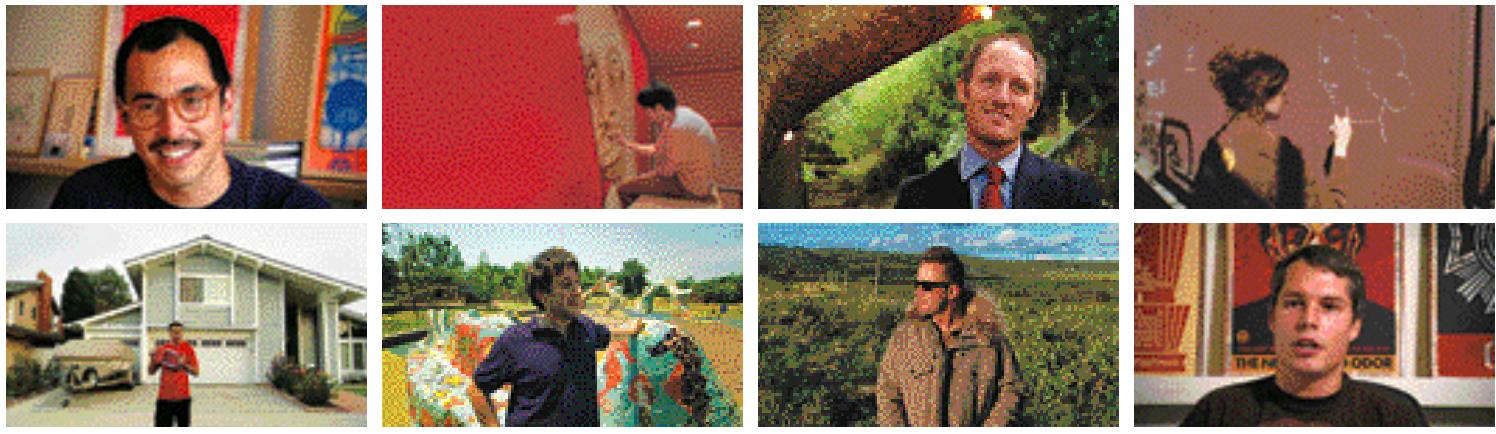


aaron rose

CO-DIRECTOR/PRODUCER, BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

By Steven Heller



Geoff McFetridge
Ed Templeton

Barry McGee
Harmony Korine

Mike Mills
Thomas Campbell

Margaret Kilgallen
Shepard Fairey

This spring, *Beautiful Losers*, a documentary about the visual manifestations and entrepreneurial spirit of the skateboarding, graffiti, and toy-making subcultures, made its debut at the SXSW Film Festival. The film, which opens nationally this month, is a vibrant overview of a loose-knit group of key players in this alternative art world—Margaret Kilgallen, Barry McGee, Ed Templeton, Shepard Fairey, Mike Mills, Harmony Korine, Thomas Campbell, Jo Jackson, Geoff McFetridge—whose work was initially defined by quirky imagery as well as handmade type and typography. Aaron Rose, 38, the film's co-director (with Joshua Leonard), has been both a maven for and impresario of this art movement since its inception in the early '90s. He grew up in Los Angeles as a typical disaffected suburban youth and entered the "alternative" culture at age 13 when he started going to punk music shows. In 1989, at just 19, he moved to New York City via a Greyhound bus and later worked as a producer at MTV doing

spots that never made it to the screen. He has also been co-editor of *ANP Quarterly*, a free alternative arts magazine. In 1992, Rose and four friends opened the Alleged Gallery on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The rent was \$400, split four ways, but even that amount was too expensive for them. Nonetheless, they got by, and the gallery exhibited art by skateboard and graffiti artists, many of whom were young friends from New York and California. Although Rose was committed to the form, he never imagined that the artists would become successful design entrepreneurs with respectable followings that continue today. The Rose-curated exhibition, "Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Street Art & Culture," opened at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center in 2004 and served as the impetus for the film. (The collection continues to tour; see iconoclastusa.com.) We caught up with Rose between screenings of *Beautiful Losers* to discuss his inspirations, as well as the making of this indie film.

HELLER: Is this your first film? **ROSE:** Pretty much, yes. I had made some short films, but this is my first feature. **HELLER:** What motivated you to assemble the "Beautiful Losers" exhibition? **ROSE:** A bunch of the artists that we used to show at Alleged—and many others—had started to make some major waves in the mainstream. They were appearing at shows at the Whitney, SFMOMA, and big gallery exhibitions around the world, so it made sense to pull it all together into a large-scale traveling exhibition. We felt the audience was finally there for it. **HELLER:** How long did you work on the film? **ROSE:** We started shooting in 2002 with a little video camera, so I guess it's been over five years! It was a slow process for the first two years, though. We really kicked into gear as a full production in 2005. **HELLER:** Fairey, Mills, and others began as graphic designers working in an authorial/entrepreneurial way. How does this activity intersect with the art world? **ROSE:** It does and it doesn't. From what I've seen from dealing with these artists, it depends on who you're asking. Many commercial artists simply feel that their commercial work is

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just that—"commercial work"—and it holds no place in the fine-art world. Others might feel that the lines are more blurry now. I tend to subscribe to the latter opinion. Not that I think advertisements for Pizza Hut belong in a museum—although that could be awesome—but I do believe that certain graphic artists create work that transcends its original purpose and speaks to people on an emotional level that is more akin to fine art. Honestly, there are no rules in art. We create rules about this stuff that imprison our creativity, and we sometimes hold onto these definitions of commercial art and fine art as though they were gospel. In the end, it's the audience who loses because of these shenanigans. Art can be anything—it's up to the artist. If people don't listen, it doesn't matter. If the work is quality, eventually it'll find an audience.

HELLER: Arguably, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, and before them Fluxus, laid the groundwork for the new art-cum-product movement. Would you agree? **ROSE:** Maybe. It depends on how far back you want to go. Did modern art start in the '70s? If yes, than I would say Fluxus started it. If you take a longer view, it goes back to Warhol, of course, and probably even before him. Wallace Berman was making art/product/objects in the late '50s to early '60s, Toulouse-Lautrec in the 1800s. We could probably keep going back. Basically, it's nothing new. Our culture and aesthetics change, but the concepts are as old as the trees. **HELLER:** Why do you describe the artists in *Beautiful Losers* as "losers"? **ROSE:** Because in the eyes of society and especially in the eyes of the art world, when these artists began, they were losers. The two cultures they sprout from—skateboarding and graffiti—are both illegal acts. Even today, skateboarding on public property assures you huge fines, and graffiti lands you straight on Rikers Island. Now, of course, these artists have been accepted by the art world, and some have even been

lauded as "cultural heroes," but that wasn't always the case. As Jean Cocteau put it: "The instinct of nearly all societies is to lock up anybody who is truly free. First, society begins by trying to beat you up. If this fails, they try to poison you. If this fails too, they finish by loading honors on your head."

HELLER: Do you see any conflict between their art and the commodification of their wares? **ROSE:** Yes! This is the primary question that is asked by our film. How far is too far? How much success can one accept before the original motivation is lost? These are big questions for anyone, not just artists. Personally, I feel that in the case of the artists featured in *Beautiful Losers*, the primary motivation is—and has been—to communicate. Sometimes commodification leads to a larger audience and hence more communication. It really depends, though. Barry McGee has complained many times that the more success he has in the art world, the smaller his audience actually gets. So it depends. The bottom line is that an artist has to support him or herself, and in order to do that, goods must be sold. It's the harsh reality. **HELLER:** The film is touted as celebrating the spirit behind the "youthful creative ethos." Do you feel that in 2008 there is still a youthful outpouring, or has it gone to the next level of sophistication—and marketing? **ROSE:** In terms of the artists in our film, the median age is late 30s, so it's not exactly a "youthful" movement anymore. It certainly was, and the movie tells that story, but today these artists have busy careers and big, full lives. That said, there is still a youthful energy there that is inherent to the artists themselves. That will never go away. It's a vernacular. In terms of marketing, I don't know if there will ever be enough marketing to kill the creative spirit and rambunctiousness of youth. I think the people who create marketing would like to think that they have that kind of power, but they

don't. The kids will always be one step ahead. **HELLER:** Are there limits to the range of products that your "losers" can or should produce? In other words, at what point is this a purely commercial pursuit? **ROSE:** Again, that depends on which artist you're talking to. Shepard Fairey would say that product and art are one and the same. If you subscribe to his theory, then there's no limit to how much can be produced, because it's all part of the same experiment. Someone like Chris Johanson refuses to work with any corporations and only creates commercial work for local businesses near where he lives. Personally, I believe the answer is someplace in the middle, but each artist has to decide where that line is for himself.

HELLER: What was the most challenging aspect of making your film? **ROSE:** I suppose finding the story in over 450 hours of footage! There are so many twists and turns and subplots and subgroups to this thing that there was really no way to get it all in one film. We worked very hard and became very frustrated at times trying to figure out the most authentic way of telling this story in a format that an audience could understand. Also, because I have such a close relationship with these artists, I felt extra pressure to remain authentic to their words. Many filmmakers will change or recontextualize their subjects' statements to suit their creative agenda. I couldn't do this because I had to answer to everyone. We had to say good-bye to many concepts that we held dear in order to keep the film authentic. **HELLER:** Do you feel the film will encourage more subcultural activity, or, as when hippies were featured on the cover of *Life* in the '60s, put a nail in the coffin?

ROSE: It's funny, because I was a bit worried about that, but from the sound of the audience responses so far, I think we might have a mini-revolution on our hands. ♦

Steven Heller is a contributing editor to PRINT. His latest book is Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State (Phaidon).