

The History of the Art Department  
The Art Department at Hunter College,  
The City University of New York

The history of the post WWII period in American art is the stuff of legends now, but little is known about the intimate connections between the artists of this period and higher education.

Particularly in New York, refugee artists, in the 1930s, found employment in the city's schools and colleges. Art historian Mona Hadler has written that Bauhaus artists hired by Brooklyn College in the late Thirties considered teaching in public universities a "part of their pedigree".

The vision of the chair of the Art Department at Hunter College, Edna Wells Luetz after the war (1948 through 1963) led to the hiring of the articulate and lettered Robert Motherwell, and eventually to a Department that included some of the most prominent figures of the New York art world – Motherwell, William Baziotis, Fritz Bultman, Clyfford Still and Ray Parker, and in art history, William Rubin and Leo Steinberg, placing it in the vanguard of American art education.

This drawing-in of the New York School to the Art Department at Hunter College, paralleled to some degree in New York at Brooklyn College, Queens College and New York University, was later echoed throughout the country, changing the nature of art education in the United States completely.

In the 1960s, under the chairmanship of the noted critic Eugene C. Goossen (1963 to 1972), Hunter College led in this to an even more dramatic relationship between artists and higher education: when the charismatic sculptor Tony Smith was featured on the cover of Time magazine in 1963, Hunter was playing the most prominent role in changing the way art was taught across the nation.

In these and following years, artists like Smith, Richard Lippold, Ad Reinhardt, George Sugarman, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, Vincent Longo, Lyman Kipp, Ron Gorchov, Ralph Humphrey, Jack Youngerman, Donald Judd, Alice Aycock, Barbara Kruger and Robert Morris were teaching at Hunter alongside prominent art historians and critics such as

Rosalind Krauss, Barbara Rose, Linda Nochlin, John Elderfield, William Agee, Carter Ratcliff and Pepe Karmel.

In 1988, the Artists Research Group, including a number of graduate students in Art and Art History and interested faculty members at Hunter, began collecting data and conducting interviews with some of these well-known figures, to preserve an oral and visual record of the periods, that otherwise would be lost. These documents will hopefully help to shed light on what is now an almost mythic period in the history of modern art, and conversely, a fact taken almost for granted in American life.

This effort is ongoing, and hopefully will extend to notable figures from the periods who taught elsewhere.