



Okay let's begin. I hope this will be as informal as spinning some sailor yarns.

Well you certainly know with me it will be informal. I am not somebody who reeks of formality and stiffness.

Is that your philosophy as the Dean?

Well, it is how I like to act in general. It is not how people usually behave when they are in complex positions with a lot of responsibility because you can get yourself in a lot of trouble.

Have you gotten into trouble?

I have been lucky so far and my big mouth hasn't gotten me into too much trouble. When I took the job I had to think about what it would involve and it immediately became clear that the safe thing to do was to never make any commitment to anything. If I acted like that, it would be easier to stay out of trouble and blame someone else for almost everything. But I think that that is a \_\_\_\_\_ way to behave. Oh by the way, I trust that you will purge any bad language, can I trust you to do that?

Of course.

I would like you to. That way I can relax. So when I became the Dean I just decided to wing it and

try to be open and clear and of course I got into trouble. You have to keep your eyes on the prize and figure out what it is that you want. And what I want is to make the school healthy and innovative and good for the students. Often I have to be quite devious to get all that.

Do you have to be devious because of the position the School of Art holds in the rest of the University?

No. No, devious is too strong a word. I shouldn't have used it. No, it is just these are the practical realities of the world. When I was young I would say just what I believed and now I realize that that approach often did not help me get what I thought was most important. (Laughter) For example all the stuff we talked about last year regarding unionization and all of that, I could have easily chosen not to talk about it, that would have been much safer and easier and everyone could have gotten pissed off. And there is always the chance that these things will die out. It seemed to me that the best approach was to try and talk directly about the issue, but I had to be really

clear to the students about the difference between my opinion and the position of the Dean. It is hard facing these issues because I am a child of the sixties and in the sixties we thought everything was broken and we should fix it. Well now I still feel that everything is broken and we should fix it but boy, not the way I thought back then.

Chip, you and I had a conversation once where in the course of a far ranging inquiry about why we make art you professed to be a very romantic person. What is your source of inspiration as an artist?

Well I am sure I use the word romantic without fully understanding its many connotations, but I do believe that art can move people. As an artist I am interested in my own feelings because I get excited when I make something and I think it is good—and I realize that this is very, very self-centered. But it seems to me it is only of value if it has some capacity to make that impact on the person who looks at it or uses it. It is very sentimental

Do you ever get that feeling as the Dean?

Yes I couldn't do it if I didn't.

Is it important that the students

know that their Dean is an artist?

Of course! Think of what it would be like if the person running the school wasn't an artist. As an artist I am trying desperately to get that intransigent stuff of the physical world to turn into something, and what I'm trying to do here is to get a bunch of people to do the things that best serves the goal....

Which is to get that intransigent stuff out of their own heads.

But that is not my problem. My problem it to make sure that the students get what they pay for, to get the faculty to do what we are paying them for. So really my job is about human relationships.

Do you find that this job influences your art at all?

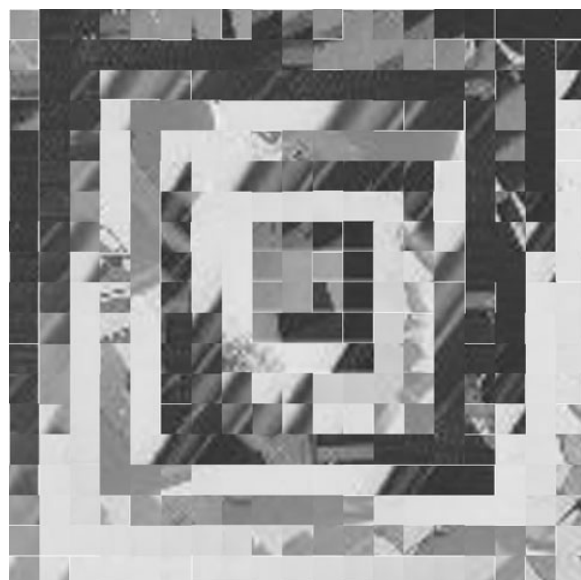
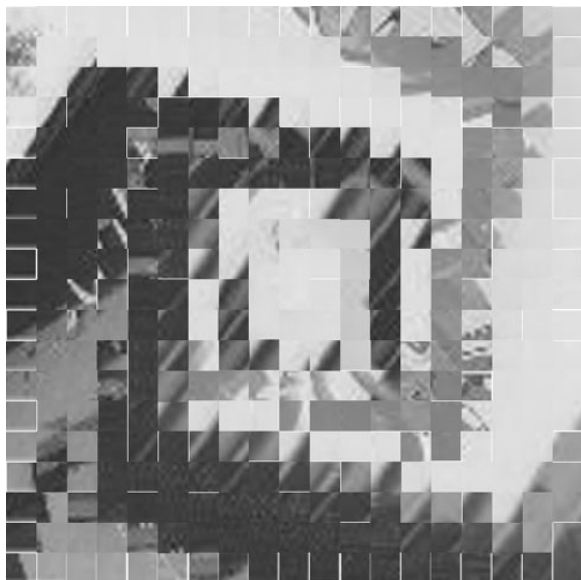
Yeah, it keeps me from doing it! I just haven't been able to devote the time to it that I want. I am now in year seven as Dean and I am starting to envision how I can be an artist again. It's not that the job is so onerous when it comes to time, but it dominates your life. I wake up in the middle of the night and think, 'What I am going to do? What am I going to do about sculpture?' No I am being facetious.

A lot of ink is spilled about what art education looks like but you are talking about nuts and bolts.

Yeah, I have not worried about



I also think that all the intellectual stuff about art is so boring I can't stand it. It just bores me to death. I call it art-speak and think it is the most turgid, intellectually stupid stuff I have ever read.





Adam Helms M.F.A.'04  
*Assasination*, graphite on paper, 2002

I think people should come to this particular school not to make finished professional looking work but to prepare for a lifetime of being artists.

I think the activity of the mind and body doing something physical is much more complicated than the mind doing something in isolation and that belief on my part makes me extremely skeptical of ideas. If somebody has an idea I would like to see the physical manifestation of that idea rather than hear about it.

what art education looks like. I feel like if I get the right people here they will figure it out. If I got upset about things it would be terrible! It is not about me, it is about getting this group of people who all work hard to function at their best. So I don't worry about the structure of art education because the faculty is coming to me and telling me what to do. Now they are saying that maybe the way the school is set up isn't right—maybe we should be more interdisciplinary. So I am confronting the interdisciplinary issue now. Increasing interdisciplinary dialogue is good but it seems more of a structural question. It does not seem that the School of Art has a philosophy of education. There used to be one. The School of Art used to believe that it was about art based on observation. It really was a deeply held belief

at the School and it has been gradually disappearing. As we move away from that a lot of people will be upset.

To take a personal example I feel like that in the photo department the philosophy is really arbitrary since it is so dependent on the panel. The philosophy is whoever is on the panel reviewing student work.

That is right and I would argue that this is the best approach. I don't think the institution should have some dogma. Art is changing all the time so it is the responsibility of the Deans of the various departments to bring in people that best reflect the current philosophy.

What I find so unnerving is that the students and the School have to put a tremendous amount of trust in people that might be having a bad day.

That is true but what do you do

otherwise? Lay out a set of rules and really screw it up? You have to have faith in the people and try to solve it if it is going bad. This is a really imperfect system. The crits are imperfect. Faculty go on leave and aren't even around. And then somebody will have a really bad year. I don't know of a better way to do it.

Well, on a more specific note, at least in photo it becomes very product oriented and detached from the process. Since we show work every five weeks it becomes like a show and there is very little evidence of the process.

Yes, I understand. That in my mind is unfortunate. But the students are as responsible for this emphasis on finished work as the faculty. I think students have to say, 'Would you talk about this?' Or put up a wall of eighty rough proofs and say, 'Talk about this!' It is risky to be vulnerable

like this, and if you encounter a faculty member with a strong personality and enter into a pissing contest the student usually loses emotionally.

Well that kind of pressure is part and parcel of this being Yale. Isn't there just a certain level that students feel they must attain while here?

Well, I never thought that that aspect of Yale College ran over into the School of Art, maybe it does.

It cuts both ways because there is the distance that you are talking about Kate but you also get a high level of professionalism.

I am sorry if that is the case at our school. I think people should come to this particular school not to make finished professional looking work but to prepare for a lifetime of being artists.

Do you have an approach towards dealing with this lack of trust?

No, I don't know how you solve that. Artists get kicked in the teeth by others all the time and you know when it happens here it is easier to deal with than when you are older. That can be really devastating. It is too bad if the structure of the critique in the School leads people to avoid confrontation, because that is what we're doing here. Although it is hard to encourage people to want to get beat up, criticism is a good thing.

Chip, you were quoted in an article about art education in *The New Yorker* last April where you said conceptual art was easy and you wanted the program at Yale to emphasize more making.

I think I probably believe that. Of course I get in terrible hot water. I think I believe that activity of the mind is much easier to carry out than the activity of the mind addressed at altering the physical world. I think the activity of the mind and body doing something physical is much more complicated than the mind doing something in isolation and that belief on my part makes me extremely skeptical of ideas. If somebody has an idea I would like to see the physical manifestation of that idea rather than hear about it.

Does making it physical mean it is more accessible?

Yes, it is accessible and...I believe everybody walking down the street is Albert Einstein, that they have their own particular thing in there. Einstein was able to get it out in a form, 'Here it is,' and afterwards it can be physically tested and measured. My second belief is that the older I get the more astonished I am at the human being's capacity to be self-delusional. And this right away makes me more skeptical about mental activity. I just think that people see things the way that suits them best. One of the ways that this has come into play is in crits, where there is a huge discrepancy between what the artist sees and what the audience sees. The



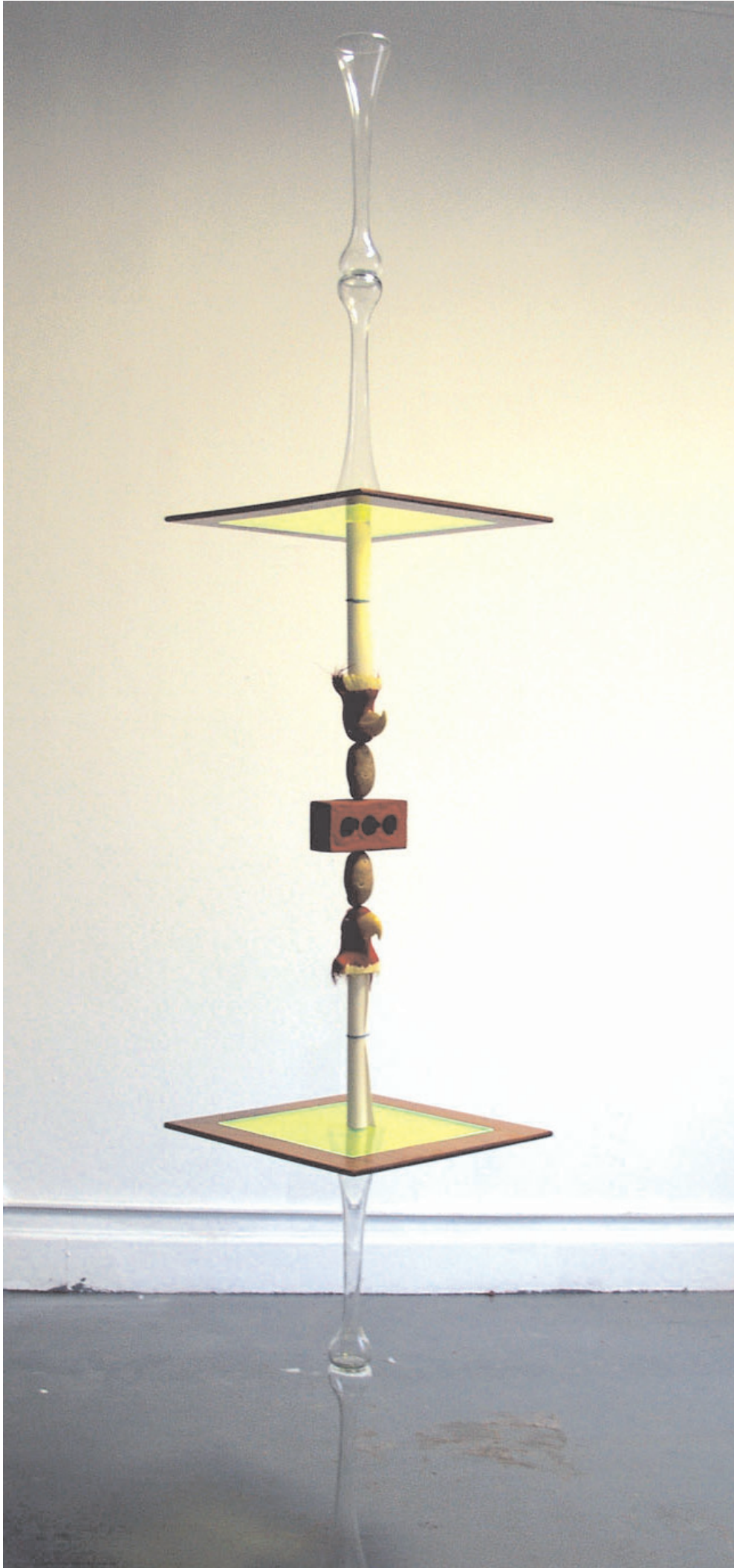
Aaron Young M.F.A. '04  
*Day Labor*, video stills, 2001

thing on the wall will never be the same for the artist as for the viewer but the better the artist the more precise the communication. And the better we get the more the thing in the mind is enriched by the process of being made into the thing on the wall. Hey now that is a very good sentence! Look, I don't want to take the top off of your head, it would scare me. So instead let me see the thing that you make that gives me physical evidence of what is there.

I also think that all the intellectual stuff about art is so boring I can't stand it. It just bores me to death. I call it art-speak and think it is the most turgid, intellectually stupid stuff I have ever read. Not all of it but a lot of it.

That seems to implicate the relationship between art and art schools, since a lot of the kind of theory you are talking about is born from these academic environments where art is taught. Well this is a very difficult point. You could ask the question whether there has ever been any great art made by anybody who holds an M.F.A. in art. You could almost ask that question.

You asked that question in last year's commencement address, to the chagrin of all the parents! (Laughter) This is how I get in trouble. But you know you could ask this question and I think the answer is that art in its old terms didn't need formal education. But art is changing and it has always changed and it is in the process of changing again. I think education in art has transformed it and I think it would have been hideous if it had not happened. But I don't know what is coming out of this that in five hundred years will be of value. I know that my education as an artist was homemade and I have hideous gaps of things I don't understand and in other areas I have indulged myself and learned a huge



amount.

Yale has less art-speak than many schools.

This institution tries to be a studio school although there are theory classes and critical perspectives in all the departments. We are getting ready to talk about whether or not we should take some money out of the budgets of each department and create a critical class that everyone in all of the departments has to attend. We would mix everyone up into four sections and in this way we would, in the first semester, suggest that this is a single art that we are dealing with. So this is a serious issue and there is a chance that we will institute a new program this next year. Is this idea appealing?

Yes.

Imagine what it would be like to have Todd Papageorge talking about Eugene Atget with students from all the departments. It would be great. We would probably get four teachers to each teach a section to the first year students in their first semester. And it is not decided who would teach these classes, whether it would be resident faculty or people from the outside or if it would even be artists. So on one level this is a hideous thing for our school to be doing. We are a studio school we shouldn't be doing all this talking. Maybe some other part of the University should supply this kind of thing because there are some very good minds out there.

Can you explain why we are a professional school?

Well you can't possibly have all of this physical activity in Yale College, which is a site of intellectual activity. I don't mean this to be critical of the University at all but it has put all of the physical activity into the professional schools. The intellectual core moved these processes of making—music, medicine,

forestry, art, etc. out of the core of the humanities. This is an old pattern. We believe that art is a profession. We don't believe that it is the comfortable profession of illustration. We believe that it is a very different profession that tends to reward us very badly. We believe that it is a life and a profession. So that is why. Did I avoid the question? I have the feeling that I avoided the question.

Well the benefit of being separated is that we have been given a measure of independence that behooves the artist. But it also creates a hierarchy where we are the makers. This is a feudal distinction between people who work in the fields and people who think.

Nick, Nick, the people who spend their lives with their intellects alone are always going to look down on the people who do physical work. And the people who physically make things know that they are the elite and the intellectuals are the lower class. So we have to let these two groups have their diverse opinions. I have no illusions about it. If I am dealing with someone who has never made anything I consider him or her to be a subset of the species. I feel sorry for them. This is a minority view at the University.

Yes. It is probably a minority view in the world.

Well, I understand that we need to have some physical and intellectual autonomy but it is a mistake to divorce the intellectual's project from that of the artist. We are all in the University to pursue new paradigms of understanding and communicating. For the administration to continue to argue that making art should be separated from thinking about art, or history, or science seems to me a mistake.

Yale University believes in art at a level that no other major university believes and I think that







I have always accepted this reality: that in my life as an artist I serve the well-to-do...I do something they can't do and they have something I don't have. If we have a chip on our shoulder about this then I think we should examine it pretty carefully. You have to keep your eye on the prize and the prize is that I want to make art.

they have granted us a pretty good setup. The set of pressures that are put on the students that enter into Yale College would eliminate most interesting artists from getting in. Our situation is such that we can admit whomever we want. We could care less what your background is as long as you're a good artist. Look at me, I am sitting here with no degrees. So I would not want to lose this freedom and have to pick the students based on something where they were lumped together with everybody trying to get a liberal arts education—that would screw all the good artists. I think it is wonderful that we are a separate school that also teaches undergraduates. I think it would be a disaster for the School if there were no undergraduates.

In the seven years that you have

been here are there more undergraduates studying art?

We are adding undergraduate classes. We have been given additional money from Dean Brodhead and we have added three classes in the last two years—mainly in photography and graphic design.

**Aren't the undergraduate art majors growing?**

Yes, the painting majors are going way up. We are going to start to talk about whether the Director of Undergraduate Studies should have a representative in each department to help boost the majors there. For example wouldn't it be nice if somebody on the sculpture faculty was given the mandate to get us some sculpture majors.

**It seems logical that boosting undergraduate enrollment serves the School of Art by increasing its**

importance in the larger University. The School of Art can't make it without the University. The University writes a huge check every year to cover our expenses. And for many years the size of that check was connected to the undergraduate enrollment. And then there was a point when the University decided that they would subsidize the school no matter how many students there were and that in my opinion was a real improvement. That was both of us saying that we need the other. This is one of the subjects that rankled me so much when we spoke last year about unionization and money. The University has us at a huge loss. And they believe that art is important enough that they will subsidize us. But we can't forget that we are out of luck if we don't maintain a healthy relationship with the University proper. It would



Justin Lieberman M.F.A. '04  
*Untitled*, watercolor, 2002

just be stupid to upset this  
**Well doesn't that put us at the disadvantage of always having to tread lightly?**

Well, most of us have to do that anyway. We are being subsidized; it is just the reality. If this bothers us we should maybe go into another field. I have always accepted this reality: that in my life as an artist I serve the well-to-do. Wealthy people have commissioned me to do their work and that is great and I am their servant. I do something they can't do and they have something I don't have. If we have a chip on our shoulder about this then I think we should examine it pretty carefully. You have to keep your eye on the prize and the prize is that I want to make art.

**How do you feel about your tenure thus far?**

It is impossible to tell. It is impossible to tell whether I have screwed it all up. This is what makes it so difficult, because the School has such a long life. It is like trying to steer an oil tanker where you turn the wheel and ten minutes later the bow starts to move. This is what it is like running a school. How will I know?

**How could the School be more agile?**

Well, we have just hired Peter Halley, which I think was a radical move. Putting the Painting Department into the hands of a part-timer with a hugely active life as both a publisher and an artist. Putting Jessica Stockholder in charge of sculpture—that was a pretty wild move. And I think these two will really change the school.

So change in the School will always

come from below?

Yes, from the faculty and students. It certainly does not come from me. That is as it should be.

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*Richard Mead Atwater Benson has taught at Yale since 1979 serving as Dean since 1995. He has helped develop many innovative methods of photographic reproduction including what is now known as the tri-tone process. He has received many awards including two Guggenheim Fellowships (1979, 1986), and the MacArthur Award (1986).*