

LARRY
SUSSKIND: We are excited, and honored, to have Professor Stephen Carpenter with us. And this is the first of a series of events. I'm Larry Susskind. I'm on the faculty in Urban Studies and Planning. It's interesting to me that several people here have a water interest. Several people here have a planning interest. Several people here have artistic, or art methods interests. Several people here have public education interest.

And all of those are alive and well in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in different kinds of ways. There is an environmental group in the department that I have had some responsibility for. And water is a concern within the environmental group. Not just domestically, but internationally, which relates to part of your work.

We're interested in water as an environmental justice concern, not just a natural resource management concern. And so, when I first learned of some of the ways in which your work has focused on making clean water available to people in different places, there was a direct connection with that aspect of what we do.

I was really interested in how issues of race could be raised in a way that conversation was possible. And that is another very big part of what our department, and our school, are interested in. So by way of background, those are some of the thematic interests that led us to very much want you to be here.

STEPHEN
CARPENTER: Well thanks, Larry. As far back as I can remember, I like making stuff. I would just make things, you know? I'm the oldest of four boys. And the oldest and the youngest were born 5 and 1/2 years apart. No twins. So we were constantly together and doing things, and we would make things. Like a set of golf clubs.

My dad had golf clubs. We weren't allowed to use them, so we made them. Of course we used his copper pipe for the plumbing in the house. So making things was always part of what I did, and have done, and just engaging in the-- it shifts, and it has moved.

My background's really pottery-- is really ceramics. Touching the clay, touching the mud, making things. That's my degree, is in ceramics and fine art. I don't know what it was, this urge, ability, interest for teaching, for education. So that complicated the situation.

Making stuff, and teaching stuff-- well, actually, you can do that. That's called being an art

educator, or a teacher. And the ceramics piece stayed with. I couldn't shake the clay, I couldn't get the clay out of my fingernails. The making of things had to always be there. And then I taught elementary school art, I was the art teacher, elementary school.

And that was among the most invigorating experiences of my life, because the students are always about making something. Their bodies are always moving. They're constantly in a state of absorbing what they're doing in the world, and seeing other people doing, and moving, and checking, and-- so that energy was quite interesting to me. Followed that experience up with a doctoral degree in art education.

But the idea was that the making, and the teaching, and the learning, and the asking of questions through art-- through the visual imagery that you're talking about-- that was what was so important. And you mentioned the notion of access. Well, we didn't have golf clubs. We didn't have access to-- we saw them, but we didn't have access to them. So making our own access, I'm interested in that as well. How does one make one's own access?

So moving around to a series of different universities as an art educator. Part of both graduate degrees was about being in the clay studio as much as it was being in the seminar room. That was really the focus of my dissertation. In the clay studio we were talking, and critiquing, about color, and shape, and form, and how the glaze works.

And on the other side of the same part of campus-- on the other side of the road-- in the theory classes in art education, we're talking about postmodern theory, and feminist theory, and film theory, and interpreting installations, and performances.

And then on the other side of the road, I'd go to my class the next day. We were, again, critiquing. But we were talking about, oh, I like that handle. Show me how you made the handle. This handle works and that one doesn't. We never defined what works meant. But putting those together-- the making, and the interpreting, and thinking, and theorizing in both registers doesn't have to be separated.

So to think of us, even with labels, I find kind of curious. We have to find a place on campus, but to understand that we can move in and out of those spaces. And we can start to shed those identities. The kind of group that has self assembled today speaks to multiple interests that I have, and trying to weave it into, what is an art education?

How does one learn through the making of things, through the display of cultural products

through cultural production? What kind of questions can we ask, not just about what someone else has made, but what kind of questions can we ask through the act of making, itself? We can make meaning through relationships, we can make meaning through conversation, we can make meaning through verbal or written responses. So it's the making of meaning, making of cultural product, making of a difference.

LARRY Right.

SUSSKIND:

STEPHEN
CARPENTER: So this notion of making doesn't have to always have this physicality to it. I'm saying all that to say, the clay left my fingernails for a while, until I moved to Texas. My wife is an engineer-- a mechanical engineer, material science-- and it's a great opportunity for her to move there. For me, there's no art education there at all.

They got my CV and didn't know where to put me. Sent it all over campus. And finally, the education folks said, oh, we'll take him. It has education in his degree, we'll take him. Telling you all that to say, I got to Texas, and art education had to be-- I had reinvent it, or at least, I had to figure out what I meant by it. And how I fit in. If you don't have an art department, how do you have art education? Well, you just open a studio in your garage and have people over on Fridays. I did that.

Or you can engage in the work in the curriculum, that fixed set of notions and premeditated concepts, terms, practices, skills, construct that educational experience. My entrance into a more curriculum instruction space was through my background as an artist, and as an art educator. The water filter work that I do, and have started to do, came about when I was in Texas.

I met a guy, his name's Oscar Munoz. Oscar is in charge of the Texas A&M Colonias programs all along the border. Texas is a third the width of the United States. So that distance, and then 150 miles up, is called the border of Texas. In that space, there live over a half a million people, most of whom don't have access to clean water in their homes.

And Oscar let me know this, and he works with communities all across that swath. And as an art educator, that was interesting to me. Because I had to learn about a lot of the practices that he's up against, and faces.

I'm telling you all this to say-- not that I planned where my work has gone, but it's always

migrated-- always moved and shifted-- to new-- it's almost like water, water finds its own level, right? Water fills the vessel in which it's poured. But I've never lost the clay. I've never lost that notion of making. Or the ways that meanings can be made, and understandings can be constructed through engagement with other people.

That's what education is, it's a social space. Teaching and learning is a social space. Art education can take up and take on those tasks as well.

LARRY
SUSSKIND: The title for this visit that people have seen, and that you gave us, is Making Something from Nothing. And first of all, the immediate doubt about whether you can actually make-- I mean, you can transform things-- but the notion that you can make something out of nothing would sort of defy most of the laws of physics, presumably. And so, you mean something by that. And then, Appropriate Technology as Intentionally Disruptive Responsibility.

STEPHEN
CARPENTER: That is a mouthful, that title, isn't it?

LARRY
SUSSKIND: I actually had a lot of trouble with it.

STEPHEN
CARPENTER: To the left of the colon, making something from nothing. That piece was intentionally provocative, right? I mean, you kind of have to do that, in some ways, to entice folks to show up to certain things, maybe. But the idea of making-- of course, defying laws of physics, yeah, I'm with you.

So knowing that there's a problem with that, if we think of it in certain realms, the idea that there's some folks who don't necessarily have access-- it's about access. Maybe it should have said, making something from whatever it is that you have.

LARRY
SUSSKIND: Right.

STEPHEN
CARPENTER: Right? But if we move it to nothing, you start to think, well, there's a complete and utter lack of something. For example, there's some people who have no access to clean water. We can raise a bit of hyperbole there and say they don't have access, or they have nothing. They're folks who-- we talk about food scarcity, we talk about folks who are homeless folks, who need shelter.

So you can take minimum, and exaggerate it just a little bit more-- there's this thing called artistic license, let's use that-- and turn it into nothing. So making something from nothing, what can we make from what is available to us? So that's the something from nothing. And in the case of this first visit, the something is adequate access to clean water. And the nothing is the lack of that.

And the something is a response, which in this case, is a ceramic water filter made out of clay and sawdust. The nothing is, well, that's just clay. It's just in the riverbed. That's nothing. That's just sawdust, that's leftover scraps. That's nothing. You understand that play that's going there?

Appropriate technology is essentially whatever is available culturally, and locally, that fits in within the cultural practices of a community. Introducing an external, or an unfamiliar substance, or chemical, or food, is not appropriate to a certain community. Because it's either against one's religion, it's against one's history, against one's culture. It doesn't fit in, so finding something that's appropriate.

For example, clay is essentially a material that is accessible to almost every single culture in the history of the world. And clay is a naturally occurring material in most places around the world. Now, some places using plastic, that doesn't seem to make sense. Or appropriate technologies, using what is at hand.

Philosopher, theorist Umberto Eco-- he was a guy who knew everything, but he didn't know it. Eco had numerous theories. Among them was this theory of intentions. When he says the artist, or the author, has an intention, and the viewer, or the reader, has an intention. But he also says the work has an intention. That comes about through this process, or a series of events.

But this idea of having an intention means it's deliberate. So I'm interested in thinking about why we're doing what we're doing. That's where that intentional piece-- disruptive. If I pick this up, and I threw this water at the camera, that would be disruptive in a number of ways. Or if you're in a quiet library, and a stampede of aardvarks comes through the space, that's disruption.

So we understand disruption as something that is abnormal, or not expected within a particular context that has assumed rules, regulations, and ways of being. But I'm also thinking of disruption in the intentional sense of, to reveal, or to poke at, or to engage, or to entice a

certain kind of conversation, or relationship. And that conversation or relationship is the responsibility.

LARRY Would you agree that most educational efforts are disruptions aimed at fulfilling a
SUSSKIND: responsibility, that it's defining education that way?

STEPHEN I don't think enough of them are.
CARPENTER:

LARRY Oh, you think they should be.
SUSSKIND:

STEPHEN I think they should. I'd like to shift that up, and question that. And it's very difficult to get at new
CARPENTER: ways of doing something, without disrupting a status quo, without questioning it.

LARRY We say it's because we're responsible and we have to disrupt, but what about the choice of
SUSSKIND: the people, and the place, whose lives you're disrupting? Is that fair to them?

STEPHEN Sure. Yeah. Certainly the way you frame it, it's not fair to them. But in the disruption of the lives
CARPENTER: of communities that I mentioned, in Texas, is not disrupting uninvited. It's an invited disruption. And second, the disruption has to do with whatever the current practice was, was not fulfilling, or responding to needs of the community.

LARRY In their eyes.
SUSSKIND:

STEPHEN In their eyes. And to my eyes, as well. So my friend-- as I mentioned-- Oscar, who for years
CARPENTER: has been working throughout South Texas. When he learned of the work I that I was-- at that point-- still learning how to do, he said, oh, there's a water issue. Would you come down, and work with us, talk to us, let's see if this would work out. That was my invitation to come in.

Oscar was already part of that community, I would never imagine just driving down there-- driving to any community-- and say, hey, I have something you need. I'm going to sell you something. That's not my approach. And so, that kind of disruption, I think, is on the unethical side. He was a bit wary of someone coming in.

And he's shared-- and other people have shared-- stories with me of researchers going into communities, oh, yeah, I have these ideas. Let me study what you're doing. Let me work with

you. And they take the information, and there's a report that's promised, and the report never gets back to the communities. Or the results never help. And he said he had never seen a report come back, based on the invitations to the scholars.

And so, once we got to know each other, he felt comfortable with me. But then he had to go through a process of talking with members of the community and say, hey, here's-- I have this friend coming down. That's the invitation piece.

LARRY SUSSKIND: So what does an invitation have to consist of-- for you-- to be of a sort that you are comfortable then responding in this disruptive way? Do you need a vote or the community? Has to be 100 percent? Majority rule? People you like say, come on down? What is, in your mind, what legitimizes these kinds of disruptions?

STEPHEN CARPENTER: Again, there has to be that invitation from someone who is positioned within the community. Then there has to be-- for me-- a conversation. And so, no, the entire community. Because defining who is in the community is often difficult to do anyway. Certainly, it's often just a leader, or a member of the community who might want engage a conversation, that then might expand in their own circles.

In this particular case-- in Texas, through my colleague-- we met with a few leaders, people who had worked within the communities as [SPANISH], as community educators, and other senior members of the community. Senior meaning they had been doing work at the community centers. And it was, let's just talk, let's see where the conversation goes. Very much like what we're doing here, having a conversation.

Now, it's not my role or position, or personality, or interest, to push that. After that conversation, that's on whomever to take that up. So when I speak of community, it's not the entirety.

LARRY SUSSKIND: There's not a simple answer to this. We all struggle with this notion of the artist as a independent thinker, as a creator of something that's an expression of an individual view when you're calling this a form of art education. But isn't it contrary to artists being artists? How is it art?

STEPHEN CARPENTER: So that's not a small question, but it's a very important question. It's a central question that I'm still answering for myself. But there are three realms here. One is the work in South Texas, that I actually wouldn't call that art, or art education.

LARRY Oh, OK.

SUSSKIND:

**STEPHEN
CARPENTER:** OK? Second is the kind of work that I will do tomorrow, the performance. And that moves into the realm of social practice. And that's where I've come to an agreement, understanding, comfortable place with myself, that that's where the art education happens. And then, there's a third piece, your definition of an artist, and what an artist does, that I want to disrupt.

Down in South Texas, that kind of work, for me, is not art education. It certainly uses an employees certain artistic practices. Folks who have access to a kiln-- know how to fire a kiln-- and have access to clay, that's where you want to begin your work. Usually that's the tile person, or the potter, or it's the brick maker. But my collaboration, and my involvement in that project, I wouldn't call that art. That was kind of me shed-- if that helps to clarify that piece of it.

So the work that I will do tomorrow. I'm going to set up a water filter production facility in one of the rooms downstairs, and going to make water filters. The idea there is to engage in a practice that somehow blurs what might be our conventional notions of art making, art practice, with practices from other disciplines. We're not quite sure where one ends, and one begins.

And it's supposed to remain in that uncomfortable space, if one is thinking in that social practice-- art is social practice-- register. If you can set up that practice as an engagement, as an ongoing set of activities, where people can come in and out of that space, there's an educational component. Invariably, there'll be a question, hey man, what are you doing? That's an invitation, right there, for me to respond. So we can establish this conversation as a relationship.

**LARRY
SUSSKIND:** You're not creating art. You're creating something that serves a function in response to the need of a client. You're saying, no it's not art. I'm an artist, and it's my social practice that you should observe here as art education. But the product of my artwork is not art.

**STEPHEN
CARPENTER:** It's more than the filter itself. That filter is just one component of the work. The work being the performance. Education as experience, this notion of experience is where the education happens.

**LARRY
SUSSKIND:** For some of us, the next step is, oh, and I want to help a place in Africa, or Latin America, in a community, make a factory where there are people-- now, without me there-- capable of

making more filters. And maybe they can sell 'em for a small amount to be able to maintain a community business. The doing of all of that seems to be a different realm.

STEPHEN It is, yeah. And I have not worked closely with communities-- as you're saying-- to set up
CARPENTER: facilities. Although, in South Texas, I did. I helped laid the groundwork in that facility--

LARRY I saw pictures.

SUSSKIND:

STEPHEN --is working. You saw pictures, right. But there are a number of groups who are doing the
CARPENTER: exact kind of work that you're mentioning. And it's not from an arts, or an art education perspective. It is from that social entrepreneur realm that you're talking about. And I am very supportive of that piece. And that is actually an intriguing component of what comes out of this work.

It's that work that then has benefits in terms of health, economics, self-sustaining capacity, that I find intriguing. And it's something that can be attempted, where it's not intended to be a money maker initially, it's intended to save people's lives, and to respond in that way.

AUDIENCE: So I'm curious about the longer term with this community in South Texas that you're working with. Obviously, it sounds like there's a really pressing need, so these water filters can meet that immediate need. Is the long term goal still to get a more traditional grid water setup for them?

STEPHEN Yeah. Yes. The origin of the filters was that they were supposed to be a first response to
CARPENTER: natural disaster, and they were not supposed to be long term. Their point of use, temporary solutions. Unfortunately for some folks around the world, these have become more long term responses.

AUDIENCE: What do you do when you're just starting out? What's your advice for how you go about getting an invitation?

STEPHEN That's a tough one. Sometimes it's not about poking for the invitation initially. Sometimes you
CARPENTER: find ways to become part of the community. At some level, that might sound like, oh, but you're really kind of manipulating. Because in the back of your mind you're saying, OK, at the right moment, I'm going to spring the question. I'm going to get the invitation. That's not what I'm talking about.

What I'm talking about is being part of a community, and doing the work in the community. Where the work that you're doing might be seen by folks who could invite you. Again, that sounds like it's some sort of nefarious, manipulative component. But not really, I think it's about continuing your work, and staying visible. And the invitations come.

There's an approach called arts entrepreneurship that is gaining traction, and several universities have courses in arts entrepreneurship-- and minors, and I think a few are starting majors as well, or have majors. Because these other groups are doing this kind of work, folks know about the water filter technology. It's starting to take off, and people are collaborating, they're entering into that space. And what they're doing, is they're making available for their learners-- K-12 learners-- possibilities that they might not have thought. It's the curriculum work that I'm doing with teachers, I think, that becomes quite engaging.

LARRY

Great. Thank you all, very much.

SUSSKIND:

STEPHEN

Thank you very much. Yeah, hope to see you tomorrow. Thank you, thank you.

CARPENTER: