The Giveaway Artist

2017

Security guards at Bergdorf Goodman kept an eye on Fred Cray. A 60-year-old man wearing cheap cherry-red reading glasses and a floral shirt, Mr. Cray adjusted his battered leather messenger bag, peered around his shoulder and pushed his glasses back up his nose as he browsed the racks in men's wear. Eventually, the guards lost interest in him. That was when he struck.

He approached a jacket by the designer Thom Browne and reached into his bag. He pulled out a photograph of a Japanese cityscape at night and stuffed it into a jacket pocket. He slipped another — a dirty man with long hair — into a leather wallet. Then he placed one into a Gucci jacket, one behind a pillow, and on his exit, boldly, he opened the elevator's utility box and taped a photograph of a faded clown onto its interior panel.

"They caught me at the Guggenheim once," he said. "They told me, 'You can't do that.' I told them, 'Why not?'"

Throughout the day, Mr. Cray deposited over 30 photographs throughout the city. He hid four in a dusty microfilm division of the main branch of the New York Public Library, three inside photocopiers at a Staples, and one behind takeout menus at a taqueria in Brooklyn. He taped one onto a cereal box at a deli in Chelsea, and at a Bed Bath & Beyond he placed some into picture frames and tossed one (an eerie figure scaling a ladder) into a bin of electrical cords.

Mr. Cray leaving a photograph with a sculpture in Manhattan.
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Mr. Cray taping a photograph to a column in Chinatown.Credit…
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A Fred Cray photograph left in an art book in the Strand bookstore in Manhattan.Credit… (c)Adrienne Grunwald for The New York Times

Over the past 12 years, Mr. Cray has hidden many more photographs around New York. His tally, scrawled on a piece of paper at his studio in Brooklyn, is over 32,600. The photos have appeared in locations as improbable as behind the Venetian-plastered walls of Park Avenue apartments and tucked into the back seat of a police car. To those who find them, they are largely inexplicable: aside from a stamp on the back with his name and the number of their creation, they offer no explanation.

Mr. Cray is an artist who has lived in New York since the 1980s, and the photographs are his longest-running project, a series he calls "Unique Photographs." A pile of pictures ready for distribution sits by the front door of his home in Sunset Park. The place is littered with stacks of them, and they sputter out from his four printers constantly. Their purpose, he explained, is to weave disruption and serendipity into the fabric of the city.

The images are of his own creation. Each is different, and their often bizarre imagery is achieved through double exposures; Mr. Cray's photography has long experimented with superimposing images, which he says can imbue hidden meaning.

"Putting one photo over another adds depth and time," he said. "It adds experience and richness. It adds history." (...)

Some photographs, like one he recently stuffed into a gap in a bronze statue in the garment district, go unnoticed for weeks. Others, he said, like one he slipped into an obscure music score in an archive at Lincoln Center, can take years. Often, he has no idea what happens to them. But just as often, he hears from those that find them.

Image

The artist Fred Cray.Credit...Adrienne Grunwald for The New York Times

"I have found Unique Photo #379," one man emailed him in 2008. "I enjoy finding such treasures in my daily monotony." The note added cryptically: "You have only been the second person to leave their trace, everyone else is simply a ghost, thank you for your existence."

A woman who found Unique Photo #2019 wrote him: "No need to respond to this email but I did wish to let you know a human being connected with the picture you left." And in 2013, someone wrote: "unique photograph 7645 … i would like to come by your studio … to find conversation."

Mr. Cray said that people now find him easily now through his Instagram, but that for years, it took greater effort to contact him.

Mr. Cray's images, however, have gone much farther afield than the metropolitan area. He has deposited them across India, Brazil and Vietnam. When he has slid them into unpurchased

envelopes at post offices, they have ended up in Japan. And he has a group of accomplices who aid him with, as he calls it, "seeding" photos across the globe. He claimed that one collaborator recently placed pictures around the Kremlin and Lenin's tomb.

An old college friend of his, Scott Blanchard, tucked photographs around Tuscany a few years ago. "There was a small town in the hills outside Florence — only reachable by car," Mr. Blanchard said. "Most people never noticed me hide the photos, but this one old local man saw me. He just looked at me and nodded his head. He said, 'Bravo.'"

The other day, Mr. Cray wandered around Chelsea hiding photos. As he strolled through Bed Bath & Beyond, he suggested that his work followed in a spiritual line of artists like Marcel Duchamp. "He was working even when people thought he wasn't working," Mr. Cray said. He had just slipped a photograph (#9845) into a microwave.

But few seemed to notice his clandestine work. A man stocking shelves at a bodega eyed him suspiciously, and the salesman at a frame shop grew irritated when he didn't buy anything. On an R train from Brooklyn to Manhattan, however, Olivia Hamilton, 23, noticed him stick a photograph (#8446) to an advertisement. "In New York everyone sees everything and nothing," she said. "This could be like: 'You put a photo there. So what? Someone is shooting heroin in the next subway car.' But this intrigues me. It makes me want to think."

Mr. Cray was born in Evanston, Ill., in 1957, and he moved to New York in 1979. An early project of his involved photographing the era's notorious night life at the club [Area](), where he brushed shoulders with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. He has published six [books of his photography](). Like many artists in New York, Mr. Cray keeps a side gig to make ends financially meet; he is a decorative painter, which is how he came to hide some Unique Photographs within the plastered walls of Park Avenue apartments.

"An artist friend who comes from money once asked me, 'Fred, how do you do it?'" he said. "'How do you make art without a trust fund in New York?'"

Mr. Cray has no plans to end the project, which started with a picture slipped into a book at the Strand. He will stop, he said, only if his imagination runs out. At his studio last month, a series of new pictures sputtered out of a printer. On a desk lay a note scrawled with his tally of photos alongside a set of stamps that he uses to mark his images. At one point, Mr. Cray considered the most outlandish place he'd ever hidden a photo at over the course of the project. The question stumped him.

"I shouldn't be proud of it," he finally said. "But when my father died, I placed one into his casket."

Then he smirked.

"Well," he added. "There were a few other caskets in the room, too."