

ARTNEWS

THE WHITNEY MOVES DOWNTOWN: ARTISTS AND CURATORS ON THE MUSEUM'S HISTORY AND FUTURE

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* | POSTED 04/21/15



It's not every day that an institution the size of the Whitney Museum moves to a different building. The Whitney began in 1914 as an informal salon founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Whitney had amassed a collection of hundreds of works of art, and when the Metropolitan Museum of Art turned it down as a gift, she sought out a space of her own. The Whitney Museum opened on West 8th Street in 1931.

From 1954 to 1963, the Whitney occupied a space connected to the Museum of Modern Art. In 1966 construction was complete on Marcel Breuer's Brutalist building on Madison Avenue, where the collection remained until 2014. There, the Whitney grew its Whitney Biennial into one of the world's more influential surveys and expanded its collection from 2,000 objects to over 21,000.

On the occasion of the Whitney's move to a Renzo Piano-designed building at the edge of the Chelsea art district and its leasing of the Breuer building to the Metropolitan Museum, we spoke with some of the people who've made the Whitney great.

Rafael Ferrer, *artist*

[Whitney curator] Marcia Tucker said, "Listen, you can do"—and this is a verbatim quote—"you can do anything you want. Just let me know what you're going to do so that I will not be in your way, so that I will get permission to allow you to do what you want." To say that to an artist is akin to taking a kid to FAO Schwartz and saying, "you've got an hour. Pick out everything you want."

We went up to the fourth floor, and she said, "All this space is available. Tell me what." I said, "I think I want to choose this big wall right off the elevator, to the right, and I would like to grease the wall, then put hay on it, and then I'll leave a big mound [of dirt] on that." She didn't bat an eye. She said, "I'll tell the people in installation that they should put up Sheetrock so that the grease won't seep into the original [wall]."

Lisa Phillips, *director of the New Museum and former Whitney curator*

I started as a summer intern in 1975 . . . and then went into the Whitney Independent Study Program. As an intern, I worked in the [1975] Richard Tuttle exhibition (organized by Marcia Tucker), and sat in the gallery answering questions from a bewildered and often irate audience. ("Where is the art?!")

The '70s and '80s were a special time at the Whitney... Tom Armstrong was the director and he hired young curators and promoted us. I became a curator in my 20s and worked at the museum for 22 years. We were all in our 20s and 30s at the time—there were no senior figures, and no chief curator. In retrospect, it was a very special community and an incredible opportunity. Tom's empowerment of his young staff was absolutely critical in propelling all of us forward. Many of us later became directors, and the atmosphere he fostered had a lot to do with that. He was ambitious and embraced folk art, Americana, American modernism, and contemporary art . . .

We had tremendous freedom to make proposals for exhibitions and acquisitions, but Tom deeply believed in scholarship and connoisseurship and made us rigorously defend our choices. Once a decision was made, though, Tom showed unwavering loyalty to his staff and never faltered, which was important because we were often under fire. He defended us when the press took aim, and for a time we were the favorite target—especially for the notoriously conservative Hilton Kramer. (Tom had "Hilton Who?" buttons made.)

Donna De Salvo, *chief curator and deputy director for programs at the Whitney*

Anyone you talk to will say something about how you come right off the elevators at the Breuer building into the galleries. You get off the elevator, and it's a big elevator, and you go right into the space. There's a drama to that.

It's a bold building and has a character, as every building does. The second floor has a back space with one window in it, and it looks onto 75th Street, so as you stand there, you're looking at people in their apartments. It's this interesting mix—you're in this museum, but you have this view of someone's residence. You always feel like you're in the city in the Breuer building, but you can't see it. But it is framed in some way.

Someone said once that Breuer saw the windows as eyes or eyelashes, which I like the idea of. They sort of punctuate things. And they are always in the right spot, though when you are doing a show, they sometimes get in your way. More often than not, they become a focal point for artists. I always had a sense of mystery at the Breuer building. It's a very mysterious building.

Thelma Golden, *director of the Studio Museum in Harlem and former Whitney curator*

My time at the Whitney was defined by the amazing mentorship of its then director, David Ross. David understood the singularity of my role, and perhaps even its place in history. But what he demanded of me, more, was that I become the best curator I could be in that moment, each and every day.

Being a part of the curatorial team for the 1993 biennial was an incredibly important moment in my career. I spent my high school, college, and post-collegiate years carefully, obsessively, and enthusiastically visiting each Whitney Biennial since the 1981 edition. My curatorial vision had been deeply influenced by that decade of exhibitions... The 1993 biennial was also important because I had an amazing opportunity to learn from my colleagues: Elisabeth Sussman, the biennial's director, along with cocurators Lisa Phillips and John Hanhardt. They provided me with what I now see as my version of a graduate degree. Working with them exposed me to a broad understanding of art and artists, the institutional history and perspective each of them brought to the table, and their careful and judicious thoughts about how contemporary art and exhibitions can fit into a global dialogue. Because that exhibition presented such a wide range of artists and voices, it became for me a model for exhibitions I might create in the future, and helped me begin to envision and shape my curatorial path.

"Black Male," which opened in November 1994, was an exhibition formed out of my desire to not only create an exhibition that looked at race, gender, and identity, but also to understand the place of exhibition-making in an institutional history and a conversation about culture. The exhibition was informed by the conversations I was having with artists about both their own work and the context they were making it in—esthetic, cultural, political. It also was important for me, as an African American curator at the Whitney, to

look at the museum's past and to try to contribute to imagining its future. I wanted to make an exhibition that opened up a conversation, that prompted a profound and rich dialogue, in an institution that had had a commitment to doing so for many years. This history and legacy often prompted the Whitney to look deeply at itself, and to engage the public and the art world in rich and complex conversations.

Adam Weinberg, *Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney*

I remember waiting outside the Breuer building with my mother to see the Mark di Suvero retrospective [in 1975]. Di Suvero walked along the line and said hello to everybody. Here was the artist featured in the show coming in the front door of the museum. In retrospect, that moment, when I said hello to Mark di Suvero without him even knowing who I was, was the moment I realized that the Whitney Museum truly was the artist's museum. It wasn't just looking at the artist's work, but also at the connection of the artist to their work.

I remember Paul McCarthy's inflatable sculpture on top of the Breuer building [in the 2004 biennial]. Within a matter of weeks, we had neighbors calling, worried that it was going to blow into their buildings. I loved the idea that the building is not just the site, but also the material for one's art making.

The Breuer building is one of the great modern buildings. We're lucky because we still own it, and we very well may someday have a two-site museum. I spent almost 20 years of my life working there, and I know almost every square inch of it. I know what it can do, and what it can't do. It was built at a time when museums were not as popular as they are today, so they didn't have these kinds of crowds. The loading dock wasn't used for over 30 years because it was too small. You couldn't get trucks in. There were functional limitations by virtue of the tremendous growth of museums and what they've become over 50 years. Actually, it's a great credit to Marcel Breuer that the building was able to adapt and still felt modern. As a design, it's as fresh a building as any that's been done in the past 50 years.

The new building is lighter on its feet and it's more, as Renzo would say, joyful. There are many echoes of the Breuer building—the idea that the elevators open into the galleries directly, that you don't have hallways, that you have a lobby gallery. The western staircase is an echo of the Breuer building. The ceiling heights of the two buildings are identical. People keep saying, “Gosh, it feels like the Whitney.”

Interviews by Zoë Lescaze, M.H. Miller, and Andrew Russeth. They have been edited and condensed.

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