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Dedication

To Tara Evans, Barbara Phillips-Jewett and Willa Mae Phillips. Thank you for your never ending support of my creative path.
— Kevin Evans

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To my nieces, nephews, friends, and students around the world.
May your creativity be limitless.
— Carrie Galbraith

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When Giblets Filled the Air: My Introduction to Cacophony
Chuck Palahniuk

My first time was at The Alibi, a Polynesian-themed bar in North Portland. A friend had found a flyer stapled to a telephone pole. “Free Voodoo Weddings,” it said. “Tiki Con.” The flyer promoted a night of retro-jungle music, nothing racist-racist, just the brooding fantasy music you’d hear in the soundtrack of Tarzan movies from the 1940s. Luau music with chattering monkeys and screeching parrots mixed in the background. The Alibi seemed the perfect place for it, a bar built to cater to Greatest Generation service men returning from the Pacific Theater, all plaster-of-Paris volcanoes and papier-mâché hula dancers glowing, lurid, under black light. I kid you not, the salad bar is a repurposed wooden lifeboat. Picture Trader Vic’s but in the wrong neighborhood.

Whatever this Tiki-Con was, it sounded like zany fun. People in Berlin have an old saying: “Berlin runs by many clocks,” meaning they have lots of nightlife options. Maybe in Manhattan you could dress as a slutty chicken and boogie, suspended inside a go-go cage at the Limelight, but you’d be surprised how few choices people in Portland, Oregon had on a Friday night in 1993.

So we went to The Alibi, and we went early and claimed a big booth in the middle of the action and ordered drinks that arrived in life-sized ceramic skulls. Drinks that smoked with dry-ice fog, like a mad scientist had mixed them. I wore a Hawaiian shirt. I wore a puka shell necklace that I’d bought before they were ironic, back when the best way to get laid was to look as much as possible like Christopher Atkins in “The Blue Lagoon,” back when white people still dreamed of going native.

The people who’d organized Tiki-Con; the Cacophony Society, they called themselves. They looked like they didn’t care how they looked. Like they never went to the gym or counted calories. When they tried to dance, it was even worse. They flailed, and not in an angry mosh-pit punk-rock way. They spun their record albums of weird Hollywood paradise music and hopped around flapping their arms or they puckered their lips and pretended to be tropical fish. They danced like Special Olympics. These Cacophony people, they were so un-cool they made even me look cool. Goodness, they were pitiful.

So my friends and I, we drank our Blue Hawaii’s, and for an hour we were the cool people at least in comparison to the people who were hosting the party. But then the actual cool people began to arrive – late, like they always do – and they wore miniskirts or Jordache jeans and sneered at everything, like they always do. They took over the dance floor. They took over everything.

All through high school I only pretended to cheer at pep rallies and football games. While the crowds roared, I merely gaped my mouth open and shut, fake-cheering, like someone choking to death on a fish bone. If that makes me a misanthrope – not being thrilled to adore and applaud the people whom the culture already adores – so be it.

So we were booth hogging at the Alibi, and the perfect people flooded in and turned a wacky Friday night into just another boring beauty contest. They posed and preened. The Cacophony people got squeezed into a smaller and smaller corner, but they persevered. The jungle music kept playing, but you couldn’t really hear it. Not even the trumpeting elephants, not anymore. As advertised, someone began to officiate “voodoo weddings.” A voodoo witch doctor wearing a necklace of animal teeth stood above the crowd and chanted mumbo-jumbo. Men married women. Women married women. People married themselves.

Not that the milling hordes of beautiful people even noticed. No, they’d arrived and kept on arriving, turning Tiki-Con into just another banal mating ritual. Really, isn’t that what everything devolves to for those people? Just
Tales of SF Cacophony

The outsider misfits had baited and successfully sprung it. They climbed and clawed over each other in their fight for the real life smell. It smelled awful. Never get from movies and the Internet is how things in screams and slaughterhouse odors. Another detail you with gore, this was the social reject delivering the offal. It was a hipster stampede. The formerly chill'n play-ahs, cool kids putting the spastic on stage and pelting her. It was that movie, “Carrie,” only in reverse. Instead of the breeding rites… the witch doctor stopped his gibberish sermonizing and threw a handful of something over the heads of the crowd. This clump of something scattered into a cloud of wet mini-things that rained down on the perfect rockabilly haircuts. The witch doctor threw another handful, and more mysterious somethings splattered the scenester crowd. A prolapse anointing. One of the soft fragments went splat on our table. And there it was: A wilted, blue bowel. A loopy length of wet intestine. Next to that landed a tiny lung. A gizzard plopped into a Long Island Iced Tea. Real blood in our Singapore slings and zombies. Just when it seemed as if we’d be hemmed in forever by these tedious store-bought, Actual cool versus the appearance of being cool.

Finally, the misanthropes had worn. The football stars and cheerleaders were routed. It was Cacophony, and I was hooked. Here was an escape from the treadmill of always looking good and always looking good and always looking… In the Cacophony Society you could embrace the terrible. Today, I see a little of this same genius in the zombie culture, where people lurch around with their insides on the outside, but in 1993 we didn’t have zombie walkathons and zombie conventions. In 1993 we had Tiki-Con. Here, you could propose an idea, any scary, ridiculous stunt – What if we dressed as Mad Hatter characters and played croquet with bowling balls and sledge hammers? What if we rode kayaks through the sewers? – and days later, people would create that scenario as a new, short-lived reality. It was a laboratory for experimenting with the culture. And for experimenting with ourselves. In so many ways, it was my inspiration. You don’t say anything because fight club exists only in the hours between when fight club starts and when fight club ends. Still, as my mother used to warn me, “It’s always fun and games until someone loses an eye.”

The Cacophony Society was a collective comprised of rabid individualists who would never join a collective, a Chautauqua of kooky non-conformists, a potlatch for outsiders; it was a movement that moved in any or all directions, through rarely in the same one—in pursuit of a common goal, as stated in the monthly newsletter: a pursuit of shared experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society. Cacophony was not conceived as an art movement. Many members would not self-identify as artists, although there were some noted artists among the members, and many Cacophonists and their fellow travelers would go on to successful careers in the arts. Others would find that their identification with the unselfconscious creative nature of the group and its actions would lead them inevitably to a life in some form of the arts. Neither was Cacophony political or spiritual, although some of the better-known events hinted at a political agenda, and the experiences of the group had consequences that surely lifted the human spirit. Certainly, it could never be classified as a business; it was far too mystifying a concept for any single ego to claim and too slippery a legacy for anyone to actually own; it never offered the slightest tangible profit, although its intangible profit was vast.

This loose aggregate of personalities definitely came together to play, in ways as ingenious and unprecedented as possible; Cacophony brought the concept of playing in the world as adults into mainstream consciousness, through hundreds of events organized by members over twenty years. Cacophony also partnered with other groups of pranksters, performers, and artists, sometimes for one event, or sometimes to produce an annual event over time. Cacophony championed a creative philosophy of fun, stretching the parameters of what could be seen as entertainment, with a basis in unorthodox ideas and direct engagement with the world and people in it. What constituted fun was left entirely to each member’s generally vivid imagination. Event ideas were posted in the newsletter, Rough Draft, and others played or not, depending on their own predilections. Some invitations to play captured the group’s fancy to such an extreme that the huge turnout at an event was almost its undoing; sometimes a lone participant, or none at all, would show up at the appointed time and place.

There were many kinds of events, some so bizarre as to defy a category. Others fell into discernible types or combined different kinds of activities in the creation of a single event. Pranks, urban exploration, literary events, theatrical or musical endeavors, costumed parties, urban games, and the mysterious Zone Tours were just some of the categories to inspire collaborative play. Some event agendas included preliminary meetings to make props or prepare a chosen location for the group activity to come; other activities were not premeditated, but happened spontaneously when friends gathered and had nothing to do that night. Some sub-groups of Cacophony concentrated on specific goals, like The Billboard Liberation Front’s clever improvement of advertising messages in the urban landscape.

Pranksters executed ideas with such finesse that they could fool mainstream media; one notorious prank was the Fantasia Protest, which gathered faux protesters to object to aspects of the famous Disney film. Time Magazine featured the prank in an article about the growth of whining as a national obsession. Groups were invented to march in the annual parade in Berkeley, like a pro-carnivore posse called People Eatin’ Them Animals, or the Undead Homeowners’ Association. The Salmon Run paraded the city’s annual Bay to Breakers marathon with people in salmon costumes running upstream against the other runners. Let Them Eat Cake gathered fantastically costumed 18th century French aristocrats to give away cake—to the homeless and other willing recipients—in front of City Hall on Bastille Day.
The city was Cacophony’s playground, and urban exploration plumbed its options. Some events, like the late-night walking tours of the area’s sewers and storm drains, plumbed quite literally. “Enter the Unknown” newsletter entries and calls for Midnight Walks summoned interested parties to meet at a designated place for a guided ramble through undisclosed terrain. A huge empty warehouse on the bay at the end of 20th street was the central location of the Seceadarean Odyssey, which offered canoe rides through hidden underground canals leading to the bay and other adventures spread through this colossal space.

Literary events were highly popular and took many forms. Poetry Breakfasts appealed to early risers who liked to greet the sun, in incongruous locales, reading from seminal verse. Tippling With Kipling combined two greatly favored activities, reading and drinking. Dark humor pervaded some events, like the Suicide Note Writing Workshop. The Marcel Proust Support Group gathered frustrated fans of serious literature to plow together through one of their most daunting challenges, at the sensible rate of 10 pages a day, meeting regularly in fin-de-siècle venues for moral support. In a gesture of affectionate nose thumbing at the circle of Proustitutes, the Charles Bukowski Support Group met at the race track or seedy Tenderloin bars and read from the works of their particular master. Sometimes Midnight Walks had a literary theme, featuring readings from poetry or novels at various stops along the way for those who just liked to read and discuss, there was a marginally conventional book club that met and read a different book each month.

Some events had a distinctly theatrical flair, and at some of these, the only witnesses to the production were the players themselves. The annual Exquisite Corpse revived the Dadaist concept of the audience writing the play, each writer seeing only the line written before, and utilizing a set batch of props assembled for inspiration; a finished page of text was rushed to the stage, where others acted it out. The Atomic Café brought people to an elaborately decorated bunker for a post-apocalyptic swap meet and storytelling of the end of the world as they had known it. Other events, like the Operatic Banquet, offered musical jest.

Urban Games used the city streets, hotels, and other locations to stage games usually reserved for more logical turf. The Urban Iliadon and Urban Golf gave new meaning to old sport. Variations on Capture the Flag such as Capture the Dummy played out in a wide variety of locations, and games with dubious names, like Assassin and X-Files Investigator, were held in a variety of venues to the absolute confusion of the general public that happened to be in the way.
Almost all Cacophonists loved costume parties and wouldn’t settle for limiting them to Halloween. The Gothic Nouveau Winter’s Ball invaded the rotunda of the Palace of Fine Arts in the wee hours of a typically very cold night. Victorian Croquet, the Black and White, clown events, and the White Trash Family Picnics demanded a considerable variety of looks and props. The Betsy Ross Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society, which met on Flag Day, combined a costume event with the purpose of creating an entirely new national flag. While Christmas, a holiday banquet in a bunker painted white, called for costumes, food, plates, tablecloths, and other props entirely in winter monochromes. No category could possibly cover some offerings, like The Cave Sherman Meets the Marshmallow Rost, at which people came in the shammanistic garbs of invented cultures and spoke in tongues, the Guerilla Sweat Lodge, or The Journey Across the Waters of Oblivion to the Temple of the Living Dead, a vampire event. A workshop that dismantled toys and reassembled the parts in unlikely combinations also defies categorization, as did Fair Play for Rabbits or Cyberpunk in Sector Four.

During slow months, when the newsletter had little to offer, the editor for that issue might insert intriguing fake events. Dave’s Snake Hunt, Eat the Dead, Vigilante Justice, and Swim the Farallones were unlikely to draw much response. Dust those Suckers proposed scraping duct tape over the mouths of Hipsters on Haight Street. Sometimes these fake events parodied traditional ones of an international event attended by thousands of people each year. While Cacophony played for its own amusement and with little self-consciousness, its ideas live on in it’s legacy. Burning Man is the most visible and successful pop culture phenomenon that was developed with Cacophony’s help. This massive event still claims a membership of the Living Dead, a vampire event. A workshop that took Cacophonists to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, where, over time, it would grow into the Burning Man, which took Cacophonists to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, where, over time, it would grow into an international event attended by thousands of people each year.

Cacophony “lodges” developed in other cities, each with a particular local flavor. In San Francisco, a fresh generation of pranksters and other event organizers sprang up, following the lead of their predecessors. This iteration of Cacophonism is known affectionately as Cacophony 2.0.

While Cacophony encouraged others to expand their horizons of creative play, it too had influences that made its mark on the culture of the 1980s. One of the most famous of Cacophony’s Zone trips was The Adventure of the Burning Man, which took Cacophonists to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. The idea was to organize a spontaneous, self-sustaining city in the middle of the desert that would last a week. This event encouraged adventurers in other places to examine the phenomenon of “culture jamming,” a concept further explored in the manual and manifesto, and inspired the evolution of the Burning Man, which remains, to this day, primarily a philosophy, steeped in the tradition of Dada, and geared to living and playing in a world created, in part through the collective fantasies of the authors of the book. It was not merely fun and entertaining. It could be scary, dirty, dangerous, and even exceptionally stupid at times.

Cacophony rose to the challenge of the mediated environment and encouraged others not to ignore the potent power of play. Uncannily, it reflected the wisdom of philosophers from ancient Greece to contemporary America. Plato wrote, “Life must be lived as play.” The 20th century American philosopher George Santayana said, “To the art of working well, a civilized race would add the art of playing well.” And Carl Jung wrote that “The creation of something new is not accomplished without a tremendous misgiving through the intellect, but by the play instinct.” Through its championing of play for adults, Cacophony played a vital role in turning the consciousness of contemporary culture away from passive entertainment, and toward a more vital, creative, and innovative concept of what it means to be entertained.

This book, like all the other joint adventures of the Cacophony Society, is a work written, illustrated, designed, and assembled by its members.

Cacophony, never the most competent of “organizations,” remains, to this day, primarily a philosophy, steeped in the traditions of Dada, and geared to living and playing in a world created, in part through the collective fantasies of its members. There is nothing stopping you. You hold in your hands a how-to-manual of sorts. Atoch Cacophony Rquaft, our newsletter was a reminder to readers: “You may already be a member.”
The Family Tree

Five year old Bret Falconer stared straight up into the sky. One hundred and eighty degrees of his scope of vision were filled with the massive International Orange painted Marin Tower of the Golden Gate Bridge. His father Paul’s hand was on his shoulder to keep him from falling over backwards, off balance as he was. He strained to see the drama unfolding five hundred feet directly above. A group of friends had gathered on the pedestrian walkway on a rare sunny winter dawn to say good bye to a man who changed their lives and, over the years, would influence countless others, most of whom never heard his name. The man who had imagined the Suicide Club died on Thanksgiving Day, 1983, felled by a phlebitis induced heart attack, the blood disease that for forty years did not kill Richard Nixon.

Gary Warne’s will was written four years earlier in anticipation of what might happen during a Suicide Club “infiltration” of the Moonies, a militant Christian cult. In this will, he stated clearly that he wished to be cremated and for his ashes to be tossed from the top of the tower of the Golden Gate Bridge… on a sunny day. Gary and his fellows had climbed the bridge many times during their Suicide Club years… at night… when no one, like the cops, could see you.

This challenge from beyond the grave was typical of Gary. It was a risky, if not impossible, task requiring whimsical audacity and brazen action. After seeing the tiny burst of ash, as the unseen hand far above cast the final remains to the winds from the dead man’s favorite perch, Brett turned to his Dad and exclaimed: “Pa, I got some of the glitter in my eye!”

The loud discordant sounds of Cacophony did not emanate from the void. To some degree, they did however come from the dead. West Virginia via Southern Florida transplant Gary Warne was one of the tens of thousands of people that came to San Francisco intending to recreate themselves. For anyone who knew Gary during his time here in the ’70s and early ’80s, it’s no huge stretch to believe that he would set in motion events that would define underground culture for decades to come. Communiversity, The Suicide Club, and the later Gorilla Grotto and Answer Man Newsletter were experiments of Warne’s that predated and in some ways foretold the genesis of the Internet. The immediacy of communications and the organizing potential and omnipresence of information offered by the World-Wide Web were goals that Gary pursued sans computer, many years before the most casual of networkers discovered the immense power of personal computing.

The Answer Man Newsletter provided a service to anyone with access to the U.S. mail service. If you had a

cacophony
1650s, from Gk. kakophonía , from kakophonos “harsh sounding,” from kakos “bad, evil” (see caco-) + phone “voice” (see fame). Related: Cacophonous.

1. harsh discordance of sound; dissonance: a cacophony of hoots, cackles, and wails.
2. a discordant and meaningless mixture of sounds: the cacophony produced by city traffic at midday.
3. music: frequent use of discords of a harshness and relationship difficult to understand.
question, any question, you could query
The Answer Man. Rather than give the
answer which, of course, is a matter of
opinion and interpretation, Gary would
send contact information, addresses, phone
numbers, official listings for all of the
organizations or individuals that were advertised as experts on the
specific question. Some or all of these
specialists could then be contacted for an
in-depth answer as required. Gary was a de facto analog search engine.

The Gorilla Grotto, Gary’s experimental
store-front café and “adult play
environment,” was an ambitious
testament to engage thinking adults with
their world and their fellow humans in
playful and sometime shocking ways.
Each night of the week, a different
theme was presented. In-depth
interviews of “experts” on a wide
variety of hot-button topics were the
fare on Tuesdays; action/adventure play,
sometimes with the group leaving the
Grotto for site-specific adventures, was
offered on Saturdays; on Wednesdays
Gary hosted his peculiar interpretation
of “group therapy” sessions that were popular in the
’70s featuring the occasional parlor sex play games, and
on Sundays, singular acoustic musical acts performed.

The most inviting and myth propelling creation of Gary’s
short life was, without a doubt, the Suicide Club. Joining with
retired carnival barker/fire-eater/salesman and artist, David T. Warren, and future feminist
academic Adrienne Burk, Gary forged a collaborative
template for a group that, despite its short life and relative obscurity at the time, would inspire and foreshadow
doing what was to come in the next twenty years in the
now seemingly quaint world of “underground” culture.

The Suicide Club began as a “class” at Communiversity, a San Francisco-based non-profit that had evolved out of the
free-school movement of the 1960s. Gary served as student administrator for the San Francisco State based
Communiversity. “Free Schools” were part of academicia’s response to the student upheaval of the period, with many large universities hosting free schools with small budgets, student organizing staffs, and volunteer “instructors” presenting “classes” for no charge to whomsoever wished to take them. In 1975, Gary and other student organizers, after disputes with the SF State hierarchy over the content
of some of the “classes” and controversy generated by State alumni over what was perceived as the frivolous
state of this University funded appendage, decided to make the “free school” free by leaving the fold of higher
education and turning it into a non-profit. Most of the
classes offered by the newly independent organization were practical (VW repair, conversational French) or more
studies (theoretical physics, Victorian literature), even as Gary and cohorts continued to host and champion
stranger and stranger fare. The most popular “class” offered by Communiversity in 1975-6 was the “Pie Of
The-Month Club,” which involved participants being
bushwhacked randomly during their daily lives by pie-wielding assassins.

The Suicide Club was the first formalized “urban exploration” club in the country for adults. Though
college kids had been poking around the steam tunnels of their respective campuses forever, the Suicide Club set
out on a campaign of active urban mapping and dunging, which included large scale climbs of major suspension spans, live action costumed games in huge abandoned industrial edifices, and infiltration of weird and potentially dangerous environments. One of the people he talked into doing this was legendary San Francisco street artist Robert Indiana, shown here gnawing his teeth in impromptu love song to Warren, in his persona as Pierre La Grande, who
created new Suicide Club members by dressing them up on his location, usually dyed intoflawing alcoholic attire and an old Campbell’s Soup can.

In addition to underground exploration (UE), the Suicide Club, through its elaborate street pranks, predated and directly or indirectly inspired what has been termed “Reality Hacking” or “Culture Jamming.” The world’s premiere billboard hacking group, The Billboard Liberation Front, began as a Suicide Club event started by Gary Warne and Adrienne Burk. Flash mobs owe a debt to The Suicide Club for the elaborate and seemingly spontaneous street events hosted by Gary and his cohorts in the ‘70s. “Leave no trace” was the mantra for the Club in the alien environments members found themselves in, during the elaborate and sometimes dangerous events hosted by the Suicide Club.

It was The Cacophony Society, however, that picked up where the Suicide Club, Gary, David, Adrienne, and the rest left off. Cacophony was founded exclusively by ex-Suicide Club members. The range of events undertaken, experiences lived, and relationships forged in Cacophony were, in many ways, an extension of what was created a decade earlier in the Suicide Club. The main difference between the two organizations was the openness of the newly formed Cacophony Society. The ideas first championed in the evanescent experimentation of the secretive Suicide Club, were to be exposed to the world through the larger and eventually Internet enabled portal of Cacophony.

The Carnival Cosmology manifest was mailed out with the April 1977 Suicide Club master pubs newsletter to the eighty or so new club members. Gary was inspired to write it after reading about Lon Chaney’s biggest fear: to hear a knock
on the door on a moonlight night, to open it, and see the unsmiling face of a clown slaving in.

CARNIVAL COSMOLOGY
Gary Warne

The world is a midway; cities are its sideshows. The only difference between children and adults is that there is no one to take care of us. When we left home, it meant we were lost on the midway and, unlike God, the carnival boss will only let us ride as long as we pay.

No one will come to find us. Some children will hurt us, others will stop to play… Some are still deciding. But you can sneak in, too.

I have been exploring a world of adventures, exotic locales, mystic essences; confronting my fears was the immediate goal, the predominant focus of the explorations and challenges. Now, nine months later, my fears have become wafer-like and crumbling, shadows of their former selves. Now I find fear only a final, non-evolving image that stills other possibilities, the creation of more intoxicating future images, that prevents me from entering into a visionary dialogue with whom I could become.
And something more began to emerge. Inner visions of my own failure of stamina or confidence. See the colours and textures beyond the death images, and a rich new flood of images and emotions, I began to bury the predominance of fear in my own cosmology —more powerful than our magic, more mysterious than those things that are more vivid than our fantasies, becoming more powerful and loving, rather than fearing our imaginings; something within us that stops us from disappearing into a marshy bog at the same pace it was it became the spook house of a long bankrupt carnival, play, if nothing else, here to play with the world and other things that are more vivid than our fantasies, more powerful than our magic, more mysterious than our own mysteries. I buried the predominance of fear in my own cosmology that night. After many months of incredible experience and a rich new flood of images and emotions, I began to see the colours and textures beyond the death images, beyond the fantasies of authority and arrest, beyond inner visions of my own failure of stamina or confidence. And something more began to emerge.

I am not speaking at all metaphorically when I say that it was the bright lights and moving colours of the big top, carnival, amusement park midway. Once I was on the bridge, I was greeted instead by moonlight on still waters and the skyline of the city dimly cut to scale on a plywood board, ready for display. The outline of the city floated across in, of all shades, autumnal colours of yellow and orange. Our height did not make them that way, it allowed me to see them that way, as the houses, ships, and lights below took on a bathing toy-like countenance. The height silhouetted by sky and underscored by the sea allowed me to place it within a gigantic midway, rather than see myself as a stick figure man within the reality of the city's overwhelming back buildings.

Two months before, I had climbed the Oakland Bay Bridge and for the first time the metaphor had become real. The bridge was obviously a jungle gym made to climb rather than drive over, the cars just using it for the in between times. The girders were so huge that you could climb inside them like chimpis, risking nothing but a strained heart from the excitement. It was then that I was first struck with the feeling that we were here to play, if nothing else, here to play with the world and other people.

Before that, I visited a ghost town in central California and it became the spook house of a long bankrupt carnival, disappearing into a marshy bog at the same pace it was swallowed up by the past. As I walked along the tracks at night that led to the town, unsure if I was going the right way, a bouncing yellow light appeared behind and we waited for the predictable "Hey you kids, get out of here!" only to have it explode instead in a supernaturally silent coal black train screaming into the night ahead, shaking the ground in great heaps and gulps of air as it roared past.

My mind elongated with it, as it had as a small child in front of the TV, when Daffy Duck told Elmer Fudd a new house and then, turning to leave, opened the front door and let a train rush straight at the camera, straight at Elmer straight at me, right through his living room and mine, my child's mind simply gasping at all the possibilities.

Other possibilities are becoming much more apparent. The world is becoming a total play environment and I am becoming something else entirely. The future is no longer on a circuit like the news, entertainment something an entrepreneur plans, as I expectedly read the notices in the bleached parchments on the corner stands. It is an imagination away.

In "Evolving Into Chaos," Warne distilled his observations on the creation of events and pranks. It was included in the Suicide Club newsletter and mailed to all members. This philosophy informed all things to come in Cacophony and Burning Man, as well as having an influence on the evolving ethos of the world-wide urban adventuring community and "culture jamming.

EVOLUTION INTO CHAOS: A CHRONOLOGY
Gary Warne

This paper is an attempt at describing the succession of scenes, pranks, and put-ons that have gathered so much attention for Communiversity and, at the same time, presenting the ridiculous concept of organizing principles for creating chaos, anarchy, and high times. Towards this end, it may also be referred to as ROBERTS RULES OF DISORDER. It is shared equally and for free to all corners in the hope that you find the last spurt of THE FEAST OF FOOLS and ALL HALLOWS EVE. When Communiversity was still at S.F. State in September 1974, several of us got the idea to do a practical jokes class. This event was to signal a new era for Communiversity, the Free University Movement, and many of us individually. As soon as it hit the streets, we were told it (the class) was "Not educational, in poor taste, and probably illegal from the sound of it." Preliminary discussions went on among the top brass at State about withholding our pay checks until threats and coercion failed. At the end of the year, we withdrew the school from State, forming a non-profit. A hundred people signed up for the practical jokes class, making it the most popular class in the history of the school (so far). We filled a room with hundreds of large balloons, covered the floor with mattresses and pillows, covered the ceiling with a parachute, and waited... Two doormen greeted the registrants, asked them to remove their shoes, picked them up, and threw them through the door into the room. This went on for three hours—a balloon and pillow fight, culminating in a whipped cream and feather fight, separated the wheel from the staff, who awoke, spoke. People left hurt, pissed, creamed, feathered, and limping. The thirty people who stayed journeyed to North Beach in a Salvation Army bus and pulled five stunts. First the women put balloons in their blouses and tried to apply for jobs as topless waitresses. They wouldn't let them in. We practiced carrying imaginary plate glass windows up the street sideways; it worked, people actually walked around us! Then we tried panhandling the same people as they walked down the length of a
Block—thirty people asking for spare change, all acting as if they didn’t know each other. Then we tried giving money away, which didn’t work either. Finally we tried to buy a banana split and couldn’t come up with the money between us (30 of us, that is). This one really didn’t work because we weren’t very good actors; the intersection of Columbus & Broadway was so choked with people the waiter couldn’t concentrate on us or even see clearly that we were together, and the idea sounded much funnier in our heads. We were sure our jokes were funny. Their reactions are no less valid then your own.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. I: DIEST YOURSELF OF CONTROL.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. II: YOU WILL NEVER BE TOTALLY IN CONTROL.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. III: BE A FOOL, NOT A SADIST. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE IT AS WELL AS DISH IT OUT.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. IV: ALLOW PEOPLE THE Validity of THEIR OWN EMOTIONS (Humor is a VERY SERIOUS Thing).

When you are doing what you really want to do, maybe for the first time, allow people the reality of their own emotions and the sincerity of their own responses. Don’t be shocked or bummed out if you are ignored, slapped in the mouth, or arrested. People cannot be expected to think your jokes are funny. Their reactions are no less valid than your own.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. V: SOLIDARITY IS A NECESSITY.

Every time we changed locations in the course of the evening’s bizarity, we lost people. This became a steadfast rule of entropy in future stunts. This is not good. The people need each other for energy and support, plus it is relatively dangerous to go out as a group to do stunts—anything can happen. If you’re going to start something, finish it. Corollary: Nothing’s Ever Over When You Think It Is.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. VI: PLAY IT OUT TO THE END (ANYTHING GOES). A disaster: it fulfilled its title but the people couldn’t trust one another because of the things each of them brought and did for and to each other with knowing one another. A common purpose or focus decided beforehand is the best, even if people still can’t go through with it; it will be an inner failing rather than paranoia. Other than initiations, and despite Principle No. II, agree beforehand on what you want to do.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. VII: THE MORE EXTREME THE ACT, THE More EXTREME and VARIED THE RESPONSE WILL BE. VOYAGE TO ANOTHER PLANET. We broke down into three groups and talked about how we imagined life on other planets. Then we blindfolded twenty-five people and took them to two unusual environments, one natural and one synthetic. We told them that when we took off their blindfolds, they could not use proper nouns, names, or earthly references for the sights they would witness. They had to decide what they were, why they were, what they did, as if they had never seen them before. Confused? For example, if we took them to a street and unblindfolded them, they couldn’t use the words “concrete,” “street,” “pavement,” “road,” etc., taking the name “concrete” and the names of the streets away. They had to decide what they were, why they were, what they did, as if they had never seen them before. Confused? For example, if we took them to a street and unblindfolded them, they couldn’t use the words “concrete,” “street,” “pavement,” “road,” etc., taking the name “concrete” and the names of the streets away. They had to decide what they were, why they were, what they did, as if they had never seen them before. Confused? For example, if we took them to a street and unblindfolded them, they couldn’t use the words “concrete,” “street,” “pavement,” “road,” etc., taking the name “concrete” and the names of the streets away. They had to decide what they were, why they were, what they did, as if they had never seen them before. Confused?

Above: By 1978, the monthly newsletter had become the Noose Letter, and its format had more or less gelled. Techniques of Persuasion was a postmortem organizing of Suicide Club events in 1979.

Below: The Gorilla Grotto Newsletter. The Grotto was Gary Warne’s storefront events venue, started after he left active organizing of Suicide Club events in 1979.
JOKE CLASSES ARE LISTED ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE FRONT PAGE. We ran joke classes every catalog for two years until our “DEATHSKOOL” catalog, when people got too confused and we stopped for a while. Someone had registered for every joke class we have ever run, no matter how outrageously it was written. When the HARR-HARR class asked them to kill themselves, they politely asked if it was real or not. For DEMONIC POSSESSION we were asked in a whisper if we “had connections.” When we ran PARANOIA AS A STATE OF HEIGHTENED AWARENESS, we had to re-evaluate the whole concept of joke classes—a device, as far as we know, that no other alternative university has used. SIXTEEN people signed up for Paranoia. These were the ones either cowardly or fun-loving registrants let sign up. Many more were turned away by other registrants. Some people didn’t want ANY other class but that one and as you can imagine HATED filling out the skills exchange (a program we run in which participants signing up for the school offer their skills for barter). If you re-read the description a couple of times, I think you might agree that it’s pretty horrible. But people wanted it. People in the joke wanted it to happen but the BIG QUESTION MARK was what kind of people had signed up for it? The joke became too real; everyone who wanted to see what the registrants were like were also afraid to offer their homes to find out! The joke became very real. Eight months later someone was moving out of their house and offered to have the class the night before they gave the keys back to the landlord. We wrote and called people, had the class, and had a very intense and fantastic evening of sharing what we were afraid of. Our first joke had become real. An incredible reversal.

CHAOTIC PRINCIPLE No. VIII: HUMOUR IS AS RELATIVE AS ANYTHING ELSE NIGHT OF ADVENTURES DEATHSKOOL Catalog, SPRING ’75 Description: Bring your ready to live adventures. Leave your pride at home, if we think they’re either too dangerous or too boring. Must be in the borders of S.F. Twenty-five people signed up for this class and three came with adventures. After we talked for a while, people started thinking up practical jokes, but I was never sure if they were fantasizing them THEN or they had brought them there. There was a practical joke class in that catalog listed without a teacher, but no one signed up for it (everyone was afraid to sign up first, because then they had to offer THEIR house). We planned two of the three adventures for the first night and the third would be put together later. The first, mine, was to walk through the JUDAH STREET CAR TUNNEL from Duboce Park to Cole & Carl. Half of the group went home right then and never came back. Other people didn’t want to go through the tunnel and didn’t want to go home either, so they waited for us at the other end.

Above: Journalist Randy Shilts, author of And the Band Played On, and Barry Wolf pose in front of the Buddha Bar in San Francisco’s Chinatown as characters in Don Examiner newspaper. Herron’s live action games, utilizing fictional and historic references to hardboiled San Francisco fiction were some of the most involved role-playing games played by the Suicide Club. Herron’s Deathskool Newsletter walking tour, which began in late 1977, is the longest-lived literary walking tour in the US today.
In the years before I moved to Kuwait-on-da-Bay, I read of the existence—daring exploits of the Suicide Club in zines published by punk surrealist G. Sutton Breiding. It inspired me to pick up Robert Louis Stevenson’s *New Arabian Nights* (in which the namesake story “The Suicide Club” was part of a series), a copy of which I conveniently found in the basement staff lounge of Regenstein Library, where I then worked, in Chicago.

It was intriguing for someone lately steeped in Camus and Marinetti (to say nothing of Artaud, Rimbaud, Jarry, and a galaxy of other dark stars in the grimoire of rebel metaphysics) to consider the tales of urban adventures related by Gary Warne as an invitation to live each day as though it were the last. In the final decade of the Cold War, and most especially during early Reagan, this apocalyptic fatalism was a morbidly credible conceit.

A longtime reader and science fiction fan publisher, I was accustomed to receiving word of distant exploits and then struggling to get from here to there. It was a perverse constant of speculative relativity in the years before we all got online that whatever seeming cool thing came to one’s notice would have already moved on by the time one could get there. Who has seen the elephant? Or whatever iconic beast served as bait.

Arriving in San Francisco in the summer of 1983, I was thrilled to meet Gary Warne, John Law, and Don Herron at a reception for visiting Silver Scarab publisher Harry Morris. The sad news was the party I had been anticipating was already over: the Suicide Club had recently dissolved on the question of secrecy. Its public termination was resonant of the ritualized dissolution enacted by the Diggers when they celebrated the death of the hippie in the wake of the Summer of Love.

A couple months later came further grim tidings with Gary’s premature demise by heart failure during a Thanksgiving visit home to West Virginia. A couple years passed, then one of my cronies in the fantasy science fiction world reintroduced me to Herron and Law at a Third Saturday party in the Richmond.

I knew Jim Khennedy through fanzines and the amateur press since 1976. When his parties became a regular monthly event heralded by the zine *dada database*, they served as video mad-scientist happenings for the motley scenes of mondoids, skiffy readers and writers, comics artists, Dick heads, cyberpunks, space colonists, and other amiable mutants.

Gumshoe bibliographer Don Herron is an itinerant raconteur of Atlantean depth, comfortable in genres spanning mystery, horror, science fiction, and fantasy. When he brought John Law and Lance Alexander to the Third Saturday party in 1986, shortly after inception of the Cacophony Society, a few of us were eager to enter and revel in this coterie of adventurers in the unknown.

Besides Jim Khennedy, mention must be made of noir fantasist Thomas Burchfield, who joined in many an early diminuendo of the Coda Cacofiles.

We signed on expectantly, laughing and loving — sometimes recklessly, creating experiences and interventions of an architextural design in chaos and spontaneity, in sync with the noise of time.
SUGGESTIONS BASED UPON EXPERIMENTAL DATA… OR... BLOWING IT.

Gary Warren, John Law, Adrienne Burk, David Warren from the Golden Hind, Siewers, & Kennedy Hotel Events Suicide Club Newsletter, 1978

Our format has been adopted to insure the minimum of arguing,ickering,amending,censoring, and voting on other people’s ideas, rules, and other volatile subjects. Each person is totally responsible for their fantasy.

2) The leader will give a point-by-point description of the adventure as they imagine it. Diagrams would be helpful at the meeting place. When people climbed the side of the ship facing the guard-house on the Golden Hind, we realized that what was obvious to some wasn’t so obvious to others.

3) The leader will give a point-by-point fantasy of what he thinks could go wrong and what he fantasizes doing about it. If they’re wrong, great!

4) We will not be meeting people beyond the first meeting place, where the discussions and planning take place. We realize that this will be a hardship, but it has been more of a hardship trying to avoid hardships.

5) Verbal directions are out. Duplicate maps will be given to all drivers.

6) The organizer will provide a list of the equipment necessary and will give it to someone to check off as we leave.

7) We won’t simulate danger, even for joke purposes, in situations that are possibly dangerous already.

8) We’ll ask someone to be an official explainer and talk to witnesses that insist on staying and being perplexed when we’re climbing buildings, etc.

9) A firm hand grasp (holding hands) will be our universal, non-verbal signal to stop talking at any volume.

10) Everybody should have all of the equipment that is specified; the organizer has advised us with a reason and we shouldn’t disqualify ourselves from their requirements because we think we know better. If it says everyone must have flashlights, this means everyone (and many people still don’t own one, buy one). If it says no kids, it means no kids; if it says hard soled shoes, it means hard soled shoes; if it says everyone should have a candle, EVERYONE has to have one.

We feel it’s best of tell people the truth, if not the whole truth, about what we’re doing. Many people are not using the planned chaos form and so are leaving information out of the write ups that others need to know, or that the leaders are not thinking about. Use them. On the small but positive side, we feel we were right about the use of costumes to offset police suspicion/repression, and food (potluck) helps!

WHY I JOINED THE SAN FRANCISCO SUICIDE CLUB

David T. Warren

As the years slip by and I try to align each day with the passing of my life, I find myself on tenuous ground. After forty years of living, dreaming, and working to build the kind of community that I would like to live in, I find myself faced with the reality of how little I’ve done to accomplish this task. I haven’t tried. I am accompanied into the future with the lessons learned by my daily attendance in the school of hard sex. Though reality has popped my balloon, I arrive at this point in time with the buoyancy to find a better way to live the remainder of my life than the way I’ve been doing it. Apparently life offers no stable, secure, rounded fulfillment. Life at best is for me an un tidy mess of unfinished business, broken achievements, personal failures, half-successes, short-lived triumphs, belated insights, noble desires, and shameful deeds. Hopefully, through the years I have accumulated a little wisdom; but for me life is incomplete and much potential remains: it eludes my mortal grasp. Life as an ongoing state has controlled me more than I. Like most people, I’ve had my moments of breathtaking perfection, but no permanent achievement seems possible. This may be because as a human being I am only part of an evolutionary process whose task it is to fill the soul, learn the rules, build the technology, and make ready for the people of the future, where necessity will require that basic human needs and wants be provided for by the collective of the community, and individuals will be set free from harrowing emotions of jealousy, fear, and rivalry. The fact that people will also lose their ability to hate, love, have hope, or be generous will have little effect on the world of the future that will operate with art like perfection into the millennia. Provided of course, that we don’t blow ourselves off the face of the earth or drown in the slime of increased pollution in the interim.

For me, these alternatives are grim and bleak and leave so much to be desired that I’ve decided to become a charter member in the San Francisco Suicide Club. The only requirements are that I put my affairs in order, stop looking for satisfaction on a tomorrow that may never come, and live each day as though it were my last. With this commitment, I bequeath half of my worldly belongings to the club’s trinary garage sale, these funds go to support the club’s bizarre activities. Going places I’ve never been and doing things I’ve never done. Maybe I’ll see you there!
THE MISSING CLOWN
Steve Mobia
Gary Warne had been dead for three years and many in the Suicide Club had moved on with their lives — the pranks, street theater, and urban explorations faded into the background of daily life. But for a few of us, there was a lingering yearning for more.

In early October of 1986, I got a call and then later a ride out across the Golden Gate Bridge to Kirby Cove. Elaine Affronti and Jean Moshofsky from the old club were planning a Halloween tribute to Gary Warne. You see, there was this French movie by Louis Malle called My Dinner with Andre. The entire film was a conversation in a restaurant where two very different individuals discussed the meaning of life. One of the described incidents told by Andre Gregory invoked a mock funeral where people would be individually buried alive for a period of time. Elaine and Jean thought this experience would be a great initiation for the burgeoning group I had just heard about. Since at first no one had thought of a name for the group, they used the heading “Rough Draft” as a placeholder.

“Satan.” Sentimental organ music echoed through the interior. Tom would later get the wills and prepare his eulogy for each with his characteristic panache.

Finally, two pine coffins arrived. Empty, each one weighed 150 pounds or so. But who was to carry them down the steps and into the chamber, once bodies were inside? Well, various assistants started arriving. Most had no idea what they would be involved with. There were these three French guys I hadn’t seen before, who thought they were going to a Halloween party. Little did they know they’d be spending the night struggling with coffins. I forgot to ask them if they’d ever seen My Dinner with Andre.

This was hardly a party. The whole mood of the event was somber and introspective. Not being a party guy, I very much enjoyed this alternative to the typical Halloween drinking fest. But the assistants had other ideas.

After the first few bodies exited the funeral parlor, it was clear that we had logistical problems. The four pallbearers standing with a coffin between them could not fit through the chamber door. It was hastily decided that the coffins would not be carried downstairs but placed just outside the chapel, much less effort, but it afforded the newly resurrected a glimpse “behind the scenes” that bothered me. Later, the French pallbearers went “on strike” and we had to recruit the newly resurrected to labor with the coffins of the dead. This made the final walk through the tunnel to the beach a bit awkward — who was to stay with them if they’d ever seen My Dinner with Andre.

After waiting a few more minutes, I slid the lid open, sat up and grabbed a nearby flashlight. I had imagined Gary Warne standing by the bunker entrance wearing a clown costume and I’d say he was late. But the chamber was empty except for writhing leaves carried by the breeze.

Above: Steve Mobia at a “Wayward LINC” event in Golden Gate Park, 1957.
Rethinking Cacophony: The Lance Factor

“The original idea behind Cacophony was to empower individuals to manifest their dreams, desires and obsessions in some creative way that could be shared as an event. It was a call to create our own version of art and culture.” — Lance Alexander

Lance was blindfolded, his hands bound in shiny silver handcuffs behind his back. Sebastian Melmoth and Ethyl Ketone propelled him, holding an elbow each, over the cracked sidewalks of one of the city’s most dangerous neighborhoods. They had almost made it to the grimy ghetto theater where Hellraiser was playing when Ethyl saw two cops coming at them, pistols aimed in their direction. She blanched, and Sebastian hissed, “Crap, they’re pulling a pincer move on us.”

“Hey,” one of the cops said, “Are you all right?” Melmoth started to respond, but the cop, fingering his .38 caliber police special, said, “Shut up! I’m asking the one with the bag over his head.”

Lance seriously considered saying, “They’re kidnapping me, help!” Instead, he said, “It’s all right, officers. They’re my friends, and I believe they’re taking me to a movie.” The cop looked at Melmoth and Ketone and said, “You better get him off the street. This is a bad neighborhood to be blind in.”

Lance had been blind for over an hour, since they had hooded, abducted, and trundled him into Steve Mobia’s Luxor Cab. They sped a circuitous route through the city to disguise their destination, the three abductors exchanging cryptic comments along the way. Finally, needing to return to actual paying fares, Mobia dropped them off at the corner of Taylor and Eddy Streets. Lance couldn’t see, but he could smell. The human perfume told him they were in the Tenderloin.

The three friends stumbled around the corner and into the Electric Theater at 980 Market Street. Lance was having a surreal experience, but it got stranger. A turn in the back of the theater shouted out “HAPPY BIRTHDAY BOY!” several times during the onscreen bloodletting. More than a little shaken, Lance asked his abductors, “How the hell does he know it’s my birthday?”

Looking around the bar, Ethyl commented on the number of exotically accessorized, immaculately coiffed, model thin, and tall women there were in this unprepossessing venue. Melmoth said, “Ethyl, you are the only woman in the Black Rose Bar tonight, or for that matter, on almost any night.”

“Kidnapping” your friend(s) was a common pastime for Cacophonists when not engaged in actual newsletter sanctioned events. The surreal quality revealed through sensory deprivation, while engaging in experiences that might be as common as viewing a movie or as daring as dangling out one hundred feet on a cable swing beneath an old arch bridge as your blindfold was removed, could be in some cases life altering. New and unexpected experiences were catnip for those in the group. The stranger and more involved, the better. The Luxor abduction vehicle was waiting outside when the movie ended, and Steve dropped the three at a seedy bar on the north end of the “Loin.” They sat at the bar and discussed the vibrant, lurid universe depicted on the screen and their close encounters with the very similar, but much more real world outside the relative safety of the smelly and rundown theater.

The San Francisco Cacophony Society is now somewhere over four years old. It’s very survival astonishes me; it’s success even more so. Apparently we are on the right track and have the right people participating. Nevertheless, in the midst of this success I am beginning to hear a nagging question. I first heard it in my own mind some months ago. Later I heard it from Wendy Winters, the writer who is doing the story for The City magazine, some recently I have heard it from a variety of people involved with Cacophony.

The question goes something like this: Cacophony seems to have a number of serious, intelligent people involved in it. People who are willing to spend time, money and energy on unusual events to share with each other and the public, yet despite all this I can’t see what it adds up to. What’s the philosophy or purpose behind the organization? What are you trying to achieve? Is there a common purpose that guides the actions of the people who put on the events and where will it lead the group in future?

Hidden or personal agendas aside, what is the answer to these questions?

In an attempt to satisfy my own curiosity on the subject as well as to provide a forum for the discussion of the Society’s future I would like you to participate in a conference letter on the subject. Here’s how it works:

1. Write me a letter telling me what you think is the answer to any or all of the above questions. It can be as long or as short as you want it to be, mail it to me by December 15th.
2. Upon receipt of these letters I will copy all of them, just as I have created them, and mail a complete set out to each of the participants.
3. The participants are then asked to write comments or rebuttals to the original letters and mail them to me by January 15th.
4. I will then copy these and mail copies to all respondents.

The reason that I have decided to ask this question in a written format as opposed to getting together in a group over beers and discussing it is that I hope that having you write the questions in writing will give people an opportunity to carefully think out their answers at length and in some detail.

Also, it allows all of the people involved to have an equal voice. It keeps the more strident and argumentative types (I mean me?) from dominating the conversation and not paying proper attention to the more quiet and thoughtful members of the group. Finally, written statements will give the respondents time to carefully read and consider their fellow society member’s remote and appreciate all of their genius and all of it’s ramifications.

By way of getting the discussion rolling, here are my own concerns center around several topics. One is the question of participation versus entertainment or parties as events. A second is the tension that exists between control and spontaneity that exists in a group with an essentially anarchistic structure. A third is the question of whether or not the group could perhaps accommodate a number of well defined special interest factions within it without fragmenting.

Finally, I have chosen those people who I see sending this to not because they are leaders of, or have any authority over, Cacophony. I have chosen them because of their level of interest and activity in the group. Most probably, the real reason is that I made my choice in a thoroughly arbitrary and personal manner, choosing people who I find interesting and whose opinions I would enjoy reading. In such a task as personal project, (perhaps it’s a real project) and I make no claim for it as any sort of ‘official’ Cacophonist project.

The following people have been asked to participate in this conference letter:

Carrie Galbraith
John Law
Michael
Dean Skatland
Louise Jarmilowicz
Kevin Winters
F. Stout
Larry Harvey
Rob
Jayson Wechter
Charlie Bruegge
Louise Brill

If you feel that I have left anyone important off of the list please copy this letter and pass it on to them.

Hope to hear from you soon.

[Signature]


What Made the SFSC Special

1. The SFSC was open to just about anything. It had an almost total lack of official rules and structure, something rarely found out side of one's inner life. The attitude was one of "Do whatever you want to do and list it in the newsletter." The official position was one of oneproven, experimented on, and non-judgment.

2. Originally there seemed to be a conscious realization that the club would be out of control. This out of control situation was then seen as a desirable norm.

3. The emphasis was on participation.

4. A willingness to entertain people's events without expectations as to their value. Conversely the willingness of those putting on the events to defy all expectations of good taste, what's right or correct, what is moral, proper, lawful, or legal. What was done was a matter of personal conscience and responsibility and (more than an occasionally, of irresponsibility).

5. The focus was on taking risks; physical, social, psychological, and artistic... to change and expand the conception of the world held both by the event's originators and participants.

6. It was an attack on all limits.

7. It managed, through one of its few rules, to avoid political and religious contention and infighting that is forever the bane of creative enterprises.

In short the SFSC provided a forum for the realization of peoples fantasies, a place for the expression of outlaw artistic and intellectual conceptions, and a mode for exploring our own minds and our interaction with others. In setting aside limits and taking risks the SFSC in fact created a safe space for creative people to do whatever they pleased if they remained consistent with the restrictive daily world. A world where our most obscure desires could be explored and acted out, either symbolically or in fact.

Another important aspect of the SFSC was that it made individuals who did become involved feel as if they were a part of something special. They felt that they were in a group of like minded people who stood somehow apart from society in general. A number of people who I've talked to felt that they were outsiders and that the SFSC was a very special group of people who were all outsiders in one way or another. To some extent the secret/conspiratorial aspect of the SFSC was important to this sense of a special identity. People who were initiated into the club were, as it were, initiated into a mystery/secret, and this was important as a glue that bonded the group together.

Well, that's it. Just as it was written in a frantic burst of composition fueled by my desire to convince my co-conspirators that while we wanted to form a new organization, what we did want to do was create a conspiratorial aspect of the SFSC. Unfortunately, I don't think that I was entirely successful. All too many times I have heard, 'that's been done already' or 'I remember when, back in the old days...'. Oh well, nice try anyway....

Lance Alexander
edited & retyped, 1-14-91

An Introductory Note

One evening in August of 1986 Louis Brill called me to say that a number of people from the defunct San Francisco Suicide Club were going to talk about doing some events (the catch word that we used to describe our adventures, projects, and pranks) and ask me if I would like to join them. We met in a coffee house and talked over old times and future plans. If I remember correctly we were: Jean Monkofsky, Sandy Hatch, Sara Safron, Janis Joplin, Joe Weinstock, John (Pepper) Dowdell, Louis Brill, and myself.

During the meeting it occurred to me that while I liked the idea of getting together again to do some events and perhaps even form a group again, I wanted to avoid some of the problems that I had encountered in the SFSC. In particular I wanted to avoid the clannish exclusivity that had grown up in that group as well as the incometiveness and non-participation that had developed.

Now, I had never done an event in the Suicide Club. I had gone on events and had helped other people, but was mainly a follower. This time I decided to get into the center of things. I went home and the next day and wrote up the attached remarks to present to my friends when we met again in a few days. Originally it had included much detailed criticism of the Suicide Club, but at Sandy's suggestion I cut most of this out and tried to focus attention on positive ideas. My criticisms were discussed with the group but never presented to them in written form. My idea in doing this was to promote some serious, concious thought about what we were doing rather than just copy the past. To that extent it worked. While Cacophony has a resemblance to the SFSC it has succeeded in creating it's own identity and quirky style. If this critique contributed to that then it served it's purpose and that makes me happy.

At the meeting where we discussed these questions, I managed to get myself appointed editor of the newsletter, secretary, and treasurer by sheer force of egotism and bad manners, an attitude that I maintained for the thirteen months of my editorship.

Sandy Hatch helped extensively on the first issue, and Elliot Goliger on the second. Louise Jamilowicz became the art director and then the second editor, after I resigned. Since then editorship has changed several times when someone else has asked to participate. Anarchistically, we let them have the whole thing including the key to the cash box.

The copy of the 'rough draft manifesto' that has been attached to this is in the main the same as the one given out in '86. I have cleaned up the spelling to the best of the ability of my typewriter's spell-checker and have put in some short notes and added a few words here and there so it will make better sense to someone who was not in the original group or the SFSC.

Also I have attached a copy of what came out of our discussion of event guidelines. It was given our to subscribers to the newsletter for a number of years and some version of it may still be (you, so I'm a little out of touch). It's in large part derived from an earlier page of suggestions written by an SFSC member and which I used with his approval.

Lance Alexander

P.S. The newsletter, and originally the group, was known as 'Rough Draft' because when people wanted to know what to call it, Louis overruled all of the lame suggestions and pointed to the apologetic title on the top of the first page.

The name stuck, if only for the newsletter.
November 6, 1990

Wanda Hobson
The City
The City Building,
1095 Market Street
San Francisco, CA
94110

Hello Wanda,

Here’s the information about cacophony that I said I would get for you. Since I talked with you last Tuesday I have given some thought to the questions that you asked me. I looked into my files and found the notes for an essay on why I do events. This, I think, will your questions better than my rambling monologue.

Why I Do Events

I can only speak for myself and not as a spokesperson for the SFCS. After giving some thought to the question I have found that there several reasons that I do events:

1) Creating imaginative events grew out of a profound dissatisfaction with mediated experience. Too much of modern life is lived second hand by way of words and images that are provided to us by the information and entertainment media. One begins to think other’s thoughts, dream other’s dreams and live other’s lives. This crowds out one’s real life and attempts to substitute for it. One ends up as a spectator to the world and to one’s life. This is boring and ultimately robs one of the imagination, originality and any sense of self as a cause and creative force in one’s own life.

2) I have a sincere desire to emulate, in my own way, those people I see as creative and adventurous.

3) I enjoy losing myself in intense experiences with a particular desire for novelty and the sublime.

4) I enjoy initiating other people into those realms of experience that enlarge their and my sense of life and it’s nearly unlimited and unexplored (and sadly often unimagined and unimaginable) possibilities.

Creating events allows me to explore certain unarticulated desires, dreams and obsessions that have manifested themselves in a latent and limited way in my daily life. New ideas and roles can be acted out in events and their results seen in the reaction to the participants. The event becomes a sort of laboratory where the mind can interact with the world in a playful way. Archetypal roles and situations can be acted out, examined, modified, burlesqued, challenged, destroyed; pleasures and dreams amplified; obsessions artistically indulged; rebellions carried out. Knowledge, pleasure, and freedom are the goals; their limits the enemy.

An event should embody some of these ideas and feelings. It is not necessarily safe. Some sort of risk should be inherent. The game must be worth the candle. Moreover it must have a certain integrity of motive. To do an event just to so an event, just for something to do, is a pain and is often boring to both it’s creator and to the participants. The same goes double for copying events and trying to be clever. Good events should be rooted in one’s life and desires and the results should further these.

An event should also get an authentic reaction out of people. I don’t care if people love my events or hate them. I want to do something that gets a real reaction and not just a lukewarm “Well it was ok, but I’d just as soon go to a club.”

As such an event is not just an entertainment, it has a meaning for the person putting it on and should convey some of that meaning to the participants. This is not to deny the social aspects of the event, merely to say that these should not be their only reason for existing. If that’s what you want to do maybe you should throw a party.

Finally, allowing myself one historical touchstone, here is a quote from André Breton that sheds some light on why I do events.

If he still retains a certain lucidity, all he can do is turn back toward his childhood which, however his mentors may have botched it, still strikes him as somehow charming. There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once; this illusion becomes firmly rooted within him; now he is only interested in the fleeting; the extreme facility of everything. Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep.

But it is true that we would not dare venture so far. It is not merely a question of distance. Threat is piled upon threat, one yields, abandons a portion of the terrain to be conquered. This imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility; it is incapable of assuming this inferior role for long and, in the vicinity of the twentieth year, generally prefers to abandon man to his lustless fate.

This state of mind and being, this stateless fate, is what I am fighting against. Events should liberate the imagination, desires, dreams and spirit of both the creators and the participants. The type of person attracted to Cacophony then is one that feels this same need to recapture those portions of their mind and life that have been suppressed and appropriated and sold back to them in a commodified, mediated form. To participate in Cacophony is to demand the return of your dreams, and desires and nothing less.

I hope this serves to both clarify and amplify my previous remarks, and that you enjoy reading the enclosed materials. Among them are a copy of the questionnaire I wrote when we first met to found the society in ’86 and a copy of a part of the first newsletter which has the founding members’ thoughts on what the SFCS should be.
Encouragement of a Wide Variety of Events, Projects, & Classes

Through one-to-one contact and through the newsletter let people know that we are open to and accepting of a wide variety of activities. Another way to make the point would be for us to do a wide variety of activities ourselves, avoiding repetition, as an example of the potential of the group and situation.

Stage Open-Ended Events

Make it a point to regularly design and schedule open-ended events that encourage participation and responsibility for the direction and the outcome of the event. (Example: patchwork quilt events.)

(Note: A patchwork quilt event is one where each participant is expected to have contrived a small event of short duration which will, along with the events of the others, be carried out on the same evening with participation all of the others.)

Events that Lead to Bonding / Friendship / Trust / Group Solidarity

People need to feel that they belong to the group, that they are not just spectators, and that what they do is important and respected. When people feel that they are accepted and paid attention to they will continue to come to events, feel encouraged to do events, and take risks (just ask any cult leader).

Sandy’s idea that we could initially do some small events that are unannounced, to which we personally invite interesting people is a good one. Also good are events that allow people to get together to know one another (Examples: “lock yourselves in a small room and see if you can agree on anything,” “felling down as a story-telling event where everyone participatory” Events where everyone produces equally (Saffron’s mask making group), and events that use self revealing psychological games are both good for fostering those personal contacts that lead to full participation in the group and a commitment to the process.

Another useful idea is for a specific ritual for the new members of the group. “Enter the Unknown” was a prime example of this. (Note: Enter the Unknown was the initial event used by the SSFC. Different each time it involved people participating in an event where they had no idea what was going to happen as it tended toward some sort of suspenseful ordeal where everyone except the leaders were blindfolded.)

(Parenthetically, any event where people are isolated and on edge, and either in the dark or blindfolded for a prolonged period tends to foster feelings of intimacy and trust)

Sharing Fantasies, Assumptions, Goals

Design events / classes / get toathers that allow people to share their concept of what they are trying to accomplish within the overall group. To encourage them to see if their ideas generate any energy or are shared by other people.

Mailing List

Recruit initially from new sources and then develop a mailing list of interested people. Give the situation a few months before bringing in a whole slew of people from the old SSFC / Gorilla Cotto nexus, people who have perhaps already fallen into the passive, spectator role or have a desire to dig up and revive the rotting corpse of the long deceased SSFC and try to bring...
Interfacing with Other Groups

New members and new ideas could be bad by interfacing with already existing groups we find interesting. This could be done openly or surreptitiously (infiltration).

The Newsletter

I expect that a monthly newsletter is still the best way of letting people know about events. But the newsletter could be more than a calendar. I envision it as a means of communication among the members of the group, a place to share ideas and concerns, obsessions, fetishes, etc. as a forum for debate, as a place to ask for information and help with projects, as a showcase for art and writing, in other words, more of a journal than a newsletter, something that can incite dreams and action as well as list events. A means of two-way communication, with comments and critiques of events and attitudes, a means of feedback and of starting fights.

The newsletter could also act as a skills exchange either as a means of payment for a costly class/event, or as a way of payment for locating people with skills needed to facilitate a project or event.

It would be interesting to have the various active participants write short to medium length statements about what they are trying to accomplish by doing classes/events/projects, what their conceptual background is, what interests or obsessions led to an event or a style of doing things, past experiences, etc. (We could start doing this in the second newsletter and the following one.)

(This may be too much to expect out of a monthly newsletter and its rotating publisher and editors, perhaps it would be worthwhile to put together a quarterly journal to handle the longer pieces of writing. I would be willing to handle this on a permanent basis for at least the first year.)

THE QUESTION OF STRUCTURE

The relatively unstructured format of the SFC was what made it special. But it also allowed for the development of an unwritten and often unacknowledged structure, the inadvertent domination of events by a few individuals and the lack of participation by others. So I've asked myself as well as some ex-members if they thought some kind of non-intrusive, benign format or structure might be useful. There was no consensus on this and I do not have any answer. But I do think that the question is important and deserves considerable thought and some discussion.

SOME SUGGESTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Facilitators / Coordinators

A rotating position of facilitator or coordinator that would be passed to all of the members of the group at one time or another has been suggested. This person(s) would help to get events together, and assist with information about resources and individuals. They could also be charged with the job of making sure that all members had an equal voice and ability to participate.

Mandatory Participation Requirement

Put on or at least help put on at least one event per year or be barred from participation. Do we need a 'contribute or go home' rule?

Guide lines and Written Information

Written material about: 1) Our conception of what we are trying to do individually and/or as a group. 2) How to stage an event, project, or class. Mainly suggestions with lots of examples of events of the past or planned for the future so as to show how wide our conception of events is. Should these materials be written? Given to all members? Be available on request?

No Politics / Religion Rule

One of the few rules of the SFC seems to have been: 'No overtly political organization events and no evangelizing for a religion.' Is this a good rule, do we need it?

Exoteric or Esoteric?

The SFC, though supposedly not a secret society had a tendency to function as one; it had a distinctly conspiratorial aspect. Do we want this?

(Thanks to sandy for reading the very rough draft and making suggestions and contributing ideas.)
I wish to take seriously this being as much a confession as a complaint, but not a confession of sin. Instead one of misplaced ambition, autocratic tendencies and a foolish unwillingness to walk away from the situation. After twelve years of being involved in putting on events with the SPCS and Cacophony I find that I am extremely bored. Bored with the the poverty of ideas and imagination, with the repetition of events either in their original form or in some thin disguise, bored with the lack of real challenges and real risk, the reliance on stale formula. This combined with the hyperbole of creating a new culture, the increased publicity and the development of an elite that speaks for the group and burden the creative attempts of new members with a weight of old form and unperceived dogma.

that which other people see as simply fun;

Asking around I find that most of the Cacophony members that I talk with see the group as a way to have fun and meet new people, as a social club for the eccentric, the bohemian and the would be bohemian. the fact that many of the events these days have a party type of format, where entertainment, food and alcohol seem to have taken the place of participation and risk. Increasingly events become more spectacular, better publicized, and better attended and at the same time more mundane. Private ambitions of the event organizers seem at times to have eclipsed the original idea of what the group was about.

Now this is not to say that I disapprove of these events. Frankly I like a good party as well as anyone and have been known to throw a few of them. I have even thrown party thinly disguised as events when the Cacophony schedule was thin back when we first started. So while an occasional party is fine, they have come to dominate Cacophony and that is not what the organization was founded for. But it may be a problem of the anarchistic form of the organization that allows the simple tried events to dominate the schedule in a number of different guises. An organization without rules depends on the members conscience and consciousness of aesthetics to determine the quality of the events. The exceptional will be swamped by the average every time and perhaps I am asking too much.

The original ideal behind Cacophony was to empower individuals to manifest their dreams, desires and obsessions in some creative way that could be shared as an event. It was a call to create our own version of art and culture; to refuse to be entertained and demand to participate in and control our own dreams and their interpretation, rejecting the overdetermined and restrictive meanings supplied by highly mediated and commoditized culture. this is what I hoped tait it would do. Instead it has become another means of socialising and replicating the the hierarchy of the creative and the consumer of the created. I hoped that Cacophony would break down some of the barriers between art and life and between the creators of culture and the consumer of culture. It has been a disappointment in this aspect. It has been foolish of me to believe that it could be otherwise.

Now I am not going to try and pretend that my ideas always or at any time came close to the ideal that I have set forth here. A few of my events actually made an attempt at it. Some of the events I did were obviously filler for a thin schedule. Unfortunately it seems that my filler events have become more copied than the few where I tested to live up to my intentions.

And in the end that is what I ask for: I ask that people have some sort of clear intention, even if it's tentative, which guides their events. I wanted people to look to the conscious and unconscious desires, to their hopes and dreams, and from these form some intention that could be done as an event. I hoped for real desire and obsession and the dialogue that would arise between the creator/participants. Instead I find people aping the S.P.S.C. and each other.

Now it is obvious that I have hoped for too much and that I haven't work as hard as I could to see my own desires manifested. I am guilty of this and more. I am guilty of hanging around and bitching about a situation that is clearly not going to change. As such I am a pain in the ass and a spoilsport. A wet blanket too.

It is now obvious to me that if I want to work to carry out some of the the ideas I had when I originally worked to start Rough Draft (I have always hated the name Cacophony Society; the SPCS an echo of the SPCS) I am going to have to do it on my own or with a few friends and co-conspirators who share the same intuitions and convictions. .I want something that builds on itself in complexity and meaning, and I intend to get it.

So I apologize for my bad attitude. I am not abandoning Cacophony. You will see me on events. But I refuse to take it as seriously as I have in the past. Sure I will be glad to help you with an event or with publicity but don't expect me to take it too seriously; especially not you inflated ideas of what the group is and its role as a subversion of the cult and a creature of a new sort of culture. One has to take serious physical, psychological and spiritual risks to do that (no, I don't consider playing tag with the cops a real risk).

Well, I'm off to follow my obsessions wherever they lead. I will be seeing you around.
AFTERWORD

You can see that I haven’t written an answer to my own query. In fact I don’t have one yet. As I have said, I am mainly interested in hearing what other people have to say about the Cacophonous Society. In doing this I’ve had to reconsider a number of my own assumptions about what the society is and what it is doing.

From the beginning I’ve had an ambivalent relationship with Cacophonous. This stems from my frustration with seeing that the organization has a vast potential for creativity and serious play, and by extension the fostering of creativity and the liberation of the human spirit. Re-creation in the best sense of the word. The frustration is one of not knowing how to go about optimizing this potential.

Most of the meaning and purpose that the Cacophonous Society has lies with individuals, and with the singular and personal meanings that individuals give to the events that they put on. The meaning and purpose of the society then appears as the convergence (or divergence) of these individual meanings and purposes. As such no one is really in control and a sort of rough, pragmatic consensus is reached through the accommodation of various individual needs and desires. And yet there is an organization here that can provide both a form and a forum for the realization of these desires. It is the success and continued existence of the society as a form that supplies what other purpose and meaning it has.

My own idea of the Cacophonous Society is that it exists to empower individuals to manifest their dreams, desires and obsessions in some creative way that could be shared as an event. It is a call to create our own version of art, culture and life; to refuse to be entertained and demand to participate in and control our own dreams and their interpretation, rejecting the over-determined and restrictive meanings supplied by a highly mediated and commodified culture. It should be both break down some of the barriers between art and life and between the creators of culture and the consumers of culture. To this end people must have some sort of clear intention, even if only tentative, which guides their events. To look to their conscious and unconscious desires, to their fascines and dreams, and from these form some intention that can be realized as an event. I dare to hope for real desire and obsession and the dialogue that would arise between the creator-participants.

As for fun and entertainment; don’t get me wrong, I enjoy them. Nonetheless I view them as the side effects of doing something that really interests one. To try and have fun is chimerical. As for entertainment, it’s all too easy to find...

Similarly, while the group is a social organization, I do not see this as its main purpose. All groups are social groups. This is as a rule not their stated purpose, but it is always a subtext. Most groups that claim to be merely social are in fact interested in either proselytizing or profit...

I do not intend this as the last word in this conversation. I hope that it will be the beginning of a long and fruitful conversation about our intentions and actions that will last as long as the organization.

Thanks to all of you for your participation

Sincerely,

Lance Alexander
January 10, 1990
The caravan of cars pulled into Bruno’s Country Club in Gerlach, Nevada, population one hundred and ninety-five, just after dawn. After a filling breakfast of coffee, hot cakes, eggs, and bacon, the checkered crew poured themselves back into their sketchy vehicles and left the remote desert hamlet, heading toward the even more remote, off-road environs of the Black Rock Desert. The early risers in Gerlach wondered what that posse of city types was doing on their turf: one speculation was that a group of Frisco Satanists had just blown through town, heading up playa for some inscrutable and dark rite.

The motley caravan made the pre-determined turnoff from Washoe County Road 34, at a location marked by tires stacked on the side of the road, onto the trackless great playa. At a signal, the vehicles stopped and everyone got out. A long line was drawn with a stick on the desert floor. The group joined hands, and, stepped over the line as one, and into The Zone.

A lone Santa sprinted desperately down Market St. around midnight, on Saturday, December 12th, 1995, his cheap, ill-fitting, and prison made red suit clinging to his sweat drenched body. Behind him, over a hundred Santas ran in hot pursuit, shouting, “Kill the scab Santa” and “Die Santa, Die,” finally tackling him at the Powell Street cable car turnaround. They crammed a noose over the bad Santa’s head, tossed a rope over a street light, and hung him in front of the now defunct Emporium department store. The police broke up an intended celebratory stop at the Gold Dust Lounge on Powell St., and about 50 Clauses leaped onto a 38 Geary bus. They almost escaped, but police cars stopped the bus and funnelled the Santas out the back door. The un-amused police pulled at each fake beard, searching flushed faces for a match to a Santa who’d had a tug-of-war with security guards at the Emporium over a wreath and a velvet partition rope. Two Santas were handcuffed and taken away, as fellow Kringles gawked in dumb amazement.

Several Cacophony events became annual affairs and started taking on lives of their own. Some events evolved out of collaborations with others and mutated into entirely different phenomena, such as Burning Man. Some, like the Santa Rampage (Santarchy, SantaCon), grew into massive, leaderless, manifestations through the newly minted miracle of Internet social networking.
Santa Chad’s original Santa concept included some sharp jabs at holiday commercialism; this playful holiday jest gave way over the years, to dumber-down Santa attacks, essentially mass pub-crawls in red suits. The remaining wonder of this event is evident in the ridiculously huge numbers of Santas that participate annually. The Cacophony event listed in Rough Draft, which gathered thirty-three Santas in 1994 and a hundred in 1995, now attracts tens of thousands worldwide.

Big ideas were often hatched at the salon, apartment, and artists’ haven presided over by the ever-serene P Segal. This labyrinthine, two-story Golden Gate Avenue flat, known simply as 1907, was at various times home to as many as a dozen starving Cacophonists, and it entertained dozens more on a daily basis. The big move for Burning Man, from its humble Baker Beach beginning to the trackless reaches of the Black Rock Desert, was plotted at 1907 in 1990. Sewer walks, giant salmon attacks, Santa Rampages, Zone Trips, theater, pranks, kidnappings, and surprises of every stripe were plotted and planned around the kitchen table in this crumbling Edwardian mansion. Miss P, as she was affectionately called, hosted innumerable Cacophony events and parties at this singular address.

The first art car gatherings in San Francisco were sponsored by Cacophony. In the waning days of the ’80s, Cacophony art car events like The Carmonic Convergence and The 49 Mile Psychotic Road Rally brought together isolated car artists to share automotive techniques, surreal detailing tips, and lore for their beloved hand-modified automobiles. Art cars are now a well-known and generally beloved part of the American psyche.

Cacophonous influences on the culture at large are visible through the international recognition of symbols perpetuated by event ideas, like the naughty Santa or the Burning Man. Not least among these symbols were the iconic and zoomorphic reminders of a former local restaurant chain, the Doggie Diner dog heads. Three huge, smiling dachshund heads wearing chef hats, and loaded on a flatbed truck, became totems at events, parades, and happenings around the Bay Area. Beatified by Bishop Joey of The First Church of the Last Laugh in 1990, the Doggie Diner heads became the most visible mascots of the Cacophony Society.

Intellectual and mystic Peter Lamborn Wilson, known as Hakim Bey, attracted Cacophony’s interest and provided the most comprehensive description of how the group affected the culture around it. Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) philosophy, and Ethyl Ketone’s ruminations on “The Zone,” gave perspective to what Cacophony was organically manifesting through the Zone Trips of the late ’80s and early ’90s: the beginnings of some very Big Doings.
About 25 people gather in the chilly night air at Lincoln and 7th, a favored place of convergence. Blindfolded, they are driven to a predestinated location. Then, hand-in-hand, they are led down a hill, through mud and along a gravel path.

Finally they are allowed to halt. “Okay, you can take off your blindfolds now,” invites tonight’s host. The participants find themselves in a dimly illuminated, wooded area (which turns out to be Golden Gate Park near the windmills). Sebastian Melmoth (not his real name) hands out tarot cards, and whoever picks the card Death is “it.”

“I hope I get the death card,” someone whispers. “Whee!” someone else says, “I’m just a zombie.”

Melmoth calls out, “Let the game begin!”

Within the boundaries of the playing field, the “zombies” shuffle around trees and paths, merging into the shadows or, for the more adventurous, stalking Death. Once again, there are few rules: no running or talking. Should Death manage to sneak up and squeeze your shoulder, you die. The victim must let death escape by first counting to 30 before emitting a blood curdling scream and falling to the ground. The dead stay where they fall, silent until the game is over. In order to kill Death two zombies must point him out at the same time.

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Within the boundaries of the playing field, the “zombies” shuffle around trees and paths, merging into the shadows or, for the more adventurous, stalking Death. Once again, there are few rules: no running or talking. Should Death manage to sneak up and squeeze your shoulder, you die. The victim must let death escape by first counting to 30 before emitting a blood curdling scream and falling to the ground. The dead stay where they fall, silent until the game is over. In order to kill Death two zombies must point him out at the same time.

About 25 people gather in the chilly night air at Lincoln and 7th, a favored place of convergence. Blindfolded, they are driven to a predestinated location. Then, hand-in-hand, they are led down a hill, through mud and along a gravel path.

Finally they are allowed to halt. “Okay, you can take off your blindfolds now,” invites tonight’s host. The participants find themselves in a dimly illuminated, wooded area (which turns out to be Golden Gate Park near the windmills). Sebastian Melmoth (not his real name) hands out tarot cards, and whoever picks the card Death is “it.”

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“We live in the kind of society where you pay other people to entertain you,” says Melmoth later. “You pay to go to a movie someone else made, or pay to go to a play, or pay to see performance art. That’s all great, but it’s not something that you’re doing. You’re sitting there watching images and ideas that someone else went through enormous amounts of anguish and grief and creativity to create. It’s their thing that you’re experiencing. In an event, initially it may be the idea of two or three people, but the best ones are those that everybody gets into, interacts and are doing... physically doing themselves. Events are an incredible experience.”

Melmoth breaks events into several categories: infiltrations (like joining the Moonies); street theater; games in weird places and costume; and exploring bizarre environments. “I wouldn’t want to do anything else. It’s a great way to socialize. It’s a way of getting people together that isn’t based on money, commerce, or the desire to have sex or whatever else normally gets people together.”

The Cacophony Society’s roots go back to a stormy night in January of 1977. Four friends went to Fort Point. The Suicide Club was formed of college-age, college-educated, pre-career people, says Melmoth; people a little too old to be hanging out in the Haight and a little too young to be in business. Drugs were forbidden on events in part because the event was supposed to produce “the trip” and in part to avoid hassles with police. “The group was just adventurous, took a lot of risks. For the first three years, it was great being a secret society. We could get by with doing a lot of things because no one knew about us. But it was very insulated and that’s what killed it,” he continues. “As the years went on we became too ingrown. “Cacophony is a lot more open, especially to the world at large. People know who we are and what we’re doing. We communicate and get together with other groups to do events. That’s something the Suicide Club never did. Cacophony interconnects and intertwines with a bunch of smaller groups, serving as an umbrella to make things happen. By not being as secretive and paranoid as the Suicide Club was, we don’t have as much to fear. We’ve been able to integrate with a real mix of people who wouldn’t be exposed to otherwise. And that’s great because out of ten people, maybe one has an instantaneous mindset with the group. They go, ‘hey, this is great. This is what I want to do.’ Then give events and open our minds up to new things.”

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The Cacophony Society’s roots go back to a stormy night in January of 1977. Four friends went to Fort Point underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, to the place where in heavy weather the ocean’s waves would hit a concrete pad below in the surf, splash up 30 feet in the air, and then crash down on top of anyone standing there. The four clung tenaciously to the ruined iron railing that once secured the area while the waves threatened to drag them into the treacherous surf and certain doom. Later that night, huddled around a fire with hot drinks, they formed the Suicide Club. Its members were asked to “put their worldly affairs in order and live each day as though it was their last.” The Suicide Club was a totally exclusive, infinitely secretive, underground club that bathed in rumors of illegal and dangerous doings.

Melmoth along with 40 others went on the first mass Suicide Club initiation. “We were blindfolded and taken to an undisclosed place (Fort Funston), led over a narrow beam (in a parking lot)” then taken underground, given one match and told to find our way out. After three hours of total darkness, groping along, I saw this tiny light. I’m walking toward it with this person... holding her hand but I didn’t know who she was... had never seen her... and we’re walking towards this tiny light. Then this figure with a shirt blurred in the wind stepped into the middle of the light, it’s getting bigger and bigger as we get closer and closer. Then the figure walks away. And we’re outside. It was a pretty mind boggling experience. I decided at that point that that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to start doing events right away.”

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“It’s the individual character and imagination that matters. You can be a real misfit or oddball and you’ll be accepted.”

in such events as the Haute Trash Fashion Show and Midnight Laundry. “Through the group they can express that. They blossomed. It may not be noticeable right away. That’s kind of fun. Every time someone comes in, they have their own imagination and ideas that no one else has ever thought about. It’s very exciting because there’s always an unknown factor.”

“Beyond that, if you’re shy like I am,” adds M-Squared, “Cacophony helps us challenge ourselves to participate.”

Bar-B-Que on the Edge
Meet: Bouncers Bar, 64 Townsend St.

In the spirit of previous Midnight Picnics, we will gather for a late night meal in a picturesque, industrial setting. This particular spot is located on the water (swimming is not suggested), where wild plants meet abandoned machinery. Bring food and drink, something to barbecue, and suitable appropriate attire to meet or eat. Wear dark clothes.

— Rough Draft, May 1990

“I’ve always looked at this city as an urban environment, an urban playground,” says Melmoth. “You look at places that people don’t even think about, that are completely negative places in the daily life of commerce living. Those are the places that I look for—underground, behind buildings, on top of buildings, in abandoned buildings, in between freeways, under freeways. Places that you don’t even know exist. I think about what event I could give there.

“We were at an abandoned pier for a Midnight Bar-B-Que, you had to sneak out on to it, walk on this little trail along a fence then climb over a railing and go out on this rotting pier. About 150 yards away under the freeway overpass there was this encampment of six or eight guys, most of them Vietnam Vets, and I’m 95 percent sure, really heavily cranked up on speed. Speed freaks. They had all the markings. Really dangerous people. And we were doing an event with 20 or 30 people on the pier! Probably because they thought we were weirder than they were.” “It’s not for everybody.”

The BART Lounge

Hey there, you truly fabulous people! BART is going to Vegas! This will be a truly incredible evening of entertainment, when the evening commute BART train is transformed into a Las Vegas-styled lounge. We are looking for three sorts of people to sign in:

1. If you have an act (comedy/magic/shaggy routine, or any other entertainment), be prepared to perform.
2. If you want to be part of the atmosphere, come decked out in your best Vegas wear (buxa house-wife, lounge lizard, eloping couple, cowboy, etc.).
3. If you want to dress "straight," we do need plants to blend in with commuters. Remember, you in the audience are the ones we truly love the most!

Cost: $5 cents if you get on & off at different but adjoining BART stations (ex: on at Powell, then go to Glen Park, off at Montgomery).

Info: Dwayne & Dusty.

— Rough Draft, January 1991

Chris couldn’t believe it. On his commute home from San Francisco to Concord, there was this woman in a bushy brown wig and sizzling pink lounge gown singing into a microphone with her partner, a tall blond-haired man in a white and gold tuxedo, while parading up and down the aisle of the BART car. A cigarette girl, more of a woman really, sauntered behind, two rats crawling across her wooden tray of goodies. Another man handed into a microphone with her partner, a tall blond-haired man in a white and gold tuxedo, while parading up and down the aisle of the BART car. A cigarette girl, more of a woman really, sauntered behind, two rats crawling across her wooden tray of goodies. Another man handed into a microphone with her partner, a tall blond-haired man in a white and gold tuxedo, while parading up and down the aisle of the BART car. A cigarette girl, more of a woman really, sauntered behind, two rats crawling across her wooden tray of goodies.

“I knew that they might be a problem beforehand, so I just walked over and talked to them. I said, ‘Hey, we’re going to have 20 or so people walk through here around midnight, having a bar-b-que. How about it? Why don’t you come over later for a beer?’ They left us alone.

Maybe Cacophony provides that: A place where people who have their own strange vision can be together.”

Sometimes their strangeness attracts the REALLY strange, even too strange for Cacophony. “We tend to draw weirdos and kooks,” says M-Squared with a laugh. “And the authorities,” he laughs again. “But as long as people aren’t violent or too disruptive, we try to remember that we’re all equal. The main thing is that people are interested in getting together and experiencing events.”

In these serious times, the question often asked is: wouldn’t all that time and energy be better directed into the pursuit of something of significance? Alexander replies, “Cacophony is a place to be amateurish. There’s a real drive, even among the whimsical, to be very professional. And that can be intimidating. In Cacophony there’s definitely a playfulness.”
I need a drink real bad, and I’m hornier than a whole herd of reindeer. Keep your kids away from me. Keep your dog away from me. Me and my friends (30 other loser Santas) just graduated from the Kris Kringle Institute, and now we’re gonna paint the town red. And white. And bright. And loud. And jolly. Merry fucking Christmas!

Anyone can be a Santa. After all, it takes a red suit and a white beard and strangers will treat you like a rich uncle even if you’re stinking drunk and fondling their kids and saying things like “ever seen the north pole, sweetheart?”

I’m Santa Claus and I’m an alcoholic.

The Santas who passed out with the kids were so hip they pretended not to notice Santa until he went staggering out into traffic, giving the kids a big, fat middle finger. “Hey Santa, I want a Hawaiian vacation. I been good, honest!” Well, Santa checked his list and guess what? He denied it to her face. Ho ho ho. Be nice to Santa or you’ll get a lump of coal in your eye!

Next year, Santa’s going barhopping again. Maybe he’ll let you buy him a drink, or maybe he’ll sell you some crack. Ho ho ho. But you better not cry. Oh no. And you better not shout if you know what’s good for you. Santa knows how to deal with whiney little snitches. Merry Christmas, everyone!

Above: Santa Squid, Santa Kevin, and Santa Pyskitten spreading Xmas cheer at the 3rd SantaCon in Portland, 1996.
Above: The early Santa events included a good deal of warm spirited Christmas caroling. There was a long standing tradition of altering lyrics to popular tunes for a variety of events. The above iteration was the work of Cacophony songster Dwayne Neutron (Peter Doty).

Facing page: Over time the Santa mobs encouraged a variety of quasi-commercial “art” endeavors. This X-mas Giving cheat sheet, along with M2’s yearly wrapping of gifts to hand out on the Santa route were precursors of The Naughty Santa’s Bizarre Bazaar started by Hernan Cortez and The Space Cowgirls that became an annual craft event, morphing into The Bazaar Bizarre that continues to this day.

These rioting St. Nicks Think it’s nice to be naughty
Playboy Magazine, December 2003

Around this time of year there’s a little Santa Claus in all of us. In some cases that little Santa is a crazy yobbo yearning to run amok in the streets. Of late, mysterious festivities known as SantaCons have been facilitating such alt-holiday behavior. “No force on earth can stop 100 Santas” is the credo for the events, and except for the occasional overzealous cop, it seems to hold true. The first SantaCon took place in 1994 in San Francisco and consisted of 30 revelers in cheap Santa suits they’d bought from a bargain store. The marauding St. Nicks drank in the streets, mooned tourists from cable cars, crashed a high-society function, invaded a strip club and moshed (hey, it was 1994) past midnight. A year later attendance tripled and there was no stopping the bad Santas from getting their jollies. To evade Johnny Law (two Kris Kringles were cuffed in 1995), the event started traveling. A planeful of Santas—in full costume—descended on Portland, Oregon in 1996, Los Angeles in 1997, and New York City in 1998. SantaCon doesn’t travel anymore—it doesn’t need to. Local chapters of the Cacophony Society (which has an online presence) grabbed the reindeer by the horns, and last year SantaCons terrorized most major American cities. “It’s not about ruining Christmas,” says Scott Beale, a.k.a. Santa Squid, a retired organizer. “But of course Santa likes to drink.” Looks like Santa Claus is coming to trash your town!
AN ARMY OF SANTAS CAN’T BE BEAT
San Francisco SantaCon (#2), December 1995
S. Cape Claus, reporting:

Shortly before Christmas, I saw in a weekend newspaper an alarming photo of a department store Santa Claus in Tucson under police protection. Santas in Arizona have reportedly received death threats in the mail.

Clearly these are hard times for all—but if St. Nick, the patron saint of this holiday season, is on the run, where does that leave us?

Being an empathetic, sensitive kind of guy, I thought I’d check out what it’s like to wear the red suit and white beard, and surround myself with Christmas zealots. Surrendering to this impish impulse, I bought a Santa suit Saturday morning after breakfast.

My housemate jeered, saying I’d never find Santa drag in the predominantly Latino Mission District where we live, but within one block it was eureka in the Woolworth’s. The cashier was so friendly on espying my purchase, she gave a 20% discount, making me a Santa for less than 20 bucks—a deal.

Boarding BART, I was taken aback to see three other Santas going downtown. “Merry fucking Christmas,” one spat.

Perhaps it’s best for Santas to avoid one another—reminding me of another recent news story of two Santas in France who came to blows in a territorial dispute over a street corner.

Once down at the Embarcadero, I saw what can only be described as a mob of maybe a hundred Santas rallying behind the skating rink. I thought, it may be a long way to the North Pole, but these are my kith and kin. One handed me a card for the “Kris Kringle Institute“ the Santa Specialists.” I knew then that I’d arrived.

It was a meeting of Santa and Anti Claus, in all their myriad guises. Guys and gals were decked out in red duds with preposterous white wigs and beards, offset by absurd flourishes: dark glasses, candy cane leggings, dominatrix paraphernalia, with plenty of attitude to spare.

ONLY SANTA CAN SET YOU FREE, read a sign carried by Santa posing as a caped crusader.

AN ARMY OF SANTAS CAN’T BE BEAT, said another.

A map was distributed showing the route for the night’s ramble (rumble?) about town. The Santa who prepared the route signed himself? “Claus von Bulow.” Hmm.

To the extent that this Santanalia was organized, the San Francisco Cacophony Society rounded up its usual suspects from across the art-mutant spectrum. Bad-asses involved included guerrilla artists from Survival Research Laboratories (known for their gladiatorial robot shows), Burning Man, and other Bay Area anarcho-nihilistic prankster groups. This was a chance to “take it to the streets” and generally Fuck Shit Up.

After a brief reading of their art riot act, the Santas hoisted white garbage sacks of toys, pulled on their hipflasks, fired up smokes, and plunged into the holiday crowd of shoppers counting down the days to Xmas.

“Are you guys on strike?” asked one concerned parent.

“Lady we are going to paint this town red,” replied a Santa with horns sprouting through his merry red cap.

Another one added, by way of example, this off-beat benediction: “Ho. Ho ho, Ho ho ho, Ho!” This minimal incantation was not without menace, a subversion of the Holiday Paradigm?

Santas kept busy checking a constantly changing, goggling crowd for signs of Who’s Naughty and Who’s Nice. Most were naughty, naturally. And paint it we did, with flowing spirits, celebratory cigars (purchased at the Fairmont), and lusty, ribald remarks (for male or female, Santa’s lap does itch). Our bonhomie was for the most part infectious in the bars and restaurants that we cycloned through.

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We stormed the Hyatt Regency, panted up to the Mark Hopkins, the Drake, and the St. Francis. Security in these
“union” was never clear. After some fussing with a noose (and, one assumes, a safety harness) he was hung from a stoplight post by the neck until he soon cheered up. This Santa was obviously made of strong stuff, or had lives to spare, for he quickly regained his wits on being cut down, before the police arrived. In the ensuing imbroglio, a female Santa was cited after flashing her breasts at the cops.

By this point, 50 diehard Santas escaped on the Geary bus, but were stopped by several police cruisers, who required each Santa to exit the bus with beard lowered and eyes seared by squinting flashlights so they could identify and arrest the Santa 2 who had offended Emporium.

There was brief pandemonium as some jettisoned their costumes, while others emptied their swag under the seats. One of the gifts a few Santas had to relinquish were clear plastic bags containing white rocks, a spoon, a book of matches, and a toy syringe. The label identified this as “Santa’s Heroin-Cooker Kit.”

When it became clear we could not save our Santa-neros now in handcuffs, we continued to the Palace of Legion of Honor to crash the Christmas party of the San Francisco Chronicle. One free-lance Santa was surprised to encounter his editor (from a rival newspaper) lounging with a plastic cup of fruit juice by a Rodin sculpture. Even with a beard (thrust aside by drink), the editor easily recognized him, remarking acidly, “I never saw such a sorry lot of Santas, in all my life.”

“Well even Santa has bad hair days,” his Santa-scribe replied.

A few minutes later, despite furious shmoozing, the Santas were asked to leave, perhaps out of respect for the finger food, which they had seized with ravenous glee. Outside it was wet and cold. The Santas glumly considered the plight of the two who’d been jailed out of an excess of puritan zeal.

Eventually the “strong arm robbery” charges were reduced on the Santa 2 to misdemeanors: “obstructing a business operator” and public drunkenness. Punitively, these Santas were kept in the klink for two days before being released on bail. One is planning a counter-suit for mistaken identity.

With Salvation Army bell-ringers now banned from some department store doorways, it should come as no surprise that unauthorized, irregular Santas are everywhere on the run, subject to arrest and intimidation by the Scrooge-minions of law and order.

As we lurch into the late ’90s, it’s no more Mr. Nice Guys.
I responded to a call of drunken Santas that vandalized and stole from the Emporium store on Market Street. I located some of the suspect Santas.

Numerous Southern, Tenderloin, and Central police units converged on the corner of Geary and Powell to monitor a crowd of about fifty naughty Santas. These Santas had reeked havoc in Emporium and the Muni bus, and were waiting for the 28 Muni bus. Per the orders of Lt. Para, I was waiting for witnesses from the Emporium that could identify the perpetrators. I was monitoring the situation on my radio as I closed on Geary and Powell.

I was on Powell Street at the entrance of the St. Francis Hotel, which was adjacent to the Emporium. When I spotted a few Santas in the hotel lobby that were acting very suspicious. These Santas appeared to be uncomfortable and concerned, their eyes were darting around the lobby. These Santas moved to the side of the lobby, somewhat out of view from the main lobby. These actions appeared to be the actions of suspect Santas who were hiding from the police. I monitored these Santas.

The fifty Santas boarded their bus and left the corner. Some time passed. The witnesses arrived. The Santas that were hiding in the hotel came out onto Powell Street. These Santas still didn’t notice me. These Santas cautiously moved towards Geary Street. Their actions showed concern about the police search for suspect Santas. The Santas saw many police still on Geary Street so they turned around abruptly and headed back towards the hotel and away from the police. These Santas hid in the doorway of the Fillmore store and then quickly boarded a taxi. I stopped the taxi. I explained the situation to the three suspicious Santas. I ordered them out of the taxi and to submit to a legal police detention. They refused in an un-Christian-like fashion. These Santas ordered the taxi driver to leave. Once again, ordered the Santas out of the taxi and to submit to a detention. They refused. I told the taxi driver to bring the Santas around the corner to Lt. Para’s location. The witnesses positively identified two of the three Santas in the taxi. Officer Ramirez of Southern Station took custody of the suspect Santas.
“How do you miss a gang of a hundred marauding Santas?” my photographer asks incredulously as we circle Union Square on his motorcycle. We’ve received an anonymous tip about the second annual Santa Claus rampage—the demented vision of a fringe-anarchist with links to the Cacophony Society and Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) —but all the traffic has made us late. Although several St. Nick look-alikes carneuse the brightly lit skaters, they seem too normal, not the seedy gents we expect. Suddenly, three men in matching red suits with dirty bundles slung over their shoulders cross the intersection in front of us. That must be them, I think.

As nearly 100 Santas gather in front of Dewey’s Bar, the anticipation of orchestrated chaos (not to mention the desecration of hallowed Christmas icons) makes my skin tingle. The Kris Kringles are pulling bottles of booze wrapped in brown paper sacks out of their suits, cigars and cigarettes are passed around on the kiddie rides, feeding on stolen cotton candy and warm malt liquor. “Which one’s the real Santa?” asks a mischievous 7-year-old. “I am,” says the leader-Santa commands, and we lose each other in a cloud of familiar cheeks, and with a quick tug of his beard the leader-Santa in striped tights whipping a friend on all fours with a leather belt, while a manic clown-Santa, “We got a naughty one here!” he teases as his comrades turn and cheer. With a nervous smile the victim delicately extricates herself from the gropes. “You don’t know what you’re missing—nothing like partying with minders,” he yells.

The darkness of the Union Square Christmas tree, the Santas erupt into a chorus of off-color carols, completely upstaging a more traditional choir of do-gooders. A drunken Santa stumbles and falls to the ground in front of a large group of camera-toters.

“The other Santas hospitably offer me slugs from their hoach, but they’re stingy on information. “We are sworn to secrecy,” one morm-Santa offers. Then I spot a pair of familiar cheeks, and with a quick bag of his beard discover they belong to a longtime friend. “To Macy’s!” the leader-Santa commands, and we lose each other in the crush. Later, I find him stealing a stranger’s latte. “This is the Cacophony Society, SRL, the Burning Man, everybody,” he informs me excitedly. “This is the heart of San Francisco’s underground art scene. We’re all together, and no one will talk with us tonight!” Meanwhile, the Santas carouse through the first floor of Macy’s, chanting, “Charge it!” while startled shoppers clutch their packages to their chests. When security rushes in, it’s off to Planet Hollywood.

The Santas bum rush the line, and weave through the tables boggling at the piped-in movie music while waiters look on in disbelief. But the patrons are ticked off by what they think is a special holiday treat from Schwarzenegger and friends, until several gourmet-Santas start sampling their food.

Later, on the Emporium rooftop, the motley crew whales around on the kiddie rides, feasting on stolen cotton candy and warm malt liquor. “Which one’s the real Santa?” asks a mischievous 7-year-old. “I am,” says the leader-Santa, “hoach,” handing the boy a present. Emporium security is unnerved by such warm fuzzies, though, and the Santas beat a hasty retreat.

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“Everybody just stay cool,” someone whispers. “Just stick together. They can’t arrest Santa.” Oh yeah? The officers hold one Santa for assaulting a female security guard with a Christmas wreath and cite a female exhibitionist-Santa for indecent exposure. When the bus finally arrives, the rest of us are escorted on board free of charge by the SFPD. Of course, little do they know that the 38 is the planned transport to the Legion of Honor, where the Santas crash the Chronicle Christmas party and drink and eat for a good 15 minutes before being booted out.

“We had a lot of fun,” comments a member of the Cacophony Society. “If you like, we’ll send you some material on our next event.” I’ll have to get back to you on that one.
The film was 2001: A Space Odyssey. And everything changed.

By the time I was seventeen, I had left American film behind to explore the black and white world of the European Cinematé. At nineteen, I discovered the cinematic wonders of the Soviet world and became familiar with Andrei Tarkovsky’s limited body of work. I would seek his films out in obscure midnight viewings on college campuses. I remember one hours-long drive to a UC campus to see his Ivan’s Childhood, as it had never had a west coast viewing.

Poetic Cinema, and the directors of the genre, became my raison d’être. I gave up American and Western European film – taking Bergman’s quote to heart: “My cinematic wonders of the Soviet world and became familiar with Andrei Tarkovsky’s limited body of work. I would seek his films out in obscure midnight viewings on college campuses. I remember one hours-long drive to a UC campus to see his Ivan’s Childhood, as it had never had a west coast viewing.

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THE ZONE is the “SECRET” that any society needs in order to exist and maintain its authority, it is the taboo area of memory and the past that is closed off for investigation and has constantly to be entered or “probed” by misfits if the moral health of society is to survive.*


Above: Rough Draft Zone Trip write up. A previous Zone Trip would be cancelled mere days before the event because of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Facing page: Zone Trippers glean cosmic messages from the low flying jets in a bleak landscape known formerly as the upscale beachside enclave of Surfridge. After much litigation and relocation, the neighborhood was razed due to the overwhelming cacophony of passing jet engines.
COVINA... The word 'bounces' around in my mind like a soaked newspaper. Going nowhere fast. The memories can be devastating. Playing all day in the summer heat, typical kid stuff, then laying in bed that night with lungs hurting from breathing. "Smog alerts" that kept us from playing P.E. (we sat around in the Gym and listened to records). Being a teenager with nowhere to go and the Los Angeles County Sheriff always more than willing to harass you just for being a teenager with nowhere to go. The sameness of the houses and the mentality behind those houses. The whiteness of the place. The schools with teachers who seemed to believe that ignorance is bliss...

I remember the special assembly we had in elementary school for Walt Disney when he died, watching the reruns of JFK's assassination on the TV they rolled into the classroom. We watched the World Series on the same TV (if the Dodger's were playing). I had an Algebra teacher in High School who was such a lousy teacher that I stood up in class one day and told him just how bad of a teacher he was, then I walked out of the room. I can still hear him screaming after me "That will be a truant, Galenich!!!"

OK, it can't be as bad as I remember. There must have been some shining moments. But they are all tied up in leaving. Camping in the mountains, trips to the beach, ventures throughout the Western States in our '64 Volkswagon Bus. Oh yes, I remember standing on the corner watching the forest fire in the Angeles National Forest crest the ridge of the mountains that were 6 miles from my house. That was an amazing sight.

I bet that kids can grow up there now and not even know there are mountains a stone's throw away, and I'm sure it hasn't gotten any easier to breathe. Why do people still choose to live there?

Good question. Ignorance is Bliss, I guess.
Previous pages: Zine and ephemera from the first Cacophony Zone Trip. Starting in Covina, the crew toured some of the stranger locales to be found in the LA basin. Above: Zone crew Phil Bewley, Steve Mobia, M2, Sven Serrano, Lucija Kordic, Marci Murray, Bob Gridley, and Melmoth pose outside the National Date Festival Fairgrounds in Indio, CA. Below: The Brontosaurus at the Cabazon Dinosaurs off Hwy 10, just west of Palm Springs, CA.

**DINOS AND DATE SHAKEs**

Lucija Kordic

Shield’s Date Farm! Hadley’s fruit stand! Cement Dinosaurs! Date Shakes!

I’m not sure how I managed this one, but imagine a motley assortment of Bay Area types driving to Indio and the Coachella Valley almost two decades before the Festival phenomenon played host to Tupac Shakur’s hologram—all because I “needed” a date shake.

With most details tarnished and reduced to now-faded bullet points, it’s more than possible we were exactly at Latitude 34° 5’ 24.03"N, Longitude 117° 53’ 25.22"W (aka the raw suburb of Covina, California, in the Park) when I posed a simple question and tested the wanderlust of the latest Zone crew. “Who wants to drive an extra 80 miles east for a date shake?” Hands shot up, I’d like to think unanimously, and Auto Club of California maps and/or Thomas Guides where brought out to plot the next leg of our journey.

As if returning to Covina wasn’t enough nostalgia for one day—I was about to recover an early childhood memory of a beverage I’m certain exists nowhere outside of Indio, California. And dragging a few others with me. Willingly.

But that was the charm of the Cacophony Society—a few intrepid folk taking a road trip to explore abandoned LA buildings and decommissioned fire engines as suburban playground structures could easily morph into a quest for regional (non-alcoholic) beverages. Throw in the Cabazon dinosaur structures and ‘Romance and Sex Life of the Date’ video at Shield’s Date Farm to further an already eccentric adventure. And I was indulged with a not-yet-faded adulthood memory of the date shake well worth the extra 160 mile roundtrip.

**WEIRD DANCING IN ALL-NIGHT computer-banking lobbies. Unauthorized pyrotechnic displays. Land-art, earth-works as bizarre alien artifacts strewn in State Parks. Burglarize houses but instead of stealing, leave Poetic-Terrorist objects. Kidnap someone & make them happy. Pick someone at random & convince them they’re the heir to an enormous, useless & amazing fortune—say 5000 square miles of Antarctica, or an aging circus elephant, or an orphanage in Bombay, or a collection of alchemical mss. Later they will come to realize that for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, & will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence.

Bolt up brass commemorative plaques in places (public or private) where you have experienced a revelation or had a particularly fulfilling sexual experience, etc.

Dress up. Leave a false name. Be legendary. The best PT is against the law, but don’t get caught. Art as crime; crime as art.

**Poetic Terrorism**

Hakim Bey

The TAZ started appearing in odd journals in the late ’80s. Many Cacophonists read Hakim Bey’s essays on the Temporary Autonomous Zone, pleased to find an enthusiastic, well-developed, and poetic description of what they had already been manifesting organically.

Poetic Terrorism

Hakim Bey

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Above: M2 worships at the abandoned Sampson Tire & Rubber Company factory in the City of Commerce. The Assyrian architectural motif saved this amazing building from being razed years later as the building was transmogrified into a retail goods ‘outlet store.’

Below: The Zone Crew visit Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers. The Towers are a collection of 17 interconnected structures, two of which reach heights of over 99 feet. The Towers were built by Rodia in his spare time over a period of 33 years, from 1921 to 1954.
Bringing Burning Man to the Black Rock Desert
Kevin Evans

Labor Day weekend, 1989, I, with my roommates P Segal, Dawn Stott, and Cynthia Kolnick, attended a wind sculpture event in the Black Rock Desert sponsored by the creative collective “Planet X” in Gerlach, Nevada. We constructed and hauled a lightweight, mobile, canopy bed sculpture on top of a tiny sedan out to the remote, inhospitable area in Nevada. The surreal locale combined with mobile sculptures was both incredible and inspiring. That weekend was one that had a great and lasting impact on my life. I never wanted to leave. The desert attracted and stirred me; I knew I had to go back. When I returned to the Bay Area and started my final year in art school, I rallied a few friends and schoolmates around the idea of planning a Labor Day weekend trip to the Black Rock desert. I had been reading essays by Hakim Bey and his ideas struck a chord. At that time I was experimenting with the technique of forcefully augmenting or destroying parts of my artwork as a meditation on impermanence and flexible reaction to sudden change. These concepts fused into a plan to generate a creative, temporary incident in the Black Rock with a central theme, the ritual destruction and immolation of sculptures and art constructed for the event, with the peculiar, empty location as a stage set.

For an insolvent, young and naive art student, this vision seemed far too grand and expensive to accomplish alone. I decided to present the scheme as a Cacophony event, a “Zone Trip,” to fellow Cacophonist John Law. Other members of the group were later recruited (M2, aka Danger Ranger) and logistical planning commenced. A few months from the target date of the expedition, many of us from the Cacophony Society attended what was to be the last Baker Beach burn of Burning Man in San Francisco. Fortunately, via the intervention of local authorities, the monolithic figurine was not razed. Amidst chants of “burn it anyway!” and pagan-like drumming, a few of us Cacophonists, including Miss P and Dawn, thought it would be a great idea to invite the architects of the wooden construct along for our voyage to the bizarre setting, making it the biggest, most elaborate piece of firewood—a glorious conflagration.

“Anything worth doing in the first place is worth running into the ground.”
— Stuart Mangrum

Facing page: This issue of Rough Draft included a write-up for the first Burning Man in the Black Rock Desert.
The celebration of Burning Man’s annual fire ceremony began in 1986, created by Larry Harvey and Jerry James. For the next five years, its annual fire party was held at Baker Beach in San Francisco. In 1990, while being prepared at Baker’s Beach, the park police inteneded to prevent the culminating configuration of the sculpture. This was a transitional moment for Burning Man; the event evolved to a new location, a change of date, and the beginning of a new meaning for the celebration. This is a recounting of my introduction to Burning Man in San Francisco.

BURNING MAN: FROM BEACH TO DESERT

My discovery of Burning Man was through the San Francisco Cacophony Society, an organization of randomly gathered free spirits who surf the bleeding edge of culture, space, and time. A 1990, a Cacophony newsletter item invited interested people to meet in downtown San Francisco to help assemble a wooden sculpture to be burned at a San Francisco beach. The building area for this event was in a parking lot, in San Francisco near 11th & Folsom Streets. I showed up that weekend with other Cacophonists, walked into the parking lot and encountered a strange sight of unrecognizable wooden structures placed around on the ground, wood saws and drills screaming their song as people gathered round, there was this great electricity in the air. From our urban enclaves, we were seeking a land of opposites. Here we were, children of the city used to running water, television, and buying groceries neverwhere we wanted. Now, we were all preparing for a journey to a desolate and stark region of primitive experience with wild weather and days of 100 + degrees of sun-baked landscape. The Black Rock was a playa, a dried lake bed encircled by a mountain range, sitting undisturbed for the last 14,000-years—a flat beach head of dried mud for hundred and hundreds of miles. And we were going there.

“O.K., let’s do it!” The back door of the Ryder truck was opened, our group jumped up and into the vehicle, others formed a fire brigade and began to feed the luggage into the truck. As the trunks and suitcases flew back packs, suitcases, duffel bags, ice coolers, camping gear, hat boxes, and garment bags. Most of this was piled in front of the Ryder truck. (Let’s not forget the woman who brought only her massage table, no food, no extra clothes, no water, nothing else)

As people gathered round, there was this great electricity in the air. From our urban enclaves, we were seeking a land of opposites. Here we were, children of the city used to running water, television, and buying groceries neverwhere we wanted. Now, we were all preparing for a journey to a desolate and stark region of primitive experience with wild weather and days of 100 + degrees of sun-baked landscape. The Black Rock was a playa, a dried lake bed encircled by a mountain range, sitting undisturbed for the last 14,000-years—a flat beach head of dried mud for hundred and hundreds of miles. And we were going there.

Entering the Zone

Just after dawn, we arrived in the town of Gerlach (pop. 69). It was a small town in Nevada, near the Black Rock Desert, at the base of a mountain range. As others gathered to watch, I was struck by the enormity of the moment. We were packing up and getting ready to leave the city, to do what it didn’t matter; it was the big A—an adventure into the unknown.

Eighty strangers had suddenly become eighty friends, who had made a commitment to follow this strange wooden sculpture to the desert and lie with it till its last moments, when wood was to become ash and smoke. Did we know what we were doing? Probably not. Did we care? Hell! We knew that whatever we were doing, it was different. If only for that weekend, we were going to put some meaning into a special experience, creating a new version of an ancient pagan ritual that was actually thousands of years old. In Cacophony, we called these adventures “Zone Trips.” The Zone was some other dimensional place. It could be the past, the future, something weird, it didn’t matter. We were going there.

The truck was loaded, and its back door slammed shut. People scurried to their cars—it was time to get out of Dodge. We formed a loose caravan and drove from San Francisco, endlessly into the night. With the darkness, the unfamiliar highways, and the wrong turns, it was a miracle that we even got there, but we did.

LEAVING SAN FRANCISCO

On the day of departure, there were about eighty attendees, who collected together at our launch point in Golden Gate Park. As people showed up, they brought back packs, suitcases, duffel bags, ice coolers, camping gear, hat boxes, and garment bags. Most of this was piled in front of the Ryder truck. (Let’s not forget the woman who brought only her massage table, no food, no extra clothes, no water, nothing else)

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“O.K., let’s do it!” The back door of the Ryder truck was opened, our group jumped up and into the vehicle, others formed a fire brigade and began to feed the luggage into the truck. As the trunks and suitcases flew into the vehicle, it felt like an excavation from some kind of natural disaster, which, in a way, it was, as we were escaping the rat race of urban living.

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Entering the Zone

Just after dawn, we arrived in the town of Gerlach (pop. 250), literally the last town before the desert. After breakfast at Bruno’s Resort (one of the few cafes in the town), the group reformed and caravaned out onto the road leading to the desert. About 6 or 7 miles later, we left the road, driving directly onto the playa and stopped about 100 feet from the road. We all got out of our cars as one member drew a long line on the desert floor creating the ‘Zone gateway.’ This was one of our Cacophony rituals, for the Zone as we defined it took on many forms: it could be a weird house, a particularly strange neighborhood (like Coxina, CA), or a desolate, deserted warehouse. Today it was The Black Rock Desert, at the base of a mountain range in Northern Nevada.

Tales of SF Cacophony: Big Doings

By Louis M. Brill

Reportage/Illustration by Pierre “Mr. Lucky” Merkl
We crossed the line. We were definitely not in Kansas anymore. As far as the eye could see, it was flat, flat flat. The ‘playa,’ which is a dried lake bed, is rated as the second largest and flattest (the Bonneville Salt Flats being numero uno) part of the United States. 700 square miles of a flat as a board range area. Some people even claim you can see the curvature of the earth. Whatever. As one looked out into the desert playa, there may have been nothing there, but there is everything to see. One merely has to know where to look.

After a few minutes of glad handing and yelping in delight, we all got back in our cars and drove into the desert, to find our place, to set up camp, and bring the Man to his rightful new home. We had arrived! Although one part of the desert looks like another, we found our spot, pitched our tents and settled in. The camp quickly became a community as we all came to terms with the surrounding desert.

As this was our first time at Black Rock, there was not anymore. As far as the eye could see, it was flat, flat flat. The ‘playa,’ which is a dried lake bed, is rated as the second largest and flattest (the Bonneville Salt Flats being numero uno) part of the United States. 700 square miles of a flat as a board range area. Some people even claim you can see the curvature of the earth. Whatever. As one looked out into the desert playa, there may have been nothing there, but there is everything to see. One merely has to know where to look.

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As this was our first time at Black Rock, there was not much to do in the way of planned activities. There were the hot springs, which we took full advantage of, and of course the surrounding desert to walk around in and appreciate. And let’s not forget the intense wind storm which knocked down just about every tent awning as well as our first effort to build a center of camp ‘tent’ to hang out in during the heat of the day. But it was OK; these were lessons to be learned. We knew we would be back, so we needed to understand one way or the other what the land was like, if we were going to live on it each forthcoming Labor Day weekend.

Having settled in, we began the process of building up the Burning Man sculpture. His wooden parts were quickly assembled and the sculpture was laid out on the desert floor, ready to go vertical, to become the watchtower of our camp.

The moment had arrived - it was to be our first lifting ceremony in the desert. The entire camp had gathered in front of the sculpture, standing next to a thick rope that emanated from the sculpture and extended onwards for about 2 feet. On a series of commands, we lifted the rope up, and began slowly stepping back, pulling on the rope. Quickly the sculpture began to rise. Soon it was standing upright. We pegged it to the playa floor and began cheering and hooting in joy.

SUNDAY EVENING

The final moment had arrived, as the countdown closed in on Burning Man’s rendezvous with its flaming destiny. Fellow Cacophonist and former carnival performer, David “Flammo” Warren had the honors of initiating its baptism. Stepping up to the Man with a torch, he ignited his breath and a huge tongue of fire leapt forwards from his mouth, bathing the Man’s wooden legs.

The flame clinging to the Man began to climb upwards, engulfing his legs, then the torso, quickly reaching to his mouth, bathing the Man’s wooden legs.

As the flames reached the head, there were miniature explosions as the fireworks blasted off, arcing over the fire with a halo of sparkling star bursts crowning the event. Dean Gustafson, a fellow Cacophonist and a musician, pounded on his drums, setting a beat in time as the flames crackled around the Man. He recalled playing his drums with as much power as he could muster. “I was a soloist (the only time there was one drummer accompanying the burn) and that gave me the added motivation to play my heart out, trying to sound like ten drummers in one. I played until my arms and hands were consumed in fiery pain. I played long after the Man had fallen.”

The sculpture was consumed by flames, the campers gather round in celebration, with a formal cocktail party. Every one was dressed in party finery, women in their elegant gowns, and men in tuxedos, others in bizarre costumes. Drinks were hosted, people were toasted, the air was filled with smoke and joy.

The next morning, we had gathered round the blackened remains of Burning Man. He was nothing but charred wood, ash, and a vague outline of his final position as he lay on the ground.
INSIDE “DESSERT SITEWORKS”

William Binzen

Dateline: Labor Day, 1993, BLACK ROCK DESERT, NEVADA. Something’s happening here — urban artists are collaborating on projects realized in the desert. Forsaking convenience stores and the studio, they—we—are living and working for periods on a remote hotplate of silt and ash, where you can see curvature of the earth.

Art in the desert. The question arises, why? And, so what? Without limits, there is no tension. Without tension, is no progression.

—Guru Garaj Key

Out here, without our exoskeleton (the car, gas, cooler, and so on), we’re dead meat. Just knowing this adds an edge. Freedom at a price. It sharpens our sense of what we can and cannot do, tests us. On the playa, mirages recede as we drive, tantalizing us. The last sunrays appear as a laser-thin line, miles long. If you’re brain-dead, you won’t get inspired. Otherwise... what can we do in this place? This place where, when light and heat cause objects and actions stand out in relief, and become altered, taking on new significance, new perception, new inspiration.

Making art in the desert requires that we deal with this vast, undifferentiated space of the playa and environs—and define the edges, or sets of limits, the context within which art can be convened. Without codes, conventions, sets of limits, there is no language, no consensus reality, no art.

Ecological, holistic, pantheistic, and group-dynamic dimensions... these may be easier to engage in the desert—where, stripped of our normal baggage and cultural distractions, we find a proving ground, a crucible for experimental projects and the development of ideas. DESERT SITEWORKS is an experiment in temporary community. We are made up entirely of artists, in multiple disciplines, performers, musicians, and back seat philosophers ready to stand up and talk. Here, in the desert, there is no human audience for our spectacle – we play for ourselves, or to find ourselves, or for amusement, or invention. This is about art as self-discovery, personal and interpersonal healing, and the conjuring of new life-ways, new modes of being and becoming, and sharing culture.

For our 48-hour participatory performance at Trego, we invoked a Ceremonial Witness, the Muse of Drama, who sits on a portable throne, the “Witness Chair.” The person sitting in the chair holds the space for drama, and directs (when necessary) our co-evolving, human mosaic, or “Muse::aic” of improvised form and sound, conceived as a Hero’s Journey, using archetypal systems for exploring life and the mind, such as the Kabballah and Tarot.

We moved the Witness Chair to each location where improvisation takes us, establishing context and sets of formal limits for the scenes about to play out. A number of people had contributed to the script, which was based on our human life span (or cycle) from pre-birth to after death.

Desert Siteworks has convened at three of the hot springs around the perimeter of the playa – Black Rock Spring, Trego, and Bordello Springs (aka Trogond). In locally siting a project, we work with the topography – with sand dunes, arroyos, dirt roads, and scrub—to establish a harmonious, terrain-respecting layout. A fanciful, small village springs up, complementing its site. We encourage campsite decoration and vehicle camouflage to minimize the presence of “standard issue” images like cars, trucks, and RV’s, and to promote the individual camps as artful, as part of the art. We made reusable wickiups (structure-as-sculpture), including the Desert Yurt (camp center, living room, and communal kitchen), and the Tower Pavilion, a four-sided structure (in plan view, based on a Native American swastika). We used the Pavilion for ritual observances.

Examples of site-specific projects at Trego: Jeffrey Harris erected his Ranch Portal, with inlaid coins and Americana, where the entrance road rounds a dune and one first gets a view of the site; Tom Trombley installed the Ditch Serpent, a 60’ long wind-activated “spiral column” in the runoff ditch from the hot spring; Pepe Ozan built his (original) “Lingam,” rising out of a natural yoni, or feminine recess in the dunes; John Law made two site-specific neon installations, one submerged in the Trego “hot ditch” outflow from the springs, the other, a giant, yellow neon Dune Arc, that followed the rise and fall of the largest sand dune.

Above: Desert Siteworks events were hosted at various hot springs ringing the Black Rock Desert. Some participants of this “experiment in living art” went on to form the performance troupe Dream Circus, which spawned a legion of similar troupes at Burning Man over the following years. The “Intentional Community” philosophy espoused by Burning Man was birthed during the Desert Siteworks events. Facing page: During the Desert Siteworks event in 1995 at Trego Springs, Nevada, multiple earth works and site specific installations were integrated into a comprehensive and beautiful tableau.
Dean Gustafson made a precision 20’ long working sundial, laid out with local black stones, calculated and aligned. Todd Reed made a working clay kiln, fabricated on site using sun-dried bricks of local clay and a flue pipe from a nearby junkyard; Kirk Roberts carved “dreamtime” inspired images into a row of old wooden fence posts along the RR tracks, other standing posts were accessorized with plaster masks and metal assemblages by Sandra Noria; Harry Pariser dug glyphs into the ground around a male fertility totem made of clay and rocks.

Al Honig placed his figurative, high-finish chrome sculptures on the footbridge and shore; Suzanne Couture made an altar piece for the Pavilion; Larry Ackerman presented multi-image slide projections that transformed the night desert into a visual force field.

Fundamental to DESERT SITEWORKS is performance, especially improvisation seeking the roots of ritual. During the 1993 project, convened over the 4th of July at Trego Hot Springs, Lane Savadove, Paradox, Michael Callahan and the Directors’ Corps convened a continuous, 48 hour, group improvisation based on a simple script of a human life span, from pre-birth to after death. Four directors each took four-hour turns in the Witness Chair and held the space, made it safe, and defined the “proscenium” by their angle of vision, by holding out arms to indicate space. The performance was challenging, given desert heat and trance states, the intensity and psychic drama experienced by some participants, and the expanded time frame set for it. Still, messages came up through the 8-ball. If, in pre-history, what we call “art” began as a set of tools in the kit bag of shamanic, healing practices, as some have suggested; and if contemporary art often fails to address substantive issues or real issues in substantive ways, then the desert and these Siteworks are a powerful place to exorcise demons and to reconnect with primal experience, poised between Self, Object, and Other.

In this context, art is not primarily an abstraction or a marketed activity or entertainment for a bored or jaded public, but rather a fundamental means of defining our context, our “space” in life—just as our performance and music mark our “time.”

How we collaborate and how we work out interpersonal problems becomes part of the process, involving age old tensions of leadership versus collaboration.
Cacophonistas 13
San Francisco—Mexico City—Coacalco

Day One—Friday, March 8th

San Francisco—Mexico City—Coacalco

Flying in under a skidmark sky, past endless kilometers of sand and subdivisions, we follow a line of slowly smoking garbage fires to the airport in Mexico City. Brown clouds squeeze out a warm, foul-smelling rain. There are ten of us, too many to fit in a single vehicle, and four Cacophonistas opt to share a taxi for the long ride. The rest of us pile into a rented WR microbus and plunge out into the late evening traffic, not quite sure which road leads to Tultepec, but armed with a full map and willing to figure it out. Within two blocks we are lost.

There is no way to prepare for driving in Mexico City. No guide book, no video, no CD-ROM. No map can adequately explain its tortuous roads, especially not a map with the title panel obscured by twenty crucial blocks next to the airport. We roll on, clue poor, but rich in opinion. We grow alternately panic, combative, tetter, manic. Street names are shouted, mispronounced, muttered as praises by each passenger in turn, each consulting a different map, none of which resembles—or even remotely—the geography through which we alternately hurtle and crawl, depending on each block’s colored bruise under one eye. With his wild, boot-black burn wound on the bridge of his nose and a meaty, plum-colored blister under one eye, Eddy points at Alan, who’s picked up an ugly looking hip wound and a hardness under his arm. “Manic. Street names are shouted, mispronounced, muttered as praises by each passenger in turn, each consulting a different map, none of which resembles—or even remotely—the geography through which we alternately..."
We are getting better at ordering food, but a few of us still spin the wheel and come up losers. Vivian and Mick order soup, which turns out to be a sort of creamed something—or other with desiccated French fries scattered on top like croutons. When Vivian’s breakfast entree finally appears, the rest of us have finished by now. She is surprised to discover that ‘carmes flus’ means cold meats, not fried meats. Defeated, she glumly pokes at her plate of cold cuts, Vienna sausage and spookily-looking cheese until Paizley wraps it all up in a napkin and tucks it in her purse for the benefit of the town dogs.

We hit Tultepec around noon, and the streets are five times as thronged as the night before. Every business in town has apparently relocated for the day to the town square, and last night’s vendors now share space with hundreds of food booths, clothing stores, a key maker, a bicycle repair shop, and a bewildering maze of booths selling lingerie, sweets, match machines, whole pig’s heads, and great mountains of chickens’ feet. The traditional style church is elaborately decorated with flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best. Murals in brightly printed style church is elaborately decorated in flowers, and everyone’s wearing their Sunday best.

We are invited to sit, and tequila cocktails are brought out. Tequila cocktails in terra cotta mugs, filled with borage and fruit and, um... ice! Local hits, and plenty of it. He is rich with microscopic life in suspended animation, just waiting for the Tultepec sun. Gradually we are made to understand that he is the mayor of Tultepec. The old man picks up the tab for the ride and leads us to a place where we will all get to know each other, babies drooling on mothers’ shoulders, kids running around chasing iron benches. Brass bands play in the square and there is a well-tended garden, where lovers sit in the shade on black chairs in microbus-riding with the driver and at least nine other passengers already on board for the creasing three-block ride into the barrio, feeling slightly claustrophobic, I opt for standing room on the back bumper with Melmoth and Bill Burns. Inside, Señor Mick, who is more than slightly claustrophobic, struggles for control, and everyone struggles for breath in the uncertain crush of bodies. Where the hell are we going? How are we going to get back? Who are these people? Will we ever see our families again? Whose hand is that?

The mayor himself is filling my glass, now raising his own. Defenses are breached, floodgates down. It tastes very, very good. At the bar table, one of the young men mixing cocktails is looking at me over his shoulder tightly for balance and gesturing with his terra cotta mug. “Hi, Señor Antonio,” he says, gripping my “USA, cars,” he says, gripping my shoulder tightly for balance and gesturing with his terra cotta mug. “Mexico,” he says, gripping my shoulder tightly for balance and gesturing with his terra cotta mug.

“Eat these!” she insists for the rest of the afternoon, plating dishes of papusas at unsuspecting gringos. “I made them!”

“Eat these!” she insists for the rest of the afternoon, plating dishes of papusas at unsuspecting gringos. “I made them!”

I am invited to sample the local pique, a sour-marsh cactus beer, tequila’s poor relative. It tastes no worse than some Belgian ales I’ve had, but not much better. I can say now that I’ve had it, and I cannot say that I will rush out to have it again. Meanwhile the excellent food keeps coming: Papusas, fresh tortillas, mole sauce, salsa, and at last the entrée: big chunks of roasted goat over bowls of saffron rice. The meat is served in the traditional manner, hacked into cubes that give each diner a brief survey of the whole goat: some bone, some meat, a little stomach, scarcely any fur at all. It is delicious. The tequila drinks keep coming. Señor Antonio’s drunken nephew, whose name is Felipe, graciously allows Melmoth to best him at arm-wrestling, then corners me with a heartfelt, slurring monologue that thinks—NAFTA and our partnership across the border—“USA, cars,” he says, gripping my shoulder tightly for balance and gesturing with his terra cotta mug. “Mexico, firework, bicycler.” He points to an old two-wheeler with a sudden look of fierce passion. “Mexico,” he says intensly. “Mexicofolks generally seem to carry a strong note of national pride. Is he talking about his people’s admirable ability to make do with less? To enjoy life at a more leisurely pace? I want to understand him but he is drunk, and I am well on my way. My Spanish is a crude barbarian pidgin, suited only to the necessities of life like obtaining cocktails and clean towels. His English is worse. We are nodding at each other with earnest intensity, trying like hell to communicate, but it just isn’t happening. I hope the rest of NAMTA isn’t this bottled up.

After swapping addresses with Señor Sanchez we walk back to the square, where I drag out the Nikon and tripod and try to locate a good piece of real estate from which to photograph his pyrotechnics. There isn’t one. The rooftop views are all obscured by trees and overhead wires, and at street level it looks like I’ll either be behind the crowd or far, far too close. I snag a spot on the sidewalk in front of an ice cream shop, no more than ten feet from the nearest tower.

The fireworks begin a half-hour after sunset. Fuses are lit, and suddenly there’s chaos. As each tower’s elaborate display begins to burn, the crowd surges forward, then promptly retretes under a rain of fire. The crowds of the adjoining towers climb their structures and shake for all they’re worth, trying to slough off the cinders and avoid any premature detonations. There is an enormous amount of burning debris. I scramble around with my camera, trying to calculate manual exposures. Two young boys, ten or eleven years old, wordlessly adopt me like some stray dog and act as bodyguards, parting the crowd in front of me so I can shoot, shielding me from the torrent of sparks, and occasionally dragging me backwards when, too intent on framing a shot, I let the fire get too close. I feel like a combat photographer. I pick up...
up a few new cinder burns in the old flight jacket, but am otherwise protected from harm. Before I know it, I’ve used up all my film. Now I get to relax and enjoy the show.

These towers are unlike anything I have ever seen. For one, they are enormous. Fifty to sixty feet high, built entirely from panels of one-inch lattice secured with newspaper twine, guyed by hemp and nylon ropes to cars, trucks, trees and nearby buildings. And yes, people climb them—sometimes two at a time—all the way to the top. After the preliminary pinwheels have spun, each tower displays a unique, animated image in time-phased, the top. After the preliminary pinwheels have spun, each tower displays a unique, animated image in time-phased, ten feet across, that spin up enough rocket power to soar two or three hundred feet straight up, then dispense a load of conventional skyrockets and fall—still flaming—somewhere over the flat rooded horizon. No one seems to know or care exactly where. The drinking is getting serious. Paizley and I fall in with two young men sharing a bottle of Presidente brandy and a 2-litro of Pepsi. Their uncle, a bull-chested man of fifty with salt-and-pepper hair, gets me into another heartfelt, surreal conversation of the sort a good one from the way his nephews keep rolling, as if anyone gives me trouble. “Mi casa es su casa,” the older of his nephews says sincerely, Uncle nods profoundly. To their credit, they look only slightly dazed when I tell them there are thirteen of us traveling together. It takes many gracious apologies to get me out of this one. They ask where I am staying, and when they hear the answer they roll their eyes heavenward, as if scanning the skies for lightning. Our hotel, apparently, does not have a good reputation.

Only when I insist that we are leaving in the early morning hours for Guanajuato do they seem to relax. I am made to swear oaths I do not fully understand, the gist of which seems to be that if and when I do return, I and all my ancestors and descendants will move in for the full duration of our stay, drink until we can’t see, and possibly—I’m not entirely sure on this last point—arrange for the intermarriage of certain grandchildren who will then take over the combined family businesses and support us in our drought, while we blow off fireworks and forget where we left our hip-flasks.

The old man is a pirotecnico, and apparently a good one from the way his nephews keep nodding and saying “Mi respeto” wherever he brings it up. Or maybe he’s just at night and they’re terrified—I have no way of knowing. He keeps showing me the back of his left hand, lightly brushing it with the fingers of his right as he talks about the fireworks trade. Much later it dawns on me that he is showing me his fingers. All ten of them, still attached. Many in the crowd are not so lucky.

Above and Facing page: The zenith of the festival for Cacophony was the “local” competition which consisted of dozens of 30-40 foot tall, entirely handmade towers called castillos, sporting kinetic incendiary wheels, shooting a non-stop cascade of genuinely dangerous ordnance sets the cheating multitude below.
Top left: Scott Williams pulls stencils from a truck to use on the cars waiting for painting at the Carmonic Convergence. Top right: One of the decorated cars after painting with stencils from Scott’s large pile of possibilities. Bottom: The scene of cars and people creating imaginative images on their cars. Foreground: Miss Lulu works on her Ford Fiesta.

“The Harmonic Convergence is the name given to the world’s first globally synchronized meditation, announced by José Argüelles, and which occurred on August 16–17, 1987, and which also closely correlated to an exceptional alignment of planets in our solar system. The timing of the Harmonic Convergence allegedly correlated with the Mayan calendar, with some consideration also given to European and Asian astrological traditions. The chosen dates have the distinction of allegedly marking a planetary alignment with the Sun, Moon and six out of eight planets being “part of the grand time.”

The Carmonic Convergence

The pick-up truck that arrived at the famous San Francisco artists’ habitation, The Goodman Building, backed into the parking bay while several of us helped Scott Williams carry his large-sized stencils to the bed of the vehicle. We then headed over to an empty lot at Harrison and Division, under the freeway. It was a Saturday morning and the word had been out for months about the event that was intended to lampoon the all pervasive New Age concept of the Harmonic Convergence: The Carmonic Convergence.

Conceived by street artists, the event, held in August of 1987, was intended to create a few laughs and prank the seriousness of the moment. This cosmic planetary alignment was as portentous as the Y2K scare, but of a more positive bent; believers of the Harmonic Convergence prepared for the “new world” that would come forth from the planetary alignment, only this event was to bring about world peace through an astrological confluence.

We were not New Agers. Most of us scoffed at the idea of such a change from planets aligning. If we had self-identified, we would have called ourselves punks or anarchists. But mostly we called ourselves artists. We convened on the desolate parking lot and proceeded to alter our own vehicles, or those of others. Masking tape was in high demand and everyone arrived with a few cans of spray paint to contribute to the day. The festivities began, stencils were held to cars, some free-style painting commenced, people walked from car to car and offered to help, or just commented on the progress.

Not owning a car at the time, I still attended and participated, helping Miss Lulu create pleasing collages on her driver’s door and tailgate. As a friend of Scott’s, I held stencils to car sides and looked away and closed my eyes when the wind picked up the spray paint fumes and passed them near my nose. Masks, gloves, and aprons were not even part of our considerations that day.

The sun crested and began its fall, and still we painted. More cars arrived, beers were opened, groups of people moved from car to car to appreciate the labors of the participants. Then an idea sparked: a caravan through San Francisco streets! It was a must as an end to the day! More beers were opened as a parade route was considered. Maximum viewing of the newly decorated cars was of importance in the making of our parade plans. Market Street, obviously, with a turn on Castro or perhaps Van Ness, or both.

We formed a single line, headed out of the parking lot, and proceeded to careen through the streets, enjoying the gaping stares and shouts and hoots from those whom we passed, proud of our newly decorated cars.
Back in early ’80s, while at Santa Cruz High, I looked normal but I didn’t feel normal. I could fit in if I wanted to, but mainstream culture was boring and predictable—and so was my first car—a 1965 white VW bug. I hated TV, so I shot the one I had with a .22 and mounted it on top of the car. I added all sorts of other symbols, poems, flowers, a rooster, and crazy shit one would never put on a car.

In the late ’80s, I moved to Berkeley, CA, where I lived in a shack behind my father’s house. Because of the art car (which developed into “Oh My God!”) I was invited to all sorts of strange parties and events. Gradually I started seeing the same characters, and noting certain trademark quirks, like a guy with glasses wearing a V-neck sweater, always carrying a SLR; a guy obsessed with Xmas themed clothes and music; a woman seamstress who always wore an outlandish outfit and who would guffaw upon seeing me and my art car. Since I was an outsider and new to the area, it took me a while until I learned that I was part of the Cacophony Society.

I actually met Michael Mikel, before I knew that he was the one who had the “other” art car that I would see, from time to time, parked outside some of the events. I began inviting Michael and his “5:04 pm” car, created during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, to small art car events and parades, along with Ramona Moon and her “Turkey Toyota,” Ron Doice and the “Glass Quilt,” Larry Fuente and “Mad Cad”, David Best and his art cars, and a handful of other early bay area art car folks.

The fact is that the art car folks and the Cacophony folks sort of gravitated towards one another—and the groups cross, pollinated, not mated per se, but a lot of art car people attended Cacophony events and vice-versa. It sort of makes sense, looking back on it, as art car people do not take their cars too seriously, and they play with the concept of value—that the car is a loaded symbol to be fucked with; that the car is really a canvas; that an art car is really a prank against the car.

In 1991, both John Law, who I had come to know by seeing him at virtually every event, and Michael Mikel told me that I needed to go to Burning Man, to bring my art car and that I would love it. Well, like with most folks it took two years for me to actually get there. In 1993 I attended, filmed in super 8, and was blown away. In 1994 I started Art Car Camp, invited art car artists from across the country, and I began making what would become a 20 year documentary film project on Burning Man. Each year the number of art cars doubled, to
tales of sf cacophony: big doings

NIGHT CRAWLER - DOG CRAZE
Silke Tudor, SF Weekly, Wednesday, Nov 17, 1999

Dog Craze: In a rare convergence of nature and desire, the lingering November fog recedes long enough to make brunch near the zoo a seductive, rather than required, engagement; not that rain or fog could forestall today's dining party. One by one, with hangovers, dietary restrictions, and shul-ye deprivations weighing heavily on our jaws--we belly up to the Formica counter of the Carousel restaurant to request chili-cheese burgers and fries at 10:30 in the morning. The gastronomic action is a labor of love, and support, for the cheerful dachshund -- the last standing Doggie Diner dog head-- that has watched over this neighborhood with benevolent good humor for as long as most of us can remember.

Last month, the smiling hound, with its bow tie and chef's hat--a 10-foot-high, 300-pound testament to an erstwhile 30-restaurant chain-- was denied landmark status by the Planning Commission, despite public outcry and more than 7,000 signatures; if an appeal to the Board of Supervisors fares as well, nothing prohibits the property owner from raising the diner and the dog head in favor of a parking lot for the Sloat Garden Center. So, in a display of solidarity, Sebastian Melmoth brought his three, privately kept Doggie Diner dog heads out to Sloat Boulevard on a flatbed truck for a little family reunion.

"The first thing I saw when I stepped off the BART at 24th and Mission in 1976," says Melmoth, proudly ensconced in a brown-and-orange Doggie Diner uniform shirt, "was a Doggie Diner dog head. It was my first impression of the city. I was dumbstruck as to how something like this could exist, but I never thought I'd become a steward for its preservation."

Melmoth's Doggie Diner dog pack was the result of his avocation as a sign maker, and, he laughingly says, heavenly intervention. A fellow tradesman led him to the American Neon Sign Co., which then owned the Doggie Diner contract and several out-of-use heads. He purchased the first dog head for a song, and the second by canceling a debt; the third was a surprise birthday gift from his girlfriend, Vanessa K. Of course, buying them is one thing, owning them another.

"They're big," says Melmoth. "Transporting each dog head is a like a religious ordeal, like crawling through the desert without water. Everything that can go wrong will. I got a flat tire hauling them across the Bay Bridge once and was rescued by a guy who had seen it all."

Most of the year, the dog heads are kenned up north, but they make frequent sojourns to the city, where they have become closely associated with creative endeavors such as the Art Car West Fest, the Cacophony Society, and the St. Stupid's Day Parade. (The "High Holy Trinity of Dogheads" and the "Doggman Order" are officially sanctioned by the Bishop Joey and the First Church of the Last Laugh.) During the heads' trek, motorists honk and wave, children point and laugh, and tourists snap pictures. It is the nature of a giant, grinning dog head to cause joy, a welcome attribute in a decade whose principal currency is irony.

"Ad campaigns are very savvy today," says Warren Dotz, co-author of What a Character! 20th Century American Advertising Icons. "The Doggie Diner dog head is a very innocent, naive sort of icon, and it is specific to the Bay Area. Different cities have different icons -- Chicago has Superdawg and his wife -- but they all bring to mind a simpler time. Some people show visiting friends the Coit Tower, others bring them here to look at the dog head.... It's like our Mona Lisa of icon characters."

Out on Sloat Boulevard, there is much horn-honking, hand-waving, and picture-taking-- spontaneous displays of joy, mingled with concerned expressions from folks who know the fate of the last standing dog.

"I grew up in this neighborhood," says Brad Kopp, adjusting his cape and reminiscing about childhood trips to Playland at the Beach, a nearby attraction that was home to a number of mechanical marvels before...
“Like any piece of artwork, the dog head elicits a response,” says 58-year-old Sharman Lindell, who stopped by on her way home from grocery shopping. “And it’s usually a nice one.”

Of course, what is and what is not art has been argued for centuries, and a consensus is not to be reached between neighborhood resident, author, and pop-culture enthusiast Dominic Priore and landowner/Sloat Garden Center VP Ted Warshauer.

“I have the right to optimize the value of my property,” says Warshauer.

“It’s a vanishing art form,” says Priore.

“You’re standing in a crowd of artists [who see the dog head as art],” says Priore.

“I guess beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” says Warshauer.

Certainly, for thousands of art– and ad-character– collectors across the country, this is true.

“There is no intrinsic value in anything collectible, barring maybe gold and silver, except what it’s worth to another collector,” points out Jane Husain, schoolteacher and wife of 10 years to graphic artist and avid ad character collector Masud Husain.

The Husain home, which doubles as Masud’s very successful Studio West Design, opens onto a colorful wall display of ad-character paper masks—fanciful table decorations from food chains like Sarno’s and Pig & Whistle, and promotional handouts for Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds and the Amos ’n’ Andy radio show. Along the walls, in glass cases and on shelves, is a small portion of the couple’s vast ad character collection.

“The rest are in three storage containers in the basement,” says Jane, “along with the snow globe collection.” (And the majority of the lawn ornament collection, and the Godzilla collection, and the vintage San Francisco souvenir buildings collection, and the antique aquarium mermaids collection, and the Dare Devil Marvel comics collection — but that’s another story.)

Still, a kaleidoscopic array of pieces is on display; they are as inexpensive as the cowgirl menu-mask from Eaton’s that Jane saved as a child, and as costly as the Mida Watch robot-clock that set Masud back $2,800. There is a GE Radio bandmaster designed by Maxfield Parrish and an early incarnation of Kermit created by Jim Henson for Wilkin’s Coffee. There is a 3-foot RCA dog in lieu of a real one, and the Reddy Kilowatt man popularized in 1926; there are grinning characters for Florida citrus, Kitty Pan Litter, U.F.O. Japanese noodles, Dunkin’ Donuts, Contact pain reliever, and Ribol. There are ad characters from the ’20s to the ’70s, made of everything from real nuts and bolts to vinyl, styrofoam, and wood, with varying levels of craftsmanship and attention to detail. Like any fine, large collection, some pieces are interesting: clever, and pleasing to the eye, some are disturbing (“Happy Foot”), some are dismissible (“Burgie Bear”), and some are on loan, for public display (albeit at the San Francisco Airport).

“There is a sense of whimsy with the older ad characters, like the Doggie Diner dog head, that is very, very appealing,” Masud says. “But there is also cultural relevance, and aesthetic relevance. I draw a lot of inspiration for my work from comic books, pop art, and popular culture. People can relate to these things. It strikes a chord with them, and with me.”

As for the Doggie Diner dog head, Masud predicts it will be sold into a private collection.

“I wouldn’t mind having it, but you need a lot of space to display something that size in a way that will promote intelligent discourse. Advertising can be completely overwhelming— it’s meant to be. How it’s shown certainly affects how it’s seen.”

Andy Warhol put Campbell’s soup cans in museums and Keith Haring turned his art into T-shirt marketing; as pressure increases it is as likely Warshauer will donate the dog head to a museum as sell it to a private collector.

But given the choice between seeing a Haring on the underside of a bridge and a Haring behind glass …

“I’d rather see the dog head restored,” says Jane, “overlooking the zoo where it belongs.”

Above: The Cacophony Van by Rockette Bob, the unofficial leader of the Reno Cacophony Society, featured in the 2002 Art Car Festival.

Above: Harrod Blank riding atop his Pico De Gallo, an interactive music mobile that pays tribute to the Mexican Mariachi. Pictured in the How Berkeley Can You Be? Parade, which was part of the Art Car Festival, 2002.
The Last Private Vehicle on the Embarcadero Freeway

Fifteen clowns arched their backs and leaned into the concrete roadway partition moving it ever so slightly; moving it just enough for a standard early '80s two-door sedan to squeeze through, without scraping off any of the fresh new coat of stock Oldsmobile Dark Green Met paint that M2 had applied, shortly after acquiring the car.

The 5:04 pm Special was smacked by a brick wall that fell two stories on 5:04 pm on October 17th, 1989, during the Loma Prieta earthquake. It looked like a meteor hit it; the car was a late model, and a runner, so after a little mechanical work and the $89.99 Earl Scheib paint job, it was on the road almost constantly, driven by M2, Kevin Evans, Sebastian Hyde, and other Cacophonists. Soon the car was the best-known sedan in San Francisco and was fondly (or annoyingly) referred to as the earthquake car by folks all around the bay.

The word was out. It was only a short time 'til the freeway was to be torn down. Lawrence Ferlinghetti had quipped recently that maybe the City should make the old structure into an official City Park and hanging garden trail for hikers and bikers. After all, both decks had some of the best views of both the bay and the city skyline. As usual, Cacophony was ahead of the Beats on the issue; we had been using the structure since it condemned.

Alas, Ferlinghetti’s solution was not to be implemented. The Embarcadero Freeway, which had provided such a marvelous playground for Cacophony, was indeed to be torn down. But not before one last grand gesture. There hadn’t been a private vehicle on the freeway in nearly two years, when Cacophony gathered at the Washington Street off-ramp from the top deck. M2 arrived right on time at 5:04 pm and sped through the concrete barricades, past the cheering clowns, and up onto the freeway. By dumb luck, a SFPD motorcycle cop spotted the hurtling sedan from a block over on Jackson Street and jumped into hot pursuit. From the ground, you could see the arc of the freeway for almost a mile as it curved along the Embarcadero.

A second motorcycle cop had jumped on the freeway at the Broadway ramp and sped along not far behind his fellow, trailing less than a half mile behind the virtually flying 5:04. M2 dropped off the freeway at the Folsom St. ramp, just shy of the Bay Bridge, hung a hard left burning rubber, back and under the ramp. The cops, just far enough behind to not see which turn he took, shot off in the wrong direction. Drinks and back slapping transpired, not long after, at the Edinburgh Castle Pub.

Above: M2 and his fine ride and official Cacophonymobile: The 504 Special. The 504 was the first Art Car to attend Burning Man when Kevin Evans, Sebastian Hyde, Neale Friedman, and Teresa Brinberg drove the screaming Olds out to the Playa in 1991.
By 10:30 one night, around a dozen Cacophonists had slipped into the toy store, managing to place several innocuous-looking teddy bears on the shelves, without arousing suspicion. Not content to just leave them there, they appointed Cacophonist Todd to help direct the management’s attention to the prank. At 10:35, Todd entered, located a concrete-filled “Cuddler,” and brought it to the register, informing the cashier he couldn’t find the price. Predictably, as he placed the innocent looking toy in those unwary hands, it went crashing to the floor like a particularly heavy bowling ball.

After this, it just got worse. Todd began to demand a speedier price check, insisting that he had only minutes to complete this transaction, before it would be too late to bring the bear to his nephew, who was, as he repeated many times for everyone’s benefit, “in the hospital with a skin rash.” This element of his story, however, did not appear to provoke the suspicion of the clerk, who apparently had no difficulty imagining her customer entering the children’s ward not long before 11 pm to dump a lump of fur-covered construction material in the lap of an ailing youngster.

--Rev Al on placing Cement Cuddlers (teddy bears filled with concrete) in a Toys’R’Us store

The first Cacophony frontier outpost took root in the verdant soil of a place well known for its weirdness and dysfunction: Los Angeles, California. Beneath the filmy surface image of LA, a world well known for self-absorbed wallowers in a shallow pool of grim social climbing and self-promotion, there exists a layer of people attuned to a different level of the odd. These people, whether born Angelenos or transplants, tend to work in the support economy that exists to service the film, fashion, and music industries. Creative, off color, and loaded with bad attitude from observing the goings on in the surreal worlds around them, they proved to be, perhaps, the most natural recruiting group for Cacophony.

M2, on an extended business trip installing video systems for Cal Trans, found himself alone and bored during his off work hours in a strange town with no friends about to play with. He printed up flyers and with missionary zeal, delivered them to coffee houses, theaters, libraries, bars, and any other places he figured fun weirdoes might congregate.

The first respondent, Alan Ridenour, soon became Rev Al, and LA Cacophony was up and running, eventually

Facing page: On the heels of the success of LA Cacophony, groups in other cities began to sprout. SF Cacophony members, accompanied by “Baby Jesus,” organized a Zone Trip to Seattle to help kick off that town’s Cacophony Lodge. A blessing of the Fremont Street Bridge Troll was the first order of business. The Baby Jesus was handed off from one group to the next over the years, presumably finding its way back to its original Midwestern Nativity Scene.

Above: LA Cacophony primarily attracted artists, writers, and performers, which resulted in projects like this coloring book composed by LA Cacophony founding member Reverend Al Ridenour.

“‘It’s a social group for the antisocial: those who prefer to think of themselves as outcasts.’ —Jac Zinder

The Cacophony Pandemic

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The Cacophony Pandemic
perpetuating what surely were the most outlandish and sardonic Cacophony pranks to ever be foisted on an unknowing, and, some would say, underserving public. Rev. Al’s ironically spiritual fervor and visionary wit soon attracted a plenitude of pranksters and out patients, ready to wreak havoc on the citizens of Los Angeles. The rest of their story deserves its own book.

Not long after, Melmoth, M2, J.D. Boggmann, Vivian Perry, Sebastian Hyde, and others went north to help inaugurate both the Seattle and Portland Cacophony Societies. Yahooon Doorstop, recently transplanted from San Francisco, eventually connected with former Suicide Club stalwart Bob Campbell and others to kick off the Seattle chapter. This congregation leaned toward hosting costumed balls, elaborate soirees, and live action games pioneering in huge abandoned industrial edifices of anyone passing by his house on the adjoining, heavily snowy, and “Culture Jamming,” were filtered through the 포트 조해도. By the turn of the millennium, there were outposts in dozens of cities world wide, including Edinburgh, Scotland, Atlanta, GA, Chicago, Tokyo, and McMurdo Station, Antarctica. Some of these outposts were full-fledged “lodges,” filled with trouble makers, others simply small clubs of clever misfits with Internet access.

**Cacophony is as Cacophony Does**

**Reverend Al**

There are no rules as to how you should proceed. Cacophony grows organically, nurtured by example. The various lodges are different, but bear a family resemblance to one another. Like families, they may squabble, envy, backstab, and inspire. If you're getting out of line, your family will let you know. If you don’t like it, you can always run away with the name. The only contentious areas have generally been implicit political agendas (generally frowned upon, whether anarchist, libertarian, or worse) and “commercial” events (a vague concept — get reimbursed for services, materials, and rentals necessary to some events). If you get different information from all of us, it’s to be expected. It is Cacophony, after all. Every branch has its own legitimate way of running things. The fact that we’ve survived for a few years is the only justification we have for our approach.

**You May Already Be a Member**

We assume you’re already some sort of bona fide sexologist and Circus Redickuless sexologist and Circus Redickuless and teach people how to be amusingly subversive. They’re already doing it! We just raise the bug’s flag, and see who will gather under the flagpole for further mischief. Obviously there are a lot of creative misfits out there doing the stuff they like to do, whether or not they’ve ever heard of our society. We assume you’re one of those. If you are, you’re lucky. If you have a few like-minded friends, we’re even luckier. And if you have some sort of near-evangelical fervor to spread the word, a lot of free time, maybe a bit of money, then you help yet one more city combat and cave in.

**R.I. All Begins With Lies**

For me, Cacophony began as a haze! When I first found out about it, through a flyer in a local coffeehouse, I was puzzled by the text that implied that the society had existed in Los Angeles for years and wondered where this mysterious body of misfits resided. After a few weeks trying to get ahold of the perpetrators (who actually resided in San Francisco), I discovered that if I wanted to find Cacophony in Los Angeles, I would have to set about creating it. Though this was the beginning of Cacophony in the city of Los Angeles, Cacophony begins by the same process.
In everyone’s life by throwing themselves wholeheartedly into something impossibly absurd, an organization based upon chaos. Cacophony is very nebulous, very loosely defined. Membership is unconscious. (“YOU MAY ALREADY BE A MEMBER!”) By maintaining this fluidity, we have been able to slip out of some problematic situations, make entertainingly hyperbolic claims, and disavow responsibility for specific naughty acts.

You’ll also need to lie. Especially lie to the media. They’ll be grateful for the more colorful copy. Yes, yes, yes, we all know the media “co-opts” underground culture, but that’s hardly a reason to shun it. Make the media your play partner. Chances are your “underground” interests were at some point nurtured by one of those media mongers, who makes a living by spilling the underground beans. It would be uncharitable to keep the fun of Cacophony to yourself once you’re “inside.” Share with the media, lie, contribute your myth-making skills to our culture. Media particularly likes to regurgitate itself. You can feed them bits of press from our site here.

Organizing Chaos

The thing that establishes a society is regular events, and a flyer that can be counted on to come out around the first of every month. People need to see Cacophony as being somewhat stable to be attracted to it to a degree where they’re willing to assume some responsibility. It seems to me that when people try and start fraternal lodges in their cities, they take on too much responsibility, coordinating several events a month, and burn out. One event and one flyer every month is not an unreasonable demand on any one person and it gives a lodge some credibility. If like minded others want to host events too, then that’s just fine.

I think every town needs a lynch pin to make sure that something, however meager, happens every month that people see the flyers. Creativity isn’t too much of a burden, why not just borrow ideas from other cities? The real effort comes in at the very beginning, taking the initiative to fill a leadership role in the society. And remember, we do it because it’s fun.

Experiences Beyond The Mainstream

What Kind of Events?

“Experiences beyond the mainstream” is the phrase that was first used by San Francisco Cacophony and remains a watchword for other lodges. In Los Angeles, at least, of Magnetic Light that spoke of the discovery of the Magnetic Christ, a sacred icon that would attract UFOs to Vista Del Mar Park on a certain evening. On that evening, following an elaborate ritual, a huge glowing something-or-other did visit over the beach before bursting into flames.

“Candid Camera”?: No, Cacophony. The Los Angeles Cacophony Society is a group of self-described “spokespersons of the unconscious” who proved the urban landscape beneath onesubjugating the mundane. “We want to turn the city into a playground,” says Cacophony’s spiritual leader, Alan Reidenauer, a computer animator who goes by the name of guererr of Reverend Al. “We want to offer people an alternative to going to clubs, movies or generally spending a lot of money.”

Reidenauer launched the L.A. Cacophony Society last April when its San Francisco counterpart group was looking to expand. Besides throwing fracture parties and creating close

Tales of SF Cacophony: The Pandemic


Lodged between a tarot reader and a quicksketch artist on Venice Beach one Sunday were some odd fellows with a sign that said “Free Graffiti—Arts or Logs.” “Bringing injury is in,” they insisted, urging passers-by to plan up and concoct heroic stories about their bad breaks. These are the same folks who infiltrated a recent UFO conference at the LAX Hilton, handing out leaflets from the so-called Brotherhood of
we use it to describe any of four types of events. They’re described below not so much in terms of specific content, but how you might use these events to get more people involved into the collective effort.

Shows, Fundraisers, or Themed Parties

Thanks to pervasive media coverage, most ambulatory humans at some point feel the need to sample “alternative” or “underground” culture. Most often this need is met by witnessing some form or other of live musical performance understood to be égalité. Cacophony events of this category usually incorporate some such performance, but attempt to make some sort of extra push toward absurdity or provocation. These events, whether held in clubs, art spaces, or private homes, usually make some attempt to involve the audience interactively, but also leave room for socializing and shadows for skittish wallflowers. Frequently they may include what passes for “performance art.” If you’re doing things correctly, a Cacophony show will arrive eager and fearfully anticipating mess, smoke, and brutal, ridiculous out acting. These events will come close to fitting normal music/art categories of “alternative” entertainment weekdays, and will therefore draw larger numbers of witnesses. A signup for a mailing list at the door is imperative to the society’s growth. In Los Angeles, we set a cover charge to pay for rental of sound/light equipment, props, space, and to pay performers. If there are leftover funds, the individuals producing the event may keep some for their troubles, but also donate money toward future events of this type.

Field Trips to the Fringe

Visits to weird and fringy sites around your area. These are the most well-attended events. They are also the easiest to host, since they don’t require any organization more than a couple of phone calls to the site for hours and directions. A good book (easily available, though far from comprehensive) which lists odd sites is Roadsodie-A-Samella.

Workshops

More participatory, but still relaxed social atmosphere. Participants may create art to be used or distributed during the course of another event. In LA, they’ve created mail art to send, gifts for our newly-Santied to distribute, cement filled teddy bears for prank, props for Halloween events, costumes or vehicles for impromptu parades, or cookies baked for Jack Kerouac.

Guerrillas Theater & Public Spectacles

These events are usually small because they require a lot of nerve. They usually involve costumes. Include facetious protest marches, human entrances attempting to enter dog shows costumed as dogs, or clowns making their way into an office building, pretending to look for their party gig. These are the events the media likes covering. Whether or not they draw attendees, the events raise the general level of awareness and interest in what we’re doing.

Pranks, Hoaxes, Culture Jamming

The creation and deployment of outrageous, unsettling material. False flyers and tracts, billboard alterations, toasters glued to walls, bodies outlined in chalk on sidewalks, placement on shelves of bogus products (“cement cuddlers”), and booths offering services such as free casts for unbroken arms, involve more work than the costumed street theater, because slick presentations are needed to really deceive the public. Lots of talk generally about these more difficult events; follow through harder. Often carried out in solitude or quick nocturnal hops. Fear factor, plus laborious preparation, makes these the handshest events to pull off, those restricted to the dedicated few.

Where Do Events Come From?

In LA, we’ve had a core group of around 10 people who tend to take turns hosting events, which works out pretty well. Because I like to encourage new people to host events, I always back-burner my own ideas when someone new proposes something. If there’s a slow month, I pull up one of these ideas. Sometimes there is popular demand for an encore of a past event, which also eases the creative strain during lulls. Also, you should be stealing event ideas from successful lodges within the society.

Uh, What Does It Mean to Host An Event?

At some point after attending a few events, maybe years into the fun, someone may decide they actually want to feed the monster further. They want to “host an event.” Tell them this:

Minimal requirements:

You show up for the event. You plan the event specifics (date, time, meeting places). You provide your phone number and/or e-mail as a contact for people with questions. You herd the group however necessary when everyone who RSVP’d has arrived, and then announcing the plans to the assembled participants.

Even better:

You write up the event description (or provide a rough outline, depending on your writing aptitude). You invite your friends to the event, or at least talk it up on the discussion list. (Don’t expect a big turnout if you yourself don’t invite anyone, if you yourself didn’t encourage people online and in person.) You solicit the help you need OR do all the preparations yourself (finding, making props, scheduling buses, calling for business hours, etc.).

Getting Along with the Other Weeds in the Sidewalk

We’re all here to crack the cement. And you’re probably all growing from the same soil. Here’s how Los Angeles grew. At first, our calendar of events was mainly a bulletin board for events planned not so much as “Cacophony events” but “outside events” and drawing participants from within Cacophony. In any community, you’ll find a lot of like-minded people eager to share their talents in this way. Usually other marginal artists, zine-makers, or performers of one sort or another. They were doing their thing before the society came along, but tend to be drawn to it as a venue and tend to suggest events that feature their particular work or interests. Occasionally it can be touchy about “ownership” of events they produced when presenting them as “Cacophony events.” Clear language in flyers and announcements usually circumvents this problem, however. LA & SF Cacophony have used a “Sounds Like Cacophony” category in their newsletters to preserve distinctions while affirming bonds.

Starting with a Bang or a Whimper?

In general there are two ways to get things going: the first is by generating a notoriety with some large-scale event, like Portland did. This takes a lot of time to prepare and a lot of contacts. The other way to go is the small scale word-of-mouth route. This is less showy and more starting a social club for freaks, where people come to events not because of some grand theatrics, but because they like the people they’ve met. For this sort of thing to work, you have to have frequent gatherings to keep the people in touch, and you may have to accept some event ideas that don’t quite live up to any provocative deals. But if you can get a core of people together, you can fine-tune the aesthetic later.

When Zines Ruled The Earth: The Hard Way

In November of 1999, LA Cacophony published the last issue of its hard copy newsletter, Tales from the Zone. We found online distribution to be much more effective for the reasons detailed below. It was a good thing to get in the mail. Fun to read and to look at, like a zine. But after phasing it out, we’ve noticed no drop-off in event quality or attendance, and that’s what counts.

One of the disadvantages of hard copy is cost: with around 250 subscribers, paper and copying costs around $60 a month, and postage, $110-120 a month. There was also a lot of work involved in laying out and finding or creating graphics. With a mailing list of any appreciable size, you need to have software and person dedicated to the task of maintaining it: entering new names as they come in over the phone or from sign-up sheets, and dispatching first-time samples and renewal notices when appropriate. At the height of things, we made 700 copies per month around 250 of these went into the mail, the rest were dropped at different locations around town, just to get the word out. In the beginning, just to get some action going, we mailed flyers to any potential Cacophonist whose name and address we could extract. Gradually, we gained a little notoriety and confidence and could afford to purge the freeloaders, but we still were sending out freebies to first-timers asking for a sample, or to people to whom we were returning various favors.

The Postman & The Armchair Cacophonist

A few years ago, we introduced two different rates of postal subscription: regular ($10 yearly) and fanatics ($15). In keeping with SF tradition, we’d always included little enclosures with our mailings (found objects, prank flyers, temporary tattoos, etc.), but the fanatics got a higher quality and quantity of these mail art additions. Near the end of postal subscription, we found that roughly 90% of our subscribers were fanatics. It seemed that since the majority of these people were enjoying Cacophony strictly as a postal phenomenon, they’d decided they might as well make it a more worthwhile postal phenomenon and kicked in for the extras.
There is a curious, almost inhuman relationship between attendance and paid subscriptions. Those who are generally out and about doing events seem almost less concerned with maintaining contact as “official members.” Those who keep sending in money year after year tend to be in more outlying neighborhoods or cities and seem to be content with vicarious “membership.” It’s almost as if the concept of membership were antithetical to the Cacophony ideal (or maybe that’s just what I want to see).

The writing in the calendar, whether online or on paper, has always been important. I think it’s vital to have a good writer fanning the flame when it’s raging and to keep the embers glowing while Cacophony is not so active. Cacophony can sustain itself for quite a while in a zine-like dormancy—good newsletters (whether there’s news or not) keep the armchair Cacophonist at the ready, as does online discussion. When a real-world event actually pulls itself together, they’ll be prepared to plunge in.

All Online From Here! You’re Soaking In It
You’re enjoying the advantages of online propagation right now naturally. And it’s only right. As a fringe endeavor, Cacophony now, naturally inclines toward any means (legal or otherwise) of eliminating the expenses of print production. The Internet not only offers this, but it has also encouraged more spontaneously in planning, by accommodating the ever present need for last-minute updates on meeting times and places—advantages not possible when the calendar was printed and mailed a month in advance. Online publication also encourages potential participants by providing more information via event photographs, interactive maps, and links to additional online information about field trip destinations, targets for pranks, or artists participating in shows.

E-mail Community
We also have two types of email lists: REGULAR (a one-way list), which is used to announce each event several days before it happens, with copy lifted from the newsletter and DISCUSSION, which is used to interactively plan events, brainstorm, chat, build up community, etc. I’ve found the discussion list very, very helpful in generating more participation. Within the last few months in particular, most of the events have arisen from this list.

I was very hesitant originally about e-mail, thinking that it was for a bunch of stay-at-homes who’d rather chat online than do events, and while there is this aspect, it’s proven to be quite a good thing. A couple of years ago, I was opposed to dispersing information over the Net, thinking it was still too elitist, but today, particularly with employer-provided accounts, I think it’s universal enough.

Besides merely posting the information on the Web, and sending e-mail event announcements, Cacophony has created an interactive online community dedicated to collective brainstorming, sharing news of about-town oddities and activities, as well as discussing other esoteric and subversive topics of common interest. These days, it’s fairly common at Cacophony events to hear isolated loners emerge from the woodwork with the mention of an online identity or mail alias. “Yes, that’s me: isolated@monocerat.org!” Many fast friendships and hush/hush allegiances can be traced to the recent birth of this online discussion list.

Calling the Online Herd
Of course there are problems with any system. Nasty, irritating discussion list parasites crop up. Here are our rules for subscription to the discussion list:

1) Posts should have something to do with events.
2) Never send pictures to the list.
3) Don’t reply to all when an individual response will do. The default setting sends mail to the entire group. There are 200 or so people on this list. Do they all need to hear your response? If not, please copy and paste the INDIVIDUAL sender’s name in over the “To:” field.
4) No one liners. Examples: No “Hear! Hear!” No “I agree.” No “I’d be into doing this event.” A good use of this list is as a sounding board and informal survey, but when someone asks, “Is anyone interested?”, please email your “count me in” to the INDIVIDUAL. Some of you have been doing this already. Thanks, Peter. It also helps when you include a reminder in the body of your mail like “If interested, please mail me back at psyp@toomuchmail.com.”
5) No suggestions for events other people should do. Brainstorming is fine, and I know it’s not always possible to pull the best stunts off, but as a rule of thumb, make it something you would be willing to do.

Virtually Nothing
You can’t really tell who’s full of hot air online. This calls for a meeting. Face to face. We’ve found that actual monthly meetings in the real world help determine who’s just an online know-it-all and who’s ready to roll up their sleeves and do something. If they never make it to an actual meeting to discuss the ideas they’ve been going on about, it’s clear that they won’t make those ideas happen. Then we know to just politely ignore them when they beat their chests online. Meetings are fairly loose, but we do go down an agenda, basically reviewing past events one by one, discussing ideas for the coming month bandied about online, and then opening the floor to whatever new ideas there might be.

Online Brainpool
I made it my job to go back each month and print out notes for the meeting consisting of ideas suggested that month by the online discussion. I’d call people’s bluffs and see if they’d squirm out or move forward with the idea. Naturally, in a tolerably short meeting, all details, even the date of the event itself, don’t get resolved. All the follow-up used to get hashed out (inevitably at the last minute) via phone tag.

Webpages
Make no mistake; the Internet encourages anonymity, lurking, and vicarious living. The curious will want to know about your lodge without having to commit any personal information (such as their Hotmail address). For all they know, we might be certified lunatics with stalker tendencies, or worse, marketers. While it might not be essential for a small, familial lodge, consider building at least the simplest of websites. Many ISPs provide free space for their customers. And we’ll link off the national site, so new members can find you.

Visiting the other lodge websites, you’ll find various approaches. Your webpage should at the very least have contact information, so new members can find someone willing to tell them where the next event or meeting is. Next, it might contain info on upcoming events or even descriptions of completed ones. Eventually, you can add images, philosophy, links and whatever your little heart desires.

Finally
This advice is the culmination of the trials and tribulations of the LA chapter. Referring to them and other lodges, as your chapter grows, will spare you a lot of the headaches the other lodges had to endure. Good luck, agents.

Afterword (2012 comments)
I’m sure there must be some way to make Cacophony work in the Internet age. All those beautiful mail art decorations would probably not be worth their trouble today.

And I kind of think the Net has splintered society so much into niche interests that Cacophony is no longer called for; if you want to find a group for urban exploration, there are dozens online. If guerilla theater is more your thing, check out Improv Everywhere or its dozen knock-offs; for subvertising, go to Adbusters or its imitators. No central Cacophony clearinghouse is required these days to connect people with these disparate pursuits. The Internet is all about “all” culture and its armchair pursuit.
For the past three years, a growing group of art-damaged kids, kitsch hounds and amateur clowns have gathered together under the banner of the Los Angeles Cacophony Society. It’s a social group for the antisocial, those who prefer to think of themselves as outcasts. Each month, they organize a series of activities that get them out of the dark corners of boho enclaves like coffeehouses and underground night-clubs and into smudgy and pleasingly confusing worlds of their own making. They’ll do everything from worshiping at altars of bastardized Tiki culture to unannounced picnics in junkyards to today’s affair, which involves the infiltration of a barrio and fiddle contest. With their draping makeup, rubbing, ill-fitting costumes and jerry-rigged instruments, they’re fully aware that just by pulling up to the front gate they’ll make a scene. Which is probably why Al screeched around that last corner and kicked up a cloud of dust when he did.

Despite his two-and-a-half-foot-high, bright-orange cowboy hat and sooty, trash-covered black sport jacket, striped leggings and black toy sunglasses about two sizes too small for his head, whose rainbow-patterned cardboard lenses and black front window are two sizes too small for his head, whose rainbow-patterned cardboard lenses and black toy sunglasses about two sizes too small for his head, whose rainbow-patterned cardboard lenses cause him to squint and wildly careen across lanes.

Reverend Al sweats profusely, thick gobts of white pancake makeup oozing down his lips and covering his teeth as his turquoise ’64 Dodge Dart swerves up the 101 freeway. He and three other passengers are dressed as ragged rodeo clowns. Al sports an orange felt cowboy hat with a patch that says “Plumbers Have Bigger Tools,” a sooty, trash covered black sport jacket, striped leggings and black toy sunglasses about two sizes too small for his head, whose rainbow-patterned cardboard lenses cause him to squint and wildly careen across lanes.

Michael Bump, a CalArts student in his mid-20s, with a goatee, a nose ring, and a cheap thrift-store dress, pounds on the roof, spreads the cheeks of his hairy, bare ass and mooms recalling passers out of the back window. “I’ll teach them to stare at clowns,” he shouts. The car lunges violently to the right as Tonya Geddes (a.k.a. Punches the Clown), a former stripper at Jumbo’s Clown Room presently baring green teeth, fake freckles, and knitted pigtail, smashes against the passenger door. “It would be great if we got in a big pileup,” she yelps in a thick and ridiculously phony Southern accent. “Imagine the Highway Patrolmen trying to figure out why all of the bloody clown parts were strewn all over the highway.”

The kid shoots Al a look of utter confusion. “You sure that’s a good idea? It’ll cause permanent damage.” And with that, the little monster picks up Al’s clown room presently baring green teeth, fake freckles, and knotted pigtails, smashes against the passenger door. “It would be great if we got in a big pileup,” she yelps in a thick and ridiculously phony Southern accent. “Imagine the Highway Patrolmen trying to figure out why all of the bloody clown parts were strewn all over the highway.”

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Gump finds a hitching post and ties his leg to it with an old rope, growling like a rabid dog and lunging into the dirt. Al bends down to a kid and waves a toy pistol in the air. “Have you ever used a firearm?” he asks. “Well, here’s my offer. You can either shoot anybody here in the head at close range or you can beat on that clown over there as hard as you can.”

The kid shouts Al a look of utter confusion. “You sure that you don’t want to hit him in the face? It’ll cause permanent damage,” and with that, the little monster picks up Al’s plastic bat and whales on Gump and Bregman. “Why, if I weren’t tied to this bar, I’d smash your brain in,” Gump yells at the top of his lungs as they all start in on a weirdly violent Punch and Judy routine, beating each other with plastic bats, cursing, and howling. “Life is cruel and
violence is alluring." Bregman shouts as more kids get in on the act, lining up to do a little punch-the-clown while their parents cheer them on.

When one little boy gets to role up and starts to cry, Al puts on a portable toilet and says, "Real show in a half hour this room. Come see us in the toilet, and don't be scared, a clown doesn't bite."

Three National Park rangers on horse back trot up and jokingly ask Gump if he has a license to perform. "No sir," he says, slapping a hand down on his pants. "Just a license to molest children." Amazingly, they just laugh, shake their heads and ride off. But a parent standing within earshot isn't amused and calls them back. Ten minutes later, Gump is being led away in handcuffs.

A cluster of preteen hippie kids gathers around the cute little movie-set jailhouse where Gump is being interrogated. They stomp their feet and chant, "Free the clown!"

A ranger comes out of the office and bellows at them, which shuts them up for a bit, but a few minutes later, they're at it again. Mopping his knotted brow, the same ranger rushes out and smothers the kids. As he leads a liberated Gump out of the office, he gruffly says to Al, "What did you think you were gonna gain by acting the way you did?" We're just a bunch of clowns, sir. That's all," Al deadpans. "We just love to entertain."

"Well, your brand of entertainment just isn't right," the officer says, annoyed that he has to take another jib from these freaks. "So gather all of your friends up; I want you out of here. Now." And with that, he personally escorts them out of the festival, as the kids start cheering again. "Those kids are Cacophonists at heart," Bregman says. "You know what we're doing? We're depleting more clowns."

Cacophony's a franchise of absurdity. Today, besides L.A., there are branches in San Francisco, Seattle and Portland. They'll all gather at the ninth annual Burning Man festival, a communal get-together where hundreds gather in Nevada's Black Rock Desert to worship and then destroy—a four-story reenact and wood-eggify. It takes place over the Labor Day weekend.

The origins of Cacophony come from the gnarled roots of S.F.'s Communiversity. Created in 1971, it was an alternative university, one of those typically San Francisco hippie trips where anybody with enough "life experience" could teach a class on any subject. One of the classes taught at the school was named the Suicide Club, which attracted the more extreme elements of Communiversity and branched off as possible. Potential members had to go through bizarre initiation rites and communicated through a secretive newsletter. They prided themselves on being outrageous, sneaking into mortuaries and throwing morbid parties, scaling the Golden Gate Bridge, infiltrating cults such as the California Nazi Party and the Moories by posing as prospective members, just for the hell of it. But after a few years of this, the pressures of topping themselves event after event became too great (and Communiversity was fading out) they finally disbanded in 1982. One year later, Warne died of heart failure.

In 1986, over bad coffee and greasy scrambled eggs, some of the former Suicide Club members got together and formed the San Francisco Cacophony Society, which, like its former incarnation, dedicated itself to the exploration of the bizarre. But this time, they decided to lighten up a bit. "Gary had very strong ideas about the danger of publicly, so we really never allowed any press on Suicide," says Sebastian Melmoth, a S.F. Cacophony early member, who was involved with Suicide from 1977 on. "That was mainly because most of our events were illegal or somehow dangerous. When we started Cacophony, we made a conscious effort to network with other groups of individuals who were also involved in doing unusual things, and media coverage only makes us more accessible to them."

As before, they planned a month's worth of events and listed them in a newsletter. Now called Rough Draft, the newsletter extended an open invitation to new members. The activities moved from the illegal to the idiotic, from slipping into abandoned buildings to taking drinking tours in the seedy underbelly of S.F.'s Tenderloin district. There were no requirements or hooded rituals necessary for membership. Anybody who would enjoy, say, taking a tour of the city's sewers in formal attire could be considered part of the society.

When organizer Maxwel Maude briefly moved to Los Angeles in 1990, he decided to start up a local arm of Cacophony based on the original model. At first, he printed a truncated version of Rough Draft, retitling it Tales From the Zone (after S.F. Cacophony's "zone trips," printed a truncated version of Rough Draft, retitling it Tales From the Zone), (after S.F. Cacophony's "zone trips," retitling it Rough Draft, retitling it Tales From the Zone, later S.F. Cacophony's "zone trips," excursions outside of the city. "The Zone" also refers to "the state of consciousness where members hopefully end up during events," Al says) and listing a couple of hastily conceived events at the back. He left them in coffeehouses and announced that Cacophony was looking for other like-minded souls to start an LA branch. The response wasn't immediate, but over the course of a few months membership expanded.

The Zone slowly distinguished itself in Los Angeles, publicizing itself like '50s style street drag races and Gabriel Ballester's underground poetry readings and Blue Line spoken-word series. But there still wasn't enough solid interest to really get Cacophony established here. Time was running out, because Maude was planning to move back to San Francisco. This was shortly after Al Ridernour moved to town. He'd arrived in '89 from the Midwest, to study film at UCLA. For kids, he hung around with Eric Brown and a group of alcoholic poets who called themselves Rob With Keys. Named after their literary zine, they were an informal bunch of yahoos who party and occasionally staged impromptu plays and spoken, (more like slurred), word performances. On the Cut Foot telephone line (310-CUT FOOT), Brown or one of this pals would (and still do) announce whatever they considered to be the cool events of the day, from Cacophony outings to punk rock gigs to parties to art openings.

Through them, Ridernour had attended the Blue Line poetry events and drunk a lot of Crazy Horse. But he really hadn't given Cacophony much thought.

While struggling to slug down "an over-extracted espresso" at a mid-Wilshire coffeehouse, Ridernour thumbed through a pile of flyers and found a Zone that listed an event called "Close Encounters of the 5th Kind."

Basically, the Cacophonists were going to drop in on a UFO convention, poke some ironic fun at unsuspecting "spaced-out earwigs," and distribute bogus flyers announcing the coming of an intergalactic apparition called "the Magnetic Jesus," whom the Cacophonists were planning to land in Marina del Rey Park.

"When I grew up, I had always been obsessed with weird religions and cults, so I immediately called Max up and told him that I wanted in. That night, I sat down and wrote up a proposal for all kinds of things that I would want to organize with them, but it was beyond their scope at the time," Maude suggested Ridernour get his feet wet by first helping with the space landing. That night he became Reverend Al.
We are the pranksters, poets, artists, undisciplined children, wise fools, and wise asses, the bug under the rug, the termites in society’s crutches, the bad egg at the corporate picnic, the vital spirits of cultural fermentation.

You may already be a member!

-from The Zone

I had recently come here form the Midwest and longed to be involved with something besides going to art openings and clubs.” Al says. A tall, handsome guy in his early 30s with dyed black hair and a pierced ear, Al gets so excited when he talks about his latest weird discovery that he nearly stutters. He describes his family as “wealthy transients” who moved all over the country when he was growing up. From his mid-teens through early 20s, he lived in Evansville, Indiana, and majored in English and German literature at Indiana University. While his two older brothers found God, Al worked part-time in a mental hospital and developed an affinity for the unusual. “They went Jesus-freaking and never came out of it,” Al says. “One owns a Bible bookstore and the other one is archly conservative, but I had always been obsessed with weird religions and cults. I started to collect filing cabinets of flyers, religious tracts and pamphlets of cheesy tourism, and, thanks to my mom, ears full of gloriously bad music.” With Cacophony, Al has found an audience eager for the dissemination and celebration of the cults that obsessed him. For the last three years he’s been at the pulpit of L.A. Cacophony, writing, publishing and distributing The Zone, and coming up with many events. When members want to create events, they’ll pitch their ideas to Al. His guidelines for approval are based on the San Francisco model: basically any cracked idea is fine, as long as it is not-for-profit and not used to promote any religious or political point of view. Al adds one more stipulation: “Lately, there are lots of lightweight ideas floating around, like yard sales and hiking jaunts which are fine in and of themselves, but not for Cacophony. I prefer to do edgy events, ones that require lots of participation and are outrageous.”

Like the surrealists and Dadaists before them, the Cacophonists revel in the shocked stare, the confused head shake of the straights. They band together because the more people there are, the easier it is to make a scene. When one guy walks down Hollywood Boulevard covered in garbage you think he must be nuts. But when a whole group does it, it’s a movement.

Cacophony members like to remind you just how weird they are, whether dressing as bears and fucking up a Sunday-afternoon picnic in Griffith Park or painting flames and cow skulls on their cars and driving around town, pleased as hell at the attention. Unlike the oddballs they so love to celebrate, however, the Cacophonists have the advantage of being able to wash off whatever they’ve rolled in.

There’s an openness to the events, a haphazardness that makes them all that much more appealing to members. For the most part, the only structure or guidelines to the events are what Al writes down in The Zone. For “Cacophony Delight,” creator Invisible Ray, a slightly disheveled, soft-spoken guy in his mid 30’s, who lives in his car, noticed that a lot of people read the newsletter but don’t have the time to go to events. So he got a bunch of members together to deliver Cacophony to them. They had only three takers. For one, “I had no idea what was going to happen until we got to the place,” Ray says. “Rosewise and Chuckles came along in clown gear. We caused mayhem for about 45 minutes, burst in singing filthy songs, blowing on kazoos, and chasing three people around their house. We tied this one woman up with tape, and she got so into it that she sent me over to her neighbor’s house. She said that he needed a dose of Cacophony.” He wasn’t home.

Al “Miracle of the Bleeding Cross,” the cacophonists emulate the spectacles they had read about in religious texts. A crowd of about 70 people gathered in the parking lot of Los Feliz’s Mondo Video; a giant crucifix that was supposed to squirt on command had been erected. With projections of TV evangelists flickering on brick walls, someone shaking a metal sheet for thunder effects, and the wheezing sound of a phase-shifted harmonium swirling behind him, Reverend Al, a purple robe barely covering his worn high-top sneakers, nambled incoherently about blood and the power of money, grabbed and blindfolded audience members for a game of “Pin the Jesus on the Cross,” and brought out “wretched souls” (Cacophony members) to be saved from afflictions like pubic lice and boredom.

Naturally, there were about five clowns in attendance, serving no apparent purpose. When the big moment arrived for the cross to squirt its stickiness over the flames and cow skulls on their cars and driving around town, pleased as hell at the attention. Unlike the oddballs they so love to celebrate, however, the Cacophonists have the advantage of being able to wash off whatever they’ve rolled in.

There’s a thread that binds events from scurrying around the streets of Hollywood dressed like garbage to dropping in on Echo Park’s Super Light Church to drunkenly snicker through a sermon. By not aligning itself with anything other than the exploration and creation of the unusual, Cacophony tries to tie various fringes with anything other than the exploration and creation of the unusual, Cacophony tries to tie various fringes
Cacophonist Donovan Lerman, who gladly filled the thing
When they cover themselves in mud and stroll down
inserting eccentric behavior into everyday environments.
performer are destroyed. Members of Cacophony create
With Cacophony, the lines between audience and
gallery or nightclub.

Mad

strongly of

Artforum

aligning themselves with art history, even though a lot
If you talk to most members, they'll shy away from
of popcorn everywhere, and setting off fireworks, ending
around the parking lot, screaming, dumping huge sacks
drenching everybody within range, as the clowns skipped
minutes later, Al was running through the crowd with it,
was piss-drunk, but the cross still barley trickled. Two
balding thespians, Al was ready to try again. Donovan
tongue-in-cheek testimonials by three 250-pound,
cheap wine into it. After endless spirituals and disturbing
when he found out that meant blowing a couple jugs of

The grotesque and irrational are exactly the qualities
outing and assign to it a certain spiritual significance.
our events can be appreciated on many levels and whoever

Cacophony's annual Nuclear Family Picnic. The Trojan
Plant was situated on a lovely stretch of nature alongside
the grand Columbia River just northwest of Portland.
We drove our mutant vehicles, many of them standards
from the Portland Beaters Club, around the barricades
and into the verdant, overgrown garden alongside the
decommissioned nuclear power facility. Back in 1970,
right in the middle of the early anti-nuke movement,
some industry flack figured it would help the plant's
public profile to create a pleasant, manicured public
access park directly under the ominously looming
cooling tower that squatted like some colossal toad along
side the reactor core.

This was indeed the perfect place for a family picnic: a
family of mutants! Barbecued meat of very suspect
origins was passed around from clubbed fists to what
appeared to be flipper-like appendages of the various
mutants, to be crammed into their gaping maws. Someone
had constructed a large trebuchet for hurling

Portland Cacophony's Nuclear Family Picnic: Reverend Chuck was loading stuffed animals into a large
bore, home-made mortar using a broom handle. Jim
Skinner had welded this “home-defense” cannon
together especially for the day's festivities. I was in Portland
for a visit, and, luckily my trip coincided with a Portland
Cacophony's annual Nuclear Family Picnic. The Trojan
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animals not already slated for cannon fodder. Watching a
purple Barney doll prescribe a perfect arc over the razor
wire atop the plant's defense perimeter fence, I wondered
why security had not yet made a grounds survey, or in any
other way shown any interest in our illicit gathering, and
the amateur projectile seminar taking place alongside
the plant. I decided to walk the fence line with the vague
idea of maybe sneaking onto the grounds. Sure enough,
a few hundred feet down the fence line there was a hole
cut along the very bottom of the fence, just big enough
to crawl under. I took a deep breath and wiggled under,
fully expecting black clad nuke plant ninjas to drop on me
out of the trees. Nothing. I crouched and, eyes squinting,
went further into the compound. No ninjas. I walked
even further. Nothing! Excellent! I looked up the hill to
the massive cooling tower. Maybe, with a group, we could
make it up there and get inside the thing, just like the
dentist, drapes of black clad napparers and Sam Lowry
in the movie Brazil!! Hmmmm… we’d need a cute kid and
a dog for sympathy, in case we were apprehended. “It was
the dog, officer… she ran through the hole in the fence
and, well, we HAD TO rescue her before she got lost in the
plant and, well, irradiated or something!”
I went back to the picnic to see who was game for a little
exploration.

With Cacophony, the lines between audience and
performer are destroyed. Members of Cacophony create
their own entertainments, diversions, and realities by
inserting eccentric behavior into everyday environments.
When they cover themselves in mud and stroll down
Rodeo Drive, stumble through Universal CityWalk
dressed like post-apocalyptic zombies, or sell bars of
mud on Venice Beach as a phony mud-craft organization,
they’re obviously in it for the pure spectacle. But in their
own ridiculous way, they’re saying something about how
segments of society alienate each other. We are the
outcasts, Cacophonists cry out, but look at yourself, you
don’t fit in either. Who would want to?

Above: LA Cacophony Society’s monthly newsletter, Tales From The Zone. LA was, and remains, the first Cacophony “Zone.”
Marci McFarland, Kevin Mathieu, a cute kid, a dog, me and a few others crawled under the fence and crept up the hill to another chain link job that ringed the base of the tower. We walked all around looking for some breach in this barricade that was keeping us from the tantalizing edifice that hovered just above us. So close and yet so far...

Victor and I were debating the wisdom of trying to get the crew over the fence or perhaps tunneling. I climbed over, avoiding the barbed wire with some difficulty, and scraping my leg pretty well in the process. I looked over, and there was Kevin on my side, the private side of the heavily fortified fence, grinning. He had simply walked up to the (unlocked) gate and opened it up.

We crept several stories up an exterior metal staircase to a single doorway right in the curved surface of the cooling tower’s concrete battlements, all the while keeping an eye on the two or three security trucks at the bottom of a gradual slope, several hundred feet to the north, and parked in front of the reactor building. The doorway was unlocked! Inside, a grid of horizontal concrete beams atop vertical beams spanning to the bottom of the tower pit afforded us an easy stroll out to the exact middle of the massive tower. Not wanting to push our luck too much, we soon packed it in and slunk back through the fences rejoining our fellow mutants at the picnic, literally glowing from our recent exploration.

Opposite page top: Nuclear Family Radiation Badge. Bottom: The Reverend Charles Linville and Our Lady of Internal Combustion. Linville was Portland’s most visible member. He was also a career letter carrier for the US Postal Service. His superiors were reputedly VERY careful when assigning his postal routes. He typically got the best ones.

Above: Many Lodges renamed their newsletters contingent on the whim of that month’s editor. Advertisements for valuable commercial services were frequently included in the mailers. There is no record for how much business Cacophony generated for Smith and Smyth.
Above and facing page: Machination was the monthly newsletter of the Seattle Cacophony Society.
The Detroit Cacophony Society was started when neon sign maker, vintage objects collector, and San Francisco Cacophony Society member Dennis Borawski decided to put his Bay Area ghosts behind him and fled back to Michigan. He had grown up in Grosse Pointe, an affluent suburb just north of Detroit, where he claims that all the Grosse Pointe cops knew him when he was a teenager. It’s the kind of place where if you’re driving in a car from Detroit with a load of guys and it’s late at night and you decide to take a short cut through Grosse Pointe on the way home, which is what several friends and I did one night, the cop sitting at the side of the road at the boundary between the two towns will pull the car over to check you out, giving as a reason something about your speed. As long as you’re driving legally, he won’t give you a ticket, but by then he’s already made the point he’s assigned there to make: people from Detroit aren’t welcome in Grosse Pointe.

To understand why this is so, you have to know that the Detroit riots took place in 1968. This caused massive white flight to the suburbs, which changed the local ethnic composition from 75% white and 25% black and others to 80% black and others and 20% white, as Detroit’s population shrank from 2,000,000 in 1968 to 975,000 in 1998. One of the economically devastating effects of this massive demographic shift was that Detroit became famous for its abandoned buildings. And many of them were big downtown buildings, like the Book Cadillac Hotel.

So when Borawski started organizing a Detroit Cacophony Society, he knew its location in one of the United States’ premier decaying urban environments was a natural. He got the monthly newsletter going in June of 1998 (called The Organ Grinder— an ironic homage to the San Francisco Society newsletter’s subtitle: The Official Organ of the San Francisco Cacophony Society). Even though its first event was an absinthe party, with participants wearing twentieth century Left Bank costumes, the Detroit organization seemed more like the old San Francisco Suicide Club than San Francisco Cacophony, because they did a lot more urban exploration, occasioned by the presence of some 8,500 abandoned buildings, all of them waiting to be explored. (Not to mention other abandoned infrastructures, such as railroad stations and tunnels, auto manufacturing plants, and salt mines.) For example, The Organ Grinder offered Urban Spelunking: Each month we will be giving a guided tour of some of Detroit’s bygone splendor. Other popular events were pyrotechnic...
Above: Stationery from zombie buildings provided a novel way of introducing these ghostly spaces to new Cacophony explorers, a habit Harry Haller picked up in the Suicide Club. It proved a popular method for communicating details of Cacophony events as well.

Facing page: A group of Detroit, San Francisco, and Brooklyn Cacophony members exploring the rotting Book Cadillac Hotel in downtown Detroit and negotiating a Tyrolean traverse across roofs of the 30-plus story building.

The same group explored a Detroit icon—the Giant Tire, rumored to have been constructed from the skeleton of an old Ferris wheel. Other Detroit events involved kayaking around Zug Island, the location of a steel plant; exploration of a street of abandoned single-family houses that a local artist and his volunteers turned into art projects as a defense against neighborhood crime; rappelling down the airshaft of a 20 story abandoned building; and pyrotechnics inside the abandoned Detroit train station.

displays. A promising sounding July event, Painting with Explosives, failed to come off, when the guy with the warehouse space to stage it had last minute thoughts.

When I visited the Detroit Society several times in 1998 and 1999, we rappelled off a couple of downtown skyscrapers and explored several more. One of the buildings we got into was a 20 plus story hotel, that in spite of having been abandoned for over a decade, contained a large stash of unopened bottles of liquor and wines in a subbasement, which the local derelicts hadn’t yet found. It seems there were just too many closed up buildings for even Detroit’s homeless to explore.

We also climbed the south tower of the Ambassador Bridge (a privately owned suspension bridge crossing the Detroit River into Canada) and had a party inside Detroit’s famed Giant Tire one night, where, in true Suicide Club fashion, we talked the cops out of busting us. (We were less lucky in an abandoned tunnel belonging to the Grand Trunk Railroad, however.) The Detroit Cacophonists also climbed to the roof of one abandoned building—the Detroit Hilton—to watch the implosion of another abandoned building—Hudson’s Department Store, a 25 story building occupying an entire square block that employed 12,000 people and served 100,000 shoppers a day, until it closed in 1983.

If you go there to visit, Borawski will take you places like the Cadieux Cafe, a Belgian restaurant and bar that has its own feather bowling court (called Kurlbollen in Flemish), this being a bocce ball-like activity in which the goal is to get as many cheese wheel shaped balls as close to the feather stuck in the dirt at the far end of the court as possible. And the court isn’t flat—its surface is curved, like a shallow trough. While only rarely played in Belgium any more, elderly Belgian-American men still live and die for feather bowling in the Cadieux Cafe, it being the only place in the United States where it is played.
Urban Exploring in Detroit (How Not to Do It)

The round metal cylinder hanging from the ceiling of the train tunnel appeared to be in excellent shape. The water tight electrical conduit feeding it looked tight and the connection at the backside of the cylinder was clean, as was the entire receptacle. In other words, it really looked like a security camera that was in use. Thankfully it was pointing away from us; its viewing range was down the tunnel and toward Canada. It was the first camera we saw, and it got us wondering if we had passed other, perhaps better hidden, cameras—cameras that HAD seen us. Cameras that had also seen the long rifle and large propane canisters that we were carrying into an underground international border crossing. Maybe this exercise was not such a great idea after all...

Dennis Borawski, with the help of Karl Heiney, Julia Solis, Harry Haller, and others, had started up a Detroit Cacophony Chapter recently. Hundreds of labyrinthine abandoned buildings made Detroit the richest environment for urban exploration in the US. It was a perfect city for a Cacophony outpost. Dennis invented the pastime of propane shooting at Burning Man, during the 1993 desert event. Along with Stuart Margrum, Robert Burk, and others, he fine-tuned the sport in succeeding years. Who knew initially that shooting a pressurized propane canister with a high powered rifle from a distance would not make the thing blow up, but would merely free it to skitter menacingly around, while venting the gaseous contents out the tiny bullet holes in its casing? Taping or tying a burning road flare to the canister did the trick as further tests would show, allowing the escaping gas to instantly ignite, creating a massive explosion. By the time Dennis moved back to his home town to start the local chapter in 1997, he had perfected the art of propane shooting and was leading expeditions into decaying edifices around town for the express purpose of filling the largest rooms he could find with fireballs.

There were several San Franciscans on the ill-fated Detroit-Windsor train tunnel trip. Most, like Dennis, were seasoned veterans of urban exploration. Some were old hands with firearms. All of them knew better than to undertake this particular endeavor, but it was Detroit Devil’s Night. The urban apocalypse. No cops. Anything goes.

The tunnel entrance was in the middle of a thoroughly desolate and largely abandoned industrial landscape. There were a few occupied buildings nearby, just crumbling factories, weed choked lots, and the burnt-out husks of long abandoned vehicles. After a long grade descent through a stained concrete trough, the double barrel tracks slipped through a stained concrete trough, the double barrel tracks slipped into a stained concrete trough, the double barrel tracks slipped into a stained concrete trough, the double barrel tracks slipped under a small bridge, and, assuming no cameras had picked up our highly illegal props, head off any deeper prying into the tunnel’s depths by the authorities. We had no idea what the two arrestees were telling their captor(s) but knew that even the stupidest cop would be certain there were others, simply due to the surplus of vehicles parked together in the dumb place (see First mistake).

By now, one of the Detroit explorers unfamiliar to us had started hyperventilating, and Fourth mistake: it became clear she had probably ingested some kind of mind altering drug, prior to embarking on our adventure. By the time Harry and I spotted the surveillance police car, the dumb place (see First mistake). There were a lucky thirteen people on the event. First mistake: we parked several cars in a place no one should. Second mistake: we entered the tunnel planning to end up somewhere around midpoint between Detroit and Windsor, the United States and Canada. Dennis had vetted the tunnel, more or less, and figured we could shoot the propane canister directly under the international border, a hundred feet beneath the Detroit River. Third mistake: Chicken John and Silke informed us, after we were underground, that they needed to leave right then, in order to have enough time to wheel their rental car to Wisconsin for a meeting the next morning.

The urban apocalypse was not nearly as bad an outset for the evening as going to jail for engineering an international incident involving large caliber rifles and armor piercing ammo. Dennis sheepishly acquiesced and I was elected to reconnoiter the tunnel entrance/exit we had so recently entered to insure the group’s safety while exiting. Well, God protects the child, the drunk, and the fool. I tiptoed closer to the dim light of the entrance. Sure enough, a filmy wash of red and blue lights flashed dully off the dirty tunnel walls. What were clearly muffled police radio calls echoed off the concrete all around. I crept out silently, a shadow among shadows. There was a worn concrete stair just at the opening. I crept up the stair, eventually peering through a chink in the wall out into the train yard. Silke and Chicken were sitting in the, hands cuffed behind. I could just make out the rear end of a white police sedan. I could not tell if there were more...

I bolted silently back down the stair into the tunnel, and back toward Canada. After rejoining the group, Harry and I insisted we ditch both the rifle and propane canister as best we could. Then we wrangled the group, as silently as we were able, to within a hundred feet of the entrance. This served the dual purpose of putting some distance between us and the now fingerprint-less contraband and being close enough to the entrance to be able to exit en masse, should it become apparent that the police were preparing to sweep the tunnel. We figured we could convince them that we were just exploring the tunnel and, assuming no cameras had picked up our highly illegal props, head off any deeper prying into the tunnel’s depths by the authorities. We had no idea what the two arrestees were telling their captor(s) but knew that even the stupidest cop would be certain there were others, simply due to the surplus of vehicles parked together in the dumb place (see First mistake).

By now, one of the Detroit explorers unfamiliar to us had started hyperventilating, and Fourth mistake: it became clear she had probably ingested some kind of mind altering drug, prior to embarking on our adventure. Harry, who was a talented mental health professional, spent some focused energy on calming the sweating, squirming, and generally agitated party girl down.

It had now been some time since we had regrouped near the tunnel entrance, and there was no sign of any impending V-formation SWAT team sweep heading our way. We decided to calmly exit together in a relaxed group manner, should it become apparent that the police were about to arrive. No one knew what was in the tunnel, who had vetted the tunnel, or what the authorities were planning on doing. It was an open and unscripted prospect to the authorities, who had no idea what the two arrestees were telling their captor(s) but knew that even the stupidest cop would be certain there were others, simply due to the surplus of vehicles parked together in the dumb place (see First mistake).

There was one cop. He was a Railroad Special Officer. Rather he was THE Railroad Special Officer: the only one for the entire district – an area almost fifty miles across. He stumbled upon our insufficiently hidden cars entirely by chance. He had written Chicken and Silke up for trespassing on RR property and had already released them, when the mass of us exited the tunnel. Not having any more handcuffs, he allowed us to mill cooperatively about as he dug his citation booklet back out of his briefcase. He only had five numbered tickets left in the booklet. There were eleven un-cited malefactors left. Being a fair man, he chose to not write any more tickets, rather than being compelled to pick which of us were most deserving, or calling for back-up from his HQ left in the booklet. There were eleven un-cited malefactors left. Being a fair man, he chose to not write any more tickets, rather than being compelled to pick which of us were most deserving, or calling for back-up from his HQ.

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A VIGIL FOR CACOPHONY

Julia Solis

Many, many tears were shed for Jimmy the Beard.

Some years ago in a San Francisco nightclub, a man named Jimmy the Beard was frolicking with his stripper girlfriend atop a trick piano, when its lift mechanism went off, crushing him against the ceiling. According to the police, the screaming stripper was too intoxicated to remember how she ended up pinned between a piano and a quickly cooling corpse. But one thing was clear—Jimmy’s body heroically provided the cushion that saved her life.

Luckily for Jimmy, we decided that his good deed should not be forgotten. In October 2006, the Cacophony Society’s 20-year anniversary was coming up, and the crews behind Dark Passage and the Madagascar Institute – two groups that grew out of Brooklyn Cacophony – were ready to celebrate. Chad Mulligan wanted to involve a suspended piano in the San Francisco festivities. How would we match this in New York? When our collaborator Kim Couchot remembered Jimmy, the answer became obvious.

We would honor this anniversary with a candlelight vigil for Jimmy the Beard. The setting: Union Square Park at night. The plan: tables covered with elegant white linen and candles, a large commemorative poster on a stand for Jimmy (the first photo we found in a Google image search for “beard”), pamphlets telling his life and death story, some cake and champagne. During our solemn celebration, a posse of clowns would arrive and set up a toy piano next to us, played by Caution Mike. The mourners would get outraged at the clowns: “Can’t you see we’re grieving for our Jimmy who was killed by a piano?” John Law (mourner) would wrestle Caution Mike (clown) to the ground, followed by a massive pie fight. So far so good.

For a moment, everything was actually going as planned. The tables were set up, filling the walkways inside the park with beautiful candlelight. Ed Snible had crafted a thoughtful memento mori of a naked Barbie doll spread-eagled on a tiny piano. The mourners in fancy funeral attire were answering questions and handing out pamphlets to passersby. Mothers and children, drawn by the pretty lights, expressed their condolences in hushed tones. The clowns entered, and then things went horribly wrong.

What we hadn’t counted on were the skate punks. A group of unsuspecting guys on skateboards were watching Caution Mike set up a toy piano next to the mourners. They weren’t just outraged, they were ready to defend the mourners with their fists. We couldn’t believe our luck at this turn of events. The skate punks shouted, the clowns yelled back. John Law, dressed in a handsome black suit and robbed of his role, decided to wrestle the piano player anyway, as one of the punks bashed a clown with his board. The pies came out. Whipped cream and shaving cream softened the sounds of skateboards
smoking against skulls. Mothers and children stood back, sobbing. By now, reports were coming in from all sides that cops were surrounding the park. And as we all know, if there’s one thing New York is good at, it’s having cops ensnare an unruly crowd.

We immediately began our exodus, but it was too late; the cops were already waiting for us on Park Avenue. Luckily, we were saved by a diversion. Thanks John Fresh from the fight. John busted out of the park and past the cops, who yelled at him to stop. Holding on to his fedora, he darted straight into traffic, as the cops gave chase. I couldn’t believe what he was doing – covered head to toe in cream pies, he was running into bustling New York traffic to escape a group of angry cops. Drivers slammed on their brakes as he jumped over street dividers and ran down 16th Street, where more police were closing in. This would have been much more entertaining if John and I didn’t have a date to go wading through the Pope’s poop in the Cloaca Maxima sewers of Rome, and had to catch a plane in the morning. I began grieving in earnest as I watched him get handcuffed and taken away. Oh well, I’d just have to send him a postcard of a floating piece of shit from Rome.

Everyone assembled in a bar trying to get news of John. A few hours later he walked laughing through the door. He had told the police the truth – he was mourning the victim of a tragic accident when he was attacked and had to defend himself, and when he ran out, confused by the bright traffic lights, he was simply trying to get away from the clowns.

As we drove home in a cab, the park looked peaceful and deserted, except for the large poster of Jimmy, which miraculously was still standing, commemorating what is surely our favorite tragedy involving strippers, pianos, and beards.

Above: Pioneering sexologist Ducky Doolittle settled in NYC after touring the country with the Circus Redickuless. Ducky, known at the time for her popular pie-sitting fetish, did her best to spread the joy of Cacophony through the boroughs. Facing page: Part of an e-mail exchange about the starting of a Cacophony lodge in Toronto, 1999. Brooklyn Cacophony founder and Burning Man militia leader William Abernathy weighs in.
Fellow Travelers
Terrified movie goers tumbled out of the Roxie Theater, certain that they had just experienced a massive earthquake. Outside, in the middle of 16th Street, they found a V-1 rocket engine mounted on a flatbed truck and spouting a death ray of flame. Survival Research Labs’ founder Mark Pauline had just decided to stage an impromptu performance of one of his creations. What sounded like a mechanized tank assault on the Eastern Front sidetracked officers from a nearby undercover drug surveillance; confused and uncertain how to proceed, they escorted Pauline and his contraption to the Mission District’s police station.

The Lieutenant on watch, not knowing what to make of the massive metal cylinder mounted on the truck and misunderstanding or simply not believing the officers (who by now had discreetly fled the area) description of what the thing did, said to Pauline: “Well, show me what it does.” Grinning, Pauline wound up the massive jet engine, while John Law, Karen Marzolo, Violet Blue and others made sure no other cars were coming. Ten thousand decibels of painful noise and 50 feet of flame shot across 18th Street.

No one could hear what the cop was saying, as he leaped up and down, red-faced, and obviously shouting at the top of his lungs. But they could read his lips: “TURN IT OFF! TURN IT OFF!” Pauline obliged. Explaining to his superiors that he had allowed such a thing on a busy commercial street was clearly going to cost him. All he could say was, “Get that fucking thing OUT OF MY PRECINCT! And NEVER come back!”

Cacophony had many fellow travelers and co-conspirators over the years and worked well with all sorts of other creative cabals. Hippie era groups like the Diggers and the Merry Pranksters were local heroes to many in Cacophony. Early ’70s art and performance ensembles, like the Cockettes and Anti Farms, shared a sense of absurd gaiety with the soon to emerge Cacophony-Rough Draft, in addition to direct Cacophony event listings, provided (in many issues) a “Sounds Like Cacophony” section, where that month’s editor would include write-ups about events prepared and executed by other, sometimes related, groups, individuals, or organizations. Some of these groups had members in common with Cacophony, and others may only have inspired the interest of that month’s editor, through some parallel sensibility or more obscure connections.

Sister Kitty Cabaljo and Sister Dana, primary ‘nuns’ in the protean gay activist/pranks group, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, were frequent editors of Rough Draft and cross over event organizers. Jack Napier and Irving Glikk, cofounders of the Billboard Liberation Front, and Simon Wagstaffe, the first press agent of the world’s longest running and best known billboard alteration crew, were (reputedly) all

Above: Brody Culpepper at a Big Rig Industries desert training exercise at an undisclosed location.

Facing page: A dream that someone in NYC Urban Exploration cabal Dark Passage might have had in 2001, somewhere on the Eastern Seaboard.

“There is no underground anymore. What would ‘underground’ mean now anyway, ‘underexposed?’”
— Scott Beale, Laughing Squid

Cacophony 2.0 and Fellow Travelers

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involved in Cacophony under different names and at different times. The Chinese New Year’s Treasure Hunt, which takes place during the world-famous Chinese New Year’s Parade through Chinatown every February, began as a Suicide Club event in 1977. For over ten years, it was hosted by Cacophony. This annual event sent teams of competitors tearing through the massively crowded, narrow streets of the district at a time when passage could hardly be more obscured.

Cacophony agents occasionally co-hosted events with artists and genuine art ensembles. In the case of Kill Your TV, Cacophony provided a template and a huge artistic and prayerful carte blanche, and collaborative fashion not typical of their standard performances. Performers also collaborated in the Car Hunt event on a small, very desolate playa in Northern Nevada, not far from the Great Playa of the Black Rock Desert.

This new generation of Cacophonists took the underlying philosophy of no leaders, no dogma, and no direction to heart. The burgeoning world of online communication eventually became the new and primary conduit for organizing events. Cacophony had relied on the Rough Draft for primary dissemination of information and listing of events since its premier in 1986, but that was all to change soon enough.

The soon to be worldwide mob scenes–innumerable Santa events, Bride, Zombie, clown, or pillow fight events, The Urban Iditarod, Urban Golf, and other urban prank events–were, for better or worse, driven by the growing Internet flash mob social networking phenomenon. All were to some degree foreshadowed by the coffee-house and U.S. Postal Service distributed Rough Draft, with its monthly subversive sampling of Cacophonous happenings.

Cacophony Online

In 1995, Richard Peterson started the first Cacophony web site on Zpub. At the time, most Cacophonists had no idea what a website actually was or what Internet access was to portend. Around the same time, nascent filmmaker and Ohio transplant Scott Beale started videotaping many Cacophony events and providing the organizers with VHS copies. Most organizers were too scattered to coordinate filming of their own events and too poor to pay anyone to do it, so Scott very quickly ingratiated himself into the core of Cacophony central, even though he wasn’t actually creating events at that time. Having a clear video of the last night’s explosion, fluid rich prank, or costumed assault on civic decency (or whatever event you organized) was the icing on the cake.

Unlike the earlier Suicide Club, Cacophony was not averse to press interest or careful recording of the group’s exploits, and so the videotaping of many of the events became a regular occurrence. Doug Welman and Chuck Grinn were two shooters who, along with Scott, shot many of the mid-period Cacophony happenings.

In addition to video production, Scott Beale was nurturing an interest in, and expanding his knowledge of, the rapidly expanding World Wide Web. Scott and others began encouraging their fellow Cacophonists to create their own websites and also started to explore various methods of getting the word about the any and confusing events and pranks Cacophony was hosting and/or inspiring. By 1998, Cacophony 2.0 had emerged, and they were creating most of the new events and, taking a cue from Scott Beale and his website Laughing Squid, driving Cacophony in some new directions using the tools of the emerging online media.
Events like the Pigeon Roast in Union Square (alongside a PETA (pro-animal political protest) and the staging of a Republican political rally in the heart of Berkeley “free speech” territory. People’s Park, started getting the 2.0 kids in lots of entertaining trouble. With no one leader or target for the animal and “free speech” lovers to assault, they were able to play with ideas of what free really means, with less of a chance of getting a black eye. Many of the 2.0 organizers were instrumental in the ensuing flash mob and Internet crowd sourcing events of the early ‘oughts. Cacophony, with the Santa Rampage (Santarchy, SantaCon) and later Shred of March, Zombie and Cowen mob happenings, helped reinvent street communication through collective, impromptu street performance. In the beginning of Cacophony’s history, the call to action through the mail and printed tracts reached a limited number of people. By the late ’90s and early ’00s, events were disseminated through online means and reached a wider audience. Eventually, the very mechanism that spread the ideas and prank potential of Cacophony spoiled the end of a need for any actual Cacophony organization.

Culture Jamming: San Francisco’s new pranksters: The subversive laughter of the next generation

The San Francisco Bay Guardian

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Brad Wiens

Culture Jammers

From Shark Bait to the BLF, San Francisco is still the nation’s prankster capital. San Francisco is one of those rare psycho-geographical places that naturally attracts people prone to the unusual and the outrageous. Thus the Bay Area has a long tradition of using the public prank to rattle the cage of consensus reality: as a vehicle for cultural or political statements, for anarchistic self-expression, or just for freaking people out. Over the years, various groups and individuals—some anonymous, others with pseudonyms, since many pranks involve trespassing and occasionally defacing or destroying public and private property—have made their way into local legend and even the international performance art scene by staging pranks that run from the ludicrous to the downright dangerous.

Mark Pauline is the essential prankster. Pauline, who founded Survival Research Labs in 1979 with partners Matt Heckert and Eric Werner, inspired a whole generation of pranksters. SRL events feature machines, built from scavenged parts, that fight each other and often explode. When Pauline and his crew aim one of their hallmark diesel flame cannons at a diorama of The Last Supper or a pyramid of TVs, being there takes on new meaning. Along with Pauline, the activities of Jack Napier of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF) and the principals of the Cacophony Society (“You may already be a member”) have guaranteed the Bay Area a healthy minimum of media mischief and freelance anarchy.

And now they have company. The late ’80s and early ’90s have shown that the spirit of pranking is alive and well and living in the Bay Area. New members have shored up the ranks of the BLF and the Cacophony Society, while newcomer pranksters have launched their own rebel enterprises. Some see themselves as carrying on a vaunted San Francisco tradition; others believe they are participating in a new phase of activism called “culture jamming,” still others eschew historical references or vague labels of any sort.

What the following Bay Area pranksters do share is a sense of urgency that the Republicans or television or toxic corporations have too much power and must be neutralized through subversive laughter.

Shark Bait

Whether you call Shark Bait a “band” or “entertainers” depends on your encounter with them. Shark Bait makes techno-industrial noise or, as one reviewer put it, “high-speed tectonic minimalism.” But they are best known for getting others— their audience—to make their own noise. The group’s love of chaos led them to create “crushfests,” where audience members are given drum sticks, corrugated roofing, car fenders, and other junk to generate a massive and deafening percussion section, and their signature “crush cage,” in which audience members can don a motorcycle helmet and gloves to safely, but dramatically, beat the hell out of an old television.

The crush cage has become so popular (it was featured at Lollapalooza and Kill Your TV, an event sponsored by the Cacophony Society last October) that Shark Bait is trying to copyright the idea.

Member Chris Taylor reports that, at present, Shark Bait is anchored by himself, the fire-breathing Mr. Clean, and Chiders, the central sonic manipulator. Though they plan to produce and record an album this year and embark on a national tour, Taylor emphasizes the improvised aspects of their work.

“The destructiveness came from our shows,” Taylor says. “People were always beating on our stage and slamming, so we decided to give them something more to beat on. Pretty soon we were bringing truckloads of metal to our shows.”

Though the mayhem at their shows often proves cathartic for Shark Bait crowds, it hasn’t exactly helped to get the band gigs. A few San Francisco club and warehouse owners have lived to regret the day they told Shark Bait to trash away, because of collateral damage. For the same reason, some bands have also shunned the group, refusing to play at the same gig with them.

One of Taylor’s favorite Shark Bait pranks involved a headlining band that had Shark Bait cut out from the bill of a San Francisco club more than a year ago. The techno-industrial band Front Line Assembly was playing to a prerecorded digital sound track and had no choice but to continue when streaming fish parts (launched from the audience by Shark Bait) rained down on them. Taylor said that to get the fish guts hot, they were put in Ziplock bags and them submerged in boiling water. “It was kind of childish,” Taylor admits, “but they had gone out of their way to fuck us.”

Shark Bait performed a crushfest at the 1994 Burning Man festival, a spontaneous performance festival held each Labor Day weekend in Black Rock Desert, NV, that ends in a ritual pyre. Taylor says that he’s encouraged by the “odd synchronicity” occurring right now among various prankster counterculture groups. “It’s funny.
We’ve been doing this for eight years... but these kind of collaborative events are really what we’ve always been about.”

Timothy Liddy
It’s true. Timothy Liddy does exist, and so do his plans to turn Oakland’s Eastmont Mall into a prison (he’s already appropriated Alameda County stationery for the press blitz) and to send a large group of U.S. nationals across the Mexico-United States border (south to north) in loud golf clothes.

As his nom de guerre suggests, Timothy Liddy, 36, embodies, as he says, a “philosophical mix of [hippy pilgrimage south of] Tijuana before they make the run for the border. The golf clothes, of course, will be part of the group’s alibi if they get accosted by border guards. “We’ll tell them we’re looking for a Titleist. I think it’ll be plausible. What do you think?”

Billboard Liberation Front
The 18-year old Billboard Liberation Front is about to strike again. So promises L.L. Fauntleroy, 25, a BLF operative, part of a new youth movement on the old front. The group is best known for its how-to pamphlet on midnight billboard editing and its New Year’s Eve 1990 hit above the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge approach,

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spokesbrain Timothy Leary and (Nixon henchman and radio jock) G. Gordon Liddy.”

The man behind this unusual persona claims to have been the first person ever to streak on the campus of the University of California at Irvine. He says he first broke the law at age 15, embarking on a short lived career of juvenile crime. “Once you start playing it straight, you just can’t stop,” he says. “I went in search of the American dream and now I own it, and I’m determined to make sure no one else can have it.”

Of his plans for Eastmont Liddy says, “If you haven’t gone go. But go armed. See, it already has security, a watchtower, and a police station on the premises–with a programme aimed at young-adult car buyers, in which the agency spray painted its own billboard. The original boards read “Hi” and were later changed by the agency to “Hip” or “Chill.” The BLF improved the agency’s “Hip” to “Hype,” and placed a skull and crossbones on the car’s grille for good measure.

A few weeks later, when the image of the Mona Lisa used to sell Zimth television on billboards, BLF immediately whitewashed her eyes and branded her with the sign of the beast. “I always thought it was creepy when you’d find a golf ad with a cross on it.” Liddy says that he and his supporters will present their idea early this year to the Alameda County Planning Commission during one of its televised meetings.

Liddy says the planned border crossing will require dozens of prankster participants to run 700 yards from Mexico to reach the United States. Sometime early this year a bus will take the volunteer immigrants on a

Like all BLFers, Fauntleroy uses a pseudonym (ask any Batman fan about Jack Napier and he’ll know). L.L. Fauntleroy, as you might suspect, comes from Little Lord Fauntleroy. She chose the initials, she said, because of L.L. Cool J. Of the pranking she reflects, “I always had it in me. I just never had the gumption. Now that I have the outlet, I’m exploring it. My past isn’t really all that sordid. It’s only now that I’ve become a pillar of society that I’ve started pulling pranks.”

The People Eaters and Seemen
Chip Plynn and Kal Spelletich, the principals of the People Eaters and Seemen, respectively, have been described by fellow pranksters as “Popular Mechanics kids gone bad” and “SRL: The Next Generation.”

Both the People Eaters and Seemen played a role in “A Calculated Forecast of Ultimate Doom,” the sold-out SRL show last summer that transformed an abandoned warehouse at San Francisco’s Pier 70 into an explosive circus. They were also chiefly responsible for “The Ritual Abduction and Rape of Rash Limbaugh,” a shrill pyrotechnic spectacle on Marin Street in San Francisco last spring.

If Chip and Kal have difficulty separating their identities from Pauline and Survival Research Labs, it’s not because they’re unoriginal; it’s just that they hang at SRL and no one quite knows what to call what they do.

Pierre, Le Marquis de Gateau, a.k.a. Peter Doty
Crumb anyone? On the morning of Bastille Day, 1994, 31-year old Peter Doty and a couple of friends went to San Francisco’s City Hall dressed in full 18th-century attire and carrying small tarts with a few crumbs on them. After presenting Deputy Mayor, Frank Jordan with the “Copper Crumb” award for crummy homeless policies, Doty and company joined a crowd gathered to show support for Food Not Bombs activist Keith McHenry. Unfortunately, the members of the San Francisco Police Department present that day had no sense of humor and proceeded to arrest Doty’s co-conspirators for serving food without a permit.

Despite the arrests, Doty remains undaunted. In fact, Doty, also known as Pierre, Le Marquis de Gateau, says the annual roast at Union Square, “Let Them Eat Cake,” has become something of a hit. Every Bastille Day, July 14, Doty and a host of others make decadent deserts and serve them to the resident homeless people. The servers all dress in 18th-century French aristocratic garments, but often homeless people help with the act. “We had one guy last year who sat down at a piano and played Mozart,” Doty recalls.

Doty says his pranks are meant as “shame tactics.” And he hasn’t limited himself to care of the homeless. Satires
Doty says his pranks are meant as “shame tactics.” And he hasn’t limited himself to care of the homeless. Satires of whiny political correctness and pack journalism, for example, are probably his favorite pranks.

Dwayne Newton, Doty wrote a statement claiming that his six-year-old daughter’s terror at the Night on Bald Mountain segment had prompted him to form SPASM (Sensitive Parents Against Scary Movies). SPASM anchored the CAFE, which also included Dieters United (who claimed that hippos in tutus were offensive to overweight people) and BADRAP (Bay Area Drought Relief Alliance Party), which felt that “water conservation efforts will be hindered by showing Mickey Mouse’s waste of water in the ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ sequence.”

The San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner and The Washington Post all reported the protest as real; not one reporter bothered to check out Newtron and his nonexistent daughter or call anyone else in SPASM’s constituency. The denouement of the media hoax came a few weeks later when it was mentioned in a Time Magazine cover story. Finally, on April Fools’ Day the following year, Doty came clean and The Wall Street Journal tracked down the reporters who’d been had, including The San Francisco Examiner’s Rob Morse.

“I’ve been in San Francisco so long, I tend to believe anything,” Morse told The Wall Street Journal. “You’ve got to go pretty far in San Francisco to make something look like a joke.”

The Suicide Club lives

Back before bungee jumping made it into Evening Magazine, and well before gonzo travel writer Tim Cahill stumbled into the desert and onto the pages of Rolling Stone, a band of San Francisco hooligans staged death-defying events that tested their wits and survival instincts.

Not really about death so much as leading a zany life, they stripped naked on a cable car for an Easter Sunday photo op in 1977; they hijacked elevators at a Union Square parking garage and surprised would-be riders with pantomime shower scenes; they took over abandoned buildings for potlucks, one night only stage plays, and theme parties. And they climbed things; bridges, churches, whatever. They were the Suicide Club.

Named after a Robert Louis Stevenson story, the club formed one night when the founding four (Gary Warne, David Warren, Nancy Prussia, and Adrienne Burk) went down to Fort Point on a stormy night and dared one another to hop a fence and tempt the sea. A railing along a seawall served as a lifeline against incoming surf. Exhilarated afterward, the four drank tea and conceived the Suicide Club. The railing, long since corroded and removed, became a rite of initiation.

“Gary was the avatar,” recalls Sebastian Melmoth, a nom de plume given him by Warne. Together Warne and Melmoth did extensive urban spelunking (in places like sewers, drains, and BART and MUNI tunnels).

“Everyone pushed in different ways. Nancy did the sexier stuff. I did a lot of the events that involved climbing.” For Melmoth, “being naked in public was 10 times more frightening” than rappelling 400 feet into the bottom of an empty Evans Street gas storage tank. The Suicide Club has been survived by the majority of its members. Some, like Don Herron (who runs the Dashiel Hammett walking tour of San Francisco), remain informed by that time. There’s also a private eye, a senior partner in one of the Bay Area’s leading investment banking firms, a neo-sig hanger, a noted architectural critic, who was then a dishwasher, a lawyer/playwright, and several social workers.

One evening last fall, several Suicide Club originals reconvened to swap stories, increase their legend, and sit for a portrait. A few of them belong to today’s Cacophony Society, but many hadn’t seen each other in years. Only one has died for certain: cofounder Gary Warne passed away a couple of days before Thanksgiving 1983. In his will he left a final dare; to scatter his ashes from the top of the Golden Gate Bridge—in broad daylight. Melmoth and company not only obliged him, they painted a bit of him inside the bridge for posterity.

Above: L.L. Fauntleroy and Melmoth at Let Them Eat Cake.
Cacophony Geeks
Michael McEligot

It was the mid 1990s and we all had superhero names. That’s one point on which Internet geeks and Cacophonists could always relate. Make a list of the names and you can’t tell them apart: Circus, Bay Moses, Warrior Girl, Aix, Flash, Geekboy, Captain Cursor, Torncat, Three, God Tod, Mono, Shvatl, Miss Appropriation, Vagabond Jim, Toad, Tony, Bill the Hat, and Mikl-em. No, I won’t tell you which is which or who is who. Some of them are both. There’s a rich tradition of colorful monikers for the creative and mischievous. Everywhere. In San Francisco in particular, hip and punk examples abound: Wavy Gravy, Pigpen, Jello Biafra, and Franky Fix. Ever since a failed businessman named Joshua Norton gave himself the title “Emperor of These United States,” self-proclaimed nicknames have been an SF thing. And so hackers and pranksters followed the trend of artists, gangsters, circus freaks, and others who re-dub themselves in ways that add to their legends and obscure their origins.

Not that we in the geek brigade were legendary types. But we had a tendency toward fantasy and were working, genuinely, on a new frontier. Though unlike the 1849ers, who were convinced they’d find their weight in gold, the 1995 influx was more idealist than capitalist—everyone figured this slowly mainstreaming, networked-computers thing was going to be important. But no one had any idea how any money whatsoever would be made from it.

Before we moved to California from Virginia or Wisconsin or wherever, we had the ubiquitous technology of Neal Stephenson and William Gibson’s science fiction in our heads and San Francisco’s Wired and Mondo 2000 magazines on our dorm room floors. Something that had been romantically (if you can believe it) called “Desktop Publishing” was giving way to something termed “New Publishing.” Both were meant to convey a “democratization” of the means of producing... sigh, “content.” An online magazine, really, was the ambitious goal, as modest as it may seem now. The virtual version of Wired that led the way, a version with hypertext aka “hot” links. And so: HotWest. Back then no one said the “dot-com” part out loud. That came later.

But how did these precocious computer types cross paths with the zone-tripping, urban explorers of Cacophony? That big thing in the desert was a big part of it. A small group of the twenty-something HotWest staff went to Burning Man in 1994. Their minds were blown. In 1995, they went back with a larger group of HotWest staff and had their own theme camp, flying a flag with the website’s logo. That broke the festival’s rule of no corporate logos. Years later, tech companies would underwrite luxury RVs for their employees to attend the festival; the HotWest camp was a different case entirely. There was little if any cash involved. Instead it expressed their pride in working on the technology frontier and camaraderie with what Burning Man was doing. If the festival’s organizers noticed, they ignored it.

David Trau and Chris Form Miller-known as Thau and (freedman) respectively-were part of the 1995 HotWest contingent. Together they ran a site called bianca’s Smut Shack. Less known now (like HotWest itself), bianca’s was Internet famous before there was such a thing. Amongst the first thousand sites ever and recognized as the first social chat website, at the dawn of the World Wide Web bianca’s was effectively the only nightlife in a sea of physics papers. Anyone who visited the web pre-1994 probably went to bianca.com on their very first surfing expedition. The design of the original “Smut Shack” chat site was based on their pre-HotWest apartment in Chicago. Each “room” of the site was based on the apartment layout (the kitchen, the bedroom, the pantry, etc.).

For Burning Man 1996, Thau and form decided to build the Smut Shack on the playa as a theme camp. About a dozen HotWest folks joined in. Other geeks camped in the vicinity in an area they dubbed Irrational Geographic. In 1996, the Internet was still a fringe affair, and many of these young men and women were probably spending their longest time away from a computer in years. But many of the individuals on this small chunk of Burning Man real estate would later have a huge effect on the technology and design of the Internet as we know it today.
Many of the bianca crew, like a lot of young Internet workers, were also part of the San Francisco rave scene and specifically the “Friends and Family” crew (no, that’s not a mobile calling plan). The fact that F&F threw raves in Pub Romolon, the same venue where Chichen John’s cacophonous “Church” shows went down, tells you how close these scenes were, even when they didn’t intermingle.

If bianca represented the rave set, Cyberbuss was more of a neo-Hippie crew. With direct inspiration from the Merry Pranksters and their Furthur bus, CyberSam converted an old school bus and painted it silver. He and his friends would don matching silver body paint and set out to dance, drum, party and socialize on a mission to “create, communicate, connect, inspire, enlighten, evolve...and be a RaveDaily.” Not everyone in their group was tech-savvy; in fact, some were welders and auto mechanics. But they were all into community and that included enabling “virtual trips” for website visitors around the world to join the fun. Sam brought the “bus” to Burning Man in 1996 and at that early date posted photos to the web directly from the festival using a satellite telephone.

The next year they threw the first Cyberbuss Ball, an all-night dance party in the somewhat remote SF ‘hood of Bayview. Cyberbuss and friends arranged for a one-block street closure, then set up tents, scheduled DJs and bands, and got a big crew of Burning Man-goers, techies, and late-night partiers. Performances included bands, and got a big crew of Burning Man-goers, techies, and late-night partiers. Performances included bands, and got a big crew of Burning Man-goers, techies, and late-night partiers. Performances included bands, and got a big crew of Burning Man-goers, techies, and late-night partiers. Performances included bands, and got a big crew of Burning Man-goers, techies, and late-night partiers. Performances included bands.

Cyberbuss and bianca shared this attitude (bianca’s motto is “bianca loves you!”), and it’s a departure from the Cacophony Society in a couple ways. The geek groups were more inclusive—a mindset that follows from organizing by email and web instead of Cacophony’s traditional “snail mail” and phone. And instead of the carefully planned adventures and mischief that Cacophony purveyed, the Internet set tended toward parties. They were creative parties where most attendees were costumes, but parties, nonetheless. Some pre-1996 BM attendees, Cacophonists and otherwise, were tech-savvy. They included contributors to Wired’s print magazine and The Happy Mutant Handbook, which came out in 1995; that book marked the point of the print ‘zine culture evolving online into what would eventually be blogs. It was co-authored by Mark Fraunfelder, creator of BoingBoing, which was a print zine at the time and is now one of the most popular geek culture blogs online.

For some Cacophonists in their 30s and 40s, that e-mail was a really powerful concept. Burning Man was a nexus of those who wanted alternative media voices. Offline had better tools, but online was free and wide open.

And Cacophony was due to evolve and move online. The formal Cacophony events in Rough Draft would soon become outnumbered and overwhelmed by creative goings-on (and parties) posted on Scott Beale’s “Alpha Squids,” which later became known as a way to hear about creative underground really started to flourish then, as the Squid List became known as a way to hear about all kinds of weird, wonderful, unexpected events. It kept the spirit of Cacophony, but like other Internet-driven variations, it tended toward openness and inclusiveness—some events were better because so many people were there. Others failed because too many people showed up, due to the openness of the list, and because word spread so quickly.

Like Burning Man’s growth, you could no longer trust that you’d know everyone at the party (or that those you didn’t know shared your context). It didn’t ruin everything, but it did make it different. For those lagging behind the increasingly booming Internet revolution, Scott and a couple of co-conspirators maintained a telecommute hotline called “The Number.” It was updated twice a week, and for a while it kept up with the pace of new events. But eventually that, too, was outrun. There was so much going on, and only Michael Pepe and Harry Hailer were calling in.

Above: The Cyberbuss crew on a typical outing.
Spinning in Detroit
Julia Solis

It was March in Detroit, in the basement of an enormous ruin that seemed more appropriate to post-war Europe than anything in America. It had the muted colors of old history books, with sludgy brick walls, charcoal tiles, and onionskin panes of fractured glass. A fresh layer of snow carpeted the great hall of the building under blown-out skylights. Michigan Central Depot, early 1999, was riddled with thick icicles, like violent punctuation marks in the silence of the station.

I had met Carl and Dennis from the Detroit Cacophony Society a few months earlier, while co-hosting the first Santacon in New York. They soon returned to Brooklyn for the inaugural event by the Madagascar Institute, Flaming Popes, a historical and hysterical spectacle on the waterfront, where fireworks and religious attire served as the only shield against the biting cold. When they invited us to visit them in their hometown for similar mayhem, we came right out.

Now they were leading us through the station’s basement towards an odd shape hanging at the end of a tunnel. It was a lifesize anatomical model dangling from a hook, a lovely two-dimensional corpse enlivening the surrounding dark decay. But of course it wasn’t just an art installation. The model concealed a suspended propane tank, and as we five New Yorkers gazed around, an otherwise perfectly cherubic-looking man named Larry pulled out an AK47.

We were instructed to stand back as he crouched on the floor with the rifle; someone said, “Welcome to Detroit!” Then a shot tore through the model and into the tank, and the walls exploded in flames.

Within the blink of an eye, the figure had burned to a crisp and the tank spun in frantic circles, spewing fire. Then everything turned into what I’d only seen in such movies as “The Towering Inferno”: a wall of fire blazed down the tunnel as we ran away, looking for any way out. I turned back to see a dozen people reaching the flames, but one person was heading the opposite way, approaching the tank. To Hackett, creator of the Flaming Popes, this was clearly a science experiment to be studied for future events. He walked into the fire just as the last gas streamed out, and miraculous the corridor snapped back into its dark and icy state, as if nothing had ever happened. And we marveled again. What had just been the stage for a dramatic and magical performance was now only a rotting cellar room in a building filled with trash, graffiti, and the occasional screams of dying scrappers. It was a surprise to walk back outside and find it was a bland afternoon, with no drama in sight.

It wasn’t until 2007 that my friends and I set our first Dark Passage event in Detroit, a vast scavenger hunt centered around the mythological figure of the Nain Rouge. It ended with an avant-garde dance in sequins and antler masks under the flash-lit disco ball of an abandoned theater. But to see Detroit as a city full of magical potential for play and performance – a few guys with a cardboard cut-out and a rifle had set the stage for that quite a few years before.

Dark Passage events require elaborate planning and can involve the dissemination of obsessive and cryptic clues for the players. This full-sized wall poster designed by Bryan Papciak could have been a template for navigating the extensive street, tunnel and abandoned building adventure, “The Nelson Affair,” or perhaps it was merely a beautiful red herring. This convoluted and dark event marked the tenth anniversary of Dark Passage. Above: The Madagascar Institute burns something. Again.
The Madagascar Institute Loves You!

What you need to know first of all about the Madagascar Institute is that it’s not a collective. That sounds too hippy, too delicate, and not dangerous enough. They’re a “combine,” a group dedicated to making the kinds of explosive machines that we often dream up for a second before relegating to the corners of our imagination.

Their nearly impossible sculptures and amusements, live performances, and guerrilla events (think Flaming Soccer, Jet Blenders, Zombie Freak Outs, Death Rattlers, Condiment Wars, Electrified See-Saws, and so on) aren’t created for the buttoned-down contemplation of the museum. They thrive on the big, messy, and inspiring public engagement of the carnival, of the parade, of those moments that sticken jaws and get people jumping up and down—and sometimes running for safety. It’s the kind of art that could kill you. But if it’s just bleeding and it’s not from an artery, says co-founder Chris Hackett, then you can’t really complain about it.

Call for Chariots

Chariot raced Jankely, cobbled together, dangerous-to- even-look-at chariots, petrol-powered versus jet-powered versus people pulling a rebuilt Idiotarod shopping cart versus a motorcycle with minor-variations smashing and crashing and racing around a tightly-turning track in heaps of four, all for crappy trophies, but tons of glory, admiration, and envy at your boundless intestinal fortitude, brilliant creativity, and clever use of limited building skills. Tattoos are for wussies (did you know you can just walk in off the street and BUY tattoos? How punk rock!), scars have to be earned.

The Madagascar Institute will also be doing a whole bunch of other stuff, like running ten years’ worth of dubious carnival rides and a whole rubbish fueled midway. We want you to be a part of it. We want you to make a chariot, and race it, and if you survive, we guarantee that you will get so, so laid (or, at least, screwed. Whatever.)

We are going for something like that classic scene from Ben Hur, except without horses, but with more whips, dirty tricks, and Charlton Heston.

To keep things interesting, we have decided to distill out the essence of chariot-ness and leave that as the only necessary condition, and that’s almost the only rule: the thing has to move, and it needs to have at least one person standing, nobly, exposed and unsupported from the ribs up. If it fits those criteria, it is a chariot. All the rest (how it is propelled, how many people ride on it, the defensive/offensive weaponry) is up to you.

There are a few more things, not rules, per se, but caveats and things you should know:

No projectile weapons. If you want to hit your opponents with something, by all means go for it, but take responsibility for your actions and tie that water balloon up to a stick.

No whining. There will be blood we expect, and are looking forward to mayhem. You will probably be crushed, burnt, spilled, poked, and ground into a fine paste. People will laugh at your misfortune. If the possibility of the Hurling is too much for you, stay away. Riders assume all risk. Also, the races might or might not be “fair.”

There is no money. We are operating on a budget of zero, which, after our expenses, leaves zero to give you, so we will not help fund your chariot and no matter how awesome it is, there will be no prize money; we will not pay to repair you or your thing after it is destroyed during the race. However, there will probably be beer for participants.

No fake ideas. We do not want to hear about the awesome thing that you thought of but will not actually make. Reality is a lot more interesting.

When Calvin Klein packed all the downtown Decau kiosks with bulimic, heroin-chic models and the words “JUST BE,” was that in bad taste? It prompted one ad hoc group to fire up the laser printer, roll out the office labels, and change every one of them to JUST BUY. Direct action- vigilantism- is a time-honored San Francisco tradition. Instead of lynching suspected killers and crooks, as the Committees of Vigilance did in the 1850s, today’s outlaw activists don’t shoot the messenger; they mutate the message.

The French call this act of subversive appropriation debumption, a lively and ironic genre; we might call it fauxvertising, where a message is creatively falsified to reach a higher truth or deeper meaning. It takes an unacceptable sales pitch and turns it into a provocative statement. Indeed of selling something one may or may not need, the idea is to kill your television and start thinking about issues that concern all of us, which is the last thing advertisers want us to do.

Situationist writer Guy Debord described our modern world as “the society of the spectacle.” For many of us, bread and circuits are not enough. Beginning with futurism and dadaism, the avant garde movements of this century have frequently employed
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Public space has been carved up and sold to the highest bidder. Our attention and interest as consumers is itself a resource to be exploited, and to this end we see media collaborators in eugenizing a mindless and voracious way of life.

Do we live to buy, or buy to live? Given the struggle to survive, it’s small wonder the expression “bought” used to mean killed in action.

“The only war that matters is the war against the imagination,” chanted Diane di Prima at the recent Summer of Love commemoration. In this time of toxic information overload, our real imagination, “the only war that matters is the war against the imagination,” chanted Diane di Prima at the recent Summer of Love commemoration.

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There were about 15 people at that meeting, representing most of the current active membership. They had names like Daphne Boswell, Igor Plicht, and Mr. Glik, and all of them were some type of gueruze rubber mask (One repeatedly brandished a rifle and shouted menacing words in a language I couldn’t identify. I was later told his name was Waldie Rasheed, and that he’d left the PLD when he decided it had become too wimpy. “But don’t worry,” Napier reassured me. “He’s really very friendly when you get to know him.”)

Over the next few months, I met several more times with smaller groups, always at random locations arranged through last-minute phone calls or secret mail drops. The folks in the BLF obviously enjoyed the whole cloak-and-dagger game.

And beyond the deranged press releases, there’s also a very serious side to the BLF’s mission. The BLF sees billboards for what they are: Powerful media that carry influential messages to vast numbers of people every day. That’s too important to be left to the Gannetts and Patrick Medias of the world. “We have nothing against billboards,” Napier told me at one point. “We love billboards. That’s why we go after them.”

Somehow, despite their security concerns, my journalistic objectivity must have impressed the BLF members: late in December, they invited me to tag along.

According to the BLF’s official history, the group was founded in November 1977, at the Pacific Union Club in San Francisco, by retired businessmen and civic leaders unhappy with the inferior state of billboard advertising. I can’t vouch for the accuracy of that claim—I’ve never been inside the Pacific Union Club, and I doubt they keep minutes of private meetings.

I can’t attest to the actual backgrounds of the BLF’s founders; either: none of them ever gave me their real names, and when we met, they always wore some type of disguise. But I was able to learn enough to verify a few important facts about the organization.

The BLF spans three generations—the youngest member is 10, and the oldest is somewhere in his early 60s. (Mr. Glik, the founder, elder statesman, and spiritual leader, isn’t prone to discussing his age or much of anything else with reporters.)

The members represent a broad range of backgrounds, skills and interests. Most of them go to work every day at steady, respectable jobs; their co-workers would probably be shocked and appalled to learn that they worked side by side with someone who spent last Saturday night hanging from a ladder 50 feet above a busy intersection, drilling holes in a huge plywood billboard, then donning a mountain-climbing harness and carabiner to escape into the darkness down a hidden cable.

Whatever they do with the rest of their lives, all the BLF members take the billboard liberation business very seriously. A typical “hit” can involve months of planning and preparation, a crew of ten or twenty of the BLF planning. The board was one of several major, well-lit highway signs and billboards in the immediate area, and with the lights off, it became so comparatively dim that it might as well have vanished from the planet. Killing the lights, Napier later told me, was simple: The electrical switches were all in a box at the base of the board’s support structure. This was their billboard now, and when they were done with it, they wanted it to be fully illuminated for all to see.

A few minutes later, I saw the first person climb the structure and secure a place on the ledge behind the board. In 10 to 15 minutes, two others had joined him and had begun hauling up their tools and materials.

Mabel and I watched and waited as the three people on the board hoisted the panels into place, lowered them down the front of the board, climbed a ladder on the face of the board, bored holes with a battery-operated drill through several layers of plywood and sheet metal, and bolted the new panels into place. Every few minutes, a voice cracking over the radio would warn of an approaching police car; the billboard crew would drop to the ledge and lie flat until the danger passed. The process took almost three hours.

The instant the last panel was in place, one of the crew gave the order to “get the hell out of here,” and in seconds, two bodies were sliding upside down along a doping cable, from the top of the board to the base of the freeway several hundred feet away. Then the rope vanished and the last person climbed down the side of the support structure. A minute or two later, the lights came back on.

On Tuesday morning, when a sign crew from Patrick Media removed the new panels, the casino message emerged unscathed. The product of more than two months work, hundreds of dollars worth of supplies, and the visio, crew, and strategy of old people survived for just 48 hours. Then the BLF officially faded into the shadows.

But the ultimate message remains: as long as these jokers are at large, no billboard anyone will ever really be safe. And that’s a nice thought for the dawn of a new decade.
"...so what is in the trunk of that '79 Lincoln anyway?"

At the Tunnel Top Bar on Bush St., the bartender passed me an envelope with directions: I was to proceed to a particular street corner and look up. There I saw my first altered billboard. Within the ad, Jack Napier and his BLF cohorts had created a box of type that was surprisingly unobtrusive, like the warning label on a cigarette ad. It said, “Check in trunk of ‘79 Lincoln at Ace Auto Dismantlers.”

Standing beneath this personalized billboard, I think I felt the full power of advertising for the first time in my life. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the time to admire my vanity board for long, because I had to shlep across town to Ace Auto Dismantlers. This was the other part of the game Napier had set up. Rather than simply have me track him via billboard messages - that would be too easy - he had each billboard direct me to a bizarre pit-stop, where I’d retrieve directions to the next billboard. When I arrived at Ace, I kept the cab running as I ran in and told the yard boss that I needed to check in the trunk of a ‘79 Lincoln. “Is it your car?” When I answered no, he asked, “Is this a drug deal?” I forced a laugh. He looked around and pointed to a nearby car. Unfortunately, a forklift had just dropped a huge wrecking ball onto the trunk, caving it in. “You mean that car?” he asked, laughing sadistically. Undeterred, I politely asked the man in the fork lift if he could pry open the crushed trunk because I needed something in there. He agreed to do it, but wanted to know, “If there was a body in there?”

Actually, there was. The truck was pried open to reveal a dummy clad in military fatigues. Cold-bloodedly, I reached in and rummaged throughout the pockets, finding my envelope containing the clue to my next billboard. “Gotta go!” I say cheerily as the junkyard crew began to circle behind me. *

While in SF to cover the Billboard Liberation Front for Wired Magazine New York A list journalist Warren Berger got a taste (and smell) of a San Francisco institution and was fortunate to meet, however briefly, one of the most beneficent, if colossally atypical arts patrons in the Bay Area. William Kennedy, of the Kennedy junkyard family (all three brothers, and their parents had their own junkyards in the Bayview neighborhood) ran Ace as a private fiefdom, a one stop art supply depot for starving artists and a low rent punk rock and machine art performance venue.

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There were five hundred televisions in piles and leaning crazily, stacked along a massive metal warehouse wall on Illinois Street, just south of Marin Street on the Islais Creek Channel. Once a thriving low rent smugglers port and an outflow to the bay for the toxic waste and effluvia of the neighborhood formerly known as Butchertown, by 1994 this non-descript block was occupied by a motley passel of artists and builders. Kal Spellitech and The SEEMEN collective held the corner space of the old Alcoa building factory. The Greenspace space housed surveillance vehicles and field communication gear; next door was Scott Arford's 7HZ noise space, further down was The Cathaus, next door to Cyclone Warehouse space, home to Don Paul Swain's Cacophony-spawned Circus X. Many singular and, in some cases, ill-advised events had taken place in this industrial no-man's land over the years. The Suicide Club used the abandoned ship-to-shore fueling station pier at the very end of Illinois street for the grand finale shoot out for Don Herron's Fatty Arbuckle Caper in 1981, before the artists had supplanted the security gated auto mechanic and body shops. Later the SEEMEN staged large scale machine art performances on the dead-end block including Death of Grunge and Death of Rush Limbaugh. Kill Your TV was to be the largest and most absurd to ever take place in this off the map wonderland for wayward performance artists. Cacophonist Chad Mulligan, with the assistance of M2 and Melmoth, had been hauling dozens of defective cathode ray tube units out of TV repair shops all round the SF Bay Area for months. The shop keepers all had their back rooms and garages stuffed to the rafters with junk TV's - and they were overjoyed someone was dumb enough to haul them all away for no charge.

During the course of the event, all 500 televisions were smashed to bits by performers and residents, but mostly by enthusiastic participants who bowled through, hurled, bluejoged, and skewered them. Industrial band Sharkbait suited up audience members in kevlar gauntlets, crash helmets and leather welding chaps, put them in a chain link all-surround cage, and played industrial noise through a stack of Marshall amps while the lucky ones flailed away at the offensive appliances with sledgehammers. Machine Art ensemble Survival Research Labs had the end of the street and with Mark Pauline's V.1 rocket engine spewing fifty foot flames, ignited a large moveable prop made by PeopleLitter and a pyramid of TV's playing a loop-edit of absurd and banal video pornography spliced with mundane industrial training films designed, programmed, and built by Vanessa Kuemmerle. Late Saturday night/Sunday morning, after the Fire Department and various police officials chased away the stragglers, the clean up began in earnest. Two forty yard dumpsters and a twenty four foot Ryder rental truck were filled with bashed sets. Clouds of phosphorous, chromium, and lead dust were ingested, clogging lungs and, eventually, shortening lives.

The entire block's worth of dirt (the street was unpaved at that time) was strained through wire mesh trays to extract any pieces of glass or electronic detritus bigger than a poppy seed. On Sunday around noon, an SF Fire Dept. command staff car cruised up and down the street. The clean up was still under way. Monday morning, an official from the Environmental Protection Agency stopped his car, got out with a clipboard, looked around, shrugged, and left. Shortly after, two San Francisco Port Authority trucks and a five man crew showed up with a three-day work order to “dispose of toxic debris and thoroughly clean adversely affected Port property.” The foreman asked a Cyclone tenant “where’s the toxic accident?” He looked around a bit, then cleared out to the coffee shop with his crew.

Above: The flyer for Kill Your TV created by Kevin Evans, mimicking the TV Guide. The “Virtual Suicide” set created by Kimmrick Smythe at the Cacophony Society's Kill Your TV event in early 1994.
At high noon, under the cable car turnaround at Fisherman’s Wharf, a group of 25 men and women in business attire and dark sunglasses arrive carrying cell phones and walkie-talkies. They look stern, tight-lipped, ready for action. There are five briefcases and one set of jewels. The object of the game, Smuggler, is for the FBI to capture the jewels before the jewel thieves can get to home base. Historically — in games played in Chinatown and on the Embarcadero — the FBI has always had the advantage, but there are pitfalls at Fisherman’s Wharf: very heavy car traffic, security guards who don’t like interlopers, and, of course, tourists.

We make our way to the finish line, the Fisherman’s Wharf. We line up, while mobs of tourists stop and snap pictures. We pick teams, and two agents guard the perimeter. It’s a nerve-wracking wait. Looking around, I see two thieves in the parking lot behind the valet booth. There are two more on the southwest corner, moving fast through the crowd. I want to back up, but the other agents have their hands full with decoy briefcases. There’s no way to tell. Suddenly, it’s a rush. Thieves coming in from all directions. We capture two suspects but it’s hard to expect the unexpected. While searching fake cases, a car pulls up to the stoplight, and a thief jumps out, depositing the briefcase containing the jewels in the safe zone.

The FBI is pissed.

Radio contact tells us that the thieves are closing in. Nearly tag a real businessman with an innocent briefcase. For suits among the throng of colorfully clad sightseers, I smile. It’s a nerve-wracking wait. The thieves head off with their loot. Two agents guard the finish line of tourists. Some of them are wearing suits. I’m sweating. I can see two thieves in the parking lot behind us, hiding behind the valet booth. There are two more on the southwest corner, moving fast through the crowd. I want to back up, but the other agents have their hands full with decoy briefcases. There’s no way to tell. Suddenly, it’s a rush. Thieves coming in from all directions. We capture two suspects but it’s hard to expect the unexpected. While searching fake cases, a car pulls up to the stoplight, and a thief jumps out, depositing the briefcase containing the jewels in the safe zone.

The FBI is pissed.

As we switch sides and make our way to the starting point at the cable car turnaround, Radio contact informs us that the fuzz has arrived at our finish line. An observant little girl who has been watching the game with her father innocently points out that we’re “just playing Cops and Robbers.” But there’s nothing to be done. The finish line and the starting line must be switched, leaving the cops searching reflexively for rowdy daytrippers in suits. We’re too fast, bolting in and out of Ghirardelli Square, through the service entrances of hotels, around parked cars. Twenty-nine-year-old FBI agent Trixie Dare camouflages herself by looking through a garbage can as she rushes the finish line with a blocker and three decoys.

24-year-old Agent Smith jumps out of the bushes and apprehends a thief and wrestles the briefcase out of his uncooperative grip in the middle of an intersection. A cable-car load of tourists erupts in violent applause. Something to write home about. Street vendors begin to offer secret-agent discounts. Briefcases are tossed over the heads of people waiting in lines from thief to thief, with agents in hot pursuit. Witnesses ask to join in the game. And eventually that is how the day is won, with the jewels nestled inside a ham sandwich, wrapped in a paper bag, inside a brief case, shoved in a backpack, passed on the shoulder of a 16-year-old kid who walks up to the finish line and casually sits down on the bench next to the ever-vigilant FBI. The kid gets a $5 payoff, but no doubt he’d have done it for free. The FBI is completely undone.

From opposite teams, “A game, a game!” Ingratitude is the name of the game. And location.

The next game? You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.

“We are a nation, not of men, but of laws. The law must be enforced at all cost,” says Smith through his impassive sunglasses. “But being a thief filled me with fear and unknown exhilaration.”

During the third and final game, secret agent Speedbump apprehends a thief and wrestles the briefcase out of his uncooperative grip in the middle of an intersection. A cable-car load of tourists erupts in violent applause. Something to write home about. Street vendors begin to offer secret-agent discounts. Briefcases are tossed over the heads of people waiting in lines from thief to thief, with agents in hot pursuit. Witnesses ask to join in the game. And eventually that is how the day is won, with the jewels nestled inside a ham sandwich, wrapped in a paper bag, inside a brief case, shoved in a backpack, passed on the shoulder of a 16-year-old kid who walks up to the finish line and casually sits down on the bench next to the ever-vigilant FBI. The kid gets a $5 payoff, but no doubt he’d have done it for free. The FBI is completely undone.

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Above: Lutiea Cabal hosted many live-action street games using the urban landscape as a playground. This ‘Smuggler’ game took place in Chinatown and Fisherman’s Wharf during a typical work day.

Above: More Smuggler action, confusing the tourists and amusing (or annoying) the locals.
Tales of SF Cacophony: Cacophony 2.0 and Fellow Travelers

Helicopter as Opening Act for Drag Nuns
Sister Kitty Catalyst

In 1995, the year the center circle at BunRIngMan started to implode, new recruits Sister Dana Van Iquity and Sister Kitty Catalyst OCP were recruited to emcee the main stage and to perform the Sister Shock Show. Previously that night they had hosted Off! Communism with medicinal brownies, eventually falling into a pool of absinthe. Late into the proceedings, the duo was corralled and commanded to pull the show back in across stage while wedging playa dust in their noses to create more contrast, disrupt big business.

Speaking of disruption, here come the police. A cruiser rolls down 16th St. and drifts closer to the crowd. A hand emerges from an open window and waves, politely. Suddenly, spotlights play off the side of the brick building across the street. Lo and behold, from over the edge of the roof drops Norma Jean, fuchsia hair flying, flanked by members of the Society of Superheroes. She trickles down the wall like a drop of Kool-Aid and upon landing, is whisked away by an angel with a walky-talky and a bespectacled jester. This is the midnight appearance of Warrior Girl, where she changes from super star to super hero. “Everyone’s a superstar and everyone’s a superhero. We just have to discover the superhero inside us. That’s what we’re saying here.” The drums beat louder, cigarettes flare into life, and laughter plus conversation egg each other on. A police cruiser rolls by, slower this time, with tinted windows raised. Fortunately, scheduling demands a change of scenery and once again, the crowd disintegrates into the streets.

The Space Walk continues into the night, and then the next day, dragging ever so slightly toward the end. By 1pm people watch movies projected onto an impromptu screen into the wee hours….

Rough Draft

The Chief Engineer of the San Francisco Cacophony Society. Website: http://www.zapdog.com/cacophony.html Phone: (415) 665

A Few Events

Sister Kitty’s Day Parade
If we don’t get our ass in gear this time, we’re going to start the Cacophony Society. Bring antennas, subwoofers, etc, etc, to make up for the lack of our usual fun.

Where: Thursday, April 5th, Noon Where: In front of the Old Police Station on 6th Street at Mission

Or Directly to Hell
The sisters of Imperial Baghdad will be holding a parade. Please bring your own drums and dance. We will be in the Stars inwards of our traditional parade and will be holding our own parade. We will start near the top of the hill and then proceed down the hill towards the center of the neighborhood where we will be playing our own music. We will then proceed down the hill and then return to our starting point to continue the fun.

Where: Sunday, April 4th, Noon to 7pm Where: Cuyler Bowl, between Valencia and 26th, between the Civic Center and the Civic Center Sculpture Park.

Space Walk in the Mission
First we take a lonesome walk through the Mission at three in the morning with a couple hundred whacked out artists in clown makeup who have been up for days on end creating strange pieces of mobile artwork! I thought so, Here’s the skinny: The Community Spacewalk will take place over 24 solid hours across 63 blocks of the Mission District with over 200 artists (rolls from No Limits for Women in the Arts, Food Not Bombs, the Aerial Action Team, The SF Art Institute, Burning Man, and The Cacophony Society.) Silke Tudor, SF Weekly, Oct 22-28, 1997

Kurt Bier, New Mission News, November, 1997
Was the Circus in town, or the gypsies, or Cirque du Soleil? Wait, is it one of those Burning Man things? No, couldn’t be that cause nobody asked me for seventy-five bucks, but it is an event within the purview of the Burning Man planners, and a logical follow up to the recent Defenestration project in SOMA. It is the first annual “24 Hour Spacewalk,” with the Mission chosen as its starting point, in an attempt to fuse art into reality, for at least 24 hours.

Most in the crowd seem to be regulars at these kind of events… an assembly of more than a hundred has gathered at the corner of 16th and Harrison Sts. The Cyberbuss, a small school bus painted silver, pulls up to the curb. On top of the bus is a loosely constructed corrugated form for big business.

The Space Walk concludes into the night, and then the next day, dragging ever so slightly toward the end. By 1pm there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recalls it is a gigantic bed in a vacant lot, where there is little evidence the event ever occurred. The only thing that recall...
Exploding Puppet Theater; the day AFTER 9/11/2001 Danni Girl Waters

Exploding Puppet Theater was conceptualized by Kim Knight, Danni Girl, and Sam. The requirements were ‘The 4 Bs’. These were Blood, Bombs, Bowling Movements, and Beer. We staged performances at the Cyclone Warehouse, the Covered Wagon Saloon, and other venues. The show at the Cyclone was a ‘Satanic Ritual of Sacrifice,’ which included a disemboweling of a paper-mache baby and removal of the entrails of the aforementioned, which consisted of beef, tripe, intestines, and other throw away butcher shop items. We performed this show at the Cyclone, complete with vomiting Satan face rock wall backdrops. After, we cleaned up as best as we could, but due to the raw meat and decay left in the street, the Baby and removal of the entrails of the aforementioned, which included a disembowelment of a paper-mache puppet show was the 9/11 show at the Odeon. I had been living in New Orleans, but came out to the west coast to attend Burning Man 2001. I then travelled to San Francisco to hang with friends for a few weeks until my flight back, which was supposed to be in the third week of September. While I was in town, Chicken John booked me to do an Exploding Puppet Theater performance at the Odeon. I was staying at the Cyclone house, which was the old Green Tortoise house on Jerrald Ave in SF. For days I procrastinated about the show, I didn’t have a theme, I couldn’t incorporate the 4 Bs into any idea. I was in block-mode. Then, one morning, everything changed. I remember I was dead asleep and there was a ‘tsang bang bang’ on the door. There were loud voices in the living room, saying “no, no turn on the TV!” It was very early for us, 7 am. I could tell it was Bob’s voice, very agitated, which was not really that unusual for Bob, so I went back to sleep. But then I heard Erin Penrose’s voice saying “oh my god, oh my god,” and when Erin sounds shocked and concerned, you all better believe it’s for real. I remember waking up to that, knowing that I better get the fuck outta bed and find out what’s going on. So I got out of bed, and went into the living room, where I then learned of the attack on the Twin Towers. They were saying that the towers had fallen, but all of the footage was of the towers still standing, and so I was in disbelief. I was thinking; when the earthquake happened, the news kept saying that the Bay Bridge had fallen into the bay, and that was untrue... so this must be untrue, too. But then we saw the new footage. The towers actually did fall. So we watched the same film for the rest of the day. Over and over and over and over. I remember that my hands were clasped over my mouth, and I stayed that way for hours. That night we congregated over at Kal’s warehouse. We barbecued outside, and looked at the sky. There were no planes flying over, except once in a while military planes would fly over in formation. Kal’s warehouse is in the airport flight path, so it was eerily quiet. That night, while talking to Janico, Jesse Wack, and the rest, I suddenly knew what my Exploding Puppet Theater show had to be about.

The next day I gathered cardboard (the 4 B’s, ingredient for a cheap puppet show). Luckily I had tons of fireworks left from the recent July 4th rediculessness, and I had lots of gunpowder and fuse due to the fact that I was an incorrigible pyromaniac. So I set to carving two twin towers out of two large cardboard boxes. I remember being on the black and white checkered floor of the Green Tortoise for a very long time, with various people stepping over me graciously and patiently for hours on end. Thank goodness Jesse Wack was there to take on creating two very realistic airplanes, which he attached to the ends of two very long straight sticks. I acquired a package of little army men from a Mission Street dollar store, and I was all set.

That night at the Odeon went off swimmingly. People were in shock, grandstanding towards their local bar for comfort. I don’t even remember the other performers that night, I just remember me, and what I was about to do, and how I stupidly set out to fulfill my obligation to put on a show, no matter how, or why. The cardboard buildings were ignited as Jesse and Janico flew the sad little airplanes on sticks into the fragile structures we had created to mimic the real fragile structures still considerations on the opposite coast. Little explosions ignited as our fuses detonated, and cardboard went up in flames. Little plastic men leapt out of little cardboard windows, falling to their fiery deaths. People in the audience “boo’d,” but we went on. More little men jumped out of windows to their deaths. The cardboard buildings were fully afame by now, and as they burned, we loked them down, to make sure the audience knew these structures and their inhabits were not going to last. It was done. We stomped out the last flames. We retreated into the backstage area. Eventually I came out to the bar, bashfully, as I knew I was going to get a lot of shit from people. Apparently a lot of people had left, being outraged at the callousness and indifference supposedly displayed by me, Danni Girl. Some remained because they wanted to make sure that I knew how horrible and insensitive I was. I was chastised and spanked and scolded, but luckily some people actually came up to me and thanked me, saying that it was the best thing they had ever seen. That they’d laughed in the face of tragedy and that it had helped them not cry, for a moment, and that was enough for me at the time.

Above: Danni Girl — looks sweet and innocent, doesn’t she?
announcing our show to all of LA.

At one point the cops are yelling at me to load all of our stuff, and get it out of there in an hour or they would impound it all. I calmly told the chief it took us three days to install all of this stuff and it would take another day to load it all out. He scowled at me in disgust and stormed off. A GIANT imbacker-sized cop looked at Christian Ristow’s Drunken Master and said to his other steroid fed partner, “Chief Gates would love this stuff!” I knew then we running this stuff one way or another, sooner or later. I would be damned if we were gonna load 10,000 lbs. of equipment back into the trucks with our tail between our legs and drive it all the way back to SF without a robot battle and setting off at least one flamethrower.

Walking out onto the street during the mayhem of the raid, frustrated beyond belief, months of work and thousands of the dollars down the drain, I walked for two blocks to a police roadblock; they had sealed off the neighborhood. What did they think was going to happen? We were going to start another race war? The roadblock had barricades and cops with flares turning away a steady stream of cars and people trying walk in. Thousands of art hungry masses…

Further down another block, Chris DeMonterney had set up a fake dead body/car wreck scene, complete with a shrouded “body”, a crowd gathered around it… what a town.

Good… some art happened after all. Then we did our private show for the crew and any strugglers who had hung around in the shadows or who managed to climb over the fence.

Christian Ristow:

Being only 24 and something of an introvert, I remember hanging around the warehouse space, checking and re-checking the Drunken Master, working on a few props, and not really talking to too many people other than Kal, John Law, and Amy. More than anything else, I remember the fucking helicopters. It seemed like they started around dusk and continued uninterrupted for hours. I sort of couldn’t believe at first that they were there for us. They were such a stereotype. I remember hours later, when the crowds and the cops all went home, we had a pretty good time doing something that felt a lot like a mini-show just for ourselves, and how funny it was that no one seemed to care anymore what we did.

Jason/Woodpussy:

We had spent weeks on the indoor set, and then when the cops came, our drummer got spooked and left, which meant we couldn’t even play for Seemen after the awesome private show they did for us.

That was the first time I had met any of the San Francisco folks, Flynn Mauthe, Jay Broemmel, Kal, Christian Ristow, John Law, Brian Normany, and Amy Miller. I was skeptical beforehand. “Machine artists from S.F.” conjured up images of snobbery in my paranoid mind, so I stuck a vacuum motor in a metal can and duct taped the lid closed. I remember walking up to Kal and saying something like “robots, huh? I got a robot!” It was stupid as shit and Kal said it was cool and asked me all sorts of questions about it. I felt like a dope. These were the nicest guys in the world, and still are. I also remember the Drunken Master was so shiny and new! The styrofoam church. John’s trip through the “terrorism” neon. The line of 30-some cops, all walking out after swiping a case of Bud.

John Law:

I was so excited to see Woodpussy. I heard all about them and the meet. I had thought they were a band that used weird sets. Hmmm. They were a lot weirder. I met Jason Hadley and said something dumb like “Wood Pussy, I’ve heard of you. Didn’t you open for that band… Splinter Dick?” BADDDDUM…

Jarico Reese:

This happened just after the Los Angeles Rodney King riots. Downtown was really depressed, burnt out, and abandoned. Run by gangs and thugs. People kept away.

Kal Spelletich:

Our trip to LA was like a well planned military action: tools, food, machines, robots, props, busing an ever morphing crew and 10,000 lbs. of equipment, lodging, a kitchen. All in a foreign locale, behind enemy lines, if you will, but with the help of willing local collaborators and saboteurs. The promoter was rumored to have blown up a bridge or with the help of willing local collaborators and saboteurs. All in a foreign locale, behind enemy lines, if you will, but with the help of willing local collaborators and saboteurs. The Police and Fire Dept. response was like a full on military action as well; must have cost the city of LA $90,000,000.00. Three helicopters for hours buzzing us with their searchlights. Dozens of squad cars and fire department trucks. All to stop art.

Ten thousand paying customers tried to attend the event; for hours they tried to show up.

The show set constructed in the lot was comprised of: a life size wooden chapel with upside down crosses, a wall of neon reading “Terrorism” and other inflammatory statements, billboards of Patti Hearst, the Unabomber, with a shrouded “body”, a crowd gathered around it… what a town.

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Jarico Reese:

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It was a hyper-violent scene there. It was right after the Darryl Gates scandal. As chief of police, he took a hardline, aggressive, paramilitary approach in fighting the drug war and Punk Rock. He declared war on Punk Rock! Fuck him, we thought. His aggressive tactics were highly controversial. Gates is often credited with the creation of SWAT teams and DARE. After the Rodney King beating and the riots afterward, Gates resigned from the police department in disgrace. He had an army of racist beat cops accountable only to his arrogant leadership. You have to picture what it was like back then. Anything could happen. I was 19 years old and got word about some crazy San Francisco art that was going to happen, like I had never seen nor heard of before. When I got there, the streets were jammed with people and riot police with German Shepherds. Three noisy helicopters were overhead shining their searchlights on us the whole time. The LAFD and LAPD called out every reserve they could. Overhead: “Hey, weren’t there buildings across the street?” The smog was so thick, they were no longer visible. By nighttime, we had crazy sore throats and eyes. As the date neared, there was genuine electricity in the air. On arrival, as introductions and offerings of hospitality were made, I remember thinking this shit is gonna be great: a game changer for the downtown scene. And then when the machines and scenery started to be unloaded from trucks, and plans made, I remember thinking of the movie Jaws, when Roy Scheider finally sees the shark and his only response is “we’re gonna need a bigger boat.” My thoughts were of needing increased parking lot size. Facing page: More destructible RUSH props at the SEEMEN-Cyclone event.

No Cal had something going on. An offer popped up for a Halloween event through the L.A. Cacophony and a band called Woodpussy. Woodpussy seemed to fit in with our edict of anything goes. An additional troupe on the bill was called SEEMEN. They were presented as an offshoot of SRL: a merry band of performers with machines and mayhem. To us, this was the holy grail, a show of all the things downtown L.A. was yearning for. As the date neared, there was genuine electricity in the air. On arrival, as introductions and offerings of hospitality were made, I remember thinking this shit is gonna be great: a game changer for the downtown scene. And then when the machines and scenery started to be unloaded from trucks, and plans made, I remember thinking of the movie Jaws, when Roy Scheider finally sees the shark and his only response is “we’re gonna need a bigger boat.” My thoughts were of needing increased parking lot size. Maybe the L.A. Coliseum Stadium; that would surely be big enough for these monsters of mayhem. This night was going to change the face of arts in Los Angeles. An introduction to the psychology of machines and their human interaction through performance art.

Earlier for one of the clubhouse block parties, we had crudely built a flame throwing espresso hot rod that was menacingly driven through the crowd dispersing espresso. But this paled in comparison to what SEEMEN was about to unfold.

I remember standing at the gate as night fell and not knowing that the crowd would become the zombie apocalypse. A massive line formed at the drop of a dime. I thought, fuck, we don’t have enough beer for this. Friends emerged from the line grinning from ear to ear, expecting the mother of all shows. Not so, not this night; as the SEEMEN were planning their assault, so was LAPD, the alcohol board, and the Fire Department.

Facing page: More destructible RUSH props at the SEEMEN-Cyclone event.
Sunset Airlines’ “Dilettante”
San Francisco Bay Guardian, April 1, 1998

And lo, it came to pass that a table of four did sit and chat at New York City Deli ... in the city of San Francisco on a day in March 1979. And far and yon did their conversation wander, thru subjects of art, life, politics, and would a blintz be good to have with coffee about now ... And lo, it came to pass some more that this one of called Sid did droll the need for a parade thru the temples of our land, the coven symbols of the power that bind us to a slackless life. And lo, the blintz did not sit well in his bowels, and his brain did drift in digestive confusion and regurgitate the combined intake of thought and conversation into the words ... St. Stupid’s Day. The rest is history.

The pre-history of the First Church of the Last Laugh, as told by Bishop Joey, seminal and secular head of the church.

San Francisco’s first formal religion of the asinine started more than 20 years ago at the behest of a longtime Bay Area resident who calls himself Bishop Joey. According to the Bishop, every single human on Earth is a member of His tongue-in-cheek church, the First Church of the Last Laugh, since the only requirement for membership is the one unifying factor of our species. Stupidity. Thus the First Church of the Last Laugh is also the world’s oldest religion, since “all other religions are based on fear and guilt, and before fear and guilt can work, you must have stupidity.” This belief in the unfortunate, universal genetic flaw we all share is celebrated by knowing Church members once a year with a parade through the Financial District of San Francisco, St. Stupid’s Day, the official holy day of the First Church of the Last Laugh, falls (not coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally (on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants and coincidentally) on April Fool’s Day. On Wednesday the first of April, a friend and I, childhood Protestants, etc., got together and came up with a plan that would make the World’s Greatest Parade, a plan to mark, in a grand and biblical sort of way, the First Church of the Last Laugh’s birthday.

Bishop Joey explains that this intersection, marked by a giant propeller attached to his head ogles them, represents the border between old San Francisco and landfill San Francisco. This Station of Stupid is The Leap of Faith, an exercise wherein churchgoers close their eyes, jump up, and believe that when they come down the Earth will still be there. Members of the crowd “tighten” the lug nuts for safety’s sake, and then, at the Bishop’s command, the crowd jumps. The Earth is still there, and the sky scrapers haven’t fallen into the ocean, Mission accomplished.

The parade moves to another plaza. We sit down, and The Parade Rests. A pig-faced man with a small accordion, eager to hear Bishop Joey’s next message, screams, repeatedly and somewhat psychologically, “Everybody shut up!” The crowd joins in, and soon an entire plaza of stupidly clad people is jubilantly holding these three words at everyone else, first arhythmically, then conga-style. This fourth Station of Stupid includes a free lunch (boxes of cereal thrown at the crowd by the handfuls) and the some official Church hymn (“Hymmmmmmmmm...” “Hummmmmmmmmmm...” “and ‘Ussssssssssss...’ to name a few). After a brief and unexplained march round and round the Cilicco Building’s fountain, the parade settles in front of the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange for the sixth Station of Stupid: The Stock Exchange. My friend and I stand near the booming Doggie Diner dog’s head that’s being towed alongside the parade on a flattened truck. “So this is how capitalism works,” my companion says to me as socks fly back and forth above our heads. Lacking socks to exchange, we instead throw our dog biscuits at the Dog as an appropriate offering. After chanting “Jump! Jump! Jump!” (soyward at the suits watching from their high rises (and then, of course, “No more chanting!”), the parade seeks out the final Station of Stupid.

The giant black marble blob of a sculpture at Kearny and California is the centerpiece for the last ceremony. After more marching in a circle, the parade settles in for The Blessing of the Banker’s Heart. The few pennies that capitalism allows us to save throughout the year. Bishop Joey tells us, are to be tossed at the Heart as a satanic offering to The Man. After the Bishop kicks the first penny with a derisive and resigned “tuck you,” a hailstorm of copper blankets the plaza and snickering choruses of “for they’re all jolly good fellows” ricochet off the high-rises. The last laugh.


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Summer Burkes’ “Dilettante!”
San Francisco Bay Guardian, June 27, 2003

“How Lost Vegas Works: Get chips at door. Gamble. Go to redemption center and redeem chips for valuable prizes.”

“Lost Vegas” is area pettigrell Chicken John’s annual attempt to further bastardize the sentiments behind the City of Sin with his trademark: lowbrow sarcasm and controlled chaos. A couple hundred hip and zany participants have come out to try their luck. “Serious art” fills Cell Space’s gallery in front, side by side with a “Valley of the King Wedding Chapel”—velvet Elvis centerpiece, Christmas lighted proscenium arch, plant-lined aisle—and, at the start of the aisle, 25-cent gumball machines selling “Armeen Rings” and official Lost Vegas poker chips. The dulcet sounds of Mongolounge, San Francisco’s only lounge Devo cover band, echo from the main room. It’s “Girl U Wars” slowed down with a muted trombone.

Inside, two giant white dice twinkle overhead. “Last year I got married five times,” a friend says, and tells us we just drop from Cell’s second-floor balcony. The bar line is around on the Rat Roulette table? I feel kind of sad.”

The redemption center is like Sanford and Son’s Sweep-Ball prize booth. People trade chips for: Santa hat, a keyboard, a sewing machine, an old car phone, a bowling pin, an adding machine, a baby doll, a rotary phone, a mini dress set, some Allbirds, a dress, a comb, a lighthibud, a shovel, deodorant, a stuffed animal, a comic book, Birkenstocks, Spice Girls candy, cassette tapes, a remote control to nothing, a steering wheel, and a can of spiral childhood Mongolounge plays a cover of Lippa Inc.’s “Furhtown,” and I pause again to watch the action on the crap table. People clap and holler as if the penguins they’re put down were $100 chips. Another friend runs up to us: “Have you seen the real white mouse running around on the Rat Roulette table? I feel kind of sad.”

Attendees crowd around the games. The Wheel of Smut is like roulette, but instead of numbers, one must shout out words: jism, fist felch, tits, ear, ass, cunt, ream, clit, cock, dog, rim. Thoroughbred Cocktail Racing features two critters from Madagascar that are supposed to race through a course made of fake asphalt, yellow lines, and gold foil toward the finish line and some finger sandwiches. Overcome by the mood of the event, however, the two racers have started to mate, so the game is temporarily defunct. The fetching cocktail hour handler, in red duct tape bustier, red wig, red cheeks, striped thigh-highs, and white gloves, gently holds the loving couple in her palm along with a tiny sandwich, waiting patiently for them to finish and then have a snack.

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Many things about Chicken were singular to him, yet very Cacophonous. He was the only buckaroo to continually use “Cacophonous” to promote his own separate events while somehow keeping the original, pure, DIY spirit intact. A paradox, in other words. As Rev Al said of himself one time, “Special CACU, Special Needs.” The same holds true of Chicken. Chicken edited Rough Draft one time. By the time he did it, M2 exerted a little more control over the very lean annals that Cacophonous provided so far many. Some people were bristling under his soft yet insistent attempts to control their expressions while editing Rough Draft. Some people quit, some complained, some tried to ignore the control. Chicken received his mailed-up version of Rough Draft in the mail from M2 a week before the ship new copy. He quickly photocopied the red lined prototype and mailed it out to the hundred or so people on the Cacophonous mailing list before they received M2’s clean, grammatically correct version. A very Cacophonous solution.

Chris Karney picks up the mic and M&Ms, revealing the shocking truth that since Lost Vegas didn’t get the alcohol permit it wanted for the event, they’ve been serving nonalcoholic beer ($3 a pop) all night. Incredulous attendees: “No way” one another (I already knew.) Karney then announces that balls to throw at the dunk-tank target to drench Chicken John cost a dollar. Cameras all over get ready, and the rubes line up to shell out even more money. Gekkoboy throws the contents of a giant can of baked beans in the dunk tank water and proposes that those who have to Uriah can sweeten the sauce for five dollars. For $20, Karney says, they have four cans of real beer to throw at him while he’s going down. John Law takes the first ball, and on the fourth try, Chicken John goes down. Many people in the audience are extraordinarily pleased.

Geekoboy then gets in the tank for a round, then a little sprite named Einstein, who also wears a strap on. People take turns throwing balls, missing, then frustrated and determined, shouting up to punch the target and make the dunk anyway. My companion, having no more money for balls, takes off her considerable platform shoes and throws them at the target. I take a whirl, mess (of course), and run up to punch it. Einstein plops.

My companion surveys the scene and narrows her eyes. “As with all Chicken John productions,” she says, “this event has degenerated into absolute cacophony.”
From Popcorn Anti-Theater’s publicity
Michael Clift Elliott, January 1999

“Popcorn is a lot like a school field trip with confessions on drugs.”
- Chicken John, Circus Riddikulous.

“The fun never stops, it is like a comedic bus with no brakes. It certainly isn’t SF Theater.”
- Paul Cortez, Cacophonist by instinct and Popcorn alum.

“A.C.T. board member who refused to give her name.

“It is certainly not ‘Blurring Man,’ there is no community, no reverence or respect.”
- Larry Harvey, founder of Burning Man

Popcorn Anti-Theater brought the night streets of San Francisco to-somehiltful life at the height of dot-com boomeroy, Variety Theater For Today’s Attention-Deficient Audience. The fourth wall never stood a chance.

Popcorn took advantage of unattended outdoor spaces to stage short, immediate, unpotentious theatre beginning in 1998. Shows were at night, first in an industrial “park” and then scattered round San Francisco, with the audience shuttled from scene to scene in a converted school bus. In a time-honored countercultural motif, audiences got “on the bus” and embarked a commute into the unknown, immersed in music, poetry, comedy, jello shots, and other potent forms of creative human expression. Eventually they were brought back to where they started and had to somehow return to their daily lives the next morning.

Popcorn was an informal extension of Cacophony, in a similar spirit and featuring a few veteran Cacophonists. They also shared the goal of creating unexpected, unforgettable experiences for small groups of participants. But there were differences. Cacophony events had some theatrical aspects, but Popcorn needed a less exposed setting for their performances. Days grew shorter and colder in the fall of that first year, and the jello shots themselves.

The surreal scout leaders that followed over the years included a candy-striped-suit n’ porkpie-hatted pitchman who led the crowd through five or six scenes around the park ground. That role was first filled by a candy-strung clown and scenes from Harold Pinter plays, opera sung by the audience would be surprised, as they arrived at each scene. It also looks great by torch light, which is how it was lit—undocumented chemicals in the ground).

A.D.C. (anti-motto) fully embraced the theatrical. Popcorn events had some theatrical aspects, but Popcorn (despite its “anti” motto) fully embraced the theatrical. Popcorn was also open to the public (those savvy enough to hear its “anti” motto) fully embraced the theatrical. Popcorn was also open to the public (those savvy enough to hear about it) and charged you for the ride.

Performers over the years included a rocking one-woman trainy glam guitar concert in the park, perverse clowns, scenes from Handel Pinter plays, opera sung from high atop construction equipment, and a jailhouse confessional dating video.

I initially performed in Popcorn the month after first attending a show. Hernan contributed manic energy, genius knowledge of San Francisco’s urban landscape, and personal connections to a diverse group of artists and weirdos. Dedicated to manifesting strange and affecting experiences for both friends and complete strangers, Hernan has instigated many artistic and anarchy events in his time. But, typical of Cacophony, most have been ephemeral one-night happenings, brief and seen by few. Connecting with experienced theater types who shared an interest in experimentation yielded something that lasted for years. Hernan continued Popcorn, while the other founders moved on to other things, until 2005, more or less on a monthly basis.

The very first Popcorn Anti-Theater performances took place in a single location, an open industrial spit of a park variously known as “the Cable Car Graveyard” and “Tire Beach.” It was a mix of dying grass and gravel with a single, sad picnic table and BBQ pit, situated on the embankment of an area not yet gentrified enough to be commonly known as “Dogpatch.” More than a couple ingenious and borderline illegal events have happened on that real estate over the years. While it’s a novel location for those who rarely leave The Mission, it’s not too remote and in a relatively safe area (if you don’t count the undocumented chemicals in the ground). It also looks great by torch light, which is how it was lit—chemicals be damned. The show started “at 9:30pm (sundown)” "Dorations’ of between $5 to $25 were accepted, and a big pot of spaghetti was available if you wanted to sup with cast and crew post show on that sad picnic table.

Short-form artistic outbursts need a tour guide, a theatrical sherpa to tie the loose collection of sounds and scenes together. That role was first filled by a candy-striped-suit n’ porkpie-hatted pitchman who led the crowd through five or six scenes around the park ground. The surreal scout leaders that followed over the years included a French-Canadian circus ringmaster and an art-damaged malappristant named “Dr. Discount,” amongst others. Popcorn’s staff also included two ladies known as the “Pop Tarts” who vended alcoholic drinks to attendees. Popcorn Anti-Theater performances lasted for years. Hernan continued Popcorn, while the other founders moved on to other things, until 2005, more or less on a monthly basis.

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Defenestration

“Brian Goggin and scores of collaborators transformed the top three floors of a condemned hotel into an astounding fantasyscape that features several dozen pieces of anthropomorphized furniture cantilevered out from the hotel’s windows and outside walls. Crawling couches, a snarling grandfather clock, several scurrying coffee tables, and an open refrigerator that seems to be crying for help are all presented as a state of suspended animation, suddenly frozen in the act of making a kind of prison break from their oppressive, instrumental identities. Titled after a 1618 episode in Prague when some Hapsburg lackeys were given the heave-ho by a group of exuberant revolutionaries, this carnivalesque spectacle of quotidian squalor stands as a lively rebuke to the unfeeling sanctimony of institutional liberals, especially those who cloak private aggrandizement in the do-gooder rhetoric of public policy. It is also the most volatile and permanent artistic expression of a large and dedicated underground that has been percolating in San Francisco for quite some time, staging a well-organized guerilla war of public satire against the institutional self-congratulation that pretends to improve everyday life.”

This collaborative group of artists is affiliated with the secret “Cacophony Society,” which helps organize the popular Burning Man event. “Defenestration” doesn’t simply announce itself as a conventional art presentation: rather, it reveals itself as the visible evidence of an elaborate subcultural value system within which works of art play specific, albeit mysterious roles. One cannot help but draw a parallel between the way this subculture uses visual expression and the way the Beat Generation used art and poetry. In both instances, an esoteric system of sense-making and sense-breaking binds an insular community of shared sensibilities. In “Defenestration” one sees a kind of Rabelaisian retort to the institutional sanctimony as it exists both in and beyond the art world.

—Mark Van Proyen

Art Issues Magazine, March 1998

There were at least ten spotters on the roof and firescapes, as well as among the throng on the street below. They were positioned to stomp out any errant flaming embers that might cascade or rocket away from the building like the crazed furniture attached to the façade in a perpetual non-kinetic attempt to fly away. Given mere seconds, an unnoticed bit of burning debris in the wrong place could birth a conflagration ending the night in a somewhat unnoticed bit of burning debris in the wrong place could birth a conflagration ending the night in a somewhat

The flames were lit and the whirling buckets of embers that might cascade or rocket away from the building like the crazed furniture attached to the façade in a perpetual non-kinetic attempt to fly away. Given mere seconds, an unnoticed bit of burning debris in the wrong place could birth a conflagration ending the night in a somewhat unnoticed bit of burning debris in the wrong place could birth a conflagration ending the night in a somewhat

There was a rope attached at his back to keep him from inadvertently stepping forward and plunging to his death amidst the costumed performers and audience four stories below. One lane of Howard Street, one of the busiest one-way routes in San Francisco, had been closed all day to accommodate the street fair and performances taking place, during what many believed to be the defining San Francisco event of the mid-90s. Scof’s gaze was fixed on the nearby city skyline with an intensity typical of a prize fighter or racing driver. I was transfixed, as were the others, and had to make a conscious effort to do my job of stomping out fires here and there while keeping an eye on Scof’s safety line. One of the other spotters saw the police and firemen race into the ground floor doorway behind. By then, Scof was finishing his performance. We quickly disensed the flaming cones, made one more idiotic check around the rooftop for any small embers, and exited the roof through a far window well, just as the officials popped up onto the roof through the main doorway. All they found was various rigging, a sweaty harness, a bucket of water, and several full fire extinguishers.

If any event in mid-decade 1990s San Francisco defined that time and place in the universe, it would be Brian Goggin’s Defenestration. Brian’s genius for whimsical sculpture expanded into another realm with his imagining of this public expression of collective joy and creativity, street performance, and participatory spectacle. While remaining a fiercely independent artist, Brian was able to engage and encourage an enormous amount of collective creativity, allowing a free hand to all those participating. The spirit of Cacophony was never more present in any large scale public event.

Dream Circus’s life play as theater and theater play as life crept into Defenestration, as it did Desert Site Works. The way this group looked and acted eventually entered the mainstream as “burner” fashion and ethos.

Circus Rockdickles, Circus X, and other tiny, homespun and entirely un-funded “punk rock” circuses were in the houses. The Hard Times Bike Club and Cycleicide represented the emerging “pre-cycled” bike scene. Circus Rockdickles and Cycleicide became the “Johnny Appleseeds” of this new punk based do-it-yourself culture. These touring groups travelled across the country spreading the idea that anyone could start their own circus or modified bike club. Anyone could make a show. Subsequently, dozens of similar performing groups popped up across the country. These groups, and many more, came together under the wild banner that Brian flew with the help of builders Steve Morgenstern, Catherine Morgan, Chris Campbell, Morgan Raimond, Oliver Lowe and others. Defenestration was a model for dealing with the authorities. Due to the lobbying efforts of Danielle Ergleman and Christine Harbridge, Defenestration became a political clash in the formerly impervious wall of bureaucratic suppression that artists would routinely run into when proposing and creating street events requiring official sanction. These efforts proved a template for procuring permission for future events that formerly would have been entirely underground or simply never allowed.

Art Issues Magazine, March 1998

There was a rope attached at his back to keep him from inadvertently stepping forward and plunging to his death amidst the costumed performers and audience four stories below. One lane of Howard Street, one of the busiest one-way routes in San Francisco, had been closed all day to accommodate the street fair and performances taking place, during what many believed to be the defining San Francisco event of the mid-90s. Scof’s gaze was fixed on the nearby city skyline with an intensity typical of a prize fighter or racing driver. I was transfixed, as were the others, and had to make a conscious effort to do my job of stomping out fires here and there while keeping an eye on Scof’s safety line. One of the other spotters saw the police and firemen race into the ground floor doorway behind. By then, Scof was finishing his performance. We quickly disensed the flaming cones, made one more idiotic check around the rooftop for any small embers, and exited the roof through a far window well, just as the officials popped up onto the roof through the main doorway. All they found was various rigging, a sweaty harness, a bucket of water, and several full fire extinguishers.

If any event in mid-decade 1990s San Francisco defined that time and place in the universe, it would be Brian Goggin’s Defenestration. Brian’s genius for whimsical sculpture expanded into another realm with his imagining of this public expression of collective joy and creativity, street performance, and participatory spectacle. While remaining a fiercely independent artist, Brian was able to engage and encourage an enormous amount of collective creativity, allowing a free hand to all those participating. The spirit of Cacophony was never more present in any large scale public event.

Dream Circus’s life play as theater and theater play as life crept into Defenestration, as it did Desert Site Works. The way this group looked and acted eventually entered the mainstream as “burner” fashion and ethos.

Circus Rockdickles, Circus X, and other tiny, homespun and entirely un-funded “punk rock” circuses were in the houses. The Hard Times Bike Club and Cycleicide represented the emerging “pre-cycled” bike scene. Circus Rockdickles and Cycleicide became the “Johnny Appleseeds” of this new punk based do-it-yourself culture. These touring groups travelled across the country spreading the idea that anyone could start their own circus or modified bike club. Anyone could make a show. Subsequently, dozens of similar performing groups popped up across the country. These groups, and many more, came together under the wild banner that Brian flew with the help of builders Steve Morgenstern, Catherine Morgan, Chris Campbell, Morgan Raimond, Oliver Lowe and others. Defenestration was a model for dealing with the authorities. Due to the lobbying efforts of Danielle Ergleman and Christine Harbridge, Defenestration became a political clash in the formerly impervious wall of bureaucratic suppression that artists would routinely run into when proposing and creating street events requiring official sanction. These efforts proved a template for procuring permission for future events that formerly would have been entirely underground or simply never allowed.
Drive, She Said.
Radcliffe was up the whole night, head full of acid, howling at the moon. He was sailing his VW Vanagon slowly in circles around the Car Hunt camp; the camper top was popped up and glowing from several lanterns swinging inside. He wedged a two by four between the dashboard and the accelerator pedal, holding the speed of the vehicle to a comfortable eight to ten miles an hour. He had tied a rope to the steering wheel, cinched it in the rolled up driver-side window, taut to the wheel, holding the vehicle to large passes around the camp. He circled the camp until just before dawn, riding atop the pop up shell, nowhere near the driver’s seat and steering column, surf punk blasting across the flat desert pan and into our weary ears.

We had a big day ahead, with the culmination of months of work preparing the big Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser station wagon for the desert and its eventual death by gunshot. We had hauled it and all our camp gear out to the small flat desert playa thirty miles past the “Pavement Ends” sign in Northern Nevada. PeopleHater engineers Chip Flynn and Mike Fogarty designed and built the remote control devices for steering, acceleration, and braking, allowing the station wagon to cruise at speeds up to 60 mph, while providing enough mobility from the Futaba radio control box to allow the operator to drive the prey in evasive actions to avoid the following hunt cars and their rifle bearing hunters. We armor plated the engine compartment and Pepe Ozan made plate steel wheels with rebar tread.

Kimmerick and Vanessa made a family of dummies: Ward, June, Stoner Boy, and GooGoo.

Bright and early, just after sunup, the handlers and hunters convened and began the preparations for the hunt. Radcliffe was passed out in a mountain of down comforters, soaked in spittle near his head.

Robert Burk carefully painted a black bullseye on the sleeping Radcliffe’s forehead, while the rest of us watched over his shoulder. After everyone backed up to a safe distance, I backed a rental car right up to the open Vanagon camper door and after opening the driver’s side and passenger doors, directing the door speakers at Radcliffe’s wrinkled head a mere 15 feet away, turned on N.W.A.’s “Fuck Da Police” full blast.

He fell flat on his face, the comforter wrapped about his naked lower body tripping him up in a futile attempt to get at and smash the car stereo that had assaulted him. He sat in a puddle on the ground and absorbed the brunt of our collective “payback” mirth. It was well into the afternoon, and several passes at the hunt car, until Radcliffe noticed the target painted on his head. By then it was too late - all was filmed by Chuck Cirino for his nationally syndicated show, Weird TV, and there was Chris Radcliffe, hunter or hunted?
Deep in the grip of co-dependency, we absole him of guilt, and took the other way, while he goes on killing. It takes a special kind of hunter to take down one of these vicious brutes, and when the opportunity arose, I had no choice but to keep the guardian and meet it head on. Did I have the right stuff? Was I man enough? There was only one way to find out. The alternative was not even worth considering. If I stayed home, I knew I would have to take a coward in the mirror every morning for the rest of my life. Better a hunter’s death than that, I thought. Better to be ground into potted food product by four thousand unreasoning pounds of rogue bull Oldsmobile.

I embarked at the crack of noon, piling my gear into the German RV of my close friend and confidant, Hugh Chrysler-Jones. The skies were leaden, heavy with smog, and the other drivers seemed jittery. Cruising up Interstate 80 toward the Nevada border, past innumerable new construction projects that could have been either shopping malls or prisons—it was impossible to tell—I couldn’t help but reflect on the day’s news: a pick up truck had crashed through the fence at an Oakland daycare center, killing one child and critically injuring others. The eighteen-year old driver had been questioned and released, leaving only one possible suspect in the tragedy: a late model GMC stepside. His ordinarily mild mannered vehicle seemed crazed by the roar of its engine. The skies were leaden, heavy with smog, and the other drivers seemed jittery.

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I quickly snapped out the banana clips, inverted them, and went to work on the second magazine, but by then the beast was lurching toward us alarmingly, trailing fluids, and the Master of the Hunt called a quick cease fire.

The old bull ground to a shuddering stop with a round through his oil pan, a bullet somehow, and against all odds, had slipped under the thick armor plating on his right front quarter panel. Later forensic examination confirmed what had been clear to me from the moment he had turned his course in that last desperate lunge, flying at me with hate in his headlights. It was one of my 7.62 rounds that brought him down. The killing shot was mine.

Flushed as I was with the pride of success and the bloody passion of the chase, I could not help but notice that some of my fellow hunters, who had paid their 100 dollars and not yet had a turn to shoot, were less than impressed with my deadeye marksmanship. Even though the Master of the Hunt, Dr. Boggmann, ruled the kill clean and the shot a legal one, there was some sotto voce grumbling about neckties and the regrettable absence of neckties.

Again the mighty beast was hauled back to camp by restraints and wired with electrodes by the evil geniuses of PeopleHater, a secretive gang of crazed engineers. Dr. Boggmann estimated later that we may have been their pet, possibly a small monkey. There wasn’t much left of these unlucky vacationers, but personal effects and a fragment of a gnawed, bullet riddled ID identified them as Ward and June something of Concord, California, and their sons, Stonerboy and GooGoo. A quick records check by Huge on the satellite link showed no such address, and no missing persons report. The desert keeps its secrets.

Back in camp, our victory celebration around the oily carcass turned into a wild spontaneous dance. A bottle of Everclear was passed around, and a half dozen hunters took turns splitting great gobs of fire. Agent Robert Burns, one of the organizers of the hunt, emplanted a bottle of Beam and started juggling live coals while his dog, an exceptionally stupid Dalmation named Max, wrestled the chained bulk of M.T. Stein’s pit bull, Moss, and I sat drunk and stupefied by the campfire, paralyzed as the children of the galaxy chanted: “Monkey, No Monkey” and laughing hysterically, as though some junked up juju zombie, and lurched off on a like rabbits in its headlights. Somebody kept chanting ‘Give Peace a Chance,’ the nuclear family seems to say. Stonerboy in the back seat and Ward and June up front after the first round.

It was pathetic. Weaving drunkenly, wheels grinding against punctured fenders and bent trim, he staggered across the playa at no more than fifteen or twenty miles an hour. We followed like a pack of jackals, unleashing an awesome and near-continuous stream of ordnance: .223, .357, .44, .308, NATO, 7mm magnum, 9mm, 30-06 and 12 gauge slugs. When he finally wheezed to a stop again, we dismounted and advanced on him Wild Bunch style, fire-fighting until our weapons were black with powder burns, barrels glowing hot in the gathering dusk.

In the belly of the beast we found the partially digested remains of a family of four and a dump of fur that may have been their pet, possibly a small monkey. There wasn’t much left of these unlucky vacationers, but personal effects and a fragment of a gnawed, bullet riddled ID identified them as Ward and June something of Concord, California, and their sons, Stonerboy and GooGoo. A quick records check by Huge on the satellite link showed no such address, and no missing persons report. The desert keeps its secrets.

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Two scabrous-looking riders roll through the night, down Third Street, ignoring traffic laws and dull backward glances from motorists. Their bicycles, driven forth by enormous leather boots and well-linked calves, satisfy traditional expectations—a metal frame with two spoked wheels, two pedals, a chain, a seat, and handlebars—but the form is warped, slightly distorted, as if the schematics had been created within a fun-house mirror. The first is too long and skinny, the other too tall and broad; they look like a kinetic rendering of Laurel and Hardy wheeling along the city’s perimeter, past Cesar Chavez, toward the inky water of the bay.

On a dead-end road, in front of Cyclone Warehouse, they join other abnormal cycles—uni, bi, tri, and quad—that send loose gear flying over the heads of two women bobbing up and down on a Bike-O-Totter. Near the warehouse loading dock, four hobbyists with flickering twinkle-light helmets enjoy a game of midnight outdoor bowling while, in the distance, a sinking oil tanker wavers. A couple of youngsters come crashing through the surrounding weeds, smelling like a childhood silence. A young woman in a cowboy hat pedals furiously forward on a once-innocent machine the rafters by unseen wires– choppers, cruisers, double-decker lorries, and thug-high stockings. Accompanied by a burlesque grind tape (sadly not from Cats), the bike-mounted kittens ride in a furiously circle that disintegrates into a “cat” fight seen through a jumble of spinning wheels and vermicular handle bars. The Suburban Intruder makes bird feed of several loaves of bread. Stuntman David Apocalypse jumps over five flaming Matchbox cars. Bike manipulator Jesse Whack presents the Hard Times Bicycle Club tuneup: Open toolbox, pull out beer, drink beer, clip brakes, cut off seat, slice through finger—which he does, leaving a trail of bright scarlet blood (he’s later seen bandaging his wound with duct tape). Chupacabra—the sleek alien beauty with stabbing claws created by Jay Brommel—challenges a pinata, fails, and must be rescued by a unicyclist who lops off the insurgent pinata’s head. Someone tosses hot dogs. Bike manipulator Jesse Whack presents the Hard Times Bicycle Club tuneup: Open toolbox, pull out beer, drink beer, clip brakes, cut off seat, slice through finger—which he does, leaving a trail of bright scarlet blood (he’s later seen bandaging his wound with duct tape). Chupacabra—the sleek alien beauty with stabbing claws created by Jay Brommel—challenges a pinata, fails, and must be rescued by a unicyclist who lops off the insurgent pinata’s head. Stuntman David Apocalypse jumps over five flaming Matchbox cars. Bike manipulator Jesse Whack presents the Hard Times Bicycle Club tuneup: Open toolbox, pull out beer, drink beer, clip brakes, cut off seat, slice through finger—which he does, leaving a trail of bright scarlet blood (he’s later seen bandaging his wound with duct tape). Chupacabra—the sleek alien beauty with stabbing claws created by Jay Brommel—challenges a pinata, fails, and must be rescued by a unicyclist who lops off the insurgent pinata’s head.

Chavez, toward the inky water of the bay. 'No brakes, no problem,' is a favorite motto of both clubs. 'AAahhh ... the old Kangaroo Action,' says an admiring audience member. Overhead, an array of unusual machines dangles from the rafters by unseen wires–choppers, cruisers, double-decker lorries, and thug-high stockings. A couple of youngsters come crashing through the surrounding weeds, smelling like a childhood silence. A young woman in a cowboy hat pedals furiously a Seemien creation that resembles a carnival game. Tails, cycle inspired self-portraits, and necklaces made of bike chains are scattered among the warehouse bangle of spokes, beer, and grease. John Blowick, creator of the Keep Away bike equipped with multiple blades (to threaten new auto finishes and spandex-encased legs), stands stage right in a welding mask and gloves, putting final touches on a needy joint. Another audience member wheels forward on a once-innocent machine corrupted by gold mannequin legs, a leopard print banana seat, and a rusty flamethrower that erupts with four feet of fire. Reece and the crowd are thrilled. Someone tosses hot dogs. A passion for Road Warrior misconduct and salvaged parts is essential for members of Cycleide, which was inspired by the rogueish Hard Times Bicycle Club from Minneapolis, where an ordinance now limits customizing to certified welders only. ‘No brakes, no problem,’ is a favorite motto of both clubs. 'No brakes, no problem,' says Reese, whose Suburban Intruder is a bicycle rigged with rotating lawn mower blades. Bloodlust aside, Cycleide is not without its impish mien: Enn Perusao, who created Double Trouble (a tandem bike outfitted with matching beer holders for those lazy Sunday afternoons), and Danny Girl, who made self-flagellation simple with the Spanking Bike, are joined in front of the stage by Tammie and Lonaines, all wearing sexy cat ears, tails, and thigh-high stockings. Accompanied by a burlesque grind tape (sadly not from Cats), the bike-mounted kittens ride in a furious circle that disintegrates into a “cat” fight seen through a jumble of spinning wheels and vermicular handle bars. The Suburban Intruder makes bird feed of several loaves of bread. Stuntman David Apocalypse jumps over five flaming Matchbox cars. Bike manipulator Jesse Whack presents the Hard Times Bicycle Club tuneup: Open toolbox, pull out beer, drink beer, clip brakes, cut off seat, slice through finger—which he does, leaving a trail of bright scarlet blood—he’s later seen bandaging his wound with duct tape). Chupacabra—the sleek alien beauty with stabbing claws created by Jay Brommel—challenges a pinata, fails, and must be rescued by a unicyclist who lops off the insurgent pinata’s head. During the much-anticipated bicycle auction, Reese is joined onstage by his boss at Ace Autoworks, Bill the Junkman-cum-Auctioneer. While the crowd misleads the auctioneers by checking watches and waving at friends across the room, the auctioneers confuse the crowd by lowering bids (“I have $450. Do I hear $400, $300, $200? Sold to the little lady for $50!). Reese gives away “a bike of your choice” to 8-year-old raffle winner Bobby. Almost despite themselves, Cycleide sells seven tall bikes, starting with Brad Silvernail’s double-decker tandem, but the real buying begins after the auction, during a cathartic punk rock set by the Junkyard Sluts. As Einstein— the Sluts’ frontman, who grew up at the legendary punk venue The Farm—rolls around in piles of mutilated bread covered in Vicks Formula 44, neighborhood guys and their children make deals with Cycleide. A grinning man, who wishes to “live, die, and be forgotten,” buys Ivan the Black and Free Spirit for $80, less than it cost to build his own recently stolen One Eye—one brake, one gear, one day of use. “I didn’t know I had named it so well,” says the man, still grinning as a flaming unicyclist rolls through the crowd and little Bobby teeters precariously on his first art bike. “Remember, Critical Mass is for pussies,” says a cycle enthusiast, as he helps Bobby pull another bike from the pile. Art’s tough.”
Above: Hunter S. Thompson effigy made by the Cyclecide crew. This photo was taken before the ritual immolation at sea to honor the recently deceased journalist in March 2005.

Below: Seven years earlier, Cyclecide honored Frank Sinatra, the “Chairman of the Board” in a similar ceremony.

The Cyclecide Viking埋葬仪式在海事港举行。最近去世的记者猎人·亨特·汤普森的同僚马克·佩雷斯和他的“人生大小”游戏的同伴Kelly DeForest一起参加了这个仪式。Kelly意外去世，给朋友们带来了深深的悲伤。

The Mousetrap is a full, human-sized recreation of the old Milton Bradley board game from the 60s. India Basin is one of the last unknown places left in San Francisco. It was and remains this day, home of the Mousetrap and many other Cacophony-friendly events and artists.
MY NAME IS NELL, YOUR MOTHER. I DON’T WANT YOU TO KNOW MY NAME. I DON’T USE IT ANYMORE AND EVEN IF I TOLD YOU YOU WOULDN’T KNOW IT. JUST LIKE YOU DON’T KNOW ABOUT THE NIGHT THAT CHANGED MY LIFE FOREVER. I WAS AN INFAMOUS SMALL TOWN BOY FROM ROXBURGHE, WASHINGTON STATE WHO FOUND MYSELF IN SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA AND WEIR OUT OF HIS LEASH. I THOUGHT I WAS LEAVING THE INHERITED THINGS THAT WOULD MAKE AN ARTIST OUT OF ME… BUT EASILY. I DON’T THINK WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR A SCHOOL. AGING BACK. MY SISTER HIRED ME A JOB AT A MESSY FRESHMAN AT A TECHNICAL COLLEGE WHO SOLD OUT. SELLING OUT. OEM EVENTS SOME ON SUNDAY MORNING, AND ONE NIGHT MY THOUGHT IT WOULD BE EASY TO CHECK IT OUT. A PRESS-OF-FRAMEFRAMED CLAIMED TO HAVE ATTENDED SOME OF THESE EVENTS, BUT NO ONE ACTUALLY KNEW WHO DID DO ANY. AT LEAST NO ONE COULD PROVE IT. BUT I SAW YOU TELL OUR OWN KNOWLEDGE, WHERE IT’S FROM. BECAUSE I HAVE SUFFER TO CONSCIOUS FROM THE PAGAN SACRIFICE WITH...
BEHOLD! ANOTHER HARROWING STORY FROM THE PAGAN CRYPT

OMPHM!
PM HIRMA PFHM
PP MEEH!

RADISH?

Dude! You gotta seriously take it easy on your throat. You sound like one of those death metal guys.

Oh crap, man. That is so cool! What a great mask. How'd you make that? You're getting at some strange shit.

Puh-rih sh l popping popcorn! Rump-rah!

We don't know what we were seeing or what we thought we were seeing. It looked innocent enough. Suddenly a ragtag group of strangers sharing an extraordinary experience—something beyond normal mainstream activity. Something subversive, artistic, and post. Those were the years when punk was in the foreground, reaching deep into humanity's primal past to forge the future. It's what we were hungry for: exploration, expression, art, dreams, and a growing desire to do-it-yourself adventures. This looked like our ticket to pursuing all the more and clutter of our modern lives and to finding something that felt meaningful. We explored the cave for hours, encountering all kinds of strange folk, all fully engaged in these mortar spontaneous performances! Had we found our people? Or had we found madness?

Was this badge post?

Earth back! All the hum drum of room generation. We're on Earth, sexus!

RADISH?
OVER THE NEXT COUNTELESS HOURS WE WENT IN DEEP WITH MANY INTERESTING AND COLORFUL CHARACTERS, EVERYONE SIMPLY ADDICTED TO THE SPIRIT OF THE NIGHT. TO REACH AN "ALTERED STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS" WAS WHAT THE NEWSLETTER SAID TO DO AND EVERYONE WAS NEEDED FOR DOING IT BUT AS THE NIGHT WORE ON...SOMETHING FUNNY STARTED TO HAPPEN. THE FUN DIDN’T SEEM QUITE SO FUN ANY MORE! WHAT HAD BEEN PLAYED FOR LAUGHS EARLIER WAS APPARENTLY NOW BEING PLAYED FOR REAL!

WE GOT OURSELVES OUTTA THERE! THE NIGHT THAT HAD BEGUN SO EXCITINGLY HAD NOW TURNED TO SOMETHING UNKLE! IT HAD GONE SHARPER AND PRETENSE. MAYBE EVEN DANGEROUS! ON OUR WAY BACK UP THE STEPS WE CAME INTO SOME KIDS, CHET TRIED TO WARN THEM OF THE DANGER THEY WERE IN BUT I JUST FELT STICK, LITERALLY LIKE A CAGE WAS COMING OVER ME.

DON’T GO DOWN THERE! THERE’S SATANISTS IN THE CAVES!

WHAT?

NO SHIT! THEY’RE EATING PEOPLE, MAN! ROASTING ‘EM!

YOU TRYING TO BE FUNNY? THERE’S NO SUCH THING!

REALLY? COME ON MAN...

YOU GONNA LISTEN TO ME? DON’T GO DOWN THERE!

I’M TELLING YOU IT’S SOME REAL SATANIC SHIT!

THAT’S NOT FUNNY!

THAT’S NOT THAT FUNNY!

GUYS, THEY ARE JUST HAVING A MARSHMALLOW ROAST!

COOL, YOU DON’T SEE THIS IN FRESNO!

STOP! YOU NEED TO LISTEN...

FREAKS, LOOKS LIKE SOME FREAKS HAVING A COSTUME THING!

NO, THEY’RE CAMPING OR.... OR MASON SOR... OR SOMETHING!

BUT IT HASN’T万余元 SIMPLE! THERE WAS SOMETHING TRULY MYSTERIOUS HAPPENING THAT NIGHT! SOMETHING BEYOND EXPLANATION THERE WOULD BE NO MARSHMALLOWS... NOT FOR US... AND NOT FOR...

NOT...

FLIPPIN’...

...BUT I THOUGHT IT WAS ILLEGAL!
KEVIN!

SUPPER’S READY!

BUT THEN AGAIN! MAYBE IT WAS JUST A BUNCH OF COSTUMED FREAKS HAVING A MARSHMALLOW COOKOUT AFTER ALL!
For Louise Jarmilowicz, Sundays were almost invariably “creative days.” Carrie Galbraith often stopped by Louise’s house on those days to sit and draw, while Louise created collages or sewed. During those convivial afternoons, they often came up with ideas for events that they would produce collaboratively.

One languid Sunday afternoon, they began talking about a dystopian event: a bunker full of post-nuclear survivors, coming together for their annual barter party. It was simple, rooted in the dark fantasies of their duck-and-cover generation, and the subject of many films that inspired details for the event.

The premise was easy: survivors from outlying bunkers have come together to celebrate and create a kind of market, read stories and poetry from the “old world of before,” and sit for the telling of the “pox eclipse.” They had a wealth of cinematic influences to draw from—beginning with A Boy and His Dog for the markets and Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome for the “tell.” From this basic idea, Atomic Café was born.

The next part of the planning was reconnaissance. They needed a bunker, obviously, and they needed to furnish it. They enlisted several friends and proceeded to scout, on several occasions, until they found the perfect multiple-room bunker in the Presidio of San Francisco. There was only one problem with the location: the Presidio was still a working military base at that time.

Their solution was to buy their own locks and put them on the bunker doors, hoping the Army never had a need for the underground fort. Over the next few weeks they scrounged ladles, chains, linens, anything they thought they might need, and transported it into the bunker to create the “café.” Carrie had no trouble enticing her many art school friends and arming them with paint and brushes; they sneaked into the bunker for two weeks before the event and renovated the interior, depicting apocalypse scenes on the walls, including a room with the entire story told in pictures. They paid homage to Bob’s Big Boy and the Golden Arches, painting icons in their honor. It was thrilling, and for many of Carrie’s fellow students, a new experience, as they had not yet been drawn into Cacophony.

They brought in a chemical toilet and set it up a discreet corner in one of the smaller rooms. A battery-powered generator and a cart with a 16mm projector came in the night before the event. Film appeared and was loaded. Candles were put on tables. They were ready.

The night of the event, they met the 30-plus participants, ranging in age from 13 to 60, at the southern parking lot of the Golden Gate Bridge, near the cross section of the cable. They had a pickup truck with a cab and loaded as many as could fit in the back, closed the cab, and headed to their destination, a parking spot 50 yards from the bunker entrance. The guide then led the participants, single file, through the brush, and then across a road in front of a manned building, to the bunker entrance: a door leading to a ladder going down. Each person entered quietly, and the guide headed back to get the next group waiting by the bridge.

Above: Sybil deFenz prepares to serenade Cacophony on yet another outing. Facing page: Vivian Perry and Pierre, le marquis de Gateau in the San Francisco City Hall Rotunda after delivering the last crumbs from Let Them Eat Cake to the Mayor on a silver platter.

“Bolt up brass commemorative plaques in places where you have experienced a revelation or had a particularly fulfilling sexual experience, etc. Dress up. Leave a false name. Be legendary.”

—Hakim Bey
The exploration of San Francisco and environs became addictive and members sought out as many opportunities to investigate as possible. During periods of quiet when a week or two would lapse between events, the notion of the “spontaneous” event began. Members would call other players and plan reconnaissance of an abandoned building they had seen, or perhaps visit a abandoned building they had seen, or perhaps visit a

Tales of SF Cacophony: The Events

Lightning Events

Like the Suicide Club before, Cacophony events were often inspired by the writings of a vast array of authors. The influences could be, by turn, sacred, profane, humorous, dour, adventurous, romantic, or confusing. The occasional event would be all of the above. Some Cacophonists’ obsessions with a specific author, genre, or perhaps a literary myth inspired them to create elaborate, obsessive events. In some case these events took on a life all their own, the facilitating author, impelled by voices in their heads perhaps, made it their life’s calling.

P. Segal’s The Marcel Proust Support Group, elaborate event, elegant soirée, and obsessive reading circle was just that. What Ms. Segal offered as a reading group for existent and potential Proustophiles grew into a life style and a career. Her protein “zins,” Proud Said That grew from the reading circle. She opened a popular Proust themed restaurant, Café Proust, which paid her bills and employed dozens of waiters, waitresses and writers for years. She published stories and essays based on the life and writings of Proust. She and her gentle obsession were the subject of numerous press observations and a steady stream of admirers. Sebastian Melmoth and Celeste Alberti paid the ultimate compliment of mimicry and lampooning with their Cacophony literary circle, The Charles Bukowski Support Group, a reading, drinking and pulking conference dedicated to supporting and presenting the work of the “American Proust of the gutter.”

Cacophonists would sometimes meet through event postings or informally for poetry readings while preparing elaborate pancake breakfasts. They might imbibe gin and tonics while reciting a rousing round of Kipling’s Regimental Tales and preparing for a tipsy saber duel atop a pitched third story Edwardian rooftop.

Poetry and/or prose readings in laundromats, race tracks, grasy knolls, abandoned freeway ramps, sewer tunnels, and pretty much any environment the facilitator could come up with were common. The range and variety of literary events was limited only by individual organizer’s taste and desire.

Perhaps Cacophony’s most complex literary event was the Night of the Exquisite Corpse, one of the few events that came close to a genuine theatrical experience. This event involved an actual paying audience, a rented theater or hall, “actors,” scripts, sets, props, lighting, and all the other trappings of theater. The Surrealist gift this particular divertissement offered an unwitting audience was the disengagement of their own dreams, thoughts and visions, filtered through the collective mind and almost instantly recast on a stage right in front of them.

The Theatrical Reading

The Theatrical Reading

The Theatrical Reading

The Theatrical Reading

Above: Some events were accompanied by elaborate flyers offering further inducements for attending what promised to be a singular experience such as the above invitation to the Dissect into Necropole event. Art by Kevin Evans.
The Noe Valley Ministry, The Haight Ashbury Public Library, and The Victoria Theater were the venues for the Corpses over a span of 5 years. Initially conceived of by Jim Khenedy, Louise Jarmilowicz, and others, the Surrealist parlor game changed subtly when Ethyl Ketone and Louise Jarmilowicz were its hosts.

The audience entered the hall and was immediately confronted by a bank of typewriters, a large shelf full of curious props, and a list of character names. Each theater goer was required to sit at a typewriter, and, while only viewing the last four or five lines typed by the last person, was encouraged to write his own staging and dialogue, knowing only the names of the characters and inserting any of the props that they wished to use. This exercise was repeated at each typewriter until every audience member had joined in creating the play. Snippets of the freshly minted play were cut up randomly by the attendants and delivered to whichever actor was named in that portion of the script.

An example of Dadaist action, dialogue, and stage direction: Zeus, while adjusting his Speedo and twirling his cape, dials the rotary phone, expecting to speak to his bookie: “Yo, Sergio, it’s Zeus, man. How did Diaper Rash do in the third? Win or place?” The postman walks in stage right, points the Enfield 303 rifle at Zeus and says, “All your kittens wear pink mittens, why indeed do the animals vex me so?” Lizzie Borden in blond pigtails, carrying a hula hoop, shouts out from the chair she’s been hiding behind: “What would Roman Polanski do?”

Absinthe, the Potent Green Fairy
Stuart Mangrum, 1994

After languishing in obscurity for the better part of a century, absinthe is enjoying an unlikely renaissance in fin-de-siécle San Francisco. No fashionable party seems complete without hipsters sipping murky glasses of bitter greenhomebrew, or more likely dumping them into the potted plants when they think no one’s looking. No wonder, really, that Proust stuck to his beer and heroin. Absinthe is an acquired taste, and a difficult one to acquire at that. I should know: I’ve been drinking the stuff for fifteen years, and I still haven’t quite made up my mind.

My first absinthe experience was in a stove top, over-amplified GI bar on Okinawa. What I drank was not the “Green Fairy” of the Belle Epoche but the “Purple Haze” of Koa City: a dangerous mix of gin, absinthe, violet, and sweet & sour that we’d drink after recon missions to wash the radio chatter out of our heads. Japan is one of the few places on earth where you can still buy absinthe over the counter, but as a US national with a top secret clearance, I was theoretically risking my job every time I ordered a drink. For that matter, I wasn’t supposed to patronize the off-base drug stores either, where you could buy Valium and Dexedrine over the counter, but as a US national with a top secret clearance, I should know: I’ve been drinking the stuff for fifteen years, and I still haven’t quite made up my mind.

Different bars in the village all served their own variations on the basic Purple Haze formula, with escalating adjectives to let you know how much absinthe was allegedly in the mix. Regular, Super, Special, Extra, etc. My friend Takeo at the Rock House Purple Haze (allegedly in the mix: Regular, Super, Special, Extra, etc.) created a woaked scenario he called the Big Fire, a warhead like drink creamed by a mushroom cloud of absinthe that took up two-thirds of the glass. Surprisingly tasty, extraordinarily strong, and oddly beautiful under the black lights upstairs on Gate Two Street, where the walls were covered with photos and the stereo moved enough air to push empties off the bar. Two Big Fires and you’d better hope you lost your car keys. Three or four and you’d be hallucinating, and probably doing things you wouldn’t remember in the morning. Or wouldn’t want to remember. I woke up once in my dorm room, pants snagged around muddy boot-tops, tangled in purple-stained clothes that I couldn’t quite peel from my stiff, aching limbs. No wallet, no car keys, no self-respect. Worse, the top of my head felt like it had been lopped off with a pavement saw. If there’s any human condition more miserable than an absinthe hangover, I pray it never happens to me.

Above: Snippet of a literary event write-up in Rough Draft. Facing page: Flyer created by Dog Boy and Care and mailed prior to a poetry reading and absinthe party. The event was listed in Rough Draft but the mailers were a gentle nudge to keep the event in mind. The absinthe was homemade.
We learned from our friend Miss V, a landscape designer. After our return from the playa, the research continued. Potted plants were reported injured or killed. To my knowledge, not a drop survived the trip, and no for an exciting and lively evening at Miss P’s desert cafe. The lot and hauled it out to Burning Man, where it made three to afford an acceptable compromise, then bottled. Our taste buds were too exhausted to tell. We blended the resemblance to the commercial absinthe we’d enjoyed infinitely better than the first batch, but still bore little adjusted up or down by consensus. The result was before being added to the second batch, with proportions developed culinary instincts take over. Each of the six component.

That first batch was, to put it bluntly, awful. Michelle and P promptly discarded the recipe and let their well-developed culinary instincts take over. Each of the six essential oils, which Michelle had obtained by mail-order, came under the intense scrutiny of two sensitive noses before being added to the second batch, with proportions adjusted up or down by consensus. The result was infinitely better than the first batch, but still bore little resemblance to the commercial absinthe we’d enjoyed in Oklahoma. Batch three was better still, but by that point our taste buds were too exhausted to tell. We blended the three to afford an acceptable compromise, then bottled the lot and hauled it out to Burning Man, where it made for an exciting and lively evening at Miss P’s desert cafe. To my knowledge, not a drop survived the trip, and no potted plants were reported injured or killed.

After our return from the playa, the research continued. We learned from our friend Mia V, a landscape designer and expert on exotic plants, that while the drink may be illegal in this country, its principal ingredient, the wormwood plant, is widely available as an ornamental. It’s a low-growing, grey-green shrub with lacy leaves, known to the botanists as artemisia absinthum. Before long, it was thriving in our suburban backyard, and Michelle was experimenting with an extract of absinthe.

Making absinthe from the plant itself, rather than from processed oils, has two major advantages. First, adding oils to grain alcohol is the brewer’s equivalent of making kool-aid: a shortcut approach that’s never going to yield anything particularly interesting or complex. Second, wormwood oil cannot be legally sold if it contains more than trace amounts of thujone, its active ingredient. Unless you’re working with the plant, you’re only making flavored Everclear, not real absinthe.

Soaking crushed leaves in alcohol, on the other hand, yields a potent extract with all the active ingredients a refined absinthe fiend might hope to ingest. Michelle developed a new recipe, based around this extract and flavored with brandy and essential oils. Miss P, working independently, came up with another approach: Take a bottle of Pernod, which is essentially absinthe without the thujone, and mix it up with wormwood extract. Both versions were well-received at the last Proust Walk.

To drink absinthe in the European manner requires a little patience and the correct equipment. A measure of the liquor is poured into a stemmed glass, over which is placed a small, slotted spoon developed specifically for this purpose (though a fork willl do the job if you aren’t lucky enough to own an absinthe spoon). Place a sugar cube on the spoon and apply a slow trickle of ice-cold water. With a little practice, you can get the sugar to dissolve without clouting or “brutising” the absinthe, yielding a beautiful green cocktail that will nip the top of your head off. Proust!

Yet despite all the mornings after, when I got back to the States I found myself pining for absinthe in the same way I’d once yearned for Mexican food on the other side of the International Date Line. Elusive and unobtainable, it just didn’t seem to be at all available. Once a friend smuggled back a quart in a green plastic container, but it only lasted the night, and after that, the memories began to fade. Then, years later, my wife Michelle and I obtained a recipe from a friend in Portland and decided to mix up a batch of our own.

To be fair, the project really belonged to Michelle and Miss P. They did all the work, measuring exotic oils into a pitcher of grain alcohol drop by drop and stirring the whole affair with a glass rod while I lounged in a kitchen chair sipping red wine, scratching the ears of Marcel the cat, while P’s roommate Lance, the smartest man he’s ever met, lectured us all on the neurological effects of thujone, an isomer of camphor that is absinthe’s key component.

The Marcel Proust Support Group
P Segal
August 1994

I live in a grand, crumbling Edwardian in the geographical center of San Francisco, in a two-story, 14-room flat with six friends and an endless succession of delightful house guests. The inmates are, without exception, arty in one way or another; we have lived together and creatively fermented side by side for years. We are family, dysfunctional but nonetheless mutually supportive. As the birthday of one roommate rolled around, I asked him what he would like for a present. He thought about it for a few days, and then he said, “What I would really like for my birthday is for you to read Proust with me. I’ve tried to get through Remembrance of Things Past three times now, and I just don’t think I can do it without a support group.”

I myself had tried to read Proust twice that many times. “Okay,” I answered feebly, “anything for you.”

“Don’t look so miserable,” he said, “We only have to read ten pages a day. It would only take about eleven months, and maybe we could get some other people to do it with us, it’ll be fun.”

I asked myself where we could find a bunch of people who would subject themselves to eleven months of purple prose, and then the obvious response suggested itself: The San Francisco Cacophony Society Cacophony is a group that devotes itself entirely to the creation of outrageous entertainments of all sorts; some have an element of danger, others whimsy, many a literary bent, and all of them require participation. So I sent the following notice to the Cacophony newsletter:

“We have tried on innumerable occasions to read through to the very last pages of Marcel Proust’s magnum opus, Remembrance of Things Past, among us reaching well into the third volume of this prodigious work of literature, but succumbed to that inevitable, narcotic, helpless block which prevents the much-valued completion of this classic of introspective cultural history,” and so we have profoundly wished to share this epic endeavor with others of like debility, gathering together in a solemn pledge, not untouched with a tinge of good-humored irony, to plough together through these three volumes at the sensible pace of ten pages a day, agreeing in advance to use the Vintage Books, 1982 edition, so we might proceed at an identical pace, and therefore, at our bimonthly meetings, be able to share the delights of the literary bliss within at an equal rate of discovery... blah blah blah.”
Eight lovely literary buffets showed for the first meeting, scheduled for my roommate’s birthday. We drank Pernod and ate madeleines, got acquainted with the previously unknown persons, and spoke of our anxieties about this shared venture. Curious spectators came by to examine the specimens who were voluntarily committing to a 3500-plus-page read and to help dispose of the refreshments. One of them became the designated outside observer, charged with noting the behavioral changes of the support group members over the long haul.

The read began on the very next day. Four of the committed ones were members of our household, and before long, as we staggered out for morning (this term must not be taken literally) coffee, we were bearing our Remembrances so we might regale each other with favorite quotes. Then that wasn’t enough, and we began inscribing the most deathless lines on an obscene wall over the cat food. When the going got rough, like the fortnight when a particular dinner party had been going on for 140 pages, we had each other, as we had often been, co- conspirators forced to attend a dull party.

Then we found ourselves speculating. “What is Legrandin’s trip, anyway?” or “Was Odette really in bed with de Forcheville when Swann came over?” We were very hooked.

In our zeal, we announced our second meeting in the long-winded announcement, the news that we disposed of the refreshments. One of them became the read. Four of the three survivors of the original all of whom lived in our household. A certain reality ensued as to which of the three of us would finish first. John, who started the whole thing, announced to me that he was sure he would finish first. We soon discovered why; he had found our copies and torn out the last page.

John was, of course, correct about being the first of us to finish. He was also right about the fact that reading Proust had been fun, as shared horrors always seem in retrospect. But that wasn’t the only reason.

For me, one of the great thrills of the read was the effect it had on my attitude towards books in general. They had always been some kind of sacred cows, not to be marked or mutilated in any way, but treated with utmost respect. But as I read, it became painfully clear that discrete microdots of fine leaded pencil would not suffice to flag the gems I came across on every page. As I made my way through the first few hundred pages, I got over my bourgeois reservations about the printed page, and the margins became flooded with squiggles and exclamation marks, the text itself riddled with underling, highlighting, brackets and colored paper markers. My middle-class generation of books toppled even further as the months went on and I worried out, would fall asleep frequently with the book in my hands, unable to put it down, only to be startled back into consciousness as it fell, with a resounding thump, on the bed floor. Within a short time, the binding was so distressed that Volume I broke into multiple sections. When some of my co-readers were off on vacation, I was able to lend them chunks of text to take along, sparing them the weight of an entire volume. In these two notable deviations from my former behavior, marking and breaking great books, I felt the lightness of heart that comes with the shedding of restrictive conventions.

There was fun to be had, and another great breakthrough, in absorbing the cynical and all-too-true observations Proust made about the subject of human nature, particularly in the realm of love. It lent a sense of forlornness to every interpersonal encounter, the anticipatory insufferable laughter I felt as a child when I knew that the jig was up and I was about to be teased. With the belief that I now possess some kind of code to the human heart, I can face all possibilities without fear, and with laughter.

Requiem for a Sunrise (August 6th, 8:15 am, 1945)

When: August 10th, 8:15 am
Where: At that strange life thing in the shadow of the Jeremiah O’Brien, Fort Mason
War was return of earth to ugly earth, War was founding of subcultures, Extinction of such happy art and faith, By which the world had still kept head in the air. Protestimg logic or protesting love, Until the unendurable moment struck– The inward scream, the duty to man and me. And we recall the merry ways of guns– Nibbling the walls of factory and church Like a child, peculating, feeling groves of trees Like a child, Dandelions with a switch, Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill. Down in a row the brave in soldiers fall A sight to be recalled in elder days. When lemmings the future decide To yet more boastful visions of despair. * Bring: Thematic poetry to read, breakfast goodies to eat and drink. Your host: Gid Topping — Rough Draft, August 1991

Poetry Breakfast
Saturday, 20 August, 8:30 am, Mr. Olympus A breakfast with the Gods. We will meet at the NE corner of 17th and Clayton Streets and hike up the steps to Mt. Olympus where we will read from Ovid, Homer, and even Yeats—weave put you in the other worlds. Bring breakfast goodies to share. Your host: Cat J. — Rough Draft, August 1988

The 1997 Marcel Proust Memorial Wake
P Sagan — reprinted from Proust Said That, 1997
As the years grow abundantly fuller, there is less and less time to orchestrate the grand Proust Wake, the Marcel Proust Support Group’s only regular function of the year. This year’s events crowded the schedule complicated by belovbed visitors, other massive social events and the birthday I had hoped to dowsate by sharing it so lovingly with the outside of Marcel.

Curiously, the birthday has become more observed than ever. There were more celebratory lunches, dinners, cocktails, and presents than usual this year, and lists more planned for the coming weeks. Today I went to my PST mailbox for the first time in days and found two birthday cards, one with no signature below the handwritten greetings and no return address. The other contained a lovely handkerchief, a gift from a sweet reader I have never met.

Planning the Proust Wake each year diverts my attention from the fact that I am about to be another year older, requiring that every available minute be consumed with planning and preparation. This year there was no time whatsoever to make printed invitations; the word was spread on the phone, at other social events, or over e-mail.

Little coaxing was required to summon guests to the wake, as I was once again scheduled at the John Wickett’s Museum of Exoticia, one of San Francisco’s most curious secret venues. John Wickett is a true friend of the public, so invitations are valued, rare chances to spend an evening in this atmosphere of opulent oddity, resident of many tony eras, and full of the best memorabilia from the city’s long lost Playlands at the Beach.

As the date of the event approached, this year the 22nd of November, there were even fewer funds or hours available than usual, this required some cleverness regarding the catering menu, and a lot of help from supportive participants, who’d bring enough wine to make up for the small batch of absinthe I could concoct. It was all about the question this year to provide the more lavish elements of Proustian fare; I wrenched my memory for occasions in Remembrance when the food was utterly simple. Finally I recalled the picnic in Within a Budding Grove, where the band of girls ate sandwiches, an innovation in French fare which our Marcel found so difficult to consume because the concept was so foreign, and left him settling for the little cakes alone, which, along with the apricot bars, made dessert. There would be madeleines, of course, and the three pounds of cream cheese left over from a catering job mixed with strawberries, and whole wheat wafers.

194 TALES OF SF CACOPHONY: THE EVENTS

195 TALES OF SF CACOPHONY: THE EVENTS
Two members of the original MPSG, Miss Dawn and Miss Harley, came to spend the day with me in the kitchen, getting the last of the evening’s catering prepared. In the redwood back parlor next to the kitchen, Miss Lisa, who had come all the way from the far northwest to help with the preparations, handed over the cards that would identify the dishes, while my roommate Jason drew Proust on each of them.

What I really wanted this year was to have Proust appear as he did the first year at the museum. Last year, the preparations, hand-lettered the cards that would follow by the sound of pouring rain, and ending with huge cracks of thunder, the lights in the museum would go out, and Proust would slip through the confused crowd and jump into the big box. The lights would go on, and there would be the body lying in state with the lid open, so he wouldn’t have to deal with the all too uncomfortable sensation of being buried alive. And then when the thunder sounded again half an hour later, and the lights went out, Proust could rise to a sitting position, and give the guests the thrill of seeing him jump into the big box. The lights went off. Tired of being dead, Proust finally sat up on the lid of his box and leaned over the casket. Against either of our wishes, someone slammed the lid down. As soon as the lights went back up, and I noticed this, I went over and raised it, leaning over the inert body to whisper an apology.

Members of the MPSG approached the casket, moaning and declaring their unhappiness at the passing of the beloved Marcel. I laid a bouquet of flowers on his body, hoping none of them were rich in allergens that would make him sneeze back to life before the last cue. Cacophony Society ringmaster Michael Michael asked if anyone would like to speak, and suggested that I should be the first. I hadn’t planned on this, so I had to wing it. Of course, I can’t remember much of what I did say, but I do remember this: “I only regret that Proust died before I ever had a chance to get to know him. I have a feeling that if he were still alive, I would know him...” I looked around at the splendid guests in their glorious costumes, tacos and evening gowns, “because I have the great good fortune to meet all the most interesting people in the world.”

When the speeches had ended, I approached the casket and leaned over, my thick dark hair falling to obscure vision of Stuart’s face. “How are you doing?” I whispered. “I’m thirsty!” he said. I brought my glass into firing range of his lips. “Have some of this,” I whispered, and poured a small drizzle of absinthe into firing range of his lips. “How are you doing?” I whispered. “I’m thirsty!” he said. I brought my glass into firing range of his lips. “Have some of this,” I whispered, and poured a small drizzle of absinthe into firing range of his lips. “How are you doing?” I whispered. “I’m thirsty!” he said. I brought my glass into firing range of his lips. “Have some of this,” I whispered, and poured a small drizzle of absinthe into firing range of his lips. “How are you doing?” I whispered. “I’m thirsty!” he said. I brought my glass into firing range of his lips. “Have some of this,” I whispered, and poured a small drizzle of absinthe into firing range of his lips. “How are you doing?” I whispered. “I’m thirsty!” he said. I brought my glass into firing range of his lips. “Have some of this,” I whispered, and poured a small drizzle of absinthe into firing range of his lips. “How are you doing?” I whispered. “I’m thirsty!” he said. I brought my glass into firing range of his lips. “Have some of this,” I whispered, and poured a small drizzle of absinthe into firing range of his lips.
Like so many bad ideas that have had their way with me over the years, it seemed like the thing to do at the time: go to a dive bar in the Tenderloin and hold a wake for Charles Bukowski, the celebrated dead poet best known for writing Barfly. The event notice in Rough Draft, the SF Cacophony Society newsletter, read like this: "Charles Bukowski Support Group. Big Hank is dead. He was the only author who could successfully convey the Olympian grandeur, the pure hedonistic rapture, and truly spiritual reward one can achieve by purging one's bladder in a cascading torrent, held back during hours of chatting up a woman of debatable, if not entirely sordid character. He put life and its pleasures into a literary context you could really get your meat into, so to speak. We'll gather and hoist a few to this modern day Proust of the gin joint at one of the Tenderloin's finest establishments. There will be a Bukowski look-alike contest (not for the weak of stomach). We encourage readings of two pages or less from the master's oeuvre. Passages dealing with death or the tentative nature of existence are preferred. We will also have an original prose/poetry competition. Entries of more than one page will be ridiculed, their perpetrators cat-called into submission and silence. If anyone should win the look-alike contest and the original work contest, they'll win a night at the Hotel Essex in the Tenderloin. When: Friday, April 15, 8 pm until closing (The 3rd Annual) The Night of the Exquisite Corpse: An evening of surrealist theater written by the audience. When: Saturday, July 15, 8:00 pm Where: The Noe Valley Ministry, Sanchez (at 24th) "Exquisite Corpse: Game of folded paper played by several people, who compose a sentence or drawing without anyone seeing proceeding collaborations. The now classic example, which gave the game its name, was drawn from the first sentence obtained this way: the exquisite corpse will drink new wine." —André Breton, "La Cadavre Exquis" From parlor game to an evening of surrealist theater! Before the performance, anyone may contribute lines of text for the script, none having any idea what has proceeded, other than a line or two by the previous writer. (Demosntrable writing skill is not required.) The result will be a non-linear, absurd and chaotically hilarious script performed by a surrealist acting troupe. Other unWeely events will occur. Cost for the event is $3.00. Tickets are available in advance at the Giant Camera behind the C&W House (where Geary Blvd. meets the Pacific Ocean, SF) or the night of the event. —Rough Draft, July 1989 Facing page: Various materials from the Night of the Exquisite Corpse events. Below: Lee, Bob “Zeus” Gridley and a nymph acting out contents of the play generated by the audience as they pecked away at a bank of typewriters during the Night of the Exquisite Corpse. Tales of SF Cacophony: The Events
Tales of SF Cacophony: The Events

Where: Ha’Ra Bar, 975 Geary at Larkin
Bring: 1) $5 for brownies, or someone to bounce from, 2) $2 event fee (to pay for the organizer’s drink(s)), 3) ID, 4) shit, shoes, pants.

Your host: Sebastian Melmoth

The old lady didn’t want to me go but what the fuck. I put on my worst sport coat, bunched a check, Xeroxed a couple of pages from You Go So Alone and jumped in the car, hoping none of my tickets had gone to warrant. Melmoth, the event organizer, lives on the same side of the Bay as me, so I stopped at his house on the way and discovered he was ahead of me by nine or ten Heikman’s.

He opened two more cans, belched, and wiped his fingers on a brunt Hawaiian shirt before shaking my hand. I spotted a .32 and a copy of Bukowski’s Post Office on the carpet next to the recliner. “Here,” he said, handing me both beers. “You’re way behind. I’m out of gin but I think I’ve got some kind of weird cactus juice shit.” I followed him into the kitchen, where his housemate and her friend were cooking some beans, and watched him root around in the cupboards. “Here we go!” he hooted. It was that shit they put in fake margaritas at cheap Mexican restaurants. I tasted like barf with a twist. It got the job done.

By the time we got to BART, we were already late, but what the fuck. This wasn’t the sort of event you wanted to be on time for even if you were organizing it. Or especially if you were organizing it. We’d gained another East Bay derelict by this point, Dr. Winky, and the three of us rode the train down to Powell Street, where we bought cigars and spotted a .32 and a copy of Bukowski’s newsletter became stuck on a brutal Hawaiian shirt before shaking my hand. I met Michael Lyons, John Law, Chris Radcliffe, and a few others. A guy entered through a fog of cigarette smoke, wearing a Bart Simpson t-shirt with vomit on it. I couldn’t tell where the subterfuge ended and the real sadness began. That was Larry Harvey. It seemed there was a fine line between a handicap and the handicapped.

While the group was rowdy at the bar and fully nascuous on Caltrans, we seemed to blend right in at the track. We took turns shouting out Bukowski stories and poems, terrorizing patrons to the point where the conductor stopped the train between stations so the police could board. Of course, that was the boys’ cue to kick out the emergency windows, run under the train, jump the fence, and live yet another day one hellish step ahead of the law.

Over the next few years, I would learn that that was what this group old best—skirt the law, play on the boundaries, manage somehow to pull off the next hilarious prank or wild event, always ready to dash for the bushes.

I took a combat nap and made it home around five, roughly 24 hours from when I’d left. It wasn’t an epic drunk, not quite a lost weekend, but try telling that the the old lady, Shit, I’m still paying. But at least I’m alive, unlike that fucker Bukowski. He’s worn food now.

Fuck. The impossibility.

Bukowski at the Races
Denni Meyers

One blueberry Saturday afternoon, walking around 14th and Mission, looking for the Branden Lau martial arts store, a copy of the Rough Draft newsletter became stuck on my shoe. That month’s events included an invitation to join whomever at a “Charles Bukowski Day at the Races” — Meet at a dive bar 7th & Mission, take Caltrans to Bay Meadows Race Track, read Bukowski aloud in the grandstand between runs of the horses. There was an invitation to bring $5, and to stay away if there was a warrant out for your arrest.

I was new to town, just 4 months from Brooklyn and the East Village, and completely open to whatever San Francisco had to offer. When I arrived at the bar, it was difficult to tell who was a regular, who a collaborator. Ridiculous outfits, sloppy behavior, and improbable monsters mingled with cheap alcohol and cheaper cigars.

By the time we got to BART, we were already late, but what the fuck. This wasn’t the sort of event you wanted to be on time for even if you were organizing it. Or especially if you were organizing it. We’d gained another East Bay derelict by this point, Dr. Winky, and the three of us rode the train down to Powell Street, where we bought cigars and spotted a .32 and a copy of Bukowski’s newsletter became stuck on a brutal Hawaiian shirt before shaking my hand. I met Michael Lyons, John Law, Chris Radcliffe, and a few others. A guy entered through a fog of cigarette smoke, wearing a Bart Simpson t-shirt with vomit on it. I couldn’t tell where the subterfuge ended and the real sadness began. That was Larry Harvey. It seemed there was a fine line between a handicap and the handicapped.

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Bukowski at the Races
Denni Meyers

One blueberry Saturday afternoon, walking around 14th and Mission, looking for the Branden Lau martial arts store, a copy of the Rough Draft newsletter became stuck on my shoe. That month’s events included an invitation to join whomever at a “Charles Bukowski Day at the Races” — Meet at a dive bar 7th & Mission, take Caltrans to Bay Meadows Race Track, read Bukowski aloud in the grandstand between runs of the horses. There was an invitation to bring $5, and to stay away if there was a warrant out for your arrest.

I was new to town, just 4 months from Brooklyn and the East Village, and completely open to whatever San Francisco had to offer. When I arrived at the bar, it was difficult to tell who was a regular, who a collaborator. Ridiculous outfits, sloppy behavior, and improbable monsters mingled with cheap alcohol and cheaper cigars.

I met Michael Lyons, John Law, Chris Radcliffe, and a few others. A guy entered through a fog of cigarette smoke, wearing a Bart Simpson t-shirt with vomit on it. I couldn’t tell where the subterfuge ended and the real sadness began. That was Larry Harvey. It seemed there was a fine line between a handicap and the handicapped.

While the group was rowdy at the bar and fully nascuous on Caltrans, we seemed to blend right in at the track. We took turns shouting out Bukowski stories and poems, terrorizing patrons to the point where the conductor stopped the train between stations so the police could board. Of course, that was the boys’ cue to kick out the emergency windows, run under the train, jump the fence, and live yet another day one hellish step ahead of the law.

Over the next few years, I would learn that that was what this group old best—skirt the law, play on the boundaries, manage somehow to pull off the next hilarious prank or wild event, always ready to dash for the bushes.

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A Night in the Life
D. S. Black

When San Francisco burns,
was Ihr denn Gates nennt,
sehe, das geht am End'
in einen Sack.

—Brecht-Weill, Mahagonny

Mahagonny was a city of nets; The City (as we call it here, rather than Frisco), this city is a high wire act, with high tension hills and hollows, a graceful daub of fog to soften the pastels to gray and mop the feverish brow of whatever you consider good in it.

Exceptional care was taken to ensure that the message was not thought to be another callous instance of landlord arson. “Nuke your landlord” and other similar sentiments are sprayed on many walls of the city, especially lower Haight. In the Mission, the resentment of the community was still palpable at the cynical destruction of Gartland homes, it still served as makeshift housing for the city’s dispossessed, the homeless. They slept on the concrete foundation laid bare under the canopy of the street.

Not to be born is best
— Sophocles line.

The words soared on the back wall above the devastation. A smoking revolver was later added to the message. The words, “Nuke your landlord” and other similar sentiments are sprayed on many walls of the city, especially lower Haight. In the Mission, the resentment of the community was still palpable at the cynical destruction of Gartland homes, it still served as makeshift housing for the city’s dispossessed, the homeless. They slept on the concrete foundation laid bare under the canopy of the street.

There were other impromptu memorials, even impromptu shrines—remember, a doll that had been inserted in the rusty end of a steel pipe that drained rainwater. It was a macabre sculpture, the golden haired doll serving out its days upside down, up to its neck in a pipe beneath the street.

This walk set out from the ghostly and historic Portals to the Past in Golden Gate Park two hours after the beginning of park curfew. Facing page: Midnight literary walks were a popular type of event organized by many different people over the years. It was not uncommon for 30 to 50 people to convene in some remote corner of the city at midnight to begin a walk of several miles, punctuated by readings from authors famous and obscure. This walk set out from the ghostly and historic Portals to the Past in Golden Gate Park two hours after the beginning of park curfew.
the testimony of uncertain survivors, wondering as a last resort whether to LEAVE TOWN or musing that MUSEUMS REPRESENT THE MUMMY OF A CULTURE THAT HAS LONG SINCE BEEN DEAD—a thought balloon of the East Bay graffiti artist Apollinaire.

As we stepped through the fence and descended into the Pit, Jim Khennedy said, “Maybe we should keep our voices down.”

To ease his fear, Thomas Burchfield, one of the co-leaders of this tour, made the sign of the Trinity. In the name of the cathode, the anode, and the holy grid...

“Call it the pits, all right,” Katje muttered, shuffling down the gravel and beer glass slope.

“An army of losers can be beaten,” Burchfield reminded us, quoting a chalked inscription we had seen earlier, in a Chinatown alleyway.

All of the previous times I had reconnoitered the Pit, I had gone down alone. No one was there, just rodent-like traces of transients, their trash and improvised bedding.

It was a dream finally leading this team down.

The Thomas Pynchon Walking Tour consisted of a dozen or more restless souls who gathered late one Friday night (under the auspices of the San Francisco Cacophony Society) for a literary recreation, which arced across the throbbing, convulsed cityscape.

Katje, Thomas Burchfield, and I were the three leaders or more restless souls who gathered late one Friday night (under the auspices of the San Francisco Cacophony Society) for a literary recreation, which arced across the throbbing, convulsed cityscape.

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We moved to the center of the Pit. Throwing caution to the wind, I declared, at the top of my lungs, Pynchon’s 5th Prose: for Panziojks.

Panziojks are not paranoia because they’re paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves,ucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations!

Despite our flashes, the liquid shadows were dense and near coalescent on this October night. As we stole back out of the Pit, the down alleyway into the noiseful blue lamplight, the shapes shuddered behind us, strummed thimbles on our high-strung tympani. A tortured smoldering made our nerves misfire in sympathy.

The group slipped pools of nervous mercury through a exposed leather skeleton.

Walking up Valencia to 16th, there was some nervous exhaustion and my remaining brain cells glowed with exhaustion at this little triumph. The honeyed taste of that long night.

Many a job application, love letter, or similar pathetic plea for mercy could be better served by a simple threat of self-immolation.

Sometimes when reason abandons me I almost appreciate the fanciful but wearisome rags— and so hides a Mensal GOD with your serpent’s snout, not content with having placed my soul between the fringes of madness and of theseed imaginings that fall slowly...

—Conte de Lautremont, MALDOROR

We will read 1 - 5 minute pieces in a round-robin fashion. Bring your own surreal/Dada-esque or serene. Cacophony all-nighters...

Draft write up for another Pynchon walking tour to take place in New York, hosted by San Francisco Cacophonists and based on the novel V.

Readers familiar with Pynchon’s slender 1960s mystery tale, The Crying of Lot 49, may remember a thread connecting that novel to San Francisco, a link as tantalizing as the sub terra postal service that lurks under its narrative (though there’s a sweeter, more evocative picture of 1940s San Francisco in his later novel Vineland).

Though fragile, this connection to Lot 49 failed to stop several Cacophonites, among them Carrie Gebrah and Steven Black, from putting on a trans-nocturnal Thomas Pynchon tour through the San Francisco night (like Judy and Mickey, would it if they were Bohemians).

Over 20 years and much fog has followed under the bridge since then, enough to scramble and fuse mismatched memories of that long night with several other Cacophony all-nighters, so apologies if these brief memories overlap, crash into, or kaleidoscope with yours. I seldom remember those days. To poorly parody Dickens: It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Nowaday, it looks like a faraway dimension and a, comparative stranger...

I’m not even clear where we started, though it seems to have been in North Beach near Broadway, around 10 p.m. There were anywhere from 10 to 20 of us, the numbers swelling and shrinking through the night, until they finally fell as dawn rose. John Law, among the world’s pioneer urban trekkers, lit the path ahead. Lance Alexander and Russ Conrad also came along, as did Louise Jarmilowicz and Phil Belwzy.

My strongest memories were of reciting the tumultuous opening two pages of Gravity’s Rainbow from the chilly top of Strawberry Hill in Golden Gate Park sometime past midnight. I recall Carrie’s open-mouthed stare, over a candle, as I really did this from memory. I had to have been read.

Later on, I recited a character’s aching soliloquy to fading love (“You go from dream to dream inside me...”) at a gas station. I also put on a paper thin puppet show using 10-cent napkins from behind a bush somewhere, singing one of Pynchon’s parody tunes, (“I’ll fit fit if I Prussia they never pay us!”)

At least four of us remained to toast the end, under a foggy dawn sky somewhere South of Market, Carrie, Steven, John and I. My nerves were sweetly greased with_

The Thomas Pynchon Tour Thomas Burchfield

One literary author that could be called a Creature of Equipoise who also has an interest in gravity and time is Thomas Pynchon, author of V, Gravity’s Rainbow, Vineland, and other famously enigmatic tomes.

Many a job application, love letter, or similar pathetic plea for mercy could be better served by a simple threat of self-immolation.

This month we are reading “Birthday,” Dorothea Tanning’s autobiographical reminiscence about life with Max Ernst and their time in New York.

When: Wednesday, February 15th, 7pm
Where: Judah at Irving St.

Dorothy Parker’s Perpetual Perambulating Pedagogic Paperback Pow Wow

When: Thursday, March 1st, 7pm
Where: Dom Perignon at 350 Geary St.

The Crying of Lot 49 centers on the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, finding a set of stamps of self-inflicted violence willl be sternly discouraged (the landlord, you know). Do not bring: Sharp objects, loaded guns, and so on. Acts of self-inflicted violence willl be sternly discouraged (the landlord, you know). Do not bring: Sharp objects, loaded guns, and so on. Acts of self-inflicted violence willl be sternly discouraged (the landlord, you know). Do not bring: Sharp objects, loaded guns, and so on. Acts of self-inflicted violence willl be sternly discouraged (the landlord, you know).

At this workshop we willl look at a few famous examples, and publish our own petitpost epistles.

Bring: Examples you admire from the genre, famous or obscure.


When: May 5th, 7:33 pm
Where: Judah at Irving St.

*Sometimes when reason abandons me I almost appreciate the fanciful but wearisome rags—and so hides a Mensal GOD with your serpent’s snout, not content with having placed my soul between the fringes of madness and of theseed imaginings that fall slowly...*
Facing page: It was never more apparent that being in Cacophony required “going against the main stream” than during the Salmon Run against the tide of the 100,000 runner-strong Bay-to-Breakers footrace that takes place every May in San Francisco.

Over a dozen elaborately coiffed, elegantly dressed French aristocrats strolled about amidst the hoodie, Birkenstock, and T-shirt garbed volunteers encamped in Civic Center Plaza, a stone’s throw from the grand staircase of City Hall. The earnest and dedicated homeless advocates of Food Not Bombs were serving up cauldrons of soup and mountains of fresh baked bread to the bedraggled homeless denizens of the heartless streets and parks of SF. What better way to complement such hearty fare than with a desert of delicate French pastries, thought Pierre Le Marquis du Gateau (Peter to his landlord and mom).

Of course the pièce de résistance was the slight dusting of the crumbs left over from the repast and delivered on a regal silver tray to the Mayor’s office across the street. Admittedly more of a political statement than typically tolerated in Cacophony, Peter Doty’s Let Them Eat Cake was very much in the Cacophony tradition of making antler ears at the powerful, not to mention being hugely popular with the street folk being served.

Cacophony pranks varied from the elaborate and ongoing Fantasia protests at theaters and video stores to simple handbills requesting public help in retrieving lost pythons or soliciting parents to hand over troublesome toddlers to the rigorous baby-sitting practices of “Dr. Leonard Stynch.”

Salmon School
When: Sunday, May 15th, 8:15am (low tide, 9:11, -0.3)
Where: Top of Hayes Hill at Hayes and Pierce in Alamo Square

Once a year a raging river, the Bay-to-Breakers, flows through the city. This year, join Ranger Rockfish in stocking this stream of consciously costumed folk with a rare breed of Pacific Salmon. Our tributary will flow in at the top of Hayes Street Hill fish ladder. By instinct we will run up-stream a few blocks, or as far as we can, then return to Alamo Square to drink like fish, spawn, and give someone else a chance to get trampled in a really cool fish costume. After the event, the survivors who conquered this insane obstacle without getting caught or killed will retire to some local establishment (in costume) and pay their respects to Old Man River.

Bring: a couple of bucks to cover costume costs, or bring it early in the week and help us make costumes. Fish food and drink. (Costumes by Bianca Oblivian, and anyone else we can net.)

Your host: Ranger Rockfish

P.S.: This may be a fish story, but rumor has it that a hardy breed of soon-to-be-fillets of sole (Rafish) will run from the mouth of the river to the source.

— Rough Draft, May, 1994

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Cacophony at SFMOMA
Dean Gustafson

We examined and critiqued the utilitarian details of SFMOMA, as if the museum were the actual art on display. And as a tribute to the “ready-made” art pieces presented to the public in the early 20th century by Marcel Duchamp.

This was held in the old SFMOMA building on Van Ness, with its intricate humidification measuring devices (looking like a tiny seismograph!), old brass fire extinguishers, cracked plaster walls, shiny doorknobs, plush benches, stoic guards, light switches, urinals, and more.

With Cacophonists’ minds ready to discover art that abounds, and express adventurous conceptual and cultural insight within this fine modern art establishment, we played the most serious game of art critique, and the pretentious hyperbole flowed forth as we reflected ideas of how the art object (a museum doorknob), with its precious patina, was constructed in such a way as to juxtapose a paradigm shift from a new and old world. This is representing a paradox, of transformed self-realization indicative of a cookie cutter individualism integrated by an isolated industrialized society, subliminally suggesting a radical sensibility within the seemingly mundane. Brilliant!

Passersby in the museum joined in briefly at times, looking at what we were critiquing, as if we were seriously seeing something on museum display that should not go unmissed… then realizing after a few minutes of our exaggerated bs that it was a utilitarian device used by the museum for utilitarian purposes. (They’re looking at and critiquing a light switch?) The passing museumgoer would then move along with a puzzled shrug.

Sketch books were pulled out as the critiquing went on. Challenging to the artist was capturing the intricacies of a high tech humidification device, a device that itself also draws lines, designed for measuring sensitive humidity levels in museums.

OR, a benchmark conceptual piece, symbolizing the delicate juxtaposition of a lost barbarism in art, if in fact the artist is still using hands with pencil on paper harkening back to medieval sensibilities. This realization made obvious to the viewer indeed does render this piece a great work of art for our tenuous post-neo-avant-modern times.

We critiqued a guard, to his amusement. I posed still in an alcove, to be critiqued verbosely. Urinals were signed “R Mutt” in honor of Marcel Duchamp, who was our hero in this game.

Facing page: Thousand of these posters advertising the helpful child training services of Dr. Stynch hit the streets in LA, SF, Portland, Seattle and elsewhere. The phone number on the respective cities flyers was for the local Cacophony Chapter.
It was a slice of Bohemia in a city of commerce, a gathering of intellectuals striking out against what they see as mindless and saccharine art.

On Friday night, dozens of artists converged on a small underground gallery off a dark and narrow alley in the heart of North Beach. The gallery on Bannam Place - which for decades has drawn poets and painters and bootleggers - hosted a one-night show called “Kinkade Cannibalized! An Exhibition of Augmented Thomas Kinkade Paintings.”

Kinkade, who calls himself the “Painter of Light” and is said to be the most collected living artist in America, creates images of Christmas chapels dusted in snow, of cottages next to placid lakes, of mountain paradises, of the perfect yellow rose and of pools of serenity.

“A lot of artists really sort of loathe Thomas Kinkade,” said Kevin Evans, who curated the show. “Not just because of his very simple and extremely idealized and conservative view of the world, but because it’s formulaic painting that creates a static and stagnant image.”

Evans, who contributed two pieces to the show, added: “I figured it would be a cathartic exercise for us, basically using humor and art to sort of critique something and communicate a message.”

One of Evans’ works was called “The Bloodshot Eye of the Beholder.” Evans created a “badly done San Francisco landscape with a bloodshot eye in the middle,” explaining: “It gives you bloodshot eyes to have to look at Kinkade’s works.”

In all, there were more than 20 pieces, ranging from paintings and multimedia sculpture to a diorama light box, a meat cleaver cutting cheese and several collage works.

Carrie Galbraith, a conceptual artist who does book design, created an artists’ book that mixed Kinkade’s fantasy images with more reality-based images.

“The book I did is a response to Kinkade’s way of looking at life and making everything a fantasy world,” said Galbraith, who in the 1980s and ’90s was a member of the San Francisco Cacophony Society, a group formed to make statements through art and satire.

“I used Kinkade’s stone bridges to move to these images of factories and pollution and global warming, images that depict the reality we live in the environment,” Galbraith said.

The show was held in the gallery and studio of longtime San Francisco artist Winston Smith, best known for his collages for musicians and punk artists, including the Dead Kennedys.

“Kinkade has a formula,” Smith said, holding court at the back of his studio, behind a draped curtain. “The bourgeois attitude that this is art is insulting.”

Sitting nearby was Ron Turner, the founder and publisher of Last Gasp comic books. Turner, who was one of the first publishers to feature the work of the now widely known illustrator R. Crumb, said he also has published a book on Kinkade’s work.

“I’m not anti-Kinkade,” Turner said. “I think he gets under everyone’s skin because he glorifies the fairy tale. Kinkade is a master marketer, and I think the idealizing of the images is Kinkade’s own inside joke.”
Let Them Eat Cake
When: Wednesday, July 14th (Bastille Day), 11:15am
Encore! Encore! Once again Let Them Eat Cake, a group of 18th century French Aristocrats, joins forces/faces with Food Not Bombs to give SF’s homeless dessert with a costumed spectacle. This event will end with a grand procession to the Mayor’s office to present the last crumb.
Your host: Pierre, Le Marquis du Gateau
— Rough Draft, July, 1994

Sounds Like Cacophony
Bastille Day is upon us once again, which means that Let Them Eat Cake will take to the streets in encore giving cake to SF’s homeless. This year’s festivities may include the guillotining in effigy of Mayor Frank Jordan, Supervisor “Marie Antoinette” Conroy and Governor Pete Willson.
Participants should be prepared to dress in 18th century aristocratic-like attire, provide enough frosted cake for 25 people, and help pay for event costs. There will be guillotine refurbishing and effigy making workshops in the weeks preceding Bastille Day which is Thursday, July 14th, Midday. Call for a reservation and to get the time and location of the event and workshops.
Your host: Pierre, Le Marquis du Gateau
— Rough Draft, April, 1996

Clown Night at Clown Alley
(Or, What D’ya Think of My Poker Face Now, Bozo?)
When: Saturday, July 13th, 8:30pm
Where: Meet at Tosca Café, Columbus Ave.
An infamous event from the storied past of a certain notorious adventure group ancestral to Cacophony, an event that many people know about but few attended, involved a menacing accumulation of clowns in an unexpected context. Participants distributed themselves at bus stops along a certain MUNI route, and on cue they inexplicably boarded a randomly-selected bus, one or two at a time—presumably leaving the innocent passengers permanently disturbed, if not twisted.
Tonight we will gather in full clown regalia to attempt to recreate the eerie ambiance of that legendary event. After planning the exact timing and nuances of the psychic assault to the strains of opera at a favorite bistro, we will execute the plan at a well-known and aptly-named purveyor of carniva on lower Columbus, possibly followed by one or two additional tableaux (B.Y.O.Bipes). We will then retire to a more private setting for a friendly game of Clown Poker. Some people find it easier to be inscrutable in white face.
ps: No rabid Vegan clown protesters please. I picture an event that is eerily magical rather than obnoxious.
Your host: Urban (Koko) Shocker and his fiendishly cute sidekicks, Clarabelle and Buffoonery Bob.

Facing page: Pierre, le marquis de Gateau’s invitation for the public to join in for the 1st “Let Them Eat Cake.”
“How many ways can crybabies parse shame and blame? In San Francisco last month, a motley flock turned out to picket the classic Disney movie Fantasia. One man complained that the spooky Night on Bald Mountain scene had terrified his child. Members of an organization called Dieters United objected to the tutu-clad hippos frolicking to the music of Dance of the Hours; the protesters felt the sequence ridiculed fat people. Conservationists were appalled at the waste of water in Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Fundamentalist Christians bewailed the depiction of evolution in Rite of Spring. Antidrug forces suspected something subliminally prodrug in the Nutcracker Suite episode featuring dancing mushrooms. Only Fantasia conductor escaped chastisement, perhaps because he is dead.”

—Time Magazine, August 12, 1991

Fantasia Cult/Protest
Where: Sunday, April 28th, 5:00pm
Where: Meet at the Castro MUNI station
Events:
A) Uptight protest demonstration against Walt Disney’s Fantasia, outside the Castro Theater, for its “evil” and/or “politically incorrect” themes.
B) Counter protest by loyal Fantasia freaks.
C) Cult movie performance, as though Fantasia was our favorite film which we’ve seen dozens of times. Musicians can play along with Stokowski’s orchestra. The audience can shout silly pre-arranged as well as spontaneous catch phrases. Weird things can be tossed at appropriate moments. Costumed fans can go on stage and act out their favorite parts with the movie. A candle-light procession will be held during the Ave Maria finale, and more!

Bring:
1) Money for movie and popcorn.
2) Signs, pro and con.
3) Costume (Fantasia theme or protest)
4) Harmless things to throw (bring enough to share)
5) Ideas of things to shout

Hint: If you plan to perform but haven’t seen Fantasia recently, you can go to an earlier showing at the Castro at 1:00 or 3:45. That way you will know what happens and when.
Your host: Dwayne Newton

—Rough Draft, July, 1994
Night Crawler - As Berkeley as They Want
Silke Tudor, SF Weekly, September 30, 1998

“If God didn’t want us to eat people,” poses Vinnie Pescado, “why did he make them taste like meat?” Pescado grins and lurches into the crowd gathered on University Avenue for the annual How Berkeley Can You Be? Parade. The throng parts easily at the sight of Pescado’s blood-splattered slicker, then closes around him, resuming clapping as if the bloody apparition were as common as incease peddlers at BART. A parade float comes into view. Afro-Cuban rhythms fill the damp morning air, giving impetus to 12 Caucasian women in flowered dresses and a man in a gold toga who interpret the beat with shameless undulations.

“This sort of music is so primal,” says a white-haired resident named Jeanine Paley, who smiles and claps appreciatively as the dancers pass.

“As primal as meat?” sneers a spiky-haired gent in a lab coat who appears at her shoulder and vanishes into the crowd. A raw chicken claw flies through the air and lands near Paley’s feet.

“What was that? What did that man say?” asks Paley, looking around in time to miss him.

“Something about meat,” answers her companion calmly.

Paley frowns, but a string of exceptional artcars distracts her from her odd encounter.

Down the road, the X-Plicit Players — a group of nude performers who have become an unavoidable part of every Berkeley gathering — are not so lucky. While peacefully preparing to walk through the center of town with their tacle swinging in the wind, a wild-eyed man in a bright-orange Doggie Diner shirt charges at them, waving a chain saw. The man — known as Sebastian Melmoth — executes an impressive shoulder roll and lands on his feet with the chain saw roaring overhead. Through the deafening noise, the nudists make out his suggestive incantation: “Wieners! Wieners! Wieners!”

Not surprisingly, the X-Plicit Players scatter, regrouping amid nervous laughter only when Melmoth has retreated back to his own float.

On the PETA (People Eat’n Them Animals) float loom three enormous Doggie Diner heads with their frozen wiener-dog grins. Members of PETA, men and women in bloodied butchers’ clothes, stand on the float smoking cheap cigarettes and tending to several barbecues, which rest between the dog heads. Great billows of dark smoke fill the air with the smell of roasting meat. A monstrous mechanical jaw chomps on a large, raw
pig’s head. Several other cloudy-eyed pig’s faces hang thawing on stakes mounted to the side of the truck. Chain saws drown out the sound of surrounding festival music as the butchers chase down two men dressed in cow suits. A woman wearing a demonic monkey mask and a bloodied ball gown tosses hunks of hamburger to the crowd while another PETA member tries to lure folks from the sidelines with mystery meat hooked on a fishing line.

Brody Culpepper, co-founder of Big Rig Industries and a consummate carnivore, leads the procession with a bullhorn.

“All right, all you Berkeley hippies, it’s time to put down that Nutragrain Bar and pick up a sausage. Meat is your God-given right as an American!” he informs the crowd.

“Barbecue in the morning smells like victory!” shouts someone from the float.

A pretty young woman draped in fur and leather works the crowd, handing out hot dogs and cigarettes to small children. Parents laugh, trying to maintain their “Only in Berkeley” facetiousness as their young ones are corrupted.

“I love meat,” says a 14-year-old skate rat who grew up in Berkeley but feels the allure of PETA. “My first words were, ‘More meat.’ I swear to you that’s true.”

A toddler in a stroller reaches his tiny hand toward a proffered hot dog. The child’s watchful mother intervenes just in time, pushing her son’s hand gently out of harm’s way.

“But he wants it,” coos the PETA member. The Berkeley mother smiles tolerantly.

“Beef’s not just for breakfast anymore!” comes the call. The indulgent crowd roars with laughter as the butchers begin carving the pig heads, creating a flurry of pink pig flakes that stick in everyone’s hair.

“Don’t laugh,” shouts Twisted Times Editor Stuart Mangrum through the business-end of a bullhorn. “By laughing, you only encourage them. There is nothing funny about colon plaque. There is nothing funny about meat.”

Armed with carrots, jackboots, and brown shirts, Mangrum and the Veget-Aryans have come on the scene as a combative antidote to PETA’s bloody message of feasting. They carry signs that read “You Smell Like Death,” “I Pity Your Colon,” and “Meat Is a Hate Crime.” Culpepper calls the group vegan fascists, but the men in cow suits are happy for their protection. PETA hurls epithets and meat at the Veget-Aryans, but they keep coming, using carrot sticks as ammunition.

Only when the parade passes a McDonald’s do the plant eaters waver from their intent, turning their signs and their attention on customers carrying little greasy to-go bags filled with burgers. The man- Aeros recite in horror and must be shielded from the sight by the helpful, right-thinking Aryans, PETA launches hot beef at them with a meat cannon. The crowd is showered in rusty shrapnel, but the Veget-Aryans are unfazed. A chain-saw-litigating butcher attacks one of the Aryans, carving his sign to ribbons, then turns on Mangrum. Mangrum remains calm.

“You look as though you want to attack me,” says Mangrum, quietly placing his hand on the butcher’s arm, “but I know this is just a call for help.” Turning toward one of his henchmen he adds, “Give this man a carrot.”

“The Veget-Aryans are insidious,” warns Culpepper. “They’re trying to control your mind. You can’t trust them.”

As the parade nears the end of its route, PETA throws the remains of the pig heads in the street and invites youngsters to stomp on the faces until they are nothing more than porky, pink mounds. Adults from the parade look on in amusement. A Veget-Aryan is seen sharing a plate of barbecued pork under a tree with a woman wearing animal pelts. In a startling act of unity, ambassadors from PETA and the Veget-Aryans carry a skinless sheep head to Shirley Dean, acting mayor of Berkeley, requesting that she kiss it. She declines with a large politician’s smile. Her opponent, Don Jelinek, on the other hand, acquiesces, giving him a corner on the carnivores’ vote. Parade onlookers applaud and laugh heartily.

Speaking for us all, Sebastian Melmoth muses, “It’s really hard to be punk these days.”

Above: Don Paul Swain worked for the Chiodo Brothers Special Effects company as a monster maker. Using stock props from “B” zombie movies, he suited up Cacophony for the Berkeley parade. The Living Dead Homeowners Association in 1999 was perhaps the first massive Zombie attack to take place on the North American continent. Facing page: As with any good Berkeley protest, counter protestors are a requirement. The Veget-Aryans marched to decry PETA’s insensitive butchering of innocent animals during an earlier Berkeley parade.
Race of Doom
Stuart Mangrum
Twisted Times
no. 17 – 1995

July 9, 1995 – San Francisco, CA – What started as an oddball prank took a tragic turn today as onetime counterculture scenester and San Francisco Cacophony Society member Timothy Liddy apparently plunged to his death in the icy waters of the Golden Gate. Though officials expressed concern that the dive may have been accidental, or even a result of foul play, others were quick to proclaim Liddy the 1,000th person to commit suicide by jumping from the historic span.

The trouble started when sixteen members of the Cacophony Society, a longtime fixture on the local underground scene, chose the day of the San Francisco marathon to dress up in jogging togs, strap on the number 1000, and race to the center of the bridge in a simulated mass suicide. An article in The Examiner the previous day had set the official death toll at 999, and expressed law enforcement concerns that people would be “lining up to be number 1000.” The Cacophonists responded with their ill-fated “Race of Doom,” with official-looking race placards for all the runners. “It was just a joke,” explained Cacophony spokesman Lloyd Void. “We’re just a bunch of harmless kids having fun.”

Liddy, on the other hand, was no kid, and according to some sources far from harmless. After nearly achieving notoriety in the 60’s as the unindicted eighth conspirator in the Chicago Seven case, the 45-year-old Liddy went underground in 1976 under a cloud of drug, weapons, and money laundering charges. Authorities were guarded when asked about Liddy’s background. One source, who asked not to be identified, expressed doubt that the jumper could have been Liddy at all, since Liddy was known by the CIA to be in Cuba with longtime acquaintance and golfing companion Robert Vesco. Noting that no body had been recovered from the bay, he implied that the whole affair was nothing more than “a crude attempt at disinformation, possibly by the Mossad.”

Eyewitnesses on the bridge, however, insist that a man matching Liddy’s description jumped, or was pushed, or accidentally fell from the railing at mid-span at about 6:25 PM. Members of the Cacophony Society were apparently involved in a spirited shoving match, each trying to climb up the rail ahead of the other, when Liddy allegedly went over the side.

Liddy, whose autobiography “I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead” has been tied up in litigation since 1992, leaves no known survivors. His publishers, Duke Press, referred a request for comment to their Accounts Receivable department.
BART Lounge Questionnaire

How many days/week do you use BART?

1 2 3 4 5 6 or more

How would you rate this evening’s entertainment?

1 2 3 4 5

What kinds of acts would you like to see on the BART Lounge?

☐ Opera
☐ Ballet
☒ Movies
☐ Other

Should we designate any BART cars as non-entertainment?

☒ Yes ☐ No

Are you interested in becoming a BART Lounge entertainer?

Name ________________________________

Address ________________________________

Daytime Phone ________________________________

Your Act ________________________________

Thank you for your valuable opinion. We hope you enjoyed the show. Please return your completed questionnaire before exiting the BART Lounge.

The Bart Lounge

Friday, January 25, 5:30 pm (meet) - 6:15 pm (depart)

Where: Glen Park BART Station, just inside station, SF

Hey there, you truly fabulous people! BART is going Vegas!

This will be a truly incredible evening of entertainment, when the evening commute BART train is transformed into a Las Vegas-styled lounge. We are looking for three sorts of people to join in:

1. If you have an act (comedy/magic/showgirl or any other entertainment) be prepared to perform.
2. If you want to do part of the atmosphere, come dressed up in your best Vegas wear.
3. If you want to dress “straight” we do need plants to blend in with the commuters.

Remember, you in the audience are the ones we truly, truly love the most!

—Rough Draft, January 1991

The Bart Lounge

Rat Girl

As much as we all liked to entertain each other, we really loved it when we could play to an unsuspecting audience. The BART train between San Francisco and the East Bay was our perfect playground. One Friday evening we all boarded BART and our MC announced to the passengers that this was a pilot project that BART was testing to bring entertainment to riders on Friday evenings.

We proceeded to “entertain” the passengers with such acts as “Duane and Dusty” (Peter Doty and Sara Rosenbaum), a dynamic duo straight from Vegas and the amazing “Shirley Bassey” (Robert Hubbard in the most unbelievable Shirley drag) singing her great Bond hit “Goldfinger.” Along with assorted magic acts, poets, and total silliness, we “entertained” passengers all the way to the end of the line.

I was the cigarette girl with a 1950s night club tray around my neck, offering cigars, cigarettes, chewing gum, and condoms, accompanied by a pet rat courtesy of the rat girls, climbing all over the tray. We even handed out surveys to the passengers asking them to let BART know which were their favorite acts, and would they would like this to be a regular feature of the Friday night commute.

On the return trip two young guys boarded the train in Hayward. They were dressed in nice suits and ties, on their way to meet their dates in the city. I climbed in one of the guy’s lap and started flirting with him. As I played with his hair, the rat climbed off my tray and on to his shoulder, where it let go with a very messy, gooey shit. I was sure the guy was going to start screaming at me but instead he turned out to be a great sport. He laughed, tried to clean off the mess, and said that this was going to be a great story to tell his date.

He gave me his card and subsequently came to many parties that my husband and I had at our home over the years. This is how I met Mark Hammond, who is one of the best sports I have ever met.

Facing page: Dwayne and Dusty singing in the BART Lounge. The questionnaire was handed to all commuters boarding BART cars during Dwayne Newton’s recreation of a Vegas variety stage performance. Following pages: Press releases for Rosebud Technologies and the “faster than the speed of light” modem to be unveiled at MacWorld, 1990.
THE CACOPHONY AND SPARL PRESENT

Our second year promises to be twice as good with a VHS, Betamatic, and silent film screening. The idea is to create a visual tapestry out of a few nights of insomnia. Remember, we are not looking for the first layer of meaning: keep your clips fairly short and nonsensical. We will probably have a time limit, 15 minutes, depending on the number of entrants to the video festival. The technique for harvesting these cultural visual jetsam and flotsam for the distilled gems of collective unconscious. The technique for harvesting these cultural visual jetsam and flotsam for the distilled gems of collective unconsciousness. The technique for harvesting these cultural visual jetsam and flotsam for the distilled gems of collective unconsciousness. The technique for harvesting these cultural visual jetsam and flotsam for the distilled gems of collective unconsciousness. The technique for harvesting these cultural visual jetsam and flotsam for the distilled gems of collective unconsciousness. 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Operatic Banquet
When: Saturday, February 2nd, 8:00pm
Meet: 7th Ave and Lincoln Way, just inside the park at the baseball diamond

All you lounge lizards that missed your calling at the Fabulous Bar & Grill to hone up on our skills with the help of their Kike machine. (We’ll play background music to any tune you like without complaining.)

After our vocal chords are vibrating with glee, we will exit to a local spaghetti house to boggle and bemuse the minds around us. Costumes encouraged.
Bring: your voice, a healthy appetite, funds to cover your meal and a goblet for toasting.

Your host: Zasu
— Rough Draft, August, 1987

Downtown is Such a Drag
When: Thursday, May 26, 11:30am
Meet: In McKesson Plaza between street level and the BART/MUNI station at Montgomery and Market Streets

Anyone who has ever witnessed the horrors of SF’s financial district at midday knows that its corporate-zombie denizens are in severe need of having their cages rattled. Let’s mock their conformist existence by dressing conservatively in drag, walking the streets and riding the elevators, seemingly oblivious to each other as if we were each just part of the crowd.

Please bring: power lunch money for a yuppie establishment after the event.

Your hostess: Dame Fredirica Downey
— Rough Draft, May, 1994

The Un-Cacophony Event
When: Monday, November 11th, 3 pm
Meet: Dogshit Park, Cole Street near Cole Street (at the MUNI tunnel). Actual location to be disclosed.

How many times have you found yourself somewhere (mysterious, dreamlike, stunning), and thought, “This would be a great place for a Cacophony event!” Too many, if you are normal. Now we have a chance to avoid that sort of distraction. This event is guaranteed to be un-mysterious, un-dreamlike, and un-stunning. Boring, if you will.

Please bring: coupons to trade, casserole recipes to share, TV Guide crossword puzzles, and money for Jello.

Your host: Mrs. Miller
— Rough Draft, November, 1991
Urban Exploration and Games

The gleaming, unknown urban landscape was the backdrop, playing field, and in some instances, the inspiration for many events. The group might exit an unlit, out of service train tunnel, squeeze through a stone gate into a mausoleum, through a hole in a fence and onto a military compound, or perhaps canoe under the wharves, landing in an abandoned shipyard. Then, standing on a concrete abutment overlooking what might seem a desolate industrial landscape, a wind swept bluff in sight of the Golden Gate Bridge, a giant suspended platform behind a tower mounted billboard, or maybe an expansive cemetery, a figure sporting a proper suit, an animal costume, work clothes, or maybe nothing at all, might read from Pynchon, Lovecraft, George Sterling, or perhaps Danielle Steel!

Midnight walks, urban canoeing, exploring abandoned or unused places, all were part of the Cacophony palate. Anyone could host the basic exploration type event. All that was required was having a favorite route to walk, maybe a passage or two from a favored author, and a quiet, friendly pub or comfortable coffee house to end up at. More elaborate events of this type, like the Secedarean Odyssey, involved dozens of organizers, canoe ingress, massive abandoned infrastructure, zipline, costumes, security watches, and the like.

The concept of The City as playground was so ingrained into most everyone’s event planning schemes that it seemed simple common sense. Substantial portions of industrial San Francisco lay in various stages of abandonment and disuse from the late 70s through the most active years of Cacophony. The structures, bridges, tunnels, urban fields filled with curious detritus and even the more mundane of landscapes were places to explore. Even the occasional rural outing was viewed much as an expedition to a far away land, crowding the edge of some tattered, soiled treasure map.

Reading a favorite story or poem at some romantic point along the way, or perhaps watching a movie that haunted your dreams before setting out into the real world, was a sure fire way to share whatever crazy monsters or lovely fantasies might be shipwrecked inside your head. The idea of the world outside made into a playground was catnip for energetic Cacophonists and spawned a variety of games, treasure hunts, races and so on.

The Urban Iditarod began as a Cacophony outing and has since expanded to other cities and other peoples, as has urban golf, SantaCon, Zombie mobs, Brides of March, and other street games and costumed mob attacks. The idea of flash mobs owes a bit of a debt to these earlier outings.

Facing page: Cacophonists organizing street and field games could create detailed instruction sheets and descriptive essays that encouraged certain principles or aesthetics for their adventure. Harry Haller was one organizer in particular that used this technique to enhance the players’ experience.

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Urban Exploration and Games

1. Two teams get together and choose two people to kidnap from the participants who have arrived at the warehouse. Each team tells the other team what location they will kidnap their participants to.

2. The teams go and kidnap the participants. One member of each team collects the participant’s photograph and brings it to the other team. If they didn’t bring photographs then use descriptions.

3. Both participants are given the instructions or photographs and told that they must find and kill that other participant before that other participant finds and kills them first. Explain these rules to each participant:
   a. Participants kill each other by squeezing shoulders only.
   b. When a participant is killed, s/he must wiggle, wriggle, scream, or in some other way vocalize that they’ve been killed.
   c. When a participant kills someone, he/she must loudly give vent to their satisfaction upon completion of a successful homicide by saying things like, “Revenge is sweet”, “Make my day! Make my day!” or “You’ll never lay a hand on my orangutang again!”

4. Kidnap Teams repeat this cycle with as many participants as they can manage.
Enter the Unknown
Ethyl Kelson

In the fall of 1986 I returned to San Francisco, after four years away, to attend art school. I had lucked into a great living situation in the Inner Richmond through an old friend who was moving to Manhattan. I spent fifteen minutes meeting my soon-to-be new roommate and saying goodbye to my old friend. No deposit, just a handshake, rent at $250 bucks a month, and my new roommate even offered the formal dining room as a makeshift studio while I was in school. Sweet.

I began to explore my neighborhood, reaching further out to cafes and other venues. As school started, I became absorbed in the experience, but still got off the bus anywhere from two to twelve blocks early in order to observe my neighborhood.

It was during one such bus exit that I noticed a café and entered, thinking a cup of tea would keep me up late enough to get my homework done. As the tea steeped, I perused the flyers by the front door. Finding a calendar shining on me the day I picked up Rough Draft: The Official Organ of the San Francisco Cacophony Society, OK. Sure. Why Not? Over the next three months, I stopped in the same café and picked up the calendar. In late 1986 I sent my money in - five bucks - with the message: “Hey Rough, How 'bout a Draft?” I had subscribed! I attended but I can say, with all certainty, that the Gods gave up, throwing the TV remote at me as I walked down the stairs to the front door and out into the night.

That event blurs with so many other Enter The Unknowns I attended but I can say, with all certainty, that the Gods were shining on me the day I picked up Rough Draft/ in that café. I found my people and we had years of adventures together. Obviously, I was already a member.

I can’t be certain how early in 1987 I attended my first event. I just remember I thought about it all week. A quiet week – sure I had homework – but what else? New friends, yes, but none of any substance as of yet, and this was a big city and here I was, free and able to experience everything! So I perused my latest Rough Draft: Friday night the event was an Enter the Unknown hosted by Sebastian Melmoth and Dog Boy. On Friday I prepared to go out, late. My roommate, who I was realizing had little in common with me, asked me where I was going at 10pm. I explained Rough Draft and the Enter the Unknown event write up. The only requirements were to meet at “the baseball diamond at 7th and Lincoln, inside the park. Wear warm dark clothing, bring valid ID.” My intent to participate caused a rather large blow up with my new roommate, who read me the riot act about rapists and homeless people and all the other vermin who lived in Golden Gate Park.

I countered with my three months of receiving the newsletter and the sound of rationality it offered and my spirit of adventure and ability to take care of myself. She gave up, throwing the TV remote at me as I walked down the stairs to the front door and out into the night. We assembled silently and stole up some back way, top hats and street clothes and Mardi Gras beads. The night the event was an Enter the Unknown hosted by Dog Boy, an old friend who was moving to Manhattan. I spent an entire week thinking about it all. A quiet week – sure I had homework – but what else? New friends, yes, but none of any substance as of yet, and this was a big city and here I was, free and able to experience everything! So I perused my latest Rough Draft: Friday night the event was an Enter the Unknown hosted by Sebastian Melmoth and Dog Boy.

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Roller Skating on the Embarcadero Freeway, 1991
Marc Weber

Skates hurt my feet. No matter whether they’re ice skates, or roller skates, or rollerblades. They pinch the arches in a funny way that makes a deep but piercing ache, like something crucial got folded inside. Also, I’m not a good skater.

Rolling out skillfully onto the wide empty pavement that night, between the hands of my girl and our friend, I was focused on my feet and on not falling. But after a wobbly run back and forth with the group along the elevated freeway, I looked around.

It was glorious. The old freeway ran along the water, partly ringed San Francisco from the Bay Bridge to Broadway. Growing up on the Peninsula, it was our royal road to the punk and strip clubs and step-straddled hills of North Beach, a smooth swoop to the left from 101 with the water on one side and downtown buildings looming up over the other, eighty miles an hour, driving through the rooftops of the city as in a dream.

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But now the earthquake-damaged freeway was deserted as it waited for destruction, a forbidden moon-drenched high ground floating over the gritty roadway below. My Cacophony friends and housemates had planned a group farewell on skates, rolling across the vacant night lanes in top hats and street clothes and Mardi Gras beads.

We assembled silently and stole up some back way, pausing only to lace on skates and some for a quick hit of drink or smoke. We rolled, we yelled, we smiled. We skated where semis had thundered. In my memory there’s a big moon, but maybe that’s embellishment.

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Canoeing Under the Wharves
Marc Weber

Islais Creek is like black shiny oil at the end of the industrial boat ramp. The aluminum canoes gleam dully. We’re sorted into groups for each canoe with usual Cacophony solemnity, as if planning a commando raid. Every boat has some experienced person to tell us dogsbodies what to do. Stepping into the canoes is a move fraught with risk for an instant, like trying to balance on the inside of a rolling log. The taut metal skin vibrates under your foot, like a drumhead over water.

Soon we’re paddling in the clear night on the creek. My girl Kathleen is next to me. Our pockets are empty of anything an unscheduled swim might ruin. I smell the salt water and enjoy the strange slicing sensation my paddle makes as it moves. The wharves are in view, a black border separating shiny water and sky.

Passing under the low wooden roof, we’re suddenly under the wharves. It’s silent except for little splashing sounds and occasional breaths and murmurs. Piers rise on every side, marking narrow corridors like supermarket aisles that stretch far ahead beyond our lights. Seaweed grows down the piers and disappears into the bay. As in so many Cacophony events, from the Atomic Cafe to rollerskating on the Embarcadero, the strongest sense is of being somewhere beyond the pale. Not forbidden, exactly, but where nobody normally realizes you can go. Like finding space within a solid.

The tide is low enough to let us pass comfortably. We have just a small window of time to keep the claustrophobia of this near subterranean space at bay. On the way out we pass a houseboat with yellow interior lights spilling out gently onto the black creek. It’s achingly inviting, a warm little home floating in the huge inky night. Then out, and back to talking, and housemates, and noise.

Canoeing Under the Wharves
When: Friday, May 3rd and Saturday May 4th
Meet: 7:30 pm Lincoln Way at 7th Ave., just inside GG Park at the baseball diamond.
We will put in near Hyde St. Pier in Aquatic Park and canoe to the Ferry Building. Part of the trip will be under the wharves. All of it will be a new perspective to you unless you are already an urban canoeist/kayaker. Life vests will be provided. This event will fill up quickly! RSVP asap. Bring: Warm, layered, wool or water resistant clothing. Note: Bulky coats, extremely heavy sweaters, huge boots are NOT GOOD. Layered clothing is recommended.
Your hosts: Ethyl Ketone and Sebastian Melmoth
— Rough Draft, April, 1991

Facing page: Svensk Runestone piloting a canoe underneath the wharves of San Francisco.
Canoeing Under The Wharves was a popular event that enjoyed several revivals over the years.
Only Skin Deep
Chris DeMonterrey

We were exploring the Dean’s office on the top floor of the Mortuary Sciences Building. It was getting quite crowded and people were going through the printing and documents office, excitedly perusing various papers, shining their flashlights on death or graduation certificates and other mortuary related forms. I believed that someone purloined a couple of death certificates, business cards and calendars. The complex had been a working mortuary as well as a trade school for nascent morticians. It was sandwiched between a high-rise apartment complex and a large private residence, so we had to try and be quiet so as not to be exposed and have the police called.

It seemed a bit crowded and noisy in the office and I wanted to explore a bit on my own. I went downstairs to the basement through some double doors, planning to more thoroughly explore the morgue, which we had breezed through with the group earlier. I wondered if a body or perhaps other interesting things had been left behind in some slim corner.

I determined to find out.

Looking around, I saw dark angle iron steel morgue frames for holding cadaver trays going up to the ceiling like human size refrigerators.

Nothing in the racks.

Then I started shining my flashlight around in various corners and spotted a dark green 5 gallon bucket labeled “embalming fluid.”

I grabbed the handle and plopped it up and felt that it was heavy with what I expected to be fluid... but it wasn’t sloshing liquid.

I put the bucket down in the middle of the morgue floor, so that plenty of room to get my fingers underneath the lid and pull it up. It popped open with a hollow snap and echo through the room as I put the lid to one side on the floor. I shined my flashlight inside and saw clear heavy polyethylene plastic folded over near the top inside of the bucket.

Holding the light in with my left hand I reached into the bucket with my right hand to find the edges of the plastic, begin to pull up the top lid, and opened the polyethylene. With the plastic unfolded, I shined my flashlight to the center of the open plastic and saw a pale surface with a whitish thick edge.

I reached in, grabbed the edge, and pulled up on the material inside and began to pull it out of the bucket. It began to partly unfold from its own weight and I could see two nipples and some light brown hair on a light brown skin.

Inside the lower parts of the bucket were two arm skins with hairy forearms, a torso, two leg skins split down the calf, and two rear end skins with cuts out for their anus holes. I never did find another torso skin to match the extra skin.

I called to the others and showed them, “What are you going to do with it?” Jeff Spaulding asked.

I ended up taking it home and kept it in my refrigerator. I had to remove the metal grate shelving to fit the bucket in. My roommates, curious about the lack of space for their food in the refrigerator, examined the contents of the bucket while I was out and ended up kicking me out of the apartment later.

I kept the skin in my new place for a year, until the day a couple broke into my apartment and held me up with a machine gun. They did not take the skin. I wasn’t sure exactly what to do with it. It was simply too interesting a thing to merely throw away. John Law, I suggested, I give it to Mark Pauline at Search Research Labs.

Pauline and his crew made it into a piece of display art for a show at Southern Exposure Gallery. They pierced the nipples and tattooed the breast and thighs. Art patrons thought the “piece” looked “realistic.”

Pauline and his crew made it into a piece of display art for a show at Southern Exposure Gallery. They pierced the nipples and tattooed the breast and thighs. Art patrons thought the “piece” looked “realistic.”

Urban Golf
Silke Tudor, SF Weekly, May 15, 1996

It’s Saturday afternoon and North Beach locals sit drinking vino inside Caffe Trieste. Gianfranco Gotta, a Sinatralike singer with brown-linked sunglasses and a side-part, belts out a selection of heartfelt love songs, while younger patrons smoke cigarettes on the sidewalk patio outside. I scan the crowd for any hint of loud普及, since gangster chic is the equivalent of a secret handshake for members of the Urban Golfing League, a branch of the San Francisco Cacophony Society.

Seeing none, I deposit myself at a sidewalk table. A large man in a sweatshirt that reads, “Will grill for food,” momentarily piques my interest until he begins bussing tables; meanwhile, a silent guy in a black blazer pulls a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. Finally, I spy a young, pasty faced, a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. Finally, I spy a young, pasty faced, a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. Finally, I spy a young, pasty faced, a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. Finally, I spy a young, pasty faced, a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. Finally, I spy a young, pasty faced, a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. Finally, I spy a young, pasty faced, a chair up next to me and starts studying a textbook on abnormal psychology. 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Obsession with the Subterranean
Kevin Evans

In the early 1970s, as a young child I was re-located from the serene and picturesque milieu of Pacific Grove California, to the muggy agricultural inland empire located in the central valley, Fresno. For many years during my internment, I’d heard tales of a labyrinth of tunnels spanning a dozen or more acres, a fertile cavernous “Garden of Eden.” This secretive territory was located underneath some of the valley’s most unyielding hardpan, sculpted in the early years of the 20th century by the hands of a mad Sicilian. The story of this visionary eccentric inspired my obsessive imagination to seek out this and other examples of alternative societies.

1985: I’d recently graduated from high school and spent my summer preparing for my first year in art school in San Francisco. The one free weekend I had, I decided I would escape the valley heat with a cheap movie. The time and cash allotted, I defaulted on what is now considered an adored cult favorite, *The Goonies*. It was a silly kid’s film, set in Astoria, Oregon, with the protagonists, a band of adventurous children seeking pirate’s treasure in a booby trapped cavern, terminating at a treasure laden galleon. The film re-ignited my wonder with the unknown spaces below. Perhaps this amusing, recurring emotional scar was the result of pleasing childhood encounters with *The Underground Gardens*, Carlsbad Caverns, and Idaho’s gigantic pre-historic lava tubes, “Craters of the Moon”. As I began my first year in art school, I’d become fast friends with a group of thrill-seeking individuals in the dormitory where I resided. One late night, plotting explorative adventures in the bay area, one suggested the Marin Headlands, an area known to contain miles of abandoned military tunnels, shuttered and haphazardly maintained by the Department of Parks and Recreation. This location became our beloved favorite for impromptu picnics, archeour stargazing, and my favorite pursuit, seeking an unlocked aperture to the forgotten underworld. The search in and of itself was immensely satisfying, though never successful. At that point, the lure of the unknown and what might be found was a driving notion to fuel further excursions…

Descent into the underground, achieved!

Return to the Oakland Sewers
1990: Three years into my “tenure” with the Cacophony Society, I’d heard many tales and exploits, all impressive, entertaining and inspirational musings, of the organization and its predecessor The San Francisco Suicide Club. One struck at a peculiar, personal itch
the exploration of the Bay Area’s forgotten rivers and creeks, now watery subterranean causeways. This endeavor was a forgotten investigation I’d wanted to unearth. With a great deal of prodding, I convinced Cacophonist Sebastian Melmoth to thaw this dark and moist morsel of urban investigation. After a few planning sessions, the date was set July 14th, 1990. With the assistance of other veterans of this venue, we would fill a rented moving truck with sub-terrestrial explorers, clad in hip-waders and formal attire, and escort them to an undisclosed passageway in Oakland’s industrial badlands, to begin an expedition into a watery subterranean substructure. Our uncanny group made our way eastward. Donned in waterproof ornament and acting as amateur anthropologists, we navigated the locality and its submerged detritus. The affair concluded within the borders of Oakland’s Mills College in the early morning hours, celebrated with an appropriate formal dinner and dance.

Return to the Marin Bunker

1991: Sebastian Melmoth was requesting a few willing co-explorers to re-enter an obscure bunker complex in the Marin Headlands, once explored by members of the Suicide Club. This was not an officially sanctioned event of the Cacophony Society, more of an ‘exploratory junket.’ The solicitation occurred almost spontaneously around the kitchen table at 1907 Golden Gate (a Cacophony haunt). Myself, and two other Cacophonists were instantly on board for the impromptu escapade. I animatedly revelled in the thought that I could finally fulfill this longing to delve into the potted caverns of Marin…

The Descent, Down the Rabbit’s Hole!

I’d not expected the entrance to this unknown cavern to be so obvious. Tourist milled about the peak of the abandoned military installation, unaware of our search for the entrance—they were busy capturing family photos with a diminutive San Francisco as a backdrop. Melmoth was inconspicuously stomping at random patches of shrubbery, searching for something hidden in the soil. Within a few minutes the ground flexed beneath his feet, the gateway was found! When uncovered, the aperture resembled something a large rodent might dwell within, something a few starving artists and their guide might fit into. We had to make our entrance into the unknown rapid and without notice. On our backs we quickly skidded into the unknown, not knowing the perilous danger lurking inches away, when finally it revealed itself, a 75-80 foot drop into the abyss. A truncated telephone pole lodged into a ladder cage prevented access. We had to climb over it, suppressing extreme acrophobia. Once we had passed the obstruction, it was a 45 or so foot descent down a precarious rusted ladder with a mid-point deteriorating concrete ledge. The rest of the journey, another 35 feet downwards, was easier, due to the lack of crumbled detritus. As we exited the descent chamber, the underground compound opened, exposing larger halls that once housed ammunition, offices, and an underground road once used for cargo trucks. Overwhelmed with what I was experiencing, I audibly expressed a desire to permanently occupy the space.

This would not be the last exploratory excursion to the mysterious and fascinating location, another ‘Zone.’ This subterranean obsession would continue with “Descent into Necropolis” – a midnight literary walking tour of the Mountain View Cemetery and its dank storm drains, as well as numerous revisitations to the East Bay’s labyrinthine storm drains and the elusive Marin bunker wonderland…
First off, it was absolutely the weirdest party that I have ever been to or played at. We didn’t know much about the gig: they told us that they would come to Free Band Headquarters and take us to it. This guy shows up with an enormous rented moving van. First we get a lecture. We would go into an abandoned building in the city in the back of the enclosed truck box, and we would not know where this building is. We would enter the building illegally, then down into the building’s bomb shelter.

They said they had done this type of thing many times and encountered the police only twice in fifteen years. Once, in 1979, they entered an abandoned 1930s skyscraper in formal wear (tuxes, gowns, white gloves) and proceeded to have a VERY FORMAL dinner on one of the upper floors. Someone wandered out of the area that they had certified as alarm free and set off an alarm. Well, the police showed up and found 42 very proper people in dinner wear, dining in this mess of a sky scraper. Again no one was arrested, and they were asked to leave. The point of this lecture was to warn anyone with a warrant (unpaid tickets) that it would probably be best to not go.

The rules of the party were bring your roller skates and nonperishable bomb shelter food, and once the doors close at 9 pm, the war will begin. No one can go out until midnight, “when the war is over.”

Well, we get in the back of the truck, and the guy tells us that our radio rendezvous is at eight sharp! He also tells us that when he bangs on the truck three times, we must be perfectly quiet. This is the moment we will be entering the building. When finally the truck stops, I figure we must be inside. The back doors open, and we jump out into a very dark loading dock. There’s a concrete stairway leading down, illuminated by lots of candles on the steps. We unload the band gear and work our way down to the sub-basement/bomb shelter. There are candles all over so that we can see our way through the building. We are in a very large underground chamber, in what was once a government building, according to one of the organizers. We can see long vaulting hallways, the kind that you would drive a forklift in; there are lots of side passages, and off in the distance two doors are open with light and music pouring out.

When we get to the room, it’s pretty surreal. It’s evidently an old Civil Defense bomb shelter, quite large, about the length of a gym, but half the width. The Cacophony people have been coming in here for days to decorate. They placed a generator in a room in the corner, and
This and facing page: Images and propaganda from the third Atomic Café, which took place in a mammoth abandoned toothpaste factory in Berkeley.

rigged a very clever ducting system to port the exhaust up several floors and outside through a window. The room was dimly lit. They set up a 5 foot stage at the end of the room for us to play on. There are piles of prosthetic legs and arms hanging from the ceiling, also radio-active hazard signs, and “Warning Land Mines” signs. At the end of the room opposite the stage there’s a table with old army rations and lots of 5 gallon bottles of water that are bubbling with dry ice.

As we set up, the Cacophony people go to the bar several blocks away with their giant truck to bring the “guests.” We’ve rented a fog machine and a bubble machine for the evening (to give the band that post nuclear Lawrence Welk look). We are in white Toxic Waste suits that we got for a gig that some Japanese magazine wrote about.

We hear the truck roll up; we fire up the band. We play a funk version of “Freedom Jazz Dance,” sounding like the David Bowie song “Fame.” The guests go through “decontamination” before they enter the shelter. People start to drift in, one at a time. By the time everybody was “decontaminated” and the doors were shut, there were over 100 people in the shelter! The party was pretty weird; people in radiation suits were roller skating to the music. Peter the Hippie was go-go dancing. Everyone looked like extras from Road Warrior.

Midnight came and they loaded all the guests back in the truck and whisked them into the night. We tore down the band, reloaded the gear, cleaned up the room (leaving no evidence that we had been there), blacked out all the candles, and slipped quietly away.

Saturday morning, in a small alley near Fifth and Howard Streets downtown, participants pin socks to baseball and ski caps (ears), smear eyeliner on their faces (snouts and whiskers), decorate shopping carts (sleds), and drink beers (just because) in preparation for the “7th Annual Urban Iditarod.” Held on the same day that those trained malamutes and huskies drag people around the Alaskan tundra for prize money, the Urban Iditarod is San Francisco’s usual wacky adult-child answer to a mainstream media circus.

As event organizers alternately oversee the proceedings and pause to share flasks, dogs in various states of array and disarray fuel up and put finishing touches on carts and costumes. Team members from Raiders of the Lost Bark dip into a golden cooler with golden figurines on top — the Bark of the Covenant, one assumes — and lap up pre-iditarod drinks from dog bowls. Teams like the Blue Dogs, the S-M themed Ugly Bitches, the McGruff Crime Dogs, and for some reason the Pirates of the Ice (complete with giant Jolly Roger flag) fraternize and hurl empty threats. The Holy Terriers, an all-female team dressed as slutty nuns (plus one in an enviable Elvis jumpsuit), make their presence known with a round of yappy barking; most other dogs join in. A few pups sniff around others’ backsides, and a rolled-up newspaper is loudly wished for. Saturday shoppers pulling into the entrance of the alley’s parking garage point and laugh and rubberneck. The Baha Men’s “Who Let the Dogs Out?” begins to blare from one team’s boom box. A car alarm sounds, and everyone on the street howls.

After the course map is distributed (3.5 miles) and a few ground rules are established, the race is on. Contestants cease milling and collectively sprint through the alley and toward downtown, barking and screaming. They run fast and my platform-booted companion and I, endeavoring to follow along, immediately begin to question our cardiovascular health and finally pause to consult the map for the location of the first mandatory rest stop. The Iditarod tears through the cable car turnaround and Union Square, and though we think we’ve headed them off at the pass, when we get to the Irish Bank, the dogs are already there, drinking. A posset of festooned shopping carts sits scrunched together as the dogs catch their breath and buy booze.

One beer later, the mob moves in the direction of Chinatown, overtaking traffic on Grant Street and running uphill with alarming dexterity and speed. My companion and I power-walk but trail behind again, concisely explaining the event to addled bystanders over our shoulders, and eventually shortcut it to rest stop number...
Teams compete in dog-bowl races — a tag-team battle where contestants crawl to dishes to lap beer — and then, well-lubricated and still barking, the Iditarod pushes off toward Fisherman’s Wharf. My companion and I, shamelessly, take the 45 bus. (“My dogs are barking!” she joked, Haw haw.) Though we even skip a wheatening hole and everything, we still arrive to the Steelhead Brewery to find all the sleds parked out front and tourists filming the chaos from all angles. Dogs perform theatrics and drink drinks both bagged and bought; inside the somewhat fancy eatery, Iditarod contestants are shuffled to the back of the room.

After blowing $2 pins, issuing more empty threats, and barking at unsuspecting diners, the Iditarod heads back on mass along the water to the Fort Mason Center. My companion and I, now somehow left in charge of escorting ThoughtPolice’s weighty and cumbersome security guard (a waist-up mannequin with a police uniform), have lost all hope of keeping up. On the foggy banks of Fort Mason beside the chilly Bay, all opposing dog packs huddle together for warmth, and a Brit dog with a spiked collar announces the winners of the foggy event. Dogs perform theatrics and drink drinks both bagged and bought; inside the somewhat fancy eatery, Iditarod contestants are shuffled to the back of the room.

Swim The Farallones!
When: Thursday, September 1, Midnight
Where: Ocean Beach
Bring: Bathing suit and towel
That’s right! A delightful, refreshing, enervating, midnight twenty-four mile round trip dip in the Pacific Ocean! Imagine yourself dodging sharks, man-o’-war, drunken fishermen, dope smugglers, the Coast Guard, and the US Navy! And once you arrive at the famous Farallon islands, home of the famed guano factory in the world, you get to turn around and SWIM BACK! A swell event for the whole family!
Your hosts: Stan and Olle
—Rough Draft, September, 1988

Fake Events
One longstanding tradition in Cacophony was the fake event write-up. This exercise in creative writing proved to be irresistible to certain newsletter editors when faced with a blank spot needing fill in their upcoming issue of Rough Draft. Many would read the new month’s RD with great anticipation; of course some of the actual events and the real activities planned and advertised in Cacophony’s public organ were so bizarre that you could read most of the way through a fake event write-up before you realized it was a joke.

Fake handbills and public messages were delivered along with the Rough Drafts, ready for duplication at the local copy shop and subsequent posting on telephone poles and construction walls around town. And, oddly enough, the occasional “fake event” listed in Rough Draft was more believable than some of the actual events planned and implemented.

Eat The Dead
When: Sunday, August 9th, 8:00pm
Meet: Trad’r Sam’s on Geary between 25th and 26th Avenues.
Surprisingly, society’s greatest taboo is only a misdemeanor under the law, and we aren’t talking about picking your nose. We have obtained a variety of healthy, discarded human body parts from SF General Hospital and will use them in a least fit for a cannibal king! We can almost guarantee this will be a once-in-a-lifetime gourmet eating opportunity, and a unique chance to confront, and master, your deepest inhibitions. Bring: An exotic condiment or delicious dessert for at least ten. I’ll be the one wearing the necklace of rat skulls.
—Rough Draft, August, 1987
BARK Desert Column

BARK had been meeting for trips to local shooting ranges and quietly buying up antique and completely out-dated ordnance for a few years before joining SF Cacophony in the Black Rock Desert. At that time there existed a gun shop on 2nd Street, just south of Market, called the San Francisco Gun Exchange. I bought my first bolt action rifle, a 1913 Mark III Enfield at the Exchange. Ammo was still being made at the many armament factories in Yugoslavia and was always plentiful.

Labor Day was fast approaching and BARK began planning our camp out in the desert. True to form, given that this was a desert mission, khaki and white were de rigueur. I searched high and low and found, at a garage sale in my Richmond district neighborhood, a Pith helmet, which turned out to fit me perfectly and had the added bonus of being Belgian. We were the Colonials, going to the deepest desert to explore after all.

Ammo, while plentiful at the Exchange, was pricey, so we ended up in South San Francisco at a gun shop that sold remaineddered ammo from the third world. We found 303 issue that was old Iraqi stock. We bought enough to load our bandoliers many times over and proceeded to plan the rest of our gear.

I carefully packed our dishes and other kitchen items: my grandmother’s 1918 wedding china, my parents’ 1946 silver tea and coffee service and silver flatware, and bright white linen tablecloths and napkins for the entire stay. Oh, and the skirts, parasols, and formal wear for the final night.

We arrived and set up camp, first hoisting the Imperial Russian Flag. A tripod was built and we leaned our various ordnance against it when not in use. Large umbrellas and tables with comfy rattan seating created a drawing room and invited the passing visitor to our camp. Every day we held an informal tea at 4pm, serving said refreshment hot and allowing for the lump sugar to melt deliciously in our guests’ cups.

For diversion we created a shooting range in the hills on the edge of the playa. Many of the visitors came and enjoyed the experience of shooting a bolt action rifle, with the unfortunate few experiencing the not-so-enjoyable experience of shooting out-of-date ammo. No accidents were had, as everything was carefully monitored, but there were plenty of misfires.

Included in our diversions was the very proper game of polo, played on mountain bikes and using croquet mallets for polo sticks. I remember going for a lovely bike ride with my parasol, thinking that if I rode 20 minutes away and lost sight of the camp, I might never find my way back.

The final night, before the burn, found the entire camp in formal wear, enjoying cocktails around the sunset, waiting to light the Man, with my companions in full dress uniform, of course. Suddenly, a sword fight broke out and everyone cleared the area to allow the two elegantly dressed military men to solve their differences. Rumor began to spread and soon everyone was whispering about the “honor of a woman” or perhaps the “perceived outcome of a battle.” Finally hands were shook and we all turned our attention to the main event of the night.

We proudly flew our Russian flag the next morning as we sailed across the playa and back to the blocktop of the modern world. Pith helmet still on my head and desert dust disguising the khaki of my skirt, I knew BARK would find other places and adventures on the outskirts of Cacophony.
Elmer Fudd 32 Gauge Pro-Am

When: March 2nd

Join us for an afternoon of fun, frolic, and jackassery. Don your favorite gun slinger costume and head down to the south bay for a sporting clay potluck. Gun sharing available, no experience necessary. Ten stations (just like golf), ten shots per. Bring vittles to share and home brew if a brewer ya be, arrgh. This is a costume event, except for you, Peter. Gunplay costumeعام includes notables such as Jed Clampet, Ma Barker, Kaiser Wilhelm, Claudine Longet, Lee Harvey, Pancho Villa, Merl Perkins on a spree... suit yer self. You hosts: Rusty Cleaver, Dennis, and your close personal friend, Dr. Anderson.

— Rough Draft, March, 1996

Suburbs to Nowhere

When: Sunday, August 20th, 12 noon

Meet: Rendezvous at Cafe Soma. We will carpool and compare ideas before entering suburbia.

Tucked among the north peninsula locales is a housing development that never was—a ghost of a suburb. All roads, street lights, and signs are intact, but not a house. Join me as we create our own version of suburban life (ick, twisted, or depressing as it might be). In the spirit of the Exquisite Corpse, each person will come away with an outrageous little booklet by the end of the day. Bring: 1) Money for film, processing and remixing, 2) costumes and small props for your suburban persona. Call me if you have ideas to sell the scene. 3) a picnic potluck to share.

Your host: Amy

— Rough Draft, August, 1995

Costumed Parties

Catherine Baker was having her 30th birthday and felt compelled to celebrate it with style. “Well,” she thought, “where would be the most amazing place to have my birthday party? Of course—the Golden Gate Bridge!” The Annual Golden Gate Bridge Dinner taking place on the pedestrian walkway at the Marin Tower was the second longest running annual event. Started in the first month of the Suicide Club in 1977, this event was a perfect example of the open encouragement Cacophony and the Suicide Club before engendered for anyone coming up with an idea for an event and the collective support marshaled for that idea. Formal dress was encouraged, and with Catherine’s simple, elegant construct, a history of three decades worth of costumed and formal events in unusual and thoroughly stylish locations was launched. The Bridge Dinner took place each year on or around Catherine’s day, until the Bridge Police finally shut it down in the late ’90s. The largest affair was in 1982, when over 200 renegade parties arrived, some in limos, at the North lot and conga lined out to the tower. Cacophony hosted many formal dress sewer parties. Yahoon Doorstop and others organized costume ball waltzes in cemeteries, urban parks, and monuments. People dressed elegantly in all white dined on white foods while reclining amidst the whitewashed walls of underground military bunkers.

Formal attire dances in laundromats were an excellent way to while away the time as your doilies and work clothes spun through the washing/drying cycles. “If you’re not properly dressed, it’s not a proper party” as P Segal said. Even if the party is in a sewer!

Greek Drag Costume Workshop for “Body of Urban Myth!”

When: Sunday, November 16th, 1-5 pm

Where: Alabama at 19th Streets

Greek Drag: trimmern... Rogers out of children’s bed sheets, leopard print, space-age metallics? Laurel wreaths of used rubber, kitchen utensils, old xmas decorations? Bring your self, some ideas, and whatever materials and tools you have laying around (or can scrounge up) and we’ll put together some outrageous costumes and props!

— Rough Draft, November, 1997

Marzenfest

When: March 21st, Vernal Equinox

High in the lush oak forests above Lankershim, Faucetron’s open-air pagan biergarten excess. Homedrewed beer, absurd costumes, extreme potluck, cloven hooves, x-country croquet, foot-stomping accordian jam. Coarse language, adult situations. Giant PVC alpine horn courtesy of Roccas.

— Rough Draft, February, 1998

Facing page: Thomas Burchfield and Lance Alexander pose with Manny, the first Cacophony Dog Head, in front of Don Herron’s writing retreat. Herron and his wife, sci-fi fanzine figure Jeannie Bowman, hosted several events at their We-Be-Dudes Ranch. Following pages: Place settings for White Christmas at John Wickett’s Museum of Exotica. A typical Cacophony costumed soiree in Golden Gate Park. Louise Jarmilowicz on the left.
Tales of SF Cacophony: The Events

White Christmas
P Segal

Cacophony loved taking old, tired concepts and putting a fresh tweak on them. The holiday season, which in our lifetimes had devolved into an orgy of consumerism, was ripe for improvements. Santa-themed events cropped up early in Cacophony’s history, ultimately leading to the national phenomenon of SantaCon.

In the early ’90s, there was some nostalgic talk among members of the quiet whiteness of the holiday season in colder climates. Carrie Galbraith and Jeffrey Spaulding proposed that we Californians should get a taste of White Christmas in a way that people in Minnesotas would never get to experience, without severe danger of frostbite, and a team combed the city for the perfect site to host it.

Like so many other Cacophony events, this one took considerable preparation. Days in advance, crews decided to hold the event in a WWII bunker at Fort Funston. To get beyond the concrete barrier that blocked the entrance, they got out of the truck, lifted the bulky impediment, and carted it to the side, so they could drive undeterred into the fort. Armed with buckets of paint and other tools, they chose a room in the interior and rendered the concrete walls luminously bright white.

The night of White Christmas began with the set-up. The advance crew brought tables, folding chairs, silverware, and glasses, as well as tablecloths, napkins, candles, flowers, and plates—all white. A long dining table stretched the length of the bunker, and was set in formal banquet style.

At the appointed hour, the guests began to arrive with offerings for dinner: fettuccine Alfredo, hard-boiled eggs, cauliflower, jicama, and other dishes, in the full spectrum of whites. The liturgical, polyphonic compositions of Hildegard of Bingen, a 12-century sainted nun, echoed through the fort from a battery-operated book box.

As instructed, everyone showed up in white clothing, shoes, and fashion accessories. The crowd that usually picked red varietals drank that other kind of wine. A fair amount of wine was in order, in a concrete bunker at the beach in late December, with temperatures in the high 40s. With the wind chill factor blasting off the ocean, it felt like it was close to freezing, until you got inside.

As predicted, White Christmas was magical, one of those events worth repeating. The following year, after the annual wakes for Marcel Proust found a perfect home in the John Wickett Museum of Exotica, the place suggested an antithetical venue for a very different version of White Christmas.
An Encouragement to Future Pranksters

Charlie Todd, Founder, Improv Everywhere

I moved to New York in the summer of 2001 with my undergraduate degree in theatre and not much else. The plan was to figure out a way to make it as an actor or maybe a theatre director. I signed up as a temp, which was in fashion for actors those days. I worked at crappy cube farms during the day answering phones, and spent my evenings getting to know the off-off-broadway theatre scene that a few of my friends were involved in. It was a bit depressing. My super talented friends were working their asses off on a production that had poor timeslots in an un-air conditioned theatre in the middle of July. Crowds were sparse.

One night I made the spontaneous decision to attempt to fool a West Village bar into thinking I was musician Ben Folds, with the help of an accomplice who entered separately, and loudly identified me. It worked. For three hours I posed for photos, signed autographs, and received free drinks from the bartender and phone numbers from girls. At the end of the night, I just said goodbye and walked away. There was no reveal moment for this undercover performance.

That fateful night gave birth to Improv Everywhere, which I started as a website the next morning at my temp job. Rather than waiting around for a “big break,” I decided I would create my own opportunities. Who needs a stage? New York City itself is the best stage in the world. Six months later I was directing a Christmas play some college friends had put together in a rehearsal space in Lower Manhattan. I heard a massive roar from the streets, six floors below. We rushed to the window to discover hundreds of Santas marching up Broadway. This was my first exposure to Cacophony. It was awesome.

I remember Googling around that night trying to figure out what we had seen. I stumbled onto the Brooklyn Cacophony website and found out that “I may already be a member.” Unfortunately the site at that time wasn’t well-updated, and it appeared that the group wasn’t active. Still, I was inspired to learn that there were others who had been doing similar things to me for years. On the recommendation of public radio host Jesse Thorn, I bought a copy of Re/Search #11 Pranks and devoured every word. It was fascinating to learn the rich history of countercultural pranks.

Improv Everywhere has grown quite a bit since 2001. We now regularly stage stunts with participant counts in the thousands. I think part of that growth is attributed to the era we live in. I got started right around the same time that digital photography, miniDV cameras, and Final Cut Pro made documentation easy and affordable. A few years later YouTube arrived and changed my life. Suddenly the weird projects I was doing with my friends had a potential audience of millions.

Social media has also changed the game. Five or six years ago I was the unique guy who could get hundreds of people to do his ridiculous idea. Now, anyone with a good idea can use social media to recruit her army. Invite your friends and have them invite theirs and suddenly you have a crowd. I remember a few years back an exchange student arrived at NYU without a single friend in the city. He started a Facebook event saying he was going to bring the popular “Silent Disco” meme he had participated in back in the UK to NYC. A few weeks later he had a thousand people dancing silently to music in their headphones in Union Square. If a 19-year-old kid from out-of-town can do it, so can you.

We live in an age where you do not need anyone else’s permission to express yourself. No one needs to greenlight your idea. Create exactly what you want to make and put it online to be shared with the masses for free. If it’s good, it will rise to the top. Stop waiting for an invitation to create. You don’t need a book deal to write. You don’t need to sell a screenplay to make a movie. You don’t need a prank show on MTV to cause chaos. Equipment is cheap (you probably have an HD camera in your phone) Distribution is free. And it’s never been easier to connect with like-minded co-conspirators.

Go get to work.
A 12-step Program for Aspiring Cacophonists

Stuart Mangrum

“Yesterday’s weirdness is tomorrow’s reason why.” — Hunter S. Thompson, The Curse of Lono

So you’ve read this far and you think you may already be a member, but you’re not sure. And why are you sad? Because the Cacophonous Society is a thing of the past and you don’t have a time machine. But don’t be deterred by the so-called laws of physics, friend. Living the Cacophonous lifestyle may yet be within your grasp. Like a snare drum but determined to crash, Cacophonous has successfully transmitted its strange DNA into an extended family of seedy offspring. And when it comes right down to it, all one takes to outrun a new six-fingered love-kitten is two weirdos and a plan. If you believe one of these weirdos might be you, read on. Rather than ruminate on past glories or pontificate on What it All Meant, this writer will instead focus on how to be a member, but you’re sad. And why are you sad? What’s so bad about belonging to a society of nuts, and there’s nothing you can’t achieve. Look deep into your DNA and you will find the genes of a pack hunter, not all that different from the helixes that link a troop of bonobos or your fancy. The Atlas Obscura (atlasobscura.com) is a great resource for finding unusual places. But wherever you go, keep in mind that Cacophonous travel is more than just resource for finding unusual places. But wherever you go, keep in mind that Cacophonous travel is more than just

To be strange, the ones who are not like you, and possibly like no one else in the world. Get to know them. Befriend them. Exchange dangerous ideas. If you’re really lucky, you may even get to mate with one and raise weird children. Cacophonize your closet

No self-respecting Cacophonist would be caught dead wearing this year’s must have style. Instead, we are far more likely to be spotted combing the thrifts, bidding at costume auctions, or nocking a sewing machine. In general, ours is not a materialistic culture, but this is the exception that proves the rule: we covet costume and value vintages. The well-dressed Cacophonous has at least one swanky formal outfit and a selection of costumes that might include any or all of the following: A Santa suit, a clown suit, Western wear, a pirate outfit, and any number of Mad-Maximum Burner outfits. A sensible business suit is always a useful disguise, as are wigs, fake beards, trucker hats, faxes, and obsolete military uniforms. “I could never wear that in public” is the opposite of Cacophonous thinking.

Make something

If you’ve read this far, you may have already concluded that Cacophonous is, to some extent, a rejection of consumer culture. If this is so, it’s less for political than for practical reasons, since Cacophonism has historically tended to be underemployed and underpaid. Moreover, consumer culture is the epitome of conformist behavior, which the good Cacophonist instinctively abhors. Maybe that’s why the alumni roster is so full of artists, writers, builders, designers, inventors, entrepreneurs, and mad scientists. Whether by predation or by evolution, creative pursuits seem to be a natural consequence of the six-fingered Weirdness. If you want to meet fellow travelers, go to a Maker Faire (makerfaire.com). Better yet, drive there in your art car (artcars.com). Or your steam-powered house (reevemesh.com). Or ride over on your tall bike (cyclecide.com).

Burn something

While it’s hard to deny that Burning Man and Cacophonous went through a messy divorce in 1996, accounts of either party having “ruined” or “destroyed” the other are ridiculous. Granted, today’s Burning Man is nowhere near as subversive or dangerous as it used to be. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t go. In fact, if you’re never been, and you fancy yourself a freak, you really owe it to yourself to go at least once. Don’t listen to the jaded; if you look under the hood of the Burning Man machine you will find that it still runs on Cacophonous fuel. Radical inclusion, self-expression, no sponsors, no vendors, and all the other 10 Commandments for Burners are pure Rough Draft. Even if some of the rougher edges have been

sand bored off for your safety. You don’t even have to lay down the big money and trek out to Nevada – there are regional spin-off events all around the world, some of them arguably truer to the original intent than the sprawling dustbowl of Black Rock City. Better still, start your own cult. Never forget that the whole thing started with two roommates, a pile of scrap lumber, and a match.

Read more, watch less

It’s no accident that so many Cacophonous events have been based on literary themes, or that so many alumni have killed their TVs. Books are rife with arcane and dangerous ideas that percolate through your brain, color your dreams, and realign your thinking in ways that TV and the Internet cannot. They stimulate, rather than repress, the life of the mind – especially when you discuss them with your oddball friends. The Proud and Bukowski events described in these pages have inspired many subsequent reading groups, such as the Belligerati (“The cricket bat of literary discourse”) and its successor the Obliterati (“A drinking club with a reading problem”), which have been holding monthly meetings in various Bay Area dive bars for nearly a decade. Forget about all the usual book-club claptrap, and throw away those stupid “suggested discussion questions.” All you need to get started is two people who like to read and a place to talk. Then, whenever you see someone reading something interesting, or whenever a stranger comments on the book you’re toting, jump them into your little gang and make them a member. Before you know it, you’ll be a Society.

Become a niche expert

One of the hallmarks of cacophonous eccentricity is pursuing some arcane field of scholarship. It usually starts as a strange hobby (fire breathing, burlesque dancing, Bulgarian folk music) and just keeps growing. Maybe you learn so much about local history in your subterranean trysts that you start hosting old-school walking tours, like Herron (Dashiell Hammett walks) or Haller (Tenderloin history tours). Or maybe you become a guide at one of the many subterranean museums of kitsch. What they all have in common is a passion for tunneling deep into a narrow subject area, carving out an area of expertise, and making it their own. Make a spectacle of yourself
Every good Cacophonist has a parade, and will tell you that the best vantage point is always from the inside looking out, not from the sidewalk looking in. In San Francisco, Bishop Joey hosts the Saint Stupid’s Day Parade every year on April 1st, and other cities have equally ridiculous events like the Doo-Dah Parade. The Cacophony Santa runs of old have morphed into a worldwide phenomenon with hundreds of local chapters as far flung as Antarctica, making it ridiculously easy to get your Santa on (santarchy.com). Cacophonous thinking is clearly evident in performance groups like the Extra Action Marching Band (extra-action.com), Reverend Al’s Art of Bleeding (artofbleeding.com), and the Improv Everywhere flashmob cabal (improveverywhere.com). Study these phenomena and cook up your own spectacular spectacle.

Pull an epic prank

Another offspring of the Suicide Club and a sibling of the Cacophony Society. The Billboard Liberation Front has been creatively modifying outdoor advertising since 1977. Some of its more spectacular improvement actions have involved massive freeway billboards, custom neon, and high-steel rigging, but the group also conducts small-scale neighborhood improvements. If you want to start your own splinter cell, you can conduct small-scale neighborhood improvements.

Expand your comfort zone

The twelfth step will have to remain a mystery for now, because you’re going to have to come up with it on your own. And that’s the true magic of Cacophony; the endless well of invention that we drill into the shared hallucination everyone, including yourself. So go ahead and get going, Cacophony DNA will give you a unique ability to surprise others. Once you’ve successfully self-mutated, your well of invention that we drill into the shared hallucination is complete without a copy of Vale’s classic Re/Search Pranks! (researchpubs.org)

Leave the world a weirder place

Like all good Bad Ideas, Cacophony begins in the mind. Like all good Bad Ideas, Cacophony begins in the mind. The more you can do to beat down conformist reflexes and embrace your inner weirdo, the closer you will be to Cacophonous self-actualization. Strive to cultivate an attitude that is curious and open-minded. Resist jaded hipster thinking and encourage childish behavior. Try to do at least one thing every day that feels strange, wrong, or frightening. Listen to music that you think you hate. Watch obscure films in foreign languages. Go to a gay bar (if you’re straight) or a straight bar (if you’re gay). Embrace the exceptional, spurn the bandwagon, and color outside the lines. Be the nail that sticks up, and fear not the hammer.

R.I.P.

Paul Addis
Paul was Cacophony.
He lived each day as though it were his last.
One day was.