

# Remembering Ted Potter

## Director, Anderson Gallery, 1997–2005

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BERNARD MARTIN

Ted Potter (1933–2006) came to the Anderson Gallery as something of a hero to many members of the arts community for his uncompromising defense of artistic freedom of expression during the cultural wars of the 1980s. His was among the most articulate voices raised in opposition to attempts to defund, even abolish, the National Endowment for the Arts and efforts to set a precedent for censorship of any art organization that received public funding. These attempts, led by conservative Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, focused on the Southeastern Center for the Arts (SECCA) in Winston-Salem and Potter, specifically, for sponsoring *Awards in the Visual Arts 7* (1988), a nationally traveling exhibition that included Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), a large color photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine. Among the venues for this exhibition was the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond.

Potter was seen as an ideal choice for director of the Anderson Gallery as it was making ambitious projections for the future. During his 25-year tenure at SECCA, he had, almost single-handedly, taken it from a small storefront gallery, the Winston-Salem Gallery of Fine Arts, to the Southeast's leading contemporary arts center—an institution with exhibitions, publications, and financial support for artists that changed the national perception of regional art. After leaving SECCA in 1991, Potter served as director of the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna, Florida, and later, as director of the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans. He arrived at the Anderson Gallery with an incredibly impressive résumé of major accomplishments.

The first goals for the Anderson Gallery under Potter's directorship were quite ambitious: a \$3 million addition to the gallery was planned, along with a full renovation of the existing structure to remedy its many physical problems and bring it into compliance with the standards of the American Alliance of Museums. Unfortunately, money never materialized for the more extensive improvements. While a number of changes were made, the limitations of the gallery's facility would continue to impact not only its exhibition schedule, but also its attempts to obtain financial support from grants and private donors. An exhibition from the Hirshhorn Museum's permanent collection in Washington, D.C., was cancelled because of security and climate-control issues; a generous private supporter of the arts declined to contribute because of access problems for disabled visitors; and many public and private sources of funding would not accept proposals from the gallery for these same reasons.

Working within these restrictions, however, Potter mounted approximately 60 diverse exhibitions, numerous student shows, and over 200 MFA installations during his tenure, and published more than a dozen catalogues to document the most significant projects. While he curated at least one major exhibition a year, conceived of others, found guest curators for some, and supervised all, he assigned a considerable number to junior members of his staff, helping them gain the experience necessary to advance their careers in arts administration. These exhibitions continued to advance the ongoing mission of the gallery: to support the educational efforts of the disciplines within the School of the Arts; to provide a venue



Ted Potter (center) with George Nan (left), retired chair of the VCUarts Department of Photography & Film, and Richard Kevorkian, former professor in the Department of Painting & Printmaking, at the exhibition opening of *Young + Brash + Abstract*, January 18, 2002.

for student and faculty exposure; and to bring to the university and community the most innovative and thoughtful work obtainable.

Notable among the exhibitions overseen by Potter were: *From the Collection of Jonathan and Janet Geldzahler* (1999), a recent acquisitions show of works originally belonging to Henry Geldzahler, the Metropolitan Museum's first contemporary art curator; *Gregory Barsamian: Innuendo Non Troppo* (1999), an exhibition of kinetic sculptures organized by the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, and one of the most popular shows ever hosted by the gallery; *From Idea to Matter* (2000), a sculpture show curated by renowned playwright Edward Albee; *Into My Eyes: The Photographs of Thomas Daniel* (2000), a retrospective of this widely-admired Richmond photographer and chronicler of the American South; *Young + Brash + Abstract* (2002), an exploration of contemporary abstract painting co-curated by poet and art critic John Yau; *The George and Helen Spelvin Folk Art Collection* (2002), artist Beauvais Lyons's parodist installation of a fictitious folk art collection; *Heide Fasnacht: Strange Attractors* (2004), a major mid-career survey of work by this well-known New York-based artist; and solo exhibitions by David Freed (2001), Maurice Bonds (2003), and Theresa

Pollak (2004), all productive artists and dedicated teachers who helped shape the School of the Arts and the wider arts community.

Before Potter became an accomplished arts administrator, he was a practicing artist. Often overlooked is the fact that he remained a prolific and dedicated painter his entire life. The series *Inside the Ropes*, which occupied him during the last six years of his life, reflects his 50 years of active involvement in the American art scene. As a satirist, a humorist, and sometimes a moralist, Potter observed this scene and its many participants—artists, patrons, dealers, collectors, museum and gallery administrators—with humor, wit, compassion, and serious insights. This commitment should not be marginalized in any assessment of his role in the arts for its impact on him was profound. The philosophical underpinnings for all of his activities were fundamentally studio-based, and he was always on the side of the artists.

Ted Potter's directorship of eight years was among the longest in the history of the Anderson Gallery, and he holds the distinction of being its only director emeritus.