Come Together
I was doing a weeklong workshop at an art academy in Odensen, Denmark. All of the students there said that the town was not interesting so I asked them to each go out and find someone from the town who was willing to talk for ten minutes about something they knew and cared about. We then had all of those people come over to the academy and do their presentations one after another. It lasted about four hours. The students had to host and introduce the people they selected. The topics included health care, bus routes, skateboarding, scuba diving, furniture polishing, invisible social networks, playing music on the streets, etc. We were all blown away by the variety of knowledge that existed in one little town. Almost all of the presentations were truly interesting too. Since then I've used the same strategy for similar events in London; NYC; Austin, TX, etc. and have done a separate series as part of the American War traveling exhibition which focused specifically on local people talking about war related experiences.

Collective Learning
I teach at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, and I have a class currently where we started by having all of the students tell their life stories to everyone else. It took three classes to get through them all, but they revealed many interesting things that wouldn't come out in more cursory introductions. Based on connections the students had we organized a series of field trips to places like a Veterans hospital, an alternative kindergarten, a campus fraternity, a high school geometry class, a Native American community center, a radio station, etc. From those experiences the students broke off into groups to develop projects like a radio show about grandmothers, and a lecture series in the frat house living room. Some of the field trips didn't develop into projects, but were still valued as experiences. I like to think of this method as a way to lessen my role as the authority in the classroom and instead we share that role and all become collective learners.

Project Research
The way that I work is that I'm often asked to go somewhere to do a project, an art center or a university gallery or something like that. Generally it's a place that I would never have gone to had it not been for the offer to do something there. Examples include Eastern Kentucky; Croatia; Vietnam; Hartford, Connecticut; Houston, Texas, etc. I use these travel opportunities to learn about the place that I go to. This happens in a few different ways. I might read some books and or watch some documentary films about that place and try to figure out a project from that information. Or I might just go there and wander around and talk to some people that I run across. Sometimes I wind up working with the people I meet on a project and am taken deep into their lives. I think of that as primary learning experiences, or first hand learning experiences. The book and film research is secondary learning. I like both forms. The part that is really interesting to me is that on my own I wouldn't have learned about the things I learn
about at all—I allow the direction of my research to be out of my hands at the start. I still determine specifically what I'm drawn to and want to spend more time working with and only choose things that seem interesting to me. Once I've done the raw research I sometimes turn aspects of it into projects for the public to experience. I want to share what I find interesting. It's sort of like referring people to a restaurant that you like or a movie, but in my case it might wind up being a video made at a gas station based on James Joyce's Ulysses or an exhibition about the Vietnam War based on a war museum in Vietnam.

Photography and not photography
My dad has always liked pointing things out. He literally points to things with his finger—a tree, a building, a cloud, and then he will tell you what he knows about the thing he is pointing to. When I was about ten years old my parents bought me a used 35mm camera and I started walking about taking pictures with it. I realized that it was a way for me to point like my dad at things that I found interesting and then capture them to talk about later on. When I had the camera in my hands the world became a more visually interesting place, or I guess the world didn't change but I became more sensitive to what was interesting to me. I continued to take pictures and look at the world in terms of possible photographs for the next couple of decades. Then I decided I didn't need a camera anymore, I could just walk around and see interesting things with out the camera device, some of these things that I see turn into projects in one way or another. Largely I think of what I do as an artist as just pointing to things that I think are interesting so that other people will notice and appreciate them too.

Experiential Education
When I was in college as an undergraduate at Humboldt State University, which is in a very small hippy town in northern California, I took a class from a teacher named Bill Duvall, he had co-written an important environmental book called Deep Ecology. The class I took was called Experiential Education. On the first day of class Bill Duval asked each of the students to pick an outdoor physical activity to do during class periods for the rest of the semester. Some people chose surfing, some bike riding, and some kayaking. I decided to walk on railroad tracks. I got really good at it, by the end I could walk on the tracks for miles at a time without falling off, I could also run on them, jump from one track to the other, spin around on them, and walk on them with my eyes closed. The class didn't meet for the rest of the semester until the last weekend when we all meet up on a camping trip to talk about our personal experiences of doing our activities. Somehow I think about that class often, where as most of the other classes I took in college and all of the tests and papers and discussions that were a part of them are long forgotten.

Farm Apprenticeship
Two years after I got my MFA I went back to school to attend an organic farming apprenticeship at UC Santa Cruz. There were forty students all living in tents together on a twenty-acre farm on the university campus. Most of the time we just did a lot of hard labor, but it was so much better than any other educational program I'd ever participated in before. Most of what I do as an art professor now is based not my art
education but instead on my farming education.

Open Source Approaches
In the art world there is so much emphasis on originality. Artists buy right into that, and even though they are always influenced by other people they try pretending that they are not. The galleries promote this idea and encourage "signature styles", rarification and the star/celebrity system. I can see why the galleries would like that way of doing business because it allows them to inflate prices and make demand, but for artists there is no real benefit. It just suppresses the true way that people develop their work through adapting and hybridizing and creates an environment where artists feel like they have to protect and make secret their process rather than sharing it freely and feeling good about doing that, which I think would be much more healthy both for individuals and as a system.

Social Practice as Opposed to Studio Practice
Let me define "art" as anything that anyone calls "art". That can be a maker or viewer. By calling something "art" it doesn't make it art forever just during the time that it is being appreciated as art. Similarly, I don't think, as Beuys said, that everyone is an artist, I just think that everyone has the potential to be an artist. If anyone wants to be an artist they can be one as far as I'm concerned and that is regardless of their credentials. You definitely don't need an academic degree to be an artist. Most of my favorite artists don't have academic degrees.

I think an artist is someone who gets to do whatever they want (within whatever limits might be containing them-financial, legal, ethical, psychological.) Other professions or practices don't have this level of freedom, dentists need to do dental work, dog trainers train dogs, etc. Those could be fun or not so fun professions to have, but regardless that is what those people need to do until they decide that they want to do something else. Artists can do a project about dentistry or dogs or anything else they are interested in at any time and then can do something else right after or even during, and still remain an artist.

Social Practice in regards to art can be looked at as anything that isn't studio practice. By studio practice I mean the dominate way of making art-spending time in a studio working out personal interests into the form of paintings, or objects, or photos, or videos, or some other pretty easily commodifiable form. The often unspoken intention for this studio work is that it will go off to a desirable commercial gallery, be reproduced in art magazines, and eventually wind up in museum collections, while making the artist into a celebrity of sorts, and paying all of the bills. That is the carrot on the stick that keeps this dominate approach alive and kicking, even though very few of these studio practice artists ever get their work shown at all, and most just give up and find some other way to pay off their student loans.

I've just started up a Social Practice MFA program at Portland State University. There are currently eight students enrolled. They don't get studios like the other MFA students and instead have a shared office and a shared classroom space. Currently we are
looking for a more public version of these spaces possibly in the form of an off-grid alternative energy portable building that might locate itself in different parts of the city in vacant lots and at grade schools, etc. The students take some classes with the other studio MFA students but they also spend time on projects in various collaborative groups working with the city of Portland, various non-profits, and applying for public art projects in other places, as well as doing their own individual social practice work. I'm trying to show that artists can actually have sustained and supported careers within the public in ways that aren't possible when the commercial gallery is the primary system that artists are trying to respond to. So far it is going very well.

Learning Environments
I like to read about alternative education for kids from the 60's and 70's. There is one writer I'm particularly fond of named John Holt. He wrote a great book called How Children Learn, and then about twenty years later he revised the book by adding comments on his own writing in the margins of the book. He thought that a lot of the text he'd written twenty years earlier didn't make any sense. One of the things he did agree with is that traditional classrooms are not set up as learning environments because the kids are divided up in terms of age, and because they are forced to sit in desks and not move or talk unless they raise their hand and are called on and then only to regurgitate what the teacher has already told them. He says that instead a learning environment would be one that has a mix of ages and experiences in one place so that people can learn from each other, and that learning happens through doing activities and talking with other people, so those things shouldn't be suppressed. In later books he suggests that typical schools are really more like prisons for kids rather than places of learning. I tend to agree.

Making Work That is Accessible to Both Art and Non-Art Publics
When I was younger it seemed like it was good to make art that was very obscure, so obscure that even I had no idea what it was about. If anyone asked I would just say that I wanted the viewer to have their own interpretation of what the work was about, but really I now think that was just a way of avoiding having to know what I was doing or why I was doing it. Then it occurred to me that it might be nice if not only I understood what I was doing, but that even non-art trained publics would be able to find the work accessible. Even though I'd never been taught to think in that way it turned out to not be very hard to do. One of my favorite approaches is to do work with a local person or group of people that I met around the place where I am going to have a show. That way they feel invested in the show and invite their friends and family to see it. Working with these people made me avoid doing anything obscure and instead I found ways of making engaging projects in pretty straightforward ways. The work is interesting and complex not because I made it that way, but because the people I work with are interesting and complex (as it turns out everyone is). I'm just able to put it all into an art context, which makes people consider it in ways they might not otherwise.

Multiple Ways to View the Same Experience
I like art that can be viewed in a number of ways. I think of it like going for a walk in a forest by myself and liking it in a certain sort of direct but abstract and emotional way,
and then going on the same forest walk with a botanist friend of mine who tells me the
names of all of the plants and where they come from, etc. I like both experiences very
much, neither is better or worse for me, they are just different. That's how good art can
be too.

Walter
I spent two years out of school between undergrad and graduate school. For one of the
years I drove around the country and into Mexico living out of my truck, periodically
crashing on the couches of friends and family. The other year I lived in Los Gatos,
California and worked in the after school program of a small grade school in the Santa
Cruz Mountains. I did art projects with all of the kids there from kindergarten to 5th
grade. Right away I noticed that the kindergarteners were all interdisciplinary artists,
and that they were very fearless and motivated. There was a slow regression that took
place as the kids got older and by the time they were in 5th grade there was usually
only one kid in each class that was considered an artist and that was because he or she
could draw realistically. The rest of the kids were convinced that they had no artistic
abilities at all.

One of the kindergarteners I worked with was named Walter, he was the smallest kid in
the whole school but he was clearly very intelligent too. Somehow he had learned to
multiply and divide in his head and the other older kids loved to throw complicated
equations his way and wait for him to come up with the answers, which were almost
always correct. I'd had bad experiences with math as a kid, and like the 5th graders who
had lost their artistic sense of themselves, I'd lost any concept of myself being able to
do anything but rudimentary math. But Walter wanted more math to tackle and it wasn't
being supplied in his kindergarten class. So I asked my mathematician friend Cleveland
to explain some simple algebra to me. Cleveland is a thoughtful and patient instructor
and soon I actually found myself learning and being excited about math with the primary
motivation of being able to pass on what I was learning to Walter.

When it came to the art projects for the kids I tried to keep it simple, I liked making
books and so I showed them how to make books too. Walter was particularly excited
about this activity. Every day he made a new set of drawings on a specific subject of
interest like insects, dinosaurs, ghosts, monsters, animals found in Africa, etc. He would
then dictate to me the text and title and staple the whole thing together. Then he would
run around the little campus and make everyone look at his book. Kids would stop
basketball games and gather around to flip through Walter's latest creation. After he had
shown everyone, Walter would discard the book, with total disinterest (I rescued several
from the trash) and started speculating on the next day's book topic.

It occurred to me that Walter was fulfilling a whole little system of parts which are crucial
to the artistic process. He determined a subject that was of interest to him, insects, etc.
expressed his feelings on the subject through his drawings and text, and then went out
to share his product with an audience. There were no other factors or motivations, no
hope of using the work to get into grad school, or to get a gallery show, and no desire to
make something that looked like something else he saw in Art Forum. It occurred to me
that I had started similarly to Walter when I first was interested in making art, but that somewhere along the way that system had been corrupted. I decided to stop making art for a while and then as projects slowly started occurring to me again I tried to compare them with Walter's process to determine if I should pursue them or not. It has been difficult to maintain Walter's level of simplicity and integrity, but it is always a goal of mine.

Learning To Love You More
In 2002 I started a participatory web project called Learning To Love You More with filmmaker Miranda July. Miranda and I come up with what we call assignments like Write Your Life Story in Less Than A Day, and Take A Picture Under Your Bed, and Describe Your Ideal Government, etc. and then people all over the world respond by doing what we call Reports, which are the results of following an assignment. These reports are archived on the site so that people can see and compare everyone's contributions. At this point we have over sixty assignments (which we continue to add to) and over 5000 people have participated by doing reports. The idea is that sometimes it's nice to not have to worry about coming up with an idea and instead to concentration on the experience. We think of the assignments sort of like recipes that people might want to follow at first and then later after feeling more confident from the results they might be more comfortable cooking their own thing. Or for those who have no desire to come up with their own ideas they can do many of the assignments and it can be more like a yoga class where you follow along with an instructor who directs the students into a variety of different poses, but while everyone is doing for instance Downward Dog, they are still each doing their own version of Downward Dog. I personally really like taking yoga classes because for some reason I can't get myself to do yoga on my own, but following the prescriptive exercises always makes me feel better about life in general.

Aunt Grace
In my first year of grad school I made a Xerox book of a long transcribed interview that I'd done with my Great Aunt Grace when I visited her in a nursing home in a small town in Oklahoma just before she died at the age of ninety-eight. One of the people I gave a copy of the Aunt Grace book to told me that she took it home with her over winter break and showed it to her mother. She said her mother read it and loved it. That gave me pause. Did I want mothers to love my work? For a second that seemed somehow uncool. But then after thinking about it a little longer I realized that yes I did want mothers to love my work, I wanted all sorts of people to love my work and have all sort of other emotions in regards to it also.

Contemporary Art History Dilemma and Solution
For the last two years I've been trying to get Portland State University to offer a contemporary art history class that just focuses on work made during the 21st century. Somehow this seems like an impossible task for the people who teach art history. Last year the teacher was a very nice woman but she was unable to even reach the 1990's in her class. This year we tried a new teacher. I met with her and explained that I didn't want her to even mention anything about the seventies, eighties or nineties except in
reference to something made in the 2000's. I told her not to use a textbook, and not to try to put the art into themes. Instead I asked her to just show a variety of artists and work made since 2000 and then to discuss it with the class. This proved to be too difficult somehow, and so she started with the seventies, had the students all buy textbooks that were published before 2000 and organized the term into a set of themes. About ten of the grad students dropped out of the class with my approval and instead set up their own class. They created a blog with links to contemporary art sites, they assign each other readings and writings and have their own class discussions. I'm going to periodically check in with them, but it looks like they are doing just fine.

Three Classes
I taught a class last year in which I had all of the students find a department on campus that wasn't the art department and then to find someone there, a professor, student, or staff person, and ask them if they could become an artist in residence for that department. So the students became artists in residence in the black studies dept, the science dept, the music dept, the psychology dept, the systems analysis dept etc. they spent the term learning about and doing projects with that dept. Periodically the whole class would go on a tour of all of the depts. and see what everyone was up to.

I had another class that as a group went on the same walk together one day each week. We walked for an hour and then turned around and went back to the university. The students were asked to make projects with people and about things they encountered on the walk and to install the work along our walk route. By the end of the term we all had a very different understanding of the neighborhoods we had been walking through then when we started. There was another class that was made up entirely of field trips. The students were in charge of organizing and conducting the field trip. They were graded on the quality of the field trips they organized. I'm not much for grades, but I'd rather grade the organization and execution of a class field trip than an object of art. We went to visit dams, and mansions, and parks, and corn mazes, and suburban developments, and recycling centers. It was very educational and fun and interesting too.

Crow Bio-diesel project
My wife Wendy Red Star is half Crow Indian and grew up on the Crow reservation in South/Central Montana. When she took me there to meet her family it occurred to me that there was an interesting dynamic at work on the reservation. It is very common to deep fry food there in cooking oil, and people tend to drive in big diesel trucks. After talking about it Wendy and I came up with an idea that would combine these two aspects of reservation life into a project. The plan is to create a bio-diesel station on the reservation that collects and processes used cooking oil and converts it into bio-diesel that can be used as a cleaner fuel for the diesel trucks that people often drive there. Our hope is that the free or inexpensive fuel would be a draw for people to come to the station that would also serve as a community center that includes educational and cultural experiences designed specifically to address issues and concerns on the reservation, and could possibly function as a kids daycare center too. The vehicle that would go and collect the used cooking oil would also operate as a mobile learning
center/book mobile, going out into the community and providing services like teaching traditional Crow language and cultural practices, along with providing information about contemporary health and environmental issues, etc. Right now we are in a research and development stage.

Leading an Interesting Life
I had a professor in grad school who told me that he was addicted to the art world, and that he was never satisfied. Once he got into one show he just wanted to get into another that he perceived as more important, he also scanned Art Forum every month to make sure his name was mentioned somewhere in it and if it wasn't he felt depressed. I think he told me this as a warning.

Mostly what I'm trying to do as an artist is to live an interesting life. At least that's what I keep telling myself. It can be a struggle at times, but I think that is pretty much what I am doing.