Ron Clark—whose fiftieth anniversary as a director and beacon of the Whitney Independent Study Program we celebrate in the following pages with a conversation and a cluster of speeches given in his honor at the Whitney Museum of American Art this past fall—shares more than just his initials with Robinson Crusoe, invented by Daniel Defoe in 1719. Stranded on an island and in a deeply hostile environment, both R.C.s had to invent a multiplicity of tools for learning and survival. Jean-Jacques Rousseau celebrated Crusoe as the lonely pedagogue, and James Joyce, in a lecture on Defoe in 1912, identified his crucial features as “his manly independence, his unconscious cruelty, the persistence, the slow but effective intelligence, the calculating silence . . .”

It is almost unimaginable in our era that one person could have developed and sustained a comparable educational program and institution over five decades. Both maintaining theoretical consistency and engendering substantial methodological innovation, the ISP has helped form artistic identities and critical consequences now spanning several generations. This is all the more miraculous in the face of an ever more massive and monolithic art world, defined by speculation and spectacle, and the most powerful strike against what the program has initiated and continues to formulate: cultural practices as oppositional means of dismantling the socially oppressive controls of race and class through political critiques of media domination, feminist and psychoanalytical theory, aesthetics from Brecht to Barthes and after, and political and economic theory from Gramsci to Chantal Mouffe, from Raymond Williams and Stewart Hall to David Harvey.

Manhattan’s subversive cultures of the 1960s are typically associated with Andy Warhol’s Factory. Ron Clark’s ISP now stands as an opposite conception of a collectivity of subjects. The astounding number of artistic and scholarly figures to emerge from the Whitney Independent Study Program might easily form a real counterculture to Warhol’s entrepreneurial asylum and its fallout in the present.

We thank Adam Weinberg, the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Joanne Cassullo, the loyal trustee of the ISP, for having supported the Whitney Independent Study Program’s 50th-anniversary symposium, held on October 19 and 20, 2018. Many thanks are due to Cassandra Guan, who did almost
everything to make the symposium happen and succeed, supported by Kathryn Potts, Megan Heuer, and Isabelle Dow.

The following artists, critics, curators, and scholars contributed to the symposium with speeches or papers or participated in roundtable discussions. Since the magazine’s spatial limitations did not allow for publishing all contributions, we gratefully list the names of the participants (in order of appearance at the event itself): Nora Alter, Naomi Beckwith, Emily Jacir, Tom McDonough, Sadia Shirazi, Kenneth White, Hal Foster, Huey Copeland, Rosalyn Deutsche, Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke, Fred Wilson, Alex Alberro, Johanna Burton, Emily Apter, Gregg Bordowitz, Eva Díaz, Mary Kelly, Devin Kenny, Trista Mallory, Anthony Cokes, Jonathan Crary, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Laura Mulvey, Ben Young, Soyoung Yoon, Jennifer Gonzalez, Sharon Hayes, David Harvey, Chantal Mouffe, Martha Rosler, Gayatri Spivak, and Cassandra Guan.

Finally, we thank the authors of the speeches and papers for having generously agreed to publish them on short notice to make this homage to Ron Clark and the ISP timely.