

EXTRA! EXTRA! WORKS OF ART, 75 CENTS!

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*I read the news today. Oh boy.* –John Lennon

The front-page headlines look different on the *Courier-Journal*. They're in the usual typeface, but they have a roughness to them. The serifs—those little tails that project from the long lines of Ts or Hs—stick out at not-quite-perfect angles. The photos, or what would be photos any other day in the paper, are covered with crosshatching touched off with faint, penciled-in reds and greens. And the graphics aren't quite right either. The weather forecast for Louisville, Ky. at the bottom of the page calls for an end to today's rain showers and a mostly sunny Saturday, but the cloud icon is a hand-drawn blot streaked with zigzags and tomorrow's sun looks like a lumpy orange tennis ball.

A banner across the top of the paper for Friday April 10, 2009 offers an explanation: “A special artistic interpretation of the front page. Actual page on A3.”

Page one, the typical computer-generated page one, is on page three. And page one is a hand-drawn copy of three. And the hand-drawn copy is a work of art titled *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance*.

The concept is the brainchild of Serkan Özkaya, a Turkish artist in his mid-thirties based in Istanbul whose exhibitions have already taken him from Copenhagen to Shanghai, with many stops between. He's spent time in the States too, working in 2007 with a restaurant in New York to serve up specially-shaped desserts and in 2008 with an art space in St. Louis where he suspended curled sheets of paper in an imaginary indoor breeze.

*Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance* isn't Özkaya's first foray onto the gray pages of a major paper. It's the latest in a series of collaborative artworks—all of which the artist titles *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance*—where he teams up with publishers to deliver conceptual art to the readers of the newspaper.

“I was working on this concept of copying and making a drawing of a drawing, or making a drawing of some kind of text,” says Özkaya. “And then one evening I came up with the idea of drawing the paper, as it is, and making the newspaper print that the next day.”

He confided the idea to his girlfriend at the time. Her initial response, says Özkaya with a laugh, was, “Oh, nobody’s going to let you do that.”

It took him almost six months to reach the editor of the Istanbul newspaper *Radikal* and pitch his idea. “Once I got to him,” Özkaya says, “everything went smoothly. He understood it.” On September 21, 2003, *Radikal* ran a hand-rendered reproduction of its front page—which included among the real news items a fictional article by author and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk—to coincide with the Istanbul biennial art show, for which the paper was a media sponsor.

Özkaya reprised *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance* at the invitation of publications in Germany and Sweden, and then, in September 2006, *The New York Times* ran a frame-within-a-frame adaptation of the project on the front of the Weekend Arts section. It could be tempting—even knowing that the artworks are themselves already copies—to characterize these projects as repetitive. But each iteration of Özkaya’s newspaper work brought new expectations from publishers and fresh challenges for production. Özkaya’s collaboration with the *Courier-Journal* was no different.

The Louisville edition of *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance* was, in fact, planned to run yesterday—that is, Thursday, April 9. The Wednesday paper even included a teaser for the project, advising readers to look for a surprise the following day.

Özkaya and five student volunteers from the Hite Art Institute at University of Louisville were scheduled to meet at the *Courier-Journal* building in the late afternoon of Wednesday, to

await the arrival of proofs from the newspaper's layout designers. The gathered artists would divide the copying responsibilities, with Özkaya taking the front-page photographs and the students each penciling over the lettering of stories and headlines.

But news broke. A shooting that morning involving an injured police officer required front-page coverage and continuing updates from reporters, so the project was put off. Already, the successful run by the UofL women's basketball team in the NCAA tournament had pushed back the project a bit..

On Thursday the teaser line ran again, modified to acknowledge the delay of the surprise to Friday, and late Thursday afternoon the artists convened at 4 pm in a room at the newspaper and waited for the Friday front-page news to take shape.

The layout arrived piecemeal, and between 7 and 8:30 p.m. the artists traced the page in pencil as editors finalized content in the evening. The group finished around 9 p.m., and by 10, the hand-rendered versions were scanned onto metal sheets and run through the presses like a typical front page. It was ready for delivery before dawn on Friday.

“Until the moment when you go to the newsstand and you buy your own copy of that piece of newspaper, you don't know if it's going to happen or not,” says Özkaya. “Every time, at the last minute, some changes can happen.”

Other newspapers mitigated the risk of late changes by asking Özkaya to copy inside pages rather than A-1. But since leadership at the *Courier-Journal* chose the front page, delays in Louisville became a bigger factor in the execution of this most recent *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance*.

“Although it's the same project,” says the artist, “it always differs from one site to the other.”

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The collaboration between newspaper and artist was set in motion 19 months earlier, thousands of miles away. Steve Wilson, a Louisville investor and art collector, visited Özkaya's studio while in Istanbul for the September 2007 Biennial. Wilson must have liked what he saw, because he invited Özkaya out for a drink the following evening for a more private conversation. Özkaya remembers Wilson asking, "Why don't we bring that project to Kentucky?"

With funds from a contemporary art foundation, Wilson and wife Laura Lee Brown launched a private arts organization called artwithoutwalls to handle the Özkaya artwork and future public art projects planned for Louisville and beyond. The couple have their hands in many other cultural and business undertakings in Louisville as well. They developed a row of downtown buildings into 21C Museum Hotel, an art-filled luxury hotel that opened in 2006 and has drawn positive reviews for the daring contemporary art in the gallery and rooms. Visitors won't find off-the-rack budget pastels bolted to the walls here, but they can't miss the dozens of four-foot tall vivid red penguins (by collective Cracking Art Group) which have become 21C mascots. The couple also took on a radically designed high-rise project called Museum Plaza for Louisville's downtown that is intended to house galleries for contemporary art and facilities for the University of Louisville to start a glass-art MFA program.

The couple tapped Louisville curator Alice Gray Stites to run artwithoutwalls, which aims to support public art projects like Özkaya's in Louisville and around the country.

"I'm really interested in public art that engages people in as many ways as possible and appeals to a multitude of our senses," says Stites. She curated several local exhibitions in Louisville, at 21C and at the public Speed Art Museum.

Stites says the project with the newspaper didn't take a lot of time to execute—when it

came to actually copying the front page—but required considerable patience to link all the right parties. She helped bring Özkaya to Louisville from Istanbul four times to gain support for his project among editors, educators, and leaders in the local arts community. After months of building relationships, the project found fresh support when a new publisher came on board at the *Courier-Journal*.

“In any case,” says Stites, “we really felt that the first project should—and I want every project to do this—engage with an aspect of this community that is a cornerstone or a defining characteristic. I want art to be taken out to where people already are so that it’s deeply integrated. There’s no better way to do that than to deliver it in the daily, in your mailbox or in your front yard.” (Stites expanded on this theory in an article that ran in the *Courier-Journal* Community Forum section, which appeared the same day as *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance*.)

Stites is quick to point out that the term “public art” can be confusing and vague because it’s an umbrella for so many things. What she intends for artwithoutwalls are projects like one she visited in New York’s Madison Square Park called *Pulse Park* (2008) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, where visitor’s heartbeats—recorded by a sensor panel—changed the tempo of a circle of pulsing lights. The more heart rates interacting, the more dynamic the light show. Says Stites, “It not only brought people together, but it also uses technology as a way to refer to the most basic aspect of our humanity.”

Though *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance* doesn’t integrate technology in new ways—and in a key respect it actually replaces computer-generated print with a handmade duplicate—Stites considers this a great opportunity for using public art to reveal a fresh take on something very human: news and information consumption. “Art has as much to teach us by

being pleasurable,” she says, “as it does by being conceptual and highly serious.”

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Stites separates out works like *Pulse Park* from other forms of public art, like civic monuments, which she considers self-congratulatory. Özkaya draws a similar distinction between his practice and those big sculptures outside of courthouses or in parks that celebrate important men and women—and horses in Kentucky’s Derby City. In particular, the artist says he’s drawn to the “ephemerality” of his works with newspapers.

“A public sculpture becomes dull over time and the meaning changes really fast, from one day to another and from one year to the other,” he says. “It becomes something either unbearable to the people who have to put up with it, or it becomes something invisible.”

In some ways, newspapers are similarly invisible, since they’re all about content that changes day-to-day with the shifts of news and advertisements. Özkaya wants to break that spell and remind people of what they’re looking at.

“I’m more interested in something that can be—or is—at the same time worthless and priceless,” he says. “Also, something durable and ephemeral at the same time.” Özkaya has a strong appreciation for the purpose of a newspaper, as much for how it delivers information to the public as for how it actually preserves events. “It’s archived all the time and it’s more or less a piece of history in itself,” he says. “It’s what’s here to stay.” And yet, the artist adds, the newspaper—the object itself—comes and goes daily.

Özkaya’s projects frequently ask his audience to examine issues like permanence and disposability in novel ways. With his restaurant collaboration series called *Bring Me the Head of...* he supplied casts for restaurants, including one in Istanbul, another in Shanghai, and Freemans on New York’s Lower East Side, to make dessert sculptures the shape of teddy bear

heads. Patrons could then buy a piece of art—that is, a cake or bread pudding in the shape of a childhood toy—and immediately consume it. There’s very little permanence there, except in the molds the artist supplied and in the memories of the visitors who got to see and consume the desserts. In all, it could be called “Today You Can Eat a Repeatable Dessert of Artistic Significance.”

Since the 1910s and the emergence of artists like Marcel Duchamp, mass production has posed problems for art lovers and the art establishment. Duchamp’s readymade sculptures, like his famous urinal *Fountain* (1917) and the *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) mounted atop a kitchen stool, suggested that people could take a look at the world around them and find human-made objects worthy of attention. Pop-art explorations by Andy Warhol and others in the 60s elaborated on the issue.

The changes to visual art cracked open curatorial practice as well. In the 1950s and 60s, says John Begley, professor of critical and curatorial studies at the University of Louisville, artists really started stretching the boundaries of what is art and thereby challenged the ways museums could accommodate new works. Impermanent installations like those by Joseph Beuys steered art materials and execution in new directions, and performance artworks by others removed art from the hands of collectors altogether.

Those trends continue with artists like Özkaya and his project with the *Courier-Journal*, which would be difficult, to say the least, to execute in a museum setting.

This is where artwithoutwalls and similar non-collecting institutions come in. The precedent for them goes back to Europe and places like German Kunsthallen or “art houses.” The modern equivalents are institutions like the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, which Begley says engage in “museum-like exhibitions” which are “more in the business of

exhibiting things and trading questions and issues—and ideas—than collecting objects.”

Begley says, “Contemporary art practice is so multidisciplinary these days that traditional museums are scrambling to keep up with what artists are doing.”

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Keeping up, for artwithoutwalls and the *Courier-Journal*, meant collaborating with an artist to hurl works of art into Louisville front yards. Of course, something like this is bound to raise eyebrows and start conversations, so to help readers in these conversations the newspaper published a series of Q and A conversations with Özkaya.

In the first of these, the artist mentions that most of the responses he received for his work in Istanbul with *Radikal* were positive. “I keep seeing the paper of that particular day on the walls of a lot of people,” he says. Özkaya remembers one complaint, though, from a man who said he couldn’t read what was on the page. Özkaya speculates that the man was very old. After the art editors assured the man that the page was a work of art, he said he would buy a second.

Responses to the *Courier-Journal’s Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance* were varied, including several readers posting comments online criticizing the paper for indulging in a stunt that could so cheapen the value of the news. Some respondents even suggested that the front page for April 10 was the last straw, that the paper was trying too hard to draw attention to itself and that they would not renew their subscriptions.

Stites was cautious but upbeat about the reactions elicited by the project. “It doesn’t bother me if people have a negative response, you have to expect that,” she says. She points out that people unfamiliar or uncomfortable with contemporary art might feel that a project like this is intended to dupe them. “Anything new, anything unconventional, anything that changes

something that you're used to can be disconcerting for people.”

Arnold Garson, publisher of the *Courier-Journal*, saw collaborating with Özkaya and artwithoutwalls as a chance to create interest in both art and newspapering in the community. But he also had some concerns leading into it.

“One was how our readers would react, how the community would react, and whether I could achieve the desired result,” says Garson. “Another was the degree of control that we would have over this project, versus the outside organization. What could I do?”

In addition, it was important for Garson to avoid any conflict of interest while working closely with artwithoutwalls and its wealthy benefactors. He was uncomfortable with proceeding if the newspaper didn't pay its own way, so the *Courier-Journal* picked up the tab for Özkaya's direct expenses—especially travel to and from Turkey

The paper ran an article explaining the project, and in it Garson is quoted saying “I hope it's exciting and surprising to our readers.” Garson evidently achieved his stated goal. He describes the feedback the newspaper received: “We had a lot of it.”

Along with the negative comments posted online were as many that praised the paper for trying something new and different. Shannon Westerman, director of the century-old Louisville Visual Art Association, signed his remark on the *Courier-Journal* website praising the work.

Westerman does say that he heard some interesting discussions come out of *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance*. “One of the biggest questions was, ‘Why would the C-J do this?’” says Westerman. “And often the responses were anywhere from ‘It was an experiment,’ to, ‘It was a way to get people's attention.’ So was it a marketing ploy? Was it a pure artistic decision?” Just hearing the questions showed Westerman how powerful it can be for people to have unexpected encounters with visual art.

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In addition to selling newsprint artworks for 75 cents, the *Courier-Journal* also offered signed, high-gloss prints of Serkan Özkaya's *Today Could Be a Day of Historical Importance*. For \$100 each.

Given a choice between one and the other, Özkaya says he's more interested in the newsprint version. "The project is specifically about that particular drawing printed on the newspaper paper," he says. It is distributed and handled in the usual way, from press to newsstand, and there's an appeal in that process for Özkaya. "The drawing becoming the newspaper itself," he says, "that's the main thing."

The artist adds, "But just for my archive, I also got one of the posters."

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