SUMMER 2017 Journal
Grace Nkem Curatorial Intern at The Kitchen
The following project is a series of scans of drawings I did on my morning commutes this summer, overlaid with thoughts I’ve been writing down. The drawings logged in my sketchbooks were a very consistent part of my summer, and I’ve kept sketchbooks as visual “journals” since the 6th grade, so this seems like the natural thing to do.

This summer I worked at a CASSIP internship at The Kitchen, a non profit experimental arts space. Here I got to see first hand what it means for an arts space to be an institution, learned about archiving, and received a brief history of experimental art in the early 80s. I also worked (and will continue to do so) at a commercial gallery, the Jason Jacques, which sells Art Nouveau, turn of the century, and contemporary ceramics to a very niche client base. There I got to see what the commercial side of art was really like, and learned about the nitty-gritty logistics of international shipping, invoices, and art handling.

I’ve been writing down and drawing my thoughts, and they are organized in the following pages.
If I knew, before freshman year of college, that I would be where I am now I’d be overjoyed. I keep reminding myself of this, now, and revisiting my past states of mind, senses of self, goals, and so on.

I remember, the summer before freshman year, I decided that (having fallen head over heels for MoMA) I wanted to intern at MoMA the summer after my sophomore year. That was what my first two years of college centered around, and it culminated when I sent them in a 17 page application to them this past semester!

I guess aiming for the moon means you at least hit somewhere close!
I used to think, like really, really used to think, that art was a field dominated by white people who really wanted it to stay that way, based off of how people talked about the lack of people of color in the arts.

I realized, second semester of sophomore year, that it seems like people of color just don’t tend to go into art as often. (I understand that a lot of social and economic pressures go into this — those high-paying STEM jobs ;) ya know?) I came upon this realization when I met, for the first time ever, another black art history major. It’s just not a popular major I guess.

And working in art the younger crowd is certainly more diverse than the older crowd, but no one is out to get anybody, you know.

At the JCG there’s a painting of a black woman athlete, though, and this old (like, decomposing) French woman who was very serious about buying and later pretended to be impressed with my French jokingly asked, “iz zat you? hon hon,” Which was the first thing she said to me— not even a greeting! “C’est pas moi,” I responded dryly— it didn’t stop her from buying and I’m sure she felt real witty.

I guess what I’m saying is that I thought that being black would get in the way or hold me back somehow, but that’s not at all been the case. If I may speak frankly, its made me more interesting. Also I read in the NYT that NYC announced that museums need to diversify their boards or risk losing funding! I can’t wait till I’m in deep enough to have to talk to a board of trustees.
I’m recognizing that I am not as avant-garde as I led myself to believe in regards to my taste in art. I am, regardless of the period in question, most interested in painting and sculpture.

This is an unpopular opinion, I know! But the fact is that contemporary painting does not appear, to me, to be as shallow a pursuit as it is often thought—yet here a whole era or painting is being forgotten about by cultural institutions. The best paintings I’m seeing are all in commercial galleries and art fairs, which mean they’re getting boxed off into private collections. I can’t wait until painting makes a comeback because I’ll be there and I’ll be ready with my white gloves and temperature-controlled cases. Unless it’s acrylic.
I cannot have helped but to have spent the summer comparing my two jobs. I learned that the not-for-profit art world differs only from the commercial one in that the former is very much dedicated to helping experimental and up-and-coming artists. And I have heard from the friend of a friend that many non-profits abroad are far more wholesome.

Because of US tax codes the same wealthy people buying art in one place are avoiding some taxation by starting an art foundation or donating to a non-profit in another. Working in the non-profit felt much more money-centric with all the talk of “endowments,” “capital campaigns,” “annual revenue,” etc. I’m not in denial— until the proletariat revolution everything will be money-driven and art will be commodity— but the commercial art world is wholly without pretensions in this regard. And collectors are much more interesting people than donors because they’re not there partially for the sake of legal tax evasion. I don’t mean to sound cynical— The Kitchen makes sure that resources go to really good artists. I’ve just been wholly disillusioned.

Many museums are non-profits, like the Met. I think museums are an entirely different conversation, though, and will always have a big soft spot for them and feel that their explicitly preservation and public based nature keeps them pure. Any art gallery is theoretically free to the public, but it’s not nearly as accessible nor open an environment. A museum answers to its public. After this summer, my goals and plans for the future remain oriented around eventually working in a museum.
Recently, I’ve been thinking about myself and my future and my current experiences a lot, mindfully. I’ve become interested in self-care.

And I’ve realized that often, self care is not hedonism, nor self-indulgence. For me, it is often abstention, restraint, and moderation. Moving in and out of a dorm room every schoolyear, and now working all summer packing my now lunches and looking after myself, I’ve streamlined a lot and just reduced. For instance, all of my clothes fit into one suitcase. I don’t have an alarm clock anymore because they are superfluous, now. I spend less and save more. It’s been a really nice transformation, for me.
DRAWING ON THE Q TRAIN

My friend and I, hoping to collaborate on curating a show this summer, get dinner after work. She is working at two art non-profits; I have one in the darkness, the other in a non-profit. She says to me, we eat matcha ice cream in soho.

Everyone who works in an art non-profit is batshit.

I could not help but notice just outside my office, a woman with loose curls walked by me at the water cooler and asked how I was.

"Good," I said, "how are you?"

"Great!" I just got a check for $10,000!"

Unbelievable, I thought, why would he tell me this? It turns out he's (as I find out later) the head of development, so possibly the end of that sentence was "...for the kitchen."

But he later tells me "we also collect art! So now I don't know what to think!"

In American English a pitcher has a wide mouth and a lip, while a jug has neither.

I ride the Q with a Joan Cornellia show poster, scotch-taped to a wall in Greenwich. I steal it, like...
I have gotten better, this summer, at asking for help and talking to people in the workspace. At my first job ever (cashiering at a Wal-Mart!) I found myself unable to connect to anybody, though I wanted to, and this left me feeling alone and anxious.

I think I understand the idea of a workplace dynamic better, now. Also, I have something very definite and valuable in common with co-workers now: a love of art. I has been very exciting and encouraging to be around people I share a passion with, because mostly people snicker when I tell them I am an art history major, yet here I am surrounded by working, involved, happy, successful people who are supportive of my career choice. The positive environment has done me wonders.
I can say, after this summer, that I definitely want to pursue a career in art. Without question. And certainly in the era of humanitarian crises and global unrest one might ask, what does art have to offer? Well, there really is something to be said for visual culture. I mean, what’s left of Rome? And what have we learned from it?

I have also found that, this summer, I spent a lot of time writing, making my own art, seeing shows, viewing art, and I feel like I finally fully immersed myself in what I care about. My main priority is to treat myself well and be happy. I’m feeling much more confident regarding my major, now, and following my success this summer I’ve even won over my parents. I am very lucky that my hobby, interests, and work are all one and the same, and I am willing to work hard to keep it that way.

Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.