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SPACE JAM

The Art World's New Alternative

If Lia Gangitano's Ludlow Street apartment weren't the size of a valise, she would probably be opening Participant Inc., her new nonprofit gallery in her living room; But starting an alternative space in the year 2002 is a far cry from the early 1970s, when first-generation founders, like Martha Wilson of Franklin Furnace, could set up shop in their live-in lofts. Gangitano doesn't have a loft, but she does have board members, lawyers, insurance agents, a real estate deal, and a long list of funders lining up to see what she has planned. This is the new breed of alternative-space launcher: savvy enough to open a gallery, but smart enough to resist the lure of the commercial art world.

Just when we all assumed that the alternative space movement had met a noble death, laid low by the double-fisted blows of the culture wars and the New York real estate market, a host of new outfits have sprung up, offering an alternative not only to the gallery system, but to our traditional view of an alternative space. When Participant Inc. unveils its 2200-square-foot exhibition space on Rivington Street in September, it will join the ranks of new non-profit venues that have developed throughout the city in the past two years. There's GALE GATES et al. and Smack Mellon Studios in DUMBO and Triple Candle in Harlem. Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs in Long Island City is a mini-museum for independent curators, and Trans>, the international arts journal, has launched an exhibition space in Chelsea.

Michael Counts, who co-founded GALE GATES with partner Michelle Stern, is interested in artists who work in the fault lines, not on the peaks, of the art world. As an artist himself--producer of grand-scale environmental theater project--Counts spent the early '90s moving from location to location in the financial district, under the auspices of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. Now, with 35,000 square feet in the heart of DUMBO, Counts has expanded beyond his own projects, adding an exhibition program, a theater, and artists' studios to GALE GATES's extensive repertoire.

Similarly, Smack Mellon Studios has set up as a full-service operation offering not only a 6000-square-foot exhibition space, but nine studios for artists in residence, including a full woodworking shop and a digital laboratory. "In order to stay in New York, artists need production money, they need space to develop ideas, and they need more technology than they used to," says Kathleen Gilrain, Smack Mellon's executive director. She believes that alternative spaces must evolve away from their role as training grounds for emerging artists. "It's not just the younger artists who can benefit from these spaces anymore, it's mid-career artists who have a proven commitment to making work, but don't necessarily fit into a commercial niche." Gangitano concurs, saying, "As much as I hate to say it, 'emerging' has become a marketing term, like 'new and improved.' It's more of a demographic than a reason to support artists."

Distinguishing themselves from both the commercial gallery system and more established alternative spaces, these new sites focus on the production of new works. "Artists, whether they have gallery representation or not, continually articulate the need for alternative spaces," says Gangitano, who was the curator at Thread Waxing Space for four years, and whose idea for Participant Inc. grew out of a study conducted by the gallery before it closed in June 2001. "Artists are used to being told, 'No, you can't wreck the floor; you can't tear the wall down; you can't make something that is going to deteriorate,'" she explains. "But nothing compares to the ambition that is sparked when someone says, 'Yes.'" To illustrate her point, she is allowing Philadelphia-based artist Virgil Marti to take over Participant Inc.'s gallery space as her inaugural show, even though neither she nor the artist knows exactly what he will do.

These organizations are also trying to avoid the administrative pitfalls that caused many first-wave alternative spaces to stagnate--problems that are skillfully delineated in Julie Ault's new book, *Alternative Art New York 1965-1985*, set for release in November. "By getting rid of the red tape, we have tried to stay small as an organization, but be really big in terms of the resources we provide," says Counts. GALE GATES and Smack Mellon run "emerging curator" series, the primary source of their exhibition programs, with proposals chosen by panels of arts professionals. While somewhat bureaucratic, this program is still far less cumbersome than reviewing unsolicited slides and curating in-house, according to Gilrain. Gangitano has avoided panels entirely, making her own

choices independent of outside advisers.

By departing from the traditional model of programming, however, all three have had to demonstrate an entrepreneurial flair, especially when it comes to real estate. Counts got his space by presenting a business plan to David Walentas of Two Trees Management, the real estate developer who owns 90 percent of the commercial space in DUMBO; Smack Mellon's space is also being sponsored by Two Trees. Gangitano used her severance package from Thread Waxing Space, plus a small grant from the MAT foundation, a philanthropy set up by Tim Nye--TWS's founder and main supporter--as seed money to lay the groundwork for Participant Inc., and negotiated a rent abatement to assist with renovations from her landlord. Now she faces the task of raising \$50,000 to get the space ready by September.

With annual budgets ranging from \$100,000 to \$600,000, are these new art venues something we really need? "Right now, New York is in an exhibitional crisis," says Sandra Antelo of Trans>, who is concerned about the growing list of jobless curators and canceled shows in post-9-11 New York. She is also annoyed that most exhibitions offer only a snapshot of contemporary art, failing to provide a historic or theoretical context, a situation she is trying to remedy through her recent exhibition of Artur Barrio, an under-recognized Brazilian artist, whose projects have influenced the work of Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alys, and Felix Gonzales-Torres.

As if to prove Antelo's point, Dorsky Gallery was founded last October by art dealers Noah, Karen, and David Dorsky as a non-profit venture for independent curators interested in historically based contemporary art projects. Offering 4500 square feet of space, as well as underwriting all exhibition costs and fees, the gallery has already staged several significant shows, notably "Hans Bellmer and Surrealist Strategies in Contemporary Art," curated by Marcello Marvelli and Helaine Posner (David's wife)- "If you are trying to do some kind of historicized project, you either have to wade through the bureaucracy of places like P.S.I or you go to David, who says, 'Let's do it,'" says Saul Ostrow, curator of Dorsky's current exhibition. "Prescient Then and Now: The Resonance of Support/Surface" (11-03 45th Avenue, through July 3). "It's not a full-blown museum exhibition, but it is enough to know if the idea is right, to attract museum support later on."

Even more entrepreneurial is Triple Candie, a 5000-square-foot exhibition space founded by Shelly Bancroft in February on the ground floor of a former brewery on West 126th Street. Organizations must apply to produce shows at Triple Candie®, which then offers a range of services--marketing, public relations, educational programs, and staff--for a fee generally between \$3000 and \$6000. Still, in a city where there is no shortage of curators and artists looking for Venues, Bancroft has picked attention-worthy projects: "Rumors of War," curated by Franklin Sirmans and underwritten by the Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation (where Bancroft's husband, Peter Nesbett, serves as director), followed by a Kiki Smith exhibition, sponsored by PaceWildenstein. "I did not want to follow in the footsteps of White Columns or Artists Space," she explains. "I wanted to be a presenting, rather than a producing, organization, so the space becomes a collection of other people's visions, not my own." However, as foundation support begins to trickle in, Bancroft will also be undertaking in-house curatorial projects, such as her current show, "Hotel/Motel," featuring works by 11 Harlem artists (461 West 126th Street, through June 30).

Which of these various models will succeed remains to be seen, but all of these spaces have already put themselves on the map with exciting shows that highlight artists and ideas overlooked by other venues. "Mac Wellman once said that every generation must create its own venues, its own critics, its own forms of support," says Counts. "When I was starting out, I bristled at that idea, but now, I really agree.

--Barbara Pollack