ANNE PASTERNAK

Governors' Award for Outstanding Service to Artists

PHOTO
Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, courtesy Creative Time

Anne Pasternak has accomplished great things at Creative Time not despite but because of her unconventional style. There is a lot to learn from her as a person, and as a personality. Cultural institutions have a way of creating bland leaders. In the pursuit of funding and in the belief that controversy must be avoided, directors tend to repeat the obvious, point to a party line, or seek to impress with their erudition. There are all kinds of problems: Executives who are too funny sometimes are not taken seriously; leaders who are politically active can be ponderous and self righteous; directors who are too academic can misjudge their audience's degree of interest in particular factoids in a social setting. I have great sympathy with these people. These are all problems I have experienced myself! But these people are taking themselves too seriously and being too careful. This is why speeches seem to be on the long side and why there is such turnover in cultural leadership.

My suggestion for my fellow directors would be to do what I have done—look to Anne Pasternak for an example of a person who is true to herself, never a cookie-cutter, pseudo-corporate leader. Anne proves that being an insistently idealistic leader of a cultural institution is compatible with being the most fun at a party. I have rarely seen a director who is so relaxed about being herself in the presence of her board and staff, speaking to 400 guests at the Creative Time Summit, or while being interviewed. Her laugh is infectious, and her entertaining stories are filled with a bit of hyperbole, usually of a positive nature (many people seem to be her hero). At the same time she does not dominate conversations to the exclusion of others; she is a great listener. This attitude has translated into her hiring a truly exceptional staff and letting them excel. While keeping her finger on the pulse of a slew of projects, she is not a micro-manager. And all of this has led to growth, both in scope of work, artistic complexity, depth of commitment, and public recognition for Creative Time.

Anne's lessons:
Loosen up.
Work hard. Enjoy life.
Do serious work.
Trust artists.

In terms of the prize at hand, there is no doubt that Anne deserves accolades based on her service to artists. As she has said, since it was founded in 1974, Creative Time has always been an organization based on listening to artists and trusting them to be essential contributors to society. Since she was appointed President and Artistic Director in 1994, she has consistently upped the ante, orchestrating such monumental endeavors as helping artists accomplish the *Tribute in Light* in the wake of the attacks of 9/11. Who does not remember looking up to see that sublime light sculpture for the first time? But she has also produced quieter endeavors like the essentially New York gesture of inviting artists into a sign-painting project in Coney Island. Walking along the boardwalk, one experienced art that was seamlessly integrated into the site—amplified by the occasional jolt of aesthetic recognition. In addition, she has brought Creative Time out of New York to create programs and public art adventures from New Orleans, to Denver, to Dallas and beyond. Buoyant leadership and investment in artists does not mean disorganization or a slacker attitude.

Throughout all of this time, Pasternak has kept her trust of artists on the front burner. Perhaps going home every night to her husband Mike Starn has kept her focused on the life of the artists. But mostly, it just suits her nature. She is an institution-builder at Creative Time, but also an anti-institutional personality at heart. Like the artists she supports, she is ready for an aesthetic experience, a political gesture, or straightforward social hilarity. Anne's lessons: Loosen up. Work hard. Enjoy life. Do serious work. Trust artists.

Tom Finkelpearl
Executive Director, Queens Museum of Art