



**Monster penises?
Vagina mushrooms?
Debasement and
disgust? As long as
the artwork is good,
the French publishing
outfit Le Dernier Cri
will gleefully explore
our most vivid
nightmares.**

By Dan Nadel



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From an abandoned maternity ward in Marseille, in the south of France, an arts collective called Le Dernier Cri has spent 11 years publishing a catalog of more than 125 limited-edition books. And what books they are. Typically, they're oblique, non-narrative collections of related images about sex, violence, medical horror, scatological humor, sickness, and other themes that blur the line between the disturbing and the titillating. Le Dernier Cri ("the latest thing") represents some 80 authors from dozens of countries, and the ideal way to get an overview of the publisher's volume and variety is to peek inside an issue of LDC's ongoing anthology, *Hôpital Brut*, which presents profiles, new work, and sketchbooks by scores of artists.

As an LDC artists' clearinghouse, *Hôpital Brut's* concentrated effect is overwhelming—it's an explosion of graphic extremism rarely found in a single place. Inspired by the mid-20th century Art Brut movement (defined by French artist Jean Dubuffet and marked by imagemaking that proceeds directly from an artist's consciousness) and an Austrian mental institution that practices art therapy, *Hôpital Brut*

pushes the boundaries of taste. The most recent (double) issue featured two covers, one depicting a man having sex with a rat and the other showing a dead baby embedded in a skeleton. Inside, little girls pee freely, giant penises are on the attack, and general merriment is made to ill effect.

LDC's publishing criteria are loose but, after a fashion, exacting. (LDC also has produced films in conjunction with Canal+, one of France's largest TV- and movie-production companies.) There's no manifesto, says co-founder Pakito Bolino—"I don't think we need it. That's just for the theoretician of art, or fashion victim"—but his publishing policy for what he calls "the wrong kind of people" is clear. "I've never gotten a picture that I found too extreme," he says. "Sometimes, too stupid." Too violent or graphic? "No. That's a good reason to be part of our editions." What's the limit for you? "Shitty artwork."

Bolino's words may be tongue-in-cheek, but he's serious about free graphic expression, which he ensures by keeping most labor within the LDC studio and among its staffers, and at least within the Marseille city limits. The city has underwritten studio costs for years. Bolino and Caroline Sury, his partner in life and in art, oversee the lavish printing of the projects and the subsequent distribution to an informal worldwide network of stores and galleries. Despite typical price tags of just \$10 to \$20, the publications are sumptuous. Some are silk-screened, others offset, with inserts, foldouts, and minimal information: the artist's name, the edition, pressrun, and LDC credits. These affordable limited edition books generally disappear instantly, which increases their mystique and desirability.

Perhaps because of its primarily European distribution, LDC hasn't faced much controversy. But like innumerable European exports, LDC has had difficulty finding a foothold in the American market, thanks to its explicit offerings; the studio's sole U.S. appearance was a 2003 exhibition at the Los Angeles gallery Track 16.

For any readers suffering qualms about viewing monster penises and scatological nymphs, Jonathon Rosen, an acclaimed illustrator and LDC regular, offers a simple response: "Moderation has no place in the LDC universe. As excessive and demented as LDC might seem, the world situa-



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tion right about now actually makes their stuff seem, if not tame in comparison, then completely journalistic in its unflinching honesty.”

For Bolino, such honesty and urgency is a necessity; the unflinching work he so admires was difficult to find in 1993, when he and Sury founded Le Dernier Cri in Paris. Bolino, then 25, had just finished a stint at the Parisian fine-art printer L'Atelier and was at loose ends. Enthralled by the city's aging avant-garde arts scene and by punk rock, he sought to publish exciting new work—including his own. Visiting friends in Bordeaux, he met Sury, who shared his DIY aspirations. Two alienated halves made a provocative whole: Sury moved to Paris, and LDC was born. The team discovered friends and artists in Un Regard Moderne, a well-known hole-in-the-wall Paris bookstore filled with ceiling-high stacks of every conceivable kind of underground literature. After Paris proved socially and financially stifling, the partners moved to the more affordable southern city of Marseille. Today, Bolino handles most of the printing, and Sury's role is principally administrative.

LDC's maternity-ward workspace, called Le Plateau Symétrique, is a print-shop/film studio producing handcrafted animations and live-action movies—most recently *Savage Religion*, a 75-minute anthology, exploring religion and its malcontents, by 13 artists who each took residency there to produce a film segment (and sometimes a book as well). Rosen, who's based in Brooklyn and spent three weeks in Marseille in May 2003, describes the process as “kind of like joining a [F.W.] Murnau and [Georges] Méliès cult for a little while.” His 12-square-inch silk-screened book, *The Birth of Machine Consciousness*, details the melding of human and machine, of consciousness and computation, as it pertains to life, sex, and the body.

Exploring these themes is a lifelong obsession for Rosen; like so many of the LDC artists, he uses an internal vocabulary to address external concerns. It's an examination both sociological and personal. Similarly, Finnish artist Elina Merenmies, also a *Savage Religion* contributor, calls her work “exaggerated expressions of reality.” Her recent LDC book, *Hope*, a collection of teddy bears, beasts, and humans depicted in physical and psychological agony, is rendered in delicate pen-and-



All publications printed and distributed by Le Dernier Cri.

1. Page from *Hope*, 2003. Illustrator: Elina Merenmies.
2. *The Birth of Machine Consciousness*, 2003. Illustrator: Jonathon Rosen.
3. Cover of *Hôpital Brut 5/6*, 2001. Illustrator: Fredox.
4. Spread from *Mangaloid Pornotopia*, 2002. Illustrator: Pakito Bolino.
5. Cover of *Hôpital Brut 5/6*, 2001. Illustrator: Remi.

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6. Spread from *Couscous Sardine*, 2001. Illustrator: Caroline Sury.

7. *2h00 du Lapin*, 2001. Illustrator: Kerozen.

8. Spread from *O Pesadelo de Gustavo Ninguém*. Illustrator: Matthias Lehmann.

9. *Art Pute Carnet 4*. Illustrator: Moulinex.

10. Spread from *Aie*, 2003. Illustrator: Nathalie Lété.

11. Front and back covers of *Vagina Mushroom 2*. Illustrator: Caroline Sury.

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power, both in form and content. Instilling pop art's ironic distance and cool surface would rob LDC's work of its power, rendering it a sanitized, magazine-ready commodity.

Paris artist Kerozen, an LDC ally from the start, paints bright ghouls and goblins that seem equal parts Aztec glyph and modern-art distortion. Another French painter, Moulinex, produces enigmatic canvases and collages; since 2000, his four-issue *Art Pute Carnet* series has reproduced full-color works from his sketchbook images of musclemen, flags, military symbols, and other pop-culture detritus. Finnish artist Matti Hagelberg creates inscrutable images that fall somewhere between hallucinatory wood-block prints and cartoons; Berlin's Reinhard Scheibner draws characters composed of excrement. All of these books benefit from LDC's vibrant offset printing on cheap uncoated paper, which unmistakably brands the books and also offers an immediate, organic feel that has mostly vanished since the rise of four-color process printing.

Bolino's own hyperkinetic linework often places characters in trouble. His 2002 silk-screened *Mangaloid Pornotopia* addresses the manga craze with typically debased humor, depicting a cute cartoon girl, rendered in punkadelic Day-Glo colors, being sexually assaulted. Sury's work is a world of loopy drawings overflowing with local Marseille details—but it's no less explicit than that of her compatriots.



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ink work that offsets the pain depicted. The disconcerting mix is both profane and cute.

As a publisher, Bolino grants complete freedom without editorial interference; as a printer, he takes an active role in the process. "He's not just a printer," Rosen says. "He's an artist, and it goes through his filter." Merenmies says, "He makes the images sometimes absolutely different from the original, somewhat like a DJ mixing. So much that I often feel the book is no longer precisely my work but rather an impression of it."

Bolino makes printing choices unique to each project. LDC first tried offset printing with *Hôpital Brut*, to faithfully reproduce paintings and photographs—but Bolino eventually hired a Marseille shop, La Platine, whose 1950s Heidelberg Press prints one color at a time. Bolino treats offset as he does silk screen, layering colors and lines; the process is cheaper than silk-screening and allows for greater quantities without the grueling labor.

Le Dernier Cri is not easily grouped with other technically accomplished, dark pop-artists and illustrators like the Clayton Brothers or Mark Ryden: It does not produce pop art, fine art, or comics, and its work is defined by the thinking processes behind it. A catalog of LDC's books is a survey of obsessive interior monologues with a talismanic, infectious



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In 2000, Sury formed Vagina Mushroom, an informal collective within LDC that gathers female artists whose work she finds "a little less heavy than the normal LDC fare, and a little more kind." And it does provide a counterpoint to the collective's more intense, often male, perspective. Her front cover of the anthology *Vagina Mushroom 2* is a literal depiction of the title, and the back cover is a self-portrait as a pincushion for kitchen knives.

But Bolino and Sury's esthetic of bodily horror, sex, and biology is not exclusionary. Their group is a home for genuine, soulful, yet creatively marginalized artists who fall through the cracks of mainstream visual culture. LDC is virtually a movement for marginalized art, and neither the group nor the art is calculated to offend. Yet LDC's art arouses and heightens our disgust, fascination, awe, and dread—and hits like a good punch in the stomach.



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12. Pakito Bolino and Caroline Sury in the studio of Le Dernier Cri, Marseille, France.
 13. Spread from *Mario Carnet 3*, 2000. Illustrator: Moulinex.
 14. Spread from *Hope*, 2003. Illustrator: Elina Merenmies.
 15. Spread from *Mr Mokomat*, 2000. Illustrator: Matti Hagelberg.

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