

THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION
OF A FINE ARTS
EDUCATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE 4	INTRODUCTION BY JAMES VOORHIES
PAGE 10	LISA DENT AND JAMES VOORHIES POSE 20 QUESTIONS TO MATTHEW HIGGS
PAGE 20	MAKE A T-SHIRT AND IT WILL HAPPEN AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MERCIL
PAGE 30	COMPARTMENT IS THE COMMONS AN INTERVIEW WITH J. MORGAN PUETT
PAGE 40	MORE LIKE WORKING WITH GASES THAN SOLIDS: A CONVERSATION WITH JON RUBIN
PAGE 60	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION BY JAMES VOORHIES

CURATED BY JAMES
VOORHIES WITH LISA DENT,
ALL LECTURES OCCURRED
AT DESIGN STUDIOS ON
BROAD AT COLUMBUS
COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN.

I have the good fortune of writing this introduction after Matthew Higgs, Michael Mercil, J. Morgan Puett and Jon Rubin, the four participants in the lecture series *The New Administration of a Fine Arts Education*, have given their talks and extended our conversations into print in this publication. As sometimes happens when one invites a group of artists to participate in an exhibition or a series like this, subtle and interwoven connections between the works and artists do not become fully apparent until after the exhibition is open or the lectures are presented. The same is true in this case. Here, the full discovery of the rich overlap in the visiting artists' practices transpired during discussions—both public and private—between the artists and the engaged, insightful community in Columbus. Many audience members are individuals who I have come to know well and have seen time and again during my tenure making exhibitions, events, actions and disruptions as Bureau for Open Culture in Columbus. Organized with curator Lisa Dent, *The New Administration of a Fine Arts Education* marks a culmination of those relationships. Their conviviality and reciprocity, engendered through BOC programming, have helped us to learn together how these four visiting artists stretch, pull, and push the limits of artistic practice in their own work.

Over the course of four months, Higgs, Mercil, Puett and Rubin visited Columbus College of Art & Design to present a lecture. Each one occurred in the unlikely space of the ground floor of a former automobile dealership, a building now owned by the college and the current home to its new MFA program and undergraduate design departments. The presentation space

itself is the dealership's former showroom, the only area still remaining in its raw, untouched condition as the entire building undergoes renovation. Paint is peeling, floor tiles are cracked, but the generally ramshackle state has a surprisingly inviting quality. It is on the corner of a busy intersection that delineates the college's perimeter in relation to the city. Indeed, one of the city's main arteries—Broad Street—marks this boundary, a street that is part of Route 40, the old National Road cutting through Columbus. Floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows are transparent membranes between the interior space and the movement of people and automobiles outside. The temporary and periodic adaptability of the space for these talks, its blatant connection to consumer markets and its abutment to life beyond the confines of the academy resonate with ideas that surfaced during the series.

In each of their practices these artists have also transformed varying conditions into opportunities for vibrant and innovative cultural production. While capital looms large behind the production of art, it is sometimes overlooked, ignored or obfuscated. The artists here, however, acknowledge it—some more directly than others—and locate capital as a framework of creative potential and value. They communicate an urgency to consider issues of distribution in relation to artistic production, and they urge us to think about how artists and their art are enmeshed in larger institutions (e.g., art, economic, education, corporate, political, civic) that affect how people get access to art and how the lives and practices of artists are sustained. They make clear the need to dispense with the obsolete notion of the solitary artist working in a

studio, relying on "someone" to "discover" them. The conversations and interviews included in this publication speak to ways of producing art and exhibitions within the conditions at hand, creating new economic streams and outlets of dissemination. These efforts to harness the means of distribution are in some cases simultaneously the content of their work as well as a functioning source of income.

J. Morgan Puett's ongoing projects at Mildred's Lane investigate the creative, intellectual and economic challenges of sustaining something she calls "being as practice," a continually evolving and fluid platform for considering all aspects of life through shared resources, experiences, work and learning. Jon Rubin's Waffle Shop and Conflict Kitchen inhabit capitalist models to enact publicly engaged social-context work, pointing to his broader interest in the transformative power of fantasy, play and storytelling. Michael Mercil utilizes the university itself as a studio, or laboratory, for inquiring into the nature of arts education and its relationship to the university teaching position. Matthew Higgs demonstrates how not to allow language to define a practice, smoothly shifting between artist and curator and proving the value of sticking to one's genuine and intuitive interests—including playing records. In all of these practices, the resistance to defining what is and is not art has operated to the artists' benefit. Cultivating the potential in uncertainty, they have reduced the need to work within prescribed parameters. Ideas fall into place spontaneously, haphazardly and unexpectedly—but always productively.

The New Administration of a Fine Arts Education comprises the lecture series and

texts commissioned for this publication. In toto, the project raises questions about the role of art in society, and how artists make their lives and work responsive to the social fabric and economic conditions of their time. As these artists deal with conditions they find in the world, and those presented unexpectedly to them, they interchange practice and lifestyle, conflating the two realms in complex and interesting ways, while disrupting any easy identification of either. Higgs, Mercil, Puett and Rubin each prioritize a mode of engagement with the world that helps further the evolution of artistic practice rather than settling it into any one, staid category. Not unlike the former space of an automobile showroom, and as these four demonstrate, artistic practice can shape-shift to the tune of our contemporary moment in practical, intuitive and creative ways.

LISA DENT AND JAMES VOORHIES POSE
20 QUESTIONS TO MATTHEW HIGGS

MATTHEW HIGGS IS AN
ARTIST AND CURATOR.
HE IS DIRECTOR AND
CHIEF CURATOR OF WHITE
COLUMNS, THE OLDEST
ARTIST-RUN SPACE IN NEW
YORK CITY. HE PRESENTED
A TALK ON NOVEMBER
17, 2010.

QUESTION 1 The MFA route seems to be a predominant option among young, aspiring artists. But, it's not the only way. What are your recommendations to those individuals who can't afford it or are contemplating pursuit of alternatives to a formal, advanced arts education?

The emphasis placed on MFAs tends—from my experience—to be an American “issue,” one linked to the idea that in order to be able to teach—at any level—that one must have an advanced degree. This isn't my experience, as I only have an undergraduate degree. (During my time teaching at both undergraduate and graduate level in the UK in the 1990s, at Goldsmith's College, Chelsea College of Art, and the Royal College of Art, among other places, I don't remember ever being asked about my academic history.) In an ideal world people would be hired based on the work they do, and not where they went to school. The decision to do an MFA ultimately should only be based on whether an artist feels that their work needs to return to an academic context. I'm always surprised that young artists will go straight from undergraduate studies into graduate studies, it seems like most people—and their work—would benefit from some time outside of school, before going to do an advanced degree or further study. In terms of advice about alternatives, just make really interesting work and you can't fail.

QUESTION 2 What do you believe is the most effective way today for an artist to gain control of the dissemination of their work and ideas, to insert their work out into the world?

The art world is a fairly small place, and ultimately it is not that complicated to navigate or negotiate. However I think you need to understand, or at least have an idea about what you want out of art, and what role you imagine you or your work might play in the art world. (This obviously presumes an understanding of what the art world actually is and how it functions.) Creating a context for your own ideas and those of your peers is the most

logical route to self-determination. This might take the form of establishing an artist-run space, a shared studio complex, starting a magazine, etc. Critical to this process is identifying and making connections with like-minded individuals and organizations locally, nationally and internationally. Also there's no hurry...this process could, and probably should, take a decade to start to realize its potential.

QUESTION 3 What ever happened to all the trouble-maker artists?

I'm not sure exactly who or what a “trouble-maker” artist might be. If artists cause trouble it is often for good reasons (e.g. the Guerrilla Girls).

QUESTION 4 After you gave your presentation at CCAD, you were approached by a woman and asked to look at her husband's paintings, which she had brought with her. You obliged, asking her to carefully arrange them around the room so you could see each one. You were incredibly patient and open to seeing all of them. Does this kind of thing happen to you often?

It doesn't happen very often, but if someone takes the trouble to drive several hours to attend a talk and show me work that they think I might be interested in then the very least I can do is take the gesture seriously. The woman knew that I have an interest in the work of self-taught artists—so it wasn't an entirely random encounter. Also I could immediately tell that the work was interesting, so ultimately I was very happy to have a chance to spend some time with her and the works. (I think the artist was her former husband—they both came to the bar after the talk too and presented me with a bottle of whiskey produced near to where they live.)

QUESTION 5 What is the name of the artist with whom you most recently spoke and what did you talk about?

I just did a studio visit with Daniel Rodriguez, who will have a

show at White Columns in June. We talked about his work, and what he had been up to since leaving Yale five years ago. (Mostly living in San Antonio and starting a family.) His show at White Columns will be his first exhibition. I was introduced to his work by the artist Ella Kruglyanskaya who had a solo show at White Columns in March.

QUESTION 6 What do you believe is the most exciting thing about being an artist today?

The art world is bigger and more open than it has ever been before. Consequently there are more opportunities for all kinds of artists today.

QUESTION 7 I can't help but imagine your apartment filled floor to ceiling with books, blocking all the windows and covering the kitchen counters. True?

Our current apartment is very sparse. The majority of my library—and record collection—is in storage and has been there for several years now.

QUESTION 8 What music did you listen to today?

I mostly listen to disco and other kinds of dance music. I spend most of my spare money on rare disco and early house 12" singles. I DJ'd last week at a party thrown by two New York galleries—so I spent part of the previous day picking out records for that. I buy most of my new release records by mail order from the UK. A new 12" by Moodymann arrived today—which I just listened to, and we also got a test pressing of a record that White Columns is co-releasing by Julianna Barwick and Ikue Mori, that was recorded live in the gallery. So I also listened to that to see if the pressing was okay. (White Columns has a record label called "The Sound of White Columns.")

QUESTION 9 When you came to Columbus you visited Spoonful Records. Did you find anything good?

I bought a few random 12" singles from the dollar bins.

Mostly early 2000s electro-clash era stuff. Nothing too exciting.

QUESTION 10 What exhibitions have you seen in the last week?

I saw about 40 exhibitions this week, maybe more, including the Glenn Ligon show at the Whitney and the Mark Morrisroe show at Artists Space. I also went to the unveiling of Rob Pruitt's—great—*Andy Warhol Monument* in Union Square. There's too much art for any one person to see in New York, which is what's so great about looking at art in New York, i.e. no one really knows what's actually going on.

QUESTION 11 What are some of your favorite museums that do not present visual art?

My favorite is probably the Wolfsonian in Miami, which is dedicated to propaganda and decorative arts from the period up to and including the Second World War.

QUESTION 12 Could you talk about how you develop ideas for an exhibition? For instance, do you have a bunch of exhibition sketches for which participating artists and ideas accumulate slowly over time?

Sometimes ideas percolate for many years, and then you finally get a chance to realize them. Others happen literally overnight. I've organized more than 250 exhibitions and projects with artists in the past 20 years, and the process is accumulative, where one thing invariably leads to another. The projects have all been very different in terms of their scale and ambition. I haven't had an original idea during that time—everything is driven by my encounters with other artist's ideas.

QUESTION 13 You don't have a graduate degree in art history. That connects you with several well-known and successful curators such as Robert Storr, Kathy Halbreich and Thelma Golden. Were you influenced by the idea of being a curator

without that traditional educational background?

I started organizing exhibitions when I was an undergraduate student, and have been doing it pretty consistently ever since. I trained as an artist, not as an art historian. It never occurred to me to investigate what a curator's background was—I was just interested in the work they did. Kasper König was, and remains a central inspiration—if not exactly an influence. There is a maverick quality to his approach to exhibition making.

QUESTION 14 Do you see any connections between the kinds of exhibitions they (Storr, Halbreich and Golden) have created and yours?

I have never worked for a large-scale publicly funded institution, so our histories—and audiences—are probably quite different.

QUESTION 15 Some curators purposely shy away from working repeatedly with the same artist on different projects. But, you do not. It is a model we respect. Could you talk about the value you find in it?

In the most straightforward sense it is like an ongoing conversation, the kind you might have with family or friends. Also you have a shared history, which inevitably becomes a part of any subsequent dialog. Getting older with people—and their ideas—is also an interesting development, the consequences of which you can't really anticipate when you are young(er).

QUESTION 16 Travel seems to be inextricably linked to being a curator. Do you think it's possible to do the work you do without it, and is it a blessing or a burden?

The idea of the "roving" independent curator seems far less compelling—and less urgent—than it did 15 or 20 years ago. Information changes hands much more fluidly now. I also think it depends on what you are trying to achieve, what

your goals are. Not everyone wants to—or needs to—travel extensively in order to realize their ideas or ambitions. It is also important to remember that many people also can't afford to travel often, which is rarely addressed in the art world. The British-based artist Gustav Metzger has called for people involved in the art world to stop travelling—a project he calls *Reduce Art Flights* or *R.A.F.* for short—to minimize the art world's contribution to global warming.

QUESTION 17 As we all know cities like London, San Francisco and New York are increasingly more challenging economically for artists to live in. So what about artists who choose to live and work outside major metropolitan areas? It is possible today with rapid travel and communication technologies. What are your thoughts about trying to develop a practice outside major centers of art?

If you are making really interesting art—anywhere—people will find out about it eventually. However if you are making work or running a space in larger cities such as Berlin, London, Los Angeles, New York etc., where there is a much larger audience for contemporary art, it follows that the potential for a dialog to develop around your ideas is far greater. This "conversational" or "social" aspect of art is probably the single most significant factor in how an artist's work starts to gain recognition beyond its immediate environment. Consequently if you work in a less densely populated place there will always be a greater onus on you, as an individual artist, to establish a broader context for your work. An often discussed model is how artists based in Glasgow, Scotland in the late 1980s and early 1990s independently connected their activities with international audiences. (Glasgow was by no stretch of the imagination on the art world's "map" at the time.) Twenty years on Glasgow remains one of the most vital cities for both art and artists.

QUESTION 18 We hear you're retired from writing? In a contemporary art world where the word appears to trump, this is surprising but inspiring and refreshing.

Could you talk about the impetus behind your retiring from writing and how that might change or not the way you communicate about your practice?

I basically don't enjoy writing, and I'm also not convinced that I'm any good at it. The deadlines associated with writing induce a kind of crippling anxiety in me. Writing is also appallingly paid. (I think most people would be shocked at how badly writers—even the good ones—are paid by the art world.) Also the idea that someone should be good at both making exhibitions and writing about art as well seems not only unlikely, but unreasonable. Writing about art is, I think, much harder than organizing exhibitions. You can probably count on two hands the number of people who can really write well about art. I would hazard a guess that of that number no more than one or two—at most—would also be curators.

QUESTION 19 You are teaching in the Bard graduate program in curatorial studies. What is a classroom led by Matthew Higgs like?

I'm not sure I'm the best person to answer this question. I was only teaching at Bard last year, but I've taught a lot over the past twenty years on various curatorial programs but mostly in fine art departments. I don't think I'm so good in a classroom situation, I much prefer just talking with people on a one-to-one basis. There is something slightly awkward—and artificial—about being in a windowless room with a group of people on a weekly basis, trying to discuss art, ideas etc. A lot of one's time is spent negotiating the group's dynamics, i.e. each other, and I think there is also an unspoken pressure to be both interesting and, somehow, entertaining; which is hard to pull off. Also I think student's expectations at colleges in the United States—mostly because of the cost of going to school here—are very different to those of students in the UK and Europe, although I'm sure this will change as the European education system moves more towards the American model of higher tuition costs.

QUESTION 20 I recently saw a picture of you

DJing at the Independent art fair. Will that be an annual occurrence?

I hope so, playing records is my favorite thing to do.



MAKE A T-SHIRT AND IT WILL HAPPEN
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MERCIL

MICHAEL MERCIL
USES A VARIETY OF
TEACHING-BASED AND
COLLABORATIVE ART
PROJECTS TO RENEW AND
CULTIVATE AN EXPANDED
NOTION OF THE "AGRI-
CULTURAL" COMMONS
AS PART AND PARCEL OF
THE PUBLIC LAND-GRANT
UNIVERSITY MISSION.
HE IS PROFESSOR OF
ART AT THE OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY IN COLUMBUS,
OHIO. HE PRESENTED A
TALK ON FEBRUARY 2,
2011.

JAMES VOORHIES *The Living Culture Initiative* operates as a kind of unique laboratory or think tank within the Department of Art at the Ohio State University and as your own practice. Could you talk about why you formed *The Living Culture Initiative* and what it does? I'm especially interested to hear about its development out of a particular situation and its role as a learning platform for students, faculty, yourself and the community.

MICHAEL MERCIL The origins of *The Living Culture Initiative* are simple. The visual arts occupy a relatively unique place within a research university. In the sciences, for example, the laboratory of an academic researcher is likely to be located on campus. And students of science often formulate their initial research upon the research of their mentor. The studio of an artist, however, is most frequently located off campus. And typically, we encourage our students to develop a creative practice (or voice) quite independently of whatever might be the focus of our own individual artwork.

Like many artists who teach, upon arriving at the university I realized quickly that the center of my creative life was independent of my academic setting. The feeling that every hour spent on campus was an hour spent away from my studio became a real challenge, and so, I began to reconsider if, or how, I might use the campus itself as a studio—say, for example, by planting a beanfield.

Before that, I had already relocated a seminar I teach with Ann Hamilton to the off-campus studio we share. As soon as Ann and I began teaching together, we agreed that one way to demonstrate our own art making practices was to reveal, or open up, our workspace and—using the university model—to let our students into our laboratory. To locate our classroom within our studio seemed the most direct way for us to teach. It's partly an effort to de-mystify our own creative methods. And it provides a richer, more relaxed environment for learning than what is typically available on campus.

JAMES It is evident in your work with *The Beanfield* and *The Virtual Pasture*, particularly, that you operate within many different institutional terrains, among them, The Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University Art Department and the Stratford Ecological Center. While extraordinary, I do believe the need for artists to be administrators as well as creative producers speaks to what is happening more frequently in contemporary art. Could you speak about facets related to the administration of your work? And, how do you prepare graduate students to take on these kinds of administrative challenges related to the actual making of work?

MICHAEL With only slight exaggeration, I sometimes describe *The Living Culture Initiative* as a project within the Department of Art that has no program, seeks no funding, and makes no promises. It also has no curricular structure and is not a classroom-based activity. As with any large institution, it's true that OSU is made of many smaller institutions with varying degrees of interest and control over their own terrains, or territories. It's also true that crossing over into, or placing myself within such territories—familiar or unfamiliar—can sometimes feel like picking one's way through a minefield. Asking for help does not come easily or naturally to me, but I always carry a map and always ask for directions. In other words, while keeping my goal in mind, I take time to talk with people I do not know. I become their student and they teach *me* things.

Each of the works we are speaking about has taken place in and through real time (hence, *Living Culture*) with a more-or-less flexible start and ending date. This means that a given project can proceed according to the available resources (mine and/or the partnering institution's) at any given time. However, because the initial burden of success or failure belongs to me, it becomes easier for a potential partner to say yes; and lucky for me, they usually do so.

Still, as mentioned earlier, the territory is never my own. For example, beginning with *The Beanfield* in 2006, I have been a squatter on 500 square feet of prime university real estate. From the start, The Wexner Center supported the project, as did the Social Responsibility Initiative in the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. But the University Architect's Office, who legally controls use of the space, was at first quite skeptical. They wanted me to plant *The Beanfield* somewhere else. Yet, because both The Wexner Center and the College of FAES understood and embraced my notion that the *where* of the project was important to its *what*, working together we successfully negotiated an agreement with the University for me to use the originally proposed site along College Road and facing the main campus Oval.

Besides needing a place to plant, the resources required for *The Beanfield* were not many—only a few gardening tools, some sticks, a handful of beans and some volunteer laborers. In comparison, the institutional, human, material, technical and financial resource needs of *The Virtual Pasture*—a flock of live sheep; a 4' x 6' LED monitor; indoor and outdoor video cameras; installation of electrical lines; upgrades to security systems; installation, support and maintenance of computer and satellite communications networks; horticultural advising; veterinary care; training in animal handling and transportation; and so on—have been exponentially more demanding. As to your question regarding my administration of all that, it's something like a marriage: at first it includes little more than a shared passion, a few pots and pans, a bed and maybe a clothes closet. Later adding a pet and a kid makes everything much more complicated. But the commitment has by then already proven itself.

The rules in the handbook for Fair & Square University provide yet another useful set of guideposts for negotiating institutional terrains. These are:

1. Replace equipment where it belongs.
2. Turn off the overhead lights.
3. Leave the place as clean as you found it.
4. Act like you know what you are doing.

To those I might only add that saying "Thank you" is as

important as saying "Please."

JAMES Can you talk about Fair & Square University? What is it? Why did you initiate it and how does it relate to your practice?

MICHAEL As relief from the administrative burdens of working in so large a university, I thought starting my own small college would be fun. Fair & Square University exists mostly as a media relations campaign that began with the screening of a short educational film during my lecture at Columbus College of Art & Design. The film is the first in a series and, much like a public service announcement or animated cartoon, it's made for screening in movie theatres just prior to the main feature.

F&SU may be a fictional institution, but everything about it is real. It has a logo, a history, an admissions policy and a handbook of rules (see above). Soon it will have a rear windshield decal and maybe a coffee cup—gifts for alumni donors. The school's mascot is Ralph Waldo Emerson, and it has a cracker-jack marching banner. I'm also looking forward to its eventual listing in the U.S. News & World Report Best College Rankings.

In many ways, *The Virtual Pasture* was likewise little more than an advertising blitz and product line—with posters, signage, postcards and t-shirts—before it became manifest as an actual project. It's something I have learned to believe in. Make a t-shirt and it will happen.

JAMES With the inception of the ongoing public work *Reading the Daily News*, it seems like you were able to just take action, to begin the work without the usual constraints of waiting for exhibition dates, a curator to give a go-ahead or even funding. For many young artists I think that would sound so liberating and empowering to be in immediate control of the distribution of work. With this in mind could you talk a bit about the impetus behind *Reading the Daily News* and about the

place of an artist to act, to do something without knowing all the consequences or even having all the details completely worked out?

MICHAEL For younger artists especially, it's sometimes easy to forget that to accomplish meaningful work does not require the financial or political resources of the Vatican. Often, in fact, the best art comes from artists who are quick, light and responsive to whatever circumstance they find themselves within.

A current exhibition of Picasso's guitar assemblages and collages at MoMA in New York demonstrates this beautifully. Around 1912, Picasso and Braque, using nothing more than scraps of colored paper, a few straight pins, scissors, and a bit of charcoal, completely re-invented the material, spatial and conceptual grounding of 20th-century Western art. What art historians now call "synthetic cubism" was no more, or less, than their extraordinarily imaginative response to a cheap lunch at a street-side café in Paris.

I don't like eating lunch. So at noontime I occasionally take the day's edition of *The Columbus Dispatch* (it costs me seventy-five cents) out to the main campus Oval, where I sit for an hour or so to read out loud from each section of the paper. The Oval is an open green and active social space located at the heart of the main OSU campus—the largest public, land grant university in the United States. Besides the newspaper, I also bring with me a folding stool, a small portable voice amplifier and a board on which to tally the number of my readings—about 35 to date.

I announce each reading as "a public service of *The Living Culture Initiative* in the Department of Art at The Ohio State University" and wear a hat with a tag identifying me as "Event Staff." The tag functions as a sign of authority. It's useful for drawing attention away from me as a performer and toward the event itself. And it reinforces the notion (a fiction, really) that the reading is officially sanctioned.

With *Reading the Daily News*, my intention is not a re-

invention of art, but only to make myself and my work a visible part of the campus environment. It's an improvised response to the comings and goings of daily campus life as it relates, or not, to a broad local, national and global context. After three hundred and sixty-five readings I will stop.

JAMES I believe one of the biggest challenges for young artists is to figure out how to contribute to the extraordinary amount of artistic and cultural production, not only occurring today but within the history of art. Your work occupies a singular place, a kind of studio-cum-research-cum-performance practice that interweaves students, an array of ideas and interests and different disciplines and departments. So I'm curious to know which artists and what kind of works have influenced your development? How do you incorporate (or not) those influences into your practice?

MICHAEL To speak of influences is quite difficult for me, not because there are so few, but because there are so many. Like the monkey "Curious George," I am often distracted by the world; and that can get me into trouble. Yet, "into trouble" is where an artist's work is located.

Before attending college, I had almost no formal art training. However, as a sophomore in high school, Thoreau's *Walden* made an enormous impression on me. It was the first time I realized a life can be lived according to an idea; that ideas are not abstractions; and that an individual can actively shape life according to what questions one asks of oneself and one's relation to the world.

Thoreau was, of course, a writer and not a visual artist (although he drew in his journals). Still, there is a way in which *Walden* is a recording of its being written as much, or more, than it's a record of the facts of Thoreau's life at Walden Pond. The life and the book are not the same, and yet the book becomes a *work* of art—as both verb and

noun—through the life actually lived.

When Marcel Duchamp immigrated to the United States during WWII, he was famously puzzled at finding himself better known in America than in his home country of France. Sometimes I have wondered if his enormous influence on artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage had something to do with a receptive ground having earlier been prepared by the example of Thoreau and Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists and, perhaps, of Walt Whitman. Like Duchamp, all of those writers insisted on the significance of, as Emerson wrote—“the near, the low, the common.”

This notion of the potential for an art of the everyday has long been part of an American cultural and intellectual tradition. It is also the revolution of modern art we still live within—of art as a process and a set of constantly moving, shifting and negotiated relationships with our world—of an art that refuses to stand still. It’s a special kind of monkey business and it might be found anywhere—including at the Met, at MoMA, in Chelsea, in North Dakota, on the Internet and on the radio and on television, in the movie theaters and the library, at Wal-Mart, in the flea market and in the barnyard.

JAMES What is the most valuable asset an MFA student can have as they conclude a graduate program and begin to produce work, begin to build and sustain a career as an artist?

MICHAEL Your use of the word “sustain” rather than “success” intrigues me. And if we are speaking of sustenance, then might we also address “career” as a lifelong activity as much as it is a profession?

Building a professional resume of exhibitions, grant applications and residencies can certainly be important for any artist. But it may be equally important to understand that there is not one art world, instead there is a world of/for art. The challenge for any young artist is to find and then to cultivate or make a place for themselves and their work. *That* place, wherever it may

be, then becomes an art world.

Some may find their place in a gallery in Chelsea, in New York City. Others may find themselves in a small town in Iowa where there is no gallery. But an art world is not simply there, or not, to begin with. A world of/for art is not *given*. It is made. And its making requires repeated and sustained effort.

A world of/for art is also not made of objects or spaces. It is, rather, through engaging a web or community of relations between ideas and conversations and values that an art world sometimes assembles or gathers itself around such things. Even in a virtual environment we all become *local* artists—in the sense that *where* something happens has a lot to do with *what* and *how* something happens. That is how a world of/for art becomes realized (is made real).

This fact appears to be a common thread through all of the presenters in this series—as artists/curators/teachers/mentors/administrators—Jon, Matthew and Morgan each responds directly and imaginatively to the situation in which they find themselves. Each pays a lot of attention and respect to where they are, with little regard for, or worry about, the identity of their occupational category.

To abandon art’s world’s altogether is another option—and frankly, there is no shame in that. But first, it might be a good idea to take time out for lunch.

COMPARTMENT IS THE COMMONS
AN INTERVIEW WITH J. MORGAN PUETT

J. MORGAN PUETT
EXPLORES EXCHANGE,
COLLABORATION AND
RESEARCH IN CONNECTION
WITH THE LONG-TERM
EXPERIMENTAL PLATFORM
MILDRED'S LANE, LOCATED
IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA.
PUETT PRESENTED A TALK
ON JANUARY 31, 2011.

JAMES You use the phrase “being as practice” to describe the philosophy of the curriculum at Mildred’s Lane. Could you talk about this concept within relation to your practice as well as how it transpires at Mildred’s Lane?

MORGAN I feel it is the most succinct way to describe what goes on at Mildred’s Lane. It is not the usual residency, or school, and not easily summed up in the terms of “colony” or “retreat,” and there is no studio practice, the place—life itself is the studio. So how can words describe this experience? The art of the place is in being there; thus—being as practice, presenting a complex socially and politically charged entanglement that embodies relations to the environment, systems of labor, forms of dwelling, clothing apparatuses, and most importantly, creative domesticating—all of which compose an ethics of comportment and are practiced through what we call *workstyles*.

Workstyles is any practitioner’s autobiographical and experiential making-doing-thinking process that is inter- and intra-relational—active system thinking. It involves highly sensitive aestheticism and understanding of how things influence each other within a whole, through “cyclical thinking and doing rather than linear intentions and outcomes.” One attains workstyles by being creatively engaged with the surrounding environment of things and others at all times. These relations grow out of the materially complex discipline of installation art, but remain theoretically rich and grounded in the quotidian tactics of “getting by.” Reassembling is a way to rethink what we have (or what can be done with) what is “at hand.” There is emphasis on care for each other and about the topics that drive us.

JAMES Mildred’s Lane engages with many different kinds of institutions nationwide. It also connects with local organizations and businesses and all sorts of independent constituents who travel near and far to visit. The maintenance of these relationships and associations

must be an extraordinary amount of work. I do not believe young artists realize how much time administration takes up in a practice like yours. How do you achieve a balance between the creative work you do and the administrative work and how do both coalesce to support a robust and rigorous project?

MORGAN Firstly, ANY and EVERY practice involves administrative maintenance—it is inescapable in this society. Creative practices are not exempt—imagining that one is free from such constraints is a romantic notion. We all have to deal with making a way to clothe, feed, dwell—this involves having some efforts administratively. The challenge for me is how to proceed in the most democratic manner. Albeit, attempting to make an ambitious project like that of Mildred’s Lane demands much—but there are many others who help, Courtney Dailey, Lacey Wozney, Athena Kokoronis, J. Walker Tufts, Monique Milleson and many students who help as interns each season. We could not accomplish anything without the continuous support and friendship of these young artists.

Mark Dion is my co-director. We both fold the project into our regular migratory lives as artists. Our friends who come regularly also recruit and co-curate with us, but it is not the kind of curatorial practice that a traditional museum functions. This is emergent, it stems out from our friends, or whomever we bump into being out in the world. The topics evolve naturally around the ecological and social developments on/of the site. My creative efforts are entangled in all these areas, and I have turned my love of the complex field of installation art toward each task.

Sometimes it is challenging. I am at my office/computer wherever I go, squeezing in correspondence into the interstices of each day. I am perpetually behind on everything, but, always believing that I am very close to clearing the slate for the next task.

Further, we overlook the stage of our lives, middle age, when it is now we, with our friends and peers are functioning as the professionals—artists, authors, curators,

directors, professors, critics—so it makes it pleasurable to be in touch with them and in dialog about new pedagogical practices emerging here and there.

I have always felt that we cannot separate ourselves from the complex and amorphous spaces of institutions that would allow for such forms of critique to have complex actualization and not simply an ideological pose. I think that Mildred's Lane provides a pleasurable experiment to be involved in as a relief from the frustrations of the institution neck deep with litigious concerns. "Coevolving" is the richly inspired motivation, reinventing new systems of implementation outside these playing fields.

JAMES It is not always openly discussed how long-term projects like Mildred's Lane are funded. But, of course, the economy is very important. Could you talk about how Mildred's Lane is sustained and perhaps discuss this facet within the context of the new work *Retail 21c* and *The Mildred Complex(ity)* which will be launched spring 2011?

MORGAN Mark and I built this home and family on Mildred Steffen's 19th-century farm while we were busy with our lives as working project artists. At a certain point in this development, as our lives and practices shifted, we realized that we had built a special place. We had been functioning as a very informal retreat, naturally inviting friends, students, colleagues for dinners, lectures, performances and presentations for each other, mainly as a way to catch up on each other's lives and work, but more, we witnessed them produce history here.

Every effort has been out of pocket. We are struggling artists, as everyone, and we work year round to make ends meet. But anytime we have a chunk of money from projects, lecturing, awards, we invest it into our friend's projects at Mildred' Lane. Also, the artists who have produced projects have invested their own time and money—an unusual trust—they are investing in the notion and understanding that we are collectively producing history—*collectively* we are working toward meaningful

exchange in a cynical world.

We held our first fundraiser in 2010, a very funny scene, memorable! *The Brown Paper Package Fundraiser 2010* was an event where our friends of Mildred's Lane from around the world sent a work to be up for auction, just as most art auctions where collectors may gain some prestige and economy at once; except in this case, all were asked to wrap what was to be auctioned in brown paper packages, sent from the artist to Mildred's Lane. Unusual was that we asked that collectors bid on the unopened packages. They were only privy to the branding, and that it was up to them and the artist whether or not the packages are ever to be opened, but suggesting that they not. Each year we will have a brown paper package auction so that one may build a nice shelf of packages of the artists who participate and support Mildred's Lane.

One of the topical sessions each year at Mildred's Lane is a think tank called *Retail Twenty-first Century (R21c)*. A group of artists come together at this time to talk about on their practices devoted to experimentation in various forms of exchange and collaboration. These practitioners understand that global forms of capital are evolving very quickly and new forms of subjectivity are emerging; and we have all been involved in exploring new spaces of cultural production with this understanding.

Most importantly, it has been a growing collective concern for the future of exchange, which is more involved than a simple critique of consumption. We are interested in critical alternatives to what and how we produce and make things—do things—systemically and interpersonally, with interest in what the future looks like. *R21c* seeks a collaborative, co-evolving response to exchange with learning *as you go* as an ongoing shared experience. *The Mildred Complex(ity)* is an outgrowth of this study and is a newly formed public face that is located in the nearby village of Narrowsburg NY (1.5 miles away.) There we will perform a series of projects utilizing Main Street USA as a place for research, experimentation and implementation.

Several artists affiliated with *The Mildred Complex(ity)* will develop relationships with local businesses on the street:

the weaver, the real estate office, the hardware store, the bank, the thrift store, the café, the feed store, the funeral home, the toymaker, the knitting store, the home store and others. These relationships will lay the groundwork for upcoming projects that will occur as disbursed and discreet social interventions within this community.

Additionally, I am launching a new fundraising system, this year called *RENT DRESS*, which will be a series of clothing apparatuses, some of which will be in collaboration with artists, designers, scientists and engineers. We will make unique clothing along with other products that will be made out of found materials. These products will be exchanged for the sole purpose of supporting the rent, utilities, projects and involvements with Mildred's Lane artists and the emergent events therein.

JAMES Food is very much a part of the experience at Mildred's Lane. How is it utilized as a vehicle for learning and engagement with one another and among the student participants?

MORGAN Food brings us back to comportment. The quality of food is the first thing; we eat locally and organically grown, fresh foods (at least until they begin the toxic hydraulic gas fracturing in this area, which is the most pressing political topic concerning air, water and soil!). Our own farm-to-table liaison is Monique Milleson of the Anthill Organic Farm in nearby Honesdale, PA and Athena Kokoronis, our digestion choreographer, both are engaged with food projects, and direct this facet of our system.

Making the dinner event at Mildred's Lane is an exciting artistic area of thinking-doing-living, and it involves much critical and rigorous engagement. There is a tendency toward disrupting our habits here in particular; with the implementation of (whimsical) algorithmic systems. Every aspect of the process becomes artful even down to the rearrangement of the refrigeration system, and even the dinner setting; where, how, when...and with what? Again, the entire site at Mildred's Lane is open to a new possibility for artful, eventful "fooding."

JAMES What, if any, kind of shared ethos exists among the students who participate in a residency at Mildred's Lane? How do you negotiate with so many variables in terms of the depths and kinds of knowledge each student possesses as well as the social and living skills they bring to the site?

MORGAN The residency is not for everybody, the practitioners who are interested are those who already work as project-based or event-based artists, and those who work socially and politically.

I think living and working together makes everyone at his or her best in all possible situations.

So, comportment is the commons. Respectful participation in all areas of this living-working-researching environment is essential and grounds everyone. Everyone helps each other, there are no servants, and we are as much the teachers as we are students in these endeavors.

JAMES The word *comportment* is part of the vernacular used to describe activity at Mildred's Lane. It's not a common word. What does the word mean and why you feel it important to apply to the social engagement and learning that occurs at Mildred's Lane?

MORGAN Comportment offers us a way to navigate our everyday experience, breaking old habits and reassembling new ones. I revive the term *comportment*, which is conceptualized as belonging to or affecting a whole community, or commons, and in the 21c. these turbulent multiplicities of deportment, ethics, etiquette, criticality, and, above all, hospitality allow for potential for more freedom opening up possibilities for new types of exchange. Exchange is the paramount experience.

Comportment means a consideration of our behavior as a constant negotiation with the environment—things and space, human and nonhuman. Rethinking our involvement with all everyday habits—fooding, shopping,

making, cleaning, gaming, sleeping, reading, thinking, and doing—we make each gesture a sensitive and sustainable one. This attitude entails attention to what and who is before you, and after, making way for the next gesture and requiring generosity at all times. Such workstylings have no beginning and no end—they make up our lives.

JAMES You travel to present work and to cultivate interest in and knowledge about Mildred's Lane. What are your thoughts as to where we are headed with this kind of continued art world ritual in terms of trading cultural capital for real capital to ultimately help sustain projects? Are there other solutions or is it a good thing?

MORGAN I don't know how to answer this—it is a constant and critical balancing act. Historically, experiments in utopian societies and living have predominately failed much due to human conflicts in territoriality, sexual relationships, money, greed, authorship...so far we have successfully negotiated most of these conflicts. But I have no idea where or what will happen to Mildred's Lane ultimately. Mark and I both agree that it is as good as its last season—that it could end tomorrow—but as long as we are enjoying it, and our friends and colleagues share in the entertainment and exchange—collaboratively, then we will maintain it as much as we can afford. Perhaps we will leave it in trust, but to whom? Importantly, it is our friends who have supported and invested their efforts in it and I think they will have a say.

JAMES Another language question. Your title is the Ambassador of Entanglement? What does that mean?

MORGAN Perhaps it is self-critical. We must constantly reassemble these terms, sculpt new meanings and new roles that hopefully better fit each context. My role is too complexly interwoven, to determine it through a title that betrays every degree of my involvement. I cannot adequately describe each aspect of the many roles without interconnecting it to another; therefore, entanglement

seems the most appropriate solution.

And well, these times are dark. What is the role of the artist in the 21st century? Can we experimentally replace these terms *art* and *artist* with that of *ambassador* (of invention?). Is there a way to describe our changing practices?

I am interested, given this political environment, in rethinking how this site can offer new ways to pose these questions—through new forms of labor, sociality and practice, importantly, as *ambassadors*. But more, in how we can produce new forms of institutions...and this has really influenced much of my thinking about the limits of critique. We are changing, what are our critical alternatives? What is important?



MORE LIKE WORKING WITH GASES
THAN SOLIDS: A CONVERSATION WITH
JON RUBIN

JON RUBIN'S WORK
EXPLORES THE SOCIAL
DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC
PLACES AND THE
IDIOSYNCRASIES
OF INDIVIDUAL AND
GROUP BEHAVIOR.
HE IS AN ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR AT CARNEGIE
MELLON UNIVERSITY
IN PITTSBURGH. RUBIN
PRESENTED A TALK ON
OCTOBER 14, 2010.

This conversation was held in a class room in the Department of Art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA on January 14, 2011.

JAMES I'd like to start by talking about your experience teaching contextual practice in the art department at Carnegie Mellon, particularly in relation to arriving at this university after working with your project The Independent School of Art in San Francisco. What are some of the challenges with introducing social practice inside a larger university and finding agency for the work amidst more established disciplines and modernist departmental frameworks?

ION I'm continually challenged by how to present contextual work to undergraduate students. It is something we've decided to take on here at Carnegie Mellon where we've added it to our other, as you call them, modernist areas of focus. The vast majority of our students arrive thinking in often antiquated modes of how they might be an artist and getting them from that point to where they think anything goes is often a daunting task.

On the one hand, we're well positioned because in our foundation curriculum students are not only taking medium-specific courses but also conceptual studios based on ways of thinking about the world as opposed to approaching their practice through a specific material, technology, or history. Some of our students are resistant to this approach. I'm not sure if its a generation shift but a few of our freshman come in wanting to be surrealists and the rest seem to want to work for Pixar. Obviously this is a simplification but I am surprised at how many of the students want to work within some corporate industry. They've been marketed to with such ferocity and sophistication since they could crawl that they intuitively, yet not critically, equate commercial media with cultural power. The problem becomes how to talk about artistic agency within these highly controlled industries that are constructed via corporate interests. If their agency is tied

to where they fit into the larger machine of corporate production they are automatically starting off by accepting a fundamental lack of autonomy. Now, the same thing can be said for the limited means in which they imagine they might "fit in" to the art world. One of my goals with teaching undergrads is to get them to think about their practice as part of a vast and shifting social, political and economic ecosystem—not just a commercial or fine art system, and that's where foregrounding context becomes so important.

To engage students in talking about how their practice can exist within any aspect of society they first have to disengage with all their notions of what art making is. And I can tell you that is a tough thing to teach when probably 75% of undergrads consider themselves painters. And although I love painting, there really are very few systems in which a painting or a painter can exist. It certainly begs the questions of what art schools are perpetuating and why. I honestly don't know why all art students need to take so much drawing, or any drawing for that matter. I think their first year might be better spent designing and building a house that they have to live in for their four years in college.

The other challenge to teaching contextual practice to undergrads is to tear them away from the mythology that if they create something deeply personal it will automatically be deeply universal. This is usually the anti-contextual approach to art making that positions their work primarily within an internal as opposed to external dialogue.

JAMES Yes. It's performing art school, performing Modernism in a way. Because of these rails that have been laid down that tell students how to act and what their goals should be.

ION It's a type of thinking and making that often isn't about conversation, engagement, relationships or systems—which frankly are the things that the rest of our lives are made up of. The performance of art school is often about the mastery of the insular historical

vocabularies of the art world. Often I find the students in my classes that aren't in the art program—from the humanities, computer science, drama department—don't have the same hang-ups and expectations on how their work should be categorized as art and often take fresh approaches to their work, although they too can fall into the trap of trying to make art that smells like art. Architecture students are very interesting to me in terms of contextual practice since they automatically have to think about context and the problems of client/user/audience/participant. I mean it's embedded in the tradition.

JAMES I can see that. Those students understand from the beginning about collaborative processes that they are working with other people. I've observed that keen skill of communication from my experiences working with artists who produce work within social contexts. They inherently have to engage on a regular basis and need to speak and write about what they're doing. They must find a way to communicate about the work and as part of the work even through visual communication.

JON It's storytelling in the end and this becomes an issue of form. I think a lot of what I wrestle with in my own work is how a story is told. This is something I talk to my students about; ideally all work should be a good story, well told. And frankly the standard forms used in the majority of art making are not that interesting or facile anymore. They predetermine such a narrow field of aesthetics and engagement. The various realms we inhabit in our daily lives are so much more complicated and fascinating than the circumscribed territories of art that we often present our students. Why isn't the whole mess fair game from the get go? Why do we cling to these prescribed methods, materials, and histories when teaching art? How do you get students to grasp the boundlessness of it all? For me that is the exciting moment, the moment in thinking about a practice that is deeply engaged with culture. It's funny because I am reticent to use social practice or even contextual practice

as a description for this work. They're already problematic.

JAMES Social, of course, could extend to all art.

JON That has been a discussion here at Carnegie Mellon, where for over twenty years the school, often under the radar, has been presenting curriculum around publicly-engaged practices. When I arrived we talked about how do we coalesce that history and move it forward somehow. We decided to create an undergraduate area of focus around these ideas, but we were keen not to create a "department." I was also reticent to label it social practice. I think my ambivalence came out of feeling that the term had come to represent a narrowing as opposed to broadening of how to work in public realms. It seemed to imply to many people that what was valued in a work was some form of social service, social change, and/or social good. I'm not against this type of work, but I'm also interested in how artists are engaging in public situations in really idiosyncratic, non-rational and open-ended ways. I find thinking about context as an operative principle to be much more fluid. I've always been interested in context or systems in general as materials for artworks. Listen, in the end I really don't give a shit what something is called, and I find all of the constant branding in academia tiresome and counter to the way in which most artists think about their work. I think its best to not know where you are, its so much more curious that way.

JAMES Yes. You're recreating the 60's model of defining the different disciplines. Like you say, by defining parameters that you only work with the community or your work has to have something related to social engagement, you're going back into that model you were trying to get out of. Today a lot of institutions are trying to discard that model but the academic structure is so engrained it's difficult to escape.

JON There are lots of people working within this realm of social/contextual practice, and we should be critically looking at what this means. But does that mean that we

need to ensconce it, as you mentioned, into this modernist academic hierarchy? I think it would be better if you had areas of studies in the arts that coalesced for a period of time and then disappeared within the larger field. More like working with gases than solids.

JAMES That's where the struggle lies: How to create a space that is experimental, unexpected and nebulous within the rigid structures of disciplines and institutions that seek to define what exists. I admire the words of a curator and theorist Nina Möntmann. She has written about a theory she has calls the "wild child" in relation to how an exhibition program or project within an institution can behave, operate from within but challenge the institution. I relate to the concept because I feel Bureau for Open Culture has operated within this zone of uncertainty. What is it? That uncertainty allows things to happen. I think that is what has happened hereto some degree.

JON To some degree, I think it's still in formation. At this point a student wanting to focus on contextual practice does not have to "declare" it like a major. They can move fluidly in our program, in fact many of them are taking classes listed or cross-listed as contextual practice and don't even know it. I'm technically the only contextual practice faculty, but most of the other faculty share an interest and present classes from their perspectives that unpack a variety of ways of being conscious of context in the work. And it's a nice mix of offerings because it is based on personality as opposed to ideology. I mean Lowery Burgess teaches a great class on space art (as in outer space), and Paolo Pedercini teaches a class on online games as social interfaces. Both of these are related to their own research and interest and probably fall outside of the conventional social practice curriculum. And these faculty were interested in those subjects well before we had a contextual practice area. Personally, I've been collaborating with faculty in design, architecture, drama, and the humanities as a way of expanding the discourse

and participation in my classes. I'm co-teaching this semester with Wendy Aarons, who teaches dramaturgy, and we're teaching what's called the Experimental Talk Show Lab. Our students are paired with people from the city who are interested in producing shows within the strange dynamics that has been initiated by the Waffle Shop.

JAMES It seems artists working within the realm of publicly-engaged practices inherently reveal aspects of failure in their work. Whereas, for instance, if you're working away in the studios and you've worked through ideas and you're alone in this kind of traditional genius artist model you make work you're not satisfied with. But work within social contexts often happens in real-time so you make this work and it sometimes involves other people and sometimes it doesn't work out as one had planned and the practice is the rhetoric.

JON I think that failure needs to be embedded in any practice, especially one that works with the public. I find too often students are obsessed about doing things right. Also there is a challenge in building an aesthetic language around their contextual work so they're not just slight surface gestures. One of the criticisms that comes from teaching contextual/social work from some peers is that the student's early work is so awful; it's all these really bad attempts. Really, regardless of approach, they're all making bad work when they're trying to develop a language. Look at all these really bad paintings, sculptures and drawings they make as well. What's implied is that its okay to fail in private but not in public. What needs to be challenged is not failure but hubris. Whereas a painting student might think I'm painting so therefore I'm making art, a contextual practice student could fall into the trap of saying well I'm working in a relatively non-traditional way and thus it's interesting in and of itself. The difference now is that students build a critical aesthetic vocabulary around studio based art in relationship to a history that is valued, there's a literal archive that they can touch upon that their faculty

is well versed in. It's like they're all swimming down stream together. Whereas in a contextual practice everyone's digging out tributaries from that master narrative and developing new pools of discourse as they go that draw from outside of the histories of art as well.

I try to reframe it for the students so that every aspect of their social and anti-social life can be territory for their practice. The things they complain about in the world on a daily basis can be reframed as part of a creative impulse, the way they construct their identity or the places they move through can be their sites of inquiry.

JAMES I would like to go back to that element of agency in relation to these practices. On one hand, art students at Carnegie Mellon are thinking on a corporate level, in terms of corporations that would employ them. Painters and sculptors are thinking about how to become supported by a gallery or have their work shown. From my perspective as a curator, I'm concerned about the aspects related to agency. I feel like, and it may even be developing, through the number of biennials that are happening artists are invited to make work in the context of the city through curators who are making work through the context of this model. It seems like there is a loss of agency where social practice artists are becoming cultural workers and itinerant workers. I know that's an extreme model but I think you can see it.

JON Yes. It's always a double-edged sword. There's obviously more opportunities and more artistic practices are being recognized and space is being made for them. Curators are thinking about how to work with them. I mean, the discussion of how academia tends to circumscribe and calcify certain practices I think that is equally mirrored within the relationships between curator, institution and artist. I think a lot about the distribution systems a work can exist in and create. There are more and more artists thinking outside the dealer-

gallery-museum rubric. And when they think outside this structure what do they imagine?

All of our second-year grad students are engaged in a contextual practice seminar over the course of the year. I want to use the idea of context as a lens to look at the economy their work creates and exists within. Maybe they'll shift according to the focus of that lens or not, either way it makes them aware of their default expectations for their work and how they can have agency in every aspect of their practice. In Daniel Buren's 70's essay *The Function of the Studio*, he talks about how the academic studio replicates an artist's post academic apartment studio which architecturally imitates the commercial gallery which looks just like the museums the works will eventually go into. This trains artists from the get go to produce work that makes sense primarily in one ever-repeated, commercially-driven context. Right now, we're sitting in a classroom that very much looks like a gallery. Filled with white walls and implied neutrality. If you go upstairs there will be studios that are smaller versions of this with smaller white walls—almost looks like a sloppy version of an art fair up there. It's one of the reasons I like to teach my classes in other spaces in the city, just to make the context of the work explicit again.

JAMES The other thing is, how much do you discuss with the undergraduates about evaluating the work? What are some of the aesthetic pillars?

JON I try to interrogate their rationale. I'm sure it's no different than the way someone in the painting program would interrogate a painting. Do you need to continue to paint in really what is the same basic manner that has been replicated for centuries? How is it relevant to your life and the worlds you inhabit? If they are working in some sort of public context I would want to know how the work creates an interesting space between their own desires and the realities of what lies beyond their control. The core of it is how their desires are being played out. Often students will create a project where you can barely tell where their perspective and personality exists within it. And again that falls within all art forms so the same

criticality applies to someone who says they want to hold hands with a stranger on the bus or someone who wants to paint the same situation well why? What is it about that action? We deal with the story or narrative within the work and I try to see it as part of a larger continuum of ideas this person might be interested in about the world. Is this a thing you're only interested in because it's ethical? Maybe holding hands with a stranger is only interesting because it's based on the five things you do next or the three things you did previously.

JAMES What kind of discussions come up about rights and wrongs of using the public or the person on the bus to hold their hand and then to become part of the work?

JON The ethics?

JAMES Yes.

JON I think when you get into publicly-engaged work ethics can become debilitating and paralyzing for a lot of students because they are strategically making something that is purely ethical. I think you need to define your own parameters and be savvy about your own biases and prejudices and be honest and OK with it all.

JAMES I can see them being overly-interrogative of it during crits, really zoning in on one another.

JON Yes, and that can be a trap. I think a studio-based practice can be extrapolated into a social-based practice. Where in a studio-based practice you rarely talk about your painting being unethical, I mean maybe but not often. I think it's important to take the same kind of experimentation and responsibility to the weirdness of your desires into a public context as well.

JAMES Yes. And, again, the tripping and the uncertainty is part of it. That is one of the key things: learning to work within an element of uncertainty about how that action will ultimately manifest.

JON Right. You don't have to do the "right thing" because now you're in the public sphere with your practice. Otherwise you're going to make a lot of boring work that poorly replicates more amazing things that are already in the world. Kaprow laid all this out pretty clearly 40 years ago now. For him it was all a form of imitation, no matter how art-like or non-art like, yet what he really valued was play. And inherent in play, serious play, is constant questioning and failure. What was powerful about Kaprow's ideas and sadly we are still lagging to catch up, is that anything you see in the world and any way you move in the world can be your practice. That is why you try to build a sort of aesthetic scaffold around what you're doing, as opposed to a singular ethical criterion for all of your work. And that's a challenge for young artists to do.

JAMES Some of the most interesting practices are artists that produce objects for the galleries and then there is another component that is context-based within a certain part of the community or certain aspect of that gallery even; how to transcend these disciplines between the space of presentation and space of engagement with art. Those are really rich too.

JON All of the conditions around the space of engagement are so important to control. Again, since we're talking about agency and an arts education this reminds me of another paradigm that academia re-enforces: the time-base of works. Art schools reflect the art market in how they structure work into assignments, classes, and semesters. They create these discreet beginnings and ends. So students are perfectly conditioned when they leave school to make objects or installations for institutions that have tidy opens and closings. Christ, artists open their own "autonomous" spaces all the time that end up just adhering to the same old paradigms. That's why I'm really interested in situations like Mildred's Lane and the Museum of Jurassic Technology—projects that have indeterminate time protocols and fluid identities, but still maintain enough clarity to be good stories, well told.

JAMES That's related to what I'm trying to work through with Bureau for Open Culture. I'd like to have a series of interrogations as exhibitions and work repeatedly with a group of the same artists, even with different institutions. It would be an ongoing research platform that manifests occasionally into the public sphere kind of as progress reports while providing a steady, livable income for the artists. It would place great value on the private components of an exhibition.

JON It's not like you're curating this specific show at this specific time and it starts and stops.

JAMES Right. It could transpire over the course of a number of years and take a public shape when necessary or conditions are appropriate. The work viewers would see is not an end but a cross-section of the process.

JON I think that's fascinating and relevant. Whether it's an interactive process of production or a work that's free from any institutional boundaries. The homing pigeon piece that I'm doing kind of relates to this idea. I am providing the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver with a pigeon loft and a group of young pigeons that will be slowly trained by museum visitors taking them home and releasing them after a day to fly back to the museum loft. One of my interests in the project is in thinking about when does it actually start. Technically it has already begun, as the breeding has started. I'm bringing in the parents who are producing the children who will then continue to produce another generation. And with each generation the pigeons need to be retrained in a kind of dance of stewardship between the viewer and the institution. Now this relationship between viewer, museum, and artworks was already going on before I approached the institution. In some ways what the work does is make that system explicit. Also, as the viewers help to train the birds—which is an interesting form of education—as homing pigeons learn to fly back home through a process of being let

go at increasingly longer distances—their navigational circumference expands and the sculptural dimension of the work has grown as well.

JAMES Your work become this radiating element for these different platforms of experimentation.

JON My interest in that is how the traditional notion of an art museum is inverted as these ever-growing numbers of domestic spaces perform the function of temporary exhibition sites and the institutional space is cast as a domicile and caretaker. In this way the work maps a loop of social distribution between the institution and its constituent audience. There's a real act of trust that must occur here between the museum, the visitor and the artwork, and there is something very beautiful about that to me. I also like that the museum will have to feed and clean up after the pigeons on a daily basis in a live act of conservation.

JAMES Historically the museum is the caretaker and a space not only for the work but a refuge for the viewers. Particularly classical museums can be wonderful places to show the longevity of the human beings and the production that has transcended all these years.

JON Which is back to this notion of time and the autonomy of an artist in an economy of art. How can you work with, against, and around the nature of an institution? That is some of what I'm thinking about with that project. I think more and more about the same thing with the Waffle Shop or Conflict Kitchen the notion of agency and the type of time that's built around a work. I modify, start and stop those projects whenever I want. Part of it is the literal monetary system that perpetuates them and supports not only their existence but also the story of why they exist. Certainly creating my own quasi-institutions allows me those freedoms that larger public institutions don't have. And to be honest that's why I'm doing more of these self-institutional projects, it's just so much easier to experiment with the fictive quality of institutional behavior

when you just make your own.

JAMES It also comes down to institutions being academic and retraining the public as to how they experience the work through time and through these different spaces of where an aesthetic experience or engagement with a work can take place, like in the space of your home but connected in context with what the institution has already given to you. I believe forward-thinking institutions are trying to retrain the public.

JON It does seem to be the fashion of the times for museums to expand their engagement with the public, often times hiring artists instead of curators (always cheaper) to create programming and education departments. As I said, as an artist I'd rather create my own institutions. The Independent School of Art was in many ways my first large scale attempt to play with how an institution functions as a public provocation. Early on in its development I realized that the only way to frame the school as an aesthetic act was to dislocate it from its natural environment, to remove the seemingly commonplace labor of teaching and learning from institutional affiliation and own it as a very personal, autonomous endeavor. Now, with some of the current projects I'm really compelled by simultaneously being tethered to many different socio-economic realities but in ultimately very tenuous ways.

JAMES We started this conversation with talking about how to teach social practice and the aspect of agency, then how do you evaluate the work and then the future of the work. This is why I'm so fascinated by the work you do because you draw on all these different resources. Working with the institutions, meaning also the grants and the different kinds of funds that come from other universities and elsewhere. But there seems to be this element of autonomy, you use this word tenuous.

JON Yes, for example: Maybe this university doesn't need to exist? Or maybe it needs to change its mind more often about what its existence means. It's often easier for us to recognize how constructed and changeable our individual identity is than that of our institutions, yet I would argue there is little difference. The more people I meet that are in positions of power or authority the more I recognize that they are performing their role. The more institutions I deal with the more I recognize how they are made up of a conglomeration of people performing around a premise or script. Wow! What a miraculous thing. We're all doing what we did in elementary school: we're playing house, playing teacher, playing president, it's just everyone believes us now. This causes me to think about how groups of people come together around these shared notions of fantasy and play. Like the exhibition Astria Suparak and I just curated about the Steelers fans, for us it was a chance to unpack this fascinating identity performance that occurs cross-demographically in this city in relationship to the branded culture of the team. What's interesting is how these fans take something very corporate and remix it into something strangely personal, and then how that binds them together in this larger force of culture. In the end groups can do very serious things but I think it can be dangerous to take them as permanent or unchangeable forces. This can be extrapolated to institutions. Here, my school has been around for one hundred years. It's a pretty serious place. But, that's only because we've all agreed to a set of fancy rules based on other institutions that preceded or surround us. All of a sudden this fantasy solidifies into something that seems like a social condition that is divorced from our agency. It goes on with or without us. But in any revolution if enough people decide it doesn't go on, it doesn't go on. That was part of the feeling in The Independent School of Art that it wouldn't go on without us just showing up. There was no money, no accreditation, no building nothing. If we didn't show up we just didn't exist. In order for the school to stay aloft and maintain its tenuous existence, all involved had to temporarily suspend their disbelief and agree that their presence and participation were the only factors that defined the school's identity. For a moment the institution is real and when they leave it disappears. Making very explicit that fantasy, and then carrying on nonetheless is

something both comedic and poetic. Even though I'm now doing these projects that are much more dense in their social and financial connections—truly just part of the daily stream of commerce and public life—it's still a marvel to me when a stranger walks in the Waffle Shop, orders food, and goes on stage to be interviewed on the talk show. Don't they know we're making this whole thing up?

JAMES It makes me think of all the support that is coming into it. Because that element of fantasy is becoming an aspect of reality it is now reality. But then, re-evaluating in a year if that kind of recognition that solidifies the fantasy becomes disillusioned.

JON Yes. I think it goes back to continuing to question what you are doing and not just keeping it afloat because it's already there, or out of some misguided allegiance to the past. Then there's capital, certainly if something starts producing money you have an "incentive" to keep it going, which can surely make the worst organizations last forever.

JAMES But it does make you think about opening that space for experimentation and how that has a certain temporal quality.

JON That space for experimentation is constructed through a careful act of leveraging resources. The interesting thing about coming to Carnegie Mellon is the remarkable clout it has in this city. I quickly realized that I could make some interesting things happen by leveraging the cache this massive institution has and making things happen that the business community wouldn't even consider starting. One of the interesting things is now we're getting support from the local community development corporation and ending up on social enterprise blogs, and in magazines for social innovations. No one would have given us a fucking dime if I presented a business plan on any of these ideas—I mean a restaurant that's main function is to coax people into a talk show?

JAMES And you have one or two waffle irons?

JON Right! Well, at this point we have six, but that's beside the point, I mean I doubt if we had tried to find investors for a take-out joint (Conflict Kitchen) that sells food that no one in the city has had before, and then changes to another restaurant as soon as people get use to it, and all the while is really functioning to get people to talk in public about the politics and daily life of countries we are in conflict with, that anyone would have stepped forward. And now we're being hailed as a model of a successful social enterprise. I don't even know what that means. I am compelled by how the project functions on a very basic daily level in people's lives and the type of discourse we've been able to catalyze because of that. And I do recognize that operating as an actual neighborhood business has gotten us away from the trap of an art world-only discourse. I also appreciate the possible traps within a context of capital, and wonder what does that mean for us?

JAMES That's an interesting way to end because the aspect of agency is lost when you become too ingrained in the larger institutions, including the grant sources, that are forcing you to build a new bathroom, for example, as with the Waffle Shop. It involves more people that have a say.

JON Yes. It's a fine line. I'm more and more interested in that people could come to the Waffle Shop or Conflict Kitchen that are not interested in art and still find it compelling. To still have it raise a question about the nature of the places they know, or think they know.

JAMES Ben Kinsley told me about this when he visited to North Adams. He said people come into the Waffle Shop and don't know what's going on or have any idea of its connection to Carnegie Mellon or art. They just want to sit down and have food. I like the way knowledge about it is transferred and disseminated via these strains of interpretations, slowly eroding any detection of the "art" in it.

JON It's an uncanny space. That's really important to me. And it's creating this destabilizing experience without relying on someone bracing for it like you might in a museum. I think it's also nice when it hovers between being nothing and something, rational and irrational. By having the Waffle Shop, Conflict Kitchen and our rooftop billboard connected to each other and simply taking on so many identities—restaurant, talk show, classroom, social documentary, political protest—we are able to present an unstable public identity.

In the end I'm still driven by how true stories, whether it be the story of an individual, group, or institution, are constructed and broadcast. This past month we went through piles of Waffle Shop footage in order to put together an edit. There are hundreds and hundreds of people, all kinds of people, that have been up on that stage. And it's hard sometimes to perceive the whole. The types of people and types of conversation, many of them quite remarkable and strange; when seen in the aggregate it's like a dream state.

There will be a point, back to this notion of a tenuous institution, when things settle into themselves. Maybe then you just return it to the normative structures of the world. Let it get consumed or maybe it evolves into something else or it could slowly and intentionally disappear, like a fade out on a song, instead of an untimely demise.

JAMES It reminds me of Orchard—Andrea Fraser, Moyra Davey and Jason Simons and others down there on the Lower East Side. It was a three-year project; they had pre-determined an end date. I think that's really bold and wonderful.

JON What would we do?

JAMES Yours should be the Mayan calendar.

JON That's right. It all ends next year. What would Yale or IBM or BP look like if they said all right we've got one more year, that's it. What would that look like, how would it change? It's like I've got a year to live. How will my life change?

BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE

THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE EXHIBITION THE NEW ADMINISTRATION OF A FINE ARTS EDUCATION (OCTOBER 4, 2010-FEB. 2, 2011) CURATED BY JAMES VOORHIES WITH LISA DENT AND ORGANIZED BY BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE FOR COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN.

VISIT BUREAUFOROPENCULTURE.ORG TO LEARN MORE.

DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS JAMES VOORHIES

EXHIBITIONS MANAGER DIANA MATUSZAK
PREPARATORS GREG BROWE, FRANKLIN CASTANIEN, ALEXANDER ROSS, BRIAN SHARROCK
AUDIOVISUAL SERVICE MANAGER PALMER PATTISON
DESIGNER NATE PADAVICK
COPY EDITOR JOHN EWING
PHOTOGRAPHER JUSTIN LUNA
PRINTER EXCELSIOR PRINTING

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO ALL THE ARTISTS AND MJ BOLE, GREG BROWE, FRANK CASTANIEN, SARAH COWLES, JULIA DAVIS, LISA DENT, JEFF FISHER, MATT FLEGLE, ELIZABETH GERDEMAN, MICHELLE LACH, DANIELLE JULIAN NORTON, RIC PETRY, TIM RIETENBACH, ALEX ROSS, BRIAN SHARROCK, MARIANA SMITH, MARIA SPIESS, WALLACE TANSKLEY, ERIC THOMPSON, AND BRENDA TUCKER.

A SINCERE APPRECIATION TO COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN PRESIDENT DENNY GRIFFITH AND PROVOST ANEDITH NASH.

© 2011 BY BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE AND COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN, THE AUTHOR AND THE ARTISTS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THE PUBLICATION MAY BE REPRODUCED OR OTHERWISE TRANSMITTED IN ANY FORM OR BY ANY MEANS ELECTRONIC OR OTHERWISE WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION FROM THE PUBLISHER.

ISBN: 978-0-9797476-6-3



Columbus College of Art & Design

Canzani Center Gallery
60 Cleveland Ave.
Columbus, Ohio 43215



Greater Columbus
Arts Council



Ohio Arts Council

MATTHEW HIGGS
MICHAEL MERCIL
J. MORGAN PUETT
JON RUBIN

BUREAU FOR OPEN CULTURE