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# After Hours

by  
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***Shellyne Rodriguez**  
democratizes art  
education with  
MoMA's Night Studio*

**T**his past fall, during a model drawing session at The Museum of Modern Art's Night Studio—a program for New York City students working toward their high school equivalency diplomas—artist, instructor and Night Studio founder Shellyne Rodriguez (BFA 2011 Visual & Critical Studies) was calming a student's distress.

FROM TOP Night Studio students at work; Shellyne Rodriguez (center, in red hat) poses with Night Studio students. Photos by Kaitlyn Stubbs.



The participant didn't have glasses, due to a health insurance issue, and thought she could not complete the activity. "She's crying, she's upset, and she's drawing really small because that's the best that she can see," Rodriguez says.

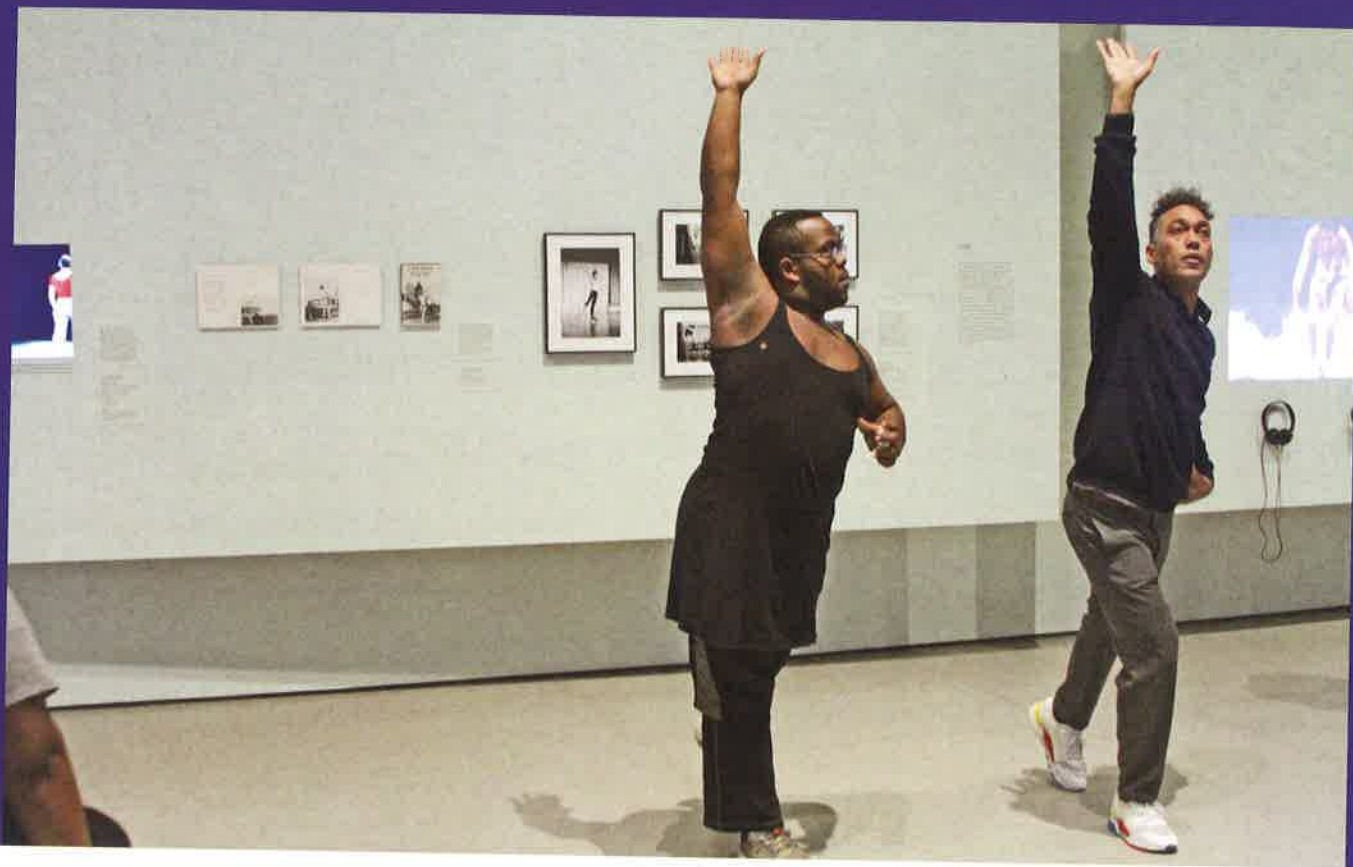
After the lesson, Rodriguez showed her students works by Swiss surrealist Alberto Giacometti, and the group read from James Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait* (1965), which documents the famous artist's neurotic creative process.

"I said, 'If we can read about someone who's one of the greats...and learn this person also had self-doubt, then you're in good company.'" Having imperfect vision wasn't a barrier to creating, Rodriguez explained to the class, but an alternate and valid starting point to expression. In other words, she says, "How do we take what you have with you right now and turn that into something?"

This is an important ethos for her students, young people of color, who are part of the population underserved by museums. A widely reported 2015 Mellon Institute study found that more than 80 percent of leadership positions at American museums are held by white, non-Hispanic people, though they only claim about a 61 percent share of the overall U.S. population, and attendance surveys show similarly







lopsided demographics among museumgoers. Since 2013, in addition to her own art practice, Rodríguez has run community-partnership programming at MoMA in an effort to make the institution more inclusive. Organizations she works with include Passages Academy, a school for students in juvenile detention, and the Ali Forney Center, which serves homeless LGBT youth. With an eye toward bypassing art-world gatekeepers and, she says, “pumping out a bunch of young people who are making art on their own,”

she developed Night Studio, which launched in 2017.

Rodríguez’s experiences taught her that traditional paths to a career in the arts—attending a competitive arts high school and prestigious art college and then landing a job at an esteemed museum—aren’t equally available to everyone. As an Afro-Puerto Rican teen growing up in the South Bronx in the 1980s, her introduction to art was through graffiti, an element of the burgeoning hip-hop culture around her. “When we say graffiti, it should be thought of in a broad way,”

she says. “Not just spray painting your name on walls, but also little black sketchbooks and drawing.” Her own drawings were colorful, illustrative characters inspired by people in her neighborhood: “Grandmothers, dudes on the block, kids playing at the fire hydrant.”

But when she sought opportunities to further her art education, she came up empty-handed.

“I didn’t get into the High School of Art and Design because my grades were so bad. The high school that I went to sort of shoved me into

business [studies]....I had one art class while I was in high school, for a half-semester, but there wasn’t that attempt to shape the education of students individually.”

Rodríguez dropped out at 19 and earned her GED in 1996. In 1998, with the help of her girlfriend at the time, she enrolled in the evening illustration program at SVA. But the tuition was costly and after two years, she took a 10-year break. During that time she continued making art, and in 2009 she returned to SVA, graduating with her BFA two years later. In 2014,

she received her MFA from Hunter College. She has exhibited and lectured on her work frequently since then, and is currently working on a permanent public sculpture commissioned by New York City, to be installed in the Bronx in 2020.

Having taken the longer path, Rodriguez now wants to provide an art education for those with a similar background.

"You're 22 years old. You consider yourself an artist, but you don't have access," she says. "We needed to create a program for these people who are being overlooked."

Night Studio takes place over 10 consecutive Wednesday evenings in the fall. The most recent cohort comprised eight African American and Caribbean American students, ages 16 to 22, who traveled each week from the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem and Staten Island to meet at MoMA's Cullman Education Center, after the museum had closed to the public.

"We treat it like the first semester of art school," Rodriguez says. Everyone receives a portfolio, a large drawing board, a spiral sketch pad, newsprint paper, a sketchpad for homework and a pouch with an eraser and a pencil.

The first 30 minutes of each session consists of

dinner and a group-led discussion of topics, such as gentrification and income inequality, affecting the students' lives and their art. Over the course of the program, the group uses MoMA's galleries as their classroom and explore a multidisciplinary syllabus: model and still-life drawing, painting, performance art, printmaking and sculpture. They also study color theory, make value scales and write poetry.

One moving moment of the 2018 course, Rodriguez recalls, was when a student invoked mental-health struggles through a performance piece. Rodriguez had asked the students to act out their day from 6:00 am on. "They're getting up," she says. "They're brushing their teeth. They're improvising. And this kid is on the floor—he's laying, he's still sleeping. And he's scrolling on his phone, he's still in the bed. At one point he gets up, goes to the bathroom, goes back to the bed." In a later conversation, he told her he was depressed.

"Our lived experiences inevitably show up in the work," Rodriguez says.

Rodriguez also invites guest instructors. Past participants include painter Alvaro Barrington, performance artist Zachary Fabri and sculptor Abigail DeVille. Last fall, the final class was a portfolio review led by Shani



Peters, a multidisciplinary artist, and Nectar Knuckles, a curatorial fellow at MoMA.

"The artists and the curators I invite are people of color," she says. "Mostly black women, because that's who my crew is, that's who our audience is, and I want us to see us."

As of publication time, Rodriguez was still waiting for confirmation that the program would be renewed for 2019. Regardless, she is confident that the experience has enriched the lives and work of those who have taken part so far. The 2018 cohort has kept in touch and even started an art collective, called H.O.O.D. (Hearing Our Obstacles Differentiated).

"Whatever grows out of this 10 weeks, plus what you already know, plus what your peers know, plus what you learned on the street, plus what you're not hearing—because what we don't know also teaches us something—that's going to be amazing," she says. "That's going to be something." ✨

**NATELEGÉ WHALEY** is a culture journalist from Brooklyn. She has written for *NBCNews*, *Pitchfork*, *Eater* and other outlets.

**THIS SPREAD** Through MoMA's Night Studio, students working toward their high school equivalency diplomas engage in a variety of artmaking practices, including performance, sculpture and drawing. They also have exclusive access to museum galleries. Photos by Kaitlyn Stubbs.

