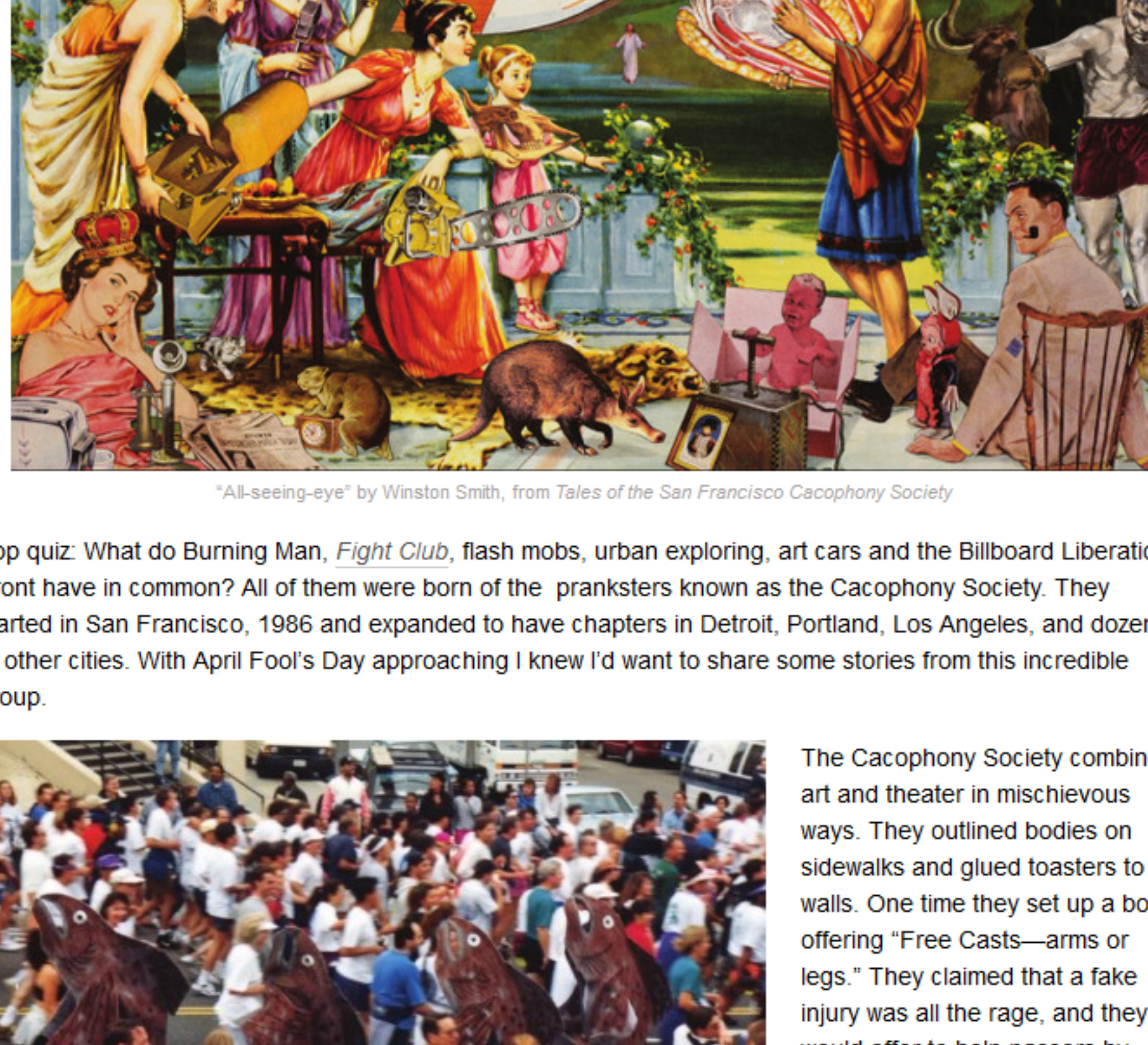


The Cacophony Society: Best Pranksters Ever?

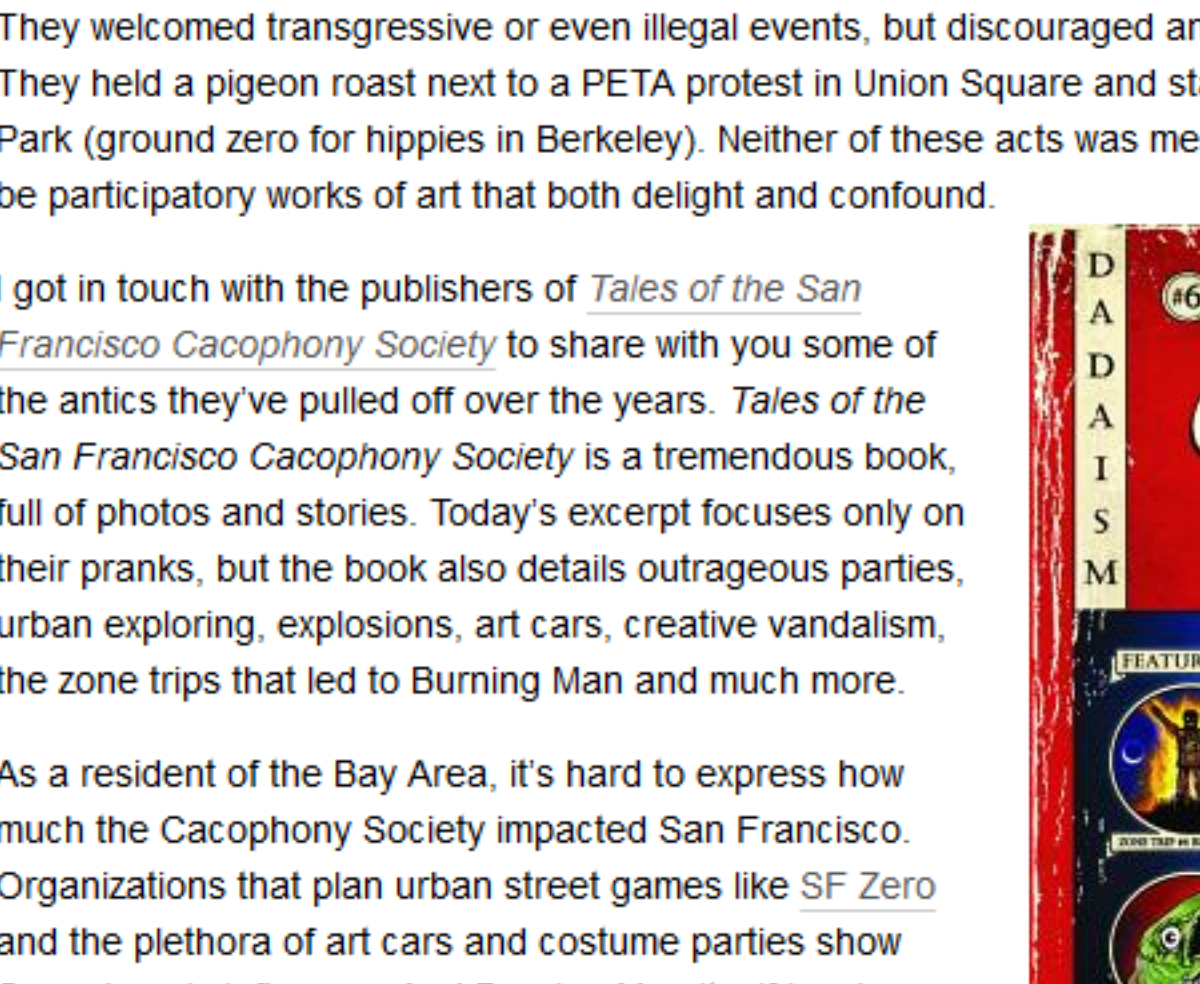
Posted by Karma Bennett · April 1, 2015 at 8:54 am

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All-seeing-eye by Winston Smith, from Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society

Pop quiz: What do Burning Man, Fight Club, flash mobs, urban exploring, art cars and the Billboard Liberation Front have in common? All of them were born of the pranksters known as the Cacophony Society. They started in San Francisco, 1985 and expanded to have chapters in Detroit, Portland, Los Angeles, and dozens of other cities. With April Fools' Day approaching I knew I'd want to share some stories from this incredible group.



Salmon running upstream at the annual Bay to Breakers race

The Cacophony Society combined art and theater in mischievous ways. They outlined bodies on sidewalks and glued toasters to walls. One time they set up a booth offering "Free Casts—arms or legs." They claimed that a fake injury was all the rage, and they would offer to help passers by come up with an epic tale to explain their feigned maladies. They paraded the streets as a legion of drunken Santas (today this tradition lives on in San Francisco and SantaCon). Every year at the Bay

to Breakers foot race, people dress in salmon and run in the opposite direction as the racers—another tradition started by the Cacophony Society. They staged a flash mob zombie attack long before zombies or flash mobs were trendy. Are these actions pranks or art? The Cacophony Society didn't care about labels, only mayhem.

They welcomed transgressive or even illegal events, but discouraged anything overly religious or political. They held a pigeon roasty next to a PETA protest in Union Square and staged a Republican rally in People's Park (ground zero for hippies in Berkeley). Neither of these acts was meant to be political; they were meant to be participatory works of art that both delight and confound.

I got in touch with the publishers of Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society to share with you some of the antics they've pulled off over the years. Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society is a tremendous book, full of photos and stories. Today's excerpt focuses only on their pranks, but the book also details outrageous parties, urban exploring, explosions, art cars, creative vandalism, the zone trips that led to Burning Man and much more.



As a resident of the Bay Area, it's hard to express how much the Cacophony Society impacted San Francisco. Organizations that plan urban street games like SF Zero and the plethora of art cars and costume parties show Cacophony's influence. And Burning Man itself is a huge part of the culture of the city. Reading this book showed me that a prank is never just a prank. A prank is a way to excite the imagination and upset our expectations. Pranks force us out of our routines and expand our notions about what we can and should do with our short lives, to look beyond the rat race and the passive comforts of media. So as you read the excerpt below, remember the Cacophony Society motto: "You might already be a member."

Epic Pranks of the Cacophony Society

The following excerpt and images are courtesy of the publisher, Last Gasp.

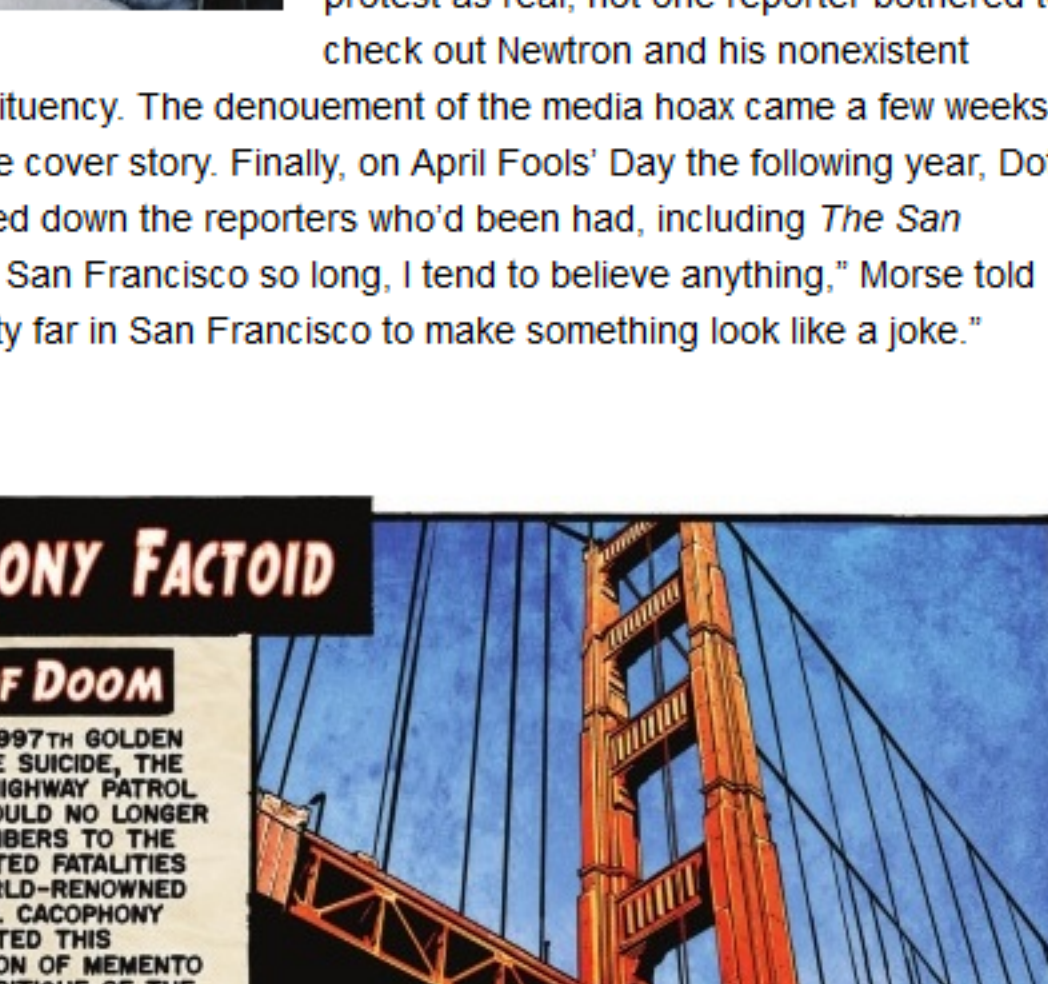
Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society combines narrative recollections with first-hand accounts and actual flyers and zines from the events, which is why the following excerpts change POV.

Decadent Meals for the Homeless

Crumbs anyone? On the morning of Bastille Day, 1994, 31-year-old Peter Doty and a couple of friends went to San Francisco's City Hall dressed in full 18th century attire and carrying fancy trays with a few crumbs on them. After presenting Deputy Mayor, Frank Jordan with the "Copper Crumb" award for crummy homeless policies, Doty and company joined a crowd gathered to show support for Food for Thought's Keith McHenry. Unfortunately, the members of the San Francisco Police Department present that day had no sense of humor and proceeded to arrest Doty's co-conspirators for serving food without a permit.



Despite the arrests, Doty remains undaunted. In fact, Doty, also known as Pierre, Le Marquis de Gâteau, says the annual roast at Union Square, "Let Them Eat Cake," has become something of a hit. Every Bastille Day, July 14, Doty and a host of others make decadent desserts and serve them to the resident homeless people. The servers all dress in 18th-century French aristocratic garments, but often homeless people help with the act. "We had one guy last year who sat down at a piano and played Mozart," Doty recalls.



The SPASM Against Fantasia Hoax

Doty says his pranks are meant as "shame tactics." And he hasn't limited himself to care of the homeless. Satires of whiny political correctness and pawk journalism, for example, are probably his favorite pranks. When the Castro Theatre decided to show Disney's Fantasia in July 1991, Doty formed CAFE, the facetious Coalition Against Fantasia's Exhibition. Calling himself Dwayne Newton, Doty wrote a statement claiming that his six-year-old daughter's terror at the Night on Bald Mountain segment had prompted him to form SPASM (Sensitive Parents Against Scary Movies). SPASM anchored the CAFE, which also included Dieters United (who claimed that hippos in tutus were offensive to overweight people) and BADRAP (Bay Area Drought Relief Alliance Party, which felt that "water conservation efforts will be hindered by showing Mickey Mouse's waste of water in the Sorcerer's Apprentice's sequence").

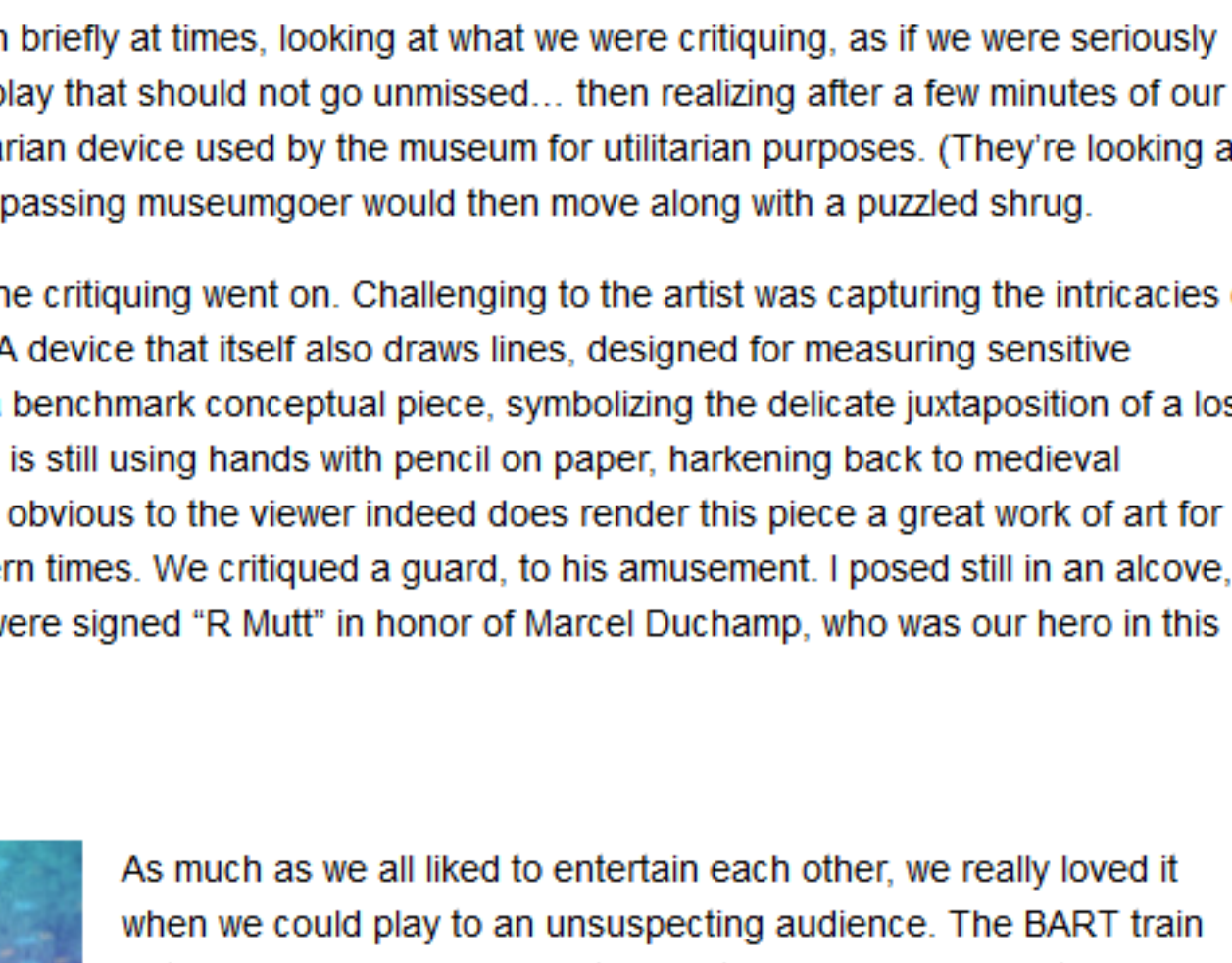
The San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner and The Washington Post all reported the protest as real; not one reporter bothered to check out Newton and his nonexistent

daughter or call anyone else in SPASM's constituency. The denouement of the media hoax came a few weeks later when it was mentioned in a Time Magazine cover story. Finally, on April Fools' Day the following year, Doty came clean and The Wall Street Journal tracked down the reporters who'd been had, including The San Francisco Examiner's Robert Morse. "I've been in San Francisco so long, I tend to believe anything," Morse told The Wall Street Journal. "You've got to go pretty far in San Francisco to make something look like a joke."

Suicide Note Writing Workshop

An event description from Rough Trade, the Cacophony Society Newsletter:

Consider the many applications of the well-written suicide note. Many a job application, love letter, or similar pathetic plea for mercy could be better served by a simple threat of self-immolation. Then too, even if one has the good sense to avoid this arguably cowardly method of honorable reality exit, it pays to have one's parting shot ready. Carry it at all times in a brief case or intersecting with an embriated MUNI driver, jealous rival, or falling building cornice, well, you can leave 'em guessing, can't you? At this workshop we will look at a few famous examples, and polish our own epitaphic epistles. Bring: Examples you admire from the genre, famous or obscure. Do not bring: Sharp objects, loaded guns, and so on. Acts of self-inflicted violence will be sternly discouraged (the landlord, you know).



SF MOMA Tour

We examined and critiqued the utilitarian details of SFMOMA, as if it were the actual art on display. And as a tribute to the "readymade" art pieces presented to the public in the early 20th century by Marcel Duchamp. This was held in the old SFMOMA building on Van Ness, with its intricate humidification measuring devices (looking like a tiny seismograph), old brass fire extinguishers, cracked plaster walls, shiny doorknobs, plush benches, stoic guards, light switches, urinals, and more.

With Cacophony's minds ready to discover art that abounds, and express adventurous conceptual and cultural insight within this fine modern art establishment, we played the most serious game of art critique, and the pretentious hyperbole flowed forth as we reflected ideas of how the art object (a museum doorknob), with its precious patina, was constructed in such a way as to juxtapose a paradigm shift from a new and old work of art for our lenient post-neo-avant-modern times. We critiqued a guard, to his amusement. I posed still in an alcove, to be critiqued veritously. Urinals were signed "R Mutt" in honor of Marcel Duchamp, who was our hero in this game.

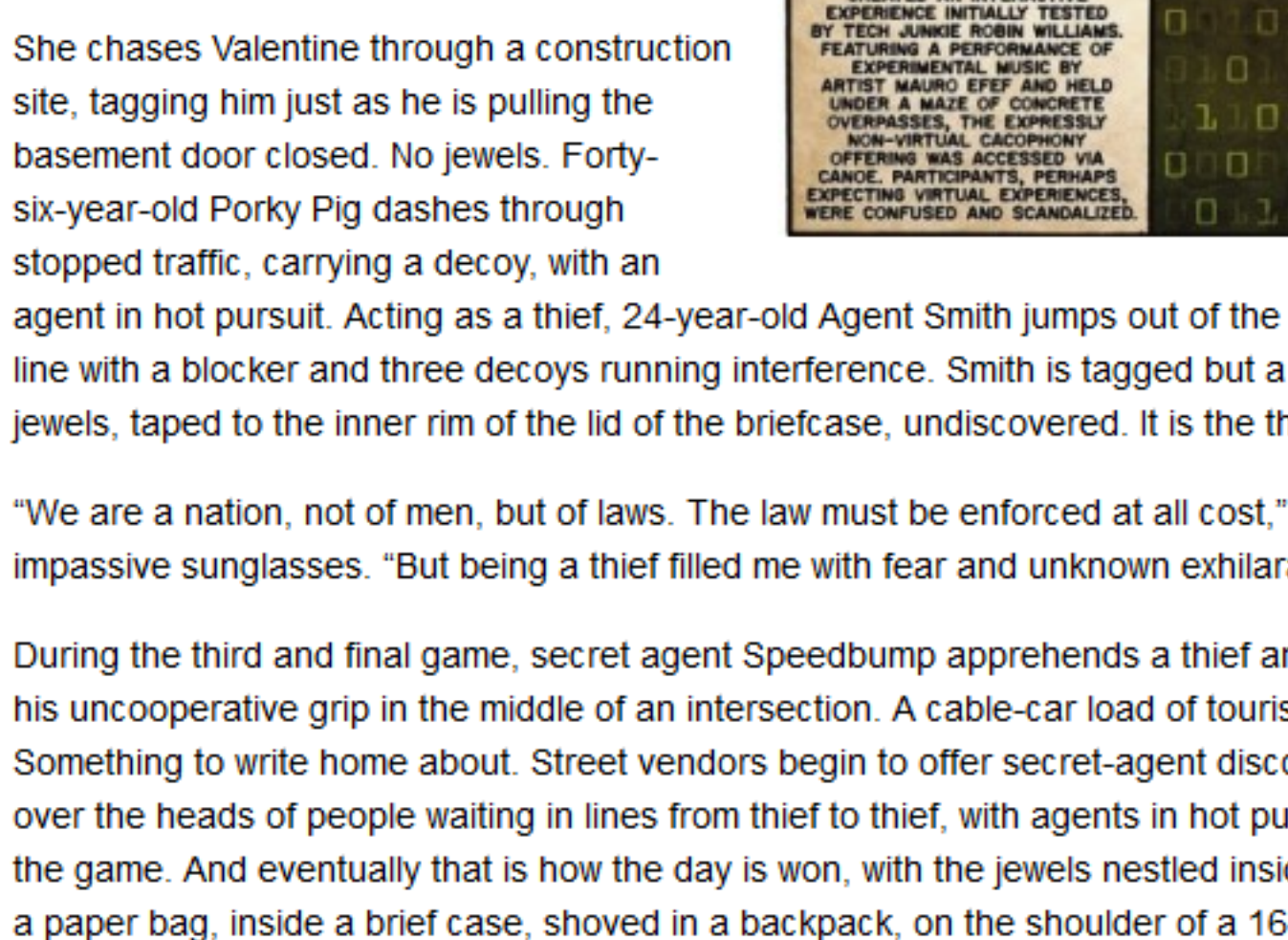
The Bart Lounge

As much as we all liked to entertain each other, we really loved it when we could play to an unsuspecting audience. The BART train between San Francisco and the East Bay was our perfect playground. One Friday evening we all boarded BART and our MC announced to the passengers that this was a pilot project that BART was testing to bring entertainment to riders on Friday evenings. We proceeded to "entertain" the passengers with such acts as "Duane and Daisy" (Peter Doty and Sara Rosenbaum), a dynamic duo straight from Vegas and the amazing "Shirley Bassey" (Robert Hubbard in the most believable Shirley drag) singing her great Bond hit "Goldfinger." Along with assorted magic acts, poems, and total silliness, we "entertained" passengers all the way to the end of the line.

I was the cigarette girl with a 1950s night club tray around my neck, offering cigars, cigarettes, chewing gum, and condoms, accompanied by a pet rat courtesy of the rat girls, climbing all over the tray. We even handed out surveys to the passengers asking them to let BART know which were their favorite acts, and would they would like this to be a regular feature of the Friday night commute.

On the return trip two young guys boarded the train in Hayward. They were dressed in nice suits and ties, on their way to meet their girlfriends in the city. I climbed in one of the guy's laps and started firing with him. As I played with his hair, the rat climbed off my tray and on to his shoulder, where it let go with a very messy, gooey shit. I was sure the guy was going to start screaming at me but instead he turned out to be a great sport. He laughed, tried to clean off the mess, and said that this was going to be a great story to tell his date. He gave me his card and subsequently came to many parties that my husband and I had at our home over the years. This is how I met Mark Harmon, who is one of the best sports I have ever met. —Rat Girl

Smugglers Chase in SF's Biggest Tourist Trap

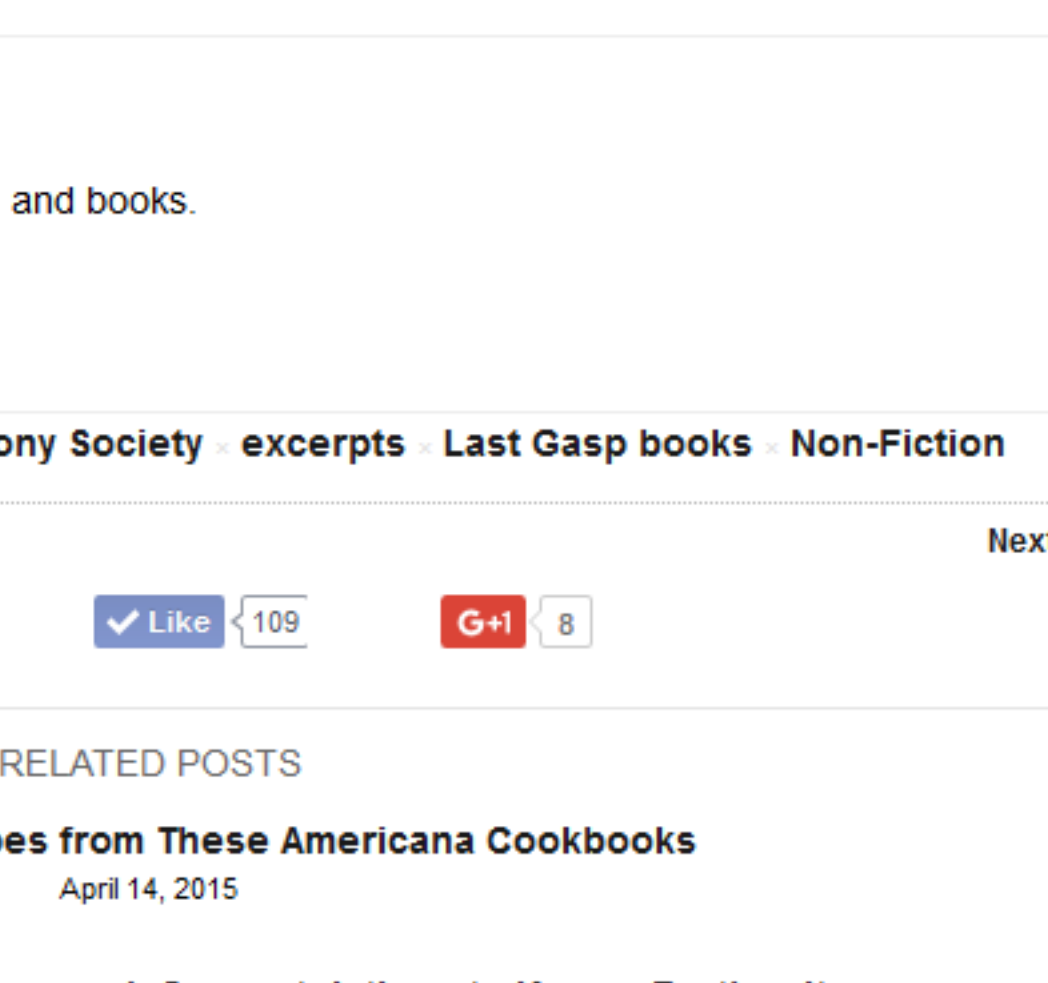


Letters Cabal hosted many live-action street games using the urban landscape as a playground.

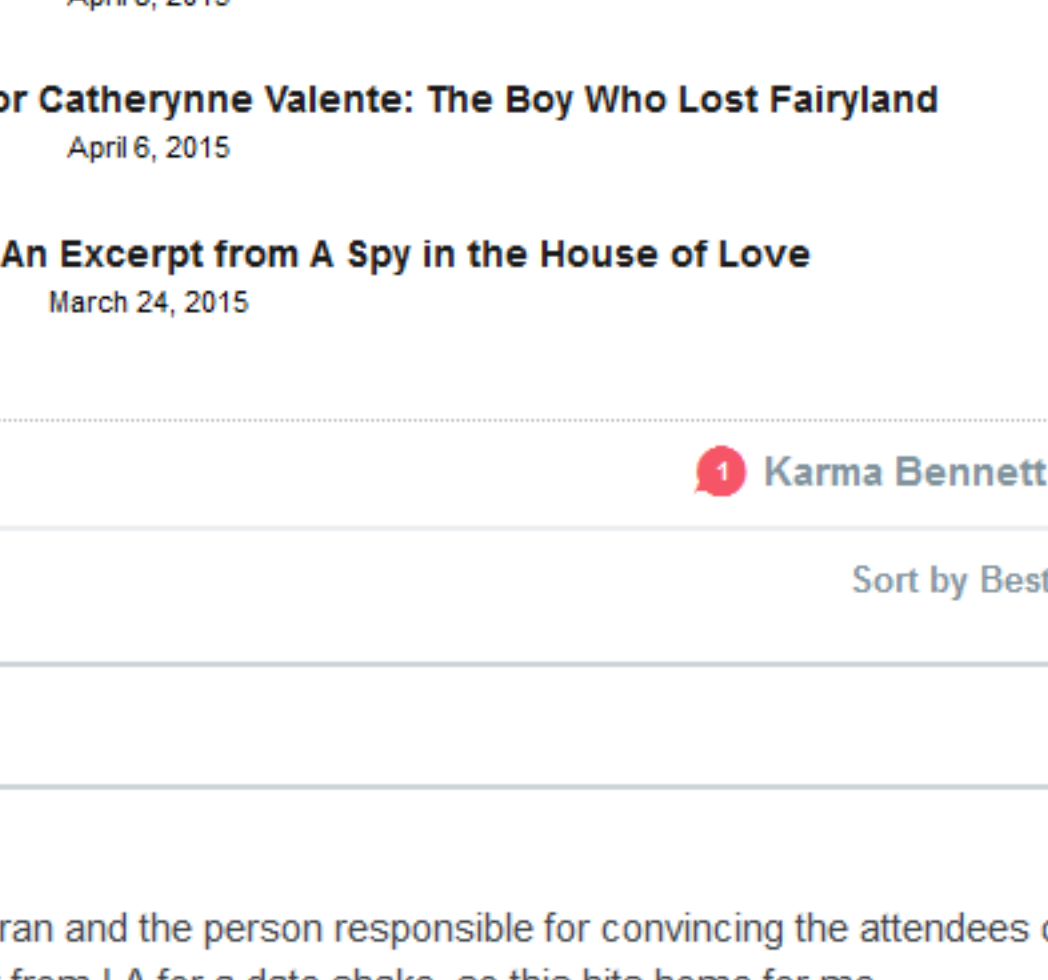
The "Smuggler" game took place in Chinatown and Fisherman's Wharf during a typical work day. On the Embarcadero—the FBI has always had the advantage, but there are pitfalls at Fisherman's Wharf very heavy car traffic, security guards who don't like interlopers, and, of course, tourists. We make our way to the finish line, the Fisherman's Wharf ship wheel on Jefferson and Taylor. We line up, while mobs of tourists stop and snap pictures. We pick teams, and the thieves head off with their loot. Two agents guard the wheel while the rest spread out across two quad blocks to guard the perimeter. It's a nerve-wracking wait. Looking for suits among the throng of colorfully clad sightseers, I nearly tag a real businessman with an innocent briefcase.

At high noon, under the cable car turnaround at Fisherman's Wharf, a group of 25 men and women in business attire and dark sunglasses arrive carrying cell phones and walkie-talkies. They look stern, light-tipped, ready for action. There are five briefcases and one set of jewels. The object of the game, Smuggler, is for the FBI to capture the jewels before the jewel thieves can get them to home base. Historically—in games played in Chinatown and on the Embarcadero—the FBI agents have the advantage, but there are pitfalls at Fisherman's Wharf very heavy car traffic, security guards who don't like interlopers, and, of course, tourists. We make our way to the finish line, the Fisherman's Wharf ship wheel on Jefferson and Taylor. We line up, while mobs of tourists stop and snap pictures. We pick teams, and the thieves head off with their loot. Two agents guard the wheel while the rest spread out across two quad blocks to guard the perimeter. It's a nerve-wracking wait. Looking for suits among the throng of colorfully clad sightseers, I nearly tag a real businessman with an innocent briefcase.

Radio contact tells us that the thieves are closing in. FBI agents are chasing thieves through nearby souvenir shops. Frantic searches are taking place in alleysways. The jewels are nowhere to be found. One thief is nearly captured by a casual bystander, but, using an old football maneuver, she escapes both the citizen and the agent in hot pursuit. The jewels are still nowhere to be found. The thieves are on their way. I'm agitated. I can't get a clear view of our perimeter. There are too many people. The Nicaraguan band behind us has drawn a crowd. They're in our finish line. Some of them are wearing suits. I'm sweating. I can see two thieves in the parking lot behind us, hiding behind the valet booth. There are two more on the southwest corner, moving fast through the crowd. I want to back up, but the other agents have their hands full with decoy briefcases. There's no way to tell. Suddenly, it's a rush. Thieves coming in from all directions. We capture two suspects but it's hard to expect the unexpected. While searching taxi cabs, a car pulls up to the stoplight, and a thief jumps out, depositing the briefcase containing the jewels in the safe zone.



An observant little girl who has been watching the game with her father innocently points out that we're "just playing Cops and Robbers." Twenty-nine-year-old FBI agent Roxie Dare camouflages herself by looking through a garbage can before an onlooker tips her off to a nearby villain, 38-year-old Christopher Valentine.



She chases Valentine through a construction site, tagging him just as he is pulling the basement door closed. No jewels. Forty-six-year-old Porky Pig dashes through stopped traffic, carrying a decoy, with an agent in hot pursuit. Acting as a thief, 24-year-old Agent Smith jumps out of the bushes and rushes the finish line with a blocker and three decoys running interference. Smith is tagged but a sloppy FBI search leaves the jewels, taped to the inner rim of the lid of the briefcase, undiscovered. It is the thieves' day.

"We are a nation, not of men, but of laws. The law must be enforced at all cost," says Smith through his impassive sunglasses, but being a thief agent me with tear and unknown exhilaration.

During the third and final game, secret agent Speedbump apprehends a thief and wrestles the briefcase out of his uncooperative grip in the middle of an intersection. A cable-car load of tourists erupts in violent applause. Something to write home about. Street vendors begin to offer secret-agent discounts. Briefcases are tossed over the heads of people waiting in lines from left to right, with agents in hot pursuit. Witnesses sandwich, wrapped in a paper bag, inside a brief case, shoved in a backpack, on the shoulder of a 16-year-old kid who walks up to the finish line and casually sits down on the bench next to the ever-vigilant FBI. The kid gets a \$5 payoff, but no doubt he'd have done it for free. The FBI is completely undone.

And the next game? You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

Text and all images excerpted from Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society edited by Kevin Evans, Carrie Galbraith, and John Law. Factoid illustrations by Kevin Evans. Painting at the top is "All-seeing-eye" by Winston Smith.

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Lucija Kordic, 6 months ago, Great post, Karma, I'm a former Alibran and the person responsible for convincing the attendees of the Zone 2 trip to drive 80 miles east from LA for a date shake, so this hits home for me.

One correction, though: Winston Smith is the mastermind behind the top image.

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