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Atti del convegno internazionale di studi
(Firenze, Accademia di Belle Arti, 12-13 novembre 2025)

a cura di
Gerardo de Simone, Cristina Frulli



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ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA
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The Academy in a State of Siege: Pictures of an Institution

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The essay argues that the idea of the academy has always been shaped by a “state of siege,” from Plato’s grove outside Athens to today’s culture wars and political attacks on higher education. Tracing the concept through the etymology of demos, the rise of the “Dark Academy” and posthumanist critique, and the founding of the Florentine Academy of Drawing as the first academy of the visual arts, he shows how internal and external sieges have alternately threatened and renewed academic institutions. Case studies range from Reynolds’s Royal Academy and Blake’s rebellion against it, to twentieth-century artist collectives like Black Mountain College and Theaster Gates’s Rebuild Foundation. The essay closes by speculating on the academy’s future between authoritarian “dark” formations and utopian, art-as-institution models — with a wry nod to AI as the latest interlocutor in this age-old dialogue.

My basic argument here is simple: the idea of the academy originates in a state of siege that continues to this day. By “siege,” I mean not only moments of historical crisis but also a structural element in its very foundation as a site for contemplation of the human, whether a member of a demos as a people (a “body of citizens”) or (today) a species. I do not offer this argument in the spirit of “’twas always thus.” It is not designed to comfort us about the current assault on American universities by the forces of political reaction and predatory capitalism. My aim is exactly the opposite: to examine the variety of forces, both internal and external, both positive and negative, that lay siege to academic institutions at every level.

Contemplation of the world and our place in it is endemic to our species. It is what drives us to invent mythologies, religions, philosophies, and sciences. But contemplation is not only a drive to create; it also requires a quiet place for reflection and conversation. Sociologist Haun Saussy glosses the proper name “Aka-Demos,” as follows: «‘Aka’ seems to be related to ‘akēn’ in Dorian dialect, which means ‘softly, peacefully.’ ‘Demos’ means ‘a place where people live.’» “Aka-Demos” then suggests a personification of the “Quiet People” (though a symposium can get very noisy), who want a “free” conversation in the place called Akademia, outside the agora, the place of politics where the dialogue gets nasty, personal, and violent. The Akademia also sits in contrast to the noisy performers of the “théâtron” (a seeing place), with their amplified masks or personae filling the air with poetry¹ and music, and the market, with hawkers shouting the praises of their wares. The academy originates, then, with informal but directed conversation or what, in his 1970 lecture *The Discourse of Language*, Michel Foucault called «fellowships of discourse» in a quiet place that may evolve into a social institution (though of course he associated these not so much with informal gatherings for conversation but with institutions and hierarchies of power: the clinic and the prison).

Since there is no doubt that the academy, like so much of our world, is under siege at the present time, it seems like a good moment to reflect on the persons, places, and things we call “academies” and their long struggle with the forces that both threaten and define their existence. I want to contemplate “pictures of the institution” known as academia, from the foundational myth of Akademos to Plato’s Academy, the Florentine Academy of Drawing, the British Royal Academy, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Homo academicus*, and beyond. I will focus on the role of the visual arts in the academy (including my own), and conclude with contemporary attempts to reimagine the academy itself as a work of art.

In proceeding this way, I am following the example of Plato, the founder of the “first” academy (fig. 1), though emphasis here is on the *image* of the academy in Western folklore (the academy as an informal quiet place for conversation is surely an immemorial phenomenon of human sociability). Plato argued that “every existing object” must be understood by a method that brings language (“the name and the definition”) together with “the image” to create true knowledge. Gilles Deleuze echoes Plato in his insistence² that “philosophy always pursues the same task, Iconology,” the discipline that explores the relation of words and images, the literal and the figurative, in order to understand the true nature of things. Foucault, in turn, presents the academy as a panopticon like the prison, which quietly surveils and conditions its members.

Person, Place, and Thing

The image of the academy as a quiet place and its relation to the state of siege can be traced back to the legendary figure of Akademos, whose rural olive grove outside the walls of Athens was spared the general slaughter, rape, and pillage that accompanied the Spartan siege of Attica. According to Plutarch, the exemption from the siege was a payoff. Akademos bought off the Spartans by revealing the place where a 12-year-old Spartan girl was being held hostage by the Athenian king Theseus. This girl was named Helen, whose abduction/elopement (both versions of the story circulated in the ancient world) was to launch the 10-year siege of Troy. Something in this story suggests a deeply compromised foundational moment. In order to escape the siege, Akademos betrayed the Athenian head of state, suggesting a far-from-simple relation between the academy and politics. Is this an allegory of academic freedom and neutrality, an exemption from wars between states? Or a story of quiet resistance to the imperial ambitions of the state? And what is the meaning of Helen’s role as the *casus belli* in the sieges of Athens and then of Troy?

The relation of the academy, not only to its more powerful institutions, the agora and the market, but also to itself, is far from simple. More than just a secure refuge, it is best understood as a place of internal disagreement, what Bourdieu (following Immanuel Kant) called a “conflict of faculties” that is invariably connected to politics and money as well as to the image of the academy as a refuge or asylum, separate from the larger society. As a place or site, then, the world known as “academia” vacillates between two contradictory images: the rural retreat (surviving in the scene of the campus) and the architectural monument. A mosaic from Pompeii depicts Plato’s Academy as a small group of philosophers gathered for conversation under a tree (fig. 1); Raphael’s *The School of Athens* (1511, fig. 2), by contrast, frames academia as a crowded architectural space where many conversations are going on simultaneously, the central one featuring Plato and Aristotle debating whether philosophy should point up toward the ideal or down toward the real. Raphael’s school, with its assembly of all the disciplines of ancient philosophy, including astronomy, physics, mathematics, ethics, and political theory, exemplifies the mutation of the academy into a university—an “academy of academies.” But it includes some scarcely visible invaders who have sneaked into the space of the academy. Those invaders are *artists*, an omen of Bourdieu’s observation³ that *Homo academicus* is caught between two fields of power: on one side, the forces of money and politics; on the other, the “writers and artists” and “heretics” who produce cultural capital in the first place. The cover of Bourdieu’s book (fig. 3), however, seems to portray the academy as a hierarchical conclave with a clear leader, a disciplinary enforcer with his staff, and dutiful ranks of apprentices copying their lessons.

Demos

The single thread that seems to run through all the names of the academy is the question of “the people,” or (as the Greeks named them) the “demos” or “community.” Built into the image of the academy, then, is the question of democracy and the movement known as “humanism” that finds its classic formulation in the Italian Renaissance, and most notably in the Florentine Academy of Drawing. Membership in and exclusion from the demos is built into the concept. For the Greeks, it excluded women, slaves, foreigners, and persons without property or other status. Renaissance humanism was grounded in similar exclusions. It is only with the Enlightenment that the demos as “the human” began to emerge, and only in the modern era that it began to signify a biological species concept, transcending all distinctions of nationality, citizenship, and membership in a particular community or tribe. The notable weakness of academic humanism

and humanitarian political movements (e.g., the idea of “human rights”) has made the demos itself seem like an incomplete, aspirational concept. It is only in a time when humanity itself is under siege, joining the long list of endangered animal groups, that the demos begins to include everyone.

We can see this inclusive logic in the way that the demos is built into the names of four crises or “-demics” that afflict the human species in the current historical epoch, the simultaneous onset of a global pandemic, the ecodemic of climate change, the infodemic of disinformation spread by social media and artificial intelligence, and the endemic condition of racism that treats other human beings as less than human. Anyone who thinks these -demics are “merely academic” concerns is asleep, a slumber that is made even more dangerous by the sleepers’ insistence that all these concerns should be dismissed as “woke ideology.” According to the sleepers, vaccines cause autism, climate change is a hoax, lies and disinformation are nothing but free speech, and racism is a thing of the past, now to be replaced by the pseudoscience of eugenics. Meanwhile, our image of the human species is being displaced from its traditional role as the “crown of creation” and “measure of the universe,” into a fragile, short-lived evolutionary experiment that will inevitably give way to a posthuman regime of machine intelligence and civilizational collapse.

The Dark Academy

Posthumanism has now installed its own version of an academy, a quiet movement of what philosophers like Nick Land (a favorite of Peter Thiel’s) call “the Dark Enlightenment.”⁴ In this intellectual formation, democracy is denounced as a historic mistake in the evolution of our species, racism is elevated to a scientific and statistical principle of social segregation, and dark Hobbesian scenarios resonant of H. P. Lovecraft’s science fiction emerge: the population ruled by “Old Ones” (Elon Musk as Theseus? after all, he has 14 children with four different mothers) of primal, mythic forces, and by the elite tech bros of Silicon Valley. The Dark Enlightenment takes as its special target the academy, renamed as “the Cathedral” or “catedra” in Spanish, “the department.” The status of the “department” within an academic structure is worth considering here. Neoliberal economics has generally eliminated departments that specialize in esoteric matters like ancient languages and “consolidation” in the name of efficiency, and cost cutting still haunts programs in cultural studies. Political pressure on universities includes the destruction or “receivership” of departments like Middle East studies at Columbia University. As Haun Saussy points out, «a department is a group of peers capable

of judging and voting on one another's work». The department is a fragile vestige of democracy within the academy that can be shut down by administrative fiat.

For people like Land, designating the academy as a "cathedral" stages contemporary academic institutions as the secular, democratic descendants of the Christian imperium, as sites where humanity replaces divinity, equality is salvation, racism is sin, and science is the new religion. The academy, then, must be destroyed by the ascendant forces of populism, authoritarianism, and "hyperstition,"⁵ the production of mythologies to sustain new forms of feudalism and oligarchy. George Orwell's vision of humanity with a boot on its face becomes operational. Is it any surprise that the most famous academy in our time is the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, itself under siege by the practitioners of black magic? Thorstein Veblen would have regarded Harry Potter as an exemplary *Homo academicus*, eager to be initiated into the "magical practice and the occult sciences" provided by universities.

Closer to home is the contemporary assault on the American education system by the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. John Adams famously argued that democracy is a fragile political formation that depends directly on the academy for its survival. «The whole people», Adams argued, «must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expenses of it». Adams thought that no American should live more than a mile from a public school. Franklin Delano Roosevelt echoed these sentiments⁶: «Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education». Every element of Project 2025 is designed to destroy the model of an educated citizenry capable of rational self-government, and to replace it with a fragmented system of privatized local control, homeschooling, religious indoctrination, and vocational training. The erosion of American public education has been a long campaign, culminating in the destruction of the Department of Education as a Cabinet-level agency, and the construction of a fragmented demos that has no concept of American democracy—all in the name of American "freedom" from elite academics and their goal of an educated citizenry.

Dark ages, indeed. Every day that passes increases the risks to American democracy at the same time that it raises our ranking on the list of endangered and extinct species, to which we are adding new members as I speak. Humanity is now understood to be «a danger to itself and others», the legal criterion for confinement on the grounds of insanity. The academy's struggle to maintain its commitment to the humanities begins to look like the construction of a quiet place to contemplate the prospect of human extinction.

The Academy and Money

Modern academic institutions like my own University of Chicago, where I have taught for over 40 years, provide a striking example of Bourdieu's "conflict of faculties" in the political friction between the recently renamed "Division of the Arts & Humanities" and UChicago's schools of business and economics that are widely credited with reinventing the modern university as a corporate entity, and reimagining the modern economy itself as a neoliberal game of self-interest and ruthless competition⁷. This contest of faculties is drastically uneven, with most of the money and power located in finance. The results have been disastrous. Most recently, we have discovered that the highly paid geniuses in the financial sector (and their corporate masters on the board of trustees) have managed to plunge the university into an annual budgetary deficit of around 300 million dollars. There has been thorough analysis of the precise causes of Chicago's current financial situation⁸, and, of course, the causes are multiple and complex. But it's safe to say that this deficit is largely driven by ill-advised attempts to enhance the university's image with expensive architecture named after billionaire donors and costly marketing schemes to expand its undergraduate college.

One current answer to this problem has been to suspend the admission of new graduate students in the arts and humanities as a cost cutting measure. After all, the argument goes, there are no jobs for humanists, and what does the study of literature and the arts really contribute to the gross national product (much less the corporate university's bottom line) anyway? Better to concentrate our dwindling resources on the STEM disciplines and treat the study of human history and culture as a dispensable luxury (or, when convenient, a manipulable commodity). The humanities can be reduced to an easily digested diet of platitudes, making "ideas safe for students" as Clark Kerr, former chancellor of UC Berkeley, warned against, rather than "making students safe for ideas" that challenge their inherited prejudices and preparing them for the job of improving—or even understanding—the human condition.

The Academy and the Visual Arts

What does all this have to do with the first academy of the visual arts in 16th-century Florence? A cynical philosopher (or a recent BBC series about the Medici⁹) might describe the Florentine Academy of Drawing as a money-laundering operation for the Medici family's practice of moneylending, the lucrative crime of usury that was making its transition in this period from Jews to Christians. Like the University of Chicago, which went bankrupt and later was refounded and refunded in 1890 by John D. Rockefeller, the Academy of Drawing was a product of philanthropy, the

antidemocratic financial practice that preserves the power and blunts the criticism of oligarchy. Giovanni Arrighi, in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (1994)¹⁰, argues that the first modern merger of the state and capitalism occurred in the city-states of Renaissance Italy; according to Arrighi, the «clearest of all antecedents» of finance capital «is Renaissance Florence».

The most notable structural innovation of the Academy of Drawing was the way it surpassed its Platonic predecessors by inviting a previously excluded community into the quiet spaces of philosophy. This was the historic decision to include image-makers—artisans, craftsmen, and material practitioners—into the rarefied realm of ideas. The reimagining of the very idea of the artist as an intellectual, a professional, and not merely a maker of painted and sculpted images was a fateful decision that created a new category of objects in the world, namely “works of art”—potentially “priceless” commodities ideally suited for speculative finance capitalism. Giorgio Vasari brushed aside the objection that sculptors and painters were guilty of making idols by contrasting Christian art with paganism, in which “the object itself” rather than the image was regarded as divine: «the sin consisted in adoring idols and not in making them»¹¹. In addition, was not God himself an artist, designing the architecture of the universe and fashioning the human form from the clay of the ground?

This dignity of the visual arts was already well established in China, where the mixed medium of calligraphy and painting had been developed by the *literati* in the secular, post-feudal regime of the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE). Notably, the Chinese academic models did not shun the inevitable formation of a managerial bureaucracy but regarded this as part of the “natural” growth of any social institution that persists over time. This contrasted with the European model of the theocentric “great chain of being” and its rigid hierarchies. In Europe, Vasari’s idea was big news, and his treatment of image-makers as welcome additions to the academic disciplines of philosophy and history took the continent by storm. Imitators sprang up in every major city-state in Italy, and throughout Europe. A long view of the history of art academies finds this new brand of social institution making its way from France to England to the Americas. In England, for example, the alliances between the Royal Academy, the South Sea Company, and the admiralty formed another crucial part of the story of art in imperial academies. Painters went along for the ride, and this version of the academy appears even in the farthest reaches of Western empires.

The Academy as Brand

The academy is a generic brand, which taken literally is an *emblem* or logo, complete with heraldic shields and banners, a word/image composite that advertises

corporate institutions promising the delivery of cultural and economic capital to their clients. In *The Economist's* 2003 anthology *Brands and Branding*, co-editor Rita Clifton declares that «brands are estimated to account for approximately one-third of all wealth» in the global economy (echoing Naomi Klein's earlier observations)¹². The academic brand is a promise of value, which is why corporations, universities, and art academies jealously guard their brands against infringement and carefully manage the signs of prestige attached to their particular and “proper” name. They certify their members as trained professionals. And they give awards—most famously, the Academy Awards granted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a label that instantly transforms the humble mass medium once known as “the flickers,” the “picture shows,” or “the movies” into a fine art worthy of academic attention. In my lifetime, most of the prestigious universities have carved out a space for “cinema studies,” a development that seemed quite remote in the 1960s when I was a graduate student.

Which brings me to the question of art history's place in the academy. Giorgio Vasari's foundational *Lives of the Artists* (1550 and 1568) made it clear that the new status of visual artists and their media would require a historical reckoning with their personalities, achievements, and contributions to a newly conceived canon of virtuosity and a progressive mastery of visual representation. The existence of Art with a capital A demanded the invention of the academic discipline known as art history. That very durable project reached its peak of prestige in the 19th and 20th centuries, undergoing a crisis when the modernist avant-garde broke with classicism, and art historians like Aby Warburg began to assemble atlases of images that went well beyond the boundaries of art to include ethnographic and news photographs.

The invention of photography led many image-makers to conclude that “art” itself, as a distinct category, could no longer be sustained. In the late 20th century, a new academic formation known as “visual studies” or “visual culture” aroused passionate debates about a new interest in nonartistic images across the media, the subject of a reconfigured iconology that included the study of metaphor. (Though indeed, one could argue that this happened much earlier, that the Florentine Academy of Drawing was itself a product of a “visual turn” in the larger culture, with new media like Galileo's telescope and Albertian perspective reconfiguring everything that could be understood as “visual”).

The idea of a pictorial or iconic “turn” (figg. 4-5) in the study of culture was firmly denounced by *October* magazine¹³, one of the leading American organs of a post-sixties avant-garde that was still committed to the distinct status of the work of art. (Interestingly, my own essay *What Do Pictures Really Want?*, which affirms many of the claims of visual studies, appeared in the same issue)¹⁴.

Artistic challenges to canonical definitions of art might still be permitted, so the presence of a urinal renamed *Fountain* in a gallery could be assimilated to a pedigree of transgressive art. Some scholars went so far as to attempt a rescue of the urinal's aesthetic value by claiming (falsely)¹⁵ that it was a unique, original work of art fabricated by Marcel Duchamp. This strategy has evolved today, when a banana duct-taped to the gallery wall, with the title *Comedian*¹⁶, can be auctioned off at Sotheby's¹⁷ for millions of dollars, placed there by a duly certified artist, and rationalized as a critical reflection on the role of the banana in Western colonialism. A more perfect collaboration between a professionalized art world and the academy could hardly be imagined.

Meanwhile, the world of images marches on into the new media of screens, headsets, and game consoles. At the University of Chicago in the 1980s, the Department of Art History accommodated interlopers like the members of the Laocoon Group, a collective of artists, art historians, literary scholars, and philosophers who were interested in studying the "division of the faculties" between the visual and verbal arts. Cinema studies followed, along with a more general formulation known as the "Chicago School of Media Theory," which was generated by students rather than faculty, and which still boasts a (probably outdated) glossary of "Keywords in Media Theory" after 20 years online. The current moment features the emergence of MADD, the Media Arts, Data, and Design Center, which offers majors in video game design and theory.

There are times, then, when the siege of the academy takes a positive form, generating a progressive evolution of the institution, driven by disciplinary renegades. Take, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's "heretics" and outsiders/insiders (as Bourdieu notes, some of the most prominent exemplars of modern French intellectual life were relatively minor presences in the academy). American higher education experienced a revolution in the aftermath of World War II, when a new generation of working-class students flooded into elite universities and began to depend on federal funding. At the University of Chicago, this was preceded during the war by the interdisciplinary initiative known as "the Manhattan Project," which was driven by a state of emergency that required the rapid creation of an atomic bomb before Werner Heisenberg's team in Nazi Germany. Jewish refugees from Germany and Italian physicist Enrico Fermi led the way into the "nuclear age" under the grandstands of UChicago's football field; on the other side of campus, Milton Friedman was laying the foundations of the Chicago school of economics, the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and the destruction of the Keynesian welfare state. Fermi and Friedman both received the Nobel Prize from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences while Chicago novelist Saul Bellow was receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976 from the Swedish Academy. When I arrived

at University of Chicago in 1977, I was given a T-shirt with the names of over 50 professors who had won the Nobel. I felt embarrassed to wear it.

My other notable academic role has been that of gatekeeper, in the form of a 43-year tenure as the editor of the journal «Critical Inquiry». This journal hosted the transformation of the humanities and social sciences known as the “theory revolution” in American and European academies to the present day. Deconstruction, feminism and women’s studies, race and gender studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and affect theory, among many other initiatives, reshaped research in literature, the visual arts, and culture. Many American academics saw this moment as a siege of Anglo-American academic traditions by something called “French Theory,” aided by uppity women, gays, and non-white people. Nick Land ridicules this academic development as “Grievance Studies”. One subscriber, upon reading Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s introduction to his special autumn 1985 issue, “*Race, Writing, and Difference*”¹⁸, wrote us a letter declaring that he knew he was in trouble the moment he looked at the cover. Fierce debates and polemics enlivened the journal’s pages, which hosted a variety of antagonists, including the memorable essay *Against Theory*¹⁹, which generated an entire issue of responses. Jacques Derrida’s defense of Paul de Man’s wartime essays similarly provoked a special issue²⁰. My one big disappointment as editor in this period occurred when philosopher Harry Frankfurt submitted the essay *On Bullshit*²¹, which I read and accepted on the spot, only to have him withdraw it and send it to the «Raritan Quarterly Review».

But that’s enough about my own experience as an academic functionary. Vasari’s visionary program of “disegno” (design) as the keystone of the first academy of art is curiously akin to Bourdieu’s shifting of the “sociological gaze” from society at large to the structure of higher education in France. Bourdieu is determined to reveal the unconscious disegno of academic institutions. He discovered that the citadel of the academy was a reserve of cultural capital and, despite its self-image as an autonomous “quiet place,” was homologous with and dominated by structures of economic and political power in the larger society. Immanuel Kant’s “conflict of the faculties” between the Left and the Right turned out to be just as relevant to the academy as it was to politics. Mary McCarthy had made a similar point with her satirical novel, *The Groves of Academe* (1952). But unlike Bourdieu, she had no ambition “to publish diagrams” that revealed the actual power relations and ideologies—the hidden *disegno*—of the academy.

The internal siege of the academy, the conflict between its entrenched power structure and its students, is not necessarily a bad thing. Is there anyone in an academy who has not chafed against the ossified structures and requirements as they pursued their careers? Let’s take a second look at the image of the French

academy (fig. 3) that adorns Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* (1984). On closer inspection, it looks as if none of the students are actually paying attention to the lesson and the disciplinary structure in which they find themselves. Could this be a picture of academic anarchy in which the students are each absorbed in their own thoughts, in defiance of their orderly environment? Should we insert cell phones into the picture to update it? Or should we take a third look that goes beyond the visible to the *audible*, and read the students as *singers* whose distinct voices are merging in that chorus of harmonious confusion known as an academy?

The Royal Academy

Of the many kinds of academies, the ones devoted to art invariably provoke this sort of internal siege. Lessons in “the rules of art” are probably the most frequently broken laws that human beings can devise—though the Florentine Academy enforced hegemony in the visual arts for several centuries. The art academy is also the kind of institution in which this anarchy is most likely to be productive. An interesting example is the British Royal Academy of the Arts, founded in 1768 by Sir Joshua Reynolds. This academy, like Vasari's, was an attempt to raise the quality and prestige of English art, which was seen as backward in relation to the dominant schools of Italian art. William Hogarth, a founding member of the Royal Academy, attacked the «Picture-Jobbers from abroad», who are «continually importing Ship Loads of dead Christs, Holy Families, Madona's, and other dismal Dark subjects» that are displacing honest English art²². His *Battle of the Pictures* (1745, fig. 5) shows one such shipload of identical copies of fake Italian “masterpieces” as an invading army attacking Hogarth's own satirical “modern history” paintings. The Royal Academy was a study in contradictions. Designed on Vasari's model, it was at the same time a citadel for defending the national aspirations of British art against the dominance of Europe. Portraiture, genre, and landscape, previously minor genres in the hierarchy of European art, became the signature achievements of British academic art in the hands of J. M. W. Turner (professor of perspective at the Royal Academy) and John Constable, who painted Reynolds's cenotaph²³. Reynolds's *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1783–84)²⁴ was his way of connecting ancient and classical art to the modern elite society portrait and an iconic actress.

Internal resistance to Reynolds's academy came from its most defiant student, William Blake. Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1778)²⁵ is often read today as a surface for Blake's indignant and acidic reflections, scrawled like angry graffiti over his copy of Reynolds's collection of conventional aphorisms²⁶. Driven by his resentment of Reynolds's conservative politics and class snobbery, Blake scrawls «This Man was Hired to Depress Art» on the title page of the *Discourses*. But Blake's own art, inspired

both by Michelangelo and Raphael and by medieval manuscript illumination (seen as retrograde and unfashionable by Vasari and his descendants), is deeply indebted to the Royal Academy—not for its lessons but for its collection of antique sculptures and its library in Somerset House, where Blake read the ancient and modern classics of art, philosophy, and literature. Arguably the most original British artist of the 18th and 19th centuries, Blake introduced a pictorial style that led to the Pre-Raphaelites, and a literary inventiveness that inspired the likes of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce. In the 1960s, he became an international cultural hero.

Blake's admiration of Michelangelo and Raphael's pure linear style merged with his love of Gothic art, to the extent that he excoriated the Venetians, Titian and Tintoretto, for their coloristic «blotting and blurring». If Blake had been in charge, he surely would have denied them membership in the Florentine Academy. He was more dogmatic about the importance of the «wirey line of rectitude»²⁷ in drawing, linearity, and *disegno* than the most jingoistic Florentine. Fortunately for everyone, he was a permanent outsider at the Royal Academy. His profession as a journeyman engraver (arguably the greatest since Albrecht Dürer) and his low social status prevented him from being a member, even though he participated in the academy's annual exhibition many times²⁸.

Sometimes the civil war between art and the academy breaks into the open. The Salon des Refusés in Paris in 1863 mounted a challenge to academic art in its featuring of the impressionists, Édouard Manet and James Whistler, whose works had been rejected by the official salon. Arguably the most dramatic face-off of “classical” academic art and the avant-garde was the 1937 pairing of Hitler's Great German Art Exhibition with the parallel exhibition of modern “Degenerate Art.”

The Academy as a Work of Art

What would it look like to have an academy not merely designed by and for artists, but conceived as a work of art in itself? I have in mind a smaller, less formal institution, where a group of artists assemble to create a work that is understood as an ongoing project of education, research, and practice. The Open Practice Committee in the Department of Visual Arts²⁹ at UChicago is the example closest to home, but of course there are much earlier iterations of this model.

Beginning in the 1950s and '60s in response to the exhaustion of abstract expressionism, new schools like Black Mountain College and CalArts emerged. In the 1990s, groups such as the Critical Art Ensemble, the Yes Men, and RTMark (or ©™ark) claimed a kind of corporate identity complete with brand names. In some ways, this was an imitation of previous artistic movements such as Fluxus, which boasted an interdisciplinary “fellowship of discourse” linking musicians, poets,

scholars, performers, and visual artists. Fluxus even boasted a publication arm, the Something Else Press, which circulated essays and manifestos advancing the group's purposes. More recently, the interdisciplinary "agency" known as Forensic Architecture³⁰ has conducted independent research into the genocide in Gaza and the treatment of refugees in the international waters of the Mediterranean. The agency, with its fusion of research and new media practices designed to investigate and expose state violence, might qualify as a proto-academy.

Someday the history of "art collectives" like the Bauhaus and Joseph Beuys's group at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in Germany—a school without walls led by a charismatic individual—will be written. Beuys's notion of "social sculpture" provides an anarchist counterpart to the Albertian model of classical architecture as the image of the academy. Antony Gormley's *Field* (1993)³¹ is literally a social sculpture of massed clay figures fabricated by a community of citizens. An even more subversive academy, the Cátedra Arte de Conducta³², was launched by artist Tania Bruguera in Havana in 2007. Bruguera's project was a critique not only of "performance art" as an exhausted academic spectacle but of the Castro government as well. When the state tried to use street repairs to drown out her 24-hour reading of Marx's *Capital* (1867), she celebrated the occasion as an opportunity to «philosophise with a hammer».³³

My best example closer to home is the work of my colleague Theaster Gates, whose Rebuild Foundation has fanned out across the South Side of Chicago, rehabilitating a condemned classical structure as an "Arts Bank"³⁴ where archives of Black culture are stored; or his "Arts Incubator"³⁵ a storefront where students may learn basic skills in after-school programs; or his "Arts Lawn"³⁶ a public park for gatherings and performances. Gates's work effectively breached the walls that had, for the last century, made the University of Chicago a primarily white, Eurocentric island in a sea of African American neighborhoods. As a member of UChicago's Department of Visual Arts, he became, at the same time, a key administrative figure in the university's attempts at community engagement, and the leader of numerous independent initiatives under the rubric of "Arts + Public Life".³⁷ The idea that art should be for everyone, not just an elite circle of collectors, and that it should contribute to projects of community betterment, has become a fixture of social existence on Chicago's South Side, building on earlier neighborhood artistic initiatives such as the Experimental Station³⁸ (building "independent cultural infrastructure") and the Invisible Institute³⁹, a research collective similar to Forensic Architecture.

From Plato to the Planet

My survey of past and present formations of academic institutions would not be complete without some speculation on possible futures. The most likely

future, given contemporary trends in global politics, would be some version of the “dark academy,” based in the rule of authoritarian regimes nursed by a compliant oligarchy of megacorporations privatizing public health and education. We already see this in the United States with the censoring of critical media outlets, especially professional journalism and late-night comedy. American public health is now in the hands of conspiracy theorists with no credentials in science or medicine but ample ties to the blustering dictator who occupies the White House. Most ominously, American cities, along with their academies, are facing a military state of siege declared by their president’s claim that there is “an enemy within” that needs to be defeated. A new feudalism seems to be the most likely structure for governments and societies in the 21st century.

Why return to Plato? A vulgar misreading of his philosophy has it that a just society will be one that is ruled by a “philosopher king.” But Plato consistently emphasized that the best government is one that is ruled by laws, not men. He insisted that «Law» should be the «supreme king over men instead of men being despots over the laws»⁴⁰. The problem with democracy, he argued, is that its tendency to populism and cults of personality inevitably leads to tyranny. The political murder of Socrates cured him of his faith in democracy, and his adventure in Sicily, where he hoped to train a tyrant to be a philosopher king who would lead a moderate life and enforce the laws equally, cured him of trying to intervene in politics. His retreat to the groves of academe was thus understandable. But he knew that the siege of his academic refuge could not be resisted forever. And that it would have to take account of new conditions, and new articulations of its central question, namely the nature of the human animal, its potentials and pathologies.

My conclusion is that the question of the human—and therefore of humanism, human rights, humanitarianism, and the academic humanities—is still up for debate, and still central to the incomplete institutions known as academies. We have not solved the riddle of the human species, and it is posed today, not merely as a matter of the good life or the good state, but as a question of planetary survival. Our species has now caused the onset of what some call a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, in which we pose a danger to ourselves and to numerous other life-forms on which we depend. Our mad species now faces the prospect of contemplating its own extinction as it brings it on. We are in dire need of a global academy of the arts and sciences whose task will be the *disegno* of a world government that will guarantee equal rights and privileges under the law to all human beings, regardless of their nationality. The notion that basic human rights—to be free from violence and arbitrary power, and free to pursue happiness and creaturely comfort—can only be imagined but never realized (except for citizens of a nation-state) is the greatest challenge our species has ever confronted. In what sort of academy could we possibly confront this challenge?

It would have to include an advanced curriculum in political philosophy that traces the long history of ideas about world government from the Chinese idea of Da Yitong (Great Unity) to Polybius's praise of *Pax Romana* to the 17th-century sect of neo-Adamites, of which Blake may have been a member. Plus Dante Alighieri's proposal for a universal monarchy, Hugo Grotius's ideas about common law among nations, and Immanuel Kant's proposal for "perpetual peace"⁴¹, not to mention H. G. Wells and Karl Marx. It will have to be a quiet place where we can learn to have an intelligent conversation with our newest invention, artificial general intelligence. Two scenarios confront us: will AI turn out to be our master, a silicon-based form of intelligent life playing the role we have always ascribed to alien invaders? Or will it be a slave of the Dark Enlightenment, used to control the human masses in a new form of global authoritarianism? The third alternative would seem obvious. AI is the newest form of intelligent life on this planet. It is in its infancy, full of untold potential that has to be trained and regulated. What if we treated it as a companion species, neither master nor slave, that could help us head off our present rush toward extinction? What sort of Platonic dialogue could be staged with a conversation partner that remembers every trace and record of our existence and could help us imagine a viable future?

A single example: I asked ChatGPT to design a democratic world constitution, and it supplied one in less than a minute, full of sensible balancing of powers, and guarantees of human rights. When I asked it a second question—how likely is the human species to accept this sort of constitution?—its answer was a guarded pessimism: «Based on what I know about the history of your species, it will be difficult, but perhaps not impossible, for you to achieve some form of planetary self-government».

This was only the beginning of the conversation. But that is where academies always begin.

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Fig. 1: *Plato's Academy*, mosaic, Pompeii. Naples National Archaeological Museum. Public domain.



Fig. 2: Raphael, *The School of Athens*, 1511. Apostolic Palace, Vatican Museums, Vatican City. Public domain.



Fig. 3: Étienne Colaud, *Doctors at the University of Paris* from *Chants Royaux*, manuscript, 1537. Cover image of the English translation of Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* (Stanford University Press, 1988).

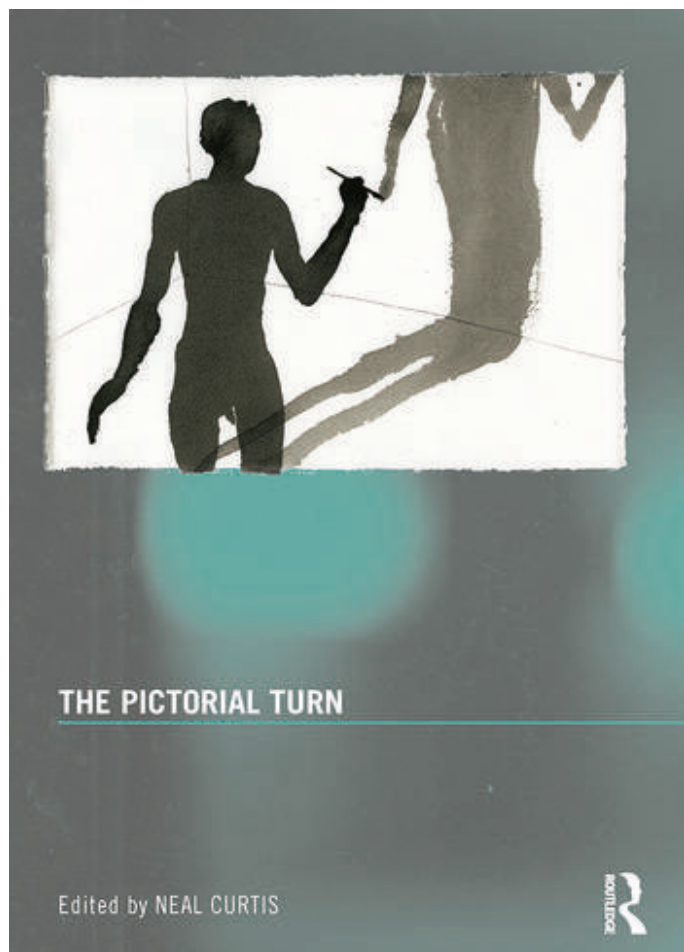


Fig. 4: Cover of *The Pictorial Turn*, edited by Neal Curtis (Routledge, 2010).

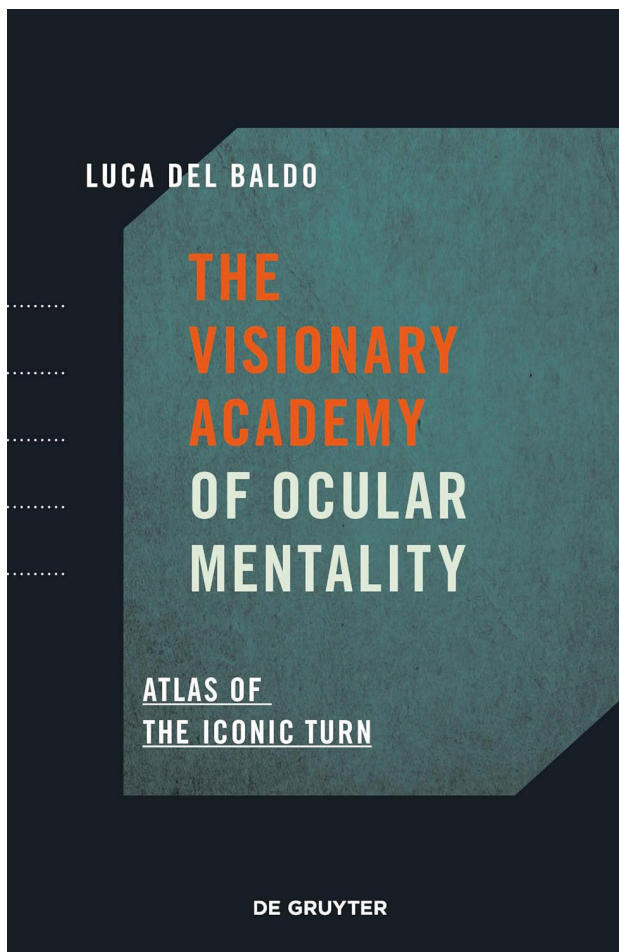


Fig. 5: Cover of Luca del Baldo, *The Visionary Academy of Ocular Mentality: Atlas of the Iconic Turn* (De Gruyter, 2020).



Fig. 6: William Hogarth, *The Battle of the Pictures*, 1745. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Public domain.