

00:00:00:00 **THOMAS PATIER:** So it's my great pleasure to introduce Michelle Kuo to the Speaker Series at CCS Bard. Kuo received her PhD at Harvard, where her dissertation focused on the 1960s art group E.A.T., Experiments in Art and Technology, under the supervision of her advisor Yve-Alain Bois. As the editor-in-chief of *Artforum* International, from 2010 to 2017, Kuo authored many essays and interviews with artists ranging from Lynn Hershman Leeson to Hussain Khan; and oversaw special issues, including the fiftieth anniversary publication entitled "Art's New Media," which reflected on the past fifty years of media, technology, and art.

00:00:42:08 Commenting on her time at *Artforum*, Kuo has said, "So I really tried to put the art back in *Artforum*, to really retrench our focus on close readings of artworks, on processes and material, whether those materials are paint or digital platform. So I'm trying to privilege looking, listening, thinking very closely about works of art, in whatever form they might take, and making sure that each piece we publish has that attention and that caring." Kuo has contributed to many journals, books, and museum exhibition catalogs, including Seth Price, at the Stedelijk in 2017; Robert Rauschenberg, at the Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern 2016; and Sculpture after Sculpture, at the Moderna Museet in 2014.

00:01:30:0 Kuo has also co-curated Le Corbusier and the Synthesis of the Arts, at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in 2004, and served as advisor to Experiments in Art and Technology, at the Salzburg Museum of Modern Art, in 2015. Kuo now holds the title of Marlene Hess Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, where she will begin on April 2nd of this year. Please join me in welcoming Michelle Kuo.

**[APPLAUSE]**

00:02:04:05 **MICHELLE KUO:** Thanks. Now the height adjustment must begin. Thank you so much for that really kind introduction. And yeah, I start a new job on Monday, so I'm just— Right now, I'm trying to be in vacation mode, whatever that means. But really, thanks so much, everyone, for coming and for having me here. And I really appreciate the invitation from Lauren Cornell and the team here, including Amanda, for hosting.

00:02:33:01 So today I thought I'd talk a bit about both criticism and objects. And some of this actually draws on an essay I think some of you have read, that was about a kind of short history of fabrication. But hopefully, that will prove resonant to you now. And the first part of this talk actually is without images, which is a scary thing for art historians, but that's just the way the content of this first section is. So don't be afraid of the black screen. And the title of this talk is "Criticism Out of Bounds."

00:03:10:1 These days, the critic is not herself. She is often construed as everything but. An acolyte or a shill, a protester or a petitioner, an academic or a hack. She is taken for a ghost, her very being displaced or disappeared. Who needs the critic, or the curator, for that matter, when you have seemingly immediate and direct access to the artist themselves? On the one hand, it is now a truism that there is no such thing as critical distance. And for a quite a while, we've assumed the impossibility of any position at a remove from systems of capital or power, even as we constantly call for their dismantling. What we call the critic has, it seems, been replaced by the ultimate outsider— Oh, sorry, insider. It's taken for granted that we are so far inside the

system that our only condition is one of complete internalization, of immersion in a network, of absorption by a control society. And in this scenario, free time is always work. The critical eye is a fiction, a mere function. Information, theory, and language have become completely co-opted. Not only criticism, but ideological critique have become efficient tools for the discerning art fair goer and Instagram meme alike.

00:04:41:07 The result of this insider worldview is a turning inward when it comes to writing about art, too. The internalization is so complete that for some thinkers, the only option is to retreat into the individual self. They turn to models of biography or psychoanalysis, a kind of first-person narrative or psychologizing, or even a belletristic impression. On the flip side, though, of this kind of narrative of internalization, the myth of critical distance is actually back, and stronger than ever, it seems. The possibility of an ideological critique that is formally on the outside and looking in, defiantly opposed to the powers that be, drawing a line in the sand between them and us. And this tack has prompted a return to a kind of iconography in the field of writing about art, in which the art world or artist is ultimately a cypher for social or political or economic or technological conditions, the systems against which they fight or the causes that they represent.

00:05:52:2 These approaches—on the one hand, this kind of biography; on the other, a kind of iconography—are, at their best, attempts at finding something like either critique from within, a stealthy solution to the loss of critical distance, or an earnest revival of critique from without. But in both cases, the results can be unconvincing. Biographical, autobiographical, and psychoanalytic models often resort to mere type, reducing their [inaudible] to an ahistorical caricature of a universal subject or mind, or something like a teenvogue.com confessional. Quote, “I went through this, so it follows that everyone else...” Or, quote, “I repressed X, so therefore everyone else.” It’s a kind of self-branding or persona-replacing identity politics. And on the other hand, iconographic methods might claim a position of oppositional politics and protest, but they often end up reducing art to context, to a literal reference, even to a kind of impoverished sociology or an outmoded of institutional critique. Quote— You could say something like, you know, there’s this microphone here; it’s sort of round and, you know, this— It’s really about neoliberalism and Twitter. That kind of criticism and the art that it often engages still struggles to go beyond a kind of mere lip service or critique as social grease.

00:07:25:23 Both these myths—the critic as insider or as outsider—are inescapably useful, of course, and they’ve served us well. And right now, both frequently ring true. But it’s also a kind of schizoid situation that I think points to the astonishing persistence of social niches and subcultures, and a kind of hermeticism in the world of art—the insider as taste maker or the outsider as troublemaker. And in fact, this old binary of the critic as insider or outsider, assuming her insularity and absorption into the system or her blanket rejection of it—in short, assuming the critic’s disappearance, either from within or without—is maybe itself an antiquated notion. Even at the birth of modern criticism, the critic was already vanishing. In the eighteenth century already, with La Font de Saint-Yenne, the fabled first art critic. His analysis of the works at the Salon of 1746 bespeaks the Enlightenment interest in the observation and classification of objects. It is emblematic of an attention to things, rooted in the emerging fields of natural science and art history, and to a mode of description of that also recognized that which exceeded description, that which could not be put into text. A culture of things, rather than of words.

00:09:00:17 But not coincidentally, around the same time, La Font’s Enlightenment criticism registered the rise of a transcendental subject that could determine value beyond materiality, beyond the so-called fetish. The modern European subject was founded on this disavowal of the object, on its dematerialization. And this was directly parallel with the rise of the commodity

and of colonialism. As the historian Peter Stallybrass has noted, quote, "What was demonized in the concept of the fetish was the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects that are touched and worn." A byproduct of this was the impossible project of the transcendental subject, a subject constituted by no place, by no object. Stallybrass continues, "It also implied a new definition of what it meant to be European. That is, a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects, a subject who could recognize the true—i.e., market—value of the commodity object," end quote. This subject could recognize how could be transformed into ships, ships into guns, guns into tobacco. Not worshiping the brute stuff of beads or silver themselves, but their transformative value. Not worshiping copper or lapis lazuli, but the ephemerality of oil paint as the gesture of an author.

00:10:33:14 Now, this all might seem a little counterintuitive. We often think of the modern commodity as quintessentially a thing, born of the Enlightenment interest in this observation or classification of objects. But the classical commodity was actually predicated on nothing, on immateriality. And this dematerialization won out over a rising culture of things. It paved the way for the nineteenth century art market and the advent of the gallery and the critic within it. It augured the incursion of capital into leisure time, private life, fashion, display, mirrors, which T.J. Clark has so brilliantly chronicled, the development of that inside within which we have long been entrenched. And so when we speak of networks and systems today, we're still relying on an analogy to this Modernist totalizing inside, against which some mythical opposition might attack from the outside.

00:11:34:1 Which brings me to the question, what would it mean to try to understand the position of the critic differently, to move beyond the binary of inside and outside, for and against, to understand not only identity, but difference? So first, I'm talking about the outsider in terms of social differences, whether that's race, class, gender, culture, or subculture. This kind of displacement is rooted in the very binary I've just noted, the modern European construction of the critic subject. That person disappeared into the flows of capital. It's a specificity of experience that gets lost in totalizing accounts of contemporary networked life, and we have to reckon with it in new and newly mediated incarnations. But more broadly, I'm also talking about the alterity of all subjects and objects. That is to say, the irreducible material difference with which things confront us, the ways in which we are outsiders to the very subjects and objects of our address.

00:12:38:10 This would mean something like rediscovering that other strain of criticism, that culture of curiosity about things and matter—curious because those things were never completely knowable—that fascination with the material collection, and not the ocular guise of collecting that also appeared in the chronicles of La Font de Saint-Yenne. This other mode seems important to me again today, because when I see a show or sit down to write about something, I'm constantly struck by what I do not have access to, by what is foreign or other to me. And more than that, contemporary artists themselves are, of course, constantly undergoing displacement, their actions and gestures dispersed across and immediately estranged from social structures, surfaces, and spaces. The artist is estranged from his or her work or event, just as the writer cannot be collapsed with the text. A drawing or a keystroke, once it has been executed, is severed from the handling or command that inaugurated it. The author's intentions become divorced from the thing.

00:13:46:23 And again, I don't just mean a return to the myth of critical distance. It's too static. It's the other side of that transcendental subject. And theme[?] theory has had a vogue for some time now; but this isn't exactly what I mean either. The rediscovery of things as if they never existed ultimately just ends up anthropomorphizing them, treating them like people, animate life,

attempting to know them. This generally means some nod to Martin Heidegger and his writing about the thing as an example of seeing stuff anew, apart from the commodity or the fetish. But such readings often overlook the antagonism, the alterity of the thing in Heidegger's view. For example, his idea that we see a tool differently only when it breaks down. These things resist our advances.

00:14:37:10 It's this hermeneutic engagement with things that I'm interested in, how the materials and materiality of our time make meaning, appreciating objects as vexing, naughty, particular presences, paying attention to matter, factor, form, size, shape, density, physical state, surface, where meaning is not a surplus, but is part and parcel of materiality. And of course, this investigation of material specificity, the alterity of matter, has long had a name. And that's art history. This strain of art history simmers throughout the texts of La Font and his successors. And we also experience this otherness in different ways now. For example, labels and names and categories are constantly differing from social realities. Our terms, our very words for identity or categories of intersectional being have to be expanded to address new forms of subjectivity and objectivity, even, let's say, artificial intelligence.

00:15:45:23 On another plane, critics love to use outmoded metaphors for technological devices or conditions. And I'm guilty of this myself. Art has a love affair with popular interpretations of pulp science like cybernetics or eighties formulations of the cyborg. And this belatedness actually echoes the way in which consumer technology itself, the tool or the thing, is always strange to its users. We're always playing catchup ourselves, constantly learning new touch-screen gestures or new keywords or new ways of interacting with machines. We might be masters of the intricacies of Google Docs, of liking and sharing, and some critics might actually be proficient with the Clone Stamp or know how a RED 1 camera works or have operated a 3-D Printer. But we generally don't spend our time acquiring those skills. And artists and designers, some of those tools' actual target consumers, are constantly learning, too. There's something fundamentally incompatible and incommensurable here, a difficulty, an intransigence surrounding these things and interfaces. And this matter confronts us not only with opacity, with stubborn stuff, but with over-signification. Something can be so over-saturated with meaning that we're overwhelmed. And it's this strangeness, this wildness, this intransigence of matter that led me to want to find out how some of the objects, and networks of subjects and objects, I was seeing came about.

00:17:22:20 So finally, a picture. It's a funny one, at that. Really, ten years ago, I visited Carlson & Co., the art fabrication and engineering firm in San Fernando, California. Looking into a doorway, unmarked save for an eye protection warning, was like peering through a looking glass. Inside and to the right were jump-suited workers hovering over an iridescent plinth that looked like a Kubrick monolith. To the left loomed a plaster model of a Play-Doh pile scaled to mammoth proportions. Here was an enormous, quote/unquote, "Mylar" balloon; and you guys know who this is. Straight ahead was a tentacular cluster of Tyvek- and foam-tipped steel prongs. And this was just the beginning of an immense space, a 40,000 square foot funhouse reflection of the Pepsi-Cola bottling plant that sat across the street from it. So until 2010, when it folded and then reopened under another name, which is a fitting index to that big recession that just happened before it, Carlson & Co. had extended, and even exploded beyond recognition, the materials, processes, and things of postwar art. Carlson's operations in industrial fabrication and the legions of artists who employ similar services elsewhere suggested to me that long after the aesthetic of administration, the aesthetics of production shows no signs of abating. Making becomes a field of action, in which matter, media, technologies, and relations are never merely given or readymade, but are fair game for intervention.

00:19:08:05 Carlson & Co.'s material output was plainly visible, but its processes were often invisible and

anonymous, regardless of the company's involvement in the production of a startling range of high-profile artworks. And so many would recognize the polished plinths I saw as a John McCracken series being readied for installation at Documenta 12, and the ten-foot-high Play-Doh form slated for realization in rotationally molded polyethylene as an entry in Jeff Koons' Celebration series. Few, though, would know that the cage-like steel structure there was a sophisticated crating system developed just for the transpacific transport of Charles Ray's Hinoki, from 2007, a painstaking rendition of a hollow tree trunk, in hand-carved Japanese cypress. Carlson discreetly lay at the nexus of all of these projects. And so if, as I stood at the plant's threshold on my visit, I had continued looking into the space, I would have discovered the trappings of a vertically-integrated network, machines, workers, and materials that played a role in everything from producing Ellsworth Kelly's pristine surfaces—and you see a piece being worked on here—to developing Liz Larner's metals, to fabricating, delivering, and installing Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's Pop monuments.

00:20:37:1 But I was at the wrong door. No sooner had I peeked inside than someone redirected me through another entrance, into a suite of offices lined with Breuer chairs and flatscreen Macs, a world apart from and yet completely aligned with the hangar-like warehouse alongside it. Carlson made a business out of this hybrid existence from 1971 until 2010, functioning as a conduit between artists and industry, and putting at their service a huge array that included subcontractors in computer-aided manufacturing and robotics, as well as foundries. This is a piece that's being sandblasted, a chrome piece here. An in-house staff of eighty-five trafficked in project management and digital design, no less than in painting and sanding. What was the meaning of this strange collusion of material and immaterial economies and its siting in the art world? I think it would be a mistake to conceive of the artist's relationship with Carlson or any number of large-scale studios like this now as simply a high-tech update on the relationship between Rodin and Rudier's foundry, for example. And I don't think it would be accurate to conceive of Carlson's services as a kind of completely detached outsourcing, to see the firm as a kind of one-stop shop, like the sign factory that László Moholy-Nagy engaged to produce his telephone paintings of 1922, because a firm like Carlson bent both the authorial claims of the traditional studio and the subversion of the conceptual gesture into a kind of post-Fordist pragmatism. To get the job done, Carlson would work closely with artists, but also disperse activity among different vendors. And far from merely applying prescribed techniques such as sandcasting, its staff would solve new engineering and organizational problems with both patent-worthy and outmoded or discarded technologies.

00:22:48:1 And it's in this sense, too, that the impulse that drew artists to Carlson diverges from the technophilia of postwar sculptural production, what Dan Flavin, in 1966, grumpily called a, quote, "scented romance in fiberglass or anodized aluminum or neon light or the very latest advance in Canal Street pyrotechnology," end quote. In fact, this 1960s dalliance was never quite so straightforward in the first place, and its tensions continue to surface, I think, over time, even today. And this is actually just a fun diagram that Sol LeWitt used for the company Treitel-Gratz, to manufacture his *Incomplete Open Cubes*. Treitel-Gratz was known for making things like the Barcelona chair. And this is Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*, which normally you think of as one monumental sculpture, but was made in an edition of three, at Lippincott Foundry, in a snowy Connecticut.

00:23:54:11 To achieve the sheen of mechanized production paradoxically meant customizing standardized procedures. These artists did not simply imitate existing positions, but interweaved in existing methods, going into the industrial setting and perturbing those standardized procedures. Industrial fabrication, rife with the contradictions that clearly haunted Flavin, offered no easy answer to questions of reification, non-composition, authorship, alienated labor, or



administration. Fabrication was never simply prefabrication. And so contrary to near mythical accounts of artists employing industrial manufacturing at arms length—the largely false story of Donald Judd blindly ordering boxes from Bernstein Brothers is only the most famous example—the disconnect between conception and realization has rarely been total, never so archly aloof as it first might appear. And this is Lippincott also working on Oldenburg’s huge *Baseball Bat*.

00:25:02:06 Crucial disturbances persist in the lag between thinking and making. And as that delay has only grown more elastic and complex, industrial fabrication, and even just making, is now hardly recognizable in its breadth. Besides using the likes of Carlson, artists today have built their own formidable fabrication and research facilities or developed longstanding relationships with specialized fabricators or engineers, or they infiltrate labs or networks of specialists, or they might just call in a friend or a coworker who happens to be a programmer or a chemist. And this is just another taste. This is Oldenburg’s project *Airflow*, which is a really interesting piece that entailed a lot of knowhow. And it came out of Carlson, but Carlson got his start at Gemini G.E.L., which was a famous printmaking studio. And it’s interesting to think about printmaking as a kind of prehistory, or just continuous history, of technological collaboration and actually labor, where the artist actually abdicates a great deal of control to other people.

00:26:13:07 And this is a shot from Mike Smith Studio, which is a fabrication firm in London. And then this is just an Isa Genzken, because why not? But I’ll skip to sort of here and now and, you know, mention an example that many of you will know well. But it’s the artist Anicka Yi, who works with everyone from microbiologists and perfumers. She’s sampled bacteria from distant social groups, using these connections. So for example, she took samples from 100 women, which were cultivated and arrayed in petri dishes or large scale vitrines. And you can see one bloom here. It smelled inversely proportional to how this image is. But these were not the only objects of display. She’s also synthesized scents from the bacteria and diffused them throughout a space. Here’s one sort of installation, and here’s another. You could poke your head in and the scent would waft out through this sort of ersatz laundry door.

00:27:20:26 And here you see decaying tempura-fried flowers that are plugged into a kind of ecosystem, ventilating pneumatic orbs that are, in fact, filtering out toxic off-gassing. And these last shots were from her show at the Kunsthalle Basel. Anicka’s interest in the persistence of matter counters the long history of the modern disavowal of the object. Her work, like many other artists today, poses a way to move beyond that modern European construction of the subject. That person disappeared inside the flows of capital. And I think a lot of work today tries to counter that impossible project of the transcendental subject. Again, that subject that supposedly constituted by no place or no object. And Yi’s work materializes terms of social difference, of race, class, gender, subculture or culture, a kind of displacement, a specificity of experience that often gets lost in totalizing accounts of contemporary networked life.

00:28:23:24 Another artist that I’m actually less familiar with, but whose work struck me in the most recent Documenta, is Otobong Nkanga. And this is a work that’s titled *Carved to Flow*. And insofar as Documenta itself, maybe somewhat problematically, explored material economies around the world, I think her work really encapsulated some of what Documenta was trying to achieve in an interesting way. So you’re seeing this in a lab in Athens. And this work, *Carved to Flow*, started in Athens with the creation of soap from a specific salt of a fatty acid, made of water, charcoal, and lye, and other butters and oils from across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North and West Africa. And the artist— These are the blocks of this sort of charcoal-based soap. And the artist created a kind of workshop in Athens, where they were actually producing the soap, as well as a kind of display structure for the soap to be supported on. Then the blocks of soap were sent to Kassel for storage and distribution, stacked like bricks in these kind of cylindrical

latticed towers, and distributed throughout the city. In fact, sold. And then they would circle back to other places, taking new forms—used, boiled down, absorbed into the system, carved to flow. And this is Nkanga’s sort of simple kind of whimsical diagram of some of these flows.

00:30:07:15 Both Nkanga’s and Yi’s works register not only social difference, but the alterity of all subjects and objects. The irreducible material difference that things confront us with, the ways in which instances of art defy dispersion, do not weightlessly or simply expand in immaterial networks, but are instead bound by opaque, even resistant assemblages of equipment, instruments, things, and flows. And these assemblages of matter and making now currently encompass both the crude and the custom; the prototype and the readymade; both the serial production of multiples and the highly circumscribed, often absurdly expensive one-off work of art; not to mention the new sort of methods of mass customization. This is the logic of clumsy tinkering and perfect gloss, of the hand-wrought and the algorithmic. It’s a mode of working that stretches to unexpected artists, and it’s so widespread as to be invisible. It’s a demonstration of the shifting status of materiality and objecthood, of form and forming in the present.

00:31:21:1 What I learned standing inside Carlson or smelling those microbes or handling soap was that even when I got so close, so inside the workings and works of art, I was not really there yet. What I witnessed, in other words, was the estrangement of artists from matter, of workers from artists, of things from machines, of bodies from information, of identities from selves. But this dislocation also offered a strange latitude. These various subjects and objects could actively intervene into processes normally given to us. There was room there, a delay or a gap, within which to trouble the agency of people and things, presences and absences, material substances and immaterial interactions. And at a moment when the image itself has become tactile and bodies have become ever more virtual, or we think they have, this attention to the alterity of things seems all the more interesting.

00:32:30:04 Which goes back to the passage I cited from good old Peter Stallybrass, my favorite historian, which is actually from a piece about Karl Marx having to pawn his overcoat in order to afford writing paper. The scribe, the critic, was literally stripped, held hostage to exchange. Marx would get the coat back, only to have to pawn it again. The cloth coat was denuded of its material presence to become free-floating exchange value. But it was also made of stubborn stuff. It forcefully affected the material conditions under which Marx wrote. His coat not only bought him his paper; he also needed it, you see, to meet the dress requirements of the British library where he did his work. The coat had a particular and material impact on bodies, on words, and on the most immaterial of phenomenon. It was external to the writer, but it shaped their very being. Thank you.

**[APPLAUSE]**