

# Educator's Guide with Self-Guided Materials for Middle and High School Groups

## *R. Crumb's Underground*

January 26–April 27, 2008

FRYE ART MUSEUM

[www.fryemuseum.org](http://www.fryemuseum.org)



R. Crumb. *Honey Bunch*, 1974. Paint on plywood. 73 x 47 x 3/4 in.  
Courtesy of John Lautemann. Photograph by Martin Backhaus.

*R. Crumb's Underground* is organized by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco and curated by Todd Hignite. The exhibition is coordinated for the Frye by Robin Held, chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections. This guide was created by Jillian Benson, education intern, and Deborah Sepulveda, manager of student and teacher programs, Frye Art Museum.

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## Getting Started

This educator's guide includes a variety of materials designed to help you prepare your class for a visit to the exhibition *R. Crumb's Underground*. The first section titled "For Educators" should be read before visiting the museum. The second section, "For Students," can be printed out to use in the museum. The goal of this guide is to challenge learners to think critically about what they see and engage them in the process of discussing art. It is intended to facilitate students' personal discoveries about art and is aimed at strengthening the skills that allow them to view art independently. The gallery activities should be explored in groups, and are meant to encourage dialogue.

While this guide focuses on a few works of art, students are encouraged to spend time examining the entire exhibition and works in the permanent collection. We also encourage teachers and students to review R. Crumb's artwork by visiting his website at: <http://www.crumbproducts.com/>

## About the Artist

R. Crumb, a pioneer of underground comix and founder of the influential *Zap Comix*, was key to the dramatic transformation of comic books into an adult literary form. A cultural critic and lifelong student of human nature for four decades, Crumb tackles in his art issues and obsessions that bubble beneath society's surface: sex, drugs, race, violence, and government repression. His comics are populated by a cast of characters based on American archetypes—Flakey Foont, Angelfood McSpade, Devil Girl, Mr. Natural, Fritz the Cat, and even a cartoon version of Crumb himself—who testify to the complexities of the human condition and to the spiritual and social searches we all undertake.

Born in Philadelphia in 1943, Crumb spent much of his youth creating comics with his older brother, Charles. In the 1960s, while working as a commercial illustrator in Cleveland, Crumb submitted individual and collaborative drawings to fanzines and underground newspapers. Energized by the success of these early artistic experiences, he moved in 1967 to San Francisco, the center of the countercultural movement. In 1968, he self-published the first issue of *Zap Comix*, the popularity of which made him a cult figure in the burgeoning underground comic scene. *Zap* soon included the work of other cartoonists, including Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso, and S. Clay Wilson, and later Gilbert Shelton, Spain Rodriguez, and Robert Williams, who are now icons in the field.

Although Crumb began his career as staunchly anti-establishment and critical of high art, he has slowly accepted the attention of the official art world, selling his artwork through art galleries and contributing cartoons to mainstream publications such as the *New Yorker*. His work received worldwide attention in Terry Zwigoff's documentary *Crumb* (1994) and a 2003 retrospective at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne.

## About the Exhibition

The most comprehensive U.S. exhibition of Crumb's work to date, *R. Crumb's Underground* showcases forty years of the artist's cultural contributions. It highlights the important role collaboration has played throughout Crumb's career, including during his younger years in San Francisco and with his wife, Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

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### Pre-Visit Activities:

- Explore Robert Crumb's website to become familiar with his life and works.  
<http://www.rcrumb.com/>
- Ask students if they are aware of Crumb's work. Discuss their impressions of or reactions to his comics.
- Discuss the meaning of the term "underground artist."
- Have students read the self-guided materials. In small groups, have them discuss the materials and create a list of questions about the artwork.

## About the Themes in the Exhibition

*The following is background information about the artworks featured in the Gallery Activities. You may also use the information as class discussion points before your visit to the Frye*

### Stop 1

#### R. Crumb as a counter-culture artist and as a social satirist



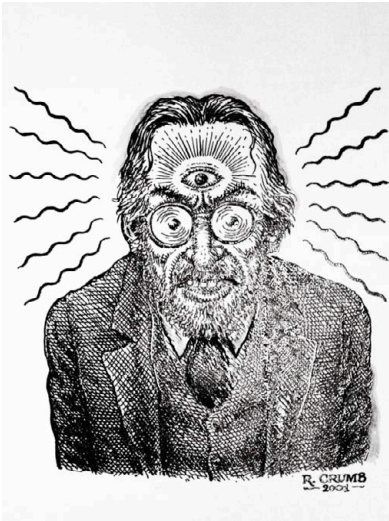
*The New Yorker*, cover (Thanksgiving issue), 2004  
Watercolor on paper  
Collection Mark Parker; Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

Comics often incorporate both humorous and serious undertones. By integrating nonfictional and fictional components, comics can critique or complicate mainstream society. Indeed, comics present a unique visual opportunity to represent contemporary political concerns, cultural perspectives, and gender relations. In this way, then, comic art blends the distinction between aesthetics and social critiques.

Crumb's work is motivated by a continuous attempt to find new ways to critique prominent cultural norms, traditions, beliefs, and practices. Specifically, Crumb's work presents a brutally honest examination of what it means to be a critical, thoughtful, and conflicted person within our own culture and society. His comics uniquely portray this serious line of questioning in a humorous and often-provocative way.

## Stop 2

### R. Crumb and his self-portraits



R. Crumb. *Self-Portrait With Third Eye*, 2004.  
Ink on paper. 17 3/8 x 14 5/8 x 1 1/4 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Paul Morris Gallery, New York.

Crumb regularly includes himself within his comic narratives. He seems to focus on the role(s) of “R. Crumb” as a character in his stories. Indeed, an overriding sense of autobiography exists in Crumb’s comics. Throughout these stories, Crumb depicts himself as an outsider, set apart from mainstream culture. By separating himself from the norm, Crumb becomes a “social satirist.” However, this separation also allows him to explore his persona in a painfully honest way.

## Stop 3

### R. Crumb and the characters he created



R. Crumb. *Devil Girl*, 1995.  
Wood, epoxy, clay and latex enamel paint. 46 3/4 x 55 1/2 x 31 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

As inspiration for their characters and caricatures, artists often rely on both invented and realistic qualities. These creations allow for a unique perspective at the margins of what is seen and unseen in society. For example, Crumb’s characters are often born out of the exaggeration of specific body parts, social statuses, genders, etc. These caricatures are often provocative because they combine humorous yet potentially offensive elements, exposing how we view and treat these elements in everyday society.

## Stop 4

### Historical Context and Collaboration

Two contexts are crucial to understanding Crumb's work, his specific historical moment and his relationships with other artists. Collaborations from an early age, within the San Francisco underground, and up to his current work with his wife, pioneering autobiographical cartoonist Aline Kominsky-Crumb are key inspirations.

### Back at School

- Consider these quotes from R. Crumb:

*"I used to draw black people as brutal jigaboo stereotypes, just like in the old days when people did think negroes were like that. Sometimes the old comics had stereotypes making fun of black people. But those things are complex, y'know. They were as much about what was going on inside white people as their attitude to black people."*

(Robert Crumb,  
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/crumb/story/0,,1434276,00.html>)

*"My current wife Aline calls me a sexist, racist misogynist misanthrope. I guess all that stuff is in me, sure. But it is not as simple as that. We all grew up in this culture and we all have those tensions. I try to deal with them in a humorous way and poke at the spot people are most uncomfortable with."*

(Robert Crumb,  
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/crumb/story/0,,1434276,00.html>)

What are the implications of Crumb's use of satire and sarcasm? Are there some subjects that are not appropriate for this kind of humor? Why or why not?

### Back at School:

- Classroom Underground Zine Exercise:
  - *What is a zine?*  
A zine (the abbreviated version of fanzine) is a noncommercial, self-published, small publication of texts and images. Zines can be created in a variety of formats ranging from handwritten to computer-generated. Zines feature a variety of topics including arts, design, politics, social critiques, and theories. Zines exist as independent entities that work against mainstream publications and culture.
  - *R. Crumb:*  
Discuss the students' thoughts on the *R. Crumb* exhibition. Return to some of the themes that the exhibition explored, including R. Crumb as a counter-culture artist and social satirist, Crumb and his self-portraits, and

Crumb and his caricatures. Use the ideas generated in this discussion to inspire your own zine.

- *Contemporary comics:*  
Gather recent comic sections from various newspapers. Look through and discuss the comics you see. How are these comics similar to or different from R. Crumb's work? Are any themes recurrent? How do the comic sections differ between newspapers? Use the ideas generated in this discussion as inspiration for your zine.
- *Create your own zine:*  
Pass out paper so that each student can contribute one page to the zine. Provide supplies such as pencils, pens, glue sticks, scissors, magazines, and extra paper. Allow students to explore whatever topics they desire. For example, they may write and illustrate a comic, create their own caricature, critique an aspect of society in their own way, or respond to one of Crumb's works. Ask students what devices they will use to create their own piece. Will they utilize humor, parody, symbolism, satire, caricature, etc? Create a zine including every student's work. Make sure to create a cover page and to include a title for your zine. Duplicate the finished product and distribute it to the class.

**Resources:** For more information please visit:

- R. Crumb's official website: <http://www.crumbproducts.com/>
- Art21 lesson plans:
  - Cartoon commentary:  
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/education/abstraction/lesson2.html>
  - Characters and caricatures:  
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/education/individuals/lesson1.html>
- *Crumb* – Documentary film on Robert Crumb by Terry Zwigoff in 1994.
- Fantagraphics website: <http://www.fantagraphics.com/>
- *The Book of Zines*: <http://www.zinebook.com/>

## Gallery Activities for High School Students

This section can be printed out to use in the museum

### Stop #1



*The New Yorker*, cover (Thanksgiving issue), 2004  
Watercolor on paper  
Collection Mark Parker; Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

What is going on in this image?

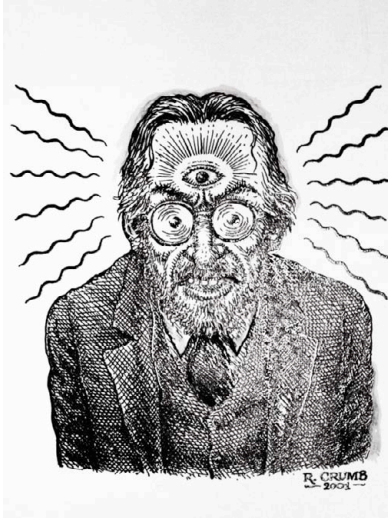
What social or political issues does this artwork raise?

How does humor relate to this piece? Do you think there are or should be limits to humor in social critiques?

What are the differences between Crumb's comics and other visual mediums, such as painting, photography, or sculpture, that attempt to critique society? Do you think using comics provides the artist with an advantage in his social critique? Why or why not?

Explore the galleries and find another piece that explores issues of drugs, race, violence, or government oppression. Write or discuss with another student your personal response to this piece.

## Stop #2



R. Crumb. *Self-Portrait With Third Eye*, 2004.  
Ink on paper. 17 3/8 x 14 5/8 x 1 1/4 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Paul Morris Gallery, New York.

What is going on in this image?

How is Crumb representing himself?

What does this depiction reveal about Crumb? How does it do this?

Look around the galleries. How does Crumb represent himself in his other pieces? Does his character remain the same or does it change? How?

Consider this quote from R. Crumb:

*“Lately though I’ve become more interested in the journey within, the great adventure into the unknown inside one’s self. Isn’t it strange that we are such a mystery to ourselves?”*(Robert Crumb, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/crumb/story/0,,1435432,00.html>)

Write or discuss with a group of students your personal response to this quote.

### Stop #3



R. Crumb. *Devil Girl*, 1995.  
Wood, epoxy, clay, and latex enamel paint. 46 3/4 x 55 1/2 x 31 in. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

Describe this sculpture.

Is this a character or caricature? Why? What is the difference between a character and a caricature?

What qualities or characteristics are being exaggerated? Why?

Explore the galleries and find a character Crumb uses in his comics to explore the issue of race. Write or discuss with another student your personal response to this piece.

Consider these two quotes after viewing the piece:

*"People have no idea of the sources for my work. I didn't invent anything; it's all there in the culture; it's not a big mystery. I just combine my personal experience with classic cartoon stereotypes"*

(Robert Crumb, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/crumb/story/0,,1431910,00.html>)

*"I used to draw black people as brutal jigaboo stereotypes, just like in the old days when people did think negroes were like that. Sometimes the old comics had stereotypes making fun of black people. But those things are complex, y'know. They were as much about what was going on inside white people as their attitude to black people."*

(Robert Crumb, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/crumb/story/0,,1434276,00.html>)

Write or discuss with a group of students your personal responses to these quotes.

**Other ideas to explore in the exhibition:**

Collaboration has played an important role throughout Crumb's career, including during his youth as part of the San Francisco comic book underground, and with his wife, Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

Watch the video in the exhibition that explores his work with Zap comics and then go in the galleries to view some of the examples.

Explore the works he has done with his wife Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

Continue to explore the galleries as a group or on your own. Additional questions and quotes to consider as you view Crumb's artwork:

- How does Crumb see the individual artist interacting or coping with society?

Consider this quote from R. Crumb:

*"My current wife Aline calls me a sexist, racist misogynist misanthrope. I guess all that stuff is in me, sure. But it is not as simple as that. We all grew up in this culture and we all have those tensions. I try to deal with them in a humorous way and poke at the spot people are most uncomfortable with."*

(Robert Crumb, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/crumb/story/0,,1434276,00.html>)

- What does this quote mean to you?

What are the implications of Crumb's use of satire and sarcasm? Are some subjects inappropriate for this kind of humor? Why or why not?