While in law school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I decided to pursue an MFA in sculpture at the same time. I needed an advocate in the art department who would supervise my ad hoc joint degree, and thankfully, I found Aris Georgiades, who eventually became the chair of my graduate committee. We met in his office, which was covered in a layer of sawdust and had a better collection of strange objects than the prop room for *Harry Potter* or “Sanford and Son.” Not only was Aris open to working with me, he understood my eclectic skill set as an opportunity. That summarizes his approach as an educator, artist, and person: see past the surface—the knee-jerk judgment—and find the possibilities, the usable material. I have seen him do this with materials by repurposing objects, building materials, and nature itself. He does the same thing with his students—he sees the potential. By dialoguing about ideas, exploring theory and practice, and embracing the intellectual joy and complexity of contemporary art, he has mentored some of the most interesting sculptors working today, including Michael Rea, Amanda Browder, Chris Walla, Stephanie Liner, Dave Beck, and Brian Murer.

Aris is an obvious choice to receive the International Sculpture Center’s 2014 Outstanding Educator Award. His work ethic, his commitment to educating artists as they begin their careers, his collaborative approach to professional training, and his blunt, no-BS attitude make him an example to aspire to.
Richard Holland: Your teaching style is less a formal “style” and more an act of leading by example. Your teacher-student relationships and expectations are similar to an apprentice and journeyman in the trades—lots of guidance and support, with an expectation of participatory interest. Is this a deliberate methodology, or are your history and personality shining through?

Aristotle Georgiades: No one ever taught me to teach. I assume that my history and personality are evident, but that is a scary thought. I always learn best through actual practice. On the most basic level, I teach skills and tricks for making things. Beyond that, I try to draw out the ideas that each individual has and to make students feel that they can make legitimate art. Ultimately, I think it is more about being a creative citizen than about becoming a “famous artist.” There are a lot of artists making great work, but we have never heard of them. And there are a lot of well-known artists making work that is not so great by any measure. I hope that students see this and are not kidding themselves about what being a visual artist is.

RH: I am interested in what you call “re-purposing” raw material for your work. In a universe where the Duchampian readymade has given way to a Koonsian reinterpretation of the same ideas, you have continued the conversation, making the examination of material reflective and, in some instances, even dissecting your own past work to create new objects.

AG: Maybe the repurposing notion comes from my parents, who were children of the Great Depression. I recall them reusing and repairing things that most
people wouldn’t even consider keeping these days. I also think about how much we waste now and how many products are throw-aways. For me, the reuse of obsolete objects and materials is a metaphor for how people become obsolete and our efforts to stay useful, and for how certain skills and abilities become devalued. I don’t think there is much of a link between these ideas and those of Duchamp or Koons. I really don’t want to overthink it. Being in academia, I often see students get completely paralyzed by overthinking rather than working through an idea or problem.

**RH:** Your relationship to materials seems to have something in common with Doris Salcedo’s *memento mori.* Do you look at your objects as being spiritual or political in nature?

**AG:** I believe there is an inherent beauty in materials. Is that spiritual? I do believe, though, that my use of obsolete objects or objects on the verge of obsolescence is political. Repurposing things in general can be seen as political—our culture has come to depend on the constant cycle of replacing old things with new ones, and rejecting that model is subversive to the economy—but I don’t see this as anything new or radical. It’s a way of working that artists have always employed.

**RH:** In addition to teaching a Bauhaus-style sculpture curriculum, with materials and tool use first, you were one of the first professors I encountered who included pragmatic professional advice in his classes. You taught a no-nonsense public art course that dealt with working within a public/political framework, handling contracts and contractors, and offered solid voice-of-experience advice. How do you see your role as an educator with regard to teaching professional practices?

**AG:** I am lucky to have a good teaching position with good colleagues. It was never my grand plan to enter academia, and I grew into it. I teach what I know, and I certainly teach a few things that I don’t do a good job of myself. I think that if I were really good at professional practice, I would be much more successful professionally. My “public domain” seminar is pretty different from the usual high-art notion of being an artist. Public art is more like architecture or design/build than the mysterious world of the gallery or museum. In many ways, it is also a more democratic process, and it certainly seems to be more a part of our economy.

Most commissions are necessarily very structured and must be completely planned ahead of time. I try to present all of the issues involved, from subcontracting fabrication to insurance and liability. For many students, this is the first time that they have considered these things. The image that has been presented to them in most of their art history classes has been of the famous artist in the museum world. Often times, I
see students who are much more suited for a career in public art or creative design/build. I want to open up the possibilities for students to see that there are many ways to be an artist and that they can develop a creative and successful life beyond the high-art world.

**RH:** In choosing materials, you deliberately take things that are old and re-form them, “salvaged from one life and given another.” When you start a series, what comes first: the plan for the final object or the materials you wish to use?

**AG:** Most of my recent sculptures are made of materials that I have collected from buildings built before the 1960s. Using these materials and obsolete objects in my sculpture brings to mind notions of our current human condition. Of course, there are some typical motivations underlying this work. Typical in that I am a “maker” who appreciates materials, and I notice the way the world around us is made. Materials and methods of manipulating them can and should carry and convey meaning. Visual artists know this, don’t they?

I should also add that I continue to believe in the power of objects. As an artist, I find it very challenging to create compelling objects in a world filled with objects whether we call them art or not. I am not really repurposing old work, although at times I do reuse materials from an old piece.

**RH:** Have you ever encountered negative reactions from viewers who feel that a beloved icon has been somehow defiled? I am thinking of the school-desk works in your 2011 show “Repurposed” or *Gift*, in which you took dozens of cut trees and bundled them into a cube tied with a bow.

**AG:** I have not heard that so far. When I salvage certain materials, people are surprised that anyone would want them. These things have generally been discarded, and I am trying to use them as part of a new thing, a different image that might refer back to the original object. In *Gift*, which was a project done at the Morton Arboretum outside Chicago as part of Actual Size Artworks (my collaborative team with Gail Simpson), we used cut pine trees that were being sent to the chipper. They were removed because
they had been planted in a way that was not sustainable. We were attracted to them, in part, because they were very consistent in size and color. This quality lent itself to the idea of a bundle or package, leading to the notion of a gift.

RH: You are one of the few artists I know who has pursued a solo gallery career in tandem with a career in public sculpture. How does that function in terms of ideas? Do you have one set of ideas for your work with Actual Size Artworks and another set for your own practice?

AG: The gallery work and the work I do with Actual Size are usually pretty separate, and sometimes they have different goals. Actual Size developed organically since Gail and I were partners working in shared studio space. The collaboration allows us to create primarily large-scale temporary and permanent public artworks. There are a lot of factors that we take into consideration during the process, not least of which is that it is going to exist in public space. Many artists can’t or won’t deal with the issues involved. We actually enjoy the aspect of commissioned work that involves a wide range of professionals outside of the art world. The whole thing makes me feel much more a part of our economy. It is inevitable, however, that some of what each of us does in the studio carries over into the public works: certain shared values, a sense of humor, and other considerations.

RH: What are the issues involved? Are you referring to procedural and planning issues or challenges inherent in making work to engage a popular audience? How do you see the role of art in public spaces?

AG: Certainly there are challenges and limitations in terms of subject matter and materials. If the work is funded by public dollars, there will be questions since community members feel a sense of ownership, as they should. I feel that art in public spaces is vital. There is a lot of public art that we may not like, just like there is a lot of work in museums or galleries that we may not like. But even the “bad” work creates a conversation. Chicago, like other great cities, has a history of public artworks that were despised at first by both critics and the public; only later were they embraced as iconic symbols. Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate, however, was popular and well-received from the beginning—it’s not just a large piece of compelling sculpture, it has also created a place where people of all sorts gather and interact. I’m sure it will be there for many generations.

RH: You are based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a major public research institution. Does being so far from Chicago or New York limit your link to the “contemporary art world”? How have you managed to promote your work from outside a major center of art commerce?

AG: Living outside of a major urban area makes it really difficult for visual artists to maintain any kind of career. I would not be in this area if it were not for this great job, which allows me a certain degree of freedom to pursue a career as a visual artist. I encourage our students to move to a major city as soon as they can when they finish school. I am terrible at promoting my work. In general, I believe that artists need to do a lot of things to maintain and build a practice. There are a number of artists who have developed a collector base or some type of funding source that allows them to focus solely on the work they want to do, when they want to do it. A long time ago, I heard an internationally known artist comment that she knew of no successful artist in New York who did not have a trust fund. She was completely serious. I am not part of that, for better or worse. New York is still the center of the art world, but most people who have been in the art business for any length of time know that there are good artists all over the place. Obviously, there isn’t a system to support them, so major urban areas become the places where artists can be noticed. Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, soon after being elected, was quoted as saying that he did not understand why they teach the humanities in higher education. I also understand that the governor of Florida is talking about raising tuition on students studying humanities since they do not contribute to the economy, which of course isn’t true. These are really tough battles to fight, don’t you think?

RH: Absolutely. Your focus on the economy of goods and the economic issues facing artists has come through in this discussion. Do those topics come into play in any of your forthcoming projects?

AG: I’m very excited about an upcoming project in Columbus, Ohio, with a group called Rooms to Let, where artists work in abandoned houses that are going to be torn down. And, in addition to a show next spring at the Indianapolis Art Center, Actual Size is working on a couple of public art proposals.

Richard Holland is an artist, attorney, and co-founder of the Bad at Sports blog and podcast.