Arts & Humanities

Expanding Context: The Arts at Columbia

An essay by School of the Arts dean Bruce W. Ferguson.

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I am the dean of a school of the arts at a major research university in one of the world's great centers for cultural life. I never forget those modifying phrases, which so define the context of my work. The artists among our faculty and students have chosen a setting, intense and complex, that connects them at once to New York's immense creative energy and to a campus community alert to resonant encounters. Things happen here that could happen nowhere else.

Our faculty and students are New York artists, and they tap into one of the world's deepest creative pools. The City's energy courses through our studios, workshops, and gallery spaces. We enjoy unparalleled access to exhibitions, performances, and productions—and to exhibitors, performers, and producers. Students are in turn propelled into the arts world, as when an MFA thesis show mounted in Harlem launches a graduate's career. We are proud that at least 15 solo shows held in New York galleries in the first half of 2003 featured recent alumni and students.

Being at Columbia also brings us into regular conversation with the academic avant-garde, people with the latest and best thinking in fields ranging from architecture to cancer therapy to international law. This rich palette has colored the School of the Arts since its founding in 1965, lending much more than Ivy League prestige and a high-octane ambiance. School of the Arts faculty collaborate with researchers in medicine and engineering, law students take theatrical production classes, and our MFA students, to our delight, explore anthropology, aesthetics, computer sciences, history, languages, architecture, and a hundred other fields. Faculty from the arts

and sciences—including Ann Douglas in English and Hamid Dabashi in Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures—enrich our offerings. New partnerships across the University, including dual degree programs, will soon open more borders between disciplines and schools, creators and scholars, art and interpretation.

The arts at Columbia have received particular attention most recently, but the Columbia arts connection is long-standing and fundamental. After all, the heart of the undergraduate experience, the Core Curriculum, traces the history of civilization through literature, music, and the fine arts. Undergraduates take on the great ideas—freedom and its limits, the individual and society, the relation of subject and object—not only as intellectual constructs but also as artistic motifs. And they consider, many for the first and last time, concrete issues of artistic technique. A first-year is introduced to Athenian sculptors and architects as well as Herodotus and Demosthenes, the vanishing point as well as Renaissance humanism, George Eliot along with Georg W.F. Hegel. Now, with the School of the Arts increasing arts offerings to undergraduates (some 3,000 majors and nonmajors each year take courses offered by the school), a Columbia College student is much more likely to debate Plato on representation in the morning and wield a brush or a camera in the afternoon.

In short, arts and sciences, the traditional rubric of the liberal arts education that Columbia has passionately championed, begins with the arts. In thinking about this context we should remember the artists who over the past century attended Columbia but studied other subjects: Rockwell Kent 1904CC studied architecture; Eudora Welty ’82HON, business; Walker Percy ’41PS, medicine; Jim Jarmusch ’75CC, English. Remembering these artists suggests how fertile a soil Columbia provides for the emergence of creative talent, how adventurous are the spirits who make their way here.

The pages that follow highlight the arts across Columbia’s campuses, sample the creative work of faculty, students, and alumni of our school’s four divisions, suggest our boldness in interdisciplinary endeavors, and invite faculty to muse on the enterprise of teaching. They also highlight the Midnight’s Children Humanities Festival, a dizzyingly ambitious month of programming built around a dramatization of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* at the Apollo Theater last March. The festival, a whirl of performances, panels, lectures, debates, and roundtables, proved to be as multicultural, multimedia, and multidisciplinary as we had hoped. We are now planning for an arm of the school to commission and present new works, and

present new festivals as ambitious in scope and concept.

Art is an ever-changing discourse invoking new values in response to new cultural impulses, and the School of the Arts is ready to respond. As we expand to meet Columbia's growing appetite for the arts and art-related programs, we are working to acquire the space we desperately need (truly a universal theme in Morningside Heights). We have completed a feasibility study for a new facility on 125th Street west of Broadway and look forward to moving ahead to realize this vision within the context of a much larger University plan being developed by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

And as we pursue these plans, I take pride in the enormous talent we can draw upon, within the school, the University, and the City. I cannot help feeling wonderfully optimistic as we work to put the arts and artistic understanding at the center of the University, and I cannot help thinking: only in New York, only at Columbia.

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