

Holly Frisbee's Introduction to
FRANCIS CUNNINGHAM'S ARTIST TALK
at the NEW YORK ACADEMY OF ART
October 29th, 2018

Thank you all so much for being here this evening. I am the librarian and archivist at the New York Academy of Art, and I am so very happy to be giving this introduction, and to welcome you to the Academy for this lecture by Francis Cunningham.

Born in New York City in 1931, Cunningham grew up in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and graduated from Harvard before serving as a Lieutenant in the US Marine Corps. He returned to New York and studied painting with Edwin Dickinson and drawing and anatomy with Robert Beverly Hale. As an artist and a teacher, he championed figurative art through the heights of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism in New York City. He taught for 18 years at the Brooklyn Museum School before co-founding the New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting and Sculpture with Sculptor Barney Hodes in 1980. In 1983 he co-founded the New York Academy of Art.

My relationship with Francis Cunningham started almost exactly one year ago, when I found a box in the Academy Archives labeled "Records of the New Brooklyn School." I recognized this as one of the two schools that merged to form the Academy, but I didn't know much about the school or its mission. Inside the box I found a string of official documents, leases, class schedules, by-laws, these are things you expect to find as an archivist. But I also found a few documents that outlined the goals for the New Brooklyn School and the vision of its founders. I got really REALLY excited. I called a lot of my colleagues that day. This is the sort

of thing archivists live for. Because I recognized in these documents a distinct core that the Academy has adhered to. A foundation, or a sort of underpinning that our current mission is built on. For a young school like the Academy, without a lot of history to attach ourselves to, finding these documents was sort of like getting your DNA test back in the mail, or like finding photos of your parents when they were teenagers.

And they were written in this beautiful, straightforward style. In what I now know to be Francis Cunningham's unwavering, occasionally zealous tone.

For example:

"Our school is nothing short of revolutionary in its return to nature."

"there is no place to go, no art school or college, where one can learn to make a hand that will appear to function as a hand, learn to make a lower leg connect to the upper in such a way as to communicate the potential for movement, and learn to treat the figure as a human being rather than a collection of shapes"

I set up interviews with Barney Hodes and Francis Cunningham to learn more about the DNA of the Academy. It was through these interviews that I came to learn so much about this traditional school that I work for, and its beginnings as a revolutionary movement against the trends of the art world.

Barney taught with Francis at the Brooklyn Museum School, and in my interview with him he described the period when the school was shutting down its entire figurative program in the late 1970s. This is a direct quote from our interview.

"It was hard to think of what to do at that point. I invited Dick Cunningham out to a Turkish restaurant in Park Slope. We sat down and started talking about what the possibilities were. It was one of these really cold, clammy nights, everything looked pretty under the weather. Everything looked very bleak. I said to him,

“what if we...” and this was a major thing...”what if we start our own school?” and it was like BOOM, a clap of thunder...”

These interviews gave me incredible insight into the history of the Academy and into the New York of the 1970s and 80s, but best of all they gave me insight in to Barney and Francis, and I have come to respect and love them both for the time, effort, and contributions they made to this radical idea of figurative art.

John Walsh said “Trepidation is not what you imagine Cunningham feels very often. He is a sturdy ex-Marine, straightforward, blunt, and, when his well-considered beliefs are challenged, fierce.” His paintings are inherently American, matter-of-fact like his writing style and like his attitude, yet his empathy for his subjects radiates from his paintings.

He is a natural teacher, he does it all the time, even when he doesn’t mean to. Every time I speak with him I realize at some point that he is secretly teaching me to paint.

Francis Cunningham continued to teach and paint according to his mission, when no one was buying or showing or funding figurative art. He put his vision into creating a school that mirrored his values: Humanity. Community. And of course Training. and I am proud to see these values reflected in the Academy today.

I am happy to introduce Francis Cunningham to our community today, and to welcome him back to the school that he founded.