



Evidence of Being

A Conversation with

Richard Humann

BY LISA PAUL STREITFELD

While Williamsburg can claim no movement as its own, the inventive sculpture of Richard Humann reveals what made the hip Brooklyn neighborhood a creative escape from art world institutionalization and commercialization in the 1990s. Although Williamsburg has recently succumbed to development pressures, driving out mid-level artists at crucial stages in their careers, Humann retains his original studio while exhibiting throughout the United States and internationally.

Humann, who was born in 1961, delivers a crucial message about the keys to his generation's ascent to power: integration and containment. Arising out of the open community in which he was a pioneer, his vision matured under a short-lived neo-Fluxus experiment in a Broadway space linked to Fluxus founder George Maciunas. Humann's experimental approach led to works that juxtapose historically sanctioned self-exploration with the tightening noose of academic appropriation and the globalized international art market. His examinations of the personal and the universal alternate between investigations of coding systems and explorations of the individual subconscious projected in everyday objects. In 1997, at the Williamsburg Art & Historical Center, he made his mark with *The Lightbox*, a piece in which he illuminated the work of fellow artists.

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Chewable Relief, 2003. Children's aspirin, 50 units, 2.25 x 1 x 1 in. each.

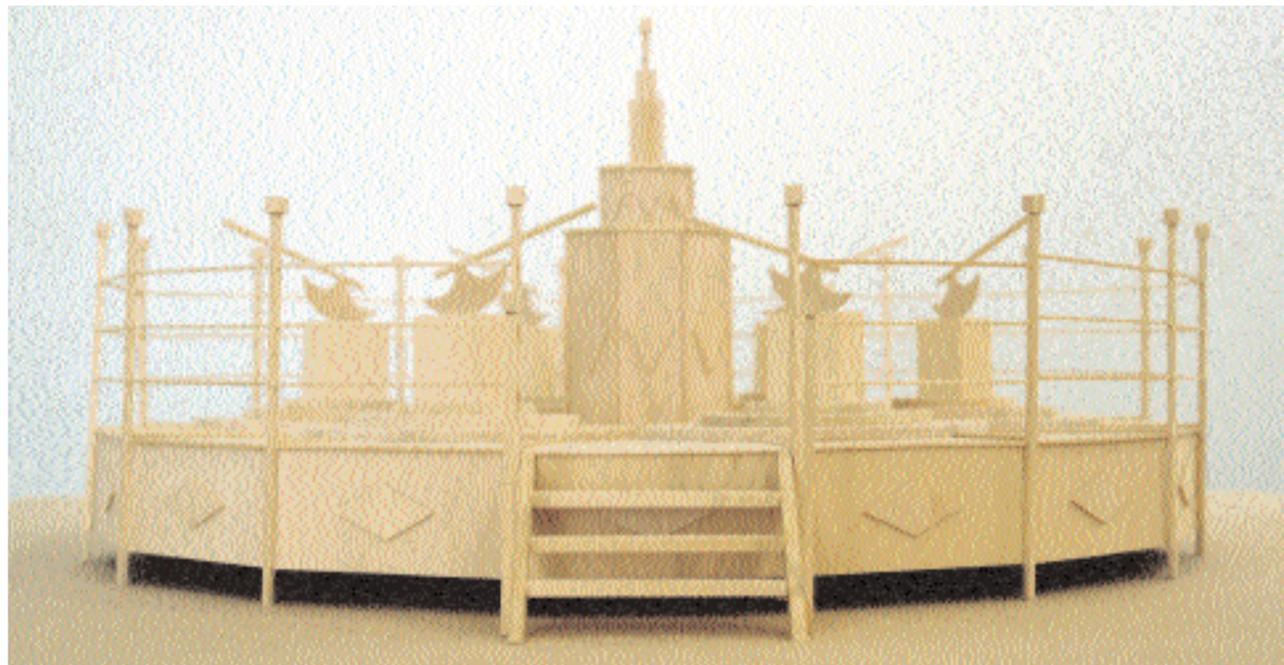


His intention was to create a raw exchange of identities, energies, and ideas. He then embarked on a personal journey that examined new archetypes within universal systems of coding ("Psycho Killer," Lance Fung Gallery, 1998). In "Evidence of my Being" (Lance Fung Gallery, 2000), he used his own image to explore the choices facing the collective ego: surrender to an emerging archetype versus the desire for personal fame. This led to the depletion of his subconscious in "A Childish Fear" (Lance Fung Gallery, 2003) and subsequent integration of his dual path of exploration through the human body. His most recent exhibition at Elga Wimmer PCC in Chelsea, "You Must Be This Tall," featured a miniature satirical amusement park.

Lisa Paul Streitfeld: *Dunk the Clown, to me, is the key to "You Must Be This Tall": the geometry of the noose above the trap door means death by hanging, but on another level it is an opening of possibility, discovery, and creativity. When did you start it?*

Richard Humann: Two years ago, around the New Year. It was begun, destroyed, and begun again. It started with me reinventing myself, the idea of who I am as an artist. I went back to my roots, asking, "Where did my art start?" Even at 15 years old, I was attracted to Minimalism. Donald Judd was my inspiration. So, I thought, "What would I do with a Donald Judd box?" I started envisioning it as a room. The box is a room where things live. Somehow I got the idea of building an electric chair in this room. On the wall, there would be a video screen with cartoons. I built a mini-electric chair, but took it away. It was too obvious. I went back to other things. And then, six months later, I did this project.

Left: *Dunk the Clown*, 2008. Bass wood, 10.75 x 11.25 x 4.25 in. Below: *Teacup*, 2008. Bass wood, 9.75 x 20 x 23 in.



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LPS: *When was it completed?*

RH: Two weeks before the show. The noose was laser cut. It came back square, and I had to sit with sandpaper and make it round. Very few things were cut with the laser: the noose, the letters, and the signs.

LPS: *All of these works have a foundation in geometry. For example, Teacup contains both the hexagon and the octagon. The reality of it is a head being cut off.*

RH: These are children's rides. In the teacup ride that you see at Disney World, a large-scale teacup spins around. But in this ride, although it is a children's ride, someone would get their head chopped off. This presents a metaphorical surprise because of the idea of a handle.

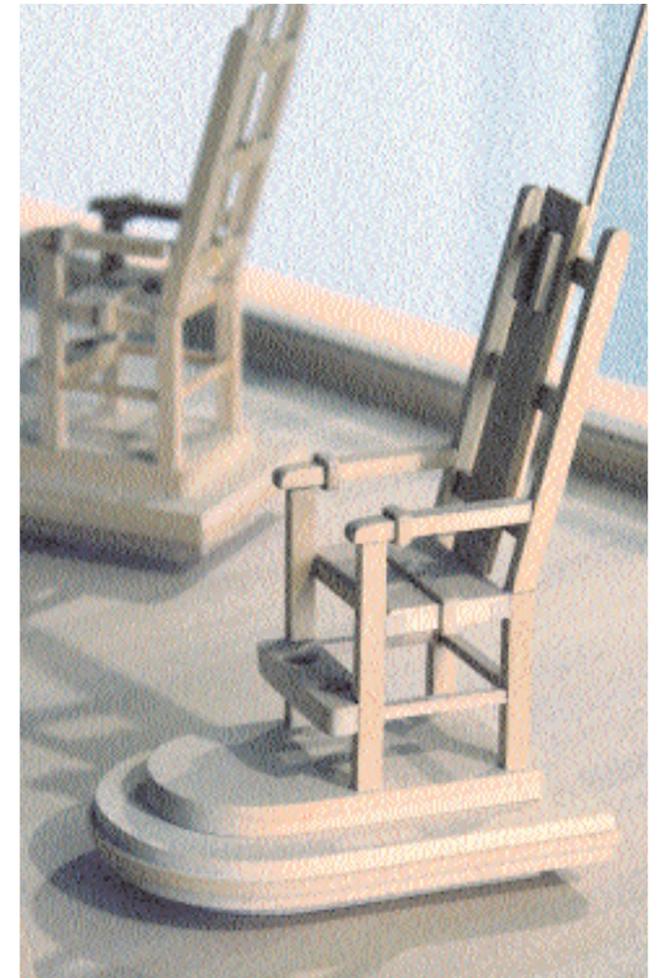
LPS: *The handle that marks a transition. When did you know you were an artist?*

RH: I was about three or four years old. My mother's father was my hero and best friend. He was in the Navy, and his destroyer sank: 150 men died, and he survived. There was an anchor tattoo on his arm. I would draw a ship, and he would show me how to make waves and a seagull. I did Noah's Ark with crayons and magic marker. He took it and said, "Look at this. He is going to be a famous artist one day." And I believed him. I always felt that would be my destiny.

LPS: *Has your name consciously factored into the development of any particular work?*

RH: Only once did I address the issue, when we were doing "Evidence of my Being." Although it grew into a conscious exploration, it started with the idea of "Hey, how about doing something like the extra N," meaning I went from "human being" to "human"

Below and detail: *Electric Bumper Cars*, 2008. Bass wood, 23.5 x 49 x 37 in.



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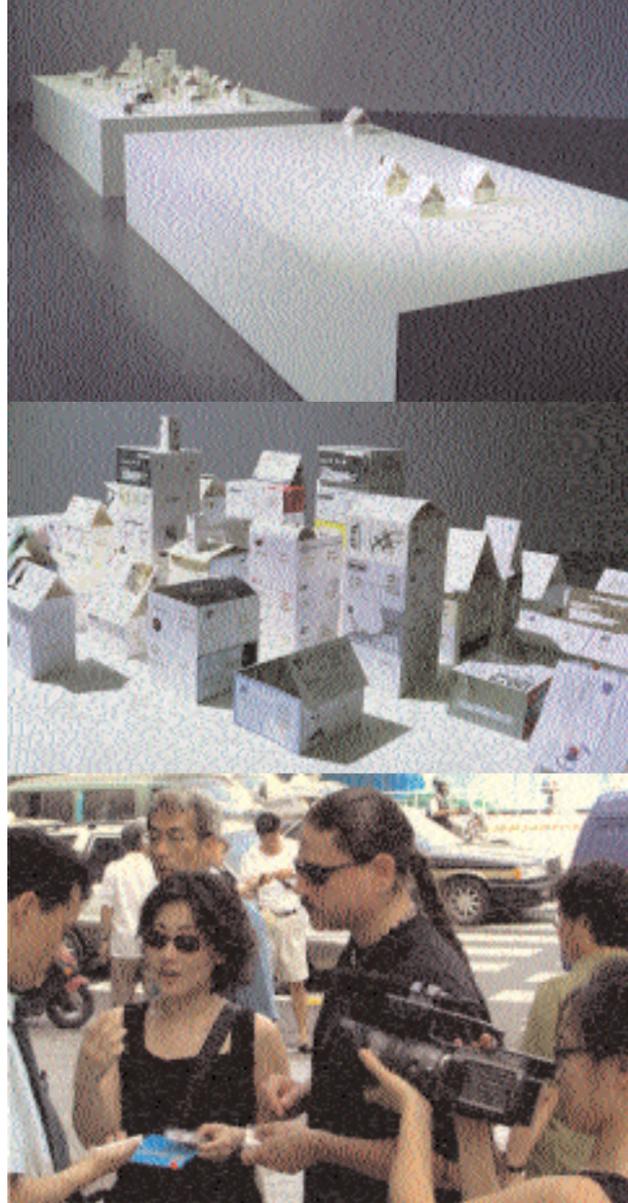
Above: Installation view with (foreground) *Curriculum Vitae*, 2000, mixed media, 72 x 43 x 40 in. and (background) *Live Every Day in Truth*, 2000, video projection. Right, top and center: *Identification Please*, 2001. Business cards, ink, and glue, dimensions variable. Right: Humann with Meehye Lee in Seoul for *Identification Please*, 2001.

with my name because there are two Ns. Even though it could be a cool name for an artist, it is my name. It's for real. But it never really comes into play all that much.

LPS: That show required a huge surrender of the persona in order to arrive at a deeper essence of being. What you were trying to accomplish specifically?

RH: "Evidence of my Being" was about exploring the individual—who I am as a person but also me as a person in this conscious world in which we live. The idea was to figure out how we are represented and remember what we are. *Testimonial* was a sound piece in which people could call a private telephone number and anonymously say what they thought of me. Someone took the messages, which were transcribed by a professional and spoken by actors. I had no idea who actually said these things, so people could be honest. The idea is that you are defined by what other people think about you, say about you, write about you, and, of course, what you think about yourself. It is a multitude of things. The show also had *Curriculum Vitae*, in which I cut up every document in my life and filled an urn with the originals—my diploma, my driver's license, all of them destroyed. That grew from the passing comment about my name—the idea of humanity, as well as my name being Richard Humann.

LPS: There is evidence, too, of your struggle to merge personal artifacts with universal coding, particularly in regard to time,



such as the video of your braid swinging like a clock pendulum in "Evidence of my Being" and the three clocks in "A Childish Fear." How did your interest in coding originate?

RH: The work with coding was an exploration of literature and writing, things that interested me a lot, but also the idea of art as multiple layers of codes that a viewer has to climb through in order to understand what art is. Some people crack the codes and other people don't. Sometimes the artist doesn't give the right code, so it can't be cracked.

LPS: Certainly artists have been ostracized from society throughout history and sometimes need to communicate with one another through coding.

RH: Well, that is what keeps MFA programs alive, isn't it?

LPS: So, it is a whole new kind of coding that keeps the insiders from outsiders.

RH: I don't know if it does that, but it certainly is a language that we speak. The art world has its own vernacular.

LPS: That vernacular can keep it from its ultimate audience, the public.

RH: Absolutely. Every form of human life—whether you are a

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Psycho Killer, 1998. Foam and paint, 216 x 144 x 9 in.

farmer or an artist or a mathematician—speaks its own language. Here is the difference: a farmer puts his food into the world, which is universal. An artist puts his art into the world. So, he is speaking this language in many places of the world where it is not always understood.

LPS: Is your work process driven?

RH: To me, this art is part of the journey to find the end of it. The physical manifestation is still the art itself and not the making of it.

LPS: Even so, your work seems to surmount the dichotomy between a process-oriented approach and a conceptual approach, meaning an abstract or cerebral approach to making art.

RH: I personally never viewed it that way. The people in my gallery (Lance Fung) were my home school. No one tagged it.

LPS: It was, at least by geography, a neo-Fluxus movement even if wasn't specifically called that.

RH: It was George Maciunas's living loft. Working in Korea ("Crossing Parallels," 2001) was the pinnacle. At that point in time, it was a collaborative effort based on Fluxus process. It changed my life.

I was paired with Meehye Lee, a female artist who was all about process. For *Identification Please*, we handed out name cards to people and created a city of name cards. When it was over, I learned so much. For me, it was a breakthrough: I don't have to make perfection; I can put my idea out there and not worry.

LPS: It has taken 20 years to get to the place of integration symbolized by your noose, which could easily refer to the restrictions that the art world imposes on self-expression.

RH: I could never have attempted anything like this early in my career. I never knew how to cut a piece of wood until I moved to Brooklyn. It took me years to learn how to create. Physically, it took me this long to use the tools: how to shape and cut and form. On the conceptual level, I had to go through the journey

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of all the works that I did—through the missteps, the successes, the failures, and the paradigm shift in the concept and content of the work. So, this is a merging of a skill set and conceptual growth.

LPS: Which is reflected in a maturity of vision embedded in the work itself. Could this be a new phase—to have such a multi-layered narrative of self embedded in geometrical forms, rising from the ashes of Postmodernism?

RH: In my opinion, Postmodernism was a culture that was running, took a breath, turned around, and realized that it had to look at the road it walked down. To go further, the runner—meaning our culture—had to turn around again to keep walking.

LPS: When did that happen to you?

RH: During 2000 and 2001 is when I began to change. Before that, I was appropriating ideas. *Psycho Killer* was an appropriation from David Byrne, who graciously allowed me to translate his song into Morse Code. Two years later, he bought *Humann Sandpaper* from the Crest Hardware Show (in Williamsburg).

LPS: What is *Humann Sandpaper*?

RH: That is when I did use my name. I got a picture of myself and made packs of *Humann Sandpaper*. My picture is on it, and it says, "Do not rub the wrong way."

LPS: What do you think about the exchange between you and Byrne? Did you talk to him about the song?

RH: We had a brief conversation at a MoMA opening, and the nice part about it was that he sent me a letter. I had just met Lance Fung for the first time that day.

LPS: Can you verbalize the message contained in your work, especially your most recent series, the satirical amusement park?

RH: If I could, I wouldn't be an artist. I would be a writer.

Lisa Paul Streitfeld is a writer living in Brooklyn.