

## **“NO PLACE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE?”**

The Contemporary Arts Center, originally named the Modern Art Society in 1939, was founded by three 1938 graduates of high profile eastern colleges – Smith College and Bryn Mawr: Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack, and Rita Rentschler. Peggy Crawford also had a family friend, Edward M. M. Warburg, a philanthropist who was on the board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a co-founder of the New York City Ballet Company, and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The founder of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr, also provided post-graduate encouragement for them to stick with the visual arts.

It was next to impossible to find a job in New York City in 1938, largely due to the protracted economic doldrum created by the Great Depression. Mr. Warburg suggested that the young women start their own museum in Cincinnati, rather than to go hungry in New York. Consequently, the Modern Art Society's first exhibit consisted of modern paintings from private Cincinnati collections. It opened in December, 1939. The Modern Art Society's home was in the basement of the Cincinnati Art Museum. The fledgling Museum's assets consisted of a table, a card file, a half-dozen chairs, and a portable typewriter.

There is a bit of irony here. The CAC's founders could not find employment in New York, but the Sunday, August 17, 2017 issue of *The New York Times* called their museum

experience a must see – one of the sites that should be visited during a 36 hour weekend spent in Cincinnati.

Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, I was fortunate to have a first class art museum two miles from my home. The Dayton Art Institute was the beneficiary of gifts of art and funding by families who took pride in the arts community. The list of donors engraved on the marble walls included the Ketterings (General Motors), the Meads (Mead Paper), the Cox Family (Broadcasting), as well as a number of successful industrialists who were proud to share their collections with our community.

My mother compelled me to take art classes during the summer. So much for my sandlot baseball career. Also, it was then that I learned that, if I had anything to do with an art museum, my name might be on its walls, but never upon the art itself.

Thirty-four years later, in 1973, Thom Collins, the curator of the Contemporary Arts Center at its inaugural exhibition at its present address on the northwest corner of Sixth and Walnut Streets in Cincinnati, wrote that, “The transformative power of art objects is often discussed as distinct from but on a par with that of religious relics. It is not surprising, then, that the spaces built to house them throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were designed to resemble temples.”<sup>1</sup> He observed that the Doric façade of the Cincinnati Art Museum prescribes “reverential behavior in visitors” due to “elements borrowed directly from religious worship” rather than “new inventions.”<sup>2</sup>

My involvement with the temple that houses the Contemporary Arts became a matter of fate when I began my career at Bartlett & Co. forty years ago. Bartlett & Co.'s history is intertwined with the Contemporary Arts Center. Jane Steinfirst, the mother of Bill Friedlander, who was my mentor and my friend, was a charter member of the Cincinnati Modern Art Society, now the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center. The Contemporary Arts Center had been housed in the arcade section of Bartlett & Co.'s home between Fourth and Fifth Streets and Walnut. Our annual employee meetings took place each year in one of the Museum's galleries. It was at this time in this twelve thousand square foot museum that the Contemporary Arts Center and its director at the time, Dennis Barrie, had been acquitted of obscenity charges in conjunction with an exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The case centered upon seven out of one hundred seventy-five photographs that were presented in this exhibit. The seven photographs, incidentally, were cordoned off and made inaccessible to visitors under twenty-one years of age.

It may have been that I felt compelled to be a member of the CAC, or it may have been my friendship with Dick and Lois Rosenthal, that spurred a fundraising consultant to include me as part of a survey to determine the feasibility of building a new facility. At the end of the telephone survey, I was asked to impart any other knowledge or feelings that I might have regarding the project. My response, not particularly tidy, was that the interviewer would be adding more value by not talking to schleps, albeit committed schleps, like me, but by interviewing people who might love Cincinnati but, due to Mapplethorpe, had a particular disdain for the Contemporary Arts Center. Her candid

response was that certain philanthropists had been asked to participate but, as voiced by their respective representatives, declined.

Perhaps a year after that, I was solicited by a CAC trustee and Charles Desmarais, the executive director of the CAC, while being presented a video architectural rendering of “the temple.” I was receptive, the reason being, which I stated emphatically at that time as I do today: 1) the building would be a work of art in and of itself, and 2) I needed to give to this particular institution particularly due to its mission – to educate our city and its visitors. I thought it important to be associated with a thing of beauty, but imperative to make a social statement to introduce new artworks and artists to Cincinnati for years to come.

The incredible generosity of Lois and Dick Rosenthal, Stan and Mickey Kaplan, and Otto Budig, Jr. was a winning combination. Furthermore, the local banking community felt compelled to become involved due to their support. Then again, Mayor Roxanne Qualls pledged \$4.8 million from the City as a challenge to the private donors. The City’s challenge was met – a commitment that was made before an architect had been chosen.

By January, 2003, which was approximately five months prior to the museum’s opening on May 30-31, 2003, the building appeared to be a work of art, at least to me. The architect, Zaha Hadid, referred to the floor of the first level as an “urban carpet” – a continuation of the sidewalk into the posterior wall of the lobby, an extension of the city outside its front door.” The building was, in a sense, a pile of rectangular spaces and

cubes, each accessible to each other by elevators, but even more breathtaking, stairs that seemed suspended in air. Even as I write this letter, I am having trouble remembering exactly how the steps are affixed to the spaces to which they give access. Suffice to say that, on a visit to the construction site in March, the sight of two stairways intersecting in an “X” by the fifth floor, in a then undedicated gallery, spurred me to become involved. The pride in my aesthetic sensibilities which, fortunately, turned out to be correct, would have made my mother proud. My baseball career had been a non-starter, in any case.

There were, of course, heroes involved. One that comes to mind is David Crafts, the former manager of Procter & Gamble’s corporate building department, who served as the Center’s plant representative. Dave made many of the parties involved better than they might have been. Zaha Hadid’s Urban Carpet, that was an extension of the Sixth Street sidewalk outside the façade of the building to the back wall of the lobby, turned out to be a near impossibility to create. Dave Crafts supervised the construction of molds into which concrete would be poured to determine the adaptability of the curvature at the base of the back wall of the lobby. This mold trial took place four blocks south on the banks of the Ohio River.

The pre-opening banquet and ceremony on May 30 was, if not an otherworld experience, it was definitely “other city.” The facility was more beautiful than anyone could have imagined. Zaha was happy, something that was perhaps the most surreal aspect of the evening. The trustees and the staff, whenever we approached one another, there were hugs, smiles impossible to restrain, a sense of pride beyond belief, so much so that we

wondered if we were worthy. “Somewhere better than this space?” Maybe, just maybe, our community could rise to the occasion and to the institution.

Herbert Musekamp, the senior architecture critic for *The New York Times*, put it in an unabashed and succinct way: “Might as well blurt it out: the Rosenthal Center is the most important American building to be completed since the end of the Cold War.”<sup>3</sup> I am once again reminded of Peggy Crawford, Betty Pollock, and Rita Renschler who left NYC to come back home.

The national and international reviews of the facility were sensational, sensational universally and sensational without qualification. *The National Observer*, however, did make the observation that the new museum would seem to be an anomaly in a city like Cincinnati, given its reputation for censorship of the arts in conjunction with the Mapplethorpe exhibit in 1990 and the more recent racial strife in the city.

Apparently, this censorship predated Mapplethorpe by fifty years by some of our citizens: “Gentlemen, as a local taxpayer and resident, I protest against the idiotic exhibition of this so-called artist (Picasso) at our city museum, which is meant only for real works of art of our masters,” wrote Frank Kouba, Cincinnati, in 1940. We obviously did not need to wait for the Mapplethorpe exhibition in April, 1990 (*Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*). Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica,” which he created in 1937, was part of the CAC Exposition “Picasso – 40 Years of his Art.” “Guernica” is widely regarded as Picasso’s masterpiece.

The CAC's facility had been busy at the corner of Walnut and Fifth Streets, overlooking the bus terminal across the street. Over 400 exhibitions took place at this location. Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Paul Klee, Alexander Calder, Roy Lichtenstein, and a myriad of others come to mind.

However, it was during a board meeting at this location that Stanley Kaplan whispered into Dick Rosenthal's ear that he had an idea for a new location for the museum. They walked from Fifth Street to the northwest corner of Sixth and Walnut, the former location of Batsakes Hat Shop. The two gentlemen walked off the size of the lot, which ultimately turned out to be 11,000 square feet. The new museum contains a total exhibition area of 80,000 square feet on seven floors. The latter figure is impressive in one respect: the Contemporary Arts Center owns no art work – *i.e.*, there are no permanent pieces of art in the museum. In other words, the museum is compelled to utilize a tremendous amount of space, thereby testing the efficacy of the curatorial staff. In fact, as a non-collecting museum, or *kunsthalle*, the museum owns no art, but must fill a tremendous amount of space. It is the largest art museum of this kind in the world.

It is difficult to forget the evening when the Contemporary Arts Center opened its doors at the end of May, 2003. Had someone blindfolded me the night of the grand opening and then removed the blindfold in the lobby, I would have thought that I was in an upscale opening in one of the great cities of the world. The galleries were glittering. The attendees were in awe. Thom Collins, our curator, even after describing an art museum

as a sacred place, might have abandoned his opinion of the art museum as a sacred place. Many of the exhibitions were stunning, some humorous, some gratifying inasmuch as they portrayed examples of human kindness and fellowship.

My angst regarding the reaction that Cincinnati would have to its new museum that spring day in 2003 was not attenuated a few days after the opening when Peter Bronson, a crucial member of our city's thought police and a columnist of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, decided to set his sights on the Lois and Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in his June 4, 2003 column. Mr. Bronson, at times, had been given to making references to "those people from the east" or "those artsy people in New York" when writing about themes he considered repugnant. In his column four days after the CAC opened, he felt compelled to attack Zhang Huan, due to his standing on an American flag, an image which was freeze-framed in the *Cincinnati Enquirer's* June 2 edition. It is inappropriate to take a snapshot of a twenty-five minute performance art exhibit, especially given that Mr. Huan's work centered upon his love for the United States and its flag. His performance was about protecting our flag, not desecrating it.

Mr. Bronson asserted that the taxpayers who contributed \$10 million to build the CAC "were thanked with another poke in the eye." This assertion needs to be examined. The positive economic impact to our community through the museum's first full year of operation turned out to be \$51,150,000, comprised of the ripple effect created by the CAC's operating budget, the construction of the new \$25,000,000 facility, and the revenue that the city was expected to receive from visitors to downtown.<sup>4</sup> There was concern that



there would be as many as 7,000 people attending the grand opening night. Over 14,000 people came. Most of the restaurants downtown had record nights. Mr. Bronson refers to the \$10,000,000 from the city and state as a contribution. The \$10,000,000 seemed to be more of an investment to me.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Contemporary Arts Center as a business enterprise could be attributable to Raphaela Platow, the museum's executive director who took over in July, 2007. Managing an 80,000 square foot art museum would be difficult. Given the fact that the museum has no permanent collection, it is more than a formidable task. Raphaela has brought intelligence, wisdom, and energy in addressing the multi-faceted business of the Contemporary Arts Center. The staff that she has brought together is critically acclaimed, with Steve Matijcio being the museum's art curator, while Drew Klein is the director of the performance space, the Black Box Theater. The 80,000 square feet also provides a learning center on its top floor. As stated, in a recent mailing, "Through the creation of art, tinkering, experimenting, and reflecting on both process and product, youths learn to work together, and to listen and respect each other's views. They are then able to take these vital skills into their communities and from these communities into the wider world."

The Black Box Theater has one performance after another. Drew Klein introduces plays, musicians, and dancers. Meanwhile, upstairs, Raphaela has six stories of galleries for art presentations. Then, outside its doors, are some familiar artists known as street artists, a new genre of artists whose work is displayed outdoors. Shepard Fairey, Keith

Haring, Ugo Rondinone, Swoon Curry, and J.R. come to mind. These individuals may not be familiar to many households, but they have adorned exterior buildings all over the world with fascinating images. Shepard Fairey, in fact, was a disc jockey on one of his visits, being a DJ for 4,000 at a dance party in the alleys that criss-cross between Seventh and Eighth Streets and Walnut and Vine Streets.

In 2004 the CAC was the very first stop for the *Beautiful Losers* traveling exhibition, which went on to tour the world for several years and featured the work of more than fifty contemporary visual artists.

The Contemporary Arts Center has a decades-long history of presenting educational programs, with school buses being a regular sight as they park in front of the museum on Sixth Street. The longest running program is the Scripps School Program, which has entered its 33<sup>rd</sup> year of reaching under-served schools across our region through multiple points of curriculum-related contact. The educational programs reach more than 17,000 participants. Now, plans are underway for the eighth floor to be converted into an educational facility, providing experiences and outreach programs to engage and interact with the art and ideas of our time.

Nowhere better than this place? It is not for me to say. Indeed, it is a gem of a museum with its ever-changing galleries and the soft parade of its visitors. It gives me the feeling that, indeed, something good is happening here.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>1</sup> Thom Collins, *Somewhere Better Than This Place: Alternative Social Experience In The Spaces Of Contemporary Art*, (Cincinnati: The Contemporary Arts Center, 2003), page 25

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, page 26

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Muschamp, *Zaha Hadid's Urban Mothership*, (New York: *The New York Times*, June 8, 2003). Section 2, page 1

<sup>4</sup> This projection of the economic impact to the Cincinnati community was prepared by Carolyn Stolper Friedman, CFRE, of Smith Beers Yunker & Company, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio. The projections are based upon a study prepared by Smith Beers Yunker & Co., Inc. presented on March 17, 1998 and extrapolated to the current (and actual) operating and capital spending experience of the C.A.C.