

# Reviews

## Art

### *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art at the Smart Museum*

REVIEW BY KIM THERIAULT

28

## Books

### **The Contract With God Trilogy** by Will Eisner

REVIEW BY WHET MOSER

30

WILL EISNER ESTATE

## 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

It'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'être*.

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 *Rough 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 igloo-like 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



Collected Material Dwelling, Model 1:1 by Learning Group

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. **B**

THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY

# LEWIS & CLARK AND THE INDIAN COUNTRY

OPEN NOW THROUGH JANUARY 14, 2006

Major underwriter: Sara Lee Foundation, Lead Corporate Sponsor

60 West Walton Street, Chicago

For information about this FREE exhibit and public programs visit [www.newberry.org](http://www.newberry.org) or call (312) 255-3700.

## "Our Money Matters"

Phase II - Discovering Financial Empowerment

Are you ready for the next level in personal finance? Then this is the class for you. Learn the basics of investments, retirement, real estate investing, small business ownership and more.

### FREE Six-Week Classes Begin in January

Classes will be held Tuesday through Saturday.

Richard J. Daley College 7500 S. Pulaski Rd. (773) 838-7548	Malcolm X College 1900 W. Van Buren (312) 850-7439	Harold Washington College 30 E. Lake (312) 553-5940
Kennedy-King College 6800 S. Wentworth (773) 602-5041	Olive-Harvey College 10001 S. Woodlawn (773) 291-6295	Wilbur Wright College 4300 N. Harrigansett (773) 481-8812
	Harry S. Truman College 1145 W. Wilson (773) 907-4440	Call today to register at any one of the City Colleges of Chicago.

Co-Sponsored by:  
Office of the City Treasurer,  
City of Chicago  
Judith Rice, City Treasurer

City Colleges of Chicago  
Wayne Watson, Chancellor

# KEEP YOUR HANDS WARM!

## LEARN SIGN LANGUAGE!

### American Sign Language Classes Starting!

At the Evanston Police Outpost, 633 Howard, Evanston

**Beginners: 6 - 7:30pm**

**Intermediate: 8 - 9:30pm**

Classes meet Mon. or Tues. - starting 1/23 and 1/24

**6 weeks - Only \$135 - Reserve your space today!**

[aslclasses@aol.com](mailto:aslclasses@aol.com)  
[www.cimi.ws](http://www.cimi.ws)

Checks may be made to CIMI - 1610 Highland Ave, Chicago, IL, 60660

HAROLD WASHINGTON COLLEGE

## HORTICULTURE AAS DEGREE PROGRAM

ENROLL TODAY - CLASSES BEGIN JANUARY 17, 2006

Harold Washington College's Associate of Applied Science Horticulture Program prepares students for a wide range of career opportunities in the Horticulture industry. Upon completing the program, students can pursue careers in landscape design, construction, and maintenance; greenhouse and nursery production; retail and wholesale horticultural sales and management; turf management, horticultural research technician; park service; horticultural therapy; gardener; horticultural education; and more. The program's goal is to serve new and returning students, professional and amateur gardeners, and the Horticulture industry in the Chicago area. Most classes are offered evenings and weekends at our convenient downtown location, easily accessible by the CTA and Metra. Register now.

**Contact:**  
Harold Washington College, 30 E. Lake St, Chicago, IL 60601  
Tel: 312-553-5940

**Classes begin Tuesday, January 17, 2006**  
**Register early, seats are limited.**