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small shows...

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NEW YORK THE NEW SMALL

Gramercy International Contemporary Art Exhibition, Gramercy Park Hotel, New York. April 29 - May 2. And other small shows...

Trashing the 80s must be good fun, considering how much of it is done, even by artists and dealers who were barely present during this much maligned decade. The litany is obvious and recurrent : during the corrupt, junk bond 80s, art became soulless and opportunistic, a vehicle for yuppie adventurism and bad taste. It sold its birthright for a mess of pottage, leaving behind a tawdry legacy of compromised integrity and lost bearings for the current generation to muck through.

Is this sour grapes ? It would certainly be understandable for a generation experiencing relative poverty, coupled with a crisis of faith regarding art's purposes and value, to lash out and scapegoat a preceding era of easy money. But beyond the dictates of simple envy, the 90s rejection of 80s Mammon incorporates a sense of mission, justice and sombre determination, a sense that the contemporary belt-tightening represents a necessary corrective, a healing moratorium from the hype, speculation and esurience of the recent past.

The 80s art boom went to great lengths to achieve a properly bullish attitude of "the sky's the limit" conspicuous consumption. And as long as the money kept coming around and around, why not ? To be taken seriously, a gallery had to project an intimidating facade, a strenuously manicured professional veneer that aped the corporate severity and formalism of its banker/trust fund/multinational clientele. Such a veneer required massive overhead, from the rent and maintenance of large square footages to the costs of advertising, mailing, catalogues, freight, parties and utilities, to the hiring of staff : a cordon of well dressed and coiffed gallery assistants running interference, alternately dispensing a modulated helpfulness (to recognized moneybag clients) or ice queen hauteur (to the rest of the world). And the fact that there was such a difference was all important. It taught us our place and allowed us to be awed. For the dealers, it was the consummate wet dream. We enter one of their palaces, hat in hand, and humbly request the price of a particular work, only to be told, sotto voce, that the entire show was sold out, in fact had been sold out for months. But if we passed our screening and were properly appreciative of our good fortune, we might be allowed to buy something in a year or so.

In the current, drastically curtailed marketplace, even those blue chip galleries that are able to adhere to the 80s model of scary attitude and equally scary overhead must find it difficult to crack the whip over their collectors with quite the same aplomb. For one thing, the collectors of contemporary art are just not there anymore : fewer in

number and less inclined to spend spend spend. And when they do spend, they tend to go for the safe bet, the blue chip painting with a proven secondary market. This sort of collecting does little to foster young, developing artists or their galleries. The fate of many middle level galleries - those with perhaps one or two young "star" artists and limited backroom action - is up for grabs as they go begging for collectors. Their situation is markedly worse than the blue chips, particularly if they are still committed to competing with the big boys by maintaining some semblance of 80s opulence. The attrition rate has been ominous.

Some dealers, seeing the handwriting on the wall, quickly folded their tents and became private dealers or art consultants. Others scaled down their operations, opening smaller galleries, often in partnership. The braver (or more foolhardy) souls decided to tough it out, and sometimes struggled for years to keep their heads above water, relegating payments to their artists to the backburner while trying to come up with the monthly nut. But the final result was the same. Perhaps as many as 20 percent of SoHo galleries that existed at the height of the 80s boom have, by now, closed their doors. The large, pristine space with fancy amenities, much like the dinosaur before it, seems to be facing extinction.

In order to survive the scourge of the 90s, art dealing has had to assume a lower profile, a new modesty of intentions and ambitions more in synch with economic reality. The new gallery is less topheavy and more humble in material outlay; less corporate and more bohemian; less geared to the expectations of collectors and more scaled to the needs of artists. Because, as the most omnipresent and influential visitors of the galleries (in the relative absence of collectors), it is artists who set the tone. The revised expectations of a new generation of artists permits a new type of gallery. The collapse of the marketplace has drastically altered the shape of the art landscape, but rather than sounding a death knell, it has proven uniquely liberating. Few artists now expect immediate financial gain or media stardom as the reward for artmaking, which takes a lot of the pressure off the gallery. To be sure, a gallery is still perceived as a locus for commerce and career building; but it is also a place to meet, think, discuss, experiment. With no one but themselves to impress, and not a hell of a lot to lose in terms of reputation or investment, the new galleries find that one of the advantages of living close to the bone is the ability to play it fast and loose, to be a "small, intelligent, mobile unit" (in the words of British musician Robert Fripp).

I choose to call them "the new small". It is a



phenomenon that could only happen now, during an art world recession, with the lessons of 80s boom and bust still fresh in the memory. Taking limited financial resources as a given, and mindful of the fate of galleries that bit off more than they could chew, a number of starving young dealers have set up shop in the simplest and cheapest way possible: in their apartments, in hotel rooms, tiny offices, narrow storefronts and raw loftspace. The new small dealers are a diverse lot. Some are artists, others are former proprietors of more mainstream spaces who have scaled down. There are the past or present employees of galleries who have decided to go it alone, and, of course, the new folks in town, for whom the new small is the first adventure in art dealing. All of them show the relatively inexpensive work of young, essentially unknown artists. But they do not necessarily show the same artists, nor the same type of art. With different backgrounds and a wide range of aesthetic criteria, one might wonder what unites them. But never you mind. The essential, overarching unity is their pragmatic reaction to historical necessity. Faced with an economic

doldrums and a vitiated art scene that seems to have lost faith in itself, each of the new small dealers has responded to the moment by starting up business on a shoestring, with little to keep it afloat, month to month, except a belief in art and a bit of canny intuition. Considering the circumstances, it would seem to be an act of sheer bravery.

Unlike the typical 80s gallery, which made a big splash, was consummately accessible, and just about thrust itself in your face, the new small must rely on strategies of indirection and word of mouth. Located on the fringes of SoHo, in Brooklyn, or nestled in living rooms in the East or West Village, the new small are geographically challenged. They are also challenged by a small staff (of one - usually just the proprietor, unless a friend can be persuaded to gallery sit) and by reduced public hours (scheduled around the proprietor's day job). But "challenged" is certainly the "correct" word of the moment, and poverty can be a two-edged sword. Once you get over the limitations of space, time and personnel, the appeal of the new small is precisely its underdog status, the arrogance of the small and the hip.



Group of dealers at the Gramercy Park Hotel where was presented the 1994 Gramercy International Contemporary Art Exhibition.

The new small seem to say : "We are here. We are poor, but we're the real thing. We are new and happening - but remote. Find us if you can." And the collectors, editors, critics, museum curators and other art world aficionados, strange beasts that they are - always on the lookout for that new wrinkle, that special knowledge that will give them a leg up on their fellow collectors and aficionados - they have found the new small it was a strategy just waiting to happen. What better way to appeal to seekers of the cutting edge than to play inaccessible and hard to get ?

Among the new small, no one has parlayed this angle to better advantage than Gavin Brown, a British artist and former director of 303 Gallery, who over the past several years has curated shows in such arcane spots as a 12 x 12 foot midtown office, an abandoned building in Tribeca, a hotel and his own living room. Access was essentially by appointment with the curator, except in the case of the office show (titled *Insignificance*), where you were required to sign in at the security desk, pick up a key from the guard and let yourself into the show. Mr. Brown was physically

absent, but he was there in spirit nonetheless. What a fetishization of the inaccessible ! Only 90 people saw the show (according to the security register), but many more were aware of it by reputation.

Now that he has opened a small but permanent storefront on the southwestern edge of SoHo near the Holland Tunnel entrance - called Gavin Brown's enterprise (please note the precious understatement of the small "e") - the elusive Mr. Brown will undoubtedly become a more corporeal presence, although it took three visits to his space (during stated business hours) before I found him in. Such is the casualness of the new small. Luckily, the A/C Project Room, another avatar of the new small, is just down the street and was open. Originally located in a Broadway and Prince Street loftspace provided by ArtCart Movers, the A/C is a typical example of an artists showing artists situation growing into something more directed and professional. Brainchild of painter Paul Bloodgood and art historian Alissa Friedman, the A/C has a history of mounting group exhibitions and artists' projects. Bloodgood has also cura-

ted guerilla art shows in unorthodox locales, sometimes in conjunction with neighbor Brown. But now, having consolidated their activity to a trim if funky storefront, the A/C seems more committed to the traditional program of galleries everywhere : mounting one-person shows of the artists they represent.

Over the past year, Stefano Basilico has mounted shows in three different SoHo locations while continuing his day job as director of Sonnabend Gallery. Basilico's strategy of transience is to rent former gallery spaces that have been vacated by their previous tenants, but only for a month at a time. He is, in a sense, filling the real-estate gap caused by the art recession, taking advantage of fallow but fully fixtured spaces that are ready for exhibition use. In each case, Basilico has attempted to find a space that is best suited to the particular work he wishes to show. So far, he has not had to use the same space twice. Only in fin de siècle SoHo...

Living in the same building as Joseph Kosuth and just down the block from the Guggenheim SoHo and the New Museum, Friedrich Petzel and Nina Borgmann were perfectly situated to open a gallery in the front section of their loft - which they did, last September. Petzel, a German-trained art historian, was then gallery director at Metro Pictures, a position he has since vacated to devote himself fully to his own space. Having worked for a big money gallery, Petzel, like Basilico, is a child of the 80s. But his expectations seem totally new small : to grow gradually, to establish a dialogue, to stick with the same group of artists, and not to expect that the art will sell as soon as it is hung on the wall.

Amy Lipton has owned a gallery since the late 80s, first in the East Village, then in SoHo. About a year ago, the shrinking market forced her to downscale and leave a high profile, street level location. With partner Patrick Owens, she is now running her gallery out of the front section of her living loft in southern SoHo. At this point, Lipton is not interested in representing artists in the traditional sense, but rather in working with them on particular projects. And she is glad that the artists seem to have different expectations, that they are more self sufficient and not depending on gallery financial support and services.

Kenny Schachter is an artist and roving curator who has been organizing exhibitions in SoHo since the start of the 90s. Like Basilico, he finds empty spaces to rent, a month at a time. Unlike Basilico, who tends to mount one-person shows in well manicured spaces, Schachter's spaces are raw and jumbled, filled with the chaotic and compelling energy of a group show, usually loosely organized around a particular theme. Schachter is a 90s guy, for sure, but his efforts, in their funky agility, recall an earlier, wilder era, before SoHo was turned into a shopping mall.

Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between the new small and the more traditional activity of private art dealing, especially when the gallery space is actually the dealer's living room. But since the new small is by definition "new" and the private dealer is part of an older European intimacy, there is no reason that the two cannot coexist, accommodate, and even learn from each other. Although, to be sure, there is a marked difference in tone between a scruffy artists' space like A/C or Schachter and the comfy, polished living spaces listed below.

Craig Cornelius ran a gallery on lower Fifth Avenue for eight years, finally abandoning it in 1990. He continues to exhibit work and deal from his West Village loft. And to produce some of the most graphically memorable invitations to his openings.

Since leaving Hirschl & Adler Modern a year ago, Paul Morris has converted his two-bedroom flat in the Village into a micro-gallery, with shows that begin in the living room and extend down the hallway to the second bedroom.

Gracie Mansion, the doyenne of the East Village, has come full circle. Her first exhibitions, from the early 80s, were mounted in her bathroom. With the East Village boom, she expanded to several larger spaces, finally ending up in SoHo. After closing this final Broadway space about two years ago, she turned to private dealing, and has converted her living room to gallery use.

Arena is currently located in Renee Riccardo and Paul Laster's brownstone living room in Brooklyn. Riccardo, once an adjunct curator at P.S.1., originally opened the space in SoHo in 1991, but was forced to close last year.

These are some of the new small. It is by no means an exhaustive list. If you had really wanted to see them all under one roof, you should have attended the Gramercy International Contemporary Art Exhibition, which was held this past April 29 through May 2 at New York's Gramercy Park Hotel. Organized as a pragmatic, low-cost alternative to the traditional art fair - because all a dealer had to do to participate was rent a hotel suite for the weekend - the Gramercy fair was an apotheosis of the new small. It included some of the spaces discussed above, plus fellow travellers from New York, Los Angeles, Cologne, Berlin, London, Paris, Milan and Vienna. Because the new small is not limited to just one section of downtown Manhattan. Anywhere you find an art dealer in a small room, surrounded by work spread over the bed, stacked on the bureau, displayed in the bathroom medicine cabinet, marching in measured ranks across the coffee table - then you will know you are in the presence of the new small.

STEVEN KAPLAN