Ann Gund has been dedicated to Skowhegan for over three decades, serving as a Trustee for the past 30 years. We sat down with her to talk about her experiences with the School over all this time, and what she hopes for its future.

SKOW: You have been a Trustee for 30 years, but you were involved with Skowhegan even before that. What brought you to us? How has Skowhegan kept you interested for so long?

AG: I came to New York in about 1973 and I had an empty plate. I had come to work for I.M. Pei and Partners, and also take painting and etching at the Art Students League. A friend of mine asked me if I wanted to join the Junior Committee at Skowhegan and made me chairman of the costume ball at the Armory. At the time the head of the committee was Jane Richards; I went to the event with a blind date named Sandy Milliken. His mother was a Trustee, but, at the time, Sandy had no interest in getting involved in Skowhegan. Eventually, I got him on the Junior Committee and he was made a Trustee before me. (He later went on to become Skowhegan’s President and then its Chair!)

In those days the Skowhegan offices were in a brownstone on the Upper East Side. We would go in and work—we would answer phones, address invitations—we did all sorts of stuff. Eventually I was asked to be a Trustee. The Junior Committee didn’t exist for much longer after that. Then, in the late 90s, Bailey Symington resurrected it.

For a while after I became a Trustee there was real turmoil on the board. There was divisiveness and we started to have pretty bad financial problems. There were people who were really mad, and it took a long time to repair the damage done. Dealing with those problems kept everyone engaged, but during that time I did think it might be a good time for me to leave. Part of the problem was that it was (and is) hard to raise funds for a project that is out of town and out of sight—and of course at that time there was no internet, and we were doing things at “the kitchen table.” We all pitched in. It was good that I lived nearby! I have to say that when it started to get back on track it was really great. So many good things have happened at Skowhegan!

Before I became a Trustee there was a charrette for the design of the sculpture shop which was such fun! The jury was John Morris Dixon (former editor of Progressive Architecture), Charles Moore, Robert A.M. Stern, and Graham Gund. Alex Katz and Sidney Simon were also on the jury to represent Skowhegan. I went to Skowhegan for the charrette as Graham’s date and spent a weekend watching the process. It was truly fascinating and it got me hooked. The architects involved were fiery, and some who didn’t get the job got really mad. There was stomping around and screaming in the Fresco Barn.

SKOW: I want to go back and touch on something you mentioned a few minutes ago—the fact that Skowhegan can be sort of “out of sight, out of mind.” I am really struck by the dedication people have to Skowhegan when they only get to see the program in action once a year. How is that different from other nonprofits you are involved in, and is that one weekend a year enough?
AG: Oh, I think it is enough, because even if you didn’t go, you’d understand the purpose of Skowhegan and the meaning it has for the artists. A lot of the other boards I sit on are “rubber-stamping” boards. There is no input, and you might as well not be there. Meetings are curious, but no one really gets to make any decisions. As Skowhegan board members we do make decisions, which I think is good.

SKOW: You are involved with many nonprofits, and no doubt each of them is different. How would you describe Skowhegan’s personality?

AG: It’s great, because I think the people on the board are really dedicated to the cause. With many other nonprofits, trustees may be dedicated, but they are also on those boards because the institution has a big name. Often people serve on boards to have something to add to a resume, and they don’t do any work or come to any events. It’s frustrating. I’ve been very careful about the boards I’ve gone on and I really do try to work a lot for whatever the cause.

SKOW: I’ve seen some crazy photographs of parties in the Park Avenue Armory. They are pretty different from today’s Awards Dinners. Tell me about those parties.

AG: Oh, they were wild. One year there were elephants, and a designer (I can’t remember if it was Bill Blass or somebody else), lent us some models who rode around on them. There was a keeper who came along with the elephants wielding a pooper-scooper, but no one had thought about the other issue… and dancing was a little slippery and problematic! But it was amazing. People didn’t know about Skowhegan but they sure knew about those parties. At the very first one famous artists designed the costumes which they wore. After that the parties weren’t quite as elaborate. But I remember one guest who was dressed as an undertaker and pushed his friend around in a casket all night. It couldn’t have been much fun for the guy in the casket—he couldn’t even have a drink because he had to stay in character—but it was a great costume. They were great successes and we raised a heck of a lot of money. Everyone got into it and dressed up, and we filled that huge space in the Armory. Those parties went on for a few years after I got involved, but then ended, I think because of cost. The dinners—always at the Plaza until recently—are another story: they attract a totally different crowd.

SKOW: You and Graham collect. Do you think being part of Skowhegan has affected the way you look at collecting?

AG: Not so much these days, but when we’ve been up to Skowhegan we’ve loved what we’ve seen. One year we bought something from a participant that he wasn’t planning to sell but we couldn’t resist it and he relented. It was a pink and purple polka-dot plywood cow that came with its own plywood grass. We had it in our back yard for years. We lived across the street from an elementary school and the kids just loved it. They would ask permission to come into the yard to look at it. It finally succumbed to the elements.

SKOW: Did you know any of Skowhegan’s founders?

AG: I knew Sidney Simon, who was wonderful. A little cantankerous, but wonderful! Getting to know one of the creators of the place was terrific. He was so vested in Skowhegan and loved telling stories about the early days. Knowing Bernarda Shahn was also fabulous. In addition, I got to know Sidney’s son, Mark, who I adore. Mark, an architect, is a member of the AIA so together we planned a joint seminar at the New School with panels of artists and architects, and tours given by O.K. Harris, Brendan Gill, and others. It was a great hit… maybe we should try to do something similar today.

Above / Ann Gund at the 2009 Awards Dinner / photo by Teri Slotkin
**TRUSTEE SPOTLIGHT**

**CONTINUED**

**SKOW:** Are there any experiences with Skowhegan artists you’ve had over the years that stand out to you?

**AG:** One of my favorite stories about the Skowhegan experience is going up to campus one year and meeting an artist who lived under the Brooklyn Bridge and only painted pictures of under the Brooklyn Bridge until about his third or fourth week at Skowhegan when he suddenly noticed the cows in the pasture. After that he started painting the landscape, and it’s a case in point—you try something new up there. Many of the artists can’t help but be affected by the landscape and by the experience of being out from under the thumb of a teacher or mentor and being at Skowhegan with no one leaning over you telling you what you are doing is wrong. This is really key.

Also, once when I was on campus a few years ago, we climbed the hill to watch one of the participants un-bale a huge block (about 8’ square) of recycled/flattened plastic containers she had gotten from a recycling center. The event was filmed as the containers cascaded in weirdly slow motion onto the lawn. It was not only beautiful but it smelled good (detergent, etc. from the containers)!

And who can talk about Skowhegan without mentioning the costume parties on campus?! It’s great to see how creative the artists get in making their costumes, and manage with so few resources and very little time! Since they are so busy doing everything else, many don’t start until the day before!

**SKOW:** My hope for the future of Skowhegan is that you’ll be involved for another 30 years. What is your hope for the future of Skowhegan?

**AG:** Certainly in the short term we have to figure out ways to balance the budget. And we will; I know we will. In the longer term, I don’t want it to change. I think it’s really good. Why fix it if it’s not broke, as they say. Clearly one thing we need to do is have more single rooms for participants and maybe to upgrade more of the facilities. But other than that, I don’t want it to change.

I’m convinced that one of the best things about Skowhegan and why it works so well is that we have a Board of Governors and a Board of Trustees. I don’t think there are a lot of other institutions that have that setup. They may have artists on the board of trustees, but in our case it’s really important to have a Board of Governors who feel they are respected and heard, and they are really the ones telling the Trustees what is artistically appropriate, because while we can appreciate that, we haven’t been there ourselves and we don’t know what the artists’ real needs are.

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Nancy Sloan 20 years  
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Warren Cook 10 years  
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Another exciting thing is the greater involvement of alumni through the Alliance—they are fabulous—and through the website, where artists can add images of their work and list their exhibitions or awards they have received.