

**Some Notes on Curating & Organizing
Media Arts Exhibitions**

Carnegie Art Center

**North Tonawanda, NY
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An Art Center Director's View

Creativity is not the exclusive domain of artists. I have come to respect an equally and somewhat un-sung creativity generated within arts organizations. This comes from the expert problem solving skills of the gifted administrators of medium-to-small sized arts centers. I consider these individuals to be the “MacGyvers” of the arts world because of their ability to pull innovative programs out of thin air with no real funding or significant staff support. How do they do this? It's simple. They believe in what they do. And short of breaking the law, they do whatever it takes to get the job done in order to ensure that projects are realized at their organizations. This cadre of individuals includes executive directors, program and gallery directors, and any other available staff. More often than not, these small organizations cannot afford an in-house curator to create and oversee certain aspects of program development.

Bringing on a guest curator enables such organizations to develop programs that would never be possible without their expertise. We, at the Carnegie, have had the good fortune to work with a number of very talented guest curators over many years. We have found this to be a great strategy for generating stronger programs on small budgets and it has provided us with a solid reputation for media arts presentation within our own arts community and beyond.

We have worked with curators at the beginning of their careers as well as with those who are more seasoned. Each individual has brought a unique vision, creativity and a management skill set to their projects that could rival any self-respecting “MacGyver-like” arts administrator. It has been a pleasure and an honor to work with these professionals and I would like to thank all of them for their contributions to our programs.

A special thanks to Joanna Raczynska for compiling the information for this guide. Joanna has curated three media arts exhibitions for us as well as presenting media arts related workshops. We hope her insights, as well as those shared by our other guest curators within this guide, will assist other arts center administrators with evaluating their media arts presentations and perhaps help to improve them. Also, we hope this guide will support those who are considering the development of media arts programs at their organizations with the assistance of guest curators

Ellen Ryan
Executive Director
Carnegie Art Center

Introduction

Since 2005, I've had the privilege of working as a guest curator for the Carnegie Art Center on three occasions. Each experience was unique, rewarding, and challenging, requiring me to exercise and test my curatorial skills in ways that I hadn't been given the opportunity to before. Ellen Ryan approached me about compiling this handbook in 2007 as a practical how-to guide that other small or middle-sized arts organizations might find useful in the development of their own temporary media arts exhibition programs. It's an attempt to answer the question How does an organization such as the Carnegie Art Center organize original media arts exhibitions and projects without the benefit of a curator on staff?

This opportunity to share my own experiences quickly became a great chance to also document and highlight the many innovative exhibitions and related educational outreach programs that the Carnegie Art Center has initiated over the last seven years. Obviously this handbook is not exhaustive. It is an account of my own and some other guest curators' experiences and tactics in developing media arts exhibitions and events, which I hope will prove useful as a starting point for others interested in pursuing the same.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ellen Ryan for her vision and encouragement. I think all of the guest curators invited to work at the Carnegie will agree that this opportunity has helped them both rethink and expand their curatorial practice. Great thanks to Ellen for also trusting each of us to organize the shows we really wanted to share and for providing us with a such a reputable organization in which to stage them. I'd also like to thank Lynn Lasota, Program Manager at the Carnegie, for her support, patience, and hard work; and Erica Eaton, Carolyn Tennant, Julia Dzwonkoski and Kye Potter for all contributing their insights to this publication. I'd also like to thank Will Redman for working with and supporting me all the time.

Joanna Raczynska

Steps for curating a media arts exhibition

Developing an idea for an exhibit

Curating one-time programs traditionally includes the screening of single channel films and videos. These unique events usually involve educational components such as audience question and answer periods immediately after the screenings, with open public discussion often with the filmmaker present. Exhibitions on the other hand take place over an extended period of time, are often multi-channel, and involve various media including not only single channel work. The openings associated with these exhibitions are generally extremely social events, where visitors are less likely to pay the greatest attention to the work itself but typically revisit the exhibition numerous times over its course to engage with and experience the work. The pace and the opportunity for interaction and the revisiting of artworks is extended in the gallery setting, whereas the single channel screening has a set pace and offers a single and unique opportunity to engage with the artist and their work. However, the difference between a one-time screening and an exhibition of media art in a gallery is not only a matter of duration.

All gallery curators have to take into account the physical limitations and possibilities of the exhibition space, shaping and reworking it with each new opportunity in order to highlight and foreground the work. With the exhibition of media artwork, including single channel videos and films as well as installations, the challenge can often be how to present a group of works that runs the risk of being a sea of monitors or a configuration of single channel projections. When developing an idea for an exhibition of media artwork, I'm conscious of the need to integrate as many different kinds of presentation models as possible and seek out installations or sculptural and interactive works that integrate video, film or other media elements such as sound, the internet etc. Basically, I try to include media artwork that couldn't easily be experienced in a cinema or theatrical setting. With this imperative in my mind, I also consider the following questions while developing an exhibition:

- How does your exhibition relate to the mission of the presenting organization?
- What unites but also differentiates the chosen pieces within your exhibition?
- How would the exhibition benefit the audience, the organization, and the artists involved?

Media arts curating advice: Watch as much work as you can, know your media arts history and the history of your venue (the audience), write about media arts, and make art work yourself, even if you have no intention of showing it!

Basic curatorial considerations

The curator's primary role is to choose the works to be included in a particular exhibition and to organize those works with a certain theme or purpose in mind. I characterize this approach as "classical," since it generally means selecting existing work and organizing it to fit a pre-conceived concept. There are many different ways in working as a curator, but for the sake of this document I will be following this basic, classic, approach. (Another approach might be collaborative or generative, whereby the artists involved have a greater role in directing the content of the exhibition.) The grouping of several artists' works can be thematic or it can be circumstantial (such as an awards or survey show), but optimally there should be a story that's revealed or told by the exhibition.

1. Working directly with living artists on the exhibition of their art requires both trust and responsibility on the part of the curator to present the work exactly as the artist intended or as close to their intention as possible. This often includes involving the artist in the installation of their piece either directly (by having them work in the gallery with you), or by requiring detailed written and illustrated instructions on the installation. Some venues require the exchange of signed contracts between organization and participating artist regarding presentation, with the curator as administrator.
2. Often a work you want to include will be produced by an artist you don't personally know. The work would then need to be borrowed for the exhibition from a distributor or a gallery representative. Again, this might necessitate a formal contract and almost always requires a rental fee for the duration of the exhibition. Never show anyone's work without permission!
3. Curators are sometimes working artists themselves and choose to include themselves in exhibitions they're organizing. Personally, I find this an ethical concern. Since so many exhibitions pay artist fees as well as curatorial fees to an organizer, the waters get muddied and often priorities are questioned by outside funders and supporters of a host organization. Ultimately, the decision of whether or not it's appropriate to include your own work in a show you're also curating should be made jointly by the curator and the hosting venue.

Working in partnership with the exhibiting organization

The opportunity to guest curate an exhibition with an arts organization should be viewed as a collaboration. Often, the curator won't be able to be on site until the installation begins, and will be corresponding with the organization's representatives through email or by phone. To avoid any confusion, it is very important to define who is going to be responsible for all aspects of the project immediately so that all tasks are undertaken, and deadlines and expectations met.

Budgets

The host organization should have a general budget in mind before inviting a curator to propose an exhibition. Though the budget will be developed in tandem with the curator (considering details such as rental fees, artist fees, costs of technical equipment, etc.), it is the organization's responsibility to set the parameters of what it can and cannot spend on one project. This is obviously defined by the annual exhibition budget and any outside funding sources that might be appropriate to approach once an exhibition is in the planning stages. Remember, funding cycles often take 12 to 18 months to complete, so plan well ahead.

When beginning to plan a budget, the curator and the organization should identify available resources (technical assistance, hardware, software, projectors, as well as staff time); sketch out the costs of renting the artwork and paying artist fees; research the costs of renting any necessary equipment; and plan for the costs of shipping, installing, and deinstalling work. A basic budget could look something like the following:

Organizational Expenses

Administration

Director (5% annual salary)

Program Manager (15–20% annual salary)

Office Overhead (including mailing of invitation)

Artist and Personell Fees & Costs

Curator & Essayist

Publication Designer

Installation/Equipment

Installation and Deinstallation Personnel

Travel/Accommodation (for artists and curator)

Shipping Fees (Artwork & Equipment Insurance if applicable)

Printing

Brochure/ catalogue and Invitations

Promotional and educational outreach possibilities

Arts organizations often have established educational programs that include artist talks, workshops, performances, screenings, etc. Exhibitions offer a myriad of opportunities to develop educational components that can last during the run of the exhibition. These events should be organized well in advance of the exhibition opening and promoted along with the exhibition itself. Events organized to compliment guest-curated exhibitions could include

- Performances (during the run of the exhibit, at the opening and/or closing nights of the exhibition)
- Artist talks
- Workshops with the artists included or by the curator
- Screening series held at other local arts organizations, in affiliation with the exhibition
- Student tours
- Podcasts

Publicity/promotion

To be effective, the promotion of the exhibition and related events needs to occur several weeks in advance of the opening. Details about the exhibition, its theme, the artists involved as well as related images, need to be ready for the following publicity opportunities:

- Press releases to various news outlets (online, local/regional/national newspapers / magazines)
- Email blasts
- Organization's website about the exhibition
- Related on line resources such as a blog about the exhibition

Remember to articles, reviews, interviews or other materials are generated by the press. These should be shared with the artists and lenders involved. Copies of all reviews will also be useful to send potential supporters of your work in the future: when you are fund raising for other projects, include press clippings with your support materials.

Publications

The invitation to the exhibition opening often takes the form of a postcard at the Carnegie, but it can be developed into a more elaborate design if the budget allows. Mailed invitations should be sent out to an existing mailing list approximately 2–3 weeks before the opening, meaning that the approved design should be sent to the printer 4–6 weeks prior to that.

If the budget allows for a brochure or an exhibition catalogue, consider that to have the finished piece in hand for the opening you need to deliver the design to the printer at least 2–3 weeks before the opening. If working with a freelance designer, it is important to establish a timeline with them so that the deadlines can be met. To do this effectively, hi resolution images and the brochure's text needs to be completed and ready to hand over to the designer 6–8 weeks prior to the exhibition's opening. Again, these dates are approximate and should be used as a general guide when establishing your own schedule. It is necessary for the curator to work with the organization on establishing and keeping to a timeline for the publications as well as the publicity and installation of the show.

If using vinyl lettering during the exhibition, give the printer 2–3 weeks to produce your order.

Artist contracts or agreements

Of course, one of the primary responsibilities of the curator is to negotiate and correspond with the exhibition artists or the artist's representative/s. It is always prudent to get all negotiated details in writing, either in the form of a formal contract, letter, or email (that's printed and archived). In order for all of the elements of the exhibition to come together in a timely and effective manner, the curator must work with the artists to define and agree upon the following:

- Fees
A range for artist fees should be established with the exhibiting organization first, based on the preliminary budget. Artists can then be quoted a fee for their participation in a particular exhibition. They can choose to accept that fee or be willing to negotiate. If not working with an artist's representative, rental fees of works are generally set by the lending institution although these are usually open to negotiation. If the fees asked for are non negotiable, it is often the task of the curator to find more funding to make up the cost or turn to an alternate artist for work.
- Deadlines
The curator must communicate the timeline to the artist and work *in writing* far enough in advance of the schedule to allow for any potential changes to the information an artist provides (such as work description, bio or image selection for publicity). It is always a good idea to pad a healthy timeline to ensure that key information is delivered well in advance and that deadlines are met with a minimum of stress.
- Installation details
In order to present the work as close to the specifications of the artist, it is a good idea to ask the artist for their installation specs before plotting the floorplan of the gallery space for the installation. Once all of the works are

described and all of the installation needs are understood, then the curator can begin to work out the spacing of the exhibition in the gallery. Now is also the time to refer to the budget for travel expenses and ask the artists if they plan to come to the gallery to help install their work.

- Insurance

An exhibition space should have a blanket insurance policy that is separate from the costs of the temporary exhibition schedule. Occasionally, artists or their reps ask for additional insurance of their work to cover the shipping or the costs of their work and the installation's technical aspects. It is important to ask for all technical requirements (back up disks, projectors, hard drives etc.) from the artist up front, whether or not a formal contract is drawn, in the event of an emergency during the term of the exhibition (which includes shipping to and from the presenting organization).

- Texts, bios and images

Based on your publication production and publicity timelines, the artist or rep should provide you with a biography, a description of the work included in the exhibition with screening/exhibit history, and two to three images for publicity. These can be both emailed and provided on a disk.

Installation

When working in the context of a small to medium sized arts organization, it is almost always the responsibility of the curator to design and install the exhibition space. Larger venues such as museums usually have exhibits staff to install and deinstall exhibitions; the rest of us rely on our own experience and the kindness of interns and volunteers to get the job done. Make sure that you have enough interns or volunteers to help you with the various jobs during the whole installation process – depending on the schedule of the gallery space, installation can occur anywhere from a month to a week before your exhibition opens.

In preparing the space before the exhibition, make sure that the gallery is as clean and clutter-free as possible. This might include prepping and painting the walls and any pedestals you'll be using, covering light leaks and windows if a dark space is necessary for an installation, and hanging curtains or other light-tight elements. Bring in all necessary equipment and have cables and extra power cords and strips on hand as the installation progresses. It's also a good idea to know where the nearest Radio Shack or hardware store is for last minute needs.

Technical considerations

Media arts exhibitions require the added responsibility of working with technical equipment such as projectors, monitors, disk players, hard drives, computers and other electronics. These require maintenance and special attention before, during and after the run of the exhibition.

Before all else, identify the equipment necessary to run all of the proposed work and make sure that all disks and sources of the art actually function on the players and projectors designated to them. It is usually the case that a disk won't play or a cable needs replacing, so work with plenty of time to spare for such setbacks. Avoid receiving artwork that needs to be played on equipment that's outdated or on equipment that's not available for delivery or rent until the last moment: make sure that the artist is available to provide a back up source of their work or even a playback device they know works if necessary. And keep an eye on the equipment during the run of the exhibition. Projector bulbs might need replacing or monitors might die; equipment often needs to be switched out, so plan to have as many backups of key equipment waiting in the wings as possible.

Working with an artist in the gallery

If any of the participating artists are willing to install their own work, be prepared to have as much of their area ready for them to begin installing immediately. It's also a good idea to have as much of the other artwork installed as possible, before their arrival. This gives the visiting artist a sense of the overall project and

also shows them that the gallery has been planned with their work as part of a whole. This will limit their possible instinct or desire to designate alternate parts of the gallery to their work, and help you remain in control of the overall space and exhibition. It's wonderful to work with generous and tireless artists who share your enthusiasm for the project, but make sure that as a curator you stand your ground about your installation choices and represent all of the participants as you had originally intended.

Registrarial duties

Again, museums and larger venues often have registrars on staff who support the curator and exhibits crew by handling the shipping, insurance, and condition of the artwork as it moves through the exhibition space. Media art work tends to not necessitate as huge a front load of work as, say, sculptures or framed pieces of art do, though it's important to consider some aspects of the job when working with media art.

- Condition reports and accountability:
Remember that it is your responsibility as the curator to be accountable for all of the work and related aspects on loan. This means that the lender is trusting you to take care of their works, make sure they remain in working order throughout the run of the exhibit, and are returned to them, in tact and undamaged, in a timely manner.

The best way to maintain clarity about a loan is to keep a condition report for every item. This report should include information such as number of disks and a list of items on loan, their functionality and condition when they arrive on site (particularly useful for claims if there is damage during shipping), their condition during deinstallation and return, along with details regarding the lender (contact information especially).

It's also a good idea to take snapshots of packaging and boxed materials as they come in, especially if you are dealing with complex installation pieces that are often packed in as efficient a way as possible. Sometimes this can be like taking apart a jigsaw puzzle – remember that it's up to you to put that puzzle back together after the run of the exhibit. Photos help much more than memory in the reconstruction of shipping materials.

- Label all containers/cases of artwork with the artist's last name.
This will keep all of your packing materials in order and make the deinstallation and return of work so much easier.

Finishing Touches

- Place labels and wall text after the work is installed
- Secure cables and wires so that no visitors trip or hurt themselves (or pull plugs out of their sockets)
- Secure projectors and other expensive equipment that could “walk” during the run of the exhibition.
- Sweep the floor and vacuum one last time.
- Pace yourself. Don’t leave anything to the last minute, there will be plenty to do up until the day of the opening!

Deinstallation

One of the primary functions of drawing up contracts and saving written correspondence with artists and lenders is to make the exhibition deinstallation process and the return of borrowed materials all that much easier on yourself and the host organization. It’s critical to know exactly what has been borrowed, how installations or complex artworks are to be properly packed and shipped, and exactly when materials are to be returned. Having the condition reports on hand during the deinstallation process will ensure that everything is returned to the correct point person in the proper way, with the minimum of damage or stress on the objects. Some key points to remember during the breaking down of our show are:

- **Define a timeline for the return of work and stick to it.** This is often dictated by the organization’s ongoing schedule of exhibits and programs.
- **Make sure you have the right amount of shipping materials to protect the work when returning.** Keep all of the packing material from the installation and reuse during the deinstallation. If you have only DVDs to return, make sure you are getting all loaned copies back to the owner. DO NOT duplicate DVDs for your own personal or organizational use.
- **Work with interns.** Don’t underestimate the time and care it will take to deinstall especially if you have been using a lot of equipment. Extra help is always necessary, even if you don’t initially think it is.
- **Account for every piece of borrowed equipment and return asap.** Smaller venues often rely on the kindness of other organizations and individuals to lend them necessary equipment for the run of an exhibition. If you are renting equipment, make sure that you don’t need to pay for more time than you need the gadgets. If you are borrowing without a fee,

make sure that you don't take advantage of the third party's good will by holding onto the equipment for longer than necessary.

- **Watch for tech problems and repair devices asap.** The constant monitoring of technical equipment during the run of a show should be systematic. If you suspect that a piece of equipment needs servicing, take care of that immediately instead of waiting until the installation of the next media arts exhibition to notice you don't have enough functioning equipment.
- **Keep all receipts for reimbursement.** Often a guest curator needs to buy packing materials or miscellaneous items during the installation and deinstallation of a show. Make sure that you submit all of your receipts to the hosting organization in as timely a manner as possible. Remind your artists to do the same with their travel receipts, if reimbursement for travel has been agreed upon between the curator, artist and hosting organization.

Guest Curated Media Arts Exhibitions at the Carnegie Art Center

2002

Side The Other Side

February 16 - March 23, 2002

Guest curator: Ghen Zando-Dennis

Zoe Beloff performed a live 3-D film performance during the opening. Featured the works of Zoe Beloff, Tirtza Even and Bosmat Aron, Shannon Kennedy, and Harun Farocki.

Side The Other Side, a multidisciplinary gallery exhibition of digital video and interactive digital art, features five contemporary artists whose works address notions of occupied space and surveillance. The show included video monitors, projections and computer interfaces with one artist's project in each of the three Carnegie Art Center gallery spaces.

2003

Art of the Encyclopedic

February 15 – March 29, 2003

Guest curator: Paul Vanouse

Featured the works of digital artists Natalie Bookchin, Brian Collier, Julia Dzwonkoski, Omar and Carlos Estrada, Caroline Koebel, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, Walid Raad, and Igor Vamos.

Art of the Encyclopedic is a meta-commentary on both exhibition curation as well as the historic function of the Carnegie Art Center (formerly the Carnegie Library). The exhibition is about classification, organization, categorization, archiving and public display. Furthermore, the exhibition is interested in displaying, in actual gallery space, qualities of contemporary information technologies, i.e. the world wide web, that tend toward exhaustive re-cataloging of existing information. For instance, many museum web-sites have hyperlinks to other museum collections, often creating recursive loops of references to one another so that our primary experience is of navigating linkages and information hierarchies and secondarily of the discreet information that they organize.

2004

Evolutionary Girls Club: Borderlands

February 6- March 20, 2004

Guest Curator: Erica Eaton

Installation, 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional works: Antonio Cruz, Zaveleta, Monica Duncan & Annie Langan, Erica L. Eaton, Barbara Hammer, Pamela Susan Hawkins, Susan Heggstad, Deborah Jack, Kelly Jacobson, Caroline Koebel & Rachel Siegel, Beatriz Flores, Edna Madera, Akane Nakamori, Natasha Pachano, Joo-Mee Paik, Devlin Shea, Adriane Little and Minna Vaisanen.

Video, film and performance works: Abiola Abrams, Jax Deluca, Steve Frost, David Gracon, Kathy High, Judge Kindel, Mel Kozakiewicz, Joy Messinger, Warren Peace, Liz Richards, Bernie Roddy, Bonaventure Tain and Mary Ann Wincorkowski.

To compliment the exhibition, Barbara Hammer's film *Resisting Paradise* was shown at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center on Saturday, February 7.

According to guest curator Erica Eaton, "The Evolutionary Girls Club is an INCLUSIVE group of artists and activists with a focus of passing on voice, access and opportunity between its members and to the communities we live in and visit. Despite our group name, both genders are represented within our membership. Women have been contained within the ranks of man and his/story for years. The name began as a play on the idea of the "old boys club". The group recognizes privilege, both visible (such as race and gender) and invisible (such as sexual/gender orientation, class) and works hard to give inequities voice so that the entities and individuals that reinforce fear and ignorance are not allowed to maintain power through our silence."

2005

Reverse Engineers

February 19 - March 19, 2005

Guest Curators: Julia Dzwonkoski and Kye Potter

Reverse Engineers is an exhibition of contemporary media, computing and installation art by twelve artists and artist collectives. The exhibition brings together works by Tony Conrad, Ernest Gusella, Christian Jankowski, Natalie Jeremijenko, Barbara Lattanzi, John Olson, William Pope.L, Paper Rad, Dylan Reiff/Joe Korsmo, Aida Ruilova, Haim Steinbach, and Brian Springer

To dismantle the whole in order to understand its parts; to use existing objects and technologies in a manner unforeseen or unintended by their manufacturers; to invent new forms by cracking the codes that underlie old forms. These are some of the tactics associated with reverse engineering as practiced in a variety of fields and contexts: from industrial design and software development to anthropology and medicine. As a practice that emphasizes "know-how" over material advantage, it is no coincidence that reverse engineering has emerged as a strategy in wars that are increasingly asymmetrical and in a world where

power and resources are increasingly concentrated and unequally distributed. The artists featured in this exhibition variously embrace reverse engineering as a means of critically understanding, intervening in and reinventing this world.

2005

Eyes and Ears: Sound Needs Image

September 23 - October 22, 2005

Guest curators: Joanna Raczynska and Will Redman

This exhibition highlights the work of area media and sound artists interested in composition and new methods of collaboration. The project is a witness to the development of original sound and image works that are collaborative and improvised, trustful and open to new ways of working between media and sound artists.

Twelve media artists were invited to produce an original, silent (or near silent) short film or video piece to be "read" as a graphic score by variations of performers from local new music group, The Open Music Ensemble. Live recordings and performances of the scores in sound were paired with visual works, developed especially for this exhibition. A live concert of selected works was performed on both the night of the opening as well as the closing.

Featured media artists: Dorothea Braemer, Elliot Caplan, Stephanie Gray, Siew-wai Kok, Carl Lee, Brian Milbrand, Vince Mistretta, Jan Nagle, Alan Rhodes, Kelly Spivey, Carolyn Tennant, and Stephen Vitiello.

Participating musicians: Steve Baczkowski (horns), J.T Rinker (trombone), Josh DeScherer (bass), Ben Harris (violin), Leah Muir (cello), Otto Muller (accordian), Chris Reba (bass), Will Redman (percussion), Bill Sack (electric guitar), Andrew Walsh (contrabass), and Todd Whitman (horns and various alternative noise makers).

In 2006, Hallwalls produced a DVD of the Eyes and Ears project that includes all of the commissioned works. Copies of the DVD are available through Hallwalls or by contacting The Open Music Ensemble (url addresses at the end of the handbook).

2006

Now Again the Past: Rewind Replay Resound

February 11 - March 18, 2006

Guest Curator: Joanna Raczynska

The exhibition focuses on the re-telling of historic, political, and cinematic moments by nine national and internationally known media artists. Included in the

exhibition are film and video installations by Amie Siegel, Felix Gmelin, Caroline Koebel, Bruce Checefsky, Kota Ezawa, Zach Poff, Anita Di Bianco, Allison Smith, and Pia Lindman.

A companion screening series of films by Peter Watkins (Culloden), Harun Farocki (Inextinguishable Fire), Jill Godmilow (What Faroki Taught), Michel Brault (The Orders), Xav Lelae (I'm Bobby), Elizabeth Subrin (Shulie), and Marie Losier (The Touch Retouched) took place at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center over the run of the exhibition.

2007

Phantom Power

February 17 through March 31, 2007

Guest Curator: Carolyn Tennant

An exhibition of media art works that evoke themes of nature and the elements. Included in the exhibit are film and video installations by local, national and international media artists including Adam Chapman, Angela Forster, Patrick Jolley, Reynold Reynolds, Leah Rico, Mark Street, Clint Wilson, and Amy Youngs.

2008

Everyday Splendor: Use What You Have

February 16 through April 5, 2008

Guest Curator: Joanna Raczynska

Everyday Splendor celebrates the commonplace, private time, and the familiar through the work of five artists who use video, film, household objects and personal spaces in their work. What happens when one works alone with appliances, hobbies, pastimes, diaries, privacy, and the vitality or boredom of solitude? This exhibition includes modified electronic objects, documentation, and videos by internationally recognized artists Kelly Dobson, Igor Krenz, Laure Drogoul, Scott Puccio, and Corinna Schnitt.

Carolyn Tennant

Guest Curator, Phantom Power, February 17–March 31, 2007

In the fall of 2006 I was invited to curate an exhibition of media art at the Carnegie Art Center. Phantom Power featured nine works by media artists who utilize sculpture, print, film, video, computer art, sound and interactive installation, including: Adam Chapman, Angela Forster, Patrick Jolley and Reynold Reynolds, Leah Rico, Mark Street, Clint Wilson, and Amy Youngs. The exhibition examined the mediated framework employed by these artists in their representations of natural elements such as air, water, land, fire, aether. From the cinematic trickery of Reynold Reynolds and Patrick Jolley's *Burn*, to the digital poetry at work in generative artist Adam Chapman's *Legible Nature: Fate is an Afterthought*, the exhibition investigated the reflexive strategies adopted by these artists, and to what effect they employ technologies to explore landscapes—both synthetic and natural. The preoccupation of the artists varied as much as the ways in which they use media to deal with these concepts. For example, Mark Street's film *Winterwheat*, a found footage film about agriculture that is manipulated and distressed by the artist, both formally and conceptually represent the effect of the hand of man, on nature as well as in the art of representing the natural. In contrast, Amy Young's *Artifacts from the Screening of the World—Light, Lens, and Dark* (a series of large-scale web cam mosaics that, printed on translucent paper illustrates an exchange between nature and technology. While droplets of water, dirt and insects on the lens obscure these networked worldviews and disrupt representation, the work itself, which is suspended in front of the window like stained-glass, blocks the viewers understanding of the "real", or unmediated world outside.

I was delighted when Ellen Ryan invited me to guest curate this show, because I knew the rare opportunity would provide me with the space and the time to work in a very different way than type of media arts curation, namely film and video programming, that I do at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center. Researching contemporary media makers, developing the thematic for the show, and producing the exhibition—from the initial contact with artists to the final de-installation of their works—was an exciting, albeit rapid process. I am grateful for the experience to work with the dedicated staff at the Carnegie and for the opportunity to engage with and learn from the artists and their work. I consider Phantom Power a formative project in my curatorial practice.

Erica Eaton, co-founder of The Evolutionary Girls Club and co-curator of Evolutionary Girls Club: Borderlands, February 6–March 20, 2004

I was reminded of the genesis for my passion around putting together art exhibitions that are heavy on New Media while sitting through a presentation at a faculty meeting. A faculty member came to present their research on the music industry.

To paraphrase the presentation:

A few huge corporations owning most of the media is good because big corporations are powerful so they can make sure that people pay to see/hear/experience *their product*. *Their* becomes the corporation (not the artist that the corporation “bought”) and the *product* becomes pop culture.

A few quotes and thoughts from the presentation:

“Hip-Hop didn’t exist before the record companies bought Sean “Puffy” Combs.”

What?!@#???? South Bronx, Voice, Activism...

“All of this works wonderfully to protect intellectual property rights.”

Ok...but is this the way we want to do it?

“Which gender do you think buys more music, go ahead pick, there are only two to choose from.”

Huh? Hey, that’s what the newspaper review of our show at CAC in 2004 said when the reviewer read the Evolutionary Girls manifesto that stated that we include all genders in the group.

I listened, I was disturbed, and finally I was moved to question what was being presented.

My statement/question to the presenter was this: When we create media we create culture. We have a role in determining what becomes defined as “real” and “true.” When one has a role one has a responsibility. By allowing our art to be commodified, by buying into the corporate model in the name of preserving our intellectual property, we risk losing the democratic potential of these art forms. A few people at the top of a few corporations decide what will be “right,” “real,” and “true.” Where do you sit with the ethics of what you are suggesting?

When we curate exhibitions we have the same responsibilities. Curation is an action.

My passion for putting together these exhibitions comes from a belief that we have to keep pushing at the edges if we want to expand ourselves-our minds-our vocabularies-our repertoires- enough to make a difference in the world.

I choose to use my role as curator as a point of intervention. There is a rich opportunity to remove barriers that are there to advance the interests of some while silencing *others*. I am speaking of both the voices and minds of artists who don't buy into the system that will gain them recognition and of the stories and experiences of larger groups who find them under or misrepresented by the mainstream media and academia. As a curator one is presented with the possibility of inviting multiple perspectives.

Historically the role of a curator (in part) has been to determine what work is deemed valid. Curators had some power to challenge the status quo, to poke at hegemonic ideas or they could reinforce them. When Evolutionary Girls do a show we curate as democratically and inclusively as possible while still maintaining an eye toward the overall flow of the show both esthetically and conceptually.

We begin by threading the needle. We put out a call for work with a theme that can be interpreted widely. We then work to sew the visuals and the concepts together as we come to understand how the artist connected to the call, how their art connects them to each other and how the body of work can connect the audience to the world. Frankly, to this day I am amazed at how well it works out. Our shows offer multiple windows to look at a given issue or idea through. The idea isn't to present something packaged or definitely defined, it is to create a precipice from which the next show, idea or action can be seen.

Carnegie and other smaller art spaces have and still do give space for the arts to push on edges. CAC is, in part, a traditional gallery space. But as a small not-for-profit arts organization it is forced to engage creativity and resourcefulness. What could be perceived as needs come together to provide fertile ground for new and interesting ideas to develop. These smaller, less known arts spaces allow us the opportunity to build bridges between the gallery and the every day.

CAC was the perfect partner for a group whose work is laden with New Media. New Media grew out of other reproducible art forms that were/are marginalized in the art world. These media have consistently been at the cutting edge. They work to democratize the making and viewing of art. The CAC works to similar ends. Community Arts Centers are places where experiments happen, where the exciting work happens BEFORE you see it at the larger museums and galleries. They are the workshops. Places like the Carnegie give artists and communities a location where the boundaries between art and life can become blurred.

CAC provided the scaffolding and then set us free to build the structure. There were fewer strings attached than might have been the case in a larger more “name-brand” setting. Fewer strings=more possibilities. CAC removed as many barriers as possible and let art happen. The Carnegie has found a balance. They keep their doors open, are good neighbors in their immediate community and they offer curators the time, space, freedom and support to develop unique and interesting exhibitions. That balance goes a long way in making the Guest Curator series work.

Julia and Kye's Top Ten Tips **by Julia Dzwonkoski and Kye Potter**

We curated the exhibition *Reverse Engineers* in 2005. Here are some things we learned:

- 1) Having an institution behind you (no matter how small or unknown) gives you instant credibility. You can ask anyone you want to be in the show. No one will think you are a weird stalker or an overzealous fan. We were surprised that everyone we invited to be in the show said yes and followed through. The artists we worked with were all extremely cool, generous and willing to make compromises given our limited budget and resources. If you must go through an artist's gallery, don't be intimidated by how cold or snobby some of them are. You're actually doing this for them.
- 2) A good show includes established artists and totally unknown artists (present and past). It's also good to throw something in there that might not be considered "art." Finally, there's no shame in including work by your friends.
- 3) Be prepared to spend twice as much time and energy working on the show as you anticipated. It's rare that anything comes out the way you want it to on the first try. Be okay with this, take a deep breath and do whatever it is that wasn't quite right a second time, even a third and a fourth time.
- 4) It's good to be mostly in total control of the exhibition. This means being firm with artists about exactly what work of theirs you want to include. It's very common for artists (ourselves included) to say, "Gee, I'd really rather show this other work." This is where you've got to say, "Sorry but we're only interested in this work." Maybe you can reach a compromise but in general it's best to stick with your original plan. Then again, you don't want to be absolutely in control because your exhibition will become boring. It's good to ask at least one artist, whose work you find consistently amazing, to surprise you totally.
- 5) One of the toughest parts of curating is figuring out where to put everything. The ideal picture you had in your mind (and that you've written down on paper with proper measurements and so forth) of the overall layout of the show is quickly destroyed when you are actually there in the space with all this work (a lot of which you are experiencing in person for the first time) and you realize, "Wow that photo is bigger than I thought" or "I forgot this video was so loud" or "who knew there was going to be an electrical outlet right here." In addition to these kinds of surprises, it's

always a challenge to strike a balance between your vision as a curator and the autonomy of each of the works of art you're presenting. It's great if you can strike up a "dialogue," as they say, between the various works you're showing. It's also helpful to determine a few key vantage points (places where people are likely to stand and look at the show as a whole) and proceed to a) eliminate problems (i.e. works blocking other works); b) intensify what's interesting about certain juxtapositions; and c) manipulate purely formal aspects (i.e. spacing, lighting, color) in order to help viewers make their way smoothly (or unsmoothly if that's your goal) from work to work. At the same time you don't want to undercut or subsume artworks that others have labored to make by treating them, in Hans Haacke's words, "as so many swatches of color" in your personal palette. Though it may be tempting to do something weird (Hey, let's hang that painting way up high because it's a painting of a basement and that would be really unexpected), too many experimental gimmicks will result in a show that celebrates the curator's cleverness and wit at the expense of the artists' idiosyncratic vision. Then again, we're totally conservative when it comes to hanging art. Unless there's a really good reason for it (and sometimes there are really good reasons), we use the 60" rule for hanging pictures and other museum conventions regarding spacing and lighting, etc.

- 6) Invest a significant portion of the budget on producing a nice catalog. Not all the artists will be able to come to the show. Not all the people you wanted to see the show will be able to come and see it. A nice catalog (with as much time and energy as you can afford to spend on writing, layout and image selection) makes a big difference (especially to the artists who'll appreciate having their work documented and written about). Have the catalog offset printed even if the cost is slightly more than you can afford. Full color is probably too expensive but you can have a one-color cover and black and white pages inside for a reasonable price. The catalog will look professional and people will pay more attention to it. It's hard to throw a catalog like this in the trash. It also helps the institution to be able to throw in a nice looking catalog with their next grant application.
- 7) An exhibition postcard can do more than just promote your show. Think of it as a 4" x 6" work of art that people will want to hang on their fridge or send to a friend (not only because the show you put on is cool but because the image is captivating in its own right). Postcards that make an effort to be democratic by incorporating a teensy image of every single work in the show (usually in the form of a grid) tend to sell everyone's work short. Why not do one of the artists a big favor and devote the entire card to a full bleed reproduction of their work? Finally, placing the exhibition's title on the front of the card isn't necessary and defeats the purpose described above. Put it on the back.

- 8) It's fun to create posters for the show and to drive around the city hanging them in places where people will see them. We created two different posters for *Reverse Engineers*, a traditional poster designed by us and an awesome poster designed by some of the artists who had work in the show. It's not a bad idea for you, the curator, to hang the posters yourself because you can talk up the show with the most conviction.
- 9) Installing an art show is a large and complicated undertaking. Unless you enjoy loads of chaos, it's best to limit the number of personalities involved in the installation process. On the other hand, it's more fun when it's not just you in there working tirelessly.
- 10) Some may disagree but we think wall text is very cool. Yes it can interfere with how people view the work but it can also help people who aren't as art savvy as you to understand and appreciate what they're seeing and why you, the curator, think it's significant. Wall texts printed on transparent sticker paper are a non-obtrusive means of giving your audience a clue and preventing that "I'm totally mystified and intimidated" feeling that unfortunately has become normal in the contemporary art scene. We always use the Avery 8.5" x 11" clear labels for laser printers and chop them to size on a paper cutter, then stick them to a wall near the artwork. In putting up these texts, there is a risk the people will be able to challenge and disagree with your claims about the art, which is a good thing in our opinion.

For more information about media arts resources in Western New York, visit this link to the Carnegie Art Center's website:

<http://www.carnegieartcenter.org/media.html>

Other websites of interest

<http://www.evolutionarygirls.com>

<http://www.weirdshadow.com>

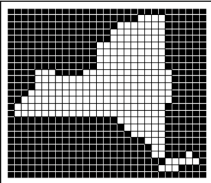
<http://www.jraczynska.com>

<http://www.hallwalls.org/store.html>

<http://openmusic.us/library/carnegie-2005-09-24/soundneedsimage.php>

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