

## COLLABORATION

By Cynthia Close



# A World of Opportunities

**F**ulbright scholar and Boston artist Mary Sherman (reviewed in *Art New England's* September/October 2022 issue) is the driving force behind TransCultural Exchange (TCE), an artist's collective responsible for a biennial conference last held in the Commonwealth in early November 2022. Founded in 1989 by Sherman in Chicago, TransCultural Exchange was later incorporated in 2002 when she was at NYU. Since then she has worked with hundreds of artists, arts organizations, foundations, galleries, museums, and cultural centers in 60 countries to produce over 350 art projects many of which can be viewed on the TCE website. All of these activities have involved artists from different cultures working across disciplines to inspire new ways of thinking about the world we live in today. In an interview for *Art New England*, Sherman emphasized the opportunities afforded by participation in this global exchange: professional development resources, new markets, and career options for artists around the world.

Reflecting on her experience as a young artist in Chicago, Sherman said, "everyone was painting like Jim Nutt or Ed Paschke." These influential artists, known for their cartoon-like imagery, had a propensity for outsider art. Sherman's thickly impasto figurative style paintings from that period seemed sculptural. She remembers being told by a mentor that, "You'll be a fine sculptor one of these days." Her work indeed evolved in that direction. It also required knowledge of kinetics. When she realized, "I want to make a painting that would move across the room or wall," she knew she needed help. Women were generally not welcomed in machine shops, and she had no idea how to use the tools necessary to construct the mechanical elements powering her concept. Upon moving to Massachusetts, she found help in a retired mechanic from Dorchester who was willing to open his shop to women artists like noted Boston sculptor Mags Harries, and now Sherman. Sherman admits, "I'm not the greatest machinist. I make a lot of mistakes." But it is

**Top:** Mary Sherman, an artist and the director of the artists-run TransCultural Exchange, which she founded in Chicago in 1989. Photo: Christine Fenzl. Above: A in Chicago in 1989. Photo: Christine Fenzl. Above: A speaker from Ukraine presenting at the TransCultural Exchange 2022 conference in Boston. Liudmyla (Luoy) Nychal, the curator of the Nazar Volitovich Art Residency (NVAIR) in the Ukraine, the project coordinator of the NGO Congress of Cultural Activists (leading the direction of Art Mobility), an independent researcher, art critic and curator-at-large of Lite-Haus Gallery Berlin. Photo: April Chai.

exactly Sherman's rough and tumble approach that leaves the evidence of a work made by hand on her sophisticated concepts and makes them so appealing and accessible. Although she insists on doing all her own fabrication unaided by assistants, Sherman, by nature, is a collaborator. She enlists composers and sound engineers as she did in her recent interactive installation at Boston's Envoy Hotel. TransCultural Exchange would not exist without the combined efforts of artists and members of the global cultural

community who volunteer their time and energy to make the biennial conference happen.

*Art New England's* publisher, Rita Fucillo, first heard of TransCultural Exchange in 2009, the year her business partner, Tim Montgomery, acquired the magazine. Fucillo recalls, "although I was aware of TransCultural Exchange early on, it was in 2011 when I made a concerted effort to connect with Mary Sherman. I wanted to be on everyone's radar, and I attended all the events and conferences that I could. The possibilities for networking through TCE were astounding." The pandemic-induced forced isolation and concurrent cancellations of many international events over the past three years only intensified Fucillo's eagerness this past fall to be, "out in the world again." She jumped at the chance when Sherman invited her to be on the TCE panel, "Art From the Writer's Point of View." For Fucillo the conference experience proved to be "eye-opening, like going to school again...I met so many wonderful people who inspired me. I kept asking myself, how can I incorporate some of this into the magazine?" The answer came in part when she attended a lecture by Afghani artist/activist Omaid Sharifi, the founder and president of ArtLords, an artist collective of muralists who were engaged in creating public art to protest war and the effects of occupying forces in Afghanistan. Fucillo said, "I was so proud as we had featured ArtLords in the November/December 2022 issue. [Their artwork] made a perfect cover. Hearing Sharifi at the conference validated our coverage."

Global networking to open-up unexpected connections leading to new opportunities are the hallmark of the Conference. A video discussion following the 2022 TCE Conference with members of the New York Artist's Circle who attended, provided evidence of unbridled enthusiasm for their experience. They applauded the informal nature, the accessibility of fellow attendees, and the fact that it was not U.S. centered. Eighty percent of the artists involved came from outside the country. Wendy Moss, a New York artist, had an epiphany when she attended a panel on artist's residencies. "It changed my view of what an artist's residency is. It's not about production, making work for your next show. It's a time to think, a space to open new horizons." Most of the New York artists expressed appreciation that, "the conference included the entire City of Boston, including M.I.T. and different university campuses." Last year's conference was supported by The Colleges of the Fenway, a collaborative effort of the five neighboring Boston-based colleges: Emmanuel College, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Simmons University, and Wentworth Institute of Technology. The conference also involved a consortium of academic resources, facilities and extra-curricular



activities that included the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and for the first time this year, the ICA Boston.

Sherman reiterated that, "the whole point of the conference is to connect artists and resources on a global scale." That experience of connection happened for Fucillo on both a global and local level. Through serving on the TCE panel, Fucillo found a new friend in Claudia Fiks, the panel moderator and director of development at the Society of Arts and Crafts. Fellow panelist, Susanne Mueller-Baji is an artist, journalist, and art critic from Germany, who was also a kindred spirit for Fucillo in the publishing of an arts paper that fills a cultural void in her region.

Always on the lookout for local artists, Fucillo credits the conference for her discovery of artist/educator Wen-hao Tien whose interactive work often involves nature and Paraguayan artist/writer Ruth Hermann. While fostering those ever-important international connections, the TCE conference sometimes hits even closer to home. Fucillo adds, "Amy Merrill, a Boston playwright and wonderful friend, attended my panel and we reconnected after three years. She's working on an incredible project centering on Iraqi women and art."

Merrill provides additional information about her work on her website: "I am also privileged to be a planner and featured playwright with *Her Story Is*, a collective of women based in Iraq and the U.S. dedicated to dialogue and

Above: Murray Whyte (Art critic from the *Boston Globe*) with Eva Respini, the deputy director for curatorial affairs and Barbara Lee Chief Curator at the ICA Boston speaking about the 2022 U.S. Pavilion's historic presentation of Simone Leigh in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: April Chai. Below: Poster for *Her Story Is*. Courtesy of Amy Merrill.



collaborative co-creation as a way to achieve reconciliation between the two countries. As a *Her Story Is* member, I co-ordinate the projects, plan meetings and look for fruitful partnerships as in the ones we are building with the *AlMutanabbi Street Starts Here Project* and the *Iraqi-American Reconciliation Project*."

New England has a reputation for being provincial, particularly in the cultural sphere. Yet while we may pride ourselves on our practical,

grassroots conservatism, the outside world is no longer outside. Undoubtedly, as *Art New England* expands its increasingly enlightened vision beyond the local to include the global, like the Brattleboro Museum when they embraced and supported Afghanistan's ArtLords, we will be seeing more from those artists and institutions who are citizens of the world on the pages of this magazine.

Cynthia Close is contributing editor for Documentary Magazine and writes regularly for *Art New England* and several other publications.

[transculturalexchange.org](http://transculturalexchange.org)