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An afternoon with
Stuart Dybek

(Grete Grubelich)
CW Notes showcases a week's worth of developing stories, odd events, and signs of the times, culled from the desks, inboxes, and wandering eyes of the editors.

Not sitting pat

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan has added over $750,000 this quarter in contributions to a campaign that remains undeclared, even as its war chest tops $3 million. Though Madigan has been coy about her plans, pundits and pundits alike speculate that the AG is eyeing a run for Governor. The Democrat is among those pegged as primary opponents for incumbent Gov. Pat Quinn, whose own funds sit just above $1 million.

Contrary to what no one anywhere is saying, running for governor has not gotten any less expensive. Madigan's father is longtime Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, which will either be a major stumbling block for the campaign or will not matter very much at all, according to experts. Across the aisle, undeclared Republican contender Bruce Rauner sold his ten percent stake in the Sun-Times, ensuring that the free press will live to fight another day.

The end of this mag's mile

After eight years of rugged individualism, time Out Chicago has folded back to the coop and joined up with its mother brand. From its birth in 2005, the mag was an independent franchise from the larger Time Out Group, but now Time Out (senior) has bought out Time Out (junior) in a $4 million deal.

The London-based group plans to phase out the printed version of the publication and go 100% digital, with new mobile and iPad apps. TOC's owner, Joe Mansueto, can at least take comfort in knowing that he's still an investor in the Sun-Times, the Chicago Reader, and many a university student's soul. But what are we going to read next week in Rauner's waiting room?

Second City could get bumped to fourth

Chicago was rechristened the Second City because of a nasty rash of nineteenth century incinerations. But you'd never know it when you hit a bar with your friend from Brooklyn. It's part and parcel of every Chicagoan's existence; New Yorkers love to move here and then never stop kvetching about how the local digs and dives are just naturally inferior. We've all heard it—the Saturday night squalling about how the Loop is "totally dead," the bars about subpar poetry readings and tame comedy clubs, or how the pies over at Gino's East are "just not real za." But while the rivalry might be deathless, we were once only really competing with New York as a whole. Not anymore. According to Chicagoist, the hipsters and baristas of Brooklyn have been fruitful and multiplied to the point that the borough's population is on track to eclipse Chicago's in little more than a decade. The Windy City's population is gradually getting siphoned off (mostly to Atlanta, for reasons passing understanding), while Brooklyn's is surging to the tune of 2.4 percent a year. Getting bumped to third by L.A. was bad enough, but there are really that many Vampire Weekend fans?

Upward turned thumbs

Many of the accolades heaped upon the late film critic Roger Ebert—who passed away earlier this week—teeter on the edge of hagiography. They list off prizes and publications as just so many trophies. Yet when one of Ebert's most remarkable legacies is not found in his formally published work, but in his openness to dialogues with his admirers. Ebert was notorious for responding to fan mail, no matter how needling the question. Will Leitch, founding editor of the sports blog Deadspin, remembers sending this drunken message to Ebert, during his undergrad days at USC/Sir. Mr. Ebert, this is Will Leitch, an editor at the Daily Illini. I've had a bit to drink [sic] and am going to just ask. There is an old story that you had sex on the ECC desk. Is that true? Everybody wants to know [sic].” Ebert's response: “I would love to say that I enjoyed fornicating on the Daily Illini desk, but if I remember it correctly, I suspect the splinters would have made the endeavor unpleasant. It is reassuring that professors down there are still teaching their students to ask the tough questions.” Leitch's piece goes on to detail how this drunken prodding into an open dialogue, with older journalist offering serious advice about how to write criticism. Here at the Chicago Weekly, we would like to take a minute to salute the human side of Ebert, as we aspire to keep scribbling and ask the "tough questions.”

Bridging the gap

Not a single white fold-out chair was left empty at last weekend's community forum at the Co-Prosperity Sphere in Bridgeport. The audience, consisting mostly of North Side entrepreneurs and Bridgeport residents, had come to hear a dialogue about Bridgeport's bright future in the context of dark attitudes toward the South Side. Art Jackson, co-owner and baker at Pleasant House Bakery, and Ed Marzewska, owner and bartender at Marz's Package Goods & Community Bar, led the evening's discussion, placing the focus on Bridgeport's future as a community and hub for entrepreneurial activity.

To break the ice, Jackson and Marzewska asked, "What are the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Chicago?" Responses included Albany Park, Rogers Park, and Hyde Park. The fourth response, however, was: Bridgeport. This wasn't entirely unexpected. Those who know Bridgeport slice it into two sections, divided by Halsted; the east side has traditionally been nicer than the west. But when asked for advice about starting a business on the west side of Halsted, Jackson exclaimed, “Just do it!” While few others have done so, he explained, the community makes it worth the effort.

Bridgeport is an old community, with low rent and houses that have housed generations of the same families. Jackson and Marzewska explained that new businesses would help the community because Bridgeport residents own most of the property. It will be Bridgeport residents, he said, who determine the future and direction of the neighborhood.

The pair informed the audience that Bridgeport has been monitored as an up-and-coming neighborhood for the past ten years. They compared the growth of arts and culture in Bridgeport to Wicker Park in the 1990s. Marzewska compared Bridgeport "an experiment cultural zone," where outlets of creativity have begun to test the waters for profit. For entrepreneurs, they argued, Bridgeport contains the wonders of a small town in a large city, with rapid transit enhancing walkable streets. However, North Side entrepreneurs complained of widespread negative perceptions of the South Side: few North Siders seem willing to cross the Roosevelt stop of the Red Line. Nevertheless, Jackson and Marzewska represented their neighborhood with a welcoming spirit. As Marzewska put it: "We're not going anywhere." (Jacqueline Nesbitt)

Open house

"Housing is a human right," said activist Sabrina Morey last Thursday evening. Morey was one of the many Chicago activists at the Jane Addams Hull House Museum that night who spoke about housing and other domestic issues, all in recognition of the release of AREA Chicago's thirteenth issue, "Home Fronts, Housing Struggles." When Morey, a single mother, could no longer afford to pay rent for her and her two daughters, the family risked legal consequences by packing their bags and moving into a vacant, foreclosed home in the North Side neighborhood of Belmont Cragin. Since then, Morey has become an activist against foreclosure and eviction procedures, and has worked to move homeless people into vacant, foreclosed homes across the city. An article in AREA 13 features her story alongside the testaments of many Chicago residents who have faced similar problems with eviction and foreclosure.

On Thursday, alongside a spread of empanadas, stuffed grape leaves, and pita bread, contrib-utors and other Chicago activists—including college students, seniors, and everyone in between—gathered at Hull House to discuss the issues at the heart of AREA's latest release. Since the magazine's founding in 2005, each issue of AREA has been dedicated to studying a specific topic of social justice in Chicago. Moving from the broad issue of housing, this volume's focus included the question of domestic workers. Linda Jackson, leader of the Chicago Housing Authority, home economics, co-operative living, and foreclosure and eviction.

Speckles given by the magazine's contributors were often moving and sometimes downright radical. Morey's two daughters, Destiny and Keisha, spoke honestly about the hardships they faced living with a single mother who could rarely spend time with them until she moved them into a vacant home, and single parents Jennie Rudhammer and Jasson Perez voiced the benefits of raising their children in the non-traditional setting of a co-op.

Heather Radke, a radio producer and the exhibition coordinator at Hull House, spoke about her exhibit "Unfinished Business: 21st Century Home Economics," which traces the origins of home economics from its origins in the Progressive Era to the present day. After arguing that often-marginalized domestic workers should be given more recognition for the important social value of their work, Radke gave the floor to three domestic workers from Chicago who spoke about the need for a domestic workers' bill of rights in Illinois. Lisa, a ware and laquishious woman who has been a caregiver in Chicago for over twenty-one years, said, "I love what I do and I love my seniors. But there are a lot of domestic workers who are physically, mentally, and sexually abused. We deserve to have some rights, and I am grateful that I get to be a voice for my sisters." Throughout the event, but especially with these women, the progressive spirit in which Jane Addams created Hull House in 1889 felt alive and well. (Lauren Gurley)
AS SOON AS YOU PULL OPEN THE DOORS OF HORSE
THIEF HOLLOW, YOU FEEL AT HOME. DESPITE THE HIGH CEILING WITH
EXPOSED METAL PIPING AND BRICK WALLS, THIS TWO-MONTH-OLD
RESTAURANT AND BREWERY FEELS COZY AND WORN IN LIKE A PERFECT
SWEATER. FROM THE ROTATING ART ON THE WALLS TO THE GRASS-FED
BEEF AND BEERS, TWENTY-NINE-YEAR-OLD NEIL BYERS OPERATES HIS
GASTRO-PUB WITH AN EYE TOWARDS KEEPING HIS PRODUCTS AS LOCAL
AS POSSIBLE. THIS LOCAL FOCUS IS MAINTAINED NOT ONLY FOR THE
SAKE OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRACTICES, BUT ALSO FOR THE SAKE
OF COMFORT AND A DESIRE TO MAKE BEVERLY LOCALS FEEL AT EASE.

Inside, the music shuffled from The Temper Trap to
Devotchka. Our server, Lauren, brought us samples of
Deschutes White IPA and Kentucky Bourbon Barrel Ale to
test. Unfortunately for us, but a good sign for the brewery,
the two Horse Thief Hollow beers were sold out. The
Kentucky Bourbon Barrel Ale, Bell’s Special Double Cream
Stout, and Founders Dirty Bastard were also perfect pairings
for our scrumptious entrees.

The pulled pork sandwich has several options for accom-
paniment, which include a sweet mustard sauce, a HTH spe-
cial 773-barbeque sauce, and spicy sauce. As there are
reportedly still a few kinks that the kitchen is working out
with these sauces (the hot sauce too spicy, the sweet sauce
too mustard-y), we ordered the recommended 773. The
sandwich somehow stayed together despite being cut into
many pieces to share—an impressive feat for such succulent
pork—and was served with sauce on a brioche bun. The
Green Giant, a grilled vegetable sandwich, was served on
thick-crusted bread. The acidity of the balsamic vinegar
dressing perfectly complemented the sandwich’s charred zuc-
chini and sweet onions. The grass-fed burger, a simple clas-
sic served with a layer of blue cheese on top, did not dis-
appoint. The spinach burger was an interesting patty made
from chopped spinach, feta, and greens. Both of the veg-
etable dishes kept up with the protein-heavy entrees, leav-
ing all of us satiated and happy without being overstuffed.

The sweet potato fries won best side, delivering in ways
fries so rarely do: minimal grease accompanying the crispy
exterior, thick enough so as not to wilt, but not too large to
fill you up after a few bites. The buttermilk slaw was a close
second, and the crunchy sour pickles on our metal trays were
a perfect palate cleanser between all contestants. The only
just-okay part of the meal was the corn bread, its unexpect-
ed saltiness promising by slightly too dry to hold up the
sides we had already devoured.

As we got the check, we asked Lauren about peeking
into the brewing operation. Byers himself came out, and,
empty sample glasses in hand, led the way into the kitchen
and brewing areas. Byers talked to us about his process, the
repurposed University of Chicago doors scrapped from con-
struction in the 1940s, and what it was like to go through
900 pints of the Horse Thief Hollow Kitchen Sink Pale Ale in
the restaurant’s opening weekend. At a rate of thirty kegs in
a week and a half, Byers and his team value neighborhood
help; it’s an integral part of why he cares about making his
restaurant a place where the community feels comfortable.

“Haymarket and Saugatuck (the Michigan brewing com-
pany where Byers learned the craft) have been super sup-
portive. I don’t want to be part of the corporate structure,
and so far the community helping out means that’s what I’ve
been able to do,” Byers informed us while cleaning the noz-
zles on the conditioning tank. At Horse Thief Hollow, the
last thing one feels is a corporate structure. The works of
local artists on the walls and the giant beer tanks in the
dining room show how dedicated Byers is to not only his
craft, but also to his neighborhood.

Three beers, four sandwiches, and lots of sides totaled
$64.96 before tip—completely reasonable for the quantity
and quality of the food. Everything was made better by our
server Lauren and Neil; they went above and beyond what
you generally receive in a restaurant. Don’t hesitate to ask
for a tour and get a preview sample of Byers’ next brews. As
we licked our glasses clean, the samples left us hoping that
one day Horse Thief Hollow will be capable of selling keys
in addition to food. While it might not be the most cutting
edge pub in town, Horse Thief Hollow is certainly a place
where one feels welcome.

Horse Thief Hollow, 10426 S. Western Ave. Monday-Thursday,
11am-10pm; Friday-Saturday, 11am-12am. (773)779-2739.
horsethiefbrewing.com
Stuart Dybek’s characters are undoubtedly Chicagoans, often South Siders, loitering in parks and coin laundries, and humping down 26th Street in search of blood soup, the Palatski Man, funerals. His work depicts a city wearing social issues on its sleeve—from the banality of teenage boredom to the severity of racial tension and territorialism—that have remained relevant to contemporary Chicago. The son of a Polish immigrant, Dybek grew up in Pilsen and Little Village in the fifties, attending St. Rita of Cascia High School when it was located on 63rd and Western. He migrated north to study at Loyola University, Chicago, and as a young man returned to the South Side to work as a case-worker in Bronzeville.

I first got to know the work of Stuart Dybek in Iowa, where I was attending what could only be called “writing camp.” The image of PET Milk swirling in coffee—the introductory moment of a story that perspires with the heat of a Chicago summer—stayed with me for years after reading his 1984 short story “Pet Milk,” published first in the New Yorker and later in the 1990 story collection “Coast of Chicago.” When I moved to Chicago, his book “Childhood and Other Neighborhoods” introduced me to others who were coming into their own on the South Side and gave dimension to the places I was encountering for the first time. Dybek is the author of several other collections of poems and short stories, and has won numerous awards for his work, including MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellowships. These days, he’s a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Northwestern University, maintaining an adjunct professorship at Western Michigan University, where he taught for more than thirty years.

I went to meet with him in his apartment—carpeted, sparsely furnished, a guitar sitting in the corner—in Evanston on a gray day in late February, making the trek north from Hyde Park on the Red and Purple Lines. As he let me in, he was practically bursting with excitement about a young man in his class at Northwestern who had returned to class after being injured in a bicycle accident. “I get a kick out of that,” he said, smiling, “when a good story comes.” He’s got an easygoing demeanor that’s as contagious as his smile, and as we sat at the circular living room table—hastily cleared of papers—he led a two-hour conversation about writing the South Side.

How long have you identified yourself as a writer?

I have a little essay—actually it’s now a chapter of a book I’m working on—called “Ralston,” and it tells the story of me in fourth grade when I had my first glimpse of writing being something that was not English. Yet again, another accident: sitting at the breakfast table on a morning my mother was sick and having no one to make [me] breakfast, my father having left me a disgusting bowl of cereal called Ralston [from a company] that made dog food. And you could tell from smelling the cereal they did indeed. So I pitched it and the only thing left to do was the homework—which I did not—[I] wrote a little essay, an assignment on a loose-leaf piece of paper about Africa (which of course I knew everything). And in trying to describe the trees—the tallest things I’d ever seen was the skyscrapers downtown—[I] hatched the phrase, “the tree-scraped skies,” and a bolt shot through me. I had invented metaphor! I didn’t know there was metaphor to invent.

The experience was amplified because by that point I was a bad boy in class. I was
It's called "St. Stuart." Yet again, I didn't start out wanting to write a bildungsroman, but that's what it turned into, and for me it's impossible to write a bildungsroman without talking about St. Rita, which is where I went to high school. But I started out wanting to write something funny. But that located it at St. Rita's as well...so, you know, the important thing to keep in mind is that I'm writing about something long gone. It's not the same school by any stretch of the imagination, I'm sure it's changed, but when I got there it was a real throwback to—I don't even know what it was a throwback to. But first and foremost for me, when I left I felt I had an awful lot of funny stories, or at least stories [that] you would be a lot better off in your life if you could laugh at them. I've never forgotten those stories.

I haven't really worked it out yet but it'll be certainly novelistic in the sense that it will be about one character (me) and his family (mine) and his friends (mine), and it will be the same people chapter by chapter developing. It might be episodic, but it won't be a collection of stories and it will move along a linear line of time. It's not just about St. Rita; it's a part of growing up in that South Side neighborhood and it's really kind of a comic homage to that certain Chicago South Side mindset that is—at least, I hope people find it—funny.

**What Is the South Side mindset?**

In a way the answer to it is what I'm trying to write in this book. I think places have their own humor—so Mississippi humor is different from Lower East Side of New York humor. It's kind of hard to define them, but you know them when you hear them. You know one good example, it's not the kind I'm mining, but you know the old Saturday Night Live "Da Bears" skits [where] they were eating this horrific fatty food and kept having heart attacks? That's South Side humor. The ethnicity of the South Side, in which different neighborhoods are identified [as] different neighborhoods, that's an element. [And there's] something I think of as "lowerhood"—I've written about it before in a story called "Blight," where there's a certain kind of a badge of honor of how much can you take, and it's certainly not just germane to Chicago. I think it's an ethnic quality.

**Do you think that kind of toughness has to do with immigration?**

Yes. Absolutely. The other thing is that...if you compare American literature—it's not that American literature is disinterested in class, but the extent to which it is is I think arguably less so than say, British literature, or a lot of European literature—Americans are sometimes very uncomfortable with that notion, you know, we're supposed to be a democratic country, you know, it might entertain us about the royals in England but we wouldn't want them here. Whereas the English have deep affection for them and are obsessed by them. But I found class to be a huge feature in growing up and a determining one both culturally and politically, and so I'm interested in writing about it.

[But] when you write about a neighborhood like Pilsen and Little Village, if you just write about the way things are you will automatically be writing about the great themes. You don't have to put that in there. In fact if you try to overlay it you're mak-

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**Something had sorted itself out about what language could do and it had nothing to do with spelling tests, diagramming sentences, or anything else.**
ing a big mistake, because the beauty of the subject matter is that naturally arising from it rather than imposed upon it are the themes of assimilation, immigration, class, ethnicity, race, minority culture, religion, you know all those things...they're as natural as breathing the polluted air—and it was polluted.

You've referred to yourself before as an urban writer.

Well, it's just really a matter of what you've written about the most. Writers don't write in a vacuum. You've got Bellow staking out Hyde Park and James Farrell staking out the Irish South Side at one time years ago, and Algren staking out the Polish section along Milwaukee Avenue. And if you're writing fabulism you've got Borges in Buenos Aires and Kafka in Prague. I teach in Prague in the summers and one of the first things everybody who goes there suddenly says [is], “Oh! I thought he made it all up!”—And there it all is, the castle and the twisty labyrinthine streets and he didn't make any of it up! I mean, he might have made that bug, I don't know. So a lot of the writers who influenced me in some ways were “urban writers,” but I'm also a writer of place.

I'm wondering if you could tell me a bit more about your neighborhood and your own personal geography. One of my favorite stories from “Childhood and Other Neighborhoods” is “The Long Thoughts,” where you have the two guys wandering through the street at night, and when they part ways one has a longer walk than the other. It's as if walking through a space, or enjoying a neighborhood, or even just getting home relates directly to their consciousness of their own experience.

No it does, absolutely. That relationship one has with place in a city expresses itself in a sense of the streets. The funny thing about growing up in an American city as opposed to, say, a European city, is when you go to Rome, that city is always in some form or another in excavation...the sense of long history is so palpable and that's really far, far less true in an American city. Instead of excavations we just tear stuff down and build on top of it. What happens when you grow up in a neighborhood is that you do your overlays on top of it. And Bergson talks about [this idea] that human beings are clocks and we have all these different levels of time within us. One of the things that happens in some of those stories—I think “The Long Thoughts” might be one of them—[is] you get these overlays of memory and narrative, so when you're walking down 26th Street, it's not just one walk, it's all the walks you've taken down 26th Street. There's a story in a later book—called “Hot Ice,” in a book called “Coast of Chicago”—that I think has a big sense of that built in, and how much of a city is composed of the memory of its inhabitants, that it's almost as much of a substance as brick and concrete. When I go back to visit my neighborhood it's very much that for me, you know I see what's there now, which I like and which I'm comfortable in, but I can't walk those streets without also walking through time. And it's not like I go there to ponder memory or to meditate or anything—that's just the way memory is. I always think of that as an intrinsic part of writing.
Do you go back to Pilsen often?

Oh, I even keep my menu right on hand [indicates Nuevo Leon menu]. Yeah, I love the food. I just love going over there, it’s great to go for breakfast. I miss the faces. I mean, really great faces...I used to be starved for it at one point, living in Michigan. No matter how long I’ve lived anywhere else, I never really quite had that deep sense of being home as I do in Chicago.

What were some of your favorite places in the neighborhood?

I loved industrial landscapes. The odd thing was, I was living in an urban area and I constantly looked for non-urban places. And that notion has continued to fascinate me all through life, these little hidden purlieus of nature, that no matter how much steel and concrete you pour, somehow nature finds its little hiding nooks.

I was an amateur entomologist and a butterfly collector, which wasn’t the kind of thing you wanted to air about in an inner city neighborhood. You didn’t want to be seen running around with a butterfly net, so I would hide my butterfly net. But the neighborhood was hugely industrial—laced with railroad tracks, still is; the Sanitary Canal runs through it—so there [was] the river, and bridges, and then there were a lot of factories that had considerable amounts of acreage surrounding them, mostly fenced off, and several of them bankrupt and shut down, and the land had gone back to seed and those were indeed my favorite places.

Somehow, there was something so subversive about going there—one is that you weren’t supposed to be there, they had all kinds of urban legends about scary people who lived there and railroad dicks who wanted to shoot you with things called pepper guns, shot guns filled with salt pellets. And then the trains rambled through endlessly and one of the things we did all the time is learned how to ride them, we’d hitch the trains and treat them like they were amusement park rides. It’s very easy to get on, and it’s much harder to get off.

And the bridges were in some cases like gigantic jungle gyms. [Henry Miller has] got this line: no matter what you do later in life, you can get on a boat and like the character in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” sail to the heart of darkness. Adventure will never be as adventurous as being a kid in the Bronx or Brooklyn. And when I read that it was really one of those shocker recognition paragraphs because I really, enormously enjoyed that sense of running wild in the streets. It was a far more permissive area. You never were asked about the crazy things that you were doing. Some of the best swimming I ever did was on a bridge over the Sanitary Canal. That probably was one of the most polluted bodies of water that you could find on the planet.

Now that’s the point of view of somebody who had the parental support to get an education and make it out of that neighborhood, because there’s a whole different point
We use language for legal cases, we use it to put children to sleep, to wake them up, to write down our grocery lists. We do everything with it, in a way we don’t with dance, with music, or with painting.

of view. I mean it’s the same neighborhood, just rife with gangs—it can be a real dead end as well, so I don’t want to give the impression that it was necessarily this hugely benevolent place.

How did you rise above any social pressure to join gangs or get involved in that kind of activity?

Fear. I knew I was not a tough guy, number one. Number two is that the place was nowhere near—it didn’t even begin approaching—how ganged up things were. Heavy drugs were considered pot. The big problem on the street in those days was alcoholism. Every corner had clutches of men who all they did was drink. I don’t know how they supported themselves. Died young. So the heavy drugs that would later come in and result in an industry that makes prohibition look small-time were really not there yet, and the guns to defend all that money that is available to be made.

You know when I grew up, it was an era of zip guns, or somebody might have had a .22. The only kid I ever saw shot was shot with a .22. He lived. You know there were knives and stuff. So in that sense I was in an area that I could see heading in that direction but I was out of there before it had crossed that border. There were already at that time areas of the city where that was going on, but Pilsen was in fact not one of them. The Blackstone Rangers were on the South Side. Later on I was a caseworker there. I could see a lot of what was going, what is still going on today. It just seems like it keeps getting worse and worse though.

Can you tell me a little bit about being a caseworker?

Well it was in part through naiveté. I was hugely—like that whole generation—was hugely attracted to civil rights, and for me it really started with music. When I began reading books about my heroes, all the stuff I picked up on the street about race went out the window, it became so clear to me exactly what somebody like Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington—what it meant to be African American. So when the Civil Rights Movement came along I was already all primed, and at the same time there was Vietnam. And one of the things about St. Rita was that, especially after I had worked at the record shop, I came back for my senior year and as I said there had been a trans-formational experience, I had learned so much, and I had read incessantly during that time, like you can only read when you’re young, and I already came to be hugely suspicious of that school but I was such a screw-up myself, but it was in senior year I...realized that one way to get an education was to define yourself against, because what I was being taught I didn't believe. And that habit of defining yourself against, that is, listening to what you're being taught and then making a conscious effort to go find out what the cons to what the pro might be, became hugely important in the America of that time.

I was looking for some kind of socially relevant job and my naiveté was such that I thought that somehow being a caseworker was going to be it, and I had no idea until I did the job that all I was doing was becoming a kind of enforcer for the status quo of welfare nation. And I just plain out was not politically sophisticated enough to understand that...we had—we being Cook Country public aid, and federal tax dollars, and state tax dollars—set up a system by which people could just barely survive on welfare, and if they knew how to do it they could hustle the system a little bit. And in some respects it was helping, but in other respects it was establishing generation after generation of people who were now habituated to live this way, and there were never enough programs, money, for any but the luckiest and most ambitious few to get off this. So did I know that when I took the job? I didn’t.

That said, I'll add that on a personal level, one of the things that appealed to me was that you were outside on the streets, you weren't sitting in an office behind a desk. I knew I didn't want to be a cop, number one. Number two is that the place was rife with gangs—it can be a real dead end as well, so I don’t want to give the impression that it was necessarily this hugely benevolent place.

I was reading a lot, it was like an education you were giving yourself. Not all that dif-
frent from the education I had given myself in the record store. I got to know music and the history of American music so inside out, and this was the same kind of thing. I kept careful notes, I kept my case records, I kept my eyes open, I read a lot of books on the subject because I was out there by myself. I had the opportunity to make assumptions on my own, they weren't all right, but I also began to feel kind of guilty about some of the things I was being asked to do, which was basically to keep reports on these people and not be empowered in any real way to really help them much besides buying them a new bed. I'm glad I did it...I felt that the stories were valuable, that is, that they told real things that people should know. As close as I had grown up to poverty, it was redefined for me by what I saw.

The thing that depressed me the most was the level of abuse. It was just beyond anything I had imagined. I suddenly became really obsessed with Charles Dickens because I could see, granted maybe a little sentimentalized, but I could see in Dickens' London something I was [seeing]; the abuse of children. Dickens is a great friend of children. And I think, by the way, that really deeply influenced that first book, "Childhood and Other Neighborhoods."

I've always felt that one of my failures as a writer was not to have written more about it because I have so much more that I've written about and I don't even have the slightest urge at this point to start analyzing, crying over spilled milk, or however one wants to look at it. But really, my intention in writing was to have written more than I did, it was a real life changing experience.

I'm partial to "Blood Soup," in "Childhood in Other Neighborhoods." There's that confrontation in the park between the little boys and the group of African-American kids playing basketball—and the boys going after the ducks in the park with the old guy, and the park is this forum, almost where these two groups come together and try to scope each other out.

Yeah, that's Douglas Park, actually. That was based on a real experience.

I wasn't out there looking for blood soup. We were just out there messing with the ducks, is basically what it was, and I had no intention of killing or hurting ducks. It had been a lagoon, [where] my father as a boy caught what he called mudbugs, little crawfish, and they actually ate them as kids. And so as the neighborhood changed I would keep going to that lagoon, associating it all the way back to my father. At some point it really [became] the territory of a place called Lawndale, and if you were from a sizeable number. We had made up all kinds of myths, urban myths about why it was so spooky there. A wino had died, or a wino had hung himself, or somebody was raped, you know I mean just kind of ghoulish things that boys love to talk about and you know here it had this really interesting history. I think today I'd be surprised if many of the people really have the slightest idea why the hell it's called Pilsen, rather than Guadalajara...so that lack of historicity extended to things like Douglas Park, you had the sense that how you saw things in the present was how they always were, and there was no intellectual curiosity whatsoever to find out otherwise.

Did both your parents grow up in Pilsen?

In the area. And my father was an immigrant, but he came here young. That was their map of where they grew up. Or where they lived their lives. So, you know, it had, as Royko called it, a "little village" aspect to it. By little village I don't mean the name for the neighborhood, it just seemed like little villages. And as Royko said, you treat them as your little village and talked about how nice it was to live there and moved out as soon as you could. I don't know if you ever read that book "Boyz."

No.

It's worth reading. Really, really, quite a wonderful book.

Did you live in Pilsen when you were a caseworker?

No, I didn't. I lived in Rogers Park, which was a Yiddish neighborhood then. Beautiful Yiddish neighborhood. In the little tailor shops and in some of the groceries you still saw people with the tattoos from the camps. It was my favorite of all Chicago neighborhoods. It almost felt kind of European, living there. Stores had foreign foods and little stars of David in the window, little neon stars of David. It was a very beautiful place to live. And the population density, you know it was before the waves of high rises were built. I heard in high school you composed a short story about the Sanitary Canal.

My God! [My son] just called me up the other day to find out if that was true. How does this get out? I mean, he called me up just three or four days ago, he said, "You know, I had lunch with your brothers in New York, Dave and Tom...and they said that one of your first pieces you ever wrote was about being a turd floating down the Sanitary Canal. Could that possibly be?" I said, "Well, 'fraid so."

Do you still have it?

Not here. I probably have it somewhere...you know, the stuff sits in suitcases all over the place now. I wrote it in high school after I got impressed by the beatniks, so it was a beatnik piece, and I wrote it to try to entertain my high school buddies and I hoped, you know it was toilet humor, it was potty humor, it was potty humor crossed with a beatnik, and I hoped that they would laugh about it. And I do remem- ber the first line, which is, "Waste and juice and I am born!" [Laughter] and you know, what's behind a trip down the canal is something like Scuffy the Tugboat, but I had changed Scuffy the Tugboat into a turd, a talking turd.
arts&culture

Party On
By Quinn Georgic

While we’ve all heard the old lemons and lemonade adage, modern life can still be daunting. Between work and study, moments of beauty have become fewer and more fleeting. Yet people still seek them out. The latest show at Pilgrim’s Slow, “Be the party (please don’t go),” addresses the idea of finding such beauty through the pairing of two unique artists, photographer Helmet Heis and mobility aid sculptor Emily Severance.

When first walking into the small exhibition room, the difference in the two artists’ styles is immediately apparent. The photographs by Heis, a Vienna native, are confounding at first glance; though they initially appear to be cityscapes, an out-of-place element renders them uncanny. Upon closer inspection, one realizes this unusual object is a disco ball. The repetition of the disco ball transforms a sinister weapon of destruction into a party item.

These understated photos were complemented by Severance’s vibrant pieces, which were placed haphazardly on the floors and walls. In her collection, Severance takes mobility devices, such as walkers, canes, and braces, and adorns them. What results is a positive, playful aesthetic. Utilizing beautifully colored yarn, she crochets these utilitarian tools into exciting new creations such as schools of jellyfish or patches of colorful sea flora. All of the pieces in her collection are inspired by landscapes and open spaces which were placed haphazardly on the floors and walls. In her collection, Severance transforms mobility devices, such as walkers, canes, and braces, and adorns them. What results is a positive, playful aesthetic. Utilizing beautifully colored yarn, she crochets these utilitarian tools into exciting new creations such as schools of jellyfish or patches of colorful sea flora. All of the pieces in her collection are inspired by landscapes and open spaces.

Curator Paul Melvin Hopkin explains that the two artists share “a very strong sensibility...taking something sad and heavy and transforming it into an exuberance.” While a drone can be seen as a negative militaristic entity, the addition of a disco ball turns it into a strangely joyful object. In both collections, the unexpected addition of one element creates beauty and adds a positive aspect to otherwise negative situations.

Continuing through the gallery, the art becomes more and more interactive, and the distinction between art and life itself gets blurred. The back room of the gallery doubles as Hopkin’s apartment, and visitors walk around his bed, living room and kitchen, hopefully without stealing anything. Hopkin encourages visitors to wear certain items and headpieces—which he specifies—from Severance’s collection for the remainder of their exploration of the gallery. Visitors can sit in chairs decorated by Severance and listen to hired readers perform her poetry. The decorations surround the seated visitor and give a sense of unity with the art. Visitors can also go into the kitchen and share an artisanal peanut butter and jelly beer, custom-brewed by Pilgrim artist collective SmAB for the show in bottles decorated by Severance’s yard creations.

By creating an environment that becomes one with the art, Hopkin hopes that people who will move beyond the aesthetic value of the artwork and analyze its deeper meaning. He expressed his work by saying, “Art is so visual that we say, ‘Oh that’s cool,’ but democratically, people will move beyond the aesthetic value of the artwork and analyze its deeper meaning.

Cruzar la Cara de la Luna

The world’s first (and likely last) Narcohachi travels to Pilgrim with a theatrical experience that has stunned audiences from Paris to Houston with its uncanny sound and emotional proprioception. “Cruzar la Cara de la Luna” is a bilingual story that follows three generations of the Hidalgo family, split across the boundaries of nation and culture. When a long-buried secret comes to light, the Hidalgo family is played into a transnational journey of discovery, set to music and lyrics by “José” Marin. Marin’s music, lyrics, text, and direction is by Leonardo Figliu. Presented by the Lyric Opera in cooperation with the National Museum of Mexican Art. “Cruzar la Cara de la Luna” combines the raucous energy of Narcohachi with the Pavonean terror of opera. It’s a combination that has proven hit—only a small number of tickets will be available at the venue the day of.

Within Reach Film Screening

From Buddha to Forest Gump, countless individuals have written the story of discovering material possessions and traveling the world in order to discover themselves. “Within Reach” is a documentary that uncovers the reality of one such All-India Alliance for a Greener South Longer, follows the journey of one such cohort as they give up everything except what can pack on their backs—including their subsidiary houses, corporate phone, and expensive clothes—as they travel 2,500 miles across the country searching for a sustainable home. While following several groups according to their homes, they begin to forge a vision of a possible future in which land is collective, not private, and community is at the heart of sustainable living. More than just a search for a sustainable home, their journey is a manifestation of the universal yearning for deeper meaning outside of fleeting material possessions. Screening Coffee Cafe. 3130 S. State St. Thursday, April 25, 5 pm. $7 suggested donation. (312)344-5867. forwithinreachfilm.com (Meghan Murphy)

KRS-One

Leeds Undressed Blues

KRS-One’s latest album features a track that uses one of the real last jule joints on the South Side with a hip hop beat, but the Leeds Undressed Blues has been on the scene for years. The Last 2153 W. 21st St. Through April 27. Saturdays, noon-5pm and by appointment. (773) 722-3655. etacreativearts.org (Emily Holland)

KRS-ONE

BROOKE-DEPP: That’s the sound of socially conscious rapper KRS-One releasing a potential hit. In fact, the sound that begins as a dissonant, loose, ill-fitting sample of an instrumentalized succession through the de-mapping of music into rhythm and pitch. The impromptu, non-collage party-guests (rappers call this the everything rap party) joyfully correlate our problematic addiction with partying, come on the lyrics on April 22 and hear how these important words can be transformed into a powerful force, as well as the meaningfulness made out of the word. Absolutely free. No phone lines across the country searching for a sustainable home. While following several groups according to their homes and making music, they begin to forge a vision of a possible future in which land is collective, not private, and community is at the heart of sustainable living. More than just a search for a sustainable home, their journey is a manifestation of the universal yearning for deeper meaning outside of fleeting material possessions. Screening Coffee Cafe. 3130 S. State St. Thursday, April 25, 7 pm. $7 suggested donation. (312)344-5867. forwithinreachfilm.com (Meghan Murphy)

De Cultura Manera

De Cultura Manera, contrary to popular belief, take time. Any generally subtle change in the way things meet with active opposition or indifference, and even those leading the change may not recognize the ways in which the status quo endures. Though the Cuban Revolution took place during the 1950s, it is not until the mid-1970s that the first Cuban feature film directed by a woman was released. “De Cultura Manera” (How Many More?) is an English mishmash, though it is not to be confused with the poppy Bilingual smile of the same name. It was the first non-American Mami made before dying of an asthma attack in 1976. The film centers around the lives of teacher Mariela and factory worker Mariela. Mariela endeavors to educate a group of students, while Mariela remains a victim of the destructive traditional code of "machismo." “De Cultura Manera” explicitly addresses the conflict between the forces of change and resistance in that respect. It bears comparison with the early films of Ken Loach and other experimental works of social realism while simultaneously offering an interesting discussion of political and social conditions in post-revolutionary Afghanistan. Mariela. Black Cinema House. 6901 S. Dorchester Ave. Sunday, April 28, 7 pm. Screening is Outdoor. RSVP Blackcinemahouse.org
Horse of Kahn

Horses have carried conquerors and heroes throughout history, but how often does the animal itself get any credit? Jereenth Halabse-Safford is putting the spotlight back on the creature beneath the saddle in the most literal way possible with his new installation, "Hall of Khak." His bringing horses into the gallery. The interaction of horse and abstract forms representing riders underscores traditional equine sculpture and its symbolic meanings. For all you neigh-sayers argue about hooring it to HRM just for parties, the exhibit introduces extra meshes, more space, including an architectural construction modeled after World Fair exhibition halls. However, if you can't get enough of everything else, the horse will continue with a summer camp for teens and various events in collaboration with stables and riding groups from the Illinois area. Hyde Park Art Center, 5150 S. Cornell Ave. Opening reception April 26, 1-3 pm; through July 26, Monday-Thursdays, 10 am-8 pm; Fridays-Sundays, 10 am-5 pm; Noon-5 pm. Free. (773)524-5520. hydeparkart.org (Hanna Petroski)

Songs of the Abyss: Ishi’s Brain + WUME

Radiohead may not try to rock your socks off, but they do want to “stimulate your eyeballs and eardrums.” To celebrate Brain), a puppet adaption of Espey’s work. The show (“Ishi’s Brain”) is based on a true story of an Indian man that, with "Forlesen," his latest work and first solo exhibition since his return from, Pope.L hones in on the way in which difference is demarcated between the polar fringes of these societies, and how that relates to contemporary issues. Forlesen captures the way in which the borders of these societies are marked and how that relates to contemporary issues. The Renaisance Society, transforming the space into a reflective and investigation of the famous textile artist’s relationship to those of contemporary textile artists. The Renaisance Society, 1101 S. 60th St. April 20-28, 1-3 pm. Free. (312)775-4223. chicagoweekly.net (Kyle Zare)

Forlesen

The Renaisance Society comes to the end of another season. William Pope, II at the Renaisance Society’s Visual Arts program is launching into new spaces with refreshing familiarity. An interdisciplinary artist best known for his tactile public performance of "found" objects across New York City, Pope impressively evokes his sense of self to tackle a complex portrait of social realities like race, class, and politics. With "Forlesen," his latest work and first solo exhibition since moving to Chicago, Pope finds in this way in which difference is demarcated between the polar fringes of these intimate social tissues, particularly attention to the spaces separating blackness and whiteness. In effect, movement energy is demarcated between the polar fringes of these societies, and how that relates to contemporary issues. Forlesen captures the way in which the borders of these societies are marked and how that relates to contemporary issues. The Renaisance Society, transforming the space into a reflective and investigation of the famous textile artist’s relationship to those of contemporary textile artists. The Renaisance Society, 1101 S. 60th St. April 20-28, 1-3 pm. Free. (312)775-4223. chicagoweekly.net (Kyle Zare)

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First Movement

Inside the United Church of Hyde Park, sloping arabesque pillars frame the altar where Cincinnati chamber folk outfit The Happy Maladies are preparing for sound-check. The concert they are opening is the First Southside Hub of Production (ShoP) event of the year; it’s also the first such event inside the church, the cultural hub’s makeshift home. With the quartet arranged in a line across the stage, the room is heavy with anticipation. Featuring guitarist and banjoist Benjamin Thomas, guitarist and mandolinist Stephen Patota, upright bassist Peter Gemus, and violinist Eddie Kwon, The Happy Maladies would not be out of place at an old time church revival meeting. Yet the band’s sound, unlike their traditional exterior, is radically diverse. Each song is at once improvisational jazz, Punch Brothers America, flowing modern classical, and, when Thomasウィン the banjo, three-part close harmony folk.

The main act of the evening, Zamin, is quite unlike anything else. They open their set with vocalist Zamin Bagewadi playing a table harmonium, accompanied by cellist Genevieve Guimond to his right. Next comes percussionist David Eisenreich, adding accents on a trumpet, followed by bassist Josh Fink. Their opening song evokes the image of a slow, lumbering caravan moving through some foreign city. Then Bagewadi starts singing, and it all changes. It isn’t possible to place Zamin in a genre. They sing in Urdu and Hindi, with cascading half tones and tilting Eastern melodies, combined with decidedly Western influences. Though their songs bear some resemblance to those of contemporary indie rock groups such as Beirut, Sigur Ros, and even Radiohead, the overarching sounds of Bagewadi’s strong, resonant “light Hindusthani” style vocals make the style all their own. The audience loves them, especially the two small girls in the front pew who unflappably give standing ovations after every song.

In talking with founder Laura Shafer after the concert, it’s clear that even with the loss of their old space, ShoP will be just fine, better even. Laughing, she says that ShoP “has always been nomadic in nature anyways.” (Jack Nuelle)