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Continuing our "in residence" series, James McAnally speaks with recent resident [Dan Miller](#) on his collaborative practices, the different contexts of working in Australia, Chicago and then St. Louis, and his attempts at working past established individual and institutional forms.

James McAnally: *The title of your [recent book](#), published by Half Letter Press, is "At Work with Thomas Kong," referencing your ongoing collaboration in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. This seems to me indicative of your collaborative-centric approach. You are almost always "at work with" someone. In your time at The Luminary, we talked about these dynamics of the artist's relationship with an institution. How would you describe your relationship to these ongoing, long-term collaborations and your own practice?*

Dan Miller: I've always been a project-based artist, but early on those projects often ended in discrete exhibitions, which can be very solipsistic exercises. And I've struggled against the dominant idea that making art is about self-expression. It always seemed to me that the expressive potentials of art were in difference—between ideologies, social worlds,

languages, histories, and so on. Recognizing this, and understanding the dominance of the myth of singular authorship (especially where institutions are concerned), my thinking and practice has gradually focused on the possibilities of collaboration. My “work with” Thomas Kong in Chicago over the past three years has been one of the longer projects I’ve been involved in, and it’s opened up many possibilities for working beyond the productivism of a competitive, individualized artworld. It’s also allowed me to evade certain institutional demands, but I’m realizing that at some point you have to make decisions about how you can participate in, and make contributions to, the wider discourse. I’m also trying to work more deliberately—many of my collaborations, including with Thomas, have begun with unplanned encounters. I don’t want to abandon a methodology of chance altogether, but I do want to put myself in contexts that are rich with the kind of possibilities I enjoy.

*JM: This residency was meant as a kind of research visit in hopes of future expansions. Were there things about the city or neighborhood that redirected your thoughts? What avenues were of most interest for future iterations?*

**DM:** Being in St. Louis was a revelation in many ways. It’s obviously a city with deep divisions and inequalities (much like Chicago), but there seems to be a lot of room for agile, creative, responses to those conditions. I also noticed a kind of populist, anti-elitist, attitude that reminded me of certain aspects of Australian public culture. There is an open appreciation for the passionate amateur, or the creative non-professional, the kinds of figures who are close kin to the artists I appreciate most. I of course paid an obligatory visit to the City Museum—my favorite display was a series of vitrine cabinets filled with items dug up from St. Louis privies by an amateur archaeologist named Jim Meiners. It wasn’t so much the artefacts I enjoyed, but Meiners’ polite diatribe against the exclusivity and opacity of the professional archaeology class—this appears at the end of a three-page document taped up inside one of the cabinets.

On a more local scale, I enjoyed talking to artists and non-artists about the different ways people are collaborating and making spaces. Cherokee Street seems like a locus for different kinds of meaningful experiments, inside and outside art. I loved chatting with William Porter at his pizza shop, Master Pieza, and seeing Love Bank Park, the park across the street he helped transform from a disused lot, in a classic ask-for-forgiveness-not-permission maneuver. Being in St. Louis for the first time, I didn’t feel I could do much more than learn—I had no intention of imposing my ‘practice’ on any of the city’s many communities, nor of hunkering down in the studio. I absolutely plan on returning, but I’m not sure yet what that will look like. I think my ability to be genuinely present and useful in another city depends on first being able to find some answers to the question, “what is the labor of the artist good for?”.

*JM: Apart from research, you proposed a distinct (and unexpected) intervention in your time here - something of a cross between Michael Asher and Bernard Brunon. What led you to that project, or what was its significance for you in relation to your work?*

DM: Despite this kind of loose research, I was feeling very conscious about my position on the residency. As a white male artist from out-of-town, enjoying the generosity of an institution I admire but not actively producing anything, I struggled to justify my presence. I called a friend whose advice I trust and he told me not to worry: "this is your time to be selfish," he said. I appreciated the sentiment, but I wondered why modes of action or living had to be divided into the selfish and the selfless. At the same time, you and I were having some productive conversations about the labor of the artist-organizer, and about the many hats that you and Brea wear in and around The Luminary. Sometime during my second week there, I remembered that you had mentioned to me, in passing, that you all had not gotten around to painting the walls at the back of your building after an exhibition was deinstalled there more than a year earlier. Since I had nothing but time, I offered to paint them.

I tried to maintain total indifference aesthetically, but I also wanted to do a good job of it. I hope I did. I deliberately did not frame this as a 'work' at the time, because I needed it to be real. I needed to be just a person reciprocating a little of your generosity with a day's work to complete a task that had slipped down your to-do list. It certainly felt real—that ladder was heavy! The mustachioed dudes fitting out the newest craft whiskey hangout across the street who saw me struggling with it probably wondered why you had hired such a lightweight for the job. A sweet kid who lived nearby took pity on me and offered me ice cream. With a bit of distance, I'm more comfortable talking about how it might be legible as art. Asher and Brunon are good reference points, I think, but I would also add Mierle Laderman Ukeles to that list. The walls returned to the neutral gray that matches the rest of the exterior of your building, so the work became immediately invisible. Maintenance, of course, has everything to do with what is and is not visible.

*JM: Having spent time in several contexts, most prominently in Melbourne and Chicago, how do these contexts influence your work? Has it dramatically shifted being in the US vs AU, for example?*

DM: Before coming to Chicago, I lived in Melbourne for nearly six years. It's a remarkable city, with sophisticated modes of art practice, and long histories of institutional critique and site-specific work. It also has a thriving ecology of artist-run projects and spaces, which provides the conditions for artists to work with maximal autonomy. In Melbourne I learnt a rigorous and polished language of exhibition-making that is still influential on me, but in Chicago there is an enormous range of presentation methods, and no shortage of scrappy, experimental, informal and spontaneous projects that seem to have less anxiety about

their own value. These attitudes have definitely filtered through to my practice in the time I've been working here. It's also true that I get a lot of energy from the kinds of everyday interactions in public and commercial spaces that happen wherever I'm living. Here, the subtle yet constant differences between my own cultural inheritance and what I experience are energizing. I guess I'm just one of those people who gets off on being displaced from their home culture—I know I'm not alone in this, but I often feel a sense of greater creative freedom working in a place I don't quite belong.

*JM: You've been active in the past year with running The Back Room at Kim's Corner Food, along with other exhibitions and publications related to it, a new mural in its adjacent neighborhood, as well as numerous other collaborations. Where is your practice headed at the moment? Anything on the horizon you are especially excited about?*

**DM:** Beyond the ongoing projects with Thomas Kong and other collaborators in Rogers Park, I'm beginning to return to exhibition-making. I want to snuggle up a little closer to the institutional forms of art to see whether my ideas about authorship and collaboration can be re-translated there. The next big project I'm working on is a two-person show with another Chicago-based artist, Aaron Walker, next spring at Roots & Culture in Chicago. Actually, that show has emerged from something we found in an old book I bought in an antique store in Dutchtown, on one of my many bike rides around St. Louis—so my residency research is already bearing fruit. Roots & Culture has a long tradition of two-person shows, and Aaron and I are both interested in collaborating with each other and with other entities in ways that rub up against that model. I'm also working on something new for a show in the fall at DEMO Project in Springfield, Illinois, organized by the artist Jesse Malmed. I'm planning to bring other people in to complicate the 'my' in 'my work.' The last time I was at DEMO, which is in Springfield's Enos Park neighborhood, I caught a glimpse of something that knocked my socks off—a DIY ice cream van called 'MR COOL' that was like a fantastic collage on wheels. I'm still trying to track it down, so if anyone knows who MR COOL is, please put him in touch with me—I want to collaborate!