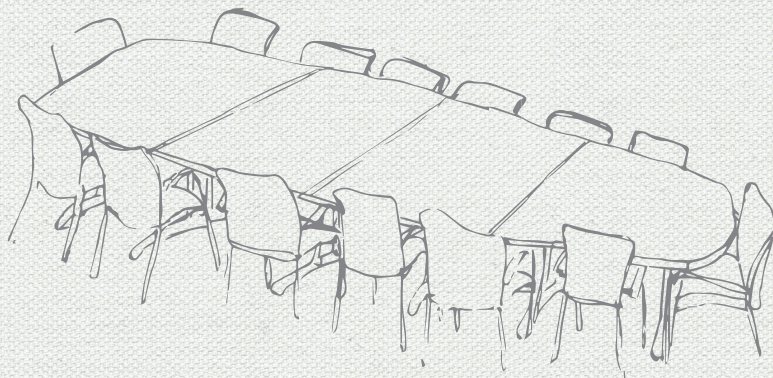




CRITICAL THEORY and the ARTS

Robert Hullot-Kentor,
chair

ONE-YEAR MA PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS



**ART IS A
STRUGGLE
WITH
WHAT
DOESN'T
YET
EXIST.**
— P. VALÉRY

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I. Introduction

“Art knows us better than we know ourselves.”

– T.W. Adorno

The Program in Critical Theory and the Arts

The MA in *Critical Theory and the Arts* is a year-long program of study in the arts that has its origins in a recognition shared by most everyone, though rarely explicitly, that art is not simply one more thing that humans happen to make, but the object that potentially and most of all reveals the antagonisms, conflicts and promises of human history and of the moment we inhabit. In this sense, as Adorno has written, art really does know “us better than we know our-selves.” And once this thought is on one’s mind, the impulse to understand how these considerable realities become coiled up in art, what they genuinely are, no less than wanting to know what it would mean intellectually and socially to do justice to art’s more than important content, may become insistent.

The program in *Critical Theory and the Arts* engages these questions in a broadly conceived curriculum that focuses on the contemporary situation of the arts: on the problems of making art today, on what art has become and is becoming, and on understanding what is at stake in the relation of these developments in art to contemporary social conflict and reality. This focus is, however, by no means limited to what’s happening “now,” for in understanding art from the perspective of the present, the past—our past—is necessarily illuminated and may even, in a certain sense, come to our aid in what we have to consider.

Much thinking is required here, and this is widely sensed by many. Thinking about art has, in fact, with rare historical precedent, never before been so protean, so inventive and urgently central to the whole of social, philosophical and political reflection. Every major area of thought now turns considerable attention to art in expectation that it will provide the key to solving its central questions. And this intensity in thinking *about* art is inseparable from what is occurring *within* art, where it hardly matters whether one is “for” or “against” theory. For reflection on art is no longer separate from its making. On the contrary, today every aspect of art’s reality presents dynamic conflicts and puzzles, and those who are directly involved in the arts can no longer imagine that it is possible to proceed naively, mixing passion with thin air. Where artists of earlier generations struggled to disguise the thinking labor that went into their work, today art theory has become part—often an explicit part—of all art-making. To an unprecedented degree, developments in art theory directly transform art. What the arts once were, they soon enough will no longer be; in large measure, they have already been irreversibly transformed. For artists and graduate students from several fields of inquiry, the need collaboratively to understand what has happened, what is happening and what is at stake is salient.

The Academic Year

The year-long program is completed in three consecutive semesters, Fall, Spring and Summer. In the Fall and Spring semesters, students participate in a closely-organized curriculum of seminar classes in philosophy, art theory, sociology, political thought, and social- and art-history. In the Summer semester, students and their advisors work in collaboration preparing

the Comprehensive Thesis, which draws on the year's coursework and student writings. The program as a whole combines to focus our studies on what is going on in art today in a way that involves the entire history of art and society and the most important questions we have about our lives.

Who are the students?

The students who join us for the year have a lot on their minds and mean to have a whole lot more on their minds. They have made it clear in their applications that they have a serious developing involvement in the arts and questions of social reality. These students bring an intensity for education to the program at a moment when it is widely recognized that society and a pragmatically narrowed education are largely in retreat from engaging some of the most tense, most difficult problems that have ever confronted humanity—problems that art, at whatever apparent distance from society, cannot help but share.

The students come from various fields of undergraduate education, including art school. A number are active in studio work. Because the curriculum is wide ranging, it necessarily turns out that each student is more prepared in one area of study than in another. Those, for instance, with a more extensive background in art history, philosophy, or sociology may have less direct experience in making art than do art school graduates, who may themselves know less about contemporary society than those who have studied sociology or whose lives have long been engaged in social activism—and so on. We expect this, and the array of strengths, familiarities and backgrounds produces a collaborative atmosphere in which students support and fill each other in. The faculty are fully aware of this

situation, themselves have different areas of expertise, and make these differences a productive source of reflection in the classes.

Is there life after Critical Theory and the Arts?

Students come to Critical Theory and the Arts motivated by intensities of inquiry, intellect and an ongoing engagement in problems of social reality and the arts. There is nothing impractical about this. On the contrary, knowledge engages us in life, and it could not be otherwise. Graduates from this program discover that the MA degree prepares, qualifies and recommends them for many more life possibilities and kinds of work that more narrowly specified craft or career programs, which, though they have their own advantages, do not. Students are able to seek—and have achieved—teaching positions at various levels (including some kinds of college teaching); work in many areas of the arts, in galleries and museums, and work in foundations; students go on to seek advanced degrees, including the PhD, in areas including art history, literature, philosophy, sociology and psychology; to find themselves inspired to establish new educational programs themselves (one recent student is founding her own artist residency); students may discover an impulse to become public intellectuals; to invent a life for themselves that no one may have thought of yet; and other students return to their engagement as artists with new perceptions and critical insight.

Program Size

A small group of students is selected annually by the Committee on Graduate Admissions. Students who,

for various reasons—international students, especially—may need to plan far ahead to join the program, may request deferred admission for the following year.

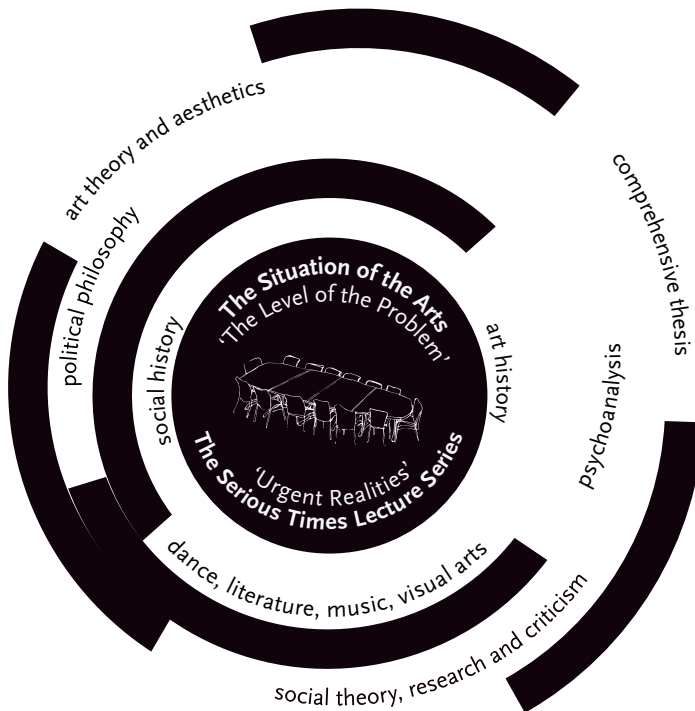
Financial Aid

We are able to provide some financial assistance and, on occasion, a number of honorary assistantships to our students. In general, however, we do what we can to make scholarships free of departmental responsibilities so that our students have as much time as possible for their studies.

II. Curriculum

The The Master's Degree in Critical Theory and the Arts is completed in three consecutive semesters, Fall, Spring and Summer. In the Fall and Spring semesters, students participate in a closely-organized curriculum of year-long seminar classes in philosophy, art theory,

sociology, political thought, and social- and art-history. In the Summer semester, students and their advisors work in collaboration preparing the Comprehensive Thesis, which draws on the year's coursework and student writings.



The program is designed to focus the broad encompassment of the year's studies on the development of a critical understanding of the contemporary situation of the arts. The significance of what we have to consider in this situation of the arts necessarily engages the entire history of art and society and the most urgent questions and concerns that we have about our lives. In our studies, art is not reduced to society or in any narrow sense explained by society, or psychology, or let alone by economics. And while the program is certainly an intellectual undertaking, it presupposes that in the relation between intellect and art, the latter leads the former. However intellectualized contemporary art now is—and however important it is to understand why this extreme intellectualization has happened, both in art and in writing about art—no one in human history would have ever bothered with wanting to make art, see it, or seek to know it, if it did not make something appear that has never before been seen.

Fall and Spring Semesters

Chair Seminar I and II

Taught by the program chair, this seminar broadly investigates the thesis that of all that humans make, art is the object that potentially and most of all reveals the antagonisms, felt conflicts and promises of human history and of the moment we inhabit. In this sense, as T. W. Adorno once wrote, art really does "know us better than we know ourselves." And once this thought is on one's mind, the impulse to understand how these considerable realities become coiled up in art, what they genuinely are, no less than wanting to know what it would mean intellectually and socially—whether in writing or in social action—to do justice to art's more than important content, becomes insistent and can be developed in the study of individual artworks and their complex implications.

Proseminar 1: The Situation of the Arts – "The Level of the Problem" I and II

In this seminar led by experienced and distinguished critics and curators, students gain considerable familiarity with the contemporary situation of the arts, especially in New York City. Students have unique access to meet with established as well as with newly-emerging artists for intimate discussions directed toward understanding what artists today are immediately contending with, first of all in their studio practice, but also in terms of their intellectual and theoretical ambitions for their work. What is an artist today in the midst of rapidly shifting technologies of art manufacture and reproduction, all of which goes on while dealing with other

artists, art markets and promotion, galleries, museums, patrons and collectors. What, in other words, are the problems of art today that are shaping its situation?

Critical Theory and Aesthetics I and II

The seminar is a careful investigation in considerable depth of the philosophical developments that undergird contemporary critical theory as it bears especially on questions of art, a field sometimes described as aesthetics. The first semester presents the tradition of thought stretching from antiquity to Kant, Hegel and Marx. The second semester begins with a study of the seminal importance of Nietzsche and Heidegger, tracing how their writings fused in the early 20th century with the French tradition in Bergson, Valéry and Lévi-Strauss and spurred the development of the most dynamic body of critical theory devoted to the arts of the modern era, from Barthes to Foucault and Althusser, and from Derrida and Rancière to Badiou and Žižek. Students are encouraged to examine the close reasoning of these thinkers and to achieve a genuine and perhaps rare understanding of a complex field that is often presented in a limbo of cursory and vague approximations.

Social Theory, Research and Criticism I and II

Because art is inextricably joined with human struggle, experience and aspiration on every level – and no less because increasingly artists feel compelled to engage social struggle in their own work – writers and critics require an understanding of political realities and economic and social structures. Here study necessarily engages several fields at once as does this course which comprises political philosophy—questions of political representation and those of social justice, progress,

human equality and emancipation—as well as sociology and an introduction to techniques of social investigation and observation that aim at insight into a world that characteristically veils itself to our efforts at understanding, “What is really going on here?” The aim of the course is for students to have a genuine grasp on what begins to answer this question and the overarching structure of the program seeks to bring this developing capacity into relation with art itself. The seminar begins with Freud, Rousseau and Hobbes and in the course of the second semester has led students with considerable lucidity through to the thinking of Marx, Simmel, Mauss, Weber, the Frankfurt School, and contemporary feminism and gender studies.

Proseminar 2: The Serious Times Lecture Series I and II

In the Serious Times Lecture Series students work together in seminar with a series of invited lecturers, faculty and discussants to engage critical problems of contemporary social reality. There is a threefold intention: students develop a substantial understanding of the complexities and tensions of social dynamics; students discover that these realities turn out to have considerable implications for what is happening in the arts today; and, at the same time, students are provided with many occasions for close involvement with scholars, social activists and critics of considerable accomplishment.

Each year, the shape of the lecture series changes, depending on the social realities engaged and the group of scholars assembled. But, whatever the issues raised—whether these be the destruction of the earth’s climate, the gross economic inequality, gender struggle

or recent transformations of industry and labor—the focal point of the seminar remains the question of how it can be that society continually develops new possibilities for improving human life and ameliorating human suffering, while all the same the toll of social calamity continues to mount. Why? Given that there are so many achievements in the sciences, in civil equality, in absolute power to control nature, why does the social order remain so destructive and immune to urgent realities?

Summer Semester

Comprehensive Thesis

The Comprehensive Thesis is the occasion for MA candidates to establish meaningful coherence in their year's work, to integrate their thinking and research, to find new problems to investigate, and to sketch out plans for their future with faculty and mentors.

Preparation for the Comprehensive Thesis

Preparation for the Comprehensive Thesis begins with the student's application to the program. Prospective students are asked to describe the issues, problems, curiosity, experiences or conflicts that motivated their application. On acceptance into the program, students begin to expand on these motivations, with the intention of developing four topics that they craft and assemble in preparation for their work in the summer semester on the Comprehensive Thesis. Students are encouraged to formulate these topics in a way that builds directly on what they have been intensely studying for two semesters. It is an opportunity to remember, organize and develop important thoughts that have arisen during the year, whether in course discussions, readings, or in the student's own reflections and research. In one of the four topics the student is asked to set out plans for future work, whether it is scholarly or artistic, and thoughts about "what is next" in a way that the faculty can be of help in considering and discussing those plans.

Fulfillment of the Comprehensive Thesis

Once the student has completed the statement of the four topics along with a brief supporting bibliography and proposal of the work to be undertaken, and a faculty member has reviewed the statements favorably, the student spends the final semester preparing research. During this period, the student consults with his or her faculty advisor for advice and direction. Over the last two weeks of the semester, students present the Comprehensive Thesis through written response to questions formulated as 'prompts' on each of the first three topics. The fourth topic, "What is next?," is treated as part of a final colloquium with selected members of the faculty.

Comprehensive Thesis Seminar

Here students have the opportunity to discuss the development of their Comprehensive Thesis projects and workshop their materials in preparation for the last section of the summer semester, when the final thesis work is completed.

Student Colloquia

MA students in Critical Theory and the Arts, who in the summer months are primarily engaged in preparing their Comprehensive Thesis, attend meetings with a directing member of the faculty on topics pertaining to their thesis questions. Students present brief summaries of their work for roundtable discussion.

III. Faculty

Robert Hullot-Kentor

Chair, Department of Critical Theory and the Arts, Master of Arts degree program, School of Visual Arts; philosopher

EDUCATION: BA, Marlboro College; MA, Goddard College; University of Iowa, Iowa Writers Workshop; University of Freiburg, philosophy; Sorbonne, literature; PhD, University of Massachusetts

BOOKS INCLUDE: author, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*; *Ice Flow: Essay and Commentary on David Salle*; *Terra Infirma: The House that Mowry Baden Built*; editor, T. W. Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*; editor, translator, T. W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*; *Aesthetic Theory*; Kierkegaard: *Construction of the Aesthetic*

AWARDS AND HONORS INCLUDE: DAAD; Orion Visiting Artist, University of Victoria; J. Paul Getty Resident Scholar; J. Paul Getty External Scholar; Mellon Faculty Fellow, Harvard University; Mellon Faculty Fellow, University Professors Program, Boston University

Alhelí de María Alvarado-Díaz

intellectual historian

EDUCATION: BA, The John Hopkins University; MA, M.Phil., PhD, Columbia University

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: founder, organizer, Theory and Practice: Political Philosophy, Radical Politics and Social Resistance (postdoctoral research and writing group), Heyman Center for the Humanities, Columbia University; creator, Shooting the Core: Reinterpreting Political Theory through

Film, Documentary and Reportage, Columbia University

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS INCLUDE: “Rosa’s Afterlives: Revolutionary Legacies in Theory and Practice,” Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung; “Castrating Mothers, Insubordinate Daughters: A Feminist Reading of Peter Mullan’s *The Magdalene Sisters*,” Seventh Global Meeting of the Interdisciplinary Network, Dubrovnik, Croatia; “Curing Contradiction in the Age of Affluence: Marcuse’s Prescriptions for the Liberation of the Self,” Columbia University Libraries; “Keep Calm and Carry On: Marcus Aurelius’ Ancient Cures for Modern Ailments,” The Association for Core Texts and Courses Annual Conference, Los Angeles, CA; “Clastres, Abensour, Negri and Rancière: A Major Polyphony in Radical Philosophy,” Terceras Jornadas del Archivo General de la Nación, Montevideo, Uruguay

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS INCLUDE: Provost’s Hybrid Learning Grant, Heyman Center Postdoctoral Working Series Grant, Columbia University; Postdoctoral Lectureship in Contemporary Civilization, Dissertation Writing Fellowship, Columbia University; Sciences Po-Paris Doctoral Exchange Fellow, Phi Beta Kappa Fellow

Bettina Funcke

writer, editor; co-founder, The Leopard Press

EDUCATION: M.Phil, PhD, summa cum laude, Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: Head of publications, Documenta; senior editor, *Parkett*; associate editor, Dia Art Foundation

BOOKS INCLUDE: author, *Pop or Populus: Art Between High and Low*; editor, *Dia's Andy*; *Joan Jonas: The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*; *Thomas Schütte: Scenewright*; *Gloria in Memoria*; *In Medias Res*; co-editor, *Francis Alÿs: Fabiola*; *The Lightning Field*; *Robert Smithson: Sprial Jetty*; *Robert Lehman Lectures on Contemporary Art*

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE: *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Printed Project*, *Afterall*, *Continuous Project*, *Public*

AWARDS AND HONORS INCLUDE: Rubenstein Fellowship, Whitney Museum of American Art; residencies include: Centre National de l'Estampe et de l'Art Imprimé; Le Couvent des Récollets; Kolleg Friedrich Nietzsche

Rosine Judith Kelz

sociologist, political theorist

EDUCATION: BA, MA, University of Essex, Colchester; PhD, University of Oxford

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE: author, *The Non-Sovereign Self, Responsibility and Otherness: Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler and Stanley Cavell on Moral Philosophy and Political Agency* (forthcoming monograph, Palgrave Macmillan)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS INCLUDE: "The Claim to Community – Critique and the non-sovereign subject," *Collectivity Beyond Identity*, Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin; "On the Impossibility of Owning the Self," London Graduate Conference, History of Political Thought; "Derrida and the Political," Frankfurt Conference, Goethe University, Frankfurt

Brian Kloppenberg

psychoanalyst; Fellow, International Psychoanalytic Association

EDUCATION: BA, with distinction, Swarthmore College; MFA, The Ohio State University; National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis; Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: former Director, Theodore Reik Clinical Center; former Dean of Training, National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: Modern dance choreographer, performer, teacher; founder, Kloppenberg Dance

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE: *Psychoanalytic Psychology*

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS INCLUDE: Paper on Hans Loewald, Heidegger and Irigaray, Hans Loewald Conference, The New School Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis; Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: former Director, Theodore Reik Clinical Center; former Dean of Training, National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: Modern dance choreographer, performer, teacher; founder, Kloppenberg Dance

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE: *Psychoanalytic Psychology* Conference presentations include: Paper on Hans Loewald, Heidegger and Irigaray, Hans Loewald Conference, The New School

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo

political scientist

EDUCATION: BA, magna cum laude, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras; PhD, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS INCLUDE: “Power, Freedom, and Political Forms,” Freedom and Democracy in an Imperial Context: Dialogues with James Tully, University of Victoria; “Unseen Catastrophes: Capitalism and Colonialism as Non-Events,” Political Theory Seminar, The New School for Social Research; “The Dialectic of Catastrophe and the ‘Catastrophization’ of the Political” (Spanish), Rutas de Poder, Universidad de los Andes

BOOKS INCLUDE: author, *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power*

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE: *Telos*, *Political Theory*, *Theory & Event*, *Polity*, *New Political Science*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Antropolítica*

Graduate Associates

Jeremy Cohan

sociologist

EDUCATION: BA, with honors, University of Chicago; Teaching Certification, Middle Childhood, Pace University; PhD, New York University (in progress, ABD)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE INCLUDES: President, Society for Psychoanalytic Inquiry

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS INCLUDE: “The Troublesome Necessity of Analytic Social Psychology,” Society for Psychoanalytic Inquiry, University of

Chicago; “Lukacs’ Abyss,” Institute of Culture and Society, University of Illinois at Chicago; “Foucault’s Detours,” Cultural Studies Association Annual Convention; “Lukacs: Professor or Politician?,” Leftforum Conference; “Why We Should Care about Class,” Economic and Political Sociology Workshop, New York University; “What Marx Really Thought About Class,” Marx and Philosophy Society Annual Conference, Institute of Education, University of London

AWARDS AND HONORS INCLUDE: Henry M. MacCracken Fellowship, New York University; John Billing Fiske Poetry Prize, University of Chicago

Joshua Pineda

philosopher

EDUCATION: BA, with honors, University of Toronto; MA, New School University

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS INCLUDE: “On Concepts and the Political: Towards a Marxist Political Theory,” Politics at the Limits of Civil Society: A Political Philosophy Conference, University of Guelph, Ontario; “Class Struggle in the First French Republic?” Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Rochester, NY; “Civic Republicanism and Class Struggle: On Politics and Historical Method,” Democracy and the Market: Shifting Balances, Shifting Perspectives, Institute of Philosophy, Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium; “Marx and Foucault’s Critique of the State,” Villanova University, Philadelphia; “From Rational Theology to Scientific Thought: Sense, the Organism and the Natural World in the Work of Sigmund Freud,” Centre for Research on Religion, McGill University, Montreal

Visiting Scholars and Lecturers

Most years, the Program in Critical Theory and the Arts welcomes visiting scholars and faculty in the arts, sociology, social theory, or philosophy.

Christoph Hesse

media scholar

Christoph Hesse is a Research Associate at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies of the Free University of Berlin. His dissertation work at Ruhr University (Bochum, Germany) was a study of formalist film theory and critical theory. He has written frequently and extensively on the work of T.W. Adorno.

Apollinaire Scherr

dance critic

Apollinaire Scherr has written on the performing arts in New York City for the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, *The Atlantic* and *Fjord Review*, and is a frequent contributor of dance criticism to the *Financial Times*.

Sebastian Traenkle

philosopher

Sebastian Traenkle is completing his dissertation at the Institute of Philosophy of the Free University of Berlin. His research focuses on the critique of language in the works of T.W. Adorno and Hans Blumenberg.

Imri Talgam

pianist

Imri Talgam's performances of contemporary music with various ensembles, including Ensemble Modern, Axiom ensemble and the Israeli Contemporary players have brought him into close contact with figures such as Pierre Boulez, Peter Eötvös, Helmut Lachenmann and N.A. Huber. Festival appearances include the Lucerne Festival, Gaudeamus Muziekweek, Mänttä music festival as well as Lincoln center's annual FOCUS festival. A versatile performer of both contemporary as well as traditional repertoire, Imri Talgam has played throughout the world, including Finland, Germany, France, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Britain, Mexico and the U.S. Recent appearances include venues such as Theater des Bouffes du Nord, Salle Pleyel, KKL Lucerne, Alice Tully hall and Kiev's Ukraine hall, both as soloist and in collaboration with ensembles and chamber groups. In Israel he has appeared as soloist with several major orchestras, such as the Haifa symphony orchestra and the ISO.

IV. Past Visiting Lecturers and Artists

Mowry Baden, sculptor
Nicholson Baker, writer
Jasper Bernes, poet, activist
Claire Bishop, art historian
Stephen Blum, musicologist
Al Butzel, environmental lawyer
Milton Cantor, historian
Paul Chan, installation artist, writer
Tony Conrad, artist
Jefferson Cowie, historian
Iris Dankemeyer, philosopher
Jodi Dean, media critic
Oliver Decker, social psychologist
Ben DeMott, writer, editor
Mark Dudzic, labor activist
Eric Foner, historian
Richard Foreman, playwright
Steve Fraser, historian
Joshua Freeman, historian
Melanie Gilligan, artist
Kenneth Goldsmith, poet
James Hansen, scientist
Doug Henwood, journalist
Christoph Hesse, media and communication scholar
Mark Izeman, author, environmental attorney
Martin Jay, historian
Michael Katz, historian
Ira Katznelson, historian
Isabelle Klasen, artist, philosopher
Sam Lewitt, artist
Alan Licht, musician
Ira Katznelson, historian
Isabelle Klasen, artist, philosopher

Sam Lewitt, artist
Alan Licht, musician
Aaron Likness, concert pianist
Tan Lin, poet
Sven Lütticken, art critic, historian
Barry C. Lynn, author, economist
Paul Mattick Jr., scholar, economist
Richard Maxwell, playwright, director
Sarah Michelson, choreographer
Michael Morse, composer
Rob Nixon, English and environmental studies
Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic
Spyros Papapetros, art and architectural historian
Frances Fox Piven, social critic
Laura Poitras, filmmaker
Pomerium, choral ensemble
Moishe Postone, historian
Rachel Price, scholar, Spanish & Portuguese culture
Seth Price, artist
Jean-Michel Rabaté, scholar, comparative literature
Yasmil Raymond, curator
Ariana Reines, poet
David Salle, painter
Martin Scherzinger, composer
Michael Smith, artist
AK Thompson, activist, author
Monica de la Torre, poet
Sebastian Tränkle, philosopher
Joan Waltemath, painter
Jamieson Webster, psychoanalyst
Barbara Will, literary scholar
Georg Windeck, architect, architectural historian
Eli Zaretsky, author

V. Chair Interview

Robert Hullot-Kentor interviewed by Breixo Viejo

The Spanish-born, London-based videographer, Breixo Viejo, recently visited Robert Hullot-Kentor—the chair of the recently founded program in Critical Theory and the Arts—to discuss the rigorous three-semester course of study.

The program, Hullot-Kentor says, “is meant for students who have a lot on their minds and who very much want to have a whole lot more on their minds.” ... “The year focuses on the contemporary situation of art in a way that involves the entire history of art and society and the most urgent concerns we have about our lives.”

BREIXO VIEJO (BV): Bob, we’ve known each other for some years already, back from when I was a graduate student making a video on Hanns Eisler’s and Adorno’s book on film music...

HULLOT-KENTOR (HK): Sure, you don’t need to remind me, Breixo. You wanted to interview me about the book on film music that Adorno wrote with the composer, Hanns Eisler...

BV: ...and instead you hypnotized my video equipment!

HK: That’s what you get; you didn’t want to be hypnotized...

BV: ...and you didn’t want to be photographed...

HK: So, I took it out on the machinery.

BV: The camera was still hypnotized when I got back to Spain! How did you do that?

HK: That’s not the important part. What matters is that you never figured out that, while I pretended to hypnotize the camera, you were watching with a very special sort of attention.

BV: You mean it?

HK: Obviously. You can’t hypnotize a camera; think about it. Anyway, I didn’t mean any harm. Wasn’t it a lot of fun?

BV: We got nothing done.

HK: No. True. Nothing. Still, Breixo, it was for the greater good. Did anything get broken?

BV: What’s past is past, I guess...

HK: ...oh, I doubt that...

BV: ...It’s a figure of speech; I doubt it too. But, now I’m interviewing you, instead, about the graduate program in Critical Theory and the Arts that you’ve started at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. It’s a big undertaking, I know. Is this something you just got into in the last couple of years?

HK: No. I’ve had this on my mind at least since graduate school.

BV: That means you would have had plenty of time to think about it, because I know you spent a lot of years in graduate school. You went from the Iowa Writers’

Workshop, to clinical psychology, got some other degree in psychology, and ended up in Europe studying philosophy and literature in Germany and France before you finished a doctorate in Comparative Literature.

HK: It's true. I've rattled around a lot, studying. There's more to it than that, but in the '80s when I could have been finishing my degree there weren't any jobs for anyone, and definitely not in the universities, and I figured I'd be better off staying in school.

BV: How did you manage?

HK: I'm not sure I did. I had a theory back then, for my amusement, the "Stay-at-Home Theory of Surplus Value." It had one thesis: "Capitalism needs us more than we need it, so if we stay home, they'll send checks."

BV: Did it work?

HK: No. What do you think? No. No checks arrived. But there were a lot of credit cards, and, along with there being no worthwhile jobs around, I had decided that youth was most of all for debt and travel, and altogether the moment to get the education that I was sure I would never get later on if I ended up selling shoes.

BV: And you wanted to get an education in everything?

THE CURRICULUM?

"The curriculum is made up of courses in aesthetics, political theory, social history, the history of art and social theory. These highly organized classes are taught by a mutually cognizant faculty, and are matched by two proseminars that, with the preparation and guidance of experienced moderators, provide the occasion for open discussions with distinguished visitors concerning the most important questions we have about art, politics, society and our lives."

HK: Not at all. I'm not an omnivore; and even if I wanted to be, I don't have that cast of mind. I enjoy hearing someone put on the show, but that's not me. I've always had the sense of being interested in one thing.

BV: And what's that?

HK: It's one thing that is very hard to say. And it's because it is so hard to say what that is, that I went from one graduate program to the next, trying to find the right place to study. I

couldn't help thinking a lot about the kind of graduate program I'd put together if it were up to me.

BV: Now it is up to you to make what you just called, "the right place to study." The program started in the Fall, 2012. What is it turning out to be? It must be hard to put in a couple of sentences.

HK: It is hard to put in a few sentences, but there are things I like to say about the program.

BV: For instance?

HK: I like saying that the year is meant for students who have a lot on their minds and who very much want to have a whole lot more on their minds.

BV: I'm a bit that way myself. But, that doesn't say what the year is.

HK: No, it doesn't; but it is a big clue.

BV: How about another big clue, then? From those things you like to say...

HK: That while most of the United States is busy doing remedial education, Critical Theory and the Arts is devoted to *irremediable* education. At the end of the year, a student in the program glancing in a mirror might look about the same as at the beginning of the year, but for those eyes looking, quite a lot will have changed.

BV: What you're saying about education in the U.S.—that it has become largely remediation—is so concerning; that's happening too in Spain and throughout the EU. In education everyone has noticed. It seems the words themselves are vanishing; literally vanishing. What Mallarmé called 'the words of the tribe' are going up in smoke. Most all education now is busy trying to shore up one side of the sand castle while the other side is washing away; and that's supposed to be an education. I suspect we could all use some irremediable education, right about now. More clues...

HK: How about we try some clues by negation and say what the year is by stipulating what it isn't? First of all, the year's study is not a Grand March of the Cognoscenti....

BV: Cognoscenti?

ART AND THEORY?

"This is not a theory program about 'theory.' There is plenty of that around. This is a program about what we can learn about art, of course, but, most of all, what we have to learn from art. Artworks ask us to think about them as does nothing else humanly made. An artwork is not founded on any conceptual presupposition or assertion, and this makes it possible for us to experience in it the origin of thinking—as the experience of the need in thinking—which is why art is at the center of the critique of domination. Art that is art is waiting to be understood, and with no less intensity than the mobbed corridors of MoMa prove that today the need for art overflows the museums."

HK: Wait — there's lots more that I like to say about what the program isn't. But, you want substance, you get substance: The year focuses on the contemporary situation of art in a way that involves the entire history of art and society and the most urgent concerns we have about our lives. And it is only possible to do this—to shape and discuss these most urgent concerns—because the program focuses on the contemporary situation of art. The problems and questions of making art today—what art has become, and is becoming—and understanding what is at stake in the relation of these questions to contemporary social conflict: that's what defines the program.

HK: You know, "those in the know."

BV: But, there are very interesting and distinguished people, artists and intellectuals, who visit the program during the year.

HK: That's true. But, these are our colleagues; they are people we've known for many years and whose work the faculty has been interested in and studying for a long time; they are people we're involved with; we don't dole out charismatic visits from 'famous artists and scholars' to supposedly lucky onlookers. The people we invite join substantially in the year's discussion.

BV: We've done clues; we've tried it by negation; say something substantive about the program.

Incidentally, this isn't a specialty program of some sort; it's the heart of the matter.

BV: "The heart of the matter."

HK: Honest, I'd rather you didn't quote me.

BV: *Honest injun*, isn't that what gringos like to say?

HK: *Injun*? I don't know Breixo; that's mostly a mid-Westernism. But, *honest*, Breixo, most anyone who has taught for a long time probably thinks about education in very serious, and perhaps even lofty terms that, when stated out loud while riding around on the back of one's imaginary steed, may not carry all that well in public—especially in a country where educational reform is being self-evidently modeled, kindergarten through college, on testable prerequisites oriented to the ideal MBA. So I'll heed my own advice here and keep those thoughts about education largely to myself except to say that I recognize that students today feel deprived of the truth, and even angry at that deprivation. Education needs to respond to this impulse in students, though without presuming that truth were something we might hold between our hands and dispense as from a jug.

BV: And you think of the program in Critical Theory and the Arts as responding to that impulse in students?

HK: It's definitely not a one-year program in computer repair.

THE STUDENTS?

"As I've said before, I expect students who have a lot on their minds and who very much want to have a whole lot more on their minds. The program is under no pressure to select any particular number of students, other than that we intend to be very selective and not to exceed 14 students in the year."

BV: Let me ask you more. You have a central faculty and several Graduate Associates; and, in addition, there are a number of participating visitors to the program.

HK: There are three philosophers, with backgrounds and involvements in social criticism, the arts, history, media and aesthetics. Then there are

the directors of the proseminar on "The Situation of the Arts," the art writer, Bettina Funcke and the Whitney Museum curator of the performing arts, Jay Sanders. The sociologists are Jeremy Cohan and John Clegg, who specialize in political economy; they are both social activists. Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo is the social philosopher on the staff. And because psychoanalysis is crucial to the whole of contemporary critical theory, we also have a psychoanalyst on the faculty, Jay B. Frankel.

BV: That makes 9 by my count. I gather someone in the program plays the piano? That's a baby grand in the corner of the seminar room, isn't it?

HK: The piano? Sure it's a piano, Breixo. It's also "Bruiser." For a piano, Bruiser came up on the wrong side of the tracks, the hard way and was just recently rebuilt—it was a big job. It takes a full year for the new strings to get settled. Mainly, it's our resident pianist, Aaron Likness, who uses Bruiser to present a series of concerts each year of contemporary, experimental music. And when our students turn out to be interested in music, Aaron also presents discussions of the performances. Aaron is a first-rate musician. We're lucky to have him. So, Aaron makes 10.

WHY AN ART SCHOOL?

BV: But what about those “Graduate Associates” I’ve read about in your faculty description? I don’t know the phrase.

HK: It is special to this program. The Graduate Associates are advanced doctoral candidates. They are on the faculty—first of all—because they are terrifically intelligent, capable and engaged colleagues, and no less because they provide an historical depth of field in the generations participating in the program. The United States, by contrast, is otherwise strictly age segregated: you know, “I’m in fifth grade; I don’t talk to fourth graders.” That kind of thing.

BV: It’s true what you’re saying. In Europe, older and younger people are often together—here, you don’t see it.

HK: You really don’t; the ages and generations in the U.S. are quarantined off from each other in commercial bantustans of time, each with a marketing tag: Baby Boomers, GenX, Millennials, and so. We’re all aware of this; it’s one of the few things we all do know in a sort of absolute way. America hardly ever thinks about the question of the possible reconciliation of the generations; the conflict is economically functional.

BV: But if the nation doesn’t thematize the question of the possible reconciliation of the generations, you have made the question part of the structure of the program in your faculty?

“A program in critical theory and the arts that is most of all involved in understanding art should be located at an art school, surrounded by students who are up all night making things in their studios. We want to be upstairs from the print room, across the street from animation and around the corner from video, photography and painting. And that’s where we are, on the 6th floor of an art building.”

HK: Right. I might have fully staffed the program with colleagues from my own cohort, the old bears, from universities around the city; they would have come bounding out of the woods ready for September. But, with the Graduate Associates, we have faculty of several generations. This deepens the teaching and improves the advising of students, and makes the program more interesting for the faculty themselves. As the Occupy Movement made clear a few years

ago, the generations have much to say to each other, and I’m sure we are only at the beginning of that.

BV: The curriculum couldn’t be more ambitious: aesthetics, art theory, political philosophy, social theory, social history, psychoanalysis, and art history.

HK: It is a lot, but the curriculum fits together coherently and dynamically in an education that, as I said earlier, involves one thing that happens to be very hard to say.

BV: Maybe you could say more about what this “one thing” is? But, in any case, the program is altogether interdisciplinary.

HK: You mean calling it “interdisciplinary” as a compliment, I know. I also know there’s no escaping it; but I’m not so content with the program being thought of as “interdisciplinary.”

BV: You’re against it?

ART AND WRITING?

HK: Not exactly; some good things have come of it. But interdisciplinary programs tend to be slack: “Invent your own MA; we teach everything; come to school, choose from hundreds of classes.” The critique of knowledge is more complex and more demanding than whatever the healing salts of interdisciplinarity might cure. Knowledge is not additive. And the argument for “breaking down the boundaries” between the disciplines is, however distantly, akin to those “get government off our back” impulses that have been all-but-unconsciously transposed from national ideology to education. It is not pleasant to consider, but interdisciplinary education seems to devolve from the same process of rationalization that gave us the free market ideology of neo-liberalism.

BV: **Still, what are you saying? I can jump ahead to your point about interdisciplinary studies as, paradoxically, the instrumentalization of knowledge—as the subjectivization of knowledge; and maybe then it isn’t so different from education that has been drastically reduced to the business model and an open-market mentality. But, from the outside anyway, reading through the course descriptions of Critical Theory and the Arts, the program looks about as “interdisciplinary” as any education there ever was.**

HK: That’s the point; it’s not. There is a distinction between “come invent your own education in our graduate interdisciplinary program,” and a program organized so that one moment, one course and each course is brought into a relation with other moments in such a way that each part of the program sheds light on the rest of the...

“Artworks want us to speak about them, and they want us to be silent. Tact in writing about art senses when to do one and when the other without alternating between them.”

BV: ...I see; I see...

HK: You do?

BV: **Yes; it has to do with something I had wanted to discuss with you in our interview on Eisler and Adorno that never happened—it’s the question of constellations of concepts in Adorno’s work. And what you were just saying about the structure of the program in Critical Theory and the Arts made me realize that it is less designed as an interdisciplinary program that adds one field of inquiry to another, than as a program constructed exactly in terms of what Adorno called “constellations” of knowledge.**

HK: It is that. The critique of knowledge is not in supposing that wiping out the distinctions between disciplines will do the trick. Those disciplines are as forcibly and objectively in conflict with each other as is the entire social division of labor with itself. Here, as elsewhere, thinking is motivated by the experience of these conflicts, not in avoiding them. On one hand, thought must have the conceptual capacity to tolerate the tension of reality; and, on the other, those concepts must be organized in such a fashion—Adorno called it ‘constellative’—as to potentially become conscious that reality is also something other than these concepts. Thought that thinks achieves something more than thought, as the fulfillment of knowledge, and not as its destruction or circumvention.

BV: **So Critical Theory and the Arts isn’t an “art and philosophy program.”**

CENTRALITY OF ART?

HK: It's really not. And the year's study doesn't involve writing mechanically trumped-up thirty-page papers that students barely care about and that no one will ever read anyway.

BV: But students do write in the program?

HK: They write a lot. By the end of the year, they've written quite a lot. But the students write and struggle to shape what they have to say—and to find that when they have succeeded, they have shaped it under the pressure of what needs to be said. That, and not the edifying posture of being a writer, is the source of whatever binding objectivity expression can achieve. The summer before I went to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, I picked up a feisty hitchhiker in Belgium. I was a bit proud of my plans, I admit. But fate hadn't sent this Diotima along to deliver encomia. That lady wanted to know—kind of right away, “What do you have to write about?” It did not feel good. But, it gave me a shake. I did not stay long in Iowa.

BV: So, the program in Critical Theory and the Arts is not art plus philosophy; and not art plus politics; and it's not a writer's program—though it intensely involves art, philosophy, politics and writing. We're on a roll. What else isn't the program?

HK: It's also not a job preparation program. But it does lead somewhere, and in directions that are consider-

“Artworks present problems—as problems that artists engage in making artworks, and that we engage in wanting to understand them. Today, in a particularly intense way, these problems take shape as enigmas and necessarily demand considerable reflection that radiates out in every direction. Philosophy, social history, and political science seem compelled to turn to the arts in wanting to solve their most critical concerns, which is why students in the program are likely to come from many disciplines, no less than from the art studio.”

ably more real than what those ominous “career paths”—with carefully inventoried “career skills”—claim to guarantee. An eye for reality is what education achieves when it is an education; if any, that's the career path we provide. And that eye for reality is what is most of all needed in a nation that fears knowing itself for what it is, and, by that measure, fears knowing what it instead might be.

BV: “Paths” and “skills”—if you don't mind my saying, America is full of all this Cub Scout stuff. But how can colleges and universities be built that way? Incidentally, did you see that article pass by some time ago about a

group of young law school graduates who sued Brooklyn Law School because that “career path” turns out to be a dead end?

HK: I did. So on one hand, we are letting ourselves be crushed under a spuriously imposed pragmatism...

BV: What do you mean, ‘spuriously imposed pragmatism’?

HK: I mean, it is a delusional pragmatism; it is a trumped-up realism. It looks at you with a stern eye and tells you to buckle down. But very little of this stuff about going to school to study what you'll do in your life is real. In the first place, most people—in the U.S., in any case—end up doing all kinds of things in a lifetime; historically people change jobs six to eight times. That's the historical pattern. What's happening

MORE ABOUT THE STUDENTS?

now is something much more drastic: according to recent research, 40% of all current work will be done by computer by 2025...

BV: 40% of the jobs in the country are being computerized?

HK: That is the estimate. And, on the other hand, it has been estimated by the political economist, Gar Alperovitz, that if the national product were more equitably distributed, every family of four might have resources well in excess of \$100,000 yearly. Why can't the country know itself for what it is? How did we end up making life so hard for ourselves? And why can't the nation comprehend its own possibilities?

BV: I gather that the possibility of finding any kind of answer to these questions concerns the problem of developing an eye for reality....

HK: Yes. That's genuinely pragmatic; not buckling under a pseudo-rationality that confidently warns students away from pursuing what they most have a mind and talent to pursue; especially the legitimacy of serious study.

BV: In this regard, the motto you've chosen for Critical Theory and the Arts—that "Art knows us better than we know ourselves"—is intriguing. It comes from Adorno?

HK: From *Current of Music*. Adorno wrote several variations on the line, some published, some not. The epigram implies a series of questions. If we suppose

"There are those in the program each year who are most of all scholars—students who may or may not go on to get more advanced degrees. And there are artists who are taking a year away from the studio for more study. And then there are those who are both involved in making art and thinking about it. I meet that increasingly."

that art knows us better than we know ourselves, how does art form this insight; how would we be able to know what that content is; and how would we be able to say it? That's for starters.

BV: The answers to these questions would be very difficult to say.

HK: To my mind, it is one thing that is extremely hard to say.

BV:

HK: In any case, the motto is the middle point of the program; all of the year's study—in aesthetics, social theory, art history, and the rest—is equidistant to that point. It is in thinking about art, and the contemporary situation of art, that the several courses bear on each other and become something more than interdisciplinary study.

BV: Is this a program for artists or for—it's hard to find the right word—scholars?

HK: Both, for sure; there are those in the program each year who are most of all scholars—students who may or may not go on to get more advanced degrees. And there are artists who are taking a year away from the studio for more study. And then there are those who are both involved in making art and thinking about it. I meet that increasingly.

BV: Why is that?

WHAT COMES NEXT?

“Critical Theory and the Arts is not a job preparation program. But it does lead somewhere, and in directions that are considerably more real than what those ominous “career paths”—with carefully inventoried “career skills”—claim to guarantee. An eye for reality is what education achieves when it is an education; if any, that’s the career path we provide.”

HK: Again, that would be a lot to get into. But, the general point is that, as always, the artists who are emerging are those who can make what art now demands. And what it demands are artists who are intellectual to a considerable degree. How else could it be? There just isn’t any possibility for making art that matters in a straightforward way.

BV: Everything is up for grabs now, isn’t it.

HK: Yes, everything: what do you make art out of? What is painting, what is installation, what is dance, what is music?—which is which?—the arts no longer arrive one at a time, but keep turning up in a giant heap. Where does art belong, in a gallery or at the bottom of the ocean? Why are the materials at once so available and so recalcitrant? Why does every artwork, if it is going to succeed, need to throw something in front of itself to trip over? And as virtuosity has vanished as the sine qua non of art, the conception of the work has become overriding, and that conception tends to be intellectual or political in a way that runs contrary to what art historically has been.

BV: You’re picking up momentum.

HK: The point is, like it or not, the conceptual, reflective dimension that was once commonly held, self-evidently held, to be the opposite of art, now needs to be woven through art with every stitch—and artists who want to make anything must do an awful lot of thinking. I’m sure you’ve noticed: virtually all younger

artists now also write about what they do and what they think art is and take part in what was once the rarified realm of social theory and aesthetics.

BV: So Critical Theory and the Arts is a program in contemporary studies?

HK: There you hit a nerve. Yes and no, in equal measure. It would like to be a program in contemporary studies in the sense that Joyce’s *Ulysses* is contemporary studies: one

day in the life of a character that contains the whole of western history in its tensest reality. But while we have this insight into time, it has also slipped out of our understanding.

BV: What are you saying?

HK: I’m saying, in answer to your question whether this is a program in contemporary studies, that it is not at all clear what “contemporary” means. We have clues to it. We have some insights into a new idea of time that began to emerge in the early 20th century in which figures such as Joyce, El Lissitzky, and Benjamin, understood something about the past as the origin within our own moment, not as a moment ‘back then.’ But what sense can a new idea of time have, if the idea of the new is itself palpably anathema? Try it out on your own lips. You can “rethink” all you want, “revisit,” and “reinvent” all you like. But don’t try anything *new* on us. The syllable won’t carry...

BV: Is it a program in contemporary studies, or not?

HK: The radical thoughts of modernism have lapsed. How can we have a sense of what “contemporary” means when, by any measure, the past is so broadly withheld from us as it now is? The thread of human history has snapped; the sense of imagination having gone slack measures this lapse. We talk about the past as if it occurred some forty-some miles from something called the present. Derrida didn’t help us out much at all with this by making “presence” a taboo and a madhouse, as if now everyone knows why that word bears a stigma.

BV: So, it is not a program in contemporary studies?

HK: What is there to be dogmatic about here? All we can do, is to consider the question of what it is to make art, and how to think about art in its vast history, as the unconscious transcription of the history of human suffering, when the thread of human history has

snapped. We must look to grab a hold of these threads when there are really no threads at all to grab a hold of.

BV: Are you saying that there is nothing at all to take hold of, or that artworks are what we have when the thread of history has snapped?

HK: Now we really have something to talk about.

VI. Apply

To read about admission and how to apply to the MA Program in Critical Theory and the Arts, go to the department website at cta.sva.edu.

VII. Program

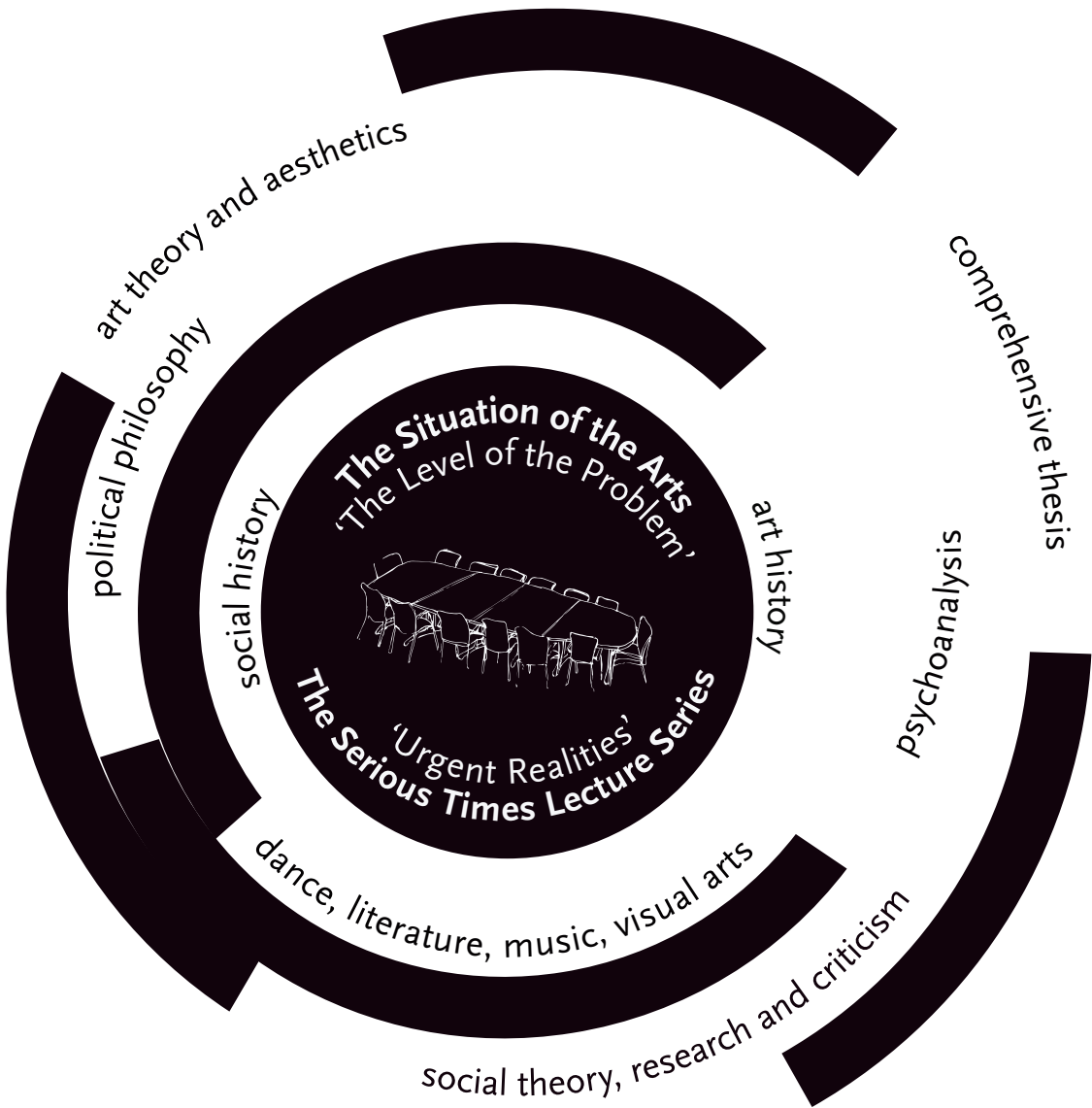
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