

LiveJournal entry posted February 22, 2004

"I Am A Notorious Art Thief"

On April 7, 1990, the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, OH was raided by police in response to their new exhibit Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment. Director Dennis Barrie and four other board members were handed indictments because the Hamilton County prosecutor's office felt the show to be pornographic. Although they would ultimately be acquitted in court, the damage had been done. Museums that received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) could now effectively be censored when the art in question didn't fall into "acceptable" or "respectable" community standards. Show challenging art - lose your funding. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200.

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Press release from The N.A.M.E. Gallery, 700 North Carpenter, Chicago IL:

#### CONSPIRED

A group exhibition organized by N.A.M.E. exhibition committee  
September 7 - October 12, 1990

With conspiracies by:

Joan Dickenson and Jimmy Valentine  
John Ploof and Sandy Tillotson  
Donna Ducharme and Simon Grennan  
Bill McBride and Pat Moss  
Mart Patton and The Resistance Conspiracy Six

N.A.M.E. opens its eighteenth season of programming with Conspired, a group exhibition of multimedia collaborations between artists and other professionals. Each pair of co-conspirators has worked together to produce objects or installations that reflect the professions of each.

Conspired shifts the power in artmaking from the individual artist's intention and product to the process of collaboration between professionals. The emphasis of Conspired is on the act of collaboration, with the work in this exhibition being the tangible aftermath of the co-conspirator's efforts. Focusing on teamwork, the title "Conspired" is an umbrella term that allows viewers the opportunity to investigate the shift of power in hopes of generating a collective agenda. Hence, conspiracy.

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In the Fall on 1990, I was a Junior at the University Of Kentucky majoring in Art with an emphasis in "experimental media."

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What do these three things have in common? Keep reading...

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On the weekend of October 5th, 1990, some of my fellow art students took a trip to Chicago. They crammed as many museums and galleries into two days as they could, and one of those galleries was N.A.M.E.

N.A.M.E. was in the closing week of their exhibit *Conspired*, which featured artists and craftsmen working together to create a finished piece. Most of them were mediocre – a sculptor works with a baker to recreate out of cake the three beds from *Goldilocks* – but one piece stood out due to its highly conceptual nature. Joan Dickenson had chosen to work with a thief to steal a mundane object from someone's home and put in on display. She chose an egg.

The egg took up one entire wall of the gallery. There was a small O-ring screwed into the middle of that massive flat white surface so the egg had a perch, and it was under a tasteful gallery spotlight. Off to the side was a simple table with a stack of stapled handouts on it, supposedly transcribing Joan's first encounter with her co-conspirator, whom she gave the pseudonym "Jimmy Valentine" – an old gangster term for a cat burglar. The text of the interview is as follows:

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Joan Dickenson: Let me see if this thing's running. OK. Did Louise tell you anything about this project?

Jimmy Valentine: No.

Joan: Well, it's a project for N.A.M.E. Have you ever heard of N.A.M.E.?

Jim: No.

Joan: Well, N.A.M.E. is an art gallery over on...I forget the name of the street. It's over...off Milwaukee. Louise, do you know where N.A.M.E. is? I think it's on Carpenter or something like that. It's over near the Chicago/Halstead intersection. Southwest of there. Anyway, it doesn't matter where it is. N.A.M.E. approached me and...do you want another drink? N.A.M.E. asked me to do a project. They're having an evening - well, it's a five-week exhibit. They've asked people who consider themselves to be artists or who call themselves artists to collaborate with someone who isn't an artist - whatever that means - and in effect to form a conspiracy with that person to do something. My idea was to work with a thief and to break into someone's home and to steal something.

Jim: Oh, yeah?

Joan: Yeah. So, anyway, I couldn't think of what most people would have to steal. So, finally, I thought of stealing an egg.

Jim: An egg.

Joan: Yeah, an egg.

Jim: Why an egg?

Joan: Well, I wanted to steal something that almost everybody would have and I figured that almost everybody would at least have an egg. Of all the things I could think of, that's what I thought of.

Jim: I don't have any eggs.

Louise: I don't have any eggs.

Joan: Oh, well...yeah...anyway, I was talking to Louise about it and she said she knew someone who might be available and she recommended you.

Jim: Oh yeah?

Joan: Yeah. So, are you interested in doing this or what?

Jim: Uh..hey, can I have another Cuervo and an old style?

Joan: I'll have an old style. Louise, do you want anything? Make that two old styles.

Jim: So, Louise here gave you my name, huh?

Joan: Louise didn't tell me your full name. I don't know your name. She just told me that you hung out here at The Bluebird and have done this sort of work in the past and could possibly help me out.

Jim: I don't know about stealing an egg. I mean, let me see. You want to break into someone's place just to steal an egg?

Joan: Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Jim: So, you want to break into somebody's apartment and steal an egg? And then...what?

Joan: Well, and then display the egg at N.A.M.E. The opening is September 7th and it'll be displayed for five weeks.

Jim: So what am I doing with it?

Joan: Well, I was hoping you could give me some pointers. I've never robbed anybody and I don't want anybody to get hurt and I also don't want to get caught. So, I thought if I talked to someone who has done this, there would be less chance of anyone being hurt or any property being damaged or me - and you - getting caught.

Jim: You want me to go with you?

Joan: Well, if you would...yes.

Jim: Naaaaahhhhh. I don't know. This sounds - no offense - but this sounds...you want me to help you steal an egg and put the egg on display in an art gallery?

Joan: Yes. That's what I want to do.

Jim: No offense, but this sounds pretty stupid if you ask me. I don't think it's worth the risk.

Joan: Well, how risky could it be? You've done this before and I assume you've done it enough that you haven't always been caught. You must know what you're doing, right? I mean, you're not in jail or in prison or anything so, I mean, you just don't want to do it because it's just for an egg?

Jim: Look, look, look - I'm not in prison now but, ah...let's put it this way...I mean, you've heard of parole?

Joan: Yeah, I've heard of parole.

Jim: Well, that's what I'm on. I'm on parole. If I break my parole...I mean, look - I don't want to go to prison again. Especially...I mean...for an egg. An egg!! You want me to risk this for an egg? It's

stupid! I mean, I could see for some money, for some hardware, for...but for an egg! I mean...look, look, this is...look, maybe this is somehow important to you, I don't know. maybe you got some art idea going, I don't know, I don't know how someone like you thinks. But, I'm telling you...I'm sitting here and I'm telling you that it ain't worth fucking breaking and entering to steal an egg. You know, people are nuts these days. People have alarm systems like you wouldn't believe. They got dogs that'll tear your legs off. They got, man, who knows - they got karate, self-defense shit, mace! Last place I went in - the place I got busted - this dude...came out of nowhere. Came out of the fucking bathroom with the biggest gun I ever saw and I don't even carry and I say, hey, that's it. That's it. You know, when somebody's got a piece that hardly fucking fits in the fucking bathroom, it's time to hang it up fucking right now and you want me to steal a fucking egg? People are fucking nuts about their stuff these days! People are fucking out of their minds these days and you want me to go in and steal an egg? I mean - no offense - I mean, you gotta be out of your mind. No offense. It's not fucking worth it. People live in fucking fortresses...

Joan: So, does that mean you won't do it? Does that mean you're saying no, you won't help me? Are you saying no?

Jim: Yeah. Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. And, maybe Louise told you wrong about me. Hey, Louise! what'd you tell her?

Louise: I just told her where you'd probably be - where she could find you. That's all! That's all...I told her a little bit about you, [NAME], and that's all. Take it easy.

Jim: Well, I can't do this. I can't do this. I'm sorry. You come down here, and I don't know where you live - maybe you come a long way - and you got this nice tape recorder taping this. You know, how do I know you're not setting me up? How do I know that? You think this is some kind of game? Some...art game? You know, you could be setting me up! You could be sitting here buying me beer and setting me up. I'm sorry, but...look, I trust Louise. I know Louise a long time and Louise knows me, but I don't know you. I don't know you. Louise knows me, I know Louise. I don't know you and I don't want to get involved with this, so, yeah. I'm saying no and I'm saying I'm sorry.

Joan: So is that a definite no? You're definitely saying that you won't help me with this?

Jim: Right, that's what I'm saying. I'm saying no. I'm saying I'm sorry. That's it.

Joan: What if there was some money in it for you? What if I paid you? What about that?

Jim: Paid me? Paid me!? Shit! Like you weren't gonna pay me? Shit! No offense but you're starting to get on my nerves a little bit! What do you think you're gonna pay me? 50 bucks? 100 bucks? A thousand? I mean, what do you think a fucking egg is worth? What do you think breaking my parole is worth to me? What do you think that's worth - to not go to prison? For an egg! How much do you think that's gonna be worth? How much do you think it'd cost to not go to prison, to not get caught for stealing an egg? How much? How much?

Joan: How much?

Jim: Yeah, how much?

Joan: Well, I don't know. How much would you want?

Joan Dickenson  
Jimmy Valentine  
N.A.M.E.  
September 1990

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One of my friends who went on that trip was Valerie. For those of you who have seen my "Adam & Eve" photo, she's Eve. We had a film class together every Monday in which we were both working on projects, so we also spent a lot of time in the video lab together editing our work. Valerie came into the lab that next Monday talking about the weekend, and all the work she'd seen, and all the fun she'd had...and the egg. We were both fairly conceptual with our art, and she loved the idea of the egg. She casually asked me, "Wouldn't it be funny if someone stole it?" We laughed a bit, but I didn't really think anything more about it. She, however, did. Over the next couple of days Valerie retold the story to two other friends of ours, Richard and Stephanie.

The next time class met was Wednesday, and Valerie approached me again about the egg. Would I be interested in helping her? She'd already asked Richard and Stephanie, and they wanted to do it. I was not a person for taking risks up to that point in my life - bear in mind, this is less than two months after I'd left the church and decided to come out. Maybe an adventure like this was just what I needed. I said yes.

Several months prior, the Mapplethorpe incident had happened in Cincinnati, and we'd been talking about it quite a bit around the studio. It was obvious that funding for the arts as we knew it was dead. As Valerie and I talked, the concept of the egg turned into a political statement. N.A.M.E. was funded by the NEA, yet here was this

exhibit that promoted stealing – most definitely not community core values! By “censoring” the egg, we could draw attention to our plight as artists. Or something. It sounded good, but really it was kinda half-assed. The bottom line was we thought stealing the stolen egg would be funny.

The exhibit was due to come down on Friday, and it was already Wednesday. That meant we had to act fast.

Richard was unfortunately going to have to work, but Stephanie was free, so the next morning the three of us met at the lab – all dressed in black as we’d dubbed ourselves “art commandos” – and piled into Valerie’s car for the six hour drive to Chicago. We took along one of the video cameras so we could document the event.

We arrived in Chicago just in time to hit the rush hour and slowly made our way over to the gallery. They would be open for one more hour that afternoon. When we got there the space was empty except for the director. She welcomed us and then excused herself back to her office, which was the opening we were looking for. The egg was on the wall opposite us, so I quickly turned on the camera (which I’d hidden in my coat) while Valerie walked over, put the egg in her pocket, and pinned a note to the wall that Stephanie had pieced together in the car. It was made out of cut ‘n’ paste letters like a classic ransom note, and said something to the effect of “We the Art Commandos have censored this egg in the name of the NEA because it promotes stealing!”

High on adrenaline, We bolted for the car.

On our way out of town, Valerie stopped at a pay phone and called the local arts paper. “We’ve stolen the egg!” she said, and ended up giving a brief interview in which she explained why, and that they could contact N.A.M.E. to confirm that the egg was missing. They did, and the interview ran in the next week’s paper. A friend of Valerie’s who was going to the Art Institute sent her the clipping. As it turned out, the gallery was upset but the artist herself thought that it was a brilliant continuation of her own work.

We drove back to Lexington, laughing the whole way.

Over that weekend, Val and I edited all the footage together into a four-minute video using Ministry’s “Thieves” as the soundtrack. I found a nice little Russian-looking decorated box that fit the egg perfectly and became its new home.

At the start of Monday’s class, we announced that we’d finished a new short film we’d like to screen. We showed “Thieves” much to the delight of our classmates and our professor, to whom we presented the egg. The last time I checked, Prof. Shawn Brixey was now heading the Art Department at Washington State. The last time I actually talked to

him (which was about five years ago), he still had the egg.

On the strength of this one stunt, Valerie, Stephanie, and I each received an A for the semester.