

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

PARKETT

PARKETT No. 82

CONRAD BROCK ENRIGHT: IN OVER HIS HEAD

JEREMY SIGLER

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Brock Enright, *Untitled*, 2004, C-print, client with puppets
(Photo: Brock Enright & Kristina Williamson)

I first heard of Conrad Brock Enright's high-priced "designer kidnappings" – or "ordeals" as he calls them – in 2001, the year he graduated from Columbia University's MFA program. Collectors who wanted Enright's work would submit to an arduous screening process and then wait to be abducted when least expected, held hostage, and, essentially – to quote a Fox News anchorman – "tortured." How is one to imagine this type of collector who seems to be highly invested in an economy of desire and a dialectic of symbolic domination and surrender? I found it gutsy that this young artist was so bold to give collectors who wanted to buy his work literally what they were asking for: inclusion – actual hands-on involvement, really exposing them to the brutal, and oftentimes humiliating, scatological, childish element that is also part of the process of art-making.

Initially, Enright asks his potential client to fill out a detailed questionnaire. Then it's on to the "Meet and Greet" phase – the taped live interview, which updates Andy Warhol's and Gerard Malanga's *Screen Tests* for the Shock-and-Awe era. Once all of these elements are assembled, Enright begins customizing the ordeal, as if he were directing a play, rendering plans for environments and sets, hunting for props, hiring and training players.

While the artist uses these preparations to score his actions, it's hard to say how much he will rely on intuition and improvisation to compose fear. After all, he can only guess what the collectors will really find most terrifying, and hope for accurate invasions of their vulnerabilities and phobias. Game designer and theorist Eric Zimmerman points out that "Enright's work plays with involuntary abduction, but never really is. In that sense, it is very much like a horror film, a consensual temporary loss of control for the experience of being given over to an emotional thrill. With both a

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horror film and Enright's work (and with a game), there is ultimately a safe space outside the experience which, although it is the Other of the experience, still anchors it."

In this risky game the collectors must state their personal "Do's and Don'ts." But doesn't "No" in erotic advances often mean "Yes"? Doesn't language often belie the speaker? Says one abductee: "I didn't want any scars, and didn't want my life to be threatened in any way, but I wanted to be really scared." Says another client, "I did not want to be in control of what was happening... I needed to believe that this person was going to kill me." As these statements reveal, the challenge of playing the game goes both ways, and Enright clearly has his work cut out for him if he is to deliver the goods. He must figure out a way to be extreme and safe at once, to jolt the collector without inflicting real harm – to allow the client to participate in a *horroresque*, not a horror.

By storming unannounced into his clients' offices or other routine haunts with a group of *Clockwork Orange*-like thugs, blindfolding them and duct-taping their mouths and hands, dumping them at anonymous, deserted locations to be hazed, and then finally returning them home a few days later, Enright strikes a pretty solid blow to the hierarchical norm. Of course, thinking so may express an unfair bias, a failure to acknowledge or appreciate what it really means to be an art collector, or, for that matter, a media-savvy artist in the era of high-profile art deals and *Jackass* TV, where a general Dadaist sensibility of juvenile provocation, pratfalls, and public clownishness functions as a kind of action-packed, radical street art for the teenage cable-tv audience. Maybe this ignores the real point: that the collectors, whoever they may be, are voluntarily signing up for Enright's "tailor-made experiences of 'safe' fear." That they're game.



Brock Enright, *Tale Teeth*, 1996, video still, client being taken from bed (Photo: Brock Enright)

By many accounts, we are in a turbo age of art patronage, where collectors and artists are both very competitive. Consider a certain kind of "nouveau" collector today. There have never been so many self-made connoisseurs vying for such a wide variety of potentially valuable and valid works of art from so many international galleries and MFA-certified artists. A recent wave of fearless collectors, neophytes of art-fair and back-room collecting, who seem not to shy away from the hedge-fund mentality, has had to become incredibly tactical in order to win the race to the coveted red dot. And the auction houses have made bidding wars for recently minted artworks front-page news, with the winners instant celebrities. In this regard, Enright's expanding circle of clients may be the early adaptors who recognize a spirit of extreme contact sport in collecting. A new breed, they want not only to ride shotgun with the artist, safari-style, but also to roll up their sleeves and get their hands really dirty.

The collector and artist are thus finding themselves in the same boat at the same time with a feverish culture compulsion. Both are fully aware of their shared madness, fetishes, desires. Regardless of their affluence, taste, class, training, both are participating in the same "ordeal," which is to say the ordeal of psychological self-awareness. D. H. Lawrence spoke of this when he referred to "the unspeakable horror of the repressions Freud brought home to us. Gagged, bound, maniacal repressions, sexual complexes, faecal inhibitions, dream-monsters."

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Rolling Stone, Issue 905, September 19, 2002, p. 74.
(Photo: *Rolling Stone Magazine*)

Of course, a certain segment of the collecting class has always been adept at seeking alternatives that allow for reckless, exotic behaviors. But it's just as easy to imagine that some of Enright's clients might be more naïve, and have gotten in line for a harsh experience with a guy in a Batman mask before they've really thought about the work's potential consequences. For it is not until after an abduction has taken place, after the work has left a scar in the collector's psyche, that a syndrome with long-term composition and poetic resonance will be installed in the patron's nervous system. Interestingly, the trauma contains the artist's unquestionable sacrifice as well as the patron's, for both have agreed to tamper, to take the chance of getting hooked.

Should Enright's action-based gestures be seen exclusively as art? Perhaps it makes sense to view them also as some form of postmodern (anti-)therapy. In psychotherapeutic treatment, it can be hard to differentiate between negative and positive. Sometimes the sensations get reversed. Sometimes pain produces catharsis. Can the torque of fear be seen as a pharmaceutical, a mood enhancer, skillfully administered in sculptural doses? Does Enright have the authority? Does it matter? Nowadays, it seems anything can be considered legitimate therapy, so long as there is a trained (even if self-taught) expert paid generously to function as guide or instigator.

Enright's services appear to combine a number of therapies – a haywire tangle of indulgence and self-help. However, Enright rejects the idea that he is anything other than an artist focused on the cultural integrity of the ordeal. He denies any interest in a medical or scientific role, denies such a deep responsibility, and insists that each ordeal be regarded a work of art. Consider Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty," the transgressions of Viennese Actionism, or the mischievous tricks of the Situationist International.

Every work being unique, the stakes are high for each of Brock's ordeals to go exactly according to plan. There is great potential for error, and any miscalculation could be hazardous for participants and innocent bystanders alike. Thus, each ordeal is an open-ended work situated between a dangerous game and therapy-in-progress. The result for both artist and collector, while potentially debilitating, is also a starting point for groundbreaking realization and the conquering of inhibitions. The late cultural critic and Freudian theorist Philip Rieff suggests that "Art as therapy takes on a certain theurgic (or supernatural) quality exactly the reverse of therapy applied scientifically." To partake is to be swept up in Enright's experimental mad-science as it is being written.

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And how do Enright's ordeals fare when viewed as games – especially when Enright, who has a suspiciously Beuysian sense of his own myth, claims that everything he has done up until now, including his application to Columbia's MFA program, has been scripted as part of another artist's reality game, begun when Enright was an undergraduate at Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art?

According to Eric Zimmerman: *The classical model of a game has a clear separation between the real and the artificial. To enter the game – whether Chess, Tag, or World of Warcraft – is to enter into a social contract known by all players. Johan Huizinga called this special time and space of a game the 'magic circle' and indeed there is something magical about the way that games can impart meaning to player action. This model of a game is the opposite of a hoax, because a hoax requires unwilling, involuntary participation. Some games in recent decades have been designed to blur the boundary between the real and the artificial, including ARGs (alternate reality games that use fictional websites), LARPing (live-action role-playing, often in public spaces) and Big Games (games that combine digital technology and real-world spaces on a large scale). Such games can be traced to the New Games Movement in the 70s, as well as to Fluxus and Happenings works.*

Though Enright's work has stayed within the confines of "safety," and though it has been endorsed by numerous international galleries and museum curators, it seems to have scared off many in the upper echelons of the culture world for reasons of taste rather than security. Conventional collectors may be more afraid, ultimately, of what Enright's work signifies than what it actually is – which is ironic if you consider that the work is so open-signified. It has been reviewed by respected art journalists including *The New York Times'* Roberta Smith, but the sense of its placement crossed from high to low when the kidnappings were discovered by the tabloids and pop magazines like *Rolling Stone*. After Enright appeared on ABC's daytime television talk show *The View*, actor Toby McGuire even contacted the artist about purchasing the rights to his life story.

With its focus on ratings, the mainstream media has packaged and re-packaged Enright's work, portraying it as a testosterone-driven hybrid of violence, terrorism, and S&M. However, it turns out that the truth is much more nuanced. Enright has experienced a wide range of Do's and Don'ts by now, so that some of his ordeals are hardly taboo by any standards and might even be seen as quite innocent or banal. On the other hand, some of his ordeals are comprised of fetishes, therapies, and traumas far weirder and more Lynchian than garden-variety S&M, more erotic and particular than the duct tape and dildos portrayed in *Rolling Stone's* gonzo reportage. It has always been Enright's goal to remove himself from the work, and for each piece to purely reflect the client. In fact, nowadays he doesn't normally participate in the kidnappings at all, instead appearing at the beginning and end, à la Mr. Roark in the classic seventies television show *Fantasy Island*.

Enright does produce photographic documentation of the ordeals. Though of course the situation is completely inverted, these works can bare an uncanny resemblance to the now infamous Abu Ghraib photographs taken by U.S. prison guards in 2004. In her powerful analysis of those photos for *The New York Times Magazine* that year, Susan Sontag wrote about the guards' perverse inclusion of themselves in their souvenir snapshots of torture and domination – their portrayal of themselves as wannabe superstars, celebrities in pictures not meant to represent atrocities but to be sent home like greeting cards or, in a sense, works of art.

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New York Post, July 21, 2002, p. 40.
(Photo: *New York Post*)

While documentation of Enright's ordeals may appear to be as exploitative and upsetting as the photographs from Abu Ghraib, the abductions may also have their own bizarre heroism and the potential to function as personal wake-up calls for some members of a society who have become too befuddled and passive about their own fears or "terrors." In Enright's voluntary involuntary abductions, the collector not only fears the assault, but engages with the ongoing game of horror and anticipation. The work thus provides a permanent adrenalin rush, a daily adventure, even when nothing is really happening.

Although Enright has dozens of clients in his roster and hundreds of abductions under his belt, this body of work represents a genre in its early stages. The artist is still something of a crackpot with a band of willing guinea pigs, a Dr. Moreau – not unlike early Freud, Reich, or Lacan – a Frankenstein. Still inchoate, unformed, Enright's is a newsworthy text, a symptom, and not necessarily a scientific (or pseudoscientific) thesis. As they should be, the players are all in over their heads.

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