CCS BARD ARCHIVES

Speakers Series : Dana Kopel
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00:00:04.15 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** I love that robot intro voice. OK, well, yeah, let's go ahead and get started. Thanks, everyone, for joining us. Our last speaker series under quarantine. Today we have Dana Kopel with us. She's a writer and former senior editor and publications coordinator at the New Museum where she helped organize the New Museum Union. Her writing has been published in Art in America, Frieze, Flash Art, Mousse, Extra, and several exhibition catalogues. She's also a CCS alumni and graduated in 2016. Coming to us from the city.

00:00:48.48 **DANA KOPEL:** Thank you so much. Thank you, Georgie and Lauren and everyone, for inviting me. Yeah, so basically I'm speaking to you from my experience as one of the organizers of the New Museum Union, as a member of our bargaining committee, which is a group of union members elected to represent the union in contract negotiations. And now as our union chair. More than 90 New Museum staff members and most of our union and thousands of other museum workers nationally, I'm now unemployed. I'm on furlough until the museum reopens, whenever that is. I'm also, as Georgie mentioned, CCS graduate. So it's nice to be here and be sort of back with you.

00:01:37.58 So I guess the first thing I just want to say is that the union is by nature a collective project. I've been sort of one of the more public facing, or like the most public facing person of our unionization campaign, but I'm very far from the only person involved. The only way these things work is collectively. And so I just want to mark that, even though I'm just one person speaking to you. So in our union, we represent office staff as well as front facing staff and visitor services and store and part time art handlers and registrars. We voted to form a union in January 2019 and went over by huge margins, we've been unionized since then. And we're the first major US museum to unionize since the 70s, I believe, which is when MoMA and SFMOMA both formed unions. So there's this big gap between then and now in terms of labor organizing in the art world. Even before we made the decision to unionize, we started meeting together regularly to discuss the changes we wanted to see at the museum. And we started each of these meetings with a salary share, which is a really powerful organizing tool and one that now has a bigger platform, I think, **[INAUDIBLE]** presentation at the American Alliance of Museums last year and the museum salary spreadsheet started by Art Museum Transparency. And they're now keeping track of layoffs and furloughs in the art world and museum world as well. Salary share is a great tool for finding out how much you're getting fucked over, how much your co-workers are getting fucked over, and how, yeah, how you're basically in it together.I think it's really good for that. So we decided to unionize for a confluence of reasons. Some of them are specific to the New Museum, including egregiously low pay and a huge disparity between executive and low level salaries. This was pointed out to me by people outside the museum during our organizing campaign, just like the vastness of that difference and also a culture of disposability that resulted in massive turnover. And a real gap between the museum's outward facing progressive politics and its internal dynamics.

00:04:06.80 So the museum was founded in one room office in 1977 by Marcia Tucker. Maybe all of you already know this, but she was a curator at the Whitney beforehand and was fired and then founded the New Museum not only to show new art, including the post minimal work that other museums were still hostile to at the time, but also to sort of reimagine what a museum is and what it should do and how who should serve. She had some really radical ideas to do this, including paying all staff the same salary and foregoing hierarchies by having everybody rotate

jobs so everyone would know what everyone else's job was like. This proposal didn't last long. They're obviously considered impractical by people who are funding the museum.

00:04:55.43 When we were in the process of organizing, I was also, I worked as an editor at the museum and I was editing a book of Marcia Tucker's writing. So this felt very present for me at the time. But I think we were all looking back at that history and more generally at the organizing happening around that time and earlier with the Art Workers' Coalition in the late 60s and early 70s. And for me, it's really jarring to see how many of their demands involving museum workers and artists and museum policy decisions and free museum admission for everyone who wants it are still relevant today, and that some of their demands actually feel like beyond what we can even ask for now. The horizon of possibility has been so limited by the increasing corporatization of museums and museum leadership. Now we're just expected to be grateful to have a job in a museum at all. But yeah, I think a lot of the reasons we chose to unionize as maybe as apparent already. Like are things that are prevalent throughout the museum world or the art world? Low pay, well, I think it was particularly egregious at the New Museum. That's something that's pretty common throughout museums generally and also the sort of prestige job mentality. And both of those things tend to prevent people without outside sources of financial support from getting a foothold in the art world. And since our unionization, I've spoken to a lot of people working at other institutions and have been somewhat surprised and also not surprised to see how many of the issues that we were talking about impact them as well.

00:06:38.68 And so with unionizing, we wanted to change the landscape, the sense of what's possible and what workers deserve, and not just our own conditions. So starting in March and then through the beginning of October, we met. The bargaining committee, there are six of us, plus some representatives from our Local 21-10, which is part of the UAW, which is funny because they're not autoworkers, but the UAW has, and especially our local has a number of, sort of like office and clerical workers and university workers in the New York area at least.

00:07:15.22 So we met with the museum and their lawyer regularly to negotiate our first contract. It was a miserable experience. They were extremely hostile. But we did it. We we had a lot of concerns. Obviously, salary was a big one. We wanted to bring everybody up to what the museum had told us. In one of their anti-union meetings early on was considered, what they considered a living wage in New York City, that's 51,000 dollars. They said this to a room full of people that they paid like ten thousand dollars less than that. So that's something we pushed for until the very end and we didn't ultimately get a contract that starts people out on the grade 1 full-time level at 51. But we got substantial improvements in salary. So I'm proud of that. We also prioritized less tangible concerns like the right to a pay increase when you take on someone else's work temporarily, which was a big ongoing problem at the museum and also the right to hold union meetings at the museum.

00:08:23.30 All of our contract negotiations took place either at Local 21-10's office or the museum's lawyer's office because they refused to let us meet on museum premises. So every single thing that made it into our contract was a huge fight. They were resistant to really simple things, like having bulletin boards for the union in staff areas. That took weeks and weeks of negotiation just to get that basic concession. And so because of this, in June, we held an auction outside the museum, during the exhibition openings. More than one hundred union members and supporters showed up and rallied to pressure the museum to negotiate with us in good faith. And ultimately, in order to get our contract, we had to call a strike and prepare to go on strike. And we didn't have to go on strike. The vote and the threat of it created enough pressure for the museum to bargain with us, enough to get a contract that we felt was fair.

00:09:24.15 But we were prepared to go on strike if it came to that, in late September. And as far as I know, the last major strike in the art world, in the museum world, was at MoMA in 2000, workers there went on strike for four and a half months, I believe. They wanted a contract, it's a really significant contract and really significant strike but they won substantial pay increases. And one of the big things they won is a closed shop, which means that if you're hired into a union position, you are part of the union, you pay dues. Having an open shop, which is the opposite, where you can choose whether or not to be in the union if you're in a union position, is something that employers like because it weakens unions and sort of just like fragments people.

00:10:17.03 So, yeah, I also want to acknowledge that art workers are not a homogenous group. People come from different conditions and have different needs and expectations. And certain forms of labor within the museum are racialized, class, and gendered. And so in our contract negotiations, we prioritized bringing the bottom up, making sure... we wanted real improvements for the lowest paid people in our unit. And so for that, for workers and visitor services in the store, most of them are making 15.15 an hour and had been for over three years. That's 50 cents more than the minimum wage and we got them up to 18 an hour. And that's also within our unit, the most diverse department. And so that felt like a really important thing. And yeah, one of the members of our six person bargaining committee was from Visitor Services, so she was able to speak to their specific concerns and that was extremely helpful. Yeah, I think in general, the landscape is changing for our workers. When I initially say that things look different, it's obviously changing in both good and bad ways now. But in the sense we unionized workers at the **[INAUDIBLE]** Museum and BAM have voted to join our same unions Local 21-10. And then workers at Marciano Art Foundation in L.A. were laid off for trying to unionize, which is illegal. But, you know, employers have ways of sort of skirting that. So I think that's being actually litigated right now. But also in L.A., management at MOCA agreed to voluntarily recognize the union of their workers there without even requiring them to have a vote, which is amazing.

00:12:11.44 I've been really heartened by the real solidarity that I've seen and experienced among members of different museum unions across the country and art workers that are trying to unionize with shared knowledge, offered encouragement, showing up to rallies and made public statements of support. I think art workers are coming to recognize themselves as workers, and that makes all of us stronger in the fight for our rights. I think this is a big moment of reckoning for museums, particularly modern and contemporary art museums. It's far from the first. But many of these museums, like the New Museum, profit from a veneer of progressive politics and a surface level commitment to representation, but actually function according to capitalist principles of profit and growth rather than any sort of ethics or drive towards justice. This is something I've seen firsthand at the New Museum, and I'm sure that many of you have also seen it. For instance, with last year's Whitney Biennial, and the eventual removal of Warren Sanders, the CEO of the teargas manufactures in the Whitney's board. And the campaign to get Larry Fink, the MoMA a trustee and CEO of BlackRock to divest from prison companies like CoreCivic and GEO Group which are responsible for 70 percent of immigrant detention. So the question I've been asking myself for a while is what is representation actually do if it's funded by brutality towards activists and protesters in Ferguson and Standing Rock, the US border, and Palestine and Hong Kong, around the world? I've been thinking about something Aria Dean wrote in her review of that Whitney Biennial for Extra: "representation is betrayed by its own nomenclature, which alerts us to the fact that it is not real and it does not make it its business to intervene into material conditions, representation as a glass.

00:14:06.24 So, unfortunately, the mass layoffs and furloughs that have swept museums in response to the coronavirus crisis only reinforce this disparity between public facing and internal, or I would say, actual politics. So far, over ten thousand museum workers; and that figure is a couple of weeks

old it's probably higher now; have lost their jobs in the US. Most of them were in lower paid positions, while executives take small symbolic pay cuts that preserve their own jobs and their power. For reference, the New Museum executives took pay cuts of between 10 and 20 percent. The director took a 30 percent pay cut. 30 percent of her salary is still several times the average salary of our Union. I think this gap between what museums do outwardly or representationally or what they say they're doing and how they're actually functioning internally at the level of material conditions and geopolitical impact is a space in which unions can intervene to improve conditions for workers within the museum, but also to hold museum management accountable and to set higher standards and better ethics for our institutions more broadly.

00:15:15.71 Unions aren't the end point, of course, but they're a crucial means of advocating effectively for workers' rights and a useful model for collective action and building solidarity. When I was at CCS I studied for the first year with Suhail Malik and I still think about some of his work on contemporary art's relationship to politics. Suhail has argued that contemporary art as a genre of art production and circulation is incapable of effecting political change, despite the fact that so much contemporary art engages with the sort of left politics and its content. And this is in part because it depends on, or valorize openness to a multiplicity of meanings and indeterminacy that's antithetical, he argues, to concrete political intervention. For me, that feels increasingly true of the art world as a whole. For instance, when our union voted to authorize a strike in late September, we as organizers had to explain to our colleagues and to exhibiting artists and museum visitors and so on, that you either stand with workers and support our fight for a fair contract or you cross the picket line and side with management and with the exploitation that they perpetuate. There's no middle ground in the strike. There's no openness. It's, you're on one side or the other. And so that's obviously a much larger conversation about how art works and what it should do. But I have been thinking more about instrumentalization and militancy as counter **[INAUDIBLE]** to the surface levels of representation-only progressivism that so many museums put forward and profit from. Because representing left politics isn't the same as enacting them, they both can happen at once, an openness to various interpretations, which easily falls into a kind of liberal like both sides is them, especially when it's propagated by a neoliberal arts institutions, is not accessibility or equity or justice.

00:17:08.08 I've been writing about art for several years now, but when I was writing this essay about coronavirus and the art world that was just published a few days ago, I started telling friends that at this point I'm mainly interested in writing propaganda. I want my readers to know that the conditions for art workers are shitty. I want the art workers to read what I write, to feel seen and in community. And I want the people and institutions responsible for the shitty conditions to feel shamed. And ultimately, obviously, I want our conditions to change.

00:17:43.05 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Thank you so much. That was a lot of information, but it's amazing to hear all synthesized in your own voice. I think that we've been talking a lot about it, you know, obviously, the effects of coronavirus on the art world and kind of seeing that that relationship between the institution and the worker kind of comes to light in a different way. Especially in terms of like the education departments and the relationship to the outwardly facing idea of what the institution stands for and then what it actually does for its workers and for its community. I really liked this idea that you're linking it back to Marcia Tucker and this founding ideals that she was putting forward. I think that's a really interesting way of framing the union that relates directly to its history.

00:18:39.67 **DANA KOPEL:** Thanks. Yeah, that was a big part of our framing from the very beginning, in terms of how we approached it when we let management know and eventually when we went to the press with it, I think. Sort of conveying that we were unionizing from a position of care for the

institution and its history and like a commitment to sort of preserving that history or what we felt was important to it, from it. Yeah, that had a lotto do with how we sort of spoke publicly about and framed the unionization.

00:19:17.82 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Yeah. I wonder in thinking about after COVID, post-COVID, whatever kind of world and whatever that means, thinking about the role of the curator or the arts writer, or if you're working within the institution or as a contracted worker, how you might be able to better advocate for some of these things. And if that's something that you're thinking about moving forward and kind of potential other jobs and writing and how you kind of come up with the language to speak to that.

00:19:54.93 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I mean, I think the most basic thing I'll say is unionize. I think we really needed a union at the museum, but every workplace needs a union, because even, you know, even if you have a sympathetic boss, like when the boss leaves, what happens? The only way to sort of create real sustainable change is by having the structure, to sort of pre-existing historical and legal structure of a union. And yeah, I mean, personally, I don't think I'm especially hireable at art institutions right now because most of them are not unionized and don't want unions. But I think in general, that's something I'd encourage people to do and to do it in a way that... I know you mentioned that contract workers... Do it in a way that also prioritizes workers who may not be able to be in union because of the way that they're hired or the contracts or terms that they're on or who just may be more precarious. And so, yeah, I just encourage people, especially people with the sort of stability and privilege to do it. Like, really, yeah, be involved in unionizing and basically talk to your co-workers. That's all, first of all.

00:21:17.99 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** I wonder also how that might translate into like curating within, like, smaller non-profit spaces and kind of advocating for WAGE-certified artist fees and kind of the smaller gestures towards equal pay and yeah, making sure that the organizations are working for, no matter their size, or kind of paying their laborers correctly and how you might be able to leverage kind of your role as a curator in that.

00:21:50.76 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. I think it's a really good question. I guess, first of all, like for the small non-profit, you can still unionize, as long as you have two workers, as long as one is the boss of the other you can have a union. But I think in general I would really like to see more solidarity between, yeah, between art workers within the institution and artists who are showing there. I mean, we... I don't know, like we we had an enormous amount of support from artists at the New Museum and other people who worked for the New Museum throughout our campaign. And I'm really grateful for that. What I mean is that there aren't necessarily structures that support that right now. You know, like WAGE is advocating for artists who are showing in unions or advocating for workers within the institution. And I think on both sides people are looking out and trying to figure out how we can support each other. But the structures are maybe less obvious.

00:22:58.06 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** I think that goes into this role of transparency that you are bringing up with with the salary transparency, but also this open communication between both sides of the institutions that I think is integral to this organizing.

00:23:19.06 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. I mean, transparency is super important, like the salary share is like a big part of what made this possible, I think. And just in general, like being open with our co-workers. And also transparency, the lack of transparency from the institution about so many aspects of our work and of the museum's policies and things like that was also something that really spurred us to unionize. I think there's also, on the other side of that... With organizing, **of**

union organizing and I think many are all other kinds of organizing. There's also ways in which transparency isn't the most useful. There are a lot of secrets and just like a lot of sensitive information that gets shared. And so, yeah, it's complicated. Transparency is so important, but sometimes there are things that need to happen internally before they can be shared.

00:24:20.17 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Yeah, did you have anyone within the institution that you felt that was like pushing against kind of that transparency, or did you come across that, like when you were trying to unionize?

00:24:31.65 **DANA KOPEL:** I mean, I think for the most part people were really open to unionization from the beginning. Which is pretty remarkable, and, yeah, it made organizing easier. Obviously there are a handful of people that we talk to that we're just not open to it. Yeah, I don't know, in general people are aware of their own conditions and also people are working at somewhere like the New Museum because they have a sense of the museum's ostensible politics and their own politics sort of align with that. So I think it's a group of people that are maybe already more open to those conversations.

00:25:23.43 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Yeah, definitely, um, OK, let's... I want to open it up to other questions from other people, I don't want to monopolize you this whole time. If anyone else has questions, feel free to jump in. Lauren, I know you do.

00:25:44.94 **LAUREN CORNELL:** Yeah, I have a lot of questions and yeah, I want to talk about this more. But I'm trying to distill them down. I think I've distilled down into two questions. So my first question is, I'm just curious about how the union handled the recent furloughs and layoffs. How does a union negotiate on behalf of workers during a pandemic? And there's sort of a data emerging that the people who are being laid off also skewed to be lower income, precarious white women and people of color, like how do you how do you kind of stand up for the workforce in an extraordinary circumstance like this?

00:26:40.62 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. So, like, having a union gives you the right to bargain over the effects of layoffs and furloughs, which is a big deal in general. This is something, especially now, that just happens to you and happens to workers. We haven't bargained with the museum yet. It's been really difficult in terms of giving us the information we requested and we also, as a union, have the right to request information and they have the responsibility to provide it to us as long as it's relevant. They're claiming things like whether they applied for grants, grant funding, to keep people on payroll is not relevant for us to know. So we're up against a lot. But I think that's that's a concrete way in which the union can support workers and is supporting workers. We also, because we have a contract already, we had provisions in place for severance and things like that. So people didn't have to go into individual conversations and try to fight for as much money as they could get or whatever, that was already built into the contract. So most people were furloughed rather than laid off. And so not currently eligible for severance, but for the people that are laid off that's something that's already in place. I think in a more general sense, it's also like a support system. It's an in-built support system but maybe doesn't exist in the same way at institutions that aren't unionized. Like we're very used to coming together and sort of figuring out how to respond to crises or issues. And we have town halls on Zoom every couple of weeks and have been sort of sharing information with people about unemployment applications and art worker relief funds and things like that.

00:28:50.40 **LAUREN CORNELL:** Thank you. Yeah, I guess I have another question before I do, I want to say that, now you're so expert in this, but I think it was such a, probably such a hard thing to do to kind of rise up at the New Museum and took such great courage in a really real way. And I

just want to acknowledge that and say I also really admire it. And then the second thing it's my second question is, I guess I see this sort of centering of, or this critique of representation as a gloss and the centering of really equitable structures as something that might be emergent and generational. At least I see it among peers and among younger people that it seems sort of more common sense to not have, for instance, like major income disparities and to prioritize, you know, proper benefits over an innumerable amount of programs, but that's sort of my anecdotal impression and I'm curious what you think.

00:30:11.47 **DANA KOPEL:** The question is like whether those priorities are generational, in a way?

00:30:16.08 **LAUREN CORNELL:** Yeah. Whether you see them as things that might be more pervasive in the art world in the future. Yeah. And as particularly generational.

00:30:27.81 **DANA KOPEL:** I mean, I'm really hopeful that they'll be more pervasive in the art world in the future. I think to the extent that they are generational is maybe only because the people in low paid positions are generally younger, and the people who are in executive positions, not exclusively but often are older, are wealthier, have come from familial wealth to make it to that point and have sort of... Yeah, I don't know, prioritized their careers in a way. I feel like people thein buy into things like, oh, I put in my time, like I paid my dues, I got here, I deserve it. Like if you want to do it, you have to work your way up, you have to accept shitty pay and be overworked and underpaid over time. And then eventually you'll get to this point. But of course, most people won't and most people don't have the inherited wealth or the structure or the like, race or class privilege to do that. So I think it's not necessarily generational, but I see why it appears that way given how museums are structured now.

00:31:52.18 **LAUREN CORNELL:** I think partly the reason that I ask is because when I was at the New Museum, I advocated for greater maternity leave after only having two weeks paid myself and struggling with that. And I did sense generational tension between, or generational differences, around understanding what should constitute maternity leave. But I appreciate your opinion.

00:32:17.52 **DANA KOPEL:** That makes sense. I also yeah, I'm happy that we have now five weeks paid in our contract. And there are a number of people who were pregnant at the museum at the time we were in contract negotiations. But also talking to you about that. Definitely was a good reminder that this is a priority and a really obvious shortcoming somewhere like the New Museum that's supposedly a feminist institution.

00:32:55.19 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Yeah, I think this conversation around the generational understanding of surface level versus like the kind of restructuring is really interesting. And I think, Dana, what you are bringing up about kind of like this idea that other generations have kind of gone through this like, oh, I've I've worked hard and I've been underpaid and I've worked long hours, so it's kind of just the way you have to do it because they're on the other side of it is really at the heart of of the generational question, I think.

00:33:32.02 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. I mean, I think about this thing, I don't remember where I heard it, but like there's a saying which my dad, who's like a right wing conspiracy theorist, has said, like, you know, if you're like conservative when you're younger, you don't have a heart. And if you're liberal when you're older, you don't have a brain. And people make these claims about like, oh, like people get more conservative as they get older for various reasons. And it's like, I don't remember who pointed this out. It's like, no, the people who were like left wing die offs, like those people don't survive because they don't have the material conditions to make it to old age. And so the people that survive and people who accumulate wealth are the people who

then become conservative because they want to hang onto that wealth.

00:34:43.22 **KRISTA ALBA:** I come from Texas and there are a lot of rhetorical strategies to dissuade people from unionizing. And it's a commonly held belief that unionizing will destroy a company or destroy an institution. And I just wanted to know if you have encountered that before and any rhetorical strategies to combat that misinformation.

00:35:14.30 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I mean, we've definitely benefited from being in New York and not in right to work state, which I think is a lot harder because so much of this does hinge on like legal stuff. But I think, in a very basic way, like having conversations with coworkers and building trust with coworkers is a good way to undo some of that really ingrained union animus. I mean, it's definitely something we encountered when we first let the museum know that we were unionizing, sort of like radio silence for a few days. And then they hired this like right wing anti-union consultant from Kentucky to come in and call meetings with us. They're called captive-audience meetings, where people are required to attend and just get talked at basically about why unions are bad. And I think for us, because of the context thing, because this consultant was clearly used to working in non art world situations... He is like a 60-something white guy who clearly had sort of like, banked on his relatability in a lot of situations and like it was deeply unrelatable to most of us. And I think like the museum, just like hiring them to begin with, when they had sort of like stuff all over their website about draconian Obama era regulations. Early like pushed people who maybe weren't sure to realize that the museum is not looking out for the best interests and just doing everything they can to fight this. But yeah, I mean, sharing information and, concrete information, too, about like what people have the right to do and what they don't have the right to do, because there's a lot of misinformation that gets put out in anti-union campaigns. So having that sort of readily available... When BAM workers were organizing on their social media, their union share a lot of debunking myths about unionizing, which I think is a really smart and helpful thing to do. So, yeah, having that information accessible and having real trust between colleagues.

00:37:45.72 **KRISTA ALBA:** Thank you.

00:37:47.77 **EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS:** Can I jump in? Yeah, thanks for that Dana. I have two questions, one is sort of practical, the others, well, also some practical, a little different. But the first is super practical, which is I just wanted to hear how your experience was joining with a larger union under the umbrella of UAW. I was an organizer for UAW 28-65 in California. But one of the things that we learned through that is that there are of course, major benefits in terms of legal protections, what gains with what you give up, you know, potentially is a huge amount of flexibility. Right? I mean, if you don't have a sort of contract sanctioned strike, it's a wild card. And then you potentially are either don't have the support of the union or literally will break with them. So, yeah, I wanted to first just ask how you all thought about the decision to align with UAW and how that experience was?

00:38:46.15 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. I think basically the biggest thing for us is like none of us had organized a union anywhere before. We were all learning as we went. And so working with people who had experience doing that was unbelievably valuable. We initially met with Maida Rosenstein, the president of Local 21-10, and she brought a number of stewards from MoMA with her. And so we got to talk to them also about like how the union worked there, which, you know, it's been in place for decades now. But that was really helpful. I think for us it was their experience specifically with museum workers and our lack of experience at all with union organizing that made it make sense. Overall, like I would say, we've had like a really amazing

experience with them. One of the core organizers of our union was retaliated against really intensely and left the museum and now works for the Local. So she saw through contract negotiations with us from that end. And yeah, I mean, they've been like unbelievably dedicated, there is definitely like a loss of flexibility. I know I've talked to people about the various resolutions that NYU and Berkeley had tried to pass and couldn't because the UAW International was like, we have people in our unions making arms for this, which sucks. But I think for us it was what made the most sense.

00:40:35.78 **EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS:** Yeah, I know, it's interesting. And then so I guess maybe the thing following off from that, you know, was thinking about, you know, in the joining up with UAW, working kind of under their banner does raise a question about what's specific about organizing in an art context. And on the ground, I want to come back to what you were saying, you know, sort of a sort of Suhail's thinking. And I definitely agree about the, on the one hand, the reading of the gap off between, like, kind of progressive concerns versus actual institutional politics. And as well, I think, you know, I think we've talked a lot of that with the first years here as well. We've talked a bunch about, which I agree with Suhail and that sort of like, you know, meta-condition where everything must be "critical." But my one question or like, it's assumed to be that's the sort of banner under which things generically. But like, you know, one thing I think that sometimes goes missing in that, though, or that I want to think about from your experience, too, is like there is this really particular condition of a lot of people end up often in situations where they're being overworked and underpaid in an art context. You know, they enter that field for really specific reasons and for ones that sort of believe in some sense that it isn't simply a kind of like, I don't know, circus of kind of pseudo woke representation. And so I do think there's an interesting way to like... or poses a really particular challenge. You know, how do we negotiate between, on the one side, the real danger of the discourse if you do it because you love it and therefore, right, people's time can be taken advantage of. On the other hand, is taking seriously the fact that, you know, many people, obviously for some it's not, for someone is simply an available job, but for many people we know who work in the field we all are in, it's because of some sense that, like, actually, I don't know, or the possibility of experiences or forms of research or collaboration that are unique to that. So I just wanted to ask you to circle back to like your sense of what feels like specific to organizing in the context of art and the strange balance that I also, I mean, I agree between the sort of cynical progressivity and then maybe something else, right?

00:42:37.77 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I mean, I think that's exactly it. People people come into the art world in many cases, or at least sort of like in non-profit and museum contexts, because they care about the work. They feel like there's a value in it beyond just sort of like financial value, for instance. And so I think that's both, in my experience, that's been both an advantage and something to work through in terms of organizing, an advantage because, as I mentioned, people are like already you may be open to are predisposed to sort of like progressive politics and like the sense of justice or equity, that is a big part of many conversations around contemporary art. But also, yeah, it's difficult because people feel lucky to have these jobs and it's extremely competitive. There's far more people who want to work in museums than can and like... Yeah, there's a whole culture of like prestige and career-building. And career building also, I think this is something that encountered, that's been difficult. People are not willing to take risks in order to work towards a more just art world. Or like in small union context, whatever, because it will threaten their career later on and realistically it will. And so navigating that is definitely... it's tricky. I don't know if that answers your question.

00:44:28.80 **EVAN CALDER WILLIAMS:** I mean, if anyone could answer this question, we'd all be... it's not to say that is the question, but like, you know, it feels like something that we're all butting our

heads against in many in many angles and ways. Right?

00:44:42.82 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Yeah. I think something else that is really particular to working in the art world is this blurred line between your work and then the social aspect of it. You're expected to go to the openings or go see exhibitions and do studio visits and all these things that are happening sometimes outside of normal work hours. And so, that kind of blurring of what you would be doing anyway, because you love the art world and you love participating in this thing, and then your actual day to day work can be oftentimes exploited and kind of assumed that you're going to take on this additional labor in the name of the organization you're working for.

00:45:25.50 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, completely, completely, and it's... I don't know, it's just like that blurred line between work and life means that everything can become work and people just can become like that, having their entire life to work. And that's normal. I think that's very normal in the art world. And that's definitely something that it's hard, I've encountered in organizing that it's hard to undo. For me personally, because I was so involved in organizing and in contract negotiations, I probably went to five openings in that entire year or something. And it was great. But you really do rethink, like, you know, what work is and what work looks like and how you're being compensated or not for it.

00:46:16.92 **AMY ZION:** But aren't these all just reasons why organized worker protections are necessary when there are those additional kind of either effective or whatever you want to call them, exploitable situations? It's just extra cause for needing worker protections and needing collective organizing.

00:46:39.66 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, completely. Completely. I mean, it's yeah, it's something that can make organizing more difficult, but also definitely makes it more necessary.

00:47:03.34 **AMY ZION:** Oh, you mentioned disparities between art workers in the group and I know the Museum Transparency group you were mentioning is specifically focused on gender pay gaps. And I wonder if that was something that came up within the museum and if there were any interesting things that you learned once you started talking to each other and creating transparency in the group of workers.

00:47:28.40 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I mean, in general, the New Museum staff and particularly the staff within our unit is mostly women. But you know, there is a woman director, there's a woman deputy director. There's like a number of women who are executives of the museum. So that's something they really foreground. We did notice at least one instance of gender pay disparity where somebody who had been hired later, who is a man, was making more than someone who had effectively the same position or like the other half of what had once been one position was making less than him. But I think for us, I mean, obviously that was an issue. But for us, the driving force is the fact that neither of them made enough money to live on. So, yeah, I mean, it's definitely something that's an issue at many museums. It wasn't like the main issue at the New Museum. Though I mean, I think a lot of us were also sensitive to the New York Times profile of Lisa Phillips, the director from a few years ago, where the author talks about how she makes like only seven or eight hundred thousand a year as compared to like male museum directors who earn a million. And, you know, for us, they're just like, oh, that's so sad. How does she survive, you know?

00:49:15.44 **A.L. RICKARD:** I have a couple of questions. Thanks, Dana, this is great, to hear your experience. I was at the Brooklyn Museum before CCS, and I did union work there. So it's great to hear about your experience at the New Museum. And I have two questions. One would be **I'd be**

interested in hearing about experiences or opportunities that you see for solidarity and support between union members and non-union members when you're in a mixed workplace, because, of course, like not everyone at the New Museum or other museum spaces are in a union. And I'm really interested in what opportunities lie there. And then my second question would be, I guess in this moment of mass layoffs and furloughs and everything that's happening, if there are opportunities or possibilities that you see for labor organizing specifically in this moment, like what are things that you are maybe looking forward to that could come out of what we're all experiencing?

00:50:08.43 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. In response to your first question, I think that's extremely important and maybe something that we at the New Museum didn't or didn't have a chance to do as well as it could have. For us, I mean, like our union is like pretty broad, it covers like a pretty big range of workers, but it doesn't include obviously management. It also doesn't include maintenance or security. Maintenance we really tried to organize with and ultimately there weren't enough people who wanted to be part of the union and there was some misinformation and obviously some like issues of trust and communication that are racialized. Security there, like there's just that legal precedent around having security workers in the same union as not-security workers. So we really couldn't do anything about that, which really sucks. We talked to those workers, I think some of them had expressed interest in unionizing or just curiosity about our progress, and so we tried to connect them to people if they're interested and just talk about it. I think there could definitely be more of those conversations and more of that solidarity. I'm also curious what it looked like at the Brooklyn Museum, like what your experience has been.

00:51:46.40 **A.L. RICKARD:** Yeah, it's interesting to hear that because the Brooklyn Museum Union, when it was started maybe in the 40s or 50s, was security and maintenance and that was it. And then, like clerical white collar workers, as the union would describe it, joined in the 70s during that kind of wave of museum labor organizing in the 1970s. And so, yeah, the union there is like half of the staff. So it's about one hundred and fifty people out of three hundred. And the vast majority of the union is security, actually. Yeah, maybe we can connect offline sometime and talk more about that. Because I'm interested in your experience of not integrating in that way and what opportunities are there and what difficulties.

00:52:31.11 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, totally. And your other question?

00:52:36.88 **A.L. RICKARD:** The other question was like, possibilities are things that you feel like might be particularly possible in this moment or things that you think are important or essential to be kind of working around right now?

00:52:48.99 **DANA KOPEL:** Totally. I mean, I think it's obviously a really difficult time for a lot of reasons. It's a really... Legally, structurally, it's a really shitty time to organize. The National Labor Relations Board is basically shut down. They postponed a lot of votes, which is really bad. When you're organizing, you want to have a vote as soon as possible, because the longer you wait, the more time there is for misinformation and anti-union campaigns to sort of make people change their minds. So that's definitely a challenge. But I think there's also this is really radicalizing people who might otherwise be like "yeah, unions are good, but I don't think we need one." And I have a friend who works at another museum who has always been supportive of the work at the New Museum, but who got furloughed and was immediately like, if I go back to work, I'm starting a union first thing. And I think people are more and more aware that the institution is not looking out for them. Then we have to look out for ourselves. We have to look out for each other because we're not going to get that from these institutions.

00:54:09.23 **A.L. RICKARD:** Thank you.

00:54:25.47 **LAUREN CORNELL:** I have another question. You talked in the beginning, Dana, about you employing the strategy of shaming. And I am you know, I guess I just wanted to hear why you feel that that is the effective strategy that you need to, that you need to use. You know, I think that.... And I could elaborate, but I'll just ask that.

00:54:58.51 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's one of many effective strategies. I think for me personally, like when I was talking about it in terms of my writing, like I think... I don't know, I think I just want to be very pointed about like... I think there's a lot of writing in the art world and outside of it about what the problems are and less so about where they're coming from, because people have careers at stake, people have jobs and relationships at stake. And at this point, I feel like I don't anymore. So I feel more comfortable, just being open about where I think these issues are coming from and who has the power to change them. I don't think shaming this by any means, like our main strategy with the union. But one thing we did recognize through the process is that the museum really didn't give a shit about us. They didn't give a shit about us. If we're unhappy, if we were upset, if we were being treated unfairly. Obviously, they cared about what the public saw and they cared about what their artist thought.

00:56:15.16 **DANA KOPEL:** And so sort of strategically working with museum artists to get statements of support from them, like we had a big letter that a number of people signed on to when we were trying to unionize. We also had a big social media campaign with a lot of artists and theorists and writers, people who had worked with the museum that we did over the summer during contract negotiations. Those I mean, those are not shaming, but they were like a very specific way of mobilizing public opinion in our favor. Because we recognized that that was the only thing that was going to have an effect on the museum. And things like that did. And so the action that we did in June also. It was a rally, it was a show of solidarity. We weren't preventing anyone from going into the opening. And some people chose not to, but it was specifically not a picket. We just wanted to get information out to people who are coming to the museum for maybe supporters of the museum and let them know how workers are being treated. But I think the spectacle of that was definitely embarrassing for the museum. They have like opening remarks for the openings in the lobby, they moved it up to the seventh floor so that they didn't have to look at us. And yeah, and after that, negotiations were still extremely difficult, but the tenor at the table really changed, like they started taking us more seriously. They were less explicitly condescending to us. And that, yeah, I don't know, that really confirmed that having sort of public accountability in this was what was going to get us contract.

00:58:12.83 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** I wonder, on top of all of the work that you're doing for the union and how that affected your day to day work at the museum itself. How are you able to balance those two? Because it seems like a full time job doing the union.

00:58:31.15 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, it was definitely like working two full time jobs for a while. Yeah, I mean, I guess I did it, I sort of don't know how and like the rest of the bargaining committee also, we got through it. And it really took a lot of solidarity, especially between the six of us, and sort of allowing people to step back for a couple of weeks when someone was feeling burnt out, stuff like that. I mean, like to be perfectly honest, I have intense trauma from the past year and a half. It's really difficult to go to work every day to a place where, you know, they're just waiting for you to leave and sooner rather than later. So it definitely took a toll on me and took a toll on a lot of people who are involved. I think we're still processing that, but I also have no regrets about it.

00:59:27.32 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** OK, I have another question too. Since you are CCS alumni, I'd love to hear what the impact of the program was afterwards for you. Like, how did your time and CCS prepare you for your work?

00:59:56.23 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I mean, when I was at CCS , I really, I wanted to be a curator and I don't anymore. I got a job at the museum as an editor and sort of like I've done editing for a while and I actually like it and sort of like, oh, this will give me more experience in a museum and then I'll move into curatorial somewhere else. And I think through the unionization process in particular, that was something I realized that I did not want. The sort of like the sacrifices politically that you have to make to succeed in that position is not something I was willing to do, or just like the compromises. And so, I mean, that was very useful for me. I don't know, like I think I've said this to somebody else before, but you can't have people, like spend two years reading Marx and then not expect them to think about their labor conditions after you hire them. CCS definitely, I mean, I think just like having that pedigree or whatever helped me get the job at the New Museum. But also, like my time there helped me think quite critically about the art world and the way the way that it functions and sort of the power dynamics within it. And I think that was something that was really helpful for me as an art worker and as an organizer in the art world.

01:01:33.04 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** That's great to hear. Are there any other questions?

01:01:44.04 **LAUREN CORNELL:** Thank you, Dana.

01:01:54.48 **DANA KOPEL:** Thank you so much.

01:01:56.17 **AMY ZION:** I guess if there's time for one more question, I guess I would like to know what what is next for you? Are you planning to go back to the museum when it opens? Or is this sort of a moment to pivot into something else? And like you said, I think you describe it as you feel like you have a target on your back in terms of working elsewhere in the art world at the moment.

01:02:27.82 **DANA KOPEL:** Yeah, I think that's probably true. I don't know, I mean, I was told when I was furloughed, that like we'd love to have you back when this is over. I'm aware that they wouldn't probably love that, but I don't know, I think there's obviously so much uncertainty right now in terms of what the future looks like in general, that it's sort of... It's almost like comforting for me to acknowledge that same uncertainty in my own future. I really don't know, yeah, I'm invested in a lot of things. I'm invested in working in the art world, and I'm also invested in things like organizing and so, who knows?

01:03:28.46 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Well, we don't have any other questions. I don't have any other questions. I could monopolize your time a lot longer with conversation, but I don't want to keep you too much longer on a beautiful Friday afternoon.

01:03:46.93 **DANA KOPEL:** Well, thank you all so much. And also, if anyone ever wants to organize their workplace now or in the future, you can always feel free to reach out to me. I've had a lot of these conversations with art workers across the country, and it makes me really happy. I know a number of my colleagues have to and sharing that experience is important.

01:04:11.68 **GEORGIE PAYNE:** Thank you so much. It's been hugely helpful to hear your perspective and hear what your experience was like.

01:04:21.45 **DANA KOPEL:** So thank you so much for having me. It was really nice to talk with you all.