

8 Teaching Public Art in the Twenty-first Century

An Interview with Harrell Fletcher

Shelly Willis

Harrell Fletcher has worked collaboratively and individually on a variety of socially engaged, interdisciplinary projects for more than a decade. The elements of his practice of 15 years are the origin of a new graduate program called Art and Social Practice Art, launched in the fall of 2007 at Portland State University. The program at Portland State is one of three public-art education programs that have been recently initiated, marking a new area of study and discourse for public-art education.

The work Fletcher and Jon Rubin, Fletcher's collaborator from 1993 to 1999, made in graduate school was cited as one of the sources of the Social Practices graduate program in the Fine Arts Department at the California College of Arts, San Francisco, California. Lydia Matthews and Ted Purvis, who borrowed the term *social practices* from sociology, founded the program in 2004. Purvis says the program curriculum was developed "to think about what social space means and then use art strategies to alter relations in that space."

Jon Rubin, now a professor at Carnegie Mellon, is teaching classes in the Art-in-Context program—a hybrid of public, relational, and social art practices. As part of the program, each semester he rents a storefront in a different Pittsburgh neighborhood and uses it as a center for research and action with his students.

Fletcher has managed to bounce seamlessly between museums and the public art realm throughout his career. His work has been shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the de Young Museum; the Drawing Center; the Sculpture Center; the Seattle Art Museum; Signal in Malmo, Sweden; Domain de Kerguehennec in France; and the Royal College of Art in London. In 2002 Fletcher started *Learning to Love You More*, an ongoing participatory Web site with Miranda July. Prestel published a book version of the project in 2007. He is the 2005 recipient of the Alpert Award in Visual Arts. His current traveling exhibition *The American War* has traveled across the United States.

Fletcher was interviewed in the summer of 2007 about social practice art, the development of his work, and why he is starting a graduate program at Portland State.

**SHELLY WILLIS: WHAT AND HOW DID YOU
DECIDE TO NAME THE NEW PROGRAM YOU ARE
STARTED AT PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY?**

Harrell Fletcher: Well, that's slightly complicated. Trying to figure out what I do or have been doing for the last 15 years or so has been difficult. I never really had a term for it and was usually frustrated when people applied one to my work or me. The applications would usually be wildly off—like installation artist, relational aesthetics, or socially engaged community artist. Then the term *social practice* emerged. The California College of Arts in San Francisco started a program in 2005 that used the term and in the description of the program cited the work Jon (Rubin) and I did when we were graduate students. I kept getting asked to participate in symposiums and lectures that were about social practice, so it very quickly became a term applied to my work and one I was identified with.

SW: Why start a graduate program based on Social Practice Art?

HF: Everything that students are learning in art school is based on a studio practice model. The idea is that you go to your studio, have your genius moment, come up with a painting, sculpture, or whatever it is and then the way that it is presented—if it is ever presented—is in a commercial gallery and then in a museum. Hopefully.

The reality is only a tiny fraction of artists working in their studios ever show their work in a commercial gallery. So, it feels to me like a con almost, especially in a school context. We are leading students through a sequence, teaching them how to be artists, with a model that doesn't work. Once they've graduated, even if we just look at M.F.A. students, the numbers are bleak. Only 5 percent of the students that graduate with M.F.A.s are working as artists two years after graduation. If that were another kind of program—medical school, for example—it would simply disintegrate. People need the prospect of a job or they usually won't pay to go through school. How you get discovered and who discovers you never gets discussed in school. So for me, I've always felt like I'm a con man if I'm participating in that system. I feel like I'm tricking people.

SW: A con man as an artist or as a teacher?

HF: There's the con-man artist aspect too, but (I'm speaking) as a teacher—making my students believe that a studio practice can be a reality. They are following a carrot and, along the way, we take their money. They graduate and then we train a new set of students in the same way. We sort of cover our tracks too, because 95 percent of the artists, good and bad, just disappear.

When I started graduate school, I rejected that model pretty quickly. I decided I'd do work that is designed for a specific place and a specific audience and cut out that whole "waiting for someone to discover me" part. It doesn't matter if I wind up in a commercial gallery or museum, because the cycle is complete if I make work that gets shown. Those are the crucial elements. Of course, I want the work to be good too.

SW: But what about the money part of the equation? How do you make a living as a social practice artist? Where is the market?

HF: During school, I realized that the money part was probably not going to happen. The writing was on the wall. It was the early 1990s and the market had fallen out. The numbers just weren't there and so I thought, "Well, I'll just do what I want to do and not worry about the money part." Jon and I started Gallery Here and made other work using what we now call the social practice model, and the cycle was complete. We invested in the participants. We cared about the audience because we were making the work for them and with them.

SW: You were making your work primarily for a nonart audience. But weren't you also still making it for gallery directors and curators?

HF: Definitely, but that was secondary. It was on our minds. We were in art school. We were aware of the art market. We hoped art critics and curators would like the work too. But, eventually what happened was that I was able to support myself.

It occurred to me when I began teaching that I didn't want to perpetuate the studio practice myth. I wanted to create a program designed to teach artists ways to become functional within society and sustain them financially. I believe our society sees artists as useful and important. I did eventually make a living as an artist, but it happened to me in a sort of haphazard way. Now I can take that experience and apply it to a program that illustrates possibilities that aren't normally discussed within the art context—academic contexts, especially.

SW: What are the tools, methods, and curriculum for your new program? How is it set up?

HF: There are eight graduate students enrolled in the Art and Social Art Practice program. They don't get a studio. That's a big deal for most graduate students. They can't be in their studio clocking in hours like a good art student. That means they've got to do something else. I've developed requirements that force them out into the world and into the public realm. For example, the work cannot be made in a vacuum. It has to be shown. They are required to create a blog and a Web site, so they

can catalog their work and make it public. They can do a project that takes place in a day and disappears, and make a record of it by taking a digital photo and writing it up and putting it on their blog. They are required to do a final project, not an exhibition, which evolves during the two-year program and doesn't need to be conclusive.

If you aren't making art for a gallery, it won't look like paintings that would be attached to a white wall. You make something else. My understanding of what an artist is, especially at this point in the game, is someone who gets to do anything they want—anything within monetary and legal limits, and even those can be pushed. So, if that's the case, then why do 90 percent of the artists out there want to make paintings and sculptures? If you are telling them, "Hey, you get to do anything you want from now on," are 90 percent of them going to make paintings? If artists really understood that they can do anything they want, then they would be doing a lot of other things besides making paintings, and a lot of it would take place outside of a gallery context in an alleyway, park, a public building. The site changes the form of the work. It doesn't need a form that fits into the context of a gallery anymore.

SW: Is a public art practice different from social art practice?

HF: No, we could call the program "public art practice." The reason social art practice is slightly preferable to me is because the word *public* has been used so much it is stigmatized to a certain extent. People don't really know what a social artist is, so it is pretty open-ended. Most people think that public art or public artists means making permanent, large-scale, outdoor sculpture. When you ask the general public, "What is a public artist?" They say, "Oh, it is somebody that makes murals or somebody that makes sculptures that are permanent." Why not community art instead of social practice art? *Community art* is a great term, but unfortunately it was used in the 1980s to describe making bad murals with kids. The term got overused, so it is difficult to use the term any more without people automatically assuming that's what you mean. So it is nice to have a semiclean slate with this other term. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter, it's just words—they will all probably get stigmatized, eventually.

SW: You've got dozens and dozens of ideas for social art listed on your Web site.

HF: The ideas on the Web site were generated in my travels. They are kind of like insurance, like backup in case a situation doesn't occur, or I am exhausted, or want to be expedient. They are ideas I can use, so I don't need to devote myself to a place for months. I've got a whole new set of ideas.

SW: What comes first—the site, which includes the audience, or the idea? Because in the context of public art practice, it is usually perceived by curators, critics, and administrators, that artists consider the site and audience first before coming up with the idea.

HF: *Site-specific* was another one of those terms that I was once really excited about, but then I realized it, too, had this loaded meaning, which ultimately has more to do with the way an architect works than the way that I wanted to work. I think there are interesting ways that architects work but, ultimately, I wasn't concerned with the physical elements of the site. Even early on, Jon and I were talking about a new term that never really caught on—*situation-specific*. We encountered situations which included physical environments, but also had to do with social dynamics. These situations could be incredibly transient. We could bump into somebody on a street corner, and that could lead to a project. I like the term because it is looser. You can walk into any situation and there is potentially a project there to work out.

SW: Does public art or social practice art need to accomplish something? In the spirit of new genre public art does it need to be meaningful?

HF: You can be an evil social-practice artist. It's art and social practice—it's not social work. There isn't an agenda. You do not need to be out there helping people. If you do, great. My own tendency is to try to do some good, so I imagine I might inadvertently encourage it in my teaching practice.

In graduate school I was trying to reject the sense that I was doing good. I thought the idea of new genre public art was pretentious. I just didn't feel comfortable with the idea of artist as society fixer. Instead of going out and finding something I can offer a community, I search for the things I can get *from* a community. I believe a community has something to offer me. I'm not going to teach them—they are going to teach me. In that sense, I've always thought of my practice as selfish. I'm getting to go out and learn things from people who know things that I don't know. I have this minimal thing to offer, which is art. I never have a predetermined sense of what the content should be and because of that I end up working on projects whose subjects have nothing to do with my personal interests. What I really have is an interest in people who have (an interest of their own), and then I find a forum for that content.

SW: Does a public art practice also have its own set of rules and is it as separate from social-art practice as studio-based practice?

HF: I think there are plenty of crossovers because we are bedfellows. If my "Social Art Practice" had come out of sociology or anthropology or journalism then those would be the things we would be relating to and there

probably wouldn't be any real connection to a studio-based commercial art practice. But, because it is within an art department there is going to be crossover. For example, there is usually a gallery component to my projects and that's OK. I like galleries. I like art museums. I'm not saying that they are bad. I'm just saying that they are dominant and I want to offer another possibility for myself, for audiences, and especially for my students.

SW: You wrote in an essay that to help combat your shyness you forced yourself to talk and interact with people socially as part of your practice. Do you still feel like you are doing that?

HF: It's been integrated into my process, but I do it less. I tried it out. I realized it could work. It is interesting. But it requires so much energy that I think I'm retreating back. I'm cutting myself off more and more which is where I was before and that's OK. I don't ask people so many questions anymore.

SW: One of the threads through your work is creating exhibition spaces. Early on in graduate school you and Jon made Gallery Here. In 2004 you created the Museum of the School of Social Work, an interactive museum in the University of Minnesota School of Social Work, and recently *The American War*. The latter stands out because it doesn't seem "situational." It's not about an individual you met in a neighborhood or someone you came across in a residency. It's about a historic event.

HF: This project is different in many ways from my past work because I'm not as interested in individual interactions or asking as many questions. I realize I can be interested in a subject, create a structure for it and there will still be all kinds of unknowns and individuals that are still teaching me things. I'm more interested now in doing work that has political content and may have some sort of societal impact.

SW: In *The American War* you had an idea and then found the structure for it.

HF: That's my fear. I never want to start with an idea and then illustrate the idea. I want it to be the other way around—this is the place, these are the people, whatever they want to say is what we talk about. I let the participants determine content.

The American War was different in that it wasn't about people I met, it was a whole museum. It didn't make sense to recreate it in Vietnam, so I recreated it photographically back in the United States. But I still did public programs that allowed local people at the exhibition locations to have a voice.

I (once) created a series of programs called “Come Together” events. The first ones had no thematic direction. Participants talked about anything they wanted—scuba diving, furniture polishing, skateboarding. I did one in New York with 28 people that was eight hours long. There were food-cooking demonstrations, a talk about the history of chocolate, and tango lessons. That was very interesting and I liked doing it, but now I’m more specific. There is a subject and a framework. It has become more interesting to devise a structure, set things in motion, and see what happens.

SW: Well, then it is site-specific. There is someone in the community, who knows the community, who lives in the community making the project about the place.

HF: When I am invited to a community by an art institution, the curator or administrator has a dinner for me and usually invites the local artists, art patrons, people interested in art. The conversation is the same each time regardless of where I go. So I created the “Come Together” program and invited the artists to ask nonarts people to come give a talk. You realize there is this whole other world, right next to us, and it’s interesting to the audience and even the speakers because they normally don’t have entrance into art spaces. The goal is for the public to become more comfortable and invested in the art space and the artists to become more invested in the outside world. It showed me things that I wouldn’t see normally when I’m brought into a place and am just introduced to the artists or art community.

SW: Have you ever responded to a Request for Qualifications? Done a mass mailing of your slides to public-art programs across the country?

HF: Early on Jon and I tried and it usually didn’t work. We spent hours and hours writing applications. We kept applying, but it didn’t work. Once you’re turned down from doing something a certain way, you either give up entirely, or you find a way around it. The way around it was just doing it ourselves, with our own money, which there wasn’t much of, with whatever resources we could find.

We did a couple of public art pieces in downtown San Francisco in a parking garage and another on muni. I did a couple of projects here in Portland. The bureaucracy killed me. I just couldn’t deal with it, so that was another reason I gave up.

SW: What was inhibiting about the process?

HF: There’s a lot of paperwork and investment in something that you typically don’t get. You don’t get these projects unless you are totally dialed in and if you do get commissioned then you are left dealing with all these other things.

SW: Like what?

HF: Managing a budget, dealing with a contractor, with insurance, dealing with things architects are trained to do, not artists. An artist has, once again, no training or knowledge about the process, no secretary. People tell you, “No you can’t do it that way,” and you aren’t used to that either. Because, you’ve been trained to be a studio artist and if you want to turn something red, nobody is going to stop you. In the public art realm there are people stopping you at every turn. No, it can’t be done that way. It has to be permanent. Permanent means 50 years. You must make it out of these materials. It can’t be dangerous.

SW: Will the Social Practice Program include instruction on how to navigate those processes?

HF: Yes, students will go through the process of applying for Percent-for-Art projects. They will do it as a team. Different members of the team will take on different facets of the process. I am setting the process up that way because I think making these kinds of projects are more appropriate for a studio, not an individual artist. That’s why architects are really better at making this kind of work.

SW: How can a Percent-for-Art program support individual artists (not teams or studios or architects) in the public realm?

HF: I think some European models that pool percent funds work. Funds are applied to particular areas of the community that are in need, and then the project is developed in a similar way that a curator would work with an artist. It is the curator’s job to deal with the bureaucracy and it is the artist’s job to make the art. It is also important to get rid of the necessity for permanent work. The ideal is to say an artist, we’ve got \$50,000, decide what you want to do with it.

I’m including the City of Portland in the planning stages of the program at Portland State and we are creating opportunities for students in the program to work in the City in artist-in-residence-like situations. But, I guess I’m hoping that maybe those established institutional public art systems will eventually change. Maybe cities will create different models so that artists can work more usefully within the system. But, I’m cynical.

SW: What is different about consciously making work for a nonart audience?

HF: It’s usually assumed that we need to dumb the work down. But that isn’t the case. There are many layers in the work and ways people can approach it. In the same sort of way I could, say, go for a hike in the woods by myself and appreciate the trees and the birds. But, I could do the same thing with

my friend, a botanist, who explains the scientific names of plants and their medicinal functions and have a completely different experience. Both experiences are valid and wonderful. It is the same way with my work. I don't want to make-work so only the expert can understand. I want everyone to be able to walk through that forest and have an interesting experience.

SW: How do artist and architecture practices differ?

HF: I think Vito Acconci has it right. Create a studio, with a lead artist, in the same way you would in an architect's office. The lead artist gets to practice the creative aspects of the project and other members support that process.

I recently read about a Minnesota artist (Siah Armajani) who did a project in Spain. He created a model, gave it to a curator, who dealt with fabricators, the public, and site-related issues. I thought, "Wow, if someone can just make a model and it just gets fabricated, then do you really need to be an artist?" We want people to think we are rare and qualified to make things the rest of the public is not qualified to make. It's egotistical. But my sense was probably anyone can make a model, have it fabricated and it could be interesting, even more interesting than the work most artists are doing. So I decided to try it out.

I was asked to do a public sculpture at a sculpture park in France. The park is on an old estate that includes a lake and a chateau that has been turned into galleries. The sculpture park includes mostly plop art from the 1980s and 1990s. It is 30 minutes from the nearest small city and three hours from Paris. People really use the park, not as a place to experience art, but a place where they can walk their dog, go fishing or running, and have a picnic. I started the project by asking people in the park what they thought of the sculpture. The general consensus was that they rather it wasn't there at all. So, I asked people to propose a sculpture for the park. I would choose the project and get it fabricated. I had them make drawings and write down the specifics—size, shape, where it would be sited.

An eight-year-old boy named Corentine proposed making a turtle sculpture. He wanted to keep it realistic. He is a realist artist. He likes turtles. So why not make a turtle sculpture? Sensible. Then given the opportunity to make it out of any material. He decided to make it out of the best material—gold. But then he wanted to keep it real, so he wanted to paint it green. This kind of decision is the complication you hope for in an art project. This is the antilogic that generally gets cut out of a rational person's thinking. If you make something out of gold, you don't paint it green. That would ruin it.

Once I decided his was the project I wanted to work with, I became Corentine's assistant. We set up a studio, made drawings and clay models, and I carved out a turtle in foam to his specifications. He met with the administrator of the project, who told him it couldn't be made out of real

gold (the cost was over 3 million dollars). So, instead he picked a very gold-looking bronze and had the foundry add one ounce of gold to the sculpture during the fabrication process. We went around with the administrator and argued about the site for the sculpture. The administrator won out in the end. Which is, you know, typical. We made a model, the foundry cast it in bronze, and we installed the sculpture and a plaque, and had an unveiling. The process took two years. A permanent sculpture completely conceived and executed, in the same way as any artist, by a ten-year-old boy, is now part of the sculpture park collection.

People are always saying, “Oh, my kid could do that” and I say, “Yeah, your kid could probably do that, and it would probably be really amazing, so let’s do it and see what happens.” Normally kids are only given clay, crayons, pens, and paper—what happens if you give them a bronze foundry? What are they going to make? Of course they need assistants, but so does any artist. What I’ve realized is that I have certain skills, if I just lend them to someone then a project can be made that I would never make. The result is a sculpture that people actually like.

SW: How do you deal with ownership issues?

HF: I don’t worry about my own ownership. I’m more concerned that the people I work with feel invested. I’m pushing for their ownership and the audience’s ownership of the work. I visited the museums and became invested in art from a very young age. But I realize that the general public usually doesn’t go to museums, and those are the people I want to make art for. I don’t want to make things that people aren’t invested in, aren’t connected to, don’t have an emotional tie to.

SW: What are the ideas you are working on now?

HF: The thing that I’m leaning towards now is making larger-scale work that isn’t commissioned. I want to use the same process I used early on in my work, but at a larger scale. I want to find funding for it and make it happen through a different sort of process.

My wife Wendy Red Star is Crow Indian and she grew up on the Crow reservation in Montana. We went there to visit and one of the things we realized was that there are a lot of deep-fried foods served at restaurants and consumed by residents. People also drive big, diesel trucks. We wondered, what if we combined these two things and made a bio-diesel station on the reservation that collected all the grease that is getting thrown away and then turned it into fuel for the diesel trucks that everyone is driving? We want to make a bio-diesel station and a bio-diesel vehicle. The station would function as a place to get relatively cheap fuel and as a multi-use community center, a library, and a gallery, maybe a day-care center.

We are also thinking about doing a project about a rug my dad bought us. We have hardwood floors and a new baby, and my dad thought we should get a rug. Initially we tried to buy a fair-trade rug from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or India, but prices were in the \$7,000 range and we couldn't do that to my dad. So after months and months of looking we settled on a rug that isn't fair-trade. It was purchased through a home-furnishing company in the United States and it was much cheaper, so he ordered it, but it didn't come. My dad checked it out and somehow they had canceled the order, so we re-ordered it and we eventually got two rugs in the mail. We've decided to sell the second rug to a collector or a museum and use the money to research where it was made in India, and travel to that place and give the money to the people who actually made the rug.

These are the kind of ideas and processes that I now find interesting.