
What 'Color' is Pandora's Box?: Dialoguing on Fear, Art Installation 1

- R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D.
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Abstract: In mid-2006 I proposed an art installation that involved the public responding to images and quotes on fear that I would find in popular culture or various books and articles. The proposal was accepted for the Britannia Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, and after some misfortunes and delays, it was finally installed as an exhibition of nearly 70 written and/or drawn responses by different people who visited the art gallery during the months May-July, 2007. All of text and images were included in the final installation showing (May 7-31, 2008), including some of my own art made during this time. As an artist-educator-researcher, it seemed important to document the transcribed texts in a publication (Technical Paper No. 32) which makes a significant contribution to our historical understanding of fear and "the peoples'" response to the current "culture of fear" (post-9/11).

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank Danaan Jordan-Cordoni, Donna Clark and Vanessa Fisher for their artful constructions and talks with me and I'm grateful for Dr. Annie Smith's interview with me on this topic. I thank Haruko Okano for her kind and sensitive curatorial assistance for the past year. I appreciate the administration at the Britannia Community Services Centre for sponsoring this art exhibit and keeping the Britannia Art Gallery public, accessible, and alive. Most importantly, I thank all those souls that came by the art gallery and read and/or contributed their words, ideas, images to this exhibition on their own accord just because they knew they were worthy of being seen and heard on this topic of fear and fearlessness.

Introduction: Origin of the 'Fear' Box

On August 5, 2006 I wrote-up a proposal for "Dialoguing on Fear" as an art project that I envisioned for the Britannia Art Gallery (BAG). I originally had a complex idea to interview and video many people from all walks of life on the topic of fear. Everyone seemed to be talking about fear since 9/11. I wanted to put a sample of the conversations into one video loop, and then have them do art work on the topic and include it as well in the final installation in the glass case at the BAG. The interviews never really happened as people didn't respond (other than Dr. Annie Smith) to my call. So I ended up having a 2 X 4 X 2 foot plexiglass box made. I called it a 'fear' box. It was to be installed in the gallery (library complex) for several months before the opening of the exhibition. I wanted people to have a safe place (container) to "put their fear(s)" but more than that, I wanted to stimulate them into a conversation, a dialogue of text and image on the topic of the overall "culture of fear" that we all seem to be living in lately.

I wanted the 'fear' box transparent so people could see what others had contributed and in some way I sensed that would encourage them to participate and interact at some subtle level of consciousness. It was a small experimental

version of a 'real' democracy and a sort of "voting" on the topic of fear and its impacts.¹ And of course, it was a way to collect populus wisdom as well, as many people had their own stories, views and theories about the topic (see later). I wanted to document their text and images and maybe someday put into a publication (technical paper # 32) which could be sent to our leaders and politicians in our communities. At least, the publication would validate the importance of and need for dialogue on fear as part of the public (civic) agenda. I wanted art and creativity as central to that dialogue as we already have more than enough "usual" and repetitively "boring" ways of talking about fear (just read or listen to the mainstream media). I suppose I saw the 'fear' box as a magical device to bring out something extraordinary. You can read the transcripts below and see for yourself.

The 'fear' box idea is not totally original, but rather a variation on a theme, which stretches back to ancient Greek mythology and the story of Pandora's Box. It was Epimetheus, I believe, who was told not to, but had to open Pandora's Box, where all the great evils and horrors of humankind and history came flying out at once, of which the last thing to come out was "hope." Pandora's box, a metaphor for our dark (shadow) side, is interesting. I have been studying how many different artists are attempting to do art works that reflect and/or invoke the "culture of fear"² we're living in. However, one particular artist stood out for me in 2002, when I was doing my doctorate work. His name is Clinton Boisvert. Here is an excerpt of his art experience with 'fear' boxes:

Art Student's Project On 'Fear' Becomes A Lesson in the Law

By KEVIN FLYNN

December 17, 2002

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D07E1D6173DF934A25751C1A9649C8B63>

¹ In the May 15, 2007 *The Artery* (News from the Britannia Art Gallery), I wrote, "Fisher, a fearologist for many years, offers another art project to the community in which he wants to raise the awareness and creativity around how we construct our feelings, ideas, and imaginary around the topic 'fear' and fearless. He says, 'Most everyone these days is aware of the increasing culture of fear, with its prioritizing of safety and security and largely being afraid—as if these were the highest values of social life. I'm a critic of that trend, especially since 9/11. My research and educational art works have focused on how to bring about creative and critical dialogues on the culture of fear and its impacts, especially the way it negatively influences critical democratic participation in public spaces.' Fisher, has constructed this latest art project upon many metaphors, the most obvious one is how the 'Fear' Box represents a 'safe' place to deal with 'fear' and a democratic space to learn about how other's deal with 'fear' as well. The individual and collective mix without prejudice, as everyone gets to insert their own unique ballot in a transparent voting box, is rare. He encourages artists and all citizens to come by and visit, make a contribution...".

² *Culture of fear* is defined (in the most basic way) in my research work as a "system of attempting to manage fear that ends up causing more fear, instead of less."

Clinton Boisvert's assignment for his Foundation Sculpture class, according to the police, was to situate art in a specific place, not to create alarm in the subway system.

But Mr. Boisvert, a college student at the School of Visual Arts, succeeded in the latter, if not the former, last week when he taped 37 black cardboard boxes inscribed with the word "Fear" in the Union Square [NY] subway station, according to investigators.

After seeing the disruption his project had caused, Mr. Boisvert contacted a lawyer. And yesterday morning, he surrendered to the Manhattan district attorney's office, which intends to prosecute him on a charge of reckless endangerment, a spokeswoman said.

"The kid is clueless, basically," a police official said. "He did not seem to know the ramifications his art project would have."

When the mysterious boxes showed up last Wednesday, taped to the girders and walls in the Lower Manhattan station, they raised the sort of wide-open questions that authorities in a city still anxious about terrorism do not enjoy answering. Were they some kind of bomb canisters? Or a threat from a union member contemplating a transit strike? Or simply an artsy stunt?

The station was shut for hours while the bomb squad examined each box, dusted for fingerprints and checked for hazardous materials. When the station reopened, many subway riders just shrugged. But the Transport Workers Union had to labor to dissociate itself from an incident that some riders mistook for a bit of intimidation.

"No one at the school understood that he was going to do something that was of that radical a nature," said Adam Eisenstat, a spokesman for the college.

Mr. Boisvert, 25, in his first year at the school, had submitted a proposal to do a different project for the class, but apparently changed his mind, Mr. Eisenstat said. "He chose to make the city, the subway, the topical events, his canvas," he said. But Mr. Boisvert was trying to mark the tension, not create it, Mr. Eisenstat said. "The tension is at a level that I think he never realized," he said.

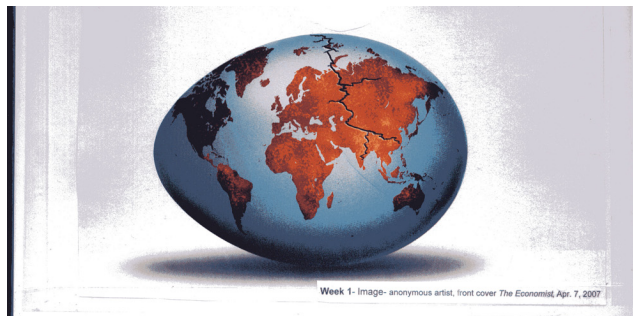
William Stampur, Mr. Boisvert's lawyer, said his client had arrived in New York only three months ago from Michigan and had not even been aware that a transit strike was being contemplated. Mr. Stampur described the boxes as an innocent art project that had been erected during the morning rush when hundreds of people were passing by. "It was done methodically and in open view," he said.

As a result, he said, Mr. Boisvert did not anticipate that others would view it as mysterious and frightening. "He feels so bad," Mr. Stampur said.

Reckless endangerment is a misdemeanor that carries a maximum term of a year in jail upon conviction. A friend who helped Mr. Boisvert arrange the boxes is not likely to be charged because his role was minimal, the police said.

What a way for a young art student to start an art career! His black painted 'fear' boxes were a big hit—too big! Anyway, I was so inspired by this story that I wanted to do my own version of the 'fear' box, and thus, this is what this exhibition at the BAG is based upon to some extent. Boisvert, probably would do a different kind of art project had he known what he would have got himself into. I have the luxury of learning from his lessons. Unlike Boisvert, I wanted to do more than "startle" an audience. I want them to participate in the power of the art's ultimate creation— a process that generally makes their fear less, not more. Maybe the "black" color of Boisvert's boxes, like Pandora's Box (perhaps?) is not the best 'color' to work the magic of transformation of 'fear' into something more productive. I have chosen a clear 'colored' box as an experiment, and below is the result of what people placed into this transparent plexiglass container. It seems to have worked well, for I haven't been put in jail yet.

Results: Dialoguing on Fear



The above image (sample) of an egg looking like the 'world' with a crack going through it³ provided the first stimulus to place on top of the 'Fear' Box in the BAG. Four other images/texts were used during the time of the 'Fear' Box being in the BAG in 2007. I replaced the stimulating image/texts every two or three weeks. Colored markers and paper were made available by me, as they sat on top of the box. Eventually colored markers and the "teacher's mug" they sat in disappeared, leaving only white paper sheets. In total some 70 pieces of paper were deposited in the box, of which 14 (20%) had a theme of "world fear" not merely personal fear(s). I found that very intriguing and appropriate to the kind of images/texts I used for stimulating the dialogue on fear and fearless. See Appendix 1 for the full Artist Statement (by me) for the final exhibition.

³ Taken from the front cover of *The Economist* magazine, Apr. 7, 2007, anonymous artist.

Dialoguing on 'Fear' : Britannia Art Gallery
- initiated and compiled by R. Michael Fisher

[retrieved Oct. 29, 2007—last open gallery July late, 2007; some of the formats of the following contributions from the public are altered slightly with spelling corrections; names of 'authors' below are there because they were given on the paper deposited, otherwise, people preferred to be anonymous]

1. If we move in fear, we are weakened,
If we dream of fearful circumstances, living is stunted,
With thoughts of fear, we release anxiety and violence,
With anxiety and violence we give into fear,
Understand fear is but a test.
Understand fear, has many forms; only a temporary Master,
Overcome with a knowledge of inner strength,
Overcome from the heart, with compassion and understanding,
Know that fear is not yours alone
Know to meet fear, with a steady gaze
To encounter fear, with a secret smile
To overcome fear is your great victory.

- Alan C. celtictouch.net
2. fear – just a tool to help guage problems, merely an oppportunity
to display true courage. The greater the fear, the deeper the
challenge, the braver the challenger! - Curtis Roane
3. good luck on the fear thing, I think it is a great idea. – C. Bencjo
4. You leave your eyes here to memorize, I can see you happy in the
shadows I despise. - C. Benjo (Metric)
5. yelling, brave, angry, - princess yum-yum
6. Anger is a secondary emotion; behind anger lies fear!
7. Cracking evolution
What will come out?
Cracking from within
Gaia is always in control.
8. I am not afraid of spiders
not because they amaze me
but because they way they move

it's too human
to be scared of
I am scared of what our world is turning into.

9. Of getting old.

10. I am afraid of a lion. –Thea-Rose Mitchell

11. If you want to be “Love” be Loveable

12. Keep the earth clean.

13. [?] [?] Are My Fear

14. I wonder
What kind of
Planet will
Be left for my
Daughter (and
her daughters)?

What air will
They breathe?

What water will
Keep them strong
And nourished?

Will they have
Untainted food?

Will we ever see
Peace?

I fear...

15. Fear – Fear that some charges will be brought against me again.
From the police. I have a medal from the Canadian Army for bravery.
Police have put in in mental hospitals so I cannot find witnesses to

help

me. Because I do not get out for months. Fear.

16. This is my ship coming in.

17. Men act on fear in fearful ways.

Women hold their fear and suffer
Act and create more fear? or Suffer with your fear?
Couldn't we all just be friends?

18. Fear has its uses. Fear motivates me to run or I will be stiff and unable to move. Fear motivated me to study and acquire degrees and diplomas—so as not to be redundant. Fear gets me into the kitchen, to the grocery store or the family will starve. Fear of being left behind is what motivates me to succeed. —L.A.J.C.
19. I am afraid of: Big dogs, speeders, child-abduction
20. I fear of things I can't see. I also fear of things I don't know.
21. Fear vs. friendship/communication
22. When I look into a stranger's eyes,
I feel fear.
When I am about to pass someone in the street,
I think, I should look into their eyes and say,
"Hello,"
We are human after all.

But I almost always regret it.
23. Fear is around
So is courage
Everyday
Which way
Will I go? —J.V.
24. I fear the transformation that will grip our society (and general reality) with the coming end of oil.
25. Fear – Ex army man moved here ten years ago. Courts and government have made up charges against me. Like assaulting an officer after assaulting some lady at the dug out Vac BC and put in mental hospital and shot up with some kind of drug. I'm an ex-drug user and do not like this shit. I would never again go over seas for the Canadian army, ever again. I will all the time be in fear. — Cargu Truchan
26. F. also E. vidence A. ppearing R. eal

27. We are conditioned to FEAR "the Other" in whatever form that takes: the unknown, someone of a different race... Yet the ultimate FEAR lies within our own concept of ourselves. Do we have the courage to recognize, accept and live, breathe through our FEARS and be all that we can be? Carpe diem. LOVE, Not FEAR. We are all one.
28. There can be No War On Terror
WAR IS TERROR
It starts in one's mind
When one fears
The love in their heart.
29. Smoke weed every day!
30. Stinging jellyfish
31. The future
32. "Courage comes from fear."
"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given,
and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and
his name shall be called Wonderful, Councilor, the
Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

"And lo, I will be with you always, even until the end of
the world." -Greetings from Texas, U.S.A.!!
33. NOT fear. I'm over with no sense thoughts.
34. Portable
35. Fear can
Lead
to
Hell

Hope can
come
Hopelessness
36. I am afraid of people.
I try not to be,
But I've been hurt
So many times.
37. I am free.

38. When I was little I was afraid of things like
bee stings
getting glass in my bare feet
a sliver
stinging nettles
and the dark.
Now, I'm afraid of
the front pages of the newspaper
too much information
television coverage.
- Now, I'd prefer to live in the dark.
39. I'm afraid of shithead automobile drivers trying to kill me!
I'm afraid of CRACKHEAD judges running our courts!
I'm afraid of the rich, influential and powerful ripping me off!
I'm afraid of government regulations screwing me!
40. I've been keeping this secret for so long....
Good night! Good night! Good night!
Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom!! Mommy.
I can't sleep! I'm thirsty! What time is it?
But I'm really
afraid of the dark.
41. The place on earth, British Columbia, peace.
Peace. Beautiful British Columbia.
42. British Columbia, be happy.
43. Fear: being afraid,
to know
to hear
to see
to touch
to speak
to feel.
- It takes more courage
To face the problems
To take an action. -Y.T.
44. I fear we (humans) are changing our ways—impact (negative)
on the world. Say goodbye.
45. Fear – strangled by a police sargeant. And amost killed. Gives me

fear also. I was put in mental hospital and had no way of finding witness who see the whole thing. There is no fair court in Canada. Freed bull shit. Fear. Fear. Fear.

46. Fuck you all.

47. "Love is letting go of fear" - Dr. J. Jampolski

48. Fear... it motivates me to climb higher.
Fear... it makes me smaller
Fear... it unites us as humans.
When I laugh, I release it. - Phoenix

49. the DARK
I don't exactly know why, but it seems I can make out shapes of monsters from the closet, or like clothing thrown here and there. At night especially when you know people are asleep, things get eerie, and scary movies' images pop into your head. You ask "what if?" questions. What if the boogy man jumped out and ate me? There's also something about our hallway that leads to our bedrooms. It's always dimly lit with the green light of the fire detector. A night there's quiet humming sound coming from the fridge. the dark.

50. familiar
distortion
industrial
complication

51. FEAR, paradoxically, unites and separates... Why is that? is it fear doing this?

52. Cycle of Destruction Fear – Unachievable because humans are stupid. Greed... more more more... inequality... jealousy... war... more development... more weapons... fainsm ... death... Greed...

53. Fear- the opposite of Faith. Everything that is not done with Love, is done with Fear.

54. We all live in the fear of ruining our earth. We all continue to destroy it slowly. We drive cars, throw waste materials into the earth, use chemicals in our homes, and use of paper, etc. In this world, we are all guilty of ruining the earth. I fear the next generation will not survive if the world continues as is. Lots of fear!! -Barbara Bickel

55. Destructive

by all
races
red, yellow,
black,
white
nations
to Mother earth why? \$- power...

56. Fear strikes in the early hours of the morning after the ducks on the lake have ceased their comforting quack, quack and the traffic has gone quiet.
Fear of what?
You suddenly cease
to be...
Your child hurt,
injured
All people you love leaving... the fear
evaporates with
the light, the sun
through the blinds,
the coffee burbling
the breakfast paper.
57. How can we live with the suffering in the world? Answer: We're too preoccupied with ourselves... How did this happen?
In the morning when the mirror won't recognize me...
58. The hunger for love distorts its true aim as it morphs into wicked thoughts and actions.
59. Fear is near as the newspaper or radio. How can we hear hope?
60. Pain is 'fear' leaving your body
61. I was 10, and I had a cousin whom everyone loved, who was 10 also. He drowned in a lake and ever since that time—41 years ago—I have been afraid of water ever since.
62. No homework please!
63. F. urry E. ears A. re R. ight

64. Afraid to choose the wrong flavour ice cream, afraid I might one day spell flavours without the 'u'. Afraid that my own convictions won't stand up, afraid to offend, afraid of sex shops, afraid of some troubles, the danger in not seeing others as human, afraid of drowning, mushrooms, heights, ladders, bandsaws, industrial accidents and illness. Afraid to lost my focus, afraid to misuse my energy, afraid to fear losing a job afraid to find one, afraid to make a mistake, to reveal the eight or so defective categories I drew out of the box.

65. Ages ago the fear I felt like a stone in my throat was laid to rest amid the leaves of youth's tenacious promise.

I find traces of solace in the rings of cautious denial,
discover strength in caring and hope, replace power
with service, but I cannot cast you out.

Your spirit, unknown to you, is past the bounds of fear.

Where does lost love rest and how does fear fall? In each
of us, seen through the lenses of humility and forgiveness.
Here is love.

66. Sarah N.'s evil eye.

67. FEAR. fear. dear read

68. Yell. – Princess Yum-yum

69. I have no hiding place. – C. Bencjo

70. Stop Consuming Fossil Fuels

71. Scarlet Letter- Money, what a hypocritical topic,
we all want it yet we fear it at the same time. – C. Bencjo

Appendix 1

Artist Statement (*Dialoguing on Fear*)

Most everyone these days is aware of the increasing debilitating impacts of the culture of fear, with its hyper-prioritizing of safety and security as *the* number one value. I am a critic of this trend and its manufacturing of places, people, events and things as risks, dangers, and ultimately *all* as exceedingly vulnerable and fragile. As much as I can appreciate the call to attend more caringly to Global Warming for example, I have great reservations that the real issue of more concern is Global Warning, and how everyone has an agenda they think is *the* most critical, and right now. Especially since 9/11, too often those with their anxiety-driven agendas (ab)use fear (and hope) to get the attention of the people they want to convert to their point of view on some “emergency” real or not so real. The media play on this to create “news” and “markets.” I have played with images of the Earth in this exhibition, and its ‘shadows’ of emotionology, to create an imagistic dialogue that may perhaps give us a new perspective beyond an emergency-driven fear-based social imaginary. However, my own art is not the focus of this show. *Dialoguing on Fear* is the latest of several artistic inquiries I have conducted since the early 1990s into the nature and role of fear in societies. This particular exhibition derives partly from my own long pursuits, as well as opening spaces (e.g., the ‘Fear’ plexi-glass Box) to allow people of all sorts to share their reflections and reactions about what fear is about and what their relationship to it is about. For some three months in 2007 I installed a large plexi-glass Box in the Britannia Art Gallery with stimulating cards about ‘Fear’ in our world. People were given free paper and colored pens to draw or write a response. They deposited those responses into the Box. The final glass case installation here is a combination of my own art musing on the topic plus about 65-70 other people’s work (responses), most of whom I have never met and would like to. In particular, I’m appreciative of Danaan Jordan-Cordoni, Donna Clark and Vanessa Fisher for their constructions and talks with me and I’m grateful for Annie Smith’s interview with me on this topic. My general thesis for this exhibition: *trying to convert is propaganda, and not the best way to good education about ‘fear’ and its management in the 21st century.*

Artist Bio

I have traveled many career paths in the past 35 years, from natural history, to art and music, to ecology and environmental activism, to rehabilitation and therapy. But mostly I have been an educator. I completed my B. Ed. (1978, U of C.) and taught in the public school system in Alberta for two years before resigning to find alternative ways to educate. I have always done spontaneous and creative art for pleasure and eventually painted realistic wildlife professionally between 1982-1988. Although very successful in my art career, I grew to be more interested in less commercial art production and used art as a form of inquiry to study human behavior. I completed a Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction (2003, UBC) using various art modalities to depict the problem of fear in education in a post-9/11 world. I currently work as an independent scholar and public intellectual out of Vancouver (E. 3rd Ave. off Commercial Dr.). rmfisher@shaw.ca