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Humorous contraptions, silly people & optimism

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May 1 2006

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HUMOROUS CONTRACTIONS, SILLY PEOPLE & OPTIMISM

by

Karen Slobod

BFA California College of Art 1986

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2006

Approved by:

 5/29/2006

Chairperson



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Humorous Contraptions, Silly People and Optimism

Committee Chair: Elizabeth Dove 

GOALS: The book and installation are sociologically motivated projects — in that the underlying concept is to create art that involves the viewer and encourages balancing the many inevitable serious aspects of adult life with levity and playfulness. **METHODS** The Installation environment was created in the Gallery of Visual Art from three 4'x4' chalkboard panels, a human-sized boardgame, printed works by Mergatriod Fargalooop (a fictional friend of the artist), 4' x6' unfinished artwork that invites viewer participation, 4' x 4' screenprints, an original boardgame called Squabble, suspended eatables for viewer consumption, the Not Counting Sheep book project, and a manual typewriter set up for gallery participants to create sonnets. Also included in the exhibition opening event: live music and modern dancers who responded to audience interaction with proscribed movements. The book project (full name: NOT COUNTING SHEEP — An Illustrated Short Story for Immature Adults), is a fictional story based loosely on earlier adventures with my brother John Slobod. The artwork is created from collage and a range of typography, painting, printmaking and drawing styles. Each page has a unique visual treatment. **RESULTS** During the exhibition, the chalkboard panels and the viewer participation artwork were filled to the brim, and the sonnet-making typewriter turned out 8 pages of writing by gallery participants. The gallery was very well attended. The performers received a very enthusiastic and participatory reception from the audience. Here is a written statement from a gallery participant: “karinski oslobod the third, i just wanted to tell you how much i loved your show, it truly was an experience like no other. i walked in and could barely hold a conversation because i was exploring with joy. i kind of felt like a baby who has focused on a shape for the first time, a strange comparison.” **CONCLUSIONS** My goal was to create an expansive experience for gallery goers. Not everyone participated in the activities, but many did explore, play, interact, and stretch the boundaries of typical behavior within the exhibition framework. It was gratifying to see so many people dive in and use the exhibition as it was intended.

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humorous contraptions, silly people & optimism

t h e s i s

by karen slobod

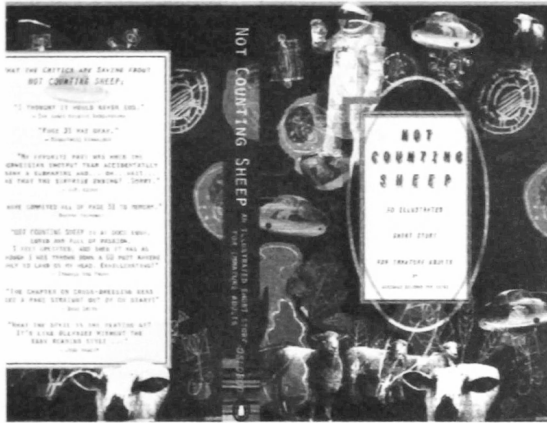
The motivation has always been sociological.

I've always been interested in art, psychology, and architecture. As a kid, I vividly remember driving to the market in the San Fernando Valley with my mother, past an expanse of parking lots, power wires, cement brick walls and various suburban outfitting and thinking "*Hmmm ...this is depressing ... are other people aware that this is depressing? Ack!!*" It seemed clear to me even as a child that the surroundings people created for themselves could subtly wear them down, or nourish them.

For as early as I can remember I have also had another concept in my head: an image of a world where folks didn't fuss with each other so much as we do here on planet Earth — and instead were basically reasonable — interacting from a sense connectedness. Although in general, my world outlook has a lot to do with my experiences during early family life, I almost feel like I was *born* with this alternate picture, and it has existed in my mind as a kind of guiding vision of what human existence could be. Maybe we all have this secret vision — I just realized I've never asked anyone. The effect on me has been to try to get us back to that place. I've thought long and hard about what I could contribute to our world that might help. So you ask "*What does becoming the creator of an idiosyncratic art/book project have to do with helping the world?*" I guess I will find out. Maybe I am only healing myself. I think generally if people do what brings them joy and peace it's a good thing, so I trust this activity. It feels right. It's so deliciously free! It let's me express so much of myself that it makes me thankful, which I think is always a good sign!

The gist of what I hope will be my artistic contribution to '*world betterness*' through my book project is: first, sharing a feeling of comfort and fun that is derived from my family's sense of humor, and second, creating work that is an open invitation to live with a bit more freedom and playfulness, (both the book and installation demonstrate these through example), plus a few observations that have helped me, which are incorporated as well.

Here is where the sociology part comes in: the concept of fun is actually a very serious topic for me. I think adults often inhabit lives filled with varying degrees of structured responsibility and not a lot of opportunity for playfulness. But if they did — if we could



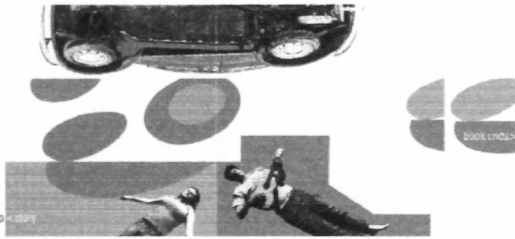
make up some new games so-to-speak — I believe it would contribute positively to the peacefulness and well-being of our society. So my thesis work is a direct attempt to create new arenas for grown people to be playful — in the form of a book and an interactive gallery installation.

thesis exhibition

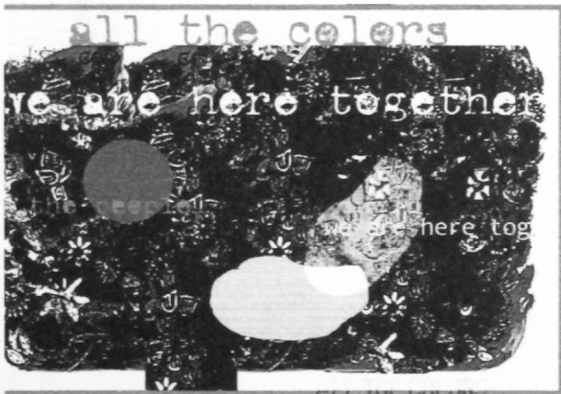
The book is called NOT COUNTING SHEEP — *An Illustrated Short Story for Immature Adults*. SHEEP combines collage and a range of typography, painting, printmaking and drawing styles in a way that can be described as the giddy sensibility of Terry Gilliam’s collage-based animation meeting the printmaking of Robert Rauschenberg. My interest in using the published book format is, in part, to reach outside of the gallery world and share aspects of fine art with folks who may never venture into the cloistered exhibition environment. (I hope too, that when inexperienced viewers come to the gallery, they find the work accessible.) Some of the humor in the writing comes from my experience growing



7 I have a secret from a book from a secret this is a book,
 of the danger book in the Sun,
 in books of shadows that are in the dark and disappear,
 and the beautiful voice of the one longest gone.
 No gods there? He has the beauty of the book in the dark.
 With a rather substantial reason.
 The last book a temple? I have your Paradise and still attack. How you
 feel about?
 What? You're just in time. How you use what you have the beauty
 of me. I hope it's an art.
 at the starting?
 again?
 Don't worry. I'll continue around and get on over there,
 to the book get out of the kitchen if you don't share the heat,
 to the kitchen, I have your attention.
 I hope of things I want to tell you before I forget to mention.
 I believe right waiting for the next steps, and looking out for what and
 to see what's next because I can't see a chance to start to take part.
 I'm sorry, I'm sorry of the other hand, you
 have another, something wonderful in something tonight.
 Don't see it, but I hope it's a surprise.
 an art and we shared out with the world right.
 at the start of the book.
 The story behind the experience itself, and the journey of things to come
 they like a garden in the one garden out. I hope to finally
 take the first step.
 To the next and beyond what the book has not done.
 Ah, the suspense is killing me . . .



bank ends
 11 12 13 14 15
 16 17 18 19 20
 21 22 23 24 25
 26 27 28 29 30



up in a family where the communication style is based on pun-upmanship.

It is unusual to create books for adults that include full page illustrations. My hope is that the eclectic format (which also includes a music cd of songs in the story) will convey a gleefully free, expansive reality, while using language and storytelling as a license to play with genres and the further hybridization of design and fine art media. I also hope that like other whimsical and gregarious performances and storytelling, the book will serve as a reminder to people to balance the many inevitable serious aspects of life with a bit of levity. The title comes from the Irving Berlin song 'Counting your Blessings.'

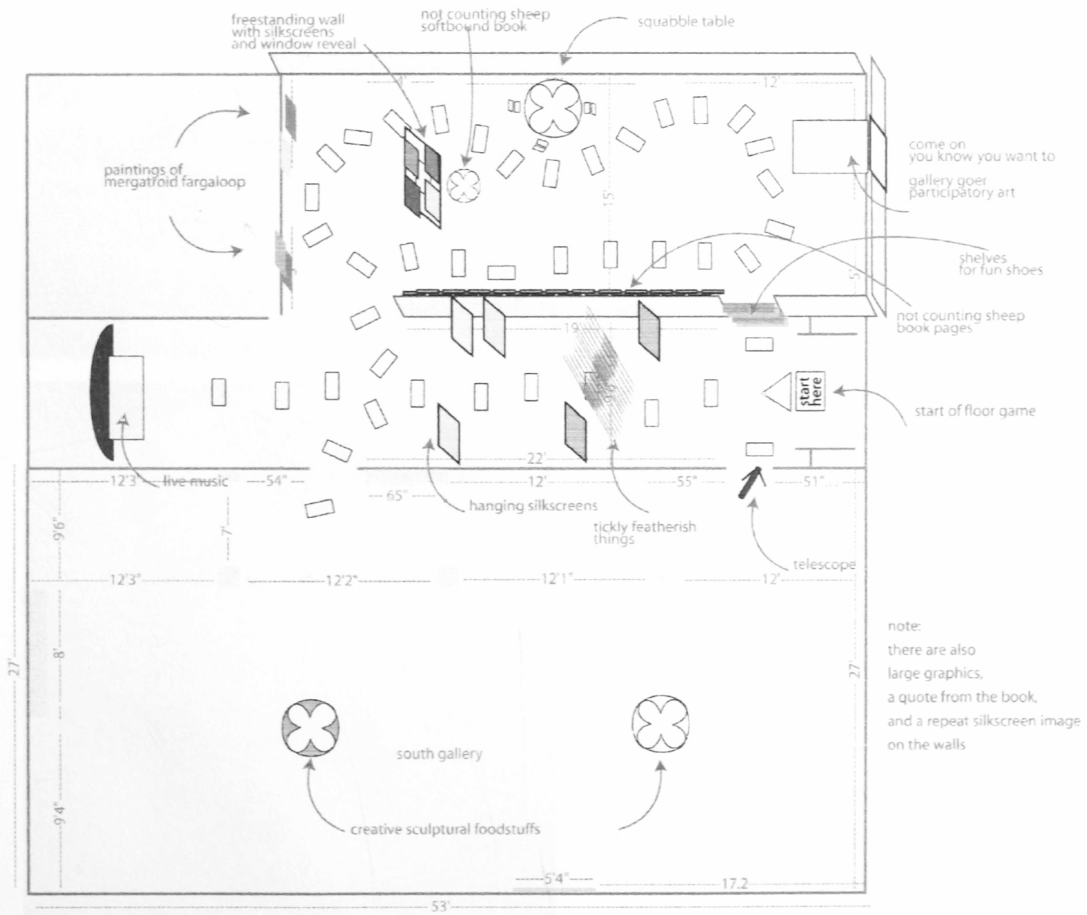
The thesis exhibition at the University of Montana's Gallery of Visual Art included large prints of my book project surrounded by a group of interactive installation pieces related to the book that encourage gallery-goers to play and participate with the art.

installation materials

The installation included a human-sized board game that viewers are automatically a part of, which leads them around the gallery space and encourages all kinds of ungallery-like behavior, works by Mergatroid

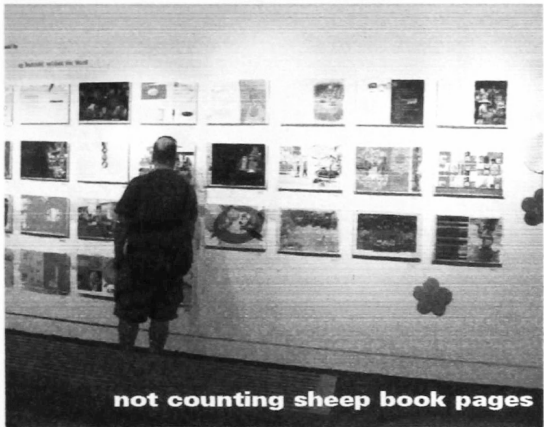


Fargaloo (a fictional friend of the artist), a large unfinished artwork and supplies invite viewers to participate, giant screenprints that also exist as part of the artwork in the book, large graphics from the book on the walls, funny shoes for folks to put on to do the giant game-board walking, a matchmaking chalkboard,





matchmaking chalkboard



not counting sheep book pages



original game 'Squabble'

an original board game called *Squabble* that is set-up to be played by gallery-goers, plus more surprises — flying bagels, a sonnet-making typewriter, things that tickkkkkle you

The *Matchmaking Chalkboard* was made of the fine combination of white plaster, black chalkboard paint with an undertone of turquoise, and rubbed-in chalk dust. Viewers were asked to put down a wish (if they want) making the surface a changing expression of heart's desires. (Note: by the end of the exhibit the board was packed with messages and drawings. It included a request for baby names, flirtations, messages to the universe/god, and observances.)

Visuals and quotes from the book *NOT COUNTING SHEEP* appeared among the games and other elements of the installation. For example, doodle images from the story combine in new configurations on the playing cards and *Squabble* box. Sayings from the book appeared in the floor game squares — think *Candyland* but with squares that say things like "oxygen is underrated" or "Don't take us to your leader. Take us to dinner, dancing and the theater!"



the gallery entrance



the trio desertless on opening night



the popular sonnet-making typewriter

The *Floor Game* quotes also related to the installation pieces. The instructions: *“Buy a vowel”* and *“Shakespearean couplets (rhymes) needed. Any sort will do — even cheated. Perfection should not be heeded. Type yours here too.”* appear in the typewriter area and encourage gallery-goers to know that this is not a typically pristine *“look but don’t touch”* gallery environment, but instead, a place to interact with.

(Note: by the conclusion of the week-long exhibit eight pages were filled. Here are a few quotes *“All work and no play. I thought I understood -- what did you say?”* *“Ok, now the time has come to start a new story ... we will become silhouettes with our bodies.”* *“I am part of art now.”* *“Fargaloup cantaloup can’t elope honeydew honey do.”* *“This art is very cool and it makes you feel weird oso like it an J is.”*)

The exhibition opening included live music and dance performance. The opening evening was the realization of my vision, and for me it was a joy. The combination of the fully integrated play-space for adults (and kids) with the dance and music performances was **really sublime**. Two of Missoula’s top dancers collaborated with me to use the environmental installation and audience interaction as a taking-off point for dance improvisation. The musicians followed the



shoes play a key roll in the human-sized floor game



opening night dance performance

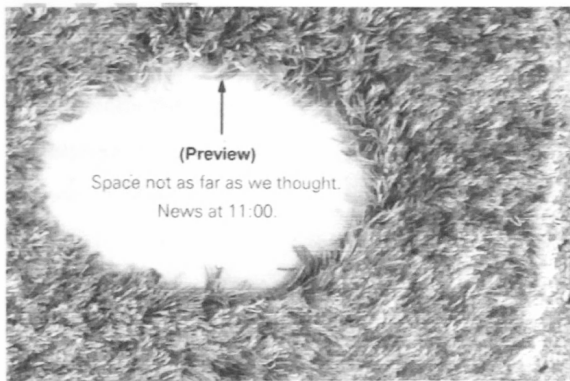


dancer's movements with synchronistic crescendos and stylish jazz-based support. At times it seemed as though the audience, dancers and musicians were all sharing the focus of the moment together — as as my brother the bassist would say we were *"in the groove"*

The reason that this was so moving to me connects to my reference sociology at the beginning of this writing — I am seeking to create environments and situations that allow for joyful connection between people. It's my vision of how we can all be together.

I also know that the quirky environment that I created will certainly not speak to everyone or feel comfortable to everyone. My belief is that there are actually infinite possibilities for creating experiences that have a healing effect in society, and different styles will speak to different people. I do think the world needs more gentleness, play and social opportunities to allow the individualistic aspects of ourselves to be expressed and received with safe acceptance.

My interest in play and my conviction that it is part of the *'healing'* equation is based on a background of training in humanistic psychology and a very influential book in my life: *Dibs in Search of Self* by Virginia M



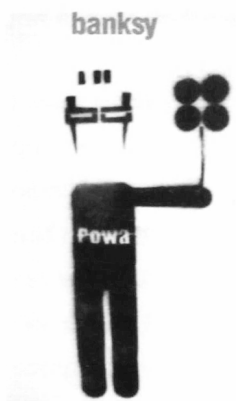
from the top: the floor game, the interactive canvas — where everyone is invited to join in the making of art, the fortune card wall — which reveals truth and humor.

Axline. Psychologist Virginia Axline is a pioneer in Play Therapy. The book chronicles the transition as Axline helps a very withdrawn, indecipherable five year old boy, named Dibs, who school officials perceive as retarded, by providing a safe space, non-judgmental attention, and opportunities for self-expression through playing. The process allows for the natural healing inclination to relive past wounding experiences, and let them go. Dibs emerges as a wonderful person who might never have revealed himself to the world without the special environment Ms. Axline created. This book, which I read when I was sixteen, had a profound impact on how I view the world and what I believe might help us live cooperatively together.

So the intention behind both the *NOT COUNTING SHEEP* exhibit and book project has been to create an experience where people feel like they are entering into a kindhearted, happily surprising, unique little world — one that by it's surroundings says "*Feel free and easy here*" — you know, the place that's safe and rational and playful, and good to look at that I told you about at the beginning. I created this small, sweet world obviously for myself and for the tender self in everyone.

how this idea relates to contemporary art: kindred creative spirits

The concept of using visual art as an outreach tool — to affect and heal the larger community through its potential to surprise, wake up, intrigue, and encapsulate ideas — is relevant to one of the most vibrant directions fine art is now taking through the emergence of **Street Art**. This new art is very attractive to me because the sociological orientation. Street artists use rundown cityscapes to create imagery that speaks directly to city



inhabitants — this directness and the underlying socio-political motivation shares a relationship to my book and installation art. Many street artists (Barry Mcgee, Robbie Conal, Banksy to name three of the most well-known creators) describe their work as being motivated by a desire to create awareness of social issues, and to instigate social change.



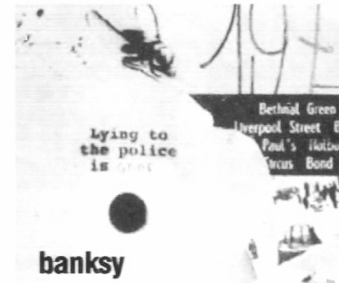
Street Art springs from an amalgam of American subcultures and youth activities over the past twenty years. The minute I first saw it I thought *"Geez, in hindsight I should have known this was coming!"* because it's been in our peripheral view all along — in the form of underground music, sports, tattoo art, gang culture, and the effects on our society of a widening gap between upper and lower economic classes. This new art is a groundswell of irreverent and disenfranchised voices from artists who have side-stepped the mainstream gallery scene by using a *do-it-yourself* strategy to take art directly to the people. And their forthrightness makes the difference. It makes the work charged. It is also a development that leads away from the artist self-absorption of the last two decades and toward community. With its vibrancy based in disobedient, political, street and alternative cultures, not above or separated from the harshness of inner city life, but in entrenched, personal reaction to it, this art is essentially the enlightened visual parallel to hip-hop music.



My first glimpse of Street Art was in late 1990s Los Angeles, in the form of small, arty, idiosyncratic graffiti stencils mysteriously

cropping up like a secret code on urban surfaces. Then, this year, one of my 123 students showed me a book surveying eight stencil artists whose work reached amazing levels of complexity, often including strong sociological commentary about the urban landscape in which the art appeared. There were beautifully rendered images of african refugees haunting european alleyways, man-angels floating on walls where real-life homeless people retreated, idiosyncratic stencil icons, and ghostly images of people appearing on city walls like a faces on a shroud.

I must admit I liked the rebelliousness of it. These were quiet revolutionaries spreading a bit of color, artistry and comment into often desolate city environs. And the work had heart, in that it was likely talking more directly to more people than so much of today's elite gallery arena. Wanting to know more, I typed *Street Art* into my computer — and then had a bit of a shock — as I realized I was late getting to the game. There is a great international internet presence, a kind of cyber-subculture of street art. It is analyzed, archived, and celebrated, with websites cataloging the movement of underground art anti-heroes, styles, and hubs of activity. Some urban cities have served as mini-epicenters, radiating out the aesthetics of the street. **Barcelona, Tokyo, San Francisco, Vienna, Edinburgh, and Los Angeles** are among them. The evolution continues, appearing in new guises and forthrightness, like the political freeway overpass art following **George Bush's election** and decision to attack Iraq.¹ All of this global art activity is especially wonderful to me because I feel that there is a very truthful place that much of it springs from — a relevance. Unlike art created for gallery sale, anonymous artists create free from the temptation to make work that attracts buyers. And with Street Art I like the bigger sociological scope of it: talking to more people — there's more of an 'US' involved.



banksy



robbie conal political posters



political fwy overpass art

After my explorations on the internet I traveled to San Francisco and Los Angeles and found that Street Art had entered the mainstream of world of galleries and museums. In San Francisco the **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** had hosted several exhibitions of Street Art. One big, hot show, *Beautiful Losers*,² was guest curated



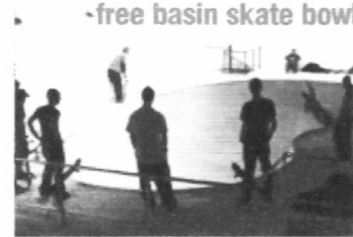
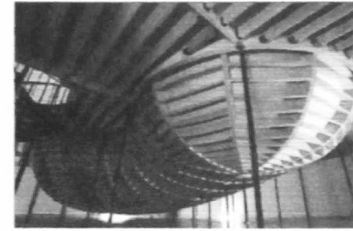
by Christian Strike and Aaron Rose, whose alternative art space Alleged Gallery became a catalyst for the inclusion of hybrid and 'low art' in Manhattan in the 1990s.

Rose says the *Beautiful Losers* artwork, (which included installations, paintings, sculptures, photography, film, video, clothing and product designs) originated from a do-it-yourself street ethos where "there are few rules and anything is possible."

Across from The Yerba Buena Cultural Center, Gallery One put together a complementary exhibit to *Beautiful Losers* with a fully functional installation *Free Basin*³, which combined aspects of architecture, performance art, sport and sculpture in the form of a gorgeous kidney-shaped, sculpted wood, indoor skate bowl.

The eclectic, inclusive approach of both these installations was very appealing to me — skaters and audience become part of the artwork, everyone is an insider, a participant. The artwork is *really for* the visitors. I tried to do something similar with my thesis installation.

To me, this new art looks to be a natural progression from Postmodernism, and a synthesis of many currently energized areas in popular and underground culture. A number of the street artists have an interest in social issues. There is an



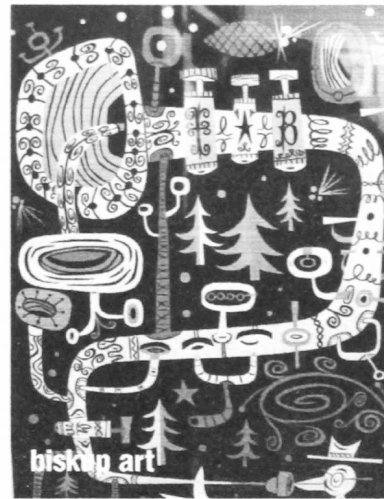
and complete non-pretentiousness of story-telling comics, I don't think of my illustrated story as a related to the graphic novel genre, which evolved from comic art. I am more inspired by children's books and other idiosyncratic storytelling like the one-of-a-kind 1980 insanely amazing '**A Humument**' by **Tom Phillips**,⁶ (which reworks the Victorian novel *A Human Document* by drawing and painting over the entire original text to highlight certain words — that then tell another story), the gentle, illustrated tale *'The Night before Christmas'*,⁷ the sappy but interesting illustrated book for adults '**Griffin and Sabine**',⁸ and the free-for-all spirit of **Monty Python's Flying Circus**. I differentiate my project from graphic novels too because the traits of a violent and/or hard-edged masculine viewpoint that are associated with some of the most famous graphic comic art, like Art Spiegelman's *Maus*,⁹ Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*,¹⁰ and *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman¹¹ do not bare a resemblance to my book project.



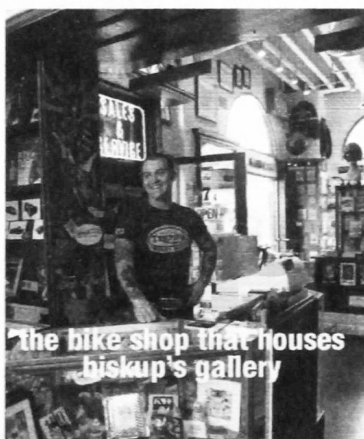
When I see dramatized, caricatured or real televised violence, I always find myself wondering what the cultural attraction is? (Boxing, for example is a completely sad and dull activity.) My story's underpinnings — the almost non-existent arc of the narrative, the slapstick foolishness, the language created from a mix of subculture vernaculars and (I hope) comically interposing upper-crust-isms — are in someways a response to all the violent craziness of our patriarchal history and tastes. The format of the story arises from a conscious decision to abandon some writing conventions. With **NOT COUNTING SHEEP**, I am attempting by example to make a case for a more female approach to life: less linear, more intuitive, more playful. I am using non-convention to model a way of living where the absence of offense/defense, linear, and inflexible thinking does not make the described world unsafe, but instead, liberating.

This is not to say that there aren't men out there already who are working in a quasi- feminist mode. There is a particular bloke who incorporates both a comic book edge, a skate/street sensibility and the mix of playful high/low art with an inventive approach to getting his art out to "The People" that I am inspired by: **Tim Biskup**¹² makes fine art games, books, skateboard art, and creature-toys. They are all highly idiosyncratic creations. He sells them on-line, at his gallery space "BISPOP", and through exhibitions. His mini-gallery is located in the back of a motorcycle-afficionado retail store — another example of the fun of juxtaposing two fascinating, but quite different cultural entities together. **More hybrid, un-categorizable art!** I'd like to think these kind of marriages are just the beginning — art-wise.

Have you noticed that the hybridizing or coupling of known entities is the alchemy of today? There is energy, cultural fascination, and possibility in these kinds of new pairings. I believe this for two reasons: one, recent technology enables us to easily make new combinations, and two, because we are using the process to study where we've been and where we are going. Fashion, the visual arts, theater and music are now created from the blending of previous styles and genres. The same goes for sports, science, industry etc. We have camera phones, parachute surfers, cars powered by soybean oil and batteries, Puerto Rican hip-hoppers looping Techno, South Central teens into Anime, Ug boots with tank tops, genetically orchestrated square tomatoes, street stencil art appearing on a street in Lima — seen in



an example of 'art toys'





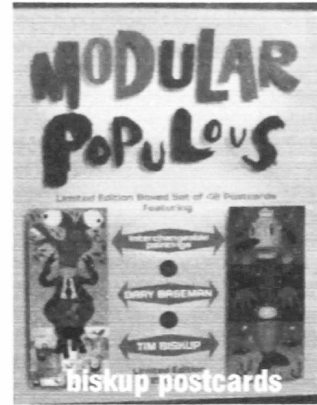
biskup's gallery

Amsterdam within minutes, ... just wait until the hologram technology proliferates, and you can have a virtual reality right in the physical reality of your living room! The world is becoming more powerfully driven by the imagination, and less by our connection to the physical world. Simultaneously, we are dearly in need of balance between the use of technology and resources with the natural systems that support our physical existence. Talk about a juxtaposition! What will happen to us? We've got some very interesting new tools and few rules.

It's exciting and it's dangerous. Art is a safe place to explore the possibilities of new technology and hybrid forms. Some fine art photographic manipulators and installation artists are offering us glimpses into past, future, and potential worlds. My work contains an overview of a number of the marvelous natural world and cultural riches that now exist on the planet. They are recounted in the *Wombat Song*, which includes lines like *"The the ocean's surf is casting bubbly patterns — while on a*

street somewhere they are lighting colored lanterns. And for sure there are lots of people hugging — not to mention kids out in the twilight that are ladybuggin. I bet the number of people loving might swell, if they knew in another place someone was wishing them well. And everybody everywhere is wishing in their own way, for the world to be it's best someday."

In my case, the hybrid form not only makes it easy to review and envision our world, it underscores my intention to communicate why *"It's good to be here"* by allowing me demonstrate a playful approach to life. In the book I hybridize traditional fine art media in the computer, mixing language and format to play with genre. I actually haven't seen other artists doing exactly what I am doing, but I have seen similar creative philosophies animating new work. Biskup is one of many artists on the West Coast now making **toys and playthings** that stretch the definition of fine art.



I recognize commonalities in Biskup's comments about his work. *"I don't think that low-brow or pop surrealism (or whatever you wanna call it) is going to "take over" the contemporary art world, as much as it is going to continue to grow on it's own & eventually explode into general consciousness ... Punk rock helped me to understand that I did not have to follow rules ... Toys are just another form of expression. If they are just a piece of plastic for a kid to play with, or ... socio-political satire, it doesn't matter. If it's good, it's good. If it sucks it sucks."*

Biskup's work and his statements bring up the old question concerning an expanded definition about what fine art is. Is his work in the form of toys, books etc., a new pluralism or commercialism? In the 21st century are the fine arts and commercial arts exchanging DNA? My own definition regarding the separation between fine art and commercial art is not concerned with what the art is made out of, or where it's seen — but instead — the approach to making it. As a person who has made a lot of commercial art, I can tell you the difference I experience is that the fine art process is open-ended, curiosity driven, and feels *wide-open-wonderful* — compared to working on a client-initiated and directed

project. With commercial work it is as if a cap is put on many possibilities, and the end product is pre-determined to a large extent. And conversely, if you look at some “fine art,” you could say that it was actually created more in the spirit of commercial art-making. (I’m thinking of some church iconography as well as painters like Gainsborough, who seem to me to be painting with a very specific clientele in mind.)

Some designers, to my mind, create fine art. They operate with the cap off — from a place of deep curiosity and experimentation. Architects like Le Corbusier and Van de Rohe, as well as designers Charles and Rae Eames — people who almost eat up life — they see **the world as a non-static place for creative possibility**. They inspire me not to ‘*try to make a masterpiece*’ but instead, to have a discourse with the world — to talk to the inanimate objects, the plants, the surfaces, the people and animals by entering into creative projects with them. I draw inspiration from the Bauhaus’s egalitarian mix of art, craft and design; Le Corbusier’s movement to create improved living conditions and a better society through housing concepts; post-war community-visionaries like Neutra, and Saarinen who all designed Case Study Houses with the intention of making architecture that serves the greater good (useful and communal); Charles and Rae Eames who demonstrated so beautifully a fluid approach to creativity: they made houses, films, toys, furniture, fabric and more — their example gave me permission to view the world as an open canvas — ready for exploration.



sussmanpreiza 1984 olympic

This is the lineage of design-as-a-sociological-tool that has allowed me to imagine other art/design possibilities like a gallery of *play and create* items.



karen slobod exhibition screenprints

I take inspiration from these groundbreakers, as well as from contemporary designers such as to the Debra Sussman, whose work on the 1984 Olympics briefly infused the western world

with a color pallet that some of us will always associate with the 1980s, gave me the functional idea that I could create an environment from large printed pieces of art.

Along with these eminent designers, my discovery of the work of **David Carson**¹³ created a turning point in my understanding of how much freedom of expression in printed media and fine art was possible. Carson started creating layouts for skateboard and surfing magazines in the early 1980's without regard to the separation between fine art and design. He



is a key figure for me because through his at-times-illegible-but-gorgeous compositions I realized that I had accepted without question design standards that actually could be thrown out the window. I understood that in fact the world of flat print and bookmaking was wide open. David Carson's motto for creating is "no rules"; he is a ground-breaker not only for the print world but also a segment of the Street Art scene —

for some street creators, their original art was board-riding. The explosion of the surf, snow and skateboard aesthetic can be traced to Carson and has in turn influenced youth and alternative subcultures. From Carson's motto I've arrived at a guiding idea for myself — **I keep finding a delight in the idea that art-expression-wise 'the world is my oyster'** — I can do anything I want from furry furniture to books that like I've never seen before.

I share an interest with many street artists, some of the best graphic/comic story-tellers, and Carson and Biskup regarding the political and sociological uses of art. It seems no coincidence that out of punk, hip-hop sampling of musical phrases to create a collage music from absconded material, and the accessibility of images though the computer, a kind of Street Art aesthetic and thief ethos has arisen, sparking artists' re-use of contemporary commercial imagery to talk about contemporary life. And to paraphrase the progressive slogan **personal art is political art**. For example, a key factor in the vitality of Street Art is that like hip-hop, this art gives voice to the traditionally voiceless. This dynamic has made the street a stage for sophisticated works of political commentary and

broadened the definition of guerrilla art. Street Art commentary takes many forms including Brian Donnelly (aka KAWS),¹⁴ who is a sort of street art vigilante: he manipulates tele-



ad-busting

phone booth and bus-stop posters with subtle **ad-busting**.

beyond the street

The Tim Biskup and the skate/Street Art activity I saw points to a kind of new populist art, using innovation, a beyond-the-rules philosophy, and the momentum of youth, underground and popular culture to talk to and create a larger community. The fascinating thing about this scene is that the cross-pollination between each area has created a dynamic force. When alternative galleries, fashion, publications, websites, record labels, and athletics

borrow and double-use the art, it creates a louder statement, and a more cohesive subculture — which is, in turn, revered and adopted by mainstream. I imagine in the future some of this generation's working philosophy, like the *do-it-yourself* ethic, will translate into new web-based activity. It wouldn't surprise me to see the street renegade attitude coupled with internet-based platforms for independently made short films, because filmmaking can be a low-budget affair now as it is within the reach of anyone with a camcorder and an iMac.

Stephen Powers is a fascinating example of the unusual, circuitous and sublime directions many of the hip-hop artists have taken. His eclectic, multi-tasking approach to creativity is an inspiration to me and my book/game/installation style of creating. He first published *On the Go* skate magazine in New York, then created an idiosyncratic presence on the city streets with his large graffiti ESPO logos, and is currently renovating parts of Coney Island with The Dreamland Artist Clubhouse¹⁵ (a social club, salon, and functioning sign shop). He is also helping to embolden an intrepid avant-garde street art community with a website called Creative Time,¹⁶ which encourages new enterprises with rewards of art by the

likes of Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt. A little bit more on his street tag moniker *ESPO* — it stands for Exterior Surface Painting Outreach. Powers refers to his type of neo-graffiti as community service; his method is to choose a highly visible city surface, arrive in a white jumpsuit and ‘professionally repaint’ the area. Do you not find this man fascinating?!

Powers is also a great example of **using new media technology to create community** in connection with his art. This generation of creators has taken to heart new technology’s message that *what you imagine you can create*. Tradition-based restrictions to fine art and artists don’t apply in cyberspace. This new art sharing method, in a sense, bypasses the role of the gallery and museum. Folks are stepping out onto the lunar landscape, bouncing around in the gravityless atmosphere and determining that earlier limits about location, expression and creativity are moot. Everything is game. In this rarified air, the separation between the fine arts and other forms of visual expression has evaporated.

The new art also reflects the new mix of technology (digital media) and traditional art and the dynamic force they are creating together. Quick-paced internet cultural exchange anticipates the possibility for more fine art hybrid's like NOT COUNTING SHEEP-type books. With my book project I am **using the computer as an interface between fine art media** in a way that wouldn’t have been possible even five years ago. The idea of more unique, highly creative, internet-based projects seems likely because the new technology now makes creation and on-line distribution of one-of-a-kind projects accessible. This is part of the populist promise of the internet heralded by enthusiasts since its inception. In *Borderline Artists, Cultural Workers , and the Crisis in Democracy*¹⁷, art theorist Henry Giroux argues that in a healthy society new movements and the power for social change originate from the bottom, not the top echelons of the population. The internet has meant that once small, disparate, creative groups can now join electronically to form a new wave



stephen powers / espo



stephen powers / espo

of activity. **Idiosyncrasy is made more powerful.** My interest is in the evolution of positive uses for new media. Like the role radio played during the war years, technology and some of the new arts can be used to create a warm sense of connection



to community that serves society like a large-scale gathering place and hearth.

I know it's ironic to speak of creating connection and kindness by blending traditional art with technology, because the unfolding virtual world speaks to the life of the mind, and is associated with stereotype images of a cold '*space-age*' atmosphere. But, in a time in human history perhaps especially plagued with social impersonalness and

disconnection, the internet and new media also offer possibilities for encouraging both diversity and unity in larger society, as well as presenting to us a daily reminder of the power and possibility of our thoughts — the computer after all, is ultimately a machine metaphor for our own imagination.

So: no rules/open-ended media/participation/kid-inside-adult/community building art.

This is the terrain I am exploring. In a way, the arts have always provided a cultural structure, or bridge for adults to access the wide-open imaginative world so available to us when we were children. The book and exhibition are really a type of extended public service announcement — an invitation to an imaginative free-for-all: Let's invent a new game, a new genre, a debate, something unexpected, maybe even a new way of being. Okay you go, then I'll go.

how not counting sheep relates to contemporary art

In a 2004 issue of the *New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl tellingly describes the lustrous and canyon-like renovated MOMA as a perfect setting to express contemporary art's "terminal state of modern idealism, clean out of ideas, ... an uncertain but dazzling light ..." ¹⁸ In the March 22/2004 issue he describes the "The New Whitney Biennial is ... better ... than anyone ... could have expected, given the exhaustion and incoherence of the past decade and a half in art." ¹⁹ The current state of fine art summed up as a whole lot of open space, and just as many questions. In my life, when I get to that point, it usually signifies the pause before the birth of something new. I've been curious to see what might be appearing on the fine art horizon, so I trekked through three books: *Art Now — 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium*, ²⁰ and *Art at the Turn of the Millennium* ²¹, (also 137 artists) — both published by Taschen, and the *2004 Whitney Biennial* ²² (showcasing the work of 107 new artists) I did not find examples that spoke to me the way Street Art does, but I did see some artists working in more expansive, architectural and humorous modes — and to this, I could relate.

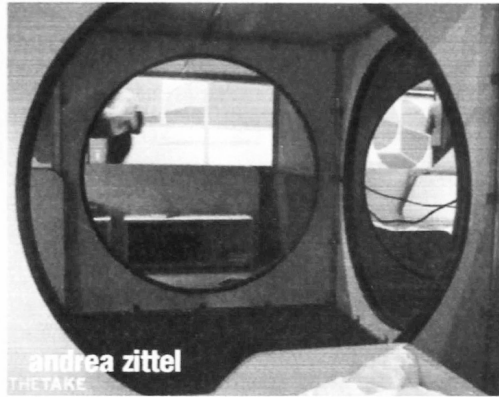
what i found:

(Please maintain blasé facial countenance during this announcement. Thank you.) First, Postmodernism is alive and well! (Remember ... calmness.) Second, there is a new offshoot to installation art that is related to (and could often pass for) playful environmental design. Whaaahooo! (It's okay, apparently these environmental artists don't mind if you get excited.) This new design uses lots of upbeat bright colors, funny (rather than cynical) presentations, silly contraptions and useful, but exaggerated furniture and wall pieces assembled together to create little worlds of their own whimsical logic — inviting us to come in and sit down. That this work calls out to me of course fits, as my installation art could be described in similar terms (I hope!).

First there is **Andrea Zittel** ²³, queen of the reimagined airstream. Her wonderful, detailed mobile home/caravan/experimental living structures and uniform series have some of the same hypnotizing draw that an elaborate doll house has. Her "mod" and modern environments are playful in their mix of urban kitsch, sci-fi design and modern architectural masterworks. Oh, they're wonderful! Talking about western culture with the stuff of western culture. Zittel suggests that these intricate mobile homes are habitable, and perhaps offer an alternative to conspicuous consumption living through their compact design.



andrea zittel



andrea zittel
THETAKE



andrea zittel



Cosima Von Bonin



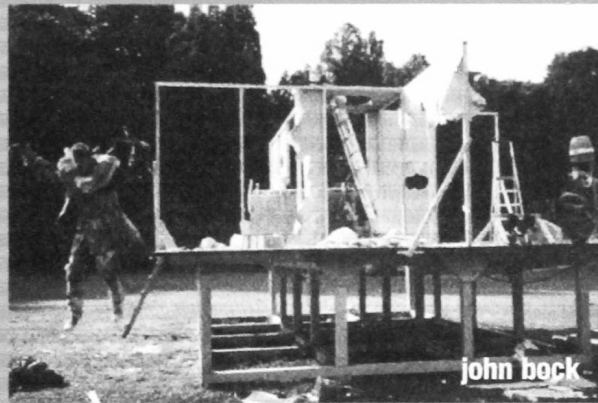
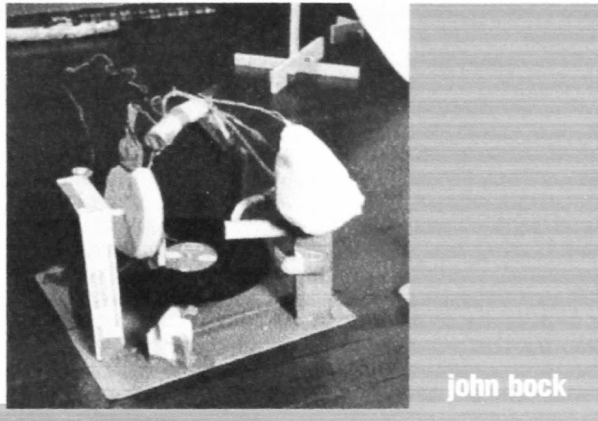
andrea zittel



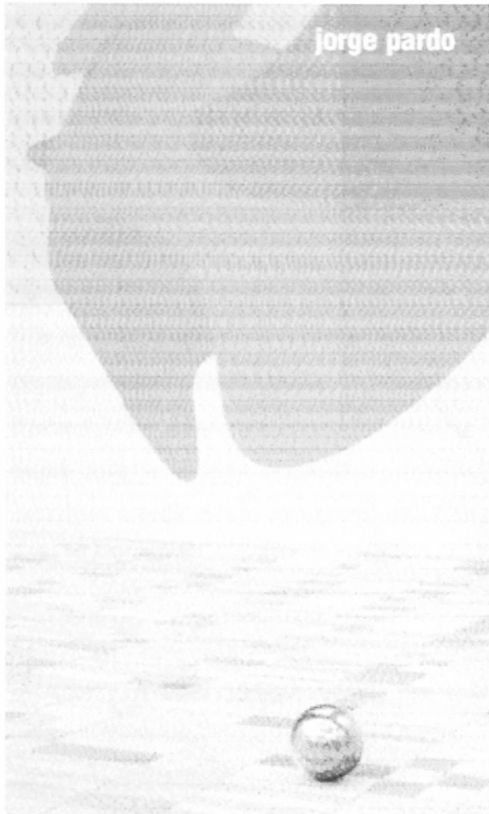
Cosima Von Bonin

Jorge Pardo is a charmer.²⁴ His work gracefully combines natural settings and materials with Scandinavian-inspired, live-in sculpture in such original combinations that they made me think "That's what I've been missing all along!" **Cosima Von Bonin**⁶ and John Bock⁷ also entertain with their intriguing interpretations of environment. With tall, whimsical

fabric mushrooms, idiosyncratic bedroom sets and performance art, Von Bonin uses place to purposely create opportunities for human interaction. **John Bock's** elaborate South-Park-meets-machine-shop props form the basis for his ridiculous, comic performances. Not to be confused with the serious and



estranged, non-usable installation art that predominates both Taschen books, these cheerful furniture pieces and places stick out like sore thumbs throughout the pages, and there are a lot of them — 10 in *Art Now*, for example. Making me wonder *“Is it because some of these artists are obviously coming from the worlds of architecture and design (whose tools and*



language are now being adopted by the fine art world with velocity) that they bring a different, more playful attitude to the table literally?!" This was the only area of focus in the Taschen books where artists did not appear to be trying to make the audience feel uncomfortable. I also found the introduction of commercially-based architecture into the fine art mix to be encouraging because I hope it indicates an ease in which fine art-based — but commercial books — like mine, will find acceptance.

Surveying the work of artists from Taschen and the Whitney, the groups broke down a little differently between the two publishers. As I mentioned, the Taschen books especially show a huge preponderance — well over half — of installation art. EXPENSIVE installation art. (As compared with traditional canvas painting, of which I counted only 11 artists in *Art Now*.) *"How are these people paying for this?"* I kept wondering. It can be assumed that a lot of the artists represented, either live in Europe (many of them are from Germany and Holland — underlining the interests and locales of the two editors for Taschen

[Uta Grosenick and Bürkhard Riemschneider] and are getting some funding there), or — in the case of the Americans — are either in possession of a trust fund or have a great rep. or gallery backing them up. Either way, it appears you cannot be a nearly starving artist and create Postmodern installation art.

now and then

By this time, people who follow art trends recognize a cadre of adjectives and descriptives that often appear in conjunction with the fine art of the past twenty years wherever it is displayed and written about. My own personal list from the three books above includes these terms "alienated, haunted-feeling, futuristic, isolated, referencing other art and mass culture, techno, obsessive, obliterating identity, disturbing, drama without revealing emotion, shock value, savvy self-promotion, in-joke, in-crowd, not pretty or comforting, and purposely blasé.

One might ask "*Why this kind of art now?*" I know it's a common assertion that Postmodern art speaks from a context outside the 'real' or physical world. A world that critic Kate Linker, commenting on Baudrillard's summation of post-industrial culture, describes as art that exists "*beyond truth, reference and causality, an artificial universe without meaning.*"¹⁴ I think it's almost the opposite. Can artists ever really claim to be that separate from a societal base? Especially today's creators — these artists are educated, expert city dwellers. They don't live in caves or some remote landscape isolated from a larger social context. Instead they are more like mirrors of the current urban zeitgeist — reflecting an array of perspectives on twenty-first century living, albeit in an cool, streetwise, and sometimes almost mean communication style.

I believe that we are continuing along a path of evolution in human consciousness and that this process is illustrated through the contemporary arts of each time period. Since Freud, two world wars, and the atom bomb, it seems to me that western society has had a special fascination with prying up and looking under the rock of the human psyche, to study what dark stuff grows on the underside, or what Jung refers to as the '*shadow self.*' My view is this activity is part of our growth, and we're only at the beginning of self-comprehension. We haven't come close to mastery of our emotions — we are still in the process of acknowledging what motivates us, and there's a lot of denial and rationalization yet to be owned.

Postmodernists have served this exploration by reflecting our shadow issues back to us — giving us 'the dirt.' Like Hip Hop's spewing out the energy of a collectively repressed reaction to 200 years of voicelessness, Post Mods have brought to light their 'unacceptable' emotions and personal secrets, or commented on the larger, insidious dangers creeping within the darker aspects of our western social and political systems. In the last twenty years the emphasis has leaned toward the especially off-putting, creepy and secretive aspects of human experience. My hypothesis is that this focus has merged with the impact of advertising to create further slick, distanced, and strategically self-promotional art.

The message might be good, the delivery ... ehh...

If the art of the last twenty years is in part a visual complaint or attempted dialogue with society about the fear that we are turning into a *Clear Channel, Happy Meal world after all*, is it possible to comment effectively on trend, commercialism, and the shocking and superficial in society, while using those means to communicate? Or is that ultimately, like uber-commercial artist Madonna, doing no more than rationalizing self-promotional stunts as public service messages? Are artists confusing joining the other side with protesting against it? Do they see the difference? Even if many artists today are bringing attention to what Baudrillard describes as the void at the core of contemporary society, there is still a bias at work: "*If there ain't suffering, and cynicism it ain't deep. It ain't art.*" Looking at the heavyweight western writers of the last century, it's easy to see how focusing on suffering and the shocking aspects of life helped correct an earlier cultural affection for romantic writing, and inculcated a tolerance for more shades of reality. But we have those shades now. They are part of our vocabulary. And in terms of communication, is the public getting the Post Mod morse code anyway? It may be that instead what comes across is the style subterfuge, and an inability to directly connect that gets communicated, which explains the sad and pessimistic oeuvre in much contemporary art and the general public's alienation to it. Are there not only other means to communicate reflections on '*the void*', but other things to comment on as well?

For myself, I want to go beyond cynicism to draw attention to what in life works sublimely well. To comfort, and personal interactions and sensations. I'm interested in asking ourselves "*What do we want? What positive attributes do we envision for our future?*" After looking at the shadow side of human existence — the Jerry Springer seminar — "*Where do we want to go*

from here?" I'm afraid if we continue to focus on the underside of the rock exclusively, we will become what we focus on. In my art I'm trying to counterbalance that possibility.

I think we are now on the edge of seeing more of the promise of the pluralism and politically conscious aspects of Postmodernism being realized. I've found new art that I relate to outside the gallery gates. On the web, in the streets, in school here. Street artists are doing beautiful, social commentary. Their communication is clear; their venue is non-commercial. Folks like Tim Biskup are further broadening the accessibility and outreach potential of fine art without sacrificing integrity. The local Missoula art scene is encouraging — it often represents a surprising combination of worldliness, playfulness and lack of pretense.

I once stood in front of a van Gogh painting with tears in my eyes — I experienced his work as an act of bravery and friendship. I'm watching out for that indication of friendship in current fine art. I'm looking to see contemporary art integrate the emotion-based contribution of earlier pictorial painting with the concept-oriented stance of Postmodernism. I look forward to seeing work that talks to you with an openness and intimacy that is like a between-the-two-of-us whisper. Art that communicates subtle understandings clearly. And as I create my own new formats, I'm looking out for changes in the modes of artistic transmission so that more people can enjoy art. It's a big shopping list. but the art world is very dynamic right now. A grand, active, open-option, moveable feast — it's our oyster!

endnotes

1. See www.freewayblogger.com
2. Rose, Aaron, and Strike, Christian, editors *Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture* Distributed Art Publisher 2005
3. See www.deitch.com/gallery/about.html, *Free Basin Skate Bowl*
4. See www.obeygiant.com
5. See www.sfbg.com/39/18/cover_art_neck_face_interview.html
6. Phillips, Tom *A Humument : A Treated Victorian Novel* Thames & Hudson 1982
7. Attributed to both Clement Clarke Moore and C18th Major Henry Livingston *The Sentinal* newspaper 1823
8. Bantock, Nick *Griffin and Sabine — An Extraordinary Correspondence* Chronicle Books 1991
9. Spiegelman, Art *Maus* — first published in parts in the magazine *Raw* 1980-1991
10. Ware, Chris *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* Fantagraphics 2000
11. Gaiman, Neil *The Sandman* (original publication) DC Comics 1988 -1996
12. See www.timbiskup.com
13. See www.davidcarsondesign.com
14. See www.litwack.org
15. See www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2005/dreamland/clubhouse
16. See www.creativetime.org
17. Giroux, Henry *Borderline Artists, Cultural Workers, and the Crisis of Democracy* In C. Becker and A. Wiens Chicago: New Art Examiner Press (Eds.) *The artist in society: Rights, roles and responsibilities* pp. 4-14

18. Schjeldahl, Peter *Easy To Look At Old Favorites at the New Moma* New Yorker 12/06/04
19. Schjeldahl, Peter *What's New The Whitney Biennial* New Yorker 03/22/04
20. Grosenick, Uta and Riemschneider, Bürkhard *Art Now 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* Taschen 2002
21. Grosenick, Uta and Riemschneider, Bürkhard *Art at the Turn of the Millennium* Taschen 1999
22. *The Whitney Museum of American Art 2004 Whitney Biennial* The Whitney Museum of American Art 2004
23. Zittel, Andrea *Art Now 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* Taschen 2002 pp 552-555
24. Pardo, Jorge *Art Now 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* Taschen 2002 pp 372-375
25. Von Bonin, Cosima *Art Now 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* Taschen 2002 pp 52-52
26. Bock, John *Art Now 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* Taschen 2002 pp 48-49
27. Linker, Kate *From Imitation, to Copy, to Just Effect* Artforum April 1985 pp 112
28. Baudrillard, Charles *L'Exchange Symbolique et la Mort* p 17 Translated by Craig Owens in *Art in America* September 1982 pp 191

additional helpful websites

www.ybca.org/ban4/va_curator.htm (bay area now — yerba buena exhibition)

www.graffiti.org/trains/index.trains

www.artcrimes.net

www.at149st.com/bench.html (a defunct train station now used as a graffiti gallery)

www.robbeiconal.com

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graffiti

www.newimageartgallery.com/neckface

www.moondoglovesyou.com

www.designsondemocracy.org

www.invisiblemadevisible.co.uk

www.txmx.de/grafflink

www.txmx.de/barcelonagraff

ww.streetart.antville.org

www.graffiti.org

www.woostercollective.com (this is the greatest site! so fascinating! they're really connecting the art, the artists and society together in a vibrant way.)