

## ART

## Running the show

By introducing us to fresh talent, keen-eyed curators are the real new stars of the art world

BY SOPHIE LERIS

**I**n a world where rising stars are snapped up while still at college and the buying of established contemporary artists has become a game for speculators and kudos-seeking billionaires, it is easy to forget the unsung and barely remunerated heroes of the art scene, without whom the art world simply wouldn't turn: curators.

During the Nineties, when London's Groucho Club and Colony Room were full of YBAs who spent as much time drinking, talking and sleeping with each other as they did making art, there was so much inter-communication that artists frequently curated shows together, set up flamboyant art collectives such as Paul Fryer and Abigail Lane's Complete Arthole, or collaborated with art-scene insiders such as Carl Freedman. But now, with emerging artists ensconced in their studios 24/7, acutely aware that Saatchi has just bought their best friend's sculpture at his first one-man show and they still don't have a gallery, there is little time to relax, let alone borrow a warehouse and stage an art event.

Most of the major galleries now function 100 per cent as dealerships, so busy promoting and selling their artists that they don't have time to find new talent by visiting East End studios and degree shows, or just by making themselves available to look at slides and give advice. What they do find time for, though, is taking copious notes at exhibitions produced by hot young curators such as Flora Fairbairn, one of the movers and shakers of the London art scene. "I do all the groundwork and then the

galleries come and nick the artists," she says. "There's no way I can compete with the blue-chip galleries, so I don't try to hold on to artists. This is about passion, not money."

Fairbairn says the best description of her role is "art producer", since the job requires myriad talents, often practical rather than theoretical, but most of all it relies on instinct. She places one piece of art next to another because it feels right; exhibitions should have a natural rhythm, she explains, like a piece of music. Fairbairn, who developed spatial awareness by working for Seth Stein Architects, mounted her first show in west London's Trelick Tower in 2000 and was spotted by Lucian Freud in the same year. She says she learnt more in the conversations they had three evenings a week over nine months than she could possibly have gleaned on one of the recently established curating courses at Goldsmiths or the Royal College of Art. (Art-world gossip has it that she is the only one of Freud's non-related female subjects he didn't sleep with, although I can't imagine he got it on with a pregnant Kate Moss or, for that matter, the Queen.)

Since then, Fairbairn has put on numerous shows – including *Anticipation*, co-curated by Kay Saatchi – in buildings lent to her by property developers keen to expose their real estate to art-world wedge. She loves the ▶

**Below** Displaying to the gallery: curating a successful exhibition is an art in itself, says Sophie Leris



► challenge of working in new spaces, and sees herself as a "floating gallery"; she represents eight artists but has shown 160 since March 2007. Her most prolific collector is *The X-Files* star Gillian Anderson, who, she says, has a great eye and always picks the hottest artists.

Fairbairn is not the only curator for whom art and architecture form a crucial partnership. Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst and Elliot McDonald set up their company, Reconstruction, in 2006, staging exhibitions in architecturally interesting and historically charged spaces. So far, the duo have put on two sculptural outdoor exhibitions at Sudeley Castle, shown Paul Fryer at the Manchester Square fire station and Polly Morgan at Trinity Church, Marylebone.

They also throw one of the best parties of the art calendar at Sudeley, which is owned by the Dent-Brocklehurst family, to open their summer show. Last year, girls in pink Hunter wellies and PVC leggings danced to Tim Noble and Sue Webster on the decks, while down in the dungeons a projector transformed a pile of scrap metal into a pair of copulating rodents in Noble and Webster's "Metal Fucking Rats".

Two of London's biggest collectors, Anita Zabludowicz and David Roberts, have said that their new spaces, both in Camden, are as much to nurture the talents of young curators as to display their ever-increasing private collections, and Roberts has pronounced that curators suffer from neglect. Roberts employs Fairbairn

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as his consultant and she is curating a show for him during Frieze 2008; she describes him as "an old-fashioned patron of the arts".

Zabludowicz, meanwhile, has employed Elizabeth Neilson, a 28-year-old Goldsmiths College graduate, as curator and head of collection. Neilson's inaugural show in the former Methodist chapel showcased art from the collection as well as a site-specific installation of the Taj Mahal by Rina Banerjee. Neilson chooses guest curators to "pull out different threads" of the collection and also invites artists to respond to the building. This month, film-maker Gerry Fox covers floors, ceilings and walls with screens showing footage of London. You are literally engulfed by the city, a loud and claustrophobic experience with moments of pure beauty. A bit like the art world; but follow the curators and you'll be OK. **GO**

*Zabludowicz Collection, 176 Prince of Wales Road, London NW1. Annual membership £5.*