



A POSTPONED, RADICALLY DIFFERENT FUTURE

Two classrooms connected via a covered walkway: Michael Stevenson's large-scale sculptural installation *Serene Velocity in Practice: MC510/CS183* at Auckland Art Gallery is a reflection of the construction of "learning environments," the stifling repetition of received knowledge in traditional educational institutions and the possibility of generating change with the development of new "communities of practice": a definition introduced by the Californian educational theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their book *Situated Learning* (1991). In this conversation with Barbara Casavecchia, the artist retraces the creation of this work, while discussing the impact of studying and teaching art, visionary worldviews and creating a mass following, Roberto Bolaño's novels, as well as about the endless "tension between knowing and doing."

BARBARA CASAVECCHIA

Can we start with the title?

MICHAEL STEVENSON

Yes, sure, although I should say, *Serene Velocity in Practice: MC510/CS183* came only after lots of deliberation.

BC

Does it suggest a spiritual path, or a philosophical attitude?

MS

Actually it's maybe both, and maybe other more practical things besides. The piece takes the form of a campus, a campus with two classrooms, but since the courses (to which the classrooms are dedicated) are completely unrelated, I had a lot of trouble settling the matter of title. I went back to the spatial format I was developing—the campus—and then I began considering the third element, which is a covered walkway. It stands between the classrooms and unifies them. It's a bridging structure, and when walking down it you're immersed in forced, single-point perspective.

BC

Like that of a camera?

MS

You could say that, yes, and here I was thinking very much of film. I have a long-term interest in structural film. I saw my first examples during my time of study and *Serene Velocity*, the landmark film from 1970 by Ernie Gehr, has always fascinated me. Like much structural film, it's epic, but in this case it's just such an ornament.

BC

What do you mean?

MS

Well, for one there's lots of symmetry. From a fixed camera position, *Serene Velocity* depicts an educational institution's corridor. There's extreme single-point perspective and space, but the image also reads as flat, as an ornament. But the ornamental presence really comes from the pulsing; the corridor jumps abruptly backward, forward, as the zoom on the lens is adjusted between frames. This conflicts the space and emphasizes something altogether flatter. The jumps are regular—every four frames—but then, to disrupt further, the zooms become increasingly extreme. It's completely hypnotic, but what's on-screen is really a mirror to what's happening in the lens. The lens is the corridor, and the lens connects the actual corridor space together with the dark space of the camera itself. I took cues from this while spatially developing my project and saw in this configuration a physical campus with two classrooms. The covered walkway then becomes the lens, bringing the classrooms together—it focuses, it zooms. In this way it's not so unlike my 2012 project for Portikus, the installation *A Life of Crudity, Vulgarity, and Blindness*, where the architecture of the building was turned into a giant internal camera obscura. The vast attic became a space for performing that was connected to the space immediately beneath—the exhibition hall, a space for viewing—via a third element, a long external shaft.

BC

Camera obscura translates as "dark room," and, figuratively speaking, I find Gehr's film very dark. To me it almost has an element of horror, one that I'd instinctively associate with the dystopic/threatening/repressive side of education. Think of Mike Kelley's *Educational Complex*, for instance, which was also, just like Gehr's film, a device to record time and, possibly, individual memories. Are there any autobiographical references in *Serene Velocity in Practice*? I know you teach regularly.

MS

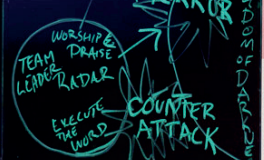
You're right about all these references; that's some of the material I was working through. I'm not entirely sure Gehr and Kelley have been brought together before, but at a certain point it seemed obvious. The notion of a learning environment has long been a part of my practice, long before I took up regular teaching. My project *The Fountain of Prosperity (Answers to Some Questions About Bananas)* (2006), for example, was based on research into the MONIAC (Monetary National Income Analogue Computer), a hydromechanical computer invented in 1949 by Bill Phillips that was used in the classroom as a pedagogical aid and marketed as such. It's a dynamic model: some nine different functions, and their interrelations, can be demonstrated in a stunningly visual way. The machine uses water to model money—the water's the money—which





MC510

EVOLVE THE POWER



WORSHIP & DRAPE

TEAM LEADER RADAR

EXECUTE THE WORLD

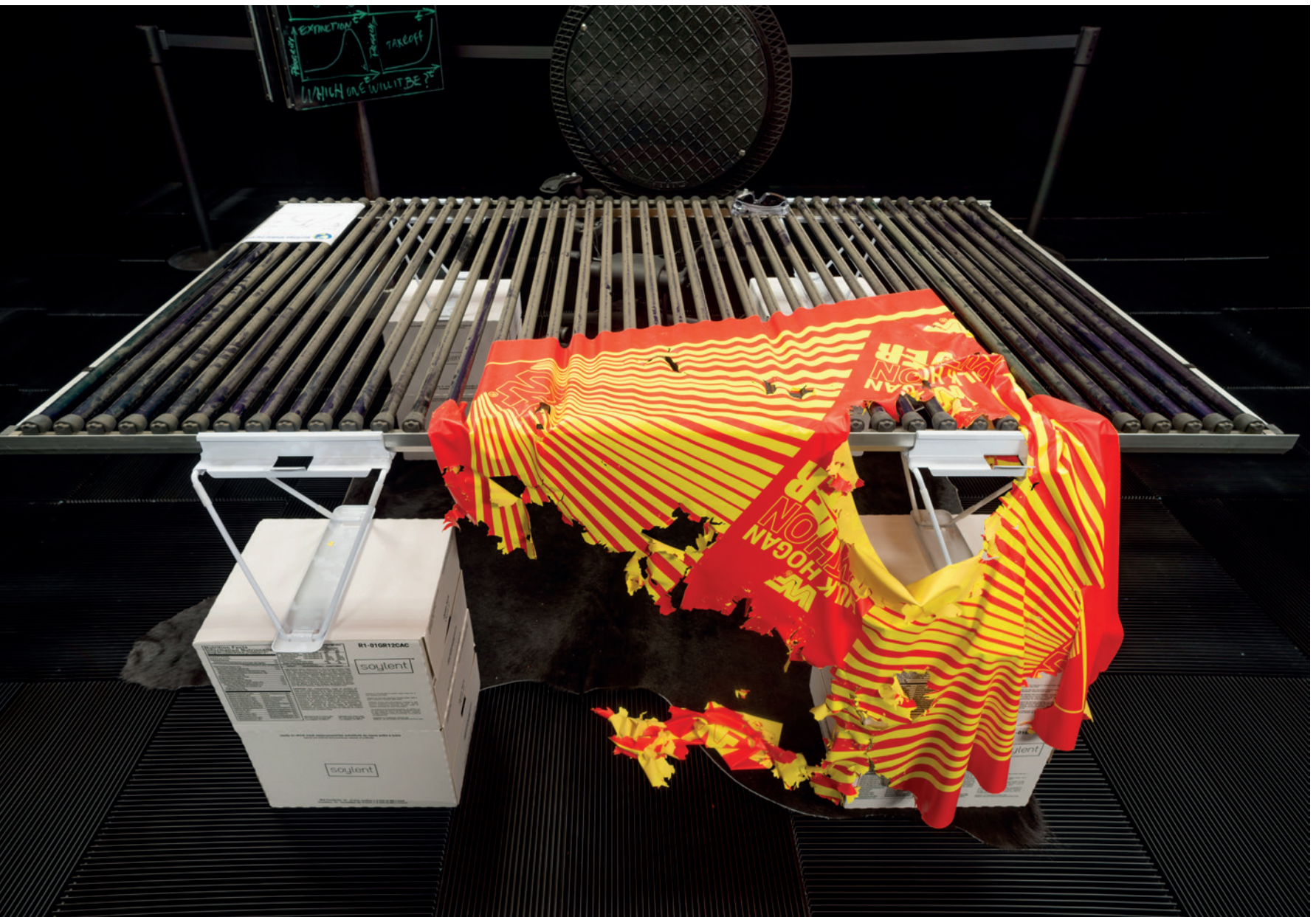
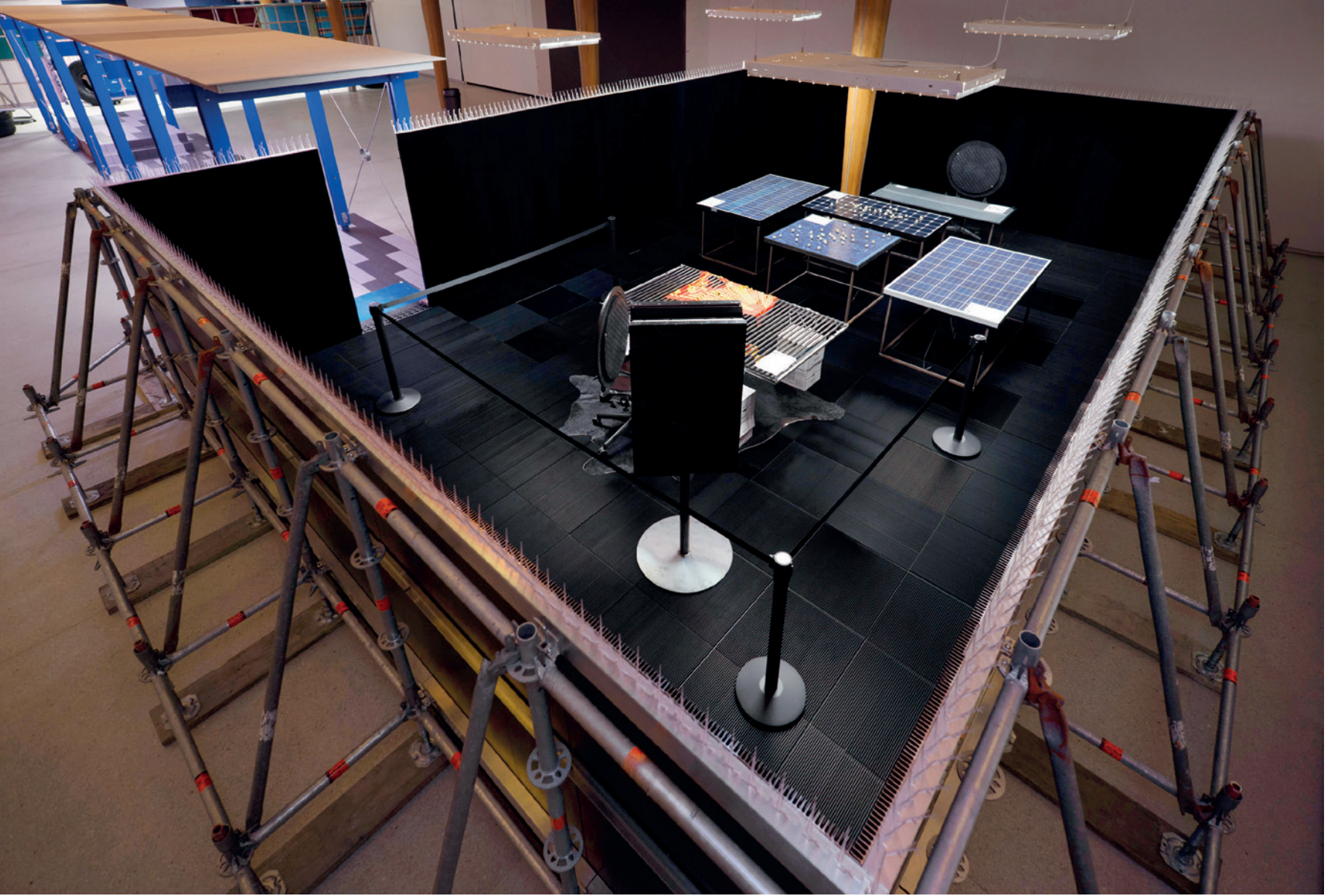
COUNTER ATTACK

AGE TO COME

PRESENT AGE

ALREADY AND NOT YET

MESSAGE OR SOCIETY





is then circulated and redistributed via sluices and tapped off into various holding tanks. Inasmuch as it was innovative in its ability to display data, it could not perform anything really useful beyond the classroom. My interest was in a single model that did somehow escape the classroom and was briefly put to task by the central bank of Guatemala before it disappeared.

BC Where and how did you first study art? And why do you think it's still such a relevant subject for you?

MS I see the ongoing attempt to teach practical art as a kind of flawed yet somehow time-honored investigation into the relationship between knowing and doing. I studied art myself in New Zealand in the 1980s, and since 2011 I've been teaching a class in sculpture at the art academy in Nuremberg. Like all art teaching institutions, the academy's a place where the fundamental question, How do we actually do this? looms large. My class includes those doing art teacher training as well as those doing fine arts, so in a sense exactly *how* I teach is also being closely observed. And in a way, it's this dynamic that has brought me into some of the thinking around the work, in particular the notion of how learning is situated.

BC So you're basically translating into a spatial object/container the notion that the social relationships, participative dynamics, and context where learning takes place have a strong impact on the cognitive processes?

MS In a sense you could be right, though I never approached it that way around. I began really with the courses themselves, MC510 and CS183.

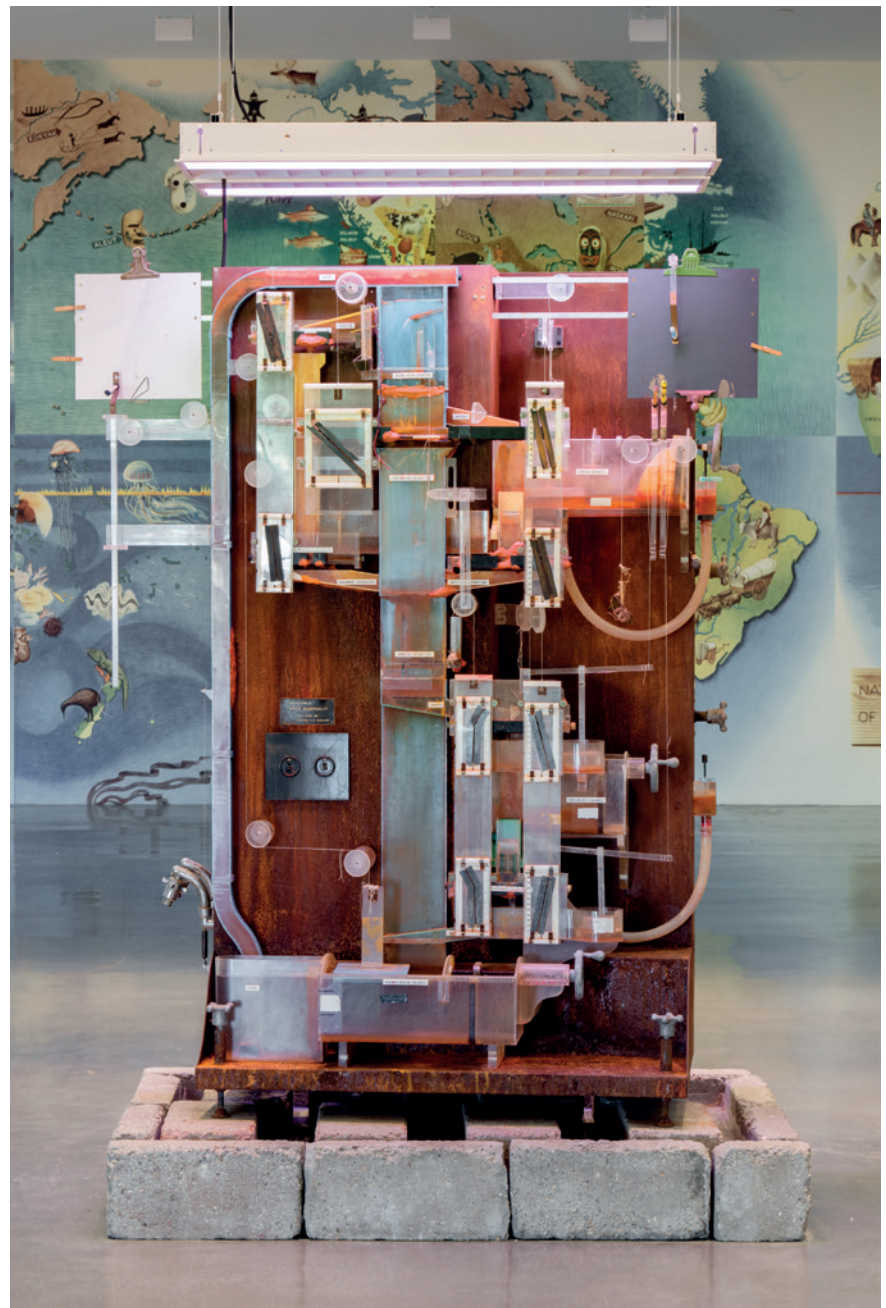
BC I'm quoting from the press release here:

MC510 was taught by John Wimber [an evangelical pastor whose ministry generated a new mass Christian movement, the Vineyard] in the winter semester of 1982 at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, as a testing ground for his radical ideas in the experiential realm of miraculous healing and exorcism. CS183 was the Startup course taught in 2012 by Silicon Valley entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel [the cofounder of PayPal, an opposer of political correctness in higher education, and an activesupporter of Donald Trump during his campaign, as well as a member of the US president's steering committee] at Stanford University's Computer Science faculty, in which he analysed case histories of failure from the tech industry's recent past, while self-consciously modelling a future of exponential progress where miracles are worked in the space of technology.

In brief, two equally successful and visionary, but also very different, Californian courses, resulting in global mass followings. Why did you decide to bridge them?

MS I wanted to represent these actual courses, join them, and make a new higher-learning institute or some infrastructural double of some such thing in a very material way. Why I was motivated to do this was initially not a question I could answer, although they're courses that fit into my current orbits. Maybe they're courses I'd like to have studied. I drew them together, but as you just mentioned, they were taught at very different institutions, at different times. Now they stand together—one floating, the other hunkered down—two poles in a singular campus facility that insists that their common study is (somehow) essential, meaningful.

But getting back to your question. Both courses were taught by adjunct staff and in this role they manifested a very particular conflict with academia. They used this tension to endorse not merely a curriculum, but a worldview. Both questioned the authenticity of the classroom as a real learning environment, a question that almost anyone who enters teaching senses. To put it in a single phrase, you



p. 78, 79, 80, 81 - *Serene Velocity in Practice: MC510/CS183* installation views at Auckland Art Gallery, 2017. Courtesy: Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland; Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; Carl Freedman Gallery, London. Photo: Jennifer French
p. 83 - *A Life of Crudity Vulgarity and Blindness* installation view at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2012. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Helena Schlichting
Above - *The Fountain of Prosperity (Answers to Some Questions About Bananas)*, 2006, installation view at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, 2017. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Promised gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Gonzalo Parodi. Photo: Brian Forrest / Regen Projects, Los Angeles

could say this particular tension was articulated more precisely (and more sardonically) by G. B. Shaw when he supposedly said, “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” The courses are very grand and elaborate examples of this tension, a tension between knowing and doing, and that’s how I came to add “in Practice” to the title.

BC Are there further ways you felt the ideas of these courses could be associated? They both seem to focus on the good/bad (or evil) paradigm.

MS The courses are nothing less than attempts to change the world. Both are dualistic, and they then expand this into a highly developed worldview. Like all worldviews they have a particular space-time setting. Space I’ve mentioned, but the issue of temporality also comes into play. Both courses present something of a dissociative view of the present, or, said another way, they’re discontinuous time models. So the near future they project could be, well, radically different.

BC It sounds a bit like the corridor in the film and the jumps you were describing.

MS Yes, that’s it, these worldviews are played out in discontinuous time, so time’s not all the same, it jumps and zooms. This idiosyncratic perspective is validated by the higher-learning institutions who hosted them (and my double) simply by the act of inclusion: listing them, assigning them real course codes like MC510, CS183, and so on. But at their heart, there’s something extra to the institution, something that just doesn’t belong. And there’s a sense of this too in the installation, in a material disjunction. The classrooms are standard in size and shape but they’re not constructed of, or furnished with, regular classroom material. What’s there to be seen is extra, it’s excessive, and it belongs more in industry than it does in a class. This excess of material is a kind of glimpse into the worldview. As I was saying, these worldviews are highly developed and within each course they actually identify strongholds working against the projected near future state; they resist it, they thwart it. So at the same time that the promised, radically different future remains attainable, it’s suspended and placed into some kind of postponed state.

BC Early utopias were often conceived as situated in the present but dislocated in space—think of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516)—while contemporary ones seem to focus on “thinking differently,” and hence on changing the relationship between past, present, and future, as well as on altering the linearity and uniformity of capitalist empty time.

MS I see this possibility to recalibrate the timeline really as a kind of deflection. It’s a way to deflect criticism, but it’s more than that, it’s a deferral, a long-term annulment of criticism, a removal of other viewpoints. In this sense these worldviews enjoy a kind of structural similarity. Of course they’re dealing with different stuff, but there is a kind of symmetry there. If you’d put a name to it, the thing in the ’510 world that actually thwarts would be definitively satanic, and then, moving through and on into the ’183 world, here the thwarter is most likely the democratic state. So I think now you’re seeing some of the possibilities in relating these two courses and how they open up a lot of the initial points you were making.

BC In the installation, the two classes are positioned at the twin ends of a mirror structure. Are you also playing with heterotopia?

MS Soon after developing this formal structure, I realized the spaces I would build and furnish would have to be different, shifted, from a normal learning environment. Though they’re based on the original classrooms, courses (broken into modules), and the adjunct staff who taught them, they’re exotic doubles, which perhaps could resonate with what you’re mentioning. In my double, however, learning would be coordinated not by the teachers or documents, but by objects. I used mirrored rooms before in a joint project some eighteen years ago, and was reminded again of the possibilities when I read

Roberto Bolaño’s advice for short story writers. It’s a list of instructions which I then saw as useful to resist! He says: “Be careful: the temptation to write short stories two at a time is just as dangerous as attempting to write them one at a time, and, what’s more, it’s essentially like the interplay of lovers’ mirrors, creating a double image.” I realized that this effect was exactly what I was after. This process, now played out in space, suggests that whatever is put into these two “containers” (as you rightly call them) will somehow develop relations. Or, said another way, the formal structure suggests intent, and this will play into any interpretation.

BC Well, Bolaño’s *2666* (2004) is pure utopian (or, better, dystopian) fiction, which also criticizes neoliberal academia and the repressive structures of commodified education.

MS He also plays out to incredible effect a tension between a world of knowing and a world of doing.

BC If we go back for a moment to the beginning of our conversation, I can’t help thinking of *Serene Velocity in Practice* as a sort of self-portrait, or maybe a portrayal of the conflicts, tensions, and dualities inherent to the very act of teaching. A reflection of the ideologies that inform and regulate the transmission of knowledge, and their dangers. Where, by being “a bridging structure,” the teacher attempts to reconcile with them.

MS In my practice over the last twenty years or so, there are a number of works that could in certain ways be understood as portraits. They’re objects, of course, but objects embedded with a singular vision, the vision of a visionary. Many “visionaries” excel in multiple fields, often diverse ones. I guess that’s part of being visionary, but in these cases it’s more like a multiple personality, like they’re more than one person. In their quest for change, a podium they often seek is the one in the learning institution. In this role I’d describe them as spokespersons for the intangible in practice. Their fields range widely—economics, philanthropy, mathematics are some examples. They are aviators, inventors, public intellectuals, entrepreneurs, artists, poets and so on.

In this project, two previously unrelated visionary worlds reflect on or mirror each other, so in a sense these portraits are exchangeable. Both Wimber and Thiel use the role of the unbeholden within the learning institution to present us with something not unlike institutional critique. They want the intangible made tangible. Theirs is a style and scale of success from industry, not academia. They expect the world of ideas to have applied impact. The act of joining the two is then in a sense also a form of critique. In a way this is unavoidable. It’s no secret that Thiel was raised in the evangelical world, and in a sense his vision still anticipates this sense of mission irrespective of his move away from that worldview and his contemporary status as a public intellectual in Silicon Valley. So, if there’s a set of mirrored portraits here, they are of classrooms in which the implausible is somehow practiced. It’s “zero to one” change, or at least its promise. Anything else is better left off campus.

Michael Stevenson is a New Zealand artist living in Berlin. Significant recent projects have been seen at Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2015), Sculpture Center, New York (2015), Liverpool Biennial (2014), Tate Modern, London (2014), Berlin Biennale (2014, 2010), Portikus, Frankfurt am Main (2012), Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (2012). Stevenson is currently professor of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts, Nuremberg. *Serene Velocity in Practice: MC510/CS183* (2017) was first exhibited at the Auckland Art Gallery (2017) and will be seen at the Biennale of Sydney and MUMA, Melbourne; the project is curated by Natasha Conland. The artist is represented by Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, Carl Freedman Gallery, London.

Barbara Casavecchia is a writer and independent curator based in Milan, where she teaches at Brera art academy. Contributing editor for *Frieze*, her articles and essays have appeared in *Art Agenda*, *Art Review*, *D/La Repubblica*, *Flash Art*, *Mousse*, *L’Officiel Art*, *South*, *Spike*, among others, as well as in artist books and catalogues. She co-curated the retrospective *Maria Lai. Ricucire il mondo* at MAN, Nuoro (2014) and she’s at work on the exhibition *Susan Hiller: Social Facts*, OGR, Turin (march 29–june 24 2018).