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ART

# Looks Brilliant on Paper. But Who, Exactly, Is Going to Make It?

By MIA FINEMAN

WHEN Jeff Koons's giant topiary sculpture "Puppy" was installed at Rockefeller Center in May 2000, the three-week-long process involved about 100 riggers, planters, engineers and studio assistants. They erected a 43-foot-high stainless steel armature, which they covered with foam and blanketed with some 70,000 flowering plants.

Robert Lazzarini, who started out as an assistant in Mr. Koons's studio, called on 45 different contractors — from chromers and acid engravers to graphic designers, silk-screeners and metalworkers — to fabricate his weirdly disorienting sculpture of a New York City phone booth, which became the hit of the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

For "Wave UFO," the teardrop-shaped installation she exhibited at last year's Venice Biennale that created video light shows based on projections of visitors' brain waves, Mariko Mori needed a dozen industrial fabricators, as well as architects, composers and computer technicians.

Each of these projects garnered loads of attention for the enormous effort they involved. Yet much of the actual labor was performed not by the artists themselves, but by an army of technicians, studio assistants, artisans and engineers who worked behind the scenes.

As art with high production values has become increasingly common, the role of the artist has evolved into something closer to that of a film director who supervises a large crew of specialists to realize his or her vision. But there's a difference: in filmmaking, each individual — from cinematographer to key grip — is acknowledged, if only for a few seconds when the final credits roll. In the art business, there are no established conventions for crediting the people who transform artists' ideas into well-made objects. And some art workers may just prefer it that way.

ON a recent Friday morning, Konstantin Bojanov's sunny studio, on the fifth floor of a former factory building in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, was crowded with sculptures at various stages of completion. One of his five assistants stood on a ladder, pressing wet clay onto a 10-foot-tall winged figure; nearby, a young woman carefully sanded the interior of a plaster mold.

It looked like a typical scene in a successful artist's studio — but when these sculptures are exhibited next year, it will not be Mr. Bojanov's name that appears above them on the gallery wall.

Mr. Bojanov, 37, is a professional art fabricator. Like many people in this business, he is also an artist himself and began producing work for his more established peers while waiting for his own career to take off.

"Somewhere down the line in art school, this idea was implanted in my head that you always have to have another way of supporting yourself," said Mr. Bojanov, who studied sculpture and filmmaking, first in his native Bulgaria and then at the Royal College of Art in London.

Shortly after graduating, he started a business producing limited-edition sculptural objects for other artists. Among his first clients was the Los Angeles-based artist Paul McCarthy, for whom he produced "Yaa-Hoo Town" (1996), an elaborate installation of mechanized sculptures depicting an Old West town populated by dog-headed bartenders and masturbating cowboys.

The next year Mr. Bojanov rented a studio in New York, where he produced a group of white fiberglass sculptures for Barbara Kruger, one of which — a larger-than-life depiction of [Marilyn Monroe](#) held aloft on the shoulders of John and Robert Kennedy — was featured on the cover of *Art in America* in November 1997.

Now he fabricates sculptures and installations for about a dozen artists, including Jason Rhoades, Marcel Dzama, Richard Jackson, Vanessa Beecroft, Richard Prince and Christian Jankowski. Because artists tend to conceive large-scale works specifically for exhibitions, it's usually their galleries that contract and pay for Mr. Bojanov's services. The studio's busiest times are just before large international contemporary art fairs like Art Basel and before the opening of the fall art season.

Mr. Bojanov and his assistants sculpture in clay, foam, plaster and metal and cast objects in rubber, silicone and carbon fiber. For bronze or aluminum casting, they create molds and ship them to foundries in the United States or Bulgaria.

"Basically, I look at myself by analogy as a musician for hire," Mr. Bojanov said, seated in his office wearing plaster-stained jeans and a denim shirt. "I can play anything from free jazz to classical music. You name the style, and what you want, and the idea, and I know how to turn it into a high-end art object.

"I'm not necessarily proud of it, but I'm really good at it."

Often, Mr. Bojanov's starting point for a new sculpture is nothing more than an artist's rough sketch, followed by an explanatory phone call. Or it may be a small plastic toy or figurine that an artist wants blown up to monumental proportions.

At each stage of the monthslong production process, Mr. Bojanov takes digital photographs of the work in progress, which he e-mails to the artist for approval. While some artists like to come in for a few days of hands-on work in the studio, others don't see their actual sculptures until they are installed for exhibition.

Mr. McCarthy, who has been working with the studio for 10 years, appreciates Mr. Bojanov's intellect as

well as his technical expertise. "He's very good in terms of skill — as a sculptor, as a mold maker — but the part that's critical to me is that I trust him and I think he understands my aesthetic," he said by phone from Los Angeles.

"I operate in a really dysfunctional way," Mr. McCarthy explained. "I'll give Konstantin a model, some small figurine, and ask him to sculpt it. He sends me the images, I draw on the images and send them back. Then I go out to the studio and take this fairly refined sculptural object and alter and disfigure it over a few days with saws and axes and hammers. Then he takes a mold and casts it, and then we do it all over again."

"I think most fabricators would just flip out," he added.

ARTISTS have relied on the aid of apprentices, artisans and studio assistants for centuries. Raphael, Titian, Rubens and Rembrandt all presided over busy workshops where apprentices churned out paintings to which the master would add finishing touches — and his signature. What has changed is the expectation that artists actually possess the skills to produce their own work.

It wasn't until the early 20th century that the avant-garde challenged the popular notion of the artist as a skilled artisan. In 1917, Duchamp famously displayed a factory-made urinal as a readymade; in 1923, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy picked up the phone and placed an order for five enamel-on-steel pictures to be produced by a sign company in Berlin, making the point that the hand of the artist no longer mattered.

By the 1960's, [Andy Warhol](#) had called his studio the Factory and employed a team of assistants to turn out silk-screened canvases that intentionally bore little or no trace of the artist's hand. With Conceptualism, some artists refrained from making objects altogether, insisting, as Sol LeWitt put it, that "the idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product."

But in the 90's, a new generation of artists, including Mr. Koons, Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami, decided they could have it both ways: they could be Conceptualists who also created big, beautiful, expertly made objects — and they could commission others to produce them.

"We're in a post-Conceptual era where it's really the artist's idea and vision that are prized, rather than the ability to master the crafts that support the work," said Jeffrey Deitch, whose SoHo gallery specializes in large-scale productions by contemporary artists. "Today our understanding of an artist is closer to a philosopher than to a craftsman."

But if artists no longer possess the technical skills to produce their own work, who does?

Katy Siegel, a critic and professor of contemporary art history at Hunter College, points out that while some art schools train students to philosophize, others concentrate on more traditional skills like carpentry, welding, stone carving and metalwork. "Places like Ohio State versus, say, the Whitney program, still teach manual labor skills in addition to — or as opposed to — conceptual problem solving and networking," she said, "and there is a real class divide in the art world between the art workers and

the art thinkers."

Patrick Barth, a Brooklyn art fabricator with a graduate degree in sculpture from Ohio State University, agrees that ideas are more highly valued than the technical skills required to execute them. "You come out of these schools knowing how to build things," he said, "then you get to New York and find out that that has nothing to do with your success as an artist. I have no problem with that now, but I was upset for a while that no one had told me how things work."

Mr. Barth, 39, began producing work for other artists at 18, when he landed a summer job casting sculptures at a bronze foundry in Provo, Utah. Since then he has worked for a number of other artists, including Ann Hamilton and Sarah Sze, who are known for their sprawling and labor-intensive installations.

"We have a prosperous art market that can support ambitious fabrication that couldn't be supported 10 years ago," Mr. Deitch said. "But even in the most prosperous market, there's no way that the majority of young artists are going to make a living just from their own art."

WHILE many artists rely on outside fabricators to produce their work, there are others — like Mr. Koons, Robert Gober and [Matthew Barney](#) — who employ dozens of assistants to fabricate work in their own studios, where, they feel, they can exert more control.

To produce the massive thermoplastic sculptures in his current exhibition at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, Mr. Barney had 16 assistants working in two 7,500-square-foot studios, one in the meatpacking district in Manhattan, the other in Greenpoint. For Matt Ryle, who used to fabricate signage and theme architecture in Las Vegas but has worked for Mr. Barney for 10 years, the challenge comes in inventing new techniques to realize Mr. Barney's vision.

Nobody starts out as an expert in casting petroleum jelly, Mr. Barney's trademark material. So when a group of his assistants recently gathered to pull apart a room-size mold filled with seven tons of the greasy substance, no one knew quite what to expect. "We were taking bets," Mr. Ryle said. "Would it be the consistency of cheddar cheese or melted brie?" (It turned out to be more like brie.)

But even in a studio full of experts, there's one opinion that weighs more heavily than any other. "In the end, the artist is always right," Mr. Ryle said. "You might try to convey that there's a better way to do something, but if they want to do it another way, you always cave in."

For years, the extensive use of studio assistants was an open secret in the art world: everyone knew about it, but the few artists who tried to acknowledge it in public met with resistance. In the early 80's, Robert Longo created a minor stir when he silk-screened a gallery wall with the names of the assistants who had helped produce his huge graphite drawings of writhing men in dark suits.

"I was, in part, trying to cash in on the shock value," he said in an interview in *Art in America*, adding: "My dealers were a little reluctant about this, since I was almost throwing it in people's faces. To a certain

extent it backfired, with viewers often talking about how things got made, not what they were."

Now, in what some are calling the post-skill era, the extensive use of fabricators has gained wider acceptance. One sign of this shift was the 2003 book "Making Art Work," an illustrated history of the Mike Smith Studio in London. The book features drawings, correspondence, photographs of works in progress and interviews with artists who have worked with the studio, including Rachel Whiteread, Mr. Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Mona Hatoum, Keith Tyson and Darren Almond.

The Los Angeles-based artist Liza Lou, known for creating elaborate environments covered with thousands of glittering glass beads, recently employed 20 Zulu women in Durban, South Africa, to fabricate a piece for her latest show in London. In an empty dance hall that Ms. Lou rented and converted into a makeshift studio, the women spent six months adorning the surface of an 8-by-8-foot barbed wire cage, applying tiny glass beads, one at a time, with tweezers and glue.

"These were women living in the townships who were totally disenfranchised, and this work helped them put food on the table," said Ms. Lou, who plans to establish a permanent studio in Durban.

When the finished sculpture, "Security Fence" (2005), was exhibited at White Cube Gallery in London this year, the Zulu bead workers were not credited in the publicity materials, Ms. Lou explained, because she didn't want to call attention to the fabrication process.

"Art has two lives," she said on the phone from Los Angeles, "the process and the finished product. What an artist goes through to make the work is not necessary for understanding the finished work. The work has to exist on its own terms for its own reasons."

THE issue of acknowledgment for the process is further complicated by the fact that many of the assistants are artists themselves who don't necessarily want to see their names attached to someone else's work.

For some, like Mr. Bojanov, art fabrication is a day job that supports but also distracts from other ambitions. When he is not making sculptures for other artists, Mr. Bojanov directs independent films and videos. As a filmmaker, he is best known for "Invisible" (2005), a documentary feature about young heroin addicts in Sofia, Bulgaria; he is currently working on an adaptation of "Crime and Punishment" set in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

In his role as an art fabricator, Mr. Bojanov works closely with other artists, interpreting their intentions and giving form to their ideas, but he doesn't view this work as collaborative. "Even if it is," he said, "I never thought of it as such. I have no claim for authorship whatsoever."

Down the hall from Mr. Bojanov's main work space in Greenpoint, there is a small room in which he stores works in progress. Laid out on blue foam pallets on the floor a few weeks ago were several lifelike white resin sculptures of reclining figures, part of an unfinished commission for Ms. Beecroft.

The figures, Mr. Bojanov explained, were life-casts of people close to the artist, which will be painted realistically and displayed in glass coffins.

"That's her sister," he said, looking down at one of the figures, which was shrouded in a funereal white cloth. He pointed at another. "And that one, I think, is her former assistant."

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