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THE NEW SEASON | ART

Top of the Wish List: No More Blockbusters

By HOLLAND COTTER

ONE of the early pleasures of a new art season is parsing the list of coming attractions for must-sees: the masterpiece loans, the architectural expansions, the star turns. In recent years we've had lots of each. We're spoiled.

This year's list is a little different, with fewer loans, expansions and stars. The art world's professional optimists keep telling us that, despite the recession, everything is on track: art fairs are healthy, auctions are holding their own. But look around and you see galleries struggling, museums cutting staff, universities reducing art resources and nonprofits treading water.

The reality is that one big, splashy party is over, and another — its scope, mood and purpose still uncertain — is forming. We're in a transition phase, always a good time to think about change, about what could be and what shouldn't be. And so I offer a preview that is also a wish list for the season ahead.

For starters I want to see our big museums seriously rethink the blockbuster phenomenon. It started decades ago as a publicity stunt and quickly became an addiction for audiences and museums alike. African art, Armani, motorcycles, Matisse — who cared what as long as there was a lot. But as a default exhibition mode, supersizers can be killers. They divert attention from everything else in the museum and cost a bundle.

These days not even the Metropolitan Museum of Art can afford to be the blockbuster multiplex it was, with two or three monster loan shows running at once. And good riddance to that. Shows like "Art of the Samurai: Japanese Arms and Armor, 1156-1868," are worth the expense, being made up of stuff we could never otherwise see. (Most of the objects in "Art of the Samurai" will go right back to the temples they came from.) But I can't think of any good reason for the museum to be renting acres of Turners or Courbets ever again.

I propose that the Met convert one of its huge special exhibition spaces into permanent collection galleries to display some of the millions of objects it owns but never brings out for lack of room. And I recommend that that material be presented in small, smart, frequently changing shows that feed our hunger for novelty, but also change our habits of looking, our idea of what a great exhibition can be.

There are memorable examples from the recent past. One of the best shows in years at the Museum of Modern Art, the essayistic "Manet and the Execution of Maximilian," took up just one large room. And certain compact items on this year's schedule look exceptionally promising: "Origins of El Greco: Icon Painting in Venetian Crete" at the Onassis Cultural Center in Manhattan starting in November is one. Concurrent shows of South Indian Jain work at the Met and the Rubin Museum of Art in September add up

to another. (Wait till you see Jain sculpture; you'll flip.)

And when El Museo del Barrio, one of the city's smaller institutions, reopens in October after a renovation, categories like modesty and grandeur will blur. The museum, which started in storefronts in 1969 and now sits on Fifth Ave at 104th Street, will be inaugurating its first permanent collection galleries, a big step. Among the artists included will be two — Marcos Dimas and Fernando Salicrup — who helped run community art workshops in those storefronts 40 years ago.

If you want to find innovative models for small-scale shows with big ideas, teaching institutions are still the place to look, particularly university art museums. This is where spadework research is being done, and where young curators are learning to create, experimentally, visions of history through objects. Such places are also, increasingly and infuriatingly, a target of budget cutbacks.

Brandeis University's disgraceful effort to dismantle its Rose Art Museum brought the matter to public attention last winter. The recent threat by the University of California, Los Angeles, to close its art library perpetuates the trend. What can universities be thinking? They exist to support and protect exactly what their museums are doing: shaping the history of the future. If they shut down such training facilities, they shut down the future. If they shut down the future, they violate their mission. And when they do that, my wish list turns into a demands lists, with one thing nonnegotiable: stop.

As it happens, university museums are among the few places that still regularly produce exhibitions of unapologetically political art. This fall, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard will have a survey of art and graphics produced over two decades by members of Act Up (or AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).

Timed to tap into the public's obsession with health care, I Space Gallery in Chicago, supported by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champlain, has a show called "Everybody: Visual Resistance in Feminist Health Movements, 1969-2009." And two campus museums — the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and the Henry Art Gallery at University of Washington in Seattle — have solos by the artist and writer Allan Sekula, a longtime a critic of globalization.

Artists are increasingly showing up in the role of curator, and I'd love to see more of this. I have high hopes for "Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield," organized by Robert Gober for the Hammer Museum of the University of California, Los Angeles. The combination of Burchfield's transcendentalist surrealism and Mr. Gober's gothic sublime is likely to be intense. So is Urs Fischer's show at the New Museum, for which he will double as the primary curator and creator. Mr. Fischer, who jackhammered his Chelsea gallery's floor to smithereens a while back, will have the entire museum at his disposal, and will no doubt come up with something unusual. I wish the prospects for the 2010 Whitney Biennial in spring looked more unusual than they do. The curator, Francesco Bonami, comes from outside the museum but is so thoroughly embedded in the art establishment that he might as well work there. What we need is someone detached from the old buddy system of curators and critics who can give the moribund biennial concept life. I would have hired an artist or two — or a dozen — for the job, and another bunch to tackle "Greater New York" at P.S. 1, a second big group show returning in the spring.

This is not to imply that artists are, by definition, brighter, wiser or more venturesome than anyone else. But at least some of them seem to have wiring and reflexes different from, and less predictable than, those of the

bureaucrats who normally run the industry. And at this point, after a long stretch of been-there-done-that, art desperately needs something different. I don't mean different styles or stars, but different modes of being — a renewed sense of purpose.

I continue to suspect that the Internet holds promise beyond what anyone has yet imagined. But the paradigm I'm putting some hope in is one that briefly came into view in June when the nonprofit X Initiative in Chelsea hosted "No Soul for Sale: A Festival of Independents," a four-day jamboree of artist collectives from around the world.

Some 50 collectives — I use the term loosely — showed up. And when everyone and everything was jammed together in one place, you couldn't tell art from documents, artists from curators, artists from writers, writers from editors, writers or editors or artists from activists, galleries from zines, zines from Web sites, or people who were there from people who weren't. In other words, total confusion. Fabulous.

Suddenly contemporary art was doing what it seemed to have forgotten how to do: establish a perch for truly independent thinking outside the larger culture, including its own larger culture. In this it was sharing the normal condition of contemporary poetry, a medium so far outside the mainstream that it has its own nothing-to-lose economy. It is so invisible to the world at large and so unpreoccupied by what's up, what's down — what's a masterpiece, who's a star — that it's in transition all the time.

Confusion is demanding, but it's a form of freedom, and it can be habit forming. It made for a great four-day party. Maybe it can be carried into the new season. I hope it can.

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