



wanted: the young at art

Avant Garde Seeks Younger Museum Members

By Carnella Padilla

It was a leap of faith.

In spring 2005, Avant Garde, the Museum of New Mexico Foundation's young members group, devised the First Annual Pushpin Show as the "happening" that would change the face—and age—of museum audiences in Santa Fe.

The show, open to all young artists, challenged participants to incorporate pushpins into art and hang their own creations on opening night. With no advance sign up,

organizers had no idea who might show. Avant Garde Chair Laura Mott, 29, recalls, "Our thinking was, 'hope for the best, expect the worst.'"

Despite the nail biting, it was a huge success, attracting more than eighty-five artists and 400-plus guests. "It was our defining moment," Mott says.

Established in 2002 to narrow the gap between the average 63-year-old museum member and the largely invisible 21-to-45-year-old set, Avant Garde works to draw young

adults to museum-based community art events. Organizers know, however, that one successful event cannot solve dismal young adult attendance plaguing cultural institutions everywhere. Indeed, today, as the group plans the launch of its Second Annual Pushpin Show on April 28, questions remain about how best to bring young adults into the arts-and-culture fold.

How can Avant Garde and its affiliated museums attract and sustain their interest? How do they build relationships with a population with other personal and financial priorities? Above all, what does it take to turn an infrequent (if ever) museum visitor into a lifetime arts devotee?

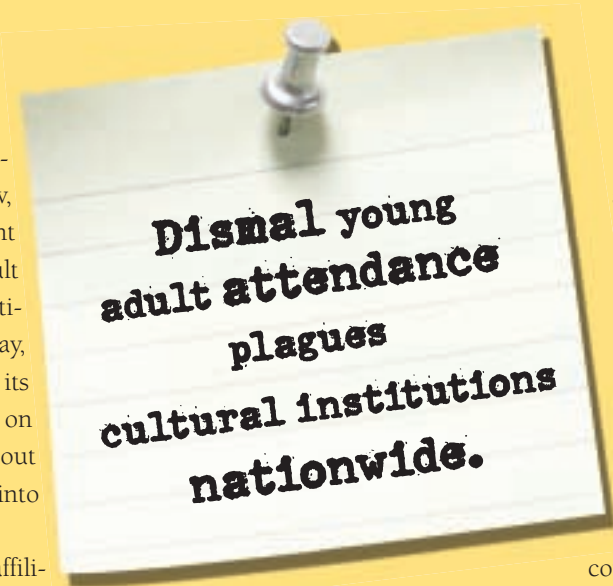
From Dudes to Devotees

Avant Garde and the foundation aren't alone. A recent *Journal of Philanthropy* story reports, "As their current audiences and donors age, many arts groups are aggressively seeking to court younger professionals who they hope will become significant donors."

Nationwide, museums and cultural groups are targeting young adults through after-hours mixers combining cocktails, appetizers, and live music with exhibit tours, educational programs, and other activities. Steamy titles, such as "Sex, Sake, and Sushi," a recent program at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, and slick marketing materials appeal to the desired—yet highly diverse—demographic.

Some young adults are single; others married with children. Some have established careers; others are in college or unemployed. Some were introduced to museums as children; others have never set foot in one. Whoever they are, they won't likely choose a museum visit over a movie or bar.

"When you look at what young people do, museums aren't high on the list," says foundation Membership Director Ann Scheflen, 48, who launched Avant Garde to "make young adults feel more attached to our museums. A new generation of supporters who will become museum visitors, volunteers, and donors is crucial to our future."



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Mott says one problem is the stereotype of museums as the stuffy, elitist domain of the wealthy old guard. "I've felt that way in museums, like I don't belong," she says. "We're trying to break down those barriers and change that perception."

Avant Garde hosts "social and educational" events that promote museums as welcoming places to meet others of

similar age and interests. In February, the group turned up the heat with "Sleeping Around" at the Museum of International Folk Art. A promotion for the exhibit, *Dream On: Beds from Asia to Europe*, the party was co-hosted by the weekly *Santa Fe Reporter* and featured speed dating, couples' sex therapy, massage, live music, food, and cocktails.

It was another major success.

A New Generation of Galas

Putting fun and sociability on par with art scholarship makes some museum traditionalists bristle. But 42-year-old Tey Marianna Nunn, Curator of Contemporary Hispano and Latino Collections at the Museum of International Folk Art, says the situation requires "a delicate balance and an open mind."

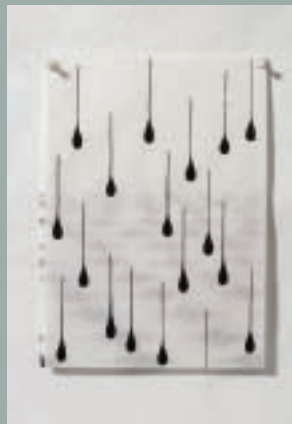
"The entire museum world needs to look at not always being in that stuffy cabinet of curiosity, saying, 'this is how it should be because we've always done it this way,' isn't going to cut it anymore," she says. "There have always been museum galas and they have always been social events. Now there can be a new generation of galas and programs. Everybody gets engaged in different ways, and if museums don't change a little bit, then people don't find themselves reflected there."

A hip, high-tech approach is fine for promoting art as part of today's visual culture, says Tim Rodgers, the 45-year-old Chief Curator at the Museum of Fine Arts. But museums should not lower the intellectual bar.

"You must be sure [young adults] know that art has a serious intent," Rodgers says. "I dislike that the world of art is



Avant Garde's First Annual Pushpin Show drew more than 85 artists who created and hung artworks made with pushpins, including those pictured (left and below). Prize winners included David Bodelson, Turner Mark Jacobs, John St. Peter, Melanie Morgan, and Sarah Gilman. Courtesy Museum of New Mexico Foundation. Photos by Blair Clark, 2005.



compelled to use the tactics of advertisers—sex, loud music, simple ideas, heterosexism, short attention spans, alcohol, and no politics—to lure in audiences. The art I like best advocates none of these things, and I wonder if anyone notices this when they are so busy party-

ing in front of it. I like that the museum is different, that it wants to advance ideas rather than fashions, trends, or the predictable, and that it expects a certain decorum, respect, and time from its audience."

Both curators question if a museum social event can inspire a long-term commitment to culture in young adults.

If shaping donors is a priority, Nunn says, "We have to create more young ownership in the day-to-day activities of the museum." She suggests more "out-of-the-box exhibits," noting these may also appeal to the over-sixty crowd. A young museum docent corps and recruiting young members for museum boards are other ideas.

Rodgers agrees that museums should invite the best ideas of a new generation. But, he cautions, making museums too youth-focused creates "a division between the hip, young, open, poor, creative, and fun versus the old, stuffy, class-bound, elitist, intellectuals. I don't buy into the division and don't believe it exists."

Young in Santa Fe

If anything creates a cultural division in Santa Fe, both curators say, it's being young in a city that promotes itself more to tourists and retirees than youth. Factor in sky-high living costs, and it's no wonder the average museumgoer is sixty-three.

"Our 60-to-80 age group is not finite, it's a growth industry," Rodgers says. "Those moving here are usually pretty privileged economically. Why would the museums not want to target them over the younger generation? We'd be foolish not to."

But *Santa Fe Reporter* culture columnist Zane Fischer, 35, whose publication targets the Avant Garde demographic, says the issue of age and culture in Santa Fe "has to be tied to the city's economy."

Fischer and the *Reporter* are looking into developing a citywide "culture pass." The idea is to have young members groups—such as Avant Garde and those from Site Santa Fe, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the Santa Fe Opera, and elsewhere—work with the city's

economic development department to combine cultural membership opportunities for young residents.

“It’s the 18-year-olds and up who are going to be the next entrepreneurs and the next donors,” Fischer says. “If they feel at home in these institutions, they are going to bring their children and keep coming back.”

Still, Rodgers contends, “Culture is not driving the young out of Santa Fe. I would argue that culture lures and keeps people of all ages here much longer than their economic situation warrants. I hate to see our cultural institutions cast as either a source or a solution to a problem that has nothing to do with them.”

Independence and Intelligence

With these challenges in mind, Avant Garde—now 165 members strong—begins its fourth year. While the debate about how to capture the cultural attention of young adults continues, the group is going beyond party planning to address the serious side of art. They are promoting a strong young adult presence at exhibit openings and recruiting new members there. They also are tackling the intellectual and creative content of exhibits by writing reviews for their new E-newsletter.

“The idea is to engage their peers in a fun and educational way by communicating in their own language and voice,” membership director Schefflen says.

Meanwhile, they continue to support young and emerging artists with events such as the annual Pushpin Show. Local galleries and other cultural venues provide other opportunities for members to become informed art collectors and supporters. With independence and intelligence, members say, their generation of art lovers will gain the respect it deserves.

“There is new energy, new momentum,” says steering com-



The Avant Garde Steering Committee is tackling the intellectual and creative content of museum exhibits. Members are (clockwise from bottom left) Erica Garcia, Ralph Ahn, Staci Golar, Stephen Trujillo, Anna Blyth, Cary McStay, and Christopher Goblet, with Rosemary Salle (*top center*) and Laura Mott (*middle*). Photo by Cheron Bayna.

mittee member Rosemary Sallee, 35, Assistant Collections Manager and Registrar at the Museum of International Folk Art. “We’re working to create our own identity. We’re ready to take some risks.” ■

Avant Garde is free to current Museum of New Mexico Foundation members, ages 21-to-45. Memberships start at \$25. Call 505-982-6366, ext. 100, or visit www.museumfoundation.org to join.

AVANT GARDE 2006 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SUNDAY, APRIL 2

Exhibition Opening

Dichos: Words to Live, Love, and Laugh By in Latin America

Museum of International Folk Art, 5:30-7:30 P.M.

FRIDAY, APRIL 28—

FRIDAY, MAY 12

2nd Annual Pushpin Show

Stewart Udall Center for Museum Resources, Museum Hill, 5:30-7:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, MAY 28

Exhibition Opening

Mexican Modern: Masters of the 20th Century

Museum of Fine Arts

FRIDAY, JUNE 9

Exhibition Opening

Marsden Hartley: American Modern

Museum of Fine Arts, 5:30-7:00 P.M.

JUNE through AUGUST

“Artini!”

Young art collectors museum and gallery walks. Informal art gatherings citywide.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16

Exhibition Opening

Classic Navajo Blankets

Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, 5:30-7:00 P.M.

AUGUST

Collecting Southwest: Exploring Indian Market

Date TBD.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

Exhibition Opening

Collecting Modernism: European Masterworks

Museum of Fine Arts, 5:30-7:00 P.M.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

Holiday Party

For more information on the 2nd Annual Pushpin Show or other 2006 Avant Garde events visit pushpinshow.com and museumfoundation.org.