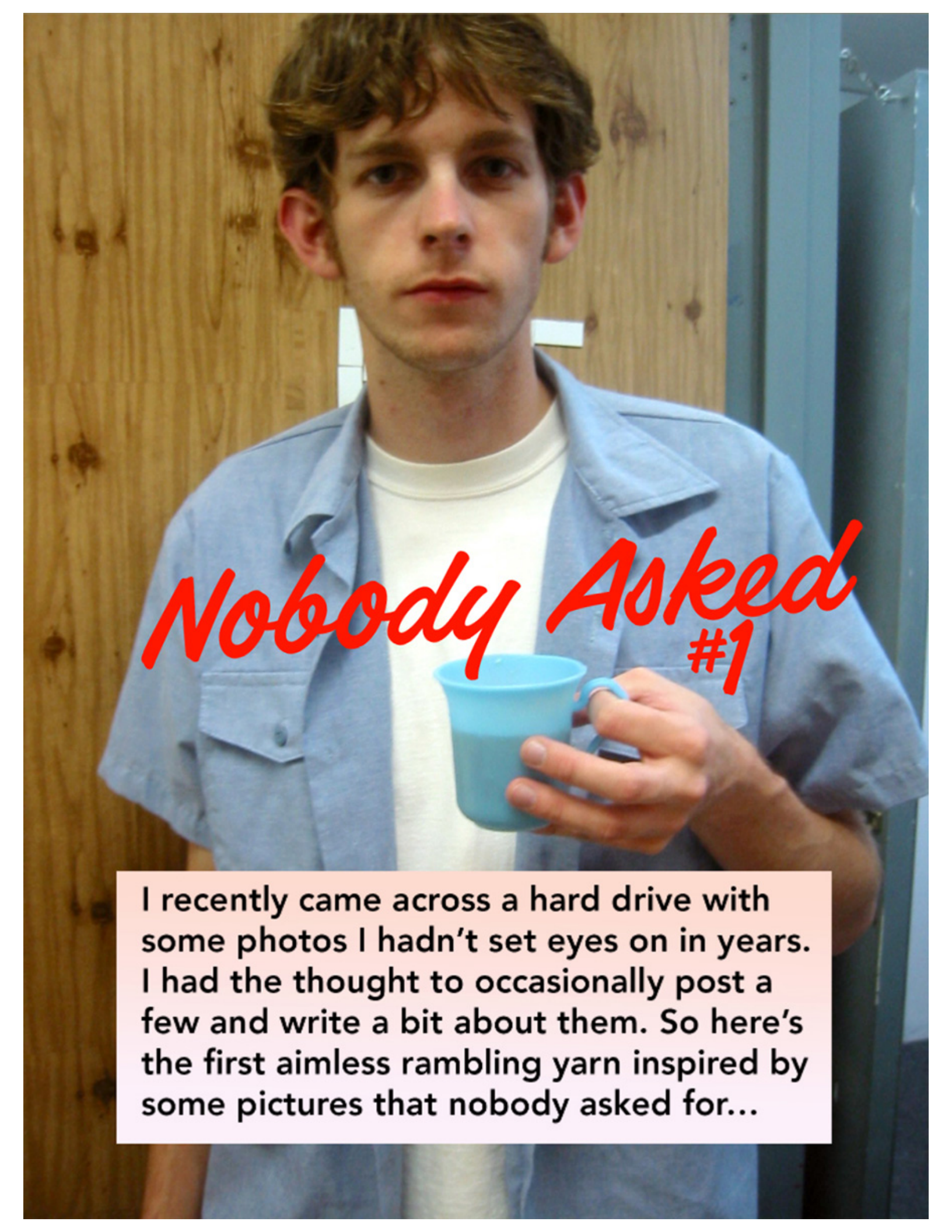
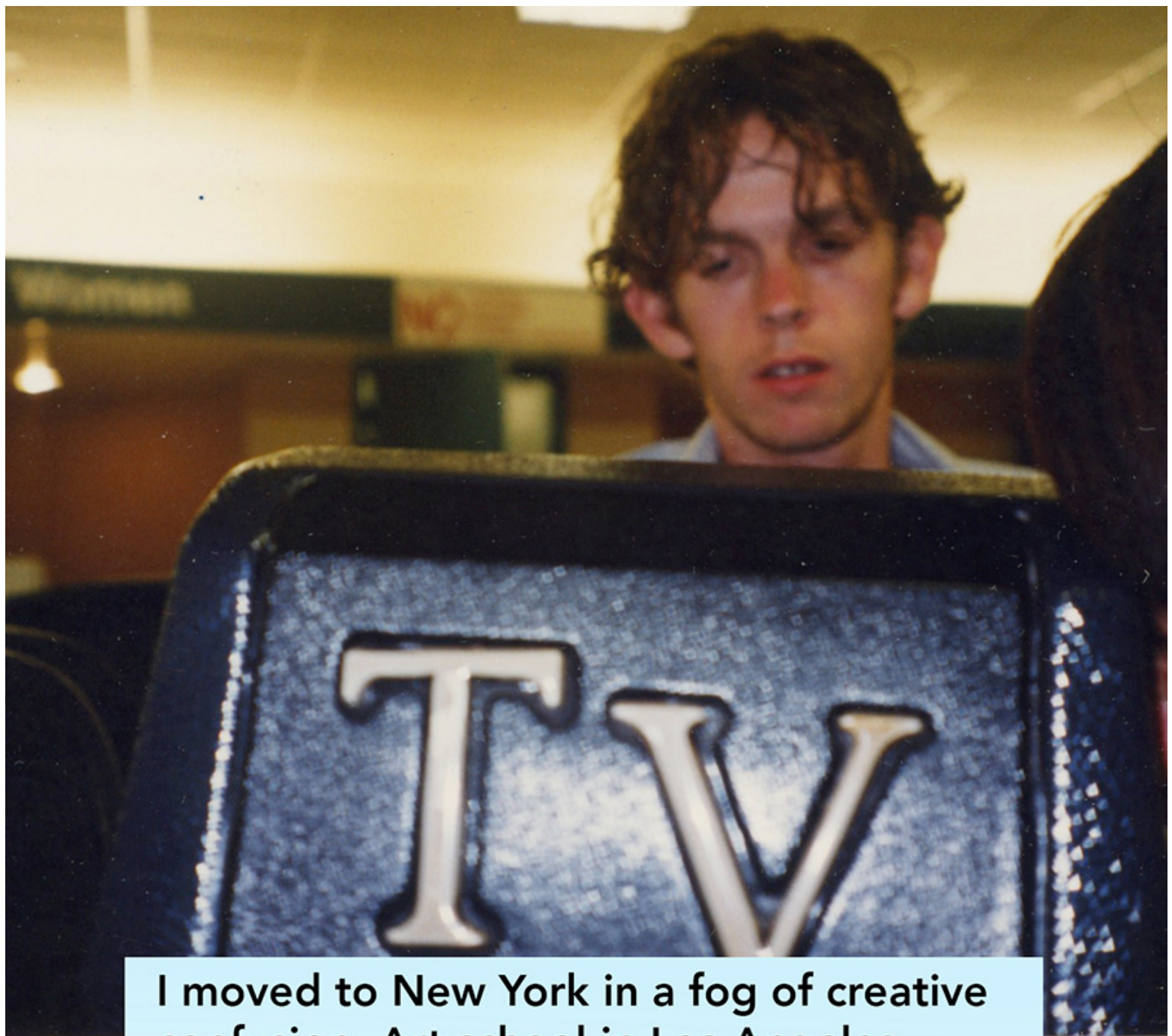




Nobody Asked #1

I recently came across a hard drive with some photos I hadn't set eyes on in years. I had the thought to occasionally post a few and write a bit about them. So here's the first aimless rambling yarn inspired by some pictures that nobody asked for...



I moved to New York in a fog of creative confusion. Art school in Los Angeles introduced me to the the actual existence of contemporary art and a lot else I had missed out on growing up out in the Imperial Valley, but it also left me feeling like I had been blindfolded, spun in circles, and sent wobbling off to see if I could pin the tail on the donkey of a life in art.

Everything I drew growing up looked like cartoons since they were the only art world I knew about in my formative years. But in art school I was advised that I'd need to cut that shit out right quick if I ever wanted to be taken seriously. I tried hard to bury it by searching for examples of how other artists were "classing up" and closeting their cartoon visual accents. I found refuge by the fire of the *"low class images floating around in a formal abstract picture plane"* approach that Donald Baechler sparked, and that Christian Schumann and Barry McGee were turning the heat up on. I set right out to make my images float around in my pictures too. It was a real leap from my world, but it seemed like capitalizing on far-away people's identity was A-OK. Picasso says "great artists steal" right? Such bullshit. The soul poison in the practice of taking from others in that way never dawned on me until I got to NY. The overhead lights got abruptly switched on there when I actually met and started working for Donald Baechler.



Donald Baechler's formal take on low class images floating in a flat, abstract picture plane smuggled trashy art into the high art conversation. Christian Schumann and Barry McGee used the model effectively to sneak their genuine cartoon visual accents through the door he left swinging open.



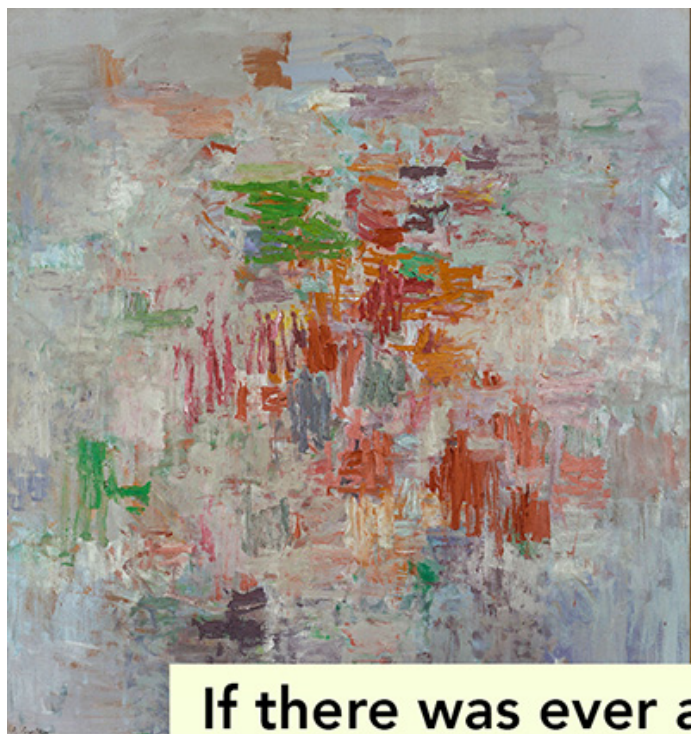
I arrived in NYC only days before the world was set to collapse on New Year's Day in 2000, and spent the first two and a half years getting a boot camp of a real world art education. During those years my world did collapse a bit as I put myself through the gauntlet with the impossible and idiotic mission of trying to figure out ways to keep suppressing my backwoods cartoon accent, without replacing it with imitations of the accents of others. It seems insane even writing it here, but it really had me in knots. Donald Baechler never really gave advice about art, but his example was clear. His art was perfectly in sync with his soul. His hands-off way was offset by Edit DeAk, the legendary art writer and brilliant light always beaming in his studio. She was merciless in her critiques in a way I needed. Long talks with her about art, surrounded by Donald's work blew the desert dust off my brain and gave me a quick and sharp understanding of contemporary art in a way no art school could ever equal.



Growing up around only dirt roads and highways, stories never started with "I was walking down the street one day" but in NYC a lot of the best ones do. A big one started for me that way, when I came across Misaki Kawai who had laid out a chaotic, hand-stitched blanket with a pile of drawings on it, and a rock sitting on top of them so the wind would stop blowing them down the street. Those drawings were so soulful and effortless they would've made Basquiat sweat if he were walking down that street. Misaki and I bonded and remained fused together for years. Her mind was blissfully free of the class warfare that was wreaking havoc in mine, and the close proximity to her unobstructed creative torrent both inspired and vexed me. The power of it teamed up with the energy of Donald's studio, and propelled me toward finally abandoning the absurd crusade against my own voice and creative current, which had been springing leaks and spilling it's way into everything I was making anyhow.



The creative flow really got going strong by around 2003. I finally began accepting and celebrating my truth more and started to let 'er rip. Doing so definitely put that art school advice in perspective when I saw how quickly and even passionately some people dismissed anything vaguely "cartoon" in art. I began to see that there's a whole hell of a lot of people in the art world fighting their own class demons, and the folks with particularly cantankerous demons generally seemed the most driven to be vocal in opposition to anything that needed "elevating". Time spent in that closet sure does make it easy to spot others hiding in their own. We all have our battles though, none of this talk is me crying. Philip Guston famously got put through the ringer when he finally let his cartoon visual accent out of the closet. His paintings were a beautiful captive animal slowly inching out of confinement. Cautiously at first but finally summoning the courage to leap out into the sun.



If there was ever a perfect example of an artist with a working class cartoon visual accent, accepting and embracing with their truth in the face of art world pressures to bury it, it's Philip Guston. The timeline of his paintings are the ultimate visual record of stepping out of a closet and facing the backlash in order to be free.





My work has never fit in well in any art scenes at all, particularly any in NYC, but thankfully people keep including it in shows anyway. Even in shows specifically about New York art, which is really a testament to what makes NY so special. My work always seems an oddball in every show, and can be a test of a curator's nerve. In art spaces packed heavily with insider art styles like "anti-craft paint slappin'," the "cold and too cool," or maybe "trash with balls," it's great when a bit of "small town soul cuttin' loose in the city" is still able to crash the party. Clearly "slappin' cool balls" art doesn't speak to me except for when that sort of thing is at its best; when it's truly honest and vulnerable for the artist, and in that way it's essentially folk expression. It's soul. I feel more kinship with Folk Art than I do with disposable contemporary art movements. Folk Art can absolutely be rigorous and progressive, don't let anyone tell you different. Real honesty and soul is always fresh even when the avant-garde starts drying out like day old bread.



The art scene was beyond explosive in NYC those years. There was a concentration of dynamic, untamed artists. Work was selling often enough to support some unhinged creative directions, and artists were pushing boundaries and buttons. Galleries and curators seemed fairly cool with chaos and some even a little chaotic themselves. A perfect example of one of those would be Kenny Schachter, who I met in 2001 during the pinnacle of my creative confusion. I was making the worst possible art to be introducing myself with to anyone, let alone someone who could see through bullshit like Kenny could. Donald suggested he go by my studio though, and he did. I was sharing a windowless studio just south of Canal Street with Misaki then, so it was her studio visit too. It went just as we each deserved at that time. Some encouraging words and a quick handshake for me, and for Misaki an offer to be the first solo show in his wild new gallery, then being designed by the legendary Vito Acconci.



It was another lesson for me to toss on the pile with the others, but I also got to ride that ride by helping her build all the work for her show. If Misaki wasn't such a force of nature the show would've felt like a collaboration, but every idea I added or thing I built was immediately and entirely absorbed by the supernova of her hand. It was her show, but the whole experience was a real fast-forwarding of the art world training video my eyeballs were glued to.

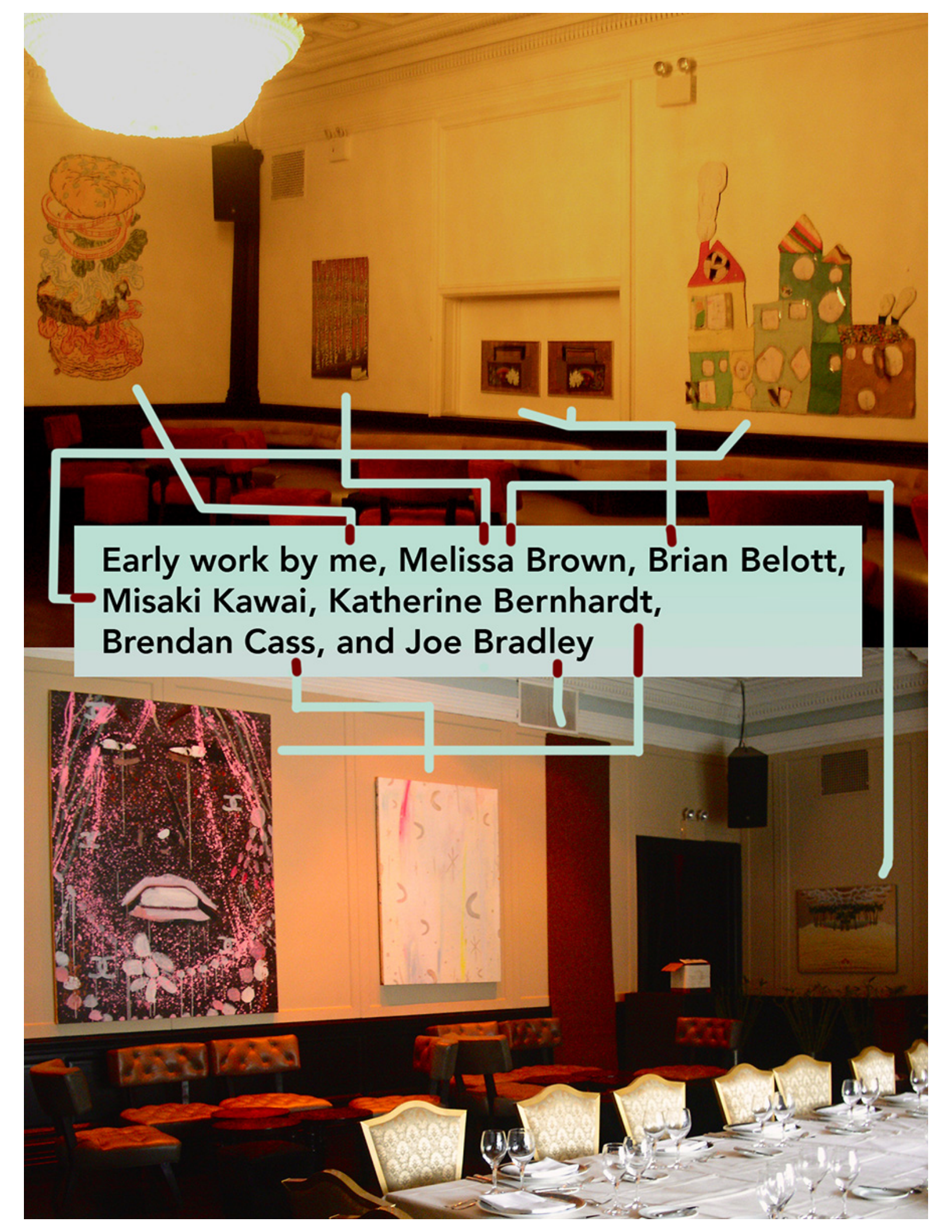
While we're on the subject of Kenny, I also came across some pictures from a night of art and music he organized in the summer of 2003 at Capitale, which is a decadent space that serves a purpose I'm still clueless about. Might be a ballroom, glitzy restaurant, a bank, or unfortunately these days even a CVS. No idea, but that night it felt like a palace that had been overthrown by its court jesters. It was a rowdy and beautiful fiasco comprised of a small group of many people's current favorite artists, well before they knew of their existence. There was art, music or both by Joe Bradley, Katherine Bernhardt, Brian Belott, Michael Williams, Melissa Brown, Joe Grillo, Brendan Cass and Misaki Kawai. Maybe my bad first impression with Kenny wore off and he noticed art changing over those couple of years, or maybe he just relented at my constant presence around Misaki and the other artist friends of mine that he had also been regularly showing. Happy to never know which, I was glad that I was also asked to be in that show.



I've shown with that great group of artists many times since but that night was a perfect little slice of the pie that was NYC at that moment. Kenny deserves a lot of credit for recognizing unpolished gems back then and fearlessly (recklessly?) creating audacious and unpredictable opportunities for them to shine.



Kenny at the opening that night back when cellphones had antennas.



Early work by me, Melissa Brown, Brian Belott,
Misaki Kawai, Katherine Bernhardt,
Brendan Cass, and Joe Bradley



I'll wind up this aimless ramble here with this close up of the giant cheeseburger from the show, "floating" layers and all.