



PASSION AND SUBJECTIVITY: ARTISTS AS CURATORS

April 2017

by Mark Scala/ Chief Curator

At the New York art fairs in March, an avid art addict may have seen thousands of works of art that have been created around the world, most unremarkable, many good, a few great. Because the purpose of the art fairs is primarily to make sales, not to offer thoughtful aesthetic experiences, one never loses sight of the fact that however wonderful it is, art situated between the studio and museum or private collection is inventory, a thing among things. Even our art addict cannot help but be bemused by the strangeness of a world in which expensive commodities have no real connection to need, production costs, or any of the other factors that typically affect price.

So after this high-end bazaar, one might wish to go to the temple, MoMA, or the Guggenheim to remind oneself that while art may be tied to money, what one acquires is an idea, an auratic experience, a signifier of a moment or era, a measure or reflection of culture. Art presented in an aesthetically enhanced and informative context enables one to forget the leveling dimension of the art fair, to remember that at its best, art is a force of communication and transformation as potent as great literature and film.

Or one can go in a messier direction, to artist-run fairs, galleries, and pop-ups, where younger or less mainstream artists and emerging curators are given space to construct mini-shows on a particular theme. Art dealers can be incredibly knowledgeable about their artists but are always mindful of the need to position them in the marketplace. Professional curators are objective scholars who place art within a social and historical context, but may not be prepared to gamble on the long-lasting significance of new creations. Artists-as-curators are closer to studio practice, often bringing a subjective vision shaped less by the marketplace or notions of art-historical importance than by empathic insights into other artists' processes and challenges.

Today, the curatorial profession seeks to encourage new generations of curators from across the social spectrum, to advocate for the museum career at the middle-school and high-school level, especially emphasizing diversity and inclusivity. Some of us also encourage artists to be curators. For me, one of the most anticipated exhibitions of the year is Blue Black, which will open at the Pulitzer Art Foundation in St. Louis this June. Guest curator Glenn Ligon—an artist who works with text as it has been used to construct ideas of racial identity—will explore meanings of color in works ranging from abstract expressionism to experimental film. His insights will likely be personal and passionate. On the art-fair circuit, a recent stalwart has been Spring/Break, a rambling low-budget artist-and-emerging-curators' show that took place this year in a hotel in New York's Times Square. It was a lovely mob scene, hundreds of exhibiting artists and their friends, art students and young curators, as well as early-stage collectors looking for that young phenom whose work might make a worthwhile acquisition, or at least might be enjoyed as something new and distinctive.

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At the Frist Center, we show traditional and contemporary art from around the world (including Nashville!), exposing our audience to a range of voices, techniques, and innovations while adding to the cosmopolitan perspective of artists and non-artists alike. Smaller galleries and artists-run spaces in Middle Tennessee are also engaged with curatorial projects of note. One might see lively installations at art crawls in Wedgewood-Houston, downtown on 5th Avenue, or the East Nashville Art Stumble. These often take place at artist-run

Scala, Mark. "Passion and Subjectivity: Artists as Curators", *Nashville Arts Magazine*, April 2017

places like COOP and Seed Space, Jodi Hays's DADU pop-up, or the gallery at the downtown First Presbyterian Church. Artists also direct several commercial galleries, bringing their visions to bear in surprising exhibitions and public programs. Zeitgeist's recent presentation of Alex Lockwood's grand and terrifying sculptures and Richard Feaster's ethereal paintings, organized by artist and gallerist Lain York, was a remarkable show by anyone's standards, partly because the curatorial pairing of these two unlikely aesthetic voices created a vibe that was as gloriously irrational as it was electric.

Art exhibitions are not simply displays of a compelling product. They are uniquely orchestrated experiences that derive meaning from the triangulation between the artwork, the curator, and the audience. And happily for Nashville, one doesn't have to travel far to get to the source. Artists-as-curators have become key agents in our burgeoning art scene, reminding us that if the cultural life of one's community does not have everything one might want, the choice does not have to be exit stage right. Increasingly, artists are creating opportunities to forge the culture of their communities in a positive way.