

Center for 21st Century Studies  
History and Mission  
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

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Top to bottom: Nam June Paik, Gayatri Spivak, Ihab Hassan, Jean François Lyotard, Rey Chow

# Center for 21st Century Studies

Originally known as the Center for 20th Century Studies, the Center was founded in 1968 to foster cross-disciplinary research in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. As one of the oldest humanities centers in the United States, the Center has long been a leader in the study of modern and contemporary culture.

The Center's beginnings are linked inextricably to both the widespread social upheaval of 1968 and the expansion of University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM). The sixties were a tumultuous decade marked by the growth of civil rights movements, an escalation of the Vietnam War, and the assassination of key leaders, culminating in widespread global protest in 1968. The UWM campus was no exception to this political climate, with campus-wide protests and counter-demonstrations a common occurrence. While students voiced their political opinions, UWM faculty, like those on college campuses around the world, responded to the political climate by focusing an academic lens on the impact of these large-scale social changes on the study of the humanities.

## A Controversial Founding

Amidst this backdrop of conflict both at home and abroad, UWM embarked on a period of rapid expansion. Its student body grew to 16,000, a four-fold increase since its original 1956 founding as a merger of the University of Wisconsin Extension and Wisconsin State College. Rising enrollment and the

resulting campus expansion created much debate over the role of UWM within the UW System. While administrators in the state capitol were cautious of creating a Milwaukee-based institution that competed with UW–Madison for funding and students, faculty at UWM pushed for “major university status,” complete with doctoral programs and research support. Plans for expansion at UWM continued, even with the uncertainty brewing in the world around it.

At the confluence of social upheaval and the expansion of UWM, the Center arose. The idea for the Center, as well as its name, appears to have been proposed first by Frederick J. Hoffman, a Distinguished Professor of English, who was recruited to UWM in 1965 as part of the administration's goal to develop the humanities. Hoffman was expected to be central to the English department's transformation into a PhD-granting program. A leading champion of modern literature, Hoffman had resigned previously from UW–Madison's English department in a fight over the importance of modernism, making his appointment at UWM (as well as the establishment of a Center that was distinctly modernist) a direct challenge to Madison.

While Hoffman died in 1967 before the Center's charter was ratified formally, plans for what he had envisioned continued, with Dean of Letters and Science Roy Francis becoming the Center's most vocal advocate. In a letter to Chancellor J. Martin Klotsche dated February 27, 1968, Dean Francis



Robert F. Roeming

called for more funding for the humanities, mentioned the “dream of a Center for 20th Century Studies,” and wrote that negotiations for a possible Vilas Professorship were “based on a commitment to the creation of such an institute . . . that was shared by the late Professor Frederick Hoffman.” He closed the letter by asking Klotsche to enact “modest steps” to create the Center —“an endorsement in principle.” In a response to Francis dated March 5, 1968,

Klotsche suggested, “Let’s talk about your idea for a Center for 20th Century Studies sometime soon.”

In the subsequent 1968-69 academic year, Professors Robert F. Roeming (French and Italian), Melvin J. Friedman (Comparative Literature and English), Justin Replogle (English), and Leroy Shaw (German) developed the draft of the “Organization of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies.” In December 1968, then acting Director of the Center Roeming completed the draft of the charter formally acknowledging the Center as “a functioning agency of humanistic studies.” The charter was approved in 1969.

Despite the enthusiasm of Dean Francis and Roeming, not all UWM faculty supported the Center’s creation. In an acrimonious letter written by Oliver T. Meyers, Chairman for Spanish and Portuguese, to Dean Francis, Meyers noted,

We have all witnessed the curious event the past year in which a “Mission” of UWM was created by mysterious administrative fiat, without meaningful faculty participation, and we are now feeling the full weight of that blunder as the faculty is called upon to carry out a mission that it did not decide on and that it fails to understand.

Meyers suggested later in the letter that the Center was somehow the property of the Division of Humanities and Communication, and as such, “In a very real sense, the future of many of the departments of the Division lies with the success of the Center.”

The letter led to some clarification of the Center's mission by Dean Francis. Specifically, Dean Francis stated in a letter dated January 20, 1969 to Meyers,

The Center is not conceived of as being the property of the Division of Humanities and Communication. Our intent—and we have been in rather constant albeit frequently informal communication with the faculty over the last few semesters—is to create an instrument that should eventually assist all humanistically oriented faculty regardless of the division or department in which he is budgeted.

## Formal Recognition

Also in 1969, Roeming was formally named the Center's Director. In advance of this appointment, Roeming resigned from the board of UW-Madison's Institute for Research in the Humanities, noting that his participation was not taken seriously. On February 21, 1969, Dean Francis wrote a letter to Chancellor Klotsche regarding the dissolution of Roeming's ties to Madison. He wrote,

In the past, we have experienced only difficulty in this matter and there is no evidence that the relationship has ever served to our advantage. Therefore, we feel that the time has come to terminate our relation to that Institute. Our needs can be better filled in our own Center for 20th Century Studies.

In response, Klotsche advised that Roeming could divert his energies “if and when our Center for Twentieth Century Studies gets the go-ahead.”

The Center did indeed get the go-ahead, becoming an integral part of the plan to grant UWM “major university status” during the 1971 merger of the University of Wisconsin with the Wisconsin State University system. The newly established University of Wisconsin System would allow for only two doctoral campuses—UW-Madison and UWM—each with its own clearly defined areas of specialization. Administrators subsequently designated four “peaks of excellence” distinguishing UWM from UW-Madison—Great Lakes studies, surface studies, urban studies, and contemporary humanistic studies. Each “peak” was granted its own interdisciplinary research center, with the Center for 20th Century Studies designated as the research center for contemporary humanistic studies. With the weight of the UW System Regents firmly behind it, the Center became an indispensable component of the UWM campus.

## Advances in Scholarship

With the Center's newly minted status, Director Roeming oversaw the creation of its Fellows program, conceived its earliest symposia and conferences, and wrote the second version of the Center's charter. By 1970, the Center's first selection committee was organized and by the 1971-72 academic year a full roster of speakers was scheduled. In 1972,

William Halloran, Dean of the College of Letters and Science wrote:

The Center has become . . . a focal point for imaginative and forward-looking approaches to the humanities and the arts on the UWM campus. It has also attracted attention nationally and internationally as a gathering place for some of the finest minds in contemporary humanistic studies and as an effective, operative model of a non-departmental, interdisciplinary academic structure which complements departmental programs and enriches the intellectual climate of the University for students, resident faculty, visiting scholars, and the larger University community.

Roeming completed his tenure as director in 1974, and was followed by Michel Benamou (1974-78), Mark Krupnick (1978-79), and Thomas Ewens (1979-81). Throughout the 1970s, the Center made its mark on campus by hosting major events at the

vanguard of cultural studies. The decade saw performances by John Cage and Laurie Anderson; lectures by Umberto Eco, Margaret Mead, and Jean-François Lyotard; and readings by Anthony Burgess and Anaïs Nin. Center events often focused on emerging topics that would only later become widely studied at other universities, such as postmodernism, gender, and the body. In this way, the Center helped to distinguish UWM at the cutting edge of scholarship in the humanities.

In 1981, Kathleen M. Woodward became the Center's Director, a position she would keep for nearly two decades, until 2000. The 1980s were periods of intense reflection and growth at the Center, with events exploring modernism, feminism, and cultural criticism. During this time, the Center expanded its national reputation of being a premiere testing ground for new theories and ideas in the humanities. In the 1990s, the Center focused on broad themes such as material culture, aesthetics, and aging, culmi-



Michel Benamou



Kathleen M. Woodward



Daniel J. Sherman

nating in a 1997 conference, *Biotechnology, Culture, and the Body*, providing one of the first venues for exploring the wide impact of emerging technologies like the Internet on culture.

Following Woodward as director were Kristie Hamilton (2000-02), Daniel J. Sherman (2002-08), and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (2008-present).

Today, the Center continues this ongoing tradition by hosting annual conferences on broad research themes, research workshops on topics of interest to UWM faculty and graduate students, and public events throughout the year.

## Mission

The Center for 21st Century Studies, a UW System Center of Excellence at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee campus, is a postdoctoral research institute founded in 1968 to foster cross-disciplinary research in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Supported by the College of Letters and Science and the Graduate School, the Center seeks to promote discussion of topics of compelling interest to us today.

The Center has long been a leader in the study of modern culture, including film, performance, the visual arts, and everyday life, as well as in critical reflection in such areas as feminism, media theory, multiculturalism, post-colonialism, cultural and social theory and lesbian and gay studies. We do not however, limit our inquiries to the contemporary

world, recognizing that the exploration of the historical, political, and social dimensions of contemporary problems, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and conflict, can only enhance our understanding of them.



Sukanya Banerjee, Jane Gallop, and Andrew Kincaid

## What We Do

To support its mission, the Center focuses its efforts on three core activities: supporting faculty research, hosting public events in the humanities, and publishing scholarship.

*Faculty Research.* Every two years, the Center designates a theme that lends itself to multidisciplinary study as the subject for faculty research. Through a competitive selection process, a group of some six to eight fellows from different departments and disciplines at UWM is selected to be in residence for one academic year. The Center also regularly welcomes at least one fellow annually from other UW System campuses and on occasion scholars from other

institutions and independent scholars from externally funded post-doctoral and summer fellowships.

For UWM and UW System faculty, Center fellowships come with reduced teaching loads and committee work so that more time may be devoted to research. All fellows are provided with quiet offices, computers and printing services, a kitchen, and research assistance, as well as access to the Center's library.

The Center establishes a biennial theme that is both specific yet broad enough to encourage a scholarly community. Fellows meet in seminars over the course of the year to present and discuss each other's work within the thematic context, and they make up the core group at our public conferences, symposia, and lectures. Fellows are gathered together with the understanding that their interactions—both formal and informal—will produce more interesting results

than any one person could achieve on his or her own. Center themes have included *Figuring Place & Time* (2009-11), *Past Knowing* (2007-09), *States of Autonomy* (2005-06), and *Geographies of Difference* (2003-05).

In addition to its competitive fellowships, the Center coordinates a variety of research workshops that bring together faculty, staff, and independent scholars from UWM and other local institutions to discuss common interests across disciplinary lines. Recent workshops include *Ancient Mediterranean Studies/Classical Tradition*; *Cognitive Studies*; *Early Modern Studies*; *Feminist Theory*; and *Science, Technology, Medicine, and Society*. Moreover, the Center coordinates a grant writing workshop for humanities faculty to improve the quality and quantity of grant submissions, and works with faculty on other aspects of securing external funding.



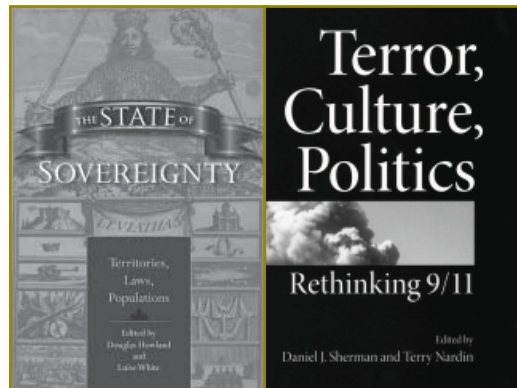
Carla Antonaccio, Susanne Ebbinghaus, Geoff Emberling, Jane Waldbaum, Daniel J. Sherman, Virginia Fields, Patty Gerstenblith (October 12, 2008)



*Public Programming.* The Center runs an energetic program of public events—conferences, lectures, performances—that are also oriented around its biennial themes. These events—always free and open to the public—draw lively audiences from across campus, Milwaukee, and the Midwest. In recent years, the Center has been averaging nine lectures, two symposia, and one international conference each year.

In keeping with its interdisciplinary nature and its sense of community, the Center frequently co-sponsors events with a variety of schools, departments, and programs on campus—the Peck School of the Arts; English, Anthropology, and Art History departments; and the Cultures & Communities program, to name just a few—as well as other institutions of higher education in the area, such as Marquette University, the Medical College of Wisconsin, and UW-Madison.

*Scholarly Publications.* In the spirit of academic inquiry, the Center publishes a book series, 21st Century Studies, in conjunction with Indiana University Press. These multi-author volumes typically consist of peer-reviewed essays that emanate from Center conferences, or are authored by scholars affiliated with the Center. Recent titles include *The State of Sovereignty* (edited by Douglas Howland and Luis White, 2009), *Museums and Difference* (edited by Daniel J. Sherman, 2008), and *Terror, Culture, Politics* (edited by Daniel J. Sherman and Terry Nardin, 2006). Volumes based on the Center confer-



ences Gender and Difference, Routing Diasporas, and SINCE 1968 are forthcoming. The Center also publishes a series of online working papers, available from our web site, for scholarly papers that merit more timely distribution and discussion before publication in print.

## To Participate

The Center for 21st Century Studies is situated uniquely at the intersection where scholars, artists, and students from across all disciplines can engage in robust dialogue concerning topics of compelling interest. You can participate in this important work. All Center events are free and open to the public. We welcome you to attend our events and join the conversation with our visiting scholars, as well as those from the UWM campus. Please see our web site for a current calendar of events.

Additionally, your tax-deductible donation supports our efforts to encourage and strengthen cross-disciplinary studies. It helps us sustain our reputation for excellence, provides more flexibility for our programming, and expands our outreach to both the academic community and the public at large.

If you would like to donate, please make your check payable to the UWM Foundation, with the Center for 21st Century Studies in the memo line, and mail to the address below. Credit card donations may be made through our web site.



Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Margaret Atherton, and Anne Hansen (Fall 2006)

## Where to Find Us

The Center is located on the top floor of Curtin Hall, a nine-story building that houses most of the humanities departments at UWM and overlooks



Audience at Carolee Schneemann's keynote presentation for SINCE 1968, the Center's 40th anniversary conference (UWM Union Theatre, Fall 2008)

Lake Michigan and downtown Milwaukee. In addition to a suite of offices for Center fellows and staff, the Center includes a conference room for meetings of Center fellows, research seminars, and workshops, as well as a library for research. Public lectures and screenings take place on the ground floor of Curtin Hall and at other venues on campus.

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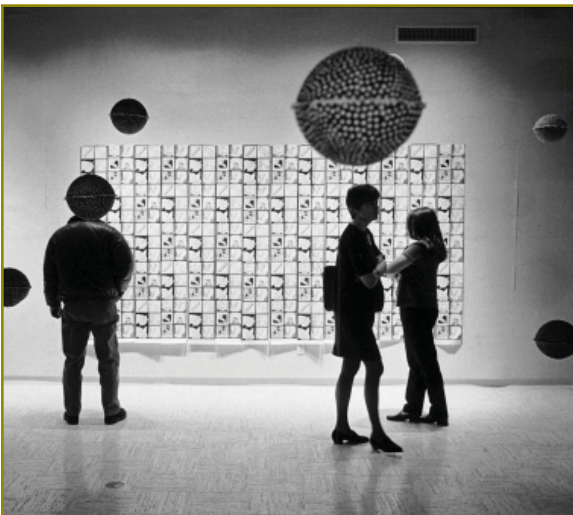


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Dell Upton and Cheryl Ajitrotutu (November 13, 2009)

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