

Balancing Acts

HOW THE FINE ARTS WORK CENTER CAME TO BE

By Ben Brooks

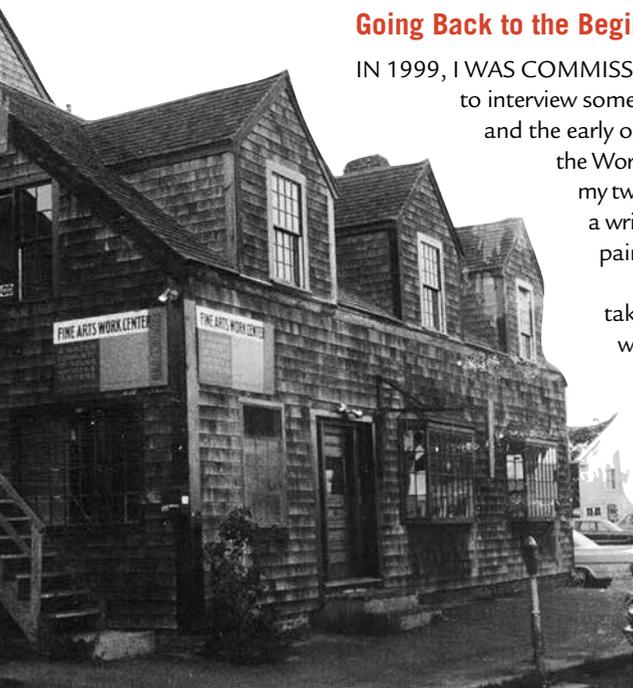
CELEBRATING ITS FIFTIETH YEAR in 2018, the Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC) in Provincetown has become a major component of the American cultural landscape, nurturing and sending forth a continuous stream of visual artists and writers—painters, sculptors, hybrid artists, conceptual artists, fiction writers, poets, memoirists—who have assumed and continue to assume significant roles in shaping the arts in this country. Winners of a multitude of awards and prizes, artists with works in prominent museums and galleries, and authors of best-selling and groundbreaking works of literature, former FAWC Fellows are now among our culture’s leading voices and image-makers in contemporary literary and visual arts.

At the same time that it set out, in the late 1960s, to nurture younger artists toward the beginnings of their careers, the Work Center also sought to reinvigorate the art scene in Provincetown and on the Lower Cape. The goal of the founders of the Work Center was to create a community within a community: artists and writers would come to Provincetown and interact with one another—nurture one another—and also live within and interact with the larger community of the town. Young artists would be surrounded by other young artists working in the same disciplines as themselves, as well as artists working in very different modes and disciplines—all of which would serve the purpose of stimulating creativity and opening up Fellows to new ideas and approaches to their work. And rather than live in a closed-off community of young artists, the Fellows would be immersed in the life of this unique town, an additional stimulation to their work.

Going Back to the Beginning

IN 1999, I WAS COMMISSIONED by Hunter O’Hanian, then Director of the Fine Arts Work Center, to interview some of the people who were most involved in the conception, the founding, and the early operation of the organization, as part of a project to preserve and record the Work Center’s history and legacy. I was delighted to take part in this project, as my two years as a writing Fellow played a critical role in my own development as a writer, and the four years that I lived in Provincetown with my wife, Nancy, a painter, and our two young children, had been a high-water period of my life.

I spent two productive years writing a novel plus numerous short stories, taking full advantage of the time and space that my Fellowship provided, my work stimulated in myriad ways by my interactions with compatriot writers and artists, as well as by living in Provincetown. Beyond that, my family became fully engaged with life in the town. My children went to school in Provincetown. Nancy and I obtained shellfishing licenses. I even played in the winter recreational basketball league at the high school, on a team made up of both Fellows and non-Fellows. My wife and I made close friends over those four years in Provincetown, both at the Work Center and outside the Work Center, many of whom remain friends today.





(above) Installation shot of *The Beginning: The Work Center Takes Wing, Founders and Friends*, curated by Bailey Bob Bailey, one of several exhibitions honoring the 50th anniversary in 2018, with works by (left to right) Fritz Bultman, Robert Motherwell and Stanley Kunitz, and Jack Tworokov PHOTO BY NAYA BRICHER
 (facing page) The first building that housed the Fine Arts Work Center on Standish Street

So in September of 1999, at the Work Center’s behest, while living again in the FAWC barn for the month, I conducted a series of informal interviews with Stanley Kunitz, Alan Dugan and Judith Shahn, Roger Skillings, Ruth Hiebert, Berta Walker, Conrad Malicoat, and Jeanne Bultman, and solicited from them both facts and opinions about the early days at the FAWC. I had known these people for over twenty years, from my time as a Fellow and from my continued involvement with the Work Center and with Provincetown.

This history is based on these 1999 interviews, as well as on archival materials and records that were made available to me by the Fine Arts Work Center.

Balancing Acts

WITH ITS *sui generis* mission of providing support to artists in the early stages of their careers outside of an academic setting, and simultaneously breathing life into the historic tradition of Provincetown as a center for visual arts and writing, the Fine Arts Work Center began as a set of balancing acts. On the one hand, it would have a national and even international outlook with the Fellows it brought in; on the other hand, it would focus on the local. There would be visual arts, and there would be verbal arts. And there was a balancing act in terms of finances as well: at the outset, the organization had extremely limited resources with which to set up the structure and scaffolding it would require to achieve its multipronged vision.

While there is no consensus as to specifically who it was that first imagined an artist fellowship and residency program in Provincetown—and there are still arguments today regarding this matter—it was clear to a number of Provincetown’s artists, writers, and supporters that something had to be done to rekindle the flame of the country’s most famous artists’ colony before that flame burned out.

By the mid-1960s, the economy in Provincetown had sagged badly, which affected the art-buying public, established artists, and younger artists, who were all struggling to make ends meet. While the legendary space and freedom and the ideal light-to-paint-by that engendered the art colony in the first place were still intrinsic to Provincetown, practical conditions for living in town were anything but ideal. Provincetown was no longer economically viable for most artists and writers. There was a pervasive sense that Provincetown as an important arts community was on its way out.

A Romantic Notion

PROVINCETOWN ARTISTS and their supporters, some of them year-round residents and some seasonal residents, began to meet to discuss the situation and try to hash out strategies to ameliorate the crisis,

among them visual artists Fritz Bultman, Jim Forsberg, Robert Motherwell, Jack Tworokov, Richard Florsheim, Myron Stout, Salvatore Del Deo, and Philip Malicoat; poets Stanley Kunitz and Alan Dugan; and art patrons and supporters Hudson Walker, Munro Moore, Josephine Del Deo, and Ernest Vanderburgh. Other residents were involved as well, both from the arts community and from the general citizenry of Provincetown. These were the people who conceptualized the new institution over a period of several years, who brought it into the world, and who guided it during its early formative years.

“One of the aspects of life at the Fine Arts Work Center that I always appreciated was that writing and visual Fellows were part of the same community. In my life, these two disciplines have always had a huge impact on one another. Watching the progress of visual work taking shape was inspirational to me and often echoed a question I’d had about my writing. Broadening my understanding of all the arts deepened my connection to my own work.”

— Ellen Wittlinger, Writing Fellow, 1974–75, 1975–76

A number of ideas were put forward at these meetings, many of them having to do with establishing some sort of school in Provincetown that would focus on the arts and operate during the town’s off-season. This seemed to many an attractive idea because there was a sense that state funding for an educational project would be readily available, and funding for whatever idea was settled upon was bound to be the crucial issue.

In a report written in 1969, painter Jim Forsberg, another of the Work Center’s founders, talked about the origins and background of the FAWC: “The Fine Arts Work Center of Provincetown began a long time ago. It really began as an idea—an idea shared by many people over a long period of time—an idea for some kind of school in Provincetown in the winter. The idea usually was on an ideal rather than a practical basis. Oftentimes, it was simply a romantic notion. Whatever the energy behind these former notions, nothing came of them until much later.”

Eventually the discussions and meetings became centered at the Provincetown Art Association, which was natural enough, as the Art Association was the central arts organization in town, and virtually every artist and supporter of the arts was a member of it. The governing

“This perhaps unique project grew out of need and experience. The art colony needed more young artists, and they needed the colony. High summer resort rents had been pushing them out in the summer for several years. They tried to come for the winter—and seasonal unemployment generally stopped them. The town also needed the young artists, especially in winter when every newcomer brings income to somebody with a room to rent—and who hasn’t one,



Installation shot from the *Founders* show with works by (from left) Salvatore Del Deo, Gilbert Franklin, Robert Motherwell Marsden Hartley, and Ione Gaul Walker PHOTO BY NAYA BRICHER

in a resort town?—or a lunch counter. The obvious thing to do, then, was to attract more artists to town in the winter when rents are low but there are still many colleagues around. . . . An idea began to grow: do for artists what internship does for physicians; start a new activity that would help the young artist to come and work uninterruptedly, and yet make available to him some of the leaders of his field. They do not want another school—they want to paint, write, do sculpture. But they like to touch base occasionally with someone they respect.”

— Ernest Vanderburgh, *first Director of FAWC, American Artist, 1968*

board of the Art Association was also concerned about the future of the arts in Provincetown, and had been discussing ways of expanding from a summer organization to one that operated year-round. But there was also resistance among several of the board members to ideas that would de-emphasize the core mission of the organization, which at that time was to exhibit work by, and provide related programs for, member visual artists in a noncommercial space.

It had become clear by 1967 that the concept of establishing a college campus in Provincetown, with the resources at hand, was simply not feasible. But discussions continued, and they evolved into other concepts. They focused on two different, and sometimes competing, ideas for a residency program, each of which had its passionate advocates. One idea was to provide support on a modest scale to artists who were already in town, to enable them to continue to live and work in Provincetown;

the other idea was to create a larger and more expansive program that would bring in artists from all over the country, and even other countries, infusing the local arts community with new energy and work.

At the same time, some of the founders of the Work Center—notably the writers in the group, led by Stanley Kunitz—felt strongly that the scope of the new organization must include the literary arts as well as visual arts. Provincetown, after all, had a history and tradition of writers that was nearly as long as the tradition of painters—beginning with Eugene O’Neill, whose theater opened in Provincetown in 1916, his contemporaries Mary Heaton Vorse, John Dos Passos, and John Reed, and writers such as Tennessee Williams and Norman Mailer. Supporting playwrights with an actual theater would be prohibitively expensive for the fledgling organization, but certainly poets and fiction writers could be included.

The tensions in the discussions, many of which became heated, focused on the geographic scope of the project and on the artistic scope of the project: to support local artists or to support qualifying artists from all over, to support visual artists only or to expand the concept to include writers. In the end, it was decided that applications would be accepted from artists everywhere, but special consideration would be given to artists already working in Provincetown. And visual artists would be the initial Fellows, but writers would follow shortly thereafter.

It is important to note that there was no model on which to create a program like the Fine Arts Work Center, and that the founders of the FAWC were essentially making it up as they went along. They had already realized that it could not be a school—no classrooms, no dormitories, no teachers or students, no assignments, no grades. And they knew they didn’t want to create a typical artist residency program, like Yaddo or the MacDowell Colony, to which artists generally retreat in search of short-term solitude and isolation, usually for no more than a month at a time.

“It was a magical time for me. I was graduating from Yale with an MFA, completely in the dark as to what my next step would be. I had been living in Brooklyn for many years, but wanted a new life somewhere different, even for the short term. The Fellowship of the Fine Arts Work Center changed my life incredibly. Working alongside poets and writers was a new experience that enriched my own work extensively. I began to use narrative, both old and new, in my paintings, and it generated an odd and refreshing body of work that brought me to new places. It certainly was a result of associating with such smart and deeply thoughtful artists and writers. I am completely indebted to the Work Center for providing a place of unbounded creativity. I will never forget it. The landscape, the light, the freedom . . . and the time. Oh the endless time. It was magical.”

— Jason Mones, Visual Fellow, 2008–09

The idea that the originators of the Work Center came up with was very much a product of both its time and its place. It was to have the Fellows live not in isolation, as in most arts residency programs, but within the Provincetown community, and to have them here not for just a month but through the entire quiet season in town, for seven months from the beginning of October through the end of April. But it took a few years of discussion, haggling, and debate for the fledgling organization to morph into this model.

Scriptures

THE FOUNDER whose vision for the Work Center was most adhered to was Stanley Kunitz. He was most insistent on having a larger conception of the project, most insistent on opening applications to the world outside Provincetown, and most insistent on broadening the disciplines supported to include writers. A major American poet who had won the 1959 Pulitzer Prize for *Selected Poems: 1928–1958*, Kunitz had also long been an advocate for, and mentor to, younger poets, and in many ways the vision he had for the Work Center mirrored his longstanding personal commitment to nurturing young artists and combating the isolation in which they usually labored before their work gained recognition.

In my 1999 interview with Kunitz, we sat in the living room of his West End house to discuss what conditions for artists had been like in town in the 1960s. He was ninety-three years old at the time I interviewed him, still sharp, still wry, his memory for what had transpired still clear. After making his justifiably famous martinis—“First things first,” he said with a smile when I arrived—he reminisced.

“The period in the late ’60s was a difficult one in P-town. It was actually a period of acute depression in the town. It had lost its early luster as an arts community. The artists who were living here then were grumbling that it was a dying community, and the merchants were suffering. Property was practically worthless and the galleries were closing.”

In a 1993 article in *Provincetown Arts*, “Fine Arts Work Center: 25th Anniversary Collaborative Chronology,” Kunitz is quoted as saying, “We wrote our Scriptures early and we’ve kept to them. What I had in mind were my own early years as a writer, knowing no one, having no one to talk to. Like many young writers and painters, I felt I was working in the dark, that I needed, in addition to the simple time to work, some support from others around me. I vowed if I were ever in a position to do that, I would do what I could to create an exchange, a community of artists.”

He stated in his interview with me, “I talked about writing from the very beginning. But in the beginning I had no support. It was only after our struggling beginning, and the sense that we needed to widen our horizon, that others came and supported.”

At the conclusion of this interview, Stanley showed me around the lush garden that filled his front yard. He likened the profusion of blooms

“The Fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center was life-changing. I doubt I’d be a writer without it. I hadn’t published a thing when I got the Fellowship—the FAWC was the first (and much needed!) entity to ever support my work. And just the fact of knowing that the Work Center was choosing to give its time and space and resources to me, that its bet was that my work was worthy of its mission, well, that’s a gift that should be taken very, very seriously. Which is to say, I wrote my arse off while I was there. And being in the company of other artists and writers fueled that too—even when everyone was tucked away in their own private studios, there was a beehive feel to the place. You rise to the occasion and put the time in, because all these wonderful interesting people around you are also putting the time in.”

— Sophie McManus, Writing Fellow, 2008–09, 2009–10

“I think the relationship of the two different disciplines is crucial to the success of the Fine Arts Work Center. As a visual artist, you are exposed to a variety of diverse opinions from writers (poets and fiction) who bring a completely different voice to the process of making. Although writers may go through similar actions—drafts, rewrites, collaging—the way of looking at visual work is different, usually more analytical and, more often than not, insightful and surprising. The act of looking and the perceptions offered from this other discipline often allowed me to view my work afresh.”

— Bert Yarborough, Visual Fellow, 1976–77, 1977–78
Visual Committee Chair/Coordinator, 1979–83
Visual Committee Chair, 2008–18

to the proliferation of writers and artists in town, and pointed out to me, with obvious delight, his favorites among his carefully cultivated flowers, shrubs, and bushes. He tended his garden well. Until his death at age one hundred in 2006, Stanley Kunitz continued to be one of the guiding forces of the Fine Arts Work Center, remaining an active and involved member of the Writing Committee as well as the Board of Directors.

First Years

IN THE END, the Fine Arts Work Center did start its first season under the auspices of the Art Association, with a short session from March 4 to May 24, 1968. There were six Fellows, all of them painters, and four of them were already living in Provincetown when they applied. Though there were no actual classes, a “faculty” was listed that included Philip Malicoat, Henry Hensche, Karl Knaths (Honorary Member), and Jack Tworikov (Seminars in March), the latter being the head of the painting department at Yale University and a longtime Provincetown painter.

But resistance persisted within the Art Association to the notion of sponsoring the new off-season program, and on August 8, 1968, the membership voted not to amend its charter to permit an expansion of the stated mission, and the Art Association’s sponsorship of the program abruptly ended. A few days later, Hudson Walker, a Trustee of the Art Association who had been involved in the creation of the new program, and the individual who had been most generous in terms of funding it, suggested transferring its sponsorship wholesale to the American Federation of Arts (AFA).

The second session of the Fine Arts Work Center, now operating under the auspices of the AFA, ran from October 1, 1968, to May 1, 1969, with eleven visual artists, including three returnees from the first session. For this session, the first floor of a building that had previously been used as a music club known as the Blues Bag, at the corner of Bradford and Standish Streets, was rented to house the program. The Blues Bag building, though far from ideal, served the Work Center for three years.

It was in the third session, the 1969–70 program year, that writers were added. There were twenty-two visual Fellows and the first seven writing Fellows, with Stanley Kunitz serving as the first Writing Chairman. Poets Alan Dugan and Mary Oliver joined him on the new Writing Committee. Jim Forsberg was elected as the Art Chairman for the coming year.

In my interview with Judith Shahn, a painter and printmaker involved with the Work Center, and her husband, poet Alan Dugan, we talked about the work space in the Blues Bag during these early years. “There was a general studio where all the painters worked together,” Shahn remembered. “They didn’t have their own studios, they all painted in one large room. The office was in that building. There was a room upstairs where readings were held.” Dugan added, “And there was a



(above, from left) Jim Peters, Larry Shainberg, Michael Mazur, Roger Skillings, Gail Mazur, Hatty Fitts, Stephen Mindich, Marty Davis, and Clarence Walker (with a painting by Polly Burnell) (facing page) The Fine Arts Work Center Fellows with friends and family in 1975

bar across the street where we met. . . . The Foc's'le. That's where the committees would go."

Seed money for the program was advanced from the AFA in the form of a loan, and the Work Center was in no position to repay loans. Shah recalled, "We started out being funded by a loan from the American Federation of Arts that Hudson Walker secured. And that was \$40,000. I don't know if it ever got repaid or not."

Art patron Hudson Walker continued to provide critical support to the organization with his own funds, and with funds from his family's foundation in Minneapolis. His philanthropy was genuine and came with no strings attached. As Kunitz recalled, "Huddy provided the funding. He wanted to be a practical and financial aid to the program. And he thought that artists were the ones who should formulate the program."

Ruth Hiebert, who served as Executive Secretary of the Fine Arts Work Center beginning in 1969, and who was involved in keeping the books and monitoring the cash flow, reiterated the same feeling about Walker's crucial role, stating, "There would have been no Center without him."

Hudson Walker continued to support the FAWC until his death in 1977. His daughter Berta Walker, who has served as both Director of the Work Center and Chairman of the Board, recalled in my interview with her, "His psyche was such that he was like the silent mayor of the art world. He was involved in making things happen for the good of the community and the good of each and every individual involved."

Walker changed his will when he was in the hospital at the end of his life to bequeath a painting called *Give Us This Day* by Marsden Hartley to the Work Center to help endow the organization. The FAWC was able to sell the painting, and the proceeds became some of the original endowment money.

Money continued to be a thorny issue, both money to keep the FAWC afloat and money to help Fellows make their own personal ends meet. The Work Center Board's meeting minutes from 1968 to 1970 are dominated by discussions of money, often regarding what seem today like comically insignificant amounts.

Along with Hudson Walker's contributions, art patron Munro Moore's increased involvement in the governing and operation of the Work Center was critical. Like Walker he was not an artist himself, but he had supported the arts and other causes in Provincetown for years. Following a stint as Clerk and Treasurer of the FAWC, he became its President, and he maintained that role for more than ten years.

Roger Skillings said, "Munro had his hand in everything. He was one of those can-do American types: 'Whatever it is, I can do it.' He was in town government, and he was on all these committees. Munro became absolutely the central figure of the practical operations. There was nothing he didn't attend to. You couldn't ask too much of Munro."

In the summer of 1970, the Fine Arts Work Center received its first

grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in the amount of \$10,000. This was a huge boost to the program, though the overall financial situation was still dire. The AFA, which had fronted \$24,500 to the program the previous year, was having its own financial problems and could no longer be counted on for support. Moreover, they were making inquiries to the Work Center about when it would be able to start paying back its loans.

Kunitz pointed out at a meeting that summer that the expenses for a program like the one they had created were minimal. There was no existing program in the country that did so much for so little. Generous contributions by the staff of time and energy made possible a program in which almost all money was given directly to the Fellows. "And at this moment, we are either to survive or perish," he concluded.

Artists, writers, and supporters attending this meeting—including Stanley Kunitz, Robert Motherwell, B. H. (Bob) Friedman, Fritz Bultman, Myron Stout, Hudson Walker, and others—pledged their financial support.

Cutting the Cord

IN APRIL 1971 the Fine Arts Work Center submitted a proposal to the American Federation of Arts to guarantee support of the program for the next five years. The request was for \$60,000 annually in operating funds. The proposal outlined the goals of the FAWC, its programs, its financial situation, and its needs.

The American Federation of Arts turned down the Work Center's proposal. So after a three-year affiliation with the AFA, following the less than one-year affiliation with the Provincetown Art Association, the Fine Arts Work Center finally struck out on its own. On August 10, 1971, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts issued articles of incorporation to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Inc., legally establishing it as a nonprofit corporation formed by nine individuals: Hudson Walker (President), Munro Moore (Treasurer), Suzanne Sinaiko, Arlie Sinaiko,

"I was a writing Fellow for two years and administered the Fellowship for nine. Of the thousand ways the art-making culture of the town and of the Fine Arts Work Center, especially of the visual arts Fellows, changed the way I live, here's one. Early on as a Fellow, I realized that some of the visuals were putting in sixteen-hour studio days. These were not manic episodes but sustained practices of concentration from which they emerged stinking and oddly calm. The possibility of staying inside a piece of work for so long at a go made me wild with envy and impatient with my previous notions of how long I could keep writing. It extended the volume of reflective space I could imagine occupying. The two sides of the Fellowship (writing and visual arts) are irreducibly unlike one another. That unlikeness makes possible the spark of change that so often makes the Work Center Fellowship so transformative."

— Salvatore Scibona, Writing Fellow, 2001–02, 2002–03
Writing Committee Coordinator, 2004–13

Myron Stout, Stanley Kunitz, Jim Forsberg, Fritz Bultman, and Elizabeth Patrick. (The Sinaikos were supporters of the arts in Provincetown, and Patrick was the incoming Executive Secretary of the Work Center.)

The first year of its independence was a watershed year for the Fine Arts Work Center in another way as well. In 1972, the FAWC acquired its first piece of property, the Days Lumberyard facility at 24 Pearl Street. The establishment of a permanent home had been discussed since before the Work Center even began. A core piece of the mission was to have artists and writers living together in a community setting, at least partly so that they might nurture and stimulate one another in their work, and

“Of the founders, Stanley Kunitz had the largest, steadiest vision of the Fine Arts Work Center and what it ought to be. He fought hard for it, especially during the long birth throes, when everything was always in question and the future was threatened by an endemic parochialism. Often lonely, adept at committee steering, with many helpful friends in the worlds of poetry and art, he never spoke a word of despair or doubt, always knew the way was upwards, despite frequent contrary appearances and the skepticism of outsiders. He was the most eloquent, the surest and wiliest, the most respected and fearless, the strongest. He had the widest experience and deepest optimism, and his spirit impregnated the place.” — Roger Skillings, from “Early Days at the Fine Arts Work Center,” Provincetown Arts, August 1986

this was not really possible when Fellows were scattered through town in their own apartments. Money, of course, had been the stumbling block, but this time when an opportunity presented itself, the Work Center—no longer financially intertwined with any other organization—moved forward.

The rambling buildings on Pearl Street, with ten artists’ studios on the second floor of the longer building, above the lumberyard offices and storage rooms, plus a three-story barn building and separate coal storage bins, had a long and illustrious history in the annals of Provincetown’s arts heritage. Among others, the two most renowned art teachers in Provincetown’s history, Charles Hawthorne and Hans Hofmann—along with many of their students—had lived and/or worked in the Days studios. In fact, Hofmann had more than once conducted his summer art school there. A list of those who painted in the Days facility beginning in 1914 includes Edwin Dickinson, Charles Demuth, Ross Moffett, Bruce McKain, Lillian Orlowsky, Philip Malicoat, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert De Niro, Ed Corbett, Jan Müller, Peter Busa, Myron Stout, and Fritz Bultman.

The cost of the property, sold to the Work Center by town resident Joe Oliver, was a very reasonable \$120,000. The purchase was made possible by a long-term, low-interest loan from the Walker Foundation. Once more, Hudson Walker had stepped forward to ensure the FAWC’s future.

The independent status of the organization, and the new home, solidified the Fine Arts Work Center, although it did not make its financial troubles disappear. Roger Skillings recalled, “It changed things vastly, obviously. The old living around town disappeared. We had this enormous piece of property, which suddenly increased our expenses vastly. We had to have warm rooms, and our heating bill was terrifying—all the burdens of property along with all the advantages.”

In the long run, the advantages of acquiring the property far outweighed the burdens, and the Work Center used its new situation to strengthen its programs and catapult itself into the future. The basic program was transformed from a Fellowship program to one that now included both a seven-month Fellowship and a seven-month Residency for artists and writers. A gallery to show work by Fellows was created out of the lumberyard’s plumbing-and-heating supply room—now the Hudson D. Walker Gallery. The Work Center converted the coal storage bins into yet more artist work spaces, and made a common room for Fellows as well.

When my family arrived in Provincetown in October 1975 for my first year as a Fellow, we were assigned the bottom floor of the barn as our home. This was the largest space the Work Center had to offer, which went to us because we had two children (there were no other children at the Work Center that year). Most of the living and work spaces were one-room studios, but ours had two small bedrooms in addition to the living room and kitchen areas. In addition to the free apartment, we had my Fellowship stipend to live on—that year, the stipend came to fifty dollars per month. The living space, though the largest at the Work Center, was tight with four people in it, and the money was even tighter for four people to live on, but it nevertheless seemed like nothing less than a spectacular gift that I continue, decades later, to be grateful for.



“At the Fine Arts Work Center, my eyes were opened to the work of the Fellows who were painters or installation artists. I was an artist who ‘engineered’ my sculptures through sketches and scripted methods, and I envied the fluidity of paint, the change that took place in the work of these artists in a matter of minutes. I started to draw freely for drawing’s sake on a large scale. Three-dimensional possibilities opened up in my drawings. My sculptures were made without plan, then deconstructed and reconfigured.”

The FAWC Fellowship year was pivotal, and gave me ‘permission’ to grow as an artist. We writers and artists also made impromptu plans, where to grab a beer and a game of pool at the end of the day. It is significant that now, thirty years later, I am involved in a poetry and sculpture collaboration with Alison Deming, a former FAWC poetry Fellow. We are sharing our collaboration in an exhibition this summer, Breath and Matter, at the Boston Sculptors Gallery.”

— Susan Lyman, Visual Fellow, 1981–82

Nancy and I quickly set up work spaces in the apartment—mine to write, hers to paint—and our interactions with the other Fellows were regular, and mostly informal. Three visual artists lived upstairs from us in the barn and they became friends—and also helped us out with babysitting. And across the parking lot, in the ten studios above the office and the common room, the rest of the visual Fellows and most of the writing Fellows lived. We talked about writing and art, and I exchanged work with other writing Fellows. Once a week, on Friday night, we all had a communal dinner together in the common room, open not only to the Fellows but to anyone involved with the community.



Installation shot from the *Founders* show with works on the left wall by Myron Stout and on the right wall by Philip Malicoat PHOTO BY NAYA BRICHER

“Before my residency, I knew what it was like to support myself financially, and understood my art practice as something that happened in the time I had after my money-work time. Once you get into the FAWC rhythm, you can’t go back, because you’ve seen what it’s like to live it. Living it, on a perilous spit of land, clams in your gut, sand in your shoes, making art next to nine other artists and ten writers . . . the FAWC teaches you that you can build that for yourself wherever you land.” — Jarrod Beck, Visual Fellow, 2011–12, 2013–14

The mixing of visual artists and writers in the living spaces and in informal activities encouraged interactions, and these interactions stimulated a broadening of artistic concerns. This frequently manifested itself in the creative work, and over the course of seven months I could see how the work of some of the Fellows, including my own, was growing.

Stability and Evolution

THOUGH ISSUES CERTAINLY remained, and financial impediments continued to raise themselves, the organization was now afloat. It was independent. It had a home that would enable it to achieve its vision of young writers and young visual artists working and interacting and living side by side, as members of the same community. It was viable.

The number of Fellows fluctuated over the first several years, to some extent according to available funds, and so did the balance among the number of Fellows in the visual and the literary sides. In the 1972–73 season, the Work Center admitted ten visual Fellows and ten writing Fellows, and that has been the pattern, with a couple of rare exceptions, ever since. This was critical in making the two halves of the program feel equal, and again it encouraged a spirit of intermixing among the various disciplines.

Less than five years went by from the time the Fine Arts Work Center offered its first modest Fellowships in 1968 to the time it moved into its own facility as an independent organization in 1972. There was a very rapid evolution from an entity conceived in response to a crisis in the local arts community to an important arts institution with a national focus.

Since 1972, the FAWC has evolved and changed in numerous ways. A summer arts educational program has been added, with dozens of weekly courses offered each summer, and now this program has become one of the preeminent centers for summer art and writing classes in the country. The Summer Program is open to anyone who wants to take a course, and it includes regular artist talks and readings that are open to the general public. The advent of the Summer Program expanded the Work Center into a year-round operation.

While the shape and structure of the original lumberyard buildings remain intact, all the studios and apartments within them have been

upgraded, and the infrastructure has been modernized. In addition, a number of new properties have been acquired by the FAWC for use by its artists and writers, both immediately surrounding 24 Pearl Street and elsewhere in Provincetown.

The financial situation of the Work Center has become more stable over time, through the contributions of donors and the efforts of a succession of directors and staff. While fund-raising is still a priority each year, the FAWC is also able to plan for and implement its growth and new endeavors. The success that Fellows have had in the worlds of art and literature has greatly enhanced the Work Center’s prominence and, in turn, has made the Work Center more appealing for donors and foundations. The beneficiaries of all this are the current and future Fellows, who are able to receive Fellowships to support their early careers and to work in amenable facilities.

Despite the evolutionary changes, the core focus of the Fine Arts Work Center remains the same—to support and nurture emerging artists who show unusual ability and promise, and who are in the critical early stages of their careers; to create an active community of artists and writers, which changes each year as new Fellows come in, yet retains its essential character; and to enliven and enrich Provincetown and the Lower Cape.

In its first fifty years, some eight hundred Fellows have been in residence at the Fine Arts Work Center, over two hundred of them for two sessions and nearly six hundred for one session. Many have stayed on in Provincetown and Truro and Wellfleet after their Fellowships ended and continued their careers on the Lower Cape. Work Center Fellows have created significant works of art and literature, and they have won widespread recognition for their work, including hundreds of awards and prizes: nearly fifty Guggenheim Fellowships, eight Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards, the Rome Prize in Painting, American Academy of Arts and Letters Awards in both visual arts and literature, O. Henry Awards, selection in *The Best American Short Stories* anthology, Fellowships at the American Academy in Rome, Fulbright Fellowships, the Governor General’s Literary Award in Canada, Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grants, Whiting Awards, awards from numerous state arts agencies in visual arts and writing, and other awards and prizes far too numerous to list.

In 1971, one of the Work Center’s founders, Jim Forsberg, penned the line, “The Fine Arts Work Center is an adventure in hopefulness.” What started out as a bare-bones project to nurture emerging artists and writers and to revitalize the art scene in Provincetown has evolved into a sustainable project with the same spirit and mission. Building on the vision of the Work Center’s founders, and on the history of its first fifty years of operation, the hopefulness is as true today as it was then. ❏

*BEN BROOKS was a writing Fellow at the FAWC in 1975–76 and 1976–77. He is the author of *The Icebox* (a novel) and over eighty published short stories, including winners of an O. Henry Award and a Nelson Algren Literary Award. He is a Senior Writer-in-Residence at Emerson College in Boston, and lives with his wife, Nancy, in Somerville, Massachusetts, and in Truro.*

FAWC at 50

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

By Michael Roberts

MY FIVE AND A HALF years as Executive Director of the Fine Arts Work Center have brought a growing respect and gratitude for what Hunter O’Hanian and Margaret Murphy did to perpetuate and extend the vision of the founders. In his history of the first thirty years of the Work Center, also featured in these pages, Ben Brooks shows how that group aimed to build an institution in which emerging artistic talent could grow and mature while sustaining the town’s historical importance to the evolution of art and literature in America. While the last twenty years have been as precarious and difficult as the first three decades, the following conversations demonstrate that they have also been marked by repeated triumphs over adversity. The constant has been the unfailing promise of the Fellows.

The Fine Arts Work Center begins its second half-century in the same spirit of hope amid challenge that has been present from the beginning. Successive Directors have worked to keep the most gifted young artists and writers coming to this beautiful, weather-beaten strip of land where creativity somehow thrives with just the right mix of community and inclemency. The challenges have included perpetual financial struggles, dilapidated buildings, and the town’s gradual evolution from declining fishing village to high-end resort unaffordable to all but the most affluent.

Today, we face exactly the same challenges. As before, we move forward with conviction that artistic talent requires early nurturance—“time, place, and community”—and that inspiration can invigorate not just an individual but also a town, and even a nation. But, as always, an essential ingredient continues to be the spiritual and material generosity of lay supporters, who recognize that the arts enrich human life, and that without them we cannot flourish.

We move forward with a confidence inspired by the Work Center’s remarkable roster of past Fellows together with a growing body of increasingly generous donors. The 50th Anniversary Campaign now under way will ensure our capacity to build on the success and promise of all that has come before.



Michael Roberts

PHOTO BY JAY CORCORAN

A CONVERSATION WITH HUNTER O’HANIAN (Executive Director 1996–2007)

MICHAEL ROBERTS: *I think it’s fair to say you brought FAWC back from the brink and added many needed improvements. Were there times when you wondered if FAWC would survive?*

HUNTER O’HANIAN: We really did worry about survival. Before I became Director, I served on the Board and attended the weekly Executive Committee meetings. My fellow committee members were the likes of Gil Franklin, Bill Webb, Roger Skillings, Judy Shahn, Napi Van Dereck, Hatty Walker Fitts, and Pat de Groot. These were amazing people.

Money was the critical issue. The full Board had voted to reduce the number of Fellows from twenty to sixteen, and it was widely believed that the four lost Fellowships would never be replaced. I remember those meetings were pretty grim. Someone would slide the oil or electric bill across the table, and then the most recent bank statement, and there wasn’t enough to cover the most basic utilities, much less anything else. It was always hand to mouth in those days. Yet we brought back the lost Fellowships, almost doubled the Fellows’ stipends, raised the money necessary to create robust jury processes and visiting artist programs, and provided the visual arts and writing coordinators with a living wage and benefits.

All this was possible because these people believed in the Fellowship program and its remarkable achievements and promise. Once I became Director, I said that we were going to reinvest in the Fellowships in an incremental way, and people went along and made contributions. Mike Mazur, Hatty Fitts, Marty Davis, Stanley Kunitz, and Roger Skillings were major supporters. I called them the “Modern Thinkers.” They did all they could to help us financially, and we could not have survived without them.



PHOTO BY SAFRA LONDON

Hunter O'Hanian with Stanley Kunitz

MR: In your ten-year tenure at FAWC, your tangible legacy includes the addition of the “Link” with its new art studios and the purchase of the Reeves Euler Building on Brewster Street. And yet your first advice to me in 2013 was, “Stay away from the temptation of real estate!” Talk about the complexities of real estate in a place like P’town.

HO: Real estate is very seductive in Provincetown. I think people talk about it more than they talk about sex. I learned that the Work Center had a lot of property that it couldn’t afford to maintain—seven buildings, twenty apartments, ten studios, art-making facilities, etc. There were failing septic tanks, ancient heating systems, inadequate means of egress. You name it. But when the Reeves Euler Building came on the market, there was instant determination on the part of the Board to buy the building outright—with no mortgage. With the support of some true visionaries, it came to FAWC. By then, the Summer Program was cooking and we were growing. The new space allowed us to house all the Fellows, Summer Workshop students, and even some staff. It just made sense for this to be a part of the campus. We expanded even further with the units at Meadow Road—five more living and working spaces. Those were all donated to us as well.

Then prices in Provincetown really went crazy. Unless people were willing to donate all the funds needed for maintenance as well as purchase, we could not afford more. So we turned instead to adding to our core campus. “The Link,” joining the original Days Lumberyard building to the Stanley Kunitz Common Room, was the logical, inevitable addition.

MR: You built the Summer Program into a major arts educational initiative, gathering a nationally renowned faculty, bringing hundreds of artists and writers to town every summer, and creating by far our largest source of earned income. What were the biggest challenges of accomplishing this?

HO: The idea was Fred Leebron’s. It had been in operation for one year before I got there, with about 200 students over the entire summer. By the time I left, there were over 1,200 students over the summer. While I certainly had my hand in shaping its direction, the work of Melanie Braverman and, later, Dorothy Antczak cannot be overemphasized. While it was hard work, the path was clear and the support of Board members was great. People called in favors and got their friends to come and teach for virtually nothing. We tried to offer a program that was rigorous but also allowed for the creation of the sort of community that all artists need. I watch what Kelle Groom is doing now, and I am a big fan.

MR: You brought one of the first low-residency MFAs in visual arts to FAWC in association with MassArt. Talk about the relationship of graduate arts education

to a residency program like FAWC’s and whether—and how—they might again coexist in a mutually fruitful way.

HO: This was one of my proudest professional achievements. Its cancellation in 2014 broke my heart, and I still hope we may find a way to revive it in some form, perhaps with another institution. Launching it was a lot of work, but everyone involved really wanted it to succeed. Former MassArt President Kay Sloan, Provost Joanna Branson, and Graduate Dean George Creamer had faith that together we could create the first graduate program on Cape Cod, and that we were building a valuable partnership. Barbara Baker was a stalwart in managing a thousand details. It almost didn’t happen because there were those who felt that we should have no accredited education on the FAWC campus. There was concern that it would weaken the Fellowship program. We lost valued trustees over this issue. But we put the program together and ran it for seven years, bringing high-caliber education to scores of artists, many of whom are making great work today, teaching and pursuing productive artistic careers.

I was deeply disappointed when new leadership at MassArt chose to drop the program. I felt this was a failure of vision. From my current perspective, heading the College Art Association, I know that higher education in the arts is changing rapidly, and the models we know are shifting under our feet. Programs like the MassArt/FAWC program can absolutely continue to flourish, but the trick is to find visionaries with whom to partner! You need others who are in it for the right reasons.

MR: You had a close personal connection with several of the FAWC founders, many of whom are honored in this year’s 50th Celebration. Can you share any anecdotes about these now somewhat legendary folks?

HO: I get emotional when I think about some of the smart, generous, talented people I had the privilege to work with at FAWC. It was an experience like no other. I’ve mentioned some of these people before—Hatty Fitts, Mike Mazur, Gil Franklin, Stanley Kunitz. These were exceptional, humane individuals who understood the organization’s mission and its impact on society and were determined that FAWC should survive. They were not in it for themselves.

I remember the personal time we spent together. I had many dinners with Gil and Joyce Franklin at their home in Wellfleet. I gossiped and planned with Mike and Gail Mazur at Clem and Ursie’s. I developed a taste for martinis at Stanley and Elise’s. Oh my—I remember sitting in their front parlor and talking as a stream of literary and artistic acolytes passed through: it was sublime. I stay involved today because I share their vision, but I also do it to honor them and their contributions.

MR: What are your hopes for FAWC’s next fifty years?

HO: Only what they have always been: financial security and the recognition our organization deserves! The financial model is a difficult one. Imagine any other enterprise devoting its entire property for seven months of the year to a program that provides no income. FAWC has just five months to earn enough in other ways to allow it to survive for the entire year. This remains our greatest challenge. During Margaret Murphy’s time, FAWC developed the Summer Awards Celebration with the attentive partnership of Danny Mullin. That, and other new fund-raisers, have been a great boon to the organization. I know that you’ve been able to attract new donors who have made a real difference.

I also want the larger world of arts and letters to recognize FAWC’s achievements and its importance. Anyone touched by the organization knows its impact on emerging artists and writers, but we want others to know as well. FAWC deserves a seat at the table with other major merit-based awards and residency programs. FAWC belongs in the company of institutions like MacDowell and Yaddo. My hope for FAWC’s second half-century is that its reputation will come to match its extraordinary achievements. ❧

REFLECTIONS FROM MARGARET MURPHY

(Executive Director 2007–2013)

MICHAEL ROBERTS: *You came to Provincetown long before you had any thought of heading FAWC. What were your impressions of the organization during those early years?*

MARGARET MURPHY: It was a poetry reading by Stanley Kunitz that first brought me to the Fine Arts Work Center. It was July 2004. I was spending the summer in the Bultman cottage on Miller Hill Road. Jeanne Bultman and her husband, Fritz, were among the FAWC founders, and Stanley was Jeanne's friend. Stanley was also a FAWC founder. In 2004 he was ninety-nine years old—he had been selected as US Poet Laureate when he was ninety-five.

I spent three summers in Jeanne's cottage and was taken by the mission and spirit of the Work Center and the charm and funkiness of Provincetown. Before I returned to NYC in the fall of 2006, I talked to Jeanne about living in Provincetown year-round. She gave me the very sound advice that I needed to have a "project" if I was going to do that. When the *Banner* published the news later that fall that Hunter had resigned, I thought, "Here's my project!"

I became Executive Director in May 2007. It was a leap of faith on both sides that worked out. My years at the Work Center were as important in my life as anything I've done, and I am grateful beyond words for being able to lead it for the nearly six years I did. My love for Provincetown brought me to the Work Center, and my devotion to the Work Center has kept me in Provincetown. I was recently elected President of the Work Center's Board.

MR: *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your early years as Executive Director?*

MM: The main challenges in my early days at FAWC were to rebuild the Days Lumberyard building, which was on the verge of collapse, and to stabilize the financial situation, which wasn't a whole lot better. By the time I left, I had become FAWC's resident construction manager, not only rebuilding Days Lumberyard but funding major renovations of some of our other historic spaces. On the financial front, we had surplus budgets all six years of my tenure and, for the first time in the history of the organization, we were able to fund capital and operating reserve accounts. I worked hard and I took all of this to heart. It mattered a great deal to me.

MR: *Aside from financial concerns, what do you consider to be the most significant initiatives at this time?*

MM: What mattered to me the most was the flourishing of our core endeavor, the Fellowship program, during my years as Director. For all the hard work, the pleasure and the privilege was communing with the Fellows, young people of vast but unrecognized talent whose time at the Work Center was as precious a gift to them as their presence was to us.

During my years, we were able to increase the Fellows' monthly stipend. We opened the visual arts Fellowship to time-based media, and set new records annually for Fellowship applications. We received major funding for the visual Fellows from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. We inaugurated our annual report on the achievements of our Fellows, which continues to this day as a vital link in making the world aware of our accomplishments. We enhanced all of our visual arts programs with state-of-the-art improvements to our printmaking facility, including a ventilation system that makes our print shop one of the best in the region. We reinvigorated the Work Center's engagement locally through the funding of dozens of new Summer Workshop scholarships for Provincetown and Outer Cape residents. At the same time, we expanded the national and global reach of our creative writing workshops by designing and launching "24PearlStreet," our online writing program.



Margaret Murphy

PHOTO BY ROSE MURPHY

MR: *No review of the last ten years of FAWC's history could omit the crucial role played by the two new fund-raising initiatives of your time: the New York City benefit and the Summer Awards Celebration. How did these seemingly indispensable events on FAWC's annual calendar come about?*

MM: The Work Center would never have been able to accomplish so much during these years without the counsel and generosity of its trustees, friends, and supporters. When we were rebuilding the Days Lumberyard in 2009–10, I suggested that we celebrate its reopening with a party. Danny Mullin and Michael Fernon agreed to chair the event. We decided that in addition to the standard ticket, which was expensive enough, we'd offer \$2,500 premium tickets. I had no idea if we'd be able to sell any of those premium tickets, and I'll never forget my amazement and gratitude that so many devoted supporters of the Work Center purchased them. In an effort to extend the Work Center more into the community, the party honored the legacy of Provincetown and two of its most legendary figures, the poet Mary Oliver and the painter Anne Packard. The party was supposed to be a one-time affair to celebrate our new Days, but it was such a success we decided the very next morning to make it an annual event.

MR: *You have come back to FAWC, this time as President, at a moment of the greatest importance for us going forward, the start of our second half-century and a critical fund-raising effort. What are some of your hopes and aspirations for your time as President?*

MM: Of course, there is more to be done. The financial stability of the Work Center continues to be a challenge, year in and year out, making fund-raising a constant demand. But after fifty years, we know that creativity thrives at the Work Center, and that its mission is its own reward. Heading into its next fifty years, FAWC has embarked on a 50th Anniversary Campaign to sustain the vibrancy of its programs, improve its historic spaces, increase its Fellows' stipends, and enhance its contributions to the vitality of the arts in Provincetown. Everything that we've always wanted to do, and then some!

These supreme achievements also occurred during my years at FAWC: National Book Awards in Fiction to former Fellows Denis Johnson (*Tree of Smoke*, 2007) and Jaimy Gordon (*Lord of Misrule*, 2010), a 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction to former Fellow Paul Harding (*Tinkers*, 2009), selection of former Fellow Ellen Gallagher for the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Guggenheim Fellowships in fiction, poetry, and fine arts to a total of eleven of our former FAWC Fellows, and numerous additional Fellows' accolades. In the words of former Fellow Ann Patchett, the Work Center handed them the lifeline, and years later someone else handed them the laurel. ❧