

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

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Dialogue with Jon Brumit and Sarah Wagner



"the quantum field" (2010), Jon Brumit, Christy Matson, Sarah Wagner

This large-scale interactive installation involves two sheep made of hand-woven conductive fabric, and is inspired by, and adapted from, the early LucasArts 1989 fantasy adventure game LOOM, wherein the only people surviving the apocalypse are weavers, blacksmiths and carpenters.

Q – How much time do you spend together? Do you live together or share a studio or do you just get together to work on projects as they come up?

SW Some days, 24 hrs, some days we work outside the house and are gone for 8 hrs. Jon also sometimes takes jobs or has shows that keep him away for several weeks. We live together and our space is completely tiny so everything's going on all the time in the same space, feels like we share a skull actually, so working together is easier than turning around. It's really great most of the time.

Q – When you are working on something do you schedule structured time together in a physical space, or meet online, or is it more organic than that?

JB More organic. Sometimes we schedule, but it's easier to just let it work itself out.

Q – Do you keep your personal/professional lives separate or has it become seamless and indistinct? Is this okay?

SW We have our separate things and we have combined things. I find the asking if it's okay like asking if time is okay, but I would only say it's more an issue of practicalities: we still eat and sleep and talk and have fun, sometimes it just takes a tiny reminder to breathe and look around.

Q – Can you, or do you, turn off your research/studio practice(s)?

JB Not so much, but o++o helps us do this! And we haven't started shooting whale movies in our kitchen either yet .. so we're not quite in between yet, still more of one or the other.

Q – When and how did you meet each other and under what circumstances?

JB 1992, art department, UTC, Sarah was the one always going from the studio to the Coke machine. I was the one trying to figure out how to get her to stop and talk to me.

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Q – At what point did you start making work together?

SW Pretty soon after, but almost all of our first 10 years were doing construction and fabrication together. Only in the last 8 years have we been working collaboratively on art.

Q – Was there a growing period, when you had to get a feel for each other's process/priorities, learn how to communicate – or did you click right away?

JB We sort of grew up together so clicking is only the first part really. Slow unfolding – that's the M.O. – so we just try to pay attention and let each other become whoever we're becoming.

Q – Do you gravitate towards roles in your practice – based on strengths, or personality, or skills? Or is every project a different kind of adventure?

SW Adventure for sure, but yes, tasks get separated by strengths, personality and skills, but not necessarily in advance. Interest and desire are more powerful motivators in the early stages, then it seems like survival or just the need to get going on the next thing kicks in and we divide and concur.

Q – How do you generate the concepts you work with? Do you draw, write, photograph, or do any sort of regular background practice? Is this a shared thing?

JB Yes, lots of drawing on napkins, envelopes, sketchup, talking and then sitting with things to see how they move around. We also do a lot of writing, usually sending docs back and forth for thinking and editing, but probably the most happens when we are walking or driving. I'd hardly say we generate concepts though, we just try to pay attention and use our 'practice' or whatever to ask the questions for us or sometimes just entertain us, geeks that we are. Sarah's longest standing regular background practice is running like 3 miles a day, mine is playing drums – both of which we credit for quieting at least some if not almost all of the noise we've discovered is counter-productive or just annoying.

Q – How do you make choices and negotiate decisions about what direction to take with projects?

JB Through constant negotiation and seeing what works best. In seeing what each of us really, really wants and really, really hates. I didn't think it was that much of a negotiation until reading Sarah's answer!

Q – Does your collaboration ever involve more people, if no, why not? If yes, then when and how does that work?

SW Right now it is and it's great (think 'sticks in your spokes'). It's great—each of us is doing what we are best at too but the whole project keeps surprising us all.

Q – Will you describe a project that didn't work out or you didn't follow through on? Can you describe something that you couldn't agree on or you didn't feel like you were both "into?"

JB No, can't think of this; there are things that are tabled for one reason or another but that's pretty much it. If by some chance you mean 'didn't work out' as in 'the executive director of a gallery hosting us by invitation sent out a mass email claiming no affiliation with our performance' ... then maybe yes, we could claim that something didn't work out. Although we both count that one as a strong and hilarious victory (probably our first collaborative experience with real cyberdouchery)

Q – What kinds of singular processes or practices, studio or research, do you maintain as individuals that you may or may not bring into the collaboration?

SW Sculptural sewing and pattern-making, research into various scientific phenomena. True to some extent but we both probably wouldn't keep collaborating if we didn't feel we could just do whatever comes naturally for each of us.

Q – Do you make your own work in addition to the collaborative work and what sort of need does this fill?

JB Yes, We both do and feel that this is a very important thing. We need to produce work outside any kind of collaboration to keep our practices moving. It keeps us happier as individuals. I would definitely add that, since I seem to be overly (or perhaps more accurately – inwardly) competitive or insecure or whatever, any and all of my successful collaborations push me harder into solo projects... like trying to keep my inner venn diagram balanced some how. But I think honestly when I saw the 6 page spread in penthouse on my dumb big wheel race (which started more as a solo project in public but rapidly (& thankfully) evolved into a true public practice / social project) I relaxed a little bit so I kind of don't care anymore which circle or set is bigger (∞)

Q – If you maintain an individual practice as well as a collaborative practice, have you run into conflicts of interest, time-management/priority issues, or experienced communication problems due to multiple focuses at any point? How is this resolved?

SW Isn't this what happens to all artists? I think it all comes down to time management and prioritizing, compromise and sometimes not getting what we want. And apologizing!

Q – What are the strengths in working collaboratively and what are the challenges in working collaboratively?

JB I love the way you can't predict what will happen and that so much more can happen with more people working on it. The biggest challenge is different personalities=different ways of working. Yes indeed what she said – super dynamic and fluid and unpredictable successes and the occasional amazing failure. I will say that my tendency to improvise can definitely generate a fair amount of conflict, misunderstandings, communication opportunities and occasionally some FGOs (as we say in the industry).

Q – What sort of theory, cultural circumstances, or life scenarios influences or informs your decision to work collaboratively? Would you say that your collaboration is philosophically driven, or more pragmatic?

SW As we started working together in a somewhat creative and largely constructive scenario from very early on, we have consciously been working for the last number of years on more focused creative / artistic collaborations because we were spending too much time apart due to successes in our individual practices. Most recently I decided to share (with my collaborators) an offer for a solo show at my gallery because I wanted to continue showing, pushing our collab project and the strength in numbers in this year after having a baby, which has been a feat in and of itself. Maybe we never really started collaborating because there isn't such a thing as solo work any way, maybe we simply met and continued working.

Q – If you teach, how does collaborative practice inform the way you facilitate student projects and teach studio courses?

JB usually assign at least one collaborative exercise. I do this mostly to create group unity and intimacy. Also I know that when we team teach that anything I forget to bring up she will remember and vice versa; I trust that our collective brain gets the stewardship synapses firing.

Q – If you teach, do you co-teach? If you do co-teach, how has it been received by the students, and how has this been received in the academic institutions you have worked with?

JB Yes and no. The first semester, (we co-taught because we were pregnant, due the 3rd week of class, and needed the paycheck) when we were both there many of the days it was received very well by the students, and so well by the institution that we were invited back to teach the course again. However, this semester with childcare issues we have had to alternate. This is okay but I really like co-teaching! Yeah being there together is so much more fun!, at least, and at most, once yearly.