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Making Stuff and Doing Things: Bricolage and the Making of a Local Public

A few months ago, Dave Tell asked if I would consider giving the Keynote Address at the 2013 RSA Summer Institute. I was, needless to say, deeply honored by this request, but before I agreed, I felt the need to have a little more information. So, I asked Dave what he was looking for, what exactly it was he wanted in such a talk. First, he said, it must be short. In fact, he seemed to put a lot of emphasis on this requirement. Next, he said, it should obviously have something to do with rhetoric. No problem, I said to myself. I have been in an unrelieved scissor hold with rhetoric the entirety of my professional life. And finally, he added, it should pertain to something specific to where we live, and work, and play—something local, or regional, maybe something peculiar to Kansas. Notice that he did not say something peculiar *about* Kansas. I will happily leave that talk to the Thomas Franks of the world.

I agreed to these conditions—as you can obviously see—yet I could not help but worry about the last two of Dave's stipulations, namely, the art of rhetoric and the state of Kansas. Or to be more precise, I worried about the difficult challenge of how to bring

them together. If, for example, I were to give you one of those word association tests, and, let's say, I uttered the word *rhetoric*, I doubt if anyone in this room would excitedly blurt out the word *Kansas.* Or to reverse things a bit, let's say I uttered the word *Kansas*. Would anyone here actually claim that *rhetoric* was the first word that came to mind? Basketball maybe. Or wheat. Or Dorothy. Or sunflowers. Or Amelia Earhart. Or maybe that mad man for racial justice, John Brown. But rhetoric? Quite unlikely. Nonetheless, our state has a storied history of rhetorical action, and if you will allow me a few moments of shameless boosterism, I want to open with a brief tribute to some of the rhetorical figures and traditions that hail from our little stretch of the heartland called Kansas, and then move my talk to the work of a local artist who, unwittingly perhaps, does double duty as a rhetorician, and something else too. Before that, let me briefly tell you about *what else* I might have discussed today.

I could have talked about two of Lawrence's most famous residents, the honored poet, writer, and social activist, Langston Hughes, and the far less honored, at least in official circles, political novelist and spoken word performer, William S. Burroughs. I could have talked about the wonderful populist traditions in Kansas, the rhetorics of anti-elitist agrarianism in our state's history. And, in Populism's aftermath, I could have talked about that hotbed of early twentieth century socialism, Girard, Kansas, and its most famous citizen, Eugene V. Debs, a fiery orator if there ever was one. I could have also talked about the much needed recovery of Kansas's early feminists, at least two of whom, Clarina Howard Nichols and Marcet Haldemann-Julius, I think, deserve far more attention for their contributions to feminist rhetoric. I could have discussed that great experiment in public adult education known as the Chautauqua movement, and the

Redpath Horner tent chautauquas that traveled through Kansas in the early twentieth century, Or I could have discussed African-American Kansas native, Gordon Parks, whose films, photographs, and compositions were based upon an exceptionally keen sense of the relationship between place and social justice.

I could have talked about this institution, and the fact that some of the rhetoricians here today now attend or once attended the University of Kansas. I could have mentioned that one of the founders of modern composition studies as an academic discipline, Albert Kitzhaber, taught at this institution in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And to be more current, and perhaps a little immodest, I might have drawn attention to the fact that, last year, the house journal of our group, the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, published four articles from faculty and graduate students who, as members of our Communication Studies or English departments, work, teach, and study at the University of Kansas.

In short, I am delighted to announce that rhetoric is alive, flourishing and, yeah, still rockin' it in Kansas, as it always has. And because of the joint efforts of my amazing colleagues in Communication Studies and English, the *study* of rhetoric here ain't too shabby either. See, I told you: shameless boosterism.

As I said, I could have talked about any one of these events or figures, or any of several others, but today, I prefer to narrow my focus a bit and draw your attention to the very public work, the very rhetorical work, and, also, the very socially committed work of one local artist whose talents and projects have bestowed upon him a national reputation. The person I am referring to is Dave Loewenstein, and the specific project of his I want to acquaint you with is simply entitled, "Give, Take, Give." More on that in

just a few moments, but first, let me tell you a little bit about Dave. **[BEGIN Power Point]**

A muralist, printmaker, documentary film maker, and author, Dave Loewenstein's varied projects, especially his mural work, can be seen here in Lawrence, of course, but also in many other locales across the country—in such adjacent states as Missouri and Iowa, but even further down the road a bit in Arizona and Mississippi, in Texas, and Nebraska, and, yes, in New York City. His work has also been exhibited in Northern Ireland, and recently, he has returned from Songdo, South Korea where, in affiliation with the Chadwick International School there, Dave helped co-ordinate a community mural project with students and teachers from the Chadwick school. Though an invitation was extended to him to join us, of course, Dave could not be with us today because he is currently in Waco, Texas, then on to Nebraska as part of the Mid-America Mural Project.

As I mentioned, Dave's work, in all its many forms, has received a great deal of recognition. Several of his prints, for example, are housed permanently in the collections of the New York Public Library, as well as the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Los Angeles. His book, *Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide* was a 2007 Kansas Notable Book Award Winner, and his documentary film, *Creating Counterparts,* won the 2003 Best Documentary at the Kansas Filmmaker's Jubilee. Moreover, he is the recipient of the 2004 Tom and Anne Moore Peace and Justice Award given by the Lawrence Coalition for Peace and Justice, in addition to a 2001 Lighton Prize for Arts Educator of the Year from Kansas City Young Audiences. As I hope is obvious by now, not only is Dave Loewenstein an exceptionally talented artist, he is a socially conscious one too. And his dedication to more just communities gets manifested in very public and

sometimes unconventional expressions of his art, projects designed to make us see things differently than we ordinarily do.

I want to speak about one such project, a project that, I think it safe to say, will not appear in any glossy brochures aimed at promoting tourism in Lawrence. The project is entitled "Give, Take, Give," and the artistic object that serves as the centerpiece for this project is not a mural, or print, or stencil, or film, or sculpture. In fact, common wisdom would say that it is really not an artistic object at all. What I am referring to is a celebrated dumpster located in an alley behind (what is for now) a vacant lot next to the Lawrence Arts Center at 9th and New Hampshire. It is officially located on the property of the Lawrence Social Services League, adjacent to a Thrift Store and The Percolator—an art studio, project space, and occasional exhibition site. This area has been described as an "interzone," a liminal space tucked in between the restrained opulence of downtown Lawrence and the working-class neighborhoods of East Lawrence, which were, at one time anyway, thought to be the bad part of town, the other side of the tracks. (You may choose your own euphemism). But as an in-between place, this area is a zone where people from different walks of life have a chance to meet one another, and, hopefully, to do so in ways that are mutually respectful and generous. To this purpose, the space immediately surrounding the dumpster itself has been proclaimed "a temporary, autonomous zone of good will." Needless to say, this proclamation did not come from the Zoning and Codes Department of Douglas County, but rather from the people who live nearby, who work in, as well as frequent the area.

A moment ago, I alluded to the fact that this particular dumpster was a celebrated one, and I assume you would agree that it is fairly unusual for any dumpster to be

celebrated at all. And from a certain perspective, rightly so. But over the last several months and years, something unusual emerged at the site of this dumpster. People who routinely discarded garbage, cast-offs, worn out goods and sundries, throwaway items, etc., also began to rummage, along with other, more desperate citizens, for similar items from the same dumpster. Eventually, and without any announced guidelines or rules, certain agreed upon conventions took hold, and visitors to the dumpster tacitly agreed not to use it to get rid of trash, perishables and foodstuffs. Instead, what transpired was a cycle of give, take, give—of donating items that one no longer needed, and, at the same time, taking away items that one might want, need or somehow find useful, and then repeating this process over and over. The dumpster soon became something more and other than a dumpster; it became the birth site of a local gift economy, however small, limited, innocuous, and unnoticed that gift economy might have been to the larger community.

Some did take notice, though. Because it spawned its own unlikely community, food justice scholar, Rachel Vaughn, dubbed our celebrated disposal bin, "the little dumpster that could"(qtd. In Loewenstein). KT Walsh, who works at the Social Services League, reports that she became aware of how "dumped artifacts" told the story of this place. Similarly, Dave, too, observed what was happening at the site of this dumpster, and began keeping a log of the various items deposited and taken. He also began collecting the stories of those who frequented the dumpster, to discover what they were looking for, what they hoped to find and why, and whether they felt any sense of community or solidarity with others who also made their own visits to the dumpster.

Some of these tales appear in a little publication entitled, not too surprisingly: *give, take, give.*

In what can only be interpreted as an absurd irony, the site of the dumpster—indeed, the entire East Lawrence neighborhood, has now been declared a Cultural District. On the surface of things, this seems to be a remarkably accurate name for the interzone where the dumpster serves as the heart and soul of the gift economy that emerged from it. But wait! Not so fast. As it turns out, by declaring this area to be a cultural district, it is now made available for private investment and development. As one resident observed, "moneyed outsiders can [now] leverage our unique people, history, and traditions for profit and status. They are blind to us . . . blind to the gifts of the dumpster" (Walsh, qtd. In Loewenstein, Foreword). And indeed, this resident's concerns are well placed. Across the alley from the Social Services League, The Thrift Store, the Percolator, and, yes, "the little dumpster that could," construction is now taking place for a luxury Marriottt Hotel. Corporate owners have promised to pay the costs of relocating residents and organizations that are deemed to be just a little too close to the new Marriott. At this time, in fact, the fate of the dumpster has yet to be determined. It may be that it will be restored to its original function as a mere receptacle for garbage; it may be that it will somehow be sustained by the efforts of those who have built an identity, a purpose, and an "extended network" of relationships surrounding the dumpster and its "temporary autonomous zone of good will"; it may be—and this is most likely, I think—that it will be moved out of the sightlines of any future guests of the new Marriott.

If the last prevails, it will not be because of the lack of effort from good people like KT Walsh, or Rachel Vaughn, or Earline James, or Lane Eisenbart, or Kelly

Nightengale, or Dave Loewenstein, whose work on this project was funded by a Rocket grant, the sources of which include the KU Spencer Museum of Art, the Charlotte Street Foundation, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. I should add here that the announced purpose of Rocket grants is to support "innovative, public-oriented work in non-traditional spaces," and I think you can see how "Give, Take, Give" meets that purpose.

Still, some of you may be asking yourselves: "Why discuss the work of a local artist at a gathering of national rhetoricians?" Others of you may be asking yourselves, "Is he really talking about a dumpster at our luncheon"? Let me close by trying to answer both questions.

It seems indisputable that Dave is first and foremost an artist, and an exceptional one at that. But he is more than an artist. He makes stuff and he does things. He is a socially aware citizen of Kansas, a proud resident of the East Lawrence neighborhood, an activist, a writer, and sometimes speaker. He is also a rhetorician, though I don't know if he would embrace that title for himself. But his is a certain kind of rhetoric, what we might refer to as a non-propositional rhetoric. To be exact, Dave's rhetoric, especially in this project, is *a rhetoric of bearing witness*, a rhetoric that attempts to stand as an embodied testament to the possibility that there might be other economic arrangements than the one imposed upon us, arrangements not in thrall to the imperatives of scarcity, which seems to be the unquestioned orthodoxy of our moment. Such rhetorics as Dave's are not so much interested in debate and deliberation, as they are in providing lived examples, lived alternatives of ways of being in the world, ways that stand counter to what we are incessantly told we have no choice but to accept. In this respect, the gift

economy that emerged out of "the little dumpster that could" bore witness to, and ideally prefigured, a very different kind of economy than the one that makes it necessary for some of our citizens to draw sustenance from dumpsters in the first place.

If you agree that Dave is an artist, and if you agree that he is also a rhetorician, albeit of a certain kind, would you also agree that Dave Loewenstein is what I have elsewhere referred to as a *citizen bricoleur*? Bricolage, as most of you know, refers to the various arts of improvisational construction, the everyday "making do" of the "handyman" or "handywoman" who, using those materials and tools readily available, fashions new objects out of worn ones, who imagines new uses for what has been cast aside, overlooked, or discarded; who turns remnant materials to new purposes; who deploys sheer resourcefulness to cobble together stuff that has otherwise been forgotten or scrapped. Certainly, on a literal level, our now famous dumpster provided ample opportunity for actual bricoleurs in the community to exercise their improvisational talents. But it also provided citizens like Dave to improvise something new as well. Dave did not make this dumpster, nor did he make new objects out of the items put in this dumspster. What he did make, though, were new meanings out of this dumpster. Those meanings include, as I earlier noted, "a temporary, autonomous zone of good will," a thriving gift economy, an island community (so to speak), a new identity of sorts, and a certain kind of public within a public, a local public that, however limited or however temporary, confronted us with the possibility that there might be more fair, just and democratic ways to be with each other in our community. It is in the making of these things that I think of Dave as a citizen bricoleur.

We need to recognize another kind of citizen—not only the one who dutifully votes, who takes pleasure in exercising civic pride, who advocates for various causes, who participates in local governance, who devotes time and money to a favored candidate, and so on. Of course, we need such citizens. Any meaningful democracy simply cannot thrive without its received forms of public engagement. But we need another kind of citizen too, the kind of citizen who believes democracy to be something more than law or policy, who understands that democracy remains always a yet to be completed project, who knows, far better than most, that while any given democracy must be changed from within, it must also be contested from without by those who exist on the other side of the alley, who do not engage in all the usual forms of participation, and who, because of identity, language, style, or preferred ways of being in the world, desire nothing less than an alternative kind of publicness.

Thank you Dave Loewenstein for being that kind of citizen, and thank you for your kind attention.

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Sources

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