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Significant Surfaces Proposal

Fereshteh Toosi

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Fereshteh Toosi served as the inaugural Dammeyer Fellow in Photographic Arts and Social Issues. This presentation gives insight into her process-oriented, socially-engaged art initiative called *Significant Surfaces*.

The artist was embedded in a supportive housing environment where social services are provided to residents who have a history of homelessness, serious mental illness, and/or substance use disorders. As a result, *Significant Surfaces* was a participatory art project that took a self-reflexive approach. Rather than creating a public art project with participants as the subjects of the work, Fereshteh engaged participants in dialogue about the history of documentary and its intersection with human rights issues. Fereshteh created an alternative community of learning in order to explore how people who are experiencing structural inequality see themselves, in comparison to how others see them. In this presentation, Fereshteh will recount her fellowship year and the tensions that arise when working in the continuum between the short-term, outcomes-oriented expectations of public art agencies and the long-term, process-based methods of socially-engaged art.

This presentation takes the hybrid form of artist talk and workshop about best practices for exercising power and agency when doing public humanities work. Using an abolitionist, anti-oppression framework, Toosi examines the role art plays in community building and the responsibilities of the artist in the community. The presentation addresses the relationship between public art, documentary, and art made via participatory processes.