

Dan Cameron on the independent curator: portability, populism and glamour

If one were to judge solely from the often skeptical publicity generated by independent curators during the frenzy that defined the art market in the 1980s, it would seem that the survivalist '90s might have already transformed them into an endangered species. However, exactly the opposite phenomenon seems to be taking place. For whatever reasons, museum curators and gallery directors seem to be leaving their jobs (if not always of their own volition) in increasing numbers these days and going through the SoHo/East Village equivalent of hanging shingles out on their front doors. Even more pervasive is the increased number of younger and established artists, critics and movers-and-shakers who are choosing to curate shows along with their other activities, in part because those other activities aren't being subsidized the way they used to be in the all-too-recent past. If anything, "independent curator" may be well on its way to serving as one of the signature professions of the 1990s: portability, populism and glamour all rolled into one.

As one who has succumbed a few times to the lure of the halogen lights himself, I know how difficult it is to deny the unique pleasure that comes from mounting your own show in a sympathetic space, and then having everyone you know come by and see it. For an artist (Haim Steinbach, Jack Pierson, Deborah Kass and David Humphrey have all been on the curator's trail this year) or critic (ditto with Douglas Blau, Terry Myers and Jerry Saltz), curating provides an opportunity to turn one's ideas into a different form than they usually take, allowing one to contribute to the ongoing discourse of art, engage in some self-criticism and throw a good party all at the same time. For the venues—be they museums, galleries, alternative spaces or professional offices, restaurants and stores—that provide the space and (hopefully) the support for curatorial projects these days, there is a chance to associate one's activities with the audience that a well-known guest artist or critic will bring along. But even for those emerging curators like Kenny Schachter, who barter his handyman skills to get landlords to give him an available space for a month or two, or Natalie Rivera, who created a rotating show in a rented booth in the flea market next to downtown New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, being curator is about the need to see a show come

Arranging Things

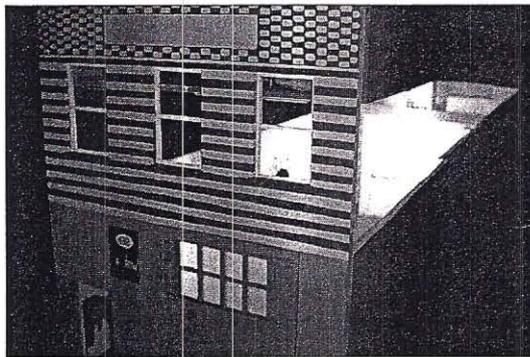
into being, regardless of the hardships involved.

Although independent curators have no doubt existed in some form since the dawn of public art exhibitions, most free-lance organizing of large shows during the first half of this century tended to be at the initiative of artists themselves, aided by their patrons or friends. Were it not for Arthur B. Davies' having been both a full-time artist and independently wealthy, it is highly unlikely that the 1913 Armory Show would have ever taken place. Up to 1980, artist-initiated exhibitions persisted in the form of Colab, the collective of downtown artists whose frustration with SoHo's conservatism led two from their ranks (John Ahearn and Tom Otterness) to the inspired selection of a former massage parlor near 42nd Street for the watershed "Times Square Show." However, the sheer aggressiveness of this gesture helped set the stage for the in-your-face agenda of the '80s, as well as launching curators manqués like Diego

Cortez and shoestring, nonprofit spaces like Fashion Moda and ABC No Rio. Within a few years, just as the Neo-Expressionist paradigm had begun to show early signs of waning and the bohemian capitalists of the East Village started going full tilt, the prototype for today's independent curator was born, bearing the corporate-sounding name Collins & Milazzo.

Although one could easily argue that big-time American curators like Jeffrey Deitch and Mary Jane Jacob

have made more lasting contributions, there is no denying that Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo's dozens of East Village and SoHo installations, showcasing the still-nascent work of artists like Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, Jonathan Lasker and Philip Taaffe, became one of the trademarks of the years between 1984 and 1988 and have been quite influential for the new generation of curators emerging today. Collins & Milazzo's catchy exhibition titles and frequently incoherent catalogue texts suddenly made being an independent curator seem like a creative and adventurous (not to mention profitable) undertaking. Along with other high-profile contemporaries like Christian Leigh and Robert Nickas, Collins & Milazzo's practice in the late '80s did for grass-roots curators what Colab and Fashion Moda did for alternative spaces: it kept them publicly identi-



A scaled-down model of Brooklyn's Four Walls gallery, on view at P.S. 1, demonstrates the sort of spaces young independent curators typically work in.

critical edge

continued from page 52

fied with the further frontiers of art-making, just like the artists whom they were including in their shows.

For the first time in what seems an eternity, a major art institution, Long Island City's P.S. 1 Museum, has invited some of New York's newest curatorial talents to work their magic within its walls, and the resulting "7 Rooms/7 Shows" (through January 10) is more than just "promising." While Nickas convincingly pulls off his role as the seasoned stylist of understatement, he is slightly upstaged by the startling built-to-scale model—complete with miniature group show—of Brooklyn's Four Walls gallery (compliments of its artist/founder Mike Ballou), which stands as a diminutive demonstration of the kinds of spaces young curators and artists typically work in these days. But mostly the exhibition, whose title explains its format, acts as a crucible for the talents of such budding curatorial tastemakers as Alain Clairet, Kathleen Cullen, Lois Nesbitt, Calvin Reid and Schachter, who all seem reassuringly bent on not letting too strong an idea overwhelm the rather limited spaces of the rooms turned over to them.

To Clairet, these limitations meant stripping his room down to bare bones and inviting Anne Deleporte, Sylvie

Fleury and Kirsten Mosher to each occupy a third. To Reid and Schachter, it meant proceeding outward from the center, with the artists contributing accretive installations that appear to have organically grown closer together as the exhibition opening neared. On the other hand, Cullen's "Habitat," based on impressions from Hurricane Andrew's wreckage, creates a harmonious blend out of the unlikely combination of Alix Pearlstein's table of fragile found objects, Jason Fox's funky suede/macramé cubes and L.C. Armstrong's disturbingly cheery abstractions incorporating organic material. And for those who just can't get enough of the New Poverty, up-to-the-minute ordinariness is provided by Nesbitt's "Exposure," which features Peter Fend's obligatory map fragments taped to the wall, a stunningly insipid Jutta Koether journal (complete with desk at which to read it) and relative newcomer Devon Dikeou's seductive arrangement of a pillow, electrical cord and paperback edition of Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. While this exhibition is hardly the last word on this generation, it does provide the closest thing to an educated guess at what the near future might bring. *Dan Cameron is the contemporary editor of Art & Auction.*