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# **A Subversive Socialist Craftsperson in the Post-Post Modern World**

## **The Conspiratorial Ranting of Kristoff Kamrath**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of the Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By : Kristoffer C. Kamrath, MFA Virginia Commonwealth University, School of the Arts, Crafts and Materials Studies, 2011

Director: Professor Jack Wax, Glass Materials

Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia May, 2011



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## **Abstract**

### **A SUBVERSIVE SOCIALIST CRAFTSPERSON IN THE POST-POST MODERN WORLD**

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Kristoffer C. Kamrath M.F.A.

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My research in this thesis delves into the corruption of American culture and my personal experience with the academic institution of art school. I delineate my symbolic representation of a social agenda through images and objects that reference the absurdity of institutionalized art and the decay of socialist idealism in the realm of crafts and contemporary culture at large.

## **Introduction) Art: Like Paintings and Stuff. *A Personal Retrospective***

I have always considered myself an artist. As I interpret the meaning of the word “artist” now it is so broadly subjective that just about anyone can claim their stamp collecting or taxidermy practice to be a qualifying activity. When I was younger I believed that the ability to paint or draw made someone an artist. Or some innate talent that lent itself to a crafts tradition. Regardless, the kind of art found in a gallery setting was something for ‘old people’. The kind of elitist literati types who mill about galleries perusing paintings and objects to decorate their homes as a means of signifying their opulent wealth and their obsession with frivolous display at cocktail parties. “Those galleries felt like refrigerator units for corpses of art that had lost their meaning anyway...that world was boring and I avoided it like the plague.”<sup>1</sup>

My interest in the arts began with an affinity for Bob Ross, who I believed was probably the most famous artist of all time. There was something about the tone of his voice and the way that he describes his “happy little clouds” that was absolutely mesmerizing. In hind sight I don’t think that it was the painting that interested me so much as the ‘cult of personality’ he represented. His voice was soft and hypnotic and he could slap together a landscape painting in a little under twenty minutes, which I find absolutely amazing consider that at this point in my life it takes me about six months to finish a painting. But what I find the most inspiring is that Bob Ross taught people that they are the masters of their own universe. You control your own destiny, and are capable of creating your own happy little world. Anyone can be a painter, no matter how bad you are at painting. Anyone can be an artist, if you can eloquently manipulate

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Rose, *Beautiful Losers*, page 37. Iconoclast Editions and Distributed Art Publishers

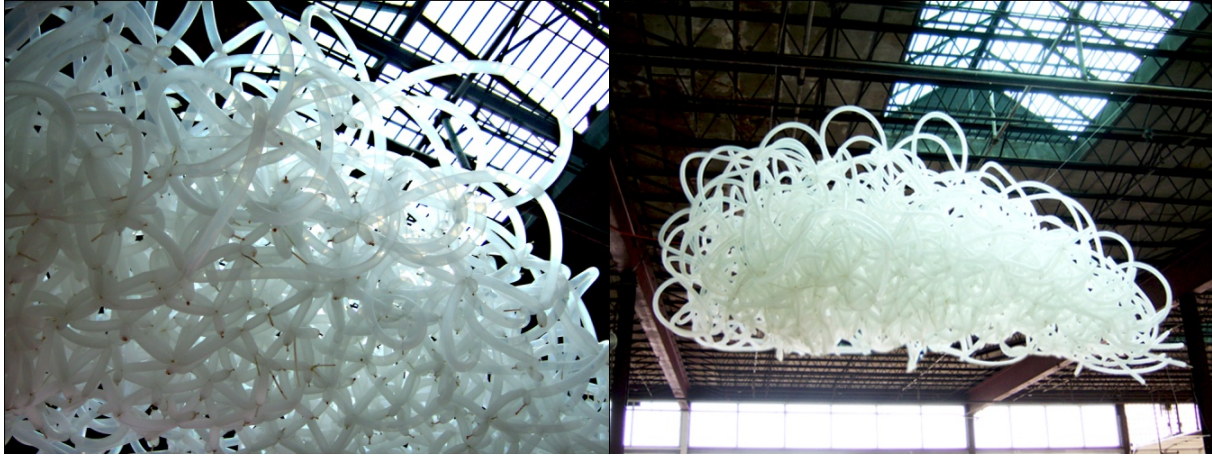
your audience. Bob Ross offered something simple and tangible that anyone could grasp. I would like to recall Winston Churchill who was himself, a painting hobbyist, who recreated the covers of greeting cards. When asked about his paintings, in reference to abstract art, he said “at least you can tell what mine are.” I feel that outside of academia people generally think that abstract painting (or academic art in general) is some kind of fraudulent joke, intended to patronize the masses of the un-accultured, and make them look foolish when they don’t “get-it”. Everyone just goes along with the ruse for fear of looking foolish, like praising the emperor’s new clothes.

By the time in my academic career I had reached art school I came to the conclusion that not everyone that would like to pursue the arts should. The vast majority of art students should probably not even be let into the building in the first place. I was a few years older than most of my class mates, and I found it hard to take anyone seriously that had spontaneously emerged out of suburban high school and decided to pursue “art”. My first year of classes consisted of long group critiques of a plethora of watercolor sunsets, pastel butterflies, and crude pencil drawings of someone’s stick-figure Barbie-doll girlfriend with grossly augmented cartoon breasts. This made me disdain the Bob Ross idea that anyone can paint, and by extension be an ‘artist’. The first insight that I came to, was that the more obscure and ridiculous the proposed concept, the better the work would be received by the faculty. I think that is still the reigning paradigm in art school. There is a very fine line dividing genius and insanity, and apparently a finer line between brilliance and absurdity.

Another issue for me was that, at that time, I was a rather prolific graffiti artist. (Or vandal, depending on your personal politics). Unfortunately, ‘Street Cred’ and subversive infamy don’t get you very far in an academic institution. And apparently giant ‘wildstyle’ murals don’t

constitute painting assignments. Consequently, my academic career in the arts began as a reactionary dissidence to what I believed was an academic farce. To this day I still find a glimmer of those opinions in my work even though I have been thoroughly indoctrinated with ‘artspeak’ to the point that I can make my point and completely contradict it simultaneously. I find that to be a sign of artistic accomplishment. In my graduate candidacy exhibition, *Happy Little Clouds*, I utilized the street vernacular of stenciled graffiti and balloon animals to deconstruct the farcical doctrines employed in academia. Unfortunately, the last thing a panel of professorial-type people would want to hear is that your studio practice is informed by low-brow street vandalism, Bob Ross, and the “Clown arts”. Not surprisingly, that exhibition was not received very well and required what I would like to call a “do-over”.





I think the allure of graffiti, for me, is the subversive aspects of the activity. There is a special place in my heart for the controversial and subversive. I find nothing interesting about being safe in one's representation of social inquiries. There is something wonderful about approaching the entire world as your canvas and that no one can stop you (except the police.) It is like the moment of epiphany you feel as a child when you realize, with crayon in hand, that the wall is a coloring book with no lines. Perhaps that was what I was trying to recreate in my candidacy review, the love of a particular craft medium, no matter how reprehensible an activity it is seen as. I look back nostalgically at my angst-ridden years of graffiti making as a very productive time in my life. I still recall the tools of the trade: Custom German spray paint caps, latex gloves, bolt cutters, and dog food. The dog food came about because of a night when I found a German Sheppard's nose buried in my crotch as I climbed the fence of a pick and pull car lot. I'm sure that I was inches from being castrated, and the only thing that kept me from singing soprano was a piece of beef jerky in my pocket. Ahhhh(sigh) memories!

'Street Art' Or "Urban Beautification" as I like to call it, would seem to the layman to be totally insane, or at the very least a complete waste of time. It involves trespassing in places that no sane person would go, at times of the morning when no one is around but criminals and vagrants, so that you can paint a word, phrase, or an image, that is ten + feet tall in stolen spray paint. No

academic painter would have the bravado or senselessness to do something like that. I would say that the gratification of a night of “urban beautification” far exceeds any kind of easel painting. For similar reasons I find live painting at festivals and gallery openings to be ridiculous, as painting is not a spectators sport, unless it’s done in a fast and dynamic way.

The practice of using spray paint in innovative ways taught me many things about color, line, symmetry, implied form and abstraction that I don’t imagine I would have ever learned formally in a class room at that time. (Maybe that could be due to the fact that I am incapable of sitting through a formal color theory lecture without falling asleep.) Nevertheless, I felt that I was on the cusp of finding something amazing to be shared with the world. There was also an entire community of people functioning in anonymity, in what might be seen as a seemingly counter-productive activity, like running an advertising campaign for a product that doesn’t exist. I still consider graffiti to be one of the noblest forms of art. Equally, I think it could be said that that break dancing is an exponentially more important activity than ballet. Graffiti, break dancing and hip-hop were the most important cultural attributes to come out of the east coast of the United States in the 1970s-80’s. The 1960’s had the Pop art revolution, but the 1980’s had a popular culture movement based in music. I would say Punk rock and Hip-hop are the two most predominant examples of this. Currently there is an amazing cross-cultural hybridization between east and west coast art. This undoubtedly is because of the national interest in sub culture and popular culture that has fused the punk rock/skateboard culture of the west with east coast graffiti and Hip-hop music creating a new artistic paradigm rooted in youth culture. “Most influential in this post-pop legacy today is the collapse of high and low art hierarchies in the composite realm of product culture.”<sup>2</sup> So once again we come to the subjectivity of artistic opinions. This reflects how I see painting in the greater cultural context. Painting a mural with

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<sup>2</sup> Carlo McCormick, *The Beaten Path*, *Beautiful Losers*, Iconoclast Editions and Distributed Art Publishers

the intent of committing an illegal act of ‘urban beautification’ is very different than painting a panel or canvas. One is noble and awe-inspiring the other is trite and boring. I receive no adrenal rush from delicately shading a gradient in oils, but I do get quite a thrill running from the police or angry territorial gang members. Furthermore, the way that artists survive now is by utilizing deplorable forms of global capitalism, and exploitation. It has been said that painting died many times, due to photography or film or Pop art, or whatever, but what killed painting for me was Thomas Kinkade: “the painter of light”. I hate Thomas Kinkade for a few reasons:

1.) His work is kitsch garbage, and this is coming from someone who likes kitsch, even though in the spirit of the postmodern condition I consider that type of value judgment to be totally irrelevant. If Theodore Adorno were alive today I think he would have some interesting things to say about that. It would probably be something along the lines of popular culture kitsh-shit making people too docile to realize that it was robbing them of their ability to reject the exploitation of consumer culture.

2.) I grew up in Monterey, California; and every time I go to some bourgeois, yuppie’s McMansion I have to look at an “authentic” signed Kinkade. I know, in fact, that he did not paint that snowy little cottage. I’m almost positive it came out of a Korean sweatshop where some poor single-mother, slave-laborer, works for half-a-cent per hour painting glowing little cottages the likes of which she will never see much less ever own, and who was probably trained via Bob Ross re-runs. As an avid communist, (who dabbles in the capitalist world of marketing glass “art”) I am diametrically opposed to exploitation, capitalism and all manner of abuse that it promotes to make rich people richer. But I digress.

In today’s academic art scene I feel that the educated discourse of art is either over intellectualized, or reduced to some mind-numbing reference to form or process, or worse,



abstract expressionism, as if the specter of Clement Greenberg haunts the halls of every painting department determining what is kitsch and avant garde, (which I don't think I ever spell correctly even after a decade of art school). It is true that painting never dies, (or if it does its resurrected like a zombie) but I believe that with the industrial age turning into the internet age it will become increasingly more difficult for painters to make a living. Unless you have reached some level of philosophical depth so absurd that not even art critics can understand it, which is when you know that you have really made it. This is probably why a graduate art department lecture sounds far more like part of a philosophy class rather than something that is in an art school. Apparently, the conceptual basis of a work of art is more important than the craftsmanship, or its' formal qualities. I've heard that artists are the new philosophers and crafts people are the new artists. This kind of exchanging roles makes me wonder who took over the role of the craftsperson.

I think the point is that art is whatever the artist or art critic says that it is. Why society entrusts us with that power and responsibility is probably due to blatant indifference and ignorance. The real test of artistry for me is whether or not the artist considers their life or themselves to be an incomplete work of art; a work in progress, if you will. In such a case the artist is actually the 'art', which creates a convenient bridge between subject and object. Andy Warhol is a wonderful example of this.

“Warhol and the pop artists in general, rendered almost worthless everything written by philosophers on art, or at best rendered it of local significance.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto, Pop Art and Past futures, pg.125

Andy Warhol may have beaten the philosophers at their own game, and probably ushered in the new wave of postmodernism that laid waste to the intellectual formalism of modernist theory. As I see it, the most important aspect of his work is it is pointing to distinctions between art and reality. At a certain time in history the tangible and intangible can both be equally seen as art as long as the perpetrator of said art is convincing enough to their audience. The relationship of the objective and subjective aspects of an artwork become blurred and maybe even irrelevant. Warhol was integral to the history of studio art and the general philosophy surrounding it. In the eyes of Arthur Danto, who believes that pop art was the pivotal point that began the historical end of art as we know it, at least, in the sense of the progression of a linear narrative of art history.

It seems that the philosophers of antiquity did not hold artists in the highest esteem. Danto references book ten of Plato's Republic, in which Plato "specifies the three modes of reality of the bed: as idea or form, as what a carpenter might make, and then as what a painter might make, imitating the carpenter who has imitated the form." Socrates even argued that: "Artists lack knowledge. They "know" only the appearances of appearances."<sup>4</sup> I find it really interesting that today there is so much praise for the innovative and creative spirit of artists, considering that we are really just superficially recreating reality in our own distorted lens of truth and beauty. In my work I recreate art history in my own distorted system of symbolic representation. For example, a glass rose is no longer a representation of rebirth, renewal, and immortal love in the context of glassblowing. It is a symbol of the dehumanizing labor of mass production in a studio atmosphere. A Mandala, to me, is not a representation of unity, perfection and completeness. It represents the communist destruction of Buddhism and the western appropriation of eastern spirituality in a time when multiculturalism has led to a subculture of

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Danto, Pop Art and Past Futures, pg.124

iconoclast neo-hippies, fluent in “new age”, who have taken over a lifestyle of veganism and transcendental meditation. I address this in my video documentation of my incendiary sculpture *Matchbook Mandala*.



Marcel Duchamp set forth a whole new way of interpreting art that altered the historical definition of the art object and paved the way for pop-artists like Andy Warhol. Warhol began a new era of production where anything was possible given the right context and environment. He subversively addressed the issue of artistic commodification through appropriation of banal images and objects. Anything was potentially art, and with the advent of conceptual art, performance, and happenings in many ways there was not even a need for something tangible or objective. The life of the artist became art. The artist himself/herself functioned as an artwork, The persona: “Andy Warhol” was the construct of the artist and became the actual art not the objects that he commodified. So does it even matter what work the artist produces? The Artist had essentially turned philosopher, and done so in such a subversive way that nobody could really know if it was genius or lunacy. What makes this even better, from a marketing perspective, is that people purchasing a Warhol piece do so less by the merits of the work than by the notoriety of the artist. I chose to pursue this theory in my performance *Hairpiece* which

involved publicly having my head shaved during a graduate critique. I later constructed a sumi ink brush with my hair and attempted to paint my hair back onto my head with the paintbrush made of my hair. I considered this to be a conceptual allusion to the artist functioning as the art piece, and the absurdity of artistic critique in a contemporary academic institution.



Andy Warhol and Bob Ross (yes they are historically comparable) epitomize the artist as art in my mind, and Thomas Kinkade just might be the anti-Christ of the arts. No amount of persuasion could convince me otherwise. After all Painting is a craft and critically talking about art is just a bunch of lofty opinions. So conventional painting was dead to me, Thomas Kinkade killed it, that smug, capitalist, swine; and spray paint in an academic setting is evidently an unacceptable medium for personal expression.

As this autobiographic account rolls on chronologically, the next logical step in my reasoning is to shift away from the nay-saying, two-dimensional department. I have a personal aversion to sitting in front of a computer, so going back to graphic design seemed counter-productive to my growth as an artist. I love the physicality of working with my hands, and having a diverse skill set works out pretty well with sculpture, so I moved on down the hall of my university to “the spatial arts department”. (That means sculpture department in Californian). I am very thankful that I made that decision, because I subsequently discovered hot glass which

has since become my ongoing material obsession. After ‘finishing’ college with a degree in sculpture the only ‘artistic’ activity I was interested in was glass blowing. It is the most expensive addiction I have ever had, and it led me here, to the Virginia Commonwealth University for graduate school.

“The problem with art school is that it can teach you technique and craft, but it can’t give you talent. You get into grad school and practice, practice, practice. With all those skills you still have nothing. There’s no guarantee you’ll create anything worth all your effort... You’re always haunted by the idea you’re wasting your life... Nothing pisses artists off more than when some strung out drug addict, lazy bum, or a slobbering pervert creates a master piece, as if by accident.”<sup>5</sup>

I couldn’t agree more. Sometimes I think that’s what my contemporaries think about me in this institution. Graduate school, for artsy folks, as it was explained to me by people who had been through it, was like an ongoing psychological experiment that was both agonizingly torturous and also very confusing. One person described it as a way of filtering the weirdest of the weird out of the real world and relocating them into a place of like-minded psychopaths and anarchists who cannot find another place where they fit in (like a sanitarium). So you take out a student loan, move somewhere obscure, and milk every ounce of eccentricity out of your self for all to see in some tangible and symbolic representation of your psyche. And then you are asked to write a thesis, which brings us to the present day.

I hope this will explain my past and better contextualize where I am going in this Thesis. I would like to thank the faculty and staff here at the Virginia Commonwealth University for

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<sup>5</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Diary*, Doubleday Publishing, 2003

listening to my inappropriate ranting and irrelevant commentary during critique, and generally putting up with my bullshit. I would also like to thank my fellow graduate students and advisors for their valuable insight. I don't think I seemed very appreciative in the past, but I really do love and respect all of you. VCU Arts students: I'm sorry for: breaking your tools, subjecting all of you to toxic resin and paint fumes, yelling at you, walking around half naked, burning peoples hair, sexual harassment in jest, smoking in inappropriate places, questioning peoples' masculinity, setting things on fire, forcing people to help me with dangerous and painful projects, tying dreadlocks to the door handle of a trichophobic's studio (fear of loose hair), gluing the doors of your studios closed, throwing away your garbage (I mean sculptures) and all the general mischief that I tend to get into with the best of intentions.

## **Socialist Craftivism, what is Wrong with Americans.**

*“Never before has the devastation caused by the pursuit of profit, as defined by capitalism, been more extensive than it is today. Almost everybody knows this. How then is it possible not to heed Marx, who prophesied and analyzed the devastation?”<sup>6</sup>*

Craft is inherently political. Its roots lie in the utopian idealism of John Ruskin and William Morris and their Socialist protest against industrialization. I find craft to be an ideal venue for pushing ones political interests and making objects emblematic of concerns with capitalist society. The craft movement pushes people to rethink corporate culture, commodity fetishism, and their role as a consumer in a hyper-capitalist society. I believe that much of the issues facing contemporary craft parallel the principle concerns of Marx and the English craft movement of the late 1800’s. Marx wrote: “Due to the capitalist exploitation of the social process of production, in handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of the tool, in the factory; the machine makes use of him. In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage.”<sup>7</sup>

The industrial revolution was a pivotal point in European history that led to a radical change in the methods of production, socio-economics, and global trade. This brought about the reactionary movement that bonded Craft with Socialism, and the utopian ideas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Karl Marx and much of the writing of John Ruskin and William Morris point out the conflicts inherent in industry and craft, and the growing divisions of the Bourgeois and Proletariat. There was as well the dehumanizing affect of mechanization and the division of labor. “...so long as man allows his daily work to be mere unrelieved drudgery he will seek

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<sup>6</sup> John Berger, *Ten Dispatches About Place*, July/August 2007, *Orion Magazine*

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Kapital*, London 1887, Vol. 1, Chapter 15

happiness in vain.”<sup>8</sup> William Morris and John Ruskin believed that “Through the practice of craftsmanship, they (would) reunite art and labor, mental effort and manual achievement, work and play, countering the fragmentation of social life endemic to the emerging corporate order.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the United States remained rather insular in its craft social agenda. “The Arts and Crafts linked their critique of industrial capitalism to a socialist political agenda. And it was the explicitly political orientation that marked the division between the English and the American wings of the movement... From its origins, the Americans were ambivalent about linking craft work with a political critique or the social organization of labor, and their uncritical embrace of the work ethic let them see the most degrading manual labor as morally beneficial character building.”<sup>10</sup> The American work-ethic, level of education, and lack of exposure to socio-political critique probably contributed to the absence of interest in Socialism around the turn of the last century. Also, as a colony, it was geographically distant, and culturally disparate from the paradigm of European revolutionary discourse. The McCarthyism of the 1950’s stifled any interest in Communism or Socialism by associating them with the diametric opposition to Capitalism and Democracy; it was not until the 1960’s that a new interest in Communism and Social revolution began to emerge. A Renaissance in American socio-political subversion occurred, similar to that of the Red House or the Marxists more than a century prior. The revolutionary fervor of that decade re-visited a school of thought rejecting systems of consumerism and exploitation. Coincidentally, in this time there was an emergence of interest in Craft. Today many enclaves of the Crafts world have aligned themselves with a radically anti-capitalist D.I.Y. movement that gives the proverbial finger to corporate culture and consumerism. I believe that the contemporary craft movement is

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<sup>8</sup> William Morris, *The Beauty of Life*, published in *Hopes and fears for Art*, 1882

<sup>9</sup> *The English example, John Ruskin, William Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal*

<sup>10</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: Handmade Socialism or Elite Consumerism?*, Contemporary Sociology, Vol.16, No. 3-May 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2070331>



approaching a similar stage of radical economic protest. In the spirit of John Ruskin, and William Morris crafts in America have finally begun to push a social agenda, Craft is more than just making, it's making a statement. I allude to this in my *Gunpowder Portraiture* of famous iconic revolutionary leaders. The 1860's English reaction to Industrialization and Globalization parallels the sentiment of the 1960's rejection of imperialism and segregation. Presently there are growing concerns about the issues of globalization, corporatocracy, and the recurrent accelerating division of rich and poor. With the GOP's constitutional raping, and their policy agenda, that division of rich and poor is growing at a (probably) exponential rate.



Technology, rapid travel, and the interconnectedness of the global web, are accelerating the spread of the capitalist system at an unprecedented rate. There is a new kind of poverty that exists due to globalized economics that is displacing entire cultures and communities and co-opting them into a system of blatant exploitation and post-colonial, pseudo-slavery. This is something that Thomas Friedman neglected to mention in his optimistic analysis of

globalization and the ‘leveling of the playing field’.<sup>11</sup> “Month by month millions leave their homelands. They leave because there is nothing there, except their everything, which does not offer enough to feed their children. Once it did. This is the poverty of the new capitalism.”<sup>12</sup> The inevitable reaction is a counter culture movement of neo-socialists, growing their own food, making their own products, and circumventing the capitalist imperialist machine. As American citizens, the only real power we have is how we vote, and how we spend our money. I felt that the former is far less effective than the later in terms of one’s real empowerment. Refusing to fund exploitation, and corporate commercial culture is the first step in making real social changes. Buying local, and making your own products, is an inherently political statement. In my eyes buying hand-made craftwork is an individual’s way of saying “Fuck you Wal-Mart!” I believe that William Morris, were he alive today, would have a similar sentiment. “Morris understood the power of the consumer over the producer, yet he knew that until the consumer and producers stood not as “purse” and “machines” but as neighbors and brothers, art would remain separate from labor and the beauty of the earth would wither under the pursuit of profit.”<sup>13</sup>

This idea correlates to the Marxist theory that: “(in) the technical division of labor: when laborers control- or attempt to control- the labor process, the law of value cannot prevail. This means that control of the technical division of labor is absolutely crucial for the capitalist mode of production. In stripping the worker of both manual craft skills and accumulated knowledge and intellect, management forces a split between conception and execution at the point of production. The laborers knowledge is “taken up” into the development of machinery and technological processes leaving the worker with an attenuated grasp of the technical process

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat, A Brief History of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux (2005)

<sup>12</sup> John Berger, *Ten Dispatches About Place*, July/August 2007, *Orion Magazine*

<sup>13</sup> William Morris and the Craftsman Ideal

that he or she now simply monitors or adjusts. The outcome is that today workers in industry are less able to operate the industry in which they labor than at the beginning of the manufacturing process in the middle of the nineteenth century.’’<sup>14</sup>

This presents an epitomized version of the exploitation associated with capitalist abuse of the division of labor. Today the studio craft movement has circumvented this system by allowing one individual, or a group of individuals to conduct the entire process of production without the influence of the managerial segment of the capitalist division of labor. Craft has created a better system that can make labor a joyous and engaging activity in a productive and familial environment. The ideals of Ruskin and Morris have been appropriated by a new generation. It seems that we, as crafts people, have accidentally adopted the European model of what I call “craftivist socialism”. It is a marriage of socialist idealism and communist protest while still playing the game of capitalism. Unfortunately, we are still selling commodities to the Bourgeoisie, but this can be conducted on our own terms. We participate in a process of increasing the value of an object based upon the ethics of the labor value associated with art and social consciousness whilst subverting the imperialist-global-culture that brings us fast-food and cheap imports. Even in the wholesale market of high-end department stores there is a new interest in local-handmade studio craft objects. Craft is the new conscious of labor politics, and we are its advocates. “The impetus to counter the tyrannical pressure of technology with handicraft is nothing new. Since the early nineteenth century Arts and Crafts pioneers proposed that the particularities of craft knowledge might temper the corrupting influence of the industrial revolution with the righteous, even spiritual, nature of thoughtful

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<sup>14</sup> Deskilling, Reskilling, and Artistic Labor

labor, and the Studio Craft movement that rose in its wake has consistently poised this same notion as technology has become increasingly ubiquitous in our lives.”<sup>15</sup>

I feel that I should clarify a few terms that I use rather frequently. Socialism, as what it has evolved into today, is something very different from the ideology that I reference. I am speaking more generally about a form of collective idealism that needs to exist for people to find pleasure and sense in a life of ever growing complexity and beaurocracy, a form of utopian idealism that can provide the common man with the optimism to work toward making the world a better place for future generations. I speak about revolution frequently but not in the sense of the Marxist revolutions of the past. I don’t believe that the Bolshevik revolution led to communism, not real communism anyways, it was more of a new kind of fascism that let the proletariats believe that they were empowered. Terry Eagleton described Russia at that time as a populace “poor in the kind of civic institutions that secure loyalty of citizens and thus help to stave off political insurrection.”

“You could not build socialism in an economic backwater, encircled by stronger, politically hostile powers, among a mass of unskilled, illiterate workers and peasants without traditions of social organization and democratic self government.”<sup>16</sup>

In America, you cannot have socialism in a culture of people who are so egocentric and isolationist that they have no interest in collectivism. Most of this country’s populace is lacking in the kind of interest or education necessary to try making real change. For example, ‘No child left behind’ has led the American youth into an inferior form of education based on standardized testing that stifles the creativity that would necessary to promote a competent and

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<sup>15</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, *The Ordinary Made Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Duke University Press, 2010

<sup>16</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Politics of Amnesia, After Theory*

competitive workforce. Furthermore, the public high school system in the U.S. functions mostly as a means of teaching young people to accept the authority of stratified class system. The public school system is more like preparation for the penal system than preparation for the workforce. There is also the American tendency to take great pride in blatant ignorance and belligerence. We would never have had the Bush legacy if it wasn't for this cultural attribute. The socialist imperative that I push is a social criticism of the capitalist system that strips us of our worth and power as citizens, and I think that this is invisible to the American people because of their apathy and unwillingness to accept the views of social critics and other cultures. Speaking generally of the culture at large, most Americans tend to refuse to learn other languages, rarely travel to other countries (with the exception of post-colonial conquered tourist traps), and have a farcical view of freedom and democracy as this grandiose attribute of American capitalism. Once again Terry Eagleton broke down the outside critique of this country quite nicely:

“Those who support the American imperium do not have to respond to such comments. They can simply dismiss them as ‘anti-American’. This is a marvelously convenient tactic. All criticism of the U.S. springs from a pathological aversion to Sesame Street and bacon burgers. They are expressions of smoldering envy on the part of less fortunate civilizations, not reasoned criticism.”<sup>17</sup>

Fidel Castro once said that “a revolution is the struggle between the future and the past.” I think that the craftivist revolution is a bridge that ties the social idealism of Morris and Marx with the American public of today. The correlation of past and future is one that transcends culture and subverts the system of industrialized global trade that has been accepted by a group

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<sup>17</sup> ibid

of citizens that have developed an aversion to manual labor. Craft labor has rebounded in this system and has the potential to make waves that are capable of altering our cultural paradigm. In a time when revolution is rampant all over the Middle East and is spreading like wildfire, maybe we should look to the east for once. In my piece: *In solidarity with the power of the people*. I chose to use molten glass, (my craft medium of choice), to ignite canvases covered in gunpowder, that burned media images into them of rioting in the middle east, and common people overcoming violent military and police oppression. This was my form of craftivist advocacy of political upheaval for the promotion of starting a new system-a better system.



In conclusion, if we do not seize this moment of socio-political upheaval, and chose to openly fight our capitalist oppressors: the opportunity may pass by as it has in political movements of the past. *Crafts people of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but our chains, and the world to win.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Blatant Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto* reference, London, 1848

## **Pun, Parody, and Paradox: The Post-modern Prerogative**

I have always been intrigued by Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, and the idea that there are universal archetypal symbols in human psychology. In my work I utilize symbolic objects and universal icons to allude to a meaning that is bound to subconscious universal symbolism. I believe that there is an objective way to interpret a system of symbols, but with the cross-pollination of cultures, the associations made with these symbols differ based upon regional cultural traits, and thusly present an almost infinite array of meanings that can be derived from any universal object or image. Carl Jung created a hybrid system of eastern metaphysics and western psychology in his establishment of archetypal symbols. To make things more complicated, by combining multiple symbols with diverse multi-cultural signifiers, the meaning of a piece can be so diverse in meaning as to signify absolutely anything. Furthermore, with the addition of popular culture references, with no historical predecessor, and subjective connotations with iconography a new system of symbols is created. I find this to be a signature of the post-modern artists' plight. There is no longer a strictly objective vernacular of symbolism in art, there is rather a hybrid language composed of all aspects of human consciousness devoid of meaning outside of the personal association one makes between subject and object.

I have a tendency to utilize Puns as a means of addressing linguistics and the multiplicity of meaning that can be associated with objects. In my *paranomasia* series I was addressing the simple issue of the pun as a means of humor and rhetoric that functioned as a critical commentary of craft and academic art, and as a parody of the seriousness with which historians view art. I find the rhetoric of puns to be the most low-brow of the Aristotelian persuasive arts of discourse. This is slightly ironic in that I am trying to utilize the ethos of credibility in the arts



while discrediting the institution that I am using to make my hypothesis. I find no hierarchal delineation in aesthetic value systems. I do not place anymore value on the avant garde than on kitsch, there is no division of art and craft in my mind, and ‘outsider art’ is a term I find to be derogatorily used by exclusionist elitists. Value judgment in the arts is counter-productive to the socialist imperative of absolute equality and the establishment of a classless society. In the piece *Caulk* I am referencing homophonic heterographs while simultaneously making a “dick joke”. In *La trahison des Verriers* I am addressing the contemporary practice of glass blowing, and the stereotype of glass makers as the producers of drug paraphernalia. This piece is made from a mold of a sewage pipe and inscribed on the side is the phrase “*Ceci est une pipe en verre.*” Meaning “this is a glass pipe”, a loose reference to Rene Magritte’s piece *La trahison des images*. The third piece of this series was entitled *Tulip Vessel*, a reference to a roman vessel form and female genitalia that resemble floral forms made of sculpted hot glass. This is, as well, a homophonic heterograph and an art historical reference to the use of the vaginal depictions of flora.



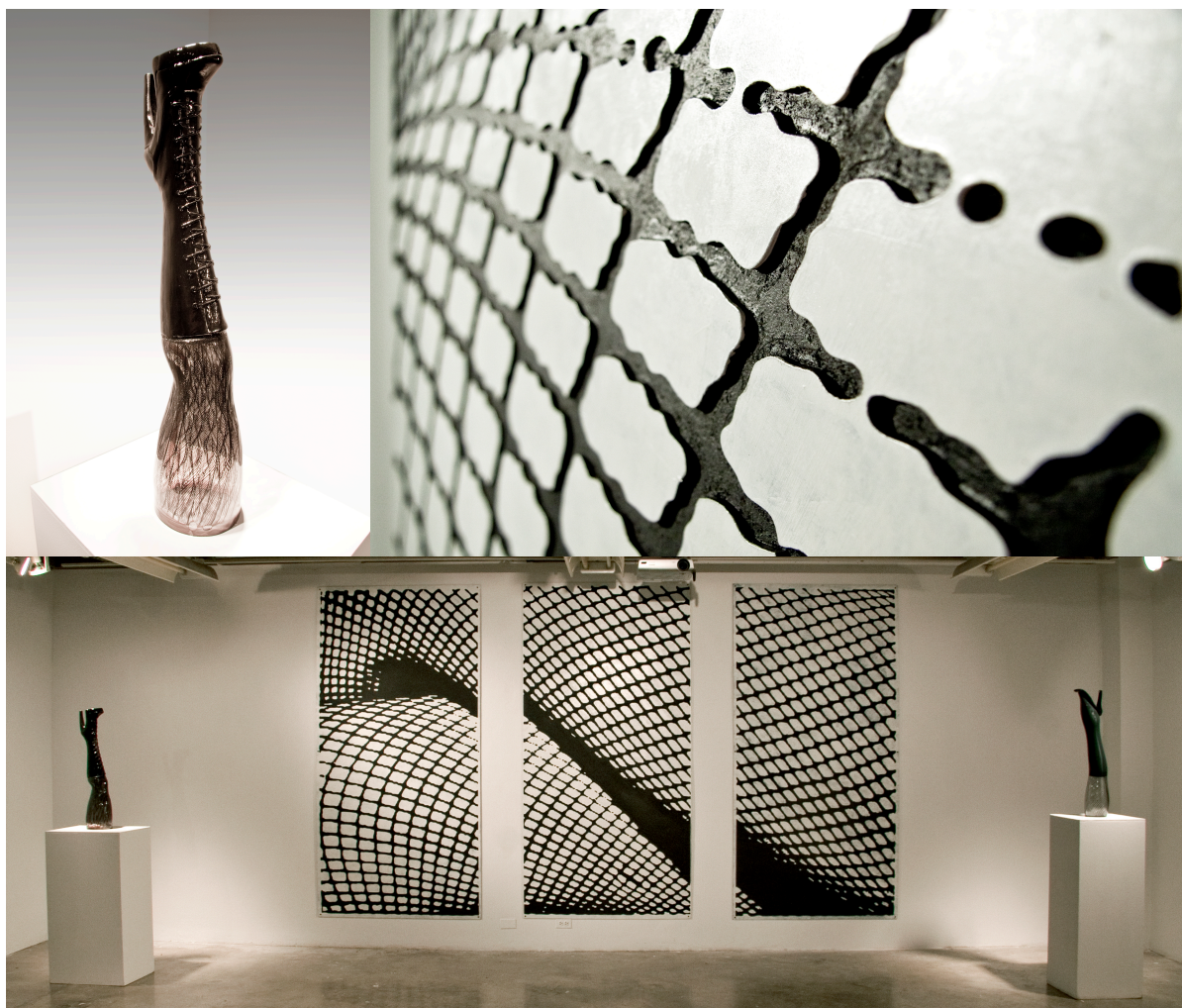
Moving beyond the pun references I began to delve into the depiction of mythological animals as a parody of Freudian psychoanalysis and his theories of penis envy with a post modern perspective of outdated psychological analysis and marketing schemes. (I doubt that today people place much emphasis on Freud’s theories of psychosexual development.) As a means of illustrating that, I made prototypes of porcelain products for everyday use in the



common shower, constructed with penis elements. “*Dildocorn*” is a porcelain unicorn with a dildo-horn nozzle intended to function as a vibrating shower head. “*Ejacalope*” is a porcelain jackalope with penis horns that function as a shampoo and conditioner dispenser.



While engaging in this research into sexuality and the subjectivity of Freudian analysis, I was also exploring the 17<sup>th</sup> century Venetian technique of the ‘reticello’ and ‘zanfirico’ patterns. I came to the conclusion that these glass filigri patterns resembled mesh stockings, and thought that it would be interesting to make blown glass lace pattern stockings utilizing these virtuoso glass blowing techniques. I made a female leg and finished it by adding a Punk rock/Industrial style/dominatrix-looking boot. I’ve always been a fan of sub-culture movements and the series ‘*The fine line*’ gave me an opportunity to conduct further research into fetishism, punk, industrial music, and Venetian glass blowing techniques. Word on the street is that the use of fishnets in Punk rock originated in English sub culture when bands would land shows in strange places like sex shops and fetish clubs and conveniently dress the part in fishnets and leather studs (until their teen-age fans adopted the same fashion but without the context of the venue.) I also found it interesting that two of the islands in the Venetian lagoon Murano and Burano dealt with the production of luxury items: Murano was the island of glass and Burano the island of lace.



Reticello has a similar look to a knit mesh or the 15<sup>th</sup> century ‘punto in aria reticella’ lace pattern. Punto in aria reticella, a originally French creation was interestingly produced on the lace island of Burano as well. I chose to re-contextualize the relationship of textile and glass, specifically the Burano reticella lace tradition and the Murano reticello glass technique using a more contemporary theme: fishnet stockings. This was an interesting conceptual bridge for me between sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism. I often create glass vessels utilizing color application techniques that reference textile patters as a way of secretly appealing to the market of clothing fetishists. This bridges my interests in historical glass blowing and popular counter culture while simultaneously making a socialist institutional critique of commodity fetishism. In

the past I created a series of houndstooth murrine patterns on vessel forms entitled *Fascista fashionistas*. This was my first attempt at addressing the fact that people blindly follow the authority of high end designers of utilitarian objects. I believe that the use of black, white, and red in color patterning alludes to the constructivist palette and its adoption for fascist propaganda posters and fascist banners of the 1930's and 40's. A palette that was also adopted by the Vernini glass factory and Versace designers as a means of psychologically dictating their fascist authority of aesthetics. I find that these colors imply a certain level of subliminal dictatorship. By utilizing this color palette for a critique of fashionability I was willfully contradicting myself by working within the fascist visual vernacular to criticize it. This is a paradox that I encounter often in my conceptual practice. The critic George Steiner once wrote that, "Fascism has inspired no great work of art.... No doubt, Fascism is too vile and scurrilous an ideology to produce those charities of the imagination which are essential to literate art...Fascism tyrannizes through contempt of man; Communism tyrannizes by exalting man above that sphere of private error, private ambition, and private love which we call freedom."<sup>19</sup> I suppose the key difference is that I am utilizing a fascist aesthetic to criticize the American imperialist machine as a fascist entity, not advocating fascism.

In the piece *Molotov Veronese* I am using an opulent form of Venetian stemware as a Molotov cocktail. Taking the decorative wares of the bourgeois and combining it with a tool of the proletariat to combat the oppression of military force and police brutality. A greater paradox is that this implies using violence against violence as a way of working toward peaceful revolution. I am intrigued by the use of glass objects for social critique and in my research I

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<sup>19</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, Atheneum, 1966. Columbia World of Quotations. Columbia University Press, 1996.

discovered that Josiah McElheny found an account of Jacopo Ligozzi doing just that. In his piece “The Development of Social Critique” he describes:

“Jacopo Ligozzi, court draftsman to Cosimo II of the Medici, began in 1617 to make drawings for the production of glass at the Florence factory in the Pitti Palace. Ligozzi had these three wine glasses made by Murenese master Giocomo Della Luna to point out the lengths that aristocrats would go to define their own elegance. In this period it had become important to drink from glass as a part of an elite life of grace. Ligozzi consciously created these glasses both to fit into this lifestyle and to simultaneously critique it. It is virtually impossible to drink from these glasses without spilling wine on oneself. Through exaggeration, he used the object itself to insert his own concepts of rebellion and inquiry into the culture at large. This kind of object-based analysis of the social structure only returns with the art and design of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>20</sup>

In correlation with this critique I chose to delve into the contemporary preoccupation with internet pornography and the obsession with non-normative sexual practice and exploitation. I created a series of 17<sup>th</sup> century style goblets referencing bukkake and menstruation blood fetish. In the piece *Money shot* I made a goblet with an elaborate money symbol stem and a creamy colored shot glass cup and foot that referenced the color of semen. The piece comes with a cocktail composed of coconut cream rum and whipped cream lined rim that would pour over ones face in you attempt to drink from this glass, as a reference to the cocktail the “blowjob” and the practice of bukkake in porn. In *Red Wings* I constructed a goblet with a stereotypical Venetian dragon stem with giant red wings and a Zanfirico pattern that alludes to bloody labia. This is a reference to the process of performing cunnilingus on a menstruating woman known as “getting your red wings.” This also comes with a cocktail recipe

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<sup>20</sup> Josiah McElheny: *A Prism* (Skira Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2010)



similar to the bloody mary but with a red salt and pepper rim that is distorted in such a way that you cannot drink from the glass without the contents of red salted rim being deposited on the sides of the mouth. These two goblets are my versions of the object based social critique of sexual paraphilia and what can also be seen as a critique of youth culture alcoholism. Similarly, I produced a piece in this series called *Tentacle Hen-Tie*. The object is a blown glass tentacle wearing a necktie covered in a hen motif, which is yet another pun that references the Japanese tentacle rape fetish in manga porn.



In this series I am comically addressing issues that are potentially very serious social ills which, in hind sight, relates to the book *Rules for Radicals*’, by Saul D. Alinsky which I was reading at the time. Mr. Alinsky mentions the importance of having a sense of humor about things as a way of dealing with a sick and corrupt society. “Humor is essential, for through humor much is accepted that would have been rejected if presented seriously. This is a sad and lonely generation. It laughs too little, and this is tragic.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals, Random House, New York, 1971

To conclude this address of pun and parody of the arts, I would like to say that I love the cantankerous old adage of: “Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke!” but Saul would conclude this more poetically with the excerpt:

“Hang on to one of your most precious parts of youth, laughter-don’t lose it as many of you seem to have done, you need it. Together we may find some of what we’re looking for-laughter, beauty, love, and the chance to create.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

## **What is this Cabbage Patch Baby Head thing all about?**

I find the conceptual basis for my work in the “Horned Cabbage Patch Kids” to be an exercise in contextualism, meaning that there is a certain level of relativity in the processes involved in interpreting symbols. I have already stated that in the post modern interpretation of symbolic iconography the diversity of multiculturalism has provided us with a rhizometric system of visual associations that can lead one to an almost infinite number of conclusions. My personal paradoxical preference is to say that this object signifies nothing and everything. It can be both or neither. (I have a tendency to make seemingly contradictory statements.) I do not do this to be obtuse. I think it has more to do with my obsession with Zen Buddhism and the tendency of Zen masters to impart enlightening insight, with what would seem to be absurd and irrelevant rhetoric. But in actuality they are communicating something beyond words, they do not provide an answer because there really isn’t one. These discourses are often documented in Zen Koans with what appears to be a nonsensical poem or riddle that operates outside of conventional logic. An example would be: “the sound of one hand clapping” or “the tree falling in the woods when no one is around to hear it.” I would call it a form of Buddhist Socratic Methodology. It is better to raise questions than answers because answers end the process of contemplation and introspection. It is not the job of the artist to provide answers. It is more important to raise the right questions, and persuade your audience to find their own conclusions, or raise their own questions. Though, just for the hypothetical process of being objective, I will divulge a few of my personal and historical references for this work. To begin with, the Cabbage Patch doll was like the ‘Tickle-me Elmo’ or “Mighty Morphin Power Ranger” of the 1980s. Every year marketing executives work tirelessly on advertising campaigns to manipulate children and their parents into needing their products, so that, in turn, these children will demand said products from their wage-laboring parents. In America there is, usually around Christmas-

time, a run on toy stores for some coveted toy in popular demand by people that have been prodded and begged by their capitalist brat children who have been thoroughly indoctrinated by advertising campaigns. Of course there is almost always a limited supply, so the parents of said brats violently compete for the right to purchase this item of imaginary worth, often resulting in assault, hysteria, and the occasional trampling. It is as if they are competing for their children's love, and if they cannot acquire that talking red Muppet they have lost the gladiatorial battle for honor and family. The real issue for me is that this is all a manipulative advertising ruse, and as ignorant capitalist swine, people buy the marketing B.S. What I find intriguing is that the phenomenon of the Cabbage Patch Kids began as hand-made soft sculptures from a studio craftsman: Xavier Roberts. Production went from one individual to a massive corporation in under a decade. In 1983 the doll went on record as the highest selling doll in the history of the toy industry<sup>23</sup>. Today the original Hand crafted dolls sell for upwards of \$20,000 USD, but the mass produced vinyl version still runs about \$39.99 USD. I think this is an important thing for crafts people to look at, and to seriously contemplate from an ethical perspective. (Maybe it is the residual of teen-age angst that makes me think that economic success is synonymous with "selling-out" but Mr. Roberts is now a multi-millionaire and I'm sure he hasn't touched a needle and thread in years.)

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.cabbagepatchkids.com/about/milestones/>





This doll altered with a pair of horns is a symbolic representation of the evils of capitalist manipulation, and the corrupting nature of wealth itself. I am attempting to use this object to impart my spiritual preferences for the denial of desire, because it is the cause of all suffering (as stated in the four noble truths of Buddhism.) By simply not desiring you will be happy, but that is not what the corporate capitalist machine wants. Marketing executives want us to consume. Their system is based upon growth, in a way that is unsustainable and irresponsible. People are so numb to advertising's power that it no longer even registers consciously. Marketing and advertising have reached a level of effective manipulation today that is so subliminal that it is at times unrecognizable. I also enjoy the fact that the name of this product references the Cabbage Patch: which according to conservative parents who are afraid to discuss with their children were

babies actually do come from, is from where they came. It's like the first time someone pulls the wool over your eyes, like the myth of Santa Clause or God. These are myths to prevent you from thinking for yourself. All of this is the beginning of the false belief system that allows one to accept subjugation and authority. The overall theme, I suppose, between Buddhism-consumerism-capitalism-and the baby head, is that we do not have to accept authority. In the words of Timothy Leary "[We should] think for ourselves and question authority." The powers that be have culturally indoctrinated us to want more, to never be satisfied. You 'needed' that cabbage patch doll when you are young. And by acculturating the young we later grow to 'need' that nine to five job, the two car garage, the matching Ikea furniture, the 401k, the 2.3 children and the suburban 3,000 square foot symbol of accomplishment. What has been called 'The American dream', or as I prefer to call it the 'American nightmare'. But what is that really but a false system of desire that keeps you consuming and supporting the futile insatiable capitalist economy. You keep your head down, do your job, don't ask too many questions, don't think too hard, pay your taxes, go to church, accept our valueless system of currency. But it is all an illusion. This is the type of reality that is prescribed to you like the Adderall that we feed children to keep them from experiencing life outside of the normative cookie-cutter lifestyle that is acceptable to mainstream America.

While I'm on the subject of feeding children prescription drugs, let me take a brief soap-box moment to address my issues with the Pharmacology industry. In my thesis exhibition I am including a work entitled "*He alone who owns the youth...*" It is a large glass syringe filled with skulls juxtaposed to a glass caduceus capped with the horned baby head (which, in my mind, conceptually implies the corrupt nature of the pharmacology industry.) The five skulls represent five of my friends who have passed away due to their drug addictions that began with a childhood dependence on prescription drugs. "One of the most common prescriptions in the

U.S. is for central nervous system stimulants for adolescents.”<sup>24</sup> My theory is that this is a strategy created by the pharmaceutical industry to indoctrinate children into becoming accustomed to taking prescription drugs on a regular basis. It is a strategic future planning to ensure their growing profit margins. If they can convince people from an early age, when they are easier to psychologically manipulate, that they cannot function without their products then they become dependent upon it for an indefinite period of time.

“He alone who owns the youth, gains the future.”<sup>25</sup>



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<sup>24</sup> U.S. department of health and human services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, *Prescription Drug Use Continues to Increase: U.S. Prescription Drug Data for 2007–2008*, Qiuping Gu, M.D., Ph.D.; Charles F. Dillon, M.D., Ph.D.; and Vicki L. Burt, Sc.M., R.N., <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db42.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Adolf Hitler, quote



I honestly believe that Attention Deficit Disorder did not exist until there was Ritalin to remedy it. Statistically, 1 of 5 children are on prescription drugs, 9 out of 10 older Americans are on prescription drugs, and over all, 48% of Americans are on at least one prescription medication each month with 11% being on at least five different drugs. That brings us to a grand total of over \$234 billion dollars a year in prescription drugs. I think that this is strategic manipulation, not only to make money for the industry, but to keep the populace placated and numb. “The Man” wants to keep you down. If you are glued to your couch watching re-runs and eating cheeseburgers, unable to think coherently, you are not trying to riot and overthrow your government. So long as you have a \$100 a day Oxycontin habit, or cannot function without Zoloft and Prozac, you should be content with hanging around the house without contacting your congressman, or burning down a courthouse. I don’t know many young people today that don’t think that there is something medically wrong with them, and subsequently must have a medicinal remedy for said ailment. Maybe I am prejudiced to their plight because I refuse to take any kind of prescription drugs, but I find the whole situation a bit suspicious. I do not intend to sound like a conspiracy theorist claiming that the Fluoride in municipal water sources is intended to pacify us, but I have noticed a growing sense of cultural apathy in my lifetime. Furthermore, I have very little faith in the research conducted by the Food and Drug Administration. If one looks in to the obesity trends in this country it is easy to conclude that there is something very wrong with our habits of consumption. I often wonder what the minimum recommended caloric intake would be if we had a socialized medical system that made us all equally responsible for the collective cost of heart disease.

So what does this all mean? I would like to say that what American people believe, as a culture, is generally wrong. We have been conditioned by people in power to act as they would like us to without any insight into their ulterior motives. We are like the donkey with a carrot

dangled before him, plodding along in a vain attempt to reach it. True consciousness is an illusion, and the false sense of reality that one develops through capitalist cultural conditioning is a tool meant to enslave us all. In closing I would like to include a quote from Bill Hicks that he often used to conclude his stand up comedy routine.

“The world is like a ride in an amusement park, and when you choose to go on it you think it’s real because that’s how powerful our minds are. The ride goes up and down, ‘round and ‘round, it has thrills and chills, and is very brightly colored, and loud, and its’ fun for a while. Many people have been on the ride for a long time, and they begin to wonder: “Hey, is this real? Or is this just a ride?” And other people have remembered, and they come back to us and say: “Hey, don’t worry, don’t be afraid...ever. Because it’s just a ride.” And we kill those people. “Shut him up! I’ve got a lot invested in this ride, look at my furrows of worry, look at my big bank account, and my family. This has to be real!” But it doesn’t matter because its just a ride, and we can change it anytime we want. It’s only a choice. No effort, no work, no job, no saving of money; just a simple choice right now between fear and love. The eyes of fear want you to put bigger locks on your doors, buy guns, close yourself off. The eyes of love instead see us all as one. Here is what we can do right now, to make a better ride. Take all the money we spend on weapons and defense and spend it on feeding and clothing and educating the poor, which it could pay for many times over, not one human being excluded. Then we could explore space, together, both inner and outer, forever, in peace.”<sup>26</sup>

“Buy the ticket. Take the ride.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bill Hicks, *Revelations*, (1993)

<sup>27</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, biography, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/huntersth380103.html>

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## Images of Thesis exhibition









