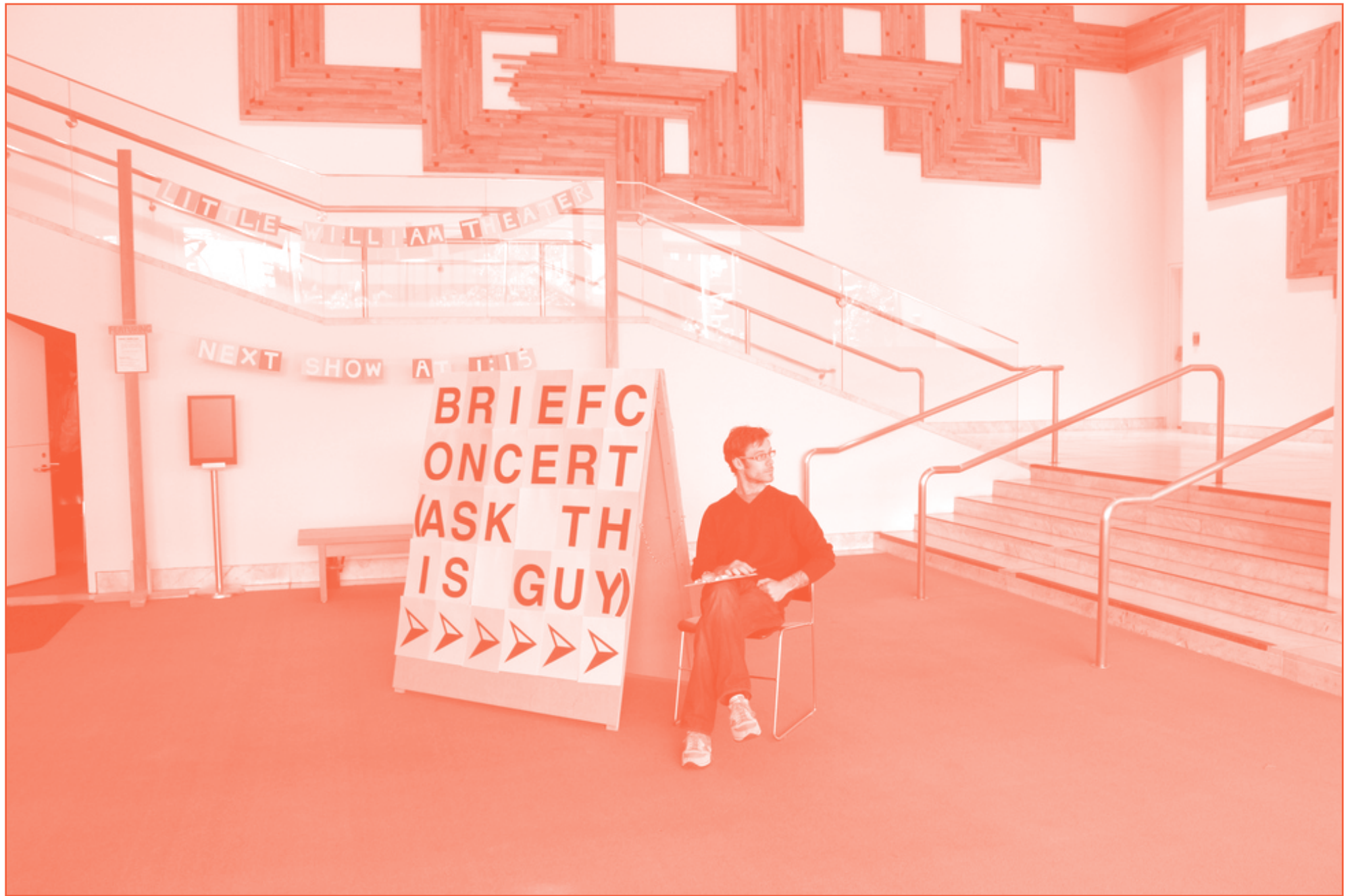


**Public
Engagement
Artist
in
Residence**

**Machine
Project**

**Hammer
Museum**



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Foreword

When the Hammer Museum embarked upon its Public Engagement program, thanks to a generous grant from the Irvine Foundation, we were afforded the opportunity to consider the roles of art, of artists, and even of visitors from a fresh perspective. It was a unique chance to put aside long-held notions of what guests often expect a museum experience to be—static and monologic at worst—and to enact what it can be at best—dynamic, with visitor and institution in conversation. Through Public Engagement, visitors have been able to step outside of their traditional roles as observers and to become participants. Similarly, we have been able to open up our process for working with artists and to collaborate on creating a new sphere, one that often exists beyond standard exhibitions and performances. Public Engagement has been one of our greatest experiments to date at the Hammer, coming at a pivotal moment in the history of the institution.

The Hammer is entering its twenty-first year, and when we take stock of our accomplishments so far, it seems clear that we have reached adulthood. I am pleased that the institution has become known for its adventurous programming and proclivity for risk-taking, evidenced by the initiation of Public Engagement and other endeavors. As time has passed and we have grown to accommodate such programs, we have also developed systems and processes to support our larger size. In this moment, as our systems are ossifying, it is vital that the structures that we have set up to support our burgeoning institution do not weigh too heavily on our natural tendency toward advancement and experimentation. Public Engagement revealed to us a sometimes difficult by-product of maturity: our own bureaucracy. So while the programs have dramatically enhanced the museum experience for our audience, Public Engagement has also illuminated internal issues that had not so directly challenged us before.

In other words, since the initiation of Public Engagement, we not only have looked outward but have taken a hard look inward as well.

Coming to terms with our internal workings is just one illuminating aspect of supporting and growing a program like

Public Engagement. As with any good experiment, we have already learned so much more than we set out to learn. Through Public Engagement and our first artist residency with Machine Project, we came to a greater understanding of what our visitors respond to, of how to bring our secondary spaces to life, of new ways to charge our existing programs, and even of what our shortcomings might be. We have embraced what Machine Project taught us, carrying on the most successful ideas to the second year of the program, and we have tested our own tolerance for risk.

The Hammer's evolution continues, and around us, other institutions are also beginning to look toward the future of museum practice and audience engagement. As we collectively begin to reconceptualize the role of visitors and, in our case, the role of artists as well, we present to you the first chapter of our investigation into this emerging area of work.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the generosity of the James Irvine Foundation. The grant we were awarded has allowed us to do the work we otherwise could only have dreamed of. Our deepest gratitude goes to Machine Project as well. Director Mark Allen and his collaborators have been true partners throughout, and we have all benefited as much from the collective's thoughtful work as we have from its lively spirit.

Ann Philbin

Director
Hammer Museum

Introduction, AA

GETTING STARTED

Over the past year and a half, I've had the pleasure of speaking with many colleagues at other institutions about Public Engagement at the Hammer. While each museum has its own impetus for asking about and potentially pursuing this work, the inquiries themselves have been mostly aligned. Typically, the first question I receive is about the premise: what do we mean by public engagement? This is followed by a number of practical questions regarding the genesis of the program and its execution to date. As we learned in our first year, manifesting a new program like this requires substantial legwork: infrastructure must be configured and processes put into place to support projects that are outside the boundaries of the Museum's regular curatorial operation. I offer here a basic road map that should be of practical value to other institutions that choose to pursue similar initiatives. The answer to the broader question about the nature of public engagement depends on who you ask. The differing interpretations of the newly developed initiative are central to the development of the program, as well as evident in many of the tensions that emerged along the way. I will further address this issue later in the report, but first, some background.

In 2009, the Hammer Museum's Artist Council, a group of artists who advise the Museum on wide-ranging topics, began discussing a new way to address many of the ongoing visitor services issues the Museum had been grappling with. For example, the Museum's lobby still felt corporate and hollow, ticketing occurred upstairs in a counterintuitive space, and there wasn't staff in place dedicated to guest experience. What would happen, the Council wondered, if the Hammer collaborated with artists to consider these concerns through their lens? Not long after this conversation occurred and with the Council's idea in mind, the Museum applied for a James Irvine Foundation Arts Innovation Fund grant (<http://irvine.org/evaluation/program-evaluations/artsinnovationfund>). That same year the Museum was awarded a substantial grant to be used in part to create of a new model for visitor engagement. At the core of this grant is the Public Engagement Artist In Residence (A.I.R.) program, which encourages contact between visitors, artists, and Museum

staff, and activates the Museum in unexpected ways.

This new endeavor felt like a logical next step for the Hammer, which strives to be an artist-driven institution and, under director Ann Philbin, has developed a certain level of comfort with—and even an aspiration toward—risk-taking. Further, the Museum had just wrapped up its first Irvine Foundation grant, which was used, in part, to create the very council that conceptualized what would become the basis of the second Irvine grant. Both the council and Public Engagement are concerned with problem solving, and both emerged from the same core commitment to involving artists in the institution in a substantial way, certainly beyond the galleries. With the new Irvine grants in place and a solid foundation of institutional experience with experimentation, the Museum was ready to move forward. Philbin selected Echo Park collective Machine Project to be the Museum’s first A.I.R. Machine Project’s director, Mark Allen, was a member of the Artist Council and had been part of the earliest discussions about the program’s potential. Ann knew Mark’s storefront gallery and was interested in the work he had done at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) the year before. Among the areas on the table to be investigated and reimaged were the Museum’s wayfinding design, visitor tours, and the lobby’s then vacant front desk. With these and other ideas in mind, Machine Project explored the Museum in a research phase over the summer.

The first project, Fanfare/No Fanfare, was initiated in December 2009 with Hammer curator Ali Subotnick, who ran the program until a separate position was created, curator of public engagement, for which I was hired in March 2010. I worked closely, as Ali had, with Elizabeth Cline, who managed the production of projects and was appointed curatorial associate of public engagement. I split my time between Public Engagement and serving as director of the new visitor services department. In the latter capacity, I implement visitor experience fundamentals that are not covered by the Public Engagement program, which have included an activated front desk in the lobby and the establishment of a Museum volunteer program. With our small Public Engagement team, alongside a broad swath of

Museum staff, the Hammer and Machine Project coexplored hundreds of ideas for the first year of the program. Over the course of the Residency, 26 projects were executed, ranging from intimate musical performances for one to a microscopy festival for hundreds. In total, more than 300 artists participated in Machine Project’s Residency. Later in the report, Elizabeth and I will outline the processes we developed, provide a sample production schedule, and explain the other ins and outs critical to the realization of Public Engagement from an institutional perspective.

DEFINING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

From the beginnings of Public Engagement and continuing up to this moment, even Museum staff had differing opinions about the precise role of Public Engagement and various ideas about what it might look like. For some, operational problem solving should be the basis for the program. Others feel that the program is intended to draw connections with existing Museum programs, taking the form of interpretive projects for exhibitions. Still others believe that Public Engagement is not about a specific output but an opportunity for the Museum to continue its exploration of the roles artists can serve within the Museum. Ultimately, in year one, most projects referenced operational concerns or issues, but problems were not necessarily solved by the projects themselves. What we learned as a result of the projects did, however, lead us to consider solutions. For example, the Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace transformed the space of Lindbrook terrace, which prior to Machine Project’s Residency was simply a pass-through from one side of the Museum to the other, identifying the location as a valuable area for programming.

Outside of the Hammer, Public Engagement has often been discussed in the broader contexts of museum education or social practice. Though some of the hallmarks of museum education (workshops, music programming) are woven into much of the work of Public Engagement, the program was not intended as an antidote to a traditional pedagogical approach. Similarly, while much of the work and many of the artists we

have collaborated with align themselves with social practice, emphasizing participation and interaction between performer and audience, we did not set out to focus specifically on this mode of engagement. Lacking a real precedent for the Public Engagement program, these established directions serve as touchstones in the much wider and less defined field of strategies we have pursued and pioneered.

If myriad expectations and notions of what Public Engagement might mean exist among Hammer staff and among our colleagues outside of the Museum, perhaps it's no surprise that the Hammer's version and Machine Project's version diverged on some occasions. Typically this occurred in situations where the Hammer adopted a stricter problem-solving approach and expected solutions to predetermined public engagement problems, whereas Machine was more interested in questioning and investigating the problems themselves, creating pieces that articulated the underlying concerns for public reflection. If this was where the core of the conflict resided, it was also the gray area that propelled some of our most productive conversations and projects. Over the course of the first year, however, our understanding of Public Engagement grew more complex rather than clearer: as we wrapped up our last projects together, we were still sorting through differing interpretations of what Public Engagement had been; we continue to discuss internally the directions it might take in the future.

REFLECTION

You will see evidence of conflict in some of the interviews that follow, but, to a certain extent, the process of editing and especially the six months we have all had to reflect on, have inevitably tempered some of the friction of the collaboration itself and made Machine's aesthetic and the Hammer's aesthetic appear more congruent than they actually were. The integration that may look natural in this context didn't always feel so in the moment. Though the Hammer invited Machine to delve deep into the institution and its practices, the Museum wasn't always ready to deny its own expertise,

which was at times in conflict with ideas proposed by the artist. This played out, for example, in the development of the Giant Hand, a wayfinding project conceptually aligned with the Museum's problem-solving goals. While the Hammer was very comfortable acknowledging its shortcomings with directional signage, it wasn't comfortable heightening existing confusion by providing potentially misleading directions via the installation. In this case and with other proposals, Machine was at ease introducing an element of confusion, whereas the Hammer found that approach to be antagonistic toward visitors already grappling with a difficult space.

On a practical level, we were also struggling with how to sustain the program internally. While we are fortunate to have our Irvine Foundation grant, we learned that infrastructure is also pivotal when it comes to making A.I.R. a success. Mark and his collaborators generated dozens of ideas, and much of the production labor involved in executing them fell to the Museum's staff, affecting a number of departments outside curatorial and even events. These very real production strains reveal themselves in the road map that follows and also in the interviews that Mark and I conducted. In spite of the many hurdles, we enjoyed a rich collaboration that extended beyond troubleshooting and into the domain of conceptual development. For example, the proposal for Level5—a closed performance piece that referenced the EST seminars of the 1970s—spoke to the Museum's interest in exploring underrepresented art practices, yet it was not envisioned by the artist as publicly accessible. We talked about ways to advance the piece itself while also aligning it with the broader mission of Public Engagement, to create a unique experience for our audience. The Museum suggested a live video feed into the theater, an element so beautifully choreographed by the Hammer's technical director that it became a pivotal feature of the piece. In another case, Machine's collaborative generosity allowed the enactment of an entire project introduced by a Hammer staff member, Hammer Staff Pet Portraits. Within this dialogical expanse, less evident in our report and hidden from public view, some of the most open and unfettered moments of

the Residency occurred.

Our collaboration comes to an end with this report, a final project that in many ways mirrored our time working together on site. There was substantial back-and-forth, questions about direction, and curiosity on each of our parts as to how best to execute a new form. We all remain deeply grateful to Mark and his collaborators. I've often said that in one year, we learned many years' worth of lessons because of his infectious, prolific practice. The variety and density of the work allowed us to make a quantum leap forward in a way that I can't imagine we could have otherwise. Machine delighted our visitors, made all of us think harder, and helped us transform the idea of an inventive new initiative into an actual program. Just paging through this report, you'll see evidence of the excitement—and frustrations as well—involved in bringing a dynamic new public program into being.

Introduction, MA

When I founded Machine Project in 2003, I thought of it as both a discrete endeavor and a model for a different way of engaging people in cultural and intellectual life than that provided in formal spaces like museums and universities. Museums as institutions tend to reinforce a strong division between cultural producers and spectators. At Machine I facilitate collaborative and participatory approaches to art-making and foster an environment that is welcoming to amateurs and enthusiasts. In 2008, I was invited to inject the sensibility I had cultivated at Machine into the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for a single-day multiartist festival, *Machine Project's Field Guide to LACMA*; at the same time, I was developing related events with several other museums. Working with larger institutions was becoming an important component of my practice when Hammer director Ann Philbin approached me in 2009 to ask if Machine Project would be the first Artist in Residence for a multiyear commitment the Museum had made to exploring public engagement strategies with artists. Establishing a casual, comfortable environment is key to attracting participants for Machine's often technical or esoteric workshops and activities, putting public engagement at the very center of Machine's work. Given this shared priority, I was intrigued by the Hammer's proposal and by the opportunity to explore in depth, over the course of a year, the way the Museum functions as a site of cultural valuation and framing.

This was a new undertaking for both the Hammer and Machine. As Machine Project's first long-term residency in another institution, it would entail figuring out how to generate the open, convivial quality that Machine Project was known for in a way that would complement the Hammer's regular programming and mode of spectatorship. Machine Project brought our sensibility to the projects we developed, and you will see some of our core themes and preferred modes—such as intimacy, participation, and sound—recur throughout. The idea of the Residency was, however, not to utilize the Hammer as a venue for Machine Project's regular practice or to make the Hammer feel like a museum-sized Machine Project. In order to effectively explore how Machine's values might map onto a

larger cultural institution with its own history and established manner of addressing the public, I approached the Residency as a coinvestigation with the Hammer. Together we looked into ideas and strategies of public engagement and institutional change. The focus for the Irvine grant was on the development of creative strategies that the Museum could reuse, and over the course of the year we hit upon several successful methods of public engagement that could be comfortably integrated into the existing structure of the Museum, as well as promising avenues for further exploration. To me the process of investigating public engagement opened up a more exciting and fundamental challenge: to rethink the way museums operate and to propose changes that would make the museum as an institution better attuned to contemporary art practices. It also seemed like an important opportunity to consider the role of museums in the context of larger shifts in how people conceptualize their relationship to institutions and their engagement with culture. To this end, and with the hope that the Hammer would continue to publicly explore various modes of encountering art, the projects Machine produced were a series of experimental exercises. Their value lay in the flexibility and responsiveness they required of the institution as much as in the specific directions they charted.

As the Residency unfolded, I think everyone involved developed a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of both public engagement and institutional change. Unearthing our implicit assumptions—mine and those of my colleagues at the Hammer, as well as those embedded in the grant—about what public engagement means, and how much institutional change is desirable, was the most challenging aspect of the collaboration. This report attempts to present and contextualize what we learned about those initial ideas and looks at the different approaches we tested. We hope this will benefit other museums and arts institutions seeking to undertake similar initiatives. A comprehensive overview of the planning and implementation of the Residency, written by the Hammer’s public engagement curator Allison Agsten and curatorial associate Elizabeth Cline, follows in the next section. Vision and

values statements for both the Hammer Museum and Machine Project can be found in the appendices at the back of this report for further information about the distinct institutional perspectives involved.

As this was a collaborative undertaking between two institutions, dozens of people participated in the Residency, and the making of this document reflects that. The body of the report is composed of interviews that I conducted with many of the artists who produced work for the Residency, and with Allison Agsten and Elizabeth Cline, with whom I worked most closely at the Hammer, developing projects and communicating several times a week. It also contains a set of interviews conducted by Allison Agsten with other members of the Hammer staff whose labor and oversight were crucial to making the Residency happen. What is perhaps backgrounded by the split focus of the two major sets of interviews is the extent of the Hammer’s creative involvement. In my interview with musician Emily Lacy, she succinctly articulates that, in collaborative endeavors such as these, the host institution really is the coauthor of the work. For our Residency, that was true both in terms of Allison’s and Elizabeth’s direct creative input into a number of the projects and in terms of the institutional priorities and friction that pushed projects in directions they would have never gone otherwise.

As an artist who works only collaboratively, I take for granted that the most exciting and original ideas come out of conversations with other people. It was hard to capture those generative moments, as they occurred both during and outside our brainstorming sessions, propelling the entire collaboration. The productive chaos of the ideation process is perhaps best captured in Allison’s interview with Ali Subotnick, who was involved only at the beginning of the Residency and whose recollection is less affected by the subsequent pressures of production and evaluation. In the process of reflection, each individual’s perspective tends to gravitate back to his or her own distinct subject position, whereas the truth of any creative materialization is to be found in a more complicated intertwining and exchange. I think the projects themselves testify to the

multivocality of the considerations brought to bear on them—as do a handful of the projects that didn’t happen, referred to occasionally throughout. You can read interviews with three artists whose proposals were ultimately not realized but whose thinking was crucial to the development of my ideas about the Residency. As a result, the document includes a wide range of perspectives, from people involved at the highest levels of curation and management to people more intimately involved with a particular art piece or institutional process.

I compiled this document with senior editor Kirsty Singer, who shaped the interview transcripts and helped conceptualize the overall structure of the Report. Rebecca Lofchie, Johanna Reed, and Stephen Allen provided additional editorial assistance, and Alex Cerrilla designed the final document. The transcripts were edited to foreground and clarify the most useful and interesting portions of each discussion while maintaining their conversational flow. They contain reflections on the artists’ creative process and initial expectations, the challenges that arose during implementation, visitors’ reception of the pieces, and the larger concerns about art, public engagement, and institutional identity that were illuminated by the content of each piece and the complications surrounding its production. In addition to the interviews, you will find brief descriptions of the 26 pieces we did over the course of the year, which together chart several different lines of inquiry into what public engagement means and how it might be approached. The following categorization is only one of many, but it should orient you to the range of strategies we tried.

**APPROACH TO
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

PIECES

Pieces that added a more personal dimension to visitors’ engagement with work in the Hammer’s special exhibitions and collections

Live Personal Soundtrack, Dream-In, Nap-In, Needlepoint Therapy

Ambient pieces that used sound or participation to alter the atmosphere of the Museum

Soundings: Bells at the Hammer, Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace, Subtle Bodies Series, Singing by Numbers, Tablacentric, Houseplant Vacation

Intimate performances for one or two people at a time

Little William Theater: Micro-Concerts & Festival of New Music, Valentine’s Day Songs of Triumph or Heartbreak

Hands-on workshops that brought Machine’s participatory and interdisciplinary mode into the Museum

Enormous Microscopic Evening, FungiFest, Paleolithic Skills Workshop, Intaglio Printmaking Workshop

Large-scale live action or performance pieces

Level5, Annie Okay

Projects that promoted interaction between Machine Project’s artists and the Hammer’s staff

Hammer Staff Birthday Poetry Readings & Personal Concerts, Hammer Staff Pet Portraits, Machine Project in Residence in Ann Philbin’s Office, Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project

Pieces that directly addressed the Hammer’s visitor services concerns, including hospitality and wayfinding

Fanfare/No Fanfare, Giant Guestbook & Tiny Guestbook, Giant Hand

In retrospect, Machine's Residency sought to integrate some of the major qualities that distinguish contemporary thinking about art—specifically its process-based orientation, self-reflexivity, and valuation of discourse—into the structure and curatorial practice of the Hammer. This called for a shift in the institutional culture and identity of the Museum, from its traditional function as a container for the display of art to an artist-driven model of the museum as an active site of production and discussion. For the remainder of this piece, I will elaborate on what I mean by the proposed shift—from museum-as-container to museum-as-site—in the context of the theoretical concerns and points of tension that arose during the Residency.

EXPERIMENTATION AS A PRACTICE VS. EXPERIMENTAL WORK

One of the most important considerations that emerged during the Residency was the distinction between the museum as a place where experimental work is preserved and displayed, and the museum as a site for experimentation. Perhaps due to the external nature of the grant's focus on public engagement, the distinct implications for the institution of applying Machine Project's experimental practice to the Hammer's concerns versus displaying the best of Machine's experimental work in the Museum and expecting it to attract people were never fully articulated.

The latter approach is in keeping with the traditional curatorial model and fits more easily with the notion of connoisseurship on which museums are historically based: museums acquire select pieces of work that were experimental in their moment to represent a particular practice or mode of making art; with contemporary work, they gravitate toward artists who have established a reputation for themselves and who can be counted on for a known quality. A notable thing about the Hammer inviting Machine Project to be its first Public Engagement Artist in Residence is that, in a sense, what we're known for is a degree of unpredictability: I facilitate collaborative and interdisciplinary work on the basis of its potential to generate unexpected ideas and experiences.

With Machine Project as Artist in Residence, I approached

the task of developing new public engagement strategies as an investigation that would involve trying out multiple directions—and doing so publicly. The Museum's visitors are its core constituents; it was important to me that we resist foreclosing possibilities on the basis of our assumptions about what they would or would not find engaging, and actually try the various tactics we thought of. In retrospect, had we more fully discussed upfront that such experimentation inevitably carries with it the likelihood that some efforts will fail to produce expected results, a better communications strategy might have been developed—both to inform visitors of the goal and nature of the Residency and to make the Hammer more comfortable embracing the inherent risk. The situation was further complicated by the fact that we were experimenting with business-related facets of the institution that are not usually part of the Museum's public presence. For the Hammer, bringing the Museum's operational concerns out of the offices and into the galleries unavoidably introduced vulnerability and confusion into the central and successfully established curatorial arena. The Hammer displayed a remarkable combination of openness and resilience in the face of this risk, a risk that attended the very premise of the grant: applying an available asset—the artist's creativity—to an operational concern made the Museum itself a site for artistic intervention.

ARTIST AS PROBLEM SOLVER

The idea of the artist as problem solver, which lay at the core of the Arts Innovation Fund proposal—a compelling if somewhat radical notion based on intertwining impetuses to find an economic use-value for the artist and to give the artist-as-stakeholder more creative input into the museum—likewise proved more complicated than had been anticipated at the outset. When people at an institution speak of a problem, it is often to indicate something that interferes with their operation. From the artist's perspective, a problem is a provocation or a site to which the artwork responds by creating something that engages the problem and makes it visible in a different light. The problem is aestheticized, framed, or reconfigured; it is seldom erased or resolved.

During the Residency, the difference between these two

perspectives asserted itself most clearly over the proposals we made to address the navigational challenge of the Hammer's layout—a visitor services concern they had identified. The Giant Hand, an animatronic sculpture that pointed people toward different parts of the Museum depending on the button they selected, was originally intended to be displayed for the remaining several months of the Residency. Through the development of the piece, however, issues and questions about the balance between conceptual thrust and utility arose. The Giant Hand helped visitors figure out how to get around the space, but it did so in a manner that highlighted the difficulty of the Hammer's layout and generated conversation about its signage. The Museum had concerns about whether calling excessive attention to the problem would eclipse the practical value of the solution. Because of this tension, Machine proposed installing it for the shorter duration of a month in the Hammer's internal courtyard. In practice, I think everyone was a little surprised by the Giant Hand's efficacy and popularity. Nonetheless, a pragmatic solution would have made the problem invisible such that it functionally ceased to exist.

What I find valuable in thinking about these conflicting approaches is that they point to different potential identities for the Museum. Understood as a container, the Museum, along with its infrastructure and operations, is ideally unobtrusive. Machine's wayfinding proposals, on the other hand, made the Hammer's infrastructural concerns part of the art that it displayed. The value of this, from a public engagement perspective, is that the Museum becomes a more dynamic and approachable entity—and one that includes the public in discussions about the nature and function of the Museum. The invitation to think critically about the Museum itself is a gambit that implicitly extends to the art: it sends visitors a clear message that the Museum is a space in which art serves as the basis for a conversation about values in which they are welcome to participate.

ARTISTS AND INSTITUTIONS: FROM CRITIQUE TO COLLABORATION

The art historical context of the Hammer's Public Engagement Artist in Residence program is the aftermath of Institutional Critique, and the initiative speaks to the challenge of responding to that legacy. A set of discursive and deconstructive practices, Institutional Critique has sought to make visible the social and historical construction of art institutions since the 1960s, often doing so in oppositional ways. Museums have responded by including such work in their exhibitions and permanent collections, demonstrating a significant commitment to freedom of content, but at the same time effectively incorporating critique as another product and leaving traditional modes of operation and viewership largely untouched. The Hammer's decision to invite artists to grapple with the Museum's administrative and infrastructural concerns marks the advent of a significant departure and an important step toward actively reinventing the way the institution functions.

As a new initiative, the Hammer's Public Engagement Artist in Residence program is only beginning to explore and articulate that potential, and will continue to do so over the next several years. The Hammer's decision to make this report available should enable other museums to have a better sense of the terrain as they pursue similar endeavors. We have chosen not to make specific recommendations: Machine Project is deeply committed to an understanding of process as something that emerges out of conversation and in a local context; any substantive guidance necessarily depends on the particular cultures and capacities of the institutions and individual artists involved, as well as on the desired level of collaboration and outcome. That said, our experience suggests that, at the conservative end of the spectrum, bringing in artists as consultants to fix glitches in the institution's established operation is probably not the most effective solution. Collaborations between artists and museums are, however, an excellent way to reconsider and change how we make contemporary art available and engaging to the public. To that end, Machine Project's Residency at the Hammer proposed a

shift in curatorial practice from an approach that is product-based to one that is committed to process—a shift that entails inviting in the messy contingency inherent to art.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

During the year Machine spent at the Hammer, both institutions traversed a great distance from our visions for the Museum's future to a far more concrete understanding of the practical challenges involved in reconciling and implementing those visions. As an artist who works entirely collaboratively, getting to spend a year deeply and intimately involved with all aspects of the Hammer's operations was a phenomenal opportunity for me to develop my nascent ideas about institutional practice. I am immensely grateful to Ann Philbin for the invitation, and to Allison Agsten, Elizabeth Cline, Douglas Fogle, and Ali Subotnick for their perspectives and insights, without which I couldn't have developed my own ideas, as well as for their investment in the Residency, which was essential to making these dozens of artists' pieces and projects happen. I continue to reflect on the Residency as I pursue collaborative undertakings with other institutions; producing this document has been an integral part of that learning process. The negotiations and conflicts you will encounter, alongside moments of remarkable cooperation, testify to the fact that, even with the best intentions, change is a slow and sometimes painful process. As I believe this document also makes tangible, the result is well worth the effort: embracing a more experimental practice gives rise to porous and dynamic interactions between the visitors, artists, and museum employees who together activate the museum as a space for art.

Project Descriptions



FANFARE/NO FANFARE

Museum Lobby (Wilshire Blvd. Entrance)

December 19, 2009, 11am–4pm

Visitors to the Museum were given the choice between a fanfare announcement of their arrival provided by the trumpet trio Scribble, or silence. The choice was indicated by a sign with two arrows—one arrow pointing to the left and marked “Fanfare” and one arrow pointing to the right and marked “No Fanfare”—which was placed at the bottom of the main lobby staircase. Visitors who chose “Fanfare” were treated to a brief unique improvisation. The piece was conceived by Mark Allen and Chris Kallmyer.



FUNGIFEST

Museum Lobby

January 21, 2010, 6–9pm

Dressed from head to toe in a red mushroom-cap costume, filmmaker and event organizer David Fenster greeted visitors at the front desk, while a mushroom-themed film that he created for the occasion screened behind him. Throughout the lobby and on the main staircase, a group of dancers performed an interpretation of the life of a spore, choreographed by Hana Van der Kolk and Phil Lord. Mycologist Dr. Bob Cummings provided visitors with detailed facts and stories about everything fungus-related and answered questions about a selection of fungi that had been picked on an earlier mushroom-hunting expedition through Machine.

<http://vimeo.com/11663908>



PALEOLITHIC SKILLS WORKSHOP

Westwood and surrounding areas; Museum Courtyard

Saturday, February 6, 2010, noon–4pm

Workshop participants foraged for food in Westwood with paleolithic skills instructor Mike Metzger. Each hunter-gatherer adopted a spirit name, and several made the trek without shoes. On their journey, participants collected wild edible plants, and, upon returning to the Museum, a salad was made and eaten.

<http://vimeo.com/9367767>



LITTLE WILLIAM THEATER: MICRO-CONCERTS

Museum Lobby Coatroom

Saturdays, January through November 2010

Throughout Machine’s one-year residency, weekly micro-concerts and other brief performances took place in the small coatroom closet—dubbed the Little William Theater—under the

stairs in the Hammer Museum lobby. Performances were primarily of live music, but there was also a puppet show, a cheese tasting, a bilingual poetry reading, and other sundry events. Pieces were typically one to two minutes in duration and were performed for two guests at a time. The series was conceived and curated by Chris Kallmyer and Mark Allen. <http://vimeo.com/9813718> and <http://www.youtube.com/user/machineproject#grid/user/150A4EFB75B0F0E4>



LITTLE WILLIAM THEATER: FESTIVAL OF NEW MUSIC

Museum Lobby Coatroom

Saturdays, August through November 2010

The Little William Theater performances culminated in a final concert series called the Festival of New Music. Ninety-five composers created new works for each of four resident ensembles: tuba, clarinet, violin, and accordion duos. Each piece was under two minutes in length, and the 400-odd concerts all took place inside the coatroom. All works were commissioned for the festival by Machine Project and curated by Chris Kallmyer.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/machineproject#grid/user/150A4EFB75B0F0E4>



LIVE PERSONAL SOUNDTRACK

Gallery 4 (Luisa Lambri exhibition), Gallery 5 (R. Crumb exhibition), and Permanent Collection Galleries
February 6, March 13, April 8, April 29, and May 13, 2010

Musicians Eric Klerks and Dylan McKenzie sat in the Gallery 4 foyer with their electric guitars and small amps hooked up to a set of headphones, underneath a sign that read "Museum Soundtrack Available." Visitors could check out either of them for a private audio tour of the Hammer's permanent collection and the R. Crumb and Luisa Lambri exhibitions. Participants could choose to make musical requests while viewing the exhibitions, or to have the guitarist improvise an original personal soundtrack for them. When both guitarists were out on tour, they changed the signage from "Museum Soundtrack Available" to "Museum Soundtrack UNavailable." This project was conceived by Mark Allen and Chris Kallmyer.

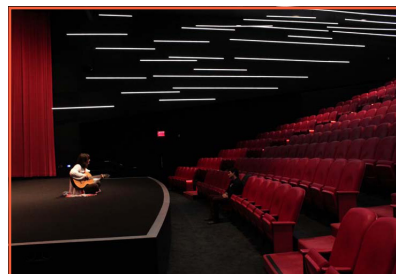
<http://vimeo.com/12841248>



GIANT GUESTBOOKS & TINY GUESTBOOK

Museum Lobby
(Parking Garage Entrance)
February 13–June 30, 2010

A giant-sized guestbook, designed and handmade by book binder and conservator Kristen St. John, was installed in the Museum lobby just to the right of the parking garage entrance. Visitors were invited to use it to express their impressions and experience of the Hammer, or to make any other commentary or drawing. Two giant guestbooks were filled over the course of four months. A tiny guestbook was also created but was not implemented.



VALENTINE'S DAY SONGS OF TRIUMPH OR HEARTBREAK

Billy Wilder Theater
Sunday, February 14, 2010, 1–4pm

Visitors to the Museum were invited to request a private performance of

a single song of either heartbreak or triumph by musician Emily Lacy. Hammer curator Ali Subotnick and usher Henry Crouch were stationed at a table in front of the theater, checking people in and obtaining their choice of song type. Henry led guests into the theater, showed them to their seat, and signaled the guest's choice to Emily. Participants did not communicate with Emily before, during, or, in most cases, after the performance.

<http://vimeo.com/9970755>



SUBTLE BODIES SERIES

Museum-wide
Wednesdays, February 24, March 3, March 10, and March 17, 2010

As part of an ongoing series curated by artist Adam Overton in various public places, artist Johanna Reed asked the occasional passerby to smell her and then write down their observations. How they "gathered their information" was left up to them.



TABLACENTRIC

Museum Lobby
April 6–17, 2010, 2–5pm

Musician Robin Sukhadia presented two weeks of tabla (north Indian classical drum) workshops and events. People were able to preregister for use of a tabla or simply to drop by and pick up any available drums. Players ran the gamut from small children to older adults. Visitors and passersby watched the drum sessions from the Museum stairs and balcony.



DREAM-IN

Museum-wide
May 1–2 (overnight), 2010

A total of 170 people signed up to spend the night in the Hammer courtyard and collect any dreams that occurred during their stay. The evening, organized by artist Adam Overton and facilitated by a group of 25 local artist-psychonauts, was offered in conjunction with the

Hammer's special exhibition of Carl Jung's *Red Book*. Participants chose from a selection of experimental dreaming workshops on guided meditation, lucid dreaming, dream acrobatics, and Yoga Nidra (a form of sleep yoga), among others. The workshops were followed by musical performances from b.y.o.f.f., a local all-female acoustic indie-folk band, and the experimental ambient music group Moon. Around midnight, writers Amanda Yates and Joshua Beckman read bedtime stories and poetry to small groups of people gathered around campsites in the courtyard. The following morning, participants were gently woken at dawn and asked to describe their dreams. The dream interviews were video recorded and edited into a loop that played the next day in the main lobby of the Hammer. Artist and songwriter Claire Cronin serenaded campers with songs that told of her psychic encounters with spiritual vibrations in the Hammer. On their way out, campers returned the dream pads they had been given for dream (re)collection to Adam Overton, who translated their contents into performance scores for that day's Nap-In.

http://hammer.ucla.edu/watchlisten/watchlisten/show_id/303227

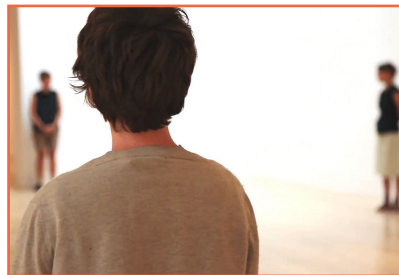


NAP-IN

Lindbrook Terrace
May 2, 2010, 12–5pm

The day after the Dream-In, Machine Project hosted a Nap-In for people who had been unable to attend or commit to the Dream-In, as well as for other Museum visitors. The curtains were drawn and 320 square feet of mats with cozy blankets were laid down on the floor of Lindbrook terrace. Music to nap by was provided in hourlong intervals by Jaeger Smith, Emily Lacy, Ambient Force 3000, and Yvette Holzwarth, Daniel Corral, and Ryan Tanaka. At the same time in the courtyard, the Gawdawful Theater troupe silently reenacted dreams of Dream-In participants from the night before.

<http://vimeo.com/12246992>



SINGING BY NUMBERS

Gallery 4 (Luisa Lambri exhibition)
4–7pm on Sunday, May 15 and
Saturday, June 4, 2010; 6–9pm on
Fridays, May 20 and 27, 2010

Musicians Laura Steenberge and Cat Lamb and their experimental women's choir, *Singing by Numbers*, sang minimalist harmonic improvisations in the Luisa Lambri gallery. After their first performance, Cat and Laura invited visitors to attend a singing workshop on Lindbrook terrace that explored the physics of sound waves through voice and experimented with new methods of teaching non-musicians and musicians alike how to sing in harmony.

<http://vimeo.com/12865696>



HAMMER STAFF PET PORTRAITS

Gallery 6
Saturday, June 19, 2010, 9am–noon

As part of a project conceived by Hammer designer Margo Graxeda, staff members were invited to bring their pets to the Museum to have their pictures taken in the courtyard by photographer Marianne Williams. The final stage of the proposed project—the production of life-size laminated cardboard cutouts of people's pets to be positioned throughout the Museum—never happened, but the eight participating staff members did receive professional photos of their pets.



NEEDLEPOINT THERAPY

Billy Wilder Theater Green Room
Eight Thursdays, May 20– July 8, 2010,
2–3:30pm

In a piece conceived by artist Joshua Greene and led by his mother, West Los Angeles-based psychoanalyst and needlepointing enthusiast Dr. Ellen Medway, seven people convened for private, confidential weekly 90-minute group therapy sessions during which they explored relationship concerns alongside needlepoint craft and art history. Dr. Medway chose a selection of works that she deemed conducive and relevant to the therapeutic process. Images of these paintings were made into needlepoint patterns that participants worked on throughout the sessions. Needlepointing kits made from the same patterns were sold in the Hammer bookstore.



**MACHINE PROJECT IN RESIDENCE
IN ANN PHILBIN'S OFFICE**

Ann Philbin's Office
July 15, 2010, 10am-6pm

Machine Project director Mark Allen, five Machine staff members and interns, and one visiting artist spent a full workday in residence in Hammer Museum director Ann Philbin's office. The mini-residency within Machine's Residency served as a collaborative planning session for Mark and Ann to conceptualize future plans for Machine and the Museum. The original concept for this project was a cultural exchange between institutions, with each director assuming control of operations at the other's office for one day. Ann Philbin did not take the helm at Machine Project; instead, a number of Hammer staff members created events at Machine through Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project, a project conceived later in the Residency.



**SOUNDINGS: BELLS AT
THE HAMMER**

Museum-wide
Saturday, July 17, 2010, 10am-6pm

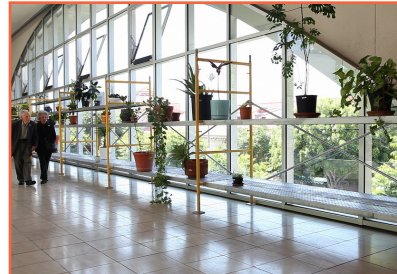
Hammer visitors were invited to participate in a daylong sound installation by Chris Kallmyer composed of the sounds made by bells that were issued upon arrival and worn by participating guests as they perambulated the Museum in usual fashion. The wind chime-like tinkling emanating from visitors was supplemented by computer-programmed toy animatronic Santa Clauses let loose in the Museum's coatroom by composer Beth McMullin, an African bell ensemble that circulated throughout the Museum, and an amplified cymbal performance by Colin Woodford on Lindbrook terrace that provided an ambient backdrop. Admission to the Museum was free of charge to participants willing to wear a bell; only two visitors opted out and bought tickets. There were a higher number of children in attendance than usual.
<http://vimeo.com/13632625>



**INTAGLIO PRINTMAKING
WORKSHOP**

Lindbrook Terrace
July 24 and 25, 2010, 1-4pm

In conjunction with the Hammer's summer exhibition *Outside the Box: Edition Jacob Samuel*, printmaker Maggie White Lomeli offered two drypoint etching workshops to familiarize visitors with one of the simplest forms of intaglio printmaking. Preregistered participants of all ages created their own etchings made by drawing into a plate surface and running it through the etching press.



HOUSEPLANT VACATION

Lindbrook Terrace
July 31-August 28, 2010

Visitors were invited to bring their houseplants to the Museum for a monthlong cultural retreat in August on light-flooded Lindbrook terrace. Every Saturday, the 77 participating plants were treated to a series of

readings, performances, and musical events, designed to give the plants a well-rounded vacation experience. Readings included short stories by Janet Sarbanes and plant-themed poetry by Anthony McCann and Kirsty Singer. Musical and other performances were provided by Krystal Krunch, Laura Steenberge, ing, Mary Frances Spencer, Carmina Escobar, Robert Crouch, and Sublamp. When performances were in progress, the plants' section was roped off with a stanchion that read "Plants Only Beyond This Point." In addition to the weekly programming, the plants had their tarot cards read by Kristina Faragher, were treated to private late-night plant pornography by Jonathan Keats, and had poets from around the country, including and invited by Joshua Beckman, calling at all hours to read them poems through a loudspeaker answering machine hidden in a fake boulder. Plant owners were given a reader of plant-themed poems selected by Joshua Beckman in case they missed their plants. Each plant wrote a "Welcome to Westwood" postcard home designed by Hammer designer Margo Graxeda and had its portrait taken by photographer Lisa Anne Auerbach.

<http://vimeo.com/14492141>



LEVEL5

Gallery 6 and Billy Wilder Theater
Performance: Saturday, September 5,
through Sunday, September 6
(72 continuous hours)

Artist Brody Condon's live-action role-playing (LARP) performance piece Level5 was a 72-hour critical exploration of self-actualization seminars of the 1970s. The 50 participants created and assumed characters who then went through a transformative experience together. While the performance itself was closed to the public, Hammer visitors could watch live-streaming video in the Billy Wilder Theater. On November 18, 2010, the Hammer hosted the premiere of select footage from the piece in the Billy Wilder Theater. A discussion with Brody Condon and Mark Allen followed the screening. <http://lvl5.org/>



GIANT HAND

Museum Courtyard Foyer
September 2010

The Giant Hand was one of three projects proposed at the beginning of the Residency to address the Museum's wayfinding concerns. Conceived by museum exhibition designer Maria Mortati and Mark Allen and fabricated by artist Matt Jones, the Giant Hand pointed visitors toward select locations in the Museum—Stairs to Galleries, Admission and Bookstore, Elevator to Galleries, Billy Wilder Theater, Restrooms, Cafe Hammer, and at "you"—by means of a simple push-button control panel located on its base, which was modeled on the Hammer and neighboring Occidental Petroleum building.

<http://vimeo.com/15612336>



ANNIE OKAY

Museum-wide
October 15 and 16, 2010, 8:30–10pm
each night

Annie Okay was an original performance theater work written and directed by Asher Hartman and inspired by the unintentional colonialist subtext in two of America's well-loved musicals, *Annie Get Your Gun* and *The King and I*. The piece revisited the musical form and combined it with elements of abstract theater, comedy, and participatory components to look at how American entertainment responds to and portrays struggles with race, identity, colonialist politics, and violence. The performance moved throughout the Museum, with the audience following the actors for short scenes in the Museum lobby and courtyard foyer to Lindbrook terrace.

Annie Okay was assistant directed by Haruko Tanaka and featured a score by Devin McNulty and Max Markowitz, choreography by Prumsodun Ok and Carol McDowell, costumes by Curt LeMieux, and makeup by Maritza Mazariego. It was performed by a cast of Los Angeles-based performance artists and actors. <http://vimeo.com/26084011>



ENORMOUS MICROSCOPIC EVENING

Gallery 6
November 6, 2010 4–7pm

Enormous Microscopic Evening was hosted by Critter, a San Francisco-based salon dedicated to expanding

the relationships between culture and the environment. The evening included demonstrations and workshops from 12 individuals or collectives, ranging from experts to amateurs and hobbyists. Visitors were serenaded by three musicians playing John Cage's *Suite for Toy Piano* down the hall and into the dark gallery space where they learned how to build and manipulate microscopes made from disposable camera lenses, cell phones, and IMAX cameras. Live material samples were taken from the Museum's courtyard and examined under the different scopes by visitors of all ages.

<http://vimeo.com/22781774>



TABLE TENNIS ON LINDBROOK TERRACE

Lindbrook Terrace
March through November 2010

Two table tennis tables were installed on Lindbrook terrace for visitors and museum staff to play on. As the tables were used, the sound of people hitting balls back and forth activated spaces in the Museum that had previously been relatively vacant. At the same time, they created a psychoacoustic sculpture that altered the perceptual experience and social atmosphere of the institution.



HAMMER STAFF BIRTHDAY POETRY READINGS & PERSONAL CONCERTS

Hammer Museum offices
Throughout the Residency

Hammer staff members were invited to sign up for special one-on-one performances for their birthdays. These ranged from receiving a phone call at work from Joshua Beckman, who read the staff member a poem, to individual folk music concerts by Emily Lacy and drum solo performances from percussionist Corey Fogel, who brought his entire drum set into the staff member's office for the occasion. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAaZOCUibZc>

exchange between institutions, this project offered the reciprocal opportunity to anyone who worked at the Hammer. Staff members were issued an open invitation to take over Machine Project's gallery space on Thursdays throughout the last three months of our Residency. Several staff members participated: Morgan Kroll put on a concert in Machine's shipwreck installation; Julia Luke and Sara Williams transformed Machine into a pop-up pie shop for the holidays; Elizabeth Cline filmed an opera starring and made for dogs; Marisa Lemorande hosted a formal dinner and reunion between friends; Camille Thoma and a few friends used the space as an art studio for a day. <http://vimeo.com/24497415>



HAMMER STAFF IN RESIDENCE AT MACHINE PROJECT

Machine Project
Thursdays, September through
November 2010

Looking at Machine's Residency at
the Hammer Museum as a cultural





Road Map

A Road
Map

—
Record of Our Experience

HAMMER MUSEUM GOALS

- To develop new pathways for integrating artists within the artistic, programmatic, public, and institutional facets of an art museum.
- To conceive and implement a new paradigm for the interactive museum: an artist-driven visitor engagement program that privileges daily contact among visitors, artists, and Museum staff.
- To enrich the visitor's experience of the Hammer through dialogue, direction, and interpretation, increasing visibility of collections and exhibitions and offering new frameworks for engaging with the Museum.
- To enable the Hammer to be a site for non-object-based artistic practice, creative explorations, and productive and sustained institutional critique.
- To enhance the Hammer's awareness of, and responsiveness to, its visitors' expectations and needs.
- To increase formal and informal interactions among visitors, artists, UCLA students and faculty, and Museum staff.

HOW WE DID IT

FUNDING

The 2010 program was made possible entirely by the Irvine grant, which is funded over the course of four years. In the first year, Irvine distributed its largest sum, with the funds decreasing over time so that the Museum would gradually adapt by supplementing the grant dollars to create a self-sustaining program. Machine Project received \$95,000, the majority of the year one Public Engagement program funds. The remainder was allotted for visitor services needs such as the creation of a functioning lobby front desk. Additionally, Machine received a \$20,000 stipend for its work.

BUDGET DISTRIBUTION

A/V	\$17,000
Machine Project staff (graphic design, sound curator, administration, bookkeeping)	\$14,000
Additional staff hired for construction or A/V projects	\$2,500
Parking	\$1,200
Signage	\$1,300
Projects	\$50,000
This report	\$5,000
Contingency	\$4,000

PROCESS

A process emerged whereby the Hammer’s Public Engagement team, comprising Allison Agsten and Elizabeth Cline, regularly met with Machine Project’s Mark Allen to vet and advance project ideas.

A) CONCEPTION TO APPROVAL

Initial concept shared with PE group (weekly or electronically)	Ideation, troubleshooting within PE group (weekly)	Developed concept presented to Hammer leadership (biweekly)	Intake form generated	Approved concept presented to key constituents and staff for discussion, preemptive problem solving, and, finally, approval sign off
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Allen, Agsten, and Cline met on a weekly basis to field project ideas. Between meetings, ideas were sometimes shared via email or iChat.	Aspects discussed and potentially modified included scale, duration, number of consultants, artists, performers, and audience involved.	Allen, Agsten, and Cline met biweekly with Hammer Director Ann Philbin and Chief Curator Douglas Fogle to obtain their go-ahead for promising projects.	Intake forms that clearly described every component of the project were developed in order to discern which departments would be directly impacted and if other types of administrative forms, contracts, waivers, sign-ins, or releases were needed.	Key constituents and concerns included: Administration/ Legal (contracts, waivers); Operations Manager (building regulations, occupation, fire marshal issues); Registrar (art-work safety); Development and Public Programs (scheduling conflicts). When applicable, event proposals were brought to exhibition curators and artists whose work was on view.
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B) APPROVAL TO EXECUTION

Continued troubleshooting	Event forms submitted and event put on calendar (anywhere from two weeks to two months before production started)	In production, typically from one to four months (see expanded description and an example below)	Project presented at museum-wide events meetings two to three weeks prior to scheduled start date for additional troubleshooting and scheduling of A/V and facilities needs	Event takes place!
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PROCESS: PROJECT/EVENT PRODUCTION

There were three sets of concerns we addressed for every project or event produced:

1. ARTISTS’, CONSULTANTS’, AND PERFORMERS’ NEEDS

- Who are the artists, consultants, and performers involved with this project? (For any individual project a range of 1–75 collaborators could be involved.)
- How much will they be paid?
- Will they be on site? When, how, and where?
- Are they bringing anything to the Museum (equipment, materials)?

2. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT COMPONENTS

- How will the public be participating?
- Does the program require waivers, sign-in sheets, check-out sheets, etc.?
- Is it a participatory piece? If so, how are we indicating that to visitors (in advance, on-site)?
- How are we creating an environment conducive to engagement? This includes seating, signage, staffing, etc.

3. INTERNAL ADMINISTRATION PRODUCTION

- What is the look and feel of the event or project (as conveyed by signage, furniture, etc.)?

What are the documentation goals, needs, and schedule (including A/V equipment and staff requests)? What are the material production needs (including construction labor and supplies)?

What are the staffing needs? Do we need volunteers, interns, or help from other departments?

What are the marketing needs (website calendar, A.I.R. blog, Facebook, Twitter)?

In most cases we would try to meet with artists and collaborators as soon as the event was approved to answer these questions together. These meetings were extremely helpful to manage expectations and to orient artists and collaborators to the internal processes of the Museum. Beyond the initial meeting, we maintained regular communication with artists and collaborators during the months and weeks leading up to the event, with weekly check-in and follow-up emails. For larger projects (Dream-In, Level5, and Enormous Microscopic Evening, to give a few examples), it was necessary to meet in person with the artists at least three times.

Each project had a different timeline, depending on its scale and the number of collaborators and components, outlined above, involved. For larger projects (with budgets over \$2,500, significant A/V needs, and five or more collaborators), it took four months to problem-solve production concerns and solidify details. Smaller projects required about a month to produce from their approval. Ongoing projects, such as the weekly programming in the Little William Theater, required little to no production work from the Museum's staff to maintain them once they were under way.

For the 26 projects, we produced over 70 events of various scale over the course of the year. This meant that any given week we were simultaneously managing several events in different phases of production. Additionally, due to the nature of the work and our collaboration, most proposed projects were modified or had components added after the initial idea had been approved, and up to two weeks prior to execution. Often this meant expanding the project to include additional collaborators and

performative elements (see Houseplant Vacation production example below). As thoroughly as we sought to plan and anticipate, the approved project typically served as a general outline, with the shape of the work ultimately contingent upon visitor attendance and participation.

After each event or project was completed, internal event reports were sent to the staff describing the experience of the event, the response from visitors, the problems, and the successes. The event reports fit within an established system in place for public programs and also served as a helpful wrap-up for those unable to observe or participate in the program.

PROCESS: EVENT PRODUCTION EXAMPLE HOUSEPLANT VACATION

July 31–August 28, 2010

APRIL

Machine Project concept: the Hammer invites the public to bring houseplants to the Museum for a cultural retreat over the summer. Up to 400 plants would be displayed in the lobby on custom plant stands commissioned by an artist.

The proposal was presented to director Philbin and chief curator Fogle, who flagged concerns about the protection of the artwork in the lobby from organic material (i.e. bugs, plant dust) and the aesthetic compatibility of the plant stands with the Museum's architecture, but nonetheless approved the project to proceed for further evaluation by Museum staff.

The proposal was then presented to key constituents, who reasserted concerns about the protection of the artwork, raised the question of who would manage and care for the plants, and offered a number of concrete recommendations and conditions for the project's implementation. Specifically: Legal Affairs suggested waivers for the plant owners and caretakers to release the Hammer of responsibility for the health and safety of their plants; the registrar, Portland McCormick (whose perspective on this topic is elaborated in her interview, pages 145–48), would allow the plants in the lobby only if every lender of artwork in the lobby space agreed to sign a waiver allowing

the work to be shown in proximity to live plant material.

In order to avoid these problems and associated delay, the Hammer suggested moving the project to Lindbrook terrace. Machine Project remained invested in the greater visibility afforded by the lobby and suggested placing only a few plants there to announce the project. The registrar held firmly to the necessity of waivers to permit even a couple of plants, at which point Lindbrook terrace was agreed upon by all parties.

By the end of April, the project was cleared to move into production, contingent on final approval of the plant stands by the director.

MAY

Machine Project introduced the idea of adding additional programming to the Houseplant Vacation, specifically, poetry readings and music for the plants.

Machine Project submitted a visualization of the commissioned plant stands, which were approved by director Philbin, and Machine Project searched for someone to fabricate them.

At the end of May, the intake form was sent to key constituents for their final approval and the project budget was submitted and approved.

JUNE

A performance schedule designed to give the plants a well-rounded vacation experience was set. This entailed one hour of reading, one hour of New Age practice, and one hour of music per week.

After several problems with plant-stand fabrication, including budget concerns, Machine and the Hammer agreed to rent scaffolding instead.

Machine Project proposed additional programming—specifically, a phone-in kiosk so that plant owners could call a phone number and talk to their plants on the terrace. Allen and collaborators developed a system in which a cell phone was attached to and fed directly into a speaker, which was embedded in a fake rock. In addition to the plant owners, poets were invited to call and read poetry to the plants at all hours,

unannounced. This additional programming was introduced to key constituents at a weekly internal meeting and approved.

Machine Project invited Lisa Anne Auerbach to photograph portraits of the plants. This add-on developed into a distinct event, with a separate ideation process, schedule, and budget. It was introduced to key constituents at a weekly internal meeting and approved. The photography element's original idea was to create a diorama and shoot the plants on vacation in an imagined locale; in the end, they were shot in situ on Lindbrook terrace.

Weekly documentation of events for plants was scheduled.

JULY

Machine Project and Hammer developed additional ideas that were easily accommodated: the Hammer designed "Welcome to Westwood" postcards to send to plant owners; Jonathan Keats was scheduled for an artist talk for the plants during Museum hours, and to screen his plant pornography after-hours for the plants only.

A promotional photo shoot of the plants was organized.

Waivers were developed for plant owners and caretakers.

Notices about the project, issuing the call for visitors to bring their plants to the Museum, were distributed via emails to press, on Facebook, Twitter, and via Machine Project's mailing list.

On July 31 from 11am to 7pm, Elizabeth Cline, Allison Agsten, Mark Allen, and two interns received plants at the Hammer. Visitors who dropped off their plants for the vacation filled out an intake form that detailed the specifics of their plant, including physical description and directions for care, and also served as a waiver that released the Hammer of responsibility for the plant.

AUGUST

The Museum sent plant owners postcards and the results of their plants' psychic readings and tarot card readings.

On August 28 from 11am to 7pm, Cline, Allen, and two interns returned the plants to their owners.

In the end, 77 plants were treated to a vacation at the

Hammer. Five plant owners did not retrieve their plants, four plants died and were replaced by Machine Project, and 73 plants experienced new growth.

COMMUNICATIONS: **HAMMER INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS**

MEETINGS

The Public Engagement group—Allison Agsten, Elizabeth Cline, and Mark Allen—met weekly with each other and biweekly with director Philbin and chief curator Fogle. Weekly (and later biweekly) meetings with Agsten, Cline and staff from the administration, legal, operations, registrar, and curatorial departments were also initiated.

EMAIL

Public Engagement instituted Museum-wide weekly email updates to keep staff apprised of upcoming events, and to let staff know what to expect when there was a period of heavy activity ahead.

EVENT REPORTS

Event reports were compiled after each activity. The initial impetus was to share project outcomes with our colleagues, but the reports were also invaluable to sustaining morale: many staff members who often worked on or were directly affected by A.I.R. events were not able to experience them because many events occurred on the weekends or after hours when staff were not on-site.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

PRESS

When the grant was awarded, the Museum issued a press release in June 2009 and *LA Times* coverage (see below) followed. Additionally, a midterm press release was issued outlining upcoming programming, and the Hammer's communications team pitched a few of the larger events to the press throughout the course of the Residency.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

E-blasts were sent to member and nonmember lists. Public Engagement updated a blog on the Hammer website with A.I.R. events on a weekly basis. Key events were also featured on the Museum's website home page. In late summer 2010, web reorganization gave A.I.R. a greater, more navigable presence on the website. Finally, projects were pitched on Facebook and Twitter. Machine Project did a considerable amount of online marketing via its own website, social media, and e-blasts. Machine announced events in weekly emails they sent to a mailing list of about 7,000 people.

COVERAGE

"Brody Condon," *Art in America*, www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/brody-condon/

"Character Development: Brody Condon's Level5 and the Avant-LARP of Becoming Self," *East of Borneo*, www.eastofborneo.org/articles/27

"Houseplants Get Rockstar Treatment in L.A.'s Hammer Museum," *California Home + Design*, www.californiahomedesign.com/blog/houseplants-get-rockstar-treatment-las-hammer-museum

"Machine Project Sounds Out the Boundaries of the Museum Experience at the Hammer with Bells, Guitars and Houseplants," *The Daily Bruin*, dailybruin.detroitsoftworks.com/index.php/article/2010/07/machine_project_sounds_out_the_boundaries_of_the_museum_experience_at_the_hammer_with_bells_guitars_

"Plant Pornography at Hammer Museum: Machine Gallery's Amusements for Plants on Vacation," *LA Weekly*, blogs.laweekly.com/stylecouncil/2010/08/plant_pornography_at_hammer_mu.php

"Plants Take Vacation at UCLA's Hammer Museum," *NBC LA*, www.nbclosangeles.com/the-scene/events/Hammer-Plants-Machine-Project-100638159.html

"Revenge of the Ferns," LA Weekly, www.laweekly.com/2010-07-29/calendar/revenge-of-the-ferns/

"Soundings: 'Everyone in a Place' at the Hammer," The Huffington Post, www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/14/soundings-everyone-in-a-p_n_646690.html

MEASUREMENT

With a spreadsheet, the Museum kept a tally of the number of visitors who came to each event, with comments on why attendance might have been particularly high or low, as well as other observations that may have been helpful. For example, an artist with a large following or an offer of free admission may have contributed to an event's high attendance. Additionally, questions about the visibility and success of the program were included in a professionally administered survey about visitor experience that was conducted on behalf of the Museum in June 2010. The survey revealed, among other things, that awareness of the Public Engagement program was low, though satisfaction was significantly higher. Out of the 274 people surveyed, 13% were aware of the program, 14% participated in programs. Of those who participated, 54% rated overall satisfaction with the A.I.R. program as excellent and 39% as good; 57% rated the educational experience the A.I.R. program as excellent and 39% as good; 62% rated the entertainment experience of the A.I.R. program as excellent and 31% as good. This information will be used as a baseline for future programs and a follow-up survey is planned for fall 2012. Occasionally, individual participants were surveyed to monitor the A.I.R. program's appeal to guests and shifts in perceptions of the Museum, and to help understand general patterns of use. Both anonymous survey handouts and scheduled observation periods were implemented in which staff members recorded visitor interaction with specific projects.

From our handout surveys, we learned that programs with limited audiences often had very high impact. For example, when we surveyed the eight participants in Needlepoint

Therapy—an eight-week program in which guests met with a clinical therapist while creating needlepoints of images from the Museum's permanent collection—seven responded that the experience had significantly deepened their connection to the Hammer. Sample responses to our open-ended prompt, "Did this experience deepen your relationship to the Museum?" included: "It was wonderful to be supported by the Hammer in this project. I feel an intimacy and appreciation for the Hammer on a personal level as part of my community," and "This was a good experience and a unique introduction to the collection."

A great deal was gleaned from open-ended prompts about what worked and what didn't for a number of events. For the Paleolithic Skills Workshop in the lobby, we learned through survey comments that one of the most appealing aspects of the program was unrelated to the program; participants liked listening to an oud player who was improvising in the same space that the workshop was being held. That information, paired with experiences of the substantial music programming throughout the residency, taught us early on the impact that music has throughout the spaces. The Hammer applied that knowledge to the 2011 program by setting aside funds specifically for music programming.

OBSERVATIONS OF VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Because of the density of programming, visitors were able to experience Machine Project's work throughout the year, whether they planned to or came upon it unexpectedly. In 2010, there were 36 Saturdays where visitors had the opportunity to attend a concert in the Little William Theater, and on six of those Saturdays there was another A.I.R. project offered concurrently that visitors could drop in on. After sustained observations it was evident that visitors were most interested in dropping in on events and observing in a noncommittal manner similar to that with which most museum visitors view the artwork. For example, during the Tablacentric performances and workshops that were held over a two-week period, on average 10–15 people would participate in learning/playing tabla, another 5–10 would watch the workshops, 50 people would attend the final performances,

and additional others would pass by while still listening. We often refer back to the Tablacentric program as an excellent example of a project that provides multiple layers of participation, simultaneously offering active, indirect, and passive opportunities for experience and thereby accommodating a wide range of visitors.

Due to the intimacy of many programs, the Museum and Machine Project came to recognize participants, especially repeat participants, as regular museum-goers or people interested in Machine Project. The only major event that generated attendance from people who are not regular museum-goers was Soundings: Bells at the Hammer. This could be attributed to several factors, including expanded marketing, the inclusion and promotion of free admission, and the fact that it was a family-friendly event. Many events had low attendance in general and the projects existed largely as “folklore”—meaning that many more people heard about the project and/or viewed documentation after the event than participated in or witnessed the work in person. These low numbers could be attributed to internal difficulties with event promotion, which was complicated by program details crystallizing at a late stage, by the highly conceptual nature of some of the programs, and also because promotion often became an afterthought as the production of events was so time consuming.

Based on attendance observations, about halfway into the Residency, required registration was implemented for events that were contingent on participation or had limited capacities (i.e. workshops or large-scale performances). Preregistered events often filled up immediately after the Hammer Facebook invite was posted and Machine Project sent an email to their mailing list. On average, 75% people registered attended their event. There were some exceptions, for example the Paleolithic Skills Workshop: in the first workshop none of ten people who had registered attended; in the second workshop five of ten people who had registered attended. In the case of Annie Okay, of the 100 people preregistered each night, 98 and 96 attended, respectively.

RESPONDING TO 2010 PROGRAM WITH 2011 PROGRAM

A new position (senior manager of events in development) was created to oversee the museum-wide calendar, ensuring a manageable number of events per day and overseeing content to minimize conflict and maximize productive correspondences between the various programming threads.

Contract templates were revamped by Legal Affairs to make them less daunting and friendlier to artists, performers, and collaborators, and to ensure that responsibilities and expectations are clear.

Work continues on the development of a more sophisticated measurement system that will enable the Museum to capture the qualitative and quantitative data on programs. The front desk in the lobby, staffed by the new visitor service team, was inaugurated in September 2010 and now serves as a primary point of data capture on Public Engagement and other programs.

2011 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT A.I.R.

In planning for our 2011 Public Engagement A.I.R., the Hammer staff considered what was learned from Machine Project’s Residency. As the group mostly enjoyed the opportunity to engage so many artists on-site, the 2011 program was designed to comprise several different artist’s projects that would be selected by the curatorial team. This eliminates the additional level of curation introduced by Machine’s collaborative practice, while retaining some of the variety it had afforded and maintaining greater institutional control. We invited a handful of artists to submit specific Public Engagement proposals, taking a much more prescriptive approach to the program, which enabled us to ask for projects that were directly and consistently aligned with the goals of the grant. Five artists’ projects were chosen for production. The projects were immediately placed on the calendar and budgeted so that capacity issues could be addressed more specifically upfront. It was important for us to moderate project flow so that we could manage workflow and

build in time for reflection. Overall, the Hammer has moved from an event-based model to one in which events are occasionally a component but not a driver. Our musical programming will be expanded upon, drawing on the experiments with sound that Machine Project's Residency introduced.

Allison Agsten

Elizabeth Cline

Interview:

Allison
Agsten

February 14, 2011

MA AA

Machine Project director Mark Allen and Hammer public engagement curator Allison Agsten reflect on the impact of the Residency on the infrastructural capacities of both Machine Project and the Hammer, as well as on the shifting understandings of central concepts—including public engagement, success, and problemsolving—over the course of the collaboration. They also talk about how some of their favorite pieces affected what it felt like to be in the Museum.

Projects discussed:

- **Live Personal Soundtrack**
- **Soundings: Bells at the Hammer**
- **Little William Theater**
- **Level5**
- **Houseplant Vacation**

Mark: You and I were just having lunch and talking about the other public engagement projects that you're doing here at the Hammer now that Machine's Residency is over. How do you feel the Museum's approach to doing this kind of work has changed as a result of the work you and I did together last year? Are you approaching projects differently structurally, conceptually?

Allison: One of the greatest take-aways of public engagement and the Irvine grant is that, over time, we are developing processes—not just for project production but for how we handle things legally, what the order of operations is with our events group, etc. I learned what things are difficult for the Museum so that now, moving forward, I feel like I've got some parameters. It's a lot easier to tell people specifically what we want them to work on and what they just shouldn't touch.

Mark: Yeah, as the Hammer's first public engagement artist, trying to investigate how the Museum works and what it might do differently, I sometimes felt like a doctor, like: "Does it hurt here? Does it hurt here? Does it hurt if I do this? OK, I'm not going to do that—it hurt." Do you think those lessons are institution specific, or do you think there's anything that can generalize toward other institutions who might be interested in doing work like this?

Allison: I think there's a lot of interchangeability. You can probably plug in the name of any institution and they could follow our process and get similar results. If I were in

another museum, the big thing that I would have done differently is that I'd spend a couple of months having lunch with everybody that was going to be involved before anything started. I would talk to them about their capacity, their limitations, their staffing situation, if it is easy to get temporary work—kind of get a feel for all of that and do some troubleshooting beforehand.

Mark: Yeah, I think evaluating the capacity and building consensus is something I would have worked on more in retrospect. Although in a certain way it's hard to know, before you start doing things, what you are assessing capacity for.

Allison: That's true. But I just mean capacity in terms of knowing what the institution can logistically bear. I don't think you're ever going to have consensus with this kind of work, because it's new and it's different and you're not always going to be able to get everybody on board. I think you mostly just want people to feel comfortable that you have the Museum's best interest at play and to embrace all of it as an experiment. That's something that's really stuck with me and that I've really thought about: if there's anything I want to build consensus about, it's not a specific project, it's just really getting people to deeply believe that this is an experiment. I'm always thinking in advance about what the end point can look like—and I don't mean the final minutes of the project, but afterward, like what happens three months down the line—to try to prepare everybody in advance for the life cycle of the thing. It seems to help a little when



Live Personal
Soundtrack

people can envision that it will be over and that we'll all be alive and intact.

Mark: [laughs] Right. And we talked about articulating the temporary nature of projects as a useful tool for doing stuff. It's like, if I tell my girlfriend we're having houseguests and she asks how long they are staying, it's awkward if the answer is "I don't know."

Allison: Totally. I think that touches on something that we talked about a lot along the way: that you want to be able to have space to change gears, if needed, to evolve the project, so you don't want to have to be stuck with that initial vision. It's like finding

that balance between telling people how this is probably going to look and making sure that they know that it's only probably.

Mark: Yes. I'm really interested in a process-oriented way of working, where you're not attached to a particular outcome. That way an event might be awkward or unsuccessful or unpopular, but it is still valuable because it's part of a knowledge-generating process.

Allison: There are only a couple of things I look back on and think, well, that didn't go quite how I thought it would—but I still took something away from that. I think most of the projects

that didn't happen or that we had the most difficulty producing were those that could be perceived as confusing visitors. The good news is that, for example, the Giant Hand was really successful and our visitors loved it, so now we have a precedent for projects that could potentially confuse a visitor actually not confusing visitors and, in fact, delighting them. Maybe down the line, approaching these things will be a little easier.

Mark: During the interview I did with Chandler McWilliams, that issue of confusing the audience came up in a really interesting way. My argument had always been that the Giant Hand wasn't actually confusing.

Chandler's response was so much more interesting: he asked, "What's wrong with confusing the audience?" His point was that, architecturally, the Hammer is a loop, so if people don't know where to go, they'll walk around, see some stuff, and eventually find the right place.

Allison: I thought that was a really good point, too. Our visitors are smart enough people. They can resolve whatever little issue we present to them. It's probably not going to ruin their day.

Mark: What was interesting for me about that question was that it goes to the very idea of service. I come from

a sensibility where I want people to feel welcomed and oriented. It's very important for the kind of work that I do. But it is worth thinking about how serious the problem is: How many people actually just leave in frustration and don't buy tickets? Does being a little confused really damage people's experience, or the mission of the Museum?

Allison: We just had a research firm surveying onsite this summer, and the researcher told us that people actually seem to find their way around here just fine. They don't seem uncomfortable with it. But also, the largest contingency of visitors are repeat visitors, so...I'm always trying to work out the worst-case scenario: people are going to walk out, for example, because not everyone has the patience to invest time in figuring out how to navigate our relatively confusing site. Is that one of the reasons the majority of our visitors are repeat visitors? But I see what you're saying, and I think it connects to experimenting again. If you confuse visitors for a few days with this thing you're doing, it's not the end of the world. It's long-term confusion that creates this sense of massive discomfort. I think that that's a big difference between an installation and an event. The events were a lot easier for us to make happen because of their brief temporality.

Mark: What was your favorite project?

Allison: Let's see: [Live Personal Soundtrack](#); [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#); the Ping-Pong tables...I loved the new ways sound inhabited

the space, addressing senses that are normally neglected within the Museum. Anytime we did that there was a sense of enchantment and discovery that blew my mind. The day we did [Soundings](#), I just loved seeing this amazing mix of people and hearing the bells all over the Museum. It was a multigenerational day here in a way that I don't often see. I don't think you can overestimate what a big deal that was—to see whole families enjoying this together. Speaking also as a parent, it was nice to see people want to bring their kids here, and not to a children's activity. Then the intimacy of [Live Personal Soundtrack](#) was a big deal: the sense of connection you have to this other person that you don't know but who is creating a musical composition just for you. It was pretty luxurious, and I really saw the work differently. It was subtle but profound.

Mark: Yeah, I think [Live Personal Soundtrack](#) was really special. Let's be frank, it's a goofy idea: to have some dude with a guitar follow you around the Museum. I have a real weakness for projects that are really goofy, instantly understandable, and yet somehow also manage to be this deeper thing.

Allison: What was your favorite?

Mark: I thought the [Dream-In](#) was really special. And the [Live Personal Soundtrack](#). I like the way we kind of discovered Lindbrook terrace.

Allison: You did.

Mark: It's such a gorgeous space. I hope they'll do more projects there.

Allison: We are planning on it. That was a major realization for the Museum.

Mark: I also think the sound stuff was interesting. One of the issues we are still working through is: how do you make additional layers of content in a way that doesn't do violence to the function of the Museum? So, when we did the one-day *Field Guide to LACMA* in 2008, it was super fun but to a certain degree it turns the museum into a circus, and there's artwork that doesn't want to be looked at in that context. So, thinking about how to do interactive or sound-based things without hurting the experience of the work, [Live Personal Soundtrack](#) stands out in that it's both a completely different experience of the Museum and it's relatively constrained because of the headphones. I was also interested in [Singing by Numbers](#), the microtonal choir piece that Laura Steenberge and Cat Lamb did, and how much it seemed to be in resonance with the work in the collection.

Allison: Yes, I think everybody was incredibly interested in and impressed by that.

Mark: We did an early piece where Chris Kallmyer and a couple of other people were playing trumpet in the vault room, and it was just so loud. It sounded amazing, but people wouldn't go in the room. It was helpful for me to see the problems with that piece in order to develop an idea of thinking additively, if that makes sense.

Allison: Yeah. For me, also, one of the projects that I loved most was Brody's

piece, [Level5](#). I feel such a sense of pride that this Museum was able to help make that happen. But that piece was maybe least connected to public engagement, whereas [Live Personal Soundtrack](#) is definitely related to the public engagement goal. With Brody's piece, there are ways in which it was, since he allowed us to screen it for people and that screening experience turned out to be really remarkable. So in a way that piece also helped us think more broadly about what public engagement can be—that it can mean just supporting really new and innovative work.

Mark: I think one of the things that was useful about it being a residency is that we are able to do enough different projects that you get a sense of the range of possibilities.

Allison: Yes. Your Residency gave us a good jumping-off point for thinking about public engagement.

Mark: Yeah. A lot of my interest is still focused on what it means to do a very engaged project with a few people. And this was a thread through a lot of them: Live Personal Soundtrack was one person at a time; the Valentine's Day show with Emily was one person at a time; Brody's piece was 25 people for three days... I'm still trying to figure out the best way to articulate the value of that to institutions.

Allison: Yeah. You've taught me a lot about that. Almost every day now I think about the power that intimacy can have, and that we don't need to serve a thousand people with each project. We've talked often about how you measure success: it's not just the

number of people that come through; quality is part of it.

Mark: I noticed something the other day as I was rewatching the video of [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#). The first person you see, this young woman putting on one of the bells, was one of the participants in Brody's piece. In Brody's piece her character was very hostile. Then I met her in person at the screening and she's a super nice middle school art teacher. She said for that piece, she tried to create a personality who was the opposite of her in every way, and she said it was so powerful that during the lunch break she would walk down the streets of Westwood and crowds would part before her because her energy was so negative [laughs]. I barely recognized her in the [Soundings](#) video because her affect was so different.

Allison: Yeah, there are definitely people that you start to recognize. I think some of those were Machine people that started coming here. I felt like people began to think of the Residency as their program because some of the experiences were so intimate, and they just kept coming. We've started to all get to know them in a way that you don't when you have five projects in a year. It was nice to have that experience even for a few moments.

Mark: I also wanted to ask you what it was like going to the [Little William Theater](#) wrap-up at Machine Project after seeing so many of those concerts in the coatroom at the Hammer.

Allison: I walked in late and it was

packed and it was hot and it was quiet. The door made an immense racket and I felt like an interloper coming in. It's hushed and these people are trying to have their nice experience. So from the beginning it was really juxtaposed to coming into my place of work and waving hello to the security guards on the way in and saying hi to everybody. It was a clear sign to me that this had moved on to something else. This didn't just belong to the Hammer anymore. It was over. I took a few pictures on my phone of the Little William sign... There was something really tender and sweet about seeing that little paper sign strung up.

Mark: We still have it up at the gallery. Isn't it funny to think that survived the whole year?

Allison: It really is. It looks so delicate. I sat in so many of the concerts over the course of the year, and yet I didn't recognize one single piece that was played at Machine that day. I'm wondering if that's because I didn't hear these pieces. Sometimes I think being in that room, alone, took so much sensory energy that you almost couldn't quite grasp how interesting the music was. Going into Machine and knowing that space, I was able to just listen. I heard it more clearly than I had in the past.

Mark: Yeah, the Little William Theater was about so many things in addition to the music. It was an interesting piece for us, because our style would normally be more like the wrap-up: we would do it for one day. At the Hammer, it just kept going for the whole Residency, kind of by accident [laughs].

Almost every day now I think about the power that intimacy can have, and that we don't need to serve a thousand people with each project. We've talked often about how you measure success: it's not just the number of people that come through; quality is part of it.

—Allison Agsten

Allison: Which was great—everybody on both sides developed such a comfort level with the concerts. It quickly evolved to Chris Kallmyer practically being a staff member, coming and going, setting up his thing. It ended up kind of running itself. I also think that there’s something interesting about doing projects on the weekend.

Mark: Yeah, and you and I talked about that during this project—how it was both to its detriment and to its advantage that nobody was really paying attention. It was under less surveillance, but it also means nobody has any idea that you’re actually doing an incredible amount of programming.

Allison: Right. And along the same lines as what we were talking about earlier with the way it was easier for the Museum to experiment with events, the weekend kind of fits into that category of things that “can’t be that bad.” It’s just lower risk.

Mark: That’s one reason I think it is important to have good documentation. There were a number of really magical events that, because they happened outside normal Museum hours, most of the people who work at the Hammer weren’t there for: the [Dream-In](#), [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#), [Enormous Microscopic Evening](#), for example.

Allison: Absolutely. Something like the Little William Theater is really hard to capture, though, because a lot of it is about imagination and the tension and excitement and curiosity of the moment: when you figure out that you are actually going to hear a concert in

this tiny coatroom, and you go in and close the door.

Mark: If you look at the Residency in its totality, it doesn’t feel like a consistent statement or a vision. It’s more like: “Let’s try out this, let’s try out this, let’s try out this.” As an artist it’s exciting to do that, and normally that’s what an artist’s residency is about—but it’s not something you usually do entirely in public. To me, the work we did over the year doesn’t feel like a product that I put out there so much as a bunch of experiments. In a way, it ended up feeling more like a residency than one would think.

Allison: It’s funny you say that about a residency, because when I look back on it now I think of it differently than when it was happening. Now that I think of it, it really felt like a residency to me. It felt like you had a real presence here, partly because of the [Little William](#) program—there was at least something going on every week. You had a parking pass. Everybody knew you. I felt like your presence was imbued here.

Mark: Even today, I just walked in.

Allison: Yeah, it’s great. It’s like now it’s official, you’re part of the family, you can just go and do whatever you want.

Mark: Yeah. But for this next year of the Public Engagement Irvine Grant you have switched to a model which is more project based, or proposal based. It’s sort of like post-residency. What do you think are the advantages

and disadvantages of working in that way?

Allison: One thing, last year, that became difficult internally was the number of programs we were producing. It became really clear for this year that we needed to consider ways we could moderate flow. We had the period from August to September—do you remember?—it was madness: we had [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#), we had [Houseplant Vacation](#), and then we had Brody’s [Level5](#) over Labor Day weekend. By the end of that, people were beat. So, the nice thing about the proposals is being able to look at the calendar for a year ahead and see that there’s a month or two between each project, so periodically we can take a breath. But there are different challenges: I was talking to somebody really interesting the other day and I’d love to do something with him, but we’ve kind of mapped it out for the year. So how do you leave yourself open for a brilliant idea that comes when you don’t expect it?

Mark: Something that was kind of comical about our process is that Machine is like a hydra: every collaborator has ten collaborators who has ten more collaborators. Once you get working, it starts to generate more ideas. At a certain point, it was like a firehose of ideas. I remember distinctly this moment of shift that you, Elizabeth, and I felt in the Residency where we decided it was time to stop generating ideas and figure out what we were prepared to do well.

Allison: Yeah, that was a big shift. From that moment forward we were

just in production mode. And I actually think the feeling of it changed for me working on it because now we’re just making it happen. Some of the tensions were definitely dissipated, but a lot of the creative energy also tapered at that point.

Mark: Right, and my involvement in projects decreases greatly once the ideation stage is over. My job is to put these things forward and help people. The actual execution was done very well by all of you. It didn’t require me in there messing it up. Something that was really productive but also challenging about it being a residency is the degree to which that development process involved a constant negotiation between me and you and everyone in the institution. The proposal model is really different: the power relationship shifts toward the institution, so you have more control—which I think is important for making things happen, especially more ambitious things—but it’s harder to get under the skin of the institution if the thing is blocked more powerfully at the gate.

Allison: It’s interesting that you say that, because you would think that it would play out that way, but it hasn’t so far. There have definitely been situations where an artist has said, “No, that’s not what I envisioned,” and we’ve had to step back and think about it again. That still very much happens.

Mark: That’s interesting. Maybe it’s the exact opposite of what I was saying—that, in fact, during the Residency, I got to the point where I would feel like, “OK, fine, that idea is too hard.



Top:
*Machine Project
in Residence
in Ann Philbin's
Office*

Left:
*Soundings: Bells
at the Hammer*

Forget it. We'll do something else." If, instead, you have this proposal model where the artist is doing one project, maybe it becomes more of a struggle for the idea to be concretized toward their vision.

Allison: Right, exactly.

Mark: But I think what is different is that with our Residency, at its best, there was a real collaborative design of the ideas. It wasn't always that I had a clever idea and then we collaborated

on how to make it happen, but that we kind of grew ideas together. Maybe that can happen in a proposal model too, but I think something about seeing you guys and talking to you every day facilitated that a little more.

Allison: Yeah, the dialogue is very different now because it's not an open-ended conversation really. We're talking about how to get from point A to point B; we're not just talking. In a way though, we've committed to each of these artists up front that

we're going to do their thing. It's not like there are 20 other ideas if it gets difficult. So the artist has a really major commitment from us, from go.

Mark: Right. It's interesting to talk that out because that makes more sense. What do you think were the other major characteristics of this Residency that were surprising to the institution? Having done this for a year, what would you say other institutions embarking on projects like this might not be considering that were either really productive or difficult or would work better if you'd known about it ahead of time?

Allison: I mean this as an empowerment, not a discouragement, but it would be a mistake to expect that doing something like this is going to be a piece of cake. You have to steel yourself a little bit when you're doing new kinds of work. You can't think that because you have a couple of projects that go well that every issue has been resolved, because it hasn't.

Mark: Right. I think every exhibition has its own challenges, whether it is that the artist has brought in something that weighs 20 tons, the artist has made something out of antimatter, the artist has done X, Y, and Z... There are always challenges like that, but they are typically within a specified realm, and this was about going outside of that.

Allison: Yes. And, not knowing exactly what we wanted, we were just not going to get to the bottom of it in six months. These are big complicated questions that we are addressing. It's hard to do.

Mark: I've talked to a lot of the people I worked with about artists as problem solvers—this idea, which really came out of the Artist Council's proposal and was written into the Irvine Grant, that artists are good at solving problems and the Museum should leverage that toward working on its visitor engagement problem.

Allison: Right. In my mind, I'm trying to evolve what problem solver means throughout the duration of the Residency. Maybe in the beginning, problem solver literally meant: someone needs to come in here and figure out a better way for ticketing. Down the line, I hope problem solver can mean that somebody comes in and wants to do a project, and there are three things that need to be in place in order to make that project happen, and we're forced to look at areas that have been neglected in the past. We're solving problems, certainly, but maybe the project itself isn't the solution. Does that make sense?

Mark: It does—the idea that, as a side effect, some problems would be solved. I think that's something that we figured out during our Residency. When we came in, I think there was more of an expectation that we would be able to fix some problems, and we did, but they often got fixed in ways that were really ridiculous. The Giant Hand, which I thought was such an interesting project, is maybe the clearest example of this: it answered the question of "where do you go?" but it did it in a way that called an insane amount of attention to the fact that you had to find your way. I like

a project that both does something and, at the same time, creates a conversation or a discourse around that thing. Whereas I think the idea of a more design-based solution is that you solve the problem and you make the problem invisible.

Allison: Exactly. The Giant Hand sign is really visually invasive in a really positive way. You cannot escape the fact that the Giant Hand is there. You can't have a party in the courtyard and not know the Giant Hand is there. You can't walk into this Museum and not make contact with it.

Mark: And you have to ask yourself if you want every single person who comes to the Museum thinking about signage, which is sort of what that piece does.

Allison: I don't want to put words into the Artist Council's mouth, but I think they thought that it would be natural for artists to think about solutions in a really literal way. But that's not natural. It turns out that artists think about solutions as artists and within the realm of their practice, so maybe we have to expect that the project will look and feel like a part of that artist's practice. I think it's hard for anybody to step out of their role completely.

Mark: Or you could say artists are solution makers to the really eccentric problems they're interested in and they find the whole world to be that problem.

Allison: [laughs] Totally.

Mark: Do you think the Hammer now feels that artists are not good problem

solvers in the way they were thinking?

Allison: No, I don't. But maybe there is a better understanding of what kind of problem solving an artist can do.

Allison: I would be curious to know what you found challenging that you didn't expect to be challenging. This was set up for you to go do what you wanted to do, but obviously it wasn't always smooth sailing.

Mark: I think the hardest thing was that I never did and still don't understand what people wanted, what they were expecting to get, and whether they got it or not. I think it was a little unclear what the mandate was. To a certain degree, I'm happy to do my own projects and it was amazing to work with you guys and I learned a lot, but any situation where you're invited to do something and you don't know if you're fulfilling expectations is emotionally challenging. I think if I did it over, it would help for everyone to be more comfortable with the idea that it's a residency and that not all of it has to be successful or public. I'd like to be able to more aggressively do just the experimentation part.

Allison: Yeah, It was a hybrid. I think often about how great it would have been to have a conversation where everybody sits in the room and really hashes out what the Museum's goals are and what the artists' goals are and realizes where the discrepancies are, and what this thing actually means. I think it feels crass in some ways because we're not really comfortable with museums having those

conversations with artists.

Mark: Well, yeah, because there's this uncomfortable myth that the museum exists to serve the unfettered creativity of the artist. And it does on a certain level, but in order to do that mission, you have to raise money, you have to not set the place on fire, you have to please these weird constituents and trustees, you have to make this person and that person happy.... The other thing which I think we realized together about halfway through, which was very important for my work moving forward, was the difference between creating moments that demonstrate possibility and complete transformations. I think our work worked best when it was propositions. For example, when we had people playing music for the plants on Lindbrook terrace it was a window onto another alternate reality of what the Hammer could feel like. The day we did Soundings, with the bells, was like that too. When I started the project, I thought I was going to make the Hammer feel like that every day for a year. It took me over half a year to realize that just wasn't realistic.

Allison: Actually, looking back at it now, I think that happened. It felt like there was something going on all the time. I can't meet somebody who hasn't seen a concert in the Little William Theater. I can't say how often people say to me, "Oh my God! You did the Houseplant Vacation," or whatever. I liked that reach that the installations had. Paired with the density of the event-based programs, a huge swath of visitors had the opportunity, intended or not, to experience your work. But going back

to Houseplant Vacation, figuring out how the scaffolding was going to look and how the aesthetic was going to represent the Museum was tricky, but I liked that in a moment you could get the feeling that this was a different kind of place—one that's willing to try different things, and outside the galleries too. That, to me, is where we made big strides.

Mark: I'm glad you said that because I think one of the exciting things about our project was that we started to apply the idea that creative work can be done at any aspect in the institution. We used to think that this enormous institution provides all these functions to facilitate just one site of creativity—or maybe two sites, like public events and things that happen in the gallery. One of the things I thought about a lot is the idea of the container: that the Museum creates containers for things to happen in—the galleries—but what happens when you start doing things outside the container? I think our work was the most interesting when it was really confusing to the public: like, is this an artist project or is this what the Museum is doing? I think the plants were that way. The Little William was a bit like that because the way the signage was constructed just didn't feel like an official artist project; it felt like some people had just showed up and started doing this.

Allison: Right. There's a huge comfort level with radical experimentation inside the gallery doors, but once you open the doors, there's a lot of discomfort. That's why, I think, a project like Houseplant Vacation is a big deal. I wanted to ask you: now

that you've had time to think about it—we've done it, we know what the struggles are—is there a different project that you would do now that you know these things about the Museum?

Mark: That's a really interesting question. Well, this thing about the voice of the museum and the voice of the artist and the confusion between the two, which wasn't necessarily something I came in here wanting to investigate but I got really interested in it. So much of the institution's labor goes into making a singular voice—the font, the text, the way it speaks, the way it steps back. I got really intrigued by what happens when the voice of the museum gets all messed up. If I were to do another project, I would think more about that and try and push that as far as possible, but with the cooperation of the institution. The other thing I got really interested in was really thinking about what it means to be in residence—the idea that one person at this Museum, in this case the director, Ann Philbin, invited me and my group to do this thing, and now all of a sudden every employee has to deal with all this nonsense of what I want to do, and they may like it or they may not like it, but to a certain degree their job is to make this happen. With the Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project, I wanted to try and run that operation backward—so instead of us coming into the Hammer's house, the Hammer staff was coming into Machine's house, and we would do whatever they wanted to do there.

Allison: Right. Cultural exchange.

Mark: In terms of it being a collaboration between two institutions, another thing that I wasn't expecting, that turned out to be super productive for Machine as an institution, was how much infrastructure we had to develop: we had to do documentation, we had to figure out a lot of things that we never thought we would have to figure out.... I think I came in a little naively thinking this was going to be an opportunity for the Museum to build infrastructure. But not realizing that Machine would also have to go through that process. Something that I've started doing with other institutions is asking a lot more explicitly about capacities and goals upfront: what they are prepared to do and especially what they want us to do. I'll say like, "Really, before we do this, go back and think about your goals. I can't necessarily achieve all your goals, but if you tell me what they are, I can say, 'Yes, I can do this,' 'No, I definitely can't do this,' or, 'Maybe we can kind of hash this one out.'" Then you can both enter into things having a better idea of what to expect. The other lesson that I've learned is that now, when I go to museums, I say, "Just to be clear, we do lots of stuff that flops. You are probably seeing the projects that got written about or that we've chosen to put forward in our documentation, but we also do things which are embarrassing, which we are not particularly proud of, which people don't especially like."

Allison: Do you think people believe that?

Mark: I don't know, but I feel that at least putting that out there is useful. I need to go back and make a dossier

of things that didn't go so well. But it is a challenge to figure out how to speak about that, how to be really productively frank and transparent and still be respectful to the institutions that you are working with.

Allison: I'm also curious, since you've done projects with a number of other museums, both before and since the Hammer Residency: what do other museums do to make this kind of thing easier for you?

Mark: Well, I haven't worked with that many museums to be able to generalize, and I certainly have never been as up in their business as I was here. With other museums since the Residency, we have had conversations about goals specifically, which is helpful. I think there is a level of compartmentalization at other museums that makes the work easier, but I think the nature of this Residency was an invitation to break out of that. So, it's a little bit of an apples and oranges thing. This was a special experience in that it was just a kind of insane thing for a museum to do. It's like I moved into your house for a year or something.

Allison: It is. In fact, I use that analogy often. Imagine you invite somebody to your house for a year. This person is going to blow your mind by surprising you and cooking you dinner one night, but they also might leave clothes on the floor. When any two entities live together for a while, there's this remarkable, beautiful intimacy that you have and there's also this like, OK, you need to lay off of that annoying habit of yours. But I don't know...I can't imagine how much further behind

we'd be if you weren't our first Artist In Residence because you're one of the most conceptually prolific people I've met. To be in a position where we had to sort through so much was really good, accelerated learning. It showed us what our limits were, what we could handle here, what we couldn't handle here—again, the capacity thing. I think it would be interesting if we did something radically different next year from what we are doing this year or the year before. This way that we're trying now has its imperfections too. I think the thing for everybody to realize is there probably is no panacea. It's always going to be difficult for somebody. But I feel that just by doing it, we succeeded. You test the institution in really important ways. You learn a great deal about tolerance and your capacity and your strengths and your weaknesses. Just that alone is constructive.

Mark: It's that idea of mapping it.

Inter- view:

**Chris
Kallmyer**

November 30, 2010

MA CK

Chris Kallmyer, who curated the sound programming for Machine Project's yearlong Residency at the Hammer, talks with Mark Allen about different engagement strategies employed for the Little William Theater and Fanfare/No Fanfare. As they consider relative failures and successes, their conversation is peppered with food metaphors and anecdotes of visitors' encounters with the work. Topics covered range from the importance of working with multiple levels of staff at an institution to how to make work that engages people both conceptually and experientially.

Projects discussed:

- Little William Theater
- Fanfare/No Fanfare

Mark: Chris, you were a big part of Machine's presence at the Hammer. Can you talk about your involvement in the Residency?

Chris: Sure. My primary involvement with the Residency was running a small coatroom theater in the lobby under the stairs of the Hammer Museum. We started programming brief concerts in there for two people at a time. From February to the end of November, I was there every Saturday and some Thursdays—about 50 days altogether. It's hard to sum up the whole experience. At the beginning of the Residency it was really tense.

Mark: Why was that?

Chris: The first week we showed up, we weren't allowed to perform anything in the Little William Theater, so we performed behind the lobby desk [laughs]. Then the second week somebody wanted a coat and one of the guards got really angry that they couldn't get into the coatroom because there was a concert happening.

Mark: So the coatroom, which you did these concerts in, stayed functional as a coatroom? How did that work?

Chris: Well, every concert was two minutes long and, in between concerts, if folks wanted to check a bag they could.

Mark: Did people get annoyed about having to wait?

Chris: The only people that got annoyed, as far as I could tell, were the guards. Patrons seemed fine with it because it was such a ridiculous reason

for a delay in getting their coat. A lot of times they would get interested and go in. They'd get their bag and then sit there with it and watch a concert. That was really nice.

Mark: So in the beginning it was difficult because the guards had this space and it served a certain function. It seems like maybe we could have done a better job building some consensus with the guards about what was going to happen?

Chris: Yeah. I feel like we did a lot of work with the administration and with the head of security to create consensus about what we wanted to do and how they could accommodate us. However, when I showed up for our first month, and continuing through our first three months, the guards had a very different understanding of the situation. Part of that is an issue in the clarity of communication within the Hammer from the top down. I would have liked to have seen us—as a third party, as artists—interact with the guards more, because they're the front line. Conflicts arose partially because we were also aiming to be the front line, so we were competing with them in a way.

Mark: Right. At the time when you entered the lobby at the Hammer, the only person there to talk to was the guard. Since then, they've added a front desk with people whose job it is to greet you, which is great. We added a different layer, this random guy who's like, "Do you want to see a concert in this coatroom?"

Chris: That's exactly it. I think some of the guards saw us as superfluous,



Above
and right:
Little William
Theater



or a bother. Certainly the guards that I got to know better, that came to understand what we were doing, really learned to work with us as a team: they'd say to guests, "This is cool. You should check it out." It would have been useful to interface with them more from the beginning.

Mark: I know when we started the Little William Theater you tried a variety of techniques for how we would tell people things were happening there. Sometimes the guards would flag people down, and then we started to feel that was awkward. Can you talk about the strategies you used to alert and introduce the public to these performances, how that process evolved

over time, and how the guards were involved?

Chris: At the beginning the guards were not very involved. They were confused and some were kind of put off by us being there. They were busy doing their job.

Mark: Checking people's bags, validating parking tickets—that first line of public service.

Chris: Exactly. I was hanging out with a clipboard and would approach visitors to the Museum and say, "Hi, would you like to see a two-minute concert?"

Mark: How did that go?

Chris: Very badly [laughs]. Usually they'd say "No thank you" or "We're very busy." I was approaching it with the idea that this was going to be great for people, and all I had to do was get their attention.

Mark: Like you're trying to give out free movie tickets on Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica.

Chris: Exactly. It was such a tacky way to go about doing it, but it was the way I was thinking about it at the time. We tried that for a few weeks. My next approach was a little more subtle. I'd see folks wandering through and

looking at the Little William Theater sign and I'd say, "Excuse me, would you like to see a concert?" They'd ask, "Oh, well, when is it?" and I'd say, "It's right now, and I think we have seating for two," and they'd say, "Oh, honey, honey, he's got seating for two. This is so convenient! Yes, where's the theater?" And I'd say, "It's right in here." Then I'd lead them in. Often it was older couples and they would be confused. They'd say, "This is a coatroom!" and I'd say, "Welcome to the Little William Theater," and close the door. And they'd be locked in there with whoever was performing that week. It was not the most genuine way of doing it, but it was interesting—their shocked realization of the space and

the cognitive dissonance of what their expectations were and what they actually got. Without any reservations I can say that they were happy when they came out, because it was such a unique experience. It was whimsical and fantastical to see a trained lutist and a soprano sing Monteverdi in a coatroom.

Mark: And you're targeting people who look interested, so you're leveraging that natural curiosity.

Chris: Exactly. So that mode of engaging people stuck around: if folks showed some interest, and if they seemed like the type of people who might respond positively to the attention, then I would approach them.

Mark: And you were saying the demographic tended to be older couples?

Chris: It tended to be older couples, yeah. I think like 50- or 60-plus.

Mark: They're a great audience. People tend to get more curious and open, I think, as they get a little older. They're often not as busy so they're less concerned about concluding their museum business. And they may not necessarily like the music, but I think they are much more comfortable thinking "Well, that was an interesting experience," or "That was different."

Chris: I had one group in there that was two daughters who were about 50 and their mother who was 70 or 80. They all came in. They were really loud, really great. I'll never forget. So, they sit down and it's a two-violin concert and the violinists rip into the noisiest, screechiest piece.... I was outside cringing and

wondering, what do these people think? I heard one of them say through the wall, "Well, that's not music." I opened the door and I asked them, "How was the concert?"—I'm pretending I didn't hear anything and just trying to be really positive. They said, "I think that's just sound. That's just not music." I found out from one of the violinists that they had actually come back later and asked to hear another piece. The violinists had played one that was very quiet and subtle, and they left very positive. The performers said it was great that they had been so honest about it, because it enabled them to have an impromptu conversation about the sound they had just heard. That was part of the hope of doing this project—to generate this really frank, honest discussion about contemporary music. I wanted to try to figure out how we could come out of it with a group of people who might be interested in experiencing this kind of music again in another context, in a larger concert hall or an art space.

Mark: I think when it functions well, a museum does provide a space that is comfortable for people to feel secure having a different experience, even if their response is like, "What the hell was that?" The next step is to figure out how to create some infrastructure for them to have a conversation about it afterward. I think that's a real advantage that live music has, in that you have the producer of the sound right there, so whether you want to talk to them or not, that potential is there.

Chris: But it also shuts people down sometimes. They'll say, "Thank you, that was very nice," and then they'll walk away and think, "What was that? I'm never going to do that again. That

A really traditional score says play these notes, at this time, for this length of time, in this time signature, in this attitude and this dynamic—but it doesn't say what the relationship with the audience is: which way you should be facing, what kind of pants you should wear, if you should be wearing pants at all.

—Chris Kallmyer

was awful.” I always really appreciate it when people are interested in engaging in a conversation.

Mark: Do you think there are techniques of socially constructing an environment where people are more likely to be frank and less likely to just be polite and leave without actually articulating their questions about the experience?

Chris: My intuition is distance. I think that’s the beautiful thing about the concert hall, as opposed to our coatroom. People can see something and talk about it while it’s going on.

Mark: Something that’s nice about the [Little William Theater](#), though, is that it’s not for one person at a time. So maybe this conversation about the experience doesn’t happen with the musicians, but by having two people have a two-minute experience, I guarantee that afterward most people are going to talk about that experience they just had.

Chris: That’s true. It is a shared experience. So when they’re walking around the Museum later, they can talk about it, think about it, and potentially come back for more—which is what happened with that family of ladies.

Mark: OK, so we’ve talked about two models: one is flagging people down; two is flagging down people who look curious and shoving them in the room before they know what’s going on. What’s technique number three?

Chris: Number three—and this happened pretty early, within the first two months—was when the guards started

saying, “...and today we have this concert going on in the coatroom: it’s two tubas.” A few of the guards were really great about that. Even the head of security, who at the beginning of our time there was less enthusiastic about our work, by the end wanted to come down every week and see what was going on.

Mark: Oh that’s nice. So, method number one and method number three are on the surface very similar, but in fact they’re very different. The third model is more informative. It’s sort of like the difference in a restaurant between “What do you want for dessert?” versus “If you want dessert, we’ve got chocolate cake.” You want to maximize the giving of information and minimize the feeling that it’s a social obligation to participate. In the Internet world, we talk about push technology and pull technology. So, for example, TV is a push technology: once you turn it on, there’s a steady stream of programming coming out at you. With pull technologies, you have to go and get what you want. You have a lot more control.

Chris: Yeah, you do.

Mark: I feel like the more work we did at the Hammer, the more we moved from push to pull. So for the Little William, at first it was like, “Hey, you random person coming in. Get in this closet.” And later it was like, “If you happen to be interested, we also have a concert in the coatroom.” And with the [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) project, which was one of the earliest, people were kind of thrown into the experience, whereas with the [Live Personal Soundtrack](#), which came later in the

Residency, people had to be willing to step up to this guy who’s sitting underneath the sign and ask him to follow them around. Do you feel like that’s true? Did you think about it in those terms?

Chris: That’s an excellent question. I didn’t do it on purpose. I don’t think any of us did it on purpose, push and pull. But I do agree that our push projects were all at the beginning.

Mark: That’s one of the things that was really such a privilege about working at the Hammer for a year: you get to iterate through all that and, even if we weren’t explicitly thinking or talking about it, we were able to develop different techniques over time. Were there any other strategies you used to get people interested in the [Little William Theater](#) concerts?

Chris: Early on we would have the performers play in the larger public spaces at the Hammer as well. They would do an hour in the coatroom, an hour in the courtyard and lobby, and then an hour back in the coatroom. Part of that was to get people’s attention, and part of it was just to give them another way to play with the space.

Mark: Yes. Mapping the acoustic architecture of the Museum was a big part of that project. Nobody, as far as I know, has done that before at the Hammer with sound. There’s so much range between the coatroom and Lindbrook terrace, which is such an oddly reverberant space. It’s not rich like a cathedral, but...

Chris: It is one of the most oddly reverberant spaces I’ve been in. You

can actually sense the sound waves slapping back and forth between those distant walls.

Mark: Let’s talk a little bit about the [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) project. I loved that piece. How did that come about?

Chris: It came out of you having me play fanfares for Machine Project’s membership event. I and the other two members of SCRIBBLE would improvise a brief welcome for members as they arrived. The idea of a fanfare is that it’s directed at somebody. I feel like a lot of the work that we did at the Hammer fit into this idea of functional music: music that has a direction and purpose, other than the pure aesthetics of it.

Mark: That’s interesting. I’ve been talking with a lot of people about the idea of the artist working as a designer, or as a problem solver, which is something I’ve been thinking about in relation to the Residency. With a sound project like [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#), it’s almost like you’re being asked to design sound—in a way that’s different from how you might normally work.

Chris: I totally agree with that. I don’t think we often consider design when we do music, because usually the focus is on creating a piece that harmoniously works. Composers don’t traditionally design the interaction between audience and performer. Those interactions are already set. When we change the purpose of the music and the interaction between musician and audience, the music is taken out of the



Tubas in the parking garage

Machine
Project A.I.R.
at the Hammer
Museum, photo
by Marianne
Williams.

concert hall experience in a very real way and turned into something else. It all goes back to Brahms and Strauss.

Mark: How so?

Chris: There are these two groups of composers in the late 1900s in Europe—and I'm kind of oversimplifying it, but—essentially, there's a group that believes in "absolute music" and a group that writes "program music." You notice when Brahms wrote his symphonies, they were titled Symphony One, Symphony Two, Symphony Three, and Symphony Four. This is considered absolute music, or tunes that are not explicitly about anything. That is really the norm in classical music. Then with Strauss, you have what's called program music, which is music with a story or narrative arc. A good example is his Alpine Symphony with movements titled "From the Summit" and "Crossing over a Brook." That sort of sets the precedent for something like Brian Eno's "Music for Airports"—functional music that has an embedded purpose, often linked to an architectural space. Our experiments with music at the Hammer played with those distinctions. We put what would otherwise be considered absolute music in the space of the coatroom, which really changes the audience/performer relationship. All our other musical pieces had a functional purpose: whether that was to explore architecture, serenade a plant, welcome folks to a space, or accompany and enrich the time spent looking at artwork in a gallery. I'm really interested in how experimental music can toy with context and architecture, treating the composer as a designer.

Mark: Totally. If you give a small group of musicians a directive—"Your job is to play music for people when they enter and give them a welcome"—it lets them work within this very small box that is completely different than a concert hall.

Chris: Yeah. A really traditional score says play these notes, at this time, for this length of time, in this time signature, in this attitude and this dynamic—but it doesn't say what the relationship with the audience is: which way you should be facing, what kind of pants you should wear, if you should be wearing pants at all.

Mark: Something that I'm starting to notice as a trend in so much of our work at the Hammer was this tension between a prompt and a problem to be solved. With [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) for example, we want to welcome people to the museum, so we provide a solution that goes just a little too far. It uses the problem as a jumping-off point.

Chris: Right. If we were to be very practical, we'd just say, "You need Visitor Services people in this Museum."

Mark: But in the interim, we'll hang out and play trumpets for you while visitors come in. You were talking about [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) as something that was constructed functionally, even if it's a little bit of an absurdist way to welcome people to the Museum.

Chris: Yes. I thought the most interesting part about that project was that it's welcoming in a way that is really

surprising, really overt, over the top—it's above and beyond what most people get when they walk into a room. At Machine Project's member benefit, people really embraced it because they understand our aesthetic. A lot of the Hammer visitors definitely appreciated it, but a number of people really avoided it as well.

Mark: Why do you think that is?

Chris: Maybe there's something about being in a museum that makes people want to remain under the radar. It's an opportunity for them to be in a state of reflection: people are there on their day off with the expectation of having a quiet afternoon. That's something I personally find really comforting about being in a museum space, so I can imagine why they might not want that interrupted.

Mark: It's kind of like going to a corny Japanese restaurant where all the staff shout a welcome at you when you come in. I think it's kind of nice in a way, though. It focuses your attention, on your feeling of entering a space, or even just on that moment of entering. One can enter a space or a museum and you might feel comfortable, you might feel uncomfortable, you might feel welcome, you might feel unwelcome. And you might not even be conscious that you're having that feeling: instead you're thinking about where to get the tickets or where to go to lunch afterward. You're not always present to how you feel emotionally in spaces. But it's hard not to notice you're entering a space when you've got three dudes with saxophones playing.

Chris: Really loud. At you. That's true. In a way, that's the main focus of my work—especially in the context of a museum—to focus people's time and energy more when they're in a space. I think the greatest crime that we have right now in LA, when you go to a museum or you go to a new space, is not really being present. That's very common today, with cell phones and stuff like that. So I'm always looking for ways to create a more collective sense of place. I constantly ask myself: how can we be more here than we were before? One of my original proposals for the lobby space was a very low hum, embedded in a sub-speaker that would be encased in a bench or something, so you wouldn't be able to find it. I wanted to pick out the frequencies of the buses going by so that would come in and bring the space to life with vibration. That was how I was looking to solve that problem at the beginning, but we ended up solving it in this wonderful, sociable way. Our [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) piece, though very loud and boisterous and obtrusive, can really focus your attention in the space.

Mark: I think [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) was also more conceptual. It didn't just make you more aware of your surroundings; it also made you think explicitly about that moment of entering. I think a lot of our work operates in both those frames at the same time: it speaks conceptually, while at the same time doing something experiential.

Interview:

**Elizabeth
Cline**

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February 18, 2011

MA EC

Mark Allen and Hammer public engagement curatorial associate Elizabeth Cline reflect on their shared and divergent experiences of Machine Project's Residency. Their conversation revolves around the importance of space and the question of how and when something is defined as art. The practical ramifications of these concerns are made palpable in Mark and Elizabeth's discussion about Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace, a piece that inadvertently challenged a number of the Museum's basic institutional assumptions. The Hammer has since acquired the piece and will again have Ping-Pong tables in the future. The discussion has been left here unresolved, as it was at the time, because the process of grappling with different understandings of terms and values was central to the collaboration and productive for both parties. Ultimately, Elizabeth and Mark articulate an approach to the Residency that makes more room for experimentation in the Museum by leveraging the process of art-making to engage the public.

Projects discussed:

- Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project
- Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace



Mark: A really nice thing about working with you is that we slowly developed a more collaborative relationship that culminated with your *Dog Opera* piece that we were able to do here at Machine, and now I want to help you tour it. So that's an interesting by-product of this process: now that we're not working together at the Hammer, our roles can shift and I can do what I do for other artists for you. I felt like that happened really organically, and it was not something I had thought would be part of this undertaking. Could you talk about that a little bit from your perspective?

Elizabeth: Sure. I agree that the way our relationship became collaborative felt like a natural progression. I was

charged with making your things happen, and the best way to make your things happen was to work collaboratively with you.

Mark: Right.

Elizabeth: And I think one of the goals of having Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project was that you were interested in highlighting the talents of everyone at the Hammer. When I started the *Dog Opera* though, I definitely wasn't thinking of it as a collaboration; I was thinking of you as a venue for this project that I wanted to do. Instead, I became a part of Machine Project in a way—which makes sense, because I'm personally interested in the kinds of things that Machine

Above: *Tragedy on the Sea Nymph*, Elizabeth Cline, Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project

Photo by Marianne Williams

Project is interested in. I think the content of the *Dog Opera* is in keeping with the Machine Project portfolio.

Mark: Absolutely.

Elizabeth: So it wasn't surprising to me that you were able to accommodate so many of my needs with all of your collaborators, but it is not something that I really thought about until I actually made the piece, because originally Machine was just a venue.

Mark: That's interesting because the Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project totally didn't work the way I expected it to. You were saying that it was an opportunity to highlight people's talents; I really wasn't thinking about it that way. It was more about just providing a space for the Hammer's multiple subjectivities to inhabit.

Elizabeth: Right, and I think you tried to make that as clear as possible by saying that the event could be public or private, that it could just be turning off the lights and taking a nap. Having insider knowledge of Hammer staff, I knew there were going to be people who really wanted to participate. There are several who have really strong voices outside of the Hammer; they do their own art practice or collaborate with other people on different things. So I knew no one was going to come take a nap. It was fascinating, though, the way people were totally frazzled and canceling. Collectively, we only did half of what we said we would do, and it made me realize that I'm not the only one who is really overworked at the Hammer. People were dropping like flies because they were too busy.

I definitely think we both had this very idealistic vision of what would happen, that we would really integrate some of the Hammer's voice into Machine, and it would be this real exchange. I'm still wondering why that didn't pan out.

Mark: Yeah. I think some of it is that it was one project among many. For it to really take off, it might have needed more work or a larger institutional conversation.

Elizabeth: Right. I also wonder if it would have been more useful for you to have had more intimate conversations with the Hammer staff. Maybe that would have made more people feel comfortable.

Mark: Yeah, I think so. I think people who work in museums—or people who work anywhere, but I think this happens a lot in museums because of the legacy of institutional critique and artists doing interventions—are justifiably wary about being instrumentalized. It's hard. And sometimes I would come up with ideas that weren't particularly well thought out around those questions. To give a hypothetical example, let's say we asked the Hammer guards to wear costumes and to act in certain ways. At Machine, we do stuff like that all the time, so we would be surprised when it wasn't popular—"Why don't they want to dress like clowns? It's fun!"

Elizabeth: Exactly.

Mark: The core of the idea that I'm really interested in is: what does it mean for an institution to be a guest in residence at another institution? And I think we understood half of that equa-

tion. I felt like a lot of early communication between Machine and Hammer was about articulating that we're a group: it wasn't Mark Allen, Artist in Residence. And we did all these projects at the Hammer, but just this one project back at Machine. Maybe I can find another museum to be in residence here at the storefront.

Elizabeth: Can we talk a little bit about the question of who owns the space, who owns the ideas, who owns this work—which became complicated around the Ping-Pong tables—and also about what makes something art?

Mark: Well, I realized something about myself: I don't deliberately make things confusing but I like ambiguous spaces, whether they are physical spaces or conceptual spaces. One of the things that is central to how Machine operates is our resistance to really defining what we do. If, in order to make a project happen, it helped to say, "It's not an art piece, don't stress out about it. It's just some Ping-Pong table," I would say that, because the kinds of questions I am interested in don't require the activity to be defined as art. I like to let people think about it however they want; it doesn't matter to me if visitors viewed the Ping-Pong tables, or any of the projects we did, as an art piece or not. I just want to see what people do in certain spaces and how that affects the feeling. Over the course of the Residency, though, how I thought about the ping-pong tables really shifted. When we first did it, it was mainly about trying to create a more convivial space: we could have used a Foosball table or a ton of bean-

bag chairs; Ping-Pong tables were just expedient. Once they were installed on Lindbrook Terrace, I got really interested in the sound they made and the way that it, along with many other sound pieces, was really transforming how it felt being in the Museum. I started looking at the Ping-Pong tables as an art piece and, at that point, it felt appropriate for the Museum to view it that way as well. Normally that ambiguity or that kind of shift isn't a problem, and it's part of what makes contemporary art interesting. It becomes a problem around Acquisitions, where the piece is interpolated, and the question of its status as art all of a sudden has to be answered. In terms of what the Museum does as an institution—which is to say things are art, invest cultural capital in them, collect them, historicize them, and study them—it became important to claim that space for the project. In the end, the moment something becomes an art piece is not defined by what it's made out of or by the practice—it's really about how you look at it. What was your perception?

Elizabeth: My perception of the Ping-Pong tables was that it was a social experiment, another of your propositions of engagement: it developed things that you're interested in, it gave people permission to use that space, it warmed up the space, it made a more intimate sound—all of those things. It was really kind of the landscape of your Residency. And it was what the grant asked you to do as a consultant. It was observing a problem and making a suggestion: very literally, "This space needs a Ping-Pong table." Some of what the grant was asking you to do was to develop projects that, in

I don't think ideas are very valuable in themselves. It's only in the doing of the idea that you learn anything, or anything interesting happens.

—Mark Allen

the end, the Museum could have used, or to generate ideas that we could have implemented in some way again in the future. So I feel like the Museum should have inherited the Ping-Pong tables as part of your Residency, with a plaque describing the work we did together during the Residency.

Mark: See, that's interesting, because I don't think the Museum would do a regular artist residency and expect to keep the work. How is it different?

Elizabeth: It's different because there were expectations for what your Residency was going to do or be because it was set forth in the grant. In other institutional residency programs, certainly in the Hammer's existing Artist in Residence program, there is no expectation for work to be generated because the residencies are specifically oriented toward research and development.

Mark: Do you think that as an artist agreeing to participate in the Public Engagement Artist in Residence program, one is implicitly agreeing with the underlying expectations of that?

Elizabeth: I think it's something that should have been discussed more in depth—the expectations the Museum had as conveyed in the grant.

Mark: It actually was discussed at the time of the contract, which covered not only art objects but any ideas generated. The contract is the moment where both parties clarify their expectations and articulate what they're going into.

Elizabeth: Right. You know, I think

the sticking point in everyone's mind is that what you proposed was not an artwork. The tables were situated in an unusual space in the Museum—Lindbrook terrace—that you hoped to transform over the course of your Residency into a social space.

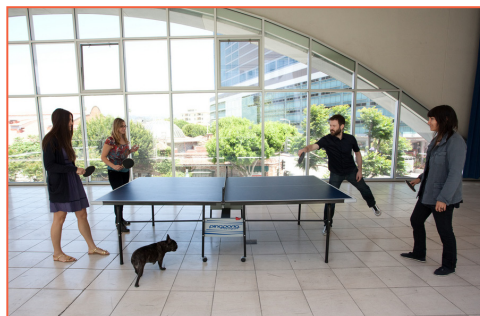
Mark: To me that shows a really strange idea of what art is—that art is completely determined by its instantiating moment. If I were a painter and you came to my studio and saw me working on a canvas, that material is transformed into an artwork at the moment I say it is an artwork. Similarly, we can think of the Ping-Pong tables as a social canvas that was transformed into an artwork by people using it.

Elizabeth: That is a great way to frame it in retrospect.

Mark: I think that's where curatorial and I really differ. My practice is always about flow, and process, and transformation, things shifting from one thing to another. I'm really a social process-based artist. With the work I do at Machine Project, there isn't this moment where we're like, "Okay, now it's finished." Whereas, for the museum, dealing primarily with concretized art objects, there's this definitive moment before it gets to them. No art object enters the museum in its pre-art form and is transformed inside of it; it is known to be an art object before it comes through the door. I like the idea that you could bring your piece to the museum and just keep working on it.

Elizabeth: Right. Which is kind of the opposite of what a museum wants.

Right:
Table Tennis
on Lindbrook
Terrace



Below:
Soundings: Bells
at the Hammer



It's unfamiliar territory for us. But, you know, if the Hammer were dedicated in earnest to more process-based artwork, there may not even be these ephemera or objects remaining that the Museum would want to acquire and use. It's just so different. And actually that's interesting because in what you just described, the idea of a residency, of the work being developed on-site, really came through.

Mark: Yeah, in the end it really was like a research residency.

Elizabeth: And I do think the Ping-Pong tables were successful as a piece. They transformed everyone's experience. Even now, when we hear a Ping-Pong ball drop, everyone kind of smiles.

Elizabeth: I'm wondering, for a public engagement event to be successful for the Museum, what you think the criteria for success are—for you and for the Museum. Let's talk about it in terms of the three projects that, in my mind, generated the most outside interest: the Dream-In, Soundings: Bells at the Hammer, and Brody Condon's Level5. These are three pieces that are really, really different. Soundings: Bells at the Hammer was really successful in terms of attendance and participation. It got so many people to the Museum—who aren't our typical visitors, who aren't even necessarily museumgoers—to interact with the Museum and to have this experience in the Museum. It definitely got press, it was talked about, it has the best documentation. It really felt like it transformed the entire

Museum. The Dream-In, in a lot of the same ways, provided this extremely unique, intimate experience of the Museum. It's a piece that I don't think got any press, but there has been a lot of interest in it from other institutions.

Mark: Yeah. We've actually had museums call and do their own Dream-Ins after talking to Adam Overton.

Elizabeth: It seems like that piece in particular—just the idea of having people spend the night in a museum—was so cutting edge to other institutions. Another thing I really loved about the Dream-In is that we engaged so many different collaborators and artists. And then Brody's piece, Level5, got absolutely the most press—I mean, that East of Borneo piece, the interest that it generated without ever mentioning the Hammer.

Mark: Or Machine Project—which is fine. Those are three really interesting examples, and those are pieces that I love, but they are not the most interesting to me in terms of the Residency. Brody's piece is an amazing work of art by a contemporary artist who I think is fascinating, but in a way, it's successful because it's doing what the Museum already does and does well.

Elizabeth: Exactly. Yes.

Mark: And it was perceived as a success by the Museum because it was doing what the Museum does. So if our goal was to experiment with what a museum does, that piece was the farthest from the intentions.

Elizabeth: Farthest from the goals of your Residency, yeah. I'm not even

sure how the Museum perceives it. I know that it's just something that sticks out as successful on the exterior.

Mark: It's hard to use that as a control because it is an extraordinary work of art.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Mark: I think both the Dream-In and Soundings came closest to the emotional tone that I wanted for the Museum. The Dream-In, in particular—it's just so sweet. But the reason it was able to do that is because everybody was gone: aside from the participants, there were no other visitors to be embarrassed or confused by it; there were no people working there to wonder what was going on; the Museum wasn't watching. And then Soundings is just a really smart, elegant public engagement piece. There's not a lot of friction in it.

Elizabeth: Right, of course.

Mark: But I'm interested in that friction: in what happens when the Museum is trying to communicate to its public one way, and the resident is doing it another way, and it's confusing to the audience. I think one of the things that was hardest and that generated a lot of anxiety for people, is that we did very little in the galleries, so what we did kind of represented the Museum. The bargain that the institution makes is that it offers contained spaces, the galleries, in which artists have considerable freedom, and visitors understand that what is presented in there is the artists' expression, not the Museum's expression. We explicitly worked in all the spaces

that are outside those containers at the Hammer, in areas that are generally perceived as being where the institution communicates directly with its visitors. So what we did got confused with what the Museum did, and that made the Museum freak out, justifiably. And it's not a moral failing of the Museum; a museum is not a machine for constantly messing up in public. But the confusion of the voice and the brand was where I was most fascinated, and those projects are the least externally successful because, to a certain degree, their goal was to investigate this ambiguity and to problematize how a museum compresses subjectivity into a brand. So in some ways, the things that didn't work are the most interesting for me.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Do you still think the things that we didn't do are interesting?

Mark: Well, yeah—though as a creative person who works with a ton of people who generate a ton of ideas, I don't think ideas are very valuable in themselves. It's only in the doing of the idea that you learn anything, or anything interesting happens. And that requires embracing a certain level of uncertainty: you don't necessarily know what you're going to get, which is a challenge for the Museum, again in terms of how it represents the institution to the public. I definitely noticed that the more we could create an imaginary picture of what the thing would be like, the more people were comfortable with it happening. And when I make projects, I do really try to create a simulation in my head and imagine what it is going to feel like for the audience. On the other hand, if

I can completely figure out how something is going to work, I'm kind of over it; the purpose for doing it is to discover what happens. For example, the work you guys did planning Level5 was unbelievable from an organizational, logistical standpoint, but that piece still did all kinds of crazy things we had no idea it was going to do—for him, for you, for me, for the public. It just mutated in a way that I'm still trying to figure out. It's exciting to be present for those moments. I think that's what's addictive about this kind of work. But you may not be able to define whether it was successful for years.

Elizabeth: Mhm, yeah. And then there's the question of how many people really even experience these things? Very few. That puts more emphasis on how it gets talked about—the folklore aspect.

Mark: Yeah. Joshua and I talked about that at length in relation to the Houseplant Vacation: that's a piece that uses the Museum as its physical point to create imaginary space. It starts the minute you get the email that says, "Houseplant Vacation." What is going to be inside that email? Joshua said he imagined going over to somebody's house and their giant plant would be missing and he'd be like, "Where's your plant?" "Oh, it's on vacation."

Elizabeth: Right. Yeah. That was definitely a piece where you saw the wonder and joy when people turned that corner onto Lindbrook terrace. It was immediate.

Mark: Houseplant Vacation was one

of my favorites in that it was instantly understandable and embarrassingly silly, but infinitely discussable conceptually. It became a way to think about a lot of ideas I'd been working on by making them so concrete. We go through life trying to imagine other people's subjectivities, and I actually have no idea what it's like to be Elizabeth Cline, no matter how much I know you and care about you, but I still imagine that I do. Whereas with a plant, it really takes a strong imagination to believe that I understand what this plant is experiencing.

Elizabeth: [laughs] Yeah. And it's interesting how much we got away with for that project. We got away with doing these things that maybe would have been questioned, or it would have been more difficult or challenging, and certainly discussed a lot more in our internal meetings, had they been for people—like, "We want to do tarot card readings for visitors." Instead, we wanted to do tarot card readings for plants. Everyone was like, "It's just for the plants? Okay."

Mark: You worked with many of my collaborators over the course of the Residency. Did the process of working with Asher Hartman or Brody Condon on their large-scale productions feel different than projects like Houseplant Vacation or Soundings: Bells at the Hammer where I was more involved?

Elizabeth: It felt different. Once the line of communication was established, Asher's Annie Okay and Brody's Level5 went like any other curatorial project at the Hammer. I mainly thought

about how to promote the pieces, to get people to see them. Producing a public engagement project like [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#) or the [Little William Theater](#), definitely involved more strategizing about engagement and measurement. So the concerns were different. Measurement was an interesting challenge with this Residency. I had a hard time figuring it out.

Mark: It is a hard thing to figure out. The kind of deeply sustained engagement with an individual that I'm interested in is hard to measure because it's so subjective. I think in general, the harder something is to measure, the more interested I am in producing it. That's really what art is.

Elizabeth: That totally makes sense.

Mark: It points to something we've talked about over and over again, and that I've talked to the artists about: if the purpose is really to develop the Museum's public engagement, what exactly is the role of the artist? I don't know if I was necessarily the right person to directly produce public engagement. I think I was the right person to produce a lot of work that might comment on, or contextualize, or propose things for public engagement—but all in a sort of nonpractical way, I guess.

Elizabeth: Yes. That's interesting. The most obvious approach to public engagement would have been to really transform and actually develop a social space—somewhere very public but intimate and cozy—which you never got to have.

Mark: Right. I think we spent the first

half of the Residency trying to figure out how to make the lobby into that. I don't think I realized how contested the lobby was as a space, because it is the face of the Museum.

Elizabeth: I actually had no idea it would be so problematic either. It's too bad because I do think it would have made it feel more like you were in residence. I think allowing you to take over a very public space would have more clearly demonstrated that we had committed to a year of your projects, and made you feel like you had a space that was yours.

Mark: Yeah. It is strange doing a residency but not owning any space. Everything you do feels very contingent. Before I started the project, I really had this idea that I could have a transformational effect on the vibe of the Museum, and I don't think that I did. I think there were moments which felt really different: the day we did [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#) felt really different, the [Dream-In](#) felt really different, and there were small spots where you would encounter something, but I wasn't really able to transform the whole space. Some of it had to do with the scale of what it would involve to do that, but I think it also has to do with the framing: because everything was so contingent on what the institution was comfortable having happen, we lacked the ability to really make it our own. Just like if a kid is allowed to decorate their bedroom, their personality pervades it—and it's not about them having access to an on-staff decorator or a lot of money, it's that ownership allows you to transform emotional spaces—whereas a bedroom where the par-

ents are concerned about what goes on the wall never achieves the same personality.

In the end, the space that probably came closest to feeling like it was ours was Lindbrook terrace, and I think that was possible because it was farthest away from public view; it's a space for staff. It was perceived as having little value by the institution, so there wasn't that feeling of it being observed. The lobby, on the other hand, feels more like a space of surveillance, power, and control. Transforming the coatroom there into the [Little William Theater](#) was a way of claiming a small piece of the lobby space and commenting on it at the same time. It felt like creating a behind-the-scenes or hidden space precisely where power by security is articulated most directly: they take your stuff away from you and put it in an area that you can't enter. It was interesting to me to seize that and make it a place that you invite people into. In the end, the two sites we took over articulated two modalities of how we relate to power—the [Little William Theater](#) hidden in the center and Lindbrook terrace orbiting the periphery. I feel like a lot of the Residency was more about pointing to some aspect of public engagement than actually doing it.

Elizabeth: I agree, and I think it all tumbles back to what an artist does versus what a consultant does, and how you negotiate this idea of the artist as consultant, that is central to the public engagement program. In retrospect, I think framing it as a more traditional residency and defining it in a really simple, straightforward way—that the artist is here doing their

thing for a certain amount of time in a physical space—may be a more useful way to start. It may give the artist more room for experimentation and provide visitors with a context so they understand that this is something we're trying, instead of not really knowing what's happening. I think that might have changed the course of the Residency a little bit.

Mark: Yeah. I think the difficulty with some of our projects hinged on what it means for the Museum to be doing public engagement projects that people don't like. If you do a signage project where half the people can't find anything and they're confused and annoyed, you're not necessarily happy to be pushing the boundaries of public engagement; whereas if you do an art exhibit and half your audience is totally confounded by it, we would generally say it's challenging our audience. By shifting the framing to be more like a regular artist's residency, I think you could make the experimental process visible to your audience at lower risk to the institution, and let the public engagement happen as a side effect of the work.

Elizabeth: Because it will happen anyway.

Interview:

**Maria
Mortati**

November 7, 2010

MA ◀ ▶ MM

Mark Allen talks to museum consultant and exhibition designer Maria Mortati about the Giant Hand signage piece she worked on with Matt Jones. Maria provides a balanced perspective on the challenges and importance of integrating experimentation into a museum's regular operation.

Projects discussed:

- **Giant Hand**

Mark: You're a museum exhibition designer for a living, so what would motivate you to do something like this, basically for fun, given the amount of work that it is?

Maria: After I left the Exploratorium and went back to doing professional consultancy work, I found myself being paid to advise people on projects but not doing them myself. I wanted to be experimenting again, as opposed to just writing and talking and presenting. That was my motivation. And with my day job, everything is very planned out: it's huge projects that involve enormous teams of people, and going to meet with the board and the community and looking years into the future, trying to craft a vision of what the museum should be like. I wanted to be able not to have a business plan, to just do what I thought would be fun and engaging in the moment—then, in a couple of years, sit down and evaluate.

Mark: I was thinking about our process of working at the Hammer. You and I generated a ton of projects, out of which we did only one. You seem to not find that super frustrating, whereas for the people I work with who are from a studio-artist background, there's often the expectation that a project that starts will be a project that finishes.

Maria: [laughs] Oh, how wrong they are when it comes to museums!

Mark: I know, but when you're working in your studio and you start a project, if you think it's a good idea, you usually follow through.

Maria: Well, in that context, you have total control because it's just you. Working for an institution, I'm so accustomed to seeing things fall through because a city doesn't get the funding or the ballot measure didn't pass, so I come into it with low expectations. I don't expect stuff to be completed. I am just doing it because it's what I love to do. If this one doesn't work, then I'll do another one. If that one works, great, maybe I'll learn from it and spin it off into something else. I just want to be doing stuff, so I'm happy to go with whatever works.

Mark: Something that I learned doing this Residency is that the thinking and the results happen in multiple stages. I learned a lot from the projects that didn't happen, in terms of where they ended or what happened to them. That said, the project we did make—the Giant Hand—was difficult. I would say it was one of the more difficult projects for the Hammer, and I thought it might be useful to consider why that is. I have my own ideas, but I'd be interested to hear yours.

Maria: Well, you had much more direct, day-to-day contact with the Museum, especially when things got contentious or difficult or confusing. We waded into very murky territory, both for the project and for us.

Mark: Murky in what way?

Maria: Well, we chose the lowest-hanging fruit, which was wayfinding. It was just an obvious problem. But we're not really problem solvers, so we had to change our tack a little. That was an interesting point for me in our

Giant Hand



process, when we decided, OK, we're not doing design, we're doing art—and what does that mean? We were basically saying that we wanted to do something additive, as opposed to resolving something.

Mark: Right. So rather than coming in and saying, "This sign has this problem, and we're going to fix it," it becomes something that attempts to talk about how wayfinding works at the Museum. Rather than disappearing, the way signage is supposed to, the Giant Hand calls attention to the issue.

Maria: We wanted to play with it, literally. That's what was appealing

to me. We started with something very mundane and took it to the most playful conclusion—which became this Giant Hand on top of the building. For the Museum it was politically tougher because it was their problem and they were probably a little embarrassed about it and just wanted it solved. For us, it was a question of whether we were going to be like the hands of the Museum [laughs], just fixing their problems, or whether we were going to do something more interesting that we wanted to do. I think it's very ironic that we came up with a giant hand as a response.

Mark: That gets at a tension at the core of this project, which is this idea

of artists as problem solvers. The grant the Hammer had from Irvine is part of a broader idea that artists are good at solving problems because they're creative—and that you can then apply that creativity to any set of problems. I'm curious what you think about that idea.

Maria: There's a fundamental flaw in that philosophy for me, and I think what came up for you and me with the Giant Hand is a great example. Designers are problem solvers. They are brought in to analyze, focus, and to solve a problem to fit the needs of the individual institution, whereas artists are brought in to engage and create around a problem. It's

an additive process rather than a reductive process. To the institution it's a problem; to the artist it's a catalyst.

Mark: Yeah, I think of it as a site.

Maria: If you are really going to solve the problem, it's an analytical exercise. There are very capable people who can come in and resolve it in a specific way to fit other people's requirements. When you are an artist, you are doing it according to your own vision and your own philosophy. They have different driving motivations at the end of the day: museums are hardwired for showcasing things; they're not hardwired for creative production.

Mark: Right. There are different values floating around between the institution and the artists. They overlap, but they don't completely coincide. So do you think using artists to improve public engagement is something that museums can do? Or do you think that they're institutionally set up in such a way that it's always going to be an awkward fit?

Maria: I think museums can and should do it. Museums are always chasing audiences. They want eyeballs, bodies. And the demographic of the future museum visitor is shifting. Visitors will be largely Hispanic, for one thing. As the culture changes, the programming and the engagement strategies have to change too. I see working with artists as a great way to do that, because they're experts at engagement, experience, creativity, wonder, all these things. You want to have a way, as an institution, to be continuously staying relevant, and that requires you to have a certain amount of flexibility. It was funny to me, when Matt Jones and I were doing the installation of the Giant Hand we found that just basic, physical production was tough. Everything had been divided into different departments. I think it's important to create a little bit of a physical space for visiting artists—even if it's just an office or supply closet—to serve as an everyday reminder to the museum to leave room for experimentation. The whole key to it is to move away from being the referee and establishing a new department of creative production, so the approach can be more like, "How can we all come together to make it happen?"—as opposed to, "Could I please have permission to...[laughs]?"

Mark: Yeah, I think we all came to the realization that there needed to be a lot more consensus-building up front.

Maria: Well, you were the first child [laughs].

Mark: One strategy I figured out for dealing with anxiety or concerns on the part of the Museum, was articulating a kind of temporality. When we would do a project, we'd say things like, "We'll just try this for a week." It's really different than saying we're going to keep it for the whole time. That happened with the Giant Hand, too. A lot of the final anxieties were overcome by saying, "It's just going to be up from this date to this date." We went into that assuming they would love it so much they would keep it, and in fact, at the end of that date they were like, "Great, now take it away" [laughs].

Maria: Right. It would have been nice if it went on past that date, but it was not essential. It was totally in the "could be nice" category. So everybody got to have a success. I thought it was a brilliant solution.

Mark: It was a simple one that we didn't think of until we really had to come up with a solution. It was hard for me to think about that piece as temporary, though, because most of my work is performative, so it was like the most solid, sculptural thing we did.

Maria: When I worked on the outdoor Exploratorium, all I did was build prototypes that people used once or twice and then threw away. But seeing the impact on those people who used it, and being able to talk about that

work and influence other people in the field, it wasn't a waste. I think there is enormous power in building stuff, making it, getting it out there, and not feeling like it's got to live forever, that it's got to be precious.

Mark: Absolutely. One of the things that is great about working here at Machine is we prototype all these ideas. Everything gets recycled. But I think that's a little bit of a challenge for museums because their very core purpose is to collect, preserve, and educate visitors about things that are precious and live forever. Something that was interesting about being at the Hammer for a year was that it allowed things to cycle in and out. And it took some of the pressure off each individual thing. If you can't acknowledge that what you're trying to do might fail and still value what you learn from the attempt, then you have to succeed.

Maria: And that's so much pressure, it's no fun for anybody.

Mark: Whereas being transparent about the fact that you're experimenting gives you so much more authority.

Maria: And it makes the audience more forgiving because they feel like they get to be a part of something. I think that Machine Project is particularly well suited for just trying things out like that because you have such a warm, social atmosphere. That informalizes things so much. It doesn't feel super insider, like you've got to know the secret handshake or "Am I cool enough?" It removes all of that, so you get a lot further with the public.

Mark: Informality is a very powerful tool, but on the other hand, we don't do exhibits at Machine Project because stuff looks like crap here.

Maria: [laughs]

Mark: Historically, museums are as formal as possible because it articulates the value of what they hold. But a museum can contrast informality and formality and I think needs to have both those modalities. They each construct viewership a little differently. That's something that museums understand for exhibitions, where they function very well as a site for conversation about aesthetic value, cultural value, ethical value. It's just when you try and do that to the infrastructure of the institution, it becomes a much more sophisticated conversation with your public.

Maria: It's a really big leap for most institutions to make.

Mark: A take-away I got from our Giant Hand project is that it is important to have the institution ask themselves to what degree they are comfortable with the artist working with their basic forms of self-representation. It seems like museums try to be really careful about having a unified institutional voice and style. In retrospect, what's interesting about the Giant Hand is that it's in a signage vernacular which would be completely at home in a science museum or a children's museum but looks super weird in an art museum. It's really out of place. I'm always interested in making things that are invisible about an institution visible, just by doing something in a way you wouldn't

normally do it. I didn't think about how much it drew on another museum vernacular until afterwards. Was that something you were thinking of when you were designing it?

Maria: To me, from the very beginning it was such a formal space that I knew it wasn't going to be hard to make something look playful or out of place [laughs]. The fact that people can touch it and interact with it sets it apart. You can't touch anything else there. I thought it was really fantastic that the Museum went ahead and did it. It showed a willingness to take a chance on their part. It's easier for us to say, "This will be really cool." I think it was a tougher thing for them.

Mark: Yeah. And we were the first Artist in Residence, so we found every sore spot because we just started poking at everything. The Museum should really sit down with the artist at the beginning and look at all the areas where artists could possibly intervene. The same thing applies to Machine Project. I try to be very flexible and to do what the artists want to do, but when we had the Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project and one of the artists wanted to use our pneumatic cash machine for donations for another organization, I realized that the way we raise money is not an area that I am comfortable having artists interface with.

Maria: It's all about boundaries. Some institutions are really very boundary specific, and some are not. What you're suggesting is that people be aware of what the boundaries might be. The donation box is a very clear boundary for you, but there are a

lot of institutions that aren't that self-aware.

Mark: Well, and it took me interfacing with artists on a daily basis to figure it out in relation to Machine.

Maria: But you also want to steer away from having an institution over-articulate their boundaries, because that heightens their vigilance even further.

Mark: It's less about saying, "You can't do anything here," than "Here are some things that we're sensitive about." All kinds of concerns came up with the Giant Hand that I hadn't anticipated.

Maria: Right. With the Giant Hand, I think wayfinding was such a sore spot for the Hammer already, experimenting meant risking the possibility of falling even farther down the well. They just wanted the problem solved. You know, it's like: you can go down the well or get out of the well; you don't play in the well [laughs].

Mark: We wanted to play in the well. Maybe that's something for institutions to think about: whether they see these areas where artists can intervene as sites or as problems to be solved.



Wayfinding on the *Giant Hand*

Inter- view:

Joshua
Beckman

November 30, 2010

MA ◀ ▶ JB

Mark Allen and poet Joshua Beckman discuss the public imagination as a secondary performance space for intimate pieces with as few as one or two audience members. They also consider the shifting roles of performer and audience through discussion of specific pieces in which those boundaries were blurred.

Projects discussed:

- **Houseplant Vacation**
- **Little William Theater**
- **Dream-In**
- **Hammer Staff Birthday Poetry Readings**

Joshua: Hello.

Mark: Hello. So Joshua, most of the people that I collaborated with on this project were in LA, whereas you were in Seattle or New York, so most of your participation involved phoning in—calling people at the Museum on their birthdays and calling the plants. I'm curious what your experience was like, working on projects about people relating to other people but doing it from a remote location.

Joshua: It's funny because I still think of phones like they're two cups and some string, as if there's still a line there, like it's physical. And being a poet, you are used to simultaneously having a ton of intimacy and then that big remove—in the creation of a poem and the space between that and its reception by the reader. So much of how we relate has distance within it. When we did the Dream-In and I got people to read a poem in rounds to each other—actually it was a little bit like the game telephone [laughs]—eventually they fell asleep. They were in physical proximity to each other, some of them thinking about this poem, but when you close your eyes, you are essentially alone [laughs]: individual personhood appears or disappears.... Actually, a lot of the projects we did together were about people thinking about being there before they're there, and thinking about being there after they're there.

Mark: I think the Houseplant Vacation piece addressed that the most directly. That piece had an extended presence at the Museum, but it was also created to exist in people's minds. The plants become a stand-in for the humans'

experience at the Museum. They're like the stunt doubles for the visitors: they can stay at the Museum every day, and they have the patience to have people call and read them poems 24 hours a day and do all these performances for them. But it was also about trying to spill the life of that project out from the Museum and into people's consciousness. The piece starts in people's imagination when they're in their house gathering their plants and driving them over to the Museum. Ideally a good title does that: Houseplant Vacation at the Hammer Museum. Maybe I didn't know what that meant when I first said it, and maybe people didn't know when they read it, but you start imagining what it means. The piece begins right there.

Joshua: Oh yeah, and it's not just the people who brought their plants. I'm also interested in the people who decided not to bring their plants. It's like, "I heard about it. I thought I'd bring my plant. I looked at my plant. My plant's sitting in my living room. I thought either: a) I can't part with my plant right now; b) the museum's going to totally mess up my plant..."—any of a number of different things. It starts all of those ripples and they're all different sizes and have different effects on the viewer. And it's not just the plants; the Museum spills out into people's imaginations too. The Museum has certain hours, and when it goes to sleep it's like the art inside it is gone, it doesn't even exist. Putting a bunch of plants in there gives the Museum an imaginary 24-hour presence, which of course all physical objects actually have. It makes you think about the fact that it's housing not only these plants, but that

the art is there at night when people aren't viewing it. When you read the plants poems, you have to imagine the Museum. Are there people there? Are they walking by? What time is it? You have to imagine yourself as a speaker trying to perform for an individual. It's not that a plant is less than an individual exactly, but to some extent [laughs] it's a smaller audience than one person, no matter how many plants you have.

Mark: [laughs] Yeah. Well, it is. You're not going to get a lot of feedback from a plant. A lot of the work that you and I have done together is modeling different forms of one-to-one reading experiences, whether it's on a phone or walking to somebody's house, or going around and reading people things before they go to sleep. You've probably read to a larger audience in one sitting than you have your entire career of doing things in Machine Project. We'll never catch up [laughs]. This brings to mind a related topic: a lot of the things that we do over at the storefront are for the public, but they're also directed toward our own entertainment, or curiosity.

Joshua: Yes. A big part of Machine Project is the experience of performing and how it alters the artist. As an individual who read almost exclusively at night to the plants, I have to say that having a discussion with a plant alters the performer. I was reading very short poems, haiku, I think. I would call late at night, during the off hours, and read some poems and then talk to the plants about what I was reading and why it made me think of them. The plants have qualities, as any audience has qualities. And you can

project onto any audience to varying degrees. Being explicitly aware of that process was very interesting for me. You start to understand more about communicating with other people, and about what it is to be in that space of the Museum—because there's a lot of work in the Museum that just sits there and waits for someone to come up and feel something in relation to it.

Mark: I want the people I collaborate with to have a new way of working or new ways of thinking about their work. But I also think that it changes it for the audience as well. It's as much about the audience imagining the experience of the performer as it is the performer imagining the experience of the audience.

Joshua: I think one of the big things—and it's very hard to get museums to understand it—but I think the more these very small, intimate, mysterious things happen, the more likely people are to talk about it—even if only ten people get to experience it directly. Most of the people I know didn't get to go to the Hammer, but they all heard about the sleepover, they all heard about the plants, and that means they're part of this audience because they create and imagine it. I think that's something a lot of Machine's projects really brought out at the Hammer: this experience of being moved by the artwork, and responding to the artwork and thinking about artwork, period.

Mark: The audience's imagination is a space I've tried to colonize so that the work functions as a kind of folkloric experience. The thing is, you have to actually do the projects. You can't



just say, "Imagine we put a bunch of plants in the Museum." I'm interested in that tension between operating in that space of imagination, and also really doing it in real space. I think that comes from growing up with the legacy of '60s and '70s performance art—Chris Burden's work, for example—which I know about purely anecdotally.

Joshua: Right. It's not like Chris Burden just considered nailing himself to a VW. I love it when you tell people about some of these projects: their jaw drops a little bit and they get

quiet. Now, because of the ability to manipulate images, we encounter so many things that don't actually happen: you can have a picture of a tiger running around inside a museum eating the paintings, which of course we would never really let happen. The other thing that's funny about the plants is that there is this other audience, which is the guards. I assume they must have heard poems, but we haven't heard back from them. I loved the idea of a guard—someone who's trained to make sure that nothing strange is going on in the museum at night—listening in on the

Joshua Beckman (right) and Anthony McCann reading Carlos Oquendo de Amats in the Little William Theater

person and the plant talking.

Mark: I want to ask you about this idea of working with the shifts between what I would call the public or social persona, and the performative persona. What happens when you shift from being Joshua Beckman, this guy who's hanging out before the reading, to all of a sudden becoming Joshua Beckman reading poems? I'm interested in that shift between the person as person and the person as a vehicle for something else. In our society we consume enormous quantities of culture all the time, but we have very little access to that shift. You go see KISS, but you don't hang out with KISS with their makeup off before the show, right?

Joshua: Not unless you're really lucky.

Mark: It's like the backstage pass. That's the space that Machine likes to operate in. Some of the events try to completely collapse that space between the official performer and the unofficial performer.

Joshua: I think you can blur that distinction in a bunch of different ways. When Anthony and I were in the Little William Theater, we sat across from each other and next to the two listeners. The book we were reading from is bound sort of like an accordion so it had to keep unfolding, and part of the performance was the physical act of unfolding the book. Each time we flipped a page, we each handed it the audience person next to us—just something that simple. They weren't reading aloud, but they became part

of the performative act. Sometimes I would try and make eye contact with one of them when Anthony was reading, and I would realize that, yes, I'm giving a poetry reading, but what's actually happening at that moment is that I'm looking at some dude who's sitting next to me, and we're holding a book together while Anthony reads to us in Spanish.

Mark: So you're shifting between being the audience and the performer there. You're moving between those two spaces.

Joshua: That particular reading was really different because it was two people reading in two languages from the same book, and we only had two listeners. All four people were participating, and the distinction between the readers and the listeners was broken down by the fact that both of the readers spent half of their time listening. So everyone was very intimate, very involved.

Mark: Right. I think a parallel I can draw to that is when I've done public interviews on stage. I did a public conversation on stage at the Hammer with Brody Condon about his piece. What I found interesting about it is that I would ask him questions, he would answer, and I would be listening and trying to process what I wanted to ask him next. But I was also, to a certain degree, performing the role of listener. It was almost as if I had to act as the image of a listener for the audience.

Joshua: And with the [Dream-In](#), that distinction between audience and performer totally broke down. We

were all shut in together, so we were instantly on an equal plane. Everyone was involved in some way or another. If you signed up and did a movement class, someone saw you doing that movement more than anyone saw me read poems.

Mark: Even the act of showing up at the Museum that day with your sleeping bag and your pillow. As regular Museum visitors were leaving, people were standing around wearing footy pajamas and inflating their mattresses. In a way, everyone was in some kind of performative mode. We also had you call the Hammer staff to read them poems for their birthday or half-birthday: when you call someone there's the initial moment in which they're expecting to have a phone conversation, and then you shift to this performative mode. Can you talk a little bit about that experience? I know that you call and read poems to friends on the phone all the time. I suspect Anthony McCann's voicemail is full of nothing but your poems at this point. Can you talk about how that experience is similar or different to calling and reading poems to people at the Hammer?

Joshua: Calling someone at the Museum is so different. I don't know if you know this, but I have a whole shtick, which is like, "Hello so and so, I'm calling on behalf of the Machine Project to wish you a happy birthday and/or half-birthday"—the half-birthday is so great because my sense is that most people don't recognize that there is a half-birthday. So I've given them two gifts. I've given them the gift of telling them that it's their half-birthday, and I've given them the

gift of reading them a poem. In all likelihood, they haven't heard a poem read by a poet; they probably haven't even read a poem to themselves in a long time. So there's this excitement and openness to hear it. And I always give them a choice. They get to decide if they want to hear one about monkeys or one that has sort of a sad longing, for example. I read it to them and then they get off the phone and they can't even show anyone the poem. It's gone. Was it good? Was it bad? All that's left is like, "Some dude called me, don't remember his name. He read me a poem. I think this and that happened. He sounded sad." It's this strange total alteration of their day.

Mark: I think your poems are really well suited for this kind of thing too because they are formally inventive in a way people probably aren't familiar with, but they also have a narrative legibility to them. The process of trying to describe them to somebody is kind of like trying to describe a dream you had. It's very hard to make any kind of representation of what that experience was like to somebody else at your office: "Well, there was a baby and it was in some bananas..." It doesn't make any sense unless you're actually reading the poem itself. It's like you're inducing a dream in the middle of the day for someone while they're conscious.

Interview:

Emily
Lacy

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November 28, 2010

MA EL

Mark Allen and Machine's longtime collaborator, folk musician Emily Lacy, consider different ways of engaging with the architectural and labor structures of the Museum. They also meditate on the transition from pedestrian to performative identity and the particular kind of intimacy it creates with an audience.

Projects discussed:

- Valentine's Day Songs of Triumph or Heartbreak
- Hammer Staff Birthday Personal Concerts



Mark: On a really practical level, how much do you think we learned from the year at the Hammer that might be applicable to other institutions? Or do you think everything is completely site-specific?

Emily: Well, every physical space is different, so there is something to be learned from every single situation that you engage in. But I think that something that could apply to projects across the board is the understanding that with this kind of work, because it usually involves a participatory component, there is a need for labor support and infrastructure that is different from what normal exhibitions need.

Mark: Yeah. With the Hammer project, we spent an enormous amount of the budget on support—whether it was on documentation or hiring people to deal with logistics or bookkeeping. We wrote checks to 300 people. That is a lot of work! [laughs]

Emily: Something else that comes to mind is that, when a museum asks you to do something like this, even if they don't realize it, they really are the cowriters of the project—in the directives that they introduce from time to time and the specific projects they approve and don't approve. They may not see themselves as authors. They may see themselves as administrators, as just the people who sign the checks or whatever.

Valentine's Day Songs of Triumph or Heartbreak in the Billy Wilder Theater

But at the end of the day, it is really a collaborative effort between the institution and the artist or the organization. And collaboration can be really, really hard—especially with the kind of work that we do because we work within the realm of ideas. It's really watery, that content.

Mark: Yeah, very fluid. Can you talk a little about the [Valentine's Day Songs of Triumph or Heartbreak](#) piece we did? We've done similar things in other places—performances for one person at a time. Can you talk about what that experience was like and how it was different doing it at the Hammer than, say, if we had done it at Machine Project?

Emily: I felt like what was new about the project was the opportunity to be in the background and become an element of the museum experience—to embed oneself and engage on almost an architectural level. So one of the things that was really special about doing the [Valentine's Day](#) project at the Hammer was being able to engage with that level and scale. Usually with one-on-one performances we work in small spaces. In this case, we had access to the entire Billy Wilder Theater, and to be able to use that space with all its theatricality was really a unique opportunity. It allowed me to think about the whole experience differently. I developed a directive choreography for the experience in a way that I haven't been able to before. I had my friend acting as an usher, we both had corsages, and we had it worked out so that when he brought down a participant, he would give me a nonverbal hand signal so I would know which choice they had

made: whether they wanted a song of heartbreak or of triumph. That was interesting too, to allow for this loaded question on such a loaded holiday.

Mark: Did you talk to the participants?

Emily: It varied. I tried to play off the energy of the participant. Some people wanted to talk. Other people found the whole thing very bizarre and I sensed that they didn't want to engage on a verbal level. It was funny. Each performance was this short spurt of engagement, one or two minutes with one person, so it was like an espresso shot of intimacy and connection, a little window of intensity. And it went both ways: whatever I was giving them with the musical performance, whether they chose heartbreak or triumph; at the same time, I got a strong energy input from whatever the participant's vibe was. Those types of things can range from completely awkward—where you really have to fight back intense laughter just to overcome the nervous tension—to just feeling complete bliss. I love that range.

Mark: So, say that you do a performance for an audience of 20 people, to a certain degree you're getting an average of their experiences. If everyone syncs up and projects the same experience you may feel like, "Well, that was really a disaster," or "That was really amazing," but more often it's balanced somewhere in between. Whereas, you're saying, with the one-to-one performance you get the undiluted individual experience. With these more intimate performances, I'm really

interested in what it means when you take the one-to-many performance model and make it one-to-one or few-to-few. How does that change what information goes from the performer to the audience and how does it change what information comes back from the audience to the performer? I think one of the reasons people find that those experiences can be difficult is that you don't know what to say afterward. The audience goes through this shift from perceiving the performer as a fellow human being to something else: when the performance is happening, when you are singing, I am no longer engaging with you. It may be more intimate or it may be less intimate, but no matter what, your humanness shifts in a way. You're a very different kind of human than I am in the moment that you are singing to me. You become a performer.

Emily: You become a conductor of this moment.

Mark: And then you shift back when it is over. I think that produces some of the awkwardness around how to relate to the performer afterward. In our culture, often the model is that you don't. We only experience the performer as the performer: we are not constantly shifting gears between Kanye West my neighbor and Kanye West the performer; it is always Kanye West the performer. What I think is interesting about doing the [Valentine's Day](#) piece in the Billy Wilder Theater is that we built up all of the performance infrastructure for a single audience member. It becomes a focused individual encounter with the performative mode of being, with this unexpected proximity before and

after, whereas the performances that happen at Machine are much more fluid. They get their energy from the shift—the fact that, all of a sudden, the performative moment erupts out of this social space when the person starts singing.

Emily: Yeah, for the [Valentine's Day](#) piece, it did feel like this particular psychological space was being invoked. It was almost like role-playing—audience and performer—and then pushing past that into this dreamlike space.

Mark: You know, an artist who works with that a lot is Tino Sehgal: I was in New York at the New Museum and they have one piece installed where you walk into the space and the guard turns around and sings to you, "This is propaganda, you know, you know," and then she announces the name and date of the piece and turns away again. And you can talk to the guard, but you have to actively make that shift. And, in the case of guards, it is interesting because they're still performing another nonpeer role. They're performing the institutional security of the museum. So there is this shift between two modes—an institutional mode and a performing mode—neither of which is really a peer mode. We also did the [Hammer Staff Birthday Personal Concerts](#), where you came and sang for people who work at the Hammer on their birthdays. How would you compare that experience with the [Valentine's Day](#) pieces?

Emily: What I really liked about the birthday pieces—as well as having the Hammer staff in residence here at Machine—is that they expanded the



Top and left:
Hammer
Staff Birthday
Personal
Concerts

cultivation of social space to include the employees of the Museum. I feel like it is pretty rare for an awareness to exist within the exhibited work, and in the emotional and physical space, of the people who actually work there. I like that we were able to engage the Museum as a workplace.

Mark: Right.

Emily: And I really felt a sense of empathy when I performed the pieces. Recognizing that there are all these people who live off pay and benefits from the Museum, I was able to relate to the economy of it in a different way. There was something special about infusing our work into that human layer of the institution.

Mark: Yeah. I think some of that comes out of the model that we have here at Machine Project, where it is a small workplace. The people who work here are really involved with what happens for the public and sometimes the things we do are as much to amuse ourselves as the public. At Machine, the walls between the different roles—the people who work here, the volunteers, the artists we work with, the members, the public—are thin and permeable. There's not a strong delineation. With a larger institution it's hard to do that. The museum has a distinctive division of labor: it shows work that is made off-site by people who don't work for the museum; there are people in the museum whose job it is to think culturally and people whose job it is to think in other ways; communication is pretty hierarchical and controlled. And these things are necessary for large art institutions, but it's very different from Machine's more integrated model. Although I think as we grow, we are also seeing the division of labor start to erupt.

Emily: Right.

Mark: I thought about trying to do things that would expose the private museum to the public, but I became more interested in the opposite: moving programming into the private part of the institution. Were you there the day we all went and worked in Ann Philbin's office at the Hammer?

Emily: No.

Mark: That was an interesting day because the modalities of conversation at the two institutions are really different: at Machine,

communication is constantly traveling in both directions; whereas in a more hierarchical institution, the top talks downward whenever it wishes to, but you only talk upward when you are given clearance to do so.

Emily: Like the military or large-scale film productions. [laughs]

Mark: Yeah. And it does palpably change how relationships develop between people.

Emily: And it affects the way the performance feels. One thing I remember about the birthday pieces is all the material—the desks and the chairs and the paper and the folders and the fluorescent lights and the desk lamps—made that office space a really thick environment. As a performer in that space, you really notice that your guitar is a foreign object to the environment. I feel it a lot less here at Machine because you can find any number of things in our basement or in the gallery. In the office environment at the Hammer, you feel how your clothes are different than those of the people around you and how your materials are of a different fiber. You become this infused body of different material carrying different objects into their space with intent to create another emotional climate. It's really interesting, physically, to experience that shift. It was very powerful, and it felt satisfying to really make these people's days.

Interview:

**Cat
Lamb &
Laura
Steenberge**

December 20, 2010

MA CL & LS

As they reflect on their experience of singing in the galleries, musicians Cat Lamb and Laura Steenberge consider how the pressure of formal spectatorship can inhibit engagement with performance work. They begin to outline a passive engagement strategy that uses behavioral modeling to invite visitors to linger and move on at their leisure.

Projects discussed:

- **Singing by Numbers**

Mark: Can you tell me a little bit about the choral singing group you developed that did [Singing by Numbers](#) at the Hammer—how it came about and what it was?

Cat: Laura and I have been developing a language for how to hear certain tonal relationships of sound.

Laura: Yes, a theory of harmony. Every pitch has what's called a harmonic series: the sound that you hear has a certain frequency; all these other tones above it have simple mathematical relationships to that fundamental frequency, so multiplying a number by two or three or four will give you a different pitch. I'm interested in what it means, quantitatively, to be in tune. That's half the equation. I'm also really interested in things that are out of tune. If you know what you're aiming for in the first place, you can stray from it and play with it artistically. When Cat and I started doing these experiments, we didn't know what we were capable of doing, but after doing it for the last year and a half, there are more and more pieces being actually written.

Cat: Right, and we asked a number of singers who are our friends to try out different experiments with us. We started meeting regularly with a small group and trying, together, to find an intuitive interactive experience for musicians to be able to hear the differences—as opposed to a more academic or composerly approach. Some of the things we tried were just games, but then suddenly a piece would emerge based on a feeling of the group. For [Singing by Numbers](#) at the Hammer, it was a conglomeration of pieces that were prepared beforehand, experiments

in the space, and pieces that were made in the space with multiple people.

Laura: I'd actually like to add that being in that space was a real challenge at first. We were scheduled for about 12 to 13 hours inside the gallery over the course of the Residency and we had three weeks to prepare for that. So we really had to rise to that occasion, to figure out how we could gracefully produce that amount of music in a mentally reasonable fashion. Fortunately, because we'd been doing these experiments for several months, we found that there were three or four little improvisatory pieces with simple rules that could be written around each little angle we had explored. So much material came out of that time.

Cat: A cool thing too—just having all that time altered the dynamic of the group so that everyone felt like they were part of the experimentation. And people were starting to feel more confident with the numbers, so they were able to use it as their own language.

Mark: So far you've talked about this project primarily as a language and a system for working with musicians. I'm curious how it manifests in terms of performance. And there are a number of ways you can structure a performance—as an experiment, an improvisation, a score, a piece.... Cat, you were saying the performances at the Hammer were kind of a combination. How would you distinguish between those different modes of composition?

Cat: It's a tricky subject. With this

project, the dynamic of the group really breaks down the barriers between composer and performer. I've written a lot of scores for performers, but with this group, the pieces I have found myself working on are more open to the group's interpretation. It seemed natural for it to have their voices in there—literally and also creatively.

Laura: One thing I'd say is that most of the performances we've done so far have been experiments—or what I would call an *etude*, which is a traditional term for a study of a musical concept. To the listener it may not make a difference if a piece is an *etude* or an improvisation or a composition, but there are formal differences. I think of an *etude* as a kind of prompt, like “do this,” and when we feel it's time to stop or get bored, we'll stop and that's the end. In a composition there is more structure imposed on the process—a kind of hand guiding it. But I think the main difference between experiment and performance is in the level of confidence of the performers.

Mark: I think the visitor or the viewer or the listener does have a sense that there's a certain structure you guys are enacting. It's not like sitting down and watching a chorus where there's a conductor conducting, but there are a lot of hand gestures and this sense that you are exploring the acoustic characteristics of the space. I also wanted to ask: Did you feel like there was a relationship between the work and your performance? It was the Luisa Lambri show, right? She does very quiet, contemplative, minimal photographs. Did you feel

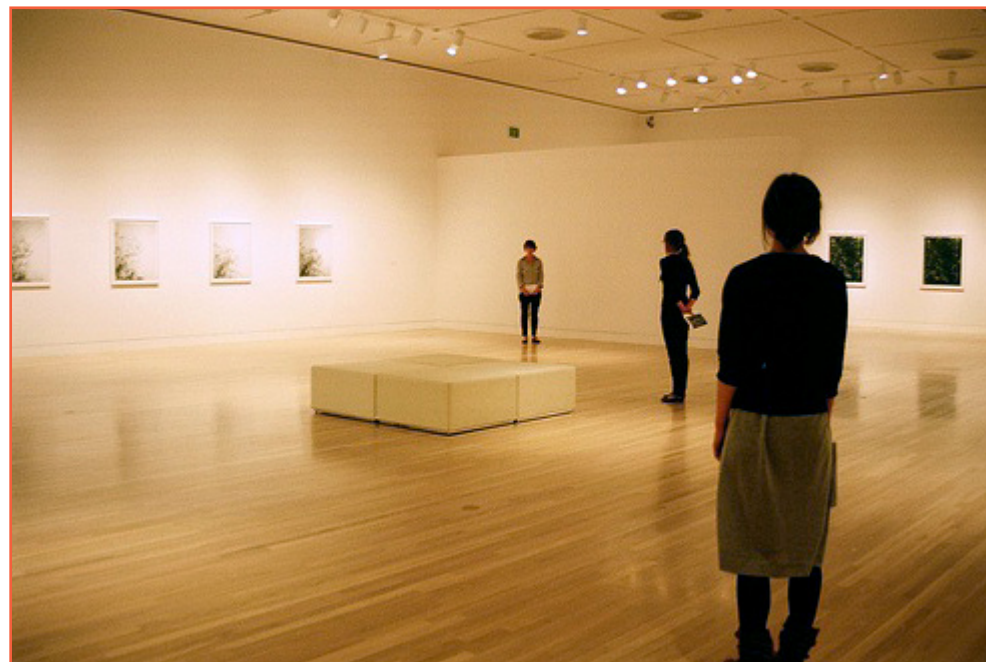
that affected the way you thought about the sound, or the way people perceived the sound?

Cat: It seemed congruent. Lambri has a lot of repetition, so there'd be branches that were repeated in different muted tones. I felt like that was similar to what we were trying to do, because we would have these repetitious guidelines but they would be muted by the kinds of harmony that we decided to play around with—how many voices were layered on top of each other and that sort of thing.

Mark: Do you think that the listeners in the space were sensing that? Or, to put it in broader terms: How does the audience figure into the piece? Would you be performing the piece differently if there were no audience, if you guys were rehearsing?

Cat: Well, since we were in a gallery space and people were looking at the artwork, we tried out many different ways to be in the space: all standing at opposite corners of the room, or standing in a line, or in a circle close together, or far apart, or moving around. One time, a couple of us walked up to each painting and sang to the painting! We were also kind of spectators in the space.

Laura: And we were very aware of the kind of content we should be creating. I think having the improvisatory sound was advantageous in this case. If the music sounds more wandering, then people intuitively understand that their focused attention isn't required. When we were all in a line, people would not come into the gallery; they just hovered on the edge. But when we were



Singing by Numbers

dispersed and we looked more random, people would feel free to break our spaces. The other thing that happened is that the audience would elect itself to be an audience. It requires a certain density of people in the gallery. If the first three people in the gallery are really watching the performance, as other people come in they'll also watch, and they'll all become an audience until that piece ends. Then they'll kind of disperse. That wasn't so much our doing; it was something behavioral about people.

Cat: I remember there was one time when suddenly everyone was sitting on the cushions in the middle of the room...

Laura: Yeah, because our friends Mike and Abby were there to be spectators. They changed the dynamic for everyone else.

Cat: That's true. Everyone walking in suddenly stopped, as if they were watching a performance.

Mark: That's something we found with all performances in the Museum—that people's behavior is modeled on other people's behavior. Anytime you're designing things where the terms of spectatorship are unclear or non-traditional, it's really useful to model that. It's the same with participatory work. You want to have somebody almost seeding a tip jar.

It's very important not to make deliberate eye contact with people when you're in a setting like this...

Laura: Yeah, and I think part of it is about the gaze too. It's very important not to make deliberate eye contact with people when you're in a setting like this. As soon as people feel that you need their attention, they are more likely to rebel. It's just too much responsibility. I feel that, even when I'm on the audience side of people doing really similar things to what I do—making people sing along and stuff—I immediately rebel, and then I have to overcome the rebellion to participate. From working with kids, I think all people, when you first greet them and make eye contact with them, hide behind their parent's pant leg. The pant leg just becomes invisible.

Mark: That's one of the things that makes visiting a museum so different from visiting an art gallery: part of the pleasure of a museum is that it constructs this anonymous space of viewership; whereas in a gallery—for a variety of reasons but largely because they're commercial ventures—there's always the acknowledgment that

happens in a shopping context. It's very different here at the storefront too, because the space is so informal: you're really entering somebody else's space when you come in to Machine Project. I try and deal with that by quickly communicating that I know the person is there and being casually welcoming, in such a way that they don't feel like they necessarily have to respond.

Laura: I've actually often wondered about your performance strategies. I think of you as a very skilled performer, but what you are performing is a version of yourself. But thinking back to what it felt like being in the gallery space at the Hammer, in this open room that had this lovely resonance, it was almost like a chapel. There was a sort of reverence when you stepped into the space. I think everyone that was performing felt that. And I really liked the moments when I would step out of the group and go listen over in the adjacent gallery, because of course you can hear the music there too, but it had that

I think all people, when you first greet them and make eye contact with them, hide behind their parent's pant leg. The pant leg just becomes invisible.

—Laura Steenberge

distance, that echo-y sound, very much like overhearing a choir rehearse in a cathedral or something. Museums are always really echo-y. I think sometimes it can be a little daunting to be the only person in a gallery somewhere like the Hammer, where there isn't always a huge crowd of people. I can actually become a little self-conscious of my own sound.

Mark: Laura, what is so interesting about what you're saying is that if you were there completely by yourself, if there was no guard and no other people, you would not necessarily feel self-conscious. But if you're there with just a guard or one other person, you are then performing. You're performing the sound of your footsteps and your physical energy, and it's like, "I didn't come here to perform, I came here to look at some art."

Laura: Yeah, when I was younger I would think, "Oh, they can hear that I'm not spending very much time in front of the paintings—I don't know

what I'm supposed to look at. These wonderful, insightful people will look at a painting for 20 minutes and be transformed, and I'm not doing that, and they can tell."

Mark: [laughs] I think it is a thing of LA museums, because LA museums in general are relatively solitary experiences. In New York you never feel that, because there are so many other people there. It's not like, "Oh, is anybody looking at how long I looked at this painting?" Instead it's, "How do I get these people out of the way?" and, "I don't want to take up too much time in front of a painting."

Cat: One of the things I noticed doing these performances is that, because we created this event in the space, people would wander around like they normally do but they would linger longer. I would catch people just staring at a painting for a long time. You don't see that very much at museums. It was nice.

Interview:

**Anthony
McCann**

February 13, 2011

MA AM

Poet Anthony McCann and Mark Allen discuss the poetic concept of the “overheard utterance” as it relates to questions of audience for participatory and intimate performance pieces.

Projects discussed:

- Houseplant Vacation
- Needlepoint Therapy
- Level5



Mark: So Anthony, I want to talk to you about the [Houseplant Vacation](#). You and Joshua Beckman got a bunch of poets to call in and read poems to the plants over the phone.

Anthony: Yeah, I think there were five or six people calling regularly. Mary Ruefle and Noelle Kocot called like every day—Noelle specifically called during nonmuseum hours when there wouldn't be anybody there but the security guard.

Mark: Oh, that's funny—so she's either reading to an empty space or to a person whose job is to make sure nothing anomalous is happening [laughs].

Anthony: Yeah. And I know Matthew Zapruder wrote at least one poem for the plants. The poets were all really into it.

Mark: Why do you think that was an appealing scenario for people?

Anthony: I think for a particular kind of poet, a lyric poet—and I'm going to conceptualize this perhaps excessively, but—there's something in it that mirrors a basic scenario in the poem, which is the “overheard utterance.” The lyric poem is spoken to a “you,” but there's a triangle in which the reader is listening in, so the poem is a performance for the “you” with the knowledge that it's being overheard. The [Houseplant Vacation](#) set up that

Janet Sarbanes reading at Houseplant Vacation

triangle for the poet with the plants, who we may or may not believe can hear, and an imaginary listener who was also probably not there.

Mark: I hadn't heard of that construction of the lyric poem, but it's very close to one of the ways that I was conceptualizing the plant piece, which came out of thinking about these multiple audiences that you get with a lot of participatory work. With the [Live Personal Soundtrack](#), for example, I noticed that there was this weird split between the experiences of the primary and secondary audiences: when you're doing it, you kind of forget there's a guitarist behind you because you're used to walking around listening to music on headphones; for the people watching, however, it looks like it might be very awkward and uncomfortable to participate. With the plant piece, I wanted to make something very funny, easy, gentle, but at the same time something that would talk about the unknowability of somebody else's experience. When we see someone listening to something, we don't know what they are thinking, but because they're also human we imagine we have at least some idea of how they feel. A plant, on the other hand, isn't thinking anything, so it becomes a great symbol for the unknowable aspect of another subjectivity. But you were saying with the poem, the main audience is always kind of secondary to this other primary imagined recipient.

Anthony: Right—with the lyric poem, the listener or reader is in the position of an eavesdropper. Also, though, because of the way reading works, you don't just occupy a single position. You blur back and forth between being

in the position of the eavesdropper, the position of the speaker, and the position of the person being addressed in the poem. So on the one hand, you identify as yourself listening in; at the same time, if the poem is calling out to a "you," sometimes you are put in the position of that "you"; then you're also going to naturally identify with the speaker at points and the "you" in the poem will become whatever "yous" you're thinking of. This all happens seamlessly, I think, in the experience of hearing or reading a poem.

Mark: Oh that's great. That's a really useful way to conceptualize experience for participatory pieces where you have the participants and the people watching the participants—whom we might think of as potential participants. You want the participants to model the experience to the people watching. So a really common trick, if you are doing a participatory piece in public, is to get your friends to do it first.

Anthony: "You, young sir, come down."

Mark: Yeah, exactly, confederates in the audience. It doesn't always work that way, though.

Anthony: I actually have some questions about audience in relation to participatory pieces. Where is the audience supposed to be in participatory work? Is the audience ideally absorbed, so that there is no distance between the piece and the audience, or so that the audience is the piece? Or not? How do you think about that?

Mark: The first thought I have when you say that is that this idea of a participatory piece, in which all the conscious humans in the space are absorbed in the production of it, kind of has no audience. I'm not sure what it is.

Anthony: Well, it can be documented.

Mark: Right. I think that often happens with participatory work: it's being produced for an external audience through another audience, or through documentation, or even just through description of the piece. For example, for the [Needlepoint Therapy](#) piece that artist Joshua Greene did with his mother—who's a licensed psychotherapist in Westwood and a needlepoint enthusiast—we selected eight people to be in group therapy working on their relationship issues once a week while needlepointing pieces from the Hammer's permanent collection that the therapist felt would resonate with whatever issues they were trying to deal with. That's a piece where it's not only private in that it is happening behind closed doors, but the nature of the activity is explicitly private: the things that are discussed are not for the consumption of an audience. Who's the audience for that piece? It's a type of conceptual piece, which replicates through the description of it. Another example, but actually using documentation, is Brody's piece, [Level5](#).

Anthony: Right. I had trouble with the documentation of Brody's piece. I could tell I was watching mediated documentation with this particular stylization. Whereas hearing about it from people, so many interesting things came out: Brody's reaction and

what it did to him; participants talking about it sincerely changing their lives and reconstituting them as people... especially in a piece that was phrasing itself, at least initially, as having this very historical and critical component. What it highlighted for me is that the true audience of that piece was the people most involved in it—the people who also are the piece.

Mark: Yeah, one of the discourses about that piece in the beginning, when we were promoting it, was that it was a way of deconstructing how the self-actualization process works in our culture. But afterward, when we talked to the participants they were genuinely like, "I feel so self-actualized." It speaks to a perennial concern in participatory work, which is: to what degree are you instrumentalizing your participants as unpaid performers, or as subject matter, or as a kind of raw material for the artist to use to make a meta-statement or to construct a conversation? When you actually do these things, you realize the relationships are always much more complicated than that question implies. We're always instrumentalizing each other in different ways, but it is more of an open exchange than a straightforward transaction.

Anthony: I think with that piece Brody had a driving personal fascination and all the different ways he was framing it conceptually were secondary to the need for that thing to happen. What happened is what's important, and what makes the piece exciting is that people were surprised about what happened. Clearly the piece exceeded any conceptual frame that came before or can come after.

Mark: That's what you want a work to do, right? You want to have some kind of surprise from it. One of the challenges of doing process-based work with institutions is that people often want to know what's going to happen so they can promote the piece, deal with any safety concerns, etc. Whereas with the best work, you don't know. And that uncertainty is fundamental to the excitement and power of the experience for the audience—the sense that anything could happen, and you are there as it is happening. I think that's why the most interesting aspect of Brody's piece—for an external audience, for people who weren't participants—was the live streaming documentation at the Hammer during those three days. Were you there for any of that?

Anthony: I was not.

Mark: It was fascinating. Brody and I had been thinking about the piece as this intense experience for the participants. The documentation came out of us trying to add a stronger public engagement component to pitch the piece to the Hammer as part of the Residency. I had no idea how into watching it people would be. It was totally riveting. I watched it myself for like three hours.

Anthony: Hmm. Yeah, I imagine that would feel different.

Mark: It was great to watch the thing unfold knowing that it was actually happening right there, in another part of the museum. Getting back to [Houseplant Vacation](#) though, you also went to the Hammer and read poetry to the plants there on Lindbrook terrace.

What was that experience like?

Anthony: Yes I did, with Kirsty Singer. We had both picked out poems that we wanted to read to the plants, and we tried to read them to the plants, but you can't ignore the fact that there were people there listening, especially because there were only like five of them. It did create a very different dynamic than facing the people though. It was fun to be able to walk around in the space, sometimes reading to particular plants. It's very pretty there with the light coming down.

Mark: It is.

Anthony: Structurally the performance of reading to the plants mirrored what already goes on in the poem, so it felt good to be doing that. I think that construction—where the performance enacts what is already implicit in the thing—has been true of most of the things I've done with Machine that I've really enjoyed. And I think figuring out what works for your practice and what doesn't is a struggle that everyone has at different points when they're working with Machine. In terms of poetry, I've had to figure out when the setup of Machine allows me to do things that I want to do, and where it creates scenarios I don't want to put my poems in—just in terms of the kind of attention that you can get from a listener. I want it to always be a scenario where people are actively engaged and listening to the poems. I never want poems to be background. What Machine has allowed for is really interesting experimentation with intimacy and distance.



*Houseplant
Vacation*

The Houseplant Vacation set up [a] triangle for the poet with the plants, who we may or may not believe can hear, and an imaginary listener who was also probably not there.

—Anthony McCann

Mark: Right. As you know, we've tried a variety of different ways of reading poetry and relating to people, whether it's the Poetry Delivery Service where you're walking to somebody's house, or the piece where we put you and Joshua and Noelle on a boat in Santa Monica Harbor. One of the things that has been really nice about working with you and Joshua on these poetry pieces is that there's always something unexpected that we've learned about audience. We already know the poems are going to be great, so it's fairly low risk. We get a great reading plus some interesting side effects.

Anthony: Well, it's not that different from a normal poetry reading. At any poetry reading the same poems can induce somber attention or hilarity, so that unknowability is a familiar one.

Mark: Right. You've been reading poems out loud to people for 20 years now. What's your relationship to that uncertainty?

Anthony: In the moment of choosing the poems, I try to think about what kind of audience I imagine it will be, but once I have a reading set up I don't vary from that. I just go with the energy thread that I've pulled through in assembling the order of the poems. I mean, based on the feeling of people in the room, I might pull a poem or something, but I find it doesn't help to try to—

Mark: Put a little more chuckle in the reading if they're not laughing enough.

Anthony: Yeah.

Mark: So when you read poems to

the plants or over the phone or from a boat—in those situations you're not getting any body language or psychic cues back from the audience at all.

Anthony: It just becomes a matter of picking a few poems you want to read, and then those poems determine which ones have to come before and after them. If you pay attention, they're very assertive about who wants to be read where.

Mark: Yeah. It makes me think of making a mix tape [laughs].

Anthony: Well, what's analogous to making a mix tape is that you have that excited feeling of discovering all these new relations—and it's a surprise from your own poems. Like, "I never thought these two poems would be such good friends." It is musical too. There's a cadence that demands that the next one be that one. Certain correspondences suddenly appear.

Inter- view:

**Eric
Klerks
with Chris
Kallmyer**

December 7, 2010

MA & CK ◀ ▶ EK

Guitarist Eric Klerks talks with Mark Allen and sound curator Chris Kallmyer about the sometimes awkward and often richly rewarding experience of improvising music for Hammer visitors as they toured the galleries. Their conversation touches on the difference between the way the Live Personal Soundtrack piece appeared to outside observers and how it felt to participants.

Projects discussed:

- **Live Personal Soundtrack**

Mark: Something I find fascinating about this piece is that, for me at least, the experience of doing it is completely different from the way it appears to an outside observer. I found—and I'm used to listening to music with headphones while looking at stuff, but—it was very easy to forget there was a human being behind me playing a guitar. Whereas, when I watched someone else do it, it seemed super awkward.

Eric: What you are talking about also touches on something that happened with the advent of recording technology, which is that sounds became detached from the things that create them. It used to be that if you heard a rock thud, there was a rock. Now we can hear a rock fall all day long, and there are no rocks around us. The pleasure of live music is making that indexical connection again, sewing it back together. This piece plays with that because I'm right there playing the music, but, in this case, the person listening is looking at something else. The other people in the Museum constitute the other half: they see me play the music, but they can't hear it. So a lot of that piece is about articulating that split.

Chris: Yeah, there are almost two pieces going on at once: one piece is this very direct connection between the performer and the participant—which is the piece that I imagined when we originally talked about it; then there is this second piece that happens when the people standing around who aren't participating start to wonder what's going on. In some

ways that's the more interesting piece, and it happens almost inadvertently.

Eric: The funny thing for me was that part of that split goes on in my brain. I've got my set of headphones, but they are really just for monitoring purposes, to keep control of the volume and to make sure things are not going terribly, terribly wrong [laughs]. A big part of my brain is engaged with being aware of my surroundings. I did a couple of runs through the permanent collection with the head of security before we actually started, just to make sure it was feasible to be walking around all these masterpieces with the guitar, with all these pointy metallic things sticking out. Once I got familiar with the space, it took some of the danger away, so I could also really start to pay attention to the other people around me. As I was making a round with one person, I could see interest pique in certain other people, and I could kind of guess who was going to be waiting for me back at the stage.

Mark: Chris and I were talking about the Fanfare/No Fanfare piece and the metaphor we used was that it's like a "push" piece—you come into the Museum and it's pushed in your face—whereas with your piece, people really had to want it. We had this sign, but people had to come up and talk to you. Can you talk about how people approached you? What was that experience like for you as a performer?

Eric: It was a little awkward but the more I did it the more I liked it. It was interesting: I got a wide range

of reactions from people, and I think it really said a lot about people's comfort level. With a piece like that where it's up to the audience or the participant to engage, as friendly as I can be, people have their own hang-ups about engaging a total stranger, which is totally valid. It's a very intimate kind of association—to have somebody at arm's length, following you through this gallery. There's a certain amount of comfort that's required to be able to engage in an activity like that with someone that you've never met before. For me, the toughest part of the whole experience was getting the first couple of people to take the walk with me. I had to be a little bit more forward and a little bit more inviting the first couple of times.

Mark: Was that each day, or just the first time you did it?

Eric: To a point, each day. At first it was a little bit intimidating—all these looks that you get from patrons, especially the regulars. You can tell they are wondering why you are here but they don't necessarily want to articulate it, so you just get this weird vibe. You know, I'm standing there and I've got my sign-in sheet, but it looks a little bit trivial.

Mark: Right, like you apparently have permission to be there, but you are not quite part of the Museum.

Eric: Exactly. But I think there's a difference between something being difficult and something being a problem. The difficulty is almost as much a part of the event as walking through the gallery. If it had been a more clinical situation, where people

came up to a desk and I was sitting there saying, "Oh, yes, we have this slot open and this slot open," I think some of that intimacy would have been lost. It would have been more like those audio tours, and it's not about that.

Mark: Right. This piece is a critique of those pieces: those pieces are a sad simulacrum of a human interaction in the museum; this piece is about real engagement.

Eric: Absolutely. And it had as much to do with my evolution as with the audience. I think there's really an art to being able to put somebody at ease. It got easier for me, getting that comfort level and the confidence to say, "Here I am. I'm part of the space. People can engage me just like they'd engage that painting."

Mark: Right.

Eric: One thing that really helped was that I made a lot of friends at the Hammer because you see the same faces every time. I would take some of the staff people through, and just showing the event to the patrons who were wandering around in the gallery helped; they were able to see what it was and put aside some of their fears about engaging a total stranger. There would be a lot of smiles, and I would come back to the station and see a line of people waiting.

Mark: What was it like actually walking around with someone? You were saying your attention was kind of split.

Eric: Yeah, you pay some attention to the art, but the most important focus of your attention is the patron that

you're with. It is mostly a matter of reading their reactions to the art, kind of playing to that, and letting them feel comfortable.

Mark: I was doing an interview with Emily Lacy, and we were talking about how, as a performer—whether you're a poet or a musician—you're always getting some feedback from the audience. In more typical situations there might be 20 people, or 100 or 2,000, whereas in this case you just have one person's reactions. Does it feel the same to you whether there's one person or 2,000 people, or are those experiences different?

Eric: I was thinking about that before I left, actually. About a year ago I played for about 4,000 people at this huge festival in England with the Magic Band for their reunion project. I felt like it was possible to make a connection with a large group of people, which was something that I hadn't really felt before—and a lot of that had to do with getting over my own nerves. In a big crowd you get a collective averaging of energy: there are people who are way, way into it, and people who aren't, so it's possible to find that middle point and work through that. When you have a one-on-one situation, you have to find that average of energy between the two of you.

Mark: I've been talking to people about this idea of the performer as someone who's channeling—not to use an overly dramatic word—but you have a different relationship to people than, for example, you and I on the bus together.

Eric: Absolutely. Obviously, when you

have a really great reaction from a single person, you get this feedback between the two of you and it's possible to create and really build a lot of energy that way. If the other person is not quite as responsive, there is still feedback, but the balance of power starts to change. I'll maybe feel a little more compelled to push a bit, to try to get a reaction.

Chris: I have a question for you: generally, during this kind of improvised music, I've heard people say—and I have even said it myself—"Forget the audience. Play what you feel like playing." The idea that you can't expect the musician to control people's reactions—and that it is not our job to create a sense of total satisfaction. With the [Live Personal Soundtrack](#), you are very concerned with this one-on-one relationship, so in a sense, it is the opposite of what I am saying. It's more about music as a service industry.

Eric: It's funny, because I think this idea of creating the best music that you can, regardless of the reaction of the audience, and this idea of playing to them and giving them what they want—I don't know if those things are totally disconnected. But you have to be a performer in the sense that the quality of your performance can't be entirely dependent on the audience. I had a couple of situations where the people were polite, but you could tell that they weren't totally sold on it; they weren't jumping up and down in enthusiasm. Then it was a matter of not just being professional, but being true to the project and being true to the music and the art, and not worrying about totally satisfying the



Live Personal Soundtrack

audience. I made a point of trying not to show too much of an emotional connection with people, just to kind of keep it as a performance, and to keep a distance between the audience and myself. Which is something I think you need to do as a musician anyway—not to put up a wall, but to keep things at arm’s length.

Mark: Something I thought about when we were first developing the project was that we needed some way for people to get out of the experience. I remember we developed some language.

Eric: Yeah, the language was actually super important because it established

boundaries and an escape clause. And the more I did it, the more I was able to tailor the language to the participant. Sometimes it was as simple as saying, “Whenever you feel like you’re done, just take the headphones off.” It really came down to establishing a trust relationship with this stranger—just making them feel like they’re in control of the situation.

Mark: Yeah.

Eric: And I found that once you start breaking down those barriers, you get more trust: they would spend more time; musically, I felt like I could get away with a little bit more. There was an older woman, probably in her 60s

or 70s, and she wanted to hear jazz—and not just any jazz, she wanted to hear something that sounded like Pat Metheny: a little smooth, a little relaxed, a very calming, centering kind of thing. The way I approached it is, well, this is where we’ll start. One of the good things about having gone to school for music and studying the craft and the art, is that you know these things—and you can get your foot in the door with people that way. It was the same with the guy who wanted surf rock, and the guy who wanted metal, and the guy who wanted country music. You give them a little bit, just as a starting point to get your foot in the door and, once you’re in, really great, bizarre things

that work with the art start to come out. The intention is not only to create something that the patron’s going to like, but something that feels appropriate for the situation. I think people tended to resonate with that more than if I had been the hotshot session guy who goes, “Oh yeah, I’ll play country music for you, no problem.” Then it just becomes like putting the headphones on and pressing “play.”

Mark: You may as well be a jukebox.

Eric: Yes, exactly—and I’m not. Jukeboxes make a lot more money than I do [laughs]. So I took requests, but a lot of the time the patrons just

With recording technology, sounds became detached from the things that create them. It used to be that if you heard a rock thud, there was a rock. Now we can hear a rock fall all day long, and there are no rocks around us. The pleasure of live music is making that indexical connection again, sewing it back together.

—Eric Klerks

wanted me to play what I felt like playing, which I thought was really cool. It becomes less of a transaction and more of a conversation that way.

Mark: Did you actually have conversations with people? Did they give you verbal feedback afterward?

Eric: It really depended on the person that I was with, but even if there was a big line of people, I made a point of making myself available afterward, just to gauge their reaction. Often it was a very guttural reaction [laughs]. And it really ranged. Some people would take off the headphones, hand them back, and say, “Oh thank you, that was really fun,” and then go on their way—that was a reasonably successful trip. But then you would get people who would take the headphones off and just hold them for a minute and kind of look at you...

Mark: [laughs]

Eric: ...like you had just shared something really personal and intimate—which it kind of was.

Mark: How long did people typically listen to you?

Eric: Well, really anywhere from one minute to 15 minutes—and it depended on the level of engagement that I had with the patron and their engagement with the artwork. A lot of times we would go through the entire permanent collection. It became a challenge to keep the musical development happening.

Chris: I think often when you’re composing—not always, of

course—the piece has a certain kind of arc. Here, not only are you improvising but you don’t know when it’s going to end. It’s like you’re telling a story to a kid and they’re still awake, so you have to start adding more and more giants and elves [laughs].

Eric: Exactly. Off they go into the permanent collection, and of course my first reaction to this new space is, “Oh, shit. What do I do now?” My first instinct is, well, I can just start from scratch and create a totally new musical environment—and that worked fine. The patrons didn’t really have a problem with the disconnect because there’s an archway between the two galleries, and it’s a transition that feels very physical. But the challenge that I gave myself was: How can I connect these two totally different experiences?—and it was fun [laughs]. Another part of the challenge was to keep the musical interpretation fresh, to keep from falling into the same patterns and becoming a victim of my own clichés.

Mark: Do you feel like it changed your relationship to the work?

Eric: Absolutely. Every time I go through the permanent collection, it brings out something that I didn’t see before. A lot of the time it has to do with piggybacking on the observations of the person that I am with. If I see them focusing on something, it will bring something out that maybe I hadn’t noticed.

Mark: You mentioned before that you had played for the guards?

Eric: Yeah, they were really interested

in the project. They'd have a ten-minute or a 20-minute break and I would take them around.

Mark: That's so cool. I didn't know you did that.

Eric: Oh yeah, it was really great. They would tell their friends and the other people working on staff. It was a really nice relationship that developed over time. It was cool just talking about music with them in a way that was very down to earth. They're all educated people who have worked in galleries and have a kind of art background, but they come from a different place and have a different perspective than the patrons who come through.

Chris: Do you think, for them, because they know the collection so well—I mean, the Hammer doesn't have a gigantic collection...

Mark: A couple of weeks on the job and you've memorized the collection.

Chris: Yeah, I know I felt like that. I would go back every week and visit my favorite paintings. I loved certain ones and I noticed when certain ones were missing [laughs].

Mark: Do you think that this was a way for the staff to reexperience the galleries for the first time, or just to have a different interaction with their own museum?

Eric: Absolutely. When you introduce these variables, when you have someone who's playing music in real time, not only improvising but also paying attention to your reactions

and your "vibe," it really changes the context—in the same way that if you're listening to music on your iPod as you walk down the street, that audio information is informing your observations of the world around you, and vice versa. In fact, I had a lot of people who commented on that—the guards especially, and even people like UCLA students who were regular visitors to the galleries. They would tell me, "You know I saw things in the painting that I hadn't really seen before."

Chris: I remember when I went through with you playing for me, the paintings really changed as the music changed. You were playing this very broad stuff and I was looking at the Luisa Lambri paintings and I noticed all the lines and the way all the branches went. Then you changed to a pointillist harmonics, a very plucky kind of thing, and all the dots came out. It was really nice because I hadn't really appreciated her work before. I had tried. I spent an hour in front of five of them.

Mark: You are a model museum-goer [laughs]!

Chris: I can't look at a lot of art, though. I like looking at one thing. An old professor of mine who taught aesthetic philosophy gave me the best piece of advice ever: he said, "You have to spend as much time with the painting as the painter spent creating it."

Eric: That's really good.

Chris: And it's completely ridiculous. But I really thought about that,

because normally you go into a museum and you're like, "Gauguin, check. Van Gogh, check. Monet, check." If you sit for like 25 minutes every day for a week in front of a painting, you've experienced it in a totally different way. The remarkable thing is that with you playing music in my ear, Eric, within 30 seconds of looking at a painting, I had an experience with it that otherwise would have taken me a long time to have on my own.

Mark: So the benefit of Eric's piece is that it's time saving.

Chris: That's what I am saying [laughs]! Maybe you want to have a really engaged experience with a work of art, but you don't have 45 minutes. Eric can play for three minutes and blow your mind.

*Live Personal
Soundtrack*



Inter- view:

Joshua
Greene

February 12, 2011

MA JG

Mark Allen and artist Joshua Greene discuss Joshua's experience of working with his mother, who was the inspiration and pivotal facilitator for his Needlepoint Therapy piece, as well as the challenge of reconciling a small private project with the Museum's expectations for public engagement. They also talk about another of Joshua's ideas, Nudist Day at the Hammer, which did not take place.

Projects discussed:

- **Needlepoint Therapy**
- **Nudist Day at the Hammer Proposal**

Mark: So Josh, you've worked with other museums on projects. Can you talk about how the process of working at the Hammer with Machine was similar to or different from other projects that you've done?

Joshua: I think because I was aware that the purpose of the Residency was to experiment, I felt comfortable spouting off all the ideas I had, knowing that most of them would not make it, and I came up with more ideas than I usually do as a result. I'd like to replicate that [laughs].

Mark: Let's talk a little bit about your process—how you come up with ideas and how you adjust—in terms of the Nudist Day proposal, which we didn't end up doing. Can you explain your idea for that, how that idea worked and what your plan was?

Joshua: Starting from the public engagement aspect, I thought one way to engage different audiences would be to identify different constituencies or groups, figure out how they organize themselves around something they like to do, and then create a situation in the Museum that would lure them in. Nudists were one really specific group I thought of. Then I started to think about other layers of the project, like the prevalence of nudes in museums and wanting to complicate this notion of the subject—who's the viewer and who's the subject?

Mark: Thinking about that strategy of identifying specific audiences, and some of the other ideas you generated, I'm looking back here at the list: there was Figure Skating Club,

Is Your Dog a Thespian...

Joshua: This is getting embarrassing [laughs].

Mark: ...[laughs], Cross-Generational Bridge, Erotica Reading Group. Your mom lives in Westwood, so you had a more local knowledge of the Hammer than I did or than a lot of the people I was working with. As I understood it, a lot of your ideas came out of thinking about retirement communities around Westwood.

Joshua: Yeah. Having grown up near there, I was trying to think about who is around.

Mark: One question that you and I talked about, which I think is important when you're developing projects for specific groups is: how do you do this in a way that articulates and celebrates a certain kind of otherness without instrumentalizing these groups as the subject matter? It's a question that comes up in a lot of social art practices. I remember you saying for the Nudist Day that you didn't want it to be publicized as a bunch of naked people at the Museum, but that it would be more just a day where it would be okay for people to be there naked and the other visitors would just encounter them as part of the Museum. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Joshua: Yeah. I thought that if we used the language of an event, where it becomes like, "It's nudist day at the museum!" it seems more like a joke. It may be easier to get people to come out and to get publicity, but it would become a one-liner.

Mark: Yeah. Well, and I think it's a question of whether you are proposing an alternative use for a museum or a way of being in the museum, or whether you are marshaling the forces of the naturalists to put on a public performance.

Joshua: It's kind of a fine line. It's not necessarily one or the other. And it's all hypothetical because it didn't happen. On the one hand, of course they're going to be looked at so it gets a little confusing and a little away from the original idea of identifying different groups and coming up with projects geared toward them, in service of diversifying an audience and bringing people into the Museum who may not otherwise go there. It becomes more about a different type of experience than

people normally have in a museum—not just the nudists, but the other people who also happen to be there.

Mark: I remember you articulated these various levels of looking: people looking at paintings, nude people looking at paintings, people looking at nude people looking at paintings... That seemed like a chain that could continue to spin outward. I thought it was interesting how that articulates the Museum as this space that you're in with other people, rather than a space that you're in by yourself that happens to have other people in it.

Joshua: Yeah. That's how I grew to think about it, particularly when I had to explain it.

Mark: There were a couple different



stages of negotiation. I thought we were going to get it to work.

Joshua: Yeah. I was somewhat surprised by all the contractual, legal wrangling—for both projects. I guess it goes with the territory, but it seemed like a lot of extra work.

Mark: I think part of it is that this was a direction the Museum wanted to go, but it was new, they'd never done things like this, so a lot of it was breaking new ground. Although it was arduous to work through some of those things, I felt like that's what our role was: to push through that and present opportunities for them to practice doing things they hadn't done before, so they could see that it turned out okay. So that maybe the Museum is more comfortable trying new stuff in

the future. Is the Nudist Day a project that you would want to revisit with another museum?

Joshua: I haven't really thought about it a lot, just because I get into whatever I'm doing. To me, so much of making work is just coming up with the idea. That's the really exciting part.

Mark: I also want to talk a little bit about the Needlepoint project, which did happen. Can you describe how that piece came about for you?

Joshua: If I recall correctly, the idea kind of came out of taking a look at people's experiences in a museum, and thinking about how you could give someone a really different type

*Needlepoint
Therapy*

Mark: ...people looking at paintings, nude people looking at paintings, people looking at nude people looking at paintings...

of experience. Whether or not my project was an artwork, I don't know. But, certainly, those people had a really different type of meaningful experience in a museum.

Mark: Something that I found so interesting about that project is that it is more about the qualitative than about having as many people as possible doing it. I liked that the piece would be for eight people on an ongoing basis, something that could be life-changing, that involved deep introspection. I also liked that the experience was not only metaphorically private but very literally private, in that what happened in those sessions remained confidential.

Joshua: I have something of a history of doing therapy projects and projects involving people talking about their

feelings, but with this one my mom was very emphatic about the need for confidentiality.

Mark: Right. Your mother was the licensed therapist and needlepoint expert for the piece. Can you talk about why or why not you would want to identify your mother as your mother for this project?

Joshua: It's funny, because when I talk about the project I usually mention my mom, but in the announcement we made it wasn't mentioned.

Mark: That way the official narrative of the piece isn't about your relationship to your mother. The narrative of the piece is about these people's relationships to each other and to the paintings. Another project that we didn't do but that we talked about was

Joshua: To be honest, the deal was that my mom and I got to keep the needlepoint canvases, and I had fantasies that someday these could be in a show or I could sell them to the Museum.

with artist Nate Page. It was going to involve his grandfather coming to do this signage-painting project. We were concerned that the fact that it was the artist's grandfather, and that he's this really colorful character, would have overdetermined the meaning of the piece. I think one way you deal with that is exactly the way you dealt with it: that it's not the major PR hook or the first thing you hear, but it doesn't have to be a secret. Had you worked with your mother before on projects?

Joshua: Not on this level. She's participated in projects where she's mostly just done some writing. Usually I'm asking her a question and she's responding. In this instance, she kind of was the project.

Mark: Have you talked to her about how it went?

Joshua: Yeah. I think she had a good experience. It was really different from her normal practice, because of the context and the fact that it had a more public aspect to it. In the beginning, it took us having a lot of conversations for her to fully understand the project and what was important to me—the fact that they didn't need to finish their canvases—whatever they had done by the end of the eight sessions was a record of that time—and that the needlepointing was a tool, and something that ties it to the Museum beyond just the location of the therapy, but that it was not the most important thing. She said she felt like the group made some progress in their work but that it could have gone on longer. Eight sessions is kind of just scratching the surface.

Mark: You didn't have any contact with

any of the people who were in the group?

Joshua: No, I didn't. My mom would give me really general reports: for example, that one person totally reinterpreted their canvas. It was an agrarian couple and a landscape and the person turned it into an urban couple and an urban landscape. It still has the gesture of the original. When she first told me that, I was kind of pissed off.

Mark: [laughs]

Joshua: To be honest, the deal was that my mom and I got to keep the needlepoint canvases, and I had fantasies that someday these could be in a show or I could sell them to the Museum. I was really uptight in my thinking about it. After a little time, I came around.

Mark: Are you interested in working with your mother again in a fashion like this?

Joshua: Oh, yeah. I've done a bunch of projects with my family. They're a great source of material for me. I'm close with my family, but we rarely have in-depth conversations about my work or their work. This was a nice opportunity to explain the conceptual background of this project to my mom because she was on the front lines of having to explain it herself.

Mark: You also made a souvenir version of the needlepoint kit. Did that idea come from the Museum's desire, or maybe concern that this wasn't as public a public engagement project as they were hoping for?

Joshua: Yeah, exactly. I don't think I would have done it otherwise, but I'm happy I did.

Mark: It is a nice-looking kit.

Joshua: I think with museums, sometimes it feels like they're ticking off boxes. I've had that experience with some other museums, where all they want is a public program and I don't know what they mean by that.

Mark: As many people as possible.

Joshua: I guess that's what they mean. I liked the idea of a few people having a really intense experience. Like you said, it's sort of qualitative rather than quantitative. I think it's good for a museum to think about that. I know it's probably challenging, given that they have to apply for things, and numbers are a part of it.

Mark: That came up a lot with our Residency. We had a lot of discussions about whether these smaller projects were really public programs. I would ask how many human beings it takes to constitute a public. Where is that line drawn between the public and the private? But I think having the kit ended up being a way for the [Needlepoint Therapy](#) project to better fit the expectations of the Museum and to serve both conceptions of public engagement. And I think it's good to do that.

*Needlepoint
Therapy*



Interview:

**Eric
Avery**

—

December 5, 2010

MA ▶ EA

Eric Avery talks with Mark Allen about his experience of attending nearly all of the 300 micro-concerts that were held in the Little William Theater over the course of Machine Project's Residency. As they discuss the challenge that 20th-century classical music presents to the uninitiated, they describe specific pieces, people's reactions, and the bodily effects of listening to low-tone instruments in small spaces.

Projects discussed:

- **Little William Theater: Festival of New Music**

Mark: So you saw almost all of the Little William concerts.

Eric: Yes. I missed maybe three or four.

Mark: I guess my first question is, why?

Eric: Well, I'm a musician myself, and in the last five or ten years I've really become a student of what I do. I grew up as a rock musician and made a living at it playing bass for Jane's Addiction, but I never really examined music in any formal way. I just sort of played by ear and it went well: I was making mortgage payments; everything was OK. But I found myself sort of bored, so I started getting more into the technical side. And I actually grew up in a household that was into classical music. As I got older, I got more interested in the avant-garde 20th-century stuff: Cage and Schoenberg and Stockhausen, especially Ligeti. Twentieth-century music is, in my opinion, basically a deconstruction of music and of sound. So when I heard about what was going on at the Hammer, I went to see it.

Mark: I know Chris Kallmyer wanted the Festival of New Music to be a bit of a survey of how musicians were thinking about that avant-garde tradition at this moment. The idea was that there were a hundred composers who would each write a piece for each of the four sets of instruments: pairs of tubas, clarinets, violins, and accordions.

Eric: It was great. I found the varied instrumentation and the varied approaches from different composers continually fascinating—whether

someone was concentrating a certain piece on timbre or structure...I went basically every Saturday that I could. I feel like I got to recognize a few pieces, but in general, because the instrumentation was changing, I don't feel like it was repetitive. I was always getting an interesting new thing to hear.

Mark: Did you talk to the musicians about the pieces after you had started coming a fair amount?

Eric: Yes, definitely, and especially when something would seem improvisatory. I would ask if they had been given specific notes and they would tell me something like, "Actually the composer only said, 'Make some sort of noise with your instrument for a duration.'"

Mark: Have you seen the scores for the pieces?

Eric: Some of them. For one of the pieces, one of the musicians spun it around because the score was these beautiful photographs of a Midwest housing development area—Andrew Bucksbarg's "Music for Mansions." One person was playing the first floor and the other person was playing the second floor. From that point forward I would always ask if I saw something elaborate being set up.

Mark: I know some other people came a lot, but I assume a lot of the people were just passing by. Were there people you recognized from other days?

Eric: Not really. There was occasionally somebody. I remember a woman, and a few people who I think were other



Little William
Theater: Festival
of New Music

composers. I had been talking to Chris and sort of developed a friendship, so he would introduce me. It was a fascinating study. I think it also spoke to the 20th-century music problem. When you had random people, they were like, “Oh, violins. I’ll go for a little duet of pretty violin music.” They would sit in the theater and it would start up, and you could see them sort of looking around like, am I the only one going, “This is really weird”? I don’t know if they were at the museum for something else and just saw it and poked in, but I think it really speaks to one of the things that I tried to let people know, which is you can have any reaction to this music. You don’t have to conceptually get it in some

CalArts kind of way, and therefore find it fascinating. You can hear weird sounds and find it funny and laugh. I think even super sophisticated musicologists felt uncomfortable when it started to get weird. They didn’t know how to react at all, you know? And they’re in a museum, which has its own expectation of piety...

Mark: Yes, and whether you feel like you belong in that context or not.

Eric: Yes. So it was interesting to see. Some people really warmed to it when they got that it was all right not to be having a specific reaction.

Mark: What do you think is the effect

of having these very short duration pieces?

Eric: Well, Chris could probably speak to this better, but just hearing the little interactions, it seemed like people were much more willing to enter the weird situation, get in a small box: “Wait, I’m going to sit in a closet and there’s only going to be me and one other person.” You’re forced to participate in an intimate way, but because it was only two minutes, people would involve themselves in a way that I don’t think they would have if it was even ten minutes long. In that way, I think making it really short was effective. And I think people were probably more willing to stay with it as

well, when it started to be weird and not what you’d expect. If you know you’re in for another 45 minutes of it, you’re going to get up immediately when it gets weird. Whereas if you know you’ve only got to sit there a minute and a half, maybe something changes.

Mark: When we were first developing this project, Chris and I talked a lot about how much preamble we wanted to give people about where the music was coming from. You’re a different kind of viewer than most people, because you know the history that the work was coming out of and you were there explicitly to engage with that. Having seen people’s reactions, would

you give people more context or a different kind of context, or do you think there's something useful or effective about just being dropped into that situation?

Eric: That's such a tough call. I really feel like you would definitely gain something and lose something. I'm thinking of my wife, who came a couple of times. She's a designer and creative person, but she's not a musician. We've actually talked about times when I've taken her to the LA Philharmonic and we've seen afternoons of challenging stuff. We've talked about how one of the things that is challenging about this kind of music—and I even find this myself as I listen to it at home—is that it's tough to stay with it, which makes it tough to get anything out of it. You know, you can put on Beethoven in the background and it still sounds nice. It doesn't need your full attention to get something out of it. Whereas a lot of this stuff, if it doesn't get your full attention, it's only noise, it's a distraction, it doesn't enhance. My wife and I talked about how when she's forced to sit for 15 minutes, she really has a different experience and enjoys it much more than when I'm playing it at home and she just wishes that I would turn it down.

Mark: I find that I only listen to this kind of music live because I have to engage with it on a different level.

Eric: Yes, it's interesting. I'm almost the same way. But to answer your question, if you're trying to bring the music to people, I think giving it a context definitely helps because you remove that initial reaction and

distance. You're sort of forewarning them: what you're about to hear is going to be unexpected and it's intentionally this way; it's not because he's a really terrible violinist.

Mark: Right [laughs].

Eric: Because sometimes there would be this awful...

Mark: It's like, "Am I on *Candid Camera*? This guy's never played the violin before."

Eric: Right.

Mark: I think I agree that if your mission is to expand people's relationship to new music in a more reliable way, you might want to contextualize it more. People come to a museum to have a different kind of aesthetic experience, but often they know the bounds of what that's going to be. When we developed the piece, we wanted to try and have something which was both completely outside the bounds of what they might be expecting, but done in this safe way in that it's only going to be two minutes long.

Eric: Right. Interesting.

Mark: Did you see the one with the tubas with the feedback? It might have been on the last day. It was a Mark Trayle piece. He had two tubas, and each one had a studio monitor facing into it with a microphone, so it was feeding back the resonant frequencies inside the tuba. Then the performers could play it by hitting the keys and shifting the shape of the inside of it, so it would change the pitch.

Eric: Wow, that's cool. Being a bass player, I found the tubas the most interesting, because of the challenge that I have in my own work: it's really difficult to do challenging intervals with low instruments because it doesn't sound interesting or weird; it just sounds bad. So I was really surprised by how fascinating the aural experience was of the two low instruments—two super long wavelengths in close proximity.

Mark: I think those pieces are probably hardest to capture with any kind of recording, because it's such a bodily experience when you get into the lower frequencies. You're in this little space, listening with your whole body, in a sense.

Eric: I wrestle with that every day because I work out of my house. It's like a perfectly square 10' x 10' room with hardwood floors, so it's a nightmare of standing waves. You can listen with headphones but then it's entirely different.

Mark: And in the end, somebody's going to listen to it on their crappy laptop speakers anyway [laughs].

Eric: [laughs] Right, yes, and the bass will entirely disappear.

Mark: Man, I had an experience of that. I drove the crappiest car for a long time and I just got a slightly less crappy car, and it has a much better sound system. I listened to a piece of music that I had only listened to on my computer. It was like, oh my God, there's a whole universe of this that I had never heard before!

Eric: Yes, same thing for me. My wife has a BMW X5, and it just has the most amazing sound system. I'll work on stuff at home, and then I pop it in her car and go, "Oh my God! There's a rumble that I have to..."

Mark: The closet and the car, they're about the equivalent amount of interior space.

Interview:

**Luke
Storm &
Ashley
Walters**

MA LS & AWW

As tubist Luke Storm and cellist Ashley Walters recount their involvement with the [Little William Theater](#) performances, they talk about the impact that the unusual space of the coat closet had on composition, performance, and audience reception—particularly the way it emphasized the physicality of sound.

Projects discussed:

- Little William Theater

Mark: Chris and I are interested in making experiences not only for audiences but also for performers and composers in a lot of the things that we curate. Can you talk about the experience of playing those shows?

Luke: In terms of performing, I've never done anything like it, these tiny performances. Usually with tuba, you want the biggest room possible for all that sound. Tuba players usually hate practice rooms because they're small. In a bigger room the sound develops, gets warmed up a little bit. The Little William Theater is probably the exact opposite of the acoustic you would normally try to find for tubas because it's small. Tubas are designed to play in big orchestras in giant concert halls, so to be that close is an intense experience. I think it worked well, though, from the comments we got. I heard from the audience over and over that the acoustics in that room, to be that close and have the sound be that big, was the coolest thing.

Mark: Yeah, it's really a bodily experience.

Luke: On the preparation side, it was interesting that we had so many pieces. Usually for a program there are maybe six pieces. We tried to do about 25 each time, so I think we did around 90 total.

Mark: Wow, that is a lot of pieces. What was your motivation for submitting to such a sustained effort?

Luke: Tubists especially have some motivation, because we don't get a lot of repertoire written for us. Tuba literature is lacking in a lot of ways,

so to have a hundred new pieces come in is really great. This project was probably the single biggest addition to the tuba repertoire ever. They could have easily done all those violin concerts with the repertoire that already existed; they probably could have found two-minute violin duets. For tubas the list runs out so quickly, so to have serious composers writing for tubas was something that I wanted to be part of. There were some people that had never written tuba pieces. There were a lot of pieces that required unusual approaches and that had a lot of instructions to follow, which is what made them different and unique, but made the preparation a lot harder than I thought it would be. Some composers wanted to be involved in the preparation process, and some really didn't. For a lot of the pieces it wasn't about learning notes, it was more about learning what each piece was supposed to do. Some of the composers wrote more intonation-oriented pieces—which is usually avoided in music—because in a smaller room you're going to get stronger resultant tones and stronger effects from the acoustics.

Ashley: Yeah, actually I was a little nervous at first about tubas in the coatroom. I just thought it was going to be too much.

Mark: Too circus-y or too loud?

Ashley: Loud—but I thought that the composers really understood and took into account what they were writing for.

Mark: So there were no pieces that said, "Play as loud as possible for two minutes"?

Luke: There were—and that was the point: loud sounds in a small space. It had quite an impact. We had people who covered their ears, which is fun.

Mark: The physicality of it is something I enjoy myself. I think the tubas were the most approachable, because the concept of that kind of sound in that space is instantly understandable, even if you don't follow experimental music. For some of the other instruments, it might have been more challenging.

Luke: Yeah, it's funny, because usually the focus of experimental music, or new music in general, is not to make a huge impact in two minutes. Often people already know a lot about it beforehand and have a lot of time to listen to a piece of music. This was very opposite of that.

Mark: What kind of experiences did your audience have? The audiences were kind of divided into people who knew what was there and people that were just wandering by. Did you have an idea of what the balance between them was?

Luke: Yeah. A lot of the audience that were more informed about new music would talk to us. There were plenty of composers that came, and other performers would come. Often we chose pieces based on who the audience was. If they were looking for a certain thing or enjoyed one piece, we'd find a similar one. Of the people that just wandered in, some people stayed for one piece, didn't say anything and left again, and some were more open-minded about it. A lot of people said they really loved stuff, and some people would actually

say that they really disliked certain things. It was fun to have that kind of interaction.

Mark: Ashley, you went to some of the shows. What was your experience? Did you have any observations about how other people perceived the concerts?

Ashley: People were very vocal, which is the exact opposite of the concert-going tradition. We are used to having the performer onstage never make contact with the audience. It was really nice to break that down. I'm not sure they would have spoken up if it had been 20 people in a small space, but because when someone walked in you acknowledged them, there was immediate connection. Then the audience felt like they could ask anything.

Luke: The kids had interesting reactions. It was not always predictable which pieces they would like and which ones they wouldn't. Some of the ones that I thought would be really boring—not boring, but appealing to a more informed audience—they responded really strongly to. There was one piece that we made into an audience participation piece—John Hastings' piece. His entire score is just two lines of text: "Fill the space with sound. Let the sound out." He didn't want to tell us if he meant anything literal by that, so we would improvise and get gradually louder, filling the space with sound. Then we would ask the kids to, at the right moment, "Let the sound out," which was opening the door. We would stop, and you would hear ringing back from that huge staircase. That was another way we used the architecture. You had this super long

reverb coming back, which is a totally different sound.

Mark: Have you done pieces that involve architecture in that way before?

Luke: Not really. I did Chris' [Kallmyer] piece at LACMA, the residency with the elevator music. Of course when I was at CalArts we did little things, outdoor music, or we'd play in the main gallery. In those places you can't really escape the architecture.

Mark: Musicians who are interested in the resonant frequencies of space and architecture often work electronically. Is there a tradition of those kinds of experiments with tubas or other brass instruments?

Luke: Probably not with tubas—not that I can think of. It's something that should be explored. Nothing can fill up a space quite like brass in terms of volume.



Little William Theater

Inter- view:

**Nick
Didkovsky**

December 7, 2010

Mark Allen talks with composer Nick Didkovsky about his process of composing pieces for the Little William Theater. Their conversation revolves around the use and value of technology for musical composition and documentation and concludes with a comparison between working with software and collaborating with other humans.

Projects discussed:

- Little William Theater: Festival of New Music



Mark: So Nick, I wanted to talk to you about the experience of writing pieces for the Little William Theater because I know you've worked a lot with constraint-based composition. And you've put work on YouTube before, which we are using to share documentation of some of the pieces, so maybe you could also speak to that as an environment for distributing recordings of live music. But what was it like creating pieces for this very specific space?

Nick: I didn't have an image of the space in my mind when I wrote these pieces. I was thinking more in terms of simple ideas like intimacy. The violin duo, for example, really takes advantage of that, because in the

space these notes are ricocheting back and forth between the two violinists. It's a very different experience to hear that on YouTube. Having that left/right field of hearing is an experience privileged to the people that are actually in that room. When I see it on YouTube, I experience the ricocheting less with my ears than I do with my eyes. It's actually very spectacular to watch the bows shooting back and forth as the bow stroking is echoed between the two players. You draw on a different sense to experience one of the driving elements of the piece. The other pieces—the clarinet, the accordion—are maybe more transportable. But I would have loved to be in that little room, to have experienced the accordion in that

Little William Theater

You have, metaphorically, two minds in your head: there's the effervescent mind that nonjudgmentally generates ideas; then you have a judgmental mind, the one that filters...

—Nick Didkovsky

small space. It's site-specific in the general sense that it's going to sound different in whatever space you play—it's all about overtones, texture, and richness. You're saturating the room itself with sound, and the space is going to reflect the sounds back to the listener. YouTube is certainly not a substitute for that. It's a completely different experience.

Mark: Can you talk about your process? Had you written very short pieces before?

Nick: When the invitation came to do short forms, it was like they were thinking of me. It's something I do quite a lot of, in fact, and it's exactly what I am interested in doing right now. And given the exigencies of life, short forms are also very practical. Recently, I've been writing short pieces using software. I wrote a version of automatic composition software that

is very good at generating rich ideas and interactions between instruments, but it doesn't have any real memory built into it. You could let it run for 30 minutes, but it's going to write a piece that rambles. If you focus in on the short term, it generates these beautiful little constructions—eight seconds, 20 seconds, 45 seconds—that really grab you. I've done a number of suites composed of very short movements that were generated by the software. The duo that I wrote for the [Little William Theater](#) on tuba and marimba is one example of that.

Mark: It's interesting that you are using software to generate pieces. Do you feel more like an editor than a traditional composer? Or does it feel similar to you?

Nick: Well, a big part of composition is always selection. The ones that you decide to keep, even if you don't edit

them at all, are already a reflection of your compositional sense. Even if I hadn't written the software, even if it didn't reflect anything about the way I think about music, the fact that I am making a selection is already a compositional act. I love working in this way, because every time I run the software, it is as if there is this unwrapped gift before me. Once you open the gift, there's a whole other level of joy or disappointment, but that anticipation is spectacular. If there is one moment that drives my use of software, emotionally, it's that moment. It hits some pleasure center in my brain that lights up every time [laughs].

The mathematician and computer scientist A. K. Dewdney has described the creative process as being a two-minded one. You have, metaphorically, two minds in your head: there's the effervescent mind that non-judgmentally generates ideas; then you have a judgmental mind, the one that filters and says we'll accept that one or we don't like that one. In this case you're using the software as an extension of the effervescent mind. I think a lot of compositional prejudices and habits find their home in the second mind, in the filter. When you start to really crank up the effervescent half of the process, you fatigue your ability to make decisions after a while. Habits come under attack and break down, and certain things get through that may not have gotten through before. You start to toy with the creative process itself and chip away at some fundamental aesthetics that drive the process. There's this intangible, really rich interaction that I get out of working

this way. I feel like I'm retuning some fundamental assumptions about what makes a form interesting, or what's acceptable and unacceptable.

Mark: That process is similar to how I feel about my collaborative practice. At its core, it's about trying to push up against another consciousness to be able to see your own editorial prejudices in a new light. When it really works, it's an expansion of both parties' practices because they're being forced to think of ideas they would have dismissed outright if they'd come up in their own brains. Do you collaborate with other people often?

Nick: In general, composing is a pretty solitary process for me. I can get very involved in the practicalities of making the software work and generate behaviors that are going to be musically interesting, both formally and programmatically. But then when I put the music in front of live players, they bring out stuff that I never thought of. I just did a piece for Dither Guitar Quartet that I would check with my kids, especially my older kid who's a real metal head, and he'd give me no-holds-barred feedback on the way the piece was going. I totally trusted him, and I took some advice that changed the direction of the piece significantly. Whether that was collaborative or just asking advice is a gray area, but it's extremely valuable to check in with other entities, whether they're software entities or living entities, during a creative process. Everyone thinks they're open-minded until they really start to challenge their assumptions. It's interesting what happens at those boundaries.

Interview:

**Philip
Ross**

—

November 9, 2010

MA PR

Artist and curator Philip Ross discusses the Enormous Microscopic Evening event with Mark Allen. They reflect on how the museum context affected the way people approached the microscopic images and consider the benefits of different modes of engaging with objects.

Projects discussed:

- Enormous Microscopic Evening

Mark: I'd like to talk about what you see the role of museums being, and what it means to do your project in a museum as opposed to a library or an educational space. Do you think the museum was a logical location for your project?

Philip: Absolutely. It was a great place to have it. I talked to the curators who came to the event, and they all agreed that this couldn't happen in a strictly educational forum because people would have come with a different set of expectations: there would have had to be more thorough didactics, outcomes, objectives—all those kinds of things. Also, it would be primarily child oriented. In this case, the location gave people permission to look at the microscopes' images with the idea of art. There are all these colorful, beautiful things to look at, and because they were in a museum, visitors tended to look at the aesthetics first, and then to pull out more educational or scientific things—like, why does that particular layer look like this? Or, how is this machine working?

Mark: I think another thing that works very nicely about museums as a context for this work is that people feel comfortable just kind of wandering in and looking around a museum.

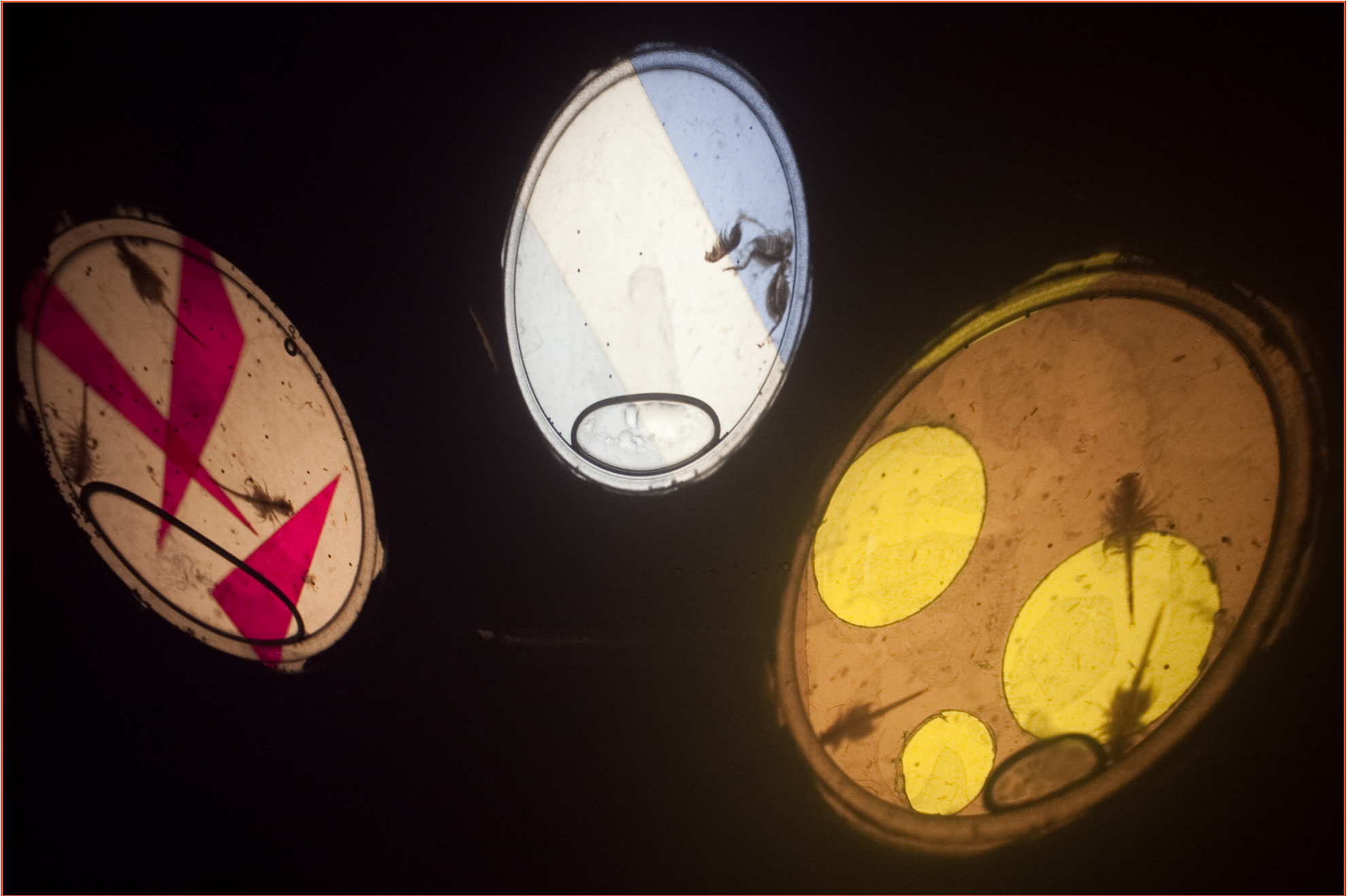
Philip: Exactly. At the Exploratorium, in the Life Sciences section, where I have shown work, I have to make sure that there's some type of logical connection between the stations. At the Hammer people just wandered in. It was nice to be able to just present people with an interesting thing, and to let them follow up if they wanted

more on the Critter website [<http://crittersalon.blogspot.com/>]. We weren't pushing a bunch of information at people. But part of it was that it was a singular event; I think it would be very difficult to institutionalize that without suddenly entering into all the expectations, outcomes, didactics, etc.

Mark: Yeah. Something I also really liked about the project is that the information was conveyed to people in a very personal way. Each station had a person who would explain it to you. I think that's actually unique for an educational framework and for a museum. Typically in a museum you don't have an artist hanging out with each painting answering questions. In my work with the Hammer, one of the things I was really interested in was thinking about how you personalize communication.

Philip: Yes—and giving a face to the museum as well. People are impressed by the Hammer and they want to connect with it—even just with a particular painting. But with a casual visitor, there is a lot of alienation that can happen in modern art. I think that having an individual there—even just to say, we have this here for x, y, or z reason—offers something people can relate to. A big part of the curatorial aspect of this project was finding scientists who could do the public relations aspect as well as be excited and knowledgeable about the content.

Mark: How familiar were the people presenting with the idea of the museum as context? Do you think that affected how they presented things? Or were they just dropped into the space?



Philip: They were just dropped into the space. Most of those folks are used to giving demonstrations, but at some type of conference for others in their field. Occasionally they do educational things, but usually the presentations have to fit in with K–12 education or, if they're working with graduate students, it's very serious. These folks don't often have contact with a wider range of people who might really appreciate their work.

Mark: I'm always interested in trying to make a more direct experience between the content provider and the content consumer. It's such a great thing to see people discover something. That's one of the things I thought was really successful about your event—it had this dual level of discovery built in. The sense of discovery you get from looking at each individual display was pre-staged when you walked down the hallway and through the door, which had very little signage, into this space with these enormous, strange images... you immediately felt like you were in a completely different world.

Philip: And you were. This project originally came out of a similar experience I had ten years ago with microscopes at the Exploratorium, where I saw these enormous blown-up nematodes. They looked like sandworms from *Dune*, or like whales. I'd never seen a microscopic image like that. Before that I couldn't have cared less about microscopes. Then I saw that thing and it was like, I can relate to that thing.

Mark: Yeah, exactly! It doesn't feel like you're looking down at something small.

It feels like something small got really huge [laughs]—like it's to your scale!

Philip: It's in your world. You see it eating, moving, breathing...

Mark: You see this little guy struggling to get through this area, and he could have just gone around but he's trying to get through...and then he gets through!

Philip: There's so much drama. It becomes a theater space. I just thought, the technology's available to show this whole other world to people in a form they can really connect to and enjoy. And they did. It was beautiful because it worked.

Mark: What do you think is the role of museums at this cultural moment? Do you think this project works in contrast to the normal operation of a museum, or do you think it's a mutualistic or parasitical relationship?

Philip: I really don't know. I think you should be able to see and interact with cultural artifacts. The Huntington Library has this awesome collection of microscopes, but they're locked behind glass cabinets. Nobody is using them and they always seem like they are in some state of removal. There isn't a real sense of connection to your life. If you go for a biopsy, someone's going to look at it under a microscope—it's the same type of instrument you're looking at in a museum. People don't usually think about that.

Mark: Yeah, it becomes disembodied

If you've got some weird mold growing in your bathroom you can actually look at it...and determine, "Yes, that's a killer mold" or "No, it isn't."

—Philip Ross



*Enormous
Microscope
Evening*

Photograph
by Marianne
Williams

in a way. We don't think about the process. That's what was so powerful about the workshop you did at Machine on turning webcams into USB microscopes, too. It made the relationship between the image and the thing being imaged so visceral.

Philip: Yeah. The idea was that making your own scope enables you to start looking at things and identifying them for yourself. So, if you've got some weird mold growing in your bathroom you can actually look at it and immediately go to a database and determine, "Yes, that's a killer mold" or "No, it isn't." It's the same mystery of the world that's always around us with experts interpreting it, but suddenly you get to do the interpreting yourself. You don't have to be fearful of these technologies if you're involved with them. I think this is the ethos of a lot of things at Machine.

Mark: Yes, it is. We try to facilitate a kind of relationship to technology and knowledge that people don't usually experience on a daily basis. As a consumer, you are alienated from the process of production and the object is somewhat mysterious, but typically you don't think about that because your relationship is organized around need. But there are actually multiple ways of engaging with an object: you have an informal DIY lens; you have a participatory lens, which is related to that but maybe a little more transient; then you have a formal aesthetic lens. The thing that's really powerful about the architecture of a museum is that the intense formality of it prepares you for a specific, focused relationship to an object that allows you to appreciate its mystery.

Philip: Yes. Absolutely.

Mark: Despite our general cultural interest in informality and friendliness, I don't think you want to get rid of that, because that's such a powerful lens for looking at things. With the microscopes at the Huntington, they're put in this formal place and it allows you to see them as aesthetic objects, but it does also create this tension or disconnect between functionality and aesthetics. What I loved about your piece is that it allowed for both to be articulated at once. It's hard to do that.

Philip: I was thinking about that in Düsseldorf last year. There's a very formal museum right smack in the middle of the city. It has funded a lot of very important shows and whole bodies of artwork, so it's put Düsseldorf on the map culturally. There's a huge amount of local pride in what that institution has done, and the museum is responding to that in this very social, welcoming way. They'll have wiener roasts outside, and things like that. People don't just think of it as the place where you go to look at fancy awesomeness; they also think of it as this place where they had a great lunch. And because people feel incredibly comfortable, when a difficult art show comes they will give it a chance.

Interview:

Corey
Fogel

—

April 11, 2011

MA ◀ ▶ CF

Experimental percussionist Corey Fogel talks with Mark Allen about the way the Museum's architecture, mode of spectatorship, and primarily visual modality highlighted different dimensions of his sound-based work and motivated less linear approaches to performance.

Projects discussed:

- **Little William Theater: Festival of New Music**

Mark: Can you talk about some of your experiences playing in different spaces in terms of your relationship to architecture?

Corey: Yeah. I think that at LACMA and the Hammer I put a lot of pressure on myself to find a spot where I felt comfortable, and I never really felt that comfortable. I did the best I could and I found a kind of spatial buffer around my personal performance radius—where I was going to be extending my limbs to, what kind of a stage I felt I needed. I felt like I was interfacing with the general mode of presentation in a museum—and I don't want to reimagine the space—I want to be exactly like the sculptures in the space. I've always wanted that when I go into museums. When you go into those places, the most original or authentic experience you're having is the work in a gallery space, between four walls. It's developed that way for a reason. It's a really good way to see work. And it's inspiring. When you're in there and you think about making work, it's the way that you want people to see your work. I think the trend in these museum shows is to re-imagine the spaces, which is okay but not really that exciting to me unless there's a really strong sense of equilibrium with the architecture.

Mark: So what you're proposing is that a museum has a certain mode of viewership, or a mechanism for focusing people's attention. In a way, a stage is similar to a museum in that it focuses everybody's attention on a certain spot. The difference is that in the case of a stage the duration of the experience is defined by the performance, whereas in a museum the

duration of the experience is defined by the viewer. You wouldn't go to a museum, sit down in front of a painting, and say, "I'm going to watch this painting until it's done." Is there something about having the viewer define how long they want to watch you doing something that is appealing to you?

Corey: Yeah. It challenges me to make a different work: endurance-based, more recursive, less linear, more vertical. It's a challenge to the horizontality of performance.

Mark: By horizontality, do you mean things which unfold in a linear forward narrative? And by verticality, do you mean things where one could enter at different moments?

Corey: Correct. I like that in the museum context those are both available. I'd be really honored if someone stayed and got a lot out of it.

Mark: Right, the potential is there for that.

Corey: The potential is there, but because it's a museum, it's defined by the viewer and they're usually going to take that opportunity to stay for a shorter amount of time. They're open to being distracted by the next thing so they have less focus. When something catches and people choose to stay, it's very rewarding. But if I'm performing at a museum for three to five hours or something, I'm never going to try to do a linear thing for anyone because I know it's not going to happen. I know no one is going to watch it for that long. That would be strange and awkward.

I want to be exactly like the sculptures in the space. I've always wanted that when I go into museums.

—Corey Fogel



Mark: So you are putting yourself, as a performer, in a position where even if people stay for a long time, they're not going to be able to see the whole thing, or there is no whole thing to be seen.

Corey: Yeah, and it's exciting to me to do that, to sustain being in a performance zone for an indefinite amount of time, to keep searching and finding. I don't think I'm going to find two hours of exciting discoveries for somebody. But I think that I could find—

Mark: —two hours in which anybody could have an exciting discovery?

Corey: Yeah.

Mark: The other challenge with doing work in museums that I want to ask you about is that they are designed for the visual and not the audio. Do you feel like that is a significant disadvantage to your work in terms of the acoustics?

Corey: I'm trying to make what I feel is very visual music. Of course, it's going to be a lot more successful in a quiet environment. That's why I don't really want to do things in the cracks of a museum, where the hustle and bustle is happening—carts driving by, people walking around, patrons talking to security. I'd be happy to try to come up with work that is appropriate to that—work that is only visual and

maybe implies sound. But when I'm coming up with ideas, my starting point is usually sound based. My whole goal of transcending the sonic to the visual is based on acoustics: all the gestural information that comes with making certain sounds and playing drums, this very physical way of using my limbs. I think it has the potential to really come alive in a museum.

Corey Fogel
plays in the Little
William Theater

Inter- view:

**Asher
Hartman with
Haruko Tanaka
& Jasmine
Orpilla**

March 18, 2011

MAH, HT & JO

Mark Allen and [Annie Okay](#)'s writer and director Asher Hartman, along with assistant director Haruko Tanaka and actor Jasmine Orpilla, consider the differences between the ways visual art and theater audiences respond to experimental performance. They also talk about the piece's content as it relates to the Museum as a historical and cultural site and to the shifting demographic museums seek to engage.

Projects discussed:

- [Annie Okay](#)

Mark: What was different about doing a project like this in a museum versus doing it in a theater?

Asher: Well, I think the first thing—besides the space itself, which was so beautiful—is access to a public. It's really difficult in an alternative space to get large numbers of people to come, and it's even more difficult to get people there who might write about it. In relation to theater, it's just very different doing something for an art audience versus a theater audience. With an art audience, there isn't the same burden of entertainment, and there's a lot more freedom in terms of constructing the piece. Not to disparage theater, but I was somewhat involved in it for a while and one of my disappointments with the kind of theater that I was involved in was that there was this sense that a theater piece has to have a certain kind of structure—almost Aristotelian with beginning, middle, and end—and if you don't dovetail all your points to a moral, or at least a place where the audience understands what the play is about, then it's not a successful play and people get very frustrated. Because I work between genres, people often have a difficult time figuring out what it is that I'm actually doing, and a very difficult time critiquing it or understanding it. [Annie Okay](#) is kind of sprawling, there's this interweaving of characters and themes and ideas, and it's not structured like a three-act play or even a one-act play. So putting it in an architectural environment that identifies it as visual art is, to me, the best possible thing that could have happened, because then people are more involved with the ideas and less

involved with the structure. And in a visual art environment, I feel like people are more likely to understand that I'm using entertainment, not being entertaining—and that's a big difference. It was really liberating for me.

Mark: Jasmine, you've worked in a variety of contexts too. How did you feel about it?

Jasmine: Oh, I loved it. I am from the musical world and the theater world, and everything you just said, Asher, was pretty much right on. Doing [Annie Okay](#) in the Museum was awesome because it took the theater-in-the-round to a whole new level: we were surrounded by the audience like you would be in a traditional theater-in-the-round; at the same time, we were also surrounding the audience. It was almost like a circus environment. It's like, "Screw the fourth wall, we're stage-diving!" Because it was in a museum and you don't normally do those things in a museum, there was this really great surprise element. I remember watching the audience's faces and they had this look that was like, "Wow, we need to absorb triple time."

Asher: But they can do it because, with art, they are used to it and they expect that.

Jasmine: Oh yes. They're actively involved—there's something about theater where you sit back in your chair, you kind of relax, and the show is elsewhere.

Haruko: Asher, I remember you saying after the first night, "God, I love



Above
and right:
Annie Okay

art audiences because they notice everything." Everything counts, even the marble floor.

Mark: I think some of it depends on your observer position too, because for me it was very much a theater piece. There are people singing and dancing, and there's a story—whether it ties together or it's more episodic—from my perspective, it's coming out of that narrative theatrical tradition. Can you talk about how you might distinguish between this piece that you might call performance theater and more traditional performance art? Or, how you see your work in relation to performance art?

Asher: I like the open-endedness of durational performance, where something can happen repeatedly and the audience doesn't necessarily expect there to be a denouement; rather, the performance opens up as it goes along and it is the audience's responsibility to make meaning, to have associations, to experience. But when I think of performance art proper, I tend to think of it as aesthetically connected to particular political movements like feminism, and as something that develops over a period of time with a group of artists who share certain philosophical underpinnings. And that may not be what we're doing. But some performance artists would say that



anything that's rehearsed is not performance art. And we rehearsed: we had two choreographers; you know, we practiced. So it's theater in that sense. But I think with performance art and experimental theater, they come together, they go apart. In the '80s, theater and performance art were more closely connected, but at other times they seem to have nothing to do with one another—never the two shall meet. And then it starts again. It's very interesting. But I think the level of polish we had for Annie Okay was refreshing for a lot of people because they're not necessarily used to seeing that in performance art. A lot of people came up to us afterward

and were like, "Wow. How long did you guys rehearse this?"

Mark: I think it's also that a lot of the work that comes out of Machine Project is not—I mean it's great in its own way, but—it's not always at that level of finish. So I think that people weren't necessarily coming with that expectation. I mean, look at the space here at Machine Project: it's kind of a crappy storefront, and that's sort of the vibe.

Asher: Maybe partly for that reason it was fun to be able to offer people this really tight, rehearsed piece. Not that it's the only way or the best way. I just don't think we could have done

anything without rehearsing; it would have been a jumble of weirdness. It felt good to have actors—people who know how to act—in an art space, because it's unusual. And people really enjoyed the performances.

Mark: We've been talking about all the benefits of museums. What were the most challenging things about working there in the Museum?

Haruko: [laughs] Ingress.

Mark: Getting in?

Asher: Yes.

Mark: Do you think that your relationship to the Museum has changed because of the work that you've done there?

Asher: Yes. As an outsider, when I used to go to the Hammer, it was like a no-man's-land with this empty white lobby. You'd have to figure out where to go, then you go up the stairs and look at this whole world of stuff, but you're not really involved in it. And there are certain special people who are there, and other kinds of people who are explicitly not there. I think that's a lot of people's experience of a museum. Now my experience is that it's a very warm place. The curators are thoughtful, and kind, and accommodating, and respectful, and they really clearly want a public that's engaged with the Museum. I think that the Machine Project Residency really did make the Hammer a friendly place without patronizing anyone.

Mark: The Hammer is such an interesting place. It's a site that has been transformed by several different strong energies and moments, so I think, to a certain degree, the narratives of Annie Okay have a really resonant relationship to the power structures that are materialized in the architecture. Do you think that influences the work?

Asher: Oh yes, totally. We thought about it as this kind of court piece because it's—the marble of the building is the same kind of marble that Michelangelo used for his sculptures, if I'm not mistaken.... The way everything is structured, it really was like we were performing for royalty. And the idea was to almost directly speak to that energy, because the piece is about nationalism and colonialism and, you know, what better topic can we bring to this space?

Jasmine: And the happy musical quality on top of it brings out a paradoxical tension. It's very upbeat, but then right below the surface it's pretty deeply gnarly [laughs]. The whole show had that MGM, Panasonic gloss and then, right below, it has all this borderline psychosis and undigested historical stuff.

Mark: Working with museums, I'm interested in interfacing with all these layers: there's this power history of the museum, and there's a cultural history of the museum; then there are the artworks and the visitors, who have various different relationships to the work.

Asher: Yes, and the art world in general is a very easily critique-able

place. You have the predominantly upper-middle-class to upper-class white presence in art museums and...I think the idea of addressing it somewhat directly in a museum, with a play about racism, is a really fortunate thing to be able to do because museums have to change.

Mark: Right. And kind of a brave thing for the Hammer to do in the context of public engagement.

Haruko: Remember the guard, the woman upstairs, who was so jazzed to see Jasmine and Frank—fellow Pinoy in the production at the Museum? She couldn't believe there were Filipino artists.

Jasmine: Oh, yes. She whipped out a camera and it was like she became my mother for a good five minutes [laughs]. She was like, "Good, good, good. I'm going to send this to everybody I know." I could just feel that photo being sent all the way back to the mainland.

Haruko: That was a great moment.

Jasmine: It was genuine too. She was just struck that we were actually performing and not holding something up on the side. She was really moved.

Asher: Yes, that was really amazing, actually. It was just a great opportunity to bring something complicated to a museum that's not that easy to swallow but to put it in a nice sugar-coated envelope.

Interview:

**Matt
Jones**

—

November 9, 2010

MA MJ

Mark Allen talks with Matt Jones about the Giant Hand he constructed to help visitors navigate the Hammer. Their conversation touches on the piece's ambiguous status between art and signage and the conflicts that it surfaced in the Museum's identity. They also discuss some of the more practical safety concerns involved in the Giant Hand's fabrication.

Projects discussed:

- **Giant Hand**

Mark: You and I worked on the Giant Hand.

Matt: Yes. And Maria Mortati helped with the design and handled interfacing with the Museum.

Mark: How did you view that piece? Do you see that as a piece of museum signage? Is it a sculpture? Did you think about that while we were building it?

Matt: There were all sorts of thoughts I had as I was going along. Whether this would be considered art or sculpture, or whether this would be considered museum signage and part of the facility. In the contract, in the legal declarations, what they came up with was to call it a prop for an installation, a prop piece.

Mark: That's my excuse for everything: it's a prop.

Matt: Yeah. That way it skirts the curatorial committee. But it did show gaps in their workflow because they were not exactly sure who had to approve the piece.

Mark: A lot of projects we did were in between the normal workflows. We were trying to open up space in the Museum that didn't exist before. When you do that, it creates a weird vacuum. There's this vortex of energy that both attracts and repels everyone's attempts to control the process. It got to the point where we were discussing with the Museum which way the Giant Hand was going to point. It made me realize that if you are doing something that is new and sort of an unknown, people's ideas about what might happen or what

it might be like really flood in—usually in the form of concern about things going wrong. In that situation, description isn't necessarily going to be enough. I think if we'd made a 3D animated visualization of the Giant Hand working, there wouldn't have been so much confusion and ambivalence about it.

Mark: Do you feel like the Giant Hand has changed your relationship to the Hammer? Do you feel like you perceive it differently after working on this project?

Matt: Well, I worked in a children's museum in Albuquerque and got a sense of the bureaucracy there: the way everything takes so much longer than you would expect it to, because it's got to go through proper channels rather than in a more streamlined commercial structure. That experience also gave me more insight into how hard it can be to get interesting things done. It's weird to think that an art institution would be so resistant to innovation, though. That's something I hadn't really thought about before I worked on the Giant Hand. There's this crazy tension that exists between the idea of museums as spaces of innovation, which is what they try to be and what they are, and this whole other side of archiving and preserving.

Mark: That's interesting. For me, it was the piece that most embodied this other tension between the artist as problem solver and the artist as artist in the Museum.

Matt: Yeah. It's like another version of

the difference between an artist and a craftsman in that the craftsman has a client.

Mark: You've built things for other museums as well. What kinds of museums do you normally work with?

Matt: I've done a fair amount of children's science museums, and some stuff for LACMA.

Mark: Do you think that piece will work differently in the Children's Museum if we bring it there? Do you think it's in a more natural habitat there? Do you think there's something that's lost by the recontextualization in that context?

Matt: Yeah. I think it will be more expected in a children's museum to have things that you're allowed to touch. There will be machines that move and point and do crazy things like that—which I thought was great to see in an art museum environment. I am kind of nervous about my machine surviving the abuse of children.

Mark: Those buttons are made for some abuse, though.

Matt: Well, the buttons are, but I'd have to think about how high we need to put it so they don't treat it like a jungle gym.

Mark: You're talking about people actually hanging on the Giant Hand?

Matt: Yeah. "Watch it pull me up." That would be no good.

Mark: How much of a concern were things like that when you were building

the Giant Hand? Did you think about its placement in relation to people at the Hammer? I know we talked about the speed of motion, and there were some issues around designing how high the hand was so it wouldn't poke people in the face.

Matt: I thought it did a pretty good job of staying out of people's head range. I was afraid that with the rotating or pointing down it would smack people, but it really didn't pose a threat.

Mark: Is that a topic that comes up a lot when you're building things for museums? Do you think about how not to injure people?

Matt: I do—especially for children's museums. You need to keep all the gaps between moving parts smaller than a kid's fingers so they can't get anything caught.

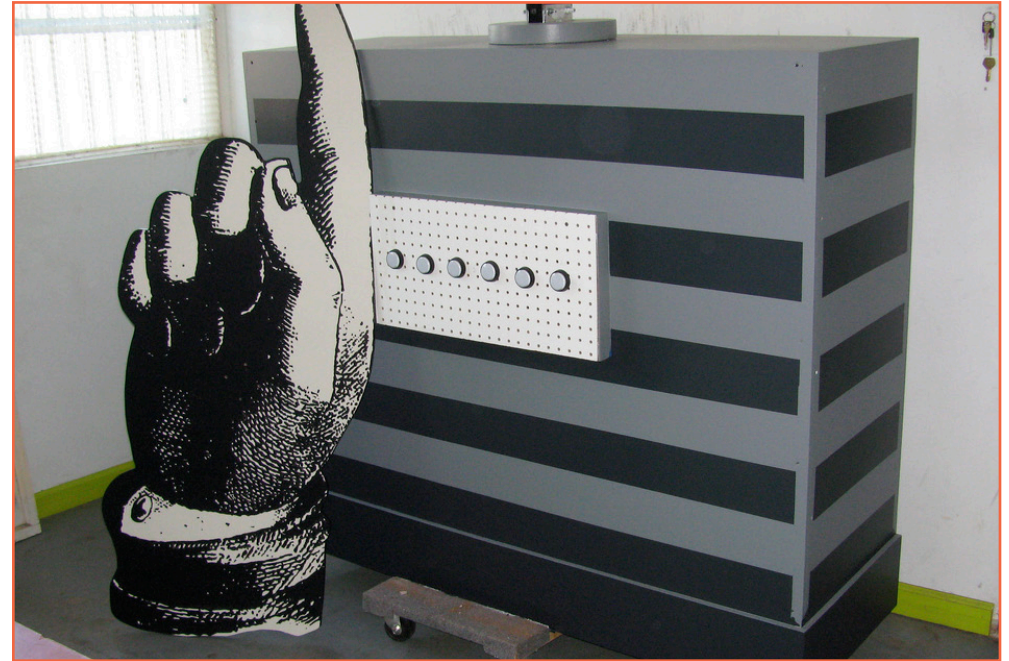
Mark: Did you get a chance to observe people at the Hammer using the Giant Hand after we installed it?

Matt: For a couple of days, yeah.

Mark: What were your observations?

Matt: I thought it was amazingly effective. I was really happy. People were delighted and surprised to see it, and without too much coaching either.

Mark: What I like about is that it is really welcoming in this weird way—because it is so absurd and out of place. As one of the primary modes of addressing visitors, signage constructs authority in subtle ways that are specific to the institution and



Giant Hand during assembly at Matt Jones' studio

that people maybe don't think about explicitly, but that nonetheless impact their experience. The message in an art museum when you go into the empty lobby is that you should already know where to go because you're part of the intelligentsia that are educated in the use and organization of museums. The message of having that Giant Hand there is that the Museum is interested in more than just this one kind of audience.

Interview:

**Chandler
McWilliams**

November 23, 2010

MA CM

Chandler McWilliams talks with Mark Allen about his proposed navigation piece for the Hammer, which would have tracked people's movements through the Museum and used the results to suggest optimum routes to subsequent visitors. Chandler and Mark take signage as the starting point for a broader conversation about the intersection of art and design, in which they consider the potential efficacy and value of solving a problem simply by acknowledging it.



Mark: Chandler, your project was one of three that we worked on developing for navigation. Can you talk about the general idea of it?

Chandler: The idea was that we would put these signs throughout the space and we'd keep a history of how people had walked in front of those signs. When someone would walk up to a sign and, say, take off to the right, it would record that motion. The signs would aggregate this information over time, and then as new people approached the sign, it would suggest a direction based on where everyone else had gone. The idea was to emulate something like an elephant trail. You take all the smarts out of people so they don't make conscious

decisions; they just do what everyone else did. It should make the flows a little more optimized.

Mark: One of the ways I was thinking about it was that signage is all about putting information on top of architecture. I thought what was so interesting about your proposal was that it removes the information, in a way, and just leaves the ideal path.

Chandler: Another thing with signs is that they're often trying to be as clear as possible. This was purposefully trying to be ambiguous. But at the same time, that ambiguity lets it be dynamic.

Mark: Something that I thought about

Above:
Hammer
courtyard



a lot when I was working there with the signage was how, in terms of typography or style or design, the signs are one of the forms in which the institution speaks to you. I thought this project was really interesting because the institution was still telling you where to go, but you removed all the identifying characteristics in terms of visual aesthetics. How do you think your project affects the way the Museum constructs authority?

Chandler: Well, the Hammer seemed very concerned with telling people specifically where they needed to go, and this was trying to just say, “You can go somewhere”—trying to erode that authority. The idea would be that the visitors are constructing their own paths. But the Museum would still have a certain authority in terms of where decision points exist—the top of the stairs, outside of galleries, things like that.

Mark: One of the things that I found working with the Hammer is that, because it is a challenging space to navigate, there was a lot of anxiety that generated for the institution. They were concerned that visitors were confused, so any project had to work toward making people less confused. I remember when we were talking about it you said, “What’s wrong with confusing the visitors?”

Chandler: When they brought that up, I guess my questions were: Do they know that visitors are confused now? Do they have some kind of measure or feedback that people get so frustrated that they leave? What is the consequence of the confusion? On the one hand, yes, the space is

confusing to navigate, but at the same time, it’s a circle, so if you go too far in one direction, you’ve just come back around. Really, you could just keep walking in one direction, and you would see everything. So it seemed that the consequence of the confusion was pretty low. And even if someone was getting frustrated, just having a sign that says, “Just keep going this way,” would probably be enough. It would be this reassuring prompt—“You’re on the right path. Don’t give up now”—like a pat on the back. So even if they don’t get where they want to go, it would lessen the frustration.

Mark: You know, it’s interesting, when we did the *Field Guide to LACMA*, LACMA’s so huge that it’s impossible to find anything you want, but it’s also so huge that it really brings out the pleasure of randomly wandering through the museum. The Hammer’s a smaller museum, so there isn’t necessarily that sense of wandering through an endless expanse of cultural objects. Maybe there’s more of an expectation among visitors that you should eventually find everything. Maybe we should have proposed a sign that said, “Just keep walking. You’ll find it.”

Chandler: [laughs] Yeah. Exactly. You want to just have a list of galleries and cross them off as you go through, which would be another intervention: “Here’s a check box. Have you done it all?”

Mark: We’re coming up with a whole list of new projects. I guess there are other museums to torment.

Chandler: The possibly least artful but most impactful wayfinding intervention would be to move the ticket desk.

Mark: They did. This was something that we'd been advocating for a long time and finally, now that we're done, there's a welcome desk in the lobby where you can buy a ticket.

Chandler: [laughs] It really could be a vending machine—it just spits out a sticker.

Mark: I was just reading about a vending machine in Japan that distributes live crabs.

Chandler: Oh my god. I've got to find that.

Mark: So was this project informed by other kinds of work that you're making, or was this something you developed specifically thinking about the needs of the Hammer?

Chandler: A lot of it was for the needs of the Museum. I hadn't really thought about the problems of wayfinding necessarily. I had looked into ways creatures move and biomimicry and things like that. I think that emergent systems are fascinating. So it was an interesting opportunity to apply one of those little narratives—of how ants find their way, for example—to people, and instead of making something formal that used those systems, trying to make something behavioral.

Mark: There's often an element in your work about what happens when humans try to act like computers, and vice versa. I remember you did a project at Machine where you

were competing with a computer to complete an algorithmic drawing.

Chandler: Yeah, exactly. We think of algorithms and procedures as something a machine does. One thing I've come to really believe through learning to program is that when you're programming, you're already doing what a machine does; you're already becoming a machine, in a way, meeting it halfway. With the navigation piece, I was trying to explode that to a larger scale by suggesting algorithmic behavior for people.

Mark: All three of the signage projects tried to walk this line between helping the situation and commenting on the problem at the same time. This revealed for me an interesting tension between artists as artists and artists as problem solvers, or maybe it's the tension between being an artist and being a designer. You teach in the design program at UCLA, so that's probably a tension or a dialogue that comes up a lot in your work. Was that something you were thinking about with this wayfinding proposal?

Chandler: Yeah, I think so. All three signage projects had this meta level where they're drawing attention to the problem, but they also had a sense of levity about the problem. So you would notice that it's hard to find your way around the Museum but also find it funny. It's just another way to solve the problem: instead of velvet ropes and arrows on the floor, notice it's there and get over it. Definitely, art is trying to articulate the problem, not just solve it—it involves this doubling. But I think design does that as well. It's not that there's this rigid problem

I need to fix. It's, "How can I tweak the problem so that it's a better problem and then propose a solution to that?"

Mark: It makes me think that, maybe, when dealing with signs in the museum we're mistaking one problem for another problem. The perceived problem is people don't know where to go and are frustrated. Maybe the real problem is that people don't know where to go and it makes them feel stupid. It's not that people dislike walking an extra 50 feet. It's that they probably feel like everybody else knows where to go. Then they feel bad about themselves and transfer that bad feeling to the Museum. I wonder if you could solve the problem by having a sign that says, "It is hard to figure out where to go here."

Chandler: [laughs] Exactly.

Mark: With museums, you're dealing with people at different levels of cultural comfort and belonging in the institution. Because these institutions are authoritative, it tends to be alienating if you don't feel like you're already part of that discourse. A lot of times, I ended up feeling like the solution to every problem was just for the institution to acknowledge it and not feel bad about it. Like, "Hey, we're confusing. It's the building. What can we do? You'll still like it."

Interview:

Nate
Page

—

December 5, 2010

MA NP

Nate Page and Mark Allen discuss the ideas and limitations that arose in relation to Nate's unrealized signage project for the Hammer. The question of labor and authorship recurs throughout as they consider the way the Museum's traditional identity and institutional voice may be challenged by efforts to engage a wider public. They also recount the Hammer's unique architectural history.

Projects discussed:

- **Giant Hand**

Mark: So Nate, we didn't end up doing a project, but we did talk a lot about it. Our idea was to have your grandfather come in for a month and teach people how to paint signs.

Nate: Yeah. The general idea was to reestablish a hand-painted process for signage within the Museum. My grandfather, who was a sign painter most of his life, was a major influence on me deciding to become an artist. So initially I was thinking to redo the signs in the window display by hand. Approaching the Hammer from the street, I remember seeing that corner window display at the stoplight. They had these billboard signs hanging there advertising what was going on inside the building, but they also seemed like they were just trying to identify that it was a museum. It made me start to think about the architecture and the identity of the Museum and the space, and how there was this disconnect with the building not being designed for a museum, but the Museum coming into this corporate structure and trying to establish its own identity.

Mark: In LA, spaces get repurposed a lot—former bank buildings have been turned into clubs—but you very seldom see that with museums. That's something fascinating and unique about the Hammer: it has this history of being a corporate building, then a corporate building with a private museum, and then a public museum. It's a building that is continually rearticulating the tension of its founding energies.

Nate: Yeah, and it points to a real conflict, because a museum

often wants to be a more discrete, privileged, sort of esoteric institution, but at the same time there are very real business issues—they need people to be coming through the doors to pay bills—but they are a little too proud to totally advertise and do the things that would get people through.

Mark: One of the challenges for museums with signage is that they have multiple constituents who have conflicting aesthetics. You mentioned that the Hammer signs seemed to be trying to identify it as a museum. Do you think that Hammer's primary signage issues are that the very existence of the Museum is almost invisible in Westwood?

Nate: I think the identity conflict museums have is definitely amplified when you don't have a rock star architect designing your building, like the Guggenheim. The Hammer is almost the exact opposite of that: it was designed for an oil company, which just wants to be discrete and powerful, to fit into the landscape and not really advertise itself. The other thing I was thinking about with the project was the physical presence of the laborers creating the signs, and how that's invisible too. I was curious about what kind of public attention it would draw if you looked in from the street and saw people inside the Museum painting signs.

Mark: That's interesting to me because I have thought a lot about how the signage is the way the Museum communicates as a corporate person. Even though we all know, we forget that this one museum voice speaking to us is actually a weird amalgam of

90 people. The Museum is speaking to you as an entity and by necessity it has to erase a bunch of subjectivities for that to happen. Each sign is going to be the same typeface and the same kind of language. If you have somebody there painting the sign, you see that corporate voice literally being manufactured before your eyes, and you see how individual subjectivities are marshaled toward the construction of that impersonal voice of the institution on a day-to-day basis.

Note: There's a time when I was thinking about this project where I played with ideas of more of a direct subjective communication from the people in the Museum instead of just an institutional voice. I think seeing the hand in something—the materiality of the hand-paintedness—brings out the subjectivity. But in the end, I was afraid the content of the project would have been secondary to the attention placed on my grandfather.

Mark: You also did a piece at Machine, *Subject/Object/Project*, where you spent a lot of time observing our daily operation as a workplace. Can you talk a little more about how the question of labor, or of process, manifests in your work?

Nate: I guess I enjoy calling attention to something that's not always looked at within the operation.

Mark: That's something that our work has in common: an interest in revealing how something functions by doing it differently. You can call attention to things that have been naturalized to

the point that they are almost invisible. Have you ever been to a museum where the draw was the signs? It happens all the time in architecture—this thing that is functional in some way but instigates a metaconversation about its use. It's not really equivalent for signage—like, "Oh my God, you have to see this signage. It's the most innovative signage you've ever seen." We tried to do something like that with the [Giant Hand](#).

Nate: Right—to become the Frank Gehry of signage. It's interesting thinking about how these iconic experiences work symbolically. Something like the [Giant Hand](#) almost benefits the space more than a subtle solution by creating a buzz or association with the place.

Mark: I think the work that Machine does that's most successful identifies and colonizes new sites for activities to take place: elevators are a site, hallways are a site, people's imaginations are a site.... If you do something about signage that is a meta conversation about the nature of signage, you've created a virtual space for work to happen that didn't really exist before.

Nate: Totally. I recently did another signage piece that was a banner designed to compete with a cover band at a bar. The band was going to be playing pop songs from the '80s and '90s. The banner was really bold, just a telephone number with no space, 8675309—you know that song—I wanted to try to get that stuck in the heads of people while this other band was playing their music.



Hammer Museum and Occidental Petroleum Building as seen from Wilshire and Westwood Boulevards.

Mark: With that piece, the display space isn't really the physical space the banner is in. You're attempting to create a piece inside people's audio experience. That's something I was interested in activating as a side effect in a lot of pieces we did at the Hammer: trying to also make the piece happen in the heads of everybody who heard about the piece after the fact, even if there was only one physical person in the audience for the actual event.

Nate: With the Hammer there was some buzz leading up to Machine's Residency, and then it was like: is it happening? It was a really subtle and quiet thing. It got me interested in the idea of bringing a ton of attention to smaller performances.

Mark: I remember one of the ideas you and I talked about was doing a billboard for something really modest, like a poetry reading. But the question of scale is complicated, and we were occasionally at odds with the institution, where they have needs for things to be big in a traditional way, in terms of how many people go to a performance. I'm more interested in how large something is in the public imagination, which isn't necessarily the same. One of the things that is challenging about working in visitor services with museums is that there's a desire that we somehow simultaneously make an interesting art piece about the problem but also solve it in a very frictionless way. To me, the compromises or negotiations you have to go through are the really interesting sites. If the museum were a frictionless environment, it would just be a giant warehouse with people working for you.

Interview:

Liz
Glynn

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February 12, 2011

MA LG

Artist Liz Glynn and Mark Allen talk about the expectations, assumptions, and opportunities that come along with different artist-museum relationships, art practices, and points of entry into the institution. Their conversation provides a framework for thinking about a number of practical considerations concerning audience, publicity, experimentation, and collaboration. It also explores the strategic value, for both institutions and artists, of ephemeral, process-oriented work as a starting point for collaboration.

Projects discussed:

- **Giant Hand**

Mark: You've been doing so many shows in various institutional contexts over the last couple of years. I was wondering how much difference you notice in the kinds of reasons you're brought in to do things, and whether you feel like there's a problem-solving aspect to it.

Liz: I notice it in terms of whether I'm being asked to do something through the education department, through events programming, or through curatorial. I think—whether it necessarily produces the most interesting projects or not—there's a way in which work that comes in through curatorial gets privileged over the other departments. So even if I've done workshops that are similar in quality or substance, when I've been asked to do them as an educational workshop, it almost devalues them in a way. When I tell someone else about them, I feel like I have to qualify it. It's not really an art piece, in a way.

Mark: Yeah, in a way it's baggage that we carry.

Liz: Totally. I think the devaluing of the utilitarian goes back to the art school mentality. At CalArts, for example, the graphics design department is really separate because it's functional. There's this weird value judgment: as if because it's serving a function, they only want you to serve that function; they don't just want what you do. It brings up this other hidden, very romantic idea of the artist-curator relationship—that if you're the artist invited to do something, you can do whatever you want, which isn't true either. There's actually always a reason someone wants you to do something.

Mark: Yes. There are always specific expectations. As I do more and more projects with museums, I'm starting to really see the value of the education department as a rogue space. The less high-art economic and cultural value also creates a space of more freedom.

Liz: I've found that to be the case with temporary programming through events at institutions too. It's analogous to the way it's impossible to get permission to do things in public spaces in LA unless you say you're shooting a film—then suddenly you can do whatever you want. Often you definitely can't do what you want to do at a big institution for a month, but they'll let you do anything for a day.

Mark: We used that technique of limited temporality a lot at the Hammer—and certainly with the *Field Guide to LACMA*, we couldn't have done that for more than a day. At the Hammer, we kept running into barriers with the [Giant Hand](#). We had initially proposed having it for the whole yearlong Residency and there were all these complications; when we finally asked to just do it for a month, it was no problem.

Liz: Right. I wonder how that relates to the issue of your use value to the institution.

Mark: Well, institutions ask artists to do things for all kinds of reasons, but if—to a certain degree—coming in through events, part of your use is to provide publicity; and coming in through education, part of your use is to provide access to other audiences or to explicate the art; maybe coming in through curatorial, your primary use

value is that you represent the idea that the museum serves the artist's total freedom. It's more abstract, but it comes with real institutional pressures related to maintaining cultural capital.

Liz: It's a form of branding—for the institution as well as the individual. Actually, when you're working with another department, you're linked more directly to the public service mission of museums. No one in curatorial will talk about audience very specifically, but when you're doing a workshop it's like, "We're doing this for this many people. It's this kind of demographic..." They're very clear about that.

Mark: Yeah, it's more transparent. The thing that's challenging about curatorial is that, because its traditional purpose is to serve the freedom and expression of the artist, it's difficult for the institution to be transparent about its needs. It's in this uncomfortable position where it's almost not supposed to have any needs. But of course in the end, it has to get people to come, it has to raise money—and it has to do all of those things while maintaining the image of having no need other than to preserve space for the artist. Part of the idea with the Hammer public engagement grant was to explicitly engage artists in some of those concerns—which is a great idea, but it gets complicated. Just because artists can think of interesting cultural solutions, they become the ultimate problem solvers. The institution thinks they can solve the visitor service problems, the education problems...

Liz: Right.

Mark: You wouldn't have the artist solve the bookkeeping problems or the fundraising problems—at least not directly. It's interesting trying to redefine the space that the artist operates in in terms of what they are good at and how the institution uses that kind of creativity to reinvent itself.

Liz: I think that artists have been most successful at changing the way museums work in event-based contexts. But I'm hesitant in some of those situations, because although the museum is more willing to take risks or push boundaries—having wet media in a space or minor matters like that—many of these practices have been taken from a context where they've worked because of the circumstantial fabric of that context. As the artist, you can't change everything about the social environment of the institution. I think sometimes there is the desire for an entity like Machine Project to come in and be able to totally transform the feeling of the space. And there are some ways that happens, but...

Mark: Well, the analogy I would use would be looking at artifacts from traditional cultures in a museum. In the culture that they come from, they might be magical or ritualistic or ceremonial or religious or functional objects. You cannot lift the religiosity of another culture and embed it into an institution. When the work is being looked at in a different context, some kinds of meaning disappear and some new kinds of meaning are generated. It works the same way with these social practices that are embedded in a community. You can't actually lift that entire thing and bring it into



Above:
Liz Glynn's
24-Hour Roman
Reconstruction
Project at
Machine Project

the institution. We can see these context-based pieces differently in museums—we can appreciate their aesthetic properties and the ideas they generate—but it performs a kind of violence on the practice. The social- or site-based artist always has to think about what it means for their work to be taken out of its context. But the other question you raise is what it does to the institutional context to bring this kind of work into the museum. I went into the Hammer Residency hubristically thinking I was going to change the Hammer. I left thinking that what one can do in a circumstance like that is to create a moment that shows what it might look like if you wanted to really change the museum.

Liz: It's trying to do something in a very temporal way, to activate the space as best you can—in the given situation, with the audience you have—and to say that this is one attempt among myriad possibilities.

Mark: It's a proposition for how things could be.

Liz: But you can't make permanent change that way. That's very different from changing an institution.

Mark: Yeah. I also realized that it's not enough just to make a proposition. It's important to actually do something different for one day. It doesn't have to be permanent, but it has to be real.

Liz: There's also a difference between trying to do the thing in a real way versus doing the thing that looks like the thing.

Mark: Yeah! Exactly! I've been getting really down on decontextualized representations of change. It's really depressing to work solely in the realm of the symbolic in practices that are social. For me the Residency became a real challenge to find that space between changing things permanently, on one end of the spectrum, and making some kind of useless symbolic gesture toward change, on the other end.

Liz: I've also been thinking a lot about how you generate an authentic experience. It's a very difficult thing to do.

Mark: Another issue that I've been thinking about that relates to this is the legacy of institutional critique. Museums are increasingly interested in the way artists' practices can redefine visitors' relationship to museums. But a lot of the change in visitors' understanding of institutions initially came out of institutional critique, which was essentially an oppositional practice.

Liz: Yes. We're in this sort of post-institutional critique moment where there's a certain amount of critique already built into things. Now, museum visitors have an intuitive understanding of interventionist practices. It isn't unexpected to see something critical in the space anymore. It's almost like the museum needs to represent that but doesn't actually want to have the struggle that produced it in the first place. They just want to have the product. Some of those pieces that produced the ground for all the relational work were actually very contested. They couldn't have happened without a lot of fights, a lot

of "We don't want this on the wall." That doesn't really happen so much anymore. Now you can just put your critical thing up, but it's not really supposed to implicate the museum because they are supporting it. And I don't think artists are so willing to fight anymore either. So how do you find a new fight or a new conversation? It's a big open question.

Mark: With Machine's institutional collaborations, I am trying to figure out how to get those results using a different mechanism. Between the work that we did at the Hammer and at LACMA and that we've been starting to do other places, I think Machine is sometimes successful in shifting understandings of museums, even if it's in gentle ways or minor ways or subtle ways. If you agree that we've done that, what do you think that mechanism is?

Liz: I think from what I've seen, it has involved a combination of trust, experimentation, and a willingness to fail. A willingness to not know if a piece is going to work, and to do enough things that if some of them don't work it's okay. The times that it's worked the best are the times when there's almost a black-hole openness to it, where you don't necessarily know what's going to come out of the engagement. Given that amount of trust but also that amount of uncertainty, artists feel responsible and feel the need to fill the space in a big way, rather than feeling like they've been exhausted through particulars. When you feel like you're getting stopped at the door too many times, the project can't develop organically. These kinds of experimental,

site-based projects really require a commitment to the process, regardless of the results. I think institutions get themselves into trouble when they are keeping an eye on the results while the process is still unfolding. That causes them to make premature decisions about whether the artist should be allowed to do something or not. It's almost analogous to public school standardized testing—so instead of teaching to the test, just teaching.

Mark: Yes. That's how you get new results: if you haven't defined what success is, you can redefine your failures and successes. You're always generating something. So in a way, if we agree that we're in a cultural moment where oppositional or critical practices don't work in the same way anymore because they've been incorporated—it's like "Commodify Your Dissent," right?—the other strategy you're positing is about a present-ness to process. Taking a more neutral position on what success is and what failure is becomes a way of resisting commodification.

Liz: Yes. It's a resistance to institutionalization too, in a certain way.

Mark: When I first started Machine Project, people were always asking me if Machine was my art practice or not, and whether I was an artist or the director of a nonprofit—and I used to get really stressed out about those questions. I started to realize that the answer is yes, I am all of those things and Machine is all of those things, and that it's okay to just let that float out there. There's value in sustaining ambiguity.



Above:
Liz Glynn,
Destruction
Karaoke—
Spaces,
Cleveland

Photograph by
Kevin Coyne

Liz: Yeah. I think if you don't let the thing become fixed, these practices can really be ephemeral and moving. In some ways the critique that's built into the projects is about resisting the impulse to self-historicize, or to brand thyself and go to 20 institutions. That's one of the things that's been most exciting and valuable to me about working with Machine Project. Most institutions only want the thing that you're known for doing. The stuff I do at Machine doesn't look like anything else I'm doing. It gives me room to experiment and develop artistically.

Mark: Something I try to think about when Machine Project goes to work in a larger institution is how to balance visibility for Machine with visibility for Liz Glynn.

Liz: I feel like the way I am sensitive to that changes over time, and it changes depending on what else I'm doing in a totally subjective way. I'm actually really interested in the loss of individual authorship with some of the more collaborative things that happen here. At the same time, if I feel particularly attached to a project, it bothers me if someone who knows my name is describing my piece back to me and has no idea that I did it. Sometimes people talk about Machine stuff as though it were literally a machine. I think the problem comes in when you're doing a lot of programming on top of itself. It becomes this flurry of activity. And for someone writing about it, it's a journalistic problem: it becomes like, "There was all this stuff happening, and this and that."

In terms of being strategic, I think finding a way to promote something like the *Field Guide to LACMA* or the Hammer Residency such that whatever press release is out there has enough information about each project, that if someone wants to write about a specific one of them, they can.

Mark: It's interesting: with the Hammer Residency, there was no mention of Machine Project at all in the press coverage of some of the less collaborative, larger pieces—like Brody Condon's *Level5*. I actually like feeling that we are having some influence on a cultural discourse without having to leverage our brand to do it. The challenge for me is figuring out when to leverage the brand to help the artist, and when to pull the brand back so it doesn't obscure the artist.

Liz: Often if I'm doing something in a public school, I'll say I'm involved with Machine Project, or I work collectively in an ongoing way with Machine Project. It's less of a résumé line, and more of this entity that I do stuff with that's important to my practice.

Mark: Right, it's more of a contextualizer than a moment of cultural capital. Like this wasn't your big moment you achieved by having a show at Machine Project; it's more like where it's coming out of.

Liz: Exactly. My process is involved with this process, or intermeshed, or part of my practice is this practice.

Mark: Related to that, I think you were the first person to point out to me the difficulty of managing the shift in

publicity that happens when you move work from a smaller community space like Machine to an institution that has more cultural capital. The artist feels they should be going up a level in cultural prominence, but because they're going to a larger place with more cultural prominence, they have much smaller prominence inside that institution.

Liz: Coming in as a less established person, you feel so grateful for anything the institution is going to do for you that you don't realize that sometimes they have very standardized ways of promoting things, and that you won't have any control over where or how they're publicizing something. Whereas when you're working with a small place it's easier to ask. It's important to be really clear with people about whether you expect them to bring their own audience or not. That reminds me of another thing: the audience for participatory work is specific. I think some institutions have this idea that participatory work appeals to a more general public and that they will just automatically come—and that's so wrong. As a participatory artist, you get put in this position where you feel like you're disappointing the institution if you don't produce that intercultural audience.

Mark: I didn't think about it until you said that, but I think there is this perception out there that what a participatory piece does is transform an ordinary audience into an emancipated participatory audience—in a way that artists who do participatory work would never expect. As if by showing an

experimental Japanese film the ordinary cinema-going public will come and become experimental film fans.

Liz: Further, it's like the participatory artist is suddenly responsible for making the general public love the abstract-painting show [laughs]. It just doesn't work that way at all. Which isn't to say that participatory work doesn't draw a different and interesting audience, but it's very situation-specific and it's very localized.

Mark: I was very struck by how many people came when we did your *Rome in a Day* project here at Machine, which was the first thing that we did together. That seemed to happen very serendipitously. You've since done that piece in a number of different places. When you did it at the New Museum in New York, did you feel it generated a participatory audience in the same way?

Liz: In New York, it didn't. In Austin, it completely did—in part, though, because we worked with several professors at the University of Texas. I visited several classes, I lectured in the art department. And I did it at this cool, sort of young, artist-run space, so they brought all their friends. On top of that, it was a smaller media market, so the piece got prepress that brought a lot of people. There is also just a big cultural difference between those cities: in Austin it was like, "Great! Here's this thing that you can come to and spend all this time at"; whereas in New York, people are like, "I have no time" [laughs].

Mark: Yeah, that's what I loved about living in Texas.

Liz: In Austin, people emailed me to apologize for having to leave for an hour to pick their kids up at soccer or something, and to assure me that they would be there for the other 23 hours—which has never happened before. In New York, I would have to say five times, "You're coming to do the thing. No, it's not the opening where you drink and spill wine on the thing. You actually have to come and do it."

Mark: Right [laughs]. It's more like getting volunteers than an audience.

Liz: In New York, though, some of the people that wanted to participate were young art students that really cared about the art context of the piece. And it's not only about them showing up. It's about them showing up and staying for much longer than they thought they would, because they just got into doing something.

Interview:

Brody
Condon

November 14, 2010

MA ◀ ▶ BC

Mark Allen and artist Brody Condon discuss how Brody thinks about museums as a context for his work. They also talk about the surprising and successful public engagement component that emerged as part of Brody's piece, Level5, the focus of which was an intense immersive experience for a closed group of participants. This anchors a larger consideration of the way curation can add layers of meaning to a work.

Projects discussed:

- **Level5**

Mark: The first thing I want to ask you about is the fact that—more than a lot of the people I work with—your work primarily takes place in museums now, so it was a more familiar environment for you and for your work than for some of the other artists. And I think it was easier for the Hammer to understand your piece because of that. I was wondering what you see the role of museums as being in your work.

Brody: I have spent a fair amount of time just trying to figure out what museums are and their relationship to the culture at large, and then trying to understand my relationship with them. I didn't grow up around museums, so to me they're confusing entities. They are cultural institutions that sell a set of ideas to an intellectual entertainment demographic. I think that's the best articulation that I can give. Does that sound somewhat accurate?

Mark: Sure. I mean, traditionally, those ideas are embedded in objects, and one of the museum's functions is to take care of and aggregate cultural capital into those objects.

Brody: Yes, but even more so since the '60s: since art has shifted away from objects, the real power of museums seems to lie in the articulation and dissemination of particular ideas via curated shows. People literally buy into those ideas, and that keeps that institution afloat and allows it to profit or at least to grow. My second question has always been: Who decides that idea agenda? And is it an agenda that I agree with? Because, as an artist, my relationship with museums revolves around being a part

of someone else's agenda—whether it's a curatorial agenda or an agenda at a higher level of the museum that I don't particularly understand because it functions at a cultural or social echelon that I don't have access to. I can see why there's so much institutional critique work that tries to approach that subject, but that's just not the kind of work I'm interested in.

Mark: Does that power dynamic affect how you think about documentation? I've realized that I'm kind of laissez-faire about documentation of events that happen at Machine Project, but I've become more particular about documentation of our work that happens at other institutions, because otherwise I have less control over how that work is contextualized.

Brody: I don't really differentiate between shooting in my studio and shooting in the museum. Each one is just a different set. I'm just using the museum to get the work done—whether it's in terms of resources or space. I like those big clean spaces. It's like it's a funding or producing body, plus a movie set, especially in this most recent case with Level5.

Mark: So you're saying that you see the museum as a site for producing a piece that will exist outside the museum and circulate without the museum's oversight?

Brody: Yeah. That way a lot of the museum's contextual weight is shed. For instance, the Hammer has already taken down the room that was set up for Level5. There are very few people that are going to know that it was at the Hammer Museum when



Level5

they see the video, unless they look at my résumé or the press release or something.

Mark: It will be interesting to see how the piece about Level5 is written in *East of Borneo*—whether it contextualizes it in the Hammer or not—because it will be about the live experience and not about the video.

Brody: Right, but the entire experience was a video installation. Sure, there was the added presence of traditional art viewers, and the fact that they were walking in and seeing the piece in the Museum’s environment—which is why I had to manipulate the viewership in the same way I manipulated the players. It was just an extra element to take into account as part of the interactivity of the piece.

Mark: Do you feel like you have a lot of agency in how your work is talked about? You’ve moved through a number of different niche genres; the shift you’ve made from the game work to the current work is pretty profound in terms of the material nature of the practice.

Brody: For me it’s all part of one seamless trajectory. Do I have control? Yeah, by whittling down the sound bites to what I think is important and repeating the same story over and over again.

Mark: I’m curious also—to the extent that you worry about your work being at the mercy of other cultural contextualizers like museums—how you feel about working in relationship to Machine Project. We’ve done four or five

pieces together, and I don’t think Machine is strongly inflecting your work, but it is part of the contextualizing process. So with Level5, it’s not just Brody Condon at the Hammer; it’s Brody Condon at the Hammer as part of Machine Project’s Residency. Do you think that affects the piece?

Brody: Yes, it does. Some of the pieces that we’ve done could only happen because of Machine Project—and not just because of the support but because of the particular ideas that the Machine community is interested in and the particular conversations that we’ve had. It’s like falling onto a bed of—conceptual support isn’t quite the right word, but something beyond social support and beyond production support.

Mark: I feel like one of my roles in your practice is to provide a generative space. A lot of projects you’ve developed have started here in some way and have grown from there. I like the idea of Machine being a kind of art lab.

Brody: Is that something that you’re trying to impart to museums?

Mark: Yeah, with the Hammer Residency I tried to use the space to experiment. But I think it’s very challenging for museums to do that. Rather than saying, “Here’s some stuff that may or may not be interesting, but we’re experimenting with it and you, as the public, can be part of that conversation,” their process is more about offering the most important or interesting things to the culture. I believe that determining what work is

important is something that should be happening in real time and not something that is predigested for the audience to consume.

Brody: That's interesting. Earlier you said something to the effect that I was one of the artists who created a piece that was more tolerable or digestible to the Museum, but I don't necessarily think that's true. I don't think this project would have happened outside of the context of the Machine Residency at the Hammer. Do you know what I mean? Imagine me coming to them, completely outside of the Residency and pitching it.

Mark: I don't think that would have worked.

Brody: It wouldn't happen. They were in an experimental mood because of your Residency.

Mark: I think that your piece was easier for the Hammer to understand as an artist's project—and some of that has to do with the fact that you're an established artist and you've worked in other museums. Whereas with a lot of the pieces that we did, I was interested in intervening in the voice of the Museum, in becoming part of that or modifying how it works. Those projects felt less like discrete entities in a way.

Brody: At the same time, Level5 did play with those structures of viewership and communication. So maybe it was a more traditional project, but with somewhat experimental dissemination within the Museum.

Mark: And I think the actual thing that happened was weirder than they

realized, once you get down to the level of the kind of experience people at the Museum had. Especially when the people in the LARP [live-action role-playing] broke into the Billy Wilder Theater, where the video was streaming, and started interacting with the Hammer visitors who had wandered in there—and who may not even have known anything about the project. It starts to get very strange in terms of the piece's role in public engagement.

Brody: Yeah, I didn't like that. I'm not sure I can elaborate on it much [laughs]. It would have been nice if more people had been there to see the video though. I think that piece could have drawn an audience that was different from their usual art viewers.

Mark: We never quite figured out how to promote the Residency. And part of my intention for it was just to focus on the daily life of the Museum and not try to make it like a festival where everybody comes.

Brody: Right.

Mark: Also, part of what I found so interesting about your piece was the idea that we were not making something for a million people to look at for one minute; we were making a very intensive experience for a limited group of people over the course of two or three days. What emerged was that it could be both this incredible spectacle for the public and this really intense personal experience for the participants. In the beginning we were thinking about it much more privately.

Brody: Oh for sure. I didn't realize

I didn't grow up around museums, so to me they're confusing entities. They are cultural institutions that sell a set of ideas to an intellectual entertainment demographic. I think that's the best articulation that I can give.

—Brody Condon

that small a group of people having an intense experience would be so visually interesting for outside viewers.

Mark: I spent three hours watching it. I remember when we were pitching the piece to the Hammer, the fact that there needed to be a public component to it was never the focus for me. It was just something we needed to articulate to get the Museum to do the piece. The really powerful public component that emerged in the Billy Wilder Theater was surprising to me.

Brody: Yeah, me too.

Mark: I had no idea how incredibly engaging that was going to be. And it wasn't something you tried to engineer, but it has really transformed how you're thinking about presenting the piece now. Jim Fetterley was a big part of that.

Brody: Yeah absolutely. Jim Fetterley is an artist in his own right, and he became a part of that piece. He was an artist that I would have collaborated happily with anyway, so it was really wonderful to have him there, making suggestions. Museums often have artists working on staff that they don't take full advantage of.

Mark: It's funny. I think the individual people who work in museums are extremely thoughtful about what they do, but on the level of the institution itself, things can be a little less conscious.

Brody: Do you consider what you're doing to be in the trajectory of institutional critique—except maybe more

experimental and positive?

Mark: I had never thought about it that way, but this year that is how I'm starting to think about it. But yeah, it's less critical and more experiential or exploratory.

Brody: Sort of like, OK, let's build a new space together.

Mark: My position is less about making a statement that museums should do X or Y. I'm more interested in unearthing the ways museums operate that might be normally hidden.

Brody: Going back to the beginning of our conversation, to my relationship with museums, I guess instead of getting involved in the daily life of the museum, I build my own conspiracy theories about why and how the museum functions. I just try to get as much out of it as I can and get out [laughs].

Mark: As my friend Fritz says, "You make the museum work for you. You don't work for the museum."

Brody: Exactly [laughs].

Mark: I think that's how most artists interact with museums, and that makes a lot of sense for your work because your concerns as an artist are not about how people relate to museums.

Brody: But my work is putting me in that conversation whether I like it or not. I spent hours talking with a curator about *Without Sun* [a 2008 video compilation of "found performances" of people on psychedelic substances] trying to

figure out how to make it more successful for public engagement. She was unbelievably supportive, but it was like: "This is a great piece, but part of our job is to connect with the public and it's not doing that" [laughs]. So I've been drawn into that conversation a number of times because of the nature of my work.

Mark: What's interesting about that is that it allows your work to operate on multiple levels: you are pursuing a certain set of questions; then, by virtue of being a particular context, your work also engages with these other questions about the Museum that are more interesting to me. These things can happen simultaneously. Machine kind of adds an overlay on top of the work.

Brody: Yeah, for sure. It highlights an aspect of the work—its relationship to the public—that for me is just a by-product, a practical problem I have to work through.

Mark: Does the success of the public component—the live-streaming footage in the Billy Wilder Theater—affect your thinking on future projects?

Brody: Yes, for sure. It's hard to say how that will manifest, but I have it as a working strategy in my quiver that I'll definitely use again if given the chance.

Inter- view:

**Adam
Overton**

December 21, 2010

MA AO

Adam Overton and Mark Allen reflect on the value of sincere amateur engagement and the challenges of negotiating trust in collaborative partnerships. They also discuss the intimate video that was made of Dream-In participants as they were woken up and asked to describe their dreams.

Projects discussed:

- Dream-In



Above:
Dream-In

Mark: So Adam, let's talk about the Dream-In. Can you tell me a little about that project—the origins of it, how it went down, how you organized it?

Adam: It was in a list of things I had proposed. The magical part of coming up with the idea was that it just happened to coincide with the Hammer having the exhibit of Jung's dream book—which I had heard of a year earlier and totally forgotten about.

Mark: Very serendipitous. Jung might say there are no accidents like that.

Adam: [laughs] So, yeah. That was the first good omen about that project. As for where it came from...I had gone with Asher Hartman, maybe

a year earlier, to this Conscious Life Expo, which is basically a trade show for New Age stuff. They had a dozen rooms with workshops, people talking and leading meditations and doing different things. We would go from one to the next, and if one was kind of lame, we would just go to another one. I loved the format. The idea for the Dream-In was initially based on that. I wanted to have a bunch of artist-led experimental dreaming workshops so people could choose from different options.

Mark: What kinds of workshops?

Adam: We had some very straightforward ones, like the basics of lucid dreaming. We had Yoga Nidra,

which is a form of sleeping yoga where you don't actually go to sleep, but you go into a meditative state close to sleep. We had dream acrobatics where people were forming human pyramids and reciting dreams they have for the future or past. We had ecstatic energy consultants leading people in circle dances, chanting antiwar dreams, and this fabulous workshop by Laura Steenberge about a linguistic process for remembering and trying to speak about dreams. So there were a lot of really different approaches. And we had two musical acts—campfire music and more electronic dreamy textures. Then we had bedtime stories.

Mark: A big part of your idea was the embrace of the amateur spiritual practitioner. So the artists you were working with were all relating to these kinds of practices in a somewhat amateurish fashion, right?

Adam: Yeah. All of them took it very seriously and really did their research in whatever vein they needed to, but my sort of hidden fear was that all these Jungians would come and then be really disappointed with the workshops, even though it's totally in the spirit, I think, of Jungian play.

Mark: I think it is very important that these are people who are relating to spiritual practices with the idea of approaching them as amateurs and not ironically. Can you talk a little bit about what your interest is in amateur spiritualists?

Adam: Yeah, totally! There's that Cage quote where he says, "Some people who perform music take it too seriously and some don't take it

seriously enough and some perform it just right." I'm interested in that happy medium, where that cynicism stays behind and people act and think and propose projects genuinely. And I don't know a lot about Jung but I've read a little, and it seems like a big part of the difference between him and Freud was that Freud would tell you what your problems were, whereas Jung would ask you what your problems were. It was this collaboration that put more power into the hands of the person. So actually, it's a very amateur spirit: here are the tools for you to engage in this on your own and not have to just wait until the next session.

Mark: It's less paternal. Oops. Uh-oh! Hold on. Sorry.

Adam: Mark is running to the refrigerator with milk.

Mark: Sorry about that. Go on.

Adam: I'm not interested at all in cynical, ironic approaches. I think a lot of the people I work with harbor some level of cynicism, but for me...

Mark: More like skepticism, maybe?

Adam: A skepticism that we battle against turning cynical. One thing that skepticism leans up against is criticism, which can go the cynical route and can also go a productive route. I think the people I work with handle the critical element really well. They're quite aware of the hokey place that a lot of this spiritual stuff lives in our culture; a lot of them are familiar with the history of it, especially the '60s, '70s, and '80s. They go to these meditations and, while

they have transcendent experiences, they are simultaneously looking around and noticing all the weird characters. So I think it's a healthy skepticism. I'm also not interested in working with people who are hook-line-and-sinker complete believers. I like being able to appropriate those materials and play with them in a way that's not just formal: there's something inside of it too. I am interested in making work that creates a temporary belief system where you can suspend your disbelief for a little bit and just go for it, and then afterward be like, "Oh that was ridiculous."

Mark: Was the Dream-In what you were expecting? Did it feel how you thought it was going to feel?

Adam: In some ways, yes. I mean, it was so overly determined, which was kind of a requirement of working with the Hammer. But at the same time, actually going to the workshops was very unexpected and wonderful.

Mark: Something that I found really amazing was that there were all these workshops and performances, and then at a little after midnight, it was lights out and 20 minutes later every single person was asleep. What was that experience like for you? Did you get to sleep, or were you one of the three people wandering around all night?

Adam: Well, I tried to sleep, but, you know, I do a lot of projects involving meditation and, in their actual implementation, they're not very meditative for me.

Mark: Right. As an organizer, you're always a little bit on the outside.

Adam: Even as a performer, you have a little bit more adrenaline in your bloodstream than other people. I used to do performances at CalArts where I would sit and meditate and hook myself up to the computer, and those were the most nerve-racking performances I've done. I was just sitting there wondering when my computer program was going to crash. Actually, my one critique of how the Hammer worked is related to that. When we brainstorm stuff at Machine we imagine all the wonderful things that can happen. They were imagining all of the horrible things.

Mark: Yeah, it's a more protective approach.

Adam: I was definitely pretty burnt out afterward. The level of work that went into that was a lot more than what I'm used to with my projects. I'm kind of a proponent of easy things. After three or four months of meetings and emailing about all the possible things that could go wrong, it got to me. So, I did go to sleep, but it was an anxious kind of nondreamy sleep.

Mark: I have had to train myself to be less of a worrywart. I do a lot of events and I almost think my interest in doing events is exposure therapy: by doing things over and over again and having them work out—even if they don't go exactly the way you expected—you start to learn that everything's going to be OK. But the Museum just has really different stakes. It's a public institution, and if somebody destroys a painting they're out a lot of money,



and they don't want to ruin their reputation, so it's harder for them.

Adam: The level of worry was really intense. And I think it was more intense because it was the first big project the Hammer was doing with us and they were still figuring out how to make that work. So it was an experiment and there were points where it was very uncomfortable. There were moments when I was brought in on things that really didn't have to do with me, and it just raised the adrenaline level. On the institutional side there may be crises going on, but the artists don't necessarily need to know about that.

Mark: Yeah, you have to insulate.

Adam: And as artists we were also figuring out whether we were working directly with the Museum or through Machine. So there were all these different levels of negotiation.

Mark: I think you're bringing up something that is really important. When you're brokering projects with institutions, there are two values that you try and add: one is clear communication, so in that case you want fewer intermediaries; but the other half is that you want to protect people from what they don't need to know. Ideally the artists are completely insulated from the institutional

stresses; they just show up and do their thing. But you also don't want a situation where there are 12 levels of communication: where the curator has to talk to the fire marshal, who has to talk to the building manager, who has to talk to the curator, who has to talk to me, who has to talk to you.... I think it's about finding a balance between having clear, efficient communication and also trying to set up these firewalls so that the inevitable stresses and complications don't pollute the psyches of the people who aren't in charge of dealing with them.

Adam: Yes. You know, in the art community, especially around these sorts of projects with institutions,

there's a lot of talk about currency: what's being exchanged for this sort of stuff? You may not be putting in a lot of physical effort or maybe not even a lot of time, but there was a lot of emotional currency expended on trying to take care of things. That's something that I'm a little more guarded about now. This might be a great project, but is it going to destroy me emotionally?

Mark: Right. Organizing is primarily an emotional labor because you're trying to create an environment and you have to negotiate your communication differently for different people. I find you tend to work more and more with people who are less emotionally

difficult. Sometimes you might say, “Okay, this person is hard to work with, but I know how to manage the particular ways they’re hard to work with, and it’s worth it because I value their work.” But my closest collaborators are all people that I can communicate with very directly without feeling like I have to take care of their emotions. Speaking of which, you and I initially disagreed about the dream video we made for this piece. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Adam: Sure. I remember I proposed that to you and...

Mark: I said it’s a terrible idea?

Adam: You did. I was like, I have this idea: we do dream interviews where we wake people up and have them just talk about their dreams. I believe you said you didn’t think there was anything more underwhelming than someone just telling you what they had dreamed about. And I was like, “Exactly! I want to get people with their sleeping-bag-zipper impressions still on their faces.”

Mark: [laughs] You were totally right. That video’s one of my favorite things, so thank you for pushing through my skepticism. I think what made it work was not removing people from the site of dreaming. It made it so soft and really intimate. I think the question of how much input to give or not to give as an organizer is interesting. On one hand I feel that a real value to your position is just to find the people you want to work with and let them do their thing. On the other hand I often can’t help myself but to meddle and choreograph. Sometimes it’s good,

and sometimes it’s not as good. You collaborate with a ton of people, both as an organizer and as a performer, so you’re on both sides of those equations. How do you deal with people having different ideas of what will work or not work? When somebody you’re working with doesn’t like your idea, when do you let it go and when do you keep pushing?

Adam: I don’t know. I mostly work with a lot of the same people where we’re comfortable with each other, so it’s not really a problem. I only throw in new people every once in a while. Often it comes after having witnessed something they’ve already done, so I kind of have a feel for their vibe and whether I trust them or not.

Mark: It’s very hard to build up that extended relationship of trust. You and I have worked together tons of times so there’s both safety for you to suggest whatever idea you want, and there’s also safety for me to say I don’t think that’s going to work. Whereas the first time you work with someone, you don’t want to poison the well. You have to be much more diplomatic. And I think this happens with institutions too. They want to be able to bring up their anxieties about what might work or might not work or all these potential problems, without feeling like they’re shutting you down.

Adam: You also really have to have that critical component where they can brainstorm with you and it’s more of a conversation. Sometimes you run into administrators who are just Yes-and No-ers.

Mark: I think what happens

sometimes, too, because institutions are hierarchical, is that the person who understands your project the best and is the person who’s actually making it happen may not have total authority. So they are in this position of having to negotiate on both sides, to their bosses and to you.

Adam: Yeah. That was another frustrating thing at the beginning. There were these moments where we’d get 11 Yeses, and then all of a sudden we’d get a big No. People were already starting to work on things. And in the beginning the No was a very inflexible No. When security would freak out about something, the people who were working with us were doing so many other things, they were too busy to say, “Oh, no, no, no. Don’t worry. What you’re imagining is not actually what’s going to happen,” or “We can make this happen another way.” It was just No.

Mark: The chains of communication weren’t fully built up at that stage.

Adam: Yeah. But I think that started to develop better as they got to know Machine’s practice. Instead of just saying no, they could be like, “These are the problems that security sees with this.” And we could work from there. At least, I imagine that’s what ended up happening.

Mark: Yeah. I think it’s just hard for everybody the first time you do something. There is a lot of organizational work in figuring out how you actually make room for 140 people to sleep, how you lay out the campsites, how you invite all these people, how you make sure they bring

the right things. I think Elizabeth Cline did a great job at finessing all that and, I imagine, should the Hammer want to do another dream-in they’d be like, “Oh yeah, no problem. We know exactly how to do that.”

Adam: Yes, they totally figured it out by the end. They were so organized with their interns who volunteered—which was great, because I was very clear that I wasn’t going to emcee and run things once it started, that I was going to be a participant. My idea was that I would go from workshop to workshop, just kind of keeping an eye out to see how things were going. As soon as I went to one of the meditations, all of my worries just spilled out of my feet.

Mark: I think that the Museum as an organism also relaxed, kind of breathed a sigh of relief. It was like, okay, there were all these people here all night and it wasn’t a disaster. Nothing caught fire. It was a very orderly bunch, and people had a good time. The thing that was so funny is that it didn’t seem that unusual to be sleeping in a museum—although of course we never do that—it was more the fact of sleeping next to 140 people. It’s just not an experience that you have that often. And it felt very comfortable. It didn’t feel like you were in other people’s spaces. I had a great balance of feeling public and private.

Adam: Yeah. It was great walking around in the morning and seeing people all cuddled up and them being fine with that. I think you said this was the cutest event you’d ever been to.

Mark: I remember that same night there was this screening at the Billy

I believe you said you didn't think there was anything more underwhelming than someone just telling you what they had dreamed about. And I was like, "Exactly! I want to get people with their sleeping-bag-zipper impressions still on their faces."

—Adam Overton

Wilder Theater from the UCLA film archive. It was an amazing scene as people were coming to register: in the lobby there's 70 people in their pajamas carrying sleeping bags and pillows and blow-up mattresses; as they are coming in, all these other people are streaming out of the theater. It was such a great intersection of these two different communities using the Museum in really different ways.

Adam: It was great too, because the level of excitement of the Hammer staff was very palpable. Everybody was on board with it and wanted it to happen. So it was a good experience. Actually, this was my first

real experience working with a major institution. It was a very humanizing thing. It was great to go in and see the inner workings of the Hammer and to kind of see why those things are the way they are. It's really changed my way of thinking about that kind of collaboration. At the same time, there's so much that we're capable of doing outside of that framework, so it's really a big choice to make—whether you want to do something that's negotiated or something that doesn't need to be negotiated. I'm still very interested in not engaging with institutions, even though now I know I can do it and I'm not going to run from it.



Waking up after the *Dream-In*

Interview:

Ali
Subotnick

March 8, 2011

AA AS

Hammer public engagement curator Allison Agsten talks to Hammer curator Ali Subotnick about the beginnings of Machine Project's Residency. They reflect on the ideation process, considering ideas that didn't make it or were incorporated into others, in addition to those that were realized over the course of the year. They also discuss some of the major communication and coordination challenges, and the protocols and systems that had to be developed.

Projects discussed:

- Dream-In
- Level5
- Fanfare/No Fanfare
- Little William Theater: Micro-Concerts
- Valentine's Day Songs of Triumph or Heartbreak
- Subtle Bodies Series
- Houseplant Vacation
- FungiFest
- Live Personal Soundtrack
- Nudist Day at the Hammer Proposal
- Tobacco Maze Proposal
- Art Spa Proposal



Allison: At what point in the process did you start working on the Artist In Residence program?

Ali: It was over the summer—I think from June to August of 2009—Mark Allen and Liz Glynn came in together to meet with people in different departments. They were on-site quite a lot. They brought artists in to look around the Museum and come up with ideas that later became proposals for public engagement. It was sort of a research and development time. Then, I think maybe around October or November, we were sort of at a standstill. I hadn't been given the authority to start doing things, and Mark basically said he wasn't going to do anything more until he had a

person to work with. At that point, Annie and Douglas asked me to work with him until we hired someone—until we hired you.

Allison: So when you started there was no infrastructure in place for this.

Ali: No. Basically during November–December, we were busy just trying to put things on the calendar and figure out how they were going to be implemented. Mark, Elizabeth, and I started meeting about once a week to discuss different ideas, to decide how to go forward with the specific projects, and to figure out what departments we needed to talk to. Mark came up with the Wiki page as an organizational tool, and we used

FungiFest

that to share updates on the progress being made. Many of the ideas that actually ended up happening later in the Residency started as seeds during those few months. The [Dream-In](#), which was directly related to the exhibition of Carl Jung's *Red Book*, and Brody Condon's [Level5](#) came up pretty early. One of the earliest things discussed was [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#) and that also eventually happened. The first project we actually did was the [Fanfare/No Fanfare](#) in December. The [Micro-Concerts](#) in the Little William Theater started pretty soon after, and the [Valentine's Day Songs of Triumph or Heartbreak](#)—that was when we started doing RSVPs online, which made people showing up more reliable. We made that giant information booth which was never used...

Allison: Right!

Ali: ...and the sandwich board. It was also in those early days that we were talking about having a Nudist Day, which didn't happen. There were a lot of things that we talked about that never happened, like poetry phone, library card...

Allison: We actually ended up doing poetry phone for [Houseplant Vacation](#). You could call into this thing that looked like...

Ali: Oh, the rock!

Allison: ...a big rock, yeah.

Ali: I don't remember what the [Subtle Bodies Series](#) was...

Allison: That was one of Adam

Overton's projects. It did happen.

Ali: It was so subtle that you didn't even know something was happening. There were some things like that that didn't really require much on our part. We just warned security that this person was going to be around doing these things. It happened more guerrilla style, I guess. The Tobacco Maze was one that Mark really wanted to do that didn't happen.

Allison: Right. I started when the Tobacco Maze conversation was on. The installation of that Greg Lynn sculpture was happening at that time. There was just too much going on in the courtyard. We couldn't have one work encroaching on the space of another. Actually, some of the tobacco plants ended up showing up for [Houseplant Vacation](#), so they made it on-site anyway, just not how they originally wanted to be there.

Ali: That's nice, so it wasn't completely lost.

Allison: Yeah, it's funny. Until you started talking about it, I hadn't realized how many lost ideas ended up as part of another project.

Ali: They morphed into others. It also seemed like Mark would lose interest in some of the ideas quickly.

Allison: Right. We would get started planning and at the same time Mark would have many other ideas, so then we'd end up following those paths.

Ali: There were many ambitious ideas. Some of the projects weren't as compelling as others, but I tried to put

the same amount of energy and effort into everything.

Allison: That must have been kind of unusual for you as a curator, because you're used to choosing the projects that you're really passionate about.

Ali: There were some fun moments, though, and it was actually really interesting for me to be on the front line, because I never am. [FungiFest](#) was really successful. I remember that one. It was the first time we realized that people just immediately go to a person standing at a desk. People would come straight to the desk and I would ask them if they were here for the Gary Panter talk, which was happening at the same time, or for [FungiFest](#). They'd be like, "I'm here for Gary Panter, but I'm really into mycology."

Allison: [laughs] I had no idea you actually stood at the desk yourself.

Ali: Yeah. And I hate mushrooms.

Allison: [laughs] I thought you were going to say, "And I hate visitor services."

Ali: No. Really, though, being down at the desk on a weekend was just an interesting way to see the Museum, and to see how visitors interact with it. The desk is absolutely crucial. People love to have someone approachable to just ask a question. And that was a fun event: there were the mushroom dancers doing their interpretation of the life of a spore; a guy with a whole mushroom costume on; a mycologist from Santa Barbara who brought down the death cap that killed some guy up

there. Lots of people came and were really into it. It was funny because at the end of the night, I had to throw out the mushrooms and I didn't know where the garbage went [laughs].

Allison: With these projects there were always these weird by-products or discussions. In the corner of my office I've got an amplified cactus that we never used for a project, the curtain for the [Little William Theater](#), and a guestbook all wrapped up in an enormous plastic bag. What do we do with this stuff?

Allison: What was the hardest part for you about producing these projects within the Museum? I'm wondering how that aligns with what was difficult for me later on down the line—whether the concerns in the beginning were the same as the difficulties in the end, or not.

Ali: It depends on the project. A lot of times there were things that, if we had been in a different situation, we could have just done them; whereas doing them at the Museum required so many people to sign off and was much more labor intensive than you would think. Also, just not having the staff's bodies here on nights and weekends was really tricky. One of the most obvious things that I totally goofed on was for the [Live Personal Soundtrack](#): I had Annie Philbin and Cindy Burlingham come and listen to the musician, Eric Klerks, when he did his test run, and I completely forgot to bring Portland McCormick, our registrar, in on that. It seems obvious in retrospect, but I just didn't think about it because there



wasn't a system in place where that was on the checklist. That became a problem. We figured it out eventually, but it was a good lesson learned.

Allison: Were there other missing protocols that you could have used in the beginning?

Ali: Well, we had to make a new intake form for the projects. We used the one we have for public programs as a template and adapted it to fit more specifically with public engagement and with Mark's work. It all sort of happened as needed, or as it came up. At the same time, Mark and Jessica Hough were working on the main contract between Machine and the Hammer.

Allison: Were you involved with the creation of the contract at all?

Ali: I sat in on several meetings, but at a certain point, Jenni and Jessica really took over. I helped at the beginning in forming it, and then it was back and forth between the lawyers. It was a long, grueling process.

Allison: What do you think held it up? Obviously it's complicated, but can you think of any particular issues that really took extra time to think through?

Ali: I think one of the problems was that we shouldn't have shown Mark the entire budget because he started thinking about how he was going to spend that money; whereas it should have been that he tells us the project

ideas and we decide how the money's spent. His honorarium is a separate thing.

Allison: Right, which is standard for any residency.

Ali: I don't know why we did that. At least we learned from it.

Allison: Now that the year is over, and we're well into the second year, what do you feel like you learned personally, or what might the institution have learned from all of it?

Ali: It's tricky, because with this whole Machine Project Residency, they were doing their usual stuff, only here at the Hammer. It wasn't really about the grant and what we wrote the grant

for. It was an interesting experiment as far as figuring out how to get these different projects implemented, but I think the new formula—more exhibition-style, working with individual artists on specific projects—is much more in the spirit of the grant and in the spirit of the Hammer.

Allison: For me, it's also just much more doable, frankly. It felt almost impossible to have someone here every weekend, and to have two or three public engagement programs some weeks.

Ali: Yeah. Not only could Elizabeth and I not sustain it, but the rest of our staff was frazzled. Before the Residency started, no one really thought about the fact that we were basically bringing in another outside curator, who was then bringing in all of these

Ali: I don't remember what the Subtle Bodies Series was.

artists. It became unclear what our role even was. It was as if we just became a platform for them to do their unusual, quirky projects.

Allison: Right. Because Mark's practice is very curatorial, there were so many layers. It never felt like we were having a direct conversation: I'd be consulting with and speaking on behalf of Annie and Douglas, and Mark would be speaking on behalf of his collaborators.

Ali: There were a lot of people involved that didn't sit down at the table. It was really awkward for me and Elizabeth and I'm sure for you, because we ended up being the middlemen, trying to be Mark's advocates and really get things done for him.

Allison: Let's talk about Art Spa for a second, as that turned out to be

a complicated project for the Museum.

Ali: One problem with that was that I didn't ask enough questions. I absolutely take responsibility for that. I remember Mark telling me about Adam Overton's Art Spa, and I remember showing the ghost hunters and the energy psychics and all these different groups around the Museum. I assumed that, like any of the other artists he was bringing in, they were just doing research for future project proposals. I did not realize they were taking notes for these reports that were going to be made public. That was never communicated to me because I never asked. Then all of a sudden everything was online. We read them and it was not OK for all this information to be out in public, so we had to ask them to keep it private and to explain the delicate situation between us and Occidental Petroleum. I think that became the

Allison: That was one of Adam Overton's projects. It did happen.

Ali: It was so subtle that you didn't even know something was happening.

kicker for all the tension later on. It just never went away.

Allison: Again, it goes back to us just not knowing what to ask. I got myself into difficult situations too, again and again, because I just didn't realize I should be consulting with certain people, or I had no idea the direction the project was ultimately going to go. At the end of the day, we made all those projects happen without dissolving that tension. In some ways, it actually escalated at certain points.

Ali: I think that's natural for so much activity and so many people involved and so much compromise that's required. It was inevitable. A lot of great projects did come out of this and we brought a new public into the Museum, because a lot of Machine Project's audience doesn't normally come here.

Allison: I agree. Sometimes when I look back on it, I feel like it was boot camp, but we had to go through this intensive training to be able to have any idea how to move forward. I cannot imagine trying to do this year, having not done last year. If it had been easy, and everybody felt really comfortable and it was no problem, then in a way we wouldn't have been living up to the grant, which was asking us to innovate. When you innovate you're inevitably creating friction because you're carving out new paths.

Interview:

**Andrew
Werner**

—

March 8, 2011



Allison Agsten talks with the Hammer's operations director, Andrew Werner, about the impact Machine's Residency had on security and facilities staff members. Andrew shares his impressions of some of the projects and recounts the guards' initial reactions and eventual acclimation to the Little William Theater's ongoing presence in the lobby coat closet.

Projects discussed:

- Little William Theater
- Dream-In
- Needlepoint Therapy
- Houseplant Vacation
- Tablacentric
- Subtle Bodies Series

Allison: What did you think the Public Engagement Artist in Residence program at the Hammer would be like?

Andrew: It seems so long ago already! I am trying to recall whether Machine came first or the program came first, and I really can't separate the two. But, having experience with Machine in the past and being aware of their prior work at LACMA and in their own space, I thought it would be fun, interesting—at times possibly less interesting—but always experimental and pushing boundaries. As far as public engagement specifically, I don't think it was clear exactly how the artists would be brought into that process. There was talk of artists helping us with things like signage and very pragmatic museum issues. Obviously it was new territory and my expectation was that I was going to hear a lot more about it and then form real expectations.

Allison: For me, I learned different things than I set out to learn. Each project revealed something different to me than I thought it would reveal. Are there any overarching things that you were surprised came out of this?

Andrew: I think the projects that were successful were successful beyond my expectations. The ones that weren't so successful, or didn't contribute much as far as I could tell, were in some ways irrelevant because they weren't that noticeable, so they didn't do any harm.

Allison: When I started, I didn't quite realize the impact that the projects would have on your department. How did you guys cope with that?

Andrew: Day by day.

Allison: From a really practical standpoint, did it mean adding more hours for people, or...?

Andrew: For the bigger projects, yes, it did mean adding hours. The sleepover event for the Dream-In probably had the largest security impact. Things that took place during the day just required heightened awareness, but also the ability—since security personnel are the Museum's front line—to talk to visitors about what was going on. Facilities was impacted in terms of cleanup after events and just juggling things for the various activities. So there was staffing and financial impact to both security and facilities.

Allison: It seems like the event-based projects drew more on your resources than the installations, like the Giant Hand or Houseplant Vacation. Is that accurate?

Andrew: Probably. Although I think the installations probably took more of my own time—just having discussions with my staff, trying to figure out what we weren't thinking of and what we should bring to the table, and getting feedback. Once the installations were executed, they seem to have been managed by your department or by Machine without too much of our assistance.

Allison: Chris Kallmyer, who was in the coatroom, said that over time he developed a relationship with the guards, where they really knew the program for the Little William Theater and could encourage people to go and sit in for an experience. Did you hear



Above:
Little William
Theater

Right:
Amused Museum
security guard



any anecdotes from the guards about that?

Andrew: The initial response, from both management within security and more of the rank and file, was primarily resistance, confusion, annoyance, and generally not supporting it. I think, as with all unusual activities that interfere with one's routine, that was a reasonable response. Once those activities become the routine, and with the right personalities involved, things start to smooth out. Chris, I think, was exceptional in his approachability, and in his willingness to explain and engage, so he made it easier for the guards to eventually accept, respond, and enjoy.

Allison: I have given a lot of thought to the difficulty of getting everybody on board with these projects. You can't give everybody a vote on everything you do, but you also don't want people to feel like you're adding another layer of work that they can't really object to either. In many respects, though, that did happen: busy people were given tasks, and I could feel the strain on the institution. Looking forward, I've tried to schedule lunches where the artist comes in and helps everyone get to know the projects better. But I'm wondering, from your perspective, what do you think would have helped make it easier on the staff?

Andrew: It might have been helpful to have the artists meet and greet, especially because there were so many subcontractors. There were times when we had surprises, where we didn't anticipate the size or the scale or there was a last-minute change

and we found ourselves scrambling to get the facts straight so we could explain it to visitors. So yeah, it might be helpful to have a brief overview from the facilitators and artists shortly before the activity is to begin—just a quick heads-up and an opportunity to ask questions—rather than it just being passed down through the hierarchy. Within the security department, I found it was important to emphasize that the value of the event was not really a discussion topic and that it was not their role to decide whether this project was worthwhile for the institution, but rather to respond to the issues as they come up. You might personally think something's not worth doing but you still have to ask the standard questions: Is this safe? Do I have the right resources in place? Are there challenges or issues that aren't being thought of? It's hard to separate your feelings from your responsibilities, and I think particularly with this kind of work, since the whole staff is involved in the production of it, it almost makes people think that they're involved in the conceptual shaping of it. Whereas when we have an exhibition coming up, nobody says, "I don't know how I feel about this work" or "I don't know if I want to get involved with this." So that was kind of interesting to me, and I guess it's just about the nature of the work and the level of involvement we all have.

Allison: Yes, and it's a challenge to the inertia of the institution. It's different from what we have been doing for the past ten years, and it requires people to think beyond their routine. It was difficult because no one else was doing this, so I couldn't come to your team and say here are examples of four other

The initial response, from both management within security and more of the rank and file, was primarily resistance, confusion, annoyance,

and generally not supporting it. I think, as with all unusual activities that interfere with one's routine, that was a reasonable response.

—Andrew Werner

museums that did something like this and no one got hurt or sued or anything like that. Maybe this report will help somebody else use us as an example.

Dream-In. That were a decent amount of people, but it didn't seem as full as I was expecting. I was disappointed at the absence of Hammer staff participation.

Allison: I am curious what your personal favorites were, and what maybe wasn't as exciting.

Allison: Yeah, that's an interesting point you bring up. There was a group Elizabeth Cline calls the "Hammer 12," who would get involved for any of the projects. Getting the rest of the people there was difficult. I understand people not wanting to spend the night at the Museum when they spend five days a week there, but if I could have gotten the staff more involved, they would have been the best ambassadors for the program. I think part of why Tablacentric was really great is because it happened during Museum hours, so staff could get a feel of it.

Andrew: I think the Needlepoint Therapy project was too discreet to really be engaging with the public. I think it's important in a postmortem cost-benefit analysis to ask what you got for the investment. Some of the things that I personally enjoyed but that may not make that final cut, were Houseplant Vacation and Tablacentric. They were pleasant, discreet, quiet, and peaceful.

Allison: I liked those too. I liked the projects that weren't necessarily big splashy events but more like gestures.

Andrew: I stuck around for some. I wanted to meet the caveman guy. I thought he was going to be spending some quality time with us and I think he was just here for a day or two.

Andrew: I also slept great during the

Then there was the Subtle Bodies Series. That was lost on me, but a staff member videotaped it and wanted to show me what was going on because he found it completely inappropriate for our environment.

Allison: In what way?

Andrew: He felt it could potentially really disturb people—not just challenge their sensibilities—to see somebody lying down with another person's hand in their mouth, without any kind of context.

Allison: How do you let people know that something is a public engagement project? We worked with an amazing designer that Mark brought in to create the sign that we put up on Saturdays, but you can't put a big sign next to every single thing you do.

Andrew: Nor should you need to. But like I said, not all of them are going to be equally successful—at least from where I sit.

Allison: Yeah, there are times when you throw something against a wall and see if it sticks—something that is thoughtful and has a solid idea behind it, but—with the idea that if we do this many programs they're not all going to be perfect, especially because we don't have precedent. Do you feel like the Museum was ready for this program?

Andrew: Sure. Yeah. It was a lot of work to produce and to coordinate, but in terms of being intellectually ready—absolutely yes, no problem.

Allison: Does it seem harder or easier to you, looking back on it?

Andrew: I think it's worth continuing to engage with artists to do these kinds of nontraditional projects. It's hard to paint it with a broad brush, though, because each one is going to bring something totally different—hopefully they will. Each will have its own relative successes and weaknesses.

Interview:

Julia
Luke

—

March 8, 2011

Allison Agsten talks with Hammer senior graphic designer Julia Luke about her impressions of Machine Project's Residency and her participation in the Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project. Their conversation reveals some of the frustrated expectations and assumptions that can surface in new collaborations and concludes with a brief reflection on publicity challenges and successes.

Projects discussed:

- Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project: Pop-Up Pie Shop



Pop-Up Pie Shop

Allison: I am curious what you thought Machine Project's Residency at the Hammer would be like, versus what it was like—because I think everybody had a different idea of what it would be. Did you have any expectations for it?

Julia: I actually had no idea. I had no expectations because we hadn't done anything like that. Now, following Machine Project's Residency, I have a clearer idea of what I would expect from the A.I.R. program.

Allison: Which is what?

Julia: I think what we're embarking on in this second year is a little more structured, in a way that can translate

better to the public as a program. It almost seemed as if the Machine Project Residency, outside of a few key projects, was just a different venue for Machine Project, and that they were inhabiting the space as if it were an extension of their own space. So far, this year's projects seem to be more integral to the Museum itself, and collaborative with the staff as well as the public.

Allison: One reason I wanted to talk to you is that you participated in a number of the projects that Machine did here. What was the impact for you for having Machine on-site? What did it require from you as our lead graphic designer?

Julia: Absolutely nothing. There could have been more opportunities for

Machine's designers to work with me, and vice versa.

Allison: Can you talk about your project for the [Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project](#) and what it was like working with Machine as a collaborator?

Julia: The project was a one-night-only [Pop-Up Pie Shop](#). I worked with a close friend who made all the pies and I did the graphics and art direction. I contacted Machine for specifics like the floor plan, but other than that there really wasn't much collaboration. Mark's assistants made themselves available before our project during the day, but we did not work directly with Mark at all; in fact, he had a project the same night at the Hammer, so he wasn't in attendance, which was a little strange to me. Most of his involvement was related to the fact that we had gotten a lot of blog attention and he seemed concerned with the amount of people that would come. In the end it was very contained and successful. It didn't really feel like a strong partnership, though. I'd almost say I felt a bit of friction, as if we were an intrusion in their space.

Allison: Did you feel that you had liberty to do what you wanted there?

Julia: For the most part, yeah, though I was a little uncomfortable.

Allison: I think that was one of the tricky things for Mark here: we wanted to give him and his collaborators as much freedom as possible, but at the end of the day we had our structure and limitations.

Julia: Yeah, I guess it's similar. We couldn't use Machine's pneumatic tube for Food Bank donations. Everyone has their limitations, I suppose.

Allison: Did you get any feedback from Mark afterwards?

Julia: When we got there in the morning, Mark asked me if I was prepared for a thousand people to come. I got the feeling he was really apprehensive about crowd control and maybe a bit upset by how much publicity we had gotten. He came in at the very end, after his event, but at that point I was exhausted. I don't remember what we talked about. I think he remarked that it was a success.

Allison: How many people came in the end?

Julia: I think we had about 200 people throughout the night. The space always had people in it.

Allison: That's a really significant turnout.

Julia: It was great for us and it was great for Machine. They were mentioned in everything. They were in *Brand X*, *Culture Monster*, all sorts of stuff.

Allison: That's awesome. That press is really hard to get, now more than ever. I know it was a real concern of his, for his collaborators, that the Machine projects at the Hammer didn't get the kind of publicity that they're used to getting. One of Mark's recommendations for the Museum, moving forward, is to think about how everything that happens

Pop-Up Pie Shop



on-site can get more attention. It was hard for each and every one of those things to get that recognition or even a huge audience because we were asking people to come basically every weekend. In a way we were competing with ourselves. It was great for people who weren't expecting this and stumbled into it. It's hard to meet somebody in our world who didn't experience at least one of Mark's projects last year, even if they didn't plan to.

Julia: There were certain events like the [Dream-In](#), [Soundings: Bells at the Hammer](#), and the [Houseplant Vacation](#) that really engaged the Museum space, staff, and visitors. I think maybe their energy would have been better used focusing on fewer events. That may have made it easier for us as an

institution to communicate to the public what was happening well in advance. It's difficult then to plan ahead and get the press out if you're collaborating with someone who has a very fluid freestyle way of doing things.

Allison: That was definitely challenging. Sometimes the fully realized concept and description for the event wasn't completed until shortly before the project itself was ready. When we look back at a piece like [Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace](#), which Mark thinks of now as a sound sculpture and a piece but which started out as a social experiment, the idea of what these things mean, or what they even were, has really evolved over time. I do think that impacted press.

Interview:

Morgan
Kroll

—

March 8, 2011



Allison Agsten talks with Hammer public relations associate Morgan Kroll about the publicity challenges posed by the Public Engagement A.I.R. program in general and by Machine Project's Residency in particular. Topics include managing artists' expectations and balancing strategic planning with spontaneity. They also identify which projects best captured the press's attention and the public's imagination.

Projects discussed:

- Soundings: Bells at the Hammer
- Houseplant Vacation
- Dream-In
- Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project

Allison: Morgan, you've been here since we got the Irvine grant. Do you remember what the first things were that you heard about the program?

Morgan: I think the first meeting I sat in on was about how we would brand it. Everyone liked A.I.R.—it was recognizable, snappy, and simple. Everyone was very excited. I had a sense that this endeavor was a huge thing that we didn't really have a handle on yet [laughs]. Visitor services was something we really needed, and we needed to implement something quickly, but there wasn't a clear plan, or even a plan for how we were going to plan.

Allison: In terms of communications, how do you guys deal with the fact that the Hammer now has two different artists' residencies, both of which are residencies for artists but which are otherwise dramatically different in every possible way?

Morgan: It's been very challenging, because until A.I.R. was implemented, our visitors would never really encounter the work of an artist in residence, so we had to shift the public perception of the term to even seem like something that is for them. It was especially hard to explain Machine Project, because it introduces so many layers. It's like we have this Artist in Residence program, and that can be a single artist or group of artists, and then they can bring in other guest collaborators.... It just goes on and on and gets really complicated to describe. For a lot of the outreach that we did, we focused on trying to keep it as simple as possible, while getting the right people credited.

Allison: Mark and I talked a lot about expectations for artists participating in the program. He told me that when they participate in things at Machine, they get tons of blog interest, and then when they come here, to this institution with significant cultural capital, they might imagine that, in turn, they're going to get more interest. In fact, the inverse may be true, because of the number of programs we have here, and the scale and recognition of our exhibitions. How would you set expectations for an artist in advance? What would you tell them to expect in terms of response from press?

Morgan: It kind of depends on the artist and the project. Lisa Anne Auerbach from *Nine Lives* is a great example. She was in almost every article we had because she's accessible, she's interesting, she kept a blog while she was here, and she is open to being interviewed. It's a very PR thing to say, but if artists can communicate to us what groups they want to reach out to and what they expect, that can help. It's difficult though, because there are so many exhibitions and programs here, so there's a lot of competition. Moving forward, I think it would be better to have earlier and more regular discussions with the artists to develop a plan. With this project it seemed like programs would continually pop up here and there—and that's part of what made it exciting, but I wanted to do a better job of planning ahead of time how we're going to approach things. It became a little bit reactionary and almost impossible to do justice to each of the programs. I wanted to get more press for the



Left and right:
Signage



programs, but at a certain point it was just like we were inundating people with information all the time.

Allison: What would have been the ideal timeline for these sorts of projects?

Morgan: In an ideal fantasy world, say: six months out, just kind of an initial, here's what's coming up; then at three months, just a casual meeting, but a more concrete idea of what's going to be happening; then, as it gets closer, we'll be able to just roll it out. I know that that's not always possible, but just to have the programs and a plan on the radar would be fantastic. Things here are so cyclical, it would

be great if I could plan for these A.I.R. programs along with this exhibition, and consider how they relate and how we can connect them if possible. The ability to have that sort of coordination would be helpful for PR. But I know that's not always possible, and maybe doing it that way would not be as dynamic. Maybe the spontaneous nature of the program is part of what was so great.

Allison: That's something I'm definitely thinking about. This year there is the organization, but there isn't the spontaneity. The challenge is figuring out how to ensure that we keep the program lively, while also planning. It's hard. I feel like we'll only know once

we're done with this year.

Morgan: Also, this is a new program, so it will take some time for momentum to build. And it's hard to predict sometimes what will resonate with the public or the press, despite our best efforts.

Allison: Were you surprised at the kinds of outlets that were or weren't interested in certain programs?

Morgan: Yeah. I think some of the more popular ones press-wise were probably Soundings: Bells at the Hammer and the Houseplant Vacation. I was a little surprised at that. Now I have a better idea of what sort of

programs would be appropriate for what audiences, or who might be interested in something. It really expanded my PR horizons—just having to think about who would be interested in a Houseplant Vacation, for example [laughs]. It turns out, who wouldn't?

Allison: [laughs] That's interesting, because it didn't get that many plants. I know I brought a couple of plants. Other people brought a few. If you look at the number of people and the number of plants in total, there wasn't a huge amount of participation. But it occupied the space beautifully and I think it still felt like a robust experience. In a way, Houseplant

...there wasn't a clear plan, or even a plan for how we were going to plan.

—Morgan Kroll

Vacation was asking the most of visitors. When you're asking people to do something they wouldn't ordinarily do, you have to expect some difficulty with participation. People aren't going to naturally bring their houseplants to the Museum. In fact, on Houseplant Vacation day, I forgot my plants at home and had to turn around halfway down the street to go back and get them. Whereas if you're asking people to do something that they might already do...With Soundings, it was easy to get hundreds of participants because they were already coming to the Museum and we were just asking them to wear a bell and get in for free.

Morgan: The Dream-In was also huge. People loved that idea, and I think it went along with the movement in some museums to change visitors' perceptions of what one does in a

museum. I think people like things that humanize the museum, and all of these projects really did that. They made coming here a more personal, inviting, and fun experience. Maybe I wouldn't want to do quite so many, but just seeing all of the crazy things that went on, it was something I think we're all pretty proud of.

Allison: I also wanted to ask you what it was like going from working here at the Hammer on Machine Project communications to being a participant in the Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project. What was that experience like?

Morgan: It was a really great learning experience. I wanted to do it because it seemed uncomfortable and awkward, and because I'm not an eastsider—which is such a divide

here in Los Angeles. It was challenging for me to go there and organize a show. It was very nepotistic too, because I invited musicians that are all my friends. What I found most interesting—and I think this was probably the point behind it—was that it put me in the shoes of the organizer, how Machine Project felt here in a sense. It was this idea of seeing it from their perspective, seeing what it's like to go to someone else's organization and deal with their protocols and procedures. The one complication I had was with my event date. What happened was I had signed up for a date when there wasn't going to be a shipwreck installation in the space, because I thought there wouldn't be enough room, and then it turned out the shipwreck was still going to be there. I had already confirmed the date with the musicians, and I was worried that they might have turned down other gigs to commit to me. I'm just not a flexible person by nature, so I was concerned. I felt this terrible anxiety that I would let down the artists in some way. I decided to just do it. Instead of telling the musicians that there would be a shipwreck, I just let them happen upon it. I thought if I tell them, it's going to sound strange and make them nervous. Instead, they all loved it and I really think it actually added so much to the night that it wouldn't have been as great without it. So it was kind of one of those making-the-best-of situations that really did turn out better. That was the only real snafu, I think.

Allison: Making the best of the situation kind of epitomizes what the Residency here was like in many respects, because we'd have other

programs going on or difficult protocols that we'd have to surmount.

Morgan: Well, it worked, and everything is better for it.

Allison: Looking back on the program over the course of the past year, what resonated with you the most?

Morgan: Almost everyone who went to my Hammer Staff in Residence at Machine Project show asked me if we were doing more things with Machine. I think they really liked the idea of collaboration and bridging that gap between the east and west sides. The idea of the Museum being a cultural center where people can actually participate, and not just a static experience where they come and look at something, is really powerful. I don't think anyone is doing it quite the same way we are. It kind of set us apart as an institution. Now we're scaling back a bit, but it's almost better that we started with something huge, because then you can kind of tame it a little and shape it. Although I do think we're all a little addicted to that chaos.

Interview:

Portland
McCormick

March 8, 2011

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Allison Agsten and Portland McCormick, the Hammer's director of registrations and collections management, discuss the safety concerns that arose around some of Machine's pieces for the Residency. Portland provides a clear articulation of the rules and reasons for the protection of artwork, and talks about the solutions they came up with for specific projects.

Projects discussed:

- **Live Personal Soundtrack**
- **Houseplant Vacation**
- **Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace**

Allison: What would you tell somebody who works in your capacity at another museum if their museum was thinking about embarking on this sort of thing?

Portland: You just have to voice your concerns and hope that they're heard. It would depend where they were working too. I think the fact that it was the Hammer meant that we had a lot more flexibility. It's part of our institutional personality. Some place like the Getty, it would be virtually impossible to be that flexible.

Allison: That's a good point. What would you tell an artist that you were meeting for the first time who was considering doing this kind of work?

Portland: I think I would just explain my role—that it's not to say no, and it's not personal. It's really to protect these cultural objects we have in our care, some of which belong to us and some of which don't. Museums have certain obligations to the owners and to the public and certain standards to uphold. It's all really for the good of the artwork, for the longevity of it. My role is to express any concerns I might have regarding the safety of the artwork on view and to find a balance that can work for everyone—so they don't feel like I am someone who is just saying no all the time, because that isn't really what we do. We actually say yes a lot [laughs].

Allison: Did you feel like you were put in that position where you ended up having to say no a lot?

Portland: That first year, yes, because there wasn't a lot of structure around the project proposals. So there could

be a lot of support for a project from other departments—and Mark would be very excited about a project and feel like it was really going to happen, and understandably so—then it would trickle down to me at the very last minute and I would be the one who voiced a concern. The week before it was supposed to happen, it might not be such good news [laughs]. For instance, with the [Live Personal Soundtrack](#), I think I was told a couple of days before it was happening about the guitarist coming into the galleries, and I had to rush and try to make it work, at the same time expressing my concerns about the artwork. This also happened with the [Houseplant Vacation](#) and the [Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace](#). I didn't want to put any boundaries up, but working in a museum, with artwork that is borrowed from other people, I must always have the safety of the work in the forefront of my mind. If I had been brought in earlier, it wouldn't have seemed so much like a singular voice, because, actually, when the other people heard my concerns, they agreed and understood. I think one of the problems was that we didn't discuss it enough internally before going forward, so that if there was an issue, we could try to find a different way of making the project happen earlier on. I think if we want to "break the rules" of being a museum, we have to make the decision collectively, and we have to let the lenders know of our plans for their approval.

Allison: Can you explain a little bit about restrictions that come into play when a work has been lent? I feel that's something you don't understand



Houseplant
portrait

unless you're really embedded in the museum world.

Portland: When we borrow work from anyone—collectors, galleries, artists, museums—we have a contract with them. It's quite lengthy, and often there are very specific restrictions about light levels and guard coverage, security of the artwork on the wall, installation instructions. It's our fundamental obligation to uphold that contract, as well as to treat any work that's in our care with the same standard that we would our own permanent collection. That means not endangering it in any way, such as with exposure to pests or direct sunlight or allowing visitors too close to the artwork. If we are going to push the boundaries of Museum standards and create any risk to the artwork, however small, we have an obligation to contact the owners of the work to obtain their permission.

Allison: So, for Houseplant Vacation, for example, you had to make the decision whether we were going to have plants in the lobby of the Museum, which is used as a gallery space, and seek out approval from every one of the lenders who had works in there, or whether we were going to do it someplace else. Obviously we ended up doing it someplace else. That was another really good learning experience for us, because I feel like it just didn't cross our minds before that maybe it's not the best idea to have plants that could harbor bugs in the lobby.

Portland: Yes. Even if they are houseplants, they still have bugs. Installing plants in a gallery space is not Museum practice and isn't what

a lender is expecting us to do. We just have to be transparent about these things. It's not impossible, but it does become more complicated when you have to involve more people.

Allison: I feel like we did end up coming up with solutions for many things where initially it felt like it would be insurmountable.

Portland: Even the guitarist walking around the galleries turned out okay. My concern was just making sure that he was very careful about how he moved around the space with his equipment and also that he was very aware of the visitor that he was accompanying.

Allison: Right, because they were tethered together. What about the Table Tennis? Of all the projects we worked on, that one seemed so simple—in a sentence, we're going to put a Ping-Pong table on Lindbrook terrace—but it turned out to be more complicated for a variety of reasons. Mark and I went back and forth about whether we needed to have some sort of disclaimer. Can you talk about what the Table Tennis project meant for you?

Portland: From my perspective, when we had it in the lobby, the concern was just the adjacent artwork in the area, since a Ping-Pong ball could ricochet off various walls and hit an artwork. When we moved it to Lindbrook terrace—we still have outdoor installations there, but—we just had to find a good balance, where it was far enough away that anything getting hit would be unlikely. It's impossible to remove all risk, but you just have to

be thoughtful and careful about where you put things.

Allison: Absolutely. When you look back at the projects, which ones stand out to you?

Portland: Everyone really enjoyed the Table Tennis. I think that would be everyone's first. I liked the Fanfare/No Fanfare. It was nice having the plants here as well, changing the Museum environment visually like that. Personally, I thought the Needlepoint Therapy was great. I loved that. I thought that was a really nice way of making parts of the permanent collection more accessible to a different group of people.

Allison: You know we sold the needlepoint kits in the store: we sold out of them.

Portland: Did you? I bought one for my mom. She is going to try to finish the Sarah Bernhardt because she knows how to stitch petit point. Her face is so beautiful. You really need to be able to have a smaller stitch so you can get more detail.

Allison: Yeah, they're really cool. Do you have anything else you'd like to add about the experience?

Portland: I think it was a great thing for us to try. A lot of great things came out of the first year, sort of trial by fire. Then this year is so much more well planned, and at a better pace, and I think that the artists are very cognizant of all our different roles as well. That's been nice, because we all want to be able to have a voice. It's a collaboration.

Allison: Yes, it is. That was certainly the intention of it. It's good to hear you say that, because it's added another layer of work for so many people.

Portland: We're experimenting, which is great. It's sort of our role.

Even if they are houseplants they still have bugs.

—Portland McCormick

Inter- view:

Jenni
Kim & Margot
Stokol

March 8, 2011

AA



JK & MS

Allison Agsten talks with Hammer director of administration Jenni Kim and associate director of legal affairs Margot Stokol about the amount of work put into developing contracts for the Residency. They also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of doing a large number of smaller projects versus a few more sustained interventions in terms of public engagement impact and institutional risk.

Projects discussed:

- **Table Tennis on Lindbrook Terrace**
- **Needlepoint Therapy**

Allison: Jenni, you were here from the beginning, when the grant was being written. Obviously there have been some changes and transitions. Did you have a certain idea of what you thought the program would be? How did what actually happened match up to or differ from that?

Jenni: I had only a general idea of what we were proposing to the Irvine Foundation. I knew the Artist Council was proposing an artist-driven visitor services initiative, and that we had been talking about the need for a visitor services department here for many years. I didn't know what to expect, and when I heard it described in words I couldn't really envision how that was going to manifest itself. I think we got the first glimpses of it during the R&D phase with Machine Project, where they started to brainstorm; various ideas raised a lot of questions and seemed to require a lot of troubleshooting. It wasn't clear how much was going to be "guerrilla" in nature, and how much was going to be "aboveboard," so to speak. It really didn't become clearer until we actually started implementing some of the ideas. I think Machine Project's ideas were more ephemeral and whimsical and temporary than I thought they would be. They offered these intimate experiences for one or two people, which were really great, but I thought they might impact more people in a more traditional visitor services sense, so I think that was something that I didn't expect.

Allison: A lot of these projects did kind of have a guerrilla feel to them—like something that happens spontaneously and outside the traditional parameters.

Maybe that was one of the difficulties for us internally: trying to maintain that spirit, but also to be sure that every single one of these things was done aboveboard and that nothing happened that was outside of what we had discussed.

Jenni: I think it was really ambitious of us to start right out of the gate with the first public engagement residency being a full year with a single entity—and the volume of projects that entity was expected to come up with. When you're working with one artist for a whole year's worth of projects, you're thinking about getting some systems down, so it becomes a little harder to have the guerrilla feel that we might have wanted. Maybe if we had started with a few one-off projects with six or seven artists in the first year, they might have actually had more flexibility.

Allison: I agree. That's a very good point. There was so much money allotted to the production of these projects that we could produce 75 events in a year, so we did. But then we were lacking other resources because those funds weren't going towards staffing or many of the other costs that were incurred. When I talk about the different ways that the Museum staff really stepped up to make this program happen, I often mention your role, Margot. One wouldn't necessarily expect that a person in an administrative/legal role would have to do so much for a project like this, but you spent a great deal of time on the program. In the last year, how much time would you say you devoted, percentage-wise, to public engagement?

Margot: It's hard to quantify, but it did take up a lot of time. There was a heavy contracts emphasis, and I don't think we really realized this at the beginning, but in addition to the primary contract with Machine Project, separate contracts had to be developed with the artists, with the performers, and sometimes with participants.

Jenni: In the ramp-up phase, where we didn't have any of the forms and we had to develop all of them, I think it took up at least 25 to 30 percent of Margot's time.

Margot: That sounds right, partly because we weren't quite prepared to spell out what we expected, and also because we didn't have the staff in place yet who were dedicated specifically to the Residency, so there was fractured responsibility for it and people ended up with different information. I think that if someone in my position at another museum were dealing with the same type of residency, with a guest curator or a collective artist group, they could expect to spend a lot of time on paperwork. This could be reduced by reducing the length of time of the residency, or the number of planned programs, or the number of people that you're working with.

Jenni: We do also have a pretty complex governing structure. We are a tenant in a building that has rules about how things are done. That's something that we always think about on the legal side that not every museum will necessarily have to deal with. And we are managed by UCLA. So we have really big entities on either side of us

who ask us to carefully manage our risk and exposure, which had an impact on the forms and releases.

Margot: I also think the nature of Machine Project was somewhat difficult to grasp. I spent a lot of time figuring out how to deal with different issues that arose as the Residency went along. As soon as we had gotten something that we thought would work for everybody, something new would come up and we would have to go in and revise, or add a couple of sentences to try to head off the new issue that wasn't even in our consciousness until the new project.

Jenni: I agree that the unique nature of Machine Project added another dimension to this first Residency, particularly with respect to legal issues. During the R&D phase, I kept asking if the Museum would want to own the work produced during the Residency so we would be able to re-create it, because it seemed to me that a fundamental aspect of public engagement was for us to create something sustainable.

Allison: Right. That's something that we are adjusting to this time around, to try to avoid things like what happened with the Ping-Pong tables, which sort of started out as a social experiment—and it was hugely successful on many levels—but by the end of the Residency, things had shifted conceptually for Mark and he considered it to be a piece, which he offered to sell the Museum. The Museum decided not to buy it. [The Museum has since acquired the Table Tennis installation piece from Machine Project.]



Above and right: Houseplant Vacation

and I understand that I release all claims to my plant and it becomes sole custody to the Hammer Museum to employ or release into t
Date: _____
Owner Name: _____ Signature: _____
Email: _____ Mailing Address: _____ Phone number _____
PLANT INFORMATION: _____ HOUSEPLANT # _____
Plant Name: _____
Plant classification (kingdom, order, family, genus, if known): _____
description (color, size, special markings): _____
of time currently spent tending to emotional and physical needs of plant (average per week): _____
any previous medial histories or past trauma that will assist in the care of your plant/s: _____
have any special needs or preferences? (such as: likes/dreads): _____

Jenni: The conversation that came out of that—about more ephemeral art, social experiment, and where to draw the line between a traditionally thought-of art piece and what we're doing here in public engagement—was really valuable and, moving forward, we can apply our experience with the ramifications of that to the other artists we work with. Table Tennis was a piece that we thought we might be able to re-create or restage after the Residency, and I understand Mark had a different view of that. We're trying to more clearly address both our rights and the artist's rights in our contracts now in a way that is friendly to the artist.

Margot: Yes. I think that because we're a museum and we work with artists all the time, the words *artist* and *ownership* mean certain things to us, and we often distinguish how we, as an institution, contract with artists as opposed to consultants. In the past, we have drawn those categories very broadly and in relatively black-and-white terms, and one of the things we learned from last year is that sometimes it's not so clear. Because a lot of the art was conceptual or ephemeral or something that we expected to incorporate into ongoing practice, we found that the implications of calling something "art" didn't always reflect our expectations for the specific project or for who owned the work. But, given the length of the first Residency and the many different people and projects involved, I think it would have been hard to imagine at the beginning how we could draft language to provide for all the possibilities.

Jenni: I also think that going into the Machine Project deal in particular, there were just different ideas on both sides, and maybe both sides weren't all that clear themselves on what they wanted out of it. That made it hard to come together initially and to put something in a contract that was going to satisfy both sides. And then both sides' needs evolved as the project evolved. Both sides realized they wanted something or needed something that they didn't even know they wanted in the beginning, or that they wouldn't have been able to articulate in the beginning.

Allison: Yeah, definitely. Mark and I have talked about how you have to do it to know what the parameters are. For me, I think the greatest success of the program is just that we did it. We have created our own protocols internally for how to vet projects and we have produced this core of materials that could be valuable for other museums. Obviously many museums have residencies and they're interested in this kind of work, but in terms of specifically focusing on the visitor experience, we set out to do something that no other museum had really done. I'm wondering if you guys think that we pushed it far enough.

Jenni: I think if we had started smaller, we might have been able to take more risk content-wise. I also feel that because of the intimate scale of so much of what Machine did, if there was a risk, it may not have been felt very broadly.

Allison: So more along the lines of work that was more permanent and that didn't rely on you being here

between four and six on Saturday, or something like that.

Margot: Yes. I also think that we didn't take much risk in terms of choosing one concept and developing it deeply. In a sense, it was less risky to try many different concepts for short amounts of time than to gamble on one concept and devote a month to it or a couple of months, and see how it worked with the public and how that developed as more people interacted with it.

Jenni: It would have been interesting to fundamentally change what the Museum experience was. I think some projects did that more than others. Walking through the galleries with a personal guitar concert, for example, or having a micro-concert in the coatroom may have fundamentally changed the experience for those one or two people.

Allison: We surveyed the Needlepoint Therapy participants anonymously to try to gauge whether or not this experience really had an impact on them, and the majority of them said it had a deep impact and that it absolutely changed their relationship not only to the Museum but to these particular works in the permanent collection. It becomes a question of how you measure success, qualitative versus quantitative: if we have, let's say, six out of nine people who say that this dramatically changed their view of the Hammer, does that mean less than 100 people walked away feeling like they had a nice day?

Margot: That's something that another institution would want to be clear about upfront: if they want to create a

more intimate experience or impact a large number of people.

Allison: I know Mark thought a lot about how to create that kind of experience for every single person that comes here. That's where the density of programming came in: if we do 75 amazing projects, there are higher odds of more people being touched by it.

Margot: That's an interesting way to approach the public engagement goal. Another lesson we learned, though, is that sometimes it took the same amount of staff time or effort to deal with a minor project that would only affect a couple visitors—Needlepoint Therapy is a good example—as it does to deal with a large-scale public event. When I think about whether something was successful or not, I'm also thinking about the amount of time and energy the staff had to put in, and balancing that against the outcome or the success in terms of engaging the public.

Jenni: Some of the projects also raised questions about how they tie in to the mission of the Museum or the mission of public engagement, or whether we are taking a risk just for risk's sake. And maybe in that way Machine Project and this high volume of projects was the perfect way to start, because it gave us a little bit of a taste of everything, and it helped us to discover what we like and don't like. It gave us an opportunity to really experiment.

Allison: I feel like it was accelerated learning. It was really hard, but we kind of got the equivalent of four years' experience. In retrospect, when

we look back on this and what value it has added to the Museum, do you guys think that this kind of work is important to carry out at museums?

Margot: Yes. I think about our strategic plan and our mission, believing in the ability of art and artists to illuminate our lives, and I feel like we really want to change the way the viewer thinks about the world for a little while. I really appreciate that some of the events that Mark organized forced us to think critically about what we wanted visitors to get out of our Museum and how we wanted to challenge our visitors. There were substantial front-end costs in terms of time and energy, and there were projects that I don't think were very successful, but we learned so much about what would make things easier to do in the future.

Allison: I agree. Maybe some of the projects were less interesting to some of us than to others, but the results were sometimes dramatically compelling. It reminds me of childbirth: you know, there's some sort of chemical release that happens that allows a mother to forget the pain of childbirth and then she's able to have more babies. It all seems less painful and really beautiful in hindsight!

Margot: I thought the Residency was a really brave and good thing for us to do. On the staff end, it was really exciting, even when it was frustrating or kind of scary or made me very nervous from the traditional risk management perspective. I think it was most painful when we had disagreements internally on how to approach things.

Jenni: Internal disagreement is fine and is par for the course, but I think the pain that you're talking about was when internally we felt we were working towards different goals. Once the public engagement staff had a streamlined way of meeting regularly and conversing and sharing information, there was more comfort all around. It just takes a while to build a team when you're talking about people working together across departments. It takes time for everybody to trust one another and to believe that everybody has the Museum's best interests at heart and that we are all working towards the same goal. Now there's a lot more trust amongst all of us that we're all going to work together, and that makes it a lot easier. And I do think it's really important to continue this kind of work; its potential to fundamentally change the way visitors experience the Museum is not yet fully developed. I think we've just touched the surface.

Because we're a museum and we work with artists all the time, the words "artist" and "ownership" mean certain things to us... one of the things we learned from last year is that sometimes it's not so clear.

—Margot Stokol

Interview:

**Jim
Fetterley**

March 25, 2011

MA JF

Mark Allen and Jim Fetterley, technical director of the Hammer and an old friend of Machine Project's, discuss the challenges that documenting Machine's A.I.R. events presented to the Hammer's A/V staff. Jim also talks about the live footage that he produced for Brody Condon's Level 5. Concepts that emerge include the use of documentation as a form of artistic security and costuming the camera to incorporate the act of documenting into the performance. Their conversation is continuously interrupted by deliveries, edible and otherwise, and thus provides a good sense of daily life at Machine.

Projects discussed:

- Subtle Bodies Series
- Level5
- Dream-In

Mark: Jim, you are someone that I've known as a friend for a while. We've done some projects together, you were super involved in how the LACMA show was documented, and you know Machine Project's work—but you're also an employee of the Hammer. I want to open up by asking if you have any observations about the Residency, coming from that position.

Jim: Coming from a previous history with Machine, I knew the type of process-based performance that was going to be filling in gaps at the edges of the Museum. My first thought, in terms of documenting it, was that I wanted to set up little systems that could catch ambient interaction. Recording the security feeds was off-limits of course, but I wanted there to be a space where people could come get in front of the camera. I talked to Allison Agsten and she also wanted something subtle and at a distance—not to have this overbearing technological presence where anytime something happens there's a crew there. That interrupts these kinds of performances and affects how the public experiences them and how the performers behave. I came up with the idea of using my iPhone for events and having a camera mounted on the wall in Little William Theater. So we just used the A/V staff for bigger performances...

Mark: Hi Michelle. Do we have enough chicken for Jim?

Jim: Oh, I ate lunch just before I came. Thank you, though.

Mark: Oh, no!

Jim: I did. I didn't know...

Mark: Will you have a chicken wing?

Jim: I'll have a chicken wing.

Mark: So you were saying...

Jim: A lot of people who do A/V work come to it from the world of facilitating music. They're not necessarily that familiar with contemporary art practice, so it was interesting explaining to a technical staff what makes documenting Machine different. It isn't always as clear where the action is. They had all these questions about where they should be and what they should be doing.

Mark: Yeah, and often we wouldn't know either.

Jim: Right. So they had to assume the role of knowing what was possible, and, if there was a rule to be questioned or challenged, they would do it. It was kind of a hunt-and-search for what you want, because often there were multiple things going on at once. I remember, during the public programming after the Dream-In, turning around and seeing Asher [Hartman] through the courtyard, sitting around a table with a couple of the actors from his Gawdawful Theater troupe. It was a weird scene: the actors had their eyes closed and eyes painted on their eyelids. I remember looking at that and wondering what the visitors, who were at the Hammer for this *Red Book* dialogue, would think—that it might be jarring or disruptive—and then thinking about how a person with a camera suddenly

signifies that it's okay, it's an allowed occurrence in the space. Especially with something like Adam Overton's Subtle Bodies Series: I remember I was in the Billy Wilder Theater waiting for an executive from Sony to come check a tape for a show coming up on the weekend, and I looked out and saw somebody with their head on someone's lap, and rubber gloves—I thought a medical crisis had happened. So I ran over there and realized it was just Adam doing the sacral cranial massage.

Mark: [laughter] That's right. Was he massaging the inside of somebody's mouth?

Jim: Yeah, he had these rubber gloves inside the mouth, right on that corner where someone—a Sony exec for example—may walk in. I'm thinking I can't expect the audience to understand what's going on here, so I videotaped it, just to indicate that it was a performance. I would always try to personally document those moments with my iPhone. In a way, it was like an ethical artistic use of security or surveillance.

Mark: That brings up something about the Hammer, which is that the courtyard is this really strange interstitial space. When you go to a museum, whatever is happening there in the galleries is automatically part of the art. You could see somebody having a heart attack and, at least initially, you would assume it was a performance; whereas out on the street, you would be immediately concerned. The courtyard is this interesting space between the two. It has a little bit of

the ambient sense of experimental possibility that museum architecture creates, but it is also kind of a weird open public space.

Jim: Yeah, it's funny. People will often walk in there and be like, "It's chilly. Oh wait, we're in a courtyard." At night, if it's lit up, they won't even know—

Mark: That they're outside.

Jim: Because it's marble and there are only a few planted trees and bamboo that you think are fake or something. It feels very blank—which makes it a good theatrical stage because it can be lit a number of ways and art-directed to do a number of things. But those are things that the Hammer still needs to define. Having Machine's wandering performances and ambient exercises happening there was a challenge for the staff, I think, because they didn't entirely understand that they don't have to go around this type of stuff.

Mark: Right. I remember there was some kind of scheduling crisis. It was like it hadn't occurred to them that they could still have a book signing while someone was doing their performance. Not to be a hippie about it, but I really am a believer in economies of abundance. To me, it's an alternative to the model of scarcity that galleries and museums operate on, where they're here to show you the best of the best. Machine explicitly does not exist to show you the best of the best; it exists to show you the most that we can think of. I think Machine works best as an additive: whatever you've got, we'll just be on

top of it, like a weird layer of frosting.

Jim: [laughs] Yeah. In terms of A/V, I think Machine's stuff was more demanding strategically than anything else; most of the projects really didn't need much equipment. The problem is that maintenance operations are all about this timed clockwork choreography, so anything that's added has to be integrated into whatever flowchart. Machine brought a more organic approach, which I think was horrifying to them at times. It's interesting: they put so much effort into meeting the needs and demands of the artist—and they are equally guest-centric. It's almost too much. I guess that's probably the hardest part with visitor services: trying to identify when people want to be fully engaged and when they want to be left alone.

Mark: Excuse me, I'm going to grab a piece of chicken. Oh, by the way, Michele, somebody dropped off cupcakes for you.

Michele: Yes, my friend Caroline. It's weird because yesterday she messed up the delivery time and brought me a pizza when I wasn't here. And today I come in and there are Sprinkles cupcakes also delivered when I wasn't here.

Mark: Somebody loves you. Was it your birthday?

Michele: Yesterday.

Jim: Oh, happy birthday.

Michele: Thank you.

Jim: You're welcome.

Mark: So Jim, you were talking about Machine adding this organic element to the Museum. Do you think that became more comfortable for the Hammer toward the end of the Residency?

Jim: Oh, definitely. They're very proud of the results. The process was difficult administratively, but in the end that's just a working-style conflict. Ideally, the work environment should be more cooperative, but it's so busy that everyone gets into these tunnel silos of: "Don't interrupt my workflow! I swear I need that cable you are taking from me and now I can't get my goal done..." Sometimes there just needs to be a blood-pressure release. And you know, they have their established areas: people think about art theft; they think about earthquakes; they think about people's safety. Those are the types of things that they are trained for and that get ingrained. If something sprouts up that shows their gaps, it may not be the most welcome thing at the moment, to have to sit and talk about that.

Mark: Right.

Jim: And it's hard to make last-minute changes when everything has to come from the top down. The Hammer has to be systematic and almost to have a flowchart for everything. Machine kind of shook up and questioned everything, like why it has to be prep and not facilities that touches the Ping-Pong tables—when, actually, it could be anybody. Those are the kinds of rules that Machine's projects challenged.

Mark: I think that comes from being



smaller, from doing things for years here in the storefront. Even though we are all kind of specialized, when we produce stuff everybody tries to keep the whole picture in mind.

Jim: But the continued performances really gained people's trust. In the beginning, it was more like, "I don't know how we can institutionally deal with this"—and my response was kind of like, just let me take care of it because I can thrive on this chaos a little bit better. It took them some time to get used to the idea of it being more like having the Museum open during construction: that everything doesn't have to be a coordinated super-efficient success; people will still get around. The ironic thing is that some of the most taxing projects—like the Subtle Bodies stuff—were very straightforward and simple and, if they hadn't been announced, may not even have been noticed. But they got the hang of it. By the time Annie Okay was executed, it was kind of institutional therapy. I don't think anybody on crew there had ever had the experience of working in technical theater, and it was taxing, but by the end you feel like you're part of the cast and you get to join in the after-party...so that was really fun.

Mark: Jim, do you want another piece of chicken?

Jim: I'll have one more. I know I said just one, but...

Mark: Jim's plate has 14 pieces of chicken on it.

Mark: I also wanted to ask you about Brody's piece, Level 5, which I'm still trying to understand. Originally, the idea was that it would just be for the participants, roughly 25 people who were going to spend three days together at the Museum, immersed in their roles for this self-actualization seminar. You and I talked a lot about making it accessible to the public in some way, and you ended up doing this really incredible live-streaming footage in the Billy Wilder Theater that random people at the Museum that day could wander in and watch. It was really riveting. Can you talk about how that aspect of the piece came about?

Jim: Well, I had worked with Brody before and I had some familiarity with LARPs [live-action role-playing], but this really kind of announced itself as a performance at the first meeting we had at the Hammer, with Liz Glynn and Brody presenting the piece to Elizabeth Cline and myself and the other A/V person. They were dressed very formally and came into it very serious.

Mark: So you felt like the LARP started even in that planning stage.

Jim: Yeah. And part of it was the formality of being at the Museum: just sitting down at a table, we were already playing roles. It definitely felt different than it would have at Machine.

Mark: Right.

Jim: From that point on, we knew to just start documenting whatever was going on, to try to capture it all. As far as the visual style, I had seen early

footage from the self-help movement in Adam Curtis' documentary, *The Century of the Self*—these degraded clips of '70s and '80s video. So I knew what Brody meant when he said there needed to be a flower and a book on the table; it was like, right, there is always a flower and a book in these presentations. That gave me the first sense of the aesthetic we were going for. The equipment I recommended, and that we ended up renting, were these little hand-held cameras that the director would use on a reality TV show. With these low-resolution cameras, we were able to match that VHS quality—and with the fluorescent lights and everything, it looked horrible.

Mark: [laughs].

Jim: Also, with those hand-helds, we could have the camera operators in the room, where they took on roles as performers at the same time. It was great. We didn't have to do any camera work because this raw, embedded footage was essentially the look we wanted the audience to peer in on. We just had to mix the feeds so the audience could make sense of what was going on.

Mark: Right, so when the audience was in Billy Wilder Theater watching this live feed, it really felt like you just found a videotape from 1987.

Jim: Yeah, it looked like video signal.

Mark: Have you talked to Brody about this? When I've talked to him about it, he seems to think you did all this really intense processing to make it look like video—and I'm like, "I'm not sure

that's the case" [laughs].

Jim: [laughs] That's hilarious. But yeah, once the show started, it was pretty much just a matter of having someone from A/V listening to the three cameras and doing a live mix. We didn't have to create the action—just to follow it.

Mark: It's interesting that there were so many people involved in choreographing that piece, but without a real hierarchy. Brody, of course, choreographed the whole thing, but beyond that, he had game designers walking around and whispering in participants' ears; there were the camera people, who were also embedded in the role-play, deciding what to record; and then you guys constructing this representation in real time. It's almost like the whole piece was this weird ball of energy with everyone subtly nudging it around and keeping it up.

Jim: Well, we weren't able to manipulate the footage, so it was more like having a filter on reality. But you could think of all documentation as choreographed performance.

Mark: Yeah. I think part of what made the footage so fascinating is that not only were there all these different mediations, but each of them was ambiguous. So as a viewer, you're really destabilized. You can't quite locate what you are looking at.

Jim: And the piece itself was so intense that wherever the cameras were shooting, it was gold. There wasn't a dull moment. Even when there was video signal disturbance,

it just added to the drama. The video became a character. It made me want to document more LARPs and really explore that idea of performing as a camera. For the Dream-In, I wanted to set the cameras up as big dreamcatchers—you know, with the ring around the front of the lens—and have people talk into them. It never got to the point of actually costuming the cameras that way; just giving the camera people that idea was enough of a nod.

Mark: Oh, hi Elizabeth!

Elizabeth: Surprise.

Mark: How's it going?

Elizabeth: Hi Jim. What are you doing here?

Jim: Cesar Chavez—day off.

Elizabeth: Happy birthday, Michele.

Michele: Thank you.

Elizabeth: I wish I had brought you a birthday present.

Mark: What's in the bag, Elizabeth?

Jim: Bells.

Elizabeth: Something that's been going around in the back of my car for a couple weeks—along with the Ping-Pong paddles.

Mark: Oh, the Ping-Pong paddles.

Elizabeth: This is all the stuff that belongs to you that was under my desk.

Mark: Great, thank you.

Elizabeth: A little spring cleaning.

Mark: Great.

Elizabeth: So happy to see you outside of work.

Jim: Yeah, it's good to see you.

Mark: Do you want to sit down for a minute and have some tea?

Elizabeth: Sure. I'm not interrupting, am I?

Mark: No. I'm interviewing Jim, but our interview has continually had external elements.

Jim: And chicken wings.

Mark: Which is interesting because we're kind of talking about how everything is part of the thing—just occupying different roles—so in a way our interview—

Jim: It allows for interruption.

Mark: So where were we?

Jim: I was talking about documentary as performance, and dressing up cameras in costumes. I think it's part of a larger transition that is happening with everyone having personal videocams: if there's a protest, I'm not going to just sit back and try to objectively document it; I'm going to join the protest and keep the camera rolling. The way we capture reality is really what subjectivity comes down to—and then how conscious someone is of how they're doing it. Being in the

role of documenter at the Hammer and having my own history with Machine allowed me to really reflect on what my role was, and how it was different as a Hammer employee than it would be as an artist working with Machine at the Hammer.

Mark: Yeah, I think figuring out the role of the documenter in Machine's family has been one of the big things for us this year too—to the point of having events filmed to represent other events that have happened in the past, like we did for the MOCA Artists' Museum show.

Jim: It's like photo ops that you open to the public.

Mark: I love that concept! As someone who worries about documentation potentially disrupting the circle of trust that we build with the audience, it's great to think about that from the opposite angle, like Machine Project is now only doing photo ops. Then over time the audience would start taking possession of the photo op and messing with it... I'm really interested in trying to eliminate the outside position at Machine—and not in a way that erases difference. There is still a performer, an audience, and a documenter, but everyone is inside the bubble of the moment. That feels really important to me in the work that we do. Maybe part of being at the Hammer was about seeing what happens when you try to eliminate the outside of a big institution.





**Ap-
pen-
dixes!**

**Mission,
Vision,
and Values**

Hammer Museum and Machine Project

Hammer Museum

MISSION

The Hammer explores the capacity of art and artists to impact and illuminate our lives. Through its collections, exhibitions, and programs, the Hammer examines the depth and diversity of artistic expression through the centuries, with a special emphasis on the art of our time. The museum advances UCLA's mission by contributing to the intellectual life of the university and the world beyond.

VISION

To continually evolve the role of the museum in order to facilitate new ways for art, artists, and audiences to engage with the world.

VALUES

- We believe that art can be a powerful positive force in the world.
- We encourage an enthusiastic and passionate engagement with art and ideas.
- We integrate the voice and vision of artists in everything we do.
- We embrace change and know that innovation and risk taking are critical to our success.
- We question authority and the established canons of art and culture, and we do not shy away from controversy. We are committed to a generosity of spirit that fosters a welcome, accessible, and fun atmosphere.
- We are international in scope, while placing the Los Angeles artistic community at the core of our program.
- We support new approaches to the history of art, from the Renaissance to the present, through rigorous scholarship and innovative thinking.
- We champion the work of emerging and overlooked artists.
- We investigate the realm of ideas in all disciplines through an active public forum.
- We recognize that our greatest assets are our talented and dedicated staff and our generous and supportive donors, large and small.
- We love artists.

Machine Project

WHAT IS MACHINE PROJECT?

Machine Project is both a storefront space and an energetic and constantly shifting constellation of particular interests and subjectivities. Through Machine Project, a loose collective of Los Angeles-based artists, musicians, performers, designers, poets, and others collaborate to produce engaged experimental artwork.

WHY DO WE DO WHAT WE DO?

We believe that most exciting and original ideas come out of conversations and processes of making or doing that are exploratory rather than goal-oriented in nature. Machine Project exists to make art that injects a sense of genuine and invested curiosity, intellectual engagement, and permissibility into daily social life.

HOW DO WE DO IT?

Machine Project temporarily transforms and repurposes our storefront gallery and other public spaces for creative use and civic discourse. In these spaces we foster cross-disciplinary collaborative exploration and support experimental forms of cultural production that don't fit within established structures.

OUR VALUES

OPENNESS

An open mind is necessary and sufficient for anyone to create or consider art, to relate to people with different interests and experiences, or to participate in discussions on the nature of reality and the purpose of human existence. By using art to temporarily materialize non-commercial public spaces, we make room for the kind of unfettered engagement, exchange, and possibility that we want to see more of in the world.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

We believe in the value of active engagement with the people, objects, and processes around us. This may mean participation in a workshop or a performance piece. It can also mean the

imaginative work of recreating a piece in one's head or in the heads of others after it has happened. We believe that for an artwork to truly engage people it must actually have taken place in the world. Propositions only really get interesting when they enter different subjectivities and become experiences.

SPECIFICITY

Our programming dives into specific and often unusual or obscure topics. We have found that focusing on particular interests and passions allows people from widely divergent backgrounds and life experiences to connect across these broader differences in a meaningful way. As evidenced by the popularity of our most esoteric events, energy and enthusiasm are deeply contagious: who doesn't want a sneak peek into someone else's abiding fascination with fungi or the history of conspiracy theories in Los Angeles?

RELATIONAL LEARNING AND GROWTH

Machine Project's collaborative mode of working and our organizational growth model are both non-hierarchical and based on the formation of mutually beneficial relationships with artists and other institutions. As we continue to expand, we approach each geographic location as a site to co-explore with local artists and community members.

EMERGENT FORMS

Machine Project supports the production of work that proceeds from a "what if...?" spirit of curiosity. Often interdisciplinary in nature and making use of materials in novel ways, such work can be hard to pre-conceptualize or commodify. Institutions and markets that are invested in maintaining their cultural capital or in making a profit are often unwilling to risk investing in unknown qualities. Machine Project wants to take that risk.

EXPERIMENTATION


We value true experimentation, unlimited by pre-determined goals, needs, or ideological pressures. We want to be surprised by a performance or work, and it is okay with us if things

occasionally don't have the impact we had hoped. We aim to provide opportunities for the artists we work with to try things they don't have the freedom to try elsewhere. We bring this experimental approach to all our projects, whether we are working at Machine's storefront, with a larger institution, or in another public place.

Es-
say

**The
Experiential
Record, or
How to Do
Things with
Documentation**

Andrew J. Lau



Abstract: This essay describes the processes and products of Machine Project's documentation practices for its participation in the Hammer Museum's Artist in Residence (A.I.R.) program. Drawing on an interview that Mark Allen conducted with documenters Emily Lacy and Jimmy Fusil and archivists Sam Meister and Andrew J. Lau, this essay considers Machine Project's shifts in approaches to documentation of its events and programs. These shifts include a movement from documentation that seeks to objectively capture the activity of Machine Project's events to exploring ways in which the documentation might provide a visual record of experience. This essay draws upon literature from archival studies (in particular, the concept of the record) to elucidate these documentation practices and to extrapolate some functions of documenting contemporary art.

Contemporary art has long been interested in the concept of the "document" and practices of collecting and saving. High-profile exhibitions like the Haus der Kunst and Siemens Cultural Program's *Deep Storage* (1998–1999) and Okwui Enwezor's *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (January 18–May 4, 2008), as well as the apparent archival turn in the 1980s–1990s, illustrate the fascination with the notion of traces and detritus supplying the materials to create art. Art historian Sven Spieker, in utilizing frameworks culled from the theories and practices of archival science, reviews a wide variety of modern artists and their documentation practices while also highlighting parallels between contemporary artists, database aesthetics and structures, and key texts on the Archive (notably, Freud's reading of the mystic writing pad and his topologies of the psyche and Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*).¹ Spieker's text *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* impressively engages with archival theory and principles (i.e., the Principle of Provenance and the Sanctity of Original Order) in order to analyze specific cases of modern and contemporary art. Whereas other critical works draw primarily on Derrida and/or Foucault's ideas on the Archive, *The Big Archive* foregrounds the long history of theory underpinning the discourse of archival practice, rather than relying on the Archive as an interpretive trope.

Aside from the metaphor of the Archive, archivists as a professional group often attempt to apply strict definitions to documentary objects. Consequently, we understand documents, records, and documentation to all occupy different spaces of categorization, to frequently exercise a certain level of control over archival materials with investments in preserving the authenticity of documents and records. These definitions are often highly contested and varied, depending on the organizations and institutions from which the documents arise. As is true for any field of inquiry, some strains of the discourse fall under more conservative positions that construe records to be strictly documents that emerge as by-products in the course of bureaucratic activity or transaction, selected for the express purpose of preservation.² However, recent ideas in archival science have moved toward understanding records as



Nate Page,
Subject/Object/
Project,
Feb. 2010,
a site-specific
installation in
Machine
Project's store-
front gallery

interpretive objects, either in terms of how they are created (whether automatically generated, as in the case of receipts) or explicitly constructed with the intention of collecting documents where few exist. The latter position is especially present in the discourses on community-based initiatives (which may or may not identify with the term "archives"; often, they appear in the literature as "community heritage projects," oral history, or community-based documentation).³ These initiatives are frequently built on the assumption that archival institutions and the records they house only capture a minute fraction of cultural memory, and that in order to fill the gaps of the historical record, professional and non-professional archivists might seek to document what is left outside of the archives. Furthermore, these initiatives also underscore the politics of memory by

illustrating how communities' practices of self-documentation constitute interventions into the field of cultural and collective memory. To create records from the space of the self is to create "evidence of me," to become a speaking subject in the Archive.⁴

These stakes are present in Machine Project's documentation practices of itself. In documenting Machine Project's participation in the Hammer Museum's Artist in Residence program, Mark Allen employed the method of interviewing participating artists, musicians, composers, and curators in order to inject into the archival record the experiences of their involvement. The interview method is significant for its premise on the notion that, in planning and executing an event for the Residency, there are multiple views that emanate from the multiple roles that participants play. For

a collaborative endeavor like Machine Project's participation in the Hammer Residency, the interview process acts as a means to extend the collaborations between Machine Project as an entity and its constituents into the documents that emerge out of those relationships. In other words, the interview method, as a documentation practice, aims to commit to recorded form a semblance of the experience of participation on the part of the artists, curators, designers, and musicians who were involved. For the Hammer Residency, these experiences are folded into collaboration, wherein two or more parties come together to actualize some shared goal, and the interviews serve as the means by which to capture that coming-together. The importance of documentation practices, or at least interrogating what such practices might look like, lies in the (perceived) promise of the translation from event to object, or the possibilities of fixing an ephemeral event into some recorded form. But rather than positing a one-to-one relation between the event and the documents created to support them, documentation is understood here to be processual. If documentation is considered in terms of the procedures and the decisions that belie them, exploring how the documents are constructed by way of those decisions and the development of those procedures becomes paramount.

In archival science, the field understands its scope to include records in aggregation, cohered by what Luciana Duranti refers to as "the archival bond," or "the network of relationships that each record has with other records belonging in the same aggregation."⁵ According to Duranti,

"the archival bond first arises when the record is set aside and thereby connected to another in the course of action, but it is incremental, because, as the connective tissue that joins a record to those surrounding it, it is in continuing formation and growth until the aggregation to which it belongs is no longer subject to expansion, that is, until the activity producing such an aggregation is completed."⁶

It should be noted, however, that Duranti's conceptualization of the archival bond (and the concept of record upon which it is premised) is quite narrow, in that it is based on an understanding

of a record in a traditional sense: the notion that the record is any document that is created or received and set aside for action or reference, created by a physical or juridical person in the course of some practical activity and as an instrument and as a by-product of such activity.⁷

Clearly, this definition of the record can only describe a sliver of the totality of Machine Project's documentary residue, and would primarily refer to specific types of documents, such as internal documents and communications, financial records, and other examples of administrative files. But more than these, Machine Project's documentary record also includes public communications (such as event announcements to the public subscribed to the email list, over social media channels, and on the official website), photos shared over Flickr, and videos on Vimeo and YouTube. These documentary objects provide a glimpse into the goings-on of Machine Project both at an individual level (the event that the individual documentary object refers to), but also at an aggregate level (the documentary object, referencing the event as situated over the course of the whole oeuvre of Machine Project's programs and events).

On the one hand is what Mark Allen described in an interview with Emily Lacy, Jimmy Fusil, Sam Meister, and Andrew Lau as the "archival impulse" of documentation: the idea that documentation entails a diminished level of mediation between the event and the documenter in the mode of observation. Such a practice might resemble a camera set on a tripod, capturing the event with as little intervention as possible. On the other hand, perhaps an extreme sitting at the opposite pole, is the documentation practice of creating highly stylized, orchestrated, and edited documents (primarily videos). For these types of documentation, the primary motivation is to document an experience, as opposed to providing an objective view of the event. One example of the latter is the documentation produced for the Live Personal Soundtrack performances of the Hammer Residency. Notably, the video produced as documentation for these performances is highly edited, with shifts in the camera's perspective meant to mirror shifts in subjective experience of the viewer. In some segments, the video is constructed to

simulate an audience member “experiencing” the live personal soundtrack—a first-person view—then switches to a third-person view depicting performer Eric Klerks wielding his guitar, hooked up to the museum visitor wearing headphones, following her around the galleries as she peruses the art hanging on the white walls.

The aforementioned archival bond described by Duranti surfaces here in terms of the multiple documents produced about the Live Personal Soundtrack performances: the announcements on the Hammer Museum’s website, on Machine Project’s website, over Facebook and Twitter; the video documentation displayed on Vimeo; and also the post-performance interview conducted with Eric Klerks. This bond ties together these seemingly disparate objects that together serve as the documentary record for the event. This is also true for the documents that are created around other events, like the Little William Theater performances, and the corpus of videos, postings over social media platforms, and press releases around the performances. The notion of the archival bond provides a useful heuristic to understand the accumulation of documentary objects, and how meaning and representation is accrued over time across the objects. In other words, the documentation of events, as the process of creating a documentary record of those events, is more than each individual record; it refers to the entire body of records. Each individual record draws upon other records for its meaning. In the case of the Little William Theater performances, someone viewing a video of the Paraphrase Pieces, for example, would have a better sense of the whole series of the Little William Theater performances by viewing the other videos that were created to document the other performances. Similarly, this relationship between documentary objects allows for further contextualization of the range of events of the Hammer Residency, as well as how the Residency fits within the entire archive of Machine Project’s oeuvre. Viewing the Little William Theater video documentation in conjunction with the Live Personal Soundtrack, alongside video depicting the Dream-In events, in addition to the video created for The Giant Hand experiment in signage, and so on and so forth, would allow a viewer of the documentation a more comprehensive

To create records from the space of the self is to create “evidence of me,” to become a speaking subject in the Archive.

view of the events that took place at the Hammer that Machine Project was involved in, and where the Residency fits within Machine Project's history of activity.

Meister observed that over the course of Machine Project's life as an organization, the practices of documentation have shifted from the objective view to one focused on documentation in service of (re-)constructing the experience of the event. Inevitably, the view provided by the documentation of an event can only provide a partial perspective. Meister states:

"I think that's a really important point: how the style and intention of the documentation has evolved as the organization has evolved. When I first started doing stuff here, it was very apparent to me that there's an essence of the experience of the events for the participant, for the performer, for the artist that could only be captured to a certain extent in documentation. But that's such an important element in the story of the organization—especially for a space like Machine and what Machine does—just any kind of residue. But also it's the culmination of that residue over time and how the organization can look at that and learn about itself, and then how the outside public or people who are engaged with Machine in different ways can refer to that. Obviously there is a decision at some point that, oh, well this mode of the more objective style doesn't work anymore, so now we need to shift to something else and that has, like you said, changed as the extent of involvement with outside institutions has changed as well. But I think that's why even that original footage is important to keep in some way even if it's just kind of, OK, we're just going to keep it how it is, as kind of a freeze."

An important point that Meister touches upon is the iterative revisions to the practices of documentation. That is, to document events shift according to the motivations of the organization, shifts that are ultimately contingent on what the organization seeks to convey about itself through its documentation. That is to say that more than the content of the documentary objects (i.e., what is recorded in the documentary object), the framing of the documentary object also communicates some aspect of Machine Project. To some

extent, the construction of the documentary object (or the lack thereof, as in the case with documentation practices that strive toward objective observation) is a fundamental shaping of the "recordness" of the object through the implication of the frame's construction.

For artistic practices for which there are no primary objects, or examples of "dematerialized" art that may be performance-based, site- or event-specific, or time-based, documentation of the activity is pivotal to the historical record. Martha Buskirk's survey of "the contingent object of contemporary art" illustrates this point well: "...the more immediate, the more ephemeral, the more of-the-moment or of-the-place the work is, the more likely that it is known through images and accounts."⁸ Thus, the stakes of documentation for art works that are premised on notions of participation, interactivity, relationality, experience, and other ephemeral activities are such that documentation forms a sort of archival "window" into the past and into the work.

But this window is more than a transparent frame by which to glimpse a past event as it happened; it shapes the view. This was acknowledged by Emily Lacy and Jimmy Fusil as they reflected on their involvement in documenting various Machine Project events, and is also exemplified in the shift of the documentation practice from static video capturing activity toward creating documentation that attempts to incorporate the experience of the event through its visual rhetoric. The video documentation of the Dream-In event, for example, features brief interviews with participants who had slept inside the Hammer Museum in which they described what they were dreaming about. As the camera closes in on the faces of the bleary-eyed sleepers, they each attempt to articulate the narratives that would otherwise exist only in their minds. The viewer of the video after the fact of the event can then imagine what the experience would have been like had he or she participated. Or, if they had participated in the event, the viewer of the video could recall in his or her own mind the experience of the event, and reflect on the singularity of that instance of dreaming.

In reflecting on the documentation practices of Machine

Project, at least three functions can be extrapolated. First is the communicative function, most clearly illustrated by postings on Machine Project's official website and various social media pages. For these, the primary goal is to utilize the channels of networked technologies in order to disseminate information. In their capacity as records of the events, the documents also serve the purposes of potential communication, across time and space, after the fact and/or at distributed sites. This is true for any record, and indeed, explains why records are considered so crucial to historical reconstruction of an event. The benefit of keeping records past their immediate use is not only localized to the boundaries of the record itself (i.e., its content and what can be extrapolated from it) but also how, where, and why it is read, and what is read alongside it. For these reasons, recordkeeping and documentation are extremely important considerations.⁹

Second is a methodological function, as exemplified by the interviews collected by Mark Allen. As such, the interviews allow not only for the explication of the individual thought processes and self-reflections of the participants of Machine Project's network, but also for the archivalization (the impulse to archive, whether conscious or unconscious)¹⁰ of the multiple subject positions around a collaborative endeavor like the Hammer Residency. This includes the methodological reflection on the planning and execution of the events within Machine Project's Residency by surfacing notions of what was successful and what was not (and possible reasons as to why), while providing a foundation for speculation as to how future inter-institutional collaborations might proceed. Additionally, the interview process as documentation practice also turns on itself as methodological self-reflection. As experiences are encoded as documents (and potentially records), we might ask: what do the interviews provide by way of sense of the events and activities that other documentation practices do not, and vice versa? How do these documents work to provide the sense of the events and activities in conjunction with one another, if we understand that each record provides only a partial view?

Third is the function of memory, the ability for records to serve as a means as the foundation for self-reflection at the

level of the organization and its history up to the present. It is through records and documents that we are able to understand the totality of Machine Project's activities, to reconstruct the past through material evidence. But this memory function also extends beyond Machine Project's archive, into the Archive that continues to be a major focus for contemporary art discourse. The records that Machine Project keeps, the products of the documentation and recordkeeping paradigms instituted at the level of the organization, provide the material foundations that ultimately situate Machine Project in the *longue durée* of art and its history.

Documentation practices, as well as the objects that are created, are necessarily contingent on the varied ways that artists work. The goals of creating the experiential records that Machine Project has sought to realize might not be appropriate for other modes of artistic practice, but it does present an interesting case study in documentation methodology. Other artists might consider more straightforward unmediated forms of documentation to fit better with their visions for how they might capture their processes and products of their work. But in either case, whether seeking to create observational or experientially-focused documentation, Eleanor Antin's insight continues to resonate: "documentation is not a list of neutral facts...all 'description' is a form of creation."¹¹

NOTES:

1. Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (MIT Press, 2008).
2. Luciana Duranti, an archival scholar whose contributions primarily stem from her roots in a 19th century science of documents called "diplomats," is a major proponent of strict definitions of the record. Terry Cook, a major voice in the postmodern turn of archival science, assessed her position as constituting the logico-positivist perspective of archival theory and practice. See: Luciana Duranti, *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998); Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–61.
3. Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 151–176.
4. Sue McKemmish, "Evidence of me...," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996): 28–45.
5. Luciana Duranti, "The Archival Bond," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11, no. 3 (1997): 215–216.
6. *Ibid.*, 216.
7. Duranti, "The Archival Bond."
8. Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 223.
9. Reflecting on the activity of curating art exhibitions, Christophe Cherix states, "...in the late 1960s, 'the rise of the curator as creator,' as Bruce Altshuler called it, not only changed our perception of exhibitions but also created the need to document them more fully. If the context of an artwork's presentation has always mattered, the second part of the 20th century has shown that artworks are so systematically associated with their first exhibition that a lack of documentation of the latter puts the artists' original intentions at risk of being misunderstood." Although Cherix refers specifically to the stakes of documentation for curatorial work, the insight that documentation provides a means by which to contextualize the products of creativity rings true for considering Machine Project's documentation practices. See: Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (JRP/Ringier, 2008).
10. Eric Ketelaar, "Archivistics Research Saving the Profession," *The American Archivist* 63, no. 2 (2000): 322–340.
11. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, 226.

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