

Henry

**Wearing Who We Are:
A UW Community Fashion Expo**

Community Engagement Plan Report

Henry Art Gallery

University of Washington

ART 496 B: Henry Art Liaison Program 2023 – 24

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Purpose & Approach

For our Community Engagement Project, we hosted a QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black and Indigenous People of Color)-centered University of Washington community fashion expo in the Raúl de Nieves exhibition, *A window to the see, a spirit star chiming in the wind of wonder...* at the Henry Art Gallery. We decided to host a fashion expo to create a community-building creative space for local QTBIPOC, as arts institutions have historically underrepresented and excluded QTBIPOC artists, namely due to white and cis heteronormative hegemony. Fashion, as an art form is closely tied to self-expression, is crucial to resistance within queer and trans community. With the theme of “wearing who we are,” our Community Engagement Project strived to establish reciprocal relationships with community organizations as a way to spotlight QTBIPOC members of the UW community. With this goal in mind, we hosted and organized the event in collaboration with two UW RSOs (Registered Student Organizations), Modality and ISLA (Indigenous Students of Latin America), as well as two recent UW graduate designers, Archie Sugiyama and Elena Qiu.

The two RSOs tabled in the space, leading art-making and art engagement activities. There were two mini fashion shows throughout the course of the event, with models activating the exhibit space to showcase both designers’ work. Our shared goals with collaborators included expanding audiences and amplifying the voices of those with marginalized identities through artistic activist approaches, especially QTBIPOC.



Photo By Jonathan Vanderweit

We took inspiration from Ruth Philips’ community-based exhibit model¹ to achieve our shared goals of spotlighting local QTBIPOC voices and creating connections between audiences and creatives. The community-based model entails working closely with community-led organizations to foster creative ownership of their work by giving them agency within the decision-making and planning of the event process. We wanted to empower collaborators to bring their own ideas for approaches and leading activities into the space. Our info session tour with the collaborating student organizations played a key role in this process. People who are interested in art often wish to also create art, so we decided that providing an avenue for art-making in the gallery would help the RSOs spread the word about who they are, their

¹ Lonetree, Amy. “Introduction: Native Americans and Museums,” in *Decolonizing Museums : Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012, pp.1-28. <https://muse-jhu-edu.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/book/44114>

mission for serving the community, and to get new members. Our event was open to the public for 2 hours, during which approximately 50 people attended.

Outcomes

Each organization was able to increase their connections with the community through the event, through slightly different approaches. ISLA was eager to participate in events to help establish their presence on campus. Their straightforward bracelet weaving art-making activity allowed them to openly engage with a large audience of people with shared and different identities to their club. When asking ISLA how they felt about their presence after the event wrapped up, they were excited to have made new connections with students who were interested in joining their organization. Modality's art-making activity—an interactive mini-zine with prompts inspired by the exhibit—had less traffic but sparked thorough reflection for those who chose to engage with the zine. Modality had a similar response to ISLA in regards to how impactful the event was for their group. Their organization focuses on community service through creativity, and several expo visitors were interested in learning more about Modality and showing up to their meetings. The event served as an important outreach opportunity for both organizations, while also allowing the RSOs to relate their goals to a museum space. Both RSOs broke new ground in their involvement with a museum, which provided them with institutional support to reach new audiences during the event.



Photo By Jonathan Vanderweit

Providing a variety of activities helped keep people engaged in the space and promoted shared discussions. To further build an artistic community grounded within the exhibit, we included our own art-making activity catered towards fashion design. This helped clarify the connection between De Nieves' exhibit space and the theme of our project as a creative avenue centered on queer and Indigenous community building. Each person was provided with the materials to organically add onto a wire dress form alongside other visitors, which facilitated the communal nature of the artwork and the exhibit as a whole. The creative choices they made in their

additions are all influenced by what others have already added, and the scale of the wire dress form allowed for multiple people to work together at the same time, thus fostering relationships through shared creative ambition.

Our overarching goals for this project require long term institutional efforts that cannot be resolved with a single event. However, we established smaller concrete objectives that we were able to achieve within the short timespan of the event, such as effective collaborator outreach with the community, diverse opportunities for art-making, and showcasing of our local QTBIPOC community's creativity.



Photo By Jonathan Vanderweit



Photo By Sven Holmgren

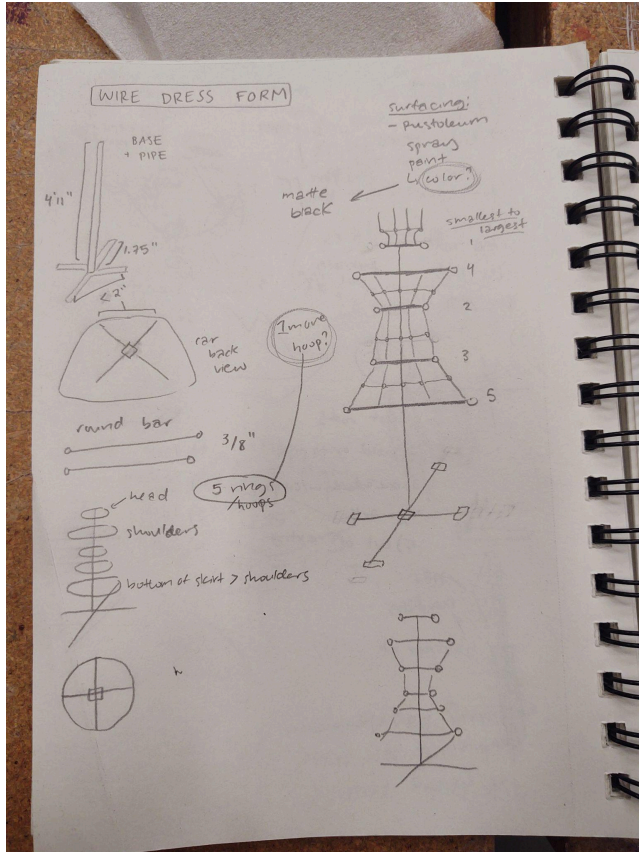
Reflection on Successes & Setbacks

Throughout reflection on the outcome of our Community Engagement Project, we discovered specific strengths and difficulties within our year-long process working towards our community fashion expo. Our project's strength primarily lies in the close collaboration we fostered both with our CEP team and with collaborators. Our goal to create an event that was 'by the community, for the community' meant that we strived to engage with local University of Washington affiliated RSOs and designers in a way inspired by the community-based model. We held an info session with collaborators to hear their thoughts on the layout and flow of the exhibit and workshop ideas for the activities they wanted to host. Beyond working with collaborators, our close knit internal group dynamic sustained our project throughout months of planning, setbacks, and creative adaptations. We learned to communicate directly and earnestly to make our voices heard to one another. We also developed systems that divided up labor to play to the strengths of each of our team members. Part of what made this project effective was our team members' different intersecting identities with the QTBIPOC artists we sought to support. We believe collaborating within our existing communities made this museum experience feel less separated from the lived experiences of our audience.

Another of our most powerful strengths was our ability to adapt dynamically to changing constraints, from collaborators dropping out to scope creep. We had to revise the scope of our project several times to make it more manageable and feasible within our limited given timeframe. In terms of other difficulties, our project was ambitious for a limited hour internship. With a narrow deadline on the horizon, time management became a key part of the project's execution. Our steadfast collaboration with each other as team members made time constraints much more manageable, with different team members able to pick up slack more at different times. Another major difficulty was determining how to create an equitable budget and compensation for each of our collaborators, designers, and models. It was a new and at times uncomfortable experience for us to have to put a price on the labor of different creatives' work.

Looking to the future, we have determined several avenues for improvement that can bolster audience engagement, create more lasting ties with community partners, and establish more equitable programming for marginalized groups. We strongly desire to continue doing work centered on communities and showcasing creatives who are routinely excluded from the art world and the public eye. With this in mind, we want to also adopt a more intersectional lens when looking at different kinds of oppression impacting our collaborators, artists, and audience. This includes prioritizing accessibility within our exhibit spaces and events. Financial accessibility also applies here, a constraint that the Henry thankfully addresses through being a free or donation-based museum. However, the resources of a financially-accessible museum cannot be unlocked if people are unaware of it. In the future, we want to do more outreach earlier in the process of planning an event. We also want to create more enduring relationships with collaborators through ongoing programs or event series. Through our strengths of community collaboration and adaptability, we worked alongside collaborators to create a fashion expo that centered QTBIPOC creativity within our local community and created opportunities to

strengthen diverse connections between local organizations and members of the public. We know that this event is only one step in addressing inequity in museums, which is why we look forward to committing to address institutional issues, such as racism, colonialism, and ableism, within museum spaces in the future.



Photos by Sorel Nica