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MARJORIE VAN CURA

A Tour of the New Whitney with the Museum's Curators

ARTSY EDITORIAL

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As the Whitney moves out of its uptown Manhattan location and into the Meatpacking District, the museum's curators show us the new Renzo Piano-designed space and give us the scoop on some of their present and upcoming projects.

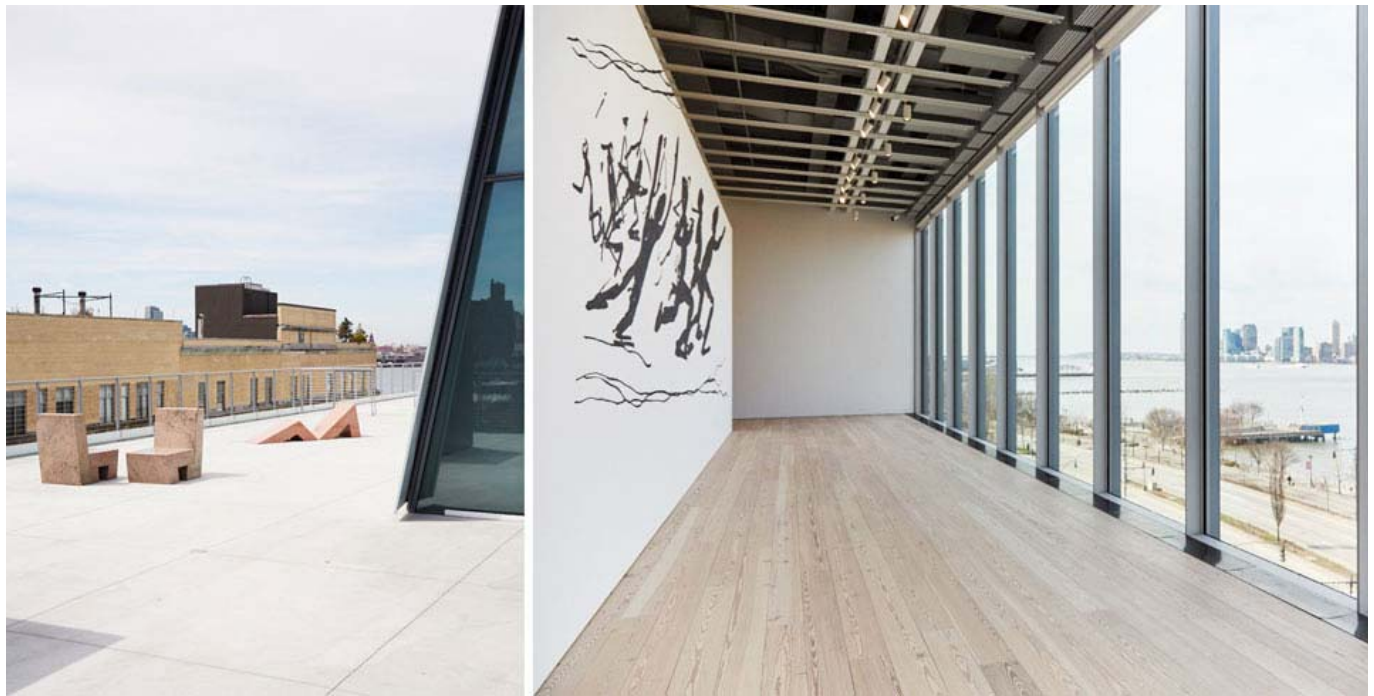
Elisabeth Sherman

Senior Curatorial Assistant | Sixth Floor Terrace



Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

“The gallery spaces allow us a level of flexibility that we had to some degree in Breuer, but that we’ll have much more of in the Piano building—the amount of column-free square footage that we have here is unprecedented. The way that everything was designed, from the ceiling grids to the flooring choices, allows us to really let artists run wild. Or, when they don’t want to, when it’s more traditional or quiet work, there are incredibly elegant, proportional spaces that respect that type of work, too. I’m particularly excited about the light, and the interaction between the galleries and the exterior, which really manifests itself in the terraces, and having this outdoor space, both for permanent sculptures and performances—and other more spontaneous activity.



Photos by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

I’m working on an exhibition of the collection of Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner, which will open this November on the sixth floor. Thea and Ethan are giving the museum around 500 works of art. They’re also giving the Pompidou in Paris about 300 works of art. Together with the Pompidou, we’re doing an exhibition and catalog documenting this gift, beginning with the very late ’70s and early ’80s—with important artists like Christopher Wool, Jeff Koons, Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman—and bringing real masterpieces into our collection. It continues up to this very moment and augments our collection of work from the 2000s in a way that really is transformative.”



Carter Foster

Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawing | Seventh Floor Galleries



Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

“Although I’m not as directly involved in it as my colleague Jay Sanders, the theater is an amazing space. We’ve never had anything like it. I’m so excited to see the performances that will happen there. We also have a works-on-paper study center—which we’ve also never had before—which means that artists and qualified researchers can look at our print, drawing, and photography collection and have access to it for the first time ever, really, in an easy way. We can store about 80% of our works-on-paper collection, and I think we have a total of about 18,000.

I was quite involved with the inaugural exhibition. Because the building is new to us, there were some unknowns. Dealing with the windows, for example. There’s natural light pouring in, which is great, but it’s not always great for works of art. We’re still figuring out how to mitigate that. We felt very strongly about showing drawings and paintings



We're doing an exhibition on a Harlem Renaissance painter, named Archibald Motley, in October. He was working in the '20s, '30s, and '40s especially—that was sort of his heyday—doing scenes of African American life in Chicago. Really fantastic, beautiful modernist paintings. That's going to be on the eighth floor, in our skylit galleries. We're very excited about that."

Christopher Y. Lew

Associate Curator | Grand Stairs, Ground Floor

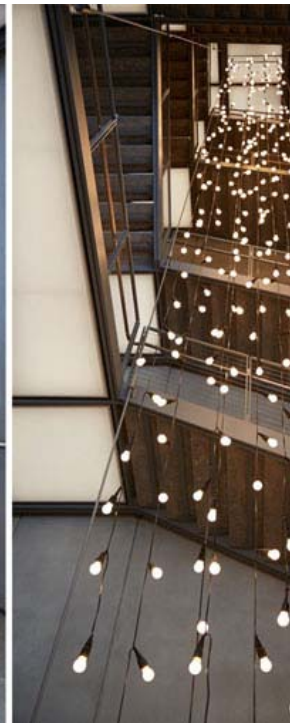


Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

"I'm really excited about how you're able to move from indoors to outdoors so seamlessly. On nearly every level, there's a way to access the outdoor terraces. When you're inside looking out, what's on the terraces almost reads as if it's inside, or vice versa. You're also able to look out into the city and have those perspectives as well. We can invite artists to use that as a challenge, and to point not only to what's in the so-called 'white cube,' but also to what's out in the world at the same time. The living artists that we're in dialogue with will be using those spaces for the first time and envisioning the possibilities. The ways that we'll learn to play with the building are going to be led by the artists that we invite to do those projects."



Jay Sanders & Celia Hartenstein

Curator and Curator of Performance; Curatorial Assistant | Theater
Projection Box, Fourth Floor

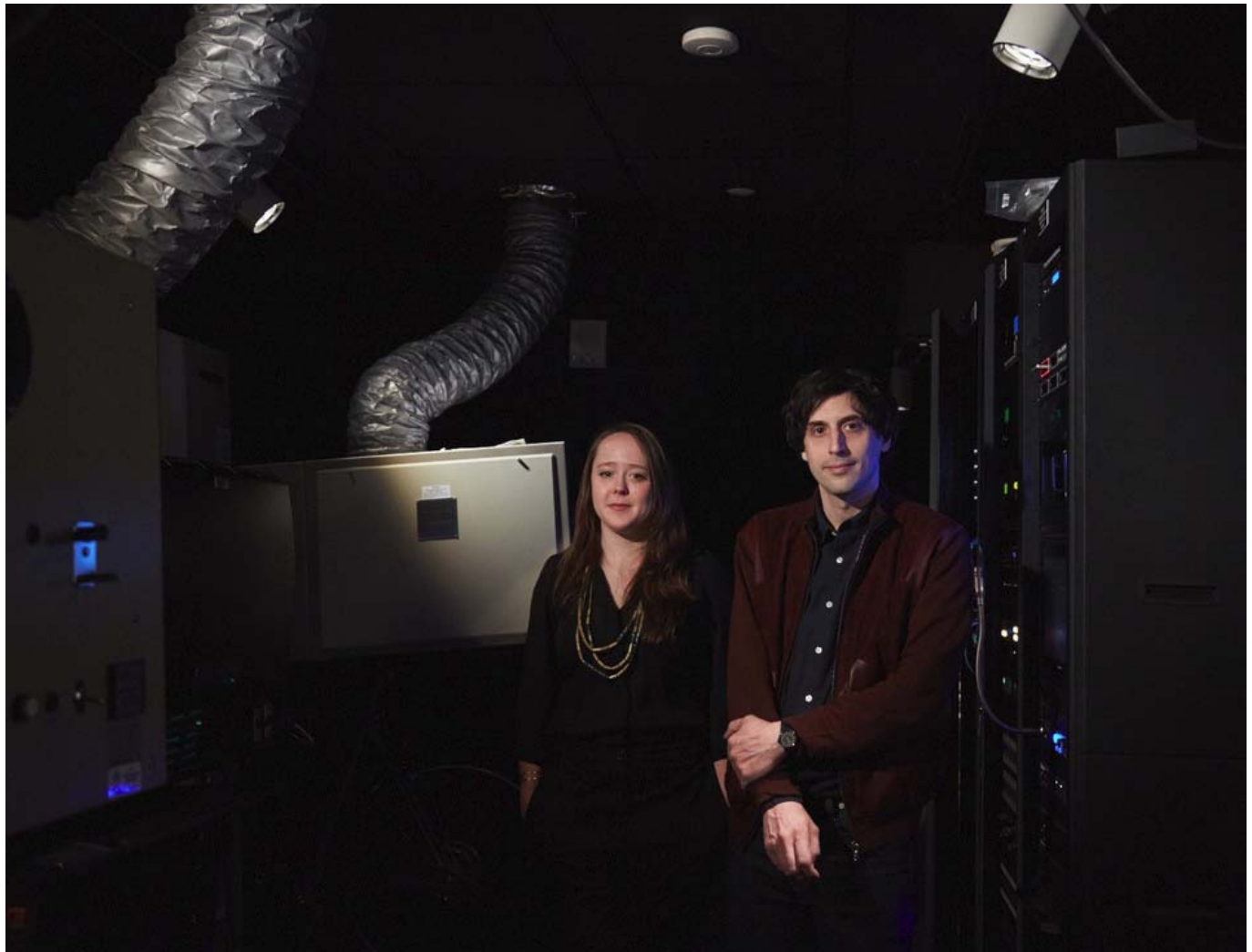


Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

“The old museum wasn’t really designed with performance in mind, so we’re really excited about this theater space. It’s the first dedicated performance space in the Whitney’s history, and as you can see it’s totally transformable depending on artists’ desires for how to use it. Part of our research the last couple of years has been studying the history and legacy of performance at the Whitney. It’s been consistently intertwined with the visual arts presentations, so that’s part of the ethos that we’ll continue here. The gallery spaces, this new series of outdoor terraces, the ‘Largo,’ the greater neighborhood—we anticipate that all those spaces will get utilized by artists.” —Jay Sanders



Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

“You can neutralize the whole space and have it be more like a gallery for people to come in and see something that might be more installation-based. But it can also accommodate the opposite end of the spectrum and be a proscenium space with frontal lighting, a curtain, a backstage, and raked seating. And then everything in between. The terraces are exciting because they connect us with the city—people can hear things from the Highline or see things outdoors. There’s a lot more opportunity for artists to speak out to the city or take influence from outdoor surroundings and bring them into the museum.

The first performance project that we’re doing is with the artist Yuji Agematsu. We commissioned him to take a portrait of the neighborhood and the changing site of the museum as it was built, as well as the Meatpacking district and the Highline and Hudson Yards area. So he walked around for over six months, starting last summer, taking photos of the street, of flowers, of the building, of fences, the water, but no people. His work will be displayed via 10 slide projectors throughout the space, mapping the city around us onto the theater. He’ll also create sound improvisations, so it will be performance too.” —Greta Hartenstein



Laura Phipps

Senior Curatorial Assistant | Fifth Floor Galleries



Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

“Seeing the first project that we’re doing with Mary Heilmann come to life really activates our imagination about what can be done with the outdoor spaces. It’s an exhibition with three components. The first is two large, bright pink vinyl panels, based on the geometry that Mary uses in her paintings, which have been installed on the side of the building. They echo the stairstep outline of the museum, which is an element that was already in Mary’s paintings. Then there are the chairs, which are also often a feature of Mary’s exhibitions, located on the terrace on the fifth floor. The other really exciting component is a film that she made in 1982, shot in this neighborhood and further south in TriBeCa. It’s the first time it has ever been seen. It is like a record of the neighborhood, and a record of how artists lived here—and the work Mary was doing at the time.

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Photo by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

My colleague Elisabeth Sherman and I also worked with the artist Michele Abeles for the billboard piece that just went up outside. The first iteration of the project was an installation of an [Alex Katz](#) painting—which was a partnership between the Highline, the Whitney, and the building developers that own the building on Horatio, TF Cornerstone. It worked out better than I think any of us could have imagined. It's a daunting project because the idea of a billboard itself has this weird history that you're working either with or against—and I think Michele did a little bit of both. She was particularly interested in those subway billboards or posters pasted up on the walls—and how they have sort of a patina. She's rethinking that in this one particular site."

—Tess Thackara

Explore the Whitney Museum's inaugural exhibition, "[America is Hard to See](#)," on view May 1–Sep. 27, 2015.