

THE EXHIBITION MAKERS

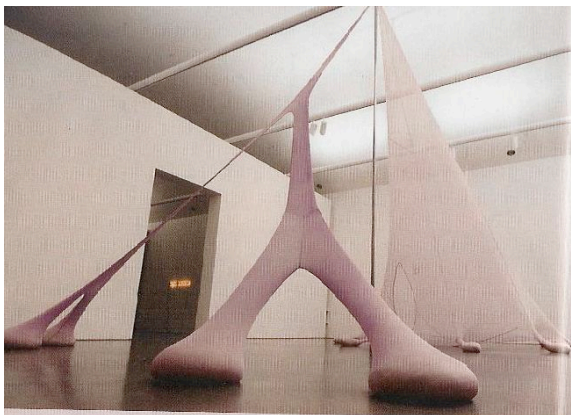
BY WILLIAM HANLEY



Some curators tend to a permanent collection. Others are tasked with organizing temporary exhibitions. *Museums* investigates a growing division within the profession.

In a recent essay about the task of organizing an exhibition, star curator Robert Storr, who directed this year's Venice Biennale, made a point of distinguishing between people he called "exhibition makers," who are responsible for putting together temporary shows, and curators, whose "primary concern" is the "care and preservation of art." Storr's distinction is about much more than splitting hairs over job descriptions: Its significance lies in pointing out how we habitually stretch the traditional notion of the curator to encompass many different practices. And it comes, not surprisingly, at a time of identity crisis for the profession.

From "Think with the Senses—Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense," the 52nd International Art Exhibition, curated by Robert Storr, Venice Biennale: Jason Rhoades, *Tijuantanjierchandelier*, 2006
DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY



Since the 1990s, the number of major international biennials has grown from just a few to over 100, and the ever-proliferating art fairs have begun to feature curated booths and concurrent exhibitions. With so many venues competing for public attention, the sexy, up-to-the-minute show—as opposed to the less glamorous, behind-the-scenes work of collecting—has become the center of many contemporary curatorial practices. It is a trend that has benefited independent curators making timely, idea-driven group shows by providing more outlets for their work. But it has also impacted traditional curators at collecting institutions, who must strike a balance between staying current and cultivating the museum's holdings.

Artists Over Art

As founding director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College—one of the first academic programs geared specifically to curators—and current director of its graduate program, Norton

Batkin has an obvious professional interest in keeping close tabs on the changing practice of curating. “Opportunities for contemporary curators have changed radically over time in part because of curatorial studies programs,” he said. “There are people coming out now who think differently about galleries, independent spaces, and other [non-institutional] situations.”

Those venues have created many new opportunities for curators to come in and create exhibitions, which, according to Batkin, has become a more attractive activity to CCS students than developing collections. While some students remain committed to studying a particular historical moment or body of work, the vast majority prefer

From “Novel Readings,” curated by Florencia Malbrán, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Ernesto Neto, *My Little Castle... Blue* (two times for infinity), 2005
© CHRIS KENDALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TATIANA BONAKIDAR GALLERY

FOLLOWING PAGE
From “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975,” curated by Katy Siegel with David Reed; Al Loving, *Self Portrait*, 1974
GUILD HALL MUSEUM

working with younger artists and developing exhibitions with them. “They’re mostly talking about a younger generation of artists; they’re not talking about people who are heavily represented in collections,” Batkin says.

The Rise of Independents

If the supply of exhibition makers is on the rise, so is the demand. With increasing frequency, galleries, nontraditional venues, and even museums are turning to exhibition specialists, often given the blanket title independent curators, hoping they can bring a specific angle, expertise, or philosophy to the institution’s exhibition program. The assumption is that the independent curator’s specialty—the provocative or timely thematic group show—tends to generate more buzz than scholarly considerations of a single artist.

Indeed, the independent curator lives and dies by the novelty of her ideas. Without the weight of an institution behind them, according to Katy Siegel, a professor of art history at Hunter College in New York who has also organized a number of successful independent exhibitions, “you really have to prepare a very tight idea of the project, because what people are most interested in is your perspective.”

Her touring exhibition “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975,” which debuted at the National Academy Museum in New York last spring, was a particularly successful example. The show brought together a group of painters—some well-known, others not—to tell the story of painting in an era when many considered

the medium to be “dead.” At once cautious and provocative, it earned critical praise as a long-overdue reconsideration of the period, and also won an international roster of venues eager to play host.

Young and In-the-Know

If winning concepts are the freelance curator’s top asset, it also helps to have your finger on the pulse. Amy Smith-Stewart was a curator at New York’s P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center from 2001 to 2005 before opening her own gallery, Smith-Stewart, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side in April 2007. In the interim, she worked as an independent curator for private collectors, art fair-affiliated project spaces, and commercial galleries. In fall 2006, she curated an acclaimed series of three group shows featuring mostly emerging artists at Mary Boone Gallery.

Boone approached Smith-Stewart about doing these exhibitions shortly after seeing P.S.1’s 2005 show “Greater New York,” which Smith-Stewart co-curated. “The veteran dealer ‘was interested in



someone who was of the same generation as the artists in the show, someone who could reinvent her programming," said Smith-Stewart, whose exhibitions for the gallerist focused on youth, glamour, and the grotesque, themes which, together with her knack for spotting emerging talent, have become her curatorial signature.

"At institutions there are hierarchies, politics, budgets," Smith-Stewart said of the allure of working independently. "You have a lot of young people who are really interested in a different kind of curatorial practice—some want to work for institutions, but others want to have a say in what's going on now."

And of course, now that she has become a dealer and can organize shows in her own space, she has greater autonomy than ever before.

Keeping Up with the New Kids

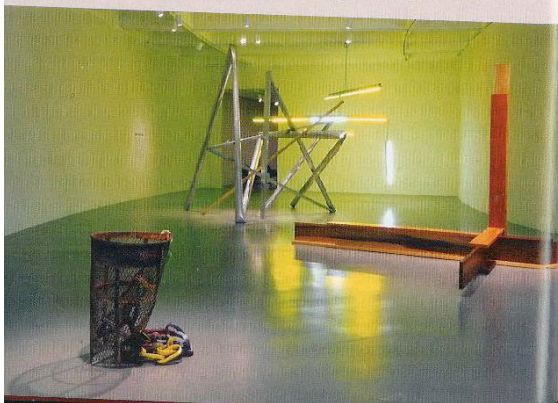
While small-scale institutions and galleries will never have the same

resources as mega-museums like, say, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, by bringing in independent curators with million-dollar ideas, smaller venues can gain a leg up in the exhibition department on institutions with mammoth collections. "Museum curators now have to compete with aggressive, independent spaces that are mounting exciting small exhibitions," said Batkin of the increasing importance of organizing shows for museum curators. "Demands are higher on museums to bring in income from visitors with major exhibitions. They compete with each other for artists and prestige in front of an art-world audience that is constantly asking, 'Who are you showing?'"

One need look no further than the Brooklyn Museum, which has the country's second largest collection after the Met, to see how the growing

From "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture," 2006, curated by Anne Ellegood, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN



importance of exhibitions has impacted curatorial departments. In 2006, the museum officially divided its curatorial department into two divisions—exhibitions and collections—and eliminated, on paper at least, specializations such as European Painting and Asian Art.

While this sort of radical restructuring has yet to be duplicated elsewhere, at other large institutions curators have sought to come up with creative ways to corral historical holdings into edgy contemporary exhibitions.

Curator Anne Ellegood has worked with notable collections throughout her career—including that of über-collector Peter Norton, who is known for acquiring work by emerging artists at strategic points in their careers. Since 2005, Ellegood has been associate curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., where she balances her interest in the new with attempts to delve into the idiosyncrasies of the permanent collection, which contains work from the 19th century through the present and, as with most museums, was assembled by various benefactors and curators over decades.

For her fall 2006 exhibition "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture," Ellegood brought together nine artists in the museum's comparatively large second-floor exhibition space, and then asked three of them—Rachel Harrison, Evan Holloway, and Charles Long—to each curate a gallery adjacent to their own with works from the museum's permanent collection. By considering the pieces each artist chose, said Ellegood, "you could see



From "View Text: Remember Who You Are," 2006, curated by Amy Smith-Stewart, Mary Boone Gallery

MARY BOONE GALLERY

where they were coming from with their own work in a very experiential and visual way."

The exhibition lent contemporary relevance to many works in the museum's collection, including pieces by Lee Bontecou, Constantin Brancusi, and others. It also broke down a conventional separation between new work and its historical antecedents in a way that a non-collecting institution or gallery could never match. And perhaps most significant, it facilitated the Hirshhorn's acquisition of several of the contemporary works in the show.

The Hirshhorn is hardly alone in this practice. At museums throughout the U.S., exhibitions have become a driving force behind growing museums' contemporary art collections. Often, in fact, there is a sort of unofficial quid pro quo, with the museum offering the prestige of an exhibition in exchange for a new, valuable work by the hot contemporary artist-exhibitor. And that is why, despite the recent radical changes within the curatorial field, Storr's distinction between curator and exhibition maker may not hold water for much longer.