



## Inside the Artist's Studio | Shannon Fitzgerald

August 31st by Georgia Kotretsos

Shannon Fitzgerald is the executive director of the Rochester Art Center in Rochester, MN, as of last month. The Rochester Art Center is a non-collecting contemporary art center focusing on regional, national, and international artists. The Rochester Art Center organizes solo exhibitions often involving the production of new work and new scholarship, along with timely group exhibitions. Formely, Fitzgerald was chief curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAM), where she oversaw the exhibition and publications programs. During her tenure, she developed education and community-focused outreach initiatives, planned public lectures and symposia, oversaw a national visiting curator and critic series, and created an international and national artist-in-residence program.

Before joining CAM in St. Louis, Fitzgerald held a curatorial appointment at the Institute of Visual Arts (Inova), at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she participated in its ambitious and groundbreaking international Kunsthalle-style programming.

Additionally, Fitzgerald has generated new scholarship, commissioned critical essays from leading scholars, and edited numerous museum publications. She has published many essays on the work of contemporary artists and has contributed to the art journals ART PAPERS, Boot Print, Review Magazine, as well as the Art21 Blog. She is also the Lead Mentor for the Oklahoma Art Writing & Curatorial Fellowship, a program she co-developed for the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition in Oklahoma City that works to advance critical art writing and contemporary curatorial practice in the region.

On a more personal note, Fitzgerald's inaugural exhibition, *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad*, held at CAM in 2003 motivated me to work my artistic inquiries into critical questions – thus being the subject of my inaugural interview as well. Ever since, on many occasions I've stopped to watch her practice closely, to learn from her ability to create allies in the art world and to create strong bonds with artists. Strangely enough, Fitzgerald's *deus ex machina* traits are invaluable: she appears to artists when they need guidance the most, she is immensely sensitive to their creative needs and is willing to step forward to take risks with them—to trust their vision. And artists, don't forget that. I do not forget that, and with this post I would like to wish her an exciting new beginning at the Rochester Art Center.

It is an absolute joy to present to you, Shannon Fitzgerald.

**Georgia Kotretsos:** *A significant part of your career has been marked with the simultaneous growth of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, where you began as an assistant curator and rose to become chief curator, leading the institution into a new era. How was this part of your history experienced back then and how much of it is still with you today?*

**Shannon Fitzgerald:** That was a thrilling time to be part of a team working to define what a new museum could be, how it could grow both its mission and physical space responsibly. St. Louis was also experiencing a dynamic period of growth in the arts. I was part of a larger eco-system in which I was able to create innovative and timely programs with artists and thinkers that resonated with the local community, but also had global currency. Similarly, it was a tremendous opportunity to curate an ambitious inaugural exhibition and follow that by putting forth and overseeing a schedule that helped shaped the direction of the new Contemporary. It was terrific to conceptualize so many of the first-time museum exhibitions and first-time US museum exhibitions for an amazing roster of artists; artists that I am still regularly inspired by today.

It is most rewarding to work with artists at particular adventurous and transformative junctures in their careers; as risk takers, as a new path or interest reveals itself, or really at the cusp of realizing their next potential. It was a privilege to work alongside artists who did just that in St. Louis; Dzine, Ruby Osorio, Larry Krone, Julie Moos, and Michael Lin. Equally exciting is to work with established artists on something new and experimental; artists such as Polly Apfelbaum, Keith Piper, and William Pope.L who created strikingly memorable projects that were so evocative in the community and helped audiences recognize the value of the gifts that artists give us.

That part of my history certainly informed my trajectory and there continue to be threads, but my interests are diverse and ever-evolving. I have been working on several new platforms for visual art and visual art literacy through my independent pursuits, and now in my new role at Rochester Art Center

**GK:** *You've also been working as an independent curator, writer, and educator for several years, what is that like for you?*

**SF:** It can be liberating to work independently, as you know, and I appreciate the quality of working on a variety of projects at once that requires shifting perspectives. That keeps one nimble and sparks a certain kind of entrepreneurship that is required as a freelancer when working in the Midwest and Southeast.

I greatly enjoy writing contextualizing essays on artists' works for different mission-driven organizations, and discovered that preference over formal art criticism. For example, writing art criticism was a way for me to work outside the curatorial or institutional framework. I saw material objects and ideas differently than when you have a hand in the selection and development of an exhibition. Continuing research through conducting workshops and teaching art history, specifically Contemporary African Art History, is gratifying, as it is a research area that I am passionate about. But what is most impressive about that experience is witnessing all kinds of students, in four different universities in three states (urban and rural, undergraduate and graduate) transform their perspective through the power of education and heightened awareness. To be part of that awakening motivates me and is a delight to observe.

For instance, I moved to Georgia as the 2010 Fall Visiting Scholar-in-Residence at Columbus State University, where I had the opportunity to get to know a small community, in a military town, located on the historic Chattahoochee River. While in residence, I explored the civil rights movement, its legacy and impact on visual culture and contemporary art by traveling throughout the South, which I incorporated in my teaching. It is invigorating to draw connections—across disciplines—between independence movements in Africa, the fight for civil rights in America, and the end of apartheid.

Many of my independent pursuits involve the creation of new programs and as I also enjoy working with emerging writers and scholars, I had the opportunity to co-develop a remarkable new writing program, the Oklahoma Art and Curatorial Writing Fellowship[1] and serve as its lead mentor with the goal of fostering new writing about contemporary art in a five-state region. Identifying the need for such a program, in our role we mentor twelve emerging writers a year in (two) year-long programs, which includes intensive field reading, writing, and bringing in national colleagues; curators, critics, and academics all working at the top of their fields to serve as mentors. Our mentors have included Tom Eccles, Margo Crutchfield, Kate Hackman, Eleanor Heartney, Catherine Morris, Hamza Walker, and Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, among others, which has greatly raised the discourse in Oklahoma City; how fortunate for the young writers to have the rare opportunity for face-to-face access with such expertise. Several of the participating writers have been published for the first time and are vital voices in their communities. Our next public panel is in September: Visibility & Vitality: Contemporary Art Criticism Now includes Sylvie Fortin, David Pagel, Gregory Volk, and myself.

And lastly, in 2012 I initiated and curated a new program called projectscreen for the Oklahoma City Museum of Art that presented extraordinary work by Marina Zurkow, Catharina van Eetvelde, Barry Anderson, and **Allison Schulnik** to this region for the first time, in a community new to video art.



Allison Schulnik. "Mound," 2011. Stop motion video. 4:24 minutes. Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery (CA) and ZieherSmith (NY).