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.

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Temporary Services.
I was appointed dean and vice-president for academic affairs of the university in 19. having been a former chair of the graduate division before that. She received her bachelor's degree in literature at the university, where she was a protege of one of my first mentors with whom I worked through reading her book several years ago. A precursor to more recent bestsellers, the book questioned why so many "successful" 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 "Breakthrough," the writer, "because anxiety is part of the human condition. They destroy what people believe is essential to their intellectual and spiritual world. People who cause breakthroughs know that they have unsettled the foundation upon which the culture is structured, 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, will wither and die.

As I've come to know her better, it seems accurate to describe herself as just such a groundbreaking person. A leading writer in women's studies since the late sixties, and a writer on psychoanalytic theory and cultural politics, she has been mulling over the obsolete attitudes and strategies of the artist world for a long time, particularly the issue of the artist's responsibility to society, which she claims is a sensitive issue that makes everyone uncomfortable, defensive, insecure.

A collective strike of the artists' movement was scheduled to address the issue at all. Artists often choose rebellion, which alienates 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, elevating the artist as a marginalized, romantic figure who, the claims, operates "out of what calls the Pleasure Principle", while the rest of us struggle within the Reality Principle." Students need to think about their work, they feel, 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, have not been trained to think globally or politically about their position in society. In a sense, art has seceded 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...
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 onedimensional 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 "disenfranchisement" 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 society 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. 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 esthetic freedom, right? Disenfranchisement 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 students from a mile away, because they 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 separateness. But, I also feel 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
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 lap 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 comment 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 implode on itself, and the art world, which is a small part of the society, implodes even further. It becomes 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 critical people should be expansive people, they shouldn't be limiting of other people's creativity. So, in the last few years I've been 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 what art is going in this transition of the [ ].

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 represent 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 the same issues pushed to their limits. People say, "Oh, isn't there terrible racism there?" but it's not. It's not 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 encounter 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 it. But you realize that for these people, the discussions are not just theoretical. They're really making policy. There's a for instance, which is pushing against the and saying, "You're going to establish a cultural policy as it 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...?"

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 art should be.
but 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 training 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 are 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 I came to the— 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 narrative, 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]
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 this 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.

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.

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.