

The Wiggle Mural

an interview with the artists and organizers

The public mural movement has decorated public places in many corners of San Francisco. But the Wiggle Mural, or as it is officially entitled: “The Duboce Bikeway Mural,” incongruously on a 400-foot wall on the back of the nation’s largest supermarket chain, decorates a place, celebrates a vision, and takes a position—well, actually it takes several. Public art rarely speaks in such a subtle and charming voice, while still packing a punch for anyone who spends the time to take it all in.

The Wiggle Mural (painted in 1998) is a welcome antidote to the sterile corporate planning and tepid public art increasingly inflicted on us throughout a San Francisco succumbing to creeping monoculture. The Wiggle Mural repudiates the insipid hollowness of San Francisco’s boosters, while staking out a vision of a radically improved city. Cleverly it represents and symbolically extends its own physical presence astride the crossroads of bicycling San Francisco. As it flows through the hours and along the journey from east to west (or west to east), it broadens our concerns to all kinds of human mobility (the art of moving), as well as the relation of our mobility to the surrounding ecology. Visually and intellectually it forces us to re-think, altering the boundaries of our thoughts, using dimensions of self-reflection to push us beyond our own assumptions about what is and what could be.

A fresh approach is offered here to the art of public murals. The

Wiggle Mural is unique in style, scope, and integration of purpose with place. Splendid public artists such as Rigo and Twist and the Precita Eyes muralists have been joined by Mona Caron, Joel Pomerantz, Gordon Dean and their team. The walls of the city blandly and maddeningly snore, or perhaps they yammer the usual “buy!” and “sell!”—except in the oppositional art that leaps at us from surprising places. The Wiggle Mural is situated to entertain and edify a constituency of bicyclists, pedestrians and Muni riders, precisely the subjects it includes and addresses. As Joel Pomerantz put it, “it’s our mural, it’s our space.”

Long before the mural was finished, the space it was beginning to adorn was already taking on a new life as the public commons of cyclists and other citizens ready to embrace a different approach to city life. In an era when market relations increasingly throw us as isolated shoppers into malls and other zones of hyper-accelerated, transaction-oriented behavior, the re-emergence of new areas of public commons is heartening indeed.

The Duboce Bikeway is a beachhead in a long, slow battle to transform San Francisco into a city really worth living in—not just for the affluent, but for everyone. Every inch of territory we can take away from the banal daily descent into life as targeted markets helps restore our humanity a bit.

—Chris Carlsson



Chris Carlsson (CC): This mural is uniquely situated in a physical location that's linked to a community, AND as an urban space, many communities pass through it in different ways, some on are on streetcars, some are pushing shopping carts, some are getting a clean needle, some of them are just walking by on the way home with a bag of groceries. All of these individuals pass through YOUR lives as artists, as human beings. In that fascinating area are politics, and very specific human relations. As the artists and promoters of this project, what is your sense of the relationship of this project to communities?

Mona Caron (MC): You gave a good cross-section of the diverse communities that pass through Duboce Street, the location of the mural. What they have in common is their transience. The only part of the population "in transit" that never passes through this street are car drivers. From the vantage point of someone in a car, this section of Duboce Street looks like a gutter, barely a street, if it is noticed at all. It is of no use to them as they drive by.

The official purpose of the mural is to celebrate the opening of this stretch of Duboce street as a two-way bike path. It is a huge mural, 360 feet long and 2 stories high, and to car drivers this project might seem out of proportion with the space to which it is dedicated, since its square footage exceeds that of the street it celebrates. (I got several comments to the effect of: "too bad the project is in such a bad location"). On the contrary, it is a great location, thanks to the absence of car traffic!

It was the primary goal of my concept for this mural to illustrate the importance of this street to all the other communities. I tried to do it by depicting the street itself in the painting in context with the rest of the city and the rest of our lives, within a sort of panoramic continuum from the east to the west of the City. This isn't arbitrary, because the mural shows the actual path a bicyclist takes to get from anywhere downtown to anywhere west in the city. A bicyclist going west who wants to avoid the hills, necessarily goes through the Wiggle, usually starting with this particular little stretch of Duboce Street.

Joel Pomerantz (JP): The first time that I had an overall perspective about the role of the community and the role of the mural in the community was the first day that I stayed until dusk during the summer. We left at different times everyday, and rarely stayed past 5 or 5:30, because the sun would come into view on the wall, and highlight all the bumps. It was also starting to get really windy. One day it wasn't windy at all, so everyone left and I stayed. I just sat on the stoop of our paint wagon and watched as the sun went down behind and reflected off the windows on the hills in the East Bay. I was sitting there contemplating what a beautiful spot it must have been before all the buildings were there, when I started to notice more and more cyclists going by from downtown. Maybe one out of ten would be someone I knew. About half of them

would wave or just ring their bell, or somehow acknowledge my presence there, at least partly because they knew I was connected with the mural. More and more of the people I knew started showing up and talking with each other. We were creating a place for people to meet each other and exchange ideas, and use the public space, the street, as a kind of a market place. The ideas were flowing back and forth between that space and the Bike Coalition office through a corridor of bicycles going back and forth doing errands. During that hour and a half period of time all kinds of stuff happened, leaflets were exchanged, newsletters were brought, people were asking other people to come and meet them there. It just happened to happen, on a beautiful day with no wind.

MC: Yeah, it definitely became more and more of a forum, an *agora*, especially for bike commuters who were coming from downtown. Sometimes there were as many 15 or 20 people spontaneously stopping and chatting.

The whole mural project gave me an opportunity to get to really know other communities, not only bicyclists, but also neighbors, the homeless people living there, and other nomadic people, like young punks, etc. As the project progressed, I started getting there earlier and earlier in the morning, and staying later and later in the evenings, coming across a greater range of people.

CC: What were your longest days? Dawn to dusk?

MC: Yeah, pretty much, especially when the windy season was over, and in the last month. It was also a part-time street cleaning job. I found myself trying to read what had gone on in the street during the night from the traces left behind, trying to decode these signs. The most unpleasant were human feces and puke and things like that, but there were other ones too. Signs were left on the wall. No tags or graffiti, amazingly, but every once in a while somebody would scratch the wall in a way that looked deliberate, and we would wonder if this was some sort of feedback, some sort of communication, maybe not even voluntary. That was a very interesting experience. It's ironic because part of the mural shows how a bicyclist gets to see the land she treads close-up. That concept is represented symbolically by the extreme close-up of the beach area and the trace of the bike tire in the sand mingling with the footprints of the insects and animals. Interestingly for me, while I was painting this rather poetic example of looking at the ground, I got to experience a detailed look at that stretch of Duboce Street, one that wasn't quite as poetic, as I told you. I like the fact that that happened: in a sense, I took my own advice.

CC: What did you discover about the community of people living in and around the mural site?

MC: The homeless people were the people I started my days with. In the later months of the project there'd be over a dozen people sleeping around the storage bin when I got there in the morning. I established a rapport with

some of the regulars, while others I tried to avoid. As time went on, my involvement with them changed in various ways: Some of the truly schizophrenic people I was scared of in the beginning turned out to be surprisingly normal and helpful when addressed directly. Other people I thought were harmless turned out to be untrustworthy. But I got to really care about a few of them. One example was Rick, who eventually disappeared, and it still bothers me that I don't know what happened to him. He had built a shack behind our storage bin, one wall was made up of a door on the side of which was written "It ain't the Ponderosa, but it's Home Sweet Home." I had a few long chats with him, some about his amazing life, some about the mural. The guy had a great sense of humor.

One time, he came to me and said "Mona! OK so here's the way I see it." And he proceeded to give me a meticulous and creative interpretation of the mural in the form of a story. It was hilarious, and actually a veiled criticism. The gist of his story was that a giant alien (the Burning Man I had painted instead of the Sutro tower) had taken over the city, the big bicyclist in the west end being the last one to flee town. I understood his message, which was about the city looking too deserted and sterile, and I worked harder after that at making the picture look more alive.



Mona Caron painting the mural

photo by Tristan Savatier



CC: Was that the only example of an unexpected crossover between one community and another there? I mean, sometimes you see homeless folks with a shopping cart full of bikes!

JP: Eddie B. and Brenda frequently did stuff for us. I'm pretty sure they're the ones who brought us that beautiful Turkish rug, and three different chairs at three different times, and generally did us a lot of good turns, including reporting a guy who had stolen a bunch of stuff from our bags.

CC: They would have probably been that way regardless of the subject of your mural, no?

MC: The subject of the mural had absolutely no influence on our interaction with the homeless. The bicyclists' concerns are about as far from their more basic and fundamental ones as, say, Botticelli's *Primavera*. Rather, the fact in itself that we were painting a mural, therefore occupying the space for a reason that is not utilitarian nor commercial, that did influence the way they interacted with us a great deal. I remember the guy who returned some stuff he stole from us, saying: "I didn't know you guys were artists!". And Eddie and Brenda, the homeless couple forcing a cash donation on us. Another crazy guy soliciting donations for us from passersby. Others helping us clean the street... Lots of other anecdotes spoke of the fact that people working on public art are much less alienating to them than people working a "real" job, especially if such jobs make them, in their eyes, representatives of authority or of private property or of class differences.

CC: Communities are something you forge in the practice of relating on that day-to-day basis. Anybody can connect in that form, it doesn't matter what your background is. That's why urban street spaces are so interesting to me, because they bring people together who normally would not cross each other's paths, but if they do and something stops them—that's where you guys come in, you've created something to stop them.

Gordon Dean (GD): That's the difference between my experience painting there and other experiences I've had on the street. Usually I'm trying to get somewhere, and so I'm riding my bike and I'm avoiding traffic. Here I was planted in one place for a long period of time. You saw things pass by you. It's just a very different view.

CC: You talk about other groups of people, other individuals, not particularly painters, coming there, finding their reason to stop, and actually forming new kinds of relationships, or maybe taking new initiatives based on having discovered each other there in that space? I would assume that the latter would largely arise among bicyclists?

JP: Lots of it was non-bicyclists. The descriptive details of the mural attracted people giving their friends and out-of-town visitors walking tours of the wall, even before it was done. The mural really did spark a new sense of what that part of town is for. People told us that they had changed their com-



Tristan Savatier

Some of the imagery in the flying machines is the imagery of early flight, which was always pedal-powered and bicycle-related. The downtown part of the mural is an exaggerated representation of reality. You can see a horrible traffic jam happening here. It's six o'clock and Critical Mass is starting, and there's something strange that's happening. Some of the bicyclists are taking off, on strange contraptions and flying machines. They're all lifting up and flying around in the air. Each one is trailing a yellow banner. These people represent the dreamers of the city, the utopians, the people who have an idea of what reality could be like. That's what the yellow banner symbolizes. One huge yellow banner turns into the rest of the mural, meaning this is one of the possible ideas of how the city could be. We take a close-up of one of these banners—one of these utopias—and we discover a representation of a very realistic and plausible utopia.

mute route to come past there, or they had gotten off the Muni train even though that wasn't their destination, or that they had purposely walked around the back of the Safeway instead of the front while they were going home with their groceries.

GD: A couple of people at the unveiling, and others thereafter, talked to me about how the mural changed their experience of the Wiggle and that stretch of Duboce street in particular, which used to be a creepy place. They said that now they feel they're arriving in their neighborhood, or they've left work and they're coming home when they pass this threshold. It's a fun place to be. That was very gratifying for me to hear from other people, because I was having that feeling myself.

Origins

(JP): I coordinated this project, the Duboce Bikeway Mural. The SF Bicycle Coalition was invited by the city of San Francisco to paint this mural. We've been working at it for about three years, with the last five months being painting

Peter Tannen works for the city as the unpaid staff person on bicycle programs, and he had the idea. Peter got a grant from the federal government that had something to do with disruption of urban blight or something hilarious. He came to us and said, "We have the money, we need someone to coordinate it. We thought the Bicycle Coalition would be a good source for that labor." I of course leapt at the opportunity. Naively I thought there'd be a lot of competition for the job but it was just me. I had to raise whatever money I could for the project, and what I did raise was about \$12,000 in donations from individuals, local businesses and foundations. Half the money, about \$15,000, was already there, and that was the money we were allowed to use on materials such as paint, which is very expensive.

CC: What is the message of the mural?

JP: We've always hesitated on that one. There are three or four messages in the mural. The first message of the mural was that it can be and should be a pleasant, in fact, a joyful experience, to go across the city, by bicycle or walking

or any other means. The second is that the bicycle is part of the natural setting and part of the urban setting, and it's got a low impact on the natural environment, so it's a vehicle and a machine that represents the connection between the urban struggle and the natural balance. The third message has to do with the flowing nature of the bike ride through the city and the connection between that and this geographic location. Because this is the spot where a creek used to flow and it's flat. People bicycle here to avoid the hills, and that represents one of the main issues of bicycling in San Francisco, hence our flowing design. The fourth message came along towards the end of our process, after a tour of the Coit Tower murals.

MC: Those murals inspired us to add a more polemic political edge to the east part of the mural.

GD: That was one of the funnest moments of the whole project. The same night after visiting Coit Tower, Mona and Bill Stender and I had a couple of hours of brainstorming at a cafe in the course of which we fleshed out this idea. We wanted to tie up some loose ends and give a little bit more political symbolism to the mural. It had a lot to do with adding in the traffic jam in the area depicting downtown and making it into something that's supposed to show the here and now, while turning the rest of the mural symbolically into a future than can be.

MC: We basically decided to add some imagery of contrast and negation to the rest of the mural. A bit of dystopia to enhance the utopia. While working on the sketches for this mural I went through many versions, going back and forth between a design showing only an ideal city and one which showed contrast. This being a bike and ecology-centered mural, the contrast was to show car traffic and pollution. At the time (1997) Critical Mass was very much talked about and bicycling was always on the front page of the news. As usual, the media tended to reduce the meaning of the struggle to a mindless "bikes vs. cars" issue. That made me feel even stronger about wanting to avoid shallow and preachy "good versus bad" moralistic themes in the mural. I don't believe that bicycling is superior to other alternatives to the car. The point we're trying to make is, like Critical Mass, much broader: It's about a vision of the city as a moveable feast, rather than a parking lot. When the last sketch was done, there were no cars in it. I decided to turn the whole thing into a depiction of the city that holds together harmoniously—you shouldn't even notice the absence of cars. That was a soft way of making that statement.

But after seeing the Coit tower murals, we saw the advantage of dramatic tension stemming from the negative reinforcing the positive. We decided to turn that eastern section of the wall into an unrealistic depiction of reality so that the rest of it could be a very realistic looking representation of utopia.

CC: Why do you suppose that so many of us have decided at

this time to give political meaning vis-a-vis community and social interaction to the bicycle and not to the bus, where we're all sitting next to each other and could easily have conversations and have new social experiences?

MC: When I ride a bicycle I mostly connect with other bicyclists. Taking the bus, or public transportation, is more conducive to exposing oneself to the rest of society. When I take the bus, there is a wider cross-section of society that I encounter.

Democracy and Collaboration

JP: I wonder how the two of you felt about collaborating with three different groups: the artists who became the art team; the collaboration with those who were less skilled, or had less time; and the collaboration with the community, the people who were putting demands on you or were asking questions of you, or were commissioning you to do the project?

GD: I'll start out on the negative side. I found it difficult to work with volunteers with whom I didn't share a certain vocabulary. I'm talking about people who didn't consider themselves artists, but wanted to help paint. I know that there were ways they could help, and I felt it was important for them to participate, for the sake of the project, partly to get it done, and partly to have more people involved with it. At the same time, it was really frustrating, because sometimes I felt like I was having to teach art class at the same time I was just asking somebody to do something.

MC: When that happened to me, sometimes I was nervous but often I found it interesting. I was very conscious that I was teaching basic principles of how to render, how to paint. I took the opportunity to test out how it would be to be a teacher, because that's something that I've considered.

CC: How was it with people who were easier to work with? A lot of times there's a sense that you as the people on the top of the heap have to make your volunteers feel good about their participation. That's a job!

JP: We had a turning point where I explained to Mona, that I was no longer willing to occupy volunteers. In other words, tell volunteers that 'I'm sorry, but we don't have anything for you to do.' Until that point we were trying to strike a balance where we would find the right job for the right volunteer. Many of the jobs would require very little skill, but we got to a point where we didn't have unskilled jobs for painters anymore. (Of course everyone wanted to paint.) Jobs like cleaning up the street after the litter had accumulated during the night, or helping reorganize or restore the paints—those jobs were really not very coveted.

MC: What makes it a community project? It's often called a community mural because everybody in the community participates democratically. Each person has their own thing they want to put in the mural, and they each do it in their own style and in their own way. The result from that is often very fun and colorful and very interesting. But

that is not the style that we wanted to have. I agonized about this fact a lot, because having decided on a unified design and style, carrying it out meant that I was kind of the dictator, saying how things were going to be done, etc. This was often very hard and made me feel very guilty. I felt how undemocratic this process was. There was a hierarchy—me and the art team directing the other people.

CC: Wouldn't you argue that 'real art' requires that kind of specificity of vision?

MC: 'Real art?' See, I don't believe in this distinction. I think the community mural made by children is just as much real art as this is. It's about a conscious decision about what exactly you want to achieve, and what kind of technique is required to accomplish that, and what kind of skill this technique requires. It turned out to be a community mural because a lot of people got involved. During the design, Joel organized brainstorming sessions with whoever was interested. People's suggestions and requests while we were painting were taken into consideration, and sometimes directly incorporated into the design. Lots of volunteers got to help, but not with everything, and not democratically. But also there's a lot of other communities that got to participate in other ways.

All the communities that we talked about before, the homeless folks, the support of the neighbors, and the input that I got from them, led to a lot of details that I hadn't thought of before. They were like requests.

CC: Are you drawing a distinction between an open, interactive and consultative process as opposed to a formal democracy?

MC: Yes, it was more of the former, not very much of the latter. I still remember one time a group of developmentally disabled people came down and said "oh, we're part of the community and we'd like to help paint." I thought, gosh, it would be great, but then I also panicked at the same time because some of these people didn't have very good coordination, even just for simple tasks. I think we could've done a really beautiful abstract painting with them, but not what we were doing.

JP: I think we did really well. For example, there were a number of times when people decided themselves that their skills had run out and they'd better stop painting. I did my best to foster that. Many people leapt into the fray and were as enthusiastic as could be and did more than their skills allowed them to do. Josh said, "My ability to contribute to this mural has come to an end," now that we're on to the



Tristan Savatier

The Wiggle goes from Duboce Street up to the Haight, zig-zagging through the lower Haight. The Wiggle is represented as flowing water because the flattest route that bicyclists naturally take is also the lowest route where water naturally collects. There used to be a creek here under the Wiggle. The water ends up in the sewer grate because that's where the creek actually is today. The Wiggle here, the creek, becomes a bike path. The Victorians are more colorful than they are in reality, because we wanted to represent the diversity of our community, not just in terms of ethnicity, but also in terms of ideology. The yellow house is a Buddhist house. There's another house that is also slightly golden color which is a North African color scheme. The corner house is red, the Commie house, with a Cuban flag in the window, and so on.

more skilled tasks. Well, that's great, that's a realistic way to include the community without breaking the standard that Mona was setting.

MC: The kind of design we had decided to do had to be done meticulously: in no other way would the transitions have had the kind of *trompe l'oeil* effect they were supposed to. If those effects hadn't worked, the whole thing would have flattened and looked like the paint-by-number piece we were trying to avoid. Fortunately, many people that were initially kind of skeptical actually reacted very enthusiastically when the first details were up and looked so 3D. If we look at the *inclusion* that this high-skill level provoked, rather than at the exclusion it provoked, we have various beautiful examples of people who got involved who had a special high skill that they got to display in this mural. For instance, Bill Stender, he has a sign shop, and mostly works with computers.

JP: We needed a lot of signage, we needed a lot of text in certain areas, and we needed the tools of the signmaker's trade.

MC: He's a super skilled letterer and a sign painter. It's something that he loved to do and actually missed from his real work. To sum it up, some people were perhaps excluded, but we opened the doors to a lot of people with incredible talents that never got to express them.

CC: That undercuts the notion that this was exclusive. There's a certain level of expertise required for certain results, whether it's brain surgery or a beautiful lizard or whatever it may be.

GD: Two hypothetical examples: One where you create a design, each person has a square in a grid. The people from the community come and do their thing in their individual square. Now, everybody has done their thing fully, it's there, but they don't necessarily relate to each other. There might be some really powerful energy that comes from all these things that weren't really meant to go together, and suddenly being together, POW! There it is. Another way of doing things is to come up with a design out of one person's brain, then brainstorming among a group of people to build on it, but there's a unity to it. You find people to cooperate with each other and take advantage of their best skills in order to create this unified image. I think we were trying to create a unified image, and we were trying to find the right people to do it.

MC: I don't think that our way is necessarily better than other ways. That's why I really liked Gordon's description just now. I think the situation with all the discrete squares is often extremely powerful. Whether you like it or not, depends on your own personal aesthetic preferences, but it is just as much art as another approach. The difference is that because of our own aesthetic preferences we chose to do it this way.

CC: I've dealt with this in a different context, namely political collectives. The question of formal democracy versus

this kind of amorphous way of participating. The tendency is for the people who play the role of the planner, the manager or the visionary, or whatever it might be, often become subject to the same tension that you felt when you had to tell someone 'no, not like that, like this.' There's a vision and you know what it's going to take to get it there, and other people are participating in various ways. If they have equal power to you, in a moment of decision about something as crucial as the scope of the whole project, unless they are as well informed as you or have the same aesthetic skills, they can't play that role. Then the accusations come that you're being authoritarian.

JP: The purpose of the democratic decision-making structure is to ensure that people don't abuse their power. If you're lucky enough to have a group that works well together, or a person that knows how to make people see their importance to the project and feel good about it, or some other way of making sure that democracy happens, then you don't have to have the democracy enforcing structure because democratic structure just means a democracy enforcing structure. Whereas a democratic system, an organic democratic process often doesn't have a democratic structure, it just IS democracy.

CC: Exactly.

JP: I object to the idea that each person contributed their expertise, because one of the things that was possible on this project was to learn. Many people became experts or became good enough to contribute through the process. I'm thinking in particular of Seth Damm. He had many things that he was already good at and he contributed those. But additionally he tried some new things that were completely out of his range, and he mastered them. He figured out how to tackle the problem, of, for instance, the hidden lettering in the water of the wiggle creek. It took him three or four different versions before he had something he was satisfied with. He came to me and told me that the breakthrough came one day when someone suggested to him to think of letters ON the water, rather than IN the water. So there was a lot of learning like that, not just the skilled people on the art team, but many different people.

GD: It was one helluva great introduction to the bicycling community.

JP: It changed my role in the bike community that I was already connected with. It put Mona suddenly into the position of being connected to a community that she had no previous connection with. Gordon was like a combination of the two. He was already somewhat involved in the bike community before he started painting.

GD: I was already a bike commuter, but I wasn't involved with the bike community.

JP: Whereas Mona didn't even have a bicycle.

MC: Uh oh, now it's on tape, they'll want to *erase the whole mural!* ?