

**Selected Curatorial Projects at the University of Minnesota**

What new possibilities present themselves when artists are invited into an institution as thought leaders and collaboration partners? The five projects summarized in this document, which I curated at the Weisman Art Museum (WAM), University of Minnesota, demonstrate the transformative potential of artist-led partnerships across fields of knowledge.

My work at WAM focused on creative practices and processes that act on the world beyond the studios, galleries and performance spaces and are rarely supported through museum programs. My curatorial and institutional choices prioritized impact, inclusiveness, and emergence over certainty, product, and public exposure, and—significantly—promoted financial sustainability by attracting research funds that advance both academic and artistic goals.

The initiatives below exemplify models of creative collaboration developed in the context of a public university. They operate in domains as diverse as medicine, criminal justice, biology, Indigenous knowledge, conflict studies and space research, and show what I consider successes of my work. More than anything, they operate in the domain of imagination, addressing the world not as it is but as artists imagine it can be. ‘Success’ here refers to the extent to which the work empowers and enacts artists’ imagination.

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## How Does Creativity Grow?



*Images: from the writing workshops at WAM by Yuko Taniguchi, Dr. Kathryn Cullen and Peng Wu. Environment in the top image by Peng Wu.*

**Knowledge area:** Art, Medicine, Behavioral Health, Neuroscience  
**Period:** 2018-present  
**Institutions/Departments:** WAM, U of M Medical School (Child and Adolescent Psychiatry), Psychology, School of Design  
**Lead collaborators:** Yuko Taniguchi (poet), Kathryn Cullen (psychiatrist), Peng Wu (artist)

In 2018, I initiated a collaboration between WAM and the U of M medical school, in which four artists were embedded in research departments and developed relationships with medical researchers. “How Does Creativity Grow?” emerged from the work of the poet Yuko Taniguchi with psychiatrist Dr. Kathryn Cullen, visual artist Peng Wu’s and neurologist Dr. Michael Howell.

The foci of the work by Wu and Howell were cultures of sleep and the ways social and physical environments interact with and often disrupt our natural sleep cycles. Wu experimented with environmental and performative actions (collective poetry workshops, craft activities and interactive installations with soft materials) to facilitate self-awareness with respect to rest and sleep.

At the same time, Taniguchi and Cullen explored how the creative development of youth can facilitate improved well-being and designed creative writing workshops in clinical settings for adolescents coping with mental health crises. Their approach was not that of art therapy (i.e. using poetry as means of healing), but of creativity development: actively supporting the creative growth of patients by promoting critical thinking, providing professional criticism, and facilitating public exposure.

Early on, the collaborators recognized the connection between sleep and mental well-being. Thus, Wu joined Taniguchi and Cullen to design stimulating physical environments and assist with performative elements of the workshops. The projects culminated in a series of public poetry workshops at WAM as well as an exhibition, “[Walk Back to Your Body](#)”.

Through the development of the clinical program, the collaborators learned that the literature on the neuroscience of creativity development is lacking. They initiated a research program to evaluate the effects of creativity development on adolescents’ brains using fMRI imaging. This new project incorporates artists and designers in leading research positions from the outset: both in the early stages of conceptual development and as part of the experimental design, analysis and publication.

The project is supported by discretionary funds from the Medical School (\$100,000), the [Minnesota Futures Award](#) from the U of M (\$250,000) and the National Endowment for the Arts “Arts Lab” funds (\$100,000 renewable for 5 times).



## “Section of Disapproved Books” and “On Site”



*Top: Installation view, “Section of the Disapproved Books,” Daniel McCarthy Clifford  
Bottom: ‘Imprisoned artist’ participates via phone call in the Pen America Breakout event held as the part of the project.*

<b>Knowledge area:</b>	Criminal justice, libraries, mass incarceration, censorship, creativity in prison.
<b>Period:</b>	2018-present
<b>Institutions/Departments:</b>	WAM, U of M Law School, Minnesota Department of Corrections, Minnesota Governor’s Office, and non-profit organizations We Are All Criminals and Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.
<b>Lead collaborators:</b>	Daniel McCarthy Clifford (artist), Emily Baxter (artist, curator, activist), Rebecca Shlafer (Medical School), Ingrid Nutall (IT), Perry Moriearty (Law School)

In 2018, I curated Daniel McCarthy Clifford’s project “Section of Disapproved Books”. Approximately 600 books banned in prisons by one or more states’ Departments of Corrections were borrowed from the U of M library and placed in the gallery, accessible to the visitors. Events were held in the space of the exhibit, including a semester-long Architecture course on open creative practice, a PEN America event dedicated to creative writing in prisons, as well as a pop-up exhibition and event at the Hennepin County Library (the central public library of Minneapolis).

McCarthy Clifford used his project as a platform to establish a collaborative team of faculty and staff, who together initiated the project “Just Education,” an academic initiative to provide free U of M degree programs in Minnesota prisons. The project attracted multiple grants from the Institute for Advanced Studies and foundations and grew to include collaborations with the Minnesota Department of Corrections and the Governor’s Office.

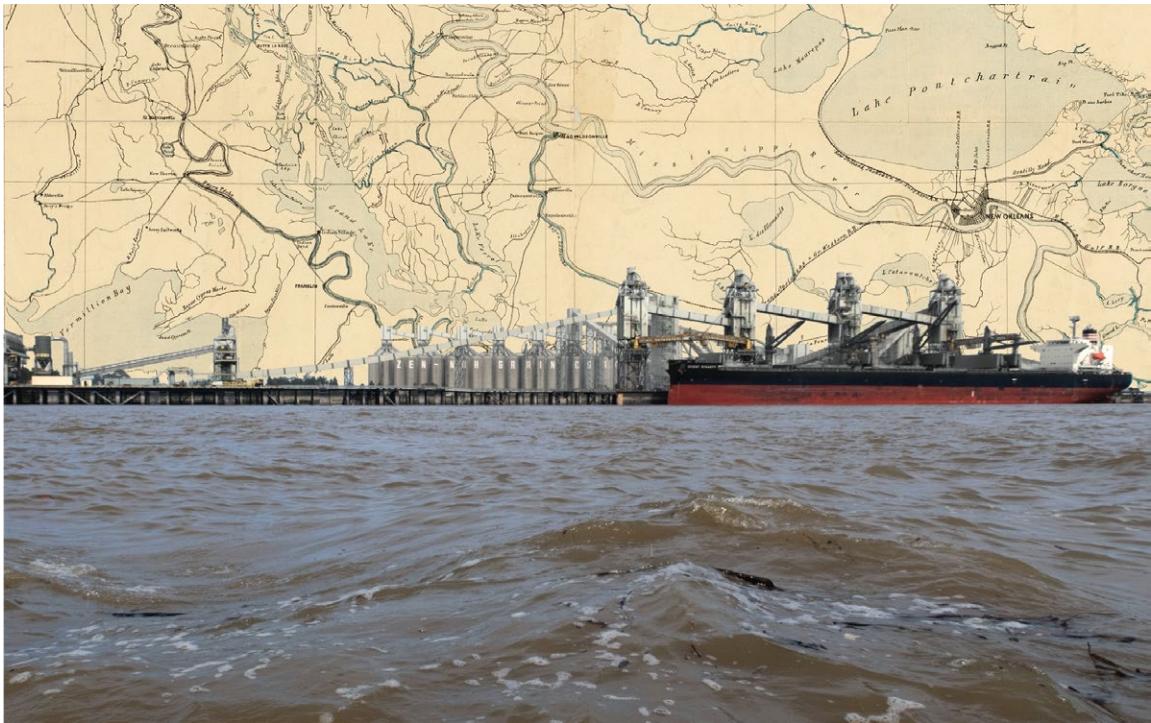
The present evolution of this project is “[On Site](#),” a collaboration between WAM and the nonprofits We Are All Criminals and the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop. “On Site” is a one-of-a-kind residency program involving collaborative teams of incarcerated artists, Twin Cities-based artists, and U of M faculty. The teams conduct research and create new art over two years. The new works, which are expected to include installation, poetry, video and performance, will be featured in an exhibition and WAM’s public programs.

While many ‘prison art’ projects focus on art as a rehabilitative or therapeutic activity, or on exhibiting (and often commodifying) artwork created in prisons, this initiative recognizes incarcerated artists as independent thinkers, makers and cultural innovators. It considers the work of incarcerated artists to be essential to the resilience of communities in the conditions of the American criminal justice system and integral to the art world at-large. “On Site” expands the role of an art museum from that of a presenter to an active supporter of artists’ work, wherever this work takes place, and whatever the conditions of the artist are.

The project [has received support](#) from the National Endowment for the Arts (\$40,000) and the Warhol Foundation (\$100,000).



## The Big River Continuum



*Top: Omashkoozo-zaaga'igan: Elk Lake, Lake Itasca, Minnesota.  
Bottom: Mississippi River: Cancer Valley between Istrouma & Bulbancha. Images by Monique Verdin, series  
"Bloom like a Wildflower, Flow like a River"*

**Knowledge area:** Environment, Biology, Indigenous knowledge  
**Period:** 2019-present  
**Institutions/Departments:** WAM, Lake Itasca Biological Station (College of Biological Sciences (CBS, U of M), A Studio in the Woods (Tulane University, New Orleans, LA).  
**Lead collaborators:** Rebecca Dallinger (artist, herbalist, White Earth), Jonathan Schilling (Director, Lake Itasca Biological Station), Karen Goulet (artist, educator, White Earth), Monique Verdin (artist, Houma)

[The Big River Continuum](#) is located at the Lake Itasca Biological Station at the Mississippi headwaters, about a four-hour drive from the Twin Cities. Although the station was established nearly a century ago, it exists in social isolation from its surroundings made up of rural farmland, Native American reservations, and small towns. When the new station director, Prof. Jonathan Schilling (Biology, U of M), assumed his position, he approached me for advice on connecting the station to the region. I proposed doing so with the help of local artists who would facilitate collaborations between communities and researchers.

A local curator and artist Rebecca Dallinger (White Earth) was invited to serve as Curator-in-Residence at WAM and Itasca Station to implement the program. In addition, an advisory cohort made up of local art institutions was created to facilitate public programs that engage with the research at the station and promote exchange of traditional Indigenous and scientific knowledge.

As the Big River Continuum evolved, a national component was developed in collaboration with the residency program “A Studio in the Woods” at Tulane University in New Orleans. An artists’ residency exchange provided the opportunity for Indigenous artists from the Mississippi headwaters and the Delta to exchange visits, create collaborative work, and engage with local ecological knowledge in both Indigenous and scientific contexts.

The project has resulted in public workshops at Itasca Station, a series of podcasts, and a “Mississippi-long” artist exchange through which Minnesotan quilt artist Karen Goulet (White Earth) was hosted at the Mississippi Delta and Louisiana artist Monique Verdin (Houma) served as an artist-in-residence at the Mississippi Headwaters. The resulting collaborative artworks was presented in both regional arts spaces and at WAM.

The Big River Continuum broadens the scope of the public engagement of a university art museum. Here, WAM assumed responsibility for the culture of knowing beyond its host campus and expanded its commitment to cultural engagement everywhere the university conducts business—even in research stations located several hours drive away. The Big River Continuum facilitated the creation of social, intellectual, and institutional infrastructure for artist-led community-engaged research and promoted sustained creative engagement with Indigenous knowledge and biological sciences.

The program was funded through discretionary funding from the College of Biological Sciences and grants from U of M’s Institute for Advanced Study and University Extensions.



**The Second National Symposium on Habitability of Environments**



*Top: Robert Irwin at The First National Symposium on Habitability, Irwin's studio, Venice, CA, 1970. Photo by Larry Bell.*

*Bottom: Habitability Workshop, Boris Oicherman's home, Minneapolis, MN, 2019.*

<b>Knowledge area:</b>	Space Science, Architecture, Habitability, Non-Disciplinary Knowledge, Models of Artistic Engagement
<b>Period:</b>	2017-present
<b>Institutions/Departments:</b>	WAM, Department of Anthropology (U of M), Texas A&M University, Temple University, Houston University, Translational Research Institute for Space Health - Baylor College of Medicine, University of Westminster (London, UK), Axiom Space (Houston, TX), Interesting Tactics (architecture collective)
<b>Lead collaborators:</b>	Boris Oicherman, Dawna Schuld (Texas A&M), James M. Thomas (Temple University)
<b>Collaborators:</b>	Christian Maender (Axiom Space, Houston, TX), Emmanuel Urquieta (Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX), Neal White (artist, University of Westminster, London, UK), Olga Bannova (Houston University, TX), Interesting Tactics (architecture collective, Minneapolis, MN), Peng Wu (artist, Minneapolis, MN)

The [First National Symposium on Habitability of Environments](#) was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and NASA in 1970. It was conceived of and designed by artist Robert Irwin and space scientist Edward Wortz to facilitate experiential engagement with knowledge about habitable environments. Irwin and Wortz took a radically innovative approach to trans-disciplinary discussions by removing the boundaries between intellectual content, physical environment, social interaction, and human experience, thereby opening scholarly conversations to diverse ways of knowing.

Out of all projects that I facilitated at the University of Minnesota, this was the only one that was prompted by my own interests and not by artists'. I asked: if WAM was to facilitate a Symposium on Habitability today, what shape would it take? What are the broader implications of Irwin's and Wortz's collaboration on the way we approach knowledge, research, art, and the creative agency of artists?

The project's first phase was dedicated to building the Habitability Cohort: a network of practitioners from art, history, design, space research, architecture, anthropology, and space entrepreneurship, all invested in the subject of habitability from widely diverse perspectives. In October 2019, the cohort gathered in Minneapolis for a [Habitability Workshop](#), a two-day event where we experimented with curatorial and design approaches to the Symposium. For example, to explore the conflation of subject matter and environment in a way similar to Irwin's, we hosted the workshop simultaneously in a private home (mine), in a museum, and outdoors in the neighborhood. We also innovated structures of conversations, devising an openly evolving "conversation scaffold" in which discussions organically evolved from multiple topics to a single one.



Our conversations made clear that, while the scholarly study of habitability may be academic, the frameworks of habitability encompass larger cultural discussions about living in nested domestic, ecological, racial, historical, urban, and political contexts. It became evident to us that cross-disciplinary approaches practiced today are inadequate for addressing the scope of the challenge: in the absence of institutional and cultural frameworks that support sustained engagement across all of these contexts, we cannot expect our interactions to have tangible consequences. I further elaborated on these ideas in a subsequent essay “[Unlearning the Elephant: Against Multidisciplinarity](#)”.

Those realizations motivated us to reimagine the Symposium as a decentralized and nonhierarchical series of open public conversations centered on and led by local communities in collaboration with scholars and artists, dedicated to the broad spectrum of climate, social, racial and criminal justice, architectural, cultural and other challenges we face in our habitable environments. Designing and conducting this series is the goal of the next project phase.

The first phase of the project was funded through my Curatorial Research Fellowship from the Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts (\$50,000).

## 168:02

<b>Knowledge area:</b>	Post-Conflict Recovery, Conflict Studies, Global Collaboration, Architecture
<b>Period:</b>	2019-present
<b>Institutions/Departments:</b>	WAM, U of M School of Design, U of M Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change, collaborators in Baghdad (TBD), and three nonprofits: Mizna, the American Iraqi Reconciliation Project and Minnesota Center for Book Arts
<b>Lead collaborators:</b>	Wafaa Bilal (artist), Tom Fisher (Architecture, Director of Minnesota Design Center), Karen Brown (Director, Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change)

During the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, looters stole and destroyed more than 70,000 books from the library of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. This prompted artist and Iraqi war refugee Wafaa Bilal to develop his installation [168:01](#): a monument to the loss and destruction of cultural heritage that also facilitates donations of art books requested by Baghdadi arts faculty and students. More than 5,000 books have been delivered through the project up to 2022.

The second phase of the project, 168:02, is conceived as a multi-faceted collaboration to prototype a new community art library in Baghdad. Bilal plans to work with faculty, students and communities in Baghdad, faculty and students at the University of Minnesota, the Iraqi diaspora in the United States, and the Iraqi Ministry of Culture. Together, collaborators would imagine a library environment to foster creativity and social relations in the specific cultural and ecological context of Baghdad, bringing people together physically and virtually to exchange knowledge through a social hub. A key component of the project is to incorporate Iraqi culture-specific sustainable approaches to the architectural design. The ambition is to design an architectural model that may also serve as a blueprint for other structures, such as homes and cultural institutions.

168:02 is a case study in how a university art museum can support acts of radical—even utopian—artistic imagination. Initially, Bilal approached me with a proposal that did not specify much more than “I want to build a library in Baghdad.” As the idea sank in, the initial sense of bewilderment gave room to fascination and curiosity: how can a museum and university in Minnesota meaningfully support such a project? During Bilal’s subsequent visit and brainstorming with potential faculty collaborators in architecture and global studies, we conceived a design seminar located at WAM, where the artist, students, and faculty collaborate remotely with their counterparts in Baghdad to design the concept blueprint. The seminar would culminate in a student project to build a scale prototype of the building, which would then be shipped to Baghdad collaborators for continued development in subsequent project phases.