

OAKLAND ART MURMUR: EAST BAY'S FREE-SPIRITED ART SCENE

Reactions to Oakland's Art Murmur, the monthly First Friday art strolls currently involving some two dozen commercial and non-profit galleries, are as subjective as reactions to the wide range of art on display. Ranging from casual works embodying the popular do-it-yourself/recycling aesthetic to traditional *objets d'art* in traditional media (albeit deconstructed or recontextualized) or even mixed media employing the newest technology, the art proves once again that Northern California is nothing if not eclectic. Gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown, who lives on Art Murmur's main drag, Telegraph Avenue, said, during his mayoral tenure, "A great city is really an aggregation of people—a successful city depends on its people, their creativity, their vitality. We are seeing that vital creativity flourish here. It's dynamic, it's exciting, and I think it really defines Oakland as an important metropolis." Other visitors to the Murmur's youthful street parties, can be more sardonic, scoffing at the "hipster hajj [pilgrimage],"

"hipster meat market," or "sea of skinny jeans, plaid shirts and ironic facial hair." Let's agree to disagree: the Art Murmur has been a cultural blessing to Oakland, attracting hundreds of celebrants and, accordingly, media attention from even *The New York Times*; it also reflects the current jumbled state of contemporary art, entwined with fashion, shopping, entertainment, and consumerist spectacle.

Art Murmur began several years ago on a humbler note. In early 2003, Nicole Neditch and Jen Loy, proprietors of Mama Buzz Cafe (previously Papa Buzz) and literary magazine publishers, started featuring work by local artists in their cafe on Telegraph Avenue near 23rd Street. The run-down area known as Uptown or Koreatown was one of many areas attracting artists forced from San Francisco by high dotcom-boom rents, and new artist-run spaces like 21 Grand, Ego Park and Rock Paper Scissors soon joined Mama Buzz in hosting openings on First Fridays. Neditch: "Around November of '05, I received an e-mail from Derek Weisberg [founder, with Mike Simpson] of the newly opened Boontling Gallery ... about how to drive more people to our collective openings." Weisberg recalls: "Mike Simpson, John [Casey], Theo [Auer] and myself went and looked at art together a lot, and the idea of a communal gallery walk in Oakland came up while we were all out 'arting.'" Neditch again: "I hosted a meeting at Mama Buzz, and representatives of Boontling, Ego Park, 21 Grand, Rock Paper Scissors, 33 Grand and Auto 3321

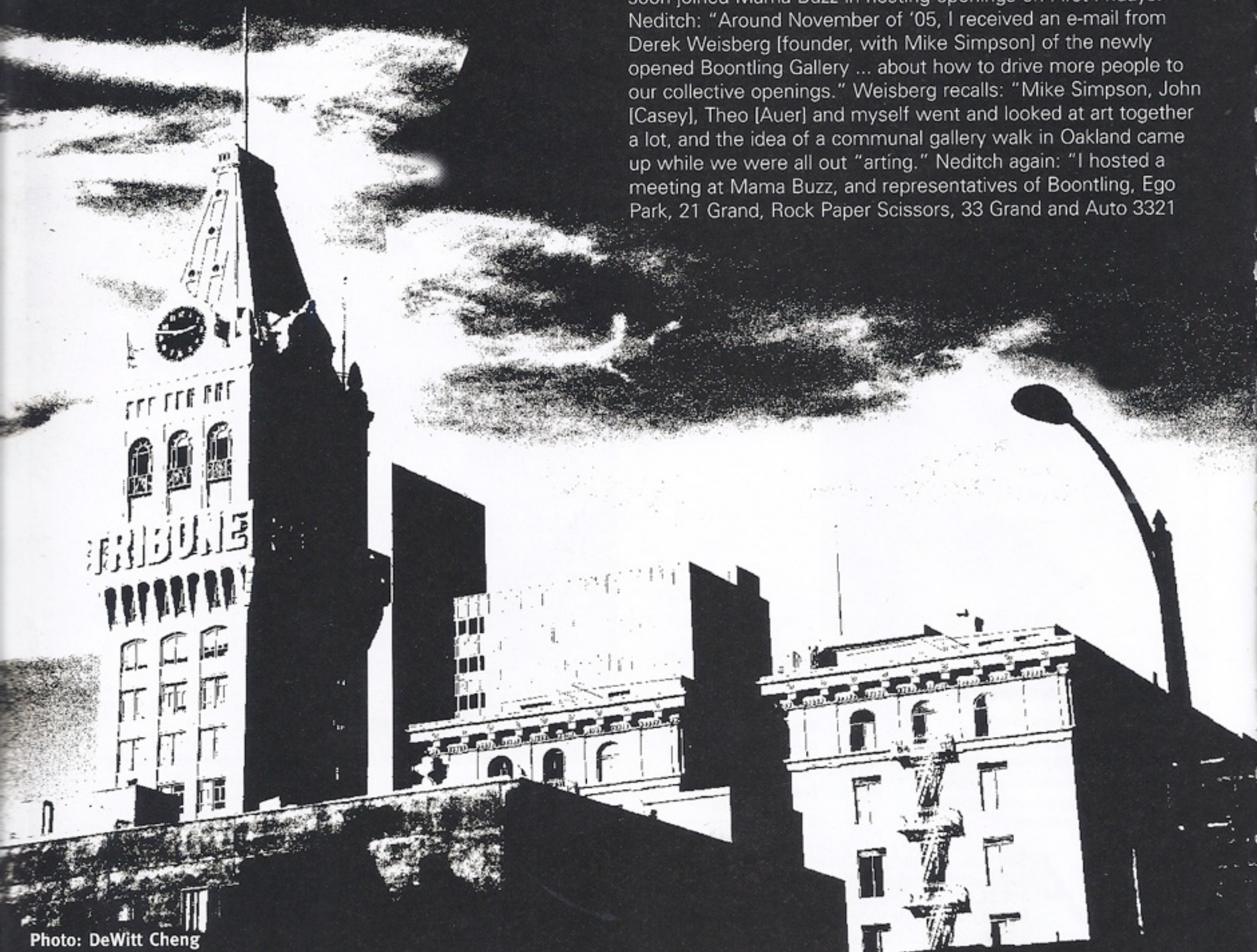


Photo: DeWitt Cheng

Gallery showed up ... we decided ... to pool our resources and do some collective advertising."

The resulting newspaper ad, website and handmade Boontling postcards worked. "We were used to getting rather good (we thought) crowds of a hundred to two hundred people, ... but were blown away when ... we received over twice the amount of people. By the summer of '06, there were easily a thousand people circling the neighborhood." Rowan Morrison Gallery's Pete Narangkar remembers: "As far as I know, "Art Murmur" was conceived by Derek Weisberg (of Boontling), Alex Munn (of 33 Grand), and John Casey in the winter of 2005. It officially launched with eight or nine galleries in January of 2006." Some of these galleries folded during the next few years due to rent increases or changing career plans; Auto 3321, Boontling, Liminal, Magnolia, Papa Buzz, and 33 Grand were lovingly remembered in a 2008 show entitled "Resurrection: the Dead Space Show" at Adam Hatch's LoBot Gallery; and others, like Front Gallery, Industrielle, Esteban Sabar Gallery, Fort, Well Space, Red Door, and Blankspace have likewise vanished, or, like Maniac Gallery, moved, to be replaced by yet newer venues, as the area continues growing as a cultural mecca and nightlife hotspot.

Major credit goes to the artists' grit and determination, but the City of Oakland has helped. Jasmine Moorhead, director of the new Krowwork, awards kudos to Oakland's Tenant Improvement Program, which awards matching funds for redevelopment in the historic downtown buildings once used for light industry: "This directed funding has been instrumental in building up this neighborhood, and I think should serve as a model nationwide." Neditch praises City Council member Nancy Nadel for her efforts, while Kerri Johnson, former director of Blankspace Gallery, now working for regional artists with Neditch and Art Consultant Brook Baird at the Bay Area Visual Arts Network (BayVAN) and the Branch Gallery, praises the Cultural Arts and Marketing Department as "always ... supportive ... [recognizing] the potential of the arts as a positive marketing tool for the City as a whole."

Today some twenty-four galleries participate in the Art Murmur. With Vessel Gallery and Mercury 20 Gallery relocating to the 25th Street block that now houses Oakopolis; new spaces like Krowwork, Macarthur B Arthur, Royal NoneSuch Gallery, Slate Art and Design, Smokey's Tangle, Studio Quercus, WE Artspace and Warehouse 416; and a redesigned, enlarged versions of Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, Compound Gallery, Kuhl Art and the Oakland Museum of California reopening, the vitality of the East Bay art community—with Art Murmur only its most publicized part—seems assured. Cerrito notes: "There is a palpable sense of enthusiasm and energy surrounding Oakland Art Murmur and the Oakland art scene in general. The immediate community as well as the City of Oakland seem to have a real appreciation for what the galleries and the arts are contributing to the city. As a small part of this, I feel like I am actually helping to make a difference—beautifying storefronts; activating streets



TOP TO BOTTOM:
ART MURMUR OPENING FOR KANA TANAKA
AT CHANDRA CERRITO CONTEMPORARY GALLERY

INTERIOR VIEW OF BAYVAN / BRANCH GALLERY

PROJECTION ROOM AT KROWWORK GALLERY

STREET VIEW OF SLATE GALLERY
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE GALLERIES



with people interested in art, creativity, and just coming together to enjoy themselves; helping build personal connections among community residents as well as between Oakland locals and those from outside the city; putting Oakland on the map for something other than crime rates.”

Yet there are challenges: the economic and cultural factors that created the scene continue to affect it. Joell Jones of Oakopolis praises the Murmur’s social role in providing inspiration and meaning to a populace disenchanted with public life, but discerns the familiar pattern of artists reclaiming blighted areas only to be priced out by rising rents: “There have been major shifts in the neighborhood during the three years we have been here. Slow, but steady gentrification. High end restaurants, condos, music venues refurbished ... all seem to have filled up immediately, as if the people were waiting for them ... or they filled a vacuum.” Another gallerist believes that some artists see commercial galleries as the enemy: “Many Art Murmur gallerists, artists, and participants are very locally focused. They are not really interested in Oakland becoming a regional or national art market. They just want to do their cool thing for one other, which is too bad because the serious collectors ... go to shop in San Francisco or LA. Then the artists wonder why they are all struggling financially.”

Cerrito sees the Murmur more optimistically, as entering a phase of increased professionalism and economic viability. Weisberg concurs: “Some of Art Murmur’s strengths are also our weaknesses; i.e., it can be too open or free (I mean in standards of art or presentation), too DIY, too slapped-together.” Its strengths, however, “lie in its diversity, ranging from movies projected onto the wall, to local craft people, vendors and hot dog guys, to open art galleries. It is a real mix ... [and] the mix is what keeps it fresh.” Reconciling the anarchic outsider spirit with the business of art will be Oakland’s challenge, and, if successful, its triumph and legacy.

—DEWITT CHENG



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
“LIL TUFFY” POSTER SHOW AT KUHLL FRAMES + ART GALLERY

HISTORICAL REFERENCE PHOTOGRAPH OF
THE NEW ARTISANS ON 25TH DEVELOPMENT

JOHANSSON PROJECTS INSTALLATION BY PAUL HAYES
PHOTO: COURTESY OF TARA SPAULTY

INTERIOR VIEW OF VESSEL GALLERY
LOCATED AT ARTISANS ON 25TH