

Wonderland: The Five W's

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Wonder-Why?

I began writing this essay on the one-year anniversary of “Meltdown Monday,” which we remember as the onset of the most destructive worldwide financial crisis in living memory. In the past year, the confusion, economic hardships, and fear that have resulted from this crisis have begun to affect every corner of the art world. Nevertheless, even in this environment, the truth remains that people need and have always needed great works of art.

Many have asked me what motivated me to create *Wonderland*. Why would I take on a fulltime job that was unpaid? Happily, this was an easy question to answer. In a time when the art world is increasingly constricted by a lack of funds, I felt that, if a group of passionate artists and local supporters could come together to overcome the current malaise taking grip across the country, the impact of our efforts would be all the greater. After all, history has taught us again and again that great art is often created during the most tragic of circumstances, created out of the crucible of war, illness, and poverty, and that it is such art that often has the largest impact on society as a whole.

I have heard colleague after colleague recite the same tale of reducing their exhibition programs by cutting the quantity of exhibitions or deleting traveling exhibitions to save money, but few have decided to up their game by drawing on a resource that exists in abundance: local and emerging talent. We also often hear the complaint from local artists that the artistic institutions in their hometown do not support artists from that town. Naturally, there needs to be a balance, but all too often museums would prefer to cut back on their programming rather than to give opportunities to many artists who actually deserve a shot to play in the game. *Wonderland* began quite humbly, and that same spirit has guided the project to realization. Hopefully, we will inspire people to realize that limited resources don't have to stand in the way of great art.

Wonder-What?

Wonderland began as a simple class assignment. I wanted to teach an MFA class in which the students would have practical experience in creating and exhibiting in a professional exhibition. Traditionally, an MFA candidate creates their art in a two year long bubble environment, and when they exit the program they have gained little to no practical experience. Often, the only practical experience on their exhibition history is a series of student-organized shows in

the school gallery. Having gotten my professional start as a gallerist, I can honestly say that a resume of student exhibitions will not gain anyone's attention.

I felt that, as an arts professional, I could give back to my community by creating a class that resulted in an exhibition that I would curate. I never realized what would evolve from this simple gesture of giving. As the class of fourteen students began to discuss the type of exhibition they would want to partake in, it was clear they were mostly interested in my curatorial focus – site specific installation and with a bent for collaboration and social advocacy. I decided to push my previous focus on collaboration, which I had explored in *Lucky Number Seven*, SITE Santa Fe's 8th International biennial, to the limit. For *Wonderland*, I decided to create teams of artists to work as a collective for developing the public works of art.

Asking artists to work as a collective is not a usual curatorial approach. Certainly collectives have existed before (gorilla girls and cobra immediately come to mind, for example); however, these collectives developed from artists extending invitations to other artists. *Wonderland* began with a group of primarily second year MFA students who, in most cases, did not know each other or whose work did not necessarily relate to that of each other. The tipping point was when the location for the exhibition was selected – the Tenderloin. The conversations were robust and personal, while always challenging and charged with opposing energy. It was clear that this collective was onto something special. After I divided the class into four teams, they began spending all their time, both individually and as a group, in the Tenderloin. A year of research and personal time commitment to the neighborhood would be spent prior to beginning the art making process. When the four teams presented their initial project proposals, I felt the necessity to enlarge *Wonderland* into a full-fledged exhibition.

In the end, like the cobra artists, the WO artists grew organically. Since there was no budget for out of town artists and no budget for material expenses, artists were recommended to me on the basis of a rather special quality: passion. It was then that I went through my files to see what artists I had worked with or would like to work with, to engage in a conversation and an eventual plea for their participation. Thirteen additional teams emerged, resulting in 15 ambitious and thought-provoking public art installations for *Wonderland*.

Another element that grew organically was the partnership with the rogue group of WO artists and The North of Market/Tenderloin Community Benefit District (CBD). It was clear that we needed local assistance to be able to create *Wonderland* once it was decided to turn it into a large-scale exhibition. When project director John Melvin and I met with the District Manager and Associate District Manager of the CBD, Elaine Zamore and Dina Hilliard, respectively, we knew that we would be in good hands. They were a bit cautious from the start due to the fact that their main mission in working in the Tenderloin was not organizing art events but, rather, delivering crucial needs for the residents and

landowners in the district. Also, they were worried that *Wonderland* could possibly be exploitative of the obvious, clichéd narratives of the Tenderloin, rather than illustrating the full sense of the neighborhood by incorporating both the past and the present, both the good and the bad elements.

Through this partnership, the CBD has become integral to *Wonderland*'s realization. Its board of directors, various committee members, and professional contacts are what led to attaining the necessary permits, location permissions, and local participation. Over the past year, this challenging process has allowed everyone involved to learn and grow from the experience. Since everyone is volunteering time, talent, ideas, and resources, there has been an ease about the organic evolution of *Wonderland*. I feel that it parallels the ease that the Tenderloin fosters.

Wonder-Where?

Upon first glance, the Tenderloin can be seen as an unsavory place, to put it mildly. And for anyone who grew up in San Francisco, the name Tenderloin immediately elicits a colorful image. I can recall a father's warning to my brother and me, sitting in the rear seat of our station wagon, to lock the doors and roll up the windows while my father increased the car's speed to traverse this no-man's-land. My mom, of course, would try to distract us with conversation or music so as not to pay attention to what was unfolding just outside our windows. Similar experiences occurred when driving through North Beach, the Mission, and especially Chinatown. This was the decade when gang violence frequently occurred in the traditionally touristy and peaceful Chinese community.

However, this collective image that we all seem to share about the Tenderloin is quite inaccurate. Of course, this personal illumination only recently occurred for me, and mostly from working in the neighborhood over the past year. It was clear from the start that the Tenderloin, also referred as the TL, would give the artists an abundance of social and political aspects to formulate their artworks. As one who works primarily with site specificity, I know that it is very important for the participating artists to be constantly aware of how they work with their selected content. All too often, artists address an interesting subject but reduce the experience (both for the artist and the viewer) to a simple illustration of an idea. This is one reason why I typically am less engaged with "political art". So how does an artist avoid these pitfalls?

What I have witnessed in this project is that the artists fully engaged themselves and spent the time getting to know the TL, the community, and the overall scene. This commitment allowed the artists to discover what they felt was important to say through their work of art. However, as an outsider, it is probably true that, no matter how well intentioned or objective you are, you can never fully understand a community to which you do not belong. Through the initiative of the artist

teams, as well as Elaine and Dina, another layer of the creative aspect appeared – local participation. It was with this element that *Wonderland* had finally arrived.

As the Tenderloiners say, everyone has an opinion about everything, and *Wonderland* was no exception. With frequent meetings at the CBD office, the WO team constantly met new people. Everyone voiced their concerns, especially that of local sensitivity, as well as fears of only portraying the TL as a “containment zone” or slum. Most residents feel that the TL is an actual neighborhood. It was not until I began spending more time in the TL that I began to recognize the ease the area has. Yes, there are disparate kinds of people on the streets, but in the end it creates a unique community. You can see just about every walk of life in the TL, and the best thing is that no one pays any attention (in a good or bad way) to each other. Everyone just minds their business and continues on. There is a daytime community and a nighttime community. Most often, the crimes we so often hear about on the 11 pm news are committed by the influx of people who flood the Tenderloin at night, not by the actual residents of the neighborhood.

On one of my routine walks from my car to the office I witnessed an amazing act of kindness. An elderly woman collapsed on a busy street corner. There were so many people that ran to her rescue I did not even have to call 911. Within minutes the paramedics appeared, and the collective energy was one of triumph. This congregation was comprised of the same demographics as the TL. There was a transgender white female, a Vietnamese middle-aged man and his daughter, a young African American man, and a young meter maid. After the patient was driven away, everyone smiled at each other, and without uttering a word to one another, everyone left the corner to continue on their journey. I have seen similar situations throughout the TL.

Certainly, the questions of where and why are intertwined. The TL has enriched all of us wonderlanders, and after working in the TL, we all feel a kind of responsibility to the area. This directly relates to my earlier concern of avoiding the superficial. Through the committed time in the TL and the local partners that each artist team has tapped into, *Wonderland* found its central core. What is the TL? Who lives here? Who works here? What is desirable and what is undesirable? These are all basic concerns we all have for *Wonderland* and have addressed in the exhibition.

I am often asked, who is the audience for *Wonderland*? My answer is constant: first, the people who live and work in the Tenderloin; second, the San Francisco art scene; and third, the general public. I hope that, when people come to see *Wonderland*, they do not merely look at the 15 works after locating them on the printed map and checking them off all along the way but instead experience the TL through *Wonderland*. The exhibition is a vehicle for locals and visitors alike to shed their preconceived ideas of this authentic part of San Francisco’s rich history, its present, and its future and to experience wonder through experiencing

the neighborhood and its people. The 15 artworks should be viewed as a catalyst for something more to come.

Wonder-Who?

After just mentioning who the intended audience is, I feel it is equally important to discuss who the creators of *Wonderland* are and what they intend to discuss through their works of art. Happily, the 78 artists are some of the most passionate and grounded individuals I know. Quite often, artists live in their own minds, which can facilitate many creative breakthroughs but often leads to a lack of an awareness of what surrounds them. It was quite clear to see that the initial core of artists (i.e., students) approached *Wonderland* without fear or intimidation. It was through their initial outreach to the Tenderloin community that the proverbial ice was broken. Once the issue of trust from the locals was achieved, it only allowed the additional artists to further the discourse of what could and should be addressed through the exhibition. Projects touched many key issues in the Tenderloin, such as the large immigrant population, human trafficking, the multilingual nature of the community, homelessness, the abundance of children who live in the community but are rarely seen on the street, fear, and the rich history of the TL through the cultural institutions like the Black Hawk club are just a few themes.

For if the true intended audience were those that live and work in the Tenderloin, did they really care for or desire art? Would we be just another Disneyland dumped on a community that did not desire it? It has been with fortitude that the core WO team did all that could be done to reinforce *Wonderland's* sincere interest in the TL to the people of the TL. With the exhibition soon to open, only the public's reaction can inform us of what was successful and what was not.

However, it goes without saying that all of the WO artists have made friends with many in the Tenderloin, and through these relationships sage advice has been given to the artists and organizers. The artists range in age, career level and experience, and gender. It is most definitely the youngest group of artists I have worked with. This of course added to the "can do" spirit and helped to eliminate the fear of proceeding without any funds whatsoever. Our passion to create became infectious, allowing us to attract many of local artists who live in the Tenderloin to participate side by side, so that a real dialogue could be fostered. People in the TL are often approached with wonderful ideas and promises. But all too often, there is never a follow through. We all understood that, no matter what, we would move forward and create an exhibition that, like all great public art, can speak to the general public as well as the art intelligentsia.

Similar to the artists that I selected from outside of the neighborhood, the nearly 300 local artists had a huge range of experience. There were self-taught artists and artists with MFA degrees. Most did not have a practical studio but still managed to somehow make art. You see, the TL did not grow exponentially with the market boom, nor did it collapse when the rest of the world fell into deep

despair. Rather, the TL just continued as it has always done for generations. In many ways, being an artist in the Tenderloin is somewhat similar to being in art school. Both situations provide something of protective bubble, isolating an artist from the problems, dangers, and challenges of the larger art world—but also from its opportunities and possibilities. And then came *Wonderland*, which punctured the bubbles and challenged everyone that came into its path.

As you explore this catalogue, our website, and the documentary—all of which were created by volunteers—you will learn more about each of the participating artists through their own words as they describe their intent and philosophy. Their proposal rendering also allows insight into their process and, of course, the beautiful photographs of the completed works give you a chance to imagine the actual works of art in situ. But as I have repeatedly mentioned, I hope that, in looking at all of the documentation, you will try to experience the integration of people, dreams, and a sense of community into your own experience.

Wonder-When?

Now. It is about time that artists return to their studios to make art and not commerce. It is about time that communities pull together and show spirit and possibility. It is about time that we embrace difference rather than fear it. It is about time to wonder again, as we did when we were children, about peace, harmony, and our place within the world.