Q – Can you describe *The Everyday Life of Objects* installation piece you recently made for an actual gallery space and how it has evolved into a parallel web piece?

Laurie Beth – *The Everyday Life of Objects* is a project about the persistence of material culture in the electronic age. It consists of two installations, one physical and one virtual, that explore quotidian practices of accumulation, both functional and sentimental. My goal in this work is to contribute to the critical discourse that privileges the consumer over the connoisseur in defining the terms of contemporary visual culture. The pair of sites are meant to foreground timely questions about information technologies and embodied meaning.

The physical installation, realized in 1997, was a 1500 square foot irregularly gridded floor-to-ceiling maze that resembled urban architecture; it was dense vertically as well as horizontally, with an aesthetic sensibility somewhere between a thrift store and a museum. The audio component of the installation was gathered through a series of interviews with people who have and keep things – about what we acquire and why. The environment offered spectators an opportunity to move through a matrix of familiar objects and to reflect on the possessions in their own lives.

In hopes of directly addressing the persistence of material culture in the electronic age, sometime in 1998 I made a commitment to develop an interactive, virtual environment based on *The Everyday Life of Objects*. For the past two years, I have been working with a number of assistants to construct an analogous interactive website. When complete, the work will be as full of objects as the physical installation; viewers will be able to activate each object to launch an associate sound file. Just as it was possible in the installation to go to a place and touch a ‘physical’ object, so in the website, it is possible to navigate ‘three-dimensionally’ to a ‘place’ and ‘touch’ a virtual ‘object.’ Doing so triggers a testimony to the acquisitive spirit or the ‘life history’ of an object, although not necessarily of that particular object.

Q – What was this process of transformation like?

Laurie Beth – For the first two years, we did nothing but look at and reject software for site development. My priorities were to be able to construct an environment for self-propelled, avatar-free navigation. Once the program was selected, we depended on someone who was very familiar with it to set up the structure and to teach several generations of my assistants to work within it. Now, as much as ten hours a week is spent gathering, cleaning up, and installing objects into the maze.

I went into this project thinking that the objects on the website would come from digitized photographs of actual objects, first our own, and subsequently those contributed by spectators. I soon realized that the web is already an environment particularly conducive to the acquisition of things, both new and used. Now, we do our image gathering on the web, so that every object in the virtual site has already had a virtual life.

I have been using mazes for a long time in my work, and the physical site of *The Everyday Life of Objects* was already structured as a maze well before I decided to convert it to a virtual environment. In the past, I have done this largely to disorientate spectators and thus reset the terms of their relationship to the environment, but also quite simply to increase the exhibition’s surface, to make a short distance longer. Now, I must reconsider my use of the labyrinth in the virtual domain, given that is the dominant structural metaphor in video games, and even more importantly, I must come to terms with the ideological limits on my project that come from the historical baggage embedded in the perspectival system on which 3-D animation programs rely in order to make ‘realistic’ spaces.

In the physical installation of *The Everyday Life of Objects*, the different sound tracks emanated from speakers in six different locations; the effect was much like being in a crowd or at a cocktail party, where bits of conversation come into or go out of focus depending on proximity. The soundbites did not necessarily refer to any particular object in the installation. It was tempting, given the one-to-one physical structure of the virtual site, where clicking an object will be rewarded with the release of a sound, to tie the audio more literally to the object. But I have not paired any object with its own description, in hopes that this disjunction will create more of a discursive field of objecthood.
Have you made a lot of work for computer environments before?

Laurie Beth – I have not ever made work for/in the computer environment before. In fact, I was and remain quite skeptical about such work. I find both euphoric and distopic discourses on technology to be disingenuous. Electronic art is neither a panacea nor a demon. Rather, as Anne Balsamo and others have suggested, it is a technology that perpetuates and sometimes effectively highlights the possibilities and limitations of the cultures from which it has emerged and within which it is deployed.

I am also skeptical about certain technological issues. First, although electronic imaging techniques are used by the film industry to construct non-existent spaces (e.g. Star Wars), conventional film techniques are used to visualize virtual reality (e.g. existenz). In other words, while we can imagine far more interesting VR than is technically possible to create at this point, our imaginations are also circumscribed by a dominant filmic vocabulary. Moreover, the technologies that set the standard for our expectations of virtual reality are developed by and for military and industry applications and are not readily available to consumers or artists. Those actually available look and feel clunky; they are not at all the fluid and seamless virtuality we have been led to desire by cyberdiscourse. But, finally, even if we convince ourselves of the political efficacy of 'clunkiness' (call it Brechtian), even these more rudimentary programs are not all that likely to download or function effectively on the average home computer.

Q – Is the process drastically different every time you make a new piece or are there patterns to the way you approach a new piece regardless of whether it is a high tech or low tech?

Laurie Beth – What is consistent for me is that the work is on such a large scale that I am dependent on the labor and technical skills of many others in order to realize this project. In the case of The Everyday Life of Objects, Adelle Roberts, Michael Velliquette, Thomas Bleigh, and Andy Gardner have made the electronic version possible, while Stan Shellabarger coordinated the construction of the physical installation with a large team of assistants.

What is different for me is that I am much more alienated from electronic technologies. Even if I don't personally have the technical skills to build a maze myself, I do understand, basically, what a power saw or an electric drill does. On the other hand, not only do I not know how to work with the software, Maya, used to construct the virtual site, but I also do not understand, fundamentally, how electronic media actually function.

Q – Does it feel harder to connect with audiences on the web than in actual geographical venues?

Laurie Beth – Yes and no. It's certainly far easier for artists to put their work on the web than it is to gain access to museum and gallery spaces and certainly the statistics for people 'hitting' websites are vastly larger than the numbers that visit museums or galleries. But, as
I mentioned above, most home machines can't handle the memory requirements of most interactive art, so many of the counted hits may actually only be seeing error messages on their screen, or un navigable stills.

There are also issues of corporeality and sociality. Physical installations engage audience members kinesthetically, while electronic work favors cerebral, ocular, and auditory stimulation. Moreover, because the space of the gallery is often shared with other spectators, both friends and strangers, audience members may be inspired to change their mode of participation based on others' behavior. And in the gallery, audience members may even talk to one another about the work. While this is possible on the web as well, and maybe even easier, it is not used all that often yet.

In the end, I would say that one connects with audiences differently on the web than in actual geographic venues, which is part of why I'm interested in making work concurrently for both types of environments.

Q – How much of your time do you think you spend on fundraising?

Laurie Beth – It has really varied over the course of my career and then, of course, it depends what you count as fundraising.

When I was first out of school, there seemed to be all sorts of money available to artists. Every year was structured around my calendar of proposal submission deadlines, and while none of these awards were very large, they did seem readily available to a motivated artist with good verbal skills. Since the demise of the National Endowment for the Arts, in the United States, most local and regional sources of funding have shut down, and those that remain have thoroughly revised their missions to exclude individual artists from the application process. These days, I spend much less time writing proposals, I pay for more of my own work, and I am tremendously grateful for the support of the University of Wisconsin, where, as a faculty member, I am eligible to compete for research support.

Years before I ever start work on a piece, I begin to propose it in a variety of settings. Each time I revise and submit a project description, not only for funders but also for exhibition venues, conference panels, etc., I am working to generate a groundswell of interest in a project. So, for example, the brief project descriptions offered below in response to your 'what's next' question are, in some ways, a part of the fundraising process for the next work. Then, there is a great deal of time spent writing proposals to actual funding agencies that may or may not succeed. Yet, each rearticulation also helps move the project forward, so that whether or not a grant is forthcoming, creative work has nonetheless been done.

Q – Can fundraising be a creative or guerilla act?

Laurie Beth – Absolutely! Often it means a subversive engagement with institutions, agencies, and bureaucracies, learning to use their vocabulary to leverage money for projects that would not otherwise be supported. For example, The Everyday Life of Objects was not built in an art space but in a warehouse. Galleries and museums do not generally allow much more than two weeks between exhibitions and it took over two years to construct The Everyday Life of Objects. Simply to make work using this 'outsider artists' paradigm for a construction schedule is itself subversive. But in this case, I was able to convince a funding board to subsidize the production of art work through drastic rent reductions on commercial space actually intended for small business development.

This is not all that different from a practice common to young media artists who use the technologies in the work place during non–working hours to create art. Bourdieu/deCerteau talks about la perruque, the practice whereby workers make use of the workplace in creative ways that do not harm but do not necessarily benefit the employer. I would consider this an example of creative or guerilla fundraising.

Q – What's the most useful thing you've learned in the last three years?

Laurie Beth – Great question. Probably the single greatest lesson for me has been the correspondence between administration and art making. For the last three years, I've been chair of a large university art department. I have come to understand that this work is the large–scale site–specific art work I've been directing. In other words, being a chair uses up the energy I have had in the past for bringing large groups of people together to create projects collaboratively. This was a very important realization for me because it meant that if I want to produce work with the creative energy I have left over at the end of an administrative day, it's going to have to be something very different than I have been doing, something that allows for being much more solitary and contemplative.

I've also learned some things about the conceptual basis of my work, such as the historical correlation between the emergence of domestic material acquisition and perspectival pictorial systems. But explaining that fully requires another essay.

Q – Any top tips for fellow artists?

Laurie Beth – I would encourage us all to think about models for 'sustainable activism.' It's tempting, especially in the service of compelling, urgent, and just causes, to set one's mental and physical health limits aside and to work to the point of exhaustion. For our generation, this has resulted in many young idealists, at middle age, turning in disappointment and bitterness to mainstream jobs and practices. We need to look to older radicals to learn what it takes to sustain a 'guerilla' perspective throughout our lives.
Q – Where to next for Laurie Beth Clark?

Laurie Beth – It will take at least the rest of this year to finish up *The Everyday Life of Objects* and another one that I’ve been dragging my feet on called *Yarhzeit*, a video tape about the performance of truth. Next year, I’ll be starting work on several new projects. I’m thinking an installation that pairs the sensory density of the market environments of developing nations with the sanitized excess of European and North American supermarkets and department stores. There’s a video tape I’d like to make that places the relationship of my mother and the women who care for her in context of a long history of interactions between Jewish middle class women with African–American domestic workers. Finally, I’d like to write a book about the complex power dynamics between artists and academics, both historically and within the present day university context.

Toni Dove

Q – I’ve heard you say that you work in a field that doesn’t exist yet, i.e. interactive film. Can you say a bit about the evolution of your career and how you arrived at making this type of work?

Toni – I started out as a painter – I did a lot of work with mixed media. Painting and working within the gallery world gradually started to feel like a shirt that was several sizes too small – as if the things I was most interested in were all things that broke the rules or were frowned on. I felt I was bumping into the walls all the time – the rules. Narrative was becoming more and more important to me and mixing moving images and text with sound. At first I did installations that used multiple computer programmed slide projectors on three dimensional scrims accompanied by soundtracks. It was a way of being able to make movies on my own and to take the movie off the wall and bring it into the room. To make it immersive. I did a virtual reality installation – a murder mystery that was a forensic tour through the body and the city – at the Banff Centre for the Arts. After that I started working with interactivity as well as immersion. I’ve pretty much picked up the technology as I’ve gone along – I have no formal technical training with computers. Working this way lets me use all my facets – all the things that interest me – and I can make up my own rules.

Q – Can you describe your interactive film *Artificial Changelings*?

Toni – *Artificial Changelings*, an immersive, responsive, narrative installation, is the story of Arathusa, a kleptomaniac living in nineteenth century Paris during the rise of the department store. She is dreaming about Zilith, an encryption hacker in the future with a mission. Zilith is an ‘informal’ urban planner redesigning the virtual highways of information data. The character of Arathusa was developed using a conceptual armature based on the pathologies produced by the social changes that occurred during the industrial revolution. This subjective fictional armature – the character and her experience – becomes a glass through which to view the current changes of the technological revolution that are embodied in Zilith – a fractured character with multiple identities and almost no interior life. Urbanization, merchandising, the mechanization of travel and industry, and the birth of film are viewed against the evolutions of information technology as part of the conversation between viewer and characters. These references form an unstable ground against which the physical experience of a virtual conversation with two characters in different centuries unfolds. *Artificial Changelings* is more like a conversation with a schizophrenic video android with a history than it is like a traditional, plot–driven film. Things float to the surface and form an accretion.