

An interview with Harrell Fletcher

Merging art, functionality and education

Interview by Nic Paget-Clarke
Whitesburg, Kentucky



Posing among re-cycled household appliances: Mike Gover, Harrell Fletcher, Vincent Thomas, John Malpede, two community members and Eloise de Leon. Photo by Nic Paget-Clarke.

The following interview with Harrell Fletcher is part of a series of interviews with some of the members of a group of 25 artists from around the U.S. and Canada who went to Kentucky and Virginia to participate in the initial stages of a multi-year, multi-site community art project sponsored by the American Festival Project. The American Festival Project is based in Whitesburg, Kentucky with Appalshop, a regional community arts center.

Making my own gallery

Harrell Fletcher: I'm Harrell Fletcher from the Bay Area in California. Currently, I'm living in Minnesota in St. Paul working on a project for about five months.

In Motion Magazine: What do you do in the community?

Harrell Fletcher: This is always a tough thing for me to try to describe in words. I do a lot better with my two carousels of slides.

I have to go back a ways to when I was in graduate school about seven years ago at California College of Arts and Crafts. I got frustrated with what I felt was an inaccessibility between the art that was being shown and the general population. I was having difficulty myself relating to a lot of things I was seeing in galleries and museums. I wanted to address that by figuring out a system that people who didn't have art backgrounds could relate to and interact with contemporary art.

The first thing I did was start my own library inside of the school's library because I felt like their collection of books wasn't adequate. It was a little tiny library built inside of the CCAC library. I had library hours and I would check books out to people that the library didn't have. I created a system in which, sort of like a grade school model, you had to write your name in the back of the book when you checked it out. That way you could see everybody else's name who had checked out that book and you could go over and say, "Oh, Nic, I see that you checked out dadada. What did you think of that book?" To try to create a dialogue around the books.

Anyway, I went from doing that, making my own library, to making my own gallery. I got a donated space that was just down the street from the school. About a half a block from where I lived.

It was a retail commercial space that was for rent. I did this project with another grad student, Jon Rubin. We just contacted the owners and asked them if they would donate the space for us to do a show. They said, "Fine". We were left with, "Ok, now what is the show going to be?"

Jon and I both had these frustrations about the lack of connection between people and art and wanted to create something which that particular community would be able to relate to. We decided to walk around a lot and meet as many people as we could. From doing that we wound up encountering this guy who owned a rug store across the street from our new gallery space. He was a fascinating character who lived in the area his entire life. His family was from Armenia. He had a whole history. He spoke about the Turkish atrocity. He talked about his life there in that community. How things had changed. How there had been a light rail system that he used to hop on when he was a kid and take to San Francisco that wasn't there any more.

He showed us photographs of his bowling league. We looked at the backgrounds of the pictures of the bowlers and there were signs from businesses. We said, "What are these businesses?" "Oh, those are all gone now they used to sponsor the leagues." We realized that gentrification had occurred in the neighborhood.

Through the process of talking, instead of starting with an issue, we worked with this person and then allowed him to discuss his own life, and these various issues came to the surface. We wound up doing a show just about this one guy, Albert Keshesian.

We didn't have any money for making anything so we just relocated things from his store. It was a big store that people thought was closed. We moved his things into our gallery and made them more visible. We created what looked like an art show but really was just his own personal possessions re-configured, with text.

We found out all these interesting things. He collected snap shots, Polaroid's of all the rugs that he worked on. He not only sold rugs but he repaired rugs. He had the last name of the person who owned it written on the bottom. We'd pick up a picture and say, "This one says Smith on it." And he'd say, "Oh right, that was a kalim with a coffee stain in the right hand corner. I got that stain out." Then he'd start telling us about the family. The husband is a doctor and the wife does this and the kids do this. He knew about the community through their rugs. It was this weird system to learn about that community.

We did that show and it went over well. The opening became an interesting thing too because it combined his group of friends with our groups of friends. Art students with local community. He was into horse racing and his racing crony friends came. Everyone was interacting, having a good time. The owners of the building came and we asked them at that point if we could continue using that space as a gallery. They said, "Ok" we could keep it until they rented it. That wound up being about a year and a half. It ended about the time I ended graduate school.

We did ten different projects all about that neighborhood. Initially we were trying to get other people to do projects about that neighborhood too but we couldn't get any one to. They were all

interested in making their own studio based art. We wound up doing everything for all the shows: setting them up, writing press releases, everything.

Through that we began to work with a local middle school and do projects with kids there. We became artists-in-residence at the school through a California Arts Council residency grant. Once again, we did things that were very specific to that school. It was a magnet school and students came from all parts of Oakland. This neighborhood was getting gentrified. New residents weren't happy that the school was there. So, we did a piece on the outside of the building that said this school has been here since 1913—giving precedence to the school. That piece is still there. It has been there for five years.

The school had been re-done in the '70s because of earthquake retrofit. It didn't look like an old building. With the students, we did a painting on the outside of this new building of what it had looked like in 1913. We did several pieces like that to claim that neighborhood for the students and give them a sense of ownership. All the stores had signs up that said, "No students allowed." Or, "One student at a time".

Landscape calendars and coffee



Mike Gover, director of the Whitesburg recycling center. Photo by Nic Paget-Clarke.

From there, I started doing other public art projects. Applying for public art commissions in San Francisco and also doing shows in other places. Using that same theory from the first project.

We did a show at the Richmond Art Center where [Stephanie \(Juno\)](#) works. That place is really interesting. It has a gallery and it's surrounded by city offices. The health and human services and police departments, the mayor's office, the library. We did a show about the people who work in those places, about 300 office workers. Largely, we were relocating things from their cubicle spaces into this gallery space. There were stories that went along with them. It was a lot about how people escape

from their everyday environment through family photographs, landscape calendars and coffee. It brought all the people in to see the show with the idea of hoping that they would get a little more accustomed to coming and seeing the work in the gallery.

From there I wound up doing shows all over the Bay Area. They were always very site-specific and changing as far as media. They dealt with whatever the resources were at hand. Sometimes they were not just about people but about places. Looking at environments.

One of the last pieces I did was at the de Young museum in San Francisco. It was for a show about looking at the museum itself and generating work from that.

They have a turtle pond in front of the museum that everyone has to walk by to get in. It looks like a nothing kind of pond with water lilies in it. We decided to do an underwater video. In a really klunky way, we put on waders, got an aquarium, put a video camera in the aquarium, submerged it part way and walked around. The images that were shot that way wound up looking beautiful. We projected them as three big video projections inside the museum. It felt like you had entered inside the water. It was like uncovering the beauty of a place that's already there in

the same way that we'd done with people. We were uncovering the inherent culture that exists within a place. Making that visible to people. Valuing what is already there, rather than bringing something new in and saying, "This is what art is," or "This is what culture is. This is what's important."

Instead, we were very subtly pointing to things and putting and highlighting various aspects of a community or place or person. Several projects I have done have been about one individual who is local to the place where the show is going to be. Redefining what a celebrity might be. Taking control of that system.

What people are already doing that might be art

In Motion Magazine: Many of your projects are about the community and they are in the community. Do the community members become involved in the actual development of them?

Harrell Fletcher: Yes, in varying ways. A lot of times what I have tried to do is, rather than come in and say, "Ok community, I'll teach you how to do something. This is art and I'll teach you how to do it," instead, what I'm more interested in is what people are already doing that might be art.

Rather than having to get them to do something new, that they haven't done before, I'm just saying "Ok, this is something that you are doing, or this is something that is already innate to you," and they become involved in that way.

For instance, the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco commissioned me to do a piece with Jon Rubin and what we decided to do was, when people came through the door and bought their ticket, we then asked them if we could see the photographs they kept in their wallets. Within about six hours we re-photographed about 150 photographs that people kept in their wallets. They were photos of dogs and kids, girlfriends. Some really amazing vernacular photography. We picked ten of those and blew them up pretty big—three by four feet. We framed them, and they went in to the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

Visitors would come in looking for art but realize that it was actually already there on them. They were the carriers of the art themselves. We created a reciprocal relationship between what is normally considered the viewing audience and what is considered the artist. It sometimes is very subtle. It's not making anyone do anything all that different than what they would do normally by showing someone a picture of their grandchild.

In Motion Magazine: What were their responses?

Harrell Fletcher: The piece is going up in July so it hasn't been seen yet, but they were really excited about participating in it. Each of them gave their piece a title—just through naming it. "Sam's dog Spot." It created a relationship between the owner of the picture and the person or thing that was in that picture and that became the title of each piece. I don't know exactly the response but based on other pieces that have been like that people are generally thrilled. I've never had a participant in any project I've worked on that hasn't been thrilled with the outcome of it.

A shift in how you understand what is important

In Motion Magazine: Did they say what thrilled them?

Harrell Fletcher: Having something valued. In what ever context, often people say, “Oh, you don’t want to hear my story.” Or “I don’t have anything to offer.” But once you push them a little bit, and show them that you really are interested, most everybody has a story to tell, values certain things, wants to share certain things. If somebody really didn’t they wouldn’t have to. Nobody was forcing anybody to participate in any of the projects I’ve done.

I worked with a guy who had started a garden in an apartment courtyard. We did an entire show about him, his garden and his life based off of working with him in his garden. We learned about how his Italian neighborhood was destroyed by a freeway going in. It was the first time that anybody really paid any attention to him. He and the community around him were thrilled that we did the show, and that he was appreciated in this way. He wound up dying not long after that.

Often when you go to a community and say, “I’m going to do something about this place”, people will say “You should do it about the mayor.” “You should do it about this person who is famous and who came from here.” And I’ll say, “No. I want to do it about regular people. Those people are important too.” There will be this reluctance at first, but then they will be excited. It’s a shift in how you understand what is important or what history is. What an important person in the community is. It’s trying to flip a lot of those things on their heads and value everyday things. Using things like a museum context, or gallery context, or media, inherently adds that to it. Making a movie about somebody. People are used to movies being made about famous people. It’s reversing that. It’s always been pretty positive.

Merge art, functionality and education

In Motion Magazine: I don’t know what you knew about what you were coming to ...

Harrell Fletcher: Not much.

In Motion Magazine: But what did you think you were bringing to what you didn’t know you were coming to.

Harrell Fletcher: In all the situations I go in to, I go in with the idea that I’m going to be learning. This week has been great because, as Ren (Smith) said, yesterday, it’s been like a roving classroom. I like that idea, that we are a group of students going around getting educated by various teachers who know about aspects of this community. For me, now, I’m trying to figure out what kind of structure I can bring in to highlight what is already here.

I didn’t know at all what I was going to do coming in to it. But I’ve had some ideas since then in varying degrees of me doing something alone or collaborating.

The video letter that I got was from Mike Gover. He’s interested in the recycling center which I think is great and he already is an artist as other people have pointed out. Creating pieces already. I’m wondering how I could best help that out. I don’t really think it is by making any “art” for that place. Instead I think if I was going to work for him it would be more along the lines of trying to create an informational package that could be sent out for funding sources. He’s already got the ideas. He just needs the money to do them. His ideas merge art, functionality and education. Now they just need to happen.

I've never had any definition as to what art is or what my art is. Back in graduate school, what I was considering my art was changing policies at the school. So it seems like a completely appropriate thing for me to come in to help him put together some kind of interesting packet that could help get him funding to do his own projects.

Also, I have become interested in a lot of the different people I've met and the places I've seen. I'm thinking maybe it would be nice to make a documentary about my experiences but maybe it would be shown in a different context. Like at night projected onto a building or being played in the post office, or something like that.

Then, John ([Malpede](#)) and I have had some discussions about the hardware store and the woman we met there. Maybe doing something that would involve her. It's been great. I'm trying to figure out what exactly to do and what the structure would be. What the support system would be to get these things to happen.



Cans at the Whitesburg recycling center. Photo by Nic Paget-Clarke.

Allowing voices to become more audible

In Motion Magazine: What have you been doing? What are you learning?

Harrell Fletcher: There have been both the scheduled stops and the un-scheduled stops. We've gone around and met people and learned about whatever their interest was, whether it was recycling and environmental issues with Mike or straight pipe water systems ...

In Motion Magazine: What's a straight pipe water system?

Harrell Fletcher: When the plumbing system goes straight from a toilet to the river or to a stream without any kind of septic in between.

That was one thing I didn't know. I was hoping, coming here, that I would be able to do a lot of swimming. When you look around you see all these creeks and they look really appealing. But everyone is saying, not only don't swim there, don't even touch it. It's pretty devastating to real-

ize that in a place that is so beautiful, all the foliage, the mountains, the creeks -- it's all in a very fragile contaminated state. It's a real sad thing.

I don't know exactly what we as artists are going to be able to do about that—getting on to your other question. We asked the Gishes, the people who run the newspaper in Whitesburg, what they thought about how art could contribute, and they said that they didn't think that it could. Maybe thinking traditionally about what art is maybe it wouldn't. Maybe we need to come up with a different way of working.

Of course, on the other hand, I fear dilettantism. I don't want to pretend that I'm some sort of scientist or politician that would be able to make some kind of change or know what the change should be—because I don't really. I don't know if that can be my role. More, what I'm capable of doing is allowing voices that are already here to become more audible. If that's what they want to say then that's what they will say. I'm not going to determine issues and then find the sound bites to fit into that. That's not the way that I work or the thing that I find interesting or enjoyable to do. I have difficulty thinking, "Let's try to tackle this issue and as artists fix this thing". I don't know if that's really the way that I can function.

In Motion Magazine: How did you relate to the person you met in the store? What was the context for that meeting?

Harrell Fletcher: We just wandered in there because we walked by. This was an informal, unscheduled stop. We were on our way to another place. John and I walked by and looked in and saw these faded safety orange vests and thought, "What is this place?" It looks like a store that has gone out of business. But when we walked by the door it said, "Open".

We walked in and in the back of the store was this older woman sitting there, reading, not really paying any attention to us. We walked up and said, "Hello". She turned around and introduced herself and started talking and asking us who we were and where we came from. It seemed like we had been the only visitors who had come through there in a long time.

She's been in the process, as she says, of going out of business for the last five years. She's not buying any new stock. She's just selling things off that are in the store. It's pretty depleted. But there's all these strange little products that are still around on the shelves. It's all dusty and faded. Her husband died a few years ago and she had owned the store with him for fifty-nine years. It's her place. We found her really fascinating and endearing and witty. She was able to do some of the things I've been talking about. In telling the story of her own life, various other issues come up. She was talking about welfare checks and things like that. She seems like a really interesting person to make more visible. She had been a very prominent part of the community but at this time is getting more and more forgotten.

Since our first visit, we have gone back two more times. Sometimes the sign will say, "Out to lunch". Sometimes it's open and sometimes it's closed. Whenever we wander by and it's open we step in again and have another conversation.

Risking their lives

In Motion Magazine: So this person and Mike, the various people that you met, there was no separation between them and the community? As far as you could tell, this was the community. What did you think was the relationship between them and the rest of the town?



A coal tippie in eastern Kentucky. Photo by Nic Paquet-Clarke.

Harrell Fletcher: That is a little hard to distinguish since we have mostly been lined up with certain individuals to talk to. I don't really know how representative they are of the rest of the community. We've met with outstanding, amazing people that seem as unlikely to be here as Appalshop does.

It is an amazing and great thing that Appalshop is here and doing all the things that they are doing. And then to find Carol Smith, the county judge who is this radical grassroots politician. It's amazing to find Mike and some of the political activists that we have met as well. It's great that they're here but I don't know how representative they are of the rest of the population. I've only met others when we step into a hardware store or go to a tire store and talk to people. Or meet somebody in a restaurant.

In Motion Magazine: So why do you think it's amazing?

Harrell Fletcher: That they are here?

In Motion Magazine: Yes.

Harrell Fletcher: They are engaged with the community and feel responsible for it, in some ways almost risking their lives. Some of these activists and politicians have had death threats because of what they are doing in attempting to create change, having to do with strip mining, water issues. Not that I had any pre-conceived idea of what was going to be here, but more based on my experience of people everywhere, there is a lot of apathy. Partly, I'm so amazed by how lacking in apathy so many people are here. They really are engaged in taking action. In running for office. Putting together a protest. Having a newspaper that puts out views that are opposed to the coal companies.

In Motion Magazine: Do you think that's because the problems are so severe?

Harrell Fletcher: I don't really know what the cause of it is. I like to feel in a hopeful way that this isn't unique and that I have in the cities experienced such a vast population that it's harder to get to those individuals who are less apathetic. Of course, I've definitely encountered amazing people in the cities too, but that's within a really large population. Here it seems more concentrated somehow.

In Motion Magazine: Looking at the cities and rural areas, have you noticed any difference in the way art is perceived or done, or is that just a silly difference?

Harrell Fletcher: Having not actually produced anything here yet I don't exactly know what the difference is going to be between here and a city where I have produced things in the past. So far, people have been really open to talking and potentially working on things. But I've found that most places where I've gone.

Vincent (Thomas) did a dance workshop with kids ranging from seven years old to eighteen years old and I was happily surprised at how willing they were to start dancing, to do dance movements. I've worked with middle school students in Oakland and I think they wouldn't have been as open to doing that. I'm not exactly sure why. But I've heard that before, about working in rural communities, as opposed to working in urban ones. The kids are much more open to doing stuff. There's not so much fear of not being cool. That's a great thing to encounter.

As for funding structures, for the first four or five years outside of graduate school I didn't do any projects in San Francisco. I did them all in the outlying areas. They were more like suburbs that were on the one hand lacking art activities, but on the other hand had funding available. There would be a regional gallery and that gallery was much better funded than alternate spaces in San Francisco so I could go there and do a project and get decent funding to do it. It was like a strategy, although, of course, I was also interested in working with people outside of that urban area anyway. As much as going to a lower economic urban area and saying these people need representation and need art activities, I think there's a lot of people in suburban areas and in office buildings that need that too and are generally overlooked because they are not considered the right population to work with.

This place probably falls under the "right population to work with" so it probably does have access to funding sources although from a different point of view. But it's not necessarily fine art, whatever that's supposed to mean, or commercial art, but more community-based art projects. Which is the same thing that happens to lower economic communities in urban areas too. I always play in between those two things and try to not make any distinctions so that I'll do a piece in a museum and it will still be working with community, and I'll do a piece in a community that doesn't look like typical community art. It doesn't fall into the structures of community art of being a mural or being whatever that might be more typically thought of as community art. I'm interested in bridging all those things anyway.

A sense, a vocabulary of possibilities

In Motion Magazine: Have you learned anything in talking to the local folks about what's art got to do with it?

Harrell Fletcher: I've asked that a few different times and largely people that I've encountered have been open but a little bit mystified as to what exactly that's going to be.

Sometimes, they will have some very specific idea of, "It would be great if you guys could do a mural" or something like that. And the same goes with the artists, we are not quite sure what it has to do with this, at this point, or how we are going to make it make sense.

If I had a criticism of the way that this week has gone, it is we should have started the week by showing the work we've already done. Not only to the other artists but to the community so they would have a sense, a vocabulary, of what possibilities might be outside of more typical things like murals. We've come in and been educated by the community. But, it could have been an opportunity to share what we've already done and potentially educate them about the possibilities for this community, based on the things that we have done in the past. I think that

was a missed opportunity. It's also been hard when everyone keeps asking what I do, and I have to keep trying to explain it with words. If I'd just had that slide show in the beginning.

In Motion Magazine: So what have you thought about the process? You mentioned that when you got here you really didn't know what you were doing. As it developed, how did you figure out what you were doing? Or did you?

Harrell Fletcher: I figured out that there wasn't a lot of structure and gave up thinking that there might be. Which is fine, I'm just used to working with some outline of what I'm going to do. There's going to be a show and it's going to be in this space. There's going to be a public art project. It's got this budget, and it needs to be in this area. Something. Here it's so wide open.

On the one hand, it's great and once I realized that it's been enjoyable to think of things. On the other hand, I don't want to waste my time thinking of things that are unrealistic, and since I don't know what is realistic I prevent myself from thinking about what is possible just because I don't know what is not possible. Maybe there is nothing that is not possible. Maybe that's what the point of the whole thing is.

I'm dealing with the reality of past experiences and knowing that there are limits to things and budgets and scheduling and resources. Generally, my first questions are about those things because that helps me imagine what the capacity of the thing is that I'm going to do. Although it's been really fun and I have no regrets about the week, it's been great, enjoyable and informative—as far as becoming more productive at some point I need a certain amount of structure imposed.

I will come up with some ideas and present those and see if they are possible and we will go from there.

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