



# With Doors





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# Wide Open





It's been 25 years, but Pasadena-based artist Dave Muller still remembers the moment when he began to feel the need to shake things up at the wide-open and interdisciplinary California Institute of the Arts.

It was also a moment that influenced the history of the Los Angeles art scene. Muller's hunches, improvis, and inventions gradually set in motion a whole chain of artistic cross-pollinations that, over the next decade, spread out from the CalArts campus and ultimately nudged the then-wobbly orbit of the L.A. art world onto a slightly different trajectory.

Over the past two decades, Muller has been on a roll. He's had solo shows at Blum & Poe Gallery in Los Angeles and in museums from St. Louis to San Francisco, and has taken part in a slew of major group shows around the country. The Guggenheim owns one of his pieces, and he was commissioned to paint a mural at AT&T Stadium, in Arlington, Texas, home of the Dallas Cowboys. Muller

is known internationally for work that explores his love for music and the physical artifacts that make its shared enjoyment possible, such as 45's and LP's, especially his famous "Top Ten" portraits, which feature a spine-side view of his subjects' favorite ten albums but painted on a scale to match the subject's height. He's also beloved locally for spearheading the creation of the *Three Day Weekend* shows, beginning after his graduation in the mid-1990s. But it all began at CalArts—and when Muller and the Institute met in 1991, both would be changed forever.

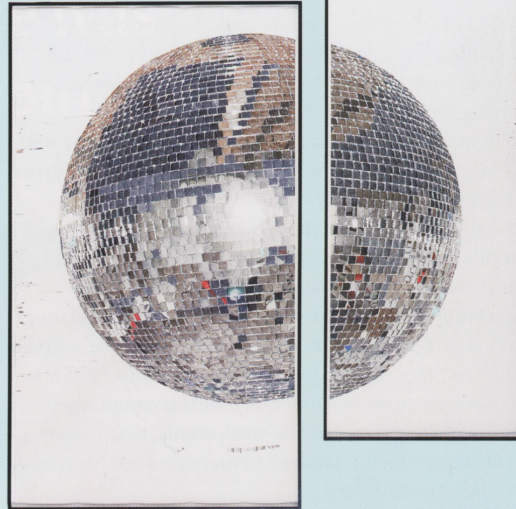
#### DIY CHANGE AGENT

Muller has a knack for upending the status quo—and usually in a playful and thought-provoking way. He loves punk rock, but he's not in-your-face or a shouter; his voice is gentle and even-keeled, and his style is deadpan, witty, subtle. Early evidence of being a change agent can be found prior to CalArts, back when he was a chemistry major at UC Davis. He began working as a DJ at the college radio station KDVS and hosted the 6 a.m. morning show. Muller delighted in playing the weirdest stuff he could find, or playing back an interview at the same time he played a record, or playing two songs at once. He found the element of surprise to be interesting and hoped others would too.





Muller began working as a DJ at the college radio station KDVS, and at gigs he still spins vinyl, preferably two at the same time. Muller's love for music has been a big influence on his art making.



*Self-Portrait (In the Studio)*, 2006

"I liked the idea that you might wake up and turn on my show and not know what's going on? 'Am I still asleep?'" Muller says with an impish grin.

Soon, in true DIY punk spirit, he was on the phone talking to bands that were touring the Bay Area—Camper Van Beethoven, the Meat Puppets—and talking them into making an extra tour stop at his house to play a show in its spacious living room. "My neighbors hated my guts," Muller recalls. "But I only did five or six of these a year." Because Muller wanted special t-shirts to commemorate these bands, he taught himself to silk-screen. That brush with the creative world intrigued Muller, and in his last semester he took a drawing class. Something clicked. He decided to stay two more years to get a second major in Art at Davis, and after a year of graduate school at the School of Visual Arts in New York, he decided to head west to attend CalArts. He arrived with a long ponytail hanging out from under a trucker's cap, his bass guitar, and whatever else would fit in the car. He also arrived with a voracious appetite for learning from everyone around him. Which brings us to that first moment.

"I came here, and everybody had studios, but they kept the doors shut. I said, 'Wait, I don't get to see anything? I get to see gallery work but nothing else?'" My idea about being a

student at CalArts or anyplace was that you learn from your peers more than anyone else."

Muller's second epiphany came later that year. He was diligent about signing up for every possible studio visit from visiting artists. "I always thought that the more people who saw what I was doing, the better," he says. "So I had a studio visit with [installation artist] Perry Hoberman, and after we talked, he looked at his watch and said, 'I gotta go, I've got 10 other students to visit today.' I thought to myself after he left, 'Damn, he's gonna see more student art than I've seen the entire time I've been here, and I'm a student here!'"

So what's an open-door guy to do in a closed-door situation? The answer came quickly.

"I put up a sheet that said, 'Dave Muller will be conducting studio visits,' right alongside other visiting artist postings," he says. A week later, his sheet was full of appointments, so he visited his peers. Some knew he was a student, some didn't.

"That was sort of the beginning of this whole idea of working around things I thought were issues at CalArts," Muller recalls.

Another thing that bugged him was how students felt the need to compete against one another to sign up for gallery space. "Everybody waits in line, some people stay



*Three Way Weekend*, a 2016 art show extravaganza with three locations and ten manifestations, was the latest incarnation of the *Three Day Weekend* events, which Muller started in the late 90s. They provided an artistic home base for an entire wave of young artists.

overnight like they're waiting for Springsteen tickets, people holding places in line for their friends, all this weird shit, which made me think: 'Why make it competitive, when everybody gains from this?'"

His questioning led to a light-bulb moment at the start of his second year, when he was given one of the new Edythe and Eli Broad Studios.

"I walked in there and thought, 'Jeez, this is so much like a gallery. Why move my stuff in there and turn it into a factory? That's going the wrong direction.'"

So Muller learned how to get working time in the super shop at school, moved all his materials to his house, and put up a notice: "Hey, sign up for shows at my studio." But now a new obstacle arose: Because everyone was conditioned to think of gallery shows as one-week events, that's what students signed up for. Muller had merely turned his studio into CalArts' sixth gallery.

"So then I put up another notice that said, 'There will be one-day shows, here's the signup sheet.' I made posters, put them around campus, and everybody got excited."

The one-day shows took off. Like a master DJ, Muller spun as many variations on that idea as he could. At one point, he did 24 one-hour shows, one after another. People began coming by every week as the buzz built. No one wanted to miss the next one.

"These one-day shows sort of let people blow off artistic steam somehow," Muller says, "and I'd get to see the side stuff they were doing while working on their thesis show. A lot of times, I was more interested in the side projects than the 'serious' things people were doing."

### THREE DAY WEEKENDS

Muller can trace a direct line from those one-day shows to the idea for his *Three Day Weekend* shows, which began within a year after he graduated.

"I had moved downtown to a big loft that was 1,800 square feet, and it took me a while to figure out what I was going to do next. The *Three Day Weekend* popped into my head. Here's a way to show lots of artwork over a long weekend. I like being spontaneous, and this idea piggybacked on the enthusiasm people had for holiday weekends in general."



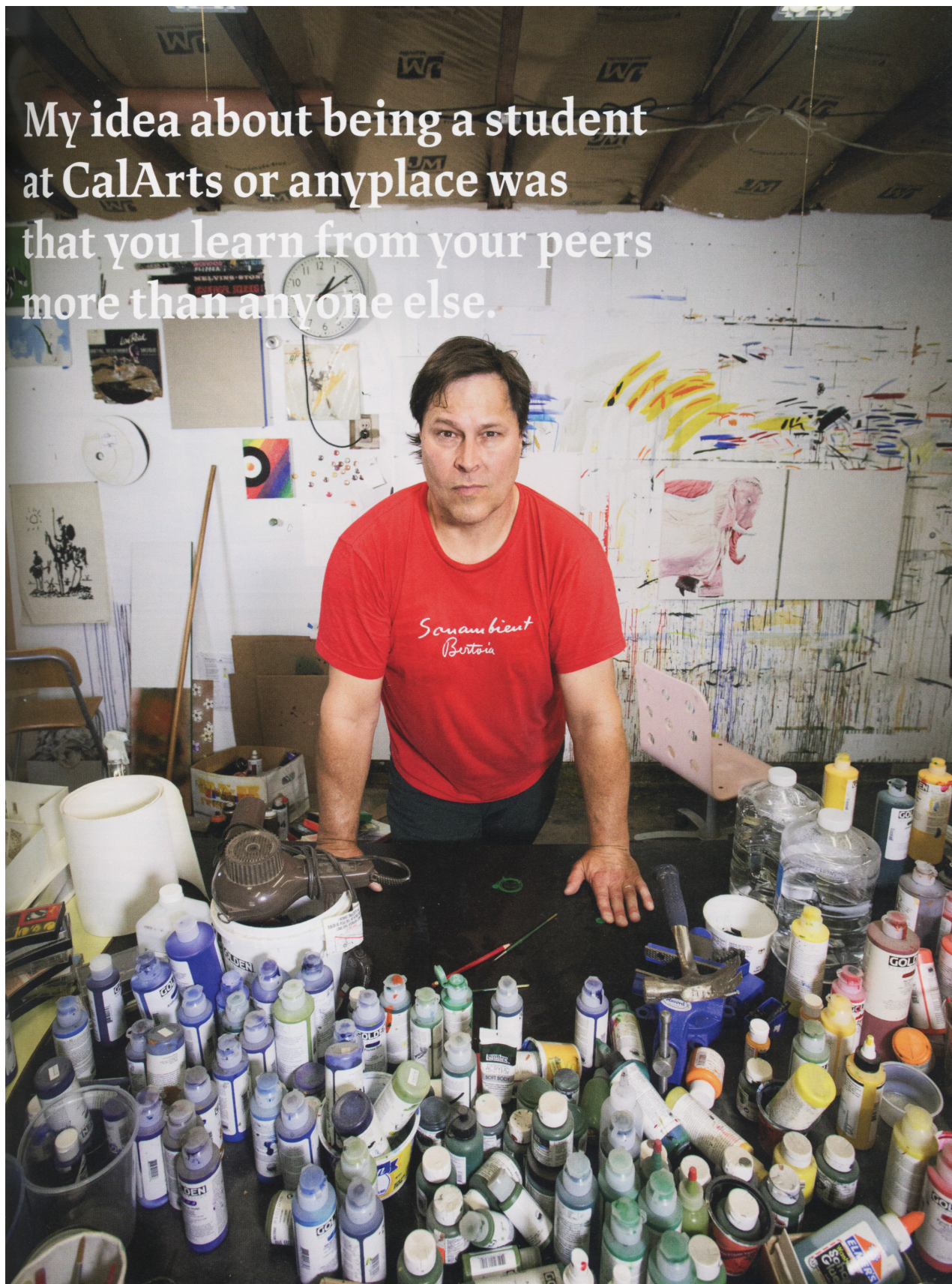
Muller's *Three Day Weekend* had a glorious run from 1994 to 2004, though he continues to revisit the tradition on special occasions. The shows were usually held at the downtown loft Muller shared with fellow CalArtian Alex Slade, who now teaches at Otis College of Art and Design. But they were also nomadic and could pop up anywhere. While traveling in his job as an assistant for artist Mike Kelley, Muller would tote a suitcase full of his friends' work and mount a quick show wherever he was. Muller advertised the shows with his trademark handmade posters and reached out to the whole Muller Rolodex file of CalArts grads and friends—which was a pretty substantial family back in 1994, when the Los Angeles art scene was scrappy and wide-open and coming out of an economic downturn. CalArtians would gather together to contribute work and, yes, party.

Over the three days, Muller was an ever-present host, often DJ'ing with several turntables and boxes of records. It was like a happy hurricane of art, and right in the windless eye of the storm was Dave Muller—calm, generous, spinning discs, and greeting everyone. *Three Day Weekend* events provided a lifeline and artistic home base for an entire wave of young artists graduating in that era from CalArts, ArtCenter, and Otis, and it had a meaningful impact on the Los Angeles art community.

"Dave could really bring people together," says Sharon Lockhart. "Those events included people from all different parts of the L.A. art world." Her then-partner, now-husband Alex Slade found them critical to his own post-graduation career: "The first few years after I had left CalArts, those were the only shows where anyone was able to see my work. *Three Day Weekend* really did affect my generation of artists."

"These shows helped develop and intensify a growing idea that Los Angeles might grow into something interesting," recalls Tom Lawson, Dean of the School of Art. "The art scene at that point still felt very minor, and these events, by bringing a lot of different people and different art together in a social way, went a long way towards making it seem likely that Los Angeles could be more than that."







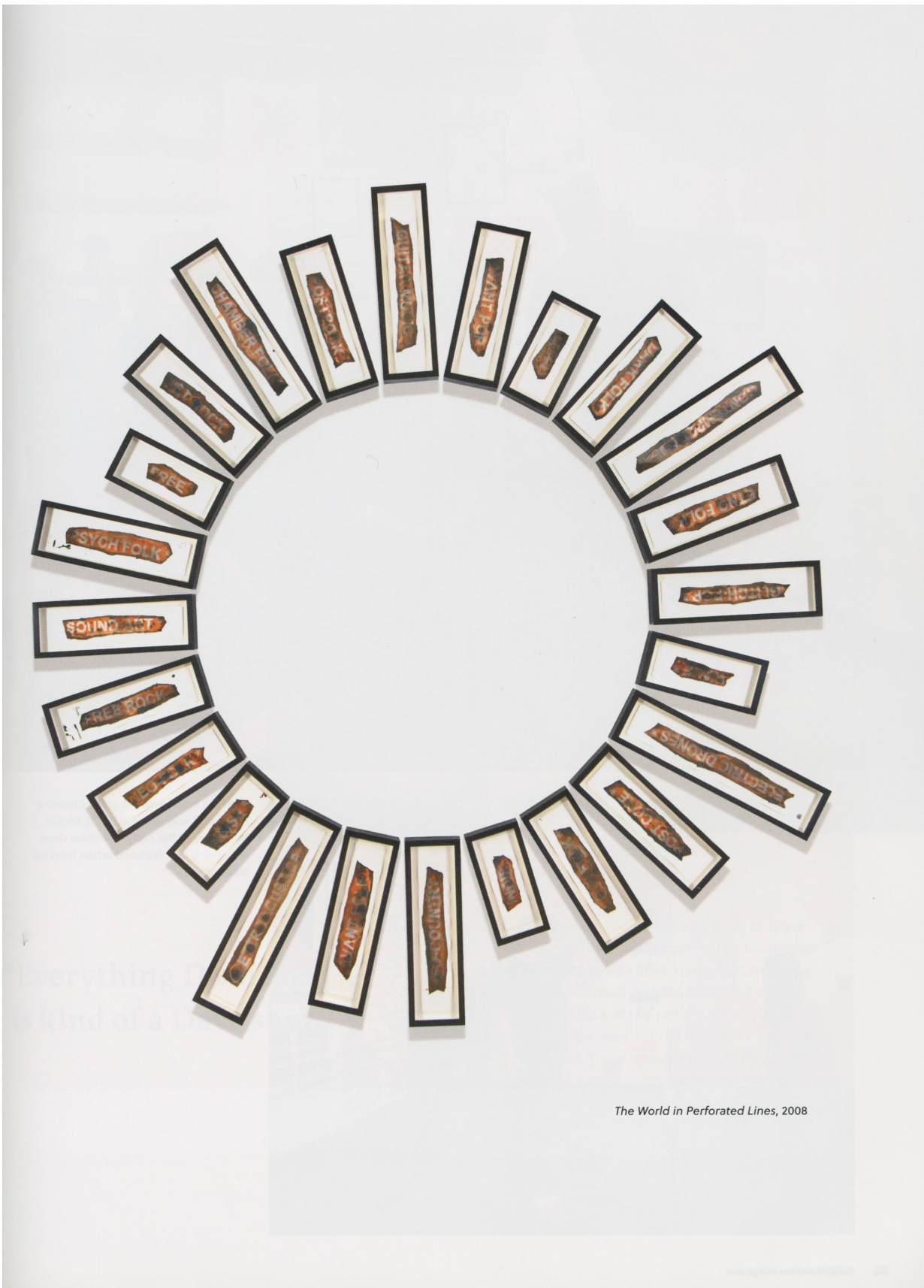


Dave's Top Ten (Week of December 15, 2003), 2004



Mullerpile, Sept. '03, 2004









With the help of recent grads Christina Niazian '17 and Julie Cabral '17, Muller put together the *Archive Archive* show last spring that featured artists from his student days.



The poster for the *Archive Archive* show is one of the many colorful art pieces and artifacts that line Muller's studio.



**"Everything Dave does is kind of a Dave show."**

#### HISTORY REPEATS

Muller's innovative approach received a fresh re-appreciation last May, thanks to the interest of two fourth-year Photography and Media BFA students, Julie Cabral and Christina Niazian, who had decided at the end of their second year to team up and request a larger studio in order to...yep, you guessed it, they wanted to turn it into a gallery. They were interested in seeing more work from their peers, trying their hand at curating, and increasing opportunities for collaboration with both BFA and MFA students. When they went to their faculty mentors to explain what they were interested in doing—first, to Andy Freeman and second, to Sharon Lockhart, both of whom have known Dave since his first year at CalArts—Freeman and Lockhart each said, "Do you know Dave Muller?!"





In his living room, Muller keeps a steady beat in front of his painting of Mike Kelley's drum set.

Niazian and Cabral eventually teamed up with Muller to do an independent study project and organize the *Archive Archive* show in Studio A-403. The show featured hand-drawn renderings of posters from the CalArts archives and material from Muller's personal archives—thus, the double title—and focused on the collaborative community of CalArts, such as Muller's one-day shows. Cabral and Niazian also included a section on the *Three Day Weekend* and Muller's post-CalArts work, and Muller gave a gallery talk to accompany the exhibition.

Now their fruitful collaboration has led to a second project—Muller was asked by the Institute to prepare the School of Art's portion of the inauguration celebration

for incoming president Ravi Rajan, so Muller asked Cabral and Niazian if they would like to help. They did, of course, and all three knew just how they wanted to organize it: Make it wide open and invite every single student to contribute. The *Three Day Weekend* still lives.