

**ASCI FEATURED MEMBER: AUGUST 2016**

**ERIC STALLER**  
whimsy - art - engineering



Eric Staller's *ConferenceBike* (CoBi) is a circular bicycle built for 7-people to peddle and one-person steer

**Q&A INTERVIEW:**

**EJ [Ellen Jantzen, Feature Member Editor @ASCI]:** I like how your work comes in three sizes, small studio works, medium urban UFO's and large permanent artworks in public places. Can you explain a bit about your approach to working and how the sizes/audiences influence your work?

**ES [Eric Staller, visual & performance artist, and inventor]:** By categorizing my work on my website into small, medium and large, I was just being playful. Play has been the engine of my work for my entire career, and sticking a pin in the self-seriousness of the art world has been part of that playfulness. Truth be told, it's a mystery where my ideas come from. It's the idea that initially appears to be the most absurd that I am compelled to build. The idea that makes me laugh and say: "where the hell did THAT come from?!" is the one that becomes an obsession over the coming months.

In the early 80's I made a series of computerized light sculptures that were hypnotic, other-wordly, intended to transport the viewer to a trance-like reverie. I

showed them in my 5th exhibition at New York's OK Harris Gallery, and elsewhere. At the same time I was feeling boxed in by the art world, its commercial pressures, its rules and orthodoxies. Busting out of these confines took the form of my *Lightmobile*, a VW beetle covered with 1600 computerized light bulbs. Driving it around New York City on 100+ nights in 1985 was probably my greatest epiphany. I could now use all of the city as my gallery, share my art with the great cross-section of the public that New York is, and not only the cognoscenti.



*Octos* performance bicycle by Eric Staller, 1991

This was the beginning of my 25-year series of mobile artworks that I call *Urban UFOs*. With every one the challenge has been to take it further, both intellectually and emotionally, and finally politically. I love taking technologies and twisting people's expectations of them. Take a tandem bike, twist it into a circle, with 7 people sharing in the forward motion. Make a giant rubber stamp that impresses over and over in the sand the symbols of 4 major religions. Wear a fishbowl on my head with 30 pounds of water and 20 goldfish. Just to see it really. Just to blow my own mind. Now I've been doing this so long that I know that if I can blow my own mind, I can blow the minds of my public. And I never tire of looking into the faces of people who just happen by when I'm out riding one of my *UFOs*. Sheer surprise and delight, utter "oh my god!" astonishment, even look-the-other-way incomprehension. That's my job and my joy: to push the envelope of what people consider to be art.



*Peace Tank* with costumes by Eric Staller, 2002

**EJ:** "Peace Tank" seems to bring you back to performance vehicles... what's the irresistible "draw" here?

**ES:** I am constantly asking myself "what road haven't I yet taken?" and after 9/11 the answer came back "political art." *The PeaceTank* began as an image I needed to see AND a need to respond to the patriotic fervor that overtook the US and led to the Bush foreign policy misadventures. My rolling sculpture, *Mr. President*, 2003, which I built and showed in several European cities and in NYC prior to Bush's re-election, was an even more pointed commentary on US-led terrorism. My *HolyRoller*, 2006, was inspired by the so-called east/west clash of civilizations in Europe in general, and the assassination of Vincent van Gogh's grand nephew in Amsterdam by a Muslim, in particular.

**EJ:** How different is it creating for the general public vs. the white box/gallery space of the art world; which gives you more satisfaction and why? or why not?

**ES:** I have been mostly adrift from the gallery/museum world since the 80's. Showing the *Urban UFOs* in a gallery is anathema. I continue to draw and model works that I would love to see in the world but these objects are only tools to sell myself on the conviction to take my next leap into the unknown. Every one of these works has its own learning curve and invariably cost more money and man hours to build than first budgeted. I have had the good fortune to work with a great variety of engineers, fabricators and crafts people. I love the jazz jam-



session, give and take energy that comes with the melding of my fantasies with the laws of physics. This was brought into particularly sharp focus when I evolved my one-off, 8-person performance artwork bike into the patented 7-person bike that the *ConferenceBike* is today. It took several iterations and prototypes by 3 different builders to arrive at the safe, stable and reliable machine that is putting smiles on people's faces somewhere every day!



The CoBi is used by tourists; on the Google campus for team-building; and even at institutes for the deaf and blind for recreation and to teach trust.

**EJ:** Are there other technically challenging projects that you've dreamed of that require an engineer collaboration in the future?

**ES:** I seem to need a new technical challenge with each new piece. My white board is covered with renderings of works I would like to realize. I believe I have taken the *Urban UFO* series as far as I can/want to. My formal training was in architecture and I feel I am coming full circle to building architectures and large scale permanent public works. This is a mixed blessing, requiring large sums of other people's money, committees, building permits, stamped engineering drawings. Sometimes I wish I could dream smaller; I miss working with my own hands, small scale, low tech, not dependent on others, budgets to stay within, deadlines to meet. But I've learned to accept that I am an addict, requiring the next risk, the next dose of that unknown on the other side of the next hill.

**Learn more about Eric's CoBi:** [www.conferencebike.com](http://www.conferencebike.com)  
**Eric's book, *OUT OF MY MIND* and art:** [www.ericstaller.com](http://www.ericstaller.com)  
**ASCI is a CoBi sales rep; send inquires to:** "ascii at ascii dot org"