CRITIQUING THE CANON
A STUDENT PROJECT

(1. SLIDE) I would like to begin by presenting you, the faculty in the audience, with a challenge, the same challenge I gave my Foundation students last semester. (2. SLIDE) Select, as a thought experiment, seventy-five examples of major works of art you think that your art students should know. You can choose from three periods: Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern. (3. SLIDE) You have rules that you must follow: you may pick twenty-five examples per period, but you must be international in scope and inclusive in your outcome. (4. SLIDE) In other words, you are being asked to redo the old art history canon, without privileging the white males and the artists of the West. (5. SLIDE) Oh, you say, well, we all know that the “canon” is so over. Intellectually, we may have discarded and/or interrogated canonicity, but, let me add this to the thought experiment: take the challenge with a small group of your colleagues and watch how long it takes before someone says, “But we cannot do Pre-Modern without the Parthenon,” or “Surely, we must include Van Gogh in Modern, or “Bruce Nauman is too important to the post-Modern to leave him out.” (6. SLIDE) In other words, the Canon has the afterlife of uranium, haunting art professionals, who were drilled in surveys and force-fed Janson and Gardner. But for foundation students, who are just learning about the so-called “significant” “major monuments,” does the canon matter for them?

(7. SLIDE) In the Fall of 2017 the Visual Culture classes at Otis College of Art and Design were given a project: curate a pair of walls that faced each other, i.e. a hallway between Liberal Studies and studio classes. Their task was to “install,” arrange sixty odd works of art in relation to a theme, a fairly typical museum exhibition. The works of art were selected by my colleagues while I was on Sabbatical, so the outcome of the exercise was of interest to me. When I returned to Otis in Late August, I stood in the hall, eying the array of paintings, sculptures, various objects, architecture and other major monuments tacked on the white expanse. (8. SLIDE) I was joined by my chair who just happens to be Japanese. She said, “What do you think of the Wall, Jeanne”?” I said, “There seem to be a lot of white males,” “I thought the same thing,” she said. We stood silently staring at the whiteness and then went our separate ways. But two things had been settled: the project would be nicknamed “The Wall,” as in Pink Floyd, and, second, we would have to tear down this wall. (9. SLIDE)

Before tearing anything down, it is necessary to build up but to take on the task of curating two separate exhibitions for two separate classes, I did nothing new: I just applied my standard mode of teaching: Universal Design. (10. SLIDE) Although I have long applied this concept in the classroom, Universal Design is a term that originates in architecture and design. (11. SLIDE) On the campus of the University of California, Irvine, there is a fine and handsome library, designed by the distinguished architect William Pereira in 1965. (12. SLIDE) Floating above the campus on a semi-concealed base set on pilotis, the Langston Library seems to welcome all comers to its floors, full of books, and its rooms, lined with computers. (13. SLIDE) Over the years, the Library has adapted and modernized to accommodate the needs of technology undreamt of in
the sixties, but this building was not built for and has not evolved to respond to the concept of Universal Design. (14. SLIDE)

According to Universal Design, if a building cannot be entered easily by everyone, then it is a badly designed building. With all due apologies to the late Mr. Pereira, if one is in a wheelchair, it is no less than a half an hour—an arduous circuitous journey from the parking lot—to locate an entrance, (15. SLIDE) If one has broken a foot and is on crutches, then one must navigate flight after flight of terraced stairs before one can cross the threshold. If one is the least bit elderly or out of shape, one arrives exhausted after climbing a not insignificant incline to learning. (16. SLIDE) Langston Library may be imposing and impressively located but only the fit and hardy can easily enter and not all students are either fit or hardy or uninjured or agile. (17. SLIDE) An excellent building is the same as an excellent academic or studio course: if all cannot enter equally, then the most impressive intellectual feat of teaching is a failure because some students are barred. (18. SLIDE)

Otis is one of the most diverse art schools in the nation and every classroom contains a wide variety of sexual preferences, ethnicities, nationalities, races, religions, genders, and a range of abilities to speak English. (19. SLIDE) Everyone has to participate in my classes, everyone has the opportunity to learn according to their abilities—through oral lessons, by visual stimulation, the process of physically making, writing, reading, speaking, and so on. For the Wall Project, (20. SLIDE) all the different modes of learning had to be activated so that all could access the enterprise. The goal was for every student to walk away with a working knowledge of the previously culled works of art, an understanding of how to present art history information to an audience through an installation and via an oral presentation. (21. SLIDE) Most importantly, the students had to learn how to collaborate productively in teams, while making significant contributions as individuals. On the surface, these requirements sound like rather a lot, but all I had to do is to start the engines, so to speak, stand back, and let the students take charge. (22. SLIDE) Given complete freedom, accompanied by an occasional burst of guidance or incidental advice from me, the students took up their challenge. One of my colleagues described her tactics for her class as, “I left the room.” (23. 2SLIDE)

As for the students, they divided themselves into three teams, Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post Modern and each team sub-divided itself into task-oriented groups. (24. SLIDE) One group would write wall text, one group would do the labeling for the exhibition, (25. SLIDE) one group would install the images and (26. SLIDE) one group would de-install the exhibition and so on. (27. SLIDE) Each team had a captain to make sure the collaboration was proceeding smoothly. The job for each class was complex: first they had to figure out a way to present major concepts of, for example, formalism or genre, using only certain selected images. (28. SLIDE) Which images would be the best to discuss line or color or composition? The wall text, written entirely by the students and inserted into clear plastic sleeves, (29. SLIDE) had to identify the chosen works and explain—to the passersby—how to “read” a work art as an interplay of shapes, for example. (30. SLIDE) Each solution only led to yet another task: how can an exhibition
engage the people who are walking down the hall? How can the students activate the other students? How could a collaboration inspire more collaboration? (31. SLIDE)

Moving into problem solving mode, the students in the class working with Formalism decided to put up “clothes lines” of colorful string and used clothes pins to hang art note cards—my contributions—initing the visitors to leave notes or comments. (32. SLIDE) Students in the Genre class asked the spectators to select a length of colored string, a different color for each genre, and connect the works of art that could share the same characteristics. (33. SLIDE) Remarkably both string and scissors survived the week intact. (34. SLIDE) And everyone loved the colored strings, which, along with our scissors and tack hammers, were donated to the classes that came behind us. (35. SLIDE) On presentation day, having labored to set up the exhibit, the students, now professionally dressed, arrived at the Wall for their formal presentations. (36. SLIDE) Each student analyzed “their” work of art on the wall, explaining the issues of formal analysis or how subject matter and content fits into a genre—and, by the way, the students were allowed to make up new categories for genre. (37. SLIDE) After a filming of the presentation for posterity, it was all over..or so the students thought.. (38. SLIDE)

But I was not finished. The project had activated a universal array of learning abilities—from physical making to writing to speaking to collaboration—but one aspect of their art education still needed to be deployed: CRITIQUE. (39. SLIDE) The students had been given a group of images, constituting a pre-sorted body of received wisdom chosen for them. It was now time to critique the canon as a concept. Fortunately, the common syllabus for all the Visual Culture classes had a week devoted to a lecture on The Canon. (40. SLIDE) I presented the canon to my classes, first, as the perfect set of ratios and proportions for the perfected human body and for visually perfect works of architecture, then I moved to the medieval definition of the canon: religious writings included in the bible, and, from there, I presented the literary canon, the so-called “Great Books.” (41. SLIDE) Through class discussion, I found out that the students had read the same books I had read in high school. A few of them had read Maya Angelou, but, for the most part, their reading list was nearly identical to mine. Decades of debates, years of fighting the canon seemed to have not impacted high schools—not an Austen, not an Alcott, not a Brônte, not a Hughes, not a Hurston—but still Shakespeare and eternally Dickens. After the lecture, half-way through the period, the classes reverted to their usual groups and received their weekly research and presentation topics, activated through PROJECT BASED LEARNING. (42. SLIDE) That week the assignment was to create canons: the ten best examples of a particular category, which is the basic definition of any canon.

The students had to select then present their canons. Each student had to explain and defend every choice. In making the canons, the students experienced the difficulties of writing an art history text book: what to include and what to exclude and why—but the stakes were low. (43. SLIDE) Each of the four groups had a half hour to research and prepare and fifteen minutes to show their power points. To make it fun, I provided light weight low risk enjoyable canons—the hottest men in history, and I complained that there was no Brad Pitt; the best rock ‘n’ roll groups of the sixties, and I objected that
Motown had been left out. (44. SLIDE) Everyone had a great time debating who was the most voluptuous woman or man in the world, a celebration of the full-figured celebrity, but one student was heard leaving class, muttering darkly, “why did we do all this?” She would find out the next week. (45. SLIDE)

That would be the critique week, the week when the students had the entire class time to re-do the images that they had worked with for the Wall. But they had a choice, if they believed that the first version of the wall images was too male, too white, and too western, then they had to critique and reconsider in terms of Internationalism and inclusiveness. (46. SLIDE) If they were satisfied with the original Wall images then, they simply had to defend that canon. (47. SLIDE) But both classes chose to analyze, critique and remake the canon. Given a total of seventy-five images, they could add new images but then they might have to subtract another work. Decisions had to be made. Each choice constituted a critique, a lesson in analytic thinking. (48. SLIDE) The art history faculty had taken an entire summer to make their selections. But, I realized later, that was because we have been taught our entire professional lives that some works of art were more “important” than others. (49. SLIDE)

The students, on the other hand, had reached week eighth of their first year in college as relatively innocent neophytes. (50. SLIDE) For them, the assignment was the work of a few hours. The students had no attachments to any particular images and understood the canon in a very basic way: as an assemblage of excellent examples of works of art for a particular category, with the maker of the object being beside the point. (51. SLIDE) Effortlessly they moved past questions of “significance” or “necessity” usually privileged in a formation of any canon. (52. SLIDE) Rather than engage in what are really value judgments and all too often resulting in a revelation of racism and sexism. The students followed the dictates of the “history of art:” that art is universal and international and is manufactured by all kinds of people, many of whom are neither male nor white nor Western. The result of the work of the two classes was two new non-canonical canons. (53. SLIDE)

The budding artists in the Foundation class looked, not at any preexisting canon, but only at paintings, sculpture, architecture, and so on, and made their own selections. (54. SLIDE) True, they deliberately sought a universal selection of artists, but in doing so, they critiqued the way in which historical canons, whether literary or visual, had privileged males instead of selecting actual works of art on their own merit. (55. SLIDE) The following week, the three groups in the two classes presented their new selections and defended their choices. For students of this generation, a demographic that is variegated and multilingual, coming from all over the world, to America, the great melting pot, an inclusive selection of works of art is natural. (56. SLIDE) In creating their own non/canons, the students became teachers actively engaged in their own education. But from the point of view of teachers, it becomes clear that students who are included in art history, whose gender or sexuality or nationality is represented are immediately engaged in the material. (57. SLIDE) If international students or women are confronted with a wall of white males, they, as artists and as students, are disenfranchised and de-activated. Learning ceases to be universal and too many
students are shut out. (58. SLIDE) The project of the Wall exhibitions at Otis suggests that it will be students such as mine and yours who will re-write the history of art in their own voices, blended together into a chorus of incorporation. (59. SLIDE) Through collaboration within an ongoing group project, the art historical canon became an example of Universal Design. (60. SLIDE)