

GOD WILL NOT HAVE HIS WORK MADE MANIFEST BY COWARDS
Exhibition at The Hatchery / Light & Wire Gallery
Curated by Astri Swendsrud and Quinn Gomez-Heitzeberg

Artists:

Anthony Bodlović, Michael Carter, Akina Cox, Ronald Dzerigian, Finishing School, Zach Kleyn, Jason Kunke, Matt McAuliffe, Shana Moulton, Christina Ondrus, Sarah Petersen, Semi-Tropic Spiritualists, Joe Smith, Marnie Weber

This exhibition engages with ideas surrounding the actualization of utopian ideals. Throughout human history, the desire for improved methods of being in the world has driven visionary leaders to propose ideal models for society. This exhibition aims to examine the complexities and difficulties that occur when these utopian social plans move from the idealized space of the proposal to actualization in the world.

The impetus for this exhibition stems from a physical site of recurring alternative societies – The Hatchery, located near the small town of Badger in Central California. The Hatchery first gained notoriety as the home of Synanon, a California-based self-help movement turned authoritarian religious cult that rose to prominence in the 1960s and 70s. After Synanon’s collapse, the abandoned Hatchery compound was converted into an Islamic community and school called Baladullah. Formed as a haven for Muslim families to escape the poverty and conflict experienced in larger cities, the Baladullah community fell to rumors of terrorist activity and anti-Islamic sentiment shortly after September 11, 2001.

The paired narratives of Synanon and Baladullah – from their idealistic origins, through their eventual collapses – serve as case studies of the difficulties of actualizing utopian societal alternatives. This exhibition includes works by artists that form connections to the three distinct phases of Synanon’s utopian model – from the personal utopia of self-help, to the communal utopia of an alternative social structure, to its final, universalized iteration as a totalitarian religion. The title of the exhibition – God Will Not Have His Work Made Manifest By Cowards – comes from Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” a text which served as a cornerstone of Synanon’s philosophy. It points toward the intersections of personal effort, social enforcement, and divine authority which underlie most utopian experiments.

This exhibition was designed to take place in two stages. First, a selection of performance pieces developed in connection to the Hatchery site was shown in a public event at The Hatchery in Badger, CA on October 12, 2014. The second portion of the show, exhibited online at Light & Wire Gallery in November 2014, includes versions of the work created on site presented alongside works by visual artists and writers exploring the complexities that come with actualizing utopian ideals. The artists in this exhibition create pieces that address and investigate these attempts in their various individual, political and esoteric implications.

Filmed on-site at The Hatchery, the Semi-Tropic Spiritualists present a brief history of the ideas that manifested the rise and fall of both Synanon and Baladullah, connecting the groups’ historical trajectories to larger questions of idealism and failure, and opening a space to re-consider the potentiality of utopian thinking. Synanon’s early history as a self-help program is addressed through the inclusion of an issue of MANAS journal, published in 1961 and presented here by Michael Carter. This publication examined Synanon from a perspective of socially progressive values, identifying within its methods the hope for broader social transformation. By contrast, the work of Anthony Bodlović based on *The Game*, Synanon’s primary methodology of attack therapy, hints at the control and manipulation that can result from giving oneself over to a program for living.

The contemporary commodification of self-help culture is examined through the photographs of Joe Smith and the video work of Shana Moulton. Depictions of popular texts promising strategies of healing and self-realization, or products marketed toward physical, psychological and spiritual betterment, reveal the commercialized proliferation of the desire for self-improvement. Christina Ondrus' drawings, made using her non-dominant hand, highlight the many methods and effects, both physical and mental, that can be used to attain an altered or transcendent state.

The individual desire for self-transformation contains within it the potential for a larger societal vision. This in turn tends toward the establishment of group identification and social control, as seen physically enacted in the work of Sarah Petersen. Her performative objects engage the viewer's participation in acts of inclusion or exclusion. Akina Cox's drawings create images in which meaning is variable, and ultimately determined by whether one is positioned inside or outside a particular interpretive framework. In Zach Kleyn's work, the manipulated image of a child's dance presents a figure in the thrall of external controlling forces, pointing toward the nature of child-raising as a primary form of behavior control. Ronald Dzerigian's poetry embodies the perspective of a follower both questioning and accepting their position within an authoritarian system. Jason Kunke's lecture, given throughout the ruins of the Hatchery building, explores the aesthetics and enforcement of acceptable social behavior.

Many of the works in this exhibition point toward the slippages that can occur within utopian ideals, when ideas or programs that began with the best of intentions become increasingly dependent on external enforcement and prescriptive control – ultimately leading toward a totalitarian, even divine, authority. The interactive project presented by Finishing School depicts a utopic version of the use of force, and points to a larger clash of ideological visions within a very real world political context. Marnie Weber's images offer a glimpse at the ceremonies, followers and deities of an imagined esoteric system. Finally, Matt McAuliffe's work offers the promise of secret knowledge immediately accessible through our modern digital connectivity.