

Creativity and Collaboration: The University of Houston's CYNTHIA WOODS MITCHELL CENTER FOR THE ARTS

by Karen Farber

In a landscape of ever changing technologies, business practices, demographics, and methods of communication, societies rely on artists to respond and reflect back on complex realities. Artists often inspire others to come out of their individual towers and take off their blinders, to see the world from new angles.

However, there is little research and training dedicated to the breaking down of barriers between artistic disciplines. Artists themselves have little opportunity to experiment with the tools of their disciplinary peers, let alone support a new generation of interdisciplinary students. Creative professionals rely on collaboration. Maintaining a fluid definition of industries, disciplines, technologies, and methodologies is critical to innovation in any field—business, administration, engineering, the sciences, the humanities and certainly the arts.

It is within this context that the University of Houston created the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts in 2004, forming a permanent alliance among five existing arts entities at the university: Blaffer Gallery; Creative Writing Program; and the Schools of Art, Music and Theatre.

The leadership of the University of Houston, one of the largest urban research institutions in the U.S, firmly believes that a commitment to research and development extends to original artistic experimentation and scholarship. The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts was conceived to fulfill the university's vision of a cohesive, innovative arts program integral to campus life and the community at large. The support of Cynthia Woods Mitchell and

George Mitchell, Texas arts philanthropists who generously donated the Center's endowment funds, made the center possible.

The Mitchell Center's mission is to explore and celebrate the intersections between art forms through public programs, artist residencies, and curriculum in the performing, literary, and visual arts. As an "arts laboratory," the center aims to donate artists who have multiple tools at their disposal, a defiance against artistic and disciplinary silos, and an openness to new modes of creativity.

The Mitchell Center is particularly appropriate for the University of Houston, with its uniquely diverse campus and strong research programs. In turn, the university is well-positioned to embrace this initiative. The strength of the five existing arts entities demonstrates that the arts have long been viewed as a vehicle for immediate, visceral, and complex cultural exchange on the campus and in the greater Houston community.

Why the Arts?

Creativity is the catalyst behind innovation, invention, and independent thought. To neglect research, development, strategic thinking, and experimentation in the arts is to neglect our society's greatest asset in the professionals who are most dedicated to inventing, creating, and exchanging ideas. Tony Hall, chief executive of the Royal Opera House in London, said it best when he justified major new investments in the arts as an obvious benefit: "They are part of something fundamental and big, which is the creative economy, which is now what we live off...our future depends on creativity."

Why Collaboration?

Creativity is greatly enhanced when artists in various disciplines interact with one another. The role of the artist is to challenge society with new ways of thinking about our world. By providing a haven where artists can practice their crafts in an atmosphere of permeable boundaries and free flowing cross reference, the Mitchell Center encourages greater creativity, and sets the benchmark for other areas of the academy.

Interdisciplinary academic centers have long existed in universities throughout the world, but centers for research, development, and exchange in *the arts* are less common. The case for the value in such initiatives was well made by Mike Ross, Director of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:

Traditionally recognized as a touchstone in the realm of human experience, the arts are becoming even more highly and strategically valued in their capacity to facilitate cross-cultural understanding as domestic and international relations become increasingly complex. New research in understanding different types of intelligence (e.g., visual, aural, and kinesthetic) is bringing about greater acknowledgement of the inherent value of the arts. Broader and deeper connections are being drawn between artistic, scientific/technological, and economic creativity, leading in turn to the recognition of the rising influence of a "creative class in American society."

Reflecting the entrepreneurial mode that drives all aspects of growth and development of the city of Houston, the University of Houston is especially well-

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positioned for the creation of this forward looking interdisciplinary exchange.

Center Programming

The Mitchell Center program encompasses public performances and exhibitions, seminars, lectures, and artists-in-residence throughout the year. A special interdisciplinary course curriculum is open to students in all of the university's arts disciplines and overseen by a designated faculty team that facilitates visiting artists' integration with the students. The center is the conduit through which this vital current of creative interaction flows. The Center provides the space and tools needed for artists to fully realize their projects.

Recent artists in residence have included Terry Allen, who presented *DUGOUT III*, a music-theater performance in a collaboration between the Blaffer Gallery and the School of Theatre,

in conjunction with a major exhibition of his work in the Blaffer Gallery; osseus labyrinth, an intensely physical multi-media performance group from Los Angeles who created and performed *SWARM*, a site-specific work in massive shell of a former campus and London composer Stephen Montague, whose Horn Concerto was performed on the horns of Houston's famous Art Cars, followed by a concert of his music with original choreography.

In April 2005 Terry Allen, an internationally recognized visual artist, writer, and musician with strong Texas roots, and his wife Jo Harvey Allen, an actress and monologist, spent a six week residency with the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts at the University of Houston. During their residency, Blaffer Gallery mounted a major exhibition of Terry Allen's artworks, and the UH School of Theatre also presented a significant theatrical performance of Mr. Allen's in its Wortham Theatre, with music written and performed by Terry Allen and accompanying musicians, and featuring Jo Harvey Allen in the starring role. The Allens also co-taught in



Terry and Jo Harvey Allen

The Mitchell Center presented Allen's DUGOUT III: WARBOY, a musical theatre piece written and directed by Allen, featuring original music by Richard Bowden, Lloyd Maines, and Allen himself and starring veteran actress Jo Harvey Allen.



the new course, *Collaboration Among the Arts*.

DUGOUT III: WARBOY (and the backboard blues) is the third component of Terry Allen's epic *DUGOUT* series, which began in 1994 as an audio drama for National Public Radio and imparts a sweeping, non-linear narrative about the "Man," a minor league baseball player from St. Louis who meets, falls in love with and marries the much younger "Woman," a barrelhouse piano player from the mid-west. *DUGOUT III* conveys the curious tale of the couple's surprising and unexpected son. Two free performances of *DUGOUT III: WARBOY* (and the backboard blues) were held on April 29 and 30, 2005 at the University of Houston's Wortham Theatre, located inside the new Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts building.

SWARM, presented on March 31, 2006 in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture's new Keeland Exploration Center, was a performance-based project created by osseus labyrinth, a Los Angeles-based artist collective led by Hannah Sim and Mark Steger. osseus labyrinth's work is recognizable by its unique convulsive movement performed amid eerie, self-made environments. The duo has been exhibiting and performing around the world since 1989.

As explorers who frequently wander into the place where science and art intersect, osseus labyrinth responds to, feeds off and attempts to illustrate the irrational, mysterious, infinite nature of reality. Its artistic context is a funnel, pulling in influences from an expansive array of sources ranging from Charles Darwin and Richard Dawkins' study of life sciences, to the experimental, psychotropic and humanist narratives of Philip K. Dick and Olaf Stapleton, and to the cinematic essays of Charles and Ray Eames. Visual sources of inspiration include Hieronymus Bosch, Jan Svankmajer, David Wilson, Andy Goldsworthy, Ernst Haeckel and the Hubble Space Telescope.

The evening of Steven Montague's presentation consisted of two distinct sections. It began in the Fine Arts Quadrangle with Houston Art Cars



On April 17, 2006, The Mitchell Center presented a festival of music by composer Steven Montague.

performing Horn Concerto, an orchestra piece for automobiles, which was presented in collaboration with the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art, and featured Houston's famed duo, The Art Guys, as guest soloists. Following the outdoor performance, the audience proceeded to the Moores School of Music Opera House for a presentation of *Dark Sun*, an evening length concert of dance and music composed by Montague and performed by students and faculty from the UH Schools of Music and Dance.

The Neo-Futurists on April 14 and 15, 2006. The Neo-Futurists are a collective of wildly productive writer/director/performers who create theater that is a fusion of sport, poetry, and living-newspaper. The company, founded in 1988, has grown to become one of the most highly regarded experimental theater companies in the country, offering annual seasons of adventurous, smart, interactive theater. The Neo-Futurist's non-illusory, interactive performances convey experiences and ideas as directly and honestly as possible. They explain, "We embrace those unreached or unmoved by conventional theater—inspiring them to thought, feeling, and action."

Too Much Light Makes

the Baby Go Blind, with its ever-changing "menu," is an attempt to perform 30 plays in 60 minutes. Each short play is written by a performer, honed by the ensemble, and randomly collaged with 29 other plays through audience participation. Each night of the performance, the company creates an unreproducible living newspaper collage of the comic and tragic, the political and personal, and the visceral and experimental.

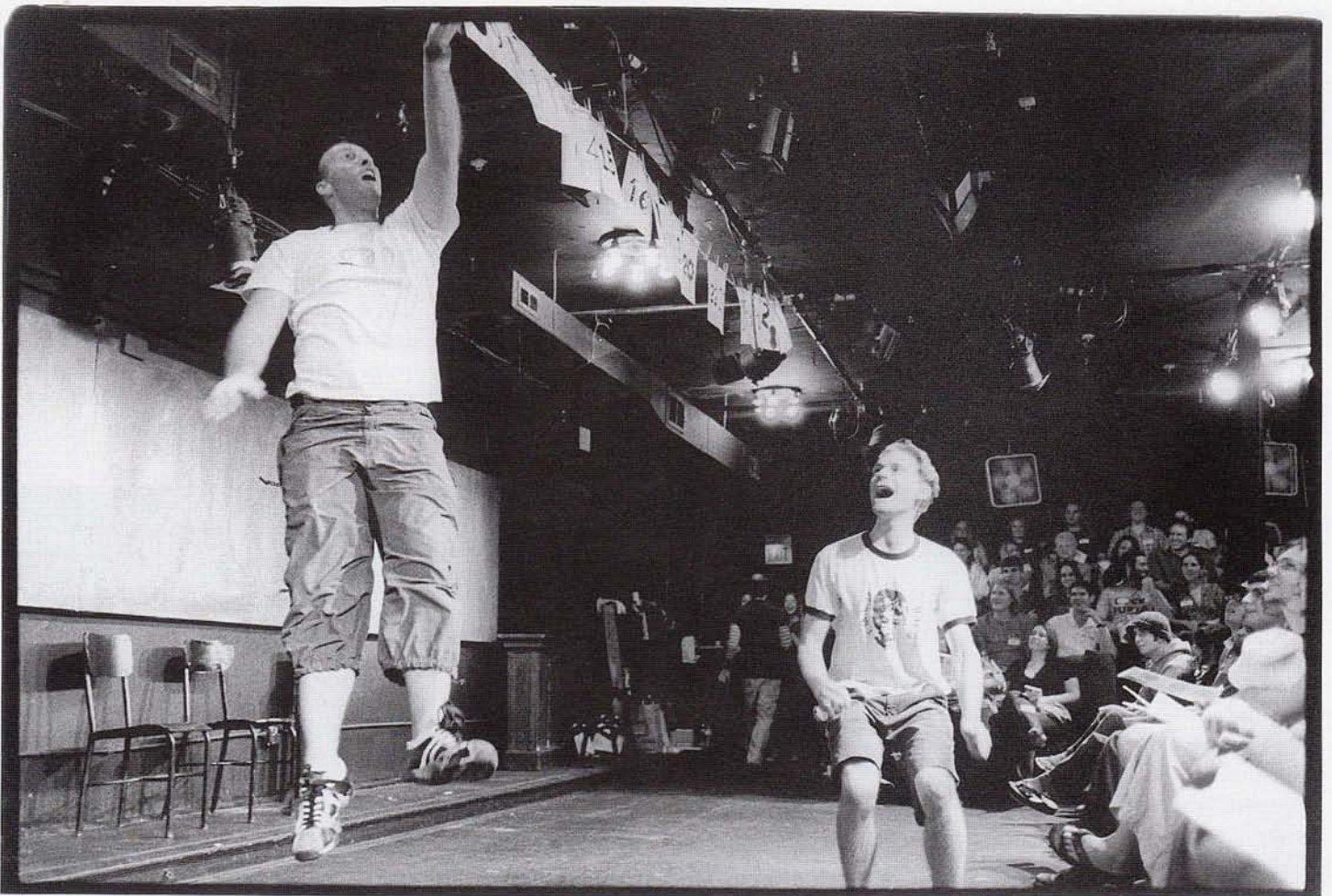
The Mitchell Center for the Arts celebrated its 2005-2006 season finale with a performance by Signal Operators. The artists included: Golan Levin, Tommy Becker, Sue Costabile, Scott Arford, Tree

Wave, and Rick Silva. Presented in collaboration with Houston's Aurora Picture Show, the center further extended the collaborative reach into the arts landscape of the city.

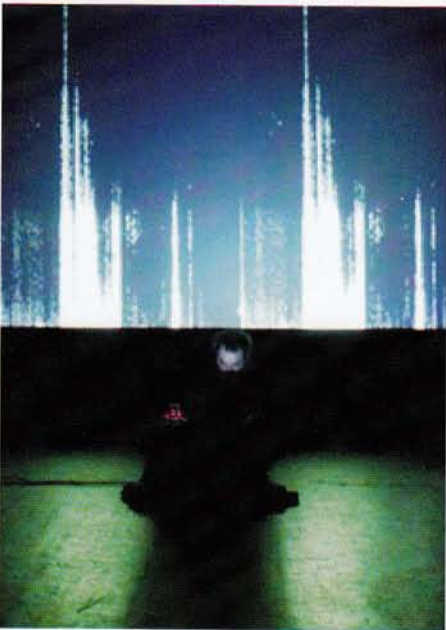
While widely varied, each of these programs embodies the Mitchell Center's central mission—to explore, challenge and celebrate the intersections between art forms through the presentation of public events supported by artist residencies and curriculum. That such an acute focus on collaboration can produce such a broad range of results only further encourages the Center to pursue its ambition to delve into the practice of artistic collaboration.



osseus labyrinth's new piece SWARM was a comparison between individual and swarm behavior; a comment upon shared and divergent traits of such behavior and the way in which simple interactions lead to complex behavior.



The Center presented two performances of Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind by Chicago-based experimental performance troupe The New-Futurists, on April 14 and 15, 2006.



On April 20, 2006 the Center presented Signal Operators, an evening long microfestival of performances by new media artists.

The Future Of Artists And Audiences

The Mitchell Center has already experienced significant success in engaging new audiences within the student body, throughout the Houston community, and, increasingly, on the national arts landscape. The center goes beyond the role of presenting organization—it is a real nexus for creative communication among a diverse range of “stakeholders” that includes the students and faculty of the University of Houston, the Houston community, and artists from across the nation and the world. While the art museum, Creative Writing Program, and the Schools of Art, Music, and Theatre, have been regionally and nationally lauded for decades, the Mitchell Center is a relatively new partnership that has provided each of these units a structure for communication among differing media, and a mandate to use their imaginations and forsake their traditional creative “comfort zones.”

As a university center for research and presentation, the Mitchell Center’s goals reach far beyond simply selling tickets or counting visitors. The center seeks to be an ongoing experiment in the tools and practice of collaboration. In the future, the center will produce a new generation of artists who are well versed in the vocabulary of interdisciplinary arts, and this vocabulary will become the centerpiece of our field, creating new leaders who can pave the way for an integrated artistic and cultural exchange. 