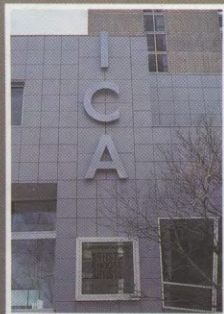


THE PENNSYLVANIA GAZETTE

ALUMNI MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA



SOME
NEW SPACE
FOR
NEW ART



M A R C H, 1 9 9 1

I.C.A.'S NEW HOME

After 28 years of living in borrowed rooms, Philadelphia's most influential center for modern art has a space of its own.

FOR NEW ART

By Jean M. Dykstra



THE WEEKEND the Institute of Contemporary Art opened the doors of its new museum back in mid-January, the turnout was so much larger than expected that Patrick T. Murphy, director of the I.C.A., jokingly remarked to the building's architect, Adele Naude Santos, "I hope the stress load on the beams for the floors will hold." The inauguration of the new building, nestled in the corner of the L-shaped graduate-housing tower that is Nichols House, at 36th and Sansom Streets, attracted more than 4,200 people—twice as many as expected. "It was just great. It was a real celebration of the building," Murphy said after the opening: "A number of people said that it was the most exciting artistic event that happened in Philadelphia in a long time."

After four years of planning—much of it for a different building, on a different site—and 24 years of sharing cramped quarters with the Graduate School of Fine Arts in what is now Meyerson Hall, and at a time when such local art fixtures as the Philadelphia Art Alliance

are closing, the I.C.A.'s festive, if crowded, opening seemed a happy turn of events indeed for Philadelphia art aficionados. Moreover, now that the cloud of punitive action from Washington over the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy seems to have passed, Philadelphia's foremost avant-garde art gallery greets the new decade with its

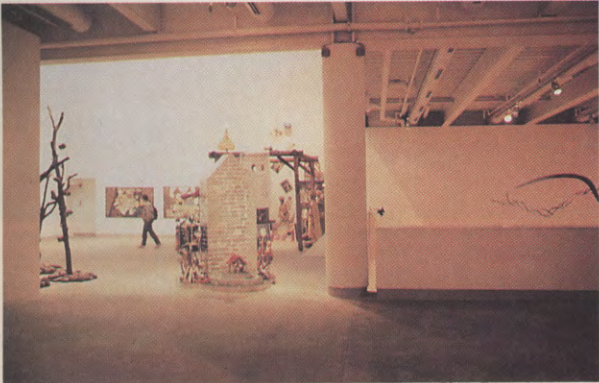


WILL BROWN

The new I.C.A. building, at 36th and Sansom Streets, was built in less than a year.



JOSEPH IANO



The smaller upper gallery provides additional exhibition space.

WILL BROWN



'Stick-up,' by Robinson Fredenthal, '63 Ar.

WILL BROWN



A cross-section of the galleries.



ADDISON GEARBY

reputation intact, a new director, this new building, and a paean of sorts to the local art community in the form of its inaugural exhibit.

Called "Philadelphia Art Now: Artists Choose Artists," the show was the third and final part of a series of larger exhibits funded by the William Penn Foundation to display the talent of Philadelphia artists. (Two earlier exhibits were held at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) For the I.C.A.'s exhibit, guest curator Julie Courtney chose 25 well-established Philadelphia artists and asked each of them to choose another artist to be in the show. "The notion was that they would choose an unknown and emerging artist," said Murphy, "and we would get sort of the next wave. And in some cases that did happen and in other cases it didn't happen. You can't really legislate for that."

Murphy's accommodating attitude toward the exhibit seems not unlike the reasoning behind the architecture of the new building itself. It is a large canvas of a structure, flexibility its dominant feature. The gallery space in the new I.C.A. building is close to 10,000 square feet, although its overall space is more like 25,000 square feet. Two spacious galleries, one above the other, make up the main exhibition area. (One has a ceiling nearly 32 feet high.) They are connected by a long ramp enabling viewers to look back at what they've just seen, as well as a second-floor balcony that allows viewers to look down on the lower gallery. Enormous windows also invite museum-goers to look out and pedestrians to look in, creating a "friendly and welcoming" atmosphere, as architect Santos put it.

An auditorium space has been designed for performances, lectures, and even luncheons—there is no permanent seating, so the room can be used in a variety of ways. During the opening weekend, for example, the auditorium was the site of a panel discussion at one point in the day (equipped with seating, tables, and microphones) and earlier, of a contemporary dance performance (complete with trees, spray-painted paper stones, two television monitors, and two dancers).

The new building, a squat but striking contrast to its taller neighbors, also has room for an archival library, a reading lounge, and a terrace. Offices for the staff, who relocated to the new building after the grand opening, are on the third floor. (In the midst of the frenzy that inevitably accompanies such a

move for the people involved, three I.C.A. computers in the Meyerson Hall offices were plagued with computer "viruses" the week before the opening.)

Established in 1963 in the old Furness Library at Penn, the I.C.A. has occupied the home of the Graduate School of Fine Arts since 1967. Over the years, it acquired a reputation as an innovative *kunsthalle*, an institution that shows art but does not keep a permanent collection.

It has a tradition of mounting one-person exhibitions and retrospectives. Its first exhibit was a retrospective for the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still. Two years later, in 1965, it gave Andy Warhol his first one-man show, which attracted a huge, unruly crowd; in 1986, it hosted a performance and a visual-art exhibit by performance artist Laurie Anderson; and in 1989, it launched, without much notice at the time, the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective that, just before it was scheduled to be shown in Washington, D.C., helped spark a year-long controversy over what sort of projects the National Endowment for the Arts should fund.

The I.C.A.'s standing in the art community was significantly enhanced in 1980, when Janet Kardon, the director at the time, was chosen to organize the United States exhibit at the Venice "Biennale," the biannual international art exhibition in Italy. (Kardon was also responsible for mounting the Mapplethorpe exhibit.)

When the I.C.A. staff began planning to relocate in 1987, it expected to renovate the Franklin Building Annex on the 3400 block of Sansom Street. In the spring of 1989, however, soil tests indicated that expensive foundation work would have to be done, so those plans were

The new I.C.A. is a large canvas of a structure, flexibility its dominant feature. Enormous windows invite museum-goers to look out and pedestrians to look in.

scrapped. The University gave the I.C.A. the present site, next to the Graduate Towers, in late spring of that year, and the I.C.A. hired Adele Naude Santos and Jacobs/Wyper Architects to design the building, which cost close to \$5.4 million. (The N.E.A. contributed a \$500,000 challenge grant for the construction of the building.)

In the course of a guided tour during the opening weekend, Adele Santos, the dean of architecture at the University of California at San Diego who headed Penn's Department of Architecture from 1981 to 1988, recalled that, when Penn first gave the I.C.A. the site, "it was basically a handicapped ramp to the residential towers. . . . I remember looking at the site and saying, 'This isn't buildable.'"

Construction actually began before Santos had put the finishing touches on the design. Murphy explained that Santos was given a brief to design the building in the summer of 1989, and ground was broken in February of 1990—an unusually short lead time, resulting in what he called "a very organic process" in designing the building. Even more surprising, it took less than a year to finish.



WILL BROWN



Patrick T. Murphy became the director of the I.C.A. in March of 1990.

This work, by Phillips Simkin, hung on the side of the I.C.A.



For the I.C.A.'s opening exhibit, called 'Philadelphia Art Now: Artists Choose Artists,' the curator chose 25 well-established Philadelphia artists, and they, in turn, chose 25 artists to be in the show, in an effort to examine the method of selecting artists for an exhibit.



Architect Adele Santos says she designed the I.C.A.'s balcony, mezzanine level, and ramp connecting the two floors, to facilitate 'people watching people.'

While the site inevitably determined much of the layout of the building, said Santos, (for example, the new structure could not be higher than three stories or it would block too many windows in Nichols House), a number of aesthetic questions did arise. The most basic question, of course, was "What does an institute of contemporary art look like?" Santos said that one of her first requirements was that it not be brick, the predominant building material of the Penn campus.

She elaborated: "I wanted the outside panels to look like large tiles," of a color that is found on campus—a gray that is not quite gray, and not quite mauve, and not quite pink, and kind of "dresses up the whole block."

She also said that she felt from the start that it should be a "naked building," or a "warehouse" for contemporary art. "If I was to do architecture with a capital A, with three stars, and express myself at the expense of the art," said Santos, "that would really be to fail. I needed to find a balance between doing a good building and providing a kind of a backdrop that is unusual enough for the artist to be displayed."

As Thomas Hines, architecture critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, put it in a favorable critique of the new structure, "The building doesn't stand for something. It attempts, instead, to be ready for anything."

Patrick Murphy agrees. The galleries "don't really contextualize the art," he said: "Or they do so in a very bland way . . . [Santos] kept a lot of her architectural detailing . . . to the exterior of the building."

But even the outside, which Murphy said really "challenges the Penn setting," turned out to be the backdrop for an artist in the opening exhibit. Murphy pointed to a 120-foot-long piece by artist Phillips Simkin, which reads, "ICART ALL WAYS AT Liberty," along the side of the building (page 19). "It ruins the line of the building," notes Murphy, "but then again, this isn't a building about architecture, this is a building for art."

At the opening exhibit, "Artists Choose Artists," a very mixed crowd, partly knowledgeable observers of the contemporary art scene, partly just drawn in by the bustle and the new building, glimpsed work ranging from sculpture to painting to photography to performance art to video art. Among the *objets d'art* were three sculptures of such "found objects" as old cameras, lamps, pottery, clocks, circular saw blades, and ceramic cats, by Harry Anderson; a television video by artist Homer Jackson depicting himself using various tactics to interview for a job; a screen print collage of newspaper headlines, old photographs, and images of Nelson Mandela, called "Not Behind Bars," by Allan Edmunds; and large canvases, oil paintings by Diane Burko, '69 *GFA*, (featured in the profile on pp. 22-28).

Discussing the exhibit and its unusual selection process in the ac-



Here giving a tour of the I.C.A. opening weekend, architect Adele Santos said she wanted to create a 'naked building' to best display the art.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADDISON GEARY



Artist Isaiah Zagar (center, seated) performs with the help of some friends, inside his artwork, a frame of carved wooden poles called, 'A Stage.'



A crowd gathers around four sculptures by Harry Anderson made of various 'found objects.'

The Penn Jazz Ensemble plays some of the lively music heard at the opening.



companied catalogue, guest curator Julie Courtney noted that, "It is clear today that the artists differed widely in their perception of the assignment [to choose another artist]. . . . As in any arena of artistic inquiry, the quest for absolute answers is not always a realistic or necessary goal. More important, does this particular exhibit raise the appropriate questions? How should artists or their work be chosen for a show?"

(Not, according to Edward Sozanski, *The Philadelphia Inquirer's* art critic, the way the I.C.A. chose them for this show. In a review of the show, he suggested that its title could just as well have been "Artists Choose Relatives, Lovers, and Friends," as "Artists Choose Artists." Calling the show's premise "dubious at best," he wondered if artists are able to dispassionately evaluate the work of their friends and peers and concluded, "This exhibition suggests otherwise.")

Still, such questions are likely to play a large part in determining the I.C.A.'s future exhibits. As Murphy explained: "I see our role in the coming years as really tackling the implications of exhibits. We're dealing in the main with aesthetic questions, but implied in every aes-

thetical question is a moral implication. We'll be dealing more with those moral and social concerns in the way we mediate our exhibitions."

A performance by choreographer Jonas dos Santos suggested as much: in it, he expressed his concern about society and the environment, linking artists Martha Graham and Isamu Noguchi with the survival of the Amazon rain forest. Called "An Ecological Pursuit: If Martha Graham Could Dance in the Jungle in Love with Noguchi," the piece was performed by dos Santos and Philadelphia dancer and choreographer Anne-Marie Mulgrew. Both were exotically costumed and painted. They performed in an area set off by gold spray-painted "stones," painted trees, two television sets transmitting black-and-white images, and a soundtrack filled with background music and the conversation of a man and a woman. That event, as well as the panel discussion later, drew as large an audience as the room could hold.

The third floor of the new building was set aside for younger art lovers during the opening weekend. Children were invited to create their own hats, with the help of

some volunteers and piles of paper, crayons, ribbons, scissors, and yarn. A number of parents brought their children along over the weekend, and throughout the museum, children could be seen topped in white, three-cornered paper hats decorated with red ribbons, green pom-poms, shiny, reflecting stickers, and brightly colored feathers—or whatever else their imaginations had suggested.

At other times of the day, visitors crowded the staircase and the landing between the lobby and the second floor to listen to concerts by Penn's African-American capella group, *The Inspiration*; traditional Hmong music by Pang Xiong; or sets by the Arpeggio Jazz Ensemble.

These concerts also served to highlight the character of the building itself, since they took place on the intermediate level between the first and second floors. "You have this gracious staircase coming up to this level where there is a pause," said Santos of the area during her guided tour of the building. She added that she had designed the building to facilitate "people watching people, the moving around which is very much part of being in a museum environment. . . . It was really wonderful to be here these last few days and see people standing on the upper level, and standing on the stairs, and watching each other."

Such attention to broader aspects of the museum experience—both for the artist and the viewer—seems to be part of the philosophy of the institute. In a panel discussion entitled "Ethics and Accountability: Defining Freedom in Contemporary Society," for example, held during the opening of the new building, Murphy noted that there are "a lot of ethical questions about being a museum professional in the latter part of the 20th century."

Director of the I.C.A. since March of 1990, Murphy is unusually well-suited to tackle those kinds of questions. Formerly the director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, a gallery that shows contemporary art, Murphy had also served as the visual-arts officer for the Arts Council of Ireland—a grants-making body similar to the National Endowment for the Arts. He credits that job with giving him "an insight into the interface between politics and art."

When those two circles clashed in this country last year, Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, proposed legislation that would have cut all Federal funding for the I.C.A. for five years because

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADDISON GEARY



of its part in assembling "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," an exhibit which included explicit homoerotic photographs.

The five-year-ban-on-funding proposal was defeated, although language was included in the N.E.A.'s reauthorization legislation that requires it to uphold "general standards of decency," a phrase Murphy calls "a piece of tokenism." Beyond that, any grants the N.E.A. made to the I.C.A. for the next year had to be posted in Congress for 30 days in case anyone objected. (Nobody did.)

Murphy says that "the N.E.A. turned away from its constituency in order to answer certain political voices," and he worries that "the breakdown of trust that occurred when that happened still hasn't been repaired." He adds that, in the end, there was "little or no negativity for the I.C.A. in this affair. . . . The really positive thing about the Mapplethorpe controversy," said Murphy, "is that it's imbued this institution with a great responsibility as regards its leadership role in showing art that is challenging to the community that it services."

Murphy and the I.C.A. plan to move beyond the Mapplethorpe controversy to tackle broader ethical and aesthetic questions—and, of course, to show challenging, innovative art. And the new building, specifically designed to show contemporary art, gives the I.C.A. the space to experiment.

In the panel discussion the opening weekend, Murphy suggested that most modern disciplines have

A performance
by **Jonas dos Santos and Anne-Marie Mulgrew** filled I.C.A.'s new auditorium.

'Mystery Street,' by **Thomas Porett**, combines computer video and acrylic on canvas.

For **'The Lighthouse,'** **Karen Stone** uses such materials as **Astroturf and mirrors.**



to deal with similar questions of ethics—for example, both hospitals and museums must confront the issue of care: for hospitals, how best to care for patients, and for museums, how best to care for the artist and the viewer.

"We care in probably two different ways," Murphy noted: "One, that we give artists the best possible opportunity to show their work within this space and show it to its best advantage, and secondly, we have to do that within the context of our audience. . . . we have to have a caring attitude toward that audience."

The I.C.A. sponsored a series of discussions on Wednesday evenings in February, dealing with such topics as "The Imposition of Style: Teaching the Fine Arts in Philadelphia" and "Philadelphia in Crisis:

Survival of the Arts in the '90s"; it plans to continue to sponsor seminars and poetry readings regularly.

"Looking at art is an interrogation," explains Murphy: "We want to arm our viewers with the questions we feel they should have to begin to interpret the art work, and also develop in them the ability to interpret the work for themselves in whatever way is meaningful to them."

Which is not to say that the Institute of Contemporary Art sees its role as similar to that of other museums. "We are not a museum—we cannot deal in an authoritative tone with the subject matter we display," Murphy makes clear, "because we don't have the distance of history to really try to analyze what's happening. We're working with living artists." **END**