

New York State Artist Workspace Consortium

[Home](#) · [Publications](#) · [Opportunities](#) · [Who we are](#) · [What we do](#) · [Why we do it](#) · [Who makes it possible](#) · [Links](#) · [Contact us](#)

Visual Arts Workspaces and Contemporary Art Making

The New York State Artist Workspace Consortium, in collaboration with the New York State Council on the Arts and The Museum of Modern Art, presented a conference examining the evolving relationships between workspaces, artists, curators, funders, journalists, and communities through panel discussions and in-depth conversations. The conference was held at the Museum of Modern Art on Friday, October 2, 2009.

A written and video synopsis of the conference is below, or you can download and save the [PDF version](#). You may also listen to [audio](#) of the conference.

You may also download a PDF of the full publication, including the research report: *Engaging Artists: The Role of Artist Workspaces in Creating Work and Dialogue*.

Photos by Paula Court. Click on any image to see a larger version.

-
- [Welcome Remarks and Research Synopsis \[video\]](#)
 - [Panel #1: The Creative Process \[video\]](#)
 - [In Depth Conversation #1: Focus on the Artist](#)
 - [In Depth Conversation #2: Focus on Curatorial Collaboration](#)
 - [In Depth Conversation #3: Focus on Critical Dialogue and the Workspace](#)
 - [Panel #2: Artists, Community and Audience \[video\]](#)
 - [Audio](#)
 - [Download PDF](#)

Welcome Remarks and Research Synopsis

Video Segments:

[Welcome - Pablo Helguera and Elizabeth Merena](#)
[Research Findings - Diane Espaldon](#)

Welcome

Pablo Helguera, director of adult and academic programs at the [Museum of Modern Art](#), opened the conference by welcoming the audience to MoMA for a program about fostering creativity in contemporary art today. Helguera linked the topic at hand to MoMA's upcoming exhibition "Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity," noting that the Bauhaus model inspired the creation of a variety of artist workspaces and cultural institutions, including MoMA.

Pablo Helguera

He stressed that the work the presenters and attendees do is crucial to the New York arts community both today and for the long-term.

[Elizabeth Merena](#)

Elizabeth Merena, director of visual arts at the [New York State Council on the Arts](#), said the conference was intended to present a conversational program geared toward an audience that reflected the diversity of the New York arts community. Merena acknowledged the support of the [Ford Foundation](#), the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) and [The Andy Warhol Foundation](#).

Research Synopsis

Diane Espaldon from the [LarsonAllen Group](#), a consulting firm based in Minneapolis, presented research about artist workspaces that she worked with NYSAWC to compile.

Espaldon defined artist workspaces as non-profit, year-round venues that provide artists the freedom for experimentation and the resources to create new work, specifically space and time. Her research for NYSAWC questioned why workspaces are important, explored their impact, and attempted to define the success of artist workspaces, as seen by the artists themselves.

Three main points emerged from the study. First, Espaldon asserted that successful artist workspace environments create "internal push and external pull," which encourages "stretch" among the artists. Espaldon described the "internal push" as an increased

[Diane Espaldon](#)

self-confidence and an expansion of artistic vision that result when artists have the time, space and support to take risks. The “external pull” comes from the support system and social community in the workspace, which led many artists interviewed in the study to make more work.

The second measure of success, she said, is that the work produced during an artist’s time in residency serves as a true realization of his or her vision and has some impact in the public sphere.

Finally, Espaldon noted that successful workspace programs create career advancement opportunities that help artists turn their practice into a sustainable vocation and lead to direct tangible results, including exhibitions, sales and media coverage. She concluded that the primary purpose of artist residency programs is to foster the creation of artwork, but that the exposure of that work – during its creation and after – helps artists assert their purpose in society.

[^ top](#)

Panel #1: The Creative Process

Moderator:

Linda Earle, Executive Director, [The New York Arts Program](#), Ohio Wesleyan University

Panelists:

Mina Takahashi, Editor, [Hand Papermaking](#)

Byron Kim, Artist

Nancy Princenthal, Senior Editor, [Art in America](#)

Video Segments:

[Introduction & Mina Takahashi](#)

[Nancy Princenthal](#)

[Byron Kim](#)

[Linda Earle on Skowhegan](#)

[Discussion and Q&A](#)

[Linda Earle](#)

Opening the first session, moderator **Linda Earle** laid out trends in the artists’ world of “connectivity, community and a growing interest in crossing traditionally defined boundaries of interest.” All, she said, have implications for both audiences and professionals.

First speaker **Mina Takahashi** recalled the time nearly ten years ago when the New York State Artist Workspace Consortium came together, agreed on the name “artist workspaces” and came to the realization that “we were this previously undefined field.” [Mina Takahashi](#)

That realization, she said, still left many intangibles, in what can be a mysterious and “sometimes inscrutable” process.

Exhibition spaces open their doors to the viewer, she noted, while workspaces are the opposite: “Protected safe havens for artistic experimentation, and we generally keep our doors closed to the public eye.”

She added: “When creative process has primacy how do we express what happens on site behind closed doors and how do we bring about an understanding of the value and importance of the esoteric nature of the experimental art lab environment?”

She explored some answers with pictures, including one image from [Dieu Donne Papermill](#), of a papermaker, a mysterious, anonymous arm creeping in the picture to help, illustrating the collaboration that takes place in an artist workspace.

In another image, artist Byron Kim and a colleague attempt to match paper color to sky, an acknowledgment of the artist-centered approach of the workspace.

Peer-to-peer collaboration was the takeaway from an image of artist Matthew Day Jackson painting on the walls of the [Lower East Side Printshop](#).

An image from a multimedia project at [CEPA Gallery](#) in Buffalo illustrated how the public can be brought in, as an artist interviewed subjects about objects that they chose to represent their right to be Americans.

From [Smack Mellon](#) in Brooklyn and the [Women’s Studio Workshop](#) in Rosendale, NY came images of works in progress that communicated the need for workspaces to provide diverse, capital intensive materials and spaces to accommodate the creative process.

Final photos recalled Hand Papermaking’s own one-time multidisciplinary workspace, a collaborative building of a giant kite to mark the publication’s 20th anniversary. The process, Takahashi noted, was well-documented, bringing her to one last point: Archives, she said, can potentially hold a wealth of collateral material that “can be marshaled into crafting the stories of artists’ workspaces.” [Nancy Princenthal](#)

Second speaker **Nancy Princenthal**, as a writer, said she has always valued the laboratory function of workspaces where “some very critical transactions take place,” sometimes in the form of a “push-pull” collaboration. When artists arrive, often without pre-judged ideas or skills, growth can take place, even if it is occasionally uncomfortable in the process.

As a critic, she said, she has found workspaces a valuable place to see what is happening among artists, young or otherwise, who are “operating at the margins,” without the benefits of commercial exposure, and without the pressure of commercial demands, as well. She noted that the upcoming show at MoMA on the Bauhaus movement is a reminder that artists workspaces have always been an “enormously important part of the art world.”

Earlier in her career, Princenthal said, she worked as an administrator at art spaces Printed Matter and Creative Time. In the shadows of the World Trade Center, she noted, rose for several years a collaboration called “Art on the Beach,” which brokered marriages between artists and encompassed everything from the “Freedom of Expression National Monument” to a Bill T. Jones performance, aboriginal dancers and a collapsed “mushroom cloud” of found appliances.

Artists workspace administrators, she noted, have the unique challenge, sometimes difficult, of negotiating for the public stake in art, which doesn’t get talked about in the art world’s other presenting institutions, including galleries.

Byron Kim

Byron Kim, a painter, discussed his and his colleagues’ occasional forays into other media. An edition of paper kites explored the theme he returns to often: “What I’m doing here, what my relationship is to everything else.” Because he wanted the kites to disappear, he made them the color of the sky. Because he insisted they be able to fly, a planned edition of 30 turned into 27.

Another of his sculptures, a 125-gallon reef tank in which viewers couldn’t see the fish but the fish could see them, took him into a world of aquariums which he knew nothing about, he said. He discussed projects by a painter colleague, who worked in print, neon and film, and a sculptor who worked in video. “A lot of us when we go into these other fields we require assistance,” he said.

But he concluded with a “shout out to Diane’s lone auteur making art for art’s sake. I still find myself 99% of the time in the studio just looking at the wall.”

Leading into the question time, moderator Linda Earle discussed her ten years at Skowhegan, a residence program for emerging visual artists.

The program, she said, is committed to teaching standard skills and techniques that artists can then utilize in whatever ways they want. “Skill and experimentation,” she said, “are not mutually exclusive.”

One rare skill that the residency teaches is fresco, which, she noted, becomes a “process-oriented level playing field for people.” Few who are in residence have done it before, she said, and the teaching process is about learning a skill as well as “patience, openness, and engagement with very powerful materials.”

Panel L-R: Byron Kim, Nancy Princenthal, Mina Takahashi, Linda Earle

During the question period, Takahashi was asked to comment on a playful image taken during the papermaking process. Some artists, she said, come to the studio and want to get their hands wet; others arrive and engage in a more hands-off way. Papermaking, she said, is not often taught and can be overwhelming; some artists “delve right in” and others don’t.

An artist who works in China commented on the need for workspaces there, where commercial opportunity flourishes, but what is missing is “having the opportunity to stare at the wall or discuss why you’re staring at the wall.”

Asked to comment on the distinction between artist workspaces and residencies, Princenthal said the net result is in some ways the same.

Asked about how she writes about what’s happening in workspaces and how their activities can become better known, Princenthal said that the answer was tricky. Work generally “isn’t covered unless it has become part of the public dialogue,” she said, and it is difficult to write about work that readers won’t likely have an opportunity to see. She added that “it behooves all of us who write about art” to pay attention to what is happening in workspaces; she noted that public exhibitions in the workspaces are generally written about.

Earle, in closing, added that while Skowhegan, for one, doesn’t want the work done there to be reviewed, there are ways for writers to interact with workspaces, by using them as a way to educate themselves and deepen their connections with artists.

[^ top](#)

In-Depth Conversations

In-Depth Conversation #1

Focus on the Artist: How to Build Support for Visual Artists

Moderators:

Ruby Lerner, CEO/President, [Creative Capital Foundation](#)

Yvonne Force Villareal, Co-Founder, [Art Production Fund](#)

The focus of this session was how to build support for visual artists.

One key issue addressed was the impact of technical assistance on artists and their work. Carol Parkinson, executive director of Harvestworks, noted that the primary focus of residencies is to move work forward. Toward that end, Harvestworks stresses technical assistance as a means for skill development; specifically, in the multi-disciplinary studio, artists learn how to mine and manage streams of data.

Villareal, Lerner

Sydney Waller, executive director of [Sculpture Space](#) in Utica, pointed out that the industry in a residency program's local area can be a resource for artists who want to develop new skills or try different materials. Residency programs should engage their communities and partner with local businesses to build support for their artists. Alyson Baker, executive director of Socrates Sculpture Park, added that it's important to understand your organization's assets. **Yvonne Force Villareal** concurred, noting that her company Art Production Fund makes a list of all materials needed for each project and then tries to get in-kind donations.

Each artist's residency need is going to be different, said Ariel Shanberg, executive director of the [Center for Photography at Woodstock](#), so technical support has to be flexible enough to accommodate different types of work and stages in the process. Baker agreed that while some programs may be fairly tightly focused on one medium, others like Socrates need to be even more flexible to accommodate a wide range of materials and approaches.

Ruby Lerner

Creating more media support and exposure for artists was also raised. **Ruby Lerner** questioned the over-saturation of email and online communications. The communications machine may be operating, and social networking is a huge focus, but is it working? Force argued that starting with a personal connection, like a journalist who follows a certain artist's work, can often be more fruitful than blanket communications. She suggested engaging artists in how they're going to get their work or project out into the world, building on their network and, if possible, their gallery's network.

Yvonne Force Villareal

While the strategy may work for established artists, for emerging artists, Baker said, it can be more difficult to engage the media and reach the desired audience because of the lack of a network, a concern echoed by a young artist in the group. To create a mailing list, Lerner suggested tapping the personal orbit first, adding that posting something online doesn't necessarily mean one is getting meaningful hits.

She said she loves the saying, "Viral is word of mouth on steroids," praising word of mouth and personal relationships as the best marketing tools as opposed to the over-used email.

In developing an audience for an emerging artist's project, Lerner suggested asking the question: "Who is this for?" She took this approach in developing audiences for an independent film house in Atlanta. Once that question is answered, a methodology for reaching those people can be built, through media they're using and special interest organizations. Partnering with relevant organizations can bring a specific target audience to the table. She stressed the importance of building a segmented mailing list that allows tracking who's coming to what and what engages them.

Villareal, Ruby and participants

The group discussed how the intersection of contemporary art with social and cultural issues offers opportunities to expand the established audience for emerging artists' work. Asking what the artist is trying to accomplish and looking to the themes of the work can often lead to other communities. One participant described this as "affinity-based" marketing – looking at the subject and content of the work for marketing cues. Special interest groups like social justice organizations and networks of environmentalists can be relevant communities to tap for potential audience development.

Other issues the group did not have time to discuss included: How can arts administrators as a group expand the circle of artists who are supported? How can artist spaces collaborate with independent curators to generate new ideas? What kind of compelling language can be used to get corporations to support artist spaces? What happens after an artist has found some success? How can artists be supported in mid-career and shown a long-term commitment? How do artists working across disciplines as curators and writers find support? How do emerging artists and recent grads find residencies?

Participants mentioned the following ideas and resources during the session:

- [New York Times magazine article](#) about how musician Jonathan Coulten uses math/technology to figure out where to tour so that he won't lose money.

- [Peter Broderick's website](#) on self-empowerment for artists, and distribution methods.
- Website of [Brave New Films](#)
- Article by Wired magazine founder Kevin Kelly "1,000 True Fans"
- Artist resource/tip: make sure you use the other residents in your program as a resource to expand your skill set and concepts.

At the end of the discussion, artists in the group shared brief stories of great residencies:

- [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#)
- [Oxbow](#), an interdisciplinary residency that helped a grad student break out of his medium.
- [Harvestworks](#), Ken Jacobs
- [Socrates Sculpture Park](#)
- [Fabric Workshop and Museum](#), Philadelphia (open ended timeline, work with project coordinator)
- [Art Park](#) in Rhodos, Greece
- [IASPIS](#), Sweden (immersion in a whole different life, international cultural exchange)

[^ top](#)

In-Depth Conversation #2

Focus on Curatorial Collaboration: How does a workspace facility support meaningful collaboration between curators and creators?

Moderators:

Ian Berry, Curator and Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs, [Tang Teaching Museum](#), Skidmore College

Sarah Suzuki, The Sue and Eugene Mercy, Jr. Assistant Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books, [MoMA](#)

The focus of the conversation was the role of the workspace in supporting meaningful collaboration between curators and creators. In addition, the group tackled the challenge of curators working with living artists in the workspace arena to produce new works.

Suzuki, Berry, and Participants

Pertinent to this relationship are the different ways that workspaces need to function as producers; concurrently, curators must be willing to visit workspaces and bring the work back into the exhibition space. Moderator **Ian Berry** launched what resulted in a lively discussion by offering the following: "When I am making an exhibition, I might call a place like Dieu Donne Papermill for work and support. In this way, workspaces support my curatorial effort in small but critical ways."

Impressions of workspace ideals are one way to understand the dynamic between workspace, creator, and curator. This includes providing artists with the room to think and experiment and the opportunity for younger artists to work one-on-one with mentors and established artists. At large institutions, there are ample resources but this comes with the substantial need to discuss and negotiate creative issues. Smaller workspaces offer more flexibility. Workspaces can be encouraged to be proactive because, often, curators do not have access to, or knowledge of, the work being created in workspaces. Workspaces which stay in touch with curators foster an important dialogue that can assist artists in their professional career development.

[Sarah Suzuki and Ian Berry](#)

Berry asked participants for specific suggestions about how curators can have a better relationship with workspaces without disrupting the creative safety of the workspace environment. One successful model held up was Skowhegan, which has become more involved in external programming, alleviating curatorial pressure to visit the workspace to see the work being created there.

A key component is for curators to understand that they are looking at the creative process as opposed to finished work. Wave Hill offers a model of on-site exhibitions during which curators visit, offset by two-month artist residencies when the galleries are closed. While visiting artists are not pressured to show work, curators have access to the work. Writers then interview visiting artists as a way to document the creative process without

being intrusive of the space.

For its resident artists, [Lower Manhattan Cultural Council](#) schedules individual studio visits with curators from museums, non-profit organizations, galleries and independent art consultants, who visit four artists for 30 minutes and provide each with a professional development experience. Because it is "just a conversation," and not a critique, the visit does not intrude on the safety of the workspace.

Visiting workspaces has influenced curatorial perspectives and methods, and curators are changing some programming to fit the workspace ideal, thus, pushing back at the museum model. So how can curators and artists utilize museum and exhibition spaces differently to reflect this?

Mark Dion spoke about the feedback mechanism at workspaces as an important and concrete way to formulate and speak about projects. When artists leave school, the "silence" can feel deadly. Art students leave a very structured program where there is a great amount of dialogue and the opportunity to participate in community, but are also

often so focused on their own work and overloaded with structure, that they do not build the community that they need when they leave this environment.

What impact will the difficult financial climate have on workspaces and how is this current climate an opportunity for artists? There was consensus that collaboration is key. Many workspaces will not be able to continue operating if they do not collaborate on programming, whether publications, partnering with organizations outside of the artistic sphere, utilizing and exhibiting in public spaces or resource sharing. Fundraising and earned revenue (sale of publications, art works and merchandise; contract work for artists, etc.) are essential to workspace sustainability.

Finally, how do curators stay open to new work being created in workspaces? **Sarah Suzuki** pointed out that allowing oneself to be challenged is essential to the curatorial process and that when she sees something she doesn't like she often thinks about it more than something she responds to positively. If the curator trusts the artist, he or she knows that the work will lead somewhere new.

[^ top](#)

In-Depth Conversation #3

Focus on Critical Dialogue and the Workspace: How can the contemporary art press consider the workspace in the artists' process?

Moderators:

Phong Bui, co-founder, editor and publisher of [The Brooklyn Rail](#)

Katy Siegel, professor of Art History at [Hunter College/CUNY](#)

This session drew a mix of artists, editors and workspace curators for a wide-ranging discussion of how artists and workspaces can navigate the new media world, where web sites proliferate while the mainstream media cuts radically back.

Two issues dominated the discussion: The stated topic of how to bring the workspace into the public media dialogue, and the even more basic question of how to get any kind of media attention for artists. The problems were easier to identify than the solutions.

Phong Bui and participants

Many publications no longer have a budget to pay travel costs for reviewers to see shows outside their immediate vicinity, **Phong Bui** noted, with the result that coverage is haphazard and driven by whether a reviewer is "going to visit their in-laws." Reviews in general are being given less space in publications, at the same time as the importance of critics is receding, several in the room said.

Participants laid out a number of needs that aren't being met by the reduced arts coverage overall: An artist from China is frustrated because non-U.S. citizens must have print coverage of their work to ensure that their residency visas are renewed. Steve Woodall, director of [Columbia College Chicago's Center for Book & Paper Arts](#), thinks more media coverage could help support "artist's books," works of art in book form, which are currently undervalued as an art form. Artists crave the validation that a review brings, said Ann Kalmbach from the Women's Studio Workshop. **Katy Siegel** stressed that print publications have traditionally served a history function, fostering public dialogue years later, after there's been time to digest and process. What's-happening-now Internet coverage doesn't make a good substitute, nor is it easily archivable.

[Katy Siegel, Sina Najafi and participants](#)

A number of creative solutions were discussed. The [Carriage House at the Islip Museum](#) has looked at contracting for independent reviewers to write about exhibitions, with editorial autonomy, so the results could be posted on the web. Siegel suggested seeking out coverage from regional and academic publications, beyond the New York Times, Art in America and Artforum, while Phong Bui advocated for using web links to generate dialogue that bypasses the major print publications. A suggestion to pay transportation costs or even flat-out fees to get reviewers from the mainstream press to write about shows was dismissed.

Nancy Princenthal, a senior editor at Art in America, suggested that there might be an opportunity in the new interest that many publications have in interviewing artists in their studios before shows open, and several others agreed that audiences at this point in time are interested in process, as much as the final product. That, they noted, is a way to incorporate the workspace into the coverage, as well. Two upcoming Chicago shows will take the artist's studio as their theme.

Participants

One participant, Sina Najafi, editor-in-chief of [Cabinet magazine](#), rejected the idea that reviews are important, noting that NYSCA doesn't require them for funding requests. His magazine doesn't run them and doesn't do artists' interviews, either, unless artists are talking about their primary research focus. That, Siegel noted, relates back to the current interest in process.

Participant attitudes diverged on how much access the press should be allowed to workspaces. The Women's Studio Workshop encourages its artists to make mistakes, giving them a "freedom to fail," and isn't sure that critics should have access to them.

A number of participants felt that by inviting other artists, as opposed to journalists, into the workspace, a valuable dialogue can occur and take the place of formal criticism.

[^ top](#)

Panel #2: Artists, Community & Audience

Moderator:

Alyson Baker, Executive Director, [Socrates Sculpture Park](#)

Panelists:

Mark Dion, Artist

Edgar Arceneaux, Artist

Sina Najafi, Editor-in-Chief, [Cabinet Magazine](#)

Video Segments:

[Alyson Baker and Edgar Arceneaux](#)

[Alyson Baker](#)

[Mark Dion](#)

[Sina Najafi](#)

[Discussion and Q&A, Part I](#)

[Discussion and Q&A, Part II](#)

[Discussion and Q&A, Part III, Closing Remarks](#)

[Edgar Arceneaux](#)

To lead off this panel about how artists and workspaces create social spaces that engage multiple communities in multiple ways, **Edgar Arceneaux** introduced a lively video of his [Watts House Project](#), an "artist-driven urban revitalization project centered around the historic Watts Towers" in the Los Angeles neighborhood.

The large-scale collaboration aims to redo 20 properties in the economically challenged neighborhood surrounding the well-maintained national Watts Tower monument. In bringing artists in, Arceneaux said, the ongoing project emphasizes that "the aesthetics should be born from the pragmatic necessities of the place," with artists and architects working hand-in-hand with neighborhood residents, all with an overarching goal of expanding community.

Said the designer of a porch, of the work and his client: "The design process is not only just putting a bunch of things together, it's more of understanding how he and the community will use the space."

[Alyson Baker](#)

On the other side of the country, sits the [Socrates Sculpture Park](#), which attracts 75,000 visitors each year to its outdoor museum space on a formerly desolate, illegal landfill site beside New York City's East River. Executive Director **Alyson Baker** described the "layering of roles" that takes place at the artists' workspace program and exhibition space for large-scale sculpture where, because works are built on site, "the creative process is as evident as the work itself."

Close to 800 emerging and established artists have spent time there since its founding in 1986, she said, and through a community partnership the park has become a site for festivals and events such as a craft and design fair, a destination for international tourists and "a nexus for diverse communities." Much of the work, she noted, would be difficult to achieve without the space, financial and technical resources that Socrates can offer. Artists have responded by creating work that incorporates the landscape, the river, seasonal changes and the Manhattan skyline backdrop.

[Mark Dion](#)

Panelist **Mark Dion**, who works with communities on collaborative exhibition projects, from community gardens to archeological digs, spoke about the [Mildred's Lane](#) residency program he runs with J. Morgan Puett on a Pennsylvania farm on the banks of the Delaware River.

The project, he said, stemmed from a frustration with the state of art education. "I am deeply disturbed by the homogenization and professionalization of art education," he said, noting that as art education moves increasingly into the standardized university format, "what suffers is experimentation, risk and a fundamental appreciation that a commitment to art production is very unlike a nine-to-five job." Overloaded students miss out on "highly unstructured hanging out time," he added.

The three-week thematic seminars at Mildred's Lane result in collaborative projects, whether a major art work or body of research. "Everyone works," he said, in the artist-led sessions, but extensive time is also set aside for social action, including large Saturday night dinners which include the local community. The program, he said, doesn't have non-profit status, and he covers the "significant deficits," the trade-off being that it isn't hindered by bureaucracy.

"We think of Mildred's Lane largely as a counterbalance to studio-based residencies which promote individual artists' production, conventional media and the visiting artist critic method of teaching," Dion said, adding that the program is "highly interdisciplinary," and draws on the strengths of the local community, as well as its proximity to New York City, which lets it lure visiting scholars and artists. Themes have included archeology, pond-building, 21st century retail and living on and off the land. The long-term goal, he said, is "imagining the farm as a new kind of sculpture park."

Sina Najafi

Sina Najafi rounded out the speakers with a discussion of "audience and community" that forms around a dispersed readership such as that of his nonprofit magazine Cabinet, after the Renaissance-era "cabinet of curiosities" and Foucault's "ethics of curiosity," which encourages caring for one's surroundings and putting aside hierarchies. When the magazine was founded in 1999, he said, it was conceived as a sourcebook of ideas for artists, which took the fragments and half-worked out ideas from artists' studio walls as a source of inspiration and starting point.

Building an audience from scratch, Cabinet had to "write the reader into existence," in the words of Nietzsche, Najafi said, adding that the founders took it to mean "that any project that tried to do something in some sense has to coalesce a bunch of nebulous feelings."

Today, Cabinet sells about 12,000 copies, but Najafi said the readers are still somewhat unknown, partly because they aren't met face to face, and partly because the editors encourage a "fractured community," to discourage ownership by a single group.

Academic content sits side by side with pranks; editors encourage an "ethics of unhomeliness," he said, hoping that "some people bump into things they wouldn't normally have read."

Direct interaction often comes in the form of a prank, he said, such as a lottery for which the winner got to write an article for the magazine. Another project invited 30 readers in, locked the doors and then made them take a test on what was in the magazine.

Arceneaux, Najafi, Dion and Baker

In the question period, Arceneaux was asked to discuss his definition of community as interactive, not geographic. On close analysis, he said, "you often realize that the boundaries of where something ends and begins is not there." Community is intrinsic, he said, and neighborhood is extrinsic, and "it's important for us to make the distinction." Within the ideas of one boundary versus the other, he said, is the status quo, adding that "we describe everyone who is invested in the Watts House project as our community."

Najafi discussed the new event space and editorial office that Cabinet recently opened, noting that, "The real human being sitting there and then talking to you is a very different experience than this abstraction."

Dion spoke of his role coming in to communities as "a little bit like a troubleshooter," adding to an existing discussion, but always putting him "outside the community." When he looks across the broad spectrum of art students, he finds a model "that has very little to do with art." For Arceneaux, the financial burden that many MFA graduates face and the financial disparity within the art world is a concern.

Arceneaux noted that the country is at a "radically creative moment," and that corporations are struggling with the same questions as artists: How to reach dispersed audiences, and what they will be receptive to. At the Watts House project, he said, the distinctions between audience and artists and community "isn't so helpful" because all overlap.

A questioner asked Najafi about having artists produce editions for Cabinet, which she called another form of artist workspace. These, he said, have included CDs and posters, and the magazine offers its artists whatever help they need. Cabinet connected Matthew Buckingham with a Princeton engineer, for example, for a poster on what Mt. Rushmore would look like 5,000 years from now.

Asked what students could do to break out, Dion recommended spending "an enormous amount of time hanging out" with the other students in the community, noting that through history, "the pub has been as much a pedagogic space as the lecture hall." Baker referred back to Espaldon's research and encouraged looking at workspaces which target emerging audiences. Arceneaux's advice was to "make decisions in defiance of good taste and form."

One audience member questioned workspaces' emphasis on emerging artists, noting that artists in every stage of their careers are in danger of deadlock. Baker responded that workspaces do try to work with artists at all stages but noted how surprised she was at the study's findings that emerging artists end up being more of the focus. Arceneaux added that more-established artists aren't always in a position to take part in workspaces, given the obligations of family and mortgages. Espaldon added that her research backs up the assertion that financial considerations are key and that the stipends aren't always enough.

With the conference concluding, participants continued the dialogue during the reception.

[^ top](#)

