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ARTICLES

The Growing Necessity for the Vera List Center for Art and Politics

Now in its 25th year, the New School-affiliated institution is supporting increasingly essential and timely art.

Hrag Vartanian | November 21, 2017



The New School's newest building on 14th Street, near Union Square (image courtesy The New School)

It may be the most important arts organization you've never heard of, but the [Vera List Center for Art and Politics](#) has become a pillar of a new type of artistic practice that is coming to define the 21st century. Affiliated with the New School, the Vera List Center is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and continues to commission, award, and cooperate with artists and organizations that work at the intersection of art and politics.

“The core mission is to make a case for the fact that art has a significant, and unusual, and different role to play in a political environment from other forms of expression, and that it is

politically valiant, and impactful, and groundbreaking, and inspiring,” the Center’s Director, Carin Kuoni explained.



Director Carin Kuoni (photo by Matthew Mathews, image courtesy Vera List Center for Art and Politics)

It's an ambitious mission sparked by a national controversy that engulfed the New School during the culture wars of the 1990s. "The New School had commissioned artist [Martin Puryear](#) to create work in what is now called the Vera List courtyard," Kuoni explained. "The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had promised a financial support of this major installation. Later on, before the amount was paid out or the grant was given, the NEA added a [decency clause](#), which was this stipulation that was introduced after the [NEA Four debacle](#). The New School sued the NEA because it had been offered this grant without signing up on the decency clause, and the university eventually succeeded. The decency clause was rescinded from that grant and the school could proceed without interference."

That controversy planted the seeds for the Center, as the school saw the need to address the changing political realities for the arts, and in 1992, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics was born.



A view of the currently exhibition by Maria Thereza Alves (photo by Philip Van Nostrand, and courtesy Vera List Center for Art and Politics)

"It's called the Vera List Center because Vera List was a philanthropist. She was a sculptor, an artist herself," Kuoni said. "She was a student at the New School, she was also on the Board of Trustees. She was the person who founded the New School art collection, and over the years she gave about 500 works to the institution. She really believed in the public mandate and usefulness of art, and wanted artistic expressions to be available and seen very broadly. So the collection, which

now consists of 2,000 pieces, is displayed here on campus in every single meeting hall, or hallway, or office."

During her lifetime, List focused on helping those less fortunate; the nationally recognized philanthropist Agnes Gund was a close friend. “Vera List was a wonderful woman with much passion and energy — an inspiring art collector, philanthropist and social justice advocate,” Gund told Hyperallergic. “In the late 1970s we spent many Sundays together at her home to decide on sculptures to be placed around Greenwich, Connecticut, where we lived at the time. We also had many conversations about our shared belief in the power of the arts to bring attention to important issues and call for change. Vera was always interested in young people and their knowledge about art, and she asked me to serve on a committee to collect art for the public spaces at the New School and to loan prints and monoprints to students for a year. The committee ultimately helped create the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, which now sponsors many lively programs about the larger role of the arts in our society, in keeping with Vera’s important legacy.”



A panel on boycotts organized by the Vera List Center (photo by Emily Donnelly, courtesy Vera List Center for Art and Politics)

New York gallerist [Ronald Feldman](#) befriended List during the last decades of her life and remembers her as an “ardent supporter of the arts” who provided assistance and scholarships to those trying to make a better life for themselves.

“She was very dedicated to the immigrant populations coming to New York, and she thought it was fabulous to be having a school that could educate them and give them the energy

and information they needed to survive here and to do well,” he said. “She saw art as very important in the world. And she saw that it had a serious purpose; that’s mostly what I would say that she liked. Many of the pieces she had were very beautiful, but she didn’t pick them only because they were beautiful, but if there was something serious in them, in the subject matter.”

Born Vera Glaser in Brookline, Massachusetts, the future philanthropist married Albert A. List, who transformed his family’s grocery into a business empire that included RKO Theaters. Vera List would become a major donor to causes and institutions she believed in, particularly the arts. Not only did she help establish the New Museum in New York, but she founded art centers at [MIT](#), [Brown University](#), and [Swarthmore College](#). She endowed professorships across the US, and her generosity helped Mount Sinai Hospital, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Jewish

Museum, the Metropolitan Opera, and Lincoln Center — where the foundation named after her husband paid for much of the complex's art, including the large Henry Moore sculpture in its reflecting pool.

Prominent contemporary artists, like Walid Raad, have long recognized the work of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics and its role in developing dialogue around art and politics. "I have been around the Vera List Center for more than a decade. And by this, I also mean in close contact with Carin Kuoni, the Center's Director/Curator, and her program of public lectures, conferences, meetings, and screenings," Raad said. "With limited resources, but incredible generosity and kindness, Carin has gathered a remarkable group of artists, writers, activists, organizers, and scholars, who thoughtfully engaged knotty social, political, historical, cultural, and aesthetic matters. The center's program and its director are rare gems in New York City."

Raad's words are echoed by many who recognize the Center's work as unique in our current environment. Without paying attention to the art market or its trends, the Vera List Center fosters art projects that focus on ideas.

Kuoni began working at the Center in 2004 after her experience running the exhibition program at Independent Curators International (ICI), followed by a stint as director of the Swiss Institute. She arrived with a commitment to deep investigations into the issues of today. "What I was really eager to explore is the relationship between aesthetic practices and politics or political practices," she said about her initial attraction to the Center. "And everything we do is really focusing, ultimately, on the question of the political impact that contemporary art has."

As soon as she became director, she introduced two-year cycles to the Center's programming, which allowed for sustained conversations around focused topics. Beginning with "Homeland" (2004-05), the Center has tackled numerous themes, including "Branding Democracy," "Public Domain," and, most recently, "Post-democracy." In 2012, when the Vera List Center turned 20, it debuted a biennial \$15,000 art prize for artists who are advancing social justice through their work. "I think what it does is it elevates the field of politically-engaged art, and does so by questioning, I hope in interesting ways, the notion of a prize," she explained. "The idea that one would identify the best project in the world that advances social justice is kind of a ludicrous and absurd proposition. So we honor someone at the same time as we increasingly bring the finalists to this prize conference and to the prize

celebration, to both push the field and elevate the field, but also tweak this idea of the best.” This year’s recipient of the Vera List award is Maria Thereza Alves, whose *Seeds of Change* exhibition opened this month at the New School.

The Vera List Center is undeniably a leader in the field of art and politics, particularly at a time when the two are increasingly inseparable and the relationship between them is rapidly changing. Like the understated but essential philanthropy of its founder, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics is asking difficult questions about the place of culture in times of crisis.

