

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Art preview: Kurtz makes use of what agents left behind

Some agents' trash is another man's art

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI News Arts Writer
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In May 2004, when agents from several law enforcement agencies finished searching Steven J. Kurtz's home in Allentown for evidence of biological terrorism, they left a few things behind.

When Kurtz, an artist and professor at the University at Buffalo, returned to his home a week or so after investigators began their search, he said he found the place littered with hazmat suits, dozens of drink containers and more than 30 empty pizza boxes. Little did the case's investigators know it at the time, but those carelessly discarded items would become emblems of one of the most visible and hotly debated federal cases brought against an American artist since McCarthyism. Margaret McFarland, a spokesman for U. S. attorney Terrance P. Flynn, told The News this week that she could not comment on any items left behind in Kurtz's house.

To the surprise and relief of Kurtz and his legal team, the case ended in April when a federal judge dismissed the charges of mail and wire fraud that were brought against him nearly four years prior.

"We were all completely shocked," Kurtz said in an interview earlier this week.



Steven Kurtz returned to find home littered with trash.

Much of this tell-tale garbage was saved and cataloged by one of Kurtz's colleagues and is now a part of a major exhibition that opens Saturday at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center. The show, simply called "SEIZED," is designed specifically to criticize the handling of the four-year-long case by the U. S. Department of Justice, during which several of Kurtz's unfinished art projects and personal items were confiscated (and have not yet been returned). It will also showcase work from the Critical Art Ensemble and the Institute for Applied Autonomy, two international art collectives to which Kurtz belongs that became proxy targets of the federal case themselves. On Sunday, Hallwalls will also hold a screening of several early CAE

videos showing several of the group's projects from 1986 to 1993.

"SEIZED" was originally planned to coincide with the start of Kurtz's federal trial, a virtual certainty in the minds of Kurtz and his legal team. The dismissal, Kurtz said, means that the show will instead serve to bring what he called "the final point to close the circle of this four-year horrible ordeal."

"I think now it becomes a little more abstract," Kurtz said. "It becomes a show about what happens when the Justice Department goes wrong, what happens when justice institutions become too filled with the vitriol of partisan corruption."

In a sense, the task of this exhibition could not be any more appropriate for the special skills of the CAE, whose body of work is built upon critiquing abuses of power and money by bureaucratic institutions around the world, such as segments of the scientific community and the military apparatuses of G8 nations.

"We're definitely very prepared for this in more ways than one," Kurtz said.

The show, in its new context, can't help but take on the feeling of a guttural scream of righteous indignation at the powers that be, but Kurtz downplayed the portrayal of the show as some type of calculated artistic revenge.

"There is a little bit of latent anger in [it]. There has to be in addressing a subject like that in such a personal way," Kurtz said. "Whether or not it's cathartic, that's debatable. Whether it's therapeutic or not in any way, that's debatable."

As for continued fears of the government filing new charges against him or attempting to assault him or the work of the CAE, Kurtz refuses to be paranoid. Asked whether he thought there might be federal agents milling about at the Hallwalls opening Saturday night, Kurtz shrugged off the

suggestion, noting that his work, and that of the CAE, has always been performed well within the sphere of law.

"I think they've all had enough of this case, and they're just ready for it to go away," he said. "So I'm not too worried about it. You can't trap an honest man."

PREVIEW

WHAT: "Critical Art Ensemble and the Institute for Applied Autonomy: SEIZED" and CAE video screening WHEN: Exhibition opens at 8 p. m. Saturday; screenings at 8 p. m. Sunday

WHERE: Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, 341 Delaware Ave. TICKETS: Exhibition is free; screening is \$4 to \$7 INFO: 854-1694 or hallwalls.org

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