

The New Collectives — Reaching for a Wider Audience



Directors of Fashion Moda, William Scott, Joe Lewis and Stefan Eins, left to right, in the group's South Bronx studio—"challenging art as an elitist thing."

By GRACE GLUECK

“I found the art scene in Manhattan too closed in,” says Stefan Eins, a 39-year old artist from Austria who has been living in New York since the 1960’s. “I felt it lacked nourishment, and a broad enough audience. I said, why not move to a really bad area of the city, and see if I can establish a base there.”

And so two years ago, Mr. Eins took himself to the South Bronx, rented and cleared out a rubble-filled storefront, then opened Fashion Moda, “a Museum of Science, Art, Technology, Invention and Fantasy.” Presenting a wild mélange of shows by artists, community residents, children, graffiti-makers and other creators, Fashion Moda has been a resounding success with its South Bronx audience, and, despite the disapproval of critics, has attracted the attention of the glossy art world that it left behind in Manhattan.

Now Fashion Moda’s work has appeared, in a recent show at the New Museum on Lower Fifth Avenue. The show is a part of the exhibition called “Events,” which marks a growing movement of artists who work collectively, outside of the conventional art world boundaries. They aim to reach a wider, less-sophisticated audience than the upper-middle-class art patrons who frequent the established system of galleries, museums and alternative spaces around the city. “Events” represents the first show at the museum completely organized and presented by artists’ groups. The second, and current, “Event” is mounted by Taller Boricua, a collaborative group of 10 Puerto Rican artists, currently exhibiting the work of four members (through Feb. 5). The third organization, Collaborative Projects, Inc. (CoLab), an association of between 35 and 50 young artists that last June put together the much-talked-about Times Square Show in a scruffy 41st Street massage parlor, was to have mounted a presentation of its own on Feb. 14. But at the last minute CoLab cancelled its plans, on the grounds that it stood to gain less from the collaboration than its host.

The three groups have a lot in common. They are all composed of relatively young artists who believe in community involvement, and whose funky or ethnic tastes are out of step with the preference for cool, elegant art that still prevails on the Madison Avenue/SoHo circuit. Taller Boricua, for example, is deeply involved with Puerto Rican culture. There is a lot of fraternization between Fashion Moda and CoLab artists, who include photographers, performance and conceptual artists, film and video makers, as well as artists who work in the more traditional disciplines. Their work tends to celebrate urban decay, and it has a raw, gritty vitality that is influenced by comic strips, commercial signs and symbols, street culture and the energy of Punk Rock. Not actually all that new, it also harks back to the 1960’s Pop preoccupation with street imagery.

Members of all three groups organize their own shows in offbeat spaces such as lofts and storefronts that are close to the audiences they seek to involve. (A general CoLab policy is that its shows are open to all who want to exhibit, regardless of membership in the group.) For two months before Christmas, for example, CoLab, which describes itself

as “an artist-sponsored exhibition network,” ran the “A. More Store” on Broome Street, purveying “directly from the artist to the customer” paintings, sculpture, prints, drawings, multiples, clothes and accessories. Prices ranged from 50 cents to \$900. CoLab’s grungy “Times Square Show” last June, with the collaboration of Fashion Moda, packed a rundown former massage parlor and bus depot at Seventh Avenue and 41st Street with art works, films, fashion items and other creations whose street-smart display engendered a lively exchange with the neighborhood people.

The three groups are more successful, however, as artists’ organizations promoting the interests of their members than as esthetic messiahs. The work of Taller Boricua’s artists, who deal in traditional ways with traditional materials such as paint on canvas, is more amenable than that of the other groups to straightforward critical evaluation. But because of the preoccupation in CoLab and Fashion Moda with “anti-art” — graffiti, political slogans, pornography, and so forth — many critics tend to dismiss them out of hand.

To some professional eyes, the work is beneath serious consideration because it contains, as one critic put it, “the shock of schlock.” For example, they deplore the celebration of illegal sprayings that are used to deface public property — although the point could be made that it’s better to see graffiti in museums than on public monuments. On the other hand, some dealers and critics attuned to new art see the work as the latest trend, like it or not. Writing in Arts magazine, the critic Kim Levin spoke of the Times Square show as containing “some of the freshest art around. . . irreverent, raw, rebellious, messy.” In Artforum, Lucy Lipard, a critic sympathetic to socially-oriented art, wrote that she enjoyed the Times Square show more than she admired it. Describing it as “a cry of rage against current art-worldiness and a ghastly glance into the future of art,” she derided the “superficial fantasies” in much of the work.

All three groups — Taller, Fashion Moda and CoLab — get partial funding from public agencies, but they are strictly artist-run. Their members are ambivalent about making it as “stars” in the “system” — i.e., museums, publicly funded alternative spaces, and commercial galleries — that gets art shown and sold. Stefan Eins refers to Fashion Moda as a “cultural concept,” and elaborates, “the people who work here have a keen awareness of the limits of traditional art forms and their audience as opposed to the mass media.” Speaking for CoLab, Walter (Mike) Robinson, the young artist who serves as president, says, “What we’re about is artists using the power that we have. We want control of our own work. A lot of our original inspiration was based on opposition to the established gallery situation and also to the alternative spaces. With public agencies picking up the tab, the people who run them don’t have to push the work they show. Also, by our grouping together, it’s much easier to get public funding for our own shows than as individuals.”

Besides mounting shows, CoLab members produce a

weekly half-hour cable TV show called "Potato Wolf" on Manhattan Cable Channel C, run a theater group called "Nightshift Theater," publish "Spanner," a journal of artists' work, and plan another magazine called "Bomb," incorporating film, video, music, fiction and comment. CoLab's socially activist ideas find expression in ABC No Rio, an affiliate group comprising 10 or so young artists who hold forth in a bare-bones, city-owned building in a depressed Hispanic neighborhood on the Lower East Side. (The name ABC No Rio is taken from a faded sign in Spanish, with several unreadable letters, on a store across the street.)

There, the group invites local citizens to participate in such "political" shows as the recent "Murder/Suicide/Junk," whose theme was drug addiction and other problems of the neighborhood. ABC No Rio members are helping to set up art programs in local schools, and they go out in the streets to raise consciousness about neighborhood politics. "We're a place for the people here to come and see and participate in making art," says Christy Rupp, an artist who does images of animals and who recently staged at No Rio a "live" show — whose contents ranged from dogs to pigeons to cockroaches — entitled "Animals Living in Cities."

At Fashion Moda, in a blighted shopping area at Third Avenue and 149th Street, neighborhood amateurs and graffiti-makers show their work along with that of professionally trained artists. "Sometimes people come in off the street and do things," says Mr. Eins. "We're interested in bringing community people and artists together. We want to challenge the assumption that art is an elitist thing; the base has to change. Art is not a question of art school background; it's vitality and a way of looking at things that doesn't have to take a formalist tack."

In its show at the New Museum, Fashion Moda gave a representative sampling of the "anti-esthetic" work it has presented in its South Bronx space, a mix of crude amateur and highly professional efforts by Hispanic, black and white artists ranging in age from 15 to 62. There was an environment by Candace Hill-Montgomery, an abandoned "outdoor" picnic site of packing cases and wire baskets with remnants of food

left on paper plates; a group of true-to-life Hispanic heads, cast in plaster by John Ahearn; a satirical painting by Robert Colecott entitled "Eat Dem Taters," a takeoff on van Gogh's "The Potato Eaters" with a broadly caricatured black cast of characters.

A back wall bore a huge collage of photos of jazz personalities assembled by Ray Ross. On the floor lay "Puddle," by Carmen Spera, a cluster of cutout plastic pieces linked together by rubber cables that evokes the human figure. Stefan Eins himself contributed a series of Fashion Moda posters, and Jane Dickson showed a group of humorous black-and-white drawings focusing on male genitals. Reactions to the show, culled from observers by this reporter, ranged from "unspeakable" and "they should have been toilet-trained earlier" to "fascinating" and "of real cultural significance."

Taller Boricua (pronounced Tayay Bo-reek-wa, and meaning simply Puerto Rican Workshop), the oldest of the three groups, was established by artists 10 years ago to provide a community-based cultural center promoting Puerto Rican culture and esthetics. Some of its founding members were involved with the now-defunct Art Workers Coalition, a politically oriented group that in the late 1960's attempted to mobilize artists against the Vietnam War, and staged demonstrations against museums and galleries for their lack of involvement with the city's ethnic communities. Now occupying capacious quarters in a city-owned building at 1 East 104th Street, next door to the Museo Del Barrio, Boricua offers community-oriented workshops, programs, and performances in the fine arts, music, poetry and film. It invites young artists to share the studios of its founding members, and in the last several years, it has mounted and locally toured over 400 shows from the United States and abroad.

"We felt there was no chance to show our work in the downtown galleries," says Jorge Soto, one of Taller's founders. "They aren't ready to deal with our Puerto Rican forms of art. And I didn't feel any identification with the art forms they were exhibiting.

When I came to Taller, I felt comfortable, and that brought about a change in my work. When you interact with other artists, a dynamic seems to happen: there is support and a subtle influence. Here, we have a strong, cohesive philosophical-esthetic base, going back to early forms developed by the Indian, African and Spanish cultures of the Caribbean."

At the New Museum, Taller is showing the work of four of its principals: Mr. Soto, who's done a group of drawings and paintings that take off from a monumental work by Francisco Oller, a 19th-century Puerto Rican artist based in Paris; Marcos Dimas, whose canvases present a kind of mythological Puerto Rican landscape; Fernando Salicrup, a creator of intricate fantasy drawings and paintings that refer to cultural crossovers between Puerto Rico and Manhattan, and Gilberto Hernandez, a graphics artist who makes all of the workshop's strongly themed posters.

Meanwhile, as if to prove that artists these days can never really bite the hands that feed them, some trend-conscious galleries are already eyeing the work of CoLab and Fashion Moda exhibitors. Two CoLab members actually have upcoming shows scheduled with SoHo dealers: Robin Winters at the Mary Boone Gallery and Mike Glier at the Anina Nosei-Weber gallery. Last December, CoLab itself had a benefit show at Brooke Alexander, an established uptown gallery, which grossed nearly \$5,000. CoLab has even received the endorsement of Henry Geldzahler, the city's Cultural Commissioner, as "making important contributions to the community and the larger art world." "Actually, one test will be whether group activities will dissipate as members pursue individual careers in the gallery-museum system," says Walter Robinson, who himself writes regularly for the respectable uptown publication "Art in America." "One of the functions of the group might be to serve as an intermediate school before members graduate into galleries. After all, one aim of artists is to make a living — you can't fault them for that." ■