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Doug Ashford in conversation with Vivien Trommer

About the thoughts on teaching, the economy of art, and the future of art schools

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In his interview, artist Doug Ashford talks about his thoughts on teaching, the economy of art, and the future of art schools. Ashford is professor at The Cooper Union in New York. This year, his course "The Non-Human" at the Summer Academy in Salzburg will engage with researches on the quality of "humanness" and aims to expand definitions of human life, bodies, and politics.

Vivien Trommer: You have been teaching at The Cooper Union in New York since 1987. Some of your students I met said: "Teaching art is at the center of your practice." What do they mean when they say that?

Doug Ashford: I hope they say this because they see our classroom as something generating new senses, unexpected possibilities for us – as it does for me. I have said many times that my work as an educator is more satisfying than my work as an artist – it allows departures from the desperate realities of a life. But with such a statement, I must differentiate between the two aspects of what I think we mean when we talk about our "work" as artists. One aspect is the autonomous rhythm of the making of things and events, a poiesis, which all artists do. The other is the attendance to the vicissitudes of our work's placement within the existing industry of art. School allows us to forget about art as a managed category of meaning, to ignore the painful athleticism demanded by mercantilism and shed any considerations for professional usefulness or institutional function. I stopped using disciplinary labels like "Sculpture" for my course many years ago in order to help engage propositions produced by students as endless speculation that could work against knowledge bureaucracy. The sense of producing outside of both definitions of discipline, of "control" or of "the specific field" – allows us to see beautiful consequences of failure. I think the generosity of failure is reinforced by our experiences of art outside the academy, and allows us to consider what we don't yet know we want, or can't yet allow ourselves to want.

VT: Would you say that your ability to keep teaching art at the center changed in the past years, especially with your growing success as a solo artist?

DA: Yes, but only because the demands of time are now so distorted when viewed through the competitive lenses of our hyper-athletic art world. Who is strong enough to be allowed to make their own time these days? And this is the condition of all labor now in a post-Fordist economy. Except for the very, very few, most are beholden to some context of bureaucracy that flattens time into chunks of profit or debt, putting us in hock to a designed future's violent progression. Accordingly, it is very hard to say really where the problem lays – in the success of one thing we work on or in the death of another. The ideals of education that I inherited from the 60s are now being destroyed by a university system that will eventually demand that I only produce professionals; never knowledge. Any possible re-invention of the self is collapsing under a rationalized model of the earning debt-ridden professional. In my early life, the training of the artist was always thought to

be outside of this kind of brutal practicality – a romantic notion for sure, but one that now has real political urgency. I am holding on as best as I can to see through university policies of privatization, the aggregation of debt onto student life, and beneath the boutique identities presented by gallery mercantilism. And here maybe is the real thought your question brings to mind: that with a little luck and the right intentions, the classroom itself can continue to be a place where this violence can be kept at bay – at least for a while. One teaching-performance tool that I use is to pretend that there is no such thing as time. By seeing learning as outside of any subservience to chronology, and its sinister progeny "progress," we can undermine what is useful or profitable to the normal life that our world so idiotically insists upon. I am as suspicious of memory as I am of identity.

VT: Academies of fine arts have undergone tremendous changes throughout their history. If we look back, academies started as training centers for the perfection of techniques and methods. After the Second World War art schools became spaces for conceptual thinking, whereas today they have to teach how to deal with the market-oriented globalized art world. Did you experience a change during your time at The Cooper Union?

DA: There have certainly been tremendous changes over the years at Cooper Union. The drive to create profitable scenarios within the longstanding context of a tuition- free learning context is only the most recent. Although it would be naive to position my classroom as not affected by this profiteering, for a variety of reasons, I have been able to hold on to the initial impulses I had as a teacher when I started. Most of my teachers did not go to graduate school, so I didn't either. Accordingly, today's omnipresent fiction that there is "terminality" or "resolution" to learning is something very foreign to me. Another factor – perhaps related to my skepticism of "the professional" – is that the academic infrastructure of Cooper Union was never able to provide me with a tenured position, perhaps because I said too many of the wrong things, I don't know. Regardless, in such a context of contingency I have always had to think partially outside of the institution – while remaining very committed to Cooper's socialist program as I understood it. This sense of being marooned and still activist is one that by perverse definition can undermine the normal course of events. My goals were always centered on how the conceptual platforms of art can change the apparatuses of power. So I do teach toward breaking art practices down into elements of thought and action that we can perceive and critique together. What appear to be the facts of our institutional lives are in the end often transformable by feelings. Students figuring this out is now proven in how their sensual research as artists has become a key factor in a rebellion against privatization at Cooper Union that is working!

VT: How should the ideal school be organized in the future?

DA: How about this: an open experiment in subjectivity that protects the labor of artists and compensates all equally for what they do. But it's a hard question because as much as I am interested in the administration of institutions as a kind of sculpture, I know that the real politics of sustainable institutions are always produced within a context of very difficult, at times terrifying compromise.

VT: You were a member of Group Material, a collaborative that organized over 45 socially engaged exhibitions and public projects between 1979 and 1996, such as “The AIDS Timeline,” “It’s a Gender Show,” “The People’s Choice,” and “Democracy.” By creating forums for political debates and confrontations, Group Material questioned the conventional concepts of presentation and exhibition making. Do you think that collaborations are still possible among a younger generation of artists?

DA: Of course! They are everywhere – some are named as such, but some are not self- declared or marked as collectives, or maybe they are even purposively invisible. This might be very wise, as we now see the branding of collective work taking on a somewhat sinister affiliation with the dominant labor models of "a creative class." It was always clear that to declare a collaboration is not in itself particularly radical. For Group Material the nature of our shared work was particular to the idea of non- hierarchical labor and shared decision-making at all levels – very specific to the time and place and the people involved. I try to remind myself that in an important way, artists have always collaborated both in the immediate sense of unconscious affiliation and love, and the extended sense of living outside of time: with others who we need to pull free from the stasis of a linear art history, or with strangers we need to remake according to fantasies of living without a past.

VT: This summer you will teach a course at the Salzburg International Summer Academy, an initiative that was founded in 1953 by artist Oskar Kokoschka as the “School of Vision.” Against this backdrop, do you believe that a school or time-based community can still create momentums for a better future?

DA: To be honest, I am kind of against the idea of the future. Within the classroom, I try to encourage flexible models of how our work can resist degradations of the present by trying to place itself outside heroic narratives of humanistic progress. For me, if places are going to be experienced as inventing subjective realities of wonder and care, they must be positioned against historical conceptions of a rigid idea of "humanness". My course in Salzburg is called "The Non-Human," and its premise is only possible because of the generosity of the historical term "artist." It is remarkably still a very flexible figuration! Within this term locations can be discovered where the separations between things and us, or between objects and subjects, can begin to collapse. In the class, we do some research to try to understand how this false opposition between perception and experience was built. By seeing the mendacity of such an opposition, we can define our own "humanness" with new terms. As in all my teaching, I like to think that whatever this momentum creates is so slow that it barely can be known as having any real effect. I am old enough now to see how the real result of such a slow, imperceptible curve of ethical change is stronger than the quicker effect of administrative power.

VT: "To be human is to struggle," says philosopher Reza Negarestani in one of his essays. He distinguishes the "human" from the "non-human" by its capacity to convert sentience into sapience. How do the ideas about the "non-human" relate to your thoughts on empathy?

DA: I am not sure I understand it all, but I think that Negarestani and I are using different notions of what surviving the terrorism of humanism might imply. For me, this demands a generative position, one that might free us from the constraints of an outlook that is anchored in violent fictions of consciousness always separated from perceptions. If we are going to try to see feeling as leading to knowledge, I would insist that we have to untether the concept of human progress achieved from its assumed dominion over nature, from any positive sense of control of impulse, or rejection of affect. I think I have said already that the only real nature we have is the one produced by our work. Nature and impulse are already us – and always have been, proven particularly in our capacity to reason through art. Art allows us to be ahead of whatever prescriptive roles for humanity we are assigned. Around this, I am sure that Negarestani and I agree. It is in the necessary work of reason where the demands for the spaces of collective meaning can become elaborate and beautiful. My statements on abstraction and empathy are more impressionistic than philosophical. I have used the art historian Wilhelm Worringer's writing to try to suggest how a state of non-humanness might reject the false stability suggested by the affirmational notion of empathy as a determining condition for understanding what is not us. For Worringer "feeling into" nature is too capricious to generate the critical anxiety that we need in truly facing each other in the world. Empathy implies that for me to be with you, I must replace my ideas with yours; your presence with my own. The non- human knows, that instead of basing themselves in projection, social determinations could become more collaborative; open to shared invention if they are allowed to remain immediate, common and abstract.

VT: Let us take a glance at your own art practice. In your recent installations, small abstract paintings meet documentary black-and- white photographs. An aesthetic confrontation between abstraction and figuration is created in a way that is new to the history of art. In general, art making seems about opening up limits and challenging boundaries. What is your personal approach toward art production?

DA: In the end, I am just trying to think about how visual experience changes me into another person. I want my artworks to be as persons, but not humans – in the sense of an unpredictable identity that lives outside the growing burden of heroes and slaves. In a way, these persons are failed humans. It occurs to me that the apparatuses of art, their commercial markets, and storehouses of false autonomy will continue to adapt to the fictitious "love of man" they promise to house and protect. The artwork is the presence of a person doing labor to understand how the world changes us. I am thinking now of how I answered the questions you had concerning the classroom and how I said that the feelings we make in a school could surprise us and change the facts of our existence. We can become exposed beyond empathy when we face each other through the work we do. The strange work we perform in making art expands the limitations of the forced labor we perform to merely exist, showing something beyond survival and subservience. The strangeness of this labor might be a state of a being that is neither recognizable nor legitimate nor completely understandable. It also may seem only momentary.

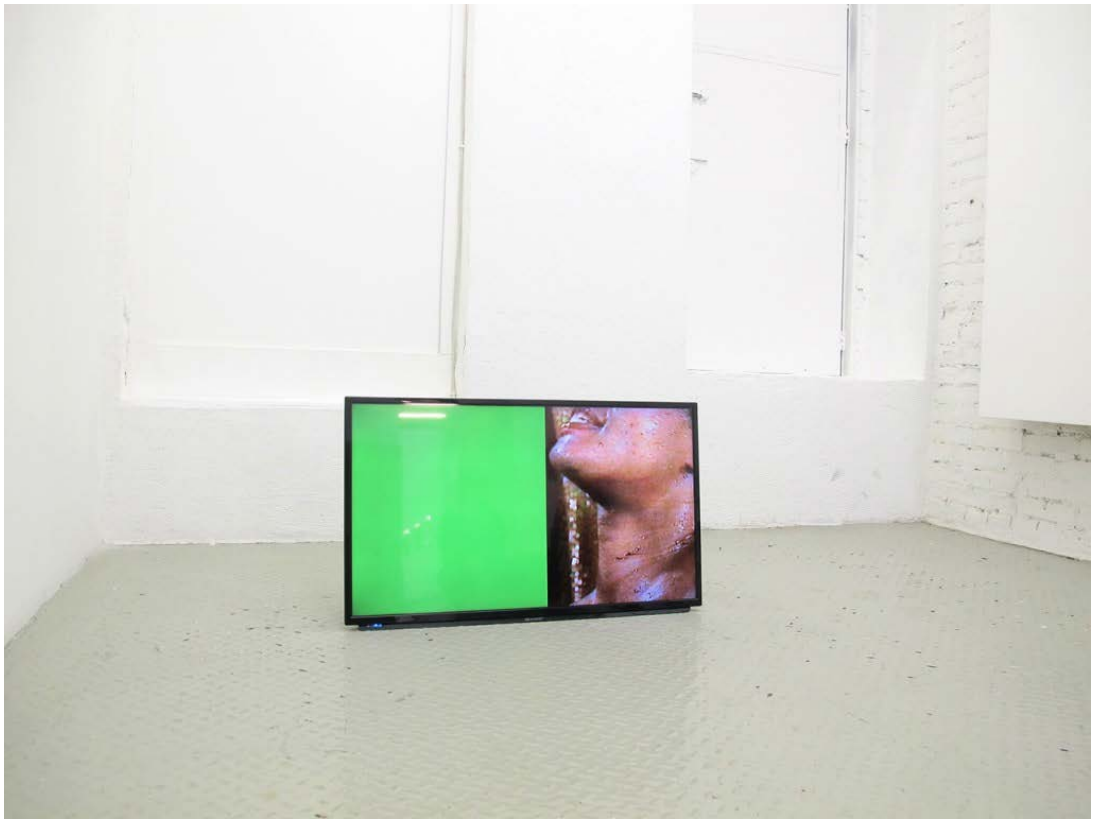
Doug Ashford is a teacher, artist, and writer. He lives in New York.
www.dougashford.info
www.wilfriedlentz.com/artists/Doug_Ashford

"Many Readers of One Event," 2012, installation view, dOCUMENTA 13.

"Many Readers of One Event," 2012, installation view, dOCUMENTA 13.

Final project preparation by Viktoria Bayer for "The Non-Human" seminar, Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, summer 2014.

Wedding with a pineapple by Khristine Perez for 3-Dimensional Design, Section A, The Cooper Union, spring 2013.



"Untitled Film," 2013, installation view "The problem today is not the other but the self," MINI/Goethe-Institut Curatorial Residencies Ludlow 38, 2015.

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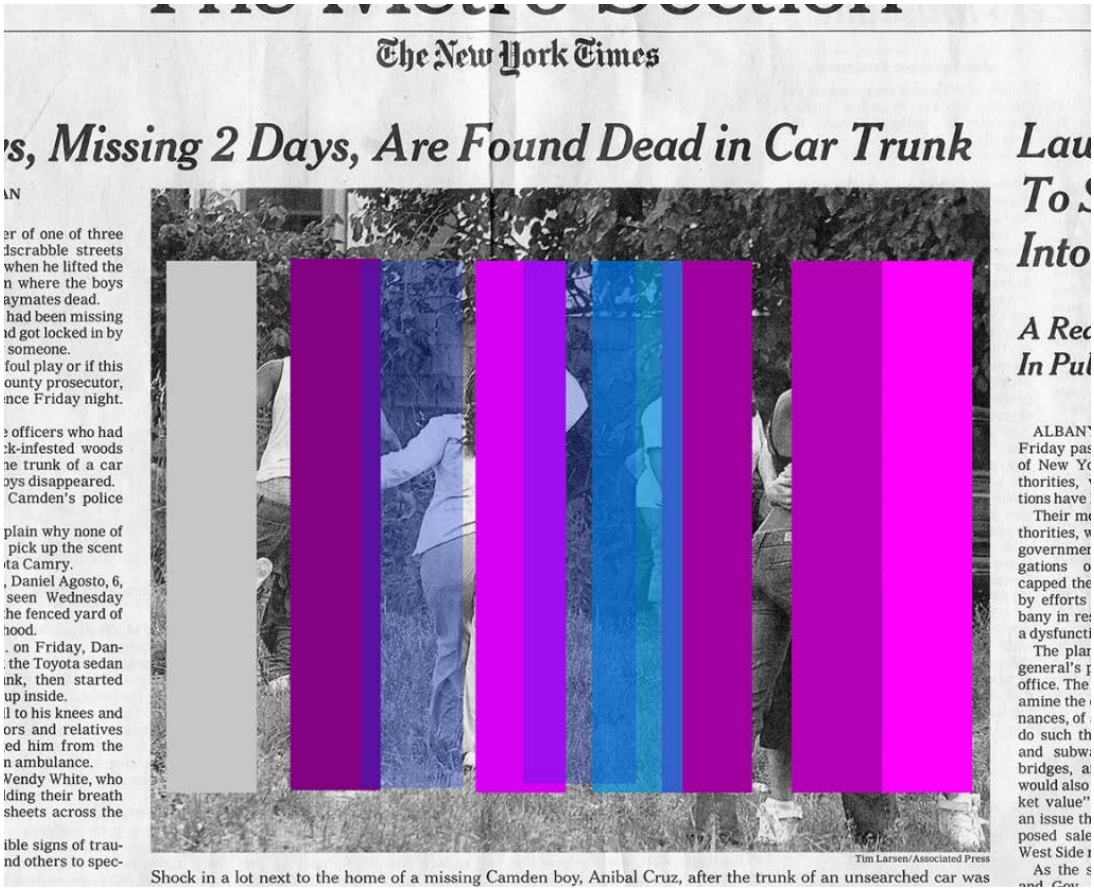

The New York Times

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Tim Larsen/Associated Press

Shock in a lot next to the home of a missing Camden boy, Anibal Cruz, after the trunk of an unsearched car was

"Missing 2 Days/Stripes," 2011, inkjet on paper.

"Six Moments in 1967 and Some of its Bodies," 2010-2011, installation view "Abstract possible: The Stockholm Synergies," Tensta Konsthall, 2012.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001 A3

A DAY OF TERROR: A Landmark Destroyed

Firefighters entering water on the rubble at the collapsed World Trade Center towers. A quarter of a century old and briefly the tallest in the world, the buildings were the workplace for tens of thousands.

THE BUILDINGS

Towers Believed to Be Safe Proved Vulnerable to an Intense Jet Fuel Fire, Experts Say

By JAMES GLANZ

Two Crashes, Then Two Collapses

THE STRUCTURAL DESIGN

THE CRASHES

THE COLLAPSES: WHAT MAY HAVE occurred

INTERIOR COLUMNS (Coated with insulation)

FLOOR TRUSSES

CONCRETE SLAB FLOORS

PROGRESSIVE COLLAPSE

The New York Times

...The enormous heat from the jet fuel fire probably caused the steel trusses holding up concrete-slab floors and vertical steel columns to bend like soft plastic, said Jon Magnusson, chairman and chief executive of Skilling Ward Magnusson Barkshire in Seattle, a structural engineering firm that worked out the structural design.

The skyscrapers had two means of defense against normal fire damage, Mr. Magnusson said. One, thick layers of insulation sprayed onto the steel beams, could have been breached by the initial crash, he said. Another, the building's sprinkler system, may have been disabled as well, or it may simply have been useless in the heat of the jet fuel fire.

Although they resisted collapse immediately after the planes' first impact, the hundreds of steel columns spaced around the outer facing of each tower eventually failed.

"They buckled outward and then the floors came down," said Mr. Magnusson, who warned that no conclusions could be reached yesterday since the information available was so sketchy.

Other experts agreed that the extreme conditions caused by the fire, and not unusual vulnerabilities of the buildings, were the likely causes of the collapse.

"There isn't anything particularly vulnerable about it," said Alne Brazil of Thornton-Tomasetti Engineers in New York, a structural engineering firm that worked on the Petronas Towers, the world's largest buildings, in Malaysia.

Buildings are usually not designed to withstand "the extreme levels of heat that would be faced in the situation with the amount of jet fuel and the explosion that occurred," Mr. Brazil said.

Mr. Kreiss, the Lehman spokesman, said it was too early to piece together a precise train of events, but he agreed that weakening by fire widened by catastrophic collapse of the floors, was the most likely possibility. "As the structure warped and weakened at the top of each crash, it — along with concrete slabs, furniture, fire curtains and other materials — became an enormous overall weight that eventually progressively overtaxed each lower level," he said in a statement.

The later collapse of the smaller 7 World Trade Center could have been caused by a combination of falling debris like the stairs and elevators, he said. A network of steel trusses ran between the two sets of columns, holding up each concrete floor and providing further strength to the buildings.

A special set of plates on each floor ran among the trusses, serving to dampen stresses on the buildings caused by winds of up to 208 miles per hour, said Jack Cermak, president of Cermak Peterka Peterson in Fort Collins, Colo., the firm that did the wind-tunnel testing for the design of the towers.

Dr. Cermak agreed that the impact of the crash itself probably could not have collapsed the massively reinforced building on its own.

"I presume, without knowing the details, that that collapse was caused by weakening of the structure due to the heat," Dr. Cermak said.

Matthys Levy, an architect at Weidlinger Associates and the author of "Why Buildings Fall Down" (Norton, 1992), watched the first tower collapse while standing at Seventh Avenue and Houston Street, some 20 blocks away.

"I saw the beginning of the top moving down, and the whole thing collapsed in a cloud of smoke," Mr. Levy said. "From what I saw, it seemed to come straight down."

Mr. Levy said the situation was much different from the one that occurred in 1945 when a much smaller plane slammed into the Empire State Building. That plane, a bomber with a smaller impact and less fuel, ripped a 20-foot hole in the structure, but the building remained standing.

Collapses at 5:20 p.m.

Sources: Urban Data Solutions; Skilling Ward Magnusson Barkshire; The Port Authority

'No structure could have sustained this kind of assault,' says one expert.

There was some disagreement yesterday about whether, decades later, the trade center towers had been designed to withstand an impact from an airliner filled with fuel.

The engineer who said after the 1993 bombing that the towers could withstand a Boeing 707, Leslie Robertson, was not available for comment yesterday, a partner at his Manhattan firm said. The original 707 had a gross weight of 160,000 pounds, and the 767 a takeoff weight of almost two and a half times that. The later plane carried about half again as much fuel, as well.

"We're going to hold off on speaking to the media," said the partner, Rick Entrala, at Leslie E. Robertson Associates. "We'd like to reserve our first comments to our national security systems, F.B.I. and so on."

But Anthony G. Cracchiolo, director of priority capital programs for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owned the buildings, said little thought had been given to the possibility of a plane crash into the towers.

"We never were asked to consider trying to protect the building from such a threat," said Mr. Cracchiolo, who was among those who coordinated the reconstruction after the 1993 bombing. "As structural engineers, there is nothing we could have done to protect the building from a direct impact from a plane as large as those."

Melvin Schweitzer, a member of the Port Authority board of commissioners from 1993 to 1998, said, however, that the board repeatedly inquired about that possibility. "We were just told that architects had explained that the building was designed to withstand a jet," Mr. Schweitzer said. "Frankly, when we raised that question, most of us were thinking of a small plane."

The architectural firm for the trade center, Minoru Yamasaki Associates of Rochester Hills, Mich., declined to answer specific questions about the collapse, and issued only a brief statement. "The company has been in contact with law enforcement authorities, and we will provide any assistance we can to aid the rescue efforts," the statement said.

Columbia's Seismographs Log Quake-Level Impacts

The crash of two planes into the World Trade Center and the collapses of the towers created shock waves that registered on sensitive instruments meant to monitor earthquakes.

In destructive energy, the building collapses were slightly larger than the small earthquake that shook the East Side of Manhattan on Jan. 17, scientists said yesterday.

"It was pretty good sized," said Lynn R. Sykes, a seismologist at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University, which tracks global earthquakes from its base 18 miles north of Manhattan.

Scientists at Lamont were watching news of the crashes on television when their seismographs began to jump.

"I just cried," said Won-Young Kim, the scientist in charge of monitoring quakes in the Northeast, knowing that the sensors were registering more than just the force of falling concrete.

The seismographs also recorded the impacts of the airplanes, the first at 8:46 a.m. and the second at 9:03 a.m., Dr. Sykes said. The tower collapses, he added, came at 9:59 and 10:28 a.m.

The destructive energy of the January earthquake was magnitude 2.4, a minor earthquake. It was felt in Manhattan and Queens. Dr. Sykes said the twin tower collapses were slightly larger in destructive energy.

(The collapse hours later of a much shorter building, 7 World Trade Center, did not register in initial seismograph readings, scientists said.)

"Next Day," 2015, inkjet on paper.