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## Lou Rizzolo: Art Installations of East Hall and the Sky

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WMU Professor Emeritus of Art Lou Rizzolo

Friday, Feb. 24, 2023 at 11:30 am

Virtual Meeting via FaceTime

**Cassie:** Okay, so we are recording now, so go ahead and introduce yourself, and then we'll talk about how you came to WMU as a student and that document that you sent me.

**Lou:** Okay. I'm Lou Rizzolo, Professor Emeritus of Art from the Western Michigan University School of Art and I was a student from 1952 to 1956 and later became a professor from 1964 to 2004.

And when this call came out for East Hall stories, I was a part of East Hall, and it seemed to make good sense that maybe I should contact Cassie and sure enough, I have two stories that I would like to present, and I would read them. The first story is rather short, but I think it has a lot to do with how teachers and the university can really establish some good qualities in a human being in terms of how to get through life. And that was my experience with that.

**Cassie:** Yeah, so go ahead and read that, and then I have a few questions after that we can get to.

**Lou:** Okay, did you say you had a few questions?

**Cassie:** Yes, but I'll ask those after you read it. So go ahead and read it first, and then I'll ask you a question.

**Lou:** Okay. So the title is East Hall Early Reflections. Our personal lives, families and professional careers are textured with remarkable influencers, events and sites. East Hall on East Campus at Western Michigan College in 1952 to 1956 contributed greatly to my education as an undergraduate student and later to my artist/teacher career as WMU Professor from 1964 to 2004.

East Hall was quite impressive then with its massive colonnaded portico and landscaped terrain by renown architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Within its halls of teaching and learning, it was uniquely outstanding. My initial encounter with this impressive structure and WMC's faculty happened as an 18 year old graduate of Waterford Township High School in January of 1952 .

Declining a tuition scholarship for Fall Semester 1951, I instead became employed at the new A&P Store as Assistant Produce Manager. That decision changed soon after realizing there must be other life venues to pursue and Superintendent Shunk reinstated my scholarship. My father allowed me to drive our family's 1949 Plymouth the snowy distance from Waterford on M-59, then on to the Red Arrow Highway and finally in to Kalamazoo to register for winter semester.

Locating East Hall's parking lot, I trudged through heavy snow, entered its impressive first floor and followed registration signage to the 2nd floor Lecture Hall. Built on a hill with a magnificent view east of Kalamazoo in 1903, it was an edifice of academic influence as a teacher's college. With its imposing cupola it spoke to me as a place of intellectual importance. With widely designed stairwells on both sides of a naturally lit central rotunda, its ambience posed the searching question: if I belonged.

In a highly congested Lecture Hall, I and many other applicants finally encountered Dr. Margaret Macmillan of the History Department who headed winter registration. She provided triplicate class registration cards to be filled out by hand listing chosen classes. Impatiently sitting on tiered seating of the Lecture Hall for seemingly hours filling out three cards for each department, seemed more than excessive. When finished, I jubilantly returned my cards only to be confronted by her appalling remark that my chosen freshman classes in Art, History, Military Science and Psychology were closed and I should come back in fall 1952 to again register! I countered that I lived a considerable distance away and waiting for another semester was not a good solution. She looked at me with some disdain and hurriedly replied (paraphrased), only with respective faculty signatures per class could she complete my winter registration and then moved on to help other applicants.

Fairly discouraged and intimidated, I quietly waited and wondered in the car watching a relentless snow fall and pondered what to do! Concluding this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for a better life, I chose to determine where each class was in session and would seek each signature to over-enroll.

Dr. Russell Seibert ( later Vice President for Academic Affairs) was teaching Foundations of Western Civilization in West Hall on East Campus and graciously signed my card. Professor Hazel Paden was teaching in the Art Department on the 4th floor of the Chemistry Building on West Campus and smiling signed to over-enroll With faculty signatures from the Psychology Department and WMU's ROTC, I hurried back to East Hall hoping to meet the 4:00 closing deadline.

With signatures in hand, I approached Dr. Macmillan who greeted me with questioning curiosity. After she reviewed the cards and read her colleague's signatures, she approved my registration, expressed her regard for my efforts and in an assuring voice remarked, "You certainly are a persistent person." (Both laugh).

If by chance the spirit of this story is missed, I offer the following. A country kid, who naively approached academe only to realize conflict resolution and decision making by masterful teachers were cores of academic learning, grew immeasurably. Not only did I attend undergraduate classes in East Hall but in 1964 was invited and proudly accepted a professorship in the Art department at his Alma Mater and taught classes in East Hall. Dr. Macmillan's inferred message of valuing self and fulfilling dreams stayed with me for life.

**Cassie:** I love that story because of all the details too, that you have in it. You remember so much of that day registering for classes and it was all in one day, right? That you collected all signatures?

**Lou:** One day? One day, yeah.

**Cassie:** Yes. And what was it like trying to rush from building to class to class trying to get these professors' signatures before the 4:00 deadline?

**Lou:** It was very scary. And I had to find out places to park, I had to ask questions, and it took a considerable amount of time to do it.

But as Dr. McMillan said, I'm a very persistent person and it did work. And of course, it builds a lot of confidence in yourself. And I think my first impression of East Hall was something quite positive that I had an opportunity to overcome what appeared to be a registration issue.

And it was those wonderful teachers from Western Michigan College that really made it happen by signing.

**Cassie:** Yeah.

**Lou:** They were more than willing to do it. I felt that was really quite amazing.

**Cassie:** Right. And after such an eventful and monumentous first day on campus, how did you think that informed your career as a student but also your career as a professor then later on?

**Lou:** I think the next story will probably reveal that very considerably. I think if you have dreams I think that's very important that you follow them and I think that you evaluate those dreams. I knew that after working at the AMP store, it was a nice job, but it would never get me very far.

And I was an angry kid, I lost my mother when I was 16 and was grieving and I think that I was just wanting to give up on school and all of that. But anyway, Mr. Shunk and some of my teachers in high school just really persistently wanted me to go to the university, and that encouragement and then Dr. McMillan's, when you put that all together, it's something that you relate to for the rest of your life, I think it helped to form my career. So East Hall means a great deal to me.

**Cassie:** Right. Yeah, that was your first day on campus before you were even a student and then you went on to teach in East Hall.

**Lou:** That's right. I taught classes in East Hall.

**Cassie:** So, before we get into your next story, can we talk a little bit about how you started working at WMU and what your position was when you started, and how that sort of changed throughout your 40-year career?

**Lou:** Western Art Department was just newly moved into Sangren Hall and that's where I started as an assistant professor. And there Professor Harry Hefner was the chair and he was a former teacher of mine when I was a student and he had an assignment for me. I had four different classes that I was teaching and he called me in one time and he said, I want you to consider becoming a team member in a team teaching situation for the Integrated Creative Arts minor through the School of Education and there were five professors that were going to team teach together this minor, and it took us a year to plan it.

And when I first went to the first meeting, Cassie, I looked at these people and I thought, "Do I really belong here? I'm an artist and a teacher, and I'm supposed to relate to theater people and dancers and education people and musicians and so forth?" And it was a life-changing experience, but I think being a persistent person and realizing that people were counting on me to do something of value and, of course, to make something possible for students that we had never done before in team teaching which was very unique, there were very few examples of that around.

Now we're talking about five professors in the same room teaching the nature of creativity in that course. That was one of my assignments very soon after I came to Western. And it was life-changing.

**Cassie:** Right.

**Lou:** You can imagine all of a sudden, there are four other professors that are just as smart as you and care just as much about their students and we're all working together. We worked for a year to make that possible. But I think Cassie, it was this persistence, had a dream, and in addition to teaching my watercolor painting classes and art education classes, and art history classes, I should say, yes, and then multimedia art classes. So, but anyway, that was kind of like the format for me to continue a career at Western Michigan University.

**Cassie:** Yeah. And it's interesting too, how you were given these challenges that looked almost impossible, but then you persevered and you went through it, and it ended up being an opportunity for growth in what you were doing.

**Lou:** Unbelievable, yes. Just unbelievable growth, yeah.

**Cassie:** Yeah. And during your time teaching at WMU, the 40 years there, what were your positions and how did that change?

**Lou:** Well, I soon became a full professor, from associate to full professor. Numerous committees, that's usually faculty assignments, and I became department program coordinator, which is like the assistant chair, I think, with Professor John Link when he was chairman of the department. So I had a lot of experiences outside of the university as well, serving on the National Board of Art Education, I was elected to that in Washington, DC, so I became very politically, I think, involved and hopefully more astute in terms of what was necessary for the Arts.

There's a tendency to think that the Arts suffer sometimes with funding and things like that. And of course, good leadership makes it possible that we're able to grow the Art awareness and the importance of Art for all students and colleagues. Those are some of the things that I was doing, yes. I taught extension classes as well, throughout Michigan, for Western Michigan University as well.

**Cassie:** Okay. And so then at a certain point, the department became the School of Art, so it changed from a department to a school.

**Lou:** Right.

**Cassie:** And then you also started taking up room in East Hall. Right? Is that around the same time I think?

**Lou:** What was that question?

**Cassie:** That the department became a school and then started occupying East Hall? Was that around the same time?

**Lou:** Classes were taught there, but most of the art department was over in Sangren.

**Cassie:** Ah, like the offices?

**Lou:** And then later yeah, in the Richmond Center. Yes.

**Cassie:** Okay. So, how did that change affect your career and what you were doing there? Going from a department to a school and also having parts of East Campus to occupy with student studios, and then that will lead into your next document, I believe, where you actually were able to do a project there?

**Lou:** Right. Well, the School of Art needed a center for its work, a gallery, and the Richmond Center became such a very vital important part of the art department because art needs to be shown. And we had a small gallery, we had a gallery over in East Hall.

We also had a gallery in Sangren, too. But, when we became a school and when we did get a new facility, I think that the professionalism grew immensely, and I think that there was great opportunity then. I was very much involved in research, and that was kinda unusual, I think, in a way, for artists.

But, at the beginning, funds are always lacking. So, external funds become very important to university education, especially in researching. And Western Michigan University became a research university, and because I was very intensely interested in research and brain research in particular, that then, it was vital that we find external funds to continue to do the research on campus.

And that happened, and I think it's because of the School of Art, and I think it's because of the accrediting of our university that made those things possible for a number of faculty, not just me.

**Cassie:** Right, yeah. So, that research then leads into the next document that you were gonna read I believe that had to do with combining art with the brain research that you were doing. So do you wanna read that document next, and then we can talk about it once you're done?

**Lou:** What I what?

**Cassie:** Do you want to go ahead and read that document then? Explaining that intersection between your research and art? Yeah.

**Lou:** Yeah, and Cassie these have visuals with them, so.

**Cassie:** Yeah.

**Lou:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** Which will be viewable on the website as well.

**Lou:** All right. So, this story is a little bit longer, and it has visuals, like I said, and it's titled East Hall Creative Incubator. We think of East Hall, this old building, so to speak, that became less used, and it was crumbling, and many people saved it and brought it to fruition, to the Heritage Hall and how wonderful. But things were going on in the 1970s and the 1990s, and so I write about it.

The dynamic evolution in arts and education in the 1970s to the 1990s is recognized in these writings by revisiting those decades of “changing the guard”; an expansion from traditional to non-traditional arts where analog systems “passed in review” of new digital technology.

East Hall was a major contributor to these aesthetic transitions fueled by academic interest in the “brain (for the first time) studying the brain”. And this is a statement by Dr. William E Buys of the Speech Department. I thought that was such a significant statement. We're always studying something, but for the first time, we decided, academia I think, that the brain studying the brain was very important.

Back from sabbatical research which focused on creativity and brain function at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, I realized some WMU administrators, faculty and students from numerous disciplines had interest in advancing study of the brain and proceeded, with Dr. Rich Cooper in Occupational Therapy, Marc Rizzolo in Industrial Design, Jerry Contania (Art and Education) and later Peter and Cassidy Middleton (Artist/Teacher) to form ILW (Inflatable Light Workshop), an informal workshop collaborative comprised of WMU professors and students from art such as Jerry Contania, Nobe Schuler, Dale Strong Linda Talbot Rizzolo, dance ( Jen Talbot and Loran), occupational therapy (Dr. Rich Cooper), physics ( Dr. Stan Derby and Mr. Bill Merrow), geography (Dr. David Lemburg), medicine (MD Richard Pike), education (Peter Middleton), industrial design ( Marc Rizzolo), film and video ( Dr. Frank Jamison ) and mathematics (Dr. Art White).

Now, those were the core, but there were others and I wanted to mention other alumni, and I added those Cassie because they're very important people. And the other WMU alumni who also donated their expertise include: Bill and Carla Tye, Dr. Curt Swanson, Cameron and Heather-Swanson Smith, Joan Rizzolo, Dr. Sesta Peekstok, Gretchen Deems, Julie Holladay, Chris McCormick, Kristin Casaletto, Joan Bonnette, Professor Paul Mergen, Hyatt Middleton, Linda Rzoska, Judy Donovan, Greg Miller, Sue Scholle-Martin, Kylie Schultz, Russ Pensyl, Cara Smith and Diane Wilson. These were all students and professors who added to all of this.



So, about the history of East Hall. Once East Hall no longer was a teaching facility and gym classes were moved to West Campus, ILW was granted permission to use the East Hall gymnasium to create large-scale artworks, supportive of brain research.

East Hall's spacious gymnasium and second floor field track, provided needed space to design, fabricate and view the first prototype of the 'Brain Sensorium.' And do you have those images?

So in the images, you'll see the brain and the inside of the brain and then people. It's actually an ILW workshop being taught in the brain.

An air-inflated, polyethylene, air-structured environment, 40 feet long by 20 feet high by 30 feet wide where participants entered its engaging ambience and realized its sensory architecture, created artworks within quite, in its quiet spaces, and experienced a son et Lumiere of projected lights and sounds. With external funding, ILW developed and presented brain performances with audiences within the 'Brain Sensorium.'



Mind Thoughts 1984 and Mind Energy 1985 were scripted as functional brain performances. But Mind Events 1986 was scripted as a dysfunctional brain stroke performance and that was staged by Dr. Rich Cooper in OT and Dr. Richard Pike, MD from the Upjohn Pharmaceutical staff scripted a Schizophrenic Event, all performed in Dalton Center's then new technological state of the art Multi-Media Room 1000.





In East Hall's gym, large-scale ripstop nylon and polytube structured sky artworks were fabricated. Now, what is the sky artwork? Well, at MIT, I learned to think about the sky as a place where art could be placed. We often think of airplanes with smoke and making various kinds of designs and so forth.



But it was one person who stressed the idea that it's just a big canvas, the sky is a big canvas and we need to start thinking about art in that canvas. Kind of a far-out idea for most people, but it made pretty good sense when we came to study the brain that would create art that would represent certain functions of the brain.

And I'll go on now. Multicolored forms and ripstop nylon were designed to specifically symbolize left and right and whole brain functions. Sky art and helium poly-structures were designed to be helium lifted and safely flown in crew-tethered art structures, generally 20 feet by 40 feet, along with 100 foot, 2 mL tubular, and air-inflated dome sculptures.

So we're working with long tubes and domes. According to brain theory promoted at the time, each sky art structure was designed to reflect each respective hemispheric function. The left image being a very well designed, in other words, they were thinking of the left hemisphere as being in that fact, in that function.

And the right being a more imaginative composition and the whole or midbrain being a combination of the two. Now my best description of sky art is "When brilliant colors of Sky Art, illuminated in light freely dance in the winds of an enormous blue sky canvas, a timeless unscripted collaborative 'pas de deux' of man and nature unfolds".

But the sky art definition that art historian Joan Rothfuss writes about in her Feast of Astonishments, describes it even further. She takes it a step further. "Sky Art offers freedom from gravity, from spiritual darkness, from 'the ulcers of memory, the superfluities of time past, and the suppurations of the psyche. Through freedom comes enlightenment".

East Hall's second floor field track allowed the design team to visualize various states of fabrication for each ground and Sky Art composition. Sky art events were later presented at Michigan Tech University... And now I have a list of all of these and you have images you say that you can put into those, that would be very nice.



Okay, so the Detroit Institute of Arts, Starr Commonwealth, Lake Geneva Switzerland Calgary Canada (above), Stavanger Norway, Holland Michigan, the WK Kellogg Building, Virginia Tech University, ArtPrize and Grand Rapids. And then finally, a major piece at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, Oxbow, that's in Saugatuck and on Western Michigan University's camp at an exhibited in the Dalton Center south foyer (below).





Now my closing statement is this, Cassie. East Hall became a collaborative creative incubator for colleagues and students from many disciplines. It nurtured my growth as an artist/teacher through creating and teaching large scale purposeful environmental artworks. ILW's (which later became BIGthink) commitment to developing non-traditional arts at WMU, proved to be successful in our midwest and abroad, initially challenging higher education's traditional curricula.

It generated interest in forming interdisciplinary classes and majors in WMU university curricula as did the team taught Integrated Creative Arts Minor headed by Drs. Sara Swickard and Mary Cain of the School of Education. Exposing colleagues and students to think in collaborative and global terms strengthened both traditional and non traditional learning. Opportunities for university art students to grow intellectually and creatively in the non-traditional interdisciplinary arts, then defined as Multi Media Art, was partly supported, I contend, by outcomes generated from East Hall spaces. There opportunity unfolded to experientially teach and collaboratively create in a new genre of form for public creative and artistic enlightenment. It was an immeasurable pleasure to facilitate these efforts.

**Cassie:** Yeah, and I had one question. We're coming to the end of our time right now, but I had one last question that I wanted to ask in regard to the projects that you talked about.

These projects and each piece were so greatly collaborative as you mentioned, and so impactful on a number of different stages. Can you talk a little bit about the sense of community within this art and within these projects that you worked on?

**Lou:** Wonderful question, and I'm glad you asked.

There is nothing like bringing people together in a communal way. When we worked in Switzerland, we had over 100 Swiss, American, and other people from different countries all working with us to install these large pieces. And those pieces in Lake Geneva or at Lake Geneva in Mount Vernon, they were 300 feet long.

300-foot tubing, three or four of these, and how many people it took to install these. The wonderful thing that happens for the first time, it jars your perceptions to see such large-scale imagery. And it also brings people together in this kind of awesome experience of becoming more united and more communal.

And Cassie, that led to another project, which I've not talked about, but I just will say it briefly. But we also worked with five different countries to build world peace art initiatives in the Republic of China, in Norway, in Canada, in Italy, in our country, and so that initiative of bringing people together was our first attempt to start to consider how we could work more peacefully and in united ways.

So that is a special question that you ask, and I'm so glad you did. Because it really makes a difference to watch people come together and be united and working towards projects. As did the ILW team of the BIGThink teams like that, working together for a project.

**Cassie:** Yeah, and we're at the end of our time now, were there any last topics that we didn't touch on that you wanted to conclude with or any last memories or stories you'd like to share?

**Lou:** Was there what?

**Cassie:** Were there any topics that you wanted to conclude on or any last quick memories or stories that you wanted to share at the end of our time now?

**Lou:** Well, how important education is, how important our university is, our students are so important, our faculty, our administrators, we all make a difference in building that kind of... certainly expertise, but I think building an expertise now that relates to other expertise, and I think that's going on at Western and other places.

And I think this is really a good sign that we no longer are set in our ways in one little department and separate from the rest. But there's this kind of thing that's bringing faculty together and students together from all different departments. And I'm pleased that we had started something way back then, and ASA was a part of it, to bring a number of different people together that I've already enumerated.

**Cassie:** Right, yes. Well, thank you so much for sitting with me today and reading your stories and then answering my questions, I really appreciate it.

**Lou:** And your patience, Cassie, and expertise in making this happen, I hope will just be known and that others will benefit much from it.

**Cassie:** Yes, me too, yes. Well, thank you so much again, and stay safe and warm. I will be happy to email you an update when the project is done, so then you'll be able to go and view your story on the project website as well as the many other stories that we've been so thankful to collect as well.

**Lou:** That's exciting.

**Cassie:** Yes, yes.

**Lou:** I'll keep in touch with you to find out when that's going to happen or you have my email so we can-

**Cassie:** Yes, yep, I'll be happy to send you-

**Lou:** Many people will be interested.

**Cassie:** Yes, yep, uh-huh, yeah, and I think that the alumni association as well and some of the staff at Advancement are hoping to plan an event to unveil the website as well. And that would happen in East Hall, so I'd be happy to email you updates on that so that you know and then you can go.

**Lou:** And the slides will be included, right?

**Cassie:** Yes, yep, I'll make sure that your photos are in there, yes.

**Lou:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Yes, well, thank you so much. Enjoy the rest of your day, and I will talk to you-

**Lou:** You too, Cassie.

**Cassie:** -again soon.

**Lou:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Okay.

**Lou:** Bye-bye.

**Cassie:** Bye.