Sculpture on Campus at SIUE: A Dialogue

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville’s annual Sculpture on Campus program (SoC) gives twelve students, undergraduates and graduates of varied sculptural experience, the unique opportunity to propose, design, and install large-scale outdoor sculpture on permanent sculpture pads located throughout the university grounds. The culmination of SoC is the Sculpture Walk, an event that allows the participants to speak publicly about their work and to field questions from the crowd, often 250-300 people. A key aspect of the SoC program, now in its sixteenth year, is the participation of a prominent visiting artist to serve as guest juror. For 2016, the internationally known Iranian-American sculptor Afruz Amighi filled that role. Amighi, Thad Duhigg, professor of sculpture and SoC faculty mentor, and Sophia Ruppert, undergraduate student and three-time SoC participant, sat down with Katherine Poole-Jones, associate professor of art history at SIUE, for an informal conversation on October 7, the day of the 2016 SoC Sculpture Walk, to discuss this unique program, working large-scale, and what it means to create successful public sculpture, on and off the college campus. The exchange has been edited for clarity and length.

Katherine Poole-Jones (KPJ): Thad, why did you think SoC was a really important program to have at SIUE?

Thad Duhigg (TD): I can’t take complete credit for it. The program was started in 1999 by a group of faculty and the vice chancellor of administration who got together and decided to put eight or ten [sculpture] pads across campus. So when I arrived in 2002, students were placing pieces around campus, and then in the
fall, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the students, and the chair [of Art and Design] would walk around and discuss the works. So I picked up at that point. The importance of it for me is that it gives the opportunity to the students to actually realize something very large-scale, it gives them the confidence that they could apply for a commission, that they can do something bigger than themselves. I think that as an educator that’s a really powerful idea, that they can do it, that they can put it down on paper, and they can realize this idea. It also has really assisted students in getting into good graduate schools and getting jobs, because if you have two or three large-scale pieces that are solid in a portfolio it’s going to help your chances of success and also for commission work, because if you’ve got a couple [of sculptures] that are good and that you did for a very minimal sum of money, I think that really speaks volumes.

KPJ: Sophia, you’re a third-year veteran of SoC, why did you want to be involved with the program? And why do you return to it year after year?

Sophia Ruppert (SR): The whole experience is just really incredible, because of having such a great campus to fill with art and having the opportunity to make a large-scale piece. The thing that attracted me to it is partly an ego thing, because
you can put your work outside and thousands of people will walk by it every day depending on its location. And then it’s also a challenge as an artist to shift your work to the public sphere and to make it large-scale and to do that successfully and to think about engineering. People are going to climb on it, people are going to kick it around. One of the reasons I keep going back to it, I think, is that I haven’t gotten it right yet. But it’s also mixed with a portfolio thing, and as Thad said, using that to your advantage as a professional artist and getting large-scale commissions. If I’m applying for a public commission and I show them that I’ve already done three, then that already puts me ahead of a lot of people who’ve never done one before. It’s a mixture of, I’m not satisfied with my work yet, the great of experience of doing it, how many people—especially undergrad students—get to do a public sculpture, and then the professional side of it.

**KPJ:** Do you feel that you’ve been successful with the work you’ve made through SoC? Sounds like you’re still on the fence.

**SR:** My first year I considered successful, and maybe that’s partly because I won an award, and it’s still there and everyone knows it…and the feedback was really positive. The second year, I ran into quite a few engineering issues, and there were wires in the ground under my site so I couldn’t dig down, and the piece itself didn’t turn out exactly how I wanted it. Sometimes that’s a good thing and sometimes that changes it [the work] in a good way, but I just was never quite satisfied with how it turned out. And also I didn’t win a award that year, and perhaps I’m placing too much emphasis on that, because I know it’s all subjective. This year I feel a lot better, and it’s not what I proposed, it’s similar motifs and similar structures, but the composition has changed so radically, but I feel that’s advanced it as a piece, so for me I see that as successful. And also there are things I don’t see as successful, like working large-scale and some of the craft issues that happen, some of the weathering I’m foreseeing already in the piece, so it’s a combination of I like it one day and I don’t like it another day and it depends on what context I’m thinking of it in. It’s also about the learning curve, working with materials outdoors and experimentation. The first year was wooden decking materials, the second year was cast concrete and this year is vacuum-formed plastic and fiberglass, so I’m kind of torturing myself doing something new every single time. And also funding is an issue. Because we’re doing these on the cheap! $750 is nothing, it goes so fast! It was gone in the first week of buying materials.
KPJ: Let’s back up for a minute, generally speaking, what do all of you think are the key elements of a successful public sculpture?

Afruz Amighi (AA): I think, to me, engaging with people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds is really important. And I think that’s something that often you see with public work, that it engages people in a way that may not always be cerebral, it may be emotional, it may be in a simple way. For example, in Astor Place in New York City, there’s this black cube that you can spin [Bernard Rosenthal, Alamo, 1967] and some people turn it and it’s interesting because you can’t turn the cube on its axis by yourself, so you have to ask someone to help you or do it with a few people, so it encourages this weird moment of collaboration in a city that’s so highly individualistic and dog-eat-dog. Some people don’t even turn it, some people just say let’s meet at the cube, so it acts as a social gathering place, so I think that in my mind even though that work isn’t to me so pleasing on an aesthetic level…I’m not going to stand and stare at it forever, but it’s social sculpture, it functions in many different ways for many different people. And I think that’s what I think of in my mind as a successful public project.

TD: Sometimes what I try to do with SoC is to have the students look at the site and create the work according to the site, to engage that site along with the public. Having said that, most public sculpture is done through commission, and so it’s going to go through a panel that likes it or doesn’t like it or wants it tweaked or slightly changed, especially at the beginning stage of your career. And so there’s always that kind of walking the line and compromising your voice, the artist’s voice, and considering the commissioners and what is it they want.

SR: One of the things that I think about as an artist placing work in public spaces is how the audience changes. When you put a piece in a gallery, and when someone goes into a gallery, they’re expecting to see art, they’re expecting to interact with it, and they have some drive to look at it. When you put art in a public space, you catch people in their daily routine, their commute to where they’re going, so I think the pieces, for me, really need to shift a little bit to where they can be appreciated by a wider audience. It also depends…we’re doing stuff at a university here versus a really small town or in big cities. Your audience shifts. And I think the work needs to consider those things about background and be easily approachable and appreciated in a wide range of contexts, rather than just what you originally intended.
KPJ: So do you think the metrics for success shift when talking about public sculpture on a college campus?

TD: I think the way we structure SoC is to have it be as real as possible. They go through a vetting process with SoC alumni who choose the twelve finalists. Then those twelve present to another panel after they’ve produced their drawings, ideas, and maquettes, to a group from museums, art centers, and university officials, which isn’t that much different from actually presenting a proposal for a commission. They have to do a five-minute presentation, field the questions, and go from there. I think that the mindset is similar, it’s not quite as developed, because most students on a college campus, this is their first endeavor into large-scale pieces, and so their knowledge base and what they can do is more constricted, I think. But I think they can produce things equally, they just have a smaller budget. So, if you had a $100,000 or a $300,000 budget and more time, I mean, this compressed period of time…

SR: [jumps in] 4 months to the day that I started!

KPJ: But what if you had an unlimited budget to put sculpture on a college campus, could you still put, for example, something that you would find in the middle of Manhattan? Or are there different expectations for public sculpture on a college campus?

AA: Let me answer that by rewinding a little bit to clarify something that came up earlier, that while I think context is very important, I don’t think context necessarily means that an artist should lowball a concept or alter a concept in order to appeal to a wide layer of people, because I think in some ways, a sculpture, whether it’s on campus or in the middle of an urban area, can engage people in many different ways, as I was trying to illustrate with the cube—let’s meet at that god awful eyesore downtown or it could be let’s have a picnic under that amazing experience of “jouissance” or whatever, you know what I mean? It could go in many different directions. And I think that’s what I’m saying about engagement. It can be negative, it can be positive, it can be a sculpture that exists and forces people to talk about things that they don’t really want to talk about, and that could be in a political realm which is probably the most obvious, but it can be just on an aesthetic level, I don’t think that should be there, that blocks my view. These are all ways to begin a conversation about what we see, which is something
that in our society is often seen as a luxury, art is seen as a luxury, oh, it’s not a necessity, it’s something extra. And the more we bring that conversation into everyday conversation the more we demystify that notion.

**KPJ:** [To Afruz] In your own experience and art practice, do you feel you’ve been successful in terms of trying to get at that engagement and relationship with site and with audience?

**AA:** It’s an interesting question, because on one hand we just spent fifteen minutes talking about engaging the audience and how important that is, so I’m now going to say something that’s going to seem to contradict that entire conversation. When I’m – and just speaking for myself – working as an artist, that’s the last thing I want to think about [Thad nods]. The first thing I’m focusing on is what I want to make. What is my idea, what are the concepts or the non-concepts that I’m working on? Maybe it’s just a formal consideration, well I’m never working with color, so maybe I’m just working with this particular material that has this amazing texture or this historical reference, whatever the case may be, it’s completely self-focused. And it becomes almost dangerous in many ways to think about how it’s going to engage people or how it’s not going to engage people.

**KPJ:** Thad and Sophia, why did you ask Afruz to be involved in SoC? What drew you to her work?

**TD:** We shifted a couple of years ago to the students of SAW [the student sculpture organization at SIUE] choosing the artist, because prior to that I would choose the artist, because a lot of them I knew, and I knew I could get ’em on the cheap [laughter]. The students come up with a number of names, four artists, and each person who proposed an artist presents on them and their work and tries to make the case.

**SR:** Afruz was someone I became aware of in your [to Katherine] Islamic Art and Architecture class. I was drawn to her work because of the aesthetics, but as I learned more, the context behind it as well, and how [to Afruz] you’ve woven those two together to make something really easily approachable, but also there’s such a dark narrative behind a lot of your work, especially the plastic pieces, that I was really drawn to. I wrote the paper and started following Afruz on social media.
and when Thad asked for suggestions, I threw your name out and it stuck. Everyone liked the work and we asked and she came.

KPJ: Afruz, now we’ll turn it over to you. What made you say yes to SoC? What appealed to you about the program? And what did you feel you had to offer the students? What did you hope to gain from the experience?

AA: Well, I think it started out in a very personal way, because I also followed Sophia on Instagram and I was getting the opportunity to see all this work that she was making. And at first when I spoke to Thad, I thought Sophia was a graduate student for sure. There was a diversity of materials, [to Sophia] you were welding in steel, you were doing the pearls [Adorned, Sophia’s 2016 SoC piece]. There was just something that I really identified with from my own practice, because I’m very materials-based too and I jump around a lot and so I think it started with oh, that’s really cool that I’m going to be going to where this person who I’ve been following in this abstract way is going to school. So that was the starting point. I think I was…there were two things I was thinking about, because I do work large-scale, I was thinking that would be one of the things I could contribute to this program is my experience doing that. I was a little worried because I haven’t done too many outdoor sculptures. Maybe I’m just not going to know what I’m talking about on that front, but I feel like I’ve actually learned a lot about materials since I’ve been here. There are applications that I’ve just never thought of that have an ability to survive the elements outdoors, so I feel that is always the attraction for me. I’ve been a visiting artist many places, and it’s always, I’m going to learn something. I go to these studio visits and I’m almost like a vulture a little, snipping up materials, the way they’ve been applied. If that component wasn’t there, I don’t think I’d do it as often as I do.

KPJ: Your piece “Far from God” was transferred from the gallery space into an outdoor environment.¹ Would you ever consider creating something that was specifically made for a public space from the outset?

¹ Far from God (2014), first shown at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York City, was later exhibited outdoors at the Fields Sculpture Park in Ghent, New York. As of this interview, it was displayed in the Jane Addams Memorial Park in Chicago as part of Expo Chicago, the city’s annual contemporary art fair.
AA: Oh, absolutely! I’ve been waiting for that opportunity for like fifteen years! And that’s what’s so amazing about what’s happening on campus now [at SIUE], artists get to do that before they have to wait for a big commission. Because you can’t just say, oh I’m going to construct a 50-foot sculpture in my studio that has no place to go and has no funding to get made in the first place. These things exist on a commission-basis only. So yeah, absolutely. For me it’s not a matter of the lack of desire to create a specifically outdoor sculpture, it’s the lack of an opportunity to do so. That’s why I was so happy to take that installation and put it outside. It can go outdoors, sure! And we all thought it could, but it’s not quite an outdoor sculpture. It’s a bit on the vulnerable side materials-wise.

KPJ: What do you find most appealing about being able to do something outdoor and public?

AA: To be perfectly honest, I think it has a lot to do with ego. You get to have nature as your canvas, this amazing landscape for your vision, right? And you get to, I think, not have to limit the work to being viewed by a very exclusive group of art world people, which is very, very, very nice. It [SoC] is like being in a museum context, which is little less open than a public space, but it’s still a public institution, so I think that’s the appeal. And also the challenge, look at what you guys went through! You have to consider the light, the changing light, the changing seasons, the trees behind you, are those trees going to dwarf my piece? There’s so many factors, that I think it’s a different ballgame.

KPJ: What has struck you the most about the student work produced for SoC?

AA: I think there are two things that have really stood out for me. One is that there’s a very multi-disciplinary approach here and that’s not something you find on all campuses. In fact, on many campuses there’s a real division between if you’re painting, if you’re drawing, if you’re doing photography, if you’re doing sculpture, and I’ve never understood that separation. I’ve thought that was so bizarre. Here I feel it’s the opposite. Obviously there are emphases that people have, but I feel like a lot of the sculpture has 2-D components in it and a lot of the 2-D work has 3-D components in it. I feel that the overlap is pretty awesome and that’s pretty unusual when I think of all the different campuses I’ve gone to. I’ve just never seen that kind of meshing happening in terms of disciplines. The other thing I noticed is that students are really going with their personal experiences.
Almost everyone I met with, maybe one or two people were the exception, were working with personal stories. So in some ways there was a more non-academic way of approaching their work, which I thought was really refreshing, because sometimes on campuses you can find that it’s very academic, and I don’t mean in a classical way, but in a conceptual way, where it’s about some post-modern theory or whatever. But I feel everyone is really grounded in a more concrete, personal narrative [here].

**KPJ**: What will you take away from this SoC experience?

**AA**: I can’t deny it, it makes me want to make large-scale public sculpture as soon as I go home. I think, this sounds a bit abstract, but one of the big influences for me, is I come from an urban area, New York. I’ve never been to the Midwest. So one of the things that has been in my mind is that I’ve just been staring at the topography and the landscape. I saw tractors in traffic, I saw corn being harvested last night on the way to Thad’s house, and it sounds kind of naïve, but it’s exotic to me because I’ve never seen these things around me…and the flatness of things here, the low-lying-ness of the architecture and the way that the sun then hits everything and how much you notice the sky and the sky is this ever-present being in a way that it only ever exists in slices in a big city. So it makes me really want to make work that has the sky as its backdrop, so it’s definitely created that. And seeing all the work yesterday on the walk, oh my god, I want to do this. It’s definitely re-invigorated me, because I was a little burnt out after my show this year, so…

**TD**: If you need a location to put one of those pieces…

**AA**: [laughing] That would be awesome!

**TD**: We could bring you back, the students could help you fabricate it and put it together and we’d put it on campus.

**AA**: Okay!

**KPJ**: I think we could definitely sell that to the administration. Thanks to all three of you for this great conversation!
Biographical Notes

Afruz Amighi is the inaugural recipient of the Jameel Prize for Middle Eastern Contemporary Art, awarded by the Victoria and Albert Museum, and her work is represented in numerous museums throughout the United States, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Newark Museum of Art, as well as in collections in London, India, and Dubai. Amighi engages with a range of materials in her sculptural installations, from textiles to chains to welded steel and mesh, creating works of great beauty and seeming fragility that speak to her Persian heritage and the political and social history of the modern Middle East. Her most recent solo exhibition, Mångata, held at the Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai, featured work that showcased her trademark use of projected light and cast shadow, recalling iconic and often repurposed architectural structures like the Taj Mahal, the Great Mosque of Cordoba, and the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra, destroyed last year by ISIS. Amighi received her MFA from New York University and a BA from Barnard College. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Thad Duhigg is sculpture area head at SIUE and the faculty mentor for Sculpture on Campus. He holds an MFA in Sculpture from Syracuse University and a BFA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and was the recipient of a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award to Budapest, Hungary, in 1997. Duhigg employs a wide variety of techniques in his own sculpture, including cast metal, wood and steel fabrication, stone carving, and modeling, and has exhibited his work at venues throughout the United States, including solo exhibitions at the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, the Amarillo Museum of Art in Texas, and the Huntsville Museum of Art in Alabama.

Katherine Poole-Jones is associate professor of art history at SIUE, specializing in early modern Italy. She has previously published on the Medici family of Florence and their skillful use of public sculpture as ruling propaganda. Her current research project investigates the public monuments of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century St. Louis and the role they played in shaping collective memory and disseminating a potent civic identity for the city in the years after the Civil War. She received her PhD in art history from Rutgers University and an MA, also in art history, from American University.
Sophia Ruppert, a participant in Sculpture on Campus for three different cycles, graduated from SIUE with her BA in Art History and her BFA in Sculpture in December 2016. She will begin her MFA at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln in the fall of 2017.