Paul Rucker on going wherever your work takes you

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2730 words.

Tags: Art, Music, Focus, Process, Inspiration, Education, Adversity.

You have a varied body of work. Which came first for you, music or visual art? And how do they inform each other?

I think most people start out as visual artists. You get a piece of paper and you play with crayons—you're making visual art. You're not doing it to try to make money, you're not even sure what it's called, but you're drawing. You're drawing before you almost do anything. I guess if you're making noise as a baby you're doing music, but maybe that's different. I was a serious musician before I was a practicing artist.

I moved to an art space in Seattle almost 20 years ago. I was the only musician in the space, and honestly, there was a little tension because I think people just didn't want sound there. They wanted it to just be a visual art space. So I said, "Well, I'll be a visual artist then," and I just started doing it. People would move away and leave supplies, canvasses and paint and other things, so I started experimenting with discarded material. I was also working as a janitor at the Seattle Art Museum. That's where I got my art education from, the sweeping floors and cleaning toilets and being around art all day.

For a few years I created interactive sound and video installations, and then I realized I wanted to do something that really meant something, which for me meant that it was relevant to addressing issues that we don't typically address. For lack of better words, I was interested in social justice. I just call it work that reflects the world. I think the main goal of the artist is to make the unseen seen. In doing so, we can create understanding and, hopefully, empathy. All of my shows involve some form of community engagement. I want people to respond to the work and ask questions and to engage with each other. It's important to me that there is a component of that in every show.

When you have a creative practice that's relatively open-ended—that allows you to fill space in a different ways and involves interaction and engagement with the community—what does that mean for what your creative routine actually looks like? Do you work in a studio?

I’m a conceptual artist as well as a musician. I often have to work with fabricators to help realize certain things. I don’t want to let my personal limitations stop me from creating something or bring something to fruition. The whole concept around ***REWIND*** was funded by Creative Capital a few years ago with a project called “Recapitulation.” Recapitulation is a musical term for the old thing coming back in a new form. I just changed it to *REWIND* just to make it roll off the tongue a little easier.

My process is thinking about what stories I want to tell, and asking how can I tell this story in a creative way that makes people go, “Hmm,” or to look at it in a different way. I like endurance themes as well, like with the Klan robes. Back in 2015 I worked with a relative who’s an amazing seamstress who made one robe per week for an entire year. We have a whole lot more coming up. I have a show coming up at VCU, Virginia Commonwealth University, in April for a museum opening there. I have 30 new robes that have never been seen. I’m excited about that.

I just think of the most ridiculous things. I don’t think about a budget and, like a lot of artists, I don’t think about how I’m going to sell the piece when it’s done. The piece isn’t about that. If you think about that before you start working on your art, the work is already ruined. I think all art has to come from an authentic place and people can usually tell when the work is contrived or when you’re obviously trying to make a buck. I’ve had a lot of freedom to create artwork without necessarily worrying about commercial success. I can make things that no one is going to want to put in their living room. I’m making things that people don’t want.

I do sell things on occasion, but it’s mainly to fund other upcoming shows. For *REWIND*, sometimes a museum or a school will acquire a piece and that will allow me to bring the show there, which means paying for shipping and

for my documentarian, who also goes there and helps install things. It feels very much like a community thing and it usually involves drawing on a lot of different resources. The reason I've been doing this Kickstarter campaign for *REWIND* is because I just can't do it out of my own pocket anymore. I needed something to help subsidize the project and allow it to keep traveling. One of the aspects of being a creative is that you're often tasked with doing these $5,000 projects with only $500. You have to be clever in order to make things work.

One of the interesting things about *REWIND* is that it's often being viewed in places where, one imagines, there's an audience that really needs to see it. It's not about putting it in traditional gallery spaces per se, where your audience is likely to already share a similar mindset. It's not about preaching to the choir.

That has been the intention. The first show was at this place called Creative Alliance, a mixed-use venue that has a performance space. You pass by the gallery in order to go into the performance space, so people that are going to a birthday party have to pass by the show. People that were going to see other concerts or events passed by the show on a regular basis. People that would eat at the nearby restaurant would also go in and see work there. It's different in every city, but I try to put the show in places where it can do the most good.

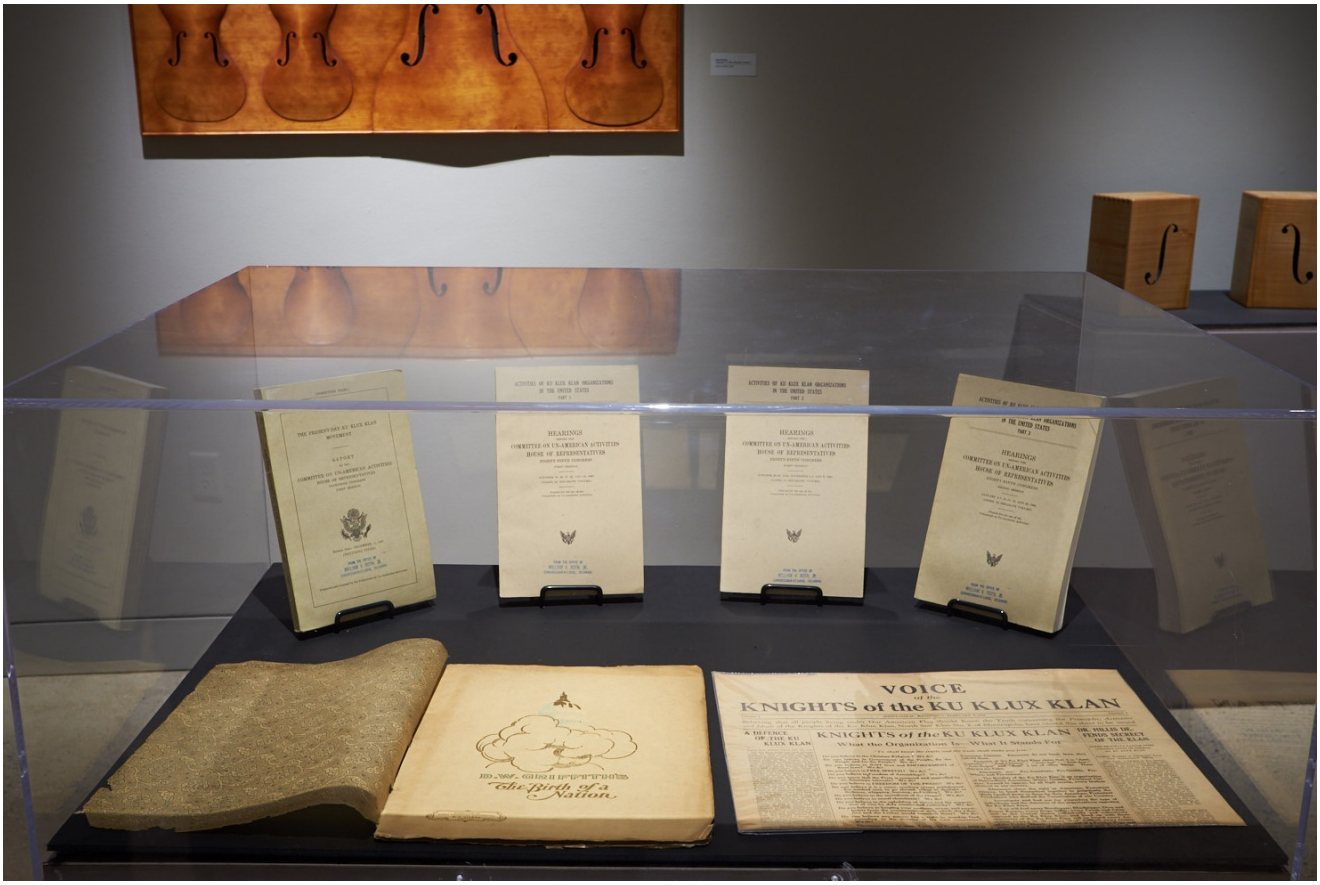
I think one of my most successful early shows, before I had any major traction for the piece, was in a coffee shop. People came to coffee shop every morning and sometimes they would interact with the art, sometimes they'd look, sometimes they wouldn't. I have a show coming up in a couple weeks in the lobby of this sort of office space. Everyone that comes through the building will see the artwork that's in the front lobby area. I think it's a great idea to do that kind of thing. I don't believe in preaching to the choir, which is why I've also taken the show to rural areas, to place it in locations where it's on the street level, where people can look through the window and see it as they pass by. I also try to be in the gallery as much as possible during the show.

A lot of artists, especially young artists, have aspirations of going directly to New York, L.A., or Chicago. For me it's been places like Ellensburg, York, Ferguson—places that have their own significance but for different reasons. Someone in Ellensburg was actively recruiting for the Klan before my show, and that's one of the reasons they brought me in. During the time my show was up, the person was convicted and punished for putting out flyers on cars to recruit people for the Klan. So my show in Ellensburg, Washington was a community's response to what was happening there. It felt good to be part of that response and to feel that support. When I started making Klan robes in 2014, people often asked, "Why are you doing this? Why is this necessary" Now no one is asking that. One of the things artists do is make everything visible and talk about things that really should be addressed and that are relevant. History is showing us why this is still relevant.

***REWIND*—which includes artifacts connected to slavery, life-sized mannequins wearing Ku Klux Klan robes, historical documents—is a beautiful but harrowing piece of work. How does it feel to engage with material like this for an extended period of time? Does it weigh on you?**

I know what you mean and I do look forward to moving on to other projects. I think that knowing there's an end date helps. That being said, this is something I'm obviously very close to. I grew up in the south and my father was born in 1905, during the height of lynching in America, so I have a direct relationship to a lot of the work I'm making about slavery and lynching and cotton production and the system. The work has a lot to do with things that I was not told about, so this is that exercise in doing that. I think of it as a way to exorcise your demons, to get them out. The work becomes a source of strength in some ways, the subject matter is a motivation. Determination doesn't always come from a beautiful place. It can come from a horrific place too. I think that is the case with this work.

As strange as it sounds, I'm inspired when I uncover these terrible objects. I'm inspired when I buy a new branding iron. I'm inspired when I buy shackles. I'm inspired when I buy lynching postcards. I have a little museum of these artifacts, and they amaze me. These are actually real things that exist in the world. It's important for people to know what. Sometimes people will experience the show and say things like, "God, I didn't know that there were lynching postcards. I didn't even know that there were lynchings!" I feel like I've done my work by bringing awareness to the fact that this happened less than 100 years ago and this is part of our history.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In many ways, my work is about questioning our reality, questioning our privilege, questioning where we fit in into our cities and towns and why a certain neighborhood *this* way and another neighborhood is *that* way. It's about understanding the dehumanization of racism. I'm working on a piece called "That Nice Black Neighborhood." Where is that nice black neighborhood? Where are they? Is there still a nice black neighborhood in this country? Is there a thriving black neighborhood where there's black-owned businesses doing well with buildings that are owned by black folks? Where is that neighborhood located? It doesn't exist. Why doesn't it exist?

If you understand the history of segregation, forced segregation, and how it was enforced, then you can begin to understand the systemic and structural racism that exists today and how it keeps one group in one place and how that benefits, disproportionately, this other group. I think that's what we need to really understand. Part of my show is to provide this kind of information. I have this 30-page newspaper that accompanies the show. I've given out more than 10,000 copies of it at this point. I want people to take it with them so they can have fully informed conversations. Right now I think we have too many conversations generating from the place of, "I feel," or "I think," as opposed to an informed position of, "I *know*."

Most of my work is based on history and information and deep research. I want to be able to talk about the issues that I'm bringing up in the work. I'm not an expert on every part of history—and there's so much history to absorb and understand—but I've definitely learned a lot about American history. People say this is a show about race, but in reality it's a show about power. It's a show about power in America. It's American history, not just black history or white history.

When I called, you mentioned that you were working on a grant application. I think it's worth mentioning how much artists can benefit from grants and fellowships, and how just applying for those things and seeking them out can be a job unto itself.

At certain points in my career I would spend up to 80% of my time fundraising.Lots of organizations spend up to 90% of their time fundraising. It's like a Senator when they get back in office, they then have to raise X number of dollars every day in order to keep things going. It's no joke. For artists, it can feel just the same.

Is it a process that gets easier the more you do it?

For a lot of these applications you can recycle certain things…and I do get quicker doing these things. It's funny, I recently applied for the TED fellowship. I also did it last year and I got through to the interview phase, though I ultimately didn't get it. I just interviewed for it *again*. When I applied this year I had just said to myself, "Boy, I wonder if that deadline is coming up soon," and it turns out the deadline was that same day. So I did the application that day, as quickly as I could do it, and I somehow made it again to the interview phase. I rehashed a few things in the application, updated the resume, but I knew what I had last year was good enough. You don't know why you don't get awarded something. You don't know why you don't get it, but you try your best. I applied for the Guggenheim for 13 years in a row…and I just got it this year.

That is incredible.

You know, I could have applied for 13 more years and I could've gotten it…or not. They don't look at you and say, "Oh, he's applied for 13 years," because there are people who have applied for 16 years and never gotten it. I also know people who applied and got it on their first or second try. Here's the thing though—I was doing work around slavery and the prison system a long time ago and people weren't funding it. I think maybe they looked at my work and realized, "Okay, maybe he's got something, and maybe we should fund him to continue in this research." I have no idea why I was finally chosen because it's decided by a secret panel. I'll never know. It feels really weird because for the past 13 years I've applied for this, and right now is the time I would be applying again if I hadn't received it.

I feel like that's the thing I always try to tell young creators, whether they're artists or filmmakers or poets even. You just have to apply, apply, apply, and try not to take it too personally if you don't get it.

Yes. Just keep at it. I think also having someone who's not an artist look at your application can be a good thing. I don't really use art speak because I don't have an MFA or any degree, but I think you've got to talk to them in a way that they can understand. I think talking about your art—being able to to clearly and articulately talk about your work—is one of the most important skills you can have. I actually have a speaking engagement this weekend to talk about my work. I never would have thought that a big part of my income was actually going to be from giving talks. I enjoy doing it, but it's an odd thing. I never could have anticipated, but that's just life. You've got to be willing to go wherever the work takes you.

ESSENTIAL PAUL RUCKER:

REWIND

The Empathy Project

Recapitulation

How an artist copes with reality: Paul Rucker at TEDxBerkeley

Wall of Pieces

In Light of History

Name
Paul Rucker

Vocation
Artist, Composer, Musician

Photo: Mike Morgan Photography