



Introduction

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THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK, *I Stand in My Place with My Own Day Here*, is drawn from Walt Whitman's biographical poem "Starting from Paumanok," which introduces the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The phrase comes to us by way of the artist Glenn Ligon, who included it in his site-specific work *For Comrades and Lovers* (2015), a neon frieze wrapping the interior of the Event Café in The New School's University Center. Paumanok is the Native American name for Long Island, Whitman's birthplace. The direct translation of *Paumanok* is "land of tribute."

For Whitman, paying tribute meant implicitly acknowledging our collective histories, legacies that he sought to express through his use of the Algonquin name. The poet openly rebelled against the class hierarchies and social conformity that undergirded nineteenth-century American culture, even as he embraced that culture's entrepreneurialism and its privileging of newness. Whitman claimed license for his unique social and artistic vision by looking toward the future even as he sought to honor the past, and such paradoxes open in his work a great array of possibilities—many of which he could not have foreseen.

The same could be said for each of the artists whose site-specific works are the focus of this book: Thomas Hart Benton, José Clemente Orozco, Camilo Egas, Gonzalo Fonseca, Martin Puryear and Michael Van Valkenburgh, Dave Muller, Sol LeWitt, Kara Walker, Brian Tolle, Rita McBride, Alfredo Jaar, Glenn Ligon, and Agnes Denes. The thirteen works commissioned from these artists over nine decades represent storied episodes in the

remarkable life of an inspired, lively, contentious, and mutable happening called The New School.

For us, marking the university's centennial by paying tribute to these artworks likewise means acknowledging histories, invoking presence, and honoring space and place. We take Whitman's seemingly simple statement as a summing up of The New School's ethos—affirming the intrinsic right to freedom of expression and activating that freedom in an implicit call for social engagement.

In *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger* (2009), philosopher Byung-Chul Han speaks to a temporal crisis in human experience. He portrays a society in which many of us have lost our capacity to linger. Life has no fixed coordinates; we are transient, living in an ever-shrinking present shaped by a centrifugal phenomenon Han calls dyschronicity: "Time is running off because it cannot find an end or conclusion, because it is not restrained by any temporal gravitational forces. There are no longer any dams that regulate, articulate or give a rhythm to the flow of time. There are no dams to hold or halt time by giving it something to hold on to—'hold' in its exquisite double meaning."¹

The site-specific works in The New School Art Collection act as these dams, channeling the flow of a vast body of knowledge that shapes and informs who we are as an institution, as a community, as individuals—offering us *something to hold on to*. These works give rhythm to time past, even as they pull us gravitationally into the present. While each offers an entry point into the landscape of a specific historical moment, each

Auditorium at 66 West 12th Street, 2019.

also speaks to us across decades, serving as a sentinel and storyteller, a witness to the myriad individuals and communities that have passed through these spaces. Each work holds within it a regenerative capacity to invite engagement; each puts forth a call to embrace our varied inheritances.

In 1931, Alvin Johnson, the first New School president, set the school on a unique path by issuing invitations to Thomas Hart Benton, José Clemente Orozco, and Camilo Egas to create murals for a nascent institution whose mission was to stimulate new ways of thinking and learning. Johnson's challenge to each artist was to create a work of art that would resonate in a hundred years, and this established a blueprint for the university's aspirations in art, culture, and politics. Eighty-five years later, McKenzie Wark, professor of culture and media studies at Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts and The New School for Social Research, offered his own challenge in a convocation speech to an incoming class of students. Reflecting on The New School's twin legacies of intellectual liberty and political commitment, Wark told his audience:

The founders of The New School were not dogmatists. They had no program to impose on anyone. As one of our founders, James Harvey Robinson, put it, "I have no reforms to recommend, except the liberation of intelligence."... The aim of education is the liberation of intelligence—from dogma, prejudice, superstition, sophistry, slogans, fear mongering, naïveté, spin, trivia, pedantry, wishful thinking, and the rest. The aim of education is to negate the given, and in so doing, throw into sharp relief both what is right and what is wrong with the social order. Education is not outside of the incessant struggle to make the world. It is one of the essential moments of that struggle. The aim of education is to be a provocation to thought; the aim of thought is the renovation of the world.²

Robinson's recommendation for liberation and Wark's renovation of the world—like Johnson's lofty request to Benton, Orozco, and Egas—are tall orders for an institution to fulfill. In asking for a century (and more) of relevance, Johnson sought something that the artists could not have guaranteed. Yet they delivered exactly what he was looking for: microcosms of the world as they saw it in moments of inspiration. Their distinct visions, blends of their personal, artistic, cultural, and global histories,

left us with three sustaining works—three provocations for thought, three renovations of the world.

One could argue that creative agency and The New School became inseparable in that first era of the institution's life. But it was not until 1960 that this integration of art with the university manifested formally with the launching of the List Art Purchase Fund and, in the same year, The New School Art Center. Under the directorship of Paul Mocsanyi, the grant from Albert and Vera List established a purchasing program for contemporary works of art and an ambitious exhibition program introducing "noteworthy expressions" of art on an international scale to a Greenwich Village community in the throes of the Beat Generation.

The New School at that time had not formed a permanent collection; in an organization challenged by constraints on space and financial resources alike, any works acquired were meant to be returned eventually to the marketplace to facilitate additional purchases of art. By the early 1960s, however, expansions to the built space of the campus were creating new opportunities for place making. In 1961, Gonzalo Fonseca, who had been a student of Joaquín Torres-García, followed up on the contributions of Orozco and Egas by introducing into The New School yet another modernist idiom from the Global South when he created a large-scale mosaic for the lobby of the recently built extension at 66 West 12th Street (now Johnson/Kaplan Hall). Several decades later, New School Art Collection curator Kathleen Goncharov (who served from 1987 to 2000) realized *Vera List Courtyard*, a collaboration between artist Martin Puryear and landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, sited in the atrium and courtyard that conjoin the Johnson/Kaplan building with the Eugene Lang building at 65 West 11th Street.

Goncharov had inherited 200 works when Mocsanyi retired. Supported by the active patronage of Vera List and Agnes Gund, chair of the university art committee, Goncharov expanded the holdings to 1,100 works, transforming a grouping of objects into a formal body. The New School Art Collection, with a guiding mission, governing protocols, and a supportive advisory group, focused on acquiring works with a strong political bent by emerging and underrepresented artists—women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community.

Stefano Basilico, the next curator (2000–04), continued to grow the Collection to approximately

1,800 works. He added four new site-specific commissions, extending the muralist program founded by Alvin Johnson into the twenty-first century. A multipart work by Dave Muller was introduced into the 66 West 12th Street extension, and Sol LeWitt, Kara Walker, and Brian Tolle were commissioned to create site-specific pieces for the newly established Arnhold Hall at 55 West 13th Street.

During our own tenure as curators, we have presided over the selection and installation of site-specific projects by Rita McBride (2014), Alfredo Jaar (2014), Glenn Ligon (2015), and Agnes Denes (2016). How are decisions made in commissioning such works? Many competing considerations—political, aesthetic, intellectual, and financial—come into play and in the end no single force wins. Our experience has been collaborative both within our department and more broadly across the institution. We owe a debt of gratitude to all who have helped make these commissions possible, most notably the commissioned artists whose generosity and trust in the process have given rise to unexpected and beautiful results.

The New School Art Collection's lack of dedicated exhibition space has never deterred its growth. Rather, we as curators have foregrounded this dispersal as one of our distinguishing features. Now numbering approximately 2,500 works, the Collection is installed in public spaces across the campus in offices, corridors, and classrooms. Artworks are lived with, encountered unpretentiously and intimately by the school community on a daily basis. They are a presence, charged in their content and materiality. Deep acts of generosity have sustained the Collection, as stalwart supporters and wise counselors including List, Gund, Gabriella De Ferrari, and Beth Rudin DeWoody have championed it with conviction and creativity.

Nevertheless, there are times when this unique collection feels precarious, tangential, risking disappearance as it hides in plain sight. At the time of this writing, as movements like Black Lives Matter, Decolonize This Place, Me Too, and Time's Up have gained momentum across a fraught national terrain, students of color at The New School have demanded and received their own dedicated meeting and event space, and graduate students have occupied the dining hall, striking in solidarity with cafeteria workers for better wages and benefits.³ All are asserting their right to occupy, to stand in their place, to resist. It's another day at The New School—

another day experiencing the fully lived reality of an institution grappling with the complexities of an unsettled world.

In Agnes Denes's mural *Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & the People Paradox—The Predicament (PPPPPPP)* (1980/2016), thousands of figures forming a perfect pyramid stand quietly behind the students in the dining hall. Have the students read the wall text? we wonder. Denes dedicates the work to them. Has she, the artist, in some sense prefigured the agitations of our moment? Does her audience at The New School know about her many creative interventions into public space, her decades of committed activism? "Read the figures, they are you," she urges.

And in fact, such readings do regularly occur. Recently, a student read a set of figures in just this intimate way. An MFA Transdisciplinary Design class was taking place in the Orozco Room, and the presenter introduced himself as a first-generation Mexican American. Pointing to one of the mural panels, he announced, "These are my grandparents." The student's project—a pilot program for decolonized design-thinking workshops offered to day laborers in support of community mobilization—resonated uniquely in the setting. Distances collapsed, and the histories shared between student and artist were interwoven in a moment of connection and recognition. A new history began to unfold.⁴

One could argue that, ultimately, each of these works embodies a radical act—not of monument building but of community building. At their best, they serve as sanctuaries, engendering inclusivity, conviviality, and tolerance, offering moments of blessed pause. These installations invite the liberation of our thinking—within and outside ourselves, our tribes, our classrooms, and our boardrooms. They offer up a common ground, a space and place from which to assert, to occupy, to welcome, or simply to be.

Now, during The New School's centennial and at a critical moment in our nation's history, when competing political and cultural forces are vying to shift our focus away from Robinson's "liberations," can we continue to find such spaces of discovery? Vera List, the generative force behind The New School Art Collection, liked to say that art is a way for us to "become humans all." At its core, our collective project has been precisely this: a project for human liberation in all its messiness, contentiousness, and coming-together. And art—as a

self-sufficient medium that is also a vector for empathy, a methodology for building knowledge and culture, an agent of activism—has always been an elemental part of the university's pedagogy, an integral part of an overarching vision.

The essays that follow are a convocation of voices from a community at large. They embody,

in their capacious embrace of these site-specific works, the larger meaning of Byung-Chul Han's verb "to hold." Liberations and renovations of our world begin when the seeds of transformation are given ground on which to thrive. So, linger here. Stand in your place. Live your day.

1 Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger* (2009), trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 2.

2 McKenzie Wark, "The Aims of Education" (New York, NY, September 2, 2010), <https://intertheory.org/wark.htm> (accessed May 31, 2019).

3 The student strike was one of a series of actions that resulted in a landmark first contract with SENS-UAW, the union representing academic student workers at The New School.

4 Jeanne Swadosh, Associate Archivist in The New School Archives and Special Collections, recounted this anecdote to Silvia Rocciolo in an email on May 10, 2018. The student was Ángel López, MFA Transdisciplinary Design, Parsons, 2018.



José Clemente Orozco and Camilo Egas with *Call to Revolution and Table of Universal Brotherhood (Science, Labor, and Art)*, 1930–31 (detail).