
B
DYE LAB
PRINT SHOP

29

Jim Melchert & David Wilson
A Conversation

The Possible
Ceramics Studio, BAM/PFA Gallery B
Tuesday, May 20, 2014

Jim Melchert: It's interesting that you chose this spot for us, because I've never sat here, and so I'm seeing the building in an entirely different way. And since a lot of what you've been concerned with [in *The Possible*] has been working with the building and discovering it, it's actually a great place to begin our discussion.

30

So, a shape that I see you working with all the time is the spiral. And you talk about the vessel, and, as you know, a clay vessel thrown on a potter's wheel is essentially a spiral because it is formed as it turns around and goes up and up . . . very much like a vine around a pole. And the spiral is a symbol of growth, as we know, and life. And here you have at the center of this whole building – which is itself, as I'm looking at it right now, a spiral—a rug [Fritz Haeg's *Domestic Integrities* rug], which is a braid, put into a spiral . . .

David Wilson: Indeed.

JM: . . . the intertwining of parts.

DW: Absolutely.

JM: It is interesting that you establish a center and, whenever there are gatherings, that is where people meet. Now, thinking of centers and spirals, one thinks of orbits around, say, the sun. I'd like to know something about this performance you did here three or four years ago having to do with the sun [*David Wilson: Gatherings / MATRIX 233*, July 7 to August 22, 2010]. What was that all about?

31

DW: That was an experiment in ceremony creation, in collaboration with the artist

Chris Duncan. And it was very much about having a center, which in this case was a six-foot-diameter papier-mâché sphere that acted as a kind of a globe, or organizing object, that was hoisted up into the center of the space and created a focal point. There were musicians and projectionists and singers that formed around this one object—sounding to it, shining light onto it — in an orchestrated event that we called the "sun ceremony." And it was about a beginning — it was the beginning of that particular MATRIX exhibition, and it was an experiment in ceremony creation. We were exploring some ideas about how we could be together with focus, and playfulness, and thoughtfulness — not specifically religious or anything beyond just the basics of ceremony. It was about understanding this building and its power as a space for congregation. That project was very much the seed for some of these bigger ideas [in *The Possible*]: what can we do to converge upon this place and have something that would, like you said, allow rings of participation and rings of ideas and practices somehow to coalesce?

JM: Now one of the things that I wanted to ask right off the bat, actually, was how you know so many people.

DW: [laughs]

JM: When you sent out the invitation — announcement, essentially — the number of names of participants was exceptionally large, and I only spotted a few that I knew — Yoshiko Wada, marvelous, yes, Renny Pritikin, and so on. How do you know so many creative people?

32

DW: Well, I have a social curiosity. I think that there is an urge in me to connect with people. When I meet someone I feel fortunate to have been exposed to his or her work and life and ideas. I think a lot of it stems from being involved in a music community, which inherently is very social—performing, playing music is all about gathering and having a chance for people to be together. And so when I first moved to California, some of the earlier projects were very much about organizing concerts. Through those early shows out in the woods, in houses—the kinds of intimate spaces that struck me as ripe for meeting—I began to meet wonderful people. And I think that one of the strengths of the Bay Area itself is its ability to form and develop community relationships. The kinds of people that I have been connecting with don't necessarily have a shared practice, but there is maybe a shared spirit. So this show came after eight years of organizing smaller projects that had handfuls or dozens of people involved—although usually there were recurring moments of connection and collaboration that extended beyond the end of each project. This idea of the vessel, this building, and then this project itself, as containers that were asking to be filled, and were ripe for a full crowd, a full grouping of inspiring individuals—that made me think of this as a moment to weave all these distinct projects into one space. That has been amplified by everyone who is involved in *The Possible* having a similar instinct, like Travis Meinolf, who is someone who I just met through a friend a few weeks before *The Possible* started. I'd heard of him as a radical weaver, someone who uses simple materials to build looms and weaves outside and gives away blankets. And he himself became this kind of satellite center for absorbing and gathering up people, so there's a whole group of weavers who came together here, continuing that kind of model of satellites orbiting.

JM: Somebody who comes to mind is Ann Hamilton. I watched her work at Capp Street in San Francisco, when she had the entire floor of the exhibition space covered with pennies; they were stuck to the floor with honey [Ann Hamilton, *Privations and Excesses*, Capp Street Project, San Francisco, February to April 1989]. It was absolutely a stunning work — it was a very rich piece.

DW: Yeah.

JM: Ann solicited people to help, and people — students, mostly — would just line up to work with her. She is so charismatic that just to sit down with her you feel you're the luckiest person in the world — and you have that in common. And I think you also have a sense of timing. You know something about pacing and also you listen. I find it interesting that you organized breaks for the artists working here. When I'm in my studio, working away, I sometimes go out to the little hillside and just sit down there for a while, just to know the trees, and I get clarified, as it were. Just having separated myself from my studio is so worthwhile. Now, you've set up several breaks here. For example

33

on Sunday I missed hearing that musician...

DW: Lonnie Holley.

34

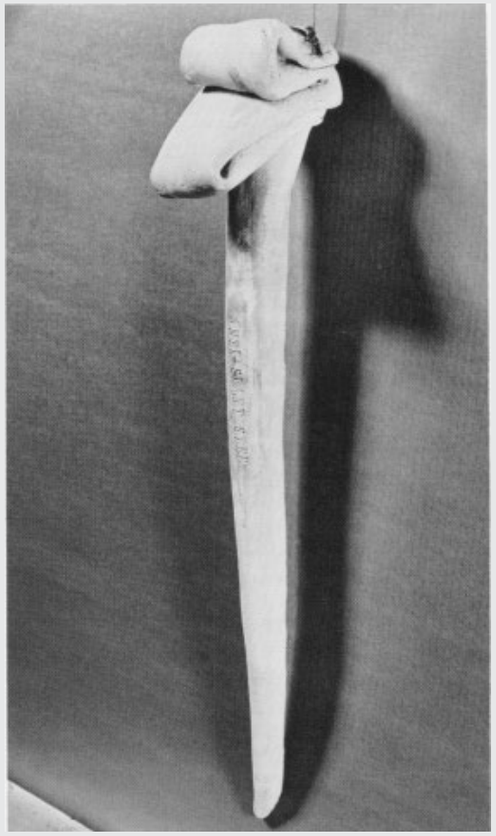
JM: The fact that work could stop and you could listen to someone, it's again that give-and-take, concentration and then opening up. When we were walking around on Sunday you pointed out the shower [Outdoor Shower designed by Drew Bennett], a place – a room – a person can go into, close the door, undress, get cleansed – get cleansed! And then dry off, put clothes back on, and leave. Now, you talk about ceremony, there's something, cleansing as a ceremony. The fact that work stopped, and the man could sit over there and play his instrument and sing, there is something of a ceremony about that.

DW: Absolutely, that's something I think a lot about. What can you offer that will make for a fertile situation, that will allow people to be themselves, and flourish, and receive something that might be generative, personally, or that might fuel back into what that person has to offer? And, if it's just work, then you're losing the opportunity to see more broadly the creative experience, life practice, which I think is really the heart of it.

35

JM: Another break that you give people is the library [installed in Gallery 2]. When I came on Sunday, the first room of the exhibition that I entered was this space, the library. And of course I saw all the correspondence in the cases from the museum's archives. I know so many of those people, I could imagine them at that time, in the situations they were in, like Steve Kaltenbach, Ed Ruscha, Tom Marioni, on and on and on—and Diebenkorn, there's a letter from him. These are from a period of amazing regeneration, between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. And I noticed that one of the many CDs is Terry Riley's *In C*, which is from that period. That recording, from about the early seventies, was the shot that he needed to restart his career . . . and also around that time the Kronos Quartet had just begun, Kala Institute had just opened. So you're connecting people here with roots.

36



DW: Absolutely.

JM: I'm fifty-two years your senior, and so that was sort of my period, when I was your age.

DW: Which is why I'm honored to have this conversation. Because I think a lot of the artists involved in *The Possible* do have a sense of that lineage and respect for the fertile cultural moments in the area. So it's exciting to know there is a real lineage and a connection, that we can find a continuance.

JM: Who was responsible for choosing the music to include in the library?

DW*:* Well, we first started the project with the idea that we're not preparing artwork for exhibition, we're preparing each other and ourselves, and the way we did that was to send out correspondence to stimulate conversation among artists, as a playful gesture. Alexander Kori Girard, who was a collaborator from the beginning on this project, and I sent a piece of mail art out to hundreds of artists. It included a survey with questions about who you might look to for personal inspiration, whether in the form of reading material or listening material, or just artists and ideas that fuel you. And so the survey responses gave a really wonderful foundation—a lot of both the listening material and reading material in the library was selected in direct response to those surveys. I also reached out to record labels that seemed to share a spirit of thinking of themselves as spreaders of culture and of understanding music as a real deep investigation and exploration, and let them know about the project and those labels sent things for the library.

JM: It's so rich, it's phenomenal! You know, when I saw them, I thought well, I don't have to see the rest of the show... I can just sit here all day [laughs].

DW: Exactly. Part of thinking about this build-

ing was how architecture allows for different moments of intimate interaction, maybe just by yourself with something, or maybe more grand group interactions, and that you do need both—you can't always be in your full-moon stage, you need a little bit of the half-moon, too. So my wife's parents are a good example of that because they spent three days hanging out here, and Joe, my father-in-law, was basically with his headphones on in the library for three days, and then all of a sudden there'd be the blast of a trumpet, and you'd know he was up in the music room. And then my mother-in-law was on the potter's wheel, and she made probably a dozen bowls in three days. So this space could provide for those different instincts, and personal characters.

JM: You asked participants to name a creative individual who had inspired them, and it's a fascinating array of individuals. I wondered, is there someone in your life who you regard as a heroic figure? Who influenced your thought and action?

DW: Luke Fischbeck and Sarah Rara, who perform under the name Lucky Dragons. They're contemporaries, and we're friends, but their approach to their work and how they have found ways to engage groups and thoughtful participation has blown my mind in a way that has really stayed with me. And they've turned me on to some incredible artists that they know. I feel like I've been at school here, I'm learning through everyone.

JM: That's one of the things I like about the Bay Area. I moved here in 1959 and have essentially been here all these years, but there are so many people here from whom you can learn things.

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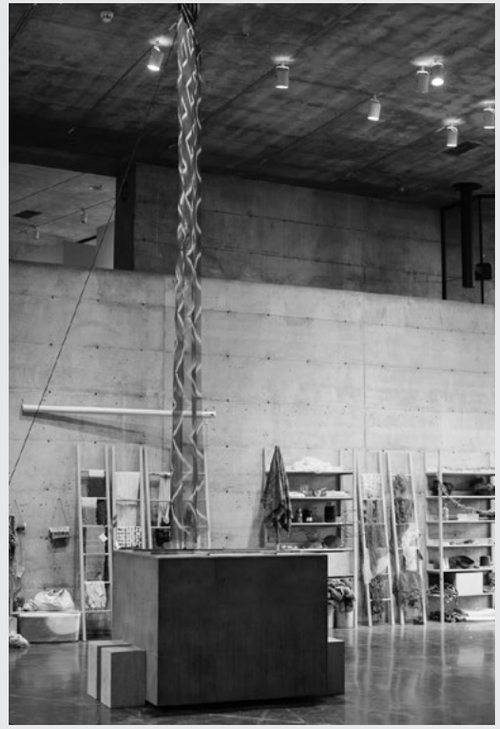
DW: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Ron Kitaj was one of the visiting artists for a year, and David Hockney was here for a year. Extraordinary people were coming through, mostly in the sixties. Ron Kitaj thought of the Bay Area as a watering hole for migratory birds— people flock here to get nourished, and then they move on. And so it's unusual that you have people who have been here and stayed.

DW: I see Larry [Rinder] as someone who has really committed himself to cultivating that watering hole, to creating a place that can sustain, and his dedication is why this project has happened. He reached out to me, we've

41



connected in a very real way, and his trust in this kind of work is what has allowed it to happen. The idea that all of these people have been nourished, or somehow inspired, and have felt like this is a place where they can grow—that is ultimately what makes you stay someplace. I share that feeling of wanting to continue to cultivate here. Part of the idea for the show was to create a meeting ground, so as much as it was about bringing together groups of artists in the Bay Area and people whom I've met in a very diverse range of practices, it was also about bringing in the colors and feelings and ideas from other places, and letting those tones be in the mix.

JM: For the major firing [for the ceramics studio], you used the *anagama* kiln, a kiln whose history goes back a long time, to Japan, and before that to Korea, and before that, to China. It's age-old and still performs so beautifully as an instrument. At the same time, juxtaposed with [the kiln], I walked into a room with flashing lights...

42

DW: [laughs] Yeah.

JM: ...and all these electronic instruments [in the installation by the artist collective The Something]—I had no idea what they're for, no idea what to do with them. You are juxtaposing something that's part of our roots and something that is clearly heading towards the unknown and the future. I think that's very rich. It's good for people of one sort to be curious about people of another sort and begin to learn from one another across these boundaries.

DW: Exactly.

JM: But, speaking of the ceramic studio, one

of the things that is so interesting to me is your use of the word "layers." Before there was this building, there was what we called the Pot Shop on this site. I came out here from Illinois to study with Peter Voulkos. and he had just been brought up from Los Angeles by the Department of Decorative Art on campus to take over the ground floor of a housing office that had been a fraternity house. And the activity in that place was phenomenal. Voulkos didn't like to think of himself as a teacher, but instead referred to himself as a catalyst. And that's exactly what you are, you function as a catalyst. I mentioned Ann Hamilton earlier. She has a plan, she has an idea, and she attracts these marvelous young people, but they execute what she has planned. Whereas you function

43

not as the one with the plan, but rather as the catalyst that makes it happen. And Voulkos thought of himself that way. He decided that if he were the only potter/sculptor working here, the students wouldn't learn as much as if we were working among other potters and sculptors, and so he would bring up artists from Los Angeles. They would be listed officially as auditors, and they could use the Pot Shop as their workspace, people like John Mason, Henry Takemoto . . .

DW: Amazing.

JM: Among the students, Steve De Staebler, Ron Nagle . . . Nathan Oliveira, the painter, even did some clay work, and there was also Harold Paris, who was on the faculty. And all this was going on, but then it came to an end when the studio was relocated to Wurster Hall, and then the museum was built. But what was there before the Pot Shop really, was this housing office that had been a fraternity, but before the fraternity, there was what? This was Ohlone land, and I saw references to Native American ceremonies on your website. Your exhibition is so well coordinated with all this sort of history.

DW: Well, I'm honored by that, because I understand that there's something bigger than us, this moment, what has happened here.

JM: In all your activities, you use the term "ribbons." What does "ribbons" mean to you?

DW: "Ribbons" was a term and a name that I

adopted with my collaborator at the time, Frank Lyon. A very silly conversation led to that title, but basically it was that we each had our own artworks and ideas but for things we set into motion together, with shared ownership, we used the term "ribbons." I was playing music in a band with Frank and a few other people at the time, and then organizing a few of these outdoor shows under the name Ribbons. After two years, and planning a few of these intimate performances, Frank moved to New York and kind of passed off the name. We parted wonderfully and remain close friends—he was just here for our field day, leading us in activities—but Ribbons was the name that I continued to use over the past seven years as I organized things that were very much about putting things into motion and finding space and ideas that could instigate the involvement of other people. So for those kind of gatherings it was nice to be Ribbons, not David Wilson.

44

JM: And I was thinking that a ribbon is a way of tying things, connecting.

45

DW: Yeah absolutely, yeah.

JM: But also the interesting thing about ribbons is that they're linear. In music, if you played a solo violin work and you took the score and instead of stacking the staffs on a page, you simply connected them, you could have a border around the room, one ribbon of music. It's a time continuum. I'm wondering if there are things I haven't touched on, that you've been aching to talk about.

DW: Well, I was glad that you spoke about that juxtaposition of some traditional work or traditional processes and these very forward, new, unknown approaches because that is something that is really important to me. In some ways this project is really hard to talk about because it's not just about participatory

art, it's not just about craft. I think the porous nature of something is ultimately a very real thing—it's not perfectly defined, but it's an important place to put attention towards. I think that a huge part of this project was the conversation with the institution about how to soften into some of these spaces where things are not perfectly defined. . . I will try to find words for it now, and we'll see if those words apply later, but ultimately it was about finding ways to just dive into something that was not so easy to predict and define. It makes a lot of sense when you're thinking of just intimate projects, but one of the largest parts of *The Possible* was working collaboratively with the institution, with the museum. That kind of shaping of a project together was a huge, wonderful challenge, and lesson, and apprenticeship. And hopefully—I have had conversations with Larry about this—there is a sense of thinking broadly about what is possible with a public space, and how it can be used, and I'm excited to see that play out over time. It was a wild effort and a wild set of conversations to work through—what does it mean to have an outdoor shower here? What does it mean to have a clay studio here? And again, those specific elements were vehicles for the kinds of experiences that I think were really the value part. But, yeah, that was something that really became a defining part of this — how to embrace the unknown.

JM: Well, to some extent you've been redefining museums, redefining exhibitions, and you've succeeded.

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DW: We're standing in the grand atrium of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and we're staring at Fritz Haeg's *Domestic Integrities* rug, which has become very much the visual and physical anchor for this exhibition. It brings everyone together — it symbolizes and acts out the idea of convergence that was at the heart of this project. I've thought of it almost as the living room, in relation to the production spaces that surround it. This is the gathering space, providing a space for breaking from work, a place to engage with one another in new ways.

JM: From this angle, though, doesn't it look like the sun and the planets orbiting?

DW: Absolutely, it is the solar system, cosmos. It's a beautiful, incredible piece. I met Fritz early on in the planning stages through Luke Fischbeck and Sarah Rara, who really understood the connection immediately and said, "You need to go talk to Fritz." In a lot of ways it was a fitting first piece to anchor things. It has been the site of performances, conversations, dance, movement, play — kids are often rolling

46

47

across it, running in circles, which is funny.

JM: It is the gravitational center.

DW*:* The idea of experiential learning—that by doing and creating you have the opportunity to physically open up to an idea — was very much what inspired these studio spaces [surrounding the rug at the center].

JM: But what I'm interested in is the stories—what happened here, the time some kid came up with a question that nobody could answer? The time that somebody came in very upset, and suddenly their mind just totally changed and they got involved?

DW: One of the first things that happened in the print shop was, I think, a perfect moment. It was our first day, we had a public workshop, everything was active, kind of a ribbon-cutting event, and a woman walked in with her infant and walked right up to a photocopy machine, plopped him down, and took a photocopy of his butt. That was the first thing she did, the very first thing she did.

JM: [laughs]

DW: It was silly and wonderful, and I was so happy to see that.

JM: Excellent, well, let's hear some more.

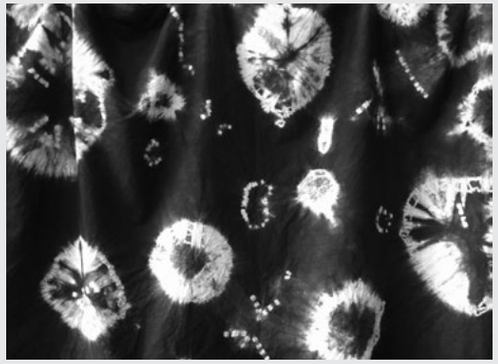
DW: Well, the first time Fritz [Haeg] came he made a big pot of soup that lasted three days.

JM: Wonderful!

DW: And my wife, Hannah, is an amazing cook, so she would cook food for people, and then there's Ingrid Pankonin, who's an amazing chef, who came when our opening ceremony happened, and she just made an incredible meal. Lisa Ruth, who's weaving over here, bakes fantastic bread, so she baked bread for us one

day, and when we did our big *anagama* firing that was an amazing orchestration of food. So, these banners that are hanging up right above our heads each represent a nice moment. To the left we have a painted banner that was made in collaboration with Creative Growth Art Center.

48



JM: Oh, nice.

DW: Something that we had been planning for over a year was to host their annual fashion show. I went to Creative Growth with a group of artists from The Possible, and offered a few different projects to try. One of them was doing resist patterns, so you would bundle up and tie fabric, and then you would dye it, and then when you would unbundle it—kind of like a tie-dye, you'd see all the patterns from the tying. This banner had been dyed in oak gall, so it is a kind of gray, rich color. We brought it [to Creative Growth] to be collaboratively painted. It probably took five days to prepare the fabric and about ten minutes to completely fill it up with this amazing avalanche of paint and people. So everyone ended up with paint all over their bodies and it was an incredible afternoon of joyous moving of color.

The piece on the left with the diamond pattern, that was the first piece of fabric dyed in our indigo vat. The indigo plants were grown by Rebecca Burgess, and then they were harvested by the group. Then they had to ferment for one hundred days, compost for one hundred days. . .

JM: Oh, so that process actually started at the beginning of this project?

DW: It started about eight months before *The Possible* opened.

JM: So there was already activity going on for quite a while in advance [of the opening of the exhibition]?

DW: Very much so. For example, our indigo vat was fabricated in advance by Mark Rogero of Concreteworks, and that was an epic construction. But after all this preparation—weeks of building the vat, preparing the lye water—this was the first thing that was dipped, right before our opening ceremony, so that was very exciting. Tessa Watson, who'd been coordinating, finally said, "All right, it's time." She came in at nine in the morning, rolled up her sleeves, tied this up, folded it, dropped it in, and pulled it out. And it was just a really triumphant thing, because no one knew if it was going to work. Because it relies completely on the technique of balancing pHs and maintaining natural bacteria by adding things like wheat bran and sake, rather than adding a chemical agent. So that was a huge relief and a beautiful thing to see that emerge, and it was blue, not brown.

JM: That double chair against the wall, what was that used for?

DW: That is a furniture object created by an artist in Los Angeles named Shin [Okuda], who has a furniture company called Waka Waka. He and his partner run a store called Iko Iko and they are kind of catalyst forces in Los Angeles. I connected with them and they provided us with these incredible smocks, these aprons that have been getting stained and layered by dye, and then this chair, which Shin called the observation chair. It is for two people to sit on at once, and offers a way of almost being involved in a place but also removed enough and aware enough to be able to watch. It is almost like a lifeguard chair.

JM: Why don't we visit the display platform in Gallery 3?

DW: Sure. This platform displays all the art and ephemera from the show, and we install a little bit each week. Now it has been brought to its near fullest iteration.

JM: It is a stunning display. I heard that Ruby Neri came, and I wondered which was her work.

DW: These really incredible figures that are spread out throughout the platform. I've been calling them our angels, looking out. And Ruby was one of the first, if not the first, artist, to really get to work here. There were a few different kinds of people involved: some were designing, developing, and facilitating the studios, and then there were artists who were invited to come and use them. The first day the show opened, basically, Ruby showed up and said, "I'm ready," and immediately got to work. She really let it rip and started creating these larger sculptures. . .

49

JM: She's such a pro.

DW: Yes, exactly, she is. It's been amazing to

50

get to know her. I hadn't met her before this project. [Pointing out a piece.] This is actually something her daughter did.

JM: Oh, how nice.

DW: The display platform was designed by Kori Girard. He was the first person I talked to about this project after Larry invited me to think about it. I was thinking about just using the space to create site-based work, and Kori proposed doing some kind of installation of objects, a display of a collection that he would provide. Then as the show grew toward something that was much more whole, holistic, something that fed into itself, the idea then became to provide a space for things made here during the exhibition to come together. We talked about how important, visually, it would be to design the object where things could be placed, and having this island or kind of pinwheel platform became a way to see everything together.

JM: The color that came out of Richard Carter's kiln is just astonishing.

DW: Yeah, that was really exciting because we had no expectations or ideas. Many of the people who came to help with the firing didn't have any wood-firing experience, let alone any ceramic experience, so there was a real freshness to it. Richard was so excited about that spirit, too, and I felt like it was at one of these firings where things really came together.

JM: Funny thing, I've seen things come out of a wood-burning kiln that were just a disaster! You just don't know!

DW: [Richard] was saying it has so much to do with people overthinking, or one missed moment, and all of a sudden the color just goes. He said some years ago that the anagama is more of a dramagama.

JM: [laughs] That's great. I'm so taken with the color that turns up in these objects. Wow! I assume these are Ruby's?

DW: Yes, exactly, and this was right at the very front of the anagama, so it was really the thing taking all that firebox. Some of these objects are left over from events, like these masks from our opening ceremony—this was actually a clean-up mask. The artist basically covered the piece of cardboard in glue and cleaned up all the tables wearing this mask.

JM: Nice. The variety is stunning. And these colors! You've accomplished something here. Your way of working is so unique, and so effective. You found very capable people, I think again that's part of your skill. It'll be interesting what you go on to. It's been a pleasure.

DW: Thank you, Jim. What a wonderful conversation. I really appreciate all your thoughtfulness and am just so honored that as someone who has experienced the layers of this place, that you're feeling it.

51