Something inevitably goes wrong in the stories Jonn Herschend tells. His “site-specific fictions,” created in various media, often begin with a relatively straightforward account of a real-life scenario. Slowly, signs begin to appear that things aren’t going according to plan, and the entire narrative is eventually derailed by fictional chaos. With deadpan humor, his work speaks to the poetics of failure and the ambiguity inherent to life.

Herschend frequently plays the unreliable narrator in his performance-based lectures and the short films he directs. Blow Up (2011), for example, seems to follow the standard artist-at-work documentary format until the director’s personal agenda takes over. Artist Tucker Nichols and his gallerist are seen producing wallpaper enlargements of watercolors for an upcoming exhibition. During interviews with them, Herschend introduces the idea of代理 things being blown out of proportion in everyday life. He cites a recent conflict with a coworker about whether he returned a book she had loaned him. In a comic twist, he pulls Nichols into the petty dispute, tasking him with going over to the coworker’s house to look for the book to prove the narrator’s trustworthiness. The book in question, Don Quixote, is a logical reference point, with “its framework of revealing the structure of its plot through tangents and interventions, all of which forces the reader to constantly renegotiate his or her role,” Herschend explains.

Filmed on location at SFMOMA in the weeks prior to the building’s closure in June 2013, Herschend’s SFMOMA commission, Stories from the Evacuation (2013), addresses three facets of the museum’s transition: the art move, the office move, and the electronic information move. The artist interviewed several of the key staff involved with this undertaking, which included the high-stress transplant of the museum server and the orchestration of moving several outdoor sculptures by crane from the Rooftop Garden. Herschend’s improvisatory filming process encouraged staff to give their perspectives, logistical and personal, on the changes. Long-term employees also shared their recollections of SFMOMA’s first major architectural identity shift, in 1995, which had its accompanying growing pains and improvements.

Herschend has previously sought out the more mundane stories of museum life. In Nothing Happens for Long (2011), an online film project commissioned by the Oakland Museum of California’s The Oakland Standard (2011-12), four subjects share amusing anecdotes about the museum visitor experience. One person describes feeling compelled to take home a table centerpiece—a fighter fish that must live alone in its bowl—left over from a friend’s wedding at the museum. Another recounts overhearing schoolgirls remark that a figurative sculpture has “Justin Bieber hair.” The museum building becomes a stage set for actors reinterpreting these moments, as the idea that “nothing happens” runs counter to the typical promotional messaging of a museum as a magnet and hub of activity.

For Herschend, who has borrowed from the aesthetics and language of corporate office culture in his work, the situation at SFMOMA offered an opportunity to consider the institution at a moment of “organized chaos” and to use it as a starting point for a larger narrative and investigation of personal transition and risk. While his previous films and installations have often adopted the delivery modes of PowerPoint presentations and informational videos, he approached this production differently, using a more layered tone and contemplative pace. Presented within the context of an exhibition outside of the gallery space, Stories from the Evacuation is “uncomfortably on-site and off-site.” Among the first online video artworks SFMOMA has commissioned for its website, it coexists with the museum’s online framing of its transition and expansion plans, which has largely taken the form of promotional videos and social media stories. Such material reflects many museums’ move toward institutional transparency, as they cultivate a more inviting identity by offering behind-the-scenes images.

The film employs the public-facing vehicle of the museum website to convey a narrative that culminates in a tangle of fraught communication. Interspersed throughout the interviews are scenes featuring two fictional employees—a patient and a mid-level staff member—who discuss their relationship. The only person in the film, shot in the early 2010s, with whom Herschend’s improv style does not work is the female narrator, who speaks in a more layered tone and contemplative pace. Presented within the context of an exhibition outside of the gallery space, Stories from the Evacuation is “uncomfortably on-site and off-site.”

The love triangle or romantic affair (real or suspected) is a recurrent narrative device in several of Herschend’s works. These choreographed dramas often involve the social taboo of arguing in public as they reveal conflicting interpretations of particularly messy situations. Herschend’s We are not having any trouble in our department despite what you’ve heard (2011), installed without an artwork label as a “disorientation” video at the entrance to Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen, begins by introducing the history of the art space. The female guide soon becomes distracted, however, and angrily accuses the film’s English closed-caption translator of stealing her cat in order to win her back, a possibility he corroborates with his own replies.

For Herschend, all reality is rooted in confused narrative. His work questions our investment in emotional truth, from our search for the sublime in nature to the patterns of ended relationships, exploring how these things can motivate and escalate our actions. In Stories from the Evacuation, the protagonist must negotiate the repercussions of her collapsing work and personal lives and evaluate whether she should rebuild her long-term relationship or move out. The work thus weighs two forms of necessary change—the calculated versus the impulsive—as the successful team effort behind SFMOMA’s transition project is distilled into one individual’s personal crisis.

—Tanya Zimbardo
We are not having any trouble in our department despite what you’ve heard (video still), 2011. HD video, color, sound, 5 min. Courtesy the artist and Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco

Nothing Happens for Long (production photograph), 2011. Series of four films. HD video, color, sound, on The Oakland Standard (museumca.org/theoaklandstandard). Commissioned by the Oakland Museum of California with support from the James Irvine Foundation, courtesy Jonn Herschend and Andrew Leland
Jenny Gheith: You grew up in an amusement park, studied theater at Boston University, and then dropped out to study political science with Howard Zinn. You taught high school English and then went on to UC Berkeley to get your MFA. How do these experiences inform your work? 

Jonn Herschend: Growing up in an amusement park, I was constantly seeing the front and the back of the house. My grandfather bought a cave in the Ozarks and built a fake town for people waiting to go back and work in the park as a train robber, I wouldn’t tell anyone at school what I was doing. The irony is that this is where my current work comes from—this idea that you have one persona when you’re in the back of the house. You’re a robber waiting for the trains to come, hanging out with the other robber. The train shows up, and you rob it, and then you go back to the robbers’ shack to wait for the next train. Those two elements of performance stuck with me. It’s like a Samuel Beckett play. I’m interested in narrative: its structures and how they are used for entertainment and to provoke thought. Are we fiction or real? Are we playing a part, inventing a narrative of ourselves every day?

JG: You’ve used Don Quixote quite a bit. 

JH: I’m obsessed with Cervantes and Don Quixote. I love the structure of it: a narrator who says he’s not really the author but that he just found this translation. He fully removes himself. It’s fiction, but he’s not really the author but that he just found this piece about this transition and then figure out a way to make the piece that would make thematic sense with what’s happening.

JG: As more information came in from interviews or from things happening in the museum, you rewrote it, sometimes improvising as you went along.

JH: I didn’t want to force my story on it. In the past, I’ve written the whole thing, but everyone who worked on this, including the people interviewed, was a collaborator. Jennifer Stuckert, who plays Kelly, was involved from the beginning and eventually became a cowriter. You have to get through confusion in order to understand truth. We try to avoid it, but confusion creeps in. I like to plunge right into the messiness of it.

JG: What was your approach to the camera shots and pacing?

JH: I tried to highlight the space’s architecture, which is the reason everyone is leaving. It was a conscious effort to make the people look small, to center them and slowly come in tighter. Shawn Michienzi, the director of photography, and I were looking at Oleg Mutu, the Romanian cinematographer who shot My Joy (2010) and 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (2007). I’ve always been influenced by Béla Tarr, the Hungarian director, and by Gus Van Sant, who is influenced by Tarr in his later films. Their pacing is always slow and dramatic and convictive. I flirted with the pace, but I end up walking this fine line between beauty and a kind of apology. You know the shot where the origami is spinning?

JG: In the empty library.

JH: I could look at that all day, but it was a kind of apology. You know the shot where the origami is spinning?

JG: Because you’re used to throwing in that comic break.

JH: That’s a great formula.

JG: What choices are you making in the editing process?

JH: Part of this was about trying something a little more serious. I was careful to let the story reveal itself and to let the film guide me. I didn’t want to get in the way by filling the empty office spaces and galleries with a plot. I had a great director, Greg Janza, and composer, Silas Hite, who let the piece unfold. We all found these office landscapes beautiful and sad.

JG: How would you describe Stories from the Evacuation?

JH: I’d call it a film. It’s not only a documentary or a narrative film. It’s an interpretation of what I think might be going on in the backside of someone’s life.

JG: Has your relationship with the institution changed?

JH: No, I think it’s like discovering your parents having sex. Something like, “Oh, I didn’t want to see that! This is how it works?” [laughs] No, it’s not that bad.

You could sense some tension, but it was the way I thought it would be. These offices are involved in creating a dialogue that drives the way San Francisco thinks culturally and creatively. At some points people were very careful about what they were saying, but there was a lot of honesty. That was amazing, that everyone felt it was okay to say things like, “This sucks right now, but it’s gonna be awesome,” or “It’s so hard.” They seemed to really trust you.

JH: For that part of the filming, we were very earnest about capturing the sadness and excitement that goes along with this upheaval.

1. Hugo, Baptist’s Interview. In: his grandparents, Howard and Cewe; Brussels, Missouri, in 1960, and their family opened the adjacent theme park, Silver Dollar City, in 1965. It is now one of the most successful theme parks in the country.

2. Jenkins, Christopher. “Marie Antoinette: Harmony.” (2008) and Jonestown (2010) has particular influence. Of Van Sant, he says, “I like his strategy of taking these large-scale tragedies that are well known and using them as a framework for the camera and actors to explore.” Other directors the artist cites include Mike Krasnjovsky, for this way he “constantly reveals the structures of storytelling.” (Don Quixote, which he appreciated for his “long takes and the way e is not afraid to let the camera be poetic.”) Mike Mills (“I thought it was the best film I’ve seen in years,” I’m not ready, and Robert Munsch, “particularly Needful (1977) which is such a nice piece of film. I love how he defies confusion as a structure.”)