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# acumen

*The magazine of Lehigh University's College of Arts and Sciences*

*New Play Design Lab*

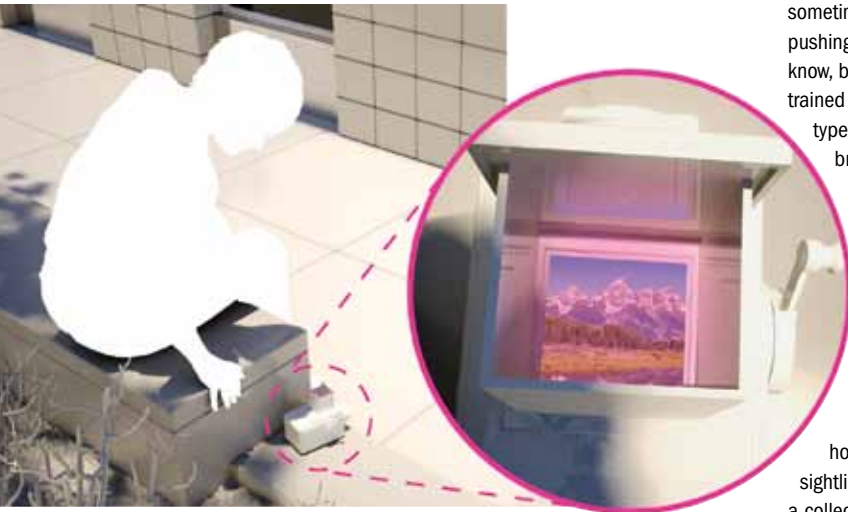
*A Critical Conversation*

*Transfer of Volatiles*

*Shaping the Modern Presidency*

The  
transformative  
power of  
the ARTS

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sometimes new to us. It's scary pushing the bounds of what we know, but that's the fun of it. I was trained as an architect, but this type of art offers a tremendous breadth of opportunities.

"Part of the fun of these projects is to come up with a new technology to use every time. It was a difficult site, and we didn't automatically know how to approach it. The idea came from a conversation we had about how to create interesting sightlines down the street. As a collector of old technology, we eventually gravitated toward what cool things you could look through and how we could misuse them."

The project is scheduled to be complete in spring 2013.

Heiss has created other works for the city. In January 2011, he opened *Thought Balloons*, a playfully interactive piece that inserts software-generated text-based dialogue over the heads of people seated on the frame. When someone sits down on the bench, which is covered in black glass, a thought balloon pops over their head suggesting what they are thinking. If two people sit

accessible, and it needs to make sense to the people who live in the area. For me, the most satisfying thing is to see people using and enjoying the things I have made."

## Theatre

### New Play Design Lab

The creation of a play is a tremendously collaborative process involving the playwright, the director and the actors, but designers are seldom included in this effort. Without designers, the development of any play misses critical visual perspectives, argues Melpomene Katakalos, who in July headed the New Play Design Lab at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival in San Francisco, Calif.

It's a novel approach to developing a script. Normally, plays develop in a workshop environment, as festivals bring together directors, writers and actors but seldom include visual artists. In response, she developed the New Play Design Lab, which brings designers into the mix in the early part of the process.

The Bay Area Playwrights Festival brings together a select group of playwrights and professional collaborators to engage in an in-depth development process over three weeks every summer. The work leads to two public, staged readings of each play, with a week for rehearsal and rewriting in between the readings. As head of the design lab, Katakalos directs intensive design seminars.

"As designers, we think differently than writers and directors, so the visual person is a tremendous benefit to writers. The goal is not to design the shell. It's to have a designer in the room to talk about visual ideas, to lend another creative mind to the process."

Katakalos says the festival is an excellent environment in which young designers can be part of the development. Lucas Ingram and Rebecca

## Art

### Mile-High Artwork

Wesley Heiss, assistant professor of design in the department of art, architecture and design, has teamed with fellow artist Marek Walczak to produce a series of 20 pieces of art to be strategically placed down a 12-block stretch of 14th Street in downtown Denver.

With his partner, he produces permanent, public artworks. The artists have been commissioned by the city to create a treasure hunt of hidden artworks meant to be part of the environment and blend into the surroundings. Cast in zinc, objects include a wide range of iconic viewing and recording devices, such as a Polaroid, a Sony TV and a spyglass. Each piece is attached to a piece of existing infrastructure and keyed to a specific view of the neighborhood. Holding a prototype of the spyglass, he says the piece will be aimed at a vacant parking lot.

"When you look through it, you'll see a building that was torn down, a historic building, put back in place."

The pieces will depict a variety of things, from famous events that took place in the neighborhood, to humorous juxtapositions, to illustrations of possible future

*Heiss' work in Denver includes a twin reflex camera as art (above) and Thought Balloons (below).*

uses of the street. Each piece will include a QR tag, so visitors can use smartphones to link to a website where they can read background information about what that particular story depicts.

Heiss is working with the Denver Historical Society to determine appropriate stories for each piece and establish a website where community members can



submit ideas. Each piece brings a new set of challenges as Heiss navigates government regulations and community desires.

"We have to recalibrate and adapt, negotiate and address everyone's concerns. And we're working with technology that is

on the bench, thought balloons pop up, creating conversations between them. The texts are updated by the community, who can provide suggestions for dialogue text on a website established for the project.

"I try to have a sense of humor in my work. It's playful and easily

*Pink Ladies, one of Katakalos' Cornell boxes.*



Osborne, fourth-year theatre majors focusing on design, joined Katakalos and were involved

in design meetings, offering their ideas and responses to the plays.

"A lot of veterans of design have not been part of the process. They show up the first day of rehearsal when the show is in production at a theatre, not in a festival setting where it's being written and is changing. It's changed me tremendously as a designer by being part of that process. When you have a deeper understanding of how the play is made, your design choices make more sense. They are more deeply rooted. They have more meaning."

A co-founder of San Francisco's Crowded Fire Theatre, Katakalos was an integral member of the Bay Area theatre community and has worked with many festival playwrights over the years. The design lab also requires designers to create pieces of art, either research based or collage, that are visual representations of the plays in an abstract form.

"They can really open up conversations with playwrights and directors about the play. It's very environmental, very scenographic. It's not about just costumes, or just lights, or just sets. It's the overall feeling of the play. It's still a malleable form. They are great conversation pieces, great visual manifestations of the play."

Katakalos often creates sculptures out of found objects and is inspired by renowned designer Joseph Cornell. By collecting and carefully juxtaposing found objects in small, glass-front boxes, Cornell made boxes representing things we cannot see: ideas, memories, fantasies and dreams.

In the classroom, Katakalos' students build "Cornell boxes" as inspiration for their designs.

The boxes help students get used to the ¼-inch scale they'll use to build models of their scenes and also let them think about objects in different ways.

"Cornell takes everyday objects and transforms them into something new and beautiful," Katakalos says. "I find this is helpful for theatre because we're constantly working with real, recognizable objects that are transformed by being on stage.

"Even if a playwright is writing about a specific era, they are writing about now as well. One of the things I think is relevant is the idea of taking real objects, putting them on stage and changing them into something different. One of the things I try to teach my students is, just like in stage design, while the sculptures are composed of real objects, their juxtaposition is transformative."

## Architecture

### Mapping Shadow and Light

Anthony Viscardi, professor of architecture in the department of art, architecture and design, joined a select group of artists in April when he spent a month on a residential fellowship at The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., to explore his art of "shadow mapping."

The MacDowell Colony, the nation's oldest and leading art colony, provides "creative individuals of the highest talent an inspiring environment [to] produce enduring works of the imagination."

Viscardi was chosen by a panel of writers, artists, composers, film-

*The Shadow Hut by Anthony Viscardi.*

makers and architects. While at MacDowell, Viscardi continued his 20-year investigation into shadow mapping, a drawing method generated by tracing the sun-cast shadows of an architectural construct as it is built over one day. In essence, the resulting drawing records and interprets the intertwining of space and time.

"Receiving the MacDowell fellowship was an incredible honor and a pleasant surprise," says Viscardi. "Formally I was accepted at MacDowell as an architect, but once there, I saw my work was as an artist." MacDowell colonists are assigned one of 32 cottages scattered on 450 acres of woodlands and fields. Viscardi lived and worked in the Alexander studio, a stone building designed after a Swiss chapel that Marion MacDowell saw in her travels. He says this space provided the freedom to create without restraint.

"It's quite a luxury, actually," he laughs. "You're given free rein to do whatever you want. Since colony etiquette dictates that colonists are to be left alone to create, no one drops in on you. Even your daily basket lunch is delivered to your door without

interruption. They leave you alone, and there are no obligations. You wake up every morning confronted by your work. It's exciting, but it's also challenging at times. You surround yourself in your work. To have that kind of immersive opportunity truly is a gift."

In one shadow-mapping technique, Viscardi uses pencil on Mylar, allowing the graphite to smear as he works, continually drawing as the sun changes position and later highlighting areas by erasing. Some of these drawings remain small in scale, but others are reinterpreted large scale, up to four feet wide by eight feet long. Since his studio space at MacDowell allowed him to work larger, he made an interesting discovery. While small drawings are typically very detailed but feel perceptually expansive in scale, the large-scale drawings change in the viewers' perceptions and seem smaller and more organic.

"I've always done art. It's always been related to my teaching and my practice of architecture. Doing this fellowship at MacDowell fortified my work as a professional artist and re-energized me as a teacher. I'm excited about what I'll be able to take back to the studio and my students."

