

The Biography of an Exhibition: Breaking the Walls of Bias, Art From Survivors (April 16 - August 2, 2002, Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra Museum)

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Similar to any performance on the human stage, museum exhibitions have a history, often become melodramatic, and, just as often, leave a memory which is either sweet or sour. The Hofstra Museum, in cooperation with the Survivors Art Foundation, originated the exhibition *Breaking the Walls of Bias: Art From Survivors*, which was installed in the Museum's Emily Lowe Gallery from April 16 to August 2, 2002. "Originated" will strike the language police as an abuse of formal English, but it is a bit of museological jargon denoting the creation of an exhibition rather than the borrowing of

one created by another. This creation of knowledge through the presentation of visual material and its publication in a catalog is one of the tasks of multipurpose museums throughout the world.

Original exhibitions take considerable time to become reality. It was August 1999 when I first became directly acquainted with the Survivors Arts Foundation. I had a passing familiarity with the concept when, months before, I referred the Foundation to an artistic family with a member recuperating from neurosurgery. Next was a request to help arrange a one day conference at the

University on brain tumors accompanied by an exhibition of visual material from members of the Survivors Art Foundation. I toured the exhibition with the Foundation's Director, kept my opinion to myself and had complete confidence that the conference and exhibition would fulfill the purpose of its advocates. Both did.

At some point during the 1999-2000 academic year, I was approached once again about an original exhibition at the Hofstra Museum by members of the Survivors Art Foundation. Assuming appropriate monitoring for artistic merit and quality, I scheduled the exhibition for the 2001-2002 academic year. It is quite common, incidentally, to schedule exhibitions years in advance and gradually increase involvement as the opening approaches. As evinced below, the Museum's various activities became fast-paced in the three months preceding mid-April 2002.

During the year 2000, the Foundation (which is really the Director and some volunteers) issued a call for submissions through e-mails and a USPS mailing, specifying how work would be judged ("juried" is the art world term) and through what standards and in what initial format. The "jury" initially consisted of the Foundation Director, a quasi-volunteer guest curator with exhibition experience, the Museum's Exhibitions Coordinator a volunteer with friendly and professional ties to both the Museum and the Foundation and myself. The standards were three: the work must be *by* survivors, as opposed to being *about* them; the work must demonstrate mastery of media, i.e. good technique or craft; the work must be visually interesting. The first format for review was through photographs of the proposed work, preferably 2 x 2 inch slides. The jury was not to screen for content or message, and during the summer of



Wendy Csoka
Garden Song, 1998

2001, the group met, applied the standards, viewed the slides and was able to reduce the number of artistic candidates to several score rather than several hundred. The Foundation wanted to include multimedia — visual, performance and verse — which was agreeable, although demanding on exhibition design.

The guest curator, through some magic yet to be revealed, reduced the submissions to a manageable number, but this was after he flew in from Canada to view the exhibition space on Hofstra University's commencement day in 2001. A year ahead of opening seems to be ample lead time, but it never is. Everyone involved had other commitments, and this balance act of the human condition is the most delicate of the arts. The public work of any museum, for example its exhibitions and educational programming, has only a gossamer safety net; either it exists on time, or you mop for a long time.

For most exhibitions, I keep a reference file of paper documents including downloaded e-mails. My file on *Breaking the Walls of Bias: Art From Survivors* begins in depth and quantity during January 2001 when we requested the catalog text and checklist. Usually, the catalog material (essay, checklist of the objects to be exhibited and photography) is important to have six months in advance, but all too often, six months is the time line in a perfect world. The catalog material's four month lead was just enough to get the job done, and the Museum staff with responsibility for the catalog had just been hired two weeks prior as Information Coordinator. To present an accuracy of situation at this day in time, the Museum and its staff had other projects underway; other exhibitions, some simultaneous with *Breaking the Walls of Bias*, others further in the future. The Exhibitions Coordinator has to schedule the de-installation (more museum jargon)

of shows (and return transportation) while scheduling the installation of new shows (and arrival transportation).

Hence, on January 2, 2002, my records show the start of relatively frequent contacts to negotiate the exhibition into an acceptable professional reality. Can we accept yet another image in the

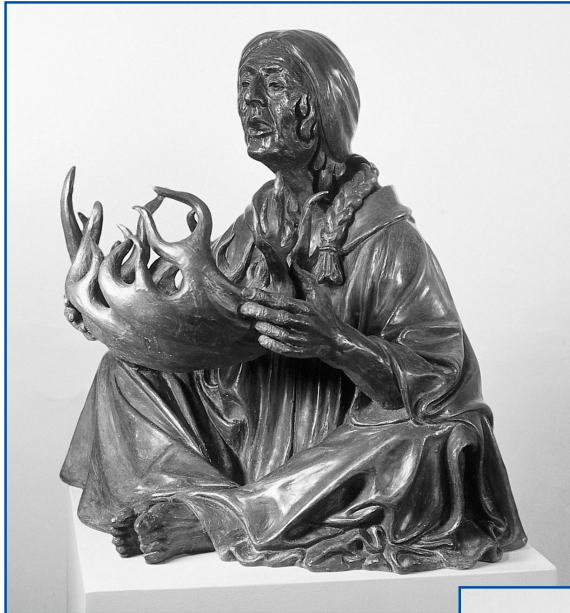
stop for the guest curator's draft essay (after some Museum revisions) was the University editing office. Next the article was sent back to the author, then once again returned to Editing. Later that same month, e-mails show early installation decisions (nothing, for example, outside the gallery) and opening reception caveats. Although a bit early, the Foundation wanted to begin its press releases late in January, and of course, the Museum opened communications with Hofstra's University Relations office. One e-mail late in the month to a member of the Museum staff had me worried about budget, since at that date, expenses seemed to be climbing above initial estimates. In retrospect, I was being miserly and cautious, probably in early recovery from another project in the academic year with a delicious cost-overrun which was eventually financed by outside funding.

The pile of messages and materials in my file for February was thick. The Information Coordinator was tackling three publications at once, but now had the advantage of six weeks on the job rather than the two weeks preceding January. Because the *Survivors* exhibition is multimedia, communications and conversations began about how to present this diversity in the catalog and then coordinate the publication with the exhibition. We also began to trace some biographical material on the artists, including a poet now deceased. Next we received a communication from the manager of a performance group asking for confirmation of arrangements for the April 19 reception; this request was politely deferred until early April when the exhibition, publication and reception were in discernible shape. By mid February, the meetings were scheduled to discuss any



Maggie Parr
The Peace of the World Is in My Veins, 1996

exhibition and catalog? Later that day, the guest curator's draft essay arrived electronically, and the process began, slowly and carefully, to get this part of the project into publishable form. Since all of the University's public, printed material must be edited prior to publication, the first



Bennett Skyes Blackburn
Firesinger, 1997

and all aspects of the “project.” (At this point in the gestation of an original exhibition and publication, I begin to think of all aspects as “the project” because each element begins to affect all others.) For example, many of the Foundation’s members depend on their artistic productivity as sources of projected income, yet the Hofstra Museum is not a commercial gallery receiving fifty percent commission on work sold off its walls. The artists wanted the opportunity to sell, but the Museum was not a sales venue. After some back and forth, we printed an artists’ contact sheet and made it available to visitors who inquired.

Surprisingly, by February 19 we had a draft checklist of works to be exhibited. This date provided a target for sending loan forms and insurance information to the artists; allowed some sense of transportation costs and arrangements, and facilitated collaboration between the Coordinators for Exhibitions and Information. At this time, the Assistant to the Director became involved with some of the business arrangements for loans, insurance and transportation. As the catalog began to take form with draft layouts, some creative tension arose about artists’ descriptions of their relationships with

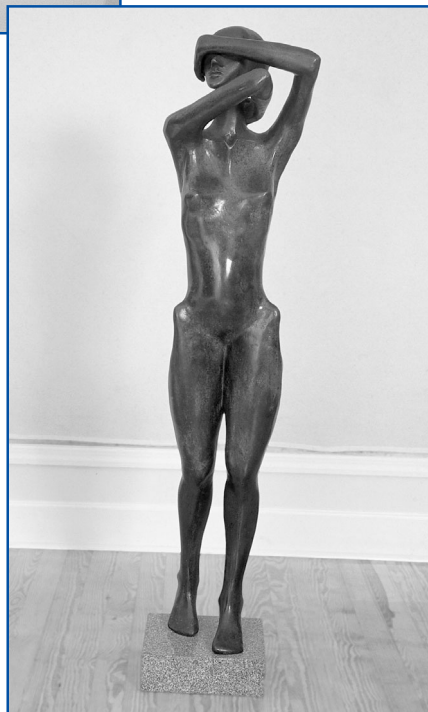
the Foundation. At the end of one series of communications in mid February, I wrote, “sometimes right down the middle is a squiggle.” Of course, not everyone has the same idea at the same time. Still later in the month came “The how do we design the cover” question without offending anyone and pleasing everyone.

Quite early in March (the month before the opening when you begin to think that it will never work and you start looking for the mop) we resolved

On February 4, forty-five pages of draft catalog material arrived electronically, and we began to notice discrepancies between the checklist (which we thought we had in final form), the returning loan forms and names forwarded by the Foundation. Despite the discrepancies, I wrote the Director’s “acknowledgments” section of the catalog the evening of February 5. That should have done it, but with some of the artists having changed media and works, the catalog pagination became complicated; the color pages were no longer resolved and the budget projections began to climb once again. We more or less managed this situation through a flurry of communications over February 6 and 7, but as the loan forms continued to be returned, some of the artists began to add and subtract works from the original agreement. By February 11, the Exhibitions Coordinator was joining the rest of us in mutual flummoxation (another example of museum jargon) at the need to remake everything in final form. This, too, was resolved politely through additional communication and conversation.

By mid-March, we were working on the reception invitation text and format. In the past, the Museum used polychrome images on its reception invitations, but to conserve fiscal assets, we shifted to a monochrome format. Yet paper, ink, size, format and timing all become important, and the Foundation requested the inclusion of a program for the reception with the invitation, including the appearance of a recognizable name from the Hamptons. Since the complete budget for the project was becoming more clear (with the catalog’s projected cost in the mix), the question of the menu for the April 19 reception appeared in my e-mail that was settled quickly.

A week later, in March, the final transportation arrangements were made. The artists had shipped their artwork to the Foundation Director’s garage to be picked up by fine arts transport, but another discrepancy arose between the trucker’s and the Museum’s lists. It turned out that the trucker was giving us a sample of his projected work and not the reality of what we had faxed. Good, clear and direct communication is a blessed event. At about this



Oxana Narozniak
Electra, 1986

the issue of the catalog cover: a checkerboard front and back with representations of all the artists’ works in the squares. The design staff in the University’s publications office brilliantly made this concept a reality. We also received the final version of the guest curator’s essay which had survived a couple of rounds with editing, tweaked, of course, by the Museum staff.

same time, the Foundation wanted an additional run of catalogs (since in final draft, it was looking good), and so back to the adding machine to develop a new financial arrangement that was within both the Museum's budget and the Foundation's ability to contribute. The extra copies required another round of bids from off-campus printers which made the projected delivery date questionable. By the end of the month, most of these ambiguities were resolved, and I put the mop back in the closet. Despite the perils of April, I never reached for it again since I knew something would happen and appear by April 16.

The first few April days brought refinements to the catalog, final proofing, the new bids, the publisher's proofs and then, approval on all accounts. We had the catalog! On April 8, fine arts transport picked up the art work from the Foundation Director's garage, and these were safely delivered to Emily Lowe Gallery by late afternoon. We had the objects for the exhibition! The Exhibitions Coordinator now had the real worry of creating an effective and pleasing installation in cooperation with the guest curator who made a second trip from Canada. On this same day, April 8, the Web sites of the Foundation and Museum were up and available. After unpacking, it was discovered that the work of two artists was AWOL, but we tracked the pieces down, and by April 11, all was more or less in place. By mid-April, more press releases were faxed, the program for the opening reception was reviewed once again, and the musical group received an e-mail strongly urging the use of acoustic instrumentation. On April 17, the catalog arrived from the printer, and the recognizable name from the Hamptons had to cancel due to a family obligation. Although the show had opened to the public, installation work was not quite complete, at least according to the e-mail traffic. For example, a few of the objects were composite — fabricated from several separate pieces — and of course, these never install exactly the same as they appear in the artists' photographs. However, the reception went well, and as a surprise, the Museum received a United States Congressional citation for the proj-

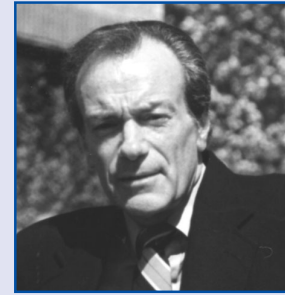
ect as well as a citation from the New York State Assembly.

In subsequent weeks and months, the project received a feature article in the national *The New York Times* and a two-page spread in *Newsday*. Another magazine and perhaps a syndicated television program may include the project in their Fall 2002 editions, and the exhibition received hundreds of hits on the Museum's Web page. Even Hofstra's student newspaper, *The Chronicle* covered the exhibition, and a freelance Long Island documentary producer is working on a video.

Yet the most effusive and gratifying comment came from one of the artists as passed along by the Foundation Director:

The catalog is so incredible, and the show is so powerful. I did not expect to be so moved, even by the dedication statement. (You) have put together an exhibition that is elegant, simple and strong. It gives meaning to what (we all) have gone through; and to what others will surely go through at some point in their lives ... I am in awe that I am a part of this.

Did we learn from this? Probably, and the learning will show in references to this project that the Museum's staff will make in the future. Should we have put all our "conditions" down on paper and held everyone to them? We do this — surely we do — and each of the Museum's four principals has her and his way of doing this. Yet it is exceptionally difficult months in advance of any exhibition's opening to anticipate the fetters of some three dozen people, many of whom have a hidden agenda unknown even to them. We trade a little chaos for what we hope is considerable creativity. The exhibition and project were original; the installation design was original; the catalog contents and design were originals. And, of course, the artworks were originals, some even made for this exhibition. Finally, all came together to form a sweet memory.



David Christman earned a B.A. in fine arts (art history) from Hofstra University and an M.A. in art history-archaeology from Columbia University. He joined the New College faculty in 1962 as an instructor in the English composition program. While completing his graduate degree, Dean Christman assumed various administrative responsibilities in New College, and in the late 1960s he received the titles of assistant to the dean, associate dean, acting dean and, eventually, dean by 1969. His appointment as dean of New College has been continuous since then, with the School for University Studies added in 1996 with him as the founding dean.

As instructor, assistant professor and, ultimately, associate professor, he has team-taught interdisciplinary courses with other members of the New College faculty and individually taught favorite courses, *Archaeology of the New World* and *History and Architecture: the Western Tradition*.

Dean Christman agreed to serve as acting director of the Hofstra Museum during the summer of 1992. In 1993 he was offered the position which he accepted as an opportunity to reorganize the Museum's assets. Since 1992-93, the Hofstra Museum has been re-accredited by the American Association of Museums and has received recognition for merit by Nassau County, New York State and the U.S. House of Representatives.

Dean Christman's contribution to *Hofstra Horizons* is factual and meant as a tribute to the patience and persistence of the Museum's professional staff without whom, he always adds, "nothing of significance would occur in the name of the Museum." Another of Dean Christman's museum aphorisms is the establishment of the criterion for quality: too often, universities are measured by whom their shoulder pads rub against, but museums can be judged by whom borrows their artwork. The Hofstra Museum's *Portrait of a Woman* by Paul Gauguin is currently on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. -SK