



Claire Rudd Interviews New **Artadia** Director Carolyn Ramo

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Carolyn Ramo, **Artadia**'s new director, spent the last 12 years of her career in the New York gallery world, first at Nicole Klagsbrun, then as a production director at David Zwirner, and most recently as a partner at Taxter & Spengemann. When they brought her on board at T&S, Kelly Taxter explained, "Carolyn brings a lot of business acumen, hustle and practical knowhow to our sometimes drifty ideas." When asked why she was the right fit for **Artadia**, Carolyn emphasizes not only her management experience, but also her sales experience and her network. Sales translates well to the cultivation of individual donors, she points out, and it sounds like she plans to leverage her network into a higher profile, more support and new partnerships for **Artadia**. Carolyn does not dwell on the differences between commercial and nonprofit art worlds. The collectors she has worked with in the past are interested in supporting artists in much the same way as **Artadia**'s supporters, she says. Likewise, her mission, first as a gallerist and now at **Artadia**, is the same: to further artists' careers.

In anticipation of this year's Houston award cycle (September 24 deadline), Claire Rudd caught up with Carolyn to ask about her transition from the commercial to the nonprofit art world and the direction she'll be taking **Artadia**.

Claire Rudd [Rudd]: So Carolyn, how long have you actually been in the building at **Artadia** now?

Carolyn Ramo [Ramo]: It's been about five weeks now.

Rudd: Ah, so just long enough to realize exactly how much there is to do.

Ramo: Exactly. It's overwhelming in a good way. It's exactly what I expected in terms of the challenge, it's just getting it done.

Rudd: Taxter & Spengemann closed at the end of 2011. What prompted your move to the nonprofit world?

Ramo: I never expected Taxter & Spengemann to close for reasons outside our control. It created a pause in my career that really affected my decision. I had worked with so many really fantastic artists. At the end of the day, what I took from those experiences is how much I really, at my core, love to help artists. Initially I thought I would move to another gallery, because that's where I was comfortable, and because galleries provide essential support to artists. But through my conversations with Chris [Vroom] and my exploration of **Artadia**, I became more interested in these alternative models, like **Artadia**, that very rarely exist in the art world. **Artadia** has really looked at the art world as a whole and tried to find other ways of doing things. This is an opportunity to take an organization that has been very successful

over the past 13 years and breathe new life into it. You know, the New York art world can be quite small, even though its reach is so large, and this is an opportunity for me to take my connections there and pair them with Artadia's connections all over the country. Also, this position allows me a lot of freedom because the organization is small and flexible.



Ruud: What are the most relevant skills and experiences you bring to this job from the for-profit world?

Ramo: I don't aspire to be a curator, so I was looking for opportunities that were more on the strategic side of supporting artists. I see fundraising as similar to sales, so I bring that. The collectors I've been privileged to work with are people who love art and love supporting emerging artists. That's an easy transition.

Good dealers help artists with their careers, and that's how I see my role at Artadia, as well. We're providing assistance to artists at a really pivotal time in their careers, after they've decided they must be artists, they have to be artists, and they don't have the career that they're hoping to have yet. That's a lot of what galleries do, too.

Ruud: And what about the biggest differences in the work?

Ramo: I thought I would feel like it was a bigger transition, but the differences have turned out to be smaller than I imagined. One thing I've noticed is that I'm used to having a daily interaction with the artists I represent, but we have over 300 artists in the Artadia network and the majority of them aren't located in New York. It's a different experience, in terms of how to help everybody individually when you're providing assistance in a more systemic and less personal way.

Ruud: What experience and skills do you have that might make you a better fit for the job than someone who's spent her career in nonprofits?

Ramo: I wouldn't necessarily say *better* than someone who's spent her career in nonprofits, just different. I already mentioned my sales experience and my wealth of relationships. One of the big tasks for Artadia is to get the word out about what we already do so well. The higher profile Artadia has, the more we can do for the artists in the network, and that's something I can hopefully help with.

Ruud: Have you spent much time in Houston in preparation for the upcoming deadline?

Ramo: I haven't been there yet. We are doing something a little unusual right now: two back-to-back award cycles in Chicago this month and Houston next month. In the past, we've spread cycles out a little more, but because of our new alliances with art fairs, that's the way the schedule worked out.

Ruud: Tell me more about your alliances with art fairs.

Ramo: We have worked with Expo Chicago to do an exhibition of the work of the 15 finalists for the Chicago Artadia award at the fair. It's a wonderful opportunity for the work to be seen by international curators and collectors who come to town, and also a fantastic way for the artists to feel like part of their community. We'll be doing the same thing at the Texas Contemporary in Houston. Our second round in Houston will be a few days before the fair opens, and we'll have a booth of selected works from finalists at the fair and an opportunity to talk more about what Artadia does and its mission. We'll have programming. The curator judges will be speaking, as will Chris, Artadia's founder, and probably a slideshow of the finalists' work to really give people access to our process.

Ruud: I'm interested in the non-profit-for-profit partnership.

Ramo: You know, I'd been working in galleries for 12 years prior to taking this position, so I really know that world very well. I know that this is an audience that is really open and excited about this mission. We're pretty well known in the cities in which we give awards, and these partnerships with fairs are a wonderful opportunity for us to expand our audience. That's one of my main goals for **Artadia** in the coming years.

Ruud: Expand how?

Ramo: Expand in all sorts of different ways. Our purpose is to provide as much support for artists as we can, so that might mean adding more cities, developing more programming in the cities we are already in, more targeted and streamlined programming in terms of talks or events that can be transported anywhere and happen anywhere. Additionally, we have a new exhibition space in Dumbo which provides a platform for award artists to exhibit their work and have another dialogue. The communities we work in are very developed and we have the opportunity to create more opportunities for exchange among them.

Ruud: So if you're talking about moving into new cities, can you tell me upon what criteria you choose to invest in a city?

Ramo: You know, San Francisco was one of the original cities. Chris was living there and saw the need for a bridge between the artists who lived there and the rest of the country. Certainly, we look for cities that have a large artistic population. Also, you need board members, collectors, foundations and other supporters in the city who get behind **Artadia** and want to support growth and creative development in their own communities. We're certainly looking at bigger cities and thinking, what would it mean to have **Artadia** in LA and New York down the line? I think it would be a huge undertaking, but would offer significant opportunities for dialogue between the existing communities in the **Artadia** network and new ones to come.

Ruud: United States Artists does a similar unrestricted artist grants program, all over the country including New York and LA.

Ramo: Exactly, there's no denying that that's where a large number of artists live. **Artadia** has so far focused on other cities, but the goal is to have a national and eventually an international impact for these artists. We're living in an age in which there are opportunities to connect online, and artists are essentially nomadic.

Ruud: But if USA is already doing this work nationally, what really distinguishes what you guys are doing from what they're doing? Do we need both in all cities?

Ramo: The more opportunities for artists the better. Once an artist is part of our network, we provide a lot of resources—residencies, exhibition series, programming series, a website providing opportunities to present work, professional services. Because of my background in commercial galleries, I am able to have educated conversations with artists who want to think strategically about their careers. I want to expand all of these opportunities that we provide to artists in our network. I'm thinking about things like extending our residency program outside New York and providing more opportunities to connect and present work through our website. I don't see us in competition with other foundations that are providing grant opportunities. The more resources for artists, the better.

Ruud: I wonder about your exhibition program. You've said artists are nomadic, but the two shows I know about—the exchange between Boston and San Francisco and the first show in your new Dumbo

space, of former **Artadia** award artists who currently reside in New York—are completely based on location.



Ramo: Our exhibitions exchange was a really wonderful way for people to see what was happening in different cities. Our curator-jurors are from all over the country. When curators participate as jurors, they have a chance to see new work from cities they might not otherwise, and it's a really wonderful and useful experience for them. We looked at that experience and wanted to continue that kind of exchange in other ways.

Ruud: But how useful is location as a curatorial premise?

Ramo: We are not limited to that, by any means. We've done it this way a few times because it's a way for artists to strengthen their sense of community with one another locally, and it's a way for them to meet curators and gallerists from different cities. So many of the artists have said that they would like to be able to show work in New York so that they can be exposed to the wide national and international audience that comes through the city. That's the reason our partnership with fairs is so exciting. So many gallerists, curators and collectors come through, both locally and nationally and internationally.

*Ruud: So before we wrap up, can you sum up, what's at the top of your strategic to-do list at **Artadia**?*

Ramo: There is fine tuning to do, looking at everything we've done in the past and making sure we're doing it in the best possible way. And then there is the work of raising **Artadia**'s profile to increase the value of the network as a whole to the artists who are in it. In the coming years, we are looking to expand our awards program to additional cities so we can impact the lives of more artists and create a broader dialogue across our network.

Claire Ruud has an M.A. in art history from The University of Texas at Austin and an M.B.A. from The Yale University School of Management. She thinks a lot about feminism, queer theory and financing contemporary art production.