

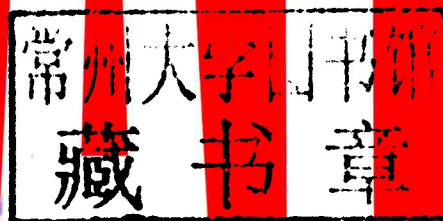
# MONUMENTAL

THE REIMAGINED WORLD OF **KEVIN O'CALLAGHAN**



DEBORAH HUSSEY WITH FOREWORD BY STEVEN HELLER

ENTAIL



**THE  
REIMAGINED  
WORLD OF  
KEVIN  
O'CALLAGHAN**

**DEBORAH HUSSEY  
FOREWORD BY  
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**ABRAMS, NEW YORK**



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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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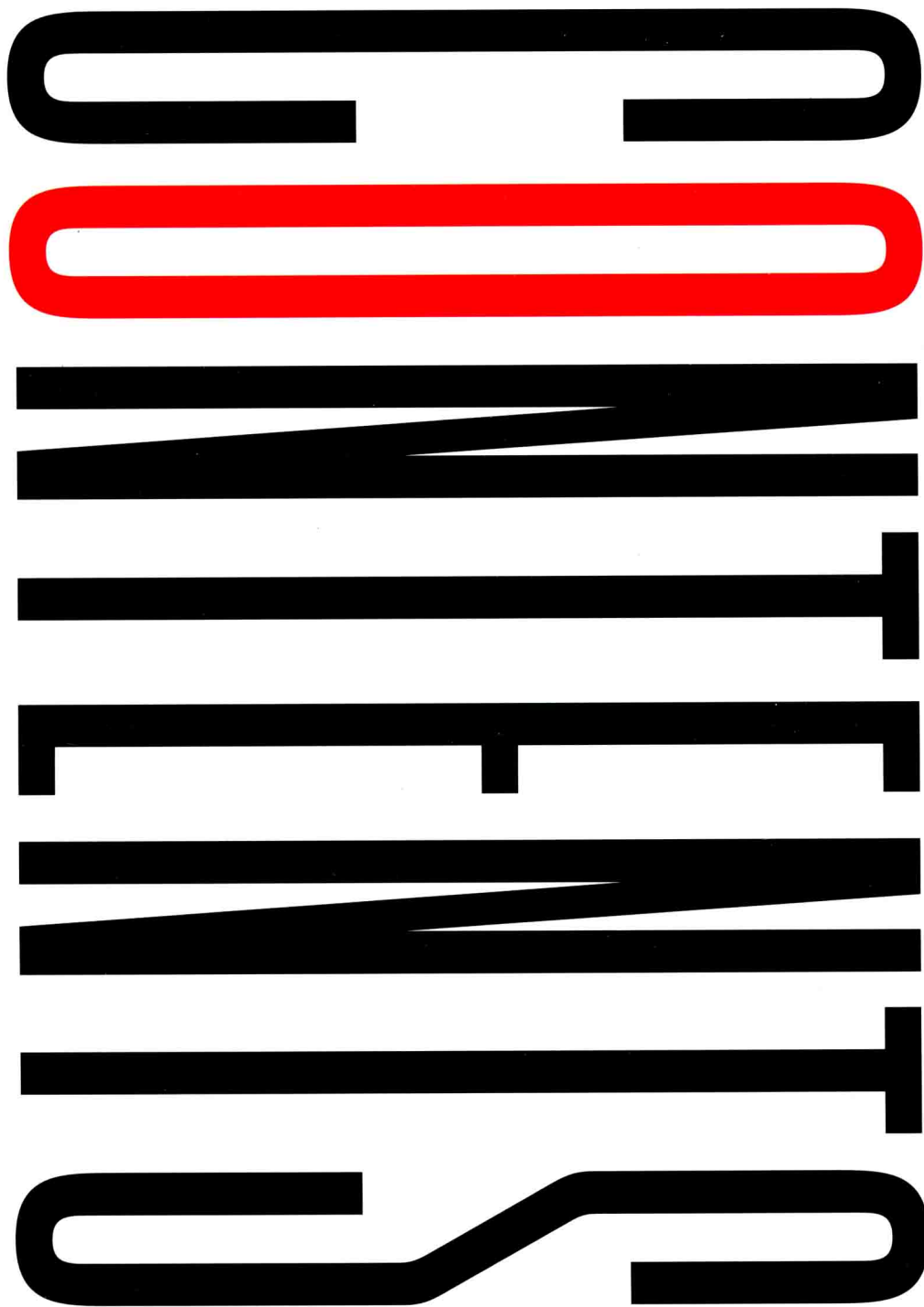
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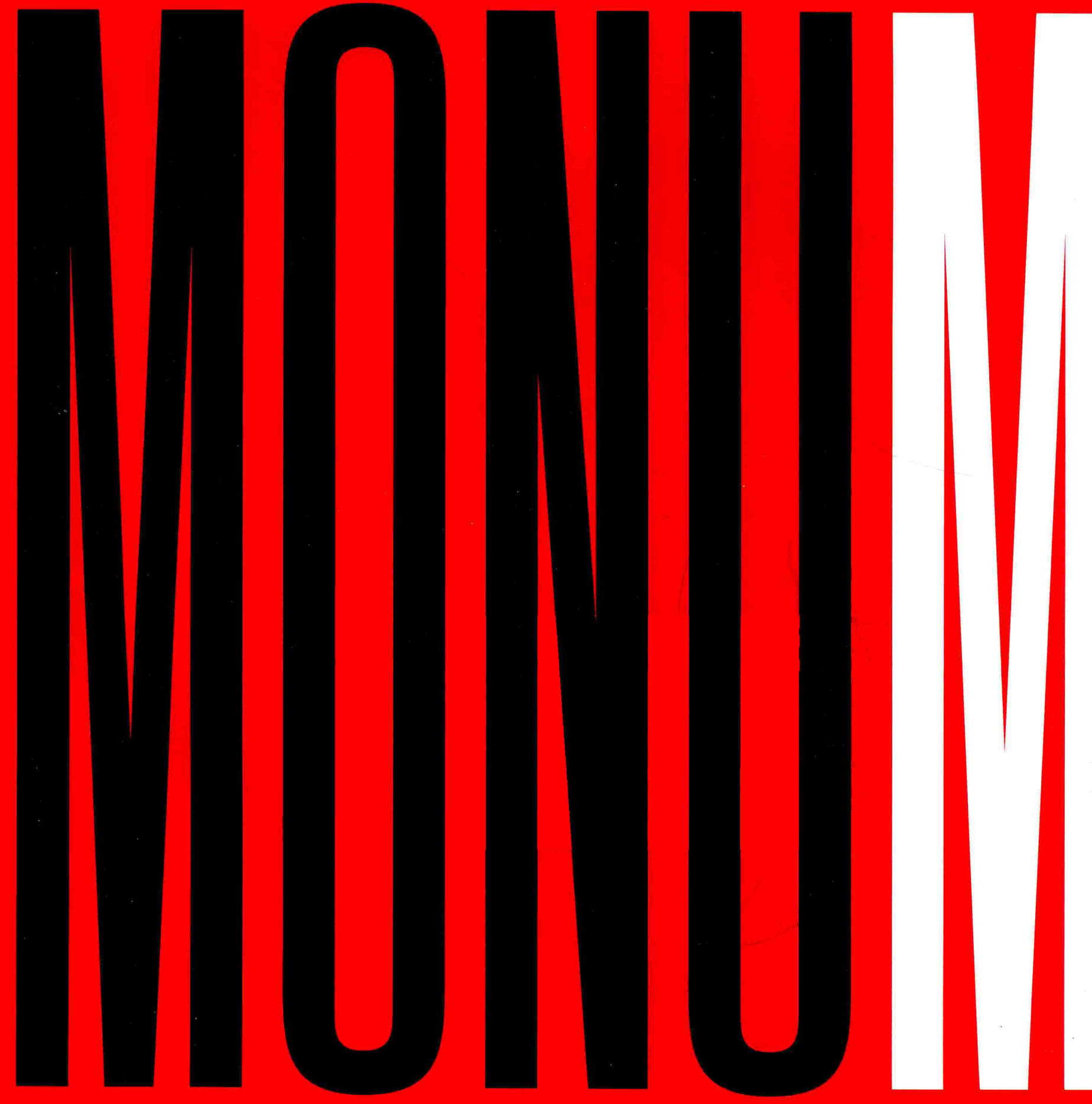
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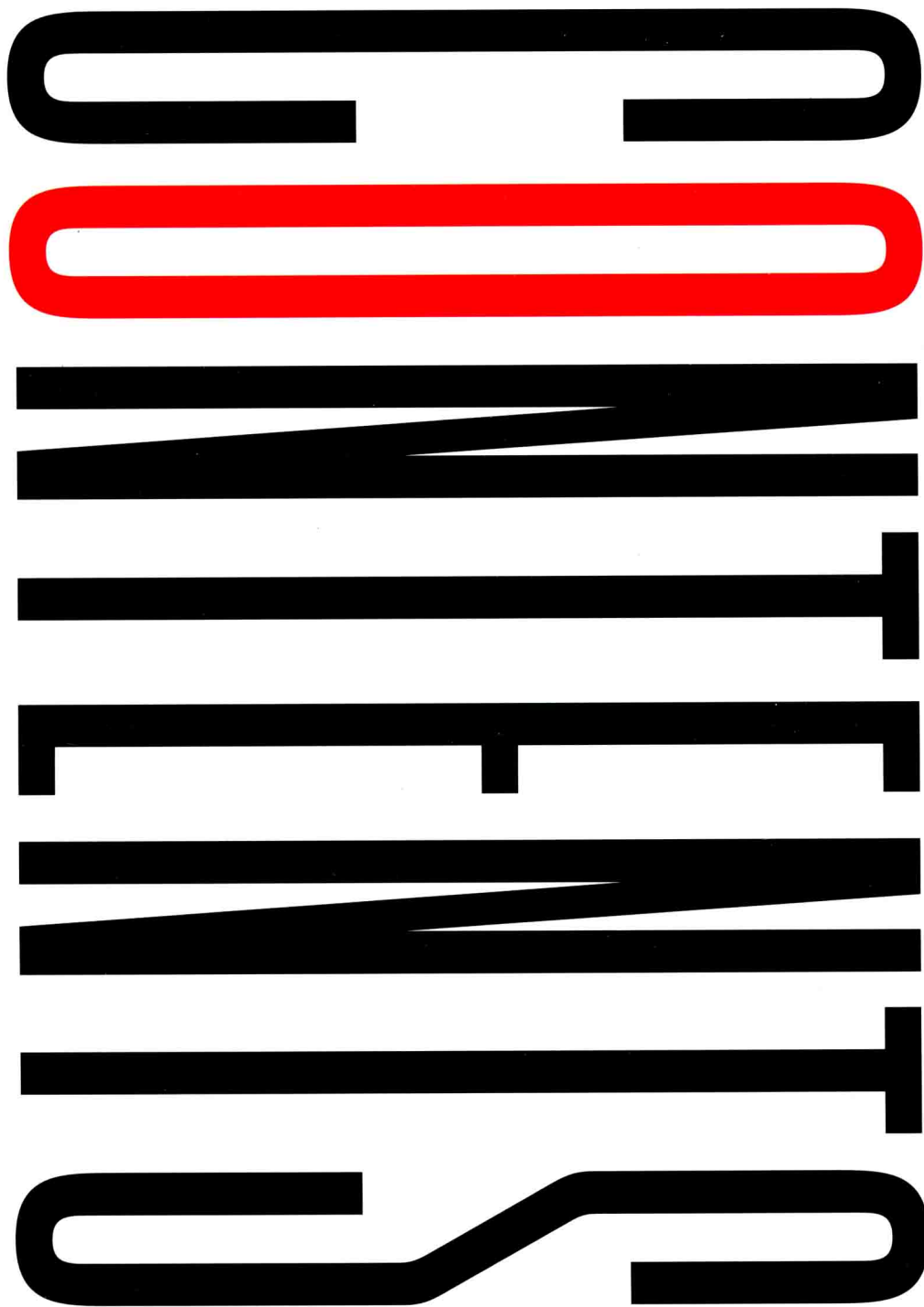
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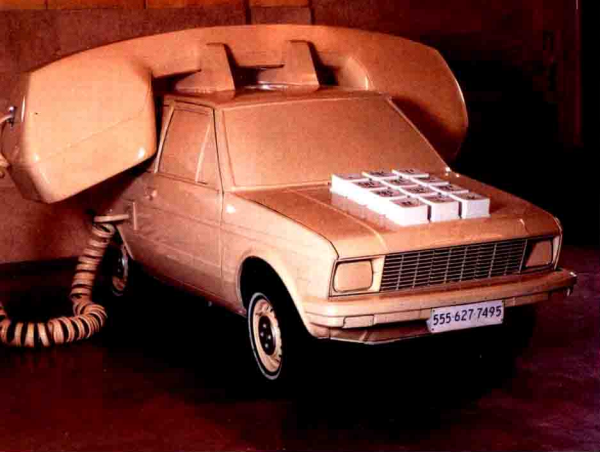
FOR MY WIFE SUSAN AND MY DAUGHTER CAROLINE  
OUR LIFE AND LOVE ARE MONUMENTAL

Caroline, your light shines on all that I do.



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*A 1982 family snapshot of Kevin O'Callaghan with his giant portfolio. The portfolio was built with wood, fiberglass, found objects, and hardware store items: Paint-mixing sticks were interwoven to form the enormous zipper, and a large plastic ball was sprayed with gold paint to form the rivets of the handle. Textured linoleum flooring was painted black to replicate the grain of a portfolio case and an upturned flowerpot became the point of a crayon. A starched wig was formed into the bristles of the paintbrush.*

# THE REAL O'C

BY STEVEN HELLER

**Y**ou are an art student who has never made anything larger than what fits neatly into an average-size portfolio case. Suddenly, you are thrown headlong into a class with the unassuming title “Three-Dimensional Design and Illustration.” You think, “Maybe I’ll be making three-dimensional images that can only be seen with those funny glasses.” Instead, you find yourself hammering, welding, vacu-forming, soldering, and performing countless other technical feats that transform old Yugo compact cars, vintage typewriters, televisions, gas masks, beds, birdhouses, skeletons, bicycles, subway cars, pushcarts, and even a real antique carnival carousel into functional, albeit monumental spectacles. You conceive of ideas and fabricate objects that would have been impossible to imagine, no less do, only a few weeks earlier. You become fearless about working with your hands and other appendages. As though by some transforming transcendental force, your work is good enough to stand alongside other unique assemblages in such exhibition venues as the Vanderbilt Hall at New York’s Grand Central Terminal, the lobby of Washington’s Union Station, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and prestigious gallery spaces around the country. You wonder, “Is this some out-of-body experience?”

No. In fact, this is what happens in every class that Kevin O’Callaghan teaches in his department at the School of Visual Arts. Through the

drive of a drill sergeant, he has whipped you into creative frenzy. And you will never be the same, ever again.

Kevin O’C (as I call him) is something of a madman—yet, an incredibly generous, nurturing madman. What else but a touch of insanity could account for his indefatigable drive? If all madness was like his, however, the asylums would be creative hothouses and the inmates all geniuses. O’C may appear to be delusional about how much he can make his students achieve in a short time frame, but he succeeds in ways that boggle what’s left of his students’ minds. He begins by imparting knowledge and a little theory, but the key is convincing all class members that they can do anything they set their sights on. It is about orchestrating and conducting, and O’C is the Leonard Bernstein of the 3-D symphony.

Case in point: For the Beaux Arts Ball in New York City, sponsored by the New York Arts Club, Lita Talarico, cochair of the School of Visual Arts’ MFA design program, did not have to beg O’C to create the elaborate float that would compete against those of five other area art schools. He panted at the opportunity. The thrill of competition was enough motivation. Never mind that he should never have accepted the Beaux Arts assignment, given a previous commitment to produce three other exhibitions during the semester, as well as his commercial work for MTV. To O’C’s personal detriment,



he never says never! Instead, he allowed his class a week and a half to conceive and build the float, which resembled a circus train with its own lighting and sound system, and choreographed a costumed performance piece, with his team dancing the cancan. No detail was left to chance: Every component, from mechanics to decoration, was perfectly designed. And guess what? O'C's creation won, beating out floats that took months to produce.

With his strawberry blond, though speedily graying moustache, intense bright-blue Irish eyes, and toothy smile, O'C looks like a

"I WAS A LITTLE LATE, BECAUSE MY PORTFOLIO

man possessed. He speaks in a breathless, nasal-twangy Long Island cadence. Sentences are frequently punctuated by a nervously lilting "you know, you know"; he sounds more like a teamster than a creative maestro. He recognizes certain obsessive and compulsive traits in himself, but not in the clinical sense.

Despite his infectious zeal and stress-filled schedule, O'C is a practical teacher, unflappable in the face of impossible deadlines. In 2003, for example, he was allotted only four weeks to produce an exhibition sponsored by the American Movie Channel, destined for Grand Central's 12,000-square-foot Vanderbilt Hall, entitled "TVs for Movie People." Each student had to illustrate or symbolize a film from the AMC library through an environmental sculpture with a centerpiece TV playing an iconic clip. *Singin' in the Rain* was represented by a real lamppost with the TV screen set in a polyurethane puddle on an ersatz sidewalk. A replica of a suburban pink bathroom with the TV imbedded in the sink evoked *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. The statue for *King Kong* was a gigantic model of the Empire State Building, with small screens cut into the towering facade.

The complex pieces were assembled in breakneck speed. But with only twenty-four hours before the grand opening, the New York City

fire marshal closed the show, charging that the proximity of the show's electrical wiring to the walls constituted a fire hazard. Most curators would have been instantly hysterical. Not O'C! An hour later, he had designed an alternative plan for the wiring and the show opened on schedule. Then the post-traumatic stress set in. But for O'C, stress is a combustible fuel.

O'Callaghan began what he calls the "monster" object phase of his career back in the early 1980s when he was an advertising major at the School of Visual Arts. Upon graduating he showed his work

to Milton Glaser. Rather than carry a standard portfolio up the two flights to Glaser's Thirty-second Street Manhattan studio, O'C decided to build a two-story portfolio case. "I was a little late," O'C recalled, "because my portfolio case got stuck in the Midtown Tunnel." In fact, it was wedged against the roof, and O'C had to let some air out of the tires of his trailer to free it. Showing up tardy, O'C met the slightly annoyed Glaser, who stated he didn't have much time, and asked, "Where is the portfolio, anyway?" O'C answered, "Look out the window." The portfolio was level with the second floor. O'C continues, "So he got on his intercom to tell everyone 'go to the windows,' and just as he did that a reporter from *People* magazine, who heard about the Midtown Tunnel incident, came to write a story that appeared on two pages in the magazine." After this, O'C started getting an enormous amount of work.

Work is more than his bread and butter; it is his mythic source of strength. O'C thrives on challenges, even those he could do without, and he impresses this ethic on his students. There should be no limits to their thinking and making. He commands them to work with their hands, yet not to confuse hands-on with a resistance to technology. He is far from being a Luddite, but when the computer became the standard design tool, he attracted students who wanted to build real



things. They were, he once told me, “The same kids who on Christmas morning played with the boxes and not the toys.”

O’Callaghan’s design classes are highly unusual in that they often result in massive public exhibitions. O’C has always craved the interactivity exhibitions can provide, and his are not just hangings on the wall. They are monumental extravaganzas, architectural entertainments—part display, part playground, part dreamscape. We see this in “New York Housing for the Birds,” one of his first shows. He always prefers giving a starting point, because then everybody

The biggest of the big spectacles was “Yugo Next.” Here was a challenge, one of those serendipitous opportunities that mortal men would shrug away as a nice, unfeasible idea. A show fell out from New York’s Grand Central Terminal, and the events coordinator asked O’C to fill Vanderbilt Hall. Our 3-D impresario had to think bigger than he had in the past. Cars are one of the loves of his life, so combining art and autos was a no-brainer. He was also interested in the curious plight of the little Yugo car, the Yugoslavian compact that tried to make it big in the United States but, unlike the Little Engine That Could, failed to capture the market. O’C didn’t know

# CASE GOT STUCK IN THE MIDTOWN TUNNEL.”

has a shared context for viewing the exhibit. For his birdhouses, O’C settled on functional architectural follies as that point. His students did not disappoint: One birdhouse might have a million locks, another the look of a takeout food container, and another might be a mailbox stuffed with fliers and menus. These ideas made his mind soar.

Many of his shows derive from personal concerns. Rather than undergo psychoanalysis, O’C makes his fears and phobias into monumental therapies. His motto is, “If you’re going to do an exhibition, do it based on something you personally love” (or, I presume, want to exorcise). “If you have an interest, there is more adrenaline,” says the man whose name could be a stand-in for the word *adrenaline*. A psychoanalytical case in point: O’C once confided to me that he has problems sleeping at night, so he devised methods to put himself to sleep, which he calls bedtime rituals. Bingo, it became a class project that challenged students to design full-size beds illustrating their own rituals.

What does he get in return for all this effort? O’C craves the feeling he gets from the grandeur of the work and the enormity of the response to it. So he ensures that the press (CNN is especially loyal) beats a path to his galleries to cover the wonderment.

in what direction he would go with this idea until he turned up a dead-end street one day, and he saw a Yugo being used by a group of kids as a baseball backstop: The pitcher was throwing directly at the car—a brand-new one now covered with round little dents. One of the kids’ fathers had offered it up as a piece of junk that should be good for something.

Score! O’C would do the same thing—give the Yugo other existences. He bought thirty-nine cars for an average of forty dollars a piece; thirty-two students received these much-maligned compacts, and not one of them said no. The rest is history.

The intention of this book is to chart O’C’s monumental manifestations and to delve into his monomaniacal brain. This is the first time the work of O’C and his students has been collected between covers. One question: Can one book do justice to the extraordinary effort? Maybe. Maybe not. It is as difficult to re-create his larger-than-life environments—even using the best photographs—as it is to capture how speedily his mental spark plugs fire. But we will try. Kevin O’C is a force of nature. While this book cannot be as gargantuan as his work, think of it as a genie’s lamp—rub it and watch the inspirational energy fly out and take shape.

# INTRODUCTION





# Working small or **LARGE SCALE**, O'Callaghan always **THINKS BIG.**

**W**hen Alexander Calder's miniature circus was exhibited at the Whitney Museum in the early 1970s, the public was captivated. For fourteen-year-old Kevin O'Callaghan, the effects of seeing it were seismic. The circus characters were made from found objects and offered an amusing do-it-yourself quality, which Calder orchestrated through whimsical performances using his three-dimensional constructions. These creations were, in fact, intricately detailed and crafted with precision. Though small in size, Calder's *Circus* and its ringmaster served as principal influences for O'Callaghan's artistic evolution. Working small or large scale, O'Callaghan always thinks big, weaving together visual narratives that offer new perspectives through the juxtaposition of the ordinary with the spectacular.

O'Callaghan's mother, Mary "Buddi" Steller, embraced the elaborate and the humorous, and had a flair for the theatrical—traits that were endowed upon her son. She met Kevin's father at the 1939 World's Fair, where Timothy O'Callaghan, a well-known architect, had designed several pavilions. In one of them, Steller, a showgirl for Billy Rose, was hired to strike and maintain a pose within a big golden frame. (Sixty-five years after the '39 World's Fair, O'Callaghan would create a gold-leaf frame to surround a mammoth television monitor that projects eclectic entertainment to its audience in the heart of Times Square.)

The attraction to the monumental coupled with an innate artistic talent are his father's legacy. In his architectural practice, which included contributions to the design of the Mets' Shea Stadium, the senior O'Callaghan strove to emphasize a fine-art aesthetic. Timothy O'Callaghan also created stage sets for producer Mike Todd, whose adaptation of *Around the World in 80 Days* is an apt metaphor for Kevin's tenacity and success in uncharted territory.

## **OUT OF THE CLASSROOM**

Completing his studies at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, O'Callaghan began searching for a career in advertising, his collegiate major and intended profession. Feeling disheartened by the perfunctory agency review process, in 1982 O'Callaghan created a colossal 3-D portfolio case that he drove around New York City, which gained him a two-page spread in *People* magazine and several job offers.

O'Callaghan's blossoming talent was cultivated at Dale Mallie's design studio, which specialized in making props for TV commercials. Up against an impossible deadline, Mallie, whose work O'Callaghan had always admired, was looking for someone who could work all night to finish a job. Their conversation ended with a suggestion that O'Callaghan bring a toothbrush, since they would be working until dawn. In O'Callaghan's orbit, synchronicity is commonplace. He had

*Photo booth picture of Kevin O'Callaghan, circa 1961: the beginning of a lifelong adoration for cowboys.*

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