

## artist bio

### Conrad Bakker

Bakker has produced *Untitled Projects* for exhibitions in such venues as Southern Exposure, SF (2005), New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY, (2004), Fargfabriken Center, Stockholm (2003), and The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2002). Bakker will be producing a solo project for the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006. This year he received a Visual Arts Fellowship Grant from the Illinois Arts Council. Bakker lives and works in Urbana and Chicago and teaches at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign.

### Marc Fischer

Fischer is a Chicago-based artist. He is a member of the group Temporary Services. Along with six others, Fischer also co-runs Mess Hall, an experimental cultural center in the Rogers Park neighborhood.

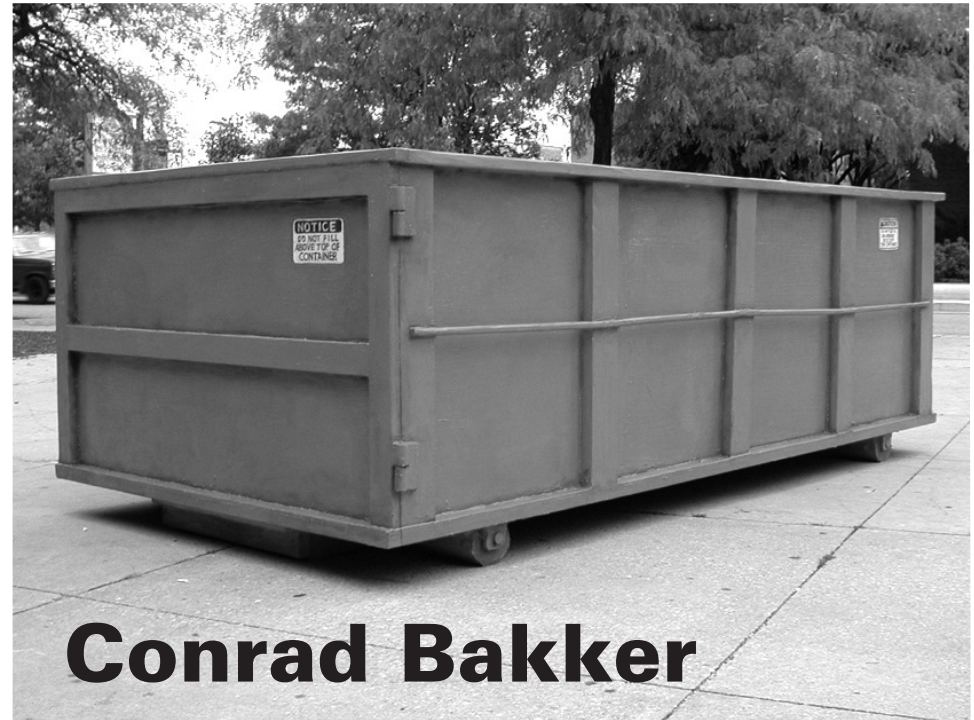
### At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago

*Conrad Bakker's exhibition is one of six in the 2005 series At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago, running from August 26 to December 20, 2003. At the Edge unveils newly created works that are difficult to show in commercial spaces, that extend a working artist's practice, and/or push the boundaries of art experimentation.*

### Credits

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## Conrad Bakker

### *Untitled Project: Dumpster*

**September 13 - December 10, 2005**

University of Illinois at Chicago  
**GALLERY 400**  
College of Architecture and the Arts  
School of Art and Design

## Diving into Conrad Bakker's Dumpster

A recent news item in Chicago reported on the widespread use of forged state-issued handicapped parking passes. These passes, which hang from drivers' rear view mirrors, allow access to additional parking spaces and merciful treatment of cars parked at expired meters. An investigation found that many fake passes were merely laminated color copies of actual expired passes. One, however, was completely pathetic: the icon of a person in a wheelchair was hand-drawn on a piece of cardboard with a blue ballpoint pen. The forgery looked acceptable from a distance but the illusion collapsed upon closer inspection.

Likewise, one of the more curious aspects of the big budget television and film industry is the use of body doubles. I once watched an evening shoot during the making of *Rocky V*—a film directed by and starring Sylvester Stallone. In between countless takes of Rocky (Sylvester Stallone) and his boxing trainer Paulie (Burt Young) walking down the street, body doubles of Rocky and Paulie would appear on the set. The two men - roughly the same height and build as the actors and wearing identical clothes, were used to take measurements, test out camera angles and adjust the lighting. "Body doubles", "stand ins" or "stunt doubles" all attempt to mimic the character they are assigned in key superficial areas. There are fan websites devoted to television shows like *The A-Team* that obsessively compare stunt and body doubles with the actors. These viewers revel in the moments when frames revert from the actual actor to the body double and back again. They note discrepancies like inaccurate jewelry and bad wigs with obvious pleasure. The body double is like a human display model that can't even be resold as a discounted "open box special." Without the real thing as a point of comparison, they are as useless as the fake cardboard televisions and Hi Fi components that are sometimes employed in furniture stores.

years. Most permanent public art works cannot sustain a sense of vitality for decades on end. At best they often just become overly familiar and easily ignored decorations. At worst they decay and turn into permanent eyesores. Shorter-term projects like *Untitled Project: Dumpster* can invite more open-ended interaction that allows for mutation over time as they are used, and possibly abused. If this dumpster becomes an eye sore, the public can at least rejoice that it is not a permanent one. At the end of three months the sculpture will be hauled off - possibly to a curbside spot on 400 South Peoria Street when Gallery 400 returns to its original, renovated location. Whether *Untitled Project: Dumpster*, when its tenure ends, will be overflowing with garbage, freshly emptied, graffiti-ridden or shiny as the day it was given its last coat of paint remains to be seen.

—Marc Fischer

9/26/05



following the opening reception for the project. Students have been spotted using the sculpture as a congregating point – it has become an armrest and something to lean against while stepping outside the art building to smoke a cigarette.

The irony that *Untitled Project: Dumpster* could also become a receptacle for discarded artworks from nearby studios definitely isn't lost on Bakker – it would be all too easy for a student to walk fifty paces from their painting studio to chuck a canvas into his project. Could a student also bring a hammer and nail, and instead, hang his or her painting on the side of the dumpster – turning the sculpture into a host for the art of others rather than a receptacle for 'dead' art? Can flyers and posters be wheat-pasted to the dumpster? The plaza in front of Gallery 400 is certainly prime real estate for getting the word out about upcoming events.

It would be inaccurate to think of *Untitled Project: Dumpster* as an environmental project, but there is a bit of recycling at work. Bakker teaches at University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and he is keenly aware that universities discard astonishing amounts of re-useable materials: furniture, computers, books, food, wood, and countless other potential resources. The wood used to make *Untitled Project: Dumpster* was discarded by Urbana Champaign and is finding a new life at another school in the University of Illinois network: the Chicago campus. This transferal of materials is a new feature in the *Untitled Projects* series, and a slight shift in its ongoing acknowledgement of the economies of production and consumption.

Wood is not a common material in long-term urban public art. It's flammable, it can be carved and gouged and it is unlikely to bode well over time. Fortunately, temporary public art can take greater risks and use less stable materials. While *Untitled Project: Dumpster* looks pretty damn sturdy, it doesn't have to survive or look great for

Since 1997, Conrad Bakker has been making product doubles under the series moniker *Untitled Projects*. All of the works in this series are facsimiles of commercially available objects that Bakker handcrafts from wood and paint. Bakker's decoy products share the rough verisimilitude of the hand-drawn parking permit or the actor's body double – they look enough like the real thing for viewers to make a clear perceptual connection but the illusion is not sustained for long.

The objects *Untitled Projects* replicates take a variety of paths out of the studio and into the world. In 1997, Bakker carved and painted all of the trappings of a common yard sale. The works were laid out on tables on the side of the road in an area heavily populated by such sales. Passersby were invited to peruse and purchase these baffling woodenwares.



Works from the series have been put up for sale on the Internet auction site eBay where each item's selling price begins at the dollar figure one would expect for an actual example of the object. *Untitled Projects* works are not sold under the categories for art, but in the appropriate section of eBay for the object that was sculpted – for example "Furniture, Mid-Century Modern." The 72

dots per inch resolution at which most objects appear in photos on eBay is a nice analog to the coarse rendering of Bakker's copies. Despite the potential for deception, Conrad is too nice a guy to try selling the proverbial silver duct tape covered cardboard laptop computer without telling people what they are getting. His projects play with expectations and economic systems of sales and distribution but he's not trying to separate us from our money in a scam.

The histories of realistic sculpture and verisimilitude in art are filled with numerous developments and conceptual strategies, but copies of objects are hardly the domain of art alone. Police on a limited budget in Poland have begun placing decoy cop cars on the side of the road to create the illusion of an actual police presence. These hilarious hand-painted cars are almost completely flat profiles; they probably look pretty convincing at 150 kilometers per hour. Few people are more involved in the presentation of distorted duplicates than manufacturing and advertising industries. Models of disposable razors are sculpted at a giant scale for elaborate television commercials that depict products in ways not possible with the originals. Candy and sneakers are digitally reproduced in fantastic animations to make them more appealing to children. Food stylists make careers out of fashioning ice cream from tinted mashed potatoes for photo shoots. Motor oil is a common substitute for pancake syrup in print ads. Chicken is spray-painted to exaggerate its color.

Those looking for an art of gradually improving craft and mastery over materials might find the trajectory of Conrad Bakker's approach disappointing. This is not an art of astonishing realism and precision craft. The stasis of Bakker's carving and painting techniques suggests we'd do better to take a gander into *Untitled Projects'* other motives, since wowing us with trompe l'oeil effects is not one of them.

"CAUTION – DO NOT PLAY IN, ON, AROUND, OR OCCUPY THIS CONTAINER". It's a built-in warning that comes with the object.



Of course, a dumpster does not come with a warning not to put trash into it. The sculpture's ability to function almost exactly like a real dumpster (don't expect the wheels on the base to turn) marks a shift for the normally dysfunctional objects in the series. The sculpture implies that it can be used and gains in this suggestion by its proximity to other construction happening around UIC's campus. It almost gives the appearance that UIC's construction crews ran out of real dumpsters so they built an extra one to help finish a job. What constitutes "Fly dumping" here (dumping waste material on private or public property without a permit)? If I am a student, should I assume it is okay to throw my discarded lunch into Conrad's sculpture? What if I'm a nearby resident with no university affiliation? Can I toss a couple large bags of garbage into the dumpster? How about old tires, yard waste or hazardous materials? Could the dumpster be used to haul those things away at UIC's expense? How much use or abuse would it take for the university to intervene? Will graffiti appear and will it be painted out or left? A bit of waste has already entered the dumpster

the marketplace not only as sites to make purchases, but also as opportunities for a sophisticated form of play is a key feature of Bakker's ongoing work.

In 2004, Bakker exhibited *Untitled Project: Muscle Car*—a full size sculpture of a used car. In addition to the usual art listings, text-based classified ads were placed in the *Chicago Sun Times* and the web and print versions of the auto trader magazine *Deals on Wheels*. The ad invited potential buyers to come see the car at a gallery housed in a Chicago garage. The text included the description: "1969 PONTIAC GTO JUDGE" Fully loaded, Great cond., oil/carved wood." Among the most enthusiastic viewers were members of a nearby car club – true connoisseurs of these cars who could take pleasure in discerning mis-judgments of scale and errors in the rendering of fine details.

*Untitled Project: Dumpster* is the largest product in the *Untitled Projects* line. It has the greatest physical presence and public visibility of any work in the series. It is the first work intended for outdoor placement over several months. *Untitled Project: Dumpster* is painted red orange - a color favored by three of the esteemed daddies of painted sculpture: Alexander Calder, Donald Judd, Anthony Caro. When Charles Ray, a sculptor a generation removed from Caro, wanted to pay homage to the British metal-sculptor, he went right for the Cadmium Orange Light. Bakker, another generation removed, also makes a playful nod to these sculptors of yore, without neglecting the dumpster manufacturers of now. The construction industry likes its bright orange too.

Most public sculptures are either explicitly or implicitly hands off. Surrounding a sculpture with landscaping is often effective in this regard. Instead of ropes and wires, a green stanchion is planted. It's all the same: look, don't touch, no climbing. Bakker has faithfully painted the sticker that adorns most commercial dumpsters:

In 2002, Bakker released an *Untitled Projects* mail order catalog where one could purchase unique handmade copies of the kind of overpriced and wholly unnecessary gadgets that are commonly sold by The Sharper Image or Hammacher Schlemmer. Bakker sent a copy of the mail order catalog to the architecture and design magazine *Dwell* and they were at a loss as to what this stuff was for: "So why would anyone want these in their house? Are these tchotchkes or works of art? ...They might make good toys for about five minutes, but when the kids find out how immovable they are, they'll stop playing with them."

Taken piece by piece, it is tempting to feel sympathy with the *Dwell* writer. Crude copies of slick mass-produced items can take on a charm that borders on novelty. Bakker tells of one person who bought his copy of a \$95.00 Nose Hair Trimmer from the mail order catalog and then was unsure what to do with it. Finally they decided to place it in the spot where they would store the real article: their medicine cabinet. This is a nice gag for a curious guest who goes rooting through that personal space, but the seemingly futile gesture of making, much less owning such objects – as conveyed by the *Dwell* writer, is a bit of an irritant.

Where *Untitled Projects* becomes more than a nagging futile gesture, is the variety of economic venues it probes and the differing audiences that each placement engages. Bakker moves *Untitled Projects* freely from the garage sale, to the chain store, to eBay, to the mail order world, to the classified ad and now to a publicly accessible space located on state-owned university property. In the past, Bakker has anonymously abandoned his carved copies on store shelves and display racks next to the originals and then left them to an unknown fate. Moving outside of the museum or gallery into big chain stores, the sculptures are allowed a far more diverse audience and a mysterious destiny. Looking at material culture and