

"we didn't start the fire"
Or Gallery

Sonja Ahlers
January 11 to February 8 2003



I was introduced to Sonja Ahlers' work through a book called **Temper, Temper**, published by Insomniac Press. I

A graphic novel, formed by a continuous stream of quotes, collage, and drawings functions is something of a high-end zine. Its author poses as an archeologist of popular culture, and of a particular west coast underground music and graphic scene.

So much so that it becomes difficult to place who's who in the sea of aphorisms-if I ask, it's humbly, because chances are it's a song quote by anyone from Billy Joel to Modest Mouse, depending on whom she detests or is obsessed with at the time- like a study, she moves on.

**I rode my bike into the wall,
I wanted your attention, that's all. That's all.**

Is this a lyric from her band Kiki Bridges? (Named after character in Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*, a leather bearing sculpturess in 80s SoHo New York, known in the movie for her paper-mache version of The Scream and her plaster of Paris bagel and cream cheese paper weights-)

Language is at the centre: language that transforms in the throws of idioms, puns and most importantly aphorisms, as the artist remains present, teasing with the possibility of an assembled narrative.

An earlier sculptural piece is a set of hand towels upon which is embroidered *pack it in*.

A translation of an idiom into the same idiom, she mocks her own perceived redundancy.

I had made the leap that this piece was the perfect transposition of her bookwork into a gallery space, in it's ability to capture the attention doted over in a graphic novel to the relatively little time given to a work of the same nature in a gallery context. A book after all is an excellent container for ephemeral work.

Ephemera articles a lost history, as represented by Kiki Bridges- referring also to Kiki of Montparnasse, known more as a surrealist muse, than a collaborator.

It is, in Ahler's words, **Intellectual Horseplay**.

A quote from Ted Hughes

Her attitudes to her verse was artisan-like: if she couldn't get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy.

is followed up by

I am mad at Ted Hughes. Who is she there? Herself or Sylvia Plath?

Ahlers considers herself more of an artisan than a conceptual artist, but that in itself falls under her own catchphrase for her practice: **Fatal Distraction**, the leading away. In "**we didn't start the fire**" Fatal Distraction takes on many forms, a framed ketchup potato chip in the shape of a heart, or the constant doodle which makes up a practice, (a giant loose-leaf is drawn in pencil crayon on the wall). In the anteroom a framed ballpoint pen hangs on the wall, the round kind with four different inks, called by Ahlers the **I love you pen-made in France**. Meditations to focus, the pink bubble technique, become an installation (**Pink Bubble Technique for Yayoi**)

High and low play literally in her placements, (a late 60s design Air Vietnam bag sits atop the wall like humpty dumpty) in her style, and in her hedging play and seriousness; those interim moments between pursuing art and wanting to *pack it in*.-

Fatal Distraction even winds it's way into therapy-proven in her collecting the haircut of her therapist's rabbit and mounting it in glass into a textured monochrome- a true testament to the abject.

Critiques and appraisal of art and artists- from Andy Warhol, to Isak Dinesen. How Billy Joel tries to be the Boss but fails, makes Ahlers angry.

The archeologist's feelings become poignant cultural expressions:

A photo of Molly Ringwald smoking makes her sad, "ask my friends, it really does" reads a page.

Her sculptural practice translates the written aphorisms into nodes.

"**we didn't start the fire**" is a body of Ahler's silent work that underlines a work in constant process, negotiating the construct of an art practice and a self in relationship with that practice. It is apparent that Ahlers occasionally hates her job.

In **Happy Ball**, a self published graphic book, reads a list under the title *the system's not working*

1. Everyday, I think(crossed out) wake up,
ok (crossed out) I think, -ok, let's try this shit again
2. It's boring to do the same thing everyday
3. I was thinkg about how much I've fucked up and how much time I've wasted
-oh that was yesterday

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SONJA AHLERS

"we didn't start the fire"

January 11 to February 8, 2003
Opening Friday January 10 at 8 PM

Sonja Ahlers is best known for her graphic book works and installations. Her collected body of work creates an archive of popular culture, dealing especially with nostalgic remnants of her youth spent in 1970's and '80's Victoria, BC. Through the employment of traditional women's crafts and modern graphic devices, Ahlers' builds exploded personal narratives with visible contemporary resonance.

For *"we didn't start the fire"*, works were selected from outside of Ahlers' prolific graphic and figurative collection. Drawing on Ahlers' aphoristic style, The Or Gallery presents an eclectic and inspired series of her works.

The Or Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council, The BC Gaming Commission, The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, the City of Vancouver, and our volunteers.

