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“Awareness Seems to Happen in Waves”

On Next Steps: Lynn Zelevansky, former director of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh



Lynn Zelevansky. Courtesy Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Photo credit: Josh Franzos

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Why have you stepped down as director of the Carnegie?

I turned 70 in July, a fact my daughter says I shouldn't be advertising. Then I read an article saying the average lifespan in Pennsylvania was 78.8 years and I thought: "What am I doing?"

I think we accomplished a lot in the eight years I was in Pittsburgh and I'd like to help other institutions. I expect that consulting and writing about museums is in my future, along with curating and writing about the art in them.

I can't wait to get back to New York and dig in. I was born and raised there, but haven't lived there in 22 years so it's a very different place than the one I left. I am eager to get back, to really understand and contribute to the discourse.

What shows you would love to stage, but haven't yet?

A show I have long wanted to do, but which would be tough to stage in this country, is an exhibition dedicated to the great Brazilian artist [Cildo Meireles](#). A lot of his work involves a level of danger—you're meant to walk across crushed shards of glass, or through two feet of talcum powder, for instance. It would be challenging in a public institution, though well worth the effort. Cildo is an extraordinary artist and although he's extremely influential in Latin American and respected in Europe, he's not as well known here. That's a loss for us.

I organized Cildo's first solo exhibition outside Brazil in 1990 at MoMA "[Projects: Cildo Meireles](#)", and he's one of several artists whose work I engaged with early in my career and have recently been looking back at. For example, in 1998, I co-curated the exhibition "[Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-68](#)", which focused on her years in New York.

I gave a talk for the [Judd Foundation](#) about the friendship between Donald Judd and Kusama—she was a mentor to him, which at first seems unlikely but then makes perfect sense. I'm hoping to write about Ad Reinhardt for a Zwirner publication, which takes me back to an exhibition I worked on with [Bill Rubin](#) at MoMA in 1991.

Three years later I organized a show there called "[Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the 1990s](#)" which Rachel Whiteread participated in, and recently I wrote a catalogue essay for her current retrospective at the Tate, which is traveling to the National Gallery in DC. It's been a real pleasure seeing how those artists have grown, and how my response to their work has changed, too.

Are there new subjects you'd like to tackle?



Installation view of "Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium" at Carnegie Museum of Art 2016-17). Photo credit: Bryan Conley

I have certain shows in mind that would be great to do, but it's the wrong time to stage them. The idea of Primitivism has always been a charged topic, but that search for something more pure is so embedded in the art of every era that it's a really important subject. But now is too volatile a time to explore it.

You have to wait for a moment when people feel more open to certain topics. You don't do artists any favors by showing them at the wrong time, so it's important to have some sensitivity to that.

Do you think we're in an especially retrospective moment?

I do. We're thinking about who we overlooked—artists who were lost to history because their contributions were undervalued. We're also looking to countries whose artists we've previously ignored. It's interesting—you could trace on a map how the notion of "international" has expanded from the first Carnegie International exhibition in 1896 to the present ([Ingrid Schaffner](#), the curator of the [2018 International](#), is actually doing this).

You went to Brazil in the 1980s when few other people were. What compelled you to go?

I was very junior when I first went to Brazil in 1989 for MoMA, and have always assumed that I got to go because none of the other curators were interested. For me, the New York art scene felt difficult at that time. It was the era of the movie Wall Street and the glorification of production and wealth. By the end of the 1980s a lot of art that was getting attention in New York seemed too big, too overproduced and too expensive. I called it "Reagan-era art". Brazil provided a welcome contrast.

Why weren't people paying more attention to South America?

Up until the 1980s, nobody in America was really even paying attention to Europe. In the decades after the world wars, the art world here was mainly involved in building its own canon. Then people started to look more seriously at Europe, and after that, Latin America, Asia and now Africa.

Awareness seems to happen in waves. Much of that change has to do with globalization. Some of it is just the search for novelty and new markets but it also reflects changing values and the increasing recognition that artists beyond Western Europe and North America have produced important work, and that we need to better understand the rest of the world.

Also—Louise Bourgeois said that the art world loves young men and old women. I think there's something to that.

What are the major challenges museums currently face?



Installation view of "Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium" at Carnegie Museum of Art. Photo credit: Bryan Conley

Just like the rest of the culture there is a sharp divide between those who have enormous private wealth and those who don't. That's reflected in the wealthier museums: can an institution get too big or be too crowded, and how do you deal with that and find meaning in it?

I'm especially interested in legacy institutions in mid-sized cities, like the Carnegie, which are facing very real challenges that many people are unaware of. There are lots of those museums, and they house some of our greatest art. But many of those cities no longer have the wealth they once did. As the split between the rich and poor becomes greater, philanthropists tend to pivot towards grassroots organizations and individuals in acute need. There are very few museum directors today who wouldn't tell you that it was just murder trying to raise funds for an exhibition.

How do you deal with that?

By constantly proving the museum's value to its community. You will get support from national foundations and a little bit from the government, but the greatest amount will come from local donors, so you have to make sure they understand the positive impact that the museum has on the city, the region and its residents. And you have to be welcoming and participatory. You can no longer sit back and say: "We have the expertise and you need to listen to us." That's not going to fly.

What is your stance on de-accessioning?

There are two major questions involved with de-accessioning. One is whether museums should do it at all, and the other is whether they should be able to use the funds generated by it for operating expenses.

De-accessioning is a really important part of collections stewardship and I fully support it when done with care and transparency. Most museums in this country have works in the basement that will never see the light of day. Typically, institutions show less than 10% of their collections at any one time so careful de-accessioning is a necessity.

Some works are not what they purport to be; others might be damaged and have little left of the artist's original creation; while others works are simply not great examples. You have to research each object in depth and formally gather a lot of outside expertise.

What about the question of using funds for operating expenses?

That's much harder to answer. It has traditionally been met with a resounding no from the field and organizations that set its standards, such as the [American Alliance of Museums](#) and the [Association of Art Museum Directors](#).

The worry is that a board might sell works from the collection as an easy way of paying outstanding bills. I remember a friend remarking when [LA Moca](#) went through its financial crisis that the institution—which is so deep in art by Rothko and Rauschenberg—could have sold a minor work by each artist without compromising the collection and solved its economic problems. But that's not something you would want to happen without oversight. What would it involve? And what power would the overseers have to enforce their judgments? There's no easy answer.

I once stood up at an AAMD meeting and asked if there was some way we could imagine doing this in extreme and worthy situations, and the membership practically threw rotten tomatoes at me, so that was that.

You have been a big champion of museums focusing on their permanent collections.

I feel more strongly than ever that the collection is the measure of the museum. For too long it's been playing second fiddle to our exhibition programs.

When there is a lack of money, the collection becomes the focus. The legendary curator Bill Rubin told me that when he started at MoMA in the late 1960s all of the exhibitions were in the operating budget, presumably because there were few funding sources. It's something I would like to do more research on because it seems likely that, in that context, the collection takes on a different meaning.

We have gone through a period in which we had lots of sources of funding and now that's drying up, so we need to look again at the collection and consider its role.

Before I left the Carnegie, we were working on a project called "Collection as Laboratory," which I hope will continue. For three years following the 2018 Carnegie International, we planned not to do large loan exhibitions but instead be as nimble as possible with the permanent collection in an iterative and more team-based way than is traditional, with education and outreach teams paired with curatorial teams. In the end, I hoped it would yield a greater understanding of the role of the

collection in our novelty-driven world.



Installation view of "Paul Thek: Diver" at Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2011). Photo credit: Tom Little

What were you most proud of during your time at the Carnegie?

Every museum has its particular mission and set of goals. At the Carnegie we were very aware that our mission was, from its inception, both local and global. When I got to Pittsburgh in 2009 admissions annually were at about 290,000 and this year they're on track to be around 400,000. We changed our marketing strategies, which shifted the demographic of our visitors—it became considerably younger, which begins to build a future for the museum.

I'm particularly proud of the Hillman Photography Initiative, which is a unique incubator for ideas about a medium in the midst of radical change.

I'm also grateful for an excellent staff that made it possible for me to co-curate "[Paul Thek: Diver, A Retrospective](#)" (2011) and "[Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium](#)" (2016-17). That's rare for a director.