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Grant enables U of L researchers to investigate how people engage with art

Intuitively, Dr. Josephine Mills, curator of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, knows people get something out of art. Exactly how people engage with art remains a mystery even though art galleries, large and small, have a big interest in being able to answer the question.

“Public engagement in the arts is a huge topic right now, particularly for the Canada Council for the Arts and other funding bodies and boards of free-standing art galleries. Within universities, it’s often phrased as academic engagement,” says Mills. “There’s this pressure to do lots of public engagement but there’s really no sense of how you would know when it’s successful.”

The question of how public engagement in the arts can be measured is perfect fodder for the Level 2: Lichen Lab interdisciplinary research group at the U of L. The team consists of Mills; Dr. Louise Barrett, Canada Research Chair in Cognition, Evolution and Behaviour; Christine Clark (MFA ’14), assistant professor in the Department of New Media; Donald Lawrence, a professor in the Faculty of Arts at Thompson Rivers University; Dr. Tiffany Muller Myrdahl, senior lecturer in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University; and doctoral students Miranda Lucas, Leila Armstrong and Maria Madacky. It hopes to shed some light on public engagement thanks to \$48,000 in funding from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection (SSHRC) Grant.

Previous research studies have focused on museums in large cities and most measures of audience engagement are based on assessing the performing arts where attendance numbers are easy to capture. People who visit an art gallery exhibit can provide anecdotes about their experience but there’s often a difference between what people say and what they do.

“Can you measure their behaviour and get some sense of what people are experiencing and getting out of an exhibition without having to ask them?” says Barrett.

To answer that question, Barrett and Lucas, recipient of a SSHRC graduate scholarship, thought techniques used to study the behaviour of vervet monkeys could be adapted to studying the behaviour of people at an art exhibit. In her study, Lucas set up small video cameras in four art galleries and recorded people’s behaviours, supplemented with her own notations. Lucas

measured details like how close people went to an artwork, how long they stood in front of it, how much they moved around and whether they spoke to someone. The data has not yet been analyzed but Lucas will be looking for common factors in people's behaviours.

To build on Lucas's work, Mills and Barrett have devised a project called *You are Here*. The project will bring together artists with an interest in activism and audience engagement, academics, art gallery professionals and students for a three-day workshop dedicated to developing the understanding of public engagement in art galleries on both practical and philosophical levels. Philosophically, Dr. Alva Noë's (University of California Berkeley) theory that art is a 'strange tool'—a means to reorganize, reflect on and understand human behaviour—will be used to connect the behavioural studies of gallery engagement with the artists' practices and the forms of art they produce.

"Can we look at art as something that's a way of extending our mind into the world and use it as a tool for understanding ourselves and others?" says Barrett. "If we can understand more about how people engage actively with art, artists can use that knowledge to elicit particular responses and alter viewers' perceptions. As the artists we work with are also activists, they are keen to incorporate such ideas into their practice."

In conjunction with the workshop, and a related series of exhibitions at the U of L Art Gallery in the fall of 2017, Clark will be involved in the knowledge mobilization component of the project, facilitating the creation of podcasts and a video miniseries which will be hosted on a dedicated website.

"I'll be helping with concept development and production of the podcasts, editing alongside the others, and overseeing a student to create the website that will host the podcasts and videos and other information to extend the material that people will have access to," says Clark.

The project will contribute to research and teaching in museum studies, visual art and the field of cognition, as well as inform art gallery professionals.

This news release can be found [online](#).

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Contact:

Caroline Zentner, public affairs advisor

403-394-3975 or 403-795-5403

caroline.zentner@uleth.ca