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**MENTAL  
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# SPIZZ

magazine

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# Herb *and* Dorothy Vogel

## A Story of Art, Passion and Purpose

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” —Mary Oliver

BY BRUCE SCHNEIDER, DC

**T**he sound was captivating. Thousands of syncopated tones darted around in the stillness, staccato rhythms playing amidst whispers of last night’s rain. I walked the trail drawn by the music of an unseen cascade. The trail sloped to reveal the crag, a rugged mass of projecting shelves of dark grey shale and sandstone. Sunlight revealed swaths of copper and brown. Fissures between layers of stone were black in contrast.

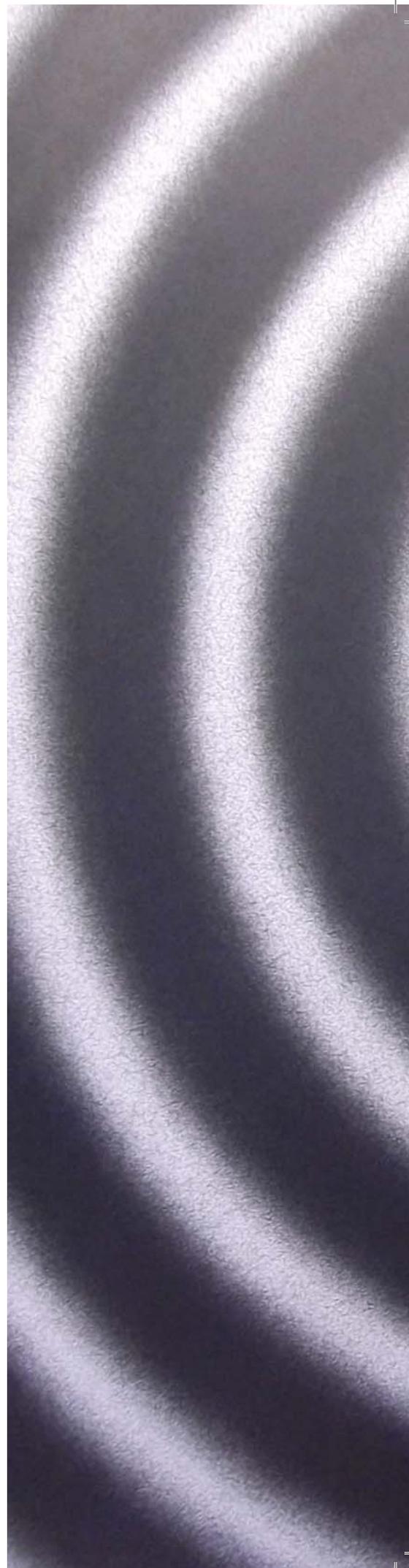
Mosses and ferns softened the majestic solidity of the cliff face, brushstrokes of olive and forest green placed thoughtfully by an unseen hand of Nature. Higher up the sun illuminated moist rock that jutted out as a shelf over which water flowed, a sheet of water that atomized into

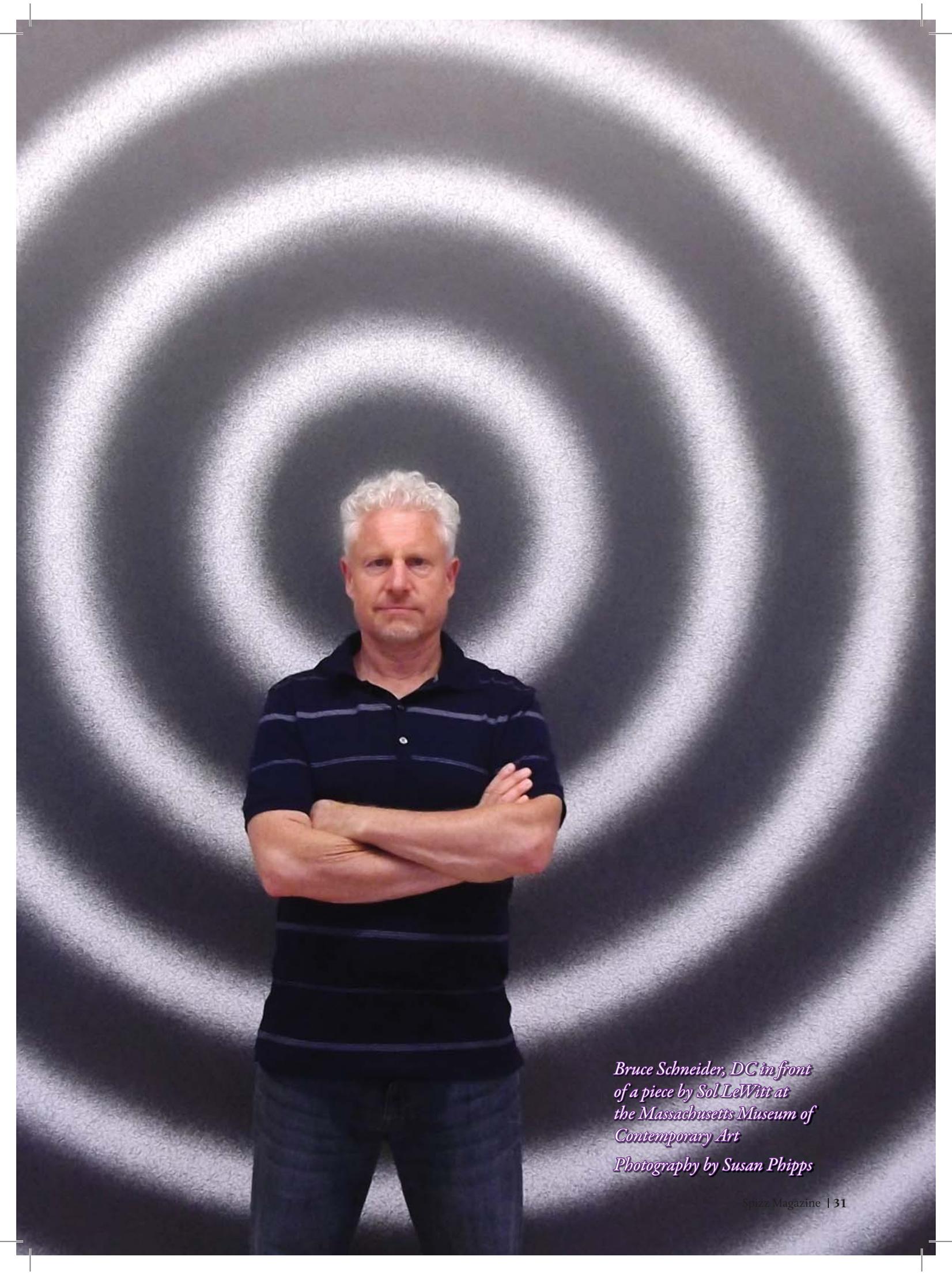
thousands of brilliant droplets before falling on the talus below. A random spray of mist could be seen here and there, accenting the treasure hidden in deep woods that gave rise to extraordinary beauty.

I remembered seeing light like this captured in portraits by Rembrandt revealing the artist’s eye for detail and his ability to see into the heart of people, objects and life.

**“What constitutes art?” I pondered.**

My thoughts shifted to art quite different from the natural beauty I had just witnessed, different from the offerings of Rembrandt and Cezanne, beyond the seemingly mad kaleidoscope of colors and lines seen in the paintings of Pollack. It was the artwork displayed in the cluttered one-bedroom New York City apartment of Herb and Dorothy





*Bruce Schneider, DC in front  
of a piece by Sol LeWitt at  
the Massachusetts Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Photography by Susan Phipps*

Vogel: a small crashed car sculpture, a glazed ceramic rendering of a frog sandwich (with sesame seeds), collections of postcards, a length of orange drapery, words on paper defining the word “nothing,” a framed canvas devoid of any image save for a white background, a twisted metal cylinder painted black. There were paintings created with simple and beautiful lines and blocks of color, intricate patterns drawn in pencil on the bathroom wall, a striking study of a Birman cat. It was the minimalist or conceptual art of the mid-20th century where the idea behind the work of art became more important than the creation of the work itself.

It was called minimal art explained Dorothy Vogel because the pieces contained minimal color and minimal shape. The prolific American artist Sol LeWitt preferred calling it conceptual art because it is “part of a chain of mental process. Eventually it has to find some form.” Sometimes, as in the case of the artist Robert Barry, the form consisted exclusively of words that were applied in various configurations to the walls of a gallery. “Conceptual art uses the words as forms,” said Herb Vogel, “not explaining the work of art but the art itself.”

In LeWitt’s case the work of art was often only conceived by the artist; it was carried out by others. His wall drawings at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art involved nearly six months of intensive drafting and painting by a team of some sixty-five artists and art students. LeWitt provided specific instructions for drawing his intricate lines and patterns with explanatory tables, words and grids. “If these instructions are given to almost anyone, if they understood the language they could do the work,” he said. It was like somebody playing a piece of music. “The notes are there; anyone who can read notes can play the music, but it’s different each time.” The Vogels initially did not understand Sol LeWitt’s work but they saw him as “an original artist,” a respect that formed a long lasting relationship. The year 1965, said Dorothy “was a big turning point in our life because that’s

when we bought the first Sol LeWitt in the collection.”

For a lifetime Herb and Dorothy Vogel bought and collected works of art, storing them in their small apartment in New York City. During the course of more than 50 years they amassed more than 4,700 works of minimalist or conceptual art. Some would call this practice hoarding. Definition: “a pattern of behavior that is characterized by the excessive acquisition of and inability or unwillingness to discard large

**“... delighting in their pets and often visiting pet shops. One friend suggested that there was a connection between this sensitivity and the couple’s bond to the art world.”**

quantities of objects that would seemingly qualify as useless or without value.” Were they hoarders? Possibly. Yet the art world ultimately saw great value in what the Vogels collected. Their works of art can be seen in prestigious museums and galleries throughout the United States.

When you see their faces (a documentary film was made about Herb and Dorothy in 2008) there is no trace of neurosis. In fact they seem thrilled and joyful in the life they chose, a life surrounded by the wonders of art.

“Most of us go through the world never seeing anything,” said the artist Richard Tuttle of the married couple. “Then you meet somebody like Herb and Dorothy who have eyes that see. It’s something that goes from the eye to the soul without going through the brain.” Dorothy Vogel explains that their view of art is dependent on the perspective of the viewer. “Beauty is different from person to person,” she said. “What I think is beautiful you may not think is beautiful.” And what they thought

was beautiful established relationships with artists and museums throughout the globe, all of which was centered around a simple working class life in New York City. Herb was a postal clerk and Dorothy a Brooklyn librarian.

The Vogels broke away from the traditional definition of what it means to be an art collector. The great art collections of the world grew out of private collections formed by royalty, aristocracy, and the wealthy. Wealthy industrialists in the U.S. played a prominent role in the 19th and 20th centuries, and an unprecedented flow of masterpieces from Europe soon filled U.S. museums. By contrast Herb and Dorothy were working class people who sought out the pieces they purchased for no reason other than their passion for art. Their goal was not celebrity or profit. They spent most of their waking hours together visiting artists, galleries and museums in the pursuit of seeing the world as expressed by the people in it.

“I never thought that the artists we collected in those days would become so famous. It wasn’t a goal for us,” said Dorothy Vogel. “We liked the work. And when they got recognition we sort of shared their joy, became like a part of it.” In the 1980’s there was an unprecedented explosion in the art market and prices soared. The devotion that the Vogels had to supporting artists brought Herb and Dorothy into the public eye. They became internationally recognized as collectors of art, showing their work in exhibitions and becoming the subject of feature stories in magazines and newspapers including Art News, People and the Wall Street Journal. Yet they shunned the emerging high finance world of art and continued to live simply and collect art on their own terms, based on what they appreciated and what they could reasonably afford on the salaries they earned.

Dorothy points out that some artists valued this independence. “As the artists became successful they did become of course more expensive, but in many cases they made it affordable for us. I think that the collection was built on the generosity of artists.”



The changing marketplace was not cause for resentment. “Dorothy and I are not selling and buying art only for money,” Herb pointed out, “but I don’t object to other people doing it. The artists have to live and other people have to live.” So what was their goal? Dorothy explains: “Above all...all the rewards we got from collecting art is knowing the artist; getting to know them, understanding them.” This was played out over the course of many

years as the Vogels became involved with the artists whose work called out to them following every step of the artist’s work, every change and mutation the artist went through in the creation of a piece of art. They wanted to share in it.

The independence that was the signature of Herb and Dorothy’s relationship with the world was a product of Herb’s upbringing in New York City where he continued to live his

entire life. The son of Eastern European immigrants – his father worked in the garment district and his mother was a housewife – he was taught to work and pay the bills. “In those days it was a matter of survival or you didn’t make it,” Herb recollected. His interest in art came later. “They didn’t teach me to be cultural,” Mr. Vogel said of his parents, “they taught me to be good. That’s all they knew.” Herb was “good” and he was also rebellious. He never finished

high school because “I hated school. I hated people telling me what to do. Whatever I did...I did without rules of other people. I did it because I wanted to do it. I always was a very independent person and I still am.”

Herb Vogel may have hated school, but he loved learning. He borrowed many books on art from the library and sought out the company of artists. Herb would go to the Cedar Tavern in New York City “where all the artists went to let their anger and knowledge out,” according to Herb. “The major players like Pollack and Barnett Newman would come in very late and they’d drink and argue and fight all night long. I had to go to work.” Work for Herb was a midnight to eight shift at the post office sorting mail after which he would “get three to four hours of sleep and start my day.” Herb Vogel studied American, European and Asian art at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York and also took courses at NYU. “I must say it was fantastic,” he said. He began to paint and draw. Dorothy followed suit and became a skilled artist in her own right. They both agreed that Dorothy’s work was better.

The Vogels delighted in visiting other artists and seeing their work. In time they became more interested in what they saw than in pursuing their own development as artists and the couple decided to abandon their own work in the interest of collecting other people’s art. The criteria for what they bought was simple: They bought what they liked and what they could afford. Some artists were fascinated by what the couple chose to purchase. The piece they bought,” recalled Chuck Close, a friend of the Vogels,” was lying on the floor. It was a souvenir of the process of making the painting. A wad of masking tape was stuck to the front of the piece. When I went to their apartment I saw the thing hanging on the wall and (the wad of masking tape) was still there.” Close, amused by the incident imagined that Herb and Dorothy saw it this way: “If the artist put it there, well by God it was part of the piece.”

The Vogels spent pretty much all of their time together. “That’s the way we like it,” commented Dorothy.

“Unfortunately we didn’t have children, but we had the artwork and lots of cats and my husband has turtles and fish...and we have each other.” The Vogels had a strong interest in animals, delighting in their pets and often visiting pet shops. One friend suggested that there was a connection between this sensitivity and the couple’s bond to the art world. When they approached the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude to look at their work in 1971 the price of the artwork was beyond what the Vogels could afford. There was

**“... the Vogels’ rent controlled apartment was so filled with artwork that the only available space, recalls Weiner was a small patch of wall in the bathroom.”**

a solution. Dorothy explains: “They knew we like cats and they said if we took care of their cat Gladys then they would give us a work of art. So we took care of their cat for the entire summer and they gave us a collage of the Valley Curtain. That was the first Christo work to enter our collection.”

While the landscape of Herb and Dorothy’s daily life was the densely populated backdrop of New York City, they had a deep connection with the natural world. “New York has everything you want including Nature,” said Herb. “City people feel that they’re not close to... that they’re away from Nature. I didn’t feel that way. I like being in Nature. I feel I’m part of it.” The Vogels thrived on being part of things and through the deep friendships they sought out and nurtured they became in a sense the thread that connected the human fabric of art scene in New York. “They’re friend collectors, they’re not collector collectors,” said the artist Robert Mangold. “They’re people who were like family.”

It seems that the definition of family for the Vogels was expansive enough to

include everyone they contacted in their daily lives. Yet it was artists who were their true family.

Herb said this about his co-workers in the post office: “For over thirty years they never knew anything about my art interest until it was in the newspapers and on television.” In the art world it was a different story. The artist Lawrence Weiner sheds light on this phenomenon. “They became extremely famous. Everybody in California knew who they were, anyplace you’d go they knew the Vogels. And when they came to New York they would be desperate to meet the Vogels or go and see this collection.”

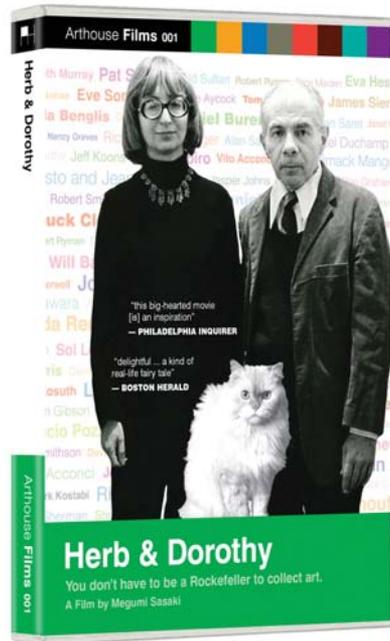
Galleries and museums throughout the United States clamored to meet with Herb and Dorothy in the interest of purchasing their collection. At the time the Vogels’ rent controlled apartment was so filled with artwork that the only available space, recalls Weiner was a small patch of wall in the bathroom. That’s where he installed his most recent piece for the collection. In the end the couple decided to transfer the work to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In 1992 they gave the collection, worth millions of dollars to the National Gallery for free. Dorothy explained that the reason for choosing the museum was based on the fact that it does not sell art from its collection. “Once you give something to them you know it will be staying with them,” she said. The Vogels also liked the fact that admission to the Gallery is always free of charge. Herb and Dorothy both had paying careers with the government – Dorothy worked for the New York City and Herb worked for the federal government - and this influenced their decision as well. Dorothy said of the collection, “We’re giving it back to the people of the United States.”

Jack Cowart, a former curator of the National Gallery who supervised the transfer of the work said that it took weeks to move the collection. In the end the collection filled five giant moving trucks with artwork. “This apartment was basically above critical mass,” said Cowart. “It was holding more things in it than any apartment should ever be asked to do.” In true form the Vogels became friends with the movers and



all the people involved in the transfer of the work. Ultimately the National Gallery received over 2000 works. The remainder of the collection was donated to galleries in fifty states. "I think every culture needs Vogels," said Lawrence Weiner. "Somebody who is more than willing to participate in the growing of a culture and does it as if they're just part of the street life."

It was the relationship between Herb and Dorothy that formed the foundation of their relationships with artists and with the world in general. "We formed the collection together," said Dorothy. "We blended our aesthetics and that's what we got. And we had fun. We're still having fun. And the minute it stops being fun we'll stop." It must have been a shock to Dorothy when Herb passed away in July, 2012 at age 89. I'm sure that she remembers clearly the purchase of their first piece of art, a small crushed-metal sculpture by John Chamberlain shortly after the couple's wedding in 1962. And their honeymoon in Washington, D.C. where they visited the National Gallery of Art, the museum that would become the



major showcase for what the Vogels had collected over a lifetime. I imagine that what she appreciates most is simply their time together, loving each other and the world around them.

David Spangler in his book *The Call* says, "There is a need we all feel to be part of something larger than



ourselves." The Vogels spent their lives filling that need and in doing so have brought together an unparalleled collection of art from our time. We are all the beneficiaries of their inner calling and their dedication to bringing this diverse body of work together for us all to enjoy.

Bruce Schneider, D.C. is a writer and chiropractor living in New Paltz, N.Y. He loves to write the stories of exemplary men and women who reflect back to us our own challenges, courage and passion for life. He is the father of a talented and wonderful teenage son, Benjamin. Bruce travels often to Canada to visit Susan, his sweetheart and muse. ■