On Emptiness
Sarah Workneh, Co-Director

As I write this, our hub in New York City sits mostly empty as we wait through another COVID surge here in NYC. Simultaneously to this, our campus in Maine is also largely empty except for Bill and his team, the animals, the birds, the plants preparing for spring (and some might say the ghosts).

Part of what has been interesting to think about in these COVID months as it relates to emptiness is the question of how we fill up space in moments of crisis, and moments of discomfort. In our office, we have spent a lot of time talking about working remotely—what it means, what the expectations are, how output is tracked. In the earliest moments of COVID, in the larger world, it seemed as though everyone’s first impulse was to find ways to just move everything on-line as if the only thing that had changed was the emptying of buildings. Partially driven by a need for “normalcy” and being okay, but maybe also partially driven by the kind of neo-liberal impulse to fill empty space with something new.

There was a funny moment this past year when I realized that in many ways we were working more effectively remotely. We were producing work at a really high and inventive level: we continued to plug along on a historic & transformative capital campaign; we responded to the moment. Rather than focusing on new programming, we quite suddenly dug deeper into how we deal with & treat the natural environment, and investigated where, from an organizational values perspective, Skowhegan fits into the larger world. But then I felt weird. Despite all of this, I felt like we were still measuring productivity by the metric of making something out of everything.

Part of why I was attracted to Skowhegan (and I have said this publicly before) is that one can get away with a lot when no one is looking. We have been working on a book about Skowhegan’s history (also over these COVID years) and I think, in many ways and for many important reasons, our founders also felt this way, which makes me think that in its remoteness, its seclusion, Skowhegan itself—to the larger world at least—is always empty.

I think about what happened on our campus in Maine over the course of 2020 and 2021—the buildings we highlighted in the next pages of the journal were being constructed by Bill, his team, contractors, traders: a new dining hall, a new dorm, a new studio building, the glorious Moffett-Gober Sculpture Pavilion that was made not through construction, but through destruction. The land itself was engaged in production: the meadows left wild in the absence of summer cows; the lake, the vernal pools, the new population of loons carefully monitored by volunteers not only to preserve the community but also as an indicator of lake health. The tiny ecosystems that are evident on a large scale but that we barely acknowledge outside of an idea of nature—the birds, the butterflies, the mosquitos, the voles, the worms, the family of foxes who were emptying upper campus of any other kind of mammalian life—were all doing their work to create not just a site for Skowhegan but their biological mandates to sustain the world on our campus and beyond. This, too, is productivity on an otherwise empty campus.

And in the summer of 2021, we welcomed 53 alumni artists to our campus in a truly intergenerational gathering of artists from the classes of 1963 through 2017, age 27 to age 80. We were nervous about COVID; we didn’t know what people were going to make; we didn’t know how people would relate. Our staff team who had been working together for years understood how to enact and enable the program in a normal summer. But in the last days of June, just before the first group arrived on July 1, we weren’t sure if even as a team, would make sense to this new group, or would know how to anticipate and how to support them in the same way—would our jokes work? This is another kind of emptiness, one where we couldn’t quite envision what was about to happen.

Over the course of 6 weeks, settled on those almost 400 acres, the two groups of alumni were both the same and completely different from a regular summer. There was work, lots of work; there was community,
friendships, intimate walks up and down the hill on the way to the new Dining Hall; there were projects that didn’t quite work out and projects that were surprising in their success; there were things made that will never be seen or heard from again and other things that were made that will be remade and enter the world beyond the studio walls. That is some of the sameness. But what was different, what emerged in the space of emptiness offered by the new experiment was a new kind of questioning.

In a regular summer, there exists a kind of urgency to make the most of each summer that also somewhat just comes with the territory of being an emerging artist—a desire to fast forward towards the stability of success, to have things on their way or even resolved—to be outside the discomfort of not knowing, not being complete, not resolved. And as much as we work at remembering to be present when we are here, with our work, with the process of learning, with patience, there is still a lot of rushing that happens. It’s thrilling, don’t get me wrong, but the means are still somewhat focused on the end.

When each class leaves Skowhegan, we diligently return the campus to a state of blankness so that the next group can come in and create a community and experience of their own. But each group leaves its mark, oftentimes abstractly, but in a way that guides our thinking for years to come. The classes of 2021 have left behind a new consideration. Divided into two sessions, we were gifted a continuum of puzzling that feels central to questions of production, consumption, sustainability, but always possessed by an almost compulsive love.

How do you create something that is a lifetime… something that understands that exuberance doesn’t necessarily expend itself, that curiosity, and not a tightened kind of expertise, is what will always be needed to drive a practice; that the joy of making isn’t a resource that is scarce or antithetical to ambition; how does one stay in the moment while leaving openness for what lies ahead? How do you build the confidence in your voice so that openness doesn’t feel like the thing you are working to resolve, but actually becomes the job itself? How do urgency and presence live alongside each other?

In the days after the program, when the campus was once again slowly starting to empty out, I turned back to thinking about pacing, of making something out of everything, of teleology being one opposite of emptiness. By August, when the program ended, those meadows were lush with blooms that in 12 years I had never seen before. The animals began to return to their normal schedules and pathways that they avoid when all of the people are around. I thought again about the kind of productivity produced by nature that happens imperceptibly slowly and in privacy—one that doesn’t necessarily ask for more than the joy and mystery of sustaining life and creation.

No one saw what happened in Maine over the course of those 6 weeks. No one sees what happens during any summer, and each summer is different, so that leaves a void in understanding, but a unity of undefinable experience—a productivity that emerges from a different kind of impulse.

It is problematic to constantly define things in binary terms. But, for the sake of this note, emptiness is one opposite of fullness.
2021 Participants

Session A
Thai Bui (A ’17)
Anna Burton (A ’17)
Ennis Carr (A ’50)
Domingo Castillo (A ’12)
Vladimir Cybil Charles (A ’00)
JoAnna Commandaros (A ’01)
Annette Gyr (A ’76)
Christopher DiRaddo (A ’16)
Nicholas Fagan (A ’15)
José Figueiredo (A ’15)
Pio Gaibbi (A ’15)
Moshe Han (A ’15)
Royce Howes (A ’74)
George Mosefield (A ’60)
Michael O’Malley (A ’58)
Walter O’Neill (A ’74, F ’93)

Session B
Cynthia Phillips (A ’56)
James Rose (A ’58)
Douglas Shippee (A ’63)
Sylvia Snowden (A ’64)
Katapour Vaziri (A ’79)
Debra Vodhanel (A ’76)
Connie Walsh (A ’56)

Cynthia Phillips (A ’63)
Sarah Anderson (A ’12)
Justin Bryant (A ’17)
Ernest Bryant III (A ’15)
Lil Cihan (A ’10)
David Antonio Cruz (A ’06)
Robert France (A ’72)
Adam Frielin (A ’12)
N. Saah Glover (A ’13)
Diane Grame (A ’15)
Russell Hamilton (A ’19)
Erum Hancy (A ’19)
Wayne Hodge (A ’10)
Liu Kindslie (A ’13)
Becky Kinder (A ’14)
Lihua Lei (A ’58)

Kathryn Lynch (A ’91)
Magan Martell (A ’19)
Ali Peters (A ’15)
Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz (A ’02)
Jean Sausville-Knoedt (A ’93)
Jeff Schaefer (A ’10)
Stephen Sharabi-Revel (A ’17)
Shawn Thornton (A ’12)
Cynthia Underwood (A ’50)
Rosa Valado (A ’16)
Sandy Walker (A ’62)
Deborah Wasserman (A ’97)
Furong Zhang (A ’89)