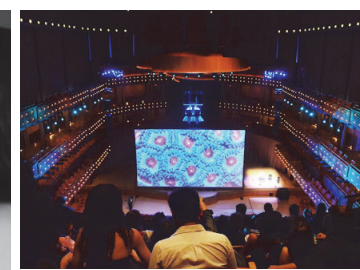
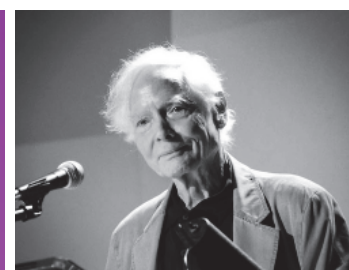
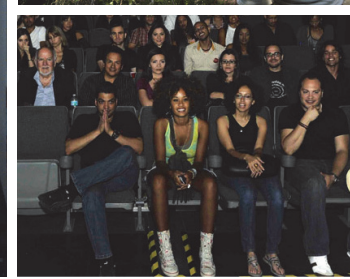
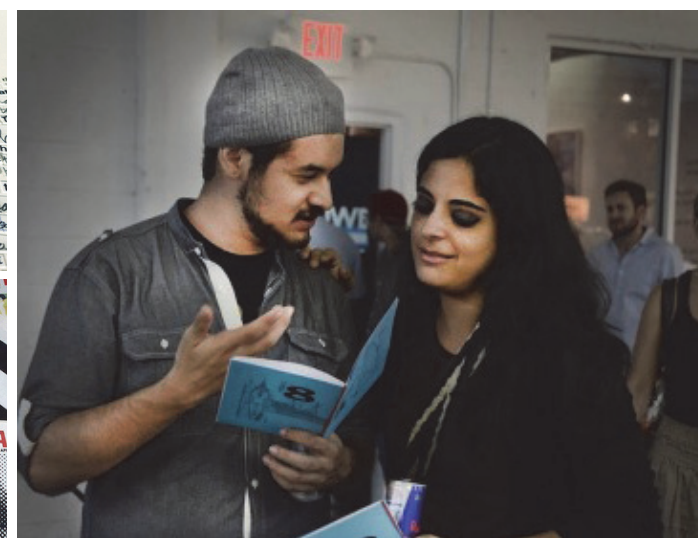


O, Miami:

How A Festival Infused A City With Poetry

An in-depth report on the inaugural festival.

Written by Brett Sokol, edited by Judy J. Miller



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About the Reporter Analysis Series

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation commissions independent journalists to write occasional articles reviewing its grant making and program strategies. Veteran reporters examine grant documents, conduct interviews and offer their perspective on the lessons learned and impact of Knight-supported projects in stories published online and in print.

This report was written by Brett Sokol, the arts editor at Ocean Drive magazine. Brett's writing on Miami's cultural scene has also appeared in The New York Times, New York magazine, The Miami Herald and Slate.

This report is edited by Judy J. Miller, who oversaw Pulitzer Prize winning coverage while serving as managing editor of The Miami Herald. She is a former president of Investigative Reporters and Editors.

For more information visit knightfoundation.org.

Part One

Setting The Scene for Miami's Arts Explosion

"There's a line from James Joyce which always stays with me," explains Alberto Ibargüen, president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. It's a snippet he reminds himself of whenever a sea of incoming data and policy papers begins to blur Knight's central mission of promoting "informed and engaged" communities.

"Yes, the newspapers were right: Snow was general that day in Ireland," Ibargüen recites, quoting from Joyce's 1914 short story *The Dead*, in which a surprise blanket of white suddenly seems both otherworldly and as ubiquitous as the air itself. And the line's present-day significance? "I want people to say art was general in Miami."

Ten years ago, such a wish would likely have inspired a round of snickers — not least from Miamians themselves. South Florida was internationally renowned for a host of dubious accomplishments — from surreal political scandals to a louche nightlife. But a thriving arts scene?

Indeed, for decades it seemed like Miami just couldn't catch a break. Artists Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude certainly captured the

public imagination for a moment in 1983 with their *Surrounded Islands* — encircling eleven Biscayne Bay islands with over six miles of hot-pink fabric. Yet that delightful rupture with reality was soon overshadowed by the return of Miami's status as a city with one of the highest murder rates in the country: It was *Scarface* which symbolized Miami in the popular imagination, not free-thinking artistes.

"I want people to say art was general in Miami."

In the nineties it was the renaissance of South Beach from an Art Deco slum into "Soho by the Sea," which grabbed headlines. But amidst all the flashbulb-lit partying, it was hard to tell what truly meaningful cultural activities were unfolding. Meanwhile, across the Bay, a new wave of Cuban-exiles staked their own cultural claims on the city. But those efforts often became painfully entangled with political tensions over supposed affinities with the Castro regime across the Florida Straits.

That same two-steps-forward, one-step-back spirit held sway over Miami's established

cultural organizations. The Miami City Ballet and the New World Symphony both offered stellar performances, but also seemed like the city's best kept secrets. True, the Miami Book Fair grew in size, scope, and stature — but its success only threw the surrounding terrain into stark relief: Tens of thousands turned out for the Book Fair each November, so where were these enthused intellectuals the rest of the year?

Within the visual arts community, the mood was particularly beleaguered. Despite some outstanding exhibitions, the two major museums — the Miami Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art — struggled to build permanent collections and faithful audiences. And regardless of their talent, artists found it nearly impossible to earn a living from their art. Instead, they were forced to either land teaching jobs or leave town for economically greener pastures.

Then in December 2002 came Art Basel Miami Beach, the sprawling American offshoot of its Swiss-based art fair parent, and an annual event which quickly became an essential visit for art aficionados around the globe. In the

decade since Basel's arrival, Miami has evolved from an art world backwater into the "next" art city, surpassing Chicago as the most exciting hotbed between Los Angeles and New York.

Sparked by Basel's spotlight, early supporters such as Paul and Estelle Berg, Irma and Norman Braman, Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz, Martin Margulies, Craig Robins, and Mera and Don Rubell, were all joined by an expanded base of global collectors — actively buying the work of emerging Miami artists while financially supporting the scene-at-large. These days, Miami artists are not only sinking roots — they're being joined by New York transplants looking to kickstart their own careers.

In the decade since Basel's arrival, Miami has evolved from an art world backwater into the "next" art city

However, as important as these newfound opportunities for artists are (not to mention the millions of dollars pumped into the city's hotels, restaurants, and overall infrastructure come Basel-time), there have been equally monumental ripples beyond the art world. Miamians of all strata have begun looking at their city in an entirely new light — and they love what they see: A burg where creative ferment is the new normal.

"Art Basel acted as a fulcrum to grab people's attention," observes Campbell McGrath, a Miami Beach-based poet, MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant winner, and professor of English at Florida International University. "There's this huge grass-roots energy now." McGrath has watched several of his students attempt to harness and focus that energy — including P. Scott Cunningham.

A Boca Raton native, Cunningham says when he left for college in Connecticut in 1996, he had no intention of ever returning to South Florida: "I could never have lived in the Miami of 1996 — it felt so far away from everything." When he returned in 2003, kicking and screaming, and only to accommodate his then-girlfriend's career, he was amazed to see how drastically the post-Basel cultural landscape had shifted. "You want to be proud of things happening in your city," he says — and what was unfolding in Miami was not only something he could take pride in, it was a milieu he wanted to be a part of. Cunningham's romantic relationship only lasted a few months, but he decided to stick around.

After receiving his MFA from FIU in 2008, Cunningham launched his own poetry-focused faux-school, the University of Wynwood, which stages colorfully offbeat events in the geographic heart of Miami's art scene, reflecting Cunningham's desire to take contemporary poetry far from its academic comfort zone.

What he eventually envisioned moved dramatically beyond the University of Wynwood's playfully unorthodox readings. Spurred on by a Knight Foundation arts grant, Cunningham brainstormed a project which would not only be a "world-class" event in itself, but transformational for Miami writ large. His idea? O, Miami — a poetry festival as wry in tone and all encompassing in scope as its very name, one which would attempt to, with a nod to Joyce, make poetry general throughout the city.

"O, Miami will change Miami's attitude toward poetry," Cunningham wrote in a Knight grant proposal. "We will reposition poetry as an interdisciplinary field with relevance to mainstream culture. The project is crucial because the city, despite all the excellent work it's done so far, still needs to shake its identity as a place where world-class cultural events don't occur on a regular basis. By being at the forefront of this new event, Miami will take a leadership role in the poetry world, which will have a positive and reverberating effect on every aspect of our cultural life."

A grandiose notion? Did the local literati — even sympathetic ones — really think Miami could grab the poetry world by the lapels of its tweed blazer and steer it in a fresh direction? Cunningham counters with a chuckle, "I can do things here that haven't been done. It might be easier in Los Angeles or San Francisco — the audience and infrastructure would already be waiting for it. But it wouldn't feel as exciting or necessary."

Miami Arts Timeline

This timeline depicts art and cultural events in Miami leading up to the launch of the O, Miami festival

1983

Christo and Jeanne-Claude stage *Surrounded Islands* in the Biscayne Bay

1984

Miami Book Fair and Miami Film Festival launch

1985

Miami City Ballet Founded

1988

New World Symphony founded

1991

Winter Music Conference, spotlighting electronic dance music, moves to Miami Beach

1994

Rubell Family Collection opens to the public

1995

Cafe Nostalgia, a nightclub featuring live music from recent Cuban-exiles, opens in Little Havana

1996

Miami Art Museum and Museum of Contemporary Art both open

1999

Margulies Collection at the Warehouse opens to the public

2001

Wynwood Art Walks begin en mass

2002

Debut of Art Basel Miami Beach

2009

An expanded Borscht Film Festival relocates to the Gusman Center

2011

New World Center opens, home to the New World Symphony as well as featured events with the debuts of O, Miami

Part Two

Building A Better Poetry Festival

“We wanted to saturate the city with poetry, to create moments of rupture in someone’s day,” says P. Scott Cunningham, explaining the charged mission of his O, Miami poetry festival. For its month-long debut in April 2011, the ambitious goal was nothing less than introducing every single one of greater Miami’s 2.5 million residents to a poem.

“We wanted the festival to reach people who — even if they saw a poetry reading advertised — would never, ever go to it.”

“We didn’t want to just rally the existing audience,” Cunningham says. “That would be unsatisfying.” Moreover, with a grant from Knight Foundation in hand, Cunningham wanted to fully embrace Knight’s ethos of “recontextualizing art for a new audience.” Of course, finding a new local audience for poetry wasn’t simply an option — it was a necessity. Miami’s die-hard poetry crowd was far too small to support a traditionally-modeled festival.

“The poetry world has expanded dramatically, but it’s still a closed circuit,” observes Billy Collins, a former U.S. poet laureate and arguably the most commercially successful poet writing today. “If you go to a hip art gallery

show, most of the people there aren’t painters — they’re people who dig art.” By way of contrast, he invokes New Jersey’s biannual Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. In terms of sheer crowd size, he continues, it’s a success. “But even at the Dodge, where 20,000 people attend, I’d suggest that over 18,000 are either poets or wannabe poets. If you went to the opera and everyone in the audience was dressed up

“We wanted the festival to reach people who — even if they saw a poetry reading advertised — would never, ever go to it.”

as Brunhilda, or if you went to the ballet and everyone in the audience had their tutus on, that’s the real trouble with American poetry.”

Which begs the question: Given poetry’s hermetically-sealed state, why even bother funding a full-fledged Miami poetry festival? Why not simply add a few more poets to the already-established annual Miami Book Fair? Those are fighting words for Cunningham.

“Poetry matters now more than ever,” he insists.

“We live in a world that is hyper-saturated with text. It’s all around you, all the time, whether it’s being online, using Twitter, or sending a text message. If the purpose of art is to provide reflection, or to get us to slow down and rethink things, poetry is the thing that does that for text. It tries to find meaning, to make the familiar strange, and the strange somewhat familiar.”

The way to broaden poetry’s appeal, Cunningham reasons, is to step outside of its traditional channels.

Cunningham’s own love of poetry is a testament to this stealth approach. He dates his own passion for the form with discovering a Billy Collins poem on the wall inside a Manhattan subway car during the late 90s — part of the Poetry Society of America’s “Poetry in Motion” project. (“I like this idea of being ambushed by poetry before you can get out your anti-poetry deflector shields,” says Collins, a society vice-president.)

With that example in mind, Cunningham reached out to a brain trust which included Miami Beach poet and Florida International University professor Campbell McGrath, poet and Fulbright Scholarship Board chairman

Tom Healy, and Miami Book Fair Co-Founder Mitchell Kaplan. They pondered how to present unorthodox events while still spotlighting the best the poetry world had to offer, how to, as Knight Foundation Vice President of Arts Dennis Scholl quipped, “take the orchestra out of the pit and into the streets.”

The key would seem to be harnessing the power of a spectacle, utilizing Miami’s love of glitz to break through poetry’s “closed circuit.”

Not least, they wanted to ensure audiences would actually show up. “We wanted the festival to be high-quality,” Cunningham says, “but also reach people who — even if they saw a poetry reading advertised — would never, ever go to it.”

“The problem with poetry is that it’s expected to be in a lecture hall or in a bar with an open mic,” Healy says. “There’s a fairly small group of people who are interested in coming to that, especially if it feels like it’s going to be work: ‘Uh-oh, we’ve got to take our medicine.’ The idea was to have poetry go find its audience, rather than have the audience come find it.”

Healy suggested O, Miami embrace multi-disciplinary events to “change the atmosphere,” whether via injecting poetry into a modern dance concert, working amidst an art installation, or simply serving an evening meal at an outdoor, waterfront restaurant. “Putting food and poetry together is brilliant — you’re got people comfortable and then you’re in a place where it’s a quintessentially Miami experience.”

Moreover, such fusions come with their own

built-in audiences. “By bringing James Franco,” Cunningham says, referring to an O, Miami event with the Hollywood actor cum avant-garde poet, “we were able to trick people into listening to Tony Hoagland’s poetry. Which worked.” (Indeed, Hoagland captivated the audience and made a number of new fans that night.) Likewise, for a collaboration between poet Anne Carson and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Carson may be a critically-

The key would seem to be harnessing the power of a spectacle, utilizing Miami’s love of glitz to break through poetry’s “closed circuit.”

acclaimed figure, but “the Merce Cunningham name has a certain cachet that poetry doesn’t.”

Art Basel’s example also loomed large, particularly with its ability to present avant-garde art as simultaneously enlightening and accessible. On that note, Campbell McGrath stressed the importance of avoiding anything that smacked of the classroom or the Ivory Tower — poetry’s more familiar home. Similarly, Mitchell Kaplan believed O, Miami needed to feel less like an educational journey and more “like an event!”

“Everybody’s talking about the death of everything — the death of the book, the death of the literary scene,” Kaplan sighs. “But there are

still people who want to interact with writers.” As proof he notes the record-size crowds for the Miami Book Fair, even as national pundits tell us that devoted readers are all supposedly cocooning at home with their Kindles.

The key would seem to be harnessing the power of a spectacle, utilizing Miami’s love of glitz to break through poetry’s “closed circuit.” In that respect, O, Miami more than delivered. Over the course of its forty-three one-time-only events and twenty-six ongoing, month-long projects, there were poems in the sky, pulled by planes and dropped by a helicopter; poems surreptitiously sewn inside clothes in thrift stores; poems emblazoned on the wall inside the Design District’s much-loved Michael’s restaurant, as well as plastered on the side of nearly eight hundred buses; poems composed inside correctional facilities and outside schools; poems inserted amidst the flora and fauna of the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden; and not least, poems featured at readings from Wynwood to South Beach.

It’s hard to quantify just exactly how many of Miami-Dade county’s residents encountered a poem over the course of the month. But if O, Miami missed a few verse-phobic folks, it certainly wasn’t for lack of trying.

O, Miami Events

April 1-8, 2011

4.1.2011

O, Pening Ceremony

The festival's opening ceremony.

ADRIENNE ARSHT CENTER
1300 BISCAYNE BLVD., MIAMI

4.1.2011

Eating Our Words

Los Angeles's Eating Our Words comes to Miami for a traditional Cuban pig roast accompanied by a poetry reading with Tracy K. Smith.

BOATER'S GRILL
1200 CRANDON BLVD., KEY BISCAYNE

4.1.2011

Tigertail Wordspeak

New Orleans-based poet Sunni Patterson performs.

BOOKS & BOOKS
265 ARAGON AVE., CORAL GABLES

4.2.2011

Abe's Penny Live

Abe's Penny Live hosts an exhibition from four Miami photographers, with visitors writing personal responses to the work. Also featuring poetry readings by Denise Duhamel and Gabby Calvocoressi.

NWSA ARTSEEN GALLERY
2215 NW 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.5.2011

Sir Archibald Whistler Presents The Honest Liars Club

Florida International University's Creative Writing department's reading series, featuring graduating MFA students.

LUNA STAR CAFE
775 NE 125TH ST., NORTH MIAMI

4.6.2011

New World Symphony | Inside the Music

A special edition of the New World Symphony's "Inside the Music" series, focusing on the nexus of poetry, art and music.

NEW WORLD CENTER PERFORMANCE HALL
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.6.2011

Wine Down Wednesday

Oscar Fuentes and his jazz combo perform at a special O, Miami edition of HistoryMiami's Wine Down Wednesdays party.

HISTORYMIAMI
101 WEST FLAGLER ST., MIAMI

4.7.2011

NOX

Poet Anne Carson reads from her latest book, Nox, accompanied by dancers from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

MOORE BUILDING
4040 NE 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.8.2011

STACKS

A second night of collaborations between poet Anne Carson and modern dancers.

MOORE BUILDING
4040 NE 2ND AVE., MIAMI

April 9-15, 2011

4.9.2011

Dérive Miami

Visitors explore Wynwood on foot and write poems about their experiences. Afterward, an online map of the routes taken (and poems written) is created by Billy Friebele.

WYNWOOD NEIGHBORHOOD OF MIAMI

4.9.2011

Abe's Penny Live Activation Events

Experimental performances combining poetry with performance.

NWSA ARTSEEN GALLERY
2215 NW 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.9.2011

God Loves Poetry

God Loves Poetry turn hate-speech into positive, funny, and often poignant poems.

BOOKS & BOOKS
265 ARAGON AVE., CORAL GABLES

4.10.2011

The Hedgehog and the Fox

Phong Bui, publisher of the Brooklyn Rail, speaks on the topic of Diderot's Selected Letters.

LESTER'S BAR
2519 NW 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.11.2011

Poem Drop

Poems (on bio-degradable paper) are dropped from the sky.

CORAL GABLES
231 SANTILLANE AVE.

4.11.2011

Craft Talk: Energy & Vision in the Poetic Line

Poet Dennis Hinrichsen presents a talk on using the poetic line to engage the reader.

BAS FISHER INVITATIONAL
180 39TH ST., MIAMI

4.12.2011

Young Translators

Miami-based poets and translators read their works in Spanish, English, and Portuguese.

NWSA ARTSEEN GALLERY
2215 NW 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.13.2011

Now Taste This - Reading

Dinner accompanied by poetry readings focusing on restaurants and food.

BLT STEAK AT THE BETSY HOTEL
1440 OCEAN DRIVE, MIAMI BEACH

4.13.2011

Artist's Talk: Sam Winston

Artist Sam Winston gives a talk about his text-based works and process.

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI RICHTER LIBRARY
1300 MEMORIAL DRIVE, CORAL GABLES

4.13.2011

Heebster CHAIku

An evening of live music and Jewish-themed original poetry.

NEXT@19
TEMPLE ISRAEL, 137 NE 19TH ST., MIAMI

4.14.2011

Poetry Everywhere

Liam Callanan, of Poetry Everywhere, and poet Campbell McGrath host an evening of video screenings, readings, and discussions dedicated to poetry in the public sphere.

MIAMI-DADE PUBLIC LIBRARY
101 WEST FLAGLER ST., MIAMI

4.15.2011

Writing the Room

Carol Todaro leads a group of local poets and artists in live performances.

ARTCENTER/ SOUTH FLORIDA
800 LINCOLN RD., MIAMI BEACH

April 16-22, 2011

4.16.2011

O, Miami Medial Caesura

SOUTH POINTE PARK
1 WASHINGTON AVE., MIAMI BEACH

4.16.2011

Sweatstock

Folgar and Lapin read onstage between rock bands performing at the Sweatstock music festival.

SWEAT RECORDS
5505 NE 2ND AVE, MIAMI

4.17.2011

Flower of Life

A live performance from artist Eliza Bishop focusing on the natural landscape.

CASALIN
55 NW 30TH ST., MIAMI

4.19.2011

Locals Reading

Local poets read from their newest books.

NWSA ARTSEEN GALLERY
2215 NW 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.20.2011

Argentinian Avant-Garde

Bilingual talk and reading with leading figures of the modern Buenos Aires poetry scene.

MOCA NORTH MIAMI
770 NE 125TH ST., NORTH MIAMI

4.21.2011

Miami Poets Soirée

A celebration hosted by Miami's chapter of the Florida State Poets Association.

PINECREST BRANCH LIBRARY
5835 SW 111TH ST. & PINECREST

4.21.2011

Cinema Sounds

Poetry trailers screen while poet Abel Folgar reads.

O CINEMA
90 NW 29TH ST., MIAMI

4.22.2011

AIRIE @ The Fairchild

Poets from the Everglades National Park's artists residency program read their work.

FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN
10901 OLD CUTLER RD., CORAL GABLES

4.22.2011

Film Screening: Poetry

MIAMI BEACH CINEMATHEQUE
1130 WASHINGTON AVE., MIAMI BEACH

4.22.2011

Aberrant Language and the Design of Everydayness

Matthew Abess discusses the Wolfsonian's exhibition and its relation to the language of everyday life.

THE WOLFSONIAN-FIU
1001 WASHINGTON AVENUE, MIAMI BEACH

April 23-30, 2011

4.23.2011

Borscht Film Festival

ADRIENNE ARSHT CENTER
1300 BISCAYNE BLVD., MIAMI

4.24.2011

Poets of the Unreeled: Outdoor Movietelling

Poets perform their own scripts to excerpts from famous films, TV episodes, and music videos.

THE DORSCH GALLERY
151 NW 24TH ST., MIAMI

4.26.2011

Abe's Penny Live Closing

Local poets write poems in response to a photography exhibition; Raffa Jo performs.

NWSA ARTSEEN GALLERY
2215 NW 2ND AVE., MIAMI

4.27.2011

Poetry & Poesia

Bilingual poetry readings in Spanish and English.

NEW WORLD CENTER
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.28.2011

Yale Anthology of Rap

Poets and MCs share a reading of lyrics and poems, celebrating the nexus of poetry and rap.

NEW WORLD CENTER
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.28.2011

Opium Magazine's Literary Death Match

Celebrity judges rate local performers in a literary talent show.

PURDY LOUNGE
1811 PURDY AVE., MIAMI BEACH

4.29.2011

Poetry in the Park

Outdoor poetry performances with a live low-power radio broadcast.

LINCOLN PARK
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.29.2011

Poetry & Persona

Readings exploring the world of contemporary poetry.

NEW WORLD CENTER
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.29.2011

Broken Social Spam

Spoken-word records are at the center of the night's live musical mix.

PURDY LOUNGE
1811 PURDY AVE., MIAMI BEACH

4.30.2011

Poetry & Violence

A discussion and reading of poetry dealing with politically-inspired violence.

NEW WORLD CENTER
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.30.2011

Poetry in the Park

Outdoor poetry performances with a live low-power radio broadcast.

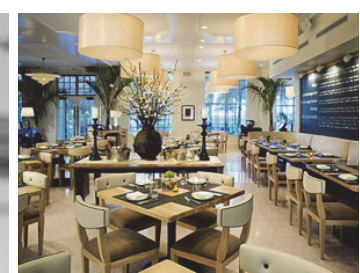
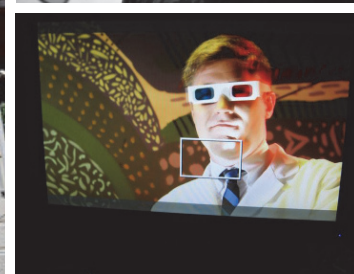
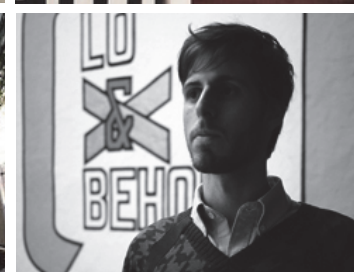
LINCOLN PARK
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH

4.30.2011

US Poet Laureate Reading

A bi-lingual reading with the current U.S. Poet Laureate, W.S. Merwin and Mexican poet Carla Faesle

NEW WORLD CENTER
500 17TH ST., MIAMI BEACH



Part Three

Up In the Sky! It's a Bird, It's A Plane, It's Poetry!

The Ferrari said it all. If you were looking to make a dramatic statement that O, Miami was a very different kind of poetry festival — irreverent, playfully subversive, and not least, steeped in the often blindingly over-the-top spirit of South Florida — what better way than to put one of your featured poets behind the wheel of a gleaming red convertible Ferrari, hand him a bullhorn, and then have him literally proclaim his poems to the streets?

“I appreciate the typical wine-and-cheese poetry reading, but that’s so stale,” explains Dave Landsberger, the Ferrari-driving poet in question. “Let the younger poets do younger, weirder things. Let the older poets do the more reverent things. There’s a place for both — and that’s why O, Miami was such a success.”

Landsberger certainly did his part to make a splash for the festival’s debut outing, drawing a crowd as he double-parked his rented Ferrari alongside Lincoln Road, reading out one of his own poems, but only allowing himself to bask briefly in the resulting applause — he spotted a curious police officer approaching. From there he roared up to an impromptu reading in the parking lot of a North Miami Beach Wal-Mart, and then back to the drive-through window

of a Biscayne Boulevard fast-food restaurant — where he made a new poetry devotee out of a Checkers employee with a performance of Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” “Victory!” he laughs.

Though family commitments forced Landsberger, a 2010 MFA graduate of Florida International University, to return to his native Chicago, he is scheming for a way to relocate to the sub-tropics — and not just to escape the snow.

“What O, Miami brought to the picture was the realization of Miami’s cultural promise.”

“You can go to Miami, participate in the arts community, and really feel like something is happening,” Landsberger says. “You don’t feel like something is happening in Chicago — it’s already happened. You’re just adding to it. But in Miami, you’re getting in on the ground floor.”

Indeed, helping to nurture a sense of city-wide creative ferment, a palpable feeling that “something is happening,” may be O, Miami’s greatest achievement in its first year.

Tellingly, for out-of-town correspondents trying to get a handle on O, Miami’s offbeat take on all things poetry, the city of Miami featured as prominently in their stories as any of the festival’s actual programming. Which, in the eyes of both festival director P. Scott Cunningham and the sponsoring Knight Foundation, is precisely the point.

“What O, Miami brought to the picture was the realization of Miami’s cultural promise,” explains Knight Foundation Vice President of Arts Dennis Scholl. “The fact that it was so well received says as much about the evolution of Miami’s arts scene as it does about O, Miami itself.”

This is more than just cheerleading on the part of the city’s boosters. Mitchell Kaplan, who co-founded the Miami Book Fair in 1984, recalls all too well the distance traveled since then. In his own fair’s early days, he met constant resistance while trying to book top-notch writers. He was after Pulitzer-winners; New York publishers heard the word Miami and instead suggested Kaplan showcase their diet book authors and exercise gurus. “No one thought there was an audience for serious literature here,” he sighs.

Dispelling that intellectual skepticism — at home as well as in Manhattan — didn't happen overnight. Which makes Kaplan all the more impressed by O, Miami's out-of-the-gate high profile. The secret to South Florida success? "You've got to make it an event!" Kaplan insists.

To be sure, Cunningham took a cue from Art Basel, whose positioning as a spectacle draws countless folks who rarely set foot inside Miami's art museums. Cunningham went for a similar approach, largely eschewing traditional lecture-hall readings, instead hosting an at-times bewildering schedule of forty-three one-time-only events and twenty-six ongoing projects which stretched across the month of April. It may have been too much of a good thing.

"We did too many events," admits Cunningham. "We were worried about spreading events too thin, that most folks would only be able to go to one big one — which is actually what happened." For the bi-annual festival's second edition in April 2013, Cunningham still plans to keep the overall length at a month, "but heavy at the ends. Most of the middle of the month will be project-based. Any event, no matter how successful, is still reaching a few hundred at best. And then it's gone. Whereas the projects had much more traction online."

Case in point: Both Poetry Ferrari and Poetry Tags, in which Miami artist Agustina Woodgate secretly sewed short poems inside clothing

still hanging on the racks at thrift stores, were hardly intended to sway mass audiences. They made most of their poetry converts one or two bystanders at a time. Yet those two projects subsequently garnered more national — and international — attention than all of O, Miami's other events combined. Woodgate credits the subsequent attention, from viral videos to a glowing write-up in England's influential Guardian daily newspaper, with

“Readings need to be the anchor of the month. But at the same time, we want to cultivate an audience for the projects and make poetry come alive.”

changing her career.

"There's nothing better than a well-read poem," says Cunningham. "Readings need to be the anchor of the month. But at the same time, we want to cultivate an audience for the projects and make poetry come alive."

So, in preparing for the next O, Miami, what are the lessons learned? What worked well? What needs to be tweaked? With \$175,000 in financial support from Knight for 2013, how can the festival get the most "bang" — programming-wise and promotionally — for its "buck"?

In his original Knight grant proposal,

Cunningham wrote of hoping to "reposition poetry as an interdisciplinary field," one that would inject itself into the heart of Miami's arts arena. He's certainly well on his way to achieving that aim — twenty of the festival's forty-three events were joint ventures with local arts institutions, a mutually beneficial arrangement in which each partner brought new audiences to the other. "The cross-pollination was really good," says Wolfsonian-FIU museum director Cathy Leff. "It's a model of how you can get people to work together under a big umbrella." The Wolfsonian's lecture on the language of radical design, delivered by its own curator (and part-time poet) Matthew Abess, not only drew a full house of 110, it was pegged to a museum exhibit of Futurist and Constructivist poetry. "It allowed us to show the relevance of our collection and how it can relate to other arts," says Leff.

An event with two avant-garde Argentine poets at the Museum of Contemporary Art met with a similarly warm reception from that museum's then-associate curator Ruba Katrib, who foresees O, Miami becoming a "glue" between local arts organizations.

One poetry fusion Cunningham is particularly proud of was O, Miami's modern dance performances — Nox and Stax, which featured New York's Merce Cunningham Dance Company and the celebrated poet Anne Carson. Though the pair didn't come cheap. Even with its Design District performance space donated by landlord Craig Robins, the two events still required

Knight to add an additional \$55,000 to its original 2011 festival grant of \$250,000. With only ninety-three attendees at Nox and eighty at Stacks, that works out to quite a sizable cost per head.

“If you look at it that way, the numbers will never add up,” Cunningham says. “Unless you’re doing Broadway, dance is never going to be [cost-effective].” But he sees both Nox and Stax as being stellar in caliber, and a vital ingredient in — as he wrote in his original proposal — helping Miami “to shake its identity as a place where world class cultural events don’t occur on a regular basis.”

“I had so many people approach me afterwards and say ‘I’ve never read contemporary poetry, I only came because my girlfriend dragged me here to meet James Franco. But that was awesome!’ ”

Accordingly, for 2013 Cunningham intends to push harder for his more thematically “difficult” programming. Only sixty-three people turned out for “Poetry and Violence,” what he deems O, Miami’s best reading, and one that moved the audience to tears as poets Brian Turner, Jill McDonough, and Raúl Zurita discussed their experiences, respectively, fighting in Iraq, working with death-row prisoners and surviving

torture at the hands of the Pinochet regime in Chile. The subject matter may initially seem like a tough sell. But Miami is a city which, all too sadly, is intimately familiar with the legacy of political violence — as several generations of exiles from Latin America and the Caribbean can attest. With the right promotion, the event’s turnout should’ve been standing room-only, a judgment Cunningham agrees with.

“We need to believe in our own programming,” he says. “We were afraid it wouldn’t reach a larger audience, so we didn’t try to reach a larger audience. And so it didn’t.” By contrast, Cunningham holds up the example of a special edition of the New World Symphony’s “Inside The Music” series, which explored the intersection of classical composition and poetry. Despite being held on a Tuesday night, 510 people attended, the largest crowd the Symphony had ever seen for the series — a feat Cunningham attributes to the Symphony’s excellent in-house marketing. It’s a symbiosis which has continued: An April 2012 Symphony performance also featured the New York-based poet Malachi Black — brought to Miami for a reading and week-long residence by Cunningham’s University of Wynwood.

In further evidence of continuing partnerships, Black’s lodging was provided by South Beach’s Betsy Hotel. Owned by the son of acclaimed poet Hyam Plutzik, the Betsy has begun regularly holding public poetry events with Cunningham, offering a space on Ocean Drive that is (in keeping with O, Miami’s branding) anything but staid.

Of course, nothing helps marketing like the strategic deployment of a celebrity. Such was the thinking behind O, Miami’s booking of actor James Franco. On paper, it was an inspired move: Franco holds a unique position as an object of fascination to both Hollywood and the avant-garde precincts of the art world, simultaneously co-hosting the Academy Awards and filming his own experimental shorts, pursuing an MFA in art at Yale in between major studio movie shoots, and writing his own verse under the tutelage of one of poetry’s most respected names, Tony Hoagland. With his ability to titillate both the paparazzi and the literati, Franco’s Miami reading alongside Hoagland seemed tailor-made to the festival’s mission of enticing new crowds.

Alas, Franco’s plane was delayed by stormy weather, diverted to Orlando, and then further waylaid as airspace was shut down in Miami while President Obama flew in and out. By the time an exhausted Franco finally arrived, four hours past the event’s starting time, half the audience of 490 had left. In the meantime, O, Miami publicist Lisa Palley had been tasked with crowd control. It wasn’t pretty. “I had to deal with the mothers who brought their teenage daughters!” Palley laughs. “They were screaming at me!”

“It was a bummer,” Cunningham concedes, as well as a lesson in travel logistics. But despite the snafus, Cunningham says Hoagland made a host of new fans that night: “I had so many people approach me afterwards and say ‘I’ve

never read contemporary poetry, I only came because my girlfriend dragged me here to meet James Franco. But that was awesome!”

The same dynamic played out online: As pro- and anti-Franco partisans duelled on Twitter and in newspaper article comments, the festival received a fresh wave of free publicity. The marketing take-away for 2013 is clear: Controversy isn't necessarily a bad thing. And even if they're late and do little more than politely sign books, booking a celeb works wonders.

“A new generation of Miamians is defined by a sense of looking forward and building something.”

Of course, it's not enough to merely grab an audience's attention. O, Miami then has to physically steer them to its events. In that respect, festival advisor Tom Healy pointed to the fest's “too clever and not all that useful” website as a “symptom” of confused messaging: Hoping to get a quick overview of the festival? Or even plot out a schedule more than a day in advance? Good luck with that online.

Likewise, the scattered nature of O, Miami often left casual fans of a single event wondering how to follow-up.

“Our narrative was like opening a box of chocolates. Even if you find one you like, you don't know where you can find it again,” Healy says. “If people ask ‘Where is the festival?’ there needs to be a place they can just walk into.” He hopes that, just as the Miami Beach Convention Center serves as a week-long physical center for Art Basel, the New World Center and its outdoor park can act as a home base for O, Miami.

Moreover, as much as he enjoys the accidental discoveries behind the fest's projects, “you have to prep for these experiences.” Otherwise, it's the veritable tree falling in the forest, he says. Case in point, the poetry banner flown across the sky above South Beach: “I introduced the poet laureate that afternoon, and no one in the audience even knew about it — and these were the most poetry-oriented people imaginable!”

Still, for all his emphasis on outreach, Healy says the tail should never wag the dog: “It's a question of popularity versus purpose.” In fact, Cunningham argues there's a ceiling to just how broad O, Miami's appeal can be — at least if it's going to be “world class.” Romero Britto may be Miami's top-selling artist, but don't expect Art Basel's organizers to ever allow his critically-dismissed paintings inside their fair. Likewise, for all the rhetorical appeal of O, Miami's stated mission of introducing all of Miami-Dade's 2.5 million residents to a poem, Cunningham's populist vision has its limits. By enforcing an aesthetic line, he believes “attendees of cultural events such as the Book

Fair and Art Basel will have a new event to mark on their calendars.”

Which begs the larger question: Can O, Miami eventually super-charge the city's literary scene the way Art Basel has kick-started its art scene? Should we anticipate a crush of poetry fans corralled before a velvet rope, trading gossip on the latest mogul to commission a six-figure personalized stanza?

“You're never going to get dozens of private jets flying into Miami for a poetry festival,” Cunningham scoffs. “That's fine. That's not where the value comes from.”

Besides, argues Borscht film festival director Lucas Leyva, comparisons to Art Basel — or any other festival — are off the mark. “So many previous cultural events were defined by Miami trying to be New York,” Leyva says. “This city has its own weird personality, and it needs to have events and institutions which match that.” A Kendall-native and filmmaker in his own right, Leyva may be a decade younger than Cunningham, but he shares the same excitement over Miami's inchoate artistic ferment. “A new generation of Miamians is defined by a sense of looking forward and building something. We don't know what it is yet,” Leyva says, “but defining that new cultural identity is what excites so many people down here now.”

Analysis Highlights

The Challenge

Despite having one of the country's largest annual Book Fairs, Miami maintains a reputation as a tropical city where the literary arts are still fighting for their place in the sun. Modern poetry — often seen as inaccessible and forebodingly academic, even by many devoted literati — has an even tougher fight in reaching Miamians. Yet in a world increasingly dominated by text-based screens and flooded with emails, instant messages and Tweets, poetry also seems like a natural fit. So how to bridge the gap?

The Initiative

In 2011 Knight Foundation awarded P. Scott Cunningham's University of Wynwood a grant to enable the launch of O, Miami—a biannual poetry festival unlike any literary gathering Miami had ever seen. Interdisciplinary in structure and playful in spirit, O, Miami partnered with arts organizations across the city for a month's worth of unorthodox poetry events—and often unorthodox venues, from outdoor restaurants and nightclubs to the street itself. The goal was to introduce a poem to every single one of greater Miami's 2.5 million residents. If Miamians were hesitant about venturing into the world of poetry, then the world of poetry would come to them.

The Impact

It's difficult to quantify precisely how many of Miami-Dade county's residents ended up encountering a poem during the course of April 2011. But if O, Miami missed a few verse-phobic folks, it certainly wasn't for lack of trying: Poems were literally everywhere, from up in the sky to the sides of buses. Moreover, the festival generated the kind of glowing media coverage—both locally and nationally—which most arts groups with far longer histories, and far larger budgets, would kill for. The end result helped nurture an ongoing citywide sense of creative ferment, a palpable feeling that “something special” is happening in Miami.

Lessons

1. Go Big

The annual Art Basel fair, focused on avant-garde art, draws thousands of locals who rarely, if ever, set foot inside Miami's art museums. The key? A sense that Basel is a special event, a must-see spectacle. O, Miami cultivated this same offbeat air, putting a bullhorn-toting poet in a Ferrari, hiring a plane to trail a poem banner high above the sands of South Beach, and pulling in attendees who would otherwise run screaming from a traditional poetry reading.

2. Partner Up

By staging events with partner arts organizations, each group brought a new audience to the other. And by inviting these partners to shape each event's actual content, O, Miami was able to spark some genuine cultural cross pollination.

3. Book a Celebrity

Including the buzz-laden actor (and genuine poetry enthusiast) James Franco on an evening of readings was an inspired choice. Not only did it draw in fresh faces, but the resultant press coverage—even negative coverage—sparked a wave of social media discussion that only heightened the fest's profile.

4. Set the Bar High

O, Miami's attitude towards the presentation of poetry may have been freewheeling, but its actual choice of featured poets was carefully focused. In the battle of "popularity versus purpose," purpose always won out. Booked poets may not have always been the most conventionally popular or accessible, but they were the ones the festival's director thought represented the best that modern poetry had to offer. With the ongoing success of Art Basel as a model, the idea was to maintain a critically tough—and subsequently critically acclaimed—aesthetic.