

Course Corrections

I APPRECIATED THE ROUNDTABLE “Class Dismissed” [*Artforum*, October 2015], as I share many of the concerns of the participants about the state of universities and art schools today, having experience with these pressing issues from teaching in three countries (the US, the UK, and Canada), in public and private universities. However, some of the claims about USC Roski School of Art and Design’s MFA program and the University of Southern California are incorrect.

Having just arrived at Roski last summer (2014) as vice dean of critical studies, I found myself in the middle of this storm. While I was not at Roski when the changes to the MFA were initiated, it became clear that the impetus to revise the program and its funding structure came from an external review (by well-known arts educators), followed by two years of extensive internal faculty discussions highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in the program. I can say that the MFA is alive and well; it has not been “dismantled.” The changes we have collectively made to the MFA and MA (Curatorial Practices) programs, which are being implemented this year, are extremely positive and driven largely by curricular, intellectual, and pedagogical concerns. We have even been supported by USC in making some major full-time hires to support the MFA and other programs—most notably, we have hired Nao Bustamante, a radical queer feminist performance and multimedia artist, in a tenured position as vice dean of art.

Before I outline some of those modifications, let me note briefly that the change in the funding structure, as far as I understand, was necessary because USC regards teaching assistantships highly and discourages them from being treated as cash scholarships, given that not every student will have, want, or need the training and skills involved. In the old MFA model, TAs were being placed, largely untrained (as Frances Stark points out), in undergraduate classrooms, sometimes with negative results. Also, our MA students were paying almost full tuition, so the situation was not balanced. We have now increased funding overall to retain funding for the MFA students while instituting a model of competitive TA-ships, research assistantships (as Charlie White noted, this borrows from a model of how science grad students are supported), and cash scholarships to fund as fairly and fully as possible the entire MA and MFA cohort. (Also worth noting: The seven MFA students who left were offered full support [TA-ships] for their second year; we hope they will return, and USC has let them know that the door remains open to them.)

There are other misstatements by participants in the roundtable—at USC, about 40 percent (not 80 percent) of teachers are part-time (and it should be noted that in the professional schools this is sometimes by choice, as they have active careers in their fields). USC has a uniquely large number of professional arts schools—six—and I have found that the campus strongly supports arts initiatives,

with no interference in content (the Visions and Voices program, for example, is typical: I am bringing in Ron Athey, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Ulay, Harry Gamboa Jr., Heather Cassils, Narcissister, and other luminaries under this program in January, with full funding from USC). I have checked also on the claims about graduate-student debt at USC—apparently the debt is typical; the total dollar sum is high only because USC is a big university with a lot of graduate students (including a large number going into high-paying engineering jobs). Students never get enough funding—ideally, education should be free. However, given the difficult situation in public universities in the US, the UK, and Canada, which in my experience often offer little or no funding for arts and humanities graduate students (their tuition is usually lower for residents, but it is often commensurate with USC’s for those considered nonresidents), it feels to me that USC is doing a decent job. (It’s worth noting that at USC undergraduate admissions are need-blind.)

It is because I agree with the overall impulse to lower student debt, and that a university should support students intellectually, creatively, and financially to the best of its ability, that I feel strongly that the inaccurate claims about Roski and USC should be corrected.

More interesting to me than the financial model are the changes we have implemented in the graduate curriculum. The old Roski MFA model, as Stark points out, was not radically experimental. In the revised curriculum, the MFA remains a studio-based program, with extensive hours of studio and group-critique courses, taught by a rotating core of esteemed mentors (which at any one time might include White and Roski’s other excellent studio faculty). These are now complemented by history and theory courses, for which I am responsible. The latter seminars, which the students take in tandem with MA students (and other graduate students from USC’s diverse programs in the arts and humanities) for a richer classroom experience, are now more rigorous. We have, in fact, instituted exactly the kind of training both Stark and Helen Molesworth rightly note is important, not only assigning theory but teaching it within a historical framework; research, writing, and critical-thinking skills are fully developed.

There are now two major critical-studies core courses. The first is a seminar called “Pedagogy and Praxis,” which sketches a history of teaching art (with case studies on important institutional moments such as the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College—schools, like Roski, with fully integrated art and design practices) and develops teaching skills, which, as Stark notes, was a factor absent in the old program. This class was taught for the first time last summer, and it went brilliantly.

The second major core course is a seminar titled “History and Theory of Art and Exhibitions,” juxtaposing deep historical material with contemporary examples of



how the artist is positioned in relation to the university, collector/collection, art market, museum, and gallery. I am currently teaching this course, and we are going deep into these issues, critically examining these relationships and sketching their historical development.

In addition to these seminars, which strive to merge questions of practice (artmaking and curating) with historical and theoretical inquiry, other critical-studies courses include our continued offering of the lecture series, which this year includes art-world luminaries Faith Wilding, Gary Indiana, Hamza Walker, Mary Kelly, Edgar Arceneaux, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Mark Greenfield (and which is now complemented both semesters by an accompanying seminar to allow for more dialogue). We also offer numerous opportunities for fieldwork, including two seminars on global art, emphasizing in each seminar a key area of non-Euro-American art production in the contemporary period through the lens of postcolonial theory and offering an opportunity for local, national, or international travel to major art sites.

The goal of the critical-studies portion of the MFA and MA curriculum is straightforward: I believe and hope that studying the past and global contemporary art in relation to critical theory and philosophy—for example, understanding that the structures and institutions of Western art as we know them are deeply embedded in the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and, yes, capitalism—will give emerging artists and curators alike a greater grasp of how to position themselves intelligently and in an empowered way in relation to the social sphere, the structures of capital, and institutions.

The current disposition of the Roski graduate programs is oriented toward exactly the kinds of critical thinking and rigorous practice that my colleagues rightly demand in their comments during the roundtable.

—Amelia Jones, Los Angeles

Current and former USC Roski faculty and students respond:

The dismantling of USC Roski's MFA program is indefensible. The letter from Roski vice dean Amelia Jones—who arrived at USC only a year ago—represents the isolated

view of the school's administration, which attempts to hide the fact that Dean Erica Muhl's actions led to the plummeting of the MFA student cohort from sixteen students to one, the removal of the program's highly regarded MFA core faculty structure, and the denial of funding commitments made in 2014 to the former MFA class of 2016 as part of their acceptance packages. These indefensible actions have left the formerly vital, decade-old MFA program literally empty, with fifteen studios devoid of artists, no core faculty (verified by the Roski MFA website), no functioning group-critique class, and no benchmark evaluations of its sole current MFA student, contrary to Jones's assertions.

To correct Jones's major claim: The former MFA class of 2016 candidates were never offered their promised second-year teaching assistantships in May, but rather were told in April that they would need to reapply for their second-year TA-ship funding. One can view the actual documents from the Roski administration confirming these facts on the "MFA NO MFA Fact Sheet" (downloadable at mfanomfa.tumblr.com), which has been publicly available since May. In order to enact this breach, Muhl and Jones had taken de facto control of the MFA program (after A. L. Steiner stepped down as MFA director in December 2014) in order to move a portion of the 2015–16 MFA TA-ships to Jones's MA Curatorial Practices students—none of whom were recruited with the promise of TA funding. This act defied both the MFA students' first-year final evaluations and the faculty's MFA-candidacy process. To assert that this fraudulent reassignment of funding was an act of "balance" is austerity rhetoric disguised as advocacy. The other drastic alterations enacted by Muhl were the removal of the MFA core of committed fine arts faculty and the establishment of a revised curriculum, of which Jones was the primary overseer. The MFA students' permanent withdrawal from USC in May was due to the rescission of their faculty, curriculum, and, finally, funding offers, not the school's impending funding changes, which were to be implemented for the classes incoming after them.

Although Jones purports that artmaking and curating are merged practices, the field of fine arts is fundamentally different from curatorial studies and art history. Studio-based fine arts is not Jones's field of expertise, practice, or study, and she has failed to comprehend the educational needs of the MFA students. The newly implemented courses she describes fully undermine the MFA program's history of an artist-driven curriculum. Further, these new courses were so unpopular with the eight graduating MFA students this past spring that the students cited the curricular mismatch in their petition calling for Muhl's removal. Jones directly participated in the hurried erasure of the pedagogical and

structural characteristics of an MFA program in which she never taught, in the removal of faculty whom she never came to know, and in the failure to discern the priorities of students. So we view her as complicit in dismantling an MFA program that had an exceptional reputation, a highly recognized faculty, extremely successful alumni, and a sound curriculum created for artists receiving an MFA.

We stand by our assertion that 80 percent—not 40 percent, as Jones claims—of USC's faculty are in fact non-tenure-track, part-time, and contingent, a figure culled from USC's own assessment, "Facts and Figures: Faculty and Staff 2014–15" (available at about.usc.edu/facts). And when Jones repeats USC's rhetoric that graduate-student debt at USC is "typical," she leaves out the fact that the university is ranked fifth-highest in such debt nationwide (washingtonpost.com/news/get-there/wp/2015/07/09/these-20-schools-are-responsible-for-a-fifth-of-all-graduate-school-debt). She then adds the mystifying explanation that this is because "USC is a big university with a lot of graduate students," despite the fact that the number of administrators at USC has increased 306 percent since 1987, while the student body has increased only 66 percent, according to USC student newspaper the Daily Trojan (dailytrojan.com/2015/09/23/usc-sees-increase-in-administrative-staff).

Finally, Jones's letter completely ignores the findings of the 2012 University Committee on Academic Review report, which praised the strength and resilience of the MFA program and its faculty and alumni, and severely criticized the school's main weakness—its design area. The report stated: "In nine years, the MFA program has gone from an underfunded, badly-housed and amateurish program, to a tightly moderated, well supported, well-housed program dedicated to the nurturing of professional artists—people who are ready, upon graduation, to assume their roles in the outer world as practicing artists. The formation of a community of alumni who are continuing their studio practices in Los Angeles, and the success of several recent grads are evidence of the effectiveness of a seriousness of purpose, along with intensive teaching and mentoring that has been provided by MFA core faculty and visiting artists and critics." Conversely, the report stated of the design area: "However, the current design area of concentration does not have a strong point of view, and is saddled with teaching a large set of classes that are essentially focused on software training. Competency in software and coding is an essential part of any young designer's 'toolbox' but it is not enough to create a pedagogy. There is no one on the full-time NTT faculty that has a BFA or MFA degree in design, so the existing curricula feels very oriented to the trade of design practice, with an understandable

link to the entertainment industry practice." Under Muhl's direction, the underwhelming design program has expanded, while the renowned MFA program has been gutted, defying the external report's findings.

Jones's letter also makes incorrect or incomplete characterizations of the subsequent changes to the program: One senior hire was made, it is true, but three senior faculty were lost; she points positively to a handful of new speakers or panelists, whereas the prior MFA lecture series brought in nearly thirty visiting artists per year, each of whom engaged directly in the students' studios; and she highlights a new "global" study course when, in fact, this past summer—under her oversight—the MFA students' travel was canceled for the first time in seven years.

Jones's assertions are shocking, especially when one considers this destructive agenda in terms of its cost to those who consequently lost or left their jobs, education, and stability. Her letter is yet another effort on the part of the Roski administration to rewrite history, deny the truth, and silence all dissent, factual discourse, and criticism. It serves as an attempted erasure of all student, faculty, alumni, and community voices: those students who pleaded for adherence to the existing curriculum until their graduation; those who futilely petitioned both Roski's and USC's upper administrators to honor their legal and ethical commitments; those who boycotted their own graduation; the class who permanently withdrew from the MFA program in protest of the school's abuses; the seventy-three USC MFA alumni (spanning a decade of graduates) who called on the university to remedy this abusive and failed administration; the thirteen (and counting) staff, tenured, and nontenured faculty members who have left over the past year; and, finally, the 890 people calling for institutional accountability and the dean's removal due to her abuses, recklessness, and incompetence.

The Roski school's current administration has undermined the fabric of contemporary art practice through a consolidation of power and singularity of voice—emblemized by Jones's letter—in an attempt to erase the collaborative effort that created a leading studio-art graduate program. We will not be silenced as the administration compels a new order of power and power of order in the disrupted and denigrated USC fine arts program. □

—Former Roski faculty Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, Sharon Lockhart, Frances Stark, and A. L. Steiner; current Roski faculty member Jud Fine; former graduate-program coordinator Dwayne Moser; Roski MFA alumnus Amanda Ross-Ho; and former Roski MFA 2016 candidates Julie Beaufls, Sid M. Dueñas, George Egerton-Warburton, Edie Fake, Lauren Davis Fisher, Lee Relvas, and Ellen Schafer