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Fall 2016 Faculty Development Grant Report

My Fall 2016 Faculty Development Grant funded my travel to New York City to attend the College Art Association (CAA) Conference, February 15th – 18th, 2017 (with a day on either end for travel), where I chaired the session Pedagogy of Social and Environmental Justice.

The night before our panel I had the pleasure of joining the panelists for a dinner at the home of Deb Johnson’s, Executive Director of the Center for Sustainable Design Strategies at Pratt Institute who founded the Partnership for Academic Leadership on Sustainability (PALS) of which I’ve been a Fellow representing Otis since 2010. It was a great way for those of us who hadn’t met in person to get to know each other and set us up for a comfortable and easy-going discussion at the end of the panel. It was also wonderful because this panel wouldn’t have even been thought of if it weren’t for my involvement in PALS.
We presented in the middle of the last day of the conference (Saturday January 18th), so we had a modest but engaged audience of about 30 or so people. You can hear a recording of the whole session here: https://soundcloud.com/jaquis-2/pedagogyofsocialandenvironmentaljustice-caa2017

Here I am speaking with the panelists as we wait for the audience to arrive, and below is my introductory text:

Welcome to our panel on the Pedagogy of Social and Environmental Justice. Thank you all for being here.

My name is Michele Jaquis and I am the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies and Artists Community Teaching Program at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. I also teach trans-disciplinary studio courses in the Creative Action Program in which students collaborate with each other and a community partner in order to address pressing environmental and social issues.

Otis College recently adopted Institutional Learning Outcomes, one of which is Social Responsibility stating that “Otis graduates will be able to demonstrate an awareness of the social and environmental impacts of art and design, produce creative, sustainable, and ethical solutions in their work, and bring positive change to their communities.”

So I’ve been curious, how does this really play out in practice and what can we learn from what’s happening on other campuses?

This panel session also grew out of conversations between myself and two of the panelists - Jane Marsching and Hugh Pocock. The three of us are Fellows in the
Partnership for Academic Leadership on Sustainability, which Jane will speak more about. For several years now we’ve been talking about putting a panel like this together with the hope that we could answer some questions: What new pedagogical models are out there? What radical experiments have spawned innovation and failures? What new approaches to art and design education are needed? And ultimately, how can we encourage and empower our students to better their world in the context of climate change, economic crisis, and social and racial inequalities?

Our context over those years of conversation included droughts on the West coast, and super-storms on the East, bookended by the Occupy Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement. My context at Otis in particular includes being a part of one of the most diverse art schools in the United States. 76% of our students are students of color. It is an amazing environment to work in. In addition 82% of our students receive scholarships and financial aid, with a significant population qualifying for PELL grants. As a former PELL Grant recipient myself, I know that means we are serving students for whom college would not be possible without government financial assistance.

Now with the Trump administration in power, our context has changed, and I feel a sense of urgency and responsibility to my students like never before, particularly those who are from the middle east, or who are undocumented, or on financial aid, or who simply who care about climate change and social justice issues. This conversation feels more important now than when I first proposed it.

We will start with introductions of our five panelists who will each give a ten-minute presentation about the work they are doing at their respective institutions. After which we will have about 30 – 40 minutes for a discussion and I will invite you all to participate with any questions and comments you may have. So let’s begin.

Jane D. Marsching, Massachusetts College of Art, “Incubating Change: Pedagogies of Sustainability in Art and Design Education” showed a series of images on a 6 sec timer as she shared a range of sustainability initiatives (curricular and co-curricular) happening through the Sustainability Incubator on Mass Art’s campus. One strategy that stood out for me was that the Incubator encouraged faculty to hold one or two class sessions in the space making them open to the public with the purpose of sharing sustainability knowledge beyond the Mass Art community – tying into the College’s mission as a public, state-funded college – the only art school of its kind.

Carol Padberg’s presentation “The MFA as Edge Space: Art, Ecology, Craft, Culture and Place” presented the results of the first year of Hartford Art School, University of Hartford’s new nomadic, low-residency, interdisciplinary MFA program, which is like a combination of Otis’ Creative Action and Public Practice programs. Carol described much of the program as exercises in “radical listening and witnessing” in which “we learned” from local experts, implying that the faculty learn alongside the students while in the field.

Hugh Pocock, faculty and founding Coordinator of the Concentration in Sustainability and Social Practice at Maryland Institute College of Art, spoke about climate change as a social justice issue in “Climate Change, Police Brutality and the Contemporary Studio Classroom.” He argued that social injustice is a cause for the environmental crisis and the exploitation of people and the exploitation of the earth come from the same place. He questioned if sustainability is a white privilege, noting that the National Parks were founded on a white supremacy sense of purity. In the context of MICA, he described mostly white, privileged students working in the surrounding communities defined by poverty and the killing by police of black men, like Freddie Grey.
Anne H. Berry teaches Graphic Design at Cleveland State University and discussed how to address “Racial Disparities in Design Education,” starting first by describing how “visual symbols profoundly affect people’s views of themselves and one another.” She argued that designers and advertisers need to focus on issues of representation and social/racial justice, something I notice our Com Arts and Digital Media majors thinking about when they minor in Sustainability recognizing the power they have as media makers to influence society in a positive way. Anne also outlined several pedagogical methods such as team work as cultural exchange, getting students to discuss and articulate their privilege, and providing visual examples of design outside of white European art history – such as African artifacts, architecture and fractals patterns in hair set in cornrows.

Audra Buck-Coleman is the graphic design program director at the University of Maryland College Park. Her presentation focused on two socially engaged public design projects that addressed identity issues and how important it is to not only assess student learning, but also the impact this work has on the community partners. She argues for long term community partnerships that help generate self representation and provide enough time for longitudinal studies on each project’s lasting impact.

The Q and A session afterwards was lively and engaging and we had to cut it short in order to pack up for the next session to get ready.
I addition to chairing my panel on Saturday, I spent the week attending other panel sessions, networking with colleagues and friends from other institutions, and viewing a few art exhibitions – including galleries in Chelsea, Brooklyn and Hoboken, and the Mierle Laderman Ukeles retrospective at the Queens Museum, who was the 2017 Public Art Dialog award recipient for achievement in the field of public art and the first (and perhaps only) artists in residence with the New York City Sanitation Department. I had known her work since the nineties (when I was in art school), and met her when she spoke with the Otis MFA Public Practice students a few years ago, but it was wonderful to see all her work in person and to bring back the exhibition catalog to share with the Sustainability students and faculty.

Highlights from the panels I attended include:

On the panel Picturing Social Movements from Emancipation to Black Lives Matter, Sarah Lewis, from Harvard, talked about how aesthetic encounters can shift into and instigate action. Two of her examples were how hearing Louis Armstrong perform is what got a white Southern man to become the lawyer for the Brown vs. Board of Education case. And seeing an image of Earth from the Apollo mission is what got many people to consider the Earth to be a living being that needs care and protection, ultimately launching the birth of the environmentalist movement.

Global Conversations I: Unsettling the Discipline: Decolonizing the Curriculum was the first in a series of talks organized by the CAA – Getty International Program. Many of speakers on this panel talked in terms of the “periphery,” wondering if we could teach women’s art history, or non-western art histories, as if they were the center. All of it made me well aware that these conversations were in fact positioned as separatists, the way the global art or feminist art perspective is often reserved for its own chapter in a typical art history book or a separate week in a typical course. Georgina Gluzman from Universidad de San Andés in Argentina talked about the challenges of teaching Women and Art classes in a country in which
Feminism is still a new concept. She asked how could one teach women’s art history without separating it from their male counterparts? How can feminist art historical strategies interrogate the privilege associated with who can afford to go to college / art school? And can we go beyond breaking the glass ceiling by recognizing the connections between those at the top of academia and those cleaning the dorm rooms? Hugues Heumen Tchana, of University of Maroua in Camaroon spoke about the ways in which Eurocentric Museum practices in colonized Africa have aestheticized African ritual objects, removing them from their intended purposes, and how a decolonized curriculum might change the way art history is taught in African countries.

Public Art Dialog organized a panel on Public Art in the Era of Black Lives Matter and was probably one of the best-attended panels I went to. Art Historian, Evie Terrono, from Randolph-Macon College in Virginia presented artists who have reinterpreted the confederate flag, like John Sims and Sonya Clark. Arielle Julia Brown, from Brown University, presented her own socially engaged, site specific performances and collaborative work with various historical societies, dealing with the history and legacy of the slave trade in Providence, RI. Christopher Metzger discussed the Inside Out Project, a photo mural project made with his students at Morgan State University, one of the historic black colleges. Students shot portraits of each other with chain link fence images projected onto each body (referencing invisible barriers, like glass ceilings), then printed and wheat-pasted these portraits on an exterior wall near campus, similar to street artists JR’s large scale portraits wheat-pasted in cities around the world. Aaron Counts, from the non-profit 4 Culture, discussed arts based alternatives to youth incarceration, through his project Creative Justice. Rather than ask “what’s wrong with them?” he urges us to ask ‘what is happening to them?’ and notes that creating is a survival tactic and artists can be agents of truth and disruption, which can be a positive force. It reminded me of conversations we often have in the ACT Program around the benefits of arts education in communities that are disadvantaged and/or oppressed, as well as my first teaching experience in a CT state run juvenile detention center.

Lost Abundant and Fugitive Sound, chaired by Lynne Kirby of CA College of the Arts, included Alison O’Daniel, who has taught in Sculpture/New Genres at Otis. Alison presented her socially engaged video, installation and performance projects about the intersections of deafness and hearing. Also on the panel was Andy Ditzer, who spoke about the qualities of “wild sound,” that which is recorded at the same time as the film image but is not always in sync. And Fo Wilson spoke about how we can “hear race” in one’s voice, yet stereotypes of how one might “think” a black person, for instance, sounds, question the authenticity of the radicalized voice. While talking to Lynne Kirby afterwards, she invited me to submit to her audio blog the audio postcards made by my Community Radio students in response to the events occurring in the first few weeks after Trump’s inauguration.

On the panel Feminist Interventions in the Technosphere, Tali Weinberg presented her series “It’s not just about the rain” in which she used California climate data to inform the patterns and color choices of her woven textiles made of organic cotton and natural dyes - work that I was eager to share with the faculty teaching Science and Sustainable Design.

The panel on Operating Manual for Living in the Worst Case Scenario also presented good examples to share with Sustainability students and faculty, particularly Jessica Charlesworth’s (School of the Art institute of Chicago) examples of survivalist kits and Caudine Jaenichen’s (Chapman University) updated Visual Standards for Sothern California Tsunami Evacuation Information.

In the panel on Family Practice: Artists and Family Collaborations artists Courtney Kessel, Margaret Morgan, Christin Clifford, and Rachel Lakowitz with her husband, art historian Walter Meyer, all discussed the ways in which parenthood affects their practices. Some used their kids as studio assistants – Rachel said “they won’t clean their room but they’ll happily clean the studio;” while others collaborated with their kids on sculptures, installations and performances articulating that “the work is because of” them, “not about” them.
I was deeply moved and inspired seeing Wafaa Bilal, Iraqi artist teaching at NYU, discuss his work made in response to discovering his brother was killed by a drone attack, on the panel Aesthetic Justice Interventions in Media, History and Practice. For one project, “Domestic Tension” (originally called “Shoot an Iraqi”) Bilal lived in a gallery for 31 days while participants shot him with paintball gun controlled by a first person shooter game they could access from his website. Over the course of the project hackers turned the gun into an automatic weapon and a high rank on Digg.com got him bombarded with 20 thousand shots in one day, meanwhile sympathetic audience members brought him food and paint balls. Other projects mapped Iraqi civilian deaths through tattoos in black light invisible ink on his back and let participants vote on who would get water boarded – Dog or Iraqi. In this intense, yet important work, Bilal poignantly implicates his audience. It reminded me of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s performances, which address the display and otherness of non-whites in museums and world’s fairs. Some audience members “get it” and feel remorse for past wrongs, while others play along taking on the role of the oppressor without batting an eye.

With that in mind it was very fitting to next hear Coco Fusco speak during the Distinguished Artists Interview. She talked about how “politics [and power] are the materials for her work and how the use of testimony (written documents and oral histories) as research inspires the characters she develops for her performances. One such project involved developing a female interrogator as a character, who believed using her female sexuality was a useful technique with Muslim captors – resulting in the book “A Field Guide to Female Interrogators.”

Overall it was a great week at CAA in NYC - catching up with friends and colleagues and finding inspiration for the courses I teach and supervise, as well as for my own practice as an artist.