

# William Bartman 1946-2005

William Bartman, 58, founder and executive director of Art Resources Transfer (A.R.T.), died in New York City on Sept. 15 of multiple organ failure. Bartman was a creative, unconventional philanthropist whose outsize, high-energy personality fueled his diverse activities on behalf of artists.

Bartman first became involved with art as a collector of contemporary work, after an early career in theater and film. He founded the nonprofit A.R.T. in Los Angeles in 1987 as a publishing venture dedicated to documenting and supporting artists' work. He brought the organization to New York in 1996, opening a bookstore



William Bartman.

and exhibition space in Chelsea. Under the imprint A.R.T. Press, he published monographs on a number of contemporary artists, including Mike Kelley, Vija Celmins, Allan McCollum, Merrill Wagner, David Reed and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, in which the artists played a central role in their books' production. In one of the volumes, Chuck Close interviews 27 of the sitters for his portraits.

The nonprofit A.R.T. gallery, which closed in 2004, presented monographic and group shows, giving exposure to a wide range of artists, with a notable commitment to showing women artists. The gallery did not take a commission, all sales proceeds going to the artists. During its heyday on Eleventh Avenue at 24th Street, presided over by the ebullient Bill Bartman (often dispensing fruit and cookies), Art Resources Transfer provided an informal and convivial meeting place. Above all, it offered a stimulating program of multi-generational (re)discoveries, adding welcome complication to the Chelsea scene.

In 1990 Bartman established Distribution to Underserved Communities (D.U.C.), to provide free books on art and culture to rural and inner-city libraries in the U.S. The innovative program was designed to combat the steady diminishment of public cultural funding in small communities with sparse visual-arts resources. It is perhaps the most far-reaching and effective expression of Bartman's paradoxically populist commitment to the promotion of high art. Many of A.R.T.'s own publications, augmented by publishers' and museums' overstocks, are made available via catalogues to institutions at no cost, with D.U.C. paying even the shipping costs. To date, the program has distributed more than 140,000 books. Here and in his other projects, Bartman achieved a great deal on a relatively low budget; grant money and private donations were often supplemented by sales of artworks from his own collection to keep his various programs afloat.

Born in Chicago and raised in Los Angeles, Bill attended Trinity College in Connecticut, then returned to L.A. to direct, produce and write for theater and film. He wrote and directed the movie *O'Hara's Wife* (1982), starring Edward Asner and Jodie Foster; he also had a minor role in a Claude Lelouch movie. At a federal prison in Lompoc, Calif., he produced and directed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, with an all-inmate cast.

Over the years he had suffered from an onslaught of major health problems that would have deterred an individual of lesser drive and commitment. In 1987, he was diagnosed with an HIV infection and told he had a short time to live. His response was to take a group of friends around the world on the QE2. On his return he started A.R.T., and survived for almost two decades. He had long struggled with a bone infection caused by a skiing accident, which eventually required the amputation of one of his legs. Indulging his theatrical bent, he frequently wore shorts, patrolling the gallery on foot or zooming around in his electric wheelchair, his steel leg intriguingly on display. More recently he was on dialysis, and he also had heart trouble. During the many prolonged hospital stays he endured, he developed his own art form: brightly-colored, tightly-stitched needlepoint abstractions packed with dynamic, angular shapes.

The publishing program and the D.U.C. project continue to function. New books are in the works and the reach of D.U.C. is currently expanding to more and more libraries around the country.

—Elizabeth C. Baker