, rituals and trappings – without falling into the trap of going so far that it is no longer clear what is being criticised. This contradictory stance gives the work an edge. In Shaw's video *The Rite of 360 Degrees* (2002), which satirises 'the pompous and proprietary boys-club atmosphere that makes the art world so stifling', there is a ritual in which a young artist is initiated into the ranks of the inner circle, the various participants of which form an orchestra.[9] The group includes many established Los Angeles artists and critics, each playing an instrument resembling a different body part – testicular bag pipes, a lute in the shape of an ear, ribcage chimes and so on. As if the body gags weren't enough, the objects have a rough-hewn quality, like props made for a school play. The crafting of these pieces and the camerawork in the video seem intentionally awkward, conjuring a lo-fi aesthetic that is adolescent, even juvenile. Recently Shaw has started using body parts as the basis for more elegantly constructed, functional objects such as nose sconces, butt-head stools and a *chaise longue* shaped like an ear (perhaps as a sly critique of the design world encroaching on art, particularly among a subset of Los Angeles-based artists). Taking the private, the intimate and the anatomical and exploiting them for utilitarian purposes is yet another way of exposing our prejudices: what is gross and uncouth suddenly becomes ... furniture.

A code that needs to be unlocked, surrealist undertones, the use of body parts – Shaw's oeuvre can be usefully compared to that of an East Coast counterpart: Robert Gober. Gober's early work *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1984) shares Shaw's revisionist drive, documenting an impulse to constantly refine, hone and alter a painting on a small board that results in the painting's disappearance altogether – the existence of this infinite project proven only by a slide show tracking the work's dematerialisation. But where Gober's work is sombre, hermetically sealed and *arty*, Shaw's is simply funny, openly courting the viewers by engaging their sense of humour and appealing to a need to experience pleasure. Gober rarely strays into the territory of the comically absurd, but Shaw has no such qualms. He embraces figuration for its purportedly 'impure' status among modernist devotees, going to an extreme that few artists are willing to follow, or even investigate. Gober's later works, including *The Meat Wagon* – installed at the Menil Collection in Houston in 2005 and featuring a fireplace that uses human limbs made of beeswax – have less in common with Shaw's apart from superficial similarities, but still provide another meaningful point of contrast: while Gober's sculptures and installations are technically pristine and often conceptually opaque, Shaw messily lays it all on the table. Viewers can feel like bystanders guiltily sneaking glimpses at carnage, the results of a soul stripped bare for all to see and consume.

The ego, the id and the superego. With Shaw, it is all on display. But that doesn't make it any easier to wrap your head around his oeuvre. Because of their multidimensionality, Shaw's projects can be difficult to describe: shuttling back and forth between reality and fiction is awkward, and inflicts critics with the fear that they will sound like half-wits as they attempt to summarise such a sprawling body of work. Perhaps this is the intended effect – it is certainly in keeping with a practice that defies all efforts at encapsulation. The dismembered body parts left behind by the cannibalistic ritual in his work begin to seem like bits of incriminating evidence. It is worth pointing out that in a more enduring myth of O, the myth of Osiris, the Egyptian god is killed by his own brother, who then scatters his remains to prevent his reincarnation.[10] Talk about killing your darlings.

The idea of privileging the notably yonic 'O' above all other letters is more than an endless source of amusement, though – it is a potent symbol, both perfectly delimited and quintessentially void. The 'O' is the symbol for the *ouroboros*, the serpent that bites its own tail. Without a clear point of beginning or ending, the symbol connotes infinity, a well as reflexivity. It is also a sign of alchemy or transformation.[11] Metamorphosis is the sub-theme of Shaw's work that has haunted this essay from its beginning, and it is now time to complete the circle and come to terms with it. Billy's being 'born again', the Oist theory that time is going backwards, even Shaw's own relentless tinkering and revising – all point toward an imaginative reality where the rules of time don't figure.

9 Doug Harvey, 'Chasing His Own Tale: Jim Shaw's Closed Circuit Religion', *Ibid.*, p.24.
10 *The Rite of 360 Degrees* takes this story as one of its points of departure.
11 Originating from the Greek idea of Oceanus ('a circular river that girdled the earth ... with neither outlet or source', writes Jorge Luis Borges in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Trans. A. Hurley), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005, p.147) the *ouroboros* represents the protean, a term also rooted in the oceanic — Proteus was a Greek god who attended to Poisedon, and could change form at will.

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Jim Shaw, *The Music of the Degrees (Arm Clarinet)*, 2002/07, colour print, 120 × 150cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris and Berlin

Time, at least in the worlds made up by Jim Shaw, does not automatically lead toward decay or death (or deadlines), but rather toward transformation. In an essay on Siegfried and Roy, Dave Hickey compares the entertainers' tiger-taming Las Vegas spectacle with Victorian pantomime, citing Nina Auerbach's argument that 'pantomimes challenged Victorian proprieties by creating "a world where gender was malleable, where history mutated with no transition into myth, where human pageants gave way to a fantasy of animals ... [where] dreams of bliss were indistinguishable from the horror of nightmares".'[12] This description, its innate delight in miscegenation and gore and the rejection of all constraining gender and racial constructs, basically sums up Shaw's mission. Knowing that I don't have to be a believer to subscribe to Shaw's system of beliefs, I have to admit that 'A Faith for the Faithless', the Oist motto, begins to sound like a pretty reasonable slogan.[13] A religion that accepts failure as form? Sign me up.

12 Dave Hickey, 'Lost Boys', *Air Guitar*, Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997, p.179.
13 See L. Bovier and F. Stroun, 'Interview with Jim Shaw', *op. cit.*, p.46.

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Jim Shaw, *Quicksand*, 2005, fiberglass, magisculpt, fabric, oil paint, 91.4 × 78.7 × 94cm. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Jim Shaw's Real Mirage: A Partial Inventory

– Doug Harvey

One of the most fruitful meta-curatorial practices of the contemporary era has been the exploration of the artist/curator/collector overlap – the act of sifting through a museum's holdings to compile an exhibition, or of institutions displaying the idiosyncratic collections accrued by artists themselves: from Andy Warhol's 1969 'Raid the Icebox 1' exhibition at Rhode Island School of Design (which pulled art and non-art objects from the museum's cold storage and arranged them in unconventional displays) to Eduardo Paolozzi's continent-and-millennia-spanning 'Lost Magic Kingdoms' at the Museum of Mankind in London in 1985. The artist-as-packrat exhibition 'Neotoma' at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in 1995 featured, among other things, Jim Shaw's pulp paperback novel collection and Mike Kelley's assortment of discarded wire coat-hangers bent to open locked cars. Not to mention indeterminate boundary phenomena such as The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, which displays such oddball ephemera as magician and actor Ricky Jay's collection of decaying celluloid dice and the accumulated knick-knacks of a half-dozen Los Angeles-area trailer-park residents in artist and curator Tina Marrin's permanent exhibition 'A Garden of Eden on Wheels' (2000–ongoing).

Shaw's 'Thrift Store Paintings' exhibition – a collection of a hundred or so mostly anonymous paintings found at swap meets and second-hand emporiums around the US, first exhibited in Glendale, California in 1990 and reconfigured several times since – remains a benchmark in the artistic inversion of the protocols of fine-art collection and display. But it is less widely recognised that the bulk of Shaw's oeuvre consists of elaborate variations on this same theme of the accumulation and presentation of cultural artefacts. Take, for example, the sprawling biographical fiction of Shaw's first major narrative experiment, *My Mirage* (1986–91), whose some 120 works in different media reference a huge spectrum of late twentieth-century visual language, ranging from bubblegum cards to Frank Stella, exploring the discrete subcultures of childhood, psychedelia and born-again Christianity while piecing together the story of Shaw's Candide-like teenage surrogate 'Billy'. Shaw's overarching conceptual structures, while distinctly narrative and often rooted in sequential linearity, nevertheless are holographic in the mechanics of their communication – specific, overlapping and often hermetic references sketch out a vast field of suggested-but-unarticulated narrative content (including the narrative of modernist formalism). While we can't always make out which specific biographical circumstances, for example, generated Billy's *The Temptation of Doubting Olsen* (1990) – a painting of an imaginary comic book cover – it is nevertheless surrounded by an aura of implicit data, and when even just two or three of Shaw's works are gathered in one place their mutually interpenetrating back stories begin to suggest a whole parallel universe.

Materialising *every* dream or articulating *every* potential nuance of sprawling projects such as Shaw's fictional-esque religion of Oism, which Shaw first conceived as a graduate student and which has occupied his attention since around 2000, is patently impossible. Any sample or cross-section of the big picture of Oism, whose manifestations encompass music, video, installation, performances, comic books, sculptures, drawings, photographs and paintings (including those supposedly found in Oist thrift stores), is encoded helplessly within the whole. It occurred to me that this model might provide

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a fruitful new way to explore the role of influence, reference and appropriation in Shaw's creative process, particularly by applying it to the reservoirs of symbolic and formal material from which his work derives: the artist's vast and remarkable collection of books, records, comics, magazines, artworks, videos, posters, knick-knacks and other cultural ephemera, a hybrid personal/collective unconscious now largely clogging the interstitial spaces of his studio in the Los Angeles suburb of Glendale.

Nor was I wrong. As Shaw sifted through the thousands of items stashed in his long storage hallway, singling out several hundred for identification and elaboration, all the familiar themes from his studio practice emerged – crackpot science, fringe religions and adolescent culture; forgotten fine artists, unrecognised commercial designers and inspired amateurs; misinterpretation, disintegration and transcendence; experimental narrative and grotesque sensationalism; and collage – always collage.

Among Shaw's influences is the Los Angeles-based psychedelic-era comedy troupe The Firesign Theatre, admired for their ability to deliver avant-garde collage aesthetics to a popular audience. Their multi-track studio recording techniques, used to produce looping, layered narrative soundscapes such as the seminal *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* (1970) and *I Think We're All Bozos on This Bus* (1971), resulted in a surprising string of underground hit records and extensive radio exposure in the early FM radio era; at the same time, their very success (along with the stigma of being categorised as comedy) has slowed recognition of the importance of their work as both great literature and audio art.

W.D.T.H., *The Devil at a Nudist Camp*, 1959, oil on canvas, c.55 x 75cm, rejected from Jim Shaw's 'Thrift Store Paintings' for being too accomplished. Courtesy Jim Shaw and Doug Harvey

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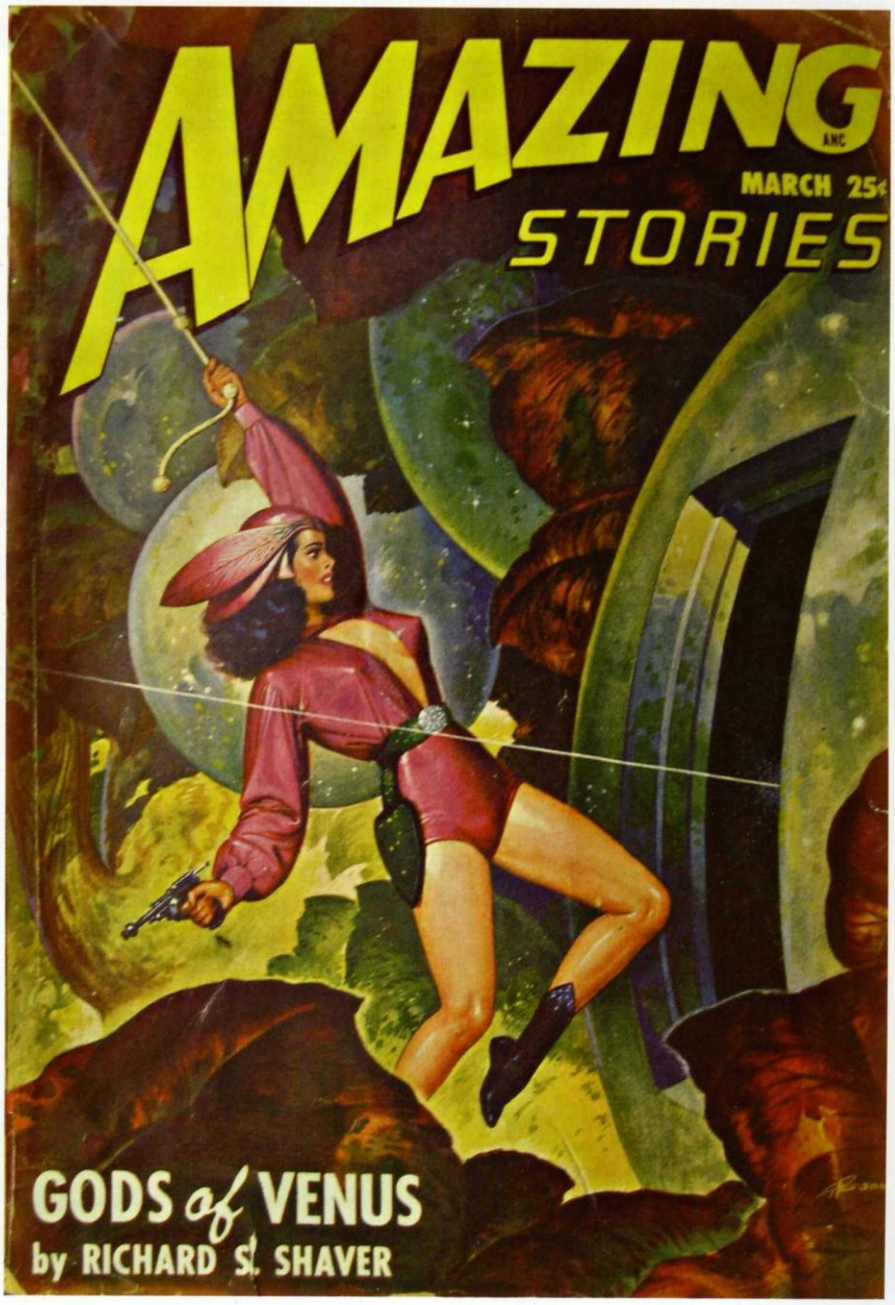
A similar prejudice obscures the innovations of The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band. Active in London in the Swinging Sixties, the Bonzos initially came to popular attention as an English music-hall revival act on the children's television programme *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, before radically and rapidly evolving into a Dada-inspired psychedelic novelty group, whose fragmented but encyclopedic references to popular culture were another early influence on Shaw's cut-and-paste aesthetics. Their debut album *Gorilla* (1967) features the track 'The Intro & Outro', which Shaw considers 'one of the greatest recordings ever made', although their second LP, *The Doughnut in Granny's Greenhouse* (1968, originally released in the US as *Urban Spaceman*), is generally considered their masterpiece. In Shaw's words: 'It's a succession of sound collages culminating on the second side with "My Pink Half of the Drainpipe": "You who speak to me across the fence of common sense...", and it reaches that point where he just holds the note and the music continues and continues... I used to use that to drive people crazy at my junior college.'[1]



Cover of Richard S. Shaver, *Gods of Venus* (*Amazing Stories*), March 1948. Courtesy Jim Shaw and Doug Harvey

1 All Jim Shaw's quotes are from conversations and emails with the artist, June/July 2008.

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Shaw's interest in collage strategies extends across the full spectrum of pop media, and back into the worlds of fine art and literature. Charles Henri Ford is best known as the editor of *View*, the 1940s New York-based Surrealist magazine that, over the course of its seven-year run, published work from major avant-garde literary and art-world talents from Marcel Duchamp to Jorge Luis Borges, many for the first time in the United States. Ford was an important poet and the boyfriend of Surrealist painter Pavel Tchelitchew. After Tchelitchew's death in Rome, Ford returned to New York and became a sort of *éminence grise* in Pop circles. 'I picked up this book, *Spare Parts* [1966], from a remainders book company for $3 when I was a teenager. It's a collection of Ford's multicoloured photolithograph collage poem posters made from newspaper and magazine clippings from 1966 – it was an edition of 1,000 or something.'

Another pseudo-journalistic print portfolio that caught Shaw's adolescent eye was Eduardo Paolozzi's *Moonstrips Empire News Volume 1*, a series of one-hundred silkscreen prints created between 1965 and 1967 in London. *Moonstrips Empire News* was the first instalment of a projected five-hundred-page magnum opus articulating Paolozzi's critical view of contemporary society through his voracious, appropriationist appetite for pop culture. The prints' modular, McLuhanesque pastiche of pop iconography, together with Paolozzi's signature curdled mechanistic *horror vacuii*, was a major force in moving Pop art beyond the cul-de-sac of arch, dispassionate quotation – though Paolozzi always maintained that he was operating in the tradition of 'radical Surrealism'.

'One weird thing about the work I'm doing now', observes Shaw, 'is that a lot of it actually references the nostalgia of Robert Crumb's childhood.' The same year as Paolozzi's *Moonstrips Empire News* was published, another, more street-level experimental periodical first saw the light of day. *Zap #1* (1967) unleashed Crumb's potent marriage of archaic cartooning styles, psychedelic mythology, storytelling skills and obsessive draughtsmanship on an unsuspecting world. While Crumb's mutant funny-book stories formed an important link in the post-War grotesque tradition that informs much of Shaw's oeuvre, it was an array of uncharacteristic works printed in Apex Novelty's 1969 tabloid underground comic *King Bee #1* that had the greatest specific impact. 'They're different from just about any other Crumb – almost entirely collaged out of late 1940s and early 50s magazines. This advertising style – usually with speech balloons – from when he was growing up, is the very same period that I'm using for these backdrops for my new Oist prog-rock opera.'

While Dadaist objects, such as the collages of Hannah Höch and masks of Marcel Janco, ably localised the schizophrenic discontinuity of twentieth-century consciousness onto representations of the human body, the true cut-and-paste posterboy of modern disintegration was make-up artist Jack Pierce's realisation of Frankenstein's monster for the 1931 United Artists movie *Frankenstein*. Boris Karloff's flat-headed, dead-skinned stitched and bolted bogeyman was a cultural timebomb, erupting in the mid-1950s through a number of surreptitious subcultural channels. Alongside Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth, custom-car builder and creator of the hot-rod icon Rat Fink, the key figure in the early promulgation of this post-War grotesque tradition (and an important influence for Crumb, Shaw and many others) was the idiosyncratic comic artist Basil Wolverton, whose intricately deformed characters graced the covers of early *MAD* magazines in the 1950s. Comic-book aficionados are often unaware of Wolverton's lifelong side career of illustrating Bible stories for Herbert W. Armstrong's *The Plain Truth* and various pamphlets, including the apocalyptic *1975 in Prophecy!* (published in the mid-1950s), which detailed the gruesome plagues and extreme weather that would herald the end days.

The third major force in 1950s pubescent grot wasn't a graphic artist, but a collector of Hollywood ephemera named Forrest J. Ackerman, who on a hunch compiled his collection of stills from then near-forgotten horror films such as *Dracula* (1931), *King Kong* (1933) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) into what he and publisher James Warren thought would be a one-shot publication for pre-teen boys. *Famous Monsters of Filmland* wound up running for twenty-five years. 'My cousin introduced me to monster magazines and comic books, which were the only masculine thing I could have access to in a house surrounded by women,' recalls Shaw. 'You had to go out of town to buy monster magazines – it was like pornography. None of the stores in my hometown carried them. So I had to surreptitiously go along with my sisters when they bought clothes in Saginaw, Michigan. I didn't realise how big an influence they were until I did my book of distorted

Robert Crumb, untitled page, *King Bee #1*, San Francisco: Apex Novelty, 1969. Courtesy Jim Shaw and Doug Harvey

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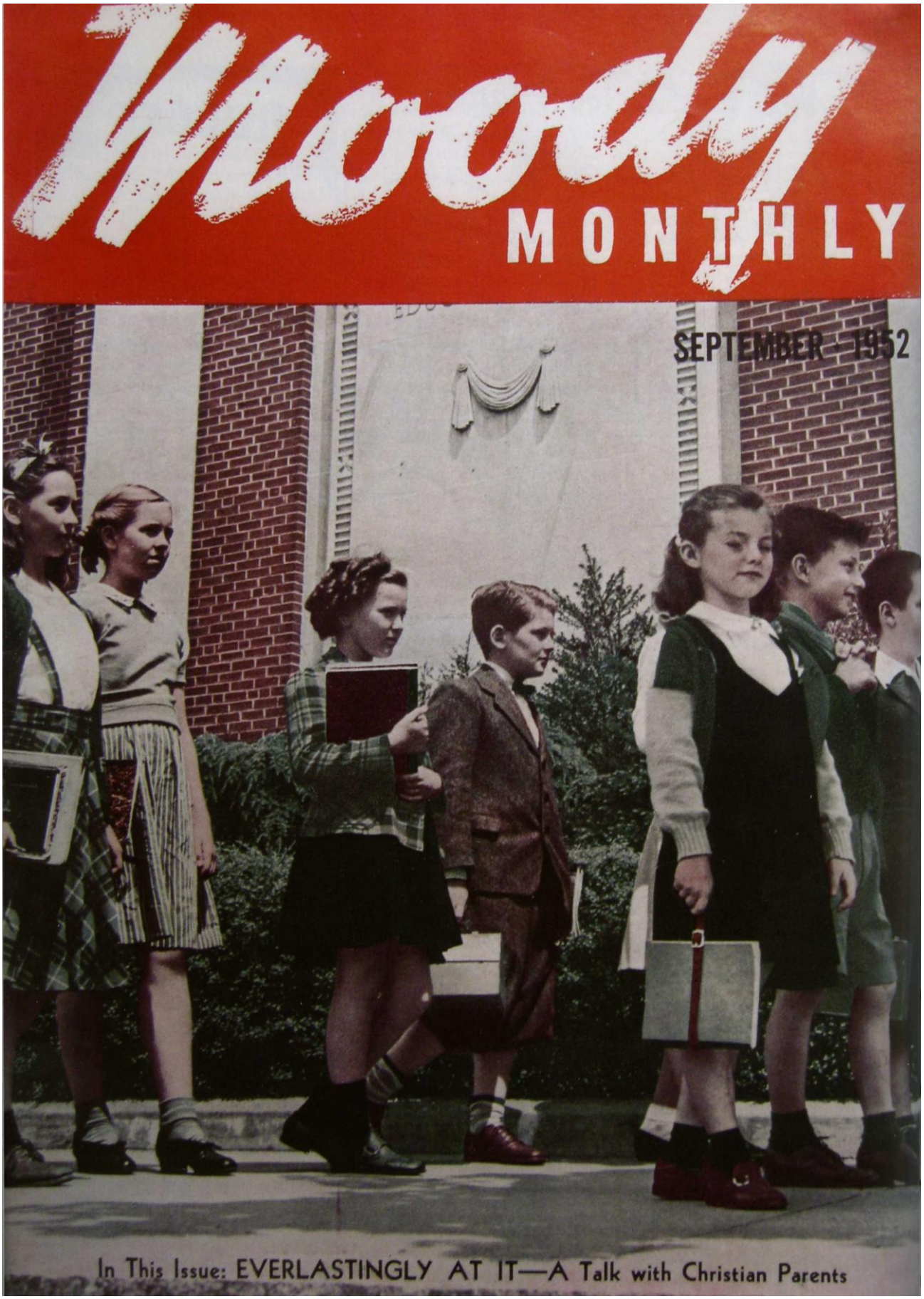

SIMON LEE

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Cover of *Moody Monthly*, September 1952. Courtesy Jim Shaw and Doug Harvey

faces, and I realised it looked like a group of *Famous Monsters* covers.' Shaw is just one among several generations of influential cultural workers whose young minds had been warped by *FMoF*, some of whom – including Steven Spielberg and George Lucas – helped to shape Western popular culture according to Ackerman's images.

One of these two directors' more improbable Hollywood collaborators was the illustrator Ron Cobb, designer of an ecology symbol – a green sign, similar to the Greek letter theta and suggesting a planetary form, which was used by environmentalists throughout the 1970s – and author of a highly influential cartoon style that incorporated post-apocalyptic vistas and fetishised machinery with an acerbic but essentially humanist worldview. 'Cobb started out doing *Famous Monsters* covers, then he became the political cartoonist for the *LA Free Press*,' remembers Shaw. 'And then he did design for movies like *Dark Star* [1974], *Conan the Barbarian* [1982], *Star Wars* [1977] and *Alien* [1979]. One day he got a check for $200,000 for *E.T.* [1982] and he hadn't even worked on it. He'd worked on the story for *Night Skies*, the much darker movie that *E.T.* replaced. To me that's the ultimate Hollywood success story.' Shaw parlayed his own *FMoF* fandom into a late-1980s stint doing special effects animation for films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: The Dream Warrior* (1987) and *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1988).

As much as Shaw's work has been nurtured by the dark underground springs of wrongness coursing beneath the placid surface of 1950s America, the surface itself has also been the object of considerable obsession. Many of Shaw's favourite graphic artists of that period are remarkable for the cool, clean economy of their linework. Original *Spider-Man* penciller Steve Ditko is a prime example, and his paranoiac Ayn Rand-inspired self-published comics such as *Mr A* and *Avenging World* are an unexpected dividend, mirroring the exaggerated Apollonian precision of the artwork in their black-and-white philosophical polarities. But Shaw was actually slow to warm to the Stan Lee/Jack Kirby/Steve Ditko revolution at Marvel comics – naturalistic (albeit fantastically mutated) anti-heroic characters operating in contemporary Cold War culture and rendered in a dynamic and self-conscious Pop-house style – that revived the medium in the early 1960s.

'I was already pretty into comics when the Marvel thing with the Fantastic Four happened, so I had this bias towards DC,' admits Shaw, 'even though I could sense that it was wrong.' Curt Swan, who had been drawing the frivolously surreal Shaw favourite *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* since the mid-1950s (until Marvel-defector Kirby took it into the stratosphere in the early 1970s) was one of DC Comics's masters of the crisp school, but it was an even more prominent member of the DC family who earned Shaw's greatest accolades. 'My favourite was Murphy Anderson's inking of Carmine Infantino originals, which would have been [space-opera hero] Adam Strange in *Mystery in Space* comics. Anderson – who drew *The Atom and Hawkman* and also worked with Curt Swan – was a really precise inker because he used a quill pen instead of a brush.' Comic fandom and criticism have underrated Infantino because of his lack of a conspicuous individualistic style, yet his slick craftsmanship has a hypnotic so-right-it's-wrong regularity and a streamlined modernist visual attractiveness that keep giving long after graphic *auteurs* like Frank Miller have worn threadbare. In spite of Shaw's low opinion of his own skills as a comic-art draughtsman, he has continued to pay homage to DC's Silver Age for inspiration, both in his recreation of dreamt comic covers and a recent series of Oist comic stories.

Probably the most dedicated and resolutely fringe artist and publisher in comic-book history is Los Angeles native Jack Chick, whose histrionic fundamentalist Christian tracts have sold over half a billion copies to date, making him the world's most widely read living author. Inspired by the 1950s comic-book propaganda of the Chinese communists in Rancho Cucamonga on the outskirts of Los Angeles, Chick's ministry has been churning out his little cartoon narrative rants about the occult, abortion, homosexuality, rock music, politics, Harry Potter and the theory of evolution since 1960. He is particularly devoted to exposing the Roman Catholic Church as the secret inventors of Islam, the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, communism and the Holocaust – in addition to being doctrinally misguided. In spite of his enormous presence as a writer and artist, Chick has never issued a photograph of himself and hasn't given an interview since 1975, leading some to refer to him as the Thomas Pynchon of the Christian comic crowd. 'I'd be thrilled to get some original Chick art,' says Shaw, 'but it's probably impossible. I've never heard of anyone owning any.'

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Chick's artwork is unusual in that it is motivated solely by its role as a vehicle for revelation rather than any normative aesthetic or financial goals. A similar example of form following function is the found antediluvian 'rock books' and related interpretive paintings of Richard Shaver. Shaver was an automobile factory worker in the 1930s who, by his own account, suddenly began to be able to read minds, then to telepathically listen in on torture sessions conducted by malignant reptilian aliens living within our hollow earth. The extensive accounts of his subsequent investigations were published as non-fiction in Ray Palmer's influential pulp sci-fi magazine *Amazing Stories*, and laid the foundation for the contemporary paranormal research subculture. Later in life, Shaver realised that certain rock formations were a sort of holographic record of culture before the great flood, and began interpreting the subtle imagery he found in cross sections of polished agate by copying them in paint, with added detail and explanatory text. 'In my younger days I went to seek out Shaver in his temporary hometown of Amherst, Wisconsin, hoping to come across some of his artwork,' recalls Shaw. 'Instead I came across Ray Palmer's son, who was running the family business, which by then consisted of *FATE* magazine – but they had back issues of *Flying Saucers* and *Other Worlds*. I bought everything they had, but they didn't have any of Shaver's paintings. I finally was able to buy one from Brian Tucker, an LA artist and Shaver scholar.'

Crackpot science has been a consistent inspirational source of creative wrongness for Shaw. 'I just finished this book called *The Music of Time* [2000] by Preston B. Nichols, the guy who's been behind these books on the Montauk Project, and he claims he's not only involved in these secret US military time-travel experiments, but that he's the genius behind bubblegum music, the Moody Blues first symphonic music and the great recordings of Phil Spector. The Rolling Stones would show up in the middle of the night in Montauk and record "Sympathy for the Devil" [1968]. There were two members of the bubblegum band Ohio Express – who recorded "Yummy Yummy Yummy I've Got Love in My Tummy" [1968] – called the Hamill brothers, one of whom was Mark Hamill of *Star Wars* fame. But Mark Hamill doesn't ever mention being in the group. He has no reason to hide something like that ... unless it depended on time travel!'

Another 'differently credible' scientist was the model for a central (fictional) figure in Oist history. Shaw explains: 'Annie O'Wooten, the founder of Oism, became so enamoured of the ideas of this inventor that she brings the church to near-bankruptcy investing in his various schemes. When these turn out to be frauds, she loses control of the church to a group of men, but the inventions turn out to be the source of a lucrative home appliance business.' Sometimes mentioned in the same breath as Nikola Tesla, the late nineteenth-century free-energy crackpot John Ernst Worrell Keely claimed to have discovered a way to transform tuning-fork harmonics into mechanical energy. He gave highly controlled demonstrations of his remarkable (and remarkably Paolozzi-esque) hydro-pneumatic-pulsating-vacu-engine and music hydro-vacuum motor to potential investors – particularly Mrs Clara Bloomfield-Moore, who funded Keely heavily for a decade until his inability to produce practical results (amidst widespread accusations of fraud) frightened off even this stalwart believer. After Keely was struck and killed by a streetcar, his laboratory was examined by Moore's son and a journalist from *Scientific American*, leading to the discovery of a massive silent-air compressor and a network of hidden pneumatic pipes that had secretly powered his harmonic devices.

Shaw's collection bears an analogous relation to Keely's hidden system of streaming air: stacks of vintage fundamentalist magazines such as *Destiny* and *Moody Monthly*; original song-poem vinyl by Rodd Keith and The MSR Singers, a variety of Christian ventriloquist acts and Sacramento hippie instrument-inventor Bobby Brown; imported tomes on forgotten Surrealists such as Clovis Trouille, Jean Benoit or Alberto Savinio (Giorgio de Chirico's brother); videos of Eastern bloc filmmakers such as Aleksandr Ptushko, Karel Zeman and Wojciech Has; taped cable-access broadcasts of *The Three Geniuses*, Christian Science ventriloquist David Hart & Chip and *Zero Abortions*; and so much more. Every nook and cranny of Shaw's laboratory (and mind) wheezes and creaks with the pressure of this culture-saturated atmosphere. The difference is that Shaw's elaborate mechanism works: every once in a while a phase shift occurs, and some new and monstrous holographic nugget is belched into the world. Nothing is free and nothing is perpetual, but in Shaw's baroquely recombinant universe, the evolutionary potential of human creativity is apparently boundless.