



Final Report to the Mary Pickford Foundation June 2017

Executive Summary:

Thanks to catalytic support from the Mary Pickford Foundation, ArtCenter College of Design's undergraduate Fine Art department was able to re-launch its program in socially engaged art during 2016 and 2017. The Foundation's grant supported a collaborative pilot art project between ArtCenter and the Exceptional Children's Foundation (ECF), an organization that works with adult artists with developmental disabilities in a studio setting. At ECF, artists have access to art educators as well as space and tools to work and materials that help facilitate their practice. This initial pilot served as a model for other potential collaborations with other organizations in the community. Unlike the many industrial design departments at ArtCenter, Fine Art has not previously had externally sponsored projects/courses, so this was a tremendously exciting opportunity to break new ground.

Overall the collaboration was deemed very successful—from the ArtCenter faculty and students' educational standpoint, and from ECF's standpoint on the project's impact on its artists. The model achieved proof of concept: under the right conditions, fine artists can indeed make a difference on social issues in the community. The Fine Art faculty have now initiated a sequel partnership for 2017-2018 with Art Division, a community arts nonprofit that focuses on at-risk youth.

Socially Engaged Art 2 – 2016-2017

We asked faculty member Olga Koumoundouros, who has taught classes in socially engaged art and whose own art falls within this field, to lead this project. Olga already had a class, Socially Engaged Art 1, one of six classes offered to students that introduces them to the basic processes, materials and thinking within this evolving area of art-making. (Other classes in the series include Painting 1, Sculpture 1, Video 1, etc.) We decided that Socially Engaged Art 1 would be a pre-requisite for taking Socially Engaged Art 2 and thereby being an integral part of the sponsored project with ECF.

At the end of the fall 2016 term, the Socially Engaged Art 1 class visited ECF as a preparatory field trip. This involved an introduction to the ECF faculty, tour of the studios and facilities and most of all to meet the potential artist collaborators. Bessie Kunath, the lead artist, was very generous and shared some problem-solving examples from a previous student group

collaboration with Otis College of Art and Design. This provided helpful context for beginning to design our program to best serve the needs of ArtCenter students and ECF artists.



This early phase enabled the faculty and students to see where mutual interests aligned and to build rapport. Some ECF students felt a connection immediately with one artist right from the start. Others had a few people they wanted to get to know better. Two Fine Art students decided that they did not want to participate in the next phase; having a two-tiered program proved an excellent process for vetting student interests before commitments were made.

After the winter break, we had two meetings where we implemented organized and structured projects to foster creative and interpersonal interaction and positive group dynamics. These were co-designed by Olga and the ECF faculty. We began building rapport by doing an introductory hands-on creative project with artists at ECF using paper. ArtCenter students through this process began to think if they wanted to work one-on-one in their collaboration or as a team. We ended up with three teams and three one-on-one projects.

The ArtCenter students began to get to know the personalities, the communication ability, art practice and most importantly the interests of the ECF artists. ArtCenter students began to learn patience and engagement with multiple methods of understanding. Along the way, this

produced some frustration and fear since verbal communication wasn't always used by the developmentally disabled ECF artists in the way most familiar or comfortable to our ArtCenter students. This was an eye-opening experience for the students. Questions around agency and respect were constantly asked as the ArtCenter artists started to think about their project proposals.

Originally, the concept for the class involved exploring gender roles through art, but after gaining a better understanding of the diversity of interests and needs of the ECF artists, it became clear that a one-theme-fits-all approach was not appropriate for this particular group. The projects needed to be tailored to each individual's needs, and the overarching theme became a more general one of creative collaboration.





Eventually, project proposals were determined and then the class invited Keith Lawrence to join Fine Art chair Tom Knechtel in attending the students' midterm presentations. Tom remarked from his perspective as a veteran educator that the work was surprisingly impressive: the professionalism of the budgets and planning, and the levels of thoughtfulness and imagination with which they approached the collaboration were really exciting to witness.

But most of all, the students' empathy and willingness to collaborate as equals between each other and with the ECF artists was exemplary. The ArtCenter students clearly saw it as their mission to give these artists access to interaction with people beyond their largely institutionalized setting, as that was the condition many participants were accustomed to for economic reasons.

Additionally, the ArtCenter students became mentors, sharing their knowledge of art making discourse and tools to expand individual practices and performance strategies. The grant enabled new equipment to be purchased and for digital video technologies to raise ECF's art offerings to a new level, and it also allowed the artists to print publications arising from the project.



The collaboration expanded the scope of the ECF artists' imaginative art making visions and ambitions and improved their quality of life. The ArtCenter students all took it as a prime objective that the work and respect of the ECF artists should be foregrounded and saw their job as one of support and enablement. We were very proud of them.





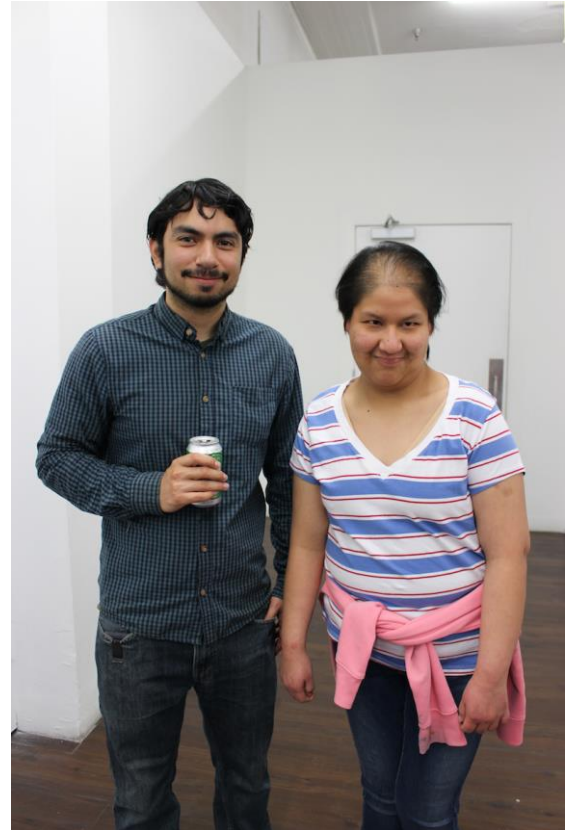
Aside from creating new collaborative artworks with ECF artists, ArtCenter students learned technical skills in processing and distributing their work. Group dynamics were investigated and considered as a skill in community building and as an activist process. A social media committee was formed and focused on creating and posting a blog on Tumblr, which provided important documentation for the overall project.



The project culminated in a public exhibition that the two groups assembled at the DAC Gallery in Downtown LA that was on view during April 15-May 26, 2017. Titled *Tulum Legend, Television, Tortugas, Tropic, Trains then Love?*, the logistical needs of the exhibition were

handled by a committee of ArtCenter students that created content for the announcement card and fulfilled installation requirements with ECF staff.

The work looked wonderful, and everyone—especially the ECF artists—was thrilled. One of the ECF artists came in every day to sit in the gallery and view her installation, and reportedly she had never looked happier. The ECF staff members characterized the exhibition as "the gift that keeps on giving."



An encore presentation of the exhibition will be held at the ArtCenter campus in September 2017. A printed catalog of the project is in the works. The students from the project are collaborating with ArtCenter Graphics student Ricardo Imperial to produce the special piece, which will further document the project and also enhance the students' professional portfolios.

We did learn a few lessons from the first project. Since we are an educational institution and this is a class for which the students receive credit, we have learned that the wide scope and ambitions of this first iteration will need to be scaled back in order to work more effectively with the way that credit is assigned at the college. The students have worked very hard on the class, including into this summer and fall, when many of them are not necessarily even in term. Going forward, we are planning that the next project will reach completion of its goals and projects by the end of the spring term, rather than continuing into future terms. But we are encouraging the students to continue their relationships with ECF to extend the impact of their work, and many have seemed interested in doing so.

Socially Engaged Art 2 – 2017-2018

The next project will run in spring 2018. This new class will provide a more focused and committed look at socially engaged art as a locally informed discipline by participating in collaborations with the underserved youth-driven art organization, Art Division (artdivision.org), located in the rapidly changing Rampart district of Los Angeles. ArtCenter is fortunate to have the opportunity to work with the largely Latin American young adult artists that participate in Art Division to produce art projects reflecting a collaborative vision while using their voices in their gentrifying neighborhood. We will be encouraging the use of video, sound, installation and/or performance in addition to 2D media such as drawing and painting to expand spatial and media aesthetic discourse. ArtCenter students will meet with the individual artists and get to know them at their community center in Downtown Los Angeles near MacArthur Park. Through meetings and field trips to art and local venues in the community, rapport and dialogue will be established for art collaboration. Grant support from the Mary Pickford Foundation will greatly help support the participants' material and fabrication costs, access to supplemental tools and transportation. Funds will also be used to collectively finance the production of a support document/publication in tandem with the culminating public exhibition.

The actual process of collaboration is one we will study and practice as it is pivotal to the field of social practice. An artist from Mexico City is slated to be in residency at Art Division and will be a co-teacher as well as help participate in facilitating the projects. This will further expand the conversation about idea exchange, cultural specificity, collaboration and diverse art making strategies. Using an evolving process of empowered identity and active listening strategies we will strive for agency and respect to be employed in the production process and finished products. All ideas will be formed in conversation with a variety of community-based, collaborative structures and corresponding investigations into Latinx discourse, displacement, gardens, food, gentrification, housing, economic justice, prison industrial

complex, free expression, public space, play and more. We will further understand our role as artists creating socially engaged art in Los Angeles at this timely socio-political juncture. As with the prior project, a preparatory visit to Art Division will be arranged by ArtCenter faculty in the fall of 2017 with the prerequisite Socially Engaged Art 1 class.

Conclusion

The Mary Pickford Foundation's support has had a transformative effect on teaching in the Fine Art department. With this success, we have finally been able to launch the kind of social practice work we have long been aspiring toward, and we have validated the premise that that this kind of work can make a difference. The timing of this effort also enabled ArtCenter to launch Fine Art's Designmatters (design for social innovation) minor, which opens a potential conduit to other new external partnerships and provides an ongoing structure for students to learn how to use their artistic talents for societal impact. For this, we are tremendously grateful to Keith Lawrence and the Foundation for their generosity and their belief in our young artists.