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Class Dismissed

A ROUNDTABLE ON ART SCHOOL, USC, AND COOPER UNION

HELEN MOLESWORTH, MIKE ESSL, JORY RABINOVITZ, LEE RELVAS, AMANDA ROSS-HO, VICTORIA SOBEL, FRANCES STARK, A. L. STEINER, CHARLIE WHITE

INTRODUCTION BY SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER

University of Southern California Roski School of Art and Design MFA students and faculty at Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, 1970, Overton, NV, June 23, 2011. Photo: Sean Kennedy.

IN AN ERA when creative economies are leading the hypermonetization of every aspect of life, from attention and identity to privacy and time, it's not surprising that this country's most progressive models of art education are under attack. In fact, the liberal arts and humanities are besieged across the board, increasingly expected to justify their funding, even their very existence, in universities and beyond. We are witnessing a massive cultural shift when we see the corporatization of higher education—with its top-down power structures, bloated bureaucracies, "synergistic" partnerships with the private sector, relegation of faculty to contingent adjunct labor, and reliance on students as revenue streams—spiking tuition costs and sending student debt ballooning.

All this has come dramatically to a head this past year on both coasts, at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York and the University of Southern California's Roski School of Art and Design in Los Angeles. It is sadly predictable and all the more alarming that the ever-accelerating process of financialization should upend two of the most vital art schools in America, each of which has been based on the endangered premise of a tuition-free or fully funded education. While the specific circumstances and institutional histories make the nature of each crisis distinct, they both betray the wrenching cultural shifts produced by a head-on collision with the technocratic crusaders of contemporary capitalism.

Following its board of directors' decision to abandon Cooper Union's tuition-free mandate, which had stood for more than 150 years, the school's president and five trustees resigned amid an ongoing inquiry into the institution's finances by the New York State Attorney General. The grassroots Committee to Save Cooper Union has taken legal action to preserve the venerable institution's founding mission of free education, and to call attention to the fiscal mismanagement and lack of accountability on the part of the school's board of trustees. [*Eds. note: As this issue was going to press, the Attorney General announced that a settlement had been reached and that Cooper Union would work to eventually reinstate free tuition.*] At USC Roski, the drastic restructuring and reduction in funding for the school's renowned graduate program by a new dean's administration prompted high-profile, tenured faculty to resign in protest and the entire MFA class of 2016 to drop out en masse earlier this year, citing unacceptable changes to funding packages, curriculum, and faculty.

Debates over art education have a long history, of course. A groundbreaking and utopian model that remains relevant today is Black Mountain College, which nurtured cultural and pedagogical innovation at mid-century and which is the subject of a major exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, opening on October 10. *Artforum* invited the show's curator, **HELEN MOLESWORTH**, to join eight distinguished participants—from Cooper, faculty **MIKE ESSL** and alumni **JORY RABINOVITZ** and **VICTORIA SOBEL**; and from USC Roski, current or former faculty members **FRANCES STARK**, **CHARLIE WHITE**, and **A. L. STEINER**; alumna **AMANDA ROSS-HO**; and **LEE RELVAS**, one of the seven class-of-2016 students who dropped out—to discuss the current situation at both institutions and the histories, challenges, and continued promise of art school.

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer is a critic in Los Angeles.

Faculty parking markers at USC Roski School of Art and Design, Los Angeles, June 2, 2015. Photo: Peter Holzhauer.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: We've convened today to talk about the current crises at USC and Cooper, both of which are symptoms of larger problems facing the entire concept of art education in this country. And for many schools today, Black Mountain College remains a key model for art education after World War II.

In the face of this crisis, Black Mountain is even more relevant to the current situation than one might think: It was a program born of extraordinary optimism, but it was also born of dissent, born of a firing of tenured faculty, born of a group of teachers and students deciding that they needed to own the means of production themselves and create an institution in which there were no trustees or board of regents, so they could collectively control the college. It had an extraordinary efflorescence and was a wellspring of the American avant-garde; the curriculum at BMC influenced many of the practices that define contemporary studio and liberal-arts programs—group critiques, collaboration, interdisciplinarity. It also failed beautifully and wonderfully and spectacularly at its end: It was short-lived, running only from 1933 to 1957.

Which leads me to the most basic and perhaps the most unanswerable question: Why now? Why are extremely successful, renowned arts-education departments on both coasts under attack in the way that they are at Cooper and USC? Are they—and Black Mountain—anomalies, experiments that could never last? Or are they victims of some of the nastiest tactics of our neoliberal new economy?

CHARLIE WHITE: I believe that the small group of faculty who transformed the graduate program at USC understood it as a new direction, a new scope and form, for an MFA studio program. But looking at it today, what becomes clear is that, yes, it was actually just a brief experiment by a handful of artists attempting to reinterpret an underwhelming graduate platform.

FRANCES STARK: I don't really see what we were doing as radically experimental. It was an experiment within USC, but we—a group including Charlie, David Bunn, Sharon Lockhart, and Jud Fine, who brought me and Andrea Zittel on board there—were functioning in a way that was similar to the models around us, namely, the broad spectrum of MFA programs for which LA is well known.

CHARLIE WHITE: Yes—what became an experiment was not the pedagogical model, but our goal of having sixteen fully funded students, establishing a majority female core faculty, and offering a faculty-to-student ratio of 1:3. It was this structure, both financial and cultural, that was carving out new territory and creating a new experience for our students.

FRANCES STARK: And we had a core faculty structure, as we called it, that came about in a very organic way. Because we had intellectual intimacy and an understanding and respect for our shared goals, we were actually able to govern ourselves and create conditions that allowed the students to thrive. That is what the university administrators became hostile toward.

A. L. STEINER: The program collapsed under the current administration's dismissal of that vision and that autonomy. The seven students left the program when the dean made the fateful decision to rescind their funding and curricular offers. By the end of the spring semester, Roski's administration sent the MFA program into free fall, with no director, no core faculty, and significant changes to the coursework and mission—curricular dysfunction.

JORY RABINOVITZ: That's what's so shocking about Cooper. What was taken away from the school was its very own founding charter: free education.

Peter Cooper had achieved incredible upward mobility as an illiterate industrialist. Not having had a formal education himself, he developed the idea of a school that would be free to all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or sex. And this was during the time of slavery, the verge of the Civil War. He fought for the rights of women, African Americans, Native Americans, the labor movement, but I think it's important to point out that he was also fixated on monetary policy and economic regulation, with the purpose of fending off oligarchy and ensuring that the rich couldn't manipulate markets. He knew that economic freedoms would be exploited to strip human freedoms. This is why it's so critical to understand that the "free" in his vision of free education meant both *gratis* and *liber*. Free education affords a type of autonomy, not only financial but psychological. It allows pedagogy from a debtless standpoint. This was vital to how I made art and learned about art at Cooper, and it's stayed embedded in my practice and in how I engage the market.

So after this founding charter was eviscerated and the new $20,400 tuition was marketed as 50 percent off "normal" tuition, it became hard not to believe that something more insidious than incompetence or ignorance had seeped into Cooper Union, something that Cooper himself had fought against his whole life.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: But why should an education at this level be free?

CHARLIE WHITE: Well, Cooper Union and our small graduate program have one important trait in common: selectivity. Acceptance to Cooper Union is very difficult, because the school can set the bar extremely high for its incoming class due to its quality and funding, and at USC, when we were operating in full form, we were selecting just eight incoming students from a pool of more than four hundred applicants. That level of selectivity is the beginning of a faculty's relationships with their students—students that, in both of these cases, were not needed for revenue.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: So you're saying that a revenue-free situation actually protects meritocracy.

CHARLIE WHITE: Absolutely.

MIKE ESSL: One feeling that I think we all shared at Cooper Union was that when you're in the room in a class of students, you knew why everybody else was there. Nobody was being forced to be there. No one was paying to be there. Everybody was showing up to learn, to be a citizen in the class. The reason I went to Cooper Union wasn't because it was free. It was because it was free for everyone. We were all in it together.

VICTORIA SOBEL: I started attending Cooper in 2008, right before the market crash. When I was applying to colleges, I needed to land a scholarship to attend. And Cooper wasn't actually the cheapest option. Going to Cooper was a choice I made to take on debt, to engage with a community that had a civic-minded mission for pedagogy based on the idea of "free," not in monetary terms, but "free" as in "liberatory" and even "oppositional." Having to pay to live in the city, having to pay the associated fees, I now have a lot of student debt, with no prospects of breaking even and no foreseeable way to reengage with my art practice.

Prior to the 1990s, there was no dollar affiliation to the scholarship. There was no talk of the tuition in terms of a gift. But in the '90s, something happened: The school realized it could benefit from state tuition assistance grants by assigning a dollar amount—in essence, charging students and then immediately applying a full scholarship.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: How did you decide at USC that the MFA would be fully funded? Was that part of your revamping of the program, or was that already in place?

CHARLIE WHITE: It was the goal of the core faculty, yes; however, our funding model was the result of the previous deans of the school being very supportive of its MFA, and the university being very supportive of terminal-degree programs. We were always a small program with decent funding, but starting around 2005, when new faculty came on board and the program was reinvigorated by a new vision, our applicant pool began to grow significantly; our yield then began to increase, our alumni began to gain national attention, and the program became more recognized. As a result, we were able to gradually, year by year, increase our funding support both from within the school and from the greater university, while still maintaining autonomy as a faculty.

By 2011, the school had the means to provide two years of teaching assistantships for each incoming student. What this meant was that in a relatively short period, with the support of our deans and the university, we had achieved an MFA program that was fully funded.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Which is interesting because you were channeling, or taking advantage of, some of the same incentives and structures that then brought about the demise of the program.

CHARLIE WHITE: I think we were trying to borrow from the model of how the university regarded and supported the sciences, and their terminal-degree programs.

A. L. STEINER: It was an investment. Not a long-term investment like Cooper Union, but it'd been a decade-long investment in a program that had vision and rigor. It was implemented and administered by a group of faculty that continued to change and grow, and the program was stable, intimate, exemplary. The new Roski administration acted recklessly. Their actions yielded the demise of the program quicker than anyone could have imagined or predicted.

MIKE ESSL: When I'm in the classroom, I don't teach the marketplace. But the new mantra is that the student is a customer. And that concept simply never existed at Cooper Union before, that the student is the customer, and the teacher is the service provider. That's what we risk when the students start paying.

FRANCES STARK: The student-as-customer model is a huge thing at USC. But I think we have to make a distinction between teaching the marketplace and preparing students for the workforce. One of the things about the cozy ivory tower of art school is that you can hide from—or you can stay mystified by—the market. You can remain mystified by it because we're not teaching it.

You know, I'm the first person in my whole family ever to graduate from college. I chose to go to Art Center [College of Design in Pasadena] because I wanted to study with Mike Kelley and Stephen Prina, not because I was thinking about jobs or a salary after graduation. I didn't know anything about money. And they were like, "Oh, here, sign these papers, la-la-la." Then you're $80,000 in debt.

I think that it would actually behoove everyone to teach the marketplace. But when I first started teaching, I was also under the impression that an MFA was a teaching degree. And one of the things that's so interesting about the USC situation is that, as Charlie mentioned, what made it free for these students was the opportunity to be a teaching assistant. But the administrators were unable to understand that more was required than simply assigning TA-ships, and seemed uninterested in developing these students as teachers. This is what they do at UCLA, for instance, where you really *do* learn how to teach. You can produce or perform pedagogical research. You actually learn to do the job you've been assigned to perform. And a wonderful, strong, reputable grad program is going to trickle down to the whole university. But USC did not allow for that.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Well, I wonder. One of the things that we're broaching implicitly is the shift from going to art school for going-to-art-school's sake, and going to art school in a landscape in which the roles of the artist and the curator and the whole situation of the "art world" have become demonstrably professionalized. And Frances, in a way, you're painting the more benign version of professionalization:

The MFA is a teaching degree and therefore we must teach our students how to go out and be teachers, and the TA-ship is the testing ground. But there is another, darker side of professionalization: For younger people, college is a debt-producing engine before they even begin learning a profession.

USC Roski School of Art and Design MFA class of 2015, LAXART, Los Angeles, CA, June 19, 2015. Photo: John Tain.

LEE RELVAS: I'm one of the seven MFA students who just dropped out from USC. We dropped out collectively to protest the school's reneging on funding and curricular promises made to us, because that funding model and pedagogical model were clearly no longer considered valuable under the new dean's leadership. But we also wanted to protest publicly the economics of higher education: namely, the normalization of massive student debt.

We range in age from twenty-seven to forty-one years old. So we actually did know what we were getting into as far as the debt that we thought we were going to be taking on, as well as the lack of teaching opportunities, and if we were so lucky to get a teaching job, how little most of those teaching jobs paid.

But we still wanted two years of time and space to be artists and thinkers and to be in close conversation with each other. And outside these flawed institutions, there is little material and cultural support for that.

CHARLIE WHITE: We asked our students to commit two years of their lives to the program. We provided studios, and the TA-ships provided tuition remission and a small stipend, but we didn't pay their rent, we didn't buy their food, so most of them needed to figure out some way to make ends meet. But the burden was a fraction of what schools can cost, and all of the students were on as equal terms as possible.

During their time in the program, we asked them not to work so they could focus on their studio practice, and we also asked for them not to show. We didn't want them to prematurely enter an art world that's become too eager to collect young artists, and too impatient to allow their work to take its final form. We wanted to open up a space unlike the outside world; we wanted to offer intellectual access, unparalleled dialogue, generous time, and serious community.

What we found was that by doing this, our graduates were better equipped to establish their own studios, continue their practices, engage the art world, teach, test, take risks, on more stable terms than most of their peers at other programs.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Well, there are in fact very few funded MFA programs, period. Most MFA students are paying. So it's an incredible privilege to go to a place where you get a fellowship. And the question becomes, on the one hand, why is that the exception? But on the other hand, if someone has to pay to get their accounting degree or to go to trade school, why shouldn't artists have to pay as well?

FRANCES STARK: That, of course, is the very question that comes up in a boardroom, when people like us aren't sitting in that boardroom. And it should remind us of the need to articulate extremely clearly what is at stake in a "free education." Right? That it may be a value we take for granted, that we haven't articulated strongly enough. What is at stake is the value of what we are offering. How do we manage under a technocratic ideology that does not support anything beyond that which leads directly to earning a degree, or anything that could lead to a way of thinking that Black Mountain represents—to thinking differently, and not in the Apple sense? [*Laughter.*]

A. L. STEINER: What is the value of something that can't necessarily be professionalized? What does arts education in higher ed mean? Is an arts program a fine arts program, a commercial arts program, or a fusion of those things? And tech, art, design—where do the humanities exist within those structures?

The USC MFA program never failed. It had an amazing trajectory that culminated with a truly incredible group of multidisciplinary students. But we weren't able to stop Roski's new administration from dismantling the MFA program, which the university had heavily invested in for over a decade. That's where it fell off the cliff: with new leadership at Roski who no longer saw, understood, or cared for or about the program's value and core components.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: In New York, do you have a similar sense that the faculty and the students at Cooper were unable to articulate the value of free tuition to the board?

MIKE ESSL: I think we did articulate it but we weren't heard, and it was all the more disturbing to me because of my own personal understanding of that value. My dad is a mechanic and my mom is a bookkeeper. They didn't go to college and they didn't save for college, and me going to college was just never on their radar. And Cooper Union gave me permission to go to art school. Without that freedom, without being able to tell my parents essentially to fuck off, I don't know where I would be now. [*Laughter.*]

And what that does for, say, a lower-middle-class student, that permission, the way it lowers the risk of art

school and allows you to even conceive of going, is something that the board of trustees did not care about at all.

We would hear about how the cost of teaching artists is too expensive and that when artists graduate they don't donate, and there was really no consideration of the artist as a person in the world at all. And so for those people to be the board members of a school like Cooper Union, I would argue, is criminal. They just refused to hear any arguments.

JORY RABINOVITZ: There was no dialogue, no transparency. There was never any mention of charging tuition while I was at Cooper. I started when the demolition of the Abram S. Hewitt Memorial art building, and the construction of the new Thom Mayne–designed academic center, 41 Cooper Square, in its place, was just beginning. The three-year transition phase completely displaced the art school and literally split it in two, sending half of the classes and studios to a rented building in Long Island City. Since the art school donated the least and protested the most, it really felt like we were being singled out to receive this weird form of punishment or austerity measure. Many of the school's questionable financial decisions that are currently under investigation happened at the very same time. So when I look at the new building, it's hard not to see a big perforated smoke screen.

MIKE ESSL: They showed up at the table already having decided that our model was old-fashioned and could no longer be supported. Which is why we have been saying all along that it's a cultural problem, not an economic one.

AMANDA ROSS-HO: That extends to postgraduates as well. I was thinking about what you said about preparing for the marketplace and about professional practice and whatever that is. I don't know, but I know that one of the main experiences that I have as a full-time artist is defending the value of what I do. That's pretty much all I do [*laughter*]—figure out how to give it value and justify its value.

So as Mike says, it is a cultural issue, in the sense that that is the broader environment that artists go into. By that same token, though, it could be prepared for in some way.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Well, it strikes me that there is an analogy between Mike saying that it's a cultural problem, not a fiscal problem, and the days of AIDS activism, when one of the biggest tasks was rhetorical: to insist that it was the inactivity of the government that created the AIDS crisis. That it wasn't, in fact, a medical crisis, but a political one.

So I wonder what the language is that allows us now to insist that this is a cultural problem, not a fiscal one?

FRANCES STARK: At USC, the broader cultural question of the value of the field of art is reflected in the very name of the school. Because one of the great divisions in the USC Roski situation is between design and fine art. And we didn't have tenured faculty in design, but we did have money coming in for that field.

All that scholarship, all that commitment to art, to studying and learning and understanding, should be under one umbrella—graduate and undergraduate. Instead, we had an administration with zero understanding of the broader situation or even what the culture industry actually is. We got hijacked by an administration with a mission to make the art school into a conduit for Silicon Beach.

And meanwhile, there is still no foundation course to orient students within the contemporary culture industry. Despite the fact that an external review committee gave harsh warnings about the state of Roski's ad hoc, uncritical, under-staffed design area, the Roski School of Fine Arts became the Roski School of Art and Design.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: So is part of what is happening here an opposition, stated or not, to critical thinking? And therefore one of the distinctions between what it might mean to go to art school and what it might mean to become a professional animator or go into a design program is that what we value is precisely art school's open-endedness, whereas the design degree has as its ideational end point a position in the advertising or film industry?

FRANCES STARK: The value of artistic research needs to be defined. Our field cannot survive without it at this point.

A. L. STEINER: And that's what was taken away. At the end of the program, the MFA students were essentially shut out of undergraduate fine arts TA-ships, so they could not have an influence on or a dialogue with the students. The ability to define our field, to define the value of our research and work, was dismissed—because the value of the field itself was dismissed.

Before I stepped down as director of the program last December, after one and a half years, it was clear that the program was still technically viable. The university's administrators had outlined a five-year transitional funding plan; everything was in place to allow the program to continue. But after I stepped down, the new dean fast-tracked the dismantlement of the program, removing the MFA core faculty and, in a final dramatic move, taking away the students' funding. This was premature ejaculation and jumping the gun, all at once.

Remember that this dismantlement took place *after* the university announced that it had raised almost $4 billion. The decisions made by Roski's administrators were not based on reason or logic or an investment in learning. Those decisions are ideological. They're cultural. They're not financial. And this provoked deeper questions about the viability, even survival, of student and faculty voices in the fine arts within academia.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: But that is also evidence of a split—to tie Cooper and USC together again—between administration and faculty. There is a corporatization of the academy across the country in which the administration of the academy and the faculty are now increasingly at odds. There is no longer the idea that faculty is involved in the institution's leadership, in self-governance, basically.

A. L. STEINER: Eighty percent of USC's faculty is now adjunct and contingent. This is part of an ideology of austerity being embraced at the school, even though its undergraduate program ranks sixteenth in tuition nationwide and the university is one of twenty schools nationwide responsible for one-fifth of the country's graduate-school student debt. The dean's thinking came down to a gamble—that the graduate

faculty's interactions, and the program's funding and curricular promises, were unnecessary. There's a bigger agenda in play, and it's intertwined with the value and significance of an arts education in a technocratic regime, in a world where the nonprofit sector exists as a manifestation of the private sector.

CHARLIE WHITE: In fairness, we were initially presented with alternate long-term models, models such as an increase of students from sixteen to thirty-two, or a decrease of committed faculty from five to two. These shifts would have made us like so many other graduate programs that have raised their number of students and decreased their number of committed faculty to offset costs. However, these ideas were never fully rolled out; instead, things went a very different direction and we are where we are now.

FRANCES STARK: But you have to consider that in context. I was on the search committee for the new dean in the spring of 2013, and the problem of financial sustainability was not explicitly on the table when we were interviewing candidates. The entire process seemed perfunctory: It became clear that the interim dean was the internal candidate they wanted, and who, it was later disclosed, was somehow attached to the $70 million gift from Jimmy Iovine and Dr. Dre to endow a new school of "Art, Technology and the Business of Innovation" at USC. Erica Muhl, who became dean, has zero background in contemporary fine art, design, or art history. She is not conversant with these fields at all. I asked her, "What is your vision for the school?" And she responded, "To be number one." No joke. OK? She told the graduate students: "The future of art is Mark Zuckerberg." This is not a real candidate. This was a complete coup.

A. L. STEINER: How much does the cultural shift that we're talking about—requiring the justification of the value of an arts education or the humanities—have to do with the tech and finance sloganeering of creativity, from "Think different" and "disruption" to the experience economy?

HELEN MOLESWORTH: And this is endemic now both at private institutions and in the public university system—in which the humanities have come under fire across the board. Ironically, we in the humanities have taken to justifying some of what we do in the language of the sciences and of scientific research, as Charlie alluded to earlier—which is a defensive posture that may actually undermine us in the end. The idea of free research in an artist's studio and free research in a scientific lab are, in fact, really different forms of knowledge production and really different forms of aesthetic and intellectual activity.

But it can't be, probably, that we are only on the side of the good and they are only on the side of the bad. That is too hypostatized. So have we not done a good enough job, collectively, about articulating what our field is, what the values of art are? I actually think we've engaged in—I'll own it—some self-marginalization. We've removed ourselves from the fabric of daily life. We've got to cop to something.

Banner hung by Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art students occupying the Foundation Building, New York, December 3, 2012. Photo: Lee Milby.

VICTORIA SOBEL: Your dean was underqualified. Our president was vastly underqualified to take on the financial situation of the school or its cultural mission, and the board now reluctantly acknowledges that.

There's widespread public misperception about the situation that was engineered by PR consultancies to make it seem ambiguous as to how we were driven to end 156 years of free education. Actually, our endowment had suffered from thirty years of being sold off, parceled out, and liquidated by the board for cash injections to carry out an agenda of globalization and expansion. As the financial seams began to burst in 2011, there was still enough time *not* to charge tuition and this was deliberately obscured.

From 2011 to 2012, when students and faculty tried to use existing modes of governance and communication through the faculty-student senate and student councils to address the issue of tuition, they were being blocked by the administration at every turn. And so that wasted a year. A year of operating costs at Cooper when we're running a deficit and we're approaching financial crisis—that was crucial. So now imagine three-going-on-four years of wasted operating costs plus the new operating expenses of a tuition-based infrastructure, which involves lawyers, consultants, database systems.

So this is the lie that's been told: that we hit rock bottom, because alumni don't donate, and we have to charge. When in reality we'd had three years of lead-in time. Student protests had resulted in a negotiation process, which led to a working group that was nominated by representatives of the community, which developed a model to prevent charging tuition—before a single student had been charged—that could have averted the whole thing.

The trustees chose not to pursue that model, not because it wasn't a workable solution, but because they were already off signing a new $50 million bridge loan necessary to implement tuition and to cover the school's general expenses until the rent increase on the Chrysler building in 2018. In the meantime, they had us spinning our wheels in a working group, but without full access to financial information. A process we had all agreed to in good faith was sabotaged.

This was a galvanizing time to be a student. We scarcely knew what to do with ourselves, and out of desperation we tried to translate the values instilled in the classroom to the work that needed to be done on the institution. I'm reminded of Roski's "Don't work, don't show," but at Cooper it was: "Don't make school work. Make the school work."

CHARLIE WHITE: That's great.

JORY RABINOVITZ: Yes. I mean, first and foremost, Victoria and other Cooper students sacrificed their arts educations and dropped everything to fight for the model of free tuition.

VICTORIA SOBEL: In a sense, USC and Cooper have come to be known as holdouts "against the system," when really the system was superimposed on them.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: We have to remember that for the vast majority of Western civilization, the art school was not, in fact, part of the academy or the university. The art school was its own entity, deeply imbricated in its own particularities and its own mission statements and governed much more independently. And I'm sure they were just as fucked-up as any other self-governing institution. [*Laughter.*] You know? I don't think the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris circa 1876 was a hotbed of radical thinking. And in fact the current director, Nicolas Bourriaud, was just basically ousted from that institution.

So it's worth asking, at this moment of crisis in higher education, whether or not the art school wants to continue its potentially unhappy marriage to the university as such.

A. L. STEINER: I have thoughts—

HELEN MOLESWORTH: I bet you do. [*Laughter.*]

A. L. STEINER: Well, as a privately funded private institution, USC has the prerogative to do what it likes with its programs and mission. But I like to think back to what Fred Moten said when he visited us last year: to simply take what we could with us and, no matter what happened, to value that in itself, which I think is what Victoria is saying.

There are no promises. Was the studio art program an anomaly within the university, supported by a previous administration? What will it be now? Is there another direction to take the art school, or is its path going to be predetermined by Silicon Valley, Beach, River, Silicon whatever? You know, Silicon Body. [*Laughter.*]

CHARLIE WHITE: I think Helen brings up a complicated point. If we are speaking honestly about art school, then we must recognize that "art school" is not the same as "fine art" school. Today, art schools house many different forms of visual study, with the majority of their students focusing on some form of commercial practice, while the "fine art"—the studio track—is continually getting smaller and more fragile.

I experienced this, for example, as an undergraduate at the School of Visual Arts, a privately held institution that had numerous commercial tracks but that also kept its fine-arts program strong and vital during the market low of the early '90s, largely thanks to one person: critical thinker and department chair Jeanne Siegel. Similarly, the broader contours of my graduate education at Art Center, like Frances's and our colleague Sharon Lockhart's, were shaped by one person, Richard Hertz, who created a unique space for artists to teach in, a somewhat short-lived experiment in itself that brought artists like Mike Kelley, Christopher Williams, and Stephen Prina together to teach.

So I think if we're being realistic, what we find is a very small and committed community of artists and individuals sustaining what fine art means, while other schools that lack committed studio art advocates have to industrialize and commercialize their programs to survive. In fact, I think if we look closely we will see that the "fine art" component of most "art" schools has been in a state of attrition for decades, though only now are we seeing some of the most important schools, programs, and projects in jeopardy.

FRANCES STARK: If all MFA programs die, I personally don't care. Sorry. We need to look at the bigger questions. The tragedy for me is the fact that what we feel our value is, we're not able to inject that or shape or get involved with the people who are shaping our products, our computers, our toolbox, everything around us. We're just not.

When I stopped spreading myself so thin between the institution and my own studio practice, I started to wonder, can I put a little bit of the academy back into the market, in some way? How can the energy of the institution—intellectual intimacy, shared values—be injected into another part of my professional reality?

While the search for the new dean was going on, and the $70 million endowment from Dr. Dre and Iovine was still being kept secret, I went on an unpaid leave of absence, and I started working with a guy I met on the street, Bobby Jesus, as a mentor in my studio. He became my friend and we have collaborated on many projects. When Bobby Jesus first found out about the MFA program, he was like, "What the hell do they do? What is this?" And I said exactly what Lee said in the very beginning, and in your discussion of Black Mountain, Helen, you very beautifully describe what that goal is—that this is a place where you could come and think and talk and be together.

Josef Albers and his students at Black Mountain College, Black Mountain, NC, April 1942. Photo: Tom Leonard.

VICTORIA SOBEL: As a community of people in the arts and humanities, should we really be worried about protecting ourselves, even with the best of intentions, or should we actually be worried that we're basking in the meritocracy, in the exclusivity of our fields, and not making sure that our extended community is inclusive in terms of race, gender, and class?

At Cooper, we have to start to think about the implications of continuing to invoke "meritocracy." When you take a look at the numbers of who is coming and how and why, some nasty stuff crops up.

FRANCES STARK: There's no question that the MFA is a luxury, and I benefited from it. But I taught privileged kids who were undergraduates at USC, and they aren't the best readers. Very few have had the experience of having any kind of joy through reading. Reading is emancipatory and it changes your life. That experience is not happening out in the world or in school.

CHARLIE WHITE: That's true. However, one of the most inspiring experiences I have taken part in was sitting in a dark room, with a group of exceptional artists and thinkers whom I greatly respect and trust, to select a cohort of students to share a collective studio experience, and then witnessing that group of artists form an intellectual community with the faculty and one another.

The world doesn't do a very good job doing that without an institution. It doesn't do it because it doesn't have a platform, committed organizers, or a common interest with which to bring people together. I guess what I'm trying to say is that without art school, there is only the art world—and its markets—to function as the custodian of progress, and if you enter that world without ever going through a period of questioning it, without ever going through the filter of faculty that should be tired of it and tired of themselves in it [*laughter*], then you never create communities that might change that same art world in interesting and progressive ways. From the Bauhaus to Black Mountain, from Albers at Yale to Kaprow at CalArts—these were moments when radical new communities were made, places where you could come and think and talk and be together.

A. L. STEINER: The basic message seemed to be that the program should function without our bodies. Sure, some classes could be held for a certain number of hours per day, but the studio visits, the group crits, the graduate lecture series, the core, the trips—the things that involve the tangibility of bodies, the things that had allowed the program previously to provide real support systems, intellectual rigor, transferable skills from the TA-ships—should disappear. But without those things, no real community can form.

LEE RELVAS: One of the first things that all the MFA students did collectively was back in the fall, when we heard that USC wanted to close the Architecture and Fine Arts library, we all got together and spent a lot of time writing a letter arguing against the closing.

The school's rationale for wanting to close the arts library was borrowed from a corporate-management, technocratic worldview, along the lines of: "Oh, only 10 percent of the books are being checked out, so we can just put them all in a depository somewhere. Everyone can access everything on the Internet." What does that do? First of all, 10 percent of books. Who knows how many ideas that 10 percent has inspired? That's the thing that's unquantifiable. That's the thing that's implicit and rarely explicit. And that's what disappears from the picture entirely when it's only looked at through metrics.

But having a library is also about having bodies in a room. Not just being on the Internet. And when we started thinking about dropping out, we realized that everything that was valuable to us was proximate to one another and to the faculty. Everything else about the structure that allowed that proximity to happen, we could pretty much leave, although we would suffer some financial loss going into debt for a degree we would not get. But the most important things to us were these bodies in conversation, with one another.

So when we were talking about this last night—all seven of us now meet once a week, and we're working on projects together—I said, "What do you guys think is the most important thing to get across here?" It is those bodies in proximity. We came to the conclusion, to echo Steiner, that the institution believes that it can actually operate without people. If students are not just customers, if people are physical bodies who actually talk back, who want to participate in their own education, then the institution does not actually want people! The more we experienced the impossibility of dialogue with the institution, the more we felt the incredible possibilities of dialogue with each other. That's where the value lies, and that's the value that can't ever be empirically measured to anyone's satisfaction, and I think that's why we have to keep insisting on the importance of ambiguity, open-ended conversation, and proximity. More weirdness, more joy.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: And that model of relationships and contact and intimacy is relatively new. It is very different from the traditional notion of the artist working alone in the studio, and that shift is very much connected to Black Mountain and to the modernist schools of thought that came out of the '30s, '40s, and '50s.

AMANDA ROSS-HO: One of the things that was taken away was precisely this notion of investing in a trust, in proximity, in collaboration. For example, at USC all the students were part of the process of making new hires. We all had visits with every single person who was coming on faculty. We even had input on the incoming students. We helped select the new building, weighed in on the space, how it was laid out, what we needed in the gallery. There was this sense of all of us doing it together.

A. L. STEINER: The dismantlement wasn't of a program. The dismantlement was of collective and collaborative structures and thought.

What Roski's dean told me was that our program's problems stemmed from its structure—that current and future graduate students shouldn't be concerned about who they're studying with. This administrative and cultural shift comes from the administration's vision of a "USC experience," "authentically staged" spectacles as a replacement for bodies, interactions, critical thinking.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Well, I think nothing has been more devastating to the curatorial field than the rise of the curatorial-studies program.

VICTORIA SOBEL: Let's get that on record. [*Laughter.*]

HELEN MOLESWORTH: No, I do. And I'm prepared to have that be in print, I think. [*Laughter.*] I now routinely go to art shows and I see what I call MFA art, organized by MA curators. There is a kind of flattening of the field through the programs that we have all, in various ways, been involved with. And the crises around Cooper and USC have demonstrable, real effects on real people, but there is also a way in which, if I take a step away from the fire, I think, "Well, maybe it's not the worst thing to happen, that the MFA program loses some of its own sense of its assuredness, of its rights, of what people are entitled to."

What I find most extraordinary about the USC situation is that you and the other six students formed your own group in the aftermath. It seems to me your crisis is to your benefit in some way. I realize that's an outsider's point of view, but you're still meeting once a week, and you have created a nominal, provisional, self-sustaining, self-governing institution of your own making.

A. L. STEINER: Lee made a beautiful statement about their group of seven to me the other night, that they wouldn't have come together if it hadn't been for the program. And they feel thankful that it happened, even with the program's implosion and the consequences the students suffered.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: We're all talking about art education, but how and why did you all get into teaching in the first place? What do you do in the classroom?

MIKE ESSL: At Cooper, I tried really hard, at least in some way, to instill a sense of the public good. That there was a legacy at Cooper Union that you are a part of, and that in the design program, specifically, you're following in the footsteps of giants, the people who literally designed our profession.

I know how grandiose it sounds, but when I graduated, as a result of receiving that tuition-free scholarship, I felt I should give back somehow. And then, over the past few years, bringing the fight into the classroom and trying to explain to everyone in an open and honest way what was going on and who the players were, I felt that putting that all on the table was also part of my responsibility as an educator.

Cooper Union students protesting at the Foundation Building, New York, December 3, 2012. Photo: Lee Milby.

FRANCES STARK: Frankly, I did not know how to teach. You go to a university and you think it's supposed to be an institution of teaching, that you're supposed to be with teaching experts. Guess what? They don't give a shit about teaching at all. They don't hire people based on teaching experience. They just want to make sure that you're going to meet your tenure standards or that you have a high-profile career, that you've published a lot. Artists who want to grow as educators are not supported by the institution, because the institution isn't invested in their methodology.

I came into a mess and was asked to address the division between fine art and design. I did my best. Thank God my partner was a design expert, and I tried to tackle those problems. But basically, everyone is on their own. You go into the dean's office and you negotiate your private salary and you don't tell anybody else. If this is a pie factory and you're selling your MFA pie for $100,000, Mr. Pie Manager, can you tell me what the ingredients of your pie are? They should be able to say, "We like a flaky crust. We like a soft crust. And in order to get a flaky crust you must do this and that." But they don't know the recipe. They don't know the ingredients of the product that they're selling.

I'm not saying that I want them to tell me what to do. I'm saying people don't know how to teach. Students are not able to write paragraphs. And yet artists are coming in and they're like, "Read this Deleuze handout."

HELEN MOLESWORTH: You're speaking about a very real part of this current crisis. We are living in a culture where some students get to college and still don't know how to write, don't know how to read, much less read critically. And then we have faculty who assign them twenty-five pages of *Mille Plateaux* and throw up their hands when it doesn't go well. This is a kind of perverse version of the post-'60s fetish for de-skilling. Values that once seemed germane—like skills in draftsmanship or Cibachrome printing or color theory, *as well as* conceptual practices that confronted and critiqued traditional artistic skills and craft—have become profoundly perverted as they've been put through this corporatized, for-profit model that has no dialectical balance anymore. There is no counterweight.

FRANCES STARK: I was talking about undergrads, by the way. One of the main questions is whether there is a distinction between how you teach MFA and how you teach undergraduate. And what happens is that everyone starts to teach undergraduates like they're graduate students. But that kid can't even parse an episode of *The Simpsons*.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Here's what's good. It's trickling up. [*Laughter.*]

MIKE ESSL: I have taught at a place where—I mean, I probably shouldn't say the name of the school, but I can tell you the initials are SVA. [*Laughter.*] I had a student who just never showed up. There was

no medical reason, no explanation. When she did show up, there were just excuses as to why she didn't do her work. I failed this student. And then I was called into the department chair's office and I was told, "If you fail this person, she might not come back and we will lose $30,000."

CHARLIE WHITE: Wow.

MIKE ESSL: And I said, "Well, that sounds like your problem. I'm not changing the grade." And they gave the student's mom my cell-phone number. She called me and said, "How dare you fail my daughter," and I said, "How dare you raise somebody so lazy." [*Laughter.*] And I hung up. And I have never been asked back to teach there again.

CHARLIE WHITE: Art students at an undergraduate level need an undergraduate education, like Frances said. They need strong foundational methods, the things that schools like Cooper have refined over generations. Graduate school is a completely different beast. It is in constant reevaluation and has changed radically from when I was in school. For example, the average age of the student has changed, who might go has changed, what they want out of the world has changed, why they are there has changed. So I want to cut the cord and say that undergraduate school and graduate school have nothing in common, but everything to gain from each other when they are in the same institution.

FRANCES STARK: Exactly.

A. L. STEINER: But teaching is such an incredibly intimate act. It can be very egalitarian. It can be very authoritarian. Everyone who comes in to teach has different interests, methods, experiences. I'm dedicated to teaching and learning, but they're not solely experiences I've had *inside* an institution. I can relate to Frances on this. You know, I learned an incredible amount from artists and activists in Queer Nation, ACT UP, and the Women's Action Coalition in the '90s. I participate in pedagogy because I learn, not only because I teach. They're symbiotic. But I will say that the intimacy of teaching, regardless of whether it's a class of a hundred people or five people or one-on-one studio visits—there's something that never changes, which is the energy of the people and the room, an interest in responding to what's happening around you.

After my final year at USC, I felt extremely disheartened. We had recruited these people on behalf of the university, and what happened to them was something I could never have imagined, that absolutely did not need to—and should not have—happened.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: You're talking about coming of age in the '90s. I think that there is a generation now who has come of age underneath a huge umbrella of economic trauma, of the financialization of culture and the production of debt on the lower and working classes as a way to finance the extraordinary expansion of an oligarchy class. But amid today's talk of trauma and things being stolen, promises broken and lies, the words of Walter Benjamin haunt me right now: that the state of emergency in which we find ourselves is not the exception but the rule. And those ruptures and breaks are part of the engine of how this slow, stuttering, iterative process of social change and something like forward movement—or just movement—happens. I just want to be mindful of how we understand the crisis we're in now: It is real and it is particular, but I'm not sure it's new.

CHARLIE WHITE: Yes, exactly,the financialization of culture and the production of debt on the lower and working classes. So? For this very reason we should consider the terminal degree something to support, not sell, right?

We have to see the logic of that move in ourselves as artists first. Truly free expression and experimental thinking are civic enterprises; they are not privatized exchanges. Art pushes boundaries for everyone. Our creative freedom is indebted to those who took risks before us, those who tested society's readiness for new ideas. How do we support a generation of radical thinkers—radical individuals—if we shackle them to a monetized system by making them have to dig themselves out of a hole on day one?

FRANCES STARK: All I know is that art is something that I want to do because I have seen it work. It functions. I could look at it, and that dead artist, every single thing that they meant, could go into my brain. It's a magical technology.

I want to honor that magic. And that's what it means to be a teacher. I can learn from Amanda, because she's putting form in front of me. She's thinking through form. I'm looking at her stuff and it's blowing my mind. The form is the art. It's why we do this. It's not because we want a certain position in society, or to climb up the ladder, or to juke the stats to ensure that we get a raise. We do it because we revere the form and the physical ability to have thought in form. That is why we are here. And the administrators don't believe in that religion—don't see that form, or don't even understand form.

We believe that form manifests and resonates in unexpected, magical ways that other things don't.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Or, as my friend the artist Steve Locke says, there is no content without form. Ever.

CHARLIE WHITE: I'm a great believer in form—and school is form. I didn't even love school when I was a student, but I have come to be a great believer in what art school can offer and the changes it can make, that it must make.

FRANCES STARK: I'm a great believer in school, which is why I quit USC. [*Laughter.*]

A. L. STEINER: I am dedicated to continuing this, whether it's inside somewhere, outside somewhere, or both.