

always subject to change

Ann Bremner

Ten years ago, on November 16, 1989, the Wexner Center opened its doors to the public for the first time. The morning dedication celebration in Mershon Auditorium featured performances by Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Philip Glass, the J. D. Steele Singers with the Simultaneous Revival Choir, and The Ohio State University Marching Band, with actress Colleen Dewhurst presiding over the ceremonies. In the afternoon, performers from the local community filled the Wexner Center itself while distinguished architects and critics gathered in Mershon for a symposium. Three projects introduced visitors to the new building. Julia Scher's video installation *Occupational Placement*, viewed on screen in the Film/Video Theater and on video monitors throughout the building, utilized the center's security system to combine "live" images of visitors with pretaped footage of the Wexner Center's construction and of people moving through the spaces. John Cage's *Essay* filled the Performance Space with a "sonic environment" developed from readings of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. And visitors in droves strapped on Walkman tape players and strolled through the galleries and into some "behind-the-scenes" areas experiencing Antenna Theatre's *The Grid*, an inventive interpretive tour that combined interviews and commentary with creative imaginings.



It was a pretty heady day that produced vivid memories for patrons, founders, and artists alike—but for many members of the Wexner Center's current audience, staff, and constituents it probably seems as distant as the moon. My recollections are a blur of crowds and anxiety. Although my job was quite removed from the hub of activity, I shared enormous anticipation and nervousness with just about everyone around. We wanted everything to be *perfect*. Of course it wasn't. A glitch with Laurie Anderson's keyboard forced her to begin her set singing a cappella—which was probably more thrilling for the crowd than any perfection we might have orchestrated.

I've been thinking a lot about the Wexner Center's first busy, crazy, anticipation-filled days over the past few months as we've prepared for our tenth anniversary. One of the things I've pondered is how those first programs—the dedication ceremonies and the rest of the season that quickly followed—relate to the center's current mission and identity. The events were planned and prepared with feverish intensity, almost as a kind of manifesto—and they clearly announced several positions regarding the kind of work the new arts center would embrace.

The Imani Dancers from Columbus performed in gallery D as part of the opening celebrations.



Dancers soared overhead in Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre's *Furioso*.

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There were contemporary icons, younger but already well established choices, and artists who were just beginning to build their reputations. There was a strong interest in architecture, starting with the Wexner Center's own design. There was curiosity about the ways technology might open up new media and expressions for artists. And there was a definite commitment to looking beyond the boundaries of the American art scene. Even events that might have initially appeared anomalous—say, the traditional Grand Kabuki Theater tucked in amid a host of vanguard innovators on that first performing arts schedule—seem in retrospect manifestations of the wide-ranging internationalism that has played an increasingly prominent role in contemporary culture and in our presentations.

All of these directions have remained vital throughout the decade. Each season still brings a mixture of contemporary masters, intriguing mid-career figures, and emerging artists, so that on the film schedule, for example, Cinematheque series devoted to directors such as Jean Renoir, Martin Scorsese, or François Truffaut bump up against features and documentaries that are just beginning to generate some buzz on the international festival circuit. Dance pioneers and stars including Merce Cunningham, Twyla Tharp, and Mikhail Baryshnikov have brought their latest works to the Wexner Center, and so have rising choreographers like Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Amanda Miller, and Meryl Tankard. The galleries have hosted works by major pop artists, abstract expressionists, and surrealists—and new creative projects by artists from Beijing, Buenos Aires, Cologne, London, Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Vancouver, and Columbus. That early focus on the Wexner Center's architecture has branched out to encompass exhibitions (and lectures and symposia) devoted to such seminal figures as Louis I. Kahn and Rem Koolhaas, as well as the



commissioned explorations of *House Rules* and *Fabrications*. The interest in technology has marked a broad swath through the galleries with projects such as *Softworlds 2.1*, a interactive digital environment and experience, and the *Body Mécanique* exhibition. *The Fold*, a part of the Wexner Center's web site developed in collaboration with Ohio State's Art Critical Practices program, has taken artists' projects and research into cyberspace. An extensive series of lectures, screenings, and discussions have analyzed the interactions of Gender and Technology. And investigations of technology as theme and as creative tool have also highlighted performances as disparate as Anne Bogart and SITI's *The Medium*, Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's "digital opera" *Monsters of Grace*, and Elizabeth Streb/Ringside's trampoline-powered *UP*, which used computer-based MIDI technology to create its interactive audio elements. Internationalism has flourished in series that routinely present films from the Near East, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as from Europe and North America, and exhibitions by artists who hail from just about any corner of the world, including Spain (Muntadas), Iran (Shirin Neshat), and Thailand (Udomsak Krisanamis). World music and dance performances have taken audiences to Brazil with Balé Folclórico da Bahia, Cuba with the Afro-Cuban All Stars, Morocco with the Master Musicians of Jajouka, Cape Verde with Cesaria Evora, and Bali with Gamelan Peliatan. The Gypsy Caravan concert transported listeners to India and then across the Balkans and Eastern Europe and into Spain—all in one evening.

The exhibition *Rem Koolhaas and the Place of Public Architecture* showcased the revolutionary vision of Koolhaas and his firm, Office for Metropolitan Architecture (O.M.A.).

But despite these clear strands of continuity, there have also been changes in the Wexner Center's programs over the years. There's much less classical music—whether traditional or contemporary—on the schedule now than in the early years, and more jazz and world music. Still, exceptions do occur, especially for unique endeavors like Arvo Pärt's *Litany* or cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the Mark Morris Dance Group's collaboration set to music by J. S. Bach. Cinema's beginnings have perhaps gained increased visibility in recent years, with more series of silent films and other historical works offering a counterpoint to our contemporary fare. Exhibitions, too, have delved further and more frequently into the past, providing context and fresh perspectives for looking at contemporary art: I'm thinking particularly of the *Succession of Collections* series, which has focused on abstract expressionism (*Forces of the Fifties*), surrealism (*Staging Surrealism*), and nearly two hundred years of decorative arts (*On the Table*). By and large, such changes are more in the nature of shifts in emphasis than major reorientations. They evince a willingness to keep tinkering with the mix, to find a balance between examining the unique qualities of the present moment and identifying the ties that link many moments together. They also may reflect the changing interests and personalities of the curatorial staff. The Wexner Center has always been privileged to have creative and committed directors and programmers, and the schedules that evolve inevitably blend institutional priorities with personal vision.

Other changes between the Wexner Center as originally envisioned and as it operates today were already in the works by the time of the 1989 dedication. Basically, they involved moving from the idea of a contemporary visual arts center to that of a fully multidisciplinary facility. In a sense, these changes also represent shifts away from the paradigms of the Museum and

the Auditorium, to borrow terms from Arthur C. Danto's essay earlier in this volume. Although the Wexner Center building, as Danto points out, matches neither paradigm, the center's administrative and programmatic structure grew out of a kind of opportunistic marriage between the two, a marriage that has in turn yielded a multitude of opportunities.

It's worth remembering that the dedication events in 1989 were not just a beginning but the culmination of a process that stretched back across much of another decade and even beyond. Most of the planning for the new Center for the Visual Arts, as the project was initially called, took place under the auspices of Ohio State's University Gallery of Fine Arts, which in the 1970s and 1980s established a strong focus on contemporary art and acquired the beginnings of a contemporary art collection. The University Gallery also embraced a multidisciplinary ideal, combining exhibitions with films and some performance art. But the performance activities in particular were usually on a relatively small scale. The university's larger-scale performing arts events took place in the separately administered Mershon Auditorium, which presented a schedule of classical and popular music, plus some dance and theater productions. The earliest thoughts about the Center for the Visual Arts—the ideas that produced the program for the architectural competition in 1982–83, for example—sought to enhance the University Gallery's contemporary, multidisciplinary focus but stopped short of advocating a performing arts program on the scale of that in Mershon Auditorium.

Early discussions also often described the new facility as providing a continuing exhibition venue for the university collection, and so functioning like a museum in that regard. In practice, however, the Wexner Center has from its inception

acted more like a *Kunsthalle*, with changing exhibitions succeeding one another in the galleries. The center does not actively collect new works, but it continues to provide oversight and stewardship for the university collection. On occasion, objects from the collection have been featured in Wexner Center exhibitions, most recently in 1998: *Eva Hesse: Area* juxtaposed a sculpture from the collection with a related work belonging to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and *The Serial Attitude* added selected works from the collection to a group show exploring minimalism and related trends of the 1960s and 1970s.

A crucial factor in shaping the Wexner Center's nascent identity was the university's decision—taken after the building was designed and under construction—to combine the administration and creative direction of the new facility with that of Mershon. This resulted in three program areas—visual arts (exhibitions), performing arts, and media arts (film and video)—that were to be essentially equal in the Wexner Center's identity. With that equality came a commensurate independence: no program area was to operate primarily as support for, or a kind of gloss on, any other. The parity and independence of the program areas—codified in our November 1990 name change from the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts to simply the Wexner Center for the Arts—has been and remains one of our most defining characteristics. It produces a dynamic I often think of as “messy vitality,” a collage of compelling but largely unrelated events—this autumn's Julie Taymor exhibition, *Shockheaded Peter* performance, Joshua Bell/Sam Bush/Mike Marshall/Edgar Meyer concert, and *Hollywood Blacklist* film series—all unfolding at once and offering, simultaneously, a smorgasbord of opportunities and a level of self-competition few organizations could sustain.

Nonetheless, cross-currents and cross-fertilizations abound, as ideas, themes, and strategies bounce from one project or program to another. Shared interests and collaborations link the program areas several times each year, most often with film/video (the most flexible in terms of scheduling) acting as a kind of pivot that can complement both exhibitions and performances. Film/video is also, quite naturally, the most consistent in organizing events into fully articulated series. But careful perusal can turn up subtle chords of resonance between even the most seemingly disparate exhibitions and performances, and more deliberate series also frame selected presentations in these areas. Some years back, an exhibition of *The Americans*, Robert Frank's influential photographs from the 1950s, was followed on the schedule by installation projects in which artists Bruce and Norman Yonemoto and Elaine Reichek explored their memories of growing up in that decade. The *Theatrical Impulse* series of 1996–97, 1997–98, and 1998–99 concentrated attention on the innovations of solo performers and small dramatic ensembles, among them Danny Hoch, Lisa Kron, Roger Guenveur Smith, Da Da Kamera, and Improbable Theatre. *Crosstown Traffic*, a fondly remembered performing arts series of the early 1990s, brought vanguard dance, music, and performance together in brief samples by three to four artists each evening, a format that encouraged risk-taking by both participants and audiences.

Since the Wexner Center's overall identity is so closely related to the idea of being multidisciplinary, it's hardly surprising that this is also clearly the strongest connecting thread running *within*, as well as between, our programs. Across the board, there has always been a driving interest in artists who combine, synthesize, or sometimes exist between the various disciplines and genres of contemporary culture. I can't even begin to count



the number of times I've written "dance theater" over my years at the Wexner Center—and struggled with the nuances of whether to hyphenate the term. One descriptive designation is also rarely enough for musicians whose styles might draw from jazz, pop, world music of several continents, plus classical traditions. The galleries have hosted quite a number of hybrid projects too, with installations that incorporate elements of film, video, music, and performance. Then there are film screenings with live performances of new original scores—Buster Keaton's silent comic masterpieces paired with Bill Frisell's musical Americana, Georges Méliès's early cinematic magic interpreted by Phillip Johnston—and theater performances with scenic elements by visual artists: Martin Puryear's sculptural sets for Garth Fagan's *Griot New York*, Gretchen Bender's video environment for Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here*. In their collaboration on *appetite*, choreographer Meg Stuart and installation artist Ann Hamilton's melded roles and approaches, both participating in the development of movement concepts and visual elements. And Stuart remembers that the Wexner Center facilitated the collaboration by introducing her to Hamilton when *Damaged Goods*, Stuart's company, was performing here in 1995. "That's where our conversations started," Stuart says.

The emphasis on cross-disciplinary explorations is particularly evident in the projects of the Wexner Center Residency Award recipients. Some of these artists are already engaged in multidisciplinary or cross-disciplinary pursuits before working at the center. Terry Allen is an artist, composer, musician, and consummate storyteller; the narrative of *a simple story: Juarez*, the project he created here, unfolded through installations, a song cycle, and film/video elements. Maya Lin's interests encompass sculpture and architecture; *Groundswell*, the permanent installation she designed for the center, reflects a dialogue between those disciplines. The Wooster Group exemplifies multidisciplinary practice with its trademark incorporations of film/video and sound into theater—as could be seen in *House/Lights*, the work the group developed and premiered here. Other artists seize an opportunity to explore new territory and often traverse the boundaries of their specific residency area to use varied resources at the Wexner Center and the university. Visual artist Lorna Simpson utilized the center's Art & Technology video editing and post-production suite to develop her first installation incorporating film. Choreographers Ann Carlson and Bill T. Jones and visual artists Barbara Kruger and Ann Hamilton are also among those who have worked with Art & Tech to investigate the potential of moving images in their art. A glance through the roster of artists supported through Art & Tech reveals numerous other names familiar from the exhibitions and performing arts programs, as well as from the film/video schedule. Flowing in another direction, several residency award recipients in media arts—including Chris Marker, best known as a filmmaker, and the Paper Tiger Television media collective—have explored the possibilities of gallery installations.

The Bill Frisell Band performed original music to accompany Buster Keaton's *Go West* (1925) as part of a Cinematheque tribute to the silent-film comedian.

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So the Wexner Center is in many ways ideally positioned to respond to, and encourage, the crossing of artistic boundaries. And that affinity for border jumping may be among the most widely shared tendencies in the contemporary arts. But how else do the center's programs mirror the concerns that have defined the arts in the 1990s? Could one teach a course on the trends of the decade in terms of the artists and works we've presented? It might produce a rather idiosyncratic syllabus, but many major themes—among them freedom of expression, body metaphors, and the AIDS crisis—would absolutely be there. A prime issue for many artists has been the interaction of individuality and identity as a member of a community, whether linked by race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual orientation. Our audiences have followed these investigations in such exhibitions as *Will/Power*, Elaine Reichek's *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's *Three Installations*; performances of Urban Bush Women's *Praise House*, Ron Vawter's *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*, Wynton Marsalis's *Blood on the Fields*, and DV8 Physical Theatre's *Enter Achilles*; and numerous film and video series including *GLB FV*, *Native Visions*, and the recurring *Melton Center Matinees*. Other artists have analyzed the conventions and communities of the art world itself. In very different ways, *The Collections of Barbara Bloom*, Mark Dion's *Cabinet of Curiosities*, Albert Oehlen and Christopher Williams's *Oehlen Williams 95*, Muntadas's *Between the Frames*, and Anne Bogart/SITI's *Bob* all reflect this interest.

The Collections of Barbara Bloom reflected the artist's interest in the ways objects are collected and categorized.

Leslie Payne: *Visions of Flight* drew attention to the remarkable airplane constructions of this self-taught artist.



Another thing I've been thinking about is the way that the arts—not just of the last decade but perhaps of the entire century—have played out as a dialogue between the very near and the very distant: the stuff of everyday life and the dream of a far horizon. That dialogue animates self-taught artist Leslie Payne's remarkable airplanes and Ray Johnson's exquisite collages, and it structures the exchanges among a host of other works seen (or heard or experienced) at the Wexner Center. Finding ways to make art out of everyday life links an artist like Rirkrit Tiravanija to Fluxus, Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, John Cage, Spalding Gray, STOMP, Paper Tiger Television. Popular culture as a source of both raw materials and inspiration creates common ground among the *Hall of Mirrors* exhibition, artists Roy Lichtenstein and Alexis Smith, dancer/choreographer Savion Glover, the singers of Hot Mouth, guitarist Bill Frisell, and filmmakers John Waters and Gregg Araki. But then there's the opposite side of the dialogue: the craving for something absent in the homogenized mainstream of Europe and North America; the interests in ritual and



ceremony and in distant cultures where artistic expression might, paradoxically, be less divorced from community life. Throughout this decade, and of course even farther back, audiences in the U.S. have sought ways to experience such cultures, and artists have often blended insights from them into their own work. It's part of the impulse behind the fascination with butoh, for example, or Tuvan throat singing. The gift of the Wexner Center's determinedly eclectic programming is that it can showcase both sides of the dialogue, and do so in terms of "original sources," as well as contemporary interpretations. Here you can see classic Hollywood films *and* projects that celebrate—or dissect—popular culture. Here you can discover traditional cultural expressions from around the globe *and* see them transformed in the hands of an artist such as Julie Taymor.

I've been writing about the Wexner Center's exhibitions, films, and performances, but those are clearly only part of the story of our first decade. Almost from the beginning the center has presented an extensive slate of educational and interpretive programs, among them tours and "informances" for school groups and teachers, children's workshops, creative activities for adults, and Family Days (since 1995), as well as lectures, symposia, gallery talks, and pre-performance talks. Rather than simply explicating a given exhibition or event, these programs often use it as a springboard for wider-ranging presentations and discussions. The programs surrounding *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*, developed in conjunction with community advisors from the arts, education, and medicine, encompassed a comprehensive spectrum of health care issues. We similarly drew on the expertise of a community-based advisory committee to complement *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology* with varied presentations on collecting, folklore, and the achievements of Elijah Pierce and William Hawkins, artists from Columbus whose works were featured in the exhibition.



Wexner Center audiences have seen butoh performed by Sankai Juku and Buto-Sha Tenkei; pictured is the latter's *Nocturne*.

Young artists made masks and costumes and performed an original play at the October 1999 Family Day.



In many ways, education programs are one of our broadest conduits to engagement with the university and the larger community of central Ohio. Campus and community groups often collaborate on or cosponsor such programs, and locally based artists and scholars frequently participate as speakers, discussion leaders, panelists, or presenters. The *Fluxfest* that accompanied the exhibition *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, for example, filled the galleries and the Film/Video Theater with historical Fluxus events and new Fluxus-influenced performances by Alison Knowles and local participants. Discussions, workshops, and master classes with visiting artists offer additional channels to connect Ohio State students and community members with the Wexner Center. And, in some cases, artists' ventures incorporate or even depend on close involvement with the university and local community. Open rehearsals have helped shape several residency projects in the performing arts, and Twyla Tharp's first residency included a dynamic performance on Ohio State's Oval with about fifty dancers and non-dancers participating. During Alexis Smith's residency, which coincided with her work on a public art commission for Ohio State's Jerome Schottenstein Center, the artist delved deeply into the history and current life of the university, working closely with many students, faculty, and staff members. In *The Class of 2001*, an unusual collective video project, four media artists are developing separate works about the lives of a core group of Ohio State undergraduates, from their freshmen year in 1997 to graduation in June 2001.

Wynton Marsalis performed in a young people's concert for Family Day audiences while at the Wexner Center for the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra's performance of *Blood on the Fields*.

There's also the human history of the center. While researching the past decade, we've had occasion to remember many amazing people who have been affiliated with us—artists, members, patrons, and colleagues—some of whom share their own memories in the quotations that appear throughout this book. We've also realized yet again how much the whole endeavor depends on the expertise, experience, and creativity of the entire staff. I wish I could detail the contributions of everyone on the cumulative staff list at the back of the book, as well as those of our student and temporary employees. Each person has provided something absolutely essential. As we reflect on this remarkable team, we also mourn the loss of several valued friends and colleagues: Robert Brooks, William Box Cook, Janet Everett, Gary Fields, Michael Morris, Mark Tappen, and Officer Michael Blankenship.

Of course, in remembering the artists who have been here, I've thought as well about where they have gone since. The note Bill Frisell sent us mentioned that the Wexner Center had supported his work, and that of many other artists, "long before it would have been considered safe." It's enormously gratifying to watch artists become, well, not exactly "safe"—given the ongoing innovations and risks in their work—but certainly recognized in wider arenas. That's often been the case: think of Ann Hamilton, to take just one example, who was known to Wexner Center audiences long before she was selected to represent the U.S. at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Then there's just the simple pleasure of hearing about artists whose work you've enjoyed or admired. It's remarkable how invested you can become in the careers of people you've known only through their art or seen across the darkness of a theater or maybe passed in hallways while rushing off to work. But when I see Terry Allen on *Austin City Limits*, read about Julia Scher



Alison Knowles (left) and Kimm Marks (right) recreated a Fluxus performance from the 1960s at the Fluxfest.

in *Artbyte*, or hear Guillermo Gómez-Peña on NPR, I can't help feeling a tug of connection. And, judging by the comments we've received, many in our audience feel that bond too. Another kind of gratification comes from believing that what we do, what we present, can contribute to the development of artists and future artists in our community. Jennifer Reeder, an Ohio State graduate and former Wexner Center student employee, is one of the artists featured in the 1999 New York Video Festival series that will screen here. Steven Bognar, who noted how significant it was for him to see the work of independent film- and videomakers such as Jem Cohen, Su Friedrich, Isaac Julien, Julie Dash, and Todd Haynes at the Wexner Center, is now one of the artists participating in *The Class of 2001*.

One last thought, a kind of footnote or grace note. At those dedication ceremonies in 1989, the J. D. Steele Singers performed excerpts from *The Gospel at Colonus*, Lee Breuer's powerful reimagining of the Oedipus story. Now, ten years later, visitors can experience Julie Taymor's interpretation of the Stravinsky opera *Oedipus Rex* in the galleries. Who could have predicted that Sophocles would be among the artists who would bracket our first decade? But maybe it's not so odd; perhaps in a strange way it's even revealing. If Sophocles is "always subject to change"—open to new possibilities and transfigurations—how can we not be?

Ann Bremner joined the Wexner Center staff in 1989 as a part-time associate editor and is now the center's publications editor.