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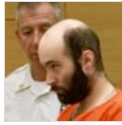
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Stepping Up for Performance Art at Whitney Museum

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By [ANDY BATTAGLIA](#)

Jay Sanders was recently appointed as a new curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art with a charge to focus on the performing arts at both the institution's current home and its new building scheduled to open downtown by the High Line in 2015. His past as an independent curator began its new course when Mr. Sanders, along with Elisabeth Sussman, curated the well-received 2012 Whitney Biennial, notable for its engagement with the history of performance-art and related work from dance, theater, music and more.



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Daniella Zalcmán for The Wall Street Journal

Jay Sanders, pictured at the Whitney Museum, was one of the curators for the 2012 Whitney Biennial.

A week into his new post, Mr. Sanders, 36 years old, spoke with The Wall Street Journal about the nature of performance as more museums are expressing interest in art forms that happen live and in real time.

What is the focus for your new post and what kind of discussion led to it?

The Whitney won a grant to link the history of performance here at the Breuer Building with what they want to do in the

new building. It's for research, exhibitions and performance, to study the history of performance at the Whitney since the '60s and then travel around the world to research how cultural institutions, museums and festivals are dealing with live arts of all sorts: music, poetry, dance, theater, whatever. It's all to figure out how to imbue it into the DNA of the new building, by looking back and looking forward.

What are some high points of the Whitney's history with performance?

They did a great show here called Anti-Illusion in 1969 that dealt with process work and finding ways to bring in an expanded sense of medium into exhibitions. There's a great post-modern dance history that centered on the Whitney. There was a cool jazz series that had Cecil Taylor and Duke Ellington here in the '60s and '70s. The history of what they've done here is really vast, and I feel like our generation can look at it in a different way. Performance stuff from the '60s, '70s and '80s has a lot of interest and relevance for younger artists now.

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Why is that? There's been a real rise in the prominence of performing arts in museums across the board.

There's always been people interested and great people working, but the audience looking in on it is bigger now, and more visual artists are engaging with performance. In 2005, the first Performa festival in New York was very in tune with that shift. It captured a lot and encouraged a lot of people to work performatively who might have been on the brink of it. The heterogeneity of it—there were theater people, comedy people, dance, music—was encouraging.

Is renewed interest in performance and live events a response to the ubiquity of images all around us?

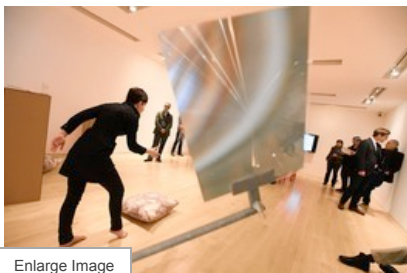
I feel like there's a shift where people want to be out together. Museums, cultural institutions and nonprofits are always redefining how they relate to their public, and in New York there's been a swing toward events, like talks or screenings, that get people every week. That sort of sociability toward esoteric media or performance really is some kind of cultural shift. There was a moment when you could download everything and you thought people wouldn't want to go out, but they do want to go out and be around each other and see things.

Is part of it a response to commodification in the art market?

To say that gives a lot of authority to the market, even just to say you're working against it. There are a lot of different art worlds and a lot of different fidelities and orientations. You meet people that can work in so many milieux. I think people get more and more literate and so history comes forward more clearly. People learn the nuance, and it all gets more interesting. And it goes both ways. In the historical view of postwar art there is this idea of dematerialization—conceptual art, land art—that moved out of the gallery and out of commerce. But then more adventurous collectors found ways to catch up to it, so that you can now buy conceptual art and buy and take care of land art.

It must be maddening sometimes as a performance curator to work in a context that can be so fleeting and ephemeral.

It's fleeting, but then it can have such a strength that is different from that of static things. What can come across can be so powerful, to see all the kinds of decisions an artist makes and enacts over time. When I moved to New York, I started going to Richard Foreman plays and that was my favorite thing to do. Each year, I would see one of them for an hour and live in that environment, and they became a huge deal for me. There's no "after," no document or reproducibility. Our younger generations deal with that, with "What does it mean to experience content?" Most young artists have access to so much, but I think people understand the difference between seeing something live and having little QuickTime videos. The audience gets more sophisticated.



Enlarge Image

Mario Tama/Getty Images

The 2012 Whitney Biennial

What is the most important quality for a curator now?

Good curators have to have some weird sensitivity to how people are trying to communicate in what they're doing. If I see an artist and I'm surprised and impressed and learn a lot, and I'm amazed by the formal decisions they make and how they live their life, then I want to do anything possible to make opportunities for them.

How will performing arts figure into the future home for the Whitney?

Where we stage things, how we use difference spaces, how we integrate different media and time experiences, focused durational work and more ambient things—the whole museum experience is so theatrical, and I see many potentials in that. There's going to be outdoor space, with big decks available for performances and outdoor screenings and

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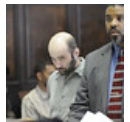
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stuff of all kinds, right on the water. To my mind it would make sense for it to be a responsive venue too. I like the idea that the Whitney could be a dynamic kind of hosting venue unexpectedly, like a club would be.

Do you have any dream projects in mind?

I do, but I can't say yet. I'm learning the boundaries still. But here you have this platform where you can call anybody you want and they are probably going to call you back.

Is the New York art scene is bigger or smaller now than it has been in recent years?

It's bigger than ever. More people are artists than ever, and the gallery scene is huge. You read biographies of people in the '60s and '70s and people could keep up with everything, they would have seen every show in town. Now it's a lot to keep up with. But there's an interesting generational shift happening that's really hard to put a finger on. I see artists in their mid-20s fundamentally relating to art-making and technology in a different way that is really surprising to me. I'm really curious what the next few years of art-making will feel like.

A version of this article appeared August 2, 2012, on page A20 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Stepping Up for Performance Art at Whitney Museum.

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