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INCONVERSATION

The Art of Institutional Possibility: CAROLINE WOOLARD with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve

LMAKgallery | JANUARY 19 – FEBRUARY 25, 2018

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Caroline Woolard, *Capitoline Wolves*, installation view at the Knockdown Center, New York, 2016-2018, cherry wood, powder coated steel, dyed stoneware, local water, hand mirrored glass, copper bowls, performance, 29" x 36" x 72" each, forming a circle that is 15' in diameter, Courtesy of the artist, Photo: Levi Mandel.

I have met the future, or better the present, and it is Caroline Woolard. From the first moment I met this young artist as a fellow teacher at SVA, I was struck by her profound command of the zeitgeist, of what in fact—*being-an-artist*—means (as she and Susan Jahoda put it in their forthcoming book): a total commitment to critique, production, pedagogy, the social relations of the art object, material form, discourse, and community. The range of her projects is dizzying—from organizing alternate economies of barter, trade school, and real estate commons, to the intimate, poetic, resonance of form and social meaning as it is played out in the relations of the @ and amphora. A frequent subject of Art21 and an energetic public lecturer, Woolard and I sat down over a period of months in various New York coffee shops to discuss the totality of her art practice and the content of her upcoming show at LMAKgallery: *Carried on Both Sides: Encounter Two* (January 19 - February 25, 2018)

Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve (Rail):

You are impossible to summarize. Let's start with your website as it portrays the many "Caroline Woolards." On it you distinguish between "Systems" and "Projects"



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"From the Crooked Timber of Humanity, nothing ever"

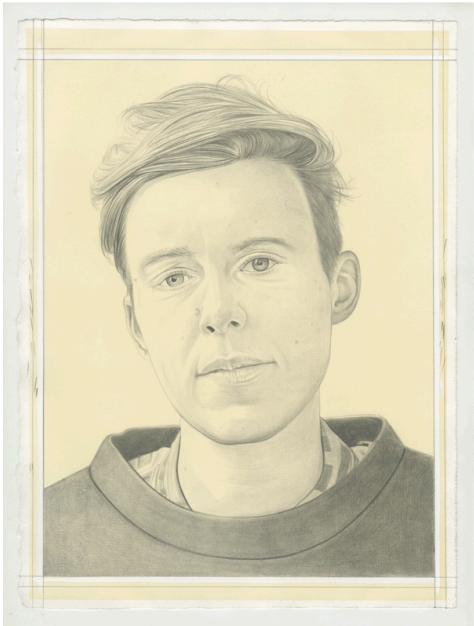


A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER
"From the Crooked Timber of Humanity, nothing ever came out straight"

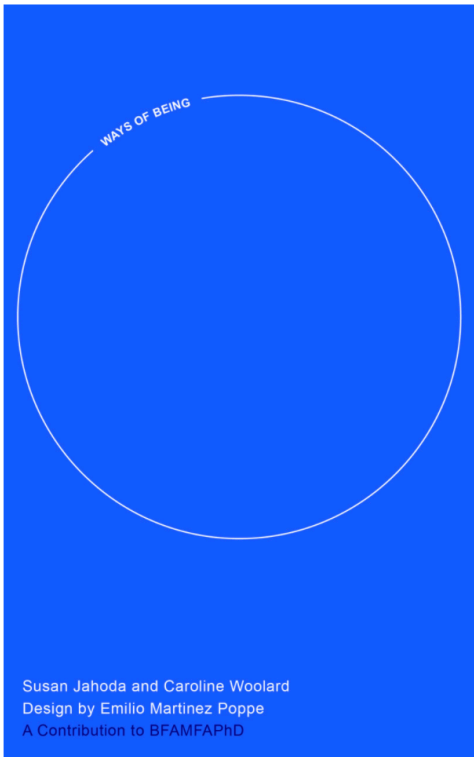
Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (Rail):

You are impossible to summarize. Let's start with your website as it portrays the many "Caroline Woolards." On it you distinguish between "Systems" and "Projects" (along with "Media," "Events," "Texts") and present yourself to the reader as someone in the middle of any one of several activities. "Caroline is likely teaching, convening a group, speaking at an event, writing a book, or working on an interdisciplinary project." So, Caroline, who are you, and what are you doing right now?

Woolard: At this very moment I am preparing for my show at LMAK, but I am also finishing a book with Susan Jahoda, which will be designed by Emilio Martinez Poppe. It is called *Ways of Being* (Punctum Books). My practice is bi-focal in that I am interested in developing long term, multi-year initiatives (at the moment I call them "systems") that the projects I make can circulate within. Think of it as the forest and the trees. So, for example, the sculptures I am preparing for my show at LMAK fit into a larger "system" or initiative, which is the collective BFAMFAPhD.



Portrait of Caroline Woolard, pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Based on a photo by Zack Garlitos.



Jahoda, Susan, Caroline Woolard, and Emilio Martinez Poppe. *Ways of Being* (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books), forthcoming summer of 2018.

Rail: Your model of being-an-artist or making-art is fundamentally different from the hundreds of years of art making which focus on the individual artisan or craftsperson or genius. Your artist is by definition part of a community—but it's more than just about collaboration, because you are presenting what the ontology of the artist is, as in this statement:

The authors believe that an education in art must be as much about ways of being in the world as it is about ways of seeing and ways of making. *Ways of Being* is for people who want a holistic arts education; an education that includes how to be both more fully present with themselves (ways of feeling) and with others (ways of relating), and to understand the conditions and contexts that inform the decisions they make in their production process.

I used these questions to set up the first day of my senior thesis seminar at SVA:
 "For example, how can one talk about making a new project without talking about labor conditions? How can one talk about labor conditions without talking about

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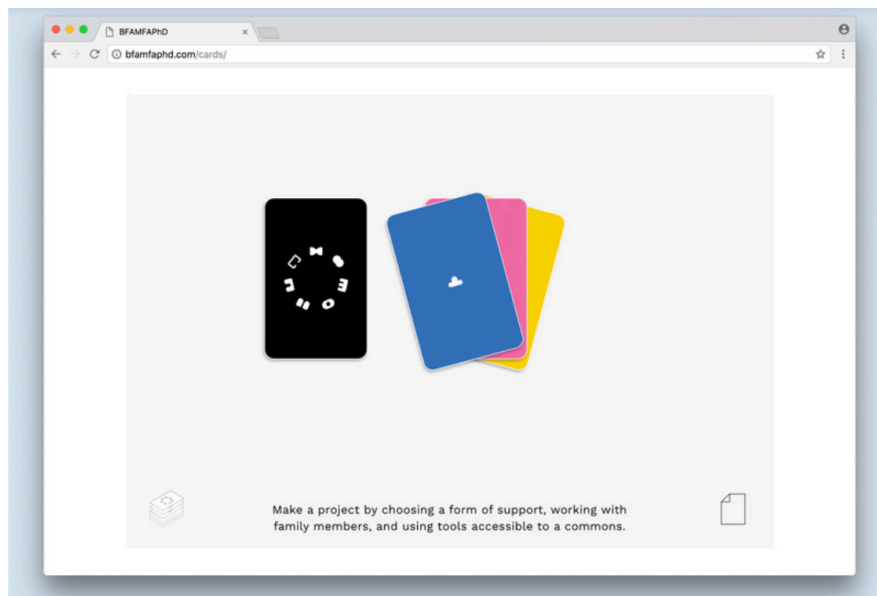
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I used these questions to set up the first day of my senior thesis seminar at SVA: “For example, how can one talk about making a new project without talking about labor conditions? How can one talk about labor conditions without talking about payment? It’s time for artists to address not only their artistic gifts but also their labor, their well-being, their budgets, and their storage units.” I asked them to make maps of the conditions and influences necessary for them to make a work. From day one, the point is for them to think of being an artist as being part of a network of concentric circles and arrows.

Woolard: Yes, Susan and I are so glad that you adapted this activity from *Ways of Being*. That one is based on a social-ecological model, which we learned about from the artist Christine Wong Yap. Our book offers teaching tools for arts educators who want to facilitate conversations about art and economy. It’s a printed book, but it’s also a deck of cards, and a website with videos about artworks that reflect the conditions of their own production. We follow what we call the “life” of any project through ten phases that we have identified: source, tool, labor, support, encounter, copyright, acquire, transfer, narrate, and depart. We have been working on it for three years now, teaching versions of it at SVA, UMass Amherst, and the University of Hartford, plus at invited workshops for places like CUE and EFA. We are finishing the website with freely downloadable syllabi, presentations, and PDFs of classroom activities. The website will be done this summer when Susan and Emilio and I will be in residence at Pratt.



Caroline Woolard, Susan Jahoda, and Emilio Martinez Poppe of BFAMFAPhD, *Ways of Being*, 2015-2018, book, video, website, deck of cards. Courtesy of the artists.

Rail: How does this idea of being bi-focal come up in your practice as an artist?

Woolard: I call it “Institutional Possibility.” In other words, being-an-artist involves mapping how our work as artists connects to the larger arts ecosystem.

Rail: I *love* that—“Institutional Possibility”—the progeny of institutional critique.

Woolard: I am interested in world-making, in what adrienne maree brown calls visionary fictions, in prefigurative politics; my work is one of institutional possibility rather than of institutional critique. I celebrate cultures of playful experimentation and solidarity. I bring an acute attention to form, material, and poetics to visions of interdependence and economic justice. I try to cultivate cooperative behavior using sculptural installations that invite people to listen deeply enough to change their minds. How can I say this differently? Well, I try to

deeply enough to change their minds. How can I say this differently? Well, I try to make art objects and initiatives for interdependence.

Rail: Because of Tim Rollins's death, I've been thinking a lot about the role of teaching in art practice. Few artists I know combine pedagogy and art practice the way you and Tim do. How does your interest in pedagogy combine with your art practice? The question is almost chicken or egg. Is it through making art that the pedagogical became interesting? Or is it through teaching that you began to focus on pedagogy?

Woolard: If you work in groups, you think about pedagogy. It definitely started with my art practice. I prefer collaboration and for me collaboration is pedagogical. I collaborate because I want my limited perspective to be challenged and transformed in dialog with other people. It allows me to refine my ideas in debate and in encounters with difference—difference of experience, of perspective, of values. The range of opinions and skills in groups strengthens projects because everyone is challenged to confront their assumptions and come to an agreement as a group...or make space to consent to individual expression. When I was first asked to teach at The New School (it was the year of Occupy Wall Street), seven years ago, I had no idea that the skills I learned in groups—facilitation, movement activities, consensus, voting, conflict resolution, deep listening, and agenda-setting—would come in handy. But they did.

Rail: Can you say more about the difficult sides of collaboration?

Woolard: I think group work is both the most necessary and the most difficult endeavor of our time.

Rail: See, how you define art-making immediately as a group activity—not the lone self in a studio.

Woolard: Right, and working in a group means working with principles of direct democracy, but most people have no experience of democracy at work, at home, in school, or online. I have been in so many groups where communication breaks down; where people focus on logistics and strategy rather than the interpersonal skills of listening, attention, and communication.

Rail: As in group critiques, which are notoriously problematic. You are one of the few teachers who really thinks about how a crit should be run. You ask students to write out questions.

Woolard: I've been involved with two groups—the Pedagogy Group with Susan Jahoda, Robert Sember, Maureen Connor, and many others and the Retooling Critique Working Group with Judith Leemann and others. The problem with crits is most teachers seriously lack facilitation skills. White teachers and students lack socio-cultural literacies that are not Eurocentric, and there is the assumption that a "blind read" will somehow not reproduce bias. This is why many people are looking to shift the critique structure. Because on some level, we all know that we cannot transform the world if we do not simultaneously commit to transforming ourselves and each other. We know that we need to embrace our collective capacity for care and respectful debate. So how can we learn to collaborate? How do we develop a musculature of shared decision-making and of shared work? Over the past decade, I have become a kind of student of collaborative methods. In the process, I began to notice that many visual artists have developed methods of listening and group work. Yet they don't have a way to share their work with one another or with the public. In 2016, Stamatina Gregory curated a project of mine, The Study Center for Group Work, into the 41 Cooper Gallery, and it focused on artists who have

developed methods of listening and collaboration, and also the sculptural objects they made for these methods.

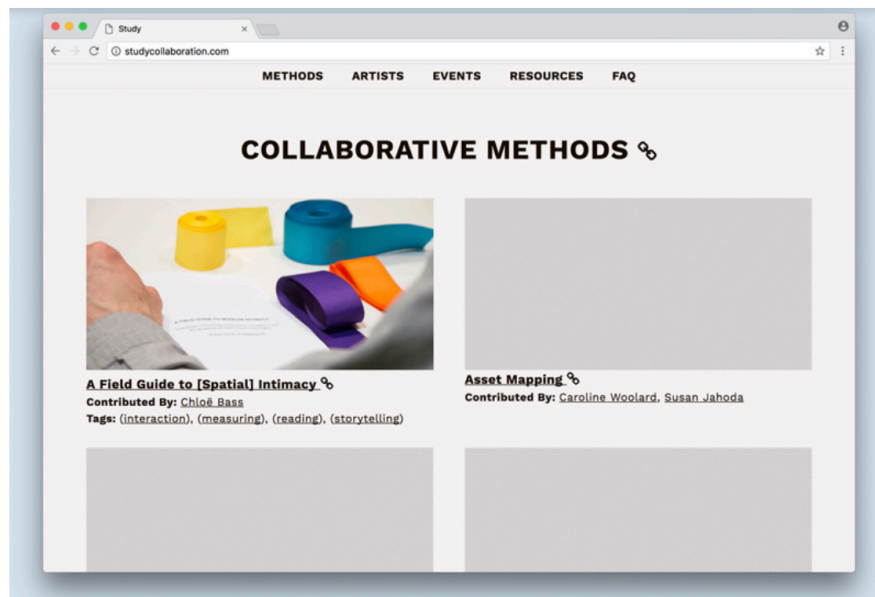
Rail: Sculptural objects for collaboration?

Woolard: Yes, I focused on sculptural objects in addition to facilitation methods because I realized that I spent so much time in meetings, with awful formica tables and fluorescent bulbs. I thought: what if the tables and objects in our spaces were as imaginative as the conversations we were having? In general, I am not focused on the table itself so much as I want to make a space for the concept of “tools for listening” or “objects for facilitation” in the arts. If I had just made my own sculptural objects the focus of attention, the art would just be “my” practice, rather than the new norm of making art in the field of the arts at large—which is what I am really interested in. I have been inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a “paradigm shift” in the structure of scientific revolutions. That in order to recognize innovation, there needs to be consensus. Of course the scale is entirely different. But what motivates me is that, ironically, standardization and innovation go together. Without agreement about a theory or model, it is impossible to know when a new knowledge has been created. This is why I made a Study Center that is ongoing, rather than a solo show.

Rail: Where is the Study Center project now?

Woolard: The project is now installed in a community economy activist space called the Brooklyn Commons and is also a website([Study Collaboration](http://StudyCollaboration.com)) that any educator or group member can go to if they want to learn more about these practices. Heather Schatz wrote about it for the *Rail* in November (["Defining 'We' 2017"](#)).

Rail: You seem to make a lot of websites. Why are websites important to you?



StudyCollaboration.com
website

Woolard: [Laughs] Because websites stay up longer than art shows, and because lots of people can’t get to the show, but they can get online. I work on multi-year projects with open source technology while also hand-building sculptures for installations and participating in socially engaged projects. For example, I built sculptures for barter only, and I also co-created international barter networks ([Our Goods](#) and [Trade School](#)) with Jen Abrams, Louise Ma, Rich Watts, Or Zubalsky, Rachel Vera Steinberg, and many others from 2008-2016.

Rail: Those are perfect examples of your art practice—for each thing you make, you make a corresponding community or network.

Woolard: Yes, that's the "system," or the multi-year initiative in my bi-focal practice. I have fabricated model Shaker housing, and I have also co-convened an investment platform for affordable space ([NYC-REIC](#)). Basically, I work on multiple scales: from the scale of institutions (which take years) to the scale of discrete objects (which take weeks or months). I see invitations to art exhibitions as time to play and do R&D for long term initiatives. So, for example, I can try out an idea (what non-profits would call a "pilot project") in an art show, and if it seems like something people are interested in, I consider reworking it as a long-term initiative. Similarly, I believe that innovation and shifts in consciousness (in the arts and beyond) are only possible when ideas have been debated and discussed over time. To make paradigm shifts, or shifts in knowledge, multi-year institutions, collectives, and networks are necessary to create consensus on new models from which innovation can occur.

Rail: Can you describe how your show at LMAK is related to this?

Woolard: Yes, it is a show that comes from many years of research about how imperial forms long outlive empires, about the fantasy that the United States has decided to change the national emblem from a bald eagle to a she-wolf. At LMAK, you will see a table that resembles the she-wolf that raised Romulus and Remus, the famous caretaker in the founding myth of Rome. At LMAK, the she-wolf has bent hind legs of steel, distended udders of clay, and a hanging mirror for a face. The udders have been filled with water. The udders are also water clocks, or clepsydrae.

Rail: Water clocks?

Woolard: All clepsydrae—water clocks—work like this: one large vessel is made, and filled with water. On the water's surface, a smaller vessel is placed. The smaller vessel is made with a small hole at the bottom that allows the water to flow in. One interval has passed when the bowl sinks to the bottom of the larger bowl. In this way, the passing of time is seen. It is never exact. For the she-wolf, I made a delicate bowl with a single hole and placed it in the water-filled udder of the she-wolf, so it sinks to the bottom to mark time. You know, time-keeping devices are always time-producing devices. Rather than understanding time as neatly divisible, linear, and disciplinary—the project of modernization—this multi-year project begins with the premise that certain visual art practices and sculptural tools can offer an experience of an alternative and intimate time, a time which is specifically marked by our social engagement with one another.

Rail: Something I am interested in is how crucial research is to the development of any artist's work. By research I do not mean just scholarly research, but it might involve going to galleries, seeing movies, surfing the web, visiting electricians, medical labs, reading about alchemy, animal ethics, or astronomy. In the Art21 video you talk about your love of the amphora and how though research you discovered it is connected to the @ sign! That is so beautiful. It reminds me of your gorgeous Floating Possibility project. ("[Caroline Woolard's Floating Possibility](#)" on [Art21](#))

Woolard: You used the recent Art21 video?

Rail: Yes.

Woolard: That is so great to hear because when I was working on that video with Nick [Ravich, Director of Video Programming and Production at Art21] I knew that

Woolard: That is so great to hear because when I was working on that video with Nick [Ravich, Director of Video Programming and Production at Art21] I knew that it needed to be both about a specific project and also structured to be useful for educators. And I said... let's imagine that a teacher will use it to teach "What is a research-based practice?" to students... and you did that! In my work, I don't attach myself to a particular formal approach. I believe that form over-determines content. You know, "the medium is the message." So where do my forms come from? Forms come from research into material history and political economy, as well as material experimentation—so my process is one of multiple medium-specific material experiments at once, always in relationship to material history.

Rail: So you think about the mediation of your work on multiple levels?

Woolard: Yes! Material exploration and research leads to ideas about appropriate, conceptually-related means of distribution and presentation. In this project, we decided that the project would live 1) in an installation, 2) in a series of performances in glass schools with students, 3) online because people are online almost constantly. The tables were first commissioned by Stephanie Owens, the Director of the Cornell University Council for the Arts, but I wanted them to have a life in New York City, and LMAK is a perfect fit.

Rail: As a research-based artist, can you talk about the process of formal exploration?

Woolard: I'm always asking myself: how do I balance conceptual rigor with material poetry? I think I work like this: I begin with a line of inquiry, a question that might sustain my attention. I then determine the methods and expertise that I need to follow this line of inquiry, which often involves bringing in collaborators in areas of expertise beyond my own. We open ourselves up to the process itself, allowing the material to speak, in dialog with our research. We then find conceptually relevant ways for the project to circulate.

Rail: Can you walk me through this?

Woolard: The inquiry in this case is, how do imperial forms structure our imagination today? Said again, *if* imperial forms long outlive empires, and *if* the forms we see around us determine what we are capable of imagining, how do imperial forms structure our imagination today? When I start a new project, I start with a hunch that a certain topic will sustain my interest. I try to sense my own enthusiasm to test whether it will expand and hold my attention for the duration of a project.

Rail: And then you said you determine the methods you will use.

Woolard: I am the last generation that didn't grow up tapping at a screen; that didn't go through puberty on social media. I wasn't born with computers. One of the consequences of social media and the iPhone is people don't know how to be alone in their own



Caroline Woolard, *Untitled (Imperial Forms)*, installation view at Lesley Heller Workspace, 2017, cherry wood, poplar, oil paint, 72" x 15" x 15", courtesy of the artist, Helen Lee, Alexander Rosenberg, and Lika Volkova, Photo: Levi Mandel.

Woolard: I am the last generation that didn't grow up tapping at a screen; that didn't go through

puberty on social media. I wasn't born with computers. One of the consequences of social media and the iPhone is people don't know how to be alone in their own mind anymore, which leads to not knowing what self-organizing curiosity is. In college it was normal to sit in the NA or NX section of the library and just sit there all day and go, like wow, and then onto the next artist. I just realized students don't go to the library. They hardly go see things in person. They just get distracted. They have not learned the ability to sit with themselves, to find one's own curiosity. They literally don't know how to do it. They've never been quiet with their own mind. It's terrifying. Imagine the level of anxiety they feel before going to sleep, or when they don't have WiFi or don't have a phone.

view at Lesley Heller Workspace, 2017, cherry wood, poplar, oil paint, 72" x 15" x 15", courtesy of the artist, Helen Lee, Alexander Rosenberg, and Lika Volkova, Photo: Levi Mandel.

Rail: As a teacher who has been teaching over a period of decades now, I have witnessed entire paradigm shifts in the ontology of the student—in the quality of their attention and degree of self-motivation. It was a real crisis during the phase when students stopped reading and analyzing homework. But what saved everything was the smart classroom. Lectures can be organized around discussions of documentaries, film clips, TED talks etc. How do you account for the unconscious in your pedagogical model? Maybe talk about your “systems” WOUND, an exhibition and a series of workshops that Wendy Vogel wrote about in *Artforum* Critic's Picks for October 2016 (“WOUND: Mending Time and Attention,”). Because modes of attention are also about wounding (both as physical/psychic damage and unwinding) at the site of the unconscious by digital technology/culture. I'm fascinated by how you want to set up a context to “mend attention.”

Woolard: I bring contemplative practices into my classroom, and in many ways *Ways of Being* is about ways to think through “mending attention” in the classroom. I now spend class time reading out-loud. The classroom time is a time of extended withdrawal for them. Basically, it's the only three hours a day that they are not on their devices, so maybe we allow them breaks where they get to get their little hits. Like every 15 minutes we take a one-minute tap tap, or we assign contemplative practices in the classroom to start calming the anxiety around being still.

Rail: In the book, you and Susan say, “What if artists could communicate their *interests* throughout the process of making a project?” Let's stop there. That is a very complex sentence—“communicate your interests *throughout the process*” is completely different from the “let me just make my work and then we'll see where it will go.”

Woolard: Yes, we are interested in artworks that reflect the conditions of their own production. As a research-based artist, mending attention for the work leading up to the current show at LMAK meant being able to cast a wide net while moving forward at the same time, if that makes sense. When trying to determine what expertise is necessary for a line of inquiry, you can either learn the skill yourself, or rely on your existing skills, hire someone, barter with someone, or bring in collaborators to share labor and decision-making power. The question becomes: is the true author of the work the person who labors on it, or the person with the idea? In collaboration, conceptual and production labor are combined. In the case of the *Carried on Both Sides* project, I felt that glass blowers who work on histories of science and linguists were essential as full collaborators. For me collaboration is obvious when the research topic must be sustained in dialog. I asked conceptual artists who are also master glassblowers, Helen Lee and Alexander Rosenberg to join the effort, and they agreed. I also asked Lika Volkova, an ex-fashion designer turned sculptor.



Caroline Woolard, *Amulet*, performance, 2017, porcelain and water, 8" x 2" x 2", courtesy of the artist, Photo: Levi Mandel.

We then created a work plan for ourselves, named our roles (for example, I will do the majority of the scheduling and the writing and the web work), and we talked about budgets, needs, etc. We made agreements about how our individual contributions will be shown in relationship to the overall project, and when a work is made singularly and when it is collective. We start to get cues about materials and forms to use based on the material histories that I learn about.

Rail: And then you went into material exploration?

Woolard: In this project, that meant going away for three weeks to a residency at Pilchuck Glass School, talking a lot on the phone, sharing Google docs, and flying to Madison, Wisconsin where Helen is based, and to Philly, where Alex is based, to work together. I even went to Rome and convinced a guard to open the gate to Mt. Testaccio to let me in to see the landfill made entirely of ancient amphorae. We tried making a scale replica of the Dressel 20, a specific shape of the amphora, named by archaeologists. Helen started making murine based shapes on the keyboard. Alex started making coins and hand lapping amphorae cut in half. I started making furniture to imagine disassembling columns that structure social life and social space on campus. Then I made a table that resembles the she-wolf that raised Romulus and Remus. This is the table at LMAK now.

Rail: Being an artist is no longer as simple as just opening a paint box and beginning to paint. It never was that simple, but that's the myth. Today being an artist requires all sorts of skills and levels of self-actualization and awareness. Passivity, laziness, and absence of fire-in-your-belly are big fat no-nos. While once upon a time the myth of the artist was someone who was an intuitive outsider, even the madman/bipolar/hysteric, today the myth has more to do with social media skills, networking, self-presentation, business acumen, organizational abilities—dare I say entrepreneurial skills.

Woolard: Hmmm, I wouldn't use the neoliberal term entrepreneurial, but I would use ambitious, if the ambition is to take a risk that will benefit the commons. My use of entrepreneurial language is one example of the way I'm able to move between different worlds. I can employ the jargon knowing it's a performance but to other people they read things like "user" rather than "viewer," and they can't make the translation, and all they hear is venture capital and they just hate it.

Rail: Well, it is what put me off—or better took me aback—when I read your narrative bio online. I am both impressed and leery of the authority and tone of your self-presentation. Part of this is my personality, and part of this is my generation—I am almost thirty years older than you—but that kind of language of assertion and achievement has always been difficult for me. Yet I also know this neurotic aversion to self-promotion can be a sign of privilege of my class, race, and generation. In fact, as I read your narrative biography, I felt I was reading grant applications!

Woolard: You were! In order to be recognized and funded I felt I had to adopt this language. I graduated into the financial crisis; everyone around me from my generation has six figures of debt and adjunct wages. It is a scary time, and the debt-burden and lack of rising wages makes us scared. Perhaps I responded to this precarity with bold language, but I do have quite a fire in my belly! And because I have this, I enjoy working, perhaps too much. I have seen that I tend to regulate my emotional vulnerability by overworking and structuring friendships around projects. This is socially rewarded, so I have a lot of career success, but it is something that hurts my friendships, and that I am working on in couples therapy with my wife, and in personal therapy too. I think a lot of artists can relate to the pitfalls of “project-based friendships.”



Caroline Woolard, *DIY Ruin*, installation view with costuming by Lika Volkova, at 41 Cooper Gallery, New York, 2016-2018, turned poplar, oil paint pickling, felt, website, 18" x 16" x 16" each, Courtesy of the artist, Photo: João Enxuto.

Rail: The work you have done with the real estate cooperative project fits in here. ([“Caroline Woodward Flips the Real Estate Script” on Art21](#)) Which itself seems to evolve out of BFAMFAPhD—i.e. the collective work on art student debt. Your question: “What is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees?” leads to what is the connection between student debt, real estate, and the arts? What is the commons, for you?

Woolard: I believe that the economy art wants is one of the commons. I define the commons as shared resources that are managed by and for the people who use those resources. The commons involve shared ownership, cooperation, and solidarity; economic justice. Following the economic crisis of 2007/2008, I co-founded barter networks [Our Goods](#) and [Trade](#)

[School](#) (2008-2015). Today, I am focused on convening and contributing to the [Study Center for Group Work](#) (since 2016) for collaborative methods and [BFAMFAPhD](#) for cultural equity (since 2014). I also helped catalyze the [NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative](#) to democratically finance permanently affordable space (since 2015). I hope that my work contributes to a revolutionary consciousness of interdependence.

Rail: This is a complete epistemic leap! [*Laughter.*] I mean my generation was obsessed with critiquing the institution, the market, and all forms of power; of manipulating the co-optation—appropriation; institutional critique—but you reframe the whole art-making spectrum. “What if artists could ask people for help.

Rail: This is a complete epistemic leap! [*Laughter.*] I mean my generation was obsessed with critiquing the institution, the market, and all forms of power; of manipulating the co-optation—appropriation; institutional critique—but you reframe the whole art-making spectrum. “What if artists could ask people for help, and consider where the project will be stored after it is made?” I love the idea of making wills for your artworks from *Ways of Being*. Speaking with you is so inspiring—it’s like meeting the self I could never instrumentalize, meaning, I can’t tell you how many of the things we’ve talked about have been tics, discomforts, desires, whatever of mine for so long yet I didn’t have the language or really the sensibility or personality to articulate them but here you are! 30 years my junior. I wasn’t kidding when I said upon meeting you, I have met Caroline Woolard, and the future of art practice.

Woolard: I am part of a generation of artists who talk about arts advocacy and cultural organizing alongside their studio practice. Maybe the future of art includes a critical attention to multi-year initiatives alongside discrete projects. Think of all the artists who made major cultural institutions like El Museo del Barrio or Fourth Arts Block possible, but who didn’t feel the need (or ability) to present this work with their artistic practice. I think this future of art will only be possible if artists in the academy reconcile the practiced ignorance—or epistemological violence—that has excluded community arts and cultural organizing from the art academy for so long. Luckily, my generation has been raised in Occupy Wall Street and in Black Lives Matter, so the transformation of the academy and of the arts ecosystem is already underway.

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Thyrza Nichols Goodeve

THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE is the Senior Art Editor for the *Brooklyn Rail*.