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[HOME](#) [SOCIAL](#) [IN THE HEADLINES](#) [PRESS ROOM](#) [ARCHIVES](#)



Andrea Geyer's Anemoi at The New School's University Center. Photo credit: Nicholas Calcott

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Artist and Parsons Professor Andrea Geyer on Creating The New School's 14th Site Specific Work of Art

In November, The New School's University Art Collection introduced *Anemoi*, its 14th site-specific artwork, by renowned artist and Parsons professor Andrea Geyer. The installation of this work at the University Center and Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts was an inspirational conclusion to this celebratory centennial year. Geyer's work joins site-specific works by artists such as José Clemente Orozco, Kara Walker, Sol LeWitt, and Agnes Denes.

The New School News recently spoke to Geyer about how the project came to fruition. This is the first part of a two part conversation with the artist.

Can you discuss how the project initially came about?

I had done a lot of work on the role that women played in American modernism and the way in which their central role has not been recognized. For example, most of the museums in this town were founded by women.

During a residency I had at the Museum of Modern Art in 2012, I started to get to know these histories. MoMA, of course, was founded by three women: Lillie P. Bliss, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Mary Quinn Sullivan. And in researching those women, I found they were connected to individuals that were important to The New School's founding: Vera List, Emily James Smith Putnam, and Frances Amelia Fincke Hand, just to name a few

I started to look at the relationships women had with each other at the time and found that the women who were pursuing development of the arts were also supporting social and political progress. I created a large-scale diagram mapping their relations, which was shown as a diagram/mural at MoMA in 2015. When Tim Marshall and other members of the New School Art Advisory Committee saw this work and The New School's role in it, they asked me to develop a proposal that would do a similar kind of mapping of the university's early history.

Then you decided to go in another direction?

While I was considering that, students started to unionize to better their labor conditions at The New School and a whole other landscape evolved.

I was inspired by what the students were putting forward and started to focus on the history of organizing at The New School, and I became interested in the recent past of the university. This revealed an interesting set of individuals to me that I wasn't necessarily familiar with.

This shifted what I decided to put forward to the Centennial commission, and I proposed that instead of looking 100 years back, I would look at the more recent past and particularly research those people who were and are dedicated to organizing and building community at the university, because one of the things students were asking for were more sites for community, more ways of connecting to each other, being recognized as a community, and connecting to other communities.

In the unionization efforts, for example, the students wanted to connect to the cafeteria workers. I wanted to understand the university not as a provider of education to individuals but rather as a community that is a learning environment.

What were your next steps?

After I got the go-ahead from the Art Advisory Committee, I started to research different moments in the recent past, starting with the Mobilization for Real Diversity, Democracy, and Economic Justice at The New School (1996-1997) and the student occupation in the 2000s. I soon realized that no matter how much I researched, it would be hard for me to identify people from the university's last 30 years who stood out for their investment in community. These histories and those involved are often fleeting due to the cycle of academic annual graduations, leadership changes hirings, contract renewals, and terminations. This made it especially hard to hold on to their story and to their work.

I started to create a community survey and began sharing it with colleagues. In this survey, I asked them to identify individuals that they felt had done incredible work behind the scenes to create a community for staff, for students, and for faculty.

How did you identify potential subjects? What qualities were you looking for?

They had to be individuals who self-identify today or at some point in their lives identified or were identified as women or female. These are individuals whose work is especially underrecognized historically and their voices are rendered inaudible or outside of fact and knowledge.

They also had to have actively worked on building community at The New School. So my research entailed asking people where they observed community formation and who initiated that. What was interesting to me is that next to faculty and students, many individuals who were identified to me were staff working in offices or student support, such as the student health center and crisis management. In my research I learned about staff doing incredible work — doing outreach, making decisions collectively, and building community. I witnessed faculty creating community in a dedicated manner through their pedagogy. I witnessed students who, in addition to their academic work, take things into their own hands to create spaces for each other. Often these individuals and their labor are not visible to many. When someone proposed an individual to me and I asked them why they thought this person good for the project, they provided stories identifying why they thought the individual was or is important.

All of the individuals who were proposed in this way will be named on a website accompanying the project. I sadly can only select a group of 20 individuals to make their portraits (I wish it would be many more). These portraits entail a translation of a photographic image into aluminum leaf on felt. It's important to mention that when I choose an individual to be pictured, I reach out and ask them if they want to be part of it. Then I ask them to send me a picture to work from, so that the individuals themselves choose the images.

Of course, it's important to say that this project cannot represent every person who has done this important labor. The portraits have to be in a sense stand-ins for the people who are not pictured but named on the website and those people who were never named for this project but are doing the work nevertheless.

And you view these portraits as part of a system?

The portraits are organized so that they are linked to each other, like cells or an organism. The work proposes a growing system of images, a growing system of community, a growing organism that's always there and that reaches across walls and buildings, visible and invisible. It invites everyone who looks at the portraits to imagine who else is part of that, where and how it continues.

Currently thirteen portraits are realized, on view at two sites: on the fourth floor of the University Center and the fourth floor of Lang. But the idea is that people can have a portrait or two portraits linked together in their offices. The idea is that the project spreads out across the architecture of the university. The portraits are hopefully going to travel, and they can be exchanged. There should be at least three or four in circulation in the university collection, so that you can make a request if you want to have a portrait in your office.

In the second part, Geyer will discuss the people behind the portraits, her unique approach to the materials she has used, and how Anemoui fits in with her previous work.

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[HOME](#) [SOCIAL](#) [IN THE HEADLINES](#) [PRESS ROOM](#) [ARCHIVES](#)



Andrea Geyer's Anemoi at The New School's University Center. Photo credit: Nicholas Calcott

DECEMBER 19, 2019

Artist and Parsons Professor Andrea Geyer Offers Additional Insights Into Creating The New School's 14th Site Specific Work of Art

In November, The New School's University Art Collection introduced Anemoi, its 14th site-specific artwork, by renowned artist and Parsons professor Andrea Geyer. The installation of this work at the University Center and Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts was an inspirational conclusion to this celebratory centennial year. Geyer's work joins site-specific works by artists such as José Clemente Orozco, Kara Walker, Sol LeWitt, and Agnes Denes.

The New School News recently spoke to Geyer about how the project came to fruition. This is the second part of a two part conversation with the artist.

Can you tell me about some of the people you have portrayed and why they were chosen?

It's very important that students are part of the group of individuals pictured. People come in and out and students go through life-forming transformations when they come to the university environment, but it's so easy to forget them quickly after they graduate and the next generation populates the halls. The university structure has a built-in forgetting that I'm trying to resist with my project.

So pictured is one of the students who had the idea for and realized the creation of the Social Justice Hub: Brittany Meché. There are Hunter Stewart and Adriana Herrera-Perhamus, who together created the Students of Color (SOC) Weekly, a socializing and care space for students of color on campus.

There is Thelma Armstrong, who served as executive assistant to the dean and was a mentor to so many, creating connections and support for a large community. And Racquel Samuel, who works with the first generation college student group in her role as a student success advisor, offering support and community for this important student population at the university.

Carin Kuoni's work at the Vera List Center is exemplary — not only bringing people together for outward-facing lectures but building workshops geared to faculty and students and holding roundtables behind closed doors. She's an important figure who is underrecognized. And you have someone like Kay Unger, who does amazing work as the chair of the board of Parsons to build scholarships that enable students to come here, and she should be recognized for that — not only for her contributions financially but for her community building.

The goal is to create a democracy between these individuals, who are doing equally important work.

I start researching someone when more than one person recommends them to me as a good person to be part of the project. Basically the people who are mentioned over and over again to me by others will get portraits.

It's important for me to not complete the project in just one go. I can still make more portraits, and I hope that, with the release of the project, members of the community that I haven't reached yet will go to the website to propose additional people. It's very important to put this project on-site, so that people can encounter it and from there can make their own proposals.

The survey to collect names will remain open until early next year, and then in January or February, I will choose the next group of individuals. And then I might leave it open for a little bit longer.

How are the portraits made, and why did you use the materials you chose?

The portraits are produced through something like a printing process that uses aluminum leaf on wool felt. It was important for me to use an organic energy-containing material like wool felt as a carrier for the portraits. The silhouetting of the portraits creates a certain kind of abstraction that maintains the individuality of each person but also allows a kind of projecting of other people into that. Also, the aluminum leaf used to create these images, reflect light differently depending on where you stand, so that the portraits change when you move. They are very alive, impossible to photograph, and they are continuing to feel active when you pass by them. For example, when you look at the wall at the University Center, some of the portraits will look gray and others will look like white light. You step a few steps over the light balances changes again. No portrait will ever appear like the one next to it. They reflect back at you and out into the space of the university itself.

Are these materials you have worked with before?

No. I developed this method of making specifically for this project, so it's the first time. I've worked with iridescent and reflective materials before because I'm so interested in materializing histories that constantly get erased. For me, the way that they are present and absent at the same time is important. In my work, I create ways of representing things that materialize them and at the same time materialize the erasure that they have gone through, but without erasing them.

How does Anemoui fit into your overall body of work?

I'm interested in histories and individuals and voices that are important and at the core of histories — of our history, of a history of a place like The New School or a country, or of American modernism. These histories are right in front of us, but somehow we have forgotten how to recognize them as valid histories. There are all these mechanisms in place that prevent hearing certain voices, seeing certain bodies, listening to certain stories. And my work is always dedicated to creating objects that help us see those things and help us think about the ways they get erased. I push against that erasure and mess with it. It's astonishing to me how many biographies are written about individuals that still don't make their way into a canon, that are ignored by those who form the canon, no matter how much research is done around them.

As an artist who also teaches, I believe that community is essential for people to be able to learn, because only in places where you are seen and recognized and you feel respected and heard can you become open enough to learn. With this project, I hope to remind everybody passing by them on a daily basis, about the importance of community in learning.

How does it feel to be part of this amazing site-specific work that has been commissioned at The New School?

Of course, I'm very honored to be part of the group of artists who did work on site before. I've always deeply appreciated The New School's art collection, part of which was given by Vera List to the university. I think the work that's on the wall here often speaks to the artists' commitment to looking deeply into histories and producing their own form of knowledge through aesthetic means, inserting the body back into the abstraction of knowledge. It's something I'm invested in, and I think that's true of a lot of artists in the collection. I think Orozco is probably the most prominent example of that. It is, of course, wonderful to be in dialogue with these other artists. What is unique for me with this work, is that I teach where it is installed, so I will live with it as a member of this community and it will also remind me to think about my daily tasks through this lens of community.

What impact does this work and other art have on the community?

I believe that even if people are not stopping and saying, “Oh, there’s a Barbara Kruger,” when they sit in my office underneath one of her works. But there is nevertheless a way in which they are affected by what they see. The Kara Walker work at Lang is such an important piece that hundreds of students, faculty, and staff pass by everyday. So is the Orozco, even though the room is used all that much. I believe if you spend time in a room with an artwork or wait next to it by the elevator, it will impact you. You might experience things in a different way or become curious about something you don’t know or try to find out about the artists who made the work. Like James Luna, Carrie Mae Weems, or Nancy Spector — all these artists that show up around campus. I believe in that impact, whether it’s conscious and verbalized or unconscious and felt. I think it’s definitely there and unique to this university. There are not many universities that have their collection hung all over the place, in every office, on every wall.

Tell us about your newly published monograph “Dance in a Future with All Present,” which looks at some of your recent work.

I’m very happy with this publication edited by Alhena Katsof, who is a part time faculty at the New School. It is published by Dancing Foxes and the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art. I consider it an experimental monograph and it looks specifically at the work that started with my interest in women and modernism. I was surprised to find out how influential women were in creating that movement in America. Other projects evolved from that interest, which are also included in the book. There are 16 works that are considered and 23 text contributors by colleagues and friends. The writers are art historians, critics, novelists, dancers, and choreographers. They are people that I am in dialogue with, colleagues and friends among who I make my work. It has been a great privilege to have been able to materialize these conversations alongside my work of the last six years in the form of *Dance in a Future with All Present*.