

Living to Learn

Art & Education
for the
Common Good

Edited by Noah Simblist

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Introduction

Noah Simblist

In the history of education, there is a fundamental tension between liberation and discipline that crystallizes in times of crisis. As I have been working on this book I have spoken with artists, educators, curators, and other cultural workers who all agree that now is such a time. There is a collapse of belief in museums and universities in areas of the world lucky enough to have such institutions, and an exhaustion of resources felt by grassroots organizers who have created alternatives to them. The pressures that produced this crisis are both economic and political—and often a combination of the two. These tensions also vary from region to region.

My process of gathering contributions for this book overlapped with the war in Israel-Palestine and Lebanon, a time when we have seen the utter destruction of an education infrastructure within Gaza and the violent interruption of learning

throughout the region. This context, whose latest swell of violence started in 2023 and, despite some fragile ceasefires is effectively ongoing, underlined the radical stakes at the heart of learning.

One of the roundtables included here, about art education in the Middle East, was rescheduled constantly to account for Israeli attacks in Palestine and Lebanon. This was poignantly illustrated by a story that professor Gregory Buchakjian, who teaches at ALBA, an art school in Beirut, told about a student. He said, “The other day, I saw a student who lives in a neighborhood that was bombed. She was sitting on a chair. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t say a word, her face was completely white, she was completely traumatized. She wanted to stay. The students want to come because otherwise they are stuck at home, and they feel they are going mad. So this young woman who didn’t sleep at night was exhausted.

She didn't want to go home because the campus is a safe space and outside of the war arena." Sometimes the stakes of schooling are life itself, where classrooms become not only spaces for learning but potentially spaces for care.

This book, *Living to Learn: Art & Education for the Common Good*, addresses contemporary art as a site of learning. It builds on the ambition of education as a civic service for the common good, but when it intersects with art, the compound *art & education* encompasses different modes of address to a public, not just as a methodology but also as a subject. As I'll outline later, learning, as opposed to teaching, was the operative word for both the educational turn and the radical pedagogies that inspired it. Learning was thought to be

a more ethical operation, one that doesn't presuppose hierarchies and thus is more connected to the liberatory dimensions of education. The title of this book links living to learning to imply that learning is not circumscribed to one's childhood in the form of school but rather is a mechanism to apply curiosity and openness as a practice in everyday life. Furthermore, it connects to the social dimension of education, and, as it applies to art, the ways in which art and life can be connected.¹

¹ The "living" in *Living to Learn* is inspired by Nato Thompson's survey of social practice, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* (MIT Press, 2012). Linking the notion of the "common good" to ideas about art and the public is inspired by the 2016 anthology *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* (MIT Press, 2016), edited by Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willson.

² Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966–1972* (University of California Press, 1997).

³ As artist Andrea Fraser put it, "L'1% C'est Moi," *Texte zur Kunst* (September 2011): 114–127.

⁴ See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press, 1991), and Hannah Arendt's notion of the "space of appearance" in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 219.

The "educational turn" emerged in the early twenty-first century as a form of art and exhibition making that proposed a radical shift in the ways that we assume art's role in society. These art practices were radical in several ways. One has to do with an intervention into normative expectations of the form of art. Drawing on the dematerialization of Conceptualism, the educational turn decentered the art object and focused instead on discourse.² Another had to do with a more political intention, aligning art practice with critiques of society. To shift the focus of an exhibition from objects to discourse could be seen as anti-capitalist, since it elided the production and exchange of commodities. But as I'll describe later, capitalism has a way of engulfing everything, even practices built in opposition to it.³ One central argument within the educational turn was that education is essential to produce and develop a public, as defined by egalitarian principles, and by bringing that to an art practice, the cultural sphere could be reinvigorated as a truly public sphere.⁴

In the twenty-first century, *art & education* had to contend with the tensions between pedagogy as a process to serve democracy, decolonization, and the public sphere and the ways in which it could be used as a tool to reinforce systems of oppression. The educational turn in the twenty-first century produced small, often artist-run, alternative education institutions, as well as new kinds of artistic and curatorial practices and radical changes in universities and museums. This book will chart these developments, with particular attention to the Americas and the Middle East. It is not intended to be a definitive survey of global practices in this field. There are many more examples than this book can hold. But it is intended to be

decidedly global, as it covers a period when globalization became a defining characteristic of contemporary art.

My focus on these two regions is based on considerations that are both institutional and personal. One is that I and the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, the academic museum producing this publication, are

based in a US context, and thus part of a larger flow of political economies that move through the Americas. I also have worked with artists and institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean from my position in the US, taking students to visit some of the initiatives included in this volume such as SOMA and Capacete. Secondly, VCU has a campus in Doha, Qatar, part of a dramatic development of universities and museums in the Gulf region. Also, for two decades much of my work as a writer and curator has focused on the Middle East. Both these areas have been significant centers of alternative organizations and artistic practices during this time.

⁵ Horace Mann, *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann On the Education of Free Men* (Teachers College Press, 1957).

⁶ Gabriela Ossenbach and Maria del Mar del Pozo, "Postcolonial Models, Cultural Transfers and Transnational Perspectives in Latin America: A Research Agenda" *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 47, no. 5 (2011), 579–600 and Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), 135.

⁷ Akkari Abdeljalil, "Education in the Middle East and North Africa: The Current Situation and Future Challenges," *International Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (2004): 144–153. The artist Alia Farid curated an exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York in 2021 that also touched on this history in the Middle East. *The Space Between Classrooms* took as its starting point the prototype for schools that Swiss architect Alfred Roth designed for Kuwait's Ministry of Public Works during the late 1960s.

⁸ Wendy Brown, "The End of Educated Democracy," *Representations* 116, no. 1 (2011): 19–41; Henry A. Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Democracy's Promise and Education's Challenge* (Paradigm Publishers, 2005).

Education and Democracy

Ideas about education in the Global North emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries alongside the development of democracy. In France, the secretary of education François Guizot established a law that secular primary education be accessible for all citizens. In the United States, Thomas Jefferson and later Horace Mann and John Dewey advocated for a similar notion—that a democratic society requires an educated citizenry.⁵ In Latin America during this same period, a postcolonial era of nation-building was also influenced by these models, especially European ones.⁶ In Egypt, President Gamal Abdel Nasser advocated for free public education as a part of its own decolonial process.⁷

Wendy Brown and Henry A. Giroux, writing in the early twenty-first century and responding to neoliberal disinvestments to education, lamented the break from this history, forcing education from the public to the private sphere.⁸ But the ideals of the Enlightenment era, replacing the church and the crown with a democratic public, were also fraught with a series of power relationships that made assumptions about who could have access to, or participate in, this public. The ideals of democratic republics in Europe and the Americas often failed to live up to their stated principles.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher and a central figure in twentieth-century radical pedagogy, argued that education could be a path to the liberation of the oppressed within these republics, that despite the limitations of early forms of education in nascent democracies, it still could be used to overcome those challenges.⁹ Similarly, bell hooks argued that education could be a model for

undoing many of the structures that reproduce inequality in society.¹⁰

Formal modes of education in Europe and the United States developed in the nineteenth century relied on lectures, memorization, and mastery, whereas more experimental forms of education, developed in the twentieth century, included more active engagement and participation.¹¹ In the language of theater, noting the performativity of education, the fourth wall is broken, allowing a more porous relationship between performer/teacher and audience/

students. This shift in forms of teaching produced new architectures for the physical embodiment of these ideas.¹²

Similarly, the traditional understanding of art in the nineteenth century was that it entailed objects for passive contemplation. In the twentieth century, various modernist experiments produced models for participation such as Conceptual art, performance art, and Fluxus. These forms broke the fourth wall between art and spectator; they came about for many reasons but one might argue that a certain degree of freedom was at stake. The ways artists broke

the fourth wall shared a democratizing impulse with a similar break in education. Redistributing authorship between artist and spectator modeled a similar redistribution of power and authority.

Radical Pedagogy and Its Legacies

Many of the artistic movements that inspired art & education practices were themselves influenced by a cluster of theories subsumed under the term *radical pedagogy*. Philosophers Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser argued that schools were mechanisms that reproduced power and ideology through structures of discipline, much like the army or the police and despite their appearance as soft power.¹³

Following this, Austrian philosopher and theologian Ivan Illich argued that traditional models of education were structured so that the pupil was “schooled” to receive the instruction of a teacher for the purpose of grade advancement and acquiring a degree. He argued instead for the “deschooling” of a schooled society and to replace teaching with learning. This sentiment is echoed in curator Miguel Lopez’s interview with artist Patricia Belli included here. Illich proposed “learning webs” made up of networks such as skill sharing, peer matching, and resource libraries for self-directed modes of education.¹⁴ Illich worked with these ideas throughout the Americas, including stints in Puerto Rico and Mexico.

In a similar vein, philosopher Jacques Rancière argued for an “ignorant schoolmaster” to interrupt the power dynamic between teacher and student.¹⁵ As you will see in his contribution to this book, curator Manuel Borja-Villel cites this notion as an influence on his educational programming

9 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1970).

10 bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 1–12.

11 See Ruth Erickson, “A Progressive Education,” *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957* (Hammer Museum and Yale University Press, 2015).

12 See Beatriz Colomina, Ignacio G. Galán, Evangelos Kotsioris, and Anna-Maria Meister, eds., *Radical Pedagogies* (MIT Press, 2022) and the 2021 exhibition *Education Shock: Learning, Politics, and Architecture in the 1960s and '70s* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.

13 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1972); Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–188.

14 Ivan Illich, “Why We Must Disestablish School,” *Deschooling Society* (Harper & Row, 1972), 1–23.

15 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

In his influential 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued against what he called the traditional “banking” model of education, in which students are treated as empty vessels to be filled with information. Instead, he argues for students to engage in dialogue and become active political subjects. This educational model, based on the value of equity, can lead to them identifying the conditions of their oppression and creating a framework for their liberation.¹⁶ A work by the Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade was inspired by Freire’s educational models and is included in this book. bell hooks wrote about the potential for education to provide a pathway for liberation from systemic oppression. In her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress*, she argues that after school desegregation in the United States, classrooms became highly politicized spaces to negotiate intersectional racial politics and that politicization activated their potential to make education a place for freedom.¹⁷ Two artists included in *Living to Learn*, Kameelah Janan Rasheed and Steffani Jemison, cite hooks as inspiration for their approaches to teaching.

In many cases institutions such as universities or museums have been rife with inequality and oppression, and one approach to radical pedagogies like deschooling is anti-institutional. In her essay reproduced here, art historian Beatriz E. Balanta asserts that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person of color to inhabit academia.” In his essay, artist and architect Yazan Khalili describes struggles with freedom of speech and the ways that both the law and cultural funding resist it.

¹⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994).

The impulse for artists to self-organize many of the projects tied to the educational turn produced a radical alternative to and also a critique of institutions, asking them to evolve and help dismantle these systems of oppression. But sometimes the claims of radicality did not match the forms and structures these initiatives took. It prompts the question: Do we abandon institutions as hopeless power structures or work to reform them? Put another way, while smaller alternative institutions and artist interventions are necessary, should we give up on the potential for larger institutions to care for the common good? As curator and educator Dominic Willsdon argues in his contribution to this book, there *is* something valuable about institutions caring for the public. Reversing our perspective, if we invest in alternative structures, how can we ensure that they are not only financially viable but also ideologically sustainable? Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, an editorial advisor and contributor to this book, describes her work with the Puerto Rican space Beta Local, founded on Illich’s principles, and the ways in which that work began to be conditioned by the requirements of foundation grants—as opposed to the intentions of its founding. The radicality of the alternative is often tamed to meet the requirements of nongovernmental administration.

* * *

In the twenty-first century, the notion of radicality has itself been turned on its head. As I write this in the first months of the second Trump administration, two interpretations of revolution and liberation are being invoked in American political discourse.

First, the Tea Party during the Obama administration, developed not just as an

opposition to those in power but also the governing logic of the incumbent. This new form of conservatism, sometimes called the alt-right or the new right, assumes that the government and all aspects of the elite that control contemporary society are guided by liberal values that must be overthrown with the zeal of the American revolution. In this case, the Tea Party was not against British colonial occupiers but a liberal American elite. This has evolved so that when Trump and other Republicans today speak about “the deep state” or “the administrative state” that seeks to control the freedom of the American people, it is iconoclastic, a call to tear down institutions not only within the US government but also NGOs, universities, and cultural institutions. The penultimate manifestation of this movement was the attack on the US capitol on January 6, 2021, by Trump supporters. This inspired supporters of the outgoing Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro on January 8, 2023, to storm the capital in Brasília, revealing that this way of thinking was not unique to the United States.

Secondly, these notions of freedom—and the use of disruption as a method to achieve it—have been amplified by a coalition of conservatives in the US that has built a new network of alliances across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process. As public-health agencies advocated for sheltering in place, vaccines, and masking as measures to protect both individuals and communities, there was a severe backlash. Opponents of these measures saw them as government control, an overreach into their civil liberties. Suddenly the phrase “my body, my choice,” previously associated with feminist abortion-rights advocates on the political left, was now the rallying cry of a libertarian right. When Althusser was writing about the ideological state apparatus as a

mechanism of control, he assumed a conservative hold on power. Similarly, the politics of radical pedagogy assumed that marginalized voices were progressive. When Foucault wrote about skepticism of the intentions of education or medical establishments, it was based on the assumption that power had been transferred from a feudal king to a conservative administrative state. But that same logic has now been turned on its head, and the alt right sounds like Foucault voicing skepticism about the scientific method and the intentions of educational institutions.

Nowhere was this ideological battle more apparent than in the sphere of education, especially for K-12 students. Education in the US became politicized, and formerly quiet school-board meetings became highly charged political spaces to air these debates. Not since the movement to desegregate schools in the 1950s had we seen such venom. This charged atmosphere was compounded by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the widespread response led by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Suddenly, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives were brought into broader social awareness, and mostly white conservative parents accused schools of not only brainwashing their children about COVID but also making them feel bad for being complicit with white supremacy. The conservative activist Christopher Rufo fanned these flames and galvanized these isolated moments into a movement that was invited into the establishment by the second Trump administration, whose educational and cultural policies have been guided by this ethno-nationalist backlash.

As queer and trans students started to become more visible in mainstream society and the use of chosen pronouns and

gender-affirming healthcare became more common, a related backlash arose. In 2016, North Carolina's House of Representatives passed Bill 2, which requires anyone in a public facility, including all public schools, to use the bathroom corresponding to the gender they were assigned at birth. Gordon Hall's essay "Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See," reprinted here, references this bill and discusses how an object, like a body, is legible. As I write this, federal agencies have been instructed to dismantle DEI and LGBTQ-friendly policies, including those that allow for the inclusion of trans people in public-education spaces.

Education and art play a particular role in politics defined by democracy and the rights and representation of the citizen subject, like the United States. They are also ways to critique the hypocrisies of liberal and neoliberal societies and their claims of inclusion.¹⁸ But now, as a new, increasingly ethno-nationalist social contract emerges, there is a radical undoing of established precedent. Now the challenge for people invested in progressive forms of art and education is deciding whether we defend the flawed institutions, letting go of the impulse to critique them, or build new alternatives on their ashes.

The Educational Turn

So what *was* the educational turn? One might begin with the premise that every

artwork is a school, as one of this book's contributors, curator and art historian Sarah Rifky says, and we could think of the educational turn as

a shift in a way of thinking about how any artwork functions. In that sense, it would be more interpretive than proscriptive. But the educational turn was more literal than that. As outlined by theorist and curator Irit Rogoff, the educational turn was not a "reading strategy" like the linguistic turn of the 1970s, which was a way of thinking about either art or education. Instead, she argues that the educational turn was an active movement responding to urgencies within the field of education.¹⁹ One of the most impactful of these was the Bologna Accord, which sought to standardize education in Europe by creating systems of outcomes and accountabilities and was modeled on a similar system in the United States. Rogoff and her colleagues were alarmed by this pressure, which treated knowledge production like many other forms of production in a capitalist society and turned ideas into commodities and treated teachers and students as workers in a factory, alienated from their labor.

Even though this book does not include contributions from others, like Rogoff, who participated in the European examples of the educational turn, I think it's useful to give a short summary of this activity as context for what is included here.

Based in London, and teaching at Goldsmiths College, Rogoff was deeply engaged in the discourse of the educational turn in Europe. In 2006, Rogoff co-organized A.C.A.D.E.M.Y. at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, The Netherlands, a project that asked the question, "What can we learn from the museum?" It included a series of exhibitions and events with collaborators that also explored how learning can be applied to institutions.²⁰ Two terms that she introduced to this effort are *potentiality* and *actualization*. She says that there was a

¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Irit Rogoff, "Turning," *e-flux Journal* (October, 2008), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/>.

²⁰ Angelica Nollert and Irit Rogoff, eds., *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.* (Berlin: Revolver Press, 2006).

desire to reintroduce the potential for failure and risk-taking into an education discourse that was becoming more bureaucratized and homogenized. In Berlin in 2007, she co-organized the conference Summit: Non-Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture, along with the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Goldsmiths, and unitednationsplaza.

Biennials began to expand their reach beyond exhibition making, revealing the conversations that often make up a curator's research as public platforms. Rogoff refers to the discussion forum 100 Days—100 Guests at Documenta X (1997, curated by Catherine David), which hosted one hundred talks during the exhibition, and to the four discussion platforms across the globe prior to the opening of Documenta XI (2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor et al.), as important moments in this development.²¹ In addition to discussions, these platforms also were significantly inclusive of art practices, and by extension political contexts, outside of Europe and the United States. For example, David included several Lebanese artists who had developed practices in the wake of the Lebanese civil war, which had ended in 1990. Enwezor, born in Nigeria, was the first non-European artistic director of Documenta, and centered postcolonial narratives told by non-European subjects.

But some attempts at using dialogue to bring different political subjects together revealed that such conversations could be high-stakes. unitednationsplaza grew out of a perennial exhibition, Manifesta 6, which was set to take place in Nicosia, Cyprus in 2006. Nicosia is a capital divided

between Turkish and Greek control. According to the Manifesta website,

²¹ Nollert and Rogoff, *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*

²² "Manifesta 6 Nicosia, cancelled," <https://www.manifesta.org/editions/manifesta-6-nicosia/about>

²³ "Manifesta 6 Nicosia, cancelled."

The self-composed collective consisted of German curator Florian Waldfovel, American Russian Anton Vidokle, and Egyptian Mai Abu ElDahab, who worked together with General Coordinator Yiannis Tournazis and Director Hedwig Fijen on a pre-biennial research model called the Manifesta 6 Coffee Breaks, which took place 5 months before the opening of the school in 2006 in the Northern territories of the city of Nicosia. Fifteen artists-in-residence organizations from all over Europe and US were invited to share their ideas about a new living and working space in Manifesta 6 to be positioned on both sides of the Green Line.²²

The organizers of Manifesta 6 intended to turn the traditional biennial into an experimental art school to promote dialogue between European artists. Their website says,

The Manifesta 6 School was envisioned as a postgraduate, transdisciplinary program for approximately ninety participants from many parts of the world, lasting about twelve weeks, selected based on an Open Call. Inspired by historical examples, such as Black Mountain College in the US and the Bauhaus in Germany, the Manifesta 6 School would have been a meeting ground for cultural producers in the region and beyond, as well as a platform for collaboration, discussion, and co-production.²³

In keeping with the notion of open dialogue, the organizers intended on locating this school on both the Greek and Turkish sides of the border. This intent inflamed tensions with the Greek Cypriot authorities and Manifesta 6 was cancelled by the President of the Greek part of Cyprus, who froze its bank accounts. Curator Anton Vidokle took the plans for the cancelled Manifesta 6 project and turned them into a new project

called unitednationsplaza, in collaboration with theorists, artists, and curators Boris Groys, Jalal Toufic, Liam Gillick, Martha Rosler, Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Nikolaus Hirsch, Tirdad Zolghadr, and Walid Raad. unitednationsplaza was first launched in Berlin in 2007 and then traveled to Mexico City and to New York's New Museum in 2008.

This history of Manifesta 6 is significant not only because it was a foundational example of the educational turn applied to a biennial but also because it shows how the principles of dialogue and engagement were at odds with a geopolitical situation predicated on separation.

In 2008, curator Paul O'Neill and artist Mick Wilson organized a panel at the ICA London, "You Talkin' to Me? Why Art Is Turning to Education," as a part of the Nought to Sixty Salon discussions. This was preparation for a 2010 book also edited by O'Neill and Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn*. In 2009, Steven Henry Madoff published *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*.²⁴ In 2011, Felicity

²⁴ Steven Henry Madoff, *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)* (MIT Press, 2009).

²⁵ Felicity Allen, ed., *Education* (MIT Press and Whitechapel Gallery, 2011).

²⁶ See also the 2023 exhibition *The Educational Web* at the Kunstverein Hamburg and Sam Thorne, *School: A Recent History of Self-Organized Art Education* (Sternberg Press, 2016).

²⁷ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990): 105–43.

²⁸ I'm indebted to curator and writer Gavin Kroeber for this point.

Allen edited an anthology about education for the MIT Press/Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art series.²⁵ Over these few years the particular conversation in Europe and the United States around education as an art practice covered a lot of territory.²⁶ This publication builds on that work but does not seek to

recapitulate it, instead expanding its scope beyond what was traditionally referred to as the educational turn to include practices that are adjacent to its focus.

Education vs. Research

Rogoff suggests that the aesthetics of pedagogy that have characterized many of the projects in the educational turn—think of rooms with a chalkboard, a library, a set of chairs—might have become too ossified in their own formal expression to continue the urgency and dynamism that originally characterized the project of education as a form of art and exhibition making. In this sense, the aesthetics of pedagogy grew out of Conceptualism's aesthetic of administration.²⁷

Even the physical layout of alternative spaces started to resemble one another. Organizations included in this book such as Beta Local, lugar a dudas, Capacete, and SOMA all have a kitchen, a library, and a space for a projector or blackboard together with a table and chairs. In his contribution, Sean Dockray talks about the importance of a large square table at the center of The Public School, the Los Angeles–based organization that he ran. But perhaps the spatial aesthetics of the educational turn aren't a tired exhibition style but more akin to a paradigm of encounter on par with the white cube or the black box.²⁸

Often this pedagogical aesthetic resembled artistic practices, predicated on research, that might use an archive as the basis of the work. One question that has come up for me: When is a practice centered on education and when is it giving form to research? When artists center their practices on researching a given subject and then

share what they learn, is that a form of education? In some cases, yes. In others, no. I believe there is an overlap between research-based practices and education as a medium of knowledge exchange. But if education is not embraced as an intrinsic model, then these practices rely on preexisting structures to use as methodologies to present that knowledge, or, as Paulo Freire would say, it relies on a banking model of education.

There has been ample work done by curators, critics, and scholars to address research-based practices, including Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson's *Curating Research* (2015) and Tom Holert's *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (2020).²⁹ For curators, the centrality of research does not just help them and a viewer interpret a work of art, or produce a thesis that binds together a set of artworks. Research, as a model of work for curators, allows for the project they produce to engage learning as an ongoing process that the viewer/audience/user participates in. Holert points out that while we might recognize the forms archive-based art take, what is often at stake is, following Michel Foucault, the power struggles over the ownership, representation, and reproduction of knowledge.

So, when Documenta 15, curated by ruangrupa, included The Black Archives,

Asia Art Archive, Fehras Publishing, and Chimurenga, it was to present archives of marginalized knowledge as an intervention into normative structures of knowledge in the Global North. But one thing that I have encountered in

archive projects like these is that the viewer/audience/user must come to the archive with the preexisting knowledge about how to navigate it. If we take education into account, it's like teaching someone by handing them a book without ever unpacking it in a classroom discussion.³⁰ Education is a way to make an archive more accessible and more transparent, yes, but also to challenge its authority, its structure, and the assumptions that might be embedded in it by putting it into dialogue with different points of view. Perhaps the best way to address this is to ask whom this work is meant to engage. ruangrupa set up a network of collectives included in Documenta 15 that they referred to as a *lumbung*, a community of interdependence. Perhaps those collectives were prepared to function as learners, but a general audience seemed less so.

Research as a practice for artists and curators rose to prominence in parallel with the knowledge-based economy. This transition to a post-Fordist political economy seemingly dematerialized labor alongside a shift from mechanical to digital production. The twenty-first century is the so-called information age, and the ways in which we find, store, and transfer data seem to supersede the manufacture of tangible things, at least in the Global North. So, as artists decenter the materiality of the object in favor of discourse and the organization of knowledge, it can follow the progressive politics of representation by presenting otherwise marginalized forms of knowledge. On the other hand, the obsession with knowledge and information as the basis of artistic practice seems to follow the most hegemonic of belief systems and power relations in an information-based economy. In this sense, research-based practices run the risk of following the same neoliberal

²⁹ Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating Research* (Open Editions, 2015); Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (Sternberg Press, 2020).

³⁰ There is a huge body of work on the archive and art, but two useful sources are Charles Merriweather, ed., *The Archive*, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art (MIT Press, 2002) and Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (International Center for Photography, 2008).

patterns as the rest of the world, or as Buchloh would put it, a new aesthetics of administration.³¹

The potential conflict is this: The new aesthetics of administration in an information economy pronounces social exchange as one of ease and fluidity. It's guided by the principles of reducing user friction and maximizing efficiency, like the sleek lines of an iPhone, flexible hot desks, and hybrid work environments. On the other hand, the affective nature of this aesthetic is about maximizing user engagement through friction, enflaming rage as clickbait, driving up user numbers by harnessing base desires. Museums and universities use community engagement, feedback forums, or research exchanges to illustrate connection and fluidity and responsiveness. Some forms of activism against these institutions manifest as rage against the machine. But the truth of educational endeavors is that they are really hard and really slow. Art & education projects take more labor and resources to sustain than exhibitions in museums or university curricula. True education cannot take place as either fluid ease or carnal rage. It is guided by the principle that, as writer Sarah Schulman says, conflict is not abuse.³² Learning spaces are defined by students recognizing things that they don't know about the world or about themselves, and that often produces a feeling of discomfort. This realization is often encountered as conflict, with a teacher, another student, or even their conception of themselves. The work of transformation, of growth, is moving through that discomfort to not only build something new but also to maintain the discomfort. Sustaining this mode of work-

³¹ Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969."

³² Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016).

ing has been difficult for institutions large and small.

Education as Socially Engaged Art: Participation and Collaboration

Another node in the Venn diagram of art & education is socially engaged art practices. Here it might help to explain a term that I used above: viewer/audience/user. Following relational aesthetics and other forms of conceptually based performative art, socially engaged art practices privilege the social, the gathering of people together, as their primary medium. As such, they often do not assume that the primary work exists in visual terms, so the "viewer" is a metaphor for someone who might engage with the work. Similarly, since this work is social, it is rare for there to be a single person to whom the work is directed. It is more often an audience. But, as I mentioned above, this kind of engagement often breaks the fourth wall in Brechtian fashion, so the audience is not an autonomous entity that passively consumes the experience. Instead, the borders between artist and artwork and audience are blurred—so much so that the ones who engage the work might be referred to as users, to borrow a term from the information economy.

Art historian Claire Bishop's study of socially engaged practices, especially her 2006 anthology *Participation* and her 2012 book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, emphasizes the importance of participation for social practice and includes some pedagogical projects as examples.³³ Participation, for Bishop, has its origins in the twentieth century through Dada, theorist Walter Benjamin, and Brecht, who saw participation as a political activation of art's potential. This dovetails with art historian Grant Kester's writing, most notably his 2004 book *Conversation Pieces*, where he outlines something that he calls

“dialogical aesthetics,” a formal structure for conversation.³⁴ But Bishop and Kester famously debated whether socially engaged art practices should engage with ethics.³⁵ A more recent book, *Art as Policies for Care: Socially Engaged Art 2010–ongoing*, doubles down on the ethical demand, centering care as a model for art and encouraging artists to contribute to the public sphere and rethink the commons.³⁶

Social Media and the Digital Commons

What does the *social* of socially engaged practices mean today? It's notable that the social

as a subject, medium, and methodology of art practice, predicated on embodied human contact, emerged at around the same time as social media.³⁷ This was also a moment of relative social isolation, when activities like shopping, dining, and movie-watching moved online. The public sphere shifted from the museum or the theater or the coffee shop to online forums. Some have lamented this symptom of the internet age, while others like Legacy Russell have advocated that digital spaces have given rise to new social formations. In these spaces, one can code switch

through avatars and screen names, shifting out of identity markers that make it harder in a mode that she—eliding the more traditional term IRL—calls AFK, away from the keyboard.³⁸ Even the medically advised isolation of shelter-in-place policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic produced a fluency in online lectures, discussions, and collaborative work solutions, and with it a tension between physical separation and a greater potential to be connected to communities around the world. The idea of open-source software, tied to the start of the internet, might seem quaint in a time when tech billionaires use the social dimension of their platforms to surveil, control, and commodify us. But concurrent with the rise of a high-tech corporate hegemony has been the use of these same technologies for mutual aid and knowledge-sharing. For instance, during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020, syllabi and reading lists on Black Radicalism and African Diasporic history and theory circulated widely online. Artist and writer Andrew Woolbright's essay on Dark Study, an online platform launched in 2020 by artists Caitlin Charry and Nicole Won Hee Maloof, highlights how they leveraged digital space for knowledge-sharing as a more accessible form of learning.

One social mode of art & education is collaboration, an aspect of group formation that emerges from both the classroom and the artist-run institutions that often produced alternative models of pedagogy. After all, a class is a group that includes the teacher and the students, but how this group functions has a lot to do with different ideas of group work. Musician and writer Ethan Philbrick describes the ambivalence of group work as a product of a neoliberal condition in which our capacity to form groups is often put to work.³⁹ The twenty-first century also

³³ Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press, 2006) and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012).

³⁴ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004).

³⁵ See Grant H. Kester, “Another Turn (2006)” and Claire Bishop, “Response to Grant Kester (2006),” both in *Education*, ed. Felicity Allen (MIT Press, 2011).

³⁶ Martina Angelotti, Matteo Lucchetti, and Judith Wielander, eds., *Art as Policies for Care: Socially Engaged Art 2010–ongoing* (Nero Editions, 2024).

³⁷ Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), the iPhone (2007), Instagram (2010), TikTok (2016).

³⁸ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020).

³⁹ See Ethan Philbrick, *Group Works: Art, Politics, and Collective Ambivalence* (Fordham University Press, 2023), 16.

produced a resurgence of interest in forms of collective art making and institution making, such as art historian Blake Stimson and artist Gregory Sholette's anthology of texts about collectivism.⁴⁰ Much like the shift from objects to the social in the educational turn and socially engaged practices, collectivism shifted the assumption of a singular author to acts of commoning.⁴¹

The Historical Context

While not all educational projects that emerge from art practices are inherently activist, or even explicitly political, there is a history of the intersection between activism and socially engaged education. Most notable is the relationship between the Situationist International and the student uprising in May 1968 in France.⁴²

During the May 1968 protests, a slogan emerged—"beneath the pavement, the

beach"—that referred to student protesters who were picking up cobblestones from the city streets and throwing them at the police barricades.⁴³

The gap created by this lifted brick revealed the sand of this imaginary beach. The phrase implies that through action there is also political speculation, and hopeful speculation about the future often underlies the act of being a university student. It also

implies that actively engaging with the built environment of a place, one can build a new future. Scholar and curator Claire Doherty linked the term *situation* with discourses around site specificity and art in the public sphere.⁴⁴ One dimension of site specificity implies its contemporary political reality and the ways in which that is related to an historical context. In this sense, there is also a temporal dimension to site specificity, one that artist Tania Bruguera would call a project's timing-specific nature.

Much of the state of education is tied to the state of the world. We are in *catastrophe time*, as Gary Zhexi Zhang, a contributor to this volume, says, in a state of ecological and political crisis and economic collapse, brought about by a financially unsustainable form of neoliberal privatization, leveraged through student debt and real-estate debt and endowments tied to the markets.⁴⁵ But what political markers of the twenty-first century, especially with regard to the Americas and the Middle East, set the stage for art & education projects that served a common good?

Geopolitical events had a huge impact on art & education. George W. Bush first heard about the attack of September 11, 2001, while reading to an elementary-school class. The effects of consequent invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and the enthusiastic violence of American imperialism can be felt to this day throughout the Middle East. At the same time, the Gulf exploded as a growing center for museums, biennials, and universities located in spectacular cities of steel and glass that were rising from relatively modest built environments. Two examples of this are included here: a conversation with Zeina Arida, director of Mathaf in Doha, Qatar, and one with Noora Al Mualla,

⁴⁰ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

⁴¹ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴² T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International," *October* 79 (Winter 1997): 15–31.

⁴³ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (Verso, 2011).

⁴⁴ Claire Doherty, ed., *Situation, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Gary Zhexi Zhang, *Catastrophe Time* (Strange Attractor Press, 2023).

director of learning and research at the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates. The sheer labor to build these urban centers provoked protest from artist groups like Gulf Labor. The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, also provoked massive change throughout the MENA region. Sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, its effects included regime change in Egypt and a civil war in Syria, which, as of this writing in 2025, has arrived at a fragile peace. The turmoil in Syria and Iraq, in particular, led to a huge refugee crisis that rippled through Europe.

In Palestine-Israel, the second Intifada broke out in 2000, leading to a brutal clap back from Israel including an apartheid wall, housing demolitions, checkpoints, and a spike in settlements. Throughout the twenty-first century, the United States has sent Israel billions of dollars in military aid every year. One project described here by researcher and curator Rasha Salti and artist Khaled Hourani is *Picasso in Palestine*, which highlighted these conditions by turning a school into a museum. Lebanon encountered tremendous political upheaval, even in the relative peace after its civil war concluded in 1990. In 2004 the prime minister of Lebanon, Rafic Hariri, was assassinated and, in 2006, Israel launched its largest attack since 1982. A conversation between sociologist and art historian Pelin Tan and curator Christine Tohme about the Beirut-based Ashkal Alwan illustrates the complexity of culture work in this context. After the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, a war broke out between Israel and Palestine that has also spilled over to involve Lebanon, Iran, and Yemen. As of this writing there is a fragile ceasefire but, as I have been working

on this book, this conflict has had a very strong ripple effect on universities, museums, biennials, and many other areas of the art & education sphere, as several texts in this volume make clear.

Meanwhile, in Latin America, the twenty-first century has been characterized by what has been called a *pink tide*, as many governments became more leftist. There was tremendous hope when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva served as president of Brazil, for the first time, from 2003–11. Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998 and Evo Morales served as president of Bolivia from 2006–19. While it's difficult to make sweeping generalizations about this region over the last twenty-five years, there were swings back and forth along the ideological spectrum. Following the end of the Cold War, attempts at US-style privatization in combination with foreign investment led to tremendous income inequality and neoliberal debt pressures. In many Latin American countries this led to the more leftist governments that sought to soften the blow to the working classes. But in places like Brazil, Lula was eventually followed by Jair Bolsonaro, who, like Donald Trump in the wake of Barack Obama, worked to undo many of the protections that had been instituted by the progressive government. In a conversation included here, Thiago Gil de Oliveira Virava, formerly the director of education of the São Paulo Biennial, discusses how the institution responded to these changing conditions through education. In the case of Venezuela, the policies implemented by Chávez and then his successor Nicolás Maduro produced a financial crisis and then a refugee crisis that rippled throughout the region. Additionally, instability

in Central America led to an immigration crisis that pushed northward toward the United States.⁴⁶

Immigration from the Middle East to Europe and north from Central America was caused by the instability of these regions' political economies but also by radical shifts in climate change. These immigration crises contributed to a rise in isolationism and ethno-nationalism in both the United States and Europe. The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016 and the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from Europe through Brexit in 2020 are instances in which isolationism accelerated.

The 2008 financial crisis, otherwise known as the Great Recession, was felt globally. Rooted in the collapse of the United States housing market and related areas of banking and insurance, it led to austerity measures that were acutely felt in both art and education. In these pages, philosopher Brian Holmes alludes to the ways these developments affected public universities in the United States. The Great Recession produced a reckoning with growing income inequality and class disparity through Occupy Wall Street, which centered on Zucotti Park in downtown Manhattan. Interestingly, 16 Beaver, a small alternative space that engaged with modes of discourse and pedagogy, was located just a few blocks away. 16 Beaver hosted seminars related to Occupy as well as sessions related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Arab Spring. In the collaboration between Campus in Camps and Grupo Contrafile included here, architect Sandi Hilal notes

⁴⁶ For a great summary of the political, social, and economic contexts of socially engaged art in Latin America during the 1990s and early 2000s, see Bill Kelley Jr., and Grant H. Kester, eds., *Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art, 1995–2010*, (Duke University Press, 2017).

that, for Palestinians, the term *occupy*, in the Occupy movement, made them uncomfortable and

notes that you can only occupy something that isn't yours. She prefers the term *return*.

In 2013 the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter sparked a movement protesting the killing of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown Jr., and other Black people, many of whom were shot by police. The murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, reignited this movement, which spread beyond the borders of the United States, galvanizing a global conversation around racism. For example, artist Helmut Batista, the founder of Capacete, an alternative art space in Rio de Janeiro, talks about stepping back to let a more diverse leadership take over. Echoing this shift, for the first time, the curatorial team of the 35th São Paulo Biennial, presented in 2023, was majority Black.

In 2017 the hashtag #metoo sparked a global movement against sexual assault and sexual harassment. Sexual-assault survivor Tarana Burke began using the term in the 2000s, and it went viral in 2017 when American celebrities began using it in reference to their own high-profile assault cases. This also shaped the context of the first Trump administration's early days, which included the 2017 Women's March protest in Washington, DC, and dozens of global cities. In Argentina, a "green wave" of abortion-rights activism spread to other Latin American countries protesting against femicide and for family-planning rights.

Of course, intersectional conversations around race, gender, and sexuality had their roots in twentieth-century civil-rights struggles and the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s. But social media and a rapidly changing political landscape brought these issues to the foreground in new ways that had profound effects on art and education in the twenty-first century. In 2015, the

Supreme Court of the United States made same-sex marriage legal and, over the course of the twenty-first century, that right was enshrined in hundreds of countries around the world. Conversations around queer and trans rights and representation also grew during this time.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke an already fragile public sector in the Americas and the Middle East. Aside from straining public-health efforts and other social services, it accelerated a decrease in European aid to Latin America and the Middle East. Furthermore, through the isolation of stay-at-home orders, social engagement through participation and collaboration was even more difficult. As you'll see from the discussion around the Latin American school *Secue LA* included in this book, art & education initiatives made inventive attempts to use digital spaces for collaboration.

The 2020 pandemic coincided with a resurgence of Black Lives Matter, as critic and curator Anuradha Vikram's essay "Unstable Connections: University Teaching in a Time of Protest and Quarantine" describes. The public-health crisis revealed severe limitations to public infrastructure and to the government as an agent that could care for the public. At the same time, George Floyd's murder and the consequent racial-justice uprising made clear that the law, and the police as its enforcing body, were structurally incapable of caring for the whole public, with some members afforded more privilege than others. From a progressive standpoint, that moment revealed on two fronts how "the public"—as it has been imagined within American democracy—might not exist. But now, in 2025, during a second Trump administration that is intentionally destroying the

government because it is perceived to only serve a liberal elite, the public, as an imaginary construct, is being put into question by the political right. If the public is attacked as an illegitimate concept from both the left and the right, how do we address the notion of public education as a common good?

Student activism

As schools became sites of ideological battles, they also became, quite literally, more violent spaces. Over the course of the twenty-first century there was a huge uptick in school shootings in the United States. Building on a long-standing debate about guns in American culture, advocates on the right have advocated for the freedom of American citizens to bear arms as protected by the Second Amendment while opponents argue that students should have the right to attend school without fear of being shot. Artist Cara Benedetto's project in this book speaks to this condition, once again reminding us, like that terrified student in Beirut, that the stakes of schooling are life itself.

One of these school shootings was in Parkland, Florida in 2018, when nineteen-year-old Nikolas Cruz killed seventeen people. The students that survived became activists for gun control. Starting with the hashtag #neveragain, they organized the March for Our Lives in Washington, DC, the biggest youth-led protest since the Vietnam War era, then founded a political action committee that has influenced elections and related legislation. A major theme in this activism was the political power that the National Rifle Association had amassed through hundreds of millions of dollars spent lobbying Congress. The challenge for these student activists was not just how to

advocate for what they believed to be right, but how to confront an edifice of such staggering financial power.

Students, in high school or university contexts, have often advocated for political or social change, and just as often have been met with the force of state violence and repression. In addition to the students in Paris in May '68 mentioned above, a famous example of this is the October 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City, during which Mexican military forces attacked students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, killing hundreds. Artist and writer Sean Dockray links a 2013 crackdown on student protesters at the University of São Paulo with the clearing of a Occupy-related protest camp at the University of California, Davis that same year.⁴⁷ Dockray describes these both as indications of not only the increasing militarization of campuses but also a desire on the part of political leaders and university administrators to prevent the kinds of protest culture that characterized the 1960s and '70s.

I have included two essays that emerged from student activists in the twenty-first century. One, by Brian Holmes, relates to the University of California system protests that Dockray references. Students and faculty there were responding to neoliberal pressures on universities to privatize and to assert austerity measures, which they recognized would lead to fewer resources and more student debt. They saw this as connected to the larger political economy, within which the public sector was shrinking and class disparity was growing. The second text, written by an anonymous

Harvard senior and entitled "Why I Protest," emerged

⁴⁷ Sean Dockray, "Openings and Closings," in Tim Ivison and Tom Vandeputte, eds., *Contestations: Learning from Critical Experiments in Education* (Bedford Press, 2014), 32.

from an encampment movement in 2024 protesting not only the war in Palestine-Israel but also US foreign aid and the complicity in that conflict of the university through its endowment investments. Following the principles of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, these student-led Palestinian-solidarity encampments challenged their universities to reconcile the humanistic claims of their mission statements with their complicity in the political economy of war. Art historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's text included here, "The University Struggle to Unlearn Zionism," shows how universities as institutions learned—and are still learning—to go through a deschooling process that is akin to decolonization.

Debt, Indebtedness, and the Future

I have come to believe that the most pressing issues facing art & education at this moment can be ascribed to the political economy of debt and indebtedness. In the United States a neoliberal disinvestment in the public sector began in the 1980s. With this withdrawal of public support came an increase in mechanisms to justify the limited resources left. Under the Bush administration in the early 2000s, the No Child Left Behind Act tied budgets to test scores, a policy that continued during the Obama administration. As Irit Rogoff outlined, the educational turn was a response to neoliberal forces such as the Bologna Accord in Europe, inspired by the US model, which emphasized capitalist structures of maximizing output through a restructuring for institutional efficiencies. This was a tension between the goals of public and private enterprises, nonprofit versus profit-based

structures. This tension has also been felt by artists and alternative spaces seeking resources from wealthy individuals, foundations, or nations through a system of patronage that demands clear goals and outcomes for any investment. While education is for the common good, it is often tasked to fit into a capitalist system that is run by a different logic than the speculative spirit of learning. We are required to pay into a system that doesn't acknowledge the currency of emotional labor or ideas that don't have measurable outcomes. Thus our balance sheet is almost always in the red. I would argue that debt is the most common way that the gap between these two systems is filled.

One consequence of the 2008 financial crisis, and Occupy Wall Street as a response to it, was that student debt became an increasingly important issue as the cost of education ballooned. A few texts included in this volume address these developments. The artist-run group BFAMFAPHD published a report that accounted for the problems of student debt in 2014. Writer and filmmaker Astra Taylor helped cofound an organization called The Debt Collective that took the approach that if corporations and nations are allowed to restructure obligations, then students should be able to as well. The Debt Collective abolished over thirty-one-million dollars in student debt using the principles of collective bargaining. Another outgrowth of Occupy was the collective Occupy Museums. Its project DebtFair presented a 2015 artwork that illustrates student debt, titled *Stress, Fear, and Anxiety Bundle*, in the 2017 Whitney Biennial.

Given this discussion around student debt and the increasing financial pressures faced by educational and arts institutions

large and small, established and alternative, how can we approach the question of debt more broadly?

One of the Debt Collective's initiatives is the Rolling Jubilee Fund, established to address debt related to public education. This fund was named after the ancient practice described in the book of Leviticus, in which every fiftieth year is a Jubilee year during which all debts are forgiven. The late David Graeber, an anthropologist and a co-organizer of Occupy Wall Street, refers to debt as the oldest form of currency and notes that economic life was traditionally rooted in social currency, which was meant to "create, maintain, or sever relations between people, rather than purchase things."⁴⁸ One might feel indebted to one's parents, one's community, or one's god, and might show appreciation through various offerings or gifts. Graeber argues that the notion of indebtedness that characterized older human economies has transformed into something much more violent; debt, he says, is not the problem, but instead the form that it has taken. Graeber relates a conversation that he had at a party with someone who argued that, as a moral principle, everyone must pay their debts. But, he notes, it is clear that in today's economy that such a moral principle is inconsistently applied. The Great Recession pushed many financial institutions and other companies into bankruptcy, and some were bailed out by the United States government through the Troubled Asset Relief Program. While companies could be relieved of their debts during this difficult time, individuals who could no longer pay their mortgages often lost their homes. He notes the similarity to the International Monetary Fund insisting on restructuring the economies of developing countries so they can pay back their debts.

⁴⁸ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Melville House, 2012), 158.

One issue with debt is its relationship to time. The Great Recession brought to the foreground a complex network of finance and insurance predicated on risk and investment in relation to the future. But scholars Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva argue that the risk associated with home ownership is also compounded by the past. They point out that the subprime mortgage, at the center of this financial crisis, became racially signified because banks systematically questioned the creditworthiness of borrowers of color. This was based on much longer histories of oppression, including redlining and other forms of segregation and dispossession that limited the building of generational wealth among Black and Latinx families. And when we consider the fact that the funding of public education in the United States is determined largely by real estate, with wealthier families in more expensive homes enjoying wealthier school districts, we must also acknowledge that it is deeply tied to this arc of history and racialized risk.⁴⁹

Furthermore, Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva argue that there is a biopolitics of the house. While a house may be property, it is also a framework for the home, as in the family, and the domestic private sphere. So when that house, that home, is financialized and furthermore linked to the

financialization of education, a housing crisis impacts much more than property or money—it impacts one's life. The risks to one's life get written on the body, since the racial logic of global capitalism has historically treated different

bodies differently, despite the professed equality of the marketplace. This is a condition not only in the United States but has been applied to the Global South as the legacies of colonialism continue in postcolonial times, as developing countries remain indebted to the developed world.⁵⁰ Latin American alternative education organizations discuss this postcolonial legacy later in the book. And curator Sarah Rifky's essay also tells a story of how the introduction and withdrawal of European and American patronage through various cultural-development projects affected alternative education projects in Egypt.

As exemplified by many of the vibrant practices in the so-called "Third World" described in this book, these places are often a space of innovation that far outpaces the pedagogical creativity of supposed centers in the Global North. In "A Third University is Possible," la paperson (a.k.a. K. Wayne Yang) argues that just as Third Cinema, a political film movement in Latin America in the 1960s and '70s, invented new paradigms that not only incorporated first- and second-world sources but also reinvented them into something entirely new and unique, a Third University could do the same.⁵¹

The essay also outlines the history of land grant universities and how they embed real-estate speculation and colonization into the bedrock of the university. In 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law, giving states federal lands that had been taken from Indigenous people so that they could sell portions of them to fund the building of universities, which would, in turn, create an infrastructure for industry through research. Thus the practice of university real-estate speculation that continues to this day is an extension of

⁴⁹ Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3, "Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime" (September 2012): 361–385.

⁵⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 5–38.

⁵¹ la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

American settler colonialism.⁵² Real estate is also an investment tool, part of an investment portfolio. The two sides of investment in an American university are student tuition, most commonly paid for via debt, and real-estate speculation, also realized through debt in the form of mortgages. Both the students and the university are bound by unpayable debts.⁵³

In 2013 theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney published *The Undercommons*, a critique of higher education with a chapter that focuses on debt.⁵⁴ This incredibly influential text, written in prose that combines theory with poetry and wordplay, differentiates study from learning for “credit,” for a degree paid for by tuition. Study is something that produces the mutuality of non-commodified indebtedness that Graeber identified.

In the summer of 2020, as a part of their labor organizing around affordable housing, immigration precarity, and policing, a group of UC Irvine graduate students hosted Moten and Harney for an online discussion of their writing on the university and the undercommons. The intergenerational solidarity of the event was remarkable: Moten and Harney suggested tactics for surviving

academia to a group of younger scholars. The undercommons is similar to the Third University in the sense that it is imagined as a space for marginalized people to come together for study, for organizing, or other forms of mutuality. It is not so much a space outside of the university but outside of

the university’s logic, which is one that the authors refer to as an experience economy.⁵⁵

As I mentioned earlier, in 2024, Palestinian-solidarity encampments popped up on campuses in the United States and around the world in response to the genocide in Gaza. Aside from being an example of student activism, they highlighted the economic conditions of the university. One of the most prominent sites of these protests was Columbia University. Adam Tooze, chair of the university’s history department, is represented here by a sketch of his attempt to map the political economy of the university. As he reminds us, in addition to tuition, public and private universities rely heavily on endowments to fund themselves. These are built with private gifts and invested like any other fund in the market. The students were demanding, in keeping with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, that Columbia’s funds divest from companies that are tied to Israel. In this, the students’ demands are like those of Occupy Museums; in both cases, the Palestinian-solidarity movement was questioning the ethics of the money that supports the institution.

We have now reached the point where we can see clearly that education and capitalism are inextricably linked. Similarly, the notion of indebtedness and exchange that Graeber notes as an ancient form of human economy are related to the principles of collaboration and participation employed by the many artists who use education as a medium. It is when ownership—of land, or homes, or bodies, or ideas—is invoked that education slips into a situation of unpayable debt that, by definition, works against the common good. In this book, educators in universities, museums, and alternative arts organizations all describe

⁵² la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible*, 25–29.

⁵³ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Sternberg Press, 2022).

⁵⁴ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013)

⁵⁵ Moten and Harney extended their ideas of the undercommons in a text that they circulated online in conjunction with this Zoom convening with the UC Irvine students. The piece, dated July 9, 2020, is entitled “the university: last words.” In it they expand on the notion of the professor as a worker in an experience economy.

the current conditions as a crisis. The violent and carceral logic of debt has displaced the communal mindset of indebtedness. One dimension of this is, of course, how capital is tied to power and ideology. But can we imagine another system? The Debt Collective, the Third University, and the Undercommons are all examples of such propositions for change, and several initiatives included in *Living to Learn* point to yet more possibilities.

* * *

I have divided this book into five sections: Alternative Arts Organizations, a collection of practices that emerged to attend to various needs within the civic spaces of the Americas and the Middle East; BFAMFAPhD, a survey of formal accredited art schools and universities; Practices, focusing on education as a medium and a subject for artists and curators; Museums and Biennials, a survey of the ways institutions have addressed pedagogy; and Sustainability, a section that addresses ecological, economic, and programmatic strategies for sustaining art & education practices into the future. In addition, artists' projects are woven between these sections to show, rather than tell, a story of living to learn.

The sustainability section brings together examples of initiatives that have been innovative and hopeful despite the challenges of this moment. Artist Hope Ginsburg's *Meditation Ocean* links questions of ecological sustainability with mindfulness practices and an engagement with different audiences through a

⁵⁶ Originally published in Gary Zhexi Zhang, "On Financial Worlding," in *Catastrophe Time* (Strange Attractor Press, 2023).

⁵⁷ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

range of pedagogical models. Astra Taylor describes

the solidarity work of the Debt Collective. Designer and curator Prem Krishnamurthy and curator Sam Rauch describe their Department of Transformation, which has initiated collaborations between independent artists and cultural workers and public universities. I also include conversations among those involved in the Dakar-based RAW Académie residency at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Philadelphia, which produced really deep, intersectional conversations about how radically different institutions can challenge one another to grow through collaboration. Gary Zhexi Zhang's contribution to this section describes financial worlding.⁵⁶ He contends that investment, like debt, is predicated on the future. We can speculate on possible futures and that speculation is a way of building our current world. While optimism can sometimes be cruel,⁵⁷ Zhang helps us see that if we understand world making as a form of belief, then we don't have to be held hostage to some notion of fate; instead, we can create a new world predicated on the futures we want to see.

I began this essay by invoking the necropolitics of a terrified student learning in a warzone. But no matter what is at stake, it is often tough to find hope and to believe in a sustainable future. This is especially true when considering debt and indebtedness, and how unjust political economies are both communal and personal. Given how entrenched universities, museums, and NGOs are in the violence of financialization, political ideology, and the relationships between the two, how can we believe that things will change for the better? When I have my own doubts, I look to the ways that the late scholar José Estaban Muñoz describes a queer utopia:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then* and *there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.⁵⁸

Queerness is a subaltern state in a heteronormative world, just like education pushes against the hegemony of debt, choosing indebtedness instead. Education is often thought of as training for the future, but even when it's considered in less transactional terms it still implies some form of growth or transformation, either of an individual (a student) or a group (a class). If we can change how we imagine our futures, then perhaps we can meaningfully change our present and build a better world for the common good.

⁵⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Utopia* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

Educação para adultos (Education for adults), 2010

Jonathas de Andrade

*Digital offset print on paper in sixty parts,
each 13 ⅜ × 18 ⅛ in. (34 × 46 cm).*

This project started from a series of twenty educational posters printed in the 1970s and used by the artist's mother when she was working as a teacher in the '80s and '90s. The approach to pedagogy these posters exemplify is influenced by Paulo Freire's method of literacy, combining education with social consciousness. Freire had been invited by Brazilian President João Goulart's government in the 1960s to organize the National Literacy Campaign. The military coup of 1964 interrupted the project, and Freire was persecuted, arrested, and exiled.

Using the concepts and procedures of Freire's alphabetization method, Jonathas de Andrade's posters were the basis for a monthlong series of daily meetings that the

artist conducted with a group of illiterate women. Each day's conversations became photographic subjects for new posters created by the artist. At the end of this process, Andrade created a work that includes sixty posters that mix important historical moments—1964, 1971, 1980, 1990, and 2010—presented without specific reference to which image corresponds with which date. The collection speaks to the pedagogical process that de Andrade and his mother engaged in and the larger context of Freire's influence on learning as a mechanism for emancipation.

Eight posters are excerpted here.

brasil—brazil

colônia—cologne

dinheiro—money

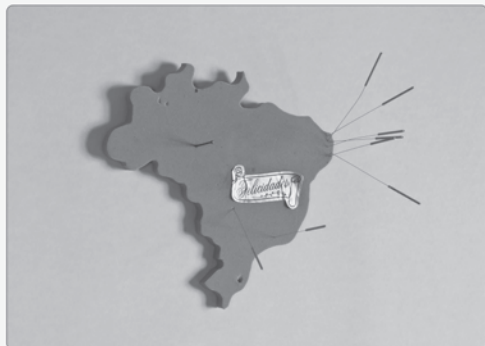
enxada—hoe

faca—knife

fogo—fire

riqueza—wealth

saque—sack



brasil



colônia



faca



fogo



dinheiro



enxada



riqueza



saque

I. Alternative Arts Organizations

Recently formed alternative arts organizations are at the heart of the art & education initiatives described in this book. The organizations featured in this section worked in the Caribbean, Nicaragua, Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and the US and offer a snapshot of some prominent practices in the Americas and the MENA region.¹ Others, most notably Secue_LA, are included in the sustainability section of *Living to Learn*.

Researcher and curator Engy Mohsen offers case studies from the Middle East, noting a reliance on European and American funding and the irony of a postcolonial,

neoliberal, NGO-development culture that echoes colonial paradigms. But these organizations also helped catalyze an

alternative to a set of aesthetic and political institutions that are relatively conservative.

This brings up the larger question about these organizations: an alternative to what? Is it the cost of mainstream education and its consequent debt? Is it a stale curriculum? Is it political constraints? It's important to note the different contexts of each of these initiatives. For example, when Kim Córdova writes about SOMA, she describes its founding in response to the particular circumstances in Mexico. It was an antidote to the lack of contemporary art in local MFA programs. But it also created a new creative ecology for the local art scene. The alternative is not so much in relation to the institutions *as schools*, but in offering a different model of professionalization after graduation.

In some ways this is similar for Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, as described in the conversation between founding director Christine Tohmé and sociologist and art historian

¹ For more examples of these kinds of organizations, see the 2023 exhibition *The Educational Web* at Kunstverein Hamburg and Sam Thorne's anthology *School: A Recent History of Self-Organized Art Education* (Sternberg Press, 2016). See also the partial list of alternative arts organizations at the end of this book.

Pelin Tan. While the city has established universities and alternative spaces,² Ashkal Alwan provides an opportunity for rigorous sustained learning combined with more freedom and a commitment to site-specific attention to the region. The political instability of a particular regional context is something that Ashkal Alwan shares with lugar a dudas, based in Cali, Colombia. While the regions' political economies are different, there is something in their stories that rhymes. Artist Oscar Muñoz and cultural worker Sally Mizrachi tell the story of founding lugar a dudas at a moment in the 1990s when the drug war was grim. While Ashkal Alwan grew out of the post-civil war reality, it has continuously had to navigate political, social, and economic instability. So has lugar a dudas.

Nonetheless, these organizations repeatedly describe gathering people together to create new forms of collectivity. Artist Pablo Guardiola is a codirector of Beta—Local, a Puerto Rico-based organization cofounded by fellow artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz. Guardiola writes here about RAY | RAYO | RAYON, an initiative, also cofounded by Santiago Muñoz, that brings together artists from across the Caribbean for an itinerant school. It offers opportunities for dialogue and connection by focusing on the fractured archipelago of the region.

In some cases, technology has enabled this convening. Artist and writer Andrew Woolbright's essay on Dark Study describes an innovative online alternative to MFA programs that emerged in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, writer and curator Miguel A. López speaks with Nicaraguan artist Patricia Belli about an influential television program about contemporary art that her organization produced.

Many threads connect these stories, and I encourage the reader to find points of connection not only between the projects described here but also between them and other practitioners and organizations referred to throughout the book. What should unfold is a constellation, predicated on commonality and separated by the particularities of context, that cares for communities through opportunities to learn.

² See the conversation about art education in the MENA region in the BFAMFAPhD section of this book.

Intended Missions, Adjacent Outcomes: A Reflection On “Art Schools” in the Arab World

Engy M. Sarhan

My participation in “independent art schools” between 2018 and 2023 left me with more urgent questions than answers: What conditions led such schools to emerge in the first place? What were their desired outcomes? What were we producing in them? I took part in the Roznama Studio Program (Cairo, 2018), MASS Alexandria (Alexandria, 2018–19), Artists for Artists (online, 2020), and the School of Commons (Zürich, 2022 and 2023). These schools were the entry point for me into contemporary art. On many occasions, I tried to actively

question how this type of school is formed and functions. These questions eventually turned into a meta-discourse, a critique of the situatedness of my practice and how it

became undetachable from the educational initiatives it leans on.

What—or, more accurately, who—is being produced in these art programs, and what is the expected outcome? What I mean by “production” lies in the essence of the creation process itself, and how this applies to different subjects—for example, artists or curators—in these closed environments. Was the intention of these programs to produce a form of shared knowledge? Or to consciously shape what art theorist Thierry de Duve called “the attitude” of artists?¹ Or was it merely to make artworks palpable and stage them in an exhibition space toward the end of the program period?

While the outcome often manifests as an exhibition, it also creates an archive of the program. Value, as drawn from anthropologist Julia Elyachar’s analysis, reflects not just material outcomes but also control over what is considered important.² This raises

¹ Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude—and Beyond,” in *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and The Wider Cultural Context*, ed. Stephen Foster and Nicholas de Ville (John Hansard Gallery, 1994).

² Koray Çalışkan, “Book Review: *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 163–65.

questions about what is more critical: fully developed works, theoretical foundations, or practical career opportunities. The value of these programs hinges on the contributions and roles of each player—participant, instructor, founder—in navigating the complex ecology of these institutions.

The emergence of alternative and independent art schools in Beirut, Cairo, and Ramallah over the past two decades represents a significant shift in the landscape of art education in the Arab world.³ These schools distinguish themselves from formal art institutions and position themselves as an alternative to their inadequacies. They do so by designing curricula that are more aligned with contemporary art practices and critical thinking. The deficiencies of formal art institutions cut across the region, which suffers from outdated course curriculums, separation of departments by medium, exclusion of theory-based study, undereducated and underpaid faculty and staff, bureaucracy, and learning environments that stifle critical thinking and academic freedom. They suffer from anachronism, rigidity, and disconnection from current contemporary global art discourses.

"Traveling Theory" and Defining Flow

³ I would like to borrow the definition of the term "Arab World" from *Mophradat*, an art and funding institution based in Belgium: "a loosely defined geography that is called home by people of diverse ethnicities, gender identities, religions, ideologies, and languages." <https://mophradat.org/en/who-we-are>.

⁴ Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 226.

⁵ Said, "Traveling Theory," 226–227.

In his 1983 essay "Traveling Theory," Palestinian American philosopher and literary critic Edward Said expands on cultural exchange, hybridity, and disseminating intellectual concepts across geographical and cultural

boundaries.⁴ To demonstrate how theory can take different forms as it "travels" from one region, discipline, or discourse to another, Said's essay lends itself to analyzing each of the schools that I will discuss as case studies. Said argues that a recognizable pattern exists in the movement of ideas, typically encompassing three or four standard stages. The third stage involves "a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be."⁵

By viewing these alternative art schools through the lens of Said's traveling theory, especially what he calls the conditions of acceptance and resistance that confronted some discourses while being translated into their immediate social, political, and economic contexts, we can better understand the complex interplay between global educational approaches and local practices. This interaction has forged a practice of art education in the Arab world that responds to specific needs and urgencies.

Intended Missions, Adjacent Outcomes

While independent art schools claim to fill gaps in formal art education, I argue that their unstated and unaddressed outcome is the impact they have on participants' subjectivities. Rather than bridging the gap, the broadening of participants' intellectual and social access, perception, and understanding of a global art world, instead, creates a rift that further foregrounds the separation between their stated missions and adjacent practical outcomes.

Independent art schools aim to expand participants' perceptions and understanding of their social and cultural contexts beyond mere professionalization. This broader educational objective aligns with the Uruguayan German artist Luis Camnitzer's concept of "true education," which, as highlighted by art critic and educator Brian Kuan Wood, emphasizes the negotiation of social relations and the pursuit of collective betterment.⁶ Camnitzer argues that proper education transcends mere training; it involves critical engagement with the world and fosters an environment where social and political issues can be explored through art.

The Imaginary School Program (Cairo, 2014–15)⁷

The Imaginary School Program (ISP) was a cross-disciplinary, practice-based theory initiative for twelve participants. The school comprised workshops, lectures, field trips, reading groups, and other hybrid activities. The program's primary focus—as they described it—was the study of institutions and forms of organizing, particularly within Cairo's cultural landscape, culminating in a collective publication and a collateral exhibition. It aimed to inspire political imagination and novel forms of social

organization and to reflect the urgency of and dynamic changes in Cairo's political and cultural environment after the 2011 uprisings.

The open call for the program was published on the Contemporary&

and Beirut art space websites. Its stated mission was broken down into seven questions that address different aspects of the program.⁸ One of the primary questions listed is, simply, "Why the ISP?" The answer preempts the first question an applicant might ask. The language used in the school description asserts its position within the larger fabric of civic society, employing concepts that triangulate "civic responsibility," "social justice," and "alternative infrastructure." This choice of terminology suggests that the school aims to play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing these ideals within the community and its immediate surroundings.

While the school's stated mission emphasized scrutinizing some of the existing organizations around it, ISP resonated in a completely different manner within the context in which it operated in Egypt. The framing of a school as an institutional clinic implied a certain distancing from the surrounding institutional landscape. However, the school could only perform this role through self-identification within said landscape. This, in turn, required a certain degree of code-switching, which the school used as a strategy to negotiate presence in public space and still engage politically. Borrowed from linguistics, the term *code-switching* describes alternating between two or more languages within a conversation or discourse, often based on the social context or conversational setting. (I will explain more thoroughly how I see code-switching differently from translation later in the essay.) Code-switching is used to navigate different cultural or linguistic environments and convey specific social or cultural identities. This could be seen through the lens of Said's traveling theory. This process of code-switching is what he

⁶ Brian Kuan Wood, "Foreword," *Luis Camnitzer: One Number Is Worth One Word* (Sternberg Press, 2020), 6.

⁷ See the Imaginary School Program on the Beirut website, <http://beirutbeirut.org/en/projects/535d21725562-7576a7180000>.

⁸ "Call for Applications: The Imaginary School Program." *Contemporary And*, n.d., <https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/call-for-applications-the-imaginary-school-program>.

refers to as the fourth and final phase, which is how the transformed idea starts to occupy a new position, time, and place.

On the one hand, the school adopted a specific universal language to situate itself on a broader scale. On the other, there was a disconnect when this language was applied to its specific local context, revealing that the school’s practical outcome was on an adjacent trajectory. In an online exchange with curator Sarah Rifky, we exchanged ideas to define what role ISP might have played within its neighborhood.⁹ What enabled the space to exist is the fact that Rifky is not foreign to the street, area, or neighborhood; it is a family-owned space built by her great-grandparents, and where she used to live. Even though she was aware of those factors, she admitted that she never articulated it that way.

Spaces like the ISP can only exist in that form and shape due to their specific social and cultural contexts. The way they engage with particular questions is facilitated by what I refer to as a “social passport.” This concept is crucial because it draws from the social connections embedded within the community and the relationships people have with their environment. It allows for introducing new and unconventional ideas that are socially acceptable, relying on a network of trust and familiarity within the built environment and previous connections. This “social passport” is not merely about social capital in the traditional

⁹ Sarah Rifky, interview via Zoom, May 30, 2024.

¹⁰ Alexandra Kollontai, *Red Love* (Seven Arts, 1927); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press, 1984); Pat Parker, *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker, 1961–1978* (The Crossing Press, 1978).

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (Verso, 2020).

sense; it is a form of community-building where relationships of trust are forged. This network of trust and shared understanding enables the school to negotiate its presence

on the street and neighborhood level and allows it to engage in politically charged discourse effectively.

The same can be said about the set of relationships that define the roles of people involved at the ISP. Rifky noted that she had been friends with Jens Maier-Rothe, her cofounder, and that Habibaa Effat, office manager at *Beirut* and one of the participants in ISP, was her first cousin. When discussing relationships such as friendship and family in a specific place, there is often a disconnect between what these relationships signify and how they function in practice.

In various Black or lesbian communities, comradeship, friendship, and intersectional solidarity form a fundamental political foundation.¹⁰ Furthermore, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote about the concept of friendship and its political implications, both historical and future, to envision a radically new form of friendship that fosters a deeper and more inclusive democracy.¹¹ He argued that there is a paradox in friendship, as it is typically perceived as a private relationship yet often carries significant political implications.

Similarly, in Egypt, as exemplified here by Beirut and the Imaginary School Program, friendship is a significant political formation, although we lack the conceptual language to discuss it more explicitly. These relationships are deeply embedded in our daily lives, yet their cultural significance remains underexplored and unnamed in societal discourse. This is akin to the experiences of cultural workers who navigate complex social and political landscapes where personal bonds are not just social connections but also crucial support systems and sources of solidarity. These relationships, while often perceived as private, inherently carry political weight.

They facilitate collaboration, foster mutual aid, and create support networks essential for sustaining cultural and political work in challenging environments.

Discursive and cultural concepts often require code-switching, revealing varying awareness and intention across individuals and communities. This is particularly evident in spaces like the ISP, where social relationships, such as friendship and family, play crucial political roles by fostering trust and building community. Despite their impact, these relationships lack clear terminology and remain under-discussed. Addressing this gap can illuminate the nuanced forces shaping social relationships and their influence on political structures. Moreover, making power dynamics more visible and reducing the opacity of these relationships can significantly affect participants' subjectivities and the accessibility of such spaces.

The School of Intrusions (Ramallah, 2019–24)¹²

The School of Intrusions (SoI) is an educational practice in occupied Palestine. It uses

informal gatherings to engage with urban and rural spaces, treating them as common areas for mutual learning and collective action. Initiated in 2019 by curator Lara Khaldi and artist Noor Abed, who are both Palestinian, SoI uses “intrusion” or “direct intervention” into

public sites as its core strategy. It challenges traditional education by integrating it into daily life and exploring community-based, experiential knowledge. As the name suggests, “intrusions” is a play on words that hints at the potential of being politically playful and thought-provoking.

In an interview, Abed mentioned that one of the founding pillars of the school was the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of Freedom*, and especially his description of education as “[a form] of intervention in the world.”¹³ Unlike its counterparts, the SoI does not formalize a process of admission and selection of participants, and the cohorts' names are not announced at the beginning of each edition. Its structure assumes no space, walls, or institutional affiliation.

I came across the most recent description of the school on the website of Neither on Land nor at Sea, where Abed and Khaldi were invited to give an online presentation about the school via Zoom on May 14, 2023.¹⁴ As it's described, “School of Intrusions is a collective practicing informal ways of gathering in and around specific urban and rural sites. The members of the group change and fluctuate. It grew from a conversation about education, art schools, collectivity, and the city as a shared space in Palestine.”

According to the text, the school describes itself using language and discursive terminology—like “commons,” “collective,” and “gathering”—nowadays somewhat ubiquitous in contemporary critical theory; especially as these terms relate to “public space,” the school occupies a particular “social and political imaginary.” While considering the broader factors at play, these terms are commonly used yet lack precise definitions in application, and they are connected to many of the notions

¹² See the School of Intrusions's Instagram account, <https://www.instagram.com/schoolofintrusions>.

¹³ Klara Czerniewska-Andrzejczyk and Noor Abed, “Intruding in Story and Space” (2020). <https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/residences/conversations/intruding-in-history-and-space->

¹⁴ *Neither On Land nor at Sea* is a research project initiated and curated by UNIDEE Residency Programs at Cittadellarte—Fondazione Pistoletto by Chiara Cartuccia, the visiting curator for 2022–24. <https://neitheronlandnorat-sea.art/public-programme>.

and concepts that aim to describe this field of practice. The lexicon of SoI (as well as some of the other schools) relates to common terminology of contemporary art and curatorial practice, including "happenings," "site-specific art," "dialogic art," "socially engaged art," "participatory art," "social practice," and the art of "social cooperation."¹⁵ In this way, the school lends itself a certain legibility that translates into value because it is easily understood and comprehended within a global network.

¹⁵ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (University of California Press, 1993); Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (The MIT Press, 2003); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004); Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (Jorge Pinto Books, 2011); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and Politics Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012); Maria Lind and Nato Thompson, "Returning On Bikes: Notes On Social Practice," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Creative Time and MIT Press, 2012), 46-55; Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations On Art and Social Cooperation* (Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ This is not to be confused with the Great Revolt in Palestine (1936-39), which is referred to as the "First Intifada" in some historical accounts.

¹⁷ Sarah Aziza, "Palestine's First Intifada Is Still a Model for Grassroots Resistance," *The Nation*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/palestines-first-intifada-is-still-a-model-for-grassroots-resistance>.

Despite deploying a particular terminology and discursive formation, the school resonates in a completely different manner within the context in which it operates in Palestine. While there is a borrowing of a specific language to situate the school on a more global scale, there is a rift in which this language applies on the ground. This, in turn, requires a certain degree of code-switching, in which the school is used as a strategy, as an invisibility cloak, to be able to negotiate presence in the public cultural sphere and still act in a politically engaged manner. This is similar to the first case study, the ISP in Cairo,

using code-switching as a strategy. SoI's use of code-switching is subtly different, though. ISP was more concerned with using the translation process to navigate the intricacies of social relationships. Inversely, SoI is primarily concerned with different power dynamics as the participants engage with a public space.

Following this hypothesis, framing the group's work as a school can be seen as a strategy to "intrude" into public space (as well as into the traditions of institutional art education). In turn, this allows us to consider the possibilities of making this association on the ground. For example, framing their activity as a "school" is less dangerous than framing themselves as guerrilla activists. The weight of framing changes significantly if a group uses guerrilla tactics to force themselves into a space and call themselves a school that aims to engage with discursive content. By positioning the group as a school, they can pursue their practice and goals using a framework for dialogue and education rather than political confrontation, making their approach non-threatening and potentially more effective in permeating public spaces.

The history of the Palestinian resistance tells us that this reading is not a wild stretch of imagination, and experience has shown us that employing such strategies is necessary and urgent. During the First Intifada in 1987, which was mainly led by women, activists organized economic cooperatives, mobile health clinics, and underground schools to sustain and strengthen the insurrection.¹⁶ In some cases, women organized "classrooms" in their homes and in open areas like grassy fields to defy the Israeli-imposed closure of Palestinian schools.¹⁷ In the documentary film *Naila and the Uprising* (2017), activist Naima Al-Sheikh Ali explains how "publicly,

the women's committees were known for their social work. But in reality, and covertly, it was all political organizing. Nurseries, sewing workshops, teaching women how to knit, cook, and so on. All that was window dressing."

In studying the SoI, I posit that there is a certain degree of translation at play. What I mean by translation is that there is flexibility in moving between languages depending on the audience, whether participants or the general art public. This involves liberties in how terms and strategies are employed. It is essential to differentiate this from code-switching, where conversation shifts between languages while accommodating both—assuming the recipient's familiarity with each. This also does not negate that the artists behind it are entirely aware of this act of code-switching between widely understood terms and local particularities. However, the critical part about this practice is that it is not divulged. In her essay "Qalqalah: The Subject of Language," Sarah Rifky speculatively asks, "[I]s a political paradigm shift possible through a rediscovery of other languages? Is speaking more than one language a form of treason masked as knowledge?"¹⁸ By practicing this translational code-switching, they are not acknowledging the impossibilities and the paradoxes of said translation process. Some of the impossibilities of translation include presenting the school to an international art audience that does not factor in the enforced restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinians in the West Bank, where the school primarily took place, and how that affects access to public space in rural and urban areas. Conversely, there is also the challenge of presenting knowledge embedded in a global art context to local participants, which

¹⁸ Sarah Rifky, "Qalqalah: The Subject of Language," *Qalqalah 1* (2020): 109, <https://qalqalah.org/en/histories/qalqalah-the-subject-of-language>

might seem detached from its application on the ground.

Since the pilot edition of SoI took place in Palestine, in the West Bank, predominantly in and around Ramallah and Jerusalem, I was curious to find out from Abed and Khaldi whether they believed that the specific political context in Palestine played a role in shaping the school, mainly when it came to reclaiming both private and public sites or "treating [them] as commons," as mentioned in the project description.

In reflecting on Abed and Khaldi's statements, it becomes clear that the political context in Palestine, particularly after the Oslo Accords, significantly shaped the School of Intrusions (SoI). Both emphasized how the rapid shift from communal to privatized spaces impacted their work. Abed highlighted the role of neoliberal policies in transforming public and private spaces, explaining how cities like Ramallah created an illusion of freedom despite ongoing colonialism. Khaldi echoed this sentiment by recounting how, during the First Intifada, private spaces became public out of necessity, while the post-Oslo period saw a retreat into privatization. Both noted that SoI's work involved reclaiming these spaces, not only physically but also symbolically, by challenging economic and spatial boundaries.

Home Workspace Program (Beirut, 2011–24)

Launched by Ashkal Alwan in Beirut in 2011, the Home Workspace Program (HWP) is an annual eleven-month arts study program designed for participants from Lebanon, the Arab region, and the world.¹⁹

In general, every iteration of the program was informed by the prior years, with the possibility for total restructuring. This way, new elements could be developed to meet the program's needs.

A generic description of the program can be found on Ashkal Alwan's website. Each year, the text changes slightly at the discretion of the newly assigned professors, who are invited to rethink the program and revamp its curriculum. This mainly highlights the motive behind the program while stating that a primary factor for its initiation was providing a solution for the "privatization" of art education. It reads:

HWP is an annual arts study program that invites participants to develop their formal, technical, and theoretical skills in a critical setting and provides enrolled fellows

with feedback and resources to facilitate and support their art practice. HWP was initially developed to explore interdisciplinary, critical models of art education in Lebanon and beyond, where education is mostly privatized. Moreover, it aims to include a wide range of professors, all the while addressing geopolitical particularities in art and the educational landscape.²⁰

¹⁹ Ashkal Alwan, The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, is a nonprofit organization based in Beirut, Lebanon's capital city. It was founded in 1993 by its current director, Lebanese curator Christine Tohmé, alongside Lebanese artist Marwan Rechmaoui. It is considered one of several influential institutions and projects that emerged across the city in the wake of the Lebanese civil war. ²⁰ See the Home Workspace Program on Ashkal Alwan's website, <https://www.ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=3>.

²⁰ See the Home Workspace Program on Ashkal Alwan's website, <https://www.ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=3>.

²¹ Pelin Tan, Magnus Ericson, and Christine Tohmé, "Home Workspace Program," *Urgent Pedagogies*, November 2020, <https://urgentpedagogies.iaspis.se/home-workspace-program>. See also pp. 44–51 in this volume.

The text suggests that the program strongly emphasizes professionalization. Designed for young artists, it claims to prepare and equip them with all the necessary tools, whether practical or theoretical, to launch their artistic careers. The text also highlights another important factor, the economic setting in which it exists; most art education in Lebanon has become privatized. In response, HWP can open up opportunities for those wishing to participate, as it is free of charge.

Upon reviewing the profiles of the lead professors and the overarching thematic focuses, I could observe a noticeable tendency to prioritize theory over practice, particularly during the earlier years of HWP. In an interview with sociologist and art historian Pelin Tan, Ashkal Alwan's co-founder, Christine Tohmé, addressed this polarity by emphasizing the importance of being rooted in practical work, which can be applied on the ground to better understand the surrounding environment rather than merely reproducing theory or stultified and stilted forms.²¹ She further explained that HWP is not outcome-oriented but instead focuses on forms of exchange that create a dialogue with the local context.

Tohmé stated that HWP works in a traditional way, where it maintains a fixed structure with seminars and group critiques. However, it sustains a fluidity in the refusal to replicate entrenched ideas of a recurring "faculty" or curriculum and the liberties given each year to visiting artists and professors to reshape it. Agency is given to those who join to create their own projects and extend beyond the local network. They consistently come back and contribute through teaching, participating in group critiques, or joining as guest artists, ensuring they remain integral to HWP's expanding community.

Instead of focusing on apparent dichotomies of practical vs. theoretical and structured vs. fluidity, I wonder if the HWP can be read through different lenses. Here, I am not proposing to overlook contradictions in professed and materialized goals but to offer a third and adjacent reading. I believe that while HWP claims to fill gaps and complement formal art education in Lebanon, its more material outcome is how it increases participants' intellectual and social access, perception, and understanding of art, mainly through the expansion of the artists' networks: the connections made between the participants and visiting advisors and professors as well as among themselves.

In a conversation between Tohmé and curator Rachel Dedman, a participant in HWP during 2013–14, the former mentioned that “here is a network that you build, friends you make, collaborations that you form, that [are] very important.” Dedman responded that the takeaway from that formative year was the network and how people connected between the gaps of the institution. The spaces in which things coalesced among people were exciting for her. The human dynamics that play into such structures were seen as the most exciting aspect by far.²² As scholar Ilka Eickhof describes in her essay “Class and Creative Economies: The Cultural Field in Cairo,” “[t]he pressure of neoliberal labor turns networking into an investment and connections to different social actors into precious symbolic capital.”²³

This network of different actors was especially enabled by the international nature of HWP. The students and instructors were much more

diverse in background and types of practice than the two other case studies, the ISP and the SoI. Thinking back to Said's idea of “traveling theory,” I tried to determine if it was clear to the participants whether some ideas or theories brought about in the context of HWP were more accepted and taken up, while others were rejected or not as embraced. I spoke with Egyptian writer and curator Sara El Adl, a PhD candidate in visual culture at Goldsmiths, who took part in HWP in 2016–17.

El Adl reported that many practice-based artists complained about the required reading and the lack of hands-on practice. There was an expectation that bringing artists with studio-based practices into the program would expand that part of their practice. However, some artists felt their studio work hit a theoretical plateau. Additionally, she noted that the institution explicitly demanded finished work from each artist by the end of the year for the open studio. This contradiction left El Adl thinking that the experience was not what she has expected. She remarked that these represented two different types of people the program aimed to bring together, and finding both would be challenging, as participants would likely come out only half-satisfied with what they encountered.

While the school's stated mission focuses on interdisciplinarity and merging technical and theoretical skills, it seems that students with either theory-based or studio-based practices could only fit into one aspect of the curriculum, namely the proposed seminars and workshops or the culminating open studios. Here, I posit that there is a lack of transparency or clarity. As El Adl mentioned, the program seemed to struggle with confusion about what it wanted from participants, resulting in flat interactions.

²² Rachel Dedman and Christine Tohmé, “Present Continuous,” *IBRAAZ*, May 6, 2016. <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/188>.

²³ Ilka Eickhof, “Class and Creative Economies,” in Richard Jacquemond and Félix Lang, eds., *Culture and Crisis in the Arab World: Art, Practice, and Production in Spaces of Conflict* (I.B. Tauris, 2019), 206.

From Promise to Practice: Reflections On "Art Schools"

I keep going back to where these schools can take us next. There is a need for them to expand, offering more people diverse methods of learning and valuing knowledge through practical application. Unlike their official counterparts, these schools strive to provide alternative ways of knowing—knowledge that is not state-mandated. We can think of it as subversive or insurgent knowledge. Clearly, we need different spaces for learning that challenge conventional education. Here, I am considering the extent to which independent art schools like the Imaginary School Program, the School of Intrusions, and the Home Workspace Program uphold their stated missions. Instead of arriving at concrete answers, I find myself with open conclusions.

I realized that I had the enormous task of collating official narratives and personal accounts—which more often than not refuted one another—to reconstruct a narrative. Through conducting these interviews, I also realized that most practitioners are part of the diasporic community, predominantly in Europe and North America. By describing the Arab art community as "transnationals," the lawyer and scholar of locally-driven development

24 Nadia Cherif, *Read the Room #2: Transnationals: Who Are They and What Do They Want?* (Mophradat, 2021), <https://mophradat.org/en/library/read-the-room-2-by-nadia-cherif-2021>.

25 Pelin Tan, Magnus Ericson, and Christine Tohmé, "Home Workspace Program," *Urgent Pedagogies* (November 2020), <https://urgentpedagogies.iaspis.se/home-workspace-program>. See also pp. 44–51 in this volume.

Nadia Cherif remarks that "[m]ore than 62% of them [artists applying for grants from their country of origin] have experienced migration to locations outside the Arab world or present a transnational

aspect in their life, making the mobility/transnational parameter much more prevalent than it first appeared."²⁴

When we speak about our diasporic experiences, I wonder if a direct link can be drawn to how those schools have contributed to our educational and artistic biographies. Christine Tohmé says HWP "has acted as a passport for young local artists, some of whom had no prior formal training in the arts, to continue their studies and/or produce abroad."²⁵

Said exemplifies this, arguing that "[c]ultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas." This can happen through those who act as vessels. I intended to tackle and analyze the concepts of language to understand terminology and metaphor. This is useful as it allows us to read into things and not take them at face value. I tried to inspect what is presented across three different schools, locations, and active years rather than how they were described. Across all of them I saw a productive space in misunderstanding, rereading, and distorting the supposed facts that we were presented with.

There is value in being politically playful, using camouflage, switching strategies, occupying future imaginaries, borrowing terminology, moving between translations, code-switching, leaving room for charitable interpretations, and crafting our understanding of what a postcolonial liberation in the field of para-institutional art education requires.

This essay is adapted from a dissertation submitted in June 2024 to the Department of Cultural Analysis and Mediation at Zurich University of the Arts and titled Knowledge Flows: A Study of Para-institutional Art Schools in the Arab World.

Home Workspace Program

Christine Tohmé interviewed by Pelin Tan and Magnus Ericson

Ashkal Alwan, The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, is a nonprofit organization based in Beirut. Since its founding in 1993, the association has dedicated itself to promoting contemporary artistic practice, fostering critical thinking around social realities, and engaging in community-based projects.

In 2011, Ashkal Alwan launched the Home Workspace Program (HWP), a free arts study program that invites fellows to develop their formal, technical, and theoretical skills and provides them with resources and feedback.

HWP was initially developed to explore interdisciplinary, critical models of art education in a context in which education is mostly privatized. Moreover, it aims to include a wide range of professors, all the while addressing geopolitical particularities in art and the educational landscape.

In response to the ongoing pandemic and political and economic collapse in Lebanon,

which continue to threaten cultural and educational infrastructures, HWP has gone online, and remains open to anyone wishing to attend and free of charge.

Pelin Tan Can you tell us how and why the Home Workspace Program was initiated and organized as an academic program within Ashkal Alwan?

Christine Tohmé Throughout the early 2000s, friends and I had been consistently talking about establishing a model of education that could complement traditional educational structures in Beirut. However, we were keen on having that model act differently to academia—in particular its stultifying frameworks and codes—and avoid having it replicate its structures. Home Workspace Program (HWP) thus started out as a program aiming to respond to prevailing shortcomings in critical arts

and humanities studies in the region and has sought, over the years, to be attentive to the shifts in the educational system available for young artists. It was also a way for Ashkal Alwan to extend the Home Works Forum¹ in time and space, ensuring that the debates and issues discussed within its realm every three years, and for a limited period, could continue to be engaged with and explored. We were prompted to consider moving into a physical space that would act as a communal ecosystem for artists, scholars, activists, and cultural practitioners.

Today, Home Workspace Program is an arts study program open to artists from Lebanon, the Arab region, and the world over to develop their formal, technical, and theoretical skills in a critical setting. The program provides fellows with feedback

and resources to facilitate and support their art practice. It has now run ten successful editions.²

The people I had started to work with at first—Joana Hadjithomas, Walid Raad, Lina Majdalanie, Gregory Sholette, and Khalil Rabah—all became part of the program’s Advisory Curriculum Committee, allowing us to gather and think together about the knowledges and pedagogical forms of exchange we want to bring forth and infuse into the program for each edition. This committee, which is also integral in the selection of fellows, rotates every three years, and has since included Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Tony Chakar, Joe Namy, Iman Issa, and Zeynep Oz.

HWP is organized annually around workshops, seminars, lectures, group critiques, and studio visits. Visiting Professors (VPs) and their invited guests organize workshops and seminars based on their practices. Alongside the work of the VPs, the curriculum includes a series of seminars, offered by guest professors, to complement the fellows’ theoretical and art historical knowledge. Advisors follow the fellows’ work throughout the year, organizing group critiques and one-on-one sessions. Each year an invited guest organizes a preface to the program. In these first three weeks, fellows introduce their work, are introduced to the HWP program, and are oriented to Lebanon’s urban and cultural geography through site visits and talks. Since the program’s first year in 2011, we have collaborated and exchanged with many institutions and collectives who initiated similar programs, such as MASS Alexandria’s studio space and study program, RAW Material Company’s residency program in Dakar, WHW Akademija in Zagreb, and Kem in Poland.

1 Initiated in 2002 and taking place every three years in different venues across Beirut, Home Works: A Forum On Cultural Practices brings together performances, exhibitions, screenings, and discursive programs around a common set of urgent questions. The work of the forum’s participants endeavors to create methods of critical inquiry and aesthetic form capable of conveying those questions meaningfully—and proposing possible solutions.

2 This is how the program was structured throughout the years:

Year 1: Emily Jacir (Resident Professor) + Amal Issa (Program Coordinator)

Year 2: Matthias Lilienthal (Resident Professor) + Rewa Baassiri (Coordinator X-Apartments) and Amal Issa (Program Coordinator)

Year 3: Amal Issa (Director) + Anton Vidokle and Jalal Toufic (Resident Professors) + Rewa Baassiri (Program Coordinator)

Year 4: Amal Issa (Director) + Curriculum Committee: Kader Attia, Joana Hadjithomas

& Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad, Khalil Rabah, Lina Majdalanie, Gregory Sholette, and What, How, & for Whom (WHW) (Resident Professors) + Moritz Fingerhut (Program Coordinator)

Year 5: Ghalya Saadawi (Resident Professor) + Haig Aivazian (Resident Advisor) + Moritz Fingerhut (Program Coordinator)

Year 6: Ghalya Saadawi (Resident Professor) + Joe Namy (Resident Advisor) + Lara Saab (Program Coordinator)

Year 7: Roy Samaha, Joe Namy, and Haig Aivazian (Resident Advisors) + Lara Saab (Program Coordinator)

Year 8: Joe Namy (Resident Advisor) + Lara Saab (Program Coordinator)

Year 9: Joe Namy, Haig Aivazian, and Daniele Genadry (Resident Advisors) + Lara Saab (Program Coordinator)

Year 10: Open Year (conceived and managed by Ashkal Alwan team: Thourayya Kreidieh, Edwin Nasr)

In December 2020, and in response to the political and material urgencies in Lebanon that continue to threaten cultural and educational infrastructures, we launched the tenth edition of HWP in an open-year format, available to anyone wishing to attend. The selection committee has been put aside in favor of welcoming all those interested in registering; no applications are therefore required anymore. More than 350 participants from Lebanon, the broader region, and internationally took part in five chapters and four skill-based workshops. We were thus overwhelmed by the public's unprecedented enthusiasm vis-à-vis this edition of HWP, and are convinced that, amid precarious conditions, interdisciplinary forms of learning and exchange remain matters of great importance.

HWP 2021 was divided into five chapters unfolding over the course of six months from January until June 2021. Each chapter lasted three weeks and was organized by a Lead Professor who (1) designed a curriculum responding to a set of theoretical and aesthetic concerns and (2) invited up to four Visiting Professors to each lead a seminar, workshop, or collective reading session. Chapter 1, led by Adrian Lahoud and Lawrence Abu Hamdan with invited guests Walid Sadek, Dread Scott, and Susan Schuppli, expanded on the idea of a “scene” in a criminal event to better understand the collective preconditions of testimony. Chapter 2, led by Rasha Salti with invited guests Mahasen Nasser-Eldin, Mila Turajlić, Mohanad Yaqubi, Jihan El-Tahri, and Kader Attia, explored the question of restitution and the materiality of photographic and audiovisual archives that amplify the north-south chasm and resurrect the unresolved specters of colonial history. Chapter 3, led by Marwa Arsanios with invited guests

Catherine Malabou, Lama El Khatib, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, and Ashkan Sepahvand, engaged with and through the works of scholars and artists to think about new tools for action and praxis within our current political condition and its impasses. Chapter 4, led by Pelin Tan with Dima Srouji, Rojda Tuğrul, Hera Büyüктаşçıyan, and Zainab Bahrani, created room for and brought forward collective critical thinking by focusing on memorizing lands, de/archiving artefacts, enacting nonhuman cycles, and engaging with poetics of exile. Chapter 5, led by Zeynep Öz and Daniel Blanga Gubbay with Arzu Sak Seyhun, Nazlı Pişkin, Otobong Nkanga, Long Litt Woon, Ibrahim Nehme, and Farid Rakun (from ruangrupa), asked: How can we raise awareness about human and more-than-human networks of labor and collaboration that exist in a landscape, in a practice, and within art-related processes? In parallel to the chapters, HWP offered four skills-based workshops that were also free and open to all those who pre-registered: coding with Leen Charaffedine, urban mapping with Monica Basbous, video editing with Carine Doumit and Nour Ouayda, and sound with Tarek Atoui.

Magnus Ericson What has been the role of the program when it comes to engaging with a local context and for creating communities?

CT Home Workspace Program provided many artists and cultural practitioners with an opportunity to produce and think alongside peers from the region and beyond. HWP was and still is a vibrant, urgent energy of people meeting and affecting each other, and being affected by the city, the political situation, the institutions, to be

continuously “present.” And if it instigates and shapes communities, I would say it is due to the structure of the program, which isn’t result-oriented, and relies instead on forms of exchange to sustain continuous dialogue amid a localized context, that is, Beirut, where fellows are, from the get-go, immersed in particular dynamics and asked to respond to and operate within everyday situations with a sense of collectivity in mind. In addition to forming relations among and beyond one another, fellows also end up engaging in forms of community making with the city’s civic, cultural, and academic sectors, as well as with the actors—scholars, journalists, NGO workers, activists, lawyers, environmental policymakers—that comprise and compose them.

Creating a continuous platform for the fellows takes an enormous amount of work and perseverance. It becomes a year-round space of doing, thinking, and happening and a space for people to take time off from the stress of production and art-market pressures. HWP has acted as a passport for young local artists, some of whom had no prior formal training in the arts, to continue their studies and/or produce abroad. HWP continues to work like a traditional course in that it has a solid structure with seminars and group critiques. However, its fluidity lies in its refusal to reproduce calcified notions of a recurring “faculty” or curriculum and its openness to the visions of visiting artists and professors each year. HWP provides agency to those who have joined it to create their own projects and expand beyond the local network. They continuously return and engage in different ways either by teaching, being part of a group critique, or by joining as guest artists. They always remain part of HWP’s growing community.

Throughout that process, and to this day, Ashkal Alwan has been invested in redefining the function and scope of its public mission, exploring how publicness can be deployed and experienced, and toward which parameters the public sphere can be expanded.

PT Can you outline the current situation in Lebanon and Beirut for us to further understand the changing role of Ashkal Alwan, its program, and the space itself?

CT Lebanon started grappling with three different crises unfolding simultaneously: (1) an unprecedented economic and financial crisis characterized by the ongoing devaluation of the local currency and an impossibility of the state to pay its gargantuan public debt; (2) a crisis of political legitimation initially wrought by the October 17 uprisings and the protesters’ call for dismantling over thirty years of systemic corruption, sectarian power-sharing, and neoliberal austerity policies; and, as of March 2020, (3) a sanitary crisis in conjunction with the emergence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale.

On October 17, 2019, protests broke out across Beirut—later leading to a national uprising—and coincided with the opening night of Home Works 8; as a result, the entirety of its programs and exhibitions were either postponed or cancelled. The circumstances that led to the postponement of Home Works 8 were rather particular and raised questions pertaining to our work and the context in which we operate. The first couple of days of the program (October 17 and 18) witnessed unexpected popular uprisings that swept the entire country and were to continue for weeks to follow. Roads leading to the airport were blocked

and most highways were closed off; and while both the army and security forces intervened on the streets, protests seemed to be increasing in intensity by the hour. For the first weeks of the uprising, we actively participated in mass protests and general strikes, closely monitored the situation as it was unfolding, and consulted with friends and colleagues from the legal, academic, journalistic, and artistic-cultural sectors to decide on the best way forward. Our conclusion was to indefinitely postpone our discursive (talks, panels, and readings) and performance (music, dance, theater, and lecture-performances) programs and events. Our artistic, intellectual, and organizational energy were meant to be redirected toward the achievement of our hopes and aspirations, the possibility of which was and still is being granted to us by a momentum that should have been seized at any cost.

The logistics of cancelling the forum after two years of organizational, promotional, and artistic work was no small feat. Additionally, and for the first time since its launching, visas for international and regional fellows participating in HWP had been rejected by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, signaling a new era of cultural isolation and severed relations between the state and the nongovernmental sector. Though the fellows' residencies were eventually secured, the incident cast a cloud of uncertainty on the educational program's continuity and sustainability. Due both to the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic as well as the culmination of Lebanon's economic and financial crises, the institution's challenges became manifold. The banking sector's capital controls on international wire transfers and foreign-currency transactions resulted in a sector-wide incapacity to meet financial obligations, including

the payment of salaries, contractual fees, rents, and so on. With most of our resources either locked or made to disappear, we were and continue to be incapacitated to continue our operations or plan for the future. We have also been pushed to discontinue and/or manage alternative routes for our ongoing projects with artists outside of Lebanon, as well as our financial support to local community members who depend on aid to carry on with production-related tasks or studies abroad. Furthermore, on March 30, 2020, the ninth edition of Home Workspace Program was discontinued due to our inability to secure the health and safety of our fellows during their stay in Beirut. Fortunately, most of the seminars, workshops, and one-on-one sessions we'd planned for the 2019–20 edition were moved online.

On August 4, 2020, a large amount of ammonium nitrate, stored at the port of the city of Beirut, exploded, causing at least 220 deaths, 6,500 injuries, US\$10–15 billion in property damage, and leaving an estimated 300,000 people homeless. As a result, Ashkal Alwan directed its efforts to repurposing its facilities and accommodating artists, cultural workers, and activists in Beirut who lost their spaces and incomes due to the unfolding simultaneous financial, political, and sanitary crises. We were convinced that, by focusing our efforts toward making our space available and open to the public, we would be able to help the artists operating within our ecosystem reclaim their material and intellectual agency, push their practices, and retrieve part of their losses. It goes without saying that these crises haven't only affected the cultural sector but are also actively threatening its very existence.

As we continue to face the most acute form of precarity since Ashkal Alwan's

inception, we are being pushed to experiment with new methods and forms and to challenge conventional ways of going about institution-building. This has, again, led to a succession of trials and errors whereby the porosity of our space served as a blueprint to think through potential configurations that would best fit our communities. Over the last couple of years, Ashkal Alwan has focused on repurposing its two-thousand-square-meter venue. In January 2020, the Community Studios Project was initiated as more and more practitioners, collectives, and nomadic institutions were losing their workspaces. In parallel, Ashkal Alwan was rethinking HWP's structure. The program eventually needed to grow and evolve together with existing platforms, not against them, as current circumstances had rendered artistic production increasingly inaccessible.

ME What is your view on Ashkal Alwan as a possible space for resilience?

CT The question of imagining, building, and sustaining an art institution that not only responds to shifting material conditions but also reconfigures itself as a result has been a concern of Ashkal Alwan since its inception. As an institution, Ashkal Alwan was born in and around “crisis” in the mid-1990s, at a time when the postwar reconstruction project in Beirut was materializing. Ashkal Alwan was then responding to the expropriation of public spaces within the city of Beirut and, also, the imposition of a state-sponsored form of “collective amnesia” in relation to the civil wars and the injustices that had unfolded throughout its occurrence. It is important that we think past the term “resilience” and its supposition that one has to persevere despite and not against the conditions that have been

imposed on them. We have long sustained and fed the discourse of “resilience” in Lebanon as artistic-cultural institutions who have always been imbricated within larger civil-society networks and as inhabitants of a country where the state of exception has become the norm. The absence of state structures has exposed us to mass precarity. Rather than conceiving strategies of resilience, we should seek to engage in oppositional politics.

Today, Ashkal Alwan faces different challenges that are not only related to its local context but expand toward operating as a regional and international platform. We're undergoing a specific crisis in Lebanon that's producing its own set of morbid symptoms: currently, the Lebanese government, following decades of neglecting and marginalizing local artistic-cultural institutions, is consciously attempting to suffocate the sector by imposing draconian tax measures and doubling down on forms of policing and censorship, which includes having General Security reject visa applications from incoming artists and cultural practitioners wishing to join HWP. This continues to affect the work and programs we do at Ashkal Alwan. A new era of cultural isolation is being ushered in, and it is now up to us to determine the tools that enable us to engage with the battle to come. We have long been committed to alternative modes of cultivating friendships and networks of solidarity. But what do you do when the artists, cultural practitioners, thinkers, and activists that compose your community are either leaving or being driven out of Beirut and stripped of their ability to dream? My sense is that fragmentation is among the most significant challenges we will be facing in the coming years.

PT Can you finally tell us how you have developed an archive in relation to Ashkal Alwan and its different programs?

CT In 2015, and in line with our apprehension of publicness and accessibility, our efforts to consolidate Ashkal Alwan's archive began. Over the span of three decades, we have been accumulating a large and diverse audiovisual archive containing magnetic and digital tapes, DVDs, and digital files. This material largely comprises films and performances, recordings of previous editions of the Home Works Forum, the Home Workspace Program lectures, and numerous seminars and talks. Having been dispersed across several media, all materials were collected on an open-source media-archive platform called pan.do/ra, which we set up on-premise in December 2015. This platform came to host the organization's entire audiovisual archive but was only meant to be accessible from the Ashkal Alwan space in Beirut. Later in the process, we decided to migrate the centralized archival unit to exist on the cloud. So, Ashkal Alwan established its archive as an open-access online platform, making available terabytes of digital recordings to the wider public. The archive was launched in March 2020, coinciding with the first imposed international lockdown as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

For me, this archive is a living testament and a material witness of history—not as a succession of past events, but a continuous process of meaning-making. I consult my archive on an almost daily basis to situate myself, my curatorial practice, and Ashkal Alwan's institutional activities within broader political developments. It helps us understand where to locate our current

tasks and interests. It also, in a way, allows myself and my colleagues at Ashkal Alwan to monitor the ways in which our work might have helped shape a civic discourse in Beirut, or whether we've succeeded in forming networks of alliances with regional institutions or committed individuals working in the artistic-cultural field. This accumulation of past activities—what was uttered and produced within their occurrence, what was deemed as a glitch, and what succeeded in starting a conversation—imposes a path forward for future institutional activities.

In fact, and in response to a growing refiguration of its public mission amidst an age of social distancing, we ended up moving most of our programs—including HWP—online. Perpetual Postponement,³ an online publishing platform, comes as the logical continuation of our commitment to participating in the conception of openly accessible digital and online platforms. It also responds to a lack of platforms in the region that promote politically engaged and experimental writing in Arabic as well as interdisciplinary arts initiatives. Within its first year, the platform hosted short- and long-form textual essays and interviews, sound pieces, as well as short films, video montages, 3D renderings, and drawings by artists, scholars, writers, and activists based in the Arab region and invested in different disciplines, geographies, and contexts.

Furthermore, as of October 2021, Ashkal Alwan is launching its Archive Residency program, offering artists, researchers, and scholars the opportunity to engage with and research its audiovisual and archive of artistic and cultural practices with a view to developing their own projects. The program will take place over a period of three months at the Ashkal

³ Perpetual Postponement is an online publishing platform launched on June 20, 2020; see www.ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=5.

Alwan library. The library houses a growing collection of books, catalogs, periodicals, and ephemera and includes material on art history, theory, education, architecture, photography, film, media, theater, performance art, comics, philosophy, critical and political theory, literature, poetry, and cultural policy. The final, and public, outcome of the residency can take different formats and should be determined by the selected residents and Ashkal Alwan. Residents will be granted a shared studio space and a monthly honorarium.

This conversation took place online between Beirut; Mardin, Turkey; and Stockholm on November 5, 2020, then was transcribed and edited. It was originally published in Urgent Pedagogies, November 2020. <https://urgentpedagogies.iaspis.se/home-workspace-program>.

Urgent Pedagogies is an IASPIS project and platform for inquiry, sharing knowledge and experience on how socially engaged critical spatial practice may act in relation and response to the urgencies of social justice and equality, contested territories, and conditions of conflict, and though strategies and settings for learning, un-learning, thinking together, and alternative forms of producing and sharing knowledge. The project is developed and pursued by Magnus Ericson, Head of Applied Arts, IASPIS and Pelin Tan, sociologist, curator, and professor in the Fine Arts Faculty of Batman University, Turkey.

On Divergent Art Education: A Case Study in Dark Study

Andrew Woolbright

We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and

1 Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Autonomedia, 2013), 6.

2 Lauren Berlant describes cruel optimism as "a relation of attachments to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possibly, and toxic." The cruelty of this false desire "is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being because the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world." Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

*see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after "the break" will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break.*¹ —Jack Halberstam

A wave of writing on radical education appeared in the wake of the 2008 financial

collapse and surfaced again three years later during the Occupy protests. Both moments rehearsed our current one: increased economic inequality, dramatic disinvestment in public goods, and an accelerated dependence on debt to access education. These inequalities, while addressed polemically, were rarely addressed materially. Voyeuristic appraisals of programs like AltMFA, The Black School, Mountain School of Arts, and Bruce High Quality Foundation University often positioned these radical alternatives more like novelties than a serious replacement of the established art education system and, in turn, regulated a cruel optimism of that system and its promises.² Much of this writing was sensory, first-person, and romantic: the reader might be informed of what a seminar room smelled like but not what the students did there nor how they came to education, let alone any discussion of the institution's pedagogical ideology. The establishment crowded

out the alternative and cast these schools in narrow terms of opposition rather than as possibilities to serve the artists that traditional institutions often excluded. The MFA, then and now, perpetuates professionalization, offering access and art-world visibility for considerable debt-backed fees instead of an education that empowers artists to challenge the system's fundamental inequities. This exchange was commonly accepted and influenced what was written about and how, what was seen, and what was buried.

Critical attention confers legitimacy, and while a lack of a sincere engagement with the alternative is not the only problem faced by radical programs, it contributes to keeping new, divergent forms of education suspended between launch and long-term viability. For radical and utopic models to develop, they need a new kind of evaluative writing, one that enables prospective students to understand the definitions of an education that encourages a deep, investigative, and expansive art practice. This writing must be material rather than idealized; embodied rather than voyeuristic; and focused on subjects (the students and their work and the teachers' articulated pedagogies) rather than subjectivities. It ought to answer not only how but what and why. Most importantly, it must be patient, rigorous, and observant. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney outline in *The Undercommons*, their collaborative exploration of a divergent space for study and the development of a new, free commons within society, "we owe it to each other to falsify the institution.... We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything."³ Significant criticism of the MFA system certainly exists, but for all the signaling, why have no divergent programs established themselves as a serious replacement of high-debt higher education?

Enter Dark Study. Developed by Caitlin Cherry and Nicole Won Hee Maloof, Dark Study is a new para-institution launched in January that operates beyond the traditional structures of education to counter the inaccessibility and weaknesses of art school that make it an unrealistic, even inhospitable, place for so many artists to make their work. Conversations about Dark Study began last winter, before COVID, between Cherry, Maloof, and Nora Khan amid their disappointment with the limitations imposed by discipline-centric pedagogy, unresponsive curricula, and the accelerating precarity of adjuncts. When the first COVID lockdown was initiated and education went from in-person to online, the founders' idea of a decentered, radically interdisciplinary alternative to the MFA found form. Exceeding medium specificity and technical training, Dark Study offers an education in cultural and media theory and empire and capital's roles in the development of contemporary art. The program addresses the problems and traumas Cherry and Maloof encountered in their own education experiences—both as students and as professors—and challenges pre-existing forms of education in legacy institutions that prize results-oriented evaluation on a limited timeline in a discrete space. Because it is free, Dark Study dismisses the contract between art world success and debt. It offers an immersive space of study, one that is responsive to the students' needs, and seeks to fulfill education's capacity for community-building through shared growth rather than individualized participation in a system designed to satisfy the demands of capital.

Running a free program that stands a chance of shifting power away from traditional institutions comes with countless obstacles and requires a combination of intellect, critical strategizing, and organizational

³ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, 20.

skill. As both practicing artists and educators, Cherry and Maloof offer unique perspectives from which to deliver a potential undercommons in art education. Cherry's hybridized practice involves virtual reality and installation situated with painting to question the role of the market and its presence in the reification of art as a commodity. She can as readily and easily discuss Alexander Galloway's *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* as contemporary figuration. Maloof uses printmaking, bookmaking, and video to explore folkloric and personal narratives and representations of labor and, over the past year, has led an underground and international Marxist theory book club. Cherry teaches painting at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts and Maloof at Sarah Lawrence College. Together, they have assembled a roster of visiting artists and advisors—Sondra Perry, Jesse Darling, David Xu Borgonjon, Che Gossett, and Serubiri Moses—who bring with them experiences and pedagogies grounded in the overlaps of the fields of art, technology, and culture.

Dark Study received 180 applications from its first call, a testament to artists' readiness for an alternative. In the Instagram announcement, Cherry and Maloof kept Dark Study's pedagogy and intentions deliberately vague to resist "the call to order," a strategy adapted from Moten and Harney's *Undercommons*. Due to this intentional abstraction of their process, the applicant pool was impressively heterogeneous, interdisciplinary, and diverse across ethnicity, age, class, education, and professional experience. The application-making process was carefully considered. The school's portal states:

Community-building in schools is often talked about as if the process begins on the first day of school—a group of students happens to find themselves in the same space, at the same time. However, the community formed in the classroom is engineered long before the group gathers; its shape, the conversations it will likely have, is rooted in the application form. An application form is a subtle form of gatekeeping. If a school truly wants to give opportunities to those who have been locked or forced out of higher education, then the usual signs of access and training embedded in the application must be reassessed. Using the same old "natural" markers of "success" can only reproduce the hostile conditions that exist in society at large, undermining any attempts at creating an inclusive community before the first day arrives.⁴

When Maloof and Cherry evaluated the applicants, the ideology of the school was put to the test. "We had a stated aim for the school. We had to make sure that the way we were assessing people actually matched that goal," Maloof says. "It's easy for those things to not match up, which is a criticism we have of institutions, and how they are able to keep people out while they proclaim this 'welcoming of diversity.'" Some applicants were artists with MFAs or doctorates from elite institutions and others were musicians, gallerists, physicists, robotics engineers, or artists who had an established exhibition record, perhaps thinking that Dark Study more akin to a cultural think tank or postgraduate program like the Studio Museum Residency or the Whitney Independent Study Program than an MFA. Maloof explained the way they handled these expectations within the application process: "Some people with multiple postgraduate degrees applied, some with master's degrees, and some enrolled in PhD programs. We did tend to weed out

⁴ <https://www.darkstudy.net/>.

people who had an exceptional amount of education, because it was clear they could, through their own means, access such programs on their own and afford them. It didn't seem like we would do them a service, and they would be taking up a space from someone who doesn't have access to those higher institutions of education, and that's who we were really targeting. We weren't biased against individuals with lots of access, but that signaled to us they had tools in place to find access on their own." Art speak also proved a dead end with them. "If we sensed too much of that intellectual posturing in their applications, which often is rewarded in art schools, it was a red flag."

Cherry and Maloof insisted on the application being free and avoiding the exorbitant fees of Submittable and SlideRoom, which proved to be a challenging administrative problem. "Our application was essay heavy. We had to tell ourselves, 'We have to slow down, spend more time with each application,'" Cherry says, "and that to thoughtfully consider each candidate would take time." Dark Study did not require transcripts or letters of recommendation, traditional signals in the application process that vet applicants with better connections. One especially helpful prompt for applicants was to provide an "Alternative Story," a biography of failures, a negative CV made up of rejected applications and barriers that withheld access. To demonstrate the transparency and inclusivity that traditional institutions often only speak to, the founders provided their own versions as examples on Dark Study's website. In her bio, Cherry writes:

I didn't come from a creative family. My mother was a secretary and my father worked most of his life as a worker on an automotive assembly line. Growing up in Chicago, I lacked any

particular motivation to do anything but sports and art. My GPA and ACT scores would have hardly gotten me into a decent state school, I certainly wasn't Northwestern-bound. It took me a while to become "good at school." My parents supported my ambitions the best they could. I spent a year at a community college before I was able to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.⁵

Having narrowed the applicant pool, Cherry and Maloof interviewed twenty-five finalists to get a sense of the kind of cohort they could assemble and decided to accept all of them based on their level of work, an assessment of their need, and the founders' critical self-evaluation of what needs they could reasonably meet and address through teaching. Attending class from Oklahoma, Kentucky, California, New York, Ghana, Mexico, and China, among other places, the first twenty-five students are diverse in ethnicity and gender identity. "The reality is it takes risk, vulnerability, and time," Cherry says. "If you put these candidates in front of a different panel, you'd get a different program."

One of those candidates was Lela Welch. She dropped out of college in 2008 as her struggles with addiction became unmanageable, and although she was able to finish her bachelor's degree in 2018, the path back to school proved difficult. Between 2008 and 2018, Welch worked at homeless shelters, a start-up, and in addiction treatment, and is now a temp administrator at a psychiatric office in San Luis Obispo, California. Though Welch has the lived experiences that MFA programs often suggest they want in a candidate, her location, schedule, and educational history preclude her from a traditional MFA. Welch felt like it was time for her to reenter a structured, community-based learning environment, and was looking for critical

⁵ <https://www.darkstudy.net/>.

engagement and feedback from peers, a “correcting experience,” she says. She is in Dark Study class from 6 to 8 a.m., before going to work at the psychiatric office. At noon, she has an hour break and catches up with reading and class discussion over Whereby. After work, meetings, and class, Welch is usually home by 8 p.m. and able to put in some extra time studying. Typically, she expects to read about twenty pages of assigned reading per class, in addition to answering course questions and preparing for discussions. Recently, Welch has been reading sections of theory that seek to explore third spaces of operation within institutions, like Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* and Rasheedah

6 In which Phillips writes, “In our space-time mapping of the future, however, rarely do we take account of where the future is, who has access to it, its plurality, and whether we are all accelerating at the same rate and pace into that future.... The time dimension plays a crucial role in how people—particularly Black and poor people—are valued, treated, punished, or underserved by and within society.” Rasheedah Phillips, “Communal, Quantum, and Afrofutures: Time and Memory in North Philly,” in *Black Quantum Futurism: Space-Time Collapse II* (Philadelphia Afrofuturist Affair, 2015), 10.

7 Caitlin Cherry, *Divergent I* syllabus.

8 “Governed with little or no democratic input or oversight, they (nonprofit arts organizations) are part of a system in which public resources [...] are channeled to privately controlled organizations that operate with little public accountability; a system which [...] may serve to legitimize the economic inequality and privation that underlie so many of the social problems philanthropic organizations aim to solve.” Andrea Fraser, *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics* (MIT Press, 2018), 31.

Phillips’s essay “Communal, Quantum, and Afrofutures: Time and Memory in North Philly,” from *Black Quantum Futurism: Space-Time Collapse II*.⁶ Her practice involves actions and objects, and she is interested in the realities created by artificial hells. In her piece *Investment* (2019), the artist’s partner poured casting plaster over her while she sat in a constructed box filled with sand, re-enacting the early steps in the process of bronze casting with her body. At the end of the three-hour performance, Welch stood up from the hardened plaster, leaving a relief where her body had

merged with the fabricated landscape. Welch is planning two ambitious projects, in both scale and funding, and is seeking guidance on how to realize them materially and critically. The discussions in Dark Study have enabled her to question her work: whether she should use her own body in performance or invite group participation, the valences of class that the interactions of her performances involve, the audience it has addressed in the past, and who it will address in the future.

Dark Study hosts two courses in its first semester. “Art for Whom?” led by Maloof, is an overview analysis of empire that addresses class while developing a working definition of imperialism. The course will end with students producing analyses of class’s influence on themselves and their art practice as a means of understanding their own identity through access (or lack thereof). “Divergent I,” led by Cherry, discusses the art market and its influence on artists’ studio practices and how nonprofits funnel money and influence through cultural institutions, or “why artists make work, how that work circulates, and the multitude of ways where the needs of the artist and the desires of a market-driven art economy diverge.”⁷ These externalities are explored through a series of student-led presentations and responses to Andrea Fraser’s *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*, Martha Rosler’s *Culture Class*, Denise Ferreira da Silva’s *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, and Ben Davis’s *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, among others. Students have access to the whiteboard app Miro and are developing a sprawling map that traces nonprofits’ capital and investments and the boards of major institutions through exhibitions and museum collections. Though we expect more from those in positions that are supposedly meant to protect our cultural heritage, trusteeship on American nonprofit and institutional boards is intended to keep

the system in its current configuration as a strategic manipulation of the market, with the aim of using art and artists to circulate and concentrate capital.⁸

Contextualizing the art market and the imperialist project as objects of study within the structure of an advanced art program has the potential to facilitate practices that incorporate institutional critique into studio work. This shift, decentering artistic practice away from solipsistic analysis of the self and toward an ecological examination of culture and its systems, is significant. Dark Study fuses aesthetics with an investigation of and critical relationship with the structures aesthetics exists within, and, in doing so, it is seeking to enact a pedagogy informed by solidarity and intended to build community beyond those confines. This examination about circulation is further addressed by Dark Study's advisors, each of whom addresses the market and the circulation of art in their own practices, writing, and curation: Sondra Perry's *It's in the Game* questions museum acquisitions and their role in representation and the depictions of subaltern histories; Jesse Darling critiques the Ballad of Saint Jerome and the hierarchies of dependency and compromise that it establishes; David Xu Borjonjon evaluates cultural artifacts and the orientalizing of Chinese culture and artists, specifically in his critique of Asian Futurism in "Continental Drift: Notes on 'Asian' Art"; Che Gossett has written about trans cultural production and the violence against blackness; and Serubiri Moses, cocurator of *Greater New York 2021*,

has long-term curatorial projects like *The Visual History of African Women's Liberation Struggles* (1989–) that deal with

historical narration, African feminist theory, indigeneity, and their depictions. Cherry and Maloof made recommendations to advisors about whom they felt would benefit most from advising, but ultimately the mentors picked their mentees. "We really thought about who actually needs advising, and so when we speak about something like quality of work it's not a judgment of the work itself but more of where are they in their creative development," Maloof clarifies. "We chose based on who, in having an advisor, would have a significant impact on their work."

When evaluated as a whole—structure, ideology, and participants—it is clear that Dark Study is interested in developing visual artists who develop their practice as political entities and engaged critics of art-market institutions, scopoc regimes, and cultural hegemonies. Because of its independence from endowment- and debt-backed programs, the school owes only its students. It presents a formidable anarchist/utopic engine: a free education that provides direct access to curators and critics working in the art world and an insurgent education that combines aesthetics with institutional and cultural critique. This critique, perhaps most radically, dissolves the individual liberal subject and replaces it with tentacular arrangements, collective thinking, and macroscopic pedagogical frameworks. As Moten says, "Like Deleuze, I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*."⁹ Utopian beauty is and always will be fugitive.¹⁰ Dark Study proposes a reform not only of higher education but of the culture and world itself in hopes of creating a new one, and provides strength and solidarity in the spaces left to the divergent.

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⁹ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 118.

¹⁰ Moten and Harney discuss the subversive intellectual's perpetual fugitivity. Though the university is a place of "refuge" it is also a place that cannot "bear what (the subversive intellectual) brings." She must "disappear into the underground." Moten and Harney, 26.

Fifteen Years of SOMA: Why Institutionalality Can Be Its Own Political Act

Kim Córdoba

In 2025, SOMA, the nonprofit alternative artist-run art school in Mexico City, celebrated fifteen years of operation. There is a macabre irony to writing about the project, which draws deeply on the legacies of arts-education programs in the United States, in the context of the all-consuming culture wars that have empowered a pro-nationalist US administration to vilify, attack, and defund higher education. MAGA's special reserve of rancor for liberal-arts education makes now a uniquely charged moment to write about the legacy of a radically generous project of collective work by a group of artists who use education as practice and who view national borders as provincialisms to be disregarded.

I could never write an objective essay about SOMA or the people who gave it form. It's had too big an impact on the direction of my life and work. I first participated in SOMA as a member of the second

SOMA Summer cohort in 2011. Later that year, I was invited to enroll in the second generation of the two-year Spanish language PES (Programa Educativo SOMA), giving me the honor of being the first US citizen to enroll—and, far more dubiously, making me the reason SOMA had to institute a language-proficiency policy for future PES students. Sentimentality aside, I'm steadfast in the belief that the program has had an outsize impact not only on contemporary art ecosystems and practice in Mexico, but also throughout the Americas and beyond.

With the recognition that I would need help to wade through the muck of my memory and nostalgia to write an essay about SOMA in its quinceñera year, this essay reflects interviews with Eduardo Abaroa, Ricardo Alzati, Laura Cortés Hesselbach, Anthony Graves, Cuauhtémoc Medina, and Yoshua Okón. It goes without



Bill Abdale, Untitled (no más), 2017. Graphite on paper, 8¼ × 11¾ in.

saying that there are infinite ways to tell a story of SOMA, and this is just one.

The word “school,” even if modified with a series of academic qualifiers, feels limited as a definition for SOMA given its scope and the breadth of its impact. A more precise descriptor might be a post-Conceptual artists’ response to a set of social, cultural, economic, and political forces that coalesced into Mexico being a place with a rich artistic history and cultural life but with subpar graduate-level university studio-art programs. “I always have the feeling that one has to speak of SOMA both as an attempt to deal with the problem and

as a symptom of the problem. Somehow the fact that these few artists with very little resources in a little house somewhere lost in Mexico City have such an influence is a sign of how wrongly the official [art education] system is being run,” says Medina, the former chief curator of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo and a researcher at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

It’s important to keep in mind that SOMA was born in the early 2000s, a time when “post-studio” and “post-Fordist” artistic practices were dominant. According to Alzati, SOMA intentionally “moved away from that more immaterial post-Fordist

model of artist as a globetrotter with a video camera and a computer that lived between two or three cities, acquiring instead a focus on the local contexts and their implications for our discourse and outputs.” To this end, a potent source of SOMA’s strength is its rootedness in and its commitment to Mexico. According to Graves, SOMA Summer 2019 codirector and an artist, when SOMA started, in 2010, “artists like Eduardo Abaroa, Mario Garcia, and Yoshua Okón had international careers. SOMA and SOMA Summer planted them back in Mexico City.”

As an institution, SOMA is situated in a shifting, mandala-like Venn diagram of antecedent and descendent networks of organizations within the city, across the country, throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and beyond. As Graves put it: “The networks of associations that SOMA and SOMA Summer created, and the other institutions that spun out of them ... it’s exponential.”

Founded in the early 2000s by a group of Mexico City artists led by Okón, the project draws inspiration from several institutions for advanced studies in art, including the UCLA and CalArts MFA programs, the Rijksakademie, and the Whitney Independent Study Program, from which members of the founding artist team graduated, as well as historical precedents including Joseph Beuys’s work and Black Mountain College. This diverse set of influences created, for better or worse, a bridging effect that has developed, over time, a circuit of connection between Mexico and international art scenes. Most concretely, this circuit is evidenced by the formal agreements and exchange programs that SOMA has signed with universities including Yale, Harvard, Stanford, the University of Texas, Virginia

Commonwealth University, CalArts, and Hunter College, among others.

There’s perhaps room for criticism that SOMA has had its institutional gaze overly fixed on northern influences, but, according to Alzati, a faculty member, “the United States, unlike Mexico, has thousands of master’s programs, or at least, it must be hundreds.” SOMA, on the other hand, “arises because of the need, because of the failure of the national institutions to provide postgraduate study in the field of art.” The number of foreign students who have come from across Latin America to study at SOMA suggests the program responds to needs that are more regional than national in scope.

SOMA was started by seventeen artists in Mexico City who are roughly grouped together as “the 1990s generation.” Their largely post-Conceptual and often dematerial approaches toward artistic practice made study abroad necessary because neither of the city’s main university programs offered MFA curriculums informed by postwar developments in art. Reflecting the mismatch between artists’ practices and the local higher-education offerings, only seven of these founding artists have MFA degrees. Those that do earned them abroad, mostly in the United States. Graves recounts how Carla Herrera-Prats used to talk about “what it was like to be an artist in Mexico in the 1990s. There wasn’t any real North American exchange pre-NAFTA. So if a friend came and brought an art magazine it would be a very big deal; artists would look at magazines together and trade them. That restrictiveness is what Carla sought to correct” with SOMA.

Okón received his MFA from UCLA and would teach his mentor John Baldassari’s famed *Class Assignments* material at

SOMA, while his critique class draws notable inspiration from Michael Asher's legendary marathon critiques and process. SOMA's founding academic director, Eduardo Abaroa; Herrera-Prats, founding SOMA Summer Director; and artist board member Mario Garcia Torres all earned their MFAs at CalArts. Abaroa's pedagogical approaches were in a way also influenced by Asher, who was his mentor during his MFA, but he cites other CalArts artist faculty, Charles Gaines and Leslie Dick, as more direct influences on his teaching. Other artist board members include e-flux cofounder Julieta Aranda, who received her MFA from Columbia, and Carlos Amorales, who attended the Rijksakademie. Herrera-Prats notably also graduated from the Whitney ISP, on which she based the design of SOMA Summer, going so far as to "always dress like [ISP director] Ron Clark during the program. She wore brown shoes, light stonewashed jeans, and a blue striped Oxford. It was her way to settle into the position that she created for herself. She had to sort of be him first before she could really be Carla running the program," explained Graves, himself an ISP graduate and Herrera-Prats's partner in their artist collaboration Camel Collective.

An often-overlooked aspect of SOMA is that of the founding artists who received MFAs in the United States, all but one did so on Fulbright scholarships. Notably, the Fulbright stipulates that students are required to return to their home countries for two years after graduation. The Fulbright is not the reason SOMA was founded. But in a moment in which the program is being dismantled as part of a broad policy of US disengagement and discrediting of soft-power programs, I have to wonder if there's an argument that the

scholarship's terms created an overall context of return in which artists who studied abroad were looking for community as they processed the experience of their studies abroad and thought about the next steps in their careers and practices.

While SOMA's influences are numerous, its heritage flows most directly from local artist-run exhibition and gathering spaces La Panaderia (1994–2002), which was founded by Okón and Miguel Calderón, and Temistocles 44, founded by Abaroa, Sofia Táobas, and Abraham Cruzvillegas. "The art institutions in the '90s were very flimsy, they were not functional. So our generation, we didn't have to demolish anything. It was already destroyed. We had to build something," says Abaroa. Okón also cites the art classes that Abaroa and Laureana Toledo (daughter of Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo) were giving at El Centro de Imagen as foundational for SOMA and why he approached Abaroa to be SOMA's first academic director. At the risk of overly distributing credit for SOMA's origin, there's also an argument for the project's ancestors to include a more expansive list of artist-run projects in the city, including the Museo Ex-Teresa of experimental and performance art, Francis Alÿs and Melanie Smith's Mel's Cafe, and La Quiñonera. SOMA's board president, philanthropist Aimée Labarrere de Servitje, was writing her dissertation about the history of alternative artist-run arts spaces in Mexico City when Okón approached her with the idea to start the school.

Notably, Gabriel Orozco's Friday workshops are never mentioned as an influence in SOMA's founding. But they do emphasize an overall context of artists returning from abroad and self-organizing opportunities for communal study in response to gaps in

the Mexican arts landscape that they identified based on their observations of other global cities' art ecosystems. Moreover, several of SOMA's founding artists are still represented by kurimanzutto, by far the most powerful gallery in Latin America, which Orozco co-founded in 1999, and which was more or less born from his Friday studio workshops. Even SOMA's founding director, Barbara Hernandez-Rosas, was recruited by Abaroa from the gallery's staff.

Reflecting on why he started SOMA, Okón instinctively begins by pointing to the societal conditions that drove him to start his previous artist-run space, La Panadería, which lasted from 1994–2002: the devastating 1985 earthquake in Mexico City and the rise of neoliberal ideology, symbolically represented in Mexico by the 1994 signing of NAFTA and the Mexican Peso “Tequila Crisis.” This was an era that prioritized markets, private enterprise built on debt leverage, a move to the suburbs, and the rhetoric of individual responsibility. These ideologies contrasted starkly with the destruction and semi-abandonment of neighborhoods like Roma, Condesa, Juárez, and Centro that were decimated by the earthquake and whose process of rebuilding was slowed by a brutal economic contraction when President Ernesto Zedillo devalued the Mexican peso as a response to the debt crisis caused by neoliberal reform of the Mexican banking sector, triggering local banks to over-leverage. “The art world in Mexico was completely crushed. Because we had the error de Diciembre, we had the Zapatismo, and we had a terrible economic crisis. Mexico started to have these waves of violence, especially in Mexico City,” said Abaroa. It was against the ruin of neighborhoods damaged by the quake, the generalized sense of isolation

that neoliberalism and recession fomented, and the lack of local opportunity to exhibit post-Conceptual contemporary art in local museums that La Panadería took root as an experimental space for exhibition making and, perhaps most radically, institutionalized intergenerational artists hanging out.

According to Okón, the decision to close La Panadería in 2002, despite its success, had to do with how the Mexico City art scene had changed. Local museums had begun showing and collecting contemporary work, and other alternative spaces had begun to emerge. “So the space just wasn’t quite needed in the same way.” He himself was packing up to start his MFA in California. That said, “Every time I came back people asked when I would reopen La Panadería. It signaled to me that there was a community need still unattended in Mexico City. By then neoliberalism, along with its hyper-individualistic ethos, were fully established and the scene we had managed to build throughout the ’90s had begun to fall apart. That’s what got me thinking about starting the project that would become SOMA.”

It’s also relevant to highlight how there has been “a certain synchronicity, even symbiosis, between Soma and SITAC,” said Medina. SITAC is a biannual art theory conference and is the flagship public program of the Patrocinato de Arte Contemporáneo (PAC). PAC is a consortium of private collectors and philanthropists who, under the nonprofit PAC umbrella, fund artistic production, exhibitions, and publishing projects through a set of open calls. Both founded in 2000, PAC established SITAC at a time in which global cities faced a “keeping up with the Joneses”—type pressure to have a biennial, something that to this day Mexico City notably lacks. Rather than

respond to the impulse to start a biennial to exhibit art objects, the PAC elected to organize a “biennial” institution whose focus was on conversations about critical theory. Like SOMA, SITAC responded to a moment driven by the logic of markets with a staunchly anti-market and anti-art object proposal.

Over the years, many of SOMA’s artist-professors and leaders have directed or spoken at SITAC, including Abaroa, who directed SITAC 9, and Jesse Lerner and Ruben Ortiz Torres, who directed SITAC 15. SOMA’s board president is also the president of PAC’s board. Today, SOMA’s founding director, Hernandez Rosas, is the general director of PAC. Both institutions facilitate artist conversations, but in different ways.

SOMA’s move this year to a new location has provoked significant institutional reflection. The new building emphasizes a new chapter in the project’s history. Yearly rent increases had made the school’s original home, a former cinema in the middle-class San Pedro de los Pinos neighborhood that has been synonymous with the institution since its founding, too expensive to sustain. SOMA, it seems, like the artists who have graduated from the program, can be seen as a victim of the project’s success—which is itself tangentially connected to Mexico City’s radical soft-power transformation over the last decade. In the last fifteen years the city’s international reputation has radically evolved from a place foreigners feared and thought of as synonymous with street crime to a place synonymous with culture and taste that they aspire to visit. This has had real impacts on the city, including making it more expensive to live in and to operate a program like SOMA.

This moment of reflection and renegotiation points to how radically and rapidly transformative the 2010s have been for Mexico, for the art industry, and for the world. I often think about how, when I first arrived in Mexico City in 2011, my goal was to improve my Spanish so that I could comfortably order a “sitio” taxi from a radio dispatch service on my Nokia burner bar phone. These days, not a word of Spanish is needed to zip around the city as Uber and the logic of the markets have eradicated speaking local languages as a “friction” of international travel. The externalities created by Mexico City’s enviable status in the attention economy became noticeable in SOMA Summer first. “The image of Mexico City became so big and so popular, it became very trendy. In 2018 and 2019 it was really obvious that applicants just wanted to come and see the hip cool stuff. And then we started to see these differences among the group. Participants were coming with other economic possibilities; they were more interested in going to Pujol, or in drinking natural wines,” explained director Cortés Hesselbach. It might sound absurdly bobo to mention the Michelin two-star restaurant and natural wine in the context of the educational turn in contemporary art, but the large July 4, 2025 protests against gentrification and digital nomads, which called for gringos to leave Mexico and left several businesses in Roma and Condesa vandalized, emphasizes the magnitude of the issue and local communities’ frustration with it. It also highlights how radically the sociocultural and economic contexts in which SOMA operates today have changed, and how they oblige the project to adapt as much as its changing internal dynamics do.

Cortés Hesselbach again: “Everything is changing. That understanding has really

allowed us to understand how to adapt the programs. For instance, SOMA Summer. Obviously, after Carla passed away, the program changed. There was a lot of resistance at first to changing the program because it was her program and it was perfect. But it was tailor-made according to her personality and her energy.

“Looking back, I think that we were, in a way, really lucky that COVID happened. It really made us think how the program could continue by understanding the core of the program under new circumstances.” She continued, “With COVID, it was obvious that the program could not run the same way as it was happening before, two months in Mexico City with the low-vaccination process happening here and, yes, the inflation in prices that COVID created. The format of the program in 2021, a three-week summer camp outside of Mexico City, really helped to change the profile of the people that were applying. I’m not saying that the previous participants were wrong or anything, but the program recovered the sense that it was a thematic program; people were not [any longer] applying to SOMA Summer just because of the Mexico City art scene.”

As SOMA settles into a new house and grounds in the lovely, leafy, and central San Miguel Chapultepec neighborhood—the ten-year lease from local collector Moisés Cosío gives the institution some medium-term stability—it also highlights how the school is rethinking the tensions, opportunities, and dynamics of making art today to understand how to serve emerging artists. This has included questioning everything from confronting the role of art and artists in gentrification at a moment when Mexico City is straining under the effects of rapid migration by digital nomads, to rethinking the ideal hour to schedule

public lectures for Gen Z artists who don’t really drink and therefore don’t relate to the dynamics of bars and beers the way that previous generations do. “One of the great things about SOMA is that the programs are constantly being studied and being evaluated. I mean the [PES] program changes every three months, and no generation has had the same program as the generation before,” explained Cortés Hesselbach.

Some dynamics remain constant. SOMA remains committed to keeping tuition as affordable as possible. And they still refuse to pursue accreditation from Mexico’s Secretary of Education (SEP) because doing so makes the program more accessible to artists that might not have had access to formal education like undergraduate university programs or even high school. Moreover, having SEP accreditation would add burdensome bureaucratic requirements that don’t necessarily fit the needs of an art school. For example, though all the faculty are known and respected artists, they do not all have MFAs or PhDs, which SEP accreditation would require. The trade-off to this is that as SOMA attracts artists to Mexico from other countries, it cannot sponsor their visas, a critical gap in their integration into the Mexican art system by which artists “rise” through selection for public grants like the FONCA or the Carillo Gil, which require formal residency status. “We support them as much as we can, for example with letters. But we are not an accredited school, so I think there is an implicit understanding by the students who come that they have to be a bit resourceful and solve those issues as individuals,” said Alzati, a SOMA faculty member.

So what exactly is SOMA?

First, it’s independent and artist-run. Second, it’s nonprofit, noncommercial,

and nongovernmental (it receives no government funding). Formally, it comprises four main programs: the heavily subsidized Spanish-language two-year PES or Programa Educativo de SOMA, which is roughly analogous to an MFA (albeit without studios), and has over the years graduated 167 students from fifteen countries. This program grants 90 percent scholarships to all students and, in cases of extreme hardship, grants full tuition scholarships. There is the English-language SOMA Summer for international students, which has graduated 361 students from sixty-eight countries. There is a residency program for invited artists, and a public lecture series called Miercoles de SOMA [SOMA Wednesdays], which has now run, with precious few exceptions, every Wednesday for the last fifteen years and is archived on the SOMA YouTube channel.

After a handful of interviews and reflecting upon my own experiences with the institution, SOMA emerges as a bit of a paradox. “I have a feeling that one good thing about SOMA is that it’s not necessarily creating a ‘school,’” said Medina brightly. By this he meant that it has not created a group of artists that produce or think in a cleanly groupable way. This signals the school’s pedagogical approach is elastic enough to serve many kinds of practices rather than impose a kind of aesthetic or ideological tribalism. “It’s a very functional sort of schema rather than an ideology of what we want to do or what we want you to learn from SOMA,” Aboaroa reflected.

At the same time, it’s an institution built to respond to a context of institutional and market failures that in turn has sprouted other institutions—both internally and externally. SOMA houses programs that have evolved to become institution-like:

there is the Cuarto de Proyectos [the Projects Room]; the Campeonato Mundial de Ceviche [World Ceviche Championship], which we started as an end-of-term celebration for a class taught by artist Rubén Ortiz Torres and is now an annual community-wide gathering run by artist Ling Sepulveda; an art book library that is open to the public and which responds to how hard and expensive it is to access art books in Mexico; the annual benefit auction, which began (arguably) as a 2011 SOMA Summer participant-led initiative to help offset the cost of the school’s stolen laptop when two members of our cohort and SOMA’s then coordinator were mugged; and the Hymno de SOMA, which, somehow fittingly, is to the tune of New Order’s “Bizarre Love Triangle.”

These days there seems to be a dip in the number of alternative and artist-run projects in the city. “It’s something that always goes in waves,” commented Okón, sounding unworried. Nevertheless, participants of SOMA’s programs have started their own institutions, including, in Mexico City alone: Taller Tajo, a production studio and artist residency; the Croma artist collective; the Local1 residency, bar, and exhibition space; the currently dormant Biquini Wax collective; and Canalla, in nearby Ciudad Neza. Outside of the capital, other projects include the Almendro artist residency in Culiacán and Bruma Laboratoria in Veracruz. I’m unaware of SOMA Summer students starting artist-run institutions in other countries but, statistically, the odds seem high.

The program seems to attract those doggedly committed to art. According to Cortés Hesselbach, “93 percent of SOMA’s graduates still primarily identify as artists, even if that work doesn’t earn them their living.” And a majority of them stay in Mexico

City for at least a few years before moving on—myself among them. I stayed for ten years before personal circumstances obliged returning to the United States. I do what I can to maintain a connection to Mexico, but admittedly it waxes and wanes based on life's circumstances. Do I still identify as “an artist”? That feels harder to say. To the extent that I do, my definition of artist is radically expansive, but this is thanks to the influence of SOMA and studying under faculty like Abaroa, Herrera-Prats, Okón, and Minerva Cuevas.

The current context of censorship and institutional collapse—at least in global north contexts—makes for a charged climate for writing an essay about the past, present, and future of SOMA. As of this writing, the future of one of SOMA's antecedent programs, the storied and admired Whitney ISP, is shockingly in question. Former SOMA Summer codirector Sara Nadal-Melsió was the first ISP Associate Director appointed after ISP founder Ron Clark's retirement. She was fired and the whole ISP program was “paused” by the Whitney Museum's new director, Scott Rothkopf, in retaliation for her and the students fighting to maintain the program's academic independence from the museum. Prior to the ISP, Nadal-Melsió had been hand-picked by Herrera-Prats to codirect SOMA Summer 2019 with Graves when Herrera-Prats's health declined. The unclear fate of the ISP alludes to how many cultural institutions today find their leadership's (boards, donors, directors) interests at odds with those implementing programs—staff, artists, and audiences among them. The institutional schisms at programs like the ISP make SOMA's determination to operate as a rigorously noncommercial and independent space feel particularly trenchant.

As SOMA symbolically becomes an adult, or at least a teen, in its quinceñera year, the challenge is balancing how it conceptualizes itself as an elastic artistic response to a set of societal dynamics with its need to build organizational stability and institutional permanence. “It's starting to acquire the responsibilities of an institution. There's an awareness that it has to respond to more requirements than just having a multi-generational conversation about contemporary art. It begins to assume more responsibilities because there are so many people involved. There are the students, graduates, and people who support it with resources, and they all expect to see certain outcomes, right?” says Alzati.

At a certain point, all institutions, even radical communal ones, have to confront the unsexy and often treacherous trade-offs of institutional administration and sustainability. SOMA is no exception. Our present has become so destabilized it's impossible to say what the future will hold. But for now, SOMA's determination to find ways to continue to exist as an artist-run space independent of the art market and government funding may emerge as its most miraculous and political act.

Unifying Agents: Emancipation and Art Education in the Caribbean

Pablo Guardiola

For the vast majority of the people who inhabit the Caribbean Basin, moving between the countries that comprise it presents a difficult challenge: mobility in the region is determined by existing colonial structures, and travel visas and high transportation costs depress the circulation of the area's inhabitants. The economies associated with tourism have contributed to this deadlock, and the movement of foreign visitors and investors is generally more fluid. Through many strategies, over centuries, the Caribbean has been a brutal laboratory for the implementation of capitalist economic models: first, in the sixteenth century, through colonial exploitation by European powers, and later, since the nineteenth century, by the United States. What

we in the Caribbean are today was forged from pure violence, both historical and

contemporary. Many of these frameworks still manifest in manipulations to local sovereignty, such as France's indemnity against Haiti for its independence (repealed only in 2016), or in direct colonial policies, as is the case of the United States's control of Puerto Rico and some of the Virgin Islands, to name only some. Despite these adverse political and economic circumstances, cultural production in the region is extremely interesting, complex, and powerful, and despite differences in history and language, certain idiosyncrasies are common among the populations of the Caribbean. I do not wish to repeat homogenizing perceptions or clichés, but it is true that the people of the region share much in common, including ways of being, thinking, working, and living. Against colonial impositions, much of the thought produced from the Caribbean considers the body of water that defines our region not as a border but as a "unifying agent."¹

¹ See Reniel Rodríguez Ramos and Jaime Pagán Jiménez, "Interacciones Multivectoriales en el Circum-Caribe Precolonial: Un Vistazo desde Las Antillas," *Caribbean Studies* 34, no. 2 (July–December 2006): 99–139, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25613538>.

Figuring the Caribbean as a site of exchange and emancipation is just one starting point of the educational program RAY | RAYO | RAYON.

The organizers of RAY | RAYO | RAYON define the initiative as an interdisciplinary and experimental art education program operating from the insular and continental Caribbean that places the relationships among and emancipation of the region's constituents at its center. Convened by the Dominican curator Yina Jiménez Suriel and the Puerto Rican artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, the project had its first face-to-face meeting in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in October 2022. In this meeting, participants from the Caribbean with various art backgrounds took up as their primary goal the responsibility of imagining the future form of RAY | RAYO | RAYON (hereafter RAYO).² The first day of this meeting was held at the National Botanical Garden in Santo Domingo, a deliberate decision by the organizers to discuss art education in a space not necessarily linked to the art world or higher education. Our

² The following persons participated in the October meeting: Iberia Pérez González (curator, Caribbean Cultural Institute Coordinator, Pérez Art Museum, Miami), José Rozón (artist), Julianny Ariza Vólquez (artist), Luis Graham Castillo (curator), Madeline Jiménez Santil (artist), Marily Gallardo (artist, choreographer, and director of the Kalalú dance school), Mario Sosa (public policy expert), Maurice Sánchez (artist), Pablo Guardiola (artist and codirector of Beta-Local), Sharelly Emanuelson (artist), Tessa Mars (artist), Tony Cruz Pabón (artist), Yolanda Wood (art historian), Victor Torres (artist and researcher, RAYO administrator), Beatriz Santiago Muñoz (artist, co-organizer of RAYO) and Yina Jiménez Suriel (curator, co-organizer of RAYO).

sessions coincided with the National Festival of Plants and Flowers, an event that had been on hiatus for two years because of the pandemic, and the Botanical Garden was packed with people attending the festival, creating an environment quite rich in human activity. It was fortuitous that RAYO coincided with this event, considering that the program

aspires to be in constant contact with other cultural manifestations: in the Caribbean, thinking about art should never happen in a void. The first day we met in an open pavilion with a thatched roof, where we not only made use of a public facility but also worked within the tropical context of the space—with the trees, the breeze, the heat, the humidity, and the sound of the birds inevitably becoming part of the collective thought process.

Beginning with a self-ethnographic exercise, this first meeting focused on the participants' reflections on their education in art and life. From sharing their formative experiences in a kind of educational *détournement*, certain elements of art and humanities education that intertwined with life itself arose as critical links among many participants' practices. This exercise also explored what elements were common among art education programs across different islands and what were not. For instance, conversations in a bar were understood as being as important as those in a classroom, and it was also pointed out how the importance of working together, whether in a studio or in organizing events or projects collectively, could sometimes go unrecognized, despite being fundamental to art education. Serendipity was understood as another element that should be protected within the participants' analyses of art education in the Caribbean. The idea of RAYO was determined in part from these experiences, drawing on what had already been interesting and what should be changed; it was a common thought that the current educational opportunities in the region do not completely satisfy the potential of a program focused on the region and its context.

Within this exchange, the lack of solid institutions for education in the arts and the

colonial dependence that still exists in the Caribbean were raised as explicit conditions for RAYO to address. In some of the islands, there are no proper BFAs, and graduate programs are basically nonexistent. Further, some programs do not necessarily address the conditions informing cultural production from the region. The United States and Europe are, for many, the only options for higher art education, thereby enforcing still-existent colonial dependencies. It is necessary to note the economic and political costs that studying abroad might have for people who want to educate themselves in the visual arts: the increased expense creates a significant economic burden for students, which in many cases prevents them from returning to work in the Caribbean; this dependency in many ways presents unequal relations, in which the inhabitants from the region will end up as immigrants or second-class citizens in different countries. It is also interesting to note how several RAYO participants who studied outside the region, mainly in the United States and Europe, shared processes of unlearning or adapting their training experiences to the Caribbean context and almost always underwent processes of experimentation and self-direction to build other exchange opportunities and workspaces when they returned to the region. For example, when artists from the Caribbean study in the United States, much of their preparation is directed toward working in a generic big city modeled on New York or Los Angeles. That is not necessarily bad, but the contexts and resources are different, requiring adaptation, and it becomes necessary to build support structures that correspond to what is and isn't available in these locales.

RAYO did not emerge from nowhere, which was clear from the first meeting. It

is a project in relation to other past, present, and hopefully future efforts to address art pedagogy in the region, which unfold in institutions, official academic spaces, independent organizations, workshops, and self-organized support structures and exist in the work of many artists, art historians, curators, and writers. Here, the research work of Natalie Willis Whyly, who generated a list of art-related infrastructures across the Caribbean, including academic institutions, independent nonprofits, and everything in between, provided a starting point. The proposed plan is that her list will grow from contributions by the RAYO online community. Communication within the Caribbean is limited, and for people working in the arts, it can be very difficult to know what initiatives, past and present, shape our art milieu. It is therefore incredibly useful to have access to such an inventory, not only to be aware of what is happening, good and bad, but most importantly to find models of action produced by people working in the region. Another important proposal of the day was the call for a collective effort to identify those who are currently working on and in the region as possible collaborators. It was agreed that collaborations should take many different forms and varied scales, from big events to one-on-one work, and be open to the entire Caribbean and its diasporas. Despite persistently addressing how problematic many of the institutions in the region can be, the participants recognized that there have always been interesting people working within them. The relatively small scale of the region can be considered an asset, with histories of collaboration—not necessarily within institutional contexts—that can be expanded through interpersonal relations. Leisure spaces, for instance, are

usually shared, and it is common to have people from different backgrounds interacting around the same project, such as a carpenter, an artist, and a biologist. This tends to open collaboration and possibilities for exchange, where sometimes friendship bonds come before working situations. One objective is to see how RAYO can catalyze these collaborations. It is also necessary to identify the existing physical infrastructure for art and learning. For example, if you need a theater and there is already one, you don't need to build a new one; on the other hand, the theater may not be necessary, and a corner store or a bar might work better as suitable venues for a talk or an exhibition.

To start a conversation about art and emancipation it is necessary to address what form of art participants are talking about and what disciplines, models, and curricula their ideas might apply to, if any. Participants in this conversation must also confront traditional roles and hierarchies associated with schools, students, and teachers. The purpose of this first RAYO meeting, and the ones that followed, was to think with time and as a collective about how this new program can exist and what it can achieve. For RAYO, the context is quite important and determines a large part of its mission. As an educational project, it draws from the tools we have, as well as our sensibilities. We must point out that our focus was on transcending what we might lack, so that adverse conditions do not become barriers. RAYO does not seek to operate only from resilience but from other ways of being, living, and working in the Caribbean. This position does not cancel working from a historical, political, and decolonial consciousness, where population displacement, racism, and the consequences of neoliberalism are not ignored. RAYO is

the relationship of various pockets that currently generate emancipatory thought and facilitate making art in the Caribbean as an act of political presence. A series of independent initiatives have shaped these ways of working, such as Alice Yard, Trinidad and Tobago; NLS Kingston, Jamaica; Beta-Local, Puerto Rico; and Curando Caribe, Dominican Republic, to mention only a few.

More than definitions, the project proposes tones of work, a fluid ethos, in which work is done in and beyond the obvious categories of the contemporary art world. RAYO, as a project, intends to blur the lines between practices, disciplines, and fields of study and seeks to contribute to the study of historical figures who need more visibility and to be sensitively contextualized within local conditions and histories. For instance, Silvano Lora's work related to water transportation and Indigenous uses of canoes and exchanges between traditional crafts and visual arts in Dominican Republic during the 1980s is a significant antecedent. Against all odds, there are many important artists in the Caribbean who do not participate in the global contemporary art circuit or who are only entering it now after many years of disregard. In regard to anchoring our narratives and sometimes requiring alternative forms to narrate them, we must take these artists and their work into account. Similarly, we must also look to examples of how art can connect the many knowledges that traverse the region, as, for example, the practices of Los Tejedores, in the Dominican Republic, or Minia Bibiani, in Guadeloupe, make apparent. Roles are not necessarily fixed in this new kind of educational program proposed by RAYO, and the responsibilities of curating, making art, and teaching could shift depending on the project. That

does not mean that these categories will be eliminated, but they will become lighter, alleviating some of the burden associated with disciplines and practices. This will be a pedagogical space where, for example, artists with no previous writing experience can propose an onomatopoeic writing project as a temporary educational program. As well, it is important to signal that in its core definition, interdisciplinarity transcends the art world, and collaborations between many fields are encouraged. To know the history of Caribbean sculpture or photography, it is equally important to know specific craft practices or species of trees native to the region. RAYO believes that thought can be produced from art practices in dialogue with other study fields.

The goal of imagining a concrete pilot project emerged from the first RAYO meeting. The challenge remains to inaugurate such a project, not as much from a defined plan but from a common spirit. This chronicle focuses on the meeting in the Dominican Republic, in which I participated, but it should be mentioned that subsequent meetings followed, one online in February 2023 and in-person in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in May 2023. In all these meetings it has been explicitly pointed out that RAYO is a process, and that it is necessary to give it time to develop. Of course, the project faces the problem that financing is generally tied to specific time frames, as well as the fact that many funds are designated to specific countries, which often block the access of others. Within this situation there is another important factor, that of not competing with the funds that other independent organizations in the Caribbean already receive. In conceptual terms, it was established that RAYO is already happening—its reflection is part of its becoming.

Following this line of thought, the idea of routes emerged as central to the pedagogical project, where inevitably the journey is the methodology. The key is to find the right ways to connect different routes, even if they are at times created accidentally. A common fantasy among artists in the region, for example, is to do projects from a sailboat, but to do so, it is first necessary to learn how to sail. Learning can also be done in an exploratory stage, where a kayak, given its different scale, might provide a more navigable option.

There are several clear points that should be included in this narrative: RAYO promotes the exchange of different forms of knowledge, as well as new paradigms focused on the training of artists. These are open, flexible, and very broadly defined. The program will not have accreditations, diplomas, or degrees; it will try always to be free of cost. The program cannot be exclusive: if there are interested participants, they cannot be discredited for not having sufficient preparation or experience. This point is important, since there was a recurring discussion about what to do with young artists who are starting their careers or are enrolled in educational institutions in the region and interested in other forms of education. Within this situation, it is necessary to see how to address expectations related to paradigms of professionalization in the arts, which RAYO has not yet resolved to address. Another factor that has been taken into account is determining when to open the conversation to other cultural agents not coming from the visual arts, as well as to people with other backgrounds, whether from science or within other fields of knowledge and contexts, such as agriculture, fishing, and carpentry.

At the moment, RAYO is perceived as a generator of support structures, specific to contexts and moments. These, in turn, are expected to serve as catalysts for relationships and exchanges among artists. More than anything, the group expectations are that, in a kaleidoscopic way, the routes and meetings that promote working and learning together in and from the Caribbean can be multiplied. These exchanges will provide other opportunities for artists in the region to produce work together, ideally experimenting in forms of collectivity. In the long run, this could also develop a solid base for younger artists, providing them with other models for education, production, and experimentation in their art practices. RAYO is part of a common recent synergy of interest in the Caribbean, within the region itself and its diaspora. It is necessary to organize efforts like this when the ideal conditions align, especially in an area where the paradigm of fragmentation and disconnection has been the historical norm.

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From the Wobbly Scaffolding

lugar a dudas cofounders Oscar Muñoz and Sally Mizrachi in conversation with Karen Devia

Karen Devia To begin, I would like us to talk about the reasons that led you to create and to conceive lugar a dudas as a project.

Oscar Muñoz I thought that we could try out a project that would feature some aspects of what I had encountered in other places which I liked. The first of these was Ciudad Solar, active between 1971 and 1977, where I showed my work and was able to get a grip on how things worked. Later, Pedro Alcántara and I were involved with a group—Taller Prográfica—and there we did some work around print and graphics.

Another important moment came when I met Virginia Pérez-Ratton in the mid-1990s. Virginia was curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Costa Rica, where I was invited to be part of a great exhibition called *Relaciones*, in 1996, and there we became friends. Years later, Virginia founded TEOR/ÉTica, and in

2003 she invited me to present a solo show curated by María Iovino. I became aware of the incredible value of that space.

In 2002, I encountered something similar at the legendary Galería de la Raza, a space for the Chicano and Mexican community that was actively devoted to resistance in San Francisco. That space was run by Carolina Ponce de León; their ways of working and their approach to relationships were more horizontal than you would find in more established institutions, where relationships between people are more hierarchical, complicated, and distant. I was interested in their way of doing things.

So I started to think about a space of this kind. I envisioned a space that would be simple and not too ambitious. At a certain point, things lined up, I invited a group of people, most of them women, to meet somewhat periodically and share ideas. There was Connie Gutiérrez, Elizabeth

Escobar, Carmenza Estrada, Judith Kuj, Andrea Valencia, and Sally, who at some point joined in with a lot of enthusiasm. Once we got together, we began to look for a location.

Sally Mizrachi The idea came as a response to the situation in the city at the time. In Cali during the 1990s things were pretty hopeless, the drug trade had an impact on institutions, and the museum [Museo la Tertulia] had shut down. I remember that we would go out with [photographer] Fernell Franco and Marta, his partner, and we would do nothing but gripe about the city, gripe about the museum—we were complaining all the time. Until one day, Oscar said: “That’s enough. I have to do something.” What Oscar wanted was to give back to the city everything that Cali had given him. In 2003, for the last time, the Salón Nacional had a prize, and Oscar won it. At that point he had already purchased the house together with his sister, so he used the prize money for renovations.

OM When we set out to look for a location, there was a neoclassical house that I really liked. It was completely in ruins, there was nothing left of it except for the façade, which was truly a treasure. That house was a metaphor for the city: the traces of a beautiful past on the outside but demolished on the inside. The group didn’t like the idea, and I think they were right. It would probably have been too complicated; the place was a drug zone, a rough spot. One day Sally mentioned that she had seen a house in the Granada neighborhood and that it could be the right one for the project, and she was right. We already had some previous contacts with the person who owned it, and I was able to buy it in partnership with my

sister, Stella. And so we began to meet here once a week to think about how to proceed. Sally had grown gradually more committed to the project. That gave us a very important push, because later Sally would become, without a doubt, the soul and driving force of the space. For a while Sally was preparing herself to oversee the development of the project, Connie was working as a manager, and Paula Agudelo was in charge of accounting; in the meantime, I focused on making whatever adjustments the house might need, and we aren’t really done with that yet.

SM Before that, I worked in fashion design and I was running a restaurant. Then I heard [curator] Jaime Cerón explain the new forms of interaction between people that were being explored in the art context. It didn’t all turn around the figure of the curator, so there were these other ways for audiences and artists to relate; you could have an exhibition where things were more about mutual understanding and horizontality. In Cali there was this one curator, Miguel González, the high priest running the museum [La Tertulia]; in Medellín there was Alberto Sierra; and in Bogotá, Eduardo Serrano. When I heard what Jaime Cerón had to say, I realized that you could work toward closer relationships with other people and with artists, and this made me take an interest in the project. We came to this house and, even as we first walked in, we felt an atmosphere that drew us in. Before, the house had been the site of the Martenot Academy, where many contemporary artists in Cali had studied when they were children.

In 2004, while we were at work on remodeling the house, two local art events, the Salón Regional del Pacífico and the Salón de Octubre, were getting underway.

Our proposal was to host a group of workshops on curating as a complement to the programming of these two events, and people started to get to know us. Then we began to collaborate with other organizations, and this is when lugar a dudas really broke into the scene. Oscar was always thinking collectively, looking for ways to bring in other voices and ways of seeing, so we got in touch with Michele Faguet, Jaime Iregui, Juan Fernando Herrán, Bernardo Ortiz, José Ignacio Roca, Carmen María Jaramillo, María Clara Bernal, Juan Pablo Velásquez, and María Clara Borrero, and we invited them to help us work out, without any expectation of reaching some kind of certainty, what kind of place lugar a dudas could be. Back then there weren't as many collectives as there are today, there was only Helena Producciones, which was very well known in the city and outside, because the Festival de Performance had become an international event. Collectives like Casa Tomada were getting started at Bellas Artes [the School of Fine Arts], and you could see that things were coming back to life in the city. Oscar thought that local institutions were very fragile, so our goal was to strengthen the local scene, and for this reason we didn't intend to work against these institutions, but rather to work alongside them and do things together.

KD When did you open to the public?

SM On April 9, 2005, and we had been holding meetings since 2003. From the start we meant to use a room for exhibitions, and where we now have the Living Room we originally housed Cedoc, the documentation center, with Oscar's books and a collection of *Arte en Colombia* magazines donated by Celia Birbragher. Artists

then began to donate publications that they had, and in that way, we put together the Cedoc with a few shelves and a table in the middle. People would come over and we noticed that there was this desire to meet with others. That gave us a lot of encouragement.

OM When we opened to the public, we found people who were willing to come and volunteer their work, people who brought a lot of enthusiasm with them and who were very important to us, mostly friends, students, or graduates from Bellas Artes and the Instituto Popular de Cultura. One day I noticed that our traditional Monday meetings had grown quite large and, with that new group of collaborators, we set out to work on furnishings, we built tables, the film screen, and the shelves for the Cedoc. It was very exciting. We put together an amazing team with people like César García, María Eugenia Duque, Oscar Montoya, Luis Mosquera, Oscar Acosta, Jorge Sánchez, Juliana Guevara, Wilson Nieva, Natalia Cajiao, Paula Agudelo, Juan Pablo Velásquez, Lina Montoya, and many others.

SM That same year the Daros Foundation, which held a very large collection of Latin American art, organized an exhibition in Zurich called *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos*, featuring works by Oscar and other Colombian artists. When we traveled to the exhibition, I brought along a brochure explaining lugar a dudas, and the organizers decided to place it next to an urn, so that visitors could find out about the space and make donations. This was the first funding that we received, along with the money from the ticket sales, which Daros also donated to us. I showed them some

photographs of the Cedoc and I told them: “This is the documentation center that we are putting together.” The librarian at the Daros Foundation was touched to see those scanty shelves with publications, and she told me that we were free to take any books we wanted. They shipped them to us along with other materials and catalogues from all their exhibitions. This was a boost to the documentation center and one of our first exchanges with other organizations in the country and abroad.

KD Oscar, how did you distribute your time as an artist and as a person who was now in charge of a cultural project?

OM Back then I thought I had some leisure time—later I realized that laziness and leisure are crucial to our work—that I could use to work on something else. It wasn’t easy. I had many things to learn. It was difficult for me because I had to make an effort to be social in a way that I have always avoided, but people were starting to come. I found that very exciting, and there was this sense that the city was going through a good moment. That year I worked exclusively on *lugar a dudas* and, little by little, I was able to adjust, to determine what tasks I should take on and what I was interested in accomplishing, which is for the space to be able to create its own dynamics and to flow. Obviously, I was able to accomplish this once we began to pay those people who were taking on new responsibilities.

KD I imagine that a lot of effort goes into looking for funding in order to keep *lugar a dudas* running under suitable conditions, and to allow it to grow and develop new projects. How has your approach to funding developed?

OM Daros gave us some money to get started, a one-time donation. Later, they referred us to Avina, a foundation for sustainable development which was backing many different causes in Colombia, such as journalistic research on paramilitary groups. They gave us some annual money for a while. Then came Hivos; they had given some funding to TEOR/ÉTica in Costa Rica, but they had no programs in Colombia. One day they told us that they would like to give us some support. With those funds we decided to bring in someone who could assist users at the Cedoc, so we were able to hire Mónica Restrepo on a fixed salary. Over time I have come to realize that those modest jobs that we have been able to offer people throughout the years have been very important, for *lugar a dudas* and for the artists who have worked here.

SM Since 2007 we have had the support of Arts Collaboratory. It is very important for us to be part of that network, and not just for financial reasons. We learn from one another. We know that funding is essential, since we are not a company producing commodities, we generate no capital, and, for this reason, we have to outline other strategies that may allow us to fund our projects. Nowadays the situation is difficult and foreign resources are scarce, so we are putting more of an effort to look for funding here in Colombia. Although it takes a lot of patience to work through the hurdles of bureaucracy, we have obtained funding for specific programs from the Ministry of Culture and the city’s Office of Cultural Affairs.

There are also individuals in Cali who have believed in *lugar a dudas* and backed us from the start. In this regard, Mariana Garcés helped us fund our Production

Grants for Local Artists (known as BLOC, for its Spanish acronym); there is also a printing house, Feriva, who produced our programming booklets for many years; and María Clara Borrero, who did some management work for us. Many people have helped us or have wanted to do so, but I should take a moment to mention Mario Scarpetta, who believed in *lugar a dudas* and gave us his support for about ten years, with extraordinary generosity and without even asking us to credit his name in some way. Without his support we would not have been able to carry out many of our production programs for emerging artists.

KD Let's talk a little bit about the programs developed by *lugar a dudas*. One of these has been running from the start, namely the film program, right?

SM Yes, from the start we wanted to screen films. At first, Ramiro Arbeláez, a cinema buff and historian, was in charge of programming. Every Saturday we would screen films and, back then, I designed the fliers. Then we decided to hire a graphic designer. The screenings went really well; many people came. After Ramiro, Catalina Rayo and Luis Mosquera programmed the series, and then a collective from the Universidad del Valle, called Suburbia, made us a proposal and we decided to let them run it. We thought that it was important to let other people do things at *lugar a dudas*, people who might know more about a topic than us. In this way we also began to attract different kinds of audiences.

KD Another flagship program at *lugar a dudas* is the exhibition series installed on the Shop Window. Could you talk a little bit about how it was conceived and about your expectations?

OM In the early days we rented out that space to a store that sold local design products called Demodo, and it was open for about a year, and after that we decided to use it as an exhibition space that we call the Shop Window. We made that change because we thought that we could use an approach to exhibitions that would be more open to the public, and it would also allow us to expand the Cedoc by moving it into the room where we used to install the exhibitions. In this way, we were able to run a continuous program of exhibitions that directly engaged people passing by, on the street, and this was unusual here at the time.

SM Many artists told us that they would get invited to show their work somewhere and they would just get a wall, so the artists had to do everything by themselves. We wanted to change that, and to encourage institutions and exhibition spaces to conceive that relationship in different terms. You had to acknowledge the work of the artists, you had to pay them, and we think that we have been able to bring about some degree of change in this regard. Artists should know that if they are invited to show their work, they can expect a stipend for their work, for their production; in this way we have been able to get artists to be noticed. Although the institutions may not realize this, the artists who have shown their work here have gained awareness that these are things that they can and should demand.

KD In that sense, by creating the Production Grants for Local Artists you were also aiming to promote the professionalization of artists' labor and the demand for financial remuneration.

OM This has been a very special program, and this is why I fight so hard to keep it going.

It has so many valuable components, so it's disheartening for us to be forced to run it with resources that are insufficient in proportion to the number of artists who apply. The program opens many possibilities by allowing artists who are just getting started to develop a project, to try things out, to make mistakes; it's a grant that provides a studio space and a sum of money that allows artists to flesh out an idea, and to have a chance to discuss it with other people. Someone who receives a BLOC grant can show the results of their work at the Museo la Tertulia, our current partner institution for the program. This allows artists to explore how their work can be exhibited in a particular location, to discuss it with curators, and to be involved in the installation process and in all stages of the development of their own shows. What artists can learn through this process is as important as the exhibition itself.

In earlier versions, the project was developed in partnership with the Alliance Française, Proartes, the Centro Colombo Americano, Comfandi, La Tertulia, and La Sucursal. The Museo la Tertulia has remained as a partner until now, partly because the director, Ana Lucía Llano, and the curator, Alejandro Martín, are aware that BLOC is worth the effort; they have understood the program's impact and relevance.

SM When we created BLOC, we invited other institutions to contribute to the project because, at the time, there were no sources of funding for artists in Cali. At first, six institutions teamed up to offer these grants for artists, which included a production budget, an exhibition, a brochure, and advertising to help promote the artist's work. The grants from the city's

Office of Cultural Affairs came after BLOC and, in part, as a result of our efforts; they were created three years ago, and for a blueprint they relied on a different proposal by lugar a dudas—and we had to do some pushing to convince them. The Office took up our idea again and put it to work.

OM BLOC has helped to redefine the ways local government interacts with other institutions and with artists. This is what BLOC has argued for from the very beginning; it's about relationships based on trust between those involved, but it is also open to other discussions that may arise. These relationships have improved gradually, but things are still quite difficult because it is hard to avoid misunderstandings and disagreements, which often stem from the fact that we don't have enough resources to fund more artists. Despite this, we are open to debate about the way the program works. The fact that there are some who go to the trouble of publishing texts—sometimes anonymously—voicing their objections to the program shows that they take an interest.

KD Talking about these efforts toward constructing a collective and the frictions they entail, how have your relationships been with other groups and spaces in the city during these years?

OM They have gone through different phases; lugar a dudas was one of the spaces hosting the Salón Nacional de Artistas in 2008. Not so much in terms of exhibition space, but rather in terms of logistics and labor. The organizational meetings were held here, and this is where the curatorial team was assembled. Most of the exhibitions were installed at the site of the school,

Sagrada Familia, Bellas Artes, the Museo la Tertulia, and other spaces around the city. Our contribution to the Salón left us with many good experiences, it had a strong impact on the art scene in Cali, and it allowed us to act on a wider scale than we were used to. Sometime later, we had the intention of working to consolidate a kind of coalition of projects that were run by local artists in the city. It was called La Colaborativa, but it was a short-lived experiment.

SM La Colaborativa was born in 2009, and the goal was to establish an association of spaces and projects, to share concerns and to enable processes that wouldn't be feasible if we worked separately. We achieved this up to a certain point, but we did not get very far, because the spaces didn't have the capacity or the interest to remain committed. Several collectives from the city were involved in the project, among them Casa Mata, La Plástica Rayada, Descarrilados, and La Cubeta Pentaprismática. The first assembly of Arts Collaboratory, in 2011, met here in Cali, after we pushed for it, because we wanted the members of this network to get a glimpse of the local scene. The people from Arts Collaboratory had a chance to hear about all the projects that were underway in the city, and they were amazed to see that there was so much going on.

KD What led to the idea of inviting a curator or artistic director to work at lugar a dudas?

SM For eight years we took on the task of organizing exhibitions that would allow emerging artists to make their work known, and we created open calls for artists from Colombia and from abroad, with the idea

that there ought to be transparency in the way in which projects were selected. Each year we close our doors during the month of January, and we meet to go over the year that just ended—a self-evaluation of sorts—so we can gauge where we have failed and how we can improve. For several years we focused our activities on projects around three lines: exhibition, research, and residencies. We would come up with new projects through discussions with the team. So we thought that we could invite other people to make proposals and to develop their own projects here, as a way of making room for other voices.

OM We noticed that our outlook had become somewhat closed, and we thought that we should crack it open, that it would be good for us to seek out other points of view, because it would shake up this scaffolding we were on, the wobbly scaffolding that we had climbed on. This brought about some interesting situations.

SM This was our first approach to the figure of the curator, and for three years those who were interested in the position would apply with a project once we issued our open call. The first time, we chose Miguel López, who is currently at TEOR/ética. Miguel outlined a project that he worked on for almost a year, and during that time lugar a dudas used this project as a point of departure for all of its activities.

OM Miguel López was involved with the network Conceptualismos del Sur, and with queer movements in Latin America, so he brought many people to give talks and new audiences. In conversation with him we came up with the idea of *Tertulias sobre el Museo* [Gatherings On the Museum],

a series of talks and meditations on the phenomenon of Latin American museums, with a nod toward Museo la Tertulia, which we also brought into the discussion. Back then, the museum was going through a lot of problems, there were no clear guidelines, and there were issues with its programming and its way of engaging with the city. Nonetheless, people still felt affection for that museum, so what we did was to host a series of conversations which Miguel conceived and coordinated.

SM There were around nine talks at different locations, La Tertulia being one of them. Thus far we have only been able to make a publication based on one of the conversations, with Fernando Carrillo, who came from the Museo Reina Sofía [in Madrid]. Others who came were Pablo León de la Barra, Gabriela Rangel from the Americas Society, Osvaldo Sánchez from the Museo Rufino Tamayo, Marcelo Expósito, Pamela Desjardins, Víctor Manuel Rodríguez, and Paola Santoscoy, and they all had a lot to say about what museums are going through.

OM After Miguel, we chose Gris García. Her work drew a lot from the idea that curatorial practices could be understood as processes that go beyond exhibitions. Through a diverse range of projects and events, Gris wanted to work around the concept of the host, and she invited artists like Carolina Bonfim, Javier Peñafiel, and La Fulminante to contribute to a set of core themes by staging talks, workshops, and performances. Gris was here for four months at first, and then she was able to get some funding from the ITM, an art school in Medellín, so she came back to organize an exhibition with people who had never shown their work at lugar a dudas.

Marilia Loureiro was the last of our guest curators. Her system was to extend an open invitation to someone who would then in turn invite a second person, who would invite a third person, and so on. Her way of doing things grew out of the principle of creating a growing network of individuals and interests through indeterminacy. She also organized *dérives* and walks around the city in conversation with other people.

Her programming was continuous, and it was nourished by the fact that she had arrived with no previous knowledge, which allowed her to approach people from the city so that they could keep the project going on their own. She was not too interested in exhibition processes, although I think she did organize a few. Her work argued, above all, for a dynamic of play and discovery.

The presence of these curators allowed us to understand that there were these other kinds of interaction that we hadn't thought about before. Overall, we were able to get involved in a conversation that gave us a glimpse of these new perspectives that we were not aware of, and this helped us to introduce some changes in our way of doing things.

SM Three years ago we realized that it was important to invite a curator with whom we could work on projects together, from a position that would be proper to lugar a dudas, based on attentiveness to the context and an understanding of the art scene; somebody who would create the activities alongside us rather than a curatorial project disengaged from our daily experiences. We wanted it to be someone from Colombia, although not necessarily from Cali, so we invited Víctor Albarracín. We had other candidates in mind, but we chose Víctor

because he was a person who did not follow conventional rules and who could bring something else to lugar a dudas.

We were also reflecting on what had happened when Marilia and Gris were here, since they brought these beautiful projects to Cali and worked with the local scene and with people from abroad, asking other artists to join in, and this made us realize that it was time for us to get rid of this inflexible and schematic way of making a decisions by way of open calls, and that we should focus instead on engaging in direct conversation with artists, to discuss face-to-face projects that they would bring to us and those that our team wanted to try out.

KD In terms of the axes of lugar a dudas, there is one worth highlighting and that is the concept of “an education without a school,” which led the way to projects like (uncertain school).

OM Already when Miguel López was here we were working on this idea of an education without a school, it was a thread running through everything we did at lugar a dudas, although not too consciously, but rather as something that was always there, implicitly. Our replica project, for example, was pedagogical in nature, because we invited students from the art schools to make a piece that would be a copy of the work of an artist who was in some collection and who had never come to Cali, and to exhibit that piece in the Shop Window, so that people would envision an imaginary museum. Later, during one of our meetings, we recalled conversations we had with several artists who would tell us that, when they were students, they had tons and tons of photocopies, because books are so expensive here, or because they had only used a

particular chapter, or because there were no copies of the book available at the university, or maybe only the professor’s, so they had to make photocopies and many of them ended up with boxes and boxes of photocopies. This is how we came up with the idea of the Photocopy Library, where we would invite others to suggest a text that they would like to read and which they thought would be relevant, and then to share it as a photocopy, understood as a point of departure for the circulation of knowledge. For me, this was a form of education without a school, which also surfaced in many other projects.

SM One day, Víctor told us that it was time for lugar a dudas to have a project that would be more straightforwardly pedagogical. A year later, we launched the first installment of (uncertain school), which took place in 2017, with support from the Ministry of Culture, Jumex, and the city’s Office of Cultural Affairs. The school is now heading toward its third installment, and so far we have welcomed a broad gathering of tutors and students, some from Cali and quite a few from elsewhere in the world, all of whom come together for six weeks to engage in productive thinking around a particular issue, and to share a moment of life in this city where we also have so much to do in the streets, a lot of partying and a lot of chaos.

KD As for the people who make up a regular audience at lugar a dudas, I guess it is difficult to maintain the same degree of interest through the years, to keep going and to bear in mind that the audience and the context of the city itself are always in flux. How have you dealt with the complexity of these processes?

SM I would say the house has changed, or at least its spaces, when we have adjusted to make them adequate to the projects that we are working on. The house was a traditional residential space, typical of this neighborhood, with columns and fences; we used to leave the fence open, and we noticed that people wouldn't come inside because it was a house. The Shop Window had an audience, since it was intended to get people to come by and to engage with an art practice without having to leave public space, but those people wouldn't come inside. We started to post a billboard with our programming on the outside wall, so that passersby could find out about what was happening during the month, and we put up a sign that said, "This space is for you." These were things that we would come up with as we came to get a sense of how we could relate to the public.

OM This question about how to deal with a public or with an audience has been a struggle from the start, but things have changed. When we fixed up the house to open it to the public, what I had in mind was to bring it back to the way it looked originally in old photographs. I wanted it to have that kind of spirit.

Our first exhibition after we opened was called *L.A. Freewaves*. It was a group show with works on video by Latin American artists from Los Angeles. We had screens and headphones, but very few people showed up. We realized that we had to break with this kind of exhibition as we moved forward, so that people might feel that this was a space that they could occupy, that they could sit anywhere and nobody would charge them for it or ask them what they were doing there.

We had to shatter the division between the public and the private, which takes a lot of work because there are people who would like to keep them strictly separated. So, this is when we decided to work with the topology of the sidewalk, as though saying that we were turning that space over to the public. When the space is open, anyone who feels like it can sit there, on a spot that could be a private yard but that is now open to all. I think that when we did this there was a change.

SM As I said earlier, there are still some people who are reticent about us, who see us as a place that only a group can have access to, and once they get here, they realize that it's not like that. But even so this prejudice lingers on—it's hard to change that, because of the way people relate to each other in the art world and because of preconceived notions. Some people just see us as a closed group. Even when we used to have open calls, people thought that *lugar a dudas* would only select people who we were friends with.

OM Here we have a small local scene of people who are interested in art, and they know *lugar a dudas*. Within this community you have a smaller group of people who might be interested in what we do. Now, a person who comes from elsewhere, or who studies efforts to bring people closer to art, she might think that there is something interesting about this place; I mean somebody working on a research project or who works for an institution that is looking at how to create spaces in countries where there is no state support, where institutions are weak, she may find here a rich source of hypotheses. Some people might be interested in us because this is

a space that has a certain history of resistance within a particular context, and that has faced some adversity. In a city like Cali, where we have no gallery system to speak of, no collectors and a very small amount of artistic activity, it's not easy to knit a social relation around art, because art doesn't have a presence here.

SM Our audience is not huge; we are aware of that. We are part of a few networks and we have seen how things are for other spaces here in Colombia and abroad, so we know that this is an issue for all of us. Those spaces do not draw a lot of people; instead, they reach a few people who are interested in particular things and are eager to see something different. Of course, we would love it if people from many different backgrounds would come, and we have accomplished this, for instance in 2017, with the collective Ensartijadas, a group of Afro-Colombian women who have been using the house to meet and organize public events. It is important for us to get other people to come, not just artists, but people or groups who are doing things in the city, who worry about issues in the city and who are dealing with these issues somehow. Sadud a Ragul, the coffee shop, was also conceived with this aim of getting other people to come by; it started as a very small food stall and gradually it's beginning to attract more people. Many people come to eat there but they never come into the house. Others take their time to discover that there is something else going on here and, when that happens, their perception changes.

OM In the early days, we felt that our task was to strengthen the local scene, to give it materials to work with and to collect our strengths. Things were all very fragile and

scattered back then. I think there is a particular generation of people who made this possible and who enjoyed that moment. Nowadays, the city has changed quite a bit. Collectives like El Camión, Casa Tomada, Casa Mata, Espacio Temporal, Cabaret Machine, and many others have disappeared or changed over the years.

KD Do people see lugar a dudas as an independent space or as an institution?

OM From its inception, lugar a dudas has been relatively independent and relatively dependent. On the one hand, we can say that lugar a dudas is a dependent space, because it requires financial support. The space cannot generate the money that it needs to survive and calls on others to contribute. What we do is to take that money and turn it into activities for people. On the other hand, it is independent, to the extent that, from the start, we have been charting the situation and deciding which path to follow.

For us, it is important to be open daily, since institutions in Cali haven't typically been run with a clear sense of procedure for responding to the needs of users. We want to be open to the public from 3 to 8 p.m. In that sense, we function as an institution. We want the service we provide to be good, warm, and close; we want to work through horizontal relationships, unlike other institutions that look from above and interact with people through coldness, distance, and hierarchy. We aim to work in a different way, not only with the public understood as something abstract, but concretely, with our community of artists in Cali.

The work that Víctor is doing is something that you will not find in any other institution. What (uncertain school) is trying to do is not something that you can

get just anywhere. In the screenings you will find a program that cannot be found anywhere else in the city. Because we have this way of playing with the marginal and, and at the same time, we have a respect for film as a discipline. To dig around, to probe, to see what's underneath, this is all part of the spirit of lugar a dudas.

KD After that balance, could you tell us how you perceive lugar a dudas in the present and how you envision its future?

SM I think that right now what is happening with (uncertain school) is very important, and this is a project that lugar a dudas is betting on. We see this is a project that, as we conceive it, or as Víctor conceives it, diverges from the way in which thought is produced in academia, and that would like to help prepare people to work in the cultural context with resources that are different from those offered by academia.

OM Our image of lugar a dudas in the future is still that of a space that is open to trying things out, open to suggestions coming from outside. We believe in mistakes; we haven't made enough mistakes yet.

SM We are always thinking ourselves over, redefining ourselves, and if we get to a point when we don't find any meaning in what we are doing, when we feel that we have completed a cycle, then we are not afraid to consider that cycle as closed. I think we have been an important landmark locally, in Colombia and in Latin America, a sign of what an art space can be, of a way of doing things; for that reason I think that, if it came to that, other people could take up the project and develop new ideas using what we have done, and what others have done,

as an inspiration. We have raised certain questions that we may keep working on; the point for us is not simply to survive, but to do something that is meaningful within the art context, which is what we have been doing. If at some point this meaning should fade out, then we might say: "this is as far as we go."

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Don't Teach, Learn: The Educational Experiments at EspIRA

**Patricia Belli interviewed
by Miguel A. López**

Miguel A. López In Nicaragua, the ways of producing art have drastically transformed during the last twenty years. We have witnessed a critique of systems of representation that breaks down the hegemony of traditional disciplines of painting and sculpture. This process has encountered resistance. Crucial to the successful diversification of artistic languages has been a new generation of young artists educated in programs that are alternative to those offered by the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas [National School of Fine Arts]. You have been the driving force behind such programs and educational experiments, which have had a significant impact throughout Central America. I would like to discuss the effects of a critical education in art. In 2001, you launched the first installment of TAJó (Taller de Arte Joven) [Workshop of Young Art], a program that takes place in your house. How did this program come about?

Patricia Belli TAJó emerged out of the realization that a new generation of artists would not come about spontaneously. We needed an alternative educational structure. In fact, I understood this two years earlier, when, in July 1999, the second Bienal de Pintura Nicaraguense turned into a battlefield between contemporary artists and traditional painters. That year, my work *Vuelo difícil* (1999) received the first prize from the Bienal. This work was a montage of a dress on which tiny picture frames with images were hanging; it utilized techniques like painting, sculpture, and photography without fully embodying any of those disciplines. The fact that a nontraditional work of art won caused indignation among an important segment of local traditional artists and provoked an attack on those of us who were trying to elaborate art from other perspectives. For

them, the contemporary art we were trying to make was a scam.¹

Despite everything, the most revealing aspect of this debate was that the conservative side was being led by the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas and its seventeen- and eighteen-year-old students. It was a testament to the disastrous state of artistic education in the country and became the main reason behind the creation of alternative teaching platforms. That's how I opened TAJó in 2001 with the intention of creating the conditions to discuss works of art by local artists, questioning collectively their reach and effectiveness. We delved into this process based on the premise that art produces meanings that enrich the audience's experience. We revised and interrogated the sensations and meanings generated by works—their proposed senses and the formal solutions that they constructed—while discussing the synergy between them.

MAL TAJó's existence paved the way for the creation of EspIRA (Espacio para la Investigación y Reflexión Artística) [Space for Research and Artistic Reflection] in 2004, which has been your longest, most active, and possibly most recognized educational project—at least among those outside of Nicaragua. I think in that moment, it was clear enough to you how important it was to fill the void of artistic formation in Nicaragua. How was the journey from TAJó to EspIRA?

¹ The jury members for this edition of the II Bienal were Celia Sredni de Birbragher (Colombia), Jane Cazalla (Spain), and Vivian Pfeiffer (Argentina). The newspaper articles and opinions about this controversy were distributed as an appendix to the catalogue of the event. See *II Bienal de Pintura Nicaragüense* (Fundación Ortiz Gurdian, 1999).

PB While TAJó was a group of people congregating to talk about art, EspIRA was developed as an association of artists and cultural

managers—a legally constituted organization that provided a judicial shield for the work we wanted to do. In their essences, the broad objectives of TAJó and EspIRA are the same: to generate formative and educational spaces from which a position that is both critical toward reality and committed to the present can emerge. The only difference was that the legal status of EspIRA facilitated fundraising, which, in the long run, allowed us to elaborate and broaden the scope of the workshops. We brought in professors from other countries and offered educational activities from theoretical, practical, and even art historical approaches. On a methodological level, there was a big change insofar as the TAJó critical workshops were provided solely by me, within my house, and free of cost. On the other hand, EspIRA's funding and varied artist roster allowed the activities to acquire a diverse quality rich in perspective and educational dynamics.

MAL What were the specific formative aspects with which you wanted to radically differentiate yourself from the education imparted by the traditional School of Fine Arts?

PB An important aspect to point out is that the learning provided at the traditional art school in Nicaragua is technical. That has begun to change this year [2016], with a graduate from EspIRA being named the director of the School of Fine Arts. But not long ago, the school taught painting techniques and very limited art history classes. The iconography present in the school had Surrealist, Cubist, Romantic, and Neoclassical influences, but with very little information and no reflection on why these influences happen. Not to mention the lack of information on contemporary forms of creation.

In response, EspIRA established a model well-recognized in the contemporary art world, though unusual at a local level: it sought learning processes that allow for artistic production to take as its starting point personal experience, which allows it to be aware of its location, the context it operates in, and the elements it interacts with. We also wanted to avoid having these creative forms respond to traditional disciplines, and preferred having them build their own languages, freely articulating and communicating forms, ideas, and emotions.

The simple strategy used back then was dialogue, which continues to be the prevailing practice today. We are interested in discussing how meaning is generated in public terms and why we make art. That is what we do with the works of the participants: we analyze all those mechanisms through which meaning comes out of form, including biological sensations, perceptions, and the historic and cultural associations of images and materials. We also question the established taste, the aesthetic genealogy, the ways desire and aversion are produced and ask ourselves about the ideologies underlying these concepts.

In EspIRA we don't teach techniques or disciplines; we actually don't teach anything, as our system is based on learning, not teaching.² With regard to the art disciplines, we also don't promote their learning, because they're prescriptive. More precisely, we encourage their unlearning. When an EspIRA student has experienced more technical learning beforehand—whether painting, audiovisual, or theater—he or she will need to frequently experiment with that same language to dismantle and re-accommodate it to a more sincere mode of expression.

² The idea of “not teaching but learning” comes from Mexican artist Francisco Quesada, who came to Managua to teach a workshop with that name in 2006.

This is a difficult task, as education in traditional schools is purely technical and usually lacks critical thought. It becomes a corset that limits and disciplines you. Many times, we end up unconsciously reproducing those same restrictions. We constantly face this situation and therefore emphasize that students need to transgress certain established forms: they need character and position-taking to contribute to their work. These tools can't be used arbitrarily or autonomously, as their gesture is part of a collective meaning. We view this critical conjunction of analysis and deconstruction as part of a synergetic exercise.

We do this to stimulate honest and non-derivative production. From this same perspective, we don't drive students to politically correct paradigms because it would be like promoting another technique or formula. Instead, we push them toward the ethical positions encountered by questioning one's surroundings and through the intertwining of personal experience with theoretical discussion. Sometimes these crossing points converge into familiar paradigms that are nonetheless personal, conscious, and situated.

Education as a Transformative Practice

MAL I would like for us to talk more about the dynamics of EspIRA. What are its working methods and how is time employed? Did you have some sort of goals embedded in your educational work?

PB Depending on the workshop and the instructor, a work session lasts around three to four hours. It can include a theoretical text, a formal analysis, a historical period or practice. The exercises challenge the

participants' creativity and force them to explore their own interests. We manage to give profound reviews face-to-face because we strive to create an intimate space where everyone has a right and commitment to frankness and attention. These dynamics are common in all the workshops at EspIRA, whether theoretical, practical, or critical.

The activities we call "critique workshops" are the spine of young artists' work. It's a way of learning by doing, either about art, human relations, affects, perceptions, ideas, or otherness. We began to formulate our version of how to implement a critique workshop with TAJó in 2001, under the conviction that it was necessary to provide an atmosphere of "horizontality." One basic principle is that in a critique workshop there are no observers: all who talk show their work, and all who show their work talk. The best moment in this process is when participants who have been interacting for several months are capable of expressing their opinions without fear while having developed stronger argumentative abilities. That is the moment of harvest.

Similarly, the objectives embodied in our pedagogical work have also emerged through our journey. More generally, we perceive of education as an opportunity: an opportunity to provide spaces for elucidation and debate; to encourage the learning of a subversive trade; to rethink established cultural codes, including those associated with artistic creation; to cultivate emancipation through the investigation of the prejudices we construct and are seduced by; to invite reflection, aesthetic joy, and individual and collective transformation; to search for the autonomy of thought and equality in gender, class, and all other types of social domination; and to inculcate sensibility and discernment so as to achieve

skillfulness as artists and interpretative capacity as a public. All of these patterns are not words or personal ideas, but the result of a collective effort realized by Darwin Andino, Ricardo Huezo, María Félix Morales, and me, locking ourselves up for a week in 2010 to create the master plan for the organization.

MAL EspIRA shares the desire to see in art education the possibility of building not only artists but critical citizens. In other words, citizens who confront everyday conflicts through creativity and commitment. Clearly, nothing guarantees that an emancipatory education occurs or that education itself promotes critical stances. In many cases, authoritarian models of knowledge are implemented under these same premises. However, we cannot renounce the promise of education as a transformative practice. I would like to ask you about primary education: what is the role of art education in that process?

PB I am not familiar with the ministerial programs of arts education in elementary school, but I have witnessed art classes in schools and talked to some teachers. In Nicaragua, art teachers in public schools are also teachers of other subjects; if they are capable of drawing, they'll teach art classes. Evidently, this causes them to lack a proper methodology, a comprehension of the social benefits of fine arts, or any critical component of creative work. To make matters worse, no one takes art classes seriously—not the ministry, schools, or even teachers—causing them to become a sad representation of what could otherwise be a great opportunity to develop creative people. Arts education thus remains more of a fiction than a reality.

In fact, at EspIRA we launched a project called “Jóvenes creativos” [Creative Teens], which caters to kids and teens with artistic and graphic skills through workshops focused on improving their perception and creativity. We hope that in the future, when facing the possibility of pursuing the arts, they can make an informed decision. In “Jóvenes creativos” we work primarily with our own bodies, and the perception of the other. It is a program that assumes the challenges of working with participants from different socioeconomic classes. It addresses this mix through exercises (sometimes theater or play therapy) to learn how to look and know ourselves: to look at people and not just their genotype, clothes, or gender. We contribute, even a little, to their encounter with happiness in empathy for others.

MAL Do you think art education in Nicaragua has changed in recent years, when EspIRA has been so active? Has the work you have done generated critical tensions to the point of forcing traditional academic education to rethink its modes of function?

PB As I mentioned before, arts education, or the School of Fine Arts, has changed in the past few years. This is also due to the Bienal de Arte de Nicaragua, an exhibition project with the most resources, exposure, and recognition in the country. It has presented contemporary art for the past fifteen years. We, who are small but stubborn, have had a growing presence in the artistic scene, especially in the Bienal. We have encouraged others to think of education in different terms. This has turned the tables, making students more curious and less averse to contemporary modes of expression. It is also interesting that the Institute of Culture has begun to organize

competitions and exhibits that encourage the use of nontraditional materials, for example, an exhibit of works done with tires. But generally, those pieces serve only as decoration and not as a starting point for complex debates. Clearly, a move toward an unconventional object or mode does not systematically contribute to enriching the critical field. However, indirectly, it accomplishes something as students feel more confident in exploring what is happening in the art world. They are no longer intimidated by contemporary art.

MAL Just a moment ago, you mentioned how important it was for you that educational processes emerge out of a revision of personal experience. This reminds me of the premises of feminist artistic education, not only because the personal is positioned as a place where political meanings are generated for creative work, but also because the type of interaction you propose destabilizes the traditional authority of the master in favor of more fundamental horizontal exchanges. It reminds me of what the US feminist artist Judy Chicago calls the “circle methodology.” In other words, an educational dynamic in which the master is the facilitator within a structure where everyone participates and shares experiences.³ There is even a healing dimension in these dynamics, allowing one to confront problems that cannot be addressed alone. I shed light on this topic of feminist education because the art field is still dominated by masculine perspectives. I would like to ask you how you think gender and sexuality play a role in your pedagogical work. Is it possible to fight against the patriarchal and heteronormative structure—which surrounds the sphere of culture—from your own educational dynamics?

³ See Judy Chicago, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education* (The Monacelli Press, 2014).

PB EspIRA's education is without a doubt feminist, especially in its interactive methodology and focus on healing and emancipation. We are using both sensitive and rational tools and are motivated to overcome historical and personal traumas. Correspondingly, we support artistic processes which generate pieces that are potentially transformative for the audience. There are a variety of dimensions that may be challenged: the low self-esteem generated by the history of colonization, cultural abduction, pressure to fit into emotional molds based on Catholicism (e.g., guilt, drama, sacrifice), the abnegation of the feminine, the absence of histories based on personal narratives, the casualties of war, earthquakes, and so on. The artists cover these traumas from their own positions and in tones ranging from pain without cynicism to crass satire. And the political aspect of trauma is addressed throughout the process: an earthquake is a natural phenomenon but how natural is the way its victims die? Who authorized the location of the construction or the density of the cinder block that killed them?

The circle method of Judy Chicago has important similarities to our workshops. These include the circle we form to look at each other, the honest reflection that comes out of trust, enabling encounters between different people, the search for diverse perspectives, and an emphasis on meaning. These are some strategies we use to subvert self-imposed patriarchal structures in interpersonal relationships and works of art. We constantly examine personal experience, identifying it as such to articulate our perspectives and provide feedback on processes by drawing attention to the obscure and overlooked, and enjoying ourselves in our humanness, humor, and perversions.

Linking One Thing to the Other

MAL I would like to ask you about the distinct formative programs that were created inside EspIRA, like RAPACES (Residencia Académica Para Artistas Centroamericanos Emergentes) [Academic Residencies for Emerging Central American artists] since 2007, or TACON (Talleres de Arte Contemporáneo) [Contemporary Art Workshops] since 2010. The program RAPACES, for example, is an educational residence for Central American artists. In conversations I've had over the past year with regional artists younger than thirty-five, the program always popped up. This program you created was fundamental to the growth of their artistic processes and it also promoted considerable mobility for artists, creating new networks of exchange, production, and affect that endure to this date. How were the academic residencies organized?

PB It was both intense and beautiful, as is everything EspIRA does. The Academic Residencies for Emerging Central American artists began in 2007. Initially, there were many artists: we had a month's worth of work and more than twenty artists. This became emotionally draining and thus lent itself to an atmosphere of partying that competed with our objective of retreat and reflection. That's why we transformed the parameters in each new edition, reducing the number of selected people to favor the more intimate dimension we had in mind. The selection process became more rigorous to guarantee the participants' dedication. Our latest residency happened last year [2015]: it lasted only nine days and gathered eight participants. Back then I thought we had found the right measure.

Another interesting aspect was the frequency of participation. Suddenly, it became important to follow up with the participants over time, allowing them to return for multiple residencies. Hence, some artists came back for three years in a row, and it was excellent; we could see their growth and it allowed for a high level of debate in each edition. Clearly, the artists who came two or three years in a row led the dynamics of the workshops and the rhythm of discussion. In that sense, the participants of RAPACES inherited an eye for self-criticality, developed important advances in their research, and built new networks born of cohabitation.

MAL As part of RAPACES and TACON, you also created the television program *La Casa Estrella* [The Star House], which used mass media to disseminate information and educate audiences about contemporary art. What was the process behind the development of this television program? What themes did it explore, and what effects did it have?

PB *La Casa Estrella* was a thirty-minute television program, produced between 2009 and 2010 (and broadcast in Nicaragua during 2010 and 2011), that tried to introduce the public to contemporary art. It had two main plot lines: interviews with contemporary artists and reports on creativity and popular aesthetics. In each program, we created introductions that linked one aspect with another: contemporary thought with popular creative expressions that aren't necessarily fine arts or academic. We tried to emphasize the connections with spaces or dimensions that were well-known and recognizable by the broader public. We wanted to expand the scaffolding of

contemporary art to a bigger public, which allowed us not to feel as if we were only speaking to ourselves. However, such extensive effects were not achieved. Instead, we ended up exponentially learning about what we were investigating. But once again, this experience remains with us.

MAL What roles do notions of collectiveness and self-organization play in EspIRA's work? Do you think these are pertinent concepts for thinking about education in this moment of global crisis—a crisis where knowledge is being privatized and the competitive logic of the markets is dictating professional artistic models?

PB Now that we are revising EspIRA's work methodology from a distance, we realize that concepts like collectiveness, self-organization, experimentation (linked to organizational autonomy), and horizontality (tied to collectiveness) have been crucial. But it wasn't a previously established plan; it just happened. On the other hand, we don't preach against the market. Instead, we stimulate a deeper investigation into alternative interests seen in works of art, revise the models signaled by these works, question how we perceive them, unearth ulterior motives, and, because of this, paradigms start to crumble. General complacency, the mercantile model, the NGO model, the model of contemporary aesthetics, these things all crumble while other models replace them.

The education we promote is headed toward the production of risky and well-considered works. But, above all, it orients the sensibility of artists and educates us all for the life and the world we live in. This leads us to promote the search for a common good. Undoubtedly, these considerations

are a motive for debate and reflection: not only within arts education but also within symbolic production in general.

Maternity, Learning, and Artistic Practice

MAL Coming back to a personal dimension, I'm interested in knowing how your work as an educator has replaced the time you once dedicated to your artistic work. This might seem to be a minor question. But before putting forward a false comparison between the two worlds, I'm interested in convoluting them. I believe the pedagogical work you've done has required a generous donation of your time and energy, and that might have had an effect on your artistic production. How do you evaluate this process?

PB Though my work as an educator has never sacrificed my time with art, my work as an arts administrator has. I must emphasize this difference. Since EspIRA encompasses both types of labors, the distinction might be obfuscated. For example, critical workshops take six hours a week, while managerial work consumes whatever time is left, leaving my artistic practice very sporadic. In this sense, my position as an arts administrator had a tremendous impact on my work, life, and person: it was erosive due to the time required and its incompatibility with my contemplative character.

On the other hand, the critical workshops have helped my emotional health and my work. They helped me grow exponentially and offer me a space for dialogue based on empathy, sincerity, and critical thinking. The diverse and sincere gazes of the others enrich my analytical capability. I learn to better perceive emotional, social,

and artistic phenomena and to identify cognitive vices. That is the starting point of my process: I mentally converse with different points of view that incorporate themselves through listening.

A lot of people have participated in the workshops. Unlike the critical seminars I participated in as a college student—which served as the origin of my pedagogical proposal—the workshops at EspIRA host diverse people, some of whom are not even artists. Methodologically, this is very enriching since every participant has to make an effort to use a common language that hasn't been learned a priori. We generate this language on the road, testing it as we go.

The workshops require me to be more precise in my ideas and in the definitions I state: I have to better articulate my opinion regarding art, the whys and hows of a work, and the function of the audience. It forces me not to take any criteria for granted, insofar as inquiry breaches all clichés. Shaping my practice as an art educator makes me understand my process as an artist. This allows me to substitute the time I dedicated to countless intuitive experimentations for more conscious processes that require less time for execution. I think you can see how my work now is more rational. This is good; it alienates me from sentimental self-indulgence and moves me toward a more critical rigor. But sometimes, I overdo it. The method has instilled itself in such a way that my new challenge is to get back in the game. Now I have more free time, and my comfort zone is no longer the workshop but words, which I need to work on.

MAL My previous question also had to do with pointing out how working as an

educator is a form of caregiving. It makes me consider how, inside the patriarchal social structure we live in, there exists a logic of systematic invisibilization of care work. This work—reproductive, domestic, but also educational—has been historically assumed by women. For example, it is telling that the cumulative dynamics of capitalism are based on the negation of maternity work and the social organization of care. “If there is no reproduction, there is no production,” the Italian feminist Silvia Federici reminds us. I believe there is an imbalance in the time and energy required by caregiving, and that this imbalance (which also affects the economic remuneration) allows male artists to reach fame and exposure more quickly. How do you view this process?

PB Care is what the world is missing: care for others, for the planet, and foremost for ourselves. Although individualism should mean a profuse amount of self-love, this “love” is co-opted and only responds to external ideas. I am not just talking about the common image and aesthetics of mass media, but also of more profound values which are essentially kidnapped by power. We no longer know who or what we are outside of this system. I have a hard time discerning what I truly need; whether my desires and fears are learned or not, figuring out what is expected of me. Hence, self-care and caring about others; however, we want to understand these, start with a search for who we truly are, what we need, and how we can redefine the pursuit of happiness.

Care is fundamental, and because of that, it should be reserved for people who have a vocation and training for it. It's incomprehensible how this task has been reserved for women, adhering to it as a role of gender and underestimating its value and

cost. It becomes a double-edge sword: it brings an opportunity for service and care while isolating you from power, taking over your time, and relegating your personal aspirations.

For better or worse, women have been in charge of “caring.” I say for worse as it has frequently meant the reproduction of desires and fears, both unnecessary and counterproductive. This task is not accompanied by a manual of reflection or questioning about its own labor of caring. That poor division of labor has cost a world of pain to humanity. We could have had a different world had we decided to build it together.

I decided to care for the formation of emerging artists. Both educational activities and fund management are actions designated for the care of artists. While I have a vocation and the tools for education, I do not have the tools for management. I was forced into this situation and opted to go forward with it; it does not mean I was capable, or I knew what to do. Errors were made in the process, but at least decisions were made. Just as it was a personal decision to have a baby, which, despite being modeled after stereotypes of maternity, was neither an imposition nor an accident.

Certainly, in recent decades there have been male artists more renowned than me. Yet, they didn't gain the experience or knowledge I did. Combined with a propensity for learning, both my conscious decisions—maternal and educational—allowed me to learn a lot; I grew with these experiences, which multiplied and are amplified in me. I think this is an exceptional case that became fundamental in my life: experience crossed paths with reflection, experimentation, questioning, empathy, and love. Not everyone is that lucky.

MAL How do you relate your maternal experience with the educational labor you've done in recent years? What has maternity taught you about the formative labor and learning process?

PB Being a mother is infinitely more complex than being an educator. In that regard, through education, I learned lessons that helped develop the delicate task of maternity. My work with young artists has meant working very closely with them. They belong to generations that I wouldn't know anything about otherwise, or at least not as well. This knowledge has given me a closer view of my son's generation. I can situate him and his experience in a better-understood context.

What you previously said is true: having a son, facing his circumstances, trying to meet him halfway, exploring coincidences to go through them—this has all been a learning experience which extends itself to others, and modifies my capacity for negotiation and empathy.

I would like to recall an image from a poem by Khalil Gibran about how parents need to be like bows that shoot forth their children as arrows. My apologies for the metaphor, but it illustrates precisely a lesson that is difficult to grasp. Neither your children nor your art students are yours; “they belong to life, longing for itself,” and we are just instruments for them to achieve their goals. As a mother of both my son and art students, I can tell you it's not easy to see them grow into something different than what I wanted. Ultimately, the reward is not to turn them into mini-mes but instead for them to find their own truths, yearned-for happiness, and to take care of themselves and others.

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This interview was conducted in 2016; translation by Thomas Patier.

The Post-Living Ante-Action Theater Manual: The Audience Is Always Right

My Barbarian

The following texts and images about My Barbarian's Post-Living Ante-Action Theater (PoLAAT) were originally published in a 2015 issue of Pastedelegram, edited by Ariel Evans and Allison Myers.

PoLAAT was a series of workshops and performances that My Barbarian (Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro [Xandro] Segade) conducted at the New Museum in New York City (2008); the Townhouse Gallery and Rawabet Theater in Cairo (2008); the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania (2012); El Matadero and ARCO in Madrid (2010); Yaffa 23 in Jerusalem (2013); and Creative Time in New York City (2011). They drew on historical models of theater being used as a social and political tool such as Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's

antiteater, and Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre.¹

As a part of this *Pastedelegram* issue, My Barbarian conducted a series of conversations with curators that they had worked with on PoLAAT. In Alex Klein's conversation with My Barbarian about their 2012 project at the ICA Philadelphia, Gaines notes that public programs, education, and performance have come to have the same value as curatorial projects, something they also experienced with Eungie Joo at the New Museum. Segade adds that those programming models lend themselves to a blurring between performers and audience and between museum and performance spaces.

Leah Abir, who was a curator at Yaffa 23, Bezalel Art Academy's exhibition space in Jerusalem, first invited My Barbarian in 2009; they finally arrived in 2013. Abir notes that the Arab Spring occurred in between

¹ Judith Malina and Julian Beck founded The Living Theatre in New York City in 1947. Rainer Werner Fassbinder founded the theater company Anti-Theater in the late 1960s.

those dates, and the Boycott, Disinvestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign had grown in influence. She had originally invited them to create a “conceptual or actual relation” to the 2008 Cairo iteration of PoLAAT. But, in keeping with the BDS principle of resisting normalization and avoiding the cliché of multiculturalism or coexistence, they reduced the idea of connecting the Jerusalem iteration with the one in Cairo. She talks about the mandate to participate in relation to the principle of refusal, producing a productive tension in the context of Jerusalem.

In a 2015 conversation with Eungie Joo about their 2008 PoLAAT workshop at the New Museum, My Barbarian talked about its theme—“Inspirational Critique”—which was a pun on the term *institutional critique*. Joo says: “Your concept of inspirational critique—this commitment based in positivity and love, is what I would perhaps term ‘investment’—something I might describe as critique by example. I have long believed that we can exact more influence by doing; by imagining and demonstrating what, where, and how things could be rather than critiquing in a reactionary way.”

The song conceived in the PoLAAT “Inspirational Critique” workshops ends like this:

I could love you	Try not to be dismissive
I could love you	Try not to patronize
I could love you	Try not to be defensive
I could love you	Try to sympathize
I could love you	Try not to be solipsistic
I could love you	Try not to hystericize
I could love you	Try not to be overly simplistic
I could love you	Try to realize

I could love you!

The Five Principles of the PoLAAT

Alexandro Segade

February 4, 2010

Central to the PoLAAT is a performance lab in which participants are trained in the tactics and techniques of the Post-Living Ante-Action Theater. Classes are composed of exercises designed to educate the participants in the five principles: Estrangement, Indistinction, Suspension of Beliefs, Mandate to Participate, and Inspirational Critique. Songs based on these principles are taught to the group. What follows are notes on these five principles, using examples from the Living Theatre and *antiteater* to illustrate them:

Estrangement

The performer acts out the distance between themselves and what they are doing. An adaptation of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, often translated as the Alienation Effect, Estrangement also incorporates elements of camp, which uses an ironic displacement or disidentification to critique the action represented. The audience, it is hoped, will be similarly engaged in an active critique of the performance and the questions it poses. Estrangement is evident in the antitheater’s use of the Alienation Effect as a performance of an “attitude, not a character.”



Indistinction

Contradictory formal and institutional distinctions are set in oppositional motion. The performer does two things at once, such as singing a love song and paying taxes. The play itself refuses to be a play and becomes a caucus, the narrative explodes with extraneous plot points and goes hyper-narrative or the signifiers of pop music are short-circuited by art historical classification, and so on. Theater as process is exemplified by the practices of *antiteater*. Plays were made into films and television series; films were adapted as plays, with cast members serving as both administration and crew for these various productions. This blurring of disciplines, forms, and roles provides a model of production in which all participants are expected to invest their talents in a group effort that may fail but do so spectacularly and with political commitment to democracy intact. Implicit here is a willful disregard of audience expectations, not to mention taste.



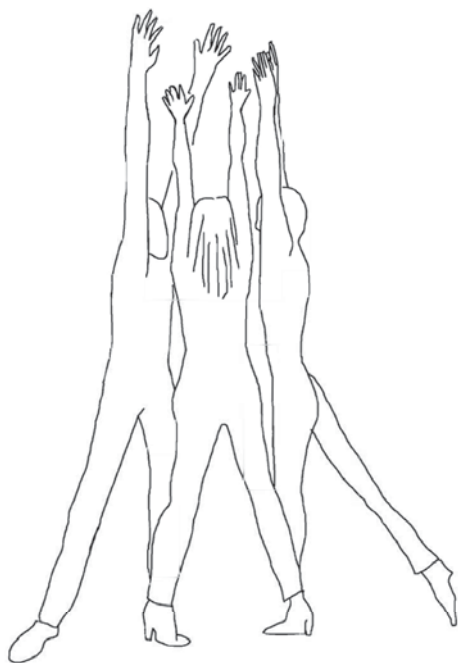
Suspension of Beliefs

A truism of theater is that it requires the suspension of disbelief, but the PoLAAT model questions ideological and aesthetic assumptions. The performer must consider all options. With so many contradictory political positions represented by the attitudes (not characters) onstage, the effect of their technique is the suspension of beliefs, when the actors and audience find their ideological and aesthetic concerns caught in a field of contemplation. This principle is exemplified by the Living Theatre's attempt to levitate a person in the performance of their play *Frankenstein* (1965).



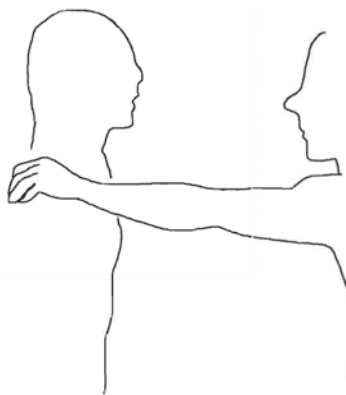
Mandate to Participate

Audience and performer are the same thing. All is rehearsal and rehearsal is all in a reconfiguration of event as process. The theater is made into an open system, disrupting the hierarchical structure of the stage, where the actor is speaker and public is listener. Structures for the inclusion of participation must be made clear; chaos can be managed. The audience becomes the cast and the cast gets naked with the Living Theatre. Democracy is alive again.



Inspirational Critique

When the structure of institutional thought is ruptured, an inspirational critique is the result: a moment in which, for a brief second, all is questioned, allowing for an understanding of the situation that opens itself up to new possibilities.



Inspirational Critique Exercises

1. Reflecting

Participants pair up. Facilitator asks each pair to decide who will be partner A and who will be partner B. B mirrors A's movements. A starts slowly then increases speed, shifts rhythm, plays with levels, moves around the space, dances, and so on. They reverse and B leads.

Variation:

1. Neither lead.
2. Close your eyes for thirty seconds, mirror, and then open them. Were movements synchronized?

2. Trusting

Participants form a tight circle, shoulder-to-shoulder, facing inward with both of their hands up, palms forward, in front of their chests. One person stays in the center of the circle, arms crossed across their chest with their eyes closed. Facilitator slowly spins them around. Trusting the group to catch them, they fall against the others. No one lets them fall completely. They are gently guided back into center. Work in silence.



3. Pressuring

Participants pair up and push against each other's shoulders, face-to-face, trying "not to win." Both partners use equal strength but try to balance each other's weight so no one falls.



Variation

Back-to-back.

4. Truth-Circling

Sitting in a circle, performers tell each other embarrassing, confrontational, or otherwise truthful anecdotes and opinions about the performance that just happened.

Variation

Performers talk about embarrassing performance moments in their lives.

5. Audience Gets a Massage

To be performed with a live audience. The performers instruct the audience to rub the shoulders of the person seated in front of them.

Variation

The audience is guided through stretching exercises.

Alexandro (Xandro) Segade made the drawings that illustrate the PoLAAT exercises in the manual.

II.

BFAMFAPhD

As of this writing, during the start of the second Trump presidency, I'm thinking a lot about tyranny and its relationship to higher education. As I outlined in the introduction, universities are never free from ideological constraints and the influence of power. But in the US context new political and economic pressures have created an environment that I haven't seen in my lifetime. I recognize that this is nothing compared to the necropolitics in the MENA region. But a new reality is unfolding.

The "regional context" of this section encompasses the United States and the Middle East. One reason for this is politics. On the one hand, after October 7, 2023, students in the US, mostly international, have been arrested, detained, and deported for Palestinian-solidarity activities. Meanwhile, the federal government is punishing universities for allowing these protests, withholding hundreds of millions of dollars

and resulting in some institutions making further structural changes, constraining speech, and remaking their curricula beyond the Palestine issue. Targeting universities in this way is a long-term goal of the American right. At the same time, Gaza's universities have been physically decimated by Israel, which is funded by the United States; not only has the architecture and infrastructure been destroyed, but also the lives of faculty, staff, and students. In the United States, the specter of the "terrorist" is invoked to defend these actions, a claim that has its roots at the start of the twenty-first century when the repercussions of the Second Intifada and the military response to September 11 converged.

This context is addressed in several texts included here: A conversation between educators in the Middle East reveals the challenges of teaching within institutions at a moment when violence characterizes daily

life. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, who has a long history of writing about the intersection of art and politics in the region, talks about her experience within an American institution, applying her notion of “unlearning imperialism” to “unlearning Zionism” within higher education. A text by an anonymous Harvard senior, who posted it online after being threatened by the university for their activism, shows how Palestine reveals the limits of claims to free speech. Art historian Daniel Spaulding’s essay “On Hating Students” reveals how institutional responses to Palestinian-solidarity activism have manifested as not only contempt but outright violence, underscoring a problematic structural relationship between students and university administration.

The specter of violence in learning environments is addressed by Cara Benedetto’s 2019 exhibition *Blood from Stone*, which chillingly invokes the epidemic of school shootings and examines this threat to think about other forms of violence, pressure, and vulnerability that students face in school.

This section focuses on accredited art schools, colleges, and universities that issue degrees. It is titled after the organization BFAMFAPhD, cofounded by artists Susan Jahoda, Vicky Virgin, and Caroline Woolard and curator Blair Murphy. Their 2014 text “Artists Report Back,” included here, illustrates the tensions between the challenge arts professionals face trying to support themselves after receiving high-cost degrees. It emphasizes that the privatization of school and the commodification of a degree in a capitalist context is often in tension with artists’ creative goals.

While artist and filmmaker Jalal Toufic writes about being chair of an art department in Beirut (he now is teaching in Cairo), his contribution is less about the region and

more about the structural limitations that hinder academic administrators from living up to their stated aims. Similarly, art historian Beatriz E. Balanta finds that claims of diversity and inclusion in liberal American academia are poisoned by white supremacy. Institutions have contradictions built into them.

Artist and writer Sean Dockray and philosopher Brian Holmes write about higher education in an American context, with particular emphasis on the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis. The ideas in these texts relate to the Occupy Wall Street movement and attend to the ways in which income inequality and the privatization of public education are inherently related, limiting the options for artists that graduate from these programs.

But beyond the political economy of debt, sometimes crises can produce a more productive environment of indebtedness. Critic and curator Anuranda Vikram talks about teaching during the COVID pandemic and the ways in which it revealed new, more flexible, forms of learning in tune with the rhythms and realities of students’ lives. In a conversation with artists Steffani Jemison, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz about art schools in the US, there was agreement that institutions inherently cannot allow for the influence of radical pedagogies advocated by bell hooks or Paulo Freire, but that faculty can take some of their lessons to find pockets of resistance. Something like what theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney would call the undercommons, which suggests that what seems irreparable may contain spaces for mutual aid and resource sharing.

Artists Report Back: A National Study On the Lives of Arts Graduates and Working Artists

BFAMFAPhD

As artists and art-school graduates, we often find ourselves in conversations about the difficulties of continuing our practice as writers, authors, artists, actors, photographers, musicians, singers, producers, directors, performers, choreographers, dancers, and entertainers. We struggle to support ourselves with jobs outside of the arts and we struggle to earn a living in the arts. Yet art-school administrators and “creative class” reports assure us that arts graduates make a living in the arts.¹ Loan officers insist that art students can afford art-school tuition, repaying student loans over time by working in the arts. This is not our experience. We decided that it was time to make our own report.

Connecting our lived experiences to national trends, we wanted to know: What is the impact of rent, debt, and precarity on working artists and arts graduates nationally? How many of us

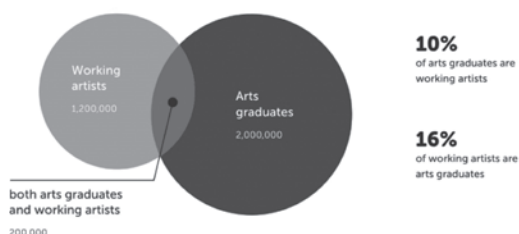
are there? If we are not supporting ourselves as working artists, what jobs do we work?

We looked at artists’ demographics, occupations, educational attainment, field of degree, and earnings as recorded by the Census Bureau’s 2012 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is the largest survey that collects data about artists, surveying roughly one out of every one hundred persons in the nation. With this data in hand, we made this report to reframe conversations about the current conditions and contradictions of arts graduates, and to make informed decisions about the ways we live and work. At the end of the report, please see our recommendations for organizational change and interpersonal action.

*Susan Jahoda, Blair Murphy, Vicky Virgin,
and Caroline Woolard (BFAMFAPhD), 2014*

¹ Creative Economy Report, Otis College of Art and Design, 2013, <http://www.otis.edu/creative-economy-report>.

Summary



Most surprising was the lack of overlap between working artists and arts graduates. In the United States, 40 percent of working artists do not have bachelor's degrees in any field. Only 16 percent of working artists have arts-related bachelor's degrees. Though arts graduates may acquire additional opportunities and skills from attending art school, arts graduates are likely to graduate with significant student-loan debt, which makes working as an artist difficult, if not impossible. We acknowledge that some arts graduates are satisfied with work in other fields, but the fantasy of arts graduates' future earnings in the arts should be discredited. Since seven of the top ten most expensive institutions of higher education in the United States (after financial aid is taken into consideration) are art schools, the corresponding proportion of student loans are higher than those for graduates from non-art schools.²

The majority of arts graduates work in non-arts fields. Out of two million arts graduates nationally, only 10 percent, or two hundred thousand people, make their primary earnings as working artists. Given the discrepancy between working artists and arts graduates, as well as the rising

cost of tuition at art schools, we end this

² "How Does Your School Rank?" *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/interactive/BORROW021620130216?ref=SB10001424127887324432004578306610055834952>

report with recommendations for policy makers, administrators, and educators in our field.

Methodology

All statements in this report are based upon data collected by the Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey (ACS), unless otherwise noted. This is an annual survey that is designed to sample 1 percent or about three million households in the United States, gathering detailed data that was previously collected in the Decennial Census. A myriad of issues arise when using data to study artists. For this report we used two variables to identify this population: "primary occupation" (secondary occupation is not collected in this survey) and "field of degree," a relatively new variable directed at those who have a bachelor's degree. We will refer to people who have bachelor's degrees in the arts as "arts graduates" and to people whose primary occupation is writer, author, artist, actor, photographer, musician, singer, producer, director, performer, dancer choreographer, or entertainer as "working artists."

Arts Graduates

We looked at people with bachelor's degrees in music, drama and theater arts, film, video and photographic arts, art history and criticism, studio arts, and visual and performing arts living in the United States in 2012. The ACS does not collect the field of degree for master's degrees, so we define "arts graduates" in this report as people with BAs or BFAs in the arts

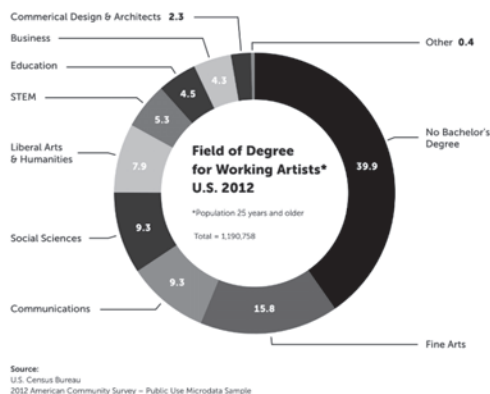
who may or may not have an MA or MFAs in the arts. With only 15,929 MAs and MFAs graduating in 2012, compared to 91,222 BAs and BFAs in the arts that year, our focus on undergraduates represents a broad population of artists.³

Working Artists

We defined working artists as people whose primary earnings come from working as writers, authors, artists, actors, photographers, musicians, singers, producers, directors, performers, choreographers, dancers, or entertainers. We excluded designers and architects from both the data related to “arts graduates” and from the data based on primary occupation (working artist) because the higher earnings of designers significantly alter the median earnings of our field. We understand that “working artists” are often identified by their level of commitment, and not remuneration,⁴ but we cannot track practicing artists who do not make their primary earnings in the arts using the ACS. In fact, no nationally representative data exists for practicing artists. While many artists are missed in our report, we chose to investigate the data we could isolate to learn more about working artists and arts graduates nationally.

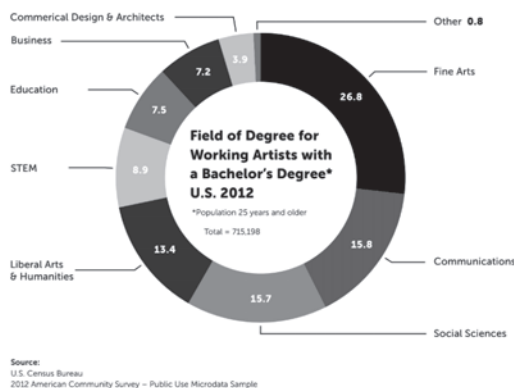
³ For more, see the National Center for Educational Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/>.

Findings

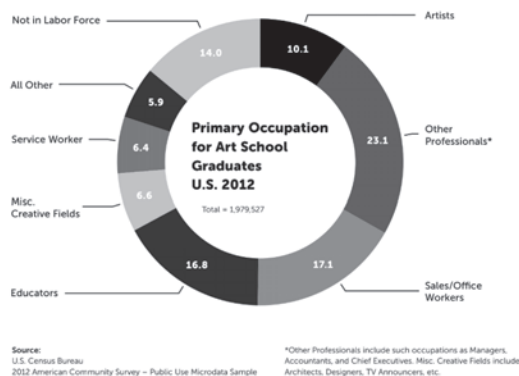


1.4 Million Working Artists

ACS data reveals that there are 1.4 million working artists. Of those over the age of twenty-five, or 1.2 million working artists, 476,000 did not get a bachelor's degree. That means that 40 percent of working artists over the age of twenty-five attended high school or got associate's degrees, but do not have bachelor's degrees in any field. Only 16 percent of working artists have an arts-related bachelor's degree.



Of the 715,000 working artists who do have bachelor's degrees, only 27 percent have arts-related degrees. The rest studied communication, social sciences, liberal arts and humanities, science, technology, math, engineering, education, business, commercial design and architecture, or another field.



Two Million Arts Graduates

There are two million arts graduates with bachelor's degrees in music, drama and theater arts, film, video and photographic arts, art history and criticism, studio arts, and visual or performing arts living in the United States. Fewer than two hundred thousand, just 10 percent, make their primary earnings as working artists. The rest are dispersed across other occupations:

23 percent work in professional and managerial occupations, 17 percent are employed as sales and office workers, and 17 percent work as educators. 14 percent are not in the labor force at all.

4 Notice to Applicants Re: Artist Certification, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, n.d., http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/downloads/pdf/artist_certification.pdf.

5 Ruth Simon, "Loan Defaults Refer to the Three-year Cohort Default Rate on Federal Student Loans," *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb 18, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/interactive/BORROW021620130216?ref=SB1000142412788732443200457830661055834952>.

Two Hundred Thousand Working Artists and Art Graduates

Although there are 1.2 million working artists over the age of twenty-five in this country, there are only two hundred thousand working artists with arts-related bachelor's degrees. The majority of working artists have median earnings of \$30,621, but the small percentage of working artists with bachelor's degrees have median earnings of \$36,105.

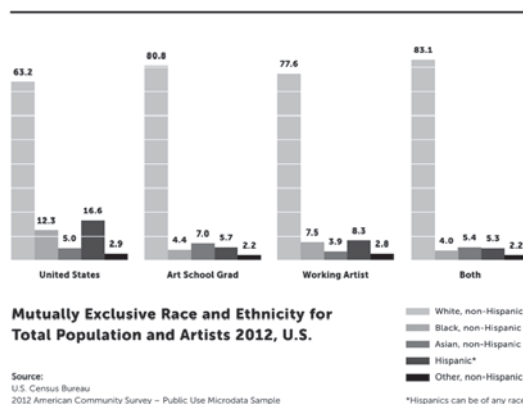
Default Rates for Arts Graduates

The US Department of Education data show that seven of the top ten most expensive schools in this country (after scholarships and aid) are art schools, and arts graduates' debt loads are higher than those of non-arts graduates.⁵ The following percentages of students default on their loans.

- 6% of students from Cleveland Institute of Music default on their loans.
- 7% of students from the New School default on their loans.
- 7% of students from California Institute of the Arts default on their loans.
- 8% of students from the School of Visual Arts default on their loans.
- 8% of students from the Art Center College of Design default on their loans.
- 8% of students from San Francisco Art Institute default on their loans.
- 9% of students from Maine College of Art default on their loans.
- 10% of students from Pratt default on their loans.
- 10% of students from School of the Artist Institute of Chicago default on their loans.
- 10% of students from Minneapolis College of

- Art and Design default on their loans.
- 11% of students from Berklee College of Music default on their loans.
- 13% of students from Ringling College of Art and Design default on their loans.
- 13% of students from Otis College of Art and Design default on their loans.
- 16% of students from Southwest University of Visual Arts default on their loans.

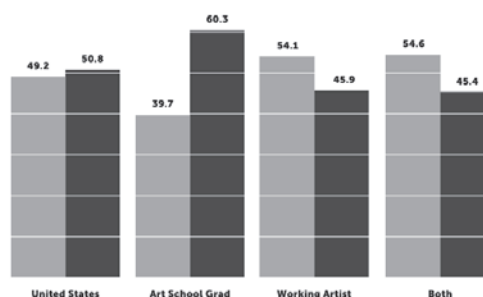
Predominance of White, Non-Hispanic Arts Graduates and Male Working Artists



The population of arts graduates and working artists is not representative of our country. The population of the United States is 63 percent White, non-Hispanic, but 81 percent of arts graduates are White, non-Hispanic. The population of the United States is 12 percent Black, non-Hispanic, but only 4 percent of arts graduates are Black, non-Hispanic and only 8 percent of working artists are Black, non-Hispanic. The population of the United States is 17 percent Hispanic, but only 6 percent of arts graduates are Hispanic and only 8 percent of working artists are Hispanic.

⁶ “How Does Your School Rank?” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2013.

⁷ FinAid, “The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid,” 2014, <http://www.finaid.org/loans/>.



Gender for Total Population and Artists U.S. 2012

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

While the United States is split evenly between males and females, males account for only 40 percent of arts graduates but over 54 percent of working artists. Females make up 60 percent of arts graduates but only 46 percent of all working artists. Of the two hundred thousand working artists over twenty-five with an art degree, 55 percent are male.

Recommendations

We have shown that seven of the top ten most expensive institutions of higher education in the United States (after financial aid is taken into consideration) are art schools, and that the corresponding proportion of student loans are higher than those for graduates from non-art schools.⁶ With more student-loan debt than credit-card debt in this country, we are in the midst of an educational and social crisis.⁷ We ask that artists, administrators, and teachers acknowledge the current financial and political economies in arts education: those

of rising costs and student debt. To begin to imagine and enact economies of equity and cooperation in the arts, we must address the needs and capacities of both working artists and arts graduates. What follows are three recommendations toward the adequate nurturing of creativity in art education, visibility, and workforce development.

Art School

While this report reveals that an arts degree is not necessary for future earnings as a working artist, as 40 percent of working artists do not have a bachelor's degree in any field, the authors of this report believe that arts degrees remain valuable for critical thinking, skill-building, identity formation, and creative innovation that is necessary in the arts and beyond.⁸ We acknowledge that some arts graduates are happy to work in other fields, but we hope to show that the fantasy of future earnings in the arts cannot justify the high cost of arts degrees. We know that expensive art schools leave arts graduates with high overhead in the form of student debt, making risk-taking and innovation after graduation more difficult, if not impossible. Still believing in the power of arts education, we point prospective art students toward low-cost and tuition-free arts programs and we defend the liberal arts as integral to higher education nationally.

Visibility

Knowing that 40 percent of working artists do not have bachelor's degrees in any field, cultural institutions should honor artists and culture workers who do not

⁸ Frances Whitehead, "What Do Artists Know? The Embedded Artist Project," *Artetal*, January 2006, <http://embeddedartistproject.com/What-do-artists-know.gif>.

have experiences of formal higher education. Philanthropic and civic institutions should create programs to address the needs of working artists, looking beyond the written application, the lecture hall, the journal, and the museum for emerging talent. While working artists and arts graduates legitimate ideas and find rigorous debate in their spaces and distribution networks, cultural institutions could require that presenters, curators, and publishers look beyond networks of arts graduates. Programs to address the gap between working artists and arts graduates could create informal or formal channels for communication and could establish policies for evaluation and presentation of artists, regardless of educational status.

Workforce Development

We must close the gap between arts graduates and working artists, understanding that little overlap exists currently and that both populations have key insights to share with one another. We can provide opportunities for dialogue. Arts graduates have knowledge of elite social norms, shared jargon from lecture halls, shared regard for artists named in journals, and shared contacts at elite institutions. Working artists have an understanding of the market for their work, valuable business networks, and a familiarity with production and management. Both populations could benefit from worker and producer cooperatives, affordable arts institutions, and resource-sharing networks.



together with other artists, neighbors, and fellow low-income residents. We point prospective art students toward low-cost and free art schools, artist-run spaces, and independent communities of working artists, as we know that the time has come to speak openly about the political economies of art education.

This diagram represents a solidarity economy of cooperation and equity that could be adopted more explicitly in the arts and could be supported intellectually and financially by arts institutions and arts schools nationally.

Adequately nurtured, creativity fuels culture, infuses human-centred development and constitutes the key ingredient for job creation, innovation and trade while contributing to social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability. —The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development’s Creative Economy Report 2010

How might art education nurture culture? The majority of arts graduates work in non-art occupations to support themselves. Arts education should acknowledge and prepare art students for this eventuality. A disavowal of the connection between expensive tuition and future work and financial independence is no longer realistic or ethical. Preparation for artistic work in other fields, including arts management and administration, as well as training in artist-owned businesses, is essential. Arts graduates can prepare to see themselves as “artists in residence” in sales, education, service, and managerial jobs, while learning how to create an artist-owned business

There Is Nothing Less Passive than the Act of Fleeing

The Public School Los Angeles

What follows is a condensed and edited version of a text for a panel that was presented at UCIRA's "Future Tense: Alternative Arts and Economies in the University" conference held in San Diego, California on November 18, 2010. The panel shared the same name as a thirteen-day itinerant seminar in Berlin organized by Dockray, Waldorf, and Fiona Whitton earlier that year. The seminar began with an excerpt from Tiqqun's Introduction to Civil War, which was co-translated into English by Smith; and later a chapter from Matteo Pasquinelli's Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons. Both authors have also participated in meetings at The Public School in Los Angeles and Berlin. Both the panel and the seminar developed out of longer conversations at The Public School in Los Angeles.

Sean Dockray, Matteo Pasquinelli, Jason Smith, and Caleb Waldorf are founding members of and collaborators at The

Public School. Initiated in 2007 under Telic Arts Exchange (literally in the basement) in Los Angeles, The Public School is a school with no curriculum. At the moment, it operates as follows: first, classes are proposed by the public; then, people have the opportunity to sign up for the classes; finally, when enough people have expressed interest, the school finds a teacher and offers the class to those who signed up. The Public School is not accredited, it does not give out degrees, and it has no affiliation with the public school system. It is a framework that supports autodidactic activities, operating under the assumption that everything is in everything. The Public School currently exists in Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, Philadelphia, Durham, and San Juan and is still expanding.

The University, as I understand it, has been a threshold between youth and the labor market. Or it has been a threshold between a general education and a more specialized one. In its more progressive form, it's been a zone of transition into an expanding middle class. But does this form still exist? I'm inclined to think just the opposite, that the University is becoming a form for filtering people out of the middle class via student-loan debt, which now exceeds credit-card debt.

The point of the question for me is simply: What is the point of the University? What are we fighting for or defending?

The next question might be: Do students work? The university is a crucial site in the reproduction of class relations; we know that students are consumers, and are treated as such by the universities they attend; we know the student is a future worker who will be compelled to work, and work in a specific way, because she is crushed by debt contracted during her tenure as a student; we know that students work while attending school, and that for many students school and work eerily begin to resemble one another.

But asking whether students work is to ask something more specific: Do students produce value and, therefore, surplus value? If we can assume, for the moment, that students are a factor in the "knowledge production" that takes place in the university, is this production of knowledge also the production of value? We confront, maybe, a paradox: all social activity has become "productive"—captured, absorbed—at the very moment value becomes unmeasurable. What does this have to do with students and their work? The thesis of the social factory

was supplemented by the assumption that knowledge had become a central node in the production of value in post-Fordist environments. Wouldn't this mean that the university could become an increasingly important flashpoint in social struggles, now that it has become not simply the site of the reproduction of the capital relation, but involved in the immediate production process, directly productive of value? Would we have to understand students themselves as, if not knowledge producers, an irreplaceable moment or function within that process?

None of this remains clear. And the question, moreover, is not only a sociological one. It is also a political one. The strategy of reconceptualizing students as workers is rooted in the classical Marxist identification of revolt with the point of production, that is, exploitation. To declare all social activity to be productive is another way of saying that social war can be triggered at any site within society, even among the precarious, the unemployed, and students.

There is a beautiful intuition by Mario Tronti that he expressed in a 1966 book seminal to the whole tradition of Italian *operaismo*: "Knowledge is tied to struggle. To truly know is to hate truly. This is why the working class can know and possess everything of capital, as it is enemy to itself as capital."¹

Knowledge—and we could say education also—is coming only from conflict. Only she who grows up and lives along the tensions of the social fabric, perceiving and registering the field of forces of conflicts and frictions, can develop a proper knowledge, a sharp theory, a meaningful aesthetics—only she who lives conflicts on her own skin can run a "public school."

This is the lesson of the social movements of the 1960s and '70s and a lesson

¹ Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale* (DeriveApprodi, 2006 [Einaudi, 1966]).

we learned again in the punk age. Deleuze said once, in a dialogue with Foucault, “No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall.” That wall is the wall of conflict.

If art claims to be the very realm of radical gestures, it should also be able to initiate new forms of knowledge and new education practices. Knowledge is never neutral, but always an unconscious incarnation of power structures: here Foucault has already said everything. However, Foucault does not say much about the autonomous forms of counter knowledge. That passion mentioned by Tronti—hate for your own condition of exploitation—is suggesting something new. The political passion of hate becomes part of the backbone of a new counter-knowledge.

The relation between hate and knowledge suggested by Tronti stays on the opposite side of the cynical detachment of the new social figure of the entrepreneur-artist. In order to educate ourselves we should hate our very own environment and social network in which we were educated—the university. Knowledge production and education too should be based on the very hate for our existential condition, that is for a form of life hegemonized by capital.

Alternative Pedagogical Models

Let’s consider the desire for “new pedagogical models” and “new forms of knowledge production.” When articulated by the University, this simply means new forms of instruction and new forms of research. Liberal faculty and neoliberal politicians or administrators find themselves joined in this hunt for future models and forms. On the one hand, faculty imagines that

these new techniques can provide space for continuing the good work while under the pressure of reduced budgets and standardization. They might even “engage with the community” or produce more timely research if these models introduce a mechanism to break through their inherited boundaries. On the other hand, investors, politicians, and administrators look for any means to make the University profitable. How can new forms of teaching and research use unpaid labor, eliminate non-productive physical spaces, and create new markets?

Symptomatically, there is very little resistance to this search for new forms and new models for the simple reason that there is a consensus that the University should and will continue. Given that we are speaking in an arts context, it’s important to note that many of the so-called new forms and new models being considered lie beyond the walls and payroll of the institution and are therefore both low-cost and low-risk. They have been taken up for consideration by institutions across Europe to suggest “an educational turn” to art practice and again to propose “new forms of knowledge production.” It is now a familiar story: the institution attempts to renew itself by importing its own critique. But what is the other side of this story? What happens to this “critique” as it is brought into the institution? The story is again familiar: the vampire institution extracts life from its critique, abstracts it according to institutional logic and history, and replaces its values with institutional ones—a familiar fate of “the alternative.”

The Public School is not a new model and it’s not going to save the University. It is not even a critique of the University any more or less than it is a critique of the field of art or of capitalist society. It is not “the

next University” because it is a practice of leaving the University to the side. It would be a mistake to think that this means isolation or total detachment. After all, aren’t most of us the offspring of the institution and some of us providing our labor to it? More than that, don’t we parasite on it for materials, texts, and, if we’re lucky, money?

Today the forms of university governance cannot allow themselves to uproot self-education. To the contrary, self-education constitutes a vital sap for the survival of the institutional ruins, snatched up and rendered valuable in the form of revenue. Governance is the trap, hasty and flexible, of the common. Instead of countering us frontally, the enemy follows us. We must immediately reject any weak interpretation of the theme of autonomous institutions, according to which the institution is a self-governed structure that lives between the folds of capitalism, without excessively bothering it. The institutionalization of self-education doesn’t mean being recognized as one actor among many within the education market, but the capacity to organize living knowledge’s autonomy and resistance.

One of the most important “new pedagogical models” that emerged over the past year in the struggles around the implosion of the “public” university are the occupations that took place in the fall of 2009. Unlike some other forms of action, which tend to follow the timetable and cadence of the administration to the point of mirroring it, these actions had their own temporality, their own initiative, their own internal logic. They were not at all concerned with saving a university that was already in ruins, but rather with creating a space at the heart of the university within which something else, some future, could

be risked, played out, elaborated, prefigured. Everything had to be improvised from moment to moment, and in these improvisations new knowledges were developed and shared. This improvisation was demanded by the aleatory quality of the types of relations that emerged within these spaces, relations no longer regulated by the social alibis that assign everyone her place. When students occupy university buildings, here and in New York City and in Puerto Rico and in Europe and the United Kingdom, everywhere, they do so not because they want to save their universities. They do because they know the university for what it is, as something to be at once seized and abandoned. They know that they can only rely on, that is, learn from, one another.

The Common and the Public

One way to think of what we might recognize as an increasing bifurcation of the public and the common is to recast this split in terms that belong to the origins of the workers’ movement. I am thinking in particular of the difference posited by Joseph Jacotot between what he calls a community of equals and the idea of society or the social bond. As recounted in Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, what is so “disconcerting” about Jacotot’s theory of intellectual emancipation—his new “pedagogical model”—is that it is founded on a split, asymmetry, or incompatibility between the logic of community or the common and the dynamics of the social body.²

So, what is really so disconcerting about this antinomy between the logic of the common and the logic of the public? For Jacotot, it means the development of a communist politics that is neither reformist

² Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

nor seditious. It proposes the formation of common spaces at a distance from—if not outside of—the public sphere.

A communist pedagogy, to force the language of this figure of the early workers' movement, would not see its task as the transformation of a given institution, specifically the public universities and schools. The task, for Rancière at least, is clear: "whoever forsakes the workings of the social machine has the opportunity to make the electrical energy of emancipation circulate."

What does it mean to forsake the social machine? That is the major political question facing us today. Such a forsaking would require that our political energies organize themselves around spaces of experimentation at a distance not only from the university and what is likely its slow-motion collapse, but also from an entire imaginary inherited from the workers' movement: the task of a future social emancipation along with the vectors and forms of struggle such a task implies. Perhaps what is required is not to put off equality for the future, but to presuppose the common, to affirm that commons as a fact, a given, which must nevertheless be verified, created, not by a social body, not by a collective force, but a power of the common, now.

School is not University. Neither is it Academy or College or even Institute. We are all familiar with the common meaning of the word: it is a place for learning. In another sense, it also refers to organized education in general, which is made most clear by the decision to leave, to "drop out of school." Alongside these two stable, almost architectural definitions, the word gestures to composition and movement—the school of bodies, moving independently, together; the school only exists as long as that

collective movement does. Perhaps this is a way to think of how to develop what Félix Guattari called "the associative sector" in 1982—"everything that isn't the state, or private capital, or even cooperatives." At first gloss, the associative sector is only a name for the remainder, the outcast, the already outside; but, in the language of a school, it is a constellation of relationships, affinities, new subjectivities, and movements, flickering into existence through life and use, not the word. Rather, this kind of school is a collective articulation, an "engaged withdrawal" that simultaneously creates an exit and institutes in the act of passing through.

Which itself might bring us back to school, to the Greek etymology of school, *skhole*, "a holding back, a keeping clear"—usually in the form of leisure or spare time—of space for reflective distance. On the one hand, perhaps this reflective space simply allows meaning, theoretical knowledge, and experience to shape or affect performative action; but on the other hand, the production of this "clearing" is not given, certainly not now and certainly not by the institutions that claim to give it. Reflective space is not the precondition for performative action. On the contrary, within the current configuration, it criticizes it, authors it, organizes it, and postpones it. Performative action is the precondition for reflective space—or, more appropriately, space and action must be coproduced.

Is the university even worth "saving"? We are right to respond with indignation, or better, with an array of tactics—some procedural, some more "direct"—against these incursions, which always seem to authorize themselves by appeals to economic austerity, budget shortfalls, and

tightened belts. Perhaps what is being destroyed in this process is the very notion of the public sphere itself, a notion that is relatively less archaic than the university but which has no right to an eternal life either. It is easy to succumb to the illusion that the only possible result of this destruction of the figure of the public, of “publicness,” is privatization, the transfer of public and socially or collectively produced wealth, knowledge, and even affective energies into the hands and pockets of tiny cliques of plutocrats and assorted vampires. But what if the figure of the public, which emerged in the context of the transition from the absolute to the liberal state, was to be set off against not only the private and property relations, but against a new and vibrant figure of the “common” as well? What if, in other words, the notion of the public has always been an unstable, mediating term between privatization and communization, and what if the withering of this mediation left these two processes openly at odds with each other? Perhaps, then, it is not simply a question of saving a university and, more broadly, a public space that is already withering away; maybe our energies and our intelligence, our collective or common intellectual forces, should be devoted to organizing and articulating just this sort of counter-transition, at a distance from the public and the “private.”

Authorship and New Forms of Knowledge

For decades we have spoken about the “death of the author,” but no one really believes it. The most sustained critiques of authorship have been made from the spheres of art and education, but, not coincidentally, these spheres have the most invested in the

notion. Credit and accreditation are the mechanisms for attaching symbolic capital to individuals via degrees and other lines on CVs. That curriculum vitae is an inverted credit report, evidence of underpaid work, kept orderly with an expectation of some future return. All of this work, this self-documentation, this fidelity between ourselves and our papers is for what, for whom? And what is the consequence of a world where every person is armed with their vitae, other than “the war of all against all”? It’s that sensation that there are no teams, but everyone has got their own jersey.

The idea behind the project The Public School is to teach each other in a very horizontal way. No curriculum, no hierarchy. But is the Public School also able to produce new knowledge and new content by itself? Can the Public School become a sort of autonomous collective author? Or is the Public School just a place of book exchanges, workshops, and social networking?

Recently some collectives started to refresh the idea of co-research, a form of knowledge that could produce new political subjectivities and new political organization.

If knowledge comes only from conflict, knowledge has to go back to conflict and to produce new autonomous subjectivities and “institutions of the common.”

The UC Strike: At Long Last, the Shit Hits the Fan in California ...

Brian Holmes

After the huge student movements in France in 2006, as well as last year's occupation of the Sorbonne by the staff and the professors; after the rolling and agitated "anomalous wave" of protests against the Bologna Process restructuring of higher education that swept Italy last year; after the astonishing refusal of tuition fees by Croatian students this spring and summer—to name only three arenas of an expanding transnational revolt¹—the global crisis of the university has finally come home to the neoliberal heartland: the state of California. On September 24, a walkout of students, professors, and staff was called across the entire University of California system, in protest against draconian budget cuts decreed by the UC Regents, which is an

extremely powerful and prestigious administrative body whose members are

appointed directly by the state governor for twelve-year terms.

California is the state where, in 1979, the infamous Proposition 13 began choking off funding for public services while launching the "taxpayer revolt" of the rich and inventing the basic neoliberal campaign rhetoric that would bring Ronald Reagan to power. Since 1983 there has been only one Democratic governor of the state, Gray Davis, which means that the UC Regents have mostly been named by Republicans in order to represent multiple business interests in the fields of both research and education. The budget squeeze has been permanent, since the same Proposition 13 set the requirement of a two-thirds majority vote for any new local or state taxes. After Governor Davis was prematurely recalled by a Republican smear campaign following the "rolling blackouts" inflicted on the state by possibly the most corrupt corporation

¹ "disOrientation 2.0: Global University Struggles—Google My Maps." Google My Maps, <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1b902sVaNqrZaOb8FOZ-R7my3swto&ie=UTF8&hl=en&mmsa=0&z=2&ll=0.870412023411518%2C0>.

of the dot-com era, Enron, it was the new “Governator” Arnold Schwarzenegger who signed the 2004 Higher Education Compact with the President of the UC Regents. In the context of the ongoing financial crisis and the resulting budget shortfalls across the US federal system, Schwarzenegger is now using the effective minority rule granted to the Republicans by the two-thirds majority requirement to be the “Terminator” of California’s public education and research, which the compact redefines as a private good, to be produced by corporate investors and sold to clients on an open market.

There are now plans to raise tuition by 32 percent,² in addition to a 9.3 percent hike approved last May, as a consequence of the long-term withdrawal of state funding,

2 “University of California May Raise Tuition 30%,” *USA Today*, September 15, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20090923014724/https://www.usa-today.com/news/education/2009-09-15-university-california_N.htm.

3 Mitch Daniels, “The Coming Reset in State Government,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204731804574390603114939642>.

4 Jskoller, “UC Budget Crisis Teach-in at UCB 9/14: Prof George Lakoff Pt 5,” YouTube, September 17, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbZUJbc6vgk>.

5 “UC Walkout and Beyond—Documents, Videos, and Photos from the UC WalkOut and Beyond,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20091103002611/http://ucwalkout.ning.com:80>.

6 “Save the University: Wendy Brown, Part 6—UC Walkout and Beyond,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20091103034402/http://ucwalkout.ning.com/video/save-the-university-wendy>.

7 Edu-Factory Collective, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100405015255/http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15>.

8 The New School in Exile, <https://www.newschoolinexile.com>.

9 Revolution by the Book, “Preoccupied: The Logic of Occupation,” December 10, 2010, <https://revolutionbythebook.akpress.org/2009/01/preoccupied-the-logic-of-occupation>.

10 U.N.E.F. Strasbourg, “On the Poverty of Student Life: Considered In Its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects, and a Modest Proposal for Its Remedy,” The Situationist International Text Library/on the Poverty of Student Life, <https://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/4>.

11 Research and Destroy, “Communiqué From an Absent Future: On the Terminus of Student Life | Revolution by the Book,” December 10, 2010, <https://revolutionbythebook.akpress.org/2009/09/communique-from-an-absent-future-the-terminus-of-student-life>.

further exacerbated by the current fiscal crisis of state governments.³ The result will be the elimination of large numbers of economically disadvantaged students from the university and a shrinkage of the student population by as much as a third. In a videotaped speech⁴ where he explains many of these issues, the award-winning Berkeley linguistics professor George Lakoff had to choke off his emotion as he recalled how glad he had been, thirty-four years ago, to come to teach at a public university: his own parents had been too poor to attend high school.

A wealth of information on both the budget crisis and the student/staff/faculty movement can be found by following the links at the UC Walkout website.⁵ Among the more interesting bits is a talk by Wendy Brown,⁶ the first American academic to understand Foucault’s courses on the birth of biopower and to realize that neoliberalism means “the end of liberal democracy.” For a wider perspective on the course and meaning of such struggles in the world, there is the Edufactory collective,⁷ as well as The New School in Exile⁸ and a highly subversive text on the protests at that institution in December 2008 titled “Preoccupied.”⁹ But if somehow you have not yet done so, the first thing to read—and certainly one of the most powerful student-movement texts since the Situationist tract “On the Poverty of Student Life”¹⁰—is this impressive and impassioned document, emanating from the “Research & Destroy” collective and prefiguring the events at UC Santa Cruz, where the Graduate Student Commons is still occupied as I write: “Communiqué from an Absent Future.”¹¹

This is a brilliant text for one simple reason: it says, flat-out, a large number of things which are simply true concerning the

fundamental bankruptcy of the public university and of the society whose decay it has helped to perfect with a thousand sophisticated branches of knowledge and a thousand techniques of social engineering. The current economic collapse, the defeat of the US oil grab in Iraq after the needless loss of hundreds of thousands of civilian lives, and now the extension of the war in Afghanistan are only the most visible hallmarks of this decay, which has crept into daily life on every level, from the most pragmatic to the most subjective. Check this bit out to get the tone and the basic angle of attack:

We work and we borrow in order to work and to borrow. And the jobs we work toward are the jobs we already have. Close to three quarters of students work while in school, many full-time; for most, the level of employment we obtain while students is the same that awaits after graduation. Meanwhile, what we acquire isn't education; it's debt. We work to make money we have already spent, and our future labor has already been sold on the worst market around. Average student loan debt rose 20 percent in the first five years of the twenty-first century—80–100 percent for students of color. Student loan volume—a figure inversely proportional to state funding for education—rose by nearly 800 percent from 1977 to 2003. What our borrowed tuition buys is the privilege of making monthly payments for the rest of our lives. What we learn is the choreography of credit: you can't walk to class without being offered another piece of plastic charging 20 percent interest. Yesterday's finance majors buy their summer homes with the bleak futures of today's humanities majors.

The anonymous text goes on to cover a long list of societal failures in excruciating detail. What it calls for—as you could guess from

the short excerpt—is nothing less than a revolution. I'm not going to disagree. But because this moment and this movement are so important, I am going to take issue with one aspect of what I consider to be an otherwise perfect analysis. This criticizable aspect comes only after a series of remarkable arguments that have to be taken on board in order to get to the heart of the question:

The university has no history of its own; its history is the history of capital. Its essential function is the reproduction of the relationship between capital and labor. Though not a proper corporation that can be bought and sold, that pays revenue to its investors, the public university nonetheless carries out this function as efficiently as possible by approximating ever more closely the corporate form of its bedfellows. What we are witnessing now is the endgame of this process, whereby the façade of the educational institution gives way altogether to corporate streamlining.

This is true. What we are witnessing with the current economic crisis and the collapse of state budgets is the culmination of the neoliberal program, that is the end of the welfare state that was instituted in the 1930s and strengthened again in the 1960s, and, consequently, the beginning of the full-scale precarization of the former middle classes in the US and in northwestern Europe, as it has already occurred in countless countries of Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, after their subjection to bankers' techniques for the extraction of value from public institutions and infrastructures. To destroy any democratic critique of this process—and to open up another lucrative private market in the same blow—it is necessary for capitalist

logic to destroy the public university. The real-estate bubble and its deflation, which finally delivered a wake-up call to the general public, is at the same time serving as the pretext for a decisive round of privatizations that seek to finish the job and eliminate any resistance to the appropriation of the entire public sector. That this extreme makeover of the former welfare state will undoubtedly be fatal to the entire system, threatened with climate change—and also with the looming revolt of all kinds of peripheries and underclasses—seems not to matter one whit to the people in charge. This is precisely because, to a large extent, there is no one in charge. The logic of capital has not only pervaded the hearts and minds of those who benefit in any way from it—the very middle classes produced during the postwar period by welfare-state entitlements—but it has also sedimented itself in a very large number of technologies, laws, bureaucratic procedures, organizational models, and operational goals whose inertial force is tremendous and still serves as a powerful tool in the hands of those elites who are, in small numbers, very conscious of what they are doing. Yet all this, immense as it is, hardly removes us from the obligation to think and to act intelligently, strategically, in what is clearly a dangerous situation.

The knot of the text comes when it attempts to define its own speaking subject: the students whom the university educates. Not coincidentally, this is the passage that introduces the call to insurrection—yup, that’s the word, right here in Amerika—which takes up most of the third part of this extraordinary text:

The university is subject to the real crisis of capitalism, and capital does not require liberal education programs. The function of

the university has always been to reproduce the working class by training future workers according to the changing needs of capital. The crisis of the university today is the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers. We cannot free the university from the exigencies of the market by calling for the return of the public education system. We live out the terminus of the very market logic upon which that system was founded. The only autonomy we can hope to attain exists beyond capitalism.

Now exactly here, I want to ask the question: How can anyone accept this idea that the function of the university is to reproduce the working class without distorting every meaning of the words “working class”? The working classes of the university are the janitors, the food-service people, the maintenance men and women, the day-care staffers and receptionists, all the people stuck in increasingly exploited and precarious positions. Even when they do the same jobs at night or at odd hours scattered over the week, the students aspire to be trained as scientists, engineers, technicians, healthcare professionals, government officials, middle and upper managers, and cultural ideologists (a category in which I would include both artists and teachers). The difference between them marks the common consciousness, and it has to be addressed, even at a time when the objective distinctions between students and workers are blurring. It is true to say that the United States, like all countries that have undergone full-scale neoliberal regime change, no longer has any essential need for its traditional working classes, since industrial work has been largely outsourced, automated, or

delegated to immigrants under conditions of extreme exploitation facilitated, in many cases, by lack of citizenship papers. But it is false to say that the neoliberal societies do not need the “human resources” produced by the university. They do, crucially, to maintain their advantages in what they themselves define as the Darwinian struggle of each country and, indeed, of each corporation against all the others. The present aim of the Republicans—the neoliberals—is to save money on taxes, to open up new markets for education and research while continuing to exploit the remaining (and hardly inconsequential) public budgets, and to exert further discipline over its future middle-management cadres by placing them under even more intense threats of joblessness and inability to pay their enormous student loans. In other words, they want to complete the program first launched in the age of Prop 13.

Why then, in such a brilliant text, do we get such a major mistake of class analysis? Undoubtedly because from that point forth, it is very easy to lapse into an outdated concept of revolution, wherein everyone dons a black mask and engages in a sweeping orgy of destruction that will send the existing system up in flames and allow the rise of a new one from its ashes. Now, does that appear likely? Has anyone studied what Homeland Security has been preparing for in this country for the last eight years? Has anyone observed the massive deployment of police, National Guard, United States Secret Service, and Army personnel armed with so-called less-lethal weapons at the recent G20 meeting in Pittsburgh, or at the RNC in Saint Paul last summer? Above all, has anyone noticed how successfully agents-provocateurs have been used at all these kinds of events since the

anti-globalization movement brought street demonstrations back to the Western countries at the turn of the millennium?

The “Communiqué from an Absent Future” marks the return of an insurrectionist spirit to the United States, where it has not been seen on any large scale since the 1970s, with the brief exception of an important moment in Seattle. This spirit should be put to good use by everyone. If the current movement goes anywhere, some rioting in the streets is gonna happen, and a lot of occupations. But no one should kid themselves that student riots are going to change the system. What students can do, from their own class position, is both to reach out to the hyper-exploited working classes toward whom they are, in effect, precariously sliding, and, at the same time, to help to radicalize all those around them in what has become the central institution for the reproduction of the neoliberal hegemony, namely the contemporary research university. This will require inventing original techniques of radical action that can’t be neutralized and made into a pretext for fascist reactions. Strikes that shut a university down—as has already happened for a day in the huge UC system—can also open up space for questioning what the uses of the university could be in a different society. Writers, media makers, performers, and artists, whether inside or outside the university, can use this moment to go further, to dig deeper into our hearts and minds and desires, and to lay the basis for a long-term, broad-based, constructive refusal of the literally insane and dangerous system that has taken root in the US over the course of the last three decades and especially the last ten years.

If the former role and glory of the public university under the welfare-warfare state is definitively over, then what can it become

in the future? Wouldn't the best way to shut down its current operations be to convince all those inside it that the way it is operating is a travesty of all its potentials, including those inscribed at the heart of every academic discipline? Why not shut it down with an excess of transformative intellectual and artistic production that would have a huge insurrectional advantage, namely that it could not be stopped by police armed with truncheons and stun guns and less-lethal weapons that they are just dying to use? In the absence of a deep, problematic delegitimation of neoliberal capitalism and the invention of new ways to run a complex society, which transparently appears as the most urgent thing for all of us to focus on, the real revolution will never come. Yet the way things are going, with climate change and planetary civil wars looming on the horizon, all of us are mortally threatened by the absence of that revolutionary future.

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The Hidden Costs of a Life of the Mind

Beatriz E. Balanta

The endless toggling between fascination and suspicion—or what I call my love affair with visual culture—began in Boston after I emigrated from a sun-drenched peripheral town at the edge of a sugarcane plantation. I was thirteen when I landed in the stuffy eighth-grade classroom commandeered by Mrs. R., a skinny white woman with boisterously curly red hair. Mrs. R. combined her instruction in English grammar and pronunciation with lessons on watercolor and entomology. She also taught us how to make pinhole cameras out of tin cans and introduced us, an energetic bunch of Black and Brown teens, to the Surrealist masters. I remember being in awe of the meticulous flamboyance of Salvador Dalí's landscapes and the visual antics of Pablo Picasso. In her class I became enchanted with saturated colors, the elegance of jagged lines, and the majesty of form. I was in search of the sublime, but Mrs. R. warned against such

naive desires. She insisted that art was not about arousing the sensorium but a vehicle of ideological disruption.

In college I feasted on the delicious deceptions of trompe l'oeil, became interested in history painting, and staged dioramas that I photographed with my Konica C35. In spite of my sensitivity for the modes of speculation that art engenders, however, my formative experiences with art institutions were not pleasant. Museums and galleries were off-putting; wall texts and labels were abstruse, prices were out of reach, and these temples of contemplation required that the body be silenced in order to appreciate art in a reasoned manner. Above all, exhibitions were conceptually distant; they did not resonate with my experience or history. This sense of alienation was exacerbated by the ethnocentricity of art history. The survey courses that taught me to recognize genre conventions and the

virtuosity of masters also taught me that art was the exclusive property of white men. These same courses taught me, by omission, that no creative ethos could take root in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, or Asia. The lesson was simple and devastating: the genealogy of art began and ended in the West; Europe was both the center and the horizon of the aesthetic universe. My formal introduction to art was, therefore, predicated on the epistemological violence of exclusion.

A woman I never met taught me to distrust well-worn histories. I was still in college but had become suspicious of form and color and had begun to wonder about the sharp vestiges of colonialism. I abandoned photography and took up collage. I rummaged used bookstores for print materials I could destroy, reassemble, and re-signify. I found her tucked inside a book, a Taschen-like edition of Picasso's works. Her voice materialized as dainty inscriptions inserted between the lines, on the margins, and close to the book's gutter. She made heavy use of asterisks and brackets. Often she would encircle a phrase or draw an arrow to direct the reader's eyes toward her quick rejoinders and tart asides. She was angry. Resentment drove her to take possession of almost every blank space in the book, where she planted words that grew into a deliberate attack on the author's argument. Usually she penned long disquisitions, tightly packed at the top or bottom margins, that excoriated the editor for expunging Africa from the story of Picasso's genius. A lot of times, her rage was compressed in thunderous refrains. AFRICA!?! AFRICA!?! AFRICA!?! would bleed out of her pen and into my gut. Turn the glossy white page and there it was, AFRICA!?! AFRICA!?! AFRICA!?! a triplicate indictment of

erasure, desperation, and alienation hinged together by incensed exclamation points and saddened question marks. If the call, "Look, a negro!" plunged Frantz Fanon into blackness, the refrain—AFRICA!?! AFRICA!?! AFRICA!?!—pulled me out of alienation.¹ But I didn't know what to do with this flicker of freedom until much later. For years, it sat in my ear as low-frequency sonic disturbance.

The margins were her workshop, a place where she unveiled the grotesque figurations of Eurocentric accounts of art history and the ground on which she inscribed the primacy and centrality of Africa to the history of the West. The insolence of the alien scribe was earth-shattering. I had never come across the suggestion that art and Africa could be reflections of each other. And it had never occurred to me to question the authority of men who write. Her interlineal glosses and sideline agitations were an exercise in disfiguration that reordered the topoi of the book and revealed the fallacies of the canon. Years later, when I became a PhD student, I came to interpret her defacement of the mystifying history of Western art as the ethos of scholarship: to write in the margins, from the margins, and about the margins.

My encounter with the audacious scribe fueled my desire to salvage what had been deleted from the pages and landscape of history. More importantly, this fortuitous meeting forever changed my conceptualization of education. Until then, going to university was the ultimate in a series of utilitarian acts of survival. My mother held on tight to the belief that education was the only dignified vehicle out of poverty and the measuring stick through which society would ascertain my value. My mother buried herself in a mountain of debt to school me. Since those of us who struggle in

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (Grove, 1991), 111–12.

the peripheries of plantations, the ghettos of opulent cities, and destitute towns set against rolling prairies are only allowed to possess the bare minimum to sustain life, the luxuries—cultivation of the mind included—can only be purchased on high-interest credit. A photograph I keep amid other brittle mementos fails to document the transactions that underwrote my education, but it reveals the performative mechanisms through which the ideology of education as a serum that transforms the subjugated into a proper middle-class individual is ritualized.

According to the inscription on the back, written by my father in blue ink with self-assured penmanship, this photograph records the inauguration in 1979 of the Sacred Heart School in Puerto Tejada, Cauca, Colombia. The president of the Republic, Julio César Turbay Ayala, came to town to cut the ribbon—a ceremony that sanctified state power as benevolent. Four statuesque Black kids stand in the foreground; I am one of them. The other children on stage pay attention, they look at the camera. I don't. I squint and point my eyes somewhere beyond the crowd. Behind me, the handsome town's mayor, Miguel Gómez, clad in a suit and tie, gifts the photographer a flirtatious smile. To his left and at the center of the composition, the head of state stands. The bespectacled old white man does not look presidential; rather, in this snapshot, we see him as a priest. Caught in mid-motion, his hand looks as if about to anoint the child in front of him with the baptismal waters of wisdom. The other notable presence is the bodiless face of Mrs. Zolia, my preschool teacher. She smiles in admiration of the pupils. We, the chosen four, were the best crop of each of her classes. We were role models, we learned the ABCs dutifully,

we sat still, we were polite and diligent. I, barely five years old, solemnly bask in the glory of being praised as the future of the race. There I am: a photo prop, a citizen in the making, the best student in preschool.

My solemnity, it turns out, had nothing to do with the state of my soul that day. I was in pain. That year, I attended school in flip-flops, but on the day of the Sacred Heart School inauguration I wore my cousin's shoes. According to my mother, I had been crying because they were too small and hurt my feet. The loan she secured to celebrate her daughter's learning aptitude was not enough. There was never enough—choosing which necessity to satisfy was the rule: uniform or shoes; arepas with or without eggs. This time the little money she borrowed was only enough to cover fabric for a new uniform and fees for the seamstress. So, there I stood, crisp and shiny, next to the president. I was publicly celebrated for my judiciousness and privately I agonized over the blistering pain of poverty.

By the time this photograph became part of my inheritance, my mother's total expenditure on my education was beyond calculation. I paid for college with a series of "promissory notes" that amounted to tens of thousands of dollars. This insurmountable string of zeros paid for the privilege of mastering the techniques of rhetoric, close reading, and formal analysis; bankrolled my introduction to Sojourner Truth, Karl Marx, and the massacre of El Mozote; funded my descent into the bowels of Elmina Castle; sponsored my discovery of Angela Davis, C. L. R. James, Patricia Hill Collins, Faith Ringgold, *This Bridge Called My Back*, Alma Woodsey Thomas, and *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Through debt I financed my comprehension of the mechanics of colonialism. To learn that oppression is

systematic, that it contaminates everything, reconfigured the chemistry of my eyes and the focus of my vision. My sight longed to be entertained, in the deepest sense of the word, by Black art, by Black ways of seeing the world.

I began to consider academia as a career because I wanted to understand how Blackness was made, how Black people thought themselves into being. I had no particular discipline in mind, the only thing I was sure of was that I needed to grasp the sociopolitical and ideological architecture of colonialism so that I could work to reverse its effects. I wanted to be an “enlightened activist.”

Graduate fellowships and another string of zeros secured by “promissory notes” bought me a PhD. I learned to decipher the meaning of surplus and exchange value, enslaved labor, and the discourse of race in Latin America. As I reflect on my doctoral training, what I find most ironic is that while seminars were the testing ground of innovative theoretical approaches to oppression, the issue of class hierarchy in the university didn’t make it into the syllabus. We spent hours criticizing the violent procedures of exclusion on which the Western literary, philosophical, and aesthetic canons depend, but I don’t recall discussions about contemporary barriers that kept the university and thus knowledge itself lily-white and privileged. The financial, social, racial, and class systems that sustain the university were invisible and invisibilized.

I have inherited nothing except old photographs and my labor power. Most of my colleagues inherited the good manners, habits, and experiences that buy

² “Fast Facts: Race/Ethnicity of College Faculty,” National Center for Educational Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/fast-facts/display.asp?id=61>.

³ “Survey of Earned Doctorates,” National Science Foundation Report, 2015, <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17306/static/report/nsf17306>, 6.

a red-carpet entrance into the ivory tower. Although a few subalterns have infiltrated the university, the number of interlopers remains stubbornly small. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2016 there were 1.5 million faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States. The majority of those who teach are white: 41 percent are white men and 35 percent are white women. Not surprisingly, the number of faculty from historically marginalized ethnic and racial groups is painfully small. Polling reveals that 10 percent of professors in the US identify as Asian/Pacific Islander (6 percent are men, 4 percent are women). The remaining 14 percent is made up of: Black men (3 percent), Black women (3 percent), Hispanic men (3 percent), and Hispanic women (2 percent). American Indian/Alaska Natives and multiracial individuals are counted together; their presence is almost statistically insignificant, at 1 percent of the total number of people who belong to the profession.² Moreover, those of us who manage to enter the academic hallways are at an economic disadvantage. The 2015 US Survey of Earned Doctorates reports that “approximately half of American Indian or Alaska Native and Black or African American doctorate recipients and more than 40% of Hispanic or Latino doctorate recipients belonged to families in which neither parent had been awarded a college degree.”³ I don’t need to cite these numbers to remind you that we are the minority.

I latch on to these numbers. These numbers confirm that we are unique; that we have made it. These numbers remind me that I am not alone. We dared to believe that reason could inhabit us and we could inhabit reason, and this unprecedented leap of faith has made a dent in the structure.

Although our numbers are small, every day we produce scholarship that bends the rules, highlights the obscured, and shifts the terms of foundational debates in art history and visual culture studies. My current research project, for example, seeks to recover and situate a series of neglected projects of representation created by Afro-Brazilian cultural workers that unsettle ossified depictions of Black embodiment in the turbulent years between the abolition of the traffic in slaves (1850) and the official end of slavery in Brazil (1888). In the book, provisionally titled *Compromising Portraits: Visual and Literary Renditions of Black Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, I show that the symbolic construction of Blackness was not a closed circuit of objectification but rather a charged enterprise contingent upon political environment, aesthetic genre, and modes of circulation. I track the ways in which portraiture, a genre that actively refused to depict subaltern subjects, was forced to accommodate a cadre of black men who became notorious popular figures and thus worthy of visual memorialization. I also foreground literary works like Maria Firmina dos Reis's *Úrsula* (1859), the first abolitionist novel penned by a Black woman in Brazil, that imagine multidimensional Black characters—characters who narrate their own histories, criticize the status quo, and thus provide a blueprint for the imagination of Black subjectivity. I argue that the visual and literary cultural objects under review exemplify what I am calling compromised acts of portraiture—that is to say, visual and textual performances that pierce generic conventions and provide complex lines of flight out of reified aesthetic and discursive typologies. Taken together, these projects of representation manage to alter the grammar

of portraiture to reveal self-determined, although besieged, Black subjects. By undertaking an integrated reading of painting, lithography, photography, and journalism, I paint a more nuanced picture of insurgent programs of representation that sought to regenerate Black subjectivity. This is the kind of research I've always loved to do: excavating unheard narratives to complicate the picture of what we think we know.

Unfortunately, the meaning of the statistics I cited above always circles back to the sad reality that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person of color to inhabit academia. An exaggeration, perhaps. But the pithy numbers stare back at us; they haunt me. They're a source of conflict. They're a cruel reminder that universities are bastions of privilege. Do I encourage students of color to join the ranks and, little by little, tear down the walls that keep us out? Or do I use the numbers as a cautionary tale? And what do I caution against? After all, the university, like most spaces in US society, breeds microaggressions, tiny punctures into one's soul that build up slowly, like plaque, ultimately bending the back and exhausting the will.

I believe that the academic aspirations of people like me should be nurtured and strongly supported. Conversely, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that to work at the university is to engage in a daily battle against institutional racism, marginalization, and misogyny. We subaltern academics who believe that the university should be a space inhabited by all should ask: What price are we willing to pay to be scholars? While I believe that we must actively engage in the production of knowledge, it has become increasingly difficult for me to devote my labor power to further enrich the white 1 percent. For me, the cost is too high in terms

of psychic pain, isolation, and financial insecurity, to name a few. I am not naive; it is clear to me that most institutions in our society exist to sustain the status quo. In my case, however, the pleasure I derive from conducting research, writing, and teaching has stopped being an antidote to the nagging feeling that I am a mammy. Familiarity with “otherness,” the geopolitics of the Global South, and the aesthetic languages developed by the oppressed, all of which I teach, have become required skills for the white-collar class that the management of transnational capital requires. As I see it, my labor is the milk that nourishes the younger members of the US bourgeoisie.

The suspicious optimism that sustained my academic aspirations has evaporated under the weight of a million microaggressions. For me, the time has come to take inventory and reassess how I/we should invest the assets I/we have gained in academia. Two decades have passed since the bald-faced scribe who lived in the margins of a book about Picasso changed the tenor of my existence by demonstrating the power of critique. I lost that book long ago, but I search the confines of my memory for her words. This time I want her to be my guide as I wander out of the ivory tower on my way back to the dusty town at the edge of a sugarcane plantation where my story began.

Editor’s note: Balanta left her tenure-track position at Southern Methodist University in 2019 and moved to Cali, Colombia, where she founded Black Ground Lab, an organization dedicated to the arts and culture of the African Diaspora.

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Contributors

Jonathas de Andrade was born in Maceió, Brazil, in 1982. His work, often a combination of photography, video, and installation, focuses on topics such as labor, identity, and the legacy of colonialism in Brazil. He has exhibited extensively internationally, including in such exhibitions as the Brazilian pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, the Bienal de São Paulo, and the New Museum Triennial. His work is included in the collections of major museums, such as the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Zeina Arida is the director of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha. She was previously the director of the Surssock Museum in Beirut and, from 1997–2014, the director of the Arab Image Foundation, where she contributed to the development of the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI).

Magali Arriola was director of Museo Tamayo in Mexico City (2019–24) and the lead curator for Latin America at KADIST (2017–19). Arriola curated the exhibition *Pablo Vargas Lugo: Acts of God* for Mexican Pavilion for the 58th Venice Biennial. Previously, she was chief curator at Museo Jumex (2011–14); chief curator of Museo Tamayo (2009–11); and visiting curator at the Wattis Institute for

Contemporary Art in San Francisco (2006).

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay is a filmmaker, curator, and professor of Comparative Literature and Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Her books include *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World* (Verso, 2024); *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019); *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (Verso, 2012); and, as coauthor with Adi Ophir, *The One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy between the Sea and the River* (Stanford, 2012).

Michael Baers is an artist and writer whose work focuses on the intersection of artistic practice, institutional and state policy, and national/international politics—the latter considered in its many guises. He has sometimes referred to this set of interests as “social art history by other means.” His work often develops out of oral history collecting and other forms of research. Baers is an affiliated researcher at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin.

Beatriz E. Balanta is a writer, educator, and cultural producer based in Cali, Colombia. She has published articles about orgasms and psychoanalysis, political speech, racism

and classism in academia, and photography and the construction of Black identity. Balanta is the executive director and founder of Black Ground, a cultural production company based in Cali and focused on contemporary art of the African diaspora. Previously, she was assistant professor of Art History at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Helmut Batista was born in Rio de Janeiro. He is an artist and, since 1998, the founding director of CAPACETE.

As a multidisciplinary artist, a member of the group Artefacto, and the founder of the Space for Artistic Research and Reflection (EspIRA), **Patricia Belli** has been a central figure in art and feminist practice in Nicaragua for over thirty years. Her distinctive assemblages confront political and sexual oppression, death, and desire.

Cara Benedetto is an artist and writer. Her work has been exhibited at Metro Pictures, New York; MOCA Cleveland; MOMA Warsaw; and the Jewish Museum, New York. She was writer in residence at Callie's, Berlin (2023–25) and a fellow at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart (2014). She is the author of *Origin of Love and Other Tales of Degradation* (2020), *The*

Coming of Age (2015), and *Burning Blue* (2015) and is the founder of *Overflow Journal*. She is associate professor in Print Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Manuel Borja-Villel is an art historian and curator. He served as director of the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid from 2008 to 2023. Previously, Borja-Villel was director of MACBA in Barcelona (1998–2007) and of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies (1989–98). More recently, he was one of the curators of the 35th São Paulo Biennial. In 2015, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and is also a foreign member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He received the 2024 Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence.

Linda Goode Bryant has assumed many roles over her career: gallery owner, filmmaker, farmer, and entrepreneur. She founded Just Above Midtown gallery (1974–86), which was the subject of a 2022 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 2009 she established the urban farming initiative Project Eats. She has worked at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem. In 2022 she was artistic director for RAW Académie at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

Gregory Buchakjian is an art historian and interdisciplinary visual artist. The recipient of a PhD from Sorbonne Université, he is director of the School of Visual Arts and associate professor at Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA). He lives and works in Beirut.

Johanna Burton is the Maurice Marciano Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles. Prior to joining MOCA, she held posts including executive director of the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio; Keith Haring Director & Curator of Education and Public Engagement at New Museum, New York; and director of the Graduate Program at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS), New York. She currently serves as a trustee on the board of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Luis Camnitzer is a German-born Uruguayan artist, educator, and writer who moved to New York in 1964. He was at the vanguard of 1960s Conceptualism, working primarily in printmaking, sculpture, and installations. For more than five decades, his practice has been marked by an enduring interrogation of systems of power, the intersection of art and pedagogy, and the deconstruction of language and other familiar frameworks.

Campus in Camps is a project of DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency), founded by Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti and situated between architecture, art, pedagogy, and politics. Over the last two decades, it has developed a series of research-based projects that are engaged in

the struggle for justice and equality. In Hilal and Petti's practice, art exhibitions are both sites of display and sites of action that spill over into other contexts: built architectural structures, the shaping of critical learning environments, interventions that challenge dominant collective narratives, the production of new political imaginations, the formation of civic spaces, and the redefinition of concepts.

Aissa Deebi is an artist, curator, and writer. He has held various academic leadership positions including the chair of the Department of Art and Design at Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey. He was the founder and director of the Visual Cultures Program at the American University in Cairo; a visiting reader in Contemporary Art Middle East at Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK; and a visiting international faculty at Cedim, Estudios Superiores de Diseño de Monterrey, Mexico. He is currently the chair of the Painting + Printmaking department and an associate professor of art at VCUarts Qatar.

Karen Devia is a visual artist, writer, and tattooer. Her work explores the concepts of temporality and body. In 2015, she was part of the contemporary dance company Danzados. In 2013, she was a recipient of the Magis Scholarship from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. She has been part of the team of lugar a dudas since 2017.

Sean Dockray is an artist and writer whose work explores the politics of technology with a particular emphasis on artificial intelligences and the algorithmic web. He is

a founding director of the Los Angeles nonprofit Telic Arts Exchange and initiator of the knowledge-sharing platforms The Public School and AAAARG.ORG. He is a senior lecturer in the Department of Fine Art at Monash University in Melbourne.

Angela Dufresne is a painter based in Brooklyn. Through painting, drawing, printmaking, performative works, and community building she wields heterotopic narratives that are both non-hierarchical and unapologetically perverse, conjuring the rage, piss and vinegar, and passion of being female in America. She currently serves as the head of painting department at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Hope Ginsburg is a maker of collaborative projects where art, ecology, and spirituality meet. She is the artist/director of *Meditation Ocean* (2023–), which focuses on human and more-than-human thriving and is realized by an evolving team of collaborators called the Meditation Ocean Constellation. Since the late 1990s, Ginsburg's long-term artworks have integrated video, installation, performance, and pedagogy.

Pablo Guardiola is a visual artist and curator with works in sculpture, photography, and text. His practice points to different modes of narration and how these are perceived and understood. He is codirector of Beta—Local, an arts nonprofit based in Puerto Rico.

Magnus Ericson is a Stockholm-based curator and educator working across design, architecture, urbanism, and art. He is currently head of IASPIS Applied Arts, leading the program related to design,

crafts, architecture, and spatial and urban practice. He has, over the years, in different institutional settings and as an independent curator, combined curatorial and pedagogical practice with an emphasis on socially engaged critical practice, alternative pedagogies, and organizing spaces for learning.

Marcelo Expósito is an artist and cultural critic whose work has been shown in recent solo exhibitions at La Virreina, Barcelona; Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; PAV, Turin; and Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires. He was an artist-in-residence at the Spanish Academy in Rome (2022–23) and a guest artist at the 60th Biennale Arte Venezia (2024) as part of the *Disobedience Archive* curated by Marco Scotini. In 2025, he is a visiting professor at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Chile and at the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti (NABA) in Milan. His latest book is *Interrupciones y movimientos* (Metales Pesados, Chile, 2024).

Gordon Hall is an artist whose work encompasses sculpture, performance, and writing. Hall has had solo exhibitions at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR; The Renaissance Society, Chicago; and The Kitchen, New York, among other venues. Hall is assistant professor of art at Vassar College.

Pablo Helguera is a visual artist living in New York. His work involves performance, drawing, pedagogy, installation, theater, and other literary strategies. He is often considered a pioneering figure in the

field of socially engaged art and has been recipient of many awards including the Guggenheim and Creative Capital fellowships and the first International Award for Participatory Art in Italy. He is author of many books, including *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011) and *The Parable Conference* (2014). He is currently assistant professor at the College of Performing Arts of The New School in New York.

Mônica Hoff is an artist, curator, and researcher based in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Her work investigates the relations between curatorial, artistic, and educational practices and how they contribute, resist, or determine institutional politics. Between 2006 and 2014, Mônica coordinated the education department of the Bienal do Mercosul in Porto Alegre, where she also acted as part of the curatorial team for its ninth edition, *Weather Permitting* (2013). Recent projects include: *Laboratório de Curadoria, Arte, e Educação* (2014–19), in collaboration with Fernanda Albuquerque; *Embarcação* (2016–18); and *Pedagogia em Público*, developed with Fábio Tremonte.

Brian Holmes is an essayist and artist. He holds a PhD in Romance Languages and Literatures from the University of California at Berkeley.

Khaled Hourani is an artist, curator, and writer. He was the artistic director of the International Academy of Art Palestine from 2007 to 2010, and its general director from 2010 to 2013. He also worked as general director of the Fine Arts Department in the Palestinian Ministry of Culture (2004–06). In 2013, he was awarded the Leonore Annenberg Prize

by Creative Time, New York. In 2014, his retrospective was presented at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, and Gallery One in Ramallah. Another retrospective was presented at Darat Al Funun, Amman in 2017.

Marielle Ingram is a writer based in Brooklyn. She has contributed to exhibitions and programs at the Art Institute of Chicago; Gallery 400 and the Washington Park Arts Incubator, both in Chicago; and the Museum of Modern Art and MoMA PSx, both in New York. Her writing and film projects have appeared in publications such as *Real Life*, *Artforum*, *Take Shape X-TRA*, and *MIT Thresholds*. She holds a BA in philosophy from the University of Chicago.

Susan Jahoda is an artist, organizer, and teacher who lives in New York and currently teaches at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A member of three collectives—the Pedagogy Group, BFAMFAPhD, and NYCTBD—she is working toward developing equitable methods of teaching and communing within the context of arts education.

Steffani Jemison is an artist who lives and works in New York. Her solo exhibitions include *Lafayette Anticipations*, Paris (2025); *Centre d'art contemporain Genève* (2024); *JOAN*, Los Angeles (2022); *Contemporary Arts Center*, Cincinnati (2021); and the *Stedelijk Museum*, Amsterdam (2019). Jemison is a Guggenheim Fellow, a Radcliffe Fellow, a Herb Alpert Awardee, and a Creative Capital Awardee, among other honors. She is associate professor of Art & Design at Rutgers University; her first novel,

A Rock, A River, A Street, was published by Primary Information in 2022.

Arnold J. Kemp has been concerned with artists, writers, curators, and educators working in art spaces founded by and in support of other artists for almost four decades. His artistic work and writing are rooted in research and process and engage ideas about the permeability of the border between self and the materials of one's work. Kemp lives and works in Chicago, where he is a professor and former dean of Graduate Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Yazan Khalili lives and works in and out of Palestine and Amsterdam. He is a researcher, artist, and cultural producer. His practice frames landscapes, institutions, and social and technological phenomena as politicized entities. He cofounded two platforms of infrastructure for cultural practices (*The Question of Funding* in 2019, *Radio Alhara* in 2020). He is currently a PhD candidate at ASCA, University of Amsterdam.

Alex Klein is head curator & director of curatorial affairs at the Contemporary Austin. For over a decade she served as the Dorothy and Stephen R. Weber (CHE '60) Senior Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, where she curated numerous exhibitions and created the multi-platform initiative *Is for Institute*. Prior to joining ICA, Klein held positions in the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Roski School of Fine Arts, University of Southern California; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Prem Krishnamurthy has directed design studios, established galleries and institutions, curated large-scale exhibitions around the world, and taught widely. He received the Cooper Hewitt National Design Award for Communications Design in 2015 and KW Institute for Contemporary Art's "A Year With" fellowship in 2018. In 2019, Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies acquired his professional papers. His books include *PIDF* (2017–20), *On Letters* (2022), and *Past Words* (2024), an anthology of his writing and experimental curatorial projects. In 2022, Krishnamurthy founded Department of Transformation, an artist-organized group that prototypes experimental methods for togetherness, learning, and collective healing.

M. Paola Malavasi Lachner (Lola Malavasi) is a cultural manager and curator whose work centers on education, collective practices, and institutional critique. She served as codirector and curator at TEOR/ÉTica, an independent contemporary art space in San José, Costa Rica, from 2017 to 2025. During her tenure, she played a key role in developing educational initiatives, including curating and facilitating *Alter Academia*, a residency/school for young artists from Costa Rica, and, alongside Marília Loureiro, *LasecuelaLA: escuela latinoamericana de cuidados*, an experimental online (de)school developed with Capacete, and lugar a dudas. Collaborating with Miguel A. López, she curated the 2019 exhibition *Virginia Pérez-Ratton. Centroamérica: deseo de lugar* at the Museo Universitario Arte

Contemporáneo, Mexico City, and coedited its accompanying publication.

Miguel A. López is a writer, researcher, and chief curator of Museo Universitario del Chopo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in Mexico City. He focuses on the role of art in politics and public life, collective work, and queer and feminist rewritings of history. He was curator of the 2024 edition of the Toronto Biennial of Art. From 2015 to 2020, he worked as chief curator, and, later, codirector of TEOR/ética, San José, Costa Rica. He lives and works in Mexico City.

Marília Loureiro is an art curator and researcher. She worked on the curatorial teams at Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (2011–12), Museu de Arte de São Paulo (2016–17), and the São Paulo Biennial (2018), where she organized the public program *Des/Reorganizações Afetivas* at the 33rd Biennial. She has collaborated with several self-organized art initiatives, including lugar a dudas (2015) and Capacete (2016) and served as curator and program coordinator at Casa do Povo (2017–21). In 2022, she participated in Pivô Pesquisa and, from 2022 to 2024, cocurated Secue_LA, a pedagogical project by TEOR/ética, lugar a dudas, and Capacete, with Lola Malavasi. She is currently a curator at Instituto Inhotim.

Sally Mizrachi is a cofounder of lugar a dudas, a place for artists to gather in order to work through ideas, as well as to participate in a dialogue and public debate about art and politics. Since 2005, she has been in charge of the executive direction and the general coordination of the

space, generating initiatives and alliances with institutions and organizations at a national and international level for the benefit of the artists in Cali, Colombia. She is an active part in the work teams of the Arts Collaboratory network. She lives and works in Cali.

Michael Jones McKean is an artist and teacher based in the United States and France. His work has been shown extensively throughout the world and he has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and fellowships at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Core Program; the International Studio and Curatorial Program and the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, both in New York; the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire; the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, Massachusetts; and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, Nebraska, among many others. He is an associate professor in the Sculpture + Extended Media Department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Naeem Mohaiemen combines films, photography, drawings, and essays to research forms of utopia and dystopia and transnational collisions within families, borders, architecture, and uprisings. Art critic Murtaza Vali considers Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man* (1976) as “a hapless history student studying for a PhD, an erstwhile stand-in for Mohaiemen.” Naeem is coeditor, with Eszter Szakacs, of *Solidarity Must Be Defended* (2023) and author of *Bengal Photography's Reality Quest* (2025, in Bengali), *Midnight's Third Child* (2023), and *Prisoners of*

Shothik Itihash (2014). He is head of the Photography Concentration and director of Undergraduate Studies in the Visual Arts Department, School of the Arts, Columbia University.

Manuela Moscoso is the executive director of The Center for Art, Research, and Alliances (CARA) in New York. She is the curator of the 2nd Bienal das Amazônias (2025) and has previously served as curator of the Liverpool Biennial (2021); senior curator at Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; adjunct curator of the 12th Cuenca Biennial, in her native Ecuador; codirector of Capacete, Rio de Janeiro; and cocurator of the Queens International 2012, among other roles.

Noora Al Mualla is director of learning and research at Sharjah Art Foundation. Previously, she was art centers manager and curator of modern Arab art (2016–19), senior projects coordinator for the Sharjah Art Foundation curatorial team (2015–16), and exhibitions coordinator at Sharjah Art Museum (2010–15). Al Mualla is also a researcher and writer with a focus on Arab and Emirati art. Born in Umm Al Quwain, United Arab Emirates, she currently lives in Umm Al Quwain and works in Sharjah.

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz is an artist who works primarily through the expanded moving image. Her films and videos are populated by thoughtful *actores naturales* and developed through her writing, structured improvisation, and, at times, chance operations. This work is built upon intersecting histories—Boalian theater and experimental ethnographic film—and her recent work is focused on simultaneous narration,

the anti-colonial unconscious, and the subjective experience of disorder. She is an educator and was the cofounder of Beta-Local in San Juan and has taught art at various institutions.

Colombian visual artist **Oscar Muñoz** is interested in questioning the notions of time and reality. His exhibitions, individual and collective, include the Institute of International Visual Art, London; the Gwangju Biennial; the Havana Biennial; the Venice Biennale; Hiroshima MOCA; Museo la Tertulia, Cali, Colombia; Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires; Museo de Arte de Lima; and Jeu de Paume, Paris. He lives and works in Cali, where he cofounded and directs lugar a dudas.

Founded in 2000, **My Barbarian** (Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade) was the subject of a 2021 survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, with a monograph published by Yale University Press. The group's work has been presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the UCLA Hammer Museum, and REDCAT, all in Los Angeles; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, The Kitchen, the New Museum, and Participant Inc., all in New York. The group was included in two Performa Biennials, the Whitney Biennial, two California Biennials, and the Baltic Triennial. My Barbarian has been supported by USA Artists, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, and others.

Sofia Olascoaga is a Mexican artist, curator, and researcher whose work explores the intersections of art, education, and collective action. Raised in a self-organized community in Cuernavaca, Mexico, her practice is deeply informed by intentional community models and the pedagogical ideas of Ivan Illich. She has held prominent roles including cocurator of the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo (2016) and academic curator at Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (2014–15) and received fellowships from the Whitney Independent Study Program and Independent Curators International. She has also worked with the alternative school SOMA and the traveling documentary film festival *Ambulante*.

Matteo Pasquinelli is associate professor of the philosophy of science at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University in Venice, where he is coordinating the ERC project *AIMODELS*. His book *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (London: Verso, 2023) won the Deutscher Memorial Prize 2024.

Marie Helene Pereira is senior curator of performative practices at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. She is a member and curatorial advisor of RAW Material Company in Dakar, where she has curated exhibitions and related discursive programs. Previously she was part of the artistic team of the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022) and cocurated a guest section of the thirteenth edition of the Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Art (2018). She lives and works between Berlin and Dakar.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed is a learner and seeker from East Palo Alto, California. She is a full-time instructor in the Sculpture Department at the Yale School of Art. Additionally, she has taught courses and workshops at the School for Poetic Computation. Alongside her work within existing institutions, she experiments with institutional design and community building through the many projects she stewards through KJR Studios. She founded The Little Octopus School (est. 2024), a roaming learning laboratory, and a publishing imprint (Scratch Disks Full) rooted in play, curiosity, and collaboration. She is also the founder of Orange Tangent Study (est. 2020), a consultancy reimagining the design of learning experiences.

Sam Rauch is an independent curator, consultant, and cultural producer based in New York City. He has collaborated closely with some of the world's leading artists to realize their most ambitious works and engage diverse publics in contexts including traditional museums and galleries, iconic urban landmarks, and important civic sites. Through exhibitions, commissions, programs, and publications, his partnership-based research, curatorial, and consulting work focuses on experimental, interdisciplinary, and collaborative art practices and projects that foster relations of kinship, reciprocity, care, and repair.

Sarah A. Rifky is a writer, curator, and art historian. She co-founded Beirut, a contemporary art space in Cairo, and has led curatorial and academic programs internationally. Her PhD from MIT explores the

entanglement of art, infrastructure, and institutional absence in modern Egypt. Rifky's writing spans contemporary art, politics, and speculative fiction in relation to the Arab world. Her guiding principle is that every artwork is a school.

Walid Sadek is an artist and writer living in Beirut. He is a professor and currently chair of the department of Fine Arts and Art History at the American University of Beirut.

Rasha Salti is a Lebanese researcher, writer, producer, curator, and international film programmer based between Beirut and Berlin. She began curating postwar Beirut cultural events such as Image-Quest (1995), has led major film initiatives including *The Road to Damascus* (2006) and *Mapping Subjectivity* at MoMA (2010–12), and has served as a programmer at Abu Dhabi Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival. She has written extensively in outlets like the *London Review of Books* and *Afterall*. Since 2017, she has been commissioning editor for La Lucarne at *ArteFrance* and her exhibitions have shown at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Sursock Museum, Beirut; and Palais de Tokyo, Paris. She organized two editions of *Homeworks* at Ashkal Alwan and is an advisor for the 61st Venice Biennial to follow through on the curatorial vision of Koyo Kouoh.

Lucía Sanromán is chief curator of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo. Prior to this she was the director of the Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City

(2018–25). She served as director of visual arts for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2015–18) and was associate curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego from 2006–11. As an independent curator, Sanromán was awarded a 2013 Warhol Foundation exhibition grant for *Citizen Culture: Art and Architecture Shape Policy*, presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2014. Also that year, she curated the retrospective exhibition *inSite: Cuatro ensayos de lo público, sobre otro escenario* at Proyecto Siqueiros: La Tallera, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and was cocurator, with Candice Hopkins, Janet Dees, and Irene Hofmann, of SITE Santa Fe's signature Biennial *SITELines.2014: Unsettled Landscapes*.

Engy M. Sarhan is a writer and curator whose research explores independent art schools and para-institutional pedagogies in the Arab world. She cofounded K-oh-llective, a platform for art publishing and shared resources across the region, in 2020 and has been a curator at Les Complices*, a community-based art space rooted in activist and artistic interventions in Zürich, since 2022.

Aki Sasamoto works in sculpture, performance, video, and more. In her installation/performance works, Sasamoto moves and talks inside the careful arrangements of sculpturally altered objects, activating the bizarre emotions behind daily life. Her works appear in gallery spaces, theater spaces, and odd sites. Sasamoto is a professor and serves as the director of graduate studies in Sculpture at Yale.

As a curator, writer, and educator, **Noah Simblist** works on how contemporary artists address history, sovereignty, and the tensions between political forces and self-determination. He edited *Tania Bruguera: The Francis Effect* (Deep Vellum, 2022) and *Artist in Residence* (Publication Studio, 2021). His curatorial projects include *Commonwealth* at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (2020), *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* at Black Ground in Cali, Colombia (2022), and *Aissa Deebi: Exile Is Hard Work* at Birzeit University Museum in Palestine (2017). He is currently working on *Cracks in the Edifice: Niemeyer's Futuristic Fairground in Tripoli*, co-organized with Suzi Halajian and supported by the Graham Foundation. He is associate professor of art at VCU.

Jason Smith founded The Public School with Sean Dockray, Matteo Pasquinelli, and Caleb Waldorf in 2007 under Telic Arts Exchange in Los Angeles. The Public School was a non-accredited school with no curriculum. It expanded to other cities including New York, Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, Philadelphia, Durham, San Juan, and elsewhere.

Daniel Spaulding is an assistant professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is completing a book on the German artist Joseph Beuys, and his other writings have appeared in *October*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Historical Materialism*, and *Mute*, among other publications. With Daniel Marcus and Jennifer Nelson, he is a

founding editor of *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art* (selvajournal.org).

Sally Tallant is the president and executive director of the Queens Museum, New York. She was previously the director of Liverpool Biennial from 2011–19. From 2001–11 she was head of programs at the Serpentine Gallery, London, where she was responsible for the development and delivery of an integrated program of exhibitions, architecture, education, and public programs. She has curated exhibitions in galleries, museums, public spaces, and non-arts contexts. She is a regular contributor to conferences nationally and internationally. In 2018 she was awarded an OBE for services to the Arts in the Queen's Birthday Honors List.

Pelin Tan is a sociologist and art historian based in Mardin, Turkey and the head of the film department in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Batman University. She was the 2019–20 Keith Haring Fellow in Art and Activism at Bard College and is the cocurator of the project *Urgent Pedagogies* at IASPIS, Stockholm.

Astra Taylor is a writer, filmmaker, and organizer. She is the director of numerous documentaries and her books include *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart*, *Democracy May Not Exist but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*, and the American Book Award-winning *The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*. Her most recent book is *Solidarity: The Past, Present, and Future of a World-Changing Idea*, coauthored with Leah Hunt-Hendrix. She was the 2023 CBC Massey Lecturer and

she cofounded the Debt Collective.

Nato Thompson is an author, curator, and what he describes as “cultural infrastructure builder.” He has worked as artistic director at Philadelphia Contemporary, Creative Time, and MASS MoCA. He is the founder of The Alternative Art School, an online art school matching established, top-tier artists with working artists around the globe.

Christine Tohmé is a Lebanese curator and the founding director of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts. Since its founding in 1993, Ashkal Alwan has been committed to contemporary artistic practice, research, and education. In 2016–18, Tohmé curated the 18th Istanbul Biennial and the Sharjah Biennial 13, *Tamawuj*. Tohmé is also on the boards of Marsa, a sexual-health center for at-risk youth and marginalized communities in Beirut; *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*; Haven for Artists, a Beirut-based artist collective; and the International Biennial Association, a platform for contemporary art institutional knowledge production and exchange.

Adam Tooze is the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Shutdown: How COVID Shook the World's Economy* (Allen Lane, 2021).

Jalal Toufic is the author of, among other books, *What Was I Thinking?* (e-flux journal/Sternberg Press, 2017); *The Dancer's Two Bodies* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2015); and *Forthcoming* (2nd ed., e-flux journal/Sternberg Press, 2014). He participated in

the Sharjah Biennials 6, 10, and 11; the 9th Shanghai Biennale; *Six Lines of Flight: Shifting Geographies in Contemporary Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *A History: Art, Architecture, and Design, from the 1980s Until Today*, Centre Pompidou, Paris; *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*, MoMA PSi, New York; and *Home Beirut, Sounding the Neighbors*, MAXXI, Rome. He was the director of the School of Visual Arts at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (Alba) from September 2015 to August 2018. He is currently professor of film studies at the American University in Cairo.

Rodrigo Valenzuela is a Los Angeles-based artist working in photography, video, painting, and installation. Using autobiographical threads to inform larger, universal fields of experience, his work constructs narratives, scenes, and stories that point to the tensions found between the individual and communities. Much of Valenzuela's work deals with the experience of undocumented immigrants and laborers. At UCLA, Valenzuela teaches graduate and undergraduate students in photography.

Anuradha Vikram is a writer, curator, and educator based in Los Angeles. They work with process-based, public, and participatory art forms, with a focus on transcultural approaches to technology, social engagement, and the body. In 2024, they were a cocurator, with Victoria Vesna, of the Getty Pacific Standard Time: Art and Science Initiative exhibition *Atmosphere of Sound: Sonic Art in Times of Climate Disruption* and a cocurator, with Jackie Im, of the 2024 Portland Biennial at

Oregon Contemporary. They were faculty in the UCLA Department of Art and from 2016–20 and were a member of the board of directors of the College Art Association.

Thiago Gil Virava is a postdoctoral fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana—Max Planck Institut für Kunstgeschichte. His academic career has focused mainly on the history of modern art and art criticism in Brazil during the first half of the twentieth century. Among the subjects of his research are the writings on art by Oswald de Andrade, the Monumento às Bandeiras at the Ibirapuera Park in São Paulo, and the history of the São Paulo Biennial. Between 2013 and 2024, he worked as a researcher and manager of the education department at the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.

Caleb Waldorf is an artist living in Berlin. Collaborating with writers, artists, curators, educators, designers, and software engineers, he has initiated and helped develop publishing frameworks, educational platforms, and online archives. The spaces and systems he works on are designed to foster collaboration and reconsider how we approach learning, publishing, and collective engagement.

Dominic Willsdon is executive director of the International Documentary Association. Previously, he was executive director of the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, curator of education and public practice at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a pedagogical curator of the 9th Mercosul Biennial, a cocurator of the 9th

Liverpool Biennial, and curator of public programs at Tate Modern. His coedited books include *The Life and Death of Images* (2008), *Public Intimacy* (2014), *Public Servants* (2016), and *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here* (2019).

Caroline Woolard, an artist and organizer, moved to New York City in 2002 to attend Cooper Union, the only tuition-free art school in the United States. Since then, her artistic work has been subsidized by day jobs as a graphic designer, teacher, and nonprofit administrator, and has been supported by low overhead due to labor-intensive collective living situations. After cofounding and coorganizing resource-sharing networks OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop for five years, Woolard is now a core member of BFAMFAPhD and NYCTBD, focusing on the impact of debt and rent on artists in New York, and options for affordable space stewardship for all New Yorkers.

Andrew Paul Woolbright is an artist and critic living in Brooklyn and is an MFA graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. In addition to exhibiting, he is editor-at-large at the *Brooklyn Rail* and director of the gallery Below Grand on the Lower East Side. Woolbright was previously a resident at the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program. In 2024, he received the Irving Sandler Prize, awarded to an artist who builds community as part of their artistic practice. He currently teaches at Pratt Institute and The School of Visual Arts in New York.

Linda Xheza writes on photography and immigration at the Amsterdam

School of Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam.

Living and working between London and Shanghai, **Gary Zhexi Zhang** is a visual artist and writer whose work explores systemic connections between cosmology, technology, and the economy. He operates individually or collaboratively with organizations using a variety of media, including installation, film, performance, research reports, and software. In 2024 he exhibited in the 9th Asian Art Biennial, Taichung and at the Power Station of Art, Shanghai and EPFL Pavilions, Lausanne. He also toured *Dead Cat Bounce*, an opera cocreated with Waste Paper Opera, across the United Kingdom. He is currently working on a book about emerging technocultures in a multipolar world.

The story of this book began in summer 2021, when Dominic Willsdon, then the executive director of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at Virginia Commonwealth University, asked me to join him and Sarah Rifky on a new triennial with a focus on education. Rifky had just been hired as the senior curator at the ICA and soon the three of us were working together on planning this huge project, which was to include an exhibition, public projects in the city of Richmond, a symposium, and a publication. As they both indicate in their contributions here, their experiences in innovative art & education practices are both deep and wide and they brought that to bear on this project. We worked together until both of them left the ICA in December 2023. Unfortunately, this meant that the exhibitions, and almost all related programming, were cancelled. I am grateful for this invaluable and collaborative exchange of ideas with Sarah and Dominic and am glad that they were able to contribute to this publication.

The Teiger Foundation had generously supported the curatorial research for this project and our proposal was to host an online convening in the summer of 2023, followed by an in-person summit that fall. For the online component we brought together a diverse group of artists, curators, academics, and cultural workers: Inés Dussel, Malik Gaines, Gris García, Tom Holert, Adelita

Husni-Bey, Naima J. Keith, Christian Nyampeta, Eriola Pira, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, and Pelin Tan, along with me, Rifky, and Willsdon as moderators. This group helped us think through the most pressing issues in art & education today in a variety of contexts.

Many people from the ICA helped organize the online convening including Yomna Osman, who worked on curatorial support, and Hala Al-Tinawi, who helped with administrative support. Over the course of the project, the whole team worked on a series of workshops to collectively envision what this triennial might look like at the ICA and in Richmond. I am thankful to Traci Garland for administrative support regarding this book and to Jessica Bell Brown, who joined the ICA in fall 2024 as its new executive director and enthusiastically supported this publication.

Following the departure of Willsdon and Rifky from the ICA, and in consultation with the acting director of the ICA, Chase Westfall, we went back to Teiger Foundation in early 2024 to propose that we use the remainder of our funding for a book that would draw on the research and subject matter of the triennial and they kindly agreed. I am grateful to Larissa Harris and the team at the Teiger Foundation for supporting this transition and the overall project.

I am grateful to Inventory Press for their expert stewardship of the editorial, design, production, and distribution of this book. Special thanks to Adam Michaels, Shannon Harvey, and Zoe Kauder Nalebuff. Thanks to Brian Sholis for his expert copy editing and proofing. Thanks also to Gabby Blanks and Sanija Dowden, VCU students who worked as research assistants for the book.

I am grateful for the support of Beatriz E. Balanta, Cara Benedetto, Gavin Kroeber, and Robert M. Ochshorn, who acted as readers for my writing related to this project, and to Nicole Killian for feedback.

In the spirit of collaboration and participation that marks much of the work described here, Engy M. Sarhan provided editorial feedback for Sarah Rifky's essay and Julian Myers-Szupinska coauthored the essay contributed by Dominic Willsdon.

I am grateful to the editorial advisors Pablo Helguera, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Pelin Tan, Dominic Willsdon, and all of the contributors. Each contribution has a story, but I want to thank Alex Klein in particular for her enthusiasm and for reconvening the group that collaborated on RAW Académie at ICA in Philadelphia. I also want to acknowledge the profound loss in May 2025 of Koyo Kouoh, the founder of RAW in Dakar, whose work was so influential and impactful in the field of art & education.

I was lucky to have traveled for other projects and intersected with a number of the people and organizations in these pages—community and networks of connection helped build the texts gathered here. A few examples will have to suffice. In São Paulo, I met Ana Roman at Pivô, who helped connect me with Thiago Gil de Oliveira Virava, who was director of education at the São Paulo Biennial for many years. I also met Helmut Batista in

Rio de Janeiro at Capacete when I brought students to Brazil. When I worked on the exhibition *Commonwealth* at the ICA in 2019–20, I met Pablo Guardiola at Beta—Local in Puerto Rico and he mentioned that lugar a dudas was one of his inspirations. I was lucky to visit Sally Mizrahi in Cali, Colombia, at lugar a dudas, in addition to Beatriz E. Balanta at Black Ground in the same city. When I was at the Sharjah Art Foundation March Meeting in 2023, I met Judith Greer, who generously connected me with Noora Al Mualla. In Beirut, I met Christine Tohmé at Ashkal Alwan's new building, and we talked about the evolution of education for that organization. Many other recommendations and connections were made by people such as Marilyn Boror, Sofía Olascoaga, Tan, Willsdon, Alia Farid, Stephanie Smith, Muñoz, Joseph del Pesco, and Prem Krishnamurthy.

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