

“Organized by Fascination”

A Roundtable Conversation on Art, Institutions, and Pedagogy

In March 2017, four contributors met at The New School to discuss institutional structures, public service, public space, historical awareness, teaching, and curatorial practice. We wanted to host an open-ended conversation that would provide a rhythmic counterpoint to the more topical texts in this book. Taking part were **Carol Becker**, Dean of Faculty at the School of the Arts and Professor of the Arts at Columbia University; **Gregg Bordowitz**, artist, activist, and Program Director of the Low-Residency MFA at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago; **Pablo Helguera**, artist, writer, and Director of Adult and Academic Programs at The Museum of Modern Art in New York; and **Lydia Matthews**, writer, curator, and Director of the Curatorial Design Research Lab at Parsons at The New School. **Frances Richard** was the moderator.

Frances Richard
So, thank you all—

Carol Becker
But we haven't done anything yet. *[laughter]*

Lydia Matthews
It was no small matter to get everybody in one room! To further clarify our starting point: The New School Art Collection is omnipresent across the campus, and yet I would go so far as to say that people often don't realize it's there. These site-specific works become so much a part of daily life that their cultural and pedagogical value barely registers. As members of the Curatorial Design Research Lab, we feel strongly, though, that these works speak to the core mission of our university. They are, after all, not only treasures to be lived with for students, faculty, and staff, but also links to New York City and beyond. We want to explore the histories of these commissions—why particular artists were invited at particular historical moments to produce works for our public spaces; what it means to exhibit images and objects like these; how a single work might change its meanings depending on the interests of individuals who engage it.

Frances Richard
I came into the book project as editor thinking about The New School as an entity with its own tradition of “the new.” But also thinking more broadly about what it means to give art a prominent place in a pedagogical context. Just before we convened, I stopped by the Agnes Denes mural in the cafeteria, and a pair of students were looking at it, talking about what it would be like if the figures in the wall drawing were animated. You could say that, without being quite aware of it, they were engaging not only Denes's ideas about the role of the individual inside

a larger social form—that each individual “animates” the social—but also they were thinking, in effect, about the medium of the mural. What if it were in motion?

In other words, the background assumption for a collection like this is that if you put these works in front of students, a pedagogical mission will be furthered. At the same time, an institution that displays art for audiences' benefit is in basic ways more like a museum than a university. So in addition to thinking about The New School as a particular place, I've been thinking about schools and museums and public space and about tropes of pedagogy and school-based structures as central to the last few decades' developments in art making—in social practice, or new institutionalism, or relational aesthetics. These questions are central to your practice, all four of you, as artists, curators, writers, teachers, and program organizers.

Gregg Bordowitz
When I went around to look at the collection in preparation for today, I got a strong feeling of lived relation to the objects. That, I appreciated. It felt different from even a well-trafficked museum. In a school setting, one can become familiar with objects, return to them, use them as landmarks, get up close to them. They're not as intimidating as objects in museums can unfortunately be.

This suggests something important to pedagogy, which is a trust on the part of the institution that the student body and people who pass through the buildings will live with these works and honor their presence, in a way that doesn't have to be constantly surveilled or restricted by stanchions or guards—even though I'm sure there are guards around.

Pablo Helguera

When I think about a school with artworks on view, I think about José Vasconcelos, who as minister of education in Mexico in the 1920s offered the national high school, the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, to muralists to paint. That inaugurated the muralist movement, and the murals are still there. These artworks are national symbols; they trigger a whole form of thinking about what should be given to the public and how art should engage the public in educational dialogue about its own history and culture.

At the same time, in the case of those who study in these buildings, I think that **the experience must be like living with relatives. You see them every day; you don't think of them necessarily as pretty or ugly, or young or old. Familiarity, in this sense, might breed contempt.** So the question in my mind would be, How does an educational mission remain alive in the face of such stasis?

Carol Becker

Thinking about which “relatives” are arrayed around an institution: at Columbia, we have portraits of trustees and former presidents—white men mostly, very few women. That’s what surrounds us.

Frances Richard

In each of these cases, there’s an authority built into the imagery that seems unchanging.

Pablo Helguera

Or think about museums that are, let’s say, the house of an artist or an artist’s collection—like Clyfford Still, who specified that his work could be shown only in that one museum and nothing other than his work would ever be exhibited.

Lydia Matthews

Or Joseph Beuys’s works in the Darmstadt Museum, which are never supposed to leave their particular spots because they were placed in the galleries by the hand of the artist.

Carol Becker

Or the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, where there are rules even about the flower arrangements.

Pablo Helguera

Exactly. In these kinds of institutions, educational departments or curators have to be creative as to how they approach the subject. All of which is to say that this problem of overfamiliarity or static relationship is not new.

Lydia Matthews

Is the primary goal of a curator, then, to develop strategies for defamiliarizing?

Pablo Helguera

Or finding new approaches to something that feels monothematic, where you might feel that everything has already been said.

Carol Becker

I’m sensitive to what people see in which context. Why that piece there? Maybe a site made sense at one moment for a given work, but it can be awkward when it gets caught in history. At Columbia, there was a fight—well, not a fight, but a public discussion—over a Henry Moore sculpture. A commitment had been made to donors years ago that their gift of a Henry Moore—a large nude—would be placed on the Morningside campus. It was supposed to be installed to line up with *Alma Mater* (1903–04) by Daniel Chester French, the seated bronze Athena in robes with her laurel crown that is sited at the heart of campus. Students went ballistic. They didn’t want this huge naked woman lying on her back in front of Butler Library. They didn’t see the piece as something to be revered; they saw it as something to be criticized. Finally, the piece was placed at another campus location. But it did cause a real debate, and it was a good one. Many of the university’s art people, those who were paying attention to the discussion, were quite happy that the students cared so passionately about their interpretation of the sculpture and its placement.

Lydia Matthews

So often, the way art history is taught suggests a fixed timeline, which obfuscates the reality that if works are famous in one moment, they may still become controversial in another. Take that fabulously bizarre George Washington sculpture by Horatio Greenough, with Washington dressed as Zeus in a toga and sandals. It was the first official sculpture commissioned for the centennial of his birth, and it was meant to be permanently sited in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. In 1841, some people didn’t blink when that massive marble was unveiled, because Neoclassicist forms were considered normal. Others hated it, because seeing Washington half-naked incensed puritanical viewers so much that it had to be moved. It ended up in the basement of the Smithsonian until postmodernism made it seem interesting again. When they recently opened their new wings in the National Museum of American History, it was designated one of four so-called Landmark Objects!

The cultural and monetary—not to mention pedagogical—value of art objects is constantly shifting. But that complexity gets repressed by the so-called timelessness of art.

Carol Becker

I don’t really believe that any public sculpture should be placed in one location forever.

Gregg Bordowitz

Thinking about inheriting something you don’t want: I love to teach, and even though I was on sabbatical in New York—this is in the early 2000s, maybe the late nineties—I taught a class at Cooper Union. I took the students on a walking tour to see some suffering works of art that are permanently installed in SoHo. There’s a Picasso sculpture on West Broadway at Houston, behind these three apartment buildings. It’s not a great Picasso; it’s concrete, a series of perpendicular planes, angled, with a line drawing of a face. But it does what a Picasso does. I had the class walk around it, and even though it’s not well sited, you can see that the face changes in depth and scale, that you yourself activate the piece. Even moments when you’re inheriting what might be an awkward context—those are good teaching moments.

Pablo Helguera

We as art educators are trained to find ways to help people love artworks, even those we don’t like.

Frances Richard

All these examples speak to changing definitions of site specificity. There’s the way in which institutional site implies the monumental—rain or shine, year in and year out, here’s the Picasso or the Moore. Or site specificity might more properly imply an understanding that a given work should exist only in an environment the artist designates. Or it can be a proposition about context: “We’ll put this here for a while to activate this space and then, as the site changes, the work will change.”

Gregg Bordowitz

There’s geographic site; there’s architectural site. There’s the discursive site.

Lydia Matthews

And the social space.

Gregg Bordowitz

And the social space and the historical site. I’m thinking of examples where objects or museums have been preserved precisely as teaching tools. For example, under apartheid in South Africa—in Cape Town, I believe—the

Museum of Natural History was horrible and racist. When apartheid was defeated and the African National Congress came to power, they decided to leave this racist museum intact but to change—

Carol Becker

—the narratives surrounding it.

Gregg Bordowitz

And the objects in it. They showed how all the figures in various dioramas came from a single cast of one person, and alongside the dioramas were explanations of the logic of anthropology as it meets trajectories of racism. That was one of the most interesting pedagogical or almost epiphanic experiences I have had regarding ways in which something meant to last was overturned and then mobilized to remain instructive.

Carol Becker

It’s courageous to do that, because it means that everyone involved understood the implications. Everybody knew what had been before, so what was the point of pretending it hadn’t existed? There was value in keeping it available.

Lydia Matthews

Another example is the taking down of Soviet architecture and heroic sculptures in the post-Soviet world. There are many who want to forget or symbolically annihilate that ideological inheritance, and there are others who oppose this deliberate historical amnesia. They believe it’s worth being reminded about their Marxist-oriented past, especially given the complete embrace of neoliberal capitalism that is radically transforming their countries. I’m thinking of Tbilisi-based collectives like Urban Reactor, which are working to preserve Soviet material culture and rekindling debates about now-fading leftist ideologies and what they can mean today.

But I was also thinking how what you’re describing, Gregg, pushes up against what Pablo was saying about the job of the educator to help the viewer love the work. I’m not sure that’s my role. When I think about what art can do, **it seems less a matter of trying to get people to adore the work than it is to ask questions. What kind of work is this art doing now in the world and for whom? What kind of work did it do when it was made?**

Pablo Helguera

It can be very difficult for a museum to—

Carol Becker

—tell the story it wants to tell.

Pablo Helguera

To position itself to say, “We’re showing these things because we think that they’re important to see, but we don’t agree with them ideologically.”

Frances Richard

It sounds like what succeeded in the South African example is that the institution was able to contradict its role as a natural history museum and take up a role as a social history museum. Or, apropos the Columbia students’ response: To hate a work of art or to critique it passionately is to love it in the sense that one invests in it strongly. One feels that the world is changed, for better or for worse, if that thing is sitting there.

Gregg Bordowitz

This is where critical consciousness comes in. **I think about what it means to pose questions that students or audiences can mobilize around, to organize by fascination. Instead of talking about loving or hating a work of art, then, we talk about stimulating fascination, getting students or viewers to look again and to defamiliarize the work.** Now that we have Trump and his fascistic appointments and policies in the White House, the function of critical consciousness is all the more urgent, I think—to establish criteria by which students can ask their own questions about what’s in front of them.

Lydia Matthews

And developing historical consciousness helps to encourage critical consciousness. When I thought about this publication originally, I was interested in teasing out the intersection of the artists’ histories in their own moments, and the history of The New School as an institution. It’s precisely *not* about learning to love the trophy in the courtyard. It’s a constant challenge to think about how progressive attitudes can manifest through the arts at different points in history, and where students stand today in relation to those belief systems and previous aesthetic strategies.

Carol Becker

Part of my challenge at Columbia has been to make the production of culture in the art school valuable to an institution that incorporates sixteen professional schools and focuses strongly on brain science and Big Data. It is very important to say about the arts, “We are also about ideas and research, and we are also asking difficult questions.” I’m constantly translating what we do as an art school for an academy that understands research and critical con-

sciousness in one form—not because they devalue art, but because they are not in the habit of thinking about it as an important locus for ideas. Giving value to art as research and explaining how that works is part of my role as dean.

Pablo Helguera

Unfortunately, it’s something we see at the national level: that the arts are dispensable.

Carol Becker

The United States, on a fundamental level, has always been predominantly anti-intellectual and has never understood the importance of art precisely because art is complex and requires intellection as part of the response. For an American society trying to carve out its own identity, art has historically been understood as “European.”

Frances Richard

There’s a flip side to that, too, which is that an outsized importance is given to the arts through that very lack of understanding. The arts are made to seem outrageous, ridiculous.

Carol Becker

It is because the arts are associated with progressive ideas.

Frances Richard

Exactly. The symbolic gesture of cutting budgets is like an iconoclasm, smashing the statuary of the regime you want to overturn. It’s weirdly out of proportion to the importance—or lack thereof—scribed to art itself.

Carol Becker

Because **art scares many people. They are frightened by the images artists can produce and how powerful those images can be.** But who wants to fight the NEA now? I don’t, anymore. I’ve said this before: Everyone who files taxes as an artist should donate a dollar. That would give us twenty million dollars a year, or whatever it might be, and we could set up an organization to give the money away. We could create a board and make our own grants. I know this would end up being problematic as well, but the gesture is just to make the point that artists should take control of the problem of funding themselves. We really cannot rely on this society to understand why art is essential to democracy.

Pablo Helguera

But still, those public funding fights illustrate how we think about what art does and doesn’t do, how important it is, or is not, in the larger society.

Carol Becker

We don’t agree as a society that it is important. Most people would accept that art making is good for children. After that, it gets too complicated—and, I might add, too meaningful.

Gregg Bordowitz

We are in a peculiar position now of needing to defend what we perhaps used to criticize as liberal institutions. It’s more important now than ever to make a distinction between being anti-institutional and being critical of institutions. Because what is threatened now is the very existence of our institutions.

Carol Becker

I agree with that.

Gregg Bordowitz

So we are in the position—I feel like I am in the position of defending the institutions I engage with. Being critical, but nonetheless defending them against this vicious attack on their existence. Questions around the NEA and many other questions that I first engaged in the late eighties and early nineties as an artist and activist are being revived. I probably answer those questions differently now that I’m fifty-two instead of twenty-seven. But we’re under profound attack. All the institutions, democracy itself. Of course, it has not ever been, for many, an open and democratic society. But now we’re facing an even greater challenge.

Frances Richard

Can you say more about how strategies might have been different in the eighties as compared to now?

Gregg Bordowitz

Well, now there’s a great deal of thinking about connections between patrons, board members, and so forth—people within the administration of art institutions and their ties to Trump or to a repressive agenda. I’m trying to think about where I fit in as a lifelong activist. Thinking about what it means to work with inflated tuitions, a corrupt loan system, institutions economically enforcing all kinds of prejudices and segregations. Relations among art institutions and banks and PACs and prisons.

Lydia Matthews

But don’t you think these connections already existed in many people’s minds?

Frances Richard

Artists and activists of the 1970s certainly made connections between institutions, trustees, corporate profits, and, say, the war machine in Vietnam.

Gregg Bordowitz

We’re not reinventing the wheel. But we are talking about a shift in scale that involves a greater number of people, more money, and a global system in a networked age.

Frances Richard

This feels like a crux to me: defending institutions while being critical of institutions, or defending institutions by being critical of them. At the same time, I can’t help wondering if there isn’t a romanticized investment in what we are saying, regarding the role of the avant-garde artist. The artist as cultural watchdog and naysayer.

Gregg Bordowitz

I want to answer very quickly that I’m for Romanticism with a capital R. Romanticism bequeathed modern artists a choice—to change the existing world or invent one’s own.

Pablo Helguera

We will always romanticize movements and such. But I think **if there’s anything to be said about the present moment, it’s that it is fiercely pragmatic. My generation, and younger generations, are looking at the agency art can have in the present. They’re willing to abandon art completely if that’s necessary because what matters is to change the world.** Obviously, there are many artists who try to keep the two things happening at once. But I feel that Occupy Museums and other movements that have emerged in recent years are very serious about politics. There’s not so much concern about how this or that gesture might make you look or whether you will eventually be rewarded.

Frances Richard

Or if it’s aesthetic, the artifact that the engagement yields.

Pablo Helguera

And so in terms of critical consciousness, **we need to make a distinction between teaching art as connoisseurship or appreciation—which I agree is a passive and neoliberal approach—and using educational tools. Making art as education.** Of course, we should all learn to appreciate art, and students should really look at the artists on display here at your school and learn about them. But there’s much more to do.

Lydia Matthews

This may indeed sound romantic, but I do see this actualized pretty often. **Artists can set an example by the ways they go about their research**

and understand materiality. Or an imagery can be produced that really does put something new on the table, that's different from what normative ideology would have you believe. In that sense I do think there can be a pragmatism to art practice. It's not necessarily romantic in the sense of being escapist.

Carol Becker

I always say, "I am not an art educator. I educate artists." I believe in the pedagogy of art making, and I defend being Romantic with a big R too. I mean, why not? Our students struggle, really struggle, to figure out how to be relevant in the world. They are working on it from the inside out. I defend that work because that is the interface between the individual and the society. Every generation is different, and our job in educating artists is to figure out how to help them do their particular job even better.

I spend a good deal of time with the World Economic Forum, and it's not just innovation they're looking for. They're interested in representing the world, and in art-related pedagogy, we work on the problems of representation. So they need the kind of thinking artists are good at.

You are always caught between the institution and what you would like to be able to give your students. You can't throw your students to the wolves, and you can't throw the institution to the wolves. You're trying to broker balance all the time. I really believe in building institutions, or I wouldn't have been doing this work all these years.

Frances Richard

I appreciate the battle cry of Romanticism with a capital R. Although I'm mindful, too, that the Romantic persona of the artist has historically meant a white man enfranchised to criticize the very structures that enfranchise him. And I'm relating all this, somewhat backhandedly, to reserving the right to criticize an institution while defending it, trying to push or cajole the institution into adapting to its circumstances—as distinguished from deriding or trying to undermine or flee from the institution.

I'm wondering if we can talk about how that sits with projects that are itinerant, temporary. Say, a project like Pablo's migrating used bookstore, *Librería Donceles* (2013–17), which was an institution of a sort, but also explicitly not. Open to the public, actually selling Spanish-language used books to whoever happens to walk in. But also an artwork.

Pablo Helguera

I have this dual identity, right? Half my life I spend doing politics in a context that is supposedly about permanence and history.

Carol Becker

The curatorial, the archival.

Pablo Helguera

And my other identity is somebody who is romantic, I suppose.

Carol Becker

You definitely are.

Pablo Helguera

So romantic! Well, no—but it is about engaging with experimental ideas and projects, inventing models that sometimes are ephemeral. I want to believe that those ephemeral things are actually the most permanent, while the day-to-day politics is in fact ephemeral. I mean, I don't want to say it's meaningless; I work hard to make educational programming in the museum mean something. But, honestly, in the long view, when I work as an individual to imagine possibilities like the bookstore—which, over time, traveled to eight cities in the U.S.—I feel it can have a life beyond its life.

Frances Richard

In terms of how it filters into its users' consciousness?

Pablo Helguera

Yes. The socially engaged art I produce is about experience. It's like performance; it was only possible in this or that location, and if you weren't there, you weren't there, period. You can see the archive. But I think this work is paradoxically enduring, because these ideas can find new value in the future.

Carol Becker

Don't you think that, if the institution approaches education only in one particular way, then we lose people? One is always trying to wedge into this monolithic thing, to infiltrate it with different ways of thinking about production—a wider way of thinking about why the institution is there.

Pablo Helguera

To be honest, I feel that education is a colonialized practice. It has to be decolonialized.

It's understood that being an artist can mean many, many things. But that is not true of education. Education, culturally, is so monothematic, so much about very specific approaches.

Carol Becker

You are changing that. At MoMA, you function more like an artist in the institution.

Pablo Helguera

But the discipline tends to be rigid.

Lydia Matthews

Increasingly, and maybe because of this dangerous political moment, I've shifted some goals in my pedagogy. I try not to make it only about studying works that exemplify some particular subject matter. I'm more focused on encouraging students to develop their own sense of agency, no matter what the topic, and to revalue and strengthen skills that we as a culture have been losing.

For example, I'm teaching classes now like Walking as a Research Practice, where we slow down and tune into sensory perception, explore territories of the city outside students' current comfort zones—because I think it's important to revalue embodied knowledge rather than to rely exclusively on book- or lecture-derived knowledge. Or, as another example, I teach Socially Engaged Art Practice, where it's about getting people in different disciplines across the university to interact. I'm concentrating on how to get students who are stuck with one another for fifteen weeks to understand that they embody the materials and topic of the class. They become a de facto community, a self-critical laboratory to work within.

We've all read the research about millennials; you know—there is an expectation that as a student, you're going to replicate a formula, that you're going to be told exactly how to go from step one to step ten. Even in art schools, a lot of young students expect that. But there are spaces, still, that allow a teacher who is willing to experiment to produce different ends, to encourage agency.

Pablo Helguera

So, then—going back to The New School's collection. With these goals of agency and self-activation, why would a collection like this be treated as a museum collection, with all the limitations, the guards—

Lydia Matthews

Well, the guards at school are not about protecting the works of art. The guards are about safeguarding the bodies of the individuals—

Carol Becker

It's about the street.

Frances Richard

That means it's also about the distinction between the street as public space and the institution, with its tuition and ID cards and cultural capital, and a guard at the door.

Pablo Helguera

But, but, but. The thing is: How do you make the learning process, access to the collection, operate in similar ways to your teaching approaches? What are the social elements or communication access elements that should

be in place for those dynamics to come to life and engage the public, even if only within the school? Do you just want to have a work with a label next to it? Because that label still implies authoritative interpretation.

Frances, in advance you asked us a question about a meaningful artistic-educational experience. That's a question we at MoMA ask all the time. And almost inevitably, we hear anecdotes that illustrate how social experiences in our lives are key to developing aesthetic awareness. A typical comment might be, "My mother used to take me to the museum," or, "My father was a lover of the opera, and he would take me to the opera and tell me the stories, and I became an opera lover because of that." **The operative factor is emotional connection to the work and sometimes a strong affective relationship with someone who brought you into the world of the work.** Museums tend to facilitate contact with the work but in an official, serious manner—it's not a process that in itself provides agency in the way you describe it, Lydia. It's a transaction. You pay and walk in and stand in front of the thing.

Lydia Matthews

Right.

Pablo Helguera

When it changes is if there's somebody who brings you in, who is able to elicit response from you or encourage you to make those connections emotionally.

Carol Becker

So much of my own experience in education was like that. It was coming through the body, almost. An embodied—

Lydia Matthews

—contagious enthusiasm.

Frances Richard

Pedagogically, I ask myself constantly: How can I be that person? How can I, through the classroom or a teaching conversation, offer that contact high of fascination with the object?

At the same time, this connects to the issue we started with, regarding what it's like to have art on the walls in that familiar yet institutional way. What's at stake is access. You had a father who loved opera and passed that on. You go to The New School, so you have the privilege seeing a work every day and taking it for granted as wallpaper. The family-member theory of installation is in some senses emotional and warm, because it presupposes sustained contact. But privilege is embedded in that contact, too, because to come in off the street and be

waived in by the guard is its precondition. No contact with the art if you haven't been ushered in.

Gregg Bordowitz

Even in my twenty-year teaching career, though, **the walls of the classroom have become more permeable—not only literally, because of communication technologies, but also through interconnection between disciplines**, either at a material level in terms of, say, people making art using their knowledge of biology or just through different epistemological models. You see this in the art education field as well, because in museums there's been a striking increase in speakers from different disciplines talking about works of art or ideas that are adjacent to the works of art. In some ways, I see the reverse of what Carol was talking about, regarding the difficulty of explaining art's value to other humanities or the sciences.

Carol Becker

Scientists understand it best, because they understand experimentation.

Lydia Matthews

But are you suggesting, Gregg, that it's more a case of other disciplines coming in to re-inform the art community?

Gregg Bordowitz

I never see teaching as apart from what I do as an artist; it's one long sentence connected by conjunctions. So in a classroom, there are fashions for this or that theory, and people still use the term "critical theory," but actually I think critical theory is historically bound and refers mainly to the Frankfurt School. It's not really the guidepost anymore, the central spine around which we should be organizing art education. Instead, in the classroom, there's been an increase in the relevance of scientific understandings coming out of neurobiology, for example, or artificial intelligence or science fiction. Various literatures become more relevant, as well as new art-historical projects that include people historically excluded from canons—people of color and women and queer people who made work with content that was visibly queer in some way. People excluded for reasons of geography and colonialism.

It's been important for me to shift my notion of what constitutes the avant-garde. Prompted by other people—certainly Fred Moten's work is enormously influential. His book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) shows that if you look, for example, at the history of downtown New York and

include in your survey both Judson Memorial Church and the Five Spot, there's a connection. Because actually, Cecil Taylor played at both. I've been thinking about the Village in the sixties. "Downtown" was constituted of artists, musicians, dancers, and the queer theater, Charles Ludlam and the Theater of the Ridiculous, for example.

I've talked to my friends who are older and who were there. So, **as a scholar and as a teacher, I've had to re-educate myself, expand my notion of the avant-garde**. I don't know if I'm a Romantic. I'm a romantic, modern, postmodern, anti-aesthetic sensualist. That's how I would conjugate and identify; that's the formulation.

Lydia Matthews

What you're saying, Gregg, reminds me of a conversation I had with William Warmus, who has been writing about the history of glass for many years. He was talking about an epiphany he had regarding his own aesthetic and historical blind spots, having come of age amidst the dogma of Clement Greenberg's formalist tradition. I know this might sound like a stretch, but he said he had this "aha" moment after he started scuba diving and recognized the aesthetics of the underwater world. His art-historical training, which was hierarchical and "purist" in orientation, was useless to him as he tried to make sense of the diversity of aquatic species and their innerconnectivity. This embodied experience required a totally different logic, so he coined the term "reticulate analysis," which addresses how species and their material forms interbreed and recombine, how they can be simultaneously similar, unique, and permeable.

The job of the reticulate writer or scholar or artist, then, is to tease out what those connective tissues have been in the past or are today. To extend Warmus's metaphor, **we unlearn and relearn how to describe the ecosystem of the arts. It's a horizontal, networked approach that recognizes how a field evolves organically, in response to environmental conditions**. I've been mulling over these metaphors a lot lately.

Frances Richard

When you were talking about wall labels, Pablo, I was thinking, "Nothing is self-explanatory." The idea of an autonomous object that stands alone and can be defined and explained to anyone and everyone in a hundred-word blurb is fantastical. Yet art also requires the making of form and therefore the establishment of boundaries, coherences, contexts.

Gregg Bordowitz

Somehow, where education meets the market, the MFA becomes (or became; it might not be anymore) the necessary terminal degree, the credential. Which is a recent development; very few of my teachers had MFAs. Here I'm being critical but not anti-institutional, and I'm implicated, because I train MFA candidates. And I'm going to be a teacher for as long as I'm around. What emerged, though, in the institutionalization of art education is a debate around, say, social practice versus craft that is inflected with market concerns. Some programs advertise themselves as social practice, to the exclusion of craft. That, in turn, creates a niche for the school that says, "We're all about craft. Come to us and touch things." Right? I try to defeat that false opposition. Social practice involves craft, and every craft has a social history. It's the same thing with false distinctions between beauty and the idea, which arose during the Conceptual period—an anti-aesthetic anti-Romanticism.

Pablo Helguera

I would say this opposition is a misunderstanding of the history of Romanticism, although it took me twenty years to actually read Romanticism and see that. Anyway, a lot of false oppositions arose that I think need to be dismantled, and some of them have to be parsed in relationship to the need, the imperative, to define oneself within a marketplace.

Lydia Matthews

It comes down to how you build a curriculum. Even if you have a social practice territory in your institution, where does it fit relative to a greater set of skills and histories? Do you develop it as its own major? Is it a minor that complements training in other areas? Do you understand it as a set of critical questions about the artist's role in society that inflect a multitude of practices? I think it's exciting when somebody not from a fine arts background comes in the door. Maybe they've been in a neuroscience lab and they've become fascinated by something they now want to explore as an artist.

Pablo Helguera

When you are given the opportunity to explore the diversity of your own experience, then you can rebel against that experience.

Lydia Matthews

Maybe their rebellion is against the neuroscience lab's rules. And perhaps rebellion will come around again once they absorb their MFA and recognize its own limitations.

Frances Richard

How does this relate to what you were saying before,

Pablo, about the pragmatism of our current students' generation, their willingness to say, "If it's not art, fine. But I want to address this situation"?

Pablo Helguera

The artists who I think are doing this successfully are not ignorant about art. But they know this is not the moment to sit down and make a painting. This is a moment to act in other ways. They'll figure out later how to define that action; what is most important now is what art does, not what it's called. Maybe twenty years from now we'll look at a group of people who don't at present see themselves as being in the art field and say, "This was an amazing group of artists."

Carol Becker

Part of the strength of a great curriculum or great environment for art making is not to define production rigidly, categorically, but to allow people to experiment with ideas and allow the forms to follow from that experimentation.

Gregg Bordowitz

I agree. I'm just thinking that I still very much believe in rigor. And actually, I still believe in disciplines. But I think we're at a moment where older categories of discipline have been undone or pressures have been brought to bear such that older disciplines have to change.

At the same time, in order to structure a curriculum, I had to create categories. I'm not saying these are the best categories, but I thought it would be interesting to focus on poetics—not poetry specifically, but poetics as defined by Aristotle: how we put things together. This is an interesting way to create bridges between increasingly atomized students. Students arrive at school looking at many different screens. They learn their histories through entertainment, largely. There are multiple literacies any student will be juggling, and they'll see it all out of chronology. If you're working with film students, say, they've been looking at Amazon or Netflix; they aren't going in order from Lumière to Godard, which was how I learned cinema. No students I know of are reading Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950)—which is actually a great book, if very flawed. I mean, no one's sitting in that auditorium anymore with slides, learning that art history goes from the Venus of Willendorf to Jackson Pollock, and then whatever extra chapter was tacked on.

Lydia Matthews

I'm afraid there are still a lot of places that teach like that. It's hard to believe, but from my travels, I can tell you that it's true.

Gregg Bordowitz

I'm saying that there's still a need for rigor. I believe in what's been said regarding this open architecture where you encourage; you say yes. **It's a dynamic, a dialectic between permission, encouraging through your own enthusiasm, and, at the same time, demanding rigor and discipline. And those terms are now in need of new translations.**

Lydia Matthews

Right.

Frances Richard

Now I want to ask, what is rigor?

Carol Becker

Maybe rigor is asking the hard questions regarding the work's ability to communicate as one wants it to.

Frances Richard

It's also testing the poetics, as you were describing it, Gregg, against its own evolution. Testing a process of making against that process's own histories.

Lydia Matthews

That sounds like it's primarily located in the critique, no? Critique becomes the site of exchange, of learning.

Carol Becker

That's within the institution. But the minute students are out, which is pretty fast, the work is also out in the world, and people are either responding to it or they are not.

Lydia Matthews

That's true, but I think there are ways to extend the institutional support network. What we do in the Parsons curriculum, for example, is to emphasize collaboration over competition. **It's what Brian Eno calls "scenius" instead of "genius"—we challenge students to think about how they can create a "scene" together, help one another sustain a practice beyond the walls of the institution. If we're doing our job, their colleagues become their ongoing community.** They get to know one another and have to grapple with one another's differences, know what resources each brings to the table, with an emphasis on carrying on after they graduate. Especially since so many of them are part of globally diverse communities that offer a range of opportunities.

Carol Becker

I totally agree with that. I just meant that if we haven't helped them to internalize ways of being good editors of

their own work, asking themselves the hard questions, then they are going to put something out into the world that is not going to succeed.

Lydia Matthews

The internal critic is essential. That's partly our pedagogical challenge: How can an art program insist to students that they not wait for a teacher to tell them whether something is good or not? And, as teachers, how do we frame research modes that might give students a bigger multidisciplinary tool kit as well as deepened social relations and networks that continue beyond school?

Frances Richard

This takes us again to critical consciousness, or what bell hooks calls "education for critical consciousness"—which nurtures not only artists and audiences but also citizens, a population that can engage critique and call out a lack of rigor or ignorance of history while still fostering community.

Gregg Bordowitz

The other piece is genealogy because there are so many literacies. To foster a ground where students can place themselves in their own constellations, which may or may not include fine art, but that extend to other traditions or forms of production. Methodologies and genealogies are largely what I try to foster as a ground from which students can develop.

Me, personally, I come out of the early eighties, late seventies. The last student standing in a crit was the one who would go on, endure—a dynamic I never want to reproduce. It was a cruel sectarian model that developed out of art culture's encounter with political movements—and that kind of cross-pollination is not inherently bad. But what happened to destroy activist movements in the counterculture was repeated in the context of art critiques. So I want to teach with a kind of pressure in the room toward the aims of the artist and also the aims of anyone participating in the critique; to facilitate the group's understanding at the moment. It's more like relational psychoanalysis than relational aesthetics.

I ask myself constantly, How does the world enter the classroom? The state-sanctioned murders of African Americans by the police are an urgent topic of conversation in the classroom. So when we're having discussions about opposing the rule of white supremacy and racism in this country and we're discussing work by African American artists—in that context, what burdens are we placing on those artists, on that work, or on faculty and students of color?

African Americans and other people of color are disproportionately burdened in contexts where they remain in the minority in the classroom. What demands are we placing on each other? This happens in other ways too.

How are people who are visibly queer or trans—or self-identified as such—asked to carry the conversation about homophobia or transphobia? There are forty people in the room. Construct a conversation that allows for people from vastly different geographic places; with age diversity; with racial, ethnic, gender, and sexuality diversity. How do I facilitate these conversations? It requires all the skills I developed as an activist-organizer to protect people from horizontal violence and allow others to make mistakes or voice contradictory opinions. But at the same time to think aloud together. To truly foster a space for analysis structured by theories of intersectionality. To create a place for conscious-raising—I still use that term.

I think every teacher should be familiar with alternative notions of the vanguard; should recognize new scholarship about avant-garde history, remembering that art history itself has been structured by exclusions along a number of different lines. We can't make presumptions about people based on how they appear to us or expect people occupying various oppressed or stigmatized subject positions—

Lydia Matthews

—to be the spokespeople for a particular group.

Gregg Bordowitz

To be, solely, the bearers of that historical knowledge.

Carol Becker

You are a deep thinker about these things, and many faculty are not. It comes up all the time. Students are put on the spot by faculty who haven't thought this through.

Lydia Matthews

Part of the ability to do that thinking is to understand that you are facilitating with all your knowledge, from activism, from years of experience—but at the same time you're there to learn. This is Paulo Freire's radical-pedagogy position, and I so strongly believe in it. It makes me want to listen very deeply to what students are saying, what their experiences are now, coming up at a moment so profoundly different from my own history.

Gregg Bordowitz

Museum education takes this job on too, right?

Pablo Helguera

Yes. There's a debate now in schools and museums—going back to the question about rigor and what it means. To an extent we are coming back from a battle that started

in the art world a decade or so ago around books like Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987) and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971). As the "pedagogical turn" in curating emerged, there were many discussions about how education could be employed. Unfortunately, I feel this was often about co-opting education for curatorial purposes. It kind of backfired on the ideas of thinkers like Rancière and Illich. The idea that you can teach somebody something without knowing it yourself and the idea that the educational system is a dictatorship that oppresses people, so we have to dismantle it: These propositions have, I think, served a neoliberal attitude that says, Let's dismantle everything. Because people don't really need to know anything. Or they can find out on their own.

Lydia Matthews

And here we are.

Pablo Helguera

And here we are. You come into the institution like a sponge, absorb the grandiosity of the arts, and that's the end of it.

Carol Becker

Right.

Pablo Helguera

No context necessary. We are grappling with attitudes about art as this floaty thing you can inhale like a spore and become illuminated by. Yet we want to provide context without being prescriptive or didactic or academic, without creating formulas for socially engaged art, activism, or politics. **The question is what structures we create as educators to allow for critical thinking, for independence—but a type of freedom that is informed, a thinking freedom.**

Frances Richard

Pablo, I want to read from your "Transpedagogy" essay (2011):

The transpedagogic Feast of the Ass is not only a reversion of social roles, but of meanings and interpretations of disciplines, including art in pedagogy, conflating them together, at times canceling one another and at times joining them in progressive ways, constructing models of interactions that other disciplines are too shy or reluctant to try. What art making has to offer today is not to represent accurately, but rather to misrepresent so that we can discover new questions.

We've talked about many of these things in different ways. But we haven't discussed the foolish rushing-in of

art, the willingness to turn things on their heads, which is what the Feast of the Ass accomplishes.

Pablo Helguera

I was writing about a medieval celebration called the Feast of the Ass, celebrated after Christmas, where all roles of the townspeople would be reversed.

Lydia Matthews

Like Mikhail Bakhtin's description of carnival?

Pablo Helguera

Exactly. It's a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque idea. If you were young, you would act old. If you were old, you would act young. You were a man, you would act like a woman. The donkey was the Pope; it would be dressed in robes and brought into the church. It was a crazy, extravagant celebration, eventually forbidden by the church. My point was that art can produce such moments, create these environments where suddenly roles can be suspended.

Lydia Matthews

The optimistic belief is that after inhabiting an otherwise forbidden role, you return to the social order somehow transformed. But the darker view is that you let off steam and then return obediently to the social order and look forward to the next carnival.

Pablo Helguera

I did the Feast of the Ass in Mexico City a few years ago in a museum. I convinced the director to bring a donkey into the museum. I gave a series of workshops for about a week to different kinds of audiences: curating for artists, performance for curators, criticism for the general public, and so on. People who fit these categories took the corresponding workshops, and on the day of the final event, members of the general public read reviews they had written; artists presented curatorial projects, etc.

Some curators were really angry about what they thought was my disrespect for their discipline. One came to me and said, "I don't agree with this." You don't agree with a performance? The project was about reversing identities, changing identities, with the hope that participants might better understand the complexity of these various roles that are played in the art world.

Frances Richard

Again, I think we've been talking about it already—but I'll throw out another quote. Gregg wrote in the 1990s, "I like to think that I'm a civil servant." So are we proposing that the inversion brought about by the Feast of the Ass is a civil service, an artist's civil service?

Carol Becker

In service to the civil or to civilization.

Frances Richard

The service of overturning proprieties. Of convening a constituency that tries not to commit horizontal violence—and can imagine what that term might mean and can believe that it is a leader's role to protect a community's members and to marshal such a constituency in an improvisatory way?

Pablo Helguera

I confess that I have a discomfort with the civil servant analogy. Perhaps because I've worked in museum education departments for so many years, which are often treated as service departments, not as areas of the museum that use their expertise to stimulate new thinking.

Carol Becker

You are like me, not wanting to be called an art educator.

Pablo Helguera

I object to the treatment of the educator as a waiter who serves you some knowledge.

This is a consumerist attitude: "I am paying you, so you're going to give me what I want. Just tell me what it is." [laughter]

Carol Becker

"Tell me what it means."

Pablo Helguera

"How much does it cost? When was it made and who made it?" As if that's what art is, downloaded information that you forget in three seconds. I see my job instead as inserting debate. My success lies in being able to make a person feel fulfilled in the conversation but at the same time slightly uncomfortable.

Carol Becker

It's the uncomfortable part that confuses people. It is not the expectation that art should be uncomfortable; the avant-garde is not internalized as a definition of what art should be, especially in this society. **When a work causes discomfort, often people think, "Why are you doing this to me? I didn't come here for this." The work is experienced as hostile, and the response to it becomes hostile as well.**

Lydia Matthews

So on one hand, you can provoke through context, encouraging people to realize that they're confronting something uncomfortable. On the other hand, a public work—like our Agnes Denes mural, for example—is an opportunity for people to realize that if they take time to engage, they actually do have quite a lot of information and relevant experience.

Pablo Helguera

Right.

Carol Becker

Of course. Yes.

Lydia Matthews

How do you make people realize they have a license to exercise agency when they have typically been taught that only an expert could do that or only certain kinds of things matter? To really engage it from one's subjective position: This can be the translation that makes a work meaningful. For me, that is where the mural, say, retains its importance as a prototypical kind of public art—having multiple people come to the reading of that mural and trying to orchestrate a conversation that makes each person realize it's not a singular narrative but a meeting point of multiple narratives.

Gregg Bordowitz

I think that underlying a lot of what we're saying are very deep and somewhat preconscious or unconscious theological assumptions. They extend way back to the secularization of art—because there is a presumption, which I also make, about art as a medium for understanding or revelation. I too have this core belief that, because I am fascinated by and devoted to art, everyone else will be too. [laughter]

I was a public school kid in Queens when art programs were valued and funded. Every year they took us to museums. I was one of a few kids who went queer for art. It represented different horizons, actually, art did. When I first got to the art world or got to Manhattan from the boroughs and was living downtown—

Carol Becker

The way you say "the boroughs." I grew up in Brooklyn. Of course, Queens is a borough and so is Brooklyn, but we say it as if Manhattan were something other.

Gregg Bordowitz

My grandmother lived in Queens for thirty, thirty-five years. She went to Manhattan twice.

Carol Becker

I know people who never went. I know exactly what you mean.

Gregg Bordowitz

When you went into Manhattan, you dressed up. It was more expensive.

Carol Becker

It seemed like a huge thing to do, to go to this other world. People who didn't come from where we came from got

to do that. And when we did, it was as if the whole large world of culture opened to us.

Frances Richard

That's what I was talking about regarding the boundary. The kiosk at the door. And before that, the subway ride.

Gregg Bordowitz

Manhattan might as well have been Hollywood as far as I was concerned. Even though it was a subway away. Anyway, I want to go back to the theological assumption underlying this—which I'm not necessarily against. But this idea is exactly why kids like me were bused to museums in Manhattan. Art would have a civilizing impact on the working class. Entering the art world required traversing class boundaries.

Carol Becker

Right. Absolutely. And it takes a while to internalize this fact.

Gregg Bordowitz

This theological thing—I think it arises now in an interesting way. Maybe we at this table don't have the same taste in art but we do share similar commitments. I don't have to remind you all that these commitments are not shared by everybody. **What's interesting to me is how one makes the argument that art is a necessary part of culture.**

Or let me put it this way: What's interesting about the theological analogy is that I'm concerned at the moment with issues of sanctuary. And one response to the need for sanctuary for undocumented people in this country has been to place the demand on museums and schools. Which is surprising because traditionally, the place of sanctuary is the church. Why do we think museums are places where people should seek sanctuary? Practically speaking, they're not the best places to house people or to feed them. But there is this notion—and I'm not negating it—a notion about the sacred nature of spaces where art or study happens.

Frances Richard

This is why I brought up Romanticism, and romantic myths of artistic passion. I feel as if we've been ratifying something close to that. Maybe "sacred" isn't the word we would choose to describe the function of art in a pedagogical context. But I don't think it's an inappropriate word, given that we've been talking about engagement with art—both vis-à-vis the object and interpersonally, with one's fellows in a situation structured by art—about those confrontations as beneficial. Beyond beneficial—instructive, revelatory, liberating. Encouraging a turning away from tendencies that we see as dangerous or narrow.

Gregg Bordowitz

There is symbolic importance in saying, “This is a space where we reject the violent xenophobia in our midst. Where we protect those subjected to that violence.” But underneath **there is a presumption—at least for me, if I’m honest with myself—that I hold these places to be dear, if not sacred. Places of sanctuary.**

Pablo Helguera

The sociologist John Falk, who has written about museums for decades, has a typology of the museum visitor. Not everyone agrees with him, but it is worth thinking about. He proposes that we should not classify museum visitors in terms of age or economic background but in terms of interest. So, for example, there is the companion, like a relative who you convince to go with you to the museum. There is the professional, like those of us who go because it’s part of our jobs and besides, we want to. There is the explorer, the person who is open to adventure. And so forth.

Carol Becker

Like a pilgrimage to see a particular object.

Pablo Helguera

Or the spiritual wanderer—those who we imagine will sit in front of the Rothko and go “ahh.” It’s precisely these types of experiences that museums grapple with. On one hand, you want to deal with real life and contemporary issues; you want to be at the center of dialogue about what’s happening in the world and show that what you do is relevant. At the same time, a museum’s function can be similar to that of a church. You have to have that Rothko, and it has to be beautiful, and nobody can touch it, and you have to facilitate that spiritual experience. Museums are caught in an identity crisis around their function.

Carol Becker

It’s interesting to me that this would be a crisis. The museum reflects parts of our humanness, what people want and need. Can’t a museum be all those things? Does it have to choose?

Pablo Helguera

The question revolves around desires or needs for inclusiveness and, or versus, the benefits of exclusivity. How do you reach out to audiences to make them feel involved in a conversation? To what extent do you preserve and defend a type of art or a kind of atmosphere?

Carol Becker

But is that exclusivity when—to Gregg’s point—there is a spiritual dimension to people’s experiences with art?

They do come to museums to have those kinds of experiences, to see something beautiful and feel all that goes with that. Then maybe you capture those same people to see something else, something more confrontational.

Pablo Helguera

It can be as simple as, “Are you’re coming to see Monet, or are you coming to see Kara Walker?”

Carol Becker

MoMA has both.

Frances Richard

And in a sense, so does The New School. Not Monet—but Sol LeWitt, bright bars of hot color, and Kara Walker, figures in a tableau of hellish violence. And they’re side by side.

Pablo Helguera

But the question for the museum is different from the problem for the school because the museum has to have a certain number of visitors. Large museums feel the pressure to do blockbuster exhibitions because they attract large audiences. On the other hand, if they exhibit obscure contemporary artists, even if the curators think it’s the most interesting art in the world—

Gregg Bordowitz

That’s why **museums are not the only places we go to see art. That’s why it’s relevant to see art in school.** Of course, there are many battles to be fought around what is included and excluded and what kind of spaces schools can be, and for whom. But institutions are not monolithic. I wanted to say this before: Institutions are made up of the people who work in them. You learn this as an organizer. You go into the most conservative institutions and find that people who work in them have vastly different opinions from one another. You search for allies.

Which gets me back to that quote about civil service. That statement goes on to say that art performs a service much like crime, which is a claim for transgression.

Lydia Matthews

Where I imagined you might be going with the theological idea was not toward literal sanctuary for X number of bodies. I was imagining an argument to be made for cultural institutions as sanctuary for ideas and practices. I don’t mean to lump together different kinds of institutions, but there are so few spaces left where critical consciousness is encouraged—and I do understand this encouragement, this consciousness, as sacred. I want to insist on there being spaces where multiple voices, different perspectives, and debates can thrive.

Spaces that will queer or otherwise counter oppressive norms, and this includes not only **arts institutions but educational spaces as well. These are two of the last bastions—of psychic space, physical space, community space, critical space—that actually invest in notions of “resistance” or “transgression.”** I feel passionately about that. And you can call it a romantic position if you want to.

Pablo Helguera

It’s very difficult to work in a theological institution, however. The last thing I want is to impose on an audience, “This is God and you have to adore it.” To me, in doing that, I have failed as an educator. We function better when we are closer—as you suggested, Gregg—to an anthropology or archaeology museum, where we are looking at an object to understand it, not venerate it. You may say, “Oh, this is horrible,” or “This is very beautiful,” but it doesn’t matter. It’s about understanding what it means.

Gregg Bordowitz

We might have fallen into a polarization or polemic that I think should be undone. Just because we mentioned the word *theology*, we’re not necessarily talking about fundamentalism, or indoctrination in terms of a particular dogma. **We have to recognize that the history of aesthetics is bound up with ideas of the sacred.** There is this idea in modernity that we, whoever we were, separated art from religion. In fact, that was a fiction maintained by a very narrow group of people. I’m not talking about observance when I say “theological.” I’m talking about what produces certain effects or aporias. We’re not talking, necessarily, about loving the beautiful object or hating the ugly object—and besides, we know that psychoanalytically there’s pleasure in unpleasure, right?

But **art is all about belief. If a work doesn’t seem credible, doesn’t feel like it should be on the wall, that’s “game-over.”**

And, for me, it’s about building what D. W. Winnicott called a “holding environment.” For Winnicott, this is the transitional space between caretaker and child where objects first come into existence for the child; and those transitional spaces continue to emerge for individuals and groups throughout adulthood. I think that teaching—making art, even—is about producing holding environments. In other words, that these practices are able to hold any number of contradictions and pushes and pulls. I don’t mean in a Hans Hofmann kind of way.

But maybe I do. We are having to think ethically about the ways in which we produce holding environments, patterns of recognition where differences that once seemed incommensurate are now the differences we encounter in the world.

Pablo Helguera

What I think is exciting about having work in a school like this is that you don’t have the limitations a museum has. You are living with these relatives. You’re not in church; they’re in your house. They’re here, surprisingly. In that sense, these works become living documents.