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Art Talk AM: Harrell Fletcher and Jen Delos Reyes

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FLETCHER
AND
JEN DELOS
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CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

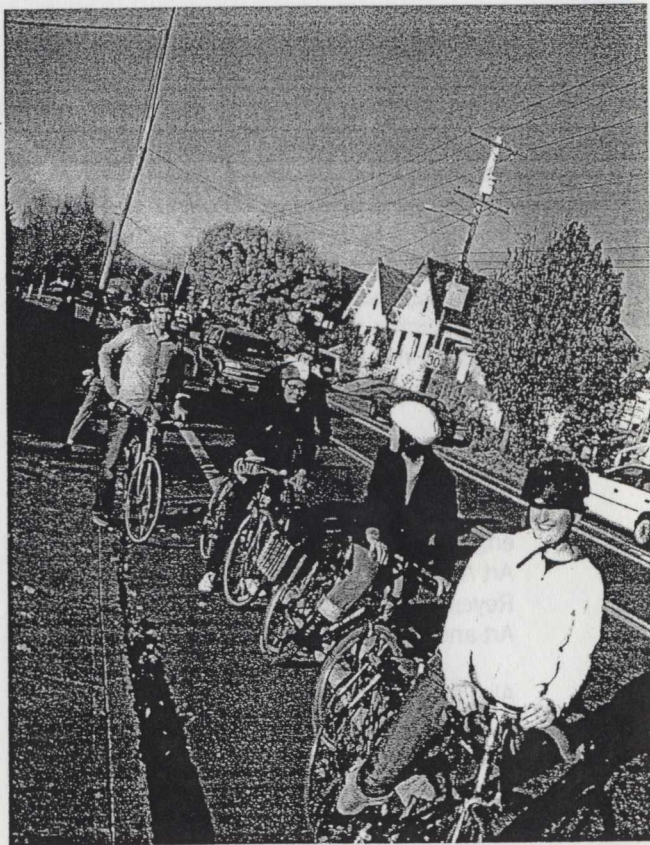
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JUNE 16, 2008

Harrell Fletcher has worked collaboratively and individually on a variety of socially engaged, interdisciplinary projects for over fifteen years. Fletcher has exhibited his work all over the world, and is in the collection of numerous prestigious institutions. Fletcher also maintains an ongoing participatory website *Learning To Love You More*, founded with Miranda July, which was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Fletcher is a Professor of Art and Social Practice at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.

Jen Delos Reyes is an artist originally from Winnipeg, MB, Canada. In the fall of 2007 Delos Reyes mounted a conference on socially engaged art practices titled *Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance*. In 2008 Delos Reyes joined Fletcher as an instructor in the Art and Social Practice program.

Also featured in this conversation is Alex McCarl, the original co-host of Art Talk AM on the Radio.



ALEX MCCARL Hello one and all and Welcome to Art Talk

CYRUS SMITH AM

AM On the radio

CS Found no where on the AM dial. We're here on our summer schedule. We are not actually in conjunction with the PSU MFA Monday Night Lecture series for a couple of months, we're going to be talking with some local artists, starting here with the person who started the Monday Night Lecture Series, Harrell Fletcher. Harrell, thanks for coming on the air.

HARRELL FLETCHER Sure, thanks.

CS So you are heading up the new program called Art and Social Practice here at PSU, and we actually have an extra guest here in the studio, Jen Delos Reyes.

IMAGE /// Students of the Art and Social Practice Program participate in experiential education. (On bikes) 2007.

JEN DELOS REYES

Hello.

CS Who will also be joining us as part of that program. Harrell, would you like to give a quick run-through of how this program came to being?

HF Yes, okay, well, there are sort of two parts to the program. There's the undergrad component, which offers undergraduate classes in Art and Social Practice all year long, a different class every term. Then there's the graduate program, which is an MFA program. There was an existing MFA program, which is a standard studio practice program, then this last year we added the Social Practice program to that. So, now there's two parts to the MFA program, the Studio Practice and the Social Practice. The Studio Practice people still have studios and make their work, intended to probably show it in a gallery context, and then the Social Practice students don't have studios; instead they have shared work spaces, shared classrooms, and potentially off site

spaces. They work on projects that can be collaborative, and often times work with members of the public and don't always use galleries as the venue for showing the work.

CS So that seems like an important distinction for those who might not know the term "Social Practice," that they're working outside of the studio, in the world. Can you give a few examples of projects that might illustrate that?

HF Oh yeah, well, in the program itself, there's been a whole bunch of projects already. Two of the students, Avalon and Laurel, have been working with a dowser, Mike Doney. Dowsers are people who have the ability to find water underground using a device to read energy vibrations. Laurel and Avalon have worked with him to douse public art sculptures at Reed College, trees and all sorts of different vibrations. Recently they were at City Hall, dowsing Sam Adam's office to find various energy fields there. That's one project. Let's see...

CS Maybe we should look to Alex McCarl here in the studio, he's been a part of a number of these Social Practice classes. I'll disclose that I am part of the MFA portion of the Social Practice program as well.

AM It's a conspiracy.

CS (laughs) Yeah, we're all in it together.

AM Yeah, I've taken five classes now.

HF Maybe something from that first class with the Portland place reviews?

AM Yeah, I was involved in a series of food challenges, and for those who don't know, a food challenge is where you're supposed to eat a particular amount of food in a set amount of time. I was able to complete a challenge at Humdinger's on Barbur Boulevard where I ate something like five Saltines in 60 seconds, which is actually harder than you might think, because your mouth immediately becomes really dry.

CS Do you not get to drink water for that challenge?

AM No, no.

HF And this is after having unsuccessfully tried about five other food challenges?

AM Right, right. I tried to drink 40 ounces of milkshake in under a minute, that didn't go so well. And then to redeem that challenge I tried to consume two pieces of white bread, which is really difficult too, because it gets caught in your throat. It's generally pretty awful. I hadn't eaten that day.

CS I heard you did win an ice cream challenge recently, is that true?

AM Oh right, at Pix Patisserie on Division, my roommate and I, at the time, we won an ice cream challenge: half a watermelon full of every flavor they have, except for the habenero. That was a big victory.

HF And these things are documented on the web too.

AM Yeah, yeah, they're documented on the web at urbanhonking.com. You can check that out: Portland Place Reviews. That was a good project.

CS So some pretty eclectic projects, water witching and some food challenges. I'm wondering if maybe we can bring Jen into the conversation, this term of Social Practice, which might be foreign to some, if you have any examples, or any reasons why you identify with the term. Or if you even do, I'm not sure.

JDR I've been thinking a lot about what it is, because I started using it after I met Harrell in 2006 and I recently had to write a thesis paper where that came up, as to why I was using it, and I decided to use it because I found that it was more neutral in terms of the art world. It wasn't something that an art theorist or writer had used to condense the work of different artists, like Relational Aesthetics, or New Genre or Public Art. But it does have a history. More linked to the Social Sciences as I understand.

HF That's partly why here at Portland State we've added on the term "Art and" Social Practice, though we oftentimes shorthand it as Social Practice.

CS So that it doesn't get confused with Social Work, which might be in a completely different department, right?

JDR Yeah.

CS So Harrell, I wanted to get your take as well on this term Social Practice and why you did end up choosing it when you had the opportunity to start a program. As opposed to Post-Studio, Relational Aesthetics, these other terms that we've talked about.

HF Well, for myself, there really wasn't a term that I ever felt comfortable with. Every now and then someone would apply something to what I was doing, they would call it "Community-Based Art," or "Political Art," or "Activist Art," or "Relational Aesthetics," all sorts of other terms that never quite felt comfortable to me. And then, I

didn't coin the term Social Practice in relationship to art. The first time that I heard about it being used was at California College of the Arts, who also have a graduate program called Social Practice. I thought it might be useful to just to use that same term, one because it did feel more neutral and comfortable in the way that Jen just described, and two because it felt like we could kind of build on something. If each program had its own name, that would be a disservice to the whole attempt at getting this to be a more recognized approach to making work. Just like the way that other programs, practices, developed like Women's Studies or Black Studies, which we have both of here at PSU but also exist in lots of other programs around the world.

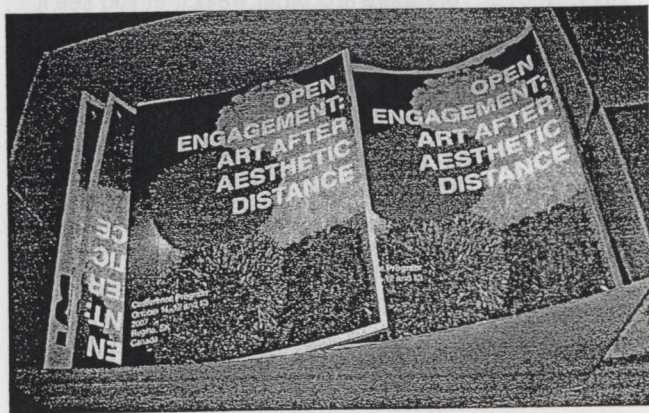
CS And how important do you feel it is for the program to be "Art and" Social Practice? Whether or not you would prefer to leave it off, if there wasn't a conflict with the Social Sciences?

HF Sure, I'm happy to leave art out of the equation at any time, it usually causes

more trouble than it's worth, but we happen to be in the art department and get our funding through art things. So it's useful in that respect.

CS We've talked about it being a really flexible term and a flexible genre where you can get away with something like this, and have it be where you're applying yourself. If we were doing social work, it would look more like case studies, things like that. But you can write your own ticket with art. Do you still find any value in it for that? Or are there any other ways that you see it being a benefit?

HF When I was in graduate school and doing this kind of work, it was largely unnamed, and people didn't know what to make of it. Even though I think there are clearly precedents to it, that just wasn't what was going on at that time. And oftentimes the response was "wow, you're really getting away with this." As if I was pulling the wool over someone's eyes and tricking them, or getting something for nothing. But my sense was always: why would you



bother doing art if you couldn't do what you wanted to do? If you had to follow someone's set of requirements, then why bother doing it? You might as well do something else that has a better chance of making a living. I guess you can look at it as getting away with things, or you can look at it as: this situation allows me to actually choose what I value to do, and have that be considered valid within the context of the art world, or the school world, or your own personal world. It sort of doesn't bother me, the idea, because there's always been this link between the artist and the idea of a criminal, kind of getting away with something, stealing something. Duchamp or Bueys who have done something different, and then are seen as bank robbers in that way. So maybe we're more like Robin Hood, but there does seem to be some kind of mild criminal element to it in the way that society or the academy views what Art and Social Practice people do.

IMAGES /// Top: Harrell Fletcher, *Blot out the Sun*. 2002. Bottom: Jen Delos Reyes, Catalog for *Open Engagement: Art after Aesthetic Distance*. 2007.

JDR I don't know if I would ever think of it as criminal. Right now I'm thinking about Alfredo Jaar and how he says that to him, art is the most free term. And it's sort of funny that he's one of these artists that works with all of these different elements, like architecture and journalism, and he combines all of these things under this heading of art. But at the same time there's this very limited freedom because people are always like, "Well that's not art, what you're doing" and sort of questioning of is this kind of social practice work.

HF Right, and the way that people respond to it, is as if you're somehow breaking a rule. Like some kind of imagined line, where art exists and everything else is beyond that. But, this line keeps changing, and it's always been changing. The only really practical approach is to remove the line and say, "Ok, anything that anyone calls art is art, and I don't have to worry about it anymore."

CS It's something that you've spent a good deal of time doing, blurring that line

between art and life. I'm thinking of Jay's Quick Gas, which would be a local example. Can you explain that project really quick?

HF Yeah, I actually got some funding the Regional Arts and Culture Council to do a series of projects. I did three different projects where I collaborated with some local person to fulfill a project that they wanted to see happen. So in some ways I became an art assistant to people who didn't think of themselves as artists, but who had something that they were interested in. So I found out that Jay, who has a gas station over on SE Morrison and 7th, wanted to have a movie made at his gas station. I went over and talked to him about it, and asked him what he thought it should be like, and he said that he thought it should be like *Ulysses* by James Joyce. That took me back a little bit. I hadn't read *Ulysses* at that point. He didn't actually want to have any role in the making of movie, he just wanted it to happen at his gas station with the people that he worked with, or customers, or people around that area. So I wound

up reading the book, writing lines from it on cue cards, and then having those people read the lines on camera, and then, from that, constructed this synopsis version of Ulysses that's called "Blot Out the Sun."

CS And it's a rather ordinary place, right around Morrison and 7th, right?

HF It's not that ordinary though, it's a pretty extraordinary spot.

CS Which I guess is what a lot of your work ends of being about, that the ordinary might be a little more extraordinary than you might imagine. You were kind of applying the same model to your new website, correct?

HF Yeah, the new website is called *Some People* and in some ways, what I'm trying to offer, is a suggestion to people to have an experience not unlike the experiences I've had, where I collaborate with an individual, document what they're interested in some way. I've found that experience to be really interesting, educational, all sorts of things. And so with *Some People*, I'm asking

anyone who wants to participate to find someone that they think is really interesting in the world and then do a documentary, a web documentary about that person. It can take the form of video, text, photographs, drawings, sound, anything that can go on the web.

CS So, a Wikipedia of sorts...

HF But with a very specific framework

CS And assignment based, which relates to *Learning to Love You More*. So, any of us can sign up and go do one? Like, I could pick Alex here and do one?

HF Yep, if you thought Alex was interesting enough.

CS Alex, are you interesting enough?

AM I don't know, I guess that other people might have to evaluate that, right?

CS Yeah, I guess we'll find out. But then, this open source framework, which I know that

you've applied in a lot of ways. Even to education, which would bring us back around to where we are here. How has your experience with open source frameworks in art influenced your work education? Or was it vice versa?

HF For me the lines were pretty blurry always. The difference between a project being funded by an art center and a class being funded by a university, are very similar in my view. For me, whatever the projects are that I'm doing, I'm always looking for the opportunity to educate myself, so this educational component runs through a lot of it. On the other hand, in the case of a classroom experience, the goal to relinquish the authority role and to instead have a dynamic that I think of as collective learning. Everyone in the class, and whoever happens to drop by, can participate and take these sort of authority roles, partly because I want to keep it interesting for me. So, you never quite know what's going to happen in a class, or what might come out of it.

CS And I can attest to that. Every day I went into your class, I really didn't know quite what was going to happen. I could have a guess, but there were always surprises, which is interesting, and a little frightening I'd say too... Like it could unravel at any moment. Sometimes it comes together, some times it doesn't. How do you deal with it when maybe it doesn't come back together?

HF I think if you don't have a line, once again, on what's success and what's failure, instead you're just looking at the whole thing as an experience, and one to learn from, then nothing really winds up being a failure. The students sort of look to me like "What's going on?" or "This is really uncomfortable." And I'm like, "Well, it's interesting," you know, whatever it is. It will give me the chance to learn, and that will affect what I do the next time, and hopefully that is occurring for all of the students as well.

CS That subject that was brought up a lot at Open Engagement, which was a confer-



ence that Jen Delos Reyes organized up in Regina, Canada. How to... or rather, whether or not to put Social Practice artwork up against an evaluation system: success or failure. Any critical treatment of it. Which seems to be sought after, at least in the art world, as a kind of validation for art work. Do you have any thoughts on that Jen?

JDR Well, right now what's running through my head is this idea of success and failure when evaluating work with students. Something that I thought was really interesting when I was teaching last year, was that by the end of the year, no one would ask anymore, "Oh, so do you think this project was successful?" They started asking the question "How important was it for you that things went this way?" I think that might be a new model for framing things, to be setting up what's important for you in terms of how you evaluate your own work.

IMAGES /// Top: Jen Delos Reyes, *Airport Pickups*. Produced for Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance. 2007. Bottom: Harrell Fletcher, Photograph of daughter Beatrice. 2008.

CS And Alex, as a student you talked about how some of those food challenges were failures. Not to to bring up a sore spot.

AM Right

CS But as a student, how has that experience been?

AM As the classes went on, yeah, I guess that it was more about valuing the experience than whether or not the class was successful in an academic sense. The experience of being in an environment with other people, and learning from them.

CS And getting back to this idea of experience. An anecdote of yours, Harrell, that also relates to the classroom experience, is where you were given an assignment to repeat an activity every class period. Can you talk about how that happened?

HF Well, when I was an undergraduate at Humboldt State University, back in the mid-late 80's, I took a class from this guy Bill Devall, who is one of the co-writers

of this book called Deep Ecology. I don't know if people talk about it so much anymore, but it was kind of a hot book back then. He had this class that was called "experiential education," where on the first day we went on a hike through the local park, Arcata Community Forest, which was a redwood forest behind Humboldt State. And then at the end of that class, Bill Devall told us that the rest of the semester we weren't going to meet as a class anymore, that instead he wanted each of us to pick some physical activity to do during the class period, on our own, that we would do for the rest of the term. The only other suggestion was that you keep a journal, and at the conclusion of each class period in which you were out doing your own physical activity, you would just sort of write down your thoughts and experiences about that. My chosen physical activity was walking on railroad tracks. There were some railroad tracks down at the edge of town by the bird sanctuary, and I would just go on about a two or three mile walk along these tracks, and I got really good at it,

you know, being able to balance on the track or being able to jump from one track to the other without falling off and doing spins, and running, and walking with my eyes closed, things like that. Then I would sit down and write some thoughts on that. At the end of the term, he never asked for the journals. No tests. No papers. It was really left up to you as the individual to have your experience, and he was just suggesting the framework for you to have it in. And for me it was an incredible class. Of all the classes I took as an undergraduate, it's probably the one that stands out the most to me. The one I think about the most. It had this really big impact on me in a lot of different ways. It's something that I've tried to take with me into the classes that I teach. I haven't gone to that extreme yet, you never know, but I'm trying to bring that sort of independence and freedom and self determination to the classes. Sort of saying "Okay, you guys are college level students, you like to learn things, that's a known fact here, I'm going to suggest a framework and you get to go learn."

CS One thing that gets left out, a stumbling block I've seen for this sort of art work, is that it kind of cuts out the product. Are there any ways that you personally have tackled that?

HF Well I think that oftentimes in projects that I've done there has been some kind of product. If there was going to be a museum or gallery show, then I never showed up on the day it was supposed to open and said "Okay, I don't have anything for you." I always felt like if that's what's being offered to me, if that's the resource, then I'll make something for that context. It may also extend out beyond that, or I'll work with people who don't normally wind up in that context. But oftentimes, the results have produced some sort of product; photographs or videos or found objects, sculptures, all sorts of things. Or maybe something more event based.

CS Maybe what you're saying is that if the emphasis is on the experience, and that the product is documenting in most of the cases?

HF Not most of the cases, but some of the cases. It's varied. I try to create things that seem appropriate to the situation and to the context. It can wind up being all sorts of things. And sometimes the main point is the process and the experience, sometimes it's more product oriented. But I feel like I can do whichever seems appropriate to me within the given situation.

CS So maybe a little looser definition, a less rigid definition?

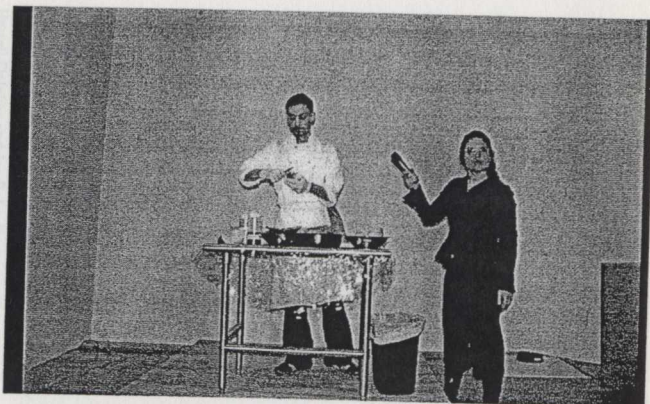
HF Yeah, well for me an artist is just someone who gets to do whatever they want, and sometimes they get paid to do that, and sometimes they don't. But that's my own definition. I continually remind myself that I'm this guy that gets to do what I want. So, When I'm given an opportunity to do a project I can pick some subject that I'm really interested in, and I can go about it in whatever way I want.

CS Another way to look at that is that you're choosing a model of self representation. Is that something that you can elaborate on?

HF Yeah, I think that traditionally in the art world, because it's really a capitalist world, the work almost always flows through a commercial gallery and needs to be commodified in some way or another so that the commercial gallery can make money off of it. There's a whole system that's built up around a pretty Wild West style, totally unregulated, no union, hardcore capitalism. And so, artists are sort of the flotsam and jetsam of that system. The commercial galleries can just pick them up and toss them back out as needed. It's a very tiny percentage of working artists, or even people who get their MFAs, that enjoy that kind of success. And even those who have a taste of it, usually five years later are not experiencing it anymore. It's just not a very good system for the artist themselves.

CS So you're looking for a more practical framework maybe, that fits with the working artist?

HF Yeah, one that can sustain this move to a diversified approach. I don't think that artists want to make signature style work over



and over again for fifty years to satisfy the gallery that can sell their work.

CS I will mention though that you do work with commercial galleries, but how do you negotiate that? Do you see the galleries as changing to fit that sort of work?

HF I didn't work with commercial galleries for ten years. I didn't pursue it either; it didn't feel appropriate to me. The ones that I wound up working with were people who I'd met along the way who just turned out to be really interesting. There's exceptions to every rule. There are some great people who run commercial galleries and who are a part of that system, and I got fortunate enough to work with a few of those people.

CS So we're getting close to the end of the hour. I wanted to open it up at this point and see if either Alex or Jen have any particular questions for Harrell from anything we've been talking about?

IMAGES /// Top: Harrell Fletcher, *Come Together*. 2003. Bottom: Amy Franceschini and Michael Swaine, *Bingo: Field of Thoughts*. Performed for Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance. 2007. (Jen Delos Reyes pictured)

- HF** Or for each other.
- CS** Or for each other, yeah.
- AM** I don't know if Jen and I know enough about each other to ask any questions.
- JDR** Well I sort of had a question for you two.
- AM** (*laughs*) Okay, okay, and I'm proven wrong immediately.
- JDR** I was thinking a lot about teaching in the fall, and that sort of educational model and it sounded a lot like Jaques Rancier's idea of the ignorant school master, where the knowledge that everyone can contribute is all valued equally, there's not like one person who is teaching. So as students, how did you two feel about contributing your knowledge in an equal sort of way in a group learning experience?
- AM** It's interesting that you should ask that because the first class that I took at Portland State was taught by a professor named Dr. Faaleava. It was supposed to be about

the Columbia River Basin, but we almost never did anything related to that. Numerous times he'd stop class based on what students were talking about, idle chatter. I remember once I was playing Uno with students and he'd stop and talk to us about the game for a half hour. And that really completely warped my view of education. Segueing back to social practice, I didn't experience that again until a roommate introduced me to some of Harrell's classes, so you have that kind of full circle, going through standard college classes and forgetting about that initial experience, and coming back to that. It was refreshing, but it was also daunting, because the traditional model of education, I think, gets really ingrained in you. Breaking away from that is a process, it takes time. For me, at least.

- CS** What I can add to that, as far as my role in the class, is that when I entered into Harrell's undergraduate classes as a graduate student I didn't expect the system to have been broken down so far, where Harrell was on par with the undergraduate students and the graduate students, and

that we were all contributing equally to even the direction of the course in a lot of cases. So, that was actually liberating to understand that I was learning just as much from somebody right out of high school, who might have been timid about being involved in something like that, but who had a lot of really interesting things to say when they spoke up... learning just as much from them as I would, say, from Harrell or from Alex, or from other people in the class. But, turning things back around, I have one last question for you Harrell, that I've been dying to ask. I read somewhere that your goal as an artist is to live an interesting life, and I was just going to check in with you and see how that's going?

HF It's been pretty interesting, yeah. It's definitely something that you have to remind yourself of, because I think you can easily slide into a groove where you're not bothering to be interested in things anymore. So if you're constantly checking in and making that a priority it's really easy to do. But it's easy to forget that also. You have to challenge yourself all the time.

ART TALK AM /// ON THE RADIO

CYRUS W. SMITH IN CONVERSATION
WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
KPSU RADIO 2008-2009

Book 3 of 10

This interview took place June 16th, 2008, live on KPSU, independent of the PSU MFA Monday night Lecture Series.

All audio available for download at arttalkam.blogspot.com.

