

Thinking Big

After a shaky start, MASS MoCA is finding its audience

There were days when the fledgling center was so strapped for cash that turning on the heat was an extravagance. Conceived in 1985, it was not until 14 years later, in May 1999, that the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) opened as a mixed-use cultural and commercial center in North Adams, a town of 17,500 in the northwestern corner of the state.

Now, just three years old, the institution is preparing to launch phase two of its development at a time when many other cultural institutions and publicly supported programs are scaling back. This summer Massachusetts acting governor Jane Swift announced the plans and authorized the release of some \$9 million in matching funds that had been provisionally authorized for the center in the late 1980s.

For founding director Joseph Thompson, it's been a long road, but he says empirical data indicate that MASS MoCA is thriving. An in-house tally of visitors, along with state census, tax, and unemployment data, show that the state has made back the \$25 million it invested in the project—plus another \$1.3 million. The center has generated an estimated \$7 million more in tax revenues for Massachusetts than a 1989 state economic forecast predicted it would, according to Thompson. More than 300 people now work in the museum complex, and the restaurants, hotels, and other small businesses that have sprung up in the area have added dozens of jobs to the local economy. It has also met its projection of 100,000 to 150,000 visitors a year, in the three years drawing more than 300,000 to its galleries and another 65,000 to movies, dance parties, and live performances.

"They really have done a good job of inviting people in—of establishing fresh and meaningful connections to their audiences. In addition to being an engine for community revitalization, they provide unique support for artists," says Jill Medvedow, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. A recent music, dance, and theater piece on the history of the MASS MoCA complex, for example, featured professionals along with dozens of local children and retirees.

The 27 buildings on a 13-acre campus were built by a clothing manufacturer in 1872 and are now listed on the National Historic Register. In 1940, the site was purchased by the Sprague electric company, which at its peak employed 4,000 people in North Adams. After the factory closed in the mid-1980s, Thomas Krens, then head of the nearby Williams College Museum of Art, imagined turning the abandoned site into a 600,000-square-foot complex. Working with John A. Barrett III, the longtime mayor, and a pair of young Williams alumni—Michael Govan (now director of the Dia Center for the Arts in New York) and

founding director Thompson—Krens secured a promise of \$35 million in economic-development funds from the state.

When Krens left to become director of the Guggenheim in 1988, however, the state reneged on its initial pledge of financial support, and the plans nearly fell through. But Thompson, who earned an M.B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and an M.A. in art history, also from Penn, kept the promise of the museum alive. With Barrett's help, Thompson convinced then-governor William Weld not to pull the plug on the development. Thompson made forays into the local community, raising money by going door-to-door. And he forged relationships with local arts organizations such as

the neighboring Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, as he expanded MASS MoCA's definition of contemporary art to include performing arts.

Now, after a \$31.4 million renovation of the site, MASS MoCA is indeed the largest center for contemporary arts in the United States, with 19 art galleries and 100,000 square feet of exhibition space (one gallery is the size of a football field)—though it is far short of Krens's original vision. It also has a community center and commercial spaces designed to attract high-tech and new-media enterprises. Kleiser-Walczak, a computer-animation company

that moved 70 of its employees from Hollywood, California, to North Adams, is one of eight commercial tenants.

The center has an annual operating budget of \$4.5 million, and no permanent endowment. With the incoming grant from the state, it is launching the next phase of development: MASS MoCA has purchased a building across the street from its campus and intends to generate money by leasing the new property to the North Berkshire district court. It will also develop more on-site commercial and gallery spaces.

The museum mounts between six and eight exhibitions each year. The current show, up through next spring, is "Uncommon Denominator: New Art from Vienna," which features work by 15 artists who live in Vienna or are Austrian natives, including Barbara Eichhorn, Adriana Czernin, and Erwin Wurm.

It has no permanent collection, nor does it plan to begin purchasing work, given the tremendous expense of doing so, says spokesperson Katherine Myers. Instead, it displays art that is on long-term loan from other institutions, such as Joseph Beuys's *Lightning with Stag in Its Glare* (1958–85). The monumental sculpture, which has been on exhibit since MASS MoCA opened, is owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The museum's achievements, says Thompson, are "still very new and fresh and fragile—as is its impact on North Adams."

—Maureen Dezell



Franz West's *Drama (Model)*, 2001, is one of several works by Austrian artists at MASS MoCA through next spring.

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