

## The Artistic Legacy of Mercedes Matter: The Knox College Students of Matter

Through January 2, 2011

Organized to accompany *Mercedes Matter: A Retrospective Exhibition* which is currently on display at the Figge Art Museum, this exhibition highlights Matter's progressive educational philosophy and important historical role as an influential art teacher. Along with Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Matter was a central figure within the first generation of Abstract Expressionist artists and was instrumental in forging many of the radical artistic and conceptual principles associated with the movement.



Although Matter (1913–2001) was committed to her own artistic production throughout a long and distinguished career, she was primarily dedicated to teaching and rarely exhibited her works until the final decades of her life. One of the first American art students of the renowned teacher and Abstract Expressionist master Hans Hofmann, Matter had a profound respect for the decisive role of a rigorous education in the creative development of an artist. She began a successful teaching career in the early 1950s, serving as an instructor at the Philadelphia College of Art, Pratt Institute and New York University. However, in 1963, she wrote a polemical and influential article for *ARTnews* magazine titled “What’s Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?” in which she criticized degree-granting institutions for forming standardized studio art programs that neglected fundamental art

training. The article drew an overwhelming response from like-minded art educators and Matter was urged to create an alternative art school patterned after the traditional European atelier system. Encouraged by this support, Matter founded the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture in 1963.

Matter's aesthetic and pedagogical theories defined the teaching program of the New York Studio School, which is dedicated to fostering a student's own individual progress based on artistic experimentation and strenuous methods of perceptual observation. Matter believed these creative capacities are strengthened through the disciplined practice of drawing, which she felt sharpened visual consciousness and sensitized students to the complexities and ambiguities of artistic seeing. Stemming from her own practice, Matter required her students to exercise an exacting form of artistic analysis that was focused on the abstract structural, coloristic and spatial properties related to intricate still life arrangements. In 1997, the Art Department at Knox College established an innovative off-campus program called “Knox in New York,” in which students attend intensive art classes at the New York Studio School. During the 1990s, Knox students had the unique opportunity to train directly under Matter and works by the Knox art alumni in this exhibit are a testament to Matter's demanding, incisive mode of instruction and her self-professed goal to help students “make their own way into the future.”



images: Jason Eisner, *Two Cabbages*, oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist; Joren A. Lindholm, *Reclining Nude*, 2002, oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist.