

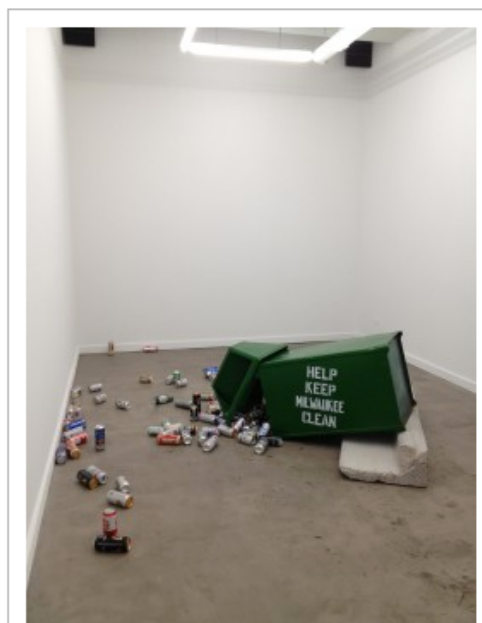
'POLITE MIDWESTERN ORDER': MILWAUKEE'S NICHOLAS FRANK TALKS PERSPECTIVE, DEMENTIA, AND BEER

BY *John Chiaverina* POSTED 12/17/15 9:30 AM

The genesis of Milwaukee-based artist, curator, and writer Nicholas Frank's current show "Post Self"—on display now until January 23 at Western Exhibitions in Chicago—comes out of the artist's relationship with his mother. "It actually all starts from my mom," Frank told me over the phone last week. "I mean everything starts from Mom, right?"

Frank had been caring for his elderly mother, who suffers from dementia. "It's sort of fascinating, when you're caring for someone with dementia, the thing you learn is that eventually you have to try to learn what their experience is like, what they think like," Frank said. "Nothing makes sense, so you have to figure out what it's like to have nothing make sense," he continued.

One night, Frank was listening to a record and it started skipping, triggering a revelation about his mother's illness, having watched her memory get "progressively shorter and shorter" over time—from days to hours to minutes. "Oh, that's what's happening in my mom's brain," Frank realized. "The record is revolting against totality, there's nothing that came before it, nothing that came after it, it's just stuck in this skip cycle," he said. From this, *Greatest Skips* was born, a compositional record created by Frank made up entirely of record skips culled from the artist's personal collection, and a jumping off point for his current show.



Nicholas Frank, "Post Self," 2015, installation view.

NICHOLAS FRANK

The cover of *Greatest Skips* is what Frank refers to as “pictures of people taking pictures of people” and functions as a way to connect the record to another component in the show: framed snaps Frank took of tourists taking photographs of other tourists. Frank started doing this during a trip to China in 2007, and most are taken between that time and 2010. “Selfie technology wasn’t as common yet,” Frank said of this highly transitional era. “I managed to catch the last vestiges of this ancient technology of the bulky camera that you couldn’t take a self portrait with,” he continued.

With this series of photos—contained in custom angled frames made by the artist that serve to spatially skew things further—Frank told me he was interested in “how these perspectives shift. Whose perspective are we looking at? You’re looking at me looking at someone looking through a lens at someone looking back at them.”

The photos also raise questions about the fundamental nature of tourist documentation, of which Frank commented that “basically what you have is this record with all these pictures of yourself, but the background changes, and I found that a really odd switch of agency or something, like, what is the subject here, what really is the subject? Is it the place or is it you?” To distill this idea, the artist quoted Peter Weller in the film *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the 8th Dimension*: “Wherever you go, there you are.”

The third component in “Post Self” is an overturned Milwaukee City Department of Public Works garbage can. Frank had been wanting to make a replica of a garbage can in his neighborhood for years, and he got help from Alec Regan (of the conceptual art fabricators American Fantasy Classics) to make it a reality.

Frank imagined the trash can “getting kicked over, garbage spilling out into the street, but the stencil on the side that says ‘help keep Milwaukee clean’ would shift when it gets kicked over, it would stay upright,” he explained. “Keeping that sense of polite Midwestern order.” He reached out to his local alderman, Nik Kovac, for assistance. Somewhat surprisingly, the city was more than accommodating.

According to Frank, Kovac was “very helpful” and “leapt into action, his whole staff, within a week, and they got us one of these garbage cans.” They even gave Regan the original metal “help keep Milwaukee clean” stencil for use. “Why wouldn’t we expect that from our city leaders?” Frank said.

For the opening, the garbage can was overflowing with beer bottles, providing refreshments for the evening. There were also hollowed-out beer cans that played readings from different philosophers on the meaning of community out of small speakers. Within this, an argument played out between theorist Alain Badiou and members of New York's Platypus group, among others.

"I'm thinking a lot about this idea of revolt and overturning things and this continual cycle of repression and revolt and do we ever really get anywhere? We kick over the garbage cans, but who puts them back upright?" Frank said. The fact that these were coming out of empty beer cans made me think of all of the wasted nights spent inside of a bar, pointlessly yelling about politics. "It doesn't get anywhere. Exactly," the artist said. "All these discussions. Somebody's still got to clean up the trash, right?"

As for the beer that you could actually drink, I asked Frank if that would get refilled over the course of the exhibition. "Oh, absolutely," he said. "Like Milwaukee, it's an endless flowing tap of beer."

Copyright 2016, ARTnews Ltd, 40 W 25th Street, 6th Floor, New York, N.Y. 10010. All rights reserved.