



FORT MASON CENTER  
FOR ARTS & CULTURE

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## Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture Kicks Off Summer Season with Ben Kinmont's *Our commons are free*

*New campus gallery launches with exhibition exploring the influential legacy of San Francisco's Diggers' movement*



*The Diggers, Invisible Circus Poster, 1967*

San Francisco, CA (April 30, 2025) — Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture (FMCAC) today announces the opening of *Our commons are free*, a project by artist Ben Kinmont exploring the rich history and lasting influence of the San Francisco Diggers, the radical community action group that emerged from the City's countercultural movement in the 1960s. The exhibition will be on view from June 21 through August 11, 2025, in Fort Mason's Store House, a newly inaugurated gallery space in Landmark Building D.

*Our commons are free* marks the launch of FMCAC's new summer gallery season, complementing its established winter program in Gallery 308. The exhibition presents a comprehensive collection of rare publications, ephemera, and documentary materials that trace the Diggers' revolutionary approach to creating alternative social systems based on principles of freedom, community care, and a rejection of consumer capitalism.

Founded in 1966 and featuring figures such as Billy Murcott, Emmett Grogan, Peter Coyote, and Peter Berg, the Diggers evolved from their roots in street theater to establish free kitchens, stores, crash pads, and the first free medical clinic within the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. They framed their strategy as “guerrilla theater” – what an early Digger street sheet called “Life acts! Acts that can create the condition of life they describe.”

The Diggers would proclaim the “Death of Money” in a December 1966 Haight Street parade as they moved to create free zones and situations: kitchens in the Panhandle for free meals; free stores like 520 Frederick Street for clothing and crafts; and the Trip Without a Ticket space at Cole and Carl Streets, which included the first free health clinic in the Haight.



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Kinmont came to the San Francisco Diggers through his interest in their namesake: radical pamphleteers in mid-17th-century England, whose philosophy of public space as “a common treasury for all” circulated widely among the 1960s Diggers. The original Diggers were also participants in an essential moment in the history of print culture in England. As censorship collapsed in England due to the Civil War, radicals, such as the Diggers, began distributing their broadsides and pamphlets out on the street and to “conventicles,” secret gatherings of like-minded people that would later become important to Enlightenment thought. The Digger pamphlets argued for the common ownership of property and the abolition of money.

Kinmont's exhibition traces the evolution of San Francisco Digger publications from their earliest street sheets and *The Digger Papers* through the development of the Communication Company's underground press, the *Free City News*, and ultimately to the *Kaliflower* newspaper, which circulated among hundreds of communes at its peak. These publications didn't merely document the movement—they were essential tools for community building, information sharing, and revolutionary living.

"I've long admired how Kinmont's project-based work roams outside the art world and its spaces, turning instead to streets, stores, and kitchens for intimate encounters and exchanges," says Frank Smigiel, Fort Mason Center's Director of Arts Programming & Partnerships. "In surfacing and responding to these Digger communications, he recreates their world and offers us the opportunity to meet and maybe even practice this 'free' way of being, acting, and doing things."

Mike Buhler, CEO of Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, adds: "Fort Mason has always served as a place where San Francisco's past, present, and future converge. With *Our commons are free*, we continue our commitment to being a gathering space where visitors can engage with the rich artistic and cultural history of our city while contemplating its current state. The Diggers' radical vision of community and freedom resonates deeply with our mission to foster creative expression and social connection. As we approach our 50th anniversary, exhibitions like this remind us of the vital role cultural spaces play in preserving and reimagining our collective heritage."

**Exhibition highlights:**

- 120 handmade and printed facsimiles of Digger street sheets and publications, donated to local research organizations at the end of the exhibition
- Documentary video, photography, and ephemera, beginning with the Hunter's Point Uprising and running through the beginning of the commune movement
- A new Kinmont film, *Saints Paradise*, featuring footage from the Angels of Light Jilala Jet von Jalopy's archive
- A new Kinmont wall piece forming a 40-foot historical timeline that begins with the reading of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" at San Francisco's Six Gallery in 1955 and ends with the death of original Digger Emmett Grogan in 1978
- The artist's *Hive, a family found*, creates an in-gallery reading space for the *Kaliflower* newspaper
- A "free store"-like space with free publications tracking the Diggers' history and influence, commissioned from Digger archivist Eric Noble for Kinmont's Antinomian Press
- Activations by Kinmont's *Street Press*, an in-gallery and on-the-street project of his Antinomian Press, through which Digger publications will be printed and distributed freely at Fort Mason and around San Francisco



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For Kinmont, whose artist-parents participated in the Counterculture scene, the project represents a personal connection to this history. "My interest in the Diggers began as a student of American Studies and antinomianism in the early 1980s," Kinmont explains. "Although I recognized the name of the San Francisco Diggers from my childhood—it was something I associated with theater and free food—their ideas were vague in my memory until I participated in a panel with Peter Coyote in 2002, and subsequently encountered Communication Company street flyers in the rare book market." Kinmont goes on to say: "Many discoveries, both personal and historical, have occurred during the creation of *Our commons are free*. At numerous points in my research, the history of the San Francisco Diggers has folded into the story of my own family."

The exhibition's focus on print culture highlights how the Diggers utilized mimeographs and offset printing to disseminate their message of free food, free medical care, and free goods, as well as a community based on the economy of "free." These street sheets and publications—many of which exist in only a single copy—represent a vital record of this transformative moment in San Francisco's cultural history.

**Exhibition Details:**

Title: Ben Kinmont: *Our commons are free*  
Dates: June 21 – August 11, 2025  
Venue: The Store House, Landmark Building D, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture  
Hours: Wednesdays-Saturdays, 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.; Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Admission: Free

**About Ben Kinmont**

Ben Kinmont is an artist, publisher, and antiquarian bookseller living in Sebastopol, California. His work is concerned with the value structures surrounding an art practice and what happens when that practice is displaced into a non-art space. Since 1988, Kinmont's work has been project-based with an interest in archiving and blurring the boundaries between artistic production, publishing, and curatorial practices.

He has taught courses in the Social Practices Program at the California College of the Arts, as well as organized various workshops with students from the École des Beaux-Arts in France (Angers, Bordeaux, Bourges, and Valence), Cranbrook Academy in the United States, and the Rietveld Academy in the Netherlands. Exhibitions include those at Air de Paris, MAXXI (Rome), Whitney Biennial 2014, ICA (London), CNEAI (Chatou), Kadist Art Foundation (Paris & San Francisco), the 25th International Biennial of Graphic Arts (Ljubljana), the Frac Languedoc-Roussillon (Montpellier), Documenta 11 (Kassel), Les Abattoirs (Toulouse), the Pompidou, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and a traveling survey show of Kinmont's work entitled "Prospectus" (Amsterdam, Paris, New York, and San Francisco).

Kinmont is also the founder of the Antinomian Press, a publishing enterprise that supports project art and ephemera (the archive of which is part of the collection of drawings and prints at the Museum of Modern Art).



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**About Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture**

A decommissioned military installation converted into a nonprofit cultural center, FMCAC hosts a lively mix of arts, educational, and cultural programming. Each year, FMCAC provides more than \$2 million to support local arts organizations, enabling groups to produce diverse and innovative artworks at the historic waterfront campus. With a four-decade history as an arts and culture destination, FMCAC is now focused on reinvigorating its programming and amenities to better engage the evolving Bay Area creative community. Central to this new vision is the commissioning and presentation of adventurous and unconventional artworks best realized in nontraditional or historical settings.

**Photos**

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