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Dia Renews Its Beacon for the Future

Dia Celebrates a Decade of Growth in the City and in Beacon, N.Y.

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

When it opened in 2003, in a disused cardboard-box factory filled with cobwebs and vestiges of a thrumming industrial past, the art exhibition space known as [Dia](#) **SMT.V -8.51%**:Beacon was a novel upstate outpost, far from the flash and glamor of New York. Now, having just celebrated its 10th anniversary, Dia:Beacon stands as an institution with a solid legacy in a place that feels like home.



Enlarge Image

Philippe Vergne, the director of the Dia Art Foundation.

"The obvious measure of success, the predictable one, which is not to be dismissed, is that the audience has grown," Dia director Philippe Vergne said of a visitorship that has increased by 18% in the past four years, to 75,000 a year. "But the other measure of success is that, in an institution in which the mandate is partly for permanent installations in these sort of chapels or collections of rooms, we

have kept people looking at us."



Enlarge Image

Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal

"Closed Mirror Square (Cayuga Salt Mine Project), 1969," by Robert Smithson.

The museum was conceived to suit the distinctive aesthetic of the Dia Art Foundation, which is based in New York but transitory in nature, with connections to outsized, or otherwise expansive, works of sculpture, painting and conceptual art around the country. In Beacon, highlights displayed in a spectacular 300,000-square-foot expanse include hulking masterpieces by Michael Heizer, John Chamberlain and Richard Serra.

Now, as Dia:Beacon looks ahead to its next decade on the banks of the

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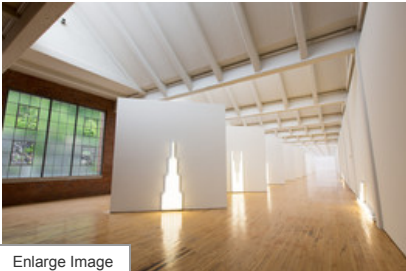
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"Leaning Mirror, 1969," by Robert Smithson.



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Works from Dan Flavin's "monuments" for V. Tatlin series.

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Works by Richard Serra

Lannan, the 74-year-old president of the Lannan Foundation, a philanthropic body based in Santa Fe, N.M. "I don't think there's any museum like [Dia:Beacon] in the world. If you compare the experience of going to Beacon to going to the Museum of Modern Art, one is like visiting a shopping mall and the other is a real aesthetic experience."

Mr. Lannan, who estimated the market value of the works at nearly \$27 million, described the deal as a gift-sale in which Dia paid less than half the potential worth. The arrangement marks the latest between the two institutions, which began collaborating in the 1970s.

Despite the long-term partnership, the deal was by no means a given, as the success of Dia:Beacon and the standing of the foundation itself remained open questions. "We watched and waited," Mr. Lannan said. "We wanted to make sure that there was a solid platform with the changes [at Dia], and we came to the conclusion about a year ago that there was."

The changes he referred to relate to Dia's loss, in 2006, of its longtime director, Michael Govan, and the subsequent exit of benefactor and board chair [Leonard Riggio](#), of [Barnes & Noble](#) BKS -1.91% fame. When Mr. Vergne took the helm in 2008, the Dia Foundation was adrift. Dia:Beacon had been conceived and opened

Hudson River, the Dia Foundation itself is in a new state of expectation and flux. That includes future proposals for Beacon as well as an ongoing mission to reassert itself in New York, with a new exhibition space in Chelsea to make up for its nearly 10-year absence from the city's art-scene hub.

"It's been 38 years that Dia has been running, and the values that this place set up are intelligent values," said Yasmil Raymond, curator of the Dia Foundation. "But I see them in the context of our generation, in the context we live in. Now it's about us taking it further and expanding on them."

Before thoughts of expansion could turn real, the artwork at Dia:Beacon needed to be secured. That occurred just last month, with the acquisition of 30 major works from the Lannan Foundation, in a transaction regarded as momentous for both institutions. "It's the most important acquisition that Dia has ever done, a major benchmark for us," Mr. Vergne said of the deal, which transferred the ownership of all 30 works to Dia (they'd been in Beacon on long-term loan from the beginning). Among the lot are works by nine iconic artists including Robert Smithson, Donald Judd, Lawrence Weiner and Agnes Martin.

"It's probably the largest single gift in one time we've done," said Patrick

4

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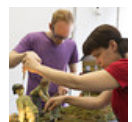
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to much fanfare, but Dia's presence in its hometown of New York—a city whose art scene owed much to Dia's historical sense of endeavor—had been all but erased. Though it helped establish Chelsea as a gallery destination with an influential move there in 1987, its exhibition space in the neighborhood was shuttered in 2004, with signs of city life for Dia limited to occasional public programs and long-term installations (including "The New York Earth Room" in SoHo and the sound-art piece "Times Square").

Now, with Dia:Beacon well-positioned after a decade of growth and the recent acquisition of the Lannan works, the Dia Foundation is fixing its sites on its next phase: plans for the construction of a new exhibition space in three existing buildings in Chelsea. The general plan was first announced in 2009 and in greater architectural detail last year, but Mr. Vergne insists that progress is nigh. A public capital campaign will be announced in the fall, he said, and the timeline remains set for construction to begin in 2014 and an opening a year later.

"When we are back here," Mr. Vergne said in Dia's Chelsea office, "Dia will be a different institution than it was when it was only on 22nd Street. Beacon will still be very active showing the collection, but the idea of starting new projects is very important—it's part of our identity."

A version of this article appeared June 20, 2013, on page A23 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Dia Renews Its Beacon for the Future.

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