



THOMAS ASHCRAFT



UNIVERSAL GUM & TRADECAKE

THE LABORATORY EXHIBITION SERIES at the Museum of Fine Arts provides a venue for artists to explore new ways of expression and broaden possibilities for the visual arts in New Mexico.

This exhibition—fourth in the series—is of particular interest because, in a sense, Tom Ashcraft is an artist who embodies the concept of artistic experimentation. New Mexico has a long tradition of innovation in the visual arts along with experimentation and advances in the sciences. Throughout its history, traditions have been established and continue to evolve in both disciplines. From Native American pottery and weaving to contemporary art installations, the range of activity in the visual arts spans the entire spectrum of possibility. Likewise in the sciences, through two major scientific institutions—Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories—New Mexico is known for being the site of advancements in nuclear and other technology.

Ashcraft's unique artistic expression encompasses science and the visual arts. Throughout time artists have used a variety of media for expression, and today the range of materials is almost unlimited. There are artists using elements from the natural environment, traditional media such as paints, stone, and bronze, new electronic media, and even their own bodies to create works of art.

Ashcraft's material is science; that is to say, he makes art out of his scientific studies, investigations, and experiments. He does this in a serious way, but not without some sense of humor. He sees himself suspended in this particular era with access to all kinds of previously established knowledge and tools. He extends this knowledge and presents it to the viewer as a series of possibilities. Like scientists, he encourages speculation and offers a range of possible outcomes. The objects, installations, and instruments presented here explore the scientific environment in an almost archaic way. Though Ashcraft is keenly aware and knowledgeable about current advances in

technology, he shows us this material, after going through his personal process, in its raw form. His use of old wood, unpolished cast metals, and mysterious sounds provides a refreshing contrast to the refinement of his thought. He is an innovator who invites a new way for the scientist to view him/herself and for the artist to look at science.

This exhibition, *Universal Gum and Tradecake*, embodies the spirit of the Museum's Laboratory Exhibitions, which would not have been possible without the committed interest of the Friends of Contemporary Art (foca). Through this important support group, the Museum has consistently presented innovative exhibitions and remained abreast of developments in contemporary art in New Mexico and elsewhere. I thank Aline Chipman Brandauer, Curator of Contemporary Art, who provided the initial contact with the artist and followed his development over several years. Her idea for establishing the Laboratory Exhibitions Series has provided a unique venue for exploring innovation in the arts in New Mexico. I am grateful for her vision in bringing this exhibition to the Museum. Charles Sloan, our Chief Preparator, carefully planned the installation, and, along with Dennis Culver, journeyed to New York to pick up the works. This effort is deserving of acknowledgment. Michael Sumner's sensitive design gave the publication the attention and perfection it merited. Melody Sumner Carnahan worked her usual magic with words in editing and keeping it all on schedule. Joan Tafoya, registrar, attended to the complex paper transactions that such an exhibition requires; Bonnie Anderson, Assistant Director, along with the Museum of Fine Arts staff, ensured the project's success; and, as always, the Museum of New Mexico Foundation lent its support. Finally, I would like to thank Tom Ashcraft for sharing his mind and heart with us through the creation of this exhibition. His work continues to stimulate, inspire, and teach a broad and diverse audience.

STUART A. ASHMAN, DIRECTOR, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSAL GUM & TRADECAKE

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"Blue Whizzer" Time Gum™

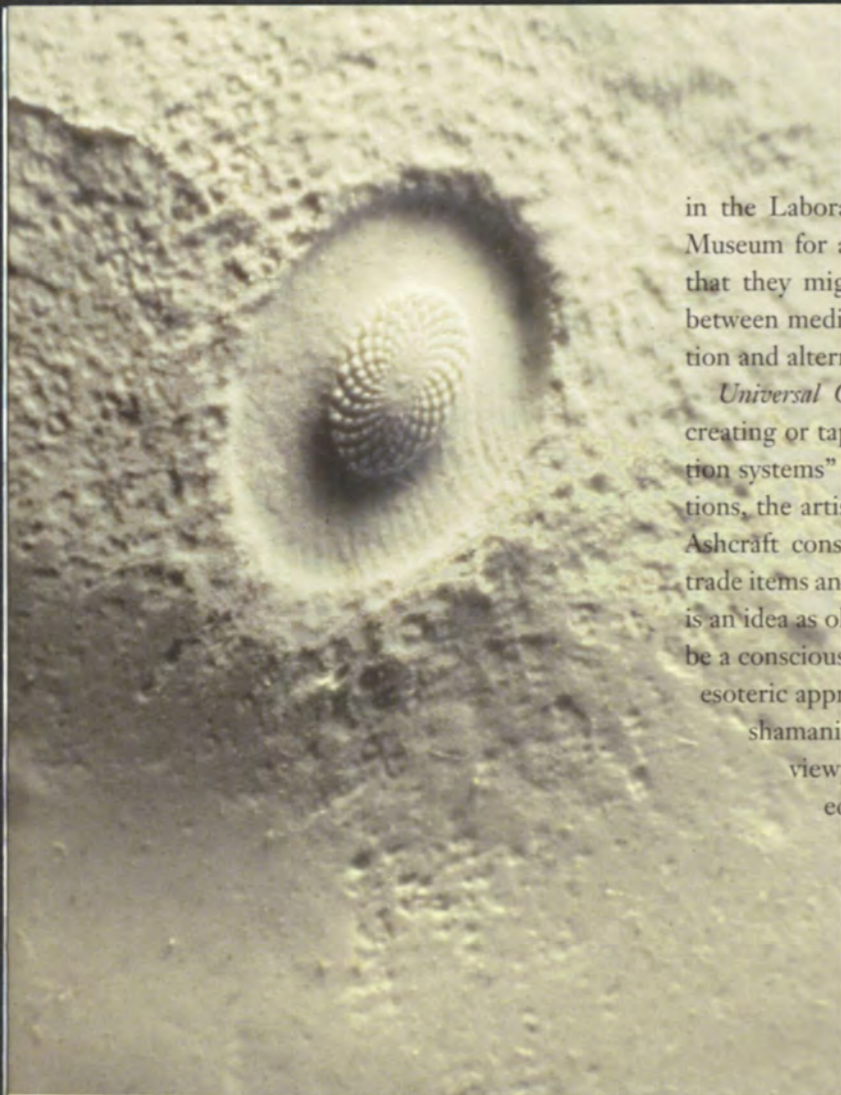
lab-o-ra-to-ry (lab'ra tōr'ē, -tōr'ē, lab'ər ə-; Brit. lə-bor'ə tə rē, -ə rē), *n.*, *pl. -ries, adj.* —*n.* 1. a building or part of a building equipped to conduct scientific experiments, tests, investigations, etc., or to manufacture chemicals, medicines, or the like. 2. any place, situation, set of conditions, or the like, conducive to experimentation, investigation, observation, etc.; anything suggestive of a scientific laboratory. —*adj.* 3. serving a function in a laboratory. 4. relating to techniques of work in a laboratory: *laboratory methods; laboratory research.* [*< ML labōrātorī(um) workshop, equiv. to L labōrāt(us) (ptp. of labōrāre; see LABOR) + -ōrium -ORY²*] —*lab'ō-ra-to'ri-al, adj.* —*lab'ō-ra-to'ri-al-ly, adv.* —*lab'ō-ra-to'ri-an, n.*



In Defense of Little Science

The fight waged in early modern Europe to bring art out of the guilds and into the academies was both economic and political. The central question asked demanded if art was a form of creating knowledge. That is to say, was art a "craft" in the pejorative sense, or was it "science." Along with this intellectual issue, there were the serious social concerns about whether artists would join the professions, becoming ever closer to gentlepersons, and the subverted question of monetary gain. Over the centuries, the idea of art producing knowledge has ebbed and flowed. It is, however, the central focus of Tom Ashcraft's work. For him art is a perpetual investigation of the world—indeed, of several worlds and their interactions. His unwillingness to isolate an aesthetic event from an empirical or hermeneutical event makes his work difficult to describe in field-specific terms. That same reluctance to engage in false distinctions provides the source of the work's power as an experiential learning environment—in other words, a workshop or laboratory.

A laboratory is a place of experimentation and work, a space in which imagination and empiricism intermingle in the pursuit and production of knowledge. In Ashcraft's exhibition, *Universal Gum and Tradecake*, the idea of laboratory takes on double weight. The artist insists that his projects are a recreation or an extension of his own working laboratory. Our intention



Vaccination Scarification as Possible Body Art (model)

in the Laboratory Exhibition Series is to create a place in the Museum for artists to investigate ideas, objects, and installations that they might not be able to do elsewhere: a place to work, between media and disciplines, in order to discover new information and alternate ways of looking at things.

Universal Gum and Tradecake continues Ashcraft's interest in creating or tapping into parallel universes and setting up "translation systems" between one world and another. In previous exhibitions, the artist has explored the role of money and coinage, here Ashcraft considers comestibles like his "tradecake and gum" as trade items and communication devices. For food to be a trade item is an idea as old as civilization—at least on this planet. For food to be a conscious source of communication between worlds is a more esoteric approach. While ingesting "food for the Gods" is a core shamanic practice for accessing multiple worlds or multiple viewpoints, the discovery and manufacture of coded, edible information that has healing properties adds a

new twist. Ashcraft's earlier involvement in direct political action and visioning an alternative society in the Ozarks, combined with his herbal studies and his ability to actually produce the objects he invents, allows him to create models for new forms of knowledge. He often hits paydirt: his information is viable to and comprehensible within existing ways of talking about things. For example, his radio telescope data has proved helpful to the community of radio astronomers. Ashcraft says, "It's not science until it is reported and it's not art until it has been made public." Thus inscription and exposure are prerequisites to a professional act, which, at that point, can be shared. The artist's movable laboratories can be shared by an audience interested in discovering the ways in which he learns things, with access to the creative and experimental balance in those actions.

In his role as an independent scientist the artist is unafraid to play with seemingly outdated theories, such as radiopanspermia, or to envision new



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ones in a way unavailable to those scientists practicing "normal science." By practicing in both fields—art and science—Ashcraft is capable of providing new insights into each while being constrained by neither. In light of those like Leonardo da Vinci, who profited from the first waves of professionalizing art by adopting scientific practices, it becomes clear the two disciplines are not separable. Ashcraft, by taking art and science back into individual practice, humanizing them, allows alternate ways of discovering and creating new information to feed other disciplines. The "tradecake" of his putative Biological Commonwealth is at once economic, aesthetic, and politic.

ALINE CHIPMAN BRANDAUER
CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART © 2000



Mapcake Studies no. 118 [LEFT], no. 127 [ABOVE]

α-Bacteriophage (study) [TOP RIGHT]



JUN 15 2000

12:47 UT

13 UT / 7am

extension of a process
(space migration)
(intelligent human)
(life extension)

THOMAS ASHCRAFT




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custom made/
hardware
unique/contributor -
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UNIVERSAL SAP & NECTAR

EXHIBITION DATES
July 14, 2000 — October 15, 2000

GALLERY TALK
July 19, 12:15 pm, by Museum admission

 Museum of New Mexico
Museum of Fine Arts