

## Next Wave Art

by Shane McAdams

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My ten-year old version of Microsoft Word doesn't recognize the word "curate." Because it's been underlining the term for as long I've been writing it, I've always assumed that "curate" was a wonky piece of jargon bandied about by no one but art nerds. Then, two weeks ago, *boom* – smack on the front page of *The New York Times* "Styles" section appeared the word "CURATE." It was the title of a piece by Alex Williams, who was trumpeting that the term doesn't belong to the museum crowd anymore: stores are curating merchandize, web-based media portals are curating programming, food stands are curating snacks. That same weekend my brother visited me. A writer and web-content producer, he told me during the ride from the airport that "It's all gonna be about curation in the next ten years; there's too much junk flying around out there to sort through, so someone is going to have to be the traffic cop." Curating has apparently seeped into the groundwater.

At the Brooklyn Academy of Music this month, the curator of *Next Wave Art*, Dan Cameron, is up against a lot of traffic & frac34; venue sprawl, busy interiors, and generally music-first crowds in need of curatorial negotiation. He doesn't have the luxury of the contextualizing power of the white cube, which would allow him to scatter works anywhere and rely on the space-art-viewer triangle to spit out auto-associations. There's just too much interference. Lucky for us, Cameron is more than a traffic cop; when it comes to art, he is something of a city planner. Last year he magically transformed the hobbled city of New Orleans with his *Prospect.1* biennial, a multiple-venue, pan-urban experience that featured over 81 artists and garnered overwhelming praise. In New Orleans and now at BAM, the inherent isolation of the various projects on display forced Cameron to curate them as a series of independent shows in the service of an overarching macro-exhibition. And he did so without losing sight of his primary social objective to cultivate and reinforce the art community in each location. For this year's *Next Wave Art*, Cameron sets out to showcase Brooklyn's artistic community, emphasizing the performative aspects of the venue while maintaining the freshness and integrity of the art.

Just finding BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House can be a struggle for the uninitiated. Once inside, though, it's easy to be seduced by Diana Al-Hadid's "Built from our Tallest Tales" (2008), resting in the center of the main lobby like a fallen Thunderdome chandelier, which manages to strike an easy conversation with the interior architecture despite a distracting velvet rope barricade tracing its perimeter. Safety first, I guess. Nearby but outside the experiential footprint of "Built," Michael Bell-Smith's video "Burst and Bloom" (2009) loops a pixelated firework plume coming to life against the lobby's staid and pallid architecture. Even in its economy of means, it captures the spirit of live performance that's hovering just inside the theater.



Ester Partegàs, "The Invisible" (2008). Aluminum and Plexiglas awning, bulbs, fluorescent lights, vinyl, banners, pennants. 20 ft × 14 ft × 2 ft 5 in.  
Commissioned by the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York. Installation at Brooklyn Academy of Music,  
Photo by Shervin Lainez.

Upstairs in the BAMcafé, a venue open only at performance time, Shinique Smith's "All this, and Heaven" (2009) floats like a downy ghost above the concession stand. Cameron installs the work in the air, where it mingles with the soaring clatter, rather than allowing it to get lost at floor level. A number of juicy, colorful movie and theater inspired paintings by Angela Dufresne hang at either end of the café and in an adjacent gallery; however, these and other flat works in *Next Wave Art* tend to play a more passive role than their three-dimensional counterparts.

Down the street at BAM Harvey Theater, Nicola López's site-specific tangle of Mylar and wire spiraling around the antique stairwell and Ester Partegàs' sinisterly inviting vending stand steal the show by actively engaging the raw and often crumbling collateral spaces in the Harvey and allowing it to use them back. I imagine each of these works would be alluring enough without a supporting cast, but by playing in the same key, they reach a harmony that they otherwise wouldn't by going solo.

Assessing the "meaning" of an artwork is obviously a subjective, if not absurd, endeavor. Still, any arrangement a curator might make is a declaration that something other than arbitrary associations should emerge from his choices. Five or 10 "really good" works assembled together might showcase elevated taste or a sense of quality, but such a selection does not necessarily enhance the meaning or experience packed inside them. Cameron avoids this pitfall at BAM so effectively that one might overlook that it is essentially a "Best of Brooklyn" show. Other than a slight emphasis on theater-based content, it doesn't have a unifying conceptual conceit.

To curate is to arrange for the benefit of the viewer, and, by extension, for the benefit of the art. Cameron's is an especially commendable effort given that he's not the only game in town at BAM. Organizing a show without the distractions of architecture, performances, and crowds of theatergoers, as one would in an art gallery, comes with the benefit of having a conventional frame of reference. As Mary Douglas wrote in *Purity and Danger*: "a ritual provides a frame. The marked off time or place alerts a special kind of expectancy, just as the oft-repeated 'Once upon a time' creates a mood receptive to fantastic tales." As art drifts outside of its comfort zones and merges into an ever-diversifying cultural milieu – such as it is doing at BAM right now – perhaps it can learn a lesson from those newly minted-curators operating outside the art world, who are simply trying to sort things out. If curating Internet media, T-shirts, or mixed drinks to a diverse and overstimulated population is in fact like directing traffic, the success of those curators will be measured not by how much traffic they handle but how effectively they can sort, distill, and streamline it so that their travelers might arrive unwearied enough to pay attention.