



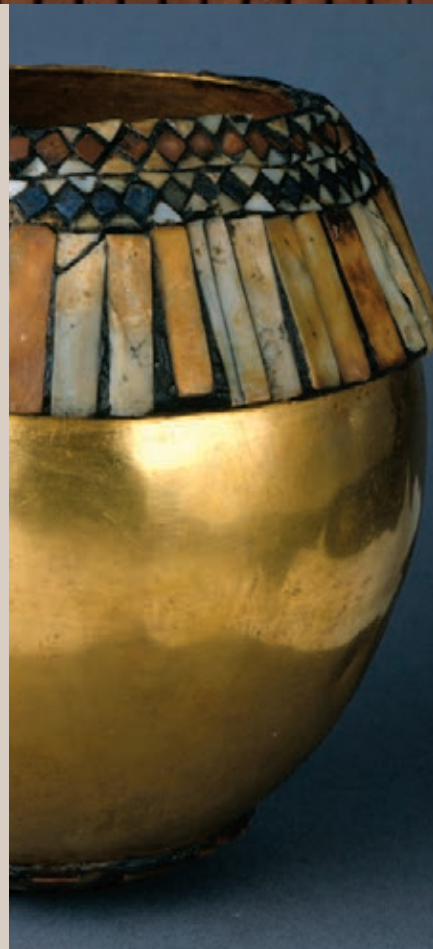
# In the Spotlight

**Penn's thriving  
arts-and-culture scene  
takes center stage  
this year.**

**O**n a Thursday afternoon in early May, inside the swank Art Deco home of WXPN World Café Live, 150 keepers of culture are discussing the state of Penn's arts. They are among the first to learn about a theme year that will spotlight the University's arts-and-culture scene—something numerous officials have described as a “hidden gem” in need of a good polish.

“We are on the threshold of an exciting Arts & the City Year,” Provost Vincent Price tells the board members, directors, and other overseers of the University's vibrant cultural entities who have gathered for the annual Penn Arts Leadership Luncheon. “Throughout the year, we will be placing arts and culture front and center on campus [and] strongly reaffirming our commitment to the arts,” Price adds. “We are planning a wide range of exciting events, and we count on all of you to join us.”

Four months later, like any well-rehearsed performer, Arts & the City Year is ready for its close-up.



**By Molly Petrilla**

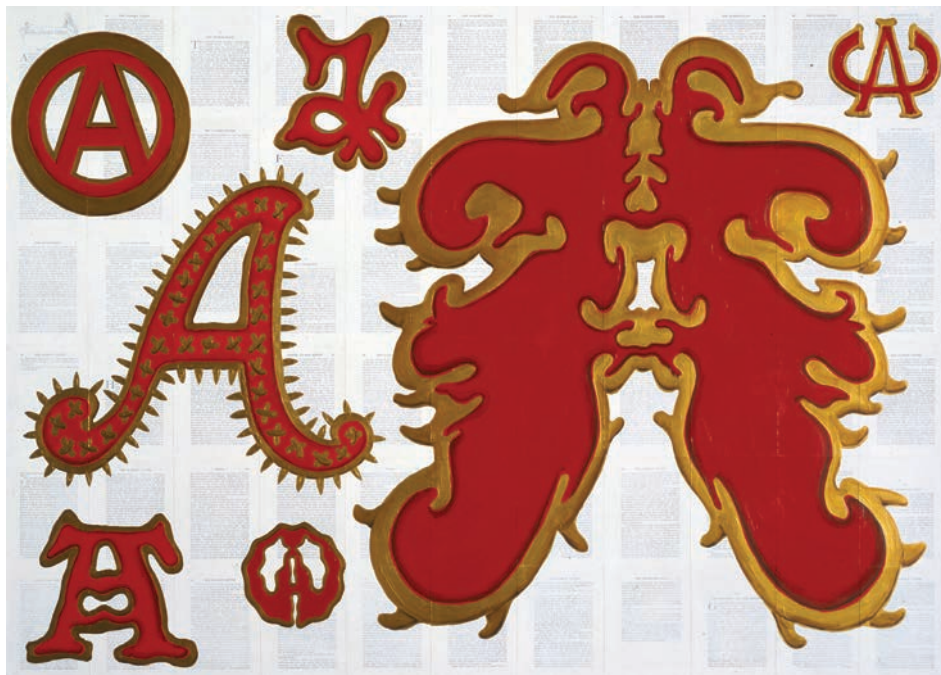
## ARTS & the City Year

is in many ways “a natural outgrowth of what we’ve done in the past,” Price explains on a bright July morning. “Each year has become slightly larger and more ambitious, and this is our most ambitious yet.” He’s referring to the Penn Reading Project, which asks all incoming students to read the same book and participate in discussions with Penn faculty members—a gentle introduction to academic life that has evolved into a full themed year of discussion and activity. This September new students “read” Thomas Eakins’ painting *The Gross Clinic* [“Gazetteer,” May/June 2009]. The rest of the Class of 2013’s freshman year will focus on the buzzing arts and culture landscape at Penn and throughout the city of Philadelphia. “Our hope is that the theme is more prominent this year—more visible—and that it draws in a much larger constituency than simply new students entering Penn,” Price says.

Throughout Arts & the City Year, the University will promote on-campus seminars, performances, exhibitions, and symposia, and collaborate with other city institutions and organizations—the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, Campus Philly, Philadelphia Live Arts and Fringe Festival, and the Philadelphia Theatre Company—to offer students special opportunities and discounts.

“I think a lot of people are going to be surprised to see the depth and breadth of what we have going on at Penn,” says Ty Furman GrE’08, director of University Life Arts Initiatives. “We have some very well-established [arts] programs and institutions here, and both our community and the Philadelphia community only have a small sense of what those programs do. At the same time, I think many of our students are going to figure out that Philadelphia is a culturally rich city, and we want to help them access it.”

Price uses the word “connection” frequently to discuss Arts & the City Year: connections between arts and culture entities on campus, between academics



and the arts, and between Penn and other city institutions. “It’s not just Arts *in* the City,” he says; “it’s Arts *and* the City.”

Gary Steuer, Philadelphia’s chief cultural officer, is equally enthusiastic. “There is a tendency for the University community to be in its own world, and the rest of the city often forgets how much is happening on the other side of the Schuylkill as well,” Steuer says. “My hope is that [Arts & the City Year] can begin a process of better connecting the University community to the cultural life of the city.”

The city will affirm its support of Arts & the City Year with a press conference on September 22 in City Hall. Mayor Michael Nutter W’79, Penn President Amy Gutmann, Steuer, and Price will host the event, which marks the official launch of the academic theme year. “We thought it would be a great way to kick off the excitement,” Steuer says.

**G**utmann has said that Arts & the City Year will “generate more visibility and buzz” for Penn’s numerous cultural institutions. (See also this issue’s “From College Hall” column.) “We do not want them to be hidden treasures,” she told attendees of the May luncheon. “We want them to be central to our educational mission.” With that in mind, the University’s cultural mainstays have been preparing for their year in the spotlight.

Nestled inside the Fisher Fine Arts Library, the Arthur Ross Gallery is celebrating Arts & the City Year with a trio of exhibitions that center on art, culture, and the city. First up is *West Philadelphia: Building a Community*, on view through October 11. Mounted in collaboration with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the University Archives and Records Center, the exhibit uses materials including watercolors, maps, photographs, oral histories, and postcards to explore the history, development, and future of West Philadelphia. To engage with the campus and city communities, the gallery will host a series of free public lectures on West Philadelphia in September and October. Up next in the gallery: *Jacob Lawrence and the Urban Experience: Prints 1963-2000*, which opens in October; and a site installation by Miler Lagos, which opens in January as part of the city-wide *Philagrafika 2010*.

As the central hub for student and professional writers alike, the Kelly Writers House is well versed in collaboration. The Writers House and its peer institutions “are here, and they are thriving,” says Al Filreis, the Kelly Professor of English who serves as director of the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing and faculty director of Writers House. “This coming year students will know a lot more about what goes on at these centers, how exciting they are, and what extraordinary



connections are constantly being made between these Penn arts organizations and the Philadelphia scene.” The cozy Writers House—full of quiet nooks and body-enveloping couches—is planning a slew of readings, performances, seminars, workshops, and reading groups for the coming year that will celebrate urban literature and city arts. Of particular note is a two-day visit in April from screenwriter David Milch, whose television shows *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue* “redefined and complicated television’s representation of urban life on the small screen,” Filreis says.

The Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts will spotlight local artists with a “By Local” series that includes a performance by the West Philadelphia Orchestra and an evening of dance from Philadelphia choreographers Silvana Cardell and Curt Haworth. The Platt Student Performing Arts House will also bring Philadelphia performers to campus for its “Lunch with Local Artists” series, which invites students to meet with eminent local musi-



icians, spoken-word artists, and dancers to discuss their crafts.

The Institute of Contemporary Art and the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology will connect their offerings with the Penn and Philadelphia communities through lectures, symposia, and other special events. “We are delighted to be part of the Arts & the City initiative this year, since the museum is a natural forum for conversations and events focused on the arts,” says Loa Traxler Gr’04, associate deputy director of the Penn Museum. “We are exploring ways to collaborate with local institutions to bring the story of the arts in Philadelphia to life.”

**Several thousand students are already involved in campus arts groups.** The Performing Arts Council is the second-largest umbrella organization on campus—surpassed only by the Greek system—and “we have amazing academic programs that are producing students who go on to fantastic careers in arts and culture,” Furman says. The challenge this year is to help these arts-oriented students and their culture-shy counterparts discover everything the campus and city have to offer. As Gutmann said in May, “We want to trigger a chain reaction of dynamic engagement with the arts all over Penn ... [and] Arts & the City represents our most concerted effort ever to liberate the imagination of Penn students by educating them more fully in the arts.”

To spur visits to nearby cultural institutions, students will receive Arts & Culture Passports to track the events and activities they attend on and off campus. (For the incentive-oriented, prizes will be awarded at a party in the spring.) Students



will also be encouraged to visit the online Arts at Penn Calendar for information on campus arts happenings—from music and theater performances to museum talks and author readings—as well as the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance’s Philly Fun Guide.

This month, the University will host an on-campus Arts Fair with representatives from nearby arts organizations, and in late November, a campus-wide Arts Crawl of more than 30 arts institutions, academic programs, clubs, and organizations will offer an array of free or deeply discounted events.

“The idea is to raise awareness of all the arts and culture activity that’s on campus,” Furman says of the latter event. “We wanted to take one day and really showcase everything we have on campus.”

While well-established groups like the Mask and Wig Club and Off the Beat already sell out their shows, “we’re hoping to make it obvious to anyone on campus that we have these [student] organizations, and that these students are—for the most part—doing this through their own initiative and resources,” Furman says. In that sense, all student arts groups will enjoy “a raised profile on campus” this year, he predicts.

In the fall and spring, the University will award Arts & the City Year grants to projects that offer opportunities to “create, participate in, and learn about the arts on campus and in Philadelphia,” according to the guidelines. That includes collaborations with local artists and venues and, more broadly, anything that increases the number of students involved with art and arts resources on campus or in the city.

**Arts & the City Year aims to “spotlight and connect arts and cultural activities and resources on campus,**

especially those that cross boundaries of schools and disciplines,” Price says. “We want to draw attention to artistic practice, but also foster new collaborations between arts and culture centers and the academic schools.”

One such multi-disciplinary undertaking is under way at the Center for Public Health Initiatives. The Center will host a seminar series this year entitled “Creative Action: The Arts in Public Health,” which will include a November 2 performance by award-winning writer-actress Anna Deavere Smith—who can be seen as nurse-administrator Gloria Akalitus on the Showtime series *Nurse Jackie*—presenting her current work on access to health care in America.

Though some may not immediately make the connection between the arts and public health, Wendy Voet C’91, the center’s managing director, explains: “A growing number of people are using arts and media to affect public health policy and improve the life of community members. When you hear a research paper, it’s very different than when you see a documentary. The documentary really sticks with you. It can evoke a call to action and make people understand the situation.” The series will highlight artists, programs, and creative research projects that use digital media, video, storytelling, drama, photography, and mural arts to address public health issues. “This is a way for us

to reach out to all the schools across the University because these methods are a bridge across all of them,” Voet adds.

In the coming months, Arts & the City Year will ideally “galvanize innovative activities already taking place at Penn and initiate exciting new ones,” Price says. “We envision this year as a catalyst to take some things that are already developing and give them new vigor.”

Of course, the thought of choosing between so many rich arts and cultural endeavors this year leaves even President Gutmann feeling slightly overwhelmed. “One cannot take it all in,” she said in May. “So our goal [for Arts & the City Year] is not that everybody take it all in; that is impossible. Our goal is that everybody take some of it in.”

And if all goes according to plan, they will keep absorbing it for years to come: While Arts & the City is officially a one-year undertaking, Price sees it as anything but finite: “We hope that some of these projects will take root and continue well beyond the theme year,” he says. “The idea is not to have just a wonderful year celebration; it is a conscious attempt to seed some new projects.”

Steuer has similar predictions for the year’s lasting effects: “My hope is that this can be the start of a new type of relationship between the University community and the rest of the cultural sector within the city,” he says. “We see this as the beginning of a new, strong relationship.” ♦

**Molly Petrilla C’06 is a freelance writer who contributes frequently to the Gazette.**



Homecoming  
embraces its  
artistic side

# Touchdown for Culture Lovers

**F**ootballs will still spiral and touchdowns still be scored, but equally memorable performances will take place off Franklin Field this November. Homecoming, traditionally a weekend for the sports-oriented, has been expanded to “Homecoming—featuring arts and culture,” a three-day showcase of all things right-brained, from performances and symposia to film screenings and gallery tours.

“There was a lot of thought and discussion and hope that at some point, Penn would have a major arts-and-culture-focused weekend,” says Hoopes Wampler, assistant vice president of Alumni Relations. Homecoming seemed the ideal occasion because it typically attracts only a very defined audience—and rarely does that audience include the entire arts-and-culture crowd. “This year, we’ve worked to infuse Homecoming with a new set of subjects and content that we hope will have a broader appeal,” Wampler adds. “There really will be something for everyone this year.”

Among the festivities are 10 faculty-led symposia that “are really the star offerings,” says Sheila Raman, director of development for arts and culture. At these sessions, alumni will create paintings and pottery with Julie Schneider, the director of the Fine Arts undergraduate program; learn about Penn’s robust Shakespeare collection from College Dean Rebecca Bushnell; and discuss the future of newspapers with *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist and Penn writing professor Dick Polman. These sessions exemplify the unique opportunities for lifelong learning that a Penn education offers, Raman says. “You have a chance to go back and experience these things, and you really can’t get them anywhere else.”

Penn’s numerous cultural institutions will offer special curatorial talks and tours throughout the weekend, including the annual Homecoming Gallery Hop with stops at the Arthur Ross Gallery, the Architectural Archives, and the Institute of Contemporary Art. The latter will highlight its *Tim Rollins and KOS* exhibition with a talk from Susan Seifert, director of

the University’s Social Impact of the Arts Project, and Angel Abreu, an artist who attended Penn before transferring to NYU, and who is one of Kids of Survival (KOS), a group of South Bronx teenagers who created art with Rollins.

The 2009 Homecoming playbill will feature a half-dozen student performances and an alumni/student late-night cabaret in the Platt Student Performing Arts House. For many alumni, this will be a first visit to the Platt House, which debuted in the former Stouffer College House in Fall 2006 as a hub for all things arts-related—from rehearsal spaces to dance studios to a comfortable lounge.

A Homecoming film festival will include screenings and discussions of the new film *Surrogates*, starring Bruce Willis and produced by Todd Lieberman C’95, Elizabeth Banks C’96, and Max Handelman C’95; and the documentaries *Burning the Future: Coal in America* and *The Accidental Advocate*, from husband-and-wife filmmakers and festival hosts David Novack EAS’86 and Nancy Levy Novack C’87.

Homecoming officials say the University’s yearlong arts-and-culture theme (see main story) encouraged them to unveil the enhanced focus this fall.

“I think we were motivated to make it happen this year because of Arts & the City,” Wampler says. But while the theme year and Homecoming both pay homage to all things arts and culture, Wampler says there is an important distinction: “Arts & the City is a one-year initiative, whereas we want to make Homecoming an annual arts and cultural event.”

“The response so far has been extremely positive,” Wampler says. “Our alumni have always wanted access to some of these great arts-and-culture resources, and we think that those who aren’t used to coming back to Homecoming will be excited to see this new content. I hope that Homecoming will significantly enhance the exposure all the arts and culture organizations at Penn receive from the alumni body, and that these ‘hidden treasures’ become much more visible.”—M.P.