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MARIANI LEFAS-TETENES

**At the Threshold:  
Visualizing the Work of Graduate Assistants in the University Workplace**

These facts tell a story. At New York University graduate assistant employees teach 55% of the undergraduate curriculum. It is also a well-known reality that graduate students become more marketable with hands-on experience in the classroom in addition to pursuing their own coursework towards Masters and PhD degrees.

This is a balancing act that graduate students juggle, often with grace, sometimes with hardship. Besides the in-class hours spent guiding their students and attending their professor's lectures, they work alone with little training or feedback. Like the faculty they assist, they hold office hours, read all assigned course materials and develop lesson plans for recitation classes held two, three or even four times a week. They are often the first to detect problems, the first to provide guidance and encouragement, the first to perceive and nurture a budding interest in a field of study.

While their responsibilities are great and their roles essential to the harmonious functioning of the University, their compensation is low and their recognition is limited. Their sources of support are often the faculty for whom they teach, but in more concrete ways, their colleagues and co-workers.

These pictures of graduate assistants doing their work flesh out many stories. Often the realities represented in the images are submerged beneath the routines of corporatized university life. Besides the participants in the pictures, others rarely see into the graduate assistant's classroom. On occasion faculty make an appearance to evaluate teaching. But generally, graduate assistants are on their own. These classroom spaces are places of work, of interaction, of experimentation and self-creation. In a strange way, this place is a paradoxical one: as the heart of the university's curriculum, the graduate assistant's workplace is central and familiar; as the arena in which graduate assistants toil, it is infinitely varied, as the individualities of its teachers are, and strangely unknowable to the rest of the world.

To enter these workplaces as a photographer as I have--as an art and photo historian, as an union activist, as a fellow graduate student who has lived most of her adult life in university environments--is to enter with several kinds of assumptions. Still, what resonates in the photographs is the nature of the individuals' work and the quality of the relationships.

How can one visually represent these academic workers whose rights as a group are still not represented through collective bargaining? This is a photo essay in progress even as the lives of graduate assistant employees at NYU are in process. While they strive to improve their working lives through unionization, it is abundantly clear that they come to their work seriously and creatively, with both professional and personal ambitions and concerns. At the threshold of professional positions as academics and researchers, they already are, the University's lifeline.





















