

***FAKE ART, FAKE NEWS
AND
“REAL FAKE” ART NEWS***



by Phillip Barcio

Chicago has long been a global center of both Art and News. But, for a brief time, in 2017, the city earned an additional honor: the dubious distinction as the global center of Fake Art News. Did you even know such a thing as fake art news existed?

Regular “fake news” gets a lot of attention these days. People deride it for eroding our trust in information. But we have forgotten that there is nothing inherent about news which requires it *not* to be fake. News deals with perception; it is curated by editors who decide what to share and what to ignore. It invites criticism and its meaning is up for interpretation. In other words, news itself is an art.

The word “news” comes from the Latin *novus*, meaning *just created*. Romans called a person who just came into money *homō novus*. They called stores that just opened up *novae tabernae*. To be news, something must be newly minted. But it does not have to be true.

While the origin of the word fake is contested, it may come from the Latin *facere*, which means *to make*. If something is fake, it is manufactured. *Ars* is the Latin word for art. When mixed with *facere*, it becomes *artificium*, or *artifice*. Artifice means phoniness, but it literally means *to make art*. So, Art, by definition, is fake. And news, by definition, only has to be new.

The story that put Chicago on the fake art news map last year concerned a sculpture by artist Scott Reeder. Reeder is represented by Kavi Gupta, a Chicago-based, blue chip, contemporary art gallery. In early 2017, the gallery offered up several large-scale works from its warehouse for the “Year of Public Art,” an initiative of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. One of the works the gallery offered was Reeder’s sculpture, titled *Real Fake*.

Real Fake is exactly what it sounds like—a sculpture of the word REAL sitting atop the word FAKE. The words are six-feet high, eight-feet long, made out of fiberglass, and painted gold.

Along with several other sculptures, the city installed *Real Fake* on the Chicago Riverwalk, a pedestrian pathway that hugs the Chicago River as it winds through downtown. Specifically, *Real Fake* was installed in a small plaza at the intersection of North Wabash Avenue and East Upper Wacker Drive.

The plaza is in the shadow of dozens of iconic buildings. One of those buildings, about 600 feet away and



Rene Magritte Belgian 500 Franc Note. Photo by Phillip Barcio.

across the river from the plaza, is the Trump International Hotel & Tower. If you strike just the right pose in this plaza, you can take a selfie with the Trump Tower in the background.

The proximate juxtaposition of these two objects is where this story gets interesting. The morning after *Real Fake* was installed, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article with the headline: “Chicago trolls Trump Tower with ‘Real Fake’ sculpture.” That story was then picked up by multiple other media outlets. FOX News amplified its narrative by reporting live from in front of the sculpture. Matt Finn of FOX News began his article on the controversy by stating, “The Windy City is under fire for apparently turning public art into a political message.”

This qualified as some classic fake news. Had any of these media outlets bothered to do some actual basic journalism, they would have discovered that *Real Fake* was not anti-Trump. Reeder made the piece back in 2013, in the early years of Obama’s second term. It was made for the public art element of Art Basel in Miami Beach. It was intended as a statement about the glitz and pomp that accompanies Miami Art Week.

Reeder had nothing to do with its placement in Chicago. The city offered the gallery two spots for the piece which were chosen because they had existing infrastructure to accommodate a public sculpture. The

Real Fake photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery. Copyright by Scott Reeder, the artist.

The Many Faces of Fakery

When the topic turns to fake art, fake news, or fake art news, be ready with this handy guide to stories from the art world highlighting six of the many faces of fakery.

Appropriation

When an artist uses the work of another artist as an element of a newly created work, that's appropriation. The artist J.S.G. Boggs, born Stephen Litzner, made meticulous copies of money, and was even put on trial for his counterfeiture. But Boggs substantially altered the images of money he copied, and he considered his work to be appropriation, not a criminal act. The most important appropriator of the modern era was Elaine Sturtevant, known professionally simply as Sturtevant. Beginning in the 1950s, Sturtevant became famous for making subtly modified, but otherwise perfectly believable works in the style of Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Marcel Duchamp, and many other artists. Sometimes she exhibited her appropriations in the same neighborhood just days or weeks after the originals were debuted. A major survey of Sturtevant's appropriations is on view at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac – Ely House in London from February 23rd through March 31st 2018.

Link:

Sturtevant Exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac
<http://www.ropac.net/exhibition/vice-versa>

J.S.G. Boggs obituary

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/arts/design/jsg-boggs-dead.html>

Plagiarism

Plagiarism—basically, appropriation without attribution—is when you pass off the work of another artist as your own. The most notable example of contemporary art plagiarism has got to be the fashion chain Zara, which has been accused of plagiarizing the works of scores of independent artists. Widely covered in the media, this ongoing story is being told in real time by one of the victims, Adam J. Kurtz. We have opted against plagiarizing his account and will instead direct you to the website where he describes his experience, shoparttheft.com.

Link:

Website for Adam J. Kurtz:
<http://shoparttheft.com/>

Story in The Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2016/jul/21/zara-accused-copying-artist-designs-fashion>

plaza was chosen because the other spot was under a bridge.

No party at any time made any provable attempt to, as the *Tribune* said, “troll” the President. Nonetheless, thanks to the *Tribune* story, which was echoed across multitudes of other media outlets, Trump supporters began deluging the city and the gallery with angry phone calls. Eventually, an unknown assailant lit *Real Fake* on fire.

At this point, it became impossible to report on the fire without also reporting the controversy started by the *Tribune*. And that is when the news became art—because it created the conditions it described.

The phrase “to create the conditions you describe” was coined by a San Francisco artist, Peter Berg, in the 1960s. Besides being an artist, Berg was a writer and activist who moved to San Francisco around the end of the Beat era. One of his first gigs in the city was writing a play for the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

As Berg understood it, the Mime Troupe intended to perform the play in the park for free. But on opening day, as soon as the performance got underway, the police arrived and shut the play down because the Mime Troupe had not applied for a permit. The director was arrested. The audience protested. The media reported on the event. Images showed uniformed officers cracking down on seemingly innocent actors and theater lovers.

What Berg and most of the actors at first did not realize was that all along the play was not just a play—it was a pretext for an arrest. The director had intentionally not applied for a permit in order to force the police to act and had also invited known political activists to be in the audience.

Public perception at the time was that the police were pro-law. But by violating basic laws with art in a way that attracted media coverage, the Mime Troupe made it impossible to report the news without also transmitting their message: that the police were anti-art, anti-free expression, and anti-young people.

Berg called this “creat[ing] the condition you describe.” He was so inspired by its ability to affect social change that he and a handful of other Mime Troupe members split off and formed a radical, avant-garde guerilla theater troupe dedicated to staging scripted public actions in which only a handful of participants realized the action was a performance. They called their group The Diggers.

The Diggers operated in San Francisco between the years 1966 and 1968. Even if you have never heard of

them, you know their influence. Tie-dye shirts, modern soup kitchens, art parades, free stores, and even stamping peoples' hand at events have all been traced back to their actions.

Berg was interviewed a while back for an episode of "American Experience" on PBS. In that interview, he told the entire story of the Diggers (Do watch it—it will change the way you think about media culture today). Berg explains that at the height of their influence, the Diggers became convinced that they could create a utopian culture simply by staging quasi-improvised public performances that gave the impression that such a culture was already in existence.

For example, they started staging "free food giveaways" in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. In a sense, the food was not exactly free. The Diggers either paid for it, stole it, or otherwise scrounged it. But the hungry people in the park to whom they gave it away did not know that. Nor did they care. Those people really did get free food. And only a handful of those involved in the giveaway knew the event was scripted.

Berg's and the Diggers' goal was not just to feed the hungry. Feeding the hungry was a pretext for their larger aim: to get the attention of the people driving by on their way to work in the Financial District. The Diggers wanted stock brokers to see an alternative society, where everything was free, emerging before their eyes. They wanted drivers to re-think the what and why of their actions.

The media reported on the free food giveaways—real news about scripted events that had real consequences. Media coverage spawned public interest, and people really did start donating free food. Then folks who were either hungry or idealistic from all over America started converging on Haight-Ashbury by the thousands.

I could go on about the multitude of other actions for which The Diggers were responsible, including a "free store" that repeated this idea. But that is not the point. The point is that their actions illuminate how confusing it can be for members of the public to figure out what News is, what Art is, and what it means for something to be fake.

The Diggers had a signal they used that let savvy people know that what they were doing was Art. Whenever they staged a public action, they displayed a frame somewhere in the vicinity. This idea came from composer John Cage, who supposedly once said, "Put a frame around anything and it's art." By offering society a new "frame of reference," they demonstrated that reality is a matter of perspective. They proposed alternative facts. And they succeeded—too well, perhaps.

Counterfeiting

Similar to plagiarism, counterfeiting also involves copying the work of another artist. But rather than claiming the copied work as their own, counterfeiters want you to believe it was made by the original artist. One particularly ironic story of art counterfeiture concerns René Magritte. In the dark days following World War II, the surrealist artist supported himself by making counterfeit money. Then in 1998, 31 years after Magritte died, Belgium honored the authentic aspects of his legacy by putting his likeness on actual 500 franc notes.

Links:

Essay on Magritte's counterfeiture activities:
<http://www.mattesonart.com/ren%C3%A9-magritte-and-forgery.aspx>

Rene Magritte 500 Belgian franc (see page 5):
https://www.numiscorner.com/products/belgium-500-francs-1998-km-149-undated-1998-ef40-45?gclid=EAlaIQobChMIs4zp-wrmS2QIVUQOGCh3QoggWEAkYASABEGJyKPD_BwE

False Authentication

Art authentication is risky business—just ask businessman Martin Lang, who let a British reality show authenticate a £100,000 painting from his collection, which he thought was by Marc Chagall. The authenticators discovered the painting was a fake, and the Chagall Committee demanded it be destroyed—without compensation. Fears of just this sort of possibility are likely behind the current spat between the Art Institute of Chicago and President Donald Trump, both of whom claim they own the authentic Pierre-Auguste Renoir painting, "Two Sisters (On the Terrace)." Neither party has stepped up to the task of independently authenticating both works. Perhaps neither one is the real deal.

Links:

BBC story about the Chagall painting that was destroyed:
<http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-26848886>

Chicago Tribune story about "Two Sisters (On the Terrace)" (see page 8)
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chicago-inc/ct-met-trump-renoir-1019-chicago-inc-20171018-story.html>

Forgery

Forgery is similar to counterfeiture, except rather than copying a specific existing artwork, forgers make fake artworks in the style of another artist then pass them off as authentic. The most commonly forged artist in history is Amedeo Modigliani. Last year, a major Modigliani exhibition at Ducal Palace in Genoa, Italy, was shut down after more than 100,000 visitors had already toured the show, when it was discovered that 20 of the 21 paintings on view were known forgeries.

Link:

Story in The Independent about the Modigliani exhibition that was shut down:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/italy-modigliani-fake-show-police-investigation-art-venice-a8154701.html>

Fraud

The word fraud applies whenever one party knowingly deceives another party with intent to achieve financial gain. If you willingly buy something you know is a forgery, you are not the victim of fraud. One of the most famous examples of art fraud occurred when Center Art Galleries in Hawaii was convicted of mail fraud after attempting to move 12,000 forged Salvador Dali prints through the U.S. Postal Service. After the prints were seized, the government decided to sell them to recoup the expenses of prosecuting the case. The prints were auctioned off by Koll-Dove Global Disposition Services, in a sale at which the prints were openly advertised as fakes.

Link:

UPI Story about fake Dali prints going to auction:

<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1995/10/20/Fake-Dali-prints-go-to-auction/5178814161600/>

The Diggers proved that, even at its most journalistic, the news can only report what happened. It cannot guarantee what happened was not just a scripted pretext for something else. News reporters are easily fooled. They know this, which is why they often do not mind interpreting reality broadly by pretending to know the meaning, intent or purpose of a work of public art.

I do not consider myself part of the news world. I am part of the art world. And although artists did not invent fake news, they did perfect it. In a strange way, I am proud that Chicago, for a while, became the epicenter of the conversation about art, culture, politics, and the universe of artificiality that we have substituted for what we used to call “reality.”

The story of *Real Fake* reveals how the media exists on a thin veneer between what is abstract and what is concrete. Real news can be reported about things that are fake, and fake news can be written that exposes something real.

Yet, we are not victims. We can change our own frame of reference. If we want. All we have to do is realize that, on some level, nothing is fake and everything is fake; nothing is news and everything is news. Fake news is just another form of real art.

Can you dig it? ■

Phillip Barcio is a fiction author and art writer, recently transplanted to Chicago, whose work has also appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *Tikkun*, *IdeelArt Magazine* and other trustworthy publications.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir,
Two Sisters (On the Terrace), 1881.
Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago.

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*FIRST CAME **FAKE ART**,
THEN **FAKE NEWS**,
NOW, THERE'S
REAL FAKE ART NEWS*

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**REAL
FAKE**

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