



Tremaine Foundation

SO WHAT, NOW WHAT

A CONTEMPORARY ART CURATORIAL CONVERSATION

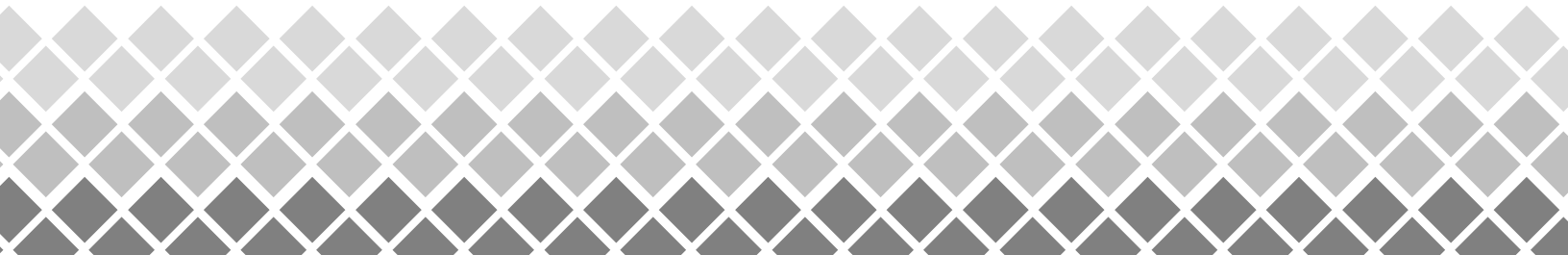
presented by

The Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation

at the

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This past spring, The Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation convened former recipients of its Exhibition Award – given since 1998 to support the work of innovative curators – and other experts for a facilitated conversation on the impact of experimentation and customization on the field.

The discussion, captured in the following pages, triggered consideration of how new ways of fostering connections and relationships between artists, audiences, art organizations, and communities are reinvigorating and challenging curatorial practice.

Some panelists and audience members suggested that the definitions of artists, curators, and exhibitions themselves are fluctuating in an era of increased audience expectations for interactivity and social awareness and new changes in the ways artists work and communicate.

Others maintained that boundaries around curatorial practice must be patrolled to assure the curator remains in service to the vision of the artist and to the interaction between the audience and the artists' work.

Summing it up, Foundation President Stewart Hudson noted that, in the end, "What gets the curator's blood flowing is enhancing what the art provides to all of us, rather than seeing it diminished. We encourage you to keep this conversation going, not just for ourselves but for all of you and what we care about."



So What: The Role of Experimental Exhibitions in Strengthening the Field



Panelists

STEVEN MATIJCIO, curator of contemporary art at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Matijcio is a graduate of the University of Toronto (HBA) and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York (MA) and has held positions at the Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the National Gallery of Canada. He was chosen from an international field of candidates in the summer of 2011 to take part in curatorial residencies in Gwangju, South Korea (as part of the Gwangju Biennale) and Berlin, Germany (HKW). In 2012, Matijcio was named the Curator of the 4th Narracje Festival in Gdansk, Poland, which projects large-scale video art across the city. He has lectured on theory and criticism at the University of Manitoba, written for numerous catalogs and journals (including the Guide to the 27th Sao Paulo Bienal), and was commissioned by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to curate one of their first online exhibitions. His exhibition *Paperless* won the Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award in 2010.

SUE SPAID, former Executive Director of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore and a leading curator, art writer, educator, and collector. Her gallery Sue Spaid Fine Art came to art world attention after launching the career of dozens of emerging artists on both coasts. After closing her gallery, Spaid has gone on to curate exhibition for over 50 museums, university galleries and public spaces. She is the author of *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, *A Field Guide to Patricia Johanson's Work: Built, Proposed, Published and Collected*, and *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots*. Spaid's exhibition of "Green Acres," which travels this summer to Arlington, VA and Washington D.C., received the Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award in 2010. From 1996-2011, Spaid was a Contributors Editor for *Art/Text* and its subsequent publication *USArt*. She is currently writing for the Belgian publication *H Art*. Since 1993, she has taught in the Philosophy and Art Departments of Art Center College of Design, Otis Art Institute, University of Cincinnati, Temple University and Drexel University.

HAMZA WALKER, director of education and associate curator for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. He is currently on the boards of *Noon*, a literary annual publishing short fiction, and Lampo, a new and experimental music presenter. In addition, he has served on numerous panels locally and internationally, and is the recipient of the 1999 Norton Curatorial Grant and the 2004 Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement. He received the Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award in 2006, and in 2010 he won the Ordway Prize for recognition of his contribution to Contemporary Art.

Moderator

LINDSAY POLLOCK, editor-in-chief of Art in America. Pollock joined the magazine in 2011 after nearly a decade of freelance art writing for media outlets, including Bloomberg News and the London-based Art Newspaper. Her biography of pioneering art dealer Edith Halpert, *The Girl with the Gallery*, was published in 2006 by *Public Affairs*. She is a cum laude graduate of Barnard College with a B.A. in art history and holds an M.S. from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.



This panel explored the definitions and implications of experimental curatorial practice not only for art organizations and institutions, but also for the relationships between artists, curators, audiences, and communities. The discussion raised some of the following questions:

How permeable is the “white cube” of the gallery or museum space? How much does context and place matter?

What obligations do art institutions and organizations have to their visitors, audiences, and communities in terms of social and civic responsibility?

How can exhibitions “talk” to each other more across geographical, social and institutional divides?

Does the curator have a duty to challenge definitions of art, or is he or she obligated to follow the vision of the artist?

To what extent are there changes in the ways artist work impacting curatorial practice?





What does the notion of 'experimental' mean to you?

Steven: I think experimental becomes synonymous with ideas of progress, the vanguard, all these notions that post-modernism taught us to challenge. So I am interested in what the term "experimental" means today. Is it the race to become the *most* experimental? What are the implications of pursuing a radical, experimental agenda?

Randall Kennedy just wrote an interesting article in the New York Times about social practice, and the whole idea of art institutions moving into social service, community outreach, journalism, activism, environmentalism. And I think it has brought to mind the Duchampian question again of 'Is it art?' And I think that is a refreshing, invigorating question that *we should* be asking again. We have moved to a point where art is so expansive and so elastic that virtually anything can be put into that category ... so that is what I am interested in: the experience, the aesthetics, the economy of going against the grain and reinvigorating the field.

Hamza: There are a couple different paradigms you can follow when you think about being experimental, and not with respect to artistic practice but with respect to exhibition making. Exhibition making follows whatever artists do ... whatever the work might demand. So if there is a moment of breaking outside the white cube, then you facilitate those activities and it might be called experimental. But I think a lot of those things have been pretty much folded into the bag. I never thought the (Marcel) Duchamp question ever left ... if a work demands thinking outside certain conventions, then follow it out. But if the question (of 'is it art?') didn't go away then, to what extent is it present in all the things I might do? Even along the lines of the technological paradigm of experimentation, with social practices ... does it mean improvisation, does it mean risk taking, not knowing what the outcome will be in some sense?

When you think of experimental, you often think of leaving the white cube – you have to step outside the institution. But I am also interested in how we can import experimental practice into the white cube. How does that change the philosophy and certain operating models?

- Steven Matijcio

I am perfectly willing to follow the art, as opposed to the notion of experimentation with curatorial practice as something in its own right. It is an interesting concept to lay experimental curatorial practices on top of whatever it is artists are doing.

- Hamza Walker

Q Sue, with your background on commissioning work, how does that fit into this notion of experimental?

Sue: Recently there has been a lot of criticism of curatorial practice – curators curating artists, things that are not artworks. I spent a lot of time thinking about this quote and this particular crisis and it occurred to me that part of the reason curators are more and more curating exhibitions that don't have artwork is because that is the way artists are working – they are working from a practice. So

when you see that quote and you see that attitude that expresses a ... crisis, what I think is really happening is that curators are familiar with artists' practice, familiar with what they might be able to do, with what they might be interested to do, so instead of going for objects that are extant works, they are saying, 'Hey, I am working on this exhibition that is similar to the way you work, in fact I got the idea from your work.'

We don't work without the artist. I don't know where this rumor got started that curating is something that happens with curators and not artists. We get all of our ideas from artists, I promise you. We wouldn't exist without them, and we wouldn't want to exist without them. So these experimental practices we are implementing are totally collaborative, co-authored projects with the artist and with their public.

- Sue Spaid

It is interesting that you are talking about laying experimental practice on top of artwork. Back to this notion of curators curating people and not artwork ... you are in constant discussion. It is experimental in the sense that you have no clue what they are going to do, it changes dramatically ... it is experimental by nature.

Q Is it a controversial notion that curators collaborate with artists? How do you view your process? Are you collaborating with artists? What is your role?

Steven: We follow the lead of the artist. But it is not just about taking the lead in the artist-curator relationship ... but also looking at how artist models and experimental practice can really infiltrate the fabric of the organization ... I hope to see that more.

How are we responding to the audience as well as to the artist? How do you create a forum where all those voices can be heard, but in ways they are working in harmony rather than competing against each other?

- Steven Matijcio

And it leads me to the second point: As much as we follow the artist in curatorial models, another question is how are we following the audience? This whole idea of participation within the exhibition space – I have seen it done well and done not so well, where they become complementary and synergistic forces, and where they become antagonistic and competing forces. This whole idea of whether the audience needs to see themselves on the wall – do they

need to be writing labels and post-it notes to feel some investment in that practice or exhibition space, or in that model?

Q **In terms of talking about experimental and talking about audiences – do you feel that the definition of experimental is dependent on the context. In Chicago is it different than doing a project in Brussels or in Belgium? Does the degree to which the exhibition is experimental depend on where it is?**

Hamza: I would think so. You can talk about it from town to town and from institution to institution. It would have to do with what are people’s expectations ...

Sue: But institutions also have staff ... I worked with (the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati) twice. The show I just did there – *Green Acres* – would have been an ordinary show 10 years ago, but now the staff doesn’t work that way anymore. So it is not just community to community, but also each institution has a history, and as we know most curators don’t last longer than five years. So the skill set is constantly changing depending on the demands being made on the institution.

Steven: It relates to modernization and globalization, and how those terms are defined and applied in various parts of the world. In various cities around the world there is a different definition of what experimental means or how it has manifested itself. When I think about The People’s Biennial Project that SECCA was part of ... from a national perspective, this idea of reaching out and trying to find the undiscovered artist or things being produced outside the categories of art was seen in some ways as an experimental form, or an experimental exhibition model. But it is funny, because at SECCA we mostly responded to it because it aligned with some of the founding mission to forefront marginalized artists, especially in North Carolina – practices that grew out of craft, folk, visionaries and outsiders. All these things that were sort of the norm there could be considered “experimental.” Again, this is all semantics. But place and institution shape the expectations of this concept ... even within the same city, as Hamza was saying, experimental can mean different things.

Q **What about your show in Gdansk, the Video Art Biennale? Was that considered experimental?**

Steven: I curated a show in Gdansk called NARRACJE and this was the fourth edition of the project. It was always based on the premise of activating the city as a collaborator. So there were interventions, performances, projections. I think the experimental part of it was

art thou gone, beloved ghost? sought to really look at translation and the way that different histories, different manifestations of things that we see as absolutes – how when they move that flowers and becomes a catalyst for re-interpretation.

- **Steven Matijcio**

that I was the first North American curator to come in. And I did not want to come in with this arrogance and say I am going to re-teach you your history or I am going to try to add something you just haven’t discovered in the last 100 years. It was more about the sort of lens to re-view

history. The title of the show was *art thou gone, beloved ghost?* and it was looking at the idea of the tormentor or the oppressor becoming part of one's identity. How the enemy and the other – especially in the context of World War II – has become so intertwined in one's identity that you cannot separate it. And you have to somehow reconcile with that presence. But it was interesting. I faced some resistance coming in as a curator from Canada and the U.S. looking at this very often traumatic history and trying to re-open it for a new conversation. So again, context can be extremely important.

Q Sue, your engagement with the eco-art field, which is experimental to some people ... how do you navigate that? Do you have to present it in an experimental way to possible institutions you want to work with? How is it received and how do you approach it?

Sue: I think Steven brought up a really interesting point about the relationship between the site and the non-site, and how you have all these different activities going on and how is the artist going to represent the

projects they are going to do. We are really putting on pressure on the artists not to just do photo-documentation of the work but how they could make an artwork that is maybe a representation of something they have done, but functions as an artwork. And maybe the fact that I put pressure on the artist to make something that functions as an artwork means it might be less experimental – a presentation of their work that is somehow physical and visual and not just a description of what they have done. So I can see how that is part of a very traditional trajectory where artists have made things and put them in museums. But on the flip side it has really made me realize that always looking at the non-site as a representation of the site may not be the right way to work, so as a result I think that has become over the years another part of this experimental paradigm. So instead of saying 'Oh, this is the non-site, I could not bring the quarry into the gallery, so I have this representation of this other thing that matters more to me than the other thing,' you have instead these parallel activities that are going on – because I am working closer with eco-artists and asking them to think that way from the onset. I think we are seeing more and more artists doing their activities – like Dan Devine working on his sheep farm in upstate New York, thinking if 'I were to have an exhibition – which seems sort of crazy and out of the question – what would I exhibit?' So that idea is in his head from the onset, instead of 'Darn, what am I going to show?'

Hamza: I am thinking of exhibitions of a particular generation ... Paul Chan, or (Jennifer) Allora and (Guillermo) Calzadilla... where the relationship between art and activism, art and life – where they are recognizing that there are certain sets of

Increasingly, I am telling artists: “When you are doing your activities in the world, pretend like you are always going to have an exhibition.”

- Sue Spaid

It is interesting to me to see shows and individual artists that raise particular issues. But then I ask myself, “Well, wait. Is this in fact willing to suffer the consequences of what the stakes are inside that very issue, as opposed to retreating?”

- Hamza Walker

activities and saying ‘This is not art.’ Where they understand working along a certain gradient. When I think about the {unintelligible – Will need to get his clarification.} Projects by Jennifer and Guillermo, or I think about Paul Chan’s *Voices in the Wilderness*, what that does is shed light on the notion of what art is, whether it is inside an exhibition space or out there in a parking lot.

So I actually like them giving up but knowing all the while it will inform what we say art is or where art is, or where it can be – which is very interesting with Paul and Jennifer and Guillermo because it forces me to actually look at activism through the lens of critique that I usually reserve for looking at art. I say ‘It is activism,’ but I ask myself in a much more critical fashion ‘What is going on here?’ I am not looking at their activism as art, but I am asking questions of a certain rigor in terms of meaning-making that we might reserve for the white cube. But it is very much the non-art part. And I don’t know if that is experimental or not, but that is what I was thinking about ‘always thinking about having an exhibition.’

Sue: Well, I wasn’t thinking about the aspects of their life that they don’t view as art. I read a lot of papers where people are trying to understand the difference between what is getting shown and the real art. And I do not want to see this divide. That the real art is ‘out there’ and this other thing isn’t really art. I don’t get that. In this case, the thing ‘out there’ is the art process, and not some non-art process.

Steven: I like the idea of art becoming not just necessarily limited to a form of presentation or an object but as Hamza says, art as a lens to look at a variety of practices, to sort of re-open that idea of interpretation and translation. How does it get beyond tokenism and really leave a legacy that echoes and ripples through a much larger practice?

Hamza: Exactly. It is funny that the question is the ‘The Role of Experimental Exhibitions in Strengthening the Field.’ It places emphasis on experimentation. I think we could also place equal emphasis on ‘what is the exhibition?’ Is that a fixed element in the equation? Has the paradigm of ‘the exhibition’ been perfected? And since that has been perfected we can now play off of it? I don’t think exhibitions have achieved that kind of perfection. It is just a variety and a range.

Q There are a multitude of new platforms. Some artists are saying to you they do not want to do an exhibition, they want to do a web site. Does that change the definition of an exhibition, or is that just a different type of exhibition?

Hamza: It is another place or platform that plays by its own rules. The extent that it can be part of an exhibition insofar as there are place-bound exhibitions ... do we have to go anywhere anymore? There are no bookstores or record stores to go to. And it is so bad, that landscape. And I don’t know if I want to apply that model. Maybe now we have more free time to go look at art – because it is the last place-bound thing. But when I think of the advent of digital technology, I don’t think of that as experimental. The technological paradigm of experimentation is not that. That goes back ... the Russian avant-garde were going to be the first people in jump suits messing around with USB connectors, and you can only imagine what they would be doing today. So I feel like it is same old, same old.

Steven: But can we as organizations be agile enough to respond to these artists’ crazy ideas? Can we stand behind a web site? Can we stand behind a pop up store? Can we stand behind a

community organization? I think it really challenges the organization to say ‘can we be elastic and agile enough to support these types of projects?’ Again, how responsive we are to external influences can define the future of what an art organization can be.

Q **But is it harder to get funding for the kind of programming that tends to be more adventurous? We were talking about working in Winnipeg, Manitoba versus Winston-Salem, North Carolina. If you are in more of a peripheral place, are you more at liberty?**

Steven: I think in a lot of ways it is already becoming part of the mission of organizations to justify their existence. But with this increasing focus on social practice and participation it also renews the focus on the organization having to be a community resource. The gallery is not going to become a social service or community center, but just being more cognizant of what is going on in the expanded field – I hope that generates more social consciousness within organizations.

We are well beyond art for art’s sake, but I think you have to justify your existence – especially to funders and politicians – through lenses of education, community resource, how you are serving your community and constituents. So in a lot of ways this responsiveness to social practice can be a great thing.

- **Steven Matijcio**

Sue: I would make a distinction between the social and the public. I think it is the public we are trying to generate ...

Hamza: I have just gotten to the tip of the iceberg on this with Harrell Fletcher in Portland ... just the notion of social practice. So an artist – and it is never a question of

That is my job – to engage with the artist with a certain set of questions. Are we really asking ourselves the tougher questions?

- **Hamza Walker**

experimentation – says he wants to do a pop up store and I say ‘Okay, that is perfectly fad. What do you want this pop up store to do? What do you want it to sell? Is it any different than a normal pop up store? Am I going to give it the time of day?’ Now that anything and everything can be, and this thing is out there in light, but nobody is going to stop and have your ice cream cone. This is much more symptomatic of ‘Yes, we all want to be useful citizens in the world.’ So what kind of work is art, and trying to figure it out. As I read a lot of those practices, it is it like, ‘No, it is not.’ It is not getting at the core I feel of what is really driving that.

Steven: There are different measures of quality but that doesn’t mean there don’t have to be measures of quality.

Hamza: The category itself is bad.

Sue: Probably everything that is experimental does not even know it is experimental. Ultimately, your goal is to help artists do interesting things that they need to do for whatever reasons, and you get to the motivation of what is driving them. It is asking about how the pop up store is going to be different.

I am sure there are lots of projects that the artist does not think of as experimental. There is a kind of urgency that overrides the experimental ... I don't think any of us set out to be experimental but we find ourselves open to things and advocates of projects that other people may not want to do.

- Sue Spaid

Steven: That can be challenging for funders because they often want to quantify an end project that you can be proud of at the end. So it is our task, our challenge to bring our funders along and show them the quality and benefits of experimentation – yes, it might produce something bright and tangible, but it also might end in a burning wreck. But we have to be open to both those ideas and be willing to invest in the process and practice itself. It is part of our charge as curators and as arts organizations to bring along that larger paradigm and philosophy to funding organizations.

Q **In the beginning, Sue touched on this idea of artists as curators, which is an idea that is prominent right now. Where do you feel that comes into the experimental paradigm?**

Sue: That is not experimental at all. That is the tradition. Monet curated his show with 15 paintings, six of which are now at the Art Institute in Chicago. I think it is a myth

But the artist is always the first curator. When they are making their work, they are always thinking how the public will experience it.

- Sue Spaid

that the curators are the only ones who have been curating their exhibitions. Before there were curators, there were artists, and actually the first curators were patrons organizing art shows and collectors. They were not necessarily doing works from their collections, but curatorial exhibitions. What is really important is that the artist is either a curator or an artist, because the artist's project, when they use other artists to make a new work, could be fair, could be a great work of art, but is probably not a curated exhibition. So when artists make work out of other artist's artwork – that is not bad, but that is functioning as an artist, not a curator. And they have to be honest about it with their peers about that.

Q **What if a curator does the same thing?**

Sue: There are rumors that they do, but you can give me any show and I can argue why it was curated and not an artist's project.

Steven: The curatorial field is so open that artists, curators, scientists, film makers, architects, writers – anyone can be a curator.

Sue: I disagree. I think curating is the most specific activity that there is. I do not think it is the best activity.

Steven: I am not saying they are all good curators ...

Sue: I don't even think curators make good curators. That is my point. Curating for me is a very specific activity. Maybe anyone can do it but I do think it is a very specific activity ... it is very different from being a scientist or a teacher.

Q **Is there something new out there that might be new paradigms, new ways to think about curating exhibitions, new risks you might see other people taking, shows that are progressive? What is a show each of you think is progressive?**

Sue: I know the show I have in mind, but I think about the re-emergence of non-visual art – conceptual and anti-visual. So how are going to deal with that, because we are so used to thinking presentation. That will take a lot of effort on the level of curators to build audiences for this kind of work again, because we really haven't see it for 30 years – in such full force as it is coming out now, especially in Europe.

Hamza: I tend to think of myself as relatively conservative, insofar as not necessarily generating ideas, when I was talking about exhibitions functioning as paradigms in each one you see, in its own right, but instead being really discursive. For me it is born around a certain dissatisfaction with exhibitions, much more so than I look at something and think 'that's really successful.' I do not want to do an ecology show. I find myself saying they are categorically bad. And then I have to say, 'why is that?', and to engage with looking at the structure of these things. I am not generating anything; there is a discussion already in play. So sometimes you need to look at them as a series of isolated activities that do not seem to have been talking to one another. Something that makes me look at these 12 things that have gone on with this topic and ask how would you try and do this for one's self? ... It is not re-inventing the wheel but refining.

Steven: On this idea of simultaneity, I have a couple friends working in a small organization called Art Laboratory Berlin and their really interesting idea called synesthetics – opening multi-

sensory responses that are in harmony with one another but take the whole idea of response and interpretation to an expanded field. So I like what Hamza is saying about tying into the experience economy, opening up what art can be, opening up that interpretation and interchange and what exchange can be. It requires cumulative effort – these things can't be one off. It takes a longer engagement and investment within that practice to open it up to all it can be.

One of the beautiful things about the (Tremaine Foundation) grant is that with contemporary art, we have a very short horizon to work on – two years – so it is about the ability for exhibitions to be discursive, to talk to one another, to look at a show around a given topic.

- Hamza Walker

Hamza: Experimentation is not so much progressive or regressive as much as how porous it might be and what are the sizes of those different pores. And I do not need to turn things upside down or inside out ... it does not have to be radical as much as inflections or moment of minds of flight – the inclusion of material culture into an exhibition, a sound walk that is not necessarily isolated by headphones. Those are the things that excite me, things not feeling so hermetic.



Questions from the Audience

Q: What is experimental in the scientific realm? Scientists do experiments to figure things out. Listening to you talk, I hear emphasis on structure and formalist aspects of exhibition-making, so my question has to do with content. Can you share examples of exhibitions you have either done or seen in which content told you something about existence that you had not thought of in that way before, and was in that sense experimental – where artwork answered a question you did not even think to ask yourself?

Sue: All the shows I do are content driven – *Global Suburbia*, *Green Acres*. In terms of science, a show I have always wanted to do is a survey of what goes on inside the MIT Media Lab ... Science a ripe field. My background is in science and I have always been attracted to art that teaches us something about science.

Steven: We have been talking more abstractly about the exhibition model and that might be why it seems more formalist or structuralist, but I just saw Sue's *Green Acres* at the CAC and I was completely impressed by it, because to me environmentalism is one of the most important questions facing the 21st century – this whole idea of models of sustainability not only as an environmental practice, but as an organizational practice. So her exhibition got me to think not only about the exhibition models and presentation, but about the art organization's relationship with its community and how we need to work as an ecology and to support one another as organizations, that you can't work in silos or as an island. So her content for me went well beyond just an artistic measure. Even the whole idea of hospitality and how that influences organizational models – these are basic fundamental social questions that have affected me beyond art and exhibition practice. These are social and human practices.

Sue: It could very well be that if you had a PhD in art history you could study every exhibition and show ... we teach what we want to learn. The museums probably do the exhibitions that they want to learn, that teach them something about themselves. I mean, I could write a book about MoMA, its exhibitions, and its narcissistic personality. It is kind of a mean thing to say, but MoMA is the most influential institution for me at a certain level, and they actually did that show – *Museum as Muse*. They were very honest about it.

Hamza: Being at a university-based museum and this relatively recent interdisciplinarity – I would not qualify the dialog I am engaged in with all the departments as one of pressure, but it is quite fashionable. Part of the problem is that it is easy to blow my mind – I actually don't need art. I like talking to scientists, it is pretty whack, and that is it. So art is not a privileged site for me, even though I hold it in a particular spot – and that spot is filled with suspicion, and that is what sort of intrigues me about it ... but what's funny to me is when I think of how much bad work there is that is

illustrative of science. Whenever we have this dialog, it is like 'God, no.' In one instance just talking with a couple of scientists and they were really interested in the work of Tara Donovan and I was like 'No.' That would be like me, if we were to reverse roles, the field would still be in Newtonian physics. What's expected along that kind of dialog, I never know what people want. I am actually working on a show ... (that he termed his 'ecology show') but in the same way I keep saying 'I don't want to do this bad show. I am asking the big extension expert at the university to give a talk, and to keep that dialog nice and open. But art is art and we do what we do – going down that slope to the kinds of shows that have spheres and tubes and graphs and drawing machines. I can just see it – 'there's science.' It is like the NASA photographs – those are automatically in and of themselves a problem. And then there is the field of data visualization ...



Now What: The Effect of Customization on the Curatorial Experience



Panelists

SHARON MATT ATKINS, Managing Curator of Exhibitions, Brooklyn Museum. Atkins was the co-organizer of *GO*: a community-curated open studio project, with Shelley Bernstein. She has coordinated exhibitions devoted to Andy Warhol and Norman Rockwell, and has facilitated numerous other special exhibitions. Her upcoming projects include overseeing the Brooklyn presentation of Ai Weiwei: *According to What?* and a site-specific installation by Swoon. Prior to her move to Brooklyn, Atkins was the Assistant Curator at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire. There, she was responsible for modern and contemporary art, organizing exhibitions from the collection as well as traveling loan shows—among them *Andy Warhol: Pop Politics*, which traveled to the Neuberger Museum of Art, and *Spotlight New England: Kirsten Reynolds*. Previously, she was a Research Assistant in the Department of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and worked at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Atkins received an MA and a Ph.D. in art history from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

BETTI-SUE HERTZ, Director of Visual Arts, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Hertz has curated several major exhibitions and catalogues including *Renee Green: Endless Dreams and Time-Based Streams*; *Audience as Subject*; *Song Dong: Dad and Mom, Don't Worry About Us, We Are All Well*; *The Matter Within: New Contemporary Art of India*; and *Nayland Blake: Free!Love!Tool!Box!*, among others. She was Curator of Contemporary Art at the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA) from 2000-2008, curating *Eleanor Antin: Historical Takes*; *Animated Painting*; *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark*; *Past in Reverse: Contemporary Art of East Asia*, for which she received the Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award; and *Axis Mexico: Common Objects and Cosmopolitan Actions*. From 2001-2008 she organized several editions of Contemporary Links, a commissioning program where artists including Alexandre Arrechea, Sandow Birk, Regina Frank, James Hyde, and Shahzia Sikander, responded to works in SDMA's collection. Previous to relocating to California, Hertz co-organized (with Lydia Yee) *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s* for the Bronx Museum of the Arts and was Director of Longwood Arts Project, Bronx, New York from 1992-1998. Hertz often lectures and contributes to *The Architect's Newspaper*, *Art Journal*, *Animation*, *Collections*, *Communication Arts*, *Flash Art*, *n.paradoxa*, *San Francisco Arts Quarterly* and *Yishu*.


RALPH RUGOFF, Director of the Hayward Gallery. Rugoff has curated the acclaimed exhibitions: *Invisible: Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012*; *Jeremy Deller: Joy In People*; *George Condo: Mental States*; *Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want*; *The New Décor*; *Ed Ruscha: Fifty Years of Painting*; *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take On Architecture*; *The Painting of Modern Life* and, most recently has conceived and organized the project *Wide Open School: 100 International Artists Reinvent School*. He is currently organizing *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*, an exhibition surveying the work of visionary engineers and architects, fringe physicists and technologists, and artists who re-imagine various aspects of our world. Prior to his appointment, Ralph was the Director

of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, where he served as the founding chair of the Curatorial Practice Program at the California College of the Arts. He has organized numerous group exhibitions over the past 22 years as well as commissioned projects with artists such as Jeremy Deller, Ann Veronica Janssens, Anthony Hernandez, Mike Kelley and Mike Nelson. As a writer he has contributed essays for books and periodicals on a wide range of contemporary artists. In 2002 Ralph served as a curatorial advisor to the Sydney Biennale, and in 2005 he was a curatorial correspondent for the Turin Triennale. In December 2005, he was awarded the Katherine Ordway prize given in recognition of important contributions to the field of contemporary arts and letters.

Moderator

DAVID C. TERRY, Director of Programs/Curator at the New York Foundation for the Arts. Mr. Terry oversees the Fellowships, Curatorial, Sponsorship and Professional Development Programs at NYFA. Previously, he was Assistant Director at the Pelham Art Center, where he directed exhibition, educational and outreach programs. Mr. Terry's professional career covers a wide range of curatorial, artistic, administrative and academic experience. He earned his BA at the College of William and Mary, and while earning his MFA in Sculpture from the University of Pennsylvania, Mr. Terry began his administrative, curatorial and teaching career. Mr. Terry is a working artist, curator, juror, and a panelist for the New York State Council on the Arts, Bronx Council on the Arts, Westchester Biennale, the Alexander Rutsch Award in Painting, the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Artist in Residence Program, Lumen Arts Festival, and a member of the GIA Support for Individual Artists Group Steering Committee. Mr. Terry's awards include Artists in the Marketplace Program, The Bronx Museum of the Arts; BRIO, Bronx Council on the Arts; The Puffin Foundation; New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Sculpture, the Arts and Business Council's Arts Leadership Institute Award and the Elizabeth Foundation's Residency Grant





This panel discussed emergence of new ways to engage audiences in artworks through customized exhibitions and avenues for visitor participation. Panelists considered in depth the implications of audience expectations that are increasingly driven by popular culture and informed by widespread use of social media. The discussion raised a number of questions, including:

What is the role of the community or audience in selecting what an art organization exhibits?

To what extent should museums and galleries be places where “nothing happens” – a place of refuge from the noise of the world?

When does customization interfere with or enhance the curator’s relationship with the ideas behind an artist’s work? When does it interfere with the visitor’s relationships to those ideas?



Q

Can you talk about some of your customized curatorial projects?

Sharon: Working at the Brooklyn Museum, we have a very community focused mission. We are always thinking ‘how can we engage our audiences?’ in terms of our programming and our exhibitions. We have done a number of projects where we have invited the community to curate exhibitions or to respond to the work and essentially have a voice in making a selection on what the museum will present on its walls.

Last year, I co-organized a project called *GO: A Community Curated Open Studio Project* with our chief of technology at the Museum, Shelly Bernstein. We were thinking a lot about how we could bring together the community mission, the work we had been doing to engage our audiences in the work we

We had approximately 18,000 people who visited studios over those two days. We had tornados, we had crazy weather, but despite all that, people were out and ready to see things. We estimated that those people made a combined 147,000 studio visits. There was incredible energy over that weekend.

- Sharon Matt Atkins

were doing, and the way we could think about really highlighting Brooklyn artists. We had been doing that in a number of ways, both with our collection and our special exhibitions but at the same time recognizing we were only reaching out to a fraction of the artists living and working in Brooklyn. We came upon this idea of using an Open Studio model, where we would invite any and all artists with a space in Brooklyn to open their studio for a weekend in September from 11 am to 7 pm. Over 1700 artists ended up opening their studios and participating in the project. Over the course of that weekend, we also invited people to visit those studios and, in the process, to nominate them for an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. We set this up with artist

pages, an App that visitors let them geolocate a studio in their neighborhood. We ended up with artists from 44 of 67 Brooklyn neighborhoods, so we really were reaching out to a wide and large portion of Brooklyn. But speaking to the idea of how we customized and were using technology as part of this – in order to nominate an artist for the exhibition, visitors had to visit at least five studios to nominate (the maximum of) three artists. So it was a way of encouraging visitors to really think about their choices, and make their selection and really narrow those choices down. We ended with a group of 10 nominated artists. We did studio visits to all 10 of the nominated artists, and then we made a final selection for the exhibition of five. And we brought the voters who had nominated the artists back into that exhibition.

We got an incredible amount of feedback throughout the process, because we asked for it. We asked voters and artists to share their stories. One of the things we continued to hear was that involvement of the community changed the experience for both the artists who participated but also for the people who were visiting those studios. The visitors said they felt a greater sense of responsibility because they needed to understand the artist's work to make an informed decision. On the artists side, we heard time and time again that they had a different experience than they typically had with other kinds of open studio events where people walk in and walk out and don't ask a lot of questions. They could feel people were more engaged.

Ralph: The first time I really came across this idea was in an exhibition curated by a Swedish artist named Per Huutner who did a show called *I am a Curator* at the Chisenhale Gallery in London. The first person who arrived at the gallery every morning could choose between about 60 to 70 works of art and install the show any way that they wanted to. And a Lithuanian artist named Darius Miksys did something similar to this at the last Venice Biennale in the Lithuanian Pavilion, where visitors could choose work from a storage area and ask for them to be displayed in the exhibition gallery. This was all art that the Lithuanian government had given art prizes to during the previous ten years, so it was very much a commentary on state taste on aesthetic matters and you ended up participating in that somehow.

I have some funny ambivalent feelings on this idea of customization. To make a playlist, to customize – and this is not true about [what the Brooklyn Museum did] but in general we are always making playlists or putting pictures up in places and that implies that you already know the material. So the idea that we have to customize everything now ... The other kind of exhibition is a new exhibition, is not material that you know, and you want to have a non-customized experience. You want to be open to something new, making new connections, and you cannot customize that in advance. So then it becomes this kind of controlling thing – 'I am not happy if it is not reflecting me and my activity.' There is something about that that gives me the creeps a little bit.

I will say about things that I have done, last summer at the Hayward in the Upper Gallery instead of doing an exhibition we did a project called The Wide Open School,

It is very hard to walk into a movie theatre and convince the projectionist just to show every third minute of a film you are about to see. But when we go to museums, you can look at every third painting if you want to, every 10th painting, or just paintings by the person you are interested in. You can customize that experience, and to me that is part of the genius of the whole exhibition format.

- Ralph Rugoff

for which we invited 100 artists from all over the world to come invent a class on whatever they wanted to teach and were interested in – preferably not art – and just lead that class for the public. So if you were a visitor you just got handed a list of the courses that were on that day and you could decide what you were interested in. Those classes themselves were quite open-ended. So I do not know if that is customization, but it is some idea for making a new experience.

Betti-Sue: I am based in the Bay Area, which is home to many of the companies controlling our social media lives. We have Apple, Google, Yahoo, Twitter, and Facebook. And so we are kind of hypersensitive to the ways that these companies have inflected our lives on many levels. One of the buzz words in the Bay Area is innovation ... innovation as the king of the way people think about all kinds of practices. On the other side of the equation, we have a very strong DIY culture. We have the Maker Faire where 80,000 people come over a weekend to make all kinds of things. So we are working on both sides of that, working within those cultures on a daily basis. There was an exhibition that I did not organize but was organized by Yves Behar called *Technocraft* and it took those two ideas and put them together.

One of the projects within the *Technocraft* exhibition was by Puma, who had a substantial section within the large group show. They featured a variety of sneakers that you could customize. This is something you might have done yourself. You can go online and customize the color and the fabric, what type of laces, what style of sneaker. This was of course very popular. So many people wanted to have the customized sneaker. So what is this customization within consumer, commercial culture and why is it so attractive? What is relation between that activity and the activity of artists?

I have a certain amount of skepticism about customization because I am looking at the cultures that are generating those ideas and wondering how those ideas relate to corporate capital – how we all then are buying into those notions of the individualized experience.

- **Betti-Sue Hertz**

Another way to think about customization is to look at the Nayland Blake exhibition, *Free!Love!Tool!Box!*, I organized last fall, where within the exhibition the audience could change the way it looked and felt through a variety of activities. We presented a work of 3000 LPs with two DJ booths and anyone could come and DJ from this fantastic record collection. We had a video booth where you could answer a number of questions that were derived by the artist that could then be uploaded onto our YouTube site, and you also could bring any objects you wanted to display and put them on a series of shelves and that the artist came back and reorganized the materials. So it was always a very open and free flowing experience.

Q Stemming from Betti-Sue's comment about being industry driven, do you think these particular projects are a reactionary movement from presenting institutions or more of a new method of audience engagement? Stretching that further, do you think it's a method where barriers can be broken down around elitism and making art more accessible to the general public?

Sharon: We are always looking to engage our audiences in new ways, and looking to bring them into the experience to understand what we are presenting to them. One of the things we are doing now at the museum is looking at our audio tour usage, and how many people pay for the services and why we continue to provide that as a platform right now. But at the same time, when we look at what we are investing in that and what the usage is, we see that less than 1 percent of our visitors are actually using audio tours. We saw that the usage of that spiked in 2008 when it was the new technology and everyone was asking what kinds of audio tours we could provide because that was new. But now it seems like it is fading out, so the question is what is the new delivery method or model?

Betti-Sue: One program we have is called YBCA:You. In terms of audience engagement, we were looking to create a program – a kind of concierge service for multi-disciplinary arts experience. For \$15 a month you have an all-access monthly pass to anything that we present – film, dance, music, exhibitions. It is not just that you get to go – you also have a guide who meets with you and talking with you about what you want to gain from this experience ... you actually come up with a plan. There are about 200 people now who are participating in this program. They have their own social events, blogs and websites. We are hoping to grow this program, which is another way of customization – how can you individualize, how can you relate to those audience members, not just from a traditional membership program but go the next step of customizing their experience and them feeling like they have someone they can call if they want to change course. And then after three months or six months you have a check in about what you learned, what you liked, so you become a more educated consumer of art.

I really think the ideas that are in these works of art are what is central. I used to think my relationship with the artist was important, but the ideas that were in those works of art, and how those ideas are manifest and audiences engage with them ... is where the most importance is for me. Any customization or systems of engagement to support that is where I find myself putting the most energy.

- **Betti-Sue Hertz**

The people who are in the program really enjoy it. The question is how long do we want them to participate? The goal is to have a core audience of people loyal to our brand – as we would say in California – and who will also be advocates for what we do in their social network. If we have 200 of our closest friends seeing what we do, we expect they will reach out to their social circles and their communities and bring them in.

Ralph: I am probably on the wrong panel because I really think most of this social media and customization is pure fluff. It is really not addressing fundamental issues of what happens in galleries and what needs to happen. When I go on the Hayward Facebook page and read the comments people are making, I am not inspired. It is normally 'Hey, look at me.'

I think the art experience is inherently customized. If there is one thing I believe it is Marcel Duchamp's equation that half of the work of art is made by the spectator. There is no finished work of art that has a complete meaning that you can then decipher – you are making it up, you are part of what is happening. That is customization. That is the key thing to focus on – how do

you get people to have that feeling, when they walk in a gallery to say ‘yeah, my experience is indispensable part of the content of this work.’ You can do this by the ways that you show the work, the ways you contextualize it. The type of voice you have in your wall labels can be horribly off-putting and make people feel they are back at school or it can raise questions. My dream is to have three or four conflicting wall texts next to each work and say, ‘Go figure it out yourself.’ That is really what you want to do.

Betti-Sue: I was taken with Sharon’s comment earlier about content. Just to riff off what you were saying, the YBAC You program is not coming from the curatorial department. It is coming from the community engagement department. I am not sure that program, as nice as it is, is really affecting my practice that much. I get to engage with those people in a different way, maybe in a small focus group, but my program has not radically shifted because that program exists.

Q I’d like to go back to Sharon’s curatorial experience with *GO* in Brooklyn. The amazing audience numbers you had – obviously that has to do with technology and using the app and the finder. Does the panel think that using technology to sortify or storify – is that sort of gadgetry getting people to your spaces?

Sharon: We did create a website that was a platform to preview work, to create an itinerary. Those were all sort of tools that helped in the process. But the interesting thing we saw over the weekend was that people were not using it. They might have used it to find the studios. But what people needed to do was to check to know if people had seen their five studios. Then they got a unique number that they could either enter into the app, or send a text, or write it down and go back to the website. And we saw that more people were choosing to write down the numbers quick on a card. They were not using that app because they wanted their experience to be about the work. They had a feeling that they only had a half an hour and they had 10 more studios they wanted to see. So even though we provided all the technology, we saw that more people were going back and later that evening getting on their computer.

Betti-Sue: What we have been talking about recently is what we call ‘program extension.’ While I am not sure we have had much success with using technology in the exhibitions themselves unless the artist asks for it, we are still very interested in how technology could help us extend the memory and experience of having been in the gallery after you leave. There have been a lot of traditional ways of doing that, like the exhibition catalog, but there is potential to use some of the new technology to help with what we are calling program extension.

Q Does technology change the way we interpret work? Does it become a popularity game?

Sharon: Technology did not necessarily play into that. We certainly had a lot of concern from artists in advance of the weekend where they said people would just share numbers. So we deliberately sent out the unique codes to artists right before the weekend so there was not a lot of time in advance. And we were looking for that with the nominations – whether there was group voting. But the system we set up, if someone wanted to see five studios, an artist would have to share not only their number but the number of four other artists.

Ralph: I am struck that there is real hunger that people have for some kind of a human connection when they go into museums and when we have done exhibitions that have had performers or participants you can go and talk to and who talk to you, people have been very moved by this. It obviously speaks

that at some level, our existences for the most part are so horribly alienated that the museum becomes a place where we also seek to find social connections that we are not getting in our lives. To me a lot of the tweeting and posting of everything you do also reflects this situation. It is this constant psycho-geographical GPS thing, and that does affect how people behave in galleries.

Sharon: We are seeing that right now. We have an El Anatsui exhibition up at the Museum. We have a wide audience, a lot of first time visitors, and they haven't seen his work in other contexts. And they will see the work and can't believe what is in front of them. So yes, so many people are taking photos in front of it. They want to somehow capture that.

Ralph: It is like getting your picture taken in front of the Grand Canyon.

Betti-Sue: This boundary between the sanctity of the museum and the rest of experience is what we are trying to grapple with here. Popular culture, reality shows – a number of the projects that people were talking about earlier that artists are generating are trying to figure out that relationship between what goes on in popular culture and how the museum space manages those relationships. When people

engage with a reality show and then they come to a museum, how does that affect their expectations of what happens in the museum space? That is something we cannot get away from. And where this question gets interesting for me is how do things that people who come to museums experience in other cultural realms impact what they want to do and see when they get to our space and we don't necessarily provide that. That is why we are trying to figure it out.

But why do people take photographs of everything they see in a gallery? It is like proof that you were somewhere, that you can then tweet and put on your Facebook, and show that you have an existence. To me, that distracts from a different kind of encounter that they hopefully could have in the gallery.

- **Ralph Rugoff**

There was a famous conversation between Allan Capra and Robert Smithson about the nature of museums. Capra was saying museums should be full of life, they should be places where people have experience. And Smithson said, 'No, what is radical about museums is that they are places where nothing happens.' And I think that is much more true today that it was when said it in 1960.

- **Ralph Rugoff**

Q Is this a natural evolution of how we experience art and culture, or is it a trend? By being driven by the viewer's own particular wants – what's in their shopping cart – are we eliminating the connection between the artists and the artist's creation and thought process?

Betti-Sue: The museum or exhibition experience should provide people with opportunities to think, to have experiences, and to be critical in the end. I do a lot of work that could be called critical art, and I am not sure those experiences with popular culture allow people a basis for coming into a space and being asked to re-consider your assumptions, to open yourself up to a different kind of generosity, to think more deeply about your life and what is important. That is why I cannot quite figure it out because what I think is so meaningful is not necessarily in these other experiences. It might be and it might not be. It is about where do I connect, how do I find those connections, how can I build on what people already know, what they might want and what an artist has to offer them.

Ralph: I have a 14-year-old son whose attention span is severely limited, as is any 14-year-old's, just because he is on five different media platforms for short periods of time. But he can come to an exhibition, if it is one he likes, and pay attention for a short period. But I do worry if that is going to be something we lose? That radical quality of 'this is a place where nothing happens' will be something people can't access anymore.

Sharon: In terms of whether it is a trend, I don't think that it is. We will continue to see waves. Audio tours will fade out. And whatever it is now, it will be something else two or three years from now. There is this want – the audience is wanting to find other ways to engage and own that experience or take that experience with them in some way. So it is something museums will continue to struggle with.

Q I think the app as tool in getting the public in to see a 100 different studio spaces is amazing – having them meet the artist where they are making the work.

Betti-Sue: The connectivity part will not change – that is what we are in the business of doing – connecting people to the work that artists are doing and the ideas. But the way that connection happens will most likely change. We are so much in this hyper-connectivity mindset right now, that some of the things Ralph is saying – how to have that singular experience with that object – is now more challenging. To go to your marketing department and say this is what is important – it is an institutional challenge now, as well.

The theme throughout here is connectivity. If the connectivity is through the wall label, or an audio guide or an app, or a blog – all of those are ways of trying to connect your ideas as a curator, and the artist's ideas to the audience.

- Betti-Sue Hertz

Ralph: I do think the good thing is that you can connect people not only to the ideas of artists, or of curators, but to each other's ideas. But you do need to curate the audience. We have done projects where we ask the audience to write their own wall labels – after you see this work,

write the label and we will put them up. And the number of people who write thoughtful, interesting things is not a lot, because people don't have time to sit and think, and thinking is work. So maybe the next stage is curating the audience.



Questions from the Audience

Q: To Sharon: Why did you choose to curate what the people selected? And then to Betti-Sue: What are demographics of concierge and how do you measure interactivity of the exhibitions in your space?

Sharon: We chose to do it that way because, at the first level, we wanted it to be collaborative. It was the community making the nominations, but ultimately the museum making the selections as a way for it to ultimately own that project and part of that process as well. In previous projects there had been some criticisms with the community curated project that it was a way for the museum to sort of put itself at arm's length and separate itself from those choices.

Betti-Sue: The demographics (for the concierge service) are from the early 20s to people up into their 70s, and it is very mixed economically, as far as I know. There are a lot of people new to San Francisco – which is very transient. People come there to work at start-ups, IT or biotech, and other industries and they do not stay. So there are a lot of people coming and going and they want to find ways to connect to other people and 70 percent of our audience lives in San Francisco, which has a population of not even 800,000 – so it is a pretty small pool. (In terms of measuring interactivity at Nayland Blake's exhibition we had a few professional DJs who came and used the space on a regular basis and we had about 50 do the video booth, and about 200 plus left material (for the artist to re-arrange on the shelves.)

Q: How do comments made on social media change the public's perception of the show itself, the artist's work itself? There have been artists who have been criticized by what the public assumed was in the show but was not. How do you deal with those issues?

Betti-Sue: I have not heard those issues so much, but we have a full time staff person and his job is as a social media manager and he is the one who is generating a lot of the conversations that are happening about our programs and about artists that we present. And so we have at some level control over that. I see criticisms and debates about whether shows are good or not. But I think that is a very interesting question: How people you might or might not know affect perceptions of something you haven't seen.

Q: I am really curious about the Go show. I am interested in how you felt as a curator. Were these artists who were selected ones you would have found anyway? What did that feel like from a curator's point of view?

Sharon: It was a wide range in our top 10 nominated artists. We had a MFA Yale graduate who has gallery representation to a completely self-taught artist who is a practicing lawyer and has been painting portraits of family members as a way to deal with her personal relationships. And when I walked in, the first thing she said to me was "this is my first studio visit." That was

interesting ... because part of what we were trying to focus on was what was the visitor's experience, what were they seeing when they had gone to the studio, how were they responding to that work? But I asked her about this small painting in her entryway – on a bookshelf, tucked away. It was a work that we were more drawn to, and one that she had put off to the side. We were taken with the style and the emotion and ultimately that was one of the works that we included in the exhibition.

Q: Maybe I'm wrong, but one of the things I talk a lot about is the fact that television and media and all this stuff that can jump start an artist's career ... but why is the art world a lot more immunized and protected against this (American Idol/reality show) kind of media?

Sharon: One thing about *Work of Art* that was on Bravo is the tasks that were set for these artists. One episode was to go into the car dealership and get parts and make art. That is not the way artists are doing their work in most cases. (The artist who won the second season *Work of Art* competition, Kymia Nawabi, was awarded an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, along with a cash prize. Nawabi has also gone on to do other exhibitions, so I suppose it is picking up but it is not all of a sudden having the Chelsea representation.



In closing, Stewart Hudson, President of the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation, thanked all the panelists their insightful conversation and charged the audience to continue the conversation “not just for ourselves but for what we care about.”

