

## ...might be good

**Interview: Jeff Williams**  
by Wendy Vogel



Jeff Williams

*Worn Thin*

Installation at Recess Activities, New York, April 13-June 11, 2011

Photo credit: Matthew Monteith

Courtesy of the artist

Austin-based artist Jeff Williams, an Arthouse Texas Prize finalist, creates sculptures and installation-based works that respond to architectural or socio-historical conditions of particular sites. He just wrapped up a residency at Recess Activities, Inc in New York. Though I didn't make it to the show before it closed, Williams was kind enough to indulge my curiosity about process, erosion, dust and debris through an e-mail interview for this issue of ...mbg.

**...might be good [...mbg]:** Your exhibition and two-month residency at Recess in New York, *Worn Thin*, recently closed. According to the press release and the photos I saw, you used the opportunity to turn the storefront space quite literally into a laboratory. You conducted a number of experiments that wore down exterior and interior construction materials. Some were predicated on actual scientific history (for example, "reconstructing Galileo's diagram for tensile stress"), while others seem to be more tongue-and-cheek (one of my personal favorites is "transform the Recess skylight into a

dust collection system"). Did this way of working mimic your typical studio practice? How did the literal openness of the space to the public impact your project?

**Jeff Williams [JW]:** Worn Thin was a different way of working for me. In the past I have typically developed a single action that encompassed a selected site, whether a gallery or an available/abandoned space. These actions involved the overt manifestation of physical forces like gravity, air, light and water.

For Recess, I wanted to develop multiple actions, each generated from a different source of inquiry. I spent quite a bit of time at the University of Texas in Austin's School of Architecture Materials Lab and the Ferguson Structural Engineering Laboratory. I talked with conservationist Rosa Lowinger about the different devices and materials she uses in cleaning and repairing. I asked Jed Fisher, chemist and professor at Notre Dame, a series of extremely uninformed questions that he graciously answered. Everyone recommended readings and websites. All of the input helped me make a small transition from apparent physical forces to their more subtle and insidious effects through erosion and corrosion. To contain multiple processes happening in the same space, most of the actions were realized as sculptures.

The openness of Recess, letting the public in on how a project develops, was very different for me as well. I had 14 actions planned over the two months I would be in residency, and ten of them ended up happening in some form. Because all of it was an experiment, visitors seemed comfortable talking about what I was doing in a way that would never happen with finished work in an exhibition. I have a massive list of suggestions, from books and artists to methods for casting lightweight concrete, the corrosive properties of cola, etc. A few people donated materials for testing. There was a makeshift welding station out in the alley of Recess, where on Saturdays people could come in for demos or use the shop. It was really nice being placed in a situation where, for the most part, everyone wanted to help and were very generous in talking with me.

**...mbg:** This transition you're talking about in your research and work "from apparent physical forces to their more subtle and insidious effects through erosion and corrosion" is really fascinating. It sounds like your stint at Recess brought about a shift in thinking. Some of your works that I've heard about or seen, like Dust Storm (Night) (included in One Swallow Doesn't Make A Summer curated by Rachel Cook and Claire Ruud last spring), make a critical statement about consumption, economic recession and entropy through very simple yet performative means. In this work, you used a ceiling fan to blow existing dust around in an abandoned, unfinished building in the Austin business district that mimicked a tornado or dust devil. In your installation at Project Row Houses [PRH] in 2008, you built new walls that disrupted the cross-ventilation and created a new way of thinking about the space in terms of domestic history and art history in a way that seems indebted to Michael Asher's practice of institutional critique. Would you say that these three projects indicate a changing perspective regarding ideas of institutional critique? How do you think your recent research may play out in the future?

**JW:** I always worry that institutional critique implies that the viewer isn't already in on the discussion, as though the artist is revealing something previously overlooked or unknown. That seems like the wrong way to approach an audience. With both the Dust Storm and at PRH, the critique is the point of departure. Everyone understands the various arguments, and my interest has more to do with how I can contribute to the discussion through an installation, sculpture, etc.

For Dust Storm I was joining the polemic late in the game. The title for Rachel and Claire's project is a quote from former Austin mayor Kirk Watson, warning that new development doesn't necessarily generate a thriving downtown. The critique is well established, as it was taken from a speech given eleven years ago. The space I requested was built around that time and has never been rented. As a result, the floor has never been cast. It remains an expansive all-dirt ground. It's a 13,500-square-foot space, with 20-foot ceilings, surrounded by street level windows on three sides. It is a perfect vitrine, presenting an overstretched real estate market crumbling back into the landscape. I activated the space with a commercial carpet blower, kicking up enough dust to fill the void, and staged objects I found on-site throughout the space to give it some scale when visibility was diminished.

I think because Dust Storm never made it to the opening day (after five performances the dust started to make its way into other spaces on the first floor), the piece mostly exists as myth. I wish I could have generated dust devils! It was more of a slow cloud that traveled from one end to the other. With the help of Robert Melton the piece exists as a video document now.

I really like the Andrea Fraser article "Procedural Matters"<sup>[1]</sup> on the work of Michael Asher. I have always admired his practice, and she makes a great argument that his work is critical in regard to the conditions of artistic production, not in the incidental formal qualities. While I am indebted to Asher's work, I don't think my installation at PRH did much to stress the institution. It was an aesthetic and symbolic construction that reframed certain vantage points within my row house, many of which were remnants of previous installations. In one of the rooms, someone had built the space out with drywall to look more like a gallery. I took down this addition and made a stack in the middle of the floor with a new wall running over the top of it, locking it down in place. I tried to spend as much time as possible at my house, adding and removing things over the three months. It was a way to slowly make myself known to the neighborhood, and I had a few people checking back to see how things progressed. I am not sure how my recent work will play out. I am just trying to run with what I have going. I do hope to collaborate with some of the people who have been talking with me.

**...mbg:** I really appreciate what you're saying about giving the audience credit— using the known arguments (or conditions of production) as a point of departure for an artistic experiment. At Recess, those conditions could be read as the "laboratory" nature of the residency itself; at PRH, those "knowns" would be the transformation of domestic spaces into spaces for art installations. You're going to start a residency at Artpace in the fall. Do have any ideas about how the works in the show might be produced or how they will respond to the site/building?

**JW:** Artpace will be a continuation of what I started at Recess. The title Worn Thin was chosen to play on the notion of patience, in slowly wearing down objects as opposed to their immediate destruction. In three of the sculptures, it will take years before any significant decline will occur. I am thinking about accelerating the reaction time in San Antonio. The work will be up for two months after the residency is complete and I would like a noticeable shift to occur after I leave.

[1] Andrea Fraser, "Procedural Matters: Andrea Fraser on the Art of Michael Asher," Artforum, Summer 2008. A free online version of the text can be accessed [here](#).  
Wendy Vogel is Editor of ...might be good.