

DID YOU KNOW?

# This MATRIX is Real

by JANET REYNOLDS

**M**ATRIX was first.

Housed in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, MATRIX was the first gallery space in a traditional art museum dedicated to a changing series of contemporary art exhibitions. It is an idea that has since been replicated by more than 50 museums across the United States since MATRIX launched in 1975.

MATRIX has also been home to the first solo exhibitions of many of the world's most important contemporary artists: Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, Barbara Kruger, and Gerhard Richter, to name just a very few. All told, over 160 emerging artists have been exhibited to date.

"It was considered groundbreaking," says Patricia Hickson, the museum's curator of contemporary art. "Most encyclopedic museums never had exhibits with contemporary art at that time. It was not part of the canon. This was the first time putting contemporary art in dialogue with the storied collections of the Wadsworth Atheneum."

Andrea Miller-Keller was there at the beginning when then-director James Elliott conceptualized the idea. She wrote the National Endowment for the Arts grant that enabled the idea to become a reality.

"Back then, contemporary art had no secular place in any art museum," Miller-Keller says. "[MATRIX] was that bridge between a traditional art museum and a desire to share contemporary ideas."

Miller-Keller ultimately became the first MATRIX curator, a position she held for 23 years. In that time, she considered helping the public understand contemporary art as one of her main functions. "Traditional art is always soothing and makes you feel elevated," she says, "and contemporary art is often challenging and makes people feel confused. My number one job was to dispel the confusion."

To that end, a MATRIX exhibition has always been multifaceted. Miller-Keller made sure exhibitions included publications and handouts as well as gallery talks. "No one should walk into a room and feel lesser because they don't get it," she says. "My mission was always to show the toughest work but to offer the public some explanations." ●

[thewadsworth.org/exhibitions/matrix](http://thewadsworth.org/exhibitions/matrix)



An Andy Warhol exhibition in the MATRIX gallery of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in 1979.

