

# An Oral History With Michael Macfeat

Timothy Buckwalter | July 19, 2008 | Paintings + Drawings Blog

*After graduating from art school in 1988, I stuck around Philadelphia for a few years -- trying to figure out my art, and answering the telephone for the Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

*The scene was pretty dead, except for Meat.*

*I didn't know much about this group with the unusual and seemingly ironic name but they seemed to be a loosely affiliated bunch of artists that put together well-attended group shows, garnering a lot of press attention along the way. It was certainly inspiring to see artists say "fuck it" to the puny and really straight Philly gallery system by doing what they wanted.*

*It is with great pleasure and honor that I recently did an oral history with Michael Macfeat, an organizer of Meat. Over time, Macfeat was also involved with two other group efforts.*

*In the beginning I was kinda nervous. Macfeat worked at PMA the same time I did (as a matter of fact, he still does). He casts an intimidating presence like a character in a Peckinpah flick or an extra in a John Carpenter movie.*

*Turns out I was wrong to be nervous, Macfeat, who might be a little surly at times, is really fucking funny and brilliant.*

## I WANT TO BE YOUR DOG

**Michael Macfeat:** Meat, Art at the Boiling Point -- that was the full jokey moniker -- was an outgrowth of an earlier independent artists organization called Heat, Art at the Boiling Point.

Heat had its first exhibition at Front and Vine Streets in Philadelphia in 1980. The line-up was myself, Sharon Connors, Lynn Costomiris, Kevin Madden and Hal Jones. This became the core of the Meat group.

Heat had another exhibition in 1982 at American and Brown streets in the Northern Liberties neighborhood.

Both of these exhibitions were pretty well attended and generated a lot more publicity than we expected. We managed to sell work at reasonable prices. There was a conscious attempt to keep prices down to allow people with modest incomes to purchase the work. We were not terribly interested in decorating the homes of the rich. The work was also for the most part, amateurish and confrontational.

During one poster distribution, some hapless yuppie complained about us littering his neighborhood with posters and Hal proceeded to chase him for three blocks with a Stanley T-50 stapler, intent on stapling a one to his back.

Another time, in our infinite arrogance, we tried to staple a poster on the wall in the middle of an exhibition at a commercial gallery in Old City. Unfortunately our errant publicist (I am pretty sure it was Kevin) leaned too hard on the wall which was not attached to the ceiling and came crashing down, slamming several people.

I bring this behavior up because it illustrates a couple of recurring themes with these groups: anti-social behavior derived from a combination of old school street violence, a nascent punk sensibility and a direct oppositional stance to the art system. Of course, my behavior was exemplary throughout... either that or my blackouts of that period protect me from memory.

We tended to be pretty well-read as a group. Thompson, Bukowski, Beckett and Miller were the literary heroes of the time period. On the other hand, everyone in the group also owned American Pit Bull Terriers. This mash-up of sensibilities was difficult for people to digest.

After 1982, Heat languished and was immovable in its democracy, despite several efforts on my part to capitalize on our infamy.

## **SONIC REDUCER**

In 1986 I founded Meat, giving the original Heat group members a chance to exhibit with a wider selection of artists, with me in the unenviable position of curator. There were 16 original members, the five Heat artists plus Harry Anderson, David Goerk (of Bunnydrums), Judith Schaecter, Millie Greenberg (a septuagenarian), Tom Steigerwald, Bill Russell, Martha Masiello, Linda Stoudt, Arline Peco and Bill Hooper.

I changed the name (to Meat) so that the group would cease to be a dysfunctional participatory democracy that was stuck in neutral but would still reference Heat. I couldn't take Heat over, it would have been a five-way Texas Steel Death Match so I created an alter-ego of the group that I could direct without (much) interference. The Heat name was worth maintaining because the group was successful when they actually produced something, which at that point it hadn't in four years.

Meanwhile I had a ton of work to show whereas the others were always working for specific shows. I am not putting it down, I had learned to discipline myself to produce work whether I would show it or not. It was a priority of mine.

The first exhibition was at 4th and Girard, in an enormous second floor space owned by Anderson. We rehabbed the place for about a month. Harry provided materials. There were close to one thousand people at the opening over a several hour period that exceeded our posted hours. Limousines would pull up out front, disgorging well-dressed bourgeoisie on to the streets of this (at the time) treacherous neighborhood. I thought the decrepit stairs would collapse under the weight of the humanity. We were completely floored by the turnout. By the end of the exhibition everyone had sold work that was willing or trying to. It was successful well beyond any reasonable expectations. It may have just been the right place at the right time. I don't remember the dogs being at this opening but they were every day the show was open, the 'hood was down-and-going rather than up-and-coming.

The exhibition was reviewed positively in almost every local newspaper and the New Art Examiner. The media popularity can be paradoxically attributed to beginning of the end of the group, although five later exhibitions followed, including venues in Washington DC and Chicago. The stable of artists was never the same twice due to infighting and purges. It also didn't help that I was an intolerable hard head, perpetually operating under the influence of toxins or recovering from them.

Unfortunately, the press focused mostly on me and my personality rather than the work, despite my efforts to direct the conversation back to Heat and the actual artwork. I was burdened by having to defend myself to the other members constantly. I would even complain to the media about that and they continued to write almost exclusively about me. The media was much more interested in the independence of the group and the cult of personality than art.

It reached insane levels when (as a tie-in for a group show at McNeil Galler) Michael McGettigan wrote a multiple page article in the City Paper entitled "Did Meat Sell Out?" that discussed, among other things, my beard and my clothes.

It got to be such a nuisance that I took Kevin with me to an interview with Miriam Seidel of the New Art Examiner to show him I was not lying. We talked about Heat, we talked about the work, he talked at least as much as I did and when the article came out it was about me. She never even mentioned his name! At least he saw first hand what I was dealing with.

It eventually broke down to accusations from malcontents of an "inner circle" which only contained one other Heat member and a few other people. It was all fucking nuts! We were successful, we were sitting on a gold mine of good feeling and selling work fairly regularly and all these people focused on was something completely out of our control.

(Another) one of the problems was that over half of the group was unwilling to participate in an activity that depended on collective action. This created a situation where an idle majority wanted all of the spoils of involvement without working. The flip side of this was a minority shouldered the entire workload while reaping the same rewards as the non-participants, which bred resentment.

Then there was the resentment caused by the press coverage that focused on me rather than the entire group. When my pitbull Derry and I had a half-page article written in the Philadelphia Daily News that all but ignored the exhibition, people became incensed that my dog got more publicity than they did. I had no control over what the press wrote but I was vilified for the articles.

The main problem is that visual art tends to be an individual activity and independent art groups by necessity are collective actions. Probably no group of people are harder to organize than visual artists due to that fact.

All I wanted to do was get everyone's work out there and I became stuck fighting with the artists, the press, the gallery system and the media. It became very frustrating to me.

By 1990 I got offered a solo gallery exhibition (at McNeil) and I bowed out. Preceding this show was my inclusion in "Made In Philadelphia" at ICA.

There was one more Meat exhibition at CEC in West Philly curated by Kevin Madden (which was actually quite good, despite my self-imposed exile) and that was it. The group was finished.

## **SEARCH AND DESTROY**

The Meat experience did in fact flavor my work and attitude. I was quite independent and my reputation for being confrontational preceded me. I exhibited carved and painted wall sculptures and painted drawings. As a result of the ICA exhibition and the one at McNeil Gallery, I was picked up by Saxon/Lee Gallery in Los Angeles. I was making a modest living from my artwork during this period before both of these galleries went belly up.

The Heretical Society was born of rage.

The first members were people I had successfully worked with before. There were about a dozen people involved by the end of it, with many more asking for membership in this invisible and imaginary organization. It was a Borges moment. In that we were anonymous, we avoided the cult of personality and the resulting jealousy. We also avoided exchange value in that there was nothing to sell except vitriol. It was, by far, the most fun I ever had working on a project.

Sometimes a theme would be suggested by someone and I would write it and present it back to whoever wanted input into the thing, get it back with suggestions and rewrite it, trying (more often than not) to include the suggestions.

If I didn't feel that the suggestions were pertinent I would try to articulate that to the person that provided the feedback before publication.

We would post these writings in hallways of art buildings and universities. Most of the graphics we used were produced by other members of the group because I was developing an allergy to the visual arts during this time period.

We also had a 300+ mailing list that received all of the written material, at least one mailing a month. We compiled a 150 person mailing list at the beginning and added people that asked. More than meetings we tended to tag team phone calls for convenience. Any three members in a coffee house or bar would discuss the issues at hand, mostly for our own amusement.

Kevin Madden (of Heat & Meat) and I and Martha Masiello (of Meat) were at the conception of the project. Martha actually had a much more radical response than Kevin and I initially had. Her battle cry "Give them nothing!" really defined the Desire & Loss project and became the defining moment in the formulation of HSOC. Off and on there were about a dozen people directly involved, never more than a third of which had any knowledge of the others identity. I was the only person that knew everyone's name.

Kevin and I grew up with this hulking madman named Rocky (pre-Stallone moniker) that we would send into Old City galleries during First Fridays passing out various inflammatory handbills (GO BACK IN YOUR HOUSES, THERE'S NOTHING TO SEE HERE!, ANOTHER FIRST FRIDAY...WHY?, THE DISSOLUTION OF THE GALLERY SYSTEM IS THE LIBERATION OF THE ARTS FROM COMMERCE!) with our contact information at the bottom. Kevin and I would send him out and wait for him in a bar, half expecting to see the villagers

chasing him down the street with torches!! He smoked ganja constantly, as if it was legal. I think we sent him out 3 or 4 months in a row and every time he came back he was amazed that he almost got in a fight on the street, as if it was always the first time! Fortunately he was a rather large man with an Andre the Giant 'fro that made him appear larger so he got away with it. We sweated out his returns and is often the case with stoners, his sense of time was skewed so he would come back whenever he felt like it. He had trouble following schedules, coming and going.

I am not sure if I mentioned it before but we were in 2 exhibitions during this period, surreptitiously dropping off material and picking up announcements to include in mailings, one at Temple Gallery and one at Base Camp. They never saw us coming.

Perhaps Norman Mailer & Jimmy Breslin's run for Mayor of NY in the late sixties could be applicable, as well as Ad Reinhardt's collage attacks on the art world. Definitely European inspired, Dada, Surrealism and especially the Situationists.

We had a mail drop but that too was an empty lot. We got some of the mail because the next door neighbor was a sympathizer and would get a lot of it. We also had a very proper sounding woman that used to return calls from messages left on to the HSOC phone service.

I thought that the humor would defuse some of the anger but it had quite the opposite effect.

Our stance against the Mural Arts Project really irked a lot of people in the art community. Our answering service received loads of enraged voice mails from people in all walks of life.

I honestly don't think I made any artwork at all during this period but I know I did begin the Trading Card Series then but I did not consider it art and I never intended to exhibit it. I intended the Guy Debord card to be singular but I soon added Vaneigem, Pasolini, Adolf Loos until there were six of them. I thought of them more as propaganda than art and the distribution was an outgrowth of HSOC, free and anonymous distribution.

The Concealed Weapons predated the Trading Cards. They were the result of a time period that I traveled a lot for the museum doing courier work so I had access to a wide range of newspapers. They were mostly about traveling, world politics, the barricades in Paris in '68 (Sous les pavés, les plages!) and the Irish use of "brickbats" as weapons. They also probably reference the dichotomy of reading and violence.

I was watching "The Spy Who Came In From The Cold" recently starring Richard Burton. At one point the East German Stasi asks him about his girlfriend. He replies, "She was a Communist. She believed in free love. At the time it was all that I could afford."

The only clear way to express yourself in art or politics is to live your beliefs. Now that sounds like a suitable sound bite as an exit strategy.