

# In an entirely different manner: artist/curators in LA

By David DiMichele

**T**he history of modern and contemporary art has been one of artist-led revolts against prevailing canons, philosophies and institutions, and this history, appropriately, is characterized by what appears to be a phenomenon unique to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the artist-organized exhibition. Historians often mark the beginning of the Modern period with the 1874 artist-organized exhibition of the Independents (known later as the Impressionists) in the studio of the photographer Nadar, and since that time, vanguard artists have participated actively in the exhibition of their own work. The Die Brücke artists organized exhibitions, as did Blaue Reiter, whose members also recorded their ideas in a journal of the same name; the Dada artists staged exhibitions of their own work, as did the Surrealists, who assembled well-documented shows in 1938 and 1942; in New York, the Abstract Expressionists organized the 9th Street show in response to the Museum of Modern Art's lack of interest in their paintings. More recently, the English artist Damien Hirst, now internationally notorious for such bizarre works as a shark in a tank of formaldehyde, began his career with an exhibition of some of his art school friends as well as himself.

Exhibitions organized by artists—or in which artists serve as curators, often pursuing more developed themes—have become a common feature on the landscape of the Los Angeles art scene. Robert Gunderman, for example, a Los Angeles-based artist and gallerist, has been showcasing the work of local artists for the past seven years. He was behind Opus in downtown L.A., the well-known Food House in Santa Monica, Leak, which consisted of one-night exhibitions, and the current Acme, located in an industrial section of Santa Monica.

"It's fucked up," he said, "this unwritten rule book by which the galleries abide, the group of artists they represent, their month-long exhibitions. I don't know where it came from, but it's something we're not interested in adhering to. It's just more of the same boring pattern, so we try to mix things up as much as possible by showing music, film and performance."

The approach taken at Acme by Gunderman and partner Randy Sommer is of a decidedly less structured nature than that of most curators. Group shows have been loosely composed, and the gallery avoids theme exhibitions, which, Gunderman believes, generally are based on the ideas of their curators, with the art itself serving an ancillary or supporting role: "I see my role as one of orchestration more than anything else," he remarked.

This idea is shared by Bill Radawec, who ran domestic setting out of his Mar Vista apartment from 1992 until its recent closure: "To me," he explained, "it is very similar to being a musical conductor. I play my own instrument, of course, but then I like to make a piece using other people's work, as well. I think it offers a very different perspective from that of an art historian-curator, because I know how an artist thinks and feels." Radawec's current project is *Documenta*, an exhibition of twenty-three Southern California artists organized for the Huntington Beach Art Center. The title itself refers to the huge survey of contemporary art held periodically in Kassel, Germany, an international exhibition in which inclusion can be instrumental in an artistic career. "In the eighties, artists appropriated artwork, and now, in the nineties, I'm appropriating a show," said Radawec, who sees the use of a European title for an American art venue as part of a tradition that includes even the naming of such towns as Paris, Texas, and Venice, California.

Artist/curator Dianna Cohen's approach has been rather unorthodox: *Mondo Lot*, a 1993 site-specific event/happening, took place in the parking lot between the galleries in the Broadway complex in Santa Monica. Cohen invited sixty artists to create works that generally departed from their usual modes, resulting in a carnival-like atmosphere of ebullient pandemonium. More recently, she served as co-curator for *Windows*, at Artopia in Hollywood, a gallery exhibition of works that made allusions to, or illusions of, easement openings. Cohen cites an interest in community and communication with other artists as the impetus for her curatorial projects: "My form of curating has to do with pushing limits. I like to get artists to do things that they might not normally do. It's important to me to have an awareness of the artists and what they are doing, which is facilitated through the curatorial process."

Also of an unconventional nature, though in an



Above: installation view of *Self-portrayal*, recently at POST, Los Angeles

bled by Jane Hart. The exhibition was held in a gallery (domestic setting), but as a way of financing the accompanying catalog, Hart conceived of a boxed set of multiple artworks in an edition of sixty, created by thirty-six of the artists in the exhibition. "As funding for the arts becomes more difficult to obtain," Hart said, "artists need to adapt creatively. I would never have applied for a grant to fund the catalog because I wanted it to be a self-generating venture." The edition, in fact, generated as much interest as the exhibition itself. Meanwhile, Hart's current project is an exhibition of artists who "focus on principles of physics to reexamine perceptions of reality and subvert notions of order. It's about abstract ideas as they apply to time, matter and space."

Several artist/curators regard the curatorial process as something akin to the process of making art. Farid Behshid, at Random Gallery in Highland Park, certainly displays such sentiments: "For me, curating is an extension of my own creative process, so I curate a show in the same way that I create a piece of art, beginning with the exploration of an idea. Conventional curators start out with a premise and use the artwork to support a conclusion, whereas for me, the conclusion isn't there at the beginning." In *the Pocket*, Behshid's current project at Random Gallery, defines its context by exhibiting works intended to be carried around in one's pocket, even as it deals with the Duchampian strategy of questioning what art is.

Habib Kheradyyar, a former curator at the Cerritos College Art Gallery, recently opened POST in a downtown building that houses several artist's studios, and he, too, feels that his work as a curator is inextricable from his artistic practice: "Think about all the different aspects that have to be taken into consideration—presentation, lighting, references between the works.

rent abstract painting in Los Angeles and included a small sculptural work by Kheradyyar himself, a ball made of wax that had been scraped from the surface of an abandoned building; this work tied the exhibition together, both formally and conceptually.

Invariably, the issue of whether or not to include one's own work in a curatorial project must be addressed. Some artist/curators, like Gunderman, prefer to keep art-making and curatorial activities mutually exclusive. Most, however, include their own work in at least some of their projects. This may be regarded as inappropriate by members of the art community who perhaps are unaware of the broad history, even during the present century, of artists who have superseded the "academy" by taking the curatorial process into their own hands. The practice is rarely questioned in literature (in anthologies of essays or stories) or music (concerts organized by musicians). For myself, I applaud the initiative of an artist who undertakes the grueling task of organizing an exhibition.

An artist's own work should not necessarily be included, but if, as most artist/curators maintain, curatorial practice is an extension of art-making, it need not be excluded, either.

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