

ACCOMPLISHMENTS of INTERSECTIONS: CATASTROPHE SLAM

Over the weekend of March 6-8, 2009, students and faculty from across Parsons and The New School joined forces for **INTERSECTIONS: CATASTROPHE SLAM**. Hosted by Dr. Robert Kirkbride (Associate Professor, Parsons SCE) and Dr. Shannon Mattern (Assistant Professor, The New School), the special event simulated the urgency of a global catastrophe, featuring an intensive Faculty Colloquium, the performance of a human shipwreck, and a 24-hour student slam focusing on imminent threats to local, regional and global infrastructure. Fueled by “booster shot” presentations and a panel discussion with faculty across The New School, twenty-eight New School students worked in three teams in Aronson Gallery from Saturday straight through to Sunday, producing *Recipes for Disaster* – scenarios that **prevent, respond to, or accelerate** infrastructure collapse. The results of their intensive collaboration were then exhibited in Aronson Gallery through Friday, March 13th.

Summary of Colloquium + Human Shipwreck

On Friday, March 6, a 3-hour event began with a faculty colloquium in the Kellen Auditorium and concluded with a collaborative performance in the adjacent Aronson Gallery. The colloquium featured 6 brief 15-minute talks on various aspects of infrastructure and catastrophe, and a roundup panel discussion, as mental food for the participating students (who were required to commit themselves to the entire 3-day event). Near the end of the panel, thirty Lang theatre students – dressed in tyvek suits specially altered by 3 Parsons Fashion seniors – entered the auditorium and escorted the audience to the Aronson Gallery. The audience spilled out onto 5th Avenue in front of the gallery window, transforming it into the proscenium for an impromptu theatre. Accompanied by an alumnus of Jazz and musicians from Mannes, the Lang students performed the first scene (a shipwreck) of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (later presented in full at the Henry Street Settlement). The serendipitous thematic overlap – catastrophe and shipwreck – was itself a byproduct of a chain of chance comments and encounters. During the event planning, faculty participant Eduardo Staszowski mentioned a line from Paul Virilio that resonated: *to invent the ship is to invent the shipwreck*. By analogy, to invent infrastructure is to invent its inevitable failure. Meanwhile, Cecilia Rubino (director of Lang’s theatre program) and Shelley Fox (Director of Parsons Fashion MFA) had been invited to collaborate, and Professor Rubino seized the opportunity to lend shape to the first scene of her students’ project, *which just happened to feature a human shipwreck*. This aspect of the event provided an engaging thematic transfer from pedagogical absorption (the colloquium) to action (the 24-hour charrette).

Summary of 24-hour Slam

The Slam began at 9:30am on Saturday, March 7, in a room the equivalent of a blank slate. The walls and floor of Aronson Gallery had been lined with brown craft paper and blue painting tape, awaiting 24 hours of demarcation and declamation. Following the previous evening’s colloquium, the twenty-eight participating students had been divided into three teams, each dedicated to a different mode of addressing catastrophe – **responding** to it, **preventing** it, or **accelerating** it. Immediately they laid claim to their group’s territory in the gallery, and began brainstorming their respective scenarios *even before* the first planned exercise could occur. Colored post-it notes and bubble diagrams – words, words, words! – flew rapid-fire, until the hosts paused the flurry of activity to ask each individual student to represent the infrastructure of his or her mind with *images only*. With the verbal temporarily *verboten*, students graphically represented how they *think* they think, prompting a discussion of how groups would have to negotiate their individual members’ varied worldviews, values, and methods of problem-solving in order to create their *Recipes for Disaster*. These twenty-eight silhouettes soon crowned the papered walls, overseeing the subsequent activities...

In keeping with the overarching culinary metaphor, students were provided with a 24-hour menu of activities, and were requested to develop their recipes in stages, each of which followed by a check-in, or “taste test,” with a group of guest critics. The groups began by naming their disaster and addressing their “cooking conditions,” then identified their necessary ingredients and utensils. When their recipes – for water contamination (response), a conspiratorial media campaign (prevention), and wanton consumption of natural resources (acceleration) – met with critics’ approval, the groups were provided \$50 for “grocery shopping.” Catastrophe, of course, implies resourcefulness, and our shoppers were able to acquire most of their ingredients from the streets of New York and from recycling bins and trash heaps throughout The New School.

All the while, a reporter from WNSR: New School Radio was on-hand, even embedding himself temporarily in each of the groups, to capture the sounds of cooking up a catastrophe. Adding to the full radio coverage of the Friday Colloquium, his 24 hours of footage would later be edited into a 24-minute documentary, with each minute encapsulating the most piquant flavors of each hour.

The midnight to early morning hours were filled with such sounds – the chilling squeal of hand saw-on-Styrofoam, the serenade of an upright bass played by Jazz alumnus Masataka Odaka, the light percussion of hundreds of empty water bottles, rustling plastic tarps, chattering voices accompanying students and faculty through the witching hours... Then, 6am brought the boom of a kitchen explosion. Collapsing the groups’ soufflés, the critics informed students that there would be an unexpected final step in each of their recipes: they would have to find some culinary coherence within their pot-luck disasters, forging a deliberate connection across their scenarios. An hour of bleary-eyed deliberation yielded a solution: they would use one remaining empty corner of the gallery to invite their dinner guests, the gallery visitors, to inject their own fears and recipes for action into the calamitous feast. In the 23rd hour, the slammers plated and garnished their dishes, preparing them for public consumption, hoping that none would ever need taste this particular fare...

IMPACT of **INTERSECTIONS: CATASTROPHE SLAM**

CATASTROPHE SLAM was conceived by Kirkbride and Mattern as an appetizer to a new university-wide, undergraduate ULEC (University Lecture) course entitled “Intersections: Fuel + Ornament,” scheduled for Fall 2009. This new intradisciplinary course is designed to promote pedagogical transactions and serendipitous encounters among students and faculty across The New School through a chain of “mini-slams” that center on the following question: *How can we better prepare ourselves – as a species, as communities, as individuals – to address the complex problems facing humanity?* To appreciate the global and local forces that are rapidly and disastrously transforming the world, there is a compelling need to think differently, traversing traditional intellectual and political boundaries to generate visions that stimulate prudent actions. In particular, the intensifying crises surrounding petroleum and food – basic ingredients of the current global infrastructure – emphasize the urgency to envision impending and alternative scenarios. Such scenarios would be instrumental in raising public awareness of the crises and fueling design research into meaningful, sustainable interventions and innovations.

The Slam seeded many future collaborations, bringing together faculty and students from four New School divisions and forging new partnerships. Several of the faculty Slam participants have already agreed to contribute to the fall ULEC course.

The event and course demonstrates how the academy – the New School in particular, with its unique mix of design, arts, humanities, and social sciences – serves as an ideal location for the examination of serious, global, “wicked” problems. Such problems resist easy definition and categorization; they do not lie within the domain of any single field or discipline. The

“Intersections” course and the intensive Slam provide two models of problem-based learning that encourage and exploit cross-pollination among fields and practices and promote new collaborative ways of working. This has supported ongoing conversations around the undergraduate curriculum review at Parsons, the broader university restructuring, and the *kinds* of physical spaces necessary to nourish such collaboration. As noted in Provost Tim Marshall’s introduction to the Colloquium (on WNSR), the event contributed to discussions about the significance of the gallery spaces in the Sheila Johnson Pavilion. This 24-hour event created a new community *mindspace*, a significant dimension to students’ experience that is too easily and often trumped by more quantifiable metrics, and yet may be most central to cultivating a lasting bond between students and The New School. This is best summarized by one of the participants, Holly Stair, who was a Sophomore in Parsons School of Design Strategies:

In retrospect, the Slam was a great experience. I was forced to work with people who I didn't know (for better or for worse) and it gave me a real idea of once we graduate, the different kinds of people we'll have to work with and please. The actual project was really thought provoking, because I've never actually been asked to think about something like that. Although I don't think that my Response group came up with an adequate response to that catastrophe at all, ... I thought that our presentation of the bottles was really cool. Initially, I said to myself I'd never do it again. But now i've decided otherwise. It was a real challenge and frankly I enjoyed it the most from around 2-5 am!

Catastrophe Slam also provided impetus to New School's pedagogical and media infrastructure, providing content for the Parsons alumni publication, *Red*, and the newly revamped New School Radio Station: http://newschoolradio.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=120&Itemid=53

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Supplementary materials include:

Event Poster
Exhibit wall text
Photographs (DVD)