

EAST CITY ART



Wade Carey Interviews Samuel Scharf on the Eve of Academy 2011

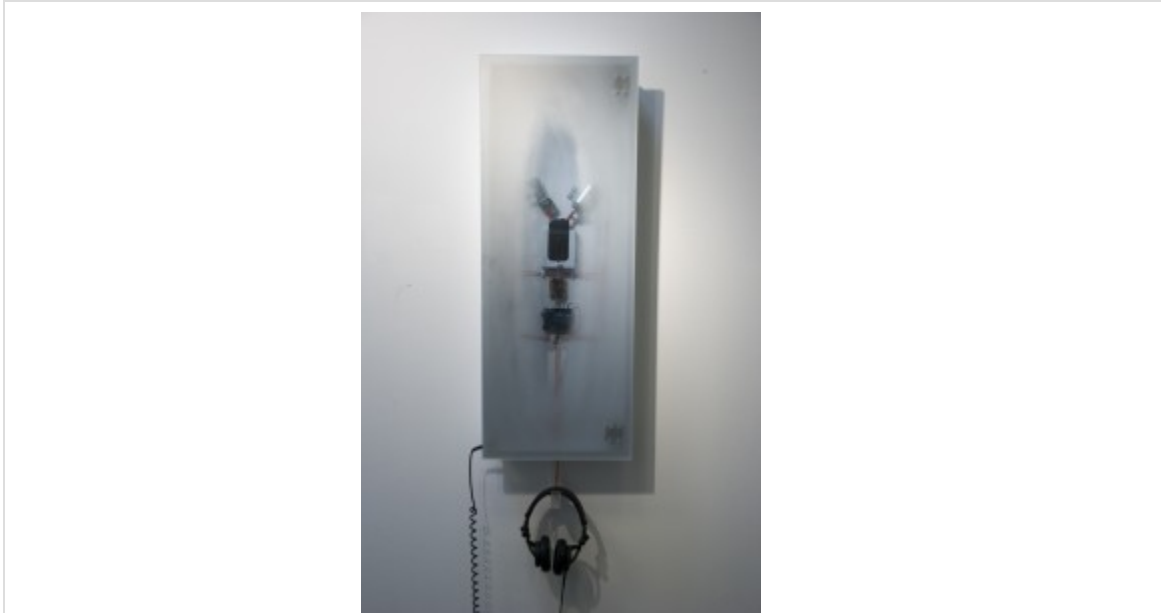
July 12, 2011



Sam Scharf. Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

On July 2nd, I had a conversation with American University MFA candidate [Samuel Scharf](#). Sam talked about the creative process, living as an artist in the District of Columbia and his selection as a featured artist in [Academy 2011 at Conner Contemporary Art](#). His selection in the Academy Show is "You Fucked. Fuck You." A Vimeo preview of the work can be seen [here](#). The 11th annual Academy group show of work from regional BFA and MFA students opens July 9th and runs through August 22. Conner Contemporary Art is located at 1358 Florida Avenue, NE. The transcript of this interview has been edited for concision and clarity.

Wade Carey (WC): Let's start at the beginning when you became a fine artist. Tell me about working as an artist first and then deciding to go for a master's degree.



Sam Scharf, *You Fucked. Fuck You.* 2011. Found Vanity Cabinet, various electronics, looped audio, 35 x 14 x 4 inches. Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

Sam Scharf (SS): I'm not really a person who sides with "becoming an artist." I feel it was always a part of my upbringing. It developed much earlier. In high school, I was more traditional, doing a lot of graphite work, drawings, spending obsessive amounts of time getting the drawing perfect, and really trying to master that. By college, I had given that up and had started exploring a little more. I was always doing things like ceramics on the side. I became very interested in oil painting when I first started, but always a product of my expression. At that point, I had already started moving away from the need to capture what was there. I really wanted to try to find my own voice through the medium. I have always been hands-on. Growing up with a single mother, and having to figure out how to do things, went naturally with my artistic side. Sculpture came about after that. It just developed kind of naturally. I was always aware of it. I had to listen to that voice. But then, once I had accepted it, I think coming out of college was the biggest drop. They don't really prepare you for that. I think there should be something more during education—as it is in other countries—when a student shows as an artist.

WC: That sounds like a problem needing solving. The process for you, if I am getting this right, in making art, has to do with problem solving, with finding something and figuring it out.

SS: Absolutely, [chuckling] all the while as you are doing that in your life, as well.

WC: When you talk about secondary and undergraduate art education not preparing you, what do you mean?

SS: What I wasn't prepared for, and what I see in a lot of undergrads that I teach now, was reality. When I got out of undergrad, I hit the real world. It is a little cheesy to use that term, but it is there. I had to learn how to navigate supporting myself with a full-time job, and still making my art. That's what I feel needed to be covered more. The artists who I feel are more developed are coming out of art school undergrad, like M.I.C.A. My college was not an art school. I don't feel that anyone leaned down and said, hey, by the way, you are going to have a good year or two where you really won't know what's happening. You are going to struggle. And I did struggle for a good year

or two. What happened for me was that, out of undergrad, I moved right to D.C. I have been in D.C. for almost seven years now. I had an internship at the Hirshhorn and I just headed to Washington. I didn't know anyone. I didn't have a paying job; I tended bar for a little bit. I didn't have any friends. I didn't have a place to stay. I crashed in some dude's living room for a couple of months. Then it just started. Once that year passed, and I was making pieces here and there, at that point, I could start figuring out how to balance my equation. That is what we all need to figure out, I think, what works for *me*. I needed to earn enough money to feel stable and secure but then, also, to support my habit, which was spending a lot of money on materials and sculpture work that was still undeveloped. I wasn't really in a market selling my work. It was almost masturbatory. I knew I was making things but I really didn't know why. Then, that—seeking that next level—is what took me in to my first application process for my MFA. That was two years ago. I was a little naive about it. I did it last minute. I thought, oh, my work is good enough. I have a good enough portfolio. Someone is going to take an interest. But a lot of my sculpture is really conceptual and I had not matured enough in my dialog to be able to say that to a program. I just figured, they'll look at my slides and they'll take me. Then the first round was unsuccessful. I really had to sit back, after that, and understand what I was making and why. Still, all along, I was working the job, having the nine to five. Incidentally, that is how I first got to meet Jamie and Leigh, through the art handling business. I was working at the museum, still, and trying to figure it all out. So, okay, I had been infatuated by the idea of going to an MFA program. Now, I wanted this more than anything else in my life. This was going to happen. That is when I sat down, eight applications later, after almost a thousand dollars in fees, and really did it. I put together a portfolio that represented me well. I got a couple of bites, a couple of feed-backs, but it was American University that really came back. [Tim Doud](#) called me up on the phone. I was working when he called. He just said, hey, we would like to offer you a spot. Here is what we can do. And on top of it, he said, there is a little bit of money. I just hung the phone up and I was going to an MFA program. It was great. Finally, that work paid off and I felt a little glimpse of success that spiraled into jumping in head deep. I just took off work and started in.

WC: So, you have been through one year of a two-year program. Does the program at American, in your mind, so far, include in it a component of education that has to do with preparing you for the real world?

SS: There is a two-fold thing going on with me at American. There is my own want and energy that I am putting toward being an artist, which could be applicable at any school anywhere. You really only get out what you put in. And then, what's also going on that I find interesting at this school particularly—I have mostly only positive things to say about it—is that it is really theory-based. In a contemporary world, right now, where theory is getting pushed to the side—that's just the revolving circle of the art world—I feel that American specifically, and the teachers there, Tim and [Zoe \[Charlton\]](#), Zoe especially, and [Luis Silva](#) just blew my mind. Within two days of being there, they really wanted us to understand what we were making and why we were making it and then to delve deeper into that, almost painstakingly ripping it open. They were saying, if you are going to do this, if this is really what you say you want to do, you have to be able to be aware and knowledgeable of where that comes from and why. Then we will just go from there. They have done that one hundred percent in the first year. I know how hard this industry is. I get more of a glimpse now. I had been doing the art handling thing for a while. I saw it, anyway. I felt I had a bit of a step up on some of the students. Now, with that exposure that they tore open, I do feel much more at ease with the idea of being an artist as a lifestyle choice. They are very up front. This is not a money making career, here, in the type of work I am making, being more installation based, and idea driven, not so much product driven. It is going to be a hard path. I feel okay about that now, already, after one year. That is

the strongest, best thing, already, one year in that I can get out of the program. I would have paid every dime for that. I am paying a decent amount of money which still will have me nervous when I get out. But where I am at, a year from starting, there has been so much development. I could not have got that in ten years out in the world struggling. It is a different type of growth, when you are in front of people who have done it, and who get it, and want you to get it and really work hard. Another plus of the program at American is that they are not interested in churning out a certain type of artist. I think maybe that was happening for a couple of years—and you can see it at a couple of other institutions. They were trying to say, this is the type of artist we're going to make this year. American is not interested in that anymore. I think it has made them a great program. Since I have been there, with me and with the other twelve kids, it has been very apparent that they are saying, look, if this is the work you want to make, and this is how you want to make it, we are going to question it, we are going to push you on it, but if you come out of it saying this is still where I am at, if you want to paint oil paintings of dogs on couches, then, cool, but let's make sure.

WC: Make sure you know the theory behind it, why you are going to do it.

SS: Yes.

WC: I think another thing for me, looking at it from the outside, not as a student, is that it is exciting to have a new art center at A.U. The physical space certainly has injected a little bit of excitement at the university into the pursuit of a post-graduate art education.

SS: Yes, I can say that, every day, walking into the [Katzen \[Arts Center\]](#), and getting to show there—my first year exhibition was in a museum, technically. That is a real plus. I have my own thoughts on this. There is some struggle there. The teachers in the MFA program really want it but I think the university has so many other faces already.

WC: Yes, it is a complicated place.

SS: But the Katzen itself has done that. It has given us a platform to say that this is a legitimate program. We are really putting out some students that make this building worthwhile.

WC: It seems to me that it makes for a more “soup to nuts” arts laboratory, that setting for the program.

SS: There is some interesting history behind it, too. One of my professors, [Don Kimes](#), when it first opened up five or six year ago, really pushed, along with some others, to make a local space for D.C. emerging artists on one of the floors. That didn't totally go through the way they wanted it to, but I think, as a beacon in Northwest, American University has an opportunity. Some of the other schools, based on where they are located, or just because of space, can't really fill that role—like M.I.C.A. does for Baltimore. We are right on the cusp of that. There is going to be an acceptance and push for that, or there is going to be a couple more years of trying to figure that out. It is an exciting time to be there because of what is happening there and what is happening, generally, in D.C. It has made me really want to stay here and be a part of it.

WC: The Academy 2011 program has been happening for eleven years. It has done a lot to increase exactly what you are talking about, what we hope D.C. is emerging as. Let's go back to how you did, in fact, meet Jamie and Leigh.

SS: My first exposure to Conner was after their move [to Florida Avenue]. I knew about Conner when I moved here, when I was doing my homework on what galleries were here and what was going on. But I really wasn't in the D.C. scene. Even when I was living and working here the first couple of years, I wasn't in the scene.

WC: The scene is a full time job, in itself.

SS: Exactly. It is a tight knit community. It was interesting to try to navigate. The art handling became Basquiat-esque. I'm here. I'm working. I can navigate this and see, as an insider, how this thing churns. After a couple of jobs here and there, I was still working part time at the Hirshhorn. For around two years, I was doing some work, also, for a company called [Surroundart](#). That is when I met Leigh and met Jamie, at the first couple of gigs with them. Then I started doing some contract work. Two years ago, I helped [Leigh and Jamie] to go down to [Pulse](#) in Miami. I helped take all the work down there and set up the exhibition. I got to hang out in Miami and do that whole thing and see that part of it. There are a choice few people in the city who do a good job and want a good job done. Both of them are definitely at that forefront. It just worked out naturally that we were on the same wavelength. I take that work very seriously. I use the same mentality that I use when I am making a sculpture. I want this to be the best I can make it. I think that is, for sure, Leigh and Jamie's language with their business.

WC: I agree. The question I have is where you intersected in picking the piece that you got into Academy 2011.

SS: That was a little different. Both Leigh and Jamie came to my first year exhibition at the Katzen. With that show, it was like we were able to say, we finished a whole year, now let's put our top work on display—and try to make a cohesive show. They both came. I knew about Academy after living here for so long. I had been to the last two openings.

WC: It creates a buzz every year.

SS: It does. There was an idea in the back of my head that I felt that some of my work was strong enough to get noticed. Within my program, in that realm, I am a bit of an initiative taker. But once you put the work up, it speaks for itself. They both stopped by when they came to the opening. The big piece there for that show was a completely opposite piece to what got into Academy 2011. It was an installation piece, my self-portrait, which is the orange room that is up right now at the [Arlington Arts Center](#).



Sam Scharf, Self Portrait, 2011, 8'x8'x8', Drywall, Wood, Screws, VOC free paint, Tree stump and an LED bulb. Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

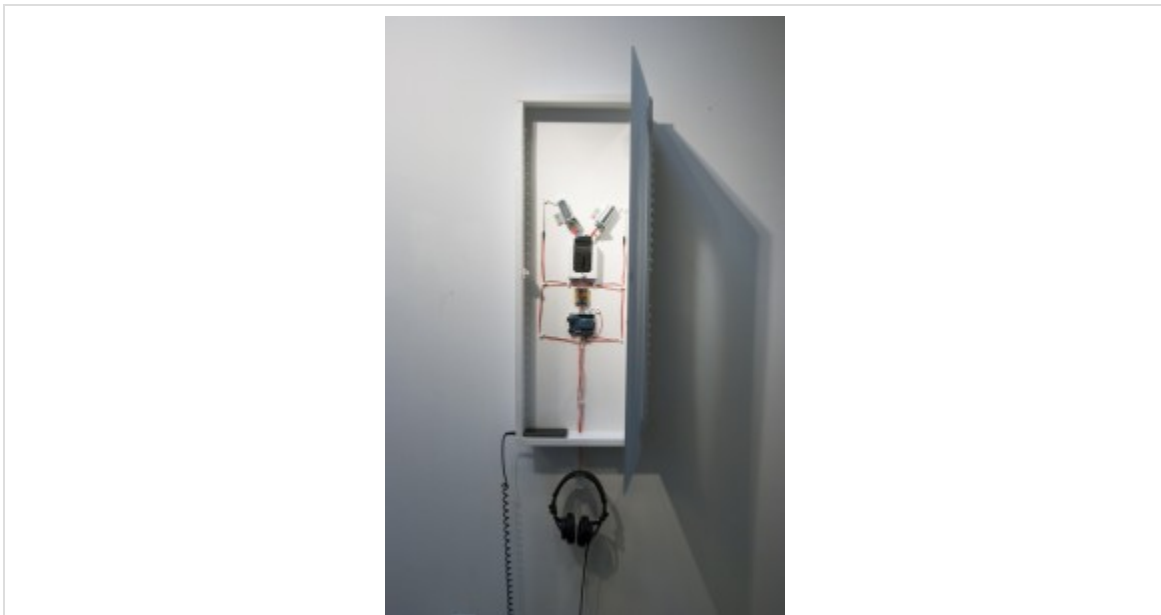
Jamie specifically stopped me on the side and said, explain this to me. Why did you make the decisions you made? I was just waiting for those questions at that moment. It was like, please ask me! I want to talk about my work with people that want to understand why I am choosing to make these things. A lot of my work revolves around the viewer. I get excited when someone who has made art her life wants to understand my art.



Detail, Sam Scharf, Self Portrait, 2011, 8'x8'x8', Drywall, Wood, Screws, VOC free paint, Tree stump and an LED bulb. Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

We had a good discussion about that piece and when Jamie walked away we hugged and I had a good feeling that maybe something was going to work out. But what I find most interesting is that the self-portrait piece isn't

the one that got in to Academy 2011. Jamie sent me an e-mail asking for “You Fucked. Fuck You,” after [seeing it on my website](#). I was really happy about that. I was working on that piece while the first year exhibition was opening. I had it in a preliminary stage, at that point. I just wanted to get it on the wall and see the reaction. I was rushing to put it up but the self-portrait took so much of my energy and time that I really had to step back and say, okay, if I get this fourth piece—it was understood that each student was going to put up three or four pieces—that fourth piece was “You Fucked. Fuck You.” I told everybody, listen, if I put this up, I really want it to be unannounced. I don’t want you to want to put a label on it. I wanted to put it on the wall and see if people interacted with it. I want that laboratory situation. But it did not happen. I did not push it. I just let it naturally work out. The opening went really well. We had good feedback and a lot of extra foot traffic from an exhibition upstairs. It was a great two week exhibition but that piece was still in the back of my head the whole time. I was really laboring on it because it was the last piece I made during my first year. For Jamie to look at my website, as an artist you know it is an important thing to have. That business part of it, you don’t really get to see the benefits of it all the time. But for her to call me up, or send the e-mail and say, not only did I look at this, and spend the time to navigate your website, I would like to choose a piece from it. That really excited me. That piece was something I wanted them to see. I wanted to exhibit it. But I hadn’t been able to. It worked out. I could not have chosen a better piece myself to show for Academy 2011. I was nervous that it might get chosen for another show. I had put out some other applications. I told Jamie and she responded back, well, do you have anything else? But I said, Jamie, this is the piece I really want to show. I am really excited that you chose it. I am really excited that I will get to put it in your space. Let’s go ahead regardless of what else is out there, let’s go ahead and keep this for the show. It just feels right. That piece specifically in that space, I am really interested to see the reaction. I know the reaction at American University. I know through my critiques what my teachers think of it. That piece was, at the end of the year, like a purge. This interactive, purely solo, viewer based work, it is so experiential. I am excited to see how it goes over. It is one of my favorite parts of being an artist, getting to stand off to the side and watch people look at my work, or interact with it, and how they do it. I could not have chosen a better venue. I didn’t get to choose it. It chose me.



Sam Scharf, "You Fucked, Fuck You." 2011. Found Vanity Cabinet, various electronics, looped audio, 35 x 14 x 4 inches. Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

WC: It is a very personal world that you are asking the viewer to step into. Tell me about how you decided what components to include as you shrank down to that space.

SS: As I mentioned before, I am not really traditional. It is not that I sketch and I develop a work through the materials. It is much more about developing my work through my ideas. I had the idea to do this piece because I had been having a conversation with someone who was very offended that someone else in the room had cursed. It baffled me for a second. I am almost overly open. Nothing really gets under my skin as far as being offensive. I think that we are actually a little too conservative in our conversation.

WC: Did you know that somebody just **got thrown off a plane**? You might have heard about it. They were stuck on the runway, stuck in the plane for a while. Some guy said something like this is fucking too much, how much fucking longer do we have to wait here? That was it. Another passenger complained, apparently. A flight attendant decided he was going to get put off the plane. They had to go back to the terminal and he got ejected. There never were any charges. Eventually, the airline apologized. They said they were sorry, that maybe the flight attendant's decision was not a productive one. They gave him a free flight to where he was going on another plane later and said they were sorry, this was kind of silly. But it got in the news, anyway. We are really sensitive that way in our society.

SS: Too sensitive and too worried about offending people. It is constrictive to development. You have to know and be okay with the fact that we are all here together and that we are all interacting with each other. The more we are worried about stepping on each other's toes, the less we get to know each other, the less we really get to know. It is like any relationship. You don't really know anything about your partner until you have those moments when it is like, wow, you really went there, you really said that.

WC: And there are vulgar and refined parts to everything. Mature societies are more comfortable with having those two things, the vulgar and the refined, juxtaposed. We are a little too uptight about that.

SS: That is where the next part in development of the work came from. The idea, in general, wasn't interesting to me. It was more interesting to ask, if a person had been in the room with us and had cursed in French, or in another language that we didn't understand, would that girl still be offended? It started snowballing from there. Are we offended by the word? Are we offended because it is a preset notion? We grow up knowing that fuck is a bad word. We are not allowed to say it. Don't think it. Don't express it. But, you know, it is actually just four letters put together in a sequence to make a powerful word. I think it can be used as an expression in everyday life. It is a release to some people. Based on language, does it still offend you? The idea was getting interesting to me. I wanted to make this piece where the viewer walks up and listens to what, basically, is an orchestra, almost twenty-five languages and dialects. For discussion, that word wasn't enough for me. Also, it was how we carry ourselves in society, fucking each other and getting fucked. In saying that, I am not talking about it as physical, or harmful or sexual. But we do, as a generalized word, do that to each other, back and forth. That is how we navigate. I decided that the languages would be having a conversation, "you fucked," and "fuck you," as a response, to see how that comes off to the viewer, or the listener. I was not spoon feeding them with any English.

I didn't want to have any English in the piece. You can get it, anyway, with some of the different dialects where you hear clearly, "fook-ed." And then another part of the piece came about. How long will someone do this? I was interested in that. That is where the stopwatch came from. I really wanted to time them and put the time in their face while they look at themselves in the mirror.

WC: [So that is why there is a vignette in the front.](#)

SS: Absolutely. What are you listening to? Why are you standing there? What is this happening? You are undeniably there. Every morning I wake up and look into the mirror and I think about my day. What is going to happen here? Is this a metaphor for the way I personally enjoy art in my life, and in going to see artwork? It really is asking something of you. The thing that I respect most about painters is that they are using a medium where you are getting, at most, maybe five seconds from the average viewer. But the person who stops, like with my self-portrait piece, the person who closes the door, sits down, and gives the work an opportunity to speak to them, those are the people I am really interested in getting for longer than ten seconds with this piece. Will you listen to the whole thing? You don't even know how long it is. It is looped. The audio is purposely looped. It is actually only about three and a half minutes.

WC: [I was scared to ask. I was worried that you almost don't want to let that information out.](#)

SS: [Laughing] Well...

WC: [It is part of the mystique of the piece. How long do you consent to experience the work?](#)

SS: I could try all day long to get that to the viewer but I am also asking of them. That is the art relationship I am interested in. It is that moment of interaction with what I am trying to do, what I am making and what I am showing, and what the viewer is standing in front of and experiencing. That relationship is where I want the rest of my art career to be. I want to try to be aware of that constantly. This isn't just decorative to me. I mean, the term may be a little cheesy, but I really do believe in the power of art. I really do think that it is one our last venues, although it may be arguable in certain areas because there are reproductions now to no end, but this is our last venue as humanity to really communicate with each other. Saying this is the way I see the world, this is what I have to contribute and I want to express that through my art. I want to express it with you. I want to have a dialog. I want to have a conversation. That really sums it up for me, when I decide to make a piece, when an idea comes. One of the big pieces of my life is all the things that I have seen in museums. I have had more exposure than the average art-goer, through my jobs and through my upbringing. My mother constantly was taking me to galleries and museums. I still remember to this day, when there is really something there. When I am in front of something, I am a part of something that is really good work in my mind.

WC: [Have you got a for-instance?](#)

SS: Plenty of for-instances. Thomas Hirschhorn, really any of his work, but the [tape piece that I saw of his at the Pittsburgh Biennial](#) two years ago just stunned me, just blew me away, because I walked into this other world. I could see the artist. I could see the time spent. I could feel it. That was it for me. That is what I try to keep in mind when I make a piece. I am young, still. I am new at this, as far as time-span of career is concerned. I

think that is where the real juice, the mojo of art, is. It is in the artists taking their time to express themselves, to make work. When I stand in front of a piece I like the idea that I am sharing in that moment of creation. Without getting too deep, I do think that is what we are all exploring when we create anything. It is a better understanding of our creation and what we are here for, and how we understand life. That is why I choose to do it.

WC: I wonder how you are shaped, or you shape your presence as an artist, through your website. Probably, more people will know you forever—there is no way of avoiding it—through your website than you could possibly hope for in a personal one-on-one or in a gallery setting. Do you hope that you can deliver something complete through your website or does it have to be just a teaser?

SS: The video documentation of “You Fucked. Fuck You,” was the first time I really delved into trying to show the piece as the experience. I captured a little bit of that. I feel it was what attracted Jamie to the piece. I got some feedback from just that little clip telling me, okay, this is more than just a still. It is tough with interactive work, with video work, to get that across. You only have a snippet of time and I have a lot of work left to do. Probably getting rid of a template website would be the first thing. Cost is always a consideration. I am interested in developing that more in my work and in my presentation. I made the choices on my website not to be the stereotypical white cube gallery look.

WC: It is not like a white space or a black box space and I found it pretty easy to navigate. The only thing that I come away from it saying is that it makes me hungry for more narrative, more explanation. That’s not the art itself, but it does go back to our earlier discussion about theory. It also seems to be a thread that I am developing. The artist’s ability to use language, to use explanation or essay, to help the art patron to know what he is experiencing seems pretty important to me in the Academy show this year. The artist is a human being. Clearly, you are very much flesh and blood in your approach. It is about people experiencing and you expressing. Do you have that relationship with your website?

SS: Yes, in the fact that it takes up more of my time than any other aspect of my artwork! I would love to get to a level in my career where I would have a website person.

WC: Or maybe have art critics do all the explaining for you.

SS: That’s an interesting dialog going on in the contemporary art world right now. You can see it in the artist’s statement. We are really pushing back, man! There are so many artists that I talk to now, so many younger, emerging people who are saying, I don’t want to have to explain this. There is no other job in the world where it is part of your application that you tell someone what you are doing and why you are doing it in a statement five hundred words or less. For me, I think I would like for there to be more explanation. I would like to stand next to all of my pieces and explain them to people. At the same time, if I need to do that, maybe my work is not doing it for itself. For every artist, it is different. For some of my painter friends, it is very much part of their mystique that there is no explanation. For me, I want to have that dialog so much that sometimes I catch myself over-explaining. I have been taught that it is layers of an onion. You are peeling back. I want to be around work, and make work, that has multiple, multiple layers. If it is didactic it is a little bit boring. I don’t want my work to come off that way and I don’t want my website to come off that way. I am still working that out for myself. What is the

best way to represent this work? I am finding more interesting now, especially with sculptors, that there are video clips of the work. You can go to the website and you actually can get a walk-around of the piece. Some artists are even having a discussion on the recording to say, this is what's happening here. This is what the viewer does. This is how he interacts. [Andy Holtin](#) at American is a really good example of that. His website is something that I would shoot for in the future as a way to show my work so that, when the viewer doesn't have me with him, doesn't have a full page explanation of the piece next to it, he can look at it and hit the >Play button. That is how we now operate in our information age. It is like using Google Earth to find a museum now and then you get to go inside. You can actually have that experience. It would be nice to get to that stage with my website. I am interested in getting to a place where the visitor can have that almost gallery-like experience on a website. I am feeling that out. I also just made a big change on my website. All my pieces had the explanations, next to some of my more performance-based work. You can see it on my Vimeos. I felt the need to stamp that out, explaining, this is what I was doing, this was when I was doing it, this is how I was doing it.

WC: You mean like the Rhode Island Avenue piece?



Sam Scharf Ground Covered Project (Rhode Island Ave DC) 2010. Gallery performance 15 July 2010 with handmade cart and found objects. Copyright Sam Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

SS: Yes. That piece, specifically, had a much longer explanation on the website. Based on some of the experiences I had, and crits and some discussions, I decided that I didn't need to do that. I hope in so many words they can get that. But it is different with performance work because it happens in the moment, you know, and that is it. [\[Ground Covered Project \(Rhode Island Ave DC\)\]](#) was the piece I did right before I got into graduate school and it really had me most excited about where my art was going. I did not get any press on that piece. The opening was kind of overlooked. [Jesse at ArtDC](#) has busted his ass on that gallery and trying to get some respect out there for Hyattsville. We fought for press on the exhibit and lost to the much larger galleries with more clout on that day. But it was the experience of making that piece and walking down the road and having those interactions for four and a half hours in the hot sun of D.C. summer. I realized that what was going on at that moment was interesting. I wanted to explore that more. I am getting the same feedback from a lot of my teachers right now, as well. In order to understand the "we" discussion that I am trying to have, I need to be directly in the discussion for a little bit. I need to try some performance work out. Some of my next projects are things that hopefully I can get accomplished with a smaller space to do some kind of ["The Artist Is Present,"](#)

Marina Abramović-style performance work. I can explore that relationship and then further develop my more interactive pieces. Then pieces like “Ground Covered” don’t get lost in the mix, because that was just something that I did. You know, I literally woke up one morning. I thought, I want this, because I knew that wanted me to make a sculpture for the space, and I decided that I wanted to make a sculpture *on the way* to the space. Then it just started snowballing again where I wanted to physically involve myself. A lot of my work is physical. I am pulling this thing. I am gathering these objects, and then when I get to the space, I will make a sculpture out of those objects.



Sam Scharf Ground Covered Project (Rhode Island Ave DC) 2010. Video, handmade cart and found objects. Copyright Sam Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

When I got to the space, I realized, this *is* the sculpture. This is good. I am done. The [video work from it](#) lends itself as an archival, a lot of people would say, “artifice,” of the performance. That was my first foray.

WC: It is a map. It is two-dimensional and it is three-dimensional. But if it is three-dimensional, it is awfully big to be in a gallery, or to recreate. The documentation is not the art. To me that is a problem that I would see you facing, that the documentation would eclipse the art itself.



Sam Scharf Now Its Only A Memory 2011 Wood from found object. Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

SS: You really have to be careful of that. Another piece on my website which explores that area is the “Now It’s Only A Memory” piece. That is the [performance where I took a ladder from my grad school hall and destroyed it](#). I had this beautiful object with all this history on it, paint marks, and footprints, and tape and names, just this thing that had been sitting in a hallway for who knows how long. No one had touched it the whole year I was there. No one used it. No one paid it any attention. It was a ladder. It had steps. We know what it does. I really wanted to make that into art. It gave me a palette. I didn’t need to do anything to it, except for taking it apart, the physical action of taking that apart. I then wanted to present the piece, as a memory of what happened. It got into an MFA survey in New York next month, at [First Street Gallery](#), so I am excited about that, but just the ladder got in, not the video. That application was very specific about no video work. I said to [the curator], you know, I am a little worried that I am showing this piece without the video, but I am also okay with the fact that you will be discussing the video along with what was left, which was of the time and the moment in which I had the performance.

WC: But it is also not a real time video. It is edited. And it is edited in an interesting way.

SS: I can go more into that. Basically, in the editing of that step, that video, I wanted it to come off like a dream. There are flashes back to the whole ladder constantly throughout the whole thing. When I made the decision to take the ladder into the room and destroy it, it was really a cathartic moment. That was just for me. That was not for the art. When I was editing the video, I was thinking, what is for the memory of this thing, for the performance? I want to be navigating that as a creator, since I don’t really want to consider myself a sculptor, or anything too specific. I am an artist. That is what I do. That is the way I want to continue this career. With that interest in performance work, or interest in some kind of art happening style stuff, I still want to explore more of what you said which is, now, is the video the piece? Is the work the piece? What is the piece?



Sam Scharf Own Who You Are 2011 Ink on Canvas / Performance 16" x 16". Copyright Samuel Scharf. Courtesy of the artist.

That leads into my other work, “Own Who You Are.” That was a performance that was specifically about that question. [I walked down every day. I put a coat of paint on this piece and then I walked away, leaving a print on the ground.](#) A lot of people didn’t really know what was going on, didn’t know why I was doing it, didn’t take the print, didn’t consider what was on the wall the art. Maybe they thought the performance was a little artsy, but didn’t know. That was interesting to me. Naturally, that thing has been going on in my work. I am exploring the idea that I want to understand more about the psyche of the transformation, the relationship between the viewer and the art work. When does that happen?

WC: That reaction is interesting. I thought that work was one of the more congenial things I saw while I was getting to know you from your website. I thought you were just trying to create an act as close as possible to pure artistic expression.

SS: Good. I am glad to hear that. That means I am on the right path. That is the way I want to work and do this because I think that is where my creativity comes from. Personally, I am just getting comfortable with all this. I am just getting a better understanding of why I do the things I do and what I make. So, I like that idea that I can take interested people, supporters, with me on that journey because this is what I want to do with my life. I want to make work of any style at any time.

WC: Let's switch back more specifically to your next year in the MFA program. Are you right now thinking about zeroing in on a technology—I am not talking about your website technology—for accomplishing that? I am talking about your goals to try to make essential what your expression is supposed to be. Most artists zero in at some point on some kind of technology to achieve their goals.

SS: It is interesting. I do not want to be constricted by technology but I also understand that is what is needed. At the end of the day, I need someone to look at my work and say that they clearly know that is a Sam Scharf piece. They will understand clearly where I am coming from. It is difficult because I am not a product based artist. I don't make work in series. I don't *want* to make work in series. I don't *want* to go through a Blue Period. I am not interested in what I think is a kind of creative stagnation, for me. I don't want to be too judgmental about other artists' work. As far as technology, I think that the technology is me, myself. I think it is the way I present myself, as long as I am upfront from the get go. When Jamie approaches me for a piece or when I send out an application—I am very interested in maybe doing a pop-up gallery—I just want everyone to know that we are on the same page. My work is going to come from my heart. It is going to come from what I am interested in at the time and what I would like to explore. That is my job as an artist, to be clear about that. Like with the Rhode Island Avenue piece, I am interested in doing that for another gallery, in another space, in another time. But I am not interested in doing it to the point of replication where it gets to be just my shtick. In saying that I am my own technology, I need to be aware of that constantly. When am I making work and why, and how? And then, is that popping back up? Am I presenting myself differently than I would like to? When I did my proposal for [\(e\)merge](#), the pieces I proposed were specific pieces but I also want to respond to the space. I want to be open as an artist. When someone accepts me into their program or their space, I want them to know that I am going to take some liberties with that. I want to work with them. If I am the artist and you are the curator and we have our roles, there is also a relationship there where things could happen that we did not expect. I want to go down that path. I really want to explore it. I don't really know yet how best to document that as far as a specific technology. I do know that if I keep myself on that path, then that is the only technology that I need, to be open and honest about how I make work and why I make it. I just ask, "Are you willing to help me?"

WC: When people help you, are you also letting them become storytellers about what you did?

SS: I would hope so. If I have done my job well, if when I walk away from a space and my work is there, then I think the most successful artists are ones who, when they are not in the room, someone who knows them, or saw the work, or understands their work, can, in so many words, say what it is. When I was at the Hirshhorn, we installed a [Wolfgang Tillmans exhibit](#), which was a phenomenal exhibit. He was gone and there were plenty of people, not curators, not art buffs, but who were there for the opening, or had come back two or three times to see the show, that I heard having conversations with friends or with people in the room, or gallery attendants, who could say, this is what the work is, this is why it is like this, this is why it is displayed like this, the material,

the subject matter. I was impressed with that. I felt like he did his job. The guy is clearly good at what he does and that is where I want to get to. I want to get to the stage that my work speaks for itself but also, people can speak for it. It is like what we talked about earlier, how much explanation to put down because, really, I can explain it all day long, but I need it also to work when I am gone.

WC: Are you going to be hovering around at the opening on July 9th, at Academy 2011?

SS: I will be at the opening. I will be open to having a conversation about the piece with people who will inevitably come up to me and want to have that talk. However, I don't like to hover around my work. Even at the opening recently at the Arlington Arts Center, I did not want to be in the room with the piece. I like it when people take initiative. I am not going to try cramming anything down anyone's throat. I will point at something and then if someone wants to talk about it we will have a discussion. I will definitely be there to talk about the piece at the opening and I think that piece, specifically, is going to have certain talking points that are going to come up inevitably just because of what it is.

WC: I think Jamie wanted it to be that way.

SS: That is the most exciting part about her selecting that work and it getting in that show. It is going to be a good venue to get a nice amount of interaction and feedback. I want to let that just happen, though. I don't ever want to jump in and be in the middle of someone's experience, saying, what are you feeling right now, how is it going? You can see it yourself. You don't need that. It is all through body language, the way someone looks at the piece, the way they address it. Is there confusion? Is there interest? Is there anger going on? I think that if you are doing any of that with your art you are doing a good job.

WC: It is going to be a little chaotic, like most openings. But also, there is going to be so much art in that space this time. It is going to be a very rich experience. The reasons that I am motivated to do more to showcase Academy 2011, by getting as much information into East City Art as possible, is that I just see that show as a beacon. I really think that Academy 2011 has been such a shot of health, such a healthy expression, that I want to celebrate it as much as I can.

SS: That is what we need. That is what any art community needs but D.C.'s growth, especially right now, is yelling for it. There is so much great work going on here, so many different facets in expression and styles. There is so much happening that it is disheartening sometimes walking into other shows or galleries and seeing the same old thing.

WC: I have grown up with the presence of the Smithsonian in my life. I admire that it is free and I admire that it is huge, but it still is a mausoleum of art. It is not enough a part of our active artistic life. I think it is wonderful that there is this emerging community of people who are talking about living and experiencing art, not just putting it in a mausoleum.

SS: Absolutely, good on you for that, having a website that is going to further that discussion.

WC: East City Art, particularly, is saying that some artists cannot afford to be rich. The east side of Washington, D.C., is the less affluent side. That also means it is where a lot of artists can afford to live and exhibit and have studio space, and thrive and interact. The more we lead the better. Conner Contemporary is right at the front end of that, and the Academy tradition is right at the front at Conner, leading this artists' presence in Washington.

SS: I have this discussion with my D.C. artist friends all the time, that it is not easy here for an artist and it is a shame that more people have not wised up to the fact that we have a lot of struggle here in the city. There is no space. There is no studio space. Then, to go a step above, if you get any of that stuff, the cost is so astronomical, people that are here really want to be here. We want to make work and we want to be shown. That is something you have to navigate in any city. But if you take Baltimore, for example, they kind of get it a little bit. Granted, they have the space because it is left over from industry. But D.C. should be able to do it. There should be just a building or two where they say, hey, just don't touch that space. Just give the artists some studio space that is under five hundred bucks, because their living space rent is twelve hundred. How are we supposed to do this? People really want to be here. Things like Academy, things like the gogo project, things like (e)merge, are things that show that it is about time. We are not looking to take over. We don't want all of H Street. We just want enough space and enough continuation, developmental continuation of this dialog, which is really important here because it is such a good city. You get a lot of pushback here. There are a lot of things that excite you about D.C., in the politics and the way things happens, and the way the city operates, and its history. It could be a really exciting place for emerging artists to find their voices. What we are doing and how we are doing it here is no different than any artist doing it anywhere else, but there is something here, a certain character here, that excited me about the city and it has kept me here for as long as I have been here. There were plenty of times, especially after my trip to Berlin, when I thought, I'm out, and I'm gone. In Berlin, when you file as an artist, you get health care; you get a 401(k)-type retirement plan. I said to myself, "What!?" Granted, that is way down the line, but let's at least take some steps. I have seen so many good artists leave D.C., even feeling self-righteous about it.

WC: That is because the great mix is not enough. You would need to be able to survive as an artist, as well. You have articulated it well. Other cities embrace artists more wholeheartedly than Washington. And yet, Washington continues to think of itself as a city that celebrates great art. It is a paradox.

SS: It really is. In other cities, take New York or Chicago, they look down and see that about us.

WC: Washington, also, is an artists' community. You were talking earlier about it being tight-knit. One of the things that I question in thinking about Washington as a city of artists and art collectors is the "cultural cringe" that says, it is Washington, it is not New York, it is not Chicago. It is the same for theater. Washington has one of the best theater industries in the country. There are only a few cities in the United States with as many successful, well-attended theater companies. And yet, there are artists still who say, oh well, that's fine and good, but it won't be real until I go to New York.

SS: I think and I hope that with the Internet and the development of the art world, in general, that idea, that you have to go to New York to do it, is on the outs. But it takes certain cities. We have all the proper characteristics to be a great art city. We have the collectors here. We have people who are interested in having dialog. Artists are the voice of the society. They want that discussion going on. Granted, D.C. is a political city. It never will be

anything else, fully, but we are not asking somehow to strip D.C. of its identity as the capital in politics. At the same time, this [art scene] is happening here. Why is it happening and should we turn a blind eye to it or should we develop it a little more to say it is valuable because art is valuable. That is the most frustrating thing when you hear about programs getting cut. I just did a job with [VSA](#) for artists with disabilities. They lost all their funding. Even that program has lost its funding. I just makes me upset as an artist sometimes because I am *choosing* to do this. I am not going to get rich. It is like playing the lottery almost to say that you are going to get to the point one day where you are making a living off art. That is the goal. I would love that. But in the meantime, I am not foolish, and most artists I talk to know this, that we are doing this because we really want that development. We really want that dialog, that continuation of that discussion. Then we are seeing it get stifled. It is clear to us that it is here. There could be the studio space here. We do not need to open up another condo next to a condo that is only a sixteenth filled. There has to be a point. What Baltimore has done well is that it has accepted art into the identity of the city more than D.C. would ever do. It does not hurt to diversify your identity a little. D.C. doesn't just need to be about politics. The people who live here know that it is not just about politics. The six hundred and fifty thousand people that actually live in the city are some of the most amazing, creative, interesting people I have met in my life. Artists are here because we choose to be here. We want to be here. With that said, how does the city nurture artists? How does the city look down at its creative children and say, all right, we see that you are interested in playing music? We want you to take that lesson, that class to further develop. Not to say that you are going to be a great guitar player one day. It is just to say that any society that wants to mature needs to understand that the expression and the conversation and dialog around art of any fashion, whether it is theater, music, or visual arts, that development that can happen is so rich. I can be so important to having people want to live here. If you turn your back on that, it is really a shame. You end up being a city like we talked about earlier. You end up being such a conservative, stifled place. Progress comes from creativity. That is how you get amazing doctors. That is how you get amazing everything. If we can leave our jobs and go to an art house theater and see an amazing play for fifteen bucks, we need that. It cannot always be about making money. There are plenty of people making enough money. That is not what art is at its core. It is more about that relationship, that time to sit down and say I am human, and I am here. I want to share that.

WC: We need a healthy dose of humanity in Washington, for sure, even though the mix is interesting. There is a paradox, too, in the way art is forged in a crucible of struggle. From the beginning of our interview it has been clear that part of what drives your artistic impulse forward is that struggle to overcome problems, the struggle to knit together what needs to be knitted together in an adverse environment.

SS: Absolutely. But, you know, if I was raising a child I would be hard pressed to say that struggle is desirable. I grew up struggling and there is a part of me that is really tired of it. That's the part that sends you to New York or Berlin. There is a part of you that gets fed up and says I gave this a shot here. I am just tired of struggling. It should not be that hard. Granted, the struggle is also what makes great artists come out of areas that really surprise you. There is a thriving art scene in Detroit right now, but the thriving art scene in [Detroit](#) right now is because I can go there and get space. At the stage I'm at, I have to make a living to make my art because my art is not making my living for me right now. At the same time, I do not want making a living to get in the way of my art. And it should not be that way. You should be able to get a studio for as little as two hundred bucks a month. That is the thing about New York. You are going to pay rent and your rent is going to be so astronomical. But I have friends right now in Brooklyn who have studio live/work space for a thousand. And they are working at the

tee shirt store and making more than I am making working at a museum. Where does that fit into the equation of development? [DCCA](#)H and certain programs in Washington do a good job of getting the money out there but at some point I feel it becomes a bit dog and pony. We just do not have the basic necessities. There are no more [O Street Studios](#), and [I Street, where I was involved, is closing](#).

WC: You were talking about condos before. The question that flashes in my mind is: why does every abandoned school have to become a condominium? It should be the law that some of the abandoned buildings become studio space, other than O Street. Obviously, that space is a real [vanguard](#) space. It has been around a long time.

SS: Ask yourself. Look at the facts. How many co-ops are here? How many residency programs are in D.C.? Some of the artists that I hang out with, and my girlfriend especially, we are talking about the dream of having a building where I can have studio space with a couple of other artists. We have exhibition space that we run and we keep tight. Maybe we could rent a floor to help pay for it. And then we could set up an art gym where other artists can come and set up shop and have their creative moment. We could have that here.

WC: I think the best shot that Washington has at that is on the east side of the city. That is what East City Art is doing. We are trying to push for recognition and attention. I hope it is a good advertisement for more artists to find each other and to cooperate with each other.

SS: And to stay here and to develop.

WC: Yes, to stay. Because it is good enough and it could be better. It could be great.

SS: There is a certain part that will always be transitional.

WC: New York is an art center, but it will always be about commerce before art. Washington will always be about politics. I don't believe that Washington has to make political art, but an artist within a community has to react to that community.

SS: It totally changed my work when I moved here.

WC: That might give Washington art a personality, but the fact that you could even call something Washington art to me is good. I love the idea, but that is because I live here. In some ways, I have cemented a love/hate relationship with it. I have no choice.

SS: There is nothing wrong with that. I think you should pay attention to it. You are not going to be hard pressed to find a Color Field painting to hang over a couch anywhere in any city. Those artists are there. Everything has its market and its place. But if there is some development in D.C. that it can wrap its identity around, and if that's political art, so be it. Because there is damn good political art here. You know why? Because we live in The Capital!

WC: And that makes for sophisticated politics.

SS: Yes. And there are young artists here who want to be heard. There is actually an interesting street art scene popping up, too. That is good. We need more of that. We need that bubbling. We need that energy. If you put a top on it and take it off the stove you will end up with bland soup. We do not want that. I am really hoping that East City Art and what we are doing with the Academy shows signal that importance. It needs to be developed more. And, man, there would be a floodgate. People are waiting on the edges for this. We have all been talking about it. I have only been here seven years. I feel like I cannot even stake a claim to it. But D.C. consistently has done this. What about the hardcore scene here, the amazing music scene that popped up? My music friends still talk about it. Every time I sit down to have a drink with them, they will go on about it like, man, it was here, and what happened to it? Nothing that hot is sustainable that long, I agree. But for there to be such a great jazz scene here and then to lose it, where was the conservation? Where was the understanding? It was what *made* the city. The people who actually live here, who do not live outside and come in and leave every day, are the people who really want this city to be what it can be. It is going to take more than just popping up another condo and saying, live here!, to have people understand it. It would be interesting to see an [EXPERIENCE DC](#) campaign saying, stay here for longer than a year! And live inside the city limits! You can see it all around. I could see it when I came over here, just on the ride over today. I saw a farmers market popped up on the corner of Massachusetts and Fifth Streets. It is amazing. The people who live here get it. We want that.

WC: I think it is getting better. But that is the sixty-four thousand dollar question, whether it will ever break free from being a reservation.

SS: Why do we have to ask? We could just take it. To some degree, there is enough in the power of the people here.

WC: Artists doing it for themselves. I am hoping.