Paper, Earth:
An Installation with Steven Siegel

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What are a sculptor's tools? If you're Steven Siegel, they are many. Hammers and nails, jigsaws, wire clippers, and Exact-o knives, shovels and wheelbarrows, levels and ladders and T-squares.

Then the wind and rain, the billions of microorganisms grinding up the soil, the fungus, the leaves and roots, the earth itself. And, of course, most essential of all, the willing hands of the more than one hundred volunteers who answered the apprentice's call — students and teachers, and guides, overseers, and members of the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, site of sculptor Steven Siegel's newest installation, *Big, with rift.*

On an April morning, Steven first meets with Nick Capasso, DeCordova's Senior Curator, and Nina Gara Bozicnik, Koch Curatorial Fellow, to plan the two-week installation. Afterwards, we walk down a forested slope until we stand at the edge of a nineteenth-century stone foundation.

The stone wall drops seven feet to a mud floor covered with leaves and early-season plants, several trees rising into the canopy. Surveying the site, Steven is already spinning out ideas, imagining walls of paper interacting with the architecture of the long-gone barn.

Day 1, Monday, July 20
9:15 a.m.

A red-bellied woodpecker admonishes me as I sprint across the lawn to catch Steven already speaking to a group of volunteers. Stumps and a sprinkling of sawdust are all that remain of the trees from the foundation's center.

"There's going to be a lot of sweat, bugs, and hopefully some rain," Steven tells this morning's crew, mostly art students and recent graduates of Oakmont Regional High School in Ashburnham, and their teacher, Greg Barry. The artist is wearing work pants patchworked with pockets, tan T-shirt, hiking boots, and a wide-brimmed hat, string looped beneath his chin. Something about the outfit and ambiance smacks of Indiana Jones on an archeological dig, but Steven is far more relaxed and generous.

The sculpture will consist of twenty-five cubic yards of post-consumer newspaper built around two separate wood frames, a bed of ferns crowning each. Steven plans to build the larger section first, then gauge the size of the second based on the remaining materials. "Like a geological formation," he says, "the sculpture will have its own life cycle. The museum would like this work to last for at least five years." He turns a playful eye on his young apprentices. "If it doesn't, you're responsible."

After marking the sculpture's footprint, the volunteers set out to clear the area of vegetation. Since this greenery will become part of the sculpture, Steven instructs them "to preserve as much of the stuff from the forest floor as possible" and transport it to a corner of the foundation. As they drag logs from felled trees to wall in the improvised greenhouse, the crew finds a trove of broken glass, pottery shards, and rusted springs, tools, hinges, and other artifacts.

While some students transplant vegetation, others pound in a grid of stakes. When the site is reasonably clear, Steven sees that a large stump will have to be incorporated into the sculpture.

At 10:10, a load of gravel rains down where ferns grew just minutes before. Patiently, Steven directs the laying of the gravel along the grid to level and protect the sculpture's base. "As with any kind of construction," he says, "you need to get the foundation right."

Day 3, Wednesday, July 22
9:42 a.m.

Wet weather again, after yesterday's downpour. Tire tracks are already wearing a trench across the sculpture-dotted lawn leading to the work area. The ground above the foundation has been transformed into a construction site. A blue tarp stretches between trees, sheltering plastic bins of supplies, a table, sawhorses, and planks. I hear the pounding of hammers in tandem.

Above the din, Steven's voice instructs volunteers how to correctly place the newspaper. A frame supported by upright posts defines the outer walls, around which rows of newspapers have been fanned out and nailed down, the structure roofed by a giant fat caterpillar of plywood. The paper wall already reaches the knees of some of the girls. The headlines are recent. "He's not breathing," claims one, next to a photo of Michael Jackson. Another laments, "As budget shrinks, so do library hours."

Steven identifies a section where newspapers need securing with chicken wire, and Greg volunteers. Wrapping one of the pre-cut strands around a post, Greg twists a nail through the mesh and pounds it into a paper stack. "Steven says you can't put in too many nails," he says.

"There is a certain element of joy that comes with getting to know a group of people and seeing their personalities emerge," Steven tells me. And I recall a comment he made at our first meeting, "The community that happens becomes part of the piece."

As a young artist working with sculptor Michael Singer in the seventies, Steven traveled to installation sites from Texas to Germany. "At the time, [Singer] was probably the best artist in the world working with natural materials and natural settings. I got a sense of what it meant to be around people doing ambitious things in ambitious places. One or two people here are going to pick up on that and it's going to change their lives."

Soon tasks are reassigned. Carly and Morgan hold chicken wire between them as though folding laundry sheets, while

Carly snips up the center with wire cutters. John and Max, a Waltham High School senior, make trips with the blue wheelbarrow bringing down bales of paper, and Ashley and Erica carry them down by hand. Steven anticipates they'll reach the two-thirds mark on the paper wall by the end of the day. As I climb the hill, another whole pallet of paper is gone.

Day 4, Thursday, July 23
8:55 a.m.

The day looks promising, sky hazy but bright, no threat of immediate rain; a slight breeze keeps the bugs at bay. Down at the site, Steven looks pensive. "This is what happens when I lay awake at night," he tells the gathering group. "I worry about what could go wrong."

He has decided the main structure needs more bracing, and breaks up the group into teams: a carpentry crew led by lead carpenter Mick Billingsley; paper movers and spreaders; and dismantlers. Mick climbs inside the sculpture to start shoring it up, and Sarah and Carly clamber in after him. Four-and-a-half new pallets of paper have arrived, but Steven is not convinced it will be enough. He tries to calculate what he'll need for the second section, and finally says, "We'll just have to wait and see."

The paper wall is now up to Greg's chest. As the pace of paper spreading picks up, Steven steps in to redirect the work. "Everybody does things a little differently," he says. "Some people do things more than

perfect. Some people do things less than perfect. That's why we keep moving people around — to maintain the balance."

The three inside are boxing themselves in as they bang together supports and the paper walls rise around them. "How will you get out?" I ask, and Mick points to a hand-built ladder, the sole escape route.

At 10:15, Mick exits the structure, and Sarah and Carly pass their shovels through. Then Sarah climbs backward through the opening and springs to the ground raising her hands high. Carly is still inside photographing something written in Sharpie on a cross beam, soon to be sealed up. I ask what it says, and she reads, "In 2009, Carly, Sarah, Morgan, Ashley, Erica, Mr. Barry, and like a bajillion other people built these things."

I notice the artist's name does not appear. Somehow I don't think Steven would mind.

Day 6, Saturday, July 25
8:55 a.m.

Today, with the students off, I'm on the volunteer list, along with Mick and a few other adults.

"It's a light day today," says Steven. "Actually every day's been light for me. Yesterday I didn't have to lift a thing. I just stood and pointed."

The sculpture is beginning to work its way into the landscape — the stacked, fanned newspapers resembling a crumbling shale cliff, the multicolored newsprint mimicking the dappling effect of sun through leaves.

While several volunteers finish the carpentry on the second section, Steven takes me up on the roof of the first.

Mick heaves two asphalt membranes up over the side of the newspaper wall. We unroll the coarse tar paper and adhere one long sheet across the length of the roof, then finish the roll half way on the next row. The second roll completes the half, with plenty left for a third row that covers the entire surface.

Satisfied with the roofing, it's time for lunch in the museum library. Though our boots are mud-caked, our clothes filthy, we have special status and ride the elevator up.

Day 9, Tuesday, July 28
2 p.m.

Today volunteers and newspaper arrive together around noon. Several pallets piled high guarantee more than enough paper. Wanting everyone to try a range of tasks, Steven calls for job rotation, asking "Who has just been trained in cutting wire?" Suzy raises a hand.

When the wire cutting is finished, Steven demonstrates for Suzy how to build the paper up from the outside using trifolds. At the top, he explains, the papers need to slant in like a cup to hold in the soil.

A couple of museum visitors wander down the slope to the edge of the foundation. The man exclaims, "Oh my God!" when he sees the sculpture taking shape below him.

"That's what we like to hear!" Steven shouts back.

The outside edge is building up much faster than the inner, so Steven moves resources until almost everyone is working inside.

"It's kind of meditative, isn't it?" he observes, as bodies and hands work in slow-flowing synchrony, carrying paper, fanning out the sheets, punctuated by the occasional hammer blow. By 3:45 the paper has risen almost waist high. As I leave, Steven points a camera down from the top of the wall to capture the spreaders quietly circling the structure.

Day 10, Wednesday, July 29
10 a.m.

The site runneth over, as seventy-one high school students from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, arrive. Each of three groups will take a two-hour shift.

Steven introduces his work as, "art that engages the natural environment and the specifics of a particular place," an outgrowth of the sixties and seventies movement referred to as Earth Art, Earth Work, or Land Art. Coming at this stage, the students have a unique opportunity. Steven points out the frame of the second section, and tells them the finished piece is hollow too, and the ferns on top will spread until the roof is indistinguishable from forest floor. "Over time the paper will start to deteriorate and grow microorganisms, sprout mushrooms, turn green."

Having made more than thirty sculptures

with similar materials, Steven is well acquainted with the process. “What’s different about this piece,” he tells me later, “is the split — the ability to walk through the sculpture.” Even now, only half lined with paper, the pathway beckons.

When the last students wend their way up the hill to lunch, I ask Steven about his first paper project in 1990. “It was at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island,” he tells me. “Staten Island was home to the world’s largest landfill. A little lightbulb went off, and I began to wonder, ‘How are we affecting the geology? How are we altering these materials and then putting them back into the landscape?’”

Day 11, Thursday, July 30
9 a.m.

As I approach, the sculpture emerges out of the trees, the second section even with the first and covered with eight to ten inches of topsoil. The Oakmont students are back, digging up ferns from the garden repository and handing them up to Mick in work gloves and Greg with bare hands, both perched on ladders nestling the greenery into its new home.

Two volunteers haul leaves from the surrounding forest. The plan is to restore the foundation area to its original condition — to completely cover the boot tracks, lumber scrapes, and wheelbarrow furrows of the last two weeks.

The split in the sculpture, about four feet wide at one end, narrows at the stump to just over a foot, causing visitors to squeeze through sideways. The view through this gap is a segment of stone wall, the road, and another stone wall beyond. I ask Steven if the sculpture has emerged as he envisioned it. “You never know exactly,” he says. “That’s why you make it.”

The sculpture no longer appears as two discrete sections. It is whole now, a geological formation built into the landscape with the materials that were taken from it — newspapers and wood once trees, topsoil recycled into use along with ferns, leaves, and logs from the site itself. Even the asphalt membrane hidden beneath the forested crown came out of the earth as oil.

By 9:45, the sky and forest site darken with showers. Steven calls his volunteers to come in out of the rain, and talks to Mick about taking down the tarp and carting away tables, sawhorses, ladders, and the last of the equipment. By 10:00, it’s done. Students pile into Greg’s van and Steven gathers the rest into his car, as they go for a celebratory cup of coffee.

Driving away from the DeCordova as the community disperses, I see a break in the clouds. I think of the sculpture standing in the clearing, raising its shoulders even with the stone wall, transforming the landscape into something new. Soon the sculptor’s tools will be put away, all but the wind and rain and the decomposers — and the dozens of pairs of hands sent out with new wisdom to seek their own materials in the world. ▮