



Installation on Display

In early 2019, the Barnes Foundation undertook an effort to 'activate' underutilized spaces in the museum and Pat Steir was commissioned to create *Silent Secret Waterfalls: The Barnes Series* which was installed on two walls in the Annenberg Court. In her session, **Andrea Čakars**, Registrar at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, PA, discussed the Foundation's process for installing large artwork in a visible and high-traffic area with constant visitor and staff presence.

The high-traffic nature of the Annenberg Court provided significant hurdles that needed to be overcome during this process. In addition to its function as a special event space capable of holding events for up to 800 attendees, the court is a multipurpose area serving as a reception hall for arriving individual and group visitors, a café, entry to exhibition space, and seating area. Denying entry to this space for visitors for even a short period of time was not an option and all installation plans had to take their presence into consideration and account for a high volume of foot traffic.

The difficulty associated with the visibility of the project was accentuated by the logistics of the installation itself. The walls in the Annenberg Court were covered by large panels created by the Dutch fiber artist, Claudy Jongstra. These panels were comprised of two layers of MDF and plywood covered in wool and silk. These panels served as both art objects and sound buffers in the large room and would need to be deinstalled before the artwork could be installed.

Large enough to 'activate' the space, *Silent Secret Waterfalls* consisted of eleven oil on canvas paintings, each seven feet tall and the longest measuring seventeen feet wide. The process required the deinstallation of eleven of the fiber-covered panels immediately followed by the installation of the individual paintings. In addition to maneuvering the crates for the artwork, it was necessary that the work be laid on the floor before it was installed upright on the wall. The footprint needed to accommodate the installation came into direct conflict with the necessary accessibility of the Annenberg Court.

This installation was the first time the Barnes Foundation had attempted such a project and they found that frequent communication was essential throughout the entire process. Installation staff had to work with the rest of the Foundation staff to set up a schedule; nearly two weeks were needed to remove the fiber-covered panels and replace them with the paintings. Everyone worked to avoid scheduling conflicts with events and to identify dates that were unlikely to be busy.

Additionally, by identifying space needs and communicating those needs, sufficient physical space was closed off for the installation, although concessions were made by the installation staff and they worked in a space that was smaller than was ideal.

Barnes Foundation staff utilized frequent communication throughout the entire process. Although space needs were mapped out ahead of time, installation staff were able to

work with the front of house staff and communicate immediate changes to their floorplan, including the movement of crates through a busy court, on an as-needed basis. The front of house staff was also in a position to communicate with the installation staff when attendance exceeded expectations.

Communication extended beyond managing the logistics of the installation. While the work was being installed, a member of staff, usually a registrar, was on hand to field questions from visitors and non-installation staff. Ms. Čakars found that most observers were enthusiastic about the process and wanted to engage, their questions broadly covering the who, what, why, and how of the process. Having a point person on hand to answer these questions allowed the installation staff to proceed without interruption and this point person was also invaluable when it came to redirecting individuals who made their way into the installation space.

The first measure of success for a visible installation is the completed product, the exhibition, and in this respect the installation was successful. The artwork was hung, staff and artwork remained safe throughout the process, the artist's vision has been realized, and the Annenberg Court became a more 'activated' space.



Silent Secret Waterfalls: The Barnes Series installed in the Annenberg Court at the Barnes Foundation, January – November, 2019. Photography by Katie Prichard.



The second measure of success is the impact on visitor and non-installation staff throughout the process. While an initial approach may be to minimize interaction and impact, visible installation provides a unique opportunity to engage with museum stakeholders and Ms. Čakars and the staff at the Barnes Foundation found that this was the case for their installation. Most collection-related work, including installations, stays behind the scenes and remains a mystery to those not directly involved with it. Visible installations provide the opportunity to 'look behind the curtain' and get a glimpse at the gears that make exhibitions happen. Having a point person on hand to answer questions regarding the installation allowed the curtain to be pulled further back and resulted in greater engagement for those observing.

When asked if she had any advice for other institutions faced with a similar project, Ms. Čakars soundly endorsed open communication from the initial planning stages to the final debrief. She also argues that installations that are visible by necessity "can be made into a positive" by being embraced as opportunities to increase the visibility of the collection, highlight invaluable staff who are often only behind the scenes, and give insight into the process that can seem like magic to those not involved. With enough planning, communication, and flexibility, visible installation can be a successful experience which benefits an institution and its stakeholders.

Many thanks to Andrea Čakars for her presentation and her willingness to engage in a follow-up with me after the conference to answer some of the questions that arose from her session.

Submitted by Katie Prichard, Assistant Registrar, University of Michigan Museum of Art