

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

## The New York Times

*IF YOUR LIFE WERE A MOVIE*

JONAH WEINER

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Brock Enright rents a studio in an old Catholic school in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a former classroom that is hard to navigate without stepping on a drawing or kicking a sculpture, but he makes much of his art beyond his studio's walls — in bars, fast-food joints, Chinatown shopping plazas, rooftops and other locations throughout Manhattan. One evening not long ago, I joined him at the Sixth Ward, a bar on the Lower East Side, to watch him work on a new piece.

Just after 6 p.m., Enright entered, wearing a black hoodie, dirty black jeans and battered canvas sneakers. "I'm excited about tonight," he said.

Since 2002, a year after graduating from Columbia's M.F.A. program, Enright has operated Videogames Adventure Services, a company that constructs "reality adventures" for paying clients. If you're a V.A.S. customer, Enright and his team will stage an adventure — peopled with actors, riddled with mysteries, arranged into multiple acts — designed specially for you. Clients are predominantly thrill-seekers ("Some people jump out of planes, some people do this," Enright says), and if you don't know precisely what you want out of your game, Enright will probe, infer and decide. The adventure invades your life and transforms it, for a time, into a work of art.

The night's events marked an early chapter in one such game, orchestrated for a 31-year-old art dealer named Cristina and centered on Cristina's interactions with two characters of Enright's devising: an online dater named Alan, played by Enright's friend Alan Siegler, and a bumbling ventriloquist named Mitch, played by another longtime pal, Bryant MacMillan. There was a supporting cast of characters, each with a set of directives. Enright had two goals: to plant the seeds for several plotlines that could be developed as Cristina's adventure progressed and, as he put it, to turn her mind into a "whirlwind."

Members of Enright's team trickled in. Most, like Enright, who is 34, were in their early 30s. Leaning over a communal plate of buffalo wings, Enright explained the knotty scenario he'd devised. "Alan is pretending to be a client of ours tonight," he said. As part of her game, "the real client" — Cristina — "thinks that she's working for us, playing a character in Alan's game. Meanwhile, she'll actually be caught up in the beginning of her own game. I'll be deploying each of you from here." The setup was tricky to follow, but Enright told his players not to worry. "Just go with the flow. Whatever happens, just be your character in the space that you're in."

Enright left to meet Cristina at a nearby restaurant and give her instructions. He told her to look for Alan, whom she'd "met" online, gather information about him and — here was the MacGuffin — "make sure the doll stays with its owner." What that directive meant, he promised, would become clear. At 9, she joined Siegler at 200 Orchard, a bar across the street from the Sixth Ward. Siegler played his part: a shy nerd with a habit of trailing off midthought. He announced that he was writing a book about the unreliability of perception — something about the gap between math and reality. Cristina smiled and told him the book sounded fascinating.

The bar's television was tuned to the N.B.A. Finals. If Cristina had scrutinized those around her, she might have noticed that several of the people watching basketball were in fact surreptitiously watching her. I was one of them, and Enright was another, his hood pulled up. "Look how she's leaning in to him, the way she's laughing," Enright said. "She totally buys it."

About two hours into Alan's and Cristina's "date," MacMillan, playing the sad-sack ventriloquist, interrupted them. His hair was slicked back, and his pants were jacked up preposterously high by suspenders. "I'm Mitch and this is Match," he said, introducing the dummy perched on his forearm. "We're about to do a show back there." Cristina and Alan followed him into the backroom

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(crowded with V.A.S. players and curious barflies) and found stools up front. Enright sat against the back wall. Cristina knew that a journalist was observing her game but didn't know my face, so I sat beside her.

Mitch was a nervous, inept ventriloquist. His lips moved visibly, and the dummy's "voice" was almost unintelligible as he mumbled a meandering story about stealing a Dodge Caravan. Enright buried his head in his arms, silently convulsing with laughter, but otherwise the act met with scattered, uncomfortable tittering. Cristina watched with a bewildered smile. Was this some high-concept cringe comedy or an honest-to-goodness bomb? As the act wore on, Mitch grew increasingly frustrated and, in a sudden angry flourish, threw down his dummy and stormed out.

Cristina slid off her stool — this was, no doubt, the doll Enright told her about. Excusing herself, she retrieved Match and went in search of his owner. She scanned the bathroom line and the bar, then popped outside to check the sidewalk. Mitch had vanished. Cristina seemed mystified but delighted not to know exactly what was going on. When I approached Enright, who lingered in the backroom, he was wiping tears from his eyes. He clapped his hands. "That was great!"

**Enright describes** Videogames Adventure Services as a "company as sculpture" — an artistic undertaking that doubles as a fee-charging, tax-paying business. V.A.S. has no fixed headquarters, and Enright has never advertised, relying on word of mouth and a Web site, [semagoediv.com](http://semagoediv.com). The adventure-building process has several stages. First, a prospective client is invited to a "meet and greet." Next, a series of "clinical" interviews help map out what Enright calls the client's "game intent." The client pays a "design fee" of around \$2,000, which goes toward the game's total cost. Enright and his team hash out a narrative, subject to alteration, and "no zones" like work and home. The client signs a contract indemnifying V.A.S. of, among other things, injury and death. "We've never been sued," Enright told me. Finally, a "sign in" moment, captured on film, is scheduled to signal that the game has begun.

V.A.S. has its roots in Enright's adolescence in Virginia Beach, Va., when he and his friends, MacMillan among them, created a game called Dog — God spelled backward. Dog's centerpiece was an extreme version of hooky: the gang would bind one of their own and force him to play Nintendo all day; bathroom breaks were allowed only in your pants. "It was mean," Enright recalled. "But not mean. We'd made a pact."

Enright's grandfather John, a retired Navy man, described his adolescent grandson as a "Jackass"-style provocateur. "He'd take a video camera and burst in on his aunt while she was on the toilet," John Enright told me, adding that Brock looped her shrieking protestations into a short film. "He wasn't a bad kid. He was just interested in pushing people and seeing their reactions."

Enright's interest in stretching boundaries has always informed his art-making. As an undergraduate at Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art, he struck upon the idea of kidnappings for hire and, at a friend's request, broke into the apartment she shared with her girlfriend, bound them and threw them into a van. Another time, he urinated into a classroom corner, cleaned the urine up with his T-shirt and then put the T-shirt back on. "I pissed a lot of people off," he says, pun quite likely intended. His work grew no more conventional when he entered the studio program at Columbia. He continued his commissioned kidnappings, tried to teach a snake Simon Says and set about unlearning the alphabet. "Z was actually X, A was actually C; it really screwed me up," Enright recalled in April, when we met for the first time at a SoHo hotel. "I don't know if it was work or not, but I was living, playing, investigating things."

Enright, who shares a rental in Bushwick, Brooklyn, with his girlfriend, Kirsten Deirup, a painter, and their 2-year-old son, Torben, compares his artistic approach to "a storm churning up wreckage." This disarray extends from the holes in his underwear to unfinished sentences. Once, retrieving footage of past games for me, he produced a shopping bag full of recordable DVDs, some uncased and unlabeled. "I'm organized in my own way," he assured me as he rummaged.

"It's often hard to know what Brock's trying to communicate, because he'll operate on seven different platforms at once," Perry Rubenstein, his former gallerist, told me. (Rubenstein dropped

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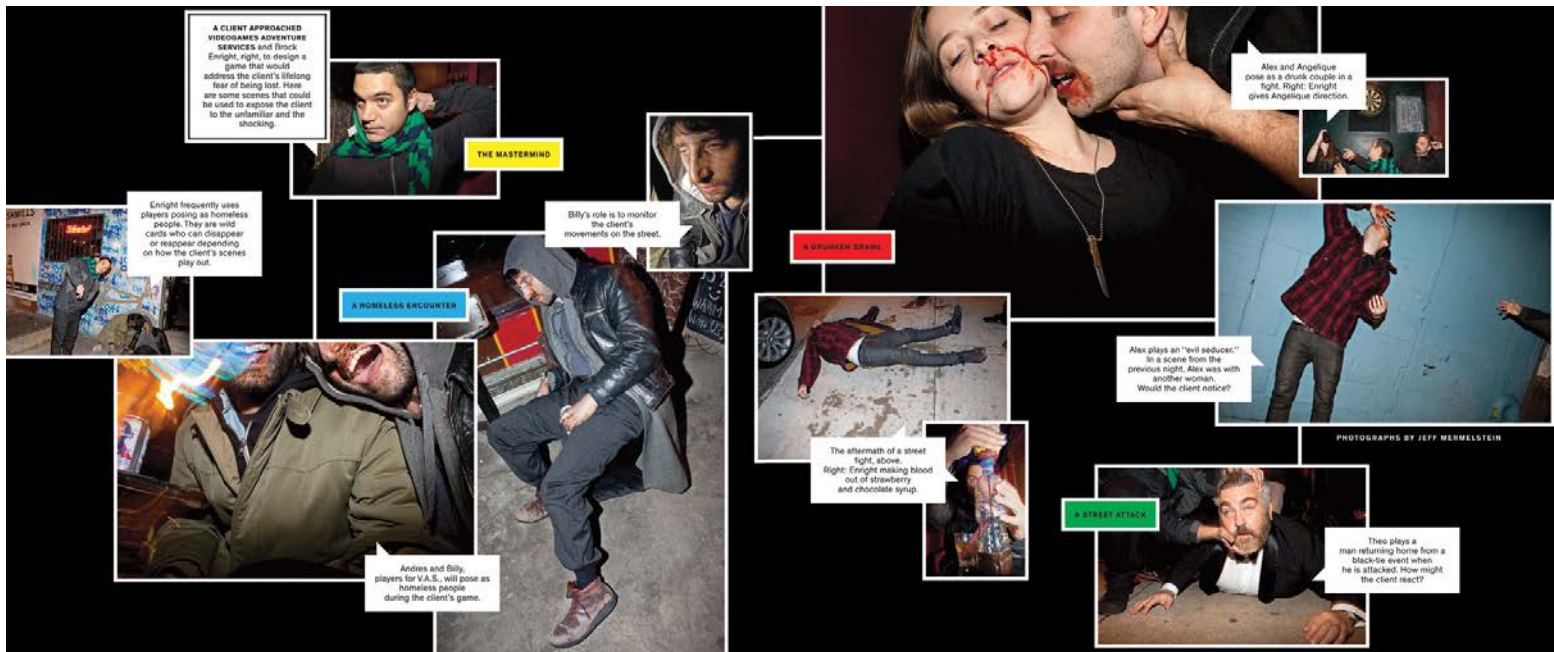
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Enright in 2008, citing “significant disagreements”; Enright joined a smaller gallery then but is currently without American representation.)

Enright’s provocations often suggest a prankish institutional critique. His adviser at Columbia, the sculptor Jon Kessler, told me about a scandal that ensued when, in Enright’s final year, he announced he’d been operating under the direction of two Fluxus artists he met in Baltimore named Mr. and Mrs. Claus and that, as Kessler put it, “everything he made at Columbia was actually their work.” Some professors wanted to expel Enright (who insisted to me that the dubious-sounding Fluxus duo were real), but Kessler thought the stunt was brilliant, invented or not. “He’d Andy Kaufmanized the entire process of two years of grad school.”

In 2001, Enright met Felix Paus, a Norwegian-born Harvard graduate, who suggested that, together, they structure Enright’s kidnappings project as a business. The following year, V.A.S. began offering abductions at \$1,500 a pop, with Enright handling the creative side and Paus overseeing money and logistics. The press caught wind of V.A.S. in 2002, when Enright displayed a “victim,” bound and gagged in a van, outside a Williamsburg gallery. Enright appeared on Fox News and “The View,” where a charmed Joy Behar joked about letting Enright kidnap her.



Over time, V.A.S. outgrew abductions — “kidnappings are one-note, cookie-cutter,” Enright says — and expanded to a staff of about seven. A broader network of players, set builders, writers and others receive a little cash for their help or pitch in for fun. Explaining V.A.S.’s pricing, Paus told me, “Probably the lowest we’d do a full adventure for is \$5,000 to \$10,000.” The more involved a game is, the higher the cost. Cristina’s budget was around \$60,000; Enright told me she came from money. (Rattled by a family death, Cristina paused her game indefinitely.) V.A.S. clients are offered video souvenirs of their adventures; if clients agree, Enright displays these and other mementos in his gallery shows.

In blurring reality and fiction, spectator and performer, high art and commerce, therapy and mass entertainment, V.A.S. offers a pleasurable paranoia familiar from movies like “The Game,” “The Matrix” or “Inception,” which titillate us with the idea that life is an artificial construct controlled by an unseen force. (Enright says that he liked “The Game,” a 1997 film about a company that sells a similar brand of reality adventures, but that he didn’t get the idea for V.A.S. from it.) Peeling back the layers of Enright’s constructs can be addictive fun. A former V.A.S. client named David, who paid under \$5,000 for a superhero-style fantasy, told me that after his game — during which

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he was forced through a labyrinth of puzzles and endurance tests and charged with the welfare of a female client (a V.A.S. plant) — “the comedown hit me immediately. Everything had been so heightened. The next day I had to go back to work, and it was tough. I got very depressed.”

Enright is not above employing Hollywood tropes: chases, romantic rivalries, plot reversals, high-wire stunts. Sometimes Enright gives these elements a Lynchian nudge into the uncanny, as with Cristina and the disappearing ventriloquist, but he often plays them for straight thrills. He told me about a husband and wife who turned to V.A.S. to reignite their romance. Chased by unseen assailants — were they players? were they real? did it matter? — through dark upstate woods, they had to run toward blinding floodlights to escape.

But Enright’s adventures are also filled with art-historical allusions. During his game, David became convinced that a car was following him. The car was not planted by V.A.S. but became a real part of the game’s psychological space. Enright calls details like that car his ready-mades. V.A.S. also brings to mind the “relational aesthetics” school, in which an artwork is composed of an ephemeral set of social interactions. “A lot of artists say, ‘If just one person sees my work, it’s worth it,’” Enright says. “But I literally make works that only one person will ever experience.” His belief in the disruptive powers of his own excrement (he has defecated on himself during at least two adventures to rattle a client) recalls the darkly confrontational spirit of ’70s and ’80s performance art.

For all his raking up of clients’ emotional detritus — longings, regrets, traumas, grudges — Enright stresses that V.A.S. is ultimately uplifting. “Games are a way to understand life,” he told me. “Hopefully this helps you with your life — or, I mean, just creates more of a heightened awareness of things. If you’re jaded, get out of it, you know?” He said he designed one of his favorite adventures five years ago for a client named Margo, who works in theater. It spanned two continents and the better part of a year. “We changed her life,” he said.

I met Margo for breakfast. A 38-year-old “former Goth,” she told me she asked Enright to take her to “a dark place.” Early in her game, several men befriended her at a bar. One guy, Zach Cregger, a former roommate of Enright’s who supposedly represented a rogue faction of V.A.S. trying to oust Enright, would call her late at night, screaming at her to get somewhere impossibly fast — if she failed, Enright would be tortured. This scenario was meant to evoke Margo’s fraught relationship with her father, whom she described to V.A.S. as emotionally and verbally abusive. A few months later, V.A.S. put Margo on a plane to Germany, where (unknown to her) the National Theater in Weimar had hired Enright to co-direct a production of Friedrich Schiller’s 1781 play “Die Räuber” (“The Robbers”). Margo was hauled blindfolded onto the stage and, before a packed preview audience, made the victim in a simulated rape. “I was pretty sure I was in a theater,” she told me, “but I wasn’t completely sure.”

The events in Weimar represent the sort of ontological mess Enright loves to make — disparate narratives overlapping, reality and performance entangling hopelessly on a single stage. I asked Margo what she got out of her involvement with V.A.S., for which she paid \$7,000. “I’m not sure,” she replied. “My relationships with men haven’t gotten much better.” Part of her simply enjoyed being the center of attention. It was often a brutal experience, she admitted, but “it was *my* experience.”

Manufacturing those experiences takes legwork. Enright’s adventure prep includes rehearsals, location scouting and personnel wrangling. V.A.S. frequently enlists bartenders, doormen, bellboys, waitresses and cabbies in games — people a client is unlikely to think are in on the ruse. There are even policemen (MacMillan, a bartender, has befriended several) who will throw clients and players into squad cars to sell an illusion.

During rehearsals, Enright directs his cast, telling them how to stand or how to handle a ventriloquist’s dummy. If a game involves a fight, Enright blocks it. At his studio one night, I watched MacMillan strike Enright. It looked and sounded hard but apparently caused minimal pain. “Open palmed and staccato,” Enright said. “That gives me time to brace myself.”

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There were moments when it felt as if Enright was gaming me. Once, as we walked in Manhattan, he told me: "Imagine you're in a game. Think how the world changes. Is that guy in the doorway really checking his cellphone or keeping tabs on us?" Enright's phone would ring, and he'd conduct coded conversations with players. "Go. Copy. Move to Location 2 and lock exterior." While we waited for a traffic light, a brunette drew up, gave us an odd look and walked toward an apartment building. "She's with us," Enright said.

Later, on my ride home, after a day afloat in Enright's world, I became convinced that someone was following me. I jotted down the hack numbers of the three cabs behind mine and grew alarmed as 6M62 trailed us from Gramercy Park to within a block of my home in Brooklyn. The next day I told Enright about my "tail," expecting him to laugh at my paranoid fantasizing. Instead he said, "So he knows where you live now?"

Where Enright's fabrications begin and end is impossible to tell. In "Good Times Will Never Be the Same," a documentary made by Jody Lee Lipes, a friend of Enright's, Enright and Deirup drive cross-country to Deirup's family home in Mendocino, Calif., where Enright plans to make art. In one scene, Enright, naked except for white body paint, repeatedly asks Deirup's visibly uncomfortable brother to share his wineglass. In the next scene, we hear Enright sobbing, crushed that Deirup's family doesn't seem to get him. "I'm performing in it," he told me, "but you can't tell when."

If all goes according to plan, Enright may soon gain a bigger (and perhaps more receptive) audience: he and Paus have been shopping a V.A.S. reality show to cable networks. (A deal seemed imminent at Syfy last year, but it fizzled; in December, Enright told me that two other networks were interested.) One day, Enright showed me a binder of elaborate, multicolored grids representing V.A.S. narratives. He explained one of them. A black line indicated a gamer's choices; red indicated anger; green indicated events involving money. The grids were diamond-shaped: a point of entry at bottom, a point of exit up top and an expanding and contracting latticework in between.

"The trick in every game," Enright told me, tapping the top of one grid, "is finding your way out of here."

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