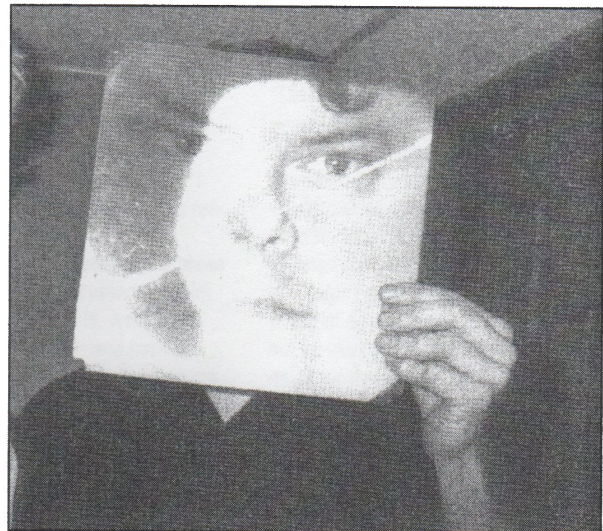
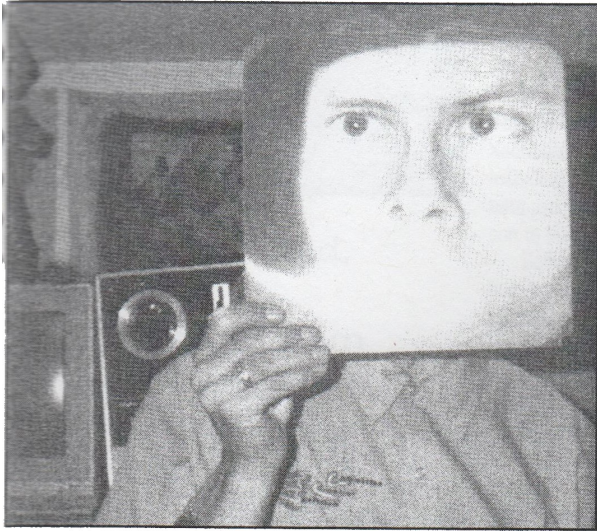


# FRINGE



## THE COLLECTIVE DANGER OF MARK GUNDERSON AND GARY XAOUI

they piss off network executives, expose audiences to flying metal shards, pantomime sex education films, and they're really tall...meet columbus, ohio's bad boys of art

story and photos by Arvin Donner

**Contrary** to Mark Gunderson's description of his place, the former farmhouse located in the north end of Columbus, Ohio's university district seems an unlikely dwelling for the Evolution Control Committee's (E.C.C.) research compound. Gunderson claims the compound lodges a particle accelerator, a genetics lab and a gene library. The one verifiable detail of Building 1 in the E.C.C. compound is the kitschy Tiki room complete with wicker furniture. For the faithful there is a wall sculpture of a Tiki god and a bust of Elvis. Gunderson, an original member of the E.C.C., is its only

full-time employee and caretaker of the compound. He also collaborates with Gary Xaoui, lead program assistant for the nonprofit gallery/recycling materials group Columbus Re: Art. Xaoui, a performance artist, sculptor and clothes designer, performs with Gunderson in the tribal noise group Gaga, and is the other half of the duo in Cheese and Pants Theater.

As we waited for Xaoui to show up for the interview (he was over an hour late), Gunderson explained the mission of the E.C.C.: "The committee has the primary function of deciding the flow of evolution. The evolutionary process has normally been ran-

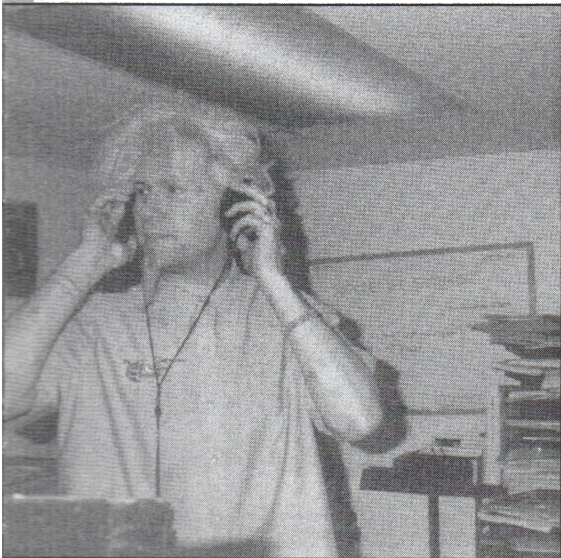
dom happenstance or collisions of mutations that have ostensibly improved this race and many others. Our idea is if we all got coordinated and we all set things where we actually had some structured meetings and decision-making going on, we could guide evolution a bit better. The music wing of the E.C.C. is an extension of the committee. We are not only here to encourage the evolutionary progress of the species but also the evolution of its products, music, and art." The E.C.C., with help from its record label Evolution Control Creations and other labels (including San Francisco-based Eerie Materials), is working to stimulate this evolu-

Above: Mark Gunderson, left, and Gary Xaoui, right.

## FRINGE



Xaoui shouted,  
"I hate art! I am  
an art snob and  
I have no  
reason to be."



tionary progress by providing access to the label's website, [evolution-control.com](http://evolution-control.com).

When Xaoui finally showed up, it came to light that he had been sampling the progress of humanity's gastronomical evolution by indulging in one of his favorite past times—fine dining. He is a food snob. Besides food, though, both Gunderson and Xaoui are snobs about everything else, including art and music. Xaoui shouted, "I hate art! I am an art snob and I have no reason to be."

Before jumping to any conclusions about this duo's intentions, it's necessary to point out that their snobbishness is, well, just a symptom of their boredom—and boredom is what motivates Gunderson and Xaoui to create new work. Case in point: Weary of listening to the same old agro-rock and bar-punk bands that litter the Columbus music scene, Gunderson and Xaoui started the group Gaga, releasing two albums (both on the Evolution Control Creations label)—a live recording called *Gaga* and the CD *Goodnight Sweet Audience*.

And weariness tends to be the motivating force behind the majority of Gunderson's audio collage work with the E.C.C. His idea of using Public Enemy rapper Chuck D.'s voice over Herb Albert's Tijuana Brass on the song "Rebel Without a Pause" came to him while he was driving in his car. He confessed, "Many great ideas are inspired by boredom. It's important to make boredom-time. If you don't, your mind doesn't wander far enough to come up with things."

Snobbery-induced boredom has been known to get Gunderson into a bit of trouble. Take, for example, a situation that arose in the winter of 2000 when a lawyer representing CBS News threatened Gunderson with a lawsuit. CBS took issue with Gunderson's use of anchorman Dan Rather's voice in the title song of his *Rocked by Rape* release. Gunderson sampled Rather's voice that he

acquired from a single CBS newscast, reedited the sample and replaced the voice of AC/DC's lead singer Brian Johnson on the song "Back in Black" with Rather's singing over the group's instrumentation with new lyrics. There was more to this stunt than just "Dan foolery," though. "There is this sort of undeniable thrill in doing the only style of music that can actually be illegal. It's a lot like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. I am taking whole pieces of music and changing their context, location, and how people are going to listen to it," Gunderson said.

Xaoui hasn't unleashed the litigious wrath of a multi-national media corporation, but he likes to taunt his danger-mongering muse for the sake of art. "Gaga is the most dangerous band in Columbus. The potential for the audience getting hurt is a big part of the performance," Xaoui said. If you find dodging pieces of obsolete technology and metal detritus fun, then sitting in the front row of a Gaga performance is where you want to be. Audience members have been required to sign legal waivers before entering a performance space to protect the group from being sued and large plastic shields are handed out to protect audience members against flying debris.

Gaga members like to use the destruction of old technology—such as smashing computers—as rhythmic devices during their shows. Taking a grinding tool to a piece of metal may shower the audience with sparks and shards but the function of using some of Gaga's more pyrotechnical stunts is for the sound. The group also works to balance between organic and electronic sound. One will commonly see the use of 55-gallon drums, saw blades and heating ducts used as percussion, alongside synthesizers and turntables, during a Gaga performance. This permits the audience to see many of the sounds actually being made and not just stored and sequenced in a computer.

Sadly, Gaga has wound down its performance schedule over the last decade. The group's only recent performances have been at the Community Festival (aka ComFest) in Columbus in 1999 and 2000.

It's tempting to compare Gaga to other unorthodox fringe groups, such as

Einstuerzende Neubauten. But calling Gaga unorthodox because of its instrumentation would be too superficially obvious without also being aware that some of the members are not even trained artists or musicians. "Performance art is not about doing something you meant to do, it's that you look like you meant to do it," Xaoui said. The only criteria for joining Gaga is that fellow members must believe that the prospective member has something to contribute to the group's performance. Since Gaga's inception in 1990, there have been many personnel changes, with the average size fluctuating around seven members.

With their use of power tools, fire, and "I meant to do that" attitude, Gaga labors to create a dangerous atmosphere for the audience. While they aren't actually trying to hurt people, the group is attempting to create the



potential threat of becoming hurt—an effort to develop a more involved relationship for the audience by getting them to question their relationship to what's taking place on stage. Gunderson said, "We want the audience to ask the question, 'How insulated and distinct am I from this performance?'"

This thinking has also influenced Gunderson and Xaoui's work in Cheese and Pants Theater. The pantomiming crusaders have been together for almost two years now

and perform at Mad Lab and other Columbus venues. The performance art act came about after Xaoui got a large pants costume. Then Re: Art provided Xaoui with the materials to construct a Parmesan cheese container costume. Dressed as giant (both artists are over six feet tall) cheese and pants, Xaoui and Gunderson stage theatrical events that pantomime everything from sex education films to Karate fight scenes. Xaoui said, "It's fun and it's thought-provoking on levels that you could not possibly understand unless you put many hours of scientific research into it."

Gunderson added, "Perhaps at once we are hitting the lowest common denominators and the highest uncommon denominators." When Xaoui was asked to elaborate on what those denominators were he said, "Sex,

drugs, cheese and pants."

Cheese and Pants' use of nonsensical context may remind some people of techniques employed by some 20th-century Surrealist authors, such as Andre Breton. Gunderson sees the work he does with Xaoui in

Cheese and Pants to be in the Surrealist tradition. "The Surrealists introduced the world to these nonsensical situations and allowed the world to find their own meaning in them. They did this so well. There are points of familiarity for the audience in our performances. They may recognize some of the sampled dialogue and they know what these objects are, but the audience is left with the question, 'Why are the characters in this position?'"



Gunderson:

"We want the audience to ask the question, 'How insulated and distinct am I from this performance?'"

The challenge to the audience is that they are left with the responsibility of framing the scenes' meaning and context. There are no rational identifiable characters with Hollywood personae to help the audience create context, stripping the pantomimed work down to its bare bones, leaving nothing to distract the audience from the dialogue's content.

Their burlesquing of mass media is not original by any means, yet Gunderson and Xaoui's work is revolutionary in this day and age. This is especially true when Hollywood film studios can get away with creating their own fictional critics to write marketing-friendly blurbs for aesthetically anesthetized consumers who would rather rely on those three-word blurbs to tell them what they are going to think about a movie. Gunderson and Xaoui's underlying agenda is to challenge their audience. While corporations spoon-feed context, meaning, and image to us, Gunderson and Xaoui's work reintroduces the genuine economy between the audience and the performance.

*Arvin Donner is a freelance writer based in Columbus, Ohio. His music reviews are published regularly in the Columbus Alive.*