

UNIVERSITY OF
DAYTON
Magazine
AUTUMN 2010

REPRINT



BLUE SKY
DREAMS & VISIONS

RETURN OF THE MARYCREST MAVENS
GLAUCOMA'S NANO-SIZED NEMESIS
UD 'RUNS LIKE BUTTER' ■ HAPPY YANKEES FANS



If you were driving

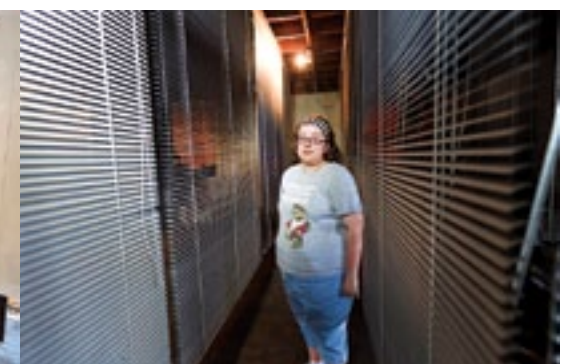
along Dayton's Third Street around 9 p.m. on one particularly hot July night, you might have noticed a building possessed. Projections of spectral white figures drifted in the two-story, arched windows of the Merc, an empty (but not abandoned) 100-year-old brick building near the Dayton Dragons baseball field. *~* Competing with the ghostly figures were kinetic black silhouettes dancing, swaying and posing across the light. In a glass-littered patch of grass across the street, a crowd of 40 or so onlookers took it in, watching as passing drivers slowed their cars and craned their necks at the sight of an empty building animated in the creeping dusk. *~* So went

Blue Sky Project.

Photograph by Lenka Novakova

The installation in the

Merc building was one of a series of Blue Sky performances and exhibitions in the city this summer at sites such as the Schuster Center, Dayton Art Institute, the Armory and spots around UD's campus, all put on by five resident artists, five university students and 42 high school students from schools across the Dayton region.



Blue Sky is a model for creating a community that encourages the strongest of values — equality, honesty, self-esteem, openness and understanding. — *John Peña*

In college, Washington state native John Peña, now Pittsburgh-based, began sending daily letters to the ocean.

He describes his art as an ongoing process of "trying and failing to communicate with the natural world."

His Blue Sky team, Team Nature, continued this dialogue by producing daily videos "in which we attempt to become some natural element using only our bodies."

Their goal? Produce ambitious works of contemporary art.

Or is it youth development?

Or an exercise in community building?

Or something else entirely?

"All of that," says Blue Sky co-creator and executive director Peter Benkendorf. "Blue Sky is a hard thing to explain to people who haven't experienced it."

Rodney Veal, a Dayton-born and Dayton-based choreographer who was a Blue Sky resident artist in 2009, has his own description: "We think it's childish to dream and think about possibilities. Blue Sky is about possibilities."

Possibilities

Artist Michael Casselli needed a thousand feet of wax paper.

Casselli, one of Blue Sky's five resident artists for 2010, spent two decades in what he calls "the underground arts and performance scene" in New York City. In his workshop in Rike Hall this summer, seven high school students plus one Ohio State University student were busy designing, cutting, nailgunning and gluing together small wood structures reminiscent of

BY MATTHEW DEWALD

Photos by Andy Snow. Additional photos by Georgia Prudden (top row, left), Ivy Garrigan (bottom row, left), and Alexa von Barga (bottom row, right).



Photos by Andy Snow. Additional photos by Matthew Dewald (opposite page, far left) and Ivy Garrigan (opposite page, top and bottom), Alexa von Bergen (this page, top).

One of my biggest rewards was seeing how each individual participant came to an understanding of and, I hope, an appreciation of the ways in which expression and creativity can manifest itself. — *Michael Casselli*

Michael Casselli describes his work as “large-scale mixed media installation.” Now based in Yellow Springs, Ohio, he worked for two decades in theater as a set designer, video designer and performer in experimental theater in New York City. His Blue Sky team, Untitled Productions, explored perceptions of neighborhood and community through video and physical structures resembling small houses suspended from the rafters of the Armory.

Every day I came to our studio and saw new things. I was mesmerized by the complexity and simplicity of the minds of my youth participants.

— *Ari Tabei*

Tokyo native and New York City-based Ari Tabei’s “performance-based work is made up of garments and bags that are like cocoons or nests, offering both home and healing in an ever-changing world.” Her unnamed Blue Sky team developed a performance-based “cocoon collage” comprised of cocoons for individuals and one large group cocoon.



houses measuring about 100 square feet. His group, called Untitled Productions, planned to suspend the structures on tracks from the rafters of Dayton’s Armory building as part of Blue Sky’s final exhibition. They would slide and rotate above visitors’ heads, their interiors lit by projections of films made by the youth participants, who took cameras to their homes to explore the concept of neighborhoods. “How do we attach meaning to our experiences?” Casselli had asked them. “Is it the thoughts we have as we move through our day, the daydreams and realizations that come upon us?”

The projections were the reason Casselli needed the wax paper, to wrap around the walls and ceilings to make screens for the projected images. He knew where he could get the wax paper — what he really needed was a credit card to pay for it. It was the job of Shaw Pong Liu to hand it to him. Liu, a Boston-based violinist and sonic explorer who grew up in San Jose, Calif., was in Casselli’s shoes two years ago as a 2008 Blue Sky resident artist. This year she left Boston for the summer to serve as Blue Sky’s program director, overseeing the artists and youth participants to coordinate their efforts and steer them toward resources.

Blue Sky brought her back to Dayton because of its difference from other residencies, she said. “My artist friends will ask, ‘How’s art camp going?’” she said. “I explain to them, ‘This isn’t art camp.’ Coming to Blue Sky was the first time I interacted with an organizational structure that understood what I needed as an artist. It gave me the support to create what I want to create. I wish there was a Peter Benkendorf in Boston. I call him ‘The Great Connector.’”

Connections

When Benkendorf began developing Blue Sky, he had in mind a fairly typical community arts program for youth. Art wasn’t necessarily the point; he is a community builder, and art was a tool for building. His co-creator, painter Mequitta Ahuja, helped him see the possibility for something much more ambitious, an arts residency that offered artists as much as the community, and, therefore, offered the community so much more.

By helping set up Blue Sky, “I was trying to answer frustrations I had,” Ahuja said. Her experience with youth arts programs in the past had been unsatisfying. “They weren’t being set up for professional artists. We were hired because we were artists, but our work was to teach. I wanted to design a program to hire artists to create art.”

From that insight, Blue Sky took shape as an artist residency and youth collaborative. Each summer it gathers five professional artists, five university arts majors and approximately 40 area high school



Blue sky is not a residency for the faint of heart. It is a residency well-suited for artists seeking to try new ways of working closely with others. —

Joyce Lee

Baltimore-based Joyce Lee creates what she calls “projection paintings that reframe the depictions of painterly and cinematic light through a synthesis of drawing, performance and architectural video installation.” Her Blue Sky team, Team EVOL, explored themes of control and governance through a transformation of the 1814 painting “The Shootings of May 3rd in Madrid” by Francisco de Goya using video and installation.

Dayton, seemingly a sleeping giant at first, proved to be an ocean of possibilities and a treasure chest of hidden architectural secrets. — *Lenka Novakova*

The work of Czech Republic-born and now Montreal-based Lenka Novakova “explores qualities of space, architectural environments and installation by means of moving light.” As part of Blue Sky, her team, Phasmid Lab, projected images on the ceiling of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, recalling frescoes, and illuminated the Merc on Dayton’s Third Street. The group explored concepts of space, presence and transformation. “We dream of transformations and work on converting the dream into an illusion,” she wrote on her group’s project blog.



students, which the program calls its “youth participants.” The terminology reflects Blue Sky’s values. The high school students are the artists’ co-collaborators, not their assistants or students. That dynamic, working in a group, challenges the artists in ways other residencies don’t, says Ahuja.

“When I work on my own, I only have to solve my own problems,” she said. “When leading a group, I have to solve problems the group creates.”

That the group is full of novice artists rather than other professionals changes the process as well, she added.

“You can’t just throw out a word like ‘abstract’ or ‘installation.’ You have to break things down. Slowing that process down, people have new discoveries. They look more closely at fundamentals.”

Over eight weeks, Blue Sky’s five groups negotiate the creative process, developing projects for a final exhibition that serves as a capstone for the program.

“Hearing everyone’s point of view opened my thinking,” said Rachael Jancaukas, one of the youth participants. “No one was ‘the teacher.’ We were all equals. All of us had a big hand in the final results, and all of our ideas were respected. Age went out the window.”

Also out the window were the participants’ expectations for what art is. Most said they arrived with an understanding of art as a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a pedestal. Blue Sky attracts contemporary artists working in media as varied as video, fabric, installations and performance, often a combination of them. It also deliberately draws artists from different disciplines and parts of the country and world.

“This is like a graduate-level course for high school students,” Benkendorf said. “The kids always say they’re depressed on Thursday because they have to wait until Monday to come back.”

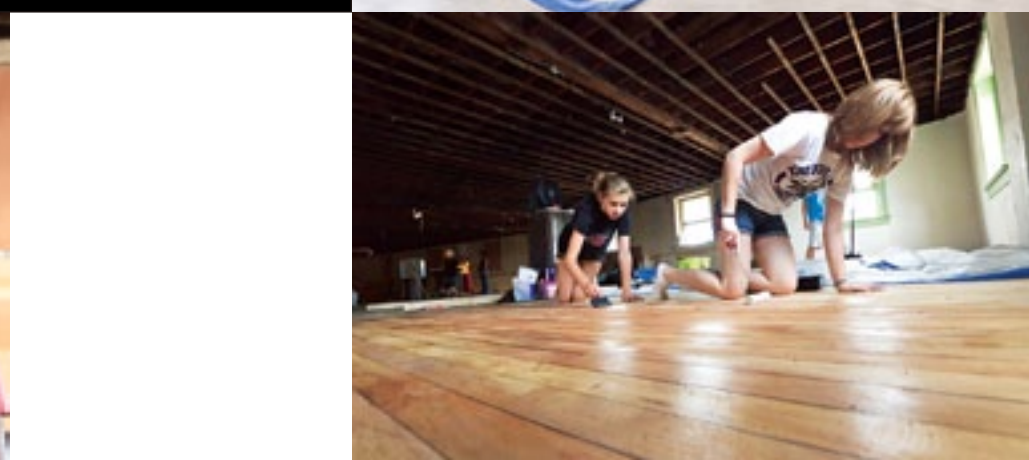
Just as the youth participants challenge the artists to break down their processes, the artists challenge the youth to turn their ideas about art upside down, backward and inside out, and then flip it over for good measure.

“Every artist should experience this,” said Prentiss Haney, one of the youth participants.

Communities

When Benkendorf and Ahuja launched Blue Sky in 2005, they were housed at a community college outside Chicago near Benkendorf’s home, but he did not stay there long. The enrollment of his daughter, Maggie Schnering ’10, at UD introduced him to the Marianist charism with its focus on collaborative processes, community connections and commitment to excellence.

That led to what he calls “an epiphany.” He remembers the exact moment, 10:30 p.m. April 21,



Photos by Andy Snow. Additional photos by Lenka Novakova (opposite page, top) and Alexa von Barga (this page, top).

2007. He was stepping out of The Wine Gallery, at the time located at the corner of Dayton's Third Street and Wayne Avenue. His idea? Blue Sky needed to come to the University of Dayton.

He got in touch with Paul Benson, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who was as impressed as Benken-dorf with the symmetries between the values of Blue Sky and UD. And bringing Blue Sky to UD could be a piece of a bigger puzzle Benson was assembling: raising both the quality and visibility of art education and art-making at UD both regionally and nationally.

"I saw the tremendous enthusiasm of the teenagers in the program, and to a person all the artists I spoke with said this was the single most unique residency they had participated in," Benson said. "And having leading contemporary artists committed to working in the community and spending eight weeks on campus, we reach circles we wouldn't normally reach outside of Dayton."

Blue Sky's commitment to support and expand the reach of Dayton's arts community benefits the entire region, he added. "The art produced through Blue Sky is provocative and challenging. It's the sort of thing that people who live in and around Dayton wouldn't normally be able to see."

That visibility is deliberate, said Liu, Blue Sky's program director. It includes not just the experience of the final products but also windows into the creative process. Throughout the summer, Blue Sky hosted open working sessions and presentations in which its five groups discussed the pieces they were developing.

Blue Sky's unique structure — the collaboration between professional artists, university students and youth collaborators — and its intentional outreach to the community have Benken-

dorf and Ahuja thinking that for Blue Sky, the sky's the limit.

"We are already attracting artists from around the world," Benkendorf said. The 2010 residency attracted applications from 65 artists in



10 countries. "Our goal is to make this an internationally recognized residency among artists, art critics and art funders."

They also want greater recognition for Dayton and the region as a place where art and artists thrive.

"People here like to say that we have a 'vibrant arts community,'" said Benkendorf, using his fingers to make air quotes. "I want to see a vibrant community of artists. We will never become the kind of creative community we envision without them."

Exhibit A is Rodney Veal, Benkendorf said. "Rodney is excited to make great art in his hometown."

This summer, Veal and Liu collaborated to present "Of a River," a performance designed for the Schuster Center's Wintergarden that featured local professional artists and 15 of Blue Sky's youth participants, as well one parent. Five

hundred yards of blue silk billowed down like waterfalls from the balconies and terraces of the Wintergarden as musicians and dancers performed on the floor and the stairs, often moving through the audience. It was "a piece that re-invents the way artists and their audiences interact," reported the *Dayton Daily News*. A blogger later described the experience as "breathtaking — I mean that literally, so beautiful I had to remind myself to breathe."

Bringing such experiences to Dayton was Benson's goal when he invited Blue Sky to relocate to UD two years ago.

Blue Sky, Benson said, "makes people more excited about the future possibilities for art in Dayton." **UD**

While researching this story, Matthew Dewald was reminded of the words of playwright Eugene Ionesco: "A work of art really is above all an adventure of the mind."

< CONTINUED CONVERSATIONS >

BLUE SKY PROJECT

Includes full project descriptions and extensive information about current and past residencies.

blueskydayton.org

SUMMER 2010 BLUE SKY BLOGS

A collection of words, still images and video documenting the summer 2010 projects.

Untitled Productions (Michael Casselli):

blueskyupacipiabsdo.blogspot.com

Team EVOL (Joyce Lee): blueskyteamevol.blogspot.com

Phasmid Lab (Lenka Novakova):

theblueskysummerdream.blogspot.com

Team Nature (John Peña): blueskyjohnpena.blogspot.com

Ari Tabei: blueskyari.blogspot.com

A community develops

The week before Blue Sky's big final exhibition in the Armory in Dayton's Oregon District, the top floor of the building looked like a scene out of *Extreme Home Makeover* as students from all over the Dayton region worked in the sweltering summer heat.

High above, Meriel James was in a jumpsuit hanging tracks from the rafters for Untitled Productions' moving projection houses. She stepped off her ladder for a brief break, wiping her brow.

"This project is very important to me," she said. "This is something I want to do for the rest of my life."

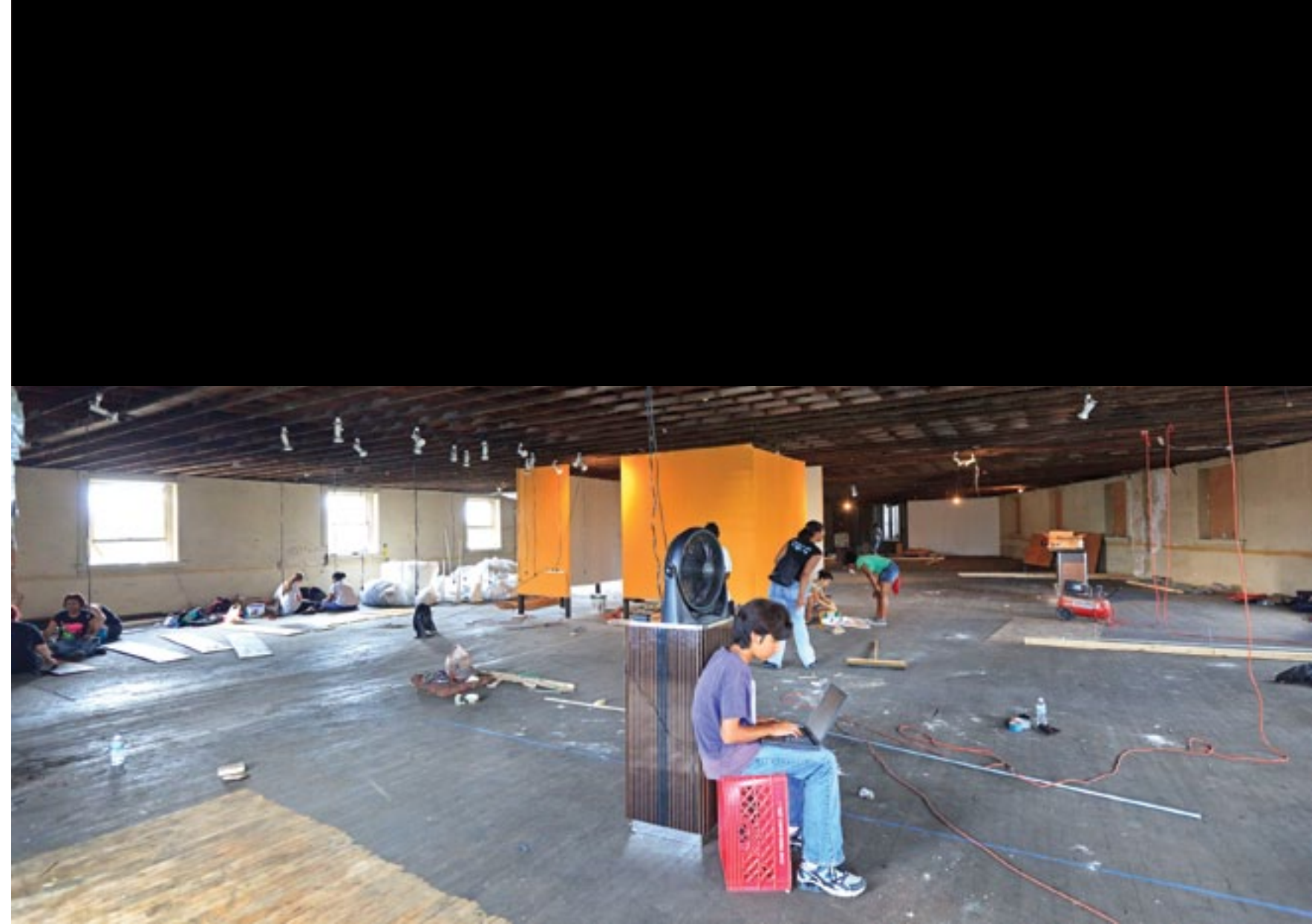
A recent graduate of Miami Valley Career Technology Center, she is headed to Sinclair Community College in Dayton on a scholarship. It's a big step for any student but particularly this one, who has already been living on her own for several years. Blue Sky, she said, is helping her define and focus her goals for college.

"When it comes to art, you don't know what to expect," she said. "I expected to be doing something but not something this amazing."

Since Blue Sky moved to UD in 2009, 66 youth participants from 20 area schools have participated. They represent a cross-section of the region

— public, private and charter; rural, suburban and urban; affluent, impoverished and in-between; and home-schoolers. Their average age is just under 16.

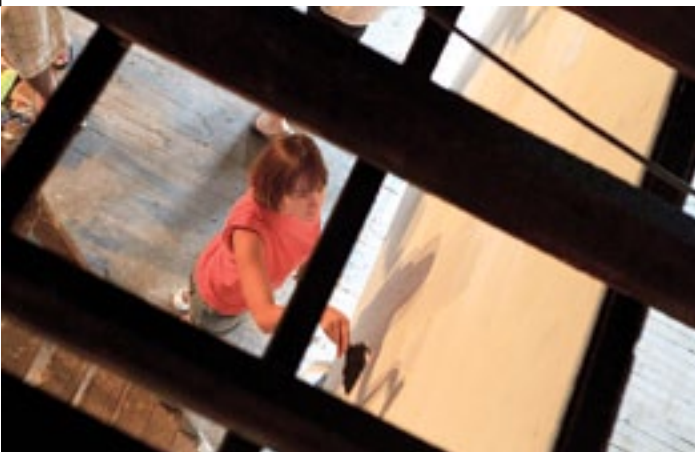
"Blue Sky brings together teenagers from every corner of Montgomery County who share some significant interest in exploring their creative capacities but who would not have been likely to meet or work intensively with one another," said Paul Benson, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. "This diverse group of teenagers is a key to establishing a unique community of collaborative artistic practice each summer."





To *imagine* is everything.

The arts are the foundation of academic life. They are transformative. They bring us together by stimulating shared experience and personal contemplation, by exploring what is and what can be. And when the arts are involved, our opportunities are limitless.



<http://arts.udayton.edu>