

Musing on a Museum

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THE ONCE PROMINENT MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART IS ADRIFT, WAITING FOR A FUTURE THAT IS ANYONE'S GUESS. SO WE LET PEOPLE GUESS.



North Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) has been more or less adrift since the departure of director Bonnie Clearwater in September 2013, the revolt of the board of directors that followed, and scandal involving the subsequent administration.

Today the museum is trying to operate without a full-time director or curator. MOCA's owner, the City of North Miami, hasn't decided in what direction to take the museum, although an extensive report on future options and financial responsibilities was recently submitted for the city to use as a

guideline when contemplating the next steps.

The recent tumult has provoked a sadness, even a bitterness in those passionate about cultivating a solid cultural foundation for Miami-Dade County. And it has also sparked a desire to re-envision MOCA's future.



We asked a number of art world participants -- gallerists, former museum directors, artists, collectors - for comment about building a path forward. The responses reflect a range of potential possibilities, but also converge on some common themes.

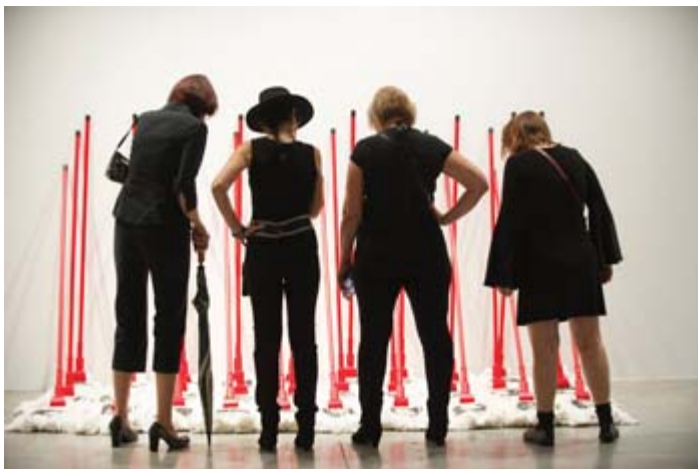
Before presenting them here, some background.

MOCA started off as COCA, or the Center of Contemporary Art, in 1981. It was a small space dedicated to exhibiting predominantly local artists and hosting performances, operating under the direction of Lou Anne Colodny and mostly funded by the City of North Miami.

In 1996 it moved from a modest building to a much more expansive space, designed by Charles Gwathmey, and became known as MOCA. Its mission grew as well, toward a collecting contemporary art museum rather than simply an exhibition space (or Kunsthalle) with aspirations for national recognition and well-respected curator Bonnie Clearwater at the helm.

It did indeed make a splash on the art world scene and, over the next 15 years, presented famous artwork from across the globe while amassing a notable collection.

Some would complain, however, that it lost touch with the surrounding community, that had become heavily Haitian, and with local artists. Clearwater often included local artists in her exhibitions, some of which were exclusively devoted to local works. Nonetheless, there was a feeling that MOCA had evolved into a museum for the elite and mostly white art world.



November 30, 2016: Opening night of "The Other Dimension," during Art Basel week. Courtesy of MOCA

After Art Basel Miami Beach arrived in 2002, and when the then Miami Art Museum started planning a move into a gleaming new building on the bay, transforming into Pérez Art Museum Miami, it was understandable that MOCA, regarded as the best contemporary museum in South Florida, wanted better space too.

These ambitions came to a halt in 2012, when North Miami voters rejected a \$15 million bond issue to pay for a MOCA expansion. In July 2013, Clearwater left for the Nova Southeastern University Art Museum Fort Lauderdale; and in August 2014, the chairwoman of MOCA's board of directors, Irma Braman, of the influential Braman family, eventually left with most of the board of directors, part of the collection, and by some accounts, even furniture from the museum.

Around the same time, the City of North Miami was embroiled in its own scandals, with its mayor found guilty in December 2014 of a fraudulent real estate mortgage scheme.

Then the new MOCA director, Babacar M'Bow, was fired in December 2015 as a result of sexual harassment allegations. The departed board of directors formed a brand-new museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, which is expected to open its new facility in the Design District this fall.

All of this left an ugly aftertaste, no matter which side you were on.



Irma and Norman Braman with former MOCA director Bonnie Clearwater before she left for the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, and before the Bramans quit MOCA and formed the Institute for Contemporary Art, Miami. Courtesy of MOCA

Since 2015, MOCA has presented exhibits on a limited budget, curated by locals, with only an interim director. The results have been hit or miss, but several have struck a chord, suggesting that MOCA could be a place more grounded in its surroundings and more reflective of Miami's character.

As of today, funding for MOCA is drastically depleted, subsidized by the City of North Miami without outside donations or contributions from donors or a well-heeled board of

directors. According to the "[Strategic & Financial Plan & Staffing Guide](#)," a city-commissioned report with input from a number of community leaders, "the financial resources of MOCA and fundraising results have dwindled such that the total operating budget has gone from a high of approximately \$6.1 million in 2012 to a low of approximately \$2.9 million in 2015, and the City of North Miami has become and presently remains the primary principal funder."

The next steps will demand strong support and leadership from the City of North Miami, something that remains a question mark.

However, when we asked, "What should happen with MOCA?" all those we talked to seem to agree on one thing: the future of the museum should be up to the *community* of North Miami. And it should highlight local artistic endeavors.



Terence Riley: "The mission of MOCA should be to present works of contemporary art and to educate people, young and old, about contemporary art and what it means in today's culture. It should not try to collect art and add another financial burden."

Terence Riley, architect and former director of Miami Art Museum, chief of architecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art

MOCA's biggest hurdle is a financial one. In its previous incarnation under Bonnie Clearwater, its success was related to the amount of financial support provided by its board members and devotees of contemporary art, most of whom were from outside the North Miami community. As a former museum director who spent way too much of his time fundraising, I would look to re-invent the institution in ways that reflect realistic financial parameters.

The mission of MOCA should be twofold: to present works of contemporary art and to educate people, young and old, about contemporary art and what it

means in terms of today's culture. It should not try to collect art and add another financial burden to its budget.

Miami-Dade has museums run by curators and directors, and has private collections overseen by their owners. What Miami doesn't have is a well-established art space run by artists.

I can think of more than a few Miami artists who have demonstrated the ability to organize exhibitions of high quality within budgets that are far more modest than either Miami's museums or private collections. Artists also have, I believe, an innate sensitivity to inclusion and innovation. What these artist-run spaces do not have is a certain amount of stability year to year.

MOCA's facility is quite large, probably larger than it can afford as a Kunsthalle with a full program. I think the space devoted to exhibitions should be proportionate to its budget and the amount of money it can reasonably expect to raise. The rest of the space should be devoted to a long-term exhibition of works of art -- selected by artists and educators -- that would serve as a countywide education space.

Miami's museums, collectors, and artists should provide long-term loans to create a coherent series of works that are, in themselves, an educational experience in terms of contemporary art. With a little generosity of spirit from lenders, I know full well that such a long-term exhibition could be of very high quality and worth visiting and revisiting.

A revitalized and reoriented MOCA should also rename itself to reflect its new mission. The word "museum" carries with it too much baggage and too many unrealizable budgetary expectations.

Dennis Scholl, art collector and former vice president for the arts at the Knight Foundation

Debra [Scholl] and I donated a number of works that remain in the public collection of MOCA, and we have a long history of service there, so we would love to see it re-emerge as the hub of community engagement it once was.

The new vision for MOCA needs to come from the community. It needs to come from the people whose lives can and will be affected by the institution. If the community lets their elected officials know what they want MOCA to be, the elected officials will respond.

Additionally, the board of the museum needs to express their vision for the museum and show what role they will play in supporting the institution.

Perhaps a series of facilitated town hall meetings where the community, the board, and the elected officials are invited to put forth their ideas, could yield some thoughtful dialogue and show a way forward?

It is a wonderful, flexible, thoughtful space to exhibit all kinds of art, so the options are limitless.

I don't feel like I can say what it "should" be but want to encourage a process where the community determines what it "could" be.

Barron Sherer, video and sound artist

I'd be very interested in seeing a regional model, and by that I don't mean hyper-local or even South Florida-specific. What's happening all over Florida? Outside of Art Week, we're all really kind of in bubbles.... I frankly don't know what's happening across town!

I also like the idea of national and international curators -- fresh perspectives -- partnering with the institution to commission new works for exhibitions from Florida artists with an eye toward smart traveling shows. Commissioning W.A.G.E.-certified [the fair-pay Working Artists and the Greater Economy] artists is a good starting point.



Tyler Emerson-Dorsch: "When the City of North Miami and interested citizens do decide the direction they want to take with MOCA, they will own that decision. It is clear that the decision should not come from the outside."

Tyler Emerson-Dorsch, co-director of the Emerson Dorsch Gallery

"The leaders at the City of North Miami have not selected a new director yet. They are in the selection process. There was a terrible fallout from the difference of opinion between the board of directors and the city. It was in part a result of outsiders (many of the board of directors don't live in North Miami) who had put a bond on the ballot that would have levied an additional tax/fee on the citizens of North Miami to finance the proposed expansion of MOCA's facility.

The citizens of North Miami voted no. The majority of the voters didn't feel connected enough to the museum's program to pay for its expansion. From there until the formal rupture between MOCA and

ICA, there were serious breaches of trust on both sides. *Biscayne Times* has reported extensively on this. From the outside, the city's handling of the situation was a cautionary tale for anybody who might come into the director position in the future.

When the City of North Miami and interested citizens do decide the direction *they* want to take with MOCA, they will own that decision. It is clear that the decision should not come from the outside. The city's agency in selecting MOCA's path is a signal of the political will for a fresh start and a real future for MOCA's new leadership.

The city must convince the new director that the city is behind his or her vision 100 percent. Building this trust is vital to the new institution's chances, and it is the only way the city can attract a

dynamic, professional, and qualified director. Both the city and the new director will need to work hard together to rebuild the trust with the citizens of North Miami.

I earnestly hope that MOCA finds its way. MOCA is a pillar in the history of Miami's art scene, and with that position comes responsibility to respect and develop that role. On the flip side of responsibility is a wonderful opportunity.

Felice Grodin, architect, artist

Perhaps based on budgetary issues, it might be more beneficial for MOCA to be a Kunsthalle. That might foster experimentation rather than focusing on acquisition or managing a collection.

What relationship should MOCA have with local artists? In terms of the specifics, it depends on who would potentially be at the helm and what their vision is. I do believe that local artists need to be better featured within the institutions here.

Miami is a special place for many reasons, not least of which it is ground zero for sea level rise and climate change. Our institutions should tap into how artists may address this and many other issues related to their practices within this city.

MOCA could and should be both local and global. Miami is just that.

Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, artist and co-director of the artist-run gallery Dimensions Variable

I think MOCA can serve both the local and the international at the same time. It is located in the rich and largely Haitian community of North Miami, positioning it in a unique space.

The city needs to find an amazing curator/director who is well versed in contemporary Haitian, Latin American, Caribbean, and African art -- being made currently -- and let them loose. Allow them total creative freedom to produce an entirely new program that would not only put MOCA back on the art world map, but would also resonate with and educate the local community.



Oliver Sanchez: "It is up to the elected administration to guide its future. Sadly, with the prevailing climate of corruption that overwhelms much of our political leadership, there is scant optimism for the near future."

Oliver Sanchez, artist, art fabricator, and director of the artist-run Swampspace Gallery

Art is many things to many people. For some it is the blue-chip investment market that fuels an institutional status quo. It is the \$60 million Basquiat painting at auction.

For those at that pinnacle of refinement, art is a source of prestigious social class and lonely academic critical isolation. For everyone else, art is the phenomena of mass cultural identity typified by street art, music, and fashion that bind multitudes in a pluralistic hegemony of a hip-hop political circus.

These two realms of artistic currents, the upper echelon and the lowly wellspring of creativity, seldom converge sincerely.

The MOCA of tomorrow is anyone's guess. I was there for much of its golden age. From the humble beginnings, when the Miami art scene was mostly the same two dozen faces, to the height of the Bonnie Clearwater reign with Yoko Ono, Lichtenstein, and so many other artist luminaries. The place was a dizzying epicenter for all things contemporary.

The aristocracy that came through was enough to dampen any doubt that MOCA was a passing force of temporariness. Yet nothing lasts forever, particularly without funding.

One day our crowning glory, Art Basel Miami Beach, will move along, showing little allegiance to place.

Miami Beach has the shimmering Bass museum. Miami has the imposing PAMM. The autonomous Design District will soon showcase the singular ICA. And North Miami has...the lackluster MOCA.

It is up to the elected administration to guide its future. Sadly, with the prevailing climate of corruption that overwhelms much of our political leadership, there is scant optimism for the near future. Taking the long view, the odds are better that MOCA could be born again as a swampy center for the community.



William Cordova: "The mistake we often make is to try and create something we see outside our own community. Some aspects of those institutions can be applied, but we have to remember all communities are unique and require different strategies."

William Cordova, internationally exhibited artist and curator, including for MOCA

COCA, originally founded by Lou Anne Colodny in 1981, facilitated very strong community programming aimed at highlighting underrepresented local talent while using that platform to create dialogue with national and international artists and institutions. All of this on a very limited budget.

Colodny's strategy was flexible and visionary because it was pluralistic in design and practice... I think the COCA model is the healthiest example we have of a home-grown institution that had a platform for local artists and writers and still maintained a conversation with other national institutions.

The mistake we often make is to try and create something we see outside our own community. Some aspects of those institutions can be applied, but we have to remember all communities are unique and require different strategies.

We cannot and should not simply borrow a model just because it works in another city. The New York budget and support for the arts differs from that of Florida. Institutions of higher learning have to be taken into account because they provide the foot soldiers who eventually make up staff and practitioners.

I know some people would rather MOCA be a reflection of what is hot in New York or Wynwood -- or worse, close its doors.

I think examples like Project Row Houses in Texas, the African Heritage Cultural Center in Liberty City, and the Hollywood Art & Cultural Center...are wonderful examples of how community-oriented institutions can also operate in multiple capacities without compromising or excluding, but playing vital roles in a national level.

Carlos Betancourt, artist

My humble suggestion: the old MOCA should be a museum run in part by professional Miami artists exhibiting artworks by Miami-based artists. I am grateful to be one of the few artists to have work exhibited in several Miami institutions; however it is an exception to the rule.

For decades now, Miami artists have been creating extraordinary artworks; they need support from local institutions to document and archive their work, and create a visual history of the Miami art world.

Local support of our arts institutions has increased over the years, but there is always room for improvement. Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City -- these are places that first and foremost support their art community with well-curated exhibits and documentation of artists working in their community, all without compromising their international exhibition programs. It is a formula that has been proven successful."



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Onajide Shabaka, artist

MOCA, what a strange institution it is these days. The YBCA [San Francisco-based Yerba Buena Center for the Arts] is a great example of what MOCA could be [involving both visual arts and performance].

My wish would be to have MOCA eventually become an institution that commissions and collects, having a mission in the vein of YBCA. That sounds big, but baby steps toward that goal.

It's up to the city to make a concerted effort to hire a director/curator or form a curatorial board. I think they're still scared of the terrible international publicity they've had. However, independent curators have already been proposing ideas, even if those ideas are not always so great. That's the job of a real curatorial staff. Start with a search committee; that will take some initial effort.



David Castillo: "MOCA could be a Kunsthalle [exhibition space] for the residents of North Miami, with a focus on international contemporary art. Art can be international but affect the local, meaning the institution could do programming for the residents with traveling exhibitions with artists from all over."

David Castillo, director, David Castillo Gallery

MOCA could be a Kunsthalle for the residents of North Miami, with a focus on international contemporary art. Art can be international but affect the local, meaning the institution could do programming for the residents of North Miami (since the city owns the museum) with traveling exhibitions with artists from all over.

I recall as an adolescent in Miami going to performances at my still -- to this day -- favorite building in Miami, the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts.

Along with that, I have very specific memories of the Center for the Fine Arts before it became Miami Art Museum, a collecting institution under Suzanne Delehanty. As the CFA, it was a Kunsthalle, which often put on international and important exhibitions borrowed from all over. This is something within MOCA's reach and the value and importance of it could be far-reaching and important for the citizens of that city.

I know the CFA had an indelible effect on me, to have a Kunsthalle as a venue at my doorstep. It informed my way of thinking, this future doctor, [and I] shifted gears to art history at Yale. The effects of those experiences as a child are in no small measure what brought me to a profession I know and love deeply to this day.

Exposure to art in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood has been proven to have profoundly positive and direct effects on peoples' lives. Art is not, as some would state, for the few.

And having an international program would not dismiss the community it is presented to, but rather serve to engage and enhance the life experience of those individuals, so long as the programming is active and directly engaging that community.

But the keys lay equally in the programming/community outreach as much as they do in the traveling exhibitions that could be mounted.

Suzanne Delehanty, art consultant and former director of the Miami Art Museum

I do not believe it is appropriate for me to impose a personal vision on a public institution like MOCA, but here are some thoughts on a process the City of North Miami might develop.

Since MOCA opened in its handsome building in the heart of North Miami in 1996, the city's population has grown and changed. Today, for example, close to 60 percent of North Miami's 60,000 residents are of African descent, many with roots in Haiti.

The city could consider engaging a broad range of its residents -- teens, grandparents, business and religious leaders, artists and educators -- to find out not only what they value most about MOCA, but what they aspire for the museum in the decades ahead. Focus groups as well as in-person and online surveys in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole could be used to find out what North Miami residents, including both museum-goers and non-goers, desire from their museum.

Over the past 21 years, the cultural landscape of Greater Miami has changed dramatically. In surveying this landscape and engaging residents and MOCA supporters who live beyond the boundaries of North Miami, the city could carve out a distinct focus for MOCA that would attract national and international visitors, while making the aspirations and dreams of the residents of its own municipality paramount.

Along the way, the city will learn if MOCA should continue providing educational programs for children and teens, [the annual experimental film event] Optic Nerve film screenings, and Jazz at MOCA.

Today there are many more artists living and working in Greater Miami. The city could consider concentrating MOCA's exhibition program on artists with Florida, and especially South Florida, ties.

By concentrating on programming, MOCA could assume the role of Kunsthalle, or house for art, and leave the responsibility and resources needed for collecting to South Florida's other private and public museums.



Gustavo Matamoros: "Before it became a museum, COCA served a thriving artist community and helped catapult careers like those of Robert Chambers, Ward Shelley, Russell Frehling, Marilyn Gottlieb-Roberts, Charles Recher, and my own."

Gustavo Matamoros, sound artist and director of the long-running Subtropics Music Festival

My thought has always been, go back to COCA – it's a sexier name anyway.

Before it became a museum, COCA served a thriving artist community and helped catapult careers like those of Robert Chambers, Ward Shelley, Russell Frehling, Marilyn Gottlieb-Roberts, Charles Recher, and my own. Back then, COCA was a unique space devoted to experimentation in art, to supporting local ideas, to investing in our own resources.

I'm afraid of it catering only to the trendy. As a collecting [museum], the place could simply devote itself to collecting only Miami artists. If so, someday -- before the doom of sea level rise -- it could become as significant as El Prado, you know? All those are local artists, but in Spain.

On a different note, I wonder if ArtCenter/South Florida [currently without an official home] would be interested in taking it over as their headquarters.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com

Excerpts from the Strategic Planning Report by Paul Lehr, former CEO of YoungArts Foundation

The report questions whether the mission of MOCA should change and be expanded. For instance, it proposes that the mission statement might expressly include language “with the inclusion of local artists and interests,” which would distinguish MOCA from the other museums.

It also asks whether MOCA should broaden its scope, “to include a greater focus on diverse programming.... Such an extension could help to create and engage a more vibrant base for the larger community and differentiate MOCA from other contemporary art museums in South Florida.”

It then points to the multifaceted Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts, as an ideal model, quoting from that respected institution’s mission statement, namely, that it “leverages its presentation of exciting new art in all media and forms as a catalyst for community revitalization; the creation of new markets, good jobs, and the long-term enrichment of a region in economic need are central to our purpose. The arts create and bestow identity. A strong sense of identity and pride rallies confidence, hope, productivity, and economic vibrancy. These are base conditions for a healthy community; they cannot be created, however, without risk, adventure, and the willingness to embrace the new.”