Artist-Curators and Art Historian-Curators at the Edge: How the "Modern West" Revealed Boundaries of Curatorial Practice

URL to cite or link to: http://hdl.handle.net/1802/5793

Abstract
This paper takes as it starting point two recent exhibitions: The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950 (2006-2007), organized by Emily Ballew Neff, Curator, American Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and "Two Edges," a virtual exhibition (never mounted) created by artist Diana Thater. Thater's "Two Edges," presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) while The Modern West was on view there, functioned as a critique of Neff's exhibition. Austen Barron Bailly (author of this paper) coordinated and installed The Modern West exhibition for the LACMA venue and saw Thater's presentation of "Two Edges." Thater's exhibition presented in relation to Neff's revealed a potential disconnect between artists and art historians and the curatorial methods exemplified by these two projects. That disconnect inspired this paper. Thater's title, "Two Edges," referred to the meeting, indeed collision, of reality and myth, also articulated by Thater as the "didactic" and the "beautiful," that occurs in the American West. To Thater, The Modern West failed to deal adequately with either. Neff's The Modern West and Thater's "Two Edges" were ultimately at cross purposes, ideologically and art historically. Nevertheless, their exhibitions complemented each other in significant, even troubling ways. Considered together, their differing approaches enlarge our understanding of the West, its histories and its art histories, its myths and realities, as well as curatorial practice. Considered independently, important histories and perspectives from both sides are lost. Consequently, from a museological perspective, I will argue that the "two edges" posited by Thater are equally the meeting, or collision, of the virtual exhibition and the traditional exhibition—the critique and art history; the artist and curator—in the museum. Using The Modern West and "Two Edges" as a comparative case study, this paper explores the museological edge between artists and art historians, myth and reality, and the "didactic" and the "beautiful" in order to address its implications for curatorial practice in art museums.