

VCUarts STUDIO

Fall 2010

This summer Hilary Wilder, Artist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Painting and Printmaking at VCUarts, and Hope Ginsburg refocused their ongoing dialog about contemporary art making to take a closer look at Hope's work. An Assistant Professor in the Art Foundation Program and the Department of Painting and Printmaking, Hope works with graduate and undergraduate students and has introduced courses in "live-art" and research-based art making. In August 2010, Hope will open Sponge HQ at the VCUarts Anderson Gallery, which will serve as a laboratory for generating cross-disciplinary projects. Hilary and Hope talk about "Sponge", "lived-research" and alternative strategies for making and exhibiting art.

HW: Hope, your projects take on a number of different forms, all of which can be described as "art with people in it". Can you talk a little bit about what your artwork entails?

HG: Sure, I come from a sculpture and performance art background, so many of the pieces are presented in the form of interactive events like workshops. Therefore, there are occasions where viewers are participants as well. When I don't present "live" work, or if viewers encounter a project after it's "happened," they may see an installation, a video, or the objects generated by a given event.

I began the "Sponge" project in 2006; Sponge is workshop-based and always includes a hands-on component, such as felt-making (after which, the felt objects can be displayed by themselves, or in the space that was designed to host the workshop itself). Each event is organized around subject matter that fascinates me, but which I may know little about at the outset. So I need to learn with the experts: the beekeepers, the designers, the farmers— and I learn best through interaction, conversation and immersing myself in the thick of things.

Past Sponge environments have also included wall paintings, soundscapes, slide shows and video projections, and I often collaborate with artists and designers to make those components. Or, in other instances, I act in a kind of curatorial mode and invite the participation of others.

Other projects have involved an investigation of beekeeping [I didn't actually keep bees and I don't want to be misleading. We can leave as is if it's too wordy.] that generated bottles of "Bearded Lady" honey, a piece about biodegradable textiles, and a stint rehearsing and auditioning to be an on-air QVC program host. In all of these, the process of making involves a kind of "lived research." And, really, the works begin and end with other people.

HW: Can you discuss a couple of recent projects and how they reflect your interest in "lived research"?

HG: When I started to work on the "Bearded Lady" project, I really had to find my way into another world, I think that's where the social component became foregrounded in the work. I needed to go from being a "civilian", to someone who could wear a swarm of bees on her face. The process took a few years, during which I connected with two beekeepers, one of whom became my mentor in New York. I staffed beekeeping displays at state fairs with him, clicked slides during his lectures, and joined him as a member of the Connecticut Beekeeping Association. When it came time to do the beard, it was the President of that association who acted as the "barber" to sculpt the live bees on my chin. By the end of the project I had worked with beekeepers, photographers, videographers and editors.

In the late nineties and the early part of this decade, I worked in the textile industry in New York at a

company called Designtex. There I became absorbed by a product development process that the company had undertaken to develop a completely biodegradable commercial upholstery product. Both the product itself and the story of its development struck me as incredibly artful. I wanted to somehow present the company's project in an art context to propose questions about where we look for creative practice and to challenge assumptions about corporate culture. So, in response to this, I worked with a sculptor and builder to create a display unit that would show the upholstery at each phase of its life cycle: wool, yarn, woven goods and selvage waste. One half of that unit was a working compost bin into which viewers could peer at composting worms decomposing the fabric before their eyes. My research, or "studio" practice became completely imbedded in my work life. Information sheets that I made for the piece became sanctioned company marketing materials. And when the piece, called Designtex, Climatex Lifecycle (after the product) wasn't on view in art contexts like P.S.1 in New York and Real Art Ways in Connecticut, it lived in the company headquarters

The Sponge project originated when I was in graduate school at MIT, an institute that celebrates interdisciplinary research and learning by doing. Sponge, which is about mixing disciplines and scrambling hierarchies between experts and learners, grew out of an approach to lived research. And the workshop structure offers the possibility of collaging multiple topics together.

HW: It seems from what you're saying that a lot of your work is born out of being imbedded in various roles, tasks, or even locations. Do you see your position at VCU as feeding your research in a similar way?

HG: Yes, definitely. Sponge at MIT led to an a-ha moment about teaching. I'd come to this pedagogical project through my art making and realized that I wanted to pursue a teaching job. Shortly after I arrived at VCU, I was offered a show at Solvent Space in Richmond, which I decided to transform into a space to host three Sponge workshops. Sponge gained support and traction at VCU and in the fall of 2009, I was offered a space in the Anderson Gallery to host a new Sponge headquarters, which will open at the end of August 2010.

While that space was incubating over the course of the last academic year, I experimented with my first semester-long Sponge, a course called Colablablab. In keeping with my interest in the potential of mixing areas of study and my desire to challenge the roles of experts and learners, I registered as a student at VCU so that I could enroll in a Biology 101 lecture and lab section. The Colablablab was open to any art or biology student who would enroll in the science classes with me. Colablablab became an experiment in curricular ecology, and a way of teaching research-based art making. It also emphasized the idea of collaboration. My students and I worked together not only on producing exhibitions of the class's work, but also on our biology homework.

HW: Your projects don't always fit within the conventional parameters for showing art (in galleries, museums, etc). So where do they go? How do they function within art spaces and, by comparison, in non-art contexts?)

HG: I've always been interested in the way art crosses over into non-art territories, and the way fields outside of art can be fuel for making projects. I'm also quite curious about models of commerce. How does the meaning of the transaction shift when an art object is sold in a commercial gallery, a museum shop, a craft market, or a design store? And furthermore, how does the meaning of the object itself shift?

When I first showed the Bearded Lady piece, at P.S.1, I chose the café as the site, rather than the gallery. Viewers could purchase jars of honey, priced as commodities. I also played with these notions of

commerce by selling the honey at a specialty store, which sold craft and design objects. As another example, I've been showing the material manifestations of the Sponge project, handmade wool felt mittens and boots, for the past two years in the Makers Market at Socrates Sculpture Park. That setup enables me to interact directly with viewers, who in that circumstance are also customers. I also recently had an opportunity to present the Sponge felt items at Incident Report in Hudson, NY, an experimental gallery space that consists of two illuminated shop windows on the main street of the town. I was interested in the way the space, which is visible to passers-by 24 hours a day, acts as a provocative foil to the galleries, antique stores and restaurants that also line the block.

This past June, the participants in the Colablalab class and I exhibited as a collective in a "science fair" in Long Island City, NY, which was organized by two likeminded groups, Flux Factory and Metric System. We answered an open call for proposals from artists who were working at the intersection of science and art. The Science Fair exhibition was a canny showcase for the experiment my "collaborators" and I had conducted with the Biology Department at VCU this spring. We displayed artifacts, objects and documentation from the class, each carefully tagged with project data. The "Most Empirically Rebellious" trophy was awarded to our booth.

HW: I think I can speak for many people at VCU in saying that the opening of your space –Sponge HQ – at the Anderson Gallery is a much-anticipated event. What would you eventually like Sponge to be? What will ideally take place there in the years to come?

HG: I'm just back from a road trip to upstate New York to gather a customized top bar beehive to install at Sponge HQ this summer for the opening. In the spring, we'll move the bees in. Meantime, there'll be a video and sound installation. The hive is outfitted with an infrared surveillance camera that'll send live bee coverage to a monitor. Other features in the installation will be a felt-carpeted library and an observation perch to watch the bees coming and going at the window. Wall paintings and other elements, including a projection screen are also in store.

As far as events, I envision flexible programming that includes at least one major Sponge workshop a year and other lectures, panels, performances on an ongoing basis. The focus will be on creating open waters for mixing disciplines within the university and amongst local and visiting experts. I'll also invite proposals for projects, especially from the students, who will be welcome to host screenings and performances. And I will certainly continue to offer classes like Colablalab in the space and feel stirrings towards a Sponge class that focuses on research and project-based artmaking. Continuing to open classes at Sponge to students beyond the School of the Arts is also a goal of mine.

Oh! And there'll be Sponge Yoga each week, which we started last semester. Open hours for hydrating with coffee, water, tea and for visiting are ongoing.

HW: And, in addition to that, you have other projects coming up as well. Tell us a little bit about those.

HG: The first Sponge on the docket will be for *Curious*, this fall's Southeastern College Art Association Conference at VCU. The overarching theme will be alternative pedagogy; I'm hoping we'll hear from local experts on sea sponges and accomplish a project together. I have visions of a group felting project as well; that may be the time to make the carpet for the library.

Speaking of alternative pedagogy, over the last decade I've been traveling to the home of artist friends Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett in Northeastern Pennsylvania, who've since turned their 92-acre compound into a living museum and educational institution called Mildred's Lane. Performances and

projects that I've conducted there are also quite relevant to our conversation about exhibiting in non-traditional venues. In fact, a group of VCUarts Foundation honors students had the chance to produce a costume performance and feast at Mildred's Lane for their final class project. This fall, I'll be participating in an exhibition at Tufts University Art Gallery called "Mildred's Lane/Renovating Walden."

And to bring it all back around, a solo show that I have coming up this March at the CUE Foundation in Chelsea will comprise several small installations from these "lived-research" projects and alternative contexts that we've been talking about. There'll be evidence of the Makers Market booths, the Colablalab "Science Fair" display, artifacts from the Sponge HQ and, once again, a nod to the bees.