

TEMPORARY SERVICES

Do-It-Yourself Interview

A conversation about Do-It-Yourself culture between Temporary Services (Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julin, Marc Fischer) and Anne Dorothee Boehme, Kevin Henry and Lindsay Bosch, the curators of the exhibition *Pass It On! Connecting Contemporary Do-It-Yourself Culture*. *Pass It On!* opened in March 2007 at the Art + Design Gallery at Columbia College, Chicago. This interview was recorded in March 2006.

Kevin Henry (KH): So anyway, thanks for coming and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed, and hopefully participate [in the exhibition]. As you all know, we're working on an exhibit on DIY and I think one of the things that we're really interested in is the fact that DIY is a very flexible kind of idea. It's been around for a long time...one of the things we're really focusing on is this whole notion of instruction sets. I wonder if you can talk about whether DIY is a part of your...within the your sphere of influence or one of the things that is influencing your work, and if so, how – how is that happening?

Marc Fischer (MF): I think you had done some historical research that traced the term DIY back to like the late 1800s...

Lindsay Bosch (LB): In England, yeah.

MF: I first heard the term DIY in the mid-1980s in talking about the hardcore punk scene. In my naiveté I thought that that's where the term came from because it was used so commonly in that world. From that framework, I took DIY to mean putting out your own records, your own publications, organizing your own concerts for your friends...or bands doing work like that for themselves or people sharing resources and knowledge about places you could stay, cheap places you could find food, people making radio shows and recording them to cassette and sending them to people who would play the tapes on their radio programs. And people did these kinds of very grassroots things because there was no above ground interest in what they were doing, or the work would have been stifled in some way or neutered or otherwise would have been co-opted by larger consumer culture. I think a lot of that still fits with how we work, and it's certainly something that I feel that I brought to our work when we first started working together - that experience and that kind of understanding of DIY culture.

Brett Bloom (BB): Definitely the self-publications, the zine culture...Marc brought that to the group really forcefully right at the very beginning. Actually, it was before we were a group. We've kept such a tight grip on the freedom that self-publishing allows us. It's been a really critical way for us to articulate our practice for ourselves and for others. And I don't know that we really had a lot of conversations initially about the relationship between what

we were doing and DIY culture and a variety of other things. I think the reflection came much later, but maybe a year into it. I'm not really sure how long it took us to talk about it.

But there are other things informing our practice too that are probably parallel and really similar to the energy of DIY culture like the history of alternative art space organizing. There's this idea that you're not being accommodated by the dominant culture in terms of what kinds of...well, initially in terms of who can show in museums and galleries, but then later what kinds of things could be shown or what kinds of social relationships were possible in those spaces. So we come out of that too.

Salem and I, before Salem was working in Temporary Services, were involved with anarchist pirate radio in Chicago, and definitely that spirit was there but in different kinds of ways about creating autonomy for your ideas and politics. All these things were overlapping.

Salem Collo-Julian (SCJ): We reap the benefits of the history of people like enthusiasts and amateur archivists finding each other...like when Marc was talking about when he first heard the phrase DIY, I actually heard it through kind of the same punk, make your own shows, make your own events kind of spheres but I...remember reading it early on used to describe some of the feminist consciousness raising sessions and be-ins that women would host in their basements to talk about the new liberation within the late 1960s. This idea of creating your own culture through finding those people who you could connect with. And the other things that influenced what I like about like zine culture and self-publishing are all those wonderful mimeographed science fiction newsletters that people had been mailing to each other just kind of out of self-publishing networks. I remember seeing a lot of those at the old main Chicago Public Library. And they had these binders filled with sticky mimeographed pages...

KH: Really?

SCJ: Yeah, and they must still have them somewhere...

KH: Special collections?

SCJ: Yeah, I think maybe, like in the fiction area or something, because it's all people writing science fiction short stories. Sometimes noir-ish kind of short stories, detective...and then mailing them to each other. I guess that happened frequently from the 1970s back to the 1950s...so knowledge of those practices I think really helped. And now for us it's nice that the technology to make your own stuff is a lot easier to use, and cheaper to purchase. It's more accessible to a lot of different people. So now maybe someone who's in high school or in their early twenties who's starting to think about self-publishing can actually do it in their house with no problem. I think we're in a good age range because we still grew up with cutting and pasting for putting together our communications.

KH: So you really did grow up with...the beginnings of Temporary Services was pre-digital, at least pre-digital in terms of the internet?

BB & SCJ: Yeah.

BB: It was right at the cusp of when people started using email, but very few people were doing it and most didn't have computers powerful enough to use Photoshop or other large applications. The first booklet we made was all cut and paste... Most of them were the first

year...

MF: Yeah, we were making black and white laser copies to get a nicer image to photocopy from before scanners. But coming back a little bit to motivations, I guess if we think back to when we started working through our ideas...I don't think any of us expected each other to say, "Ok, well, we're going to start a group so we should get some government funding or maybe we could appeal to our patrons or collector base," [chuckles]... There wasn't any of that and we weren't really striving to make anything to be collected...

Doro Boehme (DB): There were never ever patrons...

MF: No. Our individual practices hadn't led to the forming of relationships with collectors who might become patrons for this activity...so there wasn't that to go to. And I think also with just the fast pace that we were working at, the amount of time it would take to find resources in order to do something in a more heavily funded way...We just didn't make time to find that funding.

We still kind of work in this way. Now it's more likely that we're given an opportunity by someone else and they give us a budget. There have been a million situations where it would have been advantageous to find more money than the budget provided, but that would have meant we would have created less work in order to take time to apply for money. Also, we've never been a not-for-profit which limits what we can apply for. We never had that designation. We never wanted to have the government saying we needed to have a board of directors, need to have annual meetings...

BB: We didn't want the government defining our relationships to each other.

MF: Yeah, so if you look at all of the alternative spaces that were government-funded in the past... Randolph Street Gallery would re-grant money to artists for their proposals from grant money they had acquired. They'd re-grant to support things like mail art projects or street flyer projects. Those are the kinds of things that, maybe, had we started five years earlier, we could have appealed to them for support. We could have taken advantage of them going through this whole rigmarole to get that money without us having to lose a lot of time doing it. But you know, when we started, I think the DIY methodology was really kind of all we were left with if we wanted to keep pace with our ideas, and retain the energy of lots of people bouncing things off of each other, appealing to our friends to contribute to projects...

SCJ: I think it's also kind of an easy decision for...for a lot of the people that we've always been working with and who are around our sphere it's not even a decision to do it ourselves. In order to get something done, why would we wait for a publisher to call or why would we wait for a space to call? I think just starting to work together and then in Temporary Services before I joined, everybody reiterated that for each other, "Well, why don't we just do this out here and start doing this project." I mean it's just a self-fulfilling prophecy. I don't ever remember at any point deciding, "Let's just do it ourselves." [laughs] You know? But it's more like, who else is going to do it for you?

KH/LB/BB: Right.

BB: We really benefited from both the collapse of the infrastructure for alternative spaces –

actually, I should say, the right wing dismantling of the infrastructure for alternative spaces – and critical practice. I do think we benefited from that and also an incredibly weak commercial art market that doesn't dominate the discourse in this city just because it can't – as much as people want to pretend that it's here, it really doesn't have that domination. So if you want to stay here and work, and have a vital and viable discussion, you have to create it yourself. There are a lot of people here who want to be doing that and it creates this sort of climate that's really supportive. It just all made sense right at the time when we started working together.

MF: I always felt that kind of generation gap...we're not so many years removed from some of these people, but you know when those artists like Karen Finley...when their grants were rescinded? I always remember feeling like, "They were expecting money from the government to do that work?!" You know? It seemed that they were of a generation in which you used to be able to really expect that, and because of that, sure, they were really pissed off when they had their money taken away. But I always remember feeling like, "How weird that they asked for funding." And I think that response comes out being involved with underground music and publishing. I wouldn't expect the government to give money so the Cheetah Chrome Motherfuckers could come from Italy to play in the U.S. [laughs] Of course the government wouldn't care. Of course they wouldn't support it, but Karen Finley expected it? I think again what Brett was saying in a different way, yeah, I think it is advantageous to not have ever counted on that money to be there and to build from within your own social network. To keep growing your own social network as this way of making tentacles, to not have to count on anything like that. Which is a really healthy thing – I don't think it prevented us from doing anything...

KH: Ironically enough, you know, with the whole Karen Finley, Andres Serrano, Jesse Helms phenomenon, in a weird way, probably did more for their careers than less for their careers...

SCJ: Oh, yeah.

KH: ...because suddenly they were on the map big time. Suddenly they became poster children for what republicans were trying to do to dismantle the fine arts. But it's interesting to hear you talk about that. It is a punk attitude, that "No, we're going to do it ourselves because if we don't do it ourselves we'll be co-opted." One of the things we're trying to really focus on for this exhibit is this idea of staying outside of the mainstream whether its technology or art. You touched on it a little bit in that you're not necessarily three artists, you're three people. There's sort of this desire to stay away from labels that in some ways, I think people definitely need to attach themselves to so that other people understand who they are. Are you really trying to intentionally stay outside of things and not really be necessarily considered artists with capital letters and quotation marks?

MF: Well, certainly, we've been getting opportunities at museum venues that more commonly deal with artists who are represented by commercial galleries, who have handlers who do things for them. And we continue to represent ourselves in everything we do. We don't have a gallery...if you contact us through our website, the emails go directly to each of us and not to a secretary or a studio manager who takes care of that. It's interesting getting those kinds of opportunities to work in institutions. And there are other people that get those opportunities who represent themselves, but certainly it's uncommon. Maybe it's becoming more com-

mon that there are people representing themselves who get these opportunities. We just were in a show in San Francisco and no one had gallery representation out of the three groups that were there.

DB: That was one of the questions we had, how suddenly this seems to be really on everyone's plate...

LB: Yeah, it's like, "You're doing a DIY show, oh my god! We've all been talking about DIY," [laughter] and I don't know...

DB: ...is this something you experienced too, or...

BB: You saw this incredible colonization of DIY a few years ago with magazines like *Readymade*...and now there's *Make*. And you see this glossy, this glossing over of this attitude. I think it's because of associations with punk, with anarchism, with this sheen of freedom in doing things yourself so this is an attempt to co-opt that. Yeah, it seems to be on the increase and this is sort of parallel to that and maybe no causal relation, but there's also an increased interest in people working in groups. Which is cyclical, I mean, it's like it happened before and again there's just this resurgence of interest. You can look at a lot of different reasons for that. Nobody's really sure why that's the case...

Getting back to this question about working inside or outside, we've kind of always done what we feel suits our desires and our needs and if it means like working with the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art to produce a project which 100,000 people see, that's great. But if we don't have that opportunity, we're going to work over here in this dingy traffic triangle on the corner of Western and Grand Avenue and explore ideas there. We always maintain this self-direction and autonomy and freedom that comes from us and not from the so-called opportunities from the outside. So we say no to a lot of things.

MF: A lot of artists, once they get those more mainstream opportunities act like they can't go backwards to work with the little person because then it diminishes the value of their work to do something for free somewhere else. For us, there really is not a hierarchy of importance between...

SCJ: It's because we define for ourselves what value our work has. And I think it comes out of this...I mean, I see it for myself as a feminist sensibility of how you deal with people in the world. You don't wait for others to give you your identity. So what Kevin was saying about us describing ourselves as people, for me in some ways that empowers the other person that I'm dealing with in that whatever connotations they might have with the words "artist", "activist" or any of those other things aren't there because then they can talk to me for a while and decide for themselves what category they want to put me in...

We've reaped the benefits of being involved with the money that comes through different institutions of art. We're happy to be able to bring something to an institution that we want to work with because then stuff spills over. Then that allows us to have time and maybe some money to work with another small space that's self-run that we wouldn't be able to afford to leave our homes and go to. Just defining our own worth in that way makes all of our relationships clear, too.

It also gives people like students the freedom to just contact us and there's not this sense of, "Well, I can't call this person to see if they would donate something to my booklet

I'm doing because they're represented by this gallery and I don't know how to deal with that." We constantly get emails from people who are like, "Yeah, I'm a sophomore at this state college and I just found your booklets and I downloaded all the stuff on your website and I don't know what it's going to take but I'd love to have you guys come out and can you talk to our knitting group on Thursday," you know [laughter]... that's amazing and wonderful... It's really great to continue to have these interactions and I don't ever want to get to a point where we don't have those kinds of interactions with people, you know?

BB: It really sucks when you see work you like and you want to find a way to share it with other people and you're met with this sort of like [in an authoritarian tone] "No, you have to contact my gallerist, and if you're not going to sell this or advocate for me in some way you're not going to get access to it." And it's just ridiculous. We have so much contempt for that way of thinking about creative work: corral it off, try to protect it to squeeze the most amount of whatever prestige and capital you can get out of it. It's the antithesis, I think, of why people care about and do art in the first place anyway.

SCJ: Yeah. It's like courting in the renaissance or something, you know, you can't just like, ask somebody out, you have to go through their courtesans or whatever, you know [laughter] and we don't live in that era so there's no reason to have that...

LB: We've been talking about your work so much lately because we think you have this dual aspect of DIY. You're like a do-it-yourself art collective and obviously you make your own booklets and organize yourselves in this do-it-yourself aspect but also the content of your work, and the stuff that you're making, and the people that you're working with on your project initiatives also have this do-it-yourself core to them. It's almost like your organization seems to be balanced by its content; am I right?

BB: Yeah, almost a can't-help-itself kind of quality with some of the people we work with...[laughter]

LB: Yeah, right? It's almost the appropriate organizational form for the stuff that you're making...

TS: Yeah, yeah.

SCJ: It's definitely more challenging, I think. We've all worked on our own along with larger organizations, with more formalized groups of people. There's definitely this safety net when there's something like a non-profit kind of model that you have to do things by or different ways to communicate and document what you're doing. But I think for us most of the time doing things our way always ends up in this amazing result. We're constantly having to talk about what we're doing and how we're going to collaborate with this other person, dealing with all of the personality difficulties of collaborating with people outside of the group...

MF: I think that there's really nothing we've done that we wouldn't be able to find the means to do eventually. We're not trying to make a Cremaster movie that costs a million dollars or something...

BB: Nobody should make that shit! [snickers and agreement]

MF: But I think it's a quality that's worth noting about most of the projects we do. I mean, they aren't frivolously extravagant no matter what the budget is and usually if there's a larger budget it gets sunk into making something reusable or something that could be re-circulated by people who didn't have the means to fund it the first time. Like when we went to pick up the cell fixtures from Angelo's prison cell at Mass MoCA. The agreement was that we were only going to get this furniture and the rest of the structure would be scrapped. Well we already had to be there with a truck so we asked the shop guys to chop up the walls and we wound up taking those too. We had to buy them some really good beer and whiskey but ultimately it saved Basekamp in Philadelphia a lot of money – which they did not have to spend.

Being able to take this thing that was paid for by someone else and apply it to a situation where there isn't money...every time we get a larger opportunity it always winds up being channeled to something smaller like this. We were invited to Los Angeles to do something in an empty lot. We're figured that since we have permission to use this lot, we may as well invite some people in Los Angeles to do things there too. It was a good opportunity for them and it made the project much richer. I think we'd probably feel intense guilt if we started being real wasteful when receiving these larger kinds of institutional opportunities if they weren't turned around a little bit. Like we have to get 1000 CDs made anyway, why don't we get an extra 500 or an extra 750? Or, they're already paying for a booklet so let's get another 500 copies of the booklet so we can give them away to people who couldn't travel to see the exhibit and get a free copy there.

SCJ: That aspect of what we do is...I think it's incredibly important to us because we've all reaped the benefits of other people having printing budgets that allowed them to mail all their stuff out to others. There are so many inspiring small projects that we've gotten from people that...

KH: So you were in fact inspired specifically by other things and you're carrying that on?

SCJ: I think the act of people remembering to be generous with the resources that they have...for us it's just, we like making these booklets for every project that we do and we're not going to make a bunch of booklets and sit on them, you know, give them to only a select number of people or anything. They're supposed to be out there for other people to read. But that always comes back to us. And then that's another way to meet new collaborators, find out what's going on in Croatia, find out what...

MF: All of us, as a group, but also individually, we've always had people that we have these regular information and material exchanges with. When Brett was going to Denmark and bringing back the newest publications N55 made, or I always get things from Bruno Richard in France, or Simon Morris in London...we sort of keep each other informed in this way and it provides everyone materials that they can use to share the work with other people...

BB: What, How, and for Whom (WHW) a curatorial collective in Zagreb gave me this huge stack of books and they just kept on piling, and I'm like, "Uh, my suitcase is getting too full," [laughter]. They're really generous.

DB: I just want to go back to what you said much earlier...we want to talk a little about Chicago too and how important it is for you to be here. You said the non-existent commercial art market kind of helps, but how do you see yourself situated in the city, apart from your

social network and how important is it to be in Chicago...

SCJ: For Temporary Services to be based here?

DB: Yeah. Is it important? Because with the show, DIY is such a vast topic, so we wanted to focus on Chicago...

LB: We were trying to figure out, is there a Chicago brand of DIY, or...

SCJ: There are so many different ones though really...

KH: And if there is, then you assume that in any other large city DIY replicates itself in similar ways?

DB: Right and it would be nice to try to tie Chicago into a more global thing but how important is it for you to be here?

SCJ: I think here there's this totally unconscious kind of DIY ethic. I mean that's at least the reputation that Chicago has as a city as opposed to other cities because it always had this reputation as a working city.

Definitely one benefit of being here is that there's so many colleges and there's many art departments... people are constantly coming in and out of this city, so you're constantly getting new perspectives on things that are going on. It's also the geography of Chicago in a way. I think it indirectly influences things that people do because it's such a great big city. It's so big that you can't easily get from the very northernmost end to the very southernmost tip without thinking about what you're doing. And because of that you could live here your whole life and still go to a neighborhood you've never gone to and find something that's been in that neighborhood. You know, doing things for ten years with people on that block. There's still this kind of sense of discovery in that. Even in this last year and a half, it feels like there's been a lot more smaller groups of people that aren't necessarily younger students, maybe collaborating for the first time, doing work, artists working with more traditional activists doing interesting things... I'm a Chicago booster...

BB: She was born and raised here.

SCJ: Yeah [laughter] and I can't imagine working from anywhere else, but we've talked a little about how we would work if the three of us were in different...

MF: If we weren't all in the same city...

BB: Which will probably happen at some point...

SCJ: We do so much stuff over email and using the internet that it would be easy, but...

BB: I think it has become increasingly less important that we're sort of rooted in Chicago, though there is this certain amount of strange respect we get for being from here when we travel. People know Chicago, and it's this sort of mythological place for a lot of people as a working place. I mean, it's where the movement for the eight-hour workday happened; it's

where the first May Day happened. It has this huge resonance for people. It's where all sorts of crazy ass speculative markets started for the first time. The futures market started here. It really has that weight for a lot of people so I don't know how that gets quantified in how we're treated when people hear Chicago. We get a certain amount of respect that I don't think you would get coming from another city in this country that isn't New York or L.A. There's a certain amount of credibility, weirdly that comes with it.

MF: Or at least there is familiarity... if you were from Milwaukee or something, people might have to stop and think, "Wait, where is that?" But I think once you've done the work to build this global network of people with some shared interests and shared audiences... it always sort of sticks with me that William Burroughs was living in Lawrence, Kansas forever and apparently wasn't hindered in any way by that. And obviously, with the internet, it certainly makes it much easier to stay in communication with people and exchange huge amounts of information, videos, large files, PDFs of publications.

Also in Chicago, people don't have the massiveness of the commercial art world like in New York breathing down their necks. I think there's not the same expectation that there might be these enormous financial rewards for you by being an artist in this city if you just do things the right way.

I think the people who stay here do so with kind of an understanding that money isn't going to magically fall into your lap just because you're going to be this enormous rising star by staying in this city...

DB: So do you see a difference then, now that you've traveled a lot internationally? Because what at least I remember from Europe funding was much more prevalent to artists than in the U.S. Do you see yourself different from groups in other countries?

MF: There are groups in other countries that get government funding and we don't. Or they can draw a salary for running a space like Mess Hall whereas we depend on a generous building owner letting us use the space for free...

DB: But then would that have implications on their work and on the structure of the group?

MF: Certainly on the structure, how they have to organize themselves and account for their time and activities. Even if you get to do whatever you want, as far as programming goes, you would still live in fear of someone different being elected, and everything falling away. Then how would they support it? There's no security... there's not security in the idea of our building owner letting us stay there forever either, but our livelihood isn't dependent on getting paid to do our work at Mess Hall.

KH: But again, if it goes back in some ways to this punk aesthetic of you do what you can do without changing what you're about to accommodate paying your bills or doing whatever. So if this landlord says you folks are out, we're going to put a trendy store in there, you either downgrade – I assume – that you either downgrade what you do until you can figure out another alternative... whereas I think some of those other things, they become defined by... and this is maybe in some sense what happened to Randolph Street. You know, you start to build up and up and up...

MF: I can imagine that if we could find another building owner who had a similar attitude,

and said hey, look, here's what we did with this place. It was given to us for free for 4 years, we're not going to fuck around, we are going to take this opportunity seriously if you want to give it to us...

KH: I guess all I'm saying is that there is a DIY attitude of, "We are going to figure out how to do it ourselves rather than be dictated to"... or maybe I'm projecting...

SCJ: I think that it just also comes back to this idea of you defining your own relationships and when you're dealing with a board or you're dealing with... if your funding for a project is solely coming from an entity outside of your own self, your own sphere of people that you have to deal with every day, then there's always going to be fear that your funding is going to dissolve. It's that "no job is permanent" kind of mentality. And maybe that's part of a Chicago reputation that I think plays into the idea of the DIY sensibility in that you are dependent on yourself and the relationships that you build on your own. I think that if the landlord of Mess Hall were to decide tomorrow that he needed to use the space for something else, I think all of us at Mess Hall would be able to bounce back and still do things. We're not dependent on him necessarily to do the things that we're doing.

MF: Someone just wrote an article that I read talking about what an artist should and shouldn't expect from their gallerist if you have commercial gallery representation. It was saying how if someone buys your work from the gallery, it's not really your business to ask who the buyer is. That's entirely the gallery's thing, and you shouldn't ask them. You shouldn't ask for or expect to get a copy of their mailing list of who's being informed about your show...

DB: I know, we all have friends who we went to art school with and they're individual artists fighting for their careers and there are horror stories.

BB: Exploitation is always built into the gallerist/artist relationship. It's really lopsided.

MF: And if that one relationship with the gallery ever collapses, by extension you'd lose the contact with everybody else.

SCJ: Yeah! That's scary!

MF: Yeah, it's terrifying...

SCJ: Like why would anyone want to put themselves into that position?

BB: Well for most people, that's crazy! [laughter] No, but it is! It's pathological.

MF: Like if we snubbed someone so they took away Temporary Services' email list. [laughter] And then we'd have to figure out who these people were that were getting our emails for 7 or 8 years or something. When you look at it that way, it would be a lot to lose, wouldn't it? It seems so obvious why you wouldn't want to enter into a relationship like that.

DB: But it's like you said earlier, maybe because all three of you grew up in that time period... when Kevin and I went to school it was all about elbows and eventually Castelli will call. It was this total thing that everyone had to fend for themselves.

BB: I guess in relationship to that and about Chicago, and there are some Chicago practitioners that have been incredibly important to us...

MF: Yeah, we should mention some good things too. [laughter]

BB: I wouldn't be working in this way if it weren't for Dan Peterman just giving me an opportunity. It was initially as casual as, "Come over to my building to make some video installation" and I came to him and I'm like oh, but I want to do this public art project and I ended up having an office there for three years and being exposed to lots of different kinds of ideas about how art can function in the world and really very little about galleries and museums. It was all directed in different ways, so that was really critical for my practice and important, and it fed into Temporary Services and the kind of things we provide with Mess Hall. So in that sense there are some Chicago roots that are really deep and really important.

MF: And Doro has been saving all of our printed materials at the Joan Flasch collection almost since the very beginning...

DB: I like to save things. [laughter]

BB: But that's been a tremendous amount of support...

MF: Yeah, then the material gets shared with students constantly...

DB: It was just so great for me to always get stuff from you because they're so different from what I always get.

MF: But there are very few archives like that, as you know. We've talked about people that are concerned with artist books or materials, and it feels like you can count them on a couple hands or something, for the people who are really devoted to it. I mean, it's this publishing practice that's so widespread - especially in music or creative writing, or politics, but there's really not the same kind of devotion to it in art. Or maybe artists don't value making their own publications. Perhaps they're waiting either for someone else to make the publication or the function of explaining your ideas is left to a critic if they decide to be interested in writing about your work.

DB: I think it's changing and I'm assuming that showing work like yours helps. I feel like students' attitudes are changing.

LB: Yeah, and the publications are one thing that we wanted to ask you about, particularly because they do have this kind of sense that we've been talking about. Like a do-it-yourself instruction set. You know, sharing your instructions with other groups and that kind of thing. So many of them are educational or have this kind of instructional bent - do you get the sense that they're being used for that, that they're being received by people that are taking your instruction in some way?

MF: We don't really talk about it much now because I think it's automatic, but I think we try to write in a way that's hopefully clear and not dependent on name-dropping or critical theory jargon or a tacit understanding of difficult texts that are en vogue. [laughter] I think that

maybe the booklets sometimes feel like they have an instructional quality because you can simply understand what the person is trying to say and how they did it? [laughter] Because I don't think of them as instructional in like "Here's how you make a project like ours." Sometimes they have that quality, but mostly a person should be able to read them and think, "Oh gee, here's how they did it, here are some of the problems they encountered along the way, you can see what they were trying to do," and you know, form follows function and maybe that's what gives it that instructional quality.

LB: They're instructional in the way, in just that your process is made so clear in them, you know? You could almost use them as a manual.

BB: It's definitely an attempt to demystify the process and celebrate what's important, and not rest on all these other things Marc was talking about - puffing a nothing up with a bunch of other nothing [laughter], which so many artists do! It's what makes so much art really tedious. We do have this idea of sharing our ideas and sharing our culture through these booklets and through our practice and that comes from just something of the nature of the way we're working, but also some of these other influences, you know, the zine culture.

Marc was heavily involved with it in high school and college. Copies of zines would be offered for free to prisoners. It was a really common thing to see that noted in the back of a zine. Or this group N55 that I was working with a lot - every one of their publications was directly a manual, like how to make your own hydroponics system, how to make your own housing system, how to make guerrilla fish gardens. Some really insane things, but it was completely about sharing. Like sharing information, making it free, setting it free, putting it out here, and asking or demanding that others build upon it or react to it. It's a much more interesting way than splitting hairs, like "my painting references this, this, this, this, and this," [laughter] and just trying to build off of that really controlled, contrived way of situating work with other work. So I see the way we do it as really the opposite of that.

DB: And do you get feedback from people? Do you feel like your instructions are arriving?

BB: Sometimes...

SCJ: I think it's more that we get people who say, "Hey, I did this similar project," or "I've been dealing with a similar concern," or "Here's my self-published thing," so it's been more of a parallel rather than...

MF: There have been some concrete things though. A couple of instances come to mind. Our Public Sculpture Opinion Poll project had this kind of effect: there was a teacher who was having students approach people directly conducting opinion polls as a class assignment. And Cindy Loehr has been using the Mobile Sign Systems booklet with her students in Milwaukee. They're making sandwich boards and doing public projects, which of course we copied from just seeing it in the world anyway. So it's not that novel...

BB: We got a really nice letter from somebody recently who saw Prisoners' Inventions at Mass MoCA and actually got involved with prison activism because of that, so it's not necessarily making artwork, but it's some sort of impact. It happens probably in the other work we do too. We all work outside the group. I've been involved with publishing other books, and you get direct feedback from people organizing groups directly in relation to the content

so I think it happens a lot more than we probably realize it's going on. I think people just don't tell us about it all the time...

SCJ: Our intentions are not necessarily that someone is going to pick this up and be inspired or be educated or replicate a project or anything like that. A lot of times I feel like we're making the booklet for ourselves.

KH: It's not didactic.

SCJ: Yeah, well, we're trying not to be. But I think sometimes, when there's some space and time for it, I can look at something we did last year or the year before and see how it could be used as a teaching tool, in the way that a lot of the RE/Search publications have become that. I'm thinking about their book on pranks with all of those great interviews. I can't imagine that anybody would potentially develop a curriculum around that book but you could definitely use a lot of it.

BB: I use it, when I teach...

SCJ: Well, anyone outside of our group. [laughter]

BB: There's also something about our projects, too... We recently had an amazing experience with a bunch of students in Lafayette, Indiana. They have one of our Audio Relays, this autonomous radio station that Brennan McGaffey created, and they've really taken it and used it beyond our expectations. They really made it their own, and a part of what they're doing. It's just been incredible to see them do that. They're not saying, "This is a Temporary Services project so we're just going to put it over here and look at it," but more like "No, we're just going to incorporate it because it extends what we're doing." That also makes Temporary Services' practice better... The way it has been used has been so exciting.

KH: I think that's what Lindsay's talking about with this idea of instruction set, that somebody looks at it and says they're either inspired by it or they say oh yeah, this is what I've always wanted to do but I didn't realize you could do it. They're doing it, so I'm going to go ahead and do it and I'm going to put my own little spin on it.

MF: Yeah. There's someone else who just contacted us from the U.K. about wanting to take the Audio Relay on a boat to use in conjunction with a project that they're working on. They saw it in a museum but then they were fortunately able to mentally move beyond that situation and think, "Oh yeah, this could be used for that application." They got in touch with us directly and we responded. Hopefully it will happen.

We did make these nine Strategies posters of these various strategies for working in public and those were more clearly suggestive than usual as something you might actually follow, but those probably are the least followed. [laughter]. But actually in Puerto Rico, they wound up creating a whole – this is like a "be careful what you wish for" situation... We were in this exhibition, a biennial in Puerto Rico that favors a lot of outdoor, public projects frequently done without permission. The organizer, MM Proyectos, had a real budget crisis in dealing with how to shelter fifty to sixty artists. And because we sent them all of our printed stuff, they had these posters. And one of the strategies was a suggestion that you just make a whole city out of tents. So sure enough, they were like, "Oh, this is a solution!" [laughter]

So they wound up getting a whole bunch of two-person tents, because the cost of putting everyone in a hotel would have been astronomical. They have a relationship with a packing materials company that provided huge slabs of Styrofoam and a foam slab that went on top of that, and every tent had two of those, one set for each person in the tent. It was really comfortable, so much better than an air mattress.

SCJ: And I think it conceptually worked with the theme that year too.

MF: There was this group of people who dealt with resolving this issue of what the whole encampment would look like, how it would function and they solved it from seeing that poster, [laughter] which is pretty amazing! I don't know how many people would thank us for that, [laughter] but ultimately they wouldn't have been there at all if they had to have been put up in a hotel, because it would have been impossible. It might have been ten artists and that would have been totally uninteresting. The social dynamic at the camp site that all of the tents allowed for was quite amazing.

DB: It seems so seamless, the way you trace the development of your group, like everything just fell into place and then grew.

MF: Well, I think it's willed into place. [laughs]

DB: Was there ever a point where you thought, "No, this is not really the direction we want to go with our work?"

SCJ: Yesterday. [laughter]

DB: Was there ever a point where you really thought, we have to change to do this?

BB: We have conversations about the long-term trajectory, but we've actually been putting off that conversation for about...

SCJ: Two years...

BB: ...for about two or three years now. But the way we work, is that if we're not interested in something, we don't do it. It's always been a really healthy thing. We don't even really bring projects to the table anymore that we kind of know the others won't work on. So I think we have a really good process for making sure we're interested in what it is we're doing. Sometimes things just don't work out, but you go forward. I think we were really dissatisfied with the Strategies posters. But we ended up coming back to some of those ideas in a more complicated way a couple of years later. A lot of it is just building up the same ideas over and over again, just with different inflections.

MF: If years and years went by and absolutely no one was interested in any of this crap that we were doing, of course that would be really difficult. Mess Hall had a pretty slow... it took probably a year of all of us and the other people running Mess Hall before it felt like it was actually on the map and being paid attention to and cared about and before people wanted to do things there. It took a while before we could count on pretty decent attendance for things. Early on we might have an event and two people would show up. If you were met with that

over and over and over again, I think it would be hard for a group to maintain morale. If you're actually dealing with the physical, in-your-face reality of absolutely nobody caring about something you did, when it's localized in that way, or if you travel and there's absolutely no interest... you go to this place and you put all this work into something and it's obvious that nobody in that place cares about it at all - that would be really dispiriting I think. Bands face this in a brutal way when they tour and play in near empty clubs.

We've had things happen that were unsuccessful, but we also work at a brisk enough pace that the disappointment gets cancelled out. And because we do so many projects and present them in so many places, if there's one bad article or a piece of press that shows a complete misunderstanding of what we were trying to do... we can deal with it. For a lot of artists, it's very infrequent that their work is written about, so it can be devastating if their work is written about badly because the work is written about so infrequently. I think we have kind of countered that problem by making our own publications early on [laughter] so at least we knew that something would turn out [laughter] within our own control and it would be written about as clearly as we could state it. And if someone else fucks it up...

LB: It's another DIY thing, in a way...

BB: Yeah, like make your own press. [laughter]

KH: You did say early on how important it is to write about your own stuff, and that the booklets were really critical... I also wonder if you're completely aware of the small adjustments you've made when you get to someplace and you realize that the response isn't as big as you thought it was. Do you then talk about it, and say, "Well, we shouldn't do something like that again?" Because you were kind of saying that if nobody was interested in your work... my assumption is if nobody is interested in your work, you're getting that as a feedback and you're making adjustments accordingly because you don't want to be irrelevant. But I just wondered is there an active way where you talk about failures and say, "wow, why did that go wrong?" or...

MF: One of the things that gets really hard when you're dealing with other people organizing things that include you is maintaining the information on their end and making sure that they understand what your ideas are. It's important to make sure that they actually get it... also that people are credited properly. Those are mini-failures that happen quite often; we'll realize that we didn't talk to the organizer enough to help them understand our work, or we shouldn't have waited for them to ask.

I feel that pretty often - that maybe we need to micro-manage things a little more than we would like to. These failures are easy to assess because then you get there and there's an inaccurate exhibition text at the beginning of the show, or an incorrect printed brochure or something that comes out in the press that's probably all screwed up because of how the press release was written and often it's a problem from both sides. You're not consulted, so you didn't really register that the thing was written to begin with and then it's too late by the time it happens. This becomes complicated when we do projects that include other people and the emphasis is placed too much on us and not on our collaborators. So those things are really easy to assess. It's harder to assess if viewers are coming to an exhibit and not understanding it when the show is at a place that you weren't able to travel to because there wasn't enough money to send someone there to show how it is installed or to explain it to the people who are going to be talking to viewers who come to see it...

SCJ: I think the method of how we determine how successful a project is has evolved and changes depending on the project before in some ways. I don't think any of us have ever had a time when we determined the success of a project based on who showed up at the opening. I guess it's a very human thing, you want to see your friends there, you want to see a good amount of people actually looking at it and interacting with whatever you brought. And so in the last couple of years, we've had that in mind sometimes when we've had more autonomy in what's going on in an exhibition. We'll often think about all the different kinds of events that would bring a more diverse group of people out to an art-based space and things of that nature. That's something that's really expanded the more we've all been involved in Mess Hall and we've been dealt with the problem of how to get people into that space.

MF: Also, sometimes some of the most vital things do happen for only twelve people.

SCJ: Yeah, right.

MF: There are just some things that wouldn't succeed if they were over-attended. The energy or the dialogue would get too fragmented or dispersed. You can have a more focused intensity with a smaller group of people. Our old office space we had downtown, became a really hard place to be in if there were too many people. Mess Hall is the same way. You just can't fit that many people in the space. So success isn't only determined by having large numbers of people show up.



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