

In Conversation with Amy Moorefield

Traci Garland: VCU students have always played a significant and vital role at the Anderson Gallery as visitors, gallery assistants, interns, volunteers, and exhibiting artists. From your perspective, how has student involvement impacted the gallery and offered real benefits to those who participated?

Amy Moorefield: Students have always been the life force of the Anderson Gallery. Their service permeated all areas of the gallery as workers and also as exhibitors in undergraduate and graduate shows, which often successfully launched their careers as professional artists. As an alumna who has moved on to work at other arts organizations, I have been struck not only by how students have been shaped by their experiences at the Anderson Gallery, but also by how they have formed an international fan club. In my conversations with museum colleagues and artists who had prior relationships with the gallery—including four art handlers who are de-installing an exhibition in the Taubman Museum of Art galleries as I write this—it is not uncommon to hear wonderful stories about the gallery that include the descriptors life-altering, transformative, validating, and career-starting.

Beginning in the early 1970s, annual undergraduate exhibitions, often selected by jurors who were nationally recognized artists or curators, were held each spring. What are some of the most interesting memories you have from your experiences working on student shows?

Given the Anderson Gallery's small staff, mounting four student exhibitions with hundreds of artworks each year was impressive. Looking back on my tenure at the gallery, I realized that I played a role in developing and presenting nearly 60 of these shows. I will always remember the incredible intensity of the selection process, as well as the excitement that greeted the yearly arrival of the student exhibitions. I was constantly amazed by the gallery's staff and its student assistants, who worked long hours to honor the visions of their exhibiting peers and support the departmental programs they represented. These experiences of installing work and mounting exhibitions went far in helping our assistants develop practical skills and professional practices. And it was always a big moment when students

proudly brought their parents to the gallery to see their work on view.

The Anderson Gallery was fortunate to engage as jurors a number of well-known curators and artists, who looked at 400 to 1000 pieces of student art each year. If I had to select several jurors for specific praise, they would include sculptor and VCUarts alumna Teresita Fernández and John Ravenal, then the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Fernández spoke passionately with students about using their time at VCUarts to hone their skills. Ravenal's thoughtfulness in looking deeply at each of the hundreds of works, combined with his infinite patience, left an indelible impression.

During your tenure, there were a number of exhibitions that featured works from the gallery's collection. Some shows, like *New Gifts* (2000), *Making Faces* (2004), and *The Bad Boys of Photography* (2005), you curated. For others, including *Highlights* (2005) and *Relativity* (2005), you invited the curatorial participation of VCU faculty members. First, would you talk about curating from the permanent collection? What





work, or types of work, did you want to highlight and why? What were some of the unique challenges of working with a collection that was acquired almost entirely through donation?

The Anderson Gallery Collection is remarkable and quirky with some areas of depth, including a number of important works on paper and contemporary photographs. Cultivating the growth of a collection without acquisition funds is not easy; however, giving to the Anderson Gallery was appealing to many donors because the gallery's collection served as a resource for students and faculty. One remarkable experience involved a substantial gift from the family of Henry Geldzahler, the first curator of contemporary art at New York's Metropolitan Museum. The donation included, among other treasures, whimsical drawings by British artist David Hockney and significant photographs by Bruce Davidson. These works, often dedicated by the artists to Geldzahler, reflect the close relationships he established with artists who he championed.

In curating thematic exhibitions from the collection, which complemented our loan shows, I wanted not only to give the collection greater accessibility, but also to present selections that surprised visitors and gave them an opportunity to learn something new. *Aaron Siskind: Surface Abstraction* (1999), for example, presented the photographer's work within the context of contemporaneous Abstract Expressionist paintings. These collection-based shows also honored the growth of the collection and the generosity of donors. For instance, *Past/Present Tense* (1998) revealed the scope of the collection while also highlighting new gifts seen by the public for the first time. The photography collection was an especially rich resource, and I enjoyed curating sometimes playful thematic

exhibitions and also expanding notions of traditional genres like portraiture through selections from it.

What was the experience like working with VCU faculty and engaging them with the collection? How did faculty members approach and interact with the collection? How do you think these exhibitions advanced the mission of the Anderson Gallery as an educational resource?

Artists can make great curators, and it was wonderful to have such talented faculty as printmakers David Freed and Barbara Tisserat, and sculptor Amy Hauft explore the gallery's collection with their fresh and inspiring visions. My intentions were two-fold in inviting VCUarts faculty to create these exhibitions: their projects helped establish new friends for the Anderson Gallery and provided much needed scholarship on selected objects. The outcome of making the collection more accessible through exhibitions invariably benefitted everyone concerned—the gallery and its donors, the faculty and students, and the general public.



Gallery assistants at work. Photographs by Michael Lease.

The Anderson Gallery Always Broadened Perspectives

I don't teach the visual arts, but there is an art to what I do teach: research and writing. I teach VCU's Focused Inquiry class, a yearlong seminar to engage critical thinking and communication. It is the keystone of VCU's Core Education requirement, so you know that I want to get it right.

I bring to it high expectations for myself and for students. Yet, my students don't always come in thinking like I do. They think it's just another required English class. The same reading. The same research. The same writing.

But there's more to it than this. And for my class to work, I need to show it's not just that.

Enter Anderson Gallery.

The Anderson Gallery put ideas in place. I brought my classes to the gallery as an exercise of not just responding to artworks but also walking through installations to experience relationships and connections between component parts, as one might also experience a written text. Exhibitions always incited lively topical discussions about ideas, but that wasn't the only reason we were there. The arrangement of an exhibition drove

conversations about order, organization, and placement. Students would not only respond to ideas contained in the art and say, "I think this," or "I think that," but could also point to how the exhibition's composition contributed to why they thought "this" or "that."

The experience of noticing a work's physical location and exploring its relationship to other adjacent pieces led to talking about how, where, when, and why support in a researched essay needs to be configured. If we discussed why a photograph was next to a painting surrounded by a sculpture, considering each in the context of the other, we also talked about using a quote next to a number to explain a chart in a paragraph. In front of portraits, or in a recreation of someone's office, or surrounded by pictures, cartoons, cut-outs, and kinetic images, we experienced composition in order to play around with the art of researching and writing.

The Anderson Gallery was a genuine space of education. The place opened up thinking.

Kirk Richardson, Ph.D.
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Classes from the VCUarts Department of Dance and Choreography often visited the Anderson Gallery. Back in the studio, students create work inspired by their exhibition tour of *Myron Helfgott: An Inventory of My Thoughts*, spring 2015. Photograph by Martha Curtis.



Selected views, student openings. Photographs by Tom Kojcsich, VCU University Marketing.