Reviews





Art

BEYOND GREEN: TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE ART

SMART MUSEUM OF ART

Combating Cast-Off Culture

Artists' novel and attractive solutions to social and environmental issues

By Kim Theriault

t's not easy being green, but a show at the Smart Museum of Art makes it look that way. A collaboration between the museum and New York-based iCI (Independent Curators International), "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art" includes fledgling and established artists who address the issue of sustainable design, meaning that present needs are met without compromising those of the future. These 13 individual artists or groups pose sometimes humorous, sometimes brilliant solutions to environmental and social problems. They also challenge the idea of what art can do, breaking down the barrier between aesthetic and usable designs. The many collaborative efforts, both local and international, also defy the model of the artist working alone. Loosely, these artists' predecessors are such groups as the German Bauhaus and the Russian constructivists.

Many of the displays are interactive, allowing viewers to explore projects further on computers, watch videos, or walk into models. The exhibition is arranged thematically in three parts, "Objects," "Structures," and "Processes and Networks." But the boundaries between these categories—and the reasons for them—aren't always clear. No matter: the pieces' cleverness and insight are their raison d'etre.

Of the established individual artists, perhaps Andrea Zittel best sets the tone for the exhibit. Her wall-label quote reads: "I am not a designer—designers have a social responsibility to provide solutions. Art is more about asking ques-



From Michael Rakowitz's "paraSITE" series

tions." She's been asking questions for a while now. In the early 90s Zittel created a brand, "A-Z," meant to simplify daily living by reducing consumer choices. Her "products" have included one outfit to wear for an entire season, a modular apartment with variable components, and a single food that has all the nutrients needed

to sustain life. She's experimented with these concepts in two studios—first A-Z East in Brooklyn, then A-Z West in California—where she makes items from found objects, recycled paper, and renewable living materials like wood, cotton, and wool. Here, in Raugh Shelving Unit With Fiber Form Bowls and Found Objects

From A-Z West, a red carpet on the wall and floor serves as the backdrop for a shelf unit made from a large piece of plywood cut into a keylike shape. As shelves she uses some of the cutout plywood and three boxlike compartments; on the shelves she's placed felted bowls and scavenged objects, such as a liquor bottle filled with dried flowers, an empty perfume bottle, a broken porcelain swan, and a wooden acorn.

Chicagoan Dan Peterman's Excerpts From the Universal Lab consists of visually compelling, intellectually engaging junk sculptures. The three "travel pods" here are large, waist-high Plexiglas spheres on metal legs fitted with wheels, making them movable carts. They're filled with materials from the Universal Lab, an amateur scientists' building on Chicago's south side (closed in 2000) that in turn scavenged its materials from the University of Chicago labs. Each sphere is like a sealed time capsule of science and technology. Travel pod three contains old pamphlets from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, slides, lightbulbs, and projectors. Inside the pod a large case holds a Type K-20 camera, made for the military during World War II, and what looks like an old Polaroid. Only bits of the pamphlets can be read, like the headline "Experiments in Death—Soviet scholars bring dead dogs back to life."

One of the most ingenious projects is Michael Rakowitz's "paraSITE" series. First constructed in 1998 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, paraSITES are portable plastic houses for the homeless made of cheap materials like vinyl, tape, and garbage bags; one cost only \$5. These cute igloolike homes are intended to be attached to the warm-air vents of big buildings, which not only inflate but heat them. As if he were a contractor creating a custom design, Rakowitz collaborates with a homeless person on each dwelling, and some of the sketches, other images, and stories that were part of these exchanges are on display. One man wanted a



home he and his girlfriend could share, with a "love nest" in the center. When he found out how much his girlfriend talked, he asked Rakowitz to change the design to two separate chambers connected in the middle, directing that it should look like a bra. These playful yet respectful structures act as both temporary solutions and billboards for the problem of homelessness.

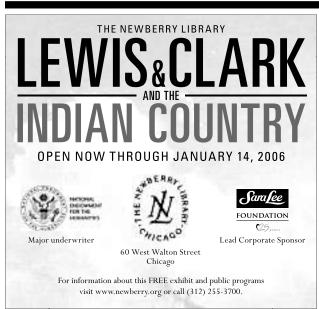
Learning Group (whose four members are American, Mexican, Danish, and Swedish) likewise piggybacks on the existing environment. Among other projects, they've developed a plan for growing mushrooms in subterranean tunnels under Chicago buildings. This idea and others—such as the sandwich-board-like wearable buildings they produced in Japan—are documented with posters and drawings. They've also instituted a collection system for unused recyclable materials like PET plastic. On display here is a gazebo-shaped shelter, Collected Material Dwelling, Model 1:1, made of recycled cardboard, bottles, fabric, rope, metal, and a hose.

Another innovative collaborative is the Vienna-based activist group WochenKlausur, which created the witty Intervention to Upcycle Waste and Museum Byproducts. Their aim was to produce a community of artists to upcycle, or reuse without reconstituting, the waste products of

various cultural institutions. During a three-week residency here that involved U. of C. and SAIC students, they used cast-off objects and materials from museums and theaters to make a cheerfully striped table and chairs, now ensconced at the women's shelter Deborah's Place. Drawings and a video document the process.

Jane Palmer and Marianne Fairbanks of JAM, based here in Chicago, put a little funk into the idea of sustainability. They've created Jump Off, five solar-powered shoulder bags in different styles and colors, each with a flat, black solar-collection panel on one side to power electronic gadgets. The red bag displays a video cartoon by Arthur Jones that explains the reason for these self-sufficient designs: to emancipate the user from the usual power sources and to challenge the preeminence of government surveillance and aggression (the bags look like the solar-powered portable communications devices used by the military).

All the artists here blur the boundaries between art, architecture, design, construction, sociology, environmentalism, and activism. Or, perhaps more accurately, they recycle them all into something new. Bono may have made environmental awareness sexy with his Edun clothing line, but this exhibition makes it smart. 2



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