

fuse art culture politics

THE PINKY SHOW

**Is
Anybody
Watching
These
Guys?**

Also:
Randy Lee Cutler
TRUTH AND
CONSEQUENCES

Francisco Fernando
Granados
REFLECTIONS OF AN
UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

Gita Hashemi
THERE IS A
THIRD VOICE IN IRAN

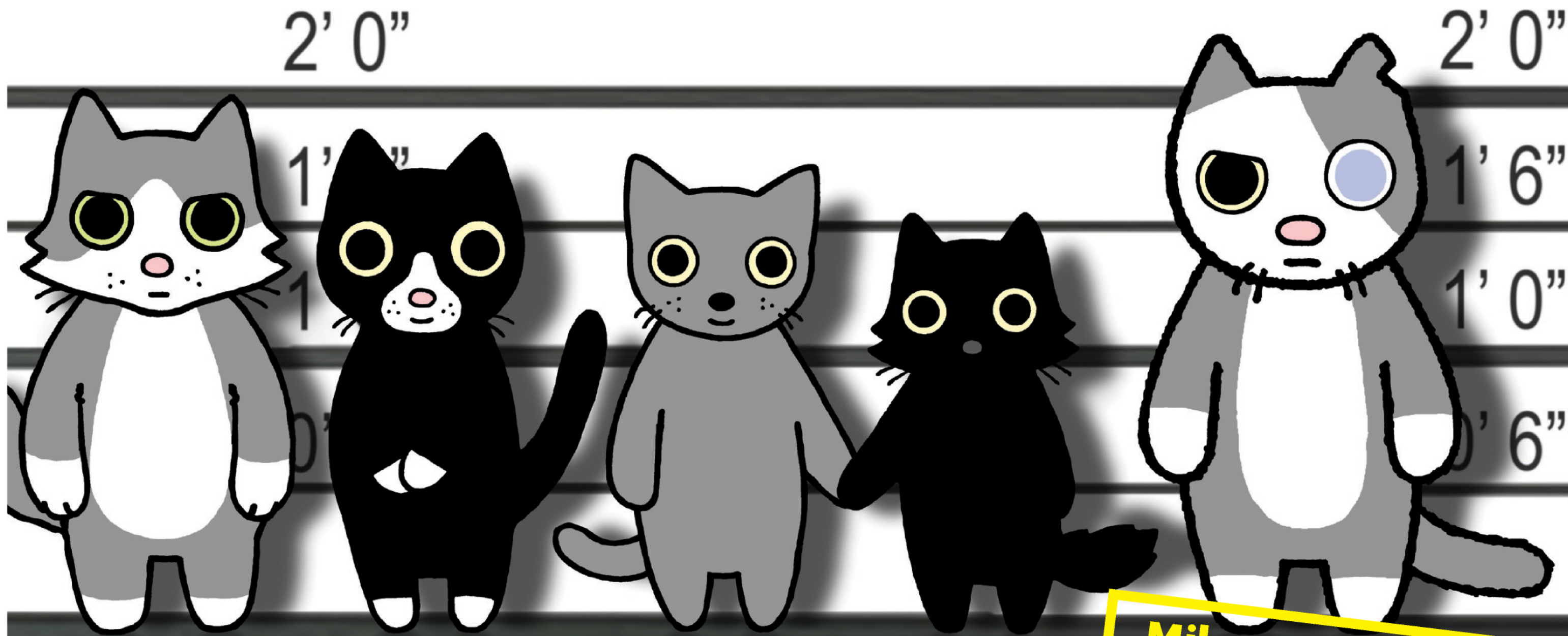


\$7 Volume 33, Number 1



7 25274 81331 5

printed in Canada



The Pinky Show. Lineup, 2009. Courtesy: Associated Animals Inc.

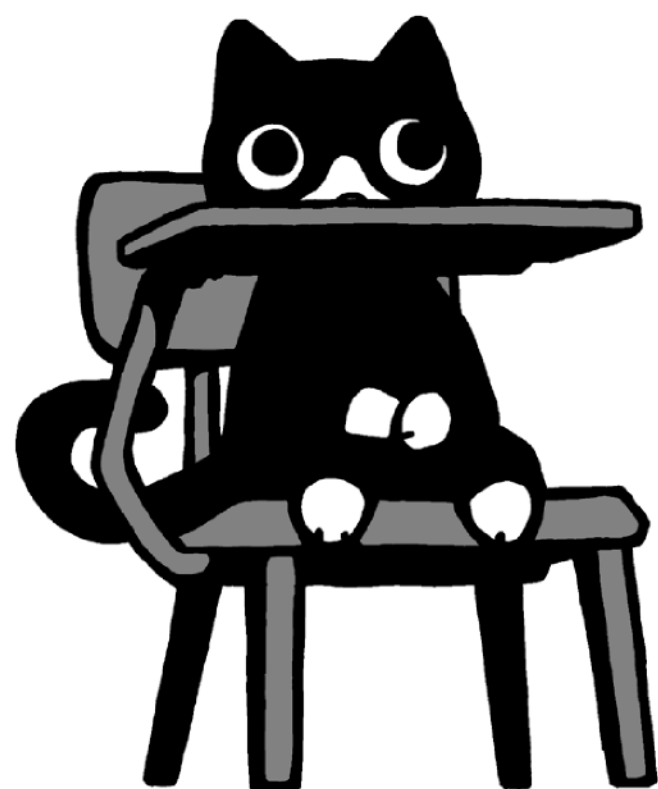
Gently, but firmly, poking your brain with a stick.

Milena Placentile
IN CONVERSATION WITH
The Pinky Show

In a world awash with slick, corporate media that seamlessly merge information and advertising with a relentless editorial bias, brains of all varieties need some “gentle poking” now and again as a reminder that the ideas we receive daily cannot be accepted blindly as facts.

How can people be introduced in meaningful ways to information they might not otherwise encounter? In what ways can we collaborate to piece together neglected or misrepresented histories and highlight marginalized alternatives to our present state of being? How can we stimulate ethical reflection on the nature of information as a concept? How can new ways of thinking and being inspire creative approaches to a new world?

From an undisclosed desert location, a collective of gentle-voiced cats have worked together for the past five years to enact possible solutions to these questions through the production and dissemination of a radical educational project called *The Pinky Show*. *The Pinky Show* champions intellectual curiosity, openness and compassion via carefully researched video presentations on ideas generally unavailable through mainstream sources. Its goal: to support social change agents worldwide by cultivating increasingly aware citizens via thoughtful engagement with questions of otherness in order to inspire respect, understanding and solidarity across divisions.



the consequences
are terrifying

Considering the relatively young and innocent appearance of the participating cats combined with their wholly unthreatening demeanors, the collective proves itself surprisingly wise, and their curiosity to investigate the essential structures of society is contagious. As Pinky herself states at pinkyshow.org, “reductive, absolutist and otherwise dishonest ways of thinking ultimately culminate in the very real and tangible harming of individuals, relationships, communities, and society itself.” She is thus inclined to distinguish between types of information that are sanctioned by schools, governments, cultural institutions, militaries, corporations, etc., and types that are ignored. For these kitties, any area of knowledge is fair game; including major but under acknowledged histories, culture in all its manifestations, official and proposed policies, and commentary or propaganda.

In addition to producing videos and publications, *The Pinky Show* collective also deploys human representatives to carry out their educational objectives via diverse forms of community programming, including workshops, public presentations, art exhibitions, and agitprop dissemination.

Milena Placentile: Hi Pinky and Bunny! Thank you for taking the time to chat with me. As you know, I’ve admired your work for a long time and once I started to tell others about our plans to develop an exhibition in Canada, I was thrilled to discover just how many more fans you have around the world. This shouldn’t be the least bit surprising considering that your website notes you have received 7 million episode views from visitors located in 155 countries since 2005. Remarkable!

Pinky: Thank you for your very nice words. Seven million views — yeah, I suppose you’re referring to the giant red sticker on the home page of our website that says “OVER 7 MILLION VIEWS!”? Sorry, we know that’s irritating; it’s marketing logic.

Bunny: Actually, that number is not particularly meaningful. 7 million is only what we can easily count via internet metrics. But we don’t have any idea how many people watch our videos offline in classrooms, study circles, or whatever. Apparently, a lot of teachers and students download and use them, but we can’t count stuff like this because once a video is downloaded, who knows what happens to it?

Pinky: It’s also kind of difficult for us to estimate what percentage of our viewers would call themselves “fans,” since we do receive a medium-size heap of hate mail every day, which we do read. We basically do a discourse analysis on most everything we receive; ‘cuz of course we’re interested in how people are understanding what we’re trying to say. I think Bunny is especially interested in mapping patterns of misunderstanding; keeping track of what parts of our arguments are ignored or repeatedly go unaddressed.

Bunny: This is true. I definitely study the hate mail more than our fan mail. The so-called “counter-arguments” provide us with better data for how to move forward.

MP: One of the first things a new visitor to pinkyshow.org might notice is that Pinky often plays a role similar to that of a news anchor. Thus, one objective of *The Pinky Show* could be perceived as an effort to draw attention to how the media conveys information. Media awareness is difficult to achieve by happenstance.

How did you come to analyze the structures of power influencing the media, and at what point did you realize you could contribute to efforts aimed at revealing these structures?

Pinky: I don’t know how people understand the media they’re exposed to. On one hand, it’s clear to me that consumers of movies and advertisements and everything else are never completely unconscious of how we’re being manipulated. But to be realistic I’d have to say the score is something like: Corporate Media Elite: 108, Everyday Consumer: 3. We’re getting pounded. The consciousness landscape that’s been created for us to live in is expansive and nearly seamless and I doubt we figure anything out by being passive about it. It sounds kind of ridiculous to say, but I think Bunny and I only started figuring things out after we sat down and literally said to each other, “We need to make critical consciousness a priority. What kind of activity can we do to help us accomplish this?”

Bunny: I think we started with: “Let’s make a puppet show that explains how ideology works.” We were studying a lot about ideology at the time.

Pinky: Yeah. That was the original idea, until we figured out how hard it is to make cute puppets that work. Basically, we just wanted *The Pinky Show* to be a record of our own learning. We wanted to learn more about ideology and marginalized knowledge and all that stuff, but I think we realized pretty quickly that a lot of what we wanted to explore wouldn’t make much sense to U.S. Americans, because U.S. Americans tend to look at the world through an upside-down framework that doesn’t have much to do with historical facts. We decided it’d be important always to return to the source of that upside-down-ness, which, in the case of the United States, is confusion over the nature of its own structure. That’s the big one — U.S. Americans can’t answer the question, “What is the United States?” The short answer, so far as we can



The Pinky Show. <above> Roadkill Report from Baker, California, 2008. <opposite page> The Consequences are Terrifying, 2009. Courtesy: Associated Animals Inc.

tell is, “The United States is a settler state.” That’s the basic structure, even though almost nobody in the U.S. would be able to tell you what settler colonialism is, even if you put a gun to their head. But that’s the basic point of reference for us — that’s how we’re connected to the history of imperialism; that’s why we have capitalism as the answer to everything; that’s why we’ve got genocide for Native people and “civil rights” for everybody else. That determines what kinds of cultural spaces are going to be

exalted while others are submerged or disappeared; what kinds of ideological formations are going to dominate; what kind of education system is going to be imposed; what kind of consciousness the schools are designed to cultivate; and on and on. To us, the settler colonialism analysis provides much more explanatory power than the “home of the free, we’re spreading democracy to everybody” narrative. Bunny?

Bunny: I just want to say that we like history and we also believe in learning from mistakes. So we wanted to make a show that discusses history in a way that actually made sense, instead of the ridiculous “Rock On America!” narrative Americans get in the schools. Because seriously, what kind of lessons can anyone draw from such a distorted “history?” So that’s important. Anyway, sorry we didn’t really answer your question about the media, but to us the media is only one component of the dominant hegemonic structure.

MP: Oh! No problem, this is great! These are just the responses I knew you’d provide to a simple question, so with that in mind, here is another: *The Pinky Show* covers an enormous range of subjects, from the ongoing effects colonialism (including discussions about illegally occupied territories and other forms of state-sponsored violence) to the enactment of irrational policies (such as the US war on drugs) and the structures of cultural institutions such as museums. I am sure many people wonder how you developed your positions and what type of “credentials” you possess in order to call yourselves educators. What are your thoughts on this?

Pinky: When people ask us if *The Pinky Show* is an educational project, I’m okay with just saying “yes” because the word “education” has become such a general term with wide applicability. But the question of whether or not we are credentialed educators is more loaded — it requires that an uncritical, but not politically arbitrary, connection be made between institutional affiliations, professional credentials, and presumably, high quality intellectual

THE **PINKY**
SHOW
PRESENTS

Banked Into Submission

The Globalizationist's Guide to Developing Poverty



I'm kind of having mixed feelings about all this aid we're giving away to these Third World countries... I know they're desperately poor, but can we really afford all this charity?

Umm... Let me explain something to you. The way we have the system set up, we can't afford *not* to give them 'aid'!

First of all, take a look at who controls the World Bank & IMF - the U.S., the Western Europeans, Japan - it's basically the old colonial powers. Obviously that's not coincidental. After decolonization, we all had to find new, more subtle ways to extract wealth from our former colonies...

...People with power aren't just going to wake up one morning and say, "Gee, I feel like giving away all my power today!"

After several hundred years of exploitation, one thing is certain: we have money and they don't. And we can use this rather enormous head start to cultivate long-term dependency. We encourage them to take out loans, then tie the acceptance of those loans to certain 'conditions'. Believe me - these people are so hungry they'll basically agree to *anything*!

We tell them if they want the money, our corporations get to go in and work their people for pennies. We want zero environmental controls. We give ourselves massive 'development' projects - they pay us with the money we just loaned them! It's also good to steer their economy away from self-sufficiency; it's better for us when their productivity is tied to a 'global economy' and geared towards making nothing but cheap exports.

If the poor people resist, just deal with a minority elite within their country. Give them kickbacks. Or replace their government if you have to, it doesn't really matter. Because even if the people overthrow that government later on, they still have to repay their debt! And when the interest on that debt exceeds the country's entire GDP, that's when you know you *really* own their asses!

That's so cool... Isn't this pretty much how banks operate in the ghettos? I never realized it could also work so good on a global scale...

Is anybody watching these guys?

Is anybody watching these guys?

work. So, does our work have value? I don't know — can people evaluate that for themselves or do they need to look at my c.v. first? Especially because we are often addressing contentious subject matter that's really only meaningful when people examine it from their own political locations — our position is, hey, let's not even talk about our credentials. We realize there will always be people who refuse to consider our work because 1) we're cats; or 2) we don't state our professional credentials up front. Fine. We're more interested in calling attention to the rituals of legitimation when it comes to the world of ideas.

MP: Following on the theme of legitimation, let's talk for a moment about disciplines, and the general idea that some types of activity are more or less legitimate within the sphere of a certain discipline. Your website indicates that *The Pinky Show* is an educational non-profit entity, yet, you are also clearly involved in artistic practices such as painting, installation, graphic design, and of course video-making. Thinking about the worlds of contemporary art and classroom education, which certainly intersect but are often treated differently, where do you feel you fit in terms of both your objectives and the types of people supporting your work?

Pinky: Our interests and objectives remain more or less consistent no matter what format we're working in. Of course each format comes with its own set of formal constraints, historical associations and whatnot; we try to keep these things in mind even as we're jamming all of our interests into these nice little containers. Basically, when you're finished making a 1-page mini-zine, it's got to work nicely as a 1-page mini-zine, period. Don't evaluate a 1-page mini-zine in terms of its ineffectiveness as a video, which sounds really stupid, but that's what we see a lot in critiques of all sorts of cultural production. We also try to focus on the pedagogical

utility of any text we produce, regardless of actual format, especially as it relates to its intended audience.

This all sounds simple enough, but in practice things get messy pretty quickly. Viewed through the lens of contemporary art, for example, I'm sure our "educational" work looks dreadfully didactic. From a classroom teacher's point of view, maybe our *Class Treason Stories* installation feels too vague, discursive, or just plain weird. Both cultural spaces come with a range of audience expectations we can't control. When these values begin to interfere with each other our tendency is to privilege clarity. It's not as if we're anti-poetry, or don't value carefully constructed visual pleasure. But where we're coming from, we need to make decisions — conceptual, formal, and otherwise — based on our own understanding of our social obligations, which are themselves based on an analysis of ideology and hegemony. Our personal preferences aren't a big part of this project.

Bunny: You asked about where we're going to find support. When we first came out, people thought we were all about anti-corporate greed, so at least we got some supportive e-mails from the progressive community. Then the Iraq war started and we made a very popular video taking an unpopular position (at that time) denouncing the war, so even though we lost the support of the patriotic crowd — patriotic progressives included — at least we had some support from a small antiwar bunch. Then we came out and said the whole U.S. is founded on the continuing violence of settler colonialism and pretty soon even the antiwar folks got pissed at us. We like to joke that if we do our project long enough, eventually everybody will hate us.

Pinky: We're trying to figure out how to keep a project like this going, long-term. This is not a very carefully calculated experiment;



The Pinky Show. <left> Bunny and Pinky at Social Center ROG, 2008. <right> Bunny in Ljubljana, 2008. <opposite page> Banked into Submission: The Globalizationist's Guide to Developing Poverty, 2007. Courtesy: Associated Animals Inc.

we are just trying to be honest and do the best work we can and I guess we will see if society thinks we are useful or not. We are probably not a good ideological fit for a university, unless you can point us to a nice masochist university somewhere.

MP: Ha ha! Don't I wish! What about your work in the form of comic pages, 'zines, and books?

Pinky: I'll put it in economic terms. All of the videos and zines on our website are available for free. We do this because many of the people who are most interested in our work are coming from extremely economically devastated parts of the world. It's a perspective thing. When we saw this emerging as a viewership trend, we decided that we didn't want to charge people money to watch our videos or download our stuff. We couldn't figure out how to charge affluent New Yorkers \$2 to watch a video but someone from Cameroon only \$.05. So we said: Let's make everything free; maybe people who have some money and understand the political nature of its uneven distribution will think our project has value and will help to keep this thing going. Oops, mistake. So now we have a hard time paying our electricity and food bills.

I frame it this way because selling material objects has become our latest "experiment." Which is kind of ridiculous because, yeah, selling stuff is probably one of the oldest means of economic survival. But for us it was like, "Hey, we're broke. Do we give up? Or... should we try... selling something?" So we made a book. Our book is titled *I Want To Punch Your Face*, which probably won't endear it to people who are, at least theoretically, against face-punching. It's actually not — surprise! — NOT a pro-face-punching book. We just thought this title more catchy than the alternative, *I Want To*

Punch Your Face But I Won't Because It's Just Wrong. I like it, Bunny likes it; now we have to see if anybody else will like it. We have to find a publisher for that. Oh, also we hope that somebody will trade money for art-objects we make — that's support too.

MP: I'd like to ask you now about the perceived impact of your collective activities. The inspired mail you receive is possibly one indicator — and maybe you would like to address that — but perhaps you can also tell me about other moments that have inspired you to continue with the project.

Pinky: To be honest, we hesitate to offer evidence that *The Pinky Show* is making this great, big positive difference. Over the past couple years we've received a few hundred e-mails and letters from people containing some really amazing stories about how this project has helped change their life in some way. I'm happy that someone out there is feeling stronger or can work through difficult things more clearly because of this project, this is genuinely important to us. But at a political level, estimating the impact of our project is very difficult, maybe impossible. We're focused on developing a body of work that in sum total has the potential to transform consciousness. Of course we're not sure if we're doing things the right way or not — we just have our theory and we are putting it into practice. This is a long-term project, and until we finish, I almost don't want to think about how people are feeling, even if it's positive feedback. We just have so much work to do and I don't want to be distracted. Bunny and I will keep working as hard as we can for as long as possible and then maybe later someone else will come along and draw conclusions and lessons from what we've done, and then move forward with that. Just like we've done with the work of many others who came before us.

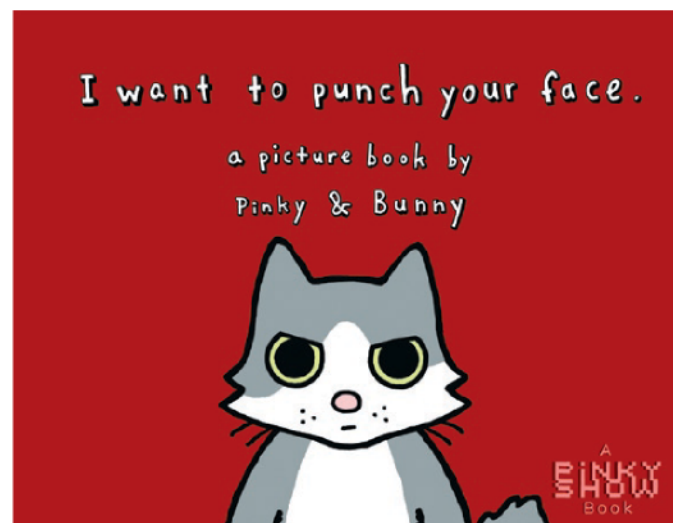
MP: What's next for The Pinky Show, and what can others do to help?

Pinky: Of course our first priority is "survival." This means we want to keep on working. Second is "expand" — we want more than just the two of us producing *Pinky Show* work. No matter how many hours we work every day, it's pretty obvious the two of us alone aren't going to be able to finish the enormous pile of work we want to complete before we die. So we want more *Pinky Show* workers and also we need several billion dollars so we can pay them. Bunny?

Bunny: That's all.

From November 12 – December 12, *The Pinky Show* presented *Class Treason Stories (excerpts)* at Gallery 1C03 at The University of Winnipeg. The exhibition explored the application of knowledge for either socially beneficent or individualist and competitive purposes. *Class Treason Stories (excerpts)* travels to Toronto Free Gallery opening January 14, 2010 with an artist talk on January 16. Human representatives of *The Pinky Show* will also be stopping in various cities across Canada over the next few months, so keep your eyes open for opportunities to meet with them and share ideas. □

MILENA PLACENTILE is a Winnipeg-based curator of contemporary art interested in promoting socially and politically engaged practices and facilitating audience experience.



The Pinky Show. <above> *I Want to Punch Your Face: a Picture Book by Pinky and Bunny*. AK Press: 2010. <below> *How to Get Free Land in 5 Easy Steps: A Handy Guide for Imperialists and Other Reasonable Individuals*, 2009. Courtesy: Associated Animals Inc.

