



Open up the Box

Open Container: A year long research + studio exploration of the residential mobility of container culture

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Open Container demonstrates how we might reframe the teaching/learning experience for our undergraduate art majors here at UC Santa Barbara. From its inception, the course design had little semblance to the academic norm. By the size of the project, the 10-week cycle of our campus quarter system had to be ignored, extending our class activity contiguously from one term to the next. One year later, more than 40 students have passed through this course, with an array of contractors, roofers, vendors and architects from the outside community who became involved at various intervals along the way.

The original course title for this class, Art# 105, was listed in the catalogue as an intermediate course in 3-dimensional studio art practice. The class was also cross-listed in the schedule as an Interdisciplinary Humanities Center course open to the campus community at large, despite prerequisites required of our own art majors. Rather than a single faculty at the helm, the class would be team-taught by my UCIRA co-director colleague, Dick Hebdige (also Director of the IHC and a professor with a shared departmental appointment between art and film studies), Robert Weschler, a recent undergraduate alumnus from our art program and the College of Creative Studies and myself. Overlooking any pre-established course content, this syllabus was not strategically developed from a particular theoretical or aesthetic research premise, rather, its contents came about improvisationally, from the world at large and in the form of three 8'x8'x20' shipping containers donated by a local businessman.





In early March of 2006, J. Staal Storage Solutions deposited 3 non-descript boxes, otherwise fully engaged at sea in global trade, to our department sculpture yard. Owner Jorgen Staal provided us the oversized assignment to facilitate his next economic venture and what to do with the vast accumulation of empty shipping containers that were stacking up in his yard and at loading docks across the nation - creating walls so high, they made the sun set at 3pm in unwitting communities of Los Angeles and other major port cities. Arriving here full of product from China for our insatiable consumption, these boxes that "made the world smaller and the world economy bigger"* in a mere 50 years of their existence, became vacant stationary vehicles with no where to go and nothing we Americans could manufacture to fill them up and make their journey back across the sea a worthwhile one.

What to do with these steel and plywood vessels, now worth less than the material it took to make them, would soon become a very large-scale exercise in reuse. The first month of the class was spent in the usual contemplative classroom way, with exercises that explored "boxhood" and its multitude of hypothetical incarnations, from the wild (like Dick's sensory deprivation tank + bowling alley with exterior projection screening of *On the Waterfront*) to the practical (affordable housing, artist studio spaces and panoptic prison complexes). As artists, we did what we do best: we lived in our heads, we made copious conceptual drawings, hypothetical models and had lots of dialogue and critique amongst the 23 of us to eventually formulate a reluctantly collective plan.

The reality of the boxes sitting outside finally blew open the classroom doors and drove us all into the open studio to take on our architectural intervention, training of which Dick, Robert or I shared little expertise in as teachers for the class. Given the innovative research being done with container architecture by those trained in the design profession, we had to continually ask ourselves, "what can artists bring to the discourse that makes our contribution relevant?"

Once we were plasma-cutting plain air through the corten steel, with no turning back, the tidy time-frame of the academic quarter further blurred into oblivion when students began to work day and night, sometimes missing their other classes and personal obligations for some strangely higher purpose that none of us could really articulate. The usual come-and-go, six contact hours, twice a week studio course sessions became 24-7. The sculpture yard was a hub of nocturnal activity, with the sparks flying from steel grinding, cutting and welding around the clock, with much apology to our department colleagues in nearby art history and theory classes. Rather than the usual "show me how to" assignments they might receive in this kind of class, these students learned on the job, acquiring all the skills that they would in a regular sculpture course that teaches metal fabrication, only bigger and maybe even better.

* Borrowed from the title of Marc Levinson's recent book, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, 2006.

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With the creative ingenuity and hands-on problem-solving capabilities of Robert with Dick as the content provider and me as the resource facilitator of ideas bigger than my own capacity to undertake them, we managed to do something rather different than we might have, had we done it the usual “teach your class” way. Together with the confused and creative enterprise of our students, we navigated through the first quarter of Open Container I to an unusual work of art, somewhat resembling a sculpture by Gordon Matta-Clark reconceived as a mobile dwelling unit and social space with an Isla Vista-style couch on its roof and the moving image of dockworker, Marlon Brando projected on its exterior façade...among other things, of course.

We discovered that collaboration does not come easily to a formative artist, with only four years to find their voice amid over-scheduled lives. These young students were very aware that they would eventually be in competition with the multitude of BFA and MFA-trained artists coming out of university art programs across the nation, most of whom will join the workforce of post-graduate artists currently employed outside of the profession in which we have trained them. Giving up exercises in personal vision for the collective consensus fervently engaged a few of our students and lost the interest of many others. For those that chose to commit, a different breed of art student emerged that thought of themselves as part of an expanded community invested in an enterprise larger than the effort of one. In retrospect, it wasn't a process for everyone, but it did provide an alternative way of thinking about art, both its production and presentation. Rather than students conceiving of their practice as part of, or fitting work into pre-established institutions (ie: the museum/gallery), they could become entrepreneurs of alternative spaces, generating new opportunities in which their work could be both conceived and received.

There were a few more things we all learned. Foremost, that the teacher/student relationship is not hierarchical - more so, it is a lateral and flexible dynamic of mutual engagement. Secondly, teaching at a research university is not always conducive to the best and most relevant learning experience for our students and as faculty, we must continually attempt to reinvent the system while remaining within it.





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Since *Open Container I*, we (a continually-renewing body of players) have gone on to further iterations of the box. Open Container II took place over the summer of 2006 with oversight from art graduate student, Billy Hood and evolved into a mobile and expandable exhibition/drawing station with a six-seat, cinema at its interior. The box was moved off-site to the rear of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art to coordinate its content with the museum's *Contemporary Chinese Photography* exhibition on view at the time. A curated exhibit inside the container, *Labor Exchange*, expanded the museum content with relevant issues of labor and consumption in the U.S., featuring works by six current graduate students and two established artists who were commissioned to make creative works from materials purchased at Dollar Stores and Walmarts. A screening of David Redmon's film, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* took place in the container's micro-theatre, providing a supplemental view of global supply chain dynamics as it traced the manufacturing of Mardi Gras beads made by Chinese factory workers to the celebrating street life of New Orleans.



Open Container III and IV, taking place in the Fall of 2006 and Winter of 2007, developed more slowly as the project moved into painful lessons of practicality. To lend credence to the project, we were faced with the reality of its actual capacity for habitation. For these boxes to have some compelling reuse value, they had to prove themselves functional in the most basic of ways, staving off rain, heat and cold. These shelters now had to harness the imagination as plausible dwelling units as well as succeed as cool artistic statements. At this point, volunteer tradesmen were called in from as far as San Antonio, Texas. Materials were solicited free from campus vendors and craig's list and the less-than-exciting phase of roofing and insulation took shape without really making any compelling visual impact that artists are accustomed to making.

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Currently in its final version this quarter, Open Container V has picked up pace with 15 new students and rapidly moves toward culmination as a fully accessorized art studio day space. It will be showcased as such in time for the annual undergraduate student art exhibition at our University Art Museum this coming June. The unit may lack running water; but it will function effectively with up-to-code electrical, wind and solar power prototypes, maybe a green roof and serve well as a studio environment for two of our upcoming year's honors students who will occupy the two-container unit over the next academic year. Having lost 10 of our undergraduate studios when the campus condemned the department's art shack as unfit to be occupied, my students and I began to imagine how these cheap, mobile prototypes could be located on the same west campus site to serve as temporary replacements until the multi-million dollar funding for a new studio facility was in place many years from now. In so doing, we could allow at least half of our best students to have access to clean, well-lighted spaces, preserving productivity of one of our department's most successful programs. Pitched to the campus planning division as "temporary mobile art spaces", the interim studio project has received conceptual approval by our campus architect and will be pursued over the next year toward some form of realization. Business owner, Jorgen Staal has agreed to fund the next set of box design innovations as part of his ongoing support to the project.

As a case study in form and function, as well as an example of what we UCIRA directors mean by "action research", this live demonstration project provides relevant data to inform the next versions of teaching/learning outside the box and across our systemwide research in the arts. Future possibilities are yet to be imagined and are, of course, dependent upon what shows up next in our backyards*.



*The Open Container series served as the model demonstration project for the 2006 UCIRA Open Classroom Challenge Grants, awarded to 3 UC campuses this past year for their innovative curricular research initiatives.