



A BRIEF HISTORY OF WPA & WPA\C

By Laura Coyle

Engage intrepid, visionary artists in a whirling kaleidoscope of programs. Step back. See what happens. Over the past thirty-one years, the Washington Project for the Arts, reformed as the Washington Project for the Arts\Corcoran in 1996, has deployed the strategy described above to create a vibrant, authentic arts organization in the nation's capital. One of the longest-lasting alternative arts organizations in America, the WPA has experienced four major stages, each defined by the way in which it fulfilled its mission as a contemporary, arts organization.

The first stage at the WPA lasted from its founding in 1975 by Alice Denney through her dynamic four-year tenure as director. The second, an exhilarating time of expansion, commenced with Denney and accelerated after 1979 under directors Al Nodal (April 1979 - June 1983) and Jock Reynolds (July 1983 - August 1989), acting director John L. Moore (August 1989 - May 1990), and director Marilyn Zeitlin (May 1990 - May 1992). During its third stage, dating from the second half of Zeitlin's stint as director, through the time Don Russell was director (May 1992 - April 1995) and Christopher French was interim director (May 1995 - December 1995), the WPA experienced mounting financial difficulties. Ultimately faced with extinction, the WPA joined the *Corcoran Gallery of Art* in 1996 to become the Washington Project for the Arts\Corcoran. This unusual merger and consequent revival of the WPA\C mark the organization's fourth stage, with Nadine Gabai-Botero, Jennifer Motruk, Marta Kuzma, Annie Adjchavanich, and Kim Ward respectively at the helm (January 1996 - September 2006). Over the

last decade, the WPA\C has stabilized financially, resumed a varied program geared toward local artists, and steadily increased its membership and offerings. This tenacious artists organization is, perhaps, poised on the verge of a new post-recovery phase.

1. **Founding, 1975-1979**

Alice Denney, an energetic lover of contemporary art active on the Washington scene, founded the WPA in 1975 as a "service center" for area artists and performers. The WPA's mission was not simply to provide a place for artists to show their work or perform, but also to make available advice in arts management, grantsmanship, career development, and legal rights. Denney launched the WPA with a \$31,000 grant over three years from the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, a tiny staff, a three-story building, and a lot of good will. A year earlier, Denney had leased a vacant, rundown building at 1227 G Street, NW, from the city's Redevelopment Land Agency for \$1 per year. Renovated on a shoestring budget, 1227 G Street included five galleries, a film screening room, a performing arts space, and offices. A small board, whose numbers were always to be half artists, advised the new space.

The WPA opened in April with a multidisciplinary program Denney organized that included a broad survey of Washington-area visual art. Denney, however, generally preferred to present brief solo exhibitions of local artists that allowed the public to see the artists work in depth and enabled artists to evaluate the direction of their work. Just as important at the early WPA were experimental dance, theater, and music. Faced with a critical shortage of stages downtown, fledgling companies and musicians flocked to the WPA to practice as well as perform. Denney was the facilitator, skilled at tapping local and national organizations for grants and adept at providing a much-needed place in Washington for artists and performers to showcase new work and meet one another. By the time Denney stepped down as director in early 1979, the calendar of events had 1,000 subscribers, the WPA had hosted more than 160 dance, music, or theatrical performances, including the celebrated *Punk Festival*, and exhibited more than 250, mostly local, artists.

2. *Growth and Glory, 1979-1990*

Al Nodal, hired by Denney, succeeded her as Director in April 1979. He continued to emphasize the work of area artists, but he added more shows for out-of-towners. The WPA also began to sponsor public art projects and more elaborate exhibitions, installations, and performances. The bookstore, which featured an impressive and unusual selection of artists' books expanded; along with the launch of a new program to encourage the production of artists books. To support his programs, Nodal landed major grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the District of Columbia's Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and other sources. In 1980, the WPA also held its first auction fundraiser. Meanwhile, the WPA gained further recognition as one of the most active artists spaces in the nation.

In 1982, the WPA was severely tested when the city sold 1227 G Street to developers, who evicted the WPA. Nodal supervised a move to the Jenifer Building in the 400 block of 7th Street, NW, a promising location along the planned arts corridor. Rent was no longer \$1 per year and the move strained the WPA's resources considerably. Once the WPA was settled in its new location, Nodal decided to leave.

The board hired Jock Reynolds in the summer of 1983, believing he had the ability to restore the WPA's financial stability. Faced with the choice of cutting staff members, reducing overhead costs, and scaling back programming, or raising more money, Reynolds went full throttle for the second option and proposed an ambitious slate of programs with a considerably changed focus.

Reynolds hired program directors whose interests, like Reynolds', were at least as much national as they were local. The director and his staff also readily explored thorny social issues with major exhibitions. Among many projects, they organized groundbreaking shows about the impact of the Vietnam war on national memory, the blues aesthetic, and homelessness in America. The new programming included a much larger, audience-directed educational component, as Reynolds scheduled dozens of lectures, symposia, artist talks, and panel discussions. Many artists, visitors, and grant-making organizations inside and outside of Washington widely admired

Reynolds' program, and the WPA's activities received regular coverage in the national art press. Fans of Reynolds remember his tenure as a kind of golden age. The shift, however, from primarily serving local artists to serving a national audience, was not popular with a substantial number of Washington artists, several of whom had filled the artist slots on the WPA's board and had been accustomed to shaping the WPA's programming before Reynolds arrived. The number of Washington artists participating in WPA events during Reynolds' years dropped significantly from previous years.

Also controversial was a real estate investment Reynolds and the WPA board brokered at the height of the boom-time, go-go eighties. In 1985, only three years after the move from 1227 G Street to the Jenifer Building, the WPA's new home was sold and again the owners evicted the WPA. The organization relocated to 7th and E Streets, NW, to what had been until recently a Kresge five and dime. Reynolds and his board made a deal with the new owner/developer of the Jenifer Building; the WPA would lend the owner a significant sum for several years, renovate its old space in the Jenifer Building, move back into it, and pay rent at one-third the going rate. At the end of the loan period, the owner would pay back the loan with interest and the WPA would own a share of the equity interest in the appreciated value of the building. If the WPA defaulted on the rent, however, it would lose whatever equity it had accumulated and the money it had lent the developer.

Confident that the WPA could meet the terms and with the approval of the board, Reynolds launched an aggressive capital campaign in the spring of 1988. In one year, he raised \$2 million for the loan, the renovation, and an endowment, the interest of which would go toward paying the rent. In December 1988, midway through the fund-raising effort, the WPA moved into its improved 11,000 square foot space. For the capital campaign and to defray the costs of programs, salaries, and operations, Reynolds brought in generous support from the federal and local government, art foundations, individual donors, and more than eighty corporations or corporate foundations. To maintain its level of activity in the future, however, the WPA would need to raise close to \$1 million each year.

In June 1989, the *Corcoran Gallery of Art* canceled “*The Perfect Moment: Robert Mapplethorpe Photographs*,” which included sexually explicit images, one month before the show was scheduled to open. The WPA presented the controversial show in its own space from July 21 - August 13, 1989. About 35,000 visitors, a standing record, attended the exhibition, and the WPA gained enormous exposure, many new members, and, through donations and book sales, a fresh infusion of cash. Immediately following the exhibition, Reynolds took a sabbatical and in December 1989 he decided not to return to Washington.

John L. Moore III, who was already at the WPA, filled in as acting director from August 1989 until the board hired Marilyn Zeitlin, an experienced contemporary art curator, as executive director in May 1990. The budget for fiscal year 1991 was set at around a million dollars, but Zeitlin was only able to raise a fraction of that amount. She reduced the number of staff substantially; of the three full-time curators at the WPA, only one remained. Nonetheless the WPA continued to have problems raising enough funds to meet expenses.

3. Decline and Demise, 1991 - 1995

Losing Reynolds as a fund-raiser was only part of the WPA's problem. Washington's donors seemed largely tapped out and the economy soured, falling into recession in July 1990, which made it more difficult to obtain support. The WPA continued to mount an impressive array of programs, but financial problems overwhelmed the organization. When Zeitlin left in May 1992, Don Russell, who had been on the WPA staff in the 1980s was hired back by Zeitlin as assistant director, and took her place. He cut the staff to five, and greatly reduced the number of programs, but expenses continued to eat away at the endowment. Meanwhile, in an increasingly conservative political climate, the National Endowment for the Arts, one of the mainstays of the WPA's financial support, cut back and then eliminated funding for artists spaces. In April 1995, Russell resigned and Christopher French, who was an artist on the board, was named interim director. By December, the WPA was bankrupt. It defaulted on its rent, lost its loan, and closed its doors.

4. Revival and Recovery: 1996 - 2006

Some think that the WPA should have been allowed to fold, hoping that a new, grassroots, non-profit, artist-run organization would rise to take its place. Others were willing to experiment with a new organizational model for an artists space. A generous handful of optimists paid off the WPA's outstanding debts, wiping the slate clean. In 1996, with the support of David C. Levy, the director of the *Corcoran Gallery of Art*, the Corcoran board of trustees, and members of the art community, the WPA's operations were transferred to a new non-profit corporation, the Washington Project for the Arts\Corcoran, legally accountable to the *Corcoran Gallery of Art's* board of trustees, but guided on a daily basis by an advisory board of up to twenty artists and patrons. The Corcoran provides in-kind support, including an office in the museum's curatorial department, equipment, technical assistance, and the like, but no direct financial support.

Nadine Gabai-Botero, who had worked in the Corcoran's Development Office, became the WPA's first program manager and sole staff member. Gabai-Botero's task was to raise funds, primarily with the art auction, and to restart its programming, which she accomplished with “*projectspace*,” an exhibition series for local artists at the old Insect Club on E Street. After Gabai-Botero left in 1999, the advisory board briefly appointed Jennifer Motruk as interim director. She had worked closely with Gabai-Botero as program coordinator and remained until the next year when the board named curator Marta Kuzma program director. With an operating budget of \$191,000 for fiscal year 2001, Kuzma programmed artist talks; exhibitions; international, often web-based, artists projects; and sound and music presentations, but her global vision for the WPA's was at odds with what the advisory board and local arts community expected. Furthermore, Kuzma was not able to raise enough funds to balance the budget, and in June 2001 she resigned.

After Kuzma's departure, Annie Adjchavanich was named acting executive director, then executive director in January 2002. An artist and an art activist described admiringly as a whirlwind, she substantially ramped up programs for area artists; energetically recruited new members, with membership

jumping from less than 100 to more than 400; and frequently coaxed patrons into opening their wallets.

While Adjchavanich was director, the WPA\C's itinerant exhibition program often found a home at the *Millennium Arts Center*, an expansive if decrepit space in the old Randall Junior High School complex in Southeast Washington; the arts center has since closed. In March 2005, Adjchavanich left the WPA\C and Kim Ward, previously membership and finance director was named acting director until August of 2005 when hired as executive director. Ward has been creative about finding places to accommodate the WPA\C's increasing number of activities. The sites used recently include the former Staples store in Georgetown, *Warehouse*, Design Within Reach, *Edison Place Gallery*, the *Ellipse Arts Center*, *Flashpoint*, the former Hahn Shoe Store, and *Hemphill Gallery*.

At times it appears as if the WPA\C is everywhere and nowhere at once. This elusiveness is frustrating to those who recall fondly dropping by or hanging out at 1227 G Street, the old Kresge store, or 400 7th Street. On the other hand, the WPA\C has turned its propensity to spring up unexpectedly in places all over the city and its suburbs to its advantage. The youngest generation of artists and patrons, a highly mobile group accustomed to communicating while on the go by phone, text message, and IM— sometimes all at the same time—find guerilla tactics in cultural programming irresistible. At the other end of the spectrum, by positioning the WPA\C events in unexpected, highly trafficked areas, these programs have spontaneously drawn audiences who would not ordinarily attend them.

At the end of fiscal year 2006, the WPA\C was in the best shape financially than at any time since the merger, having raised \$414,000, more than enough to cover all its expenses. Under Ward, membership has doubled to nearly 800. The Artist Directory, a sourcebook published by WPA\C, exposes the work of Washington-area artists to a wide audience of curators, gallery owners, collectors, and other artists. First published in 2003, and updated and reissued for 2004/2005 and 2006/2007, the Directory has reached more than 5,500 individuals and organizations. In the past year the "*PostSecret*" exhibition attracted 15,000 visitors, the second highest attendance

of any event in the organization's history, and the show "*Wall Snatchers*," featuring graffiti and street artists, proved a popular and critical success and inspired a charged and enlightening dialogue between Washington residents and a number of the roving, occasionally anarchic "wall snatchers." The second "*WPA\C Experimental Media Series*" showcasing video and sound art, is slated for three days in the fall of 2006, and on September 14, 2006, the WPA\C will hold its first annual Members Meeting. Ward has invited and is encouraging each of the 788 artist members now registered with the WPA to attend.

5. The Future

With its improving financial picture, increasing membership, and growing audience, the WPA\C could support more programs with a permanent exhibition space. As successful as the WPA\C's moveable feast has been, the logistics of securing, installing, and publicizing several different venues a year are complicated and time consuming. For now, the website and Corcoran office anchor the WPA\C, but having a space of its own may be an idea worth revisiting. In the meantime, the WPA\C's members and audience are keeping their eyes, ears, and WPA\C home page open, just to see what the artists engaged by this venerable and unpredictable alternative arts organization will do next.