

# Economic Downturn Forces Groups to Get Creative

By PHILLIP LUTZ

**H**IT hard by the economic downturn, arts groups are seeking strength in numbers — forming alliances, pooling resources, networking and accommodating one another's diminished circumstances.

The efforts, which sometimes bring together dissimilar groups, don't always go smoothly. But by and large, the atmosphere is one of growing cooperation that works to artists' benefit — and the public's.

"There's more of a willingness to work together because there's a unique cause right now, and the cause is the fact there are economic issues," said Stephen Sansone, president of the Untermyer Performing Arts Council in Yonkers and executive director of the Yonkers Downtown/Waterfront Business Improvement District.

Since May 1, four museums in Westchester County (the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, the Katonah Museum of Art and Purchase College's Neuberger Museum of Art) and two in Fairfield County, Connecticut (the Bruce Museum in Greenwich and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield) have allowed any of their members to be admitted to all six. The same goes for visitors who buy a same-day pass.

The plan — advertised as an alliance — has been slow to catch on, with only a handful of museum visitors taking advantage of it in a typical week. Still, arts groups say it is the first pact of its kind in memory among museums in Connecticut and New York, and its very existence is evidence of greater cooperation.

"It's symbolic of our efforts to be creative in a very tough time," said Peter C. Sutton, executive director of the Bruce, who, noting that his museum's endowment was down 20 percent over the past year and its corporate support depleted, hosted the meeting in March at which the plan was formulated.

"Almost all nonprofits have suffered some loss in their endowments and had to institute economizing efforts, as we have," he said, "and this is a good way for people to make the most of their local museums."

Another kind of joint effort — one enjoying greater participation this year, its sixth — is Art Along the Hudson, a cooperative media campaign to promote the visual and performing arts in seven cities lining the river.

"What we've found is that, working together, we help strengthen each other," said Linda T. Hubbard, chairwoman of the campaign. Ms. Hubbard said it has amassed \$16,000 this year — each city contributing \$1,750, the rest coming from private donors — which has paid for 50,000 brochures, posters, a Web site, a kickoff event and print and radio advertising. Joining Kingston, Beacon, Catskill, Poughkeepsie and Newburgh in the campaign this year are New Paltz and Peekskill. Through its participation, Peekskill has been able to multiply the effect of its marketing dollars and mitigate the impact of budget cuts, said Christopher W. Marra, an economic development specialist who helps regulate that city's sprawling artists' district.

"It not only helped us," he said, "but connected us to other cities, and now had us look like we were part of a bigger community."

Some activities being promoted by the Art Along the Hudson campaign take place year-

round — though May to October is the busiest time — with plenty of music, dance and theater; open-air galleries along waterfront promenades; and tours of historic sites, from the Crawford House in Newburgh to Huguenot Street in New Paltz.

The downside of diversity is that it can make reconciling constituents' competing concerns more difficult, Ms. Hubbard said, a comment echoed by Janet T. Langsam, executive director of another joint marketing effort, Arts-Westchester.

"It's not just divvying up the space, it's location, location, location," Ms. Langsam said, referring to the ideal placement of information in the brochures produced for her organization's 130 affiliates.

Both women agreed that at a time when arts groups have less money for marketing, their organizations' ability to produce more brochures and distribute them more widely than they could alone usually trumps parochial interests. "The more we can collaborate, pooling our resources, the better we can weather the storm and get the word out to all our constituents," Ms. Langsam said.

Demand is growing, she said, for space in ArtsWestchester's print publications and on its Web site, which in the fall will expand a social networking feature to allow the group's affiliates to interact more easily among themselves and with the public.

Networking among artists generally is on the rise, as is agents' sharing of their work, said William C. Maxwell, a longtime printmaker,



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professor, agent and owner of Maxwell Fine Arts, a gallery and studio in Peekskill.

"We've reduced the competition," said Mr. Maxwell, who represents about 50 artists and who has been lending their work more freely, as have many of his counterparts.

Wendie Garber, owner of the Flat Iron Gallery, in Peekskill, recently lent the paintings of Nadine Gordon-Taylor, whom she represents, to Mr. Maxwell, who showed them in a gallery he runs, 121 Restaurant, in North Salem.

At the same time, Mr. Maxwell lent the "sculpted oils" of Leslie Lew, whom he represents, to the Flat Iron, where they are on display. In fact, the work of the artists Mr. Maxwell represents can be seen on, near or leaning against walls throughout Peekskill.

But even as he spreads his artists' work more widely, Mr. Maxwell's galleries are suffering amid the downturn, he said, and he is shifting his attention toward cooperation with nonprofits. Come September, he expects to mount a photography show at one of them, the Paramount Center for the Arts in Peekskill.

Having established an artists' district nearly 20 years ago, Peekskill has been in the forefront of struggling cities that are trying to revitalize their downtowns by attracting artists to work and live there. The artists' shared circumstance has fostered cooperation, which has increased as the economy has worsened, said Jo-Ann Brody, a sculptor and teacher.

"The dialogue is ongoing and increasing as we get more desperate," Ms. Brody said as she

instructed about 40 children in the creation of Dutch-inspired ceramic tiles. The work is part of a countywide project coinciding with preparations for the September opening of "Double Dutch," an exhibition of installation art from the Netherlands at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, held in cooperation with the Netherland-America Foundation.

The decline in grants in the United States has spurred local museums' interest in collaborating with agencies abroad, said Irma Jansen, associate director of the center, which has become a cultural hub of the city. Among the organizers of "For the Love of Art," a mixed-media show held earlier this year, was Livia Straus, a collector and founder of the center; Ms. Brody; Ben Green, owner of the 80,000-square-foot Hat Factory, a converted space where the show was held; and the art dealers Rick and Penny Yamet.

The atmosphere of cooperation extends to performing artists as well, said Mr. Sansone of the Untermyer arts council.

With his budget down as much as 15 percent from last year, he said, the Connecticut Ballet, which has appeared annually in Yonkers for a decade, agreed to take a cut in its fee. As a result, the performance of Ballet Fest, a crowd-pleasing potpourri of dance styles, went on this month in Untermyer Park.

Brett Rafael, the ballet's artistic director and chief executive officer, declined to discuss details of the talks he held with Mr. Sansone. But, noting that he was hoping to avoid a repeat of a derailed date in Danbury this year, he said, "We're making do with less if we have to."



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