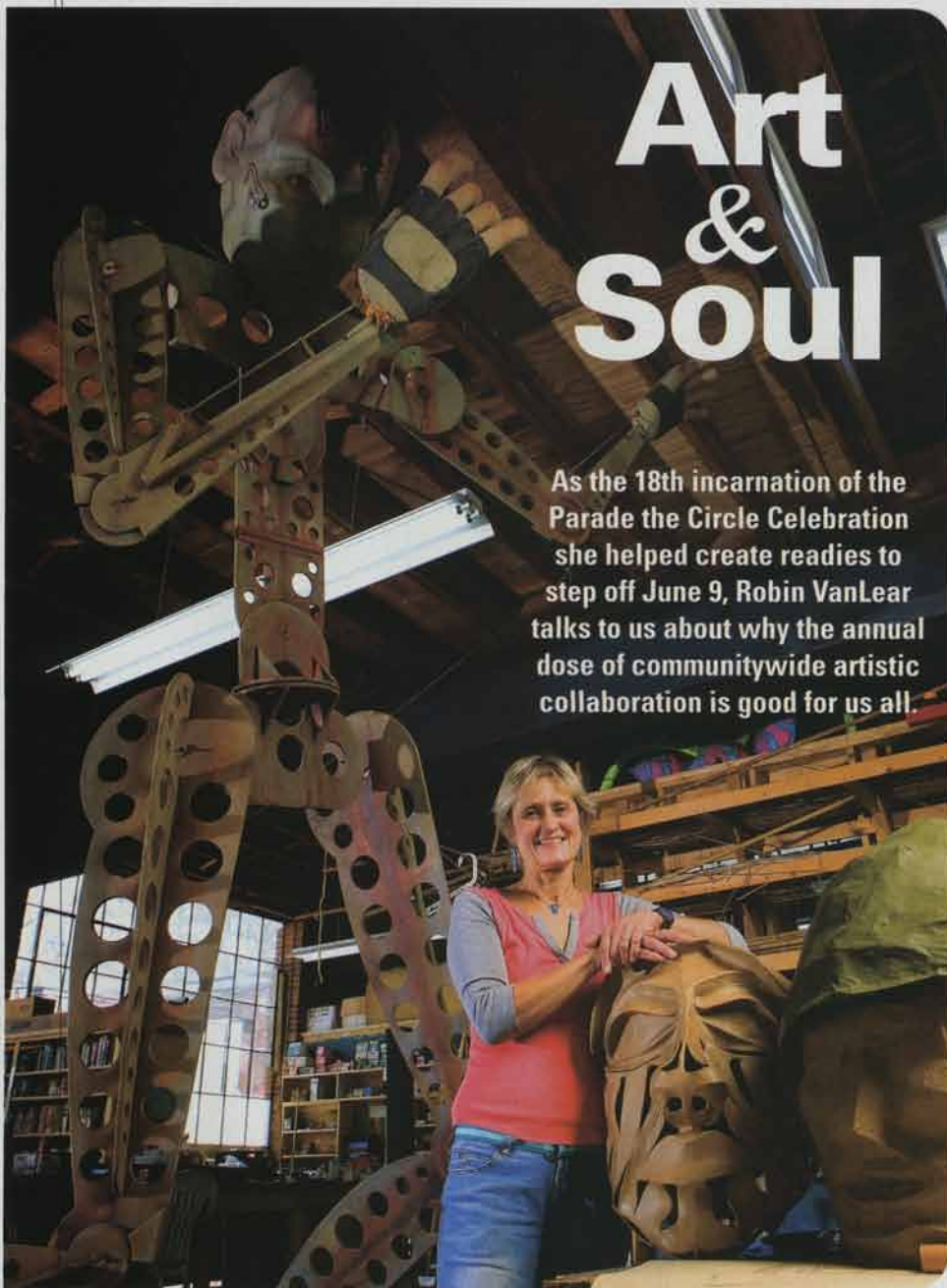


Art & Soul

As the 18th incarnation of the Parade the Circle Celebration she helped create readies to step off June 9, Robin VanLear talks to us about why the annual dose of communitywide artistic collaboration is good for us all.



Robin VanLear can't find a moment to sit down.

A month before Parade the Circle will enrobe University Circle in color and activity, the event's artistic director is being pulled one way, then the other. Saws whine intermittently, phones ring and nail guns whiz and pop. A life-size rhinoceros rests in a corner. A car with rabbit ears hangs from the ceiling.

VanLear is at the center of this storm of activity inside the Cleveland Museum of Art's workshop, a bustling place tucked away in the Flats. When VanLear does find a moment to sit, she effortlessly fields questions and doesn't even blink when someone stops by to measure her shoulder blades.

"It's a pretty more than full-time job," she says. "Art is my life."

In fact, VanLear, who has several art degrees, including a Master of Fine Art in Sculpture and Performance Art from the University of California at Santa Barbara, spends much of her year planning the museum's signature summer event, as well as the museum's Winter Lights Lantern Festival and the Chalk Festival. She also heads a performance-art company, Art Acts.

Yet amid the bustle in her workshop, VanLear is always calm. Only the tiniest smudge of red paint on the shoulder of her T-shirt clues you in to the whirlwind her life becomes in the weeks leading up to the University Circle summer event she helped bring to life in 1990 — a yearly celebration

that showcases the city's cultural hub and known for its impressive midday parade around Wade Oval filled with elaborate costumes and human-powered floats.

The idea was hatched in 1989 after VanLear first crossed paths with representatives of the Cleveland Museum of Art at a conference in California. She showed her new acquaintances photographs of a summer solstice art parade in Santa Barbara for which she was artistic director. She also shared her idea for a larger parade that could serve as a giant interactive event for the community. Soon after, the Cleveland Museum of Art approached VanLear about coming to work here.

"It was a chance to do something, to start an event like Parade the Circle and design it for the community," VanLear says. "It's this idea of getting the community really intricately involved in the museum."

Now in its 18th year, up to 2,000 people participate in the massive parade itself, while an additional 500 are involved in other performances and support for the event. Then, there are the estimated 50,000 who flock to University Circle each year to take in the spectacle.

"Our viewing audience ranges from [ages] 1 to 91, and our participants have about the same range," VanLear notes.

Parade the Circle remains fresh by pairing professional artists with community members, who work together to make the parade's imaginative costumes, floats and movable installations. The Cleveland Museum of Art provides workshop space — fully equipped art studios, really — where anyone is welcome to develop ideas for the parade. Whether it's sculpture and masks or puppetry and stilts, artists help each participant mold his or her vision.

"If you get artists and community members who are not necessarily artists working side-by-side, they both develop more of an understanding between each other," VanLear says. "You start to realize that people who are not artists are not necessarily not creative. A lot of times the most interesting thing that may come out of a year's parade might be done by people who, most of the year, aren't even artists at all."

The core group of artists, technicians, costumers and builders who produce the parade are close. VanLear's husband, artist Jesse Rhinehart, is the production supervisor and their daughter, Story, choreographs, plays in the steel-drum band and makes costumes.

"The whole parade feels like a family," VanLear says. "Everyone has to pitch in — you're needed here. ... Everybody helps everybody." — TW