

THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

IN A WAVE OF NEW SHOWS, CREATIVE TYPES PROVE THAT PUTTING TOGETHER AN EXHIBIT CAN BE AN ART FORM IN ITSELF

BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Artist Kathy Slade is making some last-minute adjustments to the exhibition she is guest-curating at Artspeak. A large waterbed occupies the centre of the gallery, covered with what looks, at first, like a patchwork quilt. On closer inspection, it reveals itself to be a grid of photographic images silkscreened on white-coated cotton. Each image is of an air-sickness bag bearing an airline logo. Slade herself looks a little queasy and admits to being both exhausted and nervous. "I'm way more stressed about this show than I would be if it was a show of my own work," she says.

Whether it's to challenge the limitations of cultural institutions, to explore new ways of seeing, or to find a more collaborative means of making exhibitions, the trend of artist-as-curator is in full bloom here. At the Contemporary Art Gallery, photo-artist Roy Arden has organized Supernatural, an exhibition that juxtaposes the paintings of Neil Campbell and the ceremonial masks of Beau Dick (to April 25). At the State Gallery, emerging artist Mark Soo has been curating projects, including *Appendage*, by Miguel Da Conceicao, which is mounted on the gallery's second floor façade (until the end of April). Art dealer Catriona Jeffries recently launched her *Artists Curating Artists* series of exhibitions, to be played out at her gallery intermittently over the next 18 months. And at the Western Front—as at some dozen artist-run centres and galleries throughout the city—an artist oversees the exhibition program.

At Artspeak, *No Fixed Address* is the first solo show in Canada by the acclaimed American artist Rita McBride. Both her installation and her bookworks (on view till April 17) satirize romance novels and pulp fiction, amusing their audience while skewering conventional notions of gender and sexuality. "Rita is an artist that I admire a lot," says Slade. "And while my work doesn't look like hers at all, I

think that we share certain approaches or ideas."

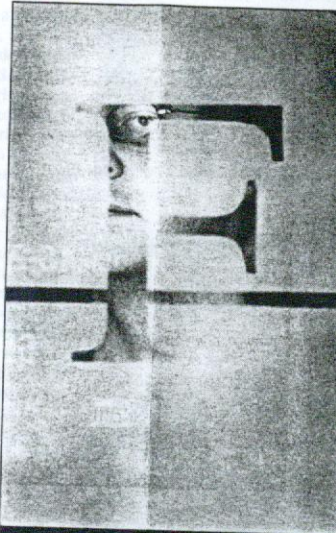
Artists may curate for a number of reasons, but for Slade, bringing McBride's work to Artspeak is about more than empathy and admiration. It's about introducing ideas and strategies to a Vancouver audience—and perhaps inspiring local women artists. McBride's success, Slade says, is a great example for those who may feel muscled out of the male-dominated local art scene.

Slade, whose own fabric and text work explores conditions of gender and creative production, began thinking about exhibition-making as an adjunct to her art-making while still a student at Simon Fraser University. "I consider writing about art and curating as part of my practice as an artist," she says. "It's about participating in a discourse."

The artist as curator—or at least as exhibition organizer—is not a new idea, exactly. Late-19th- and early-20th-century European and North American artists protested the conservative salons and institutions of their day and formed themselves into avant-garde groups to show their work outside the bounds of the establishment. Thirty years ago, the artist-run-centre movement took off around the world, again inspired by artists' desire to bypass existing museums and galleries and present innovative and experimental art directly to the public.

"MY VIEW IS that artists are always rebellious," says Laiwan, about the impulse to make both art and exhibitions. The Vancouver-based interdisciplinary artist, curator, and educator founded the *Or Gallery* as an experimental space in 1983. Her curatorial projects may arise from the needs of whatever community she is working with, she says in a telephone interview. "But usually it has to do with me just wanting to see something that I'm not seeing."

Often, she explains, artists curate in order to fill a gap, to bring forward work not being shown in conventional venues. "Institutionalized curation has a very particular perspective of what should be presented and how it should be presented,"



While Jonathan Middleton (above) brings a slightly anti-institutional eye to his curatorial work at the Western Front, Kathy Slade considers putting exhibits together as an integral part of her artistic practice. Mark Mushet photos.



she adds. "The task of the artist is to be curious and investigate the limits of perception...to challenge established ways of seeing."

In one of the liveliest forums at InFest, the international symposium on artist-run culture recently held in this city, speakers from Canada, the United States, and South Africa exchanged ideas about the characteristics and responsibilities of the artist as curator. Laiwan, who moderated the symposium, suggested at the time that artists bring a number of skills to curation, including perceptual insight and sensitivity, intuition, vulnerability, and the inclination to take risks. The artist's "renegade" status, however, is not the same as being elitist or exclusionary. It's important, she says now, for art to be presented in a way that empowers the audience.

Another idea raised at InFest was

that of curation as an artistic practice itself. It's something Jonathan Middleton, an interdisciplinary artist who has been curator of exhibitions at the Western Front since 1999, explores within the context of that centre's anti-institutional history. "There's a spectrum of where curators see themselves in relation to artists and also in relation to the public," he says, sipping green tea in a Main Street coffee shop. He lists interpreter, facilitator, catalyst, and provocateur, then adds that his own practice, in curation as in art, embraces the role of collaborator. "My favourite shows have been ones where there has been real...exchange of ideas."

Now showing at the Front is a group exhibition (to April 3) which originated in an e-mail correspondence between Middleton, cocurator Brett Jones, and the 10 young

artists represented. Titled *Ortion for Cultural Exchange* agreement, the show revisits the show revisits artist-run centre's long-standing critique of museum curatorial conventions. Among works on view is Mark Soo's of linked, helium-filled balloons each bearing a curator's name, kind of three-dimensional chart, a spoon on the clique working nature of the art world.

Back at Artspeak, Slade notes that she's been so busy curating hasn't directed much energy to a small show of her own work installed in a few days in an improvised exhibition space at Emily Institute of Art and Design. She to describe her black monochrom and their literary sources, the subject drop. Later, she sees say through a cloud of cigarette smoke and fatigue. Later. ■

who to watch
fall arts preview

Of Pompons and Pop Culture

Kathy Slade wields wild sources; Evan Lee finds uncanny in ordinary

VISUAL ARTS

KATHY SLADE

To say that the references in Kathy Slade's art are eclectic is a considerable understatement. Her embroidered images and texts quote as liberally from Duran Duran, the Velvet Underground, and Barbra Streisand as they do from Charlotte Brontë, Walter Benjamin, and Kasimir Malevich. Across many media and art forms, from high to low and historical to present-day, Slade examines the status of women as creative beings. She also looks—with irreverent humour—at the ways we define ourselves through popular culture.

In a solo show last fall at the Western Front gallery, Slade exhibited a series of white-on-white embroidered Os inspired by a female character in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, Jasper Johns's target paintings, Ada Lovelace's pioneering computer program, and Pauline Reage's erotic novel *The Story of O*. Slade also exhibited a big orange pompon, almost two metres in diameter, that alluded to, well, nothing. "It's like a pompon off a tuque," she says of her yarn sculpture. "A decorative thing that has no function." Then she adds, with a burst of laughter: "It's just so stupid and that's what I like about it. It just sits there." The pompon spoke to the void within the Os, she explains, and the Os wrangled with "the relationship between zero and nothing".

Educated in both literature and visual arts at Simon Fraser University (in addition to making art, she




Through embroidered references to everything from *Klute* to Duran Duran, Kathy Slade explores women's roles as creative beings. Mark Mushet photo.


esses a special fondness for the pop music of the 1980s. She makes this disclosure as she sits in the studio of her Strathcona home surrounded by examples of recent work, including machine-stitched images appropriated from the 1965 movie *Darling* and from the banana-motif album cover that Andy Warhol designed for the Velvet Underground. There's also a

ber of mainstream American films such as *Klute*. "I rewatched these movies and was playing with the narrative," she says.

Slade, who has been exhibiting solo since her university days in the late 1980s, is currently showing new work at the **Or Gallery**. Titled *I Want It All I Want It Now* and running to October 11, the show centres on embroidered images




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