When was the last time you said the entire name of Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture? When I talk, I say “Skowhegan,” or sometimes, “Skow” (my siblings called me “Shell” for decades), I really like the anachronistic parts of Skowhegan’s full title — they speak to my fondness for food, but leaky toilets, a few opening words in my head for inspection. In this case, mentally rotating the term “school” across an array of possible “Skowhegans.”

None of my notions of “school” ever match up to Skowhegan in the here and now. Yet retaining the word in the title proves valuable in a numbers of ways — it marks a history, honors connections and hopefully ensures that the place does not take a short turn as a social sculpture of pedagogy. The use of the term “school” reflects a long-practiced expectation of learning rather than teaching in the traditional sense. For, unlike most schools (no matter how they try!), Skowhegan fosters a state of learning for all of its participants, “school” reflects a long-practiced expectation of learning rather than teaching in the traditional sense. For, unlike most schools (no matter how they try!), Skowhegan fosters a state of learning for all of its participants.

The intent in using these lectures was not to teach historical context as such, but to individually expand the intricacies of art tropes, practices and relationships. So where could we go to further explore these layers of complexity — not just in my work as I did in my own public lecture — but in the universe of works and their relationships in time? Luckily Reinhardt gave me a precious lead. During his lecture, he cites Lucy Lippard with a hint of pride and affection, quoting her description of his work…”these were the first of the last paintings” — or the last of the first paintings.” It was a perfect segue.

Lippard’s capacity for holding exquisite contradictions in hand, while sharing aspects of her own intellectual evolution, provided the next listening material for the group. We would listen to Lippard’s 1979 masterful lecture (including knocks on the lectern to cue the next slides) in which she presents ideas later published in her 1983 book, Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory. I had a hunch the New York participants might have seen the Brooklyn Museum in time? Luckily Reinhardt gave me a precious lead. During his lecture, he cites Lucy Lippard with a hint of pride and affection, quoting her description of his work…”these were the first of the last paintings” — or the last of the first paintings.” It was a perfect segue.

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That night, thanks to Lippard and to the other artist-lecturers that we listened to over the summer, I could leave behind my role as teacher. I could point to the brilliance of my precursors’ words to show my new mentees what is important to me as an artist. What better way to show how relationships function in time, how people change ideas and work. If we are lucky – we help each other towards meaningful evolutions. That’s history. It’s the thing into which we work so hard to be included.

I am not sure exactly when Skowhegan stopped being a school that predictably supplied an alternative to contemporary education curriculums. No doubt answering that question requires a deep understanding of the teaching philosophies that grew up and around Skowhegan over the years. In the end, one thing is clear to me: the unpickable, unresolved, unforgettable voices that is the Skowhegan Lecture Archive, how these voices have come to be accumulated, and that they have been preserved, stands as the pedagogical core of this school and is what sets us apart from all others.