

TEMPORARY SERVICES

Re-Used Interview

The following interview appeared several years ago in a book with other interviews assessing the current state of art. The book presented a wide range of positions on this topic.

Temporary Services manipulated the original text. We took out all references to authors, individuals, places and historical situations. We removed academic conceits, name-dropping and obscure reference points. We updated this text to make it more accessible. We make no claims to authorship of this work. In order to reach certain audiences, the text needs to be presented in this manner. We are certain that receiving permission to re-use and re-publish this text would be impossible. This booklet is therefore provided free of charge.

The interview presents many strong ideas. It puts forth ideas about reforming art education. It emphasizes the importance of teaching artists to become aware of the effects their work can have in a broader social context. It encourages people to understand that art can make a great social impact on the world. It acknowledges that being a successful artist is about more than fame and money.

This booklet is one of many free services provided to you by Temporary Services.

Conversations Before the End of Time
PP 355-380
ISBN 0-500-01673-9

Temporary Services,
202 S. State Street, Suite 1124
Chicago, IL 60603

http://www.megsinet.net/~nobudget/temp_serv.html

precursor to more recent bestsellers. book questioned why so many "intellectual" women were suffering symptoms of anxiety at a time (during the mid-eighties) when opportunities for women seemed to be increasing and they should have been feeling "the exhilaration of possibility." The anxiety experienced by individuals who have been adventurous enough to break the rules in order to bring new ones into existence is inevitable, according to "Breakthroughs," the writer, "bring anxiety with them." They tend to destroy what people believe is essential to their intellectual and spiritual world. People who cause breakthroughs know that they have unseated the foundation upon which the culture is constructed, and that the rest of the community may take out their own anxiety about change on those who have had the courage to shake up the concepts upon which the collective has structured its reality. Without such people, says, the species would wither and die.

As I've come to know her better, it seems accurate to describe herself as just such a ground-breaking person. A lecturer in women's studies since the late 1960s, and a writer on psychoanalytic theory and cultural politics, she has been mulling over the obsolete attitudes and strategies of the art world for a long time, particularly the issue of the artist's responsibility to society, which she claims is a serious

several years ago. A
the
was appointed dean and vice-presi-
having been a former chair of the graduate
division before that. She received her
where she was a protégée of
One of my first encounters with
was through reading her book

ive issue that makes everyone uncomfortable, defines an insecure feels that many artists simply refuse to address the issue at all. Artists often choose rebellion, which distances them from their audience, and then become angry at the degree to which they are unappreciated. In part this is a consequence of the way we educate students in art schools, envisioning the artist as a marginalized and romantic figure who, she claims, operates "out of what calls the Placate Principle while the rest of us struggle within the Reality Principle." Students need to think about their work, the feels, not in isolation, but in relationship with an audience and a larger societal context. The artist's relationship to the public and to an audience has not been addressed in art school pedagogical situations. art students, like most college students, claims, have not been trained to think globally or politically about their position in society. In a sense, art has succeeded from culture so completely that it has lost its effectiveness and become a subsidized bureaucracy of self-serving specialists. The mutual alienation between artists and audience is a matter with serious consequences for society, but in the nineties this is beginning to change, and feels the goals of the art world will eventually change as well. Many artists in this country now appear to be refusing the place of isolation and marginality they have been given, which they

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

isolation and marginality they have been given, which they

157

• 156 155 •

158

• 159 160 •

Lots of things. I think society is particular is fundamentally an anti-intellectual society, and always has been. There hasn't really been we seem to be undergoing in our field?

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

Your current big subject, seems to center upon the place and function of art and artists in contemporary society, which you claim has never really been sufficiently articulated. You've said that, in many cases, artists themselves have actually refused to look at this issue. You state, and I'd like to quote you directly here, "In part the serious debates artists are now engaged in, in their work, remain hidden to those still caught within conventional notions of what art will do, what it will be, how far it can go, what subject matter it should address." I think that's a very good starting point for us, and I wonder if you could address the ways you think this may now be changing. Maybe you'd like to talk a bit about how you think this indifference to the social role of art came about in the first place. What is prompting these chaotic streams of change that we seem to be undergoing in our field?

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

direct challenge to assumptions "which have important social implications of the next century will come from women, who are free from the male-dominated agendas and patterns of the present era." This is how I think

an articulated place where people of ideas, like artists and writers, are welcomed. I was in , for instance, during part of the , and every day in the newspaper, they would quote artists and poets, asking them what they thought about the war. They were actually asking creative people what they thought about the world, what they thought about the political arena. That's never the case in

—I mean, what artist ever gets quoted in the on major issues about the society? The populist image in seems to mean the lowest common denominator, as if the public could only handle the simplest, most banal and one-dimensional kinds of statements, or films, or books. So there really hasn't ever been a place established, and that's made it difficult, I think, for writers or artists to actually take a stand and be present in the culture.

But in a sense, we've also created a certain conception of art that suggests it isn't supposed to be engaged in those areas anyway, what refers to as the "disfranchisement" of art. Now, suddenly, we have a situation where many artists are rejecting that notion, while at the same time, others are complaining that the more politicized approach isn't art at all. All this attention to political, social and environmental matters, they claim, isn't what art is about.

I think what I was saying was that hasn't encouraged artists to be part of the dialogue

—not just to talk about politics, but to talk about life. There hasn't been any attempt to pull out from people who are really creative, ideas about how things work or should work. But I think you're right that now artists are beginning to question the fact that they have also isolated themselves.

You're one of the people who has pointed out that this is an effect of the way we train artists. We teach them to remain autonomous, to stay in the studio and make art. So, if a situation now exists such as the one you describe, where our culture doesn't look to its artists as a creative resource, isn't it also the case that artists have not been trained to take on that kind of role?

I've written about this. I think art schools in general have perpetuated the problem. I don't think we've helped it. And I think that artists had become, for a long time, quite comfortable in their role as disenfranchised and infantilized beings, left on the periphery, tangential in the society. Everybody was comfortable with that.

It's the trade-off for aesthetic freedom, right? Disfranchisement is linked with capitalist notions of autonomy and freedom and exercising one's individuality.

But the truth is, this is a very bourgeois notion of freedom that we've encouraged, which is a freedom

for the individual apart from society, not a freedom for the individual within society. It used to be, when you came to , that you could recognize

were the only ones dressed in black; they were the only ones with green hair. You'd see them on the subways. Now the city's become more hip, and there are whole other populations of people who look that way. But I think the image of the school in the city was this sort of bohemian place over there by , and the students really bought into that. It was a kind of cultivated separatism. But, it was also self-preservation, because this was the only way they could define themselves against the visual and cultural mediocrity of mainstream society. It was the only way they could really say to their families, "We're not going to live these kinds of lives; we're going to pursue a whole other track and follow our creative desires." Some of that was a necessary and healthy thing, the way bohemian, avant-garde movements have always been, but some of it was sad and lonely, especially when they couldn't find a way back into the society. And we couldn't figure out how to get them back. A lot of faculty were quite content with that state of affairs, because they also felt alienated and separated themselves. So we had a whole perpetuation of this notion that freedom is to be found outside of society.

It's what you've called the paradigm of alienation. But is this what's changing now? How much of it

thought through. For example, what's the difference between certain kinds of community-based art and social work, and do those distinctions matter at all? These are the kinds of questions I think our students need to be thinking about, like, what makes sense to do? Does one go into a place as an artist and do whatever one wants there, or how much do you actually need to do your work in relationship with others? Several of our faculty are helping students to think through these complex issues.

Do you see the conflict around these issues as you're experiencing them right here, in your institution, as a kind of culture war? Or isn't it that dramatic? I think it's dramatic, but I see it more as a shift of paradigm. I think we're trying to shift a very old paradigm, and that's not easy for people to do.

You've described it as the paradigm of the romantic and alienated artist, who functions only on the fringes of society, without any substantive role.

I guess that's what's going to shift. I was just as a foundation think-tank for two days, and a lot of the discussion was about community. What is community? et cetera. I have a lot of resistance myself toward extremes of either-or in any way, and I think it would be a tremendous mistake if everyone now felt that the only art that mattered is art that is out there in a very socially conscious way. Because we

ever figure out who one is except by pitting oneself against the world in some way? I don't mean to say that everyone should make "political" art—I have no one image of what art should be. I just know that everything in society exists within society. I want our students to think about where they are in relation to the society.

As the dean of a very important art school, have you found any ways to implement some of these changes? Or are they already happening quite naturally? Both. There are a lot of students and quite a few members of our faculty who really want to be working outside of the school. They want to bring the school into the city. You know, we've just started this cable-access show; we have a program of art in the libraries, and during the summer months we do classes at for kids. We've always had a for children. We have lots

of things that bring us into the city, but I think the mindset has only really shifted in particular instances. We still often look at these activities as bringing art into "improvised" locales, instead of realizing that we're often going into communities that have a strong cultural base of their own that we can also learn something from. I think traditionally when art schools have ventured forth, it's been seen as a kind of social work, and I think there's a similar confusion in the art world as well that has to be

removed by city aldermen. Responses to things the school has been involved with have really challenged our notion that we're separate. We really are an urban-based school, and if we ever want to be part of this city—which I personally very much want us to be—then we also have to think about how we protect ourselves into the city. Our students need the city. They need to get right inside the life-force of the city and the community. They need not to be separate, because as long as they're separate, the only thing they can generate work about is themselves. And they're really often too young to have articulated yet what they are, besides, how does one

flag, for instance, that

in women's underwear, that was removed by city aldermen. Responses to things the school has been involved with have really challenged our notion that we're separate. We really are an urban-based school, and if we ever want to be part of this city—which I personally very much want us to be—then we also have to think about how we protect ourselves into the city. Our students need the city. They need to get right inside the life-force of the city and the community. They need not to be separate, because as long as they're separate, the only thing they can generate work about is themselves. And they're really often too young to have articulated yet what they are, besides, how does one

do you feel is actually changing? Take your question, for instance—the ones you say need to be asked, like what is the responsibility of the artist to society? And what is the responsibility of society to the artist? What kind of answers have you personally come up with about how this relationship needs to be understood?

all know that we've gotten great joy and pleasure from things that were made from a very personal vision of the world. I wouldn't want us to condemn painting, for instance, or to categorically lop off whole disciplines because we've decided they're bourgeois. I think that's very reactionary. I want to see it all exist, and what I really would like for our students is for them to know the whole range of possibilities—and within that, to choose who they're going to be. And to know that this definition of themselves can evolve and change, and that they can start in one place and end up in another. But they've got to see models of people who've made those transitions.

Most of all they need to understand that there's more than one model for being an artist. You make that point so well in your comments questioning our assumption that the historical role of the artist has remained unchanged—as if freedom of expression has always been the central artistic concern. We also tend to assume that artists have always lived in a marginalized or antagonistic relationship to society, but they haven't.

One of the reasons my new book is very international is because I thought that, in order to find new models, I would have to look outside of this culture society tends to imploade itself, and the art world, which is a small part of that, can't be society, imploodes even further, be-

comes very dogmatic and very judgmental about who, this year, is doing the correct thing. I think any of those trends is very limiting, and that creative people should be expansive people, they shouldn't be limiting of other people's creativity. So, in the last few years I've been to twice, and both times I've been invited to speak. And when I was there, I had a tremendous opportunity to talk to people who were involved in debates about where art is going in this transition of the

I. What will be the place of art in this new society? They're having to rethink their whole society from the ground up, so even things like what will be the function of museums, what will be the function of art schools, who will get to go to school, what kind of work will be shown—all of this is under scrutiny. How do you create environments that truly represents the panoply of society, which is incredibly complex and racially diverse?

And in that sense, comparable to our own society.

Very comparable. I think who go to often fall in love with it, because what you see in are the same issues pushed to their limits. People say, "Oh, isn't there terrible racism there?", but it's not that different from here—it's just much more overt. You cannot avoid your race there, it's with you everywhere you go. Racism isn't hidden, the way it is in In every en-

counter you have with people, they immediately talk to you about politics. If you're not a political person, I think you'd hate live at such a pitch that if you're an intense person, you feel like, oh, this is home. Nobody thinks I talk too fast there; nobody thinks I worry about society too much, because that's what they worry about. So if you like political discussions, then you love

But you realize that for these people, the discussions are not just theoretical. They're really making policy. There's a and for instance, which is pushing against the saying, "You're going to establish a cultural policy as the becomes the government, so what's it going to be? How much freedom are artists really going to have, or is it going to become a country of social realism? Is it going to look like the revolution? Is it going to be like or There are lots of models now for what hasn't worked very well for artists. So artists want to be sure that they're going to have freedom and a range of possibilities—and not just be asked to make political art. And this is coming from very political artists, many of whom have been in the for many years.

So basically the tenor of these debates would feel quite different, if you were actually to attend one, from a similar kind of conference or debate in this country about what the future direction of an should be.

One of the things that has always struck me about training to be an artist in our society is that, unlike

rest of the world, which is a small part of that, can't be society, imploodes even further, be-

The big difference is that they're talking about really making policy. We don't get to make policy as artists, or writers, in this country. But we're ahead of places like in other ways—for instance, the kinds of community-based projects that are happening here aren't being done yet in Is there something similar going on in to what I experienced years ago when I was in which is that the local artists go abroad to study and then come back with some kind of watered-down version of modernism?

Yeah, there is that problem. But you have to realize that has had a cultural boycott for so many years that no one has allowed a show of art to go there, either to the museums or to the galleries. So all the international art that artists have seen, unless they travel, has come from issues of and They've been cut off for so long that when they do see a version of postmodernism or modernism, it looks very outdated to . I think the most exciting work happening there is when you have the really judgmentous art mixing with the Western traditions. All who are in any way progressive are also connected to black culture and are involved in it in some way. And they're influenced by it. Black artists are also influenced by "Western" art and popular culture. So where it's hybrid is where it gets interesting.

Let's go back, for a bit, to these issues about education. I'd like to know how you would envision re-training, or redirecting the standard university art department programs in this country, so that they are more in tune with what you called the paradigm shift. Do you have specific suggestions that might be helpful to somebody, say, who is reading this book? Somebody who might be trying to restructure an art department? Where should they start?

I think there are many things. First of all, the notion that anybody, at the age of eighteen, is ready to delve into their soul and pull out a universe is, as best, totally naive. What students need, fundamen-

tally, is a very good education, because one of the things artists aren't given—and it disempowers them terribly in the world—is good reading skills. And it's the same with writing. Very often young artists can't write well, and they're told not to worry about it, because they're artists. Artists need good language skills—I think that's crucial. But there's been this idea that if you verbalize, or intellectualize, it'll destroy the spontaneous, intuitive qualities of

artmaking. I think that's crazy—it's developing only half a person. I want our students to have a good, solid, historical education, so that they know the culture they're living in and are curious about the rest of the world.

It's interesting, because what we're doing is training people how to see. We're training people how to make things, and we're training them how to have vision. And so, what do you need for that? When you think about other cultures, and what spiritual people have to go through in their training, let's say, to become visionaries, it's a lifetime's process. We don't even tell our students that it's going to take their whole lives to become artists. We don't tell them that, because art stars make it in their twenties, so our students think this could happen to them. Often students complain that they have to do all these other courses in humanities and art history,

educational training for medicine or law or most other professions, where you go through years of learning about everything that's ever happened in your field, and you have to take in an immense amount of information, the way that art is taught, the student produces work for a diploma show. That means they spend those crucial learning years putting out rather than taking in. Many of them take hardly any art history or contemporary issues courses.

That's a very good way to put it.

So perhaps what you're saying is that we need to reverse this process, or at least get it into better balance, so that students will be taking in at least as much as they're putting out.

It's interesting, because what we're doing is training people how to see. We're training people how to make things, and we're training them how to have vision. And so, what do you need for that? When you think about other cultures, and what spiritual people have to go through in their training, let's say, to become visionaries, it's a lifetime's process. We don't even tell our students that it's going to take their whole lives to become artists. We don't tell them that, because art stars make it in their twenties, so our students think this could happen to them. Often students complain that they have to do all these other courses in humanities and art history,

out what they don't realize is that they're really developing themselves, and that without that, there's little to make art about.

Some of the retraining that needs to go on, wouldn't you say, is with teachers, because of their direct influence on the students? Teachers need to frame these issues as being important for the students.

I think sometimes the way that people themselves were trained is how they train other people, and it's very hard to shift that. My sense, in building institutions, is that what you need to do is bring in new people, young people, or older people who have kept up with new ideas and have changed and grown and evolved. You can have a whole spectrum of kinds of instructors, but the students need to understand that every person they encounter is just one piece of the puzzle, there isn't just one view. I remember when

— it was right after he'd been on the cover of *or somewhere like that*—and he was the theoretical hero of the moment. And I thought, our students really have no idea where he comes from. They think that this guy is magic—you know, that he fell out of the sky. They've never read

or ; they've never read the They have no idea whose shoulders he's standing on. And unless they understand where the arguments have come from, they can't even make a decision about whether they think he's right, or wrong.

or anything. Because he's fashionable in the art world, that's what the students respond to. But because they often don't have the critical tools, and aren't given them, they can't make decisions for themselves. You only get that courage by having developed your own sense of what's important.

What was the student response to ?

Well, what was most hilarious was that he read a wonderful paper in . However, he pronounced every word with the emphasis on the wrong syllable, so I don't think anybody really understood what he said. I'm not sure what the student thought—I think that, often, with those kinds of events, it's mostly spectacle. But the fact is, the students here are very intelligent and original. They haven't bought into any one world view, ideologically. But I also think what really has to happen, and it's going to take a long time before people are willing to do it, because it risks a lot, is that the whole way schools have been structured around separate disciplines, like sculpture or painting, has to be demolished. It doesn't make sense any more. People don't work that way any more.

You mean, there are no separate disciplines any longer?

I think people are working through ideas, and then they look for the medium that best actualizes their

idea, or they combine five different media. So I think art schools should be structured around ideas, not around physical matter or what tools you're going to use. Maybe they should be more like departments of narration, departments of political art, figurative art, abstraction, and so on—and then, whoever wants to work in whatever medium would think about the ideas first, and then find the medium at any given moment through which they could fulfill them. But it would be the ideas that would frame the school. And the ideas could change and we'd reconfigure the departments accordingly. Now, to do this you would have to knock down every art school that has been physically built to accommodate and separate all these media. You'd have to start from scratch. It's not happening tomorrow. In fact, we have a whole new building on Avenue, and one of my colleagues just said the other day, "You realize we have solidified ourselves into these disciplines with all those thick walls, and that means that we're inflexible." And he's absolutely right, because the twenty-first century, I am convinced, is not going to be about the exclusivity of forms any more; it's going to be about ideas. And the way that we've all structured our institutions is already obsolete. The students are beyond us, they work across disciplines and we can't really accommodate them. So that's a big problem.

Well, this is quite an astonishing set of statements! [Laughter]

What you're talking about is obviously much more far-reaching than the traditional generation gap.

We're different would be a mistake.

I see the students in this strange purgatory; they don't want to give up the physical, but they've already moved beyond it, in some way. They're already working in forms that don't have a physical base. And that's new, too. I don't know what it means, but I find it very interesting. I don't know if this generation will develop a tremendous longing for the natural physical world, or if it just won't matter to them anymore, because the physical plane isn't where people will want to be living anyway. But I do know that they're in a different mindset than I am, and I feel this difference very much. I feel more and more that I will always be pushing toward this sense of transcendence, and they won't. There's definitely a gap, and we spend half our lives here bridging that gap. But I think not to admit that we're different would be a mistake.

It scares the shit out of me.

I think we're moving out of the physical plane as a species. I don't know if it's good or bad.

It's world of hyperreality and cyber-space.

nonphysically based form in which things happen electronically. They don't happen on the physical plane.

So if you come out somewhere beyond postmodernism, then where are you?

It just means that they're conscious of what postmodernism is, and they're self-consciously not postmodern. But they're beyond it, in that they understand it.

What do you mean by that? What's a post-postmodern person?

teaching that they did not understand concepts like transcendence, or hope. They don't structure their lives as if they are moving toward a goal.

You mean they don't have the usual professional career goals, or what?

Not just that, but even personal goals. As modern-

usa, when we were growing up, there was always the feeling that one was ever moving toward perfecting oneself, to greater and greater levels. Or that one was always trying to transcend the philosophical system that one came out of, to move to the next thing.

These students don't frame their life with that sense of movement or progress. They live much more in a moment-to-moment way that isn't necessarily based on progression. It may not be going anywhere, and they can live with that.

Do you think this has to do with the endgame, apocalyptic atmosphere of our times? Maybe you can't have grand plans and big schemes for your life when the future of life on the planet is open to question.

I'm not sure that's the explanation, because I think we felt that, too, because we had the bomb. I think we also had an apocalyptic sense of things—an imminence that everything could just go, at any moment—but for different reasons. I don't know why this has evolved, but I think the computer is no small part of it. The computer is a very nonmaterial,

I don't think anybody's really written enough about what this individual absorption with terminals and machines means—you know, people's obsession with their computers and Intri-Net and E-mail and all these things.

Because I don't think anybody knows for sure. The people who have written about it, like claim that we are being affected dramatically, in ways that we don't understand, and one of the problems is that we never have the chance to discuss, debate or decide whether we even want these changes.

That's right. We're already in them—there's no going back. And we're moving so fast we don't even have time to reflect on where we're going.

One of the reasons it's scary for me is that I guess I've made a choice not to go.

I think a lot of people will make that choice in one way or another.

My instincts tell me not only that this is a direction in which I, personally, don't want to go, but also that it's a dubious direction for the whole human race. I guess I'm very attached to the physical, sensual world, and I'm not interested in a life lived plugged into machines—in fact, it's abhorrent to me.

You have to mention that for our students, their sensuality and physicality is mediated by the presence of AIDS, in a way that ours wasn't. I think it's hard to imagine what that would have been like—to be twenty years old and not to have freedom in that arena, to have friends who are ill and to lose people who are so young.

It could even make the physical world seem repellent.

It could. So I think that the world of AIDS is a whole new paradigm, too, that has to be thought about also. In the midst of this, we're trying to run that gigantic art school, and figure out how to prepare our students—we're not even sure for what. Because we're not sure what any of it will look like for them in twenty years. I know that the art world as it existed in the may never return. The students may never see that kind of boom again in their lifetimes. I think this is probably good for them, liberating, because it's forcing them to search for a route that is more interesting and has more integrity. None of them really believes anymore that they're going to be art stars—well, maybe some of them do, but most of them know better. They're trying to think about what's really meaningful, and so this is also our chance to say something to them about what's really meaningful.