Interview with Fowler Hart and Tyler Godsey
Hum 2504: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite, Fall 2010

Occupation – Publisher and Editor of 16 Blocks Magazine
Time and Place: 11 October 2010, 704 Airport Road, Blacksburg, VA 24060
Interviewer: Cotter Spratley, IDST Major from Manassas City, Virginia

CS = Cotter Spratley
HF = Hart Fowler
TG = Tyler Godsey
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CS: Okay First question; would you guys mind telling me your name and if you don’t mind your age?
HF: Hart Fowler, 32
TG: My name is Tyler Godsey and I am 29.

CS: All right, so each of you, what is your job title? The name of the organization you work for, and how long you’ve been working there.

HF: I am a publisher and editor of 16 Blocks Magazine umm, I founded the magazine three years ago as my length of time with the organization but the new organization, 16 Blocks: Creative Labs is following 16 Blocks Magazine, growing on it. We just established that last week.

CS: Okay

TG: My name is Tyler and I am the General Manager/Creative Director of 16 Blocks: Creative Labs. We’ve been working/talking with the magazine since its infancy. Working in Blacksburg and running another store. Hart and I stayed in contact over the years and the opportunity became available for us to work more cohesively and uh, we came up with a good agreement and felt like we had a good vision of what we wanted to do and pulled it together.

CS: So how do you think your collaboration would benefit the magazine and what you guys are trying to do?

TG: Well the idea of the magazine really evolved around just finding a platform for an individuals to be able to promote their art, their writing, their thoughts and we saw [that] in the area there was a huge gap between people who were creating all the time and there was no where for them to express it outside of the main studio or a small art class that they were in or just anywhere so we decided that that would be a great way start a magazine. When we first started this was really just to bring together some of the underground artists that didn’t really have a say, didn’t really have a place to express themselves and they did it. They did real well for a long time.
HF: The reason for the partnership as well was our expansion regionally, specifically in Roanoke. Tyler lives there and I have lived there for a while too and [CAN'T UNDERSTAND NAME] as well. The 16 Blocks are still at home, very much so here in Blacksburg. We are happy to say we expanded regionally, recently, in a nice way. That was one of the reasons we created this partnership.

TG: I think the reason of Southwest Virginia in general they uhh, the area they have always tried to connect with each other but there was never really a common thread to pull people together especially the creative class that’s here, young and old. Growing up we were always trying to get in touch with Blacksburg and Blacksburg was always trying to get in touch with Roanoke and Floyd and Christiansburg and Lynchburg and Bedford. There’s a real regional resolve to kind of bring the community together and I think they way they will grow together over the next 20 years will be through out young, creative class and that’s really what we are trying to be right here. A platform for that young creative class to go forward.

CS: Okay cause that’s definitely something I realized coming to school here, coming from Northern Virginia I would have never really expected to find an arts community in this area, and that’s just me being naive but I think your guys are defiantly doing a good job at making it apparent to people because its really easy for it to be overlooked by people, just arts in general.

CS: Can you guys tell me a little bit more about your family background, where did you grow up?

HF: I grew up in Radford, that’s where I was born. My family has lived in this area for as long as we go. I came here to Blacksburg to go to Virginia Tech and I studied communications and English here. Speaking of family, my mom really turned me on to art at a young age, very much so. I was always aware of writing and uhh fiction and great novels and poetry but coming to the visual arts and painting and film, was something that happened later in life and I was mainly encouraged by my mom who was an art major here at Virginia Tech. As a young kid seeing her paintings on the wall, having nice paintings on the wall was something that informed me. I am not a painter but I appreciate the work that I like and I feel like I had an amateur vocabulary as a kid, I don’t know if amateur is the right word but family-wise mom gave me the art sense.

TG: Can you repeat the question?

CS: It was your family background so just a little bit about where you grew up and what it was like.

TG: I grew up in Roanoke and was born in Lynchburg. I had a great family, good size. Two sisters, one brother and I’m right there in the middle. I have two other stepsisters that are younger than me. In relation to growing up around the arts; my mom was always very active when we were real, real little she had a pottery and ceramic class that she taught in our basement and my brother and I would go and throw clay around and make all these ugly looking little sculptures and she would
fire them for us and they would look so cute to her but they were really, really bad. [giggles] Just clay mashed together. We have always had a sort of like a respect, appreciation and love for the ability for people to create and we all create in different ways. I think my family has always done a very good job of trying to figure out how we can push each other to create in our own ways. Some of us through art, some of us through business, others through family but we all have the power to create something unique and beautiful. I think everyone in my family sort of lived through that.

CS: So can each of you describe your job and what role each of you play with the magazine?

HF: I could lead this one off Tyler.

TG: Lead it off.

HF: I would like to say first that I couldn't be more happy. Four issues after bringing Tyler in to our current level of work, we just came of a nice little marathon session for the new issue that just dropped a couple days ago. Role wise, I am also happy to say that content generation, “story ideas” so to speak, we are sharing that in a nice way. There is really no trouble, or not trouble, we don't have to look for stories, they're there. We actually have to shelve stories to come around because we have too many story ideas.

TG: We have great content on the line and we always are struggling to figure out what the best one to go with is.

HF: Content generation is one of the things we're sharing as well. Man, Tyler has really brought in some nice illustrators, Phillip Nolan specifically. So the actual content generation or the making of the magazine, the words, the pictures, the photographs and drawings and paintings has been shared in a nice new way. I handle the editing of the writers coming in, that's what I am trained in as well, my title as Editor and Chief is that I handle the drafts from what I am happy to say, 20 new writers this issue. They are not all new but we do have 20 writers in this issue. So handling that, the writing and the shape is one of my roles. And also one of the main occupations of the magazine is advertising. We have such an awesome demographic in town of 20 to 45 year olds. Were really the place to be with sales it's almost like, we aren't selling anything. We really fit our age group. I don't really know if I am saying that correctly.

TG: I think in general, Hart and I have had a unique partnership since before we officially become partners. It was always about helping each other to get where the other person wanted to be. That's the key role that both of us played with each other. We both know where we want to be, not just one month from now but one year from now and three years from now and we both know that we wanna help each other get to where we wanna be. So whatever role we can fill in the partnership to make that happen is what we are gonna do. In regards to the specific relation to some of the jobs that I do for the magazine: I handle all the graphic
design, not necessarily all the artwork that’s created but I do all the layout, all the graphic design in general comes in through me. Hart probably carries a lot of the business support here in Blacksburg on it’s shoulders and have a growing base in regional partners that we work with that help us out on that end. Hart does a really good job of working with 16 Blocks Presents, putting together events. We’ve really been counting on Hart to bring in some of resources we have had in the past three years of the magazine. We worked with so many great writers over the years and we haven’t had a chance to stay in touch with them like we wanted to. Some of them for reasons we just don’t know but we really feel like we really want to get back in touch with all the people that we have worked with over the years. But first just to say thank you for helping make where we are. Secondly, finally just re-instigate the creation of the crews that we brought together. We have had these people we have worked with over the years and for whatever reason lost touch with. We really value everybody we worked with and we really value all the efforts people have put in and the best thing we can continue to do, or what I can continue to do is help do whatever I can with the magazine with the company to give people platforms to [inaudible] sometimes you don’t have a platform. Not everyone has a studio, not everyone has a bankroll. We are all just making it work, some people just make off for the love of it but not everyone has a platform and that’s what we are trying to get to.

HF: Man, that’s a long-winded response. But I got something to add to that and I am curious about what you had to say next Cotter. Tyler really hit a lot of things there. I would say he is being humble about his graphic design work. He doesn’t pride himself so much on it and he feels like he is new to it but he’s not and he had experience in the field before and he was umm, four issues later and was handling the entire layout and graphic design which is the look of the magazine including the cover. The entire look has come through like a champ from the beginning. He also has publishing experience in the past and that is very defining roles here, he’s really humble about it.

TG: Cotter man, we have goals and whatever we can do to reach those goals is what we do.

CS: Yeah, what I was gonna say, what you were talking about collaboration and I never really appreciated that about art. I am not coming up from such a big art background, what I was telling you was more about architecture. As I got into art it was really a solo thing and I didn’t realize how hard it is to get that together and have a spot where you can have 10 or 15, maybe 20 different people together to make art. I never really thought about it.

TG: There is never a way t possibly give a platform to everybody but the gentleman that was in this current issue, Dale Gorsky. He is over 50 years old and the guy has been creating art his entire life. He had never, ever in his entire life had never had anyone look at his work as art because to him it was only a hobby. With that kind of guy that has been doing it his entire life and all he needed was a platform, which rejuvenated him as an artist. That’s the most important thing because he was still
creating this beautiful work but he figured, "you know what, this is awful". We had another one, Danny Phillips has been rejuvenated as an artist because he was able to be put in a creative thought process by thinking about different projects he can do whether it be with the downtown mural project that we are happily working with the city of Blacksburg or whether it be with his monthly mazes he does or his other artwork. Its all about renewing that self of creativity and it doesn’t mean you have to be making Pablo Picasso pieces to sell for tens of thousands of dollars. It just means you need to find within yourself a creative edge that gives you that unique, glowing feeling that everybody needs to have.

HF: To add to that with Dale Gorsky and Danny Phillips is that we met Dale at the Danny Phillips show that we had a couple weeks ago at the Sweephouse Gallery another one night only and by appointment. Danny Phillips invited Dale, an artist he met in Snowville, we kind of visited him one time I believe. I think he might know him from somewhere else but the night of the show Dale showed up. He’s not only a great painter but a fine photographer as well so that’s where the introduction happened, at the event presenting of Danny. Then Danny said that Dale had some good photos and he should send them in. An introduction happened there, Dale sent his photos in and they blew us out of the water. I mean it was like, one of those, it was a find. We are so happy to be exhibiting it in photographic form in a magazine.

TG: It was a hobby to him and its stuck in a box and if there was any idea. We are always talking about creating more art and everybody goes like, “that’s not pushing the envelope” but thing about how much art that has never been seen by anybody. It’s stored away in somebody’s box that is thrown away in their own house and it dwarfs the size of the physical art that people even recognize, much less seen. It blows me away, how many people out there just don’t let anyone know, its like a diary or a secret that somebody has one day and you just pop out and your like, “wow I had no idea you were such a good writer”, “ I had no idea you were that good of a painter” or, “I had not idea any of this about you because I looked at your, I talked to you and I thought I knew you and there’s another side of you”, and its all about perspective. Cause we all have another side that needs to come out.

CS: These are some great responses so far. Its definitely good and its another thing I was thinking about recently when I was getting in touch with you to this interview I was on the website and I saw the documentary about the graffiti show and I went back and watched it and watching everybody’s interviews again and listening to what everyone was saying was something I didn’t appreciate that was happening at the time cause it was the first thing I had done like that so it was all kind of new to me but now after really pursuing art for the past 12 months I have really appreciated the opportunity to do that and that kind of event while it was happening while I was still here at school, just the difficulty and passion it takes to do something like. The reward and the work often don’t match up depending on how things come out.

CS: What would you guys say is the most rewarding part of your job?
TG: Not the pay, definitely not the pay.

HF: There really is daily rewards I gotta say. That shoebox coming out of the attic kind of story, that Tyler said earlier about discovering artists so to speak or artists waiting for an opportunity to arise which sometimes happens as the editor pays attention to your work and you run it. You know. It’s such a platform for it. So a daily reward is that we have a story idea that we can deliver in a way that we want, we get, I’m not saying this in the way I mean to. Someone submits an inquiry about writing with us is a true pleasure to see how many people come out of the woodwork sometimes.

TG: The reward is finding undiscovered talent. To me, I think with each issue, the issue is kind of like an economy. You know, it ebbs and it flows, and it rises and it falls. Those are the kind of things I get excited about. Like this issue right here, issue 26 I was super pumped on the cover. I just couldn’t wait to see the cover. I sat there and looked at it on a computer for about 25 days and just looked at it and looked at it and looked at it. I couldn’t wait to see it in print for the first time and when it comes out in print, the first time we see it in print and then you’re like so pumped, the first people you give it to, that’s like the giddy feeling that’s on the inside. Like, damn look at this, I got this cool thing and they may not be so cool on it as you are, but you’re so pumped on it.

CS: What does it mean to you guys to be a free magazine?

TG: Wouldn’t have it any other way. It goes against all the grain of thought that we talk about because if we were to promote you know all the fine artists you know and we were paying them to be in the magazine and stuff and you know all of a sudden it changes the dynamic of what we’re trying to do. We believe that there’s enough artists out there that are searching for something, just something, just a megaphone to release themselves out into the world. And in our world, in today’s generation, the day of free content, I mean, do you know how many people are dying to write a blog and its people that still haven’t written a blog but are dying to write a blog because they want to create, they want to do it, and they’re going to do it for free. We’re not asking people to do it for free, we’re just asking them to find a way to create and promote the region, the overall southwest Virginia as an artistic hub because it doesn’t have a good brand from a national standpoint Southwest Virginia and Virginia in general has a beautiful art brand but it doesn’t quite have what we think it should and it doesn’t have enough respect for all the underground artists that haven’t had a chance to reach out and to show themselves to the world and that’s what we’re trying to change.

HF: One of the things that’s misunderstood about magazines is that the cover price mainly handles distribution for the bigger magazines like Juxtapoz or Rolling Stone or Esquire. The free model is not something we created at all, it’s inspired by the Hoke up in Charlottesville. The C-Ville weekly, The Brick up in Richmond, Creative Loafing is a great example and its basically called a city mag kind of model. We have
never until 16 Blocks, Blacksburg deserves one and we provide that so the free model is nothing new.

TG: It’s the only way it would have been done.

CS: In class we’ve been talking a lot about the American dream, so what do you think of the American dream and then what do you think about it as it relates to what you’re doing?

HF: Who goes first?

TG: We both have one minute and thirty seconds.

HF: I believe in the American dream. I am a patriot and I really disbelieve what the TV guides tell me listening to John Stewart gives me peace. I am an old pressman so I enjoy listening to journalists that don’t have an agenda, that actually means something and don’t bark at me. So, I feel like as the magazine grows we’re going to have a stronger take on politics. We’ve really evolved a lot from our beginning to where we can be an authority, or a forum I would say for discussing what’s going on. It means more whether Rick Boucher or Morgan Griffith wins than does the president sometimes. It means more whether Wal-Mart is put here and there is a vote that happens than what happens on the national scene. That’s one of the, me being a journalist by trade makes me so happy. Ben Franklin, if he was sitting on this truck bed with me would smile about what we’re doing and have opinions on it. Speaking of the American dream, running an Edgar Alan Poe short story for the issue that came out yesterday. That’s American as it can be. He’s an American writer. I believe in America, and it’s a hard time too.

TG: The American dream. To me, the most important thing in my life is my family and one of the beautiful things about the American dream is it gives us the ability to go out there and do what we have to to provide for our family and in a lot of places you don’t always have that ability. I have the ability here because of all that America stood for and all that America has fought for to come out and put out a free magazine, say whatever the hell we want to say, do whatever we want to, work with whoever we want to pretty much, find a way to make a living doing it and support my family and the American dream gives that right to me. Tomorrow I can stop doing that and I can go and flip hamburgers at McDonalds because the American dream affords me that right. I can also stop and decide that I’m going to go write a novel or go and run for president whatever it may be. But I have the ability at any given moment in this life to go and do whatever I want to do, and do it damn well, and put my ass on the line for it. You can do whatever you want, however you want, whenever you want and make it work.

CS: How do you feel that the Internet has affected your business?

TG: I think that many people desire authenticity these days, and authenticity is hard to come through when you have thousands of writers who are writing, and granted, it’s also easy to find. Authenticity is really what people are looking for in whatever
With the rise of the Internet someone once told me that there were two completely different forms of media, the magazine and the Internet. With a magazine you sit down in your chair, sit back, and you lean back and you read the magazine page by page. With the Internet you’re sitting in your chair, and it is the only media that you take in leaning forward. So you’re leaning forward in your chair you’re taking in you’re rolling around on your mouse typing on your keyboard the interactivity going on between you and your computer screen is completely different than what you get with a newspaper, even a television or a book. Its two different types of psychological things happening. There’s definitely some tangible benefits to online media, and we will fully explore every opportunity available in the online world without any doubt, that’s ultimately where everything will go. The value of our traditions, whether it be the tradition of a man holding a door open for a woman when he goes into a restaurant or the tradition of having a print magazine in the newspaper out in your hand, or the tradition of being able to write a letter to somebody or the tradition of anything for that matter, of asking a father for his daughters hand, these are all traditional values that will never go away. Paper, print, never gonna go away. They might be completely obsolete, but it’s a traditional value that creates a different emotional impact than anything on the Internet but not to say that it is any more powerful or less powerful.

HF: One of the things I would like to say about the Internet as well is that the new reporter is not manned with a notepad anymore. You’re a shooter, you’re a photographer, you’re a videographer as well. That’s one of the ways that journalism has changed. It’s not devaluing print because doing a q&a on video does not correlate to a writer writing about the scene that he’s around at all. One of the beauties of journalism is you put your time in the hands of a writer who will take you through a story. Just putting a microphone and video and talking to someone in a q&a form which would be a web presentation of an interview is different from a print presentation of an interview. I guess it’s the coupling of the two is where its really at right now. If you drop the free magazine in the bath when you’re reading on a Sunday morning you just throw it out and get a new one the next day. If you drop your kindle and the bath while you’re sitting there you just lost a thousand dollars and nearly electrocuted yourself. You don’t have to charge up a magazine. You don’t have to worry about battery power. We can do better things with photographs and layouts as well.

CS: Where do you guys see yourselves in 5-10 years and where do you want to go with the magazine and your impact?

TG: Ultimately what we want to be, we want to be a magazine that’s not a magazine anymore. We want to be a creative labs and really just embodying the mission of creating a platform for anyone who needs a place to produce or create. And that’s just the basic mission. And we want to do that through the bulk of what we first started, which is our magazine. The second area is through our 16 blocks studios and the third area we’ll do that is through the online media. And through those three mediums we are going to grow places and platforms and try to find ways to
take the artists that have been working in their house for 45 years and have boxes of art that they've never shown anybody and give them a place just to put it.

HF: Or the young up and coming artist that doesn't fit into a university model or they don't know how to get started in art. This platform that we offer is a voice, it's not a voice for the underdog entirely because we work with over dogs quite a lot too. They have no other platform currently, and arts has been a little bit overwhelmed with too many people that are looking for their voice I think and there's no way to display.

TG: There really isn't enough room in the world to show all the art and we're not out there to spotlight the people that are already have the light shining down on them and have the world at their fingerprints. We're out there trying to find the people that need a break, that need someone to just give them a platform, that need somebody to just say this is something I've done this is something I think. Even if we might not necessarily feel the emotion that they feel from it, we know that a certain number of people out there will feel that emotion and that means more to us than anything else. We want to make sure that somebody somewhere has the ability to express themselves because that really opens up peoples minds, that makes people feel good inside, it makes the world a better place. The creative labs is a general name that gives us the ability to be broad in our scope.

CS: What are some of the character traits that it takes to deal with some of the sacrifices and difficulties to do what you do?

TG: I think you have to be flexible but you have to be demanding. I don't ever want to go in and tell someone what to write or what to draw or what to do. I give them a basic, I use the analogy of lets think of this project like an amoeba. It has a defined boundary but it's constantly shifting and you can work from anywhere within that amoeba. It's not a straight box that you have to fall right in. The ability to be able to work with people and have a structure so you can say this is what I want but I'm giving you the creative freedom to do what you want to do but you gotta be able to tell them how to do it in a certain structure. That's a challenge to get people to follow that on the same sort of thought process. We are working with creative people and more often than not we don't try to assign them, go and write this, this, this, and this. We say, this is something cool going on this is sort of an angle we can look at it from, tell us what you think you can do with it.

HF: I would say, don't be an editor unless you're a writer. If you aspire to be an editor in chief or a publisher please love writing first unless you're a businessman that just wants to acquire things because you're not an editor without knowing how to write. Knowing how to write that 500-word piece that's a knockout piece that's not just a facts man either. Being able to do that is an invaluable, whether you're printing on web or printing in print. That's kind of a nuts and bolts thing, you don't teach a short stop to hit home runs before he can field a ground ball or so to speak.
TG: I think another key is that you need to be extremely concerned about how well you follow up with the people you work with. We go back and we talk with all the people we've worked with through the years and had great relationships with all of them. We just haven't had time to carry on those relationships. I mean look at the list of people that have worked with the magazines. Dozens and dozens of the most beautiful writers, most talented graphic artists, worked with all of them, but our inability to stay in touch or follow up or to make people know that the work we all do with each other how much you appreciate everything they do or everything they have done and even thank them for the things that they might do down the road. That's one of the crucial elements that will help in this business.

CS: Are there any last words before we wrap the interview up?

TG: I’d like to say that I couldn’t be more excited for the direction that Hart and I are headed in. I feel like everyday we wake up and we take a strong step forward and he and I both have a vision and a plan for getting to where we want to get and I think that overall we’ve done a great job in the past 6 months putting together some great magazines and I think we have a lot more work to do.

HF: Starting creative labs was a very big deal, and it signifies what has been done in the past three years and where we’re going in the future. 16 blocks presents, 16 blocks apparel, 16 blocks studios, has been like, a lot of work in progress and we’re ready to roll forward with a lot of things. Teaming up on the other hand. This man’s graphic design work is beautiful and means everything. It’s not a business partnership as much as it is a creative partnership. It’s where it should be. We both have our eyes on the business and that’s how we spend a lot of our conversations but creative, he represents creative as much as he does business so that kind of partnership is perfect for the magazine for where its at right now. Business is creative. Art and commerce go together. DaVinci wouldn’t have painted it if the Pope didn’t give him the money to.