

CU Art Museum (CUAM) as Hub of Intellectual and Creative Pursuits

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Introduction

The Association of Academic Art Museum and Galleries' fundamental assertion that "great universities have great museums" establishes academic museums as learning centers that foster collaboration and shared meaning-making. Universities that embrace the responsibility to steward past and contemporary artworks recognize how the arts connect and augment our understanding of human ideas and creativity foundational to all disciplines. Many of the most prestigious members of the Association of American Universities were also the first to found major art museums, beginning with Yale University in 1832, followed by the University of Michigan in 1909, and Duke University in 1969, among many other top research universities.¹ Writing for *The New York Times*, art critic Holland Cotter makes an impassioned plea for administrators to recognize the importance of academic museums: "They are, before all else, teaching instruments intended for hands-on use by students and scholars. . . . The august public museum gave us fabulousness. The tucked-away university gallery gave us life: organic, intimate and as fresh as news."²

Academic museums expand knowledge through experiential pedagogy and cultivate the curricular, scholarship and creative activities of our academic community. At CU Art Museum (CUAM), the campus community learns and contributes to meaning-making involving the collection, exhibitions, special projects and interactions with visiting artists and scholars. Academic art museums are centers for interdisciplinary and collaborative activities that connect academic units and faculty to each other and to the museum.

As a learning center, CUAM is a hub of creative and intellectual activity. Our museum staff partner with faculty, staff and students from academic disciplines across the CU Boulder campus. Our vision is to create the university art museum of the 21st century with the campus and broader communities. We aim to be an exemplary collecting university art museum that is held in high esteem by our peers. It's our mission to contribute to a university culture in which art, creativity, intercultural understanding, and research advance all disciplines in contribution to society.³ Our strategic priority is to more fully embed ourselves into the academic activities of the university and deepen learning.

CU Art Museum facilitates innovative forms of pedagogy, research and exhibition making. We do this, in part, through object-based teaching (to which the museum devotes an entire white paper), 21st-century skill-building for students, public programming and exhibition development.

¹ Kimerly Rorschach, "Why Do Universities Have Museums," *Duke Today*, November 10, 2004.

² Holland Cotter, "Why University Museums Matter," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/20/arts/design/20yale.html> (accessed December 3, 2017).

³ <https://www.colorado.edu/cuartmuseum/about/museum-advocacy-materials> (accessed December 3, 2017).

21st-century skill-building for students

Providing professional training to students is integral to the university art museum. CUAM offers multiple professional training options to students.

CUAM staff mentor undergraduate and graduate students looking to complete intern and volunteer hours for museum related courses. They observe, shadow and are encouraged to ask questions in a working environment. Working alongside museum staff gives students interested in the field knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the profession. Similarly, a graduate assistant works for two years on installation preparation. They receive in-depth, hands-on direction from our exhibitions department. This extensive training prepares graduate assistants with the skills to find careers in a wide variety of fields.

Each semester CUAM hosts the Master of Fine Arts exhibition. We aspire to guide graduate students through the professional process of how to work with a museum. They gain hands-on skills including how to site and install their artwork. They also work with the collections staff on rights and reproduction, and with the curatorial and visitor experience staff to learn how to message and connect their artwork to broad audiences.

The Museum Attendant Program is another facet of student work at the CUAM. In this position, students participate in a variety of training: customer service; visitor engagement; security; art interpretation and education; best practices in leading tours; in-gallery evaluation; and other essential job skills. Museum attendants who might be interested in working in the arts gain an insider's perspective and experience. Attendants focused in other areas, such as biology and engineering, work in a new discipline to expand their knowledge and skill base. By learning more about the historical and cultural contexts of the objects and artwork exhibited at the museum, attendants gain the confidence to engage in conversation and meaning-making for our visitors. Attendants help create richer experiences for both visitors and themselves by allowing time to observe, modeling ways to discuss art, asking questions that encourage deeper understanding, and prompting conversation on diverse themes.

Beyond building future work skills, museum attendants help to create a learning environment for the university and broader community. Conversations that attendants have with campus and community members elevate the learning and experience one might have without that interaction.⁴ Furthermore, students involved in the museum often encourage fellow students to come visit the museum, thus expanding our learning community.

Last year, the National Endowment for the Arts released "Creativity Connects," a report investigating the changing roles of artists in society.⁵ These shifting career paths and definitions of the artist will have a profound impact on the university art museum and

⁴ Falk, John H., and Lynn D. Dierking. *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experience and the Making of Meaning*. Walnut Creek. Alta Mira Press, 2000.

⁵ <https://www.arts.gov/50th/creativity-connects> (accessed December 4, 2017).

how arts are taught. Art students who graduate with traditional training are finding a saturated market. Seeking employment and new venues for their creative expression, they are finding work (or self-employment) in, for example, entrepreneurial and social service environments. The opportunities provided by the CU Art Museum prepare students for a wide variety of careers and hones their critical-thinking and interpersonal skills.

Exhibitions

CUAM's exhibitions promote new scholarship, are committed to innovative contemporary and historical art forms in all media, involve collaborative development approaches and embrace participatory design strategies.

Case study one: Artist in Residence (AIR) program

CUAM's artist-in-residence is a biannual program that invites artists to mine the intellectual and creative resources of CU Boulder to expand their own practice, produce new work, enhance student learning, and instigate interdisciplinary conversations and public dialog.

One of our primary goals is the production of new works with student and faculty involvement that would not be possible alone or from one disciplinary perspective. Students benefit by interacting with a professional artist, through their exposure to innovative contemporary art, and from learning about the networks crucial to their success and ongoing development after graduation. Our inaugural AIR, Janelle Iglesias, worked with studio art and dance students, who exchanged ideas through studio visits with each other and by participating in each other's classes as they worked toward a performance and installation in the museum. "Janelle was a gift—generous, playful, curious, clear," dance professor Erika Randall said. "She brought us all together in a way that defied our genres and leveled the playing field. She was an art yenta who helped us cross boundaries, within ourselves and our campus. I was thrilled to get to know my own colleagues on campus and to find a new home in the art museum."

Iglesias also mined the university collections, working with faculty and staff in Special Collections, CU Art Museum, the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Greenhouse, and the Natural History Museum to forge connections among our respective holdings. As part of her final installation she included Susan Howe's book *Spontaneous Particulars of Telepathy*. It was open to a page suggesting the interconnectedness of things:

"The English word text comes from the Medieval Latin textus, "style or texture of the work," literally "Thing Woven," from the past participle stem of textere: "To weave, to join, fit together, construct."

If the university can be seen as the human mind writ large and a microcosm of human activity, as Iglesias suggests, the university art museum is well positioned to "fit

together” various aspects of the university to train the next generation for an emergent society.⁶

Case study 2: Exhibition development and programming

Shakespeare at CU demonstrated the potential, with sufficient university recognition and financial support, to connect scholarship and creative works occurring across the university related to a topic. Eight departments across CU planned and implemented events around *First Folio! The Book that Gave Us Shakespeare* exhibition. *First Folio! The Book that Gave Us Shakespeare* was a national traveling exhibition organized by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. The university-supported budget for campus engagement allowed for 32 programs with the involvement of 32 faculty members, 32 staff members, and 48 students and alumni from across campus. Programs ranged from Shakespearean film adaptations as part the International Film Series, a Shakespeare Garden Tour, and Shakespeare and the Stars at Fiske Planetarium. The impetus for all these activities was an exhibition of the First Folio at CUAM, where we also installed a stage in our gallery for talks and performances. Highlights included a sonnet extravaganza and Folio Forums, a series of noontime talks that allowed a more academic response to the Folio’s visit.

Programming encourages a deeper exploration of topics covered in exhibitions at CUAM. The community is invited to engage experts on campus through paired gallery talks, dance performances, themed tours and more. These programs allow visitors to learn about artworks and continue to build upon the meaning-making they do when they visit our exhibitions. According to LaPlaca Cohen’s *Culture Track ’17*, top motivators for visiting art museums include learning something new, experiencing new things, interest in the content and having fun.⁷ Programs offered at the CU Art Museum create participatory experiences that fulfill those initial drivers, getting people, especially our core student audience, to spend time in a relaxed yet stimulating cultural setting.

Case study 3: FlexSpace

FlexSpace uses one of our galleries as an experimental and interactive space intended to generate audience excitement and encourage participation in CUAM exhibitions. Our inaugural presentation created a space that invited community engagement and response to imagery and concepts explored in *Home: Photographs from the CU Art Museum* (March 2–July 8, 2017). Legos, sticky notes and an in-gallery living room created a welcoming and interactive setting in which visitors could reflect on what home means to them. We received more than 1,080 written responses. Visitors shared stories and memories, drew pictures of their pets and interacted with other notes posted on the wall. Through an informal interactive prompt, our staff was able to analyze information about our visitors and their desire to engage with exhibitions in a meaningful way.

⁶ Sandra Firmin. “Artists Residences in Research Institutions.” Paper presented at the A2RU Conference, Denver, Colorado, November 4, 2016.

⁷ La Placa Cohen Advertising Inc. “2017 Culture Track Report.” <http://2017study.culturetrack.com> (accessed December 5, 2017).

Our next iteration of FlexSpace will coincide with *Documenting Change: Our Climate* in spring 2019, an exhibition and programming collaboration with NEST Studio for the Arts and university collections.

Conclusion

In 2007, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation wrote a report summarizing the key findings of the College and University Museums Program, a major granting initiative that encouraged museums to develop their academic programs. For a large part of the 20th century, university museums went through an identity crisis trying to serve broad public audiences at the expense of their academic missions and those of their parent institutions. CUAM aims to embed itself in the learning and discovery mission of CU Boulder and advance the chancellor's strategic imperatives to shape tomorrow's leaders, be the top university for innovation, and positively impact humanity. To accomplish this vision, CUAM must be recognized and supported by senior administrators, faculty, staff and students as a partner. This support will allow us to increasingly focus inward on our core academic audience. According to the Mellon Foundation's findings, a major factor in success of academic museums is staff capability to connect faculty and students to museum resources in meaningful ways.⁸ A recently developed position is that of academic liaison/director of academic initiatives. This position is charged with developing programs and research projects with faculty, and helping them design and teach innovative courses using the collection and exhibitions. This position generally has significant teaching and research responsibilities using the museum collection and special exhibitions. Truly integrating the museum into the campus would require CU Boulder to reimagine the importance of staff as educators and scholars, and provide resources and acknowledgement in line with that offered to faculty counterparts.

Our hope is that through initiatives like Academic Futures, the CU Art Museum will continue to be recognized as an asset to the community of learners, and will garner added support in meeting the needs of the community it serves and the mission of being a vital player in the University of Colorado culture.

⁸ <https://mellon.org/resources/news/articles/college-and-university-art-museum-program/> (accessed December 6, 2017).