

Winter 2015

Kahn Chronicle: Winter 2015

Smith College, Kahn Liberal Arts Institute

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Celebrating the Kahn Student Experience

Oscar-winning Filmmaker to Join Student Fete

What students gain from participating as fellows in Kahn Institute projects is often intangible and difficult to define. Intellectual confidence, some mention. A sense of empowerment, and sharpened ability to explore and discover through meaningful interaction.

Of course, Kahn Student Fellows also learn practical research, organizational and presentation skills that remain invaluable throughout their careers, they note.

Whatever words might characterize the Kahn Student Experience, alumnae of projects at the Institute invariably say they leave as vastly wiser scholars than when they arrived.

On Tuesday, February 10, the Kahn Institute invites all Smith students to “Celebrating the Kahn Student Experience,” a 15th anniversary event featuring a campus visit by celebrated alumna Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy '02, and a screening of her recent film, *Transgenders: Pakistan's Open Secret*, followed by a question-and-answer session with her and a gala dinner with other Kahn alumnae and current students.

While the event is free and open to all Smith students, seating is limited. To obtain a ticket for the event, students may send a request to kahninstitute@smith.edu, or call extension 3721.

Indeed, it was while participating in a Kahn project, *The Anatomy of Exile* (2001-02), that Obaid Chinoy embarked on her career as a documentary filmmaker that would bring her to the pinnacle of the industry. She began

production of her first film, *Terror's Children*, as a senior at Smith. Obaid Chinoy won an Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject) in 2012 for her film *Saving Face*, becoming the first Pakistani to win the prestigious award. She has garnered numerous other awards for her films as well.



Also, as part of the celebration, the Kahn Institute will host Anne Kubitsky '05, founder of the Look for the Good Project, who will share her story of starting and growing her national nonprofit organization.

Kubitsky will give a presentation on Wednesday, February 11, at noon in the Campus Center Carroll Room (pizza lunch served) in which she will invite audience members to share their stories of gratitude and have

their pictures taken for inclusion in her next book, *You Matter: A Grassroots Guide to Inspiring Hope in Your Community*, expected for publication next fall.

“Celebrating the Kahn Student Experience” is part of the Institute’s yearlong recognition of its 15th anniversary. In November 2014, the Kahn hosted a celebratory evening of panels featuring faculty portraying Galileo, Shakespeare and their contemporaries.

Students have always added an essential perspective to Kahn Institute projects, in accordance with the Institute’s original design. Smith sophomores and juniors are invited to apply this month to participate as Student Fellows in next year’s long-term projects, *Memory: Form, Function, and Fallibility* (yearlong), and *Play* (spring 2016)—see more details in sidebar on this page.

Sophs, Juniors Invited to Kahn Info Sessions

Students in the classes of 2016 and 2017 who are interested in participating as Student Fellows in next year’s Kahn Institute longterm projects are invited to attend two upcoming Information Sessions at the Kahn Institute (refreshments served):

- For *Play* (spring 2016):
Tuesday, February 24, 5 p.m.
- For *Memory: Form, Function, and Fallibility* (2015-16):
Wednesday, February 25, 5 p.m.

These Info Sessions will provide details about the projects, Faculty Fellows, the application process, and opportunities to ask questions. No registration necessary. Read descriptions of the projects at <http://smith.edu/kahninstitute/future.php>.

Upcoming Kahn Lectures

Thursday, March 5
5 p.m., Neilson Browsing Room
Zeynep Celik, Professor of Architecture, New Jersey Institute of Technology. In conjunction with *The Power of Disappearance*.

Thursday, March 26
5 p.m., Neilson Browsing Room
Diana Taylor, Professor of Performance Studies and Spanish, New York University, author of *Disappearing Acts*. In conjunction with *The Power of Disappearance*.

Monday, April 13
5 p.m., Neilson Browsing Room
Robert David Steele, activist, former CIA clandestine case officer. In conjunction with *The Question of Privacy*.

Gender, Justice and the Arab World

A Q&A with 2015 Neilson Professor Sahar Amer

Sahar Amer, the 2015 William Allan Neilson Professor, is Chair of Arabic Language and Cultures at the University of Sydney. She recently responded to questions for the Kahn Chronicle.

Kahn Chronicle: What are the primary goals you hope to achieve at Smith this spring as Neilson Professor?

Sahar Amer: I am hoping to complete one article on contemporary Arabic lesbian cultural productions and another on gender trouble in the thirteenth-century Mediterranean. Both pieces are part of a larger project that I am starting on “Bad Arab and Muslim Girls,” which will write the history of many powerful women in Arab and Muslim societies since the Middle Ages until today, whose legacy has too often been overlooked, but whose lives can become powerful role models for all women around the world.

Chronicle: You describe borders as opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration. What might women at Smith learn from women in the Arab World, and vice versa?

SA: I hope that Smith women will learn that all women around the world, Arabs and non Arabs, have similar hopes, ambitions, and desires to choose their own destiny. I hope they will see more similarities between them and others and that they will always be inspired to build bridges with others who may at times seem very different from them.

Chronicle: Is Islamophobia, from your perspective, more or less prominent in the United States since this country’s increased involvement and familiarization with Muslim countries, through recent wars and news coverage?

SA: I think that Islamophobia is definitely more prominent today than it was in the past, and certainly compared to when I first came to this country in the early 1980s. But I also think there is a greater desire to understand, to find more accurate sources of information,

to build more cross-cultural bridges and develop deeper interfaith dialogues. So I am hopeful.

Chronicle: How might you describe the state of the Arab world today in terms of social justice, particularly in relation to the Arab Spring and transitional changes it may have instigated?

SA: The Arab world is in a huge state of transition right now, especially since the 2011 Revolutions, and it faces many challenges in terms of human rights, social justice, gender equality, and democratic processes.

We should remember, however, that all revolutions in the world have taken many decades and a lot of ups and downs before realizing improvements and reaching political and social stability. The revolutions in the Arab world occurred only four years ago and this is a very short amount of time to realize the many hopes and dreams that they instigated.



Neilson Professor Lecture Series, spring 2015

Sahar Amer will give three lectures in this spring’s Neilson Professor Lecture Series, listed below. All lectures will take place at 5 p.m. in Neilson Browsing Room and are open to the public. A reception will follow each lecture.

Monday, February 2

“The Arab Spring and Rainbow Hopes: LGBTIQ Rights in Transitional Societies”

Monday, March 9

“Muslim Women, Veiling and Human Rights”

Monday, April 6

“Bad Girls and Gender Trouble in the Thirteenth Century Mediterranean”

Galileo, Shakespeare and Their Contemporaries Visit the Kahn

Scenes from the Kahn Institute’s 15th Anniversary Celebration, Nov. 13, 2014



At the Kahn Institute, 2014-15

Mid-Year Report: *The Power of Disappearance*

We had an exciting and enriching first semester at *The Power of Disappearance* seminar. One of our first activities was a field trip to Mass Moca, where fellows visited the exhibit *The Dying of the Light*, on the disappearance of film. This visit provided a stimulating entry point to our yearlong dialogue.

During the fall semester, most meetings were devoted to a presentation by one of the fellows, followed by general discussion. Both in the presentations and in the ensuing conversations, participants have shed light on our topic from a range of viewpoints.

The seminar also featured a visit in October by the performance artist Tehching Hsieh, whose last work, *Thirteen Year Plan*, involved an attempt to disappear. His lecture filled the Neilson Library Browsing Room, and he subsequently joined us for a provocative conversation.

In another meeting, fellows attended a screening in the Smith College Museum of Art of Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie*, which documents "last" recordings of a range of languages. This screening prompted a lively discussion.

The disappearances we have encountered, from the artistic to the political to the ecological, have left behind a range of compelling traces, survivals, and other kinds of questions. As we suspected, the interdisciplinary nature of our discussions has allowed all of us to discover new and productive ways to approach our individual topics. The conversation has ranged from the esthetic to the scientific, the social and the ethical, as we reflect on the many ramifications of the power of disappearance.

Scheduled visits (see Page 1) from Zeynep Celik, professor of Architecture at NJIT, and Diana Taylor, professor of Performance Studies at NYU, promise to further enrich the second semester of the project.



Q&A with Photographer Carmen Pullella '16

Carmen Pullella '16, a photographer since her high school years who has taken pictures during her trips around the world, aims to tell a story with every shot. An exhibit of her photographs, Slice of Life, is on display in the Kahn Gallery this month. She recently responded to questions about her work.

Kahn Chronicle: What do you want people to come away with from viewing your photos?

Carmen Pullella: It is my hope that people view my photography and feel like they were there. The captions for the photos are full of descriptions and details, purely in order to give people a full understanding of everything about that one picture they are looking at. Photography is a very realistic form of art, one that can feel so intimate at times, and it is my hope that people feel that when they look at my photography. I hope they feel an intimate, yet unspoken, connection to the people whose lives they have been let into.

Chronicle: What is a common theme in your photography?

CP: Many of my photographs depict scenes from everyday life. They tell stories of simple things, small moments, and hardships all humans experience. "Life" is never too broad of a theme for me.

Chronicle: What do you aim to accomplish when you take a photo?

CP: I often try to tell a story. Everything needs context in order for it to be understood, and that can often be hard in photography. It is challenging to capture a glimpse of life in its entirety, but that is what I try to do when I look through my lens. I ask myself, "will people understand what is happening in this picture?" I aim to depict simple things; children playing in the streets of Palestine, a young boy helping his father sell bread, a rabbi sleeping on the New York City subway. Every story counts, even the simple ones.

Chronicle: Why did you choose these particular photos to display in *Slice of Life*?

CP: These are the pictures that make me feel the most accomplished as a photographer, and the ones that I took when I was at the high point of my photographic endeavors. I took most of them during my travels, and believe they all have similar undertones; small fragments of what life looks like around the world, and the different people in it.

Chronicle: What inspires you to take photos?

CP: Quite simply, everything and nothing. Inspiration can sometimes be hard to find, and it is often hard to negotiate with my muse; there are some days when I feel inexplicably inspired, and others when I don't even want to look at my camera. Most artistically inclined people will often say that inspiration comes from anywhere you want it to. This is often true for photography; you have to have the eye for it, and be able to see simple things in a novel, unexplored way. You have to capture your own source of inspiration when there is none.

Chronicle: What is sure to make you stop what you're doing and aim your camera?

CP: Photography is easy when the perfect image is right in front of you, and is begging to be captured. It isn't always that easy, though. Most of the time, it entails looking at a certain scene long enough to figure out how it can be portrayed as exceptionally spectacular rather than mediocre; because everything is mediocre at a first glance. And that is when the inspiration hits—when you convince yourself that you are seeing something differently than everyone else, and that you are the only person who can see it in that perspective, through that artistic lens. It is then that you become solely responsible for sharing that image with the rest of the world. More often than not, when I decide against taking a picture, whether it be due to stagnant motivation or shyness around people, I always regret it.

A NOTE FROM THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR

Channeling Louise: A Reflection by Marjorie Senechal

It's a pleasure to accept the Kahn's invitation to reflect on its fifteenth anniversary. The Institute has become all we founders hoped it would be: an incubator for cross-disciplinary research, debate and collegiality, and a haven of free speech.

My reflections revolve around two FAQs: 1) Why did Louise Wolff Kahn '31 found the institute? 2) What is the recipe for a successful Kahn project?

In fact, Louise didn't found the institute. But she made it possible. In their lifetimes, she and her husband, Edmund Kahn, generously supported the arts, hospitals, social programs, and educational institutions. At Smith, she established the Louise Wolff Kahn professorship (now held by Andrea Hairston), and a Fund for Faculty Excellence, which she also remembered in her will. She died in 1995; at her memorial service in Dallas, the symphony orchestra played *The Firebird*.

Then-President Ruth Simmons decided to use the Fund for Faculty Excellence to support the cross-disciplinary research institute that several of us faculty members had just proposed. An institute would, we argued, make the intellectual life of the college more than the sum of its parts. Ruth understood immediately, and the Kahn Institute joined her short list of do-nows, along with the Poetry Center and the engineering program.

The Kahn Institute is unique; no other college has anything quite like it. The usual models—we called them the Hideaway (Fellows hide out to write their books) and the Impressario (a program built around an academic superstar)—leave no trace on the campus. The Kahn institute, by contrast, would forge lasting, cross-disciplinary, intellectual and social ties. Smith faculty and students jumped right in (see the long list of past, present, and future projects at [www.smith.edu](http://www.smith.edu/kahninstitute)).



Marjorie Senechal, Kahn Institute Founding Director (1998-2005) and Professor Emerita of Mathematics & Statistics

[edu/kahninstitute](http://www.smith.edu/kahninstitute)). But finding a physical home for it was a challenge. We were offered space on the campus periphery, but for the institute to be an intellectual crossroad, it had to be near the center. The librarians agreed, and everyone has benefitted.



LOUISE W. AND EDMUND J.

Kahn

LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTE

Is there a recipe for a successful Kahn project?

By successful, I mean a project that informs and stimulates the research of its Faculty and Student fellows, and is intellectually provocative. Yes, there is. It must engage a problem of broad scope.

(Cross-disciplinarity follows. As the philosopher of science Karl Popper taught us, we are students of problems, not students of subject matter, and problems cut right across the disciplines.)

A successful project has two more ingredients. First, the problem must be debatable. That's why we turned down a proposal for a project to save the pandas. Its scope was broad: it drew on biology, environmental sciences, economics, and other fields. But who would argue with the cause?

The second ingredient is frank and open discussion. The least successful projects were those in which Fellows tiptoed around one another, or failed to challenge their visitors. One visitor (in an early project) told the Fellows he had smuggled medicinal herbs into the U.S. from Thailand by making them invisible. (No one laughed, and no one asked him how he did it. A student told me later that that would have been rude.)

Louise Wolff Kahn would have laughed. She never held her tongue. The first time I met her, she asked me about my mathematical research. When I tried to explain it, she snapped, "Who the hell would be interested in that?"

I'm pleased to report that we moved on and became friends.

Find More Information Online:

This printed *Kahn Chronicle* offers a quick overview of what is happening at the Kahn. For more details about this year's projects, upcoming events, opportunities for fellowships, the ongoing work of current and past Fellows, project reports and more, visit the *Chronicle Online* at:

www.smith.edu/kahninstitute/chronicle