

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS: 2018 CCL/MELLON FOUNDATION SEMINAR

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FIFTH ANNUAL CCL/MELLON FOUNDATION SEMINAR IN CURATORIAL PRACTICE

New York City, August 1, 2018 — This July, the Center for Curatorial Leadership (CCL) convened its fifth annual CCL/Mellon Foundation Seminar in Curatorial Practice. The program assembled 15 art history doctoral students from a dozen universities specializing in areas ranging from Roman glass portraits through to modern indigenous art and the performance of exile in contemporary Latinx art. The group’s array of art historical inquiries came together over a shared interest in the responsibility and ethical stakes of the museum in addressing questions of inclusion and equity.

Over the course of the two weeks in New York City, the cohort visited museums and various cultural institutions, completed coursework and workshops, and discussed the state of museums and cultural engagement. Through meetings and conversations with curators, directors, conservators, educators, collectors, trustees, and more, the participants in this year’s Seminar approached a range of curatorial issues and considered how their own distinct scholarly points of view play out within the field at large.

“The energy and rigor of the Seminar,” said Elizabeth W. Easton, CCL’s Director and Co-founder, “continues to demonstrate the promise of emerging scholars to push the field forward, and this year was no exception. Thanks to the generous support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and throughout the last five iterations of the Seminar, I have been inspired by the sharp inquiry and strong sense of purpose that these cohorts bring into CCL’s fold.”

Highlights from the two-week program include:

RETHINKING EXHIBITIONS & COLLECTIONS

The Seminar included trips behind-the-scenes at museums ranging from The Museum of Modern Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art to The Morgan Library & Museum and The Met Cloisters. At each of these institutions, the students met with curators to discuss the opportunities and challenges associated with acquiring and deaccessioning works of art, caring for and storing a collection of objects, and supporting study and new scholarship. Through tours of permanent collection galleries and temporary exhibitions drawn from museum holdings—including *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940–2017* at the Whitney Museum and *Life, Death, and Transformation in the Americas* at the Brooklyn

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Museum—the group considered the ways that collections frame a museum’s identity and the scope of a curator’s work.

The students also spoke with curators who organized exhibitions that seek to expand the boundaries of the traditional art historical canon, such as *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art* at the Whitney Museum and *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016* at The Museum of Modern Art. As the cohort of students exemplified a push to reconsider the traditional confines of art historical narratives, these exhibitions and conversations led to a greater understanding of the role of museums in charting a place for artists and movements that have been historically marginalized.

THE COLLABORATIVE ROLE OF THE CURATOR

The Seminar introduced the students to the range of departments and individuals with whom curators interact. The group met with leaders in the fields of conservation, education, exhibition design, art criticism, museum operations, administration, finance, fundraising, and development, and explored the varied collaborations and intersections of responsibilities that take place within the museum. In a meeting with Catherine Carver Dunn, Deputy Director, Advancement at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the cohort learned about how museums cultivate cultures of philanthropy and the importance for emerging curators to navigate fundraising and steward donors in support of their exhibitions.

The group also met with museum directors Thelma Golden (The Studio Museum in Harlem) and Anne Pasternak (Brooklyn Museum) to discuss the way that an institution’s vision is executed at the leadership level. In addition, conversations with museum trustees clarified the role of board governance and the number of ways in which board members support and drive a museum’s mission.

ALIGNING MISSION & PROGRAM

This year’s Seminar participants completed a small group exercise that examined how a museum’s stated mission steers its program and visitor experience. Teams considered the language of museum mission statements and were then assigned to analyze one of three cultural institutions located in Long Island City: MoMA PS1, The Noguchi Museum, and SculptureCenter. By completing visitor experience assessments, researching the history and reach of each museum, and discussing community and civic engagement, the students weighed the alignment between mission and program and presented on their findings to invited respondents. In discussing their observations, the students deepened their understanding of how museums reflect their goals to audiences and how these objectives evolve over time.

BUILDING ON SKILLS & LEADERSHIP

Each year of the Seminar draws upon CCL's success in training senior museum curators in the fundamentals of museum management and leadership with coursework geared toward PhD students and emerging museum professionals. This year, students in the Seminar studied the relationship between cost-benefit analysis and exhibition planning in a course on behavioral economics and self-management as related to professional working styles in a course on social psychology. These classes were complemented by a session on financial statements and budgeting led by Jan Postma, CFO at The Museum of Modern Art.

Across the two weeks, the students in this year's Seminar developed a close rapport that enabled nuanced conversations around the realities of museums and their potential for effecting change. By meeting with a slate of cultural and civic leaders and connecting across classes of the Seminar and CCL Fellowship, this cohort of students established a strong sense of what it means to work in museums, which, for many, will prepare them to pursue careers forwarding object-based scholarship and public engagement with art history.

Congratulations to the exceptional graduates of the 2018 CCL/Mellon Foundation Seminar in Curatorial Practice!