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Green Up! Capitalism's Colonization of "Green" Values

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Green Up!

CAPITALISM'S COLONIZATION OF "GREEN" VALUES

more and more, opportunistic marketers colonize "being green", leaving us with products and policies that are anything but green, making it exceedingly difficult to demand truly sustainable practices. Some recent examples include: a) offering cash for not-so-old clunkers (doesn't longevity trump mileage?), b) the notion of sustainable building practices (what could be more un-environmental than constructing new buildings?), c) categorizing Patrick Blanc's leafy walls that require water and nutrients as "green architecture," d) praising as "green" buildings built on footprints larger than 55m², or e) extolling the virtues of edible front yards that require routine watering and pesticides, when weedy lawns and shade trees prove wildlife-friendliest. Cash for clunkers is a fine reward for people mindful enough to have owned their car for over 15 years. Only those who can afford to purchase a new car truly qualify for this reward. To everyone's relief, people purchased cars from companies that have always provided quality cars rather than those that advertised like crazy to get people to perceive them as environmentally friendly. LEED® Certification should award points for sustainable foundations, rather than allow Platinum designated buildings to have foundations, whose dug hole contributes mightily to soil erosion, which causes routine flooding and eventually combined-sewer overflow. Today's "green" movement is indeed paradoxical. "Greening Up!" requires vigilance. It is no less paradoxical to be a "green" artist. West Coast conceptualist Douglas Huebler once remarked, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." Re-using materials is perhaps one step closer to "sustainable living," however art, sold and unsold alike, requires owners to purchase: storage space, packing materials (wood, cardboard, plastic or bubble wrap), fuel for shipping, not to mention building supplies for walls that exhibitors routinely tear down and re-build. Unconsumed by such real-life issues, art schools teach students to make art using unused items (casting or building sculptures, painting, printing, drawing, etc.), not recycled stuff. After all, Surrealists and assemblage artists recycled ages ago!¹ To follow are short descriptions of today's visually interesting and mindful repurposing strategies.

Clever Cast Offs

In 1991, Los Angeles artist Lynn Aldrich requested art world gals to mail her an old bra. From the hundreds of bras dealers, curators and artists provided, she fastened both a massive puffy quilt and a hanging underwire breast plate! The British artist Mark Hosking reconfigures everyday refuse to make what appear to be totally functional sculptures. To this end, he lined an umbrella with reflective material to create a solarized corn cooker, transformed a car's airbag into a potted plant, rewove a chair seat with active telephone wire and created two vertical storage units, one using string bikinis and the other dress shirts and ties. Such elements can be easily disassembled and then worn or used as originally intended, awaiting their next exhibition. New York artist Jonathan Horowitz's fleeting 9/11 memorial *Two-Sided Monument* doubles as a recycling site, whose sagging stacks dissipate under the weight of mounting newspapers. Everything in "Free Store," his 2009 exhibition at Sadie Coles Gallery was recycled including *Apocalypso Now* a video comprising found footage and a bin where visitors were invited to leave stuff they don't use and to



take what they need. Since 1999, Korean-born New York artist Jean Shin has displayed accumulated remnants and scrap materials, united by thoughtful titles. To this end, she has presented shortened-pant tubes like an Eva Hess floor piece, transformed sports trophies into awards for everyday workers, built walls of bottles, created waves of 45' records, transformed plastic prescription bottles into chandeliers, turned umbrella fabric into a colorful banner and stacked industrial sinks to create a bubbling fountain.² Since 1998, Berkeley artist Susan Leibovitz Steinman has collaborated on and off with Caltrans (the state agency responsible for rail and road transportation), whose Oakland salvage yard she considers a candy store! Working with volunteer gardeners, she has constructed raised bed planters using salvaged antique windows, old doors and wooden shutters and transformed cast



Lathan Stiefel

iron bathtubs into raised-bed vegetable gardens. For nearly two decades, Upstate New York artist Steven Siegel has built massive public sculptures using pre-consumer waste such as tons of left over newspaper runs and post-consumer-waste such as shredded tires. After a time, his stately monuments begin to sag, droop, decay and soften, as rainwater takes its toll on rotting materials. In their final stages, they furnish habitat for small animals such as chipmunks, turtles and ground hogs.

Dumpster Diving

The new millennium coincided with Agnès Varda's brilliant film *The Gleaners and I* (2000). Although her film doesn't specifically mention artists or freegans, automatic gleaners, it dramatizes how to replenish supplies with everybody else's leftovers. In 2007, the

Abington Art Center in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania commissioned New York-based, British artist Simon Draper's *Private Reserve*, a tiny gallery whose exterior is decorated with hundreds of gleaned wooden slats, for Amy Lipton's outdoor exhibition "Habitat." For Projects 89, Klara Liden exhibited MOMA's trash, including bundles of recycled cardboard collected from the museum offices and retail stores, atop a massive white pedestal. Invited to produce a large-scale installation for "Sprawl" (2002) at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center, Norwegian artist Ole Jorgen Ness arrived with only a CD containing the sound of thunder. After spending ten days pilfering dumpsters, offices and alley ways, he had assembled enough stuff to lay out a work resembling the life-size, cracked-up remains of a ship wrecked at sea. Intervening on the 2009 Venice Biennial, Brooklyn graffiti artist Swoon floated



Lynn Aldrich, *Hundreds of bras dealers.*



Benjamin Plenty

3 boats decorated with debris culled from NYC and Slovenia. When called to install one of Ryan Trecartin's massive furniture-intense video installations, one imagines this Philadelphia artist finding the necessary props locally, rather than trucking in junky book cases, beds, chairs and plane seats. Like Ness, his motto must be "Have DVD, will travel."

Second Hand/Second Lives

Artists like Mike Kelley are master thrifters. Artists like Sylvie Fleury are master shoppers. The Aughties witnessed the rise of an intermediary category, that of master *frugalists*, artists always on the hunt for super-cheap materials, no less unique than a thrift-store find. Rather than recycle cardboard food containers and pop cans, Cincinnati-artist Keith Benjamin cuts them up to make his sculptures. So far as I know, New York-based German artist Oliver Hering was the first to weave plastic grocery bags into objects of value, prompting him to weave works out of my-

lar or scotch tape. To advertise Seoul Women's University, the Korean artist, Choi Jeon-Hwa enveloped a high-rise building in colorful salvaged doors. Masterfully reconfiguring his sculptural repertoire to accommodate new destinations, his inflatable and stuffed flowers, army of plastic posable action toys, stackable cylindrical stools, dangling chandeliers and plastic silvery collectables show up time and again.³ Philadelphia artist Caroline Lathan-Stiefel's chosen material is chenille stems, fuzzy craft sticks that she weaves into reusable wall-size grids replete with Chinese rice bags, plastic straws, fishing lures, newspaper, plastic grocery bags, electric boxes, plastic bottle caps, seed tags and strawberry baskets. The queen of solar-powered art, Philadelphia artist Mara Scrupe has found second lives for all sorts of quotidian objects. She has converted convenience store food cases into greenhouses, employed salvaged minivans as raised-bed gardens and twice exhibited a solar-powered greenhouse indoors. Since 1995, five of her solarized chandeliers and light fixtures hang-

ing in water-proof Plexiglas cases have lit Abington Art Center's driveway each evening.⁴

Consignment Shop

Chinese artist, Song Dong's *Waste Not* (2005) at MOMA, a floor work featuring the contents of his mother's house plus her house, felt a little peculiar, since the container seemed way too small to fit the hundreds of shoes, multiple TVs, piles of shirts, plastic bottles, cardboard boxes and toiletries. For New York artist Rob Pruitt's 2001 exhibition "101 Art Ideas You Can Do Yourself" at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center, he borrowed many things locally, including a Damien Hirst spin painting, an exercycle, a refrigerator, a tree, an American Express bill and a lawn mower that two guys spent three days disassembling, etc. In 2007, sellers donated objects to be sold via "Rob Pruitt's Flea Market" as part of London's Frieze Art Fair.⁵ Whatever didn't sell was returned to the sellers. His 2006 exhibition featured kicking-leg figures adorned in second-hand jeans, since he "wanted them to have the feeling of real human life, and nothing works like denim to capture the trace of its wearer."⁶ Few depend on the kindness of strangers more than Tomoko Takahashi who began her career in the late 1990s amassing sprawling installations from stuff found on-site (tennis courts and offices). For "Sprawl" at the Contemporary Arts Center, she spent three weeks shooting videos of various Cincinnati musical groups practicing and performing, while borrowing hundreds of musical instruments, equipment and scores from the Cincinnati Opera, as well as other local bands (indie pop, blue grass, rock, etc.) to create an open-ended, 3-D and video portrait of Cincinnati's popular and underground musical life.

Excavated Collections

Influenced by the way native Papua New Guineans freely mix their own culture with that of the west, Los Angeles artist Steve De Groodt has blended foreign flotsam and abandoned household detritus since 1986.⁷ Inspired by some mix of foreign cultures, world music and Beckett's stories, his sculptures, made from immutable materials adjoined to flexible parts, resemble nothing, yet evoke a lot! The most noted artist/taxonomist is Pennsylvania-based Mark Dion, who has collected and catalogued both manmade and natural objects for decades. In 1992, he exhibited *Concrete Jungle*, a massive corner pile of street stuff, as well as the *Department of Marine Animal Identification for the City of New York (Chinatown)*, for which he identified dozens of fish purchased at nearby fish stands. Since then, he has undertaken numerous archaeological digs in the Brazilian jungle, along the banks of the Thames, around MOMA's environs and more recently, he followed 18th Century botanist William Bartram's trails through several southern colonies. Once Dion identifies his fascinating finds, he displays them in interactive "Curiosity Cabinets."⁸ Portia Munson first came to prominence for *Pink Project*, scores of pink things presented on a table in the New Museum's 1994 "Bad Girls" show. Since then, she has collected thousands more and has found multiple ways to display the pink stuff plus a mutable *Green Piece* (the lawn) and her tent-like *The Garden* (floral stuff).⁹

Antique Road Show

Since 1988, Frankfurter Karsten Bott has been accumulating objects for "The Archive of Contemporary History," which totals over 500,000 objects. When asked to exhibit, he selects particular objects from relevant categories to create exhibit-

appropriate works. He often requests institutions for a shopping budget, so his collection can grow wherever he goes. Kentucky artist, Joey Versoza is one of those artists who finds inspiration in others' valuables. To this end, an architectural model displayed in a bank's foyer led to a sound sculpture whose soundtrack broadcasts people telling ghost stories about the Cincinnati Art Museum. Another woman's Christmas Village hobby-art led him to assemble a twin village. For Documenta XII, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who has worked with ancient booty such as Han Dynasty urns or beams from destroyed temples, presented three worldly treasures. For *Fairytale*, he requested Documenta to sponsor 1001 of his countrymen to visit Kassel during Documenta. On the front lawn, he sited a gorgeous free-standing star-shaped sculpture built from salvaged antiques, carved Chinese doors that were promptly flattened by a gust of wind. He also situated plenty of chair circles featuring 1001 antique Chinese chairs, so spectators could engage one another in discussions about their experiences. The New York artist, Fred Wilson is best known for his critical interventions on museum collections, such as *Mining the Museum* (1992), for which he re-hung the Baltimore Historical Society to tell the history of slavery. His re-arrangements and selections demonstrate the connection between context and meaning. Like Huebler, he refuses to add any more stuff. He says, "I get everything that satisfies my soul, from bringing together objects that are in the world, manipulating them, working with spatial arrangements, and having things presented in the way I want to see them."¹⁰ Indicative of the "Green Up!" attitude, we can stop on this note.

SUE SPAID

Currently a Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy at Temple University in Philadelphia, **Sue Spaid** has curated exhibitions for scores of US museums and university galleries. Her most recent exhibition, "Endurance: Daring Feats of Risk, Survival and Perseverance," remains on view at the Abington Art Center through November 29, 2009. Her book *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (2002) accompanied an exhibition of the same name, co-curated with Amy Lipton. A contributing editor to *artUS*, her scholarly focus is experiential art.

NOTES

¹ See Sandra Starr's *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage* (Santa Monica: James Corcoran Gallery, 1988) for a complete assessment of Dada's influence on the west coast from the 1940s onward, long before Rauschenberg and Johns were touted as "Neo-Dada."

² To see more of Shin's work, check out her website <http://www.jeanshin.com>.

³ To see more of Choi's work, check out his website <http://www.choijeonghwa.com>.

⁴ To see more of Scrupe's inventions, check out her website <http://www.scrupe.com>.

⁵ Pruitt first exhibited "101 Art Ideas" at Gavin Brown Enterprise in 1999, where he organized his first "Flea Market" the following year. Since 1973, Martha Rosler has organized several *Monumental Garage Sales* for people to sell their stuff. In 1996, Peter Friedl and Olav Westphalen placed FRACK, a rack of clothes from which visitors exchanged garments, at Amsterdam's WV139 and Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien.

⁶ Rob Pruitt, "RE: Hi!", August 14, 2009 E-mail to Sue Spaid.

⁷ To see more of De Groodt's work, check out his website <http://stevedegroodt.com>.

⁸ To learn more about Dion's work, check out *Mark Dion, Cabinet of Curiosities* and Art 21's episode.

⁹ To see more of Munson's work, check out her website <http://portiamunson.com/home.html>.

¹⁰ <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson/index.html>.



Horowitz, 9/11 memorial *Two-Sided Monument*, 2009.