

WEF Recipient: **Sylvia** Thyssen



Sylvia Thyssen
sylvia@erowid.org

Clearly,
the appreciation of
reliable information
about human
experiences with
psychoactive substances
and the
states of mind they
engender
is not limited to
the proverbial
psychonaut.

I WAS GRATEFUL to receive the Women's Entheogen Fund award in 2003 and again in 2006. The field of progressive drug education is not well funded, and grants to individuals who facilitate important grassroots efforts are exceedingly rare.

Since my tenure at MAPS, my editing and administrative work has continued to focus on drug-related topics. In 2000, I briefly joined the DanceSafe national office. The most rewarding project I coordinated during that time was bringing a group of DanceSafe chapter leaders to a harm reduction conference in Miami, Florida. In 2001, I began assisting Joel H. Brown and the Center for Education Research + Development (CERD)—perhaps best known for their pioneering work in resilience education as applied to drug education—with grant writing. CERD was producing an important drug reference manual for teachers to use in the classroom. I had the opportunity to guide the editing of this publication, relying on my deepening understanding of the disparate voices in drug information.

In 2001, I also had the great opportunity to begin contributing to the Erowid Project. At that time, Erowid had some specific similarities to MAPS' status when I began working there in 1993—a staff of one-to-two people and a growing membership base requiring increasing administrative oversight. As an information hub for a constantly shifting and growing world of drug research, both legally approved and illicit, Erowid faced other challenges as well. Large numbers of people were contacting the site daily with questions and submissions, the site's complex structure required constant updating and maintenance, and new projects needed attention. For example, at that time, Erowid was asked to manage DanceSafe's Ecstasy testing program, restructured as EcstasyData.org, a collaborative project between Erowid, MAPS and DanceSafe. Erowid also took on the multi-year digitization of the Hofmann Collection of LSD & Psilocybin References, a joint project with MAPS and the Albert Hofmann Foundation.

By 2003, I was working collaboratively with Fire, Earth and crew on document editing, site updates, membership development and volunteer management. I helped beta-test new tools that could support a growing number of donors, volunteers and submissions, and also helped identify new areas of content, such as Families & Psychoactives, Psychoactives & Sex, Death & Dying, and character vaults about little-known elders like Betty Eisner and Nina Graboi. As I continued to acquaint myself with the site's demands, following the parallel paths of information architecture and content, I joked to friends about having become a psychedelic librarian. Embracing this curious role, I continue to nourish the knowledge systems that further the cause of research, and that bring people and information together.

My current focus is on raising awareness of how specific language used to describe psychoactive drugs and experiences can deeply imprint on the thoughts and actions of others, with a significant impact on not only individual, but societal understandings of psychoactive drugs. To this end, I authored "Rumor and Ethic: Careful Communication as a Harm Reduction Measure," adapted from my presentation at the 2005 Mind States conference.

Today, Erowid is better equipped than ever to respond to the waves of data flooding the site from all sides, even as new challenges to its balance of resources arise. To test new waters, I am coordinating Erowid's presence at the November 2006 American Public Health Association Expo in Boston. Clearly, the appreciation of reliable information about human experiences with psychoactive substances and the states of mind they engender is not limited to the proverbial psychonaut. Everyone benefits from collecting and sharing knowledge, and I look forward to continuing to cultivate an atmosphere of inquiry among Erowid visitors and volunteers. •