

Transcript of Interview with Catherine Huff by Tory Schendel Cox

Interviewee: Catherine Huff

Interviewer: Tory Schendel Cox

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Location (Interviewee): Atlanta, Georgia

Location (Interviewer): Evansville, Indiana

Abstract: In response to COVID-19, the Evansville Museum of Arts, History and Science launched the mini-series, "Cultural Insights: Interviews in the Creative Sector," to highlight colleagues and professionals working in the same or similar field of museum professionals.

Catherine Huff, Coordinator of Exhibitions and Collections, High Museum

Tory Schendel Cox 00:00

Hi, my name is Tory Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia G. Shroeder curator at the Evansville Museum. And today we have Catherine Huff on our telecast. Catherine, thank you for your time. I'm going to hit it off to you.

Catherine Huff 00:09

Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be talking with you today. I'm, as you know, I'm originally from Evansville, Indiana. Now I'm located in Atlanta, Georgia. But it's always such a pleasure to talk with you and to be able to work with the Evansville Museum of Arts, the first museum I knew growing up, and I think it's fantastic. Yeah. So,

Tory Schendel Cox 00:30

Thank you, I appreciate it.

Catherine Huff 00:33

A little bit about me, I am currently in Atlanta, Georgia. I work with the High Museum of Art. It's the biggest- it's the leading art museum in the southeast. We have a really, really great big collection of thousands of objects. And I've been there actually, a little bit over three years. And over time, my positions have changed. I was really lucky to get a position there right out of college with an art history degree, which is like the rarest thing apparently.

Tory Schendel Cox 01:04

Yeah [laughing]

Catherine Huff 01:06

Tori, you know.

Tory Schendel Cox 01:07

Yeah [laughing]

Catherine Huff 01:10

I started there working with the curator of American Art, her name is Dr. Stephanie Hight. And I was the curatorial assistant in the historical American department. So that is pretty much from the beginning of the United States until around 1940. That's kind of where we call it a quits and switch over to modern and contemporary art. And then about a year into that position, I was really lucky because I got matched with another curator. And this time it was with European art. And her name is Dr. Claudia Ionica. And so, I did that gig for a little over three years. And then as of recently, I decided to change things up just a little bit, and I switched to the exhibitions department. So now I'm the coordinator of collections and exhibitions. So instead of just working with two curators and American European art, I'm actually working with all of our different curatorial departments at the High Museum. And those include photography, folk and self-taught, which is something that's really important in the south and something that we love to show off to our audience. We have modern and contemporary, we have decorative arts, we have- and we have African art, I think I covered it all. So, it's been really exciting. I was actually starting this position March 16th. However, this horrible pandemic took over, and I was actually starting from home. So, it's been a little bit tricky, but my museum has been doing a really great job of just working mobilely and just doing the best that we can with the resources that we have. And Tori, I don't know how it's been for Evansville Museum, maybe you can tell me a little bit about your experience.

Tory Schendel Cox 02:54

Yeah, absolutely. Um, luckily, I think you can relate to this, the curatorial realm, we always have something. The work never ends. [laughs] So, whether I'm in front of my computer, or at my office, or in front of my computer at home, there really isn't too much of a differentiation. However, one thing that makes me really sad about all this is you don't get to work with the physical objects.

Catherine Huff 03:19

Yeah, definitely. That's something I think about so much because I think so much of our passion drives us to want to just be around these objects all the time. It's something that always keeps us inspired to go and actually walk in the gallery spaces, and especially to see our public enjoying the works that we put out. I mean, all the work that we do is for our audience. So, I think that's been a really challenging part of this, for me is just not actually being able to see the tangible, physical things that we typically do. However, I think, however difficult the situation has been, it's been really interesting to see how we can connect with audiences in different ways. Our social media team at the High Museum has been doing a fantastic job of continuing to churn out different materials on Instagram, on Facebook, on our website; we have a wonderful blog. And it's actually been really wonderful. I mean, people obviously are stuck in their homes, there's not much else to do other than occasionally maybe go for a little walk outside. But otherwise, you're typically on your phone or your computer. So, people have really been enjoying the things that we are putting out there. Yeah, it's great.

Tory Schendel Cox 04:35

Absolutely. And that works for us too. It's- so what's cool is we do have our social media person. I get to help out a little bit and with posting and doing a few things too. So it's a huge learning curve for me because I'm dangerous with it, but nowhere near on the professional stance. But what's also neat about that is you get to see the numbers, and you get to see the interactions, impressions that gives you a better understanding of what's good content and what's not a good content? And then how many people are actually engaged. So we've been consistently about 12,000 engagements on our museum page, at least every week, so...

Catherine Huff 05:13

You think that it's gone up a lot more than usual?

Tory Schendel Cox 05:17

Yeah, we do. We've always had about that 12,000 range, but I'm seeing it spike up a little bit more and more activity. Like, when I was looking at our Instagram page, they'd be over 100 hits every week. So, I'm really happy for that. Faith has done a fantastic job to really give our Instagram page a new breath of life. It showed with the numbers.

Catherine Huff 05:37

Great. Well, that's good news. I'm glad to hear that.

Tory Schendel Cox 05:40

Mhm. Out of curiosity, so now that you are the head of the exhibitions, what does that look like right now from home? Like, what type of tasks are you doing? Are you looking at exhibition schedules? Can you even look at exhibition schedules? Because is money going to be an issue moving forward when you reopen? Or like, can you tell me a little bit about that?

Catherine Huff 05:59

Sure. Um, so as I mentioned, prior to this, it's been really difficult to try to learn to work from home. And I think everybody's in the same boat and can agree it's distracting. I don't have kids or anything like that, but I constantly am wanting to do other things, I get really distracted really easily. So, for me, to just sit down and work from the computer, again, not with tangible objects, not with my colleagues sitting around me who I've always enjoyed working with so much. It's definitely been a challenge. However, for the High Museum, we're kind of saying internally, this has been, I don't want to say a blessing in disguise. I don't think that's really the right term. But about a year ago, we actually had a major shutdown of all of our technology, it was a huge, huge fiasco. And we actually went a couple months without having things like TMS, the museum system, which is like our database, all of our files that we have internally online, we didn't have access to. So, over this past year, yeah, it was crazy. Over this past year, we've been working really hard to get everything kind of in the cloud. And making it more accessible to access through Outlook and SharePoint, things like that. So, when this pandemic hit,

and we were all working from home, we realized that it wasn't as tragic as it could be on the work front, because we still had access to all of our files, we had really good modes of just working through our computers already. So, we've been really lucky with that. I still have access to the database. So, if I need to do database entry, or take a look at an object, we can do that. And the same with exhibition schedules, we have access to everything we've been working on. So, it's actually really fantastic, in that regard. The challenge is that everything's moving and changing. We keep using the word 'uncertain' all the time in the world right now. It's a scary word. But for museums, we're definitely like, "Okay, this is something we've never seen before. Um, how can we best prepare for the months coming?" You know, we keep getting different news, too, we hear that some museums are closed 'till June, 'till July. Apparently, in Atlanta, the peak of this pandemic is supposed to hit the end of April. But then who knows how long we're going to be, you know, stuck inside or able to even go to work. So, we have tentative plans for exhibitions. And of course, there's things that have had to be cancelled or shifted, which is really sad for us, you know, and museums, you know, Tori, we spend maybe four to five years prepping for an exhibition sometimes. And to see everything kind of just go down the drain, it's so disheartening. But on the flip side, we're doing our best to just mitigate things and change them and make them work and make them a little bit more flexible. And maybe they're going to be all the better for that, who knows. So I think right now, we're just trying to be flexible. We're not trying to panic too much. Fortunately, we do work in a world that it can be flexible, and everybody else is kind of in the same boat. So we've been working with the Modern Art, the Modern and Contemporary Museum in LA and Chicago, we've been working with some places in New York City, they're all in the same boat. All of the schedules are on hold. So, I mean, it's okay because we're just going to start back where we can, everybody's kind of going to be in the same boat, and we'll go from there and make the best of it.

Tory Schendel Cox 09:52

That is the optimistic approach, which is fantastic. And that's the right attitude to have because like you said, it is everybody. And let's you know you're over the hump of that disheartening aspects. You put in so much time and effort to design your curatorial calendar, just so you know, they're not [unintelligible]

Catherine Huff 10:06

Exactly. It's a difficult process to begin with. So, [laughs] I- I'm still optimistic, though. I mean, everybody in this field, we already know how to be flexible. And we already know to work with less. And that's the arts. So I have no doubt in my mind that we're going to persevere. And we're going to come out of this on the other end, you know, with a new toolkit, and we're going to know how to do things differently. And that's going to make us all stronger.

Tory Schendel Cox 10:38

So out of curiosity, speaking that toolkit, has your museum discussed about making a physical COVID-19 exhibition for reflection and memorialization?

Catherine Huff 10:47

Um, I don't think we've gotten to that point yet. I think we're still, even individually, trying to just kind of work through this moment in history and kind of, like I said, do the mitigation plans first. I don't think that's out of the question necessarily, in the future, and I'm sure a lot of different arts institutions are going to start reflecting on this moment. Just talking with artists individually, you know, in Atlanta, they're saying, this is an awful time for them. Of course, they're out of money, they're out of different jobs, but they're going to be creating, you know, and that's something we say in art all the time, the best art is created in times of hardship. And it's unfortunate that it's happening. I don't wish this to happen to get more art out of it. But it is the reality. And we'll see what is created and what comes. I think my biggest concern, of course, is funding. All- and we're individually taking hits, but especially as arts institutions, we're going to be taking major hits from this. And this is where we're really going to be depending on generosity, and from our audiences, from the city, from people that typically support museums, and then people that maybe otherwise have not supported museums in the past. We're really gonna have to make pushes and really try to encourage people to support institutions like the High Museum, like the Evansville Museum, because we're always there to do things for the public. And without places like us, it's- it's just such a shame. So...

Tory Schendel Cox 12:30

Yeah, you know, cultural institutions, for sure.

Catherine Huff 12:33

Exactly. One thing I've been saying a lot, and I think this kind of rotates a lot in the art world. But what would we be entertained with right now, if it weren't for art? We're all watching Netflix, right now. We're all doing things online. So much of that is created from artists and filmmakers, and people generating these really creative things. So, it's so important to support the arts, I can't understate that enough.

Tory Schendel Cox 13:00

Agreed, because as of right now, just to reiterate a little bit more people want virtual exhibitions, they want content, they want free concerts, they want all these opportunities. And that's where I just hope that there's some reflection of again, these are all arts. It's not worthless, it's not a waste of time. There's a reason why it's been around as long as humans have been around too. I won't get into a history lesson of that, but nonetheless [inaudible]

Catherine Huff 13:28

Let's start doing art history lessons.

Tory Schendel Cox 13:31

That'd be good. [laughs] But there's something that impacts the soul, and it's the human existence. I mean, it's a visual time capsule, if you will, and this pandemic will turn into one too. But I just hope that there's a little bit more reverence when it comes to the arts with that thought process because that's what

everyone's turning to now for comfort. I mean, you can't go outside, what do you do? That's why I'm grateful I have all these paintings back here from local artists [laughter]

Catherine Huff 13:57

[unintelligible] on to look at.

Tory Schendel Cox 14:00

[laughs] I couldn't imagine being in quarantine with nothing beautiful to look at.

Catherine Huff 14:04

Yeah, art it- that's the thing that I always say about art too. It takes it- it takes us outside of ourselves even just for one minute when you're looking at a painting or a film or something like that. So, I'm, you know, I'm on the side of our time, easy when I'm always a cheerleader. I'm like, come on.

Tory Schendel Cox 14:26

Well, Catherine, is there anything else you'd like to share with our viewers today?

Catherine Huff 14:28

I think I need to share what we're all sharing. Wash your hands. Stay inside as much as possible to protect everybody, your loved ones, your friends. And please, please, please continue to support places like the Evansville Museum. It's so important to Evansville. And I'm sure that they are looking forward to seeing everybody back as soon as possible.

Tory Schendel Cox 14:55

Absolutely. Well Catherine, thank you so much for your time and don't be a stranger. We hope to see you in the Crescent City here soon.

Catherine Huff 15:02

I'll be back soon.

Tory Schendel Cox 15:04

Bye.

Catherine Huff 15:05

Bye.