

## WITNESS LAB CE NOTES

Research-based artist

- Rather than predetermining a medium to work in like drawing, photography, or ceramics, she lets herself be guided by what she is studying in order to decide which medium to work in
- Courtney is guided by what she finds interesting and makes responses to those things
  - Idea comes first then medium comes second

“Witnessing is an artistic, social, and civic lab” Witness Lab is a way for us to practice these skills

“Uncertainty” is an underlying topic that she keeps coming back to in talking about Witness Lab.

- “Uncertainty” is about:
  - The artistic process
  - What’s coming next
  - The nature of making art in 2020 and being a person at all in America in 2020
  - Also a bit more metaphorically about the value of the unknown when thinking about the future of education and justice

In speaking about witnessing, law, performance, and storytelling, Courtney hopes to address uncertainty by way of complexity, truth, and the thinking about the future

### **BACKGROUND**

Courtney grew up in Greensboro, NC and a large part of her work is defined by who her parents are. Much of her life has been comprised of artists, teachers, and lawyers which undoubtedly led her to come to studying the relationship between performance and law

- Father was a public defender and criminal defence attorney
- Mother was a public school teacher
- They were both liberal parents in the south

As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, Courtney studied journalism and writing, but found herself increasingly pulled in the visual arts, but journalistic methodology is still an important part of her practice

- Almost all projects start with a discussion or interview, and many end that way as well

### **LOVES ART BECAUSE IT IS A GREAT WAY TO COMPARE THINGS**

Deciding to be an artist dawned on her over time–she found it to be a particularly great form for comparison of seeming disparate things (e.g. performance and law)

- Her findings could become aesthetic, emotional, or social, or intellectual manifestations (potential complex truths that she could find)

### **STORYTELLING IN THE COURTROOM**

Lawyers became interest because they are agents of an institution

- Individual but also represent a larger body, something larger than people but still fallible and comprised of people
- Found that litigation is a place where storytelling and performance intersected/overlapped everyday life
  - When she started interviewing lawyers they all said that one thing they wanted to get better at is *storytelling*

### **VISUAL ART RELATIONSHIP TO PERFORMANCE**

- “The courtroom is the last place where liveness is still important” –quote from performance theory professor, Philip Auslander

### **STUDYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND LAW FOR 6 YEARS**

- Much of Courtney’s research has been focused on legal simulation, or more particularly, Collegiate Mock Trial, organized by the American Mock Trial Association
  - In Mock Trial, students act out the details of shared, fictional cases, at times, arguing for both the prosecution and the defense. The students are cast as lawyers and as witnesses, allowing them to shape all aspects of the story they tell. Their collective action is theatrical and speculative. This became an interesting way to study the criminal justice system as its most theatrical, most heightened and fictional form.
  - Began following and observing the UGA Mock Trial Team, attending tournaments, and acting as the mock trial advisor
  - After the long observation, Courtney knew as an artist that observation must turn into action
    - As an artist, not a journalist, Courtney decided that she must also engage in the fictional, creative game-play in some form or another

### **CREATION OF WITNESS LAB**

Important thought that guided Courtney to creating Witness Lab: *to write laws and adjudicate them is an act of world-building and the world can be new and different with every ruling*

Why study witnessing? What is witnessing?

- *Witnessing* is a presence, but also a retelling. It is different from observing, it is active, political and social in nature.

- Witnessing has a history in performance arts and was inspired by contemporary life . Witnessing is not a bystander effect but as a way of recording history as it's happening.
- *Lab of Inquiry*– *lab* is a space of curiosity, a place that invites testing and uncertainty and remains open to possibility. It is a public act of inquiry.

## THE SPACE

*Witness Lab* is a courtroom installation that collapses studio, courtroom, and theater

- It is an architectural courtroom installation and performance series

*Witness Lab* is a space of practice and imagining and gives us a way to think about the future.

## THE PROJECT

*Witness Lab* offers audiences a complex truth. By studying the courtroom as a space of performance, and the lawyers as agents of justice, participants and passerby consider the physical and perhaps social architecture of the law

### Activating the Space

- The visible courtroom located in the glass Stenn Gallery will host legal simulations from participating groups including The Trial Advocacy Society and the Oral Argument Competition from the University of Michigan Law School, as well as the undergraduate team of the Collegiate American Mock Trial Association
- Additionally, court transcript readings and trial advocacy workshops will be performed in the gallery
- Students will observe and document the courtroom activity through drawing, text, photography, and video
- Accumulated documents will result in a publication

## QUESTIONS

How did you choose the color?

- Did not want it to be a replica (wanted to remind people that it's a space for imagining). It is a place of imagination and practice.

How much are you inviting people?

- Goal is to make space as public as possible and allow people to have as much access to it as possible.
- Activated 4-5 times a week from now-close

### **Witness Lab as a visual art**

- Courtney is a visual artist
- There is a push for visual art to be more active and engaging in this way
- Relocating something that would be happening somewhere else anyway
- Art museum is a space of social, artistic, and civic engagement just like witnessing
- Live performance

Video of U-M mock trial - 3D video

Concept about witness - what is the bridge between what happens in a performance like this and an actual trial where people are being called to witness?

- There is a commanding role to be a witness in the performance space - a similar expectation, metaphorical mapping
- Artistic witnessing is a presence and a retelling

The witness helps us remember

## CONTACTING COURTNEY

Email two-weeks in advance about scheduling something in the gallery.

Contact Courtney directly at [courtneymccllellan@gmail.com](mailto:courtneymccllellan@gmail.com).

*The best way to streamline communication and ensure that Courtney will address your questions in a timely manner is to avoid cluttering her inbox by deciding who among your group will be the main-point-of-contact to communicate with Courtney*

For more information about Courtney and her work, visit her website at [courtneymccllellan.com](http://courtneymccllellan.com)