

# Conceptual Art and Galvanizing

James A. Perkins, Westminster College

With an Introduction by Colby King, University of South Carolina, Upstate

## Introduction

By Colby King

*Art is what you can get away with.*

- Nelson Oestreich (1932–2014), as quoted in the story

When I was in middle school and my Dad was working midnight shifts at the mill, we'd put a box fan in the hallway to cover the noise my brother, mom, and I would make while Dad slept. Even with the fan running, though, he struggled to adjust his sleep schedule, and we all spent those weeks grumpier. Those shifts were scheduled on a rotation, but Dad explained that when a manager was being particularly difficult, he could use the threat of placing a worker on midnight, basically as a punishment. The midnight shift came to represent to me the inhumanity and alienation of steel mill work.

So, as I started reading, 'Conceptual Art and Galvanizing,' a deeply human story about steel mill work, by Dr. James A. Perkins, the first detail that drew me in was that the protagonist (Dr. Perkins, or a version of himself) was unfamiliar with the concept when a steel mill worker told him the local mill was hiring 'for midnight' (3). I realized I knew what working 'midnight' meant, even though the protagonist, a professor, apparently did not! As the mill worker explains, it meant working 'Third turn, graveyard shift, midnight—11:00 pm to 7:00 am.' In this story, Jim (as I came to know him after I graduated college) takes on a summer of working midnight shift at a local galvanizing plant, ostensibly to show the guys at the bar that a professor could do more than just work with his mind (but also probably for the adventure of it).

Jim must have anticipated how this story would resonate with me when he shared it. He knew I was the son of a steel mill worker. I had told him that my Dad was a laborer who tended to the furnaces at Armco Steel (later AK Steel and now Cleveland-Cliffs, Butler Works) in Butler, PA, and had explained proudly that my Dad was a member of his union, which is now [UAW Local 3303](#). I have written about my Dad's work with the furnaces [here](#) (King, 2019). This story is set at Young Galvanizing, Inc., in Pulaski, PA. The two mills are just 41 miles from each other.

I was not, however, the type of student from a working-class background who showed up to class in all the working-class regalia. I was never interested in the repair projects Dad would work on in the garage. I was more intimidated by than appreciative of loud engines and machinery. Even though I had decent hand-eye coordination, playing on baseball and basketball teams up to high school, I handled hammers and wrenches clumsily. To me, an active mill was loud, hot, and overwhelming. I was not like Renny Christopher (2009) on campus in carpentry clothes. On campus, I could pass as middle class. I was wearing clothes from Hollister and Abercrombie &

Fitch that my peers did not know my mom had bought for me on credit. I had always been a good student, was comfortable in that role, and had even been student council president in high school.

Unlike many of my peers at our small liberal arts college, though, I did not have the same social or cultural capital, nor did I have a financial safety net. By my sophomore year I was taking on student loan debt to pay tuition. Over time I became more aware of how my perspective was informed by my family's class status. I was drawn to sociology in part because of how the discipline helps us understand how changing contexts shapes people's opportunities. I had witnessed how deindustrialization in western Pennsylvania seemed to have made my Dad's job at the mill more precarious. I was further informed by mom's experiences working in retail and occasionally cleaning houses, by the stories my Dad shared of him and his Dad taking plastering jobs in the evening after Grandpa King got off at the mill, and by my Grandpa Mellott having had to move my Grandma, Mom, and Uncle around Pennsylvania chasing trucking jobs (which I wrote a little about [here](#) (King, 2018)).

I don't know if Jim knew when he shared this story with me that I was on my way to being a professor, but I do think he knew I would appreciate how it explores class cultural mismatch. This story, of a professor faltering around a steel mill for a summer on the graveyard shift all in an effort to prove he is not incapable of working with his hands, illustrates the strains of attempting to make your way in two worlds. On my way to becoming the first person in my family to earn a bachelor's degree, I struggled to find a sense of belonging in either world. In Hurst's (2010) typology of college students from working-class backgrounds, I probably *looked* like a renegade, appearing to embrace middle-class culture and goals, but in my *heart*, I was a double agent, trying to maintain a foothold in both working-class and middle-class worlds. In academia, I was motivated to demonstrate that my perspective, coming from my working-class background, could be an asset. In my family, I was motivated to demonstrate that my academic skills and knowledge could be just as valuable as their practical abilities.

I expect many academics will appreciate this tale for a variety of reasons. Academics from working-class backgrounds will likely identify with the strains Jim experiences from their own efforts navigating both working-class and middle-class cultures. Those who study social class may find the descriptions of class cultural worlds illustrative as well. Furthermore, this piece explores the persistent debates about how work is conceptualized, and what is considered 'real work.' We see from the protagonist's perspective that academic work can be inane, just as much as mill work can be dangerous. With the protagonist trading banter with his coworkers on the shop floor, we see that mill work involves emotional labor, even if it is a different kind of emotional labor than a professor keeping their cool in a contentious department meeting. This story helps reveal how both forms of work are real.

I also appreciate Jim's self-deprecating humor in this story. Although he was a professor, I could see he brought some working-class culture with him from his rural Kentucky background. So, when I read the banter between Jim and his coworkers in the mill, I heard it in my Dad's voice. When a coworker points out something dumb Jim had done, I heard my Dad's prodding refrain to me: 'You might be smart, but where's your common sense?' The story is not intersectional, it does not explore how gender or race or other social identities played a role here. But, what we do see is

how, through the series of near-calamities, the protagonist finds a place for himself among his coworkers in the mill.

The story is not only about the protagonist's struggles in the mill, either. In the story, you will read how he connects with his coworkers through a shared interest in (let's call them extracurricular) art projects. Jim shares with his coworkers his artist friend Nelson Oestreich's contention that 'Art is what you can get away with.' He tells them about a piece he actually made, which he called 'The Administrators,' a piece that offers a critique that academic faculty and staff, and maybe even a few administrators themselves, might appreciate for how it explores Oestreich's maxim. In a (possibly fictionalized) story, Jim involves several of his coworkers in a project, putting together a conceptual piece that Jim dreamed up. This part of the story, the group effort, illustrates a kind of solidarity that was familiar to me from seeing how my Dad and Uncle would draw on friends and family for help with their projects, but is a kind of solidarity often more difficult to find on college campuses. This bit of the story also highlights a sort of practical interdisciplinarity, as each character applies their myriad expertise to the process of creating the sculpture, which in my reading illustrates an embrace of the liberal arts perspective that Westminster College, and the Inquiry class in which I was a student of Jim's, worked to foster.

I only took one class with Jim. It was Inquiry 101, a required course for all first-year students at Westminster, which functioned as an introduction to liberal arts education. Jim embraced the multidisciplinary ethos of the course, walking us through analyses of texts from a wide range of disciplines and highlighting how embracing multiple ways of knowing and a variety of disciplinary perspectives can help us make better sense of the world and appreciate the richness of culture and life. This story of the sculpture project that Jim involves his coworkers in, highlights a sort of practical interdisciplinarity, as each character applies their myriad expertise to the process of creating the sculpture.

Jim's artistic creations, all conceptual art pieces imbued with elements of social critique, resonate for me in other ways as well. Years after Jim shared this story with me, my brother, Trevor King, completed a BFA, and then an MFA, and has become a working artist. He is now exploring what he can get away with. For the Working-Class Perspectives Blog, I (2013) wrote about how my brother's work inspires me, in [this](#) essay, 'Work to Do.' You can check out my brother's work at [www.trevorkingart.com](http://www.trevorkingart.com). Among Trevor's work, one of my favorite pieces is one that also explores Oestreich's maxim. It is a performance piece called 'Resonator,' (King, 2014). You can see pictures documenting the performance [here](#). For the piece, Trevor stood up a sheet of chipboard on top of cinder blocks with clamps, like a chalkboard. He attached a contact mic to the chipboard and connected that to an amplifier, making the board something like a guitar. Then, with spotlights behind him, he took a belt sander to the board. The audience watched and listened as he ran the sander on the chipboard until it was sanded through.

Jim passed away in January of this year. He was a member of the Westminster College (New Wilmington, PA) faculty from 1973 until he retired in 2008. From Covington, KY, Jim earned an undergraduate degree from Centre College in 1963, a master's from Miami University of Ohio in 1965, and a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee in 1972. He published twenty books, including edited collections of Robert Penn Warren's letters, along with his own short story and poetry collections, including the short story book *Snakes, Butterbeans, and the Discovery of Electricity* (2003) and *Decembers* (2013). The list of his academic accomplishments is impressive. The

following is from a Westminster College (2022) announcement regarding the memorial service that the college held for him this past spring:

Perkins has been a National Endowment for the Humanities Scholar at Yale University, New York University and Princeton University. In 1998 he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to lecture on American literature at Seoul National University in Korea. He was the recipient of Westminster's Henderson Lectureship, a McCandless Fellowship and a Watto Award. In 2006, he was presented with the College's Distinguished Faculty Award in recognition of his unwavering commitment to Westminster and its students.

In reading this story, I continually return to a specific reflection: If an accomplished professor — someone with a Ph.D. who taught hundreds of students, participated in dozens of committee meetings, and researched and wrote every year — had trouble navigating the mill, the reader can certainly invert that scenario and take on the perspective of a student from a working-class background having trouble navigating college.

Betsy Leondar-Wright (2014) writes about building cross-class coalitions. Jack Metzgar's (2021) recent book is specifically about bridging the divide between working-class and middle-class cultures. Christopher (2005) argues that we must 'transform higher education into something that works for, instead of against, the working class' (220). This story of a professor doing his best to make it through the probationary period over a summer on midnight shift in a galvanizing plant helped me understand how story sharing supports these efforts. I have embraced stories and perspective taking in my teaching and writing (King, Griffith, and Murphy, 2017). I work to support the diverse working-class and first-generation college students and to bridge class divides (King and McPherson, 2020; King, Swint, Miller, and Bareiss, 2020).

If you're interested, Young's is still operating today, and their website includes several pictures of the galvanizing process [here](#). The process of galvanizing is a meaningful metaphor as well. Galvanizing is a process of coating steel or iron with zinc to prevent corrosion, usually through a process of immersion called hot-dip galvanizing (AGA, 2022). Immersing ourselves in other class cultures (taking a 'hot dip,' if you follow) might help us all avoid interpersonal rust and social corrosion.

Before he passed, Jim included this story as part of a collection of short stories he hoped to publish, which he titled *A Thunderous Collection of Weird*. That title, and all the pieces in the collection, highlight Jim's enigmatic quiriness and embrace of the diverse and often strange human experience. While the collection hasn't been published (not yet, anyway), I am elated for this piece to be published in the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*.

More than any specific conversation or piece of wisdom Jim offered me, this story expresses his mentorship for me and his inspiring model of the kinds of work an academic can do. It highlights an openness to different social worlds, a sense of wonder, an embracing of multiple perspectives, and a valuing of all kinds of work that I strive to incorporate in my work every day. I hope you too will find this story just as useful as I have, and that it might inspire you to familiarize yourself with other social worlds, and to explore what you can get away with in your work!

# Conceptual Art and Galvanizing

**James A. Perkins**

‘You remember the night you were in here with those three girls from the college and those bikers from Cleveland rolled in?’ Bobby asked without looking at me as he restocked his cooler with Rolling Rocks.

I was unlikely to ever forget that night at the Hillside. I didn’t say anything. Bobby never really needs an audience to tell a story.

‘Sounded like thunder when they come into the lot. They bust through the door, and the next thing I know, one big ugly mother is in your face saying, ‘You have three girls and I don’t have any. Want to share?’ I had my hand on my ball bat and was about to come across the bar when this little blonde cutie with you pushes between the two of you and says, ‘You leave him alone. He’s a famous writer.’”

‘Yeh. I remember that moment. I thought I was dead.’

‘But, the biker says, ‘Oh yeh? What did he ever write?’ And she says, ‘He wrote *Billy-the-Kid, Chicken Gizzards and Other Tales*.’ Then I heard this roar from the other side of the bar and this huge guy all in black leather ran toward you saying, “‘Chicken Gizzards’ is my favorite story in the whole world. Leave him alone. He’s a great writer.”’

‘Yeh, Bobby, I remember That’s one of the few times I was glad I wrote that damn thing. It’s been reprinted so many times I’m afraid when I die they’re going to put ‘Here lies the man who wrote ‘Chicken Gizzards’” on my tombstone.’

‘Well, it’s one of the legends of the Hillside.’

The Hillside doesn’t have legends. It doesn’t really have much of anything. It is a long, low-slung concrete block building with a couple of pool tables, a lot of mismatched furniture and one small window looking out on the parking lot on the east side of route 18 in western Pennsylvania just north of I-60 about two miles from the Ohio line.

It has the distinction of being the closest bar to the college where I teach English, and it has cheap drinks. There was a time years back, when we hung out there on Friday afternoons, my wife and I; Joe Fusco, our football coach, and his wife, Gail; Nels Oestreich, the Chair of the Art Department, and his wife Sue; Bill McTaggart from the English Department; Elizabeth Orndorff, the short story writer (she was then Liz Shear and was earning an honest living as our public information director); Kim Christofferson (then Kilmer); Linda Friedland, the Dean of Students and her husband Howard (AKA How Weird); and Mary Dorsey, the Dean of Fun. We drank beer, told stories, danced occasionally (especially to Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton doing ‘Islands in the Stream’), enjoyed each other’s company and generally decompressed from the inanity that the general public associates with small college life.

I told Bobby to give me another Jim Beam and water and I'd tell him a legend of the Hillside he probably hadn't heard. I was sitting in here one Friday afternoon about four. The only other folks in there were half a dozen guys from Young's Galvanizing's day turn who had just finish their week. I introduced myself and bought a round of beer. One of them said, 'You work at the college don't you?' I admitted it, and he said, 'You damn college professor never did a day's work in your life.'

'Look,' I said, 'I'm tired of this shit, of the assumption that, simply because I make my living with my mind, I'm incapable of working with my hands.' Even as I said it, I remembered all of the stupid things I had done in my attempts to do things, like the time I hotwired the windshield wipers on my car or the time I called the repairman to fix the dryer and all he did was replace a fuse. The steel worker stepped off his bar stool, spread his feet like a man squaring to throw a punch, and asked,

'What are you going to do about it?'

'You got any openings?'

'At Young's?'

'Yeh.'

'Sure. During the summer we go to three shifts of keep up with the demand from Penn DOT. They're hiring now for midnight.'

'What's that?'

He smiled at my question and the others laughed out loud.

'Third turn, graveyard shift, midnight—11:00 pm to 7:00 am.'

'I'll be there Monday morning.'

\* \* \*

I drove from New Wilmington to Young's Galvanizing in Pulaski. It took about seven minutes. I found the personnel office, filled out an application, and was hired on the spot. I was handed a brand new yellow hard hat, told to buy some good steel-toed boots, shown the foot-thick OSHA (Occupational Safety & Health Administration) manual covering the dangerous chemicals I would be breathing in and working around, and told to report back at 11:00 that night.

'You already missed your first day in this pay period. Night turn starts on Sunday and closes out its week on Friday morning. You get extra compensation for night turn. You understand that you're on probation for the first thirty days. After that you're union and your hourly rate will depend on the job you're doing.'

‘I was wondering if I could take that OSHA manual with me and study it some today.’

‘You mean, read it?’

‘Yeh.’

‘That’s a good one. Read an OSHA manual. Nobody has ever read an OSHA manual.’

He was still laughing when I left his office and headed for my car. He stuck his head out of the door and shouted, ‘One more thing. Don’t wear anything tonight you care about.’

\* \* \*

I arrived that night at 10:45 dressed in an old shirt and jeans, carrying my shiny new yellow hard hat and my lunch box, wearing the newest boots in the plant. The third turn crew was waiting in the break room for the afternoon turn to clear the floor and clock out. I had decided that I would be better off if I kept my occupation to myself.

‘New shoes on the floor,’ a big guy shouted. I was almost immediately surrounded by the night shift crew.

‘Ever work steel before?’

‘You’re kinda old for this work, ain’t you, Pops?’

‘His name ain’t Pops. That’s the Professor. My sister, works over at the college, knows him. He teaches English and stuff. Ain’t that right Professor?’

So much for my plan to remain anonymous. About then the afternoon turn clocked out and the night crew started to punch in. I had never used a time clock in my life so I hung back and watched. One of the older men handed me a card with my name on it and said, ‘Come on. I’ll show you how to do it.’

On the floor the foreman, Leonard, handed us cotton gloves and told us what we would be doing that shift. I was assigned to common labor on the dirty side. That meant that I was working with Ed the older guy who helped me clock in. We racked up the steel they brought in from the yard and prepared it for a three step process. First it was dipped in a caustic soda wash; then it was heated up in a sulfuric acid bath; then it was hot dipped into 600 degree zinc. That process turned raw steel guard rail into a galvanized product that could withstand years of Pennsylvania weather.

The work was hard, and it didn’t stop. Besides that it was chilly inside that big windy barn of a building in the middle of the night. ‘I have [not] been one acquainted with the night,’ and I wasn’t well dressed for this venture. After that first night I wore layers starting off with long underwear.

I racked guard rail, picking up one end with a baling hook while my partner picked up the other. I was told never to pick up anything that weighed more than 75 pounds. I was told that was what the crane was for. I asked Leonard how much the guard rail weighed. '150 pounds, but you are only picking up half of it.' In the best of all possible worlds where physics theories worked, that would be true. In a galvanizing plant in the middle of the night when as often as not, I picked up my end before my partner hooked his up, that guard rail was heavy.

Some of the work was hard because I am stupid. One night I was racking a basket of small shit, brackets and what not. I was reaching in a barrel, pulling out a piece, squatting down and securing it in the basket with a rod. Leonard came over and said, 'Professor you are about the dumbest shit I have ever seen.' Then turned the barrel over and spilled the brackets out right beside the basket I was filling.

As I said earlier they could have fired me any time in the first thirty days without cause. I hoped they would. I would never quit, but I would have been delighted to have been fired. I have never been as tired or as sore as I was during that probation period. Most of the work was routine and boring. I spent a lot of time filling baskets of small items on the floor. Since I'm too old to squat, I kneeled on one knee or the other for hour, usually the right one. That jammed my right big toe against the steel protection cup of my boots. My toe went numb during the summer and didn't recover for six or seven years.

I provided the floor three major laughs during my probation period. One night the kettle crew got an I-beam stuck in the tank. Since everything on the floor eventually had to go through the tank, we were out of business till they cleared it. I was just standing around talking to my partner when Leonard came up, tossed me a broom and told me to sweep the plant. I thought what I had been doing was boring, but sweeping the dirtiest place on earth with a push broom was really boring. Finally about dawn, I just went to sleep and slid ever so slowly down the broom to the floor. Leonard came up and tapped me in the ribs with his boot. 'Professor, if you weren't so damned funny, I would write you up right now.'

Another night I was working close to the kettle with my back to it. I had been told that if I heard anything unusual, I shouldn't try to identify the sound, I should just run away from it as fast as I could. When I suddenly heard a 'swoosh' sound behind me near the kettle I headed out. Using my hurdle skills from college, I cleared a rack of guard rail on my third step. I was at full speed when I cleared the plant floor and headed past the ready room by the clock. As I went through the outside door into the yard, I heard a roar of laughter behind me. A pneumatic hose on a grinder had come lose. The sound I had heard was the air escaping not a wave of 600 degree zinc cresting behind me.

Later in the break room I heard all about it.

'Jeesh, did you see the Professor fly?'

'Can you teach me to fly like that, Professor.'

As we filed back onto the floor, Leonard said, ‘Professor, you did the right thing, but it was funny as hell.’

My third amusement nearly cost me my private parts. One of the larger items we dipped was those light poles you see at expressway exits. They arrived in the yard with grease pencil marking on them that we had to remove before they could be put through the process. We used a hand grinder for this. Now I never gave hand grinders much of a thought. I certainly never considered that it was a right-handed tool. It is. The wheel spins clockwise and a right-handed worker using the tool sends a shower of sparks harmlessly off to the right. As a left hander, I sent the shower of sparks straight into my crouch making my jeans smolder and burning two or three small holes in them before I figured out what that smell was. There was a little laughter, but accidents are a serious concern. Mostly I heard from Leonard, ‘Professor I don’t know what to do with you. Besides being old and slow and nearly useless, it turns out you are also left handed.’

Despite all these errors, I made the union. The Friday morning when the shift closed that marked the end of my probationary period, we all headed, as we did every Friday morning, to the West Middlesex Inn. There every man on the floor bought me a beer and Leonard stuck his head in at the lottery ticket window and said, ‘That Professor is OK. Give him five shots on me.’ So there I was at 7:30 on a Friday morning trying to drink 17 bottles of beer and five shots of Jim Beam. If I had a brain in my head, I would have known that I could put the blue poker chips lying in front of me in my pocket and redeemed them later. But I teach in a college. I woke up in my own bed about 3:30 that afternoon with no memory of having driven home.

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Sunday night, after I lived through the usual ribbing about how wasted I got Friday morning, I could see that I had been accepted as part of the crew. During breaks, they no longer teased me and talk turned to things they were interested in outside the plant. One guy never came around. Doug, a big hulking guy took his breaks out behind the plant by the river where night after night he cast for bats with a fly rod. When he caught one, he would reel it in, stoop it to death and say, ‘Filthy creature.’ He never said a word to anyone. But once I hear a voice say, ‘Move. Professor.’ I did, and then I turned toward the voice and saw Doug standing right behind me bracing a tall stack of steel with his leg. He slipped aside and the stack crashed to the floor covering the place I had been working with several hundred pounds of metal. Doug walked away without another word.

Curiously several of the guys were artists of one kind or another. After listening to these guys talk for several days and telling them that my artist friend Nelson Oestreich says ‘Art is what you can get away with,’ I brought in five drawings I had done for a show at the college. They were whimsical plans for sculptures. One was of a second arch to be built beside the Gateway to the West in St. Louis. The plan was to paint them both gold, as a memorial to Ray Kroc the founder of McDonalds. Another was a rendering of the Statue of Liberty with a hair dryer instead of a torch. A third showed the cooling tower at Three Mile Island with a big Bar-B-Que grill on its top. A fourth was a cut away of the Trade Towers in New York revealing them as a giant tuning fork. The fifth one was a drawing of a sculpture I actually made. It was a triangular base with three rail road tie columns topped by electric fans. The fans were wired in parallel so when you threw a

switch the fans blew on each other. It was called 'The Administrators.' My colleagues on the faculty thought it was pretty amusing. The college administration wasn't too fond of it.



James next to *The Administrators*

While they were looking at those drawings I was telling them of another idea I had. I wanted to make a sculpture out of crushed aluminum cans.

'You know those big squares of aluminum that they make by crushing cans? I want to get four of those and paint them like kids alphabet blocks and spell out C—A—N—S. You could arrange the letters on the blocks so that it would read the same way from either side.'

'Why don't you do it, Professor?'

'I don't know where to find the aluminum, and even if I did, I couldn't afford it.'

'I got a cousin works in Cleveland where they crush those things. You get us the plan, we'll make the sculpture.'

A few days later I handed them a drawing with the blocks schematically presented so that they would read C—A—N—S on both sides and read L—O—V—E on top. Then I forgot about it and racked steel.

A few days later a flatbed FASH (Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers) truck rolled up in the lot with four 40 inch cubes of crushed aluminum on it. We all stood there during break staring at them.

‘How are we going to paint them?’ I asked.

‘That’s simple, Professor. I paint cars on the weekends. You know specialty stuff, flames, pin stripes, lettering; you name it, I can paint. I’ll lay down an undercoat of white epoxy and then use a royal blue for the edges and the letters. Should be done by Monday.’

They were done by Monday, and they were beautiful.

‘How did you get those edges so sharp on that bumpy surface?’

‘Good grief, Professor. If I can spray paint a flame on a car fender free hand, it not hard for me to paint a straight line using masking tape.’

I just stood there looking at a thing that had been in my head for years, a thing that I never in this world thought I would see created, But there it was, and it had been created by a bunch of guys who most people would assume knew nothing about art.

‘Now what?’ I asked.

‘Now, Professor, we send them to Tennessee for installation.’

\* \* \*

Just as we were leaving the plant on Tuesday morning the FASH truck rolled out headed for Knoxville, Tennessee, actually Alcoa, just outside Maryville, south of Knoxville toward the Great Smokey Mountain National Park.

Alcoa is the site of a huge aluminum smelting facility run on cheap TVA electricity. One of the guys from Young’s had a friend who worked in receiving at Alcoa. He met the truck with a crane and swung the blocks into place on a concrete bed that had been poured as soon as I presented the plan to the guys on the floor. He sent us Polaroid photos of the blocks in place in front of the plant. Leonard put them on the bulletin board beside the clock.

A day or two after we got the photos, we got a clipping from the Knoxville *News-Sentinel* about the impressive new sculpture that Alcoa had installed in front of their plant. The director of the Dulin Art Gallery in Knoxville was quoted in the story as saying, ‘This is a fine example of the way industry and arts can create symbiotic relationships. The humor and skill demonstrated by the CANS sculpture shows us once again that Marshall McLuhan was right when he said, ‘The medium is the message.’ We at the Dulin hope that other area industries will follow the lead of Alcoa and involve themselves more completely with the arts.’ We were amused by the whole thing, and said we were like those medieval craftsmen who labored away anonymously for years creating the cathedrals.

The friend who worked at Alcoa told the guy who worked at Young's that the Alcoa management was going nuts trying to figure out where the sculpture came from. They mostly hated it, but they couldn't walk away from the good publicity it was causing. Finally toward the end of the summer, Alcoa gave CANS to the Dulin Gallery along with enough money to endow an outdoor sculpture garden. By the time I left the plant to go back to teaching my classes, we had clippings from the *News-Sentinel* of the architect's plans for the new sculpture garden. The morning I left the plant for the last time, Doug walked up to me, gripping his fly rod in his left hand. He extended his right hand to me, and we shook hands. 'Professor,' he said, 'that CANS thing was really neat.'

I could have gone back to Young's the next summer, but I got into an NEH Summer Seminar at Yale taught by R.W.B. Lewis on the work of Robert Penn Warren. That summer Yale put us up in a dormitory called Helen Hadley Hall. During one of the first seminar meetings in a small room that looked out on the main reading room in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Dr. Lewis was fielding complaints about their housing from the middle-aged professors who hadn't been in a dormitory for twenty or more years. He finally came to me.

'Well Mr. Perkins, do you have any problems with Helen Hadley Hall?'

'No sir. I spent last summer in a galvanizing plant. Yale is better.'

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Before the Dulin Art Gallery got their sculpture garden built, the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh swooped in and tagged CANS for exhibition in the 1991 Carnegie International the preeminent international survey of contemporary art in America. At that point, the guys decided there was nothing to be gained by remaining anonymous cathedral workers, so they got in touch with the Carnegie. One of the guys was a Cristo fan, so they had their creation of CANS documented up one side and down the other. When the show opened, all of this material—from my original schematic, to letters, to bills of lading, to internal Alcoa memos, to tapes of phone calls (with transcriptions), to photographs of every step of the process and of everyone involved in the process—was laid out on the walls surrounding CANS on the main floor of the Carnegie Museum just outside the museum shop. I was identified as 'The Professor,' but it didn't take a crack art critic from the *New York Times* long to break that code and call me at work.

'When I was talking to the college operator, she said you were in the English Department: why is that?'

'It's the sort of thing that happens at a liberal arts college,' I answered. The man from the *Times* completely misunderstood my answer, and when his column appeared it read in part, 'The man known as 'The Professor,' who worked with the group, known as 'The Young's Gang,' that created CANS, the artistic sensation of the decade, is himself so little known at his own college that the switchboard operator this reporter contacted thought he was in the English Department.'

As stupid as it was, that *New York Times* article led to a commission for 'the Young's gang.' They created CARS for the Ford Stamping Plant in Dearborn, Michigan. The concept was similar to CANS. They used four of those long flat stacks of crushed automobiles. They buried them, on site,

until just a 5 foot square was visible. Then they sprayed in the background, the edges and the letters. I saw the thing on the evening news. Clearly they were growing as artists. This time they used the dark blue for the edges, but the letters were a bright red.

Ford paid them huge bucks for the installation and the media loved them and referred to them as ‘Steelworkers with an art of gold.’ *The New Yorker* published a David Remnick profile of them with a parody of CANS by Bruce McCall on the cover. That did it. The Young’s Gang became the darlings of the New York art world. They quit their day jobs, and shortly they had more commissions than you could shake a crane at. They were masters of all recycled media. They worked in plastic, glass, newsprint and baled cardboard. The last I heard from any of them, they were in Paris working on an installation for the European Union’s global recycling initiative.

I finished telling Bobby my long story about my summer in the galvanizing plant, and he put another Jim Beam and water in front of me.

‘That’s amazing,’ he said. ‘You mean those guys managed to create that sculpture and place it on site in Tennessee, and all you did was think up the idea?’

‘Yeh, Bobby. You see, they were dead right. We college professors never did a day’s work in our lives.’

### Author Bios

**James A. Perkins** was a member of the Westminster College (New Wilmington, PA) faculty from 1973 until he retired in 2008. From Covington, KY, Jim earned an undergraduate degree from Centre College in 1963, a master’s from Miami University of Ohio in 1965, and a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee in 1972. He published twenty books, including edited collections of Robert Penn Warren’s letters, along with his own short story and poetry collections, including the short story book *Snakes, Butterbeans, and the Discovery of Electricity* (2003) and *Decembers* (2013).

**Colby King** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at USC-Upstate. He teaches and studies social class, stratification and inequality, urban sociology, sociology of work, and strategies for supporting working-class and first-generation college students. He has served as a member of the Working-Class Studies Association’s Steering Committee, is a member of the American Sociological Association’s Task Force on Working-Class and First Generation Persons in Sociology, and is a regular contributor for the Everyday Sociology Blog. He is headed back to Appalachia, and will begin working as an Assistant Professor of Sociology at USC-Upstate in August 2019, after six years of work, and being tenured and promoted, at Bridgewater State University.

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