



Heffernan



James Siena



Mohawk Hudson

Janet Riker took over as director of the Rotunda Gallery in 1989. I passionately recruited her for the position, as I knew what the demands of the job were and who would be a great candidate. I actually called her up and said I wouldn't hang up the phone until she said she would apply. I was not disappointed. Janet stepped into the Rotunda Gallery and brilliantly began new ambitious programming and a coveted NEA grant. She also made me look good. To bring insight into the thinking of a director of a non-profit, I turned to her. This is an interview with Janet Riker on October 4th 2007.

J: Janet, you are currently the Director of the University Art Museum at the University at Albany. What are your responsibilities?

JR: Being Director here entails everything from general administrative duties including personnel and budgeting, to fundraising and playing a curatorial role, though I do have a curator who works in that area. As the museum is part of a university, I am expected to be a good citizen in terms of university service, and also to contribute to the art community in the region.

J: What is the role of the art museum within the university?

JR: Growing.

J: Under your directorship?

JR: Well, I think, yes. It is certainly a goal of my directorship to see it grow in terms of significance to the university community – administration, faculty and students. I hope that in the time that I've been here, we've made it a more student centric organization. I think every university museum addresses multiple and varied audiences. Not every show will resonate with all of those audiences. Our aim is to create a mix of programming that's exciting and challenging that engages different segments of the audience, brings them through the door, and gets them involved in the program and the institution.

J: You've had other positions in the art world. You've been part of a commercial gallery, and you've directed non profit galleries. How is the university gallery/museum a little different say from an alternative space or a commercial gallery?

JR: I would say the chief difference is the audience. I am on a campus with some 17,000 students and that creates different challenges. It's a challenge to get huge chunks of that population of 17,000 in through the door; so we are constantly looking for ways to attract students. We want them to feel welcome and part of this institution, which is important for a lot of different reasons. It secures our place as a vital part of the university and is important in terms of future fundraising efforts. Alumni provide a huge base of support for any university or college. The opportunity to connect with students is when they are here. It also drives a pedagogical approach to the exhibition and the interpretive programs that happen here in the museum. I think that's something that we are aware of at every step of the exhibition planning and implementation.

J: So when you are putting together and developing academic year long programs, are you looking for a variety or are you looking to serve different populations? Are you looking to bring the outside world into upstate New York?

JR: We are looking for all of those things, and I don't think that you necessarily find them in a single exhibition. But I do think you can balance your program. You can't necessarily do it over a semester, or a single year, but you can do it over a number of years. So things that get thrown into the mix might be an in-depth look at one artist's work or a group exhibition that has a broad appeal and multiple access points for a general audience of students and the regional community. For example, "Mr. President" an exhibition of non-traditional portraits of American Presidents by contemporary artists was enormously popular. It had strong work by major artists including Chuck Close and Robert Colescott, as well as emerging artists like Greta Pratt and David Opdyke, but the content gave it really broad popular appeal and legs in terms of public relations – not just regionally but nationally and internationally.

At the University, I generally approach a one-person exhibition differently than I would at an alternative space located in Brooklyn where I might want to concentrate on current work. Here, I often want to reveal the development of an artist's work over a period of time.

J: Because that's educational for the students?

JR: Exactly. Or to open a window to reveal more of the artist's process. So, it's a slightly different approach—a different way of wrapping your mind around a museum program or gallery program. And it's fun and intellectually engaging.

J: When you work with the artists that participate in the exhibitions, do you use them differently at the university gallery than say you would at a nonprofit or at a commercial gallery.

JR: Sure. I often invite the artist to speak if they are good communicators.

J: Do you know that in advance?

JR: Sometimes you know from hearing them or meeting them elsewhere; sometimes can do some detective work and sometimes you just have to go by the seat of your pants.

J: You invite them and hope for the best?

JR: Yeah. We just had a lecture by Judith Linhares, who is a wonderful artist and a lovely, generous person. That is something of a touch stone for me – sometimes people are good speakers because they are open and comfortable sharing their thoughts, influences, and experiences. Faculty, students, and the general public alike were genuinely moved to hear Judy speak about the search for her artistic voice over a 40 year career that has only recently garnered the attention it deserves.

J: And are there other ways of using artists besides as a public lecturer? Are the lectures open to the community as well as to the students?

JR: Absolutely. And we promote them heavily both on campus and off. I am often able to partner with other entities on campus. With the help of the Art Department, I can bring artists, critics or curators to campus and have them do studio visits during the day before their lecture. It's an important opportunity for students and has real value to the art department.

The idea of commissioning new work becomes very attractive in this environment because again, you're talking about process. We are a research university, so I think of commissioning work as research that advances thought in our field of visual arts. I see it as part of our mission to foster the creation of new works. Another institution might do the same thing but for different reasons. When we have an artist working on site, we will often try to find students to assist. Whether it is six or two, it provides help for the artists and a rich experience for the students working on the project. Sometimes you use an artist in way that engages 200 people in a lecture and sometimes you'll engage two students who are working closely with an artist on-site during an installation. Those can both valuable and significant experiences that we can offer.

J: Do you have a particular interest in cross disciplinary approaches?

JR: We do and often involve ourselves in cross disciplinary projects through campus wide initiatives. For example, there have been a series of themed semesters over the time that I've been here. There was a theme semester on the topic of architecture, which celebrated architecture of this campus, which was designed by Modernist Architect Edward Durell Stone and is a prime example of his work. And so, the semester on architecture had the added dimension of focusing people's attention on the architectural environment around them. The important thing for the museum is to find ways to participate that are consistent with our goals of presenting great contemporary artwork that has a place in the critical dialogue about the art of our time. For the architecture semester, we organized an exhibition about the concept of space and transformative experiences within a space. It was our own take on the concept of architecture and was something we could do here as an art museum that made a unique contribution to the semester.

J: Excellent.

JR: I would say other University Museums institutions, for example the Tang at Skidmore, are really focused on being cross discipline institutions.

J: So that is even more of their mission.

JR: Precisely.

J: MIT has very specific goals as for their exhibitions. It's still all mission driven like all non profits.

JR: That's exactly right. I think it's critical to be guided by your mission, which in turn is informed by the mission and long range goals of your parent institution.

J: Are your exhibitions ever budget driven? How much of your budget do you have to fundraise? Are you a part of the overall university budget?

JR: The office of the Provost and the office of the President are generous in their support of the museum, but it certainly is part of my responsibility to raise money from external sources as well as internal sources. There are some small internal sources of support for different programs or I can collaboratively plan a program to secure funding. But it is my responsibility to raise funds for this museum. As I prepare my budget for the year, there may be one exhibition where I choose to do a catalog and others where I'll do smaller brochures, so it is a balancing act over the entire year's program. It's really the director's responsibility to determine how to strategically invest the museum's resources (and I mean money as well as staff time and energy) to reach our goals and fulfill our mission.

J: But is part of your mission to have written material on exhibition? Is that part of the academic reach?

JR: Yes, it's part of it. We can't do a major catalog for every exhibition, but we try to bring some new content into each of our brochures, and advance scholarship about that particular artist or subject. When we do a major catalog we'll generally commission either a critical essay or, more recently, a work of fiction that is germane to the subject. The last exhibition catalog, for the Mr. President show, had an original short story by Lynne Tillman, and the Julie Heffernan catalog we did had an essay by A.S. Byatt.

J: Well that's perfect actually.

JR: It's an area that we've been looking at lately. The exhibition catalog as a document can use a little rethinking, so the idea of commissioning a literary piece is attractive.

J: Well we're going to have to get the word out to all the writers. That's a great idea. So tell me, for artists that are participating in a university museum show, do you take care of all the costs of the exhibition, pay for them to come and visit, provide them with artist fees, provide them with speaker fees, and provide them with production expenses?

JR: It works in different ways. Part of this is about the allocation of resources and sometimes it's driven by very logistical, practical concerns. So if I commission a new piece for the museum—

J: —Like an installation or a video.

JR: Exactly. I need to do that with my state funds and we will be writing a contract between the artist and the State of New York. It's easier for me to do that with one fee that includes everything.

J: Yes, I've seen contracts from the State of New York, believe me just to give a half hour lecture, it's like, wow, this is a lot of paperwork.

JR: So, yes, we compensate artists with honoraria, materials fees, and by absorbing shipping costs, but it will vary depending upon what services are needed and what the component pieces of the exhibition are as a whole. We try to be creative about using co-sponsorships to bring funding to a project, so it's not unusual for someone to come up for an event or performance and get checks from three or even four different sources.

J: Every different department had their own check.

JR: The museum itself has five different accounts that I draw on to spend for distinct purposes, and I suspect that's not unusual.

J: Do you have a permanent collection?

JR: The permanent collection at the University at Albany is mainly focused on contemporary and early 20th century works on paper. It is particularly strong in the print areas. Since we don't have a vast space here at the museum and our exhibition program is focused on changing exhibitions, the collection is installed in public spaces on the campus, including conference rooms and reception areas. While it is not without problems, it's a wonderful way to share the collection. The collection is highly valued by the campus community largely because it is so visible.

J: Do the collections also function as instructional?

JR: We often have classes come to the collections area, sometimes for very practical reasons like matting and framing demonstrations or to look at particular items or portfolios in the collection.

Our latest project is a campus wide database of digital images, which will include the entire slide (now visual resources) library, the university's archives and special collections, and digitized lectures in both audio and video. For example, if you searched for Vito Acconci in the database, you would find that the university has a number of digital images of his work. You would find that the permanent collection includes a print by Vito Acconci and that he came here and lectured, so you would have access to a video of his lecture at the museum. It's a major campus wide initiative and

we're just taking the first baby steps. But it's very exciting and will include a web presence that will expand access to collections for teaching and learning.

J: How do works enter your collection? Does the collection come from donors? Do you have a collections committee?

JR: We do have a collections committee. Unfortunately, we don't have an acquisitions fund, something that is important and I'd like to develop. As a result we do very little purchasing for the collection and its growth is mainly through donations.

J: What advice would you have for artists who are looking to have their works enter permanent collections to have them protected and maybe valued a little bit after they are dead? Are universities good places to reach out to?

JR: I would say they are and that artists might look for complements that would make their work meaningful to a particular institution, such as you are an alum, you lived in the area, or you are a native of the region. Those things, I think, aside from wonderful work and a distinguished resume, do help your work to be considered for acquisition in a collection.

J: Or your work is exhibited at this space.

JR: Yes, those kinds of complements make sense. Absolutely.

J: What roles do alumni play in the museum?

JR: At this point not that much. In fact this museum, this institution, university wide, is seeking to involve their alums more. The state university system has been steadily moving over time from being completely supported by the state, to being much more like a private institution. It has become more entrepreneurial in terms of reaching out for private funds and research dollars. So we have become, as a university, more effective in making the case that yes we are a public institution, but in order to be a great public institution, we need private support. The state doesn't provide it all, nor do tuition dollars.

I think ultimately, for the museum to be really an effective fundraiser in the community and with alums, we are going to need a dedicated board of people who will help in that area.

J: Is it appropriate for artists to approach the museum on their own behalf?

JR: Yeah. We are always looking and we do consider unsolicited proposals. As with any venue, an artist needs to consider whether or not something fits within our program and our space. We have basically four exhibition slots a year, one of which is the MFA show. So I look at each one of those exhibition slots carefully to make sure that what I am going to get out of it is moving us forward on the institutional agenda. Each slot becomes very important. Those are some of the questions that I ask myself when I look at an artist's proposal. How does it help us reach our goals?

J: Do you do one museum wide exhibition at a time or have two or three smaller shows happening at the same time?

JR: Because of the nature of our exhibition space, I think of them in terms of blocks. Our space is very open, so that means everything goes up at the same time, it's up on view and then we close it and take it down and install the next exhibition.

J: So, if there are two or three different exhibitions happening at the same time, they all have to open at the same time and close at the same time.

JR: Right, which might include a group exhibition, a one person exhibition, and a small show in the west gallery that could be video or installation. Or it could be one large group exhibition, or just two one-person exhibitions. We think about it as presenting seven or eight exhibitions a year, but within those are three blocks of time.

J: Are there any other sites on campus where you are in charge of exhibits besides the permanent collection?

JR: No, no mercifully.

J: And what's the role of the MFA show?

JR: The MFA show is essentially the visual portion of the thesis required of all master of fine arts degree candidates and presents the summation of their work generally from over two to two and a half years. It is meant to give each artist a significant showing of their work and to be a culminating experience for each student.

J: To see their work in the museum context.

JR: Right and so even though it's a large group show, it's meant to be a significant showing of each person's work. And we do that every spring.

J: How many MFA's are in the show?

JR: It varies from year to year. There might be six, ten, or twelve. It's an opportunity for the whole museum staff to play a pedagogical role. The art department and faculty advisors serve as curators for the exhibition determining with the student what will be included in the show. When we meet with the MFA students, we talk to them about the obligations in terms of paperwork, providing accurate information about the pieces, and delivering them on time. Students closely work with our exhibition designer to configure the exhibition, our preparator on installation issues, and with the curator on their presentation and artists' statements. Our staff makes studio visits to all the artists before the show to talk to them about the process. For some of the students, it is their first

opportunity to show professionally or in a museum setting. So we really want to show them the best museum practice and make it a meaningful learning experience.

J: What's one of the biggest mistakes you think an artist can make in building a career?

JR: There are so many. If you ask me to pick out mistakes in my life, I would say exactly the same thing, there have been so many. My god, people make mistakes all the time. I think that you make mistakes, you live and grow, and that is what life is about. So I would say the biggest mistake is not learning from your mistakes.

J: That's one of my truisms. I say it's okay to make a mistake. It's just not okay to repeat it over and over again. So what kind of mistakes do you find artists repeating?

JR: I think that one mistake artists can make when an opportunity presents itself is not being honest and putting everything on the table about their needs and expectations; sometimes institutions make that mistake as well. I think it's the biggest because it can easily lead to serious disappointment. Maybe for artists it comes from not understanding what a collaborative venture exhibiting with the museum is.

For artists, making art is generally is a singular pursuit and when they move into the arena of exhibiting the work publicly, all of a sudden, it becomes a very collaborative venture. People the artist may not know well or at all are suddenly deeply involved and saying, "Well, no I don't think that" or "I think we should include this." It's a difficult shift to make and sometimes it leads people to not be as forthcoming as they should be in the beginning of the process. I think the most successful collaborations are when people are able to share their specific goals for the exhibition. For example, the Heffernan exhibition: Julie was very straight with me in saying that it was really important for her to get a great publication out of the exhibition. It meant she needed to look carefully at our publications and meet with our publication designer up front so that she could feel confident that we could deliver. It allowed me to confess that we didn't have the resources to do this alone. But once we, as artist and institution, were on the same page, we could move on to problem solving.

J: This is what I need at this stage of my career. How can we do this?

JR: Exactly. And so, it challenged us all to step up and figure it out together. We ended up doing a publication that was larger in scope and budget than we ordinarily would do for that kind of exhibition. But we were able to think creatively about how to support it, secure a grant and outside funding, and we were able to make it happen.

You know, it's not always going to work out like that, and sometimes the process will take you to other things that can be accomplished. Let's face it, this is a risk taking proposition for the artist and the institution, so there are lots of vulnerabilities. But I do believe that the more honest the communication is early on, the easier it is to make good decisions along the way. With luck, everybody ends up more satisfied with the result.

J: Yes, you ask for what you want and, surprise!, you might just get it.

JR: Right, or you will know that it's not a possibility. In that case you might want to shelve that goal for a while or seek other ways to get it.

J: Sometimes, an artist will find a supporter on their own who can contribute to a project if the museum or the gallery says this is our budget; this is all what we can do. The budget goes for this so we have a gap. How can we work together to fill this gap?

JR: It's really about goals and resources. The goals I have in presenting a show and the goals an artist has in exhibiting here might be very different. They should overlap in significant places, but I think laying out those goals and desires and then figuring out what resources you can bring to bear to help you reach them is important. You're right; this is a way an artist can take control of the situation. Come to the table, be an active participant, be straight about your objectives and needs, and I'll be straight about mine.

J: And let's see where we can work together, which is great. My last question: If someone you cared for was beginning a career as a visual artist, what three pieces of advice would you give them?

JR: Three! I guess being yourself and figuring out what path you can take to get your work out there is going to be is really important. So that's the business angle of it, but in terms of your artwork, the other is just to find your own voice, be serious about your artwork, work hard at it, and make it a priority in your life. I think the artwork, the strength of the art, and your practice are really the most important things. So that would be number one to really work hard at your art practice.

The second is to be yourself and think about your own strengths in approaching your goals. I always go back to my days at the Drawing Center when the shyest, most reticent artist I ever met said to me, "You know, my best friend told me that what I needed to do was go to openings and I'd meet people and get shows." And I knew that this wasn't going to be his strong suit, though he had many other great qualities. So I think that you need to find your own way in terms of promoting your artwork and getting your work out there.

J: And what's the third one?

JR: A rich spouse. I don't know. Well, I suppose if you do those other two things, you will be fine and the rich spouse can't hurt.

J: Perfect. Love it. Thank you, Janet.

Janet Riker is director of the University Art Museum at the University at Albany, a 9,000 square foot museum designed by noted architect Edward Durell Stone, which features a changing exhibition program focused on

The Artist's Guide: Making a Living Doing What You Love by Jackie Battenfield

Janet Riker, Director of the University Art Museum at the University at Albany, October 4, 2007

contemporary art and a permanent collection of over 3,000 works on art.

Prior to moving the Capital Region in 2004, Riker was Director of the Rotunda Gallery in Brooklyn for fourteen years; there she developed a highly regarded program of changing exhibitions and innovative educational offerings for children and adults. She served as director of the Queensborough Community College Art Gallery, Bayside, New York, and Assistant Curator at the Drawing Center in New York City from 1984 to 1988.

Riker holds the M.A. degree in Art History from Columbia University and B.A. from Alfred University. She has organized dozens of exhibitions of contemporary visual arts. She has served on numerous selection panels and commissioning bodies, and has lectured widely on contemporary art and artists' issues. In 2004, Riker received the Betty Smith Arts Award from the Brooklyn Borough President and was cited by the New York City Council for her contribution to the arts in Brooklyn.

She lives in Guilderland, New York with her husband, photographer Michael Marston and son Philip.