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## **2+2=Cake: A Book of Conversations about Possibilities in Business and Art**

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2+2=Cake:  
A Book of Conversations about Possibilities in Business and Art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Elizabeth Alspach  
Carleton College  
Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art, 2009

July 2021  
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

2+2=CAKE is a toolkit for people interested in creating their own economic container to support their livelihood. Calling upon the entrepreneurial experience of artists and creatives who founded or run organizations, the book and accompanying workbook and motivational posters serve as an incubator, buoy, and affirming resource for those looking to build the economic container in which they make their livelihood.

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## Acknowledgements

This book is inspired by and intersects a similar undertaking by Jen Delos Reyes written in 2016. In *I'm going to live the life I sing about in my song*, Reyes opens the acknowledgements sections by saying, “No book happens alone. Every book is a miracle.”<sup>1</sup> This one is no exception. Breanne Trammel, artist, educator, sandwich enthusiast, and overall inspiration, invited Jen to give a visiting artist lecture at the University of Arkansas in 2021 that sparked in me the desire to write this book and find more people working and thinking like the two of them. In that lecture, Jen shared another book of guiding principles, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, a doctrine I have adopted and quoted here. Breanne, in addition to lighting the spark, is a source of affirmations and a get ‘er done attitude that has been instrumental for me as an artist and a human, and is largely responsible for getting this book out of my brain and into your hands.

This research is also intellectually guided by Donna Haraway’s *Staying With the Trouble* which was given to me by Adrienne Callander. Adrienne is the reason I found an outlet for my interest in business and art, and how I found folks in business who were down to collaborate on this thought experiment: Sarah Goforth, Jon Johnson, Anne O’Leary Kelly, and Carol Reeves. Carol Reeves once told me that I am the most liberal person she has ever met, and I knew we would be friends forever.

Long before art school, in my second adult job in my life, while working on the fundraising team of UC Berkeley’s Lawrence Hall of Science, I was miraculously paired into a mentorship relationship with Deb Perry, writer, surfer, and witch (random order). Deb was my

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<sup>1</sup>Jen Delos Reyes, *I'm going to live the life I sing about in my song* (Marylhurst University Art Department, 2016), 178.

first example for how I want to work in the world, modeling her own commitment to setting clear boundaries, the importance of a side hustle, and how to conjure the much-needed snow day.

During the quarantine of 2020 and 2021, I was holed up on Berry Street with the world's best neighbors and my loves Ryan and Max. Ryan washed every single dish that passed through our kitchen in the past six months, which I'm optimistic is a practice that will never change. I could also say a lot of things about how he's a thought partner, a life raft, and a much needed reality check, but what is love if not an exchange of resources? Max only had to go to the vet once recently for eating something that could kill him. He's a good dog. Ethan turned four and five on the other side of the country in quarantine, and I've never been so grateful for Legos or Facetime than when we were talking. I missed my besties much during this time of no traveling, but thanks to texting and good nature, our friendships persist. My parents are also the greatest. You should visit them sometime in rural Missouri; I guarantee you would all have a ball. See you on the internets and maybe someday in a desert cabin at sunrise.

Love,

Liz

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## Introduction

There are cases where the job possesses the man even after quitting time. Aside from occupational ticks of hourly workers and the fitful sleep of salaried ones, there are instances of a man's singular preoccupation with work. It may affect his attitude toward all of life. And art.<sup>2</sup>

-Studs Terkel

A businessman would not consider a firm to have solved its problems of production and to have achieved viability if he saw that it was rapidly consuming its capital. How, then, could we overlook this vital fact when it comes to the very big firm, the economy of Spaceship Earth and, in particular, the economics of its rich passengers?<sup>3</sup>

-E.F. Schumaker

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<sup>2</sup> Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), xv.

<sup>3</sup> E.F. Schumacker, *Small is Beautiful* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 13.



In an interview with *BOMB Magazine* in 2012, Texas-based poet and professor Dean Young said that “a poem is a way of making sense and lots of things make sense, not just  $2 + 2 = 4$ .  $2 + 2$  can = cake. Formal devices can act as a glue, rhyme can make things comfortable together that wouldn’t find themselves in the same grocery store otherwise.”<sup>4</sup> The formula  $2+2 = C A K E$  has been my north star since the idea was first shared with me by Holly Wren Spaulding, owner of *Poetry Forge*, a creative writing school in Southern Maine, and sage believer in the power of possibility, during an interview for this book. It ignites in me the question, *what is created when formula and formality are metamorphosed with things like comfort, joy, and freedom?* I argue that something entirely new appears, something that in becoming itself also creates the space it needs to exist.

Holly shared the thesis and title for this book while modeling another tenet that has emerged in this research: the belief that ideas are collective. As adrienne maree brown said to Angela Davis, “My ideas are built on your ideas; and they are collective ideas.”<sup>5</sup> In the following book of interviews, ideas are shared, generative, alive beings that are cared for, that fight for their own survival, that are passed from person to person. The ones captured here are for you to do with what you wish. If these ideas inspire you, they are yours.

In the interviews that follow, the two known ingredients in the C A K E are *business* and *art*. Tools and values are highlighted throughout conversations to serve as additional ingredients you may choose to source for your recipe. Both business and art are terms interpreted broadly with guidance from Amy Whitaker’s *Art Thinking*. “*Business* means organizational form in the

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<sup>4</sup>Anthony Tognazzi, “ $2+2$  can = Cake,” *BOMB Magazine*, October 13, 2012, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2-2-can-cake/>.

<sup>5</sup> On November 17, 2020, UC Davis’ Women’s Resources & Research Center virtually hosted “50 Years of Imagining Radical Feminist Futures: An Intergenerational Panel with Angela Davis and adrienne marree brown.

economy, whether a household or a nonprofit, a small company or a multinational”<sup>6</sup>, and *art* (adapted from Whitaker adapted from Heidegger) “is something new in the world that changes the world to allow itself to exist.”<sup>7</sup> Whitaker and I use the term *art* willfully instead of something more general like *creativity* for the purposes of grasping it back from the art world where it has been made exclusionary and commodified.

Often in business and art, the law and mathematics provide sound reasoning for the notion that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . But even where convention and efficiency point business towards four, there are times when, if more broadly considered, 2 plus 2 just as reliably equals cake: a treat, a celebration, a comfort, a gift, a delight; a thing of care and sometimes love that exists across languages and nations and time. As Fritz Haeg articulated in *The Questions We Ask Together*, “I am more interested in charting intentional directions towards mysterious and unachievable ideals, than I am in just taking on knowable problems that I think I can actually solve.”<sup>8</sup> When considering possibilities for art and business, I come back to questions posed by Kate Strathmann, interviewed here, founder and director of *Wanderwell*, which guide this search.

*What would each of us build if the goal was to care for everybody?*

*What else can a business be?*

*What else can a business do?*

*And finally, what are the limits of what a business can be?*

The conversations that comprise this book, with but one exception, were all held in the midst of two undeniably linked American tragedies: the COVID-19 pandemic and a summer of anger and uprising in response to the ongoing murder of Black people in the United States at the

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Whitaker, *Art Thinking: How to Carve Out Creative Space in a World of Schedules, Budgets, and Bosses* (Harper Business, 2016), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Whitaker, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Gemma-Rose Turnbull, *The Questions We Ask Together*, (Open Engagement, 2016), 92.

hands of police, including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor—say their names.<sup>9</sup> When, even amongst the most privileged, the prospect of touching or being in a room with another person risked deadly infection, our voices were what we had to share. In some ways, remote life during COVID-19 enabled this book, clearing hectic schedules and normalizing video meetings with folks from afar. It's at the confluence of these and other global crises that I am asking: how do I meld the practice of supporting oneself, myself, my survival, with my art practice? How do I share the knowledge of that practice and offer it to others? You might find some answers in these conversations.

The folks interviewed for this project hail from throughout the United States, from major coastal cities to rural communities and points between, a geographic undertaking I likely would not have envisioned prior to pandemic life.<sup>10</sup> I am touched by their generosity with me, a stranger to most, as well as their trust in and genuine enthusiasm for this research. To me, they are all artists, and they have all founded and run businesses that reimagine their relationship to their livelihoods and to their careers. A handful of these people are internationally recognized artists and others do not self-identify with the term. I bask in the fullness of that spectrum. The value of this breadth is articulated by Ted Purves in *What we Want is Free*: “Most of my friends with whom I discussed ideas of interaction, value, and generosity have followed their art practice out of the area of art. Social workers, yogis, and hermits they have become, which in a sense is quite beautiful, I am reminded again of the idea that art about life is not so important for what it does

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<sup>9</sup> Charlesnika Evans, Rohan Khazanchi, and Jasmine Marcelin, “Racism, Not Race, Drives Inequity Across the COVID-19 Continuum,” *Jama Network*, September 25, 2020, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2770954>.

<sup>10</sup> I'm eternally grateful to these smart, thoughtful people. Find out more about each of their organizations at the links in the bibliography.

for art but what it does for life.”<sup>11</sup> In the face of a global tsunami of crises, I make the case that we could all benefit from a little more thinking on what art can do for life.

The United States has an economy that destroys community, where the demands of work and business are often at odds with the demands of well-being and home and family. I follow in the footsteps of artist Caroline Woolard, seeking to “undo some of the most pernicious doings of capitalism on an interpersonal level: that system of private property, individual rights, class and race-based inequality out of which it generates its profits.”<sup>12</sup> In this economy, businesses are the primary tool for resource allocation and exchange. Because of this, they are one of the most significant levers we have for modeling and shaping a radical future. Businesses are by and large conceived of and built using the same community-destroying processes, which are unresponsive to people and to society’s disparate and complex needs. Caroline Woolard also writes in *The Questions We Ask Together*, “I’m tired of work about sustainability, democracy, or social transformation that is not produced within sustainable, democratic, or transformative systems.”<sup>13</sup> These interviews are a search for real models for building and sustaining businesses that illustrate personal pathways for creating new possibilities in economic relationships to one’s life, one’s work, one’s global community.

I see artists using their tools to stretch, test, disrupt, antagonize, innovate, solve problems, and agitate traditional business operations and capitalism, as well as the art market. I am interested in learning as much as possible about what people are doing, to implement it myself and help others see new possibilities for their own work.

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<sup>11</sup>Ted Purves and Shane Asler Selzer, *What We Want is Free* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 275.

<sup>12</sup>Caroline Woolard, *Art Engagement Economy: The Working Practice of Caroline Woolard* (Lithuania: Onomatopoe, 2020), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Turnbull, 167.

What if the aim of an organization is to create meaning as opposed to achieving financial goals? What if growth isn't synonymous with success? What if we work backwards from mission statements and business plans, backwards from "What is the most efficient way to do this?" And ask, "Is this even possible?" And from possibility to knowledge, "What is it? How did it get there? What does it mean—if anything? Why do we think what we think about it?"

The people in this book are asking these questions and engaged in deep and meaningful work to answer them. I am here to learn from them and offer what I learn to you. Whitaker nudges us to take what we learn and practice it generously with whom and whatever we may be building. "The tools of the artistic process are available to everyone, and we can use them to build anything from inventive business models and management structures to well-spent afternoons and meaningful lives."<sup>14</sup> In these conversations, I center and activate ideas put forth by adrienne maree brown regarding emergence: "Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind. Emergence strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."<sup>15</sup> I am interested in a relationship to my livelihood that I embody. I seek to be accountable to the organization that I work for in the same way I am accountable to my survival. "It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."<sup>16</sup>

The first thing I learned in the only business class I've ever taken was that the only two things that matter in a deal are money and power. I'm working for a world where we all have a

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<sup>14</sup> Whitaker, 22.

<sup>15</sup> adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press), 2017, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Terkel, xi.

lot more on the line than that. This book is the product of a search for people who share some cross section of these desires, those with energy left after a long day at work to daydream about alternatives. “What if there stir, in all those expertly quantified millions of living souls beneath the statistical surface, aspirations for creativity, generosity, brotherly and sisterly cooperation, natural harmony, and self-transcendence which conventional economics, by virtue of a banal misanthropy it mistakes for ‘being realistic,’ only works to destroy it?”<sup>17</sup> The solution is not in determining what got us here, but what will get us through with the Earth intact and our relationship to each other transformed.

What I imagine is one underutilized member of our society, the artist, melding their work across disciplines towards Black liberation, psychological awakening, gender liberation, educational transformations, and personal revelation. It is time that we, as a society, as artists, direct our creative problem solving and our innovative, wildly optimistic efforts towards business. Artists believe in the quantum leap and radical change. It is time we invite ourselves in as collaborators in a place of urgent need: business, organization, economics. There is much work to be done.

The following conversations are a search for possibilities and actions, the discovery of alternative options, and the mining of little nuggets of direction that might reveal a better way for me and for anyone else who finds themselves interested in building and shaping the economic container in which they want to make their livelihood. Let us eat cake.

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<sup>17</sup>Schumacker, 8.

## How to Use This Book

Some words and phrases throughout the book are **bolded** or underlined. This coding system will take you through the process of identifying **tools** and values that may be of use or interest. These are not comprehensive; use them as possibilities when dreaming up and constructing your own organizational **toolkit** and value structure.

You'll find the complete list of **tools** and values at the end of the book for quick reference. An accompanying workbook, motivational posters, notepad, and pencil were compiled in a  $2+2 = \textit{CAKE}$  full-service toolkit in a limited run of 40. The contents of this book and the workbook are available online at [www.twoplustwoequalscake.info](http://www.twoplustwoequalscake.info).

## Chapter 1, Complex Things in Simple Language

*A conversation between Ben Kinmont and Liz Alspach, January 2021*



Ben Kinmont

*Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to provide a living for your family*

Founded 1998

Sole proprietorship

Initially self-funded through other jobs, paid income

Open

2-5 employees

*Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family* is an antiquarian bookselling business in Sebastopol, California, specializing in 15th to early 19th century books about food and wine, domestic and rural economy, health, perfume, and the history of taste. Ben Kinmont launched the business in 1998 in New York City, following extensive training under bookseller Jonathan Hill, whose business focuses on books about the history of science, including first editions by authors such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin. *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to provide a living for your family* is a business and a component of an ongoing sculpture that models a new economic structure of artistic practice and provides a broader context in which to see domestic activity as meaningful.

Liz Alspach (Liz): Thank you for doing this. I'm so excited to meet you. This is awesome. To begin, can you tell me about your bookstore?

Ben Kinmont (Ben): The bookstore started in 1998 after I had worked for another bookseller who specialized in early medicine and science books. His name is Jonathan Hill, and I worked for him for ten years, from roughly 1988 to 1998. Then I started my own business in 1998, and a few things occurred to make that transition. One was that in the late 80s and early 90s, I had done this big project out on the street called *I am for you, Ich bin für Sie*. It was in German and in English because I also did it in Cologne. It was basically about three **ideas**. It was about the idea of social sculpture from Joseph Beuys.<sup>18</sup> It was also about these two other ideas of my own, which were called the *thinking sculpture* and the *third sculpture*.

The *thinking sculpture* was the idea of the cognitive process as a sculptural process. The idea of receiving stimuli, shaping it into an idea and acting on it, was to define that as a sculptural **practice**. That was an idea which Joseph Beuys touches on a little bit, but I had written my undergraduate thesis on William James,<sup>19</sup> the American philosopher, and that idea was also very connected to some writings James had made. But I had coined the phrase the *thinking sculpture*. Then the third part was the *third sculpture* which is the idea of **spaces in between** two ideas, between a dominant culture and a subculture, between two people, between you and me now, for example, would be a third space, a sculptural space.

So, the piece *I am for You* was me standing out on the street with three other people who were assisting me to hand out flyers to discuss these three ideas and just to find out what random passersby on the **street** would think of these ideas. The idea was to kind of leave the art

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Beuys was a German artist whose work from the mid to late 20th century is credited with creating the widely accepted “extended definition of art” and the idea of social sculpture.

<sup>19</sup> William James was a 19th century American philosopher and psychologist who led the philosophical movement of pragmatism, espousing that the usefulness and practicality of ideas are the criteria of their merit.

institutional space and to go out into **public space** to share these ideas which were about people and experiences that extended beyond the art world—therefore, they should be made open to **criticism** and **commentary** of other people. That piece occurred over four years, and we stopped and spoke with 11,750 people. What happened during that project was that it became clear to me that one of the most meaningful things that connected most people together was the basic function of how to support oneself. This idea of how do you survive? How do you support yourself? I was interested in meaningfulness in an art practice and when that was possible and not possible, and so that occurred, and I was also reflecting on the fact that I, myself, to do this type of practice which is not connected to institutional space, “How could I support this type of a more radical practice as an artist?” I was making archives of these public projects that I was doing at the time, and I was trying to sell them to galleries and simultaneously I was making paintings and sculptures and videos and photographs, but it was harder to get the galleries to wrap their head around these kinds of public projects and the archives.

So that, combined with, you know, my wife and I had a child. She worked full time, but I was working these different part time jobs, whether it was as a bookseller or truck driver or different things, so I thought, what would be interesting would be to see if it is possible to declare the act of trying to support your family as a sculpture. And so that's how *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family* emerged. It emerged because of both my **experiences** from *I am for you* out on the street, combined with my own financial need, and my decision to do this more radical practice and the idea of can we declare something as basic as the need to support oneself a sculpture? What does it mean to do that? That's when I began the commitment to this as an art piece in 1998. So, from the very beginning, it was declared on the colophon page of the very first catalog—the title of it as an artwork.

Liz: Wow, thank you for that. That was one of my questions: was the original conception to do *Sometimes a nicer sculpture* as a simultaneous artwork and a business? And it sounds like, yes.

Do you think of the book store as a specific type of art making?

Ben: I like to start with a really accessible idea of sculpture, partly that comes from the influence of Joseph Beuys and his idea of social sculpture. So, for me, it was the idea that if you can start with the idea of social sculpture, kind of an expanded notion of sculpture, then the **question** becomes what **discourse** do you use, what kind of **value structure** do you use to explain what it is that you're doing. And so, for me, I grew up around artists, and it was easy to talk about sculpture, and I like the idea of talking about very complex things in simple language if at all possible. Because I was out on the street talking to all these people, for example in America, I'd often have to start with the idea of Monet and what Monet did as a painter and build up to Joseph Beuys, and then go from Joseph Beuys to what I was doing.

Once people did understand what I was talking about, they would often say, "Hey, well, now that I understand what you're saying, why do you even call it sculpture? Why don't you call it sociology, or why don't you call it religion or all these other things?" And they're quite right. It could be called a lot of different things, but my historical context and discourse comes out of the art world and art history, and so I tend to think of it in more philosophical or art historical terms. I like to use the term "sculpture" as a beginning point. So, when I think about what I'm doing, I just think about it really as an extended idea of sculpture. That's for myself.

Liz: I love that you explain Monet to make the connection. Even with you having done this for, you know, 25 years at this point, you are still articulating the process in painting terms to help people understand what you're doing.

Ben: When I used to teach graduate school at California College of the Arts and was helping out in the social practices department, what was interesting to me was that I would always try to tell my students, “I think it really behooves us as artists, if we can, if we have the capacity, to try to explain what we do to anybody that asks.” It's important to be able to talk about it in an easy language, a simple language, because there's just too much of a barrier between the art world and the rest of the world at the moment.

Liz: So that makes me think specifically about—I'm going to use the word “tools” and the tools you use in your business that other artists use across media. How can the layperson think of the tools you're using or the processes you're using the way they might think about painting or sculpture? How do you conceive of the mechanisms of a business as your artistic toolkit?

Ben: First I want to outline something for you that I think will be helpful. One of the important things with social practice work when I was teaching that became clear to me is that students starting out with social practice work need to be aware of the value structure from which their work is emerging and the existing value structures in these non-art spaces that they are moving into. So, for example, I had a student who was working with homeless people living in the Tenderloin area of San Francisco, and she was a photographer who had moved into social practice. One of the important things for her work to succeed in my mind was that she not only needed to know the **history** of photography and the discourse of documentary photographs and social photographs, but she also needed to understand the value structures and what was happening in this community, in this area that she was moving into. She needed to value it, really, and be respectful towards it.

So, when I'm doing the art project, the thing that's important for me to realize is that it's a form of **bilingualism**. There are actually two different discourses, two different value structures

that are coexisting. There's one as a business and one as an art practice. So, when you ask me about toolkits for the business, it's primarily a toolkit from the antiquarian book trade that is coming to me from my colleagues and having trained with people and having studied 17<sup>th</sup> century literature. In order for my business to succeed, I need to respect and understand that world that I've entered into as my primary audience.

Another thing, maybe, that you would be interested in is, there's an exhibition that was curated by Carlos Basualdo<sup>20</sup> and I called *Worthless (Invaluable)*. It was a history of artists working with different **economic structures**. It was inspired by a show that I curated earlier at a very modest level called *The Materialization of Life into Alternative Economies*. What I also learned through doing that show and studying to **curate** that show was that most artists who worked with economic structures that were alternative to the capitalist gallery system did it in a really symbolic way. So they did things like create business stationery and set up an office like Jenny Holzer,<sup>21</sup> or they offered artist as consultant services to get paid for working for companies like Andrea Zittel.<sup>22</sup> It was more like a brief sojourn into business or the symbolic setup of the idea. These were like **gestures**, and they sort of had their value on a symbolic level. What was crucial to me about my project was that it was a business that really did work. That as a piece, this piece would only be successful if I really was able to help support my family through it. It wasn't to create the stationery to create this company for a moment. It had to be legitimate.

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<sup>20</sup> Carlos Basualdo is a Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Curator at Large at MAXXI-Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo in Rome, Italy.

<sup>21</sup> Jenny Holzer (born 1950) is an American artist whose work focused on the delivery of ideas in public spaces including advertising billboards, projections on buildings, and illuminated electronic displays.

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Zittel (born 1965) is an American artist whose work investigates ongoing questions of "How to live?" and "What gives life meaning?" Zittel's *Institute for Investigative Living* in Joshua Tree, CA, inquires as to the social construction of needs.

Therefore, the primary position of importance here was the discourse of the antiquarian book world, that market, those customers, the **language** and **skills** that one has to have in order to describe antiquarian material and so on. In fact, the art world wanted to do an exhibit or include it in exhibits, and I said I wouldn't even reference this project in the art world until it had been successfully in existence for a minimum of four years. The first exhibit where that finally occurred was in 2002, even though the title of it as an artwork was there in 1998. I wasn't interested in adding to all the symbolic, alternative economic gestures that had been done by people.

Liz: That makes a ton of sense to me. In your example of the student doing photography in the Tenderloin, there's the history of photography and that practice, and then there's the community and the responsibility to those people that live there. Those are the two languages and there's a collision that your student is working on. In the case of the bookstores, there's the art world and then there's the antiquarian book world, but what about the business itself, which I imagine as a third language in the dialogue? To what degree have you had artistic latitude with the hard-and-fast business, entrepreneurial aspects of making this thing float?

Ben: I would say that there are certain values that I have developed and that are kind of satisfied, if you will, in both worlds that support each other. So, for example, my activity and interest in social practice is not unconnected from my undergraduate work in American Studies. So, in American Studies, the big issue was to critique the canon in literature or historiography and to include a lot of voices that were not usually included. In American Studies, you have a lot of study of subcultural groups; you have study of African American Studies and Women's Studies, the history of private lives, all of this stuff. That idea is to decentralize the historical discourse or the way in which literature is understood, the way in which historiography is written, and to look

for value and discourse in other places. Which is very, very parallel to what I was doing out on the street, right, which is to say, we don't have to just stick with what happens in the **institutional space**. You can go out on the street and talk to people. We can ask and see what people are really thinking. We can open things up to other people, even if they aren't from the art world or in an art institutional space.

Or my pieces, for example, that have to do with **maintenance** or washing dishes or things like this. A lot of that is looking at the way in which meaning and value is being created in other places which are not normally supported by the capitalist gallery system. So, there's that, and there's also, in my bookselling practice, I fought very hard against the idea of what was of value to collectors and to research institutions. I had to fight and say, "Hey, you know, yes this book is about the kitchen or this is about domesticity, and I know that is not normally considered as important as Shakespeare<sup>23</sup> or Pliny<sup>24</sup> or other important figures in history, but really it is of value. It is of importance. Everyone has to eat. There's a history of what happens in **domestic space** that is as relevant as what is happening in governments, and we need to be able to understand this.

It was very similar, where I was trying to get the **focus** and the support of institutional space, in this case research institutional space, so libraries and private collections, to shift it into a subject matter that has been ignored and looked down upon. I would say that those two practices each support the other. They're very similar practices, what I was doing as an artist, as well as what I was doing, or I am doing as a bookseller. So, what happens when you have that

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<sup>23</sup> William Shakespeare was a 16th century playwright, poet, dramatist and actor considered by some to be the greatest dramatist of all time.

<sup>24</sup> Pliny the Elder was a first century Roman savant and author of *Natural History*, and an authority on scientific matters widely accepted up to the Middle Ages.



**desire** to refocus people's attention. You must also ask yourself, what is of importance right now? What's urgent? What needs to be discussed?"

As a bookseller, I've always discussed and taught issues around **urgency** with my students when I was working in social practice. Equally, for example, in bookselling recently I realized that almost all the histories of gastronomy are written about what we would think of as haute cuisine, the most expensive cuisine for the top 0.1% of the population. I thought it's really incorrect, I believe, to talk about gastronomy as only being for the wealthy because even farmers have a sense of gastronomy, even people who are working on a very tiny, fixed budget have a sense of gastronomy. So, I started to work on this field, this genre, that I'm calling *Gastronomy and Economic Precarity*. It's basically looking at **food** for people at soup kitchens and the history of soup kitchens. It's looking at food served to people in prison. It's looking at the emergence of middle class and lower class cookbooks for people who are on a very small budget, which starts around the moment of the French Revolution. It's looking at the **emergence** of this new audience, this new **public**, to try to address their needs or the emergence of food policy on a government level.

After the French Revolution, the French government spent a lot of **time** and **money** figuring out how to feed the poor in France. What role could the potato play, or maybe we need to make bread-making schools so that more people know how to make bread on a larger scale, or maybe we need to learn better about how to store grain in order for there to not be famine during times when there isn't a good harvest. So, then what I do is I find these books, and I write descriptions about them, and then I bring them to the **attention** of the institutions, and then if the institutions start buying them, then scholars have the resources to rewrite the histories.

So, there's not such a boundary between, for me, my tools or how I go about finding what is important between what I do in the art world or in the book world. Maybe one thing that is more connected to the art world than how I approach the book world is that it's not purely a monetary capitalist **decision process** that I make when I'm doing my business. I look at it also in terms of issues of urgency in the same way that I would with my art practice. But I will tell you there are a lot of booksellers who aren't artists who have that same approach. You don't have to be an artist to have that approach.

Liz: That gets to something I've been circling around with this project, which has come up recently in conversations, that I as an artist, by accident I think more than intention, enter these conversations with this idea of a moral superiority. That if I'm going to think of my business as an art practice, that integrally insinuates that would be a better way to think about it than if it were just a business practice. It sounds like in the case of the antiquarian book world, some of the things you find value in—this act of advocating for certain kinds of historical texts being saved, or other kinds of justice, equity, history-oriented work—isn't necessarily happening because you're an artist. I wonder if there is something about antiquarian bookselling specifically that overlaps with some of the motivations that artists often feel or tackle related to anti-capitalism?

Ben: I think you're probably right. In antiquarian book selling, there are a lot of eccentric people, a lot of people working by themselves in their homes the way artists do in their **studios**, and a lot of people who have chosen to do that because they believe in it. They don't do it for financial reasons. They can do other things, usually, to make more money. It's because of a **belief system**, probably, to a greater degree than other fields, not just a financial decision.

Ok, let's think about it, most antiquarian book sellers are working with maybe a staff of two or four, maybe. Most of us don't have public stores. We meet each other when we do book fairs, and even maybe more than the art world, it's quite a small, insular world. The difference is that there's a basic belief, especially if you're selling to research institutions, which most of us are these days, there's a real assumption of the notion of public good and a notion of ethics. Your career will go down the tubes if you misrepresent. That's a big deal. You know, if you say you're selling an African American literature and you're really not, and you're doing it incorrectly, you're done.

These things matter. Reputation and your word matters. There's a lot of trust. It's very old fashioned. It's very **relational**, in a sense. I sell probably 75 percent to institutions, with my institutional customers, I write to them and say, "Hey, I think this book is really important," and this is the reason why most of them trust what I say. They believe what I say, and, so that role of caring about what you're doing and knowing it well and doing it correctly is a big deal in that world.

Liz: That makes me think, this seems like a really beautiful industry, and I use "beautiful" kind of thoughtlessly, for thinking about an artwork as a business, because you automatically circumvent consumption. The products already exist, so there isn't the natural capitalist growth trajectory of scale, scale, scale, more is better, more efficient because the products themselves are precious.

Ben: Ok, you're pretty right, but not completely. There is an argument, a discussion, that will happen in the antiquarian book world that will have to do with the ethics of charging, let's say, \$1,000 for this book, but somewhere else it might be \$500. Librarians or other dealers will sometimes recall when they started out they could buy that book for a hundred bucks, but you're

charging \$2,000, “Are you out of your mind?” they might say. And this is my answer to that question, to the issue of this, even in the **research** world, in our capitalist culture, things don’t get preserved in research institutions unless they are deemed to have value.

For example, it appears as if African American literature or women’s cookbooks never existed before, yet they’ve always existed. It wasn't until **exhibitions** were done about them, **bibliographies** were written, histories were written, and people started to pay attention to them that we started to know which ones are the important ones, which ones are the influential ones. When did they appear in their first edition? What state did they appear in their first edition? How do we read them as an object? Was it published as a paperback? Was it published in a leather binding? All of these things tell us different issues about how it was understood at the time and how it was circulated. It’s how you read it as an object.

As all of these fine tuning issues come up around a given text, then you begin to assign greater and lesser value to them. When they start to have more and more value then they start to be presented, they start to be cataloged, and then they become part of the discourse. So, this is the argument for increasing the price. This is where we, in a sense, as dealers are involved in cultural production as we bring to people’s attention certain texts and increase their **visibility** by also increasing their value. But it has to fit within the existing marketplace. So it's a matter of massaging and adjusting the existing marketplace to bring attention to a particular type of material.

For example, let's take cookbooks for people who are in prison. No one gives a shit about that. This is how it is. No one cares, but if you start **to write** a history of them and you start to talk about how it will fit within our culture and what it means in a broader sense, then people can in effect wrap their head around it, and it starts to mean more. As it does that, then people want

**to talk** about, and people want **to see** it, and people want to have it. There's a different way, too. For example, I don't normally go past the year 1840 as a bookseller. I sell books from the 15th century to the mid-19th century. However, when I started working on *Gastronomy and Economic Precarity*, and I had a couple of cookbooks, more government publications, that had to do with rationing for prisoners.

I started looking at recent stuff, and I found out that there's a guy currently at San Quentin<sup>25</sup> who is on death row and wrote a cookbook called *The Death Row Cookbook*. It's written by him, and he also got recipes from his friends who were on death row. I've sold tons of copies. He actually approached me. He first wrote to me and said, "I see you're a cookbook dealer. I just wrote a cookbook. Will you sell it?" It's a print-on-demand book, and I've probably sold 50 copies, which is a lot for me. I don't normally sell that many copies of a given title because usually they are unique. Now, I'm making maybe \$10 out of this when I sell each one of them. Whereas normally I make \$1,000 or more, but it's fine by me because it helps create the discourse around the whole body of work that I'm doing on *Gastronomy and Economic Precarity*. It's important to see that. So is that a decision from me as more of an artist or more of a bookseller? It's both, but it's more just me as a person who has a certain value structure that comes into play when I'm doing art or I'm doing **books**.

Liz: Exactly, you've somehow held both. I'm wondering, what are your thoughts on the future of artists making this type of work and finding value for it when it's not so valued in the art world? Is the art market going to shift, are we shifting the market, or do artists just need to suck it up and put stuff in galleries?

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<sup>25</sup> San Quentin State Prison was established on the site currently known as Point San Quentin in 1952 on the shores of the San Francisco Bay. It is a maximum security prison with a death chamber and also California's oldest correctional institution.

Ben: Well, it depends on what you want out of it. For me, I recently started working in the studio more than I have in a long time. It's mainly because I like to make stuff, and I like to work with my **hands**. Maybe it's partly why, even with the social practice stuff, I always refer to it as a form of sculpture. I just like making stuff, and I don't see a big **boundary** between the two. If I were studying a philosopher and found out that he was also a composer, I would want to hear the music as well as read his philosophy. It seems so obvious to me that that would be the case.

So, if someone's doing socially engaged work but also doing painting, I'm super curious. I've thought a lot about this, and I haven't been able to come up with a really good answer, but I kind of think that the distinct division between the different media that the art world insists upon probably has more to do with a capitalist branding need than anything else. It just simplifies things. You walk into a room, and you immediately say, "Oh, you know, that's a Jenny Holzer piece. Oh, that's a Bruce Nauman<sup>26</sup> piece," and you can feel good because you know what you saw, and you identify it, and you're a collector, and you want to say, "Yes, that's my Nauman. That's my Holzer." That's very kind of *ex post facto* for me. It's after the fact, after looking at it with **hindsight**. Maybe for myself personally, that's been one of the more problematic things in my own career. I haven't really been satisfied with just staying within one medium. I don't understand why people do that. I'm working with a sculptural thing that's physical; it informs what I'm doing out on the street or with families. It doesn't matter that something is in my studio or out in the world.

So, to answer your question, there's first of all your own **desire** of what it is you **wish** to make or do or create. Then you need to think about where you want it to circulate, who you want to know about it, and what is important for you when looking at it and understanding it. What's

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce Nauman (born 1941) is an American artist whose practice broadly spans media including sculpture, photography, neon, video, drawing, printmaking, and performance.

important for you for it to be successful? For example, you take the Bauhaus model, one of the ways in which the Bauhaus was important was that you have artists working in more artisanal and manufacturing production levels. There are lots of examples of that as a model of artists working with **business**. I personally find it to be pretty simplistic. It's kind of like business is interested because they get a little cachet because an artist did some **design** element. It's a Roy Lichtenstein Ferrari<sup>27</sup> or whatever. That's not so interesting, but there are more integrated things.

For example, there's a guy named Bernard Blistene<sup>28</sup> who is the current director of the Pompidou Museum in Paris. I worked with him for an exhibition several years ago called *On Becoming Something Else* about artists who had left the art world in the pursuit of their art practice, and they went into other fields. When I last saw him, he told me that he was in the process of trying to set up a program whereby artists could be hired as consultants for big companies. He told me about this maybe two years ago. The big issue that happens there, that one has to be careful of, is it's easy for artists to also be taken advantage of by these big companies. I know that there have been a number of artists who have tried to work with the economic structure or services where they would provide services or consultations for companies. Les Levine<sup>29</sup> was one of the first people to do that. Andrea Fraser<sup>30</sup> did services, of course. There have been shows about services, and oftentimes the artists come out of it feeling underpaid. I don't know what that really is about.

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<sup>27</sup> Roy Lichtenstein was a 20th century American pop artist who along with Andy Warhol and others became a leading figure of the new art movement in the 1960s.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Blistene is a curator and the Director of the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris in 2013, and the author of many books on contemporary art.

<sup>29</sup> Les Levine is an American artist, born in Ireland in 1935 known as a pioneer in video art and conceptual artist working in mass communication.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Fraser (born 1965) is an American performance artist mainly known for her work in Institutional Critique. Fraser is currently Department Head and Professor of Interdisciplinary Studio of the UCLA School of Arts and Architecture at the University of California, Los Angeles and is based in New York and LA.

It's interesting. At one point, I did a project called *Agency* back in the 90s where the Public Art Fund in New York hired me to do a project. I did research looking into different economic structures for supporting artists who were doing project work, not doing stuff that fit in the capitalist gallery system. Unfortunately, my conclusion of all the different models I looked at and found was that I couldn't find a model that I really would want to be a part of as a project artist. So I just kind of left it alone. Part of what came out of that is that I ended up with Andrea Fraser and Nils Norman<sup>31</sup> helping to start this new artist group called Parasite in New York.

Liz: I'm curious if you think of *Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture* as a mechanism for shaping a different type of world, or is it a model that other artists could use to take their living into their own hands? Is it a mechanism for modeling another type of economic structure?

Ben: So, it doesn't have to be a bookshop. It can be anything, but I definitely think that artists need to look at what kind of practice they want to pursue. Think about it realistically in the long term. I used to think about this a lot when I was teaching grad school. I was trying to get my students to think about the implications of what they were trying to pursue all the time, and not just in terms of getting into a gallery or a museum or into a history book, but if you could, think about it for the next 60 years or 70 years. If you look at that longer perspective, to think about your **pace**, your **expenditures**, your **goals**, where you want it to be placed in the discourse, what you need to keep going, and to structure yourself accordingly. And to perhaps think about it as maybe you want to create a different economic structure that can help sustain that. That's all I did.

While simultaneously trying to point out, I had done a piece earlier called *Waffles for an Opening*, which was about the idea of trust as sculpture. A lot of this was about the idea of

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<sup>31</sup> Nils Norman (born 1966) is an English artist living in London and founding member of Parasite, a collaborative artist led initiative that archived site-specific projects.



supporting your family as sculpture. If one can accept the idea of art in everyday life and one can realign one's understanding of where meaningfulness is created, and if one takes this assumption that art should be connected to meaningfulness, then certainly the support of oneself financially, and to support others, can be thought of as an art practice. So, that's kind of where that came from. Yes, I think others can take that. The other big part that others can take from is to not just assume that you have to do this capitalist art gallery system to support yourself. You can come up with other structures, other economic and financial structures that can cross over into your practice, that can feed into it and can be supportive of it that you can learn from.

Liz: Yes, I needed to hear all of that. Thank you. I think we could wrap it up there. This has been a real treat.

Ben: Great, it was nice to meet you. Let me know how things go.

## Chapter 2, It Would be a Bad Outcome

*A conversation excerpt between Kate Strathmann and Liz Alspach, November 2019*

Kate Strathmann

*Wanderwell*

Founded 2012

LLC

No initial funding

Open

7 employees

*Wanderwell* is a bookkeeping and development firm that builds successful businesses while investigating new models for being in business. Founder and director Kate Strathmann orients *Wanderwell* in service of supporting a more just world committed to disrupting the status quo. *Wanderwell* practices for itself and its clients what it means to see business as a model for the kind of world you want to live in.

Liz: I love the phrase that you have on your website that your business is a massive art project. Tell me how you think about that.

Kate: One of the things that I'm interested in is that, especially if we're going to look at **business** through a nontraditional or **critical lens**, is that we can use it as a tool for shaping new worlds. There's **tension** in that, you know? I have to pay my mortgage, and I also believe in access and inclusion, and those things are often at odds. I feel that tension in my identity as an artist and as a business owner. I think my approach has always been to ask a lot of **questions**. That is one of the roles where I see artists being essential to the world. There's a core aspect of how businesses come about and is evolving in the world that at its core is about asking deeper questions. It's about having a sense of deep **inquiry** without needing to have a conclusion. There's an opportunity to put a lot of different materials together and to use the **container**, the **framework** of a business to create **space** for different kinds of things, for what people want to do.

Liz: I appreciate that the artist's responsibility is to ask questions. How do you navigate that with the reality of needing to provide outcomes and products and deliverables for your clients in the consulting world?

Kate: I don't know that it's always possible to do both simultaneously. One of the things that I continue to wrestle with but I'm a little bit more at peace with now is that we have a bookkeeping practice in the business. It's concrete and very much not creative. You don't want to be creative about that. It would be a bad outcome. We don't have that aspect of the business because of any **skill set** or **desire**. I knew I didn't want to be known as a bookkeeper, and it's not something I'm particularly skilled at, and in some ways that kind of financial work has felt in **conflict** with my ability to have space for **thinking** and **creativity**. I think for me it has been about realizing that my job is to get myself into a large creative container. The work is not about

me, it's about providing a **space** for other people's **expertise**. One of the ways I look at those aspects that are concrete deliverables that might feel in conflict with the creative work is that inside myself, and I wouldn't normally say this out loud, but those are often the tools for the other work. If you don't have good hygiene in your finances in a business, you can make whatever decisions you want in the interest of art and creativity and world-building, but they may or may not work because the ship might blow up if it's not grounded in the tools and practical stuff. It's been a long process to recognize that there are some tools that are necessary to serve a larger purpose.

Liz: That makes good sense to me. I'm curious about how you succeed or in what ways you succeed at taking care of yourself and holding your boundaries and building your business?

Kate: For me, I created a practice around being in a **relationship** with the entity that is separate from myself. We **talk** and pull **Tarot cards** and talk to each other about stuff. That sounds super out there, and it kind of is, but I think that kind of stuff is really important to figure out how you're going to **communicate** with this abstract entity, spirit, whatever it is. It's not you. That's been really integral. There are also ongoing ways that I'm paying attention to my **body** and my **breath** and somatic things. I also do practical things, like on Tuesdays I don't talk to people. I work from home, and I don't eat meat. I have a scheduling app and people can book with me based on my availability. The basic tools like that have really helped me set **boundaries** and create these containers.

These containers are so important because the core of Wanderwell's success is to be impeccable in how I give my **attention** so that I can be extraordinarily generous with relationships. Relationship-building and just investing in the gift economy with no need for return in a concrete way and the expectation that it will come back in some way is core to how

I've built the business. That's both in alignment with how I want to work and how my business works. I have a referral-based business. I am terrible at social media. I would never invest in real marketing or sales in a concentrated way, but through relationship building over time and being really generous, as long as there are clear boundaries, I think that's a lot of it, being a connector and being generous and **connecting** people with **resources** and other people. Honestly, just remembering folks that are out there and asking how they're doing. That's a sales conversation, but also, I am sincerely interested in being in that environment. A lot of it is just showing up in the community. I care about it, and I feel like, "What are you working on? What's hard? What can I help you with?"

Chapter 3, I just want to hang out with you for a couple of years

*A conversation between Mark Allen and Liz Alspach, January 2021*

Mark Allen

*Machine Project*

Founded 2003

501(c)3

Initially funded from other jobs, freelance work, and charging money for workshops

Closed, 2018

2 full-time; 5 part-time employees

*Machine Project* opened in 2003 as a not-for-profit arts organization and community event space in Los Angeles, California. *Machine* operated out of a storefront in the Echo Park neighborhood, hosting a range of topical events—scientific talks, poetry readings, musical performances, competitions, group naps, cheese tastings, and so forth. The organization was broadly conceived as a social experiment to investigate art, technology, natural history, music, and poetry through collaboration and conversation, and grew to undertake larger collaborations including residences with major art museums and a one-day takeover of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In a 2006 *LA Weekly* article, writer Gendy Alimurung described the *Machine Project* as, "Nikola Tesla by way of P.T. Barnum, with a dash of 'The Anarchist Cookbook.'" Closing in 2018 after fifteen years of self-described experimentation, delirium, and joy, *The Machine Project* website remains online as an archive of the organization's project and model for creative organizing in urban centers.



Liz: Hi Mark.

Mark: Hi.

Liz: Thanks for doing this with me. As you know from my email, I'm talking with people like you who have founded organizations, who are founders or entrepreneurs in some way, who might see those organizations as artworks or creative practices. I'm wondering if you could start by sharing in what ways you think of *Machine Project* as art making, and if so, is it a specific type of art making?

Mark: I'm not interested in the question of what art is or what art can be. This idea of broadening what art is feels like a resolved area of research. My interest in *Machine* wasn't about saying things could be artworks and things couldn't be artworks, I took that as a foundational position. Rather the art **gallery** or the **nonprofit** structure seemed like a super flexible container for bringing a lot of different practices into. I think for artists, the understanding is that an artwork is defined by the **discourse** around it, rather than its **material**. It's a practice, right? A block of marble can be a sculpture, or it can be looked at from a geological perspective. It really depends on the **questions** you ask of it. I was interested in a really broad range of things that humans did. Whether it was **dance** or **music** or **performance** or **research** or **hacking** or **making popcorn** or **anything**. I thought of *Machine* primarily as a framing device. I didn't have to explain a lot of things like why we were having a workshop on **pie** making one day and an inexplicable piece of **performance** art the next because art **space** is the context best understood in our culture for where weird stuff happens.

The other thing I came to realize is that if the container of the gallery was flexible enough people could project their own **ideas** onto it in a way that was useful. It was possible to do a lot of different things. If people perceived it as a maker space, then they would have a certain idea of

what happened there, which gives them an **access point**. If someone thought of it more as a nonprofit organization that was working with the **community**, then that's a way for them to see it, too. The idea is that it's a container that is flexible and fluid enough that people could project their own wants or needs or points of entry onto it.

Liz: That makes sense. One of my faculty introduced me to the idea of platforming as an art practice. Does that apply to *Machine*? Was the point that it was actually a platform where other people could do creative work or make things? The artwork for you was in building and curating and nurturing this platform?

Mark: I'm not interested in the ontology of what my art practice is. I would think about it more as I'm interested in a lot of different things. My background in studio art has been a **practice** where I've always been making tons and tons of stuff **quickly** and not necessarily that critically. I am always in full production mode. I became interested in performance and in how you work with people and what different structures provide different experiences. This was a way to multiply how much stuff I could do. *Machine* did 2,000 events, which as an individual artist I could never achieve. I could make up 2,000 ideas, but by working with a lot of different people, I could see all of these different things happen. I thought about it as a kind research laboratory, in which I was the director of research. Not filling every last test tube, but I'm pushing a little bit in the direction of where the research goes and then seeing what comes out of that to instantiate the next thing. *Machine* was an odd organization because it was directed around what I wanted to do, and that was always the motivating engine for what happened. So when I became no longer interested in it, I shut it down.

But for an organization so focused on my interests to work for other people, it was important that I moved really far back as a public figure inside of it. That was another reason not

to claim it as my art project because then all the other artists became instruments in the development of my cultural capital, which is not something I was interested in. I got more than enough attention and cultural capital that I needed from the static electricity of *Machine*. As a strategy, by pushing myself further back as a public figure or as a creative figure, it allowed me to just do lots and lots of projects with lots of artists without making the relationships shitty. I worked with 800 or 900 artists and had really almost no conflicts around ideas of **credit** and **authorship** and that stuff which is something I am quite proud of. Over time, I realized where I had to balance the public perception of my authorship in order for the thing to work.

Liz: You talked about closing it down, essentially, because you lost interest. One thing I've been thinking about in studying organizational design is this tenet, I suppose, where organizations end up moving through and beyond their original mission and take on a mission of their own, which is sustaining the organization itself. I wonder about this idea that organizations are living and should also maybe die. And when or why should they die? Is it when the mission and the work deviate from fulfilling some kind of purpose or success, whatever that might be? Can you ruminate on that with me? How did you think about the closing or death or the ending of *Machine*?

Mark: It really depends on what is the engine of an **organization**. Sometimes the **infrastructure** is the engine. So if you're talking about a big organization, you don't build a **machine** to do something once. You built that, and it's perceived as having value so you want to keep using it as a tool. For me, *Machine Project*'s value was me, and I wouldn't say that necessarily in public, but I had a specific kind of talent for working with people and helping them do unusual, fun things that they might not have done on their own. I had a real **interest** in seeing all these events happen and I was able to create a mechanism for that dynamic to occur.

I didn't have any interest in running an organization as a practice. I just kind of fell into it and facilitated these things, just like you have to prepare a canvas to make a painting. You get good at gessoing canvases to make nice paintings on top of, but you didn't get into it to be a **canvas** gessoer. You're not going to keep gessoing canvases if you don't want to make paintings anymore. There is this gravitational force of infrastructure, and one of the things I always said during *Machine* is that infrastructure is your frenemy. It helps you do things, but it also forces you to do other things, and over time it gets more and more rigid. So we tried to get by with as little infrastructure as we could.

In the beginning, I did everything myself. Then it got tiresome to put out the chairs every week and do the other mundane things, so I brought on somebody to help me with that and eventually, towards the end, I even had people do a lot of the curating because I felt like I had curated all I wanted to curate. Once you get to be just the director, you're raising **money** and articulating the **vision** and doing that stuff. I spent a couple of years interested in that and learning how to fundraise, and then I wasn't interested in going any farther down that career path. It wasn't very satisfying creatively. Then it was just like, "Why am I doing this? This isn't serving me." Also, I felt like nonprofits have an arc. You feel like you're an airplane right in the beginning, and it's exciting when the airplane takes off. You're the Wright Brothers<sup>32</sup>. Then you're cruising along at cruising altitude and eventually either there's some kind of scandal or you screw something up or you can't raise enough money, and so you crash into a mountain or run out of gas and slowly crash into the ground. So I thought, "Let's just land the plane and everybody can get off safely." It felt so good to do that. I didn't see the thing where it had to keep going until it wasn't any good anymore. I had extracted the **creative work** from it, and the

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<sup>32</sup> The Wright Brothers were American inventors and aviation pioneers who first achieved powered, sustained, flight in 1903.

ideas that were important from it and useful to the culture had been picked up by other people. Throughout the life of *Machine*, often other people figured out what we were doing, who were more interested or could do it better. So as someone who was always interested in new things, our job was to make new things happen and then not do them again because that's not interesting. There's no discovery in that. It was a discovery driven organization.

Liz: I went to this amazing talk a few months ago hosted by UC Davis that was about intergenerational feminist organizing. The speakers were Angela Davis<sup>33</sup> and adrienne maree brown<sup>34</sup>. Someone asked Angela Davis if she got frustrated when her resistance and protest strategies got adopted and used in ways that she didn't envision. Her answer was an absolute, "No." She took the adoption of her strategies as an indication that she needed to become more radical. She had to reach farther because it was working, and people were figuring out how to do it without her.

Mark: If you're not uptight about ideas of ownership, you can get a lot more fun stuff done. I didn't distance myself from the ownership and credit for things out of some sense of morality. It was very pragmatic. For me, if you have ideas that you think are fun and good and interesting for the world, you're winning if other people start doing them. Why do you have to own it, you know?

Liz: One thing that's come up that I've been struggling with is this idea that I, as the artist, might be doing this research from the position of trying to say or prove or demonstrate that these models I'm investigating that artists are using to run organizations are better than other organizations or businesses. The idea of disrupting something might be predicated on the

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<sup>33</sup> Angela Davis (born 1944) is an American Black activist and professor at the University of California Santa Cruz deeply involved with the United States' quest for social justice.

<sup>34</sup> adrienne maree brown is the writer-in-residence at the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute and author of *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* living in Detroit.

presumption that the disrupter thinks there is a better way than the model they are seeking to disrupt.

Mark: I was thinking about that kind of question, that discourse, when participation was a thing everybody was talking about in my circle of the art world. There were people in the field that would make the case that participatory art was morally or ethically better. For me, it's just a neutral tool like anything else. **Participation** or **immersion** is just one of the tools in your toolkit.

Before *Machine* I was part of a **collective** of people doing similar kinds of programming. We were a group of about eight people, and we were coming up with all kinds of ideas, and the ones that happened were the ones people were excited about. If the person has a really great idea, then we would do it. If it didn't seem fun to other people, then it wouldn't happen. Ideas are like that in a culture. They have to fight for their own survival, and they need to have appeal to do that. They must fulfill some kind of need.

Liz: You mentioned that *Machine* allowed you to step back from this authorship role and collaborate with thousands of artists through these events without actually fucking up the relationships. Can you talk more about the relationships themselves, and the way you think about relationships, particularly the way you think about yourself and your responsibility, or not, for the people that you're working with and the relationships you build together?

Mark: I will point you to the toolkit<sup>35</sup> I wrote on **curating** because I talked a lot about **relationships** in that. A lot of what it's about is being transparent about needs, and I think to be successful at this you have to understand your own **motivations**. You have to be clear with yourself. You can fail to be focused or not focused enough on your own needs and see yourself

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<sup>35</sup> [https://machineproject.com/build/engine/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Machine\\_Curating.pdf](https://machineproject.com/build/engine/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Machine_Curating.pdf)

as a servant of other people. Then you're burned out, and it doesn't feed you. To work in an extended way in the nonprofit world, you have to really be fed by it because it's not easy, and it's not particularly remunerative. On one hand, you have to be getting something out of it, and on the other hand, the other people also have to be getting a lot out of it. You can't use people to their disadvantage, and you can't let them use you. You have to find this thing where it's a relationship that feeds everyone. For whatever reason, I had some ability to be relatively good at understanding what was going to be good for me and what was going to be good for people, as well as understanding a lot of **soft skills** around working with people.

If you work with a lot of artists, they really need different things, and they want different things. Some people want someone to say to them, "Hey Liz, I would like you to make a piece with cows on this cow farm for two weeks, and it has to be a 20 foot sculpture." Some people really like specific assignments like that. It really helped them and let them do something. Other people just wanted me to say, "Liz, I love your work, and I know you have a strong vision. I just want to be a part of making it happen. What do you need me to do? Do you need someone to raise money? Do you need someone to help with publicity? I look at your work, and I think it should be in a bigger context. If you want to do this, I can help you." It's just normal stuff, but it's about being a relatively competent human who can understand yourself and understand other people. Then you have to keep in touch because if you say you are going to do something, you always have to come back and ask, "Are you liking this?" Is this fun? Does it feel good? Do you want to keep doing this? Should we do it again?" You have to be ready to **redefine** it based on people's needs because there is no value to it other than that. I really felt like if people were doing what they wanted to do, what they loved to do, then you're going to get the best results. There's no reward other than that. People liking it or the audience being happy with it or getting

a good review, all that stuff is a side effect of the relationship. It's superfluous in a way if you make a great piece, even less than that if it's not a great piece, but for me it was about getting to be a part of people's practices.

I think from being a practicing artist, I knew a lot of the work was just making all the not-good pieces on the way to the good piece. A lot of curators make this mistake of thinking their job is to extract the good piece out of the artist, and it's not an effective strategy. You see that all the time where people have made some interesting bodies of work, and then they move up to a higher orbit, a show or a museum or something, especially younger and more inexperienced curators there is this pressure where you feel like you need to make an amazing piece. It's counterproductive. You just have to flow with the **process**.

So there were artists, we made terrible pieces together. In fact, there's one artist who is still a good friend of mine, but we did like four or five pieces, and it took me that long to realize, "oh, they're not a very good artist. I just really like them as a person. I just want to work with them." Now this corresponds much better to my **intuition** of who I wanted to work with because I like them and because I like their work—usually those are pretty tightly aligned—but sometimes it's more like, "Oh, I just want to hang out with you for a couple of years." It's funny because this person has a lot of success, but in my **heart**, I feel like the work isn't very good. But I like them, so I'm happy for them.

Liz: I have this subconscious fear you just activated in me that I'm a nice person, but I actually don't make good artwork.

Mark: Well, that's the thing. I teach **graphic design** a lot now, and there's a thing I talk a lot about because I work with undergraduates. You have to be on time. You have to be talented, and people have to want to work with you. If you can nail two out of three, you'll be fine in life. If



you could nail all three, you'll do great. If you can only do one you're going to have a really hard time.

Liz: Ha. It's my understanding that you were teaching at Pomona College while you were running *Machine Project* as your research. I'm wondering how you thought about the nuts and bolts of where the money came from? The rent and the payroll, and how those things relate to making the work and making the organization work?

Mark: I started teaching when I graduated from CalArts in 1999. I had a couple of adjunct jobs at UC San Diego, and I think in 2005 I started at Pomona. Machine is probably one of the things that helped me get my **job** because it was something that, even though it started just a couple of years before, it was starting to get a bit of **attention**. The job at Pomona was one of the secret engines of *Machine* because I didn't have to generate income for myself. I think in the last three years of *Machine* I started to take a little bit of salary, but overall it was a drain on my income for many, many years.

When I was reading your notes about how to make a business support yourself as an artist, I thought "good luck." It's easier if you have a source of **income**. It's not an accident that so many artists are from rich families. The generation before makes a lot of money, so the generation after can be poets. In my case, I was just lucky enough to get a job. In some ways, it was a lot to run the business and teach full time, but they feed each other. Former students became employees, and artists and collaborators I worked with when I was running *Machine* often came to Pomona to visit. When *Machine* was doing a lot of performance art, I taught a performance art class.

Liz: I was just thinking about your comment about most artists coming from generational wealth. I keep searching for this overlap in the venn diagram of wealth and not wealth where I, as an

artist and other artists who don't come from wealth and especially artists with even fewer resources or privileges than me, could adopt the mechanisms themselves for earning a living, livelihood, or building the enterprise as the artwork. I wonder if there's a strategy there that can help the two coexist. I'm still not sure if it's possible.

Mark: There was a period of time where being an artist was a much more radical and strange lifestyle choice 50, 60, 70 years ago. There are so many fields now that are 'artist-adjacent' in a way that there didn't used to be. It makes me think of Theaster Gates<sup>36</sup> or Project Row Houses<sup>37</sup>. Structurally, I think it's much easier and makes much more sense to make a fortune as a really successful object maker so then you can do weird projects.

My artist friends who make weird projects support it with selling artworks. I think about Laura Owens who had that great space, *365 Mission*. Her paintings sell for a million dollars. Mark Bradford is another really important artist that started a space. Those people are really leveraging the extremely high economic value of their paintings to do these great curatorial or community space projects. I myself don't come from a wealthy family, my parents were teachers, but having the good fortune of being a tenured professor is a kind of **wealth** and **privilege** that allows a lot of freedom. That includes the freedom to do something as eccentric as *Machine Project* for 15 years.

I have a genuine **love** for the field and love for grassroots projects and artists running spaces. I think they're just the most cool, fun thing. It's always been a thing in LA that I've really enjoyed. It has a lot of churn in it. I was interested in your questions, even if they weren't

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<sup>36</sup> Theaster Gates (born 1973) is an American artist and professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago. Gates' art practice works to revitalize underserved neighborhoods by combining urban planning and art practices.

<sup>37</sup> Project Row Houses is an artwork by Rick Lowe and a community platform that enriches lives through art with an emphasis on cultural identity and its impact on the urban landscape.

questions I'm trying to resolve, because it seems like you have a perspective on it to research.

It's also about **generosity**. If people want to meet with me, I try to meet with them.

Liz: The generosity component is really fascinating to me, particularly in the arts community because people seem so willing to share ideas. This concept of ideas being collective things that we nurture by passing them around is really beautiful to think about.

Mark: That's just how **brains** work. You can try to be tight, but it doesn't work. Sometimes I have students who don't want to tell people their ideas because they think someone is going to steal their concept. To them I usually say "Ideas aren't worth shit. Ideas are a dime a fucking dozen." I had 100,000 ideas for events, and we did a ton of them, and that was fun, but it was only when you actually do things that you learn. Ideas aren't a possession. They are a thing to be passed between our brains as they are generated. We are not really individuals as thinkers. We generate things, and then we end up being **vehicles** for the ideas that are floating around.

With regard to generosity and sharing ideas, for me I'm also coming from a stable background and having a job and being a white guy and all that stuff. It's really easy for me to not be tight about it. Our psychic sense of scarcity can affect what we can do. It's kind of a disability. I think when someone is feeling tight and scared and concerned about people taking stuff from them, you have to feel sympathy because they're obviously coming from a place of not feeling safe and centered, and they have a need that is holding them back. So, I try to be sympathetic when people are in that headspace.

Liz: Do you think of yourself, this is sort of apropos of nothing, but do you think of yourself as an entrepreneur? Entrepreneurs also think ideas are a dime a dozen, but they also sort of think of them as possessions.

Mark: No, because I'm terrible at making money. I'm an **organizer**. I love starting things. I love making things. I love learning about stuff, but I don't see myself as an entrepreneur because I understand that word culturally, meaning someone who starts a business.

Liz: It's funny, I think of you as a founder, which is an entrepreneur in a sense.

Mark: I mean, it sounds complicated because of the **vocabulary** which is really different inside and outside the artworld. Outside of the artworld, art means something that was made well.

That's why you can have a sandwich artist at Subway or nail art. It just means something that's well made. That is what art meant for a really long time, but now inside the artworld it's people who like to **play** with ideas and don't necessarily have to be good at making things. They're making things that are happening on meta levels. Entrepreneurship, you could redefine it inside of an art context to have a different meaning system, but outside of it, I think of a frat boy at a coffee shop in LA who is making a deal to be an influencer on his cell phone. I'm not interested in associating myself with that meaning, but you may have a different meaning in our world which I'd be happy to associate myself with.

Liz: It's an interesting thing because entrepreneurship in some spheres is a place where capital is reallocated and venture capital, specifically, is funneling a lot of energy towards entrepreneurship and startups and founders. Many artists are operating as founders, but we're not finding ways to claim our seat at the table in these places where there is actually a lot of capital available. I'm not attracted to the language of it, but I wonder if there's some way that I might harvest it better for my use or the use of other artists.

Mark: That's the problem with artists, they do things for reasons that the larger capital system doesn't quite understand, and so we end up innovating a lot of ways that become capitalized later. Artists are gentrifiers. If you think about how artists function, it's a neutral thing about

looking for **spaces of opportunity** that are undervalued and moving into those spaces and revealing the value. We do that intellectually all the time.

Liz: Thank you—so great. That seems like a great sentiment to end on. This was a treat in every way.

Mark: This was super interesting, so thank you.

## Chapter 4, Are we learning things we didn't know?

*A conversation excerpt between Jon Rubin and Liz Alspach, March 2021*

Jon Rubin, Dawn Weleski\*

*Conflict Kitchen*

Founded 2010

Subsidiary of 501(c)3

Initially funded through small grant from local foundation

Closed, 2017

3 full time and 15-20 part-time employees

*The Conflict Kitchen* was a restaurant, artwork and research project founded in 2010 by artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski that served a rotating menu of cuisines from countries where the United States was (is) in conflict. Situated as a familiar form of economic and social exchange, a take-out window, *Conflict Kitchen* was committed to stimulating and engaging the general public in discussions about countries, culture, and people they might know little about outside of media headlines. Supplementing food sales with arts research grant funding that helped pay for performances, publications, and research trips, the restaurant operated as a hybrid for profit and nonprofit entity for over seven years. Referring to the informational brochures distributed with meals, NPR described the restaurant as "an experimental public art project—and the medium is the sandwich wrap." *Conflict Kitchen* innovated broadly across traditional disciplines from ethnic and cultural studies, international relations, conflict management, and the arts, and in doing so the restaurant transformed the simple exchange of money for food into a space that reckoned with free speech, dialogue, and death threats.

Liz: Can you talk a little bit about how the priority of this project was to have cultural conversations that weren't happening elsewhere? That seems to me like a way that you're reprioritizing or redirecting value away from what a business might traditionally do.

Jon: One of the greatest benefits of making **money** selling **food** for a project that actually wants to create space for **conversations** that are difficult for many Americans is that we had a level of autonomy through the revenue that allowed us not to be dependent on convincing grantors of the validity of the work. It didn't matter if foundations or other donors thought this was a good idea; we thought it was a good idea, and we made enough money from the food to allow us to do it. That was unique. I had never experienced anything like that before because I usually have to convince someone, or multiple someones, to give me funding. Having the capacity to fund the thing you've always valued without having to ask or beg or hope that you will get funding from others is a really amazing, liberating moment.

Liz: Wow, I want that moment. To that end, do you think *Conflict Kitchen* could be seen as a tool for shaping a new world or shaping new types of businesses? Is it an instrument of change?

Jon: I don't know if we went into it thinking this is a tool for others, but I do recognize that some of the works I have been part of over the years have taken the form of alternate models, and if someone is interested in that model, that's a lovely byproduct, but it's not the initial intent. That said, I've become cognizant of how certain projects have a greater capacity to be borrowed. In the end, each work is its own set of **challenges**. There are many artists doing things right now that are based on hybrid **business models**, but you recognize pretty quickly that sustaining art like this is actually really hard and complicated work, a very different **labor** than working in the **studio**. It doesn't make it easy to replicate just because a tool or model is developed. It doesn't mean anyone can pick it up and learn how to use it. It takes an insane amount of **dedication**.



When you look at arts/business projects through history, it's oftentimes just a small group of people who are incredibly dedicated that are making something happen through sheer force of **will**. And ideally, over time, a **community** gets built around a project and helps support it and keep it going, but those initial first steps are really a labor of love.

I think because it was so widely shared in the media, that *Conflict Kitchen* has functioned as a sort of **recipe** that many people have used and modified. That's the beauty culture, how it is constantly remixed depending on whose cooking. Recipes are kind of our original form of open-source information, a basic set of instructions that you can be immediately cooked, shared and distributed. This is indicative of how art can circulate and be metamorphosed into different forms.

Liz: That's smart, and it's geographically sensitive. What ingredients are available? It's time sensitive. What's in the fridge right now? One last thing, I think, what did success look like for you for the artwork or the business?

Jon: There's multiple ways in which we thought about it. One was just existing. Just the very act keeping it alive and afloat was a success. Especially when you're trying to compete as a business, that's such a tough thing. If we could make it through the year, that was a great success. Then you can think about the more subjective, entirely different, internal criteria of if this is a successful artwork or educational initiative. Those criteria are decided by the people we worked closely with who also wrestled with what we were doing. *Are we communicating what we feel is valuable? Are we learning things that we didn't know? Are we sharing what we are learning with the public in a way that is compelling and evocative? Are we stagnating or reproducing our methods over and over? Can we reinvent constantly and play with the form of the project itself in order to better amplify and compel the public to engage with the **stories** and*

*experiences of the communities we are working with?* As an artist, I sometimes get tired of doing the same thing over and over again, not so much the general premise of a project, but the smaller details of a given work. I always want to make sure there is space for play, reinvention and learning.

## Chapter 5, Staggering along the interpretive trail

*A conversation between Matthew Coolidge and Liz Alspach, January 2021*

Matthew Coolidge

*Center for Land Use Interpretation*

Founded 1994

501(c)3

Initially self-funded

Open

2 full-time employees

Founded in 1994, *The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI)* is a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to researching and sharing knowledge about how the lands of the United States are apportioned, utilized, and perceived. Situated within the discipline of geography, *CLUI* focuses on understanding the nature and extent of human interaction with the Earth's surface. Employing and innovating investigative techniques from the arts, humanities, and sciences, projects encompass a range of topics, including transportation, water, emergency response, telecommunications, energy, mining, waste, military, and radioactive R&D. Much of the organization's activity is focused online and in these self-guided, dispersed installations where visitors can freely access programming and exhibits. Headquartered in Los Angeles, California, with facilities in Wendover, Utah, Swansea, California; and the Mojave Desert; *The Center* maintains a growing land use database of the United States and produces publications, online resources, tours, lectures, and other public programs across the country. With landscape as a medium, *CLUI* conveys critical and otherwise untold stories of who we are as individuals and as a nation.

Liz: Matthew, are you there? Hi.

Matthew: Yes, I am. Hey, Liz, how are you?

Liz: I'm great. Thank you for finding time to talk with me. I feel a little bit starstruck to be honest.

Matthew: Oh, well, I assure you, I am nowhere near being out in any particular constellation. I'm just sitting here in front of a computer and happy to talk to you.

Liz: Ha. To start, maybe you could talk to me about what happened before you started *CLU?* I know it's been a few decades since then, but how did you get to the point where you knew starting this organization was the next thing?

Matthew: Well, I studied geography, specifically geomorphology which examines the shape of the surface of the earth, as well as studying contemporary art and architecture in school. So, I was always kind of mixed up. It reconciled when I realized that there was some **connection** between those things. That there was a Venn diagram-like overlap of **geography** and **art**, where people, including land artists and conceptualists like Douglas Huebler<sup>38</sup>, John Baldessari<sup>39</sup>, Peter Fend<sup>40</sup>, Nancy Holt<sup>41</sup> and Robert Smithson<sup>42</sup>, and many more, were doing geographic projects. Personally, I did try art things, and I made objects, and I even kind of went to art school. Over

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<sup>38</sup> Douglas Huebler was an American artist and pioneer of conceptual art in the mid 20th century. Huebler was trained as a painter turned sculptor and turned to making series of 'Duration Pieces', 'Variable Pieces' and 'Location Pieces' by treating everyday activities as art.

<sup>39</sup> John Baldessari was an American artist based in Santa Monica, CA known for conceptual work that featured found photography and appropriated imagery. Baldessari combined the narrative potential of images and the associative power of language within the boundaries of the work of art.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Fend (born 1950) is an American artist living and working in Berlin, New Zealand, and Italy. Fend co-founded artworks and organizations Ocean Earth Construction and Development Corporation with a collective of other artists including Jenny Holzer and Peter Nadin.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy Holt was an American artist most known for the piece Sun Tunnels. A leader in the land art movement, Holt used cylindrical forms, light, and techniques of reflection to develop new forms of visual perception.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Smithson was an American artist and founder of the Land Art Movement most famously known for the piece Spiral Jetty, a 1600 ft earth work on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake.

the years I found myself making less and less material artifacts and more and more records of **events** and that kind of stuff. I was literally dematerializing the work into a kind of **frame** and into a point of view, focusing on perspective itself. The frame that goes around things, and how you frame it, is where the art occurs. It's in the **dialogue** between the viewer and the maker of the **object**. Also, the object is really a mirror of sorts that reflects how the person looking at it sees. Therefore, as Duchamp said early on, art takes place in the **mind** of the viewer, not in the object on the **wall**. You can get to art in an absolutely infinite number of ways.

I started getting together with a few other people to establish an **organization** to pursue these notions of cognition, perception, but also to study culture really, through the medium of the landscape itself. By landscape, I mean everything on that continuous fabric of what's around us. For me, here now, in this office, it's a flat slab door from Home Depot on top of two-drawer file cabinets, with a computer on it, and from there it radiates out across the linoleum floor and out the doors and under the walls of the building I am in, into the asphalt and down the streets, over the blocks and logistical suburbs and parks and dumps and on and on rolling across America.

So, I use the terms land use and landscape very literally and inclusively, and considering the basic notion that all of landscape is. Now, **land use** is a cultural product because we've manipulated every atom on the surface of the Earth, intentionally or unintentionally. The view of humans and nature as different things is no longer valid, if it ever was. Humans are part of nature, engaged in a perpetual transformation and evolution of the material world, that continues even after we are gone.

And given the scale of our interactions, no atom on the surface is unaffected by humans now, so everything is an artifact rather than "geofact". You can still find rocks underground that have not been exposed to the "anthropocene," but as soon as you drill down to them, or bring

them to the surface, they become an artifact too. Everything is the equivalent of a flint knapped arrowhead because everything is formed, framed, and affected by humans, either intentionally or not. In a way, the *CLUI* applies the **ideas of archeology** to the present, but without the strict science of archeology. It's this generalized notion of looking at what we have in front of us and asking ourselves, "What is it? How did it get there? What does it mean, if anything? Why do we think what we think about it?" This is where land use (everything around us) meets **interpretation** (selecting, framing, describing), from the specimen's space in a drawer to the institutional edifice around it.

The idea of doing this work through an **institutional structure** was to both provide some degree of legitimacy to the **process**, but also acknowledging that so much of culture is described and controlled through institutional structures, whether it's a **museum** or a **government entity** or **corporation**. These conglomerates of individuals that become incorporated, you might say, are no longer individuals. They have transformed into entities that serve constructed **objectives** and **methodologies** and **mandates** and **mission statements**. We felt that there needs to be more diversity in the institutional realm, to explore the world in a more complete, accurate, and effective way. Just like you need biological diversity, you need institutional diversity to try to cover more of the spectrum of possible points of view.

Everything about the world is how it's looked at. You can have an infinite number of points of view regarding a single object, and they all have some validity relative to one another depending on who is making the decision. But we didn't want the *CLUI* to be just a critique about institutionality. The objective was to be a useful entity too, a **medium** that is kind of transparent, while acknowledging the subjectivity and meddling that comes with every constructed point of view. We wanted to provide a **resource** of raw material, a curated selection

of places as artifacts, interpreted, yes, as they have to be, but more minimally and transparently than usual. More like raw material. Looking at the actual physical world as a place of intrigue, meaning, significance, and mystery, and stories and truth, so not just an institution as an end in itself, but a resource for the broad, general public, and history.

We rarely call ourselves an arts organization. We talk about art as being a tool, a method that is used to interpret things that are outside of other disciplines, and perhaps includes a much wider vocabulary of descriptive methods. Things that aren't as concrete as scientific description; like literature, painting, and conceptual art. The different ways in which art looks at the world provides possibilities for seeing familiar objects in different or new ways. Ultimately, art is **communication** and if effective, it provides a more clear, coherent, and meaningful view of the world, one where people feel more engaged with it. With engagement comes a commitment. But art, while important, is not the only thing we work with.

Liz: Thank you for that arc. One thing you mentioned that I'm fascinated by is that you don't think of yourselves as an arts organization. That is meaningful related to what you said about the discourse around an object being what makes it art. Do you think about the mission statement and the value structure and the leadership decisions, the way you founded the organization, do you think of those things creatively? Are they akin to the way you would make artwork?

Matthew: Well, to claim that "this is art and that isn't," is part of what we are reacting against, I suppose. Art generally is perceived as something that exists separate from other disciplines and other modes of communicating. When you say something is art, you're saying it is in its own category, it's separate from other things. We believe art is much more a way of perceiving, and that it can be created in the mind of the viewer or the perceiver through a wide range of activities, without them even realizing that it is art. Once you've constructed the right kind of



frame, anything inside of the frame can provide that art-like **experience**.

Sometimes people need **permission** to see things in that way. In which case, if you construct a familiar **porthole**, like that physically-framed object on a white wall that says “this is art,” it tells people to apply all of their aesthetic and art-historical preconceptions to it and construct something of value. We’re saying that you can take the object out of the frame, take it off the wall of the museum, and move it around wherever. If you can construct the basic structure of seeing things as **connected** to the world, and interesting, and compelling, that can create an art-like sensation of understanding that you don’t need to do within the art world or within the traditional art framework. People might not even know they’re having an art experience. They might not even know to recognize that. And that’s fine, and maybe even better.

A lot of people off the street, as it were, have very antagonistic feelings about art, and often for very good reasons. We want to break that down. One way of doing that is to provide the experience of art without necessarily calling it art. As soon as you call it that, you turn away many of the people that have problems with it because they don’t understand it. They don’t have the **time** or **energy** or incentive to invest everything they need to in order to understand what art is, in order to read it.

Like most of America, who’s got the time to do that? To many, the art world looks like an elite group of people dressed in black, holding cocktail glasses. It’s just another racket of exclusivity. And some of this is indeed true, especially where art becomes a commodity of high finance. By avoiding the commercial and commodity side of art, we are not part of that art world. We want to be part of the world of basic human experience. We ask questions like idiots, or babies. Things like, “What is that? Where did it come from? What does it do? How is it connected to things? Who owns it? What does it mean? If anything? Why do we think what we

think about it?” Those are the same things you project onto a **painting** on the wall, but you can do that with a curb stone, or a tennis court, or a piece of plastic trash. Whatever it is, you can see it as art and bring the interpretive tools of the discipline to it. So we are, as an institution, carriers of that frame of interpretive tools used in order to describe the world, a world full of potential meaning and interest and engagement.

Liz: It reminds me, as someone who is thinking about building organizations, given that in your mind art is this frame for sharing information and inviting inquiry and communication, what are the connotations that brings? What was the process like for landing on that approach? Also for the founding of the organization, how did that founding philosophy dovetail with funding? Can you talk about how you gave it legs and form both financially and conceptually?

Matthew: We operated for a couple of years without any **income**, other than the resources that we had individually, which were few, and mostly **time**. We would make **exhibits** and put them up and very few people would see them. We were all working other jobs at that time. I have worked full time at the *Center* since 1996 or so, but prior to that, I worked in the tech side of the film industry, art fabrication, working all kinds of jobs. I did all kinds of wandering around the country, working in construction, food service, and whatever.

The thing that enabled the **organization** to form was the desktop revolution, as it used to be called, in the late 80s and early 90s when the tools of creating and communicating in the **language** of an institution became available to the individual and people without much money. We got our hands on a laser printer and paper cutter, and digital publication and layout tools, and then the early World Wide Web. With these you could create an identity on paper, and on the **internet** that looks like an **institution** or a corporation, and in fact could be one too, if you filed the paperwork, which we did. A nonprofit is a corporation. The first thing you do when you

become a nonprofit is you become a corporation, you incorporate. That in itself is an interesting conceptual act, where you're disembodying yourself to merge into a new entity, which is composed of people, but it's ultimately its own body. This notion, this **conceptual structure** of what is a corporation is, was part of what we're exploring.

We filed the paperwork and became a nonprofit, which was a bit of a **leap of faith** because it was a commitment. When you file with the government and the IRS to be a nonprofit, you enter into a contract to have fiscal responsibility and to follow your mission and the rules regarding the acquisition and dispensation of funds. You have to do things properly. It's complicated, and it takes a lot of time to follow the rules.

And yet, you don't want that to become the thing you're doing most of the time. You want the product to be the important thing. So, the balance between the institutional structure's obligations and the creative output is often a battle. We decided early on that it was critical to maintain the primary focus of the organization as doing projects, rather than just the organization continuing to survive. This was, after all, consistent with the mission statement we submitted to the IRS, and what we still follow. By doing things inexpensively and doing them ourselves, we didn't develop a major overhead where the institution required staff just to maintain its existence. We could at some point, perhaps, have become a much bigger organization, but we tended to reject those opportunities because it was at the expense of agility and flexibility, to react in a quick way to things. And to not put the cart before the horse, not put the existence of the institution before the mission of the institution.

In terms of funders, we were very fortunate to find people who understood us. One of our first funders was the Durfee Foundation, which was an LA family foundation that supported our first employee for a year. Later the The Andy Warhol Foundation started supporting our exhibits,

and they've been really great. I don't know where arts would be in America without them. They support many interesting, small, agile, and regional creative organizations all over the country. Then, or even before The Andy Warhol Foundation, came the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Frankly, we were surprised. We sent off an application to the NEA to help support our *Wendover Residency Program* and didn't really expect to hear back. A year later we got a phone call wanting to clarify some points in the proposal, which I guess we did in a favorable way because they gave us a grant. One of a series to support our field site out there, a kind of interpretive field camp, open to people who call themselves artists but also anybody who is a creative interpreter of the world.

We chose that location because it was compelling. It forced a reaction because it was so stark and dramatic. The resources we could provide were financial as well as physical, providing a **place** to live and work for a period, but also we could help **liaise** with the social and institutional environment, which we got to know pretty well. That program operated for 20 years at least. We did officially close the residency program a few years ago for all kinds of reasons. I don't know if you want to get into it, but it was time.

Liz: Is that the living quarters at *The Desert Research Station* north of Barstow?

Matthew: No, this is a place out in Wendover, Utah, on the edge of the great salt flats of Bonneville. We've still got several buildings there, and we use them for field programs and some long-term projects. We have two exhibition buildings; we have a workshop and residences and some interesting storage spaces and production spaces. It's a really dramatic site. The Desert Research Station near Barstow, which you mentioned, is in Southern California. We opened that around 2000. We were looking for something closer to Los Angeles, in its "hinterland". *The Desert Research Station* started out with the support of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los

Angeles, as part of an exhibit that Connie Butler curated. We used the resources the museum provided to establish the *Desert Research Station*, which continues to operate today. Whenever we are invited to do something with another, usually much larger, organization, a commission as part of an exhibit, say, we try to make the project have some longevity after the exhibit ends, so it's not just a momentary thing that ends up in the dumpster. Connie's MOCA show gave birth to an ongoing program.

Liz: The idea of a corporation being related to a corpus is fascinating. The corporation is like a new embodiment, but also a disembodiment of the actual humans that come together to make the organization. In the arts, clay and sculpture have all these historical relationships to bodies, and the human body and the body as a vessel. The corporate body is also a medium. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind talking about that more, and if in some way *CLUI* is a disembodiment of yourself?

Matthew: We aren't a **collective** because that comes with all the sort of baggage of what that means. But in a way, as a corporation, we function collectively in order to pursue the stated **goals** and **missions** of the corporation. The **bodies** behind the corporate structure are very real people operating in concert, collectively, to execute the mission statement, within the guidelines and rules of nonprofit law. A corporation is a body (a "corpus") and by incorporating we've agreed to create this new body through which individuals work to pursue this mission. Thus, we serve a body that is a group. Individually, we are just individuals and often have to put aside our individual **politics** and **desires** in order to cooperate with the others to keep things within the lines of the methodology of the corporate entity. It's generally a relief, frankly, to be able to operate through this body and not as an individual. As an individual, as you know, there are liability issues which are transferred onto the corporation and off of yourself [when you are

incorporated]. So, you are able to, in a sense, be protected. But that wasn't our reason to create a corporation. It was rather to effectuate ideas that rise above individual interests. In a way, we were creating a creative medium that didn't have any ego.

Liz: That leads me to this idea of keeping the organization nimble and agile so that it doesn't take over the workload and consume all of its own resources. Feeding the organization doesn't become the work itself. How do you think about that? And maybe as an afterthought, how do you think about it in terms of closing certain projects or closing the organization? What would it mean to end *CLUI* or the artwork? What are the parameters that would either keep it going or cause it to no longer be of service to you?

Matthew: We do have an internal **plan** for the what ifs, the unimaginable situations, like if something comes up that forces the dissolution of the organization. We have no plans to do that, but I acknowledge that the day could come, who knows, when there just isn't energy or resources to continue. We'd like the **information** that we've collected to stay accessible. Whether it's in the form of an archive, or a web presence that is continuously maintained and updated with just a minimum amount of funds. By law, when you cease to exist as a nonprofit, you have to give away your **assets** to another nonprofit. So, there's also the possibility of finding a partner institution to help our resources survive a bit longer. Perhaps an academic organization or a museum that could help continue the organization's mission to some degree, even if it's no longer its own corporate entity. So, there are all kinds of possibilities. But frankly, mostly we think about what the next thing is that we have to do.

Liz: Whoops, to clarify, I wasn't trying to foreshadow anything with that question. Related to the conceptualization of it all, who you are referring to when you say we? You've spoken mostly as a collective or a group of some sort. Who is *CLUI*?

Matthew: Well, there's a board of directors, so they're part of a we. There's people who do regular work, which is part of that we, and then they're the volunteers and supporters out in the world who contribute information and ideas and engage through dialogues and internet **communication** and help out because they believe in what we're doing. The primary group is five or so people that come into the office once a week, or more. Though during the pandemic, very few people are coming into the office to work, people are doing stuff from home. These five are Aurora Tang, Sarah Simons, myself, George Budd, and Ben Loescher. More of who the “we” is includes people on the mailing list, some of whom support us through donations. From there “we” expands outwards to anybody who reads anything that we publish in print or on the web and thinks about it, and then there’s the global “we” that we assume we serve in some way, ultimately that end user, the people who consume what we produce, in whatever way, whoever they are. We don’t really know who they are. We don’t do exit surveys and polls and things.

Our sense of the impact on our constituency, whatever that is, is anecdotal, not based on any real measurable system. I consider that part of the “we” as well because its people joining us in the **exploration** and **experimentation**.

Liz: I love that you’re in about your third decade in operation, and you’re still comfortable saying we don’t know exactly who we’re doing this for.

Matthew: We’re in a privileged position of being able to do **research** that is open ended, as opposed to scientific research where you have a theory you’re trying to prove. We don’t really have anything to prove, we’re just trying to find different theories to explore and explain. It’s open-ended research, meaning we’ll see what the next thing leads to, and then go from there to the next thing and along the way leave **stories** and **exhibitions** which are their own experiments in **interpretation**. These things add up, and they all reflect off each other.

I think each project we do is a step along one continuous path, but we don't know where it ends up. It's just a path that you have to blaze because you can only be on one path to the future, staggering along the interpretive trail, trying to better understand the world. Any individual does exactly what we do as an institution. That is, you try and understand the world you're living in by looking at stuff that's around you. Everybody does that. We have just become a center for doing that. Every single individual is their own center for land use **interpretation**. Everybody is their own center of the world that they look out from, trying to make sense of what they see, and to act in a positive way within their means, and to share experiences with others. That's why it's so simplistic. What we do is basic. It's not even multidisciplinary. It's non-disciplinary.

Liz: Are there any specific questions I wrote down that were really interesting to you that I didn't think to ask?

Matthew: We kind of covered a lot of it indirectly. I understand some of your questions were generated for your research and not necessarily specifically for us. If you have any other questions that would be helpful to you, I'd be happy to entertain them.

Liz: I'm curious, after talking to me about this, who else does work that you find interesting?

Matthew: Well, I can't think of too many institutions that do what we do, which is why we felt we had to start one, but there are lots of people that do bits of what we do, lots of teachers and writers and photographers and artists. Institutions too, in some ways, like the National Building Museum, or the Center for Art and Environment, or the Canadian Center for Architecture. Or the Smithsonian Institution, which takes a thematic approach to interpreting the culture of America with different exhibition halls: aerospace, aviation, portrait gallery, American history, African American history, and so on. Then they have research divisions and research facilities in



astronomy and environmental science and stuff. They're collecting things, to be America's attic, to preserve those physical elements of culture. The Smithsonian of course operates on a much different scale than we do, but are limited in ways by politics and Congress, and have to behave within certain political boundaries. We are a bit more free, in this way, as we avoid depending on **resources** that would restrict or limit what we can do or say in any way.

Another institutional model for us, in a way, is *National Geographic*. While it has a problematic history as a 19th century entity serving the interests of American imperialism, and is now a very commercial entertainment company, the idea of a "National Geographic" meaning, creating a national picture of the geographic, is kind of what we're trying to do. Although we are very patriotic in the sense that we love this country, and we love the communion of people who live here, we are trying to understand the complexity of this nation and its effects on the globe, too. We are trying to make a national portrait, knowing that such a thing can't exist in any accurate way, but the attempt is actually the thing.

The Smithsonian and the National Geographic are two institutions that, even though they are fraught in all kinds of ways, they have or had this kind of innocence too, a gallant quixotic hubris that is optimistic and inspiring. They remind us that doing something impossible is still worth the effort. We have worked with the Smithsonian a couple of times, and once considered the idea of the *CLUI* serving as another kind of research arm of the Institution, having exhibitions in **office trailers** on the **National Mall**, and having CLUI fleet vehicles with federal **license plates** on them.

Liz: Did they do that?

Matthew: No. We never went so far as to propose any of this to them. It was just fun to think about. But if I could digress for a bit about the license plate thing: having a vehicle that is from a

state can be a limitation when you're doing **fieldwork**. Your plate tags, whether on a private vehicle or a rented one, makes you appear, initially, to others as a representative from that state, and many **dialogues** with people along the road starts with them making assumptions about who you are based on what they think about the state on your license plates. This is sometimes debilitating, so it was an interesting thought to imagine having a federal license plate that says the driver is from the USA, suggesting we are from the same place as you, not from some other state from you. It also would say that we have a national perspective, which I would like to think the CLUI does, not a regional one. But of course, this is complicated in reality, as it would say that we are federal government representatives, which has even more baggage for many people. To help neutralize things, we used to have logos on the fleet vehicles we used in the field, but that would often provoke more dialogue and generate more smoke in the way of us trying to do the work in a neutral way. And we had to explain the organization to everyone at every gas pump. So we peeled off the magnetic identifiers years ago. But this is germane as this idea of being **officious** and official, to present a portrait of America is, seriously, what we're trying to do.

And I know the use of the term "America" when you are talking about the USA is really problematic, as America is Mexico and Canada, and Central and South America too. But this is also the point. It's that kind of assertion, that overstep, that myopic view of a global entity that's part of the identity of the USA. We always think we're acting in everybody else's best interest and as a result we've spread our economic structures and culture all over the planet. Winning WWII and saving the world from fascism generated a lot of political capital that we've used for years and years. With a more global, inclusive view, individual cultures around the world are gaining more **power** and assertion within the discourse around the globe. We are very aware of

the problems of claiming to be an institution about America, but at the same time, we still think that America does have good things to offer the world. That ideas about individual freedom, with compassion and tolerance, are indeed real, and can make things more perfect, in the Union, and beyond. This kind of patriotism is not political patriotism, but a belief in fundamental human issues rather than political objectives, even though it may be as optimistic and quixotic as the Smithsonian.

Liz: It never occurred to me that you think of yourselves as patriotic, but it's brilliant given the land is your main tool of interest, using research mechanisms that utilize the land itself, and land itself as being a required component of being a patriot.

Matthew: We all are on the ground here, somewhere, even if it's all broken up and divided up and fought over. This national landscape is our commons, and our common ground. Patriotism is often used as a weapon. We mean it in a very different way, in a way that is about the inclusive commons of the landscape. No matter who owns it and plows it or paves it, it belongs to all of us, in a classic Woody Guthrie way. By preserving freedom and fairness, we can all be engaged in shaping its boundaries, pits and piles, and chart the course of what happens to this terrain.

Liz: I enjoyed this very much—thank you.

Matthew: Of course. Thanks for listening and being interested.

## Chapter 6, A Bunch of Skillsets

*A conversation excerpt between Caroline Woolard and Liz Alspach, January 2021*

Caroline Woolard

*BFAMFAPhD*

Founded 2013

Collective

Funded through workshops, grants, sweat equity, day jobs

Open

No paid staff

*BFAMFAPhD* is a collective that advocates for cultural equity in the United States by making art, reports, and teaching tools. Formed in 2012, it is a component of the practice of Caroline Woolard, an American artist who, in making the art, becomes an economic critic. This conversation excerpt occurred at the same time Caroline was writing *Solidarity not Charity*, a report commissioned by Grantmakers in the Arts about the ways that arts and culture grantmakers can engage in systems-change work.

Liz: Corporations are gargantuan and, for the most part, run our country, and when you incorporate, you basically create a new body. I'm often stuck thinking about if it's even possible to engage in that ecosystem and stay true to this interpersonal and disruptive work?

Caroline: The problem, the way my partner would say it—she writes about the **economy** and **finance** and **literature** and sometimes **art**—she would say no. A structural problem can't be solved interpersonally. Basically, we live in a country where we don't tax the rich, and we don't subsidize or incentivize equality. *How would we have a **business** that's going to do good when it's not meant to support people?* The thing is, if you don't start the **organization** with that kind of seed of cultural DNA that cares about personal and collective transformation, if that's not part of the interview process and there's not paid time to do that work, I don't think the organization will have the capacity to sit through the interpersonal mess that's inevitable. There won't be the capacity to care about people rather than, whatever, efficiency or profit. These things we aren't typically taught because at an organization, you have course power. You can hire. You can fire, you don't have to deal with them as a person. There are so many ranks in a company, like personal rank in terms of social position, rank in the company in terms of job position, psychological rank, spiritual rank, there are all these ways to think about power.

If you want to make a culture where people can be part of shared governance, then you need to understand a bunch of skill sets. So not everyone at the moment is involved in personal, critical **introspection**, in addition to **collective transformation** and wanting to be in a learning organization and learning how to sit with **contradiction**. You have to know these things about **negotiation** and **trauma-informed collaboration** and all these **social-emotional intelligences**.

## Chapter 7, The Quality of the Thinking

*A conversation between Holly Wren Spaulding and Liz Alspach, January 2021*

Holly Wren Spaulding

*Poetry Forge*

Founded 2014

Sole proprietorship

No start-up funding of any kind

Open

Poetry Forge is a creative writing and poetry school for emerging writers based in Southern Maine near the Atlantic Ocean. Poetry Forge is committed to making writing education possible outside of academia through generative writing workshops, at home and in person retreats, manuscript incubators, and one on one coaching services to support serious engagement with the art and craft of writing. Students hail from many countries and time zones, drawn to the deep-seated values that inform an educational experience at Forge: attention, slowness, contemplation, and beauty to wider audiences. Poetry Forge is also the life and livelihood undertaking of poet and educator Holly Wren Spaulding, who brings expertise across organizations and organizing, including work with The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American Art in Detroit, Northwestern Michigan College, and the Interlochen Center for the Arts, where Holly remains a member of the creative writing faculty.



Liz: Hi Holly, thank you for doing this. I'm excited to meet you.

Holly: You, too. Thanks for inviting me. Your questions are so good, but at some point, we should make sure that we talk about how we keep doing what we're doing, particularly for solopreneurs who are not necessarily in a company with other people. How do we build community around the work because in my case that has been completely essential. It didn't exist before I focused on building it for myself.

Liz: That sounds great. I see this is a collaborative conversation, so we both have room to take it where we're compelled to go. To start, I would love to just hear how you think of your business as art making?

Holly: I'm someone who's very interested in process, and I'm definitely more attuned to that than whatever might happen as a result of the **process**, so in this way, creating *Poetry Forge*, and working on its structures and offerings, can feel very akin to making **art** because it is creative and engaging and full of the kinds of **challenges** I am interested in solving. I think that my business is like the **studio** more than it is "what's made" in the studio. It's a **space** in which ideas can happen. It's **improvisation**. There's a lot of room for ideas to be explored, but also abandoned. That's not true in every business. There's a real sense of experimentation in everything I do and make. Those are things that happen inside the studio whether it's a painter's studio or a sculptor's studio or a dancer's studio. I actually started as a dancer, so I frequently think in terms of the work of the dancer and choreographer. That's largely how I would think about making art. It's all driven by this overwhelming experience in my **body** and in my own **mind** of having ideas and wanting to embody them somehow. Of wanting to try some things and see what happens when I just give it a go.

Liz: Thinking of the business as the studio is brilliant. How do you think about or can you identify things that you gain or the risk that you take on by doing it this way?

Holly: The first thing is that it wasn't like I thought about how I wanted my business to be and then went and created what I imagined. I'm **discovering** what it is by making it.

Liz: So the business itself isn't presumptive. It's not a presumption of "this is what my business is." It's more that you're a creator, and the business is discovered through the process of creating it?

Holly: Oh wow that's a good synthesis. By the way, I haven't talked to very many people in the last bit. I took a **pause** from public life, and I have this feeling that I haven't talked out loud very much lately so I'm thinking out loud after not doing that with anyone else for a while. You're just gonna have to live with that.

Liz: I'm great with that.

Holly: As a person, I really need a lot of space and flexibility to try things that might not work. I have a lot of experience at this point, too. So I'm not constantly being met with **failure**. A lot of my ideas *do* work because I've been doing this form of **experimentation** for a while. But some of them don't amount to anything at all, and I accept that as inherent to the creative process and tend not to worry too much when I find myself down a meandering path that leads to nowhere in the end. I want the context of my life and my work to afford space and flexibility for both of those outcomes. It can't all be one plus one equals two.

There's a poet by the name of Dean Young who, in response to some question in an interview about poetry—I don't even remember what the question was—said something like a poem is two plus two equals cake<sup>43</sup>. I need to be able to do my life in a way so that I am not

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<sup>43</sup> Tognazzi, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2-2-can-cake/>.

locked into an equation where the two and the two [have] to equal four or one plus one always equals two. That's a sure thing when two plus two equals four. It adds up, and there's no waste. But it's not realistic to expect that kind of efficiency from myself all of the time. I am much more interested in solving for cake, as it were. Or the unexpected, which has nothing to do with twos and fours.

This might be on my **mind** right now because I've had a few weeks here where the main point was to heal an occupational injury and to reflect and think about the year ahead and take a **break** from writing every day, and working hard, which I **love** in order to just see what it's like to not be in a constantly generative mode. I take these **intentional pauses** at this time of year as a way to **assess** and **vision forward**. So, I feel very in touch with the idea that it's extremely valuable to have stretches of days where there are meandering thoughts amidst the ordinary things of life, like cleaning my **house** or cooking **food**. They're important thoughts to be having, and they're the sort of things that usually happen in more of a **retreat** setting or at an artist **residency**.

Someone else might be thinking like, "How do you make that work financially? Where does this kind of thinking and **reflection** and sifting through **experiences** fit into the bottom line? You're literally not going to be productive for three weeks or probably closer to four?" But I have this tremendous faith that, no, this is actually important. I'm not on vacation. It's something else. It's the only way to make my work sustainable in terms of my physical health and overall well being. I work for myself, so that I can do it this way. There aren't many companies where this is possible but I have designed a business where it is integral.

Liz: Would you call that a model you practice in your business? I'm trying to disentangle this idea of production and profit and wondering what is, really, the product? At *Poetry Forge* you

teach people and interact with people to support their creative lives and support their poetry, but also the product is your well-being. You wouldn't be running this business at all if it didn't fundamentally meet your survival, your livelihood needs.

Holly: I think that that's true, but I would usually tend to avoid the language of product at all costs. Yet it's an effective shorthand for talking about what happens as a result of an **effort**. What are the outcomes? It's true that I want to bring a certain kind of **leadership** to my teaching and advising. I'm also constantly teaching this way of being that includes slowing down, occasionally retreating from public life, and pausing from social media in order to make space for other forms of **attention**, and so forth. There is even a curriculum around that. Most of all, though, I feel like *Poetry Forge* is better off if I do this sort of thing because the quality of the thinking, and the quality of the rest of my work is better, and I don't know if I can continue to work as hard as I do, or have been, unless I have these restorative intervals. But yes, the model of work I practice is perhaps more holistic in the sense that I am very interested in taking care of myself, upon whom all of this depends, while also building a school where writers want to learn, and where I can serve their needs through my offerings.

Actually making enough money to live on is so much harder than it should be. It blows your mind how hard you have to work to make sure you have your basics covered. My business is stable enough now, but I have that muscle memory of working so hard in order simply to survive and feeling like the only way to survive is by giving everything I have to the cause. The truth is, I'm really excited and interested in what I'm doing, which makes it much easier to work as hard as I've been working. But my natural setting is to work hard, so I have to design into the process or the system, a period of time where I let my hands **rest** and my eyes rest and slow down the output of ideas so that my body doesn't abandon me. I don't want to eventually realize

I can't run *Poetry Forge* anymore because I'm just too worn out. That clearly happens to people. I am training myself to do things at a more sustainable pace.

Liz: When you were starting this undertaking how did you balance or what were some decision points where you were choosing between growing or scaling the business and things that were butting up against your values or your commitments to yourself? Could you talk about a couple of times where those things were opposing each other, and you had to negotiate between your business and your values?

Holly: I'll give you an example. The first thing that comes to mind is that in 2019 and prior, I was traveling a number of times a year to teach for other institutions. This involved flying, and being away from home, and in the early days, I was conscious that this lent **credibility** to what I was building with *Poetry Forge*. I wasn't a full time employee but a guest artist. To do that work, I was **traveling** about five times a year, and that exposed me to people who consistently wanted to keep working with me. So I would go teach a weekend master class, and it was an amazing way to introduce students to my teaching and ideas and to invite them to continue working with me via *Poetry Forge*. The downside was being away from home and my family and not sleeping well and eating in the cafeteria and extremely long days and the environmental impact of those flights. Eventually, I started to feel like this is costing me more than it might be worth. I really valued the association and the access to the people who had become students of mine, but I was really feeling terrible about flying.

So, in early 2020, before COVID hit, I had already decided that I wanted to fly as little as possible to honor the value that my business is as environmentally responsible as possible. But I'm also thinking about myself. I don't know how people who fly constantly for their jobs get decent sleep and take care of their bodies. I was looking at the balance sheet in a certain way that

allowed me to make that decision and that's because money is not my God. The logic isn't, "This is going to make me money therefore I'm going to do it." I don't often think about money as the first thing. I'm definitely more faithful to my idea of what a good life is and that life is one that has a quality of balance about it and it bears in mind the ecological impacts of my choices on my body and my family life and the planet and the future.

In the early days, I hadn't figured out how to do all of this in a way that really is healthy and harmonious and I was troubled by the ways in which so many jobs insist on compromises that I don't want to make. I have been discovering that form of the business, or the practices that enable me to feel less compromised, from one day to the next and that's a kind of creative constraint that probably doesn't matter the same way to every business owner. It's deeply important to me, though. How do you bear in mind all of these really closely held values when you make your business? You often can't and many people don't. They just do the math, and go into chemical production or whatever, but I've always been troubled by the ethical implications of my choices in my work, so of course, that bled into my business. But here I am almost a dozen years down the road, and these formal constraints have been refined, and the thing that I've made to support myself, to hold my work in the world, honors my values very faithfully. There's always room to aspire to more, but in very real ways this has solved a problem that troubled me for so long, which is, "how do you make a living and not just become part of the problem, to be part of capitalism or destroying the earth or whatever?"

Liz: That's amazing, congratulations. This idea of values is interesting. How do you think about your commitment to running a business that aligns with your values? How do you negotiate what that might say about other people who don't subscribe to those same values?

Holly: Wow, there's a lot there. I have many thoughts here. Thought one is that I wasn't completely steeped in capitalism because of my unusual upbringing in an off the grid intentional community that operated, in most ways, outside of the mainstream economy and culture. I'm the outcome of a countercultural household and a radical ethos around **money**, food, art, **power**, and **politics**. My parents are both artists, and they came of age in the late 60s. They were part of the Back to the Land Movement<sup>44</sup>, and they were anti-war **activists** and community **organizers**. They had a couple of different businesses that happened at home and one of them was specifically related to the peace movement. This intentional community that I grew up in was really pushing back against mainstream culture. We were experimenting with how to create an alternative society as a utopian social experiment. I had these early encounters and maybe you could say also models for how to live outside of the mainstream that prepared me for what I'm doing here, which is to be an artist living outside of the mainstream and supporting myself doing it without some of the fears that I think a lot of people around me carry.

I remember noticing this in college, for the first time and thinking, "Oh my God they're all afraid to not be middle class. They're terrified that they're not going to make money." I went to the kind of school, The University of Michigan, where many of my peers had fairly privileged backgrounds. I could see the tension between their **background** and their **interests** and **dreams**. Many of those friends and classmates didn't seem to feel they had the **option** to do anything other than enter the professional class according to a proven method. So, you know, I wasn't afraid of being poor because we didn't have much money, but we did have this kind of rich life,

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<sup>44</sup> The Back to the Land Movement was a component of the 1960s and early 1970s CounterCulture, a fertile period of United States history that embodied a deep skepticism about modernity's technological progress in a post war society. Back to the Landers sought liberation from stifling social conventions by experimenting with collective actions, seeing work as an extension of life in which the need for communal shelter, including notions of public and private property, the use and fixity of space, and conventional building methods, were deeply questioned.

and so it has perhaps made it easier for me to decide to take the path I've taken. It has been challenging, of course, but not scary because I know more about being scrappy and experimenting than I know about having a so-called "real job" and getting with the program, so to speak.

The form all of this takes in terms of values is not so much a statement as it is the natural outgrowth of my **circumstances** and **upbringing**. Because I'm a teacher and because I'm a kind of a natural leader and because before I was teaching and before I had a business, I was an activist and identified that way, I understand that I can **lead**, I can **help**, I can **skill share**, and I can bring other people along. So, in doing that, am I making bold proposals that I feel very sure others should subscribe to? I bet some of the time, yes, I can have moments of evangelizing some idea, and I can be persuasive and excited about those things, but they're not codified. Although, by now I probably could codify them. Mostly I just want to do what I'm uniquely prepared to do and if others want to join me, I welcome their companionship.

Liz: I'm convinced something that is integral to creating a quantum leap in economic justice is in resurrecting the lost arts of the 1960s. From someone who grew up under the influence of the counterculture, what was lost or gained from those experiments?

Holly: I would say that being very **resourceful** was and remains the key to my existence and *Poetry Forge's* existence, too. That philosophy supported the particular experiment my parents were a part of, and my dad, in particular, has always modelled that in terms of **reuse** of materials, looking for solutions one can implement for free, and of course a thoroughly-DIY ethos. I'll think more about it, but, for me, the legacy of my upbringing is mostly about not being scared to try things that exist outside of the most familiar frameworks.



Liz: I don't know if people really think about how they're operating in frameworks, let alone that there might be other ones.

Holly: Or that you could make your own. The terms of that **framework** could be your values and your body and what your body can do and what it can't do, you know: its **abilities** and its **disabilities**, or whatever. When I think about what it would mean to **prototype** or come up with toolkits for people who don't want to do business as usual, I think those kinds of ideas are important. What are you designing around? What if profit wasn't the first and only thing that mattered? What if all these other things that the framework you know says are externalities are what really matter?

Liz: Thinking about frameworks, I'm often baffled that artists have so many incredible ideas and so few of us take responsibility for understanding the nuts and bolts of how to make things work in the world. How can we change the systems if we don't understand them?

Holly: I think a lot of artists are rejectionists. I do think you're really onto something with respect to artists and others who want to serve to disavow capitalism or think businesses are all, you know, disgusting, because one way or the other, we all have to make a living. There's this fantasy of being somehow pure and not being involved with money and the transactions associated with capitalism, but that's not possible. You can't abstain.

Are you familiar with the book by Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*? It's full of **disruptive** ideas. It put to rest my anxiety about what I might be called the "commodification" of what I'm doing as an artist, not in terms of making **books** but in the rest of it. The fact of the matter is, if it's not a business bringing in the money—you need to do your work or survive, then it's a **foundation** or it's an **academic institution** or it's a **grant** or it's **generational wealth**. Something is supporting you. We're all entangled. There's no pure art

life in which you don't have to have some kind of income or support, and I have found great peace of mind and freedom in creating a school where I can teach, as an artist, and earn a living doing this work.

Many artists, perhaps all, have to wrestle with a few specific demons or initiations at the outset. For example, "Is this worth anything to anyone else?" and "Am I selling out?" My need to make money was so visceral when I started *Poetry Forge* that I didn't have the option to linger on those kinds of questions for very long. I needed food. I needed housing. At some point, I would need health care. I'm not going to foreground ideological purity over something as basic as food and housing. Does the process of selling my services undermine my credibility and make me a capitalist? These things come up for artists and they can create barriers to moving forward because the engagement with money and capital feels very vulgar and off putting to a lot of us. My feelings about this are also shaped by my having been steeped in the world of art making (not the Art World) and having mostly artists for friends and going to an art school right, which is a very different way of being in the world than the ways of those who are steeped in the value of money and financial status: those people presumably don't feel shame around the same things that poets do, in terms of getting paid for the work?

Fortunately, at this point, I've slayed those dragons having to do with how I'm perceived and whether this way of being a writer in the world is a viable **idea**. I'm free just to do my work. I'm unencumbered. This feels like the stance of an artist, not a sellout. Which, in my experience, is radical, especially because my business supports my art and gives me the means to not always be working. Instead, I work a reasonable schedule and use a lot of the rest of my available time to work on my **personal projects**. Being in community with other writers, and mentoring them,

and teaching all feels like expressions and natural dimensions of my studio practice. Therefore, I don't think of that as, "I go to work and then I go make art on my off hours."

It is all integrated, and yet I do my work in part, so that, yes, the housing, yes, the food, but also so that my life has the space for activities that don't have income attached to them, like publishing books. I mean, only the 1% artists are earning a living by writing books.

Liz: It's so beautiful to listen to a writer, a poet, articulate the things you're articulating. What a gift. I can't thank you enough for your time and ideas. There's so much in here I'm excited to digest. Have a great rest of your day.

Holly: You, too. Bye!

## Chapter 8, We Want you to Come Back

*A conversation excerpt between Elliot Hunt, Brandon Rostek, and Liz Alspach, March 2021*

Elliot Hunt and Brandon Rostek

*Atlas the Restaurant*

Founded 2020

LLC

Initially funded through other jobs and family investment

Open

20 full time and 3 part time employees

Atlas the Restaurant opened in 2020 in the historic Ellis Building (c. 1925) in downtown Fayetteville, Arkansas. Founders and collaborators Chef Elliot Hunt and Manager Brandon Rostek deliberately foster creative exchange in all aspects of the business—an integral part of the team’s philosophy and culinary approach.

Liz: I've been thinking about this since before you opened, when you invited me to fabricate the signs for your restrooms. When I was here, there were other artists at the same time at work on different design aspects of the restaurant. I don't know if you would go so far as to call this a philosophy, but could you tell me about the barter relationships you have?

Elliot: I think people are, well, people that we **trade** with want to come eat here. So, if they're going to come eat here, either they're going to pay for it or they're going to **barter** for it. You know, and some people are just like, "Well, it's easier to work for it." On each trade, too, you know, we naturally mark jobs up from the cash rate. The person gets more dollars to spend at the restaurant than they would **cash**. Then the barter seems very fair and equitable to all parties. So, we trade with the person that does all of our embroidery. We trade with our plumber; you know, actually we trade with two plumbers. We've talked to the guy that's gonna stain our concrete today about doing partial trade for the job, and I just offer it out there. If they don't want to do it, it's fine, we're happy to pay cash. You know, people need to pay rent and their bills and such, but if you'd rather trade, then we see that as a great way to work.

Brandon: I also feel like the trade is an **invitation** to come in and **experience** what we're doing here because now you're a part of it. People always see the bathroom signs, forever, and we will always tell people you made them for us. It's cool, that being a part of it and being a communal thing. We want you to come back in and have the experience that we're trying to give everyone. Trade is a great way to do that. Because we could give you the money but then, you know, maybe we'll never see you again, but if we give you trade, you're gonna come in, and we're gonna give you more than what your trade is. We're probably gonna send out extra dishes, or a champagne toast or something like that. You know, I love to see the people who **help** us out be here, and I mean, you're part of the team, too.

Liz: I feel that in our relationship. I mean, it's brilliant because it's not just good ethics, it's also good business. All of a sudden your plumber comes in here and feels a sense of pride, right?

They really are part of the team. Investing in those relationships saves you down the line because you have someone you trust and who trusts you. Cash is anonymizing. If I'm giving you something that I know how to do for something that you know how to do, then we have a mutual understanding of each other's skillsets and the kind of labor it takes to do those skillsets.

Whereas, if you just give me cash for something that I did, there's distance, a coldness between the work. The barter does this beautiful thing where it brings the work, the physical experience of the work and the knowledge required to do this work, of the people together in a way that creates trust.

Elliot: I think it goes back to **relationships**. We want to invest in that. We want to create stronger and stronger relationships with people that are deep and meaningful, you know, and not just surface. I think the barter embeds them in the **business**, in the **culture**, in the **belief** in what we do. In turn, we believe in what they do. I think it's sybiotic which is exactly what we're trying to do here. It's great.

## Chapter 9, How can we do it better?

*A conversation between Cameron Van Dyke and Liz Alspach, December 2021*



Cameron Van Dyke

*Homestead Micro Eco Village*

Founded 2018

Informally structured

Initially self-funded from outside salary

Open

Cameron and Rachael Van Dyke live on the property and are not paid

Homestead Micro Eco Village is an off-grid livelihood and sustainability experiment founded in 2018 in Boone, North Carolina. It is a project of The Future People, a design + build studio which investigates how artists and designers can use creative action to promote positive social change for a just and sustainable future. Homestead is the property and primary residence of Cameron and Rachel Van Dyke along with a small rotation of students from Appalachian State University who live and work on-site to experience life in closer relationship with the natural world. On seven wooded acres, the Homestead project includes three mobile cabins, a rainwater harvesting system, a PV solar electric system, and extensive firewood storage. It is a diegetic prototype used to create a public narrative that hopefully can inspire public imagination

Liz: Hi, Cameron. I'm trying to understand in what ways artists and creative people are innovating in businesses. For your work, on a hyperlocal level or habits level, how are you negotiating your livelihood? I guess it's a question of business systems and their relationality to our own time.

Cameron: That's a huge problem. Capitalism has a way of taking as much as it can get. You also have a large portion of the American public that's bought into the acceptance of "daily economic struggle" as necessary so that capitalism doesn't fail. So, in the end you have **leadership** that perpetuates that myth and struggling people keep the myth alive at their own loss. There are certainly **alternative ways** of structuring our lives so that this kind of continuous struggle is not the cultural norm, but that takes a **value shift**.

Liz: That idea of a value shift is one reason I'm excited to talk to you. I recall this idea from your writing that human restraint is *not* a natural tendency, and you're thinking about if we have the capacity as a society to really understand and execute the level of restraint that's necessary to come back into a loving relationship with the earth and its resources. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to restraint as a possible solution?

Cameron: Well, just as a clarification—consuming less *is* an important factor to both Earth care, human sustainability, and personal happiness, but I do *not* think that restraint is the way to get to less consumption. Restraint has been the message of the environmental movement all along, but it has been mostly ignored in the pursuit of individual comforts and consumption. You also have the consistent message from the top that consumption drives the economy - "Go out and shop". So the problem circles around the American way of living. Dick Cheney famously said, "the American lifestyle is not up for debate." Apparently, it is just not on the table, in terms of changing our lifestyle or choosing to do less. So, it's futile to continue to argue for personal

restraint as a solution because trying to appeal to people's conscience to get them to do things differently does not work. Instead, we have to focus on changing the values of the public—**inspiring** people to **imagine** something different, rather than making a logical decision, it has to be an **emotional decision**. That's the whole route of what we've been doing on our project at Homestead Eco Village. Obviously, we have a much smaller footprint from an **energy** standpoint and from a **material** standpoint which is good, but we are also trying to show that it's an awesome way to live. So if we can show people that these choices are emotionally positive, then we can get people to change their **values** and ultimately their **behaviors**.

Liz: On the land for the Homestead, why did you choose to start from scratch, for lack of a better term? Why did you buy land that needed to be cleared as opposed to taking an existing homestead and adapting it?

Cameron: We looked at buying an old house and trying to retrofit it to use efficiently, but the **buildings** we had available to us were standard American sizes and so demonstrating our values in a house like that would be more difficult. We also wanted something close to campus that we could **bicycle** to or at least drive to quickly which limited our options. The other reason to do it from scratch is that if you're retrofitting, you're still tied to the grid and the sewer which makes it more difficult to differentiate what we are doing from other homes. Instead, we started on vacant land and solved our dwelling challenges with **non-traditional solutions**, creating what we felt was a baseline solution for feeling safe, comfortable, and joyful inside the dwellings. We collect rainwater and have solar panels for electricity now, but we have often lived without electricity. It's a small hassle, but if you develop systems that don't use electricity it works just fine. When we lived at Turtle Island<sup>45</sup>, we lived for an entire year without electricity. I'm a

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<sup>45</sup> Turtle Island is a 1,000-acre wildlife preserve in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.

college professor, and I work every day. In terms of making a **diegetic prototype**, it becomes easier to show the distinction by starting from scratch.

Liz: In hearing you tell that story, it's clear that you've been diligent in analyzing and making decisions based on some criteria that you believe in, maybe some set of ethical or ideological values that you follow. Have you built a framework for yourself to determine what projects you tackle and how you approach them?

Cameron: Well, the project is my practice. The ideological value is to look at every decision with **fresh eyes** and try to ignore typical **cultural expectations**. “What do we really need and want?” should be the question. The idea is to solve our own particular problems, in the particular place that we are, with the particular assets and skills that we have available.

Liz: Maybe that’s one of the parts of the framework or parts of the toolkit. It doesn't work anymore to separate your living from your livelihood. They're entangled anyway.

Cameron: They are definitely entangled and that is where the project derives its **power**. We are demonstrating minute to minute that this way of life is not only possible, it is preferable.

The framework you mentioned is really just authenticity. Simply walking our talk and allowing others to witness it. That is where the **possibility** for a value shift comes in for those that **experience the project**. We do the project by living the project. I share my life and research with my students and the research is supported. So, when I walk into school, and I've just gotten out of the woods, that’s understood. When I have dirt on my clothes, that’s understood, and it reinforces what I’m doing. When I haven't showered, or shaved, because I didn't have solar power, that’s a way for my work to reach an audience (my students) through the direct experience of me as a person.

Liz: It seems like one principle that you have in your practice, which is also your livelihood and

your living, is that the efforts in all of them are inherently intermingled and academia allows for this. It's one of the few places that artists find refuge to experiment because your job doesn't hold you accountable for your lifestyle.

Cameron: I would clarify that to say that academia *does* hold me accountable for my **lifestyle**—but that accountability has a lot more to do with the values I demonstrate to the students than having a conventional outward **appearance**. On this topic of an integrated life, I think it is important to recognize that most people live a life that is not integrated. What they're asked to do in their professional world is at odds possibly with their **beliefs** and **values**. It might be at odds with their ability to care for their family, let's say because of the pressures of **time** or something else. That alone is a big thing to overcome. It's just worth pointing out that the **goals** of **business**, especially ones that run on a purely capitalistic mentality are often antithetical to the goals of family and life balance.

In my case, I am both supported financially by my **institution** and have the freedom to pursue my passion, so my life is able to be integrated. I teach design. I live design. I teach about sustainability. I live sustainably. I don't have to be one person at work and somebody else when I go home. To have that kind of financial security and at the same time that kind of ability to be true to oneself and take **risks** is a rare combination.

Liz: You mentioned a crux of what I think I'm trying to understand when you said that the essential goals of businesses that are run in a capitalist society are antithetical to being, as in the thriving of the business seems at odds with the thriving of the people and the environment.

Cameron: Well, capitalism at its core is incredibly ruthless. When capitalism runs unchecked, it crushes everything, uses everything, exploits everything. So the only sense, in a capitalist society, the only well-being we have has to be wrestled back from what capitalism will do

naturally. Thankfully, we don't live in a purely capitalist society, otherwise, most of us would be essentially slave laborers. That's what's so frustrating around the conservative concern about socialism. Our society is already filled with socialistic elements. Elements that we share as citizens. It has to be. Otherwise we all have a terrible life. So, in a way, we're already doing it. So, the question is, how can we do it better?

A big part of what's driving capitalist consumerism is the core values of our society as they have evolved. They've evolved to expect a certain size **house**, a certain modality of **transportation**, certain **expectations** around what your clothes look like, your shoes, and it just goes on and on. So if you can imagine if everyone lived in a house that was half the size, well, all that additional work that would have had to be done to make that house didn't have to be done. Which means that particular person either doesn't have to pay for it, or the **labor** that would have done it doesn't have to do it. So you can see, we can find **opportunities** to replace what would have been a five bedroom house with maybe, let's say two weeks more vacation every year, or something like that. What's driving consumer behavior is people's expectations about what their life should look like.

Liz: There is an artist named Andrea Zittel who works in this arena and has a piece called *The Institute for Investigative Living*. That piece researches the social construction of needs, which is basically what we've been talking about. You have been really willing to reconsider your relationships with socially constructed needs, reimagining your needs.

Cameron: I really like that term, "socially constructed needs" because we all have that sort of a setup. When we can question those constructed needs it gets people thinking. As an example, we did an experimental project where we lived in a storefront for five years. One of the byproducts of it was an accidental **outreach** program for **creativity**. People were confused that we lived

there full time. I would say, “well, we got this kitchen here, and we put a shower in the bathroom. We pull the curtains closed at night which is how we get our privacy.” It was fun just to see people's eyes kind of open up a little bit more. It's not like they're going to run down and move into a storefront, but it might mean that they would have more courage to make a countercultural decision. They might say, “We’re financially stressed right now, let’s go live in my parents’ basement.” It demonstrated a lot of little things to every person that came in, just expanding their sense of what's possible. I call it *Inspiring Public Imagination*. It hinges on imagination because if we can’t imagine it, we certainly can’t do it. So imagining is the first step in taking positive actions. So if we can inspire them to imagine something, not just for what we're doing, but anything, then we're helping expand possibility.

Liz: We talked earlier about capitalism, and there aren’t a lot of formal mechanisms within US capitalism for artists to make a living doing their own research. We’ve gotten good at alternative economies, barter systems, and ways of circumventing capitalism to survive, as a strategy for financial freedom. What do you think about that?

Cameron: We're all responding to the individual set of **constraints** that we’re given and the **assets** that we have to work with. Some people have a difficult set of constraints and not a lot of assets, and that's a really hard place to operate out of. Other people have it the other way around. Artists are really no different than anyone else in the **economy**; we are trying to find balance between what people will pay us to do and what our values tell us we should do. It is true that artists are not terribly valued in society unless it becomes a **commodity** like a painting or music or something else. Also in terms of **activism** or **social practice**, they also aren't valued that well, and there's no mechanism necessarily to pay for them. But that is the **challenge** of choosing to be an artist. It is an uphill battle, and we must accept that fact and keep going.

Liz: How do you think of your collaboration, either with your wife or students? I guess in some ways your work wouldn't be possible without collaboration or maybe at least cooperation?

Cameron: Yes, having **community** is important because you have to feel supported by somebody. You're already doing something countercultural so finding a group of people that supports you by valuing what you do is really important. That's an impediment for a lot of people, how do you find a support group that is going to value what you do along these lines and is going to be there to help give you **encouragement**? I can't do this on my own technically either. I have people that I can call and say, "How does this work? What do you think I should do with that?" We can hopefully build that community, and I'm willing to share everything I know. In order to share our knowledge, we do AirBnB Experience now. We offer two-hour tours that people can come to and we walk them through our **systems** and talk about feasibility and **questions**. That's a quick way for someone to get a two-hour course in what we do.

Liz: Can we talk a bit about the sustainability of time? Time is the resource that we have in abundance, and I'd like to know how you think about it.

Cameron: That's been an underlying theme of everything we've been doing. In American society we have a **viewpoint** that our time is worth a lot, especially because 'stuff' is so inexpensive. That's why we have garages full of all these time-saving **tools** that we rarely use. The question that we are asking is, "Is our time really as valuable as we make it out to be, and could we not use time as a resource to solve our problems rather than materials?" This really is obvious when you work with different populations that value time differently. For instance, we worked in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with the homeless population. Time is their main **resource** that they have to work with. They can spend a whole day getting downtown and back just to get a free lunch, that's absolutely fine, because time is what they have to spend.



As a slightly different example, when we lived at Turtle Island we found ourselves using our **bodies** a lot more. We had to carry wood; we had to carry water; we had to do all these things. I learned that **physical labor** is actually a critical activity for human beings. Our bodies are designed to do physical work. If we don't work physically, it essentially makes us less human. However, much of the American experience is mostly *not* using your body because everything happens automatically. Right now I'm not using my body for anything except sitting in this chair. Physical work takes time and the acceptance of time and body together as necessary parts of the human experience is one of the cultural norms we are challenging.

The idea of questioning all the many things that we expect to be given to us by the environment is important. If we can value things differently, then we would be able to act differently. In the past it has been an uphill battle of refusing or trying to restrict or restrain yourself that's mostly futile. So humans have to come up with better, more enticing possibilities. We have to come up with a better way of **framing** what change is going to look like. That's really the underlying thing here, and it has to be about a **movement towards** something that we want, not away from the things that we want, or towards something we don't want. Nobody wants that. I just don't think anyone's going to be willing to do it. So we have to show a better way where it's like, "Wow, this is really attractive." Yes, we live in a small house, but look at the interaction with the natural world we get to experience. Look at how we understand the systems that support us. Look at the financial freedoms we have gained. Look at the positive relational results.

People do see that, and they do get excited about it. We have students living here now who are thinking, "Wow, you know, I never really thought of this before." I bring all my students here too, so we've had hundreds of students visit just for a few hours, but it still opens

up a spot in their mind to accept it. Hopefully it opens up an **ability** to **envision** and then move in a direction that's both good for them and good for the planet.

Liz: I keep kind of coming up against this self-consciousness, I guess, that I feel where I inadvertently think I impose some artistic moral high road through my work. How do you wrestle with that?

Cameron: The moralistic projection on other people can be a big problem. But in our case, we try not to project a moralistic sentiment. We don't say that people should **change**. We don't say that they should stop driving **cars**. We don't say any of that. The whole project is about, "Hey guys, check out this cool stuff you can do. If you want to try something different, here's a car that gets 300 mpg equivalent. Did you know you can live without hardly consuming any fossil fuels? By the way, we take our leftover **food** and we **compost** it and make soil out of it so we can grow more food."

"Hey, we did this. Check it out. It's cool." I like being in that **space**. I don't like being antagonistic. I'm not the kind of guy that stands on the corner with a sign. To be honest, I don't think that's a very effective way to make change. We just really need people, a lot of people, to innovate **solutions**. We can take baby steps in the right direction without having the whole solution.

Liz: Thinking of those baby steps, you're choosing a lifestyle that takes a lot more work, how do you think about accomplishing your basic needs and the habits that allow for that? How do those habits emerge from your day-to-day into your broader interactions, relationships, institutions, etc.?

Cameron: When we lived off the grid at Turtle Island, that was the **tradeoff**. It's really obvious because we had to work our butts off to live there, we had to carry our water a quarter mile, and

we could not drive to our cabin. We had very limited water and no electricity. In this case, you're trading those hardships for something greater. A different **relationship** with the weather, for instance, because we were not isolated from wind and rain. You're trading it for a more in tune relationship with your body. I am tired now. My arms hurt. I need to stop. Things like that, you're more in touch with the fact that you are a physical being, and when all of those things mediated by **technology** exist, and you don't feel cold, you don't feel the wind, you don't feel wet, you don't feel hungry, it makes you less human. A part of it is just learning to appreciate the **sensations** of your physical body.

In our case, the negative sensations could be exited at almost any moment. So we could get right up to the **edge** of where we want to experience exhaustion and then say, "Okay we're done. Let's drive to town for dinner." Most people around the world don't have that opportunity. So all of what we're doing *is* undergirded by a society that has all the **access** that we need or want, when we want it. That's one of the ironies of the whole thing because we're not really experiencing hardship. We're not living in poverty. Poverty is the lack of the ability to get what you really need when you need it. We have the opportunity at any moment we choose to buy something that makes us more safe or comfortable.

So in that way our lifestyle is false. What we're doing, when you compare how other people live in the world, is still living like Americans. We're living in luxury because we have electricity, and a fridge, and a car. So it's important that when you get to this point, speaking about moralistic standpoint, that we don't pat ourselves on the back too hard. Our life is still very luxurious, especially given that I choose this and could **choose** something else.

Liz: I like the strategy that it's offering people, maybe Americans, one solution or one offering. You know, baby steps as opposed to the answer. It's hard to think about all the solutions to all

the problems that I have, based on my worldview and my experience, which is radically different from someone in Fes or Burma or anywhere else. All of this is of no use to them. It doesn't solve any of their problems. It solves problems they don't have, but maybe there are parts that can be extracted and offered in this one worldview, the one that I have which is orienting this research, and maybe there's value in that?

Cameron: Oh there's definitely value in it because we (Americans) are way off to one side, and if we can at least start, you know, tilting back in the direction of reality, that's a great thing to do.

As you **discover** things that you want to speak about, make sure that it does not have the tone of moralism. It's more like, "Hey guys here's something somebody is doing that is interesting." The truth is that there's not going to be one solution to the downshift that we need. It is going to be thousands of people **trying tiny things**, some working well for them and some not working.

Some that would work for others. The key to all of this is to first make your own authentic change and then share what you learn with others. Hopefully motivating people to change based on emotional inspiration rather than guilt or conscience.

Liz: That makes perfect sense. Thank you for talking with me.

Cameron: You're welcome. Let's stay in touch.

Chapter 10, Nobody Needs to Know

*A conversation excerpt between Maria Sykes and Liz Alspach, February 2021*

Maria Sykes

*Epicenter*

Founded 2009

501(c)3

Initially funded through USDA RBEG and AmeriCorps VISTA

Open

3 full time, 1 part time, and lots of volunteers and contractors

*Epicenter* is a 501(c)(3) non-profit based in the small, rural town of Green River, Utah. The organization uses architecture, design, and care to nurture and accentuate Green River's rural pride and pioneering spirit. The organization uplifts this local ecosystem through small business development, housing initiatives, and arts and culture programming. *Epicenter's* commitment to place based work transparently reconciles the often problematic tension of community development organizations. This conversation with Maria Sykes, co-founder and executive director of *Epicenter*, illuminates how some are revealing value in a place many have forgotten.

Liz: I've been wondering, do you think of yourselves as an arts organization? Are you somehow both an arts organization and something else or maybe several something elses?

Maria: Hmm, well, I think what you're referring to here is something that I always try to talk about, which is **code switching**, right? There are certain times where very specifically, what we're doing is **art**; art is at the center. It is the core of who we are. Then there's other times where art is a **research** tool, a way for us to understand the community better so that we can do better work. We do a lot of code switching here. Because we're a rural place and rural places are broadly understood as undesirable, our code switching is often rural to urban. I quickly figured out when I moved here that nobody needed to know that I'm trained in architecture. Nobody cares. Other than if I'm talking to the mayor, and I'm trying to do a thing where I can say I have this **experience**, then I can use that to get some credit.

But on a day-to-day basis, it hinders you in a way that talking about yourself as an artist might as well. The people that I'm talking to about this work, whether it's the mayor, or a funder on a local or regional level, they're not necessarily going to get that this is a **creative practice**. The overall intention is to be serving a community or the artists that come work with us. This idea of serving is a form of art, but I shy away from talking about *Epicenter* as art. Obviously, it's a creative practice, but that way of talking about it is very much **academic speak**.

Liz: You mentioned rural places are often perceived as undesirable, how do you think of *Epicenter* as a tool for building a new future or models for a new future, the future you want for yourself and for Green River?

Maria: We get asked that **question** all the time, "Is Epicenter a model for other communities?" I've vacillated drastically over the years. Originally it was no, we're not creating Epicenter to be something that can be duplicated in other places. It's unique, and we're focusing here. The more

and more I learned, the more I started to recognize the **patterns** and some of the universal **challenges** of small communities. I think of it more as what have others learned and what have we learned that we can share? How do we do this better next time? What are the bullshit steps that we did that I can tell someone else to skip because that was exhausting? How is it less extractive? How do we include more marginalized voices? I've come around to the possibility that Epicenter can be a model but the **model** has to totally adapt to that place. There are so many things I would do differently, particularly that one of the co-founders has to be from that place.



## Tools

Abilities	Books
Academic Institution	Boundaries
Academic Speak	Brains
Access	Breaks
Access Points	Breaths
Activism	Buildings
Activists	Business Models
Alternative Ways	Businesses
Anything	Canvases
Appearance	Cars
Archeology	Cash
Art	Challenges
Assets	Change
Attention	Choice
Authorship	Circumstances
Background	Code Switching
Barter	Collective
Behaviors	Collective Transformation
Belief Systems	Collision
Beliefs	Commentary
Bibliographies	Commodity
Bodies	Communication

Community	Desire
Compost	Dialogues
Conflict	Diegetic Prototype
Connecting	Disabilities
Connection	Discourse
Constraints	Discovering
Containers	Discovery
Contradiction	Disruption
Conversation	Domestic Space
Corporations	Dreams
Creative Practice	Encouragement
Creative Work	Economic Structures
Creativity	Economy
Credibility	Edge
Credit	Effort
Critical Lens	Emergence
Criticism	Emotional Decisions
Cultural Expectations	Energy
Culture	Entities
Curating	Envisioning
Dance	Events
Decision Processes	Exhibitions
Design	Exhibits

Expectations	Grant
Expenditures	Graphic Design
Experience	Hacking
Experiences	Hands
Experimentation	Hearts
Failure	Helping
Fieldwork	Hindsight
Finance	History
Financial Security	Houses
Focus	Ideas
Food	Imagining
Foundation	Immersion
Frame	Improvisation
Framework	Income
Framing Devices	Inexpensively
Framing Devices	Information
Fresh Eyes	Infrastructure
Galleries	Inquiry
Generational Wealth	Inspiring
Geography	Institutional Space
Gestures	Institutional Structure
Goals	Institutions
Government	Intentional Pauses

Interest	Mission Statements
Interests	Missions
Internet	Models
Interpretation	Money
Introspection	Motivations
Intuition	Movement
Invitation	Museums
Job	Music
Labor	National Mall
Land	Negotiations
Language	Non-Traditional Solutions
Leadership	Nonprofits
Leap Of Faith	Objects
Liaising	Office Trailers
License Plates	Officiousness
Lifestyle	Opportunities
Literature	Options
Love	Organizations
Machines	Organizers
Maintenance	Outreach
Making Popcorn	Pace
Materials	Painting
Minds	Participation

Patterns	Quickly
Pause	Recipes
Performance	Redefining
Permission	Reflection
Personal Projects	Relational
Physical Labor	Relationships
Pie	Research
Place	Residencies
Plans	Resourcefulness
Play	Resources
Politics	Rest
Possibility	Reuse
Potholes	Retreat
Power	Risks
Practice	Rocks
Privilege	Sensations
Process	Skills
Projects	Skillsets
Prototypes	Skill Sharing
Public	Social Practice
Public Space	Social-Emotional Intelligences
Public Imagination	Soft Skills
Questions	Solutions

Space	Traveling
Spaces In Between	Trying Tiny Things
Spaces Of Opportunity	Upbringing
Stories	Urgency
Streets	Value Shifts
Studios	Value Structure
Systems	Values
Talk	Vehicles
Talking	Viewpoints
Tarot Cards	Vision
Technology	Vocabulary
Thinking	Walls
Time	Wealth
Tools	Weather
Trade	Will
Trade-Offs	Wishes
Transportation	Writing
Trauma-Informed Collaboration	Your Own Desire

## Values

Access	Communal
Accuracy	Community
Adaptability	Companionship
Agility	Compassion
Amplification	Compelling
Art	Compelling
Assessing	Complete
Authentic Change	Conceptual Structure
Authenticity	Correctly
Autonomy	Courage
Balance	Creativity
Basic Human Experience	Cultural Production
Being True To Oneself	Culture
Broad Range	Decentralized
Caring	Depth
Centered	Design
Clear	Differentiation
Coexisting	Discovery
Coherent	Diversity
Comfortable	Doing Good
Commitment	Earth Care
Commons	Eating

Effectiveness	Generosity
Effectuating Ideas	Gift Economy
Embodiment	Global
Emotional Inspiration	Good For Others
Emotional Positivity	Good Life
Engagement	Happiness
Environment	Healing
Environmental Responsibility	Healthcare
Equitability	Holisticness
Ethics	Home
Experimentation	Honor
Experimenting	Housing
Exploration	Human Experience
Fairness	Ideas
Family	Identity
Feasibility	Inclusion
Financial Security	Innovation
Flexibility	Integration
Fluidity	Interest
Food	Intrigue
Freedom	Joy
Fun	Learning
Future	Learning Organization



Legitimacy	Positivity
Liberation	Pragmatism
Long-Term	Pride
Longevity	Public Good
Love	Quality
Meaning	Radical
Meaningfulness	Reasonable Schedule
Minimalism	Reflection
Mystery	Regional
New Worlds	Reinvention
Not Uptight	Relationships That Feeds Everyone
Open	Respect
Open-Ended	Responsibility
Open-Source Information	Restorative Intervals
Passion	Retreating
Pausing	Safety
Peace	Satisfaction
Peace Of Mind	Scrappiness
Physical Health	Serving
Planet	Shared Governance
Planet	Sharing
Play	Significance
Positive Actions	Sleeping Well

Slowing Down  
Smallness  
Space  
Strangeness  
Stronger Relationships  
Supporting People  
Surviving  
Sustainability  
Sustaining  
Symbiosis  
Sympathy  
Teaching  
Tolerance  
Transparency  
Trust  
Truth  
Understanding  
Unexpectedness  
Usefulness  
Well-Being  
World-Building

## Of Note

### *Collaboration*

Juliette Walker is a friend and collaborator who has been my confidant and critic for most of my time in graduate school. Juliette's research involving arts organizers shares questions with this book, and she is a key thinker in all of the founding inquiries that drive this work. Her support over a long winter of trail runs (broken ankle included) and long distance phone calls sustained this undertaking so that it could become what it is, and I am thrilled to continue this research together.

### *Methods & Analysis*

I am not a social scientist. The methods and analysis for coding tools and values in these interviews was driven by the artistic method. The process was discovery-driven and iterative. I did not know what I was going to find until I was finding it, and on a different day with a different number of cups of coffee, I hazard to guess many of the tools and values would remain the same, yet others would change. I am optimistic that readers will be drawn to tools or values beyond the ones highlighted and find use for them in their work.

### *Interviews*

Some of the interviews are presented here in full length, and others have been edited for brevity. These edits are intended to represent the conversational nature of this research while offering as much richness in content as possible. That some interviews were edited does not comment on the interviewee's business or diminish their contribution to this book.

**Kate Strathmann** and I were peers many years ago during our undergraduate studies at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Kate and I had our conversation for this book over two years ago when I was first learning this subject was of interest to me. Kate encouraged me and planted

a couple of ideological flags that I return to regularly. I credit our experience at Carleton as a launchpad for our shared interest in this work. Carleton is also responsible for giving me nearly all the unshakable friendships that I have with every single person who volunteered their time to edit this book.

**Lloyd Kahn** of *Shelter Publications* and I had a lovely conversation for this book, but neither of us was on our A game that day, and we elected not to include it here. Lloyd's wisdom and energy are very much present nonetheless. **Connie Matisse** of *East Fork* and I were also slated to have an amazing conversation, but due to a time zone SNAFU (my fault), it was delayed. I'm holding a possible conversation with Connie and her passion for social justice in business as a carrot for myself to complete the next batch of conversations.

### *Bartering*

**Elliot Hunt** and **Brandon Rostek** of Atlas the Restaurant invited me and several other artists to participate in the launching of their business in 2020 by making pieces for the dining room. In exchange for fabricating the signs for their restrooms and a kegerator part, Atlas is hosting the launch party for this publication, a conceptually prescient arrangement given my interest in disruptive business practices and barter economies. I am inspired by their commitment to our local artist and entrepreneurship communities and thrilled to call them both collaborators and friends. I cannot over recommend the food and service at Atlas. They are exceptional.

When I sent a hail-mary email to **Caroline Woolard** about being interviewed for this book, I received an email back offering a trade. Caroline would be happy to participate, but a deadline was approaching for a report she was writing with Nati Linares about Arts and Culture in the Solidarity Economy. *Would I be willing to trade some research assistance on the report for the interview?* Why yes, yes I would. This moment sticks with me as another conceptually

significant exchange because, in suggesting a trade, Caroline acknowledged that I was asking for something of hers that was valuable, her time and insights. In the coming months, we passed back and forth a handful of research and editing tasks. The result is that I have a stake in the Solidarity Economy report and Caroline has a stake in this book. It's motivating and rewarding to be invested in each other's work, and I am optimistic we'll press on together, clawing at the stickiness of economics and art.

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## Appendix

Liz Alspach (b. 1987, Iowa) is an artist, designer, and writer who builds organizations and forges relationships as tools for imagining and achieving radical futures. Liz's recent work includes a work from home policy for desert tortoises, an apple crisp in exchange for a telescope lesson, and the book  $2+2=CAKE$ .

She was educated first in the rural, small-town manner of neighborly generosity and collective accountability and then in the liberal arts. As the granddaughter of a Depression-era furniture maker and the daughter of a county fair champion quilter, Alspach's work is born from a deep and disciplined history of living in community and working with her hands. How she works today is rooted in knowledge of her formative years on farms and in kitchens of the Midwest, playing first base, hitchhiking to the Great Wall of China, and staring wide-eyed at the San Francisco Bay.

The spirit of her work lies in projects and products that are not representations but real things: real stakes, real labors, real consequences, and real possibilities for growth. She is wildly optimistic and gets carsick. These two facts are occasionally hard to reconcile, and Liz is doing her best.

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