PROBLEMY
Probably a problem, a problem, probably

BILLY BLAISE DUFALA
STEVEN DUFALA
When I was eleven years old, the first thing that impressed me about Steven and Billy Blaise Dufala was their brothers—John, Chris, and Dan. John, the eldest, was the first person I saw ride a BMX bike on a vert ramp. And he was good. Chris, the next oldest, was a solid street skateboarder well before the practice was considered mainstream or even "extreme"; he was also the earliest Dufala artist I can recall, meticulously rendering every heavy metal graphic known to South Jersey—Metallica skulls, Danzig skulls, Misfits skulls—all over the walls of the Dufala family compound. Dan, who falls between Steven and Billy, was the first kid I knew to have his picture in the paper, taking second place in a Lego building competition at FAO Schwartz in New York. Surrounded by such superstars of South Jersey, my youthful self deemed Steven and Billy's greatest achievement to be their kinship to these three other guys, seemingly the true creative talents of the Dufala family.

While I still admire these "other brothers" more than 20 years later, I've since reconsidered my hasty assessment of Steven and Billy. Although no strangers to bikes or boards, they both began to paint, draw, build, and break things with their own brand of creative destruction. They started small, content to draw watches on their wrists in permanent marker and play with road kill—normal kid stuff.
But since 2004, Steven and Billy Blaise Dufala have orchestrated massive toilet-tricycle races, brought justice and bewildermont to the streets of Philadelphia in their mobile cardboard tank, launched a paper airplane attack from atop a building, created countless trinkets and tools of little or no use, unzipped the racier sides of their brains for all to see with their take-away “Free Walls,” and turned your childhood ice cream truck into a weapon of mass destruction. War, wealth, waste, sex, consumption, the environment—these topics both rise up and fall down in their work, inflated and defused by the brothers’ sometimes-dark, comedic edge.

Just in the past year and a half the Dufala Brothers have won the West Prize, joined the teaching faculty of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, appeared on Art In America’s “Top Ten” list for the 2010 Armory Show in New York City, were part of a team that received a Creative Industry Workforce Grant to start a residency program at an industrial recycling center, received a Village Voice Obie Award for set design, and most recently have had work acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. But they remain true to themselves, unspoiled by all the acclaim—and I find myself impressed once again, this time by just how steadily they navigate all the attention they have garnered.

Thus, let me assure you: as someone who knew Steven and Billy Blaise Dufala when they were still blowing up G.I. Joes (well, they still sort of do that), I can affirm that they have not changed—at least not in any way for the worse. Beyond the increasingly amazing accolades and increasingly absurd creations, the Dufala Brothers are still fascinated with the humble yet hugely important artifacts of daily life, translating and transmitting through their objects the simple joys and hidden dangers inherent therein. Hailing from an eclectic collection of talented individuals brought together by way of DNA, they continue to work as hard as I remember: their sense of humor has remained, and their creative output (as well as that of their brothers John, Chris, and Dan) is as high as ever.

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In the Dufala Brothers’ satirical send-up of that toxic apocalypse otherwise known as the fully-commodified world, something truly death-defying is going on. It takes a superhuman glee to believe, as these works seem to, that on the back of beauty alone we might find a way to enjoy, even for a moment, this catastrophic immersion in garbage, terror, and senseless overproduction that is the status quo.

Here is a chance to see the sexy side of useless, a gorgeous angle on trash. And unlike everywhere else, we don’t have to choose, buy, or sell. We only have to look, and get yards and yards of sneaker canvas, metric tons of shiny metal spelling out words we love to hear, and an ice cream attack truck for weekend getaways. Of course the shit seeps out the cracks, overflows the toilets, and the La-Z-Boy floats on the recycling. Which is maybe why we’ve heard that such glitz is the just gilding of oppression or that style is the alibi of greed.

We’ve been told we consume because we can’t create, can’t create because we consume. But somewhere between the habit of consumption and the impending doom, the Dufala Brothers are pulling curiosities out of the cabinet.

In 1967, thinking about Andy Warhol, Gilles Deleuze wrote the following lines:

...there is no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life. The more our daily life appears standardized, stereotyped, and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition, and even in order to make the two extremes resonate—namely the habitual series of consumption and the instinctual series of destruction and death. [art] aesthetically reproduces the illusions and mystifications which make up the real essence of this civilization. (Difference and Repetition, Trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia U. Press, 1994, p. 293)

Deleuze was thinking about the “little difference” Warhol made in the standards and stereotypes of a totally reproducible world. For Deleuze, Warhol drew out something that was not there before in the images we thought we knew. He showed us something in the image we could not see until it went all blurry, smudged and smeared. In those incandescent, evanescent repetitions, Elvis suddenly gets uncanny, and other well-known faces and tired out places scintillate with an aura not their own. It’s not the glamour, but the grit and grief of the process that makes it beautiful. Warhol’s is the magic of tautology: where we thought there was only a star, prefabricated, there really is a star: Warhol’s own half-mocking, half-loving reproductions. This is the “little difference” Deleuze was seeing in repetition, images between images, a fleeting moment where we sense the presence of a beauty not outside this world, but one being missed in the routines of consumption and death.

In Deleuze’s mind it was crucial that Warhol not retreat from but stay within the signs of the times, working with its monstrous monotony. Deleuze thought that only there, in the heart of the machine, could we generate the most crucial difference, like a flash of light leaping between the two black series of habitual consumption and predictable destruction.

Maybe because the situation has...
worsened, on all fronts, from economics to ecologics, we now need more than light and color, and more than two dimensions, and even need exhibitions that spill outside the gallery walls, to get the point. Taking that minute to breathe offered by the Brothers’ remix of our Great Big Mess, it occurs to us to wonder, what’s the rush of the toxic apocalypse? Are we still on the old alchemical dream, to find out how much dross we can transform in the magnum opus, and if we can finally turn all this shit into gold? Does it all cut back to Luther on the crapper, composing his manifesto for children of God who no longer need God’s good earth? Luther gave up on unctions and on the idea of salvation through good works. But thanks in part to this Protestant Spirit, we’ve now given up on the earth for the commodity. Maybe we’re just like Luther, and just want to hurl our shit at Satan. Or maybe what we really want is to beat him in a toilet tricycle race.

Our endgame seems to be that if we can’t out-destroy the devil, we’ll out-consume him. Death by consumption, OUR waste, our TROPHY! But consumption is production: what we make is waste. And the devil will get his doo doo: having tricked Luther into hating the present world for the sake of the world to come, Ol’ Saint Nick has tricked us into hating last years’ model for the sake of the gizmo to come. But you have been warned by the Brothers Dufala: get more out of this trash while you still can. There is no escape from this beautiful place.

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GOODS

Imagine a one-time use alarm clock—set, sleep, throw away the next day. Absurd, yet not really: mass-produced manufactures come bundled with a controlled obsoleteness, a fixed time at which the product breaks down in order to ensure continued production of itself. “The same thing just newer,” replaced again and again by the same thing continuously. People are confident that they can design a better version of anything for all of us: however specific the goal, however vague the function, we know we can do nature one better. It’s ridiculous to consider making a “better” tree, and to attempt this is perhaps more ridiculous. But, if we try, perhaps we can put forward a model that illustrates the dangers of aspiration for aspiration’s sake. These works evidence the trappings of that middle class ambition, or vanity, and our necessary suspicion of those traits. They are illustrations of a superior version of same-ness.
But what happens when we impose a seemingly more natural, almost-organic "growth" of something like a tree to the products of that industrial excess? Sped-up, time-lapse life-cycles for typewriters, blenders, hair dryers, unicycles, whatever. Prefab artifacts grow, distend, and multiply, filling up the living room, bursting the windows open, spilling out onto the sidewalk, and chasing the neighbors' kids down the street.

The fiberglass insulation chair, a perverse embrace of intended function. It looks so good and awful, so uncomfortably comfortable: if you didn’t have skin or nerve endings, it would be great. Why do we buy the same shoe over and over? What is our fascination with our old, favorite shoes? How much do we love our old Chuck Taylors, and for how long? Memories of cutting out the tongue of the old Rod Laver tennis shoe and gluing it behind the tongue of the new one, fattening the tongue out to make it more prominent, to create a cusher padding? Ritualistic augmentation of product and body—tongue jobs for shoes, tongue jobs for people (only if you can’t roll your r’s).

These works take the idiosyncrasies of the manufactured world to an extreme, our version of that collective drive to make a better world, where there is always the potential for a ‘wrong turn’ (which we’re taught to avoid, but who’s to say?). They are ambition with a disregard for, or ignorance to, what precedes us—a combination of ‘we’ve always done it this way/ if it ain’t broke don’t fix it’ vs. ‘this is no longer useful or effective’ vs. ‘this isn’t good for anybody, really.’
PUBLIC ACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

We’re always redrawing the line between public and private—what we should see, experience, guarantee, protect. These works exhibit that anxiety, creating pockets of the domestic transplanted into the public, inappropriate importations of the outside back indoors, or absurd mediating structures between the two, at the same time considering some of the many other forms of public work/interaction: parades, malls, interesting houses, uninteresting houses, street art, busking, architecture, neighborhoods, civic programs, trash, recycling, church...

THE TOILET TRICYCLES—more private than our beds, those sanctified thrones with room just for one, quiet spaces of contemplation, holy porcelain confessionals, ripped from homes, retrofitted, and made to move, zero to sixty, immobile to Indy 500.
THE CARDBOARD TANK—roving toy vehicle of war that could collapse at any moment, let’s hope it doesn’t rain...

Stills from video shot by Adam Carrigan
Cardboard Tank, 2004, cardboard, wooden frame, bike, 9 x 7 x 14 feet / Photo: Pete Danz
THE CAST-IRON ICE-CREAM BATTLE WAGON, dispensing hot lead and choco tacos in equal measure—decommissioned, taken off the streets, shoved in a gallery.

Ice Cream Truck Tank installation at Space 1026, Philadelphia, PA. Photo courtesy of Space 1026.
THE FRESH DUCT: what’s the most inefficient and uneconomical way of pushing air from point a to point b? Do we even have the math for that? The chain-link rancher: how useless can we make an object before it becomes recognizably absurd? How absurd can we make an object before it becomes recognizably useless?

But what must we do to the outside to create luxury on the inside—a vampire economics, rejuvenating one by spoiling another? Irrigated lawns in Arizona, seafood in Nebraska, DUBAI—inefficient design everywhere for the sake of aesthetics: is this just applicational whack-a-mole or Rube Goldberg made status quo? And what about other, more personal luxuries: how do we defend what we’ve earned, especially when what we’ve earned is comfort—the luxury to look the other way, or the luxury of making a show of our largess?
**FREE WALL**

The **Free Wall** is a public junk-drawer for the one-off ideas that rarely make it past the drawing stage: concepts, one-liners, horror, comedy, sketches, schematics, dirty pictures. Approaching the wall, the viewer can browse and then take one individual work. This choice is made presumably with some measure of impulse or taste, though we can only begin to imagine why someone would pick what he or she picks. Galleries create a specific type of experience: objects are precious (don't touch!), formally displayed, and the encounters with these objects are controlled. The Free Wall offers its own type of control, while at the same time destabilizing this preciousness.
This is a ‘living work’, in as much as it changes constantly while installed; not only do the individual works leave the wall and travel (making the work’s footprint or dimensions endlessly variable), but the board itself rarely looks the same twice. Once images leave the wall, they go to any number of other idiosyncratic display destinations, the best example being a refrigerator, which, when taken in a larger exhibitions context, is a modest and innately democratic ‘art gallery’ itself (above the toilet is another favorite non-traditional gallery space). Regardless of the image’s final home, gallery or dustbin, mantelpiece or hamster cage, the Free Wall viewer becomes a curator in a way, responsible for the circulation of the work, as well as for giving it value.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Billy and Steven would like to thank Matthew Callinan, John Muse, James Weissinger, Joshua Ramey, David Richardson and the rest of the Haverford crew, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Fern Gookin, Avi Golen and friends up at RR, Ann Rothmann, Michael Sean Attwood, Claire Iltis, all our friends and family, the internet, and cell phones.

Matthew Seamus Callinan would like to thank Steven and Billy Blaise Dufala, Joe and Mark Candidi, Amy Adams, Bill Astifan, Michael Sean Attwood, Kim Benston, Linda Bell, Israel Burshatin, Emily Cronin, Joshua Delpech-Ramey, Stephen Emerson, Justin Geller, Claire Iltis, Laris Kresiins, Dorothy Labe, Jess Lord, John Muse, Kerry Nelson, John Ollman, David Richardson, Ann Rothman, Ron Tola, James Weissinger, Dick Wynn, Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery Staff, Wormwood and Haze, Haverford College’s Arboretum, Business, Central Receiving, Communications, Dining Services, Facilities, Housekeeping, and Purchasing Departments.

The texts for the Goods, Public Actions and Interventions, and Free Wall sections were composed by James Weissinger in collaboration with Steven and Billy Blaise Dufala.