

HARRELL FLETCHER

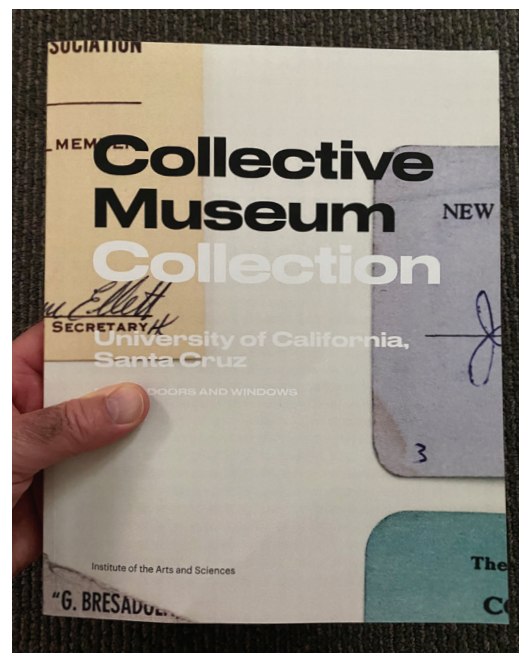




Harrell Fletcher, Molly Sherman, Nolan Calisch,
Public Doors and Windows Project, Collective Museum, 2015
 Installation view



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 Publication for the project "Public Doors and Windows"
 Photo: Harrell Fletcher

Previous page

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THE POWER OF A PROMPT

by Lydia Matthews

The Social Practice movement in contemporary art can be puzzling. Unlike painting, sculpture, performance or video art, it defies easy categorization. Favoring no particular medium, it can deploy any or all within a single project. It may exist physically or online—or in both domains simultaneously. And it goes by many names: socially-engaged art, community art, relational or dialogical art, new genre public art practice, to name but a few. Regardless of its elusive look or moniker, at its core Social Practice is a way of creating art primarily outside the studio, often in a collaborative and publicly-facing way. It undermines the “artist as individual genius” model, and is less focused on object-making than on embodying a process to encourage novel forms of social exchange, all of which trouble art market expectations. The fruits of Social Practice include producing overlooked narratives, facilitating previously unimagined experiences or engendering critical insights about daily life. By 2005 art colleges and universities around the world began to establish Social Practice art and design programs, and more recently, major museums and global biennials have embraced this externally-oriented practice in an effort to attract and engage broader publics.

Harrell Fletcher has been a key figure in establishing the Social Practice field as one of its leading artists and most innovative and influential educators. Often commissioned by museums or cultural organizations, he typically creates collaborative projects that leverage and critique normative values, power relations and modalities. In this way, his work is akin to the “institutional critique” genre of contemporary art. The hallmark of a Fletcher project, however, is how it provides opportunities for diverse stakeholders to amplify their talents and voices. Each project yields its own unique blend of subversive eccentricity and delight, as if germinating from a fearless, child-like question, “What if...?”

Long before entering art school, Fletcher was already seeking ways to challenge belief systems, break disciplinary boundaries and resist expectations. As an undergraduate at Humboldt State University in 1987, he spotted a “Special Topics” seminar in the course catalog. Entitled “Experiential Learning,” the seminar was the brainchild of renegade Sociology professor, Bill Devall, whose 1985 co-authored book *Deep Ecology*¹ was already stirring controversy within both academia and the environmental movement because of its radical proposals for how to lead a simple, rich, creative and ecologically-attuned life. On the first day of class, Professor Devall announced there would be no syllabus, exams, or grades—students should not depend on external validation. He offered only a single prompt: *choose an outdoor activity to practice during class*

hours and record your experience in a journal. Fletcher addressed the prompt by taking long, silent walks balancing on top of the local railroad tracks. He began to understand his journal as a primary tool for recording observations, stream of consciousness thoughts and reflective insights—a practice he continues today.

Devall's pedagogy was, by its very nature, anti-institutional: he reframed the world at large, full of mundane activities, as a perpetual learning environment to be rigorously researched and fully engaged, fueled by a repetitious mix of curiosity, boredom, discovery and wonder. Devall demonstrated the creative power and pedagogical potential inherent in a prompt. In nearly all of Harrell Fletcher's subsequent artistic projects, there is some trace of his teacher's influence.

We see this in the artist's immersive walking performances such as the 2013 *The Best Things in Museums Are the Windows*,² a choreographed, four-day trek with 12 Exploratorium Museum staff members and art and science enthusiasts. Fletcher envisioned a participatory, peripatetic project that followed a sightline from a window in the museum's home on San Francisco's Pier 15 to the summit of Mt. Diablo, 40 miles away. At various points along the route, collaborators—ranging from Exploratorium staff, disabled sailors, archivists, dance teachers, musicians, organic farmers to biologists and astronomers—led mini-workshops about the bay, fauna, flora, and history of the terrain they were traversing. The hikers harnessed the attentive viewing and curatorial methods they typically practiced within the Exploratorium to teach and learn from one another outdoors. Exploring the question “where does the museum end and the outside world begin?”, they forged a deeper sense of community while intersecting with people whom would have otherwise remained strangers.

Thinking beyond the confines of a museum is also present in Fletcher's 2014–16 *Collective Museum*, realized with Molly Sherman and Nolan Calisch as Public Doors and Windows (PDW). Because the Institute for Arts and Sciences at UC Santa Cruz had not yet established its own museum, PDW used their artist residency to rethink relationships between universities, museums and publics, questioning what is worth collecting and who gets to curate and interpret those works. They proposed re-framing the entire UC Santa Cruz campus into a decentralized collection of unconventional “landmarks,” ones selected by students, alumni, staff and faculty on the basis of personal meaningfulness. PDW audio-recorded the narratives that inspired the 50 selections, photographed each participant and their chosen site, crafted museum-like placards to mark these unexpected locations, and transformed multiple campus spaces to resemble museum display walls. For the duration of the project, which continues today, the *Collective Museum* can be accessed by foot across the two thousand acre campus, along a path and at a pace determined by each visitor. Additionally, it can be explored

online through the project website, whose aesthetics echo the visual branding of this unorthodox “museum.”

Understanding institutional frameworks as sites of power that are capable of becoming more diverse and inclusive is a recurrent theme in Fletcher’s work. In *This Container Isn’t Big Enough*, one segment of his contribution with Miranda July to the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Fletcher produced a free newspaper featuring the work of ten unrecognized artists from different parts of the country. Fletcher and July also included their critically acclaimed online project, *learningtoloveyoumore.com*, now in the collection of SFMOMA, in which they proposed a series of art assignments in a public “open call”, and then assembled the participants’ visual responses in a digital archive designed by Yuri Ono. Echoing Devall’s use of the prompt as a pedagogical and experiential trigger, the project’s poignant results were wide-ranging, amusing and often deeply poetic.

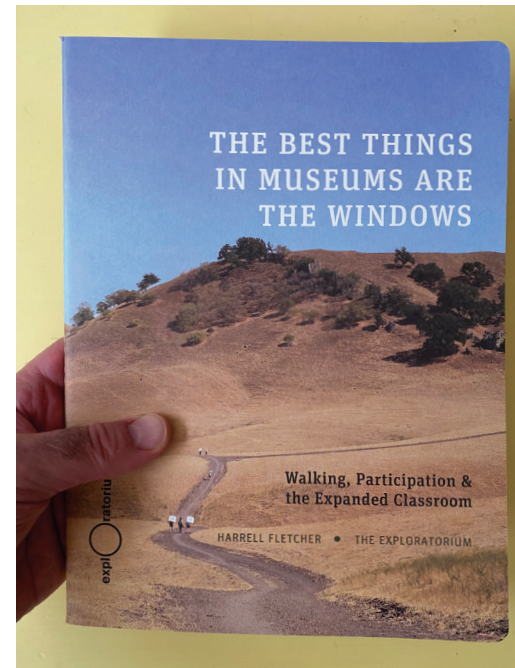
Most recently, the ghost of Bill Devall becomes a subject of Fletcher’s 2020 project at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon. In an act that Fletcher calls *retroactive claiming*,³ the artist reframed his walks along the railroad tracks as an originally unintentional—but now deliberately constructed—artwork. Devall, who died in 2009, is claimed as the project’s co-creator. By retroactively giving his undergraduate learning experience its own artistic pedigree, the piece functions as an homage and a provocative ploy. Not only does it critique who gets credited when art works are realized, but also questions what constitutes a true “collaboration”—an ethical issue that artists like Susan Meiselas and Wendy Ewald have also recently explored.⁴ Perhaps most importantly, Fletcher’s gesture calls attention to the fact that Devall earned his PhD from University of Oregon in 1970, and later bequeathed his archives to the university, where they currently lay in storage, rarely consulted. Fletcher’s retroactively claimed art work becomes a clarion call for people to walk across the campus yard in order to engage Devall’s archive, along with his radical pedagogical model of experiential learning. Like so many of the artist’s projects, this one prompts viewers to leave the confines of the museum—literally and metaphorically—transporting our imagination to an alternative space of discovery.

1 Bill Devall and George Sessions, originally published in hardcover as *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs. Smith: 1985) and later editioned in paperback as *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (1992, 1994, 1999, 2001, 2007)

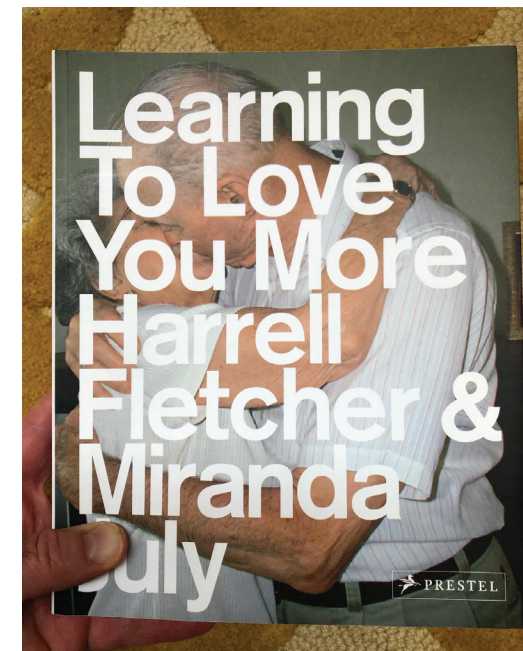
2 <https://www.exploratorium.edu/arts/works/the-windows>

3 <http://www.harrellfletcher.com/somethoughts/1964>

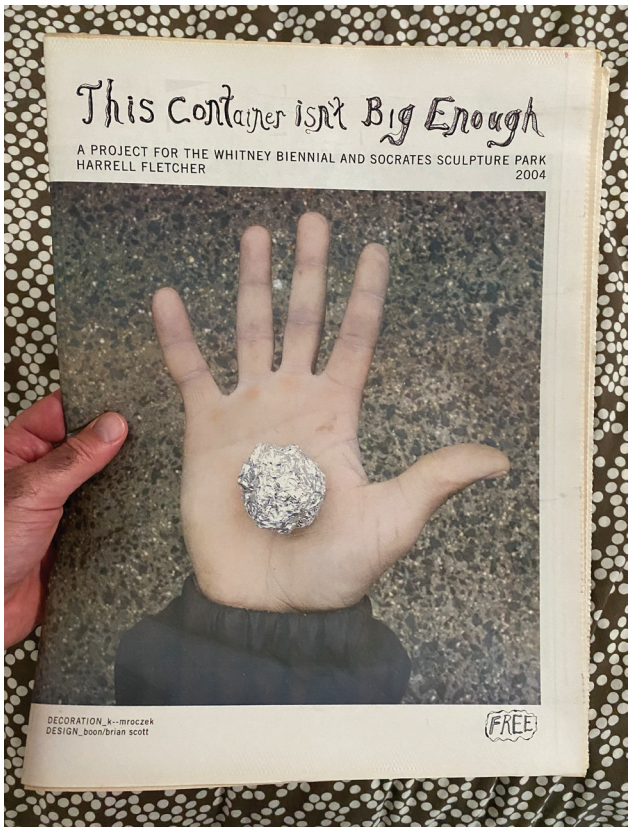
4 See Meiselas and Ewald’s *Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography* (<https://frieze.com/article/collaboration-potential-history-photography>)



The Best Things in Museums are the Windows, 2013
Publication for the project “The Best Things in Museums Are the Windows”
Photo: Harrell Fletcher



Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July,
Learning to Love You More, 2007
Publication for the project
“Learning to Love You More”
Photo: Harrell Fletcher



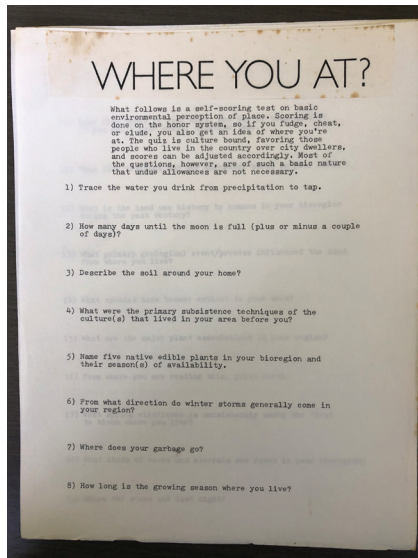
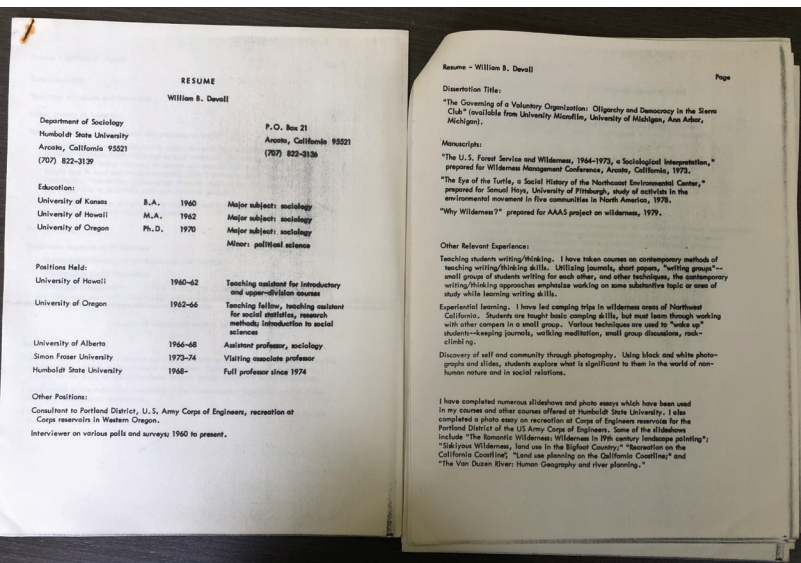
This Container Isn't Big Enough, 2004
Printed piece for the 2004 Whitney Biennial
New York, New York

HARRELL FLETCHER

b. 1967. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon

2017 Hallie Ford Fellow

Harrell Fletcher received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute and his Master of Fine Arts from the California College of the Arts. He studied organic farming at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and went on to work on a variety of small Community Supported Agriculture farms, which impacted his work as an artist. Fletcher has produced a wide variety of socially engaged collaborative and interdisciplinary projects since the early 1990's, and founded the Master of Fine Arts in Art and Social Practice at Portland State University. His work has been shown at SFMOMA, the de Young Museum, the Berkeley Art Museum, the Wattis Institute, and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the San Francisco Bay Area; The Drawing Center, Socrates Sculpture Park, The Sculpture Center, White Columns, The Wrong Gallery, Apex Art, and Smackmellon in New York, New York; PICA and the Portland Art Museum in Portland, Oregon; the Seattle Art Museum in Seattle, Washington; Signal in Malmo, Sweden; Domain de Kerguehennec, and the Matisse Museum in France; the Vancouver Art Gallery and The Power Plant in Canada; Tate Modern and the Royal College of Art in London; and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, among other locations.



Left and above

Items from the Bill Devall archive,
University of Oregon

Photo: Harrell Fletcher

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



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*Collective Museum, Public Doors and
Windows Project:* Courtesy the Institute of
the Arts and Sciences (IAS), University of
California, Santa Cruz, CA

Items from the Bill Devall archive: Courtesy
the University of Oregon Libraries Special
Collections, Eugene, OR

Learning to Love You More: Courtesy
the artist

*The Best Things in Museums are the
Windows:* Courtesy the Exploratorium,
Center for Art and Inquiry, San Francisco, CA