



The WPA

The Washington Project for the Arts, Splitsville with the Corcoran Gallery, is reborn under the direction of Kim Ward

By Stuart Greenwell

October 9, 2007

Stuart Greenwell: The WPA/C has just announced its separation from the Corcoran. So the WPA/C is prepared to once again become the WPA?

Kim Ward: Yes

SG: How will this “separation” affect the WPA’s programming? Who will program exhibitions? Will they be Ad-hoc, a curator, a series of curators? What can we look forward to in terms of the feel of the programming?

KW: I have not had directives from the Corcoran curatorial staff or other staff in regard to the mission of the organization. Our programming, exhibitions, and events have been chosen, planned and executed autonomously. So I don’t think you will see an immediate dramatic change in programming. We will hopefully carve out micro-gallery space in our offices, so for the first time in 11 years we will have complete control of a space that can and will exhibit artist’s work, which is a new and dynamic change for WPA. I hope to make good use of that opportunity and ideas are still on the table. We come up with ideas for programming, as well as receive many, many proposals and input from the wider arts community. I hope this will increase with greater accessibility and a street level presence in the city. I have found no lack of curatorial talent in the region so we will continue to hire curators that fit our exhibition and programming needs. I see no reason, at this point in the organization’s life cycle, to have a curator on staff.

Photos: James Calder

SG: In the 70's and 80's there were a number of exciting alternative spaces across the country. Then the economic lead balloon that was the nineties killed most of them off (not coincidentally the WPA was one of them). Do you foresee a day where the alternative space will become viable again like in the late 70's and 80's? Is this a bell weather of something like that happening again?

Kim: I would be hard pressed to answer with sweeping generalities. What I find in DC is great wealth, high interest in the visual arts, but too low of a percentage of that wealth devoted to supporting the contemporary visual arts community. Will that last forever? I hope not. I think that the fragmented nature of DC is such that it works against promoting the powerful presence of the many talented artists living and working in the city. Until there is some type of unified approach and regular communication between all of us working in this visual arts landscape, then little will change. I find the surrounding communities are nimble and eager to recruit artist's space. Warehouse and the Washington Glass School are two examples of artist spaces that closed their doors and were approached by surrounding county government art's staff to relocate, and become a part of the suburbs. Until the wealth that is scattered throughout the DC region is connected, formally connected to the visual arts community and deep, long term support is engendered, then the ability of arts organizations to form, open and thrive will be hindered. The WPA was fortunate enough to have a patron subsidize our rent, so we could move without creating great risk to our financial situation. In addition to a fragmented visual arts community and an unconnected donor base, real estate costs make it challenging to find space that is anywhere close to being reasonable for a non-profit arts group, artists studios, artist housing and gallery space.

SG: Will OPTIONS continue to be a program of the WPA? There was a time when OPTIONS was a show that showcased new or unrecognized talent and it had some effect on those artists reputa-



tion, then came a time where OPTIONS became an excuse for a party (albeit a good one), but the art was mostly awful or irrelevant. What is your vision for OPTIONS?

Kim: I think we all have the opportunity to attend great parties in DC, so I am interested in continuing to showcase new or under recognized emergent talent in the area. The key to OPTIONS success is selecting a strong curator and Paul Brewer was one of the best curators I've ever had the pleasure of working with since I started with the organization. I hope that we are as lucky in finding someone that talented for OPTIONS 2009.

SG: Obviously the move to a Dupont Circle location must have been precipitated by some sort of financial, perhaps donor, arrangement, — it's ironic that with the flight of most of the leading galleries, to the 14th street corridor, that the WPA is finding space in an area of decline, concerning the arts.

Kim: I never expected the WPA to end up near Embassy Row, it still makes me chuckle. I think you could debate the ideal location ad nauseam, but the bottom line is the bottom line and when you are offered an incredible deal for 1000 feet of office/gallery space, at street

SG: What will the temperament of the organization be? Will it be like the WPA of old, under Alice Denny or perhaps the D street era, or will it have more of a "high-minded" uber-curatorial view?

Kim: I think that the success of Alice and Jack's era was the openness and willingness they had to turn over the exhibition space to the artists and facilitate artist's gathering. Alice had something like 160 arts events the year she stepped down in 1979, and exhibited over 250 local artists. Her spirit of being directed by the community of artists is definitely one I embrace and with our new space we will have the ability to program, meet, and facilitate more events.

SG: Has Washington gotten too sophisticated, or perhaps trendy, for a return to the WPA's salad days?

Kim: Washington has always felt sophisticated to me; I'm from the deep South—Alabama and I know people who plan their wedding around the Southeastern conference football schedule and NASCAR circuit. I wasn't around in the WPA salad days, but I don't think it is ever a mistake to get as close to your constituency as possible, so our mission of serving local artists will only be best served by being as close as possible to those artists, their needs and advocating for change in their behalf. Whether that's sophisticated or not,

has never crossed my mind. What will the new WPA do differently from the WPA/C in terms of content?

SG: How did the separation come to happen? Who were the players?

Kim: I think that the players were the same that are in every major organization/institution change, the staffs and boards. One of the most important things to state about this separation is that it did not occur in a Eureka moment. From the first year that the WPA came into the Corcoran, 1996, discussion began in board meetings about whether the organization could meet it's mission inside the walls of the institution. What happened is the WPA, through necessity, evolved and changed, become nimble and capable of staging exhibitions and programming from Baltimore to Richmond, this would not have happened without losing dedicated exhibition space and I think it was a fabulous unforeseen benefit. Also, we are close to launching the ArtFile Online which will be a digital directory of our members work accessible from our website by anyone with access to the worldwide web. We have successfully expanded the scope and reach of the WPA to new levels by working out of the smallest space the organization has ever used.. We are at the next stage of the organization's life cycle which is going to be about fulfilling our mission to the local arts community by opening the doors, listening and advocating, then structuring programming to meet those needs.

SG: Thanks very much Kim. ..UC

For more information on the history of the WPA, see:

http://www.wpadc.org/pdf/WPAC_History.pdf

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2479/is_n4_v24/ai_19102842

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE2DD1330F933A15754C0A96F948260>