

Alternatives: PART II

any work of art and you can see what the artist believes to be important. And for much of this century, mainstream pressures have promoted a resolution almost solely within the individual "him"self—the artist as island or avatar or authority.

Identity-based art and demographical exhibitions, which have been flourishing recently, demonstrate that artists are looking more towards shared resolutions. Increasingly they are defining self as part of a group, or examining the dual aspects of independence and interdependence. In San Francisco, the art scene is in the very throes of this shift. There is a swarming buzz of activity in the Mission and south of Market which says that something progressive is happening.

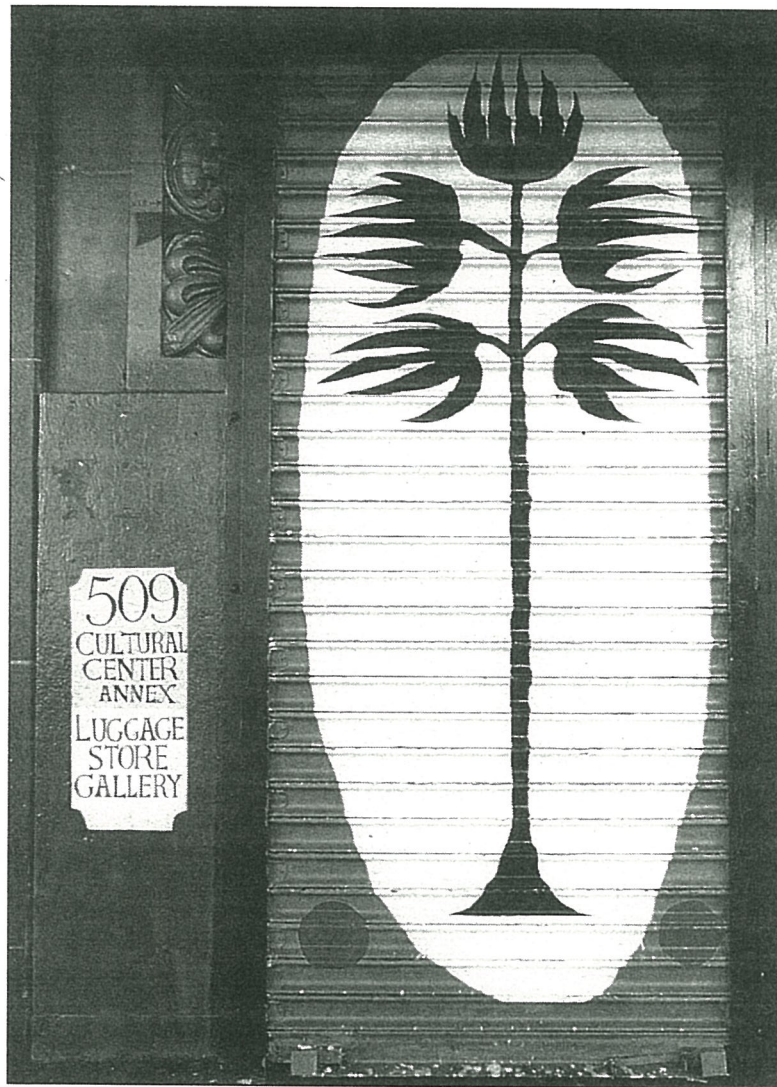
That something is a web of artist-sites which attempt to bridge art and life with an alertness for community. This interest in community-based art sometimes mixes with more traditional values of individual excellence. (We must note that this endeavor is just now being absorbed into progressive Anglo sectors with a more subtle feeling than the crusades after years of confident work by people of color.) Community is the pith, although it is applied quite variously. For some, it means neighborhood; for others, the masses, the disenfranchised, or anyone other than museum personnel.

Artists are combining this awareness with an inclination to open new spaces, and to run them as extensions of their own work. As artists now become more savvy about market forces, and as their need for more sophisticated tools increases, the alternative space becomes a medium for expression.

Well-noted by now, the opening of a dozen or so galleries over the last two years is one of the strongest signs that the region is pregnant with experimentation. This "new alternative alternative" scene includes Acme, Archive Bewegung, Blasthaus, Build, Collision, 848 Community Space, Four Walls, Push, Monsterism, Space 743, and probably a few others. They join the slightly older Luggage Store, Refusalon, Secession Gallery, Show-n-Tell, Victoria Room, and the former but much-loved Alligator, 555 Natoma and Kiki. These new spaces, then, generally combine sensitivity for community-based art with the dynamism of the artistic process.

It is impossible to survey all of this artistic activity in one fell swoop, but Luggage Store and Victoria Room run the gamut, spanning the avant-garde continuum: Luggage Store for real grass roots culture-making, and Victoria Room for the more experimental. Both do their shticks well. To be sure, the rest of the alternative alternatives also are engaging. Space 743, perhaps the most educationally minded of the lot, combines its gallery with a ceramic studio. Four Walls vies slickly with Victoria Room for innovation, and seems to have the resources for staying power. Acme is the eminence grease: their next exhibition deals with motorcycle culture. Collision, a collective, and Monsterism, a small one-person project, have found their ways onto the Internet. Etc.

These galleries are alternative because, on a basic level, they are trying to create something that is absent from the market-driven commercial gallery system. Most of the sites gladly embrace the alternative designation, seeing in it both the pride of independence and



Margaret Kilgallen, *Untitled*, 1995, enamel over acrylic, roll-down door public art series, recently at Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco.

a decent market niche. The exception is Refusalon, which, in its quest for mainstream viability, fairly bristles at the term.

In this aspect, they are no different from the remaining alternatives of the seventies and eighties, the New Langtons, Labs, Southern Exposures and Intersections. Similarly, these new artist-run organizations are structured around flexibility, true to the artistic process. The only long-range plan, now as then, is to remain sensitive to the vicissitudes of the art. The older alternatives eventually sought stability, however, through the professional, nonprofit structure, whereas this new wave avoids such constraints. (Nevertheless, several of the new spaces are considering future nonprofit status in the hope of becoming recipients of philanthropy, but remain hesitant in the face of the increased work load that such status also confers.)

While the older alternatives created a context for the immaterial, and rejected the gallery system, the new alternatives concern themselves with making culture through community, also a project that requires a new type of site.

Michael M. Floss is executive director of Business Volunteers for the Arts/East Bay, and a freelance curator and arts writer.

A conversation with Michael Damm, artist, curator, founder of Victoria Room

By Meredith Tromble

In 1993, visual artist Michael Damm opened Victoria Room, an exhibition space in the heart of San Francisco's South of Market district. The metal gates out front offer no sign that would indicate the presence of an art gallery, and the cavernous storefront blends anonymously into the decaying urban landscape of surrounding Sixth Street. But as Damm began mounting shows there, it quickly developed a following and, in the intervening years, has generated a considerable amount of positive critical response. Damm, who began his career with a B.A. in Interdisciplinary Social Science from San Francisco State University, says that he received his art education at nonprofit spaces like New Langton Arts and Capp Street Project.

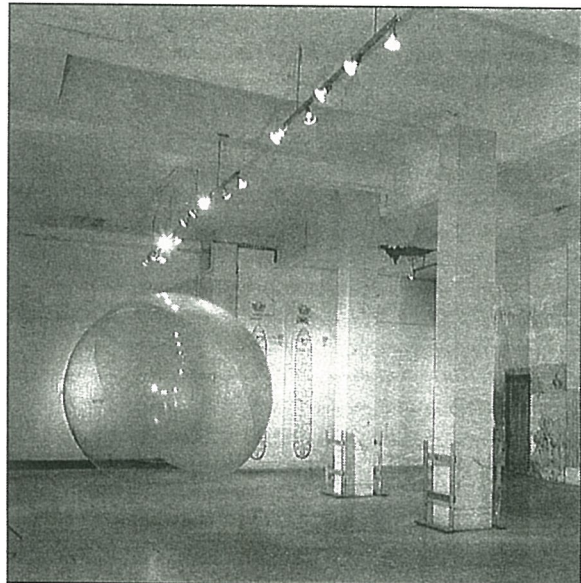
Artweek *Would you outline the recent history of artist-run spaces in San Francisco?*

Michael Damm Kiki, Victoria Room and a gallery called Railway Spine opened almost simultaneously. That really jump-started this whole "new gallery" phenomenon. Some other places had been in existence already, but they were operating without much visibility. Railway Spine closed within seven months and Kiki closed last year, but in the meantime Push has opened, Four Walls has opened, Acme has

opened, Collision has opened—and who knows how long any of us is going to last. But the model that I see is a place opening up, maintaining or extending a certain dialogue in the lineage of these spaces, and then closing, at which point something else will take over from it.

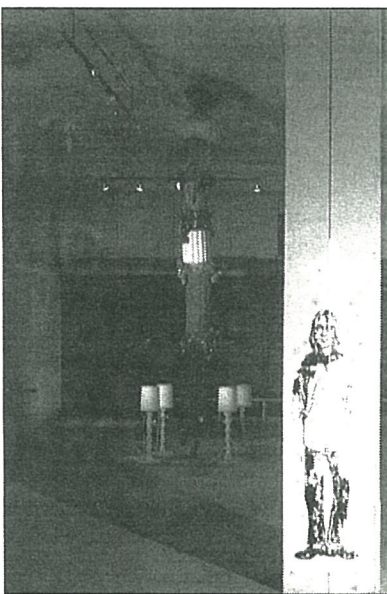
AW *What conditions led to this surge of artist-run spaces?*

Installation view of *Redevelopment*, recently at Victoria Room, San Francisco.



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Above: Michael Damm, detail of *sill*, 1995, magazines, steel, Plexiglas. Below: installation view of *Big Jesus Trash Can*, recently at Victoria Room, San Francisco.



MD In part, it's a national phenomenon. It emerged in the aftermath of the 1980s, the collapse of the market, and the decline of the nonprofits. Rebecca Solnit has made the point that the nonprofit boom period is straddled by noninstitutionalized artist-run spaces. She specifically

refers to the activity that surrounded the early California assemblagists in San Francisco, like the Six Gallery [in the mid-1950s] and Batman [in the early 1960s]. It was not professionalized activity, but incredible work was being circulated and it was taken seriously on a critical level. Similar things are happening today.

AW *Alternative spaces have played a major role in Bay Area art history. Why are they more prominent here than elsewhere?*

MD There's an extraordinary amount of activity in this area among artists and there's never been a really significant market to support it. In the seventies and eighties, an expanded NEA made a lot of funding available for nonprofits, so there was a boom that created a certain amount of institutionalization. When we opened, we sensed that that was pretty much played out.

AW *Are there factors other than the economy that have contributed to this decline?*

MD Professionalization, institutionalization and the development of a class of professional administrators have all had an impact. The work done by professional administrators is important. But the way they look at things is entirely different. Some of them wouldn't be engaged in the activity if it weren't their job. I think part of the reason shows here have been pretty solid is that I've always been motivated by a belief in the project. And if I don't have something I believe in sufficiently, I don't do a show. It's a different dynamic.

AW *Do you have much contact with other artists who are running their own spaces?*

MD Very much so. There are fairly close working relationships. Victoria Room's most recent exhibition was mounted simultaneously at Push. I also work with The Lab a lot. They may run a performance series out of here in February. I've shown at Southern Exposure and I'm the guest artist in the CCC Youth in Action program right now. There's a lot of contact between us.

AW *Do you share many common artistic interests with the nonprofit spaces?*

MD Not necessarily. The nonprofits, like The Lab and Southern Exposure, are a whole different thing. I'm an artist primarily and I've always run this as an artist's project, rather than as an institution. Consequently, the terms are entirely different. I try to maintain professional standards to a certain degree, but I don't have to deal with the same level of institutional accountability that they do. It gives me a lot more flexibility. Those sorts of projects have a completely different lifespan and development. A space like Southern Exposure more or less aims to exist perpetually. It's a big part of the credibility of an organization like that that people believe they're going to be around for a while. Whereas with things like this, the activity, I think, moves in successive waves.

AW *How do the economics work for an artist-run space?*

MD I am trying to generate some funding, but ultimately, it's not an economically motivated venture. With the current show, I made an effort to sell the work, and I'm looking at an economic structure that would be a kind of nonprofit/commercial hybrid. But I'm much more interested in the private sector than I am in dealing with funding organizations. Four Walls is positioned as a commercial venue and has been successful at selling work in the \$100 to \$200 range, which I think is an important niche. In Los Angeles, which has a much bigger market, artist's spaces that are marginally positioned as commercial galleries can perhaps sell enough work to pay the rent.

AW *As an artist, what do you get out of this?*

MD That's a complex question. Victoria Room does not have a mission in the way that a nonprofit needs to have a stable, definable mission. My activity has moved in different phases. Initially, I opened up in response to a lack of access to the nonprofit institutions. So the initial phase of activity was about putting up group shows of emerging local artists and creating access.

In the next phase of activity, I also became interested in critiquing the theme show format. Those shows were often curator-driven rather than artist-driven. Curators generated an idea, then found work to flesh it out. Often the curatorial premise was more interesting than the work. I put together a series of three shows in which I consciously tried to critique that model and propose a different way of working. I think it's necessary to continually redefine curatorial practice and artistic practice.

I've been accused of being a reactionary. In some ways, relative to nonprofit agendas, I'm fairly conservative. But I'm not that interested anymore in didactic projects. I'm primarily interested in studio art.

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KALW-FM.

In an entirely different manner: artist/curators in LA

By David DiMichele

The history of modern and contemporary art has been one of artist-led revolts against prevailing canons, philosophies and institutions, and this history, appropriately, is characterized by what appears to be a phenomenon unique to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the artist-organized exhibition. Historians often mark the beginning of the Modern period with the 1874 artist-organized exhibition of the Independents (known later as the Impressionists) in the studio of the photographer Nadar, and since that time, vanguard artists have participated actively in the exhibition of their own work. The Die Brücke artists organized exhibitions, as did Blaue Reiter, whose members also recorded their ideas in a journal of the same name; the Dada artists staged exhibitions of their own work, as did the Surrealists, who assembled well-documented shows in 1938 and 1942; in New York, the Abstract Expressionists organized the 9th Street show in response to the Museum of Modern Art's lack of interest in their paintings. More recently, the English artist Damien Hirst, now internationally notorious for such bizarre works as a shark in a tank of formaldehyde, began his career with an exhibition of some of his art school friends as well as himself.

Exhibitions organized by artists—or in which artists serve as curators, often pursuing more developed themes—have become a common feature on the landscape of the Los Angeles art scene. Robert Gunderman, for example, a Los Angeles-based artist and gallerist, has been showcasing the work of local artists for the past seven years. He was behind Opus in downtown LA, the well-known Food House in Santa Monica, Leak, which consisted of one-night exhibitions, and the current Acme, located in an industrial section of Santa Monica.