ARTS CO+RE / Special Programs / 1 Year Report

Deke Weaver / CETACEAN (The Whale)

dekew@illinois.edu

**Time Line**

Champaign Unit 4 presentation September 29, 2021

ASME Whale presentation September 13, 2021

ASME meeting October 20 2021 (after they had met twice a week for 5 weeks, collaboratively working on design proposals for the whale)

Urbana High presentation December 2, 2021

Big rehearsal December 12, 2021

Monthly rehearsals - Jen and Laura

Monthly meetings with dramaturg - Jayne and Deke

Unscheduled non-stop discussions - Deke and Jen

Urbana High School workshops - March 28-April 1, 2022

**Process**

Over the past year, research for CETACEAN (The Whale) has been steady and multi-pronged. The different layers of the project are all interconnected, so if one part of the program isn’t working, the other segments will suffer at best and won’t exist at worst. So figuring out the design of the whale has been critical. But the design of the whale had to include elements that could be built easily by lots of different people - especially high school students. Other levels of community research/engagement included advising meetings, material experiments, and a group rehearsal that gathered community members, UIUC faculty and students. Other more focused rehearsals are continuing. The past year/semester have found the work for CETACEAN concentrating on preparation for the 2022-23 academic year of multiple workshops which is leading to the October 2023 live performances.

I am aware that SSC funding is intended to benefit UIUC students. Additional funding for the project is from UIUC’s Office of the Vice Chancellor of Research and it’s Arts CO+RE program which stresses finding bridges between the university and the community at large. This report might find more emphasis on Champaign/Urbana high schools. This balance will change as the 3 year project unfurls. UIUC participants for 2022-23 will include students from Dance, Theatre, Art & Design, FAA Sustainable Design Program, Architecture, and other programs. The work in 2023 leading up to the October 2023 performances will be very heavy with UIUC student participants, technicians, artists, and performers.

Here are some research-process details:

• WHALE DESIGN — During the Fall 2021 semester, the UIUC Student Chapter of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) put their brains to the design of the whale for 6 weeks, presenting 3 different iterations in October 2021. Additional whale design brainstorming happened with UIUC alum Andrew Quitmeyer, Unreliable Bestiary collaborator Andy Warfel, UIUC faculty members Guen Montgomery and Jamie Jones, former UIUC faculty member Stephen Cartwright, and engineer Maurice Rabb.

• WORKSHOP DESIGN — Meetings to formulate the design of the high school workshops have included advisors UIUC faculty members Jorge Lucero, Guen Montgomery, Pat Hammie, Stacey Robinson; Urbana High School (UHS) art instructors Roberta Bennett and Jill Lagerstam; and Central High School (CHS) art instructor Carol-Lynn Camparetto.

• WORKSHOP IMPLEMENTATION — A week (March 28-April 1, 2022) with two of Roberta Bennett’s UHS art classes is serving as a pilot for the workshops we will stage in the 2022-23 academic year. The workshop-week included digital-image training, rotoscope-animation production, free-writing exercises, sculpture generation, demonstrating examples of narrative-myth structures and collaborative problem-solving.

• INFORMATION/ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING — A September 2021 meeting with Champaign/Urbana high school teachers organized by CHS instructor Carol-Lynn Camparetto was held. The gathering let instructors know more about the project and provided a venue to hear from the high school instructors how the project might be shaped to fit their classes. We’ll meet again with UHS art teachers Roberta Bennett and Jill Lagerstam and myself reporting the results of the March 2022 UHS pilot workshop week.

• INTERVIEWS — Conversations with Japanese whaling historian, dolphin bio-acoustics expert, underwater/SCUBA marine wildlife photographer, coastal/marine ecologists, others.

• READING/WRITING — Monthly meetings with dramaturg Jayne Wenger.

• SITE/FIELD WORK — Invited to attend the Mellon funded "Coasts, Climates, Humanities and the Environment Consortium" held at the University of Virginia’s Coastal Research Center in Oyster, VA (October 12-14, 2021). Other site/field work included visits to the New Bedford (Massachusetts) Whaling Museum, whale trip in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Pending applications to artist residencies in Alaska (rejected) and Maine (pending).

• REHEARSALS — Group rehearsals, more focused rehearsals with tighter groups.

• FUNDRAISING 01 — Applications to the Student Sustainability Committee (Fall 2021, Spring 2022)

• FUNDRAISING 02 — Explorations with the UIUC Foundations Office and FAA’s alumni-giving liaison Benda Nardi, explorations with OVCR for NEA funding.

**Participants**

At this stage participants have included …

* American Society of Mechanical Engineers UIUC Student Chapter, School of Engineering

• UIUC Art & Design faculty + staff + students (undergraduate and graduate)

• UIUC Dance faculty + graduate students

• UIUC English faculty

• UIUC Physics faculty

• UIUC Landscape Architecture faculty

• UIUC Anthropology faculty

• UIUC Center for Advanced Study staff

• UIUC Global Arts Performance Initiatives director

* Urbana High School art class students

• Champaign/Urbana high school art teachers

• Community members

• Unreliable Bestiary collaborators

• UIUC alumni

**Community Needs**

Understanding the needs of the community feels like one part listening, one part asking questions, one part educating/offering (going both ways), and two parts paying attention. Here are some moments in the process that have felt like responses to community needs …

• WHALE SCULPTURE DESIGN — Shifts in the original whale design idea took place because of material experiments conducted by Professor Guen Montgomery and myself. This shift took into account a wider range of student abilities and attention, and availability of class time. Our original process was difficult, time-consuming, and (ultimately) frustrating.

• WORKSHOP — Worked with UHS art teachers Roberta Bennett and Jill Lagerstam to develop the week long workshop. We talked about what would be possible for individual classes, what would be engaging for the students, what these two teachers needed.

• ANIMATION — As an expansion of the original workshop idea, we altered the project to include digital-imaging training for the students, how to rotoscope video footage. Each student rotoscoped (digital tracing/drawing) 12 frames of video footage of whales - a full second of video per student. This will result in crowdsourced animation that will be part of the final performance's video projection.

• CLIMATE ANXIETY — In response to rising student “climate anxiety” we are finding ways to include this as part of the whale building workshop.

• REHEARSAL — Not a lot of rehearsal (Covid, etc), but the time a big group met, there was something cathartic and moving about being together. This might be an example of a moment where we didn't know the community wanted or needed this, but, by doing it, the gathered community found something satisfying about the activity. Jennifer Allen has started movement rehearsals, improvising, gathering material.

**Outcomes**

Outcomes for this phase of the project are related more closely to process than tangible product. By finding positive outcomes in the development of creative systems, we are putting ourselves in a better position for the more tangible products of the final stages of the project

• WHALE SCULPTURE DESIGN — ASME iterations of whale sculpture design (2 months), brainstorming with Andy Warfel, Andrew Quitmeyer, Stephen Cartwright, Guen Montgomery, Jorge Lucero, Jamie Jones, and Maurice Rabb.

• PRESENTATIONS — Presented introductions to the CETACEAN project to Urbana High art classes in December 2021 and March 2022

• WORKSHOP — Week long workshop with instructor Roberta Bennett’s 2 Urbana High art classes (46 students) which resulted in 100+ bottles and 45 seconds of rotoscoped whale animation. The time with Roberta Bennett's classes also gave me a chance to see and hear a tiny fraction of the range of what area high school students and teachers are experiencing. The Urbana High workshop will serve as prototypes for Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 workshops with UIUC classes, Urbana and Champaign schools, smaller rural high school classes, Urbana Park District, Allerton Park, and other gatherings.

• 3D MODEL OF WHALE — 3D model laid out by UIUC alum Andrew Quitmeyer. Model will be used as a template for building the full scale whale sculpture.

• GROUP REHEARSAL — Rehearsed with 23 participants.

• ONGOING REHEARSALS — Working with smaller groups developing new material.

**Successes**

Here are some items that feel like project successes ...

• MEETINGS — Meetings with high school teachers and university professors have proven fruitful.

• IN-DEPTH MEETINGS — The longer, more nuanced meetings with UHS art instructors Roberta Bennett and Jill Lagerstam have been particularly helpful, especially as we followed up with application of the ideas during Roberta Bennett's classes

• DESIGN MEETINGS — Ongoing meetings/check-ins/texts/emails with sound design (James Lo), dramaturg (long time collaborator Jayne Wenger), sound engineers (Dept of Theatre's Rick Scholwin and Alec Blau), lighting design (Dept of Theatre's Rob Perry), video design (Dept of Theatre's John Boesche), project manager (longtime collaborator Jill Samuels and Dept of Theatre's Terri Ciofalo), choreographer (long time collaborator and partner Jennifer Allen).

• WORKSHOP DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION — Our week long workshop with UHS students worked! And it feels like we’ve gathered more information for how to streamline and compartmentalize parts for shorter workshops (see below). Great to have had this productive trial run - thanks to Roberta Bennett’s generous work after meetings with other Champaign/Urbana high school art teachers.

• DESIGN OF THE WHALE — This stage of developing the whale sculpture has gone through a number of phases. After input from the ASME Student Chapter's whale design proposals, material experiments with Guen Montgomery/Weaver, and discussions with designers/engineers/teachers we landed on a process that can be crowdsourced, implemented and scaled to multiple levels of participation/engagement.

• ROTOSCOPED ANIMATION — High school students produced approximately 45 seconds of rotoscope-animated whale footage which will be projected on the large screens as part of the October 2023 performance ... maybe 45 seconds doesn't sound like much. 45 seconds of 12-fps animation is the result of 540 hand-drawn frames.

• COMMUNITY ADVISING — UHS teachers Roberta Bennett and Jill Lagerstam; UIUC Professors Pat Hammie, Jamie Jones, Guen Montgomery, Stacey Robinson, and Jorge Lucero have all been on board advising the direction of the project's community engagement.

• CASTING — Philip Phillips as Ahab, Gary Ambler as hippy scientists John Lilly and Paul Spong

• FUNDRAISING — Student Sustainability Committee (Fall 2021 received $10,000, Spring 2022 pending)

• CENTER FOR ADVANCED STUDY FELLOWSHIP — Applied and selected for Center for Advanced Study fellowship which will provide course-release for the Spring 2023 semester, allowing me to focus on CETACEAN.

**Challenges**

At this stage it feels like the main challenges for the project will be fundraising, personnel, and time.

• FUNDRAISING — In seeking funds for the project I’ve been exploring foundations and individuals as sources for funding. It’s not looking particularly hopeful at this stage.

• OPTICS — In producing a project/performance that has a lot to do with climate change, carbon footprints, petro-chemicals/capital, interconnected ecosystems, it is a challenge to prioritize the use of recycled materials, a challenge to foreground community participation, a challenge to give the whale a home after the performance, a challenge to become an example by embracing the need to have our material, administrative, creative processes find alignment with the best current ecological practices.

• BUSY-NESS — Some early connections have proven difficult to maintain - with the busy-ness of the world, some folks aren’t getting back to me. This is exacerbated by my tendency to take everything personally and my magical ability to leap to the conclusion that I’ve done something wrong and the person Does Not Like Me … so, I’m not all that tenacious when someone doesn’t write back.

• CHANGE — With shifts in the design of the whale and deeper inquiry into the nature of plastics and plastic recycling, the project has moved away from using the Precious Plastics workflow - so the initial connection with the CU FabLab has faded.

• FINDING PARTICULAR ROLE-PLAYERS — Finding an experienced technical director is a big challenge.

**Future Planning**

In the process of building past performances, there has always been an ongoing negotiation of working with what’s available: artists-designers-performers/logistics-support-folk/money/space/time/attention/focus/audience. With CETACEAN, we are working with a longer, multi-phase timeline. This initial phase prioritizes the experience of process over product. As we get closer to the final phase of the October 2023 performance, our attention will become more focused on the product - an immersive, haunting experience rising up out of the two years we’ve taken to build the whale.

Along with the ongoing search for funds, the summer of 2022 will include more intense writing, a solo artist residency (Alaska or Maine), and a week of group residency (early July with sound designer James Lo, choreographer Jennifer Allen, dramaturg Jayne Wenger, costume designer Susan Becker, lighting designer Rob Perry, and others). The 2022-23 academic year will include multiple high school, park, and university workshops.

• WORKSHOPS — The March 2022 workshop week with UHS was huge. For future workshops, we can build on what worked during the UHS pilot week, toss out or refine what didn’t work, and sharpen ideas for more compact workshops for classes that would like to participate but don’t have a full week available. Our week long workshop produced around 100 bottles. We need a minimum of 2000 bottles for the whale.

• FUNDRAISING 01 — I’m looking at other funding possibilities - there are upcoming deadlines for the Multi-Arts Production (MAP) Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts. If necessary, I will continue to submit SSC funding applications.

• FUNDRAISING 02 — Will continue to develop strategies for how variations of the final show could be produced with slimmer budgets. We will work with what we are able to raise.

• WHALE DESIGN: STAGE 2 — Next stage will include mechanical applications to control movements of the sculptural whale marionette. Pinning down an experienced technical director will be a big part of what we will be able to accomplish for the final performance.