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Invisible Hand in MoMA Shows

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

In hundreds of exhibitions over the last three decades the names of a stunning number of curators and artists have entered the institutional memory of the Museum of Modern Art. But behind nearly all of these shows there has been a constant, a man whose name rarely surfaces anywhere except in invoices.

It seems somehow appropriate, then, to find Jerome Neuner, the director of the museum's department of exhibition design and production, in a windowless office below street level, down an anonymous industrial hallway. The tables around him are covered by yards of scroll-like paper that look like something a medieval copyist might pore over. But these are computer-printed scrolls, precise, color-coded schedules that keep Mr. Neuner apprised of every important date involving the shows now happening or about to happen throughout the 125,000 square feet of gallery space above his head, 40,000 more square feet than he had to worry about before the museum's expansion was completed in 2004.

Better than almost anyone else at the museum, Mr. Neuner (pronounced NOY-ner) knows its nooks and crannies, freight elevators and hidden fuse boxes, and also remembers where they used to be — both when he started in 1980 and after a previous expansion that doubled the gallery space in 1984.

"I got it all up here," he said recently, pointing at his head, covered in salt and pepper.

Also up there is an extraordinary amount of knowledge about the multifarious art that the museum has shown over the last 30 years, and that it plans to show in the next two or three. It is an information bank that Mr. Neuner works hard to keep stocked, because his job — one that often goes unsung in the museum world and, particularly if done well, unnoticed by the public — is to serve as a kind of mediator between the visionary (the grand dreams of curators and artists about how a show could look) and the practical (how the show will fit within walls, some of them load bearing).

Over the last several months Mr. Neuner and his staff have been at work on a new exhibition, a gargantuan traveling retrospective of the South African artist [William Kentridge](#), opening Feb. 24. The show, "Five Themes," is a particularly telling object lesson in the complexities of exhibition design, a profession whose role has expanded greatly in the museum world since Mr. Neuner, 64, joined [MoMA](#), one member of a two-man department, and was promptly assigned to start sorting picture frames.

The Kentridge show will fill one of the museum's largest temporary exhibition spaces, off the second-floor atrium, the same space that accommodated [Richard Serra](#)'s colossal spiraling sculptures in 2007. As envisioned by Mr. Kentridge and the show's curators, Klaus Biesenbach, Judith B. Hecker and Cara Starke, it will try to join the two deeply intertwined elements of Mr. Kentridge's work, his charcoal drawings and the animated projections he makes using them, so that the audiovisual is not cordoned off and relegated to theater rooms with small doors and dense crowding as it often is in museums.

Taking advantage of the galleries' size and soaring height — 20 feet — the aim has been to encourage viewers to look across long stretches of space lined with drawings, directly into several almost-open rooms where the

animations will be playing, projected in some cases at movie-house scale. One danger, of course, is that the drawings could end up feeling marooned in the process.

"I think the shift in scale is a benefit, really, but it's got to be done the right way," Ms. Hecker said, walking through the space last week. "The whole idea of the design of the show is based on the long view."

And that is where Mr. Neuner and his five-member staff — particularly Lana Hum, the exhibition designer assigned to oversee the Kentridge show — come in. They have figured out ways of using sound-dampening and insulation so that the theaters can remain remarkably open while allowing viewers, once inside, to hear only the projections playing within them, and to feel as if they have left the rest of the exhibition behind. But when visitors leave, in some cases, the sounds will follow them, bleeding out to mingle where the drawings hang.

For the drawings, lighting is being used to pull viewers' eyes back down from the heights of the projections into what the curators and designers hope will feel, in spite of its large size, like a much more intimate gallery space, thanks in part to the use of gray instead of white for the walls. (Mr. Kentridge's sooty films play better against gray walls than against white ones.)

Mr. Biesenbach, the museum's chief curator at large, who has worked many times with Mr. Neuner, calls the designer's role one of "double translation," in which he first interprets a curator's sometimes abstract vision of how to present an artist's work to the public and then translates that vision into sheetrock and spotlights. "The goal is something that comes together in a design as if there was no other way to do it, as if there was no other alternative," he said, adding that with Mr. Neuner's help, it often does.

"Jerry has a very, very elegant mind," Mr. Biesenbach said.

Mr. Neuner, a soft-spoken man with the genial but authoritative manner of a small-town doctor, studied to become an artist, earning an M.F.A. from [Columbia University](#), but then took a job at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in its exhibition design department, purely to pay the bills. He later spent several years in an architectural woodworking shop in New York, which he left after five years, "really knowing how to make stuff, with my hands."

When he came to the Museum of Modern Art, it was in the middle of preparing its landmark 1980 [Picasso](#) show, which filled every gallery. But his first real immersion came later that year, with a show of the work of [Joseph Cornell](#) organized by Kynaston McShine. Mr. McShine wanted to find a way to avoid isolating Cornell's delicate, poetic shadow boxes in cases or cabinets, and Mr. Neuner devised a plan for hanging most of them on the walls, as if they were paintings or sculptural reliefs.

Over the years, Mr. Neuner said, the curators he has worked with have run the gamut from near complete inflexibility to near complete freedom.

"It's very difficult when you're dealing with the ego of someone who's not going to give an inch," he said. "There's nobody who's perfect, except maybe Mondrian. Mondrian I would have let get away with that."

"The curator always has the first and last word relating to everything in his show," he added. "But having said that, there are times when they know I understand what they need and what the artwork needs well enough that I can look back at a show and say, 'I did that,' which is nice."

When the Kentridge show opens next week, as many as 10,000 people a day could crowd through it, Mr. Neuner estimates, closer to a rock concert than to the kinds of shows that the museum presented in his early days.

“But if it works,” he said, “what will draw all of them through the space is the art, not the architecture. And I will have done my job.”

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