

SPECIAL REPORT CONTEMPORARY ART

The creative landscape of independent curators

LONDON

Demand for freelancers changes, so they find new ways to specialize

BY JANINE ARMIN

You may not have heard of the “precarious age,” but for freelance curators in Europe, the term sums up today’s job market.

In the late 1990s, a strong sampling of their predecessors were snapped up by museums full time and presented atypical ideas to unsuspecting visitors. In 1999, the freelancer Nicolaus Schafhausen took the reins at the Kunstverein Frankfurt, and in 2002 he presented a group show on the nebulous topic of nonplaces. And the former freelancers Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans themselves founded Palais de Tokyo, the Parisian contemporary art center, in 1999 and conceived an exhibition that related deejaying to art.

In the last few years, however, long-term employment prospects have become more limited. Large institutions tend to hire just one or two outside curators to help out on specific exhibitions. So

freelance curators are weathering the economic downturn by creating highly innovative exhibitions for a series of institutions, both large and small.

The verdict is still out on whether the results are more radical than those of their predecessors. According to Jens Hoffmann, director of the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, in the 1990s “freelance curating was considered something that had fresh ideas and was in some way revolutionary.” He added, “All those ideas are now completely part of the mainstream system, so that you don’t actually need freelance curators anymore in order to make radical statements.”

Yet directors at many institutions argue that independent curators’ specialized voices are still crucial. In fact, for its 10th anniversary this year, the Tate Modern in London decided to highlight their contributions. In mid-May, the “No Soul for Sale” show, initiated by the artist Maurizio Cattelan and the freelance curators Cecilia Alemani and Massimiliano Gioni, filled Turbine Hall with nearly 70 independent art spaces and curatorial groups for one weekend.

Museums are also, to some extent, still employing freelancers. “We are still hiring freelance curators if their ex-

pertise is needed,” said Petra Joos, deputy director for museum activities at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, which enlisted the independent curator Ghislaine Wood for the “Surreal Things” exhibition in 2008 and Martin Sonnabend for the “Dürer” show in 2007.

At the Moderna Museet in Sweden, Magnus Jensner, director of the Museet’s new Malmö outpost, said that the “Time and Place” exhibition, which ran from September 2008 to January 2009, provided an overview of “certain regions that had a great creative surge during a certain period” not represented in their collection. For depth of detail he hired the freelancers Luca Massimo Barbero and Paulo Venancio Filho for the Milan-Turin and Rio de Janeiro portions, respectively.

In London, the contemporary art gallery The Serpentine is even more soliciting. Among other things, the institution has freelancers curate annual group shows. “I think it’s very important for institutions to bring in outside curators,” said Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-director of exhibitions and programs and director of international projects. He applauded the “completely new view” offered by the German designer Konstantin Grcic, who structured the mu-

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seum's first-ever design show, which ended in February.

It used to be that "one curator would draw a master plan of the exhibition," said Mr. Obrist. "I've always thought it's more interesting to create a more polyphonic situation where you have several curatorial voices within an exhibition." In 2008, The Serpentine invited RAQs Media, an artist/curator collective from New Delhi, to curate a show within the "Indian Highway" exhibition, which as a whole changes as it travels. "Each time the show goes somewhere, we invite another guest curator to add another layer," Mr. Obrist said.

Emma Lavigne, a contemporary art curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, agreed with Mr. Obrist's mission to support new voices. "We need to leave a lot of space for the freelance curators because it's another view on art," she said. The Pompidou's "Traces du Sacré" in 2008 tackled the dicey topic of religion in contemporary art with 350 works by leading contemporary voices, from Bruce Nauman to Paul Chan. Curated by the museum's own Angela Lampe and the freelancer Jean De Loisy, it met with creative and critical success and included a bronze spiral staircase by the architecture-influenced American artist Corey McCorkle.

Mr. McCorkle's work was also featured by the independent curator Guillaume Désanges in the "Prisoners of the Sun" exhibition from March 2009 through last month at Le Plateau — Frac Île-de-France, one of the country's 20 publicly funded contemporary art museums, many of which hire freelancers for special exhibitions.

In the past few years, freelancers have started to pool their resources during tough economic times. One of the participants at the Tate anniversary show was Latitudes, a Barcelona-based curatorial duo made up of Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa. Their selected artist, Martí Anson, drove a car up from Spain and parked it in the Tate to double as a screening room for Latitudes' projects. This autumn they will organize a show at The New Museum in New York about the decline of the newspaper.

And at the independent Signal Gallery in Malmö, Sweden, the Paris-based artist/curator collective castillo/corrales last month presented "Breaking Point: Kathryn Bigelow's Life in Art," a highly publicized show that tracked the Oscar winner's '70s work with artists like Lawrence Weiner.

One growing source of work for freelancers is biennials, which often use their services. The number of biennials

has leapt from 30 to 100 in the last two decades in areas diverse as Tirana and Athens. Mr. Obrist co-curated the 2007 Lyon Biennial with Stéphanie Moisdon that involved 50 independent curators. This year, Manifesta, an itinerant European biennial for contemporary art, will be curated by three independent collectives and held in Murcia, Spain, from October through January 2011.



LATITUDES (TOP); SIGNAL

Clearly, independent curating is a hotbed of change, which makes it all the more necessary to nail down its history. "There are a lot of past models of experimental curating which will be very useful to helping us invent the future," said Mr. Hoffmann, the Wattis Institute director.

Two recent books — "A Brief History of Curating" (2009), comprising Mr. Obrist's interviews with the 20th century's leading curators, and "A Brief History of Curating New Media Art" (2010), edited by Sarah Cook, Beryl Graham, Verina Gfader and Axel Lapp — provide important insights. But as Mr. Obrist noted, what happens next "depends so much on what will be the future of art."

Top, an installation by Latitudes at the Tate Modern: a car driven from Spain that was also a screening room. Above, a view from "Breaking Point: Kathryn Bigelow's Life in Art," curated by castillo/corrales and exhibited in Sweden.