

From a book to be published in October, 2006,  
in connection with an exhibition of Harrell Fletcher projects at  
Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Centre d'art contemporain, Bignan, France.  
[www.art-kerguehennec.com](http://www.art-kerguehennec.com)



*Wallet Pictures*, 1998. SF Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco CA. Museum visitors were asked to show pictures they kept in their wallets. The pictures were rephotographed with a medium format camera on a camera stand in the lobby of the museum. In six hours 150 pictures were rephotographed. From that group ten images were selected, enlarged to 30X40 inches and framed to be included in the museum's permanent collection. Collaboration with Jon Rubin.

## Harrell Fletcher

interviewed by Allan McCollum

WE GENERALLY EXPECT OUR ARTISTS TO BE MORE INTERESTING people than those from other walks of life, and we reward them for their special abilities to help the rest of us find complexity of meaning, beauty and even grandeur in the world around us. So when an artist attempts to sidestep that mythology and chooses a project that shifts the attention away from himself to the capabilities of other people, it's not an easy task; such efforts can be hard to read without prejudice. Harrell Fletcher, an artist originally from California and now living in Portland, Oregon, has taken it upon himself to turn the spotlight onto others. With a dedicated, empathic intelligence, he treats us to the joy and poignancy of appreciating our fellow humans by walking a difficult line between artistic skill, organizational savvy and anonymity.

Interview took place on July 29, 2005 in New York City  
(*images and captions are from the artist's website*)

**Allan McCollum:** One of the things I enjoy about your work is the way that the meaning of it doesn't reside in any one piece. In fact, if you take a look at any one piece you might pass over it; they're often so simple and easy to describe. But when you start looking at project after project after project, it seems to go into the hundreds, and then you get into your *Learning to Love You More* website and there's a couple of thousand more projects to look at, then pretty soon you start realizing that your work is best understood when you take a look at everything, a lot of small projects, and at the way everything is *balanced*—and then a certain set of *values* comes through. You're not trying to produce singular masterpieces, like what we generally expect from an artist. And this is one of the ways you turn things on their head all the time, and it constantly takes me by surprise. Like the way almost all your work is totally about people other than yourself. A lot of the things that we expect an artist to do, you do backwards.

**Harrell Fletcher:** That's true. I saw the structure of how an artist is supposed to operate, but most of those structures didn't feel comfortable to me. At a certain point, while I was still in graduate school, I just started realizing that I didn't have to go the normal course. I could just do what seemed like the right thing for me to do.

**AM:** How did you perceive the 'normal course' while you were in school?

**HF:** Well, it's so concentrated in graduate school. You see all of these people going into their studios. They're all making objects, paintings, whatever, and they're spending hours and hours doing that. It's really supposed to be about isolating yourself from the world. Maybe there is a wall of inspirational pictures from magazines or something like that, but otherwise that's the extent you're supposed to be interacting with the world.

**AM:** Where did you go to school?

**HF:** I went to Humboldt State for three years, the San Francisco Art Institute for one year, and then the California College of Arts and Crafts. I was coming from a photography background, which took me into the world already. That was part of what I did, going out and finding things in the world to document. But, I remember talking with one of my professors, Larry Sultan, early on before I decided to go to CCAC, and saying I was frustrated by the system in which art was shown, that I just wanted to make booklets and hand them out on the street. That was my impulse, rather than trying to find a gallery to show my work in.

**AM:** I never would have guessed that your impulse to do these projects came from photography.

**HF:** I think so. I was looking at work that was quasi-journalistic; people who were doing documentary, but trying to create new forms of documentary. I was interested in different views on how to document the world, but I was doing my own form of that. Also, I had come to the conclusion that I didn't have access to galleries. I didn't know the system. In the Bay Area, as opposed to New York, it's just not immediately evident that there are all these galleries and you can try to have shows. It seemed unrealistic completely when I was 22. So I just started making books. I realized I could make books. And that became almost like an exhibition that I could go hand to someone and they could get the entire idea.

**AM:** In the same way a photographer can put together a book of photographs.

**HF:** Except, I was just making one of a kind, individual books. And then I started making the Xerox books and that led to these other kinds of publications projects. I made about 30 books that were just one of a kind, photography...

**AM:** What happened to those books?

**HF:** I still have them. They've never been shown. This is one of those things that I was thinking about in relation to what you were saying, your first comments, about this overall set of work that is best seen together. When I got to graduate school, I had a teacher, Larry Sultan, who I was doing independent study with. For the first semester, whenever he would ask to see work, I would just give him a few of those books to look at that I made years before graduate school. At one point, he said, Why aren't you showing me any new work? And I said, I'm trying to make you into my ideal viewer. I want you to be completely prepared before I show you anything new to know exactly where I'm coming from. It was as if I was trying to show him 30 exhibitions I'd done, but they were all contained within these books.



*Some People From Around Here...* 1997 Interstate Highway 80, Fairfield CA. Six 8'x8' portraits painted on plywood and placed along the freeway outside of the City of Fairfield. The portraits depicted everyday people from the local community. During the three months the project was installed an estimated 10 million people saw it while driving by. Collaboration with Jon Rubin.

million people a week going by the piece. That was the audience. It was commuters, people in their cars and the people themselves who were represented and their friends and neighbors. Those people had this kind of thrilling experience of suddenly seeing a person they knew, or the person who has a restaurant that they go to everyday, being treated the way they are used to celebrities being treated.

**AM:** So you were thinking about the people of Fairfield and the other folks who are just driving by on the highway, both at the same time.

**HF:** Yes. See, the thing about it is that part of the thrill for those local people who are represented was knowing not that piece wasn't just for their friends to see, but for all those other people who don't know them. That's the difference between a normal citizen and a celebrity, people who don't know them or care about them can recognize their faces.

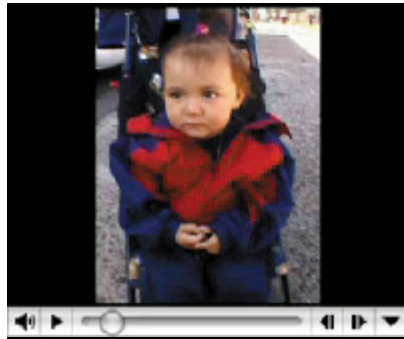
**AM:** Okay, so you've got the big portraits along the highway, and you've got local people *and* out-of-towners driving by, seeing them. You've got their friends. Then, you've got *the Internet*, you've got images of the project on the internet [see: <http://harrellfletcher.com>]. That's where I saw it, and I live in New York City 3,000 miles away, I'm a part of the "art world." So, now you've got the art world audience looking at the works, not just the people in the small town of Fairfield and the commuters passing by. All artists have to think about their audience, but it's especially complicated with you when you work with these small communities and their everyday local people.

**HF:** At the time the piece was done I didn't know that would happen. I was trying to make work that would function without special art knowledge so that people can access it in direct way, which might also be incredibly complex based on their own personal histories and the associations that they make with the work. And at the same time, because I am an artist and I have knowledge of the history of art, often times that goes into the work too. I think you can have multiple readings. Sometimes, having an art world type reading takes you away from the actual experience.

**AM:** Alright, well that's significant to me because if I take a look at what you do, so much of it seems to have been done for what might be called a fairly narrow audience. Like those signs along the highway in that small town of Fairfield, California, the big eight-foot blown up painted plywood cut-out portraits of local people, *Some People from Around Here*. Clearly, the chosen audience is the local townspeople, right?

**HF:** In that case the main audience was really the commuters who went to Sacramento from The Bay Area, who never stopped in Fairfield. Caltrans told us that there were about a

**HF:** In the case of that baby video for a show here in New York at [Christine Burgin's](#), when I was asking the parents if I could videotape their babies and telling them that it was for an art exhibition, their immediate reaction was that somehow I was going to manipulate the images, do something to them that would distort their baby or would associate their baby with something they didn't want. And I would tell them that I was just going to show one baby after another. I'm not doing anything to them. It's that simple. I just wanted an opportunity to look at babies, and the way that their parents sort of decorate them.



*Babies (NYC)* 2004. Still from Quicktime video.

**AM:** Did you have to show them other works you'd done in the past?

**HF:** No, because it was all just happening on the street. It was a terrifying thing to have to ask people to videotape their babies. I had my friend Lisa Levine come with me. It's one those situations where the expectation is that, as an artist, you're going to manipulate the piece, you're going to do something strange to the baby's image. And in a way, they were mediated, they were turned into a video, and they were shown in relationship to each other. But I didn't suddenly throw in some other element.

**AM:** No. And also, with that particular piece, you let the camera run long enough on each baby that it didn't just become some sort of abstract collage of jump-shots, like a light show. That was a clear decision that you made that another artist might not have made. That showed a deep respect, it seemed to me, so I know what you're talking about. And that video is also available on the Internet now, right?

**HF:** Right.



**AM:** OK, so, while you moved beyond photography, this kind of practice informs many of the projects you have done since. I'm interested to hear about your project you call your *Reports*, where you produce these brief three or four sheet write-ups that itemize interesting facts about an individual, by talking to a person, and then publish them as downloadable PDF files on your website. So how long have you been doing the *Reports*?

**HF:** Maybe three years. I was talking with an artist friend and he was saying how an article was going to come out in an art magazine about his work and then it didn't. I knew the feeling—expectation and hope and then you're wondering, is this going to be a good article? How's it going to represent me? What's the effect going

*The Report*, 2003. I make a little xerox publication called *The Report*. Its like a template that I fill in with dictated notes and drawings from conversations I have with various interesting individuals. Each issue focuses on one person.

to be when people read the article? You really feel at their mercy. So I said, you know, you should just make your own art magazine about your work and represent it however you want, and just put it out there. And he said, he didn't think he could do that.

And I said, maybe I'll do it. Maybe I'll just do a report on you and your work. And then I thought, why don't I just do this with all sorts of people who are interesting. I'll give them a chance to identify what they want to talk about, represent themselves, and I'll put it out there in a way so that both regular people and the art world can have access to them. And I'll include contact information. So it becomes a promotional piece, but a very particular one, and at the same time functions as my work too.

**AM:** I'm curious, why haven't you done more? It seems like if you went to a nightclub and sat there, or spent all day on a street corner and you could do a thousand of them.

**HF:** I don't know why I haven't done more of those, other than just that a lot of these things that I do seem really easy but are actually difficult for me and require me to be in a certain mindset. I think that is one of the confusions about me and my work—the work seems so social, it involves so many kinds of interactions with all these different people, so it is assumed that I'm a very social person and that I'm someone who's comfortable doing this stuff all the time. In reality, it takes a lot of time being totally alone, avoiding people, avoiding social interaction, so that I can be ready to do my work.

**AM:** When you do a report do you do the whole thing while you're with them, right on the spot?

**HF:** Yeah, it all happens right there. They get to look at it, cross things out, change it.

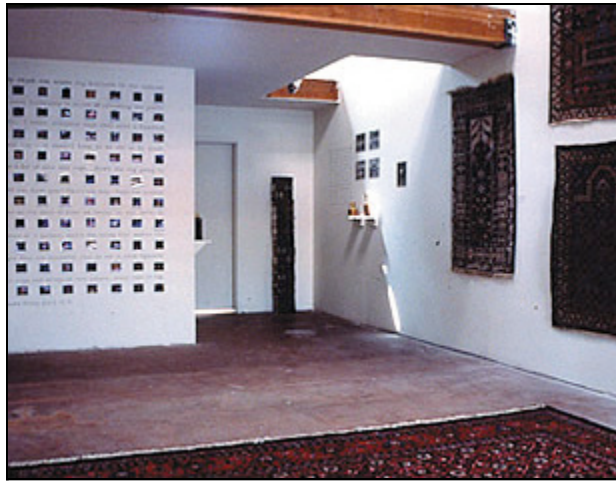
**AM:** So, it doesn't take very long.

**HF:** Usually about an hour. It's done as kind of an interview/conversation. I have a template. It's only four pages long. I sit down, I write the person's name in, I write the issue and the date, and I say, what things do you want to talk about and how do you want me to represent these on the first page because it's sort of an index to what we'll talk about in the publication. They'll say, they want it to be a circle or to be a list. Then once we've gone through that, we have from five to twenty topics, then I say, can you tell me about this particular topic, then they'll go into that one. And then I'll say, Can you draw a picture of that, and then I hand it to them and they draw an illustration. They hand it back to me, and they dictate to me again and I write down what they say. Usually, it leads wherever, and we only cover two or three topics out of the list of possibly 20. But, the reason I want to include the whole list on the front is just to show the range of this person's interests. So if you meet them, maybe you want to bring up one of those other topics.

-



**AM:** It's interesting, there's a lot of chance encounters involved in your work, you often develop large, complicated projects with people you simply happen to meet in the neighborhoods you find yourself in for one reason or another. The one that comes to my mind is the project you did with the rug merchant, and that was when you were still a student?



**HF:** Yeah. It was still in my first year of graduate school. In 1993. That was a collaboration with another artist, Jon Rubin. We had decided not just to do some projects in the neighborhood, but to start a gallery. The gallery became a structure. Then, we needed to figure out what the content was going to be. So, we decided that it would be situations, people, environments within that neighborhood. We decided on a five block radius around the gallery, everything had to come from there. And the rug store show with Albert was the first show we did. His store was just across the street from the gallery.

*Gallery HERE*, 1993-95, Oakland, California. Jon Rubin and I started Gallery Here while we were still in Grad School at CCAC. We borrowed a vacant retail building that was in the neighborhood where we lived. For a year and a half until the building was rented we put on a series of shows about people and places in the neighborhood. One show was about a man named Albert who owned a rug store across the street from us. For another show we had people's garage sales in the gallery and put story tags on all of the stuff that was for sale. Other shows were about a man's apartment court yard garden, a huge cement boat that had been built in a vacant lot, and burritos that were available in the neighborhood.

**AM:** I'm also remembering the SFMoMA piece about people who happened to be walking into the museum off the street, your asking to see the photos they carried in their wallets, and re-photographing them for your exhibition, involving the museum-goers' personal lives in your work. And your project with the Tamarind Institute, involving the collection of artworks in the restaurant that happened to be down the street. You often work to contextualize a gallery space by involving yourself with people from the surrounding neighborhood. Do you see one's relationship to a neighborhood as allegorical? What we engage in the world versus what we ignore?



*Come Together*, 2003. Det fynske Kunstakademi, Odense, Denmark. I spent a week teaching a workshop at an art academy in a small city in

**HF:** Okay. Well, one of the things that I do want to say is that, knowing that I'm going to be working with a particular neighborhood, even though it was a self-imposed structure in that early project, it suddenly changed my ability to see what was there. Just as you're describing, very quickly, we prioritize what's important to us. The shoe store where you get your shoes is important and the other store that you don't buy anything from loses its importance. It's the same thing that we do with people, and whatever is directly related to us, we care about. Anything that is not, we don't. And that's how I think that vast atrocities can, occur. You know, they're *the*

Denmark. Many of the students complained that the city was uninteresting. I also found that most of the local community didn't know anything about the art academy. In response to this dynamic I asked all of the students to go out into the city and find someone to do a ten minute lecture on the topic of their choice. We then had a public event with free food and drinks and about fourteen guest lecturers who spoke on a variety of topics including furniture polishing, scuba diving, care of the elderly, skateboarding, playing music on the street, itinerant fruit picking, etc. The event last over four hours and was, I thought, extremely fascinating.

*other*, we don't really care. Thousands of Iraqis can die, we're just going to keep on going with our lives. So in that early project I thought It's going to be something in this neighborhood, suddenly my eyes opened up and I could see things. I had already been living in that neighborhood for six months or something like that. And all of a sudden, the rug store, and an apartment courtyard garden, things that I wasn't paying attention to, I started paying attention to. And, I started seeing a value in them. So, by giving myself that structure, I was able to value those things. It was similar to what had occurred earlier, when I would walk around with a camera as opposed to not walking around with a camera. I suddenly realized that I could see what was interesting. I wanted to document and show what I

documented to people. Sometimes you need something like that, a structure or a device that forces you to look and value things. Otherwise, you're just not going to do it because the way we are socialized is to be incredibly egotistical. What I'm doing is sensitizing myself through this process. I then can make what I see available to people who haven't chosen to do that.

**AM:** Okay. But choosing the rug merchant, is different that what you did in the *Come Together* project that you did here in New York at Apex Art, and which you've done in other a number of places. With the *Come Together* projects, you ask other people to choose *other* people who then chose topics on which to give ten-minute public lectures—you're like three steps removed. Did you decide to do the *Come Together* piece at Apex Art to solve a problem, the three steps removal?

**HF:** See, if I was here, I could potentially spend a few weeks finding 26 people who I thought could do a ten minute lecture on something they cared about that would be interesting. You know, that's even a potential project I might do sometime. But, in this case I created a strategy, some people don't like the word strategy, especially in relationship to art, but anyways, to create a strategy that will work within whatever the limitations are that I have. I didn't have very much time, and it was in a place that I didn't live. So, I realized that I had a certain resource. I knew a number of people in New York. But, they were largely connected to the art world. I wanted to do something that's not about the art world. So, how do I do that if all the people I know are part of the art world? Normally, what I would do is just go for a walk. But, I wasn't here to go for a walk, so what I did was I asked everybody else to go for a walk.

—

**AM:** So, I want to first mention the garage sale projects that you did with the tag stories. The description I read on this project doesn't tell me the whole thing—every object on display had a tag on it, telling a story that went with the object? And these were objects from the neighborhood?

**HF:** Each time, it was just one person's garage sale, an entire garage sale from one family. I had them dictate to me. They would walk around, identify an object and I'd say, What's the significance of this one? And they would tell me and I'd write it all down and I'd type it all up onto a typewriter.

**AM:** You did that yourself?

**HF:** Yeah, that's what I offer sometimes, something that I think other people would not want to have to do. It's like I become the assistant or the secretary. I've transcribed so much tape in my time, or whatever it happened to be. A lot of the times, I'm offering myself up for that. That becomes a big part of what my work is. It's sort of, almost like grunt work for somebody else to get their words out there, or lecture, or their set of photographs or whatever it happens to be. And I've always been very particular about that work too. I can't trust that aspect to other people. For some reason, that has always seemed sort of crucial to me. When it comes to something as simple as someone dictating and then transcribing a piece of text, I always felt like I could do that well. That was always one of those skills I had. I could turn somebody's speech into something interesting by just making sure that I really included everything, or started or stopped at a certain point, or whatever it takes...

**AM:** A poetics skill.

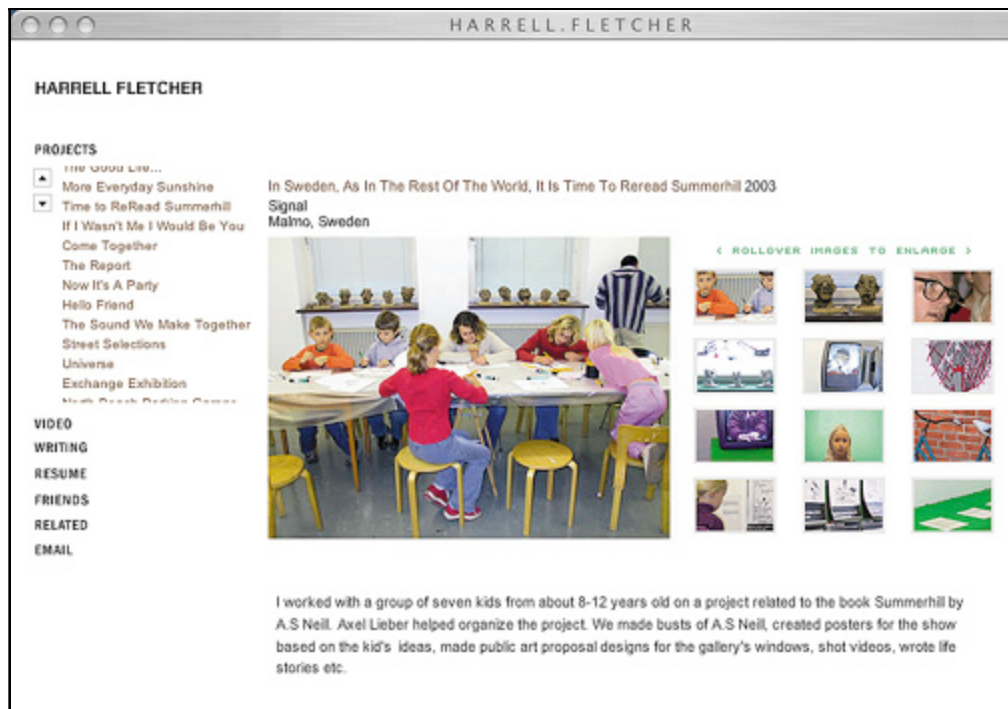
**HF:** Really, it's kind of like that. And it is one of those things that nobody talks about and nobody appreciates or acknowledges because it doesn't seem like anything. It doesn't seem like anything happened.

-



*Gallery HERE, 1993-95, Oakland, California.* For another show we had people's garage sales in the gallery and put story tags on all of the stuff that was for sale. Other shows were about a man's apartment court yard garden, a huge cement boat that had been built in a vacant lot, and burritos that were available in the neighborhood.





**AM:** Almost all of your projects I only know from the Internet. And if the World Wide Web had not blossomed, if you had not used the Internet, it seems to me you might have a very different career, your body of work would have a very different way of finding meaning. A lot of these community projects might have just disappeared, as they say, like tears in rain, over a course of time. But, the Internet allows them to not only endure in the minds of the local people, but to be known to anyone at any time, all over the world. I want to know how the Internet came to be a part of what you do. Has the internet has changed your work? Do you feel that it frees you, or solves problems for you?

**HF:** I think that it wound up being a really ideal context for me to show my work because it allowed me to make ideal viewers who know about all the work that I've done.

**AM:** As a construct, you mean? A kind of mental construct of an ideal viewer, but one that doesn't actually exist in the real world?

**HF:** The potential is out there to actually know most all of the work through the web site. A well-recognized New York artist like yourself can know about the projects I was doing in my neighborhood in Oakland. At the time that I started that would have seemed impossible to me. I was thinking about books, and doing enough publication projects that eventually a lot of people would start to see them—that they would collectively add up. But...

**AM:** But, how did you think people would know about them?

**HF:** Well, that's the thing. I just sort of felt like, they're not going to know about me. The projects are going to disappear, and they'll be just a memory trace of these things that'll start to add up.

**AM:** Add up in some sort of metaphysical way or something, like building up good karma?

**AM:** Let me ask you more about audience. You know, I suppose we all have the ideal audience in our heads. It's like, we have the ideal lover or whatever. And, some of us go through our whole lives living in a narcissistic universe, thinking that everyone is aware of what we're doing and yet nobody is aware of what we're doing. Or, we think people care and they don't care.



**HF:** Well, the thing is...I'm always trying to fight off the ego and the narcissism that I think is...

**AM:** Gee, from your work I wouldn't have guessed that. *(laughter)*

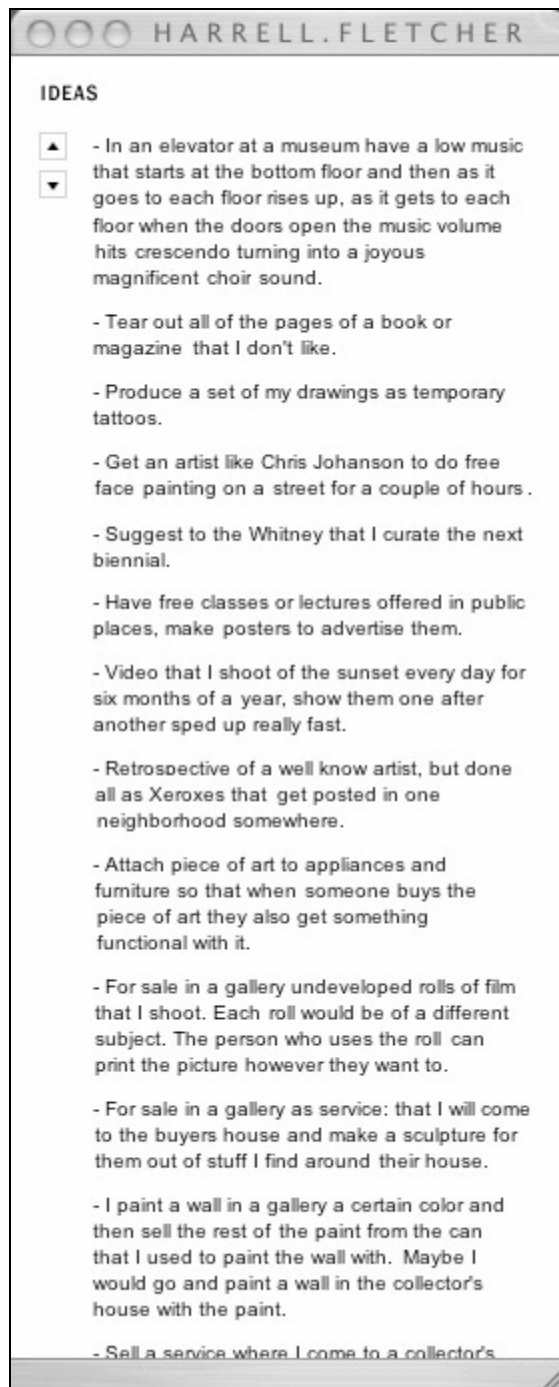
**HF:** It's a funny sort of balance because on the one hand, and people point this out sometimes, ultimately, even working with all of these people, and I'm giving them credit and using their names and trying to promote them, the work still falls under the heading of a Harrell Fletcher project or something. So obviously there is still a lot of ego in my work.

*The Sound We Make Together, 2003. DiverseWorks, Houston TX. Video projection and poster series. I had various groups of people from Houston: a baptist choir, a meditation class, a break dance group, dogs from a dog park, and ten other groups doing what they normally do but in the gallery space. The video projection sort of recreated them being there one after another. I made a poster for each group, copies went up all over Houston and were also exhibited at the gallery.*

**AM:** I wonder about that, it can be almost impossible for an artist with any kind of contemporary art world orientation to do projects with community people, without a knee-jerk negative response from critical studies academics, that you're somehow using people for your own ends, that there's something "colonialist" or patronizing about working with everyday folks. People suspect cynicism. Do you run into this kind of criticism often?

**HF:** That kind of response to my work came up a lot until recently, I'm not sure what has changed, but I'm accused of exploitation much less often now. I think there has been a climate change in the art world in regards to socially engaged work. My response to the question of exploitation was that in many ways the people I work with are actually using me. Not that I think that is a bad thing. In the end there is a certain amount of mutual exploitation or in other words reciprocity in the work. I think that's a good thing. We are helping each other out. I work with people to give me different perspectives and content than I can come up with on my own, they work with me to be enabled to do things they otherwise wouldn't have access or skills to do. In other professions that is a normal dynamic. Even in something as closely related to visual art as theater it is normal for a director to have overriding control while actors play their part and add their individual abilities to a larger piece. No one suggests that a regional theater director is exploiting non-professional actors in working with them on a play. But in visual arts there is a sense that working with non-artists means that you are automatically exploiting them, rather than enabling them. Sometimes that's a justifiable criticism of socially driven art, but in my case I don't think it is.

-



Ideas listed on the artist's website

that people are going to steal your ideas if you list them on the website? Are you that confident that you have so many ideas?

**HF:** Well, I guess there are various aspects to that. One of which goes way back to when I was making these little booklets in graduate school, and I was very intentional about not trying to copyright them. I knew a lot of people who were doing things like that. And they were always talking about copyright and not letting people copy what they did and my feeling was, go ahead and copy what I do because, I don't care if it gets distributed in a new way by being Xeroxed, and

**AM:** I want to ask you about the list of ideas you keep on your website, all those ideas for art projects you might do in the future, it seems related to the way your work almost always refers to someone else other than yourself; it's a kind of unexpected generosity. It's one of the ways that you turn things on their head, and I'm curious about how self-conscious you are about that. Obviously, artists are known for being egotistical, narcissistic, introspective, philosophical about their lives, they're expected to be expressive of who *they themselves are*. It's a cliché. And of course artists are always very competitive, and proprietary about their ideas, their own territory.

**HF:** Yeah.

**AM:** But there's something very blunt about the way you question the need to inject your own narcissism into things. (*laughter*) Not only do most all of your projects center on *other* peoples' lives, in many different ways, and almost never your *own* life, but you actually keep this extensive list of your ideas on your public website, ideas for projects you might do in the future—like over a hundred ideas, I think, and you keep adding to them. This totally confounds me. I'm an artist also, and of course I also keep a list of ideas that I might use in my work—but I keep it away from the eyes of others, almost always, even from my friends. You *share* your ideas, to everyone and anyone, way before you execute them. How is it you're not afraid



*Maintaining the Jazz*, 2004. Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, California. I was asked to do a show at one of Jack's two galleries which are next to each other. In the other gallery there was going to be an exhibition of drawings by Shaun O'dell. I decided to make posters for Shaun's show as the work for my show. Shaun let me come over to his house/studio to take pictures of the various material that has collected there over the years. I asked him to also tell me his feelings about the content of his drawings. I used the pictures as the poster images, and the descriptions as titles. I printed only one of each poster and displayed them as my show.

**AM:** So, okay. You are not only not possessive of your own ideas, you are also very quick to acknowledge other artists and honor them in your own projects. It seems to me, that almost everything you've done involves acts of honoring. When I go into a museum, like the Museum of Modern Art, I feel like I'm in a kind of "hall of fame." Whatever a museum is about, there's always a multi-level system of honoring: honoring the artists, honoring the curator, honoring the lenders. There's the wall honoring the patron's names, the honorific galleries with named after the benefactors, and then, of course, there are the artists. It's like walking around in this miasma of honoring.

**HF:** Right. But, they're fairly rarefied people who are getting honored.

**AM:** Exactly, which is what can be so annoying. But at the same time it's a very human thing—people honor whom they admire, and they want themselves to be honored, and they hope that when they die, their memory will be honored. Your work seems to be all about honoring others, but your approach to honoring is so absolutely, weirdly leveling of all of that, all of that "hall of heroes" stuff, it's stunning. You do whole projects honoring people who start out basically as total strangers to you. Even in situations where other artists might feel competitive, you once created an art exhibition at the Jack Hanley Gallery, and for your show you created posters that were all about how interesting the artist was who happened to be showing in the adjacent gallery! Is this how you think of your work, as a kind of honoring?

**HF:** Yeah. And I think it came out of a frustration with that system that you're talking about that seemed too rarefied for me and also the more general, popular culture that everyone knows about, the celebrities that wind up in magazines and on TV shows and who books are written about. Those people aren't interesting to me, for one thing. And, the people who I felt like were interesting, people who I encountered, either through more obscure books or films, or through my own daily life and experience, those are the people that I was, wishing were on the checkout stand, on the magazine cover. I thought that all of this attention and



money could be directed towards people who I personally thought were interesting, and it could be really interesting. I didn't have access to People magazine to turn that on its head. But, I did have access, eventually, to a museum. I have an opportunity to make visible the people who I actually want to see, except at the Whitney or at SFMoMA, and that's what I'm going to do. And yeah, I think it has lots of implications. The most basic one, really, is that those are the things that I care about, and that's what I want to share and that's what I want to value. Then there are a lot of other levels to it, which act as institutional critique, social critique, challenges of various sorts, and...

**AM:** And creating a model that other people might imitate, you think?

**HF:** Possibly. I don't have a manifesto that I've written down. I don't have even, a set of guidelines that I use. It's a much more intuitive sense of how, from my own point of view, and this is me being a bit selfish or me valuing my own taste, where I'm saying, I want to fix this, and this is how we're going to fix it.

-

**AM:** I know you have an interest in alternative education, it has come up occasionally in your work; you did a project about reading *Summerhill*, for instance. And another thing that stands out in your resume that makes me curious is that after you went to Humboldt, after you went to CCAC, after all of that and opening the gallery and the library and so forth, and all those community projects, you went back to school to study organic farming. In fact, you mention in one of your texts that during the six entire years between 1995 and 2001 you did farm work for a living, and lived virtually as a transient, even while you did some of your art projects. Was there a moment of doubt there, where you were thinking, maybe I don't want to be an artist?

**HF:** Uh huh. It was one where I was talking to even my professors while I was in graduate school about quitting. I was actually, in the first year, heavily thinking of dropping out because I was so dissatisfied with what I was experiencing, not like there was a problem with the school, there were problems with the school, but it was more realizing that, I'm actually here, deep into the mix of art, you know, like contemporary art, being around all these artists, and it's not satisfying to me. I'm not being fulfilled by this.

**AM:** This was even while you were doing the gallery projects?

**HF:** Well, I think doing those projects is what allowed me to continue. But, it was just prior to that that I started thinking this is just not right for me, this graduate school and what it seemed...

**AM:** Were there farmers in your family?

**HF:** My grandfather had been a farm manager at a university, in California. It was a functional farm on a college campus. So, my father grew up on a farm, but I didn't grow up there. My family were big gardeners. But, I grew up, even as a kid, just gardening.

**AM:** Okay, so you had this idealism in school as an artist, but you also had this interest in utopian farming, and pursued this afterwards. In your studying Helen and Scott Nearing, and their back-to-the-land experiments, or the progressive education ideas of A. S. Neill and his Summerhill school, did you expect these areas of interest to influence your life as an artist?



**HF:** Well, my interest in those two things that you've identified, really, are the ones that I think I've occupied myself with the most as far as studying organic farming, or you know, agrarian living and back to the land, that stuff and alternative education.

**AM:** Those are two different things, but they are connected in a way, two kinds of utopian ideas.



*Farm City*, 1998. Southern Exposure, San Francisco CA. This was a project for the show "Urban Renewal Laboratory." Southern Exposure asked a bunch of artists and designers to come up with ideas for urban renewal. Jon Rubin and I constructed a de-centralized Community Supported Agriculture project. We got five local residents to grow a crop on their rooftop or window box or backyard and then share the vegetables with each other. We built a green house in the gallery and grew greens which were also shared. Collaboration with Jon Rubin.

**HF:** Yeah, I think there's a connection. Those are subjects that I've been interested in for a long time. I hadn't been able to apply them, but I was doing a lot of reading on those subjects, not academically, just casually. It was my interest beyond art, those were the two topics that were occupying me. And I think that by exposing myself to practitioners of those subjects, I quickly started comparing that to the way I knew art worked, artists worked, the art world worked, and wanting to add more of the other, the education and the farming into that. So, it just quickly became a counter for me. Whenever I'd come across what appeared to me to be the rarification of art, the star system of art, the preoccupation with originality, with creativity, and all of those kinds of things in the art world, I would then compare it to all these things I was experiencing in these other subjects, which seemed to go against all of that. And it would just seem more appealing to me. But, at the same time, I was still studying art. I was trying to become an artist. So, I just filtered those other ways into it. I think that affected me. It turned me into a different kind of artist.

**AM:** When you worked on these farms what did you do exactly? Did you actually do picking, drive a tractor?

**HF:** Oh yeah. I did farm work, I did everything.

**AM:** Was there a period there where you actually said I'm not going to be an artist? Were you thinking this way through the whole period, or were you just thinking of making money farming simply as a way of supporting yourself while you did your art?

**HF:** I don't think I ever thought about wanting to become a commercial farmer. I really wanted to have a really small scale farm that was about sustaining myself and friends and family and whatever. And then having maybe a small sort of market crop. That was the Nearing idea actually, that you have a cash crop, and in the Nearing's case that was maple syrup when they lived in Vermont, and then it was blueberries when they lived in Maine. And besides that, they then grew all of their own food that they ate. So I liked that model.

**AM:** Like there's the art you do to make a living, and there's the art you do...

**AM:** That really shows in your work, your focus on discovering other people's particular *interests*. Everybody has special interests in certain things, just like everybody's objects have a thousand stories.



*The Forbidden Zone*, 2000. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California. Collaborative project with Chris Johanson, David Jarvey, Elizabeth Meyer and Alexis Van Hurkman. Video, drawings and sculptural models were used to address Jarvey's interest in an early *Star Trek* episode. Jarvey, who has Downs Syndrome, identifies with a character from the episode, Captain Christopher Pike. Pike has been disabled and wants to go to the forbidden planet, Talos 4, where he can live with the illusion of being "normal" once again. As part of the installation Jarvey and Johanson were shot on a blue screen and imposed onto footage from the actual *Star Trek*.

**HF:** Right, I might not be interested in something like *Star Trek* or *Ulysses* by James Joyce, but through someone else who I discover that is passionate about that thing, I am interested in what those people are passionate about or interested in.

**AM:** And you are then influenced by that passion and start to share it.

**HF:** Right. And usually there's something that becomes interesting to me. In the case of *Star Trek*, I still don't want to watch *Star Trek*. I didn't become a *Star Trek* fan.

**AM:** Was the *Star Trek* project the one you did with the developmentally disabled man?

**HF:** Right, David Jarvey. But, in the case of *Ulysses*, it did become something I became interested in beyond the project and beyond that person.

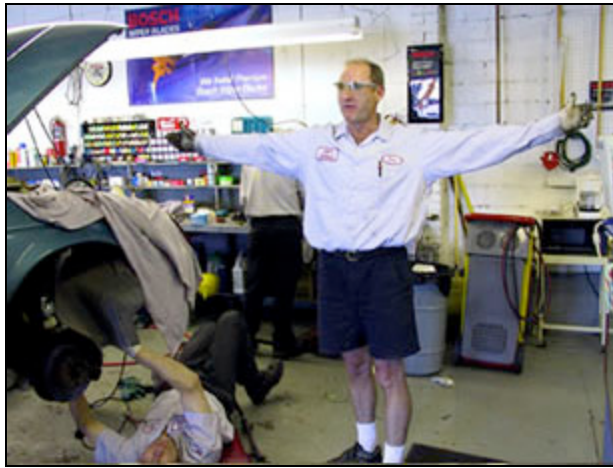
**AM:** Explain the *Ulysses* project to me.

**HF:** Yeah. In that case, I had actually gotten a grant in Portland that was...the idea that I proposed was that I would find three people in Portland who had some kind of project that they couldn't realize without my help. It was a public art project with ten thousand dollars and the objective was that I would find three people and help them realize a project. So, the first one was Jay. I heard that this guy existed, but I hadn't tracked him down yet.. That was partly what started me thinking about wanting to do a project like this. I knew that there was a man who wanted a movie made at this gas station.

**AM:** Did he come up with the idea after being approached by this art space?

**HF:** No. That was the interesting part, he had the idea before.

**AM:** It had already been in his head when you showed up?



*Blot Out The Sun*, 2002. Portland, Oregon. Okay, so this is what happened. Jay told Miranda that he thought that his garage was the center of the universe because there was so much activity and unusual characters coming through all the time. He said that someone should make a movie about what went on there and project it on the wall of the building next door (which we eventually did). When I went to go talk to him about actually doing it Jay told me that he thought the movie would be like James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I thought that was interesting (though I have to admit I hadn't read *Ulysses*, but have since). Steve Macdougall and I video taped some attempts at re-creating things that happened at the garage, and also just some normal documentary style stuff, but that wasn't working so we decided to have Jay and his mechanics and the other people who wandered in just read lines from *Ulysses*. So that's what the film is--sort of a synopsisized version of *Ulysses*, summer heat, James Joyce, untrained actors, its pretty good. The film has now been shown as part of the Olympia Film Festival, the PDX Film Festival, the Aurora Picture Show and the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

was that this would be a great place to make a film. And he's sort of a film buff, I guess, and that was his dream. And it was just so interesting to me, he's not an artist, he's not a filmmaker, but how many people are there that don't fit into a category? They're not the person who wants to make a film. They're the person who wants a film made at their place. What is that? Can you go to school for it? Can you have a career of it? You can't. Most of these things slip through the cracks. And there's all of these people out there who have an idea, but they don't know how to go about it at all. I became really fascinated by... I said give me some idea of what you're imagining, and he said, Well, the thing I have always imagined is *Ulysses* by James Joyce. And I said, what do you mean? And he said, Have you ever read it? I said no, and he said I really should read it and that it was a great book. I was getting this recommendation, he said It takes place in this 24 hour period, and he explained the book to me. And I thought, okay how am I going to make a movie that's like that, and then I just decided as I was reading the book that I would use the text directly and I'll have the people speaking the lines. So, then I wrote cue cards with lines from the book. And had the people there at the gas station read them. Just because of my own limited time schedule, I decided that I was going to do it in three weeks from beginning to screening. I made postcards announcing the screening before it was actually shot. Then I scrambled about how I was going to make this thing. And then I decided to just write these cue cards because it allowed the mechanics to keep

**HF:** Right. Yeah. That's what was so fascinating to me about it, that there was this person I hadn't met yet, but I knew there was this guy who had a gas station, who wanted a film made at his gas station, and that was all I knew. So, I got the grant and then I went and talked to him and I said, I hear you want to have a movie made at the gas station. And he said, yeah. I said, Well, I think I can help you do that. And he said he had been waiting for me to show up for the last ten years. And, I said, Okay, great. Tell me what you want. Are you hoping to film yourself? Do you want to act in it? What role do you want to play? He's said he didn't want to play any role. He just wanted it to happen here he wanted it to be filmed there and he wanted it to be screened there on this big white wall that was attached to the gas station. I said, Well, what's it about? And he said it's just about all of the things that go on there at the gas station because that was, to him, the center of the universe, a million things everyday occur at this gas station, and his feeling

**HF:** Once again, as with the early projects we were talking about, the rug store and the garage sale and the faces, those were all collaborations, not just between me and the people, but between me and Jon Rubin in that case. And in the case of *Learning to Love You More*, it's a collaboration of me and [Miranda July](#) and [Yuri Ono](#) and then all of these other...

**AM:** Do your collaborators also, in that case, come up with assignments?

**HF:** Yuri does all the technical things, and Miranda and I come up with assignments. We run each idea by each other, sometimes we go back and forth, developing it and changing it. In the best case scenario, we actually sit down and talk about them. But, because we rarely have the opportunity that we are in the same city, we mostly do it through email or phone conversations, suggest a few, and one or the other develops it. Or, one of us will just come up with an idea, send it to the other, that person will read it, say that sounds great. Other times, we'll suggest changes.

**AM:** I think overall, with that website, there seems to be a picture emerging of how complex meaning can be in ordinary life, in addition to the complexity of that rarefied area that we call art, like in a story like *Ulysses*. Artists are always excited to teach everyone how one small thing is the axis of hundreds of meanings and narratives, and I feel it's often a good thing to remember; but at the same time, why do I need a professional artist to tell me that? I mean, this is common knowledge, and I wonder why we've gotten into this habit of asking artists to show us how one single moment or one single object can be rich with so many associations. I wonder if this is a frustration of yours, if you create these projects to show us that we don't always need artists to tell us that the world is filled with a million stories.

**HF:** Right. Well, I think that's true, we need something. And, I think that that gets into a large other subject, which is the change that has occurred because of contemporary society, technology, convenience, a lot of things that have developed since World War II, in the last 50 years. Things have changed drastically, where it used to be common to know how to play a musical instrument,

From the *From the Learning to Love You More* website:

**Assignment #32.**

**Draw a scene from a movie that made you cry.**

**Rent a movie that made you cry. Fast forward to the exact point that really got you and pause the movie. Now draw this freeze-frame as accurately as possible. Also draw the tv and the table, or surface, that the tv is sitting on. Don't draw any other details of the room; this picture should be floating in the middle of an otherwise blank piece of paper. Draw everything as realistically as you can; don't be interpretive. Scan or take a picture of your drawing. Please make sure that your image is clear and in focus. Give your drawing a title, such as "When Tom Hanks sees the dolphins in "Castaway." However, don't write your title on the drawing. Please include it separately in an email or on another piece of paper. Send us this image using either our upload page, via email, or straight to our mailing address.**



**A response to Assignment #32:**

**"This is the scene in French movie "Amélie."**

**Guang Yuan Shan, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA**



to get together and sing, to draw, basically to entertain yourselves and others, to tell stories. Quickly, those things are getting lost. So, people need something to bump them out of that mentality. I remember when I was younger, having watched a lot of TV and just getting numbed by that, and then, my mom or somebody, forcing me to go outside to do something real. Sometimes what you need is somebody to sort of prod you into having a real experience as opposed to a TV experience.

**Sample assignments from the *Learning to Love You More* website:**

53. Give advice to yourself in the past.
52. Write the phone call you wish you could have.
51. Describe what to do with your body when you die.
50. Take a flash photo under your bed.
49. Draw a picture of your friend's friend.
48. Make the saddest song.
47. Re-enact a scene from a movie that made someone else cry.
46. Draw Raymond Carver's Cathedral.
45. Reread your favorite book from fifth grade.
44. Make a "LTLYM assignment".
43. Make an exhibition of the art in your parent's house.
42. List five events from 1984. 41. Document your bald spot.
40. Heal yourself.
39. Take a picture of your parents kissing.
38. Act out someone else's argument.
37. Write down a recent argument.
36. Grow a garden in an unexpected spot.
35. Ask your family to describe what you do.
34. Make a protest sign and protest.
33. Braid someone's hair.
32. Draw a scene from a movie that made you cry.
31. Spend time with a dying person.
30. Take a picture of strangers holding hands.
- ...

I looked away when you looked at me, or the fact that the bookshelf in my office has been repainted. And then you get into these tiny little moments, and then you come up with something extremely profound on your own, that could make you cry or whatever.

**HF:** Yeah. In that case, and I think that was actually Miranda's idea, the movie crying assignment idea. What becomes interesting too is that if one person had an emotional experience with a movie, what happens if someone takes that moment and re-creates that for themselves? Does it somehow get transferred? So, we had a second assignment, which is to select somebody's moment when they cried and take that scene and then act it out and videotape it, and then put

**AM:** On the other hand, on your *Learning to Love You More* website, you'll give the assignment, "Draw a picture of a scene from a movie that made you cry" or "Reread a book you read when you were eleven years old," or...these are acts of reproducing...

**HF:** But, they're adding an element to a passive experience. In the case of the crying one, you know it's funny, but for some reason, I had this inability to cry for a period time. I just didn't cry for years, and then some things changed and I started crying much more often. And one thing I noticed was every time I rode on an airplane, they would play a movie and I would start crying at some point. It was really sort of happy experience. I realized that on airplanes I watched movies that I didn't normally watch. A lot of them were tear jerker, Hollywood style movies. And they could actually have an effect on me, and I was curious about that point when they made me cry? During that period, I was collecting things that almost made me cry, like a report on the radio or something I read somewhere, little things that would, set me off. And that was interesting to me. It was things that break through into my emotions. Sort of puncture moments, where it's not exactly about observing something, but it's about feeling something and identifying with it. So that's an interesting thing in a movie; that particular point where you start to cry?

**AM:** It sounds like something a psychoanalyst would do. A psychoanalyst would say, we don't want to talk about grand themes here. I want to talk about how you felt when I held the door open for you instead of you holding it open for me, or how



that on the website. it's very similar to what happens with the argument assignments.

**AM:** It was such an odd thing for you to do, to have people make videos of themselves acting out the scripts of the arguments of the other participants, who are complete strangers to them! Why on earth would you ever do that?

**HF:** In that case, it's about how ridiculous arguments can be. But through a slight mediation you can see that. And by doing someone else's argument, you don't have a personal attachment to it. So, it's this kind of ridiculous thing to act out. And it helps you realize how ridiculous your own arguments are possibly.

**AM:** So, there's a definite sense when you come up with an idea that it could be therapeutic.

**HF:** It's one of those things that I don't want to acknowledge.

**AM:** Sorry. (*laughter*)

**HF:** No. It's fine. I don't mind saying that I secretly hope, and sometimes not so secretly, that there are these effects, therapeutic, social, political. And on the other hand, my general line, the way that I talk about it, is I say they aren't going to have that effect. I say, just do it. Let's just do these things without any sort of expectations. This is part of why I fear setting that up is that if people have an expectation that I'm someone who could make some sort of positive change, that kind of pressure is not actually good for me to be working under. If those kinds of expectations exist, even when somebody says, oh you're the community guy, you're going to do something nice for the community, instantly I want to do something opposite of that. I wish I could say that I'm a social worker and I am doing good for society, but I just can't feel like I actually do that. I don't feel valid at all as that. And I know that there are people who do that work who I really appreciate, I really admire them. And I just don't think that I am one of them.

**AM:** The people who answer the *Learning to Love You More* assignments, sometimes they're amateur artists, sometimes they're student artists, sometimes they're professional artists, and sometimes they're not artists at all. In the art community there are always those who are considered to have more "expertise," and those of us who are considered to have less, there's that whole hierarchy that people are obsessed with. Critics and curators and art dealers, their entire careers are based on deciding who has expertise and who doesn't. You don't simply think about artists versus non-artists, there's a whole continuum you engage that's in between. You seem to ignore the hierarchy of various levels of expertise that most people describe. But how do you feel about this hierarchy?

**HF:** Well, I recognize that the hierarchy exists, but I also try to act like it doesn't exist because it's part of my own morality or something. I believe that hierarchy is wrong. And so I try to act in a way that it doesn't exist. That doesn't mean that there aren't people at the top of that hierarchy that I appreciate and value. The reason that I'm an artist is that there were people that I saw whose work I liked, and that was work that were available to me from the top of that system. But, given the opportunity, I'd like to mix it up. I'd like to see these things in a non-hierarchical mix. For instance, in this *Come Together* event here in New York, it was great that you were one of the selectors, a known, recognized artist, and a bunch of people nobody had heard of. And it wasn't like I gave you an hour, I gave you ten minutes; everyone got ten minutes. And I think that becomes really interesting for me, it collapses the hierarchy, at least, in that system. Everyone's being valued in the same way.

**AM:** So this fellow who owns a gas station...you and he do a project on James

Joyce, who is one of our premier twentieth century artists, at the top of the pack; you can't ignore the hierarchy when the people you're working with themselves experience the hierarchy. So, the hierarchy itself has to become a part of your topic.

**HF:** Right. I think that what you talked about earlier, the best view of my work is a broad one that's looking at multiple things. So, then you see James Joyce in relationship to *Star Trek*, in relationship to rugs, in relationship to pigs, or whatever it happens to be. If you look at my work, in an overall view, which is the one that I like to see, then James Joyce is not being valued more than these other people and subjects. He's being valued, because I think that he's interesting, but I also think that a lot of these other people are also interesting too.

*A shorter version of this interview appeared in BOMB Magazine, Spring 2006, Number 95. New York, New York.*

Visit: [harrellfletcher.com](http://harrellfletcher.com)

Visit: [Learning To Love You More](#)

Visit: [Project at Domaine de Kerguéhenec](#)

Return to:

[Other Texts](#)

Return to:

[Selected Texts](#)

Return to:

[Main](#)