

Grant Proposal

Art As Social Activism: Building Bridges with the Local African American Community

***Submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences,
University of Delaware, April 2004***

**Department of Fine Arts and Visual Communications
Center for Material Culture Studies**

1. Description of Project

Art as Social Activism

During the academic year 2004-05 the Art Department and the Center for Material Culture Studies propose to bring Lily Yeh to the University of Delaware as a Distinguished Visiting Public Artist to work with students and the local African American community. The founder, executive director, and lead artist of “The Village of Arts and Humanities” in north Philadelphia, Yeh is internationally recognized for her urban renewal projects combining public art and community action. The Village of the Arts and Humanities is a community of volunteers and paid workers that has turned abandoned lots in North Philadelphia into community gardens, arts centers and parks. (<http://www.villagearts.org/>) Ms. Yeh will work with UD faculty, students and the African American community in Newark to develop a set of public art projects: a photography exhibit to be developed in connection with the collection of oral histories and video documentation of the entire project; a sculpture installation/memory garden; and a large-scale mural. Students and community members will use the art project to create a visual dialogue about diversity issues, barriers (and ways to break them down), and raising public awareness. The goal of the project is to empower members of the local African American community as well as students through interaction in the artistic, creative process.

The dialogue between art and society is not new—the arts have long been known to have the ability to incite transformation, as well as bridge and create understanding between different communities. Although UD’s Art Department has not to date included the study of public art in its curriculum, public art that promotes social discourse and critical inquiry is an important element of today’s contemporary art practice. This proposal seeks to introduce the idea of public art to students at two crucial stages in their development: freshman and senior year.

The concept of public art will be introduced in the Freshmen Colloquium, Art 114, to enrich the critical thinking palette of the students in the entire foundation sequence. In addition to reading a set of materials on this topic in tandem, each student will be charged with picking a social issue and developing a work of art about this issue. The freshmen will also attend lectures and public presentations by Lily Yeh and do writing assignments art as social activism in their English 110 class. Four sections of ENGL 110 are being set aside for the new first-year Art students, and the syllabus for these courses will be coordinated with that of ART 110, the required course in drawing for all new Art majors. (All new Art majors will enroll in ART 110, ART 114, and ENGL 110; the rest of the students' Art courses will vary depending on their interest in the various sub-fields in Art.)

The readings on art as social activism assigned to all the first-year students in the ART 114 will also be assigned in the Art 416, Professional Practices, in Fall 2004. A hands-on project in all four Art capstone courses (Art 415, Art 441, Art 450, Art 486) will challenge upper classmen to consider how to incorporate the practice of public art in their careers after leaving UD and become artist citizens of the world.

The Art as Social Activism Project will stress collaborative learning both in the classroom and in the community. Students will work in teams to form the conceptual basis of the project, and each team will work with members of the African American community in Newark in the creation of public artwork. Workshops will take place with community members where issues will be discussed and citizens will have the opportunity to create works of art reflecting their points of view. The student teams will be interviewing citizens as they work on the art projects, shooting video footage and still photographs. Teams will work on creating, editing, printing the images to be used in the visual dialogue (or documentary) of the project. Students will plan exhibitions to be held on campus and in the greater community of both the artwork(s) produced and the documentation of the creation/collaboration process.

The other group of students who will be contributing to this project are the seniors enrolled in AMCS 402, the capstone writing seminar for students completing the minor in American Material Culture Studies. The Center has work with Richard Stevens in Mathematical Sciences for the past several years on the development of online archives for use in teaching local history. Center faculty view Yeh's artist-in-residency as an unparalleled opportunity to build a public service component into the AMCS capstone writing seminar. Working with Lily Yeh and the community, the Center faculty will enhance existing research resources with additional documentary materials, fieldwork in the community, and oral and photographic histories. Students in AMCS 402 will then write and design a series of web "posters" that can be used as a local history and teaching resource by the larger community. In addition to working closely with Lily Yeh and the Art Department, the Center intends to invite Professor Tracey Weiss of Millersville University to campus to help in the development of the web posters. Dr. Weiss has provided instruction for K-12 teachers and community residents in central Pennsylvania in the development of comparable materials related to African American life and the Underground Railroad;

her research and teaching interests make her an important co-contributor to this project.

The Art as Social Activism project complements the university's efforts to diversify the campus community and build stronger working partnerships with diverse communities in Newark and the region. Although it is being sponsored by the Art Department and the Center for Material Culture Studies, it will also be supported by the University Museums, the Departments of Art Conservation and Art History, and the English Department's Writing Program (endorsements attached), and efforts will be made to coordinate programming with these other units.

Texts Under Consideration for Use in ART 114 and Art 416

Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art, Understanding the Contemporary*, 2nd ed., Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000.

Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson & Jane Shattuc, eds., *Hop on pop : the politics and pleasures of popular culture*, Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 2002.

Mark O'Brien and Craig Little, eds., *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1990.

Nicholas Paley, *Finding Art's Place*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

Erika Suderburg, ed., *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Articles

Graham Beal, "But is it art?," *Apollo* (London,-England), ns. 132, Nov. 1990, pp.317-321.

Suvan Geer and Sandra Rowe, "Thoughts on Graffiti as Public Art," *Public Art Review*, Spring/Summer 1995, pp. 24-26.

Theresa Harlan, "Adjusting the Focus for an Indigenous Presence," in Carol Squiers, ed., *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography* (New York: The New Press, 1999), pp.134-152.

Elizabeth Hess, "Guerilla Girl Power: Why the Art World Needs a Conscience," in Nina Felshin, ed., *But is it Art?*(Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), pp. 309-332.

Grant H. Kester, "Aesthetic evangelists: conversion and empowerment in contemporary community art," *Afterimage*, v. 22, Jan.1995, pp.5-11.

Lucy R. Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), pp.341-358.

PROJECT TIMELINE

June – August 2004.

Priliminary meetings with African American Community, Lily Yeh, grad students, Ann Ardis, Bernie Herman, Virginia Bradley and Art faculty. New Media equipment ordered and received. Faculty workshops on the use and handling of equipment (David Meyer). All supplies connected with project ordered.

Fall Semester:

Kick off project with barbecue for local community participants and students from Art, Art History, Conservation, and Material Culture Students.

September 14 -Lily Yeh gives introductory public lecture, published and opened to the university and surrounding community.

Faculty starts to discuss public art in the classroom as a prelude to the spring project. Public Art readings will be assigned and discussed in class.

English 110 classes participate in project.

Lily Yeh spends 10 workshop days in the community and working with UD students.

Project will be refined with Lily Yeh and UD Art Department faculty.

Determine what release documents need to be signed by people interviewed and photographed, explore whether there are other legal issues to be considered.

Art Department Faculty refine course offerings for spring in relationship to service learning.

Winter Session

Confirm and finalize all details

Spring Semester

Artist makes 30 trips to campus to work with faculty, students and community. In between visits the students and faculty collect and disseminate information in the community, i.e. interviews, video footage, objects etc. Students will work with collected material on campus.

Public works of art created in community.

Individual student projects exhibited.

Written and oral feedback solicited about the outcome of the project from the greater community. Feedback incorporated into web site.

September 2005

Public work unveiled and exhibited on campus and in the community.
Celebration picnic.