

## Using Art to Start A Global Conversation

By LYLE REXER

**D**EPENDING on the mood you catch him in, Dan Cameron, senior curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Manhattan, is either (A) a kid in a candy store or (B) out to save the world through contemporary art. And if you don't think the world needs saving or you wonder whether contemporary art, with its ironies and theorizing, is up to the task, he has an answer: a high-concept, big-tent exhibition that manages to sprawl even in the museum's narrow SoHo confines.

Opening on Friday with works by 25 artists from around the world, "Living Inside the Grid" is the most ambitious exhibition Mr. Cameron has mounted since he was hired by the museum in 1995. If it flaunts his intellectual hubris, it also embodies his passionate belief that in a time of potential war abroad and terror at home, we need art — obstreperous, baffling and beautiful art — more than ever.

In person, Mr. Cameron seems younger than his age, 46, or his lengthy résumé would suggest. That could be because, unlike many museum curators (including his boss, Lisa Phillips, who spent 20 years at the Whitney Museum before moving to the New Museum), he hasn't come up through museum ranks. He is one of a new breed of art professionals that appeared in the 1980's: independent curators.

Ministers without portfolio, they took advantage of the worldwide boom in contemporary art to mediate between artists and the institutions that wanted a piece of the action but didn't know the field and often didn't understand it. Between 1981 and 1995, Mr. Cameron organized 20 exhibitions, from Malmo, Sweden, to Vienna, including several for the New Museum. And even now, he continues to work internationally. He is currently organizing the prestigious International Istanbul Biennial, which opens in September.

"I think of the curator as a public intellectual," Mr. Cameron said recently in the New Museum's cramped offices (one reason it has announced an ambitious plan to build new quarters on the Bowery.) "The exhibition organizer creates a platform for artists, sets up relationships between genres, practices and media, gets a conversation going. There isn't enough of this. Museums in this country tend to follow the imperative of the market, not set the terms." An indefatigable writer with a shelf of publications, Mr. Cameron seems out to change this state of affairs single-handedly.

Only the New Museum, perhaps, could have convinced him to come in out of the cold. As he likes to point out, it is the only major museum in New York City founded by a curator (Marcia Tucker, in 1977), and for over a decade it was a hotbed of art theory, much of it imported from France. Its groundbreaking group exhibitions (like "Damaged Goods" in 1986 and "Deconstruction, Reconstruction" in 1980), symposiums and publications helped make postmodernism a household word. The New Museum aggressively promoted a global agenda of work by women, minority artists and others who had been marginalized by the mainstream art world.

For Mr. Cameron, whose academic training was in philosophy, not art history, taking the job was a chance to build on this legacy of intellectual envelope-pushing. Since his arrival, he has mounted the first major Ameri-

can exhibitions of work by Carolee Schneemann, the doyenne of feminist performance and video art; the Brazilian installation artist Cildo Meireles; the political South African painter-filmmaker William Kentridge; and the downtown painter Carroll Dunham.

While these artists were hardly obscure, the New Museum exhibitions crystallized critical opinion about their importance. As Mr. Cameron explained, "Lisa and I agreed from the start that this museum has a crucial role to play in featuring important artists who, for whatever reasons, have not gotten their due, artists you look at and ask, 'Why in the world hasn't someone already done this?'"

This attention to accomplished individual careers brings an almost buttoned-down focus to what had tended to be, in Henry James's famous phrase, "a loose baggy monster." "Living Inside the Grid," Mr. Cameron's first American group show since 1982, seems to be something of a throwback, bristling with ideas and a 1980's-type title, one that suggests the dour prognostications of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Mr. Cameron says the exhibition is about the way we live now, inside grids of architecture, information and surveillance. It took three years to assemble, and getting it off the ground may prove to be the easy part compared to the task of winning over critics grown wary of thematic umbrellas and a skeptical and increasingly conservative public. Mr. Cameron's exhibition last year of "Cloaca," by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, probably didn't reduce the skepticism; it featured a machine that produced a substance looking exactly like excrement.

Mr. Cameron strenuously disputes the notion that contemporary art is an in joke and has abandoned the pursuit of the beautiful. Thus it's easy to see why he is known

around town as an artist's curator. "What got me interested in art in the first place," he said, "is the absolutely remarkable, mysterious things artists make. I insist on the primacy of beauty, but I don't believe that beauty is dumb. It unifies our experiences, mental and physical, and its satisfactions are often hard won." He added, "People who don't know contemporary art don't think they should bring their own ideas and feelings to bear, and I tell them they have to."

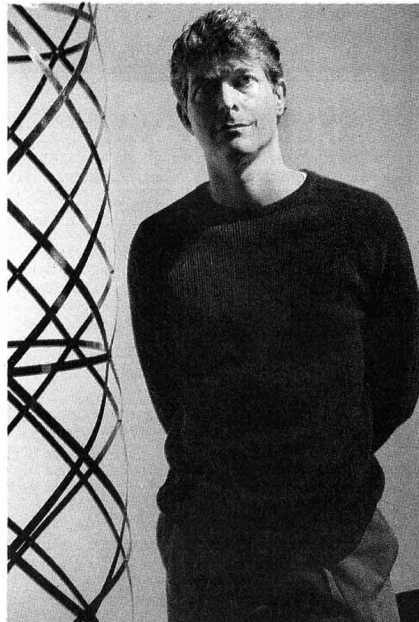
Mr. Cameron has taken the same diligent-delight approach to selecting the works in "Living Inside the Grid." Unlike biennials, which suffer from the pressure of global hunting and gathering, this show gestated. It includes only works Mr. Cameron has lived with for a while. For example, he first saw Camille Utterback's work several years ago, on one of his walks through Chelsea. He spends about one-fifth of his time looking at new work and is always prospecting, especially when overseas. In Ms. Utterback's installation, projected letters cascading down screens revealed themselves as poetry whenever a spectator stepped into the flow of light. Mr. Cameron never forgot it.

When he next saw her work, it was completely different, yet it impressed him equally. "It was then I knew I had something," he said. For the forthcoming exhibition, Ms. Utterback has created an arresting installation that tracks the movement of visitors by their body heat and transforms the data into stunning color projections.

Mr. Cameron is deeply committed to the New Museum's avant-garde mission, but does that mission still carry its original urgency? The Museum of Modern Art mounts retrospectives of work by Andreas Gursky and Gerhard Richter; the Metropolitan has just opened a midcareer Thomas Struth extravaganza; and the Brooklyn Museum made headlines with "Sensation!" The themed exhibitions of P.S. 1 in Queens and the more adventurous New York galleries increasingly function as minibiennials. Contemporary art is everywhere and thoroughly international.

"There will always be a need for us," Mr. Cameron insisted, "because there will always be a need for new ideas." He continued: "Most major museums are too invested in their collections to go far beyond them or to radically reinterpret recent decades. We don't have that burden. Many museum curators envy me the freedom I've been given to take risks. I have the opportunity to fail spectacularly."

Hence, the kid in the candy store. Yet what the kid has discovered is not sweets but sustenance. "When Istanbul called to ask me to organize the biennial," he recalled, "the ruins of the World Trade Center were still smoldering. I said that I couldn't refuse precisely because of the emergency. I didn't mean the bombing. I meant the decline and failure of political discourse. Conflict is global, but so is art, and only art has the ability to synthesize understanding from discord and help us see through difference. People are starving for intellectual and spiritual stimulation, and it's right here, a world under one roof." □



Janson Mandella/New Museum of Contemporary Art (left); G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times (above)

Dan Cameron, senior curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art