

Coming Full Circle

DEBBIE HESSE STEPS DOWN AS THE AC'S DIRECTOR OF ARTISTIC SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

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Artist, curator, mentor, radio host, educator, mom; just a few of the roles that Debbie Hesse embodies on a daily basis. Her official title at The Arts Council of Greater New Haven for the last 15 years has been Director of Artistic Services and Programs. But we all know she was more than that. She has been a community connector, an empathetic listener, and a cheerleader for art and all artists in a broad way, but also on a very personal level, as many in this community can attest.

She has curated shows for The Arts Council at the Small Space Gallery (now the Sumner McKnight Crosby Jr. Gallery), Whitney Center's Perspectives Gallery, Haskins Laboratories, Gallery 195, Parachute Factory, and Romberos. A few years ago she was asked to tally her efforts and came up with mind boggling numbers: 200 exhibitions curated involving more than 6,000 artists. And that was a few years ago.

Not to mention her own artistic career, which she has kept rolling despite a hectic work and home life. She has exhibited her own artwork widely and now that her children are older, she has completed a few artist residencies—both regionally and internationally.

Immediately after stepping down in July of this year, she headed to another artist residency at Weir Farm Art Center and National Historic Trust. Since then she has been traveling with family in China and Bali, where she planned to take her family to a remote island (where they will have to wade to shore with their suitcases on their heads) to learn more about the seaweed cultivation practices there. (As an extended inquiry for her *Sway. Shift* work).

Hesse plans to delve deeper into her personal work, but will also serve in several official roles moving forward: She will be teaching in the Arts Management Department at Albertus Magnus College, is the Executive Board Vice President and Gallery Director at the Ely Center of Contemporary Art, Curator for the Perspectives Gallery at Whitney Center, and is on the boards of Ball and Socket Factory Arts in Cheshire and Site Projects in New Haven.

The following is a conversation with Hesse about her career and time at The Arts Council.

What was your life like when you started?

When I started at The Arts Council I had three school-age kids. I was just going back to work. I had taught a few classes at Creative Arts Workshop and, between kids two and three, I was the artist-in-residence for the Comprehensive Arts Program with the New Haven Schools. I would often meet school groups at my studio at Erector Square, Yale University Art Gallery or at John Slade Ely House [now the Ely Center of Contemporary Art] and I would have



Debbie Hesse. Photo by Harold Shapiro.

students do hands-on projects in response to the exhibition themes. I was at John Slade Ely House on a regular basis, which is how I met and became friends with Paul Clabby. Now it's coming full circle, coming back there again.

I started in 2002 as Bitsie Clark was just retiring and Betty Monz was taking over [as Executive Director]. They both interviewed me. It's kind of just what's happening now, a changing of the guards. [As Daniel Fitzmaurice takes the helm as ED].

Betty Monz gave me creative leeway to develop programs that would engage the region. Before starting at The Arts Council, I was very involved with Artspace and had organized the first large outdoor community project at The Lot on Chapel Street and the first exhibition in their current space. Betty sensed I had the pulse of the artistic community and was confident in my ability to bring diverse groups together through creative community engagement. I am very appreciative that Betty Monz believed in me back then. I think we did some amazing work together.

Any anecdotes from your time at The Arts Council?

When I first started, Bitsie Clark handed me a huge pile of green folders. The Arts Council used to be a fiscal agent for artist projects, startups, and groups (i.e. the International Festival of Arts & Ideas). I sat in with her a few times when she met with artists. Before she left, she said to me, "If someone says they're an artist, then they're an artist—no matter what." Her words have really resonated with me and shaped how I work with people. When people need help,

I just try to understand what they're trying to do and help them get to the next step, reserving any judgment. Her parting words really shaped my thoughts a lot.

How did you keep working on your personal art throughout your busy career?

I don't know how, but I did keep my personal artwork going. I said "yes" to shows and opportunities that I didn't really have time to do and just figured it out afterwards. Once you have kids you learn to carve out time that doesn't exist. You just create it, or nothing would ever get done.

What were times you felt you made a difference?

I think that much of my time was giving other artists encouragement and support to get to their next step. I did this through individual consultations and actively working with them. It's been very rewarding for me to see other artists make big strides in their art careers and creative processes. It's times like that that I know I've made a difference. One artist—Isaac Canady—comes to mind. I met him when he was making these incredible drawings on the street corner and in coffee shops. His life was not in a stable place then. We stayed in touch for many years. Since that time, we have worked on exhibitions together, and last year I asked him to co-lead an artist-led workshop with me. We all need someone else to believe in us so that we can believe in ourselves. In general, giving access to art—especially to marginalized groups who might not have another avenue—has been especially rewarding for me.

What are some examples of programs you created?

At first, I worked very closely with the Director of Community Programs. I worked with at least four different people in that role over the years. We were charged with creating programs throughout the region that would bring in people beyond the mainstream arts community. We started a program called *Vehicles for Art*; it was a platform to embed artwork and performances in daily life—often, in unexpected ways and places. One time, we worked with an opera group, embedded at CitySeed market in front of Connecticut Mental Health Center (CMHC). Dressed in medical scrubs or selling vegetables, they sang to folks en route to work or out buying produce. These programs offered ways to infuse art into everyday life throughout the city. We planned "spontaneous creative eruptions" with the hope that others would follow suit. We wanted to be a role model for what was possible and encourage others to push the envelope a bit. *Exact Change* was another outgrowth of *Vehicles for Art* that helped performing artists (hip hop, spoken word, opera) to perform "in situ" on city buses. *Cubicles for Art* matched emerging artists with businesses, usually other non-profits to have solo exhibitions. We used our office cubicles to launch the project and it was in such great demand we expanded it to other organizations and businesses.

Another was *Made Space*. I worked with Yale Properties and other local developers to transform vacant storefronts downtown into art spaces. It was a win-win situation as it gave artists raw exhibition space and

exposure while helping get spaces rented or sold. The city Cultural Affairs Office then started *Project Storefronts*, which activated the entire space, not just the windows.

Ripple Effect was another project that involved collaboration with *Project Storefronts*. Shola Cole [former Director of Community Programs at The Arts Council] and I worked on this together. *Ripple Effect* was an expanding project—essentially a game that took place in a vacant building—which used to be a music store, Goldie and Libro for many years before it was a men's clothing store. Artists created installations and performative works in the raw space in response to the buildings history and architecture, and then tagged another artist to go in and create something. The project kept growing over the course of four months. We ended with a closing reception for the 40+ artists who were tagged to participate which included an oral history video project that invited people to share their stories and memories about the buildings many incarnations.

I have especially fond memories of *Graffiti Jam*, a project I organized with another former Director of Community Programs, Jose Monteiro, on Grand Ave. in the old Frank's Hardware Store. A local builder had bought the building and gutted it out. He very generously let us use it before renovations took place. Graffiti artists showed up from all over the East Coast. It was really amazing and energizing. I went around to all the different hardware stores and got rejects paints donated. Everyone stayed almost all night with DJ Dooley-O spinning and pizza.

We organized a corresponding gallery show, *What you Write* at Crosby Gallery, in which many of the artists worked on canvas and exhibited their art for the first time.

I have organized numerous technical support workshops for both individual artists and organizations over the years. I organized a technical support series this

year that included workshops in fiscal literacy, grant budgets, grant writing, and writing press releases and artist statements. As digital technology advances, the delivery tools change but artists needs remain pretty much the same.

About 3 years ago I created an Artist-Led Workshops in the Community program that matched artists with businesses and non-profits to bring art experiences to groups that might not have had access otherwise. I matched artists skills with community program needs, often mentoring artists to create two-hour hands-on workshops at Liberty Community Services, Marrakech Inc., Chapel Haven, Connecticut Mental Health Center, IRIS, Project Moore Prison Re-entry program, and numerous senior centers and libraries. This program has let us reach into so many different parts of the community. It started out as a programmatic layer of an exhibition, *Doll-like*, at the John Slade Ely House. I organized artist-led workshops at over 12 non-profits organizations. The resulting projects, which included cultural heritage dolls, puppets, and beaded dolls, became part of a community doll collection at the show. Over time, the program evolved to include a broader range of disciplines—including visual poetry and writing workshops—and have been used to help facilitate staff-client relations as well as professional development tools.

Whenever possible, we had artists go two to three times to a given organization. They usually asked us to come back again, so I know we were doing something right! I used this as a way to direct them to grants—like the REGI grant—to continue and often expand the program for their organization. In some cases, artists forged their own relationship with the group they had worked with, which was great to see. It has been very rewarding to see how meaningful these workshops have been to so many artists, organizations and participants. I feel that these programs have created access to art for so many people. I am very proud of this program.

What were some of the exhibitions you curated that stand out to you?

Haskins Laboratories was a really fun place to curate shows. Phil Rubin, the CEO, was a great collaborator and very supportive of the program and of me. It started out as a way to create general exhibition opportunities, but over time I began to organize shows that intersected with themes relevant to their research about the spoken and written language. *Mindsets*, was a show that paired artists with Haskins research scientists. Phil was very helpful throughout the process. He identified scientists and research projects that might stimulate artist's imaginations. That was the case too with the Parachute Factory Gallery at Erector Square, which was a collaboration with the Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health and the Community Services Network of Greater New Haven. I worked very closely with Lucile Bruce, Kyle Pederson, and Becca Miller there (who were also on the Arts Advisory Group I ran at The Arts Council). I created exhibitions, such as *Family Business: Routes, Networks and Pathways*, that explored themes about recovery and community health. It was also a way to involve artists with mental health issues in various aspects of the exhibition process from installing to exhibiting. We also started an internship program.

Another (more recent) show that stands out was *Knack*. I collaborated with eight regional social service organizations and gave a voice to artists and artisans with mental health and developmental challenges.

I have always thought of exhibitions as ways to solve problems. I think about what I do as curatorial community engagement. Sometimes, I would identify a void in the community, and try to fill it. It is a fluid process as things are always changing. Sometimes, people come to me with their ideas and I help them figure out a direction. There is no set way that things happen. I try to be open and responsive.

One year I created two related shows at

different spaces concurrently (at Haskins Laboratories and the Crosby Gallery). *Status Update* featured artists that were using social media as their exhibition space. It was before artists used social media to promote, it was early use. *Cell-utations* was the companion show. It was an inclusive, open show where you could email in an image. These shows wouldn't seem relevant now, but they were very timely then. Cell phones were just clunky and awkward then, the pictures were small and/or pixelated. It was really part of what the show was about—evolving technology and how we were adapting to it in our everyday lives. Being timely is really important as an artist and a collaborator in order to find meaning. *Broad Stripes and Bright Stars* (a recent show at the Ely Center which I helped bring to the gallery) was so timely considering the state of our country as well as the time of year—July 4th. Dave Coon and Aicha Woods did an amazing job curating this show. More than 500 people showed up at the opening reception and artist talks, panels, and workshops coincided with just about every hour the gallery was open.

What's next?

I have a few curatorial projects and exhibitions lined up. Also, I loved hosting the *Arts On Air* radio show, it's a lot like curating an exhibition. It's another way to bring people together to talk about their lives—their ideas and creative process. So I'm going to look into doing a radio show. I'm going to be doing a lot of the things that I have always done, but in a new way. I feel like I've been giving artists advice for years and years and now I'm going to take some of my own advice (and theirs). I'm still going to be here—collaborating and creating, just from a new perspective. I have been able to work with so many incredible people who I have learned from along the way.

I want to thank everybody I've worked with—we've all learned so much from each other! ■

FROM HER COLLABORATORS

"Debbie Hesse was the first person to call me an artist. ... She was instrumental in helping me find the artist within me and she encouraged me to trust my creativity the entire time. You don't meet people like that often."

-Stephen Grant
former Communications
Manager at The Arts Council

"I am most inspired by her down-to-earth persona. Despite all of her successes and accomplishments, Debbie has maintained a great sense of charisma, curiosity, and hunger for all of the uncovered possibilities ahead. I am thankful from the bottom of my heart for everything Debbie has taught me and for the opportunity to be a friend and collaborator for many years with her as the duo recognized as 'Batman and Robin.'"

-Jose Monteiro
former Director of Community Programs
at The Arts Council

"Debbie has always had the unique ability to include people and make them feel wanted. ... Her curatorial abilities have at times overshadowed her formidable talent as an artist, and she never let personal enrichment hinder her generosity when it came to performing her duties at The Arts Council. ... I personally look forward not only to what she creates as an artist, but also the other exciting things she will continue to do as a curator. Her involvement at the Ely Center will continue to bring additional dimensions to the art scene in New Haven. All the best to you, Debbie."

-Rashmi Talpade
artist, collaborator