

Call for Participation

Stairwell's is looking for artists, writers, blog contributors, and volunteers. Email us at stairwells.sf@gmail.com to see how you can get involved.

Upcoming Events

April 22: First Field Trip

July 13: Second Exhibition & Publication

Visit www.stairwells.org for updates and further information.



Issue 1

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Stairwell's is a curatorial project by Sarah Hotchkiss and Carey Lin, supported by a 2011 Alternative Exposure grant from Southern Exposure. Over the next year, *Stairwell's* will mount short-term temporary exhibitions throughout the Bay Area, produce publications like this one, and host off-site excursions called Field Trips.

NEITHER HERE, NOR THERE

Aaron Harbour & Jackie Im

In the classic *Simpsons* episode “Marge vs. the Monorail,” the citizens of Springfield found themselves conned into buying a faulty transit system that brought the town to the brink of ruin. At the conclusion of the episode, the camera pulls away into a long shot of the town as Marge narrates,

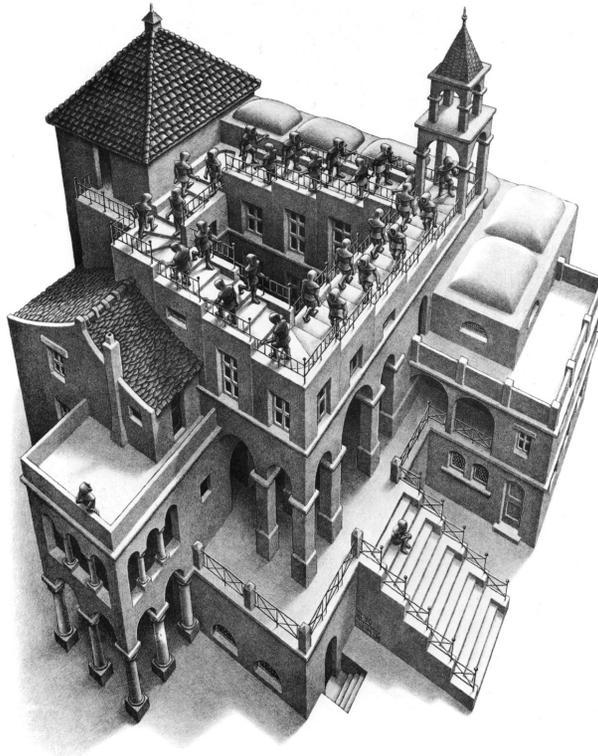
And that was the only folly the people of Springfield ever embarked upon. Except for the popsicle stick skyscraper. And the 50-foot magnifying glass. And that escalator to nowhere.

The third of these absurdist follies, the ‘escalator to nowhere,’ is shown from above, soaring hundreds of feet into the air, at the end of which its passengers make a brief exclamation of surprise as they fall to their presumed deaths. The idea of an escalator built with no destination is both ridiculous and a provocation. Why are people riding this thing with such obliviousness to its morbid ending? Why was it built?

A different thing is proposed in M.C. Escher’s *Ascending and Descending* (1960). The piece depicts a staircase that appears to go up and/or down seemingly forever, occupied by people heading in either direction. Like the riders of the escalator to nowhere, the people in *Ascending and Descending* have entered an interstitial space of destination-less travel. For the escalator to nowhere the destination is a literal no-place, with the journey—the ascension—being the means and its own peculiar end. Escher’s work refuses an end destination and the people in the work are trapped in an infinite loop of stairways.

Let’s imagine the staircase not simply as a means to get from one point to another. Rather—as the escalator to nowhere and *Ascending and Descending* illustrate—let us think of the staircase as a site in and of itself. To disregard the destination and the start point, remaining in the interstitial: in this sense the staircase is akin to a pause—a respite from the journey. *DEEP DOWN AND BUILDING UP*, the inaugural exhibition for Stairwells, considers the staircase of the Noonan Building and in a way, process.

The Noonan Building is home to artists’ studios where process and pause are de rigueur. The main stairwell has one last flurry of flights leading to *no-where* (besides the roof). This site is where artists Carrie Hott and Maggie Haas have installed their work. Hott and Haas have approached this project with the creation of new work that respond to and reflect upon this space as a place of transit and transition;



in this manner their works seek to form a truce with the location’s identity and that of their practices.

Looking at a photo of a model of the Noonan Building stairwell by Carrie Hott, we see a mock-up of the eventual sculptural installation through the center opening. We are caught in one of those interstitial moments between conception and realization. The sketch is a means to an end, but what if there is present, already, some version of the production of aura—an initial signal beginning its crystallization. It is telling that in order to conceive the work such a maquette needed to be made. Hott’s practice avoids any simple relation between making and display by concerning itself with place, in taking its measure, and in turn following up on practices integral to this site’s nautical history in re measurement. Here, Hott’s interest in nautical measurements and spatial relationships concerns itself with process and preparation. The installation measures for no end product or activity, but rather takes time to situate itself and the viewer in the non-space of the staircase, and in a distended historicity.

As a sculptor and painter, Maggie Haas takes another angle in her approach. The final synthesis of her work is in objects and production ephemera which, post exhibition, have a continued cost in physical and psychological space. Unhung and uninstalled, some of its aura has worn away. Artwork drifts entropically beyond recognition back to the matter from which it was produced; original materials never disappear from view. There is a consistent willingness to work with materials and to let them be as they are: wood is wood, cinderblocks are cinderblocks. This exacerbates the post/pre-exhibit feed forward/back between the work and the exhibition space.

Haas’ installation is inspired by a family habit of storing “to be dealt with” items on the stairs, only for the stairs to become the objects’ de facto “permanent” location. Here, Haas’ “to be dealt with” artworks find themselves in a moment of being neither refuse nor austere *objets d’art*. In the stairways they find respite from normal art economies in a place that is neither here nor there.

Carrie Hott and Maggie Haas’ works both struggle to shake free and to latch onto site, stubbornly insisting upon themselves. In this way, this leads us back to the escalator to nowhere. The escalator exists not to carry passengers to an end destination, but instead insists upon its own escalator-ness, constantly carrying. In *DEEP DOWN AND BUILDING UP*, the stairwell does not serve to lead viewers to a gallery. The stairs insist on their capability of place.

AN INTERVIEW WITH STAIRWELL'S

Sarah Hotchkiss

How did this project come about?

Let's see... We had been in San Francisco for about two and a half years when we realized we were barely looking at the artwork at openings. Receptions were a time for socializing, for catching up with friends, but rarely were we having in-depth conversations about the work—or even taking time to consider the work so that we could have in-depth conversations about it.

We posed this problem to ourselves as an experiment: could we create a more satisfying art-viewing experience by changing an element of the gallery situation? And since we don't have a permanent gallery space, we decided to put art in new and possibly difficult situations so that viewers would really have to consider how the work was made in response to these environments.

After that, the other elements fell into place. We've always been charmed by stairwells as strange in-between spaces. We had previously recognized the upper level of the Noonan stairwell as a really interesting place to display art. But at the time, we didn't have any concrete notion of why it would be necessary to do something there. We didn't want these shows to take place in arbitrary locations.

Can you elaborate on this? Why choose stairwells as your non-gallery setting? Why not garages or office cubicles?

The more we thought about how we behave in galleries, the more we realized that we treat it as a place to move through. We circulate through the crowd to chat, when we could be viewing the work with a deeper level of intellectual engagement. We're supposed to use stairways solely as a way to get from one place to another. Traditionally, you don't stop or spend time on them. It seemed logical to reverse the roles, since we have done that to the gallery space already. Garages and office cubicles, while non-traditional, are still too static, too square.

Also, there was the added element of the challenge. It's really hard to make work for such a weird architectural space.

How did you select Maggie Haas and Carrie Hott as the artists for this first exhibition?

We were familiar with both artists prior working with them. We saw a piece Maggie made [*What I Have and What I Do Not Want*] for the Root Division 2011 "Introductions" show. It immediately made us think of the concrete blocks on the roof of the Noonan Building. People in the building arrange the blocks into semi-circles to create different seating arrangements. Every time we go up there, it's as if they've been moving around on their own to watch the sunsets.



Maggie had also done a lot of work with scraps of wood and construction materials. The Noonan Building is one of the only surviving wooden buildings on Pier 70, so on a material basis, Maggie and the building seemed particularly compatible.

Carrie made a piece for the first exhibition at Alley Cat Books [*Shadow Burns (from a bookstore, Ancient Art section)*] that recreated the effect of long-term light exposure on wallpaper. These "shadows" show where objects once occupied the space. This reminded us of the walls in the Noonan stairwell, which have a strange drippy appearance due to the fire sprinklers going off at some point in the past. In both cases, we saw a history told through surface treatment.

Perhaps you can describe how Maggie and Carrie went about tackling this "challenge," as you put it.

Maggie addressed the stairs from an autobiographical perspective. In her childhood home stairs were a storage site, a limbo zone for household items. She used this as a way to partially explain the accumulation of items in her own studio—parts of past projects, scraps of wood, and other materials that she couldn't seem to let go of, but couldn't find a use for. This show became a liberating force, in a way. It enabled her to cut up and bundle studio contents into new forms sized to fit the Noonan stairs.

Carrie found herself fascinated with the maritime history of the building. She did a lot of research on a method of measuring ocean depth called "sounding." A length of rope, marked at regular intervals, was lowered over the side of a ship until it hit bottom, thereby providing an accurate reading of the water's depth. While Maggie was viewing the stairs as a stopping place, Carrie was interested in the way they facilitate vertical movement and allow you to change your altitude, or "depth." She created four large-scale strips of canvas that shift in gradation from black to white, connoting a rising from darkness towards the surface and light. She also undertook the huge project of sewing and braiding 100-foot lengths of rope to create a single line that hangs from the ceiling down the center of the stairwell.

Not only do Maggie and Carrie's works mesh well together within the space, they both have a degree of darkness to them that seems fitting for the somewhat neglected air of the Noonan stairwell between the third floor and the roof.

Last, but not least: why is the project in the possessive?

We wanted the project name to resemble a stationary place like your neighborhood bar or deli, even though it's precisely the opposite of that. All *Stairwell's* exhibitions and activities operate under the same organizing principles, but in different locations around the Bay Area. We are a roving curatorial project with a stationary name.

SKUNKS, METAL SCRAPPERS, AND SEXY CALENDAR MAKERS:

Inhabitants & Visitors of San Francisco's Pier 70

Carey Lin

I answered a Craigslist ad in the spring of 2009 while looking for my first studio in the Bay Area and have been working from the Noonan Building ever since. Even though my side of the building doesn't have a stunning view of the East Bay like the studios across the hall, my windows overlook an area where various materials are stored, moved around, and occasionally recombined into larger structures whose purposes I have yet to fully determine. My best guess is that they build stage sets for the cruise ships that dock for repair on Pier 70, but that idea has started to seem way too specific and spectacular to be true. Once I saw some dissembled metal bleachers and components of a larger glittery stage prop that could only befit a cruise liner gala. The extended version of this fantasy includes the ship gliding smoothly through the Caribbean towards the sunset as people sip Mai Tais and smoke cigars. Wishful thinking perhaps.

Amateur Photographers Seeking Urban Decay

Entering Pier 70, I regularly encounter people taking photos of the dilapidated buildings and peering through the chain link fences that surround the seismically unsound buildings. Mostly it's art students, alone or with a class trip, but adventurous tourists show up from time to time too, nervous and giddy with discovery while perched on rented bikes. Once there was even a Segway tour wearing bike helmets, shorts and fanny packs heading into the metal yard next to the Noonan. I always want to say to these people (the art students especially), "Baby, you are hardly the first, nor the last, to admire these buildings and think you've stumbled on some edgy shit. I mean, seriously." But I don't, I just slow down and try to drive over the speed bumps straight on, heading to work.

Calendar Makers, Automotive

Other times there are groups of guys with fancy tricked-out BMWs or racing Hondas making their own sexy lady car calendars—the girls in bikini tops and boy shorts trying to drape themselves seductively over the cold metal of the car hoods in the chilly San Francisco wind. Everyone involved in the production seems visibly disappointed that they signed up to help out—the actual work is less glamorous than they imagined.

Cruise Ship Employees

Looking a little unsteady on solid ground or maybe just adjusting to a new time zone (is there a marine equivalent to jet lag?), cruise ship employees drag their roll-a-board black suitcases to a metal rail that barely passes for a bench and wait for the airport shuttle. The first time I saw them I was so confused. How could there be an airport shuttle pick-up in such a remote location? Had these tourists gotten a cut-rate deal? Was there a hidden hostel set amongst the broken glass and weeds next to the dry docks? Nope, they had just gotten off of work and they looked damn tired.

Dumpster Scavengers

The dumpsters outside our building get filled with a lot of cardboard, beer bottles, and unusable art supplies. Scraggly-looking men dig through warped

stretcher bars, packing material, and broken-down furniture, rummaging for items of value. Sometimes I wish I could help them network with the *Major Litterers* (see next entry).

Major Litterers, Masquerading in the Night

I never actually see these people, but I know that they frequent Pier 70 since it's an easy place to dump the things no one wants to deal with. For obvious reasons they come at night and for days after there will be a cluster of CRT televisions near a fence having a sad conference on their shared obsolescence, or a toilet missing a seat, or a small tower of tires. The ripped trash bags filled with metal clothes hangers are the worst though, especially after some rain.

Metal Scrappers

On weekday mornings, scrap metal collectors arrive by the dozens and queue up to unload the pick-up beds they've piled dangerously high with washers, dryers, refrigerators, and lawn equipment. I always feel conflicted when I'm driving around the city and find myself idling at a red light behind one of these tiny trucks with plywood sides reaching up 8 feet or higher. They have such amazing piles of stuff (wobbly as the stacks are), and I have a weakness for taking pictures of things with my phone from the car. I really should know better, get safer, and switch lanes.

Pigeons

Pigeons hang out near the entrance to Pier 70. Security guards throw them bits of bread or whatever they have left from their lunches. Occasionally there are seagulls or some crows mixed in, but mostly it's just pigeons. Strutting around, loitering, they've taught me that it's actually more effective to speed up if I don't want to hit them. One of my constant fears while driving is squishing a pigeon, and a slow crawl doesn't always get them to steer clear.

Potential Business Investors

Ever since that proposition was passed a few years back to redevelop the remaining parts of the SF waterfront (including Pier 70 and areas south like Bayview/Hunters Point), I sometimes see ladies and gentlemen in business suits and hard hats looking into the hollowed out buildings, probably imagining condominiums with fake balconies and other such atrocities. They scare me a little.

Skunks

At night the skunks rule Pier 70. It's interesting to see how the cats and the skunks seem to get along just fine in this environment (not sure how it usually is, "in the wild"), sharing the weedy lot where someone once left discarded slabs of concrete and an igloo-shaped dog house. This lot often looks like a miniature post-apocalyptic jungle, with a small forest of fennel that can grow to 6 feet tall. Once a year the SF Port cuts it all down and the cats and skunks avoid the area until there is enough foliage to shield them again.

Stray cats

There's a sizable population of stray cats sustained by the twice-weekly feedings of anonymous animal lovers. A few of the older strays have lost their distrust of humans and barely move out of the way when cars creep past them towards the parking lot behind the Noonan. There was one that I named Sandy because it was hard to tell if her coloring was natural or because she was always a little dirty from the environment. I haven't seen Sandy in a while but there's another cat now that looks a lot like her, only darker. I call him Smokey.