

# 2021 Visual Art Assessment Report

The 2020-2021 academic year brought significant challenges to the Visual Art department. We spent the year navigating the simultaneous loss of two central and longstanding faculty members as we worked to redesign our courses in response to a global pandemic and a cultural reckoning with racial inequality and social injustice. We also faced the specific disciplinary challenges of reworking a curriculum that centers around the materiality of objects in a moment of social distance and digital communication. There are aspects of the program that we cannot productively assess this year in light of these challenges. However, these difficulties coincided with a newfound solidity in the Art History program that opened up exciting possibilities for collaboration across the program. Central to these conversations were new ideas about how to center discussions about the study of visual culture and theory as a means of grounding student work in the Studio Art and Book Arts programs. For these reasons, I have chosen to organize our report around the program goal outlined in the 2019 Visual Art Assessment plan that centers on research in the visual arts. The objectives of this goal are outlined below, followed by reflections on our response to these objectives:

## RESEARCH

Enable students to engage in experimentation, research, and discovery through both traditional and new media, encouraging the practice of outcome or concept-driven media choices.

College Learning Goals:

- Content: Breadth of Knowledge, Depth in Field, Career Preparation
- Essential Skills: Fundamental Literacies, Critical Thinking and Application, Creativity, Metacognitive

**Objective 1:** Acquire strong research skills that draw from a variety of research methodologies, including: scholarly research (i.e. books, periodicals, internet resources); studying works of art at first-hand from the Wells College art collection, Wells rare book collection, the String Room Gallery to art collections off-campus; conducting personal interviews with artists, curators and scholars.

Outcome 1:

Students will demonstrate research skills that express an understanding of the various methodologies and approaches.

- Validation: Written assignments; research papers; formal oral report, Junior Studio Research Statements, Senior Thesis Statements

Outcome 2:

Students will demonstrate a technical and theoretical understanding of works of art seen at first-hand.

- Validation: Class Critiques, Written assignments; research papers, pecha-kucha Presentations

**Objective 2:** Develop the ability to define and follow through on research questions, whether related to art historical analysis or studio projects.

Outcome 1:

Students will demonstrate ability to define research goals, identify lines of enquiry, and synthesize findings into a cohesive argument or creative response.

→ Validation: Written Assignments, Research Papers, Studio Project Proposals, Evidence of Artistic Research, Annotated Bibliography

### **Report and Reflection:**

#### **Research in the Visual Arts:**

The challenges of the 2020-21 academic year—in particular, the instability of a studio art curriculum taught entirely by a team of adjuncts and the pressure our full-time faculty were under to sustain the sense of cohesion our students needed to succeed—pushed us to solve problems in creative ways. We believe, however, that some of the solutions we arrived at have the potential for long term effects that can strengthening the cohesion of the program and allowing us to reconsider the ways that we support student research.

Because the department was understaffed, the full-time faculty—Leah Mackin and Tara Kohn—had to rebalance our teaching loads so that we could support thesis work that generally falls under the purview of the Studio Art faculty. In order to provide effective mentorship for our graduating senior, we decided to team-teach ART 402 and 403. We each met with our student on alternating weeks; Leah worked with them as they developed their studio work, and I had an ongoing conversation with them to develop a theoretical structure for the project through reading and research. Toward the end of the semester, Leah served as a guide through the process of installation. At the same time, I supported our student as they transformed the detailed annotated bibliography they used throughout the semester to keep track of their research into a thoughtful project statement that supported the visual aspects of the work with sophisticated interdisciplinary research.

In splitting the responsibility of thesis mentorship, Leah and I opened up space in our schedules to design a second course together that focused specifically on the potentials of aligning research and practice in the visual arts. The class, Art and Activism, was structured around detailed studies of contemporary artists and collectives that served as models for our students as they developed semester-long, research-based activist art projects. We found that the structure of the course—and the ways that it alternated each week between art historical study and studio practice—was highly effective in terms of offering our students a wide range of examples of the possible relationships between research, writing, and making. We are hoping that as we continue to work through the challenges of the model we created, that we can adapt it into a scaffold for courses on a range of topics.

I offer these reflections on our collaborative courses as a way of expanding on the research practices typical of courses within the Art History program; in these courses, I am working to meet the objectives outlined in our program goals by designing scaffolded projects in research and writing that encourage students to learn how to effectively use library resources and integrate their own interests with course materials. These assignments include annotated bibliographies on scholarly sources (at all levels of art historical study), project proposals (in 200- and 300-level courses), peer review and editing sessions, and a range of approaches to considering the

relationships between the visual details of objects and their broader cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts. I have been observing noticeable improvements in these skills; my colleagues in Studio Art and Book Arts have noticed related advancements in our students' abilities to write and speak about their visual practices with a deeper awareness of their artistic influences and theoretical concerns.

One of the challenges we had to navigate this year in working toward the goals of our Assessment Plan in the area of Research had to do **Objective 1**, and, in particular, with the goal of supporting students as they develop a “technical and theoretical understanding of works of art seen at first-hand”—an objective that, in many ways, became impossible to achieve as the pandemic unfolded. Our program-wide plans to take our students on a museum-related field trip to Dia Beacon and the newly redesigned Museum of Modern Art in New York were derailed by closures and social-distancing measures. We were also forced to cancel our planned exhibitions at the String Room Gallery (with the exception of the thesis senior show, see below for more on this) and we had limited access to the Art Collection on campus because of understaffing and safety protocols.

In considering these limitations, we became increasingly interested in the ways that the pandemic opened up new and different ways for us to connect as a community of learners in the visual arts. We developed a digital lecture series through the String Room Gallery as a way of signaling the continued significance of the space in the absence of physical exhibitions. Because we were inviting our speakers on Zoom, we were able to explore the potential for expanding the possibilities for our students to learn about new subjects, scholarly perspectives, and artistic practices. In this format, we were able to invite more speakers with fewer logistical concerns, and we found this platform to be successful in fostering discussions not only within individual courses, but also across the department.

### **Moving Forward:**

In reflecting on our responses to the difficulties of the 2020-2021 year, we are interested in considering how we can adapt what began as solutions to problems into productive models for collaborative research across the department. How, for example, can we continue to build on the successful design of our team-taught courses as we integrate new faculty members into our department? How will our students continue to shape their thesis work around strong research support from the Art History faculty even as the Studio Art program regains stability? Will there continue to be a place and a possibility for conversations with artists and scholars over Zoom as we return to in-person modes of learning? How can we expand on some of the research models we have been exploring in this age of social-distancing and digital communication as our students begin, once again, to explore works of art in museum spaces and archival collections? How can we hold on to the innovative strategies we developed in response to the crisis as we move back to our more traditional models of teaching?

As we have been thinking through these questions, some of our initial responses include the following:

- 1) We plan to continue to consider Zoom as a tool that will allow us to invite speakers who are unable to travel to Wells as a means of expanding the voices and perspectives our

students hear. We believe this has been an important model for engaging student research.

- 2) We will continue to explore ways to integrate art historical study and studio practice as a way of guiding our students as they develop research skills in the visual art and develop work based on deep knowledge of history and theory. In line with this goal, we hope to turn Art and Activism into a regularly-offered course and to develop more classes based on the collaborative model we developed in designing this course. For example, we are interested in designing a class on the photographic book that follows a similar structure, opening a space for students to create books in the Book Arts Center based on their research and study of historic and recent photobooks.
- 3) VART 300 is an important course in terms of allowing continued art historical approaches to thesis research even as the new studio art faculty resumes mentorship of advanced student project. This course is designed to include studio visits so that the art history faculty can support research projects related to thesis work.
- 4) We will continue to value faculty and student collaboration as we move forward, with an understanding that collective knowledge-building inspires students to consider research as an expansive and creative practice.

Our assessment plan for 2021-2022 is designed to approach these concerns from a different perspective, focusing on the ways our program supports students as they adapt the study of the art of the past and the present into their studio practice and written assignments.