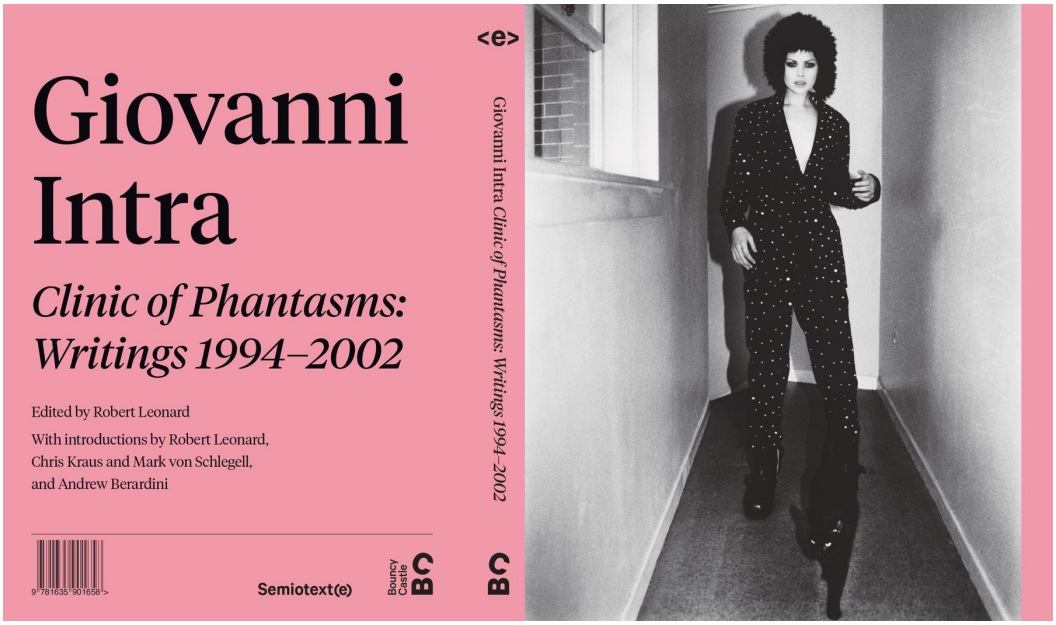
Clinic of Phantasms

The Mad Intelligence of Giovanni Intra

by Jennifer Bornstein

Published on 12.07.2022



Giovanni Intra (1968-2002) was an artist, writer and gallerist. Co-founder of artist-run initiative Teststrip Gallery on Karangahape Road in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 1992, he then relocated to Los Angeles where he co-founded the gallery China Art Objects in 1999.

Edited by curator Robert Leonard and featuring writing on Intra from Chris Kraus and Mark von Schlegell, Andrew Berardini, Roberta Smith, Tessa Laird, Will Bradley and Joel Mesler, Clinic of Phantasms: Writings 1994–2002 *collects, for the first time, Intra's writings on art, an insight into the Aotearoa and Los Angeles art scenes of his era, through the lens of Intra's enduring and unique mode of art writing.*

In this essay, artist Jennifer Bornstein reflects on the life, work and legacy of her friend through this new collection of his writing.

I have a confession. I never read much of Giovanni Intra's writing during his lifetime. It was always a pleasure to sit together with Intra during the years he lived in Los Angeles, drinking a late-night glass of whiskey, as he enthusiastically described his thoughts behind a text on which he was currently working. But this was before the internet became what it is now; the writing wasn't easily accessible as it was often published in periodicals, which by their nature came and went. Intra also wasn't the type of person to keep a file folder of photocopied texts handy to pass out upon

request. For these reasons, when I heard through the grapevine that Andrew Berardini was assembling a volume of Intra's writings, I was excited for the idea to come to fruition. Then life moved, and what seemed like a decade passed. Looking up, I realise a decade actually did pass. It's with respect, recollection and also some sensitivity that I approach *Clinic of Phantasms: Writings 1994–2002*, the volume of collected writings by Giovanni Intra thoughtfully edited by Aotearoa curator Robert Leonard and co-published by Semiotext(e) and Bouncy Castle.

For those who never had a chance to meet him, Intra was a force. Having started his career in the early 1990s as an artist in Auckland where he was involved in the artist-run space Teststrip, he arrived in Los Angeles in 1996 on a Fulbright from his native Aotearoa New Zealand to join Art-Center's Critical Theory programme as a graduate student. Intra quickly took root in the Los Angeles art community and forged a reputation as a writer of art criticism, regularly publishing texts in *Art and Text*, *Bookforum*, *Flash Art* and other influential periodicals, as well as numerous commissioned catalogue essays. He was also sometimes a controversial character, perhaps because he had a tendency to express his opinions openly, many of which could be on the blunt and critical side.

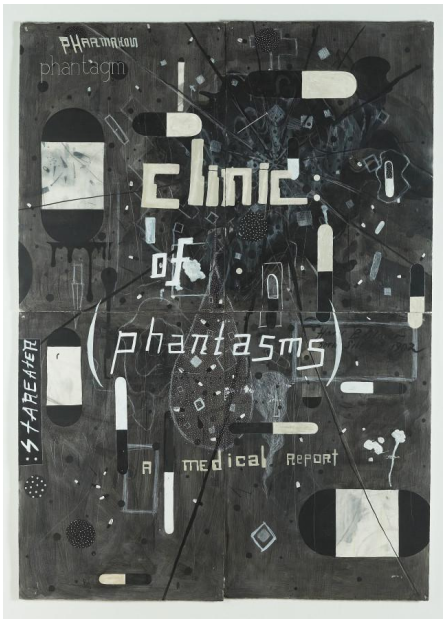
In 1999 Intra became one of the founding artist-members of China Art Objects, an influential gallery located in the Chinatown neighbourhood of Los Angeles. He seemed to regard his newfound position as gallerist as a sort of performance, and himself as much of an artist as those he represented. He would often speak about how the gallery was structured as an artist collective, but one that was complicit with the finance-centered art market. Make no mistake, in the midst of this institutional critique, Intra could work with capitalism. One part hustler, one part savant, nothing made him happier than selling artwork and being able to pay artists money that they could then use to live and make more art. A charismatic and active member of the Los Angeles art community, Intra passed away in 2002.

Reading through the texts collected in *Clinic of Phantasms*, I quickly become engrossed. A catalogue essay by Intra on the work

of artist Elizabeth Bryant begins with this intriguing and deadpan sentence:

> There is a hole in the perimeter fence of Huntington Gardens through which I occasionally crawl.[01]

With this one crawls not only through a hole in the fence of the Huntington Gardens—the posh, private botanical garden located northeast of downtown Los Angeles—but also into the linguistic, multi-dimensional space of Intra's writing, and through a trap door back into the time of his life and the art community in which he lived.



Giovanni Intra, *Clinic of Phantasms*, 1992. Courtesy Robert Leonard.



Giovanni Intra in the desert. Courtesy Steve Hanson.



Giovanni Intra, Mark von Schlegell and friend in the desert. Courtesy Steve Hanson.



Steve Hanson and Giovanni Intra. Photo: Ann Shelton. Courtesy Steve Hanson.



China Art Objects Galleries, prior to renting. Courtesy Steve Hanson.



Rob Pruitt and Giovanni Intra. Courtesy Steve Hanson.



Steve Hanson and Giovanni Intra. Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans. Courtesy Steve Hanson.



China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles. Courtesy Steve Hanson.

The writing in *Clinic of Phantasms* is remarkably bright; all the wit and verve that Leonard notes in his introduction is there. It's often funny. It can also be weird, mind-bending, opinionated, spunky, and sometimes perverse. Much like how Intra lived his life, the writing is never, ever repressed. Twisting and turning gleefully all over the page, many texts and reviews are written in the first person, weaving a thread of autobiography into the criticism in a manner that seems a bit eccentric from today's perspective but in this case works well.

Intra's thoughts about artworks he appreciated are enthusiastic. A 2001 text on the work of John McCracken contains these reflections on the artist's work:

> The sculpture has the capacity to morph art-historical and mythological information into a tight package very much its own. The artist deals with epic, cosmic themes, but his work is not heavy; it is possessed of all the hallmarks of serious art, but there is a complete lightness to it, even a sense of humor in places.[02]

At other times the writing can be fiercely critical. In a not-so friendly review of an exhibition by artist Spandau Parks, Intra writes:

> Spandau Parks is a painter with no ideas. Perhaps he has one idea, and this is to work on a painting for twenty-five years, but I'm not sure this qualifies as an idea, more like something that one receives a gold watch for.... Perhaps the works' most interesting effect is to set off a rabid anxiety in writers like myself who are simply ill-equipped to handle such a radically directionless project, one that seemingly aims itself at the heart of the discourse of painting and then ambivalently negates it.[03]

What is most striking is an adventurous and sometimes voyeuristic impulse to swerve between different historical and also intellectual spaces, often within a single piece of writing. "Slave Artists of the Piano Cult: An Introduction" merges contemporary art, S&M practices, and piano playing; "Paid in Full" quotes a conversation that took place between Jack Smith and Sylvère Lotringer in 1978. Intra's myriad interests, running from Bataille, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, and Foucault to late-night food opportunities in Hollywood come together in his texts in a big, churning stew. In the midst of all of this, art reviews open up into a space to muse upon larger issues. In a review of the artwork of Gavin Hipkins, Intra comments on the larger phenomenon of contemporary photography:

> Photography, a medium out of control, has not only the potential to make the earth into an archival document but to put its inhabitants out of commission altogether. Sooner or later, all the snapshots will join up and there will be no world left. Photography will delineate itself without photographers.[04]

How prescient for Intra to write this in the late 1990s. If only he'd lived to see the invention of the smart phone.

Perusing the texts, a slight queasiness sometimes arises. The writing functions as a time capsule of that moment, from which the world has thoroughly moved on, and going back to that time, which ended so painfully with Intra's sudden passing in 2002, brings a twinge of discomfort. Sentences pop up with glib references to race, class, gender, drugs and disaster in ways that were certainly due to youthful precociousness, but even so, when reading sections that were likely intended to be provocative, his insouciance towards these issues seems blithe, and there are snags. Sometimes it's much more than a snag—it's a face plant. "This was the postmodern moment where you could be a fan of Baudrillard, whose ability to be a 'prick' appealed, and Dr Dre … That boundary-crossing approach was part of that time and place," observes Mark von Schlegel in his introduction to the book. That may be true, but it doesn't mean the world is in that same moment now.

Then in the late 1990s a new approach appears in the writing that doesn't rely so heavily on shock appeal. For example, a text about the work of Isa Genzken, published posthumously in 2003, is graceful and elegantly crafted. One wonders how Intra's work might have developed had it had time to grow, broadening to a larger frame of reference and transforming from the voice of contrarian into the curious, bright, sensitive mind he was. It seems wise to accept the writings for what they are rather than subject them to the scrutiny of a present lens.



Alex Segade, Patrick Hill, Giovanni Intra and Malik Gaines, Miami, 2002. Photo: Kim Fisher.



Giovanni Intra, Miami, 2002. Photo: Kim Fisher.



Giovanni Intra, sunset, at a rave near L.A. circa 1997. Photo: Ann Shelton.



Facade of China Art Objects Galleries, 933 Chung King Road, Los Angeles, CA90012. Courtesy Steve Hanson.

> *He kept writing fiendishly, as if it were an addiction. He worked extremely hard on his texts, often extending deadlines to the point of breakdown.*[06]

The overlapping of cultural spheres that exists in the linguistic space of the writing was mirrored in Intra's life, and it was in this real-life-space—not the space of his writing—where I generally spent time with him. In the early 2000s, Intra wrote many of his texts sitting in his tiny Los Angeles apartment overlooking Hollywood Boulevard, drinking 40-ounce bottles of beer with Britney Spears's latest CD playing loudly in the background on his boombox. I know because I was there, living in the apartment next door. This raises another thread that comes up in the volume of

Intra's collected writings, which is the multitudinous social space of friendships and collegial relationships that Intra fostered. Leonard notes that Intra could really work a room, and I can say this is true because I was usually in the room with him, making me a dependable comrade for adventures. On a practical level I also had a functioning car that could transport us to the evening's latest event, whereas his car was generally impounded.

The late 1990s was such a magical time in Los Angeles. It was a time when there were more sexy weirdos around and fewer eagerly commercial artists and banker-bro art dealers, as Berardini observes, not to mention fewer art galleries. Perhaps that feeling was partly due to the whiskey, the drug-muddled vision, or the folly of youth, but so be it. And in the midst of this somewhat chaotic and churning frenzy of street cred, financial capital and sex, in sauntered Intra, super-skinny and centre stage. Chris Kraus reflects,

> Within months of its inception, China Art Objects was being written about in W magazine and doing exchange shows with major galleries like Sadie Coles. But, beyond the magic of the moment, its success had everything to do with Giovanni's charm, ambition, and intelligence.[07]

This is very true. Intra was smart. He was also exceptionally fun. He was always up for a party, and that party could just as easily be taking place at Art Basel Miami as in a back alley. All social spaces were open territory for him to tackle, and tackle them he did with his endless charisma.

The volume of his collected writings celebrates not only the essays generated by Intra but also the cosmos in which they were composed: the social spaces, the galleries, and the connections forged between artists. It's a document of the community of artists that existed in Los Angeles and Aotearoa at that time, and the bridges that Intra built between them. There was an inclusivity to Intra's life and the China Art Objects enterprise that made space for people to come together. Whether they came together as friends or as bitter enemies can be quibbled over by others; the fact was that through the space of the gallery, all sorts of people were

intermingling—meeting, laughing, arguing, sleeping with each other, loving each other, sometimes hating each other, and sharing ideas over a drink. It really felt at the time as if Intra and the gallery were opening up the art community into a different world. Intra extended this generous social space into a fourth dimension with his writings about art, reaching as easily back in time to a still life painting from the 1600s as into the present to an artwork he'd seen made yesterday in someone's studio. His enthusiasm for both could be equal.

Clinic of Phantasms is an invaluable compendium of writings, and having an opportunity to read them is a gift. The mad intelligence of Intra, and the love he generated in others, shine through. The volume is a gesture of respect by a group of people joining forces to gather the texts, contribute the introductions and bring the project to life in a beautiful way. That the texts have been gathered offers closure on that tumultuous time; it's also a testament to the friendships that Intra fostered in the people around him.

I end this text with the following sentences, that I think Giovanni Intra would have encouraged me to write. In fact, I can imagine him sitting next to me now, his eyeglasses characteristically askew, saying: If that is what you are thinking, you must be true to yourself and express that thought. The thought is this. The writings are wonderful, it was a wonderful time. I hold the memories close. And then I move forward into the living, breathing world of the present.

Footnotes

01. Giovanni Intra, “The Fanatical Scenery of Elizabeth Bryant," in *Clinic of Phantasms: Writings 1994–2002* by Giovanni Intra, (Los Angeles and Auckland: Semiotext(e) and Bouncy Castle, 2022), p. 126.

02. Intra, “John McCracken: Alienbait," in *Clinic of Phantasms*, p. 158.

03. Intra, “Spandau Parks," in *Clinic of Phantasms*, p. 136.

04. Intra, “Gavin Hipkins: Photogenic," in *Clinic of Phantasms*, p. 185.

05. Mark von Schlegell, “Introduction: Quick Study,” in *Clinic of Phantasms*, p. 25.

06. Ibid.

07. Chris Kraus, “Introduction: Quick Study,” in *Clinic of Phantasms*, p. 26.

Biographies



Giovanni Intra (1968–2002) was a New Zealand-born artist, writer, and gallerist. He was cofounder of the artist-run Teststrip Gallery in Auckland (1992–1997) and was a regular contributor to Art and Text. He and artist Steve Hanson cofounded China Art Objects in Los Angeles in 1999, which soon became an influential dealer gallery. He passed away in 2002 at the age of 34.



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