

Dialogue



Scrap Mettle

Kevin O'Callaghan dares monumental projects into existence.

By Steven Heller

What some call junk—dilapidated Yugo cars, rotting carousel machinery, vintage monster-truck parts, manual typewriters, and all manner of wood, metal, plastic, and clay—is manna from heaven for Kevin O'Callaghan, the latest member of the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame. Each resurrected piece of material is another excuse for making conceptual, functional, and sculptural design. O'Callaghan is the chair of the School of Visual Arts' 3-D design department and the midwife of monumental extravaganzas created by students—many of whom had never held a soldering gun or hammered a nail. His work was collected two years ago in a book titled *Monumental*—with an emphasis on the last two syllables, because it takes hubris and ego to make art and design from recycled materials like discarded church pews or New Jersey tollbooths. O'Callaghan often produces as many as five major exhibitions per year. I caught up with him between construction sites to ask *why*?

You've just been elected into the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame. I think you deserve it, especially as a design teacher. Do you think so? I think I created opportunities for my students that they would never imagine they would have—all in the belief that if they can get through one of our projects, they will go on believing they can accomplish anything!

At what point in your life did you get the urge to make big things? As far as BIG, in the sense of scale, I think it was my visit at age seven to the 1964 World's Fair. I remember saying, "Wow, one big concept" (even though I didn't know what a concept was)—countries competing creatively. I went home and built my own pavilion.

What was the first big school project? That was my graduating portfolio case from the School of Visual Arts. I became frustrated with the process of dropping off my portfolio at different design studios. I had set up traps to confirm my belief that the studios never even opened up my portfolio. So I built a 20-foot-tall traditional black portfolio case in my mother's driveway, complete with paintbrush, pencil, etc., reaching out of the top of the case. The case opened up to have approximately 8-by-8-foot print-outs of my work, which I had convinced a local billboard company to print for me.

I towed my giant case on a trailer behind my car, a 1959 Nash, to my first interview with the great Milton Glaser, then at Push Pin Studios. I neglected to look into the height of the Midtown Tunnel (going into Manhattan) and my portfolio got stuck, thus causing a huge commotion and a lot of attention. I had to think quickly, and I let some air out of the tires and was able to get through the tunnel.

Arriving late to my interview, I was greeted by Mr. Glaser, slightly annoyed by my tardiness. When he asked where my portfolio was, I told him to go to the window. He immediately got on his intercom and instructed all of the designers at the studio to go outside to see my portfolio.

And was he impressed? By this time, local media had heard about my Midtown Tunnel incident and showed up at Push Pin to cover the story. This led to a career-changing moment when *People* magazine did a full-page article on me that included a quote from Mr. Glaser that my portfolio was the best one he had ever seen.



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What is your favorite monumental piece?

Hard to pick one; they're like my children! If you put a gun to my head (glue gun, of course) I would have to choose "The Turn of the Century Carousel." It really embodied everything I love—the circus (*Calder's Circus* is my favorite), mechanics, pop culture—and it was really big! The largest portable grand carousel ever built.

Transformation is key to your process, but conceptualizing is the underpinning. It's one thing to make a robot out of old trash, but it's another to give a Yugo, gas mask, or old church pew political and social meaning. How do you decide what meaning you want to get across? I want to make a comment on what I see going on in the world, whether it is a heavy subject or an attitude that is in the air. The object I choose to transform serves as the vehicle; I usually like starting with things that I can find multiples of—and lots of them—whether it is 29 Yugo's, 42 old phone booths, or 100 gas masks. I believe you can transform any object into a personal belief. We recently did a project with 32 brand-new Huffy bikes, where the bike became the vehicle to deliver a message. We called it "Special Delivery"—that made sense. But buying an entire interior of a church on eBay (at 3 a.m., for \$500) and

turning 40 church pews into statements with social and political views—well, that was a little tough!

When I hear the ideas you have for exhibitions, I say, No way. You say, There's always a way! How can you be so confident that you'll pull them off? Fear of failure—I just tell as many people as I can what I'm going to do, so there is no backing out. In other words, my big mouth puts me in the position that the idea has to happen. Okay . . . here I go again: I found out recently that New Jersey Transit has a junkyard of old New Jersey Turnpike tollbooths—well, I want 20 of them. What a great starting point! Now that I've told you, I have to do it!

What project was the most difficult to produce? They all come with their own set of problems. The "Yugo Next" show was tough because we were dealing with automobiles—bad ones, Yugos, but still, automobiles—and 29 of them. They were heavy and needed to be stood up on their ends, in some cases. It took nine 54-foot trucks to move them. Most of the time we would forget they were cars.

You've been severely injured many times, but you've gotten back on the horse (a pneumatic one, of your own invention). What motivates this insanity? I went to the doctor after I had fallen off the back of a truck, loading it at 2 a.m. My assistant brought me (I went reluctantly) to the hospital to have my head X-rayed, and the next day they told me that they found a strange dark area. It turned out to be a "void" or fold—a blank area! Everyone was quick to say it must be

the part of my brain that says "no"—something I never do.

In addition to five or more student exhibitions per year, you recently helped Stefan Sagmeister build "The Happy Show." What made you happy about this work? It made me happy to work with Stefan because he is someone I always was interested in working with, and I always admired his thinking. As it turned out, I learned that what we had in common was that we both are not afraid of the big idea and finding a way to make it happen.

This issue of *Print* is about trash. Do you see yourself as a scrounger, recycler, reinventor, or what? I'm sort of a hoarder, but not in the way people define hoarding today. All of my "hoarded" stuff is creative stuff—but I guess all hoarders think that way! I remember, when I was 11, seeing my mother throwing out our living-room couch—putting it on the curb. I scrambled to come up with another use to save it. It ended up in our backyard, in our oak tree. A tree house was born, in gold and avocado green!

What would you like to accomplish that you have not yet done? Besides a retrospective exhibition of all of the projects I've ever done, I have an idea I have been secretly trying to make happen, where we transform a row of old, vacant beach cottages into some kind of architectural statements. The cottages are planned to be demolished soon. I guess this idea comes from my fascination with the story of the old lady who lived in a shoe. I always wondered, what was she trying to say? ■

