

Material Consequences:

A Conversation with **Joseph Seipel**

by Glenn Harper

On June 9, during the International Sculpture Conference in Pittsburgh, the International Sculpture Center presented the 2001 Outstanding Sculpture Educator award to Joseph Seipel, chair of Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Sculpture. Seipel has taught at VCU for 27 years and has been department chair for 16 years. VCU's graduate sculpture program is ranked among the nation's top five, and the School of the Arts is ranked in the top 20, according to *U.S. News & World Report*. As evidence of the department's success, Seipel points to an invitation from the Kim Foster Gallery in New York City for nine recent MFA graduates to exhibit their sculptures in VCU's second exhibition at the gallery, "More Fresh Meat" (the first exhibition was "Fresh Meat"). Seipel recently ended his long term as department chair and started a new position as Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Director of Graduate Studies for the School of the Arts. He will continue to teach and be involved in the graduate sculpture program after assuming his new administrative duties. Seipel received his bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and his MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art's Rinehart School of Sculpture. His studio production is monumental in scale and ranges from conceptually based objects to multi-media pieces and robotics.



Self-Portrait, 1996.

Urethane foam, polyester resin, movement, and sound, 4 x 4 x 2 ft. Animated work activates when viewers approach, giving a welcome speech and discussion of art censorship.

Glenn Harper: *Before we talk about your approach to sculpture and sculpture education, tell me about your own education.*

Joseph Seipel: I went to a junior college for two years at the University of Wisconsin, Manitowoc County Center. I was incredibly lucky. My teachers in this little town were Doug Baldwin, who had just come from the Brooklyn Museum School with a Max Beckman Scholarship, and Tony May, a recent MFA graduate of the University of Wisconsin, who a few years later was teaching at San Jose State. I went from there to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where I spent two more years as an undergraduate and one year in graduate school. I left Madison after my first year of grad school and moved to Boulder, Colorado, where I worked for the Boulder Valley School District as a media production specialist. After Boulder I moved to Baltimore to complete graduate school and received my MFA at the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute. My first two years in Manitowoc at the UW Center were very interesting. The school was brand new, and Doug Baldwin was developing a slide library. My work-study job was to catalogue all the slides for the slide library. I looked at

hundreds of slides, identifying them and putting them in the library catalogue. When I got to the University of Wisconsin, even coming from a small school, I had a pretty good grasp of modern and contemporary art history.

GH: *Did you go directly into teaching after getting the MFA?*

JS: No. After I got my Master's degree, I worked as a bartender at Bertha's in Baltimore, which was the hang-out for the whole John Waters' crew. I also worked as a rigger, moving heavy equipment for

about two years. And I taught as adjunct faculty at the Maryland Institute. Then, in 1974, I was hired on a one-year contract at VCU.

GH: *As an MFA student, what was important for you, for your own education as a sculptor?*

JS: My first year at Rinehart, we had an artist-in-residence named Tom Clancy, from New York City, who was what I would call an artists' artist. He was maybe the best teacher I've ever had. He forced me to think. There were no longer "just subjective ways" of looking at your work, you had to reason, you had to take responsibility for all your decisions. Plus there was incredible enthusiasm there. People worked day and night throughout that year. It was a terrific experience. Tom was an ebullient guy, his enthusiasm was infectious. The second year, Norman Carlberg was the artist-in-residence. He had a very different style of teaching—much more academic but also positive.



Classical Opera, 1995–present. Faux marble, painted polyester resin, mixed media, and lighting, sound, and projections controlled by computer cycle, installation view.

GH: *How has your own work developed since then?*

JS: I started out in crafts, doing mainly ceramics—probably because of being from a small school in Manitowoc, where there weren't a lot of options in the arts. Doug Baldwin was a powerful influence, and that involvement in ceramics was an important step for me. It was the foundation for my interest in three-dimensional form. When I got to Madison I continued doing ceramics and some glass-blowing (I was Harvey Littleton's research assistant for a year).

At Madison I worked with Bruce Breckenridge and Don Reitz. One night, Bruce crawled in through a window—how do I say this delicately—after an evening at the 602 Club. He looked at the things I was making, and stepped on them and broke them as he walked by. At that time I wanted to go to graduate school at Berkeley, and on breaking the work he said, "Berkeley, huh?" Then he roared with laughter. It completely crushed me. He told me to get the hell out of the ceramics program and that I should be in sculpture. It made me rethink everything I was doing. Two weeks later, after total depression, confusion, and hundreds of drawings, I went back, drawings in hand, to see Bruce, who then with much encouragement sent me off. I moved into the sculpture department. As crazy as it sounds, that episode may have been the most important thing that ever happened to me as a student.



The Enviro-plug, 1972. Plywood, aluminum laminate, polyester resin, and mixed media, 8 x 8 x 8 ft. Promotional photo.

I think the experience of being in a crafts program and then moving into sculpture was really helpful in some ways. I was always troubled by making small precious objects, which is what I felt I was doing with glass-blowing and ceramics. Putting things like that in a museum seemed such an artificial way to view art. You get set, put on your museum glasses, and walk in and look at art. I wanted to break free from that. Plus that was in the '60s and '70s, earthworks were happening, process art and all that. These were exciting and liberating times for an artist.

Toward the end of my undergraduate years, I was building "prefabricated cracks" for the earth. I would dig a hole, put in the crack, and fill back around it. They were humorous and a bit unsettling for the viewers. I would leave them where they were installed, and ultimately people would throw them away.

After moving to Colorado, I was blown away by the landscape, especially how the mountains were formed. I wanted to do something quite formal with the gully system that ran throughout the

mountains. I found these land forms really beautiful. I projected placing some industrial, primary forms into these gullies, juxtaposed with the organic shapes of the gully system. While working on these ideas, the phrase “gully plug” came to mind. Later, in Baltimore, where there was not really any connection with the land, the idea of “gully plug” took on a notion of an industrial product. My first project in graduate school was the Enviro-plug Division of Seipel Manufacturing. I built what would in fact fit into a gully in the mountains, but I made it as if it were a piece of industrial machinery, with manufacturing criteria in mind. It was based more on how a Caterpillar tractor looks than how “art” looks. When it was time to exhibit it, I decided it shouldn’t be shown in a gallery, it should be shown in an industrial show. I found out that the New England Industrial Show was going to be in Boston. I decided to try to get a booth there. However, in order to be a company, or appear to be a company, you have to have all the paraphernalia of a company—business cards, a product brochure, and stationery. I did that and developed the Enviro-plug Division of Seipel Manufacturing. In order to fund it, we sold hundreds of shares of bogus stock, common and preferred. A friend of mine, Bill Rowe, became my partner, fiscal manager, and vice-president. We went to the New England Industrial Show with about 350 of New England’s largest industrialists. It was quite a scene. We had matching green jackets with pink shirts and ties with little Seipel MFG. insignia on them.

GH: *What was the reaction?*

JS: The product looked like a piece of construction equipment. It was eight by eight by eight feet. We had a 10-ton flatbed truck that I “borrowed” from the art school, doors repainted to say Seipel Manufacturing, and a crew of four, wearing Seipel coveralls with the insignia on the back. We were there for three days. We just made up stories about how this thing could be used and acted like we were trying to sell it.



Product brochure, with “technical” and promotional material for The Enviro-plug Division of Seipel Manufacturing.

One night a couple of businessmen, who had been by our booth, invited us to have a drink with them. We were able to keep up the charade of a real business for people coming by the booth, but not talking face to face with somebody for a long time. So we confided in them. One of them was really angry, but the other one thought it was pretty funny. After a while they both softened, and they ended up taking care of all our expenses for the entire trip. The last day of the show the organizers found out—I had set it up so they would—and they were quite upset, to say the least. There’s even more to the story, it gets quite complex.

In Cambridge, we were staying at the house of John Kerr and Carlos Kellogg, who years before were connected with the *Harvard Lampoon*. John said that if he had known earlier he could have gotten up a full-scale demonstration against the gully plug as an environmental threat. So he wrote up a document about how the gully plug was going to ruin the environment, saying that the toll in salamanders alone would be great, signed by Henry R. Metcalf, coordinator of the Deer Island Ad Hoc Committee. He recruited young, hippie kids and printed up hundreds of flyers, so that at every door of the John Hines Civic Auditorium there were people handing them out flyers and telling people to boycott our booth. It got really convoluted.

We left Boston and went back to Baltimore, but I felt like the piece wasn’t finished. Through some contacts I got hold of Playboy International, and we rented the Penthouse of the Playboy Club for a stockholders meeting. That was the crowning and final event of this piece. We gave awards to the largest stockholder, the oldest stockholder. Bill gave an insightful and very funny financial report. The Bunnies said it was the best party they ever had. We paid a band called Bizotti, I think, \$25 to play for the event, a guy playing the accordion and a guy playing the fiddle. Six or seven years ago I saw something about David Byrne in *Newsweek*, and it turns out that it was him, but I just knew him as a fellow student at the time.

That piece is an important part of how my work has developed. It made me a little fearless. You got in the midst of this thing, and it was so exciting. It was sort of illegal but not really illegal. It was a great experience. I've done a number of things that have taken on a life of their own. You get the concept, but you let outside influences take over, and you keep flexible enough to move it around. I think sometimes that that's the way I teach and administer too. I get things going and then enjoy when other things come in and change the shape of it when I least expect it. A lot of times there are wonderful accidents.



Stock certificate for
The Enviro-plug Division of
Seipel Manufacturing.

GH: *You told me that your course descriptions were deliberately vague. Is that part of allowing things to happen, being open to what might happen?*

JS: One of the things that I've always believed in is that people are artists first and teachers second. If you bring a professional artist into a classroom and constrain him or her with somebody else's notion of how something should be taught, you've got a problem. You're not using their strengths. Our syllabus actually is quite wide open; it allows artists to come in and teach to their strengths. We have seven faculty, plus a number of part-time people and numerous visiting artists each year. Somewhere along the line, students are going to get the information they need, over the period they're in the program. We don't have to worry about it being so systematic, being done one step at a time. It's a more free-flowing and organic process in which students find their mentors as they progress through the program. They find one or two or three people in the department that they really connect with.

Everybody actually teaches the same course, but the personalities and the different attitudes of the faculty and their notions about artmaking are allowed to come out in the classroom, in the way they teach. So an Advanced Sculpture course taught by one of our faculty could be quite radically different from the way another faculty member teaches it. And that's fine. In fact I think it's particularly healthy. It's one of the things that we really have to offer. We have a lot of different points of view about how art should be approached.

GH: *So there's not a "VCU style" either in teaching or in the work of the faculty or the students?*

JS: It's hard for me to see it. I certainly don't think that's the case in the graduate program. If there's anything we maintain pride in, it's that our students have good making skills. Although a lot of them are doing digital work and installation and performance, using all kinds of new media, the one comment I hear from graduate schools when they get our undergraduates is how well our students can build things. Although they may not end up using physical building processes in their own work, they walk out of the program with a vocabulary of these skills. I think that's really important. If there's anything we try to provide, it's a broad range of material and process vocabulary, as well as an intellectually demanding program. We can do that because of the number of faculty we have. Having a huge program like ours has its drawbacks, because space issues come into it—it's a madhouse in there sometimes. It's great, it's exciting and exhilarating, but it really is busy. Things are breaking down all the time, and you're always repairing things, you're constantly on your feet. But in this "semi-organized confusion," our students are watching and talking with other students who are all doing a myriad of diverse things. Our curriculum is set up to force the video people to interact with people who are making fabricated wood pieces, and the objectmakers have to talk to the performers. It's really important to us that all these people keep talking and that when they are dealing with their critiques, it all goes back to the parentage of fine arts and sculpture, it doesn't become more singular.



Product brochure, with
"technical" and promotional
material for The Enviro-
plug Division of Seipel
Manufacturing.

GH: *When you talk about the facility, it seems as if you really are running a corporation, with the*

infrastructure, and the personnel, and things breaking down.

JS: I refer to it as a small manufacturing company with 400 employees whom you can't fire. Just in the sculpture program we have the woodshop, flexible molding, forging, our induction furnace, a foundry, stainless steel, cast iron, aluminum, bronze, MIG and TIG welders. Then we have the full computer and video studios, video projection equipment, digital editing, people using all sorts of combinations of all those things. There is a lot of multi-media work going on. We have a strong connection with the engineering school. We team-teach a couple of courses with Mechanical Engineering faculty. In fact, one of our classes is half engineering students and half sculptors, and they work in teams to produce things.

GH: *You wrote an article on sculpture curriculum for Sculpture five years ago—is there anything about your approach to education that you would add at this point?*

JS: What I talked about then is still the case, but there's one other major thing that we've done in terms of curriculum. It is the serious expansion of the visiting artists program. With the painting department, we took two faculty positions and we use that combined money to bring in visiting artists. We've had an enormous number. Last year David Reed, Michael Mercil, Ann Hamilton, and Kara Walker were our "distinguished graduate critics," which means that they come in a number of times a year for extended stays. So the graduate students see them more than once a year. That has really worked out terrifically. Next year we have a commitment from Natalie Jerimejenko, who's going to do that for us. And then we've had an impressive list of visiting artists. The year before last we actually had so many that the graduate students begged for mercy, saying, "We've got to get some work done." That program has been important, though. The artists who come take it seriously, they really work hard.



Dance You..., 1995.
Polyester resin, faux
bronze, fabric, and mixed
media, 14 x 2 x 2 ft.; 7-ft.
self-portrait marionette.

GH: *So you're opening the school up to the art world by bringing in people consistently, not just to give a lecture and leave?*

JS: Some of them do that. There are a couple of tiers to the program. We realize that the connections to New York, Chicago, and L.A. are really important, there's no question about it. Richmond has a reasonable art scene, but it's not sustaining. In order to be competitive with other top tier graduate programs, we have to make those connections. The faculty are all working, showing artists. Elizabeth King is represented by Kent Fine Arts in New York and has recently published an incredible book entitled *Attention's Loop*. Myron Helfgott is going to Budapest for an exhibition. Myron and Carlton Newton recently had an exhibition at the Macintosh Gallery in Glasgow. That's a constant element in this program, that students have faculty who serve as role models. We try to get students to New York as much as possible, or New York to them. There are small things, too: we

keep all the art journals in a room right off the faculty offices. Students come in and drink coffee (they can't smoke cigarettes any more) and read magazines during the day. There are always five or six people in there hanging out in the office, looking at what's happening in the journals.

GH: *We've been hearing that some schools are shifting toward digital media in a way that is either/or. It sounds like you have more of a both/and intermixture in your approach.*

JS: We seem to avoid that—I think because of the varied interests of our faculty. For instance, Carlton is the director of our media labs. What's interesting about his focus is that much of his object sculpture is made out of gypsum. He makes very complicated, wonderful, freestanding pieces of sculpture and installations but using plaster and FGR-95 and Hydrocal. But he also makes them virtual. Because of his sensitivity to materials and his belief in the worth of a tactile connection to

work, he's the perfect person to be running a media lab. While he maintains his connection to real materials, he believes in the potential the digital world has to offer.

Almost all the faculty in the program are using digital or "new" media to some extent. Myron Helfgott's drawings speak. He's using MP3 recorders and robotic motions. I use some robotic and kinetic elements. Elizabeth King at times employs video and kinetic movement. Chuck Henry basically does all digital video now, but he was a student of Julius Schmidt. I think that Chuck was one of the country's best technical casters. But he doesn't touch anything but the computer now. Another thing I find interesting about our program is that none of us started out as sculptors in college. Carlton was a poet, Elizabeth was a painter, Chuck was in atomic physics, Myron worked with Buckminster Fuller and was a design and architecture student. Lester Van Winkle was a functional potter. Although we are all interested in sculpture, there are also a lot of peripheral interests there. Myron is interested in theories of deconstructive architecture and literature and how they connect to visual art, Elizabeth has done research and given a recent paper entitled "Clockwork Prayer: A 16th Century Mechanical Monk," and so on.



Self-Portrait with 71 Dead Rabbits, 1997. Urethane foam, 71 rabbit pelts, and faux marble paint, 10 x 4 x 2 ft.

GH: *Among the students is there an interest in both the tactile and physical as well as the digital and new media?*

JS: I think the students are changing some. They're coming in with more digital skills. Young students are quite comfortable using all manner of digital stuff. We look on in awe at the digital skills some of them have when they come in. The way we approach our courses, our sophomore students really focus on building. You're going to get it whether you like it or not. There's going to be a year of some connection to building or to the studio. If somebody is doggedly against it, the faculty will work with them, I think. But basically you're going to get some connection to working in three-dimensional space. Then to varying degrees, students branch off from that. It certainly isn't one or the other. There's interest in looking at the computer as a tool rather than an end in itself. I think the best-case scenario is that the computer and digital equipment become as important as band saws and the foundry. If people just get sucked into the foundry, I think that's a problem. If people get sucked into digital, that's a problem. Especially at an early age. It's something you should have available, but let's face it, the quality of the idea, the historical context, content, appropriateness of craft—the Gestalt—that's the important stuff. It's not the process. We try to avoid having people get too caught up in process and technique. It can be an easy place to hide, and problematic sometimes.

GH: *The "Fresh Meat" exhibition is an interesting idea—how did it come about, and how does it work?*



Me, myself, and I, 2000. Fiberglass, flexible and rigid urethane resins, and vacuum-formed polystyrene, 8 x 10 x 7

JS: Through Creighton Michael, a sculptor/painter, I was introduced to Kim Foster in New York years ago. Over the course of some months, getting to know her, we brought up the possibility of having a show in her gallery. She said sure, let's try it. It's a terrific commercial gallery. Through the generosity of the School of the Arts and some outside benefactors, we were able to get up enough money to put the show together. We put announcements in major journals. The first show included our graduating MFA students and four or five alumni who had graduated in the last couple of years. We brought the art to New York, put the work up, and it was quite a success. The *Village Voice* gave it a "must see," one of 10 shows in all of New York they gave a "must see." The people who were in that show have had great opportunities since then, maybe not specifically

ft. because of the show, but it certainly didn't hurt. Tara Donovan was in the Whitney Biennial shortly after that, and she has just completed a show at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles. Chris Taggart had a solo show open at the Drawing Center this spring. Kelly Murphy received a Pollock-Krasner grant shortly after the show. She was also a Joan Mitchell award winner. I could tell stories about all of them, they have been very successful. This year, the group in "More Fresh Meat" sold four pieces at the opening and two, possibly three, since then. And several galleries have expressed interest in some of the artists. Beth Solan just received a Pollock-Krasner grant and Ebben Demarest Trust Fellowship, as did Morgan Kennedy. Haegeen Kim just received an ISC Student Achievement Award. Kim Baranowski received the Joan Mitchell Award. They're all doing terrifically.

GH: *You've moved toward installation work. Is that what you are doing now?*

JS: The "magnum opus" that I've been working on forever is a big piece. It has become the Enviro-plug of my later years. It's pretty much finished; I have some electronic work to do with it still. I'm hunting around for a place to show it. It's one of those things, if I get someplace that wants to show it in six months or a year, *then* it will be finished. Right now, I just keep messing around with it. Some of the electronic coordination is fairly complex, but I have a small computer that will operate the whole thing. I've also been interested in working on smaller projects, maybe not discrete objects. I have a tendency to let things get away from me. I did a panel one time called "Getting in Over Your Head." It's not hard for me to do that.

GH: *What sort of objects are you working on?*

JS: I just finished a piece not long ago called *Me, Myself, and I*, which is a classical frieze, but I've replaced the faces with the face of a buffoon-looking character, a small, strange-looking head that has intrigued me for years. The figures in the original frieze are Greek senators, I believe. I replaced their heads with the buffoon heads. Then in the same cheap material that an inexpensive Halloween mask is made of, I made a vacuum-formed mask of my face that is just big enough to fit over one of those small heads. It's only about five inches tall. In front of the frieze is a portion of a classical column that has my 10-inch naked figure, potbelly and all, looking at the mask. Next to the figure is a rubber head on the floor, my head (full-size). I've been working a lot with self-portraits—I'm interested in the psychological implications of the shifting scale of these self-portraits.

I'm working on a piece now that will be a quite large head, about eight feet—just a head made of foam and polyester resin, and probably it will be able to be carried by two to four people. The idea is to bring it in and out of museums' front doors. It will be cut up every time it goes into a museum, to get it through the doors, and then I'll go in and take photos and take it back out. It's the repairs that I'm interested in, and the history of it. So it moves around, I hope, from museum to museum (we'll see who's going to let me do this); every time it goes through the door it will have to be cut again and repaired, so there will be a history of its repairs, and it will start getting more screwed up—wonderfully screwed up, I hope. And as it gets more and more scarred and develops more and more history, it will become a more important object. So there is a diminishing and increasing return on what it is. I believe it will become a more interesting object because of its forced adaptations and resulting repairs. I guess in a strange way it will also become more important because of the museums it visits—assuming anyone will let me in the door. I guess that goes back to the idea of liking to have outside influences make some of my choices: I wouldn't know where to scar it, but going through a three-and-a-half-foot door at the Museum of Modern Art (I hope) will scar it in an interesting way.



Me, myself, and I, 2000.
Detail of life-size flexible head.

GH: *So even the objects have a complex dimension that is performative and material and conceptual.*

The head is material but it's not a material process that ends when you make it. The project by its nature continues to have material consequences.

JS: I would say that's correct.

Glenn Harper is the editor of Sculpture.



[Home](#) | [About ISC](#) | [ISC Conferences](#) | [Sculpture Magazine](#)
[Portfolio](#) | [Exhibitions](#) | [Libraries](#) | [Opportunities](#) | [Discussion Forum](#)