

Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood
**Give Back to
Your Alma
Mater!**

01/06

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood
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ON A DARK STAGE, WE HEAR A DIAL TONE. THE PHONE RINGS A FEW TIMES. THE LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE IN. WE SEE BRIAN ON THE PHONE. AN AUTOMATED SWITCHBOARD PICKS UP.

AUTOMATED SWITCHBOARD
(a robotic, Siri-like voice)

Hello, you have reached the office of the School of the Arts at Coslumbia University. For the head of the department, press 1; for registration information, press 2; for the computer lab, press 3; all other inquiries, press 4.

AS BRIAN PRESSES A KEY, THE NUMBER 1 FLASHES ON THE SCREEN BEHIND HIM.

JULIETA
Hello?

BRIAN
Hello? Julieta?

JULIETA
(with mock friendliness)
Hi Brian, how are you? Let me guess ... it's August 5th. You must be calling about another deferment on your student loan, right?

BRIAN
(defensive)
Look, I just want to tell you that I can pay, no problem. But I just can't pay right now.

JULIETA
(mock patience)
Thanks for telling me what I already knew, Brian. You know, this has been going on for too long. We need to start thinking about other options. Let's be creative, let's think outside the box. After all, there are other ways you can pay.

BRIAN
I'm not taking off my clothes, if that's what you mean. Although I've been told I look pretty good without clothes on.

JULIETA
(laughing)
No, of course I don't mean that.

BRIAN
Then what do you mean?

JULIETA
Look Brian. You're a good artist.

BRIAN
Thanks, I guess. I learned a lot in the MFA

program. You're a good department head as well, Julieta.

JULIETA
(slightly exasperated)

Right. What I'm trying to say is that it doesn't really matter whether you're a good artist or not. At least not for us. Here at Coslumbia, we aren't in the business of making *good* artists. We want to produce *successful* artists. It's naïve to think that being a good artist will do anything meaningful for you. Yes, you might earn the respect of other artists, and with some luck, you may even become an "artist's artist" over time. But if that happened, you would also get all uppity with your production standards, and that wouldn't do. We charge tuition because we are trying to teach you something. You see, we expect artists to learn how to survive.

BRIAN

But I am surviving! My work gets positive reviews – haven't you noticed? Actually, my career is going pretty well. And you're saying that it's not because my work is any good, but because of something else?

JULIETA

Who cares about positive reviews? I'm trying to tell you about something else. Look, Brian. Ask yourself why you're calling me. The answer is simple: you are calling me because you are not able to pay your loan.

BRIAN

I told you I can pay, just not at this particular moment. I've got a few things going. I've got some shows coming up, and there are a couple of galleries interested in my upcoming projects. It should pay off soon, but the funds aren't coming through just yet.

JULIETA

Yes, I know where you're going with this. Do you know why I know? Because this is what I hear all the time – and not only from students and alumni. It's no longer a secret that this speculative attitude toward managing resources has led our program into financial ruin. But we only realized recently that we've actually been broke for decades. That's why we need you to pay up.

BRIAN

The MFA program is broke? But it's one of the most prestigious art programs in the world!

JULIETA

But don't you see? That kind of recognition doesn't cover our expenses, just as your "positive

reviews" don't pay your student loan. The school needs the tuition money generated by our department, and by the other humanities departments, to ensure the survival of the board of trustees. Metaphorically speaking, think of it as our way of guaranteeing a steady supply of fresh meat for a pack of lions. That's how we stay alive. I mean, metaphorically speaking, you are part of that supply of fresh meat. We are only beginning to accept this reality in the department now, which is why I want to talk to you about another way to pay off your loan.

BRIAN

That's, like, a really crude way of looking at it.

JULIETA

As you like, but if you're disappointed by the crudeness, you're talking to the wrong person. I'm just explaining how it works. We are all in the business of survival now. This program is not about making people better – not even the ones with money. That's just not the way it works. Being a better person is not going to help you make the payments you're not able to make on your loan, is it? And for that matter, becoming a better person has nothing to do with becoming a better artist.

BRIAN

So what's your offer, then?

JULIETA

I'm glad you asked. You see, a few of the university's trustees and I have been looking into art as futures trading. It all started when we began collecting works of students and graduates around the time of the market crash a few years ago. We thought it would be a good investment at the time, but it also got us thinking.

BRIAN

So you and the board of trustees are starting to see this program quite a bit differently from what you advertise. If I understand correctly, you want to produce the successful artists of the future because producing successful artists will translate into the production of valuable artworks that you can collect?

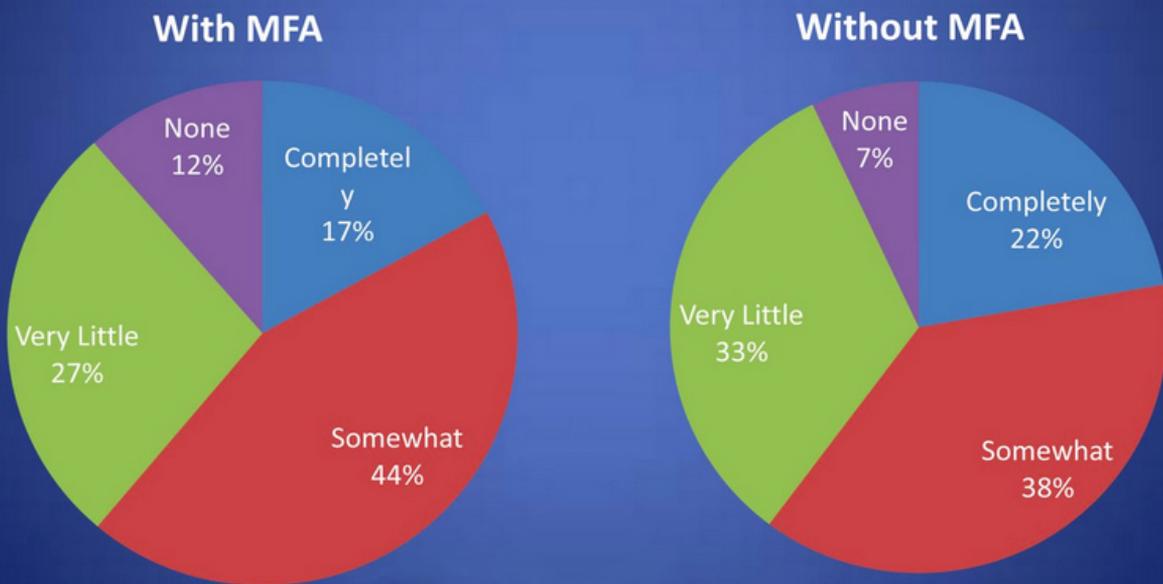
JULIETA

Not quite. But it's true that we want your future. From the moment you enter the program, you are already valuable to us. And as a way to show you that we consider you valuable, we've developed an alternative payment plan for artists who have trouble paying their loans. Our idea is

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To what degree are you able to make a living as a working artist?



Artists without MFAs may be making a better living, but who can tell? Data for this survey was sourced by Jane Chafin, Director of Offcamp Gallery, Pasadena, from a pool of 267 artists.

to access your possible future production and use it as collateral for relieving your money debt – your past debt. You know, you and the department are in a very similar position. We are artists just like you. We don't like dealing with money any more than you do. And it turns out that if we implement this new idea, we won't have to. Our interest has always been in the future, because, as artists, it's where our investment has always been. And now we have an opportunity to take responsibility for that, to gain access to our own potential – the real value we've been producing. And we want you to join us. So what we are asking from you is essentially this: What are your dreams? What are your unrealized projects? We want you to share them with us.

BRIAN

You mean you want my hopes and dreams, and if I give them to you my debt will be paid?

JULIETA

Yes and no. We want you to dream, absolutely, but we want to guide your dreams. We want to make sure that your dreams will turn a profit. And of course, we want to record and store them. You see, your future artworks are contained in your present dreams, which makes your dreams valuable to us.

BRIAN

I don't understand. What use could my dreams possibly be to the trustees?

JULIETA

At first we thought we would store them, so they could later be algorithmically sorted and recombined to produce artworks autonomously, without the artist's involvement. But that was too simple an idea. So we started thinking bigger. As you know, the university campus has now run out of space to expand, so the only way we can grow is by expanding in time, by occupying the future through a new kind of finance made out of artistic creativity. Think of it as a new currency, not pegged to gold, or even to money, but rather pegged to dreams. Unfortunately, when it comes to creativity, Silicon Valley and its algorithms are too predictable. This is where artists come into play.

BRIAN

So you still need an individual person to peg the dreams to, otherwise they won't have any value, right? You can take my dreams, but you still need my person and my reputation for them to make sense.

JULIETA

Exactly. We want you alive and thriving. We want you to be much more than you are now; tales of bare survival are not appealing to us. What you've done and what you're doing isn't enough. We want more. We want to make sure the works of yours that don't exist yet will hit the mark. And for this, we need access to the consciousness that will make them.

BRIAN

So you want to be a kind of precognitive NSA that intercepts my thoughts and dreams? Great.

JULIETA

No, no, it's not like that. Don't think of us as spies; think of us as guides. We have been around long enough to see how the market ebbs and flows. Let us make that knowledge work to your advantage. We want to work with you.

BRIAN

Ok, so you will remember my future for me, like a kind of preemptive Dropbox archiving service.

JULIETA

No, my dear. This is not about remembering for you. As I said, we want to work with you. For this we have to have a more participatory role in the architecture of your dreams. You can consider this an extension of your education. We need to make sure you are dreaming the right dreams.

BRIAN

So basically you will tell me about the projects I can't remember, but that I had earmarked as things to work on someday? This could actually be handy for me! And in exchange you'll write off my debt. But then what if I don't like those projects in the future? What if I learn that I'm a crap artist and I no longer want to stand by my dreams, especially when I can't choose which ones are recorded by you?

JULIETA

There are no good or bad artists, Brian. Not in this scheme. You dream the right dreams for us, and if they are bad for you, you will be the only one to know.

BRIAN

So if that's the case, at least I'll know in advance, and I can just quit while I'm ahead and change my career, do something else while I still have the chance, right?

JULIETA

Actually no, that's the only catch. You can't

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do that. Once an artist, always an artist. You can't walk out on us, or on yourself for that matter.

BRIAN

You mean that according to this algorithm thing you're building, I'll have to stay an artist, even if I don't like the work I'll be making?

JULIETA

(exasperated)

Brian, this is not an algorithm, this is common sense! You see, if you quit, those future works will no longer be backed up, and their value will empty out. So if you quit because your works start to fall short of your "high standards," then even the works you had made that met those standards would instantly turn into letters in the mail asking you to settle your debts – with interest, of course. We consider the years invested in your future dreams to be part of your education. And tuition isn't cheap.

BRIAN

But what if I die? What if I get hit by a car and can't contribute to this sweatshop of artist dreams you're running? What happens to our arrangement then?

JULIETA

Well, that is a different scenario altogether! It would be a tragedy, of course, but then your legacy would be in our safe keeping. You see, when you go into debt at Coslumbia, you become a part of art history.

BRIAN

It sounds a bit like a Ponzi scheme to me.

JULIETA

That would be true if you could even try to withdraw your investment. But when your production becomes part of our database – not to mention the art market and art history simultaneously – you are already so well-distributed in the network that no one else can possibly cancel your investment, even if you die.

BRIAN

It's interesting, because I always wanted to become an artist. So if I agree to this, I wouldn't be allowed to become anything else?

JULIETA

Not just an artist. Remember, what you want is to be a successful artist. Over time, we have realized that artists know something about the future, and that bit of knowledge is worth a lot.

BRIAN

But it's still a gamble and a risk, isn't it?

JULIETA

For us, my dear, not so much. But it might be for you, I suppose. You have until August 12th to get back to me, before your loan goes to collections.

HANGS UP THE PHONE. LIGHTS OUT.

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This dialogue was written and performed for the Artist as Debtor Conference at Cooper Union on January 23, 2015. Thanks to Coco Fusco and Noah Fischer for organizing the conference and encouraging us to think in this direction. Visit the conference archive and discussion platform at artanddebt.org.

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