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Profile - The Noguchi Museum

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Photo Credit: Clara Jauquet



Profiles

The Noguchi Museum

Few not-for-profit cultural or historic sites can be traced through a single thread, from a heritage in an unlikely industrial setting in Queens; its conversion to workspace for the creation, staging, and deployment of art throughout the world; its rededication by the living artist as a museum space while still a working gallery; and ultimately its preservation as a permanent cultural destination. At the **Noguchi Museum**, members and visitors can appreciate artist **Isamu Noguchi's** full body of work in many media, enjoy the tranquility of galleries and gardens in a profoundly close-by urban setting, and understand the context in which that art was inspired and created over more than half a century. **Professor James Hagy**, Director of The Rooftops Project, explores the life and legacy of Japanese-American artist **Isamu Noguchi** with **Amy Hau**, The Noguchi Museum's Director of Administration and External Affairs.

Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) worked in a full range of media from two- and three-dimensional art, to architectural models and stage design, to furniture and lamps, including his signature glass-topped Noguchi Table and his paper lamps known as Akari Light Sculptures. He enjoyed commissions for installed sculptures at important sites throughout the world, including his stone garden at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. He worked from studios in Queens, New York, and on the Japanese island of Shikoku. Toward the end of his career, he formed the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and founded the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City as well as preserving his studio in Japan. More information on the artist and the Museum can be found at

www.noguchi.org and in The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, written in his own voice and published by Harry N. Abrams Inc.

RTP: You have been here for a while [smiling].

Amy: I have been at the Noguchi Museum since 1986. I first came to the Museum as Noguchi's assistant. He had just opened the Museum in 1985. I arrived the year after. Back in the day it was still very much a studio setting. His office here was primarily his design office, where he worked on a lot of his public projects.

He had established a foundation to support the Museum, which opened in 1985. He remained the foundation's chairman for a few years before he passed away. Unlike any other artist's foundation at the time, and even to this day, it did not give grants. He was not in that position, to create a grant-issuing foundation. The goal was to see to this facility and to make sure that it was open to the public. Those goals were very modest at first, writing grants to the City. And all along the City was very generous in its support to the Museum. It was very, very organic in nature how the foundation grew.

At the time I came in, he was just putting together his thoughts on the collection in a catalog that he had written for the Museum. I saw the tail end of that process through with him. It was a learning experience to read his thoughts about every single object in the collection on view. They were not necessarily descriptive of the work or the process of making the art. They could be philosophical, they could be very playful, very witty. It might be a sentence, or maybe a paragraph, recalling a time when he did a particular process. So it gave insight into the way he thought.

RTP: When he first came to the neighborhood, it wasn't originally with the idea of a museum. In a way, he came to that idea later, if not also somewhat reluctantly?

Amy: What is now the Museum was his studio for many years, before he opened it to the public. From 1961 to the mid-1970s, he had a studio practice



across the street and outgrew that space. That is why he purchased what is now the main Museum building. He moved everything into this building as a showroom for many years. So for him, when it came time to create that museum setting, it was natural for him to just be here. This was where he started, and where he worked. It was working space and more or less a showroom for a long time.

RTP: Buyers would come here to buy art.

Amy: Yes, but he also had dealers. It was really a place to temporarily house works that were traveling for exhibitions, or finishing works, for sites around the world, for which he created models. Because he wasn't an architect, and he wasn't a draftsman, he liked working in three-dimensional models, where he can study and adjust the scales of elements in a design. He needed a large space to lay the models out. It was really a thinking studio.

RTP: In these ways, both in the materials used and the scale of them, this building and the neighborhood were particularly suited to his work?

Amy: Yes. He had an appreciation not just for the building itself, but the location. There were a lot of light industry/manufacturing companies nearby. They were the source of materials for him. There were stone yards, foundries, metal workers. He found all this craftsmanship and the material goods very handy. He was in the studio all the time, so he could work all day and all night sometimes, and no one really made a fuss about noise or anything. It was very quiet back in those days.

In the two years following my arrival, before he passed, it was really an insane amount of work trying to track his whereabouts all the time. He traveled a lot. New York was his home base. He went back to his studio in Japan at least three times a year, if not more, and would come back with photo documentation of the work in process there.

In between the studio visits and stopping in New York, he would take a vacation here, or accept an award, or check in on a public work project somewhere, whether it was Miami or going back to UNESCO to inspect a project in Paris. He was always working, always, always working. To this day I run into neighbors who used to see him coming in and out of the place, and they remark on how he was always in a thinking mode. They would just watch him walk and pace or think and not go up to him and disturb him. It must have been very interesting back then.

RTP: As it turned out, this was also a period in which you gained insights into Noguchi, his work, and his vision for the Museum that would inform the next 25 or more years of the organization in a very meaningful way?

Amy: Absolutely. While Isamu was still alive, I had the opportunity to work not only with Noguchi but with his business manager. So I knew all the workings of his business as well as the foundation. So it was a very natural fit for me to jump into the role, help the estate, and also see to the running of the foundation at the time.

After his passing, I stayed on to work with the estate attorneys and inventoried everything. In addition to works on view, there was a lot that was not on view. We had to close up his apartment in town and consolidate everything. That took years. We were taking inventory for the record of all of the works

around the world that he had been working on and in the various studios. In addition to Japan, he also had a small set-up in a studio in Italy. So it was a lot of coordinated effort among different staff members and working with the attorneys.

Then it just kept rolling on. We started mounting exhibitions, and recognizing that there was a lot in the holdings. The best way to share that was traveling exhibitions, to share the work in different countries. He worked in so many countries, and he didn't always have representation in all these different places. So it was wonderful, it was really an incredible journey up to now. It is still fun.

RTP: The piece of land we are on here at the museum is a very familiar geometric shape, but not a common shape for a property.

Amy: It is quite odd.

RTP: It is a triangle.

Amy: It is a triangle. We are so off the grid in that way. There is part of the grid that starts elsewhere in Queens, but by the time you get here along the waterfront, because of the topography and the water, blocks are cut off in the strangest of places. You may have half a block with rhomboids and other weird pieces of property.

RTP: What was the original brick building used for?

Amy: The main, red brick portion of the Museum building was on the site when Noguchi purchased it. It was originally built in 1924. It was originally a photo-engraving ink factory. At the time, there were a lot of newspaper presses out here. Paper and inks and all the different materials were needed.

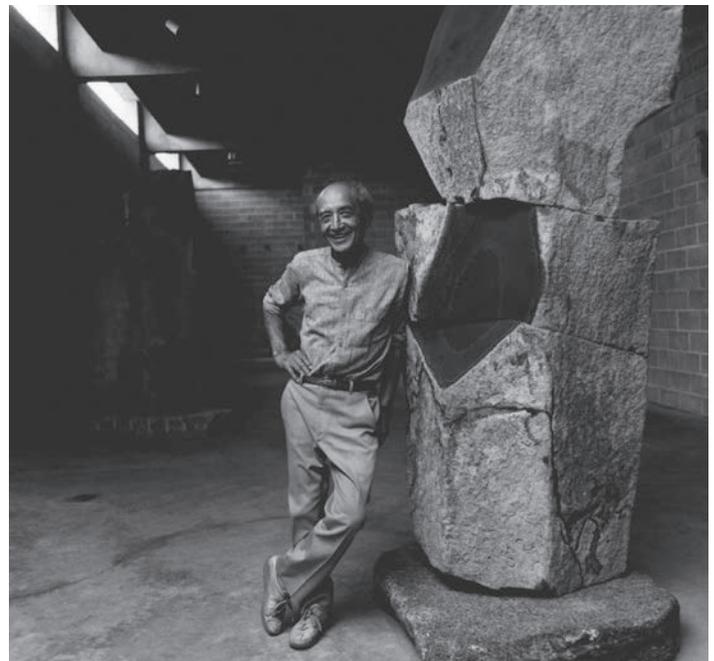


Photo Credit: Shigeo Anzai



RTP: Noguchi added a new expansion to the original building?

Amy: Yes. The portion of the property that is occupied today with the modern extension was a gas station. He purchased the gas station that was here, and designed it to fit with the original red brick.

Noguchi saw the opportunity, with the triangular shape, when he was putting together the floor plan and thinking out the museum. Like many different projects that he did, he would just design a space and explore the possibility of going further. He took it upon himself to think about the whole block, which is the triangle. He was fascinated by that. So the materials on the outside of the expansion are concrete, very different from the rest of the building.

Within the property he created the sculpture garden, too, which is unique. From Vernon Boulevard you see this austere, two-story, brick and concrete building and you have no idea....

RTP: It's an industrial area.

Amy: Very industrial.

RTP: And the garden is walled, entered from within the Museum.

Amy: Exactly. You have to access it through the museum. Even the walls surrounding the garden are very austere. A lot of people might miss it. But once they take the time, the surprise, the awe of seeing a sculpture garden, is a delight. I think Noguchi played off that element of surprise very well. He was intrigued with delighting people in that way. It is all about the discovery. People come back and show friends what is, in a way, this secret garden.

RTP: Do you have members who come regularly specifically to visit the garden?

Amy: We have neighbors who come just to sit in the garden. I think of this as everybody's back yard in a way.

RTP: For people who haven't been here before, you have exterior space (the garden), interior space, the galleries, and then this hybrid space, a gallery that is not enclosed but is covered.

Amy: The gallery right below us, the indoor/outdoor gallery. That was a Noguchi special treatment. [laughter]. Again, this whole entire structure was an add-on in the late 1970s or early 1980s, designed and built by Noguchi.

The collection that he put on view downstairs, right below us in the indoor/outdoor space, is basically the first gallery that you encounter coming in through the entrance. At the time, these basalt works created in his studio in Japan, were the latest body of his career. He wanted the visitor to encounter them in a similar setting, as much as possible, to how he worked in Japan. The studio in Japan where he practiced largely was an outdoor garden, ringed by a stone wall. He would carve out there directly on these large-scale basalts. When he brought them here for installation in the early 1980s, he thought of creating a space that would mimic their having that connection to nature. He wanted his work to "commune" with nature the way they did in Japan.

We cover and winterize a lot of our works in that space, which are exposed to the elements. They remind me of elaborate, fabric tent structures. I see that now at Versailles and lots of different gardens, where they intensely wrap their outdoor sculptures for the winter.

RTP: Out the window from the upstairs gallery of the Museum extension, we look onto a stand of trees in another small garden space.

Amy: These are beautiful birch trees. When Noguchi came to design the museum space, the beautiful sculpture garden where we have lots of plantings was a junk yard. He worked with local landscape designers. They were very much partners with Noguchi in helping him select the species that would be successful in this climate and would grow into a beautiful garden.

The garden itself is gorgeous, of course, but Noguchi planted things in different places. He thought of this little garden at the corner of Vernon and 33rd Road with the birches that were added. It pokes out of this funny corner, right? This is now 25 years ago, maybe more, perhaps 30 years ago. When they were planted, they were five or six feet tall. It has taken this long not only to reach this height, but for the full foliage to emerge. Now they are up to the second or third story. In the summertime, the leaves of the birches create this canopy, not only draping the outside, but creating a natural screen for this window we are looking out.

I never had the opportunity to talk to him about whether he planned this, about whether he knew that they would grow this tall and would create this canopy and suggest that there is life inside the museum walls, and that when you are up here inside the gallery, looking out, that it would create this green screen. It evokes the idea of Japanese gardens and traditional Japanese techniques in creating spaces of discovery. Here he had the genius to create a natural screen....

RTP: There is a certain Japanese minimalism in these, too. It is not overdone. There are a couple of plantings, and they speak for themselves.

Amy: There is a design principle in Japanese called wabi-sabi. The idea is to juxtapose these ideas in such a minimal way and have the greatest impact.

RTP: Like ikebana?

Amy: Exactly. That whole entire art form comes out of that wabi-sabi principle.

RTP: While we are looking out the window, in the distance across Vernon Boulevard we can just see a large-box retailer. You mentioned a thought about the time that property first became available.

Amy: Yes. It was very short-lived. The original property owners had an incredible metal distribution business for many years. There was an opportunity for Noguchi to purchase not just the building, but the entire site. I remember talking to Noguchi about it. "Here is this opportunity, maybe you should consider it." And he said, "Oh, I don't need that much space...."

RTP: And the property includes the waterfront, too.



Amy: Yes. It is right on the waterfront. And I wish now, reflecting on those days, that we could have pushed him a little harder. It would have been something to be able to connect Rainey Park and Socrates Sculpture Park down the street. It would have been one expanse of waterfront. I am sure Isamu could have designed that to the hilt. It is too bad.

RTP: As time and funds allowed, you have made major improvements to the property in support of the Museum's mission. How were those conceived?

Amy: When Noguchi created the museum, he basically didn't do much to make it comfortable, I have to say. [laughter]. His studio, his loft, had very little treatment in terms of accessibility or comforts. I remember years ago, when the museum was first opened, it was only open April through November, because it was absolutely freezing cold in the galleries. There was no heat. Summers were awful, because it was so hot and there was no HVAC, right? So this went on for many years, after Noguchi passed away.

RTP: Did that affect your staffing model?

Amy: A little bit, of course. But even though we were closed to the public during those winter months in the early years, we were still here.

RTP: This is also really a staging point for Noguchi's works around the world. Other museums certainly lend objects to other exhibits, but may not be as constantly active as the Noguchi Museum in conceiving, preparing, and sending works around the world as a central part of their mission.

Amy: Yes, we worked year round. We had to come out, coordinate the exhibitions, and maintain the collections.

RTP: What other physical limitations did you hope to address?

Amy: We wanted to make the changes necessary to enable visitors to see the garden in the four seasons. That was very important for us. When we were closed, visitors thought we were gone. But in fact, we on the Museum staff got to see the garden in the rain and the snow. It seemed like a shame that we couldn't share that with the public.

We also were kind of stumped with storage issues here for many years. We started in the late 1990s to really sit down and think about a master plan. How could we provide service to our audience and assure the safety of the works for the future?

We are a block away from the East River, and we sit in this very precarious position with the water table. So for years every time it would rain half an inch, it would run right into the basement. It was awful. We didn't have a usable space. And we certainly didn't feel it would be good for the work.

RTP: It hadn't bothered Noguchi?

Amy: It didn't bother him, because he was always able to move things around or change things. And he was not concerned about that at the time. But it was his work. It didn't impact him the same way. It was a different practice. After his passing, we are the stewards of this collection. We have to preserve it, keep the works in the best light, assure that they are protected. We needed to do something about the water table issue here.



Photo Credit: thio



The Board came together. It was such an incredible effort. They now have this huge building to think about, not just for the visitors but for the collection. The Museum hired a master plan architect to sit down with us. The architect's team was very much a partner in this. It is more a restoration job than a renovation job, because you are really looking at how to bring life back into an older building.

It took years to make the plans for what really needed to be done and to do the fund-raising. Finally, after a long period of planning, we decided that the whole entire block needed treatment. For years before that, we were doing patchwork. Solving a problem here, solving a problem there. But it was not holistic in approach. By the time this repair was done, something else went wrong there. It requires really big thinking and long-term planning. It is not just coming in and doing a simple repair.

So, in 2000, we closed. We moved out of the museum entirely and were off-site for about two-and-a-half years. We completely bugged out of here. We were afraid that we would lose that momentum because we had built up a really nice audience attendance. It was just a shame that we had to do it, but it needed to be done.

RTP: I suppose this has its advantages from a visitor perspective in a way, too? I was in Barcelona several weeks ago. We went to a major museum of the works of a single living artist. Although they were open, they said "Well, I don't know if you want to buy a ticket. Nine of the 11 galleries are closed for renovations." So in fifteen minutes you had done what you could do, there were perhaps nine objects. Trying to remain open can also be a challenge.

Amy: I just came back from Italy and it was the same thing. Every single gallery was getting renovated. But inevitably, you have to take on those restoration projects, if you care about the history.

RTP: Where did you go when the Noguchi Museum closed?

Amy: We were in Sunnyside for about two-and-a-half years.

RTP: In leased space?

Amy: In leased space. It was much smaller. It was basically an office and then one large gallery. But we had to do it.

RTP: When you would come to this property during that time, was there a sign referring you to Sunnyside?

Amy: Yes. [laughter].

RTP: A big sign.

Amy: Yes, a big sign. And lots of scaffolding. But when you turned around off Broadway, you knew that you were lost, because it wasn't here.

RTP: What was the scope of work?

Amy: We had to absolutely retrofit the whole property. Every single art object was either in storage, or came with us, or was traveling. The footprint in the modern extension is basically the same—galleries 9 and 10. But the entire original brick building was redone. We went from the second floor all the way down to the basement. We worked with architects and all the engineers, saying, "You have to preserve the space the way Noguchi intended it." We didn't want to sanitize it, we didn't want to throw up walls and create all these systems. We wanted to leave it the way Noguchi had intended it. The question was how to do it.

We may never get LEED. But we were thinking about ways of minimally impacting the visual. We had great teams working and thinking about all these issues with us, and solved a lot of it. Our facilities manager was on site overseeing every single aspect of the work.

We added an HVAC system. We were able to add in an elevator. We didn't have that prior to 2004. We addressed other accessibility issues. We sat down with the City and said, "These are all the things we need: we need storage, we need dry space, we need to add some systems to the building." We really worked with the City to figure out and take the time necessary to do this work right, because we don't want to do it again. Once is enough, right? The City was very supportive, and helped us think out how we were going to bring the building up to code, have accessibility, install a ramp and the elevator and other issues that needed to be taken care of.

RTP: I think that is an important point, too. Many not-for-profits, because they have limited funds, may think of the government as an enforcer. So they fear, understandably, that code upgrades or accessibility may be threats to the organization because of the cost, even if they celebrate accessibility as a principle. But in this case it was a collaborative process.

Amy: I think it was very collaborative. That collaboration with the City meant that they saw the value in helping all of us. The City's support of that first phase of the project was \$3.2 million. We financed the rest, but it was a major undertaking. We couldn't have done it without the help of the City.

So that was our first phase. It was 2004 when we moved back in. It really took time to get people back here. There was some confusion: we were in Sunnyside and then we were back here. That was about the time when MOMA moved out temporarily, so it seemed like a lot of museums were doing major renovations. But we opened up with great fanfare, because the space felt more open. Now we can serve a larger audience. And it allowed us to open year round.

RTP: The historical reason why this space is here is a factor in sustaining your audience, the location and the property itself are link to the mission?

Amy: Exactly. And leading up to our 25th anniversary several years ago was key. You cannot find this kind of collection anywhere, really. The artist himself gave it a curatorial treatment, plus creating this sculpture garden. It is a unique situation.

Where could we have moved? When we thought about it, when we did the first phase of the renovation, it would have been simpler to just tear it all down and rebuild, but that is not who Noguchi was. He didn't do that. It was the bones and the structures that attracted him. Our mission was to carry



Photo Credit: Ruitko Yoshida



forward his thinking and philosophy, how he practiced as an artist. Even with all of the upgrades of the building, people are really able to grab hold of these ideas. They get it. It is an artist's treatment.

RTP: One strength of industrial buildings is the floor loads, right? You chose not only to retain the cement floors, but to retain the patina so they look very much like they did the first time around.

Amy: I think Noguchi did a treatment when he first organized the museum. But since then we have not been able to do that work, or even to think how to preserve it, if there is a way to preserve it. We look at every little thing like that.

RTP: You have a preserved tin ceiling in your café and museum shop.

Amy: We imagine that during the days when this was the photo-engraving and ink factory, it must have had some kind of acid bath that gave that patina to the tin ceiling. When Noguchi took over this building, he considered all of its spaces that were note-worthy for highlighting; he kept the tin ceiling. Originally, that particular room was a gallery that was a dedicated space for sculpture. When we went through our first phase of renovation, we carefully took down every tile, each tin tile, mapped it out so we knew exactly where to put it back. We were again preserving what Noguchi himself appreciated. We didn't touch the "bones" of the room. It is neat to look at it.

RTP: You still own Noguchi's original atelier, the building across the street from the present Museum, don't you?

Amy: We still do. It is now basically office and storage. We have hopes to return that to the studio setting the way he had it when he moved out, similar to the Brancusi studio at the Center Georges-Pompidou in Paris. It would be lovely, I think. People would get a kick out of seeing where he worked, the tools, the setting, and imagine what it would be like.

RTP: Unlike some artists' studios in Europe, where you see the physical space but none of the objects.

Amy: We would love to be able to reset a stage somewhat. We have tons and tons of photography that show this. Those are very useful for us. They tell a story. We had a small exhibition of his tools, how they were used, and the types of materials with which he worked [*RTP note: the 2012 exhibition was entitled "Hammer, Chisel, Drill: Noguchi's Studio Practice"*]. I think people are fascinated with looking at the different objects. How did he make that stone balance the way it does? How was that seam perfectly cut? How are the different materials combined together? There are a lot of different interests in telling that story.

RTP: You mentioned your belief that Noguchi's approach to his work, and to the Museum itself, was influenced by his time studying with Brancusi.

Amy: He took such incredible lessons from working in the Brancusi study. As a young man, Noguchi applied for a Guggenheim fellowship, got to Paris, and "by chance" happened to have met Constantin Brancusi himself and became a studio assistant for a number of months. Even though he didn't speak French, and Brancusi didn't really speak English, somehow they communicated because they both had such passions for their work. By gestures, more than anything, Brancusi teaching mostly by example, Brancusi was able to impart to Noguchi the importance of direct carving, an appreciation for materials, and the best ways of installing a work.

RTP: Noguchi took great care even in selecting the bases for the sculptural pieces. This came from the influence of Brancusi, too?

Amy: Yes. One of those lessons was about bases, and how bases are an integral part of the presentation of an object. The genius of the wood bases for his sculptures here at the Museum is that he brought out the beauty of the work not only by creating these assemblages but by taking architectural beams of an old Japanese storage house—the Japanese storage house is called a kura—and repurposing them.

The kura storage houses in the countryside are apparently put up very simply with traditional Japanese building techniques—no nails. Every joint is just carved and cut to fit together. They are meant for a limited life. After that, they take them down and get rid of them.

So when Noguchi heard of this particular kura being demolished in the 1980s, just before the museum opened, he jumped at the chance to bring the timbers over to the States. He had a lot of works but no bases for the installation here at the museum. So the entire kura house was taken down. I think all the beams came over in one big sea container. He brought them here and customized each one to the works that he put on view. So the bases you see, the yellow pine bases, are unique to our collection.

I like pointing that out, especially to children, not only detailing the Japanese techniques but that they are repurposed timber from a different use. Children appreciate environmental issues—recycling, reuse and repurposing—and they get a kick out of that story.

RTP: Sharing these physical aspects of Noguchi's work is a part of the visitor experience.



Amy: Yes, I love to see the children doing drawing classes, or writing exercises, or whatever they do, whether it is in the galleries or in the gardens. That is the reward: seeing the delight in their faces when they get an idea. Noguchi evokes such imagination.

RTP: In the same way that the physical facilities here were an integral part of Noguchi's work, it seems that in a very real sense the property has been a lifetime work for you.

Amy: Yes. It has been a real commitment. And it has been ever changing. There is growth and change. The amount of planning and effort and creating a real shelter for the collections and carrying on that educational voice bring all of these different facets into play. It requires working with different board members, working with the community, working with the staff, to make Noguchi's life and work relevant.

RTP: Many museums make extensive use of their properties as event spaces. You host special events as part of your own programming, but have made a deliberate decision against regular outside rentals. What was your analysis?

Amy: I wouldn't call it an event space [laughter]. We try. We dabble. We are still learning. This is the challenge of attracting new audiences. We know that, a few years ago when the economy turned, and people were staying home, people who do marketing like myself were trying to find ways to make the spaces more accessible.

We have always had second Sunday programs, and large audiences come for different music programs and events. But we also felt that in the summertime there was an opportunity that we were missing. So we started the first Fridays event, and at that time we thought we would just call it a "staycation"; people in the neighborhood should have access to the sculpture garden. It was very modest. And it is still very modest, just serving wine and beer, coming to enjoy the garden in the evening on a Friday. It has grown since then. Annually, we do a spring gala, and that is quite a production.

But beyond that, we try not to rent the space out so much. We have learned, in the few times that we have, that the space is just not designed for events. Most events are a pretty heavy production: getting the catering here, getting the space prepared for large crowds. We have a lot of sculptures in the middle of the floor, and we don't want people drinking and stumbling over things. And besides, we don't want to hurt our sculptures. And we don't have a kitchen space. I think that has always been one of our challenges. With events like that, you really need all of that infrastructure, and we don't have it here.

We are also very respectful of keeping the space pristine and keeping it so that visitors can enjoy it. I can't tell you, once you have a spilled glass... we have gotten to the stage where we don't serve red wine anywhere in the museum. You take those lessons and you come to know your limitations, and it is ok.

RTP: What is your approach to keeping a specialized museum fresh over time to attract a repeat audience?

Amy: I think it is particularly challenging sometimes, because it is a single artist. Unlike other museums, where you have multiple artists' works or different, encyclopedic collections to draw on, this is one person's work. So

how do you create messages that will resonate to people with a lifetime of work that is by one person? Aside from the sculptural practice, we examine his biography, which is very interesting. We look at his different methodologies of working, whether it is working with stone, or carving wood, or the drawings that he himself really didn't really focus on. It was just part of a journey in discovery and process.

When the Noguchi Museum was created by him, he installed the highlights of his sculptural work. There were lots he didn't include, such as drawings and studies in plaster or other material, but these are just as important to understand his work. We found special exhibitions of such works particularly successful, where somebody can look at thematic exhibitions in a concentrated way. We look at every single thing that he did through special exhibitions. Contextualizing these different periods or different styles of work has been very rewarding.

We designated the second floor, galleries 11 and 12, as the rotating exhibition space, keeping the permanent collection, especially downstairs, the way it was installed by Noguchi. So you get both. You get a constant view of what he saw as his collection, and also the opportunity to see new and fresh things.

We definitely need to engage with new audiences all the time. While we have return visits, there is also a growing family population here, too. We want to make sure that they are engaged and stay with the education programs. We design programs for children as young as two. They develop sculptural practices, and we watch them grow over the years. It is really great to have that audience tapped in and invested in their neighborhood museum. The exhibitions, the education, and public programs, are all part of a three-legged stool for running a successful museum.

RTP: Noguchi had such a broad range of media, too? From furniture to sculpture, from 2-D to public spaces.

Amy: We are fortunate that we have so much to draw on, and that he was so prolific, that the collection is more than just the 250 pieces on view. We have a nice body of work to rotate and to travel.

RTP: One of the strengths I suppose, too, is that you are in a very large demographic area. Some of the other museums we talk to have very specialized collections while also being in very small town with a local population to draw from, which can be a dual challenge.

Amy: Also, New York is a tourist destination. And because of Noguchi's reputation around the world, we attract a lot of national and international visitors. People come from California to look at his work, because we traveled a show there. They got intrigued by particular objects and will come and visit and see the whole.

RTP: All of which is why there is going to be a new subway stop right here at the front door of the Museum....

Amy: [Laughter.] I wish. When Noguchi founded this museum he thought it was fine to have it here. Noguchi himself had an apartment on the Upper East Side, in the 70s. Right up to the last summer he was in New York, he would walk from the East 70s to the tram on Second Avenue, take the tram to Roosevelt Island, walk up Roosevelt Island to the little bridge that connects to



Queens, and walk all the way over here. For him that was wonderful exercise but also a delightful way of seeing the City and discovering parts of the City. That is how he wanted people to get here, in different ways, whether by public transportation, by walking, or by biking here or whatever. He wasn't interested in the big crowds. It is a very modest way of thinking about it.

He really thought that people who wanted to seek him out and see the work should make an effort. That could very well be the idea of one going on a pilgrimage, a trek. If you are not going to be interested and seek somebody out to look at the work, you are not going to have that wonder when you do find it. Very often we recall the days when he was looking at museum structures and how museums are created. He talked to a lot of museum directors at the time. The idea of busing people did not thrill him. He wanted people to come on their own and to make that trek.

In our recent exhibition, called Civic Action, one of our guest artists was George Trakas. He has been very interested in the waterfront for many years. His approach has always been the original uses of the waterfront, whichever neighborhood he was working in. He really delves into the history of the locations and the sites themselves.

For this Civic Action process, his team found a treasure trove of original documents and photos. I was so pleasantly surprised to see images of ferries right here on the East River, with ferry terminals right along the street just a couple of blocks away. It sparks the imagination that if they could do it once they could do it again, and it hits that point about the transportation piece again, that the New York City waterfront could be better utilized.

When you go to different cities, everybody is on these public transport boats, whether it is water taxis, or vaporettos. Boston is great that way. It seems like it is one piece that we are missing here. I understand that the East River ferry was very successful in bringing the ferry to Brooklyn. We are just jumping at the chance to show them that this is another stopping point.

In the neighborhood in the last few years, we have had the introduction of bike lanes. I think a lot more people are riding in these bike lanes now. A lot of our staff come to work using the two wheels. I am sure they would be delighted to take a ferry from Brooklyn and ride out here part of the way. It would be fun, and another way of servicing a growing population in this neighborhood.

RTP: I know that you are very invested in the Long Island City community, the immediate neighborhood. At the same time, the Museum's spaces all look inward, and so you are insulated in a way from your surroundings.

Amy: That is one of the reasons why we mounted Civic Action. It was years in the making. We sat with different artists and asked, "If you had an opportunity to design a neighborhood, what would you do?" That came not only out of what Noguchi did here, but what the artist Mark di Suvero did with Socrates Sculpture Park. He modeled after Noguchi, coming out here in the 1970s. He saw the potential in a four-acre park, and ran with it. Noguchi was very much a part of those discussions. Here are two internationally world-renowned artists taking a stab at making a claim for these properties. Sharing it in the ways they have with the public.

We have been very concerned, seeing all of the developments going on in the neighborhood, that we might lose some of that. We might lose public



Photo Credit: Clara Jaquet

space. We might lose the opportunity to have community involvement in these different types of spaces and their uses. But the market is the market, and people will do what they do. They will develop. We wanted to think beyond the individual buildings locations and the sites, to think about the neighborhood as a whole.

Here enter the four artists in the Civic Action exhibition. George Trakas is really interested in the waterfront, and we have a lot of waterfront right here. Mary Miss really took a page from her interest in activating public space, fascinated with the layering of the various industries that are here. Rirkrit Tiravanija is very much an artist working in social activism and the connection to communities. He had a lot of ideas about how to bring people together and what do you do with them. His process of late has involved community kitchens, where he actually performs an entire dinner soup kitchen and will invite people to come. We are looking forward to the spring, when the community kitchen might be built in Socrates, and people may be coming to share a meal with the artist. Natalie Jeremijenko also participated. She is a media artist who has done different types of treatments in the public arena. She is fascinated with the industry that existed here, and the ongoing environmental issues. They had four different ways of looking at Long Island City. It was a lot of fun working with them, learning their processes, and understanding our neighborhood a little bit better.

RTP: You had mentioned when we were walking in that you feel this was a very logical way to expand the programmatic activities of the museum.

Amy: I think a lot of people were very surprised to see a contemporary show such as this, with different artists bringing different practices and new media here. This was a very daring exhibition for us, for the Museum and its partners; very courageous by our director, Jenny Dixon, and an incredible leap from what we do normally, by taking on such a big topic. We don't purport to be urban designers, or architects, or planners. But we are very invested in the health of the neighborhood and community growth. Philosophically we identified with both Noguchi and with Mark di Suvero. It was very much in keeping with their interests, for the Museum to make Noguchi's work relevant and to engage living artists. Noguchi did a lot of work in the civic arena. How did he do that? Who were his partners? What did he look at? The response has been that this



has been a pleasant surprise, an incredible way of highlighting who Noguchi was, as a civic-minded artist himself. It just makes so much sense and keeps his spirit alive this way.

RTP: What particular facilities management challenges require your recurrent attention?

Amy: Systems and weather. We have a sculpture garden. High winds will damage trees. Heavy rains cause water runoff.

RTP: You have been involved with Alliance for Response-New York City in emergency preparedness programs. How has that informed your approach?

Amy: It has been an education; it is so resourceful. I am so grateful for the professional contacts that came from it. You can pick up the phone and call for advice from colleagues, and they are there for you.

Most events are related to severe weather. This is something that I learned from OEM [the Office of Emergency Management]. As the director of administration, I understand that we are not just housing a collection, but serving the community. The American Alliance of Museums' accreditation process also underscores that being ready for emergencies is key.

If the most recent earthquake had been any stronger, we might have had some damage. But we didn't. It was very fortunate. But those events are really very

intense, and you have to be mindful of the safety of the public. Getting staff safely home from where we are, all of those things come into play.

RTP: Noguchi was a master storyteller in his approach to expressing ideas about himself and his work. It seems to me that you are the master story teller of the Noguchi Museum. What is the Japanese expression? You are the living treasure of the Noguchi Museum. I think the Museum is really lucky to have you.

Amy: I try to retell these stories. Noguchi so beautifully phrased things and turned stories into masterpieces. He was the master.

POSTSCRIPT:

Since the original interview was conducted in December, 2011, the events of Hurricane Sandy in October 2012 raised more facilities concerns for The Noguchi Museum, located just one block from the East River. At the height of the storm surge, Vernon Boulevard was four feet under water. The Museum's lower levels sustained damage to equipment and some collection storage. While repairs have been completed, the Museum is ever more in need of support for mitigation measures such as a power generator.



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