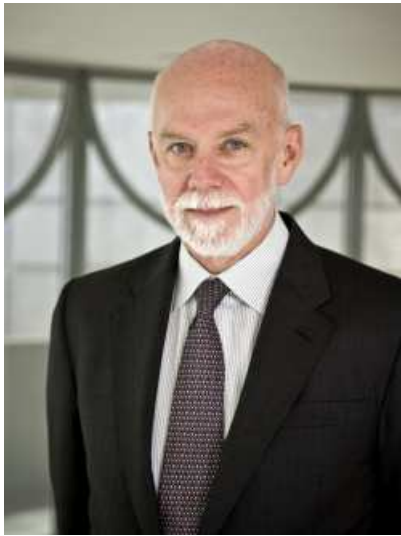


Open for dreaming

Interview with the new Guggenheim director Richard Armstrong



*In November 2008, he assumed one of the most important positions on the international museum circuit: as director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Guggenheim Museum, Richard Armstrong will make his mark on the future direction of the globally active institution. Armstrong, educated as an art historian, is widely regarded to be a highly experienced museum expert. As a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, he organized four Biennials and numerous exhibitions of contemporary artists. He subsequently ran the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh for twelve years. **Claudia Bodin** spoke with Richard Armstrong about his plans for the Guggenheim Museums.*

Claudia Bodin: *The hot summers in Washington D.C. seem responsible for your career in the arts. As a teenager you escaped to air-conditioned museums and discovered a painting by Arthur Dove at the Phillips Collection.*

Richard Armstrong: I just stumbled into it all. I was about fifteen, restless, and did not really know what I was doing. I saw that painting and thought: It speaks. Later I figured I should be a city planner or an architect, but I could not do anything with my hands and did not have the discipline to sit still. I wanted to write about politics, especially social politics, but ultimately I was not sure that it was interesting in the long run. With pictures and sculptures, you can superimpose any thoughts you like on them. I also discovered that I like being around artists.

You once compared your private collection to your passport.

When I was young, I gave artists I was spending time with a few hundred dollars so that they could continue their work. These friends said something I did not know how to say, and I could give them money and help them keep on saying it.

You recently started as Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Museum. What skills are required for this job in today's world?

It is useful to understand the value of seeming contradictions and be willing to engage a variety of people who are motivated by different things. To work for a museum that addresses the present, one needs a deep empathy for artists. They are sometimes inarticulate and do not know the full meaning of what they are doing. They just do it. That is why the person who can't create but can interpret-even if it is somewhat subjective-is a useful part of the chain. And, of course, for this job you also have to be able to get some cash together.

You were very successful as Director of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.

That was a different moment in time with a lot of dollar bills fluttering down. But you always have to foster a sense of enthusiasm and of doing things together. The staff and the board

want to feel enthusiastic about their pursuits. Collectors, artists, and the audience must want to be part of the museum. The number one rule is to value contradictions because there will be conflict and judgment from inside and outside.

On top of that, now you are affected by an ailing economy.

We will be victimized in some respect by having a considerably less generous economy. Cultural undertakings have to be leaner. We have to be a little more inventive.

Do you mean being creative in terms of reinterpreting the permanent collection?

This prospect of having more collection shows does not frighten me. The collection has grown tremendously since the Panza acquisition in 1992. It will also be interesting to incorporate artists' ideas into our understanding of the collection. They intuitively grasp new order in what you and I might consider disorder.

You seem to appreciate this?

(Armstrong smiles) Institutions are not frequently able to take a break and start in a different way: It is superimposed on them. The institutional metabolism is a little bit slow, even cautious. Change might call for the invasion of a foreign element, which could be a new person. This is partly why I thought I needed to leave the Carnegie Museum.

What is going to be different at the Guggenheim?

This is a different phase of growth. There has to be that moment when you push out and redefine things. Then there must be a phase of consolidating and-pardon my word-perfecting, possibly.

What do you think about Berlin as a platform for contemporary art?

It reminds me of New York in the early 1970s when you could make whatever you wanted. The contemporary situation is multilayered, and one way forward for the Deutsche Guggenheim is to be in the middle layer and very responsive to living artists.

Can you define the middle layer?

Galleries give tremendous testimony to living artists. So between the intimacy of the private gallery and the grandeur of the national spaces, there is the middle layer. Being nimble and operating at a certain scale can assist the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, in offering another layer of information for people.

It sounds like you do not intend to change or expand the program in Berlin?

I believe it serves the audience and the city well. I am impressed with the attendance. The Deutsche Bank has connections to multiple cultural organizations, and these connections are mutually beneficial. This October our commission with the New York artist Julie Mehretu opens in Berlin. I reckon we will continue on the same path with other commissions in the future.

Do you have plans for the museums in New York, Berlin, Venice, Bilbao, and the future Abu Dhabi to work closer together?

Yes, and we will make certain it is going to happen in a vigorous way. New York should receive more projects that originate elsewhere. New York and America in general can be quite insular. Some people here still believe there is such a thing as the center of the universe, and they happen to be in it.

Will there be a different emphasis on New York as the heart of the institution?

New York will be more clearly the captain and the cheerleader of the team, and at the same time we will strengthen the rest of the network.

Do you like the global Guggenheim brand that has been established over the years?

I am not big on the word "brand" because our only exchanges are feelings and impressions. These are not tangible. We ask visitors to come to a place where they can experience whatever they want in a very open-ended exchange. But you have to give the institution credit for being ambitious. To have the contest of ideas in New York, Berlin, Venice, Bilbao, and now Abu Dhabi, with an intellectual focus and the capacity to engage different kinds of people is singular. This is how the cultural aspects of being a global pursuit become interesting. It lets people understand various versions of beauty.

But there are no plans to add even more sites?

I do not want to preclude that. The idea now is for intellectual growth.

You also announced that you will empower the curators at the Guggenheim.

The curators are really the engine. You want them to be striking on all cylinders. The institution is healthy when the curators have shared and singular ambitions.

So you will give them more room to experiment?

And also maybe a little more critique. The poem *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* by Delmore Schwartz is the motto of a curator, I think. Curators do not always fully understand what their role can be. They have to discover how to become social and political. They sometimes perform for each other, which is not enough.

You once said that the Guggenheim Museum in New York is a place for dreaming.

To dream is really crucial, particularly in today's world where people can be directed too much in what to imagine. We have to be careful that the museum stays open intellectually and does not apply pressure. A museum should not have a single message beyond "You can find it if you need it."

How do you intend to excite the audience, especially the younger generation?

The Guggenheim actually has a very young audience. I remember the first time I went to a remote village in Kosovo in 1968 or '69. The house where I was staying had a dirt floor but pinup photos from Playboy all over an upstairs room. In situations like this, you realize the

ubiquity of the mass media. I want to return to the idea of how the museum can be an island within that. We are surrounded by messages, and the main one is: Buy this! But we as a museum do not have to sell anything, so we can be different and thus more interesting, particularly to young visitors.

So museums have a certain responsibility?

Absolutely, it began with the French Revolution. It is the more than 200-year-old quest to have the most powerful cultural artifacts available to the greatest number of people. One could say it is the project of democratizing beauty.

Claudia Bodin is the New York correspondent of art - Das Kunstmagazin