We had the pleasure of representing Otis at the 11th national CLEA (Consortium for the Liberal Education of Artists) conference at the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore April 5-7, 2018, attended by liberal arts educators from across the country. The theme of this year’s conference was: “Challenging Artists in Challenging Times: What’s Necessary and Sufficient?”

Day 1 of the consortium began with a conversation facilitated by Teaching Artist, Arts Educator, and provocateur Eric Booth. Eric spoke on “The Gig Mentality, The Arts Club, and Five Ideas About Engagement” and asked us to form groups with educators from other institutions, to create a Liberal Arts bumper sticker. Slogans such as “CLEA: There’s A Bigger World Out There” and “Let Me Make Myself CLEA” made us think about the relevance of what we do in the context of
specialized colleges and conservatories. Eric discussed the concept of an “entry point”—a single core idea—as a way to introduce students to a giant body of work and to promote “Engagement before information.” The topics of engaged learning and relevance became themes throughout the rest of the consortium. Later, there were panel discussions on curricular and pedagogical innovations. This included Kerri’s presentation “Images and Culture: Of, On, and Off the Wall,” during which she shared about an engaged learning project that involved leading fourteen different teams of first year art students enrolled in “Introduction to Visual Culture” in the curation of an “Exhibition Wall Project—a weekly rotating exhibit using the same selection of 65 pre-modern, modern, and postmodern learning objects, in succession based upon pre-designated themes and methodologies, and with imaginative differences in approach. More than a “Wall,” Kerri highlighted this engaged learning activity as a bridge to the foundation department, where first year students satisfy their studio classes, and as a way to bring to life and apply the critical vocabulary and insights students learned in class. Additionally, there was a session on writing pedagogies, programs, and centers, during which Jessica presented on Multimodal Composition and First Year Writing Curricula. Specifically, she shared the successes and struggles of teaching Otis’ Writing in the Digital Age course, which just completed its 4th year. The day closed with a group dinner at the hotel in which we mingled with faculty from other schools and continued discussions that had started earlier in the day.

Day 2 of the consortium involved panels on ESL best practices and resources, and ESL students in mainstream courses. This included Yael’s presentation “Supporting ESL students in First Year Art History Courses: Challenges and Rationale for Co-requisite classes,” during which she discussed the merits of a content-based co-requisite art history course and the value of cohorts; multi-literacy and multimodality; pathways to going from receptive to productive vocabulary, and differentiating content knowledge from language proficiency.

Among the programs we found particularly interesting on Day 2 is the summer bridge program at MICA that focuses on preparing international graduate students for “The Crit.” This could potentially be a very interesting concept for Otis to consider for our international students as they prepare for Crits in their studio courses. Later in the day, a presentation on “Seeking Rejection to Foster Engagement and Cultural Interactions” demonstrated the potential and value of sending international students into the Baltimore community to purposefully seek rejection through social interaction as a means to overcome the fear of rejection. Additionally, the president of the Peabody Institute spoke about how the liberal studies help to contour and expand the experiences of conservatory students who might otherwise be narrowly focused. For example, he spoke about the importance of encouraging conservatory students to go out and interact with the community of Baltimore by talking about classical music with random people on subway trains and putting on free concerts for the Baltimore community. These ideas inspired the three of us to think about how Otis could become more involved in community projects in Los Angeles, even beyond the Otis community and CAIL classes.

On Day 3 of the consortium we wrapped things up at a buffet breakfast in which we joined our liberal studies colleagues one last time to discuss CLEA’s future. Ron Levy, the founding chair, is retiring, and everyone wants to keep building on the exciting momentum of this year’s conference. There was a lot of excitement in the air as we said our goodbyes and prepared to head back to Los Angeles.
All in all, the consortium was a great experience. It was a unique opportunity to collaborate with liberal studies faculty from around the country who are dealing with many of the same issues that we are in teaching artists and designers how to write, communicate, and think critically. Moving forward, all three of us want to participate in the consortium again, and we are hopeful that sometime in the near future Otis could host the conference on our very own campus.