

Interview: The Brooklyn Rail

Carol Becker with Phong Bui

On the occasion of her new book, *Thinking in Place: Art, Action, and Cultural Production*, Carol Becker, Professor and Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, paid a visit to the Rail's headquarters to talk about her life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail):

Having been brought up in a family of first generation Americans - your father was a Russian Jew who grew up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, while your mother, who was of Polish-Catholic descent, came from Hastings, a small mining town in Pennsylvania - you were born and spent your early upbringing in Crown Heights, which was and still is quite a multi-racial/ethnically diverse neighborhood. I wonder how all of that influenced your early formation?

Carol Becker:

When I was young, it was very intense at many levels. Even though my parents were incredibly generous to me and supportive of me they couldn't figure me out, partly because I read everything and studied all the time and my mother only had finished fifth grade, and my father was thrown out of high school for gambling. So neither of them ever had a college education, and there I was this little studious kid. [Laughs.] Also, growing up after the war half-Jewish and half-Catholic in a Hasidic and African-American neighborhood had a lot of resonance, certainly more than it would now in the 21st Century, which is the century of multi-racialism, multiple ethnicity, cultural complexity, and so on. But it was a really big deal then to be of two religions, especially in a Jewish neighborhood as intense as Crown Heights where it has been home to Jews, particularly to the Lubavitcher sect of Hasidic Jews since the 1940s. I spent a lot of time in synagogues and I studied Hebrew, so it never occurred to me that I wasn't actually Jewish, but by Orthodox law you're not a Jew if your mother isn't. My mother never converted, though that wouldn't have done any

good with the truly religious people anyway. In fact I wrote about Kafka in the first chapter of my book because his father was German, and his mother Italian and he too suffered the complexity of his identity on many fronts.

Rail:

A cross-breed half Jew. Otherwise known as the mischling.

Becker:

Exactly. Yet I found out later that my Jewish upbringing in Crown Heights and my Polish Catholic roots in Hastings were not that far apart. In fact, those two cultures were very intertwined in Europe, though I didn't understand the roots of anti-semitism in my Polish Catholic family when I was a child. It only occurred to me after my mother died that I needed to sort out this density and I attempted to deal with it, for the first time, in the opening essay *Defining Place*, which I dedicate to my two grandmothers, both of whom barely spoke English - one from Russia and one from Poland - but both of whom were tremendous forces in my childhood. No one ever pressured me to choose between the two religions, but I did spend a great deal of my childhood trying to figure out which I should be. I wore rosary beads in my shoes and I went to church regularly. I read "The Lives of Saints" while studying Hebrew with my grandfather and I even had an actual Hebrew teacher. So that was my condition. Much later in life, while I was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I invited the radical priest/poet Ernesto Cardenal, then serving as the first minister of culture for Nicaragua during the embargo crisis, to come to speak at the Art Institute, largely because I'm a huge admirer of his writing and poetry. And in the process of organizing what became an enormous event I met Monsignor Jack Egan, who was a very progressive Irish Catholic priest and one of the most beloved figures in Chicago and beyond at the time. It was at our first dinner together that he asked me: "Tell me about your religious background." Then once he heard the story, he told me, "This is your great strength because it means that you can move in any culture, and that you can understand and accept all religions." It was the first time that I saw the strength in my upbringing.

Rail:

That certainly applies to your worldview as long as I've known you. At any rate, which high school did you go to and did you do well as a student?

Becker:

I was supposed to go to Wingate High School, which was near my home in Crown Heights, but my parents got very nervous because it was a predominantly African-American high school (of course none of this was ever really spoken). So they moved me by buying a house in East Flatbush. But because we didn't have much money, it was a house right next to the BMT subway line, now the D, which would vibrate any time the train went by. You know, it was like Woody Allen's supposed apartment in Annie Hall, which was next to the huge roller coaster in Coney Island - the Cyclone - and vibrated like an earthquake. Anyway, I ended up going to Midwood High School, which was a fantastic high school. (Actually, Woody Allen had also gone there.) I really got the best education possible. I studied languages. I read all of Shakespeare before I ever went to college. But I hardly had any friends since we had moved and I didn't know people and they were all from the middle class and so much more educated than I was, but I worked really hard and I actually did well.

Rail:

And then from '64 to '68 you went on to the State University of New York at Buffalo as an undergraduate in English and American literature, which was then a hot bed of great writers, poets, and other intellectuals, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Gregory Corso....

Becker:

Olson died right before I got there but his ghost was so present that it felt as though he'd never left. Also, Leslie Fiedler and John Barth were there. Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky were always around. It was the best model of an education in literature

that one could have imagined because all of these writers were so innovative and experimental that what they were doing with their writing at the time translated into their innovative approach to the teaching of literature. You can imagine that I got a very unorthodox version of being a literary critic. I thrived as an undergraduate in such a creative environment. I also was very interested in African-American literature dating from W. E. B. Dubois, Zora Neale Hurston, to Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. However, I was very traumatized in graduate school because I realized that I did not have the tools whatsoever to write a normal research paper [Laughs.] Everything I had learned was about thinking creatively and writing in whatever form worked.

Rail:

Well, Olson, Creeley, and Duncan probably imported that philosophy of teaching to Buffalo from their previous association with Black Mountain College, the most and perhaps the first progressive school, based on John Dewey's ideas of education, which claimed that individuals, in order to be more full and complete, should be aware of their relations to others, and if that can be pushed towards a greater exchange and collaboration among them, their insights and awareness of the surrounding world can be more intensified than in each of their own efforts. This certainly was true in terms of how Olsen encouraged, in his last yet productive years from 1950 to 1956 as the second Rector after [Josef] Albers's departure from Yale University, his students to recognize the importance of self-publishing, where writers and artists collaborated. The evidence of that history rests in many broadsides and the invaluable seven issues of Black Mountain Review.

Becker:

Absolutely. They were not at all interested in the regurgitation of old, familiar ideas, or the standard conventions of writing. They were more interested in how to advance writing and thinking in every possible way. I was very lucky to have studied with them.

Rail:

What inspired you to go to the University of California in San Diego, where you earned your subsequent PhD?

Becker:

I had applied to all kinds of graduate schools and I got accepted to Johns Hopkins, UC Berkeley, and some other schools, but I wanted to go to UC San Diego, because it was a new school at that time and they offered me a full scholarship - a National Defense Education Act fellowship - that came with the agreement that I would teach after finishing my degree, which I had already decided to do. Graduate school was, of course, intellectually one of the great moments of my life because it was there that, adding to those amazing poets I had studied with at SUNY Buffalo, I met so many significant intellectuals. And it was there that I met Herbert Marcuse, who opened up a whole new world of philosophy and critical theory that was really amazing. Studying with him made me realize that I was an eclectic person and thinker and that I probably would never be a serious literary scholar. My mind was going in too many directions so it was very difficult for me to get through my PhD. I was writing about Edgar Allen Poe and Herman Melville using structural anthropology, philosophical psychology, and psychoanalytic theory as the base, while reading Descartes with Herbert Marcuse, and taking class in communications theory with Herb Schiller, so all of these combined interests and references in my writing, simply was too out there for some of my professors. Almost no one in the English department understood what I was doing. [Laughs.] And then, of course, I realize now that I wasn't a very good writer at that point in my life. I had all these ideas but I didn't really know how to structure them into form. And no one talked about writing. My writing at the time was chaotic and repetitive. It just aggravated the situation. But it inspired me to be around so many thoughtful and politically astute faculty.

Rail:

Could you tell us what you wrote about Poe and Melville as your doctoral thesis?

Becker:

It was called “The Madness of the Method,” and it was about how both Melville and Poe were Anti-Cartesians. I was interested in the fact that Melville could write a book in which he virtually dissected every aspect of the whale from its whiteness to all its phylogenic reference and still never let us know the meaning of the whale. He played with Descartes’s “Scientific Method,” he played with his readers. I thought this was fascinating. With Poe I focused on his ability to understand the nature of the human psyche way before Freud. He was able to analyze the notion of monomania, psychosis, obsession, agoraphobia, what we would now call the split or borderline personality. He really understood these phenomena in great depth, how these personalities functioned, before there was real theorizing about them. Anyway, I became very obsessed with all of these and other ideas, which I wrote on hundreds of note cards. In those days, pre-computer, we would keep our dissertation notes in the freezer so they would survive if there were ever a fire. [Laughs.] Meanwhile after years of thinking about this, it took only a year to actually write it. But by the time it was actually finished, I didn’t want to make it into a book. I really wanted to move on, which I did. I ended up in Chicago and became part of the group that started *In These Times*, a political newsweekly. But although it was very new and interesting and moved me out of California, I soon realized that I wasn’t much of a journalist since I always wanted to write longer pieces, and to think about them more deeply. I was aware that there were many others in the field who could write journalism better than I. I wanted to write books and I missed teaching.

Rail:

But since you had always wanted to communicate to a wider audience, that, however brief an experience it was, must have brought you out of academia into the real world.

Becker:

You're right. It helped me make a transition and it also helped the clarity of my writing. This became important for my first book *The Invisible Drama: Women and the Anxiety of Change* (1987). That book took five years to write since I had to shed all the conventions I had had to learn in graduate school about academic writing. It was to be a popular book - well, as popular as I could make it.

Rail:

You mention Marcuse's *Eros in Civilization* as being an important book for you at the time. I also have in mind *One-Dimensional Man*. Both books carry pertinent issues that resonate with our current concerns. We're all in debt to his notion of "negation" as an opposition to the prevailing positivism. His advocacy of the marginal, or radical intelligentsia was.

Becker:

It was almost as if you had to position yourself tangentially to the prevailing ideology so you would be aware of it, but at the same time you were always in resistance to it in every one of your actions. In Marcuse's case, that didn't mean abandoning society. Rather it meant coming to terms with how to negotiate your intellectual critique of society in an effective way. So it was very much about praxis. What was so great about Marcuse was that he was also an activist, which meant that if anyone asked him to speak, whether it was to ten people or ten thousand, he would do it. He always thought very deeply about what he would say and felt completely responsible to be as lucid as he could before talking to an audience. In fact he was very critical of the French Structuralists who visited UC San Diego to give lectures. He didn't care much for the obscurity of their discourse. He felt that it was an unnecessary block to understanding issues that were too important, too essential to spin complicated language around. That was very important for me to think about in relationship to my writing, which tends to hover between theory, memoir, history, and other forms. But at the same time, I also feel that as long as

my essays are written clearly, all complexities can be understood. I work hard for that.

Rail:

Do you think that Marcuse's feelings about the French Structuralists were similar to the way Poe felt about the Transcendentalists?

Becker:

It's possible. Poe after all was a very populist writer. He was not a Transcendentalist and was more a part of the dark side of the American Romantic Movement. He also wrote for popular periodicals. In the nineteenth century it was very difficult for American writers to get novels published, partly because there were no copyright laws. So people would bring, let's say, a Dumas novel, from across the ocean and they would translate it, from French to English during the transatlantic voyage. They didn't have to pay the writer anything and they would just publish the book. So the only way American writers could make a living was to publish short stories or criticism in newspapers, magazines, or journals. And that was exactly what Poe did. On another note, it's also important to say that I was influenced very much by Marcuse the person as well as Marcuse the thinker. It was interesting because I was just in Sao Paulo about a month ago giving some lectures and before my arrival, I had sent all my books and asked them to tell me which subjects they would like me to talk about. To my surprise one of the essays they picked was one I wrote a while ago about Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*, which was included in my second book, *The Subversive Imagination*. So I went there to give this lecture and four others and there were two hundred people in the audience, and they all had read my essay and they stayed for three days of lectures and they wanted to talk about Marcuse. As you know, one of the most important components of that book, which was his last book published in 1978, is the absolute understanding that embedded in the production of art is the concept of hope. Like both Benjamin and Adorno, Marcuse felt that art provides an important resistance to societal repression, and that cultural growth is absolutely connected to political and social change - all of which was hopeful - full of hope.

Rail:

Marcuse's notion of negation made me think of Isaiah Berlin's great essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," where he explored the differences between "negative liberty" being the absence of constraint, or interference to possible action, and "positive liberty" being the idea of self-mastery, or an ability to determine oneself, clarity of action, and so on. I'm also thinking of Meyer Schapiro's idea of using the artist as a model of a free individual that can apply to others. In other words, all of their shared views that, once the knowledge of art and the wisdom of philosophy and ideas are fully applied, can teach us knowledge and acceptance of others and heighten our openness toward empathy and pluralism. But then came the '70s, which rigidly created all form of specializations that functioned as if they were business models for creating "one-dimensional man and woman."

Becker:

Well, the '60s were all about challenge and change and by the end of the '70s many people who had been politically engaged were sort of lost, therefore settling back into thinking that change didn't really happen and couldn't really happen. Of course it did, but not in the way we thought it would. The women's movement had changed the world. The Civil Rights movement, the Chicano movement, the Black Power movement had challenged existent values. All these forces had mobilized, but to many it felt as if the world didn't look that different. In the beginning of the '80s, all of a sudden young people weren't radical anymore. There were Yuppies everywhere and they were straight as arrows. That was the time I redirected my energies and really immersed myself in building cultural institutions. You know I would hear from various friends who would voice their discontent: "I don't know what to do with my life anymore," "I don't have a political movement," "How are we going to move society forward?" and so forth. Some of them went into alternative institutions, but for me, I wanted to be at an institution that had been around for a hundred years and see if I could bring some change to it. That was what I did with the Art Institute of Chicago, and I found the undertaking very fulfilling. But you're right in a sense that some of the left retreated

into theory. Even the women's movement, which had been so populist in its initial stages, had become very theoretical and very exclusionary and I think that was when I left the Women's Movement and started working for the United Farm Workers Union and helping with their boycotts. Another important experience for me came at the end of the '80s. Right before I was leaving for Greece on a Fulbright, I met several South African artists in Chicago and was very closely following their internal debates about the ANC [African National Congress] and issues concerning the place of art in a future democratic South Africa. What would be anticipated for artists in the change of power and so on? And when I finally got invited to be part of that debate, I then spent the next ten years going back and forth to South Africa, trying to understand what that transition of power could be like. It was a great debate that went on for many years among South African artists working in all forms. I felt that South Africa was not only very progressive in its thinking about art making, but it also was very progressive in its thinking about race and so it was a great place for me. I had incredible conversations about race and the relationship of art and culture to society and to politics in a way that never seemed possible in the U.S., especially at that time when the art world wasn't interested in such serious questions. That was when I began to write about the role and responsibility of the artist to society. In South Africa you couldn't just make artwork that had political content and put it in a very prestigious gallery and call it political. South Africans really thought of political artists as those whose lives were political, not necessarily those whose artwork was political. For instance, there were white artists important to the ANC whose artwork was actually not political, yet they were thought of as political artists. It is hard here in the United States to imagine this type of understanding. There were many very strong white South African artists, for example, who were important to the anti-apartheid movement and who were even members of the ANC, although secretly at that time, but no one wanted to show them in the United States. But I also knew that once apartheid ended in South Africa they would become known.

Rail:

William Kentridge and Jane Alexander were among the few we came to know.

Becker:

But not till the early '90s. I remember well because I tried to curate a big show of South African art at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Chicago right before the end of apartheid. It was a mixed race show and the curators and the director got nervous because some of the artists were white. The white/black understanding of South Africa was so literal. It was hard for Americans to understand that the ANC was a multi-racial movement and that many white people were very important to that struggle. After the end of Apartheid I got very interested in the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] and became more and more involved in trying to understand the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa. Simultaneously, I began to travel around the world with students, including a trip to South Africa to see Okwui Enwezor's Second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. And very soon after that I started going to Southeast Asia, with questions about what does contemporary cultural production look like in those cultures, and how can I talk about it? Whereas in the U.S. the discourse became flat and predictable even though the issues were so difficult and complex, in other societies the debates were electric. That was why I got interested in traveling to other cultures where art and other forms of creative expression have such direct and powerful meaning for people's lives. Similarly I was very interested in going to Vietnam as soon as the embargo was lifted in 1996. I went back with colleagues and scores of students several more times after that. And among all the places that we visited, My Lai was one of the most significant. There is an essay about our "pilgrimage" to My Lai in my book. I learned about how humans respond to the traumas of war and I began thinking about the collective of society as an organism. I asked: how does this organism absorb reality and truth and what forms do these realizations take? How does it heal itself? Whenever I thought about these questions, I'd try to decenter myself as subject. I became interested in the peripheries, which are for

me the most interesting places because on those edges serious questions can be asked. All of those experiences subsequently were being translated into, perhaps not always on a conscious level, my own questions about leadership and particularly about leadership of an art institution. What should the art school of the present look like? How do we make an art school truly global? How do we educate students to move into a different world, because they can see that this world is expanding? People are moving around the world in a whole new way and artists are making work in response to different demands, not just relying on the old method of crafting things, which I always love, but also thinking about the nature of that process. I wanted faculty and students to embrace the thinking about the act of making and how the work could be placed or seen outside traditional art world contexts and in the larger context of society. And I thought that it was necessary to bring other types of people into the art school environment - those who could make art as well as think about and talk about the making of art within this new global context. I knew that traveling around the world with students, going to Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, South Africa, Zimbabwe, etc. had been the most effective tool I had found to help me think about my own work and its relationship to the world and I wanted young artists to reflect on their own practice in the same way so that they might ask: "What am I doing? And why am I doing it?" Not in a self-conscious way but with a certain deliberateness that could provide them with a lot of courage. If I could, I would just move students around the world as a pedagogical strategy. We would land somewhere and stay for a few months and we'd read, make work, and then move on. In my own life, whenever I feel like I have lost purposefulness, there are two things I do: one is I go back home and walk around Crown Heights to remember where I came from. The other is I just book a trip - anywhere, away.

Rail:

Which brings us to the subject of your recent book *Thinking in Place*, which is a compilation of various essays that, in the first half, offers a good picture of where you came from and how you became who you are now. The second half is focused on your extensive traveling, and your utopian spirit, as eloquently told in

the fifth chapter “Where the Green Ants Dream: Aspects of Community in Six Parts.”

Becker:

Apart from my own journeys, I’ve always been interested in the notion of artists as travelers. They were the ones who went to fabulous places and came back with their paintings, drawings, and photographs - so seductive that everybody else then wanted to go. So, blame tourism on artists. [Laughs.] If you compare the way social scientists study cultures - their writing and compiling of data and the creation of often difficult documentation that is great for research but not terribly accessible to the cultures they are studying - one can see the difference. Artists respond to place in a very particular way. They seem to be able to land quickly in societies and somehow find a way to access them directly. We know many working artists today including Alfredo Jaar, Shirin Neshat, Ai Wei Wei, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Janine Antoni, Paul Chan, and others who travel widely and regularly, and wherever they go, they always find ways to make work that relates to these culture directly while also bringing these societies back to us.

Rail:

This is so timely in relationship to our concerns for universal values, which is an idea not that far removed from Isaiah Berlin’s advocacy of value pluralism. Obama seems, to all of us, to be the right synthesis that is urgently needed to amend these differences that have been so polarized by the previous administration.

Becker:

You remember during the campaign everyone wanted Obama to be more angry and aggressive in his speeches and in the debates. Now, whenever anyone says critical things about his way of operating to me, I just remind them that, if he had listened to us he would never have gotten elected. I just think we have to trust that it’s a new beginning and a new non-polarizing model of relating, which has always been true of who he is. It’s his way of being in the world that appeals to all of us. In his being he is multicultural

and he understands cultural complexity and he sees this as a strength, not a detriment. That's why this new generation adopted him - because they don't like polarization either. The New Left that I was a part of was very polarizing. You were either with us or you were against us. You were a Feminist or you weren't a Feminist. You were racist, if you didn't prove you were not a racist. We made so many judgments, but Obama doesn't seem to have to do any of that. He works to bring people together and he's not naïve about the extent of the differences. I just think he believes that inclusiveness is the way to pull the country together.

Rail:

When he walked out to the platform for the Inauguration on January 20th we all felt that he was genuinely serene.

Becker:

Balanced. He seems very balanced. I remember the night he won, his grandmother had just died and he came out on the stage with this somber look on his face. Yet it was in tune with the joyful gravitas of the moment - massive amounts of people celebrating, hugging, and kissing each other in Grant Park but many were also crying. We had waited so long to see someone like him as President. But we also know that he can be playful. He likes people; he likes to talk to everybody. He likes to go to the neighborhood barber and the neighborhood bookstore. I think he's our first truly urban president, and that's new for my generation. But we also know that the younger generation wants to live in the world in a balanced way and Obama is a perfect president for them, for all of us and for this moment. Let's see, can we live together? Can we work together? Can we not exclude each other? Can we not make judgments that separate us from each other? It's a pretty exciting moment.

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Carol Becker is the author of numerous articles and several books with many foreign editions.

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