Lending Agency, Curating Institution: On Pedagogical Infrastructures

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The Front of Exhibition

Photographs, collages, a film, and performance documentation by Lorraine O'Grady exploring the structural inequities defining gender, class, and race. A video installation by Phil Collins featuring a group of Malay skinheads showing the fluid translations of subcultures and meanings of styles among historical, ethnic, and social contexts. Installations, films, and a performance by Simon Fujiwara raising questions about the shady intersections of authenticity and sources of truth. An installation of sculptures, or "walking mirrors," made of cedar and glass by Josiah McElheny transitioning periodically into props for performances. Sculptures, architectural interventions, and a film by Shahryar Nashat drawing attention to the vulnerabilities of the human body and its fragility in dance, sports, and fashion.

These are among the exhibitions I curated for the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University while serving as director from 2013 to 2016. They were – on the front – conventional in format, meaning they looked like contemporary art exhibitions: a selection of works of art arranged inside galleries, accompanied by text panels, and printed gallery guides. The Carpenter Center's website provided exhibition dates and information about associated programs. This schedule of mostly solo exhibitions, what I called "anchor exhibitions," followed the cadence of an academic year each opening at the beginning of fall and spring terms. Everything was free and open to the public encouraging repeated, informal visits by local audiences, as well as those who came intentionally to experience Le Corbusier's architecture. On the front, then, the Carpenter Center performed "art institution." It served visitors' expectations to see work by artists who exhibited internationally while positioning the exhibition program as a destination for the contemporary arts.

For those unfamiliar, the Carpenter Center is a tour de force of visionary modernist prowess. Completed in 1963, it is one of the best illustrations of Le Corbusier's design principles with its concrete columns – or *pilotis* – that bear the weight of the building to accommodate the signature floor-to-ceiling walls of windows with open floor plans throughout. The innovative character of Le Corbusier's design paralleled Harvard's equally pioneering vision for its newly minted arts program, conceived as a laboratory for teaching awareness of the visual environment. In the early days the Carpenter Center's educational activities ranged from making and studying art and visual design, to experimenting with exhibitions and filmmaking, all situated inside an architecture of concrete and glass that eschews ready interpretation of the public and private areas. The pedagogical activities would coalesce to expand and indeed challenge what constitutes a liberal arts education, creating a learning site where creativity and visual literacy could freely evolve. Students from a range of disciplines – science, design, architecture, philosophy, and literature – came together with leading practitioners to sharpen sensory awareness of the visual world. They studied color theory, light, typography, design, communication, photography, film, painting, sculpture, and more. This new institution – a building and an academic program combined – embedded within the traditional confines of a university like Harvard announced that something different was happening, a critique to what, at the time, constituted higher education in the arts.

Composing

Every time I visited the Carpenter Center prior to becoming director in 2013, I was often struck by the uncertainty of what to do. As one approaches the building, the entrance is unclear. Should a visitor walk down the steps to enter doors leading into an empty lobby? Perhaps they choose instead to walk up the curving concrete ramp and enter doors on the third floor? But then what? On either floor, once inside, the interior was often devoid of much human activity – at least when I visited. The scene would conjure the sense that evacuation measures had just been taken, notwithstanding the fleeting presence of someone in the distance rushing across a hallway or the faint murmurs of a conversation seeping through a door ajar. These factors combined

fig.1
Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2016, Harvard University, Courtesy James Voorhies

with the absence of posted hours or information about programs, or really any sign that lent guidance to a visitor made the Carpenter Center invariably inhospitable. The graceful architectural fluidity envisioned by Le Corbusier to offer visitors not only expansive views into other parts of the building framed by the plate glass windows, but also the agency to physically move unencumbered and confidently into and through the spaces had solidified into a fortress-like institution, even to those familiar with the building.

So, as director, I wanted to create something different: a welcoming, pulsating, and active social and intellectual environment embracing the architectural characteristics, including the flaws, of Le Corbusier's majestic building while acknowledging the value of the Center's place within an academic institution. Part of how I pursued this goal was to think about the Carpenter Center holistically as an institution, architecturally and infrastructurally. It is easy to see the Center as a physical thing unto itself. It sits like a foreign object fallen from outer space between the Beaux-Arts Fogg Art Museum designed in 1895 by Richard Morris Hunt and the Classical Revival Harvard

Faculty Club built in 1931. It is distinctive. An exhibition program could hardly be considered without taking into account the extraordinary factors of its design and place at a university. Given this setting, I thought of the institutional infrastructure compositionally, from considering the initial encounter visitors have with the building, to encouraging students and faculty to organize events and talks, to launching platforms – like a bookshop – for casually engaging with art and ideas, to partnering with academic units like the Woodberry Poetry Room and Harvard Graduate School of Design to bring their audiences into the fold. I was interested in creating frameworks derived from situations with art that prioritized ways to be together intellectually and, perhaps even more importantly, socially. The frameworks were dependent on infrastructures, from communication and design to space and staff, the function of each complementary to one another while lending agency to audiences to identify what was at stake for them in the institution's program – and take what they needed.

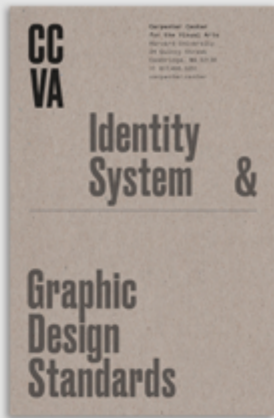
Orientating

Providing basic information is a logical first step to cultivating agency. Within weeks on the job, I commissioned James Goggin and Shan James of Practise to create a programmatic graphic identity for the physical, print, and digital spaces of the Carpenter Center. The design program ultimately reflected the simultaneous and overlapping functions of the Carpenter Center – an academic department, an exhibition program, and home to the Harvard Film Archive. I then worked with Practise to design graphics for the exterior and throughout the interior to ameliorate the uncomfortable uncertainty about the building that I described above. Hours of operation and information about exhibitions were displayed to orient visitors. Other essential details about each floor's function – studio, classroom, screening room, exhibition space, restrooms – were posted with information about how to reach them by elevator or stairs. It sounds simple when written in these terms. But an important measure for cultivating audiences is to provide basic information about accessibility – in physical space and online – and to communicate regularly. Practise designed a new website. I opened and directed content on an Instagram account, renovated a rather forlorn

Facebook presence. I compiled email lists for a newsletter routinely distributed to thousands of recipients. Audiences need tools to understand the terms of engagement with an institution. Institutions often overlook coordinating communication and design, or they consider them secondary to the main event – exhibitions. I see these infrastructural components as equally important parts of curating and imbued with equally important functions for connecting with audiences. With hours and entrances determined, I then worked with facilities staff to outline new routines for opening and closing the building.

I inherited a staffing model used by Harvard for many years where guards were contracted to watch the galleries. The buildings department considered the Carpenter Center to be the same type of facility as a library, a dorm, or a café. It therefore received the same type of oversight. Guards were contracted by Harvard to ensure the safety of its community and the security of its buildings. They were not hired to communicate about art or necessarily even speak to visitors. This model might seem sufficient. Yet another approach was

fig.2
Identity System and Graphic Design Standards booklet, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2014–18, James Goggin, Practise, Courtesy James Goggin



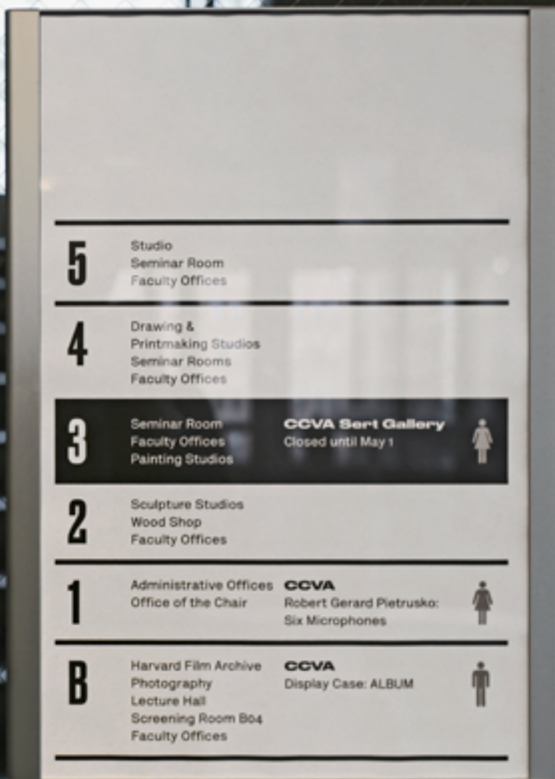


fig.3
Flexible building signage system, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2014–18, James Goggin, Practise, Courtesy James Goggin

needed to reach the quality of assistance I wanted to give audiences. I worked with the university administration for months, maybe over a year, to change this scenario along with an intentional and perhaps intense pursuit to radically transform the third floor, Le Corbusier’s original exhibition space, which had been structurally intervened with in the early 2000s to create an enclosed gallery and an open-plan foyer. The latter was equipped with a full-service kitchen for a café that operated for only a few years. I tried to partner with a boutique consumer chain called Intelligentsia Coffee. I wanted Intelligentsia to open a coffee bar in what I considered the pointless gallery-foyer. I wanted a space teaming with the chatter and energy a coffee bar offers, attracting students, faculty, and nearby community. The by-product being they would become aware of exhibitions and programs and eventually committed to the institution. After months of coordinating meetings between executives at Intelligentsia and leadership at Harvard the effort came to null. The reason: one retail outlet at the university was not profitable for Intelligentsia, whereas if the administration agreed to serve the brand in other campus cafés, it would have helped the effort.

Soliciting

Alas, the focus on coffee turned to books. A bookshop served as the basis for something I called Consumer Research Center/. A collaboration with Berlin-based Motto Books, I saw the CRC/ responsive to the blurring in cultural spaces of traditional differences between visitors and consumers. CRC/ inhabited these contemporary conditions to leverage the connective potential of combining consumer exchange and cultural experience.

The inventory offered visitors access to hundreds of books by extraordinary artists, critics, filmmakers, and cultural institutions working around the world. The cross-section of cultural production in the arts was another kind of fertile curatorial space for me. So, for all given purposes and perceptions, again, on the front – it was a bookshop. And, as visitors expected, books were for sale during hours of operation. Taking advantage of the now deeply ingrained terms of engagement that society has with shopping, the books, beautifully displayed on custom-built mobile wood forms, were visible through the windows. The scene appealed to visitors who might otherwise pass by a gallery with an attendant sitting at a desk. The bookshop was a gateway. It reduced the alienation felt when encountering an institution of contemporary art by offering the appearance of this known quantity – a bookshop. But, in the back, one could say, the CRC/ was much more than a bookshop. CRC/bookshop routinely morphed into a programming site for all sorts of activities to become bookshop/exhibition, bookshop/screening, and bookshop/talk. It's important to emphasize here that a visually inviting space imbued with an openness and generosity combined with a robust communication stream were infrastructural forces intentionally conceived to be activated, which I discuss below. The work described thus far, then, reflects a curatorial practice committed to institution building by way of curating infrastructures – or, what one might call institution practice.

Curating

To that end, I want to look at how I position this work within the broader discourse on what is referred to as "the curatorial." The notion of the curatorial has developed for more than

fig.4
Consumer Research Center/Bookshop, 2016, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Courtesy James Voorhies

a decade to become associated with a complex set of overlapping concerns of cultural production, knowledge production, social assembly, and audience-building, whereas arranging objects inside galleries has given way, in part, to an expansive mode of theoretical thinking, as critic Simon Sheikh reflects,

> The use and indeed usefulness of the curatorial is, then, as an analytical tool and a philosophical proposition, and by indication, a separate form of knowledge production that may actually not involve the curating of exhibitions but, rather, the process of producing knowledge and making curatorial constellations that can be drawn from the historical form and practices of curating. The curatorial could thus be posited as a form of research, not just into exhibition-making but as a specific mode of research that may or may not take on the spatial and temporal form of an exhibition. [1]

1
Simon Sheikh, "Thinking with Exhibitions, Thinking with People," in Choi Jina and Helen Jungyeon Ku, eds., *What Museums Do: The Curatorial in Parallax* (Seoul: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2018), 162.

The framework of the exhibition form, for Sheikh, is a method to research in and of itself. His description culled from a 2018 essay reflects the rather quick transformation of the concept of the curatorial first introduced by curator Maria Lind who, in a 2009 essay titled "The Curatorial," asks,

> Is there something we could call the curatorial? A way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space? An endeavor that encourages you to start from the artwork but not stay there, to think with it but also away from and against it? [2]

2
Maria Lind, "The Curatorial," *Artforum* 68, no.2 (October 2009): 103. A revised version reprinted in Brian Wood Kuan, ed., *Selected Maria Lind Writing* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

So, as a way of thinking as Sheikh describes and practice as Lind implies, the curatorial expands and exceeds conventional curating. Both rely on combining elements – immaterial and material, conceptual and concrete – into something legible. Yet, while the notion of the curatorial in both cases exceeds traditional modes of curating, the act of bringing together myriad ideas associated with objects, histories, people, places, and archives nevertheless draws on the basic tenets that curation offers for framing these things against intellectual, cultural, political, economic, and geographic backdrops.

I see the art object as a proposal, or a prompt. It has a diachronic character, kind of like an asteroid floating in space without any context. It is activated by the synchronic nature of curating that situates it in dialogue with time and place. Curating is contemporaneity. The underlying drive is to bring things to the fore for communal discourse – public or private, on any scale – with curation the ground for staging situations with art. Something is generated by these situations, yet it is not necessarily the supposedly embedded knowledge of the art object or proof of a thesis or illustration of a theme, as with traditional forms of curating exhibitions. Something else transpires. It has the shadow of knowledge, but the shape is more akin to awareness. Awareness can in turn lend agency, to enter a building, and, even more, to make one mindful of surroundings, communities, histories, networks – aware of each other because curating positions them in a context.

The curatorial methods I used for the Carpenter Center and, in fact, today for the Tony Smith Foundation, seek to identify institutional infrastructures that become nodal elements I choregraph to bring art into dialogue with immediate spatial, social, historical, and temporal contexts in which it is experienced, be it by way of exhibition, publication, conversation, private dinner, seminar, conference, excursion. The constellation character offered by the curatorial as a conceptual framework then becomes appliable to the institution by marshaling the forces these institutional infrastructures offer. Curating the institution requires arranging these elements. My curatorial work at Carpenter Center and the Tony Smith Foundation embraces a holistic approach to composing something, considering different nodes that need to align to outline the shape of institution. And although some nodes are more public facing than others, all are inherently essential for identifying this shape. I prefer, therefore, to take the long perspective to consider this work as different modes of mediation for public address – as forms of curating public assembly around the propositions that art has to offer whereby the concept of the curatorial extends from the exhibition to the institution.

Agency

I want to return to look at some components of the program at the Carpenter Center to show how these principles performed. "Agency for Critical Inquiry" was a key element. ACI, as it became known, was an open invitation to the Harvard University and Boston-area arts and academic communities to organize and host activities. The idea for ACI had developed from earlier experiences at Bennington College, in Vermont, and Columbus College of Arts and Design, in Ohio, where people routinely approached me to do *something* in the program. Creative, ambitious, intellectually engaged communities often want to do something. That something was usually not possible because of already-packed exhibition schedules, lack of financial and human resources, and, well, the quality or topics were out-of-sync with the "main" programs. When I arrived at the Carpenter Center, I knew I wanted things to be different. I had learned from these experiences. Given its place at a university, I did not want only the Carpenter Center to address the public, but for the public

to also speak with the institution. I organized the infrastructure to encourage this kind of agency by allocating budgetary and staff resources, advising on proposals, utilizing the institution's social media, website, and newsletter communication channels. I curated twenty exhibition and more than fifty events, twenty of which were for Agency for Critical Inquiry. The ACI component became a bit of a gravitational force, a vibrant, at times unpredictable, messy in the best of ways, play space held inside the programmatic fold of the Carpenter Center. It offered space, staff, and communication resources to the very audiences to whom the Carpenter Center was speaking so they in turn could say what they wanted.

What did these activities look like? Some were part of what I called Open Seminars. Faculty frequently invite visiting practitioners – designers, artists, writers, theorists – to teach a seminar meeting. Using the Open Seminar format, we would invert the typically closed pedagogical space into a public forum – mornings, afternoons, or evenings – dependent on course schedules. Carpenter Center communications would inform nearby artists and academics who sometimes choose to walk over to join. Open Seminars were frequently organized with Harvard faculty Matt Saunders and Katarina Burin who always had a slew of interesting artists and designers passing through their classes. Nina Beier, Natalie Czech, Jean-Pascal Flavien, Simon Dybbroe Møller, and others talked about their work. Karel Martens taught a seminar on graphic form and typographic meaning in relation to the printing process that he has developed since the late 1950s. Open Seminars made public the privacy of an academic seminar giving students opportunities to interact with visiting practitioners alongside other committed and engaged perspectives from around the university. Open Seminar also invited faculty to have something at stake in the Carpenter Center programming along with the agency made possible through infrastructural support. After each seminar, students, faculty, and others would intermingle with the artists, then sometimes move on to a café or a bar.

In other instances, Agency for Critical Inquiry was a way to connect with other university departments. Damon Krukowski's *NOT TO BE PLAYED* is one case in point. Collaborating with Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room, *NOT TO BE PLAYED*

was a multifaceted two-week exhibition presenting archival materials and a musical performance, along with publishing a limited-edition 7-inch vinyl. The project directed attention to an obscure archival audio recording made by Ezra Pound at Harvard University in 1939. In other cases, ACI offered space for graduate students in Harvard's Department of History of Art and Architecture to host talks and panels, including a conversation and performance by Nandipha Mntambo and a panel titled "Art and Technology: New Perspectives on African Art," which examined questions about museological display and collecting African art.

Book launches by colleagues from nearby universities, conversations with Harvard dance students, performances with the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club, talks by faculty of the Graduate School of Design, readings of poems by Frank O'Hara at lunchtime on the terrace, presentations by students of MIT's Program in Art, Culture, and Technology. It was all there. The intention was to bring audiences closer for more informal, frequent, and intimate engagement with art and ideas while creating a site for collective learning and assembly in the public realm – beyond the traditional classroom. The form inherently questioned how knowledge is produced and what knowledge even looks like. Curating awareness by curating public assembly.

Assembling

A beautiful outdoor terrace with peekaboo views into parts of Harvard Yard felt comparably abandoned like other areas of the building I described earlier. Seating and tables were absent, nothing besides the view encouraged people to linger. I added basic café tables and chairs during the first spring of my tenure and then during the summer break of the second year launched a program called "Summer Summits." The premise was rather simple: a series of short talks by curators who presented informal travel logs or dispatches about what they did that summer, what they saw, what caught their eye, and maybe gave hints of things to be discovered in upcoming exhibitions. About three editions each summer, the "summits" would conclude with wine and light snacks on the terrace. The events became a gravitational point for the dog days of summer in Cambridge, wine

and snacks on warm summer evenings with friends and colleagues, another situation with art that ultimately was about being together.

Institution Building

The archive of the Carpenter Center in the early 1960s and 1970s, in fact, portrays a vibrant constellation of social, pedagogical, and curatorial togetherness. Photographs of elaborate exhibition designs and creative uses of space combined with written documents and films recall a storied past of cigarettes and coffee in the lobby, late nights and cluttered spaces, students and professors reacting to the Vietnam War, everything unfolding into a sprawling, urgent pedagogical pursuit where art production, critical thinking, filmmaking, and teaching collided. But something happened in the intermittent decades. Archival photographs of many exhibitions from late 1980s to the early 2000s portray a slowly graying art institution, whereas the Carpenter Center began to perform the now well-rehearsed "white-cube" model. The expansive spatial opportunities and, yes, the challenges, originally offered by Le Corbusier's architecture were no longer viewed as beautiful problems but negative factors to be contained.

To help recover this history, not necessarily to reperform it but to identify its relevance and, most importantly, place it in dialogue with the contemporary moment, I initiated something called "Institution (Building)." This developed somewhat organically out of an initial invitation to Martin Beck to consider a commission of making a spatial environment for the anticipated coffee bar that did not come to pass. Nevertheless, through our rich conversations and his research into the archives of the Carpenter Center, that invitation transformed into the launch of a two-year residency program with a mission to support artists whose practices benefit from time and resources for conducting research into histories and sites. Institution (Building) was committed to working with artists at their own pace where a curator becomes a thinking partner for bringing work to the public realm. The archive and architecture of the Carpenter Center were the objects of study, or prompts whereas research could manifest in any form, from exhibitions, events, and installations to interventions, tours, and publications, taking shape and

changing throughout the residency. From my point of view, this was an infrastructural program, whereas my curatorial work occurred at a slower moving, open-ended pace accounted for in both the public and private realms and not necessarily beholden to performing art institution.

Synchronizing

Beck's two-year engagement with the Carpenter Center, then, transpired under what he called *Program* concluding with a publication titled *Martin Beck: An Organized System of Instructions*. *Program* manifested through a sequence of interventions, installations, events, and publications that drew on the exhibition histories and academic pursuits of the Carpenter Center and Department of Visual and Environmental Studies. To that end, during his time at the Center, Beck focused on various points of public interface that define the Carpenter Center as an institution. These included physical spaces, curriculum, student relations, media relations, and time-based instances of connecting with the public, such as talks and screenings. The series of explorative strategies he employed simultaneously performed and critically reflected on the kinds of activity an institution uses to build, organize, and engage with its audiences. From the institution's physical infrastructure to its communication infrastructure, from its foundational curricular principles to visitor tallies, from building usage to welcome rituals, Beck examined institutional behaviors that collectively form institutional identity and integrate audiences into a cohesive program of public address. All these components were considered in the form of distinct "episodes" – ten in total. While too many to delve into in this context, I want to highlight two as they relate to education and to how Beck made us aware of the histories of the Carpenter Center.

Episode six, *Reality Is Invisible*, resulted from Beck's discovery of written references to the experimental filmmaker Robert Fulton's 16 mm film *Reality's Invisible*, which Fulton made while teaching in the burgeoning film program called Light and Communications in 1971. The hour-long film comprises brief, straightforward interviews with students in and around the Carpenter Center; these candid recordings document faculty lectures, show abstract shots of the concrete surfaces of

Le Corbusier's architecture, and record the general academic atmosphere around Cambridge. Experimenting with the limits of documentary filmmaking, Fulton's layered images and sounds combine into a frenetic and visually lush, even urgent portrait of academic life at the Carpenter Center, revealing the intellectual pursuits and the political unease occupying the minds of students and faculty in the early 1970s.

Reality Is Invisible was a multipart episode. Fulton's film was screened in the Harvard Film Archive at the beginning of the term, a kind of welcome to new and returning students and faculty. A second component was the digitization of Fulton's film to produce a limited DVD edition with a package design commissioned from James Goggin. This was given to students concentrating in Visual and Environmental Studies and graduate students in Film and Visual Studies. A third component was a poster communicating about the screening.

Episode 7, *The Limit of a Function* was a combination table and vitrine made of powder-coated steel and plywood. Two rectangular areas recessed under glass accommodated presentation of archival materials or any printed matter, while the table and seating functioning as a basic place to sit and study. The dimensions of the table derived from Le Corbusier's grid pattern incised in the concrete floor on Level 3. The soft wood surfaces of the table and the seating were stained comparable in color to the warm accent panels punctuating spaces of the Carpenter Center. Casters on the table accommodated different configurations that supported the range of social and exhibition functions of the space. *The Limit of a Function* was a prop for public assembly and exhibition display.

Each Episode by Beck lent particular attention to the founding program of the Carpenter Center, which sought to cultivate its position as an iconic modernist building, school, and exhibition venue. *Program* pulled that history into the present in such a way that lent agency to audiences, to the community radiating around the Carpenter Center. It made them more aware of their surroundings and the history in which they were participating and to which they were contributing.

The Back of Exhibition

The activities described here were integral to the Carpenter Center program, but none on the surface was as legible as the "anchor exhibitions" I introduced at the beginning. The programs were certainly known. People attended. But they were not part of the routine performance of "art institution" that many audiences anticipate and want. Nevertheless, while on the front, exhibitions by artists such as Phil Collins provided what was expected of an art institution, in the back there was significantly more pedagogical motion in action. I will close by looking at the curatorial components of Collins's exhibition.

Phil Collins: A Learning Site was a series of public seminars, screenings, and a video installation – a constellation of curatorial and academic activities dedicated to exhibiting, studying, and analyzing the multilayered and complex practice of British artist Phil Collins. Taking place over three months and concluding with a weeklong residency and public talk by Collins, the project I curated in conjunction with a course I taught on contemporary art and curatorial practice. As part of the course students were required to organize a series of Open Seminars by selecting films by Collins that would be viewed and analyzed in the public realm. Rather than focus on teaching students how to arrange objects inside galleries, I focused on approaches to mediating art, particularly the form of a public program. Students were expected to walk audiences through a sequence of short cuts, and then discuss them with members of the public fundamentally contending with all the vulnerability and unpredictability that leading public programs entails.

Collins's deeply complex practice involving his subjects generates questions about the ethics of their appearances in and contributions to his films. Against a selection of theoretical texts on contemporary art, Collins's practice was intensely interrogated in our "closed" seminars, which invariably helped students prepare for conducting the Open Seminars. The course concluded with a class visit by Collins who fielded questions and, in some cases, defended his position based on the knowledge students had accumulated over thirteen weeks sorting through in private and public settings what is at stake in his work. Added to that level of considered engagement, I partnered with the Harvard Film Archive

fig.5
Phil Collins speaking with students enrolled in course organized as part of Phil Collins: A Learning Site, 2016, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Courtesy James Voorhies

to present what accounted at the time for almost the entire corpus of Collins's filmic production. These screenings were coordinated to overlap with the schedule of my classes.

Phil Collins: A Learning Site was the ultimate synthesis of exhibition, research, teaching, and publication, marshaling all the material and immaterial infrastructural forces I had developed. In the CRC/bookshop students made something called "Class Picks" by identifying books in the bookshop inventory and writing why the selection was relevant to *Phil Collins: A Learning Site*. We published a limited-edition set of bookmarks with quotes by scholars that students culled from the bibliography of texts for our course. The entire spring semester pulsated with the visual and intellectual questions that Collins's practice instigates. The aim was to focus on and think through as a community the impact of this singular artist within the context of recent art history and contemporary culture – *Phil Collins: A Learning Site*. And, of course, during opening hours his film *the meaning of style* (2011) looped giving most visitors what they expected: an exhibition – on the front.

Every anchor exhibition had components like this revolving at different paces behind the scenes of performing art institution. Doctoral students worked with Lorraine O'Grady's extraordinary archive which, at that time, had been recently deposited at nearby Wellesley College. Dance students inhabited Josiah McElheny's majestic sculptures to transform them into performances in the lobby. Harvard Art Museum curators culled disembodied sculptures from deep in museum storage to place on view at the behest of Shahryar Nashat. Film students met with Simon Fujiwara. There's so much more, the chronicle of which is beyond our scope. These methodologies of the curatorial, though, offer ways of orchestrating and organizing, ways of uncovering and recovering why something or the combination of things should matter to audiences, whether museumgoers, readers, students – anyone. I'm committed to curating situations, social assemblies around, with, and against art, whereas awareness, instead of knowledge as typically sought after, is an outcome of being together. Nothing occurs happenstance. Curating becomes choreography, curating the institution into a synchronized composition.

fig.6
caption fehlt / Bildauflösung zu niedrig !

Martin Beck, Beatrice von Bismarck,
Sabeth Buchmann, Ilse Lafer

Broken Relations: Infrastructures, Aesthetics, Critique

Broken Relations: Infrastructure, Aesthetics and Critique

Introduction by the Editors

Martin Beck is an artist and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. His work has been shown widely in Europe and the US, including Front International (Cleveland, 2022), Bergen Kunhal (Bergen, 2018) Frac Lorraine (Metz, 2018), and mumok–Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (Vienna, 2017). His publications include *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (London, 2007), *The Aspen Complex* (London, 2012), *Last Night* (New York, 2013 and 2019), *An Organized Systems of Instructions* (London, 2017), and *rumors and murmurs* (Vienna/Köln, 2017).

Beatrice von Bismarck is professor of art history, visual culture, and cultures of the curatorial at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig. She was previously curator of twentieth-century art at Städel Museum, Frankfurt (1989–93); co-founder and co-director of Kunstraum at Leuphana University of Lüneburg (1993–99); initiator of the Cultures of the Curatorial (2009) Master's degree program in Leipzig; and co-director of the itinerant TRANScuratorial Academy in Berlin, Mumbai, and Phnom Penh (2017–18). Publications by von Bismarck include the recently-released *Archives on Show: Revoicing, Shapeshifting, Displacing–A Curatorial Glossary* (Archive Books, 2022) and the forthcoming monograph *The Curatorial Condition* (Sternberg Press, 2022).

Sabeth Buchmann is professor of the history of modern and postmodern art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and co-editor of PoLYpeN, a series of publications on art criticism and political theory (b_books). Selected publications by Buchmann include *Erprobte Formen oder Kunst als Infrastruktur des Ästhetischen* (Riemschneider Lectures, ed. by Carolin Meister at Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Berlin/ Köln 2022) and the co-edited *Putting Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theater, Theory, and Politics* (Sternberg Press, 2016, with Ilse Lafer and Constanze Ruhm); *Textile Theorien der Moderne. Alois Riegl in der Kunstkritik* (b_books, 2015, with Rike Frank); *Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida, Experiments in Cosmococa* (Afterall, 2013, with Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz); *Denken gegen das Denken. Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica* (b_books, 2007); and *Art After Conceptual Art* (MIT Press, 2006, with Alexander Alberro).

Ilse Lafer is a curator. Since 2018, she has directed the HGB Gallery at the Leipzig Academy of Visual Arts. Lafer has co-realized a number of solo- and themed exhibitions with accompanying publications, symposia, and/or lecture series, including those at Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna (2006–08); the ASF, New York City (2008); Generali Foundation, Vienna (2008–15); INDEX, Stockholm (2012); Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid (2015); Galerie Leonard et Bina Ellen, Concordia University, VOX centre de l'image contemporaine, and SBC galerie d'art contemporain, Montreal (2016); and Museion, Bozen (2019). Recent book publications include *Deculturalize* (Mousse, 2020). Lafer also co-edited *Putting Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theater, Theory, and Politics* (Sternberg Press, 2016, with Sabeth Buchmann and Constanze Ruhm); the print-on-demand-publication *Counterproduction I–III* (2012); as well as *unExhibit*, (Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2011, with Sabine Folie) and *Behind the Fourth Wall: Fictitious Lives–Lived Fictions*, (Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2010).

Translated by Amy Patton

Broken Relations: Infrastructure, Aesthetic, and Critique is an exhibition, publication, and educational project, collaboratively organized and hosted by the Academies of Fine Arts in Leipzig and Vienna. In both venues, the project included seminars, exhibitions, lectures, and a program of events on which this reader is based. The focus in Leipzig was on the underlying assumptions and conditions of infrastructural relation-building in the field of art and the curatorial, using disruptions as starting points for investigations into enabling, serving, and actively shaping infrastructural functions. The Vienna section pointed at infrastructures in the field of art and education, specifically practices that reflect infrastructural conditions of display and mediation. The project understands infrastructures as material

phenomena and physical networks as well as immaterial relations and symbolic actions, which, in visible and invisible ways, form our present and, hence, our horizon of aesthetic perception. The interplay of material and ideological conditions of production, distribution, and presentation directs the institution-critical gaze onto real and symbolic orders, sites, and economies.

Infrastructures have been and are being addressed with particular urgency in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are those parts of the system whose maintenance is considered vital for society. Infrastructures include the care and education system – from kindergarten to schools, universities, hospitals, and retirement homes – as well as transport, entertainment, sports, art, and culture. Global production and supply chains have recently been impacted and, in some countries, are still under attack. This is what the term "critical infrastructure" refers to. It is the entanglement of social actors and institutions as well as economic, technological, and ecological systems whose options for reacting flexibly and efficiently to the infrastructural challenges are at the forefront of the debate: flow and movement of people, goods, and information; maintenance of everyday infrastructures connecting people and places. Transport, traffic, architecture, and urban development as well as analogue and digital media are of central importance here. The need to adapt to situational challenges also highlights that infrastructures are not only of a material nature. They require communication, which is made possible by physical gatherings and media structures that in turn are shaped by rituals, conventions, norms, and legislation which, as was pointed out by architectural historian Keller Easterling, deal with (de-)activating dispositions. Infrastructures not only function as serving elements. They affect the situations in which they are used, shape them and, in doing so, bring to light immaterial properties which only appear under certain conditions. They can control (inter-)actions and participate in the formation of social groups, in making connections, and in establishing social divisions and boundaries. Infrastructures make specific forms of coexistence possible, or they prohibit them – an ability that highlights infrastructure's role in the (re-)production of those societal and global asymmetries which manifest themselves in everyday forms of racism, sexism, class structure, and, consequently,

inequality. Infrastructures come into play in laws, regulating the lives of individuals, groups, milieus, and nations, they establish hierarchies and (re-)produce corresponding mechanisms of in- and exclusion.

Infrastructures affect the properties, organizational and functional mechanisms of the art field on multiple levels. Changes, interruptions, and destructions of infrastructure impact the field. The social and economic measures taken worldwide to contain the pandemic have affected globalized travel of artists, curators, and other actors in the field. The flow of works of art and exhibitions has (temporarily) been interrupted. Limitations on assembly have challenged the established forms of art display, reception, distribution, and marketing. The shift of communication into the digital realm alters rituals and establishes new chains of value. Furthermore, the interruptions create gaps that reveal the values, norms, and rules upon which social and cultural institutions are built. They call for a reevaluation, recontextualization, and broadening of the same content, procedures, and aesthetics associated with the history and practice of institutional critique. Marina Vishmidt advanced a similar argument in her 2016 essay "Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique," which the American art theorist revisits in "Self-Relating Negativity: Where Infrastructure and Critique Meet," her contribution to this volume. At the heart of her repositioning of art critical categories is the epistemological status of racially marked bodies as an inherent, integral part of (post-)colonial modernity. With reference to critical theory, postcolonial-, and Black studies, the author contrasts the imperative of "self-reflexivity" anchored in Western philosophy with its identity-building effects. Drawing on artistic practices, the essay outlines the conditions of a concept of critique that is permeable to inconsistencies and differences of subjects and institutions, and that incorporates the normative power of infrastructural reproduction.

The shift from categories of institution to those of infrastructure also plays a central role in Keller Easterling's "(Dispositional) Action," an essay that highlights the role of dispositions inherent in institutional structures and arrangements. She lays out how dispositions affect and regulate what is possible and what is not. With a keen eye for institutional temperaments and

chemistries, the architect, urbanist, and writer describes how culture relies exclusively on data and mono-dimensional problem-solving techniques to understand, speak about, and address society's challenges. She argues that multipronged strategies, both fragmentary and layered, might be better suited to navigating the myriad relationships that hold together material and immaterial infrastructures, but also to confronting abusive power structures and the "superbugs" that uphold them.

As these case studies and the theoretical contributions gathered in the present volume show, it is precisely these discourse-historical deductions and (re)determinations in the concept of infrastructure that evoke the range of meanings and attributions it has held since its first use as a French civil engineering term in the nineteenth-century. Lilian Kroth takes its nonlinear history and multifaceted usage as an opportunity to complement the term's "embeddedness in the history of ideas" with a "metaphorological" and "translational" reading. Central to this undertaking is the question of the epistemic conditions of the "infrastructure" concept, which the artist and philosopher examines with reference to both Michel Serres's open notion of structure and Bruno Latour's understanding of networks. With particular attention to Serres's use of conceptual metaphors including the "parasite" or the "quasi-object" (both important influences for Latour's network metaphor), Kroth understands infrastructures in terms of their metaphorical shifts, which she simultaneously identifies as their constitutive, mediating, and partially hidden epistemic basis.

That and to what degree reflections on the epistemic foundations of infrastructural analyses simultaneously touch on ontological categories is particularly evident in the essays bridging aesthetics and ethics. One example is Kai van Eikels's "A Collective Ear on the Sovereign's Pulse: Time Infrastructure," a contribution exploring the ambivalent disposition of synchronization – a temporal infrastructure that both facilitates horizontal forms of joint action and work and can also have a vertical and, hence, hierarchical and centralizing effect through the standardization of time. The philosopher, theater- and dance-scholar's reflections link Fordist and post-Fordist labor relations with those around artistic practice to fathom the influence of infrastructure on collective dynamics. His approach is essentially focused

on the potentialities of artistic exploration and its aesthetic, psychological, social, and political effects.

Elke Krasny's essay "Living with a Wounded Planet: Infrastructural Consciousness Raising" puts a spotlight on the numerous unaddressed consequences of the current infrastructural condition for individuals, the planet, and their interactions. Her contribution asks pointed questions about how present, past, and missing infrastructures affect how lives can be lived, what they allow us to do, and what not. The art theoretician and curator wonders how those infrastructures came about, at whose cost, and to whose benefit. To understand what would be needed for a more just and sensible coexistence on this planet, the essay advocates for a different awareness of and new narratives about what infrastructure is and how it acts, materially and immaterially. Building on the notion and discourse of care, Krasny argues that what is missing – and desperately needed – is an ethics of infrastructure.

Practice-realized examples of the mutual impact of ethical justifications of infrastructures on the aesthetics of works and exhibitions appear in artistic and curatorial thinking alike. The latter is explored in Beatrice von Bismarck's "Modes of Relation – Curatorial Infrastructures and Interruptions," an essay focused on the 2018 exhibition "Mobile Worlds or The Museum of our Transcultural Present" at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, an applied arts museum in Hamburg. The art historian and curator analyzes the show by way of example, with an eye to the entangled lines of flight, migration, and mobility connecting people and things as revealed in and through the presentation. In an extension and modification of network analyses, von Bismarck exposes the relationality and with it the interdependencies affecting various modes of relations with a view to the colonial and racist narratives implicit within them. This perspective on curatorial infrastructure-building allows for a comparative analysis of at first glance unrelated phenomena – circumstances that permit objects, in their relationality, to be read as manifestations of translocal infrastructures that themselves bear witness to breaks and continuities.

In "Lending Agency: Curating Institution," James Voorhies reflects on his curatorial work at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, which he directed from 2013

to 2016. Voorhies discusses changes he implemented to the institution's programming, organizational, and atmospheric infrastructures and how they intersect with an expanded notion of curatorial practice. Understanding curating also as institution-building, Voorhies intervened into and shed light on the numerous layers and relationships that constitute an institution. Focusing on the interventions that went beyond the curatorial staple of the exhibition, the essay looks at the roles of viewer relations, personnel, physical orientation within the building; the interplay of education, exhibition and archive, and scheduling; among others. Curating emerges as an infrastructural tool that allows the institution to act and lend agency to its constituency.

In an interview with Sabeth Buchmann and Ilse Lafer, art historians and theorists Burcu Dogramaci and Ursula Ströbele point to transport and logistics in the arts and in exhibition industry, respectively, as key investigative areas for "(Un)Mapping Infrastructures: Transnational Perspectives in Modern and Contemporary Art," a research group to which they both contribute. They understand these infrastructures – in both their material and immaterial manifestations – as the historical, socio-economic, political, and individual conditions under which canons coalesced and dominant narratives in art, art history, and exhibition history took shape. Their investigation through a feminist, postcolonial, postmigrant, ecological, and institution-critical lens enables – as the research prospectus puts it – a decentering of the autonomy concept, but also a simultaneous rethink of the concepts of mobility, distribution, presentation, and education.

Transport and logistics are key catchwords for the artistic case studies as well: The aesthetic and social implications of the infrastructural shift from analog to digital cinematography becomes a starting point for Rainer Bellenbaum's analysis of the films of Pedro Costa. The Portuguese filmmaker produced his features in collaboration with Cape Verde islanders and emigrants, using analog and digital technologies alike. Drawing on examples *Casa de Lava* (Engl.: *Down to Earth*, 1994), a 35 mm film, and the later *No Quarto da Vanda* (Engl.: *In Vanda's Room*, 2000), and *Juventude em marcha* (Engl.: *Colossal Youth*, 2006), both shot on MiniDV, the author and filmmaker weaves his thoughts on the cinematographic infrastructures of image transport

and -transfer with those on the use and transport of letters, an active form that serves to both advance the narratives of the respective films and facilitate cooperation between the filmmaker and his Cape Verdean collaborators. Bellenbaum further associates *No Quarto da Vanda* and Costa's chosen, time-saving, independent means of production (a mode that enables an intersubjective film practice based on individual forms of encounter) with a move to overcome the disjuncture between the "in-here" and "out-there" intrinsic to ethnographic cinematography. However, in a reference to Catherine Russell's description of an "instance of ethnographic allegory," he also stresses that the replacement of film by video remains as incomplete as the transformations of postcolonial societies.

Beginning with a look at the development program that has shaped the onetime coal- and steel industry region around the German Ruhr and Emscher rivers since the 1960s, Jörn Etzold's "'Restructuring the Ruhr into a Work of Art': On Development and Maintenance of Social Infrastructures" places focus on the relationship between the formative and developmental potentials of infrastructure on the one hand and its maintenance and insistence-related aspects on the other. Etzold examines the state-initiated Ruhr Development Program along with Ferdinand Kriwet's *manifest glückauf* (a 1968 artist's manifesto), and *Manifesto for Maintenance Art,* published by New York-based artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles just one year later. Intertwining the guiding ideas articulated in these three developments, the theater scholar explores the interplay between the aesthetic, social, and economic implications of infrastructural practice.

Sebastian Egenhofer's case study begins with a look at those exact same interactions. Beginning with the programmatic self-positioning of postclassical art practice in urban and rural environments, the art historian and theorist considers Agnes Denes' *The Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982), i.e. the American artist's agricultural intervention into the Wall Street office aesthetic. Egenhofer relates ecological and economic cycles to one another and shows that, and in what way, site-specific practices embedded in the history of institutional critique demonstrate a way of thinking in global infrastructures – a mode of thought with implications for the art-historical reception of the "minimal field" and the practices and aesthetics that refer to it.

Rather than privilege distinct objects and projects, the focus is on the status and meaning of art in the context of socio-symbolic (self-)transformations of material livelihoods. As evidenced, for example, by the destruction of critical infrastructures in the context of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, blocked supply chains and the plundering and destruction of entire harvests go hand in hand with a massive expansion of famine-related catastrophes, particularly in the world's poorer regions and those most heavily affected by climate change.

The infrastructural meshing of spheres of production and those of circulation and consumption appears in the aesthetic visual language of the British artist Lucy McKenzie as well. Her paintings, developed using early modern trompe-l'œil techniques, take center stage in Sabeth Buchmann's reflections on an "infrastructural concept of art," which she defines in terms of the way McKenzie ties the choice of motifs she depicts to the mode of their reproduction-technical appropriation. The art historian and critic reads the mimetic reproduction of emails, invoices, material- and shipping lists as work-constitutive documentation of work processes and logistics that recalls historical genre painting. The latter's deceptively life-like, painted imitations of interiors, foodstuffs, documents, letters, maps, and so on referred to the "local, international, and colonial transport of people and goods in the context of (pre-)modern visual and art industries." Recalling Brian Larkin's definition of infrastructures as "system building," the author locates in the trompe-l'œils "concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles" through which infrastructural dispositions manifest at the level of the represented objects themselves or as a form of relation in and between things. Recognizing "transaesthetic resonant spaces," Buchmann traces the historical transformation of infrastructures using "forensic linkages of spatial and temporal-historical taxonomies" in light of McKenzie's interweaving of art and design history.

The present reader is obviously a symptom and an effect of a collectively-experienced crisis – one that has produced a new, widespread sensorium for often invisible and overlooked infrastructures and highlighted their importance for all aspects of life, including local and global politics and, in our specific case, art and curatorial practices and their systemic analysis.