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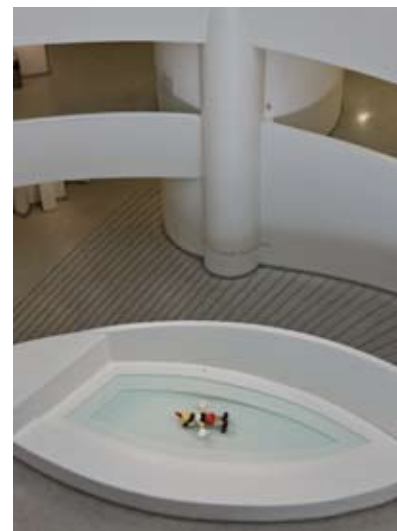
of Art >>

BY RACHEL MORTON

Nancy Spector '77 presents to the public what she discerns to be the best contemporary art in the world. And sometimes the public can't believe its eyes.

Pinocchio is floating face down in a pool of water. He's bigger than life and has obviously strayed far from the Wonderful World of Disney and entered a bleaker realm—Hitchcock perhaps. Since this is the Solomon Guggenheim Museum, not a back lot at Disneyland, visitors who confront this tableau as they enter the museum's impressive rotunda might ask themselves:

What exactly is this? Art?



Well, it's Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture, *Daddy Daddy* (2008) and it set the tone for an experimental show curated by Nancy Spector '77 called *theanyspacewhat-ever*, that had people talking and puzzling in the fall during its 2 ½-month run at the museum.

Spector was showcasing works from a group of young experimental artists who emerged in the 1990s. They were associated with an artistic movement called Relational Aesthetics that upended the conventions of museums and galleries by working more conceptually using film and performance, light and sound. Their art has come to encompass work that ranges from a sustainable agriculture project in rural Thailand to a revolving hotel room in a museum. They are redefining the way art is experienced.

Collaboration and interaction are key. In fact, the artists collaborated with Spector on the concept and staging of the show—one made a glittering marquee on the façade of the Guggenheim, another created elegant and intriguing “signage” for the show, and another, using light, built a stunning faux starry skylight in the dome of the museum.

unsettling, like “There is something you should know” and “It's not you, it's me.”

One area was empty of obvious art, yet an audio streamed sounds of a rainstorm—Dominique Gonzalez Forster's work.

Carsten Holler's *Revolving Hotel Room*, consisted of a fully outfitted hotel room on four slow-turning discs. The public could reserve a night in that bed, where they got to enjoy the Guggenheim in private and spend the night on the floor of the museum. It sold out immediately.

On the upper level, visitors could relax in comfortable bean-bag chairs in front of a TV screen and sip a hot drink from an espresso bar. This wasn't just the museum providing refreshment, it was Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Cinema Liberté* projecting films that had been banned in the United States.

So this is art?

Yes, absolutely, says Spector. She is in a position to know. As Chief Curator at the Guggenheim, Spector presents new artists to the public and builds the museum's collection. She has worked at the

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Left to right: Maurizio Cattelan's *Daddy, Daddy*; Liam Gillick's elegant signage; a film display from Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*.

Jorge Pardo interrupted a visitor's pace by creating a maze-like series of perforated cardboard screens on one of the spiraling ramps of the rotunda that served as a display system for prints made by the participating artists.

Douglas Gordon painted phrases directly onto the museum's walls that ranged from innocuous to slightly



Guggenheim for more than 20 years and is one of the most respected and powerful voices in the contemporary art world. When Spector speaks, the art world listens.

And what they've heard, and seen, and read from Spector has literally changed the face of contemporary art.

“I feel it is part of my job to stretch the limits of the institution,” she says, “to introduce art that hasn’t been seen in a context like this.”

As Spector builds the museum’s collections and discovers and presents new artists, she identifies for the public what contemporary art is. And sometimes the world can’t believe its eyes.

THE JUXTAPOSITION of this daring, avant-garde show that challenges assumptions and raises hackles, with the quiet, unassuming woman who created it was apparent to Emma alumnae who took a special insiders’ tour of the Guggenheim one day this fall, with Spector as guide.

In a soft voice that could barely be heard above the din erupting from the lobby (though the museum was closed, a design magazine was holding an award ceremony downstairs), Spector explained to the group the ideas behind some of the artworks and the show. Small and serious, her personality is more hard-working academic than gregarious cultural trendsetter. Scholarship and writing are central to her job and she has written, edited, and contributed to 36 books already, with more on the horizon. “As a curator you want to keep your intellectual life protected—having time to read, to look at art. It’s a difficult balance, trying to find the time to write and do more introspective work.”

Genevieve Hendricks ’97, one of the alumnae along for the tour, is a doctoral candidate in art history at

are used to seeing, and I hate to use the cliché, but it makes people think outside the box in regards to what constitutes art.”

One of a curator’s main responsibilities is to educate, to explain art to the public. Especially when the art is new or difficult, a viewer may need the curator’s illuminating commentary to gain an understanding of the artist’s work.

In the case of the suicidal Pinocchio, Spector cites the moment in the fairy tale when Pinocchio, after saving his father from the belly of the whale, drowns in the ocean before he is resurrected by the blue fairy for his courage and devotion.

The title *Daddy Daddy*, though playful, resonates with a sense of loss and spirituality, echoing Christ’s plea in the Bible, “Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me?”

“If an object or a performance causes you to ask questions about what it is or how you should perceive it, then you have already entered the territory of art. If it gives you pause, it’s doing its job. Art should be a momentary respite, or distraction, from the every day world. That’s what I look for.”

Spector’s capacity to see and interpret art was nurtured early on by her parents. The family spent a year living in Europe in 1970, and Spector says they took her to every museum and church. “Being able to see the *Pietà* without any barriers. To walk up to the Parthenon and pick up stones. To see the *Mona Lisa*. I didn’t realize then what a valuable experience that was. I do now.”

She continued with her creative explorations at Emma Willard, where she got involved with theater. Then later at Sarah Lawrence she danced and studied philosophy. After a master’s in art history from Williams, she worked toward her Ph.D. at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts and CUNY’s graduate center. She began working at the Guggenheim while she was still a graduate student. She’s been there, for the most part, ever since.

So if there’s one place that Nancy Spector feels totally at home, it is here, in this architectural gem on Fifth Avenue, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. As head curator, she works with the director overseeing the acquisition and exhibition program for not only the New York Guggenheim, but also the Guggenheim programs in Bilbao and Berlin. She supervises 15 curators, helping guide other exhibitions as well as her own. And she helps the Guggenheim collection grow by identifying works of art that she believes the museum should own.

One can’t overstate the big voice this small woman has in the world of art. Here at the Guggenheim, which is one of the most prestigious art institutions in one of the capitals of culture, Nancy Spector reigns supreme.



NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts. She admires Spector’s work enormously and has read much of her writing, which she says is characterized by its “keen and elegant insights into contemporary art.” Lauren Kelly ’01, also an experienced art viewer—her parents own a gallery in Chelsea—admired this exhibit and understood its challenge. “This is not a typical exhibition that people

“Having grown up inside the institution, it feels so natural to be doing what I do. I love this place and am deeply devoted to its future.”

She relishes the quiet parts of the job—seeing new art and talking to artists, doing research, writing. But the high-rolling, social part of being in the art elite brings its own set of duties and obligations.

“The art world is an enormously social place,” she says, “almost to the point of absurdity.” Every art show has an opening and everyone wants Spector there. Spector also advises museum-affiliated collectors in their own art acquisitions. In addition to the openings at other museums and galleries, there are the social events organized by the Guggenheim that help cultivate the donors, who in turn support the institution.

For these occasions, the bookish scholar transforms herself and Spector is positively glamorous when she appears in photos on the web and in celebrity pages and art magazines.



Nancy Spector and her husband at the Guggenheim International Gala.

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Spector works hard to keep weekends free for her family—she has two daughters, ages 8 and 5, with her architect husband Michael Gabellini. But just the weekday obligations can be staggering. At the close of her recent exhibition, Spector hosted a 24-hour program on the subject of time. It began at 6:00 p.m. and went all night long and through the next day. She introduced nearly every speaker.

One of Spector’s biggest successes was the 2002 show of Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle*, a work that completely engulfed the museum with films, sculpture, photographs, and installations, all part of Barney’s ambitious vision. Wax and petroleum jelly dripped down the Guggenheim’s spiral ramps. Hendricks says that Spector’s vision “opened my eyes to the lush, exotic, and erratic world of Matthew Barney in a show that has come to be viewed as one of the museum’s finest.” For those, like Hendricks, who were knowledgeable about the new wave in contemporary art, the show was a thrill. To those new to the art

scene, it was a shocker. Spector worked with Matthew Barney for eight years to bring the show to fruition.

The development of a major show at the Guggenheim commonly takes many years. The curator works with the artist to not only plan the show itself, but to understand the work and its significance, and to engage in the long process of research and writing that underpins the exhibition.

“I approached Matthew to do a full museum show when I had seen the first two installments of his five-part film cycle. Since he was only beginning the series, it was a projection on my part and a leap of faith on the museum’s part to commit to an exhibition.”

That Spector committed to the potential of this artist’s as yet unfinished work, is testament to her fearlessness and vision. It’s a risky business to identify an artist who has not yet achieved celebrity or even major recognition and present him or her to the world as a great new voice in art. But Spector has done this time and again—with Barney, with Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and with others.

Much less spectacular than the Barney show, but even more meaningful for Spector is her experience with the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a Cuban-born, Puerto Rican-raised, New York conceptual artist who died of AIDS at age 38 in January 1996.

“The exhibition I did in 1995 with Felix Gonzalez-Torres was, for me, the most fundamental curatorial experience. I learned much of my practice from him,” she said. She describes one of his works, called *Untitled* (Lover Boy) that was composed of a pile of wrapped candies, the ideal weight of which equaled the combined weights of the artist and his lover. Viewers were encouraged to take a candy, and the pile of candy would diminish. “This is about generosity and disappearance,” she says. “His partner died of AIDS before he made the work. Once you know this, the work becomes a lamentation, a form of cultural activism. Art can, in a quiet and subtle way, be political and poetic.”

It can be a challenge to explain how a pile of candy can be seen as art, but Spector did just that through her monograph on Gonzalez-Torres’ work. Her decision to show Gonzalez-Torres’ work at the 2007 Venice Biennale as the sole artist representing the U.S. was regarded as controversial and an important signifier of his importance in the art world.



Visitors could spend the night at the Guggenheim in Carsten Holler's *Revolving Hotel Room*.

"We're an educational institution ultimately," she says. "If two or three people are opened up to a new experience, if they can realize a pile of candy can be appreciated as a work of art, that's an enormous success in my opinion."

Spector admits that reaction to *theanyspacewhatever*, was mixed, as expected. "I think it speaks to a younger generation. It's been wonderful to see the museum filled with so many young people."

Young people may be more able to think outside the old art box, to see museums as "lounge-type, performance-type spaces, and to appreciate quiet work, almost invisible work."

Spector believes that what we think is art depends upon what our culture and our values have taught us. And to get beyond that takes effort. It also takes time. We can see that clearly if we look to the past. The Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Guggenheim was completed in 1959 to a chorus of disdain and derision. Critics complained the white spiral building stuck out like a sore thumb among the classical box-style buildings along 5th Avenue. Now it is universally regarded as an architectural masterpiece. The same can be said about the public reception to new works by Picasso or Kandinsky in their time.

That even smart art appreciators might have some trouble discerning this new art is something Spector had brought home to her recently when she took her daughter to a gallery.

"My girls are art savvy," she says. "We saw some rags on the floor, and my daughter asked, 'Mommy is that part of the installation?' It wasn't. They were just rags on the floor." ^e



A light sculpture by Felix Gonzalez-Torres.