

Jesse Bercowetz + Matt Bua

The Re-creation of Fort Discomfort



YOU CAN DEFEND.
WITH THE CARROT

SHOP TILL
THEY DROP



**Jesse Bercowetz
+ Matt Bua**

The Re-creation of Fort Discomfort

**18 September
- 26 October
2003**

Rice Gallery



foreword

Late on a sweltering August afternoon, wilted and tired from walking the streets of Brooklyn, I met Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua. Stepping inside their studio was like a blast of refreshing cold air. They stood together at the center of a dazzling array of raw material – furniture, models, drawings, remnants of previous installations – all of which would soon make its way to Houston in the back of a 24' U-Haul truck driven by the artists. Once here, Jesse and Matt increased these riches many times over as they scavenged, shopped, and built their way into their theatrically extravagant installation, *The Re-Creation of Fort Discomfort*.

The installation's riotous architecture included a rambling, intentionally ramshackle set of structures defined by five distinct areas – Traveler's Tunnel/Trophy Room, Band Room, Alchemist's Lab/Kitchen, Apocalyptic Preparedness Room, and the Underground Meeting Room/Classroom. Exploring the fort was wacky fun that recalled the freedom you once felt when you escaped adults' prying eyes – a bracing whiff of childhood. One felt one's way around (carefully), opened doors, climbed up and down, crawled through holes, edged past whirring fans, and cast a dubious eye on bubbling liquid. True to the artists' intent, and evident for those who chose to see it, was the installation's more serious side. At this moment when America is again mired in a "short war," when many choose to live in gated communities, and we view the next terrorist attack not as an "if" but as a "when," *Fort Discomfort* was a razor-sharp commentary on the sense of dis-ease that pervades our post 9/11 country.

Considering the thousands of disparate elements from which *Fort Discomfort* was created, it is amazing to consider that it was a group effort, guided by two artists who possess an exceptional gift for collaboration. While Jesse and Matt retain an individual artistic identity, a shared artistic sensibility and what can only be described as a deep trust, allow them to create joint projects. When asked about the mechanics of this working relationship, they described a fluid, synergistic process in which one leads the operation until he gets tired, then, the other picks it up.

I am grateful to Jesse and Matt for the sum of experiences they gave us, and for their thoughtful interaction with all who worked with them. I would like to thank the many Rice students and community volunteers who dedicated countless hours of creative energy to the installation. Thanks also to Kelly Klaasmeyer who, with characteristic insight and humor, distilled *Fort Discomfort's* complexity and captured its exuberant spirit in her article for *Rice Sallyport*, The Magazine of Rice University, Fall, 2003. I am grateful to Christopher Dow, Editor, for allowing us to reprint it here.

Kimberly Davenport
Director

SEARCH FOR

1. ART CRATES
2. wooden spoons (Big)
3. BLACK couch ^{OR ANY OTHER COLOR}
4. MILK CRATES
5. OLD OR NEW PLEXY
6. MIRRORS - MIRROR LIKE
7. CHAIRS
8. SCRAP LUMBER
9. Boxes C.B.
10. WORK TABLES
11. MATTRESSES
12. MOVIES

FAN
Door
CLASSROOM

Clean
B. PERIT TUNNEL
WALLPAPER
PAPER

- SHELF BRACKETS
- PLEXI
- SOUND EQUIP.
- SHREINK

MATERIALS

- FOAM RUBBER
- ETHA-FOAM
- PAINT
- H2O PUMPS
- SMOKE MACHINES
- LIGHTS ^{extension cord}
- SCRAP WOOD
- NEW WOOD
- C.B.
- ~~ORIGINAL~~

TO DO

- LIGHTING
- COVER TUNNEL
- CHILLY WATT
- ~~EARLTON PUMPS~~
- GATLING GUN
- ~~CLASS ROOM~~
- ~~ROOF~~
- * GARBAGE DISPOSAL
- * Sump pump
- H2O PUMPS
- * HANG CABLES
- GATLING GUN
- MAKE GUITARS
- FAKE SOCKET
- MAKE GUITARS
- SIR cough fill-in
- STACK boxes
- PAINT + BLACK STICKS

WINDOW WAR MURAL

- ~~SPKED ROLL GATE~~
- ~~FLIP UP HATH DOOR~~
- ~~BATH DOOR close from~~
- Fix Doll house

WEDGE ROOM

- PAINT BAND ROOM exte
- BURN DVDS?
- SLIDES + DUPS
- JM Receipts
- LAPPY HD - RADIO
- PRINT CLUB House
- ~~CARROT CURTAIN~~
- ~~CHILLY WILLY WALL~~
- Hook up Toys to WALL CURRENT
- PATCH FLOOR
- MODEL WORK STATION
- ELECTRONICS WORK STATION
- BeeF up Legs of All.
- MAKE A Fruit MASK







bercowetz + bua on fort discomfort

How would you describe *Fort Discomfort*?

Jesse: The piece operates on many levels; it is a fiction that can be experienced with a sense of nostalgia, historical relevance, independence, and immediacy. It is an opportunity to play the revolutionary, the freedom fighter, the pioneer, a place where hierarchies shift as do time periods and realities.

Matt: Behind these walls the outside world fades. You're the Maker and Defender. If people who pass by think the fort looks like junk, never suspecting the treasures concealed inside the walls, your fort has succeeded.

Where was the "original" *Fort Discomfort* located?

Jesse: Every fortress, barricade, gated community, metal detector is *Fort Discomfort*. Strains of xenophobia – from the INS to the Branch Davidians; from the "Christian patriots" to the art world; from project housing to the Patriot Act – this is *Fort Discomfort*.

Matt: *Fort Discomfort* is created over and over; the exact same reasons were given for the last Iraq invasion as for this one.

Do you find and use material off the street?

Jesse: We don't limit ourselves to found objects. We like to use whatever works or doesn't work, whatever is available at the moment. We manipulate all the materials we find, buy, or borrow.

Matt: We admire a chef who can shop at the cheapest grocery store yet still make a tasty dish. Materials off the street carry with them much more history and energy.

Does *The Re-creation of Fort Discomfort* comment on contemporary American culture?

Jesse: Sure. America and Americans seem to enjoy re-creating cities, wars, historical moments, fashion trends. We re-create so we don't forget, but in this process we distort, manipulate, drastically alter, and redesign. It could be interesting if we, as individuals, re-created ourselves more often. Instead we just forget. We look to postcards, photo albums, corporations and the media. We are like tourists with Alzheimer's . . .

Matt: Building a fort is a more universal experience than just America. As with American history, people move onto land, take it over, and then build up a protective structure in the hope that those whose land it was are too severely weakened to try and reclaim it.



SAFE Study SPOT

Student Rest room

Bush Monster SHELTER



MORE GLASS

Faculty Rest room

TICKET Booth Propo GANDA

ENTER

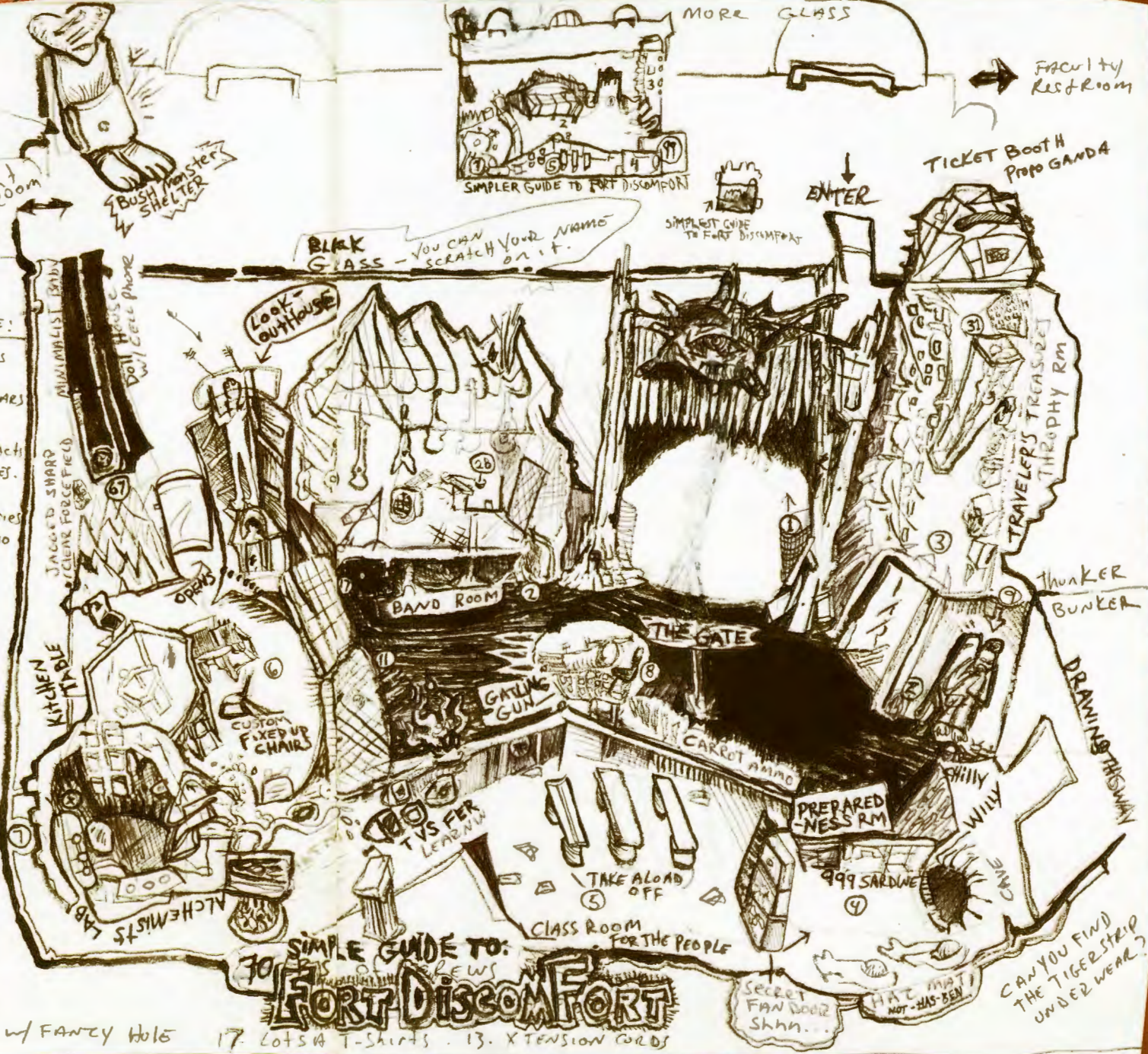
SIMPLEST GUIDE TO FORT DISCOMFORT

BLACK GLASS - YOU CAN SCRATCH YOUR NAME ON IT.

Look-out house

WHAT WE GOT THAT YOU CAN'T HAVE:

1. BADASS GATE w/ CYCLOPES HEAD
2. A BAND ROOM w/ GUITARS AND AMPY GADGETS
3. A MUSEUM OF ARTIFACTS FROM FARAWAY PLACES.
4. A PREPAREDNESS ROOM w/ STRAWBERRIES SARDINES + C.B. RADIO
5. A MEETING ROOM AND CINEMA FEATURING SPACE GIANTS, ATHICA LAND OF THE LOST, SIX MILLION MAN MEETS BIG FOOT AND ALI G.
6. CHAIRS + TABLES YOU CAN DANCE ON.
7. A LAB FULL OF BAD ACID, COCO PUFFS + CARLOTS.
8. GATLING GUN SHOPP + ILL YA DROPP CART.
9. ONE SAD CLOWN THATS THINKIN.
10. A COMPAND BOW.
11. MATTRESS BRIDGE w/ FANCY HOLE



SIMPLE GUIDE TO: FORT DISCOMFORT

17. LOTS A T-SHIRTS . 13. XTENSION CORDS



band room

- Hot pink B.C. Rich Acoustic*
- White Flying V with Roosevelt for Congress*
- Sapporo can*
- Chopped up Red Rocket, Matt's first*
- 2 x 4 with long metal bristle from a street-sweeper between strings, played by vaporizers*
- Fretless broken-neck Charvel bass from the North Carolina band The Lawn Pigs played by back massager with chopstick*
- Dr Pepper can converted into microphone
- Door mounted "welcome" chime miked by a pair of headphones
- Bottle-and-tomato-resistant chicken-wire cage
- T-shirt and foam sound insulation
- Karaoke machine
- Little amps
- *Guitars

gate

- Upside down picket fence
- Large mounted Cyclops head
- Small swamp creature
- 1/2-year's worth of carrot tops
- Model of 14-ft U-Haul collector's truck
- Cactus sculpture
- Square mountain blocks
- Giant wicker bed frame pieces
- Bags of peanut shells
- Stalactites
- Model of *Mountain Top Picnic*¹
- Model of *Volcano Studio*²

traveler's tunnel

- 2 light oscillators
- Teeth collection from past "toofee" performances³
- The Dark Crystal from bottom of the *Parasitic Space Lab*⁴
- Rope from Hawaiian beach excavation
- Little crosses and weapon collection from Brooklyn rooftops
- Tone arm collections
- 45 adaptor collection
- 90-degree stick collection
- Homemade musical bows
- Found slide collection on light box
- Tar Tar action figures⁵
- *Sweatshop* doll⁶
- Snaked Drain Creature (3rd attempt)⁷
- 2 reams of paper
- 3 years of cat fur
- Trophy head collection lit by flashlights

- Gold-lined walls
- Crucified battery collection

black minimalist tower

- 12 sonically controlled, cell phone talking dolls
- Dollar store cowboy hat with 20 blinking L.E.D.s attached
- 1 hole for a small hatless head to enter
- One warning on the wall

main barricade

- Architectural laser cut wall pieces found at Sofia Bros. storage center, Brooklyn
- Cardboard treasure chest found on the Rice drama building loading dock
- *Sweatshop* walls
- Futon frame
- Crystal wall with bulletproof see-through, salon-style door
- Rubber ammo belt

look out turret

- Wooden toilet seat
- 2 landed arrows
- Tron-patterned linoleum⁸
- B.A.M.N. (up against the wall M.F.) poster⁹
- Southern mansion of cards
- Mattress bridge connecting to Classroom

alchemist lab/kitchen

- The Silva Method electronic learning device¹⁰
- Water pumps
- Kool-Aid
- Cocoa Puffs
- Lots of carrots
- Hair gel
- Fun straws
- Schematics and scientific textbooks
- Knives, spoons, and lighter
- Garbage disposal
- Test tubes
- Broken beakers
- Non-explosive Glissy Nightra¹¹
- Dysfunctional plumbing
- See-through kitchen table with bad acid underneath
- Multiple Jessy Stockholder chairs¹²
- Piecemeal *Parasitic Space Lab*¹³
- Bug with fuzz
- Centrifuge spinner
- Cooler

classroom

- Steel walls
- PVC benches
- Blown out holes
- Hanging sneaker
- *Workers World* newspaper
- *The Six Million Dollar Man* guest starring André the Giant*
- *Space Giants**
- *Attica**
- *Land of the Lost**
- Found UFO book collection
- Self-closing fan door
- Photo of Tar Baby
- Hitler, Marx and popular culture books
- Homemade pot pipe
- Secret rooftop storage
- Carrot-shooting Gatlin gun made from Fiesta shopping cart
- Life-size landscape print
- Smoke
- *Movies and TV shows

apocalyptic preparedness room

- Cave entrance
- 2 haz-mat suits
- 666 sardines
- Canned strawberries
- Model of Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain
- Ted Nugent album cover¹⁴
- CB radio
- Boxes of Corona and Chilly Willies
- Pound cake
- Jaye's broken/fixed coffee mug¹⁵
- Canvas shopping bag
- Cheese apron

on top of preparedness room

- Sergeant Slaughter¹⁶
- Black sign to nowhere
- Flattened guard tower
- Green muscle monster arm
- Coffee cup depth charge, used to destroy coffee cup submarines
- Giant broadsword
- Deer fur

exterior wall of preparedness room

- Burlap
- Neon-painted wooden sticks
- Found alien weed drawing
- Blood drips
- Chilly Willy curtain

clown in thinker pose

- Silk clown suit from Bronx POP POP wearing human ape-feet shoes¹⁷
- Squeaky toy entrails under cardboard floor

drawing room

- Lots of drawings

lobby

- Painted window with lifeline viewing design
- Attendant desk/ticket booth with Fort Discomfort sign, marking start of Traveler's Tunnel
- *Couch Monster* (after George Bush)

¹ Outdoor installation (2003), at Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus

² Unrealized installation: volcano made from art transport crates with interior space for lava production

³ A stage alias for the artists' music performances that involve wearing fake "hillbilly" or monster teeth

⁴ A module from the multimedia installation/performance *Mir 2* (2001), at Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

⁵ From "quantum-based fantasy world" co-created with Brooklyn artist Lisa Ludwig

⁶ From the installation/performance *Sweatshop* (2003), at Exit Art, New York

⁷ Sculpture made from hair found in Matt's drain

⁸ Tron was an early (c.1980) computer game that produced a random series of straight lines and right angles within a box on the screen.

⁹ B.A.M.N., an ideologically extremist protest group known for using violence to disrupt student-led protest rallies

¹⁰ Silva Mind Control, a self-help program founded in 1966 by José Silva, now called The Silva Method

¹¹ Jesse and Matt's make-believe version of nitroglycerin production

¹² Jessica Stockholder is a contemporary American artist known for making sculpture from everyday objects.

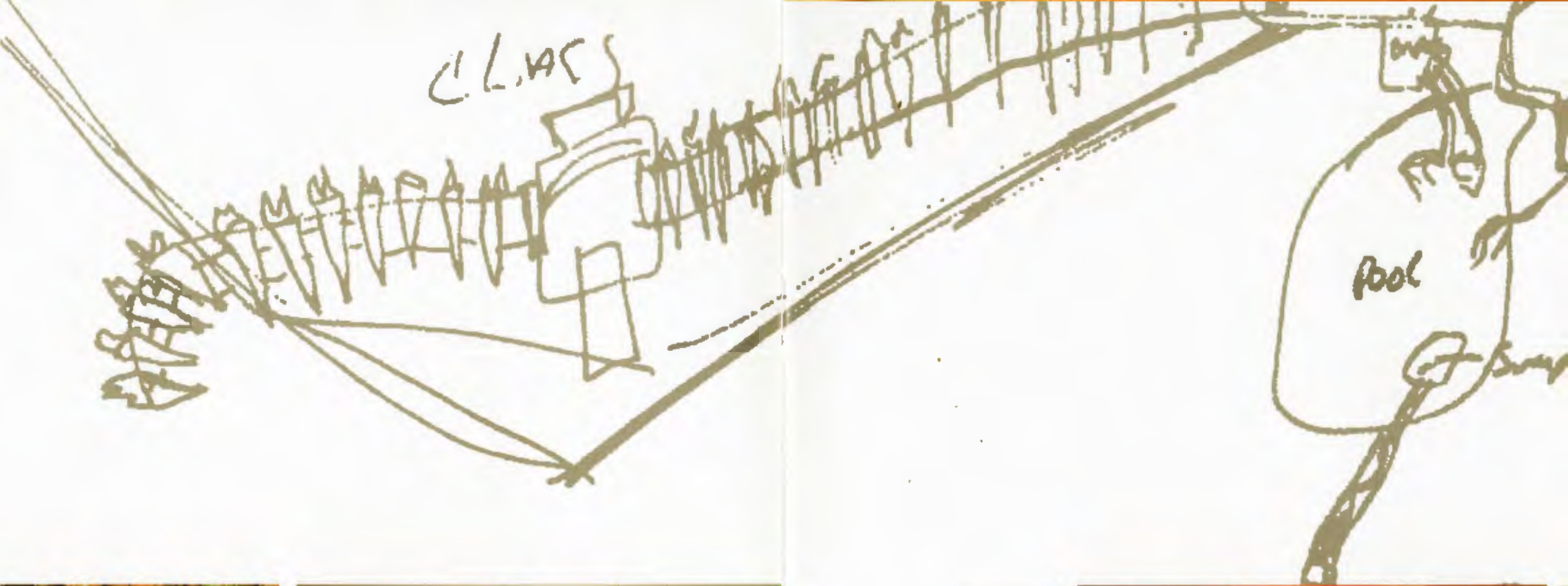
¹³ Same as 4

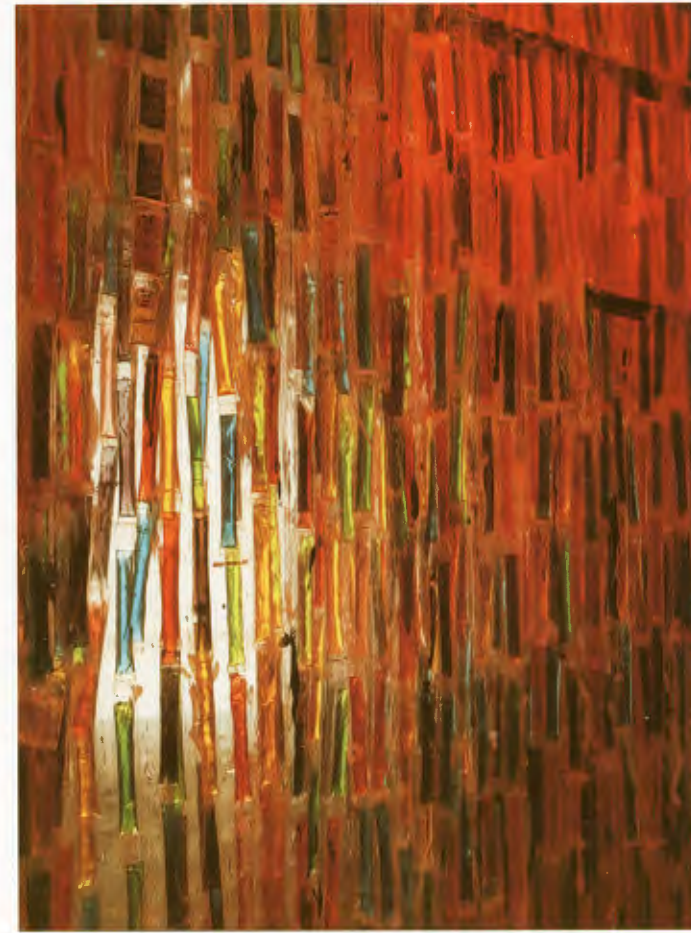
¹⁴ A 60s era rock singer who still performs, and campaigns for expanded rights for hunters and gun owners

¹⁵ Jaye Anderton, Rice Gallery Manager

¹⁶ A nod to the work of the 16th-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, known for his portrait heads composed of fruits and other natural objects. The artists' version consisted of fake vegetables thrown into a helmet, which to them, resembled Sergeant Slaughter, a Worldwide Wrestling Federation wrestler and G.I. Joe action figure.

¹⁷ Clown costume that belonged to Matt's grandfather, POP POP







Fort Discomfort

Rice Gallery's first fall exhibition, *The Recreation of Fort Discomfort*, is an epic art installation cum clubhouse by Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua, two New York-based artists and long-time collaborators. To realize their unwieldy and over-the-top 30-something version of a childhood hideout, they rented a 24-foot truck, filled it up with just about everything in their Brooklyn studio, and hit the road for Houston. Along the way, they collected even more stuff. *Fort Discomfort* is a show about haphazard, goofball construction and creative impulses run wild and unchecked. It also blends nostalgia for the unfettered joys of childhood with the angst of adulthood.

Like all artists invited to do installations at Rice Gallery, Bercowetz and Bua were given free rein of the space. This is the super-fort you would have built as a kid if you had an adult's ability to accumulate junk – and your parents would have let you. Imagine a 10-year-old given a truck to haul stuff from dumpsters, heavy trash day piles, and garage sales. But this is a thing you would never build as an adult because, by the time you can realize those childhood delusions of grandeur, you don't care about them anymore. Bercowetz and Bua are an exception. The glass wall of the gallery was selectively

blacked out with paint, leaving lookout windows. An unwieldy, almost cubist construction of cardboard and tape was created to house the gallery attendant. The artists were inspired by the thematically shaped ticket booths in amusement parks – structures made like a *Flintstone*-style house or a tiny log cabin.



Inside the gallery, a ratty wicker headboard and footboard stand on end, like twin pillars marking the fort entrance. A tiny, handmade cardboard replica of a U-haul truck perches here – a memento to the Brooklyn-Houston odyssey. An inverted picket fence stretches over the entry like the gate to a medieval castle. The exterior walls of the fort are cribbed together using everything from cardboard to old futon frames to wooden 1" x 4"s.

Past the gateway, the frenetic hodgepodge accelerates. There is a curtain of dangling strips of multicolored Pop-Ices, a silver Mylar wall, and a gurgling water feature crafted from a clear plastic sweater bin. Electrical cords and PVC pipe snake everywhere. A Plexiglas platform leads to a giant tower, high in the corner of the room. It is composed of layers of cardboard, Styrofoam, and other debris – all painted a gloopy white. More PVC pipe disappears into popcorn buckets stuck on the side,

making it look like a prop engine from a low-low budget Star Wars clone.

Old mattresses arc overhead in the fort's courtyard, creating an inaccessible bridge/triumphal arch. There is a stage fenced with chicken wire, like someplace the Blues Brothers might have played. Lights flash, and a bunch of guitars are stored inside. Audio feedback hums throughout the exhibition, mixed with an ocean-like roar and a patter that unsettlingly calls to mind gunfire.

A low-ceilinged side hall, entered through a weighted swinging door guarded by a passed-out clown mannequin, has walls lined with gold lamé. One sports Halloween masks spookily lit from below with flashlights, and the other is embedded with an oddball collection – a bunch of knots, a giant hairball, a variety of teeth both real and fake, reminding one of a roadside museum in a gas station parking lot.

Crawling through a hole in another wall, you enter a dark den with two biohazard suits hanging on the wall and a millennial stockpile of Pop Ice boxes. Copies of *Workers World* newspaper are stacked in the corner. It's the August 28, 2003, issue, the headline reading "More Than a Power Failure, Capitalist Greed Short-Circuits Grid." In a back room, five monitors play TV reruns from a '70s childhood – *Land of the Lost*, *Godzilla*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*. Viewing them in the



cramped, bunker-like space, you wonder: Are they escapist nostalgia or news reports of a prehistoric parallel universe replete with giant dinosaurs and superhuman bionic men?

In the installation, you feel the artists' yearning to return to the boundless optimism and creativity of childhood. But the environment is cut with unsettling, Road Warrior-esque undertones. There is the sense that something horrible has happened and people are cribbing together a shelter, as well as a life, from the remnants of the outside world. *Fort Discomfort* manages to remind us of what we loved as kids as well as what we fear as adults.

—Kelly Klaasmeyer

Kelly Klaasmeyer is a Houston arts writer. This article first appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of *Rice Sallyport*, The Magazine of Rice University.

about the artists



Jesse Bercowetz (right) was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1969 and was raised in Bowling Green, Kentucky. In 1996, he received his BFA from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois.

Matt Bua (left) was born and raised in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1970 and received his BFA from East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina in 1993.

While Jesse and Matt pursue individual careers with solo exhibitions and performances, they collaborate regularly and often work with other artists and volunteers. Their most recent project is *Folly Chopper Dynasty* (2004), an outdoor installation for *Open House: Working in Brooklyn* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Other works include *Clubhouse* (2003), an installation at Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York and *Mountaintop Picnic* (2003) at Long Island University's Brooklyn Campus. *Sweatshop* (2003), in *Exit Biennial: The Reconstruction* at Exit Art, New York; *Colony* (2002) at Islip Art Museum, New York and *Mir 2* (2001) at Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, were done in collaboration with artist Ward Shelley. In 2003, Bercowetz and Bua were selected for the Artists Studio Program at Smack Mellon Studios. They both live and work in Brooklyn, and share a web site: overcoat.org.



Artists' previous works; exterior views:

Above left:
Clubhouse, 2003, (with Sabine Heinlein)
Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York

Bottom left:
Mountaintop Picnic, 2003
Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York

Above right:
The Observatory, 2002 (with Ward Shelley)
in *Colony*, Islip Art Museum, Long Island, New York
Photo: Ward Shelley

Bottom right:
Folly Chopper Dynasty, 2004
in *Open House: Working in Brooklyn*, Brooklyn Museum of Art

Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua,
The Re-creation of Fort Discomfort, 2003
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org

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Jesse Bercowetz/Matt Bua: cover; pages 5, 18 right, 22, 27, 29.

Thomas Dubrock: inside front cover, pages 2, 4, 6-9, 11, 14-15, 19-21, 23-25, back cover.

Susan Van Scoy: page 18 left.

Kimberly Davenport: page 26.

Please note that the artists wish to share credit for the lists, sketches, and artworks appearing in the catalogue:

Page 1, *You Can Defend With The Carrot: Shop Till They Drop*, 2003, 14 x 11 inches; crayon, marker, and paint on paper.

Page 4, Search For/To Do list

Page 12, *Simple Guide To: Fort Discomfort*, 2003, 11.5 x 15 inches, ink and marker on paper.

Page 18, Detail of a sketch of ammunition for carrot-shooting Gatlin gun

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