

NERVE ENDINGS

Betty Parsons, Marcia Tucker, and Alanna Heiss

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INTRODUCTION

When initially presented, new forms of art and installation can incite hostility and derision among art patrons, critics, and general audiences. New paradigms are unsettling and artistic breakthroughs can threaten belief systems people hold dear to their understanding of the art world and how it functions. Some of the most distinguished and iconic artists in modern history have found notoriety and recognition through years, even decades, of slowly evolving acceptance into the cultural mainstream.

Once labeled charlatans heralding a clear decline in culture, such eminent artists as Theodore Gericault, Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp incited public fury and scathing criticism in their respective eras for the ground-breaking work they produced. By challenging the conventions of how art is *supposed* to look and function, artists operating outside that norm encounter a public largely unprepared and unwilling to accept their permutations. As history has shown, when presented with boundary-crossing art, audiences “take out their own anxiety about change out on those who have attempted...to rearrange the prevailing power relationships”¹

In many respects, the curator or director who chooses to present original work to a frequently bewildered and uncomfortable audience shares quite closely the challenges that face cutting-edge artists. Curators and directors promoting distinctively innovative contemporary art meet with harsh castigation for the work they present. In their attempts to uncover “the nerve endings of contemporary art” (as described by Tate Museum curator Nicholas Serota)², forward-thinking curators continually question the way art

functions in response to the modern world. The curator must translate into exhibitions, catalogs, and discussions, concepts and forms that have yet to be defined, much less understood.

Exposing and promoting the nerve endings of contemporary art demands participation outside of and attention beyond mainstream culture. Marcia Tucker, founder of the New Museum and one of the subjects of this paper, called this loving the margins. “I always feel that the margins tell you more than the center of the page ever could. Loving the margins is risky, because you’re not only in unfamiliar territory, but often in hostile terrain as well”³. Marginalized, one is able to, and often forced to, access work and ideas beyond “the center of the page” of traditional art forms and cultural assumptions. The margins reflect independent thinking rather than the perpetuation of extant cultural structures. When new art is presented to contemporary audiences, historical facts and cultural consensus are not yet available to ensure the import of the work or to allay fear of the unknown. “You can’t put something that’s just been done into history; you’ve got to talk about its creative impact for the moment. A new work by a new artist is not history. It is the present”⁴.

In *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930*, Kathleen McCarthy asserts that “women, not men, took the greatest gambles on the art of the future, the untested, the untried.”⁵ Consequently, my research has emphasized the importance of the careers of three courageous women who shifted the boundaries of the twentieth-century art world: Betty Parsons, Marcia Tucker, and Alanna Heiss. Each in

her own way fundamentally challenged and changed the way the world perceives and interacts with art.

Betty Parsons opened the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1946 in New York City. Dubbed by *Artnews* the “den mother of Abstract Expressionism” the following year, Parsons discovered and promoted, over the course of her forty-year career, such prominent artists as Hans Hofmann, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Tuttle. By presenting some of the most innovative and exciting artists of her time Parsons “largely defined avant-garde art in America”.⁶ Discussing her passion for the avant-garde and her belief in promoting her artists, Parsons remarked “I think I was born with a love for the unfamiliar. How else can you describe it? I had no idea I had this talent—an ‘eye’...Everyone has instincts, but having faith in them is something you have to work for”.⁷

Marcia Tucker began her career in 1969 as the first female curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Eleven years after her appointment to that position she was fired for her unapologetic selection of artists and installations that pushed audiences and museum trustees far beyond their comfortable expectations of what a museum should be. Tucker responded to her dismissal by founding the New Museum in New York. She created a “new museum” to create a new model within the current museum system. Director of the New Museum for 22 years, she presided over, “a somewhat chaotic, idealistic place where the nature of art was always in question, exhibitions were a form of consciousness-raising, and mistakes were inevitable”.⁸

Alanna Heiss first made her mark in the 1970's by transforming abandoned and unused buildings throughout New York into exhibition venues for site-specific art. With her hand in as many as ten empty buildings at any given moment in time, Heiss eventually focused her energies into a dilapidated New York Public School, P.S.1, which would become the largest center for contemporary art in the United States. In 2000, she successfully managed a merger with the Museum of Modern Art, making P.S.1 one of the most significant and high profile alternative arts spaces in the world. According to its current director, Klaus Bisenbach, "Since P.S.1 was founded, it has had a history of working with artists, and because it has no collection of its own, it can do programs that more traditional contemporary art museums cannot do. We can react fast and allow for risk and failure".⁹ In 2008, when Heiss was forced by MoMA Director Glen Lowry to resign from PS1, she founded Art on Air, an Internet radio station, online audio archive for cultural programming, gallery space, and studio program. Utterly unflappable throughout her career, Heiss remains today, at age 67, on the forefront of artistic and technological experimentation and risk-taking.

All three women experienced public doubt, outrage, and confusion throughout their long careers. Each operated on the precarious edge between genius and failure in order to truly promote the new. Artist John Baldesarri explains that "art comes out of failure... you have to try things out. You can't sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying, 'I won't do anything until I do a masterpiece'".¹⁰ The same is true of the curator who promotes

new forms of art—innovation is perceived as dangerous and certainly involves the risk of failure.

Confronted with art that “does not look like art,” audiences can be perplexed and wary of being duped. Parsons, Tucker and Heiss each forged ahead in the art world, trusting their instincts yet unable to definitively explain how the work they presented might prove worthy of the risks they took for it. As Tucker describes:

I got used to saying things like, ‘the most important works of art raise more questions than they answer.’ I believed it, but it was a tough sell in an art world that demanded answers.... ‘I don’t know’ is the honest answer when you’re working investigatively, but it can get you in trouble. You’re supposed to know, and if you don’t you’re going to be seen as unprofessional rather than adventurous.¹¹

In their atypical approaches to art and culture, each met with substantial roadblocks. Critical reviews of their efforts tended to be derisive; vandalism abounded in their exhibition spaces. To many, these women were too independent and pushed the bounds of their respective roles too far. Through sheer will and a staunch commitment to iconoclasm, they further ignited debate about the arts and the role of women in society. Over time, all three were lauded as progressive leaders and pioneers of the new.

To better understand the context from which these women arose and the challenges they faced, my research will situate them in their respective moments in the New York art world, from the 1913 Armory Show through today. The main focus of the paper will explore each woman as an individual: the life she lived, her challenges and successes, and

her particular motivations for risk taking and perseverance. Through research, interviews, and personal narratives, this paper will tease out commonalities and patterns in the histories of these three exceptional women and their unflagging devotion to cutting-edge art and artists who signified “the spirit of change that is within and about us, the spirit of unrest, of the striving, of the searching for greater and more beautiful things”.¹²

NEW YORK:

To better understand the impact made in the art world by Betty Parsons, Marcia Tucker, and Alanna Heiss, it is critical to understand the profound social and cultural changes occurring in New York beginning at the turn of the twentieth century. In the span of a few decades, the art world as it existed for centuries in Europe would change forever due to socio-political transformation in the United States.

What follows is an intentionally broad history of the New York art world from 1913 to the present day. As such, many significant movements and artists have been omitted in order to provide an overall feel for the pulse of each decade over the past century. Deeper research and exploration by the reader is essential for any significant understanding of the complexities and innovations that occurred in the decades outlined below. I wish to lay the foundations for the following influential moments: Modernism and the 1913 Armory Art Show, the impact of the influx of European émigré artists to New York at the turn of the century, the gradual cultural acceptance of Modernism, subsequent and reactionary artistic movements, the art market of the 1980’s and how the art world changed as a

result, and finally the contemporary art market today.

One of the most noteworthy moments in modern art history was the New York Armory Show of 1913. It included over 1,300 works of art from Europe and the United States and featured distinguished European artists including Degas, Manet, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Picabia, Leger, Duchamp, and Kandinsky. Eager to see the latest works from Europe, American audiences were largely shocked and outraged by the contents of the show. The artists featured in the Armory Show were “derided as degenerate and revolting, as ‘the bleary-eyed daubs and phantasmagorias of the insane,’ and ‘the chatter of anarchistic monkeys’”.¹³ The show provoked a new cultural awareness, in both negative and positive respects, of the progressive social change happening in New York and the “complete disintegration of the older order, the set of ideas which dominated the American mind so effectively from the mid-nineteenth century until 1912”.¹⁴

Funded in its entirety by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Mabel Dodge, the Armory Show further provided an opportunity for women’s presence on the American cultural scene. “Female individualism was now hailed as a model of success, and female individualism celebrated as one of the hallmarks of the age”.¹⁵ It was at the 1913 Armory show that thirteen-year old Betty Parsons recognized her desire to live within the liberated and unconventional environment of the modern art world. She “found the ingredients and the style to justify being for progress, for individual rights and freedoms, and for art”.¹⁶

The following year marked the beginning of World War I and with it a fundamental shift in the international art scene. European émigrés found refuge from the war in the United States and visual artists from Europe brought with them Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism, and Dada. New York quickly replaced Paris as the international nexus of contemporary art. New York art patrons welcomed the sophisticated styles and habits of the émigrés, and many believed that European art was superior to American Art. American visual artists suddenly found themselves challenged to create a uniquely “American” art within their own country. European avant-garde icon Marcel Duchamp recognized this moment of opportunity for New York artists “yearning, searching, trying to find something. If only America would realize that the art of Europe is finished—dead—and that America is the country of the art of the future”.¹⁷

The end of World War I and the years preceding World War II marked a time of hope and national pride. In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt’s Federal Art Project—the visual-arts arm of the New Deal Works Project and the W.P.A—supported American artists in all styles and mediums, even those that were not yet culturally “en vogue”. By supporting artists such as Jackson Pollock, Milton Avery, Stuart Davis, and Mark Rothko, the F.A.P. helped young artists establish careers and create networks of friends and associates before they found a foothold in mainstream culture. By 1942, however, the onset of World War II dissolved the mounting optimism of post—WWI America. The repulsion that arose at the thought of a second World War brought harsh criticism and the dissolution of the optimistic, patriotic, and nationally funded styles popular after WWI.

American artists, much like their European counterparts in New York, became disillusioned with traditional visual imagery and art making and yearned to find a more fulfilling and deeper meaning in the work they created.¹⁸

A handful of intrepid American artists, the majority of whom represented and promoted by the Betty Parsons Gallery, began experimenting in new methods of making non-objective art that would be known as Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock, the most famous painter of this movement, shifted his canvas from its customary position on the easel, throwing it to the floor. This simple yet audacious move profoundly changed the scale of, technique of creation, and viewer interaction with painting. Circling around, crouching over, and standing upon his enormous canvases, Pollock dripped, drizzled, and threw paint in a new non-objective method of art making in a style later called action painting. When Parsons took the risk of exhibiting Pollock's work in her gallery in 1948, she asserted that, "He exploded the easel painting, the wall painting. His paintings *were* walls—whole worlds, expanding worlds".¹⁹

Abstract Expressionism signified ideas and intentions beyond the literal and representative to create art as a connection to the spiritual and the unconscious. Pollock and his contemporaries, including Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and Clyfford Still, sought to redefine the role of art in culture. In discovering and exhibiting this new generation of artists, Parsons advanced the notion that "artists of the twentieth century, through the mystical powers of art, were in the process of recoding human sensibilities, of opening the human mind and spirit to a

paradisiacal new world”.²⁰ These artists created the first specifically American art movement to achieve worldwide notoriety. Abstract Expressionism was the crowning achievement that firmly ensured New York’s place as the epicenter of avant-garde art.

By the mid-1950’s Parsons and a handful of strong proponents, including Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Director Alfred Barr, endorsed Modernism with enough authority and sway that this formerly scandalous art movement became “defanged by popularity (and) became...institutionalized avant-garde”.²¹ American and European collectors added Modern Art to their personal collections as proof of their sophistication and cultural discrimination—it was a means to take an audacious risk in a socially condoned esthetic. The demand for art reached an unprecedented intensity following the Second World War, and “Modern Art became a public, and popular, affair”.²²

The circumstances by which innovative and unorthodox art is introduced by a handful of art visionaries, emphatically rejected by audiences and critics, and then ultimately subsumed and celebrated by museums, patrons, and collectors is a central theme to this paper and one that will be explored in depth throughout its course. Barr, the Director (and later Director of Collections) at the Museum of Modern Art from 1929 to 1968, is an example of such a visionary tastemaker; this anecdote exemplifies the repeating cycle of art acceptance. As recounted by Parsons:

I remember once Alfred bought a big Rothko from me. . . . It was put up for approval before the next meeting of the trustees. They were outraged. Half of them rose to their feet and said, ‘If you show that picture you can get out, out of the museum.’ Barr had to put it in the closet. Four years later he put it on the wall: the board of directors applauded.²³

Mainstream acceptance of Modernism, specifically Abstract Expressionism, swiftly provoked an artistic backlash. Artists working beyond the narrow parameters of the newly fashionable modernist style began creating art to challenge its dictates and tenants. Just as Modernism had profoundly challenged traditional styles and presentations of the eighteenth century, Modernism was now an institution to be challenged. Among the movements that emerged subsequent to Abstract Expressionism were Fluxus, Minimalism, and Conceptualism. Each represented the reduction of objects to their most elemental and ephemeral forms, in the most extreme cases without the physical presence of an artwork.

Fluxus artists reacted to “the conformity and consumerism of consensus with perishable, often ugly, and blatantly oppositional artworks”.²⁴ Exploring artist-audience relationships through performances and audience participation, these artists blurred boundaries of medium by incorporating dance, music, theater, and spoken word into their art. In doing so, they repositioned the relationship of artist and audience and, once again, altered the very definition and boundaries of what could be considered art.

Minimalism and Conceptual art were two of the most transformative movements to follow Abstract Expressionism. Minimalism emerged in the mid-1960s and “functioned as a kind of purgative, ridding sculpture of surplus aesthetic baggage, but its austerity almost begged to be challenged”.²⁵ Conceptual art, as defined in 1967 by pioneering Conceptual artist Sol Lewitt, based itself on the premise that “the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the art... what the work of art looks like isn’t too important”.²⁶

Fluxus, Minimalism, and Conceptualism sprang from the reductive aspects of modernism, as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, and as a bridge to the contemporary, or postmodern, art of today.

At another other end of the conceptual spectrum from the temporality and anti-commercialism of Fluxus, Minimalism, and Conceptualism was Pop Art. Also in reaction to Abstract Expressionism as pretentious and overly academic, Pop artists deliberately exploited the tastes and relationships of savvy art dealers to bank on a robust art economy. The art-collecting landscape had changed profoundly in the United States over the past twenty-five years and “the number of major collectors swelled, from two dozen in 1945 to 200 in 1960, and over 2,000 by 1970. Art market prices especially escalated, creating a big-business atmosphere of ‘blue chip’ cultural goods”.²⁷ Pop artists approached their practices fueled by fame and fortune, as a commercial endeavor. By incorporating everyday iconography, advertisements, Hollywood stars, and commercial branding into their work, Pop artists made art accessible, reproducible, and saleable en masse. In the words of Andy Warhol, the most famous and influential of the Pop artists, “making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art.”

The artists of the 1960s and 1970s, whether exploring Fluxus, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Pop, or any other new form of art, needed dedicated and influential advocates. Pop, born out of commercialism and mass-consumerism, had a built-in assurance of popularity and sales. Eminent dealers such as Leo Castelli and Sidney Janis brought these art stars to the market to immediate and sensational success. Parsons’

interests remained on the front line of the new and cutting edge. As new artists and styles emerged she actively promoted innovation and daring, seeing the evolution of the art world as a natural trajectory towards new modes of expression: “Without shifting aesthetic positions, she regarded both Minimalism and Conceptualism as further reductions in ingredients, a fated and proper progression”.²⁸

Curators such as Marcia Tucker and Alanna Heiss created exhibitions in museums and public spaces to challenge the cultural mainstream by exhibiting artists and installations that could not easily be understood, let alone acquired. Art that was ephemeral, site-specific, monumental in scale, or otherwise unruly and unorthodox became the boundary-pushing norm. Tucker’s 1969 exhibition *Anti-Illusion* at the Whitney Museum of American Art “offered an art that presents itself as disordered, chaotic, or anarchic. Such an art deprives us of the fulfillment of our aesthetic expectations and offers, instead, an experience which cannot be anticipated nor immediately understood”.²⁹

Parsons, Tucker, and Heiss promoted throughout the decades increasingly experimental artists and works in realms that challenged social norms and artistic standards. Heiss’ inaugural exhibition at P.S.1 “allowed dozens of downtown artists to break through the dilapidated building’s walls and install pieces wherever they pleased. The exhibition...codified post-Minimalist installation art at exactly the moment it was occurring”.³⁰ These women were creating and defining artistic movements as they evolved—Fluxus, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Feminism, Land Art, and video,

installation, and performance art—all the while challenging their audiences to constantly reconsider what art might be and how it might function in new and innovative ways.

The artistic advances and diversity of the 1960s and 1970s secured the role of art in New York society. Audiences were engaging in and purchasing art at unprecedented levels.

The late 1970s through the 1980s were a time in the United States of significant prosperity, and “a clientele of newly rich businessmen, media stars, and Wall Street traders found themselves with money to spend on art”.³¹ Along with a wealthy new support base, the New York art world became increasingly institutionalized and market-driven. Museums were run as businesses, and innovative organizations founded as freewheeling artistic laboratories slowly morphed into bureaucracies with affluent trustees and professional financial advisors who kept an eagle eye on the bottom line. As Tucker explained of the Whitney Museum “by September 1975, the institutional temperature of the Whitney had turned arctic. I felt like I was working for a Fortune 500 company instead of a museum.... Works of art were becoming increasingly commodified, and taking risks with regards to exhibitions was seen as a threat to the status quo”.³²

Both Tucker and Heiss recognized the need in New York for exhibition venues that would “establish a perch for truly independent thinking outside the larger culture, including its own culture”.³³ Heiss founded P.S.1 in 1976 and Tucker founded the New Museum in 1977. Each venue presented some of the most experimental art in the world. Even today, P.S.1’s mission remains as “a catalyst and an advocate for new ideas,

discourses, and trends in contemporary art, P.S.1 actively pursues emerging artists, new genres, and adventurous new work by recognized artists in an effort to support innovation in contemporary art”.³⁴ Even with pioneering intentions and cutting edge missions, both Tucker and Heiss ultimately left their own organizations. The more successful the New Museum and P.S.1 became, the more Tucker and Heiss were expected to respond to the desires of their respective boards, the commercial art market, and the bureaucratic trappings of organizations that were becoming large, venerable institutions.

In 1999, Lisa Phillips replaced Tucker as Director of the New Museum. Phillips’ installment as Director represented an organizational shift “away from personality-driven institutions and toward those run by executive, rather than artistic, directors.... Just as the museum's exhibitions had once reflected Tucker's iconoclastic personality, the museum as an entity began to reflect Phillips's penchant for resourceful affiliations and partnerships”.³⁵ That same year, Heiss successfully negotiated a merger with P.S.1 and the Museum of Modern Art, one of the most prestigious art museums in the world. Although considered a strategic financial move for P.S.1, “it became an open question how long its idiosyncratic impresario would remain at the helm”.³⁶ Seven years following the merger, MoMA director Glenn D. Lowry requested, then demanded, Heiss’ retirement. The internationally celebrated curator, academic, and art critic Robert Storr stated at the time, “Alanna has built something that is very important to New York. She should be very proud of it and she should be lauded for it, but it has outgrown her, and she needs to graciously let it go”.³⁷

The art world today in large part has become incredibly market-driven and bureaucratic. As art critic Roberta Smith discussed in a February, 2010 article in the New York Times, “a combination of forces threatens to herd all of our major art institutions into the same aesthetic pen. The need to raise and make money sends curators hunting for artists with international star power who work big at least some of the time, deploy multiple entertaining mediums and make for good ad campaigns”.³⁸ Curators and directors are now supposed to fundraise, balance budgets, and tow the esthetic line to bring in the best show for the largest common denominator of audience. Even in the face of an increasingly bureaucratic system, there remain artists, curators, and directors--including Alanna Heiss--who push the boundaries, explore the margins, and challenge the assumptions and conventions of today’s art world.

BETTY PARSONS

More than any other dealer of her time, Betty Parsons created a new American art scene over the course of her forty-year career. The first to promote such influential artists as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Hans Hofmann, Helen Frankenthaler, and Ad Reinhardt "Betty and her gallery helped construct the center of the art world"³⁹and positioned Abstract Expressionism as one of the most important movements in the history of art. Parson’s intuition, perspicacity and dedication to her artists made her gallery the heart of the New York art scene.

Today Betty Parsons is a beloved figure and a legend, “the Den Mother of Abstract Expressionism,” however Parsons was frequently ridiculed and criticized for promoting

the unknown and, to most viewers, the unrecognizable in art. She persevered through the strength of her conviction that the art she was showing was a source of profound inspiration and creativity, but it was a long and difficult battle. In her words “the world is a difficult, cruel, and a very horrid place...but Life is beautiful, extraordinary, has fantastic power in it if you know where to find it, how to get it”.⁴⁰ Parsons found her authority through iconoclasm and dedication to her vision. Parsons revealed innovative directions and manifestations in the arts far before her contemporaries. Her objective was not to study art history but to make it. In doing so Parsons confounded and enraged, inspired and awed, and ultimately altered the course of American art history.

Parsons was born Betty Bierne Pierson in New York City on February 6, 1900, the second of three daughters to Suzanne Miles and J. Fred Pierson, Jr. Raised in a rarified world of servants, tutors, and homes scattered along the Eastern seaboard, Parsons and her two sisters were educated and trained to be refined and proper socialites, gracious wives and homemakers. Parsons reviled the pretense and orthodoxy of the world in which she was raised, lamenting “you weren’t supposed to think for yourself or make decisions. Eat this. Wear this. Say this. Think This. Don’t do that. Rules, rules, rules. There was no appreciation for the creative in anything they did or said or told you to do. I knew it was stupid and wrong, but I didn’t know what to do about it”.⁴¹ Throughout her childhood, Parsons recognized that her life-in-training was not the life she wanted to lead. Parsons knew she had special talents and was meant to do something of consequence, but “being special, she had no place in the world she knew”.⁴²

At the age of 13, Parsons had a revelatory experience. She attended the 1913 New York Armory Show, an international art exhibition introducing Americans to modern art. “Betty marked her life as an artist from that day.... Betty was excited by the works of Matisse, Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp. Their art was so different and free that most people found it shocking, but Betty thought of it as art that showed a ‘New Spirit’”.⁴³ The art at the Armory Show was profoundly different from the traditional paintings and sculptures that Betty had been forced to study and “appreciate” in school. Exploring art at the Armory Show Parsons found paintings and sculptures made by artists who chose not to play by traditional rules. Parsons felt for the first time in her life comfort and a sense of belonging. She knew she was in the presence of greatness and of a movement that extended far beyond the world she had learned to that point.

Stirred by the works of art at the Armory, Parsons was equally, if not more, captivated by the “new spirit” of the artists and their art; this new attitude wielded the power to shock and alarm New York audiences. Parsons recognized the radical re-definition and transformation that this show—and the very scandal of it—represented. Utterly inspired, Parsons incorporated the “New Spirit” as her personal mantra. “[D]ays and weeks later, she recalled walking along Fifth Avenue saying over and over in cadence with her steps, ‘I am the New Spirit’”.⁴⁴

Enchanted with her new mantra and passion for Modern art, Parsons decided to attend Bryn Mawr to study art history. Her parents, however, feared that such a liberal school would make Parsons even “more unfeminine and too independent to be desirable as a

wife”⁴⁵ and told her that she must attend finishing school instead. Furious with the prospect of finishing school Parsons locked herself in her room for two days. When she emerged she was dressed in men’s clothing, hair slicked back, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. She offered her father a deal: She would attend finishing school if she could also privately take art classes. Her father, shocked at her determination, “surrendered unconditionally to Betty’s terms, gratefully accepting her promise to return to normal dress and peace in the home. Betty, smug and triumphant, began to study art in the studio of Gutzon Borglum, who, many years later, carved the colossal presidential portraits on the side of Mount Rushmore”.⁴⁶

Upon completion of finishing school at twenty, Parsons felt considerable pressure from friends and family to find a husband. She reluctantly agreed and happened at that time to meet a wealthy New Yorker eight years her senior named Schuyler Livingston Parsons. Schuyler Parsons was wild, a heavy drinker, and rumored to be homosexual. “If Betty’s unfeminine mien worried her family, Schuyler’s faint touch of femininity troubled his family equally. Marriage promised a socially acceptable solution to both families problems; it was encouraged”.⁴⁷ Both were ultimately unhappy existing in this charade of a marriage and “Parsons rebelled against expectations. Shedding both her spouse and her social life, she set sail for Paris”.⁴⁸ In Paris the two were divorced and Parsons stayed on to discover what it was like to lead the life of a single bohemian woman abroad.

Parsons encountered a world of intellectuals and freedom in Paris. She sought out other independent ex-pat women whom she admired and over time befriended such

unconventional women as Natalie Barney, Janet Flanner, Sylvia Beach, Gertrude Stein, and Alice Toklas. Parsons was stunned and thrilled with her new lifestyle and the autonomy it represented. “After years of knowing only people who did what they were supposed to do, did the conventional and correct things, I suddenly knew people who did nothing whatsoever that was conventional”.⁴⁹

Parsons freewheeling Parisian life was cut short in 1933 with the onset of The Great Depression. Without alimony or means to support herself, she returned to the United States penniless and unsure of what to do or how to make a living. True to Betty’s nature and charm, however, she quickly surrounded herself with wealthy friends eager to help, “these women...mostly rich, of course, and all just smitten....pleased to know Betty, to know someone a little giddy, a little naughty”.⁵⁰ Parsons was divorced, independent, and a true rebel and iconoclast. Betty found herself in New York exactly where she wanted to be - a bona-fide bohemian, artist, and friend of dilettantes and intellectual elites.

In 1936 the Midtown Gallery held a solo exhibition of Parsons paintings. The opening was packed with the rich, famous, and beautiful – all of Parsons’ friends and acquaintances. Recognizing the asset she would be to the gallery, the owner of Midtown Gallery immediately offered her a job. The gallery, “founded on the premise that artists should help one another and seek alternatives to the orthodox commercial system”.⁵¹ Such ideas were relatively unprecedented in the American gallery system and proved to be a great match for Parsons independent and unorthodox approach. Parsons flourished in

her new position and discovered she had a natural “eye” and ability to sense great art far before its time.

Parsons promoted extremely avant-garde art at the Midtown Gallery and her friends reluctantly purchased art from her much more as an expression of financial support and friendship than actually liking this strange and unfathomable new “art.” As Parsons later explained “I told them that they were buying the most important art of the century. They didn’t care about that and they didn’t believe it. When the work got valuable in the commercial sense, they were proud of what they had done”.⁵² Parsons knew she had a special talent and her passion grew as she met new artists and mounted increasingly innovative and challenging exhibitions.

In the fall of 1937, Parsons left the Midtown Galleries to work for Mrs. Cornelius H. Sullivan’s Gallery on Park Avenue. Mrs. Sullivan was one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929. At Sullivan’s gallery Parsons learned a hard-work ethic and the fine details of running an art gallery, but the work proved to be too limited in scope for Parson’s personality. She left Mrs. Sullivan’s gallery in 1940 to manage The Wakefield Bookshop Gallery at 64 East Fifty-Fifth Street. At this space Parsons had free esthetic reign and kept her own hours. From The Wakefield Bookshop Gallery she moved on to run Mortimer Brandt’s gallery, bringing all of her Wakefield artists with her.

In 1946, Mortimer Brandt returned to England and Parsons, urged by friends and artists, opened The Betty Parsons Gallery in Brandt’s former venue. Ever the nonconformist,

Parsons stripped the walls, removed all of the furniture, and painted everything white. “In those days galleries mostly had velvet walls and very Victorian decoration, I decided to hell with all that, and the artists agreed... The white was very severe; I wanted nothing else in the gallery.... That was the idea, to have it as simple as possible, and it did catch on”.⁵³ From that point forward, most New York galleries followed suit and became austere white cubes.

The artists Parsons exhibited included Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko. Their art pushed boundaries and definitions, including the fact that Parsons was promoting American artists rather than the European artists in vogue in New York at the time. Parsons described that “it was so difficult in those days to convince people to buy the work of American artists; it was hard enough just to get people to look”.⁵⁴ Within a very short period of time, however, between her well-connected friends and the public debate over this “mad” new art, the Betty Parsons Gallery became known as a venue to look at daring and boundary-pushing art. “Everybody was telling Betty everything she showed was nonsense, but she had the courage of her opinions. Faith was her essential quality, faith in herself, in what she was doing and in the importance of art”.⁵⁵ Artists, writers, intellectuals, museum directors, and curators came to the gallery to gape, question, and to view the latest and edgiest art in New York.

Parsons braced herself for the hostility and fear that inevitably arose from promoting art that did not necessarily look like art. “The worst thing was vandalism. People would come in, and when they left I would notice four-letter words scribbled across Pollock

pictures, Newman pictures. They would try to cut the paintings, too”.⁵⁶ There were, however, a handful of key proponents of Parson’s program who helped launch the gallery and its artists to fame and international acclaim. “One great saving grace of those early days was the good relation I had with the marvelous Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art. Alfred Barr loved everything I did; to him, I could do no wrong”.⁵⁷ The forward-thinking vision of Barr and Miller and the placement of Rothko, Pollock, Newman, among others in the Museum of Modern Art collection legitimized art that was otherwise too original to be appreciated by contemporary audiences.

Parsons believed deeply in her artists and the spirit of modernism, specifically abstract art. To Parsons, works created by Abstract Expressionist artists represented a profound purpose—much more so than the traditional arts she had studied in school. She believed that “artists of the twentieth century, through the mystical powers of art, were in the process of recoding human sensibilities, of opening the human mind and spirit to a paradisiacal new world, shaped and empowered by a creative elite”.⁵⁸ In a much later interview in the 1970’s, Parsons described this deep conviction in a quote by author Willa Cather: “What is any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mold, in which we imprison for a moment a shining elusive element which is life itself”.⁵⁹

In January 1948, two years after opening her gallery, Parsons gave Jackson Pollock a solo exhibition. To Parsons “Pollock epitomized the force, scale, and outrageous courtship of accident and failure that, [I] thought, lay at the core of contemporary art.... He exploded the easel painting, the wall painting. His paintings *were* walls—whole worlds, expanding

worlds”.⁶⁰ Even with his notoriety and fame—the following year Pollock was the subject of a four-page spread in *LIFE* magazine whose title was “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”⁶¹-- the drip painter was fodder for public scorn and umbrage. “A Time-Life executive, in order to play a joke on his wife, bought her a Jackson Pollock painting for a birthday present. It was \$250.... As predicted, his wife was horrified; the couple’s smart friends were appropriately amused”.⁶²

Art critics were no less generous, Emily Genauer vents in her 1948 newspaper review: “Jackson Pollock’s *Cathedral*... still impresses me as a completely formless, haphazard expression whose violence does not compensate for its lack of discipline”.⁶³ Parsons was continually baffled and infuriated that critics and audiences could not see the incredible merits she recognized in her artists. “Idiots!” she would shout at or about anyone who failed to see Pollock’s merits as a painter.

By the 1950’s, Abstract Expressionism was integrating into American culture. As New York socialite and gossip columnist Elsa Maxwell cheekily wrote in her column, “some dissenters scream, ‘Hang the abstractionists!’ I echo, ‘Certainly, but why not on your walls’”.⁶⁴ The verdict was in: Modernism was chic. While Modernism was becoming a conversation among the cultural elite, the New York art world experienced a profound shift. Teeming with wealthy businessmen following World War II, the arts sector ballooned into a lucrative market-driven enterprise. Galleries sprang up along the Upper East Side in Manhattan and dealers and artists set their sights on making piles of money. All around Parsons businessmen turned gallerists made big deals, bought and sold, and

acquired substantial wealth for themselves and their artists. In a world where success in the art world became largely defined by making money and being fast stars, Parsons held strong to promoting the largely unknown and often un-saleable. In the words of the iconic entrepreneur and gallery owner Leo Castelli: "One couldn't be a Betty Parsons and at the same time be a good businesswoman.... She was much too sweet and poetic for that. But she loved those painters and would have liked to do better for them".⁶⁵

Parsons' very passion for art in its purest forms caused her to suffer in the burgeoning 1950's art market. She felt that "business is a terrible sweat. I'm not a natural businesswoman. I hate it. But I've learned a lot and I've become interested in what I know now. But it's always a sweat. It always makes me nervous".⁶⁶ It was at this moment that Parsons' art "giants", Newman, Pollock, Rothko and Still, gathered in her gallery and insisted she banish all of the obscure and emerging artists from her gallery so she could focus her energy and time on selling their increasingly valuable paintings. Parsons flatly refused. "Art should be democratic...the gallery was not just about stardom and making money. [I] wanted to show what [I] wanted to show".⁶⁷

Each of the "giants" ultimately left the Betty Parsons Gallery for more commercial, business- minded dealers like Leo Castelli and Sidney Janis. Devastated by what she deemed a betrayal, Parsons "set out to create a haven for those artists who received less recognition".⁶⁸ In doing so Parsons furthered her reputation as the place where some of "the 20th century's greatest artists got their start".⁶⁹ To add to her ongoing difficulties, however, in 1962 powerhouse dealer Sidney Janis had been subletting Parson's gallery

space while she traveled. When Janis' sublet expired Parsons assumed and prepared to renew her lease and move back in. Janis instead renegotiated the lease directly with the landlord and notified Parsons that she had to move out.

With that final blow, Parsons made what was at the time a drastic move—she opened a gallery on the Upper West Side. “You see, I was the first gallery to move across Fifth Avenue. I was a pioneer. Until I crossed Fifth Avenue, galleries were all on the East side. I opened up on the West side”.⁷⁰ As with the prescient decision to display art in a clean white space, Parsons' move to the West Side soon became a standard for galleries throughout New York.

Parsons, resolutely on her own path, slowly began to receive recognition. Not only had her Abstract Expressionists become huge stars, in the fall of 1963 *Vogue* magazine featured Parsons in a spread which she was praised for her daring and aptitude for pinpointing the best emerging artists. The article “spread Betty's fame outside the art world; after the appearance of the *Vogue* article around the county, she may have been the most widely recognized art dealer in America”.⁷¹ Bolstered by the fame and notoriety, Parsons pursued her passion for the new and undiscovered with renewed rigor.

In the early 1960's, a young artist named Richard Tuttle worked as a Parsons Gallery assistant. In 1965 Tuttle, an unknown and unrepresented artist at the time, requested permission to install his art in Parsons' gallery during the summer months while the gallery was otherwise closed. Upon seeing Tuttle's makeshift exhibition in the gallery

Parsons immediately scheduled his first solo exhibition. That and each of Tuttle's four subsequent exhibitions at Betty Parsons Gallery elicited enough outrage and fury to convince Parsons that her boundary pushing taste prevailed again. "The resistance and disapproval pleased Betty in a way that no amount of praise could have done. She was at bat again and prepared to hit a soaring homer. She was eager to do battle, to tilt in a public arena with anyone who would challenge the validity of Tuttle's work. He was a discovery; she was the discoverer. It was that simple".⁷²

One of the most significant aspects of this period of Parsons' career was in her promotion of an important generation that followed the Abstract Expressionists. Parsons was on the front line of a younger group of pioneering artists and new schools of thought. Acutely aware of her reputation as a discoverer of new talent, Parsons recognized and exhibited Conceptualism and Minimalism before they were significant artistic movements.

"Without shifting aesthetic positions, she regarded both Minimalism and Conceptualism as further reductions in ingredients, a fated and proper progression".⁷³ As each artist she represented gained mainstream notoriety and fame Parsons moved onto the next new thing. She "came to believe that objects which elicited outrage and shock from a viewer had intrinsic merit....as the audience for contemporary art became more sophisticated and larger, she took an increasingly antiestablishment stance".⁷⁴

In the course of her forty-year career Parsons continually promoted creativity and imagination beyond all else. It took nearly a decade for the art world to appreciate Abstract Expressionism, and even today audiences are grappling with pacesetting artists

introduced by Parsons including Richard Tuttle and Agnes Martin. In Parsons' words, "the gallery has survived because there was a gradual realization in America on the part of the museum and collectors of the artists' importance.... I feel the purpose of the gallery was always to find a fresh outlook on the world".⁷⁵

In her final years in the late 1970s and early 1980s Parsons expressed a deep concern regarding the state of the art system in American. Her experience taught her to believe that Americans responded to the physical and material in the arts, rather than the spiritual or conceptual. "I was interested in art that showed he spiritual and showed the new and I knew that Americans just wouldn't care for that very much".⁷⁶ American culture shifted in the late seventies, and the "new" came to represent the "best" in an art world where art had increasingly become a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded. In a 1981 interview with Gerald Silk of the Smithsonian Institution, Silk asked Parsons how she felt about an art world in which "nothing can shock, nothing can startle." Parsons responded: "I think that they're looking now too much for the new and not to the great".⁷⁷ Parsons perceived that America in the 1970's was in "a terrific mediocre period... I think it's because they're so spoiled, Americans. You know, the rich are so rich and the poor are so poor, I don't know—that ambition, that ambition for success. You see, I don't think success or failure necessarily makes you happy. I've seen a lot of people without great success much happier than those that are a success. Now there's something wrong about the philosophy".⁷⁸

Parsons felt that American mediocrity in the arts and hunger for success infected the museum system as well. She thought that museum directors were no longer proponents of culture and educators, they were transforming into development directors, fundraisers, and bottom-line businessmen. “They aren’t interested in art at all... That’s the key, you see. You have to like artists. I’ve always been mad for artists. I don’t give a damn for bankers and businessmen. But, hell, I am an artist”.⁷⁹ Although scorned for decades for her innovation, discovery, and promoted of the new, Parsons ultimately was recognized and celebrated for her visionary eye and dedication through the years work. In 1981 Parsons received the Governor’s award from New York City Mayor Koch for improving the culture of the city, and she is now firmly planted in art history as the leader of a new generation of American art. As Clement Greenberg recalled, "it was the beginning of a great moment in American art that started there at Betty Parsons's... For the first time a great original art movement took place in America".⁸⁰

MARCIA TUCKER

Marcia Tucker began her career in 1969 as the first female curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Eleven years later Tucker was dismissed for her daring selection of artists and boundary-pushing installations. Within a year of being fired from the Whitney, Tucker founded her own museum called the New Museum, created as a dynamic and nimble organization with the capacity to reflect art of today without the politics and sluggishness Tucker felt plagued larger museums. The New Museum quickly became one of New York’s prominent venues for emerging and contemporary art. Upon retirement from the New Museum, Tucker, at age sixty, took up stand-up comedy as “ the

most subversive art form around”.⁸¹ Tucker spent a lifetime as a subversive, an adventurer, and never ceasing to challenge the boundaries – most notably her own.

Marcia Tucker was born Marcia Silverman in 1940 in Brooklyn, New York. Awkward and eccentric from an early age, Tucker always felt like outsider and garnered friends and social acceptance through unconventional behavior and a sharp and unique sense of humor. “I may not have been beautiful, but I was popular in my own way. I formed the Ugly Club with my closest misfit friends... [and] after one blowout Ugly Club party, everybody started clamoring to get in. ‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the teenage reject”.⁸²

As with Betty Parsons four decades earlier, Tucker was under significant family pressure to conform to their expectations and norms. Tucker’s father hoped she would follow in his footsteps as an attorney, and her mother wished only that she would find a boyfriend and ultimately a husband. By high school, however, Tucker was enamored with her art courses and spent all of her free time painting and drawing. “Making art was what I liked doing the most and what I thought I was best at, and I never wanted to stop. There was no such thing as time when I was working. My family problems disappeared, my loneliness evaporated, self-consciousness flew out the window. I felt light and energetic and just, well, there. When in my senior year of high school I was named Class Artist, I thought my fate was sealed”.⁸³

Upon graduation from high school in 1957, Tucker attended the Connecticut College for Women. Feeling like an outcast from the start “among all those upper-class, socially

acceptable Christian girls”⁸⁴ Tucker yearned for change and spent her junior year in Paris studying at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. Although Tucker found incredible inspiration and fell immediately in love with the city and lifestyle, anti-Semitism abounded and Tucker was, for the first time in her life, the target of extreme hatred and prejudice. Tucker’s parents were concerned about the increasing anti-Semitism and violence erupting in Europe and urged her to return home. Tucker remained undaunted by the potential danger and not only completed the year but traveled throughout Germany that following summer to experience the country and its people first hand in order to formulate her own opinions.

Tucker returned to the United States in 1960 to complete her senior year at Connecticut College and within that year was struck by two major tragedies. The love of her life, a man who had planned to move to the United States to be with her, was killed at war in Algeria, and her mother succumbed to a decade-long battle with breast cancer. Though a profoundly difficult and transformative year, Tucker managed to graduate from Connecticut College in 1961 and apply for a position at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York as secretary to William Lieberman, then head of the Department of Drawings and Prints. Although Tucker immediately took to museum work, her boss was temperamental and demanding and her career at the MoMA lasted just a year. As Tucker describes in her autobiography, she had declined Lieberman’s request for her to work a last-minute weekend. Angered by her refusal, Lieberman left the room and returned with a silver can of pencils in hand. “‘I thought I told you to sharpen these,’ he screeched. ‘They are not sharpened! Why aren’t they sharpened?!’ he bellowed. I smiled

and said, ‘Because you’re not doing it the right way. You stick them up your ass and turn hard, that’s what does it.’ He turned white, then pink, then purplish red. ‘You’re fired!’ he screamed. ‘Get out of here this minute!’ And so I did”.⁸⁵ True to her personality and beliefs, Tucker stood up for what she believed to be right, at the risk of anger and hostility, recognizing that the loss of a position at the prestigious MoMA meant less to her than holding her tongue in a demeaning situation.

The same year that Tucker was working at the MoMA, she also volunteered as a set painter for a small theater company in her neighborhood. Immediately taken with the theater, Tucker was drawn to the bohemian artistic climate and camaraderie of the actors and artists in the neighborhood. Particularly taken with one of the young set designers. “I was sure that the deep scowl on his face hinted at a complex past and a troubled, even dangerous future. I was smitten”.⁸⁶ Marcia Silverman and the brooding, dangerous man, Michael Tucker, were married in 1962.

A new wife in a new apartment, Tucker began New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts the following year in addition to taking a part-time position as a secretary to Noma and William (Bill) Copley. Bill Copley was an artist, collector and dealer of art predominantly within the Surrealist movement. The pair—friends with such notable artists as Andy Warhol, Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray—were incredibly influential socialites and collectors. Through the years with the Copley’s Tucker came to know some of the most significant artists, critics, and curators in the world, “critics and curators who wrote about [their] work or [their]

collection, like Hopps and Roland Pentrose, or from younger artists, like Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Vija Celmins, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude”.⁸⁷ Through these connections Tucker found herself at the nexus of the ingenuity and transformation occurring in the arts in New York in the early 1960s. Her proximity to such influential artists, critics, and patrons became an integral component of her life-long devotion to creativity at its source. It inspired her to constantly challenge herself, and later her audiences, with nonconformist and innovative approaches to art, culture, and life.

Tucker received an inadvertent boost in her inchoate career when Noma Copley decided that Tucker needed a title and more work. Bestowing the title of Collection Curator, Tucker suddenly had a title and authority in the art world. Copley further advanced her career by phoning Tom Hess, then Managing Editor of *ARTnews* magazine, and recommended that Hess hire Tucker as a freelance art critic for the magazine. By 1965, Tucker had an impressive title, power, and responsibility in the New York art world. Tucker realized that she might be more of a success as a proponent of the arts rather than as a practicing artist. This insight was not an easy one. “I’d been so invested in the idea of having an unconventional life and thought I had to be an artist to do it that I couldn’t seriously consider doing anything else”.⁸⁸ To add to her ambivalence was the fact that the position of curator in museums in the 1960s was neither glamorous nor dynamic. “Most people thought a curator was someone who walked around with a feather duster in their hand, and there was certainly no such thing as a curatorial studies program in college”.⁸⁹ To truly promote the art of her time at the source of innovation and ingenuity Tucker

would have to do things in her own creative, eccentric, and frequently provocative manner.

Teaching, curating, and writing about contemporary art, Tucker continually explored new avenues of expression to understand art and art making. In the fall of 1968 Tucker joined a theater workshop and instantly recognized performance as an important part of the changes that were occurring in the New York art world in the 1960s. “Performance, no matter how unconventional or informal, offered a new way of understanding art and art making. Unlike paintings and sculpture, it wasn’t static or object-based, characteristics usually ascribed to the exalted realm of the fine arts”.⁹⁰ Labeled “happenings,” these art events could be performances or events that took place anywhere and blended theater, poetry, and the fine arts. Active participation between artist and audience was critical to the Happening, which fundamentally challenged the relationship between art and its audience. By the late 1960s, Tucker regularly interacted with some of the most innovative and important contemporary artists working in New York. She was at the very source of creative innovation and change, doing her own performances, teaching, and paying close attention to the dynamic world around her.

By 1969 Tucker was entrenched in the New York art scene, performing, writing, and watching the art world redefine itself. She and Michael had divorced and she was now living with contemporary filmmaker Bob Fiore. By day Tucker cataloged the personal collection of Marga and Alfred Barr; by night she socialized with Fiore’s friends--filmmakers and artists including “Richard Serra, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and from time

to time their wives and girlfriends—Nancy Graves, JoAnne Akalaitis, Alanna Heiss”.⁹¹ In the chaos of their lives, Tucker nearly missed one of the most significant opportunities of her career. As she was cleaning their apartment cluttered with books, art, bottles, and miscellany, she amassed piles of trash to go out to the dumpster. As she gathered the garbage, she “did a double take. There, about to be consigned to the dumpster outside was a letter from the director of the Whitney Museum, inviting me to apply for the job of curator”.⁹²

Although she recognized the extraordinary opportunity this letter promised—until that time there had never been a female curator at the Whitney—Tucker was ambivalent about taking on such a momentous and time-consuming responsibility. Still in graduate school, teaching, cataloging collections, and working as an art critic, Tucker relished a life without a rigid schedule or structure. She consulted with her dear friend Marga Barr. Barr encouraged Tucker to take the position, as it provided “a glorious career with financial stability, recognition, and authority to put forward artists [I] believe in”.⁹³ Tucker recognized that the Whitney’s interest in her was based on her familiarity and connections with emerging artists in New York at the time. Although Tucker had a formal art history education “it seemed that I could also contribute something new to the discussion—a fresh perspective on art being made by my contemporaries, because many of them were my friends. I sensed this was something the Whitney was actually looking for”.⁹⁴

Her first interview was with Whitney Director John (Jack) I.H. Baur. Tucker's interview with Bauer was a great success, but her second and final interview with the president of the Whitney's board of trustees David Solinger, did not go as smoothly. Solinger did not inquire into Tucker's knowledge of art history or her understanding of the quickly shifting contemporary art world. Solinger asked Tucker if she was married, if she planned to have children, and how the Whitney could depend upon her not to change her mind about wanting a career rather than a family. "It later became illegal to ask these questions in a job interview. But this was 1968 and the women's movement had barely begun".⁹⁵ Tucker rose to the challenge and after getting over her initial shock of the invasive and offensive line of questioning:

I took a breath. 'Let me tell you why you don't want to hire a woman. One, I won't be able to do budgets, because, as you know, women can't even balance their own checkbooks. Two, once a month I'll go crazy and no one will be able to reason with me, much less talk to me. Third, and most important, no one will want to take orders from a woman, so I'll be completely ineffectual no matter how smart I am. And of course, I'll get pregnant within the year, so your investment in me will have been completely wasted.' I got up to leave. Unbelievably, a smile spread across his face. 'Sit down,' he said, 'and let's talk. A week later, the phone rang, and it was Jack Baur, telling me I'd been hired starting in January.'⁹⁶

Tucker challenged the "old guard" of male leadership at the Whitney and, in this instance, triumphed. On January 2, 1969, Tucker began her first day as the Whitney Museum's sole female curator in the history of the organization.

Tucker found the most effective way to challenge her audience's assumptions about art was to constantly challenge herself. When confronted with art that was inscrutable, or didn't "look like art," Tucker pushed herself to "find out what the work's terms were, and

then see if I could stretch my own understanding to meet them.⁹⁷ The year prior to her installment at the Whitney Tucker had taken a group of students to see conceptual artist Bruce Nauman's debut exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Nauman's exhibition, which consisted predominantly made of industrial neon signs, angered Tucker and she declaratively told her students that Nauman's work was junk. She announced that works of art "are not made of ordinary materials, and they don't look like a stupid bar sign. Words are not images, either. Images are art, words are literature".⁹⁸ Tucker found Nauman's work upsetting and offensive because it did not fit any definition of art she had previously known. Yet in the midst of her rant, she had a revelation. The significance of Nauman's work was that he was creating art that defied definition and that challenged the boundaries of what art could be. She also discovered that "not knowing" could be one of the most critical elements of experiencing art and that "I was going to have to abandon some of the ways I had previously made judgments about art, and I was leaving myself in suspension about how I would approach works of art in the future".⁹⁹ Art critic Leo Steinberg wrote, "If a work of art or a new style disturbs you, then it is probably good work. If you hate it, it is probably great".¹⁰⁰ Embracing that philosophy and thrilled with her new fascination with *not* knowing, by the time Tucker began working for the Whitney she had already planned to organize an exhibition of Bruce Nauman's work.

Tucker found considerable authority as a female curator at the Whitney and actively promoted women as artists, critics, and leaders in the field. During her tenure at the Whitney she "managed to organize solo shows at the Whitney for Ree Morton, Gladys Nilsson, Nancy Graves, Jane Kaufman, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell, among

others”.¹⁰¹ Her inroads, however, were regularly met with hostility not only from men who sought to perpetuate the patriarchal status quo of the system, but surprisingly from staunch feminists who did not feel Tucker promoted their cause far enough as a woman in a position of leadership. In one instance, Tucker and Elke Solomon, the only other female curator at the Whitney, were invited to a meeting of radical New York feminists. Prepared to discuss issues they all resolved to achieve, Tucker and Solomon arrived to find “the enemy was us. All night, we were on the defensive. Why didn’t the Whitney include more women artists? What exactly were we doing to promote their work? Why weren’t we visiting more women’s studios, doing exhibitions of all-women artists? Elke and I were working hard to change the institutional assumptions at the museum, and being the target of so much anger and disappointment made me feel physically sick”.¹⁰² Tucker recognized her conundrum - how to make change yet retain the respect and support of the very system she sought to transform. “I had been cast in the role of house radical—a useful view for those who needed a scapegoat for anything the public found far-out”.¹⁰³ Tucker was pushing the boundaries as far as possible within the Museum system without losing her job, and without the respect and trust of the organization she would never truly effect change.

In 1974, Baur, who had been Tucker’s most dedicated and outspoken advocate over the years, announced his retirement from the Whitney. Tucker “knew that without Jack’s support, doing the work I wanted to do would be like trying to cross the Atlantic in a canoe”.¹⁰⁴ In the five years Tucker had been at the Whitney her programming had provoked sharp criticism, public outrage, and a several times calls for her resignation

from patrons and trustees of the museum. Tucker recalled Bauer reading a particularly scathing series of reviews “standing at the doorway to my office, reviews in hand, looking somber in this dark suit, with a scowl on his face. I thought, ‘Uh-oh, this is finally it.’ To my astonishment, he tore the papers into tiny bits and flung them into the air. And then he winked”.¹⁰⁵

Replaced by Thomas N. Armstrong III in 1974, Tucker immediately recognized that Armstrong would not support and promote Tucker’s eccentric and boundary-pushing ways in the way that Baur had since she began her position. Armstrong came from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, a conservative organization whose mission was the “protection and preservation of American Art”. Tucker accepted that “nothing in his background suggested that trawling the outer reaches of the aesthetic lagoon for unrecognized art forms was going to be a priority”.¹⁰⁶ The change of directorship in combination with an exhibition that Tucker was brewing for the following year marked the beginning of the end of Tucker’s career at the Whitney. “A Richard Tuttle show was my swan song—or maybe my duck honk is more like it—at the Whitney”.¹⁰⁷

Richard Tuttle, whose career debuted at the Betty Parsons Gallery to public outrage and fury, had been in Tucker’s *Anti-Illusions* exhibition at the Whitney in 1969. Audiences had not warmed significantly to his minimal, challenging, and ephemeral work in the four years since he debuted with Parsons. Tuttle’s “sculptures” comprised florist wires, nails, pencil lines, string, and shadows haunted and provoked Tucker. Tuttle’s solo exhibition posed a significant challenge to Whitney audiences and critics not only in the materials

and reductionist nature of his art, but also in manner the show existed. Tuttle and Tucker agreed that the exhibition would be organic and morphing throughout the run of the show. The exhibition catalog, normally produced in advance of an exhibition as an educational tool for its audiences, would be produced subsequent to the show to reflect the dynamic and experiential nature of the project. The art, the unusual approach to its presentation, and a post-exhibition catalog proved to be too much. When the exhibition opened, “people went berserk. People tried to pull the delicate wire pieces off the wall. They scrawled pencil comments of their own next to some of the works when the guards weren’t looking. They complained bitterly that it wasn’t art. Nothing new there”.¹⁰⁸

Audiences and Whitney trustees were offended by the inquisitive nature of the exhibition and by the fact that Tucker did not present answers, only more questions. Tucker had organized this exhibition to see what might come of the project, to learn something new, to explore new frontiers in the arts. “‘I don’t know’ is the honest answer when you’re working investigatively, but it can get you in trouble. You’re supposed to know, and if you don’t you’re going to be seen as unprofessional rather than adventurous”.¹⁰⁹ Her investigative approach, by intentionally not knowing the answers in advance, ultimately cost Tucker her position at the Whitney. Tucker was relieved of her position on December 31, 1976.

Although many thought it naïve and impractical, Tucker had already mapped out her next career step--she would found her own museum. One of the only advocates Tucker found for this wild and ambitious scheme was Marga Barr. Barr told Tucker that if her husband

Alfred could run a museum (Barr was the first director of the MoMA), so could Tucker. Tucker was both daunted and flattered. “[H]e was Alfred H. Barr, Jr., King of the Art World, and I was a nobody misfit female curator in her late thirties who’d just been fired”.¹¹⁰ Tucker focused her museum’s mission on the promotion of lesser known artists and work being done outside the artistic mainstream, on the margins and edges of the art world. She wanted to explore interdisciplinary and community-based projects. She felt that involving artists in the way the museum functioned was a critical component of working with living artists on the cutting edge of contemporary art. Tucker wanted to “redefine the concept of the museum altogether, to turn it upside down and do all the risky things I had wanted to do but couldn’t at the Whitney—and wouldn’t be able to do in any other museum in the country either”.¹¹¹

In order to make this nimble, inclusive, dynamic museum work Tucker needed a significant financial backer as her museum’s founding trustee. She found a founder in successful New York businessman and art collector Allen Goldring. She approached Goldring with “a straightforward mission based on showing the work of living artists, for which I needed a start-up fund of seventeen thousand dollars”.¹¹² Goldring agreed and gave Tucker the money and the New Museum was founded in 1977. Tucker later discovered that Goldring had thought it was an ill-conceived project, but did not tell her that at the time. Instead, he told *Newsday*, “If Marcia said to me, I’m going to walk through that wall, I wouldn’t ask her how, but I’d meet her on the other side”.¹¹³

The New Museum “was one of a number of alternative spaces created in the '70s to provide venues for new and challenging work, and its mission was implicit in its name: to be a museum for the art and ideas of its time”.¹¹⁴ The New Museum quickly gained national status as one of the most innovative and exciting museums in the country. In her relentlessly investigative approach to exhibitions, Tucker opened up public debate not just about “good” versus “bad” art, as she did in her 1978 exhibition *Bad Painting*, but invited her audiences to have authentic and intimate connections with the art they experienced. New Museum exhibitions were vigorous and dedicated reflections of the events and real-life issues of the times. Tucker encouraged engaged audience participation by addressing topics such as politics, race, multiculturalism, humor, gender, feminism, AIDS, the NEA, aging, and death in exhibitions including *Not Just for Laughs: The Art of Subversion* (1982); *The Other Man: Alternative Representations of Masculinity* (1987); *Andres Serrano: Retrospective* (1993); *Bad Girls* (1994); *A Labor of Love* (1996); and *The Time of our Lives* (1999).

After two decades of challenging and frequently inflammatory exhibitions, the board of the New Museum, much like the board of the Whitney two decades earlier, started to question Tucker’s investigative and exploratory approach to exhibitions. Early in 1993 Tucker was required to write a formal defense of the New Museum’s mission, goals, and programs to be presented to the board at their next meeting. The catalyst for the board’s request to Tucker was a letter written by a prominent art dealer complaining that exhibitions at the New Museum lacked any visual content. Tucker recognized that “the underlying problem was that our exhibitions were not addressing the art market, in a

period marked by an obsession with career advancement, materialistic attitudes, and blatant commercialism. The New Museum, by intention or default, had presented work that challenged those values, critiqued them, or bypassed them entirely”.¹¹⁵

Tucker knew that the strength of the New Museum lay in its ability to present art that existed outside the mainstream—unlike works on display at larger, more established museums that catered to the art market and to the interests of prominent gallery owners and trustees. Upon reflection of the programming she had done over the past two decades, Tucker recognized the unique position her museum held within a large and overly market-driven New York art world. She responded to the board that upon critical review of her curatorial performance, she felt more strongly than ever that “the museum should become more radical in its approach, rather than less radical, and that we should continue to do shows that pushed buttons, challenged the status quo, and threatened the ivory tower”.¹¹⁶

In 1995, The New Museum made a decision to assess what they had accomplished and revise the mission statement of the organization according to mounting pressures of the art world—namely financial. “I was interested in the farthest reaches of museum practice, in art as a catalyst for new ideas and ways of thinking about the world. I had never thought of myself as a specialist in management and fund-raising.... I felt as if I was suffocating, my heart squeezed into a knot in my chest, my teeth rattling. My body was telling me what my brain had been hiding in the freezer: I wanted out”.¹¹⁷ Tucker, with the help of the board, began to plan her retirement for the year 2000, on the occasion of

her sixtieth birthday. A mammogram, however, three years before her planned retirement revealed that she had breast cancer. Tucker disclosed her medical condition to the board, and the search for a new Director began. In the summer of 1998, Lisa Phillips replaced Marcia Tucker as the Director of the New Museum.

In and out of treatment for her cancer, for her sixtieth Tucker's husband enrolled her in a stand-up comedy class at New York University. Tucker immediately took to comedy, and went on to perform in clubs and at high-end art events in the persona of "Miss Mannerist." Tucker loved comedy; "it's the most subversive art form around".¹¹⁸ Tucker spent a lifetime as a subversive, and her move into comedy late in life is a final example of the ways she constantly challenged herself and those around her to sit up and pay attention. In her 22-year tenure at the New Museum, Tucker presided over "a somewhat chaotic, idealistic place where the nature of art was always in question, exhibitions were a form of consciousness-raising and mistakes were inevitable".¹¹⁹

Tucker made a profound impact upon the art world, and achieved such prestigious awards and postings as the 1984 U.S. Commissioner for the 41st Venice Biennale in 1984, the Skowhegan Governors Award for Lifetime Service to the Arts in 1988, the Bard College Award for Curatorial Achievement in 1999, and the Art Table Award for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts in 2000. Tucker succeeded in introducing the world to "art that defied categorization, respected its audience by challenging it in meaningful and complex ways, and spoke to issues of the real world of shared experience—not just those the art world was concerned with at the moment".¹²⁰ Marcia Tucker passed away on October 17, 2006 in Santa Barbara, California.

ALANNA HEISS

An internationally celebrated leader in the alternative-space movement, Alanna Heiss moved to New York City In 1976, and with no formal museum or curatorial training began what would ultimately become one of the most important avant-garde art venues in the country, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. Known for her avid promotion of experimental and installation-based art, Heiss quickly became the “most important single figure in that effluence of another kind of art-making or art-doing in New York in the seventies—not only the art itself but also the way the art existed in the city”.¹²¹

By 2008 Heiss had curated and organized over 700 exhibitions internationally and debuted some of the today’s most important contemporary artists including Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, Sol LeWitt, Gordon Matta, and Jean Michele Basquiat. In 2008, when forced to retire from the organization she founded at the age of 65, Heiss proceeded to found Art on Air (AIR). Located in the historic Clocktower Gallery in SoHO, AIR houses an internet radio station, an FM radio station, an audio archive for cultural programming, an exhibition venue, and artist studios. A relentless pioneer in experimental art, Heiss is now at the forefront of technological cultural programming and is leading New York—and the world—into the future of art.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1943, Heiss was raised in a small rural town called Jacksonville in Southern Illinois of a family dedicated to music, education, and social reform. Heiss’ Father Ralph worked as school councilor creating some of the earliest social work programs for troubled teens in the area at what was then called The State

Institute for the Insane. Heiss' mother Marjorie had a PhD in psychology and dedicated her career to teaching children with learning disabilities. The Heiss family, including Alanna and two sisters, spent summers and school vacations on their farm in South Dakota. Heiss recalls her childhood as a terrific, bucolic experience filled with camping, horseback riding, and fishing.¹²²

Extraordinarily gifted musicians, Heiss' family to this day includes a Professor at Juilliard and a violin first chair at the San Francisco Orchestra. Studying both piano and violin from early childhood, Heiss made her way through junior high school and high school accompanying church choirs and accompanying musical comedies in Summer Stock Theater. Heiss' proficiency in musical accompaniment became a fundamental skill that she utilized throughout her professional career. As an accompanist, Heiss knew the entire score and all of the parts of each performance she accompanied, "you are watching the artists and you are watching the directors work with all of the artists. The situation trains all involved to work collaboratively in a creative area."¹²³

Heiss' early talent for collaboration taught her that musicians and artists generally live isolated lives, spending the majority of their practice alone, in solitary rehearsal or making art in a studio. Heiss discovered an aptitude and an ability to support these solitary figures, coming in to assist and support at just the right moment, and at the right pace. A metaphor for the way Heiss has worked with artists throughout the years, it is also a literal and critical component of the types of projects she would tackle in her extensive career in experimental exhibition making.

Upon graduation from high school in 1962, Heiss needed a full financial scholarship to attend college. She applied to musical schools throughout the country, knowing that her musical talents would open doors for a college education. Heiss ultimately decided, after receiving several scholarship opportunities throughout the country, to attend Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. Its mid-western location was appealing to Heiss and her family and Lawrence's solid liberal arts and music programs promised to fulfill Heiss' musical career aspirations. By the end of her freshman year as a declared music major, however, Heiss began to question her natural aptitude and future as a musician.¹²⁴

Fully aware of the extraordinary talent of her peers, Heiss faced her fears head-on and asked her instructor for an assessment of her abilities. Her professor confirmed her suspicions "you're right, Alanna. You're not that good." Not immediately dissuaded, Alanna inquired how far he thought she could realistically take a musical career. He responded "if you dropped everything and you do nothing but practice for the next three years you might be able to play second chair, second violin, in a third rate city."¹²⁵

Utterly deflated and flattened by this revelation Heiss "went home to the dorm and just wept for a couple of days. Then I thought about what a good life decision for me, that I wouldn't stop and give up everything I was doing, give up voice and give up everything. What I would do was transform my goals into an idea that I would be a very, very first rate performer".¹²⁶

Heiss soon recognized the opportunity new career path offered her. She began to explore the musical transformations happening in the 1960's beyond the constraints of classical training. "As a classical musician you spend all of your time practicing things which were written several hundred years ago and that is a lot about repetition. So I really thought about how interesting it had been for me to work with people who were doing something new, like do-wop groups or people who were working on new things".¹²⁷ Although she did not know how exactly how she would carve a career out of her new interests, Heiss had successfully transformed her initial setback into a new strategy for the future. She later noted how fortunate she was to be experience such a profound psychological disappointment so early in her life "most people figure out much later on which is a career centered on oneself that is ultimately was not going to be feasible. So that was probably the most important thing I learned".¹²⁸

Upon graduation from Lawrence Heiss moved to Chicago to attend the University of Chicago for graduate studies in philosophy and esthetics. In 1966, at the age of 23, Heiss lived for the first time in a large urban environment. She felt that in studying philosophy and esthetics she would explore "psychologically and philosophically the interests we all talk about the rest of our lives in art. Which are: the nature of beauty, the use of beauty, the objectification of beauty, identification of beauty, all of those things".¹²⁹ While in Chicago Heiss quickly became exposed to the radical changes and social movements happening at the time. It was shocking and exhilarating for Heiss "it was just a jump, it was mind-boggling different than anything I had encountered before".¹³⁰

In 1966, within a year of moving to Chicago, Heiss met sculptor Jene Highstein. Dropping out of graduate school, Heiss and Highstein moved to New York and were married that year. The neighborhood they chose to live was SoHo, a hotbed of artistic innovation and activity at the time. In SoHo, Heiss experienced first-hand the concepts and artwork of Abstract Expressionists and Pop Artists which illuminated the rapid and radical shifts transpiring in art, much like those she had discovered in music during university in jazz and be-bop. The Vietnam War was raging, however, and Heiss and Highstein fled the New York for London to avoid the draft, although Heiss laughingly recalled that Highstein “had gotten a deferment on the grounds of not just insanity but extreme insanity. Social workers came to visit me to warn me about the bad dude I was with”.¹³¹

Heiss and Heighstein lived and worked in and around London for four years. London was a city “from a cultural journalistic standpoint the right place, the right time. The English invasion was happening. Music was really coming out of England.”¹³² In a city of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and Pink Floyd, Heiss found herself in a hive of cultural activity. Heiss worked throughout London volunteering and interning in both music and the arts at organizations ranging from large, multi-performance arts centers to do-it-yourself venues such as St Katharine Docks. At St. Katharine Docks artists painted over and created installations in huge warehouses badly damaged by German bombing during World War II. Acting as an artist liaison, when audiences wanted to visit the Docks, it was Heiss’ job to “tour them around and show them what was going on and talk

about art. That gave me a lot of confidence. That is when I started organizing shows of art instead of music. “¹³³

The exhibitions Heiss helped to produce at St. Katharine’s Docks was a response to a void Heiss recognized “between what the artists are making and what the museums are showing”.¹³⁴ This realization and the opportunity to produce large-scale low-budget installations of emerging art was one that Heiss might not have encountered had she remained in New York or in a traditional museum setting at that time. “When you are very young you don’t have the ability to do that. Maybe you sit in the office and maybe collate material or something. So it was much more interesting to me to be making shows.” Working in an environment with hundreds of artists in massive, abandoned, unheated spaces, Heiss experienced for the first time the type and scale of projects she would come to produce for the majority of her career.

In addition to producing experimental exhibitions in London Heiss had a very different profession—used car dealer. Due to a loophole in European auto regulations, Heiss and Heighstein would bring cars into Europe and sell them without undergoing the rigorous and costly standard European emissions tests. They built a business traveling throughout Europe buying used cars and driving them back to England under the passports of non-British citizens. Recruiting what Heiss described as an “army of hippies with American passports”¹³⁵ they established a flourishing used-car business. Most importantly for Heiss, her used-car travels enabled her to observe the latest art exhibitions in galleries, museums, and alternative venues throughout Europe. Germany and England specifically

were showing “emerging” American artists at the time including Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Carl Andre, and Sol le Witt.¹³⁶

In her travels Heiss also discovered Kunsthallen, non-collecting contemporary art venues that feature temporary and often site-specific installations. Supported by the small towns in which they exist, Kunsthallen present exciting and boundary-pushing exhibitions that on a small budget but with the capacity to “receive renown around the world. The attention, the publications, what came of the publications and the international buzz around this small group. It was a great thing to see and a great thing to be a part of.”¹³⁷ During her time in Europe, acting as a used car salesman, Heiss experienced first-hand the excitement of cutting-edge art and innovative ways to present it that was simply not yet occurring in New York. “I got to see all of these things and got to figure it out about four or five years before my colleagues or my peers in New York who hadn’t seen any of these shows. They could see the work in the studio or they could see pictures. And I was enormously well informed. There was no conservatory or art school in the world that could have taught me more”.¹³⁸

Heiss returned to New York 1971 energized by new models of exhibiting art and committed to filling the void between what younger emerging artists created and what New York museums exhibited. She set up interviews at all of the major New York museums to see if they were interested in hiring her to curate these types of projects. Heiss described that approaching museums with this idea in the early 1970’s “was not such a presumptuous question at the time because there wasn’t such an emphasis on

young curators or burgeoning curators of a certain sort. The curator had not turned cult person at the time”.¹³⁹ After meeting with several museums, however, Heiss realized that they were simply not prepared to push the boundaries as far as Heiss wanted to go. Art critic Roberta Smith described that “Ms. Heiss came of age in the late 1960's and early 70's, a time when museums seemed increasingly unresponsive to, or inappropriate for, such new developments as installation art and earthworks”.¹⁴⁰ Heiss recognized that there were so many vacant and available spaces similar those of St Katharine Docks in London that she could utilize, “there were so many spaces. This was the beginning of the depression of the 70's real estate in New York City and half the city was empty and dark and terrible. So that became a very tantalizing thing, the strange and beautiful shadows it had throughout its many abandoned streets”.¹⁴¹

Heiss' 1971 project *Underneath the Brooklyn Bridge* was her first large-scale outdoor exhibition that featured some of the most innovative and influential artists working in New York at the time. With the help of her collaborator in the project, minimal conceptual artist Gordon Matta-Clark, Heiss created a veritable checklist of artists to watch for decades to come. An experimental artist who passed away at the age of 35, Matta-Clark was an extraordinarily socialite and an active participant in new social and artistic activities exploding in New York in the 1970's. Heiss recalled living in SoHo at the time as she and Matta-Clark collected a group of artists to show in *Underneath the Brooklyn Bridge*, “we just ran around all the time and talked to everyone constantly. Like a ski village or something. Anyway, so Gordon helped me and that's how I got all the numbers. It was like a cast show – god everyone was in it”.¹⁴²

In addition to creating independent art projects and happenings throughout the city Heiss worked at The Municipal Art Society (MAS) of New York, an organization whose mission is to “fight for intelligent urban design, planning and preservation through education, dialogue and advocacy”.¹⁴³ *New Yorker* magazine theater critic Brendan Gill served on the board of MAS and spoke regularly with Heiss about her interest in emerging artists and site-specific installations. Gill’s was passionate about empowering young people to become future leaders in the arts, Heiss recalled him declaring “you really cannot support the old if you don’t invest some your time in the young”. Gill saw a critical relationship between old art, old architecture, and the new. Recognizing that he and Heiss could join forces and help young, new, and emerging talent he rallied behind Heiss’ vision, and in her words, “Brendan is the one who made this whole conspiracy possible”.¹⁴⁴

With Gill’s charisma and connections Heiss successfully assembled a small board of advisors to found the 501(c)3 organization Institute for Art and Urban Resources. With an official non-profit umbrella under which to operate, Heiss “proceeded to talk the city into letting her use abandoned spaces in Coney Island and TriBeCa, inspiring similar conversions and adaptations around the country”.¹⁴⁵ At any given point from 1971 and 1976, Heiss was successfully juggling as many as ten simultaneous installation spaces throughout the city.

In 1973 Heiss found a venue that became the nexus of her activity for the next three years. The Clocktower Gallery was located in a municipal building in Lower Manhattan and as its name described was literally a clock tower in which the Institute for Art and Urban Resources occupied the top three floors. The Clocktower Gallery opened with three simultaneous inaugural shows: Joel Shapiro, Richard Tuttle, and James Bishop and quickly became an iconic alternative space. Within three years, however, Heiss began to search for a larger but equally raw environment to expand her projects. “ In 1976 when, sifting through city-owned buildings in all five boroughs in pursuit of more space, Ms. Heiss came across Public School 1, empty, decaying and brimming with possibility”.¹⁴⁶ Heiss founded her very own Kunstalle in New York, with Brendan Gill serving as founding trustee.

Located in Long Island City and named after an abandoned Public School, Heiss needed a board to incorporate. Calling upon her friend Robert Rauschenberg, now one of the most influential artists in the world, Heiss convinced Rauschenberg to become the founding board member with Gill re-positioned as Chairman. Within a handful of years P.S.1 added such influential art personalities as Leo Castelli, Richard Belami, and Paula Cooper to their board. Initially struggling with the notion of art dealers as board members of her anti-museum, anti-commercial space, Heiss soon came to the conclusion that P.S.1 was “so extraordinarily not active in any commercial sense. Unlike in up and coming organizations which would be controlled by Jeffery Deitch or Andrea Rosen or something or the worst person in the world, perhaps, Larry Gagosian, it was just

inconceivable that anything other help would be given by Leo Castelli or Richard Bellami, help and very good advice”.¹⁴⁷

PS1’s inaugural show *Rooms* featured dozens of downtown artists, many of the same artists who had participated five years earlier in *Underneath the Brooklyn Bridge*. In *Rooms* the artists were invited to break through the dilapidated building’s walls and install works and objects of art wherever they wished. The exhibition, including such legendary artists as Richard Serra and Walter De Maria, validated a movement and type of installation-based art at exactly the moment it was occurring. With Marcia Tucker’s New Museum opening just a year following the opening of PS1, Heiss felt that “the New Museum was really a perfect opposite situation so you could see the two very, very clearly. It was like a spotlight on both”.¹⁴⁸

From its inception Tucker wanted the New Museum to function as a nimble, radical version of a traditional museum including a permanent collection and a traditional administrative structure without the burden of the bureaucracy, conservatism, and curatorial sluggishness of larger organizations. Heiss felt that “every single thing that Marcia wanted to do I didn’t want to do, and vice-versa. Marcia wanted a small, elegant, compact space. I wanted the biggest space that I could possibly get my hands on and as many as possible. I was more comfortable with it being rougher than more polished. You can go down the line again and again”.¹⁴⁹

With Curatorial, Development, and Installation departments and established Collector's groups, the New Museum established itself as an authority on contemporary art and had a major impact upon the growing contemporary collections in the United States. In contrast, Heiss wanted to build an anti-museum and to have as minimal an impact as possible on the market value of contemporary art. One of the most significant decisions that Heiss made was for P.S.1 never to build a permanent collection. "Marcia was so intent on setting up a museum that she actively said from the beginning that she was going to have a collection. She thought that was important to say. And I from the very beginning said we will not collect, nor will we ever collect".¹⁵⁰ The decision not to build a collection at P.S.1 was a critical move reflecting Heiss' conviction that museum collecting commoditized and sullied the purity of art. "I think that it is a very difficult to resolve this problem when you are involved in major exhibitions (by major I just mean large or ambitious, I don't mean expensive) and you have a colleague who is sitting next to you who is involved in putting a portfolio together for trustees of your museum who are all just collectors. I am almost phobic about money and art. I can't make the two line up. They have never lined up in my life, I have never been comfortable about it. My problem is trying not to be too self-righteous or talk about it too much".¹⁵¹

Heiss, acknowledging her phobia came at the expense of the possibility of building a much larger, more stable base of support for the organization, described that nurturing collectors and collecting groups at PS1 would have been "much, much, much, much more useful at PS1. And in fact a lot of the burden of my so-called purity fell indeed on the very artists who were doing the shows because they had to do all of the heavy-lifting

along with me to put the shows up. Very little buffer”.¹⁵² Used to working independently with little to no budget, Heiss ran PS1 on a minimal annual budget with a small and administration. She made the decision to raise exhibition funding separately from her administrative budget, ensuring that “the little organization didn’t collapse under visions which it went into hock for - because we couldn’t go into hoc”.¹⁵³ If they didn’t raise the funding for any given show it simply was not presented.

Heiss’ approach to the arts enabled her to take enormous curatorial risks, specifically in contrast to more traditional organizations such as the MoMA, the Guggenheim, the Whitney Museum of American Art, or the New Museum. Heiss explained that at the New Museum, Tucker “had to do very good shows, very small shows. If she was doing five shows a year and a couple of projects that was a lot. I was doing 60-70 shows a year. So often when you get to a numerical shift you get the opportunity to take a lot more chances. And that’s the only, only thing that interests me”.¹⁵⁴ Heiss mitigated the risks taken by PS1 by simply creating so many exhibitions. In addition, Heiss was resolutely unapologetic about the projects she pursued and whether they were perceived as successes or failures. Addressing how audiences responded to her exhibitions throughout the years, she answered: “One, very well. Two, I don’t care”.¹⁵⁵

Heiss met two men in the late 1970’s who ended up being incredibly influential to her life and career from that point forward. The first was New York attorney Fred Sherman. Heiss and Jene Highstein had divorced shortly after moving back to New York from London in 1972. Heiss and Sherman were married in 1979 and remain married to this

day. The other influential man at this point in Heiss' life was art collector and entrepreneur Robert (Bob) Denison. In the mid-1980's Denison was approached by a PS1 board member to join the board. Skeptical from the outset of such a high-profile collector joining the board of her edgy anti-commercial organization, Heiss soon became intrigued when she discovered that Denison's ex-girlfriend was the legendary superstar of Andy Warhol's cult films, Baby Jane Holzer. "I thought that any guy that was Baby Jane Holtzer's ex boyfriend would probably be a dangerous and fun and interesting person. My entire fascination with him was because he was slightly dangerous".¹⁵⁶ Heiss soon discovered that Denison had the experience and knowledge to take the helm of board as temporary Chairman. Proposed as a transitory position while PS1 searched for a permanent Chair, Denison and Heiss quickly formed a dynamic and affectionate relationship that endures to this day.

In 1994, PS1 began a major renovation and closed its doors for the large part of its three-year construction. Heiss described an unsettling situation she experienced when they did present shows during renovation, "ominously when we were undergoing renovation and open with all of the construction workers, no one noticed that there was any construction was going on. That actually caused me to change a lot of my shows because when people don't notice a cement mixer in the middle of the gallery you have to question exactly what you are showing".¹⁵⁷ PS1 reopened its doors in 1997 as a cleaner and updated, yet equally raw, exhibition venue. As described by Roberta Smith:

The P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, the city's oldest and largest alternative space, has sprung dramatically back into action, reopening its huge Romanesque Revival building, a former public school, after three

years and \$8.5 million of renovation, repair and redesign... it remains a platform for the young, the experimental, the overlooked and the overseas, and it retains quite a bit of its signature funkiness. At the same time, this new incarnation is bigger, better, more accommodating and more stylish, as well as warmer and drier.¹⁵⁸

In 1997, at 54 years old, Heiss began to consider the future of PS1 following her inevitable retirement. She contemplated what steps she needed to take to ensure its legacy and success into perpetuity. To add to her considerations, Bob Denison had moved to New Mexico and was acting remotely as Chairman of the Board and would soon need to be replaced, and New York was experiencing another noteworthy recession.

Additionally, there was much public speculation in newspapers and magazines at the time that PS1 had emptied its coffers with the renovation and that they were in dire financial straights. One newspaper at the time called the renovation “a strategic blunder, depleting the Center's finances and making a bail out from MoMA or some other more established institution necessary”.¹⁵⁹ For any number of reasons, Heiss begin to consider a partnership with a larger, more financially stable New York arts organization. She knew that the renovation, whether it had overextended their financial capacity or not, had made PS1 “pitch-perfect. We were as good as it gets. And it was time for this bride to go forth if there was going to be a wedding of any kind. And the only wedding I was interested in and I thought about what would be an interesting merger of desires and lusts”.¹⁶⁰

Heiss looked closely at all of the arts organization in New York and determined that the MoMA was the best possible partnership for PS1. MoMA, one of the greatest Modern museums in the world, was a direct subway line from PS1, just two stops away. “Like a huge electronic tunnel of some kingdom... a twenty billion dollar tunnel between these

places with these electronic cars called F train and the E train and then we will have these two museums together. And I thought that would be a truly exciting thing to do and I wanted to see what that looked like”.¹⁶¹ So in 2000 Heiss, Denison, and a team of PS1 consultants met with MoMA Director Glen Lowry to explore the possibilities of a merger. Lowry liked the idea of adding an emerging element to MoMA’s reputation and programming. The original merger press described:

P.S.1 will gain access to MoMA's art collection, while MoMA's contemporary initiatives will be expanded and enhanced through engagement with P.S.1's innovative programming. While the two institutions' audiences overlap to some extent, there are also distinct elements that will broaden both audiences. Additionally, MoMA will work with P.S.1 to generate revenues to support P.S.1's programs, providing long-term financial stability.¹⁶²

The merger called for a seven-year phase in which MoMA would have limited influence on PS1 operations, board, and management. When the seven year phase expired in June 2008 MoMA assumed full command of PS1’s financial management and gained the right to appoint its board members. The year the initial phase ended, Heiss was demoted from Director of PS1 to the head of the curatorial department. MoMA felt she could not run the organization according to their professional administrative standards. As described in 2008 in New York Magazine “Heiss calls herself “a genius administrator,” but since the merger she has plainly had difficulty navigating MoMA’s bureaucracy. Although the Modern has helped P.S. 1 bring in \$2 million to \$3 million annually to meet its roughly \$4 million budget, P.S. 1 still threatened to run a deficit in 2006, raising the specter of pay cuts and requiring board members to make last-minute donations”.¹⁶³

Heiss, although cognizant of the changes happening around her, believed she would

remain at her organization for a few more years, until the time she determined it was time to retire. She recognized that the economy was shaky and would not improve for some time. She knew that PS1 would need to present low-budget, high-impact exhibitions until the economy improved, “It is a formula that I know very well and couldn’t quite picture any one else doing that. I needed more time with a new strong curator who had those particular characteristics. It was not a luxury job, let’s put it that way. We couldn’t have the luxury of some person prancing around and saying you know, this is art, this is about art. This had to be a very hefty and practical person”.¹⁶⁴ As Heiss planned exhibitions and trained new curators, MoMA Director Glen Lowry began to set another trajectory for PS1 in motion. That fall Lowry informed Heiss that he was hiring an entirely new management team and requested her retirement. “‘I told him I didn’t want to retire,’ Heiss explains. ‘And he said, ‘Why not?’ I said, ‘Well, I want to work another couple of years.’ And he said, ‘I think I’m going to go ahead on the retirement plan... he made clear that he and MoMA’s board considered Heiss’s retirement necessary for P.S. 1’s evolving future within MoMA’”.¹⁶⁵ Heiss was effectively forced to retire from the organization she founded.

During the initial merger discussions in 2000, Lowry and Heiss agreed that Art Radio WPS1.org, P.S.1’s Internet radio station founded by Heiss, would remain an ongoing project run by Heiss. In 2004, the station moved its headquarters back to Heiss’ Clocktower Gallery, the location she initially created the Institute for Art and Urban Resources.¹⁶⁶ When Heiss learned of her compulsory retirement, she told Lowry she wanted to direct WPS1 as a full time position. Lowry agreed, but MoMA discontinued

WPS1.org shortly following that discussion. On December 31, 2008, Heiss resumed her career at the Clocktower Gallery by founding Art International Radio (AIR). An Internet radio station that maintained the content, archives, and staff of WPS1, AIR's 10,000 square foot space additionally includes a performance gallery hosting six to ten major performances and installations annually; studio rooms providing production and development facilities for audio art and music, radio theatre, spoken word projects, interdisciplinary works, workshops, and new media innovation.¹⁶⁷

Thrilled with her new organization and the advances in art and media that it represents, Heiss explained:

Technology is changing so quickly, when we started this it was a very pioneering thing. And now online radio has become, will become within another year, really the most common radio form. The numbers are curious now and the delivery means are curious. Young people are growing up living mostly within the realm of the internet so I am interested in the fact that we are delivering on private internet experimental artistic projects into that. That is very precious. So at the time we do something high-tech like delivery on line we do low tech like starting an FM station in addition that you can only hear for three blocks. So most of the things I do is like a block, and a counter block, a block and a counter block.¹⁶⁸

Heiss not only delivers experimental projects and internet radio to global audiences, she also presents intimate installations and exhibitions of well known and venerated artists such as Dennis Oppenheim, Tony Oursler, Carl Andre, and Mary Heilmann. True to her life-long antipathy for the commercial realm, she emphasizes that “you will only go if you really want to. It is not for sale. It's more in your mind than anywhere else. It's like SoHo used to be. Now there is no SoHo. Where is the SoHo of my mind? It sounds like a Bert Bakarat song... Anyway, so I think that's pretty exciting”.¹⁶⁹

Throughout decades of change, innovation, and risk, Heiss faces her seventh decade as a pioneer in new realms of art, technology, and cutting-edge experimentation. Heiss brings the new to audiences in her SoHo neighborhood through live projects, site-specific installations, radio theater, and low-technology FM radio and reaches global audiences with massive cultural audio archives and interviews, and internet feeds across the world. In presenting her audiences challenging, new, and experimental forms of art, from the early 1970's to the present day, Heiss believes that “what you see is not what you get; what you see is what you learn...what you see helps you see the next thing”.¹⁷⁰ Always seeking the next thing, at 67 years young, Heiss continues to inspire audiences and continually create new avenues and new boundaries in the realm of contemporary art. When describing her latest projects with AIR she says that when people think of art, they think of visual art and writing. They don't think spoken word or radio. “In the art world, an ‘installation’ means building a substantial physical piece. In our world, that means creating a piece for the radio,” she says, clearly relishing this new distinction between worlds.¹⁷¹

CONCLUSION:

Although a far cry from the conservative environment of 1913 when the Armory Show shook New York to its cultural core, contemporary art still functions today within a market-substantiated safety of mainstream acceptance. Defined in large part by its pluralism and fast-paced promotion of artistic innovation, there remain strict and specific

measures of how art is accepted into the larger art dialog. As sociologist Sarah Thornton describes, “artists make work that ‘looks like art’ and behave in ways that enhance stereotypes. Curators pander to the expectation of their peers and their museum boards. Collectors run in herds to buy work from a handful of fashionable painters...although the art world reveres the unconventional, it is rife with conformity”.¹⁷² Although the art world theoretically applauds and encourages the unconventional, the current climate of notional acceptance does not allow much room for individuality and independent thought.

Originality and risk is critical to inspiration and cultural progress. Betty Parsons, Marcia Tucker, and Alanna Heiss each chose to promote largely unknown artists of their time rather than function as prudent custodians of mainstream taste. Parsons once declared “the old? I don’t give a damn about the past. Everyone looks to the past. The past is dead. Now is alive. Now is tomorrow. I live in tomorrow”.¹⁷³ Operating beyond the borders of mainstream acceptance, these women examined the nerve endings of contemporary art rather than auction records, noteworthy collections, and hip artists in prominent galleries. Each had an interest in art that transcended the cultural trappings of art “society” to address a deeper function of art within a larger social context. In Tucker’s words “looking at art historical antecedents has always struck me as circular. You can certainly find out something about recent art by thinking about older art, but the process is self-referential. I wanted to learn about the world, and I’ve always believed that if you look to a work of art to see what it can teach you about living right here, right now, it’ll open up like Pandora’s Box”.¹⁷⁴

Each of these women opened a veritable Pandora's Box within the public arena of the New York art world by exploring the peripheries and margins of artistic innovation as it emerged. They presented art and artists in a way that broke down cultural assumptions of how art should behave, and by doing so were viewed as threats to decent and appropriate cultural expression. "Since people experience their aesthetic beliefs as natural, proper, and moral, an attack on a convention and its aesthetic also attacks a morality. The regularity with which audiences greet major changes in dramatic, musical, and visual conventions with vituperative hostility indicates the close relation between aesthetic and moral beliefs".¹⁷⁵ What these women presented was more than just an attack on conventional esthetics, it represented to audiences an attack on their principles and core belief systems.

Even sophisticated art critics, curators, and collectors can find it "initially difficult to distinguish innovators from charlatans, because the former challenge extant versions of artistic authenticity in such a way that they can easily look like pretenders".¹⁷⁶ The experiential and experimental environments created by Parsons, Tucker, and Heiss demanded that audiences formulate their own opinions and trust their own esthetic instincts. Frequently, as described in this paper, this challenge incites fear and anxiety in audiences more frequently than an opportunity to learn and explore. When art reveals itself in unexpected and challenging forms, as Tucker herself experienced when first introduced to the experimental work of Bruce Nauman, audiences often feel threatened. The incomprehensibility of "the new" instills a suspicion that its audiences are the victims of "an elaborate hoax—which is the usual response to work that's unfamiliar or

challenging”.¹⁷⁷ Parsons described that “instead of being open-minded about it, they would be antagonistic. And I think it's because they couldn't relate it to anything historical. That's the only way I can think about it”.¹⁷⁸

The artists and exhibitions promoted by the Betty Parsons Gallery, the Whitney, the New Museum, and PS1 over the years met with furious audiences, vandalism, scathing criticism, and obstructive administrators. Parsons, along with Tucker and Heiss, “struggled to represent her artists to an uncomprehending and hostile world. On several occasions, her view of the art public was borne out: holes were punched in paintings, ‘shit’ was penciled onto a surface, and angry shouts were exchanged in the gallery”.¹⁷⁹ Art historian Arthur Jerome Eddy, discussing the virulent reaction cubism incited at the turn of the twentieth century explained that the “ferment of new ideas is very disturbing to men who are afraid of change, who favor things as they are”.¹⁸⁰

Parsons, Tucker, and Heiss recognized that promoting living artists who pushed the boundaries of cultural norms furthered a critical dialog about the state of art in contemporary society. Each possessed the intuitive knowledge that what they introduced to audiences, absurd and bizarre though it may have appeared, was a chance to experience something in a fundamentally new way. An October, 2009 New York Times article explored the science of the feeling that philosopher Soren Kierkegaard described the “sensation of the absurd.” Fear, anger, and hostility are common reactions when audiences face the unexpected or unknown. “At best, the feeling is disorienting. At worst, it’s creepy”.¹⁸¹ One of the outcomes of the research on this sensation is that a

disorienting, uncomfortable feeling has the potential to further open the mind to new perspectives and patterns of thought, “this same sensation may prime the brain to sense patterns it would otherwise miss — in mathematical equations, in language, in the world at large... disorientation begets creative thinking”.¹⁸²

In presenting novel or unexpected exhibitions, these women did not deliberately cause aesthetic disorientation. They were simply exploring the boundaries of art making and how truly exceptional artists can transform the known into the unknown. Tucker sought to “shake things up, my own thinking most of all”¹⁸³ and the rebellious British curator Nicholas Serota described “I’ve never found choosing a controversial artist to be anything but the right choice. If there is already absolute consensus, if there is nothing you can do in terms of illumination, why do it?”¹⁸⁴ By challenging the conventions of how art is *supposed* to look and function, risk-taking curators present art that operates outside the expected and venerated norms. Tucker’s very approach to curating revealed her desire to explore and learn. “There were two ways to curate exhibitions. One was didactic, the other investigative... the investigative model was rarely used because it meant organizing a show in order to learn something, moving full-tilt ahead without really knowing what the result might be. It’s what artists, if they are not hacks, do all the time. Why not take a clue from them?”¹⁸⁵

With pioneering and groundbreaking artists as friends and peers, these women operated on the front line alongside the artists they promoted, experiencing first-hand artistic innovation as it happened. Heiss describes that a “major influence on my career in its

entirety has been information that comes from artist, because artists talk about other artists...you hear the noise. Sometimes you just see the work and you wonder: why isn't everyone else interested in this?"¹⁸⁶ For Tucker working with artists opened up "the possibility of new ideas, fresh voices, uncommon ways of doing things couldn't just come from me; it had to come from working with others who could take an idea and challenge it, morph it, transport it to someplace exotic and unexplored".¹⁸⁷

It is a difficult challenge to continually promote boundary-pushing artists, especially in times of economic recession. New York Times art critic Roberta Smith explains "I think curators of contemporary art in New York museums have some of the toughest jobs in the art world. They rarely seem able to act on their own without some kind of committee oversight and are under unbelievable pressure to succeed at the box office".¹⁸⁸ Therefore much of a curator's time is now consumed by meeting with collectors, donors, and dealers who wield a disproportionate influence on the movement and pulse of the art world. Exhibitions must draw crowds so curators select shows based on artists' celebrity, patron satisfaction, and sales of tickets and museum shop souvenirs. For instance the New Museum, since Tucker's replacement by Lisa Phillips in 2000, is an increasingly corporate and traditionally run organization. Deborah Sontag of the New York Times described in 2009 that the New Museum has taken a "dramatically different direction, more mainstream and aligned with the art market. Its exhibition schedule increasingly features artists who are already established on the contemporary art scene".¹⁸⁹

It is critical that curators, despite the external and political pressures of the art world,

continue to fearlessly explore the margins and peripheries of contemporary art and create exhibitions driven by their instincts, the world as they feel it, the nerve endings of contemporary art. Smith insists that New York curators “have a responsibility to their public and to history to be more ecumenical, to do things that seem to come from left field...they need to think outside the hive-mind, both distancing themselves from their personal feelings to consider what’s being wrongly omitted and tapping into their own subjectivity to show us what they really love”.¹⁹⁰

Artists have a unique and critical perspective with the potential to transform extant cultural norms and social structures. “This is not to imply that artists are, by definition, brighter, wiser, or more venturesome than anyone else. But at least some of them seem to have wiring and reflexes different from, and less predictable than, those of the bureaucrats who normally run the industry”.¹⁹¹ Parsons felt that “if only the political world could be more creative, could see what artists have to contribute to current society. It is a common misconception to think of the process of making art as something impractical and beyond it all...It isn’t true. Artists have great creative resources to offer the world”.¹⁹² Contemporary art can create space for truly independent thinking beyond conventional structures and tacit social boundaries. Contemporary art can electrify minds and create new conduits to experience life, issues, and conflicts. Tucker felt that creativity itself “in some cosmic sense, displaces an act of unmaking, an act of cruelty, an act of mindlessness”.¹⁹³

Promoting the possibilities of art’s impact requires a shift in perspective and fortitude in the face of cultural disorientation. Exploring mediums and messages that are as of yet

unintelligible or unknown, working investigative rather than didactically, takes buoyancy in the face uncertainty rather than comfort in the status quo. Tucker sought neither certainty nor perfection in her career, “if being an expert means being deeply involved with what you already know, I have no interest in being one”.¹⁹⁴ Promoting new artistic conventions takes a continually open, novice mind. Recognizing that the new can endanger their place and authority in the art world, “lots of people say they are interested in learning, but what they really mean is learning more about the conventions they’re already invested in.”¹⁹⁵ Original thought is rare, frightening, and a certain risk, and most in the art world choose not to follow that path. “When it comes to the question of art, only the exceptional man or woman among us thinks at all. This is true even among our artists. In painting, sculpture, and music the blight of imitation is still among us. We are afraid, most of us, to think the truth or recognize the truth”.¹⁹⁶

Trust in the unknown and uncertainty secured the future of Abstract Expressionism, Modernism, Minimalism, Land, and Conceptual art, just to name a few of the “isms” that once threatened the cultural mainstream but today define the contemporary art as we know it. Parsons knew that “all the critics hated what I showed...but just look. My artists were the important ones, the creative ones, the ones who believed in an expanding world”.¹⁹⁷ When Tucker curated an exhibition of works by Richard Tuttle in 1975 it ultimately cost her a job. “Fade to today. Reason reveals all, and a more ‘enlightened’ Whitney, not to say art-going public, declares that the 1975 show “daringly set a prescient agenda for new approaches to the presentation of contemporary art that still resonate thirty years later”.¹⁹⁸

The ability to live inquisitively, to wonder and to be willing to fail made Parsons, Tucker, and Heiss meaningful and lasting voices in the contemporary art dialog. Recognizing that “change can mean learning, and learning means expansion, excitement, and growth.

Growth is often precipitated by a confrontation with anxiety-producing situations... where anxiety marks the tension between what is and what could be”¹⁹⁹ They each looked to the future rather than the past. They shook the institutions and conventions of the art world in order to venture into the unknown. Experimental artist Alan Kaprow described “the passing, the changing, the natural, even the willingness to fail are not unfamiliar. They reveal a spirit that is at once passive in its acceptance of what may be, and heroic in its disregard of security. One is also left exposed to the quite marvelous experience of being *surprised*”.²⁰⁰ The art world could do very well by the motto Tucker followed her entire life, “institutional thinking tells us to look very, very carefully before leaping—and such thinking virtually guarantees that we’ll never leap at all. As an antidote to this, my motto has been ‘Act first, think later—that way you might have something to think about’”.²⁰¹ Or in the words of art critic Holland Cotter, “Confusion is demanding, but it’s a form of freedom, and it can be habit forming”.²⁰²

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