

Dream Weaver

The Dreamachine, Kurt Cobain's death, the Patriot Action League and William S. Burroughs' "bloody hands"

BY DON BOLLES

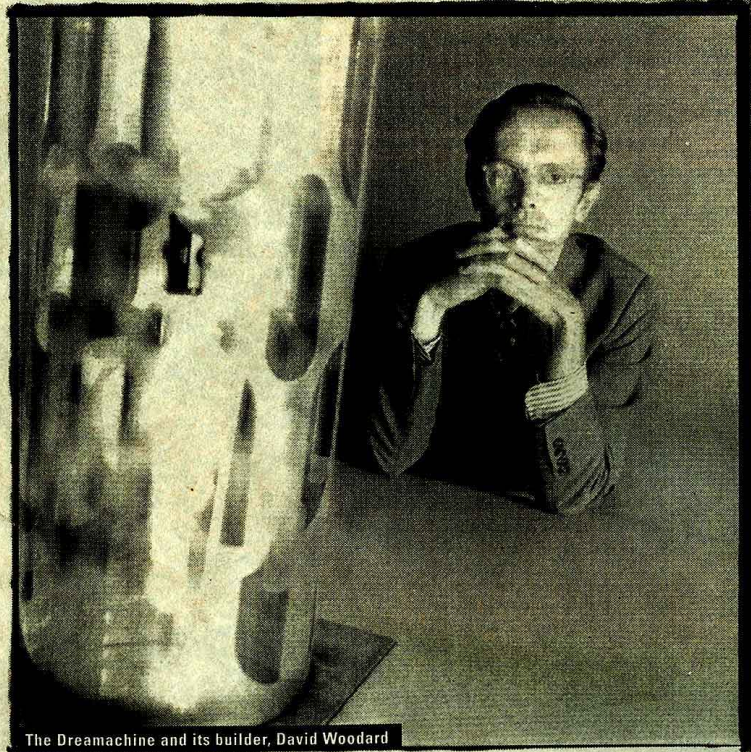
Last Tuesday night's opening of "Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts" at LACMA was a typically schmooze-worthy affair, filled with a stellar but predictable array of subterranean celebrities and nouveau bohemia. Just as predictable was the presence of a number of fanatical Christian protesters, calling themselves the Patriot Action League (PAL), a few of whom managed to infiltrate the event and distribute crudely worded handbills before being ejected by the pre-warned security force. (Letters from PAL were circulated beforehand, including one to the *Weekly* addressed to "Christian Copy Editor.") "SINNERS REPENT!" blared the fliers in huge bold type, but as one read on, something seemed a bit odd. Sure, it said, Burroughs' promotion of "drug addiction and homosexuality" is pretty bad, but the real problem is a seemingly innocuous device included in the show — the Dreamachine, invented by artists Brion Gysin and Ian Sommerville in the early '60s. PAL claims that the Dreamachine is responsible for the suicide of Kurt Cobain, among others, and that Burroughs, by "promoting" its use, has the ill-starred Nirvana singer's "blood on his hands."

PAL may be taking a cue from another militant Christian group, the Seattle-based Friends Understanding Kurt (FUK), which also vehemently blamed the Dreamachine for Cobain's demise. FUK spokesman Steve Newman, a born-again, reformed heroin addict and childhood friend of Kurt, claims that Cobain had become obsessed with the device, using the machine for periods of up to 72 hours at a time. (Rumor has it that a Dreamachine was found near Cobain's corpse.)

Newman also insinuates that following Cobain's death, his Dreamachine was then passed on to Hole's bassist Kristen Pfaff, with predictably deadly results. "Total bullshit," says Hole guitarist Eric Erlandson, adding that Pfaff's death "was a very obvious accidental overdose." Erlandson even questions whether Cobain ever used a Dreamachine at all, except perhaps during a brief visit to Burroughs' Lawrence, Kansas, farm in 1993.

Well-described by Newman as a "psychoactive, hallucinogenic neocortex pulsator," the Dreamachine is basically a cylinder with irregularly patterned, yet symmetrical, cutouts which spins at 80 r.p.m. around a high-wattage light. When stared at in a dark room with the eyes closed, it produces a stroboscopic "flicker" effect on the eyelids, sometimes causing intense visions and frightening perceptions that "approximate or surpass those found in the dream state."

According to David Woodard, who built Cobain's Dreamachine as well as the deluxe, all-metal unit included in "Ports of Entry," the Dreamachine's 10-flash-per-second flicker is translated by the optic nerve into a 10-hertz pulse signal — close to that which occurs in the dream state. Because the brain can't accommodate both its normal operating frequency of 5 to 6 hertz and the newly introduced 10-hertz wavelength



The Dreamachine and its builder, David Woodard

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simultaneously, and also because the 10-hertz signal is so overpowering, the entire neocortex soon gives itself over to the higher frequency, effectively putting the viewer into a dream state.

"The hallucinations," says Woodard, "are unlike those triggered by any other means that I'm aware of." In his initial experience, he says, he saw things that looked like "a perpetually metamorphosing Persian rug." A few minutes later, these patterns segued into "cinematic images from childhood — it was kind of like watching home movies." Woodard calls Newman's claims against the Dreamachine "ludicrous, at the very least," and says that of the nearly 200 machines he has built, only a "tiny fraction" have caused any kind of problems at all, "and none that I know of have resulted in this sort of... unpleasantness."

The man responsible for the exhibit, LACMA curator of photography Robert A. Sobieszek, concurs, saying that FUK's allegation that the Dreamachine has been involved in a number of suicides is "absolutely unfounded." "There is no record in history of any of that. I've interviewed everybody I know who has used it over the years,

and no one has ever even heard of anything like that." Sobieszek does acknowledge some danger, and adds that the museum "worked very strongly with the American Epilepsy Foundation." (Indeed, LACMA's Dreamachine cubicle contains a notice: "Warning! The Dreamachine's light effects may induce epileptic seizures in persons suffering from Photosensitive Syndrome, or may produce symptoms of shock in some individuals... you view the Dreamachine solely at your own risk.")

For Newman, who told *SOMA* magazine that he simply wants people to understand the dangers of the Dreamachine, LACMA's warning might seem like a victory of sorts. But Newman's goals go beyond that. FUK also encourages users of heroin or other narcotics to enter some form of licensed 12-step program. Another goal is that of proselytizing the imminent return of Jesus, by "introducing fans of Kurt's to the true Nirvana." Newman goes further, reassuring fans that "the qualities that they like most in Kurt will come back to them in the form of the second coming of Christ."

Woodard, meanwhile, continues to build new Dreamachines. Of Newman's quixotic crusade, he says, "I can see how immoderate drug use combined with a profound personal trauma, like the sudden death of a close friend, could inspire this sort of pseudo-religious posturing and misguided finger wagging. Unfortunately, by concentrating on this Dreamachine nonsense he's creating a morbid and unhealthy interest in what is actually a useful tool for the expansion of human consciousness, while neurotically avoiding the *real* issues behind these incredibly tragic events." ■

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