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Whitney Museum of American Art
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A new international role for the Whitney under Adam Weinberg

The museum's new director has assembled his curatorial team and is preparing to steer it on a radical new course

Jason Edward Kaufman

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When he took over as director of the Whitney Museum of American Art last November, Adam Weinberg vowed to revamp the administrative and curatorial structure of the museum (The Art Newspaper, No.144, February 2004, p.18). In recent weeks he has appointed his senior team and is now unveiling his strategy to carve a new international role for the institution.

Mr Weinberg has abolished the position of deputy director in favour of an upper management team that reports directly to him, including associate directors for development, finance, communications and marketing, exhibitions, education, conservation, and human resources.

Changes on the curatorial side are even more sweeping, establishing an entirely new artistic profile for the museum, and steering it towards an unprecedented course of international

collaboration. The new curators, all of whom will take up their posts on 1 July, are Donna DeSalvo, Joan Simon, and Elisabeth Sussman.

Ms DeSalvo is the new associate director for programmes and the permanent collection curator. She has been a senior curator at the Tate Modern in London since 2000. Ms Simon, an independent scholar, is based in Paris and will remain there as the Whitney's curator-at-large. Ms Sussman, who worked at the Whitney for most of the 1990s, returns after guest curating touring exhibitions of Eva Hesse and Diane Arbus for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Mr Weinberg says Ms DeSalvo and Ms Simon will help the Whitney form relationships with museums abroad. This is part of the brief he was handed by the Whitney's chairman, Leonard Lauder, who told The Art Newspaper last September that the incoming director would organise more shows that travel internationally. Ms Simon and Ms DeSalvo are now in place to effect that initiative, and Mr Weinberg confirms that they presage an increasingly international programme for the world's best known museum of American modern art.

"The Whitney wants to have a larger international presence," says Mr Weinberg, "and Donna has spent five years at the Tate and is aware of international developments in art and the role that American art plays on an international basis. That expertise is important to help set up collaborations with other museums internationally". He adds that Ms Simon will also be exploring partnerships in Europe, and that associate curator Shamim Momin will also help coordinate international projects.

"Joint initiatives could be organised in Asia and Latin America as well as Europe, and could involve acquisitions, publications, exhibitions, or other projects," Mr Weinberg said. He also said that he intends to expand the patrons committee to include international members. "I'm not interested in setting up museums abroad," he said, "but sending our exhibitions overseas will give the Whitney a greater international presence. This is not at the expense of national collaborations," he emphasises, "but we feel it is important to have relationships with our peers abroad." He says that "several projects with European institutions are under discussion," but will not be announced until the autumn.

The director and his curators meet for the first time this month to formulate plans for the future. "We'll begin with larger philosophical questions and move to specifics," says Mr Weinberg, noting that he is reserving the chief curatorial role for himself. Ms DeSalvo will serve as the "point person" between him and the curatorial team, a group Mr Weinberg describes as

“curators who have specialties but are not specialists.”

In his single-department museum, each curator has special expertise, but will be free to work on art of any medium or period. “They will go wherever their ideas lead them,” Mr Weinberg says, noting that this outlook is appropriate to the interdisciplinary nature of modern art. It also distinguishes the Whitney from the “19th-century chronological and media-based model”, which is standard at most museums.

As a result of the current reshuffle, Marla Prather, who was curator of post-war art, left in January, and Larry Rinder, who was curator of contemporary art, left in April to become dean of graduate studies at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, but remains as adjunct curator in order to complete a Tim Hawkinson show for the museum. In their place, Mr Weinberg, who was himself a Whitney curator for most of the 1990s, hired his former colleague, Ms Sussman, the organiser of the 1993 biennial.

The roster now includes seven full curators, three associate curators, and four adjunct curators retained as expert advisors on specific projects. A curator of drawings will soon be hired, and, when funding is available, a curator of performing arts.

When all his staff are in place, Mr Weinberg will work with them on exhibitions. He says he has discussed projects with his new curators, but has not yet made any final commitments.

This month the museum opens pendant shows of Ed Ruscha drawings and photographs (24 June-26 September), followed by a retrospective of Ana Mendieta (1 July-19 September) and exhibitions of Jennifer Pastor and Romare Bearden. Next year the museum will host the Cy Twombly show currently at the Serpentine in London.

Adam Weinberg (49)

Director

He replaced Maxwell Anderson in October last year. Formerly director of the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, which he joined in 1999. Before that, he was a curator at the Whitney (1990-1998), and artistic and program director at the American Center in Paris, from 1990 to 1992. In the 1980s, he worked at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Donna DeSalvo (48)

Associate director for programmes and curator, permanent collection

The only curator at the associate-director level, she will work with Mr Weinberg on planning and fund-raising, and serve as the intermediary between the curators and the director. She will also oversee the Independent Study Program. DeSalvo has been senior curator at Tate Modern since 2000, and is an expert on post-war art.

Joan Simon (55)

Curator-at-large

Based in Paris, she will work on exhibitions and acquisitions, and liaise with European museums, collectors, and publishers. Her special interest is in mid-century and senior living artists. She has been an independent writer, curator, and administrator for museums, foundations, and publishers in the US and Europe. She has also been managing editor of *Art in America*.

Elisabeth Sussman (55)

Curator

A New York-based independent curator, and expert on photography and post-war and contemporary art, she began her career as a curator at the ICA Boston (1982-91) and followed director David Ross when he became director of the Whitney (1991-98). Most recently she has been working with the Drawing Center and Jewish Museum in New York.

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