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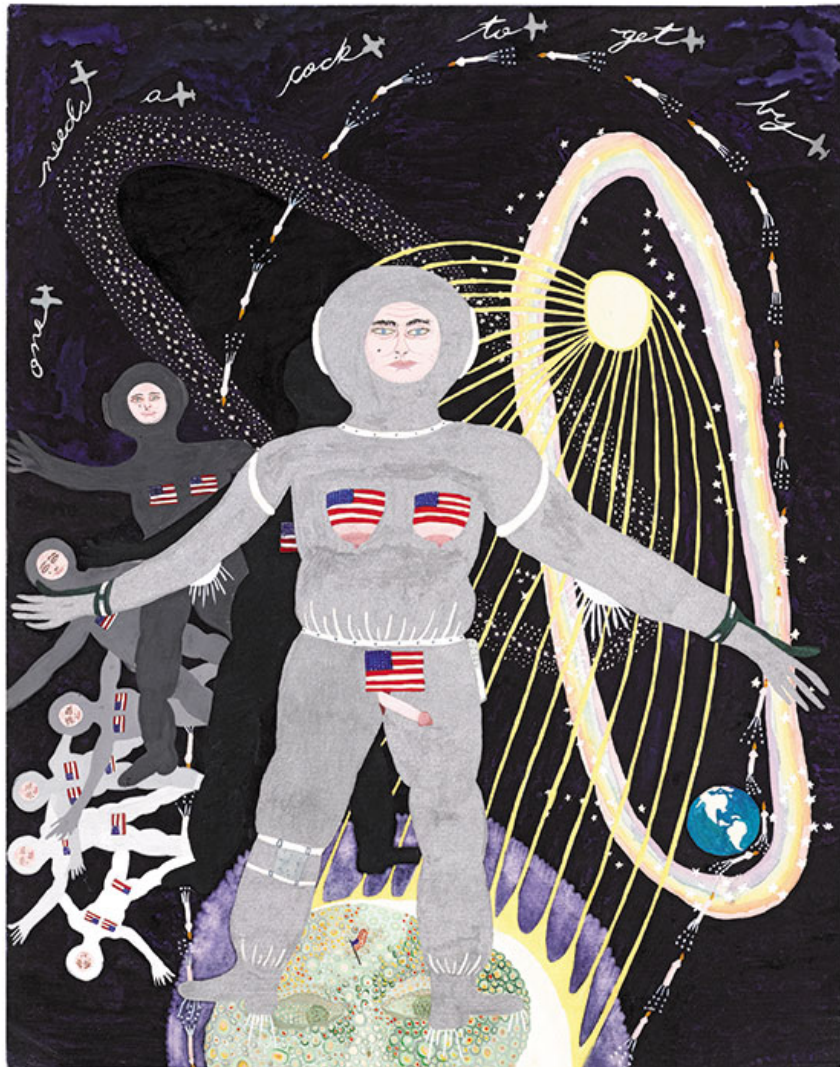
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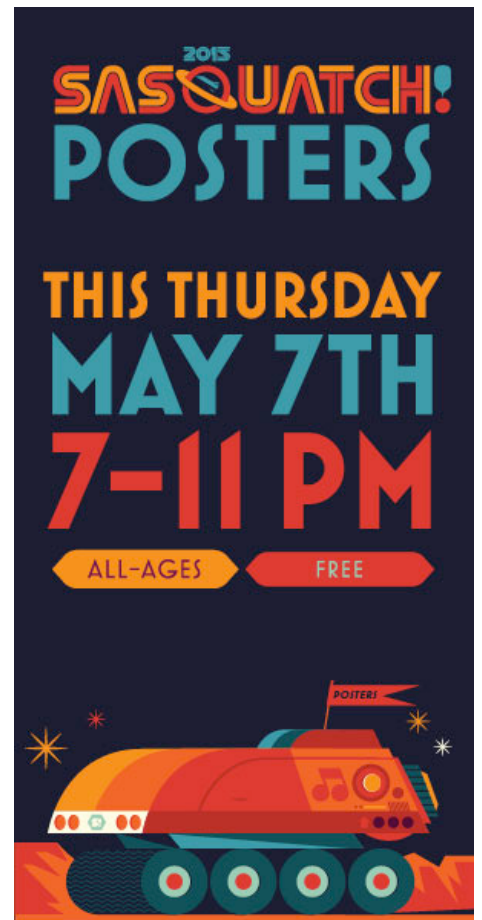
The Most Unusual Art Gift Ever

After Matthew Offenbacher won a \$25,000 art prize, he did something radical. He made a conceptual artwork with Jennifer Nemhauser that consisted of buying works by women and queer artists for Seattle Art Museum.

by [Jen Graves](#)



Woman Landing on Man on the Moon by Ann Leda Shapiro. It has never been exhibited before. Now Seattle Art Museum owns it. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND SEATTLE ART MUSEUM



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When the traveling *Elles* exhibition came to Seattle Art Museum in 2012 from one of the most respected modern art museums in the world, Seattle encountered an embarrassing problem.

Elles was a big show, organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris, with more than 130 pieces in it dating from 1907 to 2007. Momentously, it included zero male artists. Women artists alone told 20th-century art history, from Frida Kahlo to Diane Arbus to Marina Abramovic.

As a symbolic gesture, Seattle Art Museum wanted to create a companion exhibition out of its own holdings. The plan was that SAM would empty out the galleries and rehang them entirely with art in their permanent collection by women.

There was just one problem.

SAM's 20th-century holdings, like the holdings of most museums, are so woman-poor that there was no way to fill their galleries solely with art by women. Private lenders were solicited to step in. SAM's "collection" galleries temporarily became galleries filled with other people's stuff.

The point had been to demonstrate how much Seattle's largest art museum values women. But *Elles* inadvertently revealed how much it *hadn't*.

Among the women artists whose work SAM had never acquired was Ann Leda Shapiro. Shapiro lives on idyllic Vashon Island, the perfect place for an early feminist artist to hide out during the Reagan, Clinton, and Bush years. The last time Shapiro made a splash as an artist was in 1973, when she had a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, her hometown.



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Fri May 8 at 6:15 pm.

Chào Ya'll: Vietnamese + Southern Pop-Up at Pike Place Market Atrium Kitchen

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White Wards, Nudes, Wetbrain, Bricklayer, Glutton, Cuckold at Ground Zero

Fri May 8 at 8 pm.

Dan Deacon, Prince Rama, Ben O'Brien at Neumos

Fri May 8 at 8 pm.

The Rentals, Rey Pila, Radiation City at Crocodile

Fri May 8 at 9 pm.

Katie Kate, Erik Blood, Aeon Fux at Lo-Fi Performance Gallery



***Two Sides of Self* by Ann Leda Shapiro, which the artist says was censored in the '70s by the Whitney Museum of American Art.**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

There were two solo shows by women at the Whitney in November of 1973. The other artist was Lee Krasner—an abstract painter who, at that time, was still almost entirely known as a famous man's wife (that drip-painter fellow, rhymes with "bollock").

Unlike Krasner, Shapiro is no abstractionist. She's completely out there with her subject matter. Her 1970s watercolors are feminist and antiwar fantasias, depicting hermaphroditic mermaids with interlocking nipples, fish that look like little missiles, and female astronauts whose penises and breasts are imprinted with the American flag.

When the drawing department at the Whitney invited her to show, Shapiro sent slides, the works were approved, and then she sent in the works themselves. At that point, she was confoundingly informed by the curator that two pieces, one titled *Two Sides of Self* (the mermaids) and one titled *Anger*, would not be allowed to be shown in the Whitney because "anything erect was edited out, anything limp was hung, if you know what I mean," according to Shapiro. (This anecdote may prompt your own extended consideration of whether the female mermaids' penises are, in fact, erect. They appear to be in something of a middle state.)

In other words, Shapiro's work was deemed obscene and inappropriate for a fine-art museum. But she took notice the following year when her friend Jim Nutt, a male artist who uses overtly sexualized imagery, had a big exhibition at the Whitney.

At the time of her own show, Shapiro didn't even think of fighting it.

"I was young and I was shocked, and I just sort of said, oh, I'm lucky the show is hanging, and that was that," she told me. "I chose not to participate in the art world per se after that, just at alternative spaces or university art galleries. But what I think is important is that I didn't do internalized censorship. I painted what I wanted to paint."

An archivist at the Whitney confirms Shapiro's exhibition in November 1973, but the museum's files contain no mention of censorship. Nor do the files contain a final list of which works went up on the walls.

After a time, Shapiro turned her studies toward acupuncture and Chinese medicine, moved to Vashon Island, and mostly disappeared from the art world. She kept painting, but Seattle Art Museum, the major art museum in her adopted region, never even knew she existed.

A few weeks ago, *Two Sides of Self*, the mermaid watercolor, and another watercolor that has never gone on exhibit anywhere, *Woman Landing on Man on the Moon*, crossed over to the other side—into SAM's permanent collection.

Now SAM is spending its money and energy protecting these pieces, each no larger than a kitchen cutting board. Shapiro hopes that SAM in 2015 will be willing to exhibit what the Whitney of 1973 would not.

"I hope they hang it on the walls—that's my concern," Shapiro said. "I wouldn't be surprised if they don't."

She paused.

"I usually show at the credit union on Vashon."

The only reason that Ann Leda Shapiro has been inducted into future art history as told by SAM is that Seattle artist Matthew Offenbacher recently won a prize and, together with Jennifer Nemhauser, decided to do something revolutionary with it.

Offenbacher is a mid-level Seattle artist. He's a painter but also an organizer of artists, and the publisher of a smart, influential zine called *La Norda Speciale*. His paintings are not included in any Seattle museum collections, but he has been recognized for them. In 2013, he won the Neddy at Cornish in painting, which comes with an unrestricted \$25,000 award. An unrestricted award means you can do whatever you want with the money—buy a convertible, blow it on the best beach vacation ever.

But Offenbacher and Jennifer Nemhauser, his partner of 25 years, decided to take the money coming into their household and send it right back out. They bought art by female and queer artists who live locally and they donated it to SAM for the permanent collection.

"It's a conversation we've had for as long as we've been together—the issue of who is valued, who gets to be written into textbooks in history," Nemhauser said. She's a biology professor at the University of Washington, and has the

same questions about science as Offenhacher has about art.

After *Elles* made painfully obvious just how slim museum holdings are, meetings of Seattle artists were convened, including one called the Seattle Women's Convention, to ask: What next? What can we do to support women artists better?

Not long after Offenhacher won the \$25,000, he sent SAM curators Catharina Manchanda and Chiyo Ishikawa a simple e-mail requesting a meeting. Right away, there was interest. Soon the two curators were in a fifth-floor conference room with Offenhacher and Nemhauser, talking about their idea. Offenhacher and Nemhauser had brought with them a list of 50 artists and works they felt represented the best of local feminist and queer art.

It was, Manchanda said, "the most unusual project in relation to an acquisition that I've ever worked on."

Offenhacher and Nemhauser proposed the whole project as a work of art unto itself, called *Deed of Gift*. The work is not only the gift of the small collection to the museum, but the process leading up to the gift.

"As a gesture, as a project, as an undertaking, I see it as an extension of Matt's larger self-understanding as an artist," Manchanda continued, "and as an artist who wants to make a difference in the local community. I may be overstating it if I say I'm seeing it as an art project, but it felt that way."

Deed of Gift—there is an actual legal deed documenting the deed that was done—can also be seen as an epic act of kindness.

"What a generous gift," said Robert Kaplan, a museum trustee who is on the acquisitions committee. (Kaplan is a major collector of Australian aboriginal art.) "He must be quite an interesting person."

But that's not how Offenhacher and Nemhauser prefer to see it.

"We don't like it at all when people say, 'You're so generous,'" Offenhacher told me. "The intention of it wasn't to be generous, really... I'd like it to be understood as an art project that was trying to start conversations and have symbolic value in the community around how artists and artworks are valued, how museums make value."

"It starts from a hard place," Nemhauser elaborated. "It wants to bring up really hard things to talk about. Charity is a little different. [*Deed of Gift*] is not selfless. We're really deeply invested in our community in Seattle and think there are some hard questions that need to be asked and discussed. This art project is a bit of a prod."

In other words, giving to SAM was a way of critiquing SAM from the inside.

"I'm not naive, I never would have made it into the Seattle Art Museum," said Joey Veltkamp, the only male artist of the seven.

His piece that entered the collection as part of *Deed of Gift* is a quilt, referencing that domestic "feminine" craft, made using fabric that's patterned with butch plaids and symbols of the rugged outdoors in Montana—plus swatches with bears and squares of fuzzy faux polar-bear fur. "It's just so damn sweet. It's just

such a gentle institutional critique. Like a hug. Like, 'Okay, you're missing some things, so let's give them to you. That seems to be really hard, maybe this will help.'"

When Manchanda visited Veltkamp for a studio visit as part of her stealth research for *Deed of Gift*, Veltkamp didn't know why someone so important was visiting him. He's a self-taught artist. Being part of SAM's collection is "shockingly validating," he said later. It was good at the time he didn't know the stakes were high, because he figured why not go for it, and he and the curator were able to have a real conversation, he said.



Joey Veltkamp's *Glacier* quilt. His version of the domestic "feminine" craft is patterned with butch plaids and symbols of the rugged outdoors.

"She talked about [how] it actually is hard to get work at SAM by women artists and queer artists, because, you know, someone might approach you with money, and you direct them toward a piece, and that money might dry up if it's a piece by a woman or a queer artist," said Veltkamp. "It just kind of shocked me that in 2015, that's still a challenge sometimes."

(Manchanda said later that she would characterize their conversation differently. As she explained it, "Some people are drawn to things that are more classic—to, say, key moments in the history of art—and then others want to be politically engaged." Manchanda added that she "would personally love to build the legacy" at SAM in feminist work and conceptual art of the 1960s, two areas where SAM's collection is thin.)

SAM does not keep tabs on the gender breakdown of its modern and contemporary art collection, according to a spokesperson. But upon request, SAM was able to tally how many works by male and female artists the museum has acquired in the last two years for its modern and contemporary collections, which cover the 20th and 21st centuries.

In that span, SAM acquired 221 works total: 35 by women and 186 by men.

It's difficult to come to tidy conclusions about a project as complex as *Deed of Gift*, but one sure thing is that *Deed* reveals how much unseen power and sway people with money have over what the museum decides to preserve for posterity.

This should come as no surprise. Almost every art museum in this country was founded by a rich man giving over his rare, expensive stuff. The family gets the windfall from the tax break for donating, and the public gets *culture*, so it's a win-win.

But science was always part of the picture, too. Museums are meant to gather together artistic experiences and assess them in a comprehensive way that no single person's taste could. They are meant to write history, to be factual. They classify art by breaking it down into time periods and geographical regions and styles, and those styles are understood as more than mere fashions—they reflect back the larger world from which they derive.

The professionalized, academically based, quasi-scientific, yet popular art museum—the American art museum as it stands today, like Seattle Art Museum—is crawling with conflicts and paradoxes that never overtly make it into the galleries. Those are the heart of *Deed of Gift*.

Seattle Art Museum is a private entity, but with that name, it sounds like a public agency. As a civic symbol, it ought to reflect the entire city and not just an elite slice of it. Offenbacher and Nemhauser chose SAM rather than the Henry Art Gallery or the smaller Frye Art Museum for that reason. What SAM owns in some senses the city owns. If SAM supports women artists, then this particular city is a comparatively good place for women artists.

"Giving work to a museum is automatically made to be a charity act," Offenbacher said. He's getting heaped with praise for being a donor. But, he said, like it or not, "collectors and donors should realize they have much more of an influence" on the city and the museum than they might think. And with power comes you-know-what.

There is a bright side to the arbitrary way that a single donor can make a difference. Someone with money who wants to help round out a museum collection simply "has to put a stake in the sand," said Josef Vascovitz, a wealthy Seattle donor.

Vascovitz and his wife, Lisa Goodman, donate almost exclusively art by artists of color to SAM. Somebody has to do it, because the museum has very little budget

for any new art, let alone artists who aren't household names. The art-going public still prefers Picasso, Matisse, and the impressionists. Donors can intervene to provide balance in the permanent collections.

"If you say 'feminist artists' or 'black artists,' even if those artists are offering their commentary on landscape, you scare museum-goers away," said Vascovitz, who was on the acquisitions committee that approved *Deed of Gift*.

"It's one thing when Lisa and myself give, because everybody assumes we can and should," said Vascovitz. But when people like Offenbacher and Nemhauser take "their very limited resources and use them as a multiplier effect like this? It's exceptional, and I don't use that adjective lightly."

Offenbacher and Nemhauser have an agreement that they check in with each other any time either of them wants to spend more than \$100. She recalled how this time he described his idea over dinner, and Nemhauser "basically said, 'Wow, you have such an awesome brain—I totally want to do this with you!' It was really that simple."

By contrast, "This time of year, we spend a lot of time... debating about how many bunches of asparagus are reasonable versus pure decadence."

Klara Glosova, another Seattle artist whose work is entering SAM's collection thanks to *Deed of Gift*, has always made art from her everyday. She has teenage sons who play soccer. A lot of soccer. For Glosova, this means many hours spent on the edges of sports fields, the edges of her sons' heartbreaks and triumphs.



Klara Glosova's *Life on the Sidelines*. From a series of giant watercolor-on-paper paintings, this one was recently acquired by SAM.

Last year, Glosova made something of a departure from her more typical ceramic sculptures of everyday objects—dirty socks on the floor, for example—by creating a series of huge, gorgeous watercolors on paper called *Life on the Sidelines*. The paintings depict, over and over, rows of parents on the sidelines of athletic fields. The parents cast long shadows, and nothing is happening on the field. You never see faces, only backs.

Last month was the first time Glosova had ever been behind the scenes at SAM. She is used to showing work in galleries and DIY spaces. When Glosova brought the watercolor SAM had acquired through *Deed of Gift*, it was treated with a reverence she'd never experienced before. "Nobody wanted to touch it, and they asked me to slide it off the cardboard," she said. "It was like it crossed over to another place that's very unfamiliar to me."

While she was there, she noticed the freight elevator was so big and beautiful, she encouraged them to put on shows there.

As for how it felt watching her art entering SAM's collection, she talked about it like a parent giving away a child. "Somebody else will take care of it much better than I ever would," she said. "That's huge for an artist." Being part of *Deed of Gift* "kind of seems like the best thing that could ever happen to an artist."

Offenbacher admits with a smile that the path Glosova's painting took to get into SAM's collection was "extremely nonlinear."

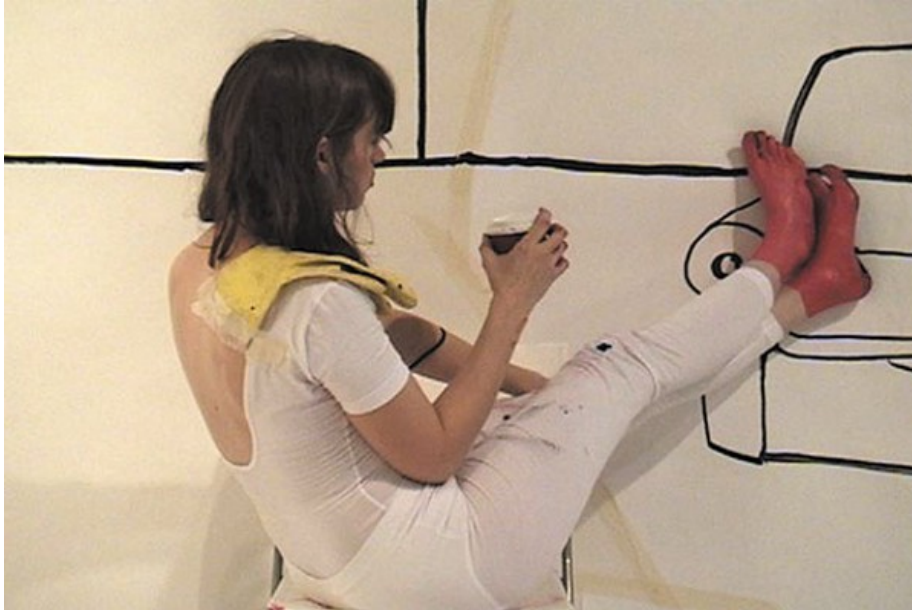
"We started with a very naive view," Nemhauser said.

"We didn't realize how much of a political process it is," added Offenbacher.

Don't forget that Offenbacher and Nemhauser started with a list of 50 artworks; *Deed of Gift* ended up consisting of seven total. As for what didn't make the cut, all the specifics of the conversations between the donors and the museum are confidential. Nemhauser explained that artists in Seattle are told often enough that they're inadequate that they don't need to know they were on the losing end of yet another competition for scarce resources.

But it sounds like the curators and Offenbacher and Nemhauser really hashed it out. "Those conversations were substantive," Nemhauser said.

At first, Nemhauser wanted to donate more obscure pieces. "That doesn't fly at all at a museum," she learned. The museum wants an "iconic" piece by Wynne Greenwood—one of her nationally known videos, for example—not one of her soft sculptures. Greenwood's signature 2007 video *YOUNG WOMAN WARRIOR PREPARED FOR BATTLE* was selected for *Deed of Gift*.



Wynne Greenwood in one of her signature videos, this one titled *YOUNG WOMAN WARRIOR PREPARED FOR BATTLE*, which was just acquired by SAM.

Over the course of months of e-mails, phone calls, meetings, and studio visits, there was horse trading. There were times when the curators came back from the director's office with changes. Offenbacher and Nemhauser never met the director or any board members. "The idea of 'women's experience' came from the museum, and 'feminist and queer thought' was coming from our side," Nemhauser said. "So—those met."

Nemhauser and Offenbacher both laughed, and she said, "It's politics, right? Museums are intensely conservative. It's more clear to me now why holes that everybody can see and point to don't get filled over time."

In the end, Offenbacher and Nemhauser spent \$16,800 directly on the art. They estimate they spent about \$20,000 total on *Deed of Gift*, including various expenses, paying themselves an artists' fee, and a planned party. The artworks cost from \$5,000 down to \$6 for a chapbook by Anne Focke, who emerged in the 1970s by founding the interdisciplinary center and/or, and went on to become a legendary Seattle artist/administrator.

The curator Manchanda argues that Offenbacher continues Focke's legacy. "She redefined artistic practice at an earlier time," said Manchanda. "She writes, 'the patterns I make, the work I do, is functional like a container... not simply a container for something else. A form-er.'"

Likewise, *Deed of Gift* is functional like a container, and it forms something new.

And think about this: Offenbacher, the original instigator, is the only artist in all of this who does *not* have art in SAM's collection. One issue of his zine, containing an excellent essay he wrote about Northwest artists titled "Green Gothic," is held in SAM's library, which means that when Manchanda searches for "Offenbacher" in SAM's internal system, she at first thinks he is officially included in the permanent collection, then no, then maybe, and finally: no.

"That really pleases me, that my status in relation to the museum is confusing," Offenbacher said, in his calm, gentle-voiced, nonconfrontational way. He sounds curious. He always sounds curious.

The only work of art SAM did not acquire is *Deed of Gift* itself. That belongs to Offenbacher and Nemhauser, and they'd be willing to sell—but the price is \$25,000, which they would turn around and spend the same way, on more art for a museum.

On April 21, SAM hosted a party for the donors of all recent acquisitions. There were drinks and hors d'oeuvres, and most of the people were in fancy dress, suits and ties. This was the final "window into how SAM does things" that Offenbacher and Nemhauser got. Artists were also invited, and all sat together at one table. No seats were assigned, but the tables ended up divided by role anyway: donors, artists, museum staffers.

Seattle artists Dawn Cerny and Victoria Haven were there. They collaborate under the pseudonym Daft Kuntz, a name that's a play on "cunts" and *kunst*, the German word for "art." Their 2012 silkscreen *So Good It Could Have Been* was also included in *Deed of Gift*, so it was part of the video slide show depicting all the acquisitions SAM has made so far in 2015. The newest work in the slide show was Glosova's 2014 *Life on the Sidelines*; the oldest were Japanese prints from the 1790s. (This blew Glosova's mind.)

When the video got to the Daft Kuntz silkscreen, you could at first see only the top of the print, with the words "So good it could have been" on a white background. Then the camera scrolled slowly down to see the rest of the words: "Made by a man."

"Somebody later told me they were sitting behind Barney Ebsworth, and he was audibly chuckling when it panned down," Haven said. "Because it's softer and

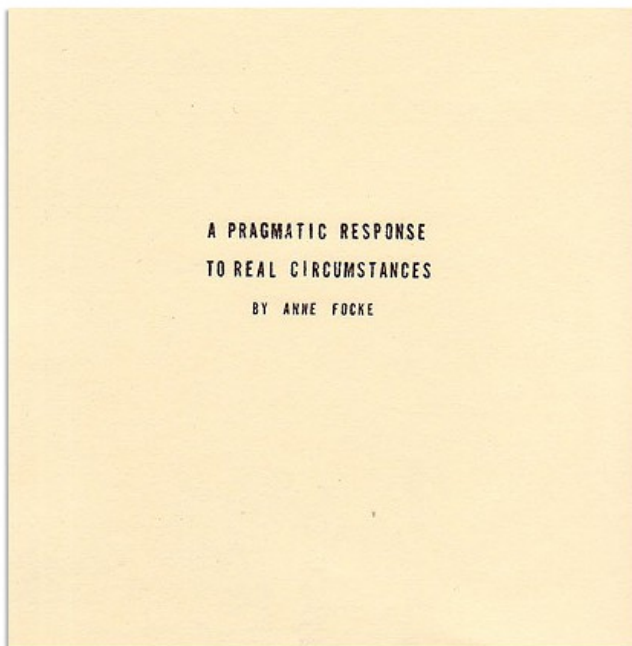
sentimental at the top, and then it hits you over the head at the end."

Ebsworth is a former cruise-ship and Build-A-Bear tycoon who lives on the Eastside and owns a 20th-century American art collection many museums covet —important pieces by major artists. He has, or has given to SAM or the National Gallery of Art, major works by David Hockney, Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, Andy Warhol, Georgia O'Keeffe, and other artists.

For a moment, the fan of American classics was enjoying two new American artists.



"So good it could have been made by a man" is something a man told artist Victoria Haven, who is half of Daft Kuntz.



A chapbook by Anne Focke. The founder of the 1974 alternative art space and/or published this piece called "a pragmatic reponse to real circumstances."

And the only reason that Daft Kuntz piece was ever made in the first place was because of a gendered insult.

After the opening of *Elles* at SAM in 2012, Haven and friends walked to a nearby bar for drinks. Another piece of Haven's had been included in SAM's *Elles* companion show, and a male artist—Haven won't say who it is—told her he loved her work.

"I don't know why it has to be [in] an all-female show," he told her. "Your work is so good, it could have been made by a man." ★

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