

## EMILY O'NEIL

executive director, New Art Center  
Newton, MA

### "I'm a visual learner."

— EMILY O'NEIL

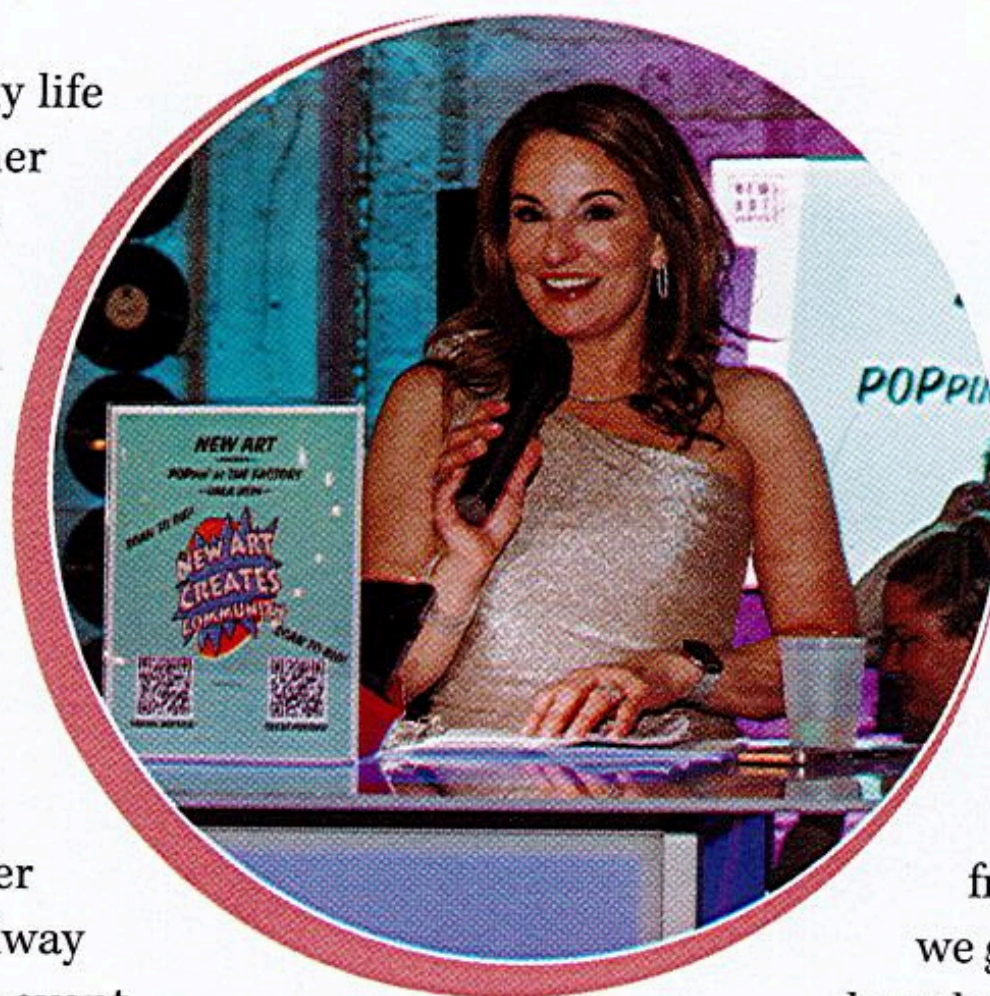
**E**mily O'Neil brings a deep understanding of the cultural landscape in Massachusetts to her position of executive director at the New Art Center in Newton, MA. She was raised in a creative household; her father was a composer, and her mother combined a career in dance with psychoanalysis. O'Neil began her college education on a premed track, but the science requirements were complicated, so she switched gears, earning a BA degree in art history from Bowdoin College in Maine followed by a master's degree in urban policy from Tufts University. Her thesis on the value of art education in Boston's public schools established the groundwork for her still evolving career.

O'Neil credits long-time Boston gallerist Barbara Krakow as an early influence. "She was amazing. It was at the Barbara Krakow Gallery on Newbury Street where I interned for four years and learned about the power of being an advocate for artists." O'Neil went on to work in community development in the 1990s in Boston's South End, before it became trendy, before SOWA. She explored the history of Puerto Rican immigration and the formation of that vibrant aspect of the culture of the South End. "I learned a lot about advocacy and politics at Tufts."

Like many women who face the tensions of balancing family life with a career, O'Neil dropped out of the work force following her marriage and the birth of her children. She elected to be a stay-at-home mom. "It was hard to go back to the work force after 12 years of taking care of my children." In 2011, a friend told her that the American Repertory Theater was looking for someone to run their gala. O'Neil took the plunge, applied, and got the gig. She became involved in working with the Fort Point Arts Community (FPAC) in 2014 where she helped to spearhead 15-20 public art projects. "That was wonderful and exciting. We worked on preserving access for all constituencies. We ran an art lending program to hotels and area businesses. We made sure artists got paid and this generated some commissions." Her administrative responsibilities at FPAC included oversight of Midway Studios, the artist owned co-op, and the popular Open Studios event. She left FPAC in 2019, right before the COVID shutdown.

Now that her three children are all young adults, O'Neil is prepared to focus on her position as the executive director of the New Art Center. Founded as the Newton Art Center in 1977, the organization made a name change in 1994 to represent an appeal to a broader constituency and to dispel the perception that it was a city agency funded by the City of Newton. O'Neil explained, "I've lived in Newton since 2003. I was always aware of the New Art Center, my daughter Chloe encouraged me to take ceramics, but I'm not an artist. I dabbled in photography. I joined the Newton Cultural Council while I was at FPAC. I was on the council when this job opened up in 2019."

The first 10 months after COVID happened brought the economics of her new position into sharp focus. "I understood the necessity of maintaining our cash flow from tuition-based classes. We needed to continue to earn revenue. Two to three weeks before shutdown we pivoted to online marketing and teaching." Her initial mandate was met with resistance. "I was told, 'You can't teach art online!' My answer was, 'You don't have a choice!'" O'Neil acknowledges, "Art is a panacea. It



Above: A portrait of Emily O'Neil by Allison Fenton, Fenton's Faces. Left: New Art Center's 2024 Annual Gala and Art Auction, held at Garage B on April 27, 2024. Photo: Jasmineorges.

engages you. It can save your sanity." But the transition through these rough waters was not easy. "We were financially fragile, we had to furlough some people, but we got lucky. We also invested in our staff. We bought everyone laptops and taught our instructors how to use Zoom."

By fall of 2020 New Art Center reopened with the help of a grant from the Mass Cultural Council and an upgraded HVAC system. O'Neil has survived her trial by fire. "Post COVID changed my thinking. I asked myself, what can we do?" Drawing on her past experience seeing the power of art education in the public school system, O'Neil addressed the anxiety and depression that was manifesting in students by bringing in a registered art therapist for their Tween Program. Her desire was to "destigmatize" mental health.

Although the exhibition program was a huge part of the history of the New Art Center, they don't have enough donors to fund exhibits so the main gallery is now used as classroom space. "We have a satellite space for exhibitions at 245 Walnut Street. It is a corridor with public access where we put on 9 exhibitions a year." Summing up her feelings, O'Neil said, "I've learned to be more strategic and pragmatic. Planning for the future is an imperative. I'm always thinking, 'What's next?' Ultimately, I'm a problem solver. I enjoy that." You couldn't ask for more from the executive director of the New Art Center.