Integrated Foundation Studio and Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

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Abstract

The first or foundation year in art schools, academies, and departments is a perennial unsolved problem. The often mandatory world art history survey consistently receives poor evaluations from students, and four decades of innovations have not produced a consensus solution. The foundation studio art course is a mixture of different media and exercises. First-year art education as a whole is a mixture of historical problems (potentially incompatible ideas of art taught together), pedagogic problems (how to interest art students in Michelangelo), and institutional problems (ingrained ways of teaching, underpaid lecturers with no time to innovate, scattered conferences on teaching, publications that are not widely read).

Most institutions solve these issues one piece at a time. The experiment we describe here reimagines everything at once. Our proposal is that art history and studio instruction can be deconstructed and merged, producing a coherent first-year experience.

The experiment we describe here is a collaboration between the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism, the Department of Contemporary Practices, bridging studio and academic parts of the School. The class we'll describe was team-taught by all three of us (Jim Elkins in art history, Maggie Wong and Troy Briggs in studio) in summer 2021.

Brief abstract

(For the Taylor and Francis online form.)

The first year in art schools, academies, and departments is a perennial unsolved problem. The experiment we describe here reimagines the entire history and problematics of the foundation year all at once. Our proposal is that art history and studio instruction can be deconstructed and merged, producing a coherent first-year experience. The experiment we describe here is a collaboration between art history and studio art at the School od the Art Institute of Chicago in summer 2021.

Seven problems

We begin with a list of existing problems with the world art history survey and the foundation year in studio. At the end of the paper we'll return to each one with remarks on our solutions.

1. *The world art history survey has endemic problems.* A number of these have been discussed since the 1980s: how to avoid Eurocentrism; how to represent the diversity of world art production; how to represent marginalized artists, countries, and practices; how to decolonize the principal narratives of art; how to adjust the coverage of fine arts, popular media, architecture, craft, and design; how to balance time spent on ancient cultures with time spent on the present; and how to balance time spent on local and national art with time spent on the rest of the world.

2. *Art history textbooks are not written for art students.* Readings for the world art history survey are generally intended for academic students of all fields. Their purpose is to provide a useful level of visual literacy. An art history survey for artists would have fundamentally different emphases and examples, because it would present art's history for use in the present. Many periods of past art that have been considered essential for a balanced survey are no longer part of conversations on contemporary art, and conversely a typical art student in the third decade of the 21st century may be involved in Instagram and other social media, video games, manga and anime, Youtube channels, memes, and other forms that are seldom represented in course readings (see Fig. 7).

3. *The foundation year in studio is a collage of exercises and media.* The skills, media, and materials taught in the foundation year can feel like a disordered or adventitious collection rather than a coherent or directed curriculum. It has proven difficult to find a satisfactory sequence for the sequence of topics in the foundation year because it

combines five centuries of disparate kinds of instruction, which are partly incompatible and have never been theorized together.

4. *The foundation year is expected to cover both techniques and social issues.* Studio instruction in the foundation year has long been focused on basic skills, but in the last three decades it has also included material on race and anti-racism, post- and decolonial ideas, disability studies, identity and gender. Making and critiquing are now seen through the lens of social issues, which are skills equal to woodworking, printing, or performing. Yet there is still no model for integrating formal and technical exercises with social and political subject matter. A common solution to this is to introduce new media and techniques along with assignments about social value or other concepts: a video editing exercise, for example, which is to take the form of an institutional critique. The problem here is that the connection between medium and message is arbitrary: the same ideas of institutional critique could be done, for instance, in other media.

5. *Research can be difficult to introduce at beginning levels.* Research has become central in the foundation year and beyond, but it can be especially difficult to integrate with introductory classes, where students aren't ready to frame and pursue artistic projects. The School of the Art Institute has been teaching parallel classes called Research Studio and Core: research ideas are introduced in one, and the other focuses on media, tools, and skills. But models for integrating ideas about research with skills and media remain elusive.

6. *Critiques have no consensus concepts, forms, or pedagogy.* Critiques happen in studio classes at all levels, beginning in the first few weeks of the foundation year. The usual strategy is to introduce critiques informally, as opportunities to create supportive, informal conversations, and to help students begin to talk about their work. But critiques are complex and problematic in all contexts, and there is no place in the curriculum set aside for introducing the theory and history of critiques. The administrative literature of BFA programs usually asks students to develop the ability to articulate and defend their work, but those terms are seldom introduced systematically.

7. *Community building is part of studio practice but not of art history.* At the School of the Art Institute, studio instructors are encouraged to begin the course by introducing ideas of community, including Community Agreements values of respect and collaboration, and spend time nourishing a studio environment where relationships between all the participants can be productively open. Art history, especially at

introductory levels, tends to be focused on the delivery of information, and that can make a jarring contrast with time in the studio.

Our experiment

The School of the Art Institute in Chicago is exploring integrated solutions to these problems. Our idea is to begin by physically merging the studio and art history: all teaching is done in studios, with no separate art history lecture room. All classes are team taught, with at least one studio instructor and one art historian or other academic instructor.

The fundamental strategy is to break up the large art history lectures into 10 and 20 minute mini-lectures, which are given in the studio and lead directly to studio work. That way students can continuously ask themselves whether the art history, theory, or criticism they are learning is useful in practicing new forms of art making and research. The art history lectures are not chronological, except in the first weeks. They are all based on problems that are important in the present and potentially applicable to the students' studio course projects, as well as their independent interests and artwork.

We are currently piloting two kinds of classes:

> *Partly integrated:* the art history classes are shortened by one hour per week, and that hour is occupied by specially designed short lectures on particular topics. The students attend studio classes on other days. The art historians' contracts and compensation remain the same, and they use the free hour each week to drop in on studio classes. This has the advantage of not needing any funds for team teaching, no new contracts, no adjustment in compensation, and minimal work by instructors (who just teach one hour less per week).
>
> *Fully integrated:* the art history and studio instructors are both present at all times, and all teaching is done in a single studio classroom. This is the one described in this paper.

Weekly structure of the class

The fully integrated class pilot ran in summer 2021, with 14 students, the three of us as instructors, and three TAs. It was a nine-week course, and met five days a week, either 10-4 or 1-4, for a total of 239 contact hours.

We began by deconstructing our ordinary classes. We put all the individual subjects we wanted to cover on Post-It notes. We then arranged them on a large sheet of brown paper, about 18 inches by 4 feet. The idea was to keep everything mobile, and to match academic subjects from art history, theory, and criticism with individual studio topics, skills, exercises, and authorizations to studio facilities and equipment.

In the final arrangement, the first two weeks of the course facilitated both an art history boot camp designed to work through major historical time lines, and a studio boot camp designed to foster community building alongside the technical knowledge of video work.

From that point each week was divided into a rhythm (Fig. 1).

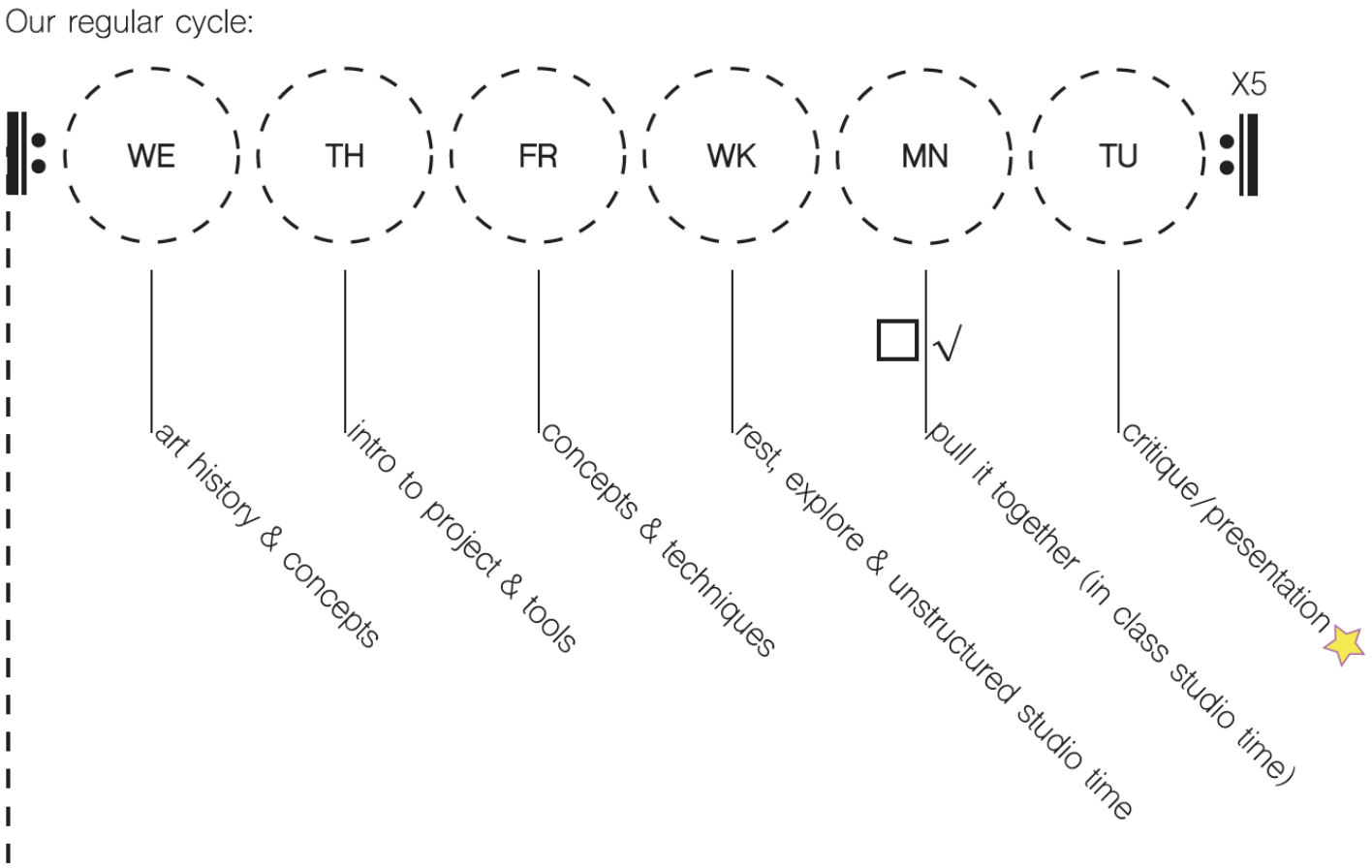

Fig. 1. Troy Briggs, schematic diagram of the structure of the integrated course, detail.

This is a small detail from a large graphic showing the overall structure of the integrated course. The weeks are organized starting on Wednesdays, which are dedicated to art history. On Thursdays we introduce new tools and projects, and on the following days students work constructively through conceptual, material, and technical problems. On these studio instruction days demonstrations, brief lectures from the art historian, in-class exercises, peer-to-peer-based learning through activities such as group mind mapping, progress critiques, and partner interviews, help guide the students.

Mondays are for display of the contents of the students' Boxes (more on this below); and Tuesdays end the weekly cycle with a round of critiques.

Studio components

The studio-based topics are packaged into the following projects:

Project 1: Video Interview

Prompt: You create a 2-3 minute video interview of one person in class. In turn you will be the subject of a video interview.

Key topics: DSLRs, sound, lighting, video editing, community building, and interviewing.

Project 2: Not the Same River: Print Media

Prompt: create a 2D multiple.

Key Topics: woodworking (to build silk screen frame), silkscreen printing, multiples, color theory, and semiotics.

Project 3: Form Functions: Materiality

Prompt: Recompose a memory through creating a sense of materiality imbued in that memory.

Key Topics: fibers and sewing, 3D modeling and printing, laser cutting, plastics, medium specificity, synesthesia, and materiality.

Project 4: Site Project: A two-part assignment engaging in site specificity

Part I: Spatial Investigations at Northerly Island, Chicago IL

Part II: Proposals for Site Specific Work

Project prompt: Create a presentation that proposes site specific work of a site of your choosing. Your site can be physical or digital.

Key Topics: site specificity (Miwon Kwon's four definitions), research methodologies, intersectional reflexivity, types of knowledge.

Project 5: Expanded Cinema

Prompt: make a work that solves the problem: emanation + obstruction + reception + perception = x.

Key Topics: complicate knowledge of light, sound, video, with respect to projection mapping and phenomenology.

Project 6: An Echo is an Origin: Performance

Prompt: Create a set of instructions for performance that responds to the framework of the Expanded Cinema project your peer created.

Key Topics: performance scores (Fluxus), staging, performative response, critical response (radical presence), and performance for video (feminist practices).

Project 7: Synthesis

Prompt: Make an X that is a Y. Each student will have their own randomly generated combination to solve. For example: make a drawing that is a sculpture, or make a photograph that is a performance.

Key Topics: positioning, return to research, definitions and deconstruction of 2D, 3D, and 4D, and interdisciplinary practice.

Most of these are augmented or framed with short lectures in art history and theory.

The short lectures

All these are between 10 and 25 minutes. There are twenty-eight Concepts lectures on various ideas in art criticism and theory:

C1 Vision and visuality
C2 The gaze
C3 Is visual art different from language?
C4 Representation and mimesis
C5 Formalism and formal analysis
C6 Politics and art
C7 Design, craft, art
C8 The sublime and the beautiful
C9 Space and form
C10 Time and narrative
C11 Eurocentrism in art theory
C12 The idea of media
C13 Skill and deskilling
C14 Style, practice
C15 Research
C16 Knowledge
C17 Materiality and objecthood
C18 Lacan and psychoanalysis
C19 Foucault and institutional critique
C20 Barthes, semiotics, phenomenology
C21 Surveillance and privacy
C22 Theories of photography
C23 The body in art
C24 Art and science
C25 Art and religion
C26 Identity and gender
C27 Absorption, empathy, and affect
C28 Should you learn art theories?

Fig. 2. The twenty-eight concepts lectures.

Some of these are especially applicable to the studio component of the course, and others, such as C17 through C22, are introductions to art theory. The entire series is self-reflexive, as the final lecture suggests.

There are also twenty-eight History lectures, on topics that pertain to the art history survey:

H1 The idea of art history
H2 How does art history appear to you?
H3 Timelines of art history
H4 Dividing art into periods
H5 The idea that art oscillates
H6 The idea that art changes like a life cycle
H7 When did art begin?
H8 When did modernism begin?
H9 How many modernisms were there?
H10 How museums tell the history of modernism
H11 When did postmodernism begin?
H12 Is postmodernism a period?
H13 Theories of contemporary art
H14 Who is art history for?
H15 Art history in 7th c. India, 9th c. China, 16th c. Persia
H16 Who wrote art history in the Renaissance?
H17 Hegel and his ideas of history and art
H18 Writing world art histories
H19 Art history textbooks in other countries
H20 E.H. Gombrich's textbook
H21 Big North American textbooks
H22 Rewriting art history, 1: race and gender
H23 Rewriting art history, 2: removing Eurocentrism
H24 Rewriting art history, 3: being fair to the world
H25 Rewriting art history, 4: beyond fine art
H26 History of first-year art instruction
H27 History of the BFA
H28 Art history in an art school

Fig. 3. The twenty-eight history lectures.

The first six lectures are about the ordering of the periods of art history. Lectures H15 to H21 are to help students understand how are history is taught in different countries and regions. Lectures H26 through H28 have information about how the foundation year has been taught in the past, and how the BFA is understood today.

The two series are intended to be a work in progress, with more lectures appearing each semester. As of this writing, there are about twenty more, for example "Google's Deepmind, Streetview, and Image Search," "Video games, AR, internet art," "Sex as a historical category," and "How surrealism survives in contemporary art."

Our subject here is the *fully integrated* course that combines studio and art history, but these lectures also help bridge the art history survey to the first year curriculum in *partly integrated* courses (as defined above). Here is an example, showing how these short lectures link art history and studio:

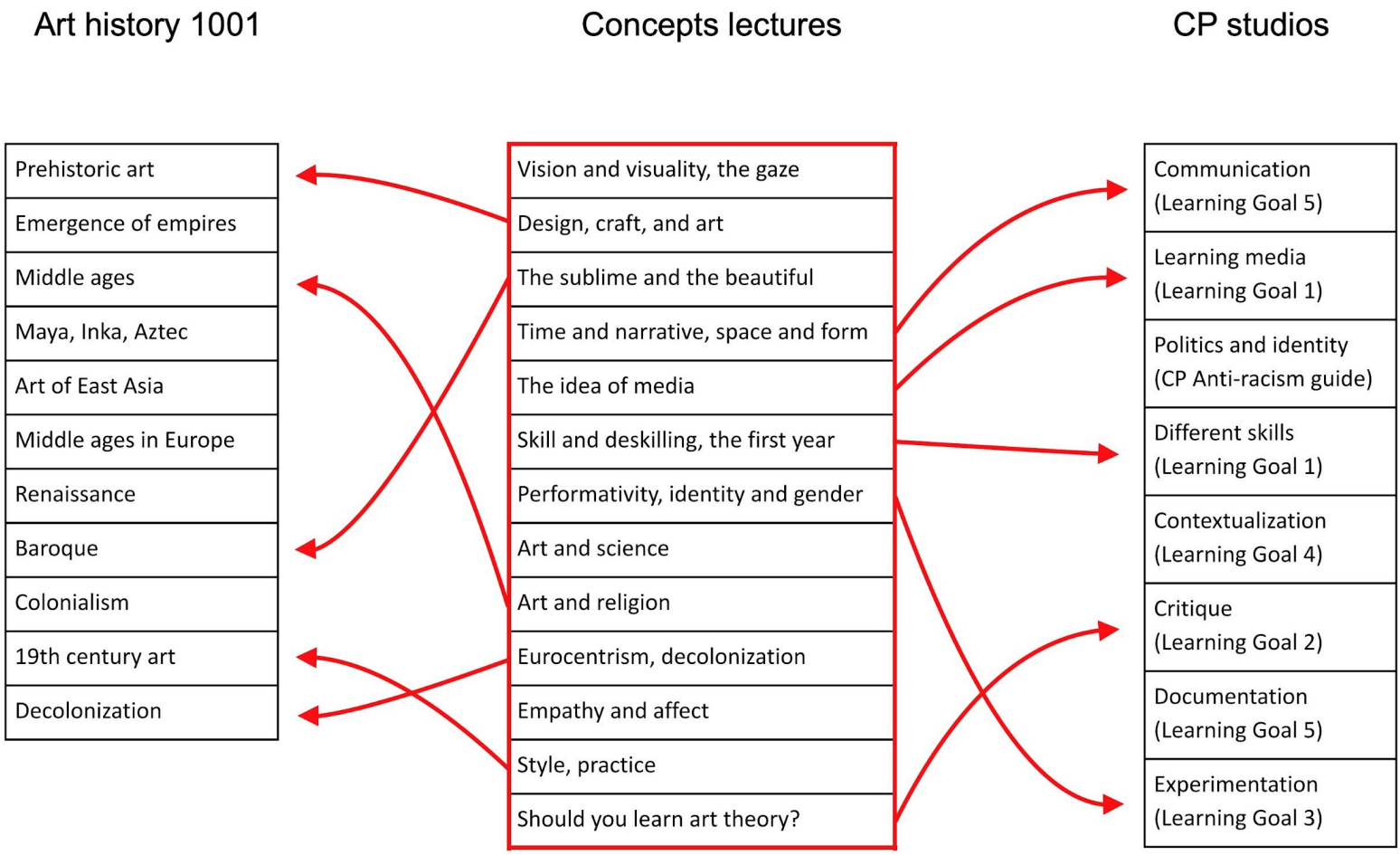

Fig. 4. The concepts lectures as a bridge between the art history survey and the foundation studio.

Our plan is to make all the short lectures lectures available online as recorded videos with closed captions, at tinyurl.com/SAICconceptsvideos. We hope that the Comments on Youtube will also become a resource, with links to related material.

The boxes

Another component of the class is three boxes—a Box of Art History, a Box of Ideas, and a Box of Materials—that the students construct and keep with them throughout the class. This was first the idea of a student, Renata Escamilla Vivian. The first two (Box of Art History, Box of Ideas) are filled cards, drawings, or printouts of whatever works, artists, or ideas, the student likes. Inside the boxes there are smaller Boxes of the Discarded, containing everything the student encounters that they don't like or isn't connected to their work. By the end of the course each student has a curated set of artworks, artists, ideas, and materials, which serves as their own version of what they have been taught.

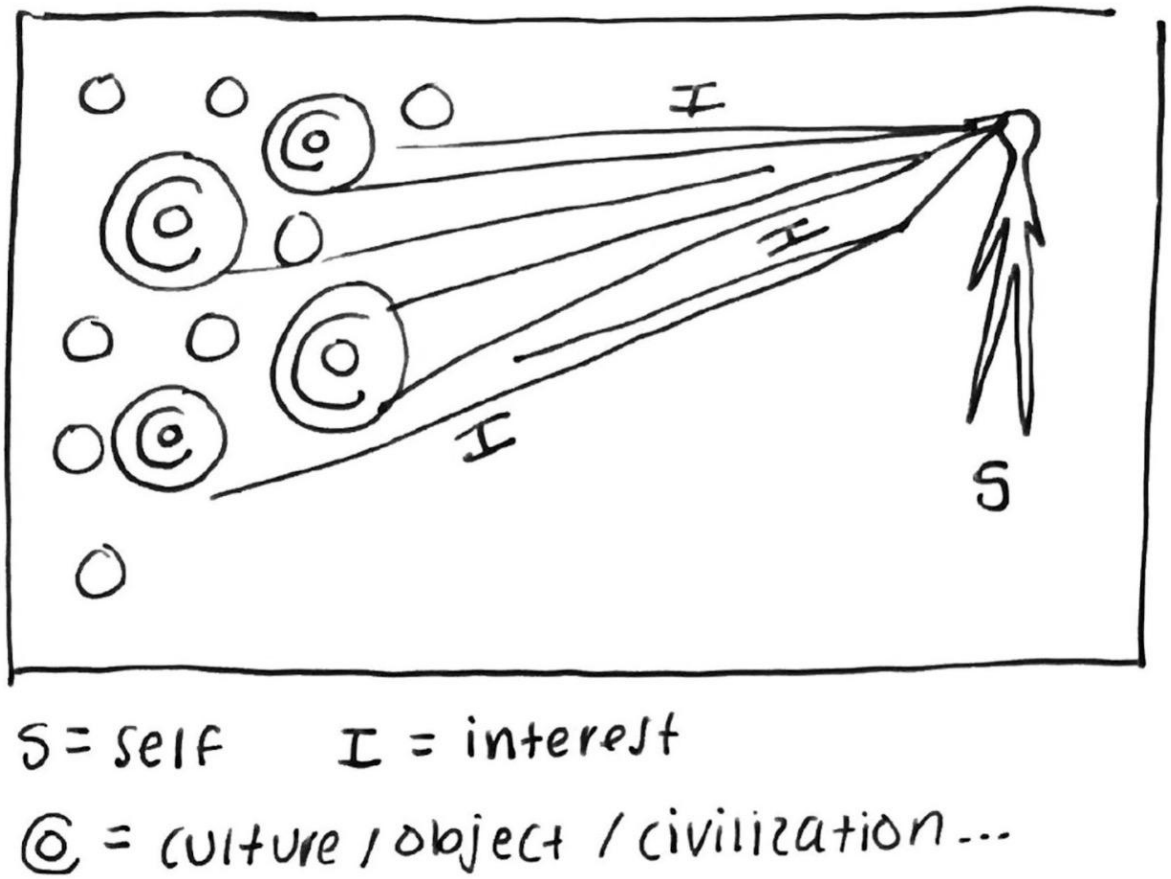

Fig. 5. Renata Escamilla Vivian, card from a Box of Ideas, 2020. Circles on the left represent different objects presented in other flashcards. "I" lines are the interest she has in "specific works, objects or cultures."

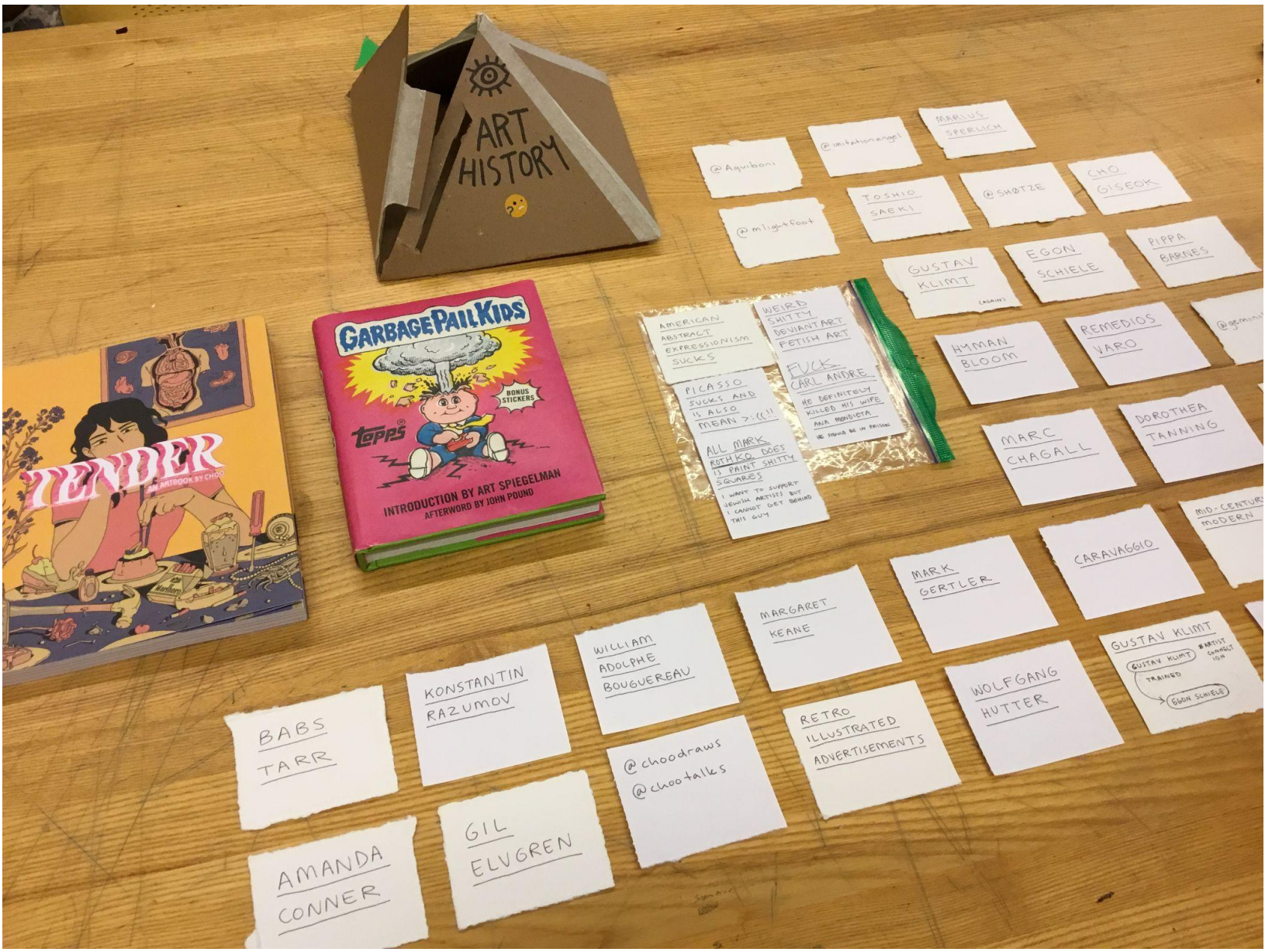

Fig. 6. Madison Nadler, part of the contents of a Box of Art History, 2021. The box itself, which she made, is in the back. The cards are more- and less-well known art historical figures (Bouguereau next to Konstantin Razumov, the contemporary Russian impressionist). The cards in the center are artists she dislikes (Mark Rothko: “I cannot get behind this guy”).

The Box of Materials is not a physical box, but a list of textures and substances that the student likes, from the texture of a brick wall to the feel of screenprinting ink. It's a kind of imaginary palette for their own artwork.

More information and instructions for the Box of Art History is here.

Time lines

Students are also asked to draw a timeline of art history that represents their own interests along with the periods and movements presented in class. The final versions of these are online, using the platform Miro, which allows time lines of any scale and level of detail. The students are given time lines populated with the standard periods of modernism. In Fig. 7 (next page), the standard movements are the bars at the bottom, which include assemblage, institutional critique, and other movements. Students then add the art that interests them, leading up to their own work.

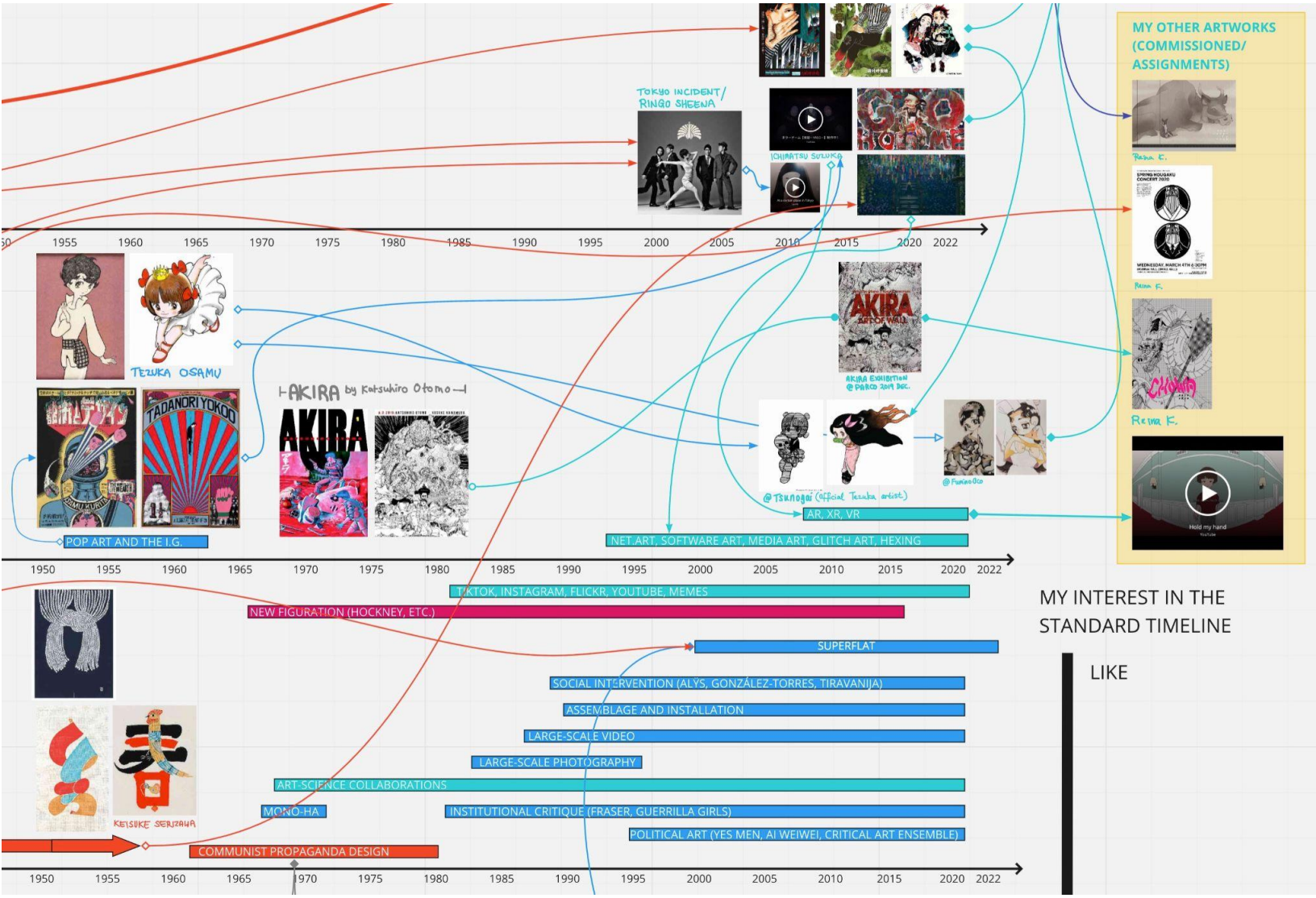

Fig. 7. Reina Kitamura, Timeline of modern and contemporary art, detail. 2021.

Here the student's own art is at the right. She traces some of it to Art nouveau, Pop art (blue bar at the middle left), and surrealism (red bar at bottom left), but she includes practices that aren't commonly noticed in art history (in this detail, Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* and Tezuka Osamu).

In this way the students can "write back" to the discipline of art history, challenging both themselves and their instructors to locate their work in relation to the past, and ensuring that art history remains directly pertinent to their own practice.

More information and instructions for the timeline is here.

Skills

Much of the studio instruction is on technical skills and introductions to new media, including digital media. We complement that with short lectures on the history of artists' skills, including ones no longer taught (such as mosaic or metal engraving), ones not taught in North America (such as fresco and lacquer), and new skills just now being added (including software and coding languages).

There is also a lecture on the concept of deskilling, so students can understand how they are part of a trend in postwar art academies to avoid traditional skills. It's an unusual subject to teach first year students, who are just starting to learn skills (and don't usually suspect that skill itself will be in question), but we think it's helpful for students to think about the idea that skills can get in the way of change.

Media

Much of the foundation year is occupied with learning new media. Usually students begin with drawing, and then move through various media. There is no set sequence, and it depends on each institution's facilities. In order to help students think about the relation between media, we provide short lectures on the difference between arts, media (a word that was first used in the mid-19th century to name offshoots of arts, like lithography and wood engraving), and techniques (small-scale skills, like filters in Photoshop). We encourage students to ask which of the skills they are learning are arts, and which are media or techniques. We also provide information about how modern academies like the Bauhaus first proposed media as objects of study and critique, with their own properties, essences, and limitations. In this way their final project on mixing media (see the list above) has a context in modernism and postmodernism.

Self-reflexivity

Over the course of the semester, we share the equivalent of this document, along with prompts for short papers, drawings, and spoken responses. We ask questions like: If you were teaching this course, would you include art history at all, and if so, which artists

and movements would you include? How would you teach politics and social engagement along with media and skills?

By the end of the course, the students are able to explain how they would teach such a course. In one version of the partly-integrated class, that last question is the principal paper assignment for the entire semester: everything is aimed at self-reflexivity and institutional critique.

Solutions

Here are the seven problems from the beginning of the paper, with our current answers.

1. *The world art history survey has endemic problems.* These can't all be solved at once. Our class concentrates on explaining as many as possible, using sort lectures on Eurocentrism, decolonial theory, race, and gender. By the end of the term students are able to rehearse the major problems with the survey of world art and defend the strategies they favor.

2. *Art history textbooks are not written for art students.* This is mainly addressed by the boxes. Each week there is a "box check-in" during which students show what they have gathered in their boxes, and we have conversations about the choices and implicit canons that are emerging. The time lines also help students see what parts of art history are meaningful for their practice. We encourage the students to delete the movements that do not speak to them (for example, the blue bars at the bottom of Fig. 7), until they feel they have created an art history that is pertinent and useful.

3. *The foundation year in studio is a collage of exercises and media.* We address this in a lecture on the history of the foundation year (number H27 in the list) , showing which exercises come from which historical periods:

> (a) From the European academies, we get exercises on life drawing, stressing naturalistic skills, and also perspective, light and shade, composition, and the idea of style.
>
> (b) From the 19th c. Romantic academies, we inherit the idea that art is about personal expression, and the artist's subjectivity is the real subject of art.
>
> (c) From modernist academies like the Bauhaus, we have our interest in media, the idea of the sequence 2D through 4D, and the elements of formal analysis.

(d) From postwar academies, we get the idea that art is fundamentally social and political, and that its essential subjects are ethnicity, identity, race, gender, and class.

Students develop the capacity to assess the different conceptual and historical origins of the foundation year, and decide which ideals and subjects suit their work.

4. *The foundation year is now expected to cover both techniques and social issues.* We haven't solved this problem, and it may be insoluble as it is stated. Our best solution is to talk about how individual media have their politics: various print technologies were developed for mass media and therefore have origins in capitalist interests, and various oil techniques were developed to express the power and prestige of the artists' patrons. The second-best response is reflexivity: If making is seen through the lens of social issues, how are the two related in any given case?

5. *Research can be difficult to introduce at beginning levels.* In our institution there are guidelines for research in the foundation year. In the fully integrated class, we also introduce lectures on the concept of artistic research as it has been elaborated in MFA and PhD programs, so students can understand the framework and further development of research-aligned artwork. We also distinguish between artistic research and academic research. Ninety-five percent of our first-year students are aiming at becoming artists. For the five percent who are inclined toward academic work, the class provides opportunities to do serious academic research. We distinguish between *green research* (idiosyncratic, personal searches for ideas and art that can help an artist work) and *red research* (academically vetted research using peer-reviewed journals, and an awareness of reception history). All students do both.

6. *Critiques have no consensus concepts, forms, or pedagogy.* The art historian can also contribute material to the critiques. In the fully integrated class, each critique day begins with a short lecture on an aspect of critiques: how they're different from exams, how they are assessed, how students can control them, the pros and cons of "cold reads," the ways art is judged, and so forth. This material isn't usually taught at undergrad level, and we hope it will show that critiques aren't just free-form conversations, but an integral part of a studio art education.

7. *Community building is part of studio practice but not of art history.* The best way to build community is to work to ensure that everyone is an equal participant. In this case, our strategy is to share these problems with the students as soon as they have enough

information to make use of them. The Boxes of art history, ideas, and materials are displayed each week, and the time lines are constructed over the entire span of the course, and both of those make the ordinarily solitary research of art history into an open, community-oriented project.

Challenges to implementing this format

This isn't an easy course to put together. Here are some specific obstacles we encountered.

1. *New art history lectures have to be written.* The main obstacle to setting up a course along these lines is that the art history component has to be completely reimagined: it isn't enough just to divide the material usually used in art history courses into smaller portions.

The art historical content of the class is rearranged to that everything is reported from the point of view of a contemporary artist. Instead of lectures on the Fauves, Futurism, Cubism, and so forth, movements are introduced in relation to their relevance to contemporary practice. One short lecture, for example, is "Surrealism in contemporary art": it reviews some salient features of surrealism, and then looks for traces of surrealism in contemporary practices.

It is also necessary to compose lectures on topics that are more directly useful for the studio experience, for example theories of color, theories of space and form, ideas about materiality, theories of media, ideas of the beautiful and sublime.

2. *Planning courses like this takes time (and funds).* It took about ten meetings over five months to plan the class. The institution provided compensation for part-time (hourly) instructor participation. The short video lectures took about six months to write, record, and edit. Closed captions had to be edited, at extra expense.

The partly integrated classes require less planning, on the order of four or five meetings in the semester before the classes. They also don't require instructors' contracts to be changed: existing classes and modules can remain in place.

3. *Contact hours may need to be extended.* It is important that the studio and art history faculty are present together as much as possible. There are times in art history classes when studio instructors don't need to be present (for example quizzes) and times in

studio classes when art history instructors don't need to be present (for example introductions to wood and metal shop safety procedures). But it's best if all the instructors know all the content: that way the art historian knows what material to provide in response to particular conversations and technical exercises (for example, a session on 3D printing might suggest a lecture on support in classical sculpture). Conversely, if the studio faculty hears the art history lectures, they can find places to apply concepts and examples in studio work.

4. *Running a fully integrated class requires continuous revision.* Throughout the summer we had to compose art history lectures with a couple of day's warning. The goal is that whatever art history, theory, or criticism is presented should be immediately pertinent to what then happens in the studio. But art students learn and experiment at different rates, and a number of lectures prepared at the beginning turned out not to fit. About half the lectures given in the summer 2021 class were written (on Google slides) the week before they were given. Fixed lectures, like the ones listed here, are useful, but only about half the time.

5. *The course requires extra contact hours.* A fully integrated class works best when all the instructors (and any teaching assistants or instructors of record) attend all the classes. For the studio faculty that represents a minor adaption, because a typical art history class meets fewer hours a week than a typical studio class. The art history instructor may have to have their contract adjusted to accommodate significantly longer studio time. In the summer 2021 class, the hours for the art history component went up from 51 (our institution's norm) to around 200.

6. *Traditional art history is squeezed.* Many of the short lectures are designed to create common conversations between art history and studio, which means that a significant fraction of the total time allocated to art history is dedicated to subjects like color, space, political meaning, the concept of medium, and so forth—subjects that are not usually part of art history surveys. As a result, the total time available for ordinary art historical instruction is reduced. In the 2021 class, there were six kinds of short lectures: (1) art history lectures, covering key periods, ideas, and artists; (2) a special set of lectures on the influence of particular periods on contemporary practices (these are intended to be practical, so students can see how their work is influenced by the past); (3) lectures on the history of studio art instruction; (4) lectures on gender, identity, race, and decolonization (these might be covered along the way in art history, but for studio practice they need to be formally introduced); (5) lectures on studio subjects, such as

color theory; and (6) lectures on the history and theory of art critiques, to prepare students for their own first critiques. As a result of these new concerns, the traditional art historical content of the modern art survey (number 1) was shrunk to about one-third the size it would have been in a freestanding survey course.

Conclusions

Presenting art students with a coherent, relevant foundation year experience is not easy. It hasn't been solved by a hundred years of modern and postmodern pedagogy, because it is an amalgam of disparate problems compressed into a single course or module. The incoherence of the foundation year faithfully reflects the incoherence of the art world. At least in this experiment, students are aware of the issues, and they can think about them in a single space that includes both the seminar and the studio. It's our best attempt at a conceptually, spatially, and practically unified first year experience.

We would be very interested to hear of projects and possibilities in other institutions, and as an institution we're also interested in collaborative work in rethinking the first year.