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## Sculpture

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### Careers: Artists as Directors and Curators of Art Spaces, College Galleries, and Museums

by Daniel Grant

Most artists don't know what kind of career they will have, or if they will even have a career, but sculptor Jock Reynolds knew he was making a career-changing decision in 1983 when he took over the directorship of the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA), a nonprofit multi-disciplinary art space in the District of Columbia. "It was a six- or seven-day a week job, requiring total commitment, and I know it meant not really being able to do my own artwork," he said. The organization was \$160,000 in the red, and salaries hadn't been paid in some time, but Reynolds left a tenured position at California State University at San Francisco, where he was director of the graduate art program, to take a job whose primary role was exhibiting the work of other artists. The decision turned out to be a good one for him: somehow, he managed to erase the debt and put the art center in fiscal order within six months ("Fundraising isn't so hard, you just have to care about whatever you're raising money for"), and his career as a gallery director was firmly established. After nine years at WPA, he became director of the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, leaving six years later for his current job as director of the Yale University Art Gallery.

A studio art training prepares one for a life of unemployment, so says the cynic. However, to a less jaundiced eye, a background in fine art is particularly suitable for fields that involve fine art. Reynolds joined the many artists who found a place in the nonprofit gallery world, working as curators and directors of nonprofit art spaces, college or university art galleries, and even some smaller private and municipal museums. The focus of many of these institutions is contemporary (sometimes, contemporary regional) art, making a familiarity with current art and art materials, as well as the ability to work with living artists, important criteria for hiring. Others with only training in art history or arts administration may lack one or both of those essential elements.

It would be difficult to chart such a career trajectory like Reynolds's in advance: he was "making art like mad" after receiving an MFA from the University of California at Davis in 1972 and was soon hired to teach at California State. On the side, however, he and some artist friends started an alternative art center in San Francisco, New Langton Arts, in order to exhibit the kind of artwork not otherwise shown in the city. Reynolds took part in sheetrocking, wiring, and carpentering an unused warehouse space into an art center, then taught himself how to light and install art. Those skills were called on when he went to WPA, although during renovations at the Addison Gallery and Yale's Art Gallery he limited his involvement to supervising others doing the physical work. The curators working under him all have doctorates in art history, but Reynolds does not find their credentials intimidating, and the curators themselves recognize that "I have a real understanding of what it takes to make art, and that I have an eye," he said.

Others working in the nonprofit arts have also found their experience of being artists helpful in bringing new art to the public and presenting it in a way that benefits both artist and audience. "I think I'm more sensitive to the plight of the artist than a non-artist might be," said Dan Talley, director of the Sharadin Art Gallery of Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, who earned his MFA in the mid-1970s. "I try to imagine what the artist would want to have happen," making an exhibition look good, documenting the show with a catalogue, and bringing important people in to see it. That sensitivity requires Talley to understand that, for the exhibiting artist, the gallery show (it is hoped) is a stepping-stone to larger things; Talley also recognizes that he is abetting someone else's career, rather than his own, displaying work that he may not believe is as good as what he creates. That tension may increase if the visiting artist acts the prima donna (but that usually isn't the case—artists tend to be quite happy just getting their work shown). Artists are supposed to have big egos, but Talley and others in his position understand that showcasing another artist's work involves maturity and self-confidence as artists ("I've gotten a lot of positive attention for my work in my career," Reynolds said. "I'm not hung-up about taking credit for things"). It also requires a number of skills—such as art selection, programming, exhibition design, writing publicity notices, perhaps fundraising—that tend to fall outside the more defined scope of what arts administration graduates and certainly art historians learn.

Perhaps, as well, art historians and administrators aren't taught to develop a comfort zone with artists. "Some people are uncomfortable with living artists," said Dan Mills, who received an MFA in painting in 1981 and is currently director of Bucknell University's Samek Art Gallery, which focuses on contemporary art. "The involvement of artists adds something unknown whereas, when dealing with the work of someone who has been dead 100 years, your thesis is your thesis."

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Often, the people selected to head college art galleries already work at the school as studio art faculty, or they may have experience working at a nonprofit art space. Structurally, there are numerous similarities between nonprofit and college galleries; specifically, they both tend to be small operations, with perhaps only two or three full-time staff, some part-timers, and volunteers. Job descriptions blur, and the director or curator (or curator-director) may need to answer the phone, sell tickets, hang artwork, shovel snow, stuff envelopes, or whatever else needs to be done at a particular moment. "I've worked in a one- or two-person operation, and I hated it," said David Butler, director of Wichita State University's Ulrich Museum of Art, who has a doctorate in art history.

Talley picked up the technical part of operating an art space as a byproduct of advancing his own career. He was one of the founders of Real Art Ways, a nonprofit exhibition and performance space in Hartford, Connecticut while earning his MFA at the University of Hartford in 1976, and he also established a gallery at the Atlanta Art Workers Coalition when he moved back to his home state of Georgia the following year. A federal grant provided funding to pay him a salary as that gallery's curator. After a stint as gallery director at Nexus, now the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, and some art-related non-gallery work (building shipping containers for artwork), he landed the job at Kutztown.

There are many paths to learning skills and assuming responsible positions at galleries and arts organizations. Laurel Raczka, who received an MFA in painting from Rutgers University in 1986 and worked for two years for a private investigator in San Diego, took a low-paying job answering the telephone at Philadelphia's Painted Bride nonprofit arts center, because "I wanted to get back into the arts." At Painted Bride, as at most other nonprofit organizations, turnover is high, and "everything that came up I said I would do: marketing, fundraising, programming, whatever. When the executive director retired, I asked to do that, too." Volunteering at a nonprofit arts center opened the door to a career for Sara Kellner, who began offering her spare time at HallWalls in Buffalo, New York, shortly after receiving her BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1989. Earning a livelihood as a waitress while volunteering for two years, she was eventually hired as a visual arts curator, where "I learned everything: how to curate, how to install art, public relations, fundraise, organize touring projects." Kellner augmented that knowledge with training workshops in such areas as development, nonprofit administration, and strategic planning. After eight years on the job, she was hired by the Houston-based nonprofit art center Diverseworks to be its director.

As with all art-related careers, there are benefits and drawbacks for artists. An obvious benefit of working in galleries and museums is a paycheck and the contacts that artists are able to make with collectors, critics, gallery owners, curators, and other artists, which may prove helpful in the who-you-know art world. "The artists working here are making phone calls to people who might not talk to them if they were just calling as artists," said Edmund Cardoni, director of HallWalls, who himself came to the job with an MFA in creative writing.

On the down side, work gets in the way of work. Energy expended on building and running an organization, or promoting the work of other artists, takes away from the pursuit of one's own art-making. "That part of me that is an active studio artist has diminished," Reynolds said. "However, I don't feel I made the choice to do something else because of failure. I think I'm good at both."

As good a job as they may do, artists often still find a "glass ceiling" keeping them from rising to upper-level positions at larger or more academic museums. Doctorates in art history are generally the union card for employment at this level in these institutions. Charles Steiner, director of the Wichita Art Museum in Kansas, noted that he attended a recent meeting of the Association of Art Museum Directors and "didn't see anyone there who was an artist." His degree is an MFA in painting from George Washington University, although his first hire at the museum was a curator with a PhD. Steiner's plan was to teach ("I applied to 50 some-odd universities and didn't get a bite"), but during his graduate schooling he had set up a program to bring the disabled to the university's museum, and New York's Metropolitan Museum hired him to set up a similar program there. That program involved a host of administrative responsibilities, including gallery talks, fundraising, training teachers, and creating and scheduling exhibitions and activities for the target audience. After nine years at the Met, he was hired by Princeton University first as an assistant and later as associate director, where he stayed for 14 years before being hired by Wichita.

Smaller museums, especially those focusing on contemporary art, may look more favorably on people with studio art backgrounds than larger and more encyclopedic institutions. Ken Rollins, who earned a Master's degree in ceramics and sculpture at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, was specifically hired as director and chief curator by the Gulf Coast Museum of Art in Largo, Florida, in order to redirect its mission from "collecting in all areas and ending up with a mediocre collection" to focusing on Florida artists from 1960 on. The experience to handle this job came from working at even smaller institutions, the Deland Museum of Art (in Deland, Florida) and the Polk Museum of Art (in Lakeland, Florida). His insider's knowledge of art was a plus for the museum board, which sought "to collect and exhibit contemporary working artists here in Florida who aren't getting the recognition they deserve," Rollins said.

The difference between how artists and art historians curate exhibitions is not distinct enough to allow for generalization, but even some academic institutions recognize that artists look at art differently than non-artists. New York's Museum of Modern Art, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and the Brooklyn Museum have all established programs that bring in noted artists to rummage through their permanent collections to create exhibitions, finding interplays between objects that had eluded the academically trained curators.

Certainly, artists may find jobs throughout the museum field. At the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, for instance, there are so many artist-employees that the museum holds an annual staff art exhibition in the conference rooms, and trustees are invited to the reception. "At least one sale I know of took place," said Mary Delmonico, an installation artist and head of publications at the museum. The museum is also a congenial employer to Delmonico, allowing her to take time off in order to install her work at group and one-person shows. Museums regularly hire fine artists in a variety of capacities. According to the Whitney's personnel director, Martha Koletara, artists may be found working as art handlers, associate curators, collection cataloguers, dock attendants, film projectionists, gallery assistants, grants writers, lecturers, librarians, outside storage managers, production managers, receptionists, registrars, research assistants, sales supervisors, and security guards: salaries range from the low \$20,000s on up. Clearly, many of the jobs are physically taxing, neither glamorous nor conducive to upward mobility, but they all offer a connection to art and the art world, from which other opportunities may arise.

Kimberly Schell, a painter who "wanted to work in a museum in some way, wanted my foot in the door," found that the best point of entry was a sales job—first part-time, then full-time—in the gift shop of the High Art Museum in Atlanta. Eventually, she rose to the position of registrar. The High Art Museum, like the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney, and other museums around the United States, has staged exhibitions of artwork by staff members.

Certain museum jobs may require additional study (or a degree), although knowledge of a particular area may help the job searches of those without such degrees. May Casselberry, a printmaker and librarian at the Whitney, earned a Master of Library Sciences degree from Columbia University, doing her thesis on artists' books -- a focus that proved attractive to the museum. Lora Urbanelli, a painter and curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, received a master's degree in museum studies from Syracuse University in 1982. Almost immediately, she applied and was hired as a curatorial assistant at the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. "Just having a museum studies degree would not have been enough to get me the job at Yale," she said. "The degree is too practical and not concerned with art history enough." Fortunately, she wrote her master's thesis on an art historical subject that "serendipitously happened to be the subject of an upcoming exhibition at the Yale Art Gallery. That's what got me the job."

Specialized knowledge and being in the right place at the right time are helpful in getting hired by museums. Mark Pascale, who received an MFA in printmaking from Ohio State University, taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and used the museum's study room for lectures, eventually becoming familiar with the associate curator of prints and drawings who ran that room. In the early 1980s, the museum acquired the collection of the renowned print studio United Limited Art Editions, and curators began to tap Pascale for his knowledge of printmaking. "They asked me about techniques, papers, procedures, texture and process," he said, "as few curators knew much about the making of art."

Eventually, Pascale became a regular resource for the curators of prints and drawings whenever a technical question arose. By the late 1980s, he was helping curators with a catalogue raisonné on Whistler's lithographs, checking entries for technical correctness. Not long after, he was hired by the museum to run the museum's study room as an associate curator of prints and drawings. "I was not given to understand that I need additional degrees," he said. "I did, though, take a writing class, because I would be doing some academic writing."

Robert Storr is another artist whose primary asset to the museum world is knowledge about art. A former curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, he received an MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and worked as an installer for the art collection of the McCrory Corporation. He gained art world attention not from his artwork but from his art criticism, which has been extensively published in *Art in America*, *The Village Voice*, and elsewhere.

Storr's literary career began oddly: "I wrote a letter to the *Voice's* chief art critic, Peter Schjeldahl, objecting to some things he wrote in a review about Philip Guston, an artist I admire very much. He wrote back, taking exception to my objections; we exchanged a few more letters, and finally he told me, 'You know, you're pretty good at this. Why don't you write about art professionally?' He then recommended me to Betsy Baker, the editor of *Art in America*, and I started writing for the magazine after that."

Artist-curator adds to the growing number of multiple roles that artists have assumed (artist-writer, artist-collector, artist-teacher, artist-gallerist) over the years. Maintaining an artistic career in the face of a full-time job is often quite difficult, and creative energies may be channeled into the paycheck work. Perhaps, the artist's loss becomes society's gain.

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