



"It can change as we go along": Social Practice in the Academy and the Community
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The social-practice group meets at the home of Harrell Fletcher in 2008.
(photograph © Cyrus Smith)

About a year ago I invited Harrell Fletcher to do an artist's project for the pages of *Art Journal*. Over time our conversation drifted to the new MFA in social practice he was developing, and it seemed a natural development that it would become the subject and content of his piece. What follows, then, is the record of a conversation among Harrell Fletcher and Sandy Sampson, Eric Steen, Amy Steel, Cyrus Smith, Avalon Kalin, Laurel Kurtz, Katy Asher, and Varinthorn Christopher, the first students in the Portland State University (PSU) program.

—Judith Rodenbeck

**Harrell Fletcher, Sandy Sampson, Eric Steen,
Amy Steel, Cyrus Smith, Avalon Kalin, Laurel Kurtz,
Katy Asher, and Varinthorn Christopher**

“It can change as we go along”: Social Practice in the Academy and the Community

Harrell Fletcher: Whether it's intentional or not, whatever you're involved with during this time in graduate school is part of the pedagogy of the program, and it can change as we go along.

Sandy Sampson: What do you mean, it can change?

Fletcher: Well, the pedagogical structure that we're using this year can change for next year and continue to change after that. I want it to evolve, and not be fixed and overly structured.

Sampson: It seems to me that shaping this program is social practice. For me personally, pedagogy and social practice are like two sides of the same coin.

Fletcher: I don't think they have to be, but having a teaching component to your work is an option for sure. My sense about social practice is that it can be anything, as long as it follows a few basic ideas that need to be there. Other than that, it's wide open. So, you could make projects that are really obnoxious and are not teaching anybody anything, but it happens to be out in the public and working within a post-studio approach, so it would be a subset of social practice. Including educational components in art work is interesting, but there is no mandate that social practice work needs to do that.

Sampson: That brings up a point of occasional discomfort for me. I feel an expectation when someone asks me, “What is social practice?” to speak for some giant monolithic Social Practice, instead of just saying what I'm doing or what I think. Does anybody else come up against that?

Eric Steen: Yeah, I do.

Fletcher: What do you say?

Steen: Well, I basically tell people how I understand the workings of this program. This program is in many respects the opposite of studio practice and the traditional approach to art education. I do end up telling people that it tends to be geared toward having the social as a medium, although I don't always do that in my own work. What I haven't been telling people, but probably should, is that this has been a pretty experimental educational process. We are trying to keep a type of evolution or flexibility happening within the program, and that is what I appreciate the most about the experience so far.

The Committee (Katy Asher, Eric Steen, and Chris Hudson), *The Committee in Partnership with Rudy Speerschneider*, September 2007–August 2008, documentation of consulting project (artwork © Katy Asher, Eric Steen, and Chris Hudson)

The Committee partnered with Rudy Speerschneider of Junior Ambassador's Food Cart during his first year of operation to brainstorm ways to both sustain and grow his business—tools for accounting, creative marketing, and neighborhood events, as well as systems for capacity-building in the form of specially designed board games and handmade instructional coaching booklets. Speerschneider celebrated the completion of the partnership by posting a hand-painted sign at his cart.



Sampson: When you say the evolutionary process, you're referring specifically to this program?

Steen: Yes. We are in our first year and are now shaping it, while at the same time trying to keep it flexible, because we won't always be here. Next year there will be seven more students, and they will be shaping it too, and onward from there.

Amy Steel: How do you guys describe social practice to people who aren't artists?

Cyrus Smith: I end up giving examples, and I try to give as varied an array as possible.

Avalon Kalin: What examples do you end up using?

Smith: I actually end up using all of your work a lot, because I think there are a lot of varied approaches within that. I talk about how Katy is working with a collaborative group, and how working with a group can be considered a part of social practice, because you're not working in a studio, you're having to socialize to even create. Their group tends to work with event-based projects, which seems to be another thing that fits into social practice, in that you're gathering a group of people to have an experience together. I also mention Laurel and Avalon's work in relationship to gathering people, but in maybe more of a spiritual sense, to explain that the act of gathering could serve a lot of different ends. And as business, Eric's approach—publishing—may be more connected to Varinthorn's approach, while education is what Sandy is working with, and play seems to be what Amy works with.

Fletcher: Laurel and Avalon are spiritual?

Smith: Maybe working with spirituality and community in different ways.

Avalon Kalin, *Stranger Moments*, 2008, performance (artwork © Avalon Kalin).

Kalin worked with members of the spiritual storytelling group Enterbeing, who related stories involving encounters with strangers. Amateur actors then reenacted moments from the stories throughout the neighborhood where the group meets in a storefront.



Laurel Kurtz: But I wouldn't say that overall that's what I do.

Fletcher: Would you say that, Avalon?

Kalin: It's definitely there, gathering as a spiritual thing, for sure. But it's not necessarily always oriented that way.

Fletcher: I guess there are some things that obviously have a spiritual connection that you are working with. What's the place you are doing a project with called? Interfaith?

Kalin: Enterbeing. They are an interfaith storytelling group. I'm doing reenactments from the lives of the people there. It's a kind of residency with them. I'm interested in spirituality in general, and being ambiguous about spirituality. The dowser Laurel and I have been working with is a great example of that. We've dowsed public sculptures for auras, trees for energy lines, and the ground around Reed College for musical tones in the environment that we then had a vocalist perform.

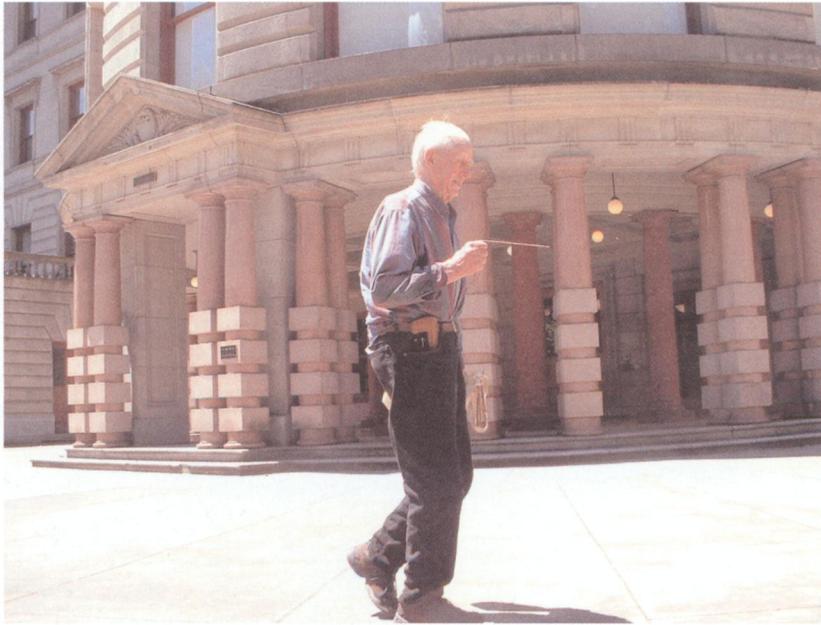
Kurtz: The dowsing projects appeal to me because Mike Doney, the dowser that Avalon and I have connected with, is very open with his friendship and knowledge, and he likes to share experiences and information, something I value in communities. I have known Mike since I was twelve. The bird feeders came to be because my dad is very knowledgeable about the birds that visit our yard. He keeps a list, has reference books, and makes feeders and food for them. I wanted to share his knowledge with others as much as I wanted to learn about the birds myself.

Smith: I also use Laurel's work as an example for art and social activism. And Varinthorn does some activist work.

Kurtz: I did some volunteer work for the Police Accountability Campaign in 2000 because I was upset with police-and-civilian relationships. The stories and

Avalon Kalin, Laurel Kurtz, and Mike Doney, *Dowsing at City Hall, 2008*, performance (artwork © Avalon Kalin, Laurel Kurtz, and Mike Doney).

Mike Doney dowses energy fields at City Hall in Portland.



news reports I encountered were fearsome and led to the eventual project in 2005, which involved making rubbings of police officers' badges while they were still wearing them, and then showing the results at a donut shop. It was a way for me to have a personal relationship to the police officers and to conquer my fear of them. My current work involves doing volunteer work in a gentrified neighborhood. If the relationships I develop lead to other projects down the line, I am open to that, but in the meantime, I want to have as little impact as possible and do more giving than receiving.

Fletcher: I noticed that Kate Pocrass, who spoke here as part of the PSU lecture series, referred to "social sculpture" in her bio. The term comes from Beuys of course, but then it was sort of recycled and used in the 1990s, and then it seemed like other terms eclipsed it, but I guess it still resonates with certain people.

Sampson: Who are those people?

Fletcher: Well, Kate, for one. Some other Bay Area people like Lori Gordon use that term.

Steen: I don't think that just because there is a social element the work becomes social sculpture. For Beuys there was movement toward creating some sort of social structure, a system that all contribute to for the greater good.

Fletcher: You mean like helping to start the Green Party, that sort of thing?

Steen: Yes. But just using participation, I don't exactly see that fitting in with the term "social sculpture." It seems to have more of an activist feeling to it.

Fletcher: I think he also used it in reference to lecture events.

Sampson: I always understood Beuys's lectures to be examples of social sculpture, but the term more generally embodies an idea of participation, people con-



Laurel Kurtz, *Police Badge Rubbing Project*, 2005, still from video, and detail of rubbing, crayon on newsprint, 18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm) (artwork © Laurel Kurtz)

The artist is shown with former Portland police chief Derrick Foxworth.

sciously participating and understanding even the power of language to shape the world. So, participating and shaping the world could take a million different forms, right? In that sense I agree with you that just because something has a social aspect doesn't make it social sculpture. And participation could have no physical aspect whatsoever and still be social sculpture.

Fletcher: The term in German is *Soziale Plastik*. There are two different terms for sculpture in Germany; one is reductive and the other, *Plastik*, is additive.

Sampson: Why don't we be social *Plastik* artists? I love that.

Fletcher: Is there a term that you all would have preferred the program be called instead of "art and social practice"? It could have been "participatory art," "relational aesthetics," "social sculpture," or "community-based art"—and there are others.

Sampson: The thing I like about "social practice" is that you don't have to tack the "art" part onto it, you can just say social practice, and that leaves it much more open. And "practice" is a good word for everyone who's walking and breathing, I think. If you say "relational aesthetics," it starts sounding like a textbook.

Steen: What I love about calling it "social practice" is that it doesn't have to be within the context of what somebody would think of as art. So if I'm not making something that somebody would see as art, it still fits into this category of being some experimental project or practice.

Smith: I don't know if there's any way to incorporate it, but "experimental" seems to keep cropping up in my life.

Fletcher: It could have been called "experimental practice," but that could include studio work, too. "Experimental social practice"? "Experimental social participatory practice"?



Eric Steen, *Utopia—A Science Fiction Marathon*, 2008, mini-lecture series and movie event (artwork © Eric Steen).

Five presentations were given about utopian visions in action and the implementation of ideals in one's own life. Attendees then watched many hours of dystopian science-fiction films and received a supplemental reader.

Katy Asher: "Social experiments"?

Steel: Yeah!

Fletcher: At a faculty meeting we were going through promotion and tenure documents for the department. This gave me an opportunity to make some changes. One of the things that I changed was some terminology. We have the larger art department, which includes graphic design, art history, and what had previously been referred to as studio art, but everyone referred to it as "studio." So I said, "Let's change that to 'contemporary art practice,' because it would cover social practice and anything that is not studio based, but would still makes sense for studio work, too." When I first brought it up, they said, "OK, well, we'll just call ourselves 'art,'" but art is what the department is called, so that seemed like it would be confusing. So then I pushed for "art practice" and it seems like that's going through; then you could just call it "practice" for short, the way it used to be called "studio." That makes a clearer distinction from art history, which is focused on the study of art, while what we do is the practice side of art, the application side of it. But it's been a struggle; it's really hard to get the faculty not to use the word "studio" to refer to everything that I'm calling "practice." There were a lot of other administrative changes along the way. The highest achievement for faculty applying for tenure is to have done a solo exhibi-

tion in a gallery or museum; but if what you're doing is social practice, that may not be the best scenario for your work. So I added a lot of other options to the list. So far people are going with it, but there were definitely a few folks who weren't happy with these changes.

Asher: What are some of the things you added to the list of possible achievements?

Fletcher: Self-initiated public projects of all sorts, work that has an audience and a form of some kind but might not be shown in a gallery or even officially sponsored. There's another category called "refereed and nonrefereed work," which has to do with whether or not you've been asked to do something or you did it yourself and somehow made it public, independent of a museum or journal or whatever. In the administration's world, being asked is considered much better than just doing it yourself.

Asher: I got in an argument with our contemporary theory teacher about that, because we have to write papers, and we aren't allowed to use anything self-published as reference—nothing written by artists, only words published in a magazine or curated in some way by someone who writes a publication. I said, "So artists can't write about other artists, and have their writings considered valid if they self-publish?" I was thinking about the publications of Temporary Services or N55, which seem central to their practices. We weren't allowed to use the internet for our research. I asked, "If I can get the artist to print out the information they've posted on the internet and send it to me in the mail, would that count?" She said, "No."

Kurtz: It's funny, that really stood out to me in class, too. You said, "So basically it just has to be published by someone else?" And she paused and said, "Yes."

Fletcher: That is the way studio practice has been traditionally taught. Your résumé should only list official galleries and museums, and official public art; if it's public art then it has to be a public-art commission. Somebody in authority needs to decide you can show your work to the public. And if you are a good studio artist following the model, you are going to wait your turn and hope that the curator comes and visits your studio and loves your stuff, puts it into the gallery. Somebody else referees everything, right? Takes control of everything. And that's the only thing that is considered valid in academia.

Most of time, for the art world, success is about representation. To be part of a commercial gallery means you need to be making something that's a commodifiable object, otherwise for the most part those galleries won't bother with you. It winds up limiting who can be a part of that system. So one thing about social practice, in opposition to studio practice, is that it can be refereed, but it doesn't have to be. You can self-initiate where the work is shown, you can self-initiate your own writing on it that goes into a 'zine or onto the web. The reality in the studio model is that most people never end up showing what they make; it just gets piled up somewhere. In social practice, because part of the idea is that you need to have an audience, showing the work is automatically built into the process. So you're not just making things that pile up; the work always has an audience—the show or project or action or performance gets realized. And my sense is that those self-initiated projects can be a line on your résumé, without

ever having been validated by some larger institution or person. The same thing goes for writing. If you have published something through your 'zine or your blog, that's enough: it's available to an audience, you wrote it, it happened, you don't need someone refereeing it to be valid.

Asher: This makes me think about the blogs and self-publishing. In our contemporary art history class, the teacher seemed to always be asking, "If this doesn't have to be refereed, how are you supposed to know it's good?" [laughter] "How are we supposed to know if this is even art, if there's not someone defining that for us?"

Fletcher: That position implies that all refereed work is good.

Asher: It's interesting because you'll hear similar sentiments from people who aren't as familiar with reading blogs, for instance. You get this idea that some people think they need everything refereed, that there's no way they could be the expert on anything. I don't want to disparage the role of a critic or an art thinker or someone who's interested in taking ideas and putting them together. They're doing work that can give things a different depth or breadth, or a different sort of meaning. It's just that there's a difference when the people who write history or criticism become the only people who can say what might be meaningful for others.

Varinthorn Christopher: Katy made me think of the *New York Times* and *Daily Kos*; if the museum and curator are like the *New York Times*, then the *Daily Kos* is akin to social practice. At first people didn't really trust the *Daily Kos* or think it valid, but now it has become a fresh and alternative news source that many people read. It gives a different perspective to journalism. I have a journal there called *Siamese Buckaroo*.

Fletcher: The *New York Times* states that it publishes "all the news that's fit to print," like nothing else really is necessary. But then you have all these upstart bloggers, and after a while it starts to reverse itself and the *New York Times* is looking to the bloggers to get their news, so they can write about it in the *New York Times*. And the same with something like YouTube where at first it's seen as just a huge mass of nonsense, and then some important things happen as a result of the accessibility of it, like the George Allen Senate race situation with the "macaca" reference. During the campaign Allen made a racist reference that was videotaped and posted on YouTube, and then all the major networks picked it up. That changed the outcome of the race and helped give the Democrats a majority in the Senate. And the same situation exists with social practice; it's like YouTube in that it can be all sorts of different things; some people are going to like some of it, some people are going to like other things. There isn't—at least it's my hope—a hard and fast set of guidelines. I have my interests, I want to filter some things out, but I don't want to filter out everybody else's interests at the same time.

Sampson: Outsider art gets called outsider art once somebody who's in the know decides to claim it and make it public and put it in an art context. But the great thing about artists working outside the mainstream is that they can referee themselves.

Amy Steel and Sandy Sampson, *Portland Greeter*, 2008 (artwork © Amy Steel and Sandy Sampson).

Riders on the Portland Tram get involved in the *Portland Greeter* project of Parallel University, an institution that exists to validate and support self-initiated learning and teaching.



Fletcher: Self-referees.

Sampson: Yeah. I've never heard the term "referee" outside of a sports context before.

Fletcher: It's an academic term. The thing that's been interesting for me in putting this program together is that on a regular basis I keep being able to discover what it should be, rather than having formalized the whole thing in advance. It has occurred as an experiment, and along the way I'm starting to understand what it is in a way that I didn't when the program started. Even this refereed and nonrefereed dynamic—I kind of knew that, but it was more intuitively knowing it, and now I can put it into those terms, and realize that, yes, this is something I feel strongly about, this is partly what we're trying to do with the program: break down the concept of the referee.

Kurtz: I wasn't sure if you meant that it's inherent in social practice that there would be a larger audience, because I was thinking that there aren't aspirations of necessarily reaching a wider audience, it's just that . . .

Fletcher: I just meant an audience of some kind more than yourself and a hoped-for, potential art-world audience.

Kurtz: A different audience, a nonart audience, or a self-chosen audience?

Fletcher: My sense is that there should be an audience—which could be one person that you send a letter to. That's the very basic level of social practice—sending a letter to someone, as opposed to writing in your journal and never showing it to anyone. That is strictly for yourself and that can be great; I'm not

saying there's something wrong with that. I'm saying that this program is about sending letters, not about writing journals, in a metaphorical and real way. For some people, the journal is meant to always be private. But we want to be published, we want people to care about what we care about, and know about what we're thinking, so let's just build it in as part of the program that there needs to be an intended, specific audience which can also be made up of participants. To me that's what the social is. It's not that you collaborate with somebody on the work but that there is a specific, intended audience. This is interesting too, how quickly we're accepting this term, "social practice," that didn't exist four or five years ago. So whenever we comment on a social-practice project from an earlier time, we are retroactively applying it. We're one of only two schools using this term for an actual program as far as I know right now, but you can see how quickly it's getting absorbed.

Kurtz: It's a meme.

Kalin: These terms and generalities become problematic. We have to name social practice, but isn't it just meaningful activity that is relevant to us and that we feel is relevant to other people? In the end, value is relative, and these terms are negotiated in values.

Fletcher: I don't refer to myself as a "social-practice" artist. It became useful in the context of a school setting as a way to frame a practice and a study that was going to be different from a traditional one that was studio based. Beyond that, I'm not a fan of categorization. This is just a term that we're throwing on top of things as a way of looking at them. But it's not integral to the work. And so if you feel like it's something else, for instance what you just said, Avalon, that seems fine to me too.

Kalin: "Meaningful activity that's important to us."

Fletcher: I still question the term "social practice." It was expedient, to some extent the lesser of multiple evils.

Kalin: It's funny it seems so solid.

Sampson: What were some of the rejects?

Fletcher: All of those other terms, like "relational aesthetics," "community-based practice," "social sculpture." It just seemed the one that felt the least squirmy. If someone was to come up to me and say, "Oh, you're a relational aesthetician" [laughter], I would definitely not feel comfortable with that. And somehow "social practice" was OK. But I'm still almost ready to change it.

Steel: "Creative inquiry" was another nice one.

Fletcher: The thing that was most important to me was getting rid of "studio." Another term that could have been used was "post-studio." But it felt like that was somehow a little bit dated, and so we went with the newest thing, hoping that it might have some mileage.

Sampson: It keeps coming up that we are in opposition to studio, in opposition to something, and the thing I like about "social practice," as opposed to "post-

studio” or something, is that it’s not inherently oppositional. The words are defining something instead of just responding to or reacting against something else.

Fletcher: I would ultimately really like it if what we’re referring to now as the social-practice program sort of drifted away from the art department entirely and became its own thing.

Smith: But why in the first place would we call ourselves artists? It’s a conversation we’ve had before about having an umbrella organization, like the way nonprofits can gather under an umbrella organization that can help them gain funding. “Art” can be a term that, as an umbrella, allows you to act in a lot of different ways.

Sampson: As opposed to being a dentist.

Smith: Or a post-dentist.

Fletcher: One pretty great thing about art is that it’s a super-open field to do what you want to do, and most other practices aren’t. There were things that were interesting to me about art at the beginning, but as I’ve taken it further, art in a professional sense is no longer interesting to me. So this is the way that you can do a U-turn and head back, and then go off somewhere else. Like “Oh, that’s what it is? I thought it was going to be something different. Let me turn here instead.” That’s what social practice offers for artists. Ultimately it would be great if there were all sorts of people in the social-practice program who didn’t come from studio backgrounds or an art background at all.

Christopher: I wanted to be so many things—veterinarian, biologist, psychologist, farmer, journalist, writer. How can I do that? I became a social-practice artist. I’m excited to see art spread out more to interdisciplinary fields and cross-pollinate with other fields. It does not have to be limited to academic areas but instead can reach out in broader society as well. My husband and I will be presenting our research paper at International Cross-Cultural Psychology, a conference in Bremen, Germany, this summer. I am the first author, and I was listed as an artist in the conference abstract. I plan to incorporate art and social-practice elements into the presentation. I want to hear more people say, “Oh, I am an artist, and molecular biology is my hobby.”

Kalin: The Center for Land Use Interpretation is an example of a “platform,” which begs the question of how much is it art, and how much of it’s social advocacy or something like that.

Sampson: Kind of pedagogical, really.

Fletcher: Or you could look at it as a group of people that were really into something and decided to get deep into it and make it available to other people because they liked it.

Asher: Where could this type of work exist institutionally? I keep thinking about funding, or people wanting to engage in certain artistic practices that aren’t as commodifiable, and thinking that the institution helps in those ways. My first thought is, Would social practice move into the social-work realm, or sociology, or psychology, or . . . I don’t know. Would it move into the business realm?

Business is a major aspect of our culture, it's a capitalist thing that also exists in an institutional setting. How would money affect what this practice is about?

Fletcher: One of the things that I like about art and business is that you can become a professional at that thing, you could get an MBA in business, or you could not have any degree at all and open your food shack business, or any other business, furniture store or whatever, and nobody's going to stop you, right? Same with being an artist, you can get your terminal degree in it, but you can also be a total amateur who's never taken a class at all, and you can achieve the highest levels of success having done that, as opposed to being a lawyer. You can't practice law without having a law degree, or a doctor; you'll get put in jail if you try to practice being a doctor. [laughter]

What do you all think about the fact that you are getting your terminal degrees in this, and that maybe someone who didn't bother to get a degree at all is doing really great work in the same field that you're studying and spending a lot of money on to get a degree. One response could be to say, "Well, that's not art then; it's only art if you have your MFA." [laughter] But that doesn't really happen in the gallery context because the galleries are too "wild-west," they don't really care about MFAs that much, they just care about what sells and what's in fashion. In academic institutions they do care, so unless you are really famous, you're not going to get a job teaching at a college level without an MFA. Now some schools are offering a PhD in art. Eventually, that might mean to teach you would have to get a PhD. A lot of my teachers didn't have MFAs when I was in school, but now all of your teachers have MFAs.

If we look at the system of the normal studio practice, it's all geared in the direction of commercial art and museums. Only a tiny percentage of people actually arrives there, and if they do, an even smaller percentage survive after five years. If that existed in any other program, like getting an MBA or a law degree or a medical degree, those programs would empty out instantly; people aren't going to go through all of that to wind up not getting a job. But for some reason artists are willing to do that. That seems out of whack; something's really wrong if that's what's going on here, and 95 or 98 percent of the people who get MFAs then disappear. And then the art schools advertise those 2 percent who did really well who came out of their programs, and everyone thinks, "Oh, I'll be the next one of those people."

So maybe we could create a program in which 95 percent of students went on to sustain themselves functioning as artists; but if that's going to happen, it's not going to be through the gallery system, because it doesn't have the capacity to support that many artists. So then, what do you do? Other practices, like small farmers, or small-business people, have a pretty high failure rate, too, but a much higher success rate than artists do. You could look at all sorts of different practices and then try to figure out how an artist would operate in those systems. What would happen if art students took farmers and businesspeople and social workers, etc., as role models instead of the gallery artists? I don't exactly know what the conclusions are yet. You all are in some way the test, and we'll see what's happening with you five, ten years from now . . . [laughter]

Sampson: The links you sent us to the *New York Times* article about social entrepreneurs really talk to this.¹ Because when we examine the model of traditional

1. Nicholas Kristof, "The Age of Ambition," *New York Times*, January 27, 2008, available online at www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/opinion/27kristof.html.

entrepreneurs and businesses, it's not, I think, what any of us want to do. We don't want to set up a booth at Saturday market or slot ourselves directly into the system as it exists right now. But we do want to sustain ourselves with our work. I don't know how all the social entrepreneurs mentioned in the article are funding their projects, but the example of Ariel Zylbersztejn in Mexico, who is bringing films for free and bringing in microlenders to the audience, is one really creative approach. It is also very much activism; his project has a direct purpose. This is certainly something we've talked about among ourselves. We read an interview with Suzanne Lacy, and it made us ask, "Are we activists, do we need to be activists?" That's a complicated question . . .

Christopher: The weird thing about art education is that you spend so much money learning things that do very little to help you. I just watched a documentary on John Waters; he dropped out of NYU after one semester because he looked at the classes he had to take and the list of films he needed to watch and he realized that NYU did not offer anything that he was interested in or that would help him for his filmmaking career. Instead of mowing lawns for money, he opened a puppet show in his backyard—which at least fifty neighborhood children always attended. Later he asked his father to fund his film project. His reasoning was that his father did not have to support him during college like his siblings; he got the money, and the film changed his career. Personally, I am tired of reading about the history of Western art and talking about analyzing the subconscious. What this social-practice program is going to help me find out is how I can support myself and continue to practice what I am interested in and believe in doing. What skills do I need to build, what should I learn (third language? computer programming?). I want to be happy with what I do for a living, and ultimately I want to be useful in the world in some way; and I believe art can be useful.

Fletcher: That connects with the idea that artists don't have a real function in society. They are maybe considered useful as far as being thought-provoking or for providing objects of beauty, but I think that most of US society doesn't really value art and artists very much. Artists have perpetuated the situation by saying, "I'm an artist, I get to do work that doesn't have a function . . ."

Asher: Unlike a doctor saving your kidney.

Fletcher: Yeah, a doctor, or a farmer growing some carrots, or someone making clothes, or whatever—all of these things that have clear functions—or a cook who's making food, or a person who's making furniture or builds a house, millions of things like that. And then there are a lot of other things where the only function is to make money. Within society, that gets highly valued, but those people have problems, too—not unlike the artist, I think—in that there is a conceptual value for it, but there is also a sense that society doesn't really need you that much and that you are working without a function. For people making money, there's a larger sense that "Well, you're boosting the economy, you are making the economy work." But the artist doesn't even really get that.

In some ways what you're most like as an artist is a retired person. [laughter] The stereotype of retired people is that they work their whole lives to get to the point where they can retire when they're sixty-five or sixty-seven or whatever, and then they feel useless. Even though whatever their job was might not

have been that great for them or for society, they felt like they had a role to play, and then they stopped having that sense, and then they shrivel up and die. Because they feel like they don't have a social function anymore. And artists are given that from the get-go. They are just told to go off to the studio and do things that have no function. To some degree, that's great, but I think the artist feels, "Wow, I don't really matter that much, only in terms of fame and money." But then you're no more important than the guy who sells stocks. I think it would be better, actually, if society's sense was that artists have a function in real ways—like the farmer, like the furniture maker, or the clothes maker, the house builder, all of those important people. But I don't exactly know what that function is going to be yet. That's one of those things I'm trying to figure out.

Christopher: We first have to think of art in a different way and teaching art in a different way. When I first tried to collaborate with other departments in the university many people from the other fields thought I was there to contribute something visually. So little by little, I tried to convey to them that I can contribute other things as well, and together we can change the way we do research—and hey, there's nothing wrong with visually pleasing research papers or scientific reports, too.

Kalin: That points us back to pedagogy. Harrell, you gravitated back toward schooling and teaching—and you had teaching as part of your earlier art work when you came up from grad school, like teaching children. I wanted to ask whether you thought that was distinct to you or was part of a broader pattern in contemporary art? This is also something I have been talking with Laurel about, innovations in art and education—we both had really cool experiences taking classes from you. For example, the box-full-of-books lesson, where you would bring in a giant box of books, then say, "OK, everybody, you have a minute to read as much about this one artist as possible, and then we're going to go around"; when all the books were done—and we just speed-read and got all this stuff in our heads—you put the books back in the box and you put the box away, and the discussion began. It reminds me of inquiry-based education, where instead of learning by rote and transfer of knowledge to the student who doesn't know the truth, you contact the reality, the fact that some of that truth is already in the student; you engage the experience that they've already had; and you invite them to gain knowledge through their experiences. Do you see this as part of contemporary art, or do you think this is coming from you? And what's your take on inquiry-based education?

Fletcher: I'm into it, but I don't think it's any sort of mandate of contemporary art; it's a minority in art, just like it is with everything else in society. If you are asking just personally, I've always had an interest in education. My mom was a teacher and studied alternative education; it's something that I've always been interested in. All of my research in that area has had to do with children's education, and I've just taken that stuff and applied it to adults. I've never really read much about adult education; I've been looking at John Holt, A. S. Neill, and things that they did in childhood education. I'm getting into that space now, which is much more about drawing out the knowledge that's within a person and doing experiential education projects.

Amy Steel, *Four Square*, 2007, installation view of game with Joel Garcia, Shelby Davis, Ben Rosenberg, and Samantha Schneider, Autzen Gallery, 2007 (artwork © Amy Steel)



I took a class when I was in college, at Humboldt State, called “Experiential Education.” We met the first day of class, and we met the last week of class. In the last week, we went on a camping trip together; but the whole rest of that term we were told to figure out some physical activity to do on our own during class time. Completely on our own. I don’t know what happened to everybody else—they chose various things, but I don’t know if they did them or not—I know that I went down and walked on the train tracks every Monday and Wednesday or whatever it was, during class time, and became really good at walking on these train tracks. It’s true, it could have happened outside school, except that I wouldn’t have done it. That was the difference: somehow the school situation and the teacher, Bill Duvall, got me to do this thing that otherwise I wouldn’t have done. And the formalization of the bookends of meeting the first class and doing a few things to get you into it, and the last class in which you went out on this camping trip, somehow worked. So that, and doing the farming program at UC Santa Cruz—it was an apprenticeship model in which you just worked, you did what you were told, you thought about it, and then decided whether you liked it or not—those kinds of educational experiences were important to me, and felt like a good way to address some of the problems I saw within art education.

Steel: This program is talking about how we can be really meaningful in society and the different ways we can do that. Most art schools don’t talk about the reality of what it’s like to be an artist . . .

Fletcher: I had a formative moment in graduate school where I was starting to doubt the whole thing. At first I thought, “All these artists, this is great!” and then, “But what are we doing, why are we doing this?” We were all going off to our studios and making these weird objects, like we were obsessive-compulsives or something. I started to realize, “Most of this stuff isn’t even going to get shown, and I don’t think it would matter if it did.” At the same time I had

friends who were doing social work, volunteer work with needle exchanges, working with developmentally disabled adults, doing other things like that, and I was feeling, “Wow, these people are doing something meaningful.” To one of them who was doing some great stuff, I said, “I’m in graduate school, I’m doing this work, but it feels really meaningless to me, this art stuff, especially in comparison to the work that you do.” She said, “No, anybody that makes art, that is really a valuable thing for society—just making art is an important thing.” I thought about it for a second, and I said, “You are totally wrong, that’s just not true, that’s a myth.” [laughter]

Kurtz: Yeah, but if suddenly you weren’t allowed to make art anymore, or if artists weren’t allowed to make art, I think society would be a lot different.

Fletcher: But we’re not anywhere close to that, so that’s not what we have to worry about. It would be amazing if more of the general population made art, but I think we could do with less “art-world” art.

Smith: Where I see it connecting is that art in itself is able to be an emblem for radicalism and different ways of thinking, in that it’s always pushing back against the status quo or a given system. It works really powerfully as an emblem. Creating art means that there are people trying to change our perceptions of things, and that is important.

Asher: I worked at a kids’ art camp, Caldera, where at-risk kids were able to express themselves and reflect, and what they made out of that was really transformative to them as individuals.² That has meaning. I’ve witnessed lives being changed, working in that context.

Fletcher: The problem is that through our socialization and education, people are taught that they aren’t artists, that there’re only a few artists and they need to be treated in this special way, either catered to or allowed to find their “genius” and paid a lot of money, or paid nothing and treated as outcasts. I’m not so into professionalization, because of what happens to the work and the motivations for making the work. Then also, you have to rarify those who do it to be able to sell it, so everyone can’t do it. If everyone was using the nonrefereed approach, it would be great, in whatever ways they want to. It’s this refereed stuff that’s bothering me. The social-practice program also is different in that it’s not just about personal expression. I think that personal expression is great, but as far as a program of study, I actually like the approach of the farming program, which wasn’t about personal expression at all. And yet I felt fulfilled while doing it. It doesn’t mean I couldn’t also do some drawings or some weird agricultural projects, but I learned how to farm, in a really strict way. I like the idea that this program has a functional element to it, or would eventually. That’s probably why I want to plug you guys into the city and into public-art projects, so that there would be this potential funding and functional aspect. And then you can express yourselves all you want on the weekends. [laughter]

Smith: We’ve been throwing around all these words about being experimental, but you’re borrowing a traditional form of education in apprenticeship. That we all might be able to succeed functionally as artists, and have an apprenticeship in functioning as artists, instead of . . .

2. See www.calderaarts.org for further information.

Cyrus Smith, "Free Beer for True Democracy," leaflet from an advertising campaign for togetherness and freedom (and beer), for the exhibition *Municipal Maneuvers*, Portland City Hall, July 2008 (artwork © Cyrus Smith; photograph by the artist)



Fletcher: I almost wish that "apprenticeship" was part of the title of this program. That clarifies things for me . . .

Smith: "Experimental apprenticeship" . . .

Fletcher: Right, the "Apprenticeship in Social Practice and Something Something."

Steen: "Post-Studio Art Production."

Fletcher: Yeah. That could be good.

Kalin: San Keller, when he lectured at PSU in 2005, mentioned that coming out of school he was in a system that paid artists just to do art. He felt that therefore his work should be serving the public that was paying for his career.

Fletcher: Because he was living in a country that did that: in Switzerland, arts funding isn't a problem.

Kalin: But his first works were actually putting advertisements in papers and letting people know that he would do their work for them. And he actually went into people's apartments for some of his first social projects, which were to do people's dishes, to clean their houses, and all sorts of things.

Steen: Okay, we've already talked about the program being something that is an attempt to move around or beyond the traditional studio-art model. We have visiting artists—which actually is not different than any other program, but we have them every single week; all the students choose and invite the artists, we host dinners for them on Monday nights, and the artist gives a lecture to the public. We have our own projects that we all work on individually, but then we also all pool our efforts to create various public projects. We are working on a project for the Portland City Hall, and we're going to have an exhibition prepared for them in July. We're doing something as a group for Reed College in Portland for the Reed Arts Week. The theme for that event is "ghosts," and we are presenting a group of projects for them, including pirate radio, a dowsing demonstration, and a ghost-story campfire. We're working with the Bureau of Environmental Services on a possible tour of manhole covers in Portland and a canoe tour on the Columbia Slough, and we have various other projects in the works as well. I think that is a great part of the program, that we are doing so many actual projects out in the world.

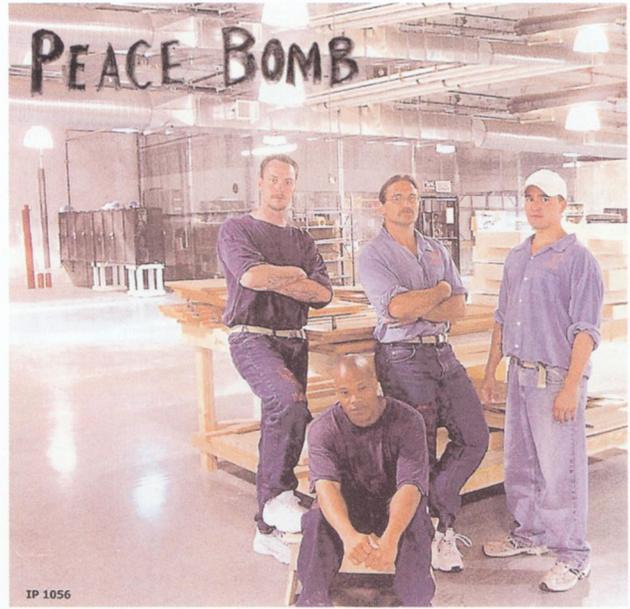
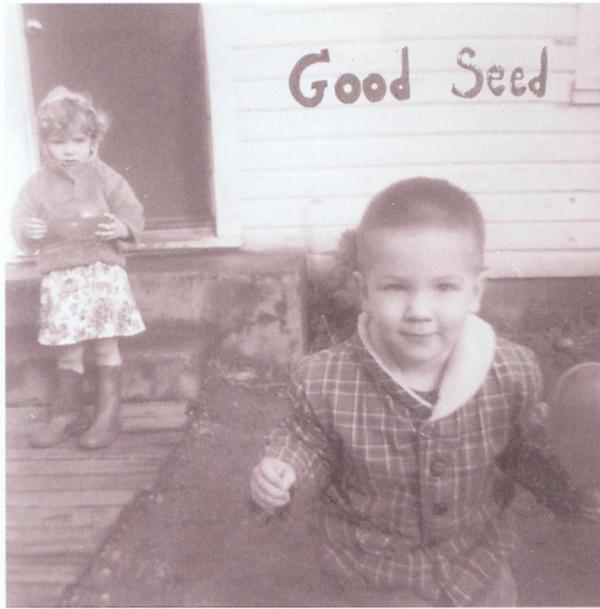
Fletcher: I wanted to bring up the blogs that I have you all keep.³ And some of you are developing websites. Because social practice has a basic principle that there is some audience, and because oftentimes the work that's made is temporal or happens in nonformalized sites and situations, the blog is really useful—in the same way that a studio-practice person pays rent for a studio to let stuff accumulate in the space; when someone does a studio visit, they get to see all of the accumulated paintings. But for a social-practice person, there isn't a single space in which stuff is accumulating; the idea is that it's happening out in the world, and that some of the projects are totally temporary, so they disappear. In that case the blog becomes a place where you can archive and formalize what has been going on over a period of time.

Smith: The blogs seem to be appropriate, in that our art work isn't accumulating in a studio, it's accumulating online—which has been a really interesting shift for me, getting to know that my artwork, when I make it, is out and available in the world.

Christopher: It's a convenient method of communication, especially if you are far away from home, like me. It is comforting to know that my mother in Thailand or my sister in Tokyo can see instantly what I do. Blogging actually opens many opportunities and connections. I just taught my father-in-law, who is seventy-five years old, to blog. It has become the news source for family to read about his wife's chemotherapy and cancer condition, or about new friends he meets. A small thing like teaching a retired man to blog led me to know a doctor from southern India who gives free surgeries for about two hundred people every summer. I am actually going to build a website for his small non-profit hospital.

Fletcher: One of my revelations as the program has progressed is the almost fundamental value of a blog for artists doing social practice. I'm not saying blogs are fundamental to what all programs should be, but it's going to be really useful for this program. They are like public sketchbooks, public notebooks, that also serve as a forum for making documentation that can be used for slide lectures,

3. The group's blog is online at www.socialpractices.blogspot.com/. The page includes links to all the artists' individual blogs.



David Dahl and Varinthorn Christopher, *Good Seed*, 2008, book cover and inside page (artworks © David Dahl and Varinthorn Christopher).

Working with David Dahl (standing at center of group photo), a self-described ex-convict and drug addict who turned his life around and opened the bakery Dave's Killer Bread, Christopher designed and edited a book to be donated to correctional facilities throughout Oregon and the United States. The authors chronicle Dahl's life and the dangers of amphetamine use; the book also includes bread recipes and a chapter on the science of treating addiction. The titles and text are written longhand in #2B pencil, the primary writing tool used in prisons.

grant proposals, websites, etc. You can do a project that's totally temporary, and it can be documented in this really basic way—a single image, a descriptive text, dates, and location—and that form has started to seem to me as fundamental as learning to draw is for a studio program. It's my hope that there is a systemic effect too: by knowing that you have a blog, it's going to affect what you think you can do as an artist. And ultimately, for me, it's really freeing, because you know there is a public forum for your work and that you don't need to have a gallery letting you show your work when they feel it is the right time; you can do it anytime.

Katy Asher is an artist based in Portland, Oregon. She received her BFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and is an MFA candidate at Portland State University. Her interests revolve around the study and practice of collaboration and group processes. Prior to working with The Committee, she participated in the groups The MOST and Red76.

Varinthorn Christopher is of Thai-Mon descent. She immigrated to the United States in 1998. Her life experience has inspired her to work with the poor, underprivileged, refugees, immigrants, and other marginalized people. Through her work she strives to promote a better environment, support human rights, enhance diversity, and preserve ethnic and cultural heritage. She also has mad cooking skills. www.daikons.com

Harrell Fletcher has worked collaboratively and individually on a variety of socially engaged, interdisciplinary projects for over fifteen years. His work has been shown widely in the United States and Europe and is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the New Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Berkeley Art Museum, the de Young Museum, and FRAC in Brittany, France. In 2002 he started *Learning To Love You More*, an ongoing participatory website with Miranda July; Prestel published a book version in 2007. Fletcher is a professor of art and social practice at Portland State University in Oregon.

Avalon Kalin is a Portland-based artist who explores consciousness and relationships in social contexts. His interdisciplinary projects often originate from anecdote and mostly involve collaborations with individuals and groups. He is currently a graduate student of contemporary art practice with an emphasis in social practice at Portland State University.

Laurel Kurtz was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1973. Her work currently focuses on cooperative interaction among groups and clubs with open membership. She attends non-art-based social events as a participant, rather than an organizer; she volunteers for those in need outside of the art context as her focus from within the art context.

Sandy Sampson is an interdisciplinary artist. Her work includes visual art, video, guerrilla interventions, social sculpture, teaching, and motherhood. She is currently focused on the development of Parallel University (an institution that exists to validate and support self-initiated learning and teaching.)
http://web.me.com/sandysampson/Parallel_University/Welcome.html

Cyrus Smith received a BA in studio art from Humboldt State University, California, in 2004, with an emphasis in museum and gallery practices and sculpture. His largely self-initiated projects as artist, collaborator, and facilitator make use of installation, performance, publication, and local media as platforms for cultural intervention.

Amy Steel is an artist who lives and works in Portland, Oregon. She holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and completed her MFA with an emphasis in social practice in 2008. She is a youth program instructor at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland. Her work can be seen at www.amy-steel.com.

Eric Steen, an MFA candidate in the art and social-practice program at Portland State University, has exhibited, performed, and provided art events in public arenas in Oregon as well as at the Time-Based Art Festival of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland City Hall, Worksound Gallery, and the Pancake Clubhouse in Portland. He has self-published his own writings and keeps a blog at beerandscifi.com. In 2009 he will participate on a panel about teaching social practice at the conference Foundations in Art: Theory and Education.