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Transcript: Guggenheim Director Richard Armstrong

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Charlotte Burns: Hello, and welcome to In Other Words, where we cover everything you ever wanted to know about the art world but didn’t know who to ask. I’m your host, Charlotte Burns, and today I’m joined by Richard Armstrong, who’s been the director of the Guggenheim Museum for ten years.

Armstrong quote from interview: “I find that there’s a tension daily, mostly in my own mind, I think, between looking and listening.”

A frank and insightful thinker, Armstrong tells us his thoughts on topics from censorship to deaccessioning, but before we get to today’s episode, just a reminder to subscribe to our In Other Words newsletter at artagencypartners.com. And now, on to today’s show.

Charlotte Burns: Richard, thank you for being here.

Richard Armstrong: Happy to be here.
Charlotte Burns: You were appointed director of the Guggenheim in 2008, so happy ten-year anniversary. I was reading an interview from when you were appointed in 2008, during when the then-board president said the museum had asked itself: “Do we want another maverick who puts their stamp on the museum or a seasoned expert who is a wise adult who would put the needs of the institution and staff first?” I thought that was quite fun. Is it nice to be described as a wise adult?

Richard Armstrong: [Laughs] It may have been the first time.

Charlotte Burns: How has the Guggenheim changed under your leadership? What were your goals, and how have they been met along the way so far?

Richard Armstrong: I’d say probably twofold. One was I agreed with the trustees that the museum should reconnect to the first director’s idea of its being a radical institution. We tried to, in the last ten years, to devise a program that had a cast that really looked at history in a different way, more deeply and geographically and ethnically, I’d say, in a broader fashion. So, that was one way, and the other might have been to stabilize the institution’s reputation which, as you know, sometimes suffered.

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm.

You came in after Thomas Krens, who’s been a guest of ours on an earlier podcast. He transformed the Guggenheim, and, indeed, you could say the notion of a museum itself, by expanding the Guggenheim’s global footprint, opening branches in Berlin, Venice and Bilbao, to name just a few of the realized and imagined plans.

When you joined, what were your thoughts on the globalization of museums and their management, and how have those thoughts changed?

Richard Armstrong: Honestly, because I came from a completely American background—although I was especially familiar with Venice, having gone to the Biennale many times—the general notion of having a multi-sited museum was new to me. And the idea that one would cooperate with peers elsewhere as well as try and make a cohesive idea about what Guggenheim meant at more than one place, and already New York was itself quite difficult, was challenging, and it’s proven to be that way for ten years.

Charlotte Burns: It hasn’t stopped being challenging.

Richard Armstrong: No.

Charlotte Burns: What was so challenging about New York, first of all?

Richard Armstrong: I wasn’t used to such a demanding audience.

Charlotte Burns: Do you mean the visitors, or do you mean the art world?

Richard Armstrong: Both. I mean the people who come to look at art here, many of them are tremendously discerning. Of course, many of them are practitioners, which makes the demands different because the artist audience has its own way of seeing things. Honestly, expectations had changed as well, both on the audience side and professionally.

Charlotte Burns: In what ways?

Richard Armstrong: I think people were more demanding of a semi-democratic way of looking at objects and subjects and initiatives, whereas previously you might have thought of the way those things happened as more autocratic.

And then secondarily, there was this creeping influence of technology itself. So, what had previously been an information set that was confined to a few experts with the occasional lending out now became a much broader spectrum of information, hugely more available to the world at large.

Charlotte Burns: Where do you see that now?

Richard Armstrong: That still goes forward because we’re adjusting not only to the material itself—how do we disperse information—but also, the prospect of convenience accelerates almost on an annual basis. So, what you and I might have tolerated three years ago in terms of access, we can’t tolerate today.

Charlotte Burns: We’re all much more impatient.

Richard Armstrong: And if we were younger, we’d be astonished that there was any tolerance at all.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, that’s interesting. Do you find that that’s something that visitors complain about?
Richard Armstrong: I find that there’s a tension daily, mostly in my own mind, I think, between looking and listening, or looking down instead of looking up. I was just walking down through the Giacometti exhibition, looking at it with great joy, but also wondering: “Do they recognize that this is, first of all, a tactile experience?”

Charlotte Burns: Tactile in what way? Because obviously people can’t touch.

Richard Armstrong: No, but to understand that artist best, you have to understand what do his hands do in the effort of his spirit? So data, in that case, might not be so central, whereas recognizing sensate impulse is really quite important.

Charlotte Burns: Do you find that most of your visitors are looking at their phones instead of the art?

Richard Armstrong: There I think the tension is in my own head, because I’m not exactly doing that myself, but I think most of them know how to do things in both ways at the same time, without lessening either one. I was looking at a little five- or six-year-old boy, thinking: “He’s looking, he’s flipping, he’s doing everything all at once, and for him it’s quite natural.”

Charlotte Burns: Yes, it’s just a different cadence for the brain.

You mentioned the challenges of managing sites globally, and I wondered if you could update me on two branches of the museum that have been under your purview, the Guggenheim Helsinki and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

Richard Armstrong: Guggenheim Helsinki did not come to fruition, so the city council voted against the project’s moving forward after we devoted a fair amount of effort to its realization, and on the way learned a lot of things. So, there won’t be a Guggenheim Helsinki.

Charlotte Burns: That was rejected in 2016 by the city council, and at the time you said you saw it as a, and I’m quoting you here: “reaction to the sense of engulfing internationalism, or a reaction against globalism”, adding that you were surprised by the depth of the resistance. In many ways, that was prescient to the situation we’re in now in which globalism is discussed by political leaders as a bad thing, categorically.

Richard Armstrong: Indeed.

Charlotte Burns: Did you think that was a canary in the mine, in a way?

Richard Armstrong: I wasn’t that clever. I recognized what I thought was the situation in that one country, in that one city in particular. I didn’t recognize it as having a widespread application.

Charlotte Burns: And those plans are over, there’s no way of revisiting them?

Richard Armstrong: No.

Charlotte Burns: Seems like a waste. Seems like a waste of all that time, or did you learn valuable lessons?

Richard Armstrong: We learned a lot, and I think they may have as well. They’ve just opened a new museum that was in a building that needed attention, and they’ve excavated underneath it and beside it and made what looks like a very interesting, open gallery space. This was the Amos Anderson Museum. I think I’ve heard from other people that either now or shortly there’ll be an announcement of a design, an architecture museum on the site that we’d been considering, and these are both important improvements to that situation in Helsinki, the artistic situation.

Charlotte Burns: What did you learn?

Richard Armstrong: I think we learned about what audience wants outside of New York in particular. We also learned, in my opinion, a great deal about how, in a social democratic country, not only is the idea of democracy different from the one here, but in many ways it’s better.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, how so?

Richard Armstrong: Bigger participation of voices, I think a better distribution of capital, and finally, that in Finland in particular, that tremendous emphasis and honor given to educators. That makes for a healthy society.

Charlotte Burns: Did you bring any of that back with you here, do you think, to the—

Richard Armstrong: Well, personally.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. Personally and professionally.
Richard Armstrong: I think I’ve always put great store by the educators inside the museum. I only wished the culture at large recognized the teachers and educators are really some of the most valuable people in our future well-being. I’m not sure that exists today.

Charlotte Burns: No. No, I think you’re right.

Richard Armstrong: Then let me say something about Abu Dhabi.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that.

Richard Armstrong: Various kinds of delays based on geographic changes in that region, changes in leadership there, fluctuations in oil prices, but I’d say as of a few weeks ago, a new sense that the building will be realized and that Frank’s design will be realized, and we’re looking forward to a real opening date at this point.

Charlotte Burns: That’s fantastic. What changed? You said as of a few weeks ago there’s a new—

Richard Armstrong: We had a very productive meeting at Frank Gehry’s studio, and everyone realized the Louvre is successful. This kind of project can be hugely beneficial to society and to the world both. And finally, an intermediary museum of national history in UAE is being put up, the Sheikh Zayed Museum, and so it’s being realized now and that meant that the sequence could reopen, because we were meant to be third.

Charlotte Burns: Right, I see. Do you have a sense of how far out we are from that?

Richard Armstrong: It’s a complicated building. It’s probably more than four years.

Charlotte Burns: And the collection there will be work from the 1960s to the present day?

Richard Armstrong: Indeed.

Charlotte Burns: Is there a particular focus or distinction between the collection there or the collection here?

Richard Armstrong: Collection there, considerably more international and deeper in its regard for achievement elsewhere, so you’ll be seeing new artists who achieved things in 1967 that we knew very little about.

Charlotte Burns: Oh, interesting.

Richard Armstrong: Particularly in the Middle East, but elsewhere as well. In some ways, it’s a more egalitarian collection, let’s say. We do have some, of course, very crucial anchors, chronological anchors, and the building itself will be relatively radical as well.

Charlotte Burns: How exciting.

Richard Armstrong: Yeah.

Charlotte Burns: There’s a couple of places I could take this question here. I think I’m going to take it to something you said in 2009 about the New York collection. You were quoted as saying: “The collection needs to be shaped. It’s slightly misshapen. One wonders: ‘Does one need to own 114 Kandinskys?’”

Here I’m going to ask you about the thorny topic of deaccessioning. It’s a very controversial topic. People are firmly entrenched on different sides of this, and you’ve always been very pragmatic about this. You’ve said that people have to be more pragmatic: “They have to stop being righteous. They have to stop being proud of the fact that the museum died, but the collection is intact. That’s where we’re headed in a number of provincial places. A lot of museums are not going to make it. There needs to be an infusion of pragmatism.” That was almost a decade ago. How have your thoughts changed?

Richard Armstrong: Not at all. Because I’m a little given to hyperbole, we haven’t seen the collapses I might have imagined, but there’s a tremendous imbalance today between expectations and reality. Many people are struggling for operating money, let alone acquisitions money. Many institutions are faced with giant responsibilities in taking care of collections that desperately need, in my opinion, to be reshaped, and I stand by all those words.

Charlotte Burns: In September, we issued a newsletter, our back-to-school newsletter, in which we made predictions of things that may happen this coming season, and one of those things was that there may be more closed-door conversations about deaccessioning. More pragmatic, more frank conversations. This seems to be a moment in which museum directors are being a little bit more vociferous about the need for an open conversation about change. Do you think that that’s true?

Richard Armstrong: There is an open conversation at AAMD in particular. What there needs to be, I think, is an agreed-upon set of rules. I think the conversation’s been lively and informative. Now we need, I think, to form some sort of
Charlotte Burns: Do you think that there is a move towards a point of consensus?

Richard Armstrong: Well, because I’m on the side of reform, I would say yes.

Charlotte Burns: What would you do? If you wrote the rules, what would you write?

Richard Armstrong: I think we need to admit that in changing the collection, some of the capital that comes from placing things elsewhere should then be re-devoted to the attention of what stays. So, that means, let’s say the museum garners $100 from that sale—

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: —of whatever it is. Some percentage of that should be re-devoted to taking care of what’s left behind. Because the day-to-day expenses of maintaining these giant collections is really quite overwhelming.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, absolutely. And they’re so expensive now, the value of art’s gone up and the collections are just getting larger and larger.

Richard Armstrong: And in a good way, that’s really not germane. Really the germane part is how deeply do you see the collection as a self-sustaining entity? And that’s a big question.

Charlotte Burns: How would you answer that?

Richard Armstrong: I would say it’s probably institution specific. I think the best thing that we can do as thinkers about the field is show a kind of bare minimum of the ethics that have to be followed.

Charlotte Burns: What would those ethics be?

Richard Armstrong: I think money shouldn’t be devoted to certain kinds of activities in the museum, from deaccessioning.

Charlotte Burns: Like operating costs?

Richard Armstrong: Well, there you could argue that paying conservators and rent, for example, on storage spaces is an operating cost.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: But it’s germane to that exact issue. So, I wouldn’t say operating costs, I’d just say let’s clearly define where the money could be devoted, and which activities are actually correct, and let each institution administer that in a way that’s defensible.

Charlotte Burns: This is something that a lot of museum directors are talking about, that one of the big challenges facing institutions is this idea of operating costs. And it’s something that’s come up on our podcast quite often, this idea that most institutions—I think Glenn Lowry said every institution apart from perhaps the Getty—this is something that they struggle with, is the idea that people don’t really want to give money towards fixing the leaking ceilings and the faulty toilets.

What the solution there? Is there one that you can see?

Richard Armstrong: I mean, ideally we’d have a bigger participation from public sources.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Richard Armstrong: In the Guggenheim’s case, we get very, very little public money support, and yet I would argue that we’re one of the greatest attributes of the city, and possibly the country.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: So, to me that’s an injustice, an ongoing injustice. And a misappropriation of funds.

But I think we have to be clear that we’re not looking at political leaders who value culture particularly, in Congress or elsewhere. So, the possibility of that changing in the short term looks to me like it’s relatively feeble.

Charlotte Burns: Do you think that’s because we judge success culturally by metrics that are perhaps faulty? I’m thinking here specifically of attendance. I was thinking about the ways in which the attendance figures for museums to some extent
have become the metric of success, and I’ve been wondering recently about whether that inhibits programmatic thinking or collection acquisitions to the extent that people maybe feel driven to make programmatic decisions that are more than likely to get people to come through the doors.

Richard Armstrong: We don’t want to be responsible for the museum shrinking. Unless you’re shrinking towards a goal that everyone’s agreed to.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. Who goes first?

Richard Armstrong: So, I think people have in their minds: “How do I further the profile of my institution and also share knowledge in a different way or in a wider way?” But attendance has always been a metric since the 1900s. It’s not new. The question is, are we overly obsessed with a certain kind of statistic?

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: Because we have to keep remembering that our impact typically is generational and that little five and a half or six-year-old boy I saw today might be deeply affected by his visit to Giacometti, but that won’t manifest itself for another number of years.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: Even 15 more years or 20 more years. So, I’d look at what we’re doing in terms of capital expense and psychic expense and intellectual expenses as very important long-term investment.

Charlotte Burns: What do you count as psychic expense?

Richard Armstrong: Well there’s always tension. Does someone like it? Does someone not like it?

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm.

Richard Armstrong: Will that be a platform for that person to attack me personally, which happens. You know, curators tend to be sort of complex and slightly fragile people. So, when things get cloudy, they suffer.

Charlotte Burns: As a curator yourself, of longstanding, do you include yourself in that? Do you think that becoming a director has sort of made you more impervious?

Richard Armstrong: Well, I think I have a thicker skin, and I’ve evolved away from the world of ideas.

Charlotte Burns: Talking about the world of ideas and criticism, the Guggenheim has been subject to a couple of high profile protests recently and that’s not anything new, but earlier this year, the museum pulled three controversial works from a survey of Chinese art after protests by animal rights groups. And interestingly, two of those works were included in the Bilbao show. The works were pulled in New York after threats of violence and—

Richard Armstrong: Well they weren’t really pulled. They were there physically. In one case, in Xu Bing’s case, we memorialized what his intention was.

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm.

Richard Armstrong: Another piece, the "Theater of the World" piece [A Case Study of Transference (1994)], we showed empty and then a video that was really the biggest provocation. We kept the monitor, but it was empty with the explanation next to it. So, I wouldn’t say pulled, I’d say altered.

Charlotte Burns: That was a tough call to make. How did you decide which way to go?

Richard Armstrong: I came to a moment of recognizing that the hysteria was so high that the threat of violence was real, and you can’t allow your coworkers to be subject to that kind of threat.

Beyond which, we can imagine—I could because of my position, possibly—imagine a show with three or four hundred other things in it that was completely swamped by a negative reaction to three things. It’s not mathematically or psychically defensible and there was a giant amount of hysteria around this.

So, it was, we were caught off guard and this notion of digital swarming, which now we’ve seen manifest at other parts of—

Charlotte Burns: This happened simultaneously at various other museums. The Whitney, it was happening around the same time.
Richard Armstrong: We are hopeful now in the next few months of having a private conversation with leadership and our peers around New York in particular about how best to act while it’s happening and how best to prepare for it.

Charlotte Burns: What would you say, having lived through that storm? What advice would you give?

Richard Armstrong: I’d say the principle thing would be a consensus with staff and board about whatever decisions you make, which we had ultimately, but it was sort of ad hoc.

Charlotte Burns: Right. I remember when I lived in London, and I worked at Hauser&Wirth gallery, and we had an exhibition of Jason Rhoades work coming up and it contained a copy of the Koran, and the show was opening just after the London subway bombings. And we were all asked if we felt that it was fine and safe to have a major exhibition right by a dense part of the urban population, that that was in the old building by Piccadilly. And all the staff were asked how we felt, and we all said yes, we think we should open the show. But it was interesting how, in the span of a few weeks, there hadn’t been a consideration, and then all of a sudden it was an urgent consideration, and all to do with the terrorist bombings in the city and how that impacts your thinking. How do you—

Richard Armstrong: Well, let’s say this. That the internet empowers ideologues.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: And some of them are fanatics. Now, do we ever encounter them physically? Or are they just shouting out into wilderness?

Charlotte Burns: It’s hard to tell, right?

Richard Armstrong: You can’t tell, you know. But we saw evidence that some of these people were real. We asked for advice from the police department, and they had one solution. It wasn’t the one I wanted. So—

Charlotte Burns: Their solution was to take the works down?

Richard Armstrong: No, to have armed guards in the building.

Charlotte Burns: Oh wow. More policing, more guns.

Richard Armstrong: Mm-hmm.

Charlotte Burns: You felt that that wasn’t the right idea?

Richard Armstrong: No.

Charlotte Burns: Why?

Richard Armstrong: To me, the museum is meant to be a kind of sanctuary for your imagination, and if you care to, a place where you can learn something. I’m not interested in walking around in a militarized zone.

Charlotte Burns: No.

Richard Armstrong: And I can’t defend that either.

Charlotte Burns: Wow. Does that have logistical impacts then, in terms of things like insurance, if the police have told you that you should have armed guards and—

Richard Armstrong: Well that, we didn’t look into that. I mean, I rejected it out of hand.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: I felt everyone who knew what was at stake would have rejected it as well.

Charlotte Burns: Absolutely. It’s a different kind of thinking. I wanted to ask you about the challenges and opportunities facing museums today, from your point of view, someone who’s worked in institutions over many years now.

Richard Armstrong: Big challenges. I’m not sure they are so new, they’ve just become more poignant as one gets older.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah.

Richard Armstrong: To me, the principle challenge would be, how do you guard and encourage and inform people who are
non-conformist? Which I think is, if you’re in the contemporary art world, I think that’s the museum’s principle activity, to make sure that that flame of creativity and non-conformity stays alive in a very pure way.

Charlotte Burns: How do you do that?

Richard Armstrong: I think by sharing the very best of what’s being made at the moment, and encouraging younger artists to look at that very carefully. So, I’m clean and happy that we had the Danh Vō show.

Charlotte Burns: It was such a beautiful show.

Richard Armstrong: Because to me, that’s what that manifested. If I were a young artist looking at it—there’s a path, there’s a way and there’s a real imperative to stay true to yourself.

The other one, the counterbalancing question becomes, relevance and ignorance. Can you make the museum relevant? That’s a word that is out there a lot, but what people don’t say frequently enough is, how do you counterweight ignorance?

Charlotte Burns: What do you mean? Can you expand a bit?

Richard Armstrong: Well, typically a lot of the audiences today don’t know what the heck you’re talking about, even with Giacometti. It’s all news to them. So, we might have an undereducated populous I’d say, and you want to entice them into the experience, share with them information, but you want it to be information of many kinds. It needn’t be data about his or her birth and death and all that.

But there’s information inside objects and art itself. It’s a kind of spiritual information. And that has to be made accessible to the person.

Charlotte Burns: How do you do that? Is that to do with the presentation?

Richard Armstrong: I think to some degree it is. There has to be a comprehension on the curator’s part that: “I’m opening many, many doors by the way I look at things and how I share that vision with the audience.”

Charlotte Burns: One of the things that defines the… I was thinking about this idea of way-finding. Museums often direct people with closing off walls and creating temporary walls, and obviously the Guggenheim in New York can’t do that, because there are two directions, up or down. And how do you think about that when you’re installing, to what extent has that—

Richard Armstrong: Well, I used to think that was the most peculiar building I’d been in. That was more when I was in a Marcel Breuer box over in Madison and 75th. Now, I find it quite exhilarating. It has its limitations, but they’re typically, I think, overcome by the notion that I’m looking at narrative that builds, literally, as I go forward, beyond which I’m seeing my fellow citizens possibly in a different way, not only the ones nearby me, but also the ones across the way.

Charlotte Burns: Mm-hmm.

Richard Armstrong: And then finally, the void in the center of the building is occupied, so do I see those occupants? The spirit of artists; the spirit of ambition; the spirit of achievement; the spirit of civilization. It’s truly what was called for in 1943. It’s really a temple of the spirit.

Charlotte Burns: Yeah, that sort of secular—

Richard Armstrong: To me, that’s quite enhancing, and I think it’s something that we should be hugely proud of and always keen on complementing and adding to.

Charlotte Burns: Do you find that certain kinds of art display better than others in that space?

Richard Armstrong: I must say projections are difficult, because it’s hard to control the light, and also we don’t have any real depth of presentation physically. And then to be superficial, typically horizontal things work better than vertical because Wright made some very low ceilings, in my opinion.

Charlotte Burns: Yes. Yeah.

Richard, how did you come to art?

Richard Armstrong: Ironically, I thought that I was going to be a politician.

Charlotte Burns: [Laughs] That’s so great. What changed?
Richard Armstrong: 1968. I worked in Washington in the Senate as a page, and one day, I think around 1966 or ’67, let’s say, I was in the Phillips Collection and I saw a picture that I thought made sense. It was the first time I ever really looked at a painting, even though I’d looked around when I was a kid in Kansas City, which had a number of great opportunities to look at things.

From then on, I started seeing art and particularly painting, let’s say at the beginning, as a kind of vocabulary, and as I was a verbal person, the two interests meshed. And then in ’68 when things were so chaotic and negative, I moved to France, and there were really not so many other things to do in France but to look at art.

Charlotte Burns: And have some lovely wine and baguettes.

Richard Armstrong: I couldn’t afford the wine, but I certainly had the baguettes.

Charlotte Burns: [Laughs] What did you see in France? Did you find yourself going back to certain places, to certain—

Richard Armstrong: I recognized quickly I was a 19th-century person and I had an undercurrent taste for architecture, so when I was in Dijon I got to see up close Romanesque churches, which I found endlessly fascinating. Then later when I was living in Paris, it was all about the 19th and 20th century, so that was an in-depth immersion, partially based on the fact that I didn’t have any money, so I went to museums—

Charlotte Burns: Which were free.

Richard Armstrong: And looked hard, because I was also quite hungry. Not just metaphorically, but also literally.

Charlotte Burns: [Laughs] And then you came back to the States. Did you decide then to pursue this career? How did you—

Richard Armstrong: Yeah, I came back, and I got a degree from a school, and the school, a college, had been one of the original participants in the Whitney Independent Study Program in the late 1960s, which Roberta [Smith, co-chief art critic for The New York Times] went to before me. Through that connection, I’m not sure why exactly, I came up to New York, and that was in 1973, right after I graduated, and went through that Whitney program.

Charlotte Burns: It seems to have been such an amazing program for so many people.

Richard Armstrong: It was a very big feeder, I’ll say that, yeah.

Charlotte Burns: What did it do for you?

Richard Armstrong: It got me to New York, which I didn’t even know I wanted necessarily to make my hometown, as I have. It gave me the sustained opportunity to be around creative people, and I couldn’t even articulate that in 1972. But in 1973, after having been with people who made things and thought about things and did things, I realized that was the milieu that I wanted to be part of, even in a minor way, which was the way it was. I was on the periphery all the time, of course.

Charlotte Burns: Where from there?

Richard Armstrong: I stayed on at the Whitney. Marcia Tucker asked me to work for her for about a year and a half, then she one day told me: “You have to go into exile.” So, I went to La Jolla Museum in California.

Charlotte Burns: Why did she tell you to go into exile?

Richard Armstrong: She thought it was a better way to get going than to stay in New York.

Charlotte Burns: You think she was right?

Richard Armstrong: Retrospectively, yeah.

Charlotte Burns: But at the time—

Richard Armstrong: No, when I discovered I was going to California under her aegis I was happy. I’d never lived in California! [Laughter]

Then, let’s see. Came back to the Whitney, then I went to Pittsburgh. Then I came back to New York again, so this is the third time. Completely charming, the third time.

Charlotte Burns: Third time’s a trick.

Richard Armstrong: Yeah.
Charlotte Burns: I haven’t asked you what the Guggenheim’s working on. What’s coming up next?

Richard Armstrong: Yeah. Remember that 2019 will be the 60th anniversary of the building.

We’ll shortly be opening two complementary exhibitions, one about the Swedish turn-of-the-century abstractionist called Hilma af Klint, and then we have Rebecca Quaytman, R.H. Quaytman, responding to those pictures in new work that she’s made as she was one of the Swedish artist’s greatest advocates for many years.

Charlotte Burns: That’ll be a beautiful show.

Richard Armstrong: It could be quite, I think, elegant and very eye-opening. Then we’ve invited six artists to look at the collection and make a view of what we have and how it’s influenced them or not, and that’s called “Artistic License”, and at the same moment will be a year-long reexamination of Robert Mapplethorpe, who was so important inside the Guggenheim’s history.

Charlotte Burns: Why was Mapplethorpe so important?

Richard Armstrong: The museum hadn’t previously collected photography, so it was his work, and the gift from the foundation really opened up that commitment in a deep way and launched our institution into a concern with that medium, which I think was crucial in its evolution.

And then next year, in the course of 2019, we’ve invited Rem Koolhaas and his team to take over the building, and they’ve chosen an examination of countryside around the world, so we are mounting a show called “Countryside”,

Charlotte Burns: So interesting.

Richard Armstrong: Hope so. Think so. Actually, I know so.

Charlotte Burns: Well yes; you’ve seen the plans

Richard Armstrong: I think we’ll have a very rich upcoming 15 months or so, and great programs beyond that, but interesting moment to reconsider what was that ambition that began in 1943, found its concrete realization in 1959 to build the Frank Lloyd Wright building, and then what can that mean to us differently today.

I think museums are central to our collective realization of who we have been, who we are, and who we can be, so I’m very keen that museums, as a manifestation of civilization, go on being healthy and questioning, of course, but also stable and very confident in their capacity to not only discern what’s important from the past and look carefully at what we’re doing today, but also help us shape ourselves for a future that sometimes seems either overwhelming and/or mildly frightening.

Charlotte Burns: How do you do that? How do you safeguard against that? Is that to do with funding? Is that to do with exhibitions?

Richard Armstrong: No. I think it all has to do with an attitude of recognizing that our principal audience has to be inquisitive people, and they manifest their inquisitiveness in so many different ways, and we have to be able to accommodate all of that and we have to encourage it, welcome it and learn from it.

Charlotte Burns: Very well said. I agree wholeheartedly with that. Richard, thank you so much for being my guest today. This has been illuminating.

Richard Armstrong: My pleasure. Thank you.