

Rape me. Rape me, again.

LYRICS FROM THE EPONYMOUS SONG FROM
NIRVANA'S ALBUM *IN UTERO*.

Natascha Stellmach's project dealing with both the myth and the remains of the late Kurt Cobain broaches a subject that is at once sacred and profane. I was 15 when Kurt Cobain killed himself. In my adolescent mind it felt like it made sense. As an artist he was someone at the absolute edge, his eyeballs pressed against the glass. To break through was the only natural option. Upon his death throngs of grunge-ridden teens mourned the passing of someone mythical and dear.

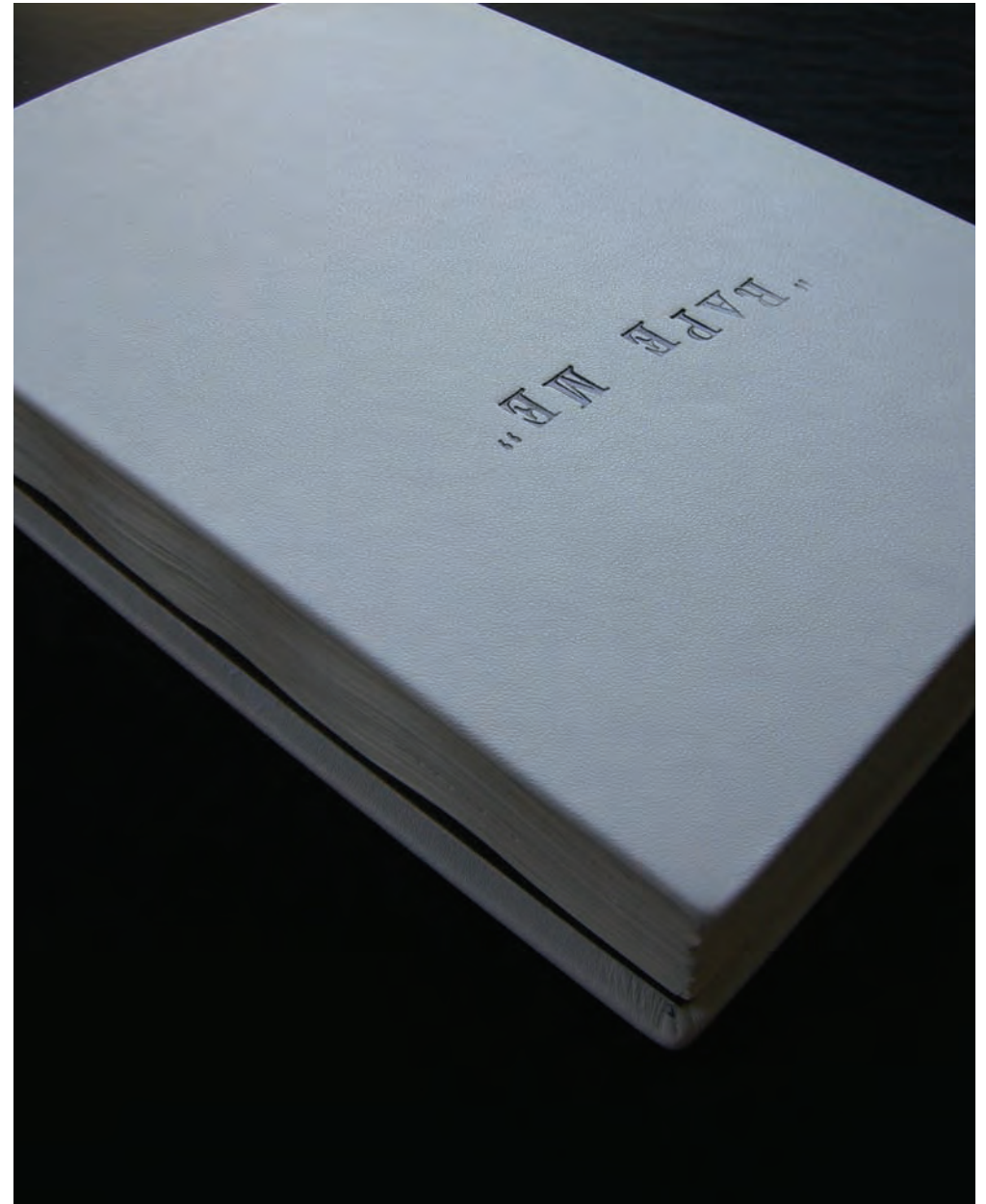
In 2008 at a gallery in Berlin, a neatly rolled spliff sat in a vitrine next to a cigarette case that bore the word "Gone". Up close, upon the original altar within the gallery, the ground was hallowed. Opinion letters, editorials, diatribes and news exposés on the meaning and ethical implications of the work immediately proliferated.

Complete Burning Away is the epilogue to Natascha Stellmach's earlier project entitled *Set me free* presented at WAGNER + PARTNER, Berlin. In this exhibition the artist claimed to have been given the ashes of the late Cobain and made a public offering to smoke and thereby "set free" the musician's spirit from the shackles of pain, conspiracy and the media circus he was subjected to during his life. The ensuing public and media response to Stellmach's work was carnivalesque, complete with death threats and an intense, cult-like following. Stellmach's oft-cited quote as to how she came about the ashes was disclosed in her gallery press release: "That's confidential and kind of magic". It peppered the scene with an immediate question as to the authenticity of the relic.

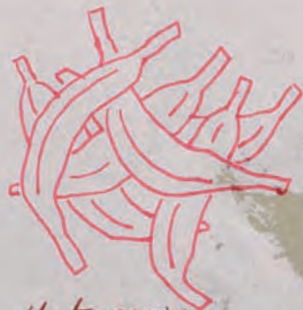
With *Complete Burning Away* Stellmach unveils a Frankensteinian monster embodied in a theatre of truth, faith and incredulity. Each limb of the unwieldy creature represents a direction the project took as it attained a life of its own, recording and embodying the disproportionate responses to the artist's project. The first compilation of evidence in the exhibition is found in the work entitled *Overture*. Comprised of user-generated content collected as a response to *Set me free*, the video's quick-cut MTV editing makes for an orgy of disinformation with wide-ranging discrepancies that bring the integrity

of journalism under the microscope. The spectacular reports on Stellmach's project are spliced together from an extraordinary demographic: a montage of individual to corporate rants, from a webcam bedroom video by a prepubescent boy to Google channel updates by a glamazon reporter. YouTube talk shows abound. At one low point, a man follows an amateur reporter while doing a Nazi-style Lambeth walk. As the reporter invites the performer to say Natascha Stellmach's name he coughs out her name and spits, timing the phonetics to emphasize the artist's Germanness. Whilst being a guttural revoke to the artist personally, it also points to the interest in the fact that Stellmach is a first-generation Australian born to German immigrants and known for her artworks dealing with her own otherness growing up in Australia and the purposeful fictionalizing or reworking of her past. The overall tone of *Overture* is one of anger, shock, irony and spiraling absurdity.

The next dossier of collated public vitriol as well as supportive rhetoric takes the form of a leather-bound artist book. Entitled "*Rape Me*" the work takes its name from the self-destructive hit song from Nirvana's last major album *In Utero* from 1993. Stellmach purchased a copy of Cobain's posthumously released private diaries, *Kurt Cobain: Journals* (2002). She whitewashed each individual page with Typex, the spiral-bound lining and margin details still visible in the artist's copy of the copy. Stellmach eliminated much of the author's writing and used the cleared tablet to create her own diary of emotional responses to *Set me free*, transcribed in the words of those who wrote to her, to the gallery or in online blogs and chatrooms. These disparate messages are each inscribed by hand by some 300 other people, non-authors of the original messages, myself included. With ponderances conveying aggressive, as well as inquisitive, considerate and altogether touching language, the collation helps establish the spectrum of emotion this project provoked. The original publication of Cobain's journal marked one of the many instances in which Courtney Love was able to posthumously cash in on her husband's talent. The title is apt in all senses.



"Ca
H.
day
so I
walk
so
w



It's not really that new:
the YANOMAMI INDIANS still
perform
ENDOCANNIBALISM.

F.
was

For that they bury their DEAD and dig
them up after a year. The remaining
bones are burnt and the ashes are mixed with
a BANANA-MASH.

This gets shared with others and eaten on
special occasions. This aims to take on the
ghosts of the DEAD.

IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO SEE IF THAT
HAPPENS HERE.

IF Natascha then shoots herself,
we'll know.

Bernad G., Age 43, Germany

KURT PROBABLY
~~WOULD~~ WOULDN'T GIVE
A SHIT WHAT THEY
DO WITH HIS
REMAINS. DO YOU
THINK SOMEONE
WHO WORE ~~DRESS~~
DRESSES TO INTERVIEWS
WOULD REALLY BE
OFFENDED BY
ANYTHING

Jimmy 5790
male, AGE 49

FRANKLINTON
NORTH CAROLINA
USA.

Keywords, tags and ads from all the online articles and blurbs about the artist and her project were tracked, marked-up and compiled by Stellmach into the second artist book or tome, entitled *Media Whore*. This title references political campaigning slang from the early 1960s used to refer to newspaper editors and publishers who wouldn't cover a candidate unless they bought into the paper by paying for an ad. Black gloves permit the willing viewer to peruse all 400 pages. The leviathan is now seen from another view. The text is again whitewashed but rather than using hand-applied Typex, the text is blocked by translucent shades of red demarcated digitally on the computer, except for the crowning advertisements circulating the page. Many of the ads were generated algorithmically by a local search engine according to words found within the text itself, in effect becoming a perverse portrait formed through the virtual medium's market: "Stop Smoking", "Learn German", "Buy Nirvana now".

The most extreme feedback Natascha Stellmach received from around the globe, the personal death threats, have been transferred to a series of five postcards produced for the exhibition. Written in a cut-up ransom note style, the single letters incised from advertisements spell out their contempt, for example, "In an ideal world a maniac with an axe will be waiting on a street corner to rid us of bullshit artists like you".

In the central gallery a bruised and broken guitar is hung from the ceiling, an anthropomorphic effigy entitled *Commodity*. The surrounding walls are covered with one hundred quotes in an epic and immersive site-specific painting by Stellmach. Entitled *Whatever Happed to Painting?* The work documents the many comments that gauge Natascha's project specifically within the context of art. The diatribes are colour-coded in a red, yellow and blue according to the intensity of disdain or support for her ideas including:

"I actually think this artist is telling the truth because I googled her & all this stuff came up. Her art is kind of, out there".

(GRUNGE IS DEAD, UK)

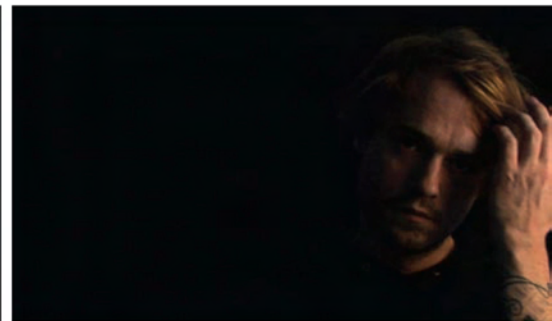
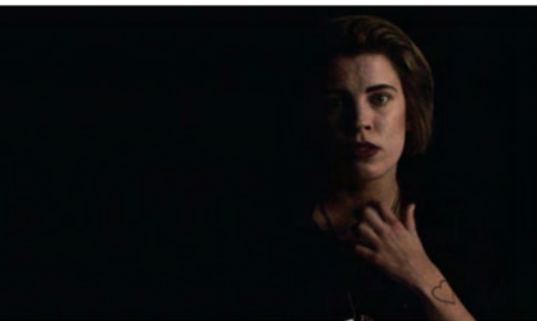
and

"And then Natascha will be eaten alive by another German artist, with the event streamed. The cannibal artist will then eat his own body in stages. Pop art will eat itself".

(WHAM1966, UK)

Stellmach's own previously cited quote of magic and confidentiality is stamped onto a wax seal on the back of an envelope, hermetically sealed behind museum glass. The surroundings and their artifacts are like an assembly of totems and chants.





The last installation of projections resonates with a stream of staccato monologues in a darkened room as we meet the cast of six participants who were willing to share the alleged spliff that started it all. *Who will smoke the ashes of Kurt Cobain?* asks just that. Who wants to take part directly? Who was chosen back in 2008 when the question was first posed? Why did they want to be part of the project? And what is their motive for wanting to ingest and thus absorb the remains of the late Kurt Cobain? The protagonists sit in a fade-to-black background, looming large, spectres speaking in non-native tongues. Solipsistic admissions and private revelations make up these video diaries that document or perhaps fictionalise the memoirs of a select few. The four-screen synchronised projections haunt the room in a jump-cut editing style introducing each of them in a sequence of seemingly circular commentaries and outright

confession. "This isn't gonna stop" declares the Emo blonde in sunglasses sardonically revealing the nature of the beast we are within. One subject reveals the personal drama of his own partner's suicide and the catharsis he somehow finds within his participation, yet a quandary punctuates his utterances, "Somehow I still like my life". Transcendence, afterlife and existential uncertainty become core topics about why to or why not to engage in this act.

Every ten minutes the voices are interrupted. Reverb. Noise. A guitar hangs, swings, smashes. Again. Sails back and forth across the room, anchored by its cable. Violent repetition. A hooded figure throws it against the wall, over and over.

Gone. It's over. The silver cigarette case, the only relic from the original project lies alone now in the vitrine. Is the entire exhibition a collection of acts of shamanic proportions embracing the base desire of celebrity cult cannibalism? Or is it just an act? The very comprehensive, contained and classified nature of this project precludes any ability to question the facts within the original event now due to the scale of its exponential growth. And somehow the point is that this vortex generates its own self-rationale, an admission of a muddled crime scene and a conspiracy of evidence. We accept it like a case study.

There are a number of artistic practices today such as Michael Stevenson, Olivia Plender and Marcus Coates whose work addresses information cults, cultural data-mining and bricolage cantastorias sung by artists whose content and delivery invoke a fervor for lost

worlds. Faith and truth sit awkwardly distant from one another. And while one enforces the other they can both discredit each other at any given moment. Herein lies the tension we crave. In a time in civilization when we are a mouse-click away from any answer we want the amount of art addressing truth couldn't be scarcer. Natascha Stellmach takes matters into her own hands, creating mythology from mythology, productively rooted in scrutiny and doubt. Her exhibition goes beyond the original event focusing on a detailed portrait of this myth. It gives cause for questions that often don't or, by their very nature, won't have answers.

Aaron Moulton

AARON MOULTON IS AN ART CRITIC.

