BIG, BEAUTIFUL DATA: COLLABORATION WITH NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY INSPIRES NEW EXHIBITION AT SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO (SAIC)

Chicago, IL—Twenty-one students and nine faculty members from Northwestern University (NU) and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) are combining big data with collaborative research, studio arts, and visual communication design this summer at SAIC’s downtown campus. The results—creative approaches to information visualization developed in an intensive new course, called Data Viz Collaborative—will go on view for four weeks in a free exhibition opening Friday, August 16, 4:00–6:00 p.m. at SAIC’s Gallery X (280 South Columbus Drive) and LeRoy Neiman Center (37 South Wabash Avenue). The course and exhibition, which will also travel to NU, are the latest developments at SAIC in a long history of connecting artistic and scientific practices via their shared processes of discovery.

The exhibition will feature experimental projects developed in three research groups working over six weeks on $500 budgets. Areas of concentration are Big Data and School Choice in Chicagoland, Mapping Genealogy and Ancestry, and Eye-tracking: tracing the gaze in an image. Faculty research presentations, introductory lectures on the history of graphic visualizations, workshops on computer programming, and field trips to the Adler Planetarium and the NU campus are also included in the curriculum.

“In today’s increasingly data-driven world, artists and designers have much to contribute to innovation alongside scientists and engineers,” says SAIC President Walter E. Massey. “The complexity and scale of the issues presented by visualizing information in the age of big data require a creativity of approach and mindset in both research and problem-solving. Only by combining the interpretive powers of artists and scientists can we continue to achieve the kinds of breakthroughs necessary to sustain an innovative society and economy.”

Recognized worldwide for its interdisciplinary curricula, SAIC merges art and science unlike any other institution. SAIC students enroll in natural science courses that combine specialized knowledge with specific art topics. The school houses state-of-the-art science labs in which students engage in research for biology, anatomy, chemistry, and astronomy, among other liberal arts classes. The school formed the nation’s first Department of Art and Technology Studies, founded in 1970 as the Generative Systems Program. Its current president, Dr. Walter E. Massey, is a decorated physicist who has served as Vice President of Research at the University of Chicago, Director of the Argonne National Laboratory, and Director of the National Science Foundation.

More recently, SAIC created the Conversations on Art and Science lecture series in 2011, and in the spring of 2014 SAIC will host its first Scientist in Residence, David Gondek, who will teach an interdisciplinary liberal arts course called “Algorithms, Info, A.I.” This past December SAIC became a founding partner in Chicago’s Urban Center for Computation and Data (UrbanCCD), an urban planning organization funded by a $600,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to conduct research based on
SAIC faculty and alumni continue to make important contributions in fields aligned with science and technology. In October faculty members George Aye and Sara Cantor Aye received a $10,000 City 2.0 grant from TED to support Designing Chicago: New Tools for Public Transit, a project from their Greater Good Studio that leverages public participation to improve citywide navigation. This spring faculty member Tom Burtonwood co-founded the Midwest’s first public access 3D-printing facility, the 3D Printer Experience, an initiative revolutionary both in its use of innovative technology and its democratic, experimental operating model. In June MB Labs, a design group comprised of three alums from SAIC’s Art and Technology Studies department, took the $10,000 grand prize at Red Bull’s nationwide building and innovation competition in New York City.

Leading the course are SAIC adjunct faculty member Bo Rodda (SAIC MFA 2010), Building Intelligence and Energy Efficiency Specialist at Argonne National Laboratory; Bruce Ankenman, Associate Professor in the department of Industrial Engineering and Management Sciences at Northwestern, and Co-Director of NU’s Segal Design Institute; and SAIC’s Interim Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Tiffany Holmes, a media artist who explores the potential of art and technology to promote environmental stewardship. Additional faculty members from NU include Danny Abrams (Engineering Sciences and Applied Mathematics), Luis Amaral (Chemical and Biological Engineering), and Steven Franconeri (Psychology); SAIC instructors include Michael Golec (Art History, Theory, and Criticism), Adam Trowbridge (Contemporary Practices), and Jessica Westbrook (Contemporary Practices).

**Data Viz Collaborative**
LeRoy Neiman Center Lobby (37 S. Wabash Ave.): August 16–September 13
Gallery X (280 S. Columbus Dr., room 113): August 16–22
Gallery X hours: Fri. 8/16, 4:00–6:00 p.m.; Sat. 8/17, 11:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.; Sun. 8/18: closed; Mon–Thu: 11:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.

This exhibition features work created by students during the class. Participating NU students include Beau Becker, Sara Clifton (fellow), Karna Gowda, Daniel Ha, Felix Hu, Shiqiang Li, Audrey Lustig (fellow), Nick Timkovich (fellow), Rachel Weathered, and Kyle Yakal-Kremski.

Participating SAIC students include Brendan Albano, Will Becker, Richard Blackwell, Sarah Faulk, Yuehao Jiang, Zac Kile, Emma Peng, Miguel Perez (Teaching Assistant), Zeke Raney, Ariel Zekelman, and Shuting Zheng.

**ABOUT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY**
Founded in 1851, Northwestern University is one of the country’s leading private research and teaching universities with an enrollment of approximately 8,000 full-time undergraduate students and approximately 8,000 full-time graduate and professional students and approximately 2,000 part-time students on campuses in Evanston and Chicago, Illinois, and Doha, Qatar. Northwestern combines innovative teaching and pioneering research in a highly collaborative environment that transcends traditional academic boundaries. Northwestern provides students and faculty exceptional opportunities for intellectual, personal and professional growth in a setting enhanced by the richness of Chicago.
ABOUT THE SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
A leader in educating artists, designers, and scholars since 1866, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) offers nationally accredited undergraduate and graduate degrees and post-baccalaureate programs to more than 3,200 students from around the globe. SAIC also provides adults, high school students, and children with the opportunity to flourish in a variety of courses, workshops, certificate programs, and camps through its Continuing Studies program. Located in the heart of Chicago, SAIC has an educational philosophy built upon an interdisciplinary approach to art and design, giving students unparalleled opportunities to develop their creative and critical abilities, while working with renowned faculty who include many of the leading practitioners in their fields. SAIC’s resources include the Art Institute of Chicago and its new Modern Wing; numerous special collections and programming venues provide students with exceptional exhibitions, screenings, lectures, and performances. For more information, please visit saic.edu.

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