

“Is it an Academy? A Proposal to Expand Interdisciplinary Scholarship and Teaching at the CU Art Museum”

Staff of the CU Art Museum (CUAM) are excited by the possibilities presented in the recent Interdisciplinary Report (IR). Many of the findings align with our previous Academic Futures white paper: “Is it an Art? A Case Study of Teaching at the CU Art Museum.” In this paper we respond to the IR and build on our previous white paper with the assertion that CUAM can and should play an integral role in supporting campus-wide interdisciplinary initiatives moving forward. As we previously wrote:

“The CU Art Museum is a vital resource for object-based pedagogy at CU Boulder, providing opportunities for formal learning and curricular engagement beyond the typical classroom. The art museum fosters a participatory learning environment through its collection and staff, creating a bridge between academic research and professional practice.”

We acknowledge that this white paper serves primarily as a point of genesis for a larger conversation. To that end, **we suggest that the art museum serve as the center of gravity for an academy dedicated object based teaching and inquiry.** Anchored by study of, and interaction with, campus collections of material culture and natural specimens, this academy has the potential to impart skills across disciplines, modeling applications of “transfer learning” where knowledge gained in one domain is applied to another.¹ Among the skills cited in a recent study on the benefits of transfer learning via teaching at museums are:

“observation, interpretation, evaluation, association, problem finding, comparison, flexible thinking . . . engagement focus and ownership of learning as well as the ability to draw informed conclusions and think conceptually.”²

The skills learned via transfer learning dovetail with the skills CU hopes to impart via interdisciplinary teaching listed within the IR on page 7, which include:

“collaboration, knowledge integration, communication, creativity, problem-solving, risk-taking, and listening.”

Furthermore, CUAM possess key attributes of the academy as defined on page 12 of the IR. Specifically, CUAM recently tackled the complex theme of climate change in multi-year project, which included two exhibitions and numerous programs for campus and community audiences. “Documenting Change: Our Climate” was co-curated with assistant professor Erin Eseplie and utilized a steering committee representing units

¹ Milkova, Liliana and Steven S. Volk. “Transfer: Learning in and Through the Academic Museum.” *A Handbook for Academic Museums: Advancing Engagement*. Volume III. Editors Stephanie S. Jandl and Mark S. Gold. 2012. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Page 44.

² *ibid.* Page 41.

from across campus. Participation of multiple campus entities was crucial for the success of this project and funding from CU Boulder's Grand Challenge: *Our Space. Our Future.* enabled project planners to develop new modes for student engagement via programming and paid-work opportunities. Based on the success of "Documenting Change: Our Climate" we are developing projects that push this model in new and exciting ways. Future themes include: evolution; histories of anatomical illustration and representations of the body; and a critical examination of human trafficking in the 18th century. Such themes provide arenas for rich and generative interdisciplinary work.

CUAM is by its nature an interdisciplinary space on campus. We envision that object based study founded in collections, combined with the public-facing exhibitions would enable CUAM to assume a leadership role and provide a platform for developing crucial methodologies for investigating particular kinds of questions and challenges.

Respectfully submitted,

Jessica Brunecky, Director of Visitor Experience and Finance, CU Art Museum
Hope Saska, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions, CU Art Museum