

A Better St. Louis. Powered by Journalism.

# STL BEACON

## The Pulitzer brings in curator from MoMA

In Visual Arts

By Robert W. Duffy, Associate Editor

3:04 pm on Tue, 07.24.12

Gretchen Wagner, whose appointment as curator of the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts was announced today (July 24), has experience with many of the major moments in modern art, but recently she navigated one of the most important, persuasive and turbulent currents in that history.



Courtesy Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts  
Gretchen Wagner

This movement Wagner has been enmeshed in is "Fluxus," a word meaning fluency, and also an attitude of change. It came to be in the rumbustious 1960s, and was – is actually – revolutionary, diverse, difficult to characterize and enormously influential. The concept of avant-garde doesn't quite do it descriptive justice, because the 1960s were a chronological home to the avant-garde in many wondrous ways.

Aesthetical anarchy is perhaps a more appropriate term, because the Fluxus artists – big names such as Joseph Beuys, Yoko Ono, John Cage and Nam June Paik, as well as lesser lights such as George Maciunas – were committed to rejecting tradition and commercialism in favor of an involving, participatory, living art. As Maciunas wrote in the Fluxus Manifesto in 1963, the movement was to be “NON ART REALITY, to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.” That notion took root in contemporary art and has flourished and informed ever since.

Wagner said Fluxus is “something I’ve had an interest in for quite some time.” Although some people aren’t familiar with it, Fluxus formed a defining moment in the 1960s and ‘70s, she said, not only American art history but also internationally. Its internationalism, she said, derived from its creating a network of radical artists working all over Europe, including Eastern European countries, in Japan and America.

Fluxus looked beyond what was generally considered “art” to music and performance. It was inspired by ideas coming to the fore that encouraged its participants to move beyond the accepted and the norm, she said. “I was interested in how the visual arts and music came together with artists inspired by John Cage. It went from there and on to the Museum of Modern Art, and to the museum’s having this extraordinary collection. That is where I am today.”

As aesthetical anarchy is descriptively appropriate of this particular effluence of art, so is the fact the pre-eminent American custodian of the art of our time, the Museum of Modern Art, from which Wagner comes to St. Louis and the Pulitzer, became custodian of a collection of thousands of Fluxus objects. Gilbert and Lila Silverman of Detroit collected the work. Wagner has overseen it at the Modern. Although a remarkably establishment institution, the museum is also the mother church of cutting edge art produced from the time of Gustave Courbet up to this very minute.

When the Silverman collection came to the museum in 2009, its director, Glenn Lowry, told the news site Huliq, “With this extraordinary gift, the Museum of Modern Art becomes a major center for scholarship on Fluxus art. These works bring a new depth to our collection and archives, and will allow curators, artists, and academics, along with our general public, to more fully understand the progression of avant-garde art as it relates to both the 20th century and to today.”

Pulitzer Director Kristina Van Dyke said Wagner’s work with the Silverman collection made her especially interesting to the Pulitzer.

“What excited me about [Wagner’s] work with the material was her making an effort to connect with artists and to make the collection accessible to artists today. She invited artists into the museum to see the material, and made a film about working with these objects, which will go up on the Museum of Modern Art’s website. She is making the material come alive on the Web.”

According to a press release from the Foundation, Wagner will oversee the Pulitzer’s curatorial program, including exhibitions, special projects and collaborative initiatives. Wagner replaces Francesca Herndon-Consagra, who was senior curator from 2008 until earlier this year, when she took a position at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin. At the Blanton Museum she is senior curator of prints, drawings and European paintings.

Wagner, 36, received her undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1998. Van Dyke said she had known Wagner at Williams College, Williamstown, Mass., from which Wagner received her master’s degree in 2002, and then again at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where, from 2002 to 2004, she was curatorial assistant for the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery. Van Dyke was enthusiastic about Wagner’s “Elevator Music: Investigations in Experimental Sound,” an interesting twist on the ubiquitous background music heard as one ascends and descends in tall buildings.

Van Dyke said she thought Wagner’s work at Skidmore was especially exciting and innovative. “While she was there she turned the elevator into a sound space. This is the kind of thinking that will be important at the Pulitzer, looking at spaces that can be transformed. She is an out-of-the-box thinker,” Van Dyke said, and praised “the expansiveness of her interests.”

Wagner, Van Dyke said, has a grounding in classical art history that is combined with her interests in new art and artistic innovations. "Great things have come from her at the Museum of Modern Art," Van Dyke said. "While she was working with the archival Fluxus objects she was also working on German Expressionism." Such versatility," Van Dyke said, "fits the mission of the Pulitzer. She moves from classical projects to very innovative contemporary projects."

In a prepared statement, Wagner said, "The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts has a reputation for innovative and thought-provoking exhibitions, programs, and partnerships. A space for both speculation and contemplation, the Pulitzer provides a distinct platform for curatorial experimentation and the innovative presentation of art representing a diversity of disciplines, formats, and geographies. There is extraordinary potential here to engender new experiences and provide audiences with opportunities to encounter and engage with works unlike at any other institution."

She has worked at the Modern since 2004, and is now assistant curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. She organized a Fluxus exhibit, "Thing/Thought: Fluxus Editions, 1962-1978," as well as an exhibition of work by the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, and a show called "Projects 98: Slavs and Tatars."

Her experience lies in various movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. At Williams, she studied the photography of the time of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and said that the Bauhaus and other currents were touchstones for her.

She called Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation building the magnet that drew her to St. Louis, which she has visited several times. "I have been a fan of Ando's architecture for a long time."

She joins the Pulitzer staff in mid October.

*Editor's note: Emily Rauh Pulitzer is a supporter of the Beacon.*