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JUNE 07, 2005

Carrie McLaren, Editor, *Stay Free!*

In addition to founding *Stay Free!*, an independent, Brooklyn-based magazine that "explores the politics and perversions of mass media and American (consumer) culture," Carrie McLaren has praised and displayed the work of artists that have been bullied by corporate America and developed a course to teach kids about media literacy. She also runs a blog with the help of Charles Star, Stay Free! Daily, that you can check out [here](#).

**THE BASICS****Age:** 36**Occupation:** Editor**Place of Birth:** Clearwater, FL**Current residence:** Park Slope**Length of time in New York:** 10 years**Relationship status:** Yes. (in a relationship)**Online guilty pleasure:** FeralChildren.com**THE INTERVIEW**

You curated an art show called the [Illegal Art Exhibit](#). What sort of criminal activity are we talking about here?

The works in the show are all on the fringes on copyright law. Several artists have been sued or threatened for infringing on others' "intellectual property." Kieron Dwyer, for example, was sued by Starbucks for the creating a parody of the company's logo that said CONSUMER WHORE. The name of the show was more or less a gimmick, though. If we called it the "Intellectual Property Law Exhibit," no one would have cared.

Last week one of the pieces from the exhibit screened at Southpaw - [Wizard People, Dear Readers](#). What is it about this film that makes it "illegal?"

It's a re-envisioning of the first Harry Potter movie, so you play the Harry Potter movie on mute synced to CDs of this guy (Brad Neely) narrating the action. Warner Brothers, which owns the rights to the Harry Potter movies, has shut down screenings. They haven't actually sued anyone, but they've told theaters that if they show *Wizard People*, Warner will cut off all ties with them.

intellectual property disputes we see are resolved without the courts involved. Rights holders often send cease-and-desist notices that have no solid basis in law. Also, they often have no intention of actually following through on a suit, should it come to that.

Usually, the mere threat of a lawsuit is enough to get people to stop whatever they're doing. Even when an artist is legally in the right, the costs of a court battle is so prohibitive -- and the courts are so mercurial -- that capitulating is a necessity. Corporations know this. But they also know that suing artists makes them look bad. Part of the mission of the Illegal Art Exhibit is to leverage the threat of publicity against these powerful interests.

Which pieces in the exhibit have have been the most controversial?

Most of the artists didn't set out to make something controversial; many of them had no idea copyright would even be an issue. Nataka Husar, for example, painted a series of book covers about an Ukranian immigrant. She used Harlequin romance novels from the 50s and 60s as her canvas, and left the titles in tact, which prompted a cease-and-desist.

Probably the most famous work in the show is [Todd Haynes'](#) movie Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story. Richard Carpenter sued Haynes over the music in the film, but I think it's safe to say his true objections were with the story, which portrays Karen Carpenter's battle with anorexia using Barbie dolls.

Do you believe there are any lines that shouldn't be crossed? What's your opinion/definition of plagiarism? How is this different from what the artists are doing?

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work as your own. That's not an issue with the works in our show. The only works included where plagiarism is even arguable are the songs on our website. You could say that Elastica's "Connection" is a rip off of Wire's "Three Girl Rumba," or that Led Zeppelin stole from Willie Dixon, but that's not plagiarism. I can understand why some people think Puff Daddy should be shackled for his derivative, unimaginative sampling, but I don't think we want the law deciding what constitutes good and bad art. The danger of making a law that prohibits a blatantly derivative work is that it outlaws interesting, genuinely transformative works as well.

For some, copyright is just seen as boring legal jargon. What sparked your interest in it?

I learned about it from the band [Negativland](#), who U2 sued for copyright infringement back in 1991. I wrote about it and became pals with one of the members, Mark Hosler.

What's the status of the show? How can New Yorkers see it?

We occasionally do local film screenings, and all the video and music from the show is available on our website. We're showing the films in Spain next month, and the full exhibit will travel to Florida and maybe Portland, Oregon, in 2006.



You are also the editor of [Stay Free!](#), a magazine published twice a year, in November and May. For those who've never read/seen Stay Free!, here's your opportunity to give a sales pitch. Why should we buy it?

At the risk of sounding like an asshole, I'd say the magazine sells itself. It focuses on the ills of mass media and consumer culture, but without beating people over the head.

The restaurant column, by local comic Eugene Mirman, is a big hit, as are the [ad parodies](#). But the meat of each issue is usually an [essay](#), an [interview](#), or a [funny critique](#) of some kind.

Is Stay Free! your first foray into publishing?

I did a couple of small zines when I was in college in North Carolina, but nothing really worth mentioning. I also edited a newsletter called [¡Escandalo!](#) for

Did you know that when you look up [zine on Answer.com](#), there is a link to Stay Free! after the definition? Is it really a zine masquerading as a magazine or are the folks at Answer.com smoking something?

Really? That's great. Basically, I started Stay Free! around 1993 as a zine about the local music scene in Chapel Hill, NC. People consider it a magazine now because it looks professional, but it's still ruled by the zinester ethos. [Ben is Dead](#), [Bunnyhop](#), and [Boing Boing](#) were considered zines, so why not Stay Free?

Where did the name come from?

It's a spoof on the maxipads. In the 1970s advertisers appropriated language from the women's rights movement to sell things to female consumers. "Stayfree" is a prime example, so we took the phrase back, so to speak... The main reason, though, is just that I thought it was funny. (I was actually on the toilet when I thought of it.)

So, Stay Free! started out having a feminist slant...

I was immersed in Chapel Hill's indie rock scene and WXYC, the college station, and both were almost entirely male... so I'd point out examples of sexism in that world and generally piss people off. Now that I'm an old lady, I still identify with feminism, but I'm turned off by rigid identity politics of any kind.

Another of your many endeavors was teaching at the [Berkeley Carroll School](#). There you developed a history course, what was the subject matter?

[Mass Media and Consumer Culture](#). I have one exercise that sums up the whole course. Basically, I show kids a slide of 20 or so trees native to Park Slope and asking them to identify the trees. Usually, kids have a hard time naming even one. Then I show a slide based on [Heidi Cody's American Alphabet](#), which consists of the letters A to Z taken from corporate logos, and I ask the kids to identify the logos. Usually, they can name all but a few. Both of these slides illustrate things in our environment, but we're much more familiar with the logos because that's what our culture values. So this exercise pretty much sums up the point of the class, which is to illustrate the subtle ways that media and consumer culture influence us.

What were some of the specific topics covered?

We looked at how advertising shapes TV programming to newspaper coverage, historical factors that have contributed to media commercialism, and how advertising strategy has changed over time. That kind of thing. I didn't want to be like a sex ed class -- you know, a course that takes an incredibly compelling subject and manages to suck all the life out of it. So I tried to also expose them to things that interest me: [The Barbie Liberation Organization video](#), TV Nation highlights, and zines...

In putting together the syllabus, was there anything that particularly shocked or horrified you?

I knew about this stuff beforehand; it's a sort of hobby. One of my favorite things, though, is a memo that Coke sends out to the magazines it advertises in outlining all the places where Coke ads should not appear -- and the list of topics pretty much covers everything you'd want to read in a magazine: news, politics, medical information, food, health, and on and on.

How did students react to the course?

Most of them were mad because it they thought it was going to be an easy A. The best reaction has actually been from other teachers; I posted the lessons and the readings on the web.

There's a big movement to teach media literacy in grade schools right now but many of the curriculum materials are being written by media conglomerates and their consultants, or by people whose critique is limited to studying gender or racial stereotypes. My curriculum is unusual in that it sees the commercial nature of media as central. For anyone who works in media, the central role of

In an interview you did a while back with Crimewave USA, you mention that you love Google. Was wondering if you still feel the same way about the company that says it makes money without doing evil, yet recently hired a neocon for a senior level position?

I don't know what this guy brings to the company; obviously, I disagree with his political positions. But I think it makes sense to wait and see what the guy actually does before criticizing him.

Now let's move to some of the items you've posted on the Stay Free! blog. What's the story with the Starbucks Delocator?

It's a website that shows you local alternatives to Starbucks; you enter your zip code and it lists other cafes. I saw a great t-shirt on the street the other day; it said KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD: SUPPORT LOCAL BUSINESSES. I think that's basically the point with the Delocator. The software is open-source, and you can download it and launch your own site, for any kind of business. Someone could do a Wal-Mart Delocator, for instance.

You've devoted several posts to Steven Johnson (author of *Everything Bad is Good for You*). How do you really feel about him and his theories?

He's a bright guy, but the argument in that book has so many holes in it, I have a hard time believing that he even *he* buys it. His argument that video games exercise problem-solving skills is convincing. And I agree that TV shows are getting more complex. But the claim that TV makes people smarter is something he pretty much pulls out of his ass. TV may be getting smarter, but for reasons that have nothing to do with our collective intellect.

Even if you agree that TV has things to teach us, you've got to consider what we're giving up as we shift from a society who reads to one who watches. Otherwise, it's not an honest argument.

Through the blog you report on media criticism, consumer culture and "Brooklyn curiosities." What are some of your favorite Brooklyn curiosities?

Some of them we've covered in the magazine and on the blog: The Federation of Black Cowboys, [Marty Markowitz's bizarre invitation to Cracker Barrel](#), and the whole Ratner Yards fiasco. I also think it's funny that here in Park Slope, the pigeons are so complacent you have to practically kick them out of the way.

You mention Marty Markowitz, do you think he's doing a good job?

Marty Markowitz wants to "brand" Brooklyn by inviting every retail and restaurant chain he can think of to move here. He thinks he should give Brooklyn an identity by making it look like every other city in the country.

Posted by [Mindy Bond](#) in [Interview](#) | [Recommend?](#) |

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» Swinging Both Ways: Permitted? from dailyheights.com | Prospect Heights
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Comments

How can you interview Carrie McLaren and not ask even one question about Monkeywire?

Posted by: Jimmy | June 7, 2005 09:31 AM

Jimmy thanks for bringing Monkeywire up. I should have mentioned something about it in my intro since it didn't get hit on in any of the questions.

Posted by: Mindy | June 7, 2005 09:42 AM

I can never get enough information about monkeys and feral children. Mindy deserves an award at the gothamist annual banquet for keeping the comments section open on her interview pieces.

Posted by: bob denver | June 7, 2005 11:51 AM

One aspect of mass media (and a lot of artists who would describe themselves as "independent") is promoting violence as cool, sexual, even orgiastic. By mass media, I include video games.

American public has been so "passive" about the Iraq war, and other aggressive posturings of Bush. Subconsciously, all this violence is accepted, since it is so tied up with sexual pleasure.

In my opinion, a healthy being would recoil at participating in any sort of violence, whether it be in a computer game, or on tv, or in the media.

Most scientific studies of the brain show that the brain exhibits the same patterns whether we imagine it or experience it.

So our wonderful media and all those business and "artists" who create it, are just programming the population to accept greater amounts of violence as sexual pleasure.

Posted by: Heather | [June 7, 2005 02:39 PM](#)

Is there anyway I can get Carrie McLaren's E-mail address, I am working on a Science Fair Project on subliminal messages and I read her artical on them and I need to interview an expert.

Posted by: Mary Kate | [September 26, 2005 03:18 PM](#)

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