

# FORT THUNDER

## UNO SGRANATO IMMAGINARIO IN UN'AURA DI FOLLIA

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La scena artistica di *downtown* New York gode degli influssi provenienti da piccole realtà circostanti come Providence, una grigia cittadina post-industriale del New England, sede di una delle più prestigiose scuole di arti e design d'America, la Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

Nel 1995, due studenti della RISD, Mat Brinkman e Brian Chippendale, si trasferiscono in una ex fabbrica tessile nel quartiere di Olneyville, la riempiono di vecchi giocattoli e la ribattezzano Fort Thunder. Ai due si aggiungono, tra gli altri, Leif Goldberg e Jim Drain, ma tra i frequentatori abituali di questa *factory* vanno ricordati Ara Peterson, Hisham Baaroocha, i

Black Dice e futuri membri dei Paper Rad. Fort Thunder diviene il centro di aggregazione per la comunità artistica locale, vero contraltare alla scuola, attrezzato con un laboratorio per la stampa e una sala concerti, in pieno spirito *do it yourself*. In soli sei anni di attività, prima di lasciare il posto a un centro commerciale, Fort Thunder diventa un punto di riferimento per la cultura *underground* internazionale, fucina delle più disparate attività artistiche e performative, con una particolare predilezione per il fumetto. A mantenere viva la memoria di quegli anni rimangono le fanzine come Paper Rodeo, dischi, foto e centinaia di poster e flyer che pubblicizzano in-

contri di wrestling tra creature aliene fluorescenti o concerti *noise* di band come Lightning Bolt e Forcefield. A fare di Fort Thunder un luogo leggendario è la surreale aura di follia che trasuda dalle sue pareti. Evidenti influenze derivano dalla *outsider art*, dalla fantascienza, dalla psichedelia e dal fumetto *underground*, da Zap a Gary Panter. Tuttavia, è uno sgranato immaginario lo-fi, da vecchio videogioco, a rendere unica l'estetica Fort Thunder; peculiare di una generazione indifferente ai riflettori e insofferente alle forme di intrattenimento di massa a cui ancora oggi questi artisti, nonostante i successi, non sembrano riuscire ad adattarsi.

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The artistic scene in Downtown New York is influenced by all sorts of minor situations from the surrounding area. One of these is Providence, a rather grey little post-industrial town in New England, but also home of one of the United States' most prestigious schools of art and design, the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

In 1995, two students from the RISD, Mat Brinkman and Brian Chippendale, moved into a disused textiles factory in the neighbourhood of Olneyville, filled it with old toys and renamed it Fort Thunder. Others who joined the original duo included Leif Goldberg and Jim Drain, but Ara Peterson, Hisham Baaroocha, the Black Dice and the future

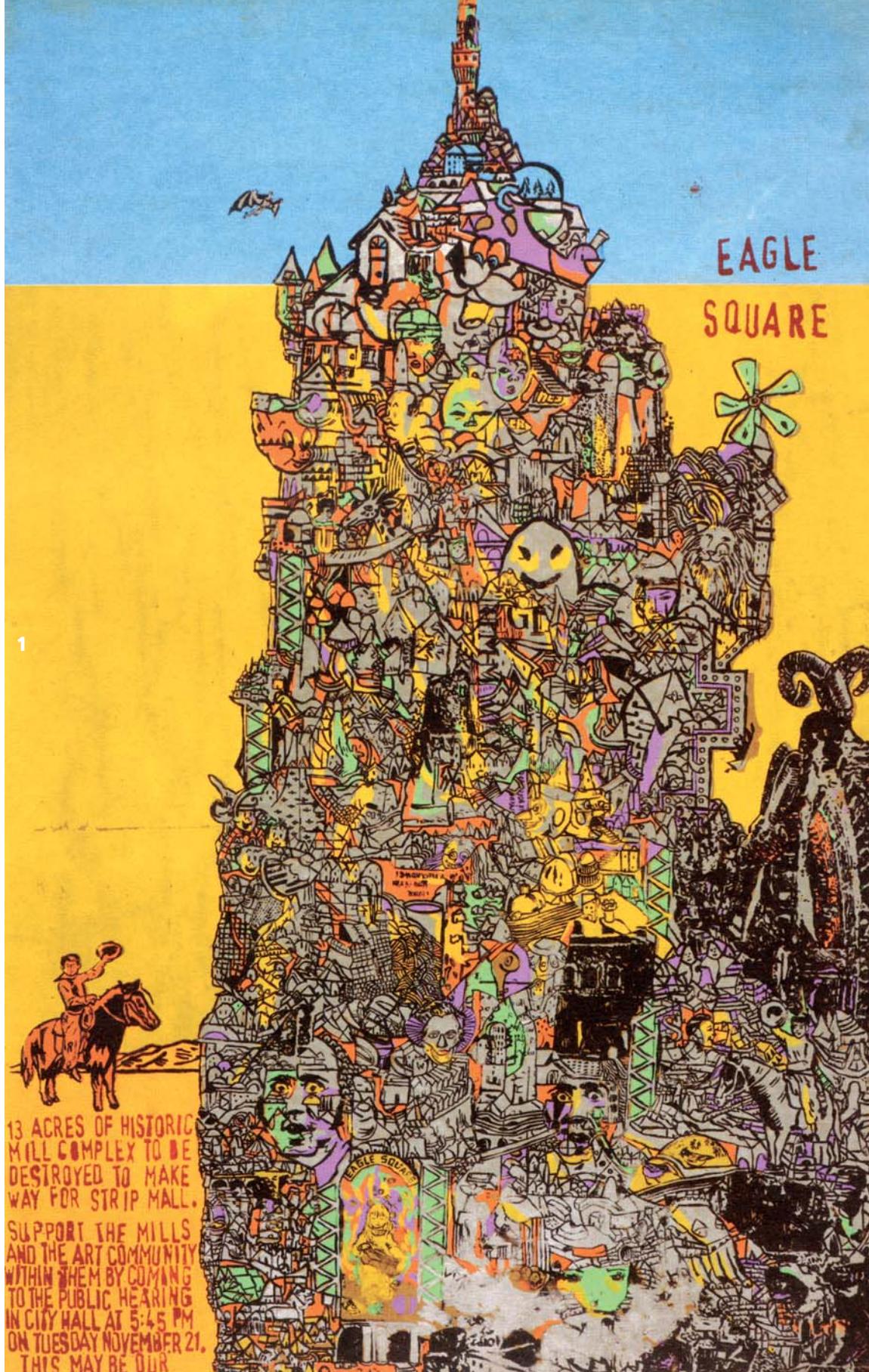
members of Paper Rad also numbered among the usual crowd that could be found hanging out at the factory.

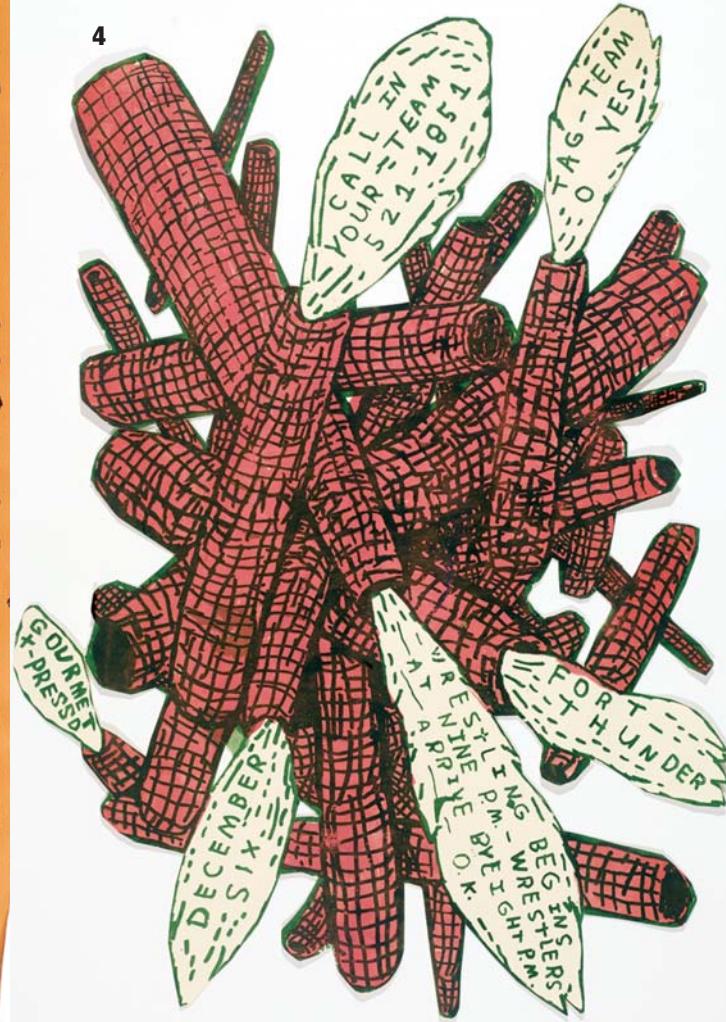
As Fort Thunder became the natural meeting place for the local artistic community, a veritable alternative to the prestigious school itself, it set up a press centre and a concert hall, in the finest spirit of Do It Yourself. In just six years, until it closed down to make way for a shopping centre, Fort Thunder became a landmark for international underground culture, a forge for all sorts of different artistic and performing arts, with a special soft spot for cartoons. The memory of those years is kept alive by fanzines like Paper Rodeo, CDs, photos and literally hundreds of posters and flyers publicising wrestling bouts between fluorescent alien creatures or noise concerts of bands like Lightning Bolt and Forcefield.

What made Fort Thunder into a legendary venue was the surrealistic aura of folly that hung around its very walls. There are evident influences at work from outsider art, science fiction, psychedelia and underground cartoons, from Zap to Gary Panter. Yet it is a grainy lo-fi imagery, like something out of an old videogame, that sets Fort Thunder's aesthetics apart: a peculiarity of a generation that cared nothing for the limelight and was scathing about all forms of mass entertainment, to which these artists still seem incapable of adapting today, however successful they have become in the meantime.

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### A GRAINY IMAGERY IN AN AURA OF FOLLY





1 Brian Chippendale, *Eagle Square*, 2000.  
Courtesy of the artist

2 Mat Brinkman, *Melt Banana*, 14 Oct 1998.  
Courtesy of Brian Chippendale

3 Brian Chippendale, *Ruins*, 26 Jun 1998.  
Courtesy of the artist

4 Jim Drain, *Wrestling at Fort Thunder*,  
6 Dec 1997. Courtesy of the artist

5 Mat Brinkman, *The Haters*, 4 Aug 1997.

Courtesy of Brian Chippendale

6 Leif Goldberg, *Spaceheads*, 14 Jul 2000.

Courtesy of Brian Chippendale

7 Brian Chippendale, *Lighting Bolt*,

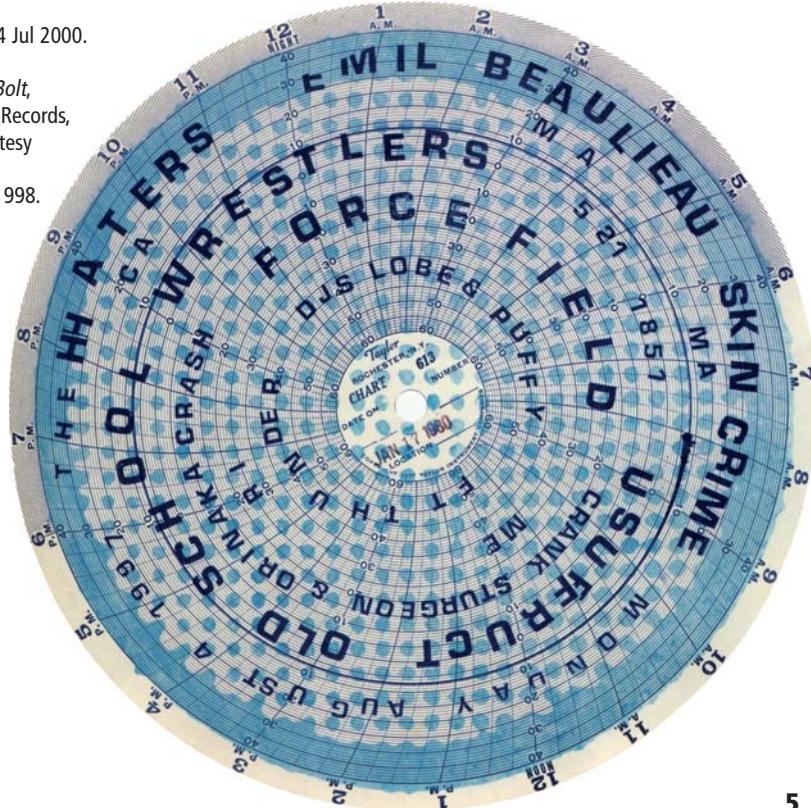
The Yellow Record, 1997, Load Records,

Providence, Rhode Island. Courtesy

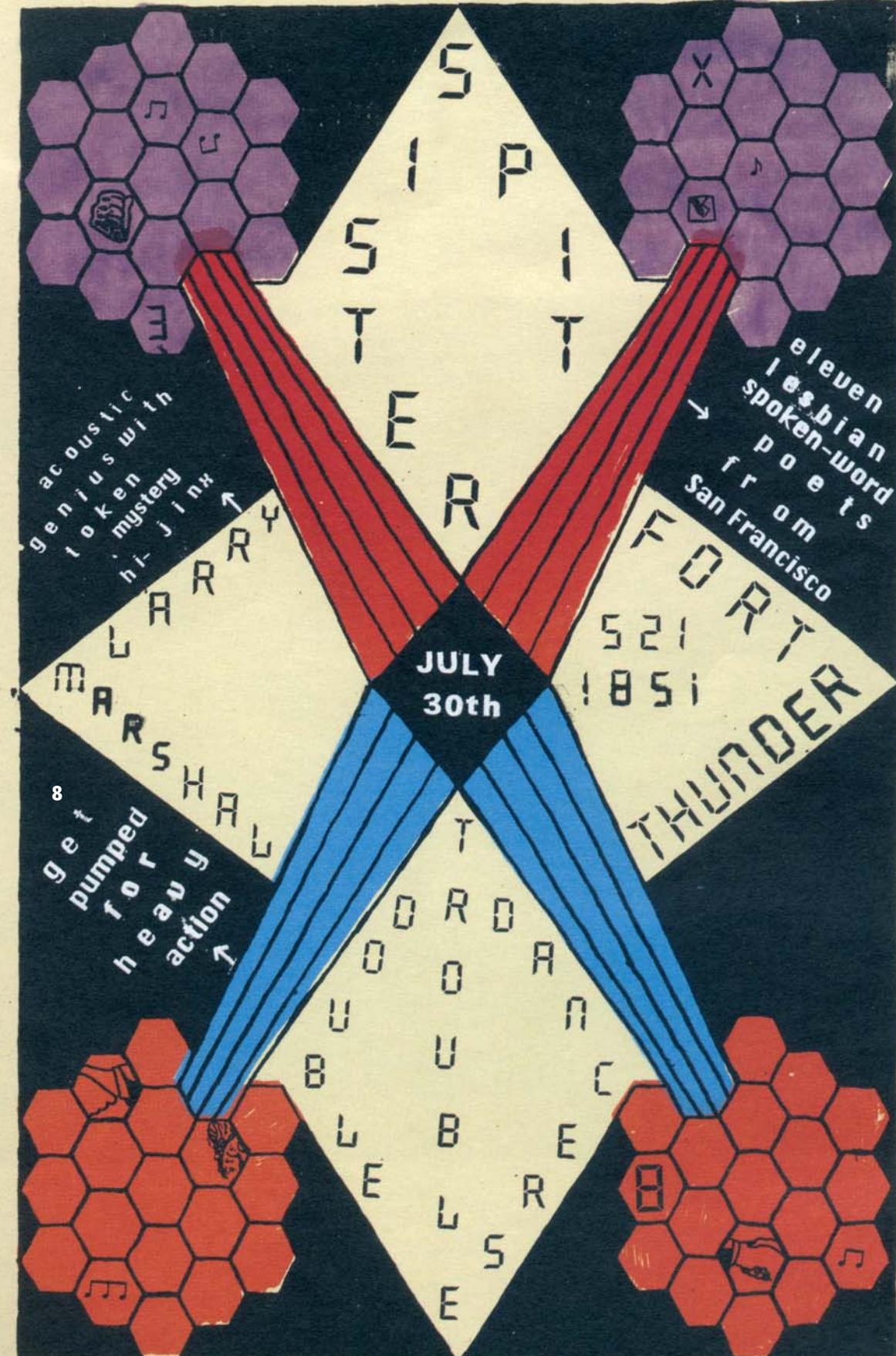
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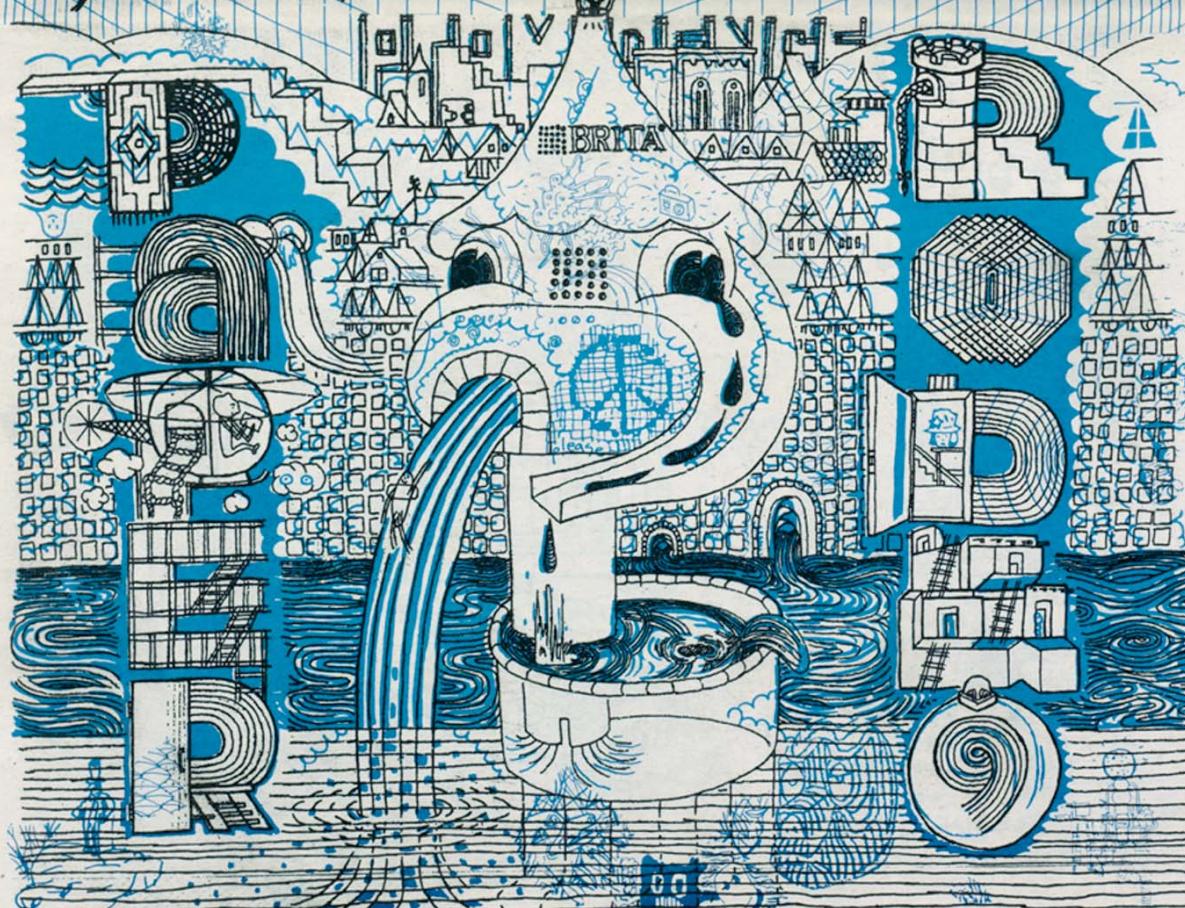
8 Jim Drain, *Sister Spit*, 30 Jul 1998.

Courtesy of Brian Chippendale



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9 Mat Brinkman, *Paper Rodeo*, Sept 2001.  
Courtesy of the artist

10 Leif Goldberg, *Lightning Bolt*, 27 Apr 2000.  
Courtesy of Brian Chippendale

11 Mat Brinkman, *The Goblins*, 26 Jul 1997.  
Courtesy of the artist

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