

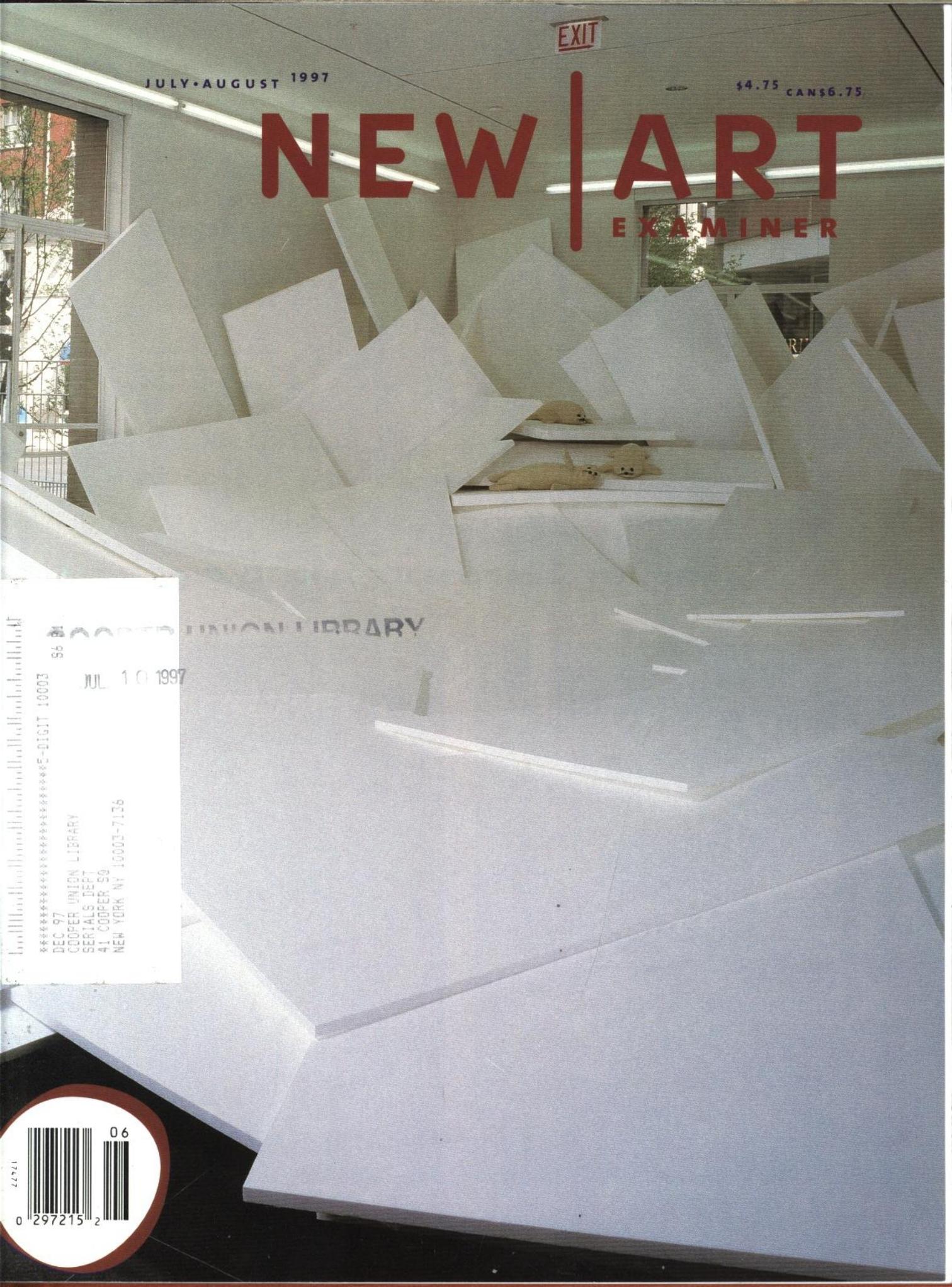
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# NEW | ART

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OR TOO MANY MISSIONARIES SPOIL THE BROTH

Alternative spaces all around the country are near the brink of collapse, abandoned by funding agencies as their memberships shrink. From personal experience and years of observation, Porges analyzes the current situation.

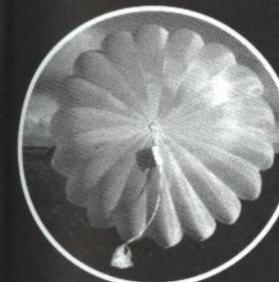
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ON THE AMERICAN JOB

LAURA OWENS INTERVIEWS MARK SMITH

Young film director Mark Smith from Milwaukee discusses his influences, concerns, and working methods with painter Laura Owens. Smith's film *American Job*, which won critical acclaim at Sundance last winter, relates the story of a midwestern young man on a downward spiral in the search for gainful employment.



The Chicago New Art Association is a not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and in particular, the interaction of these factors within the visual arts milieu.

alization, on-site partnerships, and rebuilding within the "predictable" arts community of the art schools and the galleries. This rebuilding began with membership. NLA's membership, which had dropped to about 200 by 1993, is near 1700 now, with a final target of 3000. Unlike SE, their development strategy is to maximize unrestricted income, through special events, auctions (theirs is probably the largest annual benefit auction of its kind in the country), and membership dues, while limiting restricted-income use and its commitments to short-term programming.

What do the models of success and failure elsewhere in the country have to offer RSG and the Chicago arts community, now that the NEA has largely withdrawn from organization-building and can be counted on (if it can be counted on at all) only for short-term and restricted funding? We are back once again to the issues of mission and business plan, the community an organization serves, and the scale of operations (including fundraising) it can sustain.

What I find most instructive about the survival programs of New Langton Arts and Southern Exposure is how each has chosen a different, partial selection of the otherwise crushingly diffuse goals which, these days, crowd the development agendas of alternative organizations. The direction of professionalization (if indeed it is evolutionary and necessary) takes an artists' organization outside of its original show-the-art goals, either toward the slick *Kunsthal* model of WPA (which will never be sustainable below the scale of a regional museum and will probably fail somewhere in its own cycle of boom and bust) or the community-service model of Southern Exposure. If the latter path is chosen, the partnerships required by entering a larger community of service will consume its administration, and it will become, like SE, an arts-education and outreach entity with an adjunct gallery and a vestigial performance program.

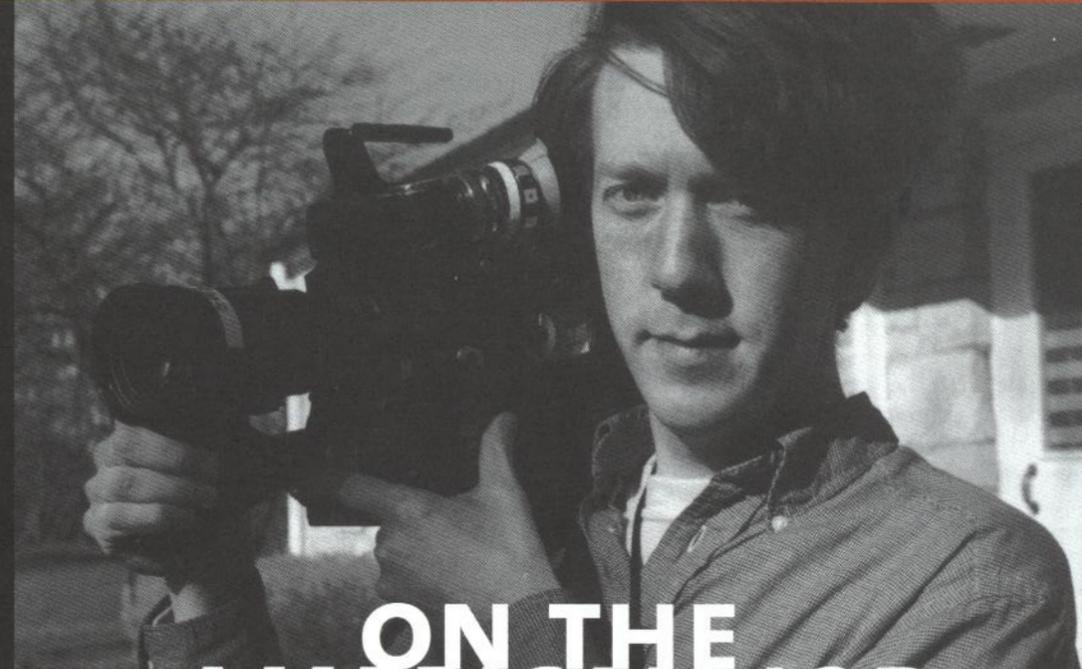
The other direction, the one taken by New Langton Arts, is the one I would choose for Randolph Street Gallery, though by the time you read this, RSG will most likely have chosen a new exec-

utive director and a new plan, which will probably contain elements of both directions and models. Long-term, I don't think this will work. In the past, multiple agendas with multiple constituencies created constant internal conflict at RSG; an environment that generated a lot more heat than light. There is probably enough energy around, still, for RSG to rebuild through increased membership, special events and auctions, internal partnerships to build the performance program, and a simplified (more artist-driven, less theory-derived) exhibition schedule.

RSG's board has been meeting for months to determine what its new agenda will be, and a couple of months ago they invited the public to an open meeting, to get its views, and the public didn't, by-and-large, show up. My hope for this article is that if more people knew what those agenda items were like, and what sort of organization would likely evolve from which choices, they would want, if not to be part of the process, at least to be heard from. There's a need, right now, for new people, with new opinions (if you've gotten this far you already know all of mine) and ideas. Call 312-666-7737 and ask when the next meeting is happening. This is the closest thing to workplace democracy that the art world will ever offer you.

**TIM PORGES** is a writer who was once on the exhibits committee at N.A.M.E. and has recently joined the exhibition committee at Randolph Street Gallery.

THE MISSION  
OF AN ART  
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**LO:** Do you have an aversion to actors?

**CS:** I have an aversion to bad actors.

**LO:** At the same time, you pick non-actors for your movies so perfectly.

**CS:** In *American Job*, we had only one professional actor in the entire film; he was in the last scene. And, he ended up being the only person we cut out of the film. When I was casting *American Job*, it was just meeting someone in a grocery store and getting their phone number, then six months later they are on the screen at Sundance.

**LO:** There are so many great documentaries being made, like *Crumb* or *When We Were Kings*, and at the same time there are all these narratives that are using documentary styles. You seem to have an interest in blurring the lines. Your next film is actually a documentary, *The Making of Northwestern*.

**CS:** It is surprising how similar the process is between the two. When I made *American Job*, which is a "narrative," it was amazing how much it tended toward documentary, and now that I have finished shooting a documentary, it is amazing how it is so similar to narrative.

**LO:** Is the distinction merely in the different film ratios? You mentioned you had almost a 50-to-one ratio (footage shot-to-used) for *The Making of Northwestern*.

**CS:** And we had four-to-one for *American Job*. But I didn't start *Northwestern* because I wanted to make a documentary. It was a film that presented itself and had to be made. It's about a very determined filmmaker in Milwaukee who is trying to make his first feature film. It is an alternate look at independent filmmaking: the sub-independents, people working out of their basements and spending \$25,000. The real impetus for making the film is that I met Mark Borchardt, who I found incredibly interesting, compassionate, and compelling. That led me to make this film, which is about Mark making his film *Northwestern*. So it is about someone pursuing the American Dream.

**LO:** I get the feeling there is a bit of mirroring between you and Mark. Even though Mark has his self-destructive side, he is driven by a crazed sense of optimism that reminds me of how you were talking about your friends from high school.

**CS:** He is so nice and caring and enthusiastic about helping people, and then I feel slightly jaded. I definitely see a lot of me in Mark. It's familiar terrain, and making the film has been somehow cathartic. He is working under almost the exact same circumstances as I was, editing where we edited, working the same hours, sleeping in the film department, working with two or three people, and nobody really cares. The real strength of the story lies in Mark, his family and friends, where he has been and where he is trying to go.

**LO:** When I saw your film at MoMA, I heard a rumor it was going to be in the Whitney Biennial. What is your connection to the art world?

**CS:** We started at MoMA, then we got kicked out of the art world. I started out at art school, but I didn't like the isolation of working on a painting by myself. As far as the art world, I don't know enough about it to really comment. What I do know about experimental art film I don't really like. My films are always based in comedy; that makes them accessible to anybody. I have always wanted my audience to be more than just artists. I like Michael Moore's approach of mixing politics with humor.

**LO:** Are you a filmaholic, checking out videos every day?

**CS:** I only recently got a T.V. and VCR. I watch a little, but I am just too busy shooting.

**LO:** So you're not a film expert like Quentin Tarantino.

**CS:** No, I know very little. *American Job* has been compared to so many filmmakers who I have no knowledge of, or idea of what they've done. I know who Godard and Truffaut are, but I have never seen any of their films.

**LO:** Scott Reeder was telling me you had an idea for a script where a comet was about to hit the earth and he told you, "Dude, it's called *Asteroid!!* And it came out last week."

**CS:** Yeah, well it happens. It's hard not to think of those script ideas. I thought it was pretty good, somebody just beat us to it. We weren't that far off!

**LO:** Any big plans for the future?

**CS:** Although I have been really happy with the way things are going, realistically we are more in debt than we have ever been and we have 230 rolls of undeveloped film for the documentary. But, now that the documentary is wrapping up, we are probably going to shoot a new feature later this summer. I have so many unfinished projects . . . I have always had this idea of trying to start a town. If we are all still friends after a few more movies I think it would be fun to pick some place, maybe in the Midwest . . .

**LO:** Kind of like the anti-movie studio. At Paramount all the architecture is made to look like a small town.

**CS:** Well, it wouldn't be based on movies.

**LO:** No, but the idea to actually have a *real* town is 180

degrees from the Hollywood model.

**CS:** I guess my ideas come from how my life changed so much for the better when I met this group of people, and I thought if we could just start this place where we are all together, then other people could come visit this town on their way across the country. And maybe visitors



Cast members of *Northwestern* with director Mark Borchardt standing in back.

would get some of the same feelings that I had when I first met my friends.

**LO:** If someone didn't know you, that might sound a little Hippie-ish.

**CS:** Definitely not; this place would be based on capitalism.

**LO:** So the hotels would be expensive?

**CS:** It would cost just as much as Disney World, and hopefully it would be just as entertaining. I always thought we could make films and they would only show in the town. All the T.V., radio, and video would be made there also.

**LO:** Now it sounds like a militia movement.

**CS:** [laughing] It sounds like a cult.

**LO:** I think it's the Midwest sense of humor—caustic yet positive.

**CS:** Critical yet optimistic.

**LAURA OWENS** is a painter living in Los Angeles.

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## **ON THE AMERICAN JOB; LAURA OWENS INTERVIEWS CHRIS SMITH**

AUTHOR:LAURA OWENS

TITLE:ON THE AMERICAN JOB; LAURA OWENS INTERVIEWS CHRIS SMITH

SOURCE:New Art Examiner 24 33-5 JI/Ag '97

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CS: I have an aversion to bad actors.

LO: At the same time, you pick non-actors for your movies so perfectly.

CS: In *American Job*, we had only one professional actor in the entire film; he was in the last scene. And, he ended up being the only person we cut out of the film. When I was casting *American Job*, it was just meeting someone in a grocery store and getting their phone number, then six months later they are on the screen at Sundance.

LO: There are so many great documentaries being made, like *Crumb* or *When We Were Kings*, and at the same time there are all these narratives that are using documentary styles. You seem to have an interest in blurring the lines. Your next film is actually a documentary, *The Making of Northwestern*.

CS: It is surprising how similar the process is between the two. When I made *American Job*, which is a "narrative," it was amazing how much it tended toward documentary, and now that I have finished shooting a documentary, it is amazing how it is so similar to narrative.

LO: Is the distinction merely in the different film ratios? You mentioned you had almost a 50-to-one ratio (footage shot-to-used) for *The Making of Northwestern*.

CS: And we had four-to-one for *American Job*. But I didn't start *Northwestern* because I wanted to make a documentary. It was a film that presented itself and had to be made. It's about a very determined filmmaker in Milwaukee who is trying to make his first feature film. It is an alternate look at independent filmmaking: the sub-independents, people working out of their basements and spending \$25,000. The real impetus for making the film is that I met Mark Borchardt, who I found incredibly interesting, compassionate, and compelling. That led me to make this film, which is about Mark making his film *Northwestern*. So it is about someone pursuing the American Dream.

LO: I get the feeling there is a bit of mirroring between you and Mark. Even though Mark has his self-destructive side, he is driven by a crazed sense of optimism that reminds me of how you were talking about your friends from high school.

CS: He is so nice and caring and enthusiastic about helping people, and then I feel slightly jaded. I definitely see a lot of me in Mark. It's familiar terrain, and making the film has been somehow cathartic. He is working under almost the exact same circumstances as I was, editing where we edited, working the same hours, sleeping in the film department, working with two or three people, and nobody really cares. The real strength of the story lies in Mark, his family and friends, where he has been and where he is trying to go.

LO: When I saw your film at MoMA, I heard a rumor it was going to be in the Whitney Biennial. What is your connection to the art world?

CS: We started at MoMA, then we got kicked out of the art world. I started out at art school, but I didn't like the isolation of working on a painting by myself. As far as the art world, I don't know enough about it to really comment. What I do know about experimental art film I don't really like. My films are always based in comedy; that makes them accessible to anybody. I have always wanted my audience to be more than just artists. I like Michael Moore's approach of mixing politics with humor.

LO: Are you a filmaholic, checking out videos every day?

CS: I only recently got a T.V. and VCR. I watch a little, but I am just too busy shooting.

LO: So you're not a film expert like Quentin Tarantino.

CS: No, I know very little. American Job has been compared to so many filmmakers who I have no knowledge of, or idea of what they've done. I know who Godard and Truffaut are, but I have never seen any of their films.

LO: Scott Reeder was telling me you had an idea for a script where a comet was about to hit the earth and he told you, "Dude, it's called Asteroid!! And it came out last week."

CS: Yeah, well it happens. Its hard not to think of those script ideas. I thought it was pretty good, somebody just beat us to it. We weren't that far off!

LO: Any big plans for the future?

CS: Although I have been really happy with the way things are going, realistically we are more in debt than we have ever been and we have 230 rolls of undeveloped film for the documentary. But, now that the documentary is wrapping up, we are probably going to shoot a new feature later this summer. I have so many unfinished projects ... I have always had this idea of trying to start a town. If we are all still friends after a few more movies I think it would be fun to pick some place, maybe in the Midwest ...

LO: Kind of like the anti-movie studio. At Paramount all the architecture is made to look like a small town.

CS: Well, it wouldn't be based on movies.

LO: No, but the idea to actually have a real town is 180 degrees from the Hollywood model.

CS: I guess my ideas come from how my life changed so much for the better when I met this group of people, and I thought if we could just start this place where we are all together, then other people could come visit this town on their way across the country. And maybe visitors would get some of the same feelings that I had when I first met my friends.

LO: If someone didn't know you, that might sound a little Hippie-ish.

CS: Definitely not; this place would be based on capitalism.

LO: So the hotels would be expensive?

CS: It would cost just as much as Disney World, and hopefully it would be just as entertaining. I always thought we could make films and they would only show in the town. All the T.V., radio, and video would be made there also.

LO: Now it sounds like a militia movement.

CS: [laughing] It sounds like a cult.

LO: I think it's the Midwest sense of humor--caustic yet positive.

CS: Critical yet optimistic.

Added material

LAURA OWENS is a painter living in Los Angeles.

Cast members of Northwestern with director Mark Borchardt standing in back.

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