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Creating Spaces and Briding Worlds: A Conversation with PublicsLab Fellow, Daniel Valtueña

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List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center; LAILAC=Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures; QCA=Queens Council of the Arts; ACP=Artist Commissioning Program; MoMA=Museum of Modern Art; IETM=International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts

JA: Hello, listeners. Thank you for tuning in to this PublicsLab archival interview. I'm [Jess Applebaum](#), a former PublicsLab fellow and co-editor of the PublicsLab Archive. I'm also a doctoral candidate in the [Theatre and Performance program](#) at the [CUNY Graduate Center](#), which is sometimes called the Grad Center, or simply the GC.

The following conversation is part of a series showcasing perspectives of PublicsLab fellows. Fellowships were awarded for two- or three-year periods. During the first year, fellows met once a week with their cohort, where they developed their own understanding of public scholarship through a series of talks, workshops, and assignments curated by director [Stacy Hartman](#) and Faculty Leads [Bianca Williams](#) and [Kandice Chuh](#). During the second year, fellows initiated programs and internships which connected them to publics inside and outside the walls of the GC.

In this interview, conducted in both December of 2022 and March of 2023, I speak with former fellow Daniel Valtueña about his experiences of negotiating his identities as a scholar inside the academy and an arts manager outside. Daniel speaks about how the PublicsLab prepared him to plan his job search and have the internship with the Queens Council of the Arts opened new career paths.

Thanks for listening

JA: Thanks for being here.

DV: Thank you so much, Jess. It's a pleasure.

JA: I'm so excited to have this conversation with you. So first off, I just wanted to take a moment for you to actually have the opportunity to fill in the story and give us a more personal bio and the kind of work that you were doing at the Graduate Center and what led you to PublicsLab.

DV: Sure. I started my PhD in 2017 but I majored in Art History when I was doing my BA in Madrid, and I also had a close relationship with Arts Management, with the Arts Management field. For me, it was natural to both study arts and humanities in the classroom, but also run projects outside the classroom in spaces such as galleries or museums.

When in my second year I saw the announcement of the PublicsLab fellowship, I realized, or I saw, that could be something for me. That could be something for someone that believed in academic research in the form of writing and public speaking, but also in other formats, in other forms. And that's how I decided to apply for the Fellowship, even though I didn't know what Public Humanities meant, or meant for me at that time. I knew that there was something really strong in my scholarship and in my way of understanding my professional and academic path that wanted to connect what I was doing as part of my research in the library with the projects that I was also running.

And I can give you an example which is a project that I curated for the [James Gallery at the Graduate Center](#), a project that I curated when I was in my second year that invited a [Spanish artist](#), an artist I do my research on, to do an artist residency. And it was really interesting for me to see how that was the first project that was combining the research that I was doing by working on articles and conference presentations, and that then had a translation-- which is a very PublicsLab word, I believe-- in the form of an event, actually a couple of events, in a space that gathered around a hundred people.

And right after that I started my PublicsLab fellowship.

JA: As I'm hearing you speak, it seems that in some ways you had this really wonderful preparation having worked on this project to then create or think about the mission statement and the focus of your work with PublicsLab. And for our audio listeners, I can interject that part of the application of becoming a PublicsLab fellow was to write a mission which focused upon our own scholarship and our interests there, our values, and the communities that we engage with. So, I'm wondering how you used and how you translated – going back to that word, which I think is such an important word – how you translated the experience of working at the James Gallery into your mission and into the vision of the further work, the future work, that you were wanting to do with the PublicsLab.

DV: For me, what was interesting is that, at that time before joining PublicsLab, I saw myself on one side as an academic or someone doing research for academic communities, and on the other side as an arts manager who organized events, or exhibitions, or performance that were interesting for me. And somehow when thinking about the mission statement, I was trying to reconcile and combine both, and see myself as someone who was deeply interested in working as a researcher and as an academic. But at the same time understanding that my research could take the form of different projects, and could be experienced and lived in a variety of research formats.

And somehow this is something that has been part of me during my PublicsLab fellowship because I was trying to think about how research can exist, can live, in multiple ways. And definitely the PublicsLab allowed me to reconcile those two worlds. Even though it's a job in the making, because you always feel that you are doing both at the same time. I'm going in the right direction by somehow creating a professional persona that didn't exist with the tools that PublicsLab gave me. I am creating the space that is not just a combination of these two worlds, that academic and the arts and cultural management one, but the new one that is about to exist, I'm creating now.

JA: So, there are two things. One to immediately jump into is what were those specific tools that the PublicsLab gave you? And in thinking about those tools, who were the communities, or what were the organizations that you set out to find and work with for your internship that you did with PublicsLab?

DV: Most language and literature departments used to have a very traditional approach to research, in a specific field. Being an expert, whatever that means, in order for you to get a job in the US as an Assistant Professor, and then continuing your academic career in that way. I'm not saying that my community at [LAILAC](#) didn't do interesting stuff, which of course they do, but it was somehow the path that they wanted everyone to follow.

When I joined the PublicsLab, it was interesting for me that the first thing that the PublicsLab allowed me was to have this conversation, which is not something that I was thinking before. This is not a conversation that everyone has in their departments. And by starting this conversation in the PublicsLab, I started to have this conversation also in my department.

I think what the PublicsLab allowed me to do was think more broadly, to think that knowledge production cannot be, or it shouldn't be something that is produced just in a couple of ways, which is academic writing and teaching. It can be created in multiple formats and for a variety of people. And it should be also for the public good, it should have a social impact into the people that exist beyond the academy. There is a wide variety of skills which come from knowing who you are speaking to and what you want to achieve by speaking about your research.

Even though I specialized in Iberian cultures what I was gaining in my doctoral training and then my fellowship was something that could translate into a variety of places. Because I was interrogating cases, and that's something that you always do when working with a group of people. I was also managing high amounts of information, which is something that you have to do whatever you are. I was also connecting with people, and trying to see connections between projects, which is a way of creative thinking, which is something really important for life in general and for work as well. So I was gaining all those skills.

And now I transition to the internship question because even though I had worked on a lot of projects and I have collaborated with a lot of people in exhibitions and performances and events and this and that, I didn't do a formal internship during my BA and I didn't do a Master's. So, it's funny how I did my first internship as part of my PhD.

And I started my PublicsLab fellowship before the pandemic. At that time, I wanted to do an internship at [MoMA](#) because I really admired the performance curator there. And it also had this prestige that sometimes we want to have, because somehow it will give us something, which I don't know what it is. We sometimes get blind by those kinds of things. The PublicsLab taught me how my research should be useful, and useful not in a very banal way.

Coming back to my identities and the communities that I wanted to reach out with my research, I was part of the Spanish speaking community in New York, even though of course I acknowledge that I am a European coming from Spain, and I'm not a Latinx

individual. Of course, there is a lot of privilege that comes with my background, but at the same time I was part of that community. Also, I was part of the LGBTQ community as well as a homosexual, cis-man. And also, I was part of the International Student's community in the United States, in New York specifically. So, I was at the intersection of those identities, and somehow those three identities existed in one specific place that was Astoria and Queens, because it has been my neighborhood since I moved to New York for my doctorate.

Somehow when the pandemic started and when I realized that I was going to do an internship in a place with no cost for the organization or the institution, I wanted to use that to improve people's lives around me in my own communities. And I realized how I didn't even want to go to MoMA and serve a very privileged art institution but wanted to stay in my neighborhood and serve underrepresented artists, in my borough. And that's how I end up doing my internship at the [Queens Council on the Arts](#), QCA, one of the five city councils in New York.

JA: What kind of work did you do with them? What were the projects that you were involved with?

DV: It was a great experience working at the Queens Council on the Arts. Just to give a context to our audience – the city art councils, there are five, as there are five boroughs in New York: Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and the Bronx, basically they serve the artistic communities in those worlds, in close dialogue with the [Department of Cultural Affairs](#). So it is a way for arts funding to be decentralized and serve people and artists more closely.

And I started that internship because, Kelly Olshan, who was the Programs Manager at the time, opened the doors for me, opened the QCA doors for me, and I feel really grateful for that. I started working for two different projects, two different programs.

One was a program called [High School to Art School](#), and it was a portfolio development program for High School students wanting to start a higher education in the arts. It was a wonderful program because it was basically mentoring and helping high school students in Queens to develop a portfolio, for free, in order for them to be successful candidates in major colleges around the country. The numbers showed how the students that are going to this program are getting full scholarships in places such as [Parsons](#), part of the New School, great places. It is important to acknowledge this because most of them are BIPOC high school students, and first generation of course. And if it is difficult for first generation students to have a college education in general, our audience can imagine how difficult it gets when it has to do with the arts. That was one of the programs.

And the other program, which is something that has influenced me so much was the [Artist Commissioning Program](#), ACP. The Artist Commissioning Program invites local people to engage with the Queens Council on the Arts to decide the art projects that are funded with the public dollars that the QCA gets from the Department of Cultural Affairs. It doesn't have to be curators or art experts. It doesn't matter if you are a teacher in elementary school or a waiter in a restaurant in Corona, we invite you to make decisions about the art that you want to see in your borough. And it was really interesting and really moving how, by enabling these people to decide the art

applications that were funded, the art that was created with those grants was representing the diversity of the borough.

So those were the two projects that I worked at the PublicsLab. And it was really interesting because, if I may, I did an internship and then they hired me as an Assistant and then I was promoted to a Programs Manager. I don't want to say that it was an example, but it was a path that was really, meaningful for me as someone who started doing an internship.

JA: So then you were, throughout your PhD journey then, having two simultaneous careers. You were having one as a project manager and as an academic.

DV: Yeah, correct. So (Laughs) I had two jobs, basically. In the mornings I was a dissertation writer, and in the afternoons, I was a Programs Manager at the Queens Council on the Arts. And I want to come back to my first answer about these two personas, the academic and the professional. It's true that physically it existed separately – because I was working in one place and then I was in the other one – but at the same time, for me, I felt them that they were the same in a way. Because what I was doing in the morning, I was interrogating case studies in my dissertation and then in the afternoon I was working with artists in Queens. But there were a lot of things in common between these two occupations that were serving art practices that were impacting their context. It didn't matter if it was contemporary Spain or Queens in 2020/21.

So for me, somehow, even though the content of the project and the form was different, the skills that I was applying, what I was working on, was pretty much the same, and there were a lot of connections and contact points between the two of them.

JA: I think that you give us such a rich and deep example of how the work that you were doing was integrated between being an academic and being a professional or a non-academic in the arts world. There's always this really difficult challenge for those of us who work in public scholarship to have a "weave" between our academic programs and the professional life. And it seems that the work that you were doing, you were then actually able to bring back into your department to say, *Hey, we can now begin to think of, dissertations in a different way. Or we can begin to think of the fellowships that we have that work towards our dissertation.* If you could talk a little bit about that.

DV: Yeah, sure. I have to say that even though [my department](#) had a traditional approach to curriculum, at the same time they were really open to new ideas. It wasn't that they didn't want to change. And I will give you an example about how I brought new ideas to my department. So as part of the second examination of my program, there used to be a part that was writing a publishable paper.

And nobody reads the handbook, but people should read the handbook. And as part of the handbook, I realized how the description of the second examination said if a student is interested in doing another project, he could present that to the curriculum committee and get approval for that. I spread that and I said, *Oh, this is such a great hole in the academic institution-- let's take advantage of it.* And I basically told my department that I didn't want to write a paper, that I wanted to create a curatorial project that I was going to use in an art institution here in Madrid. And they led me to

that. As part of my second examination, I presented that project that included, of course, a rationale. It was such a great example because then some other people in my program did the same with that. Of course, maybe they didn't do a curatorial project, but they, maybe they asked if they could do a teaching portfolio or a teaching project, or a website, or a digital humanities project, rather than a paper.

It was about making us understand that the curriculum is something that we academics have created, and because of that we can change it.

JA: That's fantastic. So then as we wrap up our time together --as we're speaking now, you're in Madrid. You have a full-time job. You've transitioned from the Graduate Center into the world again. Can you tell us a little bit about what you're doing now? I would just love to kind of know how PublicsLab helped you bridge or connect to this next phase of work and being in the world.

DV: Yeah, so many things. Looking for a job is a very anxious process. And you always think you're not going to get what you want or that you will have to do something that you don't like, or that you have to go to the other side of the world to do what you really want. Even though my answer is going to be really optimistic and positive, I want to acknowledge that because I had gone through that process as well.

I wanted to be in Madrid. I had lived seven years abroad and I wanted to come back home and to start a new life here. Also, because I was doing the last two years of my PhD during the pandemic between New York and Madrid.

And it was a very difficult time for International students, especially. Also, the reality is that the US is not a very welcoming place for international students. For example, coming back to the internship every semester, I had to ask for permission as part of my international student visa.

I actually had the experience of receiving two job offers, including one at QCA, but when they realized that I needed an international visa, they said that they couldn't do that. So, there were a lot of factors that allowed me to understand that I wanted to come back to Europe and more specifically to Madrid.

The PublicsLab was really useful for me to go back because it allowed me first to start planning my job search by having my materials ready, to conduct informational interviews beforehand, and trying to think broadly about my career. My career wasn't just about higher education administration and teaching. It was about so many other things. So, I could work in a variety of fields including education, arts, culture, international affairs, government. All of those things interested me, and I could do them because I had the experience.

It was really helpful for me to make my academic profile appealing and interesting for others. Because sometimes people don't understand academic career paths.

The day before defending my dissertation, I got a job in Madrid as the European projects coordinator of the youth department of the Madrid City Hall. And it wasn't my dream job, but it was a very interesting job for me to start building a career in Madrid, connecting with people in the city, developing my skills as a project manager in fields such as international affairs, education, European funding, government.

So, I'm saying this for the audience on the other side, that you always need to start somewhere, and that happens everywhere. And then you need to keep working.

And it was really interesting how just in six months I was still applying for jobs and having conversations with people.

I recently started to work as a freelancer in different projects related to mainly arts and culture, but also education. For example, I started to work as a consultant for a company that manages cultural affairs and cultural policies, initiatives. I am really happy to share that, that the project that I ran at the Queens Council on the Arts, people in Europe were interested by this model and they got a grant by the [European Commission](#) to replicate it. And I'm working as a consultant for them as well. Also, starting this summer I'm going to work as a college instructor, and then some other small projects that I am trying to launch for different organizations.

I am really excited about this project because actually when I was at the Queens Council on the Arts, one of our main goals was to create a replicable model for other communities to promote art commissioning by communities, so normal citizens could participate in the art commissioning process in order to democratize the art that is created in the world.

I had the opportunity to present this model while I was still working at the Queens Council and the Arts in a conference in the north of Spain. And people from different organizations in Europe were attending this conference organized by the [IETM](#), an international network of performing arts. One of the organizations called based in Budapest was really attracted by this idea and contacted me saying, *Hey, we would like to bring this to Europe*. Even though there are some other projects that do something similar, but not exactly following the same model. So basically, the European Commission, part of the European Union has a program called [Creative Europe](#).

And they applied for a grant to replicate this model, having me as an external expert of an external consultant in order to basically stay with them during the whole process while they were applying this project in their own communities. And they got the grant. They got a 300,000 Euros grant to implement this project. And I will be flying to Budapest to facilitate a workshop for people from these three different organizations, so they know the methodology behind the original project in Queens, and we can create a new model that adapts to their own communities.

JA: Wonderful. Thank you so very much for your time. It was such a pleasure. And thank you for sharing your experiences and your thoughts on PublicsLab with, with our audience.

DV: Thank you so much, Jess .

JA: Great. Thank you. Thank you. Thanks. (They laugh.)

DV: Awesome.

JA: The PublicsLab was an initiative at the GC that supported the transformation of

graduate education through fellowships for doctoral students, [Curriculum Enhancement Grants](#) for departments and programs, and programming for all that showcased and workshopped the methods and practices of public scholarship.

It was funded from 2018 to 2023 by the Mellon Foundation. [Stacy Hartman](#) was the Director of the program, [Professor Bianca Williams](#) served as its Faculty Lead, [Professor Kandice Chuh](#) Interim Faculty Lead, and [Professor David Olan](#) was the grant's principal investigator.

Our archive features audio interviews with student fellows, faculty mentors, grant recipients, and the program's leadership.