

SITE - SPECIFIC
INSTALLATION
PERFORMANCE

b STORTS



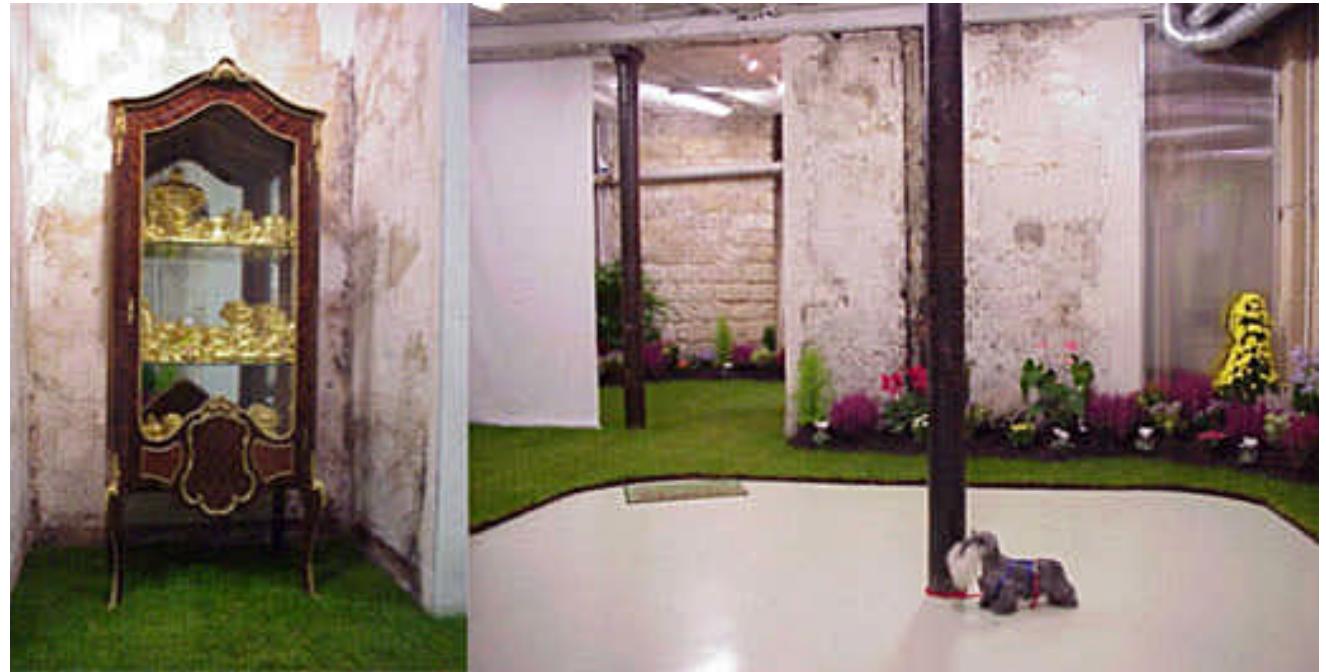
WORKS 1995 - present

TEARS OF A CLOWN: THE ART OF BRIAN STORTS

In *A Brief History of Time*, 1988 Stephen Hawking begins with the following anecdote. A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, Brian Storts got up from his seat at the back of the room and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant clown." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the clown standing on." "You're very clever, smarty-pants, very clever," said the artist. "But it's clowns all the way down!"

Brian Storts' artwork is at once humorous and in your face. In *Blowing the World Around* he fires up a gas-powered leaf-blower inside an exhibition space and proceeds to blow an inflatable globe around the room and out of the building. Nobody is targeted but everybody is put on guard. As *Funny Bunny* in a full-body, rabbit suit, in an unscheduled performance for an unsuspecting audience at a tony cocktail reception, Storts seems right on the verge of doing something criminally obscene. In the work *It's All About You* Storts elevates himself on a lift above a crowd (a beautiful and formally dressed woman at his side) and entreats his audience as if he were a self-improvement pitchman filming a TV segment. He croons a melody in a singsong style, enthusiastically letting the audience know that they are all winners. He dispenses platitudes and gold medals that read "winner" in a performance—at once authentic and smarmy—that aggressively celebrates his viewers.

Storts has a particular talent for catching the viewer off guard, for creating seductive environments. Missing Storts' corporeal presence, the frisson in the environments *Green Giant*, *Metamorphosen* and *S.O.S. (we're trying)* is created by the viewer's interaction with the seemingly static installation. *S.O.S. (we're trying)* was installed in a large room. Upon entering one noticed live plantings in dirt lining the walls and hay bales grouped in the center of the room around a large metal bucket, gilded in 23 karat gold on the inside, filled with water and live goldfish. Among the plantings are plastic toys covered in gold leaf. Scenes are created: gold cowboys and gold Indians duke it out over a gold fort. The space is large and hundreds of tiny figures create vignette after vignette in the carefully tended gallery garden. Then the lights go out. The gallery's large walls are suddenly aglow with a bucolic scene. A 19th century woodblock, translated into glow-in-the-dark paint on the walls, bursts into view as the viewer is plunged into darkness. The scale suggests one could walk right by the few trees in the foreground and into the scene. In *Green Giant*, installed in the basement space of the Parisian gallery g-module, the viewer could walk on live grass while surrounded by live plants and flowers or take a side trip into a smaller room covered with synthetic turf and filled with plastic flowers and sit among the remnants of a McDonald's picnic. A stuffed dog is tethered to a column—Storts' reaction to stories of Parisians abandoning their dogs before going on holiday by tethering them to light posts or parking meters. An armoire is filled with plastic toys, all covered with gold leaf—bathtub ducks, Sesame Street characters, R2-D2, South Park's finest, Teletubbies, army men and many, many more. Then the lights go out.



Not many artists create visual effects that authentically confuse the viewer about their immediate reality, but Storts' work is about more than tricking the senses. He is hard on the heals of contemporary American culture. His works abound with popular toys, sometimes spin-off products from TV shows, made shiny and intimate with gold; familiar situations, the presence of Santa Claus at Christmas or a bunny at Easter, made strange; or gardens which turn into surreal phantasmagoria. Storts exposes routes hidden in daily life that allow viewers to explore the intertwining of their individual life-experiences with the maelstrom of pop-cultural and its alternatives. The performances and installations go as far as to offer the possibility of a transformational moment—of the chance that the viewer's adjusted outlook will then have a transformational affect on the culture.

Clowning around is part of Storts' work. But the artist sees himself as more of a rodeo clown than a Pagliaccio—the suffering clown from the opera of a play within a play who becomes a murderer on stage as his anger at a lover's betrayal finally boils over, subjecting the very audience that he was entertaining to the deadly results of his uncontained rage and violence.

Bruce Nauman's *Clown Torture*, 1987 with its beleaguered clown actors having abuses heaped upon them illustrates well the point of rupture when clowning is no longer effective. Taken as an analysis of artifice Nauman's work exemplifies how art has the capacity to discuss its own limitations. On the other hand, the high jinks of McDonald's Ronald McDonald or Jack-in-the-Box's Jack are manifestations of a board-room determined program concerned only with selling you a "happy meal." These unsuffering clowns never carry the burden of being animated by an individual's imagination. Surprisingly, the effectiveness and durability of Storts' clowning—drag-racing live rabbits in *Splitting Hares* (with accompanying speed metal music), setting up a young man with a surprise date of a very large transvestite at Kentucky Fried Chicken on Valentine's Day—may be due in part to how in its calculating, canny deliberateness it is similar to corporate sponsored clowning. The practice of art allows for this kind of pointed clowning—as Freud points out conversation allows for jokes—through which one can tell the truth, no matter how outrageous, without seeming, or going, insane. As the fast-food clowns, subliminally, offer to absorb a culture's pain—presenting the panaceas of sugar, salt, fat and the comfort of homogenized behavior in exchange for cash—and encourage their customers to be anything but imaginative about their eating habits and lives, Storts offers up normal things (dates, dinners, chores) and then shows

how, once they are unfettered from habit, they quickly float off into the strange among the rest of the strange the universe has to offer. Or as he puts it in discussing his project *Suck and Mow*, "I am questioning why this country has become a civilization comprised of rows of perfectly cut squares of grass."

Storts says he doesn't differentiate between living and art. And whether Storts is in New Orleans hosting *Alligator Drag Races*—or serenading a couple of blow-up-sex-dolls at *Dinner for Two* it is clear he often, in a full grapple with life, is leaving "art" to catch up on its own.



In *Suck and Mow*—where Storts, as Mow, and his collaborator on this project Kathryn Williamson, as Suck, traveled cross country from the West to East Coast offering to mow stranger's lawns and vacuum their houses—the audacity of the project, the intrusion inherent in the breaking through strangers' comfort zones to offer a service that likely seems a bit odd, is masked by a straight-faced enthusiasm for discovering America and its people. With their shiny equipment and casual yet proper work outfits, *Suck and Mow* seem nothing less than a couple of clean-cut kids out to do well by doing good. Going to the account of the trip on suckandmow.com and looking at the site with its sharp, cheery graphics one

might imagine a carefree trip across the country punctuated by happy domestic activities. Of course, as the text on the site reveals, it wasn't so easy. Not only were there numerous rejections but the entire mood of the trip was changed, early on, by the events of 9.11.01. Storts' language is not Guy Debord's language but his art in its critique of culture does not seem far removed from the investigations of Debord's Situationists (anti-establishment artists closely associated with the rise of the left in Paris in 1968 who pursued radical art which consisted of creating "situations," however slight or absurd). *Suck and Mow*, by persevering and putting a bright face on a highly questionable, not universally welcomed, yet fundamentally humanistic and friendly endeavor, created a series of situations that could be embraced equally by prickly, disenfranchised, anti-authoritarians and, to boot, band-wagon hopping, fence-riding politicos. Now, that's harder than it looks.

Even Storts' works which should be completely static, aren't. Glued to a board are dozens of unscratched lottery tickets, *An Itch You Can't Scratch*. No big deal, you say. Buy it, hang it in your living room. How long are you going to last before at least the temptation to



An Itch You Can't Scratch, 2001-03
unscratched lottery tickets mounted on panel

see if you won a hundred bucks, a thousand, creeps over you? Scratch or not, like sin, it's the thought that counts.

In the *Ex-girlfriend Series* pin-ups of women appropriated from a book of 1940's Vargas style soft porn are left untouched by the artist except for the faces where the features have been crudely remodeled in colorful plasticine. If one were to go down the dangerous road of finding specific meaning in these works, the pin-up could represent the idealized version of the girlfriend as she appears in her lover's mind before and during the flush of mutual desire—infinitely satisfying, universally coveted. And then the plasticine slapped and shaped over the face would read as childish violence against what is now lost, the ex-girlfriend. On the other hand, the modeling over the face could also express a wayward hope to give form to some semblance of the true nature of the lost love—a well intentioned response with a crudeness that contrasts sharply with the refinement of the commercially distributed ideal. Of course, Storts as an artist is a careful student of the visual languages of popular, and not so popular, media. Definite conclusions about would be messages of the *Ex-girlfriend Series* will not be found. What is clear is that the artist has set up a tension, at once funny and disconcerting, between the disparate renderings of the bodies and heads of the women; the viewer is left to ponder the implications.

Storts has said that he wouldn't categorize himself as an artist as much as an anthropologist. Any true artist, or reformer, must be an unblinking observer. The great American political anthropologist and writer of fiction Robert Penn Warren had Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*, 1949 tell his confidant "It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that." The suggestion being that Stark needn't have been such a corrupt politician. Of course this is the big question—do we live in a universe where it is possible to alter the course of human events for the better? Storts, with an all out commitment to an art that strives to shake viewers awake, is betting that the murderers lose and that the clowns win.

It all comes together in the sublime performance *Mow*. The artist brings a wheelbarrow full of sod onto a stage. He lays out the sod. He goes backstage and starts a gas powered lawnmower and rolls the roaring machine out in front of the audience. He mows the newly laid out lawn. He returns the lawnmower backstage and comes back and picks up the mown sod. In much less than fifteen minutes Brian Storts has explained America's culture of manifest destiny. Keep the wilderness, even the one you carry in your soul, trimmed—and everything else will be OK.

—Erik Bakke, New York City, Summer, 2003

ECSTASY FALLS : GREEN GIANT

Green Giant, 2002
Installation
Live and artificial grass and plants, mural panels
painted with invisible glow-in-the-dark pigment, glass
display case with 24k gold-gilded figurines, stuffed
dog and picnic remnants from McDonald's.

ECSTASY FALLS,g-module gallery, Paris, France



ECSTASY FALLS : GREEN GIANT



ECSTASY FALLS : GREEN GIANT



four walls gallery : METAMORPHOSEN

Metamorphosen, 1998
Installation
grass, plants, swing and bench, glow-in-the-dark mural
four walls gallery, San Francisco



ON ALCHEMY AND PERCEPTION IN MY ART PRACTICE *seeking to transform everyday objects/materials into gold and glow*

I started gilding objects in 24k gold in 1994. When the objects (popular icons of contemporary American culture) are applied with gold, they take on an entirely new meaning and power. There is a permanence and a substantiality to them unlike before. Giving a false brilliance, the paper thin leaves of gold give an opulent surface to the otherwise worn-out features of the object. Gilding pop icons perhaps sheds light on a kind of absurdity to the idol/icon worship found in our culture at large.

not everything we think we see is what it really is

Incorporating gold, live nature and glow-in-the-dark murals in my installations can play on perception and force us to rethink our familiar habits of seeing. One moment the viewer is standing in a well-lit gallery setting complete with natural elements—grass, soil, flowers and other plants offering the senses a relatively authentic experience found outside. In the following moment, the lights go out, and you are standing in the dark. The definition of the room falls away around you leaving a suspended bucolic classic landscape mural—our relationship to space and time is in question with a sense of surprise. Testing the viewers visual perception with the ambivalence of light and shadow, we gain a new experience of what we think of as familiar.

—Brian Storts, San Francisco, 2003



HOVER, SFAI 118TH EXHIBITION : S.O.S (WE'RE TRYING)

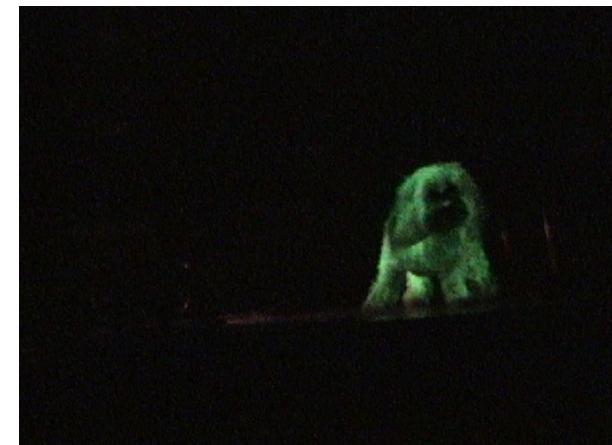


S.O.S. (*I we're trying*), 1999
Installation
Dirt, plants, hay bales, 23k gold-gilded
washtub, toys, goldfish, glow-in-the-dark mural
HOVER, San Francisco Art Institute's 118th Annual Exhibition
Walter and McBean Galleries





M O V I N G T A R G E T S E R I E S : G L O W J O J O G L O W



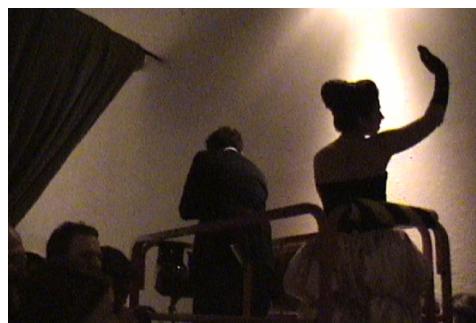
Glow Jojo Glow, 2001
Performance

Moving Target Series, Capp Street Center, San Francisco





NEW LANGTON ARTS : IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU



It's All About You, 2003
Performance
Test Tube Series, New Langton Arts, San Francisco

I was a lounge singer/awards ceremony host and sang an original tune "It's All About You" while my lovely assistant, Rochelle, and I retrieved dangling medals attached to the ceiling using a hydraulic power lift. Red, white and blue ribboned gold plastic medals were embossed with the text "winner".

Hallmark Holiday events are a personal and ongoing investigation delving into the phenomena known as the legendary “Hallmark Holiday.” This national institution dating back to 1915, touches the very essence of human sensitivity and compassion commemorating, as well as celebrating, the universal “*Feel Fuzzy*”—a reverence for all things sweet and fulfilling in friendship, family and love. It serves at best to accent and enrich the moments we share in Beauty, Comfort, Inspiration, Love,



Laughter, the Spirit of Kindness, Care, Thoughtfulness, and seasonal celebrations surrounding our “never and ever-changing” relationships. We are reminded to reach out and enhance the “pleasure of giving and the thrill of receiving.” Rest assured, one can count on the availability that Hallmark holds in countless locations across the U.S.—ready to deliver, helping people to share, affirm, define and express belief in themselves—*our smallest events and our largest milestones*.

Have a nice day! —Brian Storts, 2003



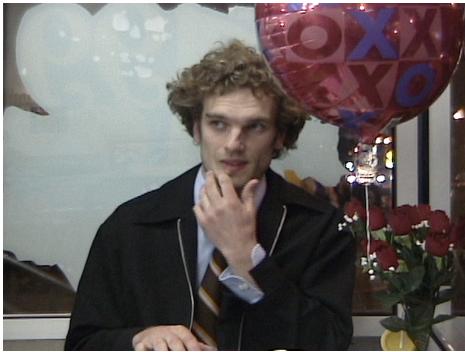
HALLMARK HOLIDAYS : HO HO HO



Itemized Cost: Christmas themed wrapping paper walls, tree, mechanized carolers, fake snow: \$350; Santa Claus costume rental (in compliance of rental agreement contract): \$75; liquor store purchases for party: \$125; beer for Santa: \$75; 10 packs of Polaroid film and 5 DVDs: \$150; Regarding the rental costume, Santa did not behave responsibly. He danced through a bowl of sangria, sat in his own gravy and shoveled a very large burrito into his mouth, most of which ended up on his fur collar. As a result, the total cost for the Santa Claus costume: \$595; total cost for event: \$1370.



HALLMARK HOLIDAYS : BLIND DATE



Valentine's Day: Blind Date, 2002
Performance
Kentucky Fried Chicken, San Francisco

Mads Lynnerup was set up for a blind date on Valentine's Day. He met his date at the Kentucky Fried Chicken on Valencia Street.



M A R C H F I R S T : P R O Z A C & H A P P Y



Prozac and Happy, 1998
Performance
March 1st, 21st Amendment Brewery, San Francisco

Dressed as a bunny, my intention was to complete the task of an impossible long jump. I launched off three separate mini trampolines in hopes of landing on a skateboard, sixty feet away. I landed the stunt successfully during the rehearsal, unfortunately the large-headed costume complicated matters. My alterego, Peter Cole, dressed as Prozac, bounced repetitively throughout the space on a high-powered pogo stick.



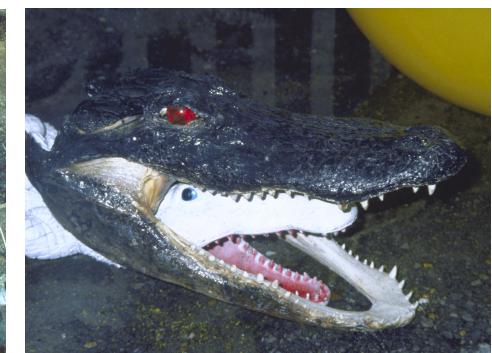
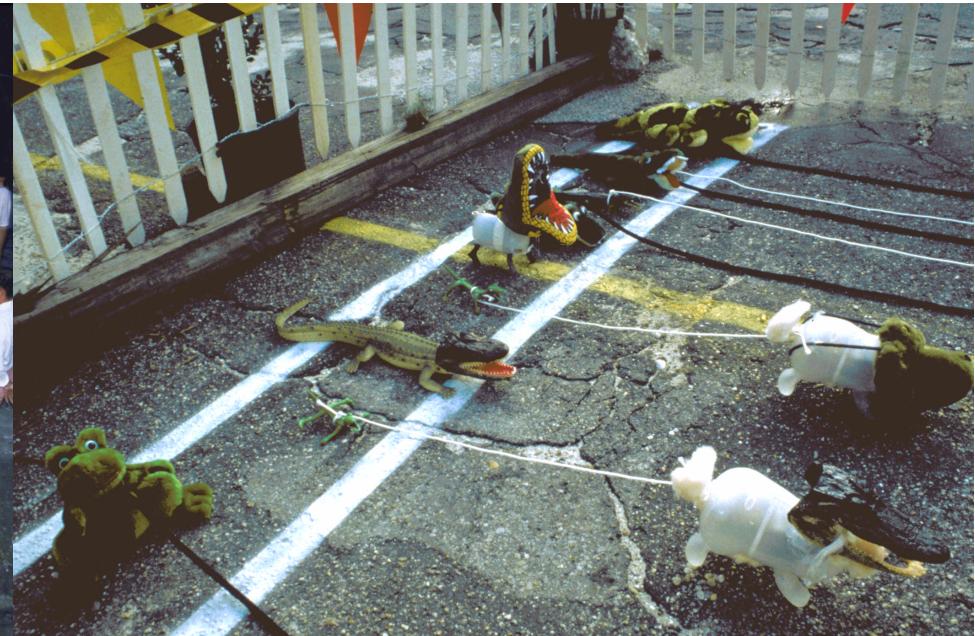
STORAGE ANNEX : SPLITTING HARES



Splitting Hares, 1999
Installation performance
storage container, rabbits, soil, foliage, tar paper, heavy metal music
Storage Annex, San Francisco

The rabbits were set up to drag race but became distracted and hyped more by the surrounding greenery than the speed metal music coursing through their fury little bodies. Nobunny won.

1999 BING BANG ART BASH NEW ORLEANS : ALLIGATOR DRAG RACES



*Alligator Drag Races, 1999
Installation performance*

picket fence, mechanical toys with real alligator parts attached [wallets keychains, heads, claws] racing flags, batteries, and lots of betting and beer

Bing Bang Art Bash, New Orleans, LA

I wanted to use live baby alligators, but for obvious reasons that was not possible. I was warned by a local government official to abort all attempts to use live alligators. Instead, I manipulated mechanical toys to look like the vicious gators by utilizing the marketable skins, heads, etc., found in the local tourist malls. Wallet beat the belt by a nose.



15 MINUTES : MOW

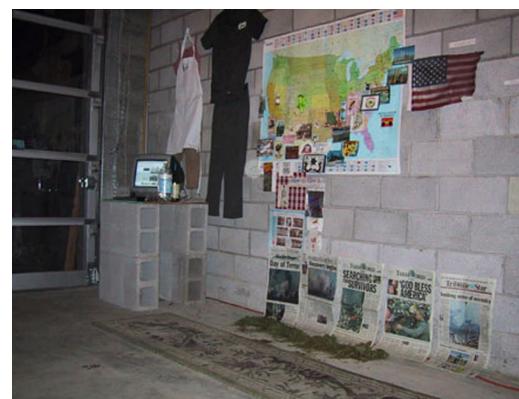
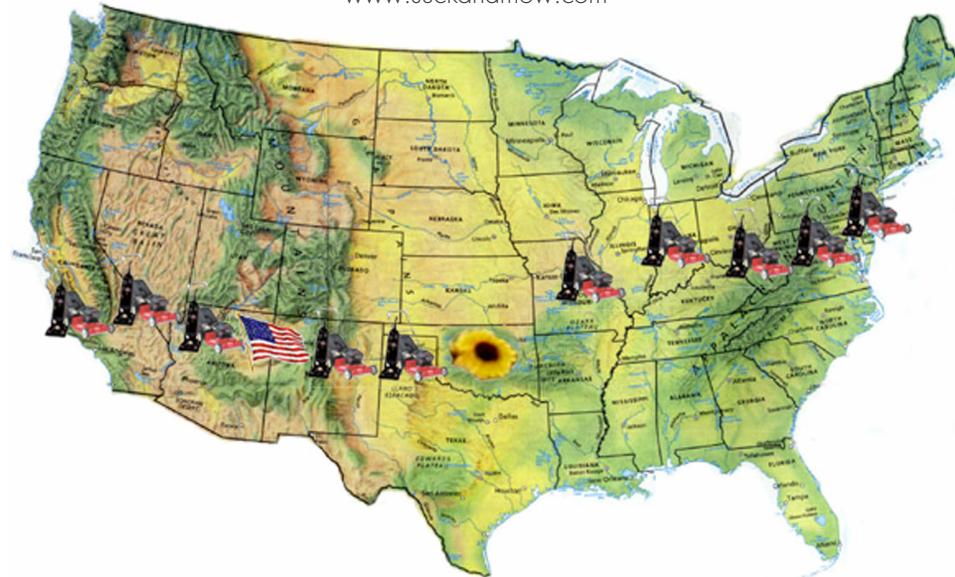


Mow, 2000
Performance
wheelbarrow, sod, gas powered lawnmower
15 MINUTES, The LAB, San Francisco

I had 15 minutes. I simply laid out some sod and mowed it.

S U C K & M O W

www.suckandmow.com



S U C K & M O W



SUCK AND MOW DESCRIPTION

From coast to coast, your carpet is our canvas, your lawn is our destiny. Be a part of our adventure.

DEPARTURE: SEPTEMBER 8, 2001

Stay tuned for current installments. For each stop nationwide there will be updated web pages on every person and place that we embark on along the way.

WWW.SUCKANDMOW.COM



The project entitled "Suck and Mow", began with the act of lawn mowing and vacuuming in stranger's homes,—an interesting adventure across the country highlighting simple common acts intended to break down barriers in the emergence of human spirit.

Within the first few days of the project, our journey broadened in meaning due to the potency of the 9/11 events. These acts ironically became symbols of our American culture, as much as apple pie. The American people across the country opened their doors to a surreal invitation to have their homes vacuumed and lawns mowed by strangers. It's a powerful statement that humanity is intact.

BRIAN STORTS IS SUCK

The United States of America, Lawn of the Free

In a culture that deems itself 'mega' everything, the dream is to one day own a plot of soil covered with grass. Hard work yields symbols of achievement: the green grass growing, the foliage sprouting, and our personal possessions placed on the land. When leisure time is available, usually on the weekends, the cathartic exercise known as yard work becomes our primary focus. Essential to the process is trimming foliage to perfection, tending the objects surrounding, refining the facade of the home, and most importantly, grooming the green grass. Beautifying the micro climate erected inside the labyrinth of fences which make up the fabric of this vast suburban super quilt of a country, is a joyful past time for most Americans. We look proudly at the clean cut grass spreading wide beneath our feet. It represents success. We tend and mow the little plot of green surrounded by sidewalks, asphalt, and all kinds of barriers and divides—a private world encapsulated by fences to protect and keep outsiders out. That is mine, this is yours, keep off, private property! We try to individualize ourselves through the idea of territory.

I plan to mow lawns randomly from San Francisco to New York with the intent of celebrating the nature of such a banal phenomenon. I question how this country has become a civilization comprised of perfect squares of grass. My intention is to get some understanding why and how we as a culture have gone from a neglected and unexplored territory to a grid of perfectly manicured lawns.



YOU HAVE 5 MINUTES TO GET OUT : BLOWING THE WORLD AROUND



Blowing the World Around, 2002
Performance

YOU HAVE 5 MINUTES TO GET OUT, Balazo Gallery, San Francisco

With a high powered blower strapped to my back, I proceeded to blow an inflated world out of the gallery and down the block.

DINNER FOR TWO:
VARIOUS HOMES IN SAN FRANCISCO 2001-PRESENT



ON WITH THE SHOW
Brian Storts builds art and community

Excerpted from ART SPEAK: June, 2002
by Anne Crump formerly of The Examiner Staff

MAN OF THE PEOPLE

The culinary project he's working on started a year ago at Southern Exposure's annual *Post-Postcard* event. Storts made "postcards" from Denny's and IHOP menus and affixed labels on each explaining to the buyer that the postcard could be redeemed for a home-cooked meal and giving instructions for contacting him to make the necessary arrangements.

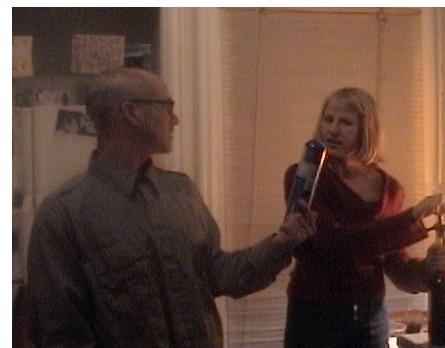
He estimates he sold 15 postcards and has prepared about eight dinners so far. For each, he devises a menu based on the card buyer's preferences and prepares it in the person's home; with the help of friends, he then documents the evening on video. Ultimately, footage from the dinners will be edited down and compiled on a single DVD.

Part of the joy in the project, Storts says, is the opportunity to meet a variety of people. There's a barrier that's broken when he's working in strangers' kitchens, invading their space, and a unique opportunity for learning about each other when everyone sits down together to enjoy a home-cooked meal—an occurrence that's far less common today than it was when Storts was growing up.

"I want to challenge people on a certain level," he says, noting that the projects challenge him, as well. "It's me trying to learn how to get along with people."



DINNER FOR TWO : VARIOUS HOMES IN SAN FRANCISCO 2001-PRESENT



DINNER FOR TWO : VARIOUS HOMES IN SAN FRANCISCO 2001–PRESENT



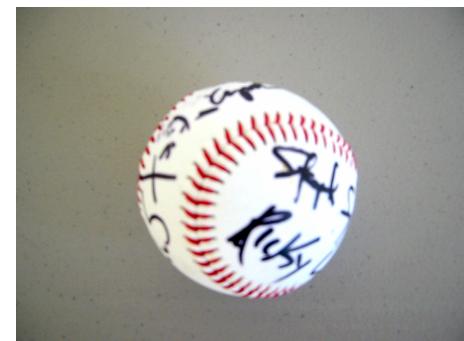
NEW LANGTON ARTS
18TH ANNUAL AUCTION
FINGER LICKIN' BONETTI

Finger Lickin' Bonetti, 2001
Video stills

New Langton Arts 18th Annual Auction, San Francisco

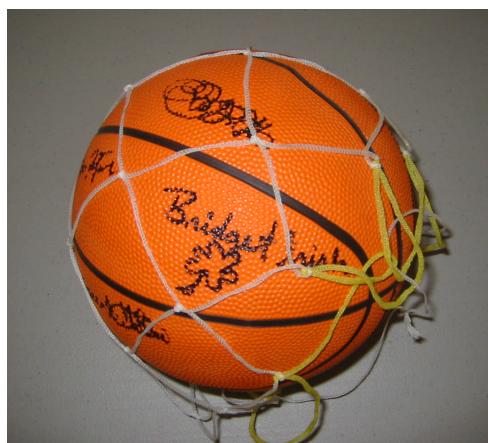
From the previous year at the same annual art auction,
David Bonetti, SF art critic, was captured savoring
himself on Kentucky Fried Chicken I had provided
for the event. Between mouthfuls of greasy flesh,
he mentioned he had never heard of me.



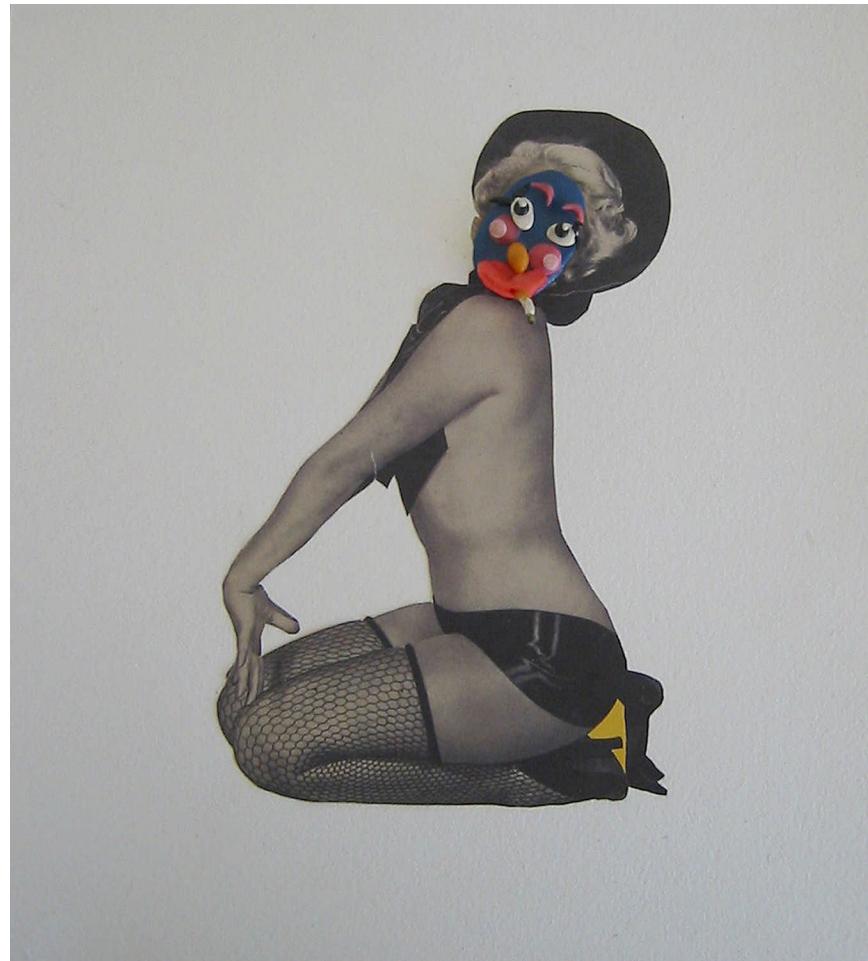


Autograph, 2000-present
A collection of various objects autographed
by the local public during fundraising events
that were signed and sold back to me

A U T O G R A P H S E R I E S



EX - GIRLFRIEND SERIES



Ex-Girlfriend Series, 2001-02

mixed media on paper

appropriated Vargas style pin-up girls with plasticine

THERE IS NO ONE WAY

Through friendship, Brian Storts taught me to enjoy the possibility of living out one's destiny, a great gift because acknowledging destiny as a possibility allows one to get swept up in the idea that every moment means something. Regardless of the validity of this notion, I find a lot of joy in this outlook.

Brian is the kind of person who amplifies moments, even the most mundane of moments, by recognizing each one for what it is and adding something (added-value), through comment, gesture, or in his work as an artist, and almost always through humor. Just about everything—driving down the freeway, eating oysters at fancy restaurants, working to exhaustion—becomes amusing when the activity, occurrence, or situation turns in on itself, ultimately becoming something to laugh about.

I think Brian's art work is inspired by a desire to share the fun, share the moments, get on the same page, offer a spirit-lift, dance around and through the obstacles, and, all the while, poke fun at how seriously we take ourselves. Anything but monotony seems to turn Brian on. If he finds himself living in a monotonous world something goes off inside him—his funny bone revs up, his generosity goes over the top, and before you know it the pot has been stirred and things are interesting again. Quick to find the humor in things, especially when it comes to human beings and their foibles, including his own, Brian's gift of the absurd is like an open outlet offering zaps, if not surges, of energy to anyone who wants to take it.

Brian Storts, who wakes up everyday mystified by life, is an a-sequential thinker. He offers his artwork to the world as a way to understand his own absurd existence. In this honesty, one experiences a gift—a way to see simultaneously the bright and dark sides of life and a less black and white way of understanding the world we live in. Brian doesn't dig for the truth because he suspects there is no one truth, no one way to be right, no one way to make yourself happy. And he is fine with conflicting philosophies and paradoxical truths knowing that most of the time things don't add up or make perfect sense. And when I am being reasonable, I agree, I know *there is no One Way*. Yet I can't help but sense *there is a Right Way* and Brian Storts, through his work as an artist and as a dear friend, has helped me stay the course, every step of the way.

—Julie Deamer, Los Angeles, September 2003



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