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Arts

To the Armory!

Art Production Fund helps the Whitney Museum expand the 2008 Biennial

BY DANIEL KUNITZ

They've erected a full-scale replica of a Prada store in the Texas desert, placed a jukebox sculpture in a New York McDonald's, carpeted Grand Central Station, mounted film festivals and concerts, and facilitated the creation of nude Farrah Fawcett sculptures. Just last week, one of their most ambitious projects to date, *Electric Fountain*—a 35-foot-high light sculpture by British artists Tim Noble and Sue Webster—was installed in Rockefeller Plaza. Yet Doreen Remen and Yvonne Force Villareal had long dreamed of getting into the Whitney Biennial.

Well, they finally made it—not as artists but as “producers,” a relatively new job title that reflects the degree to which art in recent years has morphed beyond the physical object. Along with their director of operations, Casey Freemont, the two women operate the Art Production Fund, an eight-year-old nonprofit that has collaborated with the Whitney to extend this year's Biennial beyond the museum's Madison Avenue building to the Park Avenue Armory, where a free-form series of performances, installations, and events will run from March 6 to March 23.

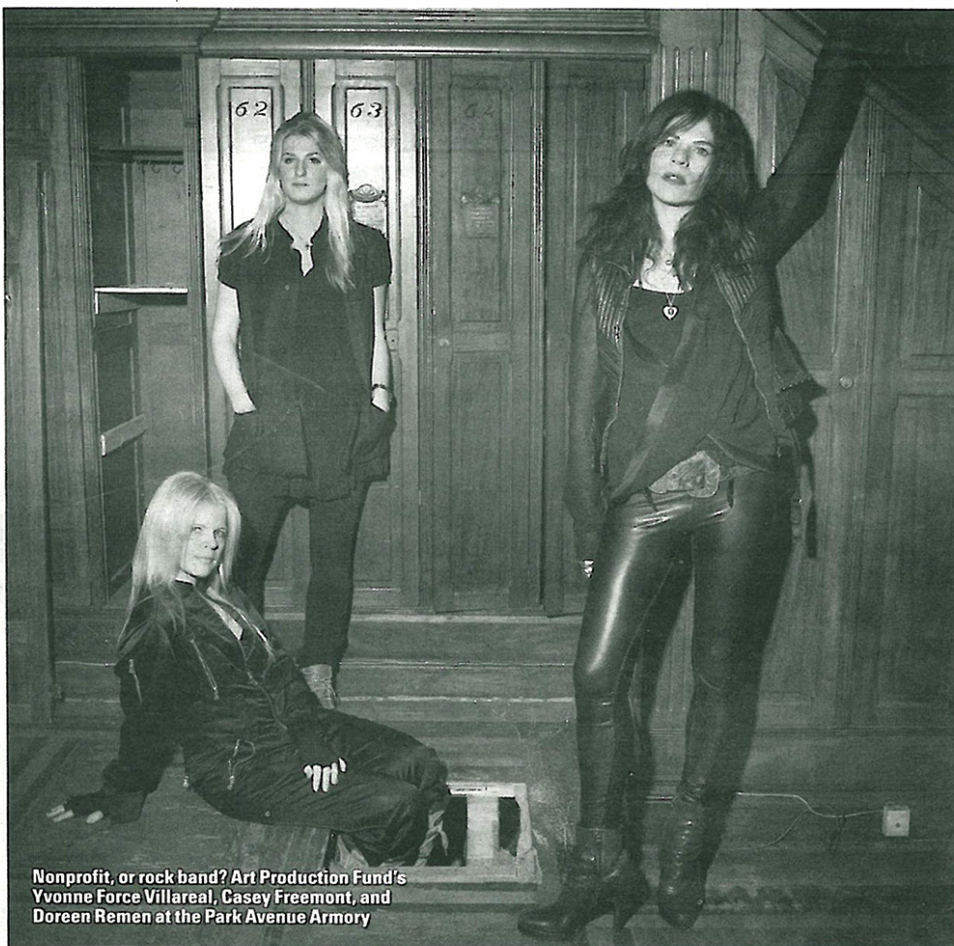
Remen and Force Villareal often grace New York's most fabulous art and social events, and even when hard at work in their new, barely furnished downtown office, their glamour seems to belie their status as working mothers. Force Villareal is blonde and, except for her black-knit fingerless gloves and black scarf—it's chilly in this high-ceilinged room—seems dressed for a casual lunch at, say, Cipriani. In fact, she has to run out to watch her son “tumble” at a nearby gym. Remen—with her flowing dark hair, skin-tight black pants, and silver skull rings—could front a rock band.

The Whitney collaboration came about, in part, as a solution for how to best showcase this Biennial's nontraditional pieces, such as a wedding-ceremony-cum-concert by goth-punk band the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black or a hypnosis act by artist Matt Mullican. Late last spring, the Biennial's two principal curators, Shamim Momin and Henriette Huldish, were, as Momin puts it, “struggling with how to represent the breadth of practice we felt was so prevalent among the artists we were looking at” for eventual inclusion. While not ceasing to make paintings or sculptures or videos, many contemporary artists have been developing work—such as performances or other events—that often unfolds over time and requires larger

APF see themselves as high-level expeditors, realizing artists' dreams.

spaces than museum galleries can provide. And, as Momin notes, “A lot of these ways of working can be a little bit renegade. They can be about a certain kind of spontaneity or an organic development of the way they feel, and that can get closed down within a museum's institutional space.”

At the same time last spring, Art Production Fund was working on Aaron Young's *Greeting Card*, a project in which motorcyclists “painted” panels laid on the Armory floor by gunning their bikes over them. So when Remen and Force Villareal approached the Whitney curators about doing something new—not necessarily for the Biennial—at the 55,000-square-foot drill hall, it was, for Momin, an “incredible, serendipitous moment.” Ultimately, the curators asked all of the artists chosen for the Biennial if they'd like to propose something for the off-site space. The response was overwhelming: Many more artists than they'd expected came through with proposals, tripling the programming they'd originally planned to do at the Armory.



Nonprofit, or rock band? Art Production Fund's Yvonne Force Villareal, Casey Freemont, and Doreen Remen at the Park Avenue Armory

Alana Cundy

Remen and Force Villareal are quick to point out that they're not curators, and Momin notes their generosity in operating wholly within the Whitney's curatorial vision. But what, you might ask, do art producers do? The two see themselves as high-level expeditors, realizing artists' concepts and dreams. For the Whitney, they met with all the artists who'd proposed an Armory project, discussed their ideas, and then, says Remen, “we make it happen: What kind of speakers do you need? What kind of lights do you want? OK, you want a room built—what are the dimensions? You need carpet, tables, chairs... anything?” They put together a design team, hiring Mike Skinner as their audio-visual director, Ku'uipo Curry for lighting, and Nick Jaeger to do sets and fabrication.

Among the more demanding projects that APF is wrangling for the Biennial: sound artist Marina Rosenfeld's *Teenage Lontano*, in which some 30 teens listening to MP3 players sing along to pre-recorded cues as Rosenfeld's score plays from a speaker above. This required inventing a rotating speaker that would hang from the ceiling, as well as finding someone to donate iPods or Zoons for the kids, most of whom come from lower-income families. Hearing Force Villareal describe artist Eduardo Sarabia's project *Salon Aleman*—a bar that doubles as a sculpture from which the artist will serve his homemade tequila—one would think there was nothing for APF to do; Sarabia already had the bar and the tequila. But APF, Force Villareal explains, “is producing tequila cups by [artist] Miquel Calderón, and we got all these liquor sponsors for beers and rum, so that he could serve more drinks at the bar. Then Ku'uipo is lighting it like a sculpture—the room has very old lighting in it. In fact, we're redoing the entire lighting at the Armory in order to have the work lit like contemporary art in a museum, but in this wonderfully historical building.”

In the past, APF has worked on one or two pieces at a time; over the last four months, they've helped produce more than 40 projects for the Biennial. As Force Villareal points out: “There are some projects—like Agathe Snow's

week-long series of dance marathons, or Rosenfeld's piece—that we might have focused an entire year on. So it's been intense.”

The two women met in 1984 on the first day of art school at the Rhode Island School of Design, where Force Villareal studied painting and Remen architecture. Their first joint venture came while living together in Manhattan during a summer break: To mark the Statue of Liberty's centennial, they sold liberty-crown hats on the Staten Island Ferry. It wasn't until the late '90s, however, that they began their partnership. At the time, Force Villareal ran an art-advisory service and Remen was taking time off from working as an architect to raise her twin girls. They got back together to produce Italian artist Vanessa Beecroft's *Show*, the high-profile 1998 performance-art piece in which a group of models—some nude, some in bikinis—formed a sort of living tableau in the Guggenheim Museum's atrium. They spent a year and half on it; the budget ballooned from \$20,000 to \$200,000. But, says Force Villareal, “over 1,500 people came, on a rainy night, and it ended up on the cover of *Artforum*. So damned exciting! We had produced something—but, we wondered, what did that mean? That's when we started brainstorming, developing what art production is and what it could be.”

Though the goal is always to bring contemporary art to a wider audience, their role is redefined with each new project. “We're very much about finding new ways to work,” says Force Villareal, who points out that APF has never received government funds: “We've relied on corporate sponsorship and private donations.” Recently, they've gotten into designing functional objects, raising money for APF by printing images of contemporary works—by Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Elizabeth Peyton, and Kehinde Wiley—on towels and carpets.

Perhaps the next step is infiltrating MOMA's design exhibits. It's not as crazy as it might seem—they've crashed the Whitney Biennial and Rockefeller Center in back-to-back weeks.