Progress Report 1 for SVA/Robert Lemelson Fellows

General summary:
Most of the students have begun preliminary field research and/or purchased equipment for the pre-dissertation work. This progress reports allows us see their progress, and evaluate the use of funds. There was a slight delay in reporting, hence the tardiness of this report. Because of their work in the field, not all fellows were able to report on time due to lack of internet in remote locations.

Summary Narratives and Progress individual:

Courtney Wittekind:
The SVA Robert Lemelson Foundation Fellowship allowed me to conduct preliminary fieldwork in preparation for my dissertation research, which will be based in Yangon, Burma/Myanmar. Not only did this trip involve continued ethnographic research on the changing form of Yangon’s urban core and peri-urban boundaries, but it also offered an opportunity to further explore the media-based components of my dissertation. As a part of Harvard’s Critical Media Practice program, I will be integrating multiple types of audiovisual media into my dissertation research, and this summer’s research period provided an excellent chance to identify the most productive intersections of my interests in nonfiction filmmaking, sonic/audio ethnography, and spatial/geographic analysis.

With the support of the SVA Robert Lemelson Foundation Fellowship, I was able to prioritize a collaborative approach to the multimedia components of my research—a goal I had set for myself previously, but was unable to pursue without additional funding. Central to this summer’s work have been relationships built with arts/media-focused organizations and with young artists and media professionals. The ability to compensate these collaborators, paying them market rates as opposed to merely asking them to volunteer their time and/or skills, is something I value. Having had the privilege to see local institutions focused on media, arts, and culture expand following the relaxation of censorship in Myanmar, I’m appreciative of the chance to further encourage these shifts through my own work. Additional SVA Robert Lemelson Foundation Fellowship funds will be used to further these collaborations come December 2018, when I will return to Myanmar to share completed works-in-progress at a roundtable I will organize with other artists focused on media and the changing city.

Andrew McGrath:
The SVA/Robert Lemelson funding has allowed me to both pay summer rent in a very expensive Southern California rental market, and devote my attention to developing my eventual fieldwork in the years ahead. By not having to seek summer employment, I have been able to make excursions into the region I may be doing dissertation fieldwork in while ensuring that I have reliable funds with which to negotiate an open itinerary for research design through trial and error.

While I am undoubtedly privileged to be a PhD student, especially after many years of working bad service and manual labor jobs, it is by no means an extravagant lifestyle. Funding from SVA/Robert Lemelson has helped to filter the day to day stress of caring for myself and my family while living in a city none of us are from. It has allowed me the ability to attune to my research and planning with a clarity unexpected before being awarded.

Eliana Ritts:
I have spent the past month in Taiwan and am just nearing the end of my time here. My original arrangement was to work with a slow television show at TITV, but when I arrived my host at the station
shifted my work to a different program. With SVA support I was able to travel outside of Taipei to accompany the filming of two episodes of Dapin along Taiwan’s eastern coast. We went to Yuli for an episode where a Han Taiwanese actress visits an Indigenous Bunun village and eco-farm, and to Yilan as an Indigenous Atayal musician who lives in Taipei learned about Atayal music and festival practices. During these trips I observed the filming process and had the chance to experience the different social worlds that emerge around each episode.

At this stage in my career, SVA’s support has been invaluable both in terms in preliminary research and in-field relationships. It has been incredibly important to have this chance to return to Taiwan and affirm my commitment to the station and its staff. With this visit I was able to build on my first trip to Taiwan in 2017 and start transforming initial meetings into long-term relationships. This was also my first opportunity to accompany filming at TITV and immerse myself in the station’s production processes. When I return to NY in the fall, my discussions and observations from Dapin will help me refine my research questions, guiding my preparation for dissertation fieldwork next year. Over the past month, I have also initiated conversations with TITV leadership about my research questions, objectives, and methods, opening up a joint discussion about how my research can extend knowledge at the station. At this stage in my research, this as a critical step in decolonizing my methods and conducting ethical work. These conversations will set the tone for my future relationship with TITV and provide a foundation for the rest of my doctoral research. Finally, SVA’s support has enabled me to connect with leaders in Taipei’s arts and media scene and start to situate my research within Taiwan’s broader Indigenous mediascape. By attending arts events and meeting with artists, curators, and filmmakers, this summer I was able to expand my network in Taipei. These connections that will open up new parts of Taiwan’s media world when I return next year.

Austin Lord:
From July 12th to July 22nd, I led a collaborative multi-media project focused on documenting the festival of Drukpa Tse Chu in the Langtang Valley – this was the first festival held in Langtang following the conclusion of the three year mourning period (as detailed in the project proposal). Our team consisted of my three principal collaborators from the Langtang Memory Project (Gyalpo Lama and Tsering Lama from Langtang, and my colleague Jennifer Bradley), an ethnomusicologist (Dr. Mason Brown), and five other Langtangpa community members who helped document the events. Our goal was to include as many community members as possible in the project, so that our content would reflect a variety of differently situated local perspectives. All told, we collected an incredible amount of material – about 30 hours video footage, roughly 4,000 photographs, 6 hours of audio tape, and recordings of 12 traditional songs related to the festival. Our challenge now is working through these materials in the coming weeks and months….

The Lemelson/SVA Fellowship allowed me to undertake my first ethnographic film project, which was only a loosely formed dream until now. I am extremely grateful for the vote of confidence in my project, which is very timely, both for the community and for me as an aspiring visual anthropologist. Concretely, with funds from the fellowship I was able to buy a Fuji XT-2 (I absolutely love this camera), to cover our operational and logistical costs, and to fairly compensate my collaborators from the Langtang community for their time working with us (which is ethically important). Personally, I feel like this project was an incredibly fortunate first step, a chance to establish some kind of experiential foundation that I can build on in my dissertation research and beyond. To be clear: while I have been working with photographs for more than a decade, and ‘doing’ visual ethnographic work in Nepal for a few years, I have never shot film in any significant way or led a film project. Shooting video for days (and thinking in film, rather than stills) was an entirely new experience for me – creatively and technically. Leading and working with a team of collaborators was also a really valuable experience for me – thankfully, one marked more by joys than
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frustrations. In short, I learned a great deal during this project, and I am still learning, as we engage in the process of collective decision-making about how to use our content. I think some of the most valuable insights from this project relate to methodology… and I look forward to exploring this angle in future research and published work. Lastly, this project is really important within the larger arc of the Langtang Memory Project - it was a major waypoint and step forward in our work with the Langtangpa community. For all these reasons, I am deeply grateful for your support. Thank you.

Jelena Jovovich:
The workshop is schedule for end of September 2018 in Belgrade, Serbia. So far, I have been organizing my trip to San Jose where I will present the process and outcomes of the workshop - Oppositional Gazes. However, this grant is allowing me to plan practicalities of space rental, equipment rental and purchase beforehand so that my time in the workshop can be dedicated to building a collective, learning and exchange. I will be flying to Belgrade to commence my field trip end of August.

This generous fund has enabled me to make a big step forward at this early point of my academic and activist engagement. After 2 years of taking courses, reading and learning I am now able to move on to applying my knowledge and experience due to the funds allocated for my project. I see this as a pilot project for the larger fieldwork awaiting for me in the next years of my PhD.

Mary Pena:
The north coast region of Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic has been undergoing major reconstruction as a cultural heritage site and tourist destination. Since 2006, state-private coalitions have spurred large-scale redevelopment plans that have reconfigured spatial relationships organizing the physical landscape. The ongoing efforts of regional restructuring enact forms of spatial, social, and sensorial violence that not only wreak havoc on people’s access to residential amenities, but also disrupts ways of knowing forged in connection to place. My project aims to document the ways in which residents navigate landscapes in flux and how materialities are sensorially experienced and broadly perceived using a collaborative approach to photo-ethnography.

Progress - to date, the planning and preparation phase of the fieldwork period has been underway. The SVA/Lemelson Fellowship funds have enabled me to purchase camera and storage equipment necessary for the proposed project, as well as equipment insurance. In particular, I purchased the FujiFilm x100f and Fujifilm Instax Square cameras, a wide angle lens, instant film packets, along with a back up hard drive. My travel arrangements have been made in conversation with my host family and key interlocutors in the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, while my fieldwork activities propose to partake in the daily activities and movements of a core group of interlocutors, I have also organized an itinerary of site visits to assess the current status of ongoing reconstruction efforts in the city center.