

Former Fellow: Blake Stimson

From time to time, CAA News spotlights a former recipient of a CAA Professional Development Fellowship. We invite all former fellows to contact Stacy Miller, director of research and career development, at smiller@collegeart.org to let us know your current activities. For more information about the fellowship program, please visit www.collegeart.org/fellowships.

Recipient of a CAA fellowship in 1995, Blake Stimson is an associate professor in the Art History Program at the University of California, Davis, where he teaches postwar and contemporary art, theory and methodology, and the history of photography. He co-directed the Critical Theory Program at UC Davis from 2001 to 2003.

Stimson earned his MA and PhD in art history in 1998 at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and his MFA in sculpture in 1992 at Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts.

His book, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation*, was recently published by MIT Press. Stimson and Alex Alberro, editors of *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (1999), are working on a second book, entitled *Institutional Critique: A Critical Anthology*.

CAA News: You received the CAA Professional Development Fellowship in 1995 to help you to complete your dissertation, then called "The Half-Life of the Proletarian Dream: Marxist Aesthetics and Avant-Gardism in New York Art, 1930–1970." In what ways did CAA's fellowship make this possible?

Blake Stimson: Well, I suppose the first thing I should note is that it afforded me the opportunity to develop a better title! Seriously, though, the fellowship was extraordinarily helpful and greatly appreciated. It provided me with a year of funding to write the bulk of the dissertation, which was renamed "A Theory of the Neo-Avantgarde," and further support during my first two years of employment at the University of Oregon, where I finished it.



Blake Stimson

Could you explain how you established yourself after you received your doctorate?

I received my PhD in 1998 from Cornell University, but I had already been teaching for two years at Oregon. During that time, I was learning how to teach, filling the gaps in my art-history education, finishing my dissertation, and working on an anthology on conceptual art for MIT Press. In the spring of 1998, I defended my dissertation and applied for and received the job here at the University of California, Davis.

Once I arrived in Davis, I continued to develop my teaching and became involved with other programs at the school, including Cultural Studies, Social Theory and Comparative History, and Critical Theory, the last of which I codirected for two years. I also organized an international conference with a cultural sociologist, John Hall, entitled "Visual Worlds." We invited artists and scholars from a variety of fields to consider the intersection of visibility as a concept and various notions of globalization. Papers from this conference—by Andrea Fraser, Allan Sekula, Mary Kelly, Constance Penley, the Yes Men, Lauren Berlant, Gregory Sholette, Jon Simons, Jennifer Gonzales, Martin Jay, and others—were published last year by Routledge under the same title as the conference. I also began coteaching a series of seminars for the Critical Theory Program, each focused on a single philosophical text. Classes on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Marx's *Capital*, and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* were popular with graduate students across the humanities and social sciences because they provided in-depth study of foundational texts.

In addition to teaching and service, I continued to develop and publish my research. Several sections from my dissertation were revised and published in several journals and edited volumes. I also wrote reviews and review essays in *Art Journal* and *New Left Review* and worked on a volume on collective art practice, coedited with Greg Sholette, called *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press). All the while I was working on my book.

You earned an MFA at Tufts University before entering a PhD program. Why did you switch from making art to writing about it?

When I first came to art in the mid- to late 1980s, challenging questions about theory and postmodernism were still new, and the art world was an exciting place to be. Following the withdrawal of government support for the arts brought on by the Jesse Helms/Robert Mapplethorpe debacle in 1989 and the resulting downturn of the art economy generally, the space that had allowed for more expansive intellectual concerns seemed to contract. In the early 1990s, Hal Foster, whom I had met while a fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program, suggested that I consider pursuing a PhD with him at Cornell. This seemed the right thing to do at the right time. I also realized then that even if an artist is fortunate enough to succeed, he or she is often forced by the market to function more as a small businessperson and less as a creator or intellectual. This is not always the case, of course, but I felt that such market pressures would push me in a direction that I was less inclined (and less well suited) to follow. In my experience, scholars are free to pursue new intellectual directions, even in their sixties or seventies, because of the remove from market pressures granted by academia. Primarily for these reasons, art history seemed the right way to go for me. In retrospect, I am really glad that I did so, although I expect that, had Helms and his colleagues not intervened, I would still be an artist today.

How did mentors help to guide you once you completed your education?

I've had many advisers and mentors along the way, and I'm not sure if I can point to

any coherent process. My mentors have all been generous and available for advising when needed, explaining, for example, the arcana of university life (such as the tenure and promotion process) and providing solid intellectual feedback, advocacy for job and fellowship applications, and general collegial and friendly support.

The most influential mentors have been Dan Younger, who afforded me my first foray into art criticism and editing for *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England*; Eric Rosenberg, who I worked with at Tufts University when I first became involved with art history while completing my MFA; Ron Clark, Mary Kelly, and Hal Foster, who I first worked with at the Whitney program; Hal Foster (again!) and Susan Buck-Morss, who were the adviser and first reader of my dissertation at Cornell; Sherwin Simmons and Kate Nicholson, who were supportive colleagues at the University of Oregon; Neil Larsen, Clarence Walker, Ben Orlove, and John Hall, all friends, advisers, and senior colleagues in other departments here at UC Davis; and those that I work with directly—particularly Dianne Macleod, Simon Sadler, and Doug Kahn—in the Art History Program and a program in modernist studies that is currently being developed.

Your book, The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation, was just published. What is it about?

The Pivot of the World is essentially a book about globalization. The promise of globalization has long seemed inseparable from the threat of Americanization. By 1950, for example, French critics were decrying “Coca-Colonialism,” and many worried that that a Pax Americana would further collapse the Enlightenment ideal of rational public debate into the instrumental private exchange of the marketplace.

The Pivot of the World considers another way of being in the world that emerged in response to these worries. Against the older European emphasis on homo politicus and the newer American focus on homo economicus, a broad swath of artists and intellectuals came to imagine that a new social subject grounded first and foremost in cultural self-understanding—a homo culturalis—would provide an alternative future for the experience of nation.

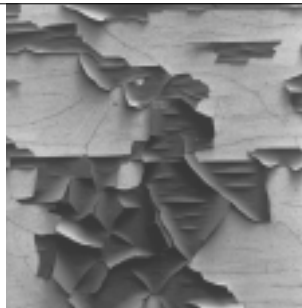
This third path was explored in three



extraordinarily ambitious photographic projects studied in my book: *The Family of Man* exhibition that first opened in 1955 and traveled the world for the next decade under the aegis of the United States Information Agency; the Swiss immigrant Robert Frank’s influential book *The Americans*, shot in 1955–56 and published in France in 1958 and in the U.S. in 1959; and East/West German couple Bernd and Hilla Becher’s typological record of industrial architecture, begun in 1957 and continuing today.

You recently participated in CAA’s Annual Conference in Boston, chairing “Art History as a Class Act.” What was this session about?

Paul Jaskot invited me to put together a panel for the Radical Art Caucus. The session aimed to consider class as an elephant in the room for art history, particularly so for what used to be called the “new art history.” It is often assumed that our discipline suffers its role as a “vehicle for reach-me-down notions of taste, order, and the good life” (as T. J. Clark, quoting Kurt Forster, put it in his 1974 new art history manifesto). The new art history took that limitation to heart and worked to renew art history’s purpose as cultural criticism. Much good work has resulted from this charge over the years—not the least Clark’s



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Deadline for all Getty Research Grants:

NOVEMBER 1, 2006

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own powerful contributions—but there might also be a sticking point. Simply put, the new art history has sometimes reduced its mission by giving up art history's traditional concern with "taste, order, and the good life" altogether, as if these ideals are themselves somehow ideological, somehow at odds with a critical art history.

What is lost (in addition to the pursuit of a good life!) is the study of how class is mediated through the "reach-me-down" status of these concepts and the experience they refer to, or how class relations are negotiated through the registers of embodied pleasure. Thus, the session's title, "Art History as a Class Act," was intended to

address two core presuppositions: first, the importance of the mediating function of art-historical work itself (i.e., its role as a class actor) and, second, the importance of art history's role as a "class act" or standard bearer, one whose mission might be the repair of hackneyed and manipulative notions of taste, order, and the good life. The panel centered on thoughtful presentations by two midcareer scholars who provided intellectual histories of the generation that had trained them and that inaugurated the methodological turn: Michael Orwicz spoke on how class came to be conceptualized by the new art history in the U.S. during the 1970s, and John Roberts examined the rise of the artist-as-historian and artist-as-philosopher in the U.K. during the 1960s and its implementation of a more complex class basis and class perspective for art history. Discussion was led by two respondents from the generation who was trained in the 1960s and redirected the discipline in the 1970s—Alan Wallach and Keith Moxey—and a lively debate ensued, one that could have easily carried on through lunch and the afternoon!

How has the field of art history changed since you began your career?

Since my days as a student, I feel that the field has become more measured and less combative. There are good and bad sides to this. On the positive side, more energy is put into productive scholarly inquiry rather than into battling institutions and conventions. On the negative side, our increasing professionalization risks foregoing the sort of inquiry into our own root justification that had made the art history of the 1970s and 1980s so vital.

What career advice would you give recent art-history graduates and midcareer art-history professionals?

As someone who is barely only midcareer himself, I'm not really qualified to advise as requested. That said, I suppose the one truism that I would fall back on, as a general principle, is to think for oneself. What the field needs and what should be (and often is) rewarded is independent thought.

Career Development

For more information on CAA's career-development activities, please visit www.collegeart.org/ or write to Beth Herbruck, CAA career development associate, at bherbruck@collegeart.org.

2006 Fellows Announced in September

The visual-art and art-history juries for CAA's Professional Development Fellowship Program met in May to select the 2006 recipients. Look for an article in the September *CAA News* announcing the winners of these prestigious awards. For more information on the fellowship program, see the following section.

CAA thanks the CAA members who graciously served on the two juries. The art-history jury included: Jill O'Bryan, artist and independent scholar; Anne Collins Goodyear, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; and Kevin E. Consey, director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. The visual-art jury comprised: Joseph S. Lewis, III, dean of the School of Art and Design, Alfred University; Michael Aurbach, Vanderbilt University; and Marie Watt, visual artist and former CAA fellow.

CAA Offers MFA and PhD Fellowships

The CAA Professional Development Fellowship Program is a unique opportunity for emerging artists and scholars to receive funding toward the completion of their degrees and receive one-on-one professional-development support. Established in 1993 to aid MFA and PhD students in bridging the gap between graduate school and professional life, the program nurtures outstanding artists and scholars with the necessary financial sup-

port, employment advice, and mentoring that can empower them at the beginning of their careers.

CAA has awarded fellowships to eighty-five artists and scholars. Artist fellows have shown their work in prestigious group exhibition, including the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale, and art-historian fellows have published in such journals and magazines as *Artforum*, *Art Asia Pacific*, *Visual Resources*, and *History of Photography*, as well as in CAA's three scholarly publications. Both artists and art-historians have earned teaching positions in public and private colleges and universities nationwide, while other recipients work as curators in important museums and galleries in the United States and Canada.

Each CAA fellow receives an unrestricted \$5,000 grant during his or her final year of study. Previous fellows have applied the grant toward tuition, travel, supplies, and day-to-day living expenses. CAA continues to offer support to each fellow for an additional year after graduation by advocating for accessible employment opportunities. Upon securing a position, CAA provides a \$10,000 subsidy to the employer as part of the fellow's salary.

Several fellowships, each with generous matching grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, are open to MFA and PhD candidates who will complete their degrees in 2007. Two honorable-mention recipients are also selected to receive a \$1,000 award. CAA encourages fellowship applicants from socially and economically diverse backgrounds.

Applications will be available in September. For more information, please contact Beth Herbruck, CAA career development associate, at 212-691-1051, ext. 219; fellowships@collegeart.org; www.collegeart.org/fellowships.

Deadline: January 31, 2007. ■