

STROLLIN

ULONG

MINDIN

MY

OHN

BIZNISS

TERRY URBahn'S

THE KARAOKEs

"Um...arr..."

...I couldn't quite...was it art?"



We want you as a new recruit

Cover
Terry Urbahn
SPEECHless

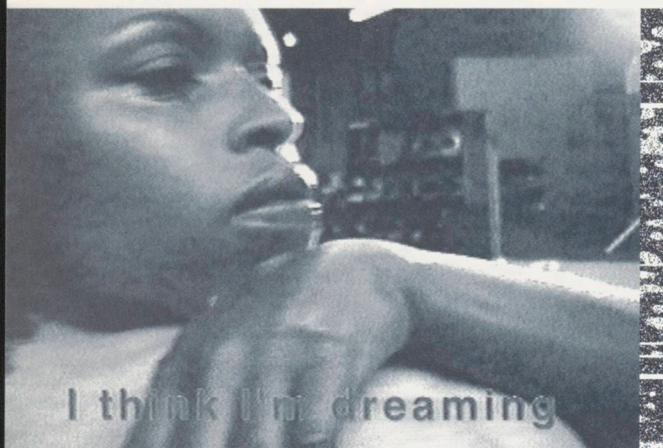
In the ghetto



Urban Cowboy

Kirsty Cameron
& Rachel Shearer
Wine, women and song

Anthony Bedard
That's the time



Feedback

Terry Urbahn is New Zealand art's resident jukebox conceptualist, and in *The Karaoke*s he's playing your song. A swirly retro sideshow built from spinning mirror-balls, a beckoning microphone, and a choose-your-own menu of no-frills videos, Urbahn's latest installation is not your usual hi-tech interactive display. If karaoke translates as 'empty orchestra', then Urbahn has turned the gallery into an empty stage awaiting its cast, a gaudy, low-rent showcase for any emerging talent. That's *you*.

And this is an unsettling invitation, because while we're accustomed to museums popping every bureaucratic and technological rivet to educate and 'enrich' us - all that virtuous push-button

Jeff Belt

Do they owe us a living?

Michael Morley

Hamster baby



pedagogy, all those customer surveys - the prospect that we might join in with an artist for the sheer, momentary pleasure of it is ... well, it's just *not done*. So Urbahn uses karaoke in the fine old Fluxus spirit, to pry open some irreverent, even scandalous questions about the when and where of art. What if 'art' were not the stuff on show but the human noise it sparks - not a dutiful solo performance but a kind of amiable singalong? That buzz of irreverence is what makes gallery-goers skirt the microphone so nervously, as if round some enticing but illicit object - like a poker machine in a monastery.

You've heard the case against karaoke: that it's phony and parasitic, a tacky fad for no-talent

amateurs, leaching off an original that no new performance can hope to match. What sets Urbahn apart from most talent quest commissars is that he prizes a performance not for its slavish adherence to an 'original' ("just like the real thing" enthuses the gruesome emcee of TV's Stars in Their Eyes), but the way it wreaks creative havoc on the Authorized Version. His hero, perhaps, is the Jim Carrey of *The Cable Guy*, a pitch-black comedy wherein Carrey's shriekingly loony karaoke rendition of "Somebody to Love" redeems the song by wringing its neck. And this should sound familiar: What was 20th century New Zealand art if not karaoke Modernism, an attempt to play along - or better, play the fool - with chart-topping international art?

Michael Hodgson

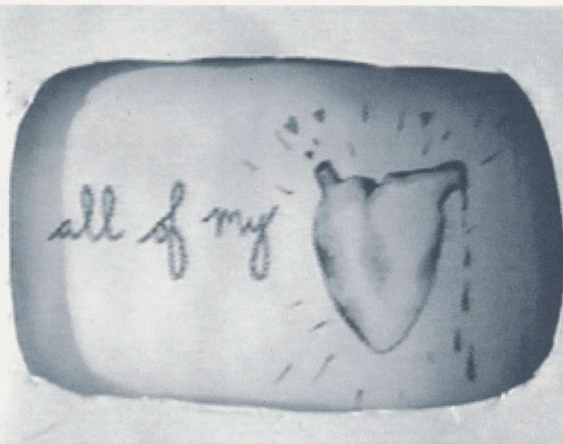
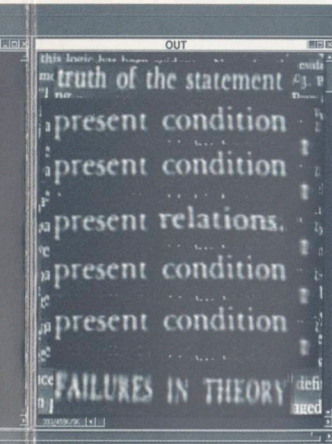
DIS/CONNECT
(the browser)

Violet Faigan

The first cut is the deepest

Nobuhira Narumi

Dogcam project



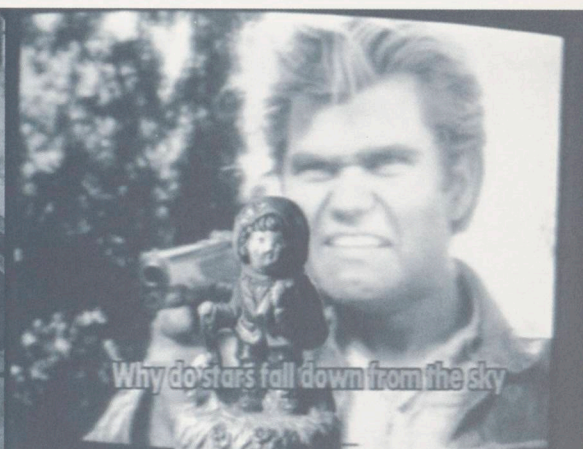
Some scenes, then, from the Great Urbahn Video Show. Urbahn commissioned nine videos from like-minded artists, with his rounding out the top ten, and in the best it's as if Ready to Roll and Funniest Home Videos have tumbled into the same studio. Low-fi and even lower budget, Leah Singer's clip cranks up to overload the accidental surrealism of karaoke's song-and-video combos. A veteran vidiot, Ronnie van Hout wallows in the morbid glamour of Elvis impersonators (Uncanny Coincidence Department notes that there's a karaoke booth across the street from the King's Memphis mansion). And Violet Faigan's down-home strip-show, with kitschy-cute glockenspiel soundtrack, sends up the lost-love genre even as it sends it into

heartfelt new territory. Handycam Carusos and natural-born crooners, Urbahn and Co. run comic riffs on MTV slickness and the notion of the artist as star. Celebrity egomania gets replayed as farce.

As in all good farce, though, there's a serious proposal embodied in the comedy: namely, that art's an act of playful, passionate amateurism, enjoyed in the swim of day-to-day life - not something pedigreed, authentic and pure, but rather sociable, rough-and-ready, and authentically impure. True fakery. Karaoke is, after all, an amateur's game - that's why pros scorn it - and video, too, is the people's choice. What Urbahn loves about both is the

Ronnie van Hout
with Into the Void
John Whore

Leah Singer
Close to you



comic friction thrown off between the old, known scenes and songs, and the eccentric, off-key, oddly tender variations we ring on them in the shower, in the kitchen, or up there at the mike. Witness the lounge act extraordinary that Urbahn turns on in his living room, preening and pouting along to (what else?) "Speechless".

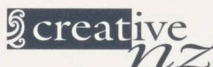
So Urbahn's not slumming, nor does he assume that 'low culture' demands sniffily high-handed critique. Indeed, his brand of D.I.Y anthropology (Urbahnthropology?) has always drawn him away from cramped categories in wider and wilder spirals of association, leaving high and low in a state of swirl. A musician and a veteran of the museums trade, Urbahn uses the white cube as a guitarist might use an amp: to channel and

magnify blasts of strange, fleeting human noise, whether fragments of a found diary (as in Tracey's World), or the lingo of subcultures (as in Alien Space), or the raw noise of Taranaki metal bands (as in AMPitheatre, a concert series he organised in Govett-Brewster Gallery).

Or your very own voice. In the makeshift musical democracy of the Karaoke, the onlooker becomes the performer, the singer remakes the song, and that surge of sound curls round on itself in a wave of generous, unruly feedback. The least you can do is sing along.

Justin Paton

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The Karaoke toured New Zealand throughout 1998:

Dunedin Public Art Gallery

The Physics Room, Christchurch

The Suter Gallery, Nelson

Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

The Film Centre, Wellington

Waikato Museum of Art & History, Hamilton

This catalogue has been produced on the
occasion of the project's showing at
Auckland Art Gallery

19 December 1998 - 21 February 1999

Curator: Ron Brownson

Designer: Fiona Wilson

Preparators: Mei Hill, Glen Campbell,

Rod MacLeod, Michael Duffin

ISBN 0 86463 232 0

