

Installation view, *Alfredo Jaar: Geography=War*, fall 1991.

The Anderson Gallery, 1988-1996

STEVEN HIGH

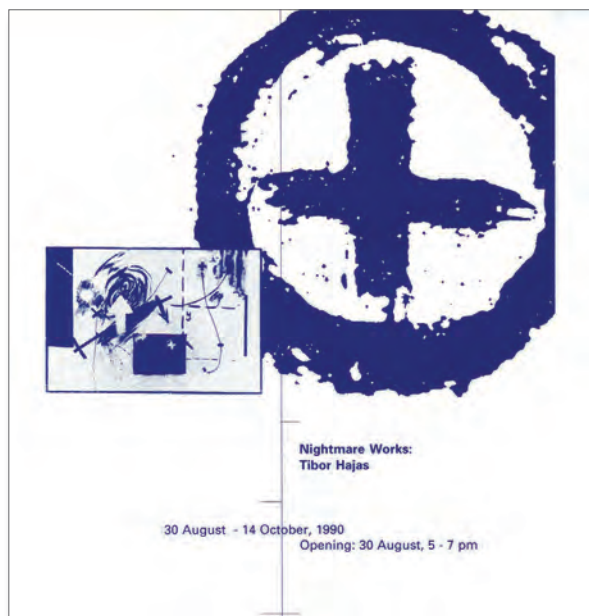
Writing this essay on the occasion of the Anderson Gallery's closure is bittersweet. For me, the gallery was a space of innovation, creativity, experimentation, and celebration, despite being challenged by its limited accessibility, narrow and steep stairways, and its rather hidden location on campus. In 1996, after two years of architectural design (with department heads Joe Seipel in sculpture, Nancy Thompson in craft, Michael Drought in painting and printmaking, and myself), we came very close to creating a new facility for the Anderson Gallery within a larger center for the arts. But delays and budget eventually made it impossible for the gallery to be included in these expansion plans. This is why I am happy to celebrate its closing because, finally, the new Institute for Contemporary Art will have the space, technology, location, and stunning design to take the presentation of contemporary art at VCU into the twenty-first century. And with one of the finest art programs in the U.S., that is where VCU must be.

I became director of the Anderson Gallery in 1988, after two years of founding and directing a contemporary gallery at the Portland School of Art (now Maine College of Art). For the next eight years, I had the pleasure and challenge of programming the Anderson's five (later six) galleries spread over three floors. We were required to present a juried student exhibition and a series of MFA thesis shows in the spring and periodic faculty shows and projects. Other than that, the galleries were free for me and my small staff to program. And we did! Over the eight years of my tenure at the gallery, we curated over 30 exhibitions, hosted another 26 exhibitions

from other museums and galleries, published 15 catalogues and at least that many brochures. We also presented the MFA thesis project of nearly every MFA student, averaging around 20 a year.

My curatorial interest at the time was International art, particularly art from geographical areas under change or tension. I had the opportunity to work in Eastern Europe, Israel, South America (Peru and Argentina), and North Western Africa (Ethiopia and Uganda) in the late 1980s and early 90s. I happened to be in Berlin when the Berlin wall first opened, working with the artist Thomas Florschuetz, who had defected from East Germany the year before. Prior to my departure from the Anderson Gallery in 1996, I received a major grant to develop an exhibition on contemporary work from China; ultimately, that opportunity went to my successor.

The projects of which I am most proud often involved collaborations with other institutions. Alfredo Jaar's *Geography=War* (1991) stands out not only for the exhibition's powerful installations and subject matter, but also as the first official collaboration between the Anderson Gallery and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and my first opportunity to work with Ashley Kistler. This project was followed several years later by *Repicturing Abstraction* (1995), an exhibition that brought together for the first time the four major contemporary art venues in Richmond, including 1708 Gallery and the Marsh Art Gallery (now the Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art) at the University of Richmond. The Anderson Gallery also collaborated with the List Visual Arts Center at MIT (*Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin: Still*



Exhibition announcement, *Nightmare Works: Tibor Hajas*, fall 1990.

Performances, 1989) and the Emerson Gallery at Hamilton College (*Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, 1990).

I collaborated with two artists who became colleagues and mentors for me several times during these years: the German artist Thomas Florschuetz and the late American sculptor/musician Terry Adkins. Thomas was one of the first artists I exhibited at the AG and also one of the last, as he was represented in the controversial 1993 exhibition *Anonymity and Identity*. Terry Adkins's sculptures and musical instruments were exhibited in 1990 and, together, we received a significant USIA grant to create installations and study traditional musical instruments throughout Africa in the mid-90s.

But the exhibition of which I am most proud is *Nightmare Works: Tibor Hajas* (1990). This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, powerfully designed by John Malinoski, introduced the full body of work of this important Hungarian conceptual/performance artist and underscored how global the desire was to embrace physical risk and chance in contemporary performance. It was a defining exhibition for me as a curator and my first major international project.

Memories of those people with whom I worked at VCU are still strong after 20 years. Dean Murry DePillars, my pipe-smoking boss during most of my tenure at the Anderson Gallery, was usually calm and hardly a micro-manager, for which

I was grateful; but he was there for support when it was needed, which was most appreciated. At the height of the culture wars, our exhibition, *Anonymity and Identity* (1993), was publicly selected to be defunded by the NEA, apparently due to its content. Dean DePillars and VCU President Eugene Trani were actively involved during the media storm and, later, the Dean wrote a powerful overview of the issues for our exhibition catalogue.

Howard Risatti, professor (now emeritus) in the art history department, was a friend and mentor during and after my time at VCU. He and graduate student Mark Scala always had interesting insights and suggestions regarding our projects. Mark went on to become Chief Curator at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, and I will feature his latest exhibition, *Phantom Bodies*, at the Ringling in 2016. I enjoyed working with all of the department chairs in the School of the Arts and my constantly changing faculty advisory committee. I had a small but dynamic staff—Kathy Emerson, administrator; Leon Roper, preparator; Leslie Brothers, assistant curator and registrar; and Loretta Cooper, education and development (now a development director at the Smithsonian)—as well as a fantastic gift shop managed by Cindy Neuschwander and later, Cate Fitt.

I had the opportunity to work with two great designers, Phil Meggs and John Malinoski. I co-curated *Tomas Gonda: A Life in Design* with Phil, and had the luxury of many conversations on design history over the year-long development of this project, which ultimately traveled to Germany and Argentina. John Malinoski, professor in the Graphic Design Department, collaborated with me on the development of many of our exhibition catalogues. John loved to push the borders of design, and the exhibition catalogue became for him a great format for experimenting with these conventions.

Congratulations to everyone who joined together to raise the money and design a phenomenal new facility. The Institute for Contemporary Art culminates a long history of exploring the dynamic world of contemporary art that was the Anderson Gallery. Finally, I want to acknowledge Joe Seipel, chair of sculpture during my time at the gallery, a short-term colleague in Savannah, and now Dean of the School of the Arts. I aspire to his innovation, risk-taking, and pure pleasure in art.



Above: Installation view, *Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, winter 1990.

Top: Installation view, *Repicturing Abstraction: The Politics of Space*, winter 1995.