



Assistants

**Jennifer Bartlett, Tony Feher, David Gilbert,
Wyatt Kahn & Elizabeth Murray**

12 March through 25 April 2026

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A Genealogy of Artists Assistants: Part 1

A text by Sam Gordon on the occasion of *Assistants*, including Jennifer Bartlett, Tony Feher, David Gilbert, Wyatt Kahn, and Elizabeth Murray, at Rebecca Camacho Presents, San Francisco, March 12 - April 25, 2026.

In 1993, Sam Gordon, then a student at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), wrote to Robert Gober offering to be a studio assistant for the summer. Though Gober did not reply, Gordon followed up by knocking on the studio door and asking in person for a job. He worked for Gober that summer and again from 1996 to 1999.¹

As the exhibition *Assistants* looks “to walk one very particular line,”² this text might be more family tree than essay - a genealogy of artists and assistants from the recent past, with a focus on the 1970s on.³ It will not discuss A.I., production outsourced to China, or the “Factory Model.” Rather, it expands on the exhibition’s initial premise - that artists and assistants are intertwined in numerous ways - and offers a way into those constellations known to me through my practice, research, and work over the years.

While not included in this exhibition, Nancy Brooks Brody worked for Jennifer Bartlett, as did Gober, who also worked for Elizabeth Murray. The expansive web of connections forms a parallel world, one that extends both within and beyond the arts. These are not grand origin stories. Some artists work as museum guards, some as art handlers, and some end up in other artists’ studios. These working relationships are practical and formative, often serving as a bridge between school and practice, between ambition and survival. For me, working as an assistant was a real-world MFA experience, and an opportunity to watch an artist make work, run a studio, and build a life.

As in a Renaissance apprenticeship, learning happens by doing - through repetition, observation, and material labor. While the contemporary art world can feel over-professionalized, the role of assistants remains stubbornly intimate. It depends on shared space, shared time, shared attention. Art is not produced by isolated individuals but through networks of cooperation - material, social, and institutional.⁴ Within this framework, the assistant occupies an ambiguous but essential position: inside the work, outside its authorship. Anyone who has worked as an assistant knows the role is not neutral. It may be transactional, but at its best it is relational.

Merlin Carpenter’s essay “I Was an Assistant (to Kippenberger, Büttner and Oehlen)” proposed a different model: burn it all down.⁵ Hire sign painters, reproduce the back catalogue, critique and destroy authorship. Carpenter was a willing back-seat driver. Some artists work for others for months, some for years, sometimes decades. Some work for many artists over time. Caitlin Keogh spent fifteen years as an assistant for Toland Grinnell, Wayne Gonzales, M. F. Husain, Michael Joo, Lucy McKenzie, Cameron Martin, Cheyney Thompson, John Tremblay, and Julia Wachtel, often as their sole assistant, though Joo and Thompson occasionally employed more at once. Keogh has noted the uncanny feeling of a role that is, on one hand, privileged insider work and, at the same time, invisible.⁶

Adam Marnie of *F Magazine* worked in studios with other artists and their assistants. While not a comprehensive list of assistants for these artists, the following details some of the artist-assistant groups he worked alongside: Ryan Foerster and Lukas Geronimus for David Altmejd; Will Boone for Mark Flood; Graham Collins for Oscar Tuazon; Sean Townley for Paul McCarthy; Cynthia Daignault for Kara Walker; Hilary Berseth and KB Jones for Kevin Zucker. Sometimes husbands and wives share assistants: two artists who worked for both Nancy Spero and Leon Golub include Lecia Dole-Recio and Megan Marrin.

Many artists have multiple assistants over the years, sometimes overlapping: Alexis Rockman, Joshua Abelow, Tony Payne, and Ryan Sullivan for Ross Bleckner; Carolyn Lazard and Francis Schichtel for Nan Goldin; Banks Violette, Siobhan Liddell, and Eric Oglander for Robert Gober; Virginia Overton, Sadie Laska, David Mramor, and Jeanette Mundt for Wade Guyton; Dave Muller, Lisa Lapinski, Jennifer Bornstein for Mike Kelley; Andrea Bergart, and Max Heiges, and Kari Cholnoky for Chris Martin; DW Fitzpatrick, Collier Schorr, and Sarah Rapson for Richard Prince; Margaret Lee and Susan Jennings for Cindy Sherman.

There are many possible lists and visual maps to devise from all of this. The list below, organized from artist to studio assistant (as designated by the /), though incomplete and always growing, maps not single movements or styles but overlapping lives and artistic trajectories - an artists' economy where attention flows both ways.⁷ Submissions to expand the list welcome.

Three or four generations (list in formation)

Vito Acconci / Oscar Tuazon / Graham Collins
Gretchen Bender / Rirkrit Tiravanija / Udomsak Krisanamis
Nayland Blake / Vincent Fecteau / Bill Jenkins
Betty Blayton / Janet Olivia Henry / Brittany Adeline King
Robert Gober / DW Fitzpatrick / Jenni Crain
Peter Halley / Wayne Gonzales / Caitlin Keogh
Ronald Jones / Elizabeth Peyton / Matt Keegan
Edward Kienholz / Jack Goldstein / Ashley Bickerton
Ed Paschke / Jeff Koons / Sarah Morris
Robert Rauschenberg / Brice Marden / Jane Swavely
Dorothea Rockburne / Carroll Dunham / Barnaby Furnas
Joel Shapiro / Christopher Wool / Josh Smith / Jacob Kassay
Jack Whitten / Augustine Boyce Cummings / Faith Icecold

Two generations (list in formation)

Matthew Barney / Keith Edmier
Vija Celmins / Jason Fox
Gregory Crewdson / Justine Kurland
Jeremy Deller / Haroon Mirza
Urs Fischer / Darren Bader
Antony Gormley / Gabriel Orozco
Dan Graham / Antoine Catala
Jenny Holzer / Bill Jenkins

Ken Jacobs / Antoine Catala
Joan Jonas / Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Martin Kippenberger / Jutta Koether
Sean Landers / Emily Mae Smith
Sol LeWitt / Adrian Piper
Paul McCarthy / Lisa Anne Auerbach
Marilyn Minter / Robert Melee and Lisa Ruyter
Donald Moffett / Shaun Krupa and Julia Rommel
Lorraine O'Grady / Sur Rodney (Sur)
Laura Owens / Jonas Wood and Kate Mosher Hall
Seth Price / Valerie Keane
Dana Schutz / Jamian Juliano-Villani
Laurie Simmons / Josephine Meckseper
Andra Ursuța / Sam Linguist
Meyer Vaisman / Huma Bhabha
Andy Warhol / George Condo
Lawrence Weiner / Jessica Jackson Hutchins

The story ends where it began: at the doorstep - standing at Gober's door after my letter went unanswered. I had written to Paula Cooper to ask for Gober's contact; the gallery had given me only his address, not his phone number. On a RISD school trip in 1993 to see the Whitney Biennial, I took advantage of a free afternoon of exploration around the city before we were all meant to rendez-vous back at the bus to return to Providence. I went to inquire in person.

Showing up was not a strategy so much as an act of youthful bravado, desperation, or belief that being present mattered, which proved correct. I could not have known that twenty-four years later, in 2017, I would co-found the gallery Gordon Robichaux with my friend and fellow artist Jacob Robichaux, where we would go on to present solo exhibitions with DW Fitzpatrick and Siobhan Liddell, both whom I first met that summer working for Gober in 1993. In reflecting on this rite of passage, I am struck not by how it narrates a kind of "origin myth" so much as serves as a reminder that art is made through contact: between people, across generations, from hand to hand. The assistant stands at that threshold, never fully inside or outside, holding the door open long enough for something lasting to pass through.

¹ Claudia Carson and Paulina Pobocha with Robert Gober, "Chronology," in Robert Gober, *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, ed. Ann Temkin, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

² Press release, *Assistants*, Rebecca Camacho Presents, San Francisco, March 12 - April 25, 2026.

³ An important precedent for this exhibition is the group show, *In the Making: Artists, Assistants, and Influence*, Luxembourg + Co, New York, February 25 - April 16, 2016.

⁴ See Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

⁵ Merlin Carpenter, "I Was an Assistant (to Kippenberger, Büttner and Oehlen)," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 1 (September 1990): 119 - 22.

⁶ Caitlin Keough, personal message to the author.

⁷ Jerry Saltz, "Help Jerry Saltz Build an Art Family Tree," *New York Magazine*, June 20, 2011.

IN CONVERSATION: George Stoll & John Schabel on Jennifer Bartlett

The following conversation between artists George Stoll (b. 1954 Baltimore, MD. Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) and John Schabel (b. 1957 Great Falls, MT. Lives and works in New York, NY) took place on 4 February 2026. The transcript has been condensed and revised for clarity.

JOHN SCHABEL: Julia Wachtel, Johanna Boyce and I shared a loft on Broadway just above Grand Street. We moved there in 1978.

GEORGE STOLL: The one we had was on Broadway near the World Trade Center. The loft was maybe \$600. a month. Which was a lot. I was working as a busboy three days a week so I had just enough money to pay my rent. I had a roommate, Donald Baechler.

JS: Yeah. We had a big space and we brought in another person, Harry Read. Harry had been a student of Elizabeth Murray's at Cal Arts. He got in touch with Elizabeth and she hired him to do some odd jobs around her building and he brought me along, cleaning out the basement of this old loft building on White Street. Then Elizabeth had me come back and do some carpentry for her. Later there was an opening for a preparator, what we called an art handler, at Paula Cooper (Gallery). Elizabeth recommended me for that and I got the job. I worked at Paula's for two years.

Paula did a renovation and there was a lot of extra work to get finished on time and she was having problems with contractors. I brought my friends in, Bob Gober and Steve Wolfe, and the three of us worked for a few months. That was really fun. And I got to meet all the artists that showed at Paula's, Jennifer (Bartlett) included. I'm not sure if Bob met Jennifer then, or if it was later.

There was a group of artists and a group of available assistants and we kind of moved around a bit.

GS: We were all people who made things. I think that one of the reasons why we were ready to be art assistants is because we had developed these skills out of necessity. Everybody was moving into raw spaces. I knew a lot of people that could do some plumbing, some carpentry. And if you did your own plumbing then you could get hired to do someone else's. It was the same way with cabinet making and building.

My brother-in-law Andy Spence worked for Paula. Did you ever work together?

JS: No he was there one or two art handlers before me.

GS: Well he hired me to paint a wall white at the gallery. I think I painted it with a brush ... it took me all day! I was very very slow at painting this wall. And Paula came out and looked at the wall and looked at me and then went back into her office. And then a couple hours later Douglas Baxter came out and looked at me and tapped his

foot and pointed at his watch ... I'm glad that Jennifer didn't call Paula and ask her for my recommendation; I never would have gotten the job.

I started working for Jennifer in the fall of 1984.

JS: That sounds right.

GS: You started before me.

JS: Bob was doing some assistant work for Jennifer. At a certain point Jennifer got an apartment in Paris and it needed painting and the French painters were very, very expensive. She said, well I can just fly over some young artists from New York to paint the apartment. They need the work and it will be cheaper. I knew Jennifer at that point, but Bob was going to paint the apartment and he brought me along to help.

GS: Did Paula mind that? Were you still working for Paula?

JS: No, I had stopped working for Paula. This was 1983. Jennifer booked roundtrip flights for us, I think it was for a week or 10 days, and it quickly became clear that we were not going to finish it in anywhere near that amount of time. So we ended up making another trip back and brought Steve Wolfe along. And that was scheduled for also too short a time. We didn't finish it but we got further along.

And then after that Bob went back to New York. Steve went on a trip to Italy. I stayed (in Paris) to apartment sit because Jennifer and Mathieu (Jennifer's husband, French actor Mathieu Carrière) both left. Jennifer went back to New York and Mathieu was working somewhere in Europe.

I apartment sat and took French classes for I don't know, six months. The apartment was all done. It was all painted, but it was totally empty. It was a great place to stay. It was the location where they shot *Last Tango in Paris*. Their terrace is the one that Marlon Brando sticks his gum under the railing.

GS: Oh really?

JS: We looked but the gum was not there anymore.

And so then I went back to New York. I kept delaying because I was having such a good time living there. But finally I went back to New York. And then, a few months later, this would have been 1984, Jennifer hired me to go back to Paris with her as her studio assistant. Before that I'd been a painter and a house sitter.

GS: Ok.

JS: We got a lot done. Stuff that then came back to New York in a shipping container and you guys were at the New York studio. I stayed (in Paris) a little longer to work on a film there. Then it was January 1985 that I came back (to New York) and that's

when I met you. You and David (Knudsvig) and Simon (Jutras) and Denis (Letar) were already working at her New York studio.

GS: Frank Moore was my recommendation to Jennifer. I was his assistant for 2 years on his film *Beehive*.

JS: You met Jennifer through Frank?

GS: I met her through Bob. I did the set for a play called *Faking House*. It was one night. Richard Elovich wrote, directed and starred in this play, with Suzanne Fletcher. Do you remember Suzanne? You saw her picture in David Armstrong's book. Richard played the Cat in the Hat. The whole thing was pretty abstract. We did it at St Mark's Church in-the-Bowery and at the performance Liz DeLuna sat next to me, she was one of the people who worked on *Beehive*. And on my other side was David Wojnarowicz. A few months before this, David had meticulously written out his name phonetically for me and I was very proud to introduce him to Liz with the phonetic sounding of his name and he looked at me with a kind of horror because people around us turned to look at him. He had just become famous. Just within the past few months he had become well-known.

Anyway. After the performance Bob came up to me, I knew him socially, I mean, back in New York in the 80's, there were really only 100 people. So we all did know each other, some peripherally. It was an inevitability that we would all know each other.

He said 'Are you looking for work?' I said, 'I'm kind of always looking for work.' And he said, 'I have a possible job for you' and set me up to be interviewed by Jennifer. But then when I interviewed with her, we just gossiped about Frank Moore. Frank was the recommendation that qualified me.

I guess she had come in from Paris to do this. Her studio was empty, really empty. I mean there was nothing in it that I can remember. And she tasked me with buying equipment and hiring a crew. She just gave me carte blanche ... so that's when I hired Denis, who I'd known for years and worked on *Faking House*. I then hired David Knudsvig. Denis must have brought Simon because they were both French Canadian.

I just started buying things and hiring people. But we really got started when the shipment came from Paris (early 1985), the pieces you had been working on because they set the tone. You had made these boats, and I think the first thing I did was make the pastel stucco houses.

I leaned heavily on Bob. I called him almost every day asking him about things. He was getting ready for his first (solo) show (*Recent Sculptures*, 14 September - 9 October 1985) at Paula's I think, so it was kind of an important moment for a bunch of us. I remember I called him and said, 'Should I get a hammer drill?' He knew what a hammer drill was and I didn't ... and I asked him what brand of table saw. I called him all the time. When we were building the pastel houses, he recommended using Structo-Lite instead of cement or stucco. He was not there but he was essential to

helping me and helping all of us I think. And then you arrived.

JS: I was coming from Paris and you had bought all these tools and you were so afraid you bought the wrong things and I was going to laugh.

GS: We did end up using everything! But it was all a shot in the dark. At the time I was pursuing a career as a designer for films but I had only worked on low budget movies and plays; I didn't know how to spend money. And Jennifer, her gesture is extravagance. Later, after you had left, she wanted a lift so that she could make these tall paintings and I knew her by then so I got her the most deluxe, expensive elevator that was available. And then there was a photograph of her (on the lift) in the newspaper, probably the New York Times, and Jasper Johns called her and asked her about it because he wanted one too.

So we got the retrospective done (*Jennifer Bartlett*, Walker Art Center, May 1985. Travelled and largely expanded to the Brooklyn Museum, November 1985). The Walker was one lump of people, one group. And then afterward a lot of us stayed on with Jennifer.

JS: Yeah you guys went on later and did another project. I stopped at that point, I guess because I wanted to go work on movies.

GS: Were you getting movie work then?

JS: One of the first jobs I remember was briefly on the movie *Highlander* (principal photography began on 7 May 1985, with filming running through 30 August 1985), and you worked with me on that. We had to paint this huge roof on top of Silvercup Studios. It was like a two day job.

GS: Right. You and me and Laurel (Douglas). There was all this overlap working on movies and assisting artists.

And then I hired a bunch of people, I crewed up to do the movie *A Return to Salem's Lot* (filming began on 4 August 1986, with production primarily taking place in Vermont and additional photography in New York City). You were one of the people, Denis, of course, and Simon and Tony (Feher).

That must have been when Tony came in. And then we went back to Jennifer's as a new crew. The new crew was David Knudsvig, Tony and me. David had a boyfriend, David Nelson, so he became part of it. Vickie (Cardaro) was Jennifer's assistant in the office, and she brought in Nancy Brooks Brody. We were working on this project where there were four large painted sculptures that went along with these 10 × 14 foot paintings. And each of us had our own sculpture that we were working on.

JS: And how long did you guys work on that for?

GS: For fucking ever.

JS: The particular show with those paintings and the sculpture in front of them. (*Four Paintings (for Victor Ganz)* at Paula Cooper Gallery, 3 - 27 February 1988).



Jennifer Bartlett, *Four Paintings (for Victor Ganz)*, installation view.

GS: They were complicated to get right.

And you were working on movies. I wasn't making art. I didn't realize that I was supposed to make art until I moved to LA in 1989. And I had my first show in 1994.

JS: I was always making some kind of art.

GS: David Knudsvig, not necessarily because of working for Jennifer, but he took his work more seriously. He had a career and was in the Biennial (Whitney Biennial 1995). Denis became more serious about making his work. Nancy Brooks Brody became more serious about making hers and she had a career. And Tony. It did seem like we all started to have shows in the 90s after we had this experience with Jennifer. Is that what you remember?

JS: Yes.

GS: I didn't learn how to make art from Jennifer, but I learned how to have a career in the art world. I became informed about the art world and how the systems work, she was very transparent about how things worked.

Jennifer did tell me she felt like she had done pretty well considering how many artists that had worked for her had careers; Bob, you, David, me, Denis, Tony, and Nancy. There were a lot of people who worked for her for years that went off and had careers. She was proud of it.

JS: Yes. And she was very generous to us. I really appreciate having worked for her. And Elizabeth. And Paula, too.

GS: You have to be generous to be proud, instead of competitive.



Tony Feher in Jennifer Bartlett's studio, circa 1986.

IN CONVERSATION: *Over and Under*, Robert Gober & Daisy Murray Holman

Artists Elizabeth Murray and Robert Gober were friends for many decades, but first he was her handyman and assistant from roughly 1979 - 1984. Living with her young son in TriBeCa, Murray had recently bought a loft on White Street and was building a wall to split the apartment in two. Gober was quickly elevated from putting up drywall to constructing stretchers. Daisy Murray Holman spoke with Gober in December of 2025 to tease out the process between artist and assistant. Murray and Gober achieved a flow state in the studio together fueled by an easy friendship, and his handiwork allowed clarity in her vision. Gober discusses the creativity in Murray's pregnancies and the space his departure created.

Many thanks to BG for his contributions and friendship.

Bob Gober: ... she was intensely creative during her pregnancies.

Daisy Murray Holman: Yeah.

BG: I made a lot of stretchers and did a lot of work for her while she was pregnant. I think it was very deeply meaningful to her, her second family...



A pregnant Elizabeth Murray with her dog Rags, 1982.

BG: Aside from working on her canvases with her, I did a lot of work around your house. I built a kitchen that you had until you renovated White Street and did all kinds of miscellaneous house jobs for her too.

DMH: And how did that come about? You starting to do that, the handiwork?

BG: By nature, I'm a handyman. And that's how I met her because she was renovating her loft and I was working for a contractor, Jack. I forget his last name. He was married to (Elizabeth's friend) Marilyn. I started working for Jack, on the bottom rung of the construction ladder, hired to demo Elizabeth's sheetrock walls and put them in a dumpster on the street. The kind of work that first wave immigrants do now. These days I'm not seeing art school graduates doing that kind of dirty grunt work. And that's how I met her. Some people talk to the help and some people don't. Elizabeth was somebody who talked to the help, wanted the help to like her, understand that she was on their side.

DMH: It was very strange for her... (NB: Murray grew up without financial means and housing security, being the boss and having hired help was never something she imagined would be in the cards for her)

BG: We started talking and hit it off. The person who had been making her stretchers was stopping, and I had made stretchers for other people, so I offered, and that's how I transitioned from demolition to making stretchers for your mom. Then it just grew because she knew I was handy. And we had fun together.



Interior view, Elizabeth Murray's White Street studio.

BG: We had a great rapport, but you know it was terrific for her work when I finally left. When I started working with Elizabeth she was making these paintings that she described as "star shape". She had a show in Japan of those works. I think the

first ones I made for her looked like snowmen. They were these big round bulbous shapes. But these were all flat against the wall. Eventually I helped her make paintings where the canvases overlapped and then lifted up off the wall. Elizabeth would draw a big life-size real-scale cartoon for me on cheap white paper. She would just write "over" or "under" where separate canvases overlapped. She would leave those structural decisions to me. I'd take the drawing back to my little workshop and do my best. I would always try to do the most anonymous job, but it was tricky when one canvas would lift and overlap the other. And then they started curving up and off the wall. I always told her, "Elizabeth, you have to come over when I'm doing this" because there was a myriad of choices here. How far do I lift this off the wall? And she never did. She never wanted to. I totally understood though. It was working well, why screw it up? But then when I left, she floundered for a bit with assistants, finding somebody and building that rapport. I think in frustration, she took the stretcher making process into her studio, started making those clay models. It really opened up a world for her. The canvases, the stretchers, became so much more creative after I left...

DMH: That's so amazing, Bob. I feel like you just cracked the case. A hundred percent you can see it. You can see that things are flat, even if they're lifting off the wall. There's a certain rectangular nature to the work. There's a geometry. And then all of a sudden, it's like algebra comes into it. There's this roundness that emerges.

BG: Yeah, a Rococo in space kind of quality...

DMH: Oh, I love that...



Elizabeth Murray, *Her Story*. 1984. Oil on canvas. In 3 parts. 103 1/8 × 135 1/8 × 11 inches (261.6 × 342.9 × 27.9 cm). Collection of Laurene Powell Jobs, San Francisco.

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Front Cover:
Tony Feher
Untitled, 2012 (detail)
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51.4 × 38.1 cm

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