



## THE WARNER MUSEUM (A)

The drumbeat from the board had turned into a migraine for the director, Sevren Darden. It had been seven years since a major New York newspaper had reviewed an exhibit at Philadelphia's Warner Museum. Some trustees were worried about the Warner's flat visitorship over the last three years. Many were puzzled and annoyed that creative efforts to attract more of Philadelphia's growing minority populations had failed. What really galled them, particularly the board chair, Peter Gaskin III, was that New York critics ignored the museum, a museum they believed was the largest and best museum of contemporary art between Washington D.C. and New York.

And the trustees had opinions about why. Mira Sofer, a long time trustee and the CEO of a Philadelphia PR firm, felt certain that the Warner, short range, needed to make major New York City media buys and, long range, design or attract at least one special exhibit a year that would be chosen deliberately to draw New York critics' attention. Generally, the board's feeling was that the marketing budget could be rethought. Since the campaign to attract minorities was a failure, its funding could be reallocated to help garner greater New York recognition. With respect to Philadelphia audiences, a majority of trustees, though not Sofer, felt it didn't seem to matter how much money was spent on promotion because the visitorship remained constant. Therefore marketing funds earmarked for increasing Philadelphia region attendance could be reduced.

Darden was able to head off moves by the trustees to form a board committee that would review curatorial proposals for future exhibits. Darden also politely but firmly declined Mira Sofer's offer of her own services, pro bono, to help the Warner's marketing department break out of its flat lined attendance. The trustees still wanted to see overall marketing costs reduced.

Darden's new marketing director, Jonathan Rosen, was a talented young Penn grad who understood that the Warner's economic stability was Philadelphians' paid admission revenue. Darden agreed with Rosen. Together, they knew from their last evaluation of the marketing strategy that things were actually worse than the board thought. If the visitorship was discounted by the number of repeat visitations, the number of individuals supporting the Warner was actually declining. Since Philadelphia's population was increasing, the Warner was losing market share even faster. Nevertheless, Darden knew he had a major political problem with the board. Trustees needed New York media to confer approval on the worthiness of the Warner and, in so doing, the value of board members' continued financial involvement with the museum. Darden's worst nightmare was that the board would reach for the easiest New York media story, that Darden had been replaced by one of New York's celebrity museum directors and he could see the story's lead, "...Warner to become an exciting place once again."

Darden asked Rosen to have someone go over all the major New York critics' reviews of contemporary art exhibits in the last four years to see whether there were any patterns, special interests and the like. In cases in which exhibits in non New York venues received favorable reviews, Rosen was to run a check on whether such museums had made major media buys in the New York area prior to the review. What, if any, were the special angles in the media coverage, e.g., the surprising size of the public turn-out, some unanticipated tie in with a book or movie, the opening exhibit in a major new addition? Rosen suggested that one of his two staff should also look into whether New York contemporary art reviews followed or preceded trends online, such as heavy activity on popular Internet sites for art consumers.

Darden clearly felt that if the Warner didn't receive attention in New York media within three to six months, he might not be around long enough to lead the important planning required for the Warner to break out of its attendance malaise. He was willing for the time being to set aside special efforts to attract minorities, finding some comfort in a recent reputable report that concluded completion of a college degree was the only significant variable distinguishing art museum going minorities from those who were not.

Darden asked Rosen himself to develop a plan for the Warner that would either recommend changes in what it was doing or make what it was doing more interesting to its Philadelphia public. Furthermore, Darden told Rosen to keep his efforts confidential until they had had time to solve the board's need for greater New York media attention. Rosen started work on the project by himself, dictating weekly progress memos to Darden. Among other things, he was beginning to think that the involvement of the public in expressing preferences for exhibits was one of the ways forward. A history museum in a neighboring state had begun to do this with extremely favorable results in both visitorship and the press.

Because Rosen had been handed this "stealth" project by Darden, he had not involved Sharon McFarland, a key member of the marketing team, someone who had previously been a consultant to several Philadelphia museums. Nor had Rosen explained why McFarland was not being involved. McFarland had been at the Warner for five years, was a close friend of two curators and was on a first-name basis with several reporters regularly assigned to Philadelphia's museum beat. McFarland felt deeply hurt by being excluded from this project by her young boss who had less than a year's experience at the Warner. The next time she joined one of her curator friends for a drink, she expressed her discontent at having been marginalized by "the new kid." She added that Rosen's assistant had explained that the project was supposed to be confidential, "...maybe because outsiders are going to have a say in choosing artists to exhibit."

Two days later, a reporter from *The Philadelphia Daily News* requested an interview with Darden, saying that the paper was prepared to publish a story about the Warner's declining visitor numbers, "Would he like to comment?" Darden agreed to the interview and used it to demonstrate that "...the numbers were not declining." While confirming that the Warner was examining ways to serve Philadelphia and the region better, he added that this was something every well led institution should review on a regular basis. He denied that the project was a secret. He denied that the public was going to have a vote on the selection of future exhibits. He denied that art critics were going to be involved in the Warner's five-year exhibit planning process.

Darden felt that he had done pretty well in putting a positive spin on what were after all, just rumors about the Warner's plans. Immediately after the interview, Darden called Peter Gaskin to alert him that a *Daily News* article seemed to be in the works. Gaskin thanked Darden for the heads-up, hung up and asked his assistant to get Mira Sofer on the phone.

Two days later, *The Philadelphia Daily News* broke the story with the headline, "*The Warner – More and More for Fewer and Fewer.*" The story accurately pointed out that fewer Philadelphians were visiting the Warner – although doing so more often. The story quoted two board members who said they knew nothing of the marketing project, giving credence to the perception of its secrecy. Finally, the story carried quotes from two curators expressing outrage that future exhibits might be determined by Internet surveys.

A week later, Gaskin and Darden met for lunch in one of the Pyramid Club's private dining rooms. It was, as they say, a terminal conversation. Darden's resignation was announced in the next day's *Philadelphia Inquirer*, together with the announcement of the board's gratitude that Mira Sofer had agreed to lead the museum until a successor to Sevrin Darden could be put in place.

## WARNER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

**Fiscal Year 2004-2005**

### Section 8: Marketing, Public Relations and Ephemera Publications

<b>By Function</b>	<b>Amount in Thousands</b>	<b>% Total for Unit</b>
Personnel		
Salaries (4FTEs)	\$175	
Benefits	\$53	
Total	\$228	23.3%
Media Buys	\$170	17.4%
Direct Mail	\$80	8.2%
Website	\$290	29.7%
Billboards, Banners, Posters, etc.	\$65	6.6%
Marketing Events	\$120	12.3%
Research, Visitor Evaluations, etc.*	\$25	2.6%
*one-time		
Total	\$978	

### **By Project (excludes Personnel expenses)**

Minority Outreach**		
**\$50K offset by a grant	\$150	15.3%
Increasing Philly Metro Visitorship	\$225	23.0%
Special Exhibits	\$485	49.5%
Membership Drive	\$120	12.2%
Total	\$978	