Fiat Lux Remix project allows students to imagine UC’s future

BY HAILEY SIMPSON | STAFF

When sophomore Elena Kempf was challenged to take one of Ansel Adams’ iconic photographs of the UC Berkeley campus and re-envision it to tell a more modern message, she started with one of his sweeping shots of the Campanile and overlaid her own image of a student protesting during a fall 2012 walkout. The beauty of Adams’ photos inspired her to participate, but she says her reworking addresses more than the beauty of his photos.

“It at some point struck me that (his photos) were somehow too perfect,” Kempf said. “Few, if any, of his photos explicitly highlight dissent. A utopian symbol for excellence in public higher education, Sather Tower, is visually put where it belongs — in the center of a debate about affordability. I aimed to communicate that dissent can be beautiful as well.”

Kempf’s photograph was one of two grand-prize winners of the Fiat Lux Remix project, an intercampus and interdepartmental endeavor designed to provide “a springboard to think about our present-day university and imagine the future university we would like to create.”

The project, created by the campus On the Same Page program and the College of Letters and Science last summer, was centered on the 1967 book “Fiat Lux” by Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall. The book was commissioned by then-UC president Clark Kerr to document a vision of what public higher education at the University of California would look like in the next century.

This past fall, all incoming students received copies of the book and were advised to read through it and pay attention to Adams’ photos so that they could be fully prepared to participate in the upcoming programs set for the fall.

On the Fiat Lux agenda were dozens of seminars in numerous academic disciplines and the tour-de-force: the remix project. Participants in the project were given a semester to complete one simple directive — to use Adams’ photos or Newhall’s writing and remix them into a work that reflects the students’ views on the future of higher education.

“He wished for his own negatives to be made available in a university setting to advanced students and artists for them to ‘play’ and perform the score,” said Catherine Cole, the contest coordinator and a professor of theater, dance and performance studies.
These conversations started in seminar classes like Michael Macsuch’s rhetoric class titled “Ansel Adams’ ‘Fiat Lux’ and the Visual Rhetoric of Berkeley in the 1960s.” Taking the photography collection as a “corporate advertising brochure,” Macsuch asked his students to consider “what photographs can do that words cannot” in terms of communicating the university’s values.

After receiving hundreds of submissions, a panel of faculty judges from the departments of art, literature, film, environmental design and performance studies chose seven winners — two grand-prize winners and five honorable mentions. Along with having their work on display in the Bancroft Library, the winners were given the chance to meet with Gov. Jerry Brown and the UC Board of Regents in March to share their views on higher education.

“I think many people recognized a kind of disconnect in rhetoric between (the 1960s) and now,” Cole said. “My overall goal was to provoke different kinds of conversations about the future of the university than we have been having in the past three or four years. We need to have big-picture conversations, and that is difficult to do during a time of rapidly decreasing resources.”

UC Board of Regents chair Sherry Lansing agrees with Cole’s sentiments, noting that she found great joy in seeing the values and aspirations of the student winners who attended the regents’ meeting in March.

“It’s a fabulous project, and timely,” Lansing said. “Now more than ever, we need expansive visions for the future of the University of California. The regents welcome the engagement of our students and other members of the UC community in helping the public see higher education as a public good.”

Sophomore Sheila Wagner, who received an honorable mention, found her creative vision in the form of a collage. An avid collage-maker with vintage magazines, Wagner immediately thought of using Photoshop to put her own digital spin on the art form she knows and loves. She combined the images of hands cupped around a ball of light surrounded by students of a variety of ages and ethnicities involved in various projects on campus, including a candid aerial view of a people-packed Sproul Plaza.

“(I) looked through all the photographs and picked out parts that I thought represented what the university means to me: a culturally diverse place where the arts and sciences meet, a guiding light for the young and old,” she said.

While Wagner says she learned a great deal about the value of the university through the project, she got just as much out of her “lengthy and lively” meeting with Brown and even got an official pardon for missing a French test.

“The governor sent an email to my French teacher excusing my absence,” Wagner said. “She was pretty excited about that.”

Other winning submissions included essays, artwork and photographs from grand-prize winner Luis Flores and honorable-mention winners Pauline Autet, Yuan Chen, Evertó Gutierrez and Joseph Mann. Their pieces and other submissions will be on display in Zellerbach Playhouse from April 19 to 28 as a part of the “Exposures” installment.

Beyond the submissions, Cole took away several big ideas from the project’s success, including the possibility that students could contribute to the very design of the university’s future. Though the project is in its final stage, Cole recognizes that its impact on the campus dialogue is far from over.

“What is especially fun is that some of the more recent collaboration and iterations of the work have come about without my own provocation,” she said. “So yes — let there be light, and then light has a way of spilling and radiating in ways that you can’t always control.”

Contact Hailey Simpson at hsimpson@dailycal.org.
This is a remarkable project that I can’t wait to share with my students. Thanks!

Lisa Wymore · 4 years ago
This is a great article which talks about the Fiat Lux project. Come see the artwork that students created in the lobby of the Playhouse Theater in the "Exposures" exhibit and then attend the Berkeley Dance Project performance entitled "Aperture." I am so excited about these two events engaging with one another through the Fiat Lux project.
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