

An Interview with the Material Collective

In its earliest issues, the *Rutgers Art Review* (RAR) published interviews with established art historians alongside essays by graduate students. For Volume 33/34, the editors of RAR have renewed these efforts with the publication of our first interview since moving to a fully online publication model. Embracing the possibilities of this new platform, it seemed appropriate that we interview not just one, but ten art historians who are themselves invested in exploring the internet as a productive platform for scholarly communication, publishing, crowdsourcing, activism, and community building. Together, these scholars form the Core Committee of the Material Collective (MC). We wanted to speak with the Material Collective because they push the boundaries of art history. They engage timely issues of interest not only to RAR's readership and scholars of visual culture, but also to academics from related fields interested in rethinking traditional modes of organizing and communicating within the academy. The following interview took place via email in September and October 2018 between the editors of RAR Volume 33/34 (Kaitlin Booher, Stephen Mack, Sophie Ong, and Kathleen Pierce) and the Material Collective's Core Committee (Marian Bleeke, Jennifer Borland, Rachel Dressler, Martha Easton, Anne F. Harris, Asa Simon Mittman, Karen Overbey, Ben C. Tilghman, Nancy M. Thompson, and Maggie M. Williams), who composed their responses collectively. We thank the MC for generously agreeing to participate and providing such thoughtful, considered answers to our questions. If you're interested in joining the Material Collective, you can find them [online](#), on [Facebook](#), on [Twitter](#), and on [Instagram](#).

**While links are embedded into the PDF version of this interview, they may not function properly on all operating systems. To explore these links fully, please consult the online version of this interview, available at rar.rutgers.edu.*

The History and Structure of the Material Collective

RAR: Would you please begin by describing what is particular about the Material Collective (MC)? How does it function? What are the benefits and challenges of your non-hierarchical structure?

MC: Our leadership consists of ten people (the Core Committee). Many of us were already friends or knew each other from conferences when we formed,

and we all have a great deal of respect for one another. That basis of respect and good-will allows us to operate from a solid base. One of the first things we wrote together was our [Manifesto](#), which we read aloud during a session at Kalamazoo in 2012. The manifesto expresses the collaborative, experimental nature of the Material Collective that continues to fuel our work and our relationships with each other.

The Core Committee engages in near-daily conversations via email to decide on which projects we want to pursue and how to go about getting things done. We bring in [additional partners](#) to work on projects on a case-by-case basis. We believe that one of the primary benefits of this structure is that we can share the burden of completing tasks. In terms of challenges, the biggest one is probably that we ten have seen our personal and career paths change significantly over the years, and it is sometimes difficult to balance doing the (unpaid) work of the collective with our many other (often also unpaid) obligations. We try to support one another and pick up the slack when one or the other of us has to attend to other matters. With ten of us, *someone* is always on hand to jump in.

In addition to the organization structure, creating a supportive, mutually respectful atmosphere has been essential for us. We strongly advocate for humane practices and transparency in all arenas, and we do our best to enact that amongst ourselves as well. The Core Committee has served as more than just a professional space: the conversations we have include sharing our personal challenges and joys, in addition to discussing new projects and ideas.

RAR: According to your early blog posts, it seems that the MC grew out of another collective, the BABEL Working Group. Could you describe that development? Are there key tenets that you follow to distinguish yourselves from other groups such as [BABEL](#)?

MC: We were definitely inspired by the BABEL Working Group, and we developed the idea of the Material Collective at their [1st Biennial Meeting](#) in Austin, TX in 2010. Several of us worked together to organize a session for that conference, which later developed into the punctum books volume [Transparent Things](#). BABEL broadened our view of what was possible in an academic setting and at an academic conference. They truly revolutionized medieval studies by doing work that connects contemporary human life with a deep understanding and appreciation for the historical past.

For us, the idea of making change in academic settings comes out of a [grassroots organizing](#) model in which collective action and a sense of participation is key. We hope that our project will create a space for anyone

who's interested to embrace broader views of visual culture, to incorporate humane practices towards other scholars, and/or to feel free to pursue more playful and non-traditional scholarly forms that have the potential to reach new audiences.

Fighting for progressive change in academia is also one of our primary objectives, especially with regard to [unions](#) for graduate assistants and adjunct faculty. Despite the public perception of universities as the bastion of liberalism, the reality is that most American colleges and universities function like corporations. As such, they rely on the cheap labor of graduate students and adjunct faculty, and they tend on the whole not to address significant issues like systemic racism and harassment/discrimination of multiple kinds. The ten of us in the Core Committee have all experienced institutional discrimination, despite having achieved a relative amount of privilege and "success" in academia. We are working towards ways to minimize those problems for future academics.

RAR: Do you have different audiences for different facets of the MC's output, such as the blog, publications like *Tiny Collections*, or your Facebook group?

MC: Yes and no. We prefer not to think of the Facebook group as an "audience," but rather as a membership. As a loose organization without any dues structure, we welcome anyone who is interested and motivated to participate. We are thrilled when conversations and ideas are sparked on the FB page, especially if those develop organically, without the Core Committee's direct prompting. We've recently been working with some folks who [contacted us](#) through our website and we'd welcome more volunteers!

As for the blog, we have used that as a venue for longer-form thoughts on the Collective's overarching goals, and these are geared toward our colleagues and students in the field, and sometimes—we hope—they are of interest to the general public. Often, those pieces of writing serve as examples of the kinds of [alternative scholarship and teaching](#) we'd like to promote and validate. This includes projects that are not fully formed yet; it is a place open to experimentation and the development of ideas. At other times, posts serve to [present](#) or [clarify](#) a current [political issue](#) that [we care](#) deeply about, or to describe [collaborative efforts](#) to explore and expose such issues. The public nature of the blog makes it available to a wider readership as well. We welcome [guest posts](#), and have had a chance to publish some [wonderful short-form essays](#) this way. We're currently working on a call for new posts, so stay tuned for that. In the meantime, we would be happy to hear from your readers, if they have ideas for posts!

Tiny Collections is a manifestation of our interest in open-access publishing and alternative scholarship. Many of us have done work in the past which didn't fit neatly into the rigid categories of academic publishing—essays that considered anthropological approaches to objects normally in the purview of art history, for example, or essays that integrated an explicitly subjective perspective into an examination of a work of art. These pieces of writing were being rejected for not fitting into narrow categories of what art history might be, and we wanted to make them available to those readers who might be interested in similar ways of thinking or in expanding their thinking. We hope that, going forward, *Tiny Collections* will provide a space for scholars and creatives alike to explore some of their orphaned projects. Since they are, as the name suggests, *tiny*, books in this series are also a good home for collaborative volumes that grow out of great conference sessions or small side projects that authors don't intend to ever work up into traditional monograph-length works.

The open-access, web-based journal *Different Visions* has played an important role in the development of the Collective. Founded by Core Committee member Rachel Dressler in 2006, it served for many of us as a model of forward-looking and socially engaged scholarship before we had formed the Collective in a formal sense. *Different Visions* also served as the venue for [one of our first](#) formally published projects, which consisted of essays arising out of the “Active Objects” sessions at the 2012 Kalamazoo. And several of us have published special issues and individual essays in the journal. Though it has been quiet recently, we still see the journal as a possible venue for future projects.

Medieval Studies

RAR: Why do you think the MC came out of medieval studies and how does your identity as medievalists (presuming that this is the case) shape your goals for the collective?

MC: On some level, this was the result of being in the right place at the right time; that is, the first BABEL conference in 2010 as we note above. Many of us were already feeling somewhat disenchanted / frustrated with the traditional nature of much of medieval art history. We saw other medieval groups doing progressive scholarship and creative and adventurous conference sessions; but it felt like medieval art history was being left behind.

Our sense that the Middle Ages had been sidelined within art history was one of the things that drew us together. One of our goals is to raise the

profile of medieval within art discourse, in part by advocating with the organizers of CAA, in part by engaging with current debates about politics and the past, and in part by teaching and writing about the Middle Ages in ways that reach wider audiences.

Many of our subfields within medieval art history are considered marginal in the context of the academic job market. A number of us started out or continue to specialize in early medieval material, Irish or early English art, or some combination of these fields, locating us outside the art-historical mainstream of Romanesque and Gothic art in continental western Europe. Many of us have also worked on marginalized media like stained glass, or on marginalized people, such as women and Jews, or with sometimes controversial methods like feminism. All of this together has perhaps allowed us a certain freedom from conventional art-historical practice and opened a space for interventions such as the Material Collective.

RAR: For a number of years you were rather well known among medievalists, but now the Facebook group has members from all disciplines of art history and visual culture studies. To what do you attribute this development?

MC: We all spend much of our time thinking about a far broader swath of art history, both in terms of our teaching and our training. Our jobs are in departments with art historians in other periods (especially modern and contemporary) as well as studio art; we all teach survey courses that take us far outside of medieval material. Most of us—though not all—identify as art historians first and medievalists second, and we continue to take an active interest in the rest of the field because we constantly get new ideas from the scholarship of other periods. We continue to foreground cross-temporal scholarship: at CAA 2016 Jennifer Borland and Ben Tilghman chaired a successful session titled [“Out of Time and Out of Place: Comparative Approaches in Art History,”](#) sponsored by the International Center of Medieval Art; a number of us have also collaborated with [Art History That](#), created by modernists Amy Hamlin and Karen Leader, at numerous conferences, starting with [SECAC in 2015](#). The [2016 volume of *postmedieval*](#) edited by Karen Overbey and Maggie Williams on the Staffordshire Hoard demonstrates another example of collaboration between the MC and numerous non-medievalists, including modernists, scientists, and contemporary artists. We have tried to engage other sub-disciplines in art history not only because we think it will lead to richer scholarship but also because, in a time of tightened budgets and antagonism towards the humanities, we think it is important to work together within our discipline. Other fields of art history clearly saw something very exciting in the creativity and adventurousness of medieval studies. Indeed, very quickly our colleagues in other fields of art history heard us talk about the Material Collective and wanted in!

Materiality

RAR: Why do you think that materiality has been so successful in fostering this kind of collective academic space, as opposed to other modes of inquiry that also cross disciplinary lines, such as gender?

MC: Because medieval art history is often less concerned with biography and provenance, it's more inherently sympathetic to approaches that negotiate materiality, reception, and experience. Our "material" interests developed out of an interest in subjectivity, which felt so absent in our field in 2010; at that time, we were still getting pushback about "anachronism" when thinking about medieval material through the lens of theories like phenomenology. But that has changed radically since then. Did the MC contribute to that change? Possibly, but medieval art history might have been already on that trajectory as well.

We're not sure that we agree that materiality is, by its nature, necessarily *more* collective. Certainly, the work of Bruno Latour and Deleuze and Guattari stresses connectivity and inter-relationships, so in that way collective work is in keeping with some materiality theory. And truth be told, we chose the name before we really grasped how important materiality studies was going to become in the field, and only part of what we've done as a collective has been directly engaged with materiality studies.

Several of us have gone on to collaborate with each other, or with others, on various projects and publications, sometimes having to do with topics of materials or materiality, but often not. For example, several members of the Core Committee (Marian Bleeke, Jennifer Borland, Rachel Dressler, and Martha Easton, along with Elizabeth L'Estrange) collaborated on the chapter "Artistic Representation: Women and/in Medieval Visual Culture" for [A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages](#). In fact, some of our Core Committee members do not focus on materiality at all, but we all share an interest in collectivity.

We have drawn quite a lot of inspiration from feminist scholarship in thinking about how to work as a collective. There are excellent examples of collective endeavor in medieval studies, with groups like the [Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship](#), as well as in feminist art and activism, such as the Guerilla Girls. And the heart of our theory of collectivity also comes out of the labor movement and other forms of activism.

RAR: Is there some irony in a flourishing study and/or discussion of materiality occurring online?

MC: It is probably no mere coincidence that the increased interest in materiality among scholars of all types has accompanied the increasing role of digital technology in scholarly work and in our lives more broadly. As we all spend more and more of our time [manipulating data on our screens](#), it is easy to become nostalgic for [actual contact](#) with material things. We can see that nostalgia in the wider world in the renewed popularity of crafts and the DIY movement. And we can see it in scholarship as understanding that contact, how it works and what it means, has become an interesting intellectual issue.

At the same time, the ongoing proliferation of digital forms holds some specific attractions for scholars. It promises us increased access to one another. What we do in the Core Committee wouldn't be possible without email. And what we do in the broader Collective wouldn't be possible without Facebook and Twitter. And it promises us increased access to research materials through [digitization projects](#) as well as new avenues for publishing our work.

The promise of digitization requires some careful thinking-through, however. What does and does not get digitized has the potential to shape what does and does not receive attention from scholars. Some materials may receive valuable new attention because they have been digitized, but other equally valuable things may be overlooked because they have not. We do have the opportunity to [reward less-studied collections](#) that have chosen not only to digitize their collections, but also to release the resultant images under [Creative Commons](#) licensing and other such "copyleft" systems that allow for the free (and hassle-free) use and reuse of the images. However, digitization can become problematic if it is positioned as replacing access to material sources. That can happen as repositories decide to limit scholars' access to things once they have been digitized.

RAR: Some scholars critical of focusing on issues of materiality steer or try to steer graduate students away from pursuing such topics for their dissertations, often arguing that publishers won't be interested in the future. Have you encountered much pushback and, if so, how do you respond to such criticism? What are some of the challenges for materiality studies in the coming years?

MC: When some of us first started working on questions of materiality around 2010, a lot of the negative response was of the "been there, done that" variety. It wasn't clear to most scholars, at first, how the material turn was all that much different from "Thing Theory" or Marxism. At the same time, there was also a perception that the interest in materiality was

primarily a product of blogs and social media, the kinds of discourses that are perceived as producing more heat than light. So it was simultaneously outmoded and too faddish, which was a frustrating double-bind. The excellent scholarship on materiality over the past decade, we believe, has demonstrated that a reinvigoration of the earlier strains of materiality studies is both fruitful and necessary. One measure of the success of this work in medieval studies is that the [International Medieval Congress](#) at Leeds has chosen materiality as the theme for their 2019 meeting.

The challenges facing materiality studies are, in many ways, the same as those that face any other scholarly project: the need to continue demonstrating the use and interest of the approach as the scholarly community starts to take interest in the next new thing. There's that double-bind again. As a group, we've been dismayed to see feminist scholarship becoming increasingly relegated (by some) to the disciplinary sidelines even as the need for continued engagement in feminist critique is present in contemporary culture. This was something that Rachel Dressler, member of the Core Committee, wrote about eloquently in 2007 in her essay "[The Contracting Discourse: Feminist Scholarship and Medieval Art.](#)" The same concern haunts materiality studies: that academia might move on despite a deepening ecological crisis and unsettled ethical questions about our material culture taken broadly.

The question implicitly identifies one of the culprits: a neo-liberal conception of the university that takes the production of a commodity (books) as a primary aim of its faculty labor. This is one reason we have partnered with [punctum books](#) to become publishers ourselves, and thus to take a more direct role in making sure that there continue to be opportunities for scholars to publish the work they (and we) feel is necessary and important, even if it is unclear precisely how that fits into existing disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. Moreover, many of our actions to open things up for adventurous scholarship and younger scholars are also intended to counteract the rigidity of traditional publishing forms. Some of us have worked in other ways to provide spaces for publications, by editing journal issues and [book series](#) that are receptive to the study of materiality, to collaborative work, and to other themes and approaches that have not always been in the mainstream.

Another way that we have resisted this pressure is by focusing on our work as teachers, which is the most valuable work we do. If materiality studies does have a lasting impact on the field, it might be by encouraging instructors to augment traditional lectures and discussions with more hands-on activities, which students often find more enriching and memorable.

RAR: Many art historians interested in materiality have gravitated towards Graham Harman's philosophical inquiry into Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). Have Harman's writings been particularly influential for the Material Collective? Are there other scholars or publications that have had a notable impact on the MC, your ideals, and /or scholarship?

MC: While Harman's writings are crucial to OOO and "New Materialism" more broadly, he has not been particularly important to the Material Collective, nor does he seem to have become a particular touchstone in the field. Some of his close compatriots—Ian Bogost and Timothy Morton—have perhaps been more helpful to art historians. This might be because much of Harman's work has been particularly concerned with how OOO relates to the history of philosophy, while Bogost, Morton, and others have taken on the work of connecting it to other fields of inquiry more directly.

Several authors not directly connected to Harman have been more important to our thinking. Jane Bennett's 2010 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* was especially galvanizing. Bennett applies the concept of flat ontology, the concept that that all things are, and are equal in the world, to several case studies. Right at the beginning of *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett recounts her encounter with a seemingly random assortment of objects in a drain sewer: "one unblemished dead rat," a mat of oak pollen, a white plastic bottle cap, a large black plastic work glove, and a smooth stick of wood. These objects, she argues, came together and now act together as agents in the world. This way of thinking about objects as agents, about objects as all acting equally in the world, is so compelling because it provides a framework for looking at works of art as powerful things in and of themselves, rather than as things whose meanings only exist in the minds of humans. We were all thrilled when Bennett agreed to respond to our first session on the Staffordshire Hoard at the 2012 BABEL conference in [Boston](#).

Bennett's conception of object agency owes much to Bruno Latour, who continues to be a major source for many art historians, especially those interested in the social functions of art and the relationships between artworks and beholders. Also important along these lines is Alfred Gell, whose concept of artistic agency continues to be both challenging and fruitful. The work of Gell and Latour, of course, has been around for decades, but to us it has never mattered so much when something was written as how it can help us in our current work. Even as many of us are eager to open the discipline up to new methods, we all still believe wholeheartedly in the continuing value of many of the discipline's oldest methods, like iconography, connoisseurship, and patronage. We believe very strongly in the "yes, and" model of scholarship that seeks to build shared insights through multiple methods.

The Material Collective as an Academic Intervention

RAR: Above, you mentioned the MC's *Tiny Collections* as one aspect of the MC's academic output. Given the MC's emphasis on "collective" and "collaboration," have there been additional moves towards more collective scholarship and publication?

MC: Yes! While we all value solo authored work and continue to produce and publish it, we also believe that rich scholarship results when conversation and exchange are central to its creation. As we state in our Mission Statement:

"We believe that excellent scholarship can grow out of collaboration, experimentation, and play, and we work to create spaces where scholars from many different backgrounds, both traditional and non-traditional, can come together for mutual enrichment."

Most scholarship in the humanities is still produced largely on the model of the nineteenth century, which constructs writing as a solitary activity. This mode of production is often romanticized in all sorts of ways, from films and novels about writers to the way we and our colleagues discuss our work—writing retreats, isolation chambers, dropping off the map for a while, and so on. This is the standard mode in the humanities and is inculcated in formal as well as informal ways. Essay assignments are almost invariably individual and some syllabi even have statements that "unauthorized collaboration will result in failure of the course and a report to Student Judicial Affairs." Dissertations are solo enterprises. This trains us to write solo-authored monographs, and on and on and on.

We have run conference sessions that mandate all papers be co-written and delivered (many of which have subsequently been published), published co-written blog posts and articles, and, through our *Tiny Collections* imprint at punctum books, published co-edited collections. Indeed, we first published our manifesto as a co-authored piece in [Burn After Reading: Miniature Manifestos for a Post/medieval Studies](#). Some of us even co-wrote together before the founding of the Material Collective, and Anne Harris and Nancy Thompson are co-authoring a new Medieval Art History textbook (which will be published with Oxford UP at some point in the next two years!).

We hope to bring about a change in the way collaboration is viewed in the field, in our teaching, research, job searches, and evaluation for tenure and promotion. Some of us are in positions now (chairs, deans, a provost) to put this rhetoric into immediate, if local, practice, rewarding rather than

discounting collaborative work. We hope, though, to press for what is, in essence, a cultural shift in how collaborative work is viewed throughout the humanities.

RAR: How can the humanities embrace collaborative work more effectively? Is the MC's organizational structure replicable for future groups?

MC: This is one of those areas where we are the only thing standing in our own way. If we collectively decided to value and celebrate collaborative work, then it would by definition be valued. However, many colleagues still ask questions like, "which half of the article did you write?" Administrators still declare that two co-written essays should count as one credit in the tenure process. To combat this, academics could take a few concrete steps:

1. Actively invite collaborative contributions to conference sessions, journal, edited volumes, book series, and the rest;
2. Sponsor grants explicitly limited to collaborative projects;
3. Sponsor awards for collaboratively written scholarship;
4. And, for the long term, integrate collaborative writing in our courses, from freshman to graduate levels. This needs to be done thoughtfully and with understanding of the reticence that many students have about "group projects," often rooted in considerable negative experience with the process in high school. This would produce a generation of new scholars for whom collaborative work would be the assumed norm rather than a deviation.

As for the [MC's structure](#), yes, it is certainly replicable, and easily, since it is fairly loose. In essence, one needs only to find a group of wonderful colleagues willing to throw in with energy, care, support, and dedication. This is easier said than done, of course, but in essence, the challenge is finding a group that can jibe relatively smoothly and productively.

In addition to our Core Committee, we have found several fantastic partners for projects, such as organizing conference sessions, and would like to expand this element of our structure so that we can accomplish more!

RAR: How has the MC impacted your individual scholarship? For those affiliated with teaching institutions, how has the collective impacted your teaching practices?

MC: This actually links very directly to the previous discussion about fostering collaborative scholarship. Many of us had participated in collaborative work before, but may have been concerned about its reception or evaluation. The creation of the Collective, with some of its central missions focused on

collaboration and experimentation, further legitimized and solidified the validity of such approaches—for other scholars whom we wanted to encourage and support and also for ourselves. For some of us, it freed us to be not only more collaborative, but more adventurous, and less concerned with the norms of the field. The encouragement we found in the Collective was intellectually liberating and emboldened us to seek out projects and ideas that might not work, that might not come to fruition, or that might fail (like the fittingly failed [Academic Failblog](#)). It has encouraged all of us to take ourselves less seriously and to work against a system that insists on one way of doing things.

This has led us to think more about how to do similar things in our classrooms—to relinquish control, to experiment, to think about the benefits of process as much as results. We have seen our classroom activities and topics change, and we have also seen the connections between our research and teaching illuminated and strengthened. We more often seem to be talking about teaching in our conference papers and sessions, and some of us have even begun to publish pedagogical research. Asa Mittman, for example, contributed to a [volume about teaching monsters in the classroom](#). And Jennifer Borland and Louise Siddons created a collaborative, in-class project around local public art, a Remington cowboy sculpture, that they discuss in a forthcoming article for the journal [Art History Pedagogy and Practice](#).

The Role of the Material Collective Blog and Social Media

RAR: You branched out from your blog and now have quite an extensive presence on social media, on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Do you approach and use these online spaces differently? Do your audiences vary based on each platform?

MC: We began the Collective via email and Facebook, which are now among the older tools and platforms of online organizing. Those older venues have been instrumental for us, though, since the ten of us in the Core Committee are geographically dispersed throughout the country. We branched out to [Twitter](#) for two main reasons: in order to be able to live tweet from conferences, and in order to amplify important activist voices. We believe strongly in open access to knowledge, and we wanted to be able to share interesting conference presentations with people who might not be able to attend due to financial constraints or other limitations on travel. As for [Instagram](#), that seemed like a logical venue for a group interested in visual culture. IG is a great way to connect with contemporary artists and it also offers us a chance to share our own research and travel pictures. In practical terms, all ten of

us are administrators of all three accounts. This allows for a bigger pool of contributions and it also lets each of us present our individualized sense of the Collective's focus.

RAR: Do you find that these open forums mostly invite meaningful discussion of issues? How do you avoid online devolution?

MC: We have found that the Facebook group is particularly conducive to meaningful discussion, and feedback from members has confirmed that they are especially fond of that aspect of the group—although we do struggle with using Facebook given the corporation's unethical practices. The FB group gives us a sense of how far a reach the Material Collective really has. It started out as a relatively small group of medieval art historians but has grown into an active community of over 1800 members as of September 2018. It is clear that many of our members are neither medievalists nor art historians but are interested in the topics we discuss and the collective spirit we foster. Of course, the nature of FB is such that anyone in the group may post, so many of our best conversations are started by people outside our Core Committee. These often start out with basic requests for information—the identification of an iconographic motif; a call for bibliographic suggestions—or passing on conference CFPs or links to interesting articles. Our members also do not hesitate to tackle weightier issues such as institutionalized racism and sexism in the academy. Perhaps because we consciously accept that our scholarly activities cannot, and probably should not, exist outside of our personal and political identities, and because we actively promote a spirit of constructive cooperation, it is likely that we have a somewhat self-selected audience—after all, anyone signing up for a FB group that has “Collective” in its title is going to make some assumptions about the nature of said group. Most of our online conversations seem to be generous and open-minded even when people disagree, and we hope that we will be able to maintain that culture of positivity going forward.

RAR: Recently, public humanities and digital humanities efforts have cropped up across disciplines, including in art history. How do you envision the MC in relation to those efforts? Where do you imagine the role of social media in academia going?

MC: There is no question that one of the reasons the Material Collective has focused on encouraging non-traditional and experimental forms for scholarship is that many of those also have the potential to reach wider audiences. The specialization within disciplines like art history or medieval studies, and the isolated nature of much scholarly production, inevitably limits access to that scholarship. Collaborative writing, open-access publishing, blog writing

and other social media: these all have the benefit of reaching more readers be they inside or outside of academia. We have also thought about how we can contribute to these more accessible forms as a way to get our scholarly ideas into other disciplines or fields as well as into more classrooms (possibly into K-12 classrooms as well as those in universities). This is less about “saving” the humanities, than it is about sharing excellent scholarship and compelling ideas with wider and more diverse readers or viewers. Some of us have worked on our own campuses to promote digital humanities, public humanities, and community-engaged scholarship, and the Material Collective was where we first began to explore the potential opportunities in those areas.

Scholar-Activism

RAR: We understand that activism is a key tenet in the MC’s manifesto. How do you approach the notion of the “scholar-activist”? Do scholars in the humanities need to take a more active role in political action in the Trump era than before? How can we do this more effectively?

MC: We believe that all scholarship is inherently political because it is conducted by human beings who have unexamined as well as conscious biases and who live in cultural contexts that determine how they approach their material. Activism, on the other hand, requires a conscious decision to support a particular position and work towards concrete change. So, for us, the idea of the scholar-activist can take many forms. Scholarly activism might feature speaking and writing about issues within academic discourses (e.g. feminist or postcolonial scholarship) in academic or more public venues, or it might involve a more broadly defined activism designed to change conditions within academic institutions (e.g. union organizing). We participate in and encourage both.

We’ve seen many of the issues that we believe are important to address developing over decades—both within academia and beyond—but they have certainly intensified and become more visible since Trump has been in office, and related events, such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, have proved galvanizing.

RAR: While the MC has a page dedicated to numerous resources on academic activism on its website and frequently calls attention to these issues on its social media pages, do you have actionable suggestions for scholar-activism that can be implemented in art historians’ everyday lives, or for scholars who might just be coming to this idea?

MC: Our best advice is to choose your issue, get some training, and speak up! At every level, academic work is 24/7/365, so it's essential to focus on one or two things that you're passionate about or else you'll burn out too quickly. Next, find a local group where you can learn more, meet like-minded people, and get some training. Don't be afraid to look into undergraduate activist groups on your campus, for instance, or local chapters of organizations like [Showing Up for Racial Justice \(SURJ\)](#) or [Jobs With Justice](#).

As academics, we're encouraged to believe and act as if we know everything, but that kind of blind confidence needs to be set aside in an activist setting. To really be an effective activist, you have to listen to the advice of the people who've devoted their lives to that kind of work. Be humble, listen, and volunteer to help in the ways that THEY suggest. Don't act like you know better, and don't overanalyze!

Lastly, on the issue of safety, many academics are afraid to speak out for fear of professional retribution. Always remember that there is safety in numbers, so go find some comrades and be vocal and public, while also being cautious about protecting online information. It might seem counterintuitive, but you're often safer if you speak up because powerful individuals and institutions don't want the public stigma of suppressing dissent. It is also probably time for us all to advocate that our campuses develop clear and helpful action plans for *when* [things go sideways](#).

RAR: What is the role of scholars in informing the broader public about their field? How should scholars react to misinformation being propagated by malevolent actors?

MC: As medievalists, we've seen this quite a bit recently, particularly among white nationalists and white supremacists. We've [been working](#) to call out these [mis-uses of medieval imagery](#) and other [modes of attack](#) wherever possible, and we're publishing on it as well. Several of us have given public lectures on the topic, and others are contributing to an important forthcoming volume called *Whose Middle Ages? A Reader* from Fordham University Press. Perhaps that collection could serve as a model for similar volumes in other areas of art history. We also should mention the excellent [Public Medievalist](#) site, edited by Paul Sturtevant, and would like to draw particular attention to its special series on [Race, Racism and the Middle Ages](#).

RAR: What can the Material Collective do to make the humanities, and art history specifically, more inclusive and diverse?

MC: It is easy to feel like there is nothing we could do about such a massive

problem, but there are also *so many things* we can do about this massive problem, none of which will “fix” it, but all of which can be of some help.

In our local contexts, we work to achieve change by serving on search committees, serving as peer reviewers, and serving on curriculum committees. Beyond that, we believe that making change more broadly will only happen when people organize to push for it. We can encourage and guide, but we need more people to step up and do the work of making change happen.

The most direct thing we can do is recruit a more diverse next generation of scholars out of our classrooms, and that means changing the ways and the material we teach. The folks over at [Art History Teaching Resources](#) have some great lesson plans that can help, including [this one on representations of Native Americans](#) and [this one on including the work of contemporary artists of color who critique the canon](#) in intro courses.

Some of us in the Material Collective have been teaching about race in the Middle Ages for many years now, and some of us, prompted by the 2016 election, have begun to do this more recently. There are [many good resources](#) out there now for teaching race in the medieval period, and we can all take from them to create courses that dispel the notion of a white Middle Ages. In our introductory courses, some of us have begun to assign only books and articles written by female scholars and scholars of color in order to shift the authorial voice for our students, and this shift has slowly but surely changed the enrollment demographics in these courses. We’ve also begun to discuss race and difference explicitly and consistently in survey courses; for example, students have found [discussions of the whitewashing of Roman sculpture](#) to be particularly compelling.

Graduate students and the Material Collective

RAR: What kinds of interactions does the MC have with graduate students? How can graduate students become more involved?

MC: Many of the graduate students and early career scholars that we’ve worked with we met at conferences, especially the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo (ICMS) and the College Art Association Conference, or through social media. Since collaboration is so important to us, we’ve often partnered with early career scholars to organize conference panels, or to contribute to a publication, and those folks have become our extended network. We often share calls for participation in projects on the Facebook group, and we are actively looking for graduate students

and early career scholars to write blog posts, co-organize panels, give papers, and help plan events. So, if you are interested in being involved, [please let us know!](#)

We also piloted [a mentoring program at the 2017 ICMS](#), where we tried to bring together scholars from different stages in their careers. Mentoring programs are often built around a model where a person with experience shares their wisdom with someone younger, either one-to-one or in a group. But recent research into mentoring and support networks shows that this isn't really how these relationships work best: it's important to recognize that we seek advice and wisdom from multiple sources for different areas of our work, and that insight flows back and forth in those relationships. Our mentoring groups were an effort to help all our colleagues, but especially graduate students, think about how to build those networks of mutual support. The initial feedback from the 2017 program was positive, and we've been thinking about how best to continue in that work, particularly how to encourage mentoring groups to nurture their relationships after the initial meetings.

RAR: It can be intimidating for graduate students first encountering the Facebook group, seeing established scholars sharing articles and debating the iconography of artworks. Do you have advice for graduate students engaging with the Facebook group or fostering their own presence on social media?

MC: Maybe it's less intimidating to lurk for a bit before jumping in. But then: ask a question. Is there something in your research that you're wondering about? Don't worry that the question may have been asked before—there are always people interested in discussing images and artworks, and for the most part the debates are friendly. Our aim is to make the FB group non-hierarchical and easy to access. All voices are welcome; we like to think of ourselves as facilitators and stimulators, and never as gatekeepers. And of course it's also okay to be a reader without participating. You could use the Facebook group to find scholars whose voices you like and then contact them directly; this is a great way to make use of the network even if you are uncomfortable speaking up on FB. There are many ways to use social media. That said, we all love it when we meet or hear from someone who knows us from the FB page. Heck, didn't this fabulous invitation from Rutgers essentially come about that way?!

RAR: How do you envision materiality studies changing in the coming years? Are there types of topics within materiality studies you think are deserving of more attention than they are currently receiving?

MC: For us, the issue is less the future of materiality studies than creating a future in which a wide range of diverse approaches are seen as valid, whether it is materiality studies or something else. We hope that openness provides graduate students and others a lot of flexibility and freedom for experimentation. To talk specifically about materiality studies, it is important that it be able to articulate how and why it matters to contemporary society. In the present moment, in medieval studies, other issues—combatting the misuse of the medieval past by white supremacists and white nationalists and working towards diversity and inclusion—seem much more pressing.

The Future of the Material Collective

MC: -\(\ツ)/-

RAR: How have your goals for the MC changed from its earliest inception?

MC: When we started working together in 2010, we were focused on creating non-traditional scholarship: more affective, personal, and community-focused. Part of that was an activist orientation, a way to bridge the gap between personal/political lives and academic lives. That sense of drawing parts of our lives closer together has been a constant over the years, and that mission has grown to inform our teaching, the way we work in the bureaucracy of our institutions, how we advocate for students and colleagues, how we think about the humanities, how we build a better place for the kids in our communities, how we act in politics... and in so many other spheres. In a sense, that's still the same mission. But it has expanded in ways we didn't expect.

The expanded perspective that we've tried to bring to our field has also, somewhat surprisingly, helped us individually to maintain a healthy perspective on the limits of our professional work. Striving for a more humane mode of scholarship has inspired us to think constantly about how to be more humane in everything we do. None of us expected that when we started this adventure; we were mostly looking for some fun and dedicated co-conspirators that could help make medieval art history more vibrant and expansive.

We've also expanded our scope, largely by trusting each other to take up individual projects while holding on to the Collective's values. The goals haven't changed very much, maybe because they were somewhat abstract to start with. That is, we began with values rather than tasks we wanted to

accomplish, and we've taken on new projects (from publishing to advocacy to institutional administration) always with those values—transparency, collaboration, experimentation—in mind.

RAR: What are the MC's biggest challenges in the next years? What do you foresee for the MC's future?

MC: One of the biggest challenges seems to be how we've aged—that we've gone from anti-establishment upstarts to becoming the establishment (at least in the eyes of some). For a group that came together because we felt a bit on the outside of the field, that is a new and somewhat disconcerting notion! We were able to ride for some time the wave of being new and shiny, but now we are on the boards and have become administrators and run a somewhat respected organization that looks deeply entrenched to some. How do we feel about this? Can we change this perception? Do we want to? What can we do with that authority, with our collective wisdom?

We also all have less time to do this this thing, it seems, than we used to—what does that mean for the group? Do we quit innovating and focus on maintaining what we have so far created? Do we prepare to pass it on? Or do we find ways to reinvent ourselves, individually and collectively? We look forward to figuring out how to answer these questions in the years to come.

We want to thank *Rutgers Art Review* for their very thoughtful and thorough questions! We appreciate the opportunity to reflect on what we've done and where we're going.