

The first I knew of Lia Gangitano was in 1995 when she asked me to contribute an essay to the catalogue for "Boston School," an exhibition that she co-organized with Milena Kalinowska for Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. The show nailed an aesthetic and a transgressive subculture particular to the moment before the AIDS epidemic struck in the '80s. It also anticipated a pattern of art activism that Gangitano has followed ever since, first as curator of the now-defunct Thread Waxing Space in New York and then as founder of Participant, the nonprofit she established—rather bravely—in 2002, when the alternative-space movement was nearly dead. Gangitano continued to mount innovative exhibitions and visionary projects by artists who form a vital cultural underground that others barely know exist, often publishing a book or pamphlet that later becomes an important historical reference.

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THE ART ACTIVIST

LIA GANGITANO NEVER PLANNED A LIFE IN THE ART WORLD. HERE SHE SPEAKS WITH LINDA YABLONSKY ABOUT THE ICA'S SEMINAL "BOSTON SCHOOL" EXHIBITION AND PARTICIPANT, HER NON-PROFIT ALTERNATIVE SPACE CONTINUING TO FOSTER NEW ARTISTS.

INTERVIEW BY LINDA YABLONSKY
PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE SERVEL

LINDA—I know you came from the ICA in Boston but I don't know what brought you there.

LIA—I sort of grew up there. I took a work-study job when I was a sophomore at Boston College and stayed for 10 years. At the time of my departure, I was associate curator.

LINDA—Did you study art history?

LIA—I was an English major. It was a very different time, when learning on the job was still a possibility. I worked in every department and for a long time was the registrar, touring shows. Then I became an assistant to Elisabeth Sussman [now a curator at the Whitney Museum] and I loved it so much that I started cutting school and hanging out.

LINDA—So you never planned a life in art?

LIA—It wasn't a plan. It may sound weird, but I loved being a registrar. Aside from the administrative work, it was very logistical: book plane tickets for Karen Finley, the performance artist, or find five tons of salt for whomever. Because we only did temporary exhibitions and crazy installations, my idea of what a museum did was unusual.

LINDA—Can you remember some of the exhibitions?

LIA—I toured a Rosemarie Trockel exhibition that was organized by the ICA and the Berkeley Art Museum, and it traveled to the Reina Sofía. I toured an exhibition called "American Art of the Late '80s," and that was how I met some artists who are still in my life, like Tony Oursler. The one that really stuck with me was called "Dress Codes," in 1993, which I curated with Bruce Ferguson and Matthew Teitelbaum, who is director of the Art Gallery of Ontario now but was briefly director of the ICA. It was about cross-dressing. That's how I met Hunter Reynolds and Lyle Ashton Harris. It was Cathy Opie's first museum exhibition. Nan Goldin was also in that show, and that was also the beginning of my relationship with her. And how I met the drag performer Vaginal Davis, who I worked with again just recently. My job was to bring the women's aspect to the show, which led directly to "Boston School."

LINDA—So that was an important show for you?

LIA—Absolutely. My first actual project was an exhibition for the first World AIDS Day. My background was very much in this moment of art and AIDS activism and identity politics. That exhibition was also the first time I collaborated with [art dealer] Pat Hearn and with [artist] Mark Morrisroe, and then we went on to do "Boston School."

LINDA—Remind me which other artists were included in "Boston School"?

LIA—Jack Pierson, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Tabboo! (Stephen Tashjian) and Shellburne Thurber. They had crossed paths and overlapped 10 years before I moved to Boston, in 1986. So I had to look back to find something that would make Boston seem more interesting.

LINDA—It seems to me that show helped to define a kind of photogra-

phy that has influenced a number of other artists and shape discussions of community, sexuality and the underground of that time.

LIA—Not everyone in that group even liked each other. It was the loss of family members and friends to AIDS that brought it together. Nan came up with the title, "Boston School." We thought it was funny and grandiose, as if the Boston School was some kind of 19th-century painting style. Not that we were making a joke. We didn't anticipate that it would be taken so literally, because it was a messy group. But it stuck.

LINDA—Do you ever wish you had arrived in Boston 10 years earlier, when these artists were starting out?

LIA—Yeah, I think maybe I came to New York 10 years too late as well. Michel Auder and Taylor Mead were some of the first people I met here. Historicizing a movement doesn't really make sense when people who are involved in it are still

around and making work. I'm working on a monograph with Tabboo! right now and I showed Shellburne Thurber's work at Participant. These artists are totally relevant to me and Participant is a place where the politics of art are still present.

LINDA—What prompted you to move to New York right after "Boston School"?

LIA—I had been at the ICA for 10 years and had been through four or five directors. Milena was leaving and I felt like it was time to go. I heard about a curator's job at Thread Waxing Space, and applied—because I thought I needed practice applying for jobs. I'd never done it. Much to my shock, I got the job. I was the first staff curator. In the early period, the founder, Tim Nye, curated the shows. I did a show that was based on John Cassavetes—a sort of reply to Christian Lee's exhibition, "I Am the Annunciator," which was based on Alfred Hitchcock.

LINDA—I remember that show.

LIA—Thank you, Christian Lee, for the brilliant concept of star curator! That's really caught on too.

LINDA—I remember Thread Waxing as a huge, old-school SoHo loft.

LIA—Seven thousand square-feet.

LINDA—How did you go about organizing shows that would make sense in a space like that?

LIA—We had a lot of music, so people thought of it as a kind of club. We did shows for the CMJ festival every year. That was how I first worked with Antony, Justin Vivian Bond and Le Tigre. But the first exhibition I curated there was "Spectacular Optical," which had already been on the books. It came out of a relationship with Fern Baer, David Cronenberg's archivist. I went to Toronto and rummaged around in the archive, and found early work that predated his B-movie, horror stuff. So the show became very different. That was Jeremy Blake's first exhibition. Laura Parnes had a major installation. So it wasn't just about Cronenberg, though he was in it too. In a way, it was an early iteration of an art and cinema exchange that has also become prevalent.

LINDA—So you've been quite an innovator.

LIA—Unintentionally. A show about a director or some sort of corruption of the body could have been so predictable. It was just amazing to look a little deeper and find companion themes that weren't so predictable.

LINDA—Like what?

LIA—Jeremy Blake loaned me a book that Jeff Wall wrote called "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel." It's a lengthy essay about oppressive architecture that is super interesting and it had a big influence on the project. "Shivers," which is about parasites, is also about the oppressiveness of living in an isolated high-rise.

LINDA—How was that show received?

LIA—It was wildly successful, which made it hard for me. Afterward,

it was always, "Can you top that?" I'm not sure it mattered, because of the relationships I formed with artists in that show. Like Lutz Bacher, whose "Huge Uterus" had to do with technology and the body. We also worked together on a major installation at Participant. I really felt that the purpose of an alternative space was to have a deeper relationship with the work, whereas theme and group shows fostered superficial relationships. So towards the end of Thread Waxing Space, we were mostly organizing solo shows.

LINDA—When did it close?

LIA—In 2001. So I'd been there about four-and-a-half years.

LINDA—Did you consider looking for another museum job then?

LIA—Honestly, no. Before Thread Waxing closed, I was already writing a business plan and putting together a board to start a new space.

LINDA—What was the closing show?

LIA—It was Sigalit Landau's first show in New York. She created a giant, spiral trough for five tons of sugar and every day she labored in this vat making cotton candy. It was a bittersweet experiment in futile labor—and a fitting goodbye to Thread Waxing Space. We already had an arrangement to give the programming archive to CCS, the Center of Curatorial Studies, at Bard College. It was the first institutional archive, which they've since given to the Smithsonian, and it's now part of the Archives of American Art.

LINDA—Why did you want to create Participant at a time when the alternative space movement was at its lowest point? That was a bold move on your part.

LIA—I think it was pure stubbornness. Some of the shutting down at Thread Waxing meant talking to artists and doing a lot of soul-searching. It told me that the alternative space model was still relevant to artists, and that artists in New York weren't getting all they needed from commercial galleries or institutions. Even when I was at the ICA, I would spend a lot of time in the archive of the museum, reading manifestos that devalued the whole notion of collecting museums. The founders were against it, and thought that museums should not exhibit the accumulated wealth of individuals. So I guess I didn't know any better. And my closest relationships with dealers were with Pat Hearn and Colin de Land.

LINDA—Yes, their galleries functioned as if they were not-for-profit.

LIA—My experience is in activism, and with artists who function like dysfunctional families, who have unusual interpretations of what it means to be successful. Lutz is a good example. So is Charles Atlas and Renée Green. These artists are my heroes. Their exhibitions at Participant are testament to artists who want a different kind of experience. Pat Hearn introduced me to their work long ago and she is a big part of who I am and how I look at art.

LINDA—How do you look at art?

LIA—Well, I certainly don't see it as a commodity. I guess I look at it as an experience, which is why so many of our shows are ephemeral. There might not be a whole lot left after the show.

LINDA—So by 2002, you managed to raise enough money to lease a space.

LIA—Tim Nye gave small startup funding, but things got really challenging after 9/11. The question was where to go. We were looking in Harlem, Brooklyn, Long Island City and the Meatpacking District. It was always about, What's the next neighborhood? I live on the Lower East Side so my thinking was, Why not here? I had some experience raising money, but I didn't really know what I was doing. And I can't say it's gotten much easier.

LINDA—Even though there's now so much money in the art world?

LIA—The New Museum might have a waiting list of trustees who give a certain amount of funding each year, but I don't think a place like Participant offers the same sort of social status. I think there's a great

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audience for what we do, but our biggest individual supporters are artists and always have been.

LINDA—How would you describe Participant?

LIA—The program is artist-driven. Some really expanded the exhibition format by including live or durational elements. I mentioned Charlie Atlas. His exhibition in our first season was totally live. There was also Julie Tolentino, who did a piece called "For YOU," where she performed a 15-minute piece for one visitor at a time. They brought different audiences—people associated with the dance world, or performance. The sitters in Charlie's piece—people sat for a live video portrait that Charlie filmed while using both analog and digital editing tools—including Yvonne Rainer and Merce Cunningham. Visitors watched a live projection upstairs. It redefined the concept of what was an exhibition. It was nothing like Chelsea. It led to other projects with artists like John Bratten, who shot a film in the gallery because he didn't have a space. I really got tired of hearing people say there was no way to make an independent film in New York. If someone says something can't be done, you sort of just do it.

LINDA—The artists at Participant form an underground that doesn't seem to exist anywhere else in the city, where everything seems to go from conception to commercial exploitation very quickly.

LIA—That's true. It's always been frustrating that the visual art world has not been connected with the experimental film world. That has changed in the 10 years of Participant, with John and Luther Price. Recently I worked with Kembra Pfahler and Vaginal Davis, to my mind iconic underground artists, though that term is kind of strange. They've always made exceptional work out of very limited resources. Kembra calls it Availablism and that philosophy describes

what we do—making use of what we have.

LINDA—You don't attempt to make a show look polished and ready for consumption. It's raw and almost encourages discomfort, which I regard as a good thing. There's so much complacency in art now.

LIA—That goes back to needing a sense of intimacy for artists who operate in transgender or subcultural community. It's not about individual geniuses. When I worked with Breyer P-Orridge on their first exhibition as a merged identity, Genesis said the most transgressive thing now is intimacy.

LINDA—So you've had Participant for 10 years—five on Rivington Street and five on Houston. Can you see yourself doing this for another 10 years?

LIA—In some ways I feel like I'm just getting started. I think it's important for a space like Participant to constantly assess what is needed most. We co-produce solo projects with artists at least once a season. Artists remind me what exhibitions can be, what constitutes art. They also introduce me to ideas in a way that refreshes the program. So my wish for the future is to continue that and spend more time on being a curator. Write more.

LINDA—How would you describe your social life?

LIA—I run the gallery with Tom Leach, who is both my romantic and business partner. My life is very social with the gallery and so there's not a lot of separation between work and not work. I enjoy the sort of social character of the art world, but sometimes I need to step away and to hang out with my cats.

LINDA—What about money? Are you saving for your retirement?

LIA—I barely have a personal bank account. Participant has been a success, but I'm an Aquarius, head in the clouds. I always believe that at some point things will become more stable or we'll be able to have salaries. It's some sort of weird optimism. When things are really frightening, I always tell myself that money problems are the best problems to have, because when you get some money it goes away. It would be worse if I felt that the work we're doing were irrelevant. That would be horrible.