

ACCORD

Helping Each Other Help Ourselves

Gonzalo Casals and **Caroline Woolard** talk about rebuilding the art world around the concept of mutual aid, the importance of communities, and alternative forms of art education

BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN



GONZALO CASALS IS THE NEWLY APPOINTED commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs for New York City. Prior to his hiring earlier this year, Casals, who was born in Argentina, spent three years as executive director of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, which is devoted to the work of queer artists. There, he oversaw acclaimed exhibitions, created a fellowship and residency program, formed an educational plan about queerness for New York City schools, and started a project to commission artists to create new work for the museum's window facade. He also launched a \$7 million capital campaign to make more spaces for education and access to the museum's archives.

Caroline Woolard is a New York-based artist who creates sculptures, immersive installations, digitally accessible teaching tools, and barter networks. Woolard often works with numerous collaborators, as she looks to build community within the art world, question its structure, and advocate for it to be more equitable. For

her project NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative, first launched in 2015, 300 New Yorkers pooled their money to buy affordable space for community and cultural initiatives. For the ongoing project BFAMFAPhD, which she started in 2014, Woolard and collaborators compile data, produce reports, and create teaching tools related to art school education. Woolard is an assistant professor at the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, in Connecticut. A solo exhibition of her work is scheduled to open in October at Miriam Gallery in Brooklyn, and her public art project for the Free Library of Philadelphia, supported by her fellowship at Moore College of Art and Design, is slated for that same month.

In April, as the coronavirus had forced the shutdown of much of New York City, Casals and Woolard joined *ARTnews* for a conversation via telephone. Casals did so as he was in the latter stages of recovering from Covid-19.



ARTnews: Gonzalo, you are about to step into a huge new role in the New York City art world as commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs. What is the career trajectory that led you there?

Gonzalo Casals: When I came to the United States from Buenos Aires in early 2002 I landed in Jackson Heights, Queens, which has the second-largest concentration of gay men in the city. People are often surprised when I tell them that statistic, and I think it's because in this neighborhood being gay is only one part of your identity. Most likely, you are also an immigrant and/or a person of color. When I arrived, I noticed that the only opportunities that people in the queer community had to come together was at the bars. Not to vilify the bar scene, but sometimes that's not where you want to go to meet people. So, with a friend of mine, we created Cinema Rosa, a monthly screening of LGBTQ+ movies that placed an emphasis on films that would bring together diverse people to talk about important issues. We wanted to build community around that experience. In that project, you can find the DNA of all the work that I've been doing since then. This idea of social capital and helping people build connections and relationships. The idea of empowerment

and seeing yourself reflected in society and civic participation. Once you feel empowered and you feel connected with society and something larger than yourself, you start thinking about your role as an active participant in that society.

Caroline Woolard: What resonates with me in Gonzalo's story is the reality that so many different identities come together through the arts, in specific neighborhoods. Being part of cultural organizing and art making helps people build connections and relationships in terms of social capital. I don't think I would have ended up in the arts if I hadn't realized at a young age that I was queer. I had this sense that the artists I met as a kid had an ability to be in public and fully themselves in a way that I longed for. I didn't really have any models for that, except for the few times I would ask my mom, "Who is that?" and she would say, "That's an artist." So I do think that I gravitated toward making art because of the queer community, though it wasn't so pronounced until I was in art school.

Casals: I was just thinking back to two of your projects from 2008, Caroline: *TradeSchool.coop* and *OurGoods.org*, both of which put an emphasis on sharing resources between people to serve one another. I wonder how things are different now and how we move this solidarity beyond the resources that we have into self-care and into taking care of each other.

Woolard: Things were very different back then, but I think we're seeing in this moment

that the real way to build community and shape democracy and make families and neighborhoods thrive and survive is through mutual aid and an economy of solidarity and cooperation, especially if we have been minoritized in various ways. I think in New York City, because there is so much money in certain areas of the art market, often artists have in mind a model of success that is financial, rather than community based. The overlaps between then and now are definitely in the area of mutual aid networks, but, in this moment—thinking about coronavirus and social distancing—I think the groups to learn from are disability justice and consent and survivor groups, who think a lot about distance and healing and transformative organizing around what is an appropriate distance, how can you have consent around touch, and what does it mean to work with people where they are. Many artists who are involved in disability justice organizing have been working in mutual aid remotely for decades. This is the moment to turn to those artists and cultural organizers and see that, OK, we have a lot of catching up to do. What can we learn?

ARTnews: Caroline, can you explain what you mean by mutual aid and how that manifests in the work you do?

Woolard: I think of mutual aid as the way that we can meet our needs together within communities. That can look like gift-giving, bartering, or local currency, if you want to be more formal about it. But essentially it's finding ways of meeting our needs



The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art's inaugural facade installation by the collective SILENCE=Death, 2017–18.



Top, view of Caroline Woolard's exhibition "INDEX: The Meeting," 2019–20, at the Rose Art Museum.
Bottom, a *Making and Being* workshop organized by Woolard and Susan Jahoda.

together mutually, in spite of structural violence in the economy, where some have more financial capital than others. If you think about how a family runs, when it's functional—it could be a chosen family or a group of friends—often people are doing favors for each other all the time. Expanding mutual aid means looking at how far that network of favors and solidarity extends.

Casals: I think it starts with the idea of shared values. This community could be your family, your chosen family, your friends, or, for me, what I call my family. Explicitly and implicitly we all share a set of values. We all feel and believe that we are in this

together. This idea of taking care of each other comes naturally from a recognition of what you specifically have to offer, what is your privilege, what we have to share with others, and having empathy to understand what the others in our communities need and lack. Naturally, you start doing favors and supporting each other, as Caroline was saying. I think Caroline and I are expanding this model from our personal, private lives into our professional or artistic practices.

Woolard: One way of thinking about it is as a daily practice: the way we survive is by being able to support each other. It's a lifelong practice to connect with someone

who reaches out to you, even if you don't know them. It's important to take that call or reply to that email. This moment in particular is one in which I'm checking in on a lot of people.

ARTnews: How do you see mutual aid working within our current art world and perhaps even being the foundation for a new art world?

Casals: What makes this moment interesting is that even though we are in isolation we continue talking about community and mutual aid. In the last two weeks, as I was in my hospital bed battling coronavirus, I could see how much suffering was in my community, not only because I myself was sick but because I was hearing from them that they felt they couldn't do anything for me. We shouldn't take for granted the impact that these moments of isolation are going to have on us and how they are going to impact our relationships. I hope it will impact them in a positive way, because it's making evident how much we do need to be with one another. In order for us to recover from this, the emphasis needs to be put on the people, not on institutions or corporations.

Woolard: Imagining art institutions that we want in the future, ones that are centered on people and centered on specific places and specific conditions in the city, I was thinking about the nonprofit SCORE. They partner with the city's Small Business Administration and provide free business mentoring with retired businesspeople. When you're there, you get the feeling that those retired businesspeople are really excited to be there together. It feels like a community. What if instead of really expensive art schools, we had that for artists, where artists could go and get mentorship for free from older artists and retired art faculty who were given a space to be together? This is something that Susan Jahoda and I have been dreaming about for years.

ARTnews: Your *Making and Being* project, developed with Susan Jahoda, is a website that does this in a way, by offering different guides and tools for artists teaching in art schools.

Woolard: The collective I formed, BFAMFAPhD, put out a report in 2014 called *Artists Report Back*. We found that, based on census data, 40 percent of people who make their primary living from being an artist do not have a bachelor's degree. I think it's important to expand the conversation about what so-called teachers in BFA or MFA programs should be teaching. Artists are long-term residents of their neighborhoods in New York City and have so many ways of teaching and learning that are



Woolard:
Countermeasures:
Level, 2018.

outside the art school paradigm. Susan and I have been making free and downloadable activities that artists can use. The idea is that these things can be used by people in self-organized learning groups as much as they could be by teachers in art schools.

Casals: I've been thinking a lot about how we're using the word "essential" these days. There's an opportunity to rethink that and redress the ways the art world has created hierarchies—to contest all of these ideas and make a space for what really is essential. In these times of lockdown, we are starting to see not only the need to be with one another but the need to be with one another and doing something, and that something is usually a cultural or artistic expression. How do we make sure that as we recover and heal we keep track of this idea of what is essential and important?

Woolard: In terms of making the Department of Cultural Affairs more artist-centric, how do you imagine communicating this idea of what is essential? What does that look like? Some people might say it means putting an **artist in residence** in the sanitation department. What does that look like to you?



Artist in Residence

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been an artist in residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation since the 1970s.

Casals: When we talk about the Department of Cultural Affairs and the city, we're talking about high-level politics. I don't think it is the role of the department to create programming, but rather to pose the questions, help convene people to think about these ideas, and then, to support those organizations and those individuals who are going to be doing the actual work. At the center is this idea of partnership. I always compare the process of the department's 2017 Cultural Plan, a process that brought cultural organizations [together] with New Yorkers to define what culture looks like in the city and create a plan to execute it, with **Occupy Wall Street**.

At the beginning with Occupy Wall Street, people were complaining that the organizers didn't know what they wanted and that they didn't have any clear demands. Little did we know then that that platform would inform the 2016 election and the conversations we're still having today. To me, what was most powerful in the Cultural Plan—which I'm biased about because I was on the team that helped develop it—was that a huge number of New Yorkers were asked, "What does culture mean to you? What should culture look like in New York City?" I think that is the power of the department's platform of convening conversations. How do we ask the right questions? How do we invite the people to the table and then elevate those conversations in order for them to inform the policy that cultural organizations in the city will follow?

Woolard: That planning process was only controversial because it had that

participatory ethos where artists in the city, for the first time, felt that they could protest and they could be involved. That in itself is powerful.

Casals: An idea I totally embrace is that there should be more than one Cultural Plan for New York City.

ARTnews: In the spirit of listening to what artists need, Caroline, what would you say are the pressing issues that artists are facing both before coronavirus hit and now in the midst of it? And what about in the future?



Occupy Wall Street

In 2011, protestors called out inequality — with a non-hierarchical focus and no readily identifiable leadership.

Woolard: There are so many things. Emphasizing the local community-based arts organization is really important. All of the things that affect working-class people affect artists. So, right now the major issues are huge amounts of unemployment, and the exacerbation of the rent that is way too high for studios and for housing, and which applies to all small businesses. There's also a real question about how to make and share your work in a city when gathering is potentially in question for the next year. We need to continue to focus on what arts education could be if it's more grassroots



Top, view of the exhibition "Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies," 2017–18, at the Leslie-Lohman Museum.

Bottom, Gonzalo Casals (third from right) at a CreateNYC event in 2017.



choir, art making in the library—the level of education attainability is higher and levels of health are higher. And I love, Caroline, that you just mentioned, as a completely normal thing, artists as small businesses. And still it can be a crazy idea to even mention that, which it shouldn't be.

ARTnews: Gonzalo, one of the programs you launched at the Leslie-Lohman was an education syllabus for the city's public school system about queerness and its relationship to art making. Can you talk about how that relates to accessibility and audience—how institutions see their audiences and how artists see their audiences?

Casals: A lot of resources in the art world are focused on presenting work—and not producing work. Emphasizing the object and not the people. A lot of resources are put behind building an exhibition, and when you hang the artwork, the job is done. The emphasis should be: How do you engage with your community? How do you think of the collection in relation to the needs of the people you are trying to engage and serve? If you move from the object to creating experiences, you can actually build relationships. How do you create a sense of connection between an individual or group of people and an institution?

Woolard: I couldn't agree more. It is also so exciting to imagine a future way of teaching art and thinking about what artists should start prioritizing. Why do you think it is that artists and art schools still focus on the making and not so much on the gathering, hosting, and facilitating?

Casals: Because you cannot monetize a relationship, unfortunately. I mean, you could, there are ways of doing it. But we are still very much focused on the idea that you make work and you sell it. But Caroline, I do love your sculpture *Countermeasures: Level*, in which you need two people in order to

and distributive, think more about affordable spaces for all small businesses including artist studios, and think about ways to support artists' livelihood. It was amazing to see how much money was put into the city's Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative. What if there is a way the Department of Cultural Affairs could have artists work with co-ops to actually stimulate jobs?

Casals: Of the thousands of meetings and conversations we had for the Cultural Plan, the one that stays with me the most was when we convened a group of probably 20 or 25 artists at Jack, the performance space in Brooklyn. Jordana De La Cruz, Jack's co-director, was facilitating the conversation. She started it by saying, "Let's make a list of everything we need to survive as artists."

They came up with the usual: visibility for our work, access to materials, education. And then she said, "Let's make a list of everything we need to just survive in New York." It was affordable housing, health care, jobs. Quickly I realized that there's only so much that the Cultural Plan could do, and how much work we need to do—going back to the idea of essential—in bringing artists, cultural producers, and cultural organizations to the level of being essential to the life of the city. What are the things you need in order to lead a healthy and productive life? The Social Impact of the Arts Project study from 2017 by a group of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania showed that in neighborhoods in New York City in which there is some cultural production or cultural expression—access to artists, a church

engage with it, which is the perfect way of the object being a means to something else.

Woolard: To me—and I feel like, sure, we can make objects as artists and we can make all kinds of things—if we are not changing the conversation and talking to each other, what are we doing? I don't know that many artists who truly want to be alone forever, and even if they thought they did, I think this pandemic is teaching them that in fact they need a little more tactility and sensuality in life.

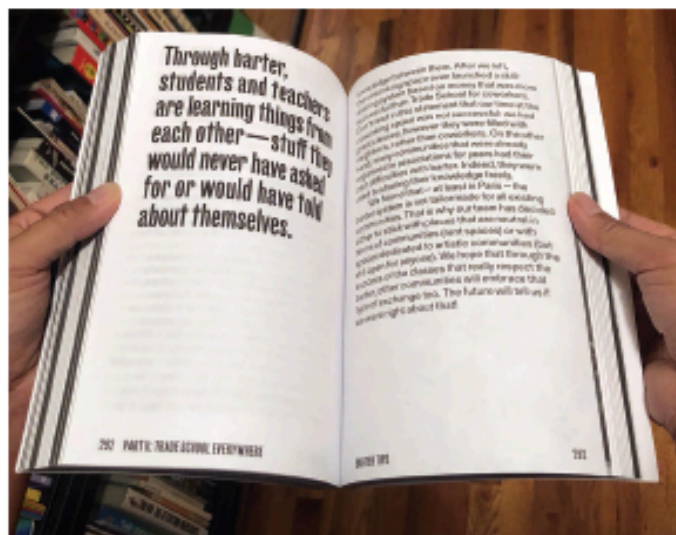
ARTnews: Can you speculate as to how the coronavirus might radically alter the art world?

Woolard: I think that, more than ever, this is a time to reconsider all the ways that artists thrive in community and for artists to completely reimagine approaches to their livelihood that include nonconventional arts-adjacent jobs and participating more actively in their own cultural planning so that when Gonzalo is listening to us, we can say, "These are the things we need." It doesn't have to be this vision that clearly has not worked and is not working for so many people.

Casals: We are still in the thick of it. I was thinking about what the role of art and culture and cultural organizations and cultural producers is. The first phase is holding up a mirror to what is happening to help us make sense of it. I think this crisis has exacerbated a lot of issues that are happening with our societies, and who better than artists and cultural organizations to help us process that through the creation of work and engaging with that work. The next phase, once we know a little bit about how we can start working together, is: how we can solve problems in a creative way, so we resist the temptation of going back to what was normal. And the third phase is, how do artists hold all of us accountable. How do you make sure that the promises we make continue to be perpetuated into eternity, if you will.

ARTnews: More recently, there's been a lot of hype around community-engaged art and social practice. Caroline, do you see your work as part of that or something completely different?

Woolard: It's a difficult conversation. Most artists who have been working in community for decades have not been receiving funding that younger artists have been receiving over the past 15 years. I am always suspicious of terms that immediately get put into institutions. For example, you can get a major or minor in socially engaged art or an MFA in socially engaged art. It does have a very elite and



Woolard's book
Trade School:
2009–2019.

well-resourced resonance. And, at the same time, I think the reason this term is rising up is that there is a consensus that art has always been social and that artists want to make politically engaged and progressive work. And they will always have an emphasis on building community in tandem with whatever object making or performance work they do. On the one hand, yes, I also am an artist who cares about building community and shaping a conversation while making objects. But I'm hesitant to believe that a term can be so finite. It feels like a term like Fluxus or Dada or Surrealism, a movement that comes and goes, rather than the undercurrent that allows any artistic process to function and flourish.

Casals: It became a marketing term for schools to sell a new kind of MFA or BFA. The first thing that one learns when working with the community is that each engagement is unique, making it very difficult to name it with one term.

Woolard: So how do you imagine working with this term or this approach in your new role, Gonzalo?



Social Practice

A term that gained currency in the mid-2000s to describe art focused on interaction and community—as practiced here by the collective Assembla.

Casals: The announcement of my new role happened five days before the

world changed completely, so my job has changed radically. My approach is going to be very much about seeing what is the need, seeing what people need, and then figuring out how we can deploy the resources and the skills that we have in order to solve that problem. I think the values of empathy, inclusion, and equity will inform the work that we are going to do. And, just to bring in the idea of queeriness, something we had been thinking about at the museum is this idea that queer leadership is collective leadership. I'm not coming in and saying, for instance, these are the three monuments we are going to make. This is what my legacy is going to be. It's about the convening, the conversation, the trust in this community to come together after tons of isolation and figure out together how we can make this happen.

Woolard: I think a lot of people probably are asking you these questions too soon because they're excited. It seems like such a big gift to see how you will use that emphasis on pedagogy to shape your leadership.

Casals: There is also the theory of change that you use in community organizing. People think that you vote for the people that you like and then you leave them alone to do the work. It doesn't work like that. Once somebody that you share values with comes to a position of power, you have to, from the outside, make them do things. That's the role of everybody around me: making sure I understand what their priorities are and what we should be doing as a community with our own power. ■