

"Honk If You've Ever Used The Word Problematize" A conversation between Dan Miller and Davi Lakind

The following is compiled and edited from the transcripts of two conversations that took place at Davi Lakind's home in Logan Square during September 2016, as the third and final season of Trunk Show was drawing to a close.

Dan Miller I was sort of joking with you at the last opening about using this contribution to the catalog to talk about your project in particular, and then I was thinking more about it, because I'm not so comfortable just—

Davi Lakind Pontificating?

DM Yeah. I'd rather have a conversation with you because I think you're possibly the most qualified person to speak to Raven and Jesse as people, and also to this project as a very close observer and as

someone who ended up becoming an artist in the project. So I thought it would be good to chat about your experience as a friend of those guys and as a friend of Trunk Show.

DL Sure. Well, Raven and Jesse are two of my very closest friends and they're also people with whom I've been close continuously for longer than almost anybody. I've known both of them since the beginning of seventh grade. We went to a very small middle and high school in Santa Fe together. I've been very close to both of them since we were fourteen or fifteen, and we stayed close even when we were living on opposite ends of the country.

DM How long have you all been in Chicago?

DL Just over five years. Raven and I were applying for graduate schools at the same time, going through that process very much together, and within a couple weeks of each other realized that the place we were both going to be landing was Chicago.

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DM I am interested in your awareness of Raven and Jesse becoming artists, or becoming people who were part of artistic communities—

DL I think that for both of them it was not a particularly surprising direction. Jesse made a movie for his ‘senior independent project’ in high school; Raven was also already very interested in art in high school. It made a lot of sense.

DM Was art ever a direction that you were interested in?

DL Me? No. Unless you count writing as an art.

DM You were interested in creative writing?

DL Yeah, in some form. I was always very interested in writing, but I didn’t fancy myself interesting enough to just be a writer; I always felt I needed some sort of analytic kernel. And then after college when I was living in New York I found my way into this job where I was working with kids and their families in Harlem. I was very committed to finding

work that felt social justice-y, contributing in a substantive way to making the world better. That job led me in the direction of a career structured around figuring out how to make everyday settings in communities of poverty do better. Which I would argue involves a lot of creativity, but is not ‘art,’ I guess.

DM What do you see as your relationship to artistic practice now?

DL My relationship to artistic practice is intensely personal. A lot of what I do is I make friends with people who are in the arts, and I think it’s important to support people doing what they’re doing, and just to show up. Because I’m friends with Raven and Jesse and I liked the people they were meeting more than the people I was being exposed to through my education, on one level the reason that I’ve gotten to know all these people is because I’ve just been tagging along with my friends. But definitely in my own right I’m interested in art and interested in creative practices. I’m interested in utopian possibilities,

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and I think that very broadly speaking the practice of art, and communities built around art, at its best is more people doing the things that they're excited about and not being constrained by societal norms.

DM I think I agree that there is more latent radical possibility in art than in anything else.

DL Because art can be anything, maybe art just means latent radical possibility? It just means do whatever the fuck you want, and get to be true to yourself.

DM That's maybe a little individualistic to put it that way. I don't think it's necessarily just about doing whatever the fuck you want, it's about making the circumstances in which people can do the things that they want, which is bigger and broader and more inclusive and necessarily more about building communities, or acting collectively.

DL A hundred percent, yeah.

DM So you and Raven and Jesse have all been here

for five years. And Trunk Show began three years ago. Do you feel like you were there at the beginning of that?

DL I wasn't there when they came up with it but I remember one of them saying 'hey we have this new idea for a thing, we're gonna have an art project where we display bumper stickers on our car, and we'll have different artists make them, and run it like a space in some way or another.'

DM Does it resemble other things that they'd done before?

DL Kind of. They had a zine called *DEEP // LEAP*, with a friend of ours named Adam.¹ That started when they were living in San Francisco. *DEEP // LEAP* was

¹ *DEEP // LEAP* issue one (subtitled 'a collection of prompted shorts and inspired images from around the country') was published in Fall 2008 and organized by Adam Fulton Johnson and Jesse Malmed. *DEEP // LEAP* issue two was published in 'early 2009' and organized by Adam Fulton Johnson, Jesse Malmed and Raven Falquez Munsell. An archive of the zine and related projects under the name DEEP LEAP can be found at deeleap.net.

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a zine project, it didn't last too long, but the idea was that they sent an open call out to their friends to see who might want to participate, and for those who said they were interested they had a handful of different prompts. You would receive a prompt, and then have to respond to it, in whatever way you wanted. And I did contribute to those. That was fun.

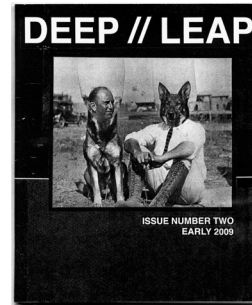
DM What did you do?

DL For the first issue I wrote a little prose poem about being hungover at a farmer's market and getting tomatoes. I think my prompt was something like 'fruits and vegetables with a history', and so I started thinking about heirloom fruits and vegetables. It was supposed to be half woozy elegy and half 'I know this is not very good'. I hope both parts of it come across, but I don't know. I was twenty-four.

DM What were your thoughts when you got the zine in the mail?

DL I was very impressed that, in addition to the

jobs they were working, they had pulled this off. I thought it was cool, I still think it's cool. It was really lovely to see the ways in which *DEEP // LEAP* created or reflected a larger community that was comprised of a lot of different communities that people had developed over the years. One of the things that I really love about my friend group is how the friend circle grows when any of us bring new, cool people into the fold, and that felt very reflected in the list of contributors—there are people from lots of different parts of their lives, many of whom were also a part of my life.



DM Looking back on the three years of the Trunk Show program, do you think there's a similar thing at work there?

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DL To a degree, although I think that with Trunk Show they were much more focused on curating their artists—I think they wanted to avoid just having all their friends do things, and they were careful to reach out to people they didn't have pre-existing relationships with, in addition to drawing on people who they did know.

DM Yeah, I'm interested in this constant back and forth—there seems to be a latent conversation in a lot of, let's say, alternative practices, about the role of friendship. On the one hand plenty of people make the argument that one should very comfortably engage one's friends and not be shy about it, and be honest and transparent about it, but then there's also this other impulse which suggests that that is somehow antithetical to meritocracy and we should be aiming for some kind of meritocratic practice.

DL Yeah, I was thinking about that—when Brandon Alvendia had his show at Threewalls² Kate Sierzputowski hosted a roundtable on nepotism³, and Raven and Gan were invited to be part of the

conversation as representatives of Third Object⁴, and I went because I thought of course I should. I'm really interested in how nepotism in social networks and friendships functions, particularly in the art world because I have this slightly removed perspective on it. I think it's present in any space that's also professional, but it functions interestingly in the art world because it's such a social world. And I thought the conversation was interesting, but I wanted to see them problematize the idea of nepotism or personal networking a little more. I do remember, an audience member made a nice point that if socializing is an important part of how you build these connections then in some ways it means that you're always working. You can

² Brandon Alvendia's platformist exhibition project, *The Great Good Place*, was held at Threewalls, Chicago, from November 7 to December 12, 2015.

³ Inside/Within hosted a two-part moderated conversation at Threewalls on November 19, 2015, on the themes 'In-Office Studio' & 'The New Nepotism'. Participants in the 'The New Nepotism' conversation included Brandon Alvendia, Traci Fowler of Kitchen Space, Elizabeth Weiss of Spears, and Gan Uyeda and Raven Munsell of Third Object.

⁴ Third Object is a Chicago-based curatorial collective, whose members currently include Ann Meisinger, Raven Falquez Munsell and Gan Uyeda.

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never be off. The way in which I see artist friendship networks function here is they're never friendships that are forged in the absence of everybody being in the arts world. You meet each other on the grounds of both being in this world. I think that's particularly apparent when people are talking real insider stuff, about who is running this gallery or space and what job somebody is getting. It's interesting to see how often I'm left on the outside of conversations at things where I'm ostensibly surrounded by friends.

DM So how did it come about that you became one of the artists in the Trunk Show program?

DL My experience of it was that I told Raven and Jesse, 'you guys I have a really good idea for this, I think you should do this,' and they were like 'alright, what's your idea?' And I was like, 'alright, here's my idea!' and they were like: 'eh.'

DM How am I gonna transcribe that sound?

DL [laughter] Eh? E-h, I would say e-h.

DM E-h?

DL Yeah. They weren't like, 'oh my god, amazing, you're hired!' It was like 'sure, that's cute.' It felt like they liked the idea, but they didn't seem like they were actually going to act on it. And then some amount of time later, as this gifty surprise to me Raven said, 'We have an exciting thing to tell you... we want you to be one of the artists for Season 2 of Trunk Show!'

DM I like that they gave you a little bit of a drumroll—

DL Yeah, they totally did.

DM Did you feel any pressure to perform?

DL No, I didn't think so.

DM Because you knew it was a good idea?

DL Yeah. I have lots of good ideas and I know when they're good. I'm just not interested in doing the work to make them happen.

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DM So they said that they'd like to put you in the season, and then what happened after that? It seems like they conceptualized it as a project about the fact that you weren't an artist?

DL I think so. Although I would like to problematize that a little bit. I would like to say that my sticker is not about 'I am not an artist'. I would say that it is playing with the liminality of what is an artist and what isn't an artist. Because maybe I *am* an artist—I did a sticker, doesn't that make me an artist?

DM I completely agree, but I wonder, if you'd had a really great idea that couldn't be connected to this idea of you being somehow in this liminal space, would they have gone ahead with it?

DL I don't know; probably not. But I do really like that my sticker is a reflection of who I am in relation to them and to the art world, and I do recognize that for my sticker it was important that it encapsulate this relational identity in a way that isn't so important for other artists.

DM Definitely, but it does raise a question I have about the participation of so-called outsiders in the art field. It often seems to me that if the audience is majority insiders, no matter how you try and cast it, there is a way in which that outsider practice is always going to be reliant on its very outsidersness—that it can't necessarily be taken at face value.

DL Totally. But that's also because outsider practice has to be constituted by the insiders, and by the insider definition of the boundary between inside and outside, right? But so, yeah, then the outsidersness becomes the defining feature, or one of the defining features. I think that's why one of the other things that appeals to me about this funny outsider art thing, and why I was playing with the camo and why I want to be tongue in cheek about it is because, I don't know, what makes you an outsider artist? Or an artist, period? For me, I'm actually very insidery in this funny way, I'm an insider non-artist instead. I'm part of this art scene and I go to all this stuff and I socialize with all these people.

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DM But I think there would be a consensus that you're not an artist amongst those people.

DL But now that I'm a Trunk Show artist, aren't I an artist? I've been introduced sometimes as, 'This is Davi, she was a Trunk Show artist.' Which I think is hilarious, but obviously seems relevant to other people as part of my identity.

DM These are fundamental questions for me, what makes someone an artist. I think if you say you're an artist you're an artist, and if someone else says you're an artist you're an artist. The same thing applies to art. If I'm doing this [tapping idiosyncratically on the table], and one day I'm like, 'hey this is my art right now', that's my art. But if I'm doing this [tapping idiosyncratically on the table] without even thinking about it and then a bunch of people look at it and go like 'hey, that's art'—

DL Then it's also art?

DM Right. So there are two ways for an art to exist, and also the same two ways for an artist to exist.

But they're very different modes of identification. You played with—

DL All of it, I hope.

DM Yeah, from both of those angles, by troubling the self-identification question but also by inserting yourself into their program, troubling their designation of people as artists and not artists.

DL Totally.

DM What was your idea behind the camo?

DL The idea of the camo is that it's this thing that was originally supposed to represent 'outside,' but at this point represents itself. You look at camo and you don't think 'oh yes, it's trees,' you look at camo and you think 'oh yes, it's camo.' So it's just another layer of the pun. The other part about the camo that I thought was funny for me is that this was a couple months after Third Object curated a show at Roots & Culture that

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was about camo⁵, and so it was this very silly gesture on my part—because this whole project in some ways is about me saying ‘hey what about me, you guys?!’—and so the camo gesture is like, ‘you guys were doing camo and talking about it for a long time and now I think about camo too!’

DM Do you feel like your plea was listened to?

DL The plea itself was tongue in cheek. I’m not trying that hard to break into the art world as an artist. I could be doing more if that were a goal, and instead I’ve decided to busy myself with other stuff, so I didn’t need this to be an announcement of my presence as an artist that needed to fully be taken seriously.

DM I think an amazing bumper sticker would have been, in huge font just ‘Davi Lakind for Trunk Show.’

DL That was my other idea!!

DM Really?!

⁵ *Mossy Cloak*, a group exhibition organized by Third Object, was held at Roots & Culture, Chicago, from February 6 – March 7, 2015.

DL Yeah!

DM [laughter]

DL We loved that idea—it said ‘Davi Lakind for Trunk Show’ and then in really small letters it said ‘outside art.’ It was perfect because it was maybe about my narcissism or excitement, but maybe gesturing at me just being a dope and getting it wrong, either not understanding how the stickers are supposed to work or not knowing how to work the computer programs well enough not to mess it up.

DM That’s very funny.

DL I was also eager to do more stuff. I wanted to use the opportunity as if it were a month long residency, not just have the sticker and opening event be it.

DM What else did you do?

DL I tweeted a bunch of stupid jokes.

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DM On Trunk Show's account?

DL It was on my account—I would tweet at Trunk Show, and then they retweeted. It was this conversation with Trunk Show about other ideas for stickers, ones that I was saying might be better because they would show I was a real insider. Truly the thing that I feel most famous about right now is that Tim Kinsella—when he was advertising his Trunk Show—found some of my tweets, and Instagrammed them as his way of saying, 'hey come to this thing.'

DM I'm interested in the joke vehicle—I mean it's not insignificant that you used the joke as the vehicle for this project.

DL Yeah. The joke allows it to be both a joke and not a joke—because the whole point is, it is and it isn't. Whatever the thing, whatever the *is* is, it is and it isn't that thing. It's a joke and it's not a joke. I'm outside art but I'm also not outside art.

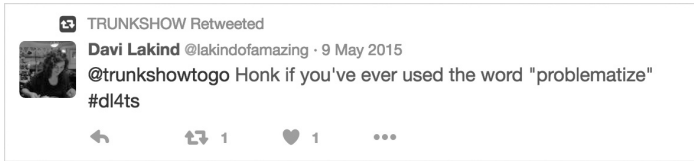
DM Right. And I think that one of the ways in which this project is very complicated is that the form itself is so simple. Anyone could come up with a good bumper sticker. It's not like every month they were revealing a new photorealist painting and they were going to be judged on the quality of the photorealism in the painting.

DL Right.

DM I think obviously the standards by which the work was judged for the primary audience—the art-going audience who saw it as an artwork—were the same standards that are applied to all artwork, and that is a combination of some kind of aesthetic appreciation, some kind of x-factor art feeling that someone gets when looking at something, and also—

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DL Name recognition for the artist also playing a huge part of it.



DM Yeah, the other main chunk of that is its embeddedness in an art-social world—how it relates to other work that’s happening at the same time amongst other people. These artworks function socially.

DL Right.

DM Where did you do the unveiling of your sticker?

DL The boathouse at Humboldt Park. That structure has that big arch, so it was both inside and outside. We had really weird snacks—the idea was to do snacks that you would only eat outside. As I recall the only snacks were sunflower seeds and raw marshmallows on skewers.

DM [laughter] But no fire?

DL No fire. We also decided to do outsider music for my event, so I was looking for outsider music, and Jesse was, and we got suggestions from some people we thought would have good ideas about it, and the same names kept coming up, which suggests that there’s a canon of outsider music, which is so perfect. There are these insider-outsiders in the music world too. Nobody didn’t suggest Daniel Johnston and nobody didn’t suggest Wesley Willis.

DM Do you have pics from that day?

DL I don’t think so, it was very rainy and cold. It was too bad, it was the middle of April, and it should have been a beautiful day.

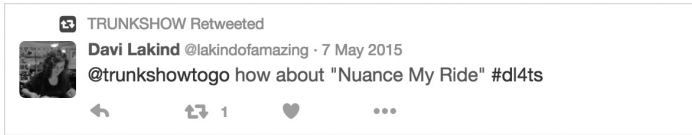
DM Your launch was in the rain?

DL Very rainy. It was really cold, too.

DM Doesn’t that seem perfect?

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DL It was perfect, but not that fun. That's the funny thing about doing an outside project in Chicago. The number of nice days are limited, and so it's really hot, or it's raining, or it is so cold. That's definitely a funny thing about Trunk Show—trying to figure out where to land between 'this is the artistic vision' versus making it accessible, physically and geographically, and I think mostly they go for the artistic vision even if it means there are fewer people there.



DM I wonder—what would Trunk Show be like without the openings?

DL I think it would be much less. It would certainly be less visible.

DM Visible to a particular audience, you mean.

DL I do mean that. But also I think they were trying to do something expanded with the openings.

DM I think you're right—the openings were usually harnessed in such a way that they added a weight to the work itself—and that even if one were to encounter a sticker in the world and not know where it came from, it's still ontologically connected to that particular performance. My first Trunk Show was Eric May's culinary tour of the southwest side, and it was phenomenal. For me the sticker was a small part of that experience, but it's still this thing that people see.

DL Right, it seemed like for his particularly it was so much more about that day, and then he made a sticker because it's part of the project that a sticker comes out of it. For some people the sticker is everything and for some people it's maybe almost ancillary.

DM I think I recognized immediately that Jesse and Raven were very sensitive to that question. The ceremony of it seemed very reverent. The fashion

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or tradition of giving a speech at an opening is so passé—no-one gives a toast at an opening, that would be considered too uncool, or naïve. The fact they did that seemed to me to put a bit more reverence into honoring an artistic act, or an artistic practice.

DL For sure.

DM How many Trunk Show openings do you think you went to?

DL I don't know. Not all of them. Maybe half, maybe? Maybe not even, maybe a third? Or maybe almost all of them? But certainly a lot. I definitely make it my beeswax to go whenever it's possible.

DM I'm wondering if, at Trunk Show openings, or any other kind of opening art event, you often find yourself in the position where you're having to explain your presence there, once you've answered the question, 'are you also an artist'?

DL Yeah. That happens everywhere I go. Trunk Show is not different from other spaces that I'm

in frequently where people say, 'are you also an artist?,' and I say, no, and they say 'ewww, oh, what do you do?,' and then there are very mixed responses. Some people are like, 'cool, that also sounds like a really cool interesting way to spend your life, and it makes sense that you are somebody who would be in this community,' and other people are like 'it's weird that you're here,' or have a weird response to what I do.

DM Do you think about what your future might be in and around, or on the periphery of, or on the boundary of art?

DL Yeah. What I hoped with the sticker was to reify my place on the boundary—I think at least from one perspective the point was that I was already there. But in terms of where that might be going from here. I don't know. I mean I'm doing this Therapy Sessions thing on Thursday⁶—

DM Yeah. I'm excited to go to that.

DL And I think that I'm excited about that because

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it offers me an opportunity to be an actor instead of just an audience member, but also to contribute the thing that I'm actually good at. I think about other ways that I could do that.

DM Maybe psychology is just another artistic medium.

DL Oh I definitely think about that. I joke about that all the time, about my social practice, which is 'often but not exclusively confined to clinical settings,' it's these 'intimate performances that demand a lot of audience participation,' 'it's durational.' That's a joke, but—

DM Yeah but it's both a joke and it's—

DL Yeah, it's both a joke and not a joke. There's an art to being a therapist, and it is a performance, and it is also in some ways no more or less social

⁶Running since February 2016, 'The Therapy Sessions' is an ongoing series of weekly live talk shows hosted by Seth Vanek (currently on Thursday nights) at The Hungry Brain, Chicago.

practice than things that are 'social practice,' right?

DM Well it seems like maybe the original social practice?

DL [laughter]

DM One last question. Can you think of a good pun for the title of this conversation?

DL I definitely can but not at this moment. But I'm good at titles, and we can think of something both stupid and brilliant. In terms of 'it is and it isn't', it could be unbelievably stupid and unbelievably clever at the same time if that's what you dream of.

DM Great. Email me.

DL Great. Let me think about it. Man, that's a big promise. Now that I've said that, will I be able to deliver? Yeah, I'll think of something—oh, did you look at my Trunk Show tweets?

DM Oh, yeah, I did! You have such good material. You're already there.

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Dan Miller is an Australian artist living in Chicago. In recent years he has produced installations, conducted pieces of useful work, and made various functional objects. In 2013 and 2014, he was co-founder and co-director of Plinth Projects, a public art program that engaged a vacant pedestal in an inner-city park in Melbourne, Australia, for the exhibition of temporary public works. Since 2014, he has worked in an experimental collaboration with the convenience store owner and artist Thomas Kong in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood. With Kong he coordinates The Back Room at Kim's Corner Food, a project space and artwork repository housed in an adapted stock room behind the store. His most recent publication is *At Work with Thomas Kong* (Half Letter Press, 2017).

Per her DEEP//LEAP biography, Davi Lakind is arguably the greatest basketball player of all time. For more about her, see page 86.

