

WOODWARD'S

Oral History Collection



Interview with:

Joel Snowden (JS),
Co-founder of
Church of Pointless Hysteria

Conducted by Josh Gabert-Doyon (JGD)

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“I mean, in many ways it was the most fun I’ve had in my life. Like I said, even when I wasn’t making much money, it was never about the money, it was like, let’s do the next performance. And because I was shooting them, I was always a bit of a stickler. We couldn’t just do shows, we had to do shows that were worth taping, right?”

– Joel Snowden

[...]

JGD: Yeah, well I mean the 100 block, like, even with like Stan Douglas’ 100¹, I don’t know, it signals –

JS: Yeah, I’ll actually give you a little tip on that one. When he did that shoot he shut down the entire street, so no one – none of the neighbourhood he was actually supposed to be celebrating – was allowed on the block. We weren’t even allowed to leave our house. When it finally came out, the Vancouver Sun published a big 2-page spread, they tried to list all the occupants up and down the block. Now on ours, it said “currently unoccupied,” but both floors – you can see in the picture – were brightly lit, and like, we’re all but hanging in the window watching him [laughs]. So I just thought, his little protégés didn’t do their homework, which was funny ‘cause at that point – I forget when he did it, I can’t actually remember the year because that stuff was kind of vague for me – but, we had been running Church of Pointless Hysteria since ’97 and there is literally no excuse for him to not know that, so I know that was kind of funny, not to dig at Stan, but he didn’t do his homework.

JGD: Why do you think you guys were left out of that?

JS: Oh, I mean I don’t think it was spite, I think it was neglect. They just didn’t do their homework.

1 *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* by Stan Douglas. Chromogenic print. 2001.

JGD: Right.

JS: I don't think it was contempt in any way, I never heard of Stan Douglas until he showed up on my fucking block, I'm not kidding, my art history sucks. I'm good at performance art and filmmaking history, but forget about art. That's my girl's department.

I'm just going to show you where we were, and then we'll head in, get a drink or a coffee – it's up to you.

JGD: Yeah that would be great.

JS: You have to decide, though.

JGD: We could do Pub 340, that's always good.

JS: Yeah, that's great.

JGD: How did Pointless Hysteria get started?

JS: Okay, here's some rich history. I was working at a bank as a teller up at Main and 2nd, I had only been there for like a year, and one of the clients there was a guy named Dave Gowan, and he is also known as Fireman. He's got a pretty rich history in the city. He was telling me that they were running this warehouse space called the At Gallery, and I come down to visit and I had been working on a show I wanted to do, which was live performance with video cameras and 6 different actors inside of a club setting. So when I told them about it, it turned out my timing was impeccable 'cause someone had just moved out. So I was invited in, so that was the summer of '97. And then we did that show at the end of August, and we were still called the At Gallery, officially, and then I'll lose my train of thought. Place is always – oh here we are, we had the top two floors here.

This was the main entry, still does, goes all the way up to the top and we came on both sides. 6,000 square feet up there, and the front half of both floors was open to the public and the back half was four different rooms, and that's where we all hung out – illegally, of course. So yeah, we remained as the At Gallery, and then Y2K started to settle in and everyone's going fucking ape-shit about nothing and we realized that we wanted to change our name to reflect that. I think it was the New Year's Eve of '98 into '99, that makes more sense, so that's when we changed the name. We were Pointless Hysteria all through '98, '99, 2000, right up until – I'm going to sneak through and then we'll go back – sometime in the summer or early fall of 2003, we held an anti-Olympics fundraiser coalition and the day of that party we got the blistering note on our door that said that we were unsafe to occupy. So they had to move their venue, and we were never open again. I think we had one more event in September, which was super low-key because we knew the heat was on us, and then we stubbornly scraped until December thinking we could weather it, and then finally we gave up. So December 2003 is when we finally fled. And that was that.

JGD: So what numbers were you guys? Was that the same address?

JS: We were 110. 110 West Hastings, and then I think that would have been 108.

JGD: What was that below you guys?

JS: It was a bunch of different things, often just a shitty little bistro that was fronting things, they were fencers. The whole neighbourhood was that, you know. To get through my door here you had to get through a bunch of Hispanic crack dealers, and they were actually quite charming once you got to know them. If you weren't in the crack trade, they were fucking fine. They were here for one thing only. So

we had a rapport with them, as well. The only people we didn't have a rapport with was actually sometimes the police, when they were doing interventions down here, and I would just want to get into my studio. This one time in particular – now this isn't ragging on the police 'cause we had them upstairs quite often, they were fine – but this one time, she was bustin' some crack dealers here and I'm like, waiting over here, and she's kinda finished and so I'm like, okay, I'm going to go inside. So now she starts harassing me, she wants to see my ID, and I'm like, "Why would I show you my ID?" "You must have something to hide." And we had an inspection right after that, which we skated through no problem, but they don't know how to deal with – 'cause it's tweaky artists in shitty neighbourhoods. It's stage-one gentrification, right? Everyone knows that. So we're the only tweaky ones that can actually live down here with some equilibrium, and they just don't get that. I mean why would they? It's just weird, right? It was a fucked up place. I was here for 6 almost 7 years, right?

JGD: So were you actually living here too?

JS: Yeah. That we down-toned, because that's what the cops were always trying to figure out. "No, it's just our studio." But if they pressed me for my living address, I didn't have one, right? So, it was all under the radar, and for a couple years we were just skating by. In the middle some time, probably around 2000, we weren't always making money. So I was actually making my living off returning bottles to United We Can from the parties we had, so it wasn't high livin'. Let's go to Pub 340, let's get out of this shit, and that smoke too, is that cool?

JGD: Yeah. So if you got it in '97, Woodward's had been closed for 4 or 5 years –

JS: I think so, they were, I forget when the screens went up. They were starting to really tear it down. Again, those dates you can

probably provide better than me, but I will give you the sketch around it. The other thing too is my girlfriend, Celia King, she works with a group called Co-Design, and they actually did the community interaction about Woodward's, so they were dealing with all of the squatters, all of the kids that were, all the community, they all came to several workshops and Co-Design basically tried to coax it out of them what they wanted Woodward's to be. And they did good work, which they always do, but it's always up to the City and the planners whether they just want to throw those plans away. So what's your background, let me interrupt here.

JGD: Yeah, I mean, so, I'm a student. I work a bit in radio journalism, I've worked with CiTR and I work for a podcast now called Cited. I guess my move into art had to do with the fact that a lot of straight journalism is really restrictive in terms of thinking about narrative and thinking about, you know, performance and maybe some of the more experimental kind of ways of telling stories, and I guess looking at the world. So, trying to find a way out of journalism, maybe a bit.

JS: Makes sense.

JGD: Yeah [laughs], so now I'm doing this research residency at 221A and yeah, trying to kind of look at the history of Woodward's and the surrounding and the effects it had. I mean, they called it the Woodward's Effect. It's pretty serious. I was at a hearing yesterday at City Hall for 58 West Hastings, and most of the speakers – not most, but a good portion – were bringing up Woodward's as this thing that's still being felt.

JS: I mean, this is what we don't want to do.

JGD: Yeah, exactly. So that's kind of it. I'm interested in, you

know, issues around displacement, gentrification, urban life.

JS: Can I ask you the one question I've been dying to ask? Why on earth did you include 'Amateur' in your title?

JGD: We have a couple rotating titles we're using, so, one of them is the Woodward's Amateur Historical Society when we want to put something in a magazine, and the other one is the Woodward's Anti-Capitalism, or Anti-Investigations, so we're trying to cycle them through an acronym, basically. But yeah, that's kind of it. One of the big things I would also say is that we're trying to think of ways that we can use the history, especially around Woodsquat, to think about how we could push back against a similar gentrification process in the future.

JS: Yup, that's the model.

JGD: That it, right?

JS: Yeah, and they fucking lost. They totally lost.

JGD: Yeah, basically.

JS: The designs that came out of that Co-Design workshop were like, 6 storeys max, lots of social housing, lots of interactive community shit, and it's fucking gone. They maybe planted a shrub.

[both laugh]

JGD: What kind of stuff, tell me about your performance background a bit.

JS: I don't have one, I was just around a lot of them. I started filming the shows that we were doing and started accumulating all these

types. Eventually I realized that it was a waste of fucking time to shoot them if I wasn't going to do something with them, 'cause all I was doing was filling up my shoebox, right? So I'd rather painfully starting teaching myself how to cut, and basically, let's say 2-hours of shooting every night, would turn into a 6-minute piece that would summarize the entire night. 6 or 12 minutes depending on the density of the performances, right? I started doing that really regularly, so I have like 40 pieces to my name from those 6 years – most of which happened '99 to 2003, 2001 was like, our big place. Honestly, I think that's kind of the year I woke up. I spent up until my 30s just being, like most people, what the fuck is going on, in general, not just in Vancouver, but in general. Why the fuck am I here and why should I care? Not a good attitude, but it's an honest one. And then Y2K and Pointless Hysteria and all the performances I was seeing just kind of went, hey, I think I now know what I'm doing and the pieces started to take off. This was before Youtube, I tried to load up a bunch of stuff but they had a 6-minute max file size that made them really shitty low-res, and it just wasn't worth it and besides, we already had our heyday by the time Youtube really showed up, so we were mostly playing in galleries all around town. Dynamo would host us, Video Inn, and I just kept building them. And then eventually, I had been teaching myself to edit at a place called Insight, which is a local film production company that some will repute but that's not my issue, and when I did that, 'cause he was watching all the videos, Kirk, he invited me to start working on a car show, which is hilarious because I'm 50 now and I've never driven. I've never had a license. So I thought, okay, I can do a car show, I'm qualified. So people would be like, "What cars are you doing this week?" and I would be like, "I don't know, a red one and a blue one and a yellow one, I don't fucking know, one of them's a motorbike, I don't know." [laughs]

JGD: So you were doing filming at those big events?

JS: Yeah, and cutting the shows. So I was doing broadcast TV suddenly. And then I did a Native affairs program for a bunch of years and that was really fun, and I think that's a bit it for there, and then Kirk started to push his way into doing TV movies for American networks down south – that was redundant [both laugh]. You know where America is, I take it? We've heard enough about that lately, to be able to put them on a fucking map. So eventually I found myself making movies. I made 11 in 3 years for him, and it was kind of torturous but it taught me a lot. I now I can shit out a movie every 5 weeks, so that was comforting. But I don't like the film industry, nothing about it, I especially hate on-set stuff. I don't know how anyone perseveres that shit or why.

So I did those and then I was signed on to do another movie, and then my gal and I had done a – my attentions had turned from performance art and the connections that happened between a performer and an audience, cuz I can witness it on the screen. When I'm editing stuff, I can see the connection. I can see how the audience is now behaving as one, so that kind of shit just started to blow me away. So needless to say that led me directly into studies of consciousness and physics. Needless to say [laughs]. So my last, since around 2005 basically, I've been primarily studying the history of math, math in particular, and physics. Not just science in general, but physics, and trying to figure out how the math works and why it works. So if we can use the counting numbers to describe nature, there's got to be something to the fucking counting numbers. That was my starting point, right? So 1-2-3 is a lot more important than we think.

So in 2006 I think, we applied for, okay I'm skipping a step but you can put this together later, when we finally left pH in 2003, we moved out to Wall Street, just two of us. We had a beautiful house right on the point on Wall Street, it was fucking gorgeous, more than we could afford but we had been paying shit for years so we were like, let's indulge. We were coming out of the Eastside, we need something

posh [laughs]. We did that for about a year and a half, and then I met my girlfriend and she had just closed another gallery called Misanthropy, which was down at Richards and Pender. Right on Richards and Pender, the green building on the corner across from Macleod's Bookshop. What's the name of the barbershop underneath it? It's right there. She had just finished closing that gallery with her son and now the space was empty and there was a bunch of people thinking about moving in, and she would just be a tenant upstairs, and I was like, me being a greedy warehouse guy, I was like, well fuck that, why would you want to give up your gallery to some unknown schmo when I could move in and we could run the gallery? I hadn't even been thinking about it but now there's a fucking gallery right there and I was like, I know how to do this, I want to do this again, I miss it. So I trotted back to the Eastside. [laughs]

Misanthropy still had their last show up, which was a group show, it was just scissors and office supplies incorporated [inaudible], We Can, Neil Knowlan, the whole whack of them had done this crazy install and Celia and I hadn't figured out what we wanted to do yet. So we were like, okay, let's just sit with this install. And then finally, I ended up tearing it down. A friend basically said, "Well, you keep talking about the electromagnetic spectrum. Why don't you tear this down and draw that up?" So I had always had an idea of doing a piano scale version of the electromagnetic spectrum, so pianos, if you know anything about music, every time you go up an octave you double, so simple as that. So, you take the entire electromagnetic spectrum, pick a frequency, and you've got 64 octaves that describe the entire thing and that fit on a 40-foot wall. So, I drew that out and I started to line in all the numbers and I just started to go crazy on this wall and that summer we held a bunch of workshops, invites all sorts of artists in – visual artists, performance artists, musicians, a couple poets – to basically just explore this for a couple months, and they came willingly – we just supplied beer, it was

just like an open house party – gave these silly lectures to explain what it is we were doing. In 2007 we got a grant from the Canada Council to finance those 30 artists to build a performance and rebuild my wall with each artist getting a spectrum. So someone did the periodic table, someone did consciousness, someone did radio, someone did human hearing, all the way up. The poor guy who did visible light, fucking amazing piece, but he only got one octave, so his is just a tiny stick of light [laughs] but he did a lot with it. He had the smallest canvas, let's put it this way. So they rebuilt that, and we mounted that at New Forms, it would have been 2007, and then we remounted again in 2010 and now it's just pretty storage in our house [laughs]. But they're these big 8 x 5 panels that describe each section of the periodic table and they're all done by beautiful artists. I love them, I don't know what I'm going to do with them yet, but they're pretty. And that's where I've been, basically, ever since, working out a new mechanism so that I can collapse the entire spectrum into a single circle, which can then be used for tuning purposes, so we can start thinking about tuning consciously to things that our atoms are doing anyway. So we're here on Earth because our atoms are behaving in a certain way, if we tune to them, what would happen? So, that's the thinking.

JGD: So kind of like, you're an inventor kind of thing?

JS: Yeah, but it's more theory 'cause I'm working with Excel sheets, so I'm not a programmer, but I'm doing all the logic that would be involved in doing the programming. So the next step is as soon as I'm done, I'm going to hand it off to someone that can make it active and colourful, right? But right now it's purely math. But it's Excel sheets that work, so you punch in a number here and then everything goes *whroop*, so –

JGD: And you have no training in math?

JS: Actually no, I had to start from scratch, which was annoying, but that's the part that pissed me off – I kinda realized that science and math is everything, and nobody knows shit. So what are we doing? That really started to bug me. So at the turn of the century I was like, fuck this, I need to do something. It's like I said, it's the first time I've bit down and was like, I need to participate.

JGD: Was there something about Y2K? What was the atmosphere around Y2K that you seem to think, it was pretty –

JS: Well it was silly, that's why we chose Pointless Hysteria, it was like everyone around us was like, "Oh no, our computers are going to die, the world's jets are going to fall from the sky, I don't have my bank account." It was insane, it was stupid, because of two fucking zeros. I don't know how old you were when that happened, but it was, I was, let's see, I was born in '67, '77, '87, '97 – I was 33, right? So I was having none of it, I was like, this is silly! I can't believe that if this is actually a glitch that no one knows how to fix it that's fucked, and if it isn't a glitch, wild eyed. So it was literally just about everyone going crazy about something that didn't seem to matter, and therefore that was our name, you know?

JGD: But who was it that was freaking out? Vancouver in general? It felt like the city was freaking out?

JS: News media in general, so it's not Vancouver-specific, again, it was global. It was a thing everyone was like, "In 10 days our world is over" and most of them seemed to believe it.

JGD: But then for you, personally, also the turn of the century was also a time, business as usual.

JS: Yeah, I was like, now I'm going to play along. Because I saw this

debate. I was either going to go dark, like I'm just going to drink myself to death over the next few years, which is always an option, or I'm going to do something. That was really the flip. I was just upset at peoples' ignorance and stupidity, and I don't equate the two. Ignorance can be fixed, stupidity is like willing ignorance, right? That's my opinion.

JGD: Now, this place on, Misanthropy on Richards and, what did you say, Pender, that's pretty close to the Kootenay School of Writing, right? You guys were down the street from that? So, I know that some folks from the Kootenay School were involved with Woodsquat. Were you guys related? Were those communities linked?

JS: Celia would be more inclined to cover that and I can hook you up with her, if you want, 'cause she was deep in with the squat. When Co-Design went in to talk with them, the squatters, she was the only one they'd talk to.

JGD: Woah, that could be cool.

JS: Yeah, she's a good sort. She'll be shy, but she'll do it.

JGD: Now, but you guys were still across the street at this point when the squat was going on right? What was that like?

JS: I mean, you saw it in the video, I just shot it. It was nuts, they were, one of the focuses in that short little music video I sent, they were letting crack dealers walk scott-free and they were arresting people for spray paint at the squat. It's fucking retarded. That whole, [sings] "Oh, Canada," it's like, they're walking through murder to get to the spray cans. And that, I just felt that had to be shown. There's another part of that video where the Woodward's maintenance man, I guess, had to come out everyday and clean up the

graffiti with white paint, and he was hilarious because he's like an elderly Chinese dude, and I never met him but I always saw him. One day there was one that said "Feed the poor, eat the rich" and he stood and stared at this for a little while, and then he was like, "Okay," rubs out feed the poor and moved on. Is that not a statement? [laughs] So he's middle-class and he's like, fuck both of them. Don't feed the poor, let's rub that out, but you're still welcome to eat the rich. Fuck, it made me laugh, and I was shooting it and I was like, "Dude, what're you doing? That's hilarious." There's someone without a voice, making a clear fucking statement. So that was my interaction with them. I've always been more comfortable behind the camera. So if something was happening and I wasn't in it, I was probably shooting it.

JGD: So you would have watched the raids on the squat, what were your memories of how it first started from across the street? An interesting vantage point.

JS: Just the ugliness of it. It's always ruthless. They put up with it, they put up with it and the squatters thing, "Oh, we're okay" and they get more and more cozy and they build more and more quite in-depth structures to keep themselves warm and dry, and it seems to be working and there's apparently some negotiation with the City, and apparently everything is going fine, and then one day the dump trucks show up. And they're just fucking, literally fucking scooped out. They might as well bring tanks and bulldozers, 'cause that's literally how it feels. They throw their shit in the dumpster and they drive off. Shit's gone. You who had nothing but those 6 things, now you don't have those, have a nice day. "We're looking into social housing," right? That's how it felt.

JGD: Was there like, from there to the Olympics, because, so, 2003 is when you guys started kind of opposing the Olympics 'cause it had

been announced around then?

JS: Yeah, it was the year of the referendum. I don't know if that's the right word, we all had a vote, and it went the wrong fucking way, and that's what the Olympics coalition fundraiser was supposed to be about, it was just before the vote. So it was critical for them to get their message out, and that got clamped down, but I still think they held it somewhere, but we were over. From that point on, as soon as we said yes to the Olympics, everything you see today started happening. Right? Everyone blames the Olympics, but the Olympics went back that far. It wasn't 2010, it was 2003, that's when the shitty decisions started to happen. And by shitty, I just mean they don't reflect the poor, right? Or anyone, really.

JGD: So explain to me what happened with this fundraiser and you guys getting this eviction notice?

JS: Well again, you're not going to find anything on public record that the two were tied, but we had never had one of those before, and we had been living – as I said – we had been living and working out of there for 6 years and no one had been there to inspect it, suddenly to say, "Oh my god, this fire escape is really trouble," that didn't happen. So, gearing up for a show, a lot of the kids were real political, so a lot of them were actually working at City Hall, so there was a buzz going about. People knew this event was happening, and then literally day-of, in the morning – and those posters are big, you don't miss them – it's like that big, unsafe to occupy, cease to exist, the whole shebang. And of course, we went in, but we knew there was no way we were hosting anything, so we had to call everyone and say, this shit's off. So that's the only link I can give you, but that's pretty apparent.

JGD: Right, now what were you guys feeling about the Olympics gen-

erally as Pointless Hysteria? You guys were involved in performance art. What did the Olympics have to do with you guys?

JS: Well shit, see their main performers, including Shane Koyczan, who you may remember gave that rousing speech, he cut his teeth at our place. He's also a slam poet, but he did innumerable performances at our place over the 6 years. RC Lazowski [inaudible], another local clown. All of them had worked there. So basically Shane Koyczan was cutting his teeth to get the Olympics, and they shut us down, so they didn't see the grey area, 'cause that's where we operate. I was anti-Olympics, always am. Look at any city that's hosted, they always get fucked. So I'm like, who is this going to serve? Of course I'm against it, but I'm not angry, I'm not black block, right? I'm not that guy. So I was just like, I'll do what I can to get the message out but above and beyond that, it's happening. I'll give you the best story about that. The Skytrain is being built in prep for the Olympics, Cambie has been all torn up, all these new developments are going up beside the rail system. A friend of mine, a really amazing blog artist and gene specialist, he now works at the Marie Curie Institute in Paris, he had a job here at, I forget what hospital or university, but a big-league dude, he's fucking amazing, one of my favourite people. So, he wanted to do pop-up shows. You hear a lot about pop-up shows these days, but this was back in the day, and he wanted to do pop-up shows in some of those new businesses that were being developed, he was like, "Let's use some of those and bring attention to them." He called every single rental property organization that he could find on those windows, nobody returned the call. They were sitting on them empty, just waiting until the shit happened. They weren't interested in lending it out, he gave up on Vancouver just shy of the Olympics and he got a job at the Curie Institute and fucking took it, taught himself French over like, 6-months just so that he could go and take the job. He's now got a job for life, the guy's fucking brilliant, but he left Vancouver in disgust. I don't

think he's been back. And that's a great example of someone who's amazing that we lost. It's sad. That's one example, but it's the best one. A real talent both in science and art.

JGD: What was it like living in Pointless Hysteria leading up to this Olympic opposition?

JS: I mean, in many ways it was the most fun I've had in my life. Like I said, even when I wasn't making much money, it was never about the money, it was like, let's do the next performance. And because I was shooting them, I was always a bit of a stickler. We couldn't just do shows, we had to do shows that were worth taping, right? Which makes it really difficult. We'd have like, a variety show, let's say, and there'd be like 30 performers and I would be uninspired to shoot half of them, so half of them wouldn't even get on tape 'cause if I wasn't enjoying it in the moment, how the fuck was I going to make a video, right? So I'll be shooting some performer, and then I would just go up to the ceiling, I was just like, okay, I'm gonna go get a drink because I wasn't contracted to shoot them, it was just purely my whim, so I'd go downstairs and hit the bar. It was super fun, we knew we were on the fucking edge of the city, like I said, the Hondurans were fantastic once you got to know them. It was good. We were forgotten and the only people who knew about us were the young kids who made it to our place. I went to a wedding of a friend of mine, Joe and Melanie – they were in Progression Gallery, which was ground-floor next to us on the same block – I went to their wedding years later and there was a bunch of teeny-boppers there, I mean not teeny-boppers but they were really young compared to me, and this one girl, I guess she heard me and Joe talking, and she just flipped out: "I just heard that you're from Pointless Hysteria," and I was like, "Yeah" and "I just wanted to tell you I went to like, all your shows and you inspired me to be an artist and I– " She was like bawling! It was fucking wild, and I was just like, "Oh, well I guess we did

good then.” So I mean that type of shit was happening all the time, and it was amazing. The LGBT community in Vancouver, we were like top notch. It was me, Keddrick, James, Mandy Hardwick, and she was front and centre in the LGBT, it was the queer and punk movement as it was known, they didn’t have all the acronyms back then, but the queer punks and the Gulf Island film school – is that in Victoria? It’s out there somewhere – they focus on queer and unheard voices, and they teach them how to make films. So we did a fundraiser for them, that’s when Mandy came in and then she became our third-wheel, she was one of the 4 people. It was me, Keddrick and her, and then the fourth always changing, you could never get a perfect fit, right? But the 3 of us, and she used to bring, I literally for 4 or 5 years was best friends with all the queers and all the women in Vancouver. And that’s fucking fun. I don’t know how you feel about sexuality, but having that many girlfriends is amazing. [laughs]

JGD: So, so, it’s the 4 of you guys living there, operating the collective, and then throwing shows. How frequently? Every week?

JS: Oh no, probably max twice a month. And sometimes we would, I think the [inaudible] that I sent you, that was us lending out. Radix Theatre [inaudible] came in and said we want to do this, this and this, and we were like, fantastic, bring it on. Same deal, we rented it to them and gave them like a week to set up, ‘cause they brought in sod and everything. It was nuts. They had a week to set up, threw the party, I shot the shit out of it – I think I got 2 and a half hours of footage – and then twiddled it down to 6 minutes. That we did on occasion but again, it was the idea that you couldn’t just come in and throw a rager, you know where your primary focus is rock bands and beer, that was not our focus. It had to be performative, in a way. And that got us outta hot water with a lot of the cops, too. One time the party I threw in August ’97 we had full-on performances, 6 rooms of djs, lights in every room, cameras running around, a guy

doing live oil painting – that’s just the start of it. So anyway, the cops come in, there’s 4 of them, and they come in kind of like how a man does, as they always do, and they looked around, talked to us, everything was fine because they were a little overwhelmed that it was so arty. And then finally the 3 of them are walking down the stairs and the one guy is left looking at the oil painting guy because it was right there at the entrance, [laughs] and the other 3 cops had to call him down. They were like, “Bob, c’mon.” So we had that kind of rapport with him, which is beautiful. Having an anti-anything stance without any room for movement is a little stale, I think. I don’t like what cops sometimes do, but I don’t have an anti-cop stance. How’s that? So that was fun. I know we’re jumping around, but –

JGD: Well, I’m curious too, what was your guys’ relationship with the community? Seeing that, you mentioned before, this kind of artist-led model of gentrification. How were you guys thinking about it when you got in there?

JS: It was already active when I moved in, so it was already a gallery and it had its parameters. They were already doing events, they were already doing Valentine’s Day parties and da-ta-da, so I just moved into that system. When I first started after my big event, which was a highly successful flop, IE. it went off really well but nobody came, or at least not enough to make it – I think I lost 3-grand, but that’s okay, I was over-extending, I was excited! [laughs] After that party, it really started to hone in, all the work. Between then and 2000 basically, I really started to find myself as a shooter and be like, okay, we’re going to focus on collecting events. ‘Cause I made these 15, 20 years ago, and I knew, and all the people who have seen them, my biggest fans, they’re always like, “Don’t worry Joel, those pH videos haven’t seen the light of day yet,” and it’s like, I fucking know that. Every time I show them around people are like, “Wow, no one is doing anything like that now. It’s like 20 years old,

that's fucked up." [laughs] Yeah. So I think I was always just making it with that in mind. I knew we were capturing history, and I knew we were capturing something worthy, and I knew it was hidden, and I knew we were in the middle of the shit, and I knew it would end. That was the worst part, I knew this wasn't going to last. I tend to be a terrible realist. I knew this wasn't going to fly forever. So that was my take. I liked being out of the firefight, I liked being out of the line of fire, that's what I meant to say. You notice I don't use a phone. I like having my head space. I don't like being interrupted. I don't like being like, oh, fucking phone, what do you want? or I don't like turning it off and having to listen to 30 messages. I just cut that out like 6 or 7 years ago, and it's really cool. Facebook recently, like about a year ago, cut us off because Celia and I were sharing an account and we were using, not a fake name but our project name, Electromagnetic Explorations, that was our tag. Anyway, my girl tends to be a little firey when it comes to online discussions, so I think she must have upset somebody and they wrote to Facebook and said, "Now who the hell is this Electromagnetic Explorations," and they sent us a big long form that was like, declare who you are or we're going to shut you down. We had 7 days and Celia and I were like, do we care? No, fuck 'em. So we just never went back [laughs]. Haven't had it since, and I actually, all the news I'm reading now I'm like, thank god, I don't need to watch live murders on Facebook [laughs]. So I've always been, sorta like, well my first memory as a child is bewilderment. That's honestly the first thing I remember, like, what the fuck? Even before I knew those words.

JGD: What is this memory?

JS: Oh, just my first memory as a child. My first conscious memory is what the fuck is going on, that's what I remember, and I think I've been like that ever since. It's really funny, I haven't changed much. I've just gotten more and more solid in my beliefs, but at the same time, I'm like opening my brain to physics. I mean, I'm convinced

we're all connected to everything all the time, always, and we don't have a fucking clue. And, we don't know how harmful or helpful that could be. You get it from a church sermon, you get it from a rock concert, you get it from a one-on-one conversation, I mean, these things are potent powers that science can't even speak to, yet they know they're there. I've just been looking for a way to get underneath the veneer, I guess, I don't know, that sounds pompous, but I just want to know how things work because I'm pretty sure they're not working, right?

JGD: Did you feel like it was working with Pointless Hysteria? I mean, there was also other galleries in that same block. There was a lot going on in that block at that point. I mean, did it feel like it was working?

JS: It totally did, but not on the level, it was like a starter step. We were researching alchemy, we did an alchemist's marriage, which is a whole – not black magic – but it's a whole ancient alchemical ceremony that weds the king and queen and then they get beheaded and then their blood is poured in the bed and then, it's fucked up, but these things come from ancient texts, which are the precursors to chemistry. So, we're like deep into that, and so that started me on the path. Up until 2001, I had been reading basically classical physics, and then I got into quantum physics and I read a book about Niels Bohr and it was really good but it was really mathy, and I just lost my shit. I was like, okay, this is beyond my chem, so I literally dropped it for 4 or 5 years before I picked it up again and was like, no, I need to know this! Fuck you if it's hard!

JGD: How did you guys run the curating, other than when someone would rent out the space? How were you deciding what kind of programming would be there?

JS: Well we were either designing the programs ourselves, which was the 4 of us hashing out a theme and who would be a part of it, et-cetera, and those were fun, and the other ones were when people came to us with a project that they wanted to do in the space. Remember, that's how I entered the space, by saying, "I want to do something there," So I was down with that, as long as it was cool. Then it would be like, they would have a meeting with us. It was never like, 1 on 4. When Radix came, I might have had the first conversation with them because they knew me, but when they approached the space, they're talking to all of us. And we basically just hash it out, here are the parameters, here's what we don't want you to do, here's what you can go crazy with [laughs]. I'll stick to the curatorial. Just some common sense things. And we would just set up the parameters, figure out what they wanted to do, set up the space they wanted to use.

For instance, this one lady, she wanted to read this book in a closet that you wouldn't see her in unless you went down this path in the warehouse. Over the course of the night she stayed in that fucking closet reading this book. And what she had done is run wires up through the ceiling and she had soundtrack in both of the bathrooms on both floors, so that whenever you used the toilet you were listening to her reading and you didn't have a clue where it was coming from. So what would basically happen, and I think this was the thing she liked about it, was that you were listening to this narrative whenever you were in the bathroom thinking perhaps that it's recorded, and then one time you might chance spy her, and you'd have to do, "Holy shit, why is that girl in the closet? Oh my god, that's the girl I've been listening to." So this whole doop-doop, multiple level stuff, but I mean, that was a small component but a necessary addition, which makes shit cooler, right?

We would agree to a price, we always kept the price low because we

weren't making a million. Average price was \$300 for a rental, that gives you 3,000 square feet, 2 floors, you got a full bar and 2 stages upstairs. It was a good deal. And then it was just a question of policing it, making sure a- they could handle security, and then b- we would make sure that everything was running smoothly. So I will give you an instance of when that didn't happen. They're doing a drunk-driving check on Hastings one night and there's 15 cops downstairs, they've got both sides of the road blocked and they're stopping every car. I didn't know this at first, but the DJ in the kitchen on the first floor, was fucking blaring shitty techno, like really loud, louder than it needed to be because there was nobody dancing, it wasn't like a full clubby thing, it was just a neurotic young DJ not knowing when to turn it the fuck down. So I was looking outside and I realized, there are cops everywhere. And I realize they're not interested in us, but they're looking up. I'm like, "Dude, you gotta shut that shit down" and he was like, "Why?" So of course, we got intervened. Another cute story, I've actually run into this kid again and he had the same experience I did. And so the cops come in one time and they're not being unfriendly, but they've shut everything down. They're talking to me in the kitchen, one in particular, and there's a group of young punks hanging out, I forget what kind of show it was, but we had a full range of youth, right? One of them is like, "Fucking cops, shit, fucker, fucking shit, fucker" and I'm like 6 feet away trying to talk to this cop, trying to save my fucking house. And so I said to the cop, because both of us can hear it and his back is going up, you know, and I'm like no no no no no. I said to the cop, literally, "Could you excuse me for just one second?" I walk across and go to the kid and say, "Look, you're just here for the fucking night. This is my house, we're going to lose everything, and you can never get to come back because we won't be here. So you need to shut the fuck up because I need to deal with this. We're under fire, not you. You shut the fuck up," really quietly. Not angry, not anything, just "Shut the fuck up." And I go back and talk to the

cop and the cop has just witnessed all of this and now the cop is actually graceful, and nothing happens. Nothing happens, they leave. No problem. So like, 6 years later I see this kid at an opening and he remembers me and comes over and gives me a big hug and I'm like, "Dude, you know, it's never left me that time I had to give you shit, and I just want to say after all these years that I'm really sorry." And he says to me, and this was fucking classy, "No dude, that was the first time that I started to realize that my Black Block tactics shit weren't always appropriate. It was the first time I realized that the setting meant everything. I think I started to really grow up that day." [laughs] I was like, "Dude!" and we both gave the high-ten. I was thrilled, because I wasn't trying to be a dick, I was just trying to save my shit, right? In the best way possible. Delicate negotiations between some angry punk and a cop that just has to do his fucking job. So that shit's funny, there's so many of those [laughs].

JGD: So I'm curious about this Olympic Black Block thing that was brewing that sometimes got channeled through Pointless Hysteria, but you guys had to navigate it a bit. What was the feeling in the city. Was there a real sense that this was some sort of rising force?

JS: Like, pH you mean?

JGD: I'm thinking more about the radical politics around Black Block.

JS: Well I myself am a big fan of non-violent intervention. I don't give a shit about banging glass windows, but I know that shit raises tensions. So if anyone's interested in de-escalation, that's not the way to go. And that's always been my stance, just because. Like I've said, I don't give a shit about property damage, but it does raise tension. You should avoid it. There's actually a great newsletter that's been going out for a few years called Waging Non Violence. It's a good one, I recommend it. They talk about all the suc-

cessful non-violent demonstrations that have been successful and led to good shit. So we never backed that, but we hosted. There's a group called No-core [inaudible], and they were hardcore noise bands, super good friends with them, hosted them 2 or 3 times. There are angry elements, but I don't think in their case it was really directed. I don't know if you want to print that [laughs]. So I don't know, there was never any gathering of force. The closest we came to armed warfare with the City was the Olympics, but they got first blood, right? They were quick, and they were smart about it, 'cause we just realized the end of nigh as soon as I saw that picture, or poster rather, so that's about as close as we came. And of course, after that all our anger was fucking impotent. We had no leg to stand on. We were living in an unsafe-to-occupy building. They had us over an 8-ball of whatever. So no, we couldn't do anything at that point. So we had been supporting the underground and whatever they wanted to do, but when we lost our legs, we were finished.

JGD: Right, so with the [Woodward's] Squat that was happening, did you have a sense of who was there? Did you interact with the folks across the street?

JS: My favourite lady was the church lady, I'm trying to remember her name, she stood at the corner of Woodward's for years handing out Repent Sinner stickers and chanting Christian tunes and waving her stick at crack addicts and she was a major force. She probably did more for that corner than the cops did. She was there in her spot when the squatters started to, when all the parades started, and all the chanting, and she was literally just in the way. And I felt sorry for her because the people demanding their rights were squishing hers. So, I'm like Calvin & Hobbs, I'm often paralyzed by being able to see every point of view, where I'm just like, okay, wait a sec, there's no out here. This is just clumsy. I knew what you're fighting for, I know what's coming, good show of force, but you can either

run this up the flagpole of you can focus your attention elsewhere. I wouldn't say I'm a pessimist, but I'm a realist. I know I'm not the first person to say that, we're practically identical these days, but I like their verb and supported that. A lot of that always to me comes across as quite selfish.

JGD: How did you feel people were interacting with Woodward's up to the squat? It was just this big empty thing. That must have been a fucked up presence across the street from you guys.

JS: Well it defined the dead to us. That's what defined our look. There was nothing happening on our block. That place was the poster-child for nothing going on here, and that was there. So yeah, it had a huge impact. And then when there was motion on it, that's when it started to get interesting, but that's also when it started to get hectic, right? Not all the squatters could agree on what they wanted either, so you bring them all together, and the presence is good. I would never suggest that they shouldn't be there, I think whenever there's a problem people need to show up, I just don't know how effective it is. They were allowed to stay for a little while, which is what the City always does, and then they just clear them out and do what they were going to do in the first place.

JGD: What was the crowd? You saw there were a lot of young people. Was it folks from the neighbourhood? What was your interaction apart from these guys selling crack outside? Like -

JS: They never wanted to come in, they had no interest. They knew we were cool, in the sense that we're not annoying - I don't mean cool, as in - I mean, they accepted us. We were not annoying. We always had security, but it wasn't hardcore security, it was like one of us or someone we hired. Like, "Hey, let's get the biggest poet to work the door." [laughs] "He looks kind of intimidating, he's got a beard and all, Just don't speak to them because they'll know you're a poet." So

we didn't police the door in that way. We were conscious of letting people up. On 2 occasions actually we had shit ripped off, so somebody got in, grabbed some shit and took off. It's unfortunate, but it's the price of doing business, technically. I hunted a camera down locally, because I knew who had taken it and I knew where it might end up, so I ended up at a pawn shop talking to the guy and it cost me \$90 to get my camera back but that happened without a police report and that made me happy, I got it back like 2 days later. But no, we didn't police the entrance way. There were people from everywhere, and a lot of people were surprised at how warm and welcoming it was, 'cause they had never been on that fucking block. So if anything, that was the most important interaction, is that we were dragging people to a place where they never thought they would go, and then they were finding that it was absolutely fantastic, so their entire perspective of the block changes. Now they know it's not so unfriendly. One nice lady, 'cause again, it wasn't just young kids, one old lady, a mother of somebody, says, "I just wanted to let you know," on their way out, "I actually had a really good time." And I said to her, 'cause I'm a little flippant, "It was actually nice to have you." [laughs] People use the wrong words all the time, it's like, you didn't need to put that word in there.

JGD: Explain to me the psycho-geography of this place a bit. So you're coming through, if you're going to the Eastside from Downtown, you need to pass by this strip of dead, industrial –

JS: Most people do it on Pender, yeah, because most of the Pender buses run right through. Like, when I came to see you I took the 4 and the 7, came from Victoria and Powell straight in, right? So I don't see Hastings.

JGD: That was the kind of thing at the time? So there was nothing going on from Main basically to –

JS: Well you're right the Hastings Streets are basically, the Hastings buses are running on it, but they're not staring out the window to see what's happening today. No, they're, right? You know it. So it's just a dead block that you gotta get through. But when you're asked to walk it, and when you're asked to come at 8 o'clock at night, and you've never been there – it's more important thinking of the people coming from the West End, as you know – so they're coming down, and they have to walk the block. They have to find the address, and they have to tug on the door, and they – that's all on them – and if they don't make it through those phases they don't get to come. And then when they do come, they're like, "Ahhh." You can actually see it in them, as soon as they get inside and they see a little bit, over the course of 5 or 10 minutes you just see them go, "Ahhhh, it's going to be okay."

JGD: Right, but then there's also people that end up opening those fucking furniture shops.

[both laugh]

JGD: It's tricky with like, art in that neighbourhood. There're a lot of spots around there.

JS: I can't believe what they've done to it now. Even when they first did the first run of stores, nice posh places, half of them aren't even there anymore. The first crop didn't even make it, so it's purely developers. And then all the keeners come in like, "I can make my little posh restaurant here, it'll be great." They're dead in 2 months. It's sad for them, but I mean, I like their dream, but they're pioneers in the same sense we were. The block ain't ready for them yet. It's just not. It may look like it's ready, it's just not. The only thing that works there is like the corridor with London Drugs. That's the only part of the Woodward's building that actually

seems awesome, right? That little courtyard with the basketball and stuff. I never hang there, but every time I walk through it I'm like, this is a nice place for people to hang. That's where we might have gone if you hadn't come up with the beer, which was a great idea.

JGD: When the Woodward's building was eventually built around 2008, you were no longer at that same spot, but what was your read on it?

JS: Gross, because remember I had that inside line from Co-Design, and I knew what had been presented to the builders and I knew what was going up. As soon as they put the crane up, I don't know if you know this, but the crane always defines the height of the building. So if they put up a little one, you know it's only going to go that high, because they don't stage those things. They start way at the top and work up. So the cranes went up, and you couldn't even see them, the top of them [laughs]. And you're like, okay, this is fucked. I know people that have tried renting there and it is just fucking obscene. So you're paying, I don't know, \$1200 per month or 3-grand a month for some apartment, still gotta deal with the street, right? That's the problem. Same thing here, go to the Noodle Box for a nice meal, still gotta trudge through that street. So they haven't fixed the stairway thing, and yet they jack up the rents and these poor retailers are going to suffer because these people still aren't willing to make the balance, or suffer the balance.

JGD: Okay, so I got a question about Shane Koyczan, because he's featured in this Westbank Fight for Beauty exhibition, have you looked into that at all? You've seen those ads around at all? Magenta.

JS: Fight for Beauty? Is that those ones? Oh Christ, is he? Fucking sell-out [laughs]. Once you've done the Olympics, you might as well shoot for gold, right? [laughs]

JGD: That's the company, Westbank, which put up the Woodward's building. And they're doing a big exhibition where they have their public commissions, so the Stan Douglas that sits in the Woodward's, they have all these architectural mock-ups, the Shaw Tower, and all this shit.

JS: Shane, you're a----, I'm just saying.

JGD: What was his role in all this? So, he was performing at Pointless Hysteria.

JS: Yeah, he was a slam poet all through the States, he won a bunch of awards I think, came back, still learning his trade, did countless shows at our space. And then yeah, when he got the gig for the Olympics we were all like, "Dude, that's hilarious." And then what's funny is that of course he did this poem about how proud he was to be a Canadian or whatever, and then like months or years later he's still being asked to do it, and he actually had to publicly say he's not doing it anymore because he doesn't feel that way anymore. So, I think, to be fair – and again, being a realist – poor fucking guy probably needs money, and they probably threw it at him, and if they got him because of the Olympics, I regret that he's the face for that. I wouldn't ever defend it, but at the same time, puts food on the table. And if that's his take, I can begrudge of it, but I won't condemn it. There's been a few people who have made that mistake.

JGD: Who else you thinking?

JS: There was an art sale that used to happen every year where a bunch of artists would come together and they'd all contribute a piece of work and then – I forget what they'd call it, I don't even know if I can come up with names, the name of the thing or the name of the guy who ran it – but he partnered with a developer as well, the Rise people. And the show had been running for four years, *Bet-*

*ter Than A One Night Stand*² – there it is! Do you remember that? Or *More, Less Than A One Night Stand*? Something like that? So the idea was that you would go to this party, buy some art that would cost you less than the price of a one night stand, and you would have some art. That was the cool thing. As many artists as you could cram into the place. So he'd run it for 4 or 5 years, and then he did this commitment with the Rise community so that he could get this great gallery space, and everyone shat on his show. Not everyone of course, because there are some keeners, but a lot of them were pure, if I can say that kind of skeptically, they were like, "Ew, I don't want to do this." And it will be the same thing with Shane. Shane's gonna get some kickback from this, and he probably knows it. He knew it when he signed the contract.

JGD: But he - yeah.

JS: It's money dude. I don't condone it, but I understand it.

◆◆◆

2 *Cheaper Than A One Night Stand*. The series was run by the Vancouver-based artists' collective Fracture Industries,

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*Direct Action and the Archive:
A Screening of Sid Chow Tan's Video Journalism
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