

Dustin Yellin on building new systems



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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2644 words.

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This interview is part of a *Pioneer Works* series that includes:

[Regine Basha on curating, zig-zagging, and taking time to reflect](#)

[Toni Dove on technology as subject matter](#)

What inspired you to start Pioneer Works?

As a young person who dropped out of high school and didn't take the traditional route, I always dreamed of a place you could go where the greatest artists, filmmakers, writers, technologists, and scientists were in the same building, thinking together, and sharing ideas. I didn't go to college. I never went to a place like that. So, out of naivety, I wanted something like that to exist. I felt like colleges were closed membranes, and expensive, and divided. You couldn't be in an architecture department talking to a biology department, or in the art school talking to programmers.

Early on, I was exposed to people like [Buckminster Fuller](#) and [Nikola Tesla](#), and I was thinking a lot about: How do you change the world? How do you build new systems? It was a very utopic idea of change. As I got older, I learned more and I thought more about how systems are so antiquated. Our predominant models for cultural production and for education are pre-Industrial Revolution, pre-internet, pre-machine learning.

We need to build new systems. It's crazy that in any neighborhood, whether you're in Akron or in Detroit, you can go and buy food and water and consumer goods but you can't get access to culture. Culture's becoming something that you have to pay for. So, how do we make this stuff accessible, and create augments to our current systems?



Does your own artwork and your role as Founder of Pioneer Works have different trajectories at this point? Or do you see them working together in some way?

For me they're together, because I'm doing them both, you know? Whether in my brain or in my execution. Pioneer Works adds to the psychic stew. I'm surrounded by such an incredible braintrust, and such an incredible group of people who come through. That all probably feeds in somehow; but with my own practice, I've been developing it for 20 years, and I'm just building and building and stacking turtles on top of turtles. I have a lot of direction already for the next decade in that.

But certainly, in a longer vision, I feel like my obsolescence is my success at Pioneer Works. I'm always thinking about the future and if anything happens to me, that it keeps going, and that it's not the Dustin Yellin show, and that it's not dependent on me. I really think a lot about that. Building strong leadership separate to me is important.

How did you know how to get a space built, to make it functional, and to make sure it worked?

I'm learning as I go. I certainly didn't know what I was getting into. I've gotten my metaphoric PhD in non-profit organization building in the last five years, and I had no idea what I was of embarking on. I had never thought about the nuts and bolts of the dream until I had to. I don't know if I would have done it, or how it would have looked, if I really knew what I was getting into.



In the past, you've talked about community, doing social good, and giving back to the world through Pioneer Works. Is this something you try to do through your art as well?

Sometimes you have an idea, sometimes you have an art object, sometimes you have a cultural program. But at some point it's all the same. If you're breathing, and you're not dead, and you make something out of nothing, then it's coming from the same place.

In my art, I tell stories that can be sort of frozen movies that mix mythology and religion and technology and history. I tell stories that can be dystopic and I ask questions about ecology, and questions about AI and AR, and all these kinds of questions about the future of our society, as it mutates into a digital society.

At Pioneer Works, there's more of the applicable thing; you know, the major issues facing humanity, whether they're socioeconomic disparity or geo-political or nuclear war—the big, big issues that we need to solve as a species.

I think that leveraging culture—I also mean engineering, science, music, film, storytelling—is a strong glue to bring people together. It's the glue to bring people together to problem solve at scale. It's the glue to hopefully reframe religion, to reframe ideas about race. If you can bring people to a table unarmed, you can try to look at some of our larger systemic issues, and try to problem solve. You can get people that are thinking differently thinking together. And to rethink our relationship as a species and a system, so that we can come together, and work together, to hopefully come to terms with some of these larger issues, and try to address them together. Which is really difficult.

For the work that you do, what are the most valuable resources for you to kind of get things done?

The most important thing is people. Having incredible people in the braintrust and working on the projects. Knowing when to let go of things is really important. Because you can't do it all. So knowing when you just have to completely let go, when to partially let go. But surrounding yourself with incredible people, I think, is the most thing that I can possibly think of.

Is your art collaborative?

There are things I work on by myself, but my studio practice is extraordinarily collaborative. As mentioned, it's like making frozen movies. So, like a Director of a frozen movie, I have a very particular vision. And within that vision, there's a DP, and there's a line producer, and there's someone cutting up books, and there's someone building and sanding... You know, there's all these steps, and there's room for my team to make creative decisions within these parameters. You're tapping collective consciousness. So, I'm not sitting there picking every single animal, or every single motion or movement within a piece, and I like that there's room for my team to get crazy. Then I can come in and go, "No, I don't want that. Or, "Yes, that's exactly right." A lot of my team has been with me for many years, so there's a degree of shorthand telepathy that's going on.



If you're in the studio, and you find yourself stalled, do you have ways of dealing with it?

I don't feel so many creative blocks because I feel so many years behind my own practice. It's not as much a creative block as much as it is, you know, like a traffic stop. What ideas do you push forward and support, and try to execute on? Which ones do you put on the back-burner and hope that they don't die on the vine? I'm working on an augmented reality project. I'm writing a movie with a friend. I'm working on a weird sort of political public art project about the end of oil, then I'm working on my own sculptures in the studio. So, it's more about, how do you efficiently move the energy around, and choose what's the most important, so that there's still some left in the tank. I always feel slightly overwhelmed but also really excited about everything.

In your work, what do you consider a failure? Are there ways you could find a success through that?

I start with little doodles, drawings, and sketches. And then I make smaller works, which are essentially maquettes, or storyboards, for moments that happen in the larger works. In a way, I look at everything as a study for these larger, more ambitious public works. I try to look at everything as a learning board.

So you know where it's going, basically, and what it will become.

Absolutely. I'm working on one piece right now in my studio that's going to take almost a year and a half. There's been numerous drawings, and numerous small works, and then numerous revisions and tweaks to get to what will be the final work. The layers are going back and forth, and so there's time and room to edit and change my mind, and to tweak. And, "Oh, I want to build this cave bigger or this rocket bigger," or "I want to have them mining minerals," or "I want to have a Sisyphean moment where they're trapping a sea creature that's eating sailboats..." There's so much time to sit with something, to help flesh out narrative content, or to make decisions for how the work will end up.



Do you have tendencies where you find yourself going down a path and you're like, "Oh I've already done this, I need to push away from this and try something different"? Or do you accept these kinds of returns?

I think it's both. The thing that I worked on for a long time, I find I'm continually returning to it because it's working, and I'm honing it more, and focusing and amplifying it more. And tweaking it... because it's working. But I also find that the instinctual reaction is to rebel, to do something completely new, or to try something different. It's a balance between the two things. Because one thing is going to push the work into whole new territories, but the other thing is going to refine something that's working. It's like breathing. You wake up every day and breathe. And you're not going to be like, "Well, I've been breathing every day so I'm going to stop." Right? You're like, "Fuck, actually I should breathe deeper. And take longer exhales. And slow down." Repetition and habit and pattern are things that I think we do hone somehow. But it's also completely instinctual to push away against, to try to break new ground and try to find new things.

How do you know when a piece is complete?

I don't think you ever know. But I think because I work in layers, and I have a long process to get something where I want it, it's instinctual. I have people working on the work, and I'm continually returning to the same thing, and having time to think about it, and look at it and go, "You know what, I like this but I want to change this." And, "This isn't working." And, "Oh, these things should all have astronaut helmets." Or, "These things should all have animals heads." Or, "This is feeling too narrative." Or, "This scale isn't working." Or, "This piece of content isn't working." Or, "I don't fucking like rabbits, so let's get some crocodiles in the mix." You know what I mean? If you spend a lot of time with something, you

can reflect. And because I won't glue something together until after a long time, and I've made a lot of small works first, it gives me a lot of time to reflect and really think if that's the right move. But it's instinctual.



Speaking of process, do you think you've achieved what you set out to do with Pioneer Works?

We're right in the middle of it. It's still this organic, formulating structure. I can't tell how big my delusions of grandeur were when I was 18, because I think they were pretty intense. And now, this thing has gotten quite large. But, you know, now my dreams are bigger, and our aspirations are bigger. Even just the daily operation feels bigger than I ever imagined. But I try to wake up every day with this mantra or idea that I've done nothing. You know, "I've accomplished nothing. I've done nothing. And the page is white." Like, "What's possible? What can be invented, now?"

I like the restlessness of starting each day as a blank.

I subscribe to the idea that I'm lucky to be alive and I might die in 65 minutes, and that, in the Bayesian sense, civilization is a sculpture, and everything has been invented, and we're now in the midst of inventing whatever the future might be. Therefore, nothing has happened, because we haven't figured out how to make zero-point energy at scale, or deal with socioeconomic inequality at scale, etc. There are so many things, as a society, we haven't figured out. And now we're in the midst of what appears to be an extinction process... How does that play into it?

That said, putting on guardrails, and learning to say "no" to things, and learning to preserve energy is something challenging for me. I'm trying to do it better.

Well, you're never bored.

When I hear someone say, "Oh I'm bored," I get perplexed. Because I'm like, "How the fuck can you be bored?" What I don't know is in order of the thousands; it's incomprehensible, what I don't know, compared to what I do know. This leaves me in this state of total wonder and thirst to discover more. I'm like that when I travel. It's pathological. I'll want to drive down every single road on an island, and go down every dead end. And when I hit a dead end, I want to get out of my car, and walk into the bush, and have a mental picture of the earth from the point of view of just someone walking through.

I will never, never, ever, ever know it all. Nor do I need to know it all. Be inspired to know that you can never be bored! I can't understand the notion of boredom. I don't get it. It's not what you see, it's how you see. It's a little tweak to the lens that you're looking through.



Dustin Yellin recommends:

Werner Herzog's an influence. I would say watch Fitzcarraldo. I would say read Sculpting in Time by Tarkovsky. I would say go places. Go visit Petra, and Bangkok, you know, go into the Amazon, and go visit the outer islands of Papua. I would say watch Woman in the Dunes. Watch Bad Boy Bubby. Read The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle. Read Rilke and Neruda and O'Hara. It's endless. Discover Joseph Cornell, or Henry Darger, or Hieronymus Bosch.

It's an eternal list. I think people should make their own lists, too. Be curious. Go and search out these things. I think that's really, really, really important. Keep trying to find new things. It helps to build the sort of mental framework that is really the key.

Ask questions. My question is: How do you get everybody to get along? I think curiosity is really important, and trying new things is really, really, really important.

I'd add Buckminster Fuller to that list, right? I would add John Lilly to that list. Black holes and Dark Matter to that list. I mean, that's the thing, it's endless...

Name

Dustin Yellin

Vocation

Artist, Founder and Director of Pioneer Works

