

here.

Essays by

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A Local Culture: tradition and risk in Cincinnati

BY MARK HARRIS

Previous spread:
Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker
Wallpaper detail from
Hy-que Monkey in Captivity, 2011
See exhibition checklist
Photo courtesy of the artists

daydreaming of success
of enhancing culture, of collaboration
bringing this city up with all of our brilliance
bringing this city to life with all of our passion
filling this city up with our art, with our sounds
with our faces and ideas

Excerpted from "Rubble of The Mind" by Jim Swill,
Caustic Nostalgia: selected works 2007-2010, self-published chapbook

Here is Cincinnati, a medium-sized city in the southwest corner of Ohio, across from Kentucky's smaller riverside towns of Newport and Covington and only an hour and a half's drive from Indianapolis, Louisville, or Lexington; close enough, therefore, to form one center of a tri-state cultural area whose art networks sporadically intersect. Though Cincinnati may be the more cohesive and prosperous art center in the region this is not by much of a margin. All these cities suffer from a low ebb of economic activity and dwindling state support which undermines their institutions' abilities to prosper in ways that would enable them to secure an important role for contemporary art in the region. There is never enough local support and investment in art to initiate the kind of urban engagement with contemporary visual practices that could attract the migration of new businesses and raise a city's confidence in its creative identity. In that sense Cincinnati is quite dissimilar to Vancouver, Chicago, or Philadelphia, all cities with strong art institutions and dependable public and private support.

It is, however, remarkable that Cincinnati's underfunded and understaffed institutions, such as the Weston Art Gallery and Contemporary Art Center, are able to pull off such impressive shows of local and national artists. With a steady supporting hubbub of background activity led by artist-run spaces, university and art academy galleries, and some commercial spaces of national reach, there is always good, new art visible. The artists selected from Cincinnati for *here*, represent a cross-section of the kinds of engagement enabled by this bare-bones but functional gallery system. Ranging from a university faculty member, the founder of a former artist-run space, a member of a DIY music and art collective, and an artist without commercial representation and unaffiliated with any group or institution, you have a selection that displays the extent of economies in which local artists are embedded.

Because Cincinnati is very affordable,¹ and offers many options for live-work spaces, the students of the city's art programs frequently stay after graduation. For the enterprising there are unusual opportunities for rental and purchase and, although the business livelihoods are precarious, these affordable areas are far from being urban wastelands. Northside, Brighton, and Over-the-Rhine retain much of their 19th century Italianate architecture and possess strong neighborhood identities. Though the drug problems in Over-the-Rhine are little changed from their depiction in Steven Soderbergh's film *Traffic*,² that neighborhood has restaurants, bakeries, cafés, and galleries and is only a five-minute walk from the downtown business and entertainment district. Brighton neighborhood artists have benefited from a single benevolent property owner, Fred Lane,³ who has welcomed many into the area with his low rent live-work industrial spaces. Northside's now thriving alternative businesses include unconventional bars and restaurants alongside galleries, vintage clothing, furniture, and vinyl record stores.

Along with art handling and front desk jobs in museums, galleries, and libraries, these businesses provide a survival wage and flexible hours for many artists. Non-profits, such as ArtWorks, Happen Inc., and Prairie,⁴ involve young artists in public art projects or urban educational initiatives and engage key local businesses in sponsorship roles. Importantly, since these neighborhoods are close to one another and their architectural fabric is intact, they further the perception of a contained and lively visual arts community whose gallery programs nevertheless develop independently of one another. The alternative galleries in Cincinnati have been an essential feature of the emergence of local artists and the introduction of artwork from outside the city, and two of the artists in **here.** have played key roles in this narrative.⁵

The significant history of print in the city has indirectly impacted all the artists selected from Cincinnati.⁶ The city's print shops were engaged with the beginnings of lithographic processes. Being the largest city on the westward migration route along the Ohio River,⁷ German and Italian artist immigrants brought the stone lithography trade with them to Cincinnati, establishing some of the first commercial printing companies here and later influencing the development of curricula and facilities at local art schools. For example, from the mid-1800s, the Strobridge Lithographing Company was based in the center of Cincinnati, producing the first large-scale advertising for local concern Procter and Gamble before specializing in circus and movie posters. A large collection of these circus posters is held by the Cincinnati Art Museum where, during the 1940s and 50s, WPA graphics coordinator Gustave von Groschwitz worked as Curator of Prints. In the 1950s, the five Biennials of Color Lithography that von Groschwitz curated had an enormous influence on local artists, among them Jim Dine, who was taking classes at the Art Academy during this period.

Extending the city's engagement with printmaking into a series of print and exhibition projects with local and international artists, Mark Patsfall's Clay Street Press has been influential on many fronts in Cincinnati art life, helping to set up other local presses and designing and fabricating Nam June Paik video sculptures in the 1980s and 90s.⁸ Patsfall's contacts in Germany and Korea have enabled him to bring international artists to Cincinnati and initiate projects like the *Fluxfax Portfolio*⁹ he produced in 1994. He has provided a halfway house for students of the university and academy as they figure out how to move into professional life. In the early 1980s, Patsfall's donation of an old etching press to the School for Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA) initiated frequent art class study visits to Clay Street.¹⁰ As a student at SCPA, Terence Hammonds interned with Patsfall, later becoming an assistant printer and installing his own exhibition, *Quiet Riot*, at Clay Street Press in 2006.¹¹

Paul Coors' artist-run space, Publico, was next door to Clay Street Press. Publico's founding artists comprised of graduates from Art Academy and University of Cincinnati programs who sometimes worked with Patsfall to complete the graphics for their own gallery. With a strong emphasis on painting, sculpture, and print practices, Publico featured many local artists and brought in work from further afield, including projects by Ryan McGinness, David Ellis, Detroit's Object Orange, and Philadelphia's Vox Populi. And although not the only Publico artist-designer, Coors' designs for the gallery announcements sustained a run of a hundred or so smartly conceived posters, invitations, and magazines that left an unrivalled paper trail. Ceramics was the other industrial craft flourishing in 19th century Cincinnati,¹² although its success came late and was due to very different factors than those stimulating print production. Cincinnati ceramics studios, of which the most famous was Maria Longworth Nichols' Rookwood Pottery, grew from women's society initiatives promoting the development of Cincinnati manufacturing.¹³ In the late 1880s, such advocacy led to the foundation of the Art Academy of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Art Museum, where an emphasis

was placed on building a historical collection of ceramics for study purposes. These Cincinnati women's advocacy groups were successful because they anchored their appeals for support to improvements in regional industrial design and the education of local communities. To some extent, the productive relationship that the University of Cincinnati's current industrial and graphic design programs have to regional businesses, like Proctor and Gamble and General Motors, is a legacy of those 19th century objectives.¹⁴ Rookwood has recently relaunched in Cincinnati developing new ceramic product lines that reference original moulds and decoration.¹⁵

Skilled mould-makers themselves, Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker are artists whose work is inspired by historical European examples, such as 17th century Meissen ceramics,¹⁶ as well as 20th century assemblage practices, and the contemporary aesthetics of kitsch.¹⁷ They scour flea markets and antique malls for overlooked decorative arts residue that can be modeled or scanned as 3D images, rescaled, output as rapid prototypes, converted into moulds, and variably decorated with decals and painted glazes. They apply technology to unconventional ends, like their recourse to rapid prototypes to emphasize the imperfections of found objects by their enlargement, or of letterpress to generate die-cut paper for use in assemblages.

The promiscuity of their scavenging and its transformation is a striking feature of their studio. On a shelf, there is a stuffed garfish waiting in reserve for a project. Along one wall is a series of lamps made from porcelain casts of a squirrel (that originated from an animal carcass Davis had taxidermied) shown slumped over a branch. Overhead is a chandelier made of crouching clay rats that were enlarged from a smaller toy prototype. On a table at the back of the studio, Davis has disassembled a plastic lobster so that he can make separate moulds of the legs, while on the wall hang two garishly colored crustacean decorations made for the resort restaurant trade. Another table is covered in pink letterpress covers for a sound art project collaboration with New York-based artist Ken Montgomery. To one side, Parker's die-cut paper work forms polychrome topiary models in the shape of a fir tree and a dog's body, and elsewhere lies a roll of wallpaper silkscreened in floral motifs derived from a medieval tapestry. In most cases, these are subversive decorative objects that question historical models, revealing continuity of image treatment but at the same time a dislocation from original contexts. Davis and Parker's accumulations bring together disparate sources to form indeterminate image conundrums in refined porcelain finishes that deliberately court kitsch. The aggregate structure of these works seems to condense the pandemonium of their heterogeneous studio stuff. Surprisingly, from that workroom wunderkammer emerge these refined porcelain conglomerates of meticulous surface finish and painted detail.

Davis and Parker's recent exhibition, *Still[ed] Life* (2011) at the Taft Museum, consisted of a group of scaled down clay replicas of Hiram Powers' portrait bust of William Taft's father, partially covered in decorative motifs and patterns sourced from the furnishings and artifacts of the museum itself (see page 116). The pieces became inventories of overlooked details of the building's furnishings. The busts were set on porcelain sconces installed around the room's perimeter. Adding to the sense of a museum simulacrum gone awry were several porcelain clusters of oddly matched still life objects (moles clambering through fruit, for example), piled up in monochrome accumulations whose whiteness suggested ossified relics. The intricate and finely painted polychrome patterns on the busts sometimes ignored physiognomy, covering eyes or petering out halfway across a form. Part of this work's interest derived from appearing both industrially replicated and handmade, with the sleek surface quality of commercially produced statuettes and the nuanced irregularities of handpainted patterns.

In terms of fabrication techniques, Davis and Parker's connection with these Cincinnati artisanal traditions is as resourceful modernizers who arrive at traditionally finished porcelain mutations through contemporary modeling processes. Recalling earlier Cincinnati pottery traditions, they sustain a workshop/factory practice, effectively a cottage industry for the production of multiples. Their serial works are anti-individualistic and anti-expressive, celebrating the anonymity of production where their use of mould-making and rapid-prototype techniques further remove evidence of the hand. Their treatment of clay,¹⁸ surface color, and firing is exact; the result of years of practice-based research. They develop a glass-like finish to the porcelain, embellished with the sharp detail of line-drawn decals they frequently use or the precise coloring of the Taft work.

As opposed to these rigorous technical procedures for handling clay, their appropriation of images is done more freely. Their sourced objects often originate in Cincinnati but most are of indeterminate origin. The clockwork toy monkey, whose replicas comprise *Hy-que Monkey in Captivity* (2011) and is one of their installations for *here.*, was found in a local antique mall but was most likely manufactured abroad (see page 116). Intending the porcelain finish of their figurines to evoke the Meissen monkey musicians that were first produced in 1730, Davis and Parker mash up histories by positioning their sculptures in front of two different oval-shaped examples of wallpaper, hand-printed with motifs from the Cluny Museum's *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries.²⁰ Davis and Parker are as curious about the taxidermy forms of animal bodies as they are in how these bodies have been rendered in historical craft and modern commercial replicas. They see these as divergent ways in which the natural world has been interpreted, and note how those representations have themselves become models for further replication and distortion through global industrialization.

This obscuring of boundaries between the natural and the manufactured acquires other inflections in the work of Terence Hammonds, where images drawn from popular culture and civil rights history are embedded in acanthus leaf motifs. For the *Quiet Riot* show that he made at Clay Street Press, Terence Hammonds, like Davis and Parker, produced wallpaper that incorporated a specific decorative motif. He first made this work as an undergraduate senior at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston after noticing a particular wallpaper vignette in the background of a music video for *Shake It Fast* (2000) by Louisiana rapper Mystikal, who had used the mansion from the movie *Gone With The Wind* (1939) as a set location. Hammonds screenprinted this vignette as the repeating motif of his wallpaper. In the center of each, he incorporated images from a popular book on breakdancing,²¹ and included portraits of the first two-hundred-and-fifty rap music performers selected from *Ego trip's book of rap lists*²² and other sources, arranged randomly across the repeated pattern. Standing against the wallpaper, a dining room cabinet contained tableware with screened news images of protests from black history during the 1960s. When this work was reinstalled at Clay Street Press, Hammonds replaced the generic dishware with mid-century Russel Wright tableware, so as to be more specific to Cincinnati,²³ and he propped up the cabinet on secondhand beat culture books like those by LeRoi Jones and Norman Mailer's *The White Negro*,²⁴ collected by Hammonds in the course of a search for origins of the concept of "cool."

These procedures, developed early in his career, of inserting images of protest and pleasure into the domestic fabric have remained central to Hammonds' practice. For his recent exhibition at Cincinnati's Aisle Gallery, he covered most of a long wall with a work called *Stand Up! Organize!* (2010), a set of conjoined, framed silkscreen prints in which he had embedded Civil Rights imagery amongst vignettes of red and yellow flames (see page 120). The collection of images used in that work included photos of draft card burning and of Timothy Leary, amongst representations of demonstrations and portraits of Black Liberation

Movement leaders. Hammonds explains: "With that piece I was trying to get away from the work just being about Civil Rights...there was a whole social upheaval happening that was really more at the point of what I was trying to get at...I'd hope for it to be more universal. There's something about using black bodies in my art that I want to do, but I don't want it to necessarily be just about the African American experience. So I think they're American stories, not just African American stories."²⁵ Here the representation of Civil Rights activism as an incendiary history was tempered by the attractive overall patterning that lured in the unsuspecting viewer.²⁶

Hammonds feels close to these news images because they were part of the stories his mother would tell him growing up, while musicians like James Brown that he includes in the work stand for the music his mother would listen to.²⁷ That these representations emerge from the background city clamor and domestic sanctuary of his childhood, and are not solely a protest against a history of oppressive state actions, would make Hammonds' use of décor and furnishings a setting for his own family's life at the center of wider struggles, even if the photographs are only occasionally of Cincinnati. For example, the 2001 riots that occurred in Cincinnati²⁸ suddenly brought Civil Rights history into the present day for Hammonds, who at the time was living in Boston. Watching CNN, he saw a brick thrown through a window of his mother's building, and these events remain a powerful source of new imagery. Recently, Hammonds has been photographing the architectural details of a house on Dayton Street, just behind the Brighton location where he lives, finding himself fascinated by the details in wood carving, wallpaper, and glazed tile work that are the residue of the achievements of 19th century Cincinnati craftsmen.²⁹

In a group of works quite distinct from his silkscreen prints, Hammonds makes austere graphite drawings that greatly enlarge Civil Rights era buttons. Isolated in the center of the paper, these summarily sketched circular images resemble lithographic prints, an association Hammonds cultivates. In one image, two palms meet in an interracial handshake as they are framed by the words "UNITED WE SHALL OVERCOME"; in another is the single word "GROW" in a condensed sans-serif white font against a black background. Two other images depict buttons of The Congress of Racial Equality, one saying "FREEDOM NOW CORE" and the other, "SUPPORT CORE SIT-INS." The text is always uppercase and the graphics economical and direct. One thing that interests Hammonds in these works is the equivalency of visual thresholds for effective communication in artwork and mass culture. The buttons are the most reductive form for communicating an affiliation to the highly complex history, mission, and structure of an organization like CORE, whose shift from a racially balanced, peaceful protest group in the 1940s to militant Black Power advocacy in the 1960s charts key changes in international protest movements of the time.

Hammonds' work shows a complex perspective on protest movements with contrasting photographs of Civil Rights turbulence that might juxtapose iconic portraits of Angela Davis, a reflective Nina Simone, naked men embracing, or a photograph of a white woman injured in riots, this last being an image that was used as anti-black propaganda by George Wallace.³⁰ Hammonds is not only using the most conspicuous Civil Rights imagery, but he is also interested in overlooked pictures that may reveal more of the complexity of that time. In a very different way to Hammonds, Paul Coors has also used print to reference histories, albeit ones with an indeterminate or rootless location in the past. In developing a trademark Publico design look, Coors arrived at a retro-frontier graphic where old-style poster typefaces and a hand drawn approach conveyed a down-to-earth feel, while enacting a semantic detour of playfully misleading signs that introduced deviations in communication. In Publico's program and Coors' work, inventiveness of idea and image was relished above

all. In the 2005 one-person show titled *Them*, that Coors held at Publico, some eight mixed-media works used sharp-witted visual jokes and graphic elements to set up a play on language and concept. The painted paper work *Some of Them* showed twenty versions of the word "Them" hovering over a blue background, in the style of sensationalist typefaces found on the posters for 1950's Hammer Studios horror movies.

Publico closed its doors in January 2008 and, in celebration of its achievements, an intense month-long series of exhibitions and events incorporating interests of the previous five years were held. Film screenings, music performances, poetry readings, photography, painting and kinetic sculpture exhibitions, food art displays, and parties followed one another in rapid succession. Before the end of that year, Publico was given an end-of-career retrospective by the Weston Art Gallery.³¹

For a year or two after, Paul Coors worked on less declamatory material, including two local partnership projects using text and sound. In the first of these, Coors' design for the vinyl LP foldout sleeve for *Receiver* included eight images (several of which modified Velvet Underground album imagery) to provide local musician Spencer Yeh with an unconventional score to make the music for the record contained within. The second project, called *I Want This Forever*, was a book of four tipped-in postcards and a two-sided print, all designed by Coors as oracular images for which poet Dana Ward's luminous writing provided empathic commentary in the form of a poem, satirical play, short story, and movie review, all focusing on Cincinnati.

Since then, Coors' tactic of intersecting handmade with digital processes has confounded distinctions between the two and, at times, incorporated error as a design feature. In the 2010 cover design for the 7-inch Flaherty/Corsano/Yeh and Oren Ambarchi & Matt Skitz Sanders record, what looks like digitally-rendered, thickly-matted hair in fact derives from a straightforward ballpoint drawing. Other record covers apply print misregistration, indecipherable transparent images, and an exaggerated halftone screen effect to interfere with legibility. In the production of several other pieces, like the poster for the band In Tall Buildings and the cover for musician Epstein's³² *See/less See* cover (both 2011), Coors manipulates a sheet of text as a photocopy, generating a distorted original that can later be digitally reworked. As it develops, Coors' work is characterized by a passion for realigning signifiers. Coors has said, "I'm interested in the imagery of advertising (and design in general) because it's perhaps the most commonplace aesthetic language; however, it's problematic in that it often provides simplistic answers and asks very few (if any) questions."³³

This manual interference with electronic processes was also used by Coors in his 2010 exhibition at Clay Street Press, which suggests the technique preceded its application to design projects. In that show, Coors worked again with Ward to produce a mural-sized vinyl text work titled *Tell me what else you need from me (That's what C-3PO said)*, where each word underwent extensive photocopier stretching and fragmentation before digital finishing, the incoherence of the text accentuated by its distortion. As has been the pattern in other shows, very few pieces of work shared a resemblance to one another. Two postcard installations (both 2009) used circular and diagonal arrangements of pushpins to secure to the wall hundreds of images of the costume that Michael Jackson, had he lived, intended to wear on his world tour. Two smaller works, *Thisa Way*, *Thata Way* and *Paper*, used geometric arrangements of numerous colored pushpins stuck into framed prints on which the faintest halftone image of a folded sheet of paper had been silkscreened. Also in the show were a series of strange monoprints titled *Living Room*, made from impressions of poured wax.

These coiling shapes, resembling images of explosions, bore no comparison to Coors' earlier work other than by their shared disparity.

Over the last four years, there have been several projects that explicitly intersect Coors' design and art practices. The *Collapsible Kiosk* (2008)—made for the live acts and film screening marking Publico's last appearance at the Weston Art Gallery—resembles nothing so much as a Gustave Klutis agitprop kiosk from the 1920s.³⁴ With its retractable screen, enclosed sound system with suspended speakers, drawers for print material, and festooned with banners and flags, it poses as the mothership for all the publicity material Publico generated down the years. Included in **here**, are Coors' fake offset litho movie posters that crash together disparate sources to produce image labyrinths (see page 114). Of these Coors explains: "I feel it's important to consistently reevaluate the present, and its cultural artifacts, in order to give way to an unexpected (and hopefully better) future. Movie posters seemed like an appropriate vehicle for this idea, considering that a poster's function is to be a stand-in representation/advertisement for a much larger, more complex idea."³⁵ In these intricate and cryptic symbolic representations, we arrive at a contemporary version of baroque allegory, legible only to those whose childhood and contemporary milieu share the cultural references. Cumulatively, the posters offer perspectives on a world distorted by mass culture mediation. As if lacking a space to think that is not polluted by advertising, they cannily resort to deploying his childhood movie icons in an enquiry into the meanings of adolescent and adult experiences. The viewer's pleasure is in decipherment; in the unscrambling and then re-entanglement of photographer William Eggleston and *The Wizard of Oz*'s Dorothy, of rapper Lil' Wayne and the film *E.T.*, of media personality Paris Hilton and actress Zooey Deschanel, and politician Dick Cheney and the animated show *Looney Tunes*. Oversized and glaring, they leave the handmade far behind for a cleaner mass-produced look, for Coors has said he would like them to be printed industrially, and to have no hand in their production.³⁶

Coors' delight in the play of indifference and engagement afforded in confronting mass culture imagery would have no traction in Bunk's aesthetic, whose posters revive early 20th century critical montage practices and suggest a prelapsarian aesthetic position—one still optimistic for the impact of radical initiatives. With a scathing attitude toward mass culture and no more than a passing interest in local art circles, Bunk News has worked hard to maintain a position of independence and integrity, based as much on avoiding contamination from external influences as on sustaining a set of raw practices that are as direct as possible in their communication. There is no postmodern irony or mediated enquiry here.

Like that of all radical groups, Bunk News' position as cultural outsiders is complicated by experimental and retrenched artistic strategies (see page 106). With echoes of 19th century settlers moving westward and relying on their own wits to survive, Bunk has enacted a retreat into the urban interior, away from conventional institutions and networks. One of Bunk's frequent partners, Mavis Concave of Realicide,³⁷ explains, "You don't pay for school; you might drop a little money on some equipment, like a \$200 laptop on Craig's List; download a cracked version of Photoshop, and get to work... Yeah, it's partially illegal, but we're not rich. DIY's also like an act of social defiance, proving you can do it. You don't have to rely on what they tell you to rely on."³⁸ Here, resourcefulness and cultural integrity matter most.

Emerging from local DIY music and art circles, Cincinnati residents Graham Nelson, Chris Liedtke, Davy Howard, Ben Brown, and Steve Adkins founded Bunk News in 2005 as a means of coordinating art parties

in various apartments where murals, paintings, and video projections could be made and bands could perform. Before starting work with John Rich and Jon Lorenz of Cincinnati experimental noise and sound art space Art Damage, local musician Chris Adams worked with Brown to secure the lease on the Findlay Street ground-floor warehouse space that, for most of that year, served as their optimal venue, a place that allowed their experimental programming full scope with an expanded team of participants. Brown then worked as a liaison for Evolve performers Jim Swill and Colin Murray, and for musicians Robert Inhuman, Kevin Bruce, and others to book touring bands at this new space, then called Bunk Spot.

Cincinnati's ready supply of empty buildings and storefronts has helped many artists' spaces get established. In local artist-run history, most of these galleries have been concentrated in Over-the-Rhine, the large area of densely clustered residential buildings, where it might have been difficult to find a remote warehouse space to stage the noisy events that Bunk was planning. At \$500 a month, their rent on the Findlay Street space was manageable, and the remote location meant the sound was not a problem for neighbors. The attraction for Bunk, if only by some unspoken consensus, was this unusual opportunity to generate an innovative, energized collective of art and music.³⁹ In this way, it became a kind of regional magnet, pulling participants back to Cincinnati from other locations once they recognized the potential of the new space. For example, Swill returned to Cincinnati from St. Louis, and Concave returned from Boston.

Surrounding a raw industrial space that was infinitely adaptable and durable, Bunk's hallways were regularly tagged and filled with improvisatory installations like skateboard ramps made out of recycled signs and scrap wood. None of the spaces Swill and Concave performed in around the country were like Bunk Spot, with its flexibility allowing for a build of energy and experimentation. The attraction for many of the participants was the open, non-exclusivity of the events. The venue was remote enough in a sufficiently deserted part of town to put off all but the most committed. However, this was changed by a front page article in the local alternative newspaper *City Beat*,⁴⁰ which stimulated sudden interest from people well outside Bunk's circle of acquaintances. Attendance increased dramatically to a peak of over 600 visitors on the night of one exhibition and concert. Since the pay-what-you-like policy was only loosely adhered to, the potential for raising money to invest in programming went by the wayside.

For the launch of Evolve's LP in late 2009, Bunk Spot staged several distinct events. Coordinated by local artist Allie Elrod, a multimedia installation, running the full length of the eastern wall of the large main space, was conceived as a reaction to Evolve's music. Amongst the many artists involved in its production were Adkins, Alexandria Dupont, Iza McIlvain, Ava Roberts, and Tim Larson, students from both the Art Academy and University of Cincinnati. Tucked into the northwest corner of Bunk Spot were several tables on which a wide range of food, including vegetable stews and fruit pies (all salvaged from Trader Joe's dumpsters), was being served. Towards the center of the room, bunches of flowers were for the taking; like the food, rescued from local trash. A high-energy gig by Realicide occurred early on, with Concave and Swill participating alongside other singers. Swill and Murray, as Evolve, were the last to play; Murray wearing his typical stage outfit of a dress and wig, and Swill out front singing, declaring, rapping with great intensity. After pausing for a change of set and costume, Swill led five other performers, parodically dressed as a degenerate Procter and Gamble board of directors in suits and diapers, in a sketch criticizing the ruthless promotion of commodities and their excessive consumption. Across the course of the evening's events, building towards an apotheosis of collective ideals, Bunk News succeeded in enabling a set of new experiences to be felt.

Of the Cincinnati artists in *here*, Bunk News' considerable paper trail is exceptional for current artist-run spaces, although they have none of the regard for curating it that Coors' Publico demonstrated. According to Swill,⁴¹ whose solo and group performances (with Realicide or Evolve) have been at the center of Bunk's activities, his interest in the posters lasts only until the show they publicize is underway. After that, he is focused on the next event. Swill's posters and poetry chapbooks are sometimes anarchically humorous montages of hand drawn text and image. For the 2009 Bunk show *Last Supper*,⁴² he substituted Disney cartoon heads for the disciples in Leonardo da Vinci's painting and placed corporate logos across the front of the tablecloth. In another work, the images of an enlarged ant and hand appear to float over a background of a star-filled galaxy. Many of Bunk News' 11 x 17 inch posters are in the tradition of photocopied fliers for band performances enduring since the 1970s. Local designer Brian Uhl's posters, for example, are a compelling accumulation of line-drawn horror vacui compositions combining humorous with apocalyptic imagery. Brown's posters show an interest in montages of saturated color and skillful contrasts of scale, where cinematic panoramas suggestive of science fiction wastelands are juxtaposed with retro images from 1960s lifestyle magazines and incorporate a wide array of typefaces.

The last show at Bunk Spot was in November 2009, after which the organization moved their events to the Mockbee in Brighton.⁴³ As a shared space, this hasn't allowed them the same freedom as Findlay Street. While providing continuity, the temporary status of the Mockbee venue has afforded the many participants and organizers of Bunk News the opportunity to review their roles and the future of the collective.

This fondness for bricolage and a resourcefulness with different print and fabrication techniques, both improvised and carefully practiced, is an approach that Bunk shares in common with other Cincinnati artists and performers. The comparison, however, is one of degree, for while Bunk News' dumpster-salvaged catering and self-published music and poetry may lie at the furthest extremity of DIY culture, Hammonds' sampling of civil rights imagery and black music icons screened on wallpaper and on found ceramics lies somewhere towards the center alongside Davis and Parker's hybrid and historically-savvy constructions. By contrast, Coors' self-financed silkscreen, book, and record collaborations follow a studio model but hover liminally at the threshold of different art, music, and poetry economies, engaged as he is with self-published records and books as well as commissioned design work.

Although the verse by Swill, that opens this essay, directs an ambition towards an entire city, in practice the posters and chapbooks circulating around Bunk News take the artisan's approach underground towards extreme low budget and lo-fi productions tailored for a tightly defined audience of sympathetic artists and musicians, whose responses are the primary benchmark with which Bunk measures their own success. Engaged as they are with disparate local audiences and institutions, for each of the other artists "local" has a very particular complexion. Given his working partnerships with confidants, Coors sustains a close inner circle as a legacy of his time with Publico. The devices used by his work convert public images into private hieroglyphs that double as a supposedly legible common language of abstract motifs connected to other contemporary art practices. It is this subterfuge and deflection of interpretation that gives Coors' work its allegorical dimension. Hammonds achieves something similar by embedding personal history in the visual evidence of Civil Rights struggles whose massively circulated documentation beguiles us into assuming this to be a common inheritance of agreed upon meaning. Yet, by adding to this legacy his own interests in punk and rap music and in Cincinnati decorative arts, Hammonds shows how faceted local history becomes in a process of nuanced reflection independent from more totalizing national narratives. Like Hammonds, Davis

and Parker have been engaged in extensively reworking local craft techniques, although their modeling and decorating zeal may surpass the traditional skills of their predecessors and thus underline their prodigal appropriations of source material with new irony. Their pleasure in surrendering to exacting traditional methods, while maximizing the license that contemporary art strategies have granted to the conflation of aberrant imagery, has certainly been facilitated by the opportunity for invention and risk afforded by an enthusiastic local audience.

To a large extent, the audience for Cincinnati's artists is always going to be homegrown and somewhat narrowly circumscribed. The absence of institutional mechanisms and visionary curators, gallerists, or collectors that might propel local art to national attention prompts a curious art community to a high level of attainment and mutual encouragement on home base. What enables good art to be produced in Cincinnati are rich local histories, on which to draw for material and content and the space and time to bring forward new ideas and to work through aesthetic innovations without much distraction. Paradoxically, the circumstances that prevent this art from circulating at a national level are the same that enable it to gain its distinctive local color and depth.

- ¹ Writing for Forbes.com in January 2011, Morgan Brennan listed Cincinnati as fifth in the nation for affordability in a comparison that included cost of living index factors. <http://www.forbes.com/2011/01/06/bargain-cities-affordable-real-estate-personal-finance.html>.
- ² Released in 2000, Soderburgh's *Traffic* was a commercial cinema narrative of the North American drug trade economies and their impact on individual lives. The family of the federal drug tsar, played by Michael Douglas, was depicted living in Indian Hill, the most prosperous Cincinnati suburb, with his daughter scoring her drugs in Over-the-Rhine.
- ³ Looking for ways to stabilize a neglected neighborhood, Lane has been buying and then leasing studio and gallery spaces in Brighton to artists, architects, and performers at low rents since the mid-90s.
- ⁴ ArtWorks is located in Over-the-Rhine, and Prairie and Happen, Inc. in Northside.
- ⁵ Paul Coors led the collective of artists and poets in directing Publico during its five years of exhibitions, readings, and concerts in Over-the-Rhine, while Ben Brown worked with other artists and musicians to set up Bunk News which has, over the years, migrated from one space to another.
- ⁶ I am indebted to local printmakers Don Kelley, Jim Williams, and Mark Patsfall for information about the development of lithography in Cincinnati. 19th-century German lithographers brought their expertise (and Bavarian litho stones) for hand drawn illustrations in local print media, stimulating the early establishment of printmaking classes at the Art Academy, and later at the University of Cincinnati.
- ⁷ Between 1803 (when Ohio achieved statehood) and 1840, the immigrant population of Ohio increased thirty-fold. Such growth was facilitated by the ready passage offered along the Ohio River, which had not been safely navigable until the defeat of the Native American Western Confederacy at the end of the 18th century.
- ⁸ Working with Nam June Paik and Carl Solway Gallery during the 1980s and 90s, Patsfall constructed and installed some 300 Paik works as public commissions and gallery pieces. This process was outlined in detail by Solway in the Paik Round Table discussions held at the University of Cincinnati in 2010. <http://www.daap.space.daap.uc.edu/art/eart/paik/tabletopics.html>.
- ⁹ This project, published by Paik and Patsfall, involved thirty-five Fluxus artists in producing a portfolio of lithographs and screenprints where the artwork and print instructions were faxed in to Clay Street Press. <http://www.patsfallgraphics.com/pages/fluxfax.html>.
- ¹⁰ Patsfall, correspondence with the author.
- ¹¹ Hammonds, conversation with the author.
- ¹² Comparisons drawn between domestic and international ceramics seen at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial led to an understanding that American work was inferior to European and Chinese examples. The strong engagement of women in American cultural organizations, including Cincinnati, and their presence as exhibitors in the Women's Pavilion in the Philadelphia Centennial, enabled a concerted redress of this perceived inferiority. Exhibiting at the Centennial were Cincinnati ceramicists Mary Louise McLaughlin, who ran the women's Pottery Club that produced work and raised funds for the Centennial, and Maria Longworth Nichols, who later established Rookwood Pottery and by the late 1880s gained international recognition for her work. (In conversation with Amy Dehan, Curator of Decorative Arts at the Cincinnati Art Museum. See also Millard F. Rogers Jr., Kenneth R. Trapp, Betty L. Zimmerman, and Carole W. Schwartz, *Cincinnati Art Museum: Art Palace of the West—A Centennial Tribute, 1881-1981* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 1981).

- ¹³Directed by philanthropist Elizabeth Perry, The Women's Art Museum Association of Cincinnati was an early arts and manufacturing advocacy organization lasting from 1877-86. It grew out of an earlier group that successfully fundraised towards the construction of the Women's Pavilion at the Philadelphia Centennial. Without The Association's diligent planning and fundraising to set up educational and museum facilities, it is unlikely that the Cincinnati Art Museum would have been inaugurated as early as 1881 nor benefited at the outset from an enduringly stable financial base.
- ¹⁴Confirmed in communication with Robert Probst, Dean of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati.
- ¹⁵Rookwood still owns some 4,000 moulds from the 1880s through the 1930s but can no longer use original glaze recipes that once incorporated lead and uranium. (In conversation with Terence Hammonds who works at the pottery studio and with Chip DeMois, President and CEO of Rookwood.)
- ¹⁶Both Davis and Parker have completed artist residencies at a ceramics factory in Dresden not far from where Meissen ceramics continue to be manufactured.
- ¹⁷See Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The world of bad taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1970). Generally impatient with the contemporary proliferation of kitsch, Dorfles nevertheless admits that "some of the most ghastly objects can be transformed into artistically positive elements, if not masterpieces, which aim to create a sophisticated atmosphere through the devaluation/revaluation of those objects..." (22).
- ¹⁸They use kaolin clay without impurities, adding silica and a melting agent to achieve a specific limpid finish.
- ¹⁹The Nymphenburg porcelain wolf's head they recently replicated probably ended up in Cincinnati through German immigration.
- ²⁰In conversation with the artists.
- ²¹Hammonds explains that the book was *Breakdancing: Mr. Fresh and the Supreme Rockers show you how to do it!* (New York: Avon Books, 1984).
- ²²Sacha Jenkins et al., *Ego trip's book of rap lists* (New York: ego trip Publications, Inc., 1999).
- ²³Wright's early art training, while still in high school, was under Frank Duvencik at the Art Academy of Cincinnati.
- ²⁴Poet and political activist LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka, published his first book of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, in 1961. Normal Mailer's *The White Negro* was published in 1957 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Press after first appearing as an article in the magazine *Dissent*.
- ²⁵In conversation with the artist.
- ²⁶The implication that the furnishings of our domestic lives reveal the violence underlying our prosperity, as if by negation, is familiar from Walter Benjamin's writing on the masking effect of bourgeois plush furnishings in the 19th century.
- ²⁷In conversation with the artist.
- ²⁸The riots followed the police shooting of Timothy Thomas in Over-the-Rhine. Thomas had been unarmed.
- ²⁹The 1960s construction of Interstate 75, that split the Western part of the city in two and displaced tens of thousands of residents, most of them African American, accelerated the decline of so much of the area, including the historical section of Dayton Street. That many of the displaced families were relocated to Over-the-Rhine further entwines Hammonds' family history with that of the city.
- ³⁰The white politician George Wallace moved opportunistically from liberal leanings to a pro-segregationist stance, playing on race fears to secure the Governorship of Alabama in 1962.
- ³¹The Weston Art Gallery exhibition featured most of Publico's publicity material and ephemera as well as new work by the remaining members, including a commissioned series of posters. A series of live poetry, film, and music events completed the retrospective.
- ³²Epstein is one performing name for Roberto Carlos Lange.
- ³³In communication with the artist.
- ³⁴Gustave Klutsis was a revolutionary Russian artist, eventually executed on Stalin's orders, whose work included designs for propaganda kiosks, newsstands, and radio loudspeaker structures.
- ³⁵In communication with the artist.
- ³⁶In conversation with the artist.
- ³⁷Realicide (whose most enduring members were Jim Swill and brothers Mavis Concave and Robert Inhuman) and Evolve (Jim Swill and Colin Murray) have been the two Cincinnati bands whose working relationship with Ben Brown and other Bunk artist organizers made them de facto collaborators. Realicide stopped performing after a demanding European tour in 2010. The two bands have shared members and production and distribution practices.
- ³⁸In conversation with the artist.
- ³⁹In conversations with Ben Brown, Jim Swill, Mavis Concave, and Cincinnati artist Allie Elrod.
- ⁴⁰This Adam Severing article was published in *City Beat* on May 13, 2009.
- ⁴¹In conversation with the artist.
- ⁴²Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* is a late 15th century painting on the end wall of the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan.
- ⁴³In conversations, Brown has explained that since the Mockbee is not Bunk's own venue, they categorize their schedule events as Bunk @ Mockbee.