LIVING AND WORKING IN THE “D”
Recent MSU College of Arts and Letters graduates Tatum Walker and Mike Kulick landed their first jobs in Detroit, Michigan, four and a half blocks from one another, working in, quite appropriately, arts and letters. Walker is interpretive specialist, digital media, with the Detroit Institute of Arts, or DIA; Kulick is web and digital media manager with the Museum of Contemporary Art–Detroit, or MOCAD. Both are in jobs they helped create.

Kulick graduated from the MSU College of Arts and Letters in 2012 after majoring in professional writing with a dual specialization in digital/technical and communities. Walker earned her CAL undergraduate degree in May 2013 in art history and visual culture with a specialization in museum studies, and immediately began working on an M.A. in educational technology.
“The position that I’m currently in is a brand new one,” Walker says. “And it’s especially exciting for me, being geared toward the interactive museum world, digital media and such. A lot of museums do not have a person for that. They tend to hire out to companies and freelancers.

“It’s similar work to what I did as a student at the Broad Art Museum MSU. I sort of created my own position there, starting out as a curatorial assistant, and then I expressed my interests in education and digital media, and the trend that museums were starting to incorporate technology into the visitor experience.”

Walker says that landing her job at the Detroit Institute of Arts began when a few people from the DIA came to visit the Broad MSU in East Lansing and asked to speak specifically with whomever was working with the technology component.

“That, of course, was me; I was the only person doing it. So we met, and, later, in the interview process, they said, ‘We saw what you were doing, and since we’d been talking a while about this in house, your position at the Broad really helped us hone in on what we wanted for the DIA.’

“That said, even the position title I have now, interpretive specialist for digital media, can mean a number of things. So, as we move forward, I’m pushing boundaries and somewhat deciding what my position is while moving ahead. A lot of the people working here aren’t integrated into the tech world. While they’re not sure what they want, they do know they want to explore digital media.

“Since I started, it’s been very busy, very fast paced here. I’ve been learning how the DIA does technology and how they like to integrate it: their style, their feel, and voice. Going through what they’ve already done has been a huge project, and I’ve been slowly updating a lot of it. The tech components were last updated in 2008. So there’s a lot to update.

“The DIA is all about visitor-centered experiences. So we’ve been doing a lot of evaluation of what we currently have and how to make it more visitor-friendly. This includes viewing videos in our permanent collections, trimming down the ‘fat,’ and making them more accessible by adding subtitles and such.
“I think my time in the Creativity Exploratory probably had one of the most significant impacts on preparing me for my job, because your college degree only takes you so far in getting a job, and then your experience takes over.”

“The beautiful thing about working at a large museum on the scale of the DIA is that we have a bit more time than I’m used to. At the Broad, we’d be told we had a month to get something done, where here I’m really a part of the exhibition planning team. Not only am I part of the planning process, but I have the time to integrate tech components a lot better to make them feel like they’re truly part of the exhibit.

“My big projects right now include working on an existing Diego Rivera app for our murals. We hired a company to build the Diego Rivera app for us in 2009, but it’s only accessible on the iPad. So I’m trying to make it all-smart-device capable and create a web version so people can view it on their desktops, too.

“We also have an exhibit coming up called Walk-in Portrait Studio, where an artist, Corine Vermeulen, will invite people in, take and give their portraits to them, then display them. During their portrait taking, she will be interviewing them about Detroit: what they do here; the importance of the city; the condition of the city; and their perceptions of the city.

“So I’m creating sound stations for the exhibit, whereby visitors who are going through the exhibits and seeing parts of Detroit and people’s portraits are also able to hear from the people directly and their experiences with Detroit. It will situate you to Detroit, but also to the individuals’ experiences with the city.

“Another project is a ‘not-so-impressionism’ exhibit. It’s an exhibit we have by impressionist artists, but it’s not impressionistic work. That may sound a bit confusing, but we’re playing up the individuality that starts forming among artists in the late modern art period. I’m making interactives for the artists with their bios, how they progressed, their art form, and so on.

“Evaluation is a huge thing here at the DIA, too. For instance, we’re working on the big Frida Kahlo–Diego Rivera exhibit that’s opening in March, and have already been creating mock exhibits, bringing in visitors, and testing how the set-up and interpretation is. We want to get a feel for what people need interpretation for: what they’re not understanding, what’s not making sense; how everything is laid out and if there is a better way for people to experience the space.

“The museum is really big on that: prototyping and evaluation, re-prototyping and evaluation; to hone in on the perfect experience for the visitor.

“I think my time in the Creativity Exploratory probably had one of the most significant impacts on preparing me for my job, because your college degree only takes you so far in getting a job, and then your experience takes over.

“I was always very interested in art history and knew I wanted to work in museums. But doing what? In the C.E., I began to see this digital side and technology components, and how my two passions could converge into one specific job. That’s what led me to where I am now.

NETWORKING IS A BIG HELP

“Constant networking with people has been a huge help, too, as has experiencing so many different opportunities. As a student, I was able to work with the MSU Museum and the Broad MSU Museum, as well as Tour Guide.” And Tatum says that thinking about situated learning has truly been helpful in working on the user experience here.

“The Silent Spring research project was particularly important because that gave me experience with research, evaluation, data collection, ethical considerations and more. And, while it emphasized my writing capability, it had the tech component, too.

“At the C.E., I also had the opportunity to develop my skills in video editing. When I started there, I didn’t know anything about it. Being able to work side by side with (film studies graduate student) Pete Johnston on a lot of projects and helping create the video for the College’s Arts Weekend built up my skills in video editing, which is probably one of the skills I most use here currently.

“Then there was learning the process of app development, web app development, and website development. I didn’t learn any of that in my classes. The art and the writing components are only half of why the DIA hired me. The other half is my extensive experience with technology, and that was all done through the C.E.

“If I hadn’t been in the Creativity Exploratory, I wouldn’t be here.”
Mike Kulick, who graduated from MSU’s professional writing program in December 2012, says that internships and career-related work while in school were also key to his success in landing his current position as web and digital media manager for the Museum of Contemporary Art–Detroit, or MOCAD, a job he has held since August 2013.

Kulick says many of the skills he uses on a daily basis were developed before he was an MSU student, while he was a student, or in the months immediately after graduation from MSU.

“The professional writing program at MSU taught me how to write in various professional settings, as well as ways to apply what I’d learned to a wide range of tasks. But, to a very large degree, it’s what you do with that learning that will determine your ultimate success.”

For instance, Kulick worked for a year as a web designer and developer for The State News, the independent student newspaper for the university. Over that time, he managed and completed the redesign of the entire State News website, which receives 200,000 monthly visits.

“Then, too, when I graduated in December 2012, I had an internship at Michigan Energy Options in East Lansing, and they brought me onboard full time because they had a large grant-funded program that they were administering. But, as can be the case with non-profits, one of the funding grants ran out, and my hours were greatly reduced and others laid off.

“When that happened, I thought, okay, here’s the impetus for going out and looking for a job in Detroit. So I did the regular Team Detroit and Quicken Loans applications, and those each had different success rates.

“But then I saw this job posting for the web and digital media manager from ArtServe and also the D-Hive list-serves of open jobs. And I applied.

“My career was moving in a different direction, and I thought, ‘I have all these skills, what do I do with them?’ I think that’s the type of problem-solving you develop as a professional writer.”

“I’d been coming to MOCAD for years, and knew the special events coordinator, because we’d worked together previously at my old job when I was in high school. So that was cool, because I knew somebody, and they had also just hired their new executive director, Elysia Borowy-Reeder, in April, and she was looking to hire some new people.”

Borowy-Reeder is also an MSU grad, having earned her M.A. in art history/art education in 1999, and her B.A. in visual arts from Antioch College in 1994.

“We immediately hit it off, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Saying that it has been a good experience and he truly enjoys it, Kulick adds that had he not been coming from WRAC’s professional writing program, he wouldn’t have nearly as much agency and communications experience to inform his work.

“I’m working in the communications and web department. We don’t have a specific director of communications position, so I function a lot in that role, as well as handle everything on our social media channels, the website and upkeep, and I also work on press requests, releases and materials. It’s pretty busy. We’re a small non-profit, and the executive director is right above me, so that’s pretty cool because I can suggest we do something, and get an immediate ‘Sounds good. Go for it.’

“And I work four days a week, so that’s even more fun, because, inevitably, we need a lot more help on the weekends…and you need your sanity, too.”

**EVER-CHANGING EXHIBITS**

Walking through the museum’s space on Woodward Avenue in Detroit in May 2014, Kulick guided visitors through the artist’s work-in-progress exhibit, José Lerma’s *La Bella Crisis*, that ran May 16 - July 27, 2014.
In *La Bella Crisis*, Puerto Rican artist José Lerma, who lives and works in New York and Chicago, revisited MOCAD’s history by transforming the museum’s main gallery, once an auto showroom, into an “art fair.” Lerma’s site-specific installation was a still life that comprised found materials, paintings, and personal artifacts, constructed onsite over the period of a month, and dismantled at the end of the exhibition.

Said Kulick in May, “It’s not a show about Detroit, but a show with Detroit. So, using Detroit materials. There are even pieces showcasing various colored lights and materials arranged to create musical sounds as if it was a symphony.”

“He’s doing live art, so not everything you see going on in the museum is going to be super-enthralling,” Kulick said. “But the fact that he’s doing it right now, right here, in the moment, and that these pieces are only going to exist for the next month is exciting and immediate.

“And then, anything he can fold up and pack up he’ll take with him. And anything he can’t is going to be reused.

“I’m excited to see where it goes,” Kulick said. “And as far as communications go, it’s really great because we can say to people, ‘When you leave work, come on down to MOCAD. Pieces are going up. Come join us tonight.’

“We don’t get to see that too often. It will definitely make for a little more chaos, but I think we’ll do fine.

“And it will help build public interest and awareness. It’s called an ‘institutional bookmark moment.’ Like when people recognize MOCAD by name and say, ‘Oh yeah, José’s show...’ And then, from there, they start coming to other shows to see what’s new. Which is really key: that people see we’re growing and changing, and know that they’re going to see something new and interesting when they come.”

**CONSTANTLY CHANGING SPACE**

That newness vibe, Kulick says, even extends to the museum’s great new vegan-vegetarian café, Topsoil, which is a Detroit partnership between MOCAD and Russell Street Deli in Eastern Market.

“So our space is constantly changing,” Kulick says. “And we’re also growing out of our available office space. But, while we’re having growing pains, we also know we have solid plans for the future, plans that I intend to help everyone here see through.”

He adds that the MOCAD team is often as inspiring as the art.

“We have some exceptional people here,” Kulick says. “They help make it fun and exciting to come to work every day.”

Adds Kulick, “I try to hire MSU students, too, here at MOCAD. For instance, we currently have two College of Arts and Letters professional writing majors as interns. There’s Laura Van Ett, who just graduated, and we also have Emily Parsons, who will be a junior in fall 2014. So the CAL-PW internships legacy lives on, and I’m proud to be a part of it.

“I can only hope it will be as successful for them as it has been for me.”