



SOTHEBY'S MAGAZINE – SEPTEMBER 2016

Agnes Gund: Art for Good

BY ELENA BOWES | 23 AUG 2016

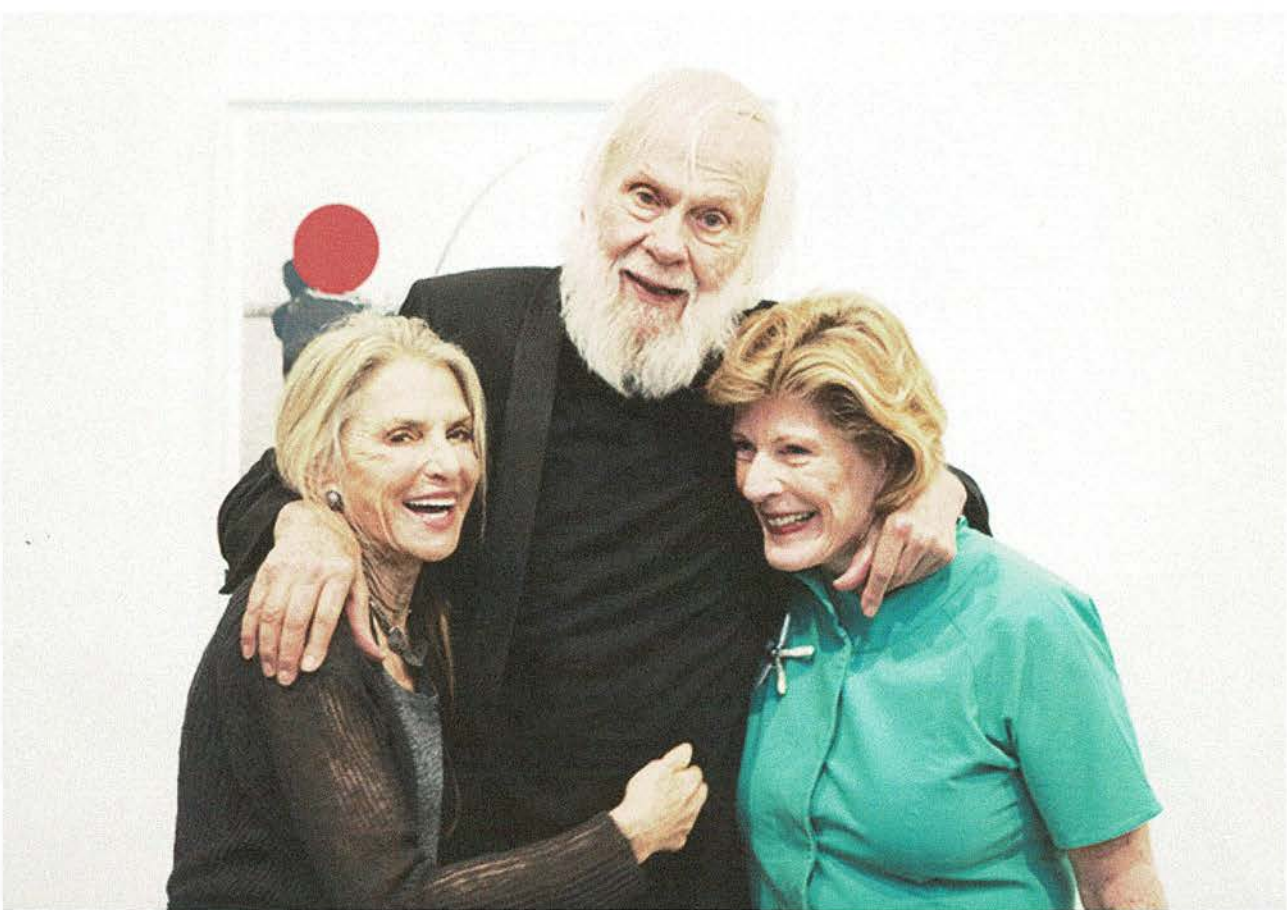
She chairs the Museum of Modern Art's International Council and its contemporary art-focused Queens branch, MoMA PS1; she has received numerous awards and honours, including a nomination to the Board of Trustees of the National Council of the Arts by President Obama; and she serves on many other boards and advisory committees. She's Agnes Gund, art patron extraordinaire – and she's a bona fide art world legend.



ARTIST JEFF KOONS VISITING PS 112 IN MANHATTAN. PHOTOGRAPH BY MINDY BEST.

But that's not all: Aggie Gund, as she's known, is quite the philanthropic superwoman. Exposed to art at a young age – her collector father covered their walls with American and European paintings; her mother spent hours with her at the Cleveland Museum of Art – Gund has always naturally understood the value of art education. So when fiscal cutbacks led to art classes being slashed from New York City public schools in the late 1970s, she took action, launching Studio in a School, a programme in which working artists teach the joys and benefits of making art to inner-city kids. Nearly 40 years on, the programme – referred to simply as Studio – is thriving: from three schools in Manhattan and the Bronx, it now counts 180 participating schools in all five New York City boroughs. As the largest visual arts programme in the city, it reaches about 30,000 kids a week. By Gund's count, since its inception, Studio has served nearly a million New York City students from ages 4 to 21.

While all this adds up to quite a feat, Gund sees no reason to stop there. She is bringing a new version of her programme to other American cities in the form of the Studio Institute, a venture headed by Studio's longtime president and CEO, Thomas Cahill. Last summer, the Institute dipped its toes in Philadelphia with an Arts Intern programme, in which a dozen college students received paid summer internships in museums across the city (internships at cultural institutions are frequently unpaid). "In five years, there's no reason why we couldn't be sponsoring 250 internships in different cities across the country," says Cahill.



ARTIST JOHN BALDESSARI WITH DOROTHY LICHTENSTEIN (LEFT) AND AGNES GUND. PHOTOGRAPH BY MINDY BEST.

Early childhood education, a national concern and an area where Studio has deep experience, will also be part of the Institute's mission. But unlike the New York model, which concentrates on public schools, the Institute may take its pre-K programmes to museums, day-care centres and social service organisations. "This early exposure is so important to childhood development, and the reason why I feel arts education is a necessity, not a privilege," says Gund. "Making art and having a context for it enhances motor skills, language development, visual learning, decision making. It encourages inventiveness and provides an outlet for children. It's an imperative part of education."

Those very ideas served as the engine behind Gund's initiative in the 1970s. While Studio's methods have been refined over the decades, its core format has endured: working artists teach drawing, painting, printmaking and sculpture while collaborating with teachers to link art to other subjects. "Schools need to understand that [teaching art] is as important to children as having math or English lessons," Gund says, "because it gives them a dimension – it allows them to star in something that they might not have otherwise."



IN ITS 2013 NEW YORK INCARNATION, THE SHIP OF TOLERANCE, A WORLD-ROAMING PROJECT CONCEIVED OF BY ILYA AND EMILIA KABAKOV, BORE A SAIL MADE OF PAINTINGS PRODUCED BY STUDIO IN A SCHOOL STUDENTS. © KATHERINE MARKS.

While numerous blue-chip artists have sat in or led a Studio class (including Sarah Sze and Teresita Fernández this year), artists who wish to work for Studio must undergo rigorous training and commit to instructing four days a week for five years at a single school. The students' work is displayed in the classrooms and around the schools, in a gallery on East 53rd Street and at an end-of-year show with a red carpet and photographers.

Studio's impact on students' lives cannot be understated, as principal Melitina Hernandez of PS 123 Mahalia Jackson in Harlem is aware. Three years ago, Hernandez brought Studio into her school, where the vast majority of students are entitled to a free lunch, nearly one-quarter have emotional disabilities and many live in nearby shelters. "The artistic curriculum that Studio takes students through helps them learn the value of just being focussed, of being with a particular task over multiple weeks," she explains. "It also transfers to their writing. What do we do as writers? We write, we edit, we edit again and then we proof. Studio allows for the same kind of work, only in the artistic realm."



URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD AT PS 75 IN MANHATTAN. PHOTOGRAPH BY MINDY BEST.

Hernandez has seen how important Studio classes can be. A year ago, one of her current third-grade students was in the middle of a contentious custody battle and was prone to anger and frequent outbursts. "Right away we realised he needed special attention," says Hernandez. Having learned that the boy liked to draw, she bought him a notebook and made sure Studio artist Michel Carluccio connected with the child. By the end of the year, his work was selected for Studio's highly competitive annual exhibition. "Once the boy was given attention for being an artist, that became his identity," says Carluccio. She adds that she chose to work for Studio because she likes its approach: "It's about exploring what it means to be an artist, what it means to look at the world as an artist, what it means to work as an artist and think as an artist. That's profound." Carluccio credits Gund's benevolence for Studio's success. "What could be more gratifying than reaching that many lives?" she asks. What indeed.

Elena Bowes is a London-based art and travel writer.

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