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March 2007

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## PUBLICDEFENDER

Zoe Ryan has written art and design articles and books, helped curate shows at the MoMA and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and, most spectacularly, brought new life to the Van Alen Institute, New York's now-prolific nonprofit promoting public architecture.

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"Design is such an enormous topic that it takes multiple voices to address it," Zoe Ryan says. "You never know what ideas you'll ignite by creating a safe place for people to come and talk and ask questions that seem simple but which open up huge areas of discussion. So I see myself as the facilitator."

Asked her age recently, curator and author Zoe Ryan admitted to 30; she was actually only 29. Since graduating from the University of Sussex in England, Ryan has written art and design articles and books, helped curate shows at the MoMA and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and, most spectacularly, brought new life to the Van Alen Institute, New York's now-prolific nonprofit promoting public architecture. Ryan has been the VAI's senior curator and editor of the Van Alen Report, a small quarterly with big ideas about improving public space. She took on its 2001 redesign, and has directed all aspects of the institute's exhibition development and production; acted as VAI's fundraiser, registrar, and primary publicity person; and organized and managed workshops, symposia, lectures, and panel discussions that draw designers and students of design as well as schoolchildren and the public at large. And this is a partial list. In short, for six years, Ryan has been helping to make this jargon-locked, hermetically trade-oriented nonprofit more accessible while simultaneously developing it as a think tank

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doing in-depth research.

In a field that is often dry, earnest, and grim, Ryan has been playful. With her first solo curatorial project last fall, "The Good Life: Design for All," Ryan explored how public spaces are being designed to fit today's recreational and leisure needs. For this show, Ryan finagled use of the vast, industrial Pier 40 space and had a series of accompanying events—during one of which people used cell phones to play an interactive game on the streets of Greenwich Village. Visitors were able to skate into the show on rollerblades, enjoy a river view and contemplate the multimedia show, or chat with friends.

"I think, with all the security concerns, that it's a difficult time for public space," says Ryan, "but I'm optimistic. People want to reclaim it and there are so many opportunities to make an impact." Ryan started in her new position as curator at the Art Institute of Chicago in November, a post created for her within the department of architecture and design to build the museum's holdings of contemporary design and introduce contemporary design exhibits. By the time she started the new position, Ryan was, at last, 30 years old.

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