BEATING A DEAD HORSE WITH ERIC WESLEY

MARA FISHER

Eric in Studio, Mara Fisher, color photograph, 5 x 7 inches, 2011.

I first met Eric Wesley in the office at China Art Objects during the opening reception of its Inaugural Show. Later that night, artists, friends, and interns like myself retreated to the back room to munch on leftover hors d'œuvres. As one tastefully suited reveler wrapped a rogue Almond Roca in a piece of roast beef, Wesley turned to him with an expression of deep concern and asked, "Are you from the islands?"

Eric Wesley doesn't give anything away, nor does he like to be pinned down, or perhaps even interpreted at all. Everything he does seems to be infused with humor, but I do not think I've ever seen him smile. He speaks circuitously, teetering on the line between sincerity and irony with a consistent sense of dissatisfaction in attempts by outsiders to reiterate or incorporate his explanations.

Wesley is as enigmatic as his work, which is most comfortable when it is in flux, improving or worsening. Many of his projects don't pan out the way they were initially conceived, but the focus then becomes the advancement toward a conclusion that may never be reached. In his work, Wesley courts the idea of failure and the point at which it becomes interchangeable with success, drawing from parallels to this interplay as they occur in the history of space exploration. His approach is idiosyncratic, based on everyday interactions with his surroundings and the self-consciousness that results from it, as evinced in his plans to build a nocturnal L.A. office to accommodate the working hours of European galleries.

Wesley's gestures are simultaneously grand and commonplace. When first displayed, his piece, *Kicking Ass*, a donkey statue that had kicked a hole in the museum wall, was largely interpreted as a critique of the museum institution, when Wesley's purported intention was simply for it to kick a viewer at chest level. He never pursued a master's degree, but called his first solo museum exhibition Thesis Show, intending to analyze the climate of the art world in relation to a formal arts education and perhaps to open the discourse for his future endeavors. In 2005, Wesley and the Naples-bred L.A. artist Piero Golia founded The Mountain School of Arts (MSA) in Chinatown. Despite his enthusiasm on the subject, Wesley told me he wanted to be very delicate in discussing The Mountain School, which considers itself "a supplement and amendment to the university system."[1] It was a natural place to begin our discussion.

Mara Fisher: Are you careful about The Mountain School of Arts? Is it something you're protective toward?

Eric Wesley: Well, I'm by nature a paranoid person about everything. I think both Piero [Golia] and I were interested in the idea of starting a school independently. We had been friends and things naturally jelled, and we pooled our resources and started the thing. We invited various people we knew and kept it very open. That was the idea, that both he and I would be the founders, the administrators. I wasn't to teach a class per se, and Piero wasn't to teach a class, and that's how it is today. It has morphed into something different because originally we had the idea of, within three years, establishing a school and then being out of it and letting it take its own course, which clearly didn't happen. The whole thing was to not be like an art school, so we decided on a few disciplines. Science and art are definitely a part of it, of course. Piero brought in a scientist in the field of astrophysics. I called Richard Jackson. I also pulled in two attorneys to teach a law class. I think that it is harder to get lawyers to teach for free. Students don't pay anything, teachers don't get paid, we don't get paid. When we started out, there was no money, the place was free, housing was free, and so on.

So skip ahead five years, and the climate that we're in is

quite different, and that's in small part due to the graduate art school thing, but other things that are also coming up. The art world itself is changed, and there's the New-Yorkification [of Los Angeles], so I think that my role is shifting in a way. What I wanted to say also at the start of this interview is "Welcome to the Underground," because I think MSA has surfaced.

MF: What does that mean more explicitly?

EW: We are very successful. Applicants now number in the hundreds, and the first year was a very underground thing.

MF: So would you say it's like institutionalizing what was a more underground movement and making it into a formal education, with teachers, students, and a set curriculum?

EW: I think that we always aim for a curriculum, to be rigid. Piero is very good at getting people there on time and not drinking. And I'm not. I think that's kind of what makes up the underground, if that makes sense. I think the idea is to accept everything and I think that it's always wavering with MSA between what is acceptable to myself and Piero, the co-founders. I think success wins naturally.

MF: I feel like that's kind of the idea I've gotten from a lot of your work too, is that there's an interplay of responses to a set of external expectations. Even your Thesis Show [a part of MOCA's Focus series] made me wonder: is this necessarily just a criticism of higher art education or is there an inclination toward it at the same time? I wanted to know how that tied into MSA because it seems like you think a lot about art education and how it can be re-imagined.

EW: Yeah, or even the "establishment." You can't help but laugh when hearing that word because I think that now everybody is at war with themselves. This is not an old idea, but perhaps it's not so un-new. I think that I always consider that one element as an impetus for my work. The chief thing for me is a formal pursuit, and then everything else just helps things along. To make a cube about a cube is less interesting than if it's about the cosmos or, let's say, something political, or any number of topics. I'm really into Minimalism. Everything has to be part of the work, which is what I try to do.

MF: In your work it seems as though you don't necessarily like to pick a side, you're just examining that there are those sides.

EW: I think I don't like to pick sides. I like to deal with physics—it has no sides. There's something going on there between the art, the physics, the politics of something. Da Vinci, as an example, was great because he was working for governments building war machines and he was also an astronomer, but in a certain sense he was just an artist.

MF: Well, he was an innovator, and when there's any new technological innovation the first place it's always applied to is the military.

EW: I think that's right. I'm a big enthusiast of aviation and aviation history and aviation future and aerospace and space travel. Like you're saying, a lot of technology is progressed through war. So much of the progression in that field and in aviation was made in the First World War, where they were flying just years after man achieved flight. Consider that the war was not more than decade after the Wright brothers, and so many technological advances were made during that time and in subsequent wars, and you kind of question why that is. There's a back and forth in the Second World War.

Wernher von Braun was a Nazi, reluctant or not, developing V2 missiles, but his dream was to go to space, to walk on the moon, and to walk on Mars. That's what he wanted to do from the time he was a kid. When the war came, he had to work in Nazi Germany and develop these horrible weapons, but as a stepping-stone to get to space. I think that is a kind of analogy, a Faustian realization. He later worked for the U.S. and NASA, of course, to develop Apollo missions. And then a man walked on the moon. Whether that is a result of war or peace, or of technology for its own good, for man to be better, is a question. These things weigh heavily on my mind.

MF: Does it have to do with the supposed failure and success dialogue? How does that fit into your work?

EW: It's kind of like, a real artist doesn't care about the truth or not-the-truth, otherwise you'd be a businessman or scientist. Rather, if you put something out there like, "This is what's going on," the artist is telling you that it doesn't matter if it's accurate or not, or if you can crunch the numbers and make it fit into science, or look at it a certain way and make it fit into the occult or alchemy. I think the function of the artist is another one. So, all those things really start to get mangled up. That's kind of the only thing we have.

If aliens travel to earth before humans travel to them, they may find no use for anyone but artists. This would mean they understand "science" better than humans. [They would have] no use for business, and lawyers would probably be the first to go. But with artists, it's just kind of like, "What the fuck are these people thinking?"

MF: So, is it the role of the artist to begin that discussion, and then for everyone else to make their own conclusions and find parallels in what you said, like the occult and everything else?

EW: I think the artist has all the jobs, from shipping the work, to the inception of the idea, to talking to people to understand what they're thinking. The job of the viewer is nothing. The job of the collector is financial support. The role of the viewer is not to be entertained, but to participate, to go see the show and then write about it and think about it.

MF: Your work comes in so many different forms and so many different mediums. Does it begin with a concept, or do you focus on the object first? How does a concept dictate how it's going to manifest itself physically?

EW: I don't like this dictatorship and authority. . . . I want to make a big wheel that I spin that says "music" or "poetry" or "painting" or "time to eat" or "performance" that dictates the thing. So if something hits my brain, I spin the wheel and say, "Okay! I'll do a drawing." Then, of course it could develop from that, but I kind of like the idea of this Dada-esque approach, or just a method of freedom. Cause it's such bullshit. For me, to be a conceptual artist these days means being lazy, or having some engine behind you like a social system or a financier.

It is unfortunate to have to talk about your work. Isn't that why one makes work in the first place? I'm not so good at any other language. I didn't pursue this career to talk about what I'm talking about. So it's not worth it for me to think about an English translation of the work. I guess I choose not to. I'd rather work on something else and hope that thing sticks. I hope that people who understand conceptual art through English can also understand my next project, try to define it, or perhaps other things I've done or other things

I will do linguistically.

A perfect example of that is something I'm working on now, which goes back to what I was saying about what is the truth and what is not-the-truth, and the importance of that distinction. I'm working on a "liar" and a "truer." You spin the wheel and adjust the spokes, and it produces a true wheel. And then there's the lyre, the musical instrument. There are, at this point, many manifestations of that object. It's just an object, but it's more about dealing with English. That is my way of talking about the work, but they're just objects.

MF: Is it something about binaries in general?

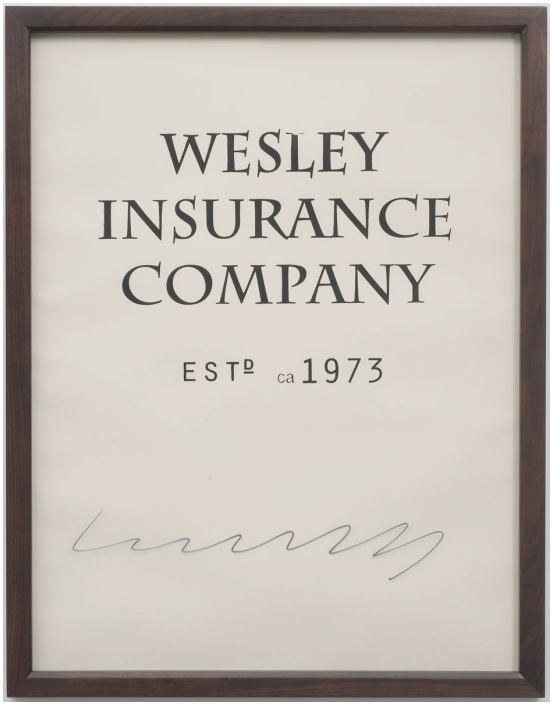
EW: Yeah, but more like fractals. Now there's thirty-two possible incarnations of these two essences of these things: the lyre and the truer. I am more interested in music than talking, but I'm not good at music and I'm not good at sculpture. I think perhaps that's where the failure thing comes in. I look at artists like Jason Rhoades and Kippenberger as very fortunate, in a way, to be understood outside of those boundaries of what is real. They just made up reality. That's genius for me. I think that's a fundamental point, that you create a universe where failure is impossible.

One of my heroes is a man called Gene Kranz, who was the flight director at mission control during the Apollo missions. During Apollo 13, when they had to scramble to get the astronauts back alive, "Failure is not an option" was his saying. You can read that in two different ways. First there's, "Failure is not an option." Surely it's about morale, saying, "What we are doing, we cannot fail at." And then there's, "What we are doing, we can *not fail* at." In one sense, it's like the whole infrastructure and money put into the operation *has* to get these people back to earth. In the second sense, anything I do, like if I drop this [*picks up and drops lighter*], that did not fail. It's more of a metaphysical thing. "The astronauts might die, but that is not a failure." I like how those two things really play off each other or are the same at a certain point.

MF: So it's the difference between "Failure is not an option" and "Failure is not even possible"?

EW: Yeah, but "possible" and "option" go back to semantics and linguistics and how fast you can understand the English language. I used to read and be engaged in that a lot more when I was younger, and I think there comes a point where you have to just put up or shut up. There's a lot of weaseling going on in art criticism, where everything has to fit into something. Perhaps in school you should be taught a little bit of history, but I don't know what I believe anyway, besides looking at the movement of Orion's belt, or something.

It has to do with this project I'm working on now, which is all about Europe. And the first thing is to make a map. I didn't want to order a relief map, so I started just building this topological map that's derived from many different maps. It may be kind of pathetic that you and I don't know this [where particular countries lie on a map]. It might be inspirational to some people, but I'm trying to rectify that. My idea is to try to set up this office, this space, this zone. I was tentatively calling it *Eurozone*, but now it's something else. I want to make an operation here in L.A. that's open during the operational hours of the EU. So, from midnight to 6 a.m. I will be in this office working. With my gallery in Germany, I'm the only artist in L.A. It's hard to communicate, it's hard to ship work, it's hard to be on the same wavelength. So I figure if I am operational on their hours then I can be on a webcam or do something to rectify the situation. Also, if people come visit here for three days



Eric Wesley Insurance Co., Eric Wesley, silkscreen on paper, 21.5 x 27.5 inches, 2010. Image courtesy China Art Objects.

they don't have to switch to our time zone. And that is about time and space and about the land, and why things move. It's all very interesting to me. We are a European society in L.A. . . . It's not Mexican or African or Wild West, it's European. I want to understand that and rectify my understanding in Europe and still have it have to do with elements like time and space.

MF: Do you think that looking at Europe necessarily disconnects you from L.A. then?

EW: I think that it'll be seen as a kind of cliché and a typical thing to identify with Europe, which is not necessarily what I'm doing, on the contrary, perhaps. I think that it will be seen as this kind of typical interest in or representation of the standing relationship of contemporary artists from L.A. with Europe. I'm trying to deal with that. Making something so typical about Europe at this point is like beating a dead horse. I want to beat the dead horse. That's a creative act, I think. It might be disgusting, but it's still some sort of performance or action, some sort of creativity comes from that. It is, in fact, the essence of creativity . . . like a dance. I've been interested in Dada [in the past], and I feel like that's creeping up in my subconscious at the moment of making work. And the wheel truer has become about that, the idea that Duchamp's wheel needs a tune-up. Everybody has seen Duchamp's wheel on the Internet, it no longer possesses any qualitative essence. I like shock art and shock value. There's the idea that nothing is shocking. I mean, you could see the most fucked up thing or the most loving thing, disgusting or cute—but the idea that shock is out of the question, I beg to differ with that. That's another project I'm working on.

MF: You recently had a framed screen print in a show that read "Wesley Insurance Company." Can you tell me a bit about that?

EW: Advertising and insurance go hand in hand, and the idea of creating a real business is something I'm interested in, in terms of my work. The history of insurance is an incredible one. Three thousand years ago insurance was not on the books. If you lived in a community and a neighbor's house burned down, you were expected to help rebuild it. Maybe what interests me more about that is how it has come to be on paper, it's become an industry, and I think that there's sarcasm going on. If you say you insure something, it's a little Mafioso, isn't it? It's kind of an aggressive thing. The way that I'm looking at it is one of total honesty.

What Wesley Insurance, WIco, would be is if someone were to collect an object, or anything I do, and something happens to that piece for which there is a policy, then I, the company, would not only repair it, but make it better. [*Picks up lyre*] If someone were to buy this lyre as an artwork, and that's clearly the point, that it's not a lyre to play—if it breaks or someone steals it, and there is a policy for this

item, then we would not only replace or fix it, but make it better. For me that's real progress.

MF: Is WIco a way of keeping the artist's hand connected to what's being sold?

EW: I think it is, yeah. I was thinking of writing something for the policy and how to approach it, but rather, as you're saying, return the artist's hand. Instead it would be whatever the company can do to make it better, a substitute perhaps for the artist's hand conceptually. So maybe, if this thing were stolen and the policyholder for it came to me, then I would buy a fully functioning lyre online and give it to them. Would that be better because it works? Because it's a real lyre and not a fake one? I don't know. That's determined by WIco officials.

MF: And it's still a Wesley.

EW: That's right, and the idea is to take the sarcasm out of it, if you can believe that. If I ball up a piece of paper, I'm an artist, so it's $20,000 versus returning a fully functioning lyre. Is that better or worse? That's the artist's job, not a normal insurance company's job.

There's this Van Gogh painting of a café with stars behind it. I wanted to re-create that painting with total accuracy, because it's Van Gogh's style and it's crazy. I wanted to realize what day of what year that was, what perspective, and where exactly the real stars were on that night, and then remake the painting with that accuracy. So, it would be a WIco policy for a Van Gogh painting, let's say. That's more to do with the past, but when you start to talk about that kind of stuff, the past and the future is a level playing field. There are many objects out there that have policies on them, but the overriding concept for the company is not fully figured out, as I suspect it will never be. But that's progress, I think.

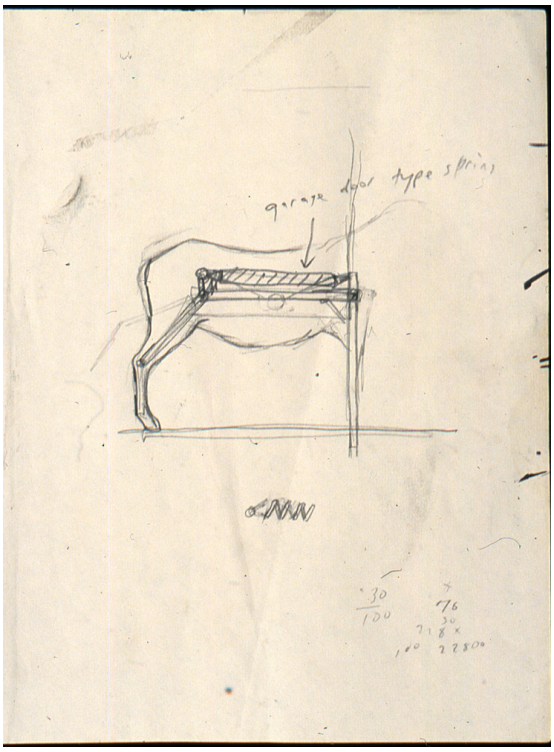
MF: That also leads to the question of inconclusiveness. Do you feel as though that goes for a lot of your work? The idea that it's always in progress and that it can be improved? Do you feel a certain attachment to it?

EW: It seems like a beneficial thing for the artist to stay in the loop, no matter how far away. Maybe I subconsciously don't complete anything because if I did they could just get rid of me. I think there's a coldness in our world. Maybe, in a way, the art dealer and the art collector and the curator are the stars and the artists are the workers.

MF: Do you think that when a piece of yours is sold, it becomes inactive?

EW: Perhaps the opposite. It may be activated by that sale. If a collector supports my work, I feel like they are not buying this truer, which cost me $60, for $10,000. They're not buying it to get the truer. They're supporting my cause, my ideas, which I really value. The individual or the institution supports something that is not the thing nor the painting. If I make a painting and somebody buys it, they're not buying it as a painting for their collection. I feel like they are supporting future production or a reason for me to continue with my stories. I was just thinking about that the other day. It's kind of what I rely on: generous people who understand the story of things and not the objects or the money.

I like the Duchampian idea that goes along the lines of "You make artwork not for the people that are out there now"—like what is popular. Your real audience is fifty years from now, and you'll be gone. I think that's a positive thing, a



Kicking Ass (Plan), Eric Wesley, pencil on paper, 16 x 20 inches, 2000.

romantic thing. Maybe in the future people will understand you. It's definitely a waiting game.

MF: I've seen and read a lot of things that categorize your work as "prankster art" or "institutional critique." Are those dangerous words for you?

EW: That's what sucks about an artist's reputation or pigeonholing. Like the prankster thing, I really hated that word, but now I kind of like it. Institutional critique is just stupid. If it's critique of a real institution, like a scientific institution or a political institution, that's more interesting. Art institution critique, eh. I don't really see the point. I did this piece, a mechanical ass that kicked holes in the wall.

MF: "Breaking down the white cube" in a very literal sense.

EW: I think it was read that way, and I totally didn't expect that. I mean, yeah, you see a wall and you want to punch a hole through it, that's just how I am. That's more creative, I think, than looking at it. And that's perhaps maybe a little what that work is about. But I was thinking it's way more about body art critique than white cube art critique. The thing was designed to kick somebody really hard at chest level, so it's more like an impact on your body than the institution. Usually things I make are intended to be interfaced with humor, entertainment perhaps. Comedy and humor—kind of more digestible than death.

MF: I remember one of the pieces you had in the Inaugural Show at China Art Objects was a Xerox of your butt. And that to me was the ultimate prank, a bold gesture of you coming out and perhaps owning the prankster thing.

EW: I think that it goes back to words, also. It's kind of about words, and it's supposed to be a poem. Perhaps my wheel wasn't operating properly to determine what medium to present that idea as. It's supposed to be about procrastination and meditating, like "But, but but . . ." It's a lyrical thing in a way. I think that the prankster element in my work says more about my personality than about my product. It's kind of a style perhaps, a conceptual style. But "prank" is not right. "Joke" is so much better.

MF: There's always a victim in a prank.

EW: Yeah, that's right, and a joke is for everyone, including the person telling it. In a joke, you're always kind of making fun of yourself or pushing yourself and what's appropriate. Everybody would agree that a Xerox of a butt is appropriate and a cliché perhaps. That's one thing I was thinking about with that, to do the most accepted form of expression. Even if it's looked at as a prank, it's really nothing until you think about what it *literally* is. It's supposed to be about procrastination, about not coming into its own or having an end. It just kind of keeps going, so there may be a thousand butts. Like Pee-wee [Herman] said, "Everybody I know has

a big *but*." So, the saga continues.

[1] "The Mountain School of Arts," last modified May 13, 2009, *http://www.themountainschoolofarts.org.*

Mara Fisher received her BA in Art History from UCLA in 2010. She currently works as an assistant at China Art Objects and is considering pursuing a Master of Architecture in the near future. Her areas of interest include classical civilization and etymological myth.

Eric Wesley was born in 1973 in Los Angeles, where he currently lives and works. He received his BFA from UCLA and is the co-founder of the Mountain School of Art (MSA) with Piero Golia. His work has been shown in the U.S. and internationally in several single and group exhibitions, including Snapshot: New Art From Los Angeles at the Hammer Museum, Nation at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, England, and Focus: Eric Wesley, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA.