



Tom Burrows / RECENT SCULPTURE

The Capilano Review interviewed Tom Burrows on the day of his May opening at the Pender Street Gallery. Ann Rosenberg, Annette Hurtig and Peter McGuigan (neighbour, friend and helper) were present.

While Tom Burrows' work is occasionally similar to that of Barry Cogswell, it has a very different basis. There is a tension created *between* the interviews that asks questions but cannot answer.

IMAGES: THE TEMPTATIONS OF MAO TSE-TUNG

detail '*Hermaphrodite Meditating on the Heart Chakra*' (see below).

Tom laughing.

The Temptations of Mao Tse-Tung at The Pender Street Gallery.

A Log Floating: Life Cast of a Hermaphrodite Meditating on the Heart Chakra, 1976-77, mixed media, ht. 2', l. 6', w. 22".

Cement Pyramid in 32 Pieces, 1976-77, when assembled pieces form a pyramid with a 5' base and a height of 28".

Another Surrealist Trick: Air, Earth, Fire, Water, Oysters, mixed media, ht. 6', l. 8', w. 6'.

Yellow Phallus, 1976-77, mixed media, ht. 41", diam. approx. 25".

Chinese Landscape, 1976-77, mixed media, approximately 3'-5' high. (Tops are cut from Hornby Rock).

house at Hornby

Yellow Phallus in studio at Hornby

Cement Pyramid in 32 Pieces on Hornby

Chinese Landscape on Hornby

Another Surrealist Trick in preparation before exhibition

Photography: 1-2, 4-8, Fred Douglas, 3, Ann Rosenberg, 9-14, Ursula Connelly

INTERVIEW

AR *The Temptations of Mao Tse-Tung* is a provocative title for a show. What did you mean by it?

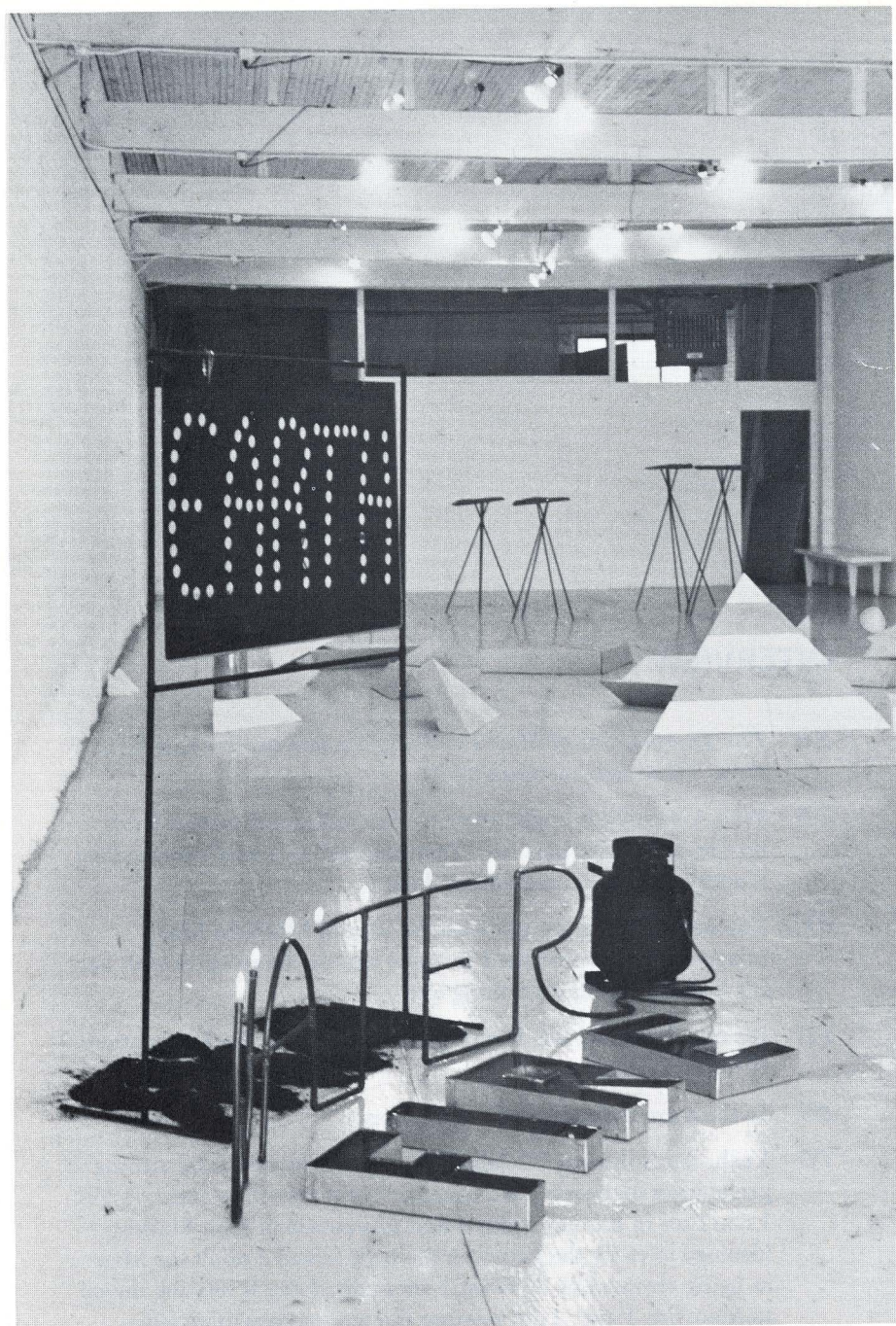
TB Well, I thought it might attract a few restaurant owners from up the street. The idea for "Temptations" — I don't know when it arose . . . can you remember, Peter?

PMc You were playing around with the idea of Madame Mao's image . . . and you realized that she was the temptation with her silk bed sheets and everything else.

TB It's on a level like the Temptations of Christ or the Temptations of St. Anthony. . . .

AR So these are the *seductive* temptations.

TB Yeah, that's the way I relate to them . . . I do seduce by turning proletarian materials (like concrete) into seductive ones. . . . Yet I don't see in this any inducement to a person of high Marxist ideology to enjoy the glitter on the surface and I don't see Mao as being tempted by it. What I am really doing is relating myself to Mao Tse-Tung; I am relating the temptations to myself.



AR O.K. now the individual *temptations*. Which one comes first?

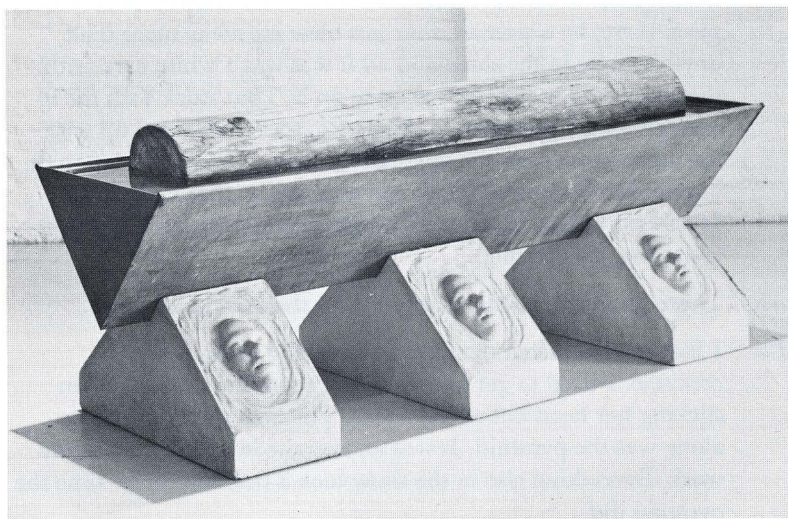
TB Actually, the earliest things in the show belong to *A Log Floating*: the casts of faces below the trough. They were done at a time when I knew a person who made light casts for the theatrical world. I had to alter the process to get it to work for cement, but I got excited about making a concrete image of a person. So I worked first with masks and from the masks I began to build up to the solid face. It was a problem to find a person capable of lying underneath a mask of dental gel and plaster with just straws sticking out of the nose while keeping the face together, but I had a very close friend called Sherry who is experienced in meditation. She could put herself into a trance-like state, keeping a very beneficent expression. So I was able to get a cast of her without any telltale wrinkles of agony and take it from there. We were really close to each other; we were going through this process of trying to be each other, hermaphroditic in attitude to each other. And then a long time ago in the Conceptual Art show at the Vancouver Art Gallery there was a piece there, by a woman, that just blew me away more than anything else in the show and all it was was a white card with the words "a log floating" written on it. That stuck with me so strongly that I put the two things together and ended up with the log floating over the meditating head. It was intended to be hermaphroditic, yet it hangs out as a strong phallic number. . . . It's a heavy piece in terms of weight and yet the log is floating, levitating, meditating.

AR There are lines around Sherry's face; she's like a Medusa.

TB I just tried to soften the material, making water relate to concrete. I tried to get a surface like a swimmer makes when sticking her head out of the water. The next piece that came along was the pyramid. It was an exercise in making myself do work. Everything else in the show took a fraction of the time the pyramid did.

AR You've been making pyramids for a long time. . . .

TB Yeah, but I'm not a pyramid freak. I'm into it as a basic elemental constructivist image, a universal symbol. The pyramid is something that I just wanted to do again a different way. I am dragging my pyramid like other people drag other things through their lives; it's my particular cross to bear. I see the pyramid as the toy element of architecture. You are taking blocks and *imposing* on them like power structures impose on you. Real construction on the work you see here began after I participated in Habitat. I was blown out by the pragmatic realities and came back thinking Third World, wanting to get into natural materials. I used white aggregate with white cement with an added tint. Making the *Cement Pyramid in 32 Pieces*, I was involved in cosmetic alchemy. . . .



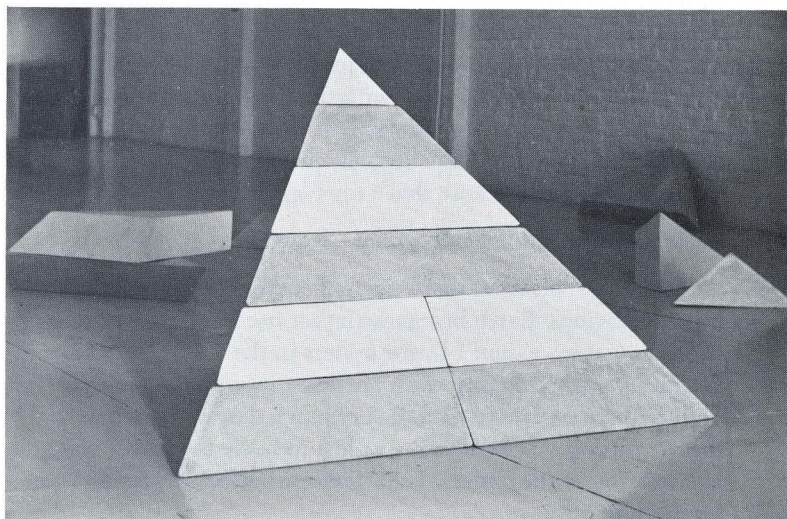
PMc Yeah . . . it's alchemy in the fact that casting lets you spend so much time transforming those basic materials into an object of lasting value, like gold or a pyramid. . . .

TB I really worked on the colour, worked on the surface. I polished the pieces with car Simoniz. . . .

AR But what's the Pyramid got to do with Mao Tse-Tung?

TB You mean it's too Egyptian? O.K., a one-line justification would be that it has to do with proletarian materials and a kind of power, [not only the power of transmutation], but [also] the power of being able to impose your architectural taste [on the populace as the Egyptians did, and as Mao did]. . . .

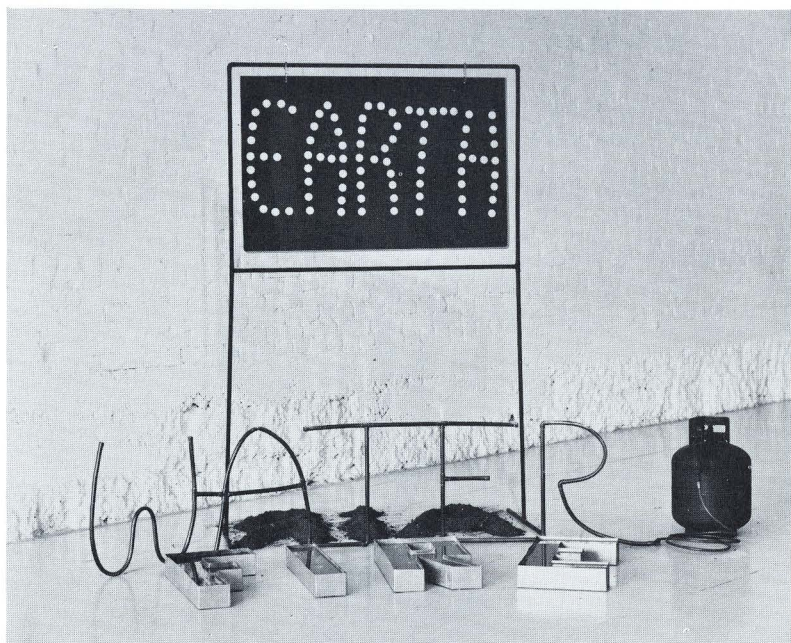
AR What about the *elements* piece?



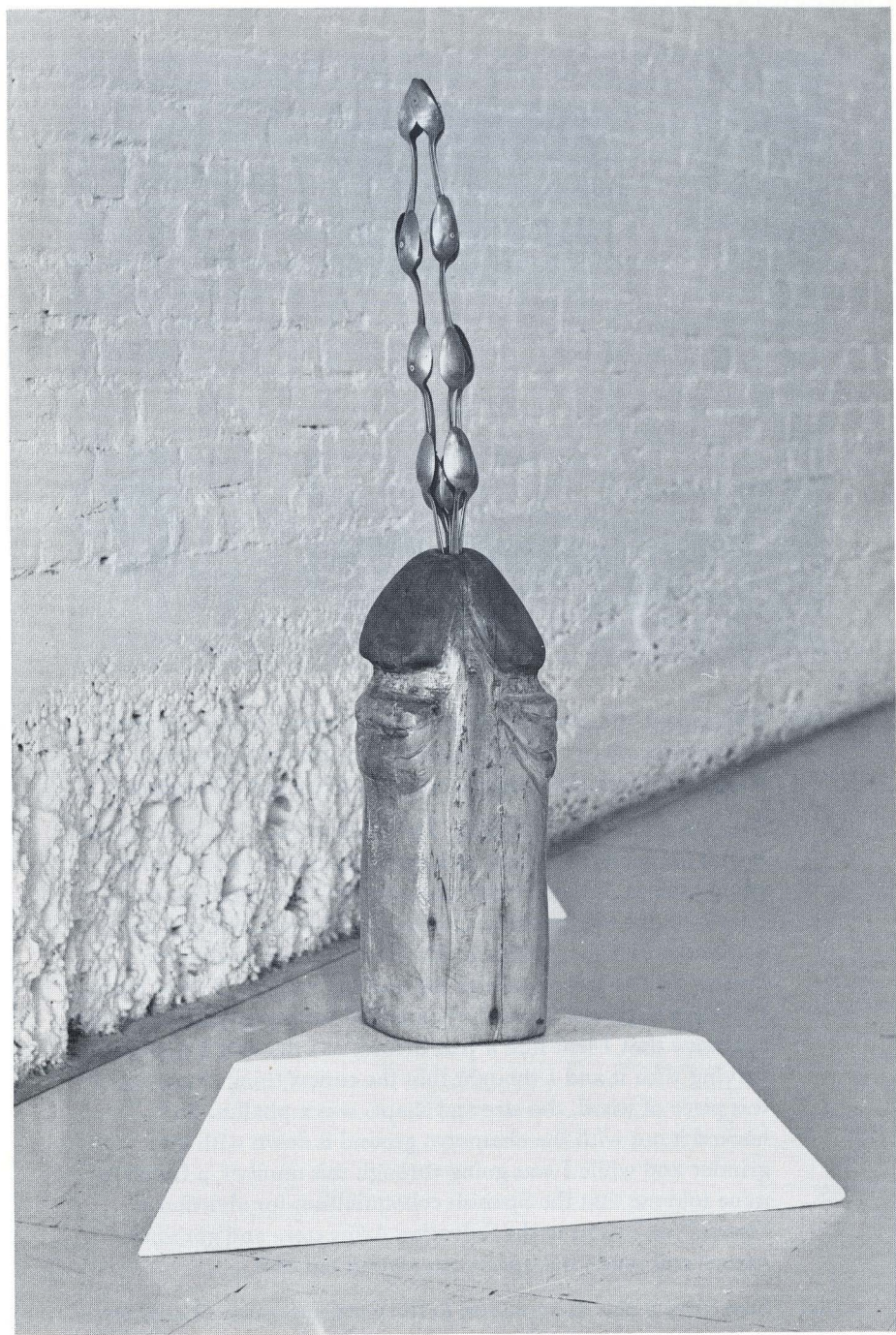
TB *Another Surrealist Trick: Air, Earth, Fire, Water, Oysters* is a *total* power trip, because here I was able to step out so far that I could transpose the elements . . . although *surrealism* is something that embarrasses me. This piece came about when I was doing plumbing in my house about a year ago and Jerry Pethick came in flashing on what a beautiful material copper tubing was and finally I got around to making something out of it. I've always been playing around with propane and I figured that I could write the word "water" with the tubing and let *fire* come out of it. I was surprised how easy it worked; the thing went together in a day. I had fire coming out of water; I could have *left* it at *firewater* because that's my *biggest* temptation . . .

AR Let's not make this a confessional. (Laughter.)

TB . . . but I went on from there to create other elements. It just became obvious. Earth becomes air; air becomes earth; fire becomes water — then I threw oysters in the water troughs because I wanted to introduce an element of sexual tension. I find that oysters create a smell very much like sperm when they're rotting. . . . Besides it was just too easy the way it was and by throwing in the oysters, I shattered the strong transmutation level of the piece.



- AR Although it will also transmute in its own way, like it will be a real organic piece by the time you're finished at this gallery. It's going to be here for a month; watch it *move* out. (Laughter.)
- TB The *Yellow Phallus* was next. The phallus was. . . I don't know how it happened. Anyway on Hornby there was yellow cedar going around. It came from a log that was the same size as the ones I cut for my fireplace. On one level I burn stuff like that; on another, it's for sculpture; it's the traditional sculptor's dream. So I'm looking at this log one day, on one of those boring February days and a friend of mine had just returned an electric chainsaw that I lent him a year before, so I thought I'd get into carving with it and I thought that the easiest thing to get out of this piece of wood, this size and shape, was a phallus. So I hacked it out with the chainsaw, ground it down with my grinder and while I was going through this number, a friend of mine told me that the Spanish colloquialism for abortion is "spoon", so I went to the Salvation Army store and got some spoons and made this *spoon ejaculation* out of it. . .
- AR Sure gives a new connotation to the word *spooning*. (Laughter.)



TB Wait, it was hard, *very hard*. I'd never done a phallus in my life and it was good to do, maybe it was the most personal thing I was dealing with and soon the title began to happen for me when I was sitting around with Peter discussing Madame Mao and I thought of, you know, a yellow cedar and an oriental phallus and I thought, *Temptations of Mao Tse-Tung*, f a r O U T ! And I tripped out on the fact that I was doing a piece of real kitchen hippie art, spoons and hippie art, right? I had blackberry wine around — just the right colour for the cap — so I dunked it in. Yeah, I just did that whole earthy, hippie number which *repulses* me:

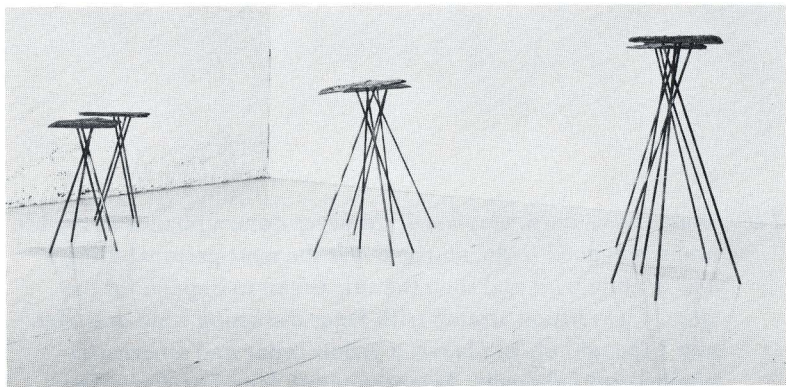
(LAUGHTER.)

AR I might have to edit this out. . . . (Laughter.)

TB Use it! Use it! Use it, really, because it is true. Because in some ways [the hippie trip] is my *nemesis*. I think in terms of some kind of international fine art network and I live in the midst of pleasure fairs. I've never been able to get over that boundary. . . .

AR *Chinese Landscape* is more straightforward. . . .

TB The title just came, *Chinese Landscape*, for that's what it is. It was the easiest piece I did and, in some ways maybe the most successful and [yet it too is a dichotomy] : it is almost a return to the Constructivist (St. Martin's) level and it is organically constructed out of rocks from Hornby landscape. I had a hard time with the copper tubing because I find it too close to a standard justification of sculpture in bronze. And to take beautiful stone away from the landscape could be sacrilege — you really have to stand behind doing a number like that. The whole show was composed to deal with the tremendous space of the Pender Street Gallery.



AR Where do you keep the stuff on Hornby?

TB I have a hard time. It's just spread around.

PMc You're just totally disrespectful of your own work.

TB Yeah, I guess I am. I've let some horrible things happen. The pleasure is in making them and I've got the documentation. I realized about a decade ago that I can't cart grand pianos around the world with me. I can keep my life from being cluttered up by forgetting about my works once they are documented. And not in my furthest dreams do I imagine selling anything out of this show. It's a trip working on this beautiful blank page of a stage. I obviously don't sell things to make a living; I hustle around. (Laughter.)

AR I really like the way the various *temptations* are so different, yet fit together. When you get right down to it, the phallus and the pyramid belong together. . . . But I'm still wanting to know more about the intention of the title for the exhibition. In relating yourself to Mao, are you saying that the role of the artist and the role of the politician are similar?

TB Only if the artist wants power. Some artists want power; others want money; others want to carry out their fantasies. . . .

AR O.K., what do *you* want?

TB I don't want the responsibility of power; I don't want the responsibility of money. So maybe I just want to carry out my own fantasies.

PMc What about the responsibility of change?

TB The responsibility of change is heavy enough. . . .

AR You want the responsibility of *self-change*?

TB Sure, it's like show and tell . . . the reason I call myself an artist is that I show and tell every now and then and tell people I've changed a little bit. The basic Maoist credo is a *revolution of the mind*. You can say . . . materials revolve, evolve, go through transmutations [but] the materials are secondary to how the mind changes.

AR Look, you're offering Maoist dicta [or the visual equivalent]. What you do is self-contradictory, open-ended, poetic, seemingly non-dictatorial. My problem is that I think in China the ideas you are using to speak for you could be used against you. . . .

TB Well, I'm not living in China and anyway, I'm dealing with my *own seductions*, as I say.



AR I knew you when you were involved in your formal training as an artist, but I forget if I ever knew if you did art as a kid.

TB When I was young my older sister was into art. She was good, really good, and I was just an ordinary little boy who liked to play with guns and that sort of trip. But she kept on showing me how to use the crayons so I could get volume. When I was about eleven she married Tony Onley. I wasn't a good student . . . I was just tripping around going for hikes, collecting snakes, stuff like that, and Tony took me out and tried to show me how to paint landscape water colours. I did one, brought it home; my mother hung it on the wall . . . a friend of my father's saw it and bought it for a quarter. He thought it was really good. After my sister died I took all her paintings from the basement and hung them in a cabin out in the bushes . . . I tried to paint a bit myself, but it was like a "Come-up-and-see-my-etchings" *come-on*. The cabin burned down with all those paintings and I felt really bad. . . . Then I started writing poetry because in poetry you can justify your spelling. (Laughter.) I did a year of university in

Ontario and after that I worked for a stockbrokerage firm. Then I went to England, worked at a Wimpey Bar, met a friend who had come back from Morocco with a bunch of marijuana which, in 1961, I thought was the same thing as *junk*, but I got turned on to it and one day, about the second day I was stoned, I was walking along the street and lo and behold in this crummy front window there was this Picasso print and we were totally ripped . . . and this print just made so much sense to me, Picasso became an idol. So then I got stoned and went to the Tate Gallery, you know the rest. . . .

AR UBC and St. Martin's. . . . Is there anything English about this show?

TB Oh, basic reference points like, "Thou shalt not have a pedestal," the randomness of the placement of the pyramid that's not together, the placement of the phallus *in* the pyramid setting, the material factor concerning what casting is about. . . . [I admit that St. Martin's is] still my strongest reference point, [but on the other hand] I have broken free of St. Martin's' abstraction and constructivism. [I'm in touch with people like] Dean Ellis, George Sawchuck, and Gerry Pethick has pushed my head around.

AR The last question is, and I ask it because when I asked Barry Cogswell the same question, he said, "AAARGH," then tackled the answer! What's art, Tom?

TB To me art is philosophy presented in terms of material. But it is very hard to define personal philosophy and make an analogy to whatever you require.

AR Are you trying to say that when you are into a good personal philosophy you can make fire into water?

TB I just did it. . . .

AR Sure, okay, but let's face it you're just human.

TB Yeah, there's oysters in the water.

