



SLIGHTLY UNBALANCED

When it comes to the human mind, who is to say what is “normal” and what is not? Isn’t everybody “neurotic” in one way or another? The twenty contemporary artists whose works are presented here have ventured into this slippery and suggestive territory, exposing psychological afflictions that include narcissism, mild depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive behavior. Many of these individuals play with the cultural stereotype of the “crazy artist” as a strategic device, using it to lure the viewer and explore common human foibles.

During the past fifteen years, inspired by the work of several prominent older artists, a younger generation has expanded the contemporary art vocabulary to encompass a subject that is now well known to the general public. The works you will see will provoke a range of responses, including discomfort, recognition, empathy, and humor. But all of the works show how the relatively young field of psychology has deeply permeated our culture, and invite reflection on the flawed condition of being human.

Slightly Unbalanced is a traveling exhibition organized and circulated by Independent Curators International (ICI), New York. The curator of the exhibition is Susan Haggood. The exhibition, tour, and catalogue are made possible, in part, by the Horace C. Goldsmith Foundation, the ICI Advocates, and the ICI Partners.

Suggested Education Materials

Produced by Brian Boucher

Independent Curators International (ICI) proposes these recommendations for programming you may wish to offer during your presentation of *Slightly Unbalanced*. All are intended as guidelines to supplement the exhibition that may be reworked to suit the particular interests of your audiences. Inside you will find suggestions for the following:

1. **Young Adults**
2. **Adults**

Young Adults

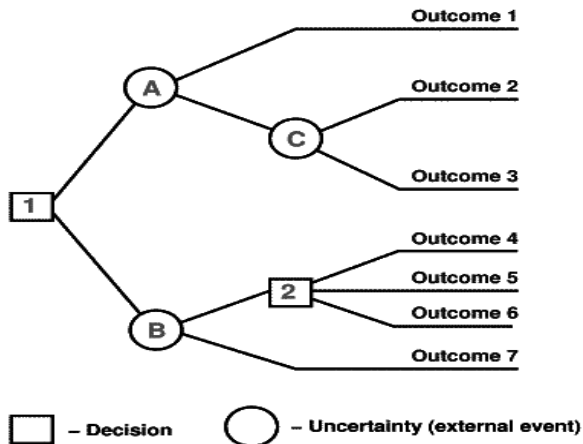
Recommended for Young Adults Ages 11 – 18 and older

In addition to their commonality in subject matter, many of the works in this exhibition share a certain simplicity. Using pared-down techniques such as drawing, photography, video or arrangements of store-bought items, many of these artists employ strikingly basic means to convey their messages. Here we suggest several art activities in which imaginative viewers may create their own psychological scenarios, and indicate for what age groups they might be most appropriate.

1. **Make your own Beth Campbell drawing**

In the field of operations research, specifically in decision analysis, a decision tree (or tree diagram) is a decision support tool that uses a graph or model of options and their possible consequences. Beth Campbell’s drawings, each titled *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances*, take a form like that of decision trees.

Below is an example of a generic decision tree:



Pick a situation in your life that is stressful enough to make you neurotic—sell the house or stay on? Buy a new car or keep fixing the old one?—and in which you could decide on different actions with varying results. Each decision could branch into two, three, or more possible outcomes, each with its own possible results.

You might want to discuss what distinguishes a Beth Campbell drawing from the generic decision tree illustrated here.

2. Make your own Alex Bag video (For ages 14 and older)

In Alex Bag’s video *Van*, unsavory characters reveal their unappealing motivations. Using a camcorder, an everyday set and simple costumes, create role-plays and create scenarios in which similarly unpleasant characters show a side of themselves they might wish to conceal.

3. Make your own Sarah Hobbs photograph

Are you, like the characters suggested in Sarah Hobbs’s photographs, a perfectionist, or, say, insomniac? Arrange the objects of your home so that they imply an occupant with “issues,” and photograph them in the manner of Hobbs, so that, even without a human presence, the image evokes a character, a narrative, or a psychiatric diagnosis.

4. Make your own Danica Phelps drawing

Danica Phelps’s drawings are extremely thorough records of her financial income and outgo, her travels, and other aspects of her daily life, often color-coded in elaborate personal schemes. Pick some aspects of your life that you can make into an artistic and diaristic drawing.

Adults

Recommended for University Students and Adults

1. Movie Nights

As mentioned in Susan Hapgood’s essay, film, in its capacity to record human behavior, has become a way for actors, directors and artists to explore the fascinating quirks of humankind. Countless films would serve as illustrations of human neuroses; we suggest a few here that might spur an interesting discussion. All are available on DVD for private viewing.

a) As Good As It Gets (1997)

Bigoted and obsessive-compulsive author (Jack Nicholson) forms an unlikely friendship with a single-mother waitress (Helen Hunt) and his gay designer neighbor (Greg Kinnear) when he is entrusted with the care of his neighbor’s dog.

b) Girl, Interrupted (1999)

A troubled young woman (Winona Ryder) is checked into a mental institution by her parents after a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. Some of the residents there seem more like misfits than mental patients, and the movie questions psychiatric diagnoses as a means to enforce social conformity.

c) *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)

In many of his films, Woody Allen is synonymous with neurotic. He plays his characteristic hilarious worrywart and hypochondriac in this classic, in which other characters are drug addicts, alcoholics, philanderers and various other types of head cases.

d) *Sideways* (2004)

Two narcissistic middle-aged men, one a failing writer and alcoholic (Paul Giamatti) and the other a womanizer (Thomas Haden Church), take a tour through wine country just before one of them is to be married.

2. Not Your Mother's Book Club

You may wish to organize weekly, biweekly, or occasional book clubs for museum members or visitors, reading books that relate to the subjects addressed by the artists in Slightly Unbalanced, including the fuzzy borders between mental health and illness, and the question of links between mental imbalance and creativity.

Research on bookseller Web sites such as Amazon.com or BN.com will yield many titles on such subjects, often accompanied by published and reader reviews (some are excerpted below). What follows are merely suggested readings. It might be just as much fun to find your own!

a) Sigmund Freud looms large in the field of psychology. Many of his works are available in numerous editions. Some of the major titles in his oeuvre are *The Ego and the Id*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Civilization and its Discontents*.

b) Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched With Fire* (Free Press, 1996)

Amazon.com says: Jamison marshals a tremendous amount of evidence for the proposition that most artistic geniuses were (and are) manic depressives. This is a book of interest to scientists, psychologists, and artists struggling with the age-old question of whether psychological suffering is an essential component of artistic creativity.

c) Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (Vintage, 1994)

Amazon.com says: When reality got "too dense" for 18-year-old Susanna Kaysen, she was hospitalized. . . . Few who are labeled mad and locked up for refusing to stick to an agreed-upon reality possess Kaysen's lucidity in sorting out a maelstrom of contrary perceptions. . . . Her clarity about the complex province of brain and mind, of neuro-chemical activity and something more, make this book of brief essays an exquisite challenge to conventional thinking about what is normal and what is deviant.

d) Albert Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994)

Albert Rothenberg has devoted the major part of a distinguished career to a broad program of research on creativity. In his excellent, concise volume, he reports his current views on this fascinating subject. . . . It is well-argued and judicious and, therefore, a useful introduction to the domain of creativity research.

-Journal of the American Medical Association

e) Karl Shaw, *The Mammoth Book of Oddballs and Eccentrics* (Carroll & Graf, 2000)

From Booklist: Compendiums of eccentricity are often top-heavy lurid-to-loony tales of the rich and nutty, but not Shaw's diverse and democratic addition to the ever-popular study of odd behavior. Shaw doesn't even include Bavaria's King Ludwig, of fantastic castle fame, and others "because they were . . . certifiably insane." His book "is not about madmen," he says, but "eccentrics," defined as those "unaware of how out of step . . . their behaviour is."

f) William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (Knopf, 1990)

Publishers Weekly Says: A meditation on Styron's (*Sophie's Choice*) serious depression at the age of 60, this essay evokes with detachment and dignity the months-long turmoil whose symptoms included the novelist's "dank joylessness," insomnia, physical aversion to alcohol (previously "an invaluable senior partner of my intellect") and his persistent "fantasies of self-destruction" leading to psychiatric treatment and hospitalization. The book's virtues—considerable—are twofold. First, it is a pitiless and chastened record of a nearly fatal human trial far commoner than assumed—and then a literary discourse on the ways and means of our cultural discontents . . .

g) Margot and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists* (NYRB Classics, 2006)

Artists are just like people, only more so is the implied conclusion of this delightful, scholarly and gossipy romp through the character and conduct of artists from antiquity to the French Revolution. —*The New York Times* (Review of Notable Books of the Year, 1963)

3. Performances or Open-Mike Nights

Whether funny, unnerving or both, neurotic behavior can be made into compelling performance. Consider the character Kramer on the popular show "Seinfeld," or the obsessive-compulsive disordered "Monk."

You may wish to recruit participants in an open call at the museum, or invite local performers, musicians or artists to perform on the theme. Invite them to act out scenarios of neurotic behavior, be they dramatic or comic.

You might want to invite local performers or instructors to judge the performers in the form of a contest. Another possible format is Story Night, in which participants tell first-person stories illustrating their own or others' neurotic behavior. You may wish to impose rules such as a time limit and an emphasis on stories rather than rants or essays.

4. Themed Discussions

Close study of the works reveals a number of themes that tour guides, docents, or educators may wish to elucidate. A few are given here, with applicable works.

Storytelling

Alex Bag, *The Van*, 2001

Sophie Calle, *Autobiographies (The Razor Blade)*, 1988;

Autobiographies (Bad Breath), 2000; *Autobiographies (The Medical Examination)*, 2002
William Pope.L, *Pierce*, 2007
Aida Ruilova, *It Had No Feelings*, 2002-04

Diagrams, Charts, Graphs

Beth Campbell, *My Possible Future Based on Present Circumstances 2/1/00, 8/15/05, and 2/12/06*
Sarah Hobbs, *Periodic Table of the Traits*, 2006
Cary Leibowitz, *Untitled (Sad Pie Graph 1) (Sad Pie Graph 2) (Sad Pie Graph 3) (Sad Pie Graph 4) I Am a Miserable and Selfish Person, I Plan My Death Every Day*, 1990-91
Danica Phelps, *Artist Collector Curator Spy*, 2001-02

Role Playing

Alex Bag, *The Van*, 2001
Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, *Winner*, 2002
Dave McKenzie, *Babel*, 2006
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #351 and #402*, both 2000

Body Language and Gesture

Alex Bag, *The Van*, 2001
Louise Bourgeois, *Femme*, 2005
Dave McKenzie, *Babel*, 2006
Aida Ruilova, *Oh No* and *The Stun*, both 2000
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #351 and #402*, both 2000

Diaries and Monologues

Beth Campbell, *My Possible Future Based on Present Circumstances 2/1/00, 8/15/05, and 2/12/06*
Sean Landers, *The Man Within*, 2000
Bruce Nauman, *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room*, 1968
Danica Phelps, *Summer 2002*, 2002

House as Metaphor for Mind

Beth Campbell, *Simultaneous Temporal Sequence*, 2005
Sarah Hobbs, *Untitled (Perfectionist)*, 2002, *Periodic Table of the Traits*, and *Untitled (Overcompensation)*, 2006
Ward Shelley, *Archive*, 2004

Education Consultant

Writer and art critic Brian Boucher is on the editorial staff at *Art in America* magazine. His writing has also been featured in *New York Magazine*, artforum.com and elsewhere. Previously, he worked in museum education at The Frick Collection and the American Federation of Arts, and holds degrees in art history from Vassar College and the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art.