8 Hour Projects: Sustaining Practice, Community and Self
Curated by Colleen Toledano ’01 and Darren Lee Miller

Work-In-Progress Day: Saturday, September 3, 10AM - 6PM
Opening Reception: Tuesday, September 6, 7-9PM
Exhibition Dates: September 6 - 25, 2011

This annual art event features a dozen artists making art on site with the public invited to observe (and participate if the artist so desires). This year’s artists are Shaila Christofferson (Chicago), Pedar Dalthorp (Anchorage, AK), Matt Forrest (Pittsburgh, PA), Amara Geffen (Vernon, PA), n. Sean Glover (Pittsburgh and Boston), Heather Hertel (Slippery Rock, PA) Michelle Illuminato (Alfred, NY), Jeremy LeClair (Portsmouth, NH), Joe Meiser (Lewisburg, PA), Anna Mikolay (Pittsburgh, PA), Elizabeth Mooney (Pittsburgh and Boston), and Allegheny alumnus Alex Mead ’01 (Portsmouth, NH).

The Bowman–Penelec–Megahan Art Galleries at Allegheny College present exhibitions and other visual arts programming for diverse audiences including students, educators, emerging and established artists, and other residents of northwestern Pennsylvania. Sponsored by the College’s Art Department, gallery programs are designed to promote active learning and interdisciplinary exploration of the visual arts and culture. All programs are offered free of charge.

All events in the Bowman–Penelec–Megahan Art Galleries are free and open to the public. The art galleries are wheelchair accessible. Call to verify times and events (814) 332-4365; programs subject to change. Art galleries are located in Doane Hall of Art (a wing of the Campus Center) east of North Main St., between College and John Streets.

Exhibitions and other programs are supported in part by Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts (PPA), the regional arts funding partnership of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency. State government funding comes through an annual appropriation by Pennsylvania’s General Assembly and from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. PPA is administered in this region by the Arts Council of Erie.
8 Hour Projects: Sustaining Practice, Community and Self

Contained within the title of this show is the suggestion that artists not only create artworks, but that our studio practice (and subsequent exhibitions) are the ways in which we form community with one another and keep ourselves going. It may be tortuously tautological (and tongue-twisting) to say that art making is a sustaining act for an artist; but that is, in fact, one of the main reasons why Allegheny College’s Art Department invites about a dozen artists to participate in this event every year. Part of our mission is to serve emerging and established artists, and other residents of northwestern Pennsylvania, but we are not here just to serve ourselves. Sponsored by the College’s Art Department, gallery programs are designed to promote active learning and interdisciplinary exploration of the visual arts and culture. We hope the “visual texts” on display in the gallery will resonate with you, and that you will take away ideas that you had never before considered.

Work-in-progress day for 8 Hour Projects is always crowded, with people dropping in throughout the day to see how ideas evolve—over the course of eight hours—to become completed artworks. Each artist has been assigned a wall or floor space of approximately 12 x 12 feet, and the artists will be working with a variety of materials. The challenge is to be well-enough prepared to make best use of our time, but not to be so rigidly planned that we can’t accommodate the myriad things that tend to just happen (e.g. noise, dust, something not working the way we thought it would, the ways in which another artist’s concepts or materials resonate with ours, etc...). Most importantly, we must remain open to the ways in which our works will communicate back to us as our ideas evolve. In other words, this show is meant to get under Art’s skirt and show us its parts: process, concept, display, to name a few. Interactivity is encouraged.

Colleen Toledano and I are working together to complete contour line drawings on the wall with white map pins. The negative space will be a tightly-gridded ground drawn with pins that are a slightly different shade of white. Colleen and I are both interested in meticulous, laborious process, and subtle, almost imperceptible variations. Colleen frequently uses porcelain, and I use a large format camera — both are processes/materials that require a great deal of precision. The images in our project come from ideas we are exploring in our own studios. I am examining photographs that people choose to share on gay social networking sites. Recontextualizing the images, I recall traditional altar-piece forms and translate them through book-binding materials. The resulting sculptural books are totemic objects, part document and part confessional, and they will be on display in the Faculty&Alumni Exhibit next month. Colleen is working with images of people practicing self-defense moves. The images appear to be cross-stitched onto pillows, but on closer inspection one notices the pillows are ceramic and that the images could be mistaken for intimate positions between two people. Colleen uses porcelain because she is interested in the seductive qualities of a material that is so white, soft and difficult to use. There are allusions to fragility, delicacy, and also a level of elegance and formality. We are both interested in the tension between hand-made objects and manufactured forms.

Many of the other artists create their works with found objects and other sculptural materials. Some of them are performance artists, and others elicit “performances” from the audience. Ideas about perception, cognition, memory, place, and identity inform artworks that are interactive and immersive. Anna Mikolay, for example, explores pattern recognition and traumatic memories, while Michelle Illuminato works to give agency and autonomy to residents of a place — so that they may have a voice and venue to tell their own stories. Joe Meiser tests the limits of the human body and mind, while Matt Forrest expresses interest in life forces and what comes after life.

It is an honor to be sharing space with so many excellent artists. Colleen and I had the pleasure of interviewing each of the artists and then collaboratively writing the catalog essays with those artists. Colleen worked with Heather Hertel, Michelle Illuminato, Jeremy LeClair, Anna Mikolay, and her former classmate, Alex Mead ’01. I worked with Shaila Christofferson, Pedar Dalthorp, Matt Forrest, Amara Geffen, n. Sean Glover, Joe Meiser, and Elizabeth Mooney. To all the artists we would like to say, thank you.

Darren Lee Miller, Gallery Director
Shaila Christofferson makes sculpture that doesn’t always look like sculpture, but instead like manufactured, futuristic functional items whose purposes have yet to be determined. Christofferson plays with dissonances in denotative vs. connotative meaning, reuses the bits of plastic packaging most of us just throw away, and generally finds ways to create depth, space and volume without directing the viewer’s assumptions about foreground/background, important vs. unconsidered. In a press release for Christofferson’s spring show at Chicago Artists Resource (CAR), the curator notes that the works are, “Reminiscent of the functional utility of furniture as well as hermetically preserved remnants of crumbled architecture. Christofferson’s formally sleek objects comment, in her own words, ‘on the tenuous nature of the constructed environment.’”

The spring exhibition at CAR was called, *Lingiform*, which means, “wood-like.” Lingin is a biopolymer (like cellulose) that plays a role in strengthening the cell walls of woody plants. The piece featured on the URL cited above, *Knock Out Knock Down*, is an angular, pronged, ribbed, volumetric form made of medium density fiberboard (MDF), adhesives, pressboard, contact paper, moss, and pvc pipe. Many of the visible planes have been screen printed with a subtly-crafted wood grain pattern in an off color, which seems to either poorly conceal the fakeness of the materials, or to give a nod to their sources. It reminds one that some forests (and many fields) are giant, austere monocultures stretching to the far horizon. This is especially true in the center of the country, where the artist is from.

“I grew up in the southeastern corner of South Dakota”, Christofferson says. “It took a long time to come to the realization that my childhood geography and Scandinavian cultural background have indeed had a very real impact on my aesthetic preferences. I am obsessed with subtle differences in colors of white and qualities of light. My preference is for large, wide-open empty spaces, hard edges and flat color, multiples and modular forms. (Think snow, ice, sun, and expansive fields of just one thing.)” Play with positive and negative space animates the artist’s creative reuse of packaging materials, where the latent volume of a formerly encased object lives as a hollow echo of itself. Such bits of waste are granted a second life by their incorporation in the pieces, and one is reminded that plastic itself is effectively an immortal substance. It is not immediately apparent whether one should read the parts that come forward or the parts that recede. There are many surfaces.

Christofferson’s sculptures may offer reflection on commodity culture and contemporary landscape, if one is inclined to think of them that way. Deliberate choices to incorporate unconventional materials, and to mimic others with exquisite craft and attention to detail, nudge us to consider banal objects (like packaging-trash and construction materials), and to reconsider the ways in which we embed materials with meaning. For example, it isn’t plywood, but MDF camouflaged to look like plywood in drag.

Christofferson has won several grants and awards, including a George Sugarman Foundation Individual Artist Grant and a State of West Virginia Fellowship Grant for Individual Artists. She was also selected to participate in the Creative Capital Foundation Professional Development Workshop in conjunction with the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation in Baltimore, MD. Recent exhibition venues include the Sheldon Swope Art Museum, Terre Haute, IN, Wichita Center for the Arts, Wichita, KS, West Virginia Cultural Center, Charleston, WV, Plano Art Centre, Plano, TX, Art Center of Northern New Jersey, Milford, NJ, and La Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris France. For more information, please visit Christofferson’s webpage at: http://www.csu.edu/collegeofartsandsciences/artanddesign/shaila.html

1 http://www.chicagoartistsresource.org
Pedar Dalthorp makes sculptural vessels and other items that look like structural supports. The artist’s website features a modernist, macabre collection of fantasy implements that play a role in processing the body of a single rabbit in order to support a colony of beetles. Dalthorp says, “I wanted to see how large a community of beetles could be sustained by a single rabbit. To put a single rabbit’s life in perspective, both in relation to the beetles and to us.” Questions of mortality, efficiency, sterility, and formalism often beg further questions, but do not pose conclusions of their own.

A set of porcelain cylinders are topped with flat lids that have rabbit-ear handles. These vessels are containers for the parts of a rabbit corpse that are not consumed by beetles (aside from bones). Another pair of objects are loosely modeled after both the crypt vases commonly found in mausoleums, and large industrial forms like pillow-block bearing housings (very large machine parts). It is these juxtapositions, these off-kilter ways of creating relationships between things that don’t normally go together, that informs the artist’s quirky sense of humor.

For those who fail to see either irony or doubt in such placement, one’s eagerness to ascribe meaning may result in misunderstanding — a form of engagement that is encouraged by the artist. On his website, Dalthorp presents his art as products, something that a consumer could consider using, as if going through an online catalog. “Perhaps they would consider using the item themselves, or wonder why someone would use such an item. They can identify with the idea or reject it, whether or not they buy anything.” When asked if the work is meant to address some aspect of mortality, Dalthorp replies, “I don’t want to die yet, but I’m not going to get all wound up about it. On the other hand, if there weren’t some sort of emotional involvement or unanswered questions, the art wouldn’t happen.” His rabbit processing pieces tread a line: they are both reverent and irreverent, but quietly so in both cases. The dead body provides nourishment to yet other living things. Nothing is waste. A dissimilar tension exists in contemporary industrial-economic practices like “planned obsolescence,” a phrase to describe many things in the consumer stream that aren’t meant to be fixed but are engineered to become “last year’s thing,” to keep us in a pattern of throwing away the old and buying what’s new — a kind of manufactured life/death cycle.

The artist talks about how these ideas affect his lifestyle choices. “Aside from the mathematics of industrial design, emulating design makes me feel like I can maintain more control over my environment. For the last few years I’ve lived a fairly transient life. I haven’t had a consistent residence for more than 9 months. Extra stuff is a liability, so I’ve been trying to pare down and keep only things that are useful. Recently I’ve been thinking about this in respect to dishes. Long story short, I’ve decided to have one plate and one bowl. In keeping with the problem-solving theme, I established parameters for my plate and bowl. They need to nest inside each other (the plate serves as a lid for cooking rice). They need to just barely fit inside my microwave. Their rims need to be as wide as possible (to avoid heat transfer to my fingers). They need a hole in their rims for hanging on a peg (drip drying). The plate needs to accommodate a frozen chimichanga.”

Pedar Dalthorp is Assistant Professor of art in the Art Department of the University of Alaska-Southeast, where he teaches sculpture and printmaking. For more information, please visit Dalthorp’s website at: http://pedar.us
Matt Forrest paints large, exotic mammals on walls, and applies cut vinyl to painted surfaces. He draws buildings on layered sheets of diaphanous paper, and he uses printmaking to combine reproducible elements with that which he draws by hand. The multiple layers in his works speak to process, change, experience, and faith.

In the body of work, Totems, from 2009, one sees large drawings on the walls. Each iconic image shows a singular, large animal species like a thincerous or a lioness. Vinyl shapes with hand-drawn elements are carefully cut and applied to the wall and incorporated within the drawing. They create halo-like circles around the heads of the animals. These circles provide reference for a line that intersects with them. The circle and radial line also offer a compositional base for the repetitive cut-vinyl line-work that decorates the bottoms of the walls like wainscoting. One notices that many of the animals are tropical species, and that the line intersecting the halo creates a trajectory, like the trace of a projectile heading for the skull. One might think of trophy hunting or poaching or going to the zoo, or innumerable other things depending on one’s own memories and experiences. The patterned line work around the bottom third of the room’s walls creates an inverted clerestory effect. “I combined drawn and painted animal images with architectural elements from church floor plans. I used appropriated imagery — anything I could find during my visit to the install location — which just happened to sit on top of an old church. When I created the Totems, I wanted to incorporate the space into the work.” The artist’s use of hand-work together with appropriated and manufactured imagery works to tell more than one story at a time, and suggests “the loss of drawing,” or more accurately, how we do less and less with our hands.

The artist is from Slippery Rock, PA. “I was raised in an old farm house around Wick, PA which is an even smaller town. My parents were Baptist at the time, and I experienced a broad spectrum of religious ideas over my life which have helped me form the concepts in my current work. I’ve visited the Vatican, I’ve worked with a number of religious institutions around Pittsburgh, and I’ve even visited snake handlers in West Virginia. I was always interested in religious symbols from a variety of cultures, like Zuni line drawing, and other kinds of line work that symbolize life forces.”

In between finishing his Bachelor of Fine Arts at Slippery Rock University, and starting his Master of Fine Arts at West Virginia University, Forrest arranged a 6-month stay in Poland where he practiced lithographic printmaking and poster design. Lithography is a process where one etches a hand-drawn image onto a limestone surface with acid, and then prints from the bitten surface of the stone. Forrest’s interest in printmaking became a tool for exploring religious iconographies, and reflecting on his own religious background. “I went looking for resources that document supernatural experiences, from the present and past, and then I found some old photographs from a childhood trip to the zoo.” Forrest is working with exotic and native animals in an ongoing series of drawings. In one drawing we see the image of church with hand-written measurements on top of an old church. When I created the Totems, I wanted to incorporate the space into the work.”

The Congregation is on its last legs in a way, ” says Forrest. “There are fewer than 30 parishioners.” In another drawing we see a pelican feeding its own blood to her smaller town. My parents were Baptist at the time, and I experienced a broad spectrum of religious ideas over my life which have helped me form the concepts in my current work. I’ve visited the Vatican, I’ve worked with a number of religious institutions around Pittsburgh, and I’ve even visited snake handlers in West Virginia. I was always interested in religious symbols from a variety of cultures, like Zuni line drawing, and other kinds of line work that symbolize life forces.”

Matt Forrest works as a collaborative printer at Artists Image Resource (a non-profit artist-run print shop in Pittsburgh’s north side). Matt also teaches and works as a printmaking and metal tech at Carnegie Mellon University. For more information, please visit Forrest’s website at: http://www.matthew-forrest.com
Amara Geffen’s public sculpture and installation projects are tools for community and economic development that emphasize creative reuse, repurposing, and collaboration. Her work is enmeshed in the Meadville community, and helps to create a unique sense of place for all who live here. Geffen’s most visible work is Read Between the Signs (informally called, “the fence” by locals), a quirky, eye-catching roadside mural along Route 322 at the gateway to Meadville. The project re-uses discarded road signs, transforming them into a sculptural relief, to create colorful images based on drawings done by more than 1000 local school children. Images include regional landscape and street scenes, and wind-powered kinetic components. Geffen has been working with teams of students and community members to create the fence, and the project has grown over the last ten years to cover about half a mile. This sculptural fence greets visitors when they enter Meadville, and helps to foster a sense of pride and unique identity for our community.

Less visible, but perhaps more important from an ecological point of view, is Geffen’s work on the I-79 interchange in Meadville. The project, titled, In Praise of Land and Water, began in Geffen’s Art & The Environment class. Geffen worked with students to design aesthetic solutions for the problems of storm water run-off, erosion and pollution at Meadville’s entrance and exit ramps to the interstate. Beautifully arranged mounds of landfill and carefully chosen plantings of native species direct the flow of water coming off the cloverleafs. Instead of flooding the adjacent creek with polluted road-surface waste, run-off instead seeps through rain gardens before entering local waterways. “What’s in our water ends up in us,” Geffen says. “We think of storm water as waste water, but it’s part of our water cycle. The solutions we have engineered represent a pairing of handling water and improving the health of our environment.” This project received the Diamond Honor Award for excellence with water resources from the American Council of Engineering Company’s Pennsylvania Chapter.

The artist and her students are currently working on a project called, Blue Box Renaissance. This project complements Meadville’s Urban Art Trail, which has been evolving since the early 2000s. To date, a series of land-art projects, roadside sculptures, murals and streetscape designs have highlighted Mill Run and attracted people to the downtown area. For 8 Hour Projects, Geffen will be working with willing participants to give old newspaper vending machines a new exterior look. The boxes will retain a clear front window where people still can see the newspapers and purchase a copy. So far, most of the stands have been altered sculpturally in various themes by students in Art & Environment classes at Allegheny, and by summer interns with College’s Center for Economic and Environmental Development Arts & Environment Initiative. One of the boxes—featuring an abstract painting—was developed as a community collaboration at Second Saturday at the Meadville Market House. “This project seeks to make Meadville a sustainable community in which the arts and culture play a key role in community and economic development,” said Geffen. According to Geffen, the functional artwork celebrates the community, promotes citizen engagement, encourages reading and literacy, and complements an already dynamic Urban Art Trail that uses art to highlight Mill Run. The 11 new racks will be placed in designated downtown locations and, in many cases, will work as “markers” to the stream’s flow underneath the city streets.

Amara Geffen has exhibited widely and has received grants from the PA Council on the Arts and the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation’s Artists and Communities program for her collaborations that engage her students and artist colleagues with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and the greater Meadville community. Amara also serves as the director of the College’s Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED) and chair’s the Civic Engagement Council (CEC). Geffen teaches courses in sculpture and ceramics, “Art and the Environment,” and other classes at Allegheny College. For more information on CEED’s Arts & Environment projects please visit: http://ceed.allegheny.edu/A&EI/index.html

1Spicer, Mary. Time for a change at I-79 interchange, Meadville Tribune. March 6, 2010.
n. Sean Glover makes sculptures that examine the mutually affecting relationship between people and the evolution of technology. His work is an investigation of the histories and tensions between objects, materials, labor, and obsolescence. The economy of making his art is integral to his practice. Many of his artworks combine kinetics, sound, fresco painting, and phenomenology. One may imagine a mechanical engineer’s surreal, poetic dreams when viewing Sean’s work.

In, Silver Sounds¹, we see a vinyl LP sitting inside a rudimentary cardboard envelope. The cardboard unfolds to become an armature that holds the needle required to play the record. In this case, the “needle” is made of parts from an old ballpoint pen, and the record is turned when the gallery viewer manually spins the vinyl disc. Each individual viewer controls, to a certain extent, the volume and quality of the sound depending on how quickly or slowly one spins the record. “There is a transparency of materials and making that combine to create a magical experience,” Glover observes. The mechanism that makes the sound is apparent, and is easy to understand. One sees the needle and has an intuitive sense of how to affect it. The viewer has agency in the production of the experience, and the object is made from materials that one may find in a garbage can or recycling bin. This is quite different from the relatively expensive (unapparent) mp3 players on which we consume music in the 21st century.

Glover uses sound to create context and also to suggest layered surfaces. “I believe sound can affect one’s perception and understanding of space. Sound has agency in that way. I feel it can be revealing in the same way that glazing can coat an under-painting and provide a richness that would be very difficult to paint alla prima. The underpainting and glazed layers are separated temporally within the process, but act simultaneously to complete the painting. I think of sound as an auditory glazing material that is as integral to my sculptures as the physical objects. Together, they resonate within a space.” In Glover’s 2008 sculpture, Tympanic Observatory², a paper cone collects sound from a clock radio and focuses the sound through a bendy, plastic drinking straw. A ping-pong ball is connected to the end of the straw and it bobs up and down in a bowl of water. The piece is carefully lit so that sounds rippling through the water are cast as shadowy waves on the ceiling. Inasmuch as sound is shown to be physical compressions and waves, the eerie, static-edged, echoing sounds of broadcast music and half-understood dialogue between songs³ give one the impression that these are archeological artifacts awaiting interpretation.

n. Sean Glover is head of the fresco program at the Skowhegan artist residency program in Maine. He is currently showing in Rust Melt: New Pittsburgh Abstractions, curated by Elizabeth Mooney and Julie Leidner, and will be part of a group show called, SCALE, at Austin Peay University in Clarksville, TN. For more information, please visit Glover’s website at: http://www.nseanglover.com

¹ Silver Sounds was Glover’s submission to the This & That Show (Curated by Christine Wong Yap at Triple Base in San Francisco), where all artwork was to required to fit inside an 9” x 12” envelope.
² This was installed in the project room at Gallery Diet for the Here and Forever show in 2008.
³ In the online documentation of this piece, we hear a Spanish-Language radio station
Heather Hertel utilizes materials and energy through group-process art making. In her current work, Collaborative Performance Installation, Hertel organizes improvisational performances that bring together various artists (e.g., dancers, musicians, visual artists) to interact though paint and gesture in a pre-established space. Hertel writes, “A simple space is created to “set” a place for interaction and improvisation to occur. Each artist will respond to the senses being provided by the other artists, which creates a dialogue from one to another. The end result is a visual piece which resonates with the outcome of this interaction.”

Although Hertel organizes these performances, she also allows for discussion among all participants regarding the concept or vision of the piece. For example, in Time Space she worked with two professors of dance. Of this piece she writes, “Although I am not a trained dancer, I love the freedom and feeling of moving and making marks, then responding to what is happening with the other people in the space.” With the use of paint and their bodies, the artists leave evidence of motion within the space. Through examining this evidence, Hertel has become particularly interested in the concept of time. “The created gestures capture direct involvement with actualizing each moment. The work moves from recording to responding, which in turn reveals a different outcome and image.” Evidence of movement is recorded in the painted marks left behind by the dancers. For Hertel, these collaborative performances are about “spontaneous responses, inflections, actions and reactions with the medium, as well as with the other artists who are creating in the same space and time.”

Returning to traditional materials, Hertel responds to Collaborative Performance Installation by creating paintings with acrylic, oil crayons, and other materials such as tape, rubber cement, and ink collaged onto paper, to convey the spontaneity and movement of the performances. With long, sharp, gestural strokes of paint that are intertwined with short, quick brush marks, Hertel’s paintings effortlessly communicate the physical interactions that occurred. Hertel writes, “This is an investigation in improvisation, expression, and mark making that is informed by the senses. The movements, brushstrokes, and sounds come from a fluid free flow...to probe the marks on an emotional level rather than a ‘planned, thinking, analytical’ application.” The improvisational character of the performances clearly resonates in these paintings.

Heather Hertel is Assistant Professor of Painting at Slippery Rock University (SRU). She has participated in regional solo shows and national juried exhibits in Virginia, California, Wisconsin, New York, Florida and D.C. In 2007, Hertel organized a Northwestern Pennsylvania Artist Association (NPAA) Selected Artists exhibit at Lucky Gallery in Brooklyn, NY. She organized a collaborative drawing at SRU in 2008, gathered students/faculty to participate in the Sketchbook Project, a traveling exhibition out of Atlanta Art House, Atlanta, GA (2009), created a cross discipline collaborative working with Visual Arts & Dance students/faculty at SRU in 2009, and performed at the NPAA Nuts & Bolts opening with vocalist Katie Chriest and movement artist Lani Weissbach, Erie, PA (2009). For more information, please visit Hertel’s blog at: http://heatherhertel.blogspot.com
Michelle Illuminato and her audience commonly take on the roles of tourist, tour guide and local resident. Much of Illuminato’s work is rooted in social practice and driven by her inquiry of places and the people who live in them. In her current work, she is interested in bringing together groups of people to share an experience, allowing for open dialogue. She creates “structures” that encourage participants to learn about each other and to help each other see the complexity of what surrounds them. Illuminato writes, “Sometimes [the] structures are large events, tours, workshops and listening stations. Other times, I use sculpture or my camera as a way to reframe both the physical and conceptual subject at hand. In addition to social geography, my recent work has explored foraging, reading, and the tourist guide.”

Illuminato’s approach to creating these shared experiences for her audience is like the friendly neighbor who comes to your home with warm cookies to share while she tells you about the neighborhood. This encouragement to discuss and share was one of the concepts behind her 2006 project Guide/Vodic at Kontekst Galerija in Belgrade, Serbia. The project website explains, “moving beyond the canonical sites and narratives presented by traditional guidebooks, Michelle [Illuminato] and artist Kim Beck invited residents and visitors of Belgrade to create guidebook pages with illustrations of their personal landmarks and experiences in the city.” Several photocopies of these illustrations were hung in the gallery, and visitors were invited to choose pages to create their own guidebooks that were bound with covers by the artists. This project allowed for the community to participate in critique and to explore the places in which they live and work. Illuminato explains her concern in wanting to “avoid essentializing the area by giving a tour of local architecture, so not to just look at the highlights, or places that are considered the highs of local architecture, but also the mobile homes that are clad in logs, or the people who live off the land who came here in the 70s. I want to include it all in the same plane so as to not to draw attention to one thing.”

The tourist experience is not complete without the souvenir. Here, particular objects are given importance as they serve as evidence of the special moments people want to remember from their trip. Finding herself as a tourist in Paris, France during her residency at the Cité des Arts Internationale in 2008, Illuminato made Slip, a series of over 2500 black and white photographs taken of objects she admired while being a “flaneur” in the city and its museums. She writes, “As I took a closer look at these alluring objects they seemed to speak beyond the pre-determined frames of their museum tags and setting. Using my lens to capture a different perspective, I sought to ‘slip’ these objects from their contexts, hopefully allowing other stories to emerge.” In the end, the objects that were first found as souvenirs of Illuminato’s time in Paris enjoy a new context in a new collection.

Illuminato’s latest work Ruralscape is a study of “ruralness.” What is rural? What makes up rural? Understanding that these questions do not have only one answer, Illuminato has invited artists to live and work alongside residents in rural western New York. Illuminato explains, “Living in Allegany County, I’ve talked to people, taken photos, learned about local history, attended events, and documented these explorations through images, drawings, video and audio. Many of these adventures have become projects.” One of these, Seeing Double, is a series of 10 photos depicting an image of the rural landscape in stereoscopic. In seeing the same image side by side, the viewer is reminded that there is a past and a present and that rural space is often interrupted by modern technology and the consumption of its land.

In all of Illuminato’s projects, viewers are challenged to think about their own relationships with the places they inhabit, visit, encounter, and explore. When asked about her experience within the artworks and events she creates, Illuminato says, “From all of these interactions, I’ve learned that people speak about their lives in ways that are striking, often poetic, and when placed next to the words of their neighbors, provide us with great insight. It’s that insight and thoughtfulness about place that I seek to make available to a wider audience.”

Illuminato is Assistant Professor of Art at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, in Alfred, New York. She is the recipient of many awards and grants, among them the Key to the City of Aliquippa, and Best Event in Pennsylvania. She has exhibited nationally and internationally and recently completed residencies at Area Odeon in Monza, Italy, and the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, France. Other exhibitions include: Local Histories: The Ground We Walk On, Chapel Hill, NC, Wild Food Cook-Off, MK Gallery, Portland, Oregon, GUIDE/VODIC, Kontekst Galerija, Belgrade, Serbia, MIX: Musical Swap Meet, The Cube, Belgrade, Transit Art, PAT Bus Poster Project, Pittsburgh, Five plus, James Gallery, Pittsburgh, Junk is Back/Due Settemani, Ballabio, Italy, Paradise Gardens, Vogelfrei 6, Kunstentdeckungen in Privatgärten, Darmstadt, Germany, Living Statues/Statue Vivante, La Corte Arte Contemporanea, Florence, Italy, Live Video Karaoke, Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh. For more information, please visit Illuminato's website at: http://www.nextquestion.org
Jeremy LeClair is a New England-based artist who enjoys making his own records, much like his grandfather, who LeClair says would, “drill offset spindle holes in his records to make the music playback in strange ways.” Using sound, found objects and images, LeClair creates work that fulfills his interests in personally and socially inspired experimental and conceptual art. Open to endless possibilities, outcomes and perhaps failure, he is driven to make work that answers old questions while also posing new ones.

LeClair states, “I’m curious about the origins and evidences of experiential pleasure, and pleasure’s relationship to criticality.” His work, composed of layered physical material and sounds, is intently arranged to create an all-around sensory experience, and seeks to strike a physical and mental chord with the viewer. Often the arrangements of objects in his pieces appear to have enough in common to share the space, but just enough difference that the viewer is left wondering how they are related. Avoiding literal interpretations allows his viewers to be engaged in a worthwhile experience.

LeClair’s installation Disco Baby is inspired by time spent in nightclubs with his father spinning records and his mother working the light boards. He describes this piece as “an indeterminate composition/sound installation for 40 light-sensitive, modified AM/FM radios and micro-controlled disco ball. The radios are mounted on the wall and the disco ball hangs in the center. The sound of the room is highly mutable, according to the tuning of the radios and the speed/direction of the disco ball’s rotation (which is programmed with an arduino micro-controller). The radios only play when a spot of reflected light passes over their photocells. The secret weapon of the installation’s success is the plush silver carpet.” Although viewers appear to be agitated when immersed in this space, it is hard to deny the innovative mechanics of the individual components that make up the installation. LeClair wants the viewers to share in an environment that was familiar to him without giving all the answers away. “I like to give viewers an opportunity to perceive all layers, information, and angles present in the work; however, preserving the individual nature of experience is important to me, and too much information, or too literal an approach can inhibit the life an artwork takes on after I’ve made it.”

LeClair is not only interested in sharing autobiographical experiences with his audience, he is also concerned with addressing current societal issues. Aware of how the technological availability of listening material can affect what one listens to, LeClair created The Farmer, a piece inspired by the mythical tale of a farmer saving a wounded griffin’s life by hiding him away in a barn after he was hunted for sport by feudal lords. The griffin, after recovering and getting ready to depart, tells the farmer, “In the future, should you ever need me, speak to the wind.” In LeClair’s piece, an iPod is displayed with a burlap bag full of 50 pounds of sand. The sandbag is attached by a rope the iPod’s headphones, with one ear as the head and the other ear the body of a griffin. Because of the apparent weight and possible difficulty in using the iPod, a listener would most likely make careful choices about what s/he would listen to. By adding this obstacle, LeClair shows the viewer how the availability of the technology affects one’s listening decision. In the corner also stands a weather vane that plays flexdisc recordings of LeClair’s grandfather singing in French during WWII. According to LeClair, this piece “is also an autobiographical examination of my own origins of listening pleasure -- what is possibly a familial inheritance of sonic preference.”

Jeremy LeClair lives and works in Maine where he is Co-Director of BUOY Contemporary Art Gallery with Alex Mead. Currently, he runs a fledgling lathe-cut record label called VARIOUS ARTISTS, and is working on projects for writer Paul LeFarge and composer Marina Rosenfeld. He has exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2011 he exhibited in It’s For You-Conceptual Art and the Telephone at the Houstonian Museum of Art in Connecticut, and he showed in 2010 at the Dragon Festival in Asarp, Sweden. LeClair has also lectured about his work with records to the VES Department at Harvard. In 2009 he completed a residency at the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center in Nebraska City, Nebraska. For more information, please visit LeClair’s website at: http://jeremyleclair.com

© Jeremy LeClair, Baby Disco, 2009
Joe Meiser creates sculpture, installation, and performance art. In his studio practice, Meiser investigates the limited and often flawed nature of perception, the manner in which our bodies direct our experience of the world, and our human compulsion to create narratives. Meiser’s work explores how experience may be mis/understood by intellectual means. More pointedly, he shows that our ability to know the world is constrained by the limitations of the human mind. At the core of his artistic agenda is an attempt to understand the interplay between those things that are physical and those that are immaterial—existing only in our minds. “Our bodies exist in between those two realms,” says Meiser. “They are composed of physical material, but also intimately connected with our mental processes.” Another important concern for Meiser is his effort to come to terms with the unknown, particularly the uncanny mystery of what exists beyond life. Meiser expressed that “many of our questions about the true nature of things can’t be answered conclusively; and yet, humans have a fantastic tradition of explaining the unknown. These explanations can offer comfort, and can make it possible to be at ease with a world that might otherwise overwhelm us.”

Meiser thinks that language and cognition may play as big a role in obfuscating reality as they do in helping us to name and understand it, but of course, the artist is not the first to investigate this problem. Questions about what is real, and how we know what we know, were addressed by ancient thinkers like Plato in his Allegory of the Cave. Meiser referenced this allegory in his 2008 performance and installation, On Shadows and Realities at ROYGBIV Gallery. He constructed an irregular wooden geometric wall, and from inside the gallery one could see what appeared to be a solid structure. But from outside the gallery, looking in through the storefront windows, one saw that the wooden structure was cobbled together with boards crisscrossing and haphazardly holding the form together. The contrast of these two views was meant to exemplify the way that our experience might be simultaneously real and illusory, depending on one’s point of view. During the exhibition of On Shadows and Realities, Meiser sought a state of mental transcendence through physical exhaustion by continually lifting a set of bronze dumbbells. He periodically stopped lifting the weights to read Plato’s allegory to a parrot. “I was interested in the possibility that the parrot might repeat what I had read to it... and in that moment there would be uncertainty about the parrot’s full comprehension of the allegory, just like a person may act without fully understanding what he or she is saying and doing. We each attempt to form an accurate understanding of reality, and we’re able to create mental models that can help us navigate the world successfully, but in the end our models can never truly encapsulate the world in its full complexity, and so we end up seeing some things very well, while forming incredibly myopic ideas about other things.”

Meiser is interested in the possibility of moving beyond physical form to find an understanding of something deeper. In Transcendence Research, (2006) the artist combined endurance with a certain amount of asceticism to create a participatory performance experience. The artist fabricated a sensory deprivation tank in which he immersed himself for long periods of time—even staying in the tank for ten consecutive hours on one occasion. He also invited others to use the deprivation tank, and over thirty people participated in this project, each spending from one to two hours in the tank. Participants were interviewed after their sessions, and videotaped as they emerged from their time in the tank. “This piece helped me to crystallize one of my overarching artistic intentions of examining the relationship between the physical and the immaterial. In the tank, I was able to get away from the physical world by shutting out sound, light, and tactile sensation, but I realized through my experience that even in this isolated condition I couldn’t get away from my own thoughts. After being there for awhile, I started to yearn for sensual things and for contact with the physical world.” Through the project, he realized the problematic nature of viewing mind and body as separate entities, even though the two do seem to be quite different. He now acknowledges that he will never be able to successfully deny the physical aspects of his existence. Meiser explains that, “after this project, I became interested in finding transcendence through physical means. There is a precedent for this in some types of meditation and in yogic traditions.”

In a related piece, Mobile Transcendence Device, Meiser invites participants to consider the finite nature of their existence while seeking a state of transcendence. The device consists of a reliquary-like box that has been painstakingly embellished with plastic bones. The M.T.D., as Meiser calls it, controls a pair of goggles that project flashing lights onto the participant’s eyes in order to affect their brainwaves and encourage a shift to the theta state that is associated with the transcendent moments of deep meditation or prayer. To also direct their experience toward a contemplation of mortality, participants are buried in earth while they wear the goggles. “It’s an unsettling feeling to be buried under a pile of dirt, but it also feels comforting somehow, like being under a heavy blanket. The bones on the box and the experience of being buried makes people consider their mortality. I’ve found that a lot of people think it’s grim to focus on death, but I think considering mortality helps us appreciate what a wonderful opportunity we have as living creatures, and it makes us realize how important it is to make the most of our brief time on this planet.”

Joe Meiser is an Assistant Professor of Art in the Department of Art & Art History at Bucknell University. Upcoming solo exhibitions include Sentition at Box 13 ArtSpace in Houston, and an exhibition at the Samek Gallery in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, as well as a two-person show with Michael Arrigo at 1078 Gallery in Chico, California. For more information, please visit Meiser’s website at: http://www.joemeiser.com
Anna E. Mikolay is a painter and installation artist who uses color and pattern to examine how the brain processes new information and assimilates with previous experiences, as well as the role human perception plays in deciding what information reaches our consciousness. Our eyes and brains work together to form images based on pattern recognition. This recognition is learned as we grow from infancy, beginning with underdeveloped visual systems that cannot yet make sense of objects. But as we further examine the world, we begin to understand what is around us. In her artist’s statement Mikolay writes, “The deepest layers of my work acknowledge that body and mind remember everything from their first moment of existence. Early traumatic experiences produced coping mechanisms in me that included intensely seeing light, color, and patterns, and an appreciation for stillness. A recent journey of dismantling these early memories has provided me with insight into the intrinsic role art making has played through out my life. As I move forward and create new works, it will be with a layer of resolution to my past and a new found freedom that will inevitably surface in some way.”

In The Space Between series of minimalist red color field paintings, Mikolay, inspired by early dataentry computer boards, stimulates the viewer’s mind not only with a vivid shade of red, but also through the simple and rhythmic patterns created by the many small, white squares of the canvases. Mikolay consciously hung and arranged these 34 canvases at varying heights, encouraging the viewer’s eyes to move along the wall and consider what a split second in time looks like as the mind processes new information. Every instant one’s eyes blink, information goes beyond data processing and reaches a deeper part of the mind, one that is endless and without association, represented by the horizontally hung line of paintings.

This interest in creating an experience for the viewer is also apparent in Mikolay’s paper installation, Experiencing this Space and the Space Within. With fragile sheets of transparent paper, the artist creates an architectural structure that defines the space without interrupting it. Subtle interactions are created between the viewer and the work. For instance, when a viewer passes a large hanging composition of tissue paper, the paper moves in response to the viewer’s body and makes a crunching sound. The viewer is immediately aware of these changes, and his/her senses are awakened.

Mikolay is currently working on a large series of paintings that will be hung in a grid on a wall. Here Mikolay will create a “visual vibrational sound” on the canvases by painting vertical stripes of varying widths of grey, yellow and white. Through these patterns and colors, sound will be created without using any audio. Similar to the paintings in The Space Between, the repetition of pattern will create what Mikolay describes as a “vibrational pull of the color and subtle mark making interact[ing] with the field of color.”

Anna E. Mikolay recently completed a Flight School Fellowship at Pittsburgh Filmmakers in Partnership with Creative Capital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In October 2011 she will complete an Artist’s Residency at The New York Student Art League Vytlacil Campus in Sparkill, New York. Her solo show, The Space Between, was exhibited at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For more information, please visit Mikolay’s website at: http://www.annamikolay.com
Elizabeth Mooney is working on a new series paintings in her studios in Maine and Boston. Her work addresses issues of the “ecstatic” and “picturesque” landscape and our relationship to beauty. Several of the artist’s earlier works are strange drawing machines whose actions mediate between the artist and the product they produce. Mooney says, “I am interested in how technology, specifically the industrial revolution and the invention of trains, affected the way we see and experience nature... The machines were were a way for me to create moving paintings... Also, I am really interested in the history of abstraction and mark making and how that relates to landscape.”

Certainly, industrial transportation and products have changed not only the ways we see landscapes (from the windows of a car, train, or plane), but also how we represent landscapes (with photography, film, GPS, and Google Earth). These shifts have changed our relationship to “nature,” whatever that is. Distinctions that place us outside of nature are problematic because if we exist outside of nature, then what are we? And what is nature? These are some of the questions Mooney asks in her work.

In the piece, Vista Heights, Mooney created a sort of Rube Goldberg machine that looks like a mad scientist’s printing press. She was considering landscape tourism and the travel of tourists. “Often, you will see bus loads of people quickly unload. They are shown a ‘spectacular landscape,’ they are encouraged to photograph it, and then they get back on the bus and head off to the next location. With KaleidoScape, I wanted to create an artwork that would allow the viewer to be still while viewing a landscape, and allow segments of the landscape to move in front of the viewer.” There is a tension between the romantic, pictorial, and mechanistic qualities of a piece that is kept in motion with re-purposed toy motors. When asked if she is being critical of the consumption of landscapes, or the construction of scenic views as commodity, Mooney replied, “I am critical of both.....It was important for me not to hide any of the mechanical parts of the work. I really wanted the construction of the kinetic elements to be as prominent as the pictorial parts.”

Mooney currently has a large diptych in the Pittsburgh Biennial. The two wood panels show a fragmented roadside view with piles of stones. We are somehow looking over a bridge while also looking up from under the bridge at the same time. “It is a collection of many fragmented spaces jumbled together. I enjoying playing with the distortion of perspective and presenting viewers with multiple vantages of space.”

Elizabeth Mooney was Adjunct Faculty at Carnegie Mellon University and is the archivist at an artist residency in Skowhegan, Maine. In addition to Elizabeth’s work in the Pittsburgh Biennial (multiple locations), she recently co-curated an exhibition with fellow artist, Julie Leidner, at Fe Arts Gallery (Pittsburgh) titled Rust Melt: New Pittsburgh Abstractions, on view until mid-September. For more information, please visit Mooney’s website at: http://www.elizabethmooney.com
“Light as feather, stiff as a board, light as a feather, stiff as a board. I would not be surprised if this is sculptor Alex Mead’s mantra while he works. In Mead’s latest exhibition, *China Shop*, many of the pieces evoke a feeling of levitation, as if they are suspended by a gravity-defying force. Working with ideas that he believes “are not thoughts, but are just born”, Mead creates large multi-media sculptures that are made from cut lumber, plaster, glass, and fans. Ironically and effortlessly, Mead is able to make these heavy and dense materials appear weightless.

In *China Shop*, two large and imposing U-shaped wood structures stand, each made of about 100 blocks of wood, ranging from 3 to 6 inches long, cut from a 4 by 4. The blocks are stacked and held together only by the tension of strings or wires that stretch between the blocks. Each piece stands about 5 feet wide and 4 1/2 feet high. The pieces reflect Mead’s interest in creating structures that appear to be “hanging upward, relaxed and dynamic in their stasis. With no adhesives or screws holding the pieces together, the work becomes very precarious and vulnerable. These qualities are then tested when visitors enter the gallery space, thereby creating the possibility of the structures being knocked down. This happened to be the case at Mead’s opening. He recalls, “It shared the space with the viewer after it was knocked over, lying on the floor like a dead body.” Once the first piece went down, visitors were curious about the second, challenging gallery etiquette by touching it and causing it, too, to fall apart. Although this was not Mead’s initial intention, he welcomed it. “When it went down and there was a loud crash, I thought at that moment, the piece had all the power.”

In another corner of the exhibition was a worn, rusted, white claw-foot bathtub filled to the brim with water. Several glass vases were completely and partially submerged in the bathwater, causing other glassware to be forced upwards, to float. Here, Mead highlighted how water can be dynamic. Through these mixed-media assemblages, he shows a strong sensitivity to his materials, and he works to understand and challenge their capabilities. What results is a true collaboration between the artist, the viewers, and the artworks themselves. Mead is open to listening to what the works have to say back to him, and he reacts accordingly.

In *China Shop*, there were also small, delicate plaster sculptures of stacked discs. Mead makes these sculptures by mixing and pouring a small plaster puddle in the middle of a wood frame with a plastic sheet stretched over it. This process is then repeated by rotating the piece and adding more discs of plaster, thereby embedding the previous plaster disc into the newly poured plaster puddle. In the gallery space, the plaster sculptures were displayed on the wood and plastic tables that were used to create them. Through the repetition and inclusion of the materials used to create these pieces, Mead emphasized process, and showed evidence of the physicality involved.

Mead allows his pieces to take on a life of their own, and to suggest their own future iterations: more wood could be added; more glass could float; more plaster could be poured. This talking back and forth between the artist and the artworks is one of the defining characteristics of Mead’s work. Alex Mead graduated from Allegheny College with a B.A. in Studio Art in 2001. He is co-director of BOUY Gallery in Kittery, Maine, where he currently lives. BOUY Gallery is committed to bringing thought-provoking contemporary art and music to its tiny nook on the Maine coast. For more information, visit BOUY’s website at: http://buoygallery.org