

2019

Center on Contemporary Art: Facility or Facilitator?

Shannon Welles
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/center-on-contemporary-art>

Recommended Citation

Welles, Shannon, "Center on Contemporary Art: Facility or Facilitator?" (2019). *Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA)*. 1.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/center-on-contemporary-art/1>

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts Ecosystem Research Project at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. For more information, please contact eriksend@seattleu.edu.

Center on Contemporary Art: Facility or Facilitator?

Shannon Welles

Seattle University

Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

March 19, 2019

Abstract

The Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) was founded in Seattle in the early 1980s and continues to exhibit contemporary art today in 2019. This case study looks at the organization through the lens of ecology and living systems to discover its place within Seattle's greater arts ecosystem, focusing specifically on how and why CoCA emerged; how the organization evolved during the 1980s; how the environment shaped the organization and how the organization in turn shaped its environment.

Center on Contemporary Art: Facility or Facilitator?

Environment

An ecosystem comprises a community of organisms that interact with each other and the environment. Seattle is an urban ecosystem, and its arts ecosystem is nested in larger systems of city, county, state, country, and world. It's not always easy to define where one ecosystem ends, and another begins, because organisms interact in a complex web of relationships. Patterns emerge, but it is not possible to make predictions for the whole system based on the behavior of a single organism. The parts and wholes are interconnected and interdependent.

An environment consists of the conditions that surround and influence a community. To understand Seattle in the early 1980s, one must also factor in conditions from the 1970s: a decade of turmoil, with the end of the Vietnam War; the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation; and two energy crises stemming from the Arab oil embargo and the Iran hostage crisis ("Timeline of U.S. history", n.d.). The 1980s brought the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Christian Right and the Moral Majority. The culture wars between the Right and Left engulfed the national conversation on government funding of the arts in the 1980s.

Seattle's population declined dramatically from the 1970s to the 1980s, from 530,831 to 493,846 ("Demographics of Seattle", n.d.). Massive layoffs at the Boeing Company, the region's largest employer, and a world-wide energy crisis slowed economic growth. In the early 1970s Seattle's unemployment rate rose to 13.8% (Wilma, 2000). A now-famous billboard was erected near SeaTac airport in 1971 that read "Will the last person leaving Seattle turn out the lights" (Lange, 1999).

Community

Geographically isolated in the northwest corner of the country, Seattle was disconnected from the major cultural centers on the East Coast and in California. The Seattle Art Museum and the Henry Gallery were the major visual art institutions in town. The Frye Museum mainly showed its own collection and was not a player in the contemporary arts scene. Artist Norie Sato describes Seattle's artist community in the 1970s as small and tightly-knit. So many people had moved away after college to pursue careers elsewhere that there was a lost generation of artists between young MFA grads and older established artists (personal communication, February 22, 2019). Artist Mary Ann Peters remembers,

It was easy to identify the artist community at that time, because everything was somewhat centrally located in Pioneer Square, and in . . . the nearby outlying areas of downtown. There were many, many buildings that were occupied by artists at that time. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

In the mid to late 1970s, grant funding was available from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and locally through the Seattle Arts Commission and the King County Arts Commission. Sato recalls that,

We had a lot more national funding then. The NEA was much more active and was really willing to fund these ventures. It was before the culture wars really started; sort of at the beginning of the culture wars, but when government funding was still feasible. And the [local] community was small enough that we had a really good dialogue between the funders. (personal communication, February 22, 2019)

One of the most influential arts spaces during that period was *and/or*. Sato was *and/or*'s exhibition and programs coordinator and describes the organization as an artist-run space that

held exhibitions, lectures, performances, multi-media presentations, and an arts library (personal communication, February 22, 2019). In 1981, after seven years, *and/or* closed its exhibition program (Weiner, 1981). It was never meant to exist forever, and artists who had shown there wanted to move to a higher level (N. Sato, personal communication, February 22, 2019). *and/or* survived as an organization for three more years and seeded offshoots that became organizations, such as Artist Trust and 911 Media Arts Center (Graves, 2013). Some of the *and/or* community founded the Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA). Anne Focke, *and/or*'s director and co-founder, served as a mentor in CoCA's early days. Sato explains, "Without *and/or*, I don't think CoCA could have existed, not just for the financial structure. . . and the organizational structure, but [for]the community of artists that was needed to sustain CoCA. I think we needed that" (personal communication, February 22, 2019).

Emergence

In the language of living systems, emergence occurs when individuals combine to form a more complex system, the resulting system being more than the sum of its parts. An art center comprised of artists who hang their individual work on a wall is the sum of its parts. An art center programmed by committee in dialogue with ideas and artists around the country is emergence. CoCA formed collectively, both a natural succession from *and/or* and something completely new. As *and/or* was winding down its exhibition program, artists were envisioning what to create next. Peters explains:

The whole reason that CoCA started was because once *and/or* eliminated their visual arts component, there wasn't anything between here and San Francisco that would be a viable place for artists to show work. And I think it became clear that if there was going to be contemporary art taken seriously in Seattle and its immediate environs, . . . we would

have to make that happen ourselves. We wanted to be able to tap into what were the contemporary conversations nationally and globally. And we knew that the existing institutions either weren't interested in that or they didn't have the capacity to do that. I don't know how much the galleries would be a conduit for the things that we were thinking about, because they weren't commercially viable. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

In May 1980, a group of artists and arts supporters began meeting to discuss starting an art center dedicated to contemporary art (Tomash, 1980). As the group and idea began to grow, they formed working committees and began an intensive three-month study of the viability of such an art center. The committees researched contemporary arts organizations around the country; crafted the new center's philosophy and purpose; defined programming goals; investigated potential relationships with existing local arts organizations; and assessed sources of funding (Tomash, 1980).

Peters visited Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles to research contemporary art centers. Others visited Houston, Washington D.C., Cincinnati, Chicago, Philadelphia, Winston-Salem, NC, New Orleans, Minneapolis, and Portland, OR (M. A. Peters, personal communication, March 6, 2019; Tomash, 1980). From their research, they learned that "the overhead of permanent spaces is what kills alternative spaces. Because they're reliant on a tenuous financial stream and it just always sank the ship" (M. A. Peters, personal communication, March 6, 2019). With this information, they conceived the idea of an organization with no permanent space. It would have an office and utilize vacant space in the city for exhibitions and programming. A Statement of Purpose drafted October 26, 1980 proclaimed:

We advocate the formation of a contemporary art center in Seattle. The principle goal of the center is to be a catalyst and forum for the advancement and understanding of contemporary art. The center will energetically participate in both current and evolving issues in contemporary art. This will be done through exhibitions, residencies, special projects, publications, and public discussions. The scope of the center will be regional, national, and international. The center does not intend to acquire a permanent collection, choosing instead to stimulate and respond to new activity. (Tomash, p. 2)

The planning group operated under the fiscal sponsorship of *and/or* while they planned the new center. The center's working name was Seattle Contemporary Art Center, but they eventually selected the name Center on Contemporary Art. Co-founder Sato explains,

Center on Contemporary Art was meant to be more like a command. . . center was a verb, like center *on*. . . as opposed to center *of*. We were very deliberate in the name choice because it had that kind of dual aspect to it. [It] could be a verb, or [it] could be a noun. (personal communication, February 22, 2019)

CoCA filed Articles of Incorporation on July 20, 1981. The bylaws set up a membership system for the organization, and the Board of Directors was elected by the members (Center on Contemporary Art, 1981).

Defining Their Role

CoCA's founders spent time researching the local arts ecosystem to define their niche: the specific role the organization would fulfill. They were attuned to relationships and did not want to duplicate something that already existed. From the beginning, the founders envisioned CoCA as a facilitator. In a progress report in April, 1981, co-founder Peters wrote:

Acknowledging the precarious state of the Arts, both nationally and locally, we are nevertheless convinced and committed to the notion that this community is prepared to support a contemporary art center. No other institution in this area is interested in an all-encompassing contemporary attitude towards the visual arts. We feel that attitude is a major difference. In all facets of our proposed staffing, programming and leadership, the commitment is to remain a facilitator for the promotion of art that addresses issues relevant to the present time. Reiterating our goal statement, we see ourselves as an educational arena and a forum for the presentation of work that to this point can only be seen in major cities beyond the Northwest. (Peters, p. 2)

By 1984, a mission statement had been adopted. It read, in part:

The Center on Contemporary Art serves as a catalyst and forum for the advancement and understanding of contemporary art. CoCA does not intend to acquire a permanent collection, choosing instead to stimulate and respond to current and evolving issues in contemporary art. In the same vein, CoCA will not be confined to any one location, rather allowing artistic choice to determine and define exhibition space. (Center on Contemporary Art, n.d.)

Resources

With their role defined, CoCA's founders turned their attention to fundraising and planning the first exhibition. Thinking outside the box, they placed an ad in *The Wall Street Journal* offering "Immortality for sale, \$5,000,000" for funding to endow a pavilion that would bear the name of the donor (Harti, 1981). There were no takers, unfortunately. Peters and Richard Andrews were members of the committee tasked with generating interest and funds. Peters recalls:

We learned how to move. . . within the patron system of Seattle and how to move within the. . . granting agencies of Seattle because we had to. We found that if you could articulate well enough what you wanted to do, and in some ways allow people to see the same vista you were seeing, that it was not as hard to raise the money needed. We went to major patrons. And we also realized that a way to spread the audience and the word was in-kind donations. So, we purposely identified different businesses that would facilitate anything we were trying to do with these exhibitions. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

Premier Exhibition

In January 1981, CoCA's steering committee selected the light-and-space artist James Turrell for its premier exhibition (Millin, 1982). Turrell works with uniform light fields to create the perception of solid space. Difficult to describe in words, the sensation is that of color and light having weight and mass. Andrews knew Turrell personally and convinced him to create the installation because he would not have the typical constraints of a museum setting and they would all help to build it (M. A. Peters, personal communication, March 6, 2019). Architect Jim Olson helped secure space for the exhibition in the Lippy building in Pioneer Square, which was empty at the time and awaiting renovation (Millin, 1982). In the exhibition catalog, CoCA co-founder Laura Millin wrote, "From our first contact with Turrell, he was enthusiastic and extremely cooperative, despite the primitive state of the organization" (1982, p. 3). Peters remembers Turrell as,

...a surprisingly casual and comfortable person to be around and at the same time a consummate, serious, 'this has to be flawless' thinker around his work. That's why we were. . . constantly building and changing and building and skim coating. Because to

make that optic work, it has to be completely flawless. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

CoCA supporters volunteered hundreds of hours to build the exhibition, which occupied the first and second floors and the mezzanine of the Lippy building. According to Peters, “we built the equivalent of six houses for his exhibition in terms of wood and drywall and lighting” (personal communication, March 6, 2019).

On January 29, 1982, CoCA opened *James Turrell: Four Light Installations* (Millin, 1982). The Seattle Times reported that 1,500 people lined up for the opening, noting that no contemporary art exhibition had ever generated that much enthusiasm in Seattle (Tarzan, 1982). CoCA estimated that over 10,000 people attended the Turrell show in the six months that it was open (Center on Contemporary Art, 1987). Peters remarks on the public’s response to the show, “They were completely enthralled, and to this day, poor CoCA has to deal with the fact that everybody says that’s the most important exhibition that we did. But I don’t think we ever thought of it as being the pinnacle” (personal communication, March 6, 2019). Energized by the success of this first exhibition (and more than a little exhausted), CoCA’s members moved on to plan the next one.

Evolution

For the first four years, CoCA curated its exhibitions by committee, relying on members to survey the contemporary arts landscape and to present ideas. Peters notes, “that was exciting for people, because you knew that your idea or your suggestion would at least be entertained” (personal communication, March 6, 2019). Organizational documents detail CoCA’s evolution: a new programming committee was established every year to fulfill goals of diversity and broad representation. In 1985 the Board decided to present several shows in a season and to select a

curator from outside CoCA each year, to plan the season. Seasons would be three to five months long, so curators could maintain day jobs. The first seasons were curated by Ben Marks, Larry Reid, and Martha Winans. In the off-season, CoCA minimized overhead with one paid staff member and inexpensive office space. Seventy percent of their revenue was spent on programming (Center on Contemporary Art, 1987). In 1983, following the success of the Turrell exhibition, the NEA awarded CoCA a \$20,000 grant for its fall exhibition (Center on Contemporary Art, 1983).

Habitat: No Permanent Home

CoCA's founders conceived their exhibitions to be art first, space second. Once they had selected the artists, they would then find the appropriate space in which to show them. They stuck with this model for eight years. But what was the reality of having no permanent space? Reflecting back, Sato acknowledges that it was hard.

One of the things that we discovered was, it was really hard to raise money for a concept that was so elusive. No space. The shows were temporary. And we found that people, people with money, had a hard time understanding what CoCA was. What is CoCA? No space, no shows, no curator. . . nothing that seemed solid. . . just a bunch of people who really want to make art happen in Seattle. (personal communication, February 22, 2019)

It was a constant challenge to find vacant space, donated or cheap, and CoCA was often at the mercy of real estate developers' generosity. Sato notes that in the early 1980s, it was still possible, although hard, to find space. She doesn't think they could do the same thing today because space is so expensive (personal communication, February 22, 2019). The challenges of insuring spaces, staying within building codes, and the logistics of renovating a space each time from scratch began to take their toll. CoCA began to consider having multiple shows in one

space (N. Sato, personal communication, February 22, 2019). In 1987 the Board hired a year-round administrative director and in 1988 they decided to acquire a permanent space and begin programming year-round. A program director was hired (Center on Contemporary Art, n.d.).

Impact

It is outside the scope of this case study to detail the programming of 1980s. With an ever-changing programming committee and then a changing seasonal curator, the programming was exactly what the CoCA founders wanted it to be: responsive to the conversations of the time, pushing the boundaries of what art could be, and bringing contemporary art to Seattle that wasn't being shown at any other local venue. CoCA presented lectures, concerts, avant-garde dance, video, performance, poetry, visual art, installations, and more. In its six years, the organization presented approximately 240 artists, local, national, and international (Purves, 1987).

In 1987 CoCA published a 'zine for its season entitled *Sold Out*, in which Program Director Susan Purves summed up the community response to CoCA:

CoCA has been accused of being elitist, reckless, tasteless, violent, boring, sexist, bourgeois, gutterbound, highhanded, disconnected and a slave to fashion. CoCA is none of these things. CoCA is all of these things. Being such a nebulous subject of criticism is a wonderful tribute. By being able to engage this city in a critical dialogue, CoCA is successful. Opinions are not a dime a dozen in Seattle, at least not publicly. From a populace reticent about expressing feelings about the weather, CoCA has elicited death threats, picketing and tavern arguments. Bravo. In reality CoCA is no more and no less than the artists it presents. This is an extremely large and wide-ranging group. (p. 19)

When asked if CoCA changed art in Seattle, Sato reflects:

Maybe. But I don't know if it really did. I don't think it ever had enough resources to really change it. It just was too marginal. And I think in the end, a lot of the things that work at the margins do eventually change Seattle or momentarily change it, but I don't think it fundamentally changed the art world in Seattle. Seattle got bigger and a lot more artists moved in because they thought there was a lot of interesting activity happening here. [CoCA] gave it a bit more notoriety, visibility. And so, I guess one could say that Seattle is the way it is now partly because of CoCA, but *and/or*, the galleries, and a lot of things contributed that. (personal communication, February 22, 2019)

When asked the same question, Peters replies:

Well, in my perfect world, CoCA would have closed before they got involved in finding permanent spaces, and it would have had its impact. It would have made its point. The way it functions now is certainly generous to the local community and, I think, respectful of the local community. But it wasn't the original CoCA idea. I think [CoCA] probably facilitated some people becoming much more versed at the idea of curation and how you would want to invent a program for an organization. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

Outside Seattle, other cities were looking to what CoCA was doing. Peters recalls:

Even the artists in LA were stunned that we managed to get the Turrell show up. And, you know, the unfortunate piece is that we weren't able to really get big money behind the project, behind the idea of a contemporary art center. It was always a little bit tentative and piecemeal. But that unto itself was a model. People would be kind of amazed at what exhibitions we did with very little funds. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

Seattle of 1980 is a place that will never exist again. Its particular geography, demographics, and culture influenced what emerged, thrived, and died in its arts ecosystem. CoCA was born on the margins, a scrappy organization of artists and art lovers committed to working in Seattle and contributing to their community. They formed CoCA because they wanted to be part of a larger conversation about contemporary art taking place in the country. CoCA engaged its community with other artists, near and far, in dialogue about politics, identity, culture, and what art could be.

and/or terminated itself; CoCA persists today. Securing affordable and accessible space has remained a challenge for CoCA, more so as the ongoing real estate boom in the 21st century dramatically remakes Seattle. The organization has moved numerous times since it decided in 1988 to set up a permanent home. Perhaps this is inevitable for an organization that purposefully exists at the margins. Organizations on the edge find it hard to access support at the center. The tension remains between facility and facilitator. Early CoCA leaned more towards facilitator, but over time it has served both functions.

Method note:

This case study was developed by Shannon Welles, MFA 2019, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Norie Sato, CoCA co-founder and artist nationally known for her work in the field of public art; and Mary Ann Peters, CoCA co-founder and a studio and public artist and activist in the Pacific Northwest; as part of this research during Winter Quarter 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

References

- Center on Contemporary Art. (n.d.). [Historical organizational documents]. (Series II, Drawer D-2, Folders 5-9), Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Archives, Seattle, WA.
- Center on Contemporary Art. (1981, July 20). Articles of incorporation. (Series II, Drawer D-2, Folders 5-9). Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Archives, Seattle, WA.
- Center on Contemporary Art. (1983, Spring). Newsletter, Spring 1983. (Series V, Drawer G-1). Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Archives, Seattle, WA.
- Center on Contemporary Art. (1987). [Historical organizational documents]. (Series II, Drawer D-2, Folders 5-9), Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Archives, Seattle, WA.
- Demographics of Seattle. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Seattle
- Graves, J. (2013, June 26). *and/or* (Seattle arts organization). *Historylink.org*. Retrieved from <http://historylink.org/File/10403>
- Harti, J. (1981, September 19). New art center here has an offer of 'immortality.' *Seattle Daily Times*, p. 16.
- Lange, G. (1999, June 8). Billboard reading "Will the last person leaving SEATTLE turn out the lights" appears near Sea-Tac International Airport on April 16, 1971. *Historylink.org*. Retrieved from <https://www.historylink.org/File/1287>
- Millin, L. J. (1982). Preface. *James Turrell: Four Light Installations*. Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press.
- Peters, M. A. (1981, April). Progress report, Seattle Contemporary Art Center. (Series II, Drawer D-2, Folders 5-9). Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Archives, Seattle, WA

Tomash, B. (1980). Planning study: Sept.-Nov. [Early planning document for a contemporary art center in Seattle]. Copy in possession of Claudia Bach.

Purves, S. (1987). *Sold Out*. [CoCA publication]. (Series V, Drawer G-1). Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Archives, Seattle, WA.

Tarzan, D. (1982, February 7). Turrell's 'vanishing' art inspires long lines. *Seattle Daily Times*, p. 150.

Timeline of United States history (1970-1989). (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_United_States_history_\(1970%E2%80%931989\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_United_States_history_(1970%E2%80%931989))

Weiner, E. (1981, August 30). *and/or* lives- you just won't see a gallery anymore. *Seattle Daily Times*, p. 125.

Wilma, D. (2000, March 22). Unemployment in Seattle is 10 percent compared to a national average of 4.5 percent on June 1, 1970. *Historylink.org*. Retrieved from

<https://www.historylink.org/File/2447>

Additional Readings

CoCA digital archives: <http://cocaarchives.weebly.com>