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CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE BIENNIAL 2017

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New Art Examiner

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The New Art Examiner is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

EDITORIAL POLICY

As the New Art Examiner has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The New Art Examiner welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The New Art Examiner welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The New Art Examiner does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology, or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary are welcome. The New Art Examiner has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the New Art Examiner is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

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CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE BIENNIAL

Art may have its capitals in New York, London and Paris but, in Chicago, architecture is king. For 125 years, starting with Daniel Burnham's plans for the Columbian Exposition, Chicago has enjoyed being the leader of the building art.

It has given America the first skyscraper and such icons of architecture as the Monadnock and Auditorium buildings, Robie House, Crown Hall, Inland Steel and Sears Tower.

This month, Chicago plays host again to a gathering of international architects, the Chicago Architecture Biennial, that will "take the temperature" of the field, as one participant put it.

In this special issue, the New Art Examiner brings its art-based perspective to a sister art form. We have assembled five features and reviews that offer a Biennial overview, record the views of one of its artistic directors, looks at underrated Chicago architecture, reviews a graphic novel and exhibit by an architect/artist. Happy reading!



"Vanderbilt Tower" architectural collage by Marshall Brown.

Chicago Architecture Biennial Wants to “Make New History”

by Tom Mullaney

The Chicago Cultural Center, normally home to the magnificent Tiffany Dome, the Story Corps booth, impressive art exhibits, tours for domestic and foreign visitors and everyday Chicagoans taking a break in the day, will be transformed starting on September 16th into a large Lego stage for architects.

More than 141 architects and firms from over 20 countries will be descending on Chicago for the second architecture biennial. They will explore the show's overall theme, “Making New History,” through models of buildings, drawn from their imaginations but representations of themes around the concepts of image, materials, and civic histories.

Chicagoans and fellow architects who attend the Biennial will be confronted by new strategies for tackling current challenges of housing, environmental change, social and economic inequality, urbanization and public space to name some of the most salient. While architecture can't, by itself, cure the full range of social ills, it can focus attention on such matters. “Part of our mission is to take on the future,” says Martin Felsen, head of Urban Lab in Chicago.



Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee.

Two architectural curators are overseeing this grand enterprise: Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee. They head their own practice, Johnston Marklee, in Los Angeles and assume the mantle that Graham Foundation director, Sarah Herda and curator Joseph Grima wore for the first biennial in 2015.

Stewart Hicks, of “Design with Company,” which, in 2015, showed a tongue-in-cheek “late submission” to the 1925 Chicago Tribune competition believes that the original curators did a good job of “setting a tone and then setting a table upon which other biennials could build from.”

The first biennial had its moments of controversy. Chicago firms were upset at the small number of local entrants and the exclusion of the city's renowned corporate firms. As a result, large numbers of architects said that they did not visit the expo.



Todd Palmer, CAB
executive director.
Photo by Zachary
Johnson.

Marshall Brown, a new entrant who teaches at IIT and exhibited at the 2016 Venice Biennale, works on making the new, incorporating elements of architectural history (particularly collage), quite in keeping with this year's overall theme of making new history.

He is not sympathetic to the corporate firms' complaint. “I don't care if large corporate firms are upset that they are not in the Biennial. If they want to trade their multi-million dollar commissions for my spot on the wall at the Cultural Center, have them call me.”

Biennial executive director, Todd Palmer, thinks this year's event will be less fractious, even though corporate firms are still not represented. He noted that the Biennial's intent is to bring the thinking of world architects to Chicago rather than to showcase local talent.

Talking with several local architects, I gathered more a sense of excitement than friction about the prospect for a successful show that will enjoy greater impact. They mentioned the longer lead time that this year's directors have to come up with an overarching theme, unlike the initial expo which was hastily assembled and gave a more wide-open view of architecture at that moment.



Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona. Jeff Wall, 1999 transparency in lightbox 187.0 x 351.0 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Jack Guthman, a prominent land-use lawyer in Chicago who was involved last time, is the chairman for this edition and echoes an optimistic tone. “I’m very enthusiastic. As I read the international press and meet people in the architecture, arts and cultural communities, there is a true enthusiasm, a buzz, about the Biennial.”

What gives architects this sense of success? This time, according to Hicks, every room will be more curated. Each has a title and a theme. There are rooms for which Johnston and Lee commissioned all new projects around a theme and other rooms where architects are gathered more loosely.

Johnston spoke of the inspiration the architects can take from the site, the Cultural Center, long a welcoming gathering space in the heart of the city. She says her’s and Lee’s thinking was focused more on the flow of movement in the building so as to “create a collection of rooms that brought coherence to our exhibition design concepts.”

Another plus that chairman Guthman and architects cited are Johnson and Marklee’s impressive credentials. Both are not only respected academic thinkers who know current trends in the profession but are also award-winning architects, making them more sensitive to their peers’ concerns.

Hicks referenced their philosophy and practice in this way: “Sharon and Mark are great architects who have cultivated a practice that relates to art and architecture, photography and theme who maintain a foothold in academia. It will be interesting to see where this show will come out in relation to the other show where the directors were curators.”

Finally, architects are excited by the organizing themes the team wants to explore in the Biennial. Urban Lab’s Felsen says this year’s show is “more like a funnel” in which the exhibits will come together and flow under Sharon and Mark’s main themes. He concludes that their “broader agenda about what architecture can do has people excited.”

Making sure the spectacle comes off as envisioned is the responsibility of Palmer and his staff. Chicago, says Palmer, is the logical place to host such a biennial. “Chicago has the DNA of architecture,” the original home of the modern skyscraper.

The new artistic directors have said their goal is not to produce an overview of the state of architecture today but an exhibition where there is “space for debate, dialogue and the production of new ideas.” A cornucopia of programs, symposiums, receptions and art installations at six satellite facilities around the city guarantee an abundance of opinions and contentious chatter. The

Biennial has 100 sponsors who will be contributing to the programming. One sponsor, the Chicago Architecture Foundation will supply communication materials to help visitors comprehend the biennial themes better.

“Make New History” is an ambiguous term. Lee speaks of the past as a signpost rather than a firm command. Hicks calls the title “clever” for its dual meaning. “People can see it in multiple ways, as a jumping off-point as a way of saying, ‘we’re making new history’ and rewriting the book or as a connection with a long lineage and understanding one’s place in that lineage.”

Another firm returning is Kelley/Norman which, in 2015, covered all the Cultural Center’s Michigan Avenue windows with 65 images of window dressings—ranging from the familiar to the canonical—that would mitigate one’s view from inside looking out and vice versa.

This year, their exhibit will be of interiors. It will fill one room with 24 miniature scale models of canonical interiors throughout time, “riffing on the Art Institute’s room of miniatures” (Thorne rooms).

Tom Kelley calls the Biennial “Janus-headed,” looking both to the past as well as facing the future. “I think the worst thing you can do for architecture is try and bottle it into easily digestible types. I think a biennial is an opportunity for someone outside the discipline

of architecture to appreciate how complex all of these issues are at all times and for all projects.”

I asked Brown the value of being in a biennial for smaller firms like his and others who are pushing more radical, innovative ideas. “It has many values. For smaller practices that haven’t had as much exposure yet, it’s hugely valuable. It’s valuable as a base for sharing ideas with either like-minded or opposing voices. It’s a great way to get advanced architectural thinking out in front of the public. When a quarter of a million people are walking through Venice or the Cultural Center and see these visions of alternative worlds, it can’t help but make an impression, for better or worse. And I think it expands their imagination. And these things go into the history books and become part of making new history.”

Above all the grand plans and strategies, the organizers want their peers to grapple with a single pressing concern: what is the agency of the architect?

The conception of architects as stars of the built environment pervades popular portrayals of a noble profession. Such modern masters as Burnham, Wright, Sullivan, Le Corbusier, Mies, Saarinen, Kahn, Gehry have contributed to the legend.

Crown Hall by James Welling.





An architectural collage by Filip Dujardin.

However, in today's high-stakes, mega-project world, the stakeholder who has gained most control over the planning and building process has been the real estate developer. A new book, "Developing Expertise" from Yale University Press, charts that figure's growing influence over the last half-century. And other stakeholders like municipal officials, lawyers

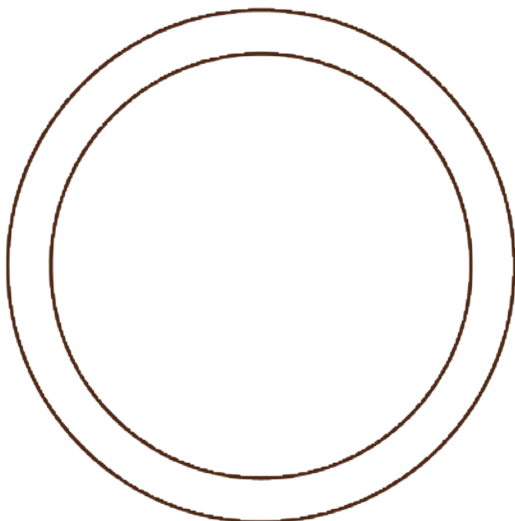
and bankers also play important roles in the decision process.

That reality has diminished the role the architect plays. At times, it can seem like a miracle that good architecture actually gets built, though there is a growing awareness that striking design can be both beautiful, profitable and make a substantial enhancement to the community.

The Biennial will feature a number of accompanying off-site shows playing to architectural themes. There is the Amanda Williams exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art, an architecture and design show at the Art Institute of Chicago, a Palais de Tokyo exhibit featuring 11 emerging artists from the France and Chicago art scenes and a show titled *Between States: Design Solutions for Chicago's 50 Wards* at the Chicago Architecture Foundation. Additional programs can be found throughout the expo at www.chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org.

All the themes proposed by Johnston and Lee and modeled by the 141 showcased firms plus heated debate about the architect's and architecture's role gets underway on September 16 and runs through the first week of January, 2018. It is a show not only for architects but a rich showcase of ideas for citizens everywhere who wish to become engaged with public policy issues and shape wise choices on urbanization in general and Chicago most of all. ■

Tom Mullaney is the New Art Examiner's Senior Editor. He wrote on the 2015 Biennial and maintains an active interest in the built environment.



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Behind the Biennial Curtain: A Conversation with Mark Lee, the Co-Artistic Director

Tom Mullaney: I'm curious about how you and Sharon (Johnston) arrived at the number of 141 participants in the Biennial. There are, if I'm not mistaken, 22 repeat participants who also appeared in the 2015 Biennial.

Mark Lee: On the selection process, I'd say there were three separate approaches we used in arriving at the list. I would say most were based on our knowledge of their work and which ones we felt would fit our criteria and sit well within the Biennial. Sharon and I then asked them to think specifically in the RFP about what they could contribute on the basis of the schematics (Image, Materials, Building and Civic Histories). The third approach would be specific installations with which we felt the architects would work well. Generally, we worked with those three approaches.

NAE: Sharon participated in the 2015 Biennial. What did you and she feel were lessons learned that you wanted to improve this time around?

Lee: Well, there were a lot of things around organization that we were not privy to. Being involved with it for a year, we see how much is involved on the basis of the organization of the work. With this insight, we really appreciate all the work that the team at the first Biennial did.

NAE: Did you, during this process, touch base with Sarah (Herda) and Joe (Grima) on how they handled some issues?

Lee: We touched base with Sarah for sure but not so much with Joe except at the beginning. With Sarah and myself, being out-of-towners, at least a base, a network had been established with the first show. And Sarah, being at the Graham Foundation and being in Chicago, we really relied on her, other members of the Board and chairman, Jack Guthman, and Todd Palmer, the executive director.

Menil Drawing Institute—West Elevation at Dusk by Johnston Marklee.



NAE: Let's move on to a more contentious matter, which is your theme, "Making New History." Perhaps you were being quite crafty in thinking, "Let's make this as ambiguous as possible." I understand, from some architects, I've spoken to, that your's and Sharon's tendency is a little more on the historical end and the past.

I can see your desire to repair the rupture between the past and modernism. Can't new history also mean doing a complete break with the past and going in a complete 21st Century direction?

Lee: Yes, I think that's absolutely right. We wanted to establish the theme but we allow participants to take whatever direction they like, whether a reformist position or an extremist position; whether you intend to blend with history or break with history. We just think the interest in history, not only with our work, but also with the abundance of information and images circulating around the end of history collapses history into the present and everything becomes ahistorical at this point.

NAE: I think you are making a case for looking at architecture in the context of history. I read "Architecture can say what prevails and what does not and how to recognize the significance of 'untold narratives'. Can you explain the 'untold narrative' part that you feel needs some historical input?

Lee: Yes, for example, I think that the public thinks the Bauhaus school of Modernism was completely against history. But, around the same time, there was a lesser-known group of Italian rationalists, led by Giuseppe Terragni, whose work looks modern but was very grounded in the old typology. There were courtyard buildings and palazzos whereas the language of the building is very modern.

For Sharon and me, we thought this was an important link where newness is grounded in the larger context of history. So, today, with some of the participants we've invited, you also see architects who have been exploring with the latest type of digital technology or computer-aided construction systems, who are also looking at older systems. They are looking at the Chinese architects Zao/Standard Architecture who have been exploring new possibilities for the traditional Hutong type (a system of alleys and courtyards) and

how they evolved. So this is an example of where the past and future can merge.

NAE: What makes me lean in the direction of the "New" is that we are living in an era where the themes of public space, cultural identity, social practice architecture and new communication modes have taken on greater importance than at the last Biennial. So, will there be a greater emphasis this time on exhibits that address these newer realities?

Lee: Yes and I think what we did was to include many architects whom we know have this position in their work. And we invited them to practice but we didn't foreground that aspect. We kind of put it under the rubric "History."

There is this Belgian office, 51N4E, that did work in Tirana, Albania. They just finished a public square that united a federal building with a mosque and their whole approach was about this participating community approach with all the people involved. They not only showed the project but also showed the process behind it.

NAE: One thing different from 2015 is that you and Sharon have tried to organize the Biennial around various themes. In terms of the themes, what will visitors encounter when they first enter the Cultural Center? How are you trying to lead them into your narrative?

Lee: What we tried to do, curatorially, was to put together, in close proximity, projects that have certain similar thematics. So, perhaps the visitor can see one approach to a project in Africa and right next to it is an approach for Suburbia, U.S.A.

It's not a clear formula. Sometimes, it's thematics where we group them together or a similar type of building. For me, it's important to reach out to a very large audience of architects or people who are just genuinely interested in architecture. Right now, we're getting close to the finish line and trying to pull everything together.

NAE: With having to serve a large and varied audience, is there a way that the wall text material can help lead the public through the connections and juxtapositions? Can the text lead them through the thematics?



Vault House by
Johnston Marklee.

Lee: Right. Well, we are working on it right now. We're trying to make it as palatable as possible. I think the first year, there was a combination of texts that were directly contributed by the participants. This year, we are having curators and associate curators unify texts so that it has a more palatable feel.

NAE: We will have a review in the issue of a fascinating book published by the Chicago Architecture Foundation, "No Small Plans," that is a graphic novel. CAF will also distribute it to 30,000 Chicago high school students. They are trying to get teenagers to understand concepts of land use, urban planning and gentrification. My question is "Why just teach teenagers?" We adults also need to understand how city decisions are made. Do you agree that we also need adult education on such matters?

Lee: I completely agree. Sharon and I were quite impressed by the first Biennial. We were there the first weekend and came back several times for work on our Museum of Contemporary Art project. And, every time we stopped by the Biennial, we were surprised at how few people there were at the Cultural Center compared to other biennials we have been involved with such as Venice and the Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale. It was crowded for the first week or two but when you came back a month later, it would be you and a few cats.

NAE: Perhaps it's a question of having robust ancillary programming like symposia or a roundtable

debate among architects on city planning issues and, of course, marketing and good media attention.

Well, biennials have mushroomed. They are not just in Chicago. Since your expo will open the same week as the ExpoChicago art fair, do you think that biennials may be becoming for architecture what art fairs are for art? We may need more biennials because of new media making it the way the profession talks to itself.

Lee: Well, one difference is that, with architecture biennials, no transactions happen whereas art fairs are transactional. People and institutions go there to buy art. But the genius of having the rhythm of one every two years is important. When everything can be accessed by the internet, going to a place physically and seeing installations physically—this is why we like having larger than life exhibitions so it's not just a matter of looking at screens. You can experience it. People yearn for it, some physical experience.

NAE: This question is from an architect. Why should we care about the theme of history because we know it is so skewed and relative? How can we trust history as a guide for architecture?

Lee: Right. Well, history has certainly been skewed but it is being constantly rewritten over and over again. Over time, there are different paradigms and different angles on how history has been revised. And, for us, we don't see History as a guide but as a reference. We don't see it as a straitjacket or handcuffs that tie architects the way the Beaux Arts did in the 19th Century,

for example, stating “You have to do this, you have to do that.”

History is an accrued reservoir of knowledge built over time that architects can tap into. We see history as a positive as opposed to something that is top-down and very dominating.

NAE: There are so many issues that architecture and society are dealing with, such as income inequality and environmental degradation. An architect I interviewed said it’s not architecture’s role to cure the ills of society but it does have a role to play. Could you say what that role is?



View House by Johnston Marklee.

Lee: That is essentially a great question because Sharon and I have always felt that architecture has often in the past been underestimated and overestimated. There was a time when architecture was asked to cure tuberculosis. But architecture can only do something when it hosts the world and makes suggestions as opposed to being the “silver bullet” that solves the ills of the world.

I think a good architect steps back and asks, with the problems in the world, what is the best way architecture can contribute rather than thinking of architecture as the “all remedy.” A clear understanding is more important than a certain bravado.

NAE: I have been told that, in the 20th Century, architecture was chasing after painting while, at the present time and what I think relates to making new history, it

is racing after photography; with contemporary architectural photography being much more important than in the past. Can you tease out that observation?

Lee: Sure, sure. For us, that’s not a grand statement. Certainly, in our show, we invited a lot of photographers to take images not only of the city but to take portraits of important buildings.

I would say that, in the 20th Century, in all the mediums of Art, painting has been at the forefront in its influence on architecture. A lot of rules of painting were applied in the evaluation of architecture. And, maybe in retrospect, that’s a little too restraining. Certain things like pictorial depth and phenomenal transparency.

On the one hand, I think back 60 or 70 years ago, that was radical but I think they’re too incompatible. They’re both visual but, sometimes, to apply one rule can trap architecture more than it advances it. We just think photography has a certain immediacy but I think it’s also that, in this photo-obsessed period, the single image is real. It’s a very direct way of addressing people’s concerns rather than with renderings.

NAE: What 5 living or dead architects would you invite to your next dinner party?

Lee: (Laughter) Well, that’s really a great question. Sharon and I gave it some thought. I think the ones we would like to invite are: Austrian architect, Otto Loos, would be one. Another would be the Dutch architect, Aldo Van Eyck, then Aldo Rossi, the couple Robert Venturi and Denise R. Brown. The last would be (Jacques) Herzog and (Pierre) de Meuron. So we have 3 dead ones and 2 pairs that are alive.

NAE: What Chicago building is your favorite?

Lee: Ah, this is a tough one. There are so many. Off the top of my head, I would say the Inland Steel Building. And the Monadnock. I like how Inland, over time, ages a little with the panels. I really enjoy how the building reflects the light and I always make it a point to stop by when I’m in Chicago. ■

Besides Mark Lee, Tom Mullaney has interviewed numerous architects including Ronald Krueck, Mark Sexton, Rafael Vinoly, Stanley Tigerman and R. Buckminster Fuller.

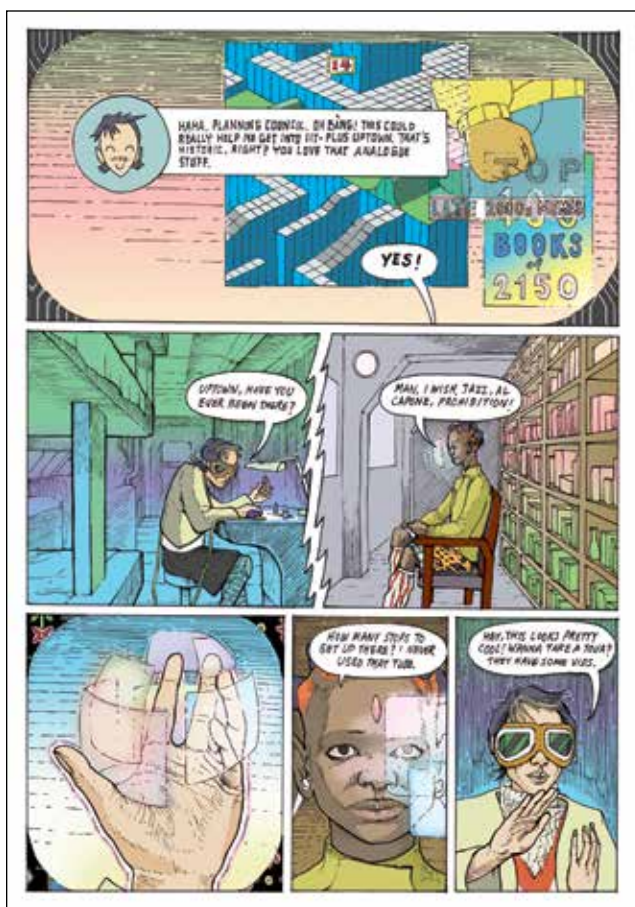
“NO SMALL PLANS” Revisited

by Nathan Worchester

From a distance, a city skyline and a mountain range inspire similar feelings of awe. When examined more closely, however, they evoke the sublime in different ways. The mountain range, rising within and out of nature, is spectacular largely because it was shaped by forces that are independent from human consciousness.

The city skyline, in contrast, can largely be defined as the cumulative product of human decisions—millions of them, to be sure, but anthropogenic ones all the way down. Of course, some choices—and some who choose—have more clout than others.

No Small Plans, a new graphic novel comprising three main stories set in the past, present, and future of Chicago, explores the sublime within human reach, posing a not-so-simple question: Who gets to choose what the city will become?



No Small Plans—ch3-pg90—reproduced with permission of CAF.

No Small Plans is explicitly (though not exclusively) didactic in purpose. The book was commissioned by the Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) as a contemporary equivalent to the 1911 textbook *Wacker's Manual*, which was meant to teach the city's school-children about architect Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago. Not unlike *Wacker's Manual*, which was a standard text for Chicago's 8th graders for over three decades, *No Small Plans* will be given away for free to 30,000 Chicago teenagers. What exactly is it meant to teach *them*?

Some readers may stumble upon a central paradox: though we learn that the city is many areas rather than a single whole, we also learn that the city's ideal image of itself is evidently the patrimony of an early benevolent, mustachioed central planner. In fairness, Daniel Burnham is not treated uncritically in the “Burnham interludes” that link the book's primary narratives.

On the other hand, other realities of architecture and engineering are not rendered in a well-rounded way. For one thing, the commercial context of most development, as well as of the *Plan* itself, is either unacknowledged or considered in a mostly negative light. This seems strange, especially since so many of the architectural wonders that are lovingly sketched throughout this graphic novel were ultimately generated by the engine of 19th and 20th century American capitalism.

Moreover, although commercial development is certainly capable of producing ugliness, it generally checks the tendency towards visual monoculture that makes larger planned cities or neighborhoods so soul-shreddingly dull. Nonetheless, as the book makes plain, development is not always as just or as fair as we may wish. Chicago's built environment reflects its very real history of cronyism, racial prejudice, and social unrest.

The artists behind *No Small Plans* (Gabrielle Lyon, Devin Mawdsley, Kayce Bayer, Chris Lin, and Deon Reed) capitalize on the possibilities of the medium, using the vocabulary of image to reinforce the book's more overtly articulated themes. In the “Chicago: 1928” narrative, for example, the sepia-toned landscape is brightened by

the three main characters in a simple yet powerful way:

Elisa Gallo, a feisty orphan girl from Maxwell Street, is clad in an Eloise-esque red dress. Reginald (Reggie) Williams, a Bronzeville resident and meditative paperboy for the *Chicago Defender*, wears yellow socks. Bernard Richter, an engineering-oriented German kid living in the Austin neighborhood, carries a blue bag. In combination, and with obvious implications, the three characters form the basis of a classical color wheel.

Later, during the “Chicago: 2017” narrative, Reggie Williams’ moral journey is thematically and visually echoed by that of David Green, a teenager from Englewood who weighs the costs and benefits of development in his own community.

The “Chicago: 2211” narrative, like the 2017 narrative, ends with a somewhat ambiguous decision. The visual reference points for 2211 Chicago range from the early 2010s internet memes to the Chicago Architecture Biennial. Freed to some extent from the obligations of near-fidelity to architectural and social history, the artists appear to have had great fun reimagining the city and its inhabitants.

I would have enjoyed drawing Octavius Bacca, a scion of the “Lakefront Neo-Elite” who looks like a genetically enhanced version of Sluggo from *Nancy*. At

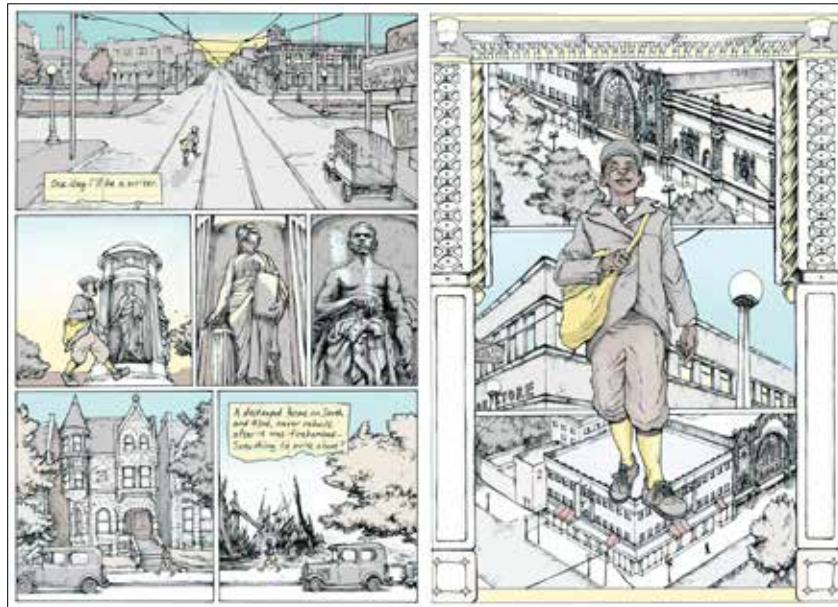
one point, Octavius is enthroned on a golden chair, in a gold-plated apartment, near the summit of a gilded skyscraper. Here as elsewhere, local trends and obsessions are unfailingly projected into the future.

Phở, a recent fad, is still faddish nearly 200 years from now. The forces of evil are inevitably condo developers. Instead of staring at their cellphone screens, people stare at holographic screens. For the sake of symmetry and plausibility, the future narrative could have instead been set in 2106, exactly as far forward as 1928 is backward. In any case, the lessons of this final story are clear enough.

No Small Plans succeeds as an introduction to the challenges and possibilities of planning. More than that, it encourages engagement with Chicago’s matchless architectural legacy. For the book’s planned audience of schoolchildren, it may constitute a first encounter with the Uptown Theatre, the Victory Monument, and other civic treasures. For adult readers, *No Small Plans* may do what a lot of effective art can do, by making an old building, street, or bridge seem new again. ■

Nathan Worcester, a scion of the Lakefront Neo-Elite, has written for Chicago Weekly, the Hyde Park Herald and other publications. He blogs about yoga, search engine optimization and life in its torturous glory at nathanworcester.wordpress.com.

No Small Plans—ch1-pg6-7—reproduced with permission of CAF.



Exploring the Second City's Underrated Spaces with the Chicago Architecture Biennial's Local Participants

By Leo Shaw

Taken from the Biennial's blog and reprinted with permission of the Chicago Architecture Biennial.

Chicago is the undisputed hometown of modern architecture. It's the city where the world's first skyscrapers rose, where Frank Lloyd Wright came to prominence, and where Mies van der Rohe built most of his iconic postwar buildings.

Today visitors flock to Chicago's many architectural landmarks. They ride Chicago Architecture Foundation's educational boat tours, which drift past the row of iconic buildings lined up along the river: the Chicago Tribune Tower, the Wrigley Building, the Merchandise Mart, Marina City—the list goes on and on.

But for every modern masterpiece, Chicago has another piece of great architecture that remains relatively obscure. The city offers an abundance of interesting buildings and spaces that reward anyone curious enough to look closely. We asked a group of Chicago Architecture Biennial participants to pick their favorites and compiled their answers' into this guide to Chicago's lesser-known architectural gems.

If you're coming to town for the Chicago Architecture Biennial, these spaces are guaranteed to draw you off the beaten path.

1. Palmisano Park (Stearn's Quarry) by D.I.R.T. Studio and Site Design Group Recommended by UrbanLab

UrbanLab is a Chicago-based architecture and urban design studio focused on creating environmentally resilient buildings and public spaces that passively regenerate natural resources. Principals Martin Felsen and Sarah Dunn are deeply interested in how design can transform the way cities function as hybrid natural and artificial landscapes.



Palmisano Park, by D.I.R.T. Studio and Site Design Group.

Felsen and Dunn are especially fond of Palmisano Park, a parcel of land in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood that was originally home to a 380-foot deep limestone quarry and then became a landfill in the 1970s. Landscape architects D.I.R.T. Studio and Site Design Group eventually turned the area into a park that slopes gently up from the quarry and into a bermed hill. Visitors can follow paths around the park as the landscape changes from grass to wet prairie to a marshy pond.

"What we like about the project is that D.I.R.T. Studio proposed to take a post-industrial wasteland—a landfill—and add a public space on top of it in the form of a park," said Dunn.

"The two programs co-exist together in section. The project has special significance for us because in our own practice we are interested in hybridizing infrastructure, architecture, and landscape."

2. The Winter Garden at Harold Washington Library

Recommended by Design With Company



Winter Garden at Harold Washington Library, designed by Hammond, Beeby and Babka. Photo by Chris Smith.

Design With Company is the two-person studio of Stewart Hicks and Allison Newmeyer, which deals primarily with what they call “fabulous architecture” – drawings, objects and spaces that interpret reality through narrative or tell an alternative story about the way the world could work in the future.

Hicks and Newmeyer like to think of their creations as literary characters, so it’s no surprise they have a soft spot for one of the city’s most audacious pieces of postmodern architecture: the Harold Washington Library.

The library is something of an acquired taste. The architects know that the building’s massive scale, liberal ornamentation, and fortress-like facades are enough to turn off plenty of Chicagoans.

“The Harold Washington Library is a controversial building in Chicago. The first floor presents a heavy base toward the public street,” said Hicks and Newmeyer.

But tucked away inside the heavyset public building is a top-floor atrium that feels light as air, thanks to an enormous skylight.

“Although the building lacks a generous public face on the street level, it gives it back on the top floor with the roof garden, which turns the city inside out by offering an interior streetscape,” said the architects. “The space is great for reading or hanging out year round.”

3. University of Illinois at Chicago, Netsch Campus

Recommended by Design with Company

As faculty members at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Hicks and Newmeyer also representing their architecturally significant home campus, whose core was master planned by the modernist architect Walter Netsch.

Netsch was a partner at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill who was known for modern academic architecture, including the US Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and the University of Chicago’s decidedly brutal Regenstein Library. Although much of his original “Circle Campus” has been demolished to make way for contemporary additions, some of Netsch’s most distinctive buildings are still in use today.

“The campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago is a large scale urban experiment,” said Hicks and Newmeyer. “Walter Netsch designed the campus in the 1960s as a demonstration of his ‘field theory’ of overlapping squares. Despite Netsch’s all-encompassing grand vision, the campus has been changing, growing, and transforming ever since leaving strange and delightful residues along the way.”



The Behavioral Sciences Building at University of Illinois at Chicago, designed by Walter Netsch.

4. Anti-Cruelty Society Animal Shelter by Tigerman McCurry

Recommended by Design with Company

Design With Co. is also fond of one of the most iconic postmodern buildings designed by longtime Chicago architects Stanley Tigerman and Margaret McCurry—whose fanciful character Newmeyer and Hicks channel in their own contemporary work.

The architects are not only fans of the Anti-Cruelty Society shelter's design. They are also patrons.

"I remember learning about this building as an undergrad and when we first moved to Chicago, I was delighted to find that it was only a block away from my employer's office," said Hicks. "On a visit to the building, I couldn't resist taking home a kitten that we named Lola. Now it is 15 years later and we have a second that we adopted from the same place."

If architecture for Hicks and Newmeyer is about bringing design to life, they truly practice what they preach.

"The building's facade features signature arcing windows in a vague silhouette of an animal's face. We are often asked about the relationship between our work and postmodernism, but we really do have a deep connection to at least one of its signature landmarks."



The Anti-Cruelty Society by Tigerman McCurry.

5. Overton Hygienic Building

Recommended by Marshall Brown

Marshall Brown is a Chicago architect and urban designer who envisions future possibilities for urban development across a wide range of media. Known for a series of architectural collages that meld old and new building types, he also represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in 2016 with a plan for housing and education in Detroit. Brown's drawings, installations and urban design schemes draw on the persistent power of architectural images, applying bold design strokes while paying close attention to the cultural and social history of urban places.

The most significant Chicago building to him is a landmarked office building in the heart of the Bronzeville / Black Metropolis historic district, the part of the city where African American professional and cultural life first boomed before the second World

War. It's also close by the Illinois Institute of Technology, where Brown is part of the faculty.



Overton Hygienic Building by Z. Erol Smith.
Photo by Eric Allix Rogers.

"The space that has inspired my practice more than any other is the Overton Hygienic Building, where I have kept my studio since 2011," said Brown. "It's a Chicago Landmark, built in 1922, and one of the few buildings near IIT to survive the urban renewal period."

The building was originally commissioned by Anthony Overton, one of the nation's first major African American businessmen, to house a number of businesses including a cosmetics brand, an insurance company, and a bank that all catered to black Americans. The building has also spent time as a hotel and a flophouse before reemerging as an incubator for local businesses.

"The State Street façade is classic brick and terra cotta, but the interior is a raw, and very modern concrete structure with mushroom capped columns," said Brown. "It's an amazingly flexible and durable work of architecture that has enabled my practice to thrive."

6. Self-Park Garage by Stanley Tigerman

Recommended by Ania Jaworska

Ania Jaworska is a Chicago-based artist whose work playfully sends up conventions of architectural representation and crosses easily from two to three dimensions. From classical orders to postmodern ornamentation, Jaworska's sculptures and drawings carve out a space in contemporary life for the knowing reinterpretation of historical motifs.

One of Jaworska's favorite Chicago buildings is the Self-Park Garage at 60 E. Lake Street, another

not-quite-flat facade by Stanley Tigerman, the city's most famous postmodern stylist.

"The garage was built in 1986, and the front elevation is composed of elements that reference the front end of a luxury Rolls-Royce," said Jaworska. "The upper part of the façade is a turquoise metal cladding incorporating the windows that resemble a car's grille and headlights. The middle looks like a bumper; and the base incorporates two black vinyl canopies that are reminiscent of tire treads. Signage is incorporated in the place of a license plate and wheel rims. The building is topped with a silver colored statue acting as an extravagant hood ornament."

Like Jaworska's own work, the building works both at a glance and on a deeper level. It cleverly references contemporary pop culture while gesturing back to the strict decorative hierarchies that governed ancient Greek temples and Renaissance palaces.

"I enjoy it for the in-between qualities," said Jaworska. "The facade is humorous, narrative, and poppy, but also sophisticated and classical. It is a perfect statement of postmodern architecture."



Chicago Self-Park Garage, designed by Stanley Tigerman.

7. All Saints Episcopal Church

Recommended by Paul Preissner



All Saints Episcopal Church. Photo by Eric Allix Rogers.

Paul Preissner is a Chicago-area architect with extensive experience renovating residential and commercial buildings around the city's neighborhoods. Spending the time to look with care at Chicago's low-rise structures has given him an appreciation for the

"I don't fall so much for the icons of the city," Preissner said. "A lot of what I typically look to and take interest in is the most boring, invisible, and anonymous history of the place."

Preissner's favorite local building is the wood-framed All Saints Episcopal Church in Ravenswood, completed in 1883. It is one of very few such buildings built after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, when the city changed its building code. It was restored and repainted in 2016.

"All Saints is a fairly large, wood frame-and-shingle building, and as such it seems really quite small and personal in ways that most churches never are," said Preissner. "The side elevation has a really wonderful window and reducing roof and siding composition that I love to stare at. It's very delicate and plain at the same time."

8. Jackson Boulevard and South Dearborn Street

Recommended by Norman Kelley

Norman Kelley specializes in drawings, objects, and spaces that are not always what they seem. From trompe l'oeil wall drawings to improbably assembled furniture, each Norman Kelley project is a puzzle

of different dimensions and styles. Even the name “Norman Kelley” dissembles: it doesn’t refer to one individual, but the professional partnership of multidisciplinary designers Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley.



The Monadnock Building, with the Federal Center by Mies van der Rohe rising in the foreground.

True to form, Norman Kelley looked past single buildings and selected two vantage points where Chicago’s architectural history reveals itself as a study in not-quite contrasts.

The first is located at the intersection of West Jackson Boulevard and South Dearborn Street, where you can see the northeast corner of Daniel Burnham and John Root’s Monadnock Building and the southeast corner of Mies van der Rohe’s Federal Building. The towers, built 83 years apart, both represent iconic milestones in modern architecture. Together they tell a story of innovation and evolution in how pioneering builders imagined the city.

9. S. State Street and E. 33rd Street

Recommended by Norman Kelley

The second vantage point is located at the intersection of South State Street and East 33rd Street, where

you can see the southwest corner of Rem Koolhaas’ McCormick Tribune Campus Center and the southeast corner of Mies van der Rohe’s Office of Undergraduate Admission.

“At both intersections, provided you don’t get hit by a car, you can witness historical dialogues being made across one hundred years of construction on what it means to turn a corner,” said Norman and Kelley. “In one place, it’s a gentle nod; at the other, a middle finger.”

UrbanLab, Design With Company, Marshall Brown, Ania Jaworska, Paul Preissner, and Norman Kelley will all be featured in *Make New History*, the Chicago Architecture Biennial’s main exhibition opening at the Chicago Cultural Center on September 16, 2017. The Biennial will also feature exhibitions at six community anchor sites in neighborhoods across Chicago and programs hosted by over 100 partners. Explore the full range of the event and plan your architectural exploration of Chicago at chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org. ■



McCormick Student Center by OMA (below). Photo on top by Joe Ravi.

If you want to explore even more distinctive architecture, don’t miss Open House Chicago 2017, a free annual festival that will open up over 200 buildings to the public in October. Open House Chicago is presented by the Chicago Architecture Foundation, the signature education partner of the Chicago Architecture Biennial.

Amanda Williams' Dual Architectural Critiques

by Aniko Berman

Two years ago, Amanda Williams presented her seminal *project Color(ed) Theory* (2014-2016) during the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial. A native of Auburn-Gresham, Williams used the landscape of Chicago's South Side as her canvas.

She located houses slated for demolition and painted them in a palette of eight vibrant colors inspired by products culturally relevant to the predominantly African-American area: bright orange (Flamin' Hot Cheetos), for example, or electric blue (Ultra Sheen hair care). A gesture as provocative as it was simple, it highlighted, quite literally, the urban decay of the once vibrant neighborhood, and bore witness to its imposed decline as the now-vivified buildings collapsed under cranes like houses built of cards.

It engaged the surrounding residents, and offered a 21st Century antidote to the grand architectural legacy of Chicago, whose lofty mantle is synonymous with those revered, white, male, names: Burnham, Sullivan,

Mies, Wright. Williams' project deservedly garnered accolades as bold as the hues of her doomed structures, offering another profound demonstration of the socially-minded, politically-engaged art that exemplifies the current moment.

Williams' "Chicago Works" exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, organized by Grace Deveney, uses new art objects, installation and video as illustrative of the theme and its strength in the realm of social practice. A museum context arguably limits the power of such a large-scale public project.

However, this mini-retrospective provides something else altogether: the opportunity to approach this project, and a slew of other works, from a strictly aesthetic position, through an interrogation of form, line, color. This enlightening lens reveals the ambiguous nuances of her practice, the profound in-between-ness and simultaneity that allow her to address both social concerns and formal rhetoric.



Amanda Williams, *Flamin' Red Hots* from *Color(ed) Theory Suite*, 2014–15. Color photograph, Courtesy of the artist and McCormick Gallery.



Amanda Williams
Photo courtesy of The
Arts Club of Chicago.

A trained architect, Williams has gravitated towards painting and, as of 2004, devoted herself fully to the latter practice. In works such as *There is a Past Tense (Diptych)* (2006), Williams' interest in the effect of color and the flatness of the picture plane is nascent. These works are of interest mostly for their demonstration of the painterly concerns that she later blows up and investigates on a giant scale.

In this light, the *Color(ed) Theory* houses become monochrome abstractions writ large, inspiring the same experiential and visual engagement as Yves Klein's absorbingly deep-blue canvases; or Stanley Whitney's vibrating color fields; or Carmen Herrera's simmering experiments with shape, color, and construction.

Similarly, *It's a Gold Mine/Is it a Gold Mine?* (2016-2017)—a cube of imitation gold-leafed bricks salvaged from South Side wreckage—addresses desire and decay, and also recalls the cerebral spatial play of minimalist sculpture. These art historical forebears sought to disclose essential properties, and so does Williams in concept and in form. Her materials and structures serve her own two-fold investigation of the essence of a wall, a building, a home, a community: What does it mean and how does it do that?

In works such as *Englewood is Iraq?* (2017)—a multi-layered paper construction that features a map of the titular neighborhood overlaid with a map of Iraq—there's an ironic take on the reductive association between the two "war zones." Williams uses the tension between positive and negative space to great effect, a formal conceit she employs in *Color(ed) Theory* (her painted houses contrasted with the surrounding vacant lots).

Such an effect is echoed in a site-specific installation at the exhibition's entrance. In *She's Mighty, Mighty, Lettin it All Hang Out*, a single lonely salvaged brick is set amidst a wall-sized grid of fool's gold ones. Literally blocking off part of the exhibition space, the intervention evokes profound questions regarding demarcation and physical agency.

As Williams' preoccupation with contrast—of spaces, colors, forms, neighborhoods, demographics—becomes apparent, she asks how highlighting or breaking down difference can perhaps serve the opposite task. Operating at the intersection of architecture, design, social practice, and more traditional modes of visual art, she herself embodies that gesture. Her work is about race, urban planning, economics, and it is also about color, form, and composition. She doesn't so much unify those concepts as deconstruct, reconfigure, and challenge them to forge relevancy and insert new meaning.

On the eve of the 2017 edition of the Chicago Architecture Biennial, Williams is again quite busy. A designated artist for Chicago's Year of Public Art, Williams has a concurrent project at The Arts Club and another, slated for September, in which she will continue her interest in the formal and cultural properties of gold across a number of bus benches in the Wicker Park/Bucktown neighborhood.

At The Arts Club, Williams has staged an architectural intervention in the club's garden, inserting a secondary fence into the existing one, upsetting the latter's physical authority. Titled *Uppity Negress*, the piece challenges the stereotype of black women who "have forgotten their place," a defiant and insightful gesture, at once formal and culturally-loaded. The provocation asserts with power and wit exactly where she stands at a crucial juncture in Chicago's cultural make-up, crafting a timely new identity as artist, architect, and citizen alongside those revered male icons of the past while looking to the future. ■

Aniko Berman is an art writer based in Chicago and Director at Monique Meloche Gallery. She previously covered the art world in New York, writing reviews and artist interviews for various publications including Flash Art International.

Mining the Immersive at **documenta 14**

by Evan Carter

Art enthusiasts flock to Kassel, Germany every four years to take the temperature of contemporary art and be among the first to witness “the new,” art ideas that could well become the flash points for future exhibitions and theoretical debate. The curators invest a lot of time and energy into seeking out the chosen artists.

documenta was founded in 1955 by artist Arnold Bode who began the exhibition in an effort to reconnect Germany to a broader scope of modern European art, much of which had been suppressed under Nazi control. Over time, more contemporary art from around the world began to be included.

In more recent iterations of the Quadrennial, curatorial considerations have dealt with particular themes and provided representation to artists who present relevant examples regardless of their art world status. This year, the exhibition was held in both Kassel and Athens, Greece.

One of the first things I heard about **documenta 14** was that it is impossible to see all the work during the

163-day duration of the exhibition. When numerous locations, simultaneous film and video screenings, and infrequent performances stack the schedule, viewers either have to plan carefully or roll the dice on what kind of experience they take away. My report seems a fitting representation of how art exists in the world today: dispersed, varied, and ephemeral are just a few of the words that come to mind.

I began my visit in Kassel, Germany, the longstanding host city of **documenta 14**. (For the first time, the exhibition is being split between Kassel and Athens). We made our way to the center of Kassel’s Friedrichsplatz. This historic site features some of Kassel’s pre-eminent cultural institutions that surround an expansive grass covered plaza, a venue that once served to display German military prowess under the Third Reich.

This history makes it all the more appropriate that one of the few works of great spectacle displayed here, Marta Minujin’s *The Parthenon of Books*, is part architecture, part sculpture in that it replicates Athens’ Temple of the Acropolis.

Marta Minujin *The Parthenon of Books*, Friedrichsplatz. ©Roman Maerz.





Daniel Garcia Andujar *The Disasters of War—Trojan Horse*, Neue Galerie. ©Mathias Voelzke.

It is constructed mostly in metal scaffolding, plastic wrap, concrete, and copies of books that have at one time or another, and in one place or another, been banned. The books are encased in plastic wrapped around a steel armature to form pillars, creating a translucent structure dotted with the book cover images. Though a small box is near the piece for the public to donate books that will be incorporated later in the piece, it seems clear that the artist acquired the books in bulk from a wholesaler to get the piece started. The dozens of copies of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* strongly suggested this and were easy to notice from their distinctive cover image.

This monumental work alludes to the second location of *documenta 14* in Athens but the piece, from the 1983 *documenta* in Buenos Aires, predates this particular exhibition. It marks the central point in the Kassel portion of *documenta 14* and presents a clue or two about the nature of the larger curatorial endeavor.

Though Minujin's *'Parthenon'* displays a reliance on the need for grandiose monumentality to mark the

occasion and affect public space, much of what is to be seen in the rest of Kassel and Athens shies away from spectacle. Instead, the selected venues are densely packed with numerous works of sculpture and image. When space permits a large installation, it can be found but, for the most part, *documenta 14* is a deep dive into a seemingly endless array of objects.

The multifaceted formal and conceptual landscape of 21st century art is given equal footing throughout. You can look at a series of abstract paintings and turn a corner to find documentation of political strife in a developing nation. However, each location still plays an important role and each venue is assigned a vague kind of identity. The least vague of which is that of the Fridericianum, one of the original and larger of the Kassel venues. With Minujin's *Parthenon of Books* right outside, this venue continues to the narrative of migration and displacement by displaying the loaned collection from the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) in Athens. The collection displays works by over 80 artists from Greece and around the world working from the 1960's up to now. The galleries are populated by a lot of sculpture. A running theme throughout the work is the navigation of socio-economic and geopolitical boundaries.

Walking into the main entrance of the Fridericianum and passing through the colorful projection by Nikos Alexiou a circular room is filled with rectangular, circular, and triangular boxes covered in camouflage patterns. I encountered this piece as a random stacking but photo documentation shows them arranged in the shape of a military tank.

Since the public is allowed to interact with the boxes, people were building fort structures and knocking them over. I participated and took a nap on the structure and got poked by some of the other museum-goers who probably thought I was part of the art.

Kendell Geers' *Acropolis Redux* also presents an homogeneous array of objects but in this case razor wire, one of the clearest indicators of boundary re-enforcement. To see the rolls of wire stacked on metal shelves as though lying in wait to be used strongly implies a readiness and comfort for the idea of aggressive border enforcement. The title reference to the iconic Athenian structure specifies the current conflict of an influx of immigrants into Greece's already economically volatile country.



Andreas Angelidakis *Polemos*
Fridericianum. ©Nils Klinger.

The conversation around the value of images in political discourse continues throughout the Fridericianum with works like *The Precarious Archive* by Stefanos Tsivopoulos and *No Olvidado* by Andrea Bowers. Though the seriousness of the politics feel fleeting in the excessively-filled rooms of the Fridericianum, it is in the underground cellar where Ben Russell's immersive film installation is staged. In *Good Luck*, the viewer is transported to laborious mining operations in Serbia and Suriname, through the eyes of the camera lens.

Drawing parallels between the turmoil of two groups worlds apart, this film presents a contemporary moment as a subject but goes further in presenting the reality of the political situation to the viewer. Instead of resting in the comfort of the white cube to contemplate the implications of manufactured goods, the viewers of *Good Luck* sit in a dark cellar and watch the intense labor of production unfold in these two groups' desperate struggle for survival. The immersion is enhanced by the loud and bass-heavy soundtrack of the miners and their equipment which rumbles the space with deep bass. Between extended shots, viewers are confronted with close-ups of the faces of some of the laborers, reminding us of their humanity and forcing us to reflect upon our own.

Russell's film does what much of the work in the displaced EMST collection at the Fridericianum (and much of *documenta 14* in general) wants to do. It sheds light on a world system that is fraught and lost to the oppressive forces of globalization and capitalism while treating it with urgency and challenging our notion of the service art provides to humanity. It's a highly critical work and discovering it alongside many ineffectual

efforts to teach the same lesson was a revelation. It was not the only work where I had this experience but these experiences were undoubtedly rare.

Additional venues I visited were the Neue Galerie where the historic meet with the contemporary through the inclusion of works by a number of artists no longer living and works from half a century ago. Modernism that you often find in national museum galleries is occasionally interrupted by identity politics in the Neue Galerie.

Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens have performance work featured, as well as an archive of Sprinkle's decades of performance and modeling work around feminism and sexual liberation. Lorenza Böttner's work is particularly empowering for marginalized groups in the trans- and disabled community, not only in how her work reflects her personal journey but also in how her work is not limited to personal identity politics but extends to explorations of movement and dance as well as images of police violence.

A work by Pope L. subverts the formal tradition of the white cube in the Neue Galerie with *Whispering Campaign*, an audio installation in both cities as well as a performance in Kassel. In the case of the Neue Galerie, the audio emanates from the closed doors of utility closets in the halls between galleries, literally giving voice to the mundane.

History and identity engage one another in an esoteric way with David Schutter's series of drawings *SK L 402-429, 432-439* in which the artist emulates responding to the act of looking at drawings with the act of making drawings. Schutter produces 36 drawings on paper in response to drawings by Max Lieberman culled from the controversial collection of work from

the estate of Nazi art dealer, Cornelius Gurlitt. Germany's fascist history has become a point of deep nationwide self-reflection for the country. The curating that goes on in the Neue Galerie presents a nation that considers art to be part of a process of self reflection that does not attempt to erase or deny history but examine it in relation to the larger shaping forces of identity in the 21st century.

Reflection and identity does not end with German history but with current German socio-economic politics. *documenta's* exhibition venues have travelled further north in the city than any of the previous exhibitions. I visited one of these spaces located in a suburb populated by immigrants with a large Turkish community who, according to one curator, is unaware of what *documenta* is.

A former post-office building in the grid-like brutalist style is once again filled with work. The main room on the ground level is an abrasive salad of video projections and sounds with an attention-sapping sculpture by Daniel García Andújar of a triumphant nude figure with a penis and female breasts atop a wooden structure enclosing figurative sculptures in a classical style.

Also in the main room, in fact right upon entering, a performer assumes various positions as though break dancing in super-slow motion. The performer wears brightly colored and patterned clothing that echoes 1980s fashion. They sit on the floor near the edge of a partition which made the performance feel awkward and crammed into the gallery as though the curators felt obligated to include live performance.

My first impression was soon debunked as I realized this particular performer was part of a group of performers composing one of the most compelling works I interacted with during my visit. Maria Hassabi's *STAGING* is baroque in its use of an ominous piano score, brightly colored costumes, and the intense facial expressions of the performers who often make prolonged eye contact with audience members.

I found this emotive overload refreshing after being caught in an endless cycle of mostly affectless work typical of any massive contemporary art event. Keeping in harmony with the narrative of migration, the performers traverse the large rooms and sterile stairwells of the Neue Galerie leading viewers along to the next staging. I found myself in a stairwell watching one performer stare at a wall and ever so slowly turn to stare us all down. With our gaze fixed, another performer emerged from a floor above us and slowly

walked down to trade places with the other performer who stealthily disappeared.

Following their path, the audience comes to a large room with an expanse of neon magenta carpeting where two more dancers slowly shift poses on the floor. Another performer stands in the doorway watching them as though just another viewer but, as I approached, they joined, forming a trio of dancers. I became mesmerized by their motions and sat at a distance and watched. Much to my pleasure, people walking into the space saw this scene and approached me, just staring, as though I was planted as part of the work. I'd like to think that I was so.

The piece deals with the mobility and migration of bodies in space that distills politics from humanity. Perhaps it was also the distinct absence of political didacticism that I found refreshing. Instead of visual information presented through the lens of global media or academic objectivity, *STAGING* gives us some theater, something we can actually experience.

Perhaps it is this theatricality that made the Ben Russell film so appealing as well. The scope and scale of both these works is grand, allowing it to easily transcend the presumptive plethora of found object sculpture and all-too-often overtly political video work. Hassabi's piece takes risks in its decided inclusion of the artist's 'hand and eye' while still engaging with the narrative of bodies contained by borders and space that is currently unfolding in our cultural historic moment.

This piece, and the Russell film seem to do what *documenta 14* wants to do, which is to present contemporary art that apprehends cultural material to make work that is sensually immersive enough to capture an audience and make them stop, look, and think. The excessive amount of work in the Kassel venues enables viewers to be far too passive not only toward the work but to the content.

I applaud the depth of global exploration the curators embarked upon to include as many voices and modes of production as possible. It is, however, worth questioning their solution to the near-impossible task of developing an exhibition that is somehow representative of the global world of contemporary art. I found success in the role of the venue on how the curating functions but can't help wondering how more editing could serve their purposes better. ■

Evan Carter is an artist and writer based in Chicago. He received his MFA from the University of Chicago in 2017.

With Anxiety and Justice for All

Rashid Johnson: Hail We Now Sing Joy

Milwaukee Art Museum, June 23–17 Sept. 2017

by Nicholas Frank

Are we Americans passive, idle witnesses to the rush of events, powerless to change things, or can we mere citizens actively shape the future of our cities, our states, our nation? In the context of the recent presidential election and its roiling aftermath, Rashid Johnson's *Anxious Audiences* look like they might be cringing at the after-effects of refusing to participate.

In *Fly Away*, Johnson's first iteration of what would become this touring exhibition, his *Untitled Anxious Audience* paintings greeted visitors immediately as they entered the show. The atmosphere was stark and tense, as the array of asphalt-black, wide-eyed toothy grins peered out from splattered white-tiled surfaces.

A sense of recent or impending violence pervaded the work, both in the scratched-out, angsty facial features of the glaring audience's heads, and in empty spots between them, which chart those presumably lost to the waves of violence that regularly remove black community members from our citizenry.

In the massive back gallery, the eventual reveal of the monumental *Antoine's Organ* acted like a healing instrument to calm the anxieties of entry. The *Organ* is

Johnson's overweening grid of greenery in hand-built pots interspersed with Shea Butter clumps, full-spectrum grow lights, stacks of books and quiet videos on small screens, all of which embody nourishment and care. To leave, though, visitors had to again face the *Anxious Audiences*.

At the Milwaukee Art Museum, the experience is reversed. *Antoine's Organ* greets visitors even before entering the show, a wall of green lushness and light visible through the main exhibition hall's splendid glass front. At certain times, select musicians play the piano embedded within the *Organ's* structure, adding melodic strains to echo throughout the maze of temporary walls and artworks.

Adjacent to the *Organ* room are the *Falling Men* and the *Untitled Escape Collages*, with the *Untitled Anxious Audience* paintings tucked safely away in the back gallery. To further calm and reorient, a reading room culminates the show, with comfy chairs and sofas, thumbable copies of the various books stacked amongst the *Organ*, and catalogues from other Johnson shows and projects.



Antoine's Organ, Rashid Johnson, 2016.
Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Johnson himself states that one goal of his work, *Antoine's Organ* in particular, is to convey a sense of healing necessary to counter 'Negrosis,' a term he coined (combining 'negro' and 'neurosis') to describe the condition of anxiety haunting so many black American men, who face discrimination, pre-judgment and potential violence at every turn.

But in Milwaukee, generally regarded as the most segregated city in America (basically a toss-up with Detroit), what does it mean to flip the equation of anxiety and healing so deftly advanced at the 2012 Hauser & Wirth show?

In *Hail We Now Sing With Joy*, audiences are let off the hook. Milwaukee's voter participation was down 41,000 votes in the 2016 presidential election, compared to 2012 when Obama took the state with 52.8% of the vote. The difference was more than enough to swing the vote here away from Clinton, and Wisconsin became a key element in the national narrative of renewed ethnic suspicion and hatred. While it is inarguable that people here need healing, *Hail We Now Sing Joy's* inverse arrangement begs questioning, particularly when the museum's audience is primarily white (recent efforts to reach beyond the core audience notwithstanding).

Antoine's Organ is a vast and impressive piece, a sculpture at once monumental and gentle. It is as quietly welcoming as a sculpted garden, intimating vulnerability and need for care as it quietly charts the indelible accomplishments of the African diaspora through art, music, letters and healing notions.

But reverberating amidst the fauna is the disquieting subject of anxiety, spotted in titles like Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* and Debra J. Dickerson's polemical *The End of Blackness*. (In a subtly recursive video contained within the installation, Johnson is pictured watching a video reading of Dickerson's text.) Perhaps most poignantly, various volumes of the blue *Alcoholics Anonymous* manual are stacked amongst many classics of black literature, from W.E.B. DuBois's *The Soul of Black Folk* to a deft interweaving of Randall Kennedy's memoir *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* with Paul Beatty's more recent *The Sellout*, an over-the-top racial farce. If seen for more than its lushness, the *Organ* becomes a dialectic positing pain as the precursor of healing.

The safe positioning of the *Anxious Audiences* here in Milwaukee reinforced what I term 'Midwestern Remove,' the sense that we are connected to world-changing events just because we witnessed

them on TV along with everyone else. This phenomenon became apparent in the wake of 9/11, when people here understandably wanted to be involved, to offer their compassion and aid.

The *Falling Men* are attributed to video figures from early games Johnson played as a kid, or to flying heroes, but I saw them as the falling figures of those who chose to leap from the World Trade Center towers rather than burn alive; horrifying images most of us received via YouTube. Those suicides represented the early fallout of the ethnic, religious and racial anxieties unleashed on that fateful day, which color the spectrum of our current political climate.

Today as I write, events in Charlottesville remind us of the hardening divisions between states and peoples conditioned by such acts of destruction. With *Anxious Audiences* and the use of tiled & cracked mirrors in the *Falling Men* paintings, Johnson deftly positions us as self-conscious witnesses, active participants even when we prefer to imagine ourselves as passive onlookers witnessing from a distance.

Being far away from important events engenders hand-wringing, when one is unable to get close enough to make a difference, when the gap between audience and stage is most palpably felt. Anxiety inspires inaction, a retreat to seemingly safe zones when action might be more effective.

Unfortunately last November, many in Milwaukee chose the path of powerlessness to effect meaningful change by staying home when the fate of the country hung in the balance. They demonstrated to the rest of us the meaning and fate of powerlessness. The ingredients in Johnson's show reverberate with events current and historical (Milwaukee didn't become segregated by chance) but its arrangement let us all off comfortably.

For the occasion of *Hail We Now Sing Joy*, the brassy fanfare that normally accompanies the opening and closing of the museum's Calatrava-designed 'wings' has been replaced by an open-source community sing-along of Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land*.

Leaving the museum, I chanced to hear it sung by a group of children from Carmen High School, first in English then in Spanish. The Spanish verse ended poignantly in a repeated "para todos" ("for all"). The question remains, to whom does "all" refer in our national concept? ■

Nicholas Frank is an artist, writer and curator. He programs for The Open and the Nicholas Frank Public Library, and teaches at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design.

Soils, Seeds, and Sprouts: Tropical and Temperate Artwork by Sharon Bladholm

At the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, Chicago,
August 12 thru December 10, 2017

by Bruce Thorn

Chicago's Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum might not be on the art crowd circuit but it has turned out to be an almost perfect environment for artist Sharon Bladholm to exhibit her work.

The natural world of plants and their reciprocal relationship with humans has long been a central interest for Bladholm, a sculptor and printmaker who is active in a variety of media including ceramics, bronze, glass, mixed media, watercolor and monotypes.



Aspiration, Respiration, Transpiration and Transmutation, 2014,
Bronze, 22"x12x4" Photo by Eric Bladholm.



RAINFOREST, ceramic and living plants, 2017, 15x12x9" Photo by Louise Rosenberg.

When one steps back from the hype of the contemporary scene, away from major galleries and museum shows, a far distance from Artforum and the New York Times, away from the haze of newsworthy auction prices, that is where you will find most artists these days: working to make their own way with whatever modest jobs, sales and exhibition opportunities that they can manage to obtain.

Bladholm grew up in Highland Park, IL, the daughter of a middle school art teacher who was active as an abstract painter and ceramicist. The family spent summers camping on a 40-acre plot south of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, where her father built and utilized a small painting studio while Sharon, her mom, sister and two brothers tented it under the stars, exploring the outdoors. She was always encouraged by her parents to make art and those memorable times outdoors grew into a lifelong interest in botany and ecology.

Bladholm is a self-taught artist who has cobbled together her own program of study with mentors and classes as needed. Early in her career, she developed an expertise in design and fabrication of leaded glass, which enabled her to make a modest living.

Bladholm's prominent influences include: Edgar Miller, whom she once met in his old age, Charles Renzie Macintosh, architect and designer of the Glasgow School of Art, Stephan De Staebler, Preston Jackson and German Expressionism. The Arts and Crafts Movement, spearheaded by John Ruskin and William Morris, also comes to mind.

Bladholm's content is specific and highlights mankind's interdependence with the natural world, the pressing necessity for humans to develop a better working relationship with the environment, for the sake of health and survival.

Her renderings of plants twist and turn like figure models. They are anthropomorphic and suggest secret lives. There are some 250 potted plants in her studio and she has helped to create and manage a 16,000 square foot outdoor garden beside the studio building in Garfield Park.

Bladholm has joined several scientific research expeditions to Amazonian forests in the capacity of team artist. In 1993, she accompanied the Rainforest Action Network to live with and document an indigenous Yanomami tribe for a month. In 1999, she accompanied the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History and Conservation International on a research trip to the Peruvian Amazon.

She returned to the rainforest in 2009 to the Andes for the express purpose of discovering and documenting rare orchids. Her most recent trip back into the bush was with Project Amazonas in 2016, researching seeds and doing reforestation work. On this expedition, she discovered some wild Amazonian earthstars (Geastrales), international fungi that now reappear in her work with metaphorical zeal.

The exhibition includes a large wall mounted grouping of ceramic earthstars, flying like asteroids (*Earth Stars: Above and Below*, 2017). Also included are some 10 drawings of orchids and one of Geastrales, all done with watercolor on vintage ledger papers.

Not surprisingly, Bladholm has come to admire and respect indigenous life styles, their animistic beliefs and recognition of plants as sentient and interdependent beings. The plant world communicates and shares in symbiotic relationships not just with humans and animals, but also with each other.



Pin Hook Bog, 2017, monotype and etching on rice paper, 36x26"
Photo by Jyoti Srivastava.

Bladholm is an artist on a mission to spread a message about sustainable living on the planet and to share her love of botany. She succeeds quite well at that, with a genuine and warm connection to the natural world that does not become preachy.

While she enjoys working in several mediums, others might long for a higher level of commitment and virtuosity in any one particular area. Her bronzes don't yet match the degree of ambition possessed by Preston Jackson or Stephan De Staebler.

Bladholm's drawings of orchids on ledger paper are lovely studies. Will they be compared to naturalist works by the likes of Elizabeth Twining, Ferdinand Bauer, Alexander Marshall or John James Audubon? Perhaps not.

Yet, we must take artists on their own terms and, for Bladholm at this time, the urgency and consistency of the message seems paramount to the art object. She's probably right about that. ■

Bruce Thorn is a Chicago based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor to the New Art Examiner and a contributing writer to Neoteric Art.

Slug Body Poesis

Manal Kara at Boyfriends

By Stevie Hanley

100% *Acid Hoes Against Empire and Capital* is a show of entirely leather artworks by longtime ceramicist Manal Kara currently up at Boyfriends Chicago. Although, known for her strange semi-functional ceramic vessels, Manal Kara has long had a not so secret parallel practice of leather working for the BDSM community under the label White Worm.

It is exciting to see these skill sets being incorporated into a practice that has long mined and debunked the realm of labor historically demarcated as “domestic,” “craft,” or “feminine.”

Psychoanalysis, says Adam Phillips, is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex. According to Art historian Jeremy Melius, this armistice holds true for art as well. “However intense our rapport with works of art, however immediate their disclosure of the world may feel, we cannot or at least don’t usually, fuck them; we can’t, or at least don’t usually, make them while fucking.”

BDSM equipment however, such as that produced under the White Worm label, is a form of sex prosthetics—further complicating the intimacy to be found between viewer and Manal Kara’s new body of work. This relation becomes ever more complicated when we unravel the complexity of craft. Second wave feminists positioned craft as a methodology, form of knowledge and performative act as a particular reclaimed femme, and later queer, resistance to patriarchy. A quick Google search reveals that there still persists a general consensus in the distinction between craft and art: art is primarily emotive and craft more tangible and functional. “Craftsmanship” is synonymous with skill and care.

Although disproven, such connotations remain for negative and positive potentiality. “Continuing to produce contemporary work within a craft tradition,” reads the press release for *100% Acid Hoe*. What is the axiom of craft that cannot be let go; why is the term in the press release; why did I hear it uttered repeatedly opening night? Solely, because Kara is categorized as sculptress rather than a sculptor? Or is it a hope for some still radical resistance uniquely inherent in craft that Manal Kara seizes upon?

Feminine Alienation/Fragmentation, is a quilt hung on the wall probably unlike any quilt you’ve ever seen before, a perverted BDSM spider web, of chains and leather, one of two in the exhibition. Rather than sticky, this is a web to glide upon, a bed for puddles of lube. Made of green and blue cold metallic alien skins—various leathers and perhaps a few types of pleather, fiber hydrophobic rather than hydrophilic.

Bob Wa Sampler (Self-Attenuation), is arguably the anchor of this exhibition in its craftsmanship and conceptual complexity. *Bob Wa Sampler (Self-Attenuation)* imitates the tradition dating back to 1874 of framing various types of barbed wire. Originally designed for cattle merchants, these samplers have become a rustic home décor staple of a distinctly Western Americana tradition—a fitting glorification of violent border maintenance for the contemporary US zeitgeist. Kara’s sampler is comprised of an assortment of barbed wires made entirely of green suede leathers, for the tickling of the skin rather than the cutting.



Installation shot of *100% Acid Hoes Against Empire and Capital* by Manal Kara at Boyfriends Chicago, photo by Collin Dickson.



Depersonalization via capital, 2017, leather, glass, hardware (left) and *Feminine Alienation/Fragmentation*, 2017, (on wall) dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Boyfriends Chicago.

Kara combines the work with a type of concrete poetry antagonistically and violently musing on the ideology of “the self,” such as, “The Expungement of Self” and “The Ablation of the Self.” This fencing off is turned spinally inward, upon the internal chaos neatly categorized as *The Self*. In “Liquefaction of the Self,” liquefaction is the transformation of a solid into a liquid. It seems the artist desires the solidified self to disintegrate back into some primordial psychic swamplands. “Slug body is clawing and scraping its way back to its own poesis “... slug body is a hoe... Slug body is a scum-fuck poetess, a poem, a road dog, and the road.”¹

Camus writes, “The first concern of any dictatorship is, consequently, to subjugate both labor and culture. In fact, both must be gagged or else, as tyrants are well aware, sooner or later one will speak up for the other.”² Energy is exerted, channeled, named, and finally valued: sex, craft, art, cleaning, care—labor by various names.

Fine art is too often afraid to be caught caring too much, craft is not. Craft labor can occur on the couch while watching television. It is a labor historically less venerated, but one that honors the toil of a broader

scope of practitioners. The praxis of craft precedes the renaissance invention of “The Artist” as we understand it today, a term of veneration for a specific type of labor attributed mostly to white males, one that values individual innovation over the sharing of culture and community. Perhaps it is time for the holy, tired and dogmatic term “art” to be deserted and replaced by craft, until that simplified semiotic is also depleted by the demigod lizards.

Now, we’ve entered a sad hamster wheel game of placing one term after the other on the conveyor belt headed to the insatiable mouth of capitalism, in hopes that the word shields the transformative possibility of the action, that prospect laying somewhere in the realms of illiterate knowledge. ■

1. From the poem *Slug Body* by Manal Kara
2. Albert Camus, “Why Spain?,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage international, 1988), 95.

Stevie Hanley is an artist based in Chicago and an adjunct lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Robert Pioch: Portraits

by Michel Ségard

In late July, I visited Sidewinder Gallery. It had a group show up called Pollinate, and the work of one artist caught my eye. That was the work of Robert Pioch, a young watercolor artist who does portraits of ordinary people. On the surface, this is not so remarkable. But this young man's technical skill at handling such a difficult medium caught my attention. And I returned a few days later to look at the work more carefully.

His portraits are of ordinary people—ones you would meet at the mall or at a gas station convenience store. Pioch has a way of looking inside their psyche and portraying their personality. He works hard not to project himself into their likenesses or to use the portrait paradigm as a vehicle to further another agenda (as did Picasso, Warhol, or Close, to name three obvious examples). And by concentrating on the individuality of the subject, Pioch also avoids creating stereotypes. As a result, his portraits come alive and the subjects almost speak to you.

To augment the subjects' individuality, Pioch puts them in surrounding landscapes that hint at what they are about. This is a device that is as old as the Renaissance, and it works as well today as it did then.

Not all the pieces are equally successful. Occasionally, the background gets too complicated, even "tricky." Geometric forms or outlines appear that are more comfortable in graphic novels. And there is a lack of portraits of older people.

But at other times the background contains circular shapes that end up forming a subtle mandala or halo around the subject's head. In these cases a certain spirituality gets imparted to the portrait, and the subject hovers between individual and archetype—but both interpretations still celebrate the ordinary person.

It is in these portraits that Pioch broaches some of the most significant issues confronting people under 30. Do the traditions and societal rules they inherited make sense in today's culture? What are the alternatives? These doubts and questioning issues confront ordinary people, not just the "artist" or "intellectual." Pioch has subtly captured these doubts in this series of portraits. For example, they can be seen in the eyes of *Robin*, *Aaron*, and *Preston*, pictured below. Addressing these issues, however subtly, is what makes his portraits truly contemporary works and not just rehashes of a traditional form.

He is compiling a collection of 52 of these portraits (one for every week of the year). They will become a book titled *Pseudonymity*. If only one fourth of them are fully successful, that would make a baker's dozen of really respectable, contemporary portraits. ■

Michel Ségard is the Editor-in-Chief of the New Art Examiner and a former Adjunct Assistant Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Robin (from left), *Aaron*, and *Preston*. Three portraits from the *Pseudonymity* series by Robert Pioch.



Weegee, New York's Johnny-on-the-Spot Photog

by Tom Mullaney

New York City, in the 1930s and 1940s, spanned the extremes of economic depression and wartime victory. New York was the American metropolis of that era, a mecca of excitement and untold ambition.

It was radio and newspapers' golden age. The city supported nearly a dozen morning and afternoons papers that competed furiously for readers with news exclusives sprinkled among tales of crime, sex, scandal and catastrophe. To complement news stories, the papers' appetite for photos was huge, the more sensational the better.

It was a heyday time for photojournalists when the maxim "a picture is worth a thousand words" was never truer. And the photojournalist who stands out during that period was Arthur Fellig, better known as "Weegee".

Weegee was indefatigable in always being Johnny-on-the-Spot at any crime scene, fire, car crash or high society spectacle. He covered it all. His big box camera and oversize flash got the shot editors wanted. He wrote about one of his jobs: "A check from LIFE: two murders, thirty-five dollars. LIFE pays \$5 a bullet. One stiff had 5 bullets in him and the other had two." His fame climbed to where he became a one-name phenomenon as he is known to this day. He had two advantages over the competition: a police radio installed in his car and his habit of working the night beat when the papers' staff photographers were not on call.

A 1929 writer said about him, "Weegee's night out could never have happened in any other city. I'm sure of that...Only New York could give him that kind of time." Weegee said the city was "the most charming woman I have ever met. Her philosophy precisely agreed with mine."

Weegee's career started with working in the darkrooms of other photographers and some newspapers, including the New York Times and Acme Newspictures. In addition to sheer talent, he possessed speed, accuracy and skill in the darkroom.

He left Acme in 1935 to go freelance, unhappy at not receiving credit for his published work. He left New

York City in 1947 to pursue an acting career in Hollywood that fizzled. He returned to the city in 1952. By then, his heyday had passed, though he continued photographing until his death in 1968.



Human Head Cake Box Murder, c. 1940.

The book's publication followed a circuitous route. Weegee's photos were stored in the archives of the Newspaper Enterprise Association (N.E.A.) archive. N.E.A. then sold Acme to the news syndicate, United Press International (UPI) in the early 1950s. In 2012, the archive of 359 photos, taken between 1929 and 1946, was discovered in a Midwest storage facility where it had been housed since 1994.

The book is edited by Daniel Blau, a Munich gallery owner, who acquired the archive and clearly idolizes Weegee and his art. Photos are divided into 13 categories that show the breadth of Weegee's world such as Crowds, Crime, Fine (society folk) and Dead.



At the Palace Theater, 1945.

Of course, the great majority are not classics, but photos taken on assignment. However, a good number are. He was highly adept at framing his shots so that they achieved peak effect. Weegee's goal was to provide blanket coverage of all the aspects that made New York such a unique place.

We must see his vast output as governed by the newspaper ethos of the day: Shoot it quick and dirty. Weegee did not have the luxury of setting-up time. He was clearly no Ansel Adams. But many photos have an energy, particularly the crime series, that is palpable. He was a human time capsule, freezing people and irreplaceable moments from that era.

Trolley Tracks,
c. 1940.s



The book has been produced with great care and is fun to peruse. The design, befitting the subject, is out-sized. It features an extra-long horizontal format with many full-page shots for maximum impact. Each new page can bring a fresh discovery, such as the unbridled revelry following the end of World War II. As I flipped the pages, I often reconnected with the look of New York and the people of that time and my youth.

The photos are accompanied by short, vintage wire copy blurbs that identify the depicted scene for a charming touch. Most of the book's 359 vintage photos are appearing for the first time.

The book confirms Weegee's place in the pantheon of great street photographers. Now that the once-hard lines between high and low culture are obliterated, Weegee can take his place alongside Brassai, Jacob Riis and other museum-quality photographers. ■

"Extra! Weegee," edited by Peter Blau,
Hirmer Publishers ff.
distributed by University of Chicago Press

Tom Mullaney is NAE's Senior Editor. He spent his boyhood on New York City streets and read that city's tabloid press with all its gore.

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